

142,000 and counting
by Courtney Ellis-Stoneman

“Aren’t you tired?” Fatima murmured.

Pot, kettle, Romy thought, rubbing her eyes lazily as she attempted to make out Fatima’s features in the dark. It was a wasted effort; Fatima’s blackout curtains blocked out any residual glow from the streetlights, and Romy could only just about pick out the curve of her jaw, the hook of her nose, the flash of her eyes. The bed was too small for the both of them, but she didn’t mind. All things considered, it was the most trivial complaint in the world.

“Time difference,” Romy said, reached out as if to touch Fatima’s face and then stopped. “It’s dinnertime on the East Coast.”

She didn’t want to think about what was happening back home too much. Natasha, her roommate, had promised her - *pinky promised*, like they were eight years old and the world as Romy knew it wasn’t crumbling around her - that she’d call if anyone was dying, if she thought Romy needed to say goodbye. It had gotten to that point now, the point where *getting worse* wasn’t newsworthy anymore; Romy was almost used to it, that rapid deterioration between one visit and the next. The brief, blistering moment where she tried to reconcile who her friends used to be with who they were now hurt no less than it had before, but it was familiar in a way that left an unpleasant, coppery taste on her tongue.

If she dwelled on it too much, she’d start crying. She didn’t want to cry. She was in London. She was in London with Fatima, and Fatima was in the same boat because *that’s the thing about epidemics*, but at least they were together.

“I know,” Fatima said. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

“What did you mean, then?” Romy frowned. Fatima wasn’t the kind of woman who traded in ambiguities and double-meanings; she wore clunky Doc Martens and cut her own mullet and embraced the miniskirt because she *could* and because Fatima Khan was about as subtle as a brick through a window. It was what had attracted Romy to her in the first place - Romy, whose childhood had been spent with her eyes cast up at stained glass windows while the priest intoned the Mass, finally, *finally* understanding why they called it Catholic guilt after all. Romy considered her adolescence repressed enough for two people; she needed to be with someone who *didn’t care*.

Well, Fatima cared about a lot of things - politics, rising tube fares, the fact that her favourite lipstick had been discontinued. She cared about Romy; even when they fought over the phone, viciously, when Romy stormed down to the travel agent’s office to cancel flights and Fatima threatened to cut her phone cord, they cared about each other. The key difference between the two of them was that Fatima didn’t care about what people thought about her. If she had something to say, she said it. The fact that she was hesitating now made Romy sit up and frown.

"Of this," Fatima said at last, waving her arm vaguely. "Of not being able to get married. Of getting harassed every time we hold hands in the street. Of going to a different funeral every other week." She looked up at Romy through her lashes, and brushed Romy's bottom lip with her thumb. "I'm so tired of it, Romy. Aren't you?"

Yes, Romy wanted to say. It was exhausting; she was *exhausted*. She was sick of turning on the TV and watching Reagan find the money for the war on drugs but not for the war on AIDS, because apparently 142,000 infections and counting didn't *matter*. She was sick of feeling a piece of herself crack and break every time she left London and returned to her shoebox apartment in Brooklyn. She was sick of being burnt-out and high-strung from years of watching men turn into shells of themselves, from years of having to beg her own government to give a damn, from spending her twenties fighting for people who were too sick to fight anymore. It was all of what the French called *ennui*, except it wasn't for lack of occupation. But what came out instead was, "You want to get married?"

Fatima laughed. It sounded almost bitter. "It's six years next May," she said, and leaned forward to press a kiss to the top of Romy's crown of tangled honey-blonde curls. "If we were straight, we'd be two kids in already."

"I hate kids," Romy commented idly, and flopped back down into the pillows so she could stare at the ceiling. "Please don't tell me you're desperate for children."

"I'm not," Fatima assured with a snort, and reached for Romy's hand. But when she said, "Thatcher wouldn't let us have them, anyway," her voice was heartbreakingly sad.

It was difficult, Romy thought, to dare to hope for a better future. It felt selfish to consider a day when, maybe, things would be better, because for most of their friends it never would; one purple lesion, and it was the beginning of the end. Besides, if she held onto that hope too tightly, it only ever hurt more when election season came around, when the ballots were counted and it was a Republican win, *again*, when someone else got murdered and the police stood by, when there were bomb threats and name-calling and *nobody did anything*. If she lived in anything but the present, she'd wallow for too long to get anything done; she'd never find the energy to get out of bed in the morning. Sure, it was unsustainable *not* to plan for the future - anybody who'd endured senior year of high school knew that - but when it boiled down to it, Romy really wasn't certain whether or not she *wanted* a future if the world kept going down the path it was currently taking. Still, that particular train of thought felt entirely too morbid for a midnight conversation, so she kept it to herself.

"We could have a wedding," Romy suggested, "if that's what you wanted. People need a party more than ever now, anyway. It could be fun."

"That is the whitest thing I've ever heard," Fatima grinned, her teeth glinting in the dimness, bright against the brown of her skin. "You know, in Pakistan, weddings last for three days."

"Vick would say that any wedding can last for three days, if you have the nerve," Romy remarked.

"I knew there was a reason why I liked your sister so much," Fatima teased. Fatima and Victoire got on shockingly well, to say that the only thing they had in common was Romy; if Fatima

called while Victoire was visiting, Romy had to tear her sister away from the phone in order to get a word in edgeways. It was a nice problem to have, she thought, seeing as her father still laboured under the assumption that one day Romy would wake up and decide to start dating a member of the endless parade of faceless country club members who either worked in a bank, a law firm, or a business. And at the very least, Victoire's marriage had eased some of the pressure from their mother for Romy herself to 'settle down', which was possibly the most optimistic view Romy could take of the woman who'd given birth to her.

They didn't talk much about Fatima's family. Fatima always said that the first mistake she'd made was to have been born a girl, and that everything had gone downhill after that.

"Anyway," Fatima cleared her throat. "I didn't mean - I don't want to get married for a party. We can have that if you want, but what I meant is - God, okay," she bit her lip and sighed. "Straight people have it so easy. They don't need to get married to be taken seriously. People just *assume* that they're together, y'know - how many times have people thought Alexei and I were a couple-"

"Don't," Romy shook her head. The answer to that was *too many times* for her own comfort. She wasn't a particularly jealous person, but something about that had always rubbed her the wrong way, and not because she suspected Alexei of secretly harbouring deep romantic feelings for Fatima - Alexei couldn't keep a secret from his own worst enemy. It just felt *wrong*.

"Right, exactly," Fatima said. "If we got married - legally married - I don't know, maybe people would stop thinking that we're best friends or distant cousins or whatever. They'd think we're *in love* first. If one of us had to go to hospital, we'd be able to visit the other. You'd be able to apply for the spousal visa and you wouldn't have to fly back and forth every other month. And I *hate* it, because it's *never going to happen*."

Her voice cracked on the last few words, and Romy felt the mattress shake underneath her as Fatima started to cry. "It's bunk," Fatima whispered. "It feels like we're going backwards."

Romy wished she could say that Fatima was wrong - that things *were* getting better, that one day they would wake up and suddenly there'd be a cure and that doctors would stop wearing two pairs of gloves and refusing to touch their patients even though they *knew* that that wasn't how it worked, and that Thatcher would decide overnight that Section 28 had been some big mistake and repeal the legislation. She wanted to be able to say those things and mean them. But Fatima wasn't the kind of woman who appreciated trite, empty words of comfort, and so Romy squeezed her hand and fought back the tightness in her own chest.

"We don't know that it won't happen," Romy said instead, and reached over to wipe the tear tracks from Fatima's cheeks. Her thumb came away wet. "Maybe not now - maybe not in five, ten years, even - but it won't be like this forever. I won't *let* it be like this forever."

She knew what Fatima was thinking - five years was too late for a good half of their combined social circle, too late when every day there was a new obituary in the local papers, when every day a friend of a friend of a friend (and it was getting less and less removed each time) had a

positive test or woke up with a cough that turned into a cold that turned into PCP or just simply didn't wake up at all. Five years was too late when, really, things needed to change back when it was still called GRIDS, back when you were told to look out for the four Hs, back when it was New York and San Francisco and a rare cancer that used to only ever occur in old men of Mediterranean descent. Five years was too late when, five years ago, things were the same, when every drug out there failed as badly as they did now, when five years ago they said there'd be a vaccine in two years and the vaccine never came. Five years was too late. If five years was too late, ten was a lifetime, fifteen an impossibility. And Fatima wouldn't say it, neither of them would, but in five years nearly an entire demographic would be gone. It wouldn't really matter what either of them did then. There'd be hardly anybody left to change things *for*, not for another generation at least.

"I mean," Fatima sniffed, "I know things could be worse. Christ, it's hard to imagine how they could be, but at least it's 1989 and not - not 1939. But I'm just - I've been angry for so long. I don't know if I have the patience to just keep waiting it out. I feel like I've been waiting it out my whole life. I want people to hurry up and decide that we have rights so we can get it over with."

Romy bit her lip. There was deep, unbridled longing in Fatima's voice; the kind that made Romy's chest hurt. She realised that maybe this was a build-up of nearly six years - their entire relationship, almost their entire adult lives. She realised that Fatima, for all her clunky Docs and mullet and miniskirts, was just as scared as she was. "You want to get married?" she asked again, but her tone was softer this time, gentler, and Fatima let out a sharp sigh. "I do," she admitted. "I really, really do. Sometimes that's all I want." "To me?" Romy pressed, and Fatima scoffed. "No, to Vick," she said. "Of course to you, you airhead."

She was clearly trying for lightness, but the mood was still somber. "*You're* all I want," Fatima added quietly. "Why else do you think my phone bill is almost as high as my rent?" "You could go back to writing me letters," Romy mumbled, turning over to press her face into Fatima's bare shoulder. She smelled like menthol cigarettes and floral body wash, like home. "It's harder to fight that way." Fatima made a noise of amusement as she wound her fingers through Romy's hair. There was a slight pull from her many silver rings; Romy had never seen her take them off, except to shower. "You smell like a dive bar." "It's from the plane," Romy yawned, and was surprised to note that, actually, she really was tired, and not just in the emotional sense. The jet lag was catching up to her. "You know those no-smoking sections never work."

"Mm," Fatima hummed, still working her hand through Romy's hair. "Go to sleep."

She thought about protesting, but maybe it was the heavy comfort of Fatima's coverlet, or the warmth of Fatima's skin, or the feeling of warped sentimentality that came from planning for something that might never happen, but she didn't. Instead, she let her breathing slow, allowed herself to sink deeper into unconsciousness, and prayed that the phone wouldn't ring.