

## SUMMER NIGHTS

By Anushka Pathak

She sits at the table, absentmindedly chewing her fountain pen. He gave it to her on her 19<sup>th</sup>, which, even though it was only some time ago, now feels like an age. Her reflection gazes back at her from the aquamarine barrel. She wonders why the words won't flow as freely as they did when they were together, when they used to gaze at the tapestry of stars above them from the hill, when they used to sit at the riverbank with their feet dipped in the water. She remembers the long, halcyon summer days of their youth, filled with laughter and love. She wonders when things changed. Rather, when he changed.

She liked being with him, she really did, it's just that it could be a bit hard sometimes. In the beginning, he was always sweet and kind, but when she disagreed with him, she would see the mask fall, for a spit-second. But he would never let the façade drop for more time than that. Now, he still treated her right, loved her, or so he says, but his mood could change suddenly and without warning. Living with him was like a delicate dance. You couldn't miss a step, move a toe out of line, or the fragile balance would be destroyed. And Lord knows what would happen to her if she pushed his buttons.

And once, he came home late, smelling of alcohol, and she asked him where he'd been. He struck out, left a red mark on her pale face. She'd ran to their room and cried. In the morning, he apologized on his knees, promised her it'd never happen again, but it always does. It's always her fault anyways. Like when she told him of her aspirations of becoming a teacher. He sneered, said that a woman's place was in the home. Who'd cook him dinners if she was working? She protested, tried to say more on the topic, but it just angered him more, and more, until it happened. Afterwards, laying on her side of the bed, alone, cold and violated, she wonders why she can't just keep her mouth shut.

Sometimes, when she visits home with a bruise on her temple, her sister tells her that she could do better. But who's she kidding? She knows that he's the only man that'd put up with her. That's what he says too, and she believes him. Why shouldn't she? He's always rights, so why would he be wrong about this? He'd never lie to her. At least, that's what he says when he comes home with rouge on his neck, and shrouded in the heady scent of a lady's perfume.

As she absentmindedly fiddles with her promise ring, the one he gave her before he left, she wonders whether he'll be back before next summer. She had always dreamed of a summer wedding. She imagines their life together; they'd live together in a small cottage, have four kids, and **then** she would be truly happy. Then everything would be perfect. He would **truly** love her then. Nibbling the end of her pen, she decides that, yes, he will. After all, they said the war'd be over by Christmas.