**First Place: Four Tickets**

**Author: Mahnoor Anees Khan**

It was a love story you rooted for, you know. While it lasted, anyway. All it is now, are four little tickets in my hand. Four irregular square pieces of run-down thermal paper, with black and blue letters scattered. The dates on the tickets were the same, the times and the feelings held when they were bought – different. There were bends and lines running on the paper, as if someone had strangled it constantly and opened its airpipes to breathe, off and on. And by someone, I mean me. The heroine of this story. Not to be self-obsessed but I am the reason it went astray, did it not? Oh, let me begin from the beginning.

Once upon a time, in a land quite different from ours, I was new and he was new too. We both were getting ready to start our future in a massive institution. His name is Fateh while my name is Aaleyah. I, am an avid book reader and someone who was in this new country to pursue her passions. He, a sportsman who was ready to break the structures of his family and be the first man to study abroad. This seems like quite a typical story, doesn’t it? Well, it probably is. But it’s also a little different. My diary was my companion throughout. I’ve pasted scanned pictures of them here. For once, I won’t think of it as an invasion of my privacy. I’ll allow it, because I want you to know how I felt about what happened. He might have a different take, and there is a very good chance he does, but I know what I did and what I felt. And here it is. The diary of a tested heart.

|  |
| --- |
| Date: 3rd October 2016, Place: Break Time Café  The weather is surprisingly not that wet. I was told of this country to be a constant collect of rain and depressed people. I’ve been here for a month now and I haven’t experienced a moment that doesn’t alight me with joy. I’ve found a gang in the few days I have been here. I stayed over at their place after meeting them for only a few sections of the day. I stood near the benches, looking at my newfound friend - who shares my love for travelling (we were planning on heading to some form of a garden and an amphitheater in the city) and Harry Potter – Zanyah Furqaan. She was placing a purple flyer which had an invitation to a club night on her seat to protect her clothes from getting dirty with rainwater. We all sat together and talked of the funniest differences of our culture to theirs. How they drank colorful drinks which made you happy and we just drank tea to feel joy. Then came Zanyah’s classmate and friend – Suleimaan Shah – with his army man swagger and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He lit it – even if Zanyah shrieked out her disapproval – and smoked as if his world could not get any better. Then came a platoon of young men who we didn’t recognize. Among them, came a guy wearing a green and blue jacket. |
| Date: 4th October 2016, Place: Break Time Café.  So, I didn’t continue the story after we met Fateh (green and blue jacket guy). To be accurate, Muhammad Fateh Armaghan Hussain was the name. He seems like a nice enough person, probably because I mercilessly teased him and he took it without a complaint. His reactions are probably why I teased him. He even passed Zanyah’s test of good men because of two reasons – one, he gave her the amount of respect you would give a sister and two, he was the funniest person we had met so far.  I’ve spent half a day with Fateh and I know most of his life story. He knows mine too. Strange, never really happened before with me or him (I’m assuming). We held a psychological counselling session where he and another friend of ours kept talking about their lives. I felt like he was sad and I just jokingly assured him that someone named Muhammad Fateh Armaghan Hussain cannot be sad. |
| Date: 23rd October 2016, Place: Basketball Court  My new best friend tells me I have a laugh that could make anyone laugh. He’s not exactly my best friend, but I think he sort of is the closest male friend I have here. Well, whatever kind of male friend a Muslim girl in the Western world can have. We had tea in the basketball court today. We spoke about everything and I told him about how I left my life back home and he spoke of how he left his. It was strange how close we had become in a few weeks of knowing each other. He felt that too. He always mentioned how he didn’t understand how time flew by so quickly when he was with me. That made me smile. It’s a sweet thing to say, isn’t it? He’s a sweet guy. That is, Fateh. Just to clarify, that he’s a nice friend. |
| Date: 5th November 2016, Place: Famous Sports Stadium  The look on his face. He was grinning from ear to ear. To take a sportsman to a place where he had dreams of being in, to take him there and to let him feel the grass with his feet – it’s a feeling I cannot describe. He was so happy. He removed his shoes and felt the grass. It made me happy to see him that way. And I think it made him happy too. I could tell – by the way he looked at me – I could tell he was happy with me being there with him. |
| Date: 26th November 2016, Place: Walk after the Theatre  I read a lot of books and I watch a lot of musicals. Tonight, it was one of my first music shows in this country. I had the chance to see one of my favorites and it was magical. The only thing I didn’t account for was how late it had gotten. I needed to get back home and I didn’t have anyone to take me. So, I told him I was going to a play and I didn’t have to ask him to come get me – he offered. I have nice friends, don’t I? Anyway, we were walking back home and we were crossing streets and drunk men were falling off their own feet. There was a man who was behind us and he was trying to touch my back and suddenly, I was being pulled away by Fateh. He grabbed my hand – just for a minute – and we walked on that way. I didn’t say anything, neither did he. We both just fell in the shallow pool of feeling something. |
| Date: 1st December 2016, Place: Basketball Court |
| We both sat together, in silence, thinking of the feelings we were feeling since that day. We still spoke every day and every night. We still knew we were friends. But we were there. Jumping on the line that stands between friendship and the something else. Juggling questions in heads and sitting in places where something always touched accidentally. It wasn’t love, it wasn’t friendship. It was Fateh and I.  Zanyah and I are in her room, talking. She was stuck with the most impossible group mates for her assignment and she was struggling. I offered my excellent company and just sat there, listening to music and talking to her. Suleiman *Bhai* (it’s what you call a big brother type person) knocked and just came in. He’s sitting on the bed and both Zanyah and him started telling me about their college days. About how Suleiman used to have a way with women and yet he remembered his decency and never acted upon his claims. Zanyah and him were the best of friends. They made me think of Fateh and I. We would never reach that level if we crossed the line of friendship. We would break apart and probably never speak again – if we didn’t define the relationship we existed in. I would lose him as a friend and as something else.  Date: 2nd December 2016, Place: The Hill  It was an event we had to go to. The day when we had to relax forcibly and not think of exams or impending doom. So, we went together. Me and Fateh. There was a hill we had to climb to get to the place. Well, the hill exists right in front of my accommodation which we have to walk up to reach anything. This hill, is the bane of my existence here. My calves are screaming at me when I reach the top, every time. Today, it was different. Today, I was wearing heels. And he was tired. What happened was, I was being my stubborn self and had decided that moving through the Hill was the best route to the party. And we started trudging on. I had begun to realize how difficult it was to climb steep heights wearing heels. So, I removed them. Very soon I understood why that was a mistake – the ground was wet and cold. Bitter cold. Fateh saw the change in my height and let out a yell of disapproval. This was the exchange between us verbatim:  Fateh: What the hell do you think you are doing?  Me: Removing these torture devices?  Fateh: Why’d you wear them in the first place?  Me: Why do you care so much?  He said nothing then. He just stopped and removed his own shoes and put them in front of me.  Me: What the hell do you think YOU are doing?  Fateh: Wear them.  Me: You wear them.  Fateh: I was wearing them.  Me: Why did you stop?  Fateh: Your feet will turn blue and fall off, Aalu. Please. Don’t argue with me and wear them.  I didn’t argue, I just didn’t listen and I kept walking. So did he. Without his shoes. He called *Aalu* – which is his nickname for me and it also means potato. I will think of it as a coincidence as I didn’t want to puncture my self-esteem.  Me: Your shoes, Fateh!  He said that he won’t wear them and he’s just leaving them there. I went back to put them on and sprinted to catch up with him, slightly crashing our hands into each other. To which he looked at my feet and smiled slightly.  Me: Why do you have to be so heroic?  Fateh: At least, you’ll know what it’s like to walk in my shoes for a while.  He said that, cracking a grin. It made me laugh and I started to feel something in the frozen tips of my toes – warmth.  We got home late. Fateh and I went to what I like to think of (and to what he referred to) as our spot. We sat there with cups of tea and we talked. He was not very glad that I was heading home the next day and that he was going to have to be alone for a while. He saw my foot covered in warm slippers and asked if I was alright. I nodded and drank tiny sips of my tea. It wasn’t very cold, but I felt a shiver pass through me. He noticed, said nothing and a second later I saw a warm jacket being splayed over my back. A very cliché romantic moment, isn’t it? The jacket being given, the shy smiles being exchanged and just the regular moments of awkward silence and hearts beating faster. In that moment though, it felt cliché and it felt silly. But it also felt wonderful. He spoke little and I spoke a lot, he moved closer and I started speaking lesser. Then I stopped speaking altogether as he just looked at me and smiled. |
| Date: 3rd December 2016, Place: Train Station |
| Date: 19th December 2016, Place: Train Station |
| It had been 16 days. I reached the station early in the morning and he was there. Standing in his black leather jacket and grey woolen cap. Oh, and ratty old jeans. His shoes were there too. The ones I wore so long ago. He told me he liked me, a few days ago. I knew that before but now it was confirmed, wasn’t it? I said the same, because I did like him too. I don’t know what we are at this point. Together? Friends? More than that? If we were more than that, what were we? Who has and who could define this abstract notion of “liking someone”? Isn’t that exactly why artists, singers, poets, writers and everyone else who can attempt at expressing this zig-zag myriad of broken lines and shady boundaries do what they do? Hasn’t the entire world capitalized everything on this one question – of what comes after friendship and before love? |

I stopped writing after that day. It seemed enough. Because that day, namely the 19th of December became the day of the four tickets. It became the day I found and lost my best friend and the person I had come to romantically care for. It seems cruel to not continue with what I have started – even if my fingers tremble to a stop as I keep on typing – I will go on.

We got into the tram service and we stood. You would imagine I would sit down and probably be exhausted. But I wasn’t. That was the first ticket that I got. At 7:45 AM, ticket no. 27564 appealed to my cautious mind. I got it in a moment of extreme confusion and deliberation of what I will do next with the man who claimed to like me. He carried my suitcases to my apartment – where I sat down with him on the sofa. My flatmates/friends were asleep so we were trying not to disturb them. We had some time before everyone woke up and we could just be with ourselves.

“Do you want to go to the basketball court?” he asked, not meeting my eyes.

“It’s too cold, isn’t it?” I responded with a deep breath hazing my reply.

“Well, I could warm you up”, he replied with a grin – making me laugh. We chose to stay in instead and talk. I’m sure you were curious about the letters and what they said, but because it is his letter, I won’t divulge the exact words he said, because it would be rude. But I will give you the gist of it – because it is needed to understand the rest of the story. In the letter, he told me he didn’t know for sure if it was love but he did know it was something. His letter informed me of his favorite moment of ours – which was us holding hands for just a minute when we were walking back from the play. He had never felt as protective for anyone else as he had that night for me.

Simply passing on his comment, I walked over to my suitcase and brought along the present I had gotten for him. It wasn’t a very big thing. But the emotion and the message I had attached to it was sweeter than I had ever been or felt.

I handed him a small letter and the tiny gift. He raised his eyebrows, clearly in confusion of receiving such a shiny blue package. It had a dark brown wooden frame, which held an hourglass with shimmering sapphire sand. He looked at it with such joy – I knew he liked these things – and then he looked at me.

“It’s for a minute. The sand falls through for just one minute and it's small, I know, but it reminded me of something. It reminded me of the favorite moment you spoke of in the letter. You held my hand that day – but just for a minute. I want more minutes with you. Because I know what I felt then and what I feel now. I need more minutes with you, Fateh.” I finished with a maneuver that landed my eyes looking at my jeans. I felt his finger pull up my chin and smile. He kissed my forehead lightly.

And he simply said, “If I want today, will that be acceptable?”

I scrunched up my forehead to question the unromantic response I had received.

“I’m leaving tomorrow for home”, he said, “And you’re leaving for your trip too. I just want a day with you. All day.”

My confusion faltered and my smile exploded on my face. I nodded. After resting for a while, I went about meeting Zanyah and Suleiman who were ecstatic that I didn’t wake them up at the unearthly hour at which I arrived. We all had breakfast and then Fateh stole me away to help him pack. I knew I had to pack for my trip to Scotland the next day as well – but I decided to go with him anyway. And so, we set off on our journey. We walked for a while and caught the tram. As we were getting on the carriage, he caught my hand and helped me get in. That sparked a smile in the ticket collector’s eyes – probably of romance that she had felt a long time ago. Maybe that’s what we looked like to other people. As a couple carrying such intense allure for the other that we were oblivious to the entire world and we knew what we were doing. They couldn’t be more wrong if they were thinking this way. As the second ticket fell in my hand – ticket no. 59802 at 8:30 AM – I felt excitement replace the confusion I felt before. To the day that lies before and to the moments that we had to experience still to become what people thought they saw. He smiled as we got off and started walking towards the bus stop.

“What was home like?” he asked, holding my hand again.

“Cathartic,” I responded and tried to act nonchalant as I pulled my hand out of his.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, just people can see” I responded, turning into a shade of rhubarb.

We waited at the bus stop, talking about the stuff he was planning on buying at duty free. He planned on buying cigarettes and gifts for his family. I scrunched my nose at the mention of the deadly device he oved exposing his lungs to. He smirked and said it was because he wouldn’t be able to smoke at home. We got into bus no. 120 and got the third ticket – ticket no. 59918 – and sat on the top deck of the bus. As we rode on, his hand snaked its way behind my head on the seat. I noticed, but didn’t say much. The familiarity and the inching closer wasn’t an entirely horrifying feeling – it was scary at the pace at which we were travelling – and I am not referring to the bus.

“You see that house?” he said, pointing to a beautiful cottage – with red rose bushes outside it and enchanting green creepers decorating the walls.

“It’s so beautiful. I love it” I replied.

“So, you can say what you feel about estate, but not about me?” he asked frankly – leaving me stunned.

“If I could, I would. But I can’t, so I shan’t” I replied with a very confident air – which I know I did not possess internally.

“I’m sure you can, what’s the point of you reading all those books then?”

“I can, but who says you’re worthy enough to hear my esteemed words?”

“I say I am. I am, after all, Muhammad Fateh Armaghan Hussain.” he said – as if this guaranteed him a title of importance.

I murmured my response in an unintelligible tone. He leaned in, grinning expectantly.

“What was that?”

“I like you more than I liked you yesterday,” I said softly.

He didn’t respond. He just put his hand back on my seat and we rode on. The large expanse of tarmac that lay before us with cottages scattered on the side – gave us time. Time to express what we felt for each other in utter silence. I could feel the bonds of friendship collapsing and rising again to form a different bond entirely. I didn’t know if it was the bond I thought I needed or the bond I did need. That was how my third ticket was bought – in a state of flux.

We entered his apartment to find an absolute mess greeting us. He grinned apologetically and shrugged – saying that he had me now to clean up after him. Which, obviously, made me start a rant on feminism and what I really thought about his cleanup plan. He laughed and put his hands on my shoulders – telling me he had no intentions of making me do it. I walked out of his embrace – uncomfortable and quite flustered.

“Let’s start packing?” I asked him. He smiled and started unloading his closet and filling his suitcase. We didn’t speak much during the packing session, and once we were done, I asked him for some water and sat on the floor. I just leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes.

I woke up after what felt like hours – turns out it was just for a few minutes – to see Fateh looking at me.

“Do you always stare at defenseless women as they slumber?” I said to him, stretching out the kinks.

“You neither slumbered nor are defenseless – for that matter”, he retorted – landing himself to sit across me. His hand started playing at my knee – not speaking at all. Him, just letting me know, that he felt something for me. He hadn’t explicitly stated it like I had.

“Do you like me, Fateh?” I regretted the question as soon as it slipped, his eyebrow responded by raising itself in confusion. “I mean, what are we doing here?”

“Here’s what I can do and what I can’t. I can be loyal to you. I can keep this interesting with your support. I can love you. I can try my best that nothing hurts you. I can make you laugh”, as he said that he trailed his fingers on my knee – making me laugh. “Here’s what I can’t do. I can’t give you false hopes. I can’t lie to you. I can’t live up to all your expectations. I can’t guarantee you marriage because I am not ready to make that decision.”

I looked up as he said that. His fingers had found his way to my neck, his fingers tracing random shapes. I didn’t know how comfortable I was with what was happening – but I didn’t want to upset him. His other hand snaked its way around my waist and pulled me closer. I realized where this was leading to and I pulled myself away from him.

“Fateh, no”, I said hesitantly.

“Just wait, Aalu”, he continued with his motions eventually resulting in his palms pressing on my cheeks pulling my face closer. I knew I had to stop myself to be accepting of wherever this was going – but I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

His eyes closed as he leaned in closer and so did mine. As I closed my eyes – I felt the eagerness of his hands pulling me closer and his lips forcing themselves to my proximity. I felt my heartbeat racing in both anticipation and fear. I felt no comfort or trust at all; I felt no unbelievable moment of revelation where I realized I loved him. I felt like my heart did skip a beat, but I couldn’t decide if fear made that decision or lust did. My eyes fluttered open as his lips were millimeters away from mine and I got up too quickly. Breathing heavily, I told him I had to go. He caught my hand and started apologizing profusely.

“Aaleyah, I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said, “Please let’s just talk about this.”

“Fateh, I can’t. I need to go,” I said.

“How about you sit on the bed and I’ll sit on the floor and we will talk?”

I sat down with my hands folded in my lap, not understanding the emotions running through me. It was so new – this feeling and so foreign that my expectations for him didn’t match his for mine. I wanted to run away but I wanted to stay as well. We talked about unrelated things for a while and as he was enacting a situation in his class, I noticed him inching closer. His hands landed themselves on my knees and one of his hands then came up to my face.

“Fateh, I need to leave,” I said softly.

“Just let me try this, Aalu. We won’t be together for so long and I’ll miss you so much” he murmured and pulled my face closer into a kiss.

It felt as if nothing around us was necessary and everything would fade away soon. It felt misplaced, confusing, unbalanced but sort of right. I felt his hands push my body backwards and his body following suit. My hand pushed his chest as well as it could – he did not budge. Every thought in my head went wild into assumptions of what was about to happen. He knew I wasn’t comfortable or ready. What was I supposed to do next? Would I run from my best friend and the man I felt something for? Or is it the man I don’t know at all? I felt his probing fingers move on to places where they didn’t belong – forcing me to shut my eyes in defiance and scream. He didn’t move or budge but his flesh managed to muffle my screams. His hands managed to control my flailing arms. His legs locked on mine and ensured that I didn’t move. His burning appetite managed to kill mine forever.

In a moment of weakness, I pushed him off and ran out of the room. I rushed to the bus stop and got in the first bus I saw – bus no. 120 – and hoped it would take me home. I got my last ticket – ticket no. 23302 at 8:30 PM – and sat on the blue spotted seats. As I grasped to my fourth ticket of the day, I felt exhaustion pull over me with its two friends – guilt and pain. The bus rumbled down the highway running past the cottages and moments I wanted to forget.