

## *Entomology*

**P**ROFESSOR RAO ENTERED THE CLASSROOM and slammed a pile of textbooks onto the table. Even though it was halfway through the semester, she still announced the name of the seminar after the morning bell.

“Insect control and toxicology,” Rao said in her high-pitched yet oddly sturdy voice. “You are all expected to memorize the pain scale for your final exam. No multiple choice. All comprehension.” She paused and looked around the room like a magician about to unveil her next trick.

“Miss, will you give grace marks,” someone asked from the back corner.

“No. You’re all seniors now. What grace marks. Open your books to page two hundred and twenty nine. Someone read.”

Zena glanced at the skeletal system illustrated in her entomology textbook. *Mandible, thorax, petiole, wings, and stinger*. Did paper wasps experience consciousness as a stream, or a series of ruptured sensations? Why had she chosen biology as her major?

“The tarantula spider’s bite is exponentially more painful than being stung by a bee. However, damage and pain are separate categories.” Zena didn’t recognize the voice. Life is all about choices, she wrote in the margin. She enjoyed some varieties of pain.

“The insect sting pain scale was created by a man named Justin Shuhmid,” the voice continued. Zena looked at the picture of him printed in the book.

“Ma’am, why is pain always measured by the experiences of men,” a woman sitting at the front of the classroom asked.

“Quiet down,” Rao said, anticipating the flurry of chatter this comment would cause. She told the voice to keep reading.

**THERE WERE RUMORS ABOUT PROFESSOR RAO.** That she was vice principal Thampi’s ex-wife. That she was the reason vice principal Thampi had nine fingers. That she ate nonvegetarian food three times a day, including beef. That she had a scar on her ring finger from soldering off her wedding band with a crème brûlée torch on the day of her divorce. From their desks, ten feet away from her lectern, students were unable to see the scar. Zena remained in awe of Rao’s ability to work the rumors in her favor: classrooms hushed when she entered.

Once, during an exam, Rao placed a palm on Zena’s desk. The gesture made Zena’s heart race, even though she hadn’t done anything wrong. Zena would never pass a lie detector test. Authority figures made her body switch into flight mode. Rao’s fingers, Zena had noted, were devoid of scars.

**AFTER CLASS, ZENA TOOK A RICKSHAW** to Lek’s house. She continued flipping through the textbook and imagined a pain scale for everyday catastrophes like stubbing your toe and getting scratched by an outdoor cat. The insect-sting scale didn’t take into account how pain gets magnified on days when you get bad haircuts or accidentally break your favorite coffee mug or get dumped and feel doubly stung.

Two years ago Zena had fallen for an older man who took her to a dive bar in Thane on their first date. At the bar, a stranger tried to flirt with her, and her date beat him unconscious. When they kissed later that night, she could smell the stranger’s blood on him, and she tried not to flinch. Their relationship lasted five months, and he was gentle with her, but every moment felt like a tightrope tense with the events of that first night. Zena never took him back to her place, and he never questioned it. When they broke up, she changed her phone number.

Since then, she had lost her ability to feel aroused by men, until she met Lokesh, whom she called Lek for unknown reasons. He had long hair up to his shoulders and wore a green sports headband that always looked stained with sweat. She fantasized about throwing it away in a wifely gesture, but

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they had only been together for six months. She would have to wait until month nine.

Zena used her key to open the door to Lek's apartment. He lay on the living room sofa with his laptop on his belly, fingers manically pressing down on the keyboard. "I found a video game about ecological activism," he said, "There's a giant thunderbird. Look at this. And before I forget—I'm going to need the house key back temporarily because Raj lost his."

Her stomach dropped, and the cold metal key burned against her fingers as she handed it over. Red fire ants crawled up her sides. "Do you want to have sex," she asked.

"Let me just complete this level," Lek said.

They went into his bedroom, and Zena sat at the edge of the bed while Lek rummaged for condoms. The sex had gotten monotonous ever since Zena refused to spank Lek with a paddle he'd bought as a surprise. He wanted her to

be cruel, but she found his request paradoxical. How can you be a sub and still be so demanding, she reasoned.

"Do you still have the paddle," Zena said. "I'd like to try it out."

"Bottom drawer on your left."

Zena took the paddle out of its clear plastic wrapping, and slapped it lightly against her left palm. She wondered about the relationship between pain and intimacy. "Use it on me," she said.

Lek avoided eye contact but walked over to her, and she handed him the paddle. Without speaking, she got on the floor on her hands and knees and noticed a mass of spider webs underneath the bed. She made a mental note to mention this to Lek after they were done.

"I don't really want to," Lek said. "I'm going to make some noodles. Do you want some?" He walked out of the room before she could lift herself off the floor.

A few days later he broke up with her in a text message.

**ZENA STOPPED GOING TO CLASS**, turned off her cellphone, and stayed in bed in Lek's grey T-shirt. She watched, on repeat, the same five episodes of Broadchurch they had seen together—refusing, out of superstition, to watch any further. She downloaded the video game about a thunderbird destroying oil pipelines and tried to imagine the pleasure Lek felt when he played it. She chewed at her fingernails until she was biting skin but felt none of the buzz she experienced when Lek grazed her skin with his teeth. There was, she realized, a period of waiting after the end of a relationship which mirrored the waiting at the beginning.

Once, she mustered enough energy to change into regular clothes, and decided to make a list of reasons why she shouldn't miss Lek. She grabbed a yellow legal pad from the stack she kept in her desk drawer, and in large block letters she scrawled the word **INATTENTIVE**, followed by a question mark. What counted as listening to someone or noticing things about them? Lek always noticed when she wore a new item of clothing but never complimented her. Is this new, he would ask, then said nothing more after her response. She crossed out **inattentive** and wrote down: **WITHHOLDING**.

A week later, Zena tapped into something that was part brokenness, part bravery and logged onto Facebook. She checked Lek's profile, bracing herself for pictures of his new girlfriend. She hadn't expected the rush of desire she felt, which almost edged out her jealousy. Lek's new girlfriend worked as a hairdresser.

Zena had once taken a class on the ethnography of emotion. She spent weeks trying to understand cruel optimism and fell behind on all her homework. Finally, a classmate told her that cruel optimism wasn't produced by the object of desire but by the act of desiring. Zena turned on her cellphone for the first time in nine days and called Happy Thoughts Hair Salon. "Could I make an appointment for a Women's cut," she said to the voice that answered the phone. "What days is Mona available?"

**THE HAIRDRESSER'S HEIGHT WAS ACCENTUATED** by the fact that Zena was seated. Mona wore sparkly, gold sneakers, and Zena could imagine Lek saying: Swag. Zena wanted to appear dramatic. She wanted to touch Mona's face, with the same gesture Lek used with her after they slept together.

“I want a pixie cut,” she said. “Can you make it look like yours?”

The question elicited the reaction Zena had wanted. Mona’s eyebrows went up, and she smiled like a child discovering her new toy is edible. “Are you sure,” she asked. “Are you really sure?”

Zena nodded.

Mona ran her fingers through Zena’s frizzy, shoulder-length hair. She asked Zena to close her eyes and sprayed a sweet-smelling mist over Zena’s scalp. Janelle Monae’s *ArchAndroid* played over the sounds of snipping and hairdryers. Mona hummed as she cut Zena’s hair with steady intensity.

“When is your birthday?” Zena asked.

Mona paused in order to answer the question. “July,” she said. “July twelfth.”

“You’re a water sign,” Zena said, but Mona had resumed cutting and didn’t hear.

Zena flipped through a fashion magazine, unable to gauge whether the silence was comfortable, strained, or necessary. She came across an article that said women develop crushes on people they want to emulate. Mona seemed like a firm and nurturing person. They didn’t speak for the next thirty minutes, and Zena tipped twenty percent before leaving. She felt smitten but didn’t know why.

Zena frequently fell in love with women but told herself it was mimetic desire. A boy with hairless arms and soft lips had once read to her about Girard’s double bind. He graduated from the philosophy program and left the city soon after. Occasionally, Zena received cryptic postcards from him with lines from surrealist poets. Their separation had been a matter of logistics: he was never returning to Bombay.

“There’s no way we won’t meet again,” he’d said.

When he left, Zena felt like a sixteen-year-old after a summer romance. A bittersweet emotion, which she wallowed in for weeks, secretly pleased that she could still fall in love like a hormonal teenager. The feeling she held for Lek was different—it made her nauseous, like her internal organs were being squished together. Along the spectrum of unpleasantness, this feeling was not the kind of unpleasantness she craved. She felt exhilarated by the precision of pain inflicted intentionally.

Zena started attending class again and got her hair styled by Mona every few weeks until it almost felt genuine: the affection she felt for this tall, ebullient woman. Months passed, and Zena nearly forgot what brought her to Mona in the first place. Being single felt easy, and her pixie haircut provided an aura of sexual ambiguity that prevented nosy relatives from asking questions about her love life. Even her fantasy life was almost devoid of Lek, though sometimes she thought about Mona.

On New Year's Eve, Zena had an appointment for a trim. She wondered why Mona looked overjoyed. "Any big plans," Zena asked.

"Big plans?"

"For tonight."

"For tonight, of course. I mean, of course that's what you meant. Just a night in with my boyfriend watching *Big Boss*. We just found out that we're pregnant."

Zena smiled and nodded, afraid that her voice wouldn't work if she tried to speak.

"Thank—I mean, sorry," Mona said and blushed when she realized Zena hadn't congratulated her. She avoided Zena's eyes in the mirror, and they lapsed into their usual silence.

It had been months since Zena had sex, or even the promise of sex. She wondered whether Lek and Mona had boring sex now that Mona was pregnant. She wondered whether they had sex at all. Zena wanted to feel special. She hoped Mona was more cordial with her other clients and tried to think of ways to confirm this wishful hunch.

The salon could only fit seven people at a time, and clients who arrived early could be seen standing outside the glass entrance doors smoking cigarettes or nursing cups from the coffee shop next door. There were two chairs between the three hairstylists, one hair-washing station, and a small desk where the receptionist took payments. She would arrive early next time, Zena decided, and squeeze herself inside the salon to eavesdrop on Mona.

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**THE FOLLOWING MONTH**, Zena showed up an hour early for her four p.m. appointment. She'd once heard that masochists are always early. She thought about how Lek woke up at six in the morning and wondered whether being an early-morning person was the same as being an early person. Like a human alarm clock, he used to wake her when he stepped out of bed at precisely five minutes to seven.

Zena stood awkwardly between the door and reception desk and caught snippets of conversation between the sound of hairdryers and running water. Was Mona inviting this client to her baby shower? Or was she trying to explain how being pregnant made it difficult to shower? That couldn't be true, Zena thought.

"Do you have any ibuprofen," Zena asked the receptionist.

"No, would you like to take a seat?"

There were no chairs available, so Zena just smiled and shook her head. Telling someone you wouldn't like to take a seat felt too aggressive. "Nice nail art," she said.

The receptionist brightened. "Mona did it for me."

Zena felt a cramp, and wondered whether she was about to get her period. She imagined the humiliation of bleeding all over the chair while having her hair styled. Lost in the possibility of this scenario, Zena missed the rest of Mona's conversation with the client who had been invited to the baby shower. She took solace in the way Mona beamed when she saw Zena waiting.

**HALFWAY THROUGH THE HAIRCUT**, right when Mona's scissors were poised to snip, Zena saw Lek in the mirror. She turned her head abruptly, and the scissors nicked her behind the ear. Mona gasped and started apologizing, even though it had been Zena's fault. A first aid kit was brought. Everyone stopped working and gathered around them. Lek stood near the door, and Zena avoided his gaze. Maybe he wouldn't recognize her, she thought. Mona applied an unnecessary amount of Dettol to the cut, and Zena felt a pleasurable sting from the antiseptic. She wondered whether some varieties of pain felt good because of the anticipation of aftercare. Seeing that the damage was minimal, everyone

went back to their stations, and Lek walked over to greet Mona. He kissed her on the cheek and nodded at Zena in a noncommittal manner.

“I won’t charge for the haircut,” Mona said.

“Your hair looks different,” Lek said.

“You two know each other,” Mona said.

Zena remained silent. She wanted to fall into Mona’s arms and sob. She wanted Mona to break Lek’s heart. But somehow they continued the conversation without her and it seemed she was now invited to a meal at their apartment.

“You’re good to go,” Mona said, tapping Zena on the shoulder. “And we’ll see you for dinner tonight. Lek has your number.”

On her way home, Zena tried to remember what had been said. How much did Mona know? How did Lek feel about her? Why had they asked her to dinner? Insisted, even. She floated home, showered, changed, and called an Uber, which dropped her outside of Lek’s apartment. At the door to his house, she realized her mistake, and texted Lek to say she would be late. They were meeting at Mona’s place, which was in the opposite direction.

**LEK OPENED THE DOOR** to Mona’s place when Zena arrived.

“Are you like living together now,” she said.

“You’re on time for once,” Lek said, even though she wasn’t, and squeezed her shoulder but didn’t hug her.

Zena followed him past the living room and into the kitchen. Mona stirred a pot of red basil curry and gestured for Lek to carry a bowl of rice into the dining area. Their movements in the kitchen were graceful.

“Hope you like Thai food,” Mona said.

“You made all this?”

“Wouldn’t that be something. No, the maid cooked. I’m just heating it up. I sent her to Deepak cinema. It’s one of the last few single screen cinemas around. She refuses to go to the multiplexes. It overwhelms her, and the ushers are rude.”

“Can I help with anything?”

“Make yourself at home,” Mona said.

Zena wasn't sure whether she should make herself at home in the living room or in the dining room where Lek was setting the table. She felt like an audience member who has been invited onstage without clear instructions. Unable to decide, she lingered in the kitchen and feigned interest in the magnetic poetry on the fridge.

*Naked nasty thighs/tremendous trembling caress/ a murmur.* These two, Zena concluded, were not particularly skilled as poets.

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**DURING DINNER**, Lek told a story that Zena remembered differently, but she didn't correct him. "On our first date," Lek said, "I pretended to live in Bandra, just so I could share a taxi with Zee, and spend a few more minutes with her. We started making out, and the driver started coughing to get us to stop but we just ignored him completely. She was wearing this dark maroon lipstick, and when I finally got home my roommates started giggling because my lips were stained with color. So next time I got my revenge and gave her a love bite."

Every first kiss begins with an invocation: a hand reaching for another hand, a tilt of the head, or a gaze that lingers. Lek had leaned forward and touched the tip of her nose with his finger before kissing her. It had been, Zena remembered, in a parking lot outside a café after their first date. But did any of that matter, did it matter he was recalling some other date with some other woman as long as he recalled their first kiss with fondness?

"How cute," Mona said.

No one said anything for a few moments. The dining table was adjacent to a small balcony with a glass sliding door and red batik curtains that were drawn open. Mona's apartment was on the second floor, and there wasn't much to see except the neighboring apartment where a middle-aged couple watched television while eating bowls of fruit. "They always look content, those two," Mona said, breaking the silence that had settled over them. "In the afternoons she gives sitar lessons to other women in the building. He's always home for dinner. Watching them is very soothing."

Lek drank too many glasses of red wine, and Mona spooned too much ice cream onto her slice of pie. Zena wondered what her own excess had been that evening and what anxieties it revealed. Had she been talking too much? Things were pleasant enough: the couple behaved graciously, expressed interest in Zena's work, and didn't make her feel excluded. Living together without getting married had been a romantic decision, they told her. Choosing to be with each other every day without a binding contract. This wasn't the same man she had dated. The man who once pretended to have lost the five-page handwritten letter she gave him because he didn't want to acknowledge her love.

Eventually the three of them moved to the living room and kept drinking. Mona and Zena sat next to each other, and Lek placed himself in the armchair across them.

"He called me by your name once," Mona said. She was addressing Zena, but her eyes were on Lek.

"What," Zena said.

"Zee," Mona said. "During sex. He called me by your name. I thought I had imagined it. You have such a unique name. And then you started coming to the salon."

"You knew who I was," Zena said.

"We have a guest," Lek said, as if the conversation had nothing to do with Zena.

"I'm trying to communicate with you," Mona said. "If this is what it takes then, well, I don't know."

Zena rubbed Mona's shoulder and said, "There there. All this sadness, it's bad for the baby."

"You're getting hysterical," Lek said.

"Why don't you just listen to her," Zena said. "Try to acknowledge her pain."

"What are you even doing here," Lek said, his face turning red. "You don't even know what this is about."

"He makes everything about him when I try to explain how I'm feeling. He doesn't get it. He thinks I don't feel trapped by this situation, that I'm thrilled about this baby. I had money saved up to start my own business, and now what."

Suddenly Mona leaned forward, and her left hand gripped Lek's hair. For a moment, Zena thought it was a gesture of affection. Lek's face scrunched up, and Zena realized Mona had pulled a few strands of hair from his scalp. Mona rose from her seat and proceeded to slap his arms until he grabbed her wrists to restrain her. Lek had never grabbed Zena in that manner.

How did Mona move with such agility, Zena wanted to ask almost as much as she felt like she needed to get out of that apartment. She got up from the couch, and said, "I'll call an Uber." She once watched a video where a relationship therapist said couples should use touch to express love where words were failing.

"Why don't you hug her," she said to Lek, who was picking up the used wineglasses. Mona had her face between her palms. Zena moved towards the door.

"Stay," Mona stated firmly. Lek's face remained neutral at this pronouncement, but he put the glasses back on the coffee table and sat down next to Mona. He placed an arm around her and glanced at Zena, indicating that she should leave.

Zena felt an urge to sink to the ground right where she stood. In her mind she calculated the proportion of food to alcohol she had consumed that evening. Not enough carbs, she reminded herself. She looked at Lek whose eyes were bloodshot, either from the wine or from holding back tears. The thought crossed her mind that she was a bad person.

"I'll go," she said. "We're taking a field trip to the Aarey Milk Colony bee farm. Early morning. And I think my Uber is here."

**ON THE RIDE HOME**, Zena wondered if the entire evening had been leading up to that moment. Had she been a catalyst for their fight? Zena imagined them having makeup sex, and remembered Lek's strange, strained grunting.

"What would you be doing, if you weren't studying insects," Lek once asked her as they lay in bed.

"I could have been a jewelry designer. Why do you ask?"

"I would have built furniture," Lek said.

Zena thought of the idiom: to stir up a hornet's nest, and how she'd once been stung by stepping on a dead wasp. It felt like pain. There were

adjectives, and quantifications, but no analogy for the experience of blinding physical pain. As an adolescent, the causes had always seemed so simple: bug bites, stomach aches, period cramps, playing hot hands, experimenting with cutting, accidentally stabbing yourself with a compass while trying to draw a perfect full moon. The dinner with Mona and Lek didn't register on Zena's pain scale. She felt calm, as if in anticipation of the tooth fairy or love at first sight, things she didn't fully believe in.

**ZENA HAD ONCE KNOWN A WOMAN** who could predict the length of a relationship before it even began. At parties, they would drink whiskey sours and stand in a corner watching people couple off.

"One night," Bina would say, pointing at a man in a denim jacket with his arm around a bored-looking woman.

"Two weeks," Zena attempted. She pointed at two men who appeared to be yelling into each other's ears.

"No," Bina said, rolling her eyes. "They've already been together two weeks. It is so obvious. Their smiles almost match. I give them five more months."

Zena and Bina had drifted apart when Zena met Lek. She had been afraid to introduce the two of them. She always wondered whether Bina knew, whether she saw the puppy-dog adoration in Zena's eyes and knew he didn't feel the same.

**THE NEXT MORNING**, seventeen biology students arrived at Aarey Milk Colony in a rented school bus. The trip would conclude their unit on insect bites and venoms. Rao took a headcount as they exited the bus. Eight students had gotten out of it by claiming an aggressive beesting allergy, and one had a family function to attend. Rao introduced the group to the beekeeper who would be their tour guide.

Zena had forgotten her sunglasses on the bus and returned to retrieve them. She found Professor Rao back in her seat and asked if she was okay.

"I'm just tired," Rao said. "When you're my age, everything hurts. All your joints hurt, and you constantly feel like you could fall over."

"It gets better with time doesn't really apply here," Zena said, then regretted her words.

In the distance, the tour had commenced, and someone shrieked followed by laughter.

“Take this,” Rao said, and pushed a warm Frooti into Zena’s hand. Zena realized she looked like a suck-up, staying back to chat with the teacher. The juice pack, which she felt obliged to accept, embarrassed her.

“Go on, get going,” Rao said.

Zena remembered something Professor Rao once said about how complicated questions can have the simplest answers. “I liked your lecture on *Apis Mellifera*,” she said. Zena stepped off the bus to join the others, having forgotten her sunglasses yet again, and enjoying the harsh afternoon sunlight against her skin like dozens of small biting insects.