

Death On Sale

Swara Shukla

Don't fight the numbness. It is protecting you from feeling the full weight of a lifetime's worth of his possessions in your bag, the full weight of the scarf you are holding, your fingers tracing the same fabric his thumbs did last winter when he leaned against your sofa sipping his over-sweetened coffee, when he insisted on wearing it despite his glistening forehead to prove his love for your lockdown knitting skills, when he hugged you for the last time before leaving for another crowded ICU. The sameness feels uncomfortable with the absences speckling this marketplace you have forgotten to walk through. There's the signboard announcing *Janpath Market* against the blue that's still as faded as it was the last time you were here, the stained grey path with the same square patterns you had playfully hopped on as he'd obliged you with his fond exasperation. And it's the same process, one foot after the other, one step forward at a time, past the signboard. Don't think about the name, the accuracy-turned-irony of "people's path," just focus on the sameness of the sign and the sameness of your movement past it.

Tighten your grip on the scarf, commit its texture to memory, just like you have done with the route you are taking to the erstwhile Sonu Sweets that you know will be devoid of the din and the fragrance of the jalebis you ended so many of your dates with. You will get used to the inconsistencies of the market; for now, don't lose your pace, you are almost there. Don't look at the missing billboards of the saree shops you had frequented two years ago, remind yourself that the unused wedding paraphernalia piled up in your room is resaleable too. Turn the corner and – don't falter – look at the shanty that those sprawling glass cases of delicacies have been reduced to, still in the same spot at the end of the same route, standing at the precipice of sameness like all the other simulacra populating the market now. Go up to the vendor – the same guy you had haggled with for all those boxes of barfi you had distributed to friends you never saw again – and add the scarf to the piles of trinkets and footwear and clothes that surround him now, random tidbits of pre-apocalyptic lives. Tell yourself it's the mask preventing you from picking up any residual aromas of

the sweets and savouries you had planned to give as return gifts to the guests, that this place is still somewhat reminiscent of the shop that provided you both with those initial stolen moments of privacy that made their way into the pages of his diaries that you finished boxing up this morning. The vendor gives you a ten-rupee-note doused in sanitizer with a finality that closes any potential to bargain, not that you know how to price-tag memories. Step back, put more than an arm's length between you and the scarf. Let it be part of this flotsam.

Take in the scene, observe the clientele of survivors milling about the shanty, the woman dressed in green giving your vendor a few books with tattered binding. Watch him weighing them and throwing them on top of some crumpled shirts, paying her with another damp note. There's a broken remnant of an old "on sale" board peeking out from behind the stall in an unwitting proclamation of human resourcefulness. You have to tap into the plentiful; death is in never-ending supply, survival in never-ending demand. This vendor is a great businessman, repurposing death for survival.

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Ignore the strap of the bag cutting into your shoulder, tugged by objects that carry more weight than the vendor's scale can measure. It is okay to hold on a little longer, okay to get used to the loss in fragments. Turn back around, reshape your memory to fit the altered contours of the market, retrace your steps, one foot after the other, always the same movement, past the signboard. Get into your car, back to safety, back to the luxury of unmasking and breathing regurgitated air that continues to protect you, even though it failed to shield him. Take the wheel, start the engine, and keep driving through this war-torn world full of silences you don't remember getting used to. Lock yourself up in your brick-and-mortar bubble as soon as you get back to it, make it more crack-proof. It's okay to be alone, remember that – it's okay to devalue human connections in a world where people are just ephemera wearing clothes for eventual sale.

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I am a PhD student in English Philology at the University of Münster, Germany, where I also teach a seminar on Indian book publishing. I hold graduate degrees in English Literature from the University of Delhi and Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow. I have a background in the publishing sector and have worked with Penguin Random House India. My short fiction has been published by magazines and small presses in the UK; including *Escaped Ink Press* and *Fly on the Wall Press* in England, and *Gutter Issue 18* and *28* in Scotland. I use fiction as an outlet for my reflections on lives on the fringes of India, mostly Delhi. Outside of books, writing and research, my interests include dogs, coffee and Indian music.



“Lineage No. 2,” Laura Nroumanis, 2023

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