

Daffodils and Switches

By Kunal Mehra

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... "Daffodils and Switches" by Kunal Mehra is sad, beautiful, and gorgeous – as if Scarlett Johansson walked up to you at the end of a movie and whispered in your ear – and I fully think that you should take the time to read this story.*

In 2001, I can remember sitting on my family's computer, signing onto instant messenger, and trying to fall in love with my classmates through writing. At school, young Joey was not the most popular kid – not the least but certainly not the most (tell you the truth, older Joey probably isn't the most popular kids either but here we are). Learning to be open and honest with another person through online communicating was new, exciting, slightly dangerous, and brought me closer to people that I would normally never have enough balls to talk to in person.

There is a longing between Julian and Isabel within this story that grows over time. There is a lustful sadness between these two characters as you watch them both fall for each other through letters – knowing that their paths may never cross or that they may never be at the right place at the right time to truly express themselves to each other. There is a beauty to reading how the connection between these two characters develops and unfolds as time goes on.

Mehra's style is simple yet emotional, revealing but veiled, needing but always giving. "Daffodils and Switches," is a story that you will enjoy if you have ever attempted to tell someone that you love them through the interwebs; it is a sweet, character driven, piece that will not only make you smile but will also hit your nostalgia hard enough to hurt your heart a little.

Enjoy this story. I'm quite positive that you will.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language)...

I like you, loopy or normal. Besides, normal is just a setting on the dryer.

He's an extroverted and social person, so I was just in shock. Later, he told me what a battle he wages every day to keep his fears and emotions inside him, while being someone else on the outside.

Daffodils and Switches

February 2001

Hey Julian,

It was nice chatting with you last night. I've talked with quite a lot of people in chat rooms, but you stood out. So far at-least, hehe.

So, what's your plan for the weekend? Any crazy parties or are you more of the read-book-on-couch kinda guy?

Curiosity and hope,

****Isabel****

• • •

Hi there,

Hope this finds you well. It was fun getting to know you. I'm not much of a party guy, but my roommate is, so it's quite likely that he'll force me to drink.

Maybe we can talk on the phone again?

Take care,

Julian

• • •

Hey fun boy,

Sorry I couldn't write sooner. This will be short, but I want you to know that I enjoyed our call from last night. Don't feel bad for feeling selfish for taking up so much of my time. Every minute I chat with you is one less minute that I'm not depressed...hehe. Talk to you soon.

Laughs and sunny days,

****Isabel****

• • •

Dear Isabel,

Did I tell you that Jessica called me last night and said she couldn't "handle seeing so much of my flesh, lol". A couple of days ago, I had emailed her a photo of me wearing just shorts. I never thought it would excite her "that way". What a weirdo I am, chatting with a fifty-five-year-old married mother-of-four janitor who works in a jail.

College sucks. Nothing new there. I am flailing miserably, especially in Economics.

Yesterday, my friend and I went to a small Amish village in Ohio. We weren't supposed to take any photographs of the Amish, but they were so adorable in their little black buggies that I couldn't resist. And, they don't use electricity, so they had a million candles lighting up their cute woodsy homes. Here's one stealth photo.

Yours,

Julian

• • •

Hey Sweetie,

That's a cute photo. I had never thought of living without electricity. Hmm...that's giving me some ideas now.

I had better not get too many ideas in my tiny red head, though. I have a hard time managing the ones I have anyway. Today, I'm so sad, I feel like laughing out loud. Lol. I talked to my dad yesterday and he said "you know Isabel, when you were a little kid, you used to laugh so much, your eyes would twinkle every time you'd laugh. I always thought that it didn't matter if the skies were cloudy at night – I could just walk over to your bed and tickle you and there'd be all the stars I ever wanted to see". After I hung up with him, I felt sadder than before. What's happening to me? I used to be light and airy, but now I feel like I'm living on a deck of cards that can crumble at any time. The slightest wind can throw me off. Do you think I'm loopy?

Enough about me. So, you don't like school? Join the club. What about Jessica? Is she cuter than me? Sometimes I wish I'd like to see that photo you shared with her...hehe. But I'd rather let my imagination run wild...

Oh, did I tell you that I rode my bicycle to class today morning? It was a sunny day – just the right temperature and a few puffy clouds lingering in the sky. There weren't a lot of people nearby, so for a few seconds, I just closed my eyes and took my hands off the handlebar, as the bike and I drifted along into the sunshine. I felt like I was going into a tunnel of happiness.

Xanax and Zoloft,

****Isabel****

ps: Now you know why I always sign off with stars next to my name.

• • •

Hey dear,

I like you, loopy or normal. Besides, normal is just a setting on the dryer.

My roommate had a nervous breakdown yesterday. We were in the living room watching TV and all of a sudden, he buried his head in his hands and started screaming out loud. I ran away from him, but then he started crying. I didn't know what to do. I made my way towards him; my gut instinct told me to hug him. And that's what I did, as weird as it sounds. I didn't say anything and just held him. He continued sobbing in my arms. It took several minutes before he calmed down and talked: he'd always suffered from bouts of manic depression and hypersensitivity. Who would have thought? He's an extroverted and social person, so I was just in shock. Later, he told me what a battle he wages every day to keep his fears and emotions inside him, while being someone else on the outside.

Sigh. We're all so complicated, including me.

On a cheerful side note – I'm thinking of taking a road trip to New Mexico later this autumn. I'm excited to be checking out the high desert and all those vast open country roads that they show in the Western movies. Of course, I want you next to me. We'll be like Kerouac and his buddies, roaring away with the wind in our hair and beer in our bellies. You'll join me, right?

Your not-so-normal lover,

Julian

ps: no, Jessica is not cuter than you. She's cute, but not quite the same level as you. I mean, she's damn hot for a mom of four, but not as cute as you. Aargh...that's not what I meant to say.

• • •

Hey plum,

That's terrible about your roommate. And it was super nice of you to just be there for him, hugs and all. That's so important. I have people in class tell me all the time that I should just get over my depression, like it's some kind of a mosquito bite. It's hurtful to be belittled and not be heard.

By the way: omg, I love the stuffed owl you sent me. It's the best birthday gift I've ever gotten. I run my fingers over it and imagine they're sifting through your long hair.

Road trip! Road trip! That sounds like so much fun.

Thank you again for the gift.

Hugs and cute bugs,

****Isabel****

ps – your comparisons of Jessica and I are sort of, well, funny.

pps - I'm sort of falling in love with you.

• • •

Isabel!

I woke up shivering last night. I dreamt that all phones and computers in the whole country stopped working. And that made me very scared – I miss you, love.

Mwah,

Julian

• • •

Hello cutie-pie,

That would be scary to have us not talk. I think I would wilt away if that were to ever happen.

I took your recommendation of watching the American Beauty and I hated it. Sorry, sweetie, it's just not my thing. Kevin Spacey is so creepy and he's so good at it, it almost seems lifelike. But I did resonate with the Ricky guy. I liked how he's quiet and shy, sad and beautiful, always paying attention to the supposedly insignificant things in life, like that plastic bag dancing in the air.

I was walking through this little garden on the way to the campus a few days ago and came across daffodils blooming in a corner. I knelt down beside those yellow beauties and said: 'How do you guys do it? How do you live without fear and anxiety? Aren't you afraid that someone might step on you? Why do you have to hide your secret from me?' They didn't reply.

I told Mohsin about this and his first response was: 'Did people nearby think you were crazy?' I was silent for a few seconds before saying, 'maybe'.

He knows this aspect of me, but I still feel like an outsider to him and to everyone else. No one knows who I really am and I try my best to hide it from them because they'll think

I'm a weirdo. Will I ever come together as me? I wore bell bottoms to class today and got nothing but odd stares. I came home and laid in bed naked and ate a whole pint of butter pecan ice cream.

Did I tell you that I requested a book from the library about how to be a freelance travel writer? That's my dream. Forget college. I want to move to Greece and live in a crispy sunny white-and-blue bungalow overlooking the Mediterranean and pen sappy masterpieces from my balcony chair. I'll walk to cafes and gorge myself on baklava.

I know it's a crazy dream, but you're the only one I can share it with. You know why? Because you, unlike other guys, aren't afraid to talk about your feelings. In fact, you're way too enthusiastic about it. So much for all your long emails. Just kidding. I really appreciate that, honey. And, you listen when I talk. A few nights ago, I went out with my best friend, who I hadn't seen in a year, and it was terrible. She wouldn't stop talking about herself. I maybe snuck in three complete sentences in our conversation and I doubt she listened to any of those.

Mohsin told me today that I was overreacting to my friend's lack of interest in my life. 'She's just a chatty person', he said. I love him, but there are times when he's so insensitive that I wonder if we're a good fit.

Sometimes, I wish there was a switch I could turn on that would make me more normal. It's a fun image to think of, isn't it?

Daffodils and switches,

****Isabel****

• • •

Isabel my life,

You know that I love bell bottoms, right? Especially on you. Almost as much as I love the idea of you lying in bed naked...I digress.

I think the flowers did reply; you just weren't able to hear them. I want to tell you what they said, but I'll save it for when we meet up on our road trip.

Oh, and it's ok – I know not everyone likes American Beauty. I however, do love *my* American Beauty.

With gratitude,

Julian

• • •

Isabel my love,

I miss you. Last night, my friend Bill and I went to a bar. We don't really have a lot of money, but school sucked so much yesterday, we had to get off campus.

Bill sat next to this nerdy blonde. I got a beer and was hanging out next to the lottery machines. Within a matter of minutes, they asked me to join them. I don't know how he does it; I could be sitting next to her for hours and we'd never get anywhere. Anyway, another beer later, he steps away and winks at me.

She had a book by Knut Hamsun on the counter. Who reads depressing Scandinavian literature in a bar?

We got to chatting about this and that...weather, school, living in Cincinnati...the normal bar-stranger talk. Turns out that she was passing through on her way to San Francisco from somewhere in Arkansas. Long story short, a fair amount of alcohol later, we

walked away from the bar and stood in a corner. I don't know what got into me, but I just did it: I pulled her close and we kissed like I never had before. And I mean that literally. I had never kissed anyone so hard and for so long. It was super awkward when it ended. Neither of us knew what to do. I told her I needed to use the restroom. By the time I came back, she was gone. I searched throughout the bar. Bill was at the counter again, this time with a different girl.

I feel sad...like long-term sad. How can you not fall in love with someone who reads Knut in a bar? Why do we have such painful poignant (did I spell that right?) fleeting experiences in our lives?

You're probably wondering why I miss you after all this mushy stuff about her. The truth, my dear, is that she reminded me of you, except that I've never met you. She was *you* coming alive. She was *you* personified, right here in front of me. And I can't bear to think of a situation when we'd meet – and kiss – and then you'd just disappear. That would be the saddest thing in the world to ever happen.

Can we confirm the road trip please?

Yours in sadness,

Julian

• • •

Hi sweet'ums,

I'm envious of the Knut girl. I wish I was her. That's all I'll say, lol.

I've already started packing for our road trip. How cold do you think it will get in Albuquerque?

Mohsin isn't talking to me. I called him like four times yesterday, but he didn't pick up. My heart would break into forty-seven pieces if he ever tells me that he's seeing someone else.

I'm really loving that freelance book. I can already imagine us in Greece sipping red wine on our balcony, with a typewriter next to us, as the sun sets. I'll dictate and you'll type, right? Hehe.

Forty-seven pieces,

****Isabel****

• • •

Hi sweetie,

I'm sorry about Mohsin. Maybe he's just busy and will get back to you soon?

Yes, let's get greasy in Greece! Sorry, I'm so slimy. You were talking about wine and that got me carried away. But yes, I'm up for it – sure beats working on a thesis that's going nowhere.

By the way, isn't it weird that you're with Mohsin and yet, you and I are in love with each other? We're so screwed up, lol. And the fact that we don't let that get in the way of us wanting to be with each other is even bizarre. Do you think we just like the idea of being in love with each other and don't care if we ever meet? Or maybe we're in love because we have these glorified versions of each other that we've built up all these months and it's tempting to just keep idolizing those images?

I'd hate to think that's the case, but that thought does come into my mind sometimes. Shoo – go away, crazy thought.

Crazy, crazy,

Julian is crazy

ps: does Mohsin know about me?

• • •

August 2001

Hey sug,

I'm afraid this will be shorter than usual.

I'm realizing that I don't really know who I am. I'm afraid to be myself, even with my own self. I'm going to have a beer now. I'm tired of my life and wish it was shorter.

By the way – please email me at this new address. I don't know why I keep switching addresses, but I just can't help it.

Delusions and dreams,

****Isabel****

• • •

Julian,

omg, Mohsin just called to tell me that we're done. Said he couldn't take my mood swings anymore. Can you please call me?

Isabel

• • •

Isabel dear,

I'm so sorry, love. I'm in the lab with my classmates right now, so can't talk, but just remember the stars in your eyes. You are beautiful in more ways than just one. I'll call you tonight.

Julian

• • •

Hi Julian,

I'm choking on the inside, but no one can see it. Part of me feels insulted – how could he do this to me? I'm not that shitty. I have my ups and downs, but aren't you supposed to help your partner through them?

I'm so freaking ready for our road trip. It will be a blast, sugar. We'll put Kerouac to shame. The first thing I'll do when I get in the car is throw a copy of my grades in the wind; I don't need an institutionalized piece of paper telling me how well I'm doing. Then, I'm going to write Mohsin's name on a piece of paper, crumble it up and throw it out the window. We'll sleep in seedy motels in small towns – the kinds where you can hear mice behind the TV – and have hot soaks and cold beers together in the bathtub.

Should we exchange photos before we meet? I'm unsure. Part of me feels like we shouldn't, because I want to make the act of seeing you at the train station be the most

amazing surprise of my life. But the other part feels so damn tempted to just peek at you a little bit before we meet.

Voids and stars,

****Isabel****

ps – would you be annoyed if I told you that I miss Mohsin right now? You mentioned how weird it was that I love both him and you. I really don't know why I love(d) him, but I do (did). Some days, I don't even know why or whether I love myself.

• • •

Hi Plum,

That must indeed feel terrible, especially after you put so much faith and love into it. I'm sorry about it. What do you think will help you get through this hard time? No, I'm not annoyed at you missing Mohsin. Remember, we have a special bond that transcends this world.

I don't think we should exchange photos. I prefer waiting till we see each other. Can you imagine it: there I would be waiting for you at the train station searching for a cute redhead walking out of the train? You might walk past me and I would have no idea until everyone else has left and there'd be just you and I on the empty platform, staring wordlessly at each other.

I love the images you're conjuring of our road trip. Count me in (the bathtub with you, I mean). We'll finally be free of our past, and the future, while it's uncertain, will be ours to carve, mile by open mile.

By the way, what will you be wearing when we meet? Can I get some hints? Can I suggest some outfits?

Excitedly,

Julian

ps: I'll have a surprise gift for you when we meet.

• • •

Hey Isabel dear,

Are you ok? It's been a while since I heard from you.

Worried,

Julian

• • •

Hi darling,

I have bad news. I don't think I can join you on the road trip. I'm battling some strong winds and don't feel like ruining your trip. I'm so sorry, sunshine. Will you call me from the road?

Sighs and highs,

Isabel

• • •

Hey honey,

Are you sure? I can come pick you up and we can drive to New Mexico together if that makes it easier? I promise I'll take care of you and you won't have to worry about any winds at all.

Miles and dreams,

Julian

ps: look, I even imitated your sign-off style just to get you excited.

• • •

Isabel!

Where are you? It's ok if you don't want to join me on the road trip. At-least tell me that you're doing ok.

Please,

Julian

• • •

November 2003

Hi Isabel,

It's been two years since I heard from you. Yesterday, I was walking the dog when I saw two cherry blossoms drift down in the wind; they briefly kissed each other before landing on the wet ground. I was reminded of us. Where are you now? Are you ok?

I can't tell you how many times I've dialed your phone. Of course, someone else has that number now and they've probably blocked me, but I just can't help dialing it. I don't even know if you're still checking this email address.

Yours, still,

Julian

• • •

Hey Isabel,

Where are you, my starry love?

I have lots to tell you about my life, but it would be selfish to lay it all out here, when I don't know a thing about you these days. I wonder if you went to Greece. Maybe that's where you are now and you're living off-grid? I hope you still think of me.

Remember I told you I had a surprise gift for you when we were planning to meet up for our road trip? It was a photo I took, lying in a field of daffodils, looking up at the clear blue sky. I framed it in a violet-colored frame, your favorite color. I wanted to tell you that daffodil bulbs have a protective layer – a tunic – that not only protects the plant from freezing and heat, but also holds within itself the embryo of the plant that will blossom the following year. Deep within, they know how to take care of themselves, year after year. And maybe that's what they were shyly trying to tell you that spring morning when you stopped your bike and talked to them.

Still hopeful,

Julian

ps: I still have that photo on my desk.

• • •

December 2005

Hi love,

I was lying in a tent one night while camping in the desert. It was late October – cold and frosty; I was awakened by something and gazed up at the cold star-laden sky, and the memory of our time together rushed into my mind. It had been several years since I had thought of you, so I don't know what triggered it. Maybe it was the distant beauty and allure of the stars – stars that I have never touched, just like you, and perhaps never will.

Still waiting,

Julian

• • •

February 2018

My dearest Isabel,

It's been almost seventeen years since we last talked. Do you remember that road trip we fantasized about? That road is still open, you know. I never could muster the desire to do it without you by my side.

I wonder what you look like now (or ever did). Do you still have pink streaks in your hair? Does the wind still make your life sway like crazy?

But most importantly, what about the stars in your eyes when you laugh?

Yours fondly,

Julian

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote 'Daffodils and Switches' because I was intrigued by the idea of two characters who'd never met in-person, who started to develop an intangible connection with each other and, despite their individual challenges, continued to stay in touch via emails (perhaps the most frequently-used electronic communication channel in the early 2000s). I was curious where I could take the story from there – would they ever meet up and start dating? Would they breakup over email? Would they slowly lose touch? Might they get married?*

I like stories that don't always have stereotypical endings, ones that create enough room for the unknown, that leave the reader wondering what the characters will do once the story's over. Chekhov, Mary Oliver, Matsuo Basho and Proust are some of my favorite authors. The themes and styles of movies by directors like Yasujiro Ozu and Andrey Tarkovsky also influence my writing.

AUTHOR BIO: Kunal Mehra is a multimedia artist who likes photography, filmmaking, writing and hiking. He grew up in India and has been living in Portland, OR, since 2002. His writing has been published by the Press Pause Press, Active Muse and Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon.

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