

SHORT STORY

# The Girl in the Yellow Painting

by Taslim Burkowicz



"Yellow" by Vanesa Erjavec

“Cocksucker. Shit. Fuck.”

Rina looks around the café in Guildford, wondering if anyone has heard her. Her Tourette’s is ten times worse when she is forced to do things that she isn’t at least partially invested in. At thirty-six, her parents are worried she hasn’t met anyone to settle down with. She doesn’t have the energy to tell them she doesn’t want the life they have, that their spats about minor things like her dad leaving a spoon in the sink make her crazy. She wants space for herself to have tics without a spectator, but most of all, she knows with certainty she wants to drink her morning tea in peace. Men are territorial, and she feels having one around with any permanency will destroy her sanctity.

Maybe her parents have found out that longevity of life is increased by having a partner, but she would gladly choose a shorter life if it meant less badgering. A female mayfly, after all, lives at the bottom of a stream in nymph form for a year before emerging as a flying adult to then live for five glorious minutes. Rina tries hard to hang on to this part of the mayfly’s story and not the other part, which says in those five minutes it must find a mate, copulate, and lay its eggs back into the water where it came from.

Rina’s parents are convinced that a Gujarati man, someone from the same community they come from, is the best person to accept her condition. Marrying an Indian man, they say, will eliminate one less thing to fight about in a marriage. Indian people take care of their own. When Rina looks back at her families’ generational habit of marrying into cousins, she wonders if there is some truth to what they say. Her Tourette’s Syndrome has made her vulnerable to falling into the category of *needing to be taken care of*. Her parents think people who come from different backgrounds can never find common ground. On television, watching soaps, she notes that Black people are always paired with Black mates and Hispanic people with Hispanic, further proof that her parents are right. In passing, her parents mention that Aliyah from mosque has a husband who is white and that he never shows up to any function. Aliyah is no better than a widow and attends weddings alone. Rina worries that at her own hypothetical wedding, her parents will plummet their life savings on midnight burger stations and an overpriced DJ that they won’t even dance to. But she can’t say any of these things to the people who are planning her wedding as if it is one of the most important things they are supposed to accomplish in life.

Rina suspects her parents would have some respect if she chose a Persian or Syrian husband, someone that comes from a culture that holds on to old world thinking where women are still revered for things like beauty and cooking, where men work hard, where everyone wears jewelled, brocaded fabrics at weddings, and where no one wears shoes indoors. They want her to be with a man who, even when faced with Christmas trees and Santa Clause, will still

indoctrinate their future children into loving Eid and Iftar instead. She doesn't bother explaining to them that she has stopped going to mosque, not just because swearing sporadically and echoing any profanity that she might have recently come across disturbs even the most devout, but that she finds the whole religion archaic and dated; the stories she has grown up on feature camels and nomads and quarterings and caves. Maybe if the religion was pitched in a different way, Rina would be a more willing participant.

But her parents are getting older and appeasing them is more important to her now than standing up for the life she wants. After all, isn't everyone born into a social network that outweighs their own individualistic aspirations, from Prince Charles to a Masai warrior? What makes Rina different than any other person in any other time who was forced to uphold familial traditions? Even adopted children are socialized to meet new expectations. There is only so much running away one can do from what families we are brought into and the disadvantages they present.

The Gujarati Date is late. That is how she likes to think of him. Not as Alim but as "The Gujarati Date." She looks around anxiously, taking in the café interspersed with brick walls, local art, and tiny macaroons arranged under a glass case that look like compacts of makeup at a Sephora counter. An odd jewel of a trendy spot in a location otherwise filled with an abundance of functional coffee spots in Surrey.

"Fuck. Motherfucker," she spews out, her lower jaw distorting.

Alim arrives just as her words have drifted away. Even in the world of Instagram and Facebook she has refused to see a picture, knowing she won't want anything to do with him once she sees how he represents his social media self. Alim will likely post gym selfies or cocky chess game play recaps. Reels of fuchsia and sapphire explosions in the sky filmed by his iPhone 14 or concert shots of has-been rappers snapped under purple lights at BC Place. Or worst of all, photos of himself cocooned in a nest of glitzy showgirls at a suburban casino. But she can't guarantee Alim hasn't seen a picture of her. She knows Indian men favour her kind of look, tall with a shade of brown that has people asking her if she is anything but Indian, two dimples that accompany her smile, and a relatively fit frame. Once they hear of her Tourette's, be it through mosque gossip or a first-person experience, they will find different ways to disengage. Thus, because Alim wants to meet Rina despite knowing of her condition, her parents have pinned an abundance of hope on The Gujarati Date.

"Rina, right?" Alim points at an empty chair for confirmation before he goes to sit down. Even before he does, Rina is almost relieved he isn't her type. He isn't fat, necessarily, but round, filled out in a chunky, half "gym" and half "I-eat-burgers-when-ever-I-want-bruh"

kind of way. He is darker and shorter than her 5'9 frame, which most guys see as a challenge to beat as if she has threatened invading their air space on purpose.

She nods, willing herself not to have an outburst this early. When she was six, her tics started with barks and growls. Now they have grown into strings of swear words and facial grimaces. Letting another person talk first, she knows, is the best way to control a verbal tic.

“So good to meet you. I’m Alim,” he says, as if she doesn’t already know this.

She nods again, hoping he will fill the space with more words.

“So, like, that painting hanging above you? It totally looks like you.”

She looks above to see where he is pointing. The background fully yellow, atop, a female face is sketched in angry streaks of indigo, blue, and pink. It’s breathtaking and disconcerting all at the same time. The face looks like it’s struggling with life and with everything that gets thrown at it, but also that it’s surviving and maybe even thriving.

“Cocksucker. Fuck you, you Sand Nigger!”

“Wow, it’s like that, is it?”

“I’m sorry,” Rina says. Her hand flies to cover her mouth. She feels ashamed as she always does, even though the tics are involuntary. The lower side of her face begins to twitch under her calmed palm.

“Nah,” he says. “You’re fucking right. I use that line on every single girl I meet here.” He gives her a half-shrug. “I judge them based on their response. Will they pretend to go along with the weird notion of being likened to an abstract painting? Will they believe my compliment is genuine? Will they be offended? Yours is actually the best response. Hey, you got yourself a drink? Am I that late?”

When she looks strained, he realizes she’s trying to control her facial spasms and to her relief, he pretends not to notice. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to get myself a drink.”

When he returns, she’s calmed a little. The worst part is over. She isn’t going to say anything more outrageous than this. Racist slurs are the worst part of her syndrome. Unfortunately, the more inappropriate, the more likely she is to memorize and parrot certain taglines. Some people do uncontrollable things like laughing when someone gets hurt or crying when they are happy, and some people have Tourette’s. It happens without conscious will, part muscle spasm, part reactionary. And nothing she does seems to help except age out. Tourette’s seems to be at its worst early on in age, levelling out in middle age, and potentially, worsening with very old age.

“Thanks for waiting,” he sits back down again, mug in hand. A leaf, engraved into the foam, decorates the surface of his coffee. His face is round, like a meatball, and he has a wide grin that takes over his face.

“I really am the girl in the painting. I take it as a compliment,” Rina finds herself saying. When he looks at her quizzically, she swallows another tic. “I feel like her. I’m chaotic, spastic, fighting for control. You know, given that I have Tourette’s. I’m sure your parents warned you that I have it.”

He nods. “Yeah, weirdly enough, I totally see it. Yellow is happiness and caution. You’re made up of brilliant and vivid colours. You’re unique; that’s for sure.”

*I am?* she wants to ask. Then she wants to snap, *You don’t even know me*, but she looks down at her hands instead.

“Why did you agree to meet me when I have Tourette’s?”

“Last two girls I met here, I wanted to rip my hair out, hand-to-god. First one was a banker. Boring as fuck. And the second, I can’t even remember what she did, took a million selfies of the coffee before she even looked up to talk to me. A man of my age can’t risk ripping out his hair, you know? I take pills to keep it. Sit under laser lights and what not. So yeah, I agreed to meet you. You sounded different.”

So much honesty, she can’t help but smile. She gets an image of him late at night ordering discount packages of hair supplements on Amazon, computer screen shining on his face.

“You like Brown girls then?”

“Yeah,” he leans back in his chair. “What’s not to like?”

*Our stupid ties to our stupid culture. Our inability to give you children with blonde hair and blue eyes.* “Oh,” she says instead. She isn’t sure whether his answer makes Alim a good person, a bad one, or neither. She isn’t sure if his attraction is based on a type of allegiance to Brown brother and sisterhood, or if it just makes him a bullshit stereotype that she wants to run away from, while tossing over her shoulder “Screw you, I will never learn your mother’s recipe for *channa bateta*, so there!”

“What else made you want to rip your hair out with the other girls,” she says, calmed by his odd confessions. She takes a sip of her still warm green tea latte.

“They quizzed me on a bunch of bullshit. Like, what my income is, and can I afford to be the sole breadwinner, and how many kids do I want.”

“But those are reasonable questions considering this date is meant to test compatibility for marriage. I could ask the same.”

“That takes the fun out of romance, don’t you think? I’m still hoping for that part.” He blows on his coffee art. It quivers. “And you won’t ask them.”

Rina raises her eyebrow.

“You’re obviously out of my league,” Alim adds. “I know that. You don’t care, so you aren’t going to waste your time.”

“I have a boyfriend.” His facial expression doesn’t change, so she continues. “His name is Finn. My parents just wanted me to at least consider another option.”

“A white guy?”

“Yeah.”

“So, they’re upset about the white guy thing?”

She considers this. “They don’t love it, but they think anyone is better than no one given my, you know, condition. Looks only last so long.”

“For what it’s worth, I think it’s emancipating that you just act as you want.”

“I don’t act as I want,” she says. “It’s actually the very opposite of what you say. I spew out things I don’t even believe in. I have to be careful of what shows I watch or who I surround myself with because I have echolalia and I might start regurgitating a bunch of nonsense. I can’t even watch a documentary on people with Tourette’s because I’m scared, you know, that I’ll start integrating a whole new batch of profanity into my already disturbing library.”

“So, you really can’t keep it in check?”

“I have OCD. It’s a comorbid condition. But weirdly enough, obsessing over things makes me feel like I can regain control over others. That’s my way of making sense of it, but experts say the conditions exist because of each other, and not because one condition is trying to help balance out the other.”

She has never discussed the length of her condition in so many details, but here she is, laying it out for The Gujarati Date. He stares at her, fascinated.

“Like tapping and skipping over cracks?”

“No. Like obsessively rechecking to make sure I haven’t sent the wrong bitchy messages to the wrong friend on Facebook messenger. Having to hit a certain amount of kilometers on a hike. That sort of thing. Oh, and obsessive thoughts, too.”

“What kind?” It isn’t invasively asked, more like a three-year-old asking why stars twinkle.

“Doing horrible things to myself like chopping off my own fingers, cutting my skin off. Those started when I was a teenager. I’d get images of someone cutting my chest open every night. But mostly though,” she waits until she has his rapt attention, “it’s me doing bad things to myself like jumping over a bridge or driving my car into someone else’s. That one’s the worst, because now I’m integrating hurting others in my neurotic thinking.”

“It’s your way of protecting yourself to make sure those things don’t happen,” he says matter-of-factly. “Moms have that when they have newborns, so they don’t accidentally do bad things to their babies.”

She takes this in. “Maybe. But mine makes me recheck things so many times it’s exhausting. I can’t even shop online because I have to check the transaction a hundred times. Routines really work for me. You know, recently I read Posh Spice eats the same thing everyday and it was pitched like the worst thing in the world. But consistency is such a relief for someone like me. Anyway, I was lucky that my germ OCD lasted only like a year of elementary school. I looked into a payphone and saw dirt in the tiny dots that are on the mouthpiece, and then started seeing that specific coloured dirt on every type of phone I used. I had to pick the dirt out of them with a toothpick. It can take a dangerous turn, letting your mind wander like that... almost restarted again when I saw that mites live on our face, and they have eight legs and a mouth. Demodex. Do not Google them,” she warns.

“You’d hate my place, then. It’s pretty filthy. I don’t tend to research parasitic mites. Hey, why not tell your parents to just accept Finn?” He changes the topic swiftly, tapping the table with his fingers now. He has square nails. Pudgy fingers she can’t imagine being attracted to.

“They think he isn’t going to take care of me in the way I deserve.” Once she has said this, she can’t take any of it back. “But,” she finds herself adding, “I’m going to work on them.”

“I want to be offended,” he pauses to take a cautious sip. “That you came to meet here, knowing full well I’m not what you’re looking for. But we’re all taking risks meeting in this kind of environment. Offering ourselves up to see if we’re attractive enough for another person to be willing to put up with our bullshit ways.”

“I’m really sorry,” Rina says. And it’s the first time in a long time that she’s apologized without triggering a tic.

“I have to ask; do you think this Finn’s going to come through for you?”

“I mean, does anyone really know what someone’s going to be like twenty years into a marriage? And like for the record, I’m not some broken baby bird, you know?”

“No,” he smiles. “No, I suppose you’re right.”

At home, in her own apartment, Rina checks the lock on the back door three times before she goes to bed. She realizes when she returns that she never once asked Alim what his job is or how many siblings he has. He had found out that she is a copywriter, helping a local sports team manage their online media platforms, their advertising material, and other tedious data. Thankfully for her, everything she does can be done safely at home with a computer. In pre-COVID times, she left many jobs before she was fired for her embarrassing interactions with clients, but post-COVID has opened a world of opportunities for jobs that don’t require in-person attendance. She feels guilty when she is grateful for the positive consequences caused by the pandemic.

Alim also knows Rina has a bachelor’s in English and while she once loved historical fiction, especially anything pertaining to WWII, she now edits documents on soccer stats and team player recruitment flyers. She even listed some of her favourite books for him, *The Book Thief*, *All the Light We Cannot See*, *Mischling*, *Sarah’s Key*, *The Nightingale*, and *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, clarifying the latter had controversy surrounding accuracy. Nonetheless, she finds stories of Josef Mengele the most haunting — the Nazi doctor who experimented on dwarves, giants, Romani, and twins, any child that fit the parameters of abnormality. Rina knows she fits this criterion. She isn’t blonde and blue eyed, and she isn’t normal, not by any definition.

When she is alone, she sometimes sings out her signature tics on purpose and fully voluntarily. “Freestyle Touretting” she calls it. She will play afrobeat on the Google kitchen speaker and wiggle, wind, gyrate, and sing alarmingly on key: “Shit, motherfucker! Cocksucker and balls!” Everything will feel better, and then she will make herself the same variation of what she usually eats at night, mixed green salad topped with a nut mix, chopped garlic or red onion (but never both), and olives, all tossed with balsamic vinaigrette and olive oil, a carb (potatoes, pasta, or rice), and some kind of frozen veggie rendition of a fish or chicken cutlet that she thaws out in the oven.

There is no Finn waiting at home for her.

There never was a Finn.

She isn’t sure why she has lied about this to Alim; even worse, why she made her boyfriend out to be white. Perhaps, if she is truly honest with herself, she thinks deep down Brown men idealize white women. At least that is how it was when she was younger, though times are changing, and she can’t say it is true for the Brown men of today. She also can’t admit that

maybe, in her ploy to stop herself from being rejected, she is making the same fallacy by elevating the white man over the Brown man. Instead of deeply examining any of this, Rina tells herself she will love anyone who will love her unconditionally, and maybe this is the truth.

Six weeks later, quite unpredictably, she meets a Tomas when she is out shopping for foods that make up her regimented diet. Tomas shows her attentive interest in a way that allows her to believe that he is sincere. She tells Tomas immediately of her condition, and Tomas spends weeks pursuing her. When she tells her parents Tomas is her new white boyfriend, they do not bring up Aliyah's white husband and his failures. They do not talk of the ways a Brown man will love her more. For recently, there are whispers at mosque that Inaya's husband wants her to quit her job and look after their children, and that Faiza's husband wants the opposite — requesting his wife to work — because he cannot sustain the workload for both of them. Her parents joke that each woman has married the wrong man. They say that both couples should be featured on *Wife Swap*, the only Canadian television show they ever invested in except for *Amazing Race* and *Survivor*. It makes her relieved that they no longer see a flaw in whiteness but worried that she will be gossiped about by someone else should she and Tomas fail. But months pass by, and Tomas' things end up in her apartment, boot by boot, and no incident of concern occurs.

When an ice storm hits on Dec 24 and she puts on her hiking shoes to brave the snow, Tomas loses it on her. Part of his behaviour is due to the fact he is truly worried for her, and the other part is because he is pissed that she can't control her neurosis. He doesn't want to join her, and he can't understand that if she doesn't go, she will fall apart. A part of her wants him to come with her. Now comes the time that he realizes her condition is not a cute idiosyncrasy. Recently, he has attempted to track the hours she spends on obsessive rituals. He is convinced that she isn't meeting her potential working as a copywriter, that it leaves her with more free time than he has. He worries about the housing market. He worries that his job in Immigration doesn't pay enough and says if she filled her time with more work or a better job, she would have less time to obsess. He worries that Brown people come to Canada for hope but end up in service jobs saying "yes sir" for a lifetime. He worries too, that Canada is letting in too many refugees. Just the same, Rina's vulnerability and a need for help becomes a burden. She is not shiny anymore in his eyes. She is dulled, flawed, broken. Still, she knows they will continue planning for their future as if they both still believe in the fiction that is the happy unification of their partnership. Her Tourette's tics are at an all time high, and now she has no solace in being able to let out ropes of verbal

profanities in private. Tomas is everywhere.

Despite their surfacing incompatibility, on Christmas Day, Tomas and Rina still give each other gifts. She receives a perfume that smells of candies and vanilla and is relieved there is no ring in the package. She is confused when one package remains under the tree; a large, flat, rectangular-shaped gift wrapped in brown paper.

“Is this one from you?” she asks.

“No,” he says. Christmas morning has thawed his anger from her late-night walk through the snow. “Your parents said it was left for you, and that you’d know who it’s from.”

She tears the paper. A sharp yellow painting. A face brushed in strokes of midnight blue, deep purple, and bright pink stares up at her, a mirror image of who she is.

“What is it?” he asks, tilting his face to study the image. “A face?”

“It’s me,” she says.