

# Him

By Athavi Nishaanthan

Tall and proud, she walks to the bathroom at the end of the lonely hall. The lights above her smile down and highlight her fair, brown skin. She's wearing her favourite jeans and white T-shirt with *New York* printed across it. Her clothes hug her body closely, enhancing every curve and edge she feels proud to call her own. And feels beautiful in her clothes. In her body.

And then she sees *him*.

And every hair on her body stands up.

Suddenly, everything good she once thought about herself disappears into thin air. *His* eyes, as dark as his skin, meet hers for a split second, and all she sees is pure hatred within him. They dart up and down her body as a malevolent grin spreads across his face. Knowing what he's thinking, she quickly looks down and continues walking, regretting being alone. Although she knows that even if her friends were there, that still wouldn't stop him. She can feel him staring. His eyes burning holes into her skin like acid burning through metal. She wishes she brought a sweater to cover herself up. She wishes she didn't wear these jeans and this shirt, because now they no longer hug her body; they squeeze her like a boa constrictor wrapping around its prey, squeezing the life out. Crushing every bit of confidence and pride she once felt. She no longer walks down the halls as if it's her stage. Instead, she crawls, feeling like she's trapped underwater. Completely helpless and vulnerable. It's funny what a single look can do to someone.

She begins to hear his footsteps start to approach her, coming closer with every step. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* She starts to walk faster and faster, quickly escalating her pace in hopes of getting away.

But she doesn't.

She never does.

He *always* gets her.

She feels his cold, meaty hand wrap around her wrist. Her entire body goes numb, paralyzed with fear like a deer caught in headlights. She can't even force herself to move, to talk. She begins to feel stinging at the back of her eyes. He pulls her to him and presses himself against her. She tries to push him away, but she can't. He's too big and she's too small. She tells him no. Stop! Get away! But her words mean nothing. They just fall into an empty abyss where no one can hear her scream. Because to him, no means yes! Stop means go on! Get away means come closer! To him, he knows what she wants more than she does herself. To him, he's giving her what she wants. What she deserves. She continues to struggle and squirm like a caterpillar trying to break free from its cocoon. Until finally, he lets go.

He treats it like it's a bad joke, and she's nothing but the sour note at its end. The punch line that falls flat and he acts like he expects her to laugh with him. And yet, she never does, because she never understands the joke in the first place. He continues to smile at her. While he

feels prideful, she feels ashamed. She turns away and runs to the bathroom. His laugh echoes in the emptiness behind her.

She finally makes it to the bathroom and, for once, she is happy to be alone. She locks herself in the stall. The air clogging her throat breaks into a sob. Tears stream down her full cheeks as she tries to gasp for air. She begins to feel knots loosen in her stomach. She falls to her knees, and with trembling hands, she clutches the toilet seat until she can no longer hold anything back - out comes her breakfast, along with a wave of emotions. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she feels like the room is a carousel that won't stop spinning as she rocks herself back and forth. She can't tell if it's because she just vomited or because of what just happened. What even happened? What do you call *that*? She can't stop herself from shaking. She feels her heart beating so hard in her throat she thinks it might explode.

Slowly, she pulls herself up and leaves the stall. She washes her hands and face with cold water and dabs them with a paper towel. She peeks out the bathroom. He's gone. She sighs with relief as she steps out and stops by the water fountain to get a drink. Her throat is sore from crying and vomiting. It feels good to have the ice cold water stream down her hoarse throat like an open creek, almost like it's healing her. Washing away all her pain. She quickly dashes to her class; in case he comes back. She steps in the room and sits down at her desk.

"Hey, you good?" one of her friends asks her.

"Yeah, of course I am." She forces a smile.