

Incapable of Love

Addy explores what it is to love someone beyond physical and social boundaries. As they say, key to happiness is something to do, someone to love and something to hope for!



Aditya Satija, 2001A8PS405

It was a cold night in August – not unusual in these parts. I had returned from the funeral of my grandfather with a box full of family memorabilia he had wanted me to have in his will. They told me that the box was just some old photographs and newspaper reports. My grandmother, an imperious lady with a famous temper and executor of the said testament had insisted that I take the box and worry about the contents later.

That night, under the influence of a cocktail of multivitamins and caffeine chewing gum, I was having trouble sleeping. I decided to open the box. I examined the lock, taking care not to damage the exquisite little carvings in an ancient alphabet. They told me that the box had been in the family for four generations before my grandfather and that it would be priceless if I ever hit the auction-house circuit. The seventh generation of fingers rolled those little wheels like a modern combination lock, trying to spell out an ancient family name in an ancient alphabet. It came from my grandfather's grandmother's family. That generation had had only daughters and the family name had been lost forever till it reappeared as my middle name.

I wondered about what I would say to my ancestors when I meet them on the other side if I did not have any children. I was inching closer to fifty and was no longer sure of my ability to carry a child to term. In a little facility on another continent, were four little containers that contained my only chances – eggs that I had preserved in my early twenties thanks to the wisdom of my mother.

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"Sometimes, I wonder if I will ever have grandchildren."

"Ma! Please! For heaven's sake, don't even begin that one! Right now, all I need is to make the next promotion. There is no way you are getting any grandchildren. I am not sure if K and I want any children at all. We haven't even started talking about it."

"You might not want them now. But, you will later. It is instinct. It is nature. We are born to beget. You are not ready now. I know that. I don't want you to give me grandchildren when you are not ready to be a mother."

"Thanks for understanding. Then, why did you even bring this up?"

"Listen carefully. I am a fertility specialist. So, this is more professional advice than parental advice..."

The box snapped open. I was scared I had broken it. The cause of the fear probably was a combination of the wrath of six generations of forefathers and the loss of the millions I would have made auctioning the contraption off. Tout suite, I shook the contents out on to the carpet and slammed the lid shut to check if I had damaged my precious box. After all, I was good at damaging things I treasured.

After twelve years of marriage, K had decided to move to South Africa for work and I realized I just did not love him enough to bother. It had taken me twelve years to realize that I did not love the man I had been married to. I did not feel any sense of belonging towards him. When he was gone, I did not miss him at all. Whatever we had was over. When he came back and hugged me, I realized I wasn't even attracted to him any more. I was indifferent. We just did not have the magic anymore. It had taken me exactly three hours to ask him for a divorce. We had a loveless marriage and we both knew it. It had taken him three minutes to



agree to it. After all, there were no children, no shared assets to squabble over – we hadn't even a joint bank account. Years of singlehood later, I wished that I never desired love. If I had not asked for divorce, we would still be carrying on like we had been – appearing together at family functions and going on vacations together. We were always in a good mood around each other and we glittered in photographs. If you believed the photographs, we had the most perfect marriage ever. So much for picture-perfect.

“Pa! I wish I still had a marriage.”

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“Are you saying you wish that you still had K?”

“Yes! I wish I had K. Actually, no! Anyone... just anyone would do. I just wish I had someone.”

“Then you did the right thing. Your marriage would have kept you both out of love. Today, you have hope and K has children with someone he loves.”

“You have been watching too many movies Pa! Oh! It is his daughter's birthday next week. I must go buy a present...”

There were pictures of my extended family scattered all over my floor. There were little newspaper clippings of pictures of my great-grandfather shaking hands with the Governor-General, that of his father with a foot over the carcass of a freshly hunted tiger and that of his mother – an old frail woman peeking out of the curtains of a palanquin for a last look at her husband's remains. That lady had owned this box at some point.

It was a strange kaleidoscope of my ancestors. It traced their lives from the black-and-white to the colored photograph era. My grandfather had neatly written a little date on a spot of Scotch Tape and affixed it to the back of the colored photographs. I wonder if they ever diagnosed OCD in those days. He had taken extra care of the pictures of my grandmother. However, not all of the pictures were happy. There were pictures of the time when she had fallen off a horse and slipped a disc in her spine and then those of the time when her liver had given way from all that drinking. There were also pictures of them in the early years of their marriage. Awww! Look at them on that camel-ride on the dunes and them on the little boat in the lagoon. Strangely, my grandfather hadn't changed at all between his youth and middle age whereas my grandmother looked like a completely different woman in her photographs with Pa as a child. In those pictures, she looked like a younger version of the matriarch who had run the household while we were growing up.

And then, I turned a picture over. It was the oldest colored picture in the lot. It was from my grandparents' wedding. Wait a minute! Grandmother looks a lot like the woman

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with Pa in shorts. Then, who is the woman with Grandfather on the camel and in the



boat?

I arranged the pictures in chronological order. Grandfather was riding camels and boats with this strange woman when Pa was fifteen years old and grandmother was recovering from her cirrhosis. Oh My Gosh! Grandfather was philandering! He was cheating on grandmother. She is in mourning for a man who was cheating on her. Oh My Gosh! She has to know about this. She has to come out of mourning. This is so degrading to her as a woman.

I couldn't sleep all night. As soon as the day broke, I knew I had to call grandmother. I knew she had to know. I just know these things. I just know what I must do like I knew I had to end my marriage. But, there was no way I was prepared for her response.

"And do you think I did not know?"

"I don't understand!"

"I know if an insect crawls on the skin of any of you. There is nothing that I can't find out when it comes to the people I love. And I did love your grandfather. She wore awful perfume. I knew he had been with her right then."

"Do you know who she was?"

"No. I never bothered to find out."

"You never bothered? You make it your business to know everything. You used to know the names and telephone numbers of the boys who called me mobile telephone

when I was in high school. I don't understand. The last time I did not bother what my husband did, you said that I needed to end my marriage."

"Do you know why I did not have children after your father?"

"You became an alcoholic! You had to send Pa off to boarding school so that he could be kept away from you."

"Yes. When your father was away, I slipped my disc and almost drank myself to death. Do you know who lived with me in this house during those five awful years of sickness? Your grandfather did! With my back, I was incapable of going to the bathroom on my own. He carried me – each time! When my liver gave way, I used to vomit like the most vicious of demons was stirring my guts. He held my hair out of my face as I retched. He was ready with aniseed, cardamom and a smile for me. Do you remember your marriage vows? In sickness and in health? For better or for worse? I don't know any man who would have done it for me. By the time I recovered, he had already passed every test of fidelity there is as far as I was concerned. He was still with me after the monster I had been to him and our child. He still held me and cared for me when I was in that condition. If there was another woman, I knew that he was devoted to me far more than he would be ever devoted to her. There is no way I was ever going to believe he was cheating on me."

"But he was!"

"If he was, I realized I loved him so much that I did not care. He had already proven he loved me so much that I did not care. The bottom line here is that when I found out, I realized I did not care. And you will watch your mouth when you speak of a dead person. Your parents have worked a lot on your upbringing."

That ended it. Love makes us do strange things. I can't imagine grandmother pardoning anything. She always knew how to punish us when we did something wrong so that we would repent it as much as we possibly could have. And here I was, incapable of loving K. Incapable of loving anyone!

Quasimodo

A love story unfolds, between the flowing river and the pebbled path. Capricious as the river is, she soon finds her new love, the Sun. Does love consume all?



Tania Roy, 2002A3PS126

Pebbled path found it difficult for footsteps to tread on him. As he twirled into himself at the thoughtless touch of bold elements, he squirmed and panicked. He liked to sing when water jived on him. He liked to waltz in the rhythm of water's music. He loved to feel the curves of the elegant lady as she caressed him along her way. He liked to gift her with a diamond ring when the silver rays dazzled on him as water gurgled along.

He was alone, solitary. He defined peace for himself. Water made him feel happy. He was one with her. As nights passed with the two lovers entwined in the gossamer fragrance under the blue moonlight, pebbled path realized that he could no longer find peace in his solitude. He would be lonely when she was gone.

Then one day, while pebbled path was still dazed by the beauty of his new-found calm, the volatility of the happiness stared at him. He was bare. He was dry. He missed the soft kisses. He missed the laughter of his lady as she danced through him to he knew not where. He detested the footsteps even more now. Then he started reveling in the pain as the rubbers brushed against him, as the pebbles dashed into each other when those giant creatures stepped on his bruises, insensate.

Then one day he discovered the colors – a pristine green. That was water's gift to him in return of the diamond ring. He felt beautiful all over again. Clad in moss, he cherished the memories of the nights when water brought the stars to him.



But, the brook - she played with her lovers. She could enter the hearts of all those she passed by. She was a good lover, nevertheless. She could devote her present to the one she loved. Alas, her love was fleeting!

She had loved to meander through the huge boulders. She loved enveloping herself around the forbidding sinews of the black rocks, cooling them even more than they were. She shivered at the touch of light; she flirted with the stars, twinkled like the first touch of youth. Pebbled path was her lover, too. The most docile of them all, he was. She played with him, she laughed when she was around him. They were a good company.

Then came the sun. She glimmered in beauty as the sun played with her waves. She started waiting under sleepless nights, for him to come back to her. The stars cried as she twinkled without any emotion.

Pebbled path grew cold under her. Memories were but burdens to her. She just waited for the sun to come, to adorn her with the diamond ring.

The sun paid her visit regularly. He scorched her as the day proceeded. He wanted her only for himself. She was enchanted. She gave her away to him. She liked being taken away, losing her identity. For, what was identity when love was all that mattered? Much to her dismay, she realized her emotions. She could not run away. Her soul was absorbed by her lover, for the first time. Then one day, she lost herself.

<http://www.microsoft.com/nz/windows/bliss/default.aspx>



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ALAPANA

Hope fades away...peace eludes us, the moment we start reminiscing about our youth. It's inevitable."



Hemant Kumar C R, 2002A4PS269

A chorus in my backyard forced me to take notice,
Something so soothing...so reminiscent of days of my youth,
I walk now with a stick in my hand,
which never forgets to remind me of the days to come...

The evening sun was going down the sea.
A scarlet image spreads across the waters
Never had it ceased to amuse me as a child,
That Sea could engulf something so powerful...

The little waves touching my feet,
taking the sand away from underneath,
Something like time does to you...
Takes away moments but promising to return with better ones...

Once, I prayed so hard to let me fall back in time,
To a life that I had once lived,
Where all I would care was to forget about time,
That was the time when the next day was more promising...

I was amidst people, who were brimming with life,

Bustling but serene at the same time,
When severing was not in mind,
yet knowing that one day we have to face it.

And then we did face it,
promising each other to never forget,
Etching the memories to our souls,
we moved on to the other side of life...

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That's when probably I began thinking about time,
and from then on it started going faster than I thought of,
Years later, I looked back,
Found nothing apart from the lingering images of my youth...

I smiled that the waves washing my feet,
once kissed the feet of others I knew,
It made me jealous for an instant,
that when I couldn't, they met the ones I love.

The dusk reminded me of the night to come,
Reminding me that the time has come,
To walk back into oblivion of my life,
And seek a rhythm to this dwindling life...

I smile at the days bygone and hope the time keeps its promise,
But life's just that...made up of broken promises and hopes of undoing that,
Pure melody I would say,
this way of life,
Chaotic yet reminding you that serenity exists in some part of the world,
A peace which everybody seeks, but only some find...



The Frozen Verdure

Some people cross our paths for a fleeting moment but leave a mark forever. Ranjit writes in memory of one such person, Shashank, a BITSian who is no longer amongst us...



Ranjit Kumar M, 2002B2A4632

8:00 a.m. in the early hours,
As we knocked on door 265 of Gandhi
Bhavan,
Tears shed out of our eyes for we no sooner
realized,
Death, the cruel monster had taken him
away,
Shadowing a part of happiness from our
lives,
Leaving us with memories all alone till day...

Days and weeks elapsed to get into tune
with,
Death, for we had to then strongly believe,
A vigorous turbulence where the loving
warmth replaced by stale
coldness,
A tidal surge where the
sweetness of grace
replaced by acute
bitterness,
And the dark nightmare
replacing the gentle
refulgent light.

Great were those rare
days,
Where our affiliation
ameliorated as deep as
the ocean,
Cuddled in a salubrious
gaiety
And coalescing in an ecstasy of felicitous
sanity.

There is always an enlivening Spirit
And a placid credence of life wherever he
was,
For he possessed that splendid charm.
Deeming of the infinite frolic we had at the
playtime,
And during our night-study, mesmerize us
till day.

We feel proud to gladly call him a great
friend,
Who was very dear, true, kind, lending a
helping hand
In support, doing that extra something,

Which wins the
hearts of others
And whose
absence yet
intensifies with
warmth
Felt in the heart
even while we are
miles apart.

Though parted
from us, he shall
Always remain in
these hearts
forever
As rich as the

dawn, for he has sown
A share of mirth and memories within!



Seduction

An obese woman, trapped in a lack-luster marriage finds motivation to lose weight from her Seduction class. Insidiously changes creep into her life. "Does she lose only her fat?" wonders the author.



Meenakshi Chatterjee, 2000B5A3721

The first time I thought of losing weight, I was in the 'Seduction' class.

"A few pounds off those thighs and waist," Michael said pointing to my navel, "and you'll be a gorgeous swan!"

I nodded slowly.

I was a slow person. It wasn't just the fat that weighed me down, my mind worked slowly too. Behind my back, my colleagues whispered, "Babel". It was an acronym for 'Baby Elephant'. I ignored it when I could. Other times I had earplugs.

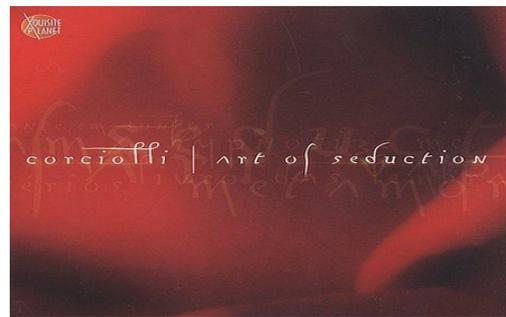
Work was dissatisfying, pay wasn't. Sitting at my desk most of the day, I let the fat accumulate. They gathered in force and in number in the nooks and crannies of my body and made themselves at home. From



pleasantly plump to overweight to obese – the transition took less than a year.

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I wasn't bothered. I was married.



My husband never complained about my weight.

'Seduction' happened just after I met Michael. He brought back all the school girlishness in me. I had an instant crush on him.

"Seduction is an art and whoever masters it never lacks admirers." I listened to Michael spellbound. His classes went on for an hour, three times a week.

Sitting among younger, prettier and slimmer women, made me feel unique. I stood out. People noticed me. That's how Michael noticed me.

"The art of seduction starts at the eyes. But what good are the eyes if the other person doesn't notice you?" I was at an advantage here.

Initially when I experimented, men were shocked rather than surprised. Out of curiosity, they responded. It worked. I found ways to better my art.

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I started having fun.

In the evenings, after my class, my husband always had dinner with me. He went back to work sometimes, actually quite often now, but always returned for our two hour dinner. During our first married month, he christened it "Two-Some-time". The name stuck and so did the time. Sometimes when I went out with friends, ate dinner at work, or just couldn't make it, he ate alone at home.

Our dinner conversations bore the same pattern.

"Is that what we are having for dinner today? Looks good to me", boomed Richard happily. Even if we were having instant noodles, Richard made the same mundane comment. I never responded. After a while of silence, he asked his next usual question.

"So how was your day honey? Amazing I hope?"

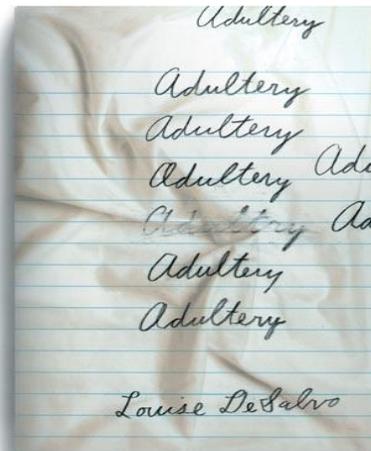
I grunted. I didn't feel the necessity to discuss my days with him. He always gave me a minute or two, expecting something more than just a grunt. It amazed me how patient a man could be. Two years of asking the same question and still he waited for my reply.

"My days don't change any more. I have been passed on by younger blood for promotion. No matter how much I try, my juniors keep outshining me. The way things are, soon I will be holding the same position for the longest time in history," Richard ended with a chuckle.

I couldn't understand how someone could make fun of his failures.

I always ended my meals before him and whenever I finished I got up and left. Sometimes I said, "I am done", and sometimes I just left with just the sound of my chair pushing back. Every time, Richard looked up at me, into my face and smiled. Then he said the three words that always left me disgusted.

"I love you."



I had been married for two years now. We met at a common friend's place. His loneliness, long bachelorhood and his parent's nagging – all contributed to our hasty courtship and rapid marriage. I was slow and by the time I realized where I was headed, I found myself married to a man I had known only for a few weeks.

Richard was rich and ugly. Childhood mumps, measles, playground injuries had all left their indelible unappealing marks on his face and body. Combined

with his fierce green eyes, it was easy to imagine him as a gun toting mafia man. For a man that looked like this, he was surprisingly gentle. He never raised his voice.

"....and so you see the benefits of

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weight loss are manifold and the best way in that direction is sustained starvation," Michael's drone broke my reverie. Everyone in class knew why he brought up the weight loss at least once. It was for me.

I decided to slim down. I had found a strong motivation to do it.

A year ago my world had fallen apart. One Monday night, when Richard returned late, I smelt her on his shirt for the first time. It was a powerful feminine smell. The next week he went on a business trip – or so he said, in Hawaii. Whenever I called him at the hotel, a husky female replied. She said she was the attendant. Obviously, I knew what needs she attended to!

When he returned, he came back with a gift for me! That was so unlike him. Richard wasn't a romantic, he didn't even come close. During our courtship, any planning was done by me. He just paid the bills. A candle light dinner was 'severe straining on his myopic eyes', a cruise was 'never-ending sea sicknesses, a gift was 'simply a waste compared to food' and love was 'overrated', 'compatibility was better'...his list was endless.

A diamond pendant hanging from a white gold chain- it was a beautiful necklace. None of the jewelry I owned measured up to it. At another time, a more naive myself would have loved it.

"Don't you like it?" Richard asked surprised.

"It must have cost a fortune, why did you buy it?"

"I wanted to surprise you. I had forgotten your last birthday so I thought..." his voice trailed off into a hurt silence.

I looked up at him. The same faint feminine smell wafted to my nostrils. His green eyes, pock-marked face, long-drawn chin looked comically sad.

My dieting was killing me. When I starved, the initial pangs of hunger and craving gave rise to a pain previously unknown. Only three meals a day with half sized portions, and a measly fruit was all I allowed myself. It was tough. After two weeks of torture, I got used to it. That's when I started walking, taking the stairs, moving about my cubicle every five minutes. When hunger hit me, I drank water. When I panted, I stopped and drank water. When others gobbled food, I drank water. All day the only thing abundantly available to me was water. If I didn't have a strong motive, I would have surely given up.

Seduction classes went on as usual. Michael's soothing drone, kept me listening. The dream of being an extremely attractive and universally coveted woman constantly fuelled my otherwise excruciating regime.

After a month, Michael noticed.

"You look lighter on the top. Your face looks thinner. Have you been working out?"

I wasn't exactly working out; I was starving myself, one day at a time. So, technically my answer was a no. He was surprised, but didn't follow up.

Another month slowly passed. Richard noticed.

Looking up from his cereal bowl, he remarked, "You look weak and perhaps a little thin. Is everything alright?"

I nodded nonchalantly. His gaze settled on my face, moved slowly down to my shoulders, lingered at my neck and then fell back to his bowl. I heard him sigh as he took another mouthful.

Perhaps he wondered why I never wore the necklace.

Things had only got worse. Just like the fat that I had let accumulate, I let my marriage fester in neglect. Things that I could fix went unnoticed. Things I could have cared for went to ruin. Things I should have tended to went rotting. In the last two months, as my body became slimmer, and stronger, my marriage became paler and weaker. Through all this, Richard never complained.

Six months, six long months later, I found myself looking completely different. The roundedness was replaced by straightness. The wobbly, soft fat in my

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arms, belly and thighs gave way to harder surfaces. My face, the round plump happy one looked gaunt, stretched and thin. When my fat left me, it also took away the gentleness from my features. I looked older than my age. Now I had a body that could fit into smaller sizes, smaller seats and smaller spaces, but I lost the cheery softness that came with it.

'Seduction' class was nearing an end. Michael's lectures had become repetitive. My classmates couldn't stop commenting on my transformation. My diet,

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my regime my routine got discussed, dissected and debated upon. I attained a new position – that of awe and inspiration.

Richard had been mostly absent during the last six months. Business trips had tripled, his personal friend's circle had multiplied, his extra-curricular activities increased manifold. He submerged himself in never-ending engagements. I saw very little of him and heard even lesser.

Sometimes at laundry, I smelt his unwashed shirts, forcing my nostrils to get a whiff of adultery. I scrutinized his clothing to find a red mark of lipstick. I rummaged through his papers to see a loving note. I stole his mobile to see any repetitive mysterious calls. Every single time, he got the better of me. I was never successful in my sorry quest. That neither deterred nor shook my conviction.

One sunny morning I realized that time had come. Looking my prettiest, I went to work. My 'Babel-calling-colleagues' unanimously remarked on my great looks, even my manager stopped by asking about my health. I was getting all the attention that was long due. I felt supremely confident.

For the six months of 'Seduction' class, which was only theory, I had held my own practice. At coffee houses, at clubs, at bars, at pubs, standing in queue close to the next man, I found my targets- painstakingly. Experiments had gone awry, embarrassments were regularity, disgust was inevitable and yet I held on. My weight made me the laughing stock. Now I looked different. I knew I would be successful – now would be different.

It took a little over a month. Every time I faltered, the infidel smell on Richard's shirt egged me on.

Late one night, I sat up waiting for Richard to come home. I had news.

When he closed the door behind him, and turned around, I said, "I need to talk to you."

"Oh! I didn't see you there." He smiled.

I waited for him to get closer.

"I am pregnant."

A wave of disbelief passed into shock on his face.

"But, I don't think..." he stopped abruptly.

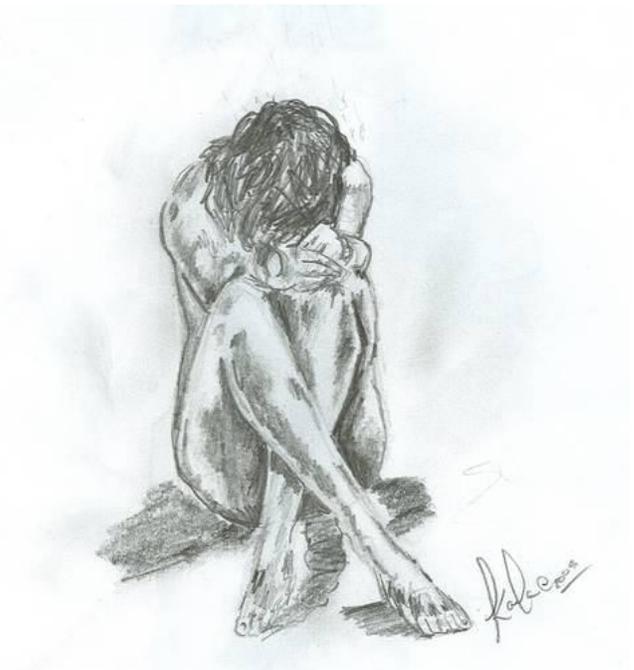
Looking intently into my eyes, he paused to think.

I knew what was passing through his mind. It was not his child. To be honest, I didn't know whose it was. When I was obese, doctors had told us, how difficult it would be for me to conceive. It had broken our hearts. Now, when I had finally achieved the miracle, I was an adulteress.

After what seemed to be an eon, Richard spoke.

"Congratulations." He walked away.

<http://www.christinas-home-remedies.com/image-files/depression-drawing.jpg>



Kafka Café

A nondescript café, Kafka Café is the regular haunt of Mr. M. As M settles down to an evening of solitude in the café, the eerie comforts of confiding strangers surround him. Do dreams reflect the reality or distort it?



Soumya Sen, 2001A8PS263

The Kafka Cafe was located right across the University lawns, but hidden from view by a labyrinth of overgrown shrubs. It was a small shop, serving only a limited variety of sandwich, pastry and coffee. Perhaps it was because of this conspicuous lack of choices that most people, preferred to visit the posh cafes on the other side of the campus. But the lack of customers did not seem to bother Joe, the aged proprietor of this cafe. In fact he appeared to be genuinely contented in his frequent declarations:

"You know, with these darn arthritic legs I can't be running around and attending too many customers, I really prefer it this way".

Nevertheless, the cafe's strange air of solitude, which seemed to possess the great power to paralyze even time itself, had earned it a few regular patrons. Among these regular visitors was M., who had found his way to the cafe some fifteen years back after a tiring day at work. That day while sitting next to the glass window, sipping a cup of hot coffee and recollecting memories of bygone times, M. had realized that he was to fall in love with this cozy shelter he had discovered for himself. He had made a few good friends at the cafe, one of them being the proprietor, old Joe, who entertained M. with his rather curious habit

of diligently relaying the news he caught on his portable radio.

M. was sitting at his usual corner in the cafe, leafing through a new architecture catalog, when the little bell on the door jingled and a girl walked in. M. had not seen her at the cafe before, but from her looks she appeared to be a student at the University. Having got herself a cup of coffee, she sat down at the table adjoining M's. M. sensed that the girl was observing the sketches he was making at the margins of his catalog. A little while later she addressed him,

"Excuse me Sir; I hope I am not intruding. Are you an architect?"

"Yes, I am. I was a professor at the University but I am retired now", replied M., taking a better look at her.

"Hi, I am Julia," she said.

"Well, I have a question with which you might be able to help me. Do you know if there are any Gothic buildings in this area?" she asked.

"Um..I don't think so. No, none in this town as far as I know," said M. thoughtfully and then inquired hesitantly,

"But may I know why you ask?"

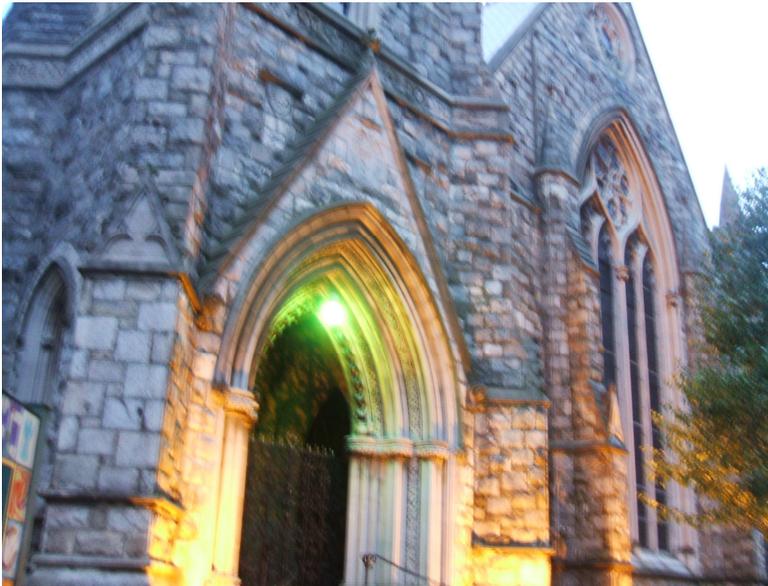


She ran her slender fingers on the outer rim of her cup and with a shy smile,

"It's a bit silly actually. I had a dream last night in which I saw a Gothic building... But strangely it seemed as if it was somewhere in this neighborhood. Although I don't recollect having seen any such building around here, I kept wondering if such a building might actually exist. Is it possible that even if I had not taken a conscious note of it, the unconscious might have registered it only to later reveal it in my dream?"

After a brief pause, she added with a coy smile,

"Maybe I am just reading too much into a dream". Only then M. noticed that the book she was clutching in her hands when she walked in was Jung's *Man and his symbols*. 'She is probably a psychology



major', thought M.

"I must say that your dream sounds very interesting me. Can you describe this building for me? Or maybe you can tell me the dream in its entirety if that's fine with you", he told her.

"Sure, it was a rather innocuous dream", she said, moving over to M.'s table. *"In the dream, I was walking back home in the evening when an old lady came up to me for directions. Having shown her the way, I started walking again but suddenly realized that I had lost my own sense of direction. While roaming around dazed, I lost my way in the shrubs. When I finally*

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emerged from it, I found myself in a colorful field of flowerbeds that stretched all the way to the horizon. A narrow track led through it to a large gate of elaborate ironwork. Beyond the gate was this ancient structure which was quite grand in its design. The gate was open and I went in to take a closer look. It had a deep arched doorway, supported over a series of closely arranged decorative columns. Above it were three Gothic windows that rose vertically to great heights; the middle one reaching higher than the others. Further above was a large circular window with extensive tracery, placed centrally between the sloping sides of the roof. On either sides of the facade rose buttresses which crowned with decorative pinnacles.

I could only make out the silhouette of this building against the fading twilight sky. I went up to the main door and knocked. Chiseled on the stones above the doorway was the message- "I am the Door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture (John 10:9)." I felt an immense joy of conquest rising in me; it seemed as if I had finally found the way I had been searching for all along. It felt as if the secret to all happiness lay beyond that door....But at this point I must have trailed off into a deeper sleep for I don't remember what happened thereafter."

Her words almost had a mesmerizing effect on M. and he too had drifted away to the land in her dream. Suddenly a voice startled him.

"I must apologize for intruding into your conversation but I just could not help it. May I join you?" It was Pat, a young artist and regular visitor at the cafe whom M. knew well. He was sitting at the table behind M. It was quite apparent that he had overheard their conversation and was not making any effort to disguise his curiosity.

"I am sorry if I am bothering you but I had a similar dream yesterday which I feel compelled to share with you." Both M. and Julia had overcome their initial surprise and were willing to hear Pat's story. *"Go ahead, we are all ears,"* said M. with a sudden inquisitiveness.

"Well, I had this dream where I found myself in an old building with tall arched windows like the ones you just described. However I don't intend to imply that we both saw the same building, because all the events in my dream took place indoors. I found myself in the nave of this building which could have been a cathedral, although there weren't any divine motifs to be seen anywhere. The nave was very long, lined with decorated pillars that supported the high vaults above. At the far end were a set of tall windows with stained glass through which light came in. In the place where the altar should have been, there were a few desks and chairs arranged to form a small classroom, and someone was standing there with open arms as if waiting to embrace me. I started to walk towards that illusive figure but the nave's end seemed to recede further and further away. I kept walking till I began to feel fatigue -my legs felt heavy, the air grew thicker and the light dimmed. I knelt down for a while to catch my breath, but when I got up, the figure had vanished. Without that mysterious figure waiting for me at the end of the nave, I suddenly realized that I had been left without a purpose. I felt cheated and humiliated as I wandered around in search for an exit. Finally I noticed an open door. When I approached, the large bronze doors appeared to be Rodin's 'Gates of Hell'. The little figurines pleaded with me not to go past them, but I did anyway. I found myself in an octagonal chamber which was covered from floor to ceiling with huge mirrors that reflected back only grotesque caricatures of me. As I looked closely I saw my deformed images imploring me to turn away. But there was no where to escape; the door had vanished and in its place stood another large mirror. I had to face my images everywhere I looked. I was trapped amidst my own ugly manifestations which were by then demanding that I blind myself. The nightmare was too much to bear, I woke up at that point," said Pat. He seemed a bit flustered as if he had to relive those moments during the narration.

M. had fallen silent. When he came out of his deep contemplation he said, "I guess I ought to tell you something as well. I wasn't going to... because it is very personal. But since you both have shared your story, I think it is only fair if I tell you a dream that I myself had. I can't help wondering whether our dreams have a common thread, so to say. I had this dream where I was searching for a very rare book at the library. The librarian

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was a friend of mine, and so he had made special arrangements for me to visit the restricted section. When he led me there it turned out to be an octagonal chamber, like the one Pat mentioned; however with the difference that instead of mirrors it was covered wall-to-wall with book shelves. The librarian informed me that there was a mandatory policy to keep that room locked all round the clock, and so it meant that I was to be locked in for the duration of my stay. Soon I found myself left alone amidst the towering racks of books. Each bookcase had fifty racks that reached three floors high and was equipped with a catalog of all books it carried. One had to climb up a long ladder to reach the upper shelves. I searched through the first six catalogs and on the seventh I rested. Unfortunately it showed that the book I was looking for was on the topmost rack of the seventh case although I found the arrangement to be inexplicably inconvenient; I had no option but to climb the ladder. The steps of the ancient ladder creaked beneath my weight. I had to struggle to keep my balance. In the end I managed to reach the top, but to my surprise the book wasn't there, in its place I found a diary titled 'The diary of Anne F.' that is all that I remember of the dream."



M. continued, "I know what you guys are thinking. No, it was not the diary of Anne Frank that I found up there. This one belonged to my late wife, Anne F. M., who had chosen to write her name in that way out of her own little fancy. Ever since her death I have wondered if she too felt threatened and tortured in her life, and in that case, was I her torturer? Was this little gesture not a fancy but a way to perhaps let me know how she felt? In my efforts to become successful in my professional life, I had probably neglected her too much. After her death I constantly felt the pangs of guilt and I couldn't carry on normally. Soon I opted for retirement, and now here I am in this cafe where I come everyday to find some solace in this quiet corner."

Ting-Tong. The bell jingled and Mr. & Mrs. R. wobbled in, arm-in-arm. They too visited

WINTER EDITION | Sandpaper2.0

the cafe regularly after their evening walk in the lawns. They were an old, happy couple. But that day they seemed to be having some disagreements. Mr. R. gruffly said, "I don't want to listen to all that anymore. Just forget it."

"You don't understand, I felt so scared and lonely...", sniffed Mrs. R. She clearly wasn't in a mood to drop it. She continued, *"...just imagine being surrounded by those statues, lonely and defenseless. I haven't had such a nightmare in years."*

The word 'nightmare' made M., Pat and Julia turn around instinctively to listen to the old couple. M. knew Mrs. R. quite well, she loved to talk, while Mr. R. was just the opposite; he preferred to brood most of the time, only with the exception of political topics in which he voluntarily joined in to criticize the Government's policies towards veterans and pensioners. Mr. R. was already enjoying his coffee but Mrs. R. clearly wanted to share something more. So M. asked her how she was. That was enough to get her started. *"Oh, thank you for asking. We are doing well, but I have been very upset since yesterday night. I could not catch any sleep last night because of a ghastly nightmare."*

"I am so sorry to hear that Mrs. R. May I ask what was it about?" inquired M. with almost a practiced politeness.

"You won't believe what I saw. I was in this museum or some place like that with high ceilings, gigantic pillars and large marble rooms with thousands of masks hanging on the walls. I had failed to keep in step with R... and had lost my way in that maze of pillars. R... was no where to be seen. I called out his name time and again, and kept stumbling around till I came to a room full of statues of hideous monsters. In the middle of the room stood three towering totem-poles with hawks perched on top of them. Just then the monsters started to come to life one by one; they woke each other up with their howls. The hawks started to circle overhead. I was scared and I cried out for help, but no one appeared. I stood there all alone to face the end. It was horrible!"

"It was just a nightmare; I am here with you now, so drop it. You sound crazy going on

and on about it," grumbled Mr. R. as he finished his coffee.

"A thunderstorm is on its way here," announced the quirky old Joe from his counter. He must have picked it up from the evening news on his radio.

"We better get going," said Mr. R. as he got up, supporting himself on his walking stick. Soon the old couple was gone.

Lightning flashed behind the branches of trees and clouds rumbled threateningly. Everyone inside the café had fallen silent. After a while Julia asked M., *"Don't you think all our dreams are linked together?"*

"Maybe or maybe not. I don't think they are necessarily connected. They are fragments that reflect our individual desires, worries and fears, but when taken together they also seem to tell a more universal story. It tells us about the way we sometimes search for higher goals and spend most of our life in trying to realize them. But over the years of struggle we lose sight of the other finer things in life which probably should have mattered more. In the end we are often left all alone, scared, repentant but still clinging on to life with ~~on~~ a hope that salvation is our destiny. But perhaps our souls are born orphans or abandoned at birth, and no one will ever wait to receive us at the end of our journey. Our isolation is an inescapable reality, but I guess it could be made more bearable if we could love and truly value the things that we already have," opined M. *"Well, the rain seems to have eased a bit, so I must take your leave now. It was nice meeting you. Goodnight!"* With these words M. got up.

Outside the cafe, a light drizzle and a chill wind welcomed M. He straightened his coat's collar and started walking towards his home. Before taking a turn at the corner he decided to look back. He saw Pat and Julia coming out of the cafe; they were closely huddled under Pat's umbrella. They both seemed to be enjoying the light rain in the company of each other. M. smiled to himself contentedly and continued on his way. It had indeed been an unusual evening and M. was feeling lighter than ever. He wondered if Anne would return to unite with him in his dream that night. Something deep inside him was telling that she surely would.

Seasonal Memories

"On the day of a classical dance event, the protagonist, a man who has rejected the bourgeoisie ways of life, learns about the arrival of an old friend in town. What follows is a story of love, friendship, nostalgia and procrastination."



Aparajith Ramnath, 2001A3PS050

'Here for the lec-dem?'

Natarajan walked up to my table, adjusting his blue cap. I was pouring my coffee from the tumbler into the bowl and back -- pulling the two utensils slowly apart, stretching the falling fluid like a band of elastic, then bringing them together again -- until the coffee was frothy and the granules of sugar in the bowl disappeared. I can never do more than one thing at a time, and now I panicked slightly, caught between acknowledging Natarajan and concentrating on my coffee-mixing. Prudence won, and I placed tumbler and bowl carefully on the vinyl-covered table top before looking up.

'Hello, hello! How are you, Thoppi? Yes, I'm here for the lec-dem. Really looking forward to it. She's supposed to be really good, isn't she?'

'Absolutely fabulous, that's what I heard from Chandran.'

'Which Chandran do you mean? Our Jayaram's son? Since when did *he* take an interest in classical dance?'

'The very fellow. Oh, he's an absolute buff now. He's moved back to town, stays in Ashok Nagar. He saw K at a performance at the Fine Arts Society there the other day and was absolutely raving about it.'

'Well, well, we do have a lot of surprises. Good for him, though. Anyway I'm looking

forward to something from the old guard, you know. Just yesterday I was watching that young MBA-cum-singer -- the seven o'clock concert. He was very correct, but I felt there was definitely *something* missing.



Spirit, experience, I don't know what it is.'

'Come on, that's not true. I think he's pretty good. I heard him myself last year.'

'Well, you should have been here yesterday, I tell you. Will you have something? Pongal for you too?'

'No, thank you. You see, I'm very measured in my intake nowadays. Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you -- remember Shakku? I hear she's in town this year. Might see her around here.' He looked at his watch. 'Anyway, should rush. It's eight twenty and the family's waiting.'

I picked up my Season brochure from the table, settled the bill, and left the Academy's make-shift canteen. The lecture-demonstration was scheduled for eight thirty, when a well-known Bharatanatyam dancer ('danseuse', the papers liked to say) was to explain her art to the discerning and the enthusiastic. But my thoughts were elsewhere as I waded through the crowd. Shakku in town. Now, after thirty years?

I looked at the people bustling in and out of the grounds, at the cars parked in neat rows, at other cars honking at the gates and being waved away brusquely by overburdened attendants, and thought of the same environs in quieter days. Around me were the same sights I used to see then, only more raucous, more hurried. There were women in their silks, the inevitable jasmine in their hair, men in crisp *veshtis* and *jibbas*, youngsters in trousers and what we used to call 'bush shirts', children with neatly combed hair and powdered faces, and elderly folk following doggedly a much-loved routine. Back in the 'sixties, though, I saw these sights not only through my eyes but through those of my several friends. We were then in our twenties. We would go to concerts together, repair to Ajantha's for coffee to dissect the performances and while away the time before the next event. Thoppi Natarajan (so called because he had already, back then, formed the habit of wearing a cap everywhere, including indoors) was one of them. So was Jayaram, then studying accounting, who went on to become, among other things, the father of the Chandran we were discussing today. And so was Shakuntala, whom we called Shakku, and who was the most free-spirited of us all.

All that was until the claims of marriage and family tore us apart, while pretending only to gently rearrange our lives.

I reached the auditorium, and brandished my season ticket to the man at the door. I've been in there hundreds of times over the years, but it never fails to excite in me a glow of expectancy and, contrastingly, of comfort. The wooden paneling, the just-about-comfortable push-back seats, the fans hanging from the ceilings by long stems, the subtle lighting, the oil portraits of past patrons on the walls, the frilled silk curtains with little tassels trailing on the stage – all these are familiar sights to a thousand regulars, and perfectly capable of enchanting the skeptical first-timer too. There's calm here, though just fifty meters away cars and trucks and motorcycles and buses honk and push and spew fumes, people are furiously engaged in business and industry, and hoardings proclaim hoarsely that WWF wrestling action is to be had on television at 4.30 pm on weekdays or that so-and-so film star always uses such-and-such motorcycle as it is 'the signature of a winner.' Today the places were getting steadily filled, and some attendees were already engaged in the sport of identifying the senior musicians arriving by the elite side entrance to occupy positions of honor. (Shakku used to say that it was a mark of our hierarchical culture that we referred to seasoned musicians as 'seniors' and not as veterans. I agreed wholeheartedly then, though over the years I have begun to say 'senior' like everybody else.)



At length, the voice of the compere came over the loudspeaker, wishing the ladies and gentlemen a good morning and *namaskaram*, and launching into a brief synopsis of the career and accomplishments of today's artiste. (Artiste - that used to be on Shakku's List of Pretentious Words too.) She had been with dance troupes, the Voice said, to the United States, to Australia, to the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary and Romania, and carried with her the art she represented. She had behind her twenty years of performances, and was the recipient of a number of honors from governments and institutions of art.

The curtains went up amidst applause, and I saw very soon that Jayaram's son was right. K had poise. It was as if dance was 'written on her forehead,' in local parlance: it was her destiny. Her movements were graceful, her face expressive. Her coterie of accompanying musicians was blemish less too. The singer had a magnetic voice, the percussionist's fingers fairly flew, and the flautist's control of breath was commendable. When, between acts, she took up the microphone to explain the *mudras* and other nuances to the audience, K was articulate yet concise.

Hands went up around the hall as questions were invited. K pointed with a dancer's flourish at a middle-aged man in the fourth row. Several rows behind her, I could see Natarajan in his blue cap, sitting with his wife and brother-in-law.

'Madam, which do you think more important – technique or feeling?'

'A good question,' she said, bowing. 'The answer to that is, well, they are inseparable. To be a dancer you must have technique and emotion in equal measure. In all my experience, I have never yet met a dancer with a wooden face, a wooden soul. Nor, may I say, do I know of successful dancers who have neglected their basic training. The two requisites are as twins.'

A prosaic beginning to the interactive session; polite applause from the audience. K scanned the audience once again. This time her eye hovered around the first row, and finally settled on a man in a kurta and a familiar white beard. I recognized him: the writer of reviews, often caustic, in the Friday newspaper supplement.

'Sir.'

'Yes, you were speaking about --' He drifted off into a technicality, something abstract, something I could not quite grasp. Several people seated around him nodded in approval, as if to say it was an intelligent question.

'I am so glad somebody phrased the question so skillfully,' said K, pleased that she could now put across a subtle point that she might have found difficult to express except as an answer to a query. Having

finished a competent explanation, she smiled and went back to the centre of the stage, anklets tinkling rhythmically, to begin her next piece.

When it was over, I strode out to the Academy's adjoining art gallery to have a look at the photo exhibition that I knew was on there. Small knots of people were standing around in the sunny yard outside: children, parents, uncles and aunts, silver-haired grandparents. I'm not one to grudge anyone their happiness, but today my reminiscing had made me sensitive once again to the fact that I live a life that is very different from the majority of people around me. I love my independence, and am thankful for the several excellent friends I have. But to be honest, this isn't the way I thought it would turn out. Susheela, the daughter of good friends of mine, likes to tease me saying that my faithful appearances at the Academy every Season is a form of vanity. 'You go to be seen as much as to see and listen,' she says. She is right, partially -- I go to be among people.

When we used to hang around the Academy all those years ago, I cultivated a sort of disdain for what I thought of as the bourgeois life cycle: college, a job, marriage... What I didn't realize then was that I was built to avoid risk of any sort, and that both I and the friends with whom I discussed these ideas were, at heart, as bourgeois as they come. Shakku was different. She managed to combine spontaneity with pragmatism. She cut a striking figure at concerts in those days, one of the few young women to shun both silk and jewellery on principle. She had opinions on everything, from Ramanathan Krishnan's performance in the Davis Cup to who should be Nehru's successor as Prime Minister. But unlike the rest of us, she made no bones about her belief that a solid family life was essential: everything else would flow from that. We debated these things several times. I always lost. I understood later that she was that rare thing, the skeptic who stops short of being a cynic, the person who is so secure about herself that she can pick or discard what she likes or what she doesn't like about the world she lives in.

The exhibition mirrored the past-ward direction of my thoughts. The walls were

covered with old sepia-toned -- isn't that what the magazines always call them? -- photographs. I walked briskly along a row of photos: here a singer, voice in mid-flight, there a dancer pirouetting, now a violinist, his delicate fingers holding the bow, horsehair about to run over violin strings. Then I froze. I had come suddenly to a scene I recognized, and remembered vividly. It was an unusual angle: the photographer had positioned himself around thirty rows back along the right flank of the auditorium, so that the frame took in both the stage and the front rows. On stage was the legendary MLV, eyes closed in concentration, left arm plucking the strings of the tambura. At the bottom right corner of the photograph was -- I peered closely to make sure -- Jayaram.

We had not been able to get seats together that day. Natarajan sat with Jayaram; Shakku, I, and some of the others were on the balcony. MLV surpassed herself. I can still hear, as clearly as if it was yesterday, the Purandaradasa song she sang in Sindhubhairavi that evening. But I remembered the concert for another reason: it had turned out to be the last one we ever attended together. Afterwards we had walked, humming under our breaths and enjoying the evening sea-breeze, to Ajantha's for tiffin. It was there that Shakku told us that her parents had found her a groom. He was in the IAS, she said, and was now posted in Delhi. She had met him once, and he had seemed a thoroughly decent, liberal sort of fellow. He had assured her he would support her efforts towards becoming a teacher. He had explained, in his resonant baritone, that he saw his job as something more: a calling. The more obscure the place he was posted to, the more he felt he could make a difference. As she narrated all this to us, Shakku's ears flushed red, just as they always did when she was embarrassed or when someone praised her effusively.

There had been much cheering and clapping. Jayaram ordered an extra round of coffee for everyone, and Natarajan took his

cap off as he contemplated the news. Six months later, Shakku was married and went off to Delhi to start a new life. I wrote her the odd postcard, but then she began to move around every two years, and eventually I lost track of her life. Meanwhile Jayaram was accepted by Indian Bank, with whom he began his career in Calcutta. One by one we were scattered like playing cards in the wind, until the only person I saw somewhat regularly was Natarajan.

I turned. Ignoring the rest of the photos, I went out into the sun. Thoppi said this morning that Shakku was in town. I must ask him if he knows how to contact her -- I haven't seen her since she first left for Delhi. I must ask Thoppi. But do I really want to know? I stood there, undecided. Then I unlocked my cycle, rode out through the side gate, and turned in the direction of Ajantha's. Let me sit down to a hot cup of coffee and think it over.

