

## 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.

