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Something Amiss.

It was only when I returned to the academy main gate after parking my car did I spot her. She always took recourse to wearing that fading pair of blue jeans and fraying white kurta whenever we met, as if it were a stock reply that could have me fooled that nothing had changed since our seven years away from school.

With a string of “excuse-mes”, I wove a way past stiffening Kanchivarams and gauzy chiffon pallus that kept slipping off conscious shoulders. Finally I reached that austere figure that stood out against this tableau like an admonition.

I watched in silence when the auto skittered past the gate in defeat. She had talked him down from his demand of two hundred rupees to one half.

There was a time when we would both sheepishly slip into the first available auto after a half-hearted attempt at huckstering. “Why do we even try?” she would grumble, “We have sucker written all over our faces...”

“Oh, you drove all the way, Shwetha, you big girl! You can park and stuff, huh?” She asked, nodding at the keys, still a loitering noose between fingers and my handbag.

We had tacitly decided to stop fumbling through our reunion hugs, recognizing that their infrequency did not permit such a familiarity.

“Come let’s go. The good seats will be taken soon. It’s a Saturday night.”

It was inevitable that she would guide me past the mass of gold and zari to the hall, after all wasn’t she far ahead in the march to adulthood?”

“Your night labour shifts done?”

“Yeah, I’m done with my obstetrics rotation. We don’t have lectures anymore so we spend the entire day at hospital. Well...almost.”

Busy looking for two acoustically acceptable seats, she didn’t reply immediately but when we had both settled down, somewhat uncomfortably among a sweaty crowd fanning themselves with the programme, waiting for the airconditioning to be switched on, she said, a little wistfully,

“So you drive out all the way to the hospital and back?”

Niraja had acquired a license two years after I had, but was yet to take to the roads, the only chink in her otherwise independent existence. And yet, in her eyes it accorded me an omnipotence that I didn’t really possess, having never managed to sever myself from the bubble wrap cladding of home as completely as she had from hers.

“Tell me about heartbeats again.” She insisted. It was always an effective ploy to dispel awkward silences, her efforts to switch me into medical lecturer mode.

“You see it isn’t simple lub-dub affair as is popularly mistaken.” I started, already enjoying this rare respite from that frightening competence of hers that scanned me like a searchlight. It wasn’t that her sudden transformation from a timid terminally shy schoolgirl into a world-weary adult woman had bestowed a cloak of superiority over her. And yet, I felt as cheated as if an impostor was lodging within that unrecognizably willowy frame of hers.

“And if the mitral valve regurgitates, the left atrial systole...”

But once the artiste started tuning his violin, she snapped into silence, as if she were one of the strings from which his notes were to be plucked and had to maintain a taut attention in his presence. I wondered if this was the reason she had talked me into accompanying her to this, that its very length along with the embargo on mid-concert whispers would preclude conversation entirely while grudgingly satisfying the “spending time together” requirement.

“Lalgudi GJR Krishnan is playing at the music academy tonight. I’ve booked us both tickets.” I couldn’t have been more stupefied than if she had booked us a trip to Mars.

Watching her follow the progress of his fingers along, I thought, this used to be the girl who joined me in laughing at the huddle of classmates who departed dutifully for ‘paatu class’ after school while we played throwball together, clued out of their chatter of kirtans and varnams. A fervour for Carnatic music ought to have been as alien to her as it was for me but here she was, patting the melody to sleep on her lap, her count perfectly synchronised with his.

It had taken Niraja three trips to Madras before we could finally meet up. The phone calls she made on arriving from Bombay made us both wince, it was performed as a painful duty and the subject of “catching” up was always broached in a tone of bringing up a long-procrastinated task. Though we began earnestly with a ping pong of possible dates, the conversation would fizz out with a vague promise of calling up again after a day, a call that would be put off guiltily but indefinitely nevertheless.

“I’ve arrived.” she would announce dully like a recorded flight announcement. “I will be leaving after 11 days.” She would say dolefully as if claiming a deathbed visit. But my routine of hospital-college-home would stay intact, all the while clamouring to rewire it because she was six kms away, drinking filter coffee over a balcony wall, hugging her homecoming languor tight to her.

But this one, a flying visit, had been different. “It’s only three days.” She had pressed me. “I don’t know when I’ll come back next.”

It hadn't an ominous sound to it, merely pleading. I had acquiesced. But now that we had met, I knew that there was something amiss. Like a forgotten errand that caused one to break into cold sweat when it stomped back into memory baying for a retribution beyond reach. Like a dripping milk packet leaving calm white shadows all the way to the kitchen after being clawed at the corners in feline fury. Like a beggar who had gone missing at a street corner one always dropped a coin at.

Somewhere inside that head of hers that was nodding surreptitiously there was a violin being played, a magic-colouring book that came alive with a carelessly wetted brush to colour-blind eyes, a violin that didn't need well-travelled fingers to coax out note-perfect music. Against my shoulders, I could feel hers shudder every time the thematic movement was played as if she was reaching for a violin that hadn't ever known her touch save in dreams.

I wondered what the music made her remember for surely it was a faraway memory that had shut out the rest of us from her eyes and made her play a violin in her head. The music was unstringing memories in my head as well and they came apart in no particular order.

Our moral education teacher Miss. Grace, had begun on love with "Love the whole world. And equally." Niraja was on her feet, Niraja who couldn't talk to a teacher for longer than a minute, or without casting her eyes downwards as if rebuking a loosened shoelace, had "talked back."

"There is only so much love one can give." She had argued, her voice for once, unquavering and audible. "If we portion it out equally to the whole of humanity, we can't give to people closest to us what they really deserve."

"You do not decide who deserves your love and who doesn't. It's your duty to love everybody the same way" Grace miss had shot back, who despite her flashing eyes and her sharp thin smile that cut into us like a knife, now looked unconvincing.

“You think the heart is a hard disk or what, run out of love the way a disk runs out of space.” I had tried to make light of the confrontation. “Look, I wasn’t showing off. It’s true” She had shot back, her mind still dwelling on the unjust codes of Christian love, “New loves replace old ones, people get replaced.”

And she had proved herself right. Niraja returned from her first year of engineering college with two albums whose plastic lined pages were slowly tearing at their seams, stuffed with photographs and nearly 1GB of photographs, hurriedly named folders containing a hundred pics apiece. Niraja’s face merging in the blur of twenty other equally radiant faces, Niraja among men who put their arms around her, Niraja’s smile, a smile that needn’t to be photographed for me to realize, after twenty years that it was a dimpled one.

“You all look so happy. Your college must be a cool place”

She had smiled a different smile, a bitter one. “It is a cursed place. Those smiles are all paid for”

I was to see those folders every year hence. Farewells, trips, fests, graduation parties, they were all the same. And all of them had that easily tearful girl whose only keepsake from a hunched hide-and-seek childhood was the slight bow in her back. And this was the girl who used to be my best friend, the girl who would rush unnecessarily to the toilet because she wanted to hide her pleasure at coming first again, because she hadn’t been able to smile back at the principal when she received her report card.

And I knew with what she had paid for those smiles and for that newly acquired poise that sat on her like a dress fresh out of store, its price tag still hanging around her neck by a plastic string.

Her holidays at home fidgeted away in a countdown to July-end for her, and the happiest day of her summers was the last time our bicycles swam together through crowded Besant Nagar roads together and our feet made fast-disappearing footprints on the Elliot’s beach shore.

“Let’s have dinner.” I was shaken out of my reverie by her voice. She rushed us both out of the hall, unmindful of the felicitation speeches and the shocked glances that reproached our lapse in concert etiquette.

My glance at the watch must have betrayed my anxiety for she said, “I know a place that’s real quick. It’s on the way home.”

And after a pause uncharacteristic of her gunfire style of speech , she added, “We haven’t spoken in the whole evening. I want to spend more time with you. It’s only eight thirty.”

This softened me immediately and I pretended not to notice that had crept into our ideas of what constituted a reasonable curfew time. Somehow I resented these little differences, as if they alone had driven us apart and reduced our conversations to wide awake descents into the trapdoors of nostalgia.

“Take a right at the flyover signal and then cut through Nandanam junction. There won’t be so much traffic now.” She guided me expertly through the roads that had suddenly grown deceitful and alien in the dark, like a well remembered lesson giving up on me during a viva.

Though her exile from the city was six years old, she, the occasional visitor possessed the city in a way I, a person who had lived here all my life never would be able to.

“How do you know the roads so well?” She squinted through the window, scanning the streets for a familiar shop sign before replying. “If you live in Bombay, you can find your way about in any city.” And then, after waving me through a four-road intersection, she added, “I used to travel by bus here, right? All these are routes I remember from buses.”

She fiddled around with the radio knobs, trying to summon songs out of my yet untuned music player. Finally it pelted out an illayraja number without ay warning, amidst a scattering of static. Niraja mouthed the first lines without singing along, caught midway between humming and singing it in her head, she had them, the lines even before the first chord was struck.

It never used be this way with words. Lyrics, movie dialogues and sitcoms were nightmares for her, she almost always depended on me to demystify familiar syllables displaced in tune and accent, like a child who had to be taught the alphabet all over again when she slips mid-way through a recital.

“Our love is simple as a song.” She broke in suddenly, not singing in silence anymore. And when I shrugged at the line, refusing to recognize it, she sighed.

“Tagore.”

I frowned at the authority with which she took his name. At college, poetry had streaked through her leaving a morbid cloud trail behind.

“I wish songs were simple. The ones we heard today definitely weren’t.” I returned.

But she wasn’t listening, her eyes had already flicked past the steering wheel, past my eyes to the lighted streamers that drooped from the trees of Venkatnaryana road like dying leaves. She motioned me to a stop outside Ratna Cafe and waited at the entrance till I got back from the parking lot.

“Best coffee in the city.” It took me aback, the way she took the city by the scruff of the neck and scuffed it about like a favourite dog. An outsider might have taken her for the local and me for the estranged.

Food arrived with the all the alacrity she had claimed for it and she ate with a relish that I envied, spreading sambar all over her leaf, allowing it to blend into a light orange with the white chutney. She ordered extra cups of sambar for she kneaded the idli to a sambar-soaked paste, her fingers happily flecked with chutney.

She smiled at me, for my glance must have been keen. “I know, I eat like a coolie, my parents say it too.” “Nothing of that for me.” She said pointing at my fork and spoon that were quartering the idlis in guilt-stricken fashion while I waited for the

food to grow cold. She had learned to eat her food hot, her tongue, having been steam-seared many times over, sought not flavour, but fire in her meals.

“Coffee?” she offered, when the waiter returned with his customary “Will you have coffee or shall I show you out with the bill?” look.

“It’s 9:30” I gasped. “You won’t fall asleep.”

“I don’t plan on falling asleep tonight.” She said calmly. Still, I shook my head, “Coffee is poison.”

She burst out laughing. “You doctors…” And then, “Have you read Garcia Gabriel Marquez?”

“Who?” I asked, fumbling with the unfamiliar sound. “Juvenal Urbino says the same thing in Love in the Times of Cholera.”

“Oh.” I stammered as if trying hard not to frame a foolish reply to a question in a foreign tongue. “Interesting”

“Niraja.” I couldn’t hold it back any longer. “Why don’t we read the same books anymore?” Or think the same thoughts, I wanted to add.

She was silent for a very long time. When the bill arrived, she snatched it expertly away from my reach even before I could notice. “I’m the independent one now.” She said, juggling the notes of her wallet confusedly in search of a note to tip with. “You’ll pay every single time after you become a millionaire surgeon.”

If she was sweeping away my remark with a joke, it didn’t last very long for my words had struck her in a thinly armoured spot.

“Do you remember, Shwetha, how we wanted to build home next door to each other and live with each other for the rest of our lives?” I nodded, hardly believing that she still remembered. “And remember, Shwetha, you were the one who

wanted to move out of your parents' home at the soonest and I the one who swore never to part with them even for a single day.”

I smiled. “Yeah, it’s funny, how things worked out in reverse. You living alone in a big city and me still stuck at home.”

“Look here.” I turned to her. “I’ll drop you home. It’s on the way.” I wondered if the times when I took her home “doubts” from school were coming back to her as irrepressibly they were to me

“I can’t.” she whispered. “I can’t go back home. I can’t sleep.”

“Niraja, it’s nearly ten thirty...”

She shook her head looking past my shoulders at a moonlit road that must have had for her all the charms that a warm bed did for me at that moment.

“I’m not on your way home anymore. You go on.”

And I drove back home that night under a canopy of lights that hung like leaves, shining uselessly over emptying roads. But I knew that the dispossessed, the sleepless, the homeless were affording them a sun’s pleasure in daylight. Then it came to me with a pang that Niraja, who had rebuffed the claims of both home and sleep with borrowed roofs and filter coffee, was abroad amongst them.