

My confounded love affair

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I write this as I am lovestruck. Between two people. I love both of them equally. I don't know whom (read: where) to go to. This is an account of lies, unfaithfulness, joy and being torn between two persons.....

Mumbai is my wife. She is everything to me. She is strong, experienced, and has a composed demeanour. She doesn't show her pain easily, as she manages our household and her work together. She is industrious, persistent and has a get-going attitude. Some evening when I return from work, I might not find her at home. Maybe she is working late today, and I will have to cook. But that's okay. Over time I have learnt to give her, her space. She deserves the respect, and relief at times.

She has a slender figure and short hair, and often gets dark circles, from staying awake late. She is not from the nearby town and was brought up somewhere else, but masks this fact well with her fluent English. I have learnt from her to be on time, and respect the value of it. She is kind, and generally good to talk to. She is also extremely intelligent and well-mannered. I wonder sometimes how she picked up so many skills in so little time.

Her diligence is worthy to me. She never forgets my smallest needs, despite rushing for her wants and keeping up with the time. I look at her sometimes and wish, I was half as energetic as her. I could have done so much better in life. I could have earned so much more money. I could have bought our house with my savings than to have my wife pay the instalments. But then again, Mumbai tells me it'll be alright. Together, we will make it work. She tells me to be grateful that we at least have a roof above her head. Many men and women and children she has encountered have asked her to find them someplace to spend the night. She has once in a while offered a few to sleep in our garage. In return, they had to do some chores for her. I am every day, amazed by her prudent.

She gets invited to parties and gatherings often, but rarely goes. She always has some excuse. I ask her to take a break at times and breathe a little. She smiles at me. Asks me if I would like to go without her. I smirk. There is an odd sense of understanding between us. Especially in the way we manage the house. There are no assigned roles. Nor have we designated ways of doing things. We just get things done without speaking much. When she cooks, I do the washing. And if she cleans, I take the laundry. There is barely any need to speak much among us. The eyes do all the talking. The other day she was wearing a necklace, and I felt she looked like a queen. It was magical. I have often learnt from her how to keep my cool. Not to be too heated, neither too cold with what I say, despite however agitated I might feel. Always knowing the right thing to say or do. It is because of her that I am today the person that I am, and I have a sense of identity.

Mumbai says she likes to talk about things openly. But, she gets teary-eyed very often, especially after our argument over should we have kids amidst our busy lives. There is mostly a ghastly silence whenever this topic comes up. Then she gets a work call and leaves. And our argument is never discussed openly. I try to content myself with the fact that our life is complete in itself, and perhaps we don't need children. Our two-bedroom apartment and a vibrant friend circle will stay by our side for a long. Inside, I feel an odd sense of despair as I cannot express to her my feelings frankly. Sometimes I feel she is unusually very sensitive and I should not upset her.

She is on the call for too long. I wait for her half-lying in the bed. I wait for her to come into the bedroom draping in her gown. I will kiss her goodnight and apologize for what I said or did earlier. And she will kiss me back, saying she loves me and will look deep into my eyes.

She barges into the room, opens her laptop and sits by the bed. She has an immense workload tonight. I turn around and gasp for breath. I want respite from this awkward silence. I cannot tell her the immense monotone and boundedness I feel. Our marriage seems to be going through a rough patch. Or is it slowly fragmenting?

Delhi is my mistress. I am her lover. I meet her often, in the old part of the town. I meet her to get respite from the indignation of my wife. She is older than Mumbai, but at times less mature. She carries around her a mystique fragrance. It is a mix of perfume and flower petals. She has a Sikh name, but I am sure she is part Hindu and part Muslim as well. She is carefree and enthusiastic. She loves open spaces, especially gardens. I like to spend time with her in those flower beds on winter afternoons as she tells me a story. She smokes at times but stops if I insist her to.

She always has a story to tell. From the time she encountered a Mughal or the time she was with the foreigners. All of the previous lovers she says have left an impression on her. Despite having so many heartbreaks, she looks cheerful. I get closer to her, brush the hair from behind her neck and look at her closely. I feel lucky to be with her. She has fading bruises behind her neck. Are those marks from the atrocities she faced earlier? I ask her about it, and she shies away. She looks to the other side and unpins the back of her dress. Slowly she reveals more such marks, and I gently try to touch them. She holds my hand, as tears roll down her cheek. I pin back her dress and she sobs in my arms. We hold on to each other and there is warmth in the cold dusky evening.

Together, we have had many memorable encounters. Because of her, I have developed an interest in aesthetics, and architecture. She has made me interested in varied cuisines, and their preparations. She, despite her ageing, makes me feel youthful again. Her spontaneity amuses me. And so does her temper. One moment she is too heated, and the other moment, she could be outright cold. She could make you feel vulnerable, but over time I have learnt that it is just a phase that she goes through. I feel happier with her. She makes me forget my responsibilities for a while and makes me appreciate life as it comes.

The other day I visited her in her new home in the sprawling part of the town. The house is modern, spacious and majestic. I like the way Delhi likes to live herself to the fullest. She has

no regrets and says she will put in more of her savings to make the most out of life if needed. I laugh at her. She looks at me longingly and laughs back. It's a sultry morning and we wait in the cool canopy of her lawn for the sun to set as I read to her poetry. She giggles and jokes once in a while, and I feel I have laughed my heart out after a long while. She gets up and brings us sherry. Pouring it out she tells me of the time, she had met a young Assamese student of literature. She had picked up a new language from her. She says she feels she is still confused about whom she likes- men or women. I like how she openly expresses what she feels, unapologetically. She has taught me to find my path in my way and be courageous about what I believe in.

As we are half-drunk now and engulfed in deep talks, I realise I have never shared such experiences with Mumbai. She was too real, and Delhi in her way provides me with a surreal relief. As we talk about each other's past, she reveals how none of her bonds and relationships has lasted very long. She doesn't regret breaking those bonds. She just likes to enjoy the company of a person when they stop by. She says she likes her life to be happening and full of uncertainty. At times lying to partners, hiding secrets from them, going away with another lover. She will perhaps like to forget some of her partners and reminisce about a few others who were good to her. She looks at me as if in question- what kind of a partner will I want to be?

Amidst her lousy talks, it makes me realise that she for me is a temporary respite as well. Perhaps I am for Delhi an encounter too. I feel my faith in her shaking. I cannot stay with her forever. I have a home to go back to, I have a wife waiting. Mumbai must not know that I am having an affair, lest I might get divorced. It is almost dark now and I must get going. I get up hurriedly and almost drop my sherry glass. Delhi looks at me worryingly, silently implying- won't I stay longer? I kiss her goodbye and look at her one last time as she shuts her door.

As I drive back home I heave a sigh of relief. I don't know what to call home. My loving dutiful wife, who has made me what I am or my bubbly lover who makes me more colourful and cheery. I am lost. I fear that life between these two people will make me feel a weird dissonance. While I am with Mumbai, I long to get back to Delhi who caresses me and imagines what next adventure awaits us. And while I am with Delhi, I feel an urgency to check up on Mumbai and be present when she comes home. What do I call home? The physical space of comfort or the emotional and semantic frame of joy. The space where you are grounded and value each breathes or the periphery of a sun-washed lawn where you feel you're at seventh heaven. The place where I am from or the place where I want to be. And I, the son of a Bengali migrant worker (quite literally), the descendant of an Indian Independence immigrant decide to let this dilemma exist. For some reason, I feel that this discomfort might itself serve as an element of surprise in my life. An unknown, confounded discovery of what is romance and romanticism. For I, living life between two cities decides to be a traveller and an explorer forever, translating and transcribing between two worlds what it feels like to be loved, cared and looked after by two unique personas.