

I AM A SEEKER AND MY SEARCH GOES ON

THE FIRST DAY of the Almanac or new year is never like all the other days that follow—at least not for me. As I opened my window, a strange nascent aroma of freshness wafts up from the pinnacles of fur and pine trees. A few sunrays, mysterious and diffused, seep through my window like a faint cloud. There were hazy shadows lurking in the corners of the garden. Perhaps that was the unknown, the new day, bringing with it a whole new year. Suddenly, I felt that the first day of the unseen masked new year was resting its head on my window sill, bursting to climb in. I realized it was not a normal day, it was something which was abstract and unknown, which was slowly becoming more tangible and physical. Yesterday was already last year.

The flowing winds of time have eroded a large segment of my life. The past, for me, has been strange, uncertain, and to a great extent unwanted. Everything in my life happened so abruptly that I lost faith in a predetermined pattern of life. Events do help in the metamorphosis of our very existence. Like the Roman priest who concealed messages in the folds of his long black robe, our future is also wrapped in an unseen mysterious robe of time. Time has no relationship with understanding, but time can help one to mature. Time helps one to attain the capacity to think, to think freely without fear, so that you begin to discover for yourself what is real and what is true. For me, the New Year day is different—it is a day of self-analysis and introspection. On this day I detach myself from the present to look back into the past, and even visualize the future with some kind

of hope and curiosity. The past has been strange, yet it has made me what I am, and has enriched my life.

The sun that morning appeared after a long and oppressively heavy snowfall. It is paradoxical that we feel the cold not when it snows but when the sky clears out. I had opened the window—melting snow flakes dripped down the tender branches of the pine and eucalyptus trees—a golden orange hue had magically transformed the surroundings into a heavenly sojourn that exuded divinity.

Mother and Pierre had danced till late last night—the melodious notes seemed to flow out of the heart—the pleasant breeze enveloping them seemed charged with their fervour. Mother was lost to the lilt of the music—memories had been pushed back to the unconscious mind. A comprehensive analysis of memories has the potential to alter one's life and is hence perceived as being dangerous. The day to come was the day Papa had left her bereft of all music and happiness—probably that was the reason she revelled in this day.

Professor Sharatji and Naina were also busy dancing. Sharatji had not given me a second look after he was introduced to Naina. Perhaps I did not possess the requisite qualities to be called attractive.

“Can I get you some wine?” Sharatji whispered in Naina's ear.

“No thank you, I do not drink.”

“Kebabs?”

“No, I am a vegetarian.”

“How about a dance?”

“No, not even that.”

“Then...”

“Then, go to hell,” Naina said. They both laughed and Sharatji abruptly caught Naina’s arm and whirled her on to the floor.

I wondered how I appeared to people. I remembered Naina saying, “How does one define you, Malvika? The eternal martyr—self suffering—why do you have such despair on your face ? Why can’t you live life, each day as it comes—I don’t know what affliction you suffer, as if a nail of the Cross has been hammered into you. Why don’t you let yourself go—when was the last time you had a good laugh Malvika?”

There was no one at my table—only the twinkling bulbs intermittently dripping a diffused light. At that moment too, I had detached myself from the inconsequential events and needs of the night and pondered what configuration the new year would take. On looking back, there was Papa’s death...Bhupen... Savita...desire...a home slipping away—this existence seemed unending...the contingent events, the pain, the success and failure—the intensities of drama played in the stormy recesses of the heart. But, mercifully, these storms calm down by the time they reach the conscious self. I often try with courage to descend to the dark anteroom of my vanquished desires, where a stench of my broken dreams and my parents’ neglect are carefully stacked, and overawed sentiments, trodden memories await uncertainly to be locked into the dungeons of the mind.

Mother did not express anything in the morning. She had even forgotten the ceremony ritually held for the peace of the departed soul.

I could hear the strains of the wakened morning—a clattering—the odds and ends of the party being cleared. Janaki, the housemaid with her grumbling, Bedi and his tirades. But the scene outside the window remained quiet and the guests continued to sleep. I had a strange desire to hear what Mother was saying. What a lot of deciphering, of the unsaid there is, in hearing. At the juncture where the mind goes beyond hearing and pauses, an opinion of what was heard is formed. I waited at just such a juncture—but Mother’s words carried nothing but a wordliness about them. The only significant act of the day was to clear the trappings of last night’s revelry—the bar glasses, the napkins, the streamers, the broken stars and spangles, the deflated balloons—yesterday’s festoons had become today’s debris. Mother saw me and said, “Are you going to college?”

“No, not immediately.”

“Then please take this register and make an inventory of the whisky, wines and soda bottles.”

“Oh, Mother,” I objected, “not so early in the morning.”

“There is no morning or evening in work. Besides, today is the First—there’s so much to be done.”

“Like what?” I asked in eager anticipation.

Perhaps she remembered.

“The routine—the servants’ salaries, special tips for the new year—the washerman will soon be here.”

I looked away...What does one do with a memory that does not have even a whisp of the fragrance of the old days. Mother said, "Malvika, please open the curtains, let's have a bit of light. Don't you think this was the first really exciting New Year's Eve celebration, here at Nirmal Kunj?"

"Well...may be..." I hesitated.

"Please draw the curtains. Don't you think these new curtains look beautiful?"

"Why do we put up curtains mother?"

"To furnish the room, and be protected against the strong glare."

"Protected against the glare or our reality?"

"You're speaking in Bhaiji's language again. Please spare me your philosophical ramblings." I thought it best to leave the room but was accosted by the sentry..."Maaji, the priest has come."

"How many times must I tell you not to call me Maaji—do I look a Mother—Can't you address me as Memsahib?"

"Yes Memsahib, the priest..."

"Yes, the priest. Must have come to collect his new year tips. It must be that boy from the shrine in the cave. Malvika, please give him something."

My uncertain steps led me to the priest—Roshanji. I invited him to be seated, organised the pooja and performed it all by myself. Papa's photograph and I—a few flowers, the chantings, and invocations—this

was all that was left of relationships. Roshanji did not ask for Mother and I did not volunteer any explanations. When mother finally made an appearance, everything was over. Janaki appeared with a glass of milk and some breakfast for Roshanji. Mother was more angry than embarrassed...“You could have reminded me, if I forgot.”

“Why remind you of something you’ve forgotten.”

“Malvika...you have wrong notions about me.”

“There is no right or wrong, Mother. We progressively respond to the state of our mind. My relationship with Papa is one of birth—that is truth and therefore, ‘right’. An Indian sentiment, as Pierre would say.”

Mother turned abruptly away. Perhaps I should not have mentioned Pierre’s name—he was responsible for her attitude, for the change in her—but why did Mother always live outside herself. Why did she never indulge in self-realization?

I am constantly drudging at maintaining Nirmal Kunj. Mother’s high pitched plea resounded in the room. She was right of course. Mother and I were both fettered to Nirmal Kunj. Some of the wings of the mansion had been left locked. Tourists came and went; and Mother and I went through the chores of looking after them meticulously. Yet, we could not imagine life without the tourists—they were like an addiction to us—our very subsistence. After Papa’s death, it was this definite means which had made our capsized lives more worthwhile. I don’t know which one of the two of us had been more affected by the disaster life had bestowed upon us.

ANY ATTEMPT AT recounting the truth is immediately accompanied by half truths, hidden truths and lies, and yet we never tire of believing the hollow sounds of our words. Our greatest problem I think is to accurately discern our own values. Mother was used to flamboyant luxury. Papa had been a very high government official, and the orderlies and servants had kept her busy with the showmanship of status. Her day started with being preoccupied with Papa, then sprucing up the house, the afternoon nap and later, the animated preparations for the evening's cocktails or dinner. I figured nowhere in her scheme of things. I lived with a governess, who looked after my needs and comforts very efficiently and with clockwork precision—but with little room for love. My childhood was a walk through dry sands, culminating in a thorny undergrowth of emotions. My existence in my parents' life was a negation in terms. I was their only child and hence a vital part of the household, but my presence did not arouse any possessiveness in them. They were so lost in a reckless celebration of life that they did not even pause to seek any of life's truths. They had the aptitude to ignore with ease, the indefinable yearning and pain that comes with growing up. My body was changing—I had changed from school to college. Change brings with it newness and sometimes maturity but not necessarily fulfilment. Neither an attempt at sentimentality nor material gain can ever make us feel complete. That was probably the reason why I found solace in books. They were certainly more entertaining than Mother's parties.

Bhaiji, Papa's elder brother, used to visit us sometimes. Papa or Mother never felt the need to rebuke me about anything. But, Bhaiji

often exercised his rights as an elder, and admonished me. He would be annoyed with Mother's ways and express his disapproval to me.

"Your Mother hasn't perpetuated any traditions. You don't seem to know a single hymn or prayer."

"Bhaiji, does Mother know any?"

"That's the pity. A restless soul—always on the move, she's constantly spinning like a top."

I could not help laughing. This candid observation of mother was rather appealing. I knew he was worried about her. I wanted to please him—the one person who was concerned enough to scold me.

"Bhaiji, why don't you teach me some mantras and prayers?"

"I would, if I were to stay with you. I will send you a book on everyday prayer and ritual. Learn it up. Every girl should be religious."

"But isn't it more important to be human than religious? Are all religious people good?"

Bhaiji said affectionately, "Well, prayer increases our proximity to God. It's a way of disciplining and dedicating ourselves to him."

I would get influenced by all that Bhaiji said and I soon found myself learning up a lot of mantras and practising religious rituals whenever I could. I started believing that the chanting of prayers was the only act that would cleanse my soul. The incantations became a spontaneous inspiration to my consciousness. Whenever I felt lifeless and inconsequential, a small ember of the holy fire would glow inside

me and the void inside would be filled with a strange tangible strength. The prayer books sent by Bhaiji and my graduation text books would fill the silence of the house.

My love for literature led me to Bhupen's novel and then finally to Bhupen. My best and only friend Savita was well groomed and bubbling with life. We would often discuss the future when we sat in a group with our other classmates. Once Savita said, "Come on girls, let's make a list of the qualities a boyfriend should possess."

Savita started reading the lists.

"Wanted, a hundred percent male, who possesses manly qualities..."

"Is full of wisdom..."

"Has social graces and a sense of humour..."

"And interest in art and music..."

She paused as she came to my list. "A hundred percent male—should be religious. I think Malvika wants a priest or maybe a mendicant. Are you planning to get married or renounce the world?"

There were guffaws of laughter and I started wondering why I had written that. Why had I thought of a hundred percent man? Did this kind of a man exist in this world?

Around that time, Bhupen, won an award for his novel, and the college Dramatics Society brought out a dramatised version of it. Everything was so new and rain kissed—the play, acting and my acquaintance with Bhupen. I shall never forget those lovely days—a host of new

friends—Mohan, Jivesh and Kanta. We would rehearse the entire day till late in the evenings.

Rakhakriti was the story of how declining relationships take their toll on the human psyche. It was the story of an ill-matched couple. The husband, a product of British education, denigrates everything Indian and looks upon India as unprogressive and stale. The wife is unable to change her Indian attitudes and values.

They both carry on living under the same roof because the husband cannot do without the luxuries that his wife's property and flourishing business provide him; and the wife, of course, is wedded to him and also to the traditions instilled in her from childhood. But she develops inscrutable ailments which doctors are unable to diagnose. She suffers alone—because during the course of her prolonged illness, everyone leaves her. The Visitor's Book lying outside her room is dutifully filled in by all her close friends and relatives who do not take the effort to step beyond the closed sickroom door. Her own sister, too, prefers to register her attendance by merely signing the book.

The lady is shocked by such apathetic behaviour and requests her doctors to transfer her to a general ward of an ordinary hospital. She sees other human beings suffering more than herself. They are in pain—but not at all lonely. Loneliness is the cross she has to bear. She compares herself to a pencil sketch—a *Rekhakriti*. She has all the comforts of life but not affection with which to colour them. Who could portray loneliness better than Malvika? And I did—because for me the

play was very symbolic and ironical. My parents had no time to come and see me perform. They even overlooked the newspaper coverage. But the play was a great success and was selected for the youth festival at Jaipur.

THE JOURNEY TO Jaipur was hot and uncomfortable. I felt claustrophobic in the dormitory which we were stuffed into, like sardines. I would go for early morning walks. The desert topography somehow made me lapse into the barrenness of life. It seemed that Age challenged Time and raced ahead, making us older each moment. What was this thing we called life? Did it dry up each day like a carcass?

Savita would often break into my reverie. “How do you like this place, Malvika?”

“It’s different...quite pleasant...how do you like it?”

“I prefer Delhi. This town lives a dying history. The pink is so artificial. There are crowds...but only foreign tourists—it seems as if everything has been specially put up on display.” Jivesh said, “It is so lonely here that I feel as if I’ve been banished from my country.”

“I wonder how people stay here,” said Mohan.

“Banished, Jivesh. You can feel dislodged within the walls of your own home. Sometimes a wandering mind is an experience in exile.”

“Come, come, Malvika. Even you don’t appear too happy here. You seem to be tired.”

“Happiness can also be tiring and rapturous bliss can cause fatigue.”

“And what, may I know, is the reason for your rapturous bliss?” Mohan said.

“Don’t you understand? Sir is here—Bhupen Singh—the fountain of her rapturous bliss.”

Jivesh laughed. I froze and Savita turned grey.

“No wonder our play has got a plain Jane as its heroine.”

By evening a silence hung between Savita and me. I kept thinking about my attraction for Bhupen—it was so miniscule, so short-lived. What magical or magnifying lens had Mohan used to decipher it? I had not even given it a name—it was just there—a special flight in fantasy—belonging to me.

That evening was the dress rehearsal. We were all very self-conscious as if the hypocrisies of life had been turned into a performance. Savita made more than her share of mistakes. She would swallow the last words of her dialogue and the entire script would go haywire for lack of her cues.

“Savita, please emote clearly. You keep chewing your words,” said Bhupen.

“Please Sir, don’t be after me. I’ve told you, I’ll perform perfectly on stage tomorrow.” She made a face and walked away from the scene. I wasn’t on stage. Savita came and sat next to me. I tried to console her.

“Stones would be left unhewn if it weren’t for the chisel—surely you wouldn’t grudge a chisel for sculpturing form into a stone?”

“I think you’re out to enact Bhupen’s ideas in real life.” There was loud laughter. Just then Bhupen came up and his cold voice stated his attempt to control his annoyance.

“Savita, you should not have walked off in a huff. Come along, let’s complete the scene.”

“No Sir, I am not in the mood. I’ll perform well tomorrow, I promise.” Bhupen left the hall and we dispersed to our rooms.

The play went off well. I got the best performance award for the main role and Savita bagged it for her supporting role.

There was a poetic soiree in the evening. We sat amidst the audience and suddenly I heard Bhupen’s name being announced for a rendering of a song by Rabindranath Tagore. I heard the group whispering, nudging each other and giggling—but I was enchanted by Bhupen’s voice that reached out to the stars.

“I feel that all the stars shine in me. The world breaks into my life like a flood. The flowers blossom in my body. All the youthfulness of land and water smokes like an incense in my heart, and the breath of all things plays on my thoughts as if on a flute. When the world sleeps I come to your door. The stars are silent and I am afraid to sing. I wait and watch till your shadow passes by the balcony of night and I return with a full heart. Then in the morning I sing by the roadsides. The flowers in the hedge give me answers and the morning air listens.”

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