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A Strange Experience

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I met Silje at a tea shop near Vishnu guest house. This was just like another weekend and I was there with my friend. The cosy place was full of smoking foreigners. The golden lights revealed a little of faces: a little about their dull or happy lives, keeping much to itself. We were sipping our lemon ginger tea when she tapped gently on my right shoulder.

“What is this exactly?” She asked narrowing her eyebrows, looking at my glass cup.

“This is lemon ginger. They crush a small piece of ginger and squeeze half a lemon into it, simple.”

“Can I try, please,” it was the next voice I heard from her after a short pause.

I looked into my glass. There was not much left into it. I was still thinking if I should buy her a glass of lemon ginger when she took the cup from my hands and took a sip. She smacked her lips, wiped her mouth with a napkin and gave the cup back to me.

It was crazy to drink from a stranger’s glass.

“Good, gracious!” She exclaimed.

She looked beautiful. I didn’t find many foreigners beautiful. They were not the persons of my eyes, to be honest. I always thought that a European girl looked too thin and a girl with a little flesh looks better but she had a perfect physique. Her skin shone as if she was rubbed with a pinch of gold dust, matching the colour of her hair. Her hair was thick and soft and curly like noodles. It touched the nape of her neck. It wasn’t long enough like a girl’s or short enough to come under boy-cut hairstyle. Her hair was diagonally cut across her face and she would take a few strands and tug it behind her ears. I noticed her earrings. I had never seen such earrings before. It was a Venus symbol: a sign of gender for females. She was in a long silky gown. It was light brown in colour and was stuck to her body revealing her shape. Her curves were visible from her clothes. However, more than that what really took my attention was other Indians gathered around her, staring hard at her body, as if she was sitting stark naked.

“Are you local?” she asked again after a little while.

“Yes. I live just next to Assi ghat. Where are you from?”

“Well, I’m from Germany. I’ve been living there for past few years. My parents are from Russia, but when I was very small they got divorced. After this, my mother married a German and we moved to Germany.”

“How long are you going to stay here?”

“Two weeks, only if I don’t get sick during my stay. I don’t want to disappoint you but Varanasi is very dirty. My friend had come here last year and she caught a severe chest infection. She didn’t want me to stay here. I want to see this Puja that’s going to happen under that Peepul tree at Dandi ghat around midnight. Can you come with me?”

“I’m afraid I can not, but we can meet tomorrow. I’ll show you around.”

“Great,” she said and we bade each other goodnight.

This would have been a strange encounter in any other part of the world, trusting a stranger so easily but in Varanasi nobody is a stranger. Nothing seems foreign. It takes people nothing to make friends or indulge into a political debate.

Silje met me near the Peepul tree at Dandi ghat next morning. It seemed it was her favourite place in Varanasi. She looked fresh as if she had come straight out of shower. Her hair looked wet and dark. I wasn’t expecting this but as she came near me she hugged me tightly. In Varanasi a man holding a man’s hand is a common sight but a man holding a woman’s hand attracts every passer-by’s attention.

“Thank you for coming,” she said cheerfully, revealing a charming smile. We walked together along the river for an hour or so. The sun was climbing the sky and it was getting warmer with the passing time. There was not the slightest hint of breeze. Trees stood there in a state of utter shock. River looked utterly calm as if it had stopped flowing at all. Silje had her hat over her head but she looked red in her face, hot as a burning vessel. I could sense the heat she was feeling, more than me, of course. I thought whether her heart was pumping all the blood only to her face. We couldn’t walk further down without taking rest for a while.

We decided to sit on the step under a huge tree. It was a stairway that ascended up and led to the meandering streets. Crooked streets of Varanasi can help you in forgetting the sense of time and space.

It was cool under the shade of this gigantic tree. A crow was cawing incessantly somewhere in the branches, well hidden behind the dense leaves. I tried to locate it but couldn't. A few macaques were jumping over from one branch to the other, manoeuvring to steal the offering that was made in the temple just next to the tree. It was a small dilapidated temple. The roof seemed like was soon to come down. The priest was sleeping on the floor in front of a small entrance of the temple so that no monkey could get inside.

After a little while, I felt a hand on my back. It was Silje caressing my back. I was unsure if she did it mistakenly but then I saw her other hand coming over to my chest. The next moment, she rested her head over my shoulder and started playing with my fingers. I became nervous. I felt the hairs standing on my hands. She smiled as she caressed my chest and back. I was still hesitant if I should touch her when she took my hands and put it over her cheeks. I began to stroke her hair. Her soft skin was as smooth as butter. I had never felt a more evoking touch in my life before.

I felt that Silje was looking somewhere else. Instead of looking into my eyes her eyes were fixed on something else. I looked into the direction of her gaze. I saw that the priest had woken up and was staring at us. I felt as if Silje was touching me only to make the priest jealous, as if she was trying to provoke him. The priest was almost bald and a few strands that were left over his head were neatly parted and dyed.

I felt embarrassed being touched in front of an old priest but Silje was almost challenging him now. She was laughing to his face and her laughter was mischievous. The priest turned his back towards us after staring hard at us for a few minutes straight and we rose to our feet and moved further.

This was something very strange. Silje and I had no emotional attachment. She didn't know anything about me except that I was a local and could help her in showing around. She never asked for more, nothing about my family or my relations. On the way back she didn't hold my hands or touched me. She kept the distance between us. It was only for a short time and in front

of that priest that she behaved peculiarly. I had never been touched by a girl before. I was young, full of energy but nervous at the same time. After this incident, my heart craved to get physical with her and I thought of her body all the time. I made plans and rehearsed in my mind about how to respond to her touch. I was determined about not missing the chance this time and utilising the opportunity.

The next day Silje called me at German café. Spiralling stairs led us to a well lit roof from a dark corridor. The roof was shaded with corrugated tin. There were a few chairs and beds and numerous white people around us. The place was nice and cosy but exorbitant for a middle class Indian. After racking up my brain over an outlandish menu for a few minutes, I figured out that I would simply have orange juice. I had never eaten anything German in my whole life before. The paintings on the walls were indecipherable. An Indian waiter put a bottle of orange pulp squeezed out and a bottle of soda in front of me. I was so nervous that I mixed so much soda in the orange pulp that it tasted only like soda. Finding it tasteless, I asked for a little sugar which I got in two qualities. One was white small crystals that I was quite familiar with and the other looked strange. I dropped a few crystals of sugar to make it drinkable but succeeded in making it cloyingly sweet.

An old waiter came to take the order for food. As he stood in front of me, Silje began to touch me again. I wasn't comfortable about being touched in front of people. In Varanasi you wouldn't find opposite sexes touching each other in public usually. I shivered terribly as her soft skin made advancements on my chest. However, I forgot to respond and I only looked around me, I was more concerned about people staring at us. I asked Silje about going back to her hotel room together. I was charged and I wanted more of her but I felt nervous in front of public.

“But why do you want to go to the hotel room?”

“I'm tired but I can't go home this early. I have to stay somewhere. Let's sleep in your hotel room till the sun gets down and then we can come to the Ghat again.” I made excuse. I don't think she understood my intention behind it as she readily agreed.

We rushed back to the hotel. I was feeling charged after her tender touch. I wanted to devour her body now. I wanted to explore the untouched corners of her body. I saw her sensual lips and wanted to kiss them. We walked back to her hotel room hurriedly.

She turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door. Her room was smelling like lemongrass oil exactly like her body.

Her bed looked very comfortable. A soft cotton white sheet was spread out. I had only one thing in my mind and the bed looked as if it was meant for the act of making love only. I felt ashamed that I was there only for sex but then I thought all the men would have felt the same. A heap of clothes was piled up in a corner. I asked her if I could take a shower in her bathroom. She nodded in ascent. I bathed like I'd never bathed before. I took my time and rubbed the soap vigorously. I wanted to smell good.

When I came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel over my waist, Silje was lying in her bed. She was in the same gown I had first met her in. I slipped slowly into her bed and began touching her soft body. I came closer and embraced her but I felt she wasn't as interested as she seemed when she was out with me. I kissed her eyes and her forehead but she didn't respond. She was breathing heavily now. Her eyes were open as she wasn't feeling anything, as if she was utterly numb. I tried to kiss her mouth but she turned her face away from me. I thought it would take time to arouse her. So I slipped my hands into her bodice. I was very charged now. I wanted her to respond but she was resisting me now.

"No," she said, turning into the other direction.

"But why? What happened?"

"I don't let any man touch me. I don't want sex."

"But you were touching me since yesterday. You touched me, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I don't want. Don't ask for reasons."

"But I'm curious. What was it exactly that you were doing there in front of the priest and in front of that waiter?"

She was again red in her face as if she was out under the sun. Her ears looked steaming red. I could sense that she was very nervous. It seemed she would faint soon.

"I wouldn't touch you. Don't worry and don't tell if you don't feel like."

She sat hunched up in the bed. I could see her watery eyes. I put on my T-shirt back and sat next to her.

“I feel traumatic being touched in privacy. I was only thirteen when I was first touched by a man in my room. I cannot forget that night when he came inside my room to kiss me goodnight. I felt as if he was touching me down there. I was unsure but then slowly I became sure. I got very nervous. I wanted to shout but I couldn’t gather enough power. I had lost the ability to speak. I remember I didn’t speak for days. It took me years to tell this to my mother. However, she forced her hands over my mouth. She didn’t want me to say that. She wanted me to remain shut and forget all that. I told her that it was impossible for me to forget. But she insisted that I should remain shut about it, that it would spoil everything, that it would ruin all her hopes.

My mother told me that she had gone through a lot to get a better life. And that now we couldn’t lose all that.”

“But why did she say so?” I asked her in a broken voice.

“Because this man who touched me was my stepfather.” Silje dropped in the bed and hid her face with her hands.

I lied down next to her as I felt drained and had no energy to remain sit. My brain was trying to push out of my head. I felt like I was bitten by a venomous snake. She had had her own inexplicable reasons about not feeling better with a man in a closed room, perhaps some psychological trauma that had developed after such a bitter experience and I didn’t ask her about it.

But this was so disgusting that she could tell this only to a stranger.