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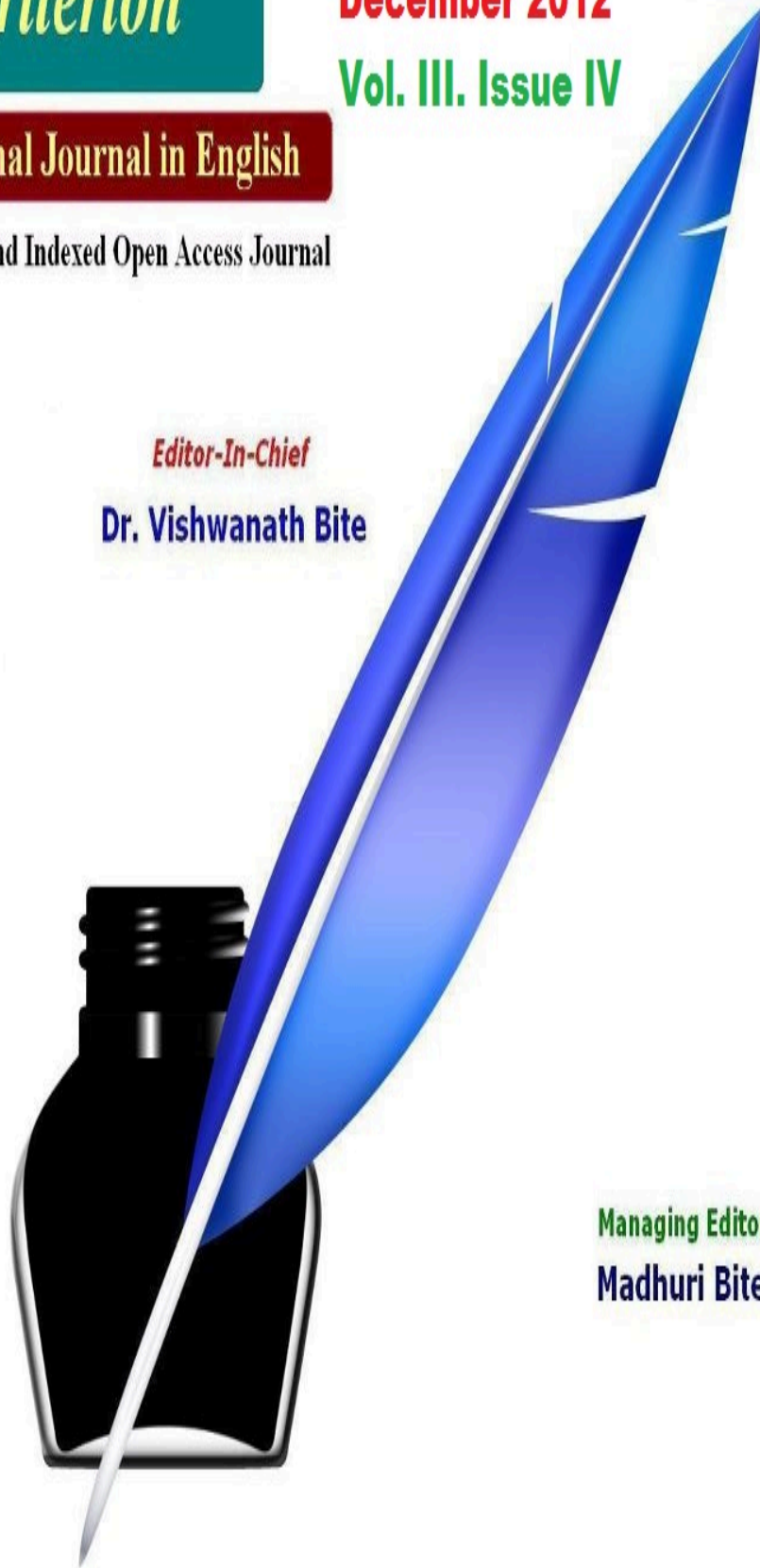
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## Ganesha's Babies

**Aparna Raj Mukhedkar**

The tree seemed as lonely as I had been since my arrival in the US two months ago. It stood right outside my balcony window close enough to extend my arms and touch it if I wanted. The tree sported a thick girth and had one solitary branch that wound itself in a wavy curve, like an elephants trunk. He reminded me of Lord Ganesha, so I named him after the elephant god. We were each others companions in what was seemingly a vast, lonesome world. Each morning, as I sipped my spiced chai, I spoke to him. Sometimes, or most times I scolded him for just standing there and watching while my spirit wilted away in this lonely, sad country where people met only during the weekends or at work! No one knocked on the door just to pop in for a cup of tea, play cards or just sit talking, gossiping and enjoying each others company. Heck! The doorbell never rang, except in the evening when Ram returned from the office. Until then, everything around was deathly silent save for an occasional rumble of thunder or the wayward whispers of the wind. There were no servants, cooks, drivers nothing! Everything was self serve and self done! Even washing and ironing clothes! There were machines to do them of course, but you had to know how to operate them. Someone had to teach me and that someone came home everyday at 6 pm dead tired from work, ate a TV dinner, had mad sex and slept! They said, no swore that marriages were made in heaven! Wish they would tell you the truth. Its like walking the longest and tallest tightrope-one slip and the ever hungry pit of darkness is ready to engulf you. So here I was unraveling on a thread of silk, walking gingerly taking one frail step in this desolate place to where I had travelled, from a flawed but vibrant India to America, the land of my visions where I hoped my dreams and aspirations would be finally be unveiled. I landed in Port Arthur, Texas to be precise, the stomping ground for oil refineries and the energy industry. What lay before me was an uncertain, unknown present from where I was daring, albeit rather desperately to carve out a bright future.

I was incredibly fortunate, however, to have found a companion during these challenging times- Ganesha! He didn't talk, but he spoke volumes. It just took me some time to hear him in all that silence!

I came to the United States as a new bride.. Having lived in India, loneliness was unheard of in my circles. Although we lived in a quiet colony up in the hills, there were always people

around. Servants milled about, neighbors trotted in and out of our house, my mother, the ever fluttering social butterfly hosted lavish parties, and my own group of friends numbered in the hundreds.

Here, in the States, my friends were my husbands at first. Everyone worked, so we met during the weekends, only if they were available. My husband was always busy from 6 am to 6pm and came home dead tired. I spoke for hours with my mother on the phone to pass time. But, since the last phone bill quarrel with my husband, I had to cut back. Our two bedroom flat was a pig sty. I yearned for a servant to clean it up. I waited every evening for my husband to load the utensils in the dishwasher. I detested the sticky smell of left over food and dirty utensils which clung to my nose like treacle. The sheets on the mattress had not been washed for weeks and sometimes I would not bathe for three days straight. I was too depressed to care. I read a bit, but it was the regular conversations I had with Ganesh that breathed life into me. Then, a football player named O.J. Simpson being chased by police vehicles in Los Angeles had me glued to the television set which I quickly befriended. It tucked the loneliness under the carpet, ready however, to spring into action whenever necessary.

So, cooped up in a two bedroom flat sitting on a third hand sofa cavorting with a million unseen bugs, I watched shows like Regis and Kathie Lee, Matlock, Murder, She Wrote and many more. I developed an insatiable craving for cheesecake and pepperoni pizza. I ate voraciously as I watched the detectives unravel murders or the cute exploits of Kathy Lee's son, Cody! One day, I managed a medium sized pizza all by myself! Needless to say, my stick thin, size four figure mushroomed into a ten in under two months! I became withdrawn and shy to meet people who noticed my ever growing waistline. But, I did nothing about it! I woke up to deathly silences that I killed with noise from the television. Along with me, my husband grew sideways too. We didn't talk much. As he ascended the corporate ladder, I fell deeper into a roiling brew of dark emotions. While he seduced power, I craved to set my soul on fire. I wanted those adrenaline pumping days as a journalist in India when I worked on a story that fuelled my zestful energy. It didn't matter if it was exposing the foibles of a corrupt politician, covering the elections, or writing a movie review. Instead, I had lost my way and the stark loneliness made me increasingly desperate. I was fit to be tied and sent off to the loony bin. Ironically, there was no one to take me there.

One day, in the fall as I chatted up Ganesha, I noticed that the branches on the tree which were leaf less began sprouting tiny green leaves. I was overjoyed. 'Ganesha's babies' I called them and congratulated him on his progeny. I had an extra cup of chai and a large piece of the blueberry cheesecake to celebrate. Besides, it was Friday the start of the weekend and that would invariably mean meeting people, someone other than my husband and escaping the four walls of this dismal flat.

That evening, my husband took me for a dinner party with his friends to an Italian restaurant. I don't recall the name of it. They served the largest portion sizes I had ever seen. What was not shocking anymore was my insane ability to chow down all of it! I was seated opposite Rajeev, a computer programmer who worked in Beaumont, TX. He was a Punjabi Jat, fair with a thin mustache and a goatee. He addressed all the men at the table as "dude" but his accent being thick it sounded like "deede". I had heard the expression before and tried my best to repress the laughter that bubbled forth. Rajeev had a round face which was much larger than his short frame and his nose was hooked like a parrot. He was rather odd looking, however, his winning smile and his crackling humor had kept the night lively and fun. He kept us enthralled with stories about his arrival to the United States from Mumbai. The day he landed, he was supposed to catch a plane from Atlanta to Houston to attend the university there. However, he boarded the wrong plane and landed in Tampa, Florida!! His manner of narrating a story had us holding our sides with laughter. While we waited for our dessert, an Alaskan flambé, suggested by Rajeev, he turned to me and enquired as to how I was getting along in a new country.

I shifted uneasily. He looked at me intently. His soft eyes beguiling, while my mind swirled, attempting to create a suitable response. I didn't want to tell him or anyone that my principle aim in life was to gorge on blueberry cheesecake and watch television all day. Before I could answer, my husband interjected.

"I think she feels lost and lonely taking refuge in cheesecakes and pizza," he said with a smile and held me close.

"Like everyone, I suppose," Rajeev said gently. "Other than the dollars, big roads, better hygienic conditions and nice houses, America is a very lonely place," he said his lips pursed hard against each other drawing his chin upward. He adjusted his glasses and said, "The thing is to beat the loneliness with something that's elevating and permanent."

"Once I start school and work, I should be ok," I said softly trying not to draw any attention to my plight of which I was terribly embarrassed.

"I'm used to a lot of people around me, noise, phones ringing, doorbell chiming all the time servants cleaning and friends dropping by for a visit..."

"I understand perfectly," Rajeev noted. "It's like that at first for everyone who comes here. But we adapt and become part of the mainstream very quickly. But, you can be different. Turn this episode into something spiritual, more meaningful."

"Like pray?" I asked as I detected a tremor of in my voice. I cleared my throat and watched from the corner of my eye, the waitress placing the Alaskan flambé gingerly in the middle of the table. Heaving a long sigh, I turned to Rajeev and said as softly as I could.

"The silences terrify me!"

"As they did me at first," he said nodding his head as though he was expecting me to reveal that particular nugget of information.

"What I am saying is that transform this silence to something magical and beautiful," he said and gently placed a bite of the flambé in his mouth. As he ate, he looked at me probably hoping to detect an understanding of what he had uttered.

"Embrace the silence," he said and wiping his plate clean said, "it is after all the abode of the gods!"

"Use your breathe, listen to it and allow the silence to penetrate deep into your soul. You will be the happiest person in the world and that is all that matters. And, whatever you do stay away from the cheesecake!"

Everyone at the table laughed as I carried his words like a heavy burden back home to that listless flat whose walls had begun to slowly close in on me.

Of course, I forgot all about his inspirational words and continued my downward spiral into my familiar abyss. One afternoon, several weeks after our dinner while watching Matlock, a huge thunderstorm knocked the lights out. I was plunged into deafening silence all of a sudden. I panicked. I began singing aloud and hopped about like a crazed rabbit. I paced up and down talking to myself and felt the first sting of tears forming around my eyes.

Tired, I sat down and began to cry. At that precise moment, Rajeev's words flooded my brain. I tried to calm myself down using my breath to inhale and exhale slowly allowing myself to

sink into the silence as he suggested. At first, my breathe staggered and I realized that I was scared. But, just for few seconds I felt euphoric. Moments later, electricity was restored and the television blared mindlessly. I switched on the mute button and waited. I had tasted something unique that intrigued me. The silence lingered, beckoning me yet again to delve within. I breathed in and out again, this time slowly, completely focused on the breathe. I felt that wave of bliss wash over me again just for a second. I wanted to capture that feeling and bottle it to use it each day. However, it went away. The following day, I tried again and felt it for a mere second. I recognised that I had to practice it every single day to bask in the glorious silence. Every morning, I practiced sitting in solitude. From minutes, it grew to hours, I was no longer afraid.

With television turned off and a cup of spiced chai every morning I watched as Ganesha grew more leaves on his branches and I consciously nudged the curtain of loneliness to part to allow solitude to fill my space.