

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

5th Year of Open Access

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The Thirty-fifth Birthday

Sreelekha Chatterjee

The mobile phone kept on ringing as I lay on the bed—lost in thoughts and as motionless as eternity. My roommate Mitali was fast asleep. A bright ray of the morning sun was imperceptibly making its way through the small window and into our room in a desperate attempt to enliven my mood. I struggled hard to get up but my limbs wouldn't move—an irreplaceable shadow of darkness seemed to drop down over my body and soul.

My inner being was tormented with the thoughts of my past days. My recollections of those days when I searched for a meaning in life seemed to burn my senses. I tried hard to forget but failed miserably in each and every attempt. I felt desolate in my world of emptiness.

The silenced phone started ringing again. On a usual day I seldom received any phone calls so early in the morning, but it was a special day for me. It was my birthday. Someone very dear to me might be trying to reach me. I didn't feel like connecting with anything that was a part of the real world. I was confused by the strange impulses that struggled within me and a feeling of melancholy seemed to engulf my senses—drowned in an eternal gloom of dissatisfaction that was below my level of consciousness. I wished to be lost... and lost forever.

At last I mustered some courage to fight against my feelings that seemed to be dominant over my body. As I splashed some water over my face, I leaned forward to take a closer look at myself in the mirror. I had forgotten to see myself for ages. Have I forgotten myself? My weak and exhausted eyes seemed to be beautiful once upon a time. I could notice the fine lines beneath my eyes and also a few of them trying hard to make an impression on my forehead. Was it too early for the signs of aging to be prominent? I had turned 35 and yet my existence seemed to be very old and boring, taking weary steps on the surface of life. My disappointment knew no bounds and I drifted away into the world of soul-searching tasks that were not scheduled to match with the requirements of the special day.

The phone was ringing again. This time I answered the call. It was my father's overwhelming wishes from the other end that hardly made a mark on my mind, as if I had forgotten to respond to his good wishes. I disconnected the phone after a very brief conversation.

I noticed Mitali still asleep in bed. On a usual day, I would wake her up and also serve tea. But today was the day when I would not indulge in anything that was a part of duty or a feeling of affection and concern for others.

I never imagined that I would be spending my 35th birthday alone with my roommate and not with somebody who would be entirely mine. I always wished to wake up on my birthday next to my dearest—the love of my life. I could swear on anything that was once dear to me to prove that I had searched for him all my life. During my adolescent days when my senses reflected the grace of innocence and inexperience, I trusted my parents to find someone for me.

I recalled one such instance when I received marriage proposals but for some strange reasons that were beyond my comprehension those were turned down by my parents. They seemed to stress on my education, and marriage seemed a distant echo in their world of duties. The subtle, insidious revolt against the rules and customs that were predominant in our society had been slowly creeping into my head. On a second thought, I realized that my rebellion would

lead to unnecessary sorrow and pain among my near and dear ones. I decided to accept their wish as my fate.

In a country like India, most middle-class girls dreamt about their parents finding a suitable match for them. They seldom considered any such opportunity of finding someone for themselves. I was no different and I never wished to be categorized as unconventional. I obeyed what my parents wanted for me and soon after completing my education, I was asked to find a job for myself. I had to travel to a distant place to earn a living, and since then I had been living all by myself. I found myself in the company of roommates who would share my apartment and occasionally would get replaced with a new face. I seemed to get used to my lifestyle but the hope of finding someone did not leave me till my 35th birthday.

A few years ago I met Ritam, a chartered accountant who had joined our office. He seemed to be younger to me, but I could feel his presence in my inner soul. I would spend hours sitting in his cabin and pretending not to understand the rules that involved payment of income tax. He would go over the tax policies again and again for me, but I would remain as ignorant as ever.

On several occasions, I would try to touch his hands while handing my income tax papers just to experience his presence within myself—a feeling that was real and not imaginary in any way. I remembered the shyness I felt at approaching him every time, which would always be followed by inarticulate moments of joy and exhilaration. There were instances of warm silence that seemed to kindle the light of happiness in my heart in a very special way. At last I could sense some affection in his eyes for me. We had a nice time watching movies together and also visiting restaurants on holidays. There were moments of despair when he wouldn't respond to my phone calls and then make up for them by presenting gifts.

I believed that I was in love till one day when my colleague Shyama unfolded the truth to me.

“Ritam is engaged. He's getting married next month.”

I couldn't believe my ears. Was he the same person whom I was seeing for the past few months? It felt as if I was afflicted by epilepsy that violently shook my whole body intermittently, and I kept on grasping for breath as I tried to recover from the sudden shock.

“Ritam and his fiancé are childhood friends. It's a family decision you know.” Shyama provided further information.

I could listen no further. I went straight to Ritam's cabin.

“Is this true?” I demanded an answer, holding his cabin's door with one hand which trembled in nervous anger.

“Yeah! I was about to tell you.” Ritam tried to explain in a matter-of-fact manner, maintaining an outward calm.

I slammed the door behind me as I walked out of his cabin and also his life. That was the only outburst that I had for him. I managed to convince as well as console myself that he was helpless and had to yield to his family's wish. I felt the love and emotion for him slowly withering within my heart and finally departing forever.

Some time had passed after that incident. I had matured a little and got over the relationship which I thought was very dear to my inner being.

I met Vaibhav through a common friend in a party. He was a handsome man who had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. His porcelain skin glowed as he smiled, spreading the

extraordinary, dazzling energy in every motion of his body. I found a great deal of warmth and affection radiating from his sparkling black eyes, which made me feel comfortable and secured. We had a strange bond right from the very beginning, and I felt as if I could deeply and emotionally connect with him.

I still remembered the day when he said the magical words to me, and that seemed to be the best moment of my life. I soaked up my senses with the dreams that I had about him and was carried away with the overwhelming experience of love. I felt his kisses all over my body—my forehead, my eyes, my lips... I responded with the softness and gentle desire of being loved and adored, “I love you, too.”

Life was going on smoothly and I started dreaming of having a home to call my own, a family to feel my own and a love to hold on to. We had decided to get married soon. I had intended to take a long leave from office. In fact, we were planning to book a flat in our name before our marriage.

I could never forget the night before I finally said goodbye to him. It seemed as if the night was darker than it had ever been in my lifetime. The night would not be followed by a pleasant morning and there would be no sense of joy and peace for me.

I received a phone call from one of my friends.

“Are you seeing Vaibhav? He’s not the right guy for you.” My friend spoke in a rush and paused to observe my reaction.

“How can you say that?” I enquired emotionally, with tears welling up in my eyes.

“Why don’t you look for yourself? You just have to type his name and search on the Internet.”

I had never been so nervous in my life. My fingers were numb and I could barely search about his deeds on the Internet. What I discovered made me feel as if that was the last day of my life. It seemed as if something had intervened between my sensibility and the reality that lay in front of me. I felt the sense of being crumpled by the weight of the disillusionment that I had for so long. He was convicted for cheating his previous employer and was also in a rehab centre for taking drugs. I could not believe what I saw on the computer screen. I struggled inwardly as I felt torn apart between his reminiscences of unconditional love and affection for me, which he showered on innumerable occasions, and his uncontrollable pull towards achieving his selfish desires by adopting unfair means that became evident to me in a flash of realization.

The hours of that night passed with a seamless flow of worries and contemplation about the best possible way to attend to the unavoidable circumstances that demanded a rational solution—a way to resolve the agony of an honesty that was forgotten, a trust that was betrayed, a divine feeling of love that was shattered into bits.

“I believe there is a compatibility problem between us.” My lips quivered when I uttered these words to Vaibhav, as I felt the immeasurable pain transforming into hatred within me.

“How can you say that when I need you the most? I know that I have been sacked by my employer. I have no ways to make amends for the sins I have done in the past...But I have been denied the opportunity to make up for that. I wish to follow the path of truth but nobody believes me now.” He said innocently but with a tone of uncertainty in his voice.

“I believe it takes ages to understand anybody and we have known each other for a very brief period.” He continued in a bid to persuade me to reconsider my decision.

“I wish to move on.” I mumbled with an expression that was very detached and ironic—these were the last words that I had for him. My throat was dry and I had very little energy left to battle against his arguments that seemed to lose face.

“As you wish! All the best to you!” He said calmly, feeling the heavy breath that he was drawing in and out.

At first I did not realize that it was all over between us. But somehow I was surprised about the way I handled this break-up. It was only a single night that I stayed awake, trying hard to immerse my feelings of love and compassion in the ocean of hatred and disgust that seemed to become a part of my existence. The remorseful tenderness of his memory that flashed to me every time was complicated with a sense of irritation against him for not having trusted my emotional capacity.

I somehow shared my feelings with my mother one day after that incident. The intensity of my emotional attachments had faded by then and the feelings of love and care seemed to be distant from my world. I thought she understood what I had been through. Perhaps it was her way of dealing with things that made her post advertisements in the newspapers for my marriage. She would often send photographs of eligible bachelors for me. She insisted that I should meet them and perhaps this could help me to get over the unpleasant memories of my life.

So far I had never faced any rejection in my life. But for the first time people commented on my looks. Many of them thought that I had a dark complexion and also my features were not sharp enough to be considered for marriage. I had almost lost count and accepted every rejection with a brave face.

I received phone calls from interested bachelors. I would never forget the tone in which they enquired, barring a few who were gentle and well behaved.

“Hey! Are you interested in marriage?” One of the bachelors posed a question over the phone. I could not fathom the reason for asking such a question but I replied in affirmative.

“Did you have an affair earlier? Don’t be shy. I am a broad-minded person. Speak up you...”

I felt as if I had reached a stage of desperation where I would have to pass through such interviews in order to be accepted for marriage.

“My parents are very rich people. I earn a handsome salary. What’s your CTC?”

I wondered in what way my salary was important in this context. I felt like an inanimate object who would be worthy of being a life partner only if I had earned a good amount and had no affairs or any kind of relationship earlier. As a middle-class girl who had imbibed all the good values in life right from her childhood days, I could not pose the same questions to them.

I felt alien in this world as if impenetrable darkness had surrounded me from all sides. My own thoughts and actions seemed to have no connection with my inner being. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness and despair. My inner self was weeping disconsolately, as I felt dejected and overpowered by a sense of great deprivation and discontent. I was alone in this world, unable to share my thoughts with anybody—not even my parents.

I looked around and found many unmarried women of my age who were far more beautiful than me. I wondered what was holding back their marriage. Was it lack of enough funds for marriage? Was it the fear and apprehension of an incompatible relationship? Was it something else that was hard to understand?

I once tried to search for an answer.

“I believe in independence. A free life!”

I was astonished by the answer I got from one of them. Was she not afraid of living alone? Was she not afraid of being an outcaste in the society? Was she putting on a brave face when in reality she was torn to bits? Did she not have any grievances?

The unpleasant reminiscences of the past days flashed in my memory just like a re-take of a movie. I shifted irritably towards the window and gazed listlessly at the flame-colored roses that adorned the small garden in front of my house. The softness and beauty of the roses did not seem to ease my agonies of loneliness and misery. I stood there as if eternally mute like a lifeless being, who was burdened with her inner conflict regarding the path she had resorted to in a bid to attain prominence and freedom of mind and soul.

It was not long before I realized to reconnect with the reality and leave aside the by-gones. I decided to start afresh. I wished to be free and believe in independence as someone told me once.

As a part of the usual routine, I finished my morning tasks about the house and then dressed up for office. I was about to leave when I realized that I had forgotten an important part of my duty.

I woke up Mitali.

“Good morning!” Mitali’s voice seemed to be unclear. She needed some time to remove the last bit of sleep from her eyes.

“You seem to be wearing a nice dress today. Is there something special?” Mitali enquired in a jumbled up tone.

“Nothing special!”

I was hurt and disheartened to know that she did not remember my birthday. At the same time, I was surprised that my feelings did not abandon me.

I reached office a bit late. I found that everyone had gathered in the conference room. Our office assistant told me that a new employee had joined and all of them had assembled to greet the person.

I felt no interest in meeting anybody on that day—especially, a fresh employee.

After a while, everyone got back to their seats.

“I am Sushil. Nice meeting you miss...” A pleasant voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked up to find a good-looking man in front of my table.

“Same here...” I uttered the words and unknowingly, a smile appeared on my face.

My heart seemed to skip a beat. Was it love again?