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The Personal Inquest

Smitha Bhandare Kamat

“Sometimes you can’t see yourself clearly until you see yourself through the eyes of others.” Ellen DeGeneres I mused over this quote, mustering all the courage to introspect, reflect and know myself. I stood at the entrance of the prominent colossal temple of ‘Ganapathi’ the elephant headed Hindu god, in the picturesque village of Mandola. I stood there, uncertain what to do next. The entire premise was carpeted with a lush layer of fine green grass, weeds and fresh moss except for the winding foot trail that cut across it like a deep scar, almost healed yet not. In the backdrop, the afternoon ‘aarti’ the tradition of worshipping with lit lamps was on. The rhythmic tolling of the temple bells and the Sanskrit mantras were in perfect sync with the faint drizzle that poured incessantly. The whole environs had conspired to enhance the already prevalent surrealistic feel of the place to bewitch me. It was like coming home, at the end of a rather tiring day and being unexpectedly enveloped in a much required warm, welcoming, loving embrace. I let that thought seep in me much like sipping precious piping hot brew on a cold winter night. I permitted the warmth of the thought to grow gradually, more like a foetus taking form on its own accord, deep within. It certainly made me feel good, making me sigh involuntarily. Finally, here I was, where peace no longer seemed elusive rather it was right there waiting to be claimed.

I surveyed, the temple premise, hungrily taking in all that it had to offer. My gaze steadied on the ancient rugged flight of steps which looked very inviting, it beckoned me to sit for a moment or two and unburden my heavy soul, absently I found myself walking towards it and in no time was sitting in its rugged embrace looking at nothing in particular. The drizzle continued and so did the *aarti* in the background, I sat transfixed much like the deity shrined inside, only that deep inside me there was this familiar turmoil of unrelenting thoughts and emotions surfacing and lashing at my very being. It overwhelmed me, but, the cool drizzle accompanied by my warm flow of tears pouring in unison like some secret pact, melted me away in its surrealistic environs. Silently, serenely we merged in an inexplicable manner, like two vibrant organisms fusing in the backdrop of an ancient massive static structure. I could have been rooted there for eons together, oblivious of the past and present

with little care for the future. Much like a revered Zen, or perhaps like the sacred bull aka 'Nandi' waiting eternally suspended in time and space...

Absently, I read the golden inscriptions on the huge black granite, near hand. As I read on, it vividly disclosed the history of the temple deity coupled with a glimpse of the dreaded inquisition. The embers of my predicament fuelled up by this unexpected development. It stirred a hornet's nests, flaring up a range of sentiments, which I found difficult to rein. Though it spoke of another time, another era, involving the pathetic plight and harried flight of our helpless ancestors and an equal set of hapless deities, in my mind's eye, I pictured a populace in a state of destitution, deprived of freedom and dignity, with the primal urge to survive... how did they respond, how did they re-act...we are after all social animals, when the noose tightens, rationality is shed aside and natural instincts takes over. I didn't find it difficult to be teleported to that period, perhaps it had more to do with my disturbed state of mind rather than a shattered heart. I could easily empathise with an entire populace who had willingly or otherwise embraced a new life...something similar was tugging my soul. Was it a mere coincidence that I happen to read a part of history, that would probably repeat in my personal life, more like an updated customised version. After all, foreknowledge is no more threatening to choice than determinism...

I wondered how embracing a new life, transiting from one religion to another, from one way of living to another unfolds... How easy or difficult is it...I would never know for certain, unless I lived it, experienced it or even shared or documented it... but, how does it commence, is here an element of duress, a certain subtle pressure ever so gentle, ever so gradual, ever so tempting or perhaps enticing that it grips you, entraps you, that it makes sense to give in, to surrender, to let go and move on, rather than spar and battle. Conflict both within and without leads to nowhere. Yet, can transition be ever smooth? Can it ever? after all change never comes easy, yet, isn't everything fair in love and war, perhaps it is...I was yet undecided about being in 'love', still drowned with the dilemma of embracing a new faith, a new life...I consciously cut off the auto dialogues in my mind. Sincerely, I didn't want to delve into the possibility of imposition of a new identity, something that I could probably drape as easily or otherwise...it's all in the mind...yes indeed... I stared ahead, numbed with too many voices demanding my undivided attention and answers to matters beyond me or perhaps within reach, which I failed to see in the right perspective and consequently address effectively.

I could hear my cousin's Shambhavi's voice echoing in my head. so, my dear chaste Brahmin lady, a pure vegan...will you learn to eat beef? It was a simple question, but I was

taken aback, I had gasped in response. She had looked at my expression and burst out laughing and then she continued between giggles...and he will make love to you...before I could respond she had scuttled off, leaving me hanging with a thought that had never crossed my mind. I shuddered not certain whether the thought was shocking or was it rather repulsive or perhaps both... Before I could ponder on it further, Sanjana my childhood chum's voice boomed in my head, 'I tell you men are narcissistic chauvinists, they are pigs who seek self gratification leaving their women high and dry. You take it from me, women end up making love to themselves, you know what I mean..' she had nudged me, I had gone red in the face. Never ever did I have such an open frank confession from my friends....you will, she continued matter of factly, you will my girl, you will, once you marry your lover boy. Mind you all this love is fine in movies and novels, in reality it's just another need demanding to be satiated, she had laughed a deep hollow laugh, I had stood there embarrassed, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me, or that my tongue which had unceremoniously knotted itself would untie and come to my rescue and say something smart to negotiate a change in the course of our unprecedented conversation, instead, I continued to be tongue tied, all the time consciously avoiding to look at her heavily bloated middle. I had desperately wanted to know did they still make love, when she was pregnant. But instead, I smiled meekly, and she gently touched my cheek, and looked away, I was almost certain her eyes had grown moist. She and her mate, were not too long ago, ferociously branded- 'the proverbial love birds', who had claimed to have been madly in love with one another for over eight years. So where does love go?. Does love evaporate? Is it an imaginative sentiment, a supposition, a fable that only a select few can access, can subsist?

My thoughts meandered and came to pause, Vaishnavi flashed before my eyes. An academically bright, physically robust and mentally strong headed girl. But for some strange reason she nurtured an irrational thought that she was more like an 'after thought' in everyone's lives. This had prompted her to take the most drastic decision in her life. How else does one explain the reason that compelled her to run away, seeking love in the dead of the night and marry her lover. I didn't foresee a future for them, which I had cautiously mentioned to her only to invite rebuke and disdain. Ever since, I learnt to keep my unsubstantiated views to myself. However, the damage had been done, she cut off from me with no explanation leaving an inexplicable void. I accidentally happen to meet her after about two years of marriage, with a baby in her arms. She pretended not to have noticed me and I was strangely relieved. Her entire being was transformed, it was not just the attire, body language or the baby that she held, it was her eyes. Our eyes had met for a brief second, but

they haunted me. Then hardly a few months away, I got news of her suicide. Not very long ago, she had vouched for him and his genuine feelings, she had sacrificed everything for her love. Walked away from her parents, family, friends and ultimately her very life. Having cut off from everyone, she had made herself vulnerable. Was this love? knowing her, she would have loved me to believe it to be so. But time had rejected her promise...

Donnelly on the other hand was my college chum. I was surprised when I was informed about her involvement with our classmate. I had never seen them together, or seen them interacting overtly or holding hands or do all the silly things two people in love normally do. Probably I had never paid attention to the silent chemistry working between the two. I was pleasantly surprised when I got an invite for their wedding. He was shy, good looking and a thorough gentleman and I was not too perplexed when I was told he had embraced her religion. Her beaming face and the pics she flashed on social media, vouched she was more than happy, though her spouse always had the same stoic expression which I found difficult to decipher, or maybe I didn't find it important or plain didn't bother enough. But I was happy for her. Though it was an open secret he was reduced to being a mere machine, a robot was how he was tagged... was this love? probably, it was just another case of blind love...talk about being judgemental.

Then there was Sheela, hardly a year of marriage and she had called me up. She was working in a multinational company based in Oida, while her husband was abroad. After the preliminary courtesies, she had lowered her voice. I just had to get this off my chest.... she paused...I trust you will take it with you to your grave...she had given a nervous laugh, making me equally nervous that I had to refrain from impulsively cutting off the connection and blocking her. I knew what she was hinting at, our social media chat pointed to the fact, that in the absence of her spouse, she had grown pretty close to her office mate. You see she had once mentioned we have different needs and she had been kind enough to enlighten me on the range of needs, be it personal, social, intellectual, spiritual and of course there's physical and least I forget there's sexual too. It may be difficult for one person to meet all these varied needs, you understand? she had quipped. I had managed to type out something with plenty of emojis to cover my lack...you're are not prejudiced she had concluded. Chatting on social media as against chatting in person or over the phone made me uncomfortable in fact all these consistent confessions had drained me in a way.

It is said in the feud to become perfect, the battle to win joy is lost. Well, my biggest challenge had/has been to be the 'perfect friend' accepting the self and others, my friends acknowledged my unsurpassable sensibilities and my non-judgemental approach, to give ear

to their woes, lend my shoulders for them to lean on. Unfortunately, it came at a terrible price. It weighed heavily on my conscience, tearing me apart. The task to tragically balance my sense of moral ideals and the various individualities, which necessarily didn't fit into my reality, took its toll on me. As Jerome Bruner, has said "*To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance,*" it never comes easy. It meant, I had to bravely slit open my own precious heart to permit the pain to flow, by acknowledging the sorrow of the many hearts that had intimately ripped open before me so that I could embrace their sorrow and in doing so acknowledge the beauty of our collective living, yet, it was nothing short of being a victim of inquisition at a personal level. I decided I will be true to myself no matter how traumatic it may turn out to be...I sat there stoically in the green sacred environs, till peace descended with the setting sun, and everything just eventually blacked out.