

“Love By the River”

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“Malaria, is it that you have, malaria?” she asked.

“That appears to be my misfortune,” he replied.

“Have you seen a doctor?”

She was holding his shoulder so he remained facing her. After a pause he said, “I have consulted the *vaidji* at the root of this building.”

She knew this Hindi word for an unlicensed medical practitioner. “What are you taking for it?” she asked, afraid of the answer.

“Quinine, of course,” he said.

Lucette had been warned against the *vaidji*, whom the newspapers called ‘quacks’. They served the poor but often gave their customers colored water, or, worse, medicine cut 4, 10 times, to reduce the price. Against malaria cut medicines were worse than nothing because they only built up the parasites’ resistance.

“You must leave here,” she said.

“Regrettably, there is currently nowhere for me to proceed,” he pointed out.

She let go of him and he lapsed onto his back. She stood and looked around the small, bare room. She looked at the other young man who had put down his book and was staring at them. “Do you know this quack?” She did not want to use the word.

Without speaking he indicated a bottle on the shelf. She picked it up. The ornate Victorian label was in Hindi. She took a long, tense breath and glanced around; she felt like a detective.

“His venue resides on the ground of this building,” the other offered in laboring English.

She left the room carrying the bottle. The child who had guided her was waiting outside to descend with her. He began telling her about “his brother’s” sari shop. She repeated and repeated that she wanted to see the *vaidji*. He seemed to understand and took her to the foyer of the building where he had a conversation in Hindi with the obese woman. Then he led her to the old man she had first met, whose speech she had been unable to recognize as language.

She squatted before him and held up the bottle. The child asked a question for her. “Excellent, excellent medicine!” the old man exclaimed in English. She attempted to ask in her guidebook Hindi what the contents were. He replied something she could not understand, and apparently the child could not either. She felt tears well in her eyes, but at the same time pursed her lips with determination. She searched from face to face. A few people were smiling at her in the open friendly Indian way, others looked to their work or the ground, and others looked at her in an ambiguous way that could be ridicule. As an outsider she was always alert for ridicule. A filthy child ran up to her and held out his begging hand. The child who had been guiding her shooed him away.

She climbed back to Chandragupta’s room. Chandragupta clutched his blanket with his face to the wall. The roommate was still reading as if she had never been there. She stood over Chandragupta, touched him on the shoulder, and said, “I will find another place for you.” He turned and smiled at her as if he were smiling at some kindly figure in a dream. She left and let the child guide her again out of the old city.

Lucette lived in a room assigned to her in a palatial Beaux-Arts family mansion built early in the 20th century by the river. In this region the river curves, and its flow deposits the fertile silt from the mountains on the north side where the city commands an agricultural plain, whereas the infertile opposite shore is sparsely populated. The builder’s family still owned the spacious dwelling and donated a few rooms to junior visiting scholars.

She took a rickshaw to the house and walked up to the columned main entrance rather than to the small side door that led to the part of the building where she roomed. The main door led into an imposing entryway with a black marble floor, white plaster walls with large mirrors, and a teak archway leading to a wide, teak staircase. A servant was sweeping the floor with a broom made of a tree branch and bundled twigs. Even though servants were constantly sweeping and polishing and there was no dust, the formal parts of the house had an unused air. Lucette was resentfully aware that although the sweeper was too low in the hierarchy to speak to, she would unobtrusively signal the butler that someone was in the entranceway. When the butler came, Lucette asked to talk to the matriarch who seemed to run the household. In a few minutes the matriarch entered the room, seated herself, and let Lucette remain standing. She was a short, stout woman in a burgundy and green sari decorously shot with gold thread. Her heavy-featured face might be any age over 40. Lucette had met her only once when the director of the dig introduced her. Lucette had never been able to make sense of the family; members seemed to come and go like fish, and often referred to one another as brother or sister in the Indian fashion though they must at the closest be cousins. However the matriarch’s presence was

always available like the immaterial sense of disuse. Lucette did not want to talk to her but she would do whatever it took to make sure Hemadri was OK.

“How can I help you, Miss Du Boissette?” the elder woman asked in a voice that was polite, but wondered whether it should rise to warmth.

Lucette explained that an Indian student from a university in another state who worked on the project had fallen ill with malaria in his rooms, and she would like to temporarily give him a room while he was treated and recovered.

“What can you tell me about his background?” the matriarch asked.

Lucette felt she wanted to know about his family and his caste. He had said nothing about his family, and she had avoided letting herself wonder about caste, so she gave some information about the stature of the university he attended and his progress there.

“I understand such universities set aside places for the unscheduled casts,” the matriarch persisted.

“I’m sorry,” Lucette replied, “but I don’t understand these things well enough to say anything about his origin in that sense.” She despised herself for the evasion.

The matriarch asked how long he would stay. Lucette answered that there were only six more weeks before he returned to school, and he should stay the whole time. After asking Lucette some questions about her own family, work, and plans, the matriarch grudgingly mentioned a small spare room in the servant's quarters that could be cleared. In speaking she revealed some black and some gold teeth. As in the lobby of Chandragupta’s building Lucette had worried about being mocked as an outsider, here she worried about the matriarch's motives, which were inscrutable to her. Were they contemptuous, as she was contemptuous about the matriarch’s questions about caste?

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Hemadri wakened in a small room with whitewashed walls and a narrow bed like the beds he had always slept in, when he had slept in beds. For several labored breaths he did not know what room he was in. Then he recalled that the French girl had come again and then a chaos of half motion, half being carried from one place to another. He remembered her spooning dahl into this mouth and bitter medicine as if he were a baby.

The room was empty except for the bed and his few tangibles piled tidily in a corner. The walls were whitewashed and the tile floor meticulously swept. He felt no fever. Light came from a high, narrow window. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and dizziness made him sit still holding the bed for a while. When he felt steady, he rose and looked out the window. The sacred river spread out below the window like a slowly moving lake. The near shore was obscured from his view. In the distance

islands and sandbars in muted greens and tans lay like horizontal brush strokes, beyond them semi-desert faded to haze at the horizon.

He realized he was wearing silk sleeping pajamas. Since he had first been able to afford special clothes for sleeping, he had slept in boxer shorts. He had never felt silk on his body. Someone must have undressed him; his face tingled with humiliation. He knelt, still shaky and dizzy, beside his things. With mournful attentiveness, he found his clothes neatly stacked, cleaned and folded, and found beneath them his little purse containing a wad of rupees and a few coins. His eight books leaned against the corner wall as if it were a bookcase, his drawing gear piled beside them, his wallet, and papers. Two white tablets lay on a note in English to take them at noon. He recalled her handwriting from watching her make entries in her notebooks at the site, though she had been writing in French. His watch showed him it was 10:30 in the morning.

He stood, steadied himself, slid out of the pajamas, and dressed himself. He lifted the pajamas close to his face. They smelled clean. The labels were in French. He dropped them. They lay on the floor like a puddle. He turned to the door, and slyly stuck out his head. He found a narrow hall with plastered walls and a tiled floor. He saw on the right a staircase, which turned a corner leading up out of sight, to the left he saw a low window, which ended the hall and revealed a garden. Closed doors to other rooms bracketed his door, but the opposite wall contained only a niche with a small shrine to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of merchants. The hall smelled clean and dusty. He could hear the river as a faint, underlying rumble, and another sound he identified after a moment as sweeping. Just then the broom appeared coming down the stairs, and after it the head and shoulders of a low-caste woman in a worn, bright sari. Before she could withdraw he asked in English to speak to the French girl. She looked at him as if he were a strange being. Hemadri realized she spoke no English, and he only a few words of Hindi, his native language being Tamil. Before he could figure out what to do, she backed upstairs. In a way, by learning English, he had become a strange being.

He went back and gazed at the river. The wall must be just above the edge for he could see only water. Groups of black dots occasionally moving on the far bank must be water buffalo. He remembered how the village Brahmin had spoken reverently and desperately of the river, how its waters removed spiritual pollution, and he had longed to immerse himself in them before died. Here Hemadri stood with no impulse to go to the river. It meant little to him now. Spiritual pollution, dharma, all the infrastructure of the house of Hindu thought seemed to him inaccurate and obsolete, yet, looking at the river, he felt as if he were looking back at a distant home.

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Someone knocked on the door, and he turned and said, "Come in." A tall, light Indian in street pajamas stood holding a tray with some chapatti, a vegetable curry, a sweet, and chai. He enunciated "Because of sickness, we bring you breakfast today. Afterward you eat with the other servants." He set the tray on the bed, and added,

“Miss dohBohasan return in the time of evening.” Hemadri thanked him in Hindi, and he withdrew.

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The food seemed disgusting, and he only drank the chai. He found that he was weaker than he'd thought, stretched out on the bed, and fell into a semi-doze where he recalled being heaved into a rickshaw, the fearful face of a strange doctor, the constant heartening presence of the French girl, while others came and went, and finally walking with his arms on the shoulders of others, his feet barely touching the floor, through confusing corridors to this room. These images reformed into images of his childhood when he had run and drifted with his friends on the streets, and then into deep sleep. He awoke, felt hungry, took the pills she had left him, and ate part of the food, slept again, ate again, and then got up and first folded the French sleeping pajamas under his other clothes, then took up one of his text books. The light was fading. It had an interesting problem in the calculus and he rummaged around and found pencil and paper and was sketching out a solution when someone knocked on the door.

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Lucette found Hemadri struggling to his feet. He had lost the hint of grey under his color and he was not sweating, but he still looked rocky.

“You helped me very much,” he stated frankly. They both remained standing. He gestured that she should sit on the bed while he stood. She wanted to insist but forbore and took the seat.

“You look very much better. I'm delighted you're better,” she said.

“Pardon me, but what is this place?” he asked.

“It's the house of some rich people that lend rooms to the institute. I stay in another room. You can stay here till you return to school.”

“And how did I come here?” He asked, looking shakier.

She patted the bed for him to sit down, but he only straightened his back and squared his shoulders. She explained that she had gotten help from his roommate and some other people in the building to get him to a rickshaw and taken him to a doctor suggested by the director of the project, and then to this residence.

“For how many days does the director accept my absence from my duties?” he asked.

“I told him the doctor said it might be three days to a week?”

“He is very generous. Is his generosity to you or to me?”

She gave him a smile she hoped looked knowing.

“How did the director prevail upon the rich people to allow me to stay?” he asked.

She shook her head and tried to describe her conversation with the matriarch. She tried to be forthright about the woman’s questions about caste without being offensive to him. “I’m sure, being a part of her society,” you would have understood these things better than I,” she concluded.

“I’m not sure you are correct. You are a social scientist, which gives you a perspective I lack. I grew up in a village,” he admitted “Where a house like this, was - not beyond imagination, but beyond,” he paused, “accurate imagination — and then I got a chance, through my engineering abilities, to enter the technical world, which is more objective in its decision making.”

She would have liked to discover if he really believed that, but she was afraid he would fall down if she let him stand any longer, so she handed him the bottle of quinine pills. When he pointed out that the label was in Hindi and asked if she knew the correct regimen, she remembered what the doctor said and told him. She stood to go and they shook hands. “I don’t know what I can ever do to thank you,” he said, a little helplessly, “Your health, it will be thanks enough,” she said.

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The next morning the servant who had brought breakfast came and indicated Hemadri should come with him for his next meal. He found the servants squatting over breakfast in a small courtyard, five in a circle and two, the sweeper and presumably another of the scheduled castes, to one side. They were eating the same sort of meal he had eaten before. It turned out one of them, the gardener, was Brahmin, was from the south, and spoke Tamil. Two of the men had helped carry him to his room the first day, and there was some good-natured joking. Hemadri quizzed the Tamil-speaker about the routine of the household, which he would have to conform to, and learned how to find a bus that would take him to the dig. He tried to make the servants understand that he was from a poor village, but had a talent that would take him far, letting ‘take me far above you’ lie unspoken on the tile floor.

He was feeling stronger rapidly and planned to go in to work the next day. He had learned where Lucette’s room was and planned to go there in the evening, if she did not visit him again, to go to her and tell her he would be at work. The pajamas loitered under his pile of clothes like an unanswered question. He returned to his books, glad of a chance to re-immense himself in abstractions.

Later, when the heat of afternoon began to diminish, the butler came to him and indicated he should follow him. They walked a cleanly swept and featureless hall and entered a long, high-ceilinged room with white columns and teak wainscoting to shoulder height. The white walls above the wainscoting were filled with photographs, mostly black and white, from the past of the family, the house, the city. Fans tuned slowly near the ceiling and the room was cool. It smelled of furniture polish. At first he stepped quickly with his eyes lowered, but then felt he owed it to his potential to walk slowly and survey room. He saw men in jewelled turbans sitting for their portrait as if they were maharajas, a few women in saris of unknowable colors separately or besides them. Men in jodhpurs with whips, men on polo ponies, views of the house, views of civic ceremonies, men languishing on couches in white European suits. At the end of the room three paintings of men in military uniforms with stunning medals and wide swaths faced him on easels. The butler gestured for him to step lively, and they passed on to the room where the matriarch had met Lucette.

“I understand you prefer English to Hindi,” she said in English without introducing herself or asking his name.

He nodded deferentially, “It is part of my training to be an engineer”

“I understand a young man can advance in that field,” she said.

“That is my hope,” he said.

She asked about his background. He told a story he often told of coming from his village and being taken up by a guru who had enabled his college career.

She had such an air of interrogation, he was afraid she would ask just how he left the village, but she only said, half a question, half a statement, “You are a Kshatriya.”

“Kurmi Kshatriya,” he nodded modestly.

“What is your relationship to the French girl,” she asked.

“She occupies for me the role of supervisor,” he replied.

“And what role is that?” the matriarch asked.

“She instructs me in how to perform various archaeological tasks,” he responded, “I have no previous training in that field.”

“She seems very interested in your welfare.”

“It was my good fortune that she was in a position to assist me,” he replied.

“You will eat in the small west dining room with the other archaeologists,” she said, and added, “I don’t want any hanky-panky going on in this house.”

For a moment he couldn't let himself understand what she meant. Then he said, "Such things are the farthest from my mind."

"No hanky-panky," she repeated. He lowered his eyes and nodded like a chastened child.

The next day Lucette knocked on his door early and conducted him to ride in a car with her and the director to the site. He was silent and hoped he was not visibly blushing. During the day they worked together as though they had never spoken outside of work. When the car let them off in the arching driveway he started towards his room, but she caught him and told him, "I have arranged with the director that you can eat with us."

The meal was in a small dining room in the high-ceilinged part of the house. The butler served them food much like the servants ate with a little more variety. Somehow the food smelled richer in this setting. The butler offered him wine, which he declined. He had never had wine and did not want to rattle his mind. Present besides Lucette and himself were the director and a colleague of the director who was visiting the site. Conversation lagged because the only language they shared was English, where none of them were at home. He took on the posture he wore when he was present at a meeting of the professors at his university, outwardly diffident, inwardly speculative. The director asked a few questions about his work. He wished these men could understand a fraction of his own professional competence.

As they were breaking up he caught a chance to say to her, "I have something I must return to you."

"I will come to your room later," she said *soto voce*.

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His watch told him it was about 10 in the evening. He had obtained a kerosene lamp from the butler, set it in the open window, and lain down to study, but it was hard. The forthcoming image of his handing the pajamas to her stood before him gushing humiliation and a thousand other images peeped behind it. He half wished he had never tried to impress her. He was working on advanced calculus but the silver moments of insight that so often drew him on now evaded him. The smell of the kerosene drifted in and out with the shifting breeze.

When her knock came, he stood and opened the door for her. He gestured for her to sit on the bed while he stood. She smiled and accepted, setting her purse on the floor.

"It is my obligation to ask you something," he said and bent to look for the pajamas under the pile of clothes on the floor, and also to hide his face. He held them out half like a gift, half like something shameful. "I must ask you to return these to whatever person owns them."

“They are mine,” she said

He involuntarily dropped them. Bending over to pick them up, do something with them, he half stumbled, half fainted and found himself sitting on the bed holding the silk in his hands. “Would you allow me....?” He stammered, but he had forgotten what he wanted to be allowed to do. Images of climactic kisses in movies clotted his brain. They put their arms around one another and pressed their lips together. He did not know what to do with his lips. His were closed but hers were open. He opened his and hoped she would not notice the rapidly swelling bulge in his underpants. When their tongues touched he expected her to lean back in a half swoon, so he would have to decide whether to control himself or to work his will upon her. But she did not lay back — she put her hands under his loose-fitting top and worked her fingers up his back. Then she pulled back and lifted his top away. She gazed at him and said, “Do you know that you’re very beautiful”

“I did not realize that,” he said. “You surprise me,” he added. He reached out and touched her breasts through her blouse without believing he was doing what he was doing. She pressed forward against his hands. She stared at his chest and gripped his shoulders so they were locked a few inches apart. He dropped his hands. The pajamas had slid to the floor.

“I am completely unprepared for a romantic encounter,” he confessed manfully.

She reached into her purse, rummaged a moment, and handed him a condom. He had gone three times to prostitutes, and this is what they had done, and charged him for it. But she was a European woman. For a moment the image of a white prostitute passed through his mind, doubly disgusting. But the prostitutes had opened the packets, opened his fly, and slipped it on, while this woman left that to him.

She stood and began undressing hastily. He followed her example, and then donned the condom. They sat down beside each other. He desperately wished she would lie back in a half swoon, so he pressed her shoulders to the bed. He clambered over her, pushed himself in, and began pumping. She threw her arms around him and responded. He could only half feel what was happening so confused was his mind with the image, as if in a movie, of actually making love with this amazing woman. He came soon and started to pull away, but she held, said, “stay with me,” and worked her way to her own orgasm. It frightened and thrilled him and soon after her he came again.

She lay crowded next to him on the narrow bed. She was actually with him. Hemadri felt proud, soiled, thrilled, unreal. She raised herself on one elbow and looked at him. “You are a beautiful color” she said, “All humanity should look like you. Your body is made of wood and earth, while mine is only dough.” Such words would have seemed silly to him, but now all she said seemed wonderful. He turned off the light, and they nodded off for a while, then she roused him and said she had to go.

“The home owner said, ‘No hanky-panky,’” he warned.

She asked what he meant, and he recounted the conversation.

“*Cette canaille,*” she said.

He did not understand her words but understood her tone. “No matter what you may venture to say, it is a problem,” he cautioned.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said.

They had only six weeks.