

Wounding Silence

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My heart was throbbing as I took the ramp from the New Jersey Turnpike. I had been dreading my return to New York City after an absence of six years. I had run away from too many things: the expectations of my community seeking a voice I couldn't be, "Indo-Caribbeans" locked in the meaningless Hindu rituals of a twice-shipwrecked tradition, the multiple identities from my time as an illegal alien, and the resulting stalemated relations as bittersweet as the Chinese plums of my childhood.

But it was no use. I couldn't seclude myself in Tampa forever. I was also looking forward to this trip. What had I to lose? There was a half-completed manuscript on my laptop. I had been downsized at the Bank of Manhattan in Tampa. This was turning out to be a boon: Krishna in disguise as a pauper come to my door, severance pay and savings to cover basic expenses for half a year. Six months to be whatever I wanted. Writerji, that old rogue of a self I had left behind, right here in this city, singing a *raga* not even that sitar genius, Pandit Ravi Shankar, could match. I was still harbouring my delusions of grandeur.

I had all of the last eighteen hours of my drive from Florida to think about this, about Devi, Trishna, and Raghu, but as I entered the Verrazanno Bridge I felt that my old life didn't matter. I was looking for a new beginning. I was back on a bridge whose curve was as beautiful as no other is at night. *Not even Judy's?* I started laughing. *Not even Judy's.* I never believed I could think this. In that instant I felt free of her. Free of the woman who would always be a great love of my life.

Automatically, I looked left at Lower Manhattan. That profusion of lights gave me a new charge of energy. I missed the Twin Towers, but I felt suddenly as indomitable as this city. No other city's nightlights came as close. *Left into Belt Parkway coming off the Bridge.* I threw the AAA TripTrik directions aside. *This is my city, can I get lost here?* I knew the directions by heart now.

My cousin Ritesh had moved since I was last here. I had never been to his new house on 125th Street. Visiting me twice in Florida, accompanied by Devi, he had implored, "Come. You'll like it. You scared or what? Come on, this was the city you loved above all. When you coming?" I was unmoved by Devi's invitation until my company downsized: seventy-five percent of the jobs in our division outsourced to

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India, making my unit, one of the few remaining, not feasible for a stand-alone operation. That cold January morning when the announcement was made, we were all angry, not as much with India as with all the American corporations that would short-sightedly take American jobs overseas. The all-expenses-paid week in June, which I spent in Elgin assisting with the transitioning of our office, came too late. Though, on the first day in Chicago, I was tempted to accept the transfer. The change from the heat of Tampa, the cherry and dogwood blossoms everywhere, new buds, and the grass a luscious apple-green from the recent showers, offered the promise of a new beginning. But I knew, as Judy once said, that spring was a dangerous time to dream. I took the severance package. If I were going to go back north, there was only one place, one city for me. And I had six months to decide.

“Anand, come whenever you ready,” Devi had said, when she learned that my job was being outsourced to India. “We have a room for you, and a walk-in office in the basement where you can see outside and write. It pretty. Stay as long as you want. A couple months, a year, whatever.” That, however, reminded me that eighteen years ago, when I had first arrived at their apartment after I’d been smuggled in from Toronto, she was furious because Ritesh hadn’t told her I was coming. This time they were expecting me.

“Pull into the driveway,” Ritesh said, as I pulled up alongside the curb. “How’s the drive?” He hugged me as I came out. “Great to have you back.”

“The drive was good. Better than I expected. No traffic until the DC Beltway. Wow!” I turned to the house, stunned by its design and shape. “This is extraordinary. Your roof, the front of the house is like the prow of a Viking longboat.” At my comment, he turned, and we looked at the house. The two modified carriage lights on either side of the doorway, pointing upwards, threw beams of fluorescent light on the tall white concave arc of the roof.

“I never thought of this,” he said. “You’re the only person to make this observation. And you’re right. Everybody else says it’s like a long, curved church steeple.” He paused, and I thought he was making fun of me when he continued. “An Italian man up the street who was a boy when the house was built said the family who built it was Scandinavian. They had their own carpenters and builders. He thinks the workmen came over from Norway or Sweden.”

“When was this?”

“Nineteen twenty-five. You want to come in and relax, unwind? I just come out for a smoke.”

“No, let me unpack first.”

He had shed some weight, but his belly still showed. He had also lost more hair. We had just finished taking the bags up the short flight of stairs when Devi came to the door.

“For your house.” I gave her a framed watercolour on cloth.

“You didn’t—”

“I wanted to.” I had seen her admiring a similar one in my house on her last visit.

“It’s beautiful.” She held it up to the light. “The gopis playing Holi with Krishna. It’s exquisite, unusual.”

“By an Indian painter in Fort Lauderdale. She studied painting, specialising in the Jaipur-Rajasthani styles.”

“Thank you.” Her large round eyes said more than that. She knew her secrets were safe with me, but every time we met after a long interval we thought about them first. Ritesh was my cousin, but I could never tell him. He could never understand her love for Raju, and Raju’s for her. Though it was before she and Ritesh got married, Raju had made it a love for all time, for those who would see, in his clear and moving poems. I didn’t agree with her assessment of Raju’s poetry at first – I have never told her how I cried when I reread the collection – but she was right. His poetry was as heart-rending as Tagore’s; it echoed similar feelings I had for Judy. He had compacted my own yearnings for her, in that one verse of his, which I carried around in my head for years:

So like the fly
Webbed in longing
I wait for spider-picking.

Six years ago when I left New York, this was one of the things I wanted to put behind me. Ritesh and I were so close that I was afraid that in one of our occasional drinking bouts I would slip up, and talk about it, and that other secret. I couldn’t anymore. I was dry. I hadn’t had a drink in six years.

“I have dhal and roti,” Devi said. “You want it warm up? And come in, why you still in the doorway?” She didn’t look like a woman in her thirties with two grown boys. Her Demerara-brown-sugar skin was smoother than I remembered, and she looked much younger. Was it all the exercise from the stairs or was she going to a gym?

“No, I’ll eat later. I can help myself.” The scent of the turmeric in the *chunkayed* dhal came to me then, and I almost changed my mind. She moved aside, and I straightened up after slipping off my sneakers. The polished floor extending to the kitchen, the glittering wooden dining table and chairs, the white leather sitting room set framing a blue-bordered cream area rug, and the pastel cherry walls combined to create a lightness I had felt in no other house. “This is uplifting. You have the most beautiful home. Your floors!”

“Original hardwood. Ritesh and the boys sanded and lacquered it before we moved in.”

“That was some job,” Ritesh said. “But I have to tell you this. We hire a Guyanese painter. Devi selected that colour.” He slipped easily into the Georgetown dialect of our childhood. “The man painting house for thirty years. He said this colour can’t match. Tell you the truth, I didn’t think the colour match too. When the man done – we see through the glass door how he looking round and round and nodding – he come and knock quietly on the kitchen door. ‘Ma’am,’ he said, addressing Devi. ‘I apologise. This colour look really good. I never apologise for being wrong with a paint job yet.’ Guess what? The man volunteer to paint the whole dining room free.” Ritesh laughed.

Devi said, “I get some ideas from *Architectural Digest* in my office. I get the idea to repaint two years ago when we visit your house. I change it up little bit.” When she and Ritesh had visited me in Florida, she said she liked the way colour-scheme made the rooms seem large. My house was in a new subdivision in New Tampa. On their last stopover, I explained that because I didn’t want any gloominess, I had had the builders use white, off-white, eggshell white and creams throughout the house. My house was light and airy, but not like this.

“You want some tea?” Ritesh asked. Six years ago he would have put a beer in my hand unasked, or brought out a bottle of D’Aguiar’s XM fifteen-year-old rum, adding his favourite line – *Our colonial legacy. Aged and cured in the finest oak casks imported from England. But no damn British whisky smoother.*

“Yes, thanks.”

“I’ll take tea too,” he said, as Devi went to the kitchen.

“Satesh sleeping?”

“No,” he replied. “He gone to Boston with Surin. He’ll spend two weeks with Surin and come down before school opens.”

Their elder son, Surin, had a scholarship to the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy. Since last year, he had been urging me to visit him in Boston. “Uncle Anand, if you like New York, you’ll love Boston. Come and spend some time, get material for your Boston novel.” Surin was gracious about my writer’s block. “Every time I visit my friend in Brookline, I think of you and your writing. What are you writing?”

I never answered. How could I say I had lost that flame in my guts, which every writer needs, and the confidence in myself to write well? How could I say that I was a fraud, that one book of mediocre short fiction published a decade ago didn’t make me a writer. Last year my excuse was my job, but everything had changed since then. I told him, a week ago, that I was considering coming to Boston. I wanted lodgings for three or four months, up to the start of the winter, in a quiet area where I could work. Surin promised he would look, but short-term leases might be hard to find.

Devi returned. The warm, sweet, milky tea was what I needed. I was already feeling relaxed, more at home than I had felt in the last six years.

“So, who’s looking after your house?” Devi asked.

“I’ve paid someone to cut the lawn, Nisha will check the place every week.” Nisha, my cousin from my father’s side of the family, lived with her husband in an adjacent subdivision. She felt I needed a break from Florida. I continued, “And I have good neighbours.” I was glad I had bought the house. I didn’t have to worry about tenants above or below me, and the value for the house had already doubled. There was no more land available for constructing new residences in northern Hillsborough County. The few remaining citrus farms and pastures were rezoned for residential and commercial usage a month ago.

“That house needs a woman,” Devi teased. I used to dread such conversations before. I was relaxed and I felt so welcomed that I didn’t mind this time. I was glad she was doing this early; this would be one less ghost from my past to deal with tomorrow.

“I think you’re right. What happened to your cousin from Queens?” I asked.

“Who, Reenu? You expect her to sit around waiting, what five, six years? You are something else.”

“I wait six years for Judy.” It slipped out. I had never spoken about her before. I, too, slid back into a dialect I had always resisted. When I spoke Standard English, they said I was putting on airs. Almost everyone in the Caribbean community felt that it was fine to speak “proper English” when dealing with “others.” Among ourselves, we should not forget “our language.” When Oxford University Press published the *Oxford Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, the Caribbean language nationalists raved. I argued, in my review, that there was no such West Indian English language now, but it was possible that in seventy-five years there would be one. In the Caribbean publications in London, the West Indies, New York, and Toronto I was called “Uncle Tom” and “the Brahmin with his head in the snow.” The battle about a Caribbean language and its usage was one I couldn’t win.

It was Judy who had made me realise that I was wrong. She had pointed out that the Caribbean was settled by Europeans before the United States; she asked rhetorically, if there was American English, why couldn’t there be Caribbean English? She was more than a lover; she was also guide and guardian of my “literary consciousness.” It was one of the things I liked: I was learning from her all the time – even in bed. Perhaps, she, too, was absorbing things from me. She was interested in “Hindu gods, especially your female gods.” When I corrected her, explaining that Hindus have one god with many manifestations, she laughed. She said she liked that I was her only “student” who was not afraid to contradict her.

Ritesh shook his head sideways and got up. “I gat a nice CD here, classical Indian flute by Pandit Hariprasad – something.”

“Chaurasia.” I completed. “Since when you start listening to Indian classical music?”

“Devi say let we buy some music you like. We know you coming.”

“Thanks. Devi, Reenu’s your cousin, but she was just like all the girls that everybody trying to fix me up with. None interested in classical Indian music or Indian art or any art. Just Indian filmi music, reggae, calypso, hip-hop, chatney music.” I hesitated before mentioning Judy. I still wanted to keep her locked away. “Judy would sit and listen to my Indian classical music, engage me in conversation on Indian and western philosophies, go with me to the Indian restaurants. She shared my life as I shared hers.” Brahms and Tchaikovsky, Southern literature, walks on Key Biscayne around the lighthouse at dusk—”

“So if she so great what happened?” Devi asked.

“You like asking tough questions?”

We all laughed. I wondered what they would think if they knew Judy was eight years older than me and was divorced. She had recently ended a relationship with her fifth female lover when I first met her. I had read everything I could find on Zelda Fitzgerald, after listening to her brilliant presentation. “My friend,” she said, a month later, in her spacious garden, “I thank you for indulging me my obsession.” We were sitting in the shade of an ancient live oak teeming with Confederate-gray Spanish

moss. “You have the South in your soul, but do not yet truly understand the repressed, talented, crazy women of the South. Call it a woman’s intuition. But you will.”

“Why don’t you invite her to New York?” Devi asked. “She can stay here. Has she ever been to New York?”

“No.” I couldn’t quite bring myself to say that she flew over New York City on the way to her son’s graduation at MIT. “It’s a thought. You know, all the time you were trying to fix me up, I wasn’t really open to anyone because of her. We’ll see. So how’s Reenu?”

“Married. Second kid on the way.”

“And Trishna?”

“Mixed up – married a Rumanian – divorced. No kids. Interested? She’s doing her PhD in Sociology at Columbia,” Devi said.

“Maybe.”

I hadn’t been able to stand the smell of smoke in Trishna’s apartment, the loud, migraine-inducing music, and the underwear, clothes, and books scattered about. One morning, after a night of lovemaking during which we were both drunk, I had awakened to find her kneeling over me. I made the mistake of turning my face away and telling her she needed a shower. She, too, called me a Brahmin, “A Brahmin ass, a Puritan skunt.” I had never felt such calm, repressed rage as I did that morning when she screamed at me to get out of her apartment. Without saying a word, or looking at her as she sobbed, I dressed and left. I had thought that she could never forgive me, and that I could never be as cruel again. I was wrong, and I didn’t want to remember. I wondered what she told Devi.

“What about Raju?” I asked Devi. Her eyes expanded in shock and I realised what I had said. Before she married Ritesh, Raju was the man she loved. She had never told Ritesh about him or of the book of love poetry he had dedicated to her. I shook my head, closed my eyes and put my hands to my head. There was silence. Was it the long drive, or had I lived too long by myself? I couldn’t look at Devi.

“You mean your partner, Raghu!” Ritesh exclaimed. “I forget. He already called today. He coming for you tomorrow morning early, nine a.m. He say you got to go with him to New Jersey. Unfinished business from ten years ago!”

“Yes. What was I saying? Yes, Raghu,” I looked quickly at Devi. Her smile returned to her mouth. I laughed and looked at Ritesh. “Now I’m feeling the drive. Apart from you, he is the only other person I told I’m coming to New York.” If there was anyone I was closer to than Ritesh, it was Raghu. When I had fled their apartment that cold winter morning, just ahead of the two immigration officers looking for me, it was finally at Rahgu’s that I had ended. We had been at the University of Guyana together, and on the student council. He always looked out for me during our anti-government, anti-socialist marches and demonstrations in Georgetown. There were tens of thousands of illegal immigrants in New York City at any one time. The immigration service did not have the staff to handle this volume. Immigration officers only came out on a lead if someone made a specific report. Under the Freedom of Information Act, I could now find out who had tipped off immigration on me. I didn’t want to know. I was afraid that it was someone close to me.

“You look tired. You’ll use Surin’s bed. I fixed it up for you.” Devi got up.

“Here’s a spare key for the front door.” Ritesh offered a key. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“No, just tired. Put it on my key-ring and leave it there in case you have to move my car. I probably won’t need it. I won’t stay long this time.”

“What’s the hurry? You just arrived.” He showed me all the light switches and the bathrooms. I retired to the bedroom.

A few minutes later, Devi knocked on the door. “Everything okay?” She leaned against the doorjamb. Her thick, wavy black hair was loose now. The light gave her brown eyes a red tint.

“Yes. Sorry.” I lowered my voice. “I really did mean Raghu. I don’t know how that slipped out. You know, I never told you, I always felt that when I had a drink I would make a slip. Ever heard of Raju?”

“Yes. He did a poetry reading here last fall. I should have told Ritesh years ago. But it was a special time – you know. Same with Judy?” I nodded. She went on, “I nearly get heart attack just now. But it’s okay, don’t worry about it. And you know what, I don’t want it known but if it come out, it come out. You know how literary critics always poking around a writer’s life. Perhaps, it’s just time till somebody else figure it out. Like you. If you have a chance with her – Judy? – don’t let it go.”

“You sending me back to Florida?” I laughed.

“No. Invite her here for Labour Day, or Thanksgiving, Diwali, Christmas.”

“You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know if it is that important anymore. I’ve made peace with myself, and her. I’m ready to move on. What we had will be a special time and space for me to –”

“Don’t fool yourself about space. There are four dimensions to space.” It came quickly from her like a stretched rubber band suddenly released. “Don’t let her go without trying,” she said softer. “And why are you running away?” She read so widely that her references were often beyond my comprehension. I wondered about her fourth dimension. As we looked at each other, I knew that there was something else she wanted to say. I suspected it might be something to do with that night almost seventeen years ago. I could hear the clock ticking in the silence. “Satesh grows more like you,” she finally said. I had no idea what she meant. She must have seen the puzzled look on my face. “Little things: the way he cups his chin, his eyes, your brows, your music.”

I still couldn’t understand where she was going with this. She continued looking at me, and it dawned on me what she was hinting at. It was only one night. I was drunk. I felt it was a preposterous idea. Why didn’t she tell me something all these years?

“No.” I felt as though someone had kicked me in the stomach. Satesh was her second son. I never thought this possible. She and I had shared one night of weakness and passion we could never talk about. That first time I stayed with them, Ritesh had started another of his periodic spells of – “lots of work at the office” – which was not unusual in the shipping business. He told me later that he was winding down his affair

with the bookkeeper, who was his girlfriend before his arranged marriage to Devi. It was on one of his late nights at the office that I found Devi distraught. She was doing the laundry and had found a hotel invoice in his trouser pocket. I had had three Banks beers and a Guinness stout in a bar on Liberty Avenue on an empty stomach. I tried to comfort her.

“Yes. Another thing. He was born here. We brought him up on baseball. He loves cricket.” We heard Ritesh coming. “I put a fresh towel in the bathroom for you.”

“All set?” Ritesh asked. “I already put on your AC, you can adjust it.” He pointed to the window unit. “We don’t have central air here like you Floridians.” Ritesh placed a hand on her shoulder. She leaned ever so lightly against him. There was a warmth in his touch that I envied, that I could hardly give.

“Thanks. I’ll be up and out early. I’ll see you when we get back from New Jersey. You know Raghu, nine is nine for him.”

“Night,” she said. A nod and looks exchanged. Their steps echoed down the narrow hallway, hers softer, merging into his. I was still in shock. I was thinking, how could Satesh be my son? Why did she never mention this before? I needed to talk to her. I went to bed, feeling as I felt years ago when I was hit by a ball, and the image of that incident came to me.

When I was sixteen, I was the wicketkeeper for our high school cricket team. We were playing the inter-county finals, and had been two hours in the sun. It was ninety degrees. The opposing batsmen were pulverising our bowlers. The last ball of the penultimate over was hit straight to the fielder at mid-off. There was no possibility of the batsmen taking a run. Still crouched behind the wicket, I let my head droop momentarily, unaware that the fielder who gathered the ball had fired a return to me. There was no reason for the return as the batsmen stood their ground, and the umpire had signalled that it was the end of the over. The ball was “dead.” I heard a warning, “Look out.” Before I could raise my head, the seam of the red leather ball struck my chin. I felt no pain and straightened up to change position for the final over of the innings. “Are you okay?” my teammates asked, crowding around me. I started walking to the other stumps, but a hand stopped me. “Call an ambulance,” someone shouted. I saw the front of my white shirt and white pants spattered with blood. There must have been a gaping hole in my face. At the hospital, I refused the ten stitches that the nurse thought my wound needed. The doctor said I was lucky not to have had a concussion. My face was numb for fifteen minutes after it had been hit. Then the pain came, and I cried like a monkey. The scar from that cut is still there on my chin; if you look closely you may see it. Ritesh was that fielder at mid-off who threw the ball to me. He never played cricket again.

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