

MUSINGS

# The Craig's List

SOMDATTA MANDAL

The newly weds were still living with ramshackle old furniture and gadgets ~ different pieces collected over the years that my son had spent as a graduate student in Cambridge, Massachusetts. So the first duty as a doting parent was to take them to the nearest Ikea store and pick up all the pieces they needed to make their home cheerful and comfortable. The truckload of new boxes arrived soon and it was fun reading the instructions and assembling the pieces as if we were grown up children having fun with Lego toys. Then arose the million dollar question. How do we dispense the old stuff? Finding buyers for such hand-me-downs was a painful exercise. We could not leave them on the sidewalk or the dumpster next to the house. The city authorities would charge us a fee even to remove them. Suddenly someone suggested that we put up an announcement in the local Craig's list.

The posting on the list via the internet was done around 9 o'clock at night. We wanted to give away for free a microwave oven, and particularly a queen-size box spring bed with the mattress. Within half an hour my daughter-in-law Mou's phone went on ringing continuously and the mailbox flooded with queries. What was the condition of the mattress? Was it bug infested? Could we send some pictures of the articles? Within no time even that was done. The camera came out, and pictures of the bed and the mattress taken from different angles were posted, along with the information. They looked so attractive; I took out a needle and thread and stitched up the frayed corners of the mattress. Mou was thrilled. She kept on



assuring every caller that things would be donated strictly on a first-come first-serve basis and she could not promise we could hold them for anyone in particular till the evening. She spent the rest of the night cleaning the microwave to make it appear as shiny as possible.

Just after breakfast next morning a young couple arrived to pick up the fifteen-year old GE microwave oven. Mou heated a cup of water to show them that it was working, albeit a little slowly. "Oh, we'll take it," said the

young man and they were off in no time. The kitchen counter stood empty, as if waiting for the new oven to be unpacked from its box. The queries for the mattress went on unabated. "Sorry, you will have to take the metal frame of the bed too. We can't give you only the mattress," I overheard Mou on the phone. One lady was desperately asking her to hold it till seven o'clock at night as she would need someone with a big car to come and pick it up after office hours.

Around five o'clock a tall African American man arrived in an old big car to take away the free gifts. He spoke very little but was well prepared with a bundle of ropes to tie the mattress on the roof of the car. Mou welcomed him like a royal guest and brought him inside the house. Within a few minutes and with the help of another person whom he had brought along with him, he managed to pack the things in his car in a very professional manner. As he was about to leave, Mou ran after him

with a nice looking pink bag. "Sir, please wait. I would also like to give you a mixer/grinder for free. It leaks a little but you can still use it. Please take it." The man nodded and accepted it. Good riddance, I thought and was reminded of the slogan we hear in our shopping malls nowadays -- "Take one and take something else for free."

Cheering ourselves for such efficient disposal and the generosity we had showered on lesser mortals, we chafed away in the front living room till my son returned from his lab at around eight. After hearing about the whole day's events from us he went inside and soon came back to the living room. "Where's my laptop? I had left it next to the bed for recharging." Sure enough the laptop had disappeared and the mesh of the bedroom window was slightly open. We were stunned. How could such a thing happen when three people were still in the house? I clearly remembered that Mou had brought in the stranger though the kitchen door when I was sitting working at my own laptop on the dining table. As I tried to figure out what had happened, I chanced to look at the chair next to the dining table. Sure enough the plug and the chords were all in place but my own new Samsung Notebook had also made a decent exit. The rest of the night was spent in anxiety, tension and narrating to the local police what had happened. "This is a safe area you know," the policeman said, "but never let a stranger in the house." Well so much for charity!

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FICTION

# What If?

JACKIE KABIR

He said she was his Achilles' heel long before she had read Homer. "What's an Achilles' heel?" She asked with the innocence of a teenager even though she was in her twenties. She had never really grown up, her mother would tell everyone. She was too naïve for the world. Achilles was a demi-god, his father being the mortal Peleus, the king of Myrmidons; but his mother Thetis was a goddess. She wanted him to be immortal like herself. She did everything in her power to give him immortality. She put ambrosial ointment all over his body after burning him in fire every night. She dunked him in the river Styx since it was believed that the immortal gods bathed in the water of that river and that conferred invulnerability to its bathers.

There was just one problem though! She had held him tight at his heels, fearing that he might drown and as a result, not a single drop of water would reach his heels. Hence the weakest part of his body was his heels. Years later, the Trojans fought the Achaeans, on the pretext that the Trojan prince Paris had eloped with Helen, Menelaus' wife, who was the Queen of Sparta. Achilles, now renowned for his strength and skills at war, had fought for the Greeks or the Achaeans. His mother had given him a shield and an armor made by the divine blacksmith Hephaestus, which not only protected him but also acted as a symbol of unrivalled strength. But in the end, Achilles was killed with an arrow from Paris's bow which hit his heels. As he had narrated the story to her, she had listened to it with wide eyes and a gaping mouth.

They would meet in the woods. She would walk around barefoot, for she wanted to feel the soft, wet grass under her sole. She would sit on benches made out of tree trunks. One day the sky was suddenly covered with heavy clouds; everything had turned dark. She was hesitant, and thought of staying back, but her skin wanted to get drenched in the rain. She looked at the sky, welcoming the rain, but all she could see was a ball of fire speeding fast from beyond the seventh sky. It seemed to be coming right towards her. What was it she wondered? A meteor? As it came down and landed a foot away from her, she saw a man. She asked him, "Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me? I'm the man who wants to give you a rose every day. If only you would accept!"

She looked him in the eye and said, "Oh! I would give anything to accept those roses from you but I have someone who gives me jasmines every other day."

"Jasmines? How can you compare roses with jasmines? A rose will knock you out with its fragrance! And its color can blow your mind. A red rose can't be compared with anything else." The man paused and said, "Do you know how the rose came to earth?"

"No," She answered.

"Well, a fairy from space fell in love with a boy from earth. She would come every night to see him. This enraged the gods and so they locked the fairy up in the sky. She cried and told them that she loved a boy and that her love was true and that they shouldn't ruin something as beautiful as her love. The gods relented and turned the love of the fairy into a beautiful red rose and gave it to earth. That's how the rose was born. People have ever since conceived the red rose as a symbol of pure love."

But a sweet fragrance of jasmine pervaded all over the house and she smelt of jasmine whenever she put the garland on her hair. She loved draping herself in the fragrance of jasmine.

She walked back to her house in small steps. Her head was full of his words and the way he had looked at her. She put on makeup and used an eye liner, looking at her mirror as she did so. She imagined him saying she was looking beautiful. She realized that everything around her had a special color now.

The next time she met him he handed her a small leather box. It fitted the palm of her hand. When she opened the lid she found the most beautiful tear drops to put on her ears. She loved them. They talked of sweet nothings and dreamt of being together. She cried when they parted.

She looked in the mirror to find how she looked with the earrings. She couldn't wait to see him. She put on a white sari and a string of white pearls. Finally, she put on her earrings. But when the members of her house asked her where she was heading, she had no answer for them. So, as Radha would, she sneaked out in the woods when everyone was resting.

She remembered the story of Radha well. Radha had been created by

Krishna himself to do *leela*, but Krishna was unable to complete the process, and so he gave her in marriage to Ayan, a student of Veda and one who practiced chastity. Ayan had vowed not to touch any woman. So Radha wanted to meet Krishna, the dark angel from heaven. But every time she wanted to go out of the house, her sister-in-law and her mother-in-law would prevent her from going out. They would take turns to do so. So one day Radha woke up crying in the morning and declared to her mother-in-law that she had dreamt that her white bangles were broken. Her mother-in-law began wailing, asking how married woman could even dream of such a thing.

Radha said, "In my dream a voice urged me to offer a prayer to the Sun god in order to save my husband."

In response, her mother-in-law told her to go and offer prayers to the Sun god. Her sister-in-law Kutila didn't believe one word of what Radha had said. She told their mother that Radha was in fact going to meet Krishna and she would follow her wherever she went. As the two sisters-in-laws walked by the river early next morning, Radha kept wondering how she was going to hide the fact that she was indeed meeting Krishna. In her mind she called to her lord for help over and over again. Krishna was waiting for Radha on the bank of the river with his flute. He knew that Radha was bringing her sister-in-law along and so he asked the wind to blow strongly. The hot wind blew sand grains into Kutila's face and almost blinded her with the dust. She immediately turned around and returned home, cursing the wind as she did so. Radha was more than relieved to see her sister-in-law leave. She could now meet Krishna in peace!

But that was the story of another time, another place.

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One day he said he would take her to watch a film. "Laili Majnu" perhaps? "What would the world think if she was seen with him?" She asked. When they went to the theatre, she found the whole hall empty apart from the two of them. "Why is it empty?" she asked. "Because I wanted to watch the movie with you alone!"

"And so you rented the whole hall?" "Yes! I would do anything for you."

They watched Laili Majnu then. She cried her heart out seeing Laili getting married to a much older man. Laili's father refused to get his daughter married off to someone who was named 'Majnun,' since it meant a madman. Hearing about Laili's marriage, the young Majnun spent his days in the desert. He wrote poems about his beloved whom he had fallen in love with the moment he had laid his eyes on her.

His parents were heart-broken. They sent news saying that they wanted him to come back home. They even left plates full of food at the edge of the desert so that Majnun wouldn't starve. But all this couldn't save Majnun.



After Laili's elderly husband had passed away she locked herself in her house for two whole years without seeing anyone then. Meanwhile, Majnun had lost his parents and fallen sick. Soon he succumbed to his illness. What a sad story indeed!

Then suddenly he disappeared. She kept on wondering where he could be. In the woods or elsewhere? Days became weeks, weeks turned into months, months into years, and yet he was nowhere to be found. She cried her heart out and at one point she stopped crying. Where could he be? She didn't have any friends who could help her to locate him and she had no clue to his

origins. Was he from the outer sky? Is that why he had disappeared like a meteor? Had she imagined all that had happened? But she had felt his presence, hadn't she? The flowers, the beautiful red roses? They were still in her house but had dried and lost their luster like their love.

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But a rose is a rose, even if it shrivels and looks like faded brown artificial flowers. And what about her tear drops? Weren't they proof enough that he did exist? Was what she felt for him really love? Who was to say? Did anyone ever know for sure what love was? All the stories of love she had read about in

books—were they real or were they all made up?

She went around the woods and the garden. She felt as though someone had washed away the colors from the picture she had painted in her mind. The landscape of her heart so full of cherry blossoms once had suddenly become barren; nothing would ever grow there again.

And yet she kept looking at the sky, for what if a meteor came her way again like it had a long time ago? What if?

Jackie Kabir is a writer and translator. Her first collection of short stories *Silent Noise* came out last year.