

JHELUM PODDER\*

*ABSENT TOUCHES*

His corpse was lying in front of Gil, and all she could do was allow the tears to roll down, stealthily. She felt desperate to be able to just howl out once in his memory. But it felt unfamiliar. She couldn't look at his lifeless form anymore. "It's just 5.35 a.m. right now," thought Gil, "If I hurry then I will make it in time for the shoot". She ran back inside her room, grabbed her camera bag, and dashed out of the house.

The previous night had been ghastly. A cyclone had hit the city. Nor'westers had been a regular beauty in Bengal for as long as Gil could recall. One of her favourite memories was collecting raw mangoes that fell from trees during the storms. It was a game she played with her cousins every summer, and she desperately waited to visit her uncle's house, for this. Thunderstorms made sure the summers were filled with raw delicacies.

In spite of serious warnings about the cyclone yesterday, Gil was looking forward to this, her old friend. She decided to stay in and enjoy the afternoon. Throughout the day she fantasized about getting soaked in its raindrops, sitting on the couch on her balcony, treating herself to Tolstoy and Darjeeling tea. As evening approached, she started to realize that this wasn't the greeting of an old friend. It was a wild beast, galloping across civilization, gradually overturning and devouring everything in its way.

Gil was worried about the trees in her compound. She brought some of the mongrels inside her house as a consolation. It was an old house with a long corridor leading up to the main entrance. She removed the shoe racks and potted plants from the corridor to make space for 4 dogs. But then, nothing

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could be done for the trees. Her fantasies turned into nightmares as the storm started making howling noises somewhere nearby. Sometimes it felt as if some woman were shrieking in pain, in, consistent lapses of time. Gil stared outside her balcony and wondered whether she would see any of the plants tomorrow. An immediate power outage adorned this thought, and Gil retired to her room with a very concerned heaviness.

Early morning escapades were always spine-tingling. She never knew what interesting sight might be captured through her lenses. Gil ran to the bus stand and quickly boarded a bus that was on the way to her destination. It usually took around 15 minutes to reach the park. Today it seemed more than an hour. Gil couldn't rid herself of the sight of her favourite friend, lying dead on the ground, completely butchered by the cyclone. Throughout the journey, her brain kept recollecting memories. She remained unaware of her watery eyes while reminiscing about all the conversation she shared with Shajar. He was right there when she did her first shoot with the neighbour's dog. Khhajur loved playing around Shajar. The incessant barking and tail-wagging became a funny chronicle in the neighbourhood. Gil's first confession of wild alcohol nights spent in a hostel was to Shajar. Lying beside him, crying over her unrequited crush, was one of the most painful images, and it pulled her out of her reverie. As the bus entered the lane leading towards the lake, Gil was devastated to see the road. Mother nature was not lenient. Every single tree was lying broken on the lane. Electrical posts shared the same fate, with wires dangling dangerously from the poles. Bull-dozers were already doing their job to make things easy for the passing vehicles. Leaves were all over the lane, lying on their death beds.

Gil walked straight inside the park with imaginary blinders, restricting her gaze straight towards the lake, all the while tightly clutching the straps of her camera bag. The brightness of the morning, reflected by the shine of the water, felt like a mockery of the surrounding destruction. Sadness engulfed Gil the moment the freshness of the dawn touched her bare skin. As she sat on a bench closest to the lake, Gil covered her face with her palms and wept.

"Are you lost?" The soft sound of a concerned voice startled Gil. She looked up and saw a petite girl sitting beside her, staring blankly at the lake.



It took a few seconds for Gil to register that it was meant for her to answer. She felt embarrassed but still answered "No" with a quaver.

"Oh! Then you must be sad. Magenta always cries when she feels sad on a rainy day. She cannot go out on those days. But why are you crying? You're already out."

Gil couldn't help but smile at the naiveté of such a conclusion. She noticed that the child had a sling bag on her lap and a long leash in her left hand. "Where is Magenta? Aren't you scared that she will get lost without you?"

The girl kept staring at the lake while replying, "Na. She knows her way to me. She's always there beside me, all the time. This is Magenta's 'me' time. I let her off-leash when we come here."

Gil suddenly felt a surge of dread. *"Where are her parents? Is she all alone? She must not be more than 6. Why would her caretakers leave her like this? Is she an orphan?!"*

It was as if Gil's panic was obvious, since the girl said, "Everyone knows me and Magenta over here. So, she doesn't worry about leaving me alone. Unfamiliar voices are strictly out of bounds for me, especially in Magenta's absence."

"Voices?" Gil was surprised to hear this marker of familiarity. And immediately she realized the reason for the blank gaze. It increased her concern for this little girl. But something else was also making her curious. "Do you know what Magenta really is?" The child giggled, "Everyone asks me that question. I lost my sight when I was 2 years old because of measles. I never saw that colour. But I like the way it sounds, M-A-A-G- E-N-T-A-A-H!"

As Gil enjoyed the lightness of the moment, a wet feeling on her right foot drew her attention away. She turned and saw a big golden retriever happily licking the mud off of her foot. "I guess Magenta is back from her stroll."

The child exclaimed, "Really! She usually barks at strangers."

As Magenta greeted the girl with wet slurps, Gil answered her curiosity. "Animals like me. I'm a wildlife photographer. I spend a lot of time with dogs and cats too, for doing photo-shoots."

"Aah! You still didn't say what made you cry!"

"Wasn't an unfamiliar voice out of bounds for you?" asked Gil, curiously.

"Sad people aren't dangerous. They're in pain so they can't hurt anyone," she replied impassively. "Why don't you hug Magenta? You'll feel better."

Gil laughed at this proposal. The girl seemed to be taken aback. "What was funny? When I feel pain, I go and pet Magenta, and I imagine her smiling with closed eyes, enjoying the petting. And I forget everything else."

The little girl's contentment was so contagious that Gil couldn't help smiling. She could suddenly feel a nice breeze blowing. It felt light on her skin. Amongst the mounds of fallen trees and debris, small yellow wildflowers were peeping out at her, rocking in the wind. The sun seemed to have mellowed. She recalled that she had the camera with her. "May I take some photographs of Magenta?"

The child stood up abruptly and exclaimed, "Yup! But you have to click me in those pictures too!"

"Certainly!" Gil acknowledged. There was a magnificent mahogany tree standing right opposite the bench. Gil came close to her and explained, "I'm going to take you over near a tree that's on the opposite side. You can ask Magenta to follow you." The little girl grabbed Gil's hand spontaneously and instructed her retriever to tag along. The mahogany created a huge canopy that covered one-fourth of the road that ran between the park and the lake. The shade had a tranquillizing effect on Gil. She had the girl face the lake; the calming light just perfectly touched her face. As she took the camera from the bag, the breeze started blowing a little harder, making the girl's long dark strands blow high up. Right at the moment that Gil decided to click the button, Magenta, patiently sitting beside her human, looked up at her with a smile, and the little girl's eyes got covered by her flowing hair. Only her giggle was visible in the picture.

"I have to go now. It's time for our breakfast," the girl announced from under the tree. "But before I leave, can I see you once?"

Gil was confused. "What do you mean?" The girl came close to her and said, "Kneel down over here, please." As she kneeled, Gil experienced sorrow looking at the light brown pair of irises in front of her. The girl slowly cupped Gil's cheeks with her small palms and started exploring her face with them. She rubbed her thumb on Gil's lips, touched her eyes and nose with her



little fingers, and gradually moved towards the hair, and stopped suddenly on discovering the length.

"Too short?"

"You're not crying anymore. Did Magenta lick your cheeks? She always does that. I think she doesn't get it that humans don't lick, they just touch their lips on the cheeks."

"In whose name do I send the photograph?"

"My parents named me Aabshar. But I like 'Aab'. You don't have to send the picture. Look at Magenta any time you feel sad." She put the leash on the dog and cued her to be on their way home.

Gil observed Aab and Magenta walking together, almost synchronically. The melancholy in their departure felt comforting. She decided to go to the shoot directly from there. On reaching her studio an hour before the agreed time, Gil was surprised to find her clients waiting for her.

"We were taking a walk and decided to come early", explained the lady. She had a very healthy Dalmatian wearing a black collar with Porky written on it.

"Why don't you come inside and wait? It will just take me 15 minutes to set up."

The human and animal couple followed her inside. Gil noticed mud on portions of Porky's body. "Where did you guys go for your walk? Because of that grey mud."

The lady laughed and replied, "Hahaha! The mud is from my house. I'm a sculptor, and Porky loves playing with the clay."

"Ah! So do you teach?"

"Sure. Keep my card and maybe you can drop in sometime."

"Thank you." Gil felt an urge to visit her studio that very day. After wrapping up the shoot, Gil went for lunch at the nearby canteen. She decided to hang around in a café for a while before leaving for the sculpting studio.

The lady was astonished to see Gil on her doorstep. "I was very curious," Gil said with subtle embarrassment.

Porky barged in and led Gil inside the studio. A sprawling paradise of clay and mud lay before her. There were different forms of sculpted figures placed on separate stools. A long table was housing a face in the making. The room

had the mesmerizing aroma of wet soil. In a corner, there was a barricade of double-layered bricks with soft gooey clay inside. She kept staring at it for what seemed like several minutes.

The lady exclaimed, "Dig in!"

Gil got inside the enclosure, squatted over the clay, immersed her hands deep in the treasure trove, and started howling as she had never done before.

JHELUM PODDER\*

## *CARICIAS AUSENTES*

Su cadáver yacía frente a Gil, y todo lo que ella podía hacer era permitir que las lágrimas rodaran, a hurtadillas. Se sentía desesperada por poder aullar una vez por su memoria. Pero se sentía desconocida. Ya no podía mirar su forma sin vida. -Son sólo las 5.35 a.m. ahora mismo, pensó Gil. Si me apuro, llegaré a tiempo para la sesión. Volvió corriendo a su habitación, tomó la bolsa de la cámara, y salió corriendo de la casa.

La noche anterior había sido espantosa. Hubo un ciclón que golpeó la ciudad. Las tormentas noroccidentales habían sido una belleza habitual en Bengala desde que Gil recordaba. Uno de sus recuerdos favoritos era recoger mangos crudos que caían de los árboles durante las tormentas. Era un juego que jugaba con sus primos todos los veranos, y lo esperaba desesperadamente para poder visitar la casa de su tío. Las tormentas aseguraban que los veranos estuvieran llenos de manjares crudos.

A pesar de las serias advertencias sobre el ciclón de ayer, Gil estaba esperando a este viejo amigo. Decidió quedarse en casa y disfrutar de la tarde.

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