



stories for the university newspaper
JUVENALIA
suneel mehmi

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DEDICATED TO DR AMBEDKAR, GURU RAVIDAS,
THE DALIT RIGHTS MOVEMENT & MY MOTHER

AUTHOR'S FOREWARD

These stories are my microfiction when I didn't know what that word meant. They were written for university newspapers and were my initial attempts to become an author, an ambition I had since I was a child. I was much smarter when I was younger. I gave up writing when I realised I couldn't make a living from it. However, the stubbornness and pigheadedness of a Punjabi male is not only extraordinary and legendary, but also entirely predictable and unwavering. I could never stop when I began on this long and arduous road to authorship.

I will be brief: I hope you enjoying reading what I wrote in my late teens and early twenties when I thought the world would fall at my feet.

Dr. Suneel Mehmi

Sunday 16 July 2023

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A COOLER LOVE

The museum was almost empty, echoing like a high-ceilinged vault with her monotonous steps. She found she had no real interest in the exhibits, seeing nothing that she had not seen before, all of it duller than she remembered. The ancients fascinated her always, but today there was some change in the air, a new edge to it which she could feel in her lungs and against the back of her throat as she breathed.

She felt the dull throbbing at her temples. She had thought the Greeks would have the same soothing effect they had always had on her, the tranquillity and peace they had brought to her since she had been a small girl with her Homer, for all their cruelty and violence. This was her mistake she thought. She could have had her rest at home instead.

She glanced at a fine old bronze, small and turquoise green. The spear struck at her thought. She pressed her hands to her head and walked into another room. She started, gave a cry, then stood absolutely stock-still, all pain forgotten.

He was exquisitely beautiful, the most splendid vision of human beauty she had ever seen. With perfect features he stood facing her, inviting her. She tried to shake off the thought, tried to stop looking, but her feet were moving towards him. She found herself melting into him, his eyes. She could not resist him and his presence, this strange attraction she was feeling.

She clasped him, put her lips on his, pulling hard with her mouth. He was cool to her, unyielding. She squeezed his hard body against her own, looking into his eyes. She wore a delicious fragrance and suddenly, wildly thought, how she wanted to drown him in it. His beautiful, expressionless eyes stared back blankly.

Her own eyes flashed, all passion and smoke and fire. Her body burned with her love, her cheeks lit with red. His flesh was alabaster, the features moulded into a fixed, unrelenting profile. Still he stood, with his lips against her own and his eyes locked to hers. Her head reeling, reeling.

Everything in the world swirled and burned around her and him. She burned too. There was nothing she could see but he and nothing she could feel but his coldness and hardness.

The museum attendants were by her now and pulled at her frantically, but she couldn't feel them. There was nothing now but her and the statue.

AN EYE ON YOU

He was lying there, still twitching with the last angry blotches of life. His lips had been baked in the sun and he groaned. He did not notice me at first in his agonies. He was busy cursing the gods and the fates and everything else. I did not feel sorry for him. What did these idiots expect when they came into the desert? They did not know its ways. They could not live here. Yet they came.

Fucking tourists.

He saw me now and he stopped cursing. He even stopped moving, but I could still hear his torn-up-paper breaths. What was he so scared about? He looked petrified. Perhaps the closeness of death appalled him. And now – he was actually trying to drive me away! The sun must have driven him quite mad. He made a few feeble attempts, so I just waited. Neither of us was going anywhere. Eventually he gave up. They always give up.

He was silent now, although he still twitched. He looked up at me with his one eye. The other burst in my mouth like a grape and the juice poured out over my beak onto the hard sand of the desert.

ANTICS

I had been watching it. I saw it larger than life: an ant. At first, it strolled. The sun came and it stopped, attentively. But then the fun began. It ran feverishly into one direction, then the other. It ran in circles, like a splinter of speed. I concentrated upon it. All at once, it stopped again. There was a strange and resigned motionlessness about it. Slowly, the ant began to fold in upon itself. Its legs struggled reflexively and it huddled as though it were imploding. There was a great, hard, viscous pop; a burst; a crack that measured the thunder of one small life and the ant became nothing more than a disgusting smell and a momentary scribble upon the brick. The smoke of death rose above it.

Yes, this was the end of a crawling thing. A spider may have eaten it, or a bird, yet this had been the ant's end. The very sun had come and eaten it. I paused reflecting upon this small event. Yet, what was there to do about it? There was a banality, an insignificance about it. I sighed. I scratched my arm and moved the magnifying glass to the fat, sweating worm I had picked out earlier. It wriggled in anticipation.

SWIMMER

The river shivered in the cold and I rose from its dark depths, gulping for air while water filled my lungs. My body felt unreal, like metal. All it wanted to do was to suck up heat – it was so cold, so cold. I felt paralysed with the cold, but I was moving. I could see the surface of the water now. I could see the prospect of a meal and the security of home again. The light filled everything, it even filled me. Clumps of green things in the water danced lazily and I went for it. I was now just below the surface and flicked one last time, opening my mouth wider and wider...

The worm speared my cheek with its cold, cold heart and pulled at me.

THE BEAUTIFUL COAT

The woman with the milky white skin and the small frosty smile had been sat in the bar for well over an hour. She was drinking a gin and tonic and I never would have noticed her, but for the beautiful coat she was wearing. It was really some piece of work and I wondered which one of the great London tailors could have made it. It was undoubtedly British in the same way that certain foods and handshakes were.

It was an incredibly exquisite coat for such a plain woman, I couldn't help thinking. But, of course, she must have been very rich. The coat was dark black and came down to her calves, with an elegant Jacobean cut. The collar was beautifully shaped and the cloth was of an exceedingly fine and expensive material. The material was hard to place from where I was sitting, so I decided to move a little closer and introduce myself.

'Hello,' I said. Wool, I thought to myself.

'Hello.' She pushed a shy frosty smile at me.

I told her something about it being a sort of sin to allow a lady to sit in a bar so long by herself.

'Oh, how sweet of you,' she said. 'Actually, I'm expecting someone.'

'I hope I'm not interfering,' I said. Size six, I thought.

'Not at all.'

She was a very reserved kind of girl. I am very good looking and I was used to women who were warmer to me. This was not conceit – I would have hated to give that impression. But it was a characteristic of mine to recognise both my strengths and weaknesses. At cricket, for example, I was something of a failure, but with women I was on equal terms with the greats. Undoubtedly.

She said that she was from Derbyshire, but I found it hard to tell from her accent. She was waiting for her brother and he should be here any second. She seemed just a little tipsy. I brought her a few more drinks and said that her brother must have forgotten to come. She laughed, then looked a little sad, so I invited her to my hotel room to try and cheer her up a little.

We went to the room and I fooled around a little bit, but by then she was very drunk, so I let her go to sleep. I took her coat and left her in bed. I paid for the old room and booked a room in a different hotel.

The coat I thought looked very beautiful on me, a perfect fit for a size six blonde. It makes the other women very jealous.

THE COCOON

Ever since he had been a boy, his ambition in life had been to write. Throughout the years at school and then at college and university, he had seized upon every opportunity to read and read and hone his talent. Eventually, he had become famous, but not by the typical routes of patronage through which most authors managed to find success. Instead, he had slaved away at the English idiom in the papers, eventually published by a small, independent company. Over the years, he had perfected his own special technique of delivery and it was an especially ascetic and self-denying one.

He would sit in a darkened room, with just a desk lamp for light. There was to be no interference with his thought processes from outside media. He sat with a clothes peg on his nose to deny him the sense of smell and wore ear plugs. He severed all outside contact and personal relationships, so that he would not be disturbed. This method gave him the focus that he needed to produce his masterful prose. His opponents had levied against him the criticism that writing was a social process and that he had intentionally starved himself of society, that this took from his work. They had tagged him “the cocoon writer” and savaged him in their literary magazines, but he had become the locus of a powerful literary faction and school.

He was at the close of his career and had produced three masterworks, which even his critics had to admit (even with all their faults) were among the most powerful and original in the realm of the English language. There was not one author that could touch him in the living world and many thought that even the dead could not compete. But he was not complacent; he did not know what the world thought of him.

He was working on his fourth and final novel, now that he was grown old and his mental faculties were going. He knew that it was his greatest work and that it could never be rivalled. He had worked at it with tremendous industry, had finished his first version and was now painstakingly revising the first draft.

His hands and fingers hurt with the writing, and his mind was weary with the writing. He paused a little and massaged the back of his neck with his hand, stared at the white ceiling. He had painted the whole room white, because he was sure that any other colour would impress its mood upon his writing. There was a little crack in the ceiling, he noticed. He had not seen it before, but it was clearly visible now.

In fact, as he looked at it, it seemed to get a little bigger. He reprimanded himself for being such an old fool and looked away. He was thinking about the main character in his novel, Catherine. He had called her a tawny blonde in the first chapter, but had changed her later to a golden blonde. He was wondering what the effect of each description would have on the overall meaning of the work. He looked up again and suddenly gasped. The crack was bigger.

He was sure it was bigger, he was not so sure about how much bigger, but that it was bigger he could be certain. He stood on his chair and looked at it more closely. He had not seen another human being for so many years and now he could see a cradle above him. The weight seemed to be breaking apart the ceiling in his apartment; the rockers were made out of metal.

He frowned and scratched his ear – a nervous habit of his and the ear plug fell out and he heard a startling sound. His heart collapsed under the shock and the surprise of it and he foamed at the mouth and died. It was a terrible beauty that destroyed his fragile world and fragile brain. It was the baby's cry.

The Dressed Head

I was pretending to read. It was absurdly difficult to concentrate since the chairs were not at all conducive to it. Yet, looking about me, I could see that the rest of the class was silently engrossed in such a task. Even with the blinds rushing at the window frame!

I looked over at everyone else and was struck by a thought. It was suddenly evident that the classroom was split into two with myself at its inexact centre. To my left the girls were pink and various shades of yellow. Like me, they were not Muslim. To the right sat all the girls with brown skin, like my own. They were Muslim. Earlier, they had been speaking of the great difficulty of fasting, but now they were exceedingly quiet and did not answer the lecturer's questions.

Today, I could not keep my eyes away from one of these girls. It was rude - a great liberty - yet I could not help myself. The young lady had a most mischievous and unconventional face though what was so striking about it was not the face itself, but what sat upon it: a beautiful hood; a delicious turquoise; a wonderful, little colour.

I beg pardon. I was in need of correction. It could not be said to be turquoise, it was another colour altogether. More green than turquoise, more blue. I could not think. I could not place it.

And it was worn so casually, so provokingly! My eyes itched to look at it. It was a colour to make one quite mad, thinking whether one could ever have seen it before, or mentioned before, or thought of before. It was really a heart-rending, magical, intoxicating, purifying, bedevilling colour!

Such a colour! Such a colour! I could but stare... this inexplicable dressed head.

THE FEELING

It was hard when the feeling set in. He found it hard.

It would come when the day was clear and cool and there was no movement to the air. The day would always begin fine. He would be doing the things that he did always. He would be lying on his bed perhaps, with his eyes on the ceiling or on the walls with the white wallpaper and the radio playing. His face would be still and he would be thinking. He would think on many things at times, because his mind was never free from the working. When the night came, he wished that he would not think, but he was never free from the working. The sleep would not come in the nights.

The feeling was strong when it came and it would come very suddenly. It would fill all of his chest and snatch away the water from his throat. It would clamp his lips together and leave his mind full of heavy thoughts, which swirled round and round, but never left his head. The feeling left a pressure at the back of his eyes, which wouldn't leave him even when he closed them. He would try to push the feeling away from him, but it was too heavy and he would find that he couldn't. The feeling left him without interest in the world and the things of the world. He would not be able to do the things that he would always do and then he would be sad.

These would always be the same, these heavy thoughts. The world is nothing, he would think, I myself am nothing. I have no fame, or talent or anything to give to anyone. When I go, the world will not miss me. I am here and I have nothing. Sometimes, he would think on how small and cold his heart was and why he could not experience things like the others. In all of the books and poetry that he had read, the writers had found their experiences very vivid and they had coloured their lives. He would feel his experiences dully and he would always be disappointed when he tried things that were new to him. He could never stop with this thinking.

The songs he heard on the radio would talk about love. The songs would be soft and emotional with the voice lovely in your ear. The voice would be very beautiful. His thoughts would turn on the voice, but in the voice too he would remember the heavy thoughts. The thoughts would not leave him and he wished that they would.

The voice would tell him about love and he would sink into the voice until there was nothing else. But he did not think there was such a thing as love. He thought that he had loved a girl once, but he was no longer so sure. She had been very lovely when he had known her, with her hair long and soft and dark down her back. He had played with the silken weight of her hair and he had made her laugh. He had spent many hours gazing into her face, which had been small and delicate, but very beautiful. He had thought he loved her, but she had not loved him. He never looked any more at the girls now and he did not play with the hair. He would see other people that thought they were in love too, but the thought was quick and deadly and then it would be over and the people went back to being out of love, then the people thought they were in love again, but with some other for this time. He had only thought he was in love once, but she had not loved him. He did not believe in love, but she had hurt him. He knew the thing that hurt was. He believed in this hurt.

He would lie, the mattress beneath him, hard and soft, hardly moving, and the feeling would be very strong. The feeling and the voice would take all of the room for everything else. He could not understand why he had the feeling. Sometimes, he would go through all of the day with his mind clear and cool without the feeling. He would hear the people talking and the music, soft and golden and drink the wine and hunt or fish in the streams that were cool and clear. Other days, there would be nothing but the feeling. The feeling took too much from him.

