5-1-2009

Exile

Indu Shanmugam
Concordia University - Portland

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean
Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation
Shanmugam, Indu (2009) "Exile," The Promethean: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 49.
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol17/iss1/49

This Story is brought to you for free and open access by CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Promethean by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu.
Tossing closer to Peter’s embrace, I allow him to gently run his fingers through my hair. His sky blue eyes and provocative pupils together form an awkward gaze. I tell him about a dream. “I saw a tall tower. The first rock on top falls slowly, and then very quickly the whole thing crashes, making a loud noise.” I pause. I watch those eyes pierce right through me. “That’s all.”

“Baby, do you believe in dream interpretation?” His cold hand reaches down to cup one of my breasts. Flinching, I let him.

“No–”

“Neither do I.” His gaze possessively consumes my body. Darting closer, he plants a kiss on my neck. The distinctive smell of cologne mixed with male sweat penetrates me. An itchy glue-like sensation spreads on my eyes and lashes - the residue of mascara worn overnight. I must pick up my expensive dress lying crumpled on the floor before it wrinkles.

Oh, 2 pm already! After brushing my teeth and a minute retouch, I grab a dress that’s closest to hand’s reach.

“Honey, where are you going?”

“The market. They close early on Saturdays.”

“You went shopping three days ago.”

While fixing the side-tie of the dress, I explain, “I know but I forgot turmeric.”

“What?” he mutters.

“Turmeric. I can’t make chicken curry without it.”

“Uh…okay.”

“The market closes early. And then I’m catching up with Emi. I haven’t seen her in ages.” A perfect last-minute lie. He buys it.

I dodge past groups of teenagers in jeans, elderly women, couples holding hands among a crowd to find the next subway. All of them fitting together like a mosaic on the busy street. Momentarily, my train of thought meditates on a familiar voice that always announces the subway stops. I imagine that voice belonging to a petite, young soft-spoken and probably Filipino woman. Striding off the subway I walk towards the market. My arm tucks my purse closer to my body. I always hear tales of pick pocketing. How the hell can a person rip a wallet right out of a purse or back pocket, especially without the victim or passerby noticing? That’s an art. Peter tells me that I can never be too careful since they usually target foreigners.

The smog of humidity hugs, always leaving a clammy residue of sweat. Not too far away a petite Malay girl, barely of the legal working age starts to operate the register while conversing in an unfamiliar language to a stout woman behind the counter. Intricately designed perfume bottles of varying voluptuous shapes line up the tables like displays of art. Turning to me she asks, “Good afternoon, may I help you with anything?”

“No thank you. I’m just looking.”

My thoughts momentarily drift. An aroma of unusual spices greets olfactory senses. Some names are still hard to pronounce. I can never forget the distinct wafting smells of coconut oil, spices, vegetables and other mixtures associated with the vendors of 15th street.

Spices aren’t my priority at this time. I head straight to the closest National Bank. I have not told Peter about this. While waiting, I wonder - How long can I keep this from him? Two years ago, as Nani lay on her deathbed she came up with the thought of giving away her remaining retirement savings to her adult grandchildren. As she passes from this world to heaven, she wants that to be a sign ushering prosperity for us. She always hopes all of us would grow up to be good Indian boys and girls. There are twelve of us. Nani decided to give her two single granddaughters a bigger portion. According to her rationale, “Nina just finished college and needs to start out and Rita is struggling to pay her bills. They need it more than others.” The others have made their mark.

After a year of grandma’s blessing, my parents start
thinking about marriage. Mama jokingly nags, “You nuh, you cannot go on this like forever, nuh. You go find a good boy and settle down.”

Something interrupts my train of thought. “Excuse me, Ms. Nina Nair. It’s a surprise you are here,” a voice of an elderly woman calls out. I freeze. That can’t be Beulah aunty—my own eccentric relative supposed to be in Bombay. Not a wandering, I learned Hindi years ago, when I lived in Bombay.

I spent fifteen years English.

Her waist. Her neck carries a necklace of oversized beads and coins of various countries poorly strung together.

“There’s no reason to be afraid, child. In case you’re wondering, I learned Hindi years ago, when I lived in Bombay. I spent fifteen years there.”

Is she Australian? Her accent is definitely not American, English or any of the other accents I’ve heard at the International School. Emma Baker, an Australian colleague comes to mind. Does this strange lady sound like Emma?

“Bombay, that’s my birthplace.”

The woman continues. “That’s splendid. I must say your accent. Where are you from?”

“Originally from Bombay but lived in America for many years and now here,” I speak dropping each word awkwardly.

“Where are you from?” I manage to ask.

“I thought I heard some American from you. I’m Aussie but mostly lived in California. I’m a world traveler.” The coins and beads around her neck catch my attention. I recognize one of the coins shaped like a hexagon, with an image of a huge pitcher of water from an unknown country.

Observing her closely, “What brings you here?”

“It’s a perfect escape for a wanderer, a stranger, a voice from this urban jungle.” She declares in a soft, eerie yet calm voice. In a meditative glance, her hazel eyes almost faded with age pry deep into my soul, searching innermost hidden thoughts.

Indeed, this is an urban jungle of car horns, tall skyscrapers, crowds of people of all types and sorts, several places. All together these elements engulf, making a person lost among its vicious wilderness. Does this stranger among the wilderness have anything valuable to say?

“Well, child, you remind me of my young days. I was bold and adventurous. I left home to find myself. I was a real hippie, not those fake, college type hippies.”

“So, you’re a real hippie?”

“Well, yeah. I lived out of a backpack and tent. My two friends and I left for India. Being young we wanted a romanticized, ideal life of freedom and thrill. Those days are over. I can tell you stories…”

Intrigue creeps. How often does anyone run into someone like this? From my adolescent days, I remember stories my parents told about foreigners back in the day. A particular piece from memory’s bank resurfaces. I remember being thirteen and sitting against the kitchen table with my brother. While eating pastries we listened to Ma’s tales of her days.

**

While in college, Ma worked her evenings helping Grandpa run the post office. Since Grandpa couldn’t speak English, Ma usually assisted foreign customers. This was a tiny secluded town almost brushing the Southern-most tip of country before plunging into the Indian Ocean. A reserved community folded in this backdrop started seeing light-haired foreigners for the first time.

“Did Indians hate foreigners?”

“Not really. People generally liked them. Some people couldn’t help but wonder why any Westerner would be
fascinated with our poor, third world country? Corrupt, useless idiot politicians ran our country. Those morons made life miserable for an average Indian. Imagine all the social problems, crime, poverty, and no law and order, all together in one place. Among all of this, some hippies show up expecting what...a land of paradise?"

"What were the hippies like?"

“Oh, those hippies. Lord, bless their souls. Such odd but interesting people. They came in expecting a land of mysticism, just because three major world religions originated there. They thought we would be very spiritual people. I guess we are in some ways. Reality-wise, the common person had too much to worry about such as paying bills and keeping his job rather than seeking spiritual paths. Did those hippies expect a land of milk and honey?

“The hippies I ran into were nice, friendly, and excited about everything. Naturally, people welcome that. Then again, some can’t help but laugh at some of the things they did such as not taking baths. They wore one outfit till it gets too dirty or worn out. Then, they buy another, usually the cheapest they can get. They never cut their hair or shaved, had strange tattoos and what not. Some villagers with no idea about the West start thinking that all Americans never bathe. Hippies were the butt of many jokes.”

***

My eyes focus on the space between a coin and an irregular shaped bead against her pale neck. I wonder if this woman one of those hippies?

“Young lady, you may think I’m a random stranger but our encounter is more than a coincidence.”

“And why is that?” I’m almost amused.

“I have insight into your life. You have been given so much into your life not out of chance by some divine grace. There’s alignment that cannot happen without supernatural intervention.” Hairs start to stand on my end. It’s true. By a slim chance, I’m living the dream life of teaching in a posh International School.

“I see. I suppose you are a fortune-teller. I’m not interested.”

Oh, heavens.

***

Considering Father’s origins in a backwater village, only by a narrow opportunistic chance my father enters college, where he met Ma. Her parents frowned on the courtship. His low caste and borderline illiterate in-laws will not be a match for Ma — educated in the best private schools and to be a successful, modern daughter. Grandma doubts him as a gold digger preying on successful women. Would he ask for a large dowry? He dare not or we’d have him killed instantly as if swatting a pesky mosquito. It’s easy for us to pay a bribe and get a gunman, or gang of thugs.

Grandma’s suspicions dispel when she hears about Dad landing a position in a prestigious company. Hearing many favorable words about him she agrees and blesses their marriage. In no time, he reaches the top of the company and then gets a chance to come to America to settle in the suburbs of Edison, NJ.

Growing up, Father always bragged about his background and working his way up to success, telling us “You girls have no idea about poverty.” I listen while painting my nails a Plumeria shade. “You don’t understand the small chance. Aye, why is this tea not strong enough?” Reaching for another tea bag, he continues to emphasize the difficulties of admission to a college in India. Every time I hear similar tales from older people it seems as though a camel passing through a needle. Not just that. It’s like catching a last boat; if you miss it you are stranded, and staring off to the sea of future, only imagining what could happen. If he couldn’t pass college, he couldn’t get an impressive career to impress Ma’s parents. His words resonate: “My parents would have set me up with some girl from a nearby village. We would never be here. Understand?” He wants to continue to hold me from flying out of America by myself. Ideally, at least right after college he prefers that I stayed within the borders.

Ma remarks “You nuth, people from around the world come to America for opportunities, while you can’t wait to jump on a plane to the East. What are you looking for, anyway?”

“Well, there’s exciting nothing here. I want an
adventure.” At that time, I didn’t want to admit that I desire change from mediocrity.

“Exciting? Aye, what nonsense!” Ma shakes her head. “Why can’t you settle here? There are good schools here.”

A week later, Ma casually mentions marriage, which comes right after graduation and a career. “You must also start thinking about marriage. You’re at the right age. It’s good for a woman to be choosy but you don’t even seem interested at all. You turn every guy down. How else will you find your suitable boy?”

I cringe and take another sip of tea. “I haven’t clicked with anyone.”

“Others asked about you, at Anita’s engagement party. Arranged marriage, uh, we’re not strict on tradition, you know. I’m fully fine with you dating. Or, are you taking time off relationships? Nothing wrong with that.”

I nod. Alas, career success is like a second skin. I never understand love. It’s a contraption like a tight dress about two sizes smaller that wraps the body possessively, restricting movement and ill-fitting for my type.

I end up departing from the US mostly because of Emily from Trenton. She connects me to her old friend, a guidance counselor of that prestigious Singaporean boarding school. Good pay and reputation is hard to come by. It will be foolish not to take hold of opportunity’s hand extended towards me. And it’s an international school too.

***

Staring back at the hippie woman, I hold my ground, “I don’t have change and I’m not interested in a fortune.” She smiles mysteriously. “I’m not after your money. I’m not a fortune-teller. Fortune-tellers tell the future. I’m rather a forth-teller. A forth-teller alerts you of what’s going on at the moment in the inner soul. The human condition is at unrest, morbid and disastrous, with the potential to destroy itself.” She reaches into a pocket and pulls out a card. An animated picture of a toppling tower flashes back to me. It looks like Rapunzel’s tower of an illustrated fairytale book. Chills run down my spine as I remember telling Peter about the dream.

“Does the card have a meaning of any sort?”

“Towers toppling symbolize drastic change. A type of change that’s destructive yet renewing. The old must die. Why? Because that’s how you gain to live abundantly. If you desire the substance of things hoped for, one must first ‘die to self’. Sometimes, things happen that you don’t understand especially in relationships. Think of a vine, in order to be grafted together to another, certain parts will be trimmed and redone. Life can be like that.” I stare at her. What on earth is she babbling about? This is ridiculous.

“Who are you and how do you know my name?”

“Oh, how rude of me. I’m Evelyn. I recognize you because your current state reminds me of myself.”

I cannot see her anymore as a psychic that makes a living from gullible people. I’m intrigued. Can she really have some gift?

“Like you, I once desired fulfillment that I couldn’t really describe. I like anyone with an adventurous spirit. Exploring and taking hold of the world. You’re not afraid to venture and settle in foreign lands. And yet, you fear going anywhere near love.”

She’s describing my tightly clenched heart remains afraid to grasp love. Love is a mysterious force too high for my reach and beyond mind’s comprehension. Where does it manifest? Three years ago, I remember the night at the Circa club for a party. Among their circles of friends, colleagues and whom else, I meet Peter. A gentle set of blue eyes matched with a smooth tone monopolizes my attention. I’m drawn. His impressive knowledge about traveling, art and wine intrigues. Peter appears into my life like a vivid dream waltzing into the dark realm of sleep. In a year, we exchange our wedding vows.

“What about love?” I demand an explanation. My pulse squirms. Spiritual gifts don’t exist.

“There’s resistance. Freedom of experiencing love sits close to your heart. A heart that is too hardened refuses to open the door to second chances. Passion then becomes another superficial accessory rather than a consuming fire that unites.”

Drifting to the late hour of yesterday, on entering the house, Peter wastes no time. Without saying a word he right
away covers my mouth with kisses. Next moment, he cradles me in his arms as he carries me upstairs. I allow him without resistance. Pleasure for the carnal sake is easy to take. There's no unity or consummation. I fear indulging the fire of passion, for it can leave me scalded. Sex is nothing. Heck, if innate desires were to overtake rationalities, I can have a one-night stand with a handsome stranger. True intimacy invades without regard.

The hippie doesn't stop. "Just look at you. Your clothing. No, I don't mean your physical clothing. Let's take make-up. Where was I going with this? Oh, ever seen some women with thick make-up. Make-up should accentuate natural features not hide them behind a mask..."

"What is she going on about?"

"Of course, yours looks nice and well done, like you just walked off a cosmetics counter of a store. Everything looks great at the surface. There's such a deception from you. Such an excellent deception is a thick mask over your true self."

"That's very deep. Sounds nice but what does that have to do with me?" In reality, I must walk away with the coldest look of disapproval. This scenario is comparable to watching a lame, low budget, thriller film. No matter how poor the special effects may be, topped with the lousiest acting and plot line, I must know what happens in the end.

"I see you with your husband last night at the Vintage Hotel. You wore that magenta silk dress with embroidery close to the hem paired with heels."

Revelation's thunders hit me. It's painful to think of a strange woman unearthing the hidden realities of a marriage.

"Please, be gentle when speaking the truth."

"Inside, both of you hold hands, affectionate and even dance the night away. Beautiful picture, aye? Such a perfectly sweet scene out of a lame soap opera."

"Oh, indeed. My life appears so."

Her finger shoots out pointing, "And YOU–Veiled underneath those long lashes and soft expression, there's distance, coldness, reservation and hatred. You are really a black widow waiting to sting him with deadly deception."

"You know what. I had enough. I must be on my way."

"Ha, you simply cannot handle the truth. When will you ever stop being so pretentious?"

Walking away disgusted, I curse myself for paying attention to her. Ridiculous! I cannot allow a strange, fortune-teller, forth teller or whatever she calls herself to convict me. Consulting my watch, I can make it to Jolly's Tea and Coffee. Inside the café, Rahul Phillips greets me with a hug and quick kiss on my lips. Holding me tightly, he says, "Hello beautiful, Are you hungry? I'll get it for you." After sitting down, he wraps his arm around me. I want him to release me. What if a familiar face sees us? Each minute drags on. I want to end this session. This will be our last encounter. Bit by bit, I spill my intentions. He blankly stares back puzzled.

"I can't do this anymore. We shouldn't."

"You don't love Peter. Didn't you feel the soul connection with me?" Rahul reaches for my hand across the table.

"No. I never believed in soul connections."

"Let's talk about this. Come to my place sometime."

"Rahul, there isn't anything to talk about. It's over. Sorry."

Leaving the café, it will be ideal if he disappears. Let him slide away from my life as though a dream passes away from the conscious mind into another stage.

-reaching home, I head straight to the bed. Peter's arms embrace me. Silence.

At the moment, I cannot express my fears. A few tears drip. I place my hands on his hands that rested just near my belly. I search for the right words. "I love you too," I utter softly. He kisses my neck. Not yet, I'll speak the necessary words later. I bask in his presence. I ponder the chance of making things work. I imagine myself surrendered and united with Peter. Genuine passion may be possible.