

A Strange Endearment

Ten days later, walking out of the hospital toward the National Library, Homie senses someone following her. He trails close behind, keeping pace, matching variations in her rhythm, *exactly*. She knows who it is. So she doesn't turn around.

It's seven thirty in the evening. Lalit has been away on business for two days now. It'll be another ten days before he gets back. Homie alone visits Father in the hospital now, on her way to and from work. She alone speaks to the gang of doctors. She buys the drugs, the supplies, the supplements – whatever Father needs. She sits wistfully in the visitors' lounge, alone. She watches the tide of visitors swell predictably as afternoon falls.

Ten days. Father's condition hasn't improved at all. He hasn't moved a muscle or cast a glance. Eyelids at half-mast. No speech, no sound, but not unconscious. The deepest sleep – as though there is no affliction of any kind in his body now. As though this frightening peace is what he has craved for a very long time. No one but Lalit even asks about Father anymore. Mother has said “do what you think best, dear.”

It's the usual heavy traffic in front of the library at this hour. Big buses, minibuses, zipping by on the avenue. Where's the red light already? Homie steps forward and back a few times. Tries to start weaving her way across. There are no other pedestrians in sight. Standing alone on a vast avenue floating through clouds of smoky yellow light brings on a startling feeling of self-sufficiency. But she, caught in the bubble of this sensation, has never in countless lifetimes been alone. Another has always been with her. Still is. Will always be. She will have to spend her life tied to a mirage.

Would he face her, like he did that day? Would he call her “empress”? She feels no unease about him now.

She doesn't take a cab. She walks into the semi darkness of the road toward Alipore Jail. Yes. The footsteps are still in tow. This part of town is a little wooded. He is walking along a line of shrubs, brushing against them lightly. She halts. She walks. She stops dead in her tracks. She quickens her pace. At one point, she takes a sharp left turn into a narrow lane right along the prison compound wall. At any moment she thinks a hand – an ascetic hand, draped in Rudraksha rosaries – would touch her shoulder.

“What next?” she would ask.

She loses track of how far she has walked. All of a sudden she finds herself in crowded Jogu Bazaar. She stands bewildered in the throes of the market's pushy, pulsating life and grit and noise. It's eight-fifteen. To get to the office she'd have to walk all the way back to the library and try crossing the avenue again. She is suddenly exhausted. The air is stuffy. Heavy clouds

have gathered and are waiting in attention above. It's going to rain for sure. No, she won't go back to the office. Or maybe she will? What's there to do at home, after all? She looks around expectantly like an infant. As if her directions are spelled out somewhere on a billboard for her. She has no strength left to think. Her head is filled with a saffron loincloth-ed, blue blanket swaddled figure. His skin a sunburned copper, burnished. Glowing. A ruthlessly beautiful male. But vilely unwashed.

Looking around, Homie notices a battered signboard, hanging on patiently through years of scorching, drenching, nearly toppling weather. It says in faint letters: "Mr. Veda, Palmist. Readings Every Evening 7 to 10." The tiny light bulb flickering over the sign seems to see Homie staring and flashes twice in response. It's joined by a brief rumbling of thunder. Above the sign is a placard with an address and a boldfaced arrow pointing toward an impossibly narrow alley. Homie peers into the alley. Turns out it isn't an alley at all but a corridor leading into the shared courtyard of three large old houses.

Wasting no more time, Homie slips into the corridor. Once inside the courtyard, she immediately sees a sign, a duplicate of the one outside, pasted over the entrance to the house on the right. The door is wide open. What would have been the front parlor in the house's heyday now serves as the palmist's chamber. A row of spare metal benches are laid out in the outer half of the room. Toward the back is a wooden partition, behind which is probably where Mr. Veda, Palmist, gives private consultations. Dingy lighting. Worn-out red and black varnish on ancient cement floors. Like a homeopathic dispensary from some bygone era.

Homie enters tentatively. No one was waiting to see the palmist. Is he not in tonight? She catches a glimpse of herself in a wall mirror. Blue jeans. Cotton tunic. Oversized leather tote. She doesn't belong here. But her eyes are brimming with curiosity. She wants to know about herself. A somber voice calls out from behind the partition "come in, please." Homie goes in.

A full head of thin white hair is tossed wildly by an overhead fan. Or maybe not! It occurs to Homie that the clunky old fan is lumbering away at a speed that doesn't at all match Mr. Veda's violently blowing hair! Some other kind of wind must be swirling inside the man's head. He is wearing steel-framed glasses on a late-middle-aged face. He is dressed in loose, nondescript clothing. Homie feels a shiver in her spine. "I would like my palm read," she says.

"Please sit," says Mr. Veda.

The large table in front of Mr. Veda is empty except for a magnifying glass, a notebook, and a pencil. Homie sits slowly down on a wooden chair next to the table.

"Give me your hand. No, the right hand."

Homie puts out her right hand and asks “you won’t ask my name, time and date of birth... that sort of thing, Mr. Veda?”

He looks up and says matter-of-factly, “these lines were written long before your birth, Madam. And in any case, do you really think anything in the world has an accurate ‘name’? Names are artifacts of language, don’t you think?”

He grasps her right hand with both of his and studies it. His hands are hot – they almost singe her skin. He asks “what would you like to know?”

“Tell me everything you see – one by one. I don’t have any particular questions. It’s just . . . a curiosity has been forming, about myself. I’ve grown interested in . . . searching.”

“You should still ask a question.”

“Who am I, Mr. Veda?”

“You’re an autodidact. Utterly self-informed. No one has made an impression on your life. You have no influences.” Mr. Veda’s response is immediate and free of hesitation.

“No influences?” Homie is astonished.

“No. None.”

“Parents, friends, lovers – no relationship has ever made an impression on me?”

“Like I said – no. A person is influenced by others through a kind of force field. You lack that field, Madam. You don’t consider anyone an intimate or a stranger. You don’t think well or ill of anyone. You don’t love, respect, hate. . . or really even acknowledge anyone. You are alone in your world.”

“Oh.”

“This is your fate line. Look at it. It’s truncated. As if soon after it began it was somehow stalled, ended.”

“What does it mean, Mr. Veda? I have no fate? No fortune or misfortune... no destiny?”

“You do. Of course you do. But it is quite unusual.”

“Before we get to that. . . you said I don’t acknowledge anyone. . . could you tell me, is there a man in my life?”

“Not exactly. There is really no person of any kind ‘in your life’ in any true sense.”

“No love?”

“No. No love. There is a web of affection lines here, but none with any depth. They appear to have formed reluctantly. Your life line is long, but severely broken up. Still, reading as best I can from what you’ve got, you are currently entangled in a social attachment but it doesn’t mean anything to you. It’s not a bond based on intimacy or tenderness. . . in any case, this association is coming to a close.”

“What are you saying?! My relationship with Lalit is ending?”

“And look, look at this line, it says there is one great love in your life – but it’s one that formed at the moment of your birth. Amazing. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Homie starts to cry. “A love formed at the moment of birth? How is it possible, Mr. Veda?”

“Take a look at your head line. Your love line merges right into it. This love will drive you throughout your life.”

“What about normal things? Successes, or enemies? Happiness, troubles, money, children... tell me about these things.”

“You have no enemies. You have no happiness or troubles. No children. I can’t really speak to money or success... those are purely relative in value. And you don’t value anything.”

Homie sits dumbfounded. Her hand lies lifeless as a piece of wood before Mr. Veda. He continues “at the point where your fate line stops, something entirely independent has developed. A fictitious fate line. It starts from... see this mound right here? That’s the creativity mound. The line originates there but then it turns and traces a path that the real fate line should be following. In other words imagination is generating your fate. What you imagine unfolds in your life. Yet fate seems to be steering your imagination. It’s complicated, to be sure. If you look over here, there’s a very deep line flowing from the mound of Venus that’s cleaving to the fictitious fate line. This means that all sexuality in your life is imagined. And all affection.”

Unable to speak a word, Homie stares blankly at the man.

“In truth, your whole life is an imaginary event, Madam.”

After a long silence, Homie asks “so, my marriage won’t last? There’s no reason for it not to, you know. We are very good friends. Lalit is very understanding.”

“It won’t last. Everything in your life is fleeting.”

Thunder hits very hard. A flash of lightening floods everything for an instant, even this far into the walled off section of the room. It's raining. Finally. A loud, strong rain. Homie's trance breaks half-heartedly. She asks what she owes. It's a small fee, just fifty rupees. She puts the money on the table and stands up.

"Do you really believe in fate, Mr. Veda?"

"Absolutely. Fate, destiny, fortune, it's all the same thing."

"But what *is* fate, really?"

He leans back on his chair and starts to laugh in a peculiar way. He looks a bit like a character from the ancient myths. Deep creases flank his mouth all the way down to his chin. Cheekbones rise up to his eyes.

"Fate is nothing extraordinary. The big tragedies, pain, loss, momentous events – these are not the only features of fate. Fate is every footstep. It's the yawning and stretching you do in the morning when you wake up. It's whether you make the 10 PM train out of Howrah Station tonight. Whether you are delayed by an 'accident' on your way or whether you get home just as you had planned, it's all predestined. All your acts, intentions, strategies, and efforts will take you toward your destiny. That progress toward destiny is all there is to fate. And it's invariable. No amount of hope, prayer, or astrological 'remedies' and precious stones and horoscopes will ever alter your fate even slightly. This question 'who am I?' that you 'suddenly' find yourself asking was destined to arise precisely as it did, when it did, down to the exact instant."

"What about the old adage that 'man is the maker of his destiny'? Isn't that what our prophets and philosophers have said? That you reap what you sow?"

"It's a helpless condition, Madam. Man makes his destiny, but exactly as destiny dictates. It's not that things are predetermined to happen regardless of what we do, but rather that what we do is itself predetermined."

"And love?"

"Coincidence. It's a function of how and where you meet someone, or don't. Maybe you are together for seven years without feeling anything, maybe one day you have an unexpected stirring, a burst of joy, some annoyance, a little contempt, all of it is coincidence. Yet predestined."

A silent scream fills Homie's chest. "Will I be never be free from the clutches of my destiny, Mr. Veda?"

"You are your destiny."

Homie runs into the driving rain. It's very late. Everything is still. The darkened street is lined with parked taxis and buses. She starts walking. Soaking wet.

Then, straight ahead, under a tree, wrapped in a fraying blue blanket, her destiny stares her in the face. His matted tangle of hair is waterlogged. His face radiates perfect peace. Like a genuine sage. His gaze holds something different tonight. Something wholly distinct from passion and desire. Love?

This exquisite man with his inimitably magnificent stance, like he was the grand arbiter of all things in Homie's world, overcomes Homie with an awesome dread and attraction. She recognizes her love formed at the moment of birth. The palmist was right. A profound self-loathing rises inside of her.