

Goodbye India

She woke up from the noise of a street sweeper roaring closely to her head. Jumping up, she remembered. Today was day five “on the road”. Her body still wasn’t accustomed to the discomfort of a missing mattress, but her mind started to work in street-smart mode. “Water, breakfast,” she thought while she brushed the dirt off her faded jeans. Although she did not like to think like that, she relaxed when realizing she still had enough money in her pocket.

With the first sunrays warming her stiff body after the night on the parking lot of the local strip mall, she started her morning routine: Lifting her arms high above her body, settling into a deep lunge, Warrior I. She liked the name of the pose. She had just learned it in a trial lesson at the Yoga Center across town. Longingly, she remembered the place, the light, the sun-bleached tree-root and holy statues, beautifully arranged on silken scarves. Of all pictures and artifacts, she especially liked one, a tiny colorful print of Vishnu and Lakshmi. For her this was the beautiful goddess of prosperity, not of financial wealth, but more some richness of life, she was devoted to find. Vishnu embodied her image of a peaceful warrior, a guide.

Breathing deeply, the girl radiated the beauty of the early morning. Some people stopped on their way from their cars to their jobs at the strip mall, just for a second, looking at this teenaged girl, with the blotchy t-shirt, her tousled hair streaming in the late-summer breeze. The girl didn’t notice, too wrapped up in her thoughts about the places she was about to explore.

“Why can’t they understand? Why can’t they let me go.” she thought. “I am old enough now to make my own choices and experiences.”

Feeling the sunlight she felt safe; everything was possible. And she swore to herself not to return to “her parent’s place”, until she had found her very own “India”. If this meant spending nights in parking lots now, fine. Soon she would be brave enough to start her trip, hitchhike south or something. But for now, she just got herself a coffee and walked down to the river park. This would give her some time to think it all through.

Wrapping her fingers around the 99 Cent latte from Dunkin Donuts, she started to walk toward the park. Usually it was empty here in the morning, especially this early. But when she came closer to the river, there was somebody sitting beneath the trees, his legs crossed, palms facing the sky. Silently, she watched the stranger for a couple of minutes. He didn’t move an inch. Her curiosity made her linger a little closer. She liked what she saw. The stranger wore a casual flannel shirt, worn blue sweatpants, but cool brown sneakers. According to his receding hairline and laugh lines, he must have been sixty, almost sixty-five, she thought.

But from a different angle he still looked young to her, athletic in a way. The three-day beard added up to the image.

“A real warrior,” she mused.

His eyes were closed. Knowing that he still had some time before his wife woke up – it was not quite 7 AM yet – he stretched his moment of peace. Here, between the beech and maple trees, down at the riverbank he felt at ease. Slowly he breathed in and out, trying to fill his lungs with the morning air: the coolness, the moisture of dew, and the taste of soil, earth, possibly a dash of berries. He also smelled a hint of coffee, from the latte in the girl’s hand. By now, he had done this morning exercise so many times, he could smell a person before he heard them approach. He looked up.

“Good morning,” said the girl, realizing her own nervousness. “How are you?”

“Please, sit down,” he offered. And, for a while, the two of them just stared at the slowly trickling water of the stream.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” He started the conversation and tried a smile.

“Yes,” answered the girl. “I wish more people would just stop and enjoy it. I am Charlene, by the way.”

“Hi, Charlene, my name is Tom.”

The sun threw some sparkles through the foliage. Charlene sipped her coffee and tried to figure out where the sadness in Tom’s face came from. His clothes and his need for a trim and shave suggested that he had been camping out here for a while.

“You know,” said Charlene, “I haven’t been home for five days either. Just took some money, my toothbrush, wool socks, a candle, lighter, some twine, a knife.”

“Very well prepared,” said Tom. “Unexpected things can happen everywhere, right?”

Charlene nodded proudly.

“Yes, I did pack for anything to happen. I just felt that there must be something more, you know. Not like school, home, parents, parties, husband, work, kids, school, I – I don’t know. There must be a different life somewhere.”

She smiled shyly, hoping this “old warrior” could be her “Vishnu” and would share some of his wisdom and adventures with her. He sighed, then looked at her seriously, almost stern.

“Would you mind sharing my morning excursion along the trail with me?”

Tom remembered the times he walked this path with his wife, how she liked to hold his hand, how they didn't have to talk much anymore to feel understood. He remembered the long Sunday afternoons, the kids running in front of them, finding odd looking roots and branches to use as weapons. He remembered looking for tracks and explaining the wilderness.

His wife had known all the plants, especially the ones with pretty flowers. She could distinguish most birds by their twitter and chirp. Now he found himself next to Charlene, who told him about her dream of India, the travels she was about to start.

“Of course my parents would never allow me something like that. They want me to become one of those successful, high-functioning people, who choose to work their whole lives, spending long unhappy hours overworking their nine-to-five dependency? Why don't they take more time for themselves instead of killing it in front of their TV? Why don't they live, travel, explore? Why don't they understand how important it is to feel, the sun, the air, to feel happy and free?”

Tom decided not to bother her with the concepts of responsibility, reliability, destiny, and determination. Instead, he found himself telling her about his intended travels; he told her about retreats and ashrams he had planned to visit with his wife in India, but had never found the time to realize. He told her about the Ganges, the beauty, the festive cremations, and how the dead got prepared to float down the river to eternity. Charlene's big eyes and detailed questions made the journeys almost seem real to Tom himself.

The lively conversation made him feel adventurous and more and more often he stepped off the path, pointing out milk vetch and buttercup to the girl, but also edible mushrooms and berries. They even picked some.

“Those they don't have in India,” Tom joked. But to his surprise, the girl did not laugh.

She just stood there, distressed. Before Tom could say anything she knelt down. Slowly, he walked around the blackberry bush. And then he saw it, too.

There beneath the scrubs, almost hidden by the brushwood, laid a bird. His red feathery breast pointed towards the sky. Charlene reached out her hand and put a finger on the bird's chest as if she could feel its pulsating little heart. It was too late. His tiny feet and body were already stiff, the head and body perversely distorted. Something, somebody must have broken that little robin's neck.

“That poor thing,” the girl whispered and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

Gently she picked it up. Tom swallowed his first reaction of scolding her to never touch any dead animal. He sighed, took a deep, deep breath, pulled his shoulders back, and started to collect some twigs and branches.

“Didn’t you mention you have some twine?” he asked.

“Sure,” answered Charlene and opened her blue survival backpack.

Slowly, Tom wove the synthetic line around the branches building a little raft just big enough for the robin to rest on. Charlene started humming a sweet, innocent tune and let some wax of the lighted candle drop on the float in Tom’s hands.

Tom thought back to the times when he and his father used to make little bark boats and he himself just needed some sunshine and air to feel happy and content in this world. Over the years, it had become harder and harder to remember this feeling, especially for the last three years. Almost to the date three years ago, they had diagnosed his wife with Alzheimer. Every morning, he tried to sneak out to his place beneath the trees, hours before she would wake up; but more and more often her medicine would give her nightmares and she would wake up early, not knowing where she was, not knowing who he was. Tom did not dare to leave her alone, being afraid that she would do something irresponsible.

Tom’s hands trembled when Charlene carefully placed the bird on the float and decorated it with little flowers, whose names his wife would have known. He placed the little boat softly in the trickling stream. The candle went out almost immediately. For a long time the man and Charlene watched the little burial boat jiggle away. And while the girl felt she had traveled further today than she might ever again, Tom closed his eyes and very quietly said, “Goodbye.”

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