The Window

I saw her first in the summer of ‘99, a month or so, that is, before I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I must not say “diagnosed”, or so my psychiatrist tells me, it seems too “medicinal” a word. Perhaps I should say they discovered I was insane; the kind of thought that has the mild flavor of insanity that every self-respecting madman should possess.

But again, I wasn’t delusional, or something like that. I know, I know. I can almost see you shaking your head. What a pity! The poor guy! No, I wasn’t at that stage just yet. Not that stark raving insanity that people actually call madness; just a little off the hook. A little cuckoo, as my friend says. Meaning that I did carry about with my daily life as normal people carry out, but I was a little prone to, you know, imagining things. Whispers. People. Sometimes even plots and controversy.

But her, she was real, more real perhaps than anything or anyone I saw around me. Much of my life during that time was a vague mist of uncertainty, a foggy veil which would occasionally resolve into a familiar face, a well known voice, and at other times become a solid brick wall, or a labyrinth. But she, she stood out in the whole fogginess. Right there, so true everything else faded away into another world, another time.

Who was she? I do not know. I didn’t know her at all. To say the truth, I never even saw her properly. All I remember of her, as I put my mind to it now, is this dark shadow, standing in front of the window, silhouetted in the light from a nearby room. Yes, I saw her through a window. I always saw her through a window; the shape and form of her shadow etched deep into my mind.

I remember very clearly the day I saw her first. It was night, a full moon night I remember, and the unnaturally large disc of the moon stood poised on top of frail, listless clouds as I walked back home from the market. I remember the moon, for I remember having seen it and wondering why, after all, did the moon have to be so large, why it didn’t simply fall away from the earth, leaving the world in its well-deserved darkness. That was when I stopped, for some reason, in front of the house just opposite my own, still looking at the moon and wondering. It was then I had a feeling someone was up close, and I turned my head to look.

And there she was. Behind the window the scratches in whose glass reflected the moonlight in diffuse patterns she stood; all that was visible of her was a dark shadow, her hair fallen delicately on her shoulders, and ruffled slightly by an unfelt wind, her hands pressed on the glass, her fingers trembling delicately as her chest heaved gently in a slow, melancholy sobbing. I went and stood directly in front of her, imagining she would perhaps see me and back off from the glass, but she just
stood there, even when I stood right in front of her; the weight of her sorrow was perhaps too large. There she was, still, yet so full of life that her sorrow pierced my heart, silent, yet so loud her cries banged into my eardrums. For some reason, I thought I looked into her eyes, her eyes filled with slow pearl like tears that stood poised on the cheek, the final stand of beauty as it fell to the harshness of the world, her eyes that beheld so much depth they drowned me in them completely, that held so brilliant a flame they set fire to my soul, that for several days, months, years to come would become the definition of life for me; the eyes that I could not see and yet could look at with wonder and awe.

That was not the only day I saw her. Throughout the next few weeks, I saw her often; sometimes in the divine light of late evening, sometimes in the darkness of a moonless midnight; always the same, though, the same shadow, sobbing gently behind the glass. Sometimes she would just stand there, looking, or so it seemed, at the far end of the road, her hands gently caressing the window sill even as her mind, I imagined, caressed her injuries. At such times, she would be more silent, less sorrowful, and no one who looked at that shadow of the lady behind the window would have refused to call her beautiful, and indeed divine; so perfect was the rustle in her hair as it fell on her shoulders, so true was the movement of her fingers. And at other times, she would fall back into her grief, crying softly as she pressed her hand against the glass; pressed it as if she was reaching out, wanting to come out, searching for that lone hand, any hand that would grasp hers and lift her out of her misery, bring her into the light that she so clearly deserved. That was the image she evoked, trying to reach out, and that was what prompted me one day to place my hand on the window exactly where her hand was. I wanted her to know I was with her, I would help her, bring her light; I wanted her to know that I would clasp her hand, but she did not notice. Perhaps because I never could do what I promised, perhaps because I never could understand. Perhaps because, somewhere, the chasm between us was more than just an inch-thick glass window.

Yet, that single touch on the glass sent tremors through my heart and soul.

And at all times, it was just a shadow. The same form every time, the same light from a distant room, the same silhouette that held me in its depth. And above all that same inherent sorrow that was so deep it drowned me, and yet so beautiful it gave everything a pearly, tear-like glow.

Then one day I stopped seeing her. Or rather, she stopped coming to the window. This was the time I actually started doing rounds of the psychiatrist, still trying to pronounce the name of my condition. The doctors were all very busy and helpful, playing as they were with a brand new toy that by a stroke of luck happened to me. Not that I hold anything particularly against them, or against my mother who took me to them, but they did seem enthusiastic to cure me.
But what they did or did not do to me was never my concern. There was only one thing that was real in my life, and that was her, and the fact that she no longer stood at the window left a hundred unanswered questions and a million shattered dreams. For hours everyday I stared into the dark, black void of that room, hoping that somehow the darkness would resolve into that familiar hair on the shoulders, the familiar hand that trembled gently as it pressed on the glass. For hours I waited outside, not knowing why I was doing so, not knowing who I was waiting for, except for that vivid fragrant memory of the days gone by; now nothing more than a silent reverberation in the depths of my heart. Try as I could, I could not forget her. I could not, because there was nothing else but her. Throughout the days she had been at the window, I had spent my day in anticipation of her, my nights in the revelry of her thoughts. But now, she was not at the window, and yet she was everywhere. The shafts of moonlight were her unseen hair, the fragrance of flowers her perfume, the sun in the day her face, and when I closed my eyes, the darkness I saw was but her shadow.

You must understand that this was not that once a day kind of love you come across. In fact, this wasn't any kind of love at all. For here I was, getting insane, and knowing it, above all; and somehow this girl of my dreams was suddenly the girl of my reality. She was what truth, and reality, and above all sanity meant for me. She was the battle between reality and fantasy, she was the rift between truth and dreams. For even as I thought of her night and day, even as I let her hair run through my hands or put her palm to my lips, there was a dark undercurrent of doubt that nagged my mind: Was she real at all?

The knowledge that I was insane had split my world into two different universes: the real and the fantastic, the truth and my dreams, the real world and my world. To which world did she belong? To question thus, to wonder if the woman I loved was just a figment of my imagination; it chilled my bones and sent searing currents through my heart and soul. The questions would leap up like fire out of a volcano, burning all those thoughts that I was nurturing and reveling in. Often I would cower in a corner, afraid as much of these questions of doubt that screamed in my mind as of the less real ones that whispered in my ears; and yet I was afraid to answer, for I was afraid of the answer. Afraid, perhaps, of the truth.

But soon there came a time when the burden of not knowing who, or where, she was grew too much upon me. I could no longer cower inside myself, living in her memories, real or imagined. She either had to be part of my life, or not exist at all. So I mustered up courage and walked across the narrow road that separated her house from mine. First I looked at the window where she used to stand, but no, she wasn’t there: just a uniform shade of dull brightness. Then I walked around to the main door and rang the bell, but no one answered. I rang the bell twice more before I noticed the large lock upon the front door. With panic welling up inside me, I ran up to the neighbouring house and pressed the door bell frantically.
“Who is it?”, asked a frail, irritated voice from behind the wooden door.

“Umm…”, I said, “Can you please tell me where the residents of 96A have gone?”

“Who are you?”, the voice replied suspiciously.

“Actually, I owed them some money”, I said cautiously, hoping the voice would hurry up and start to trust me.

“They just left for New York”, came the resigned reply.


“An hour ago. They have a flight at six.”

A flight at six. A flight at six, and all my dreams and night mares waiting for that flight. I looked at my watch. It was already half past five. If I hurried...

I ran to the main street and jumped into an auto.

As I waited impatiently for the auto to reach the airport, my mind was surprisingly clear. The murky indecisiveness and baseless fear of the last few weeks had all but gone, replaced now by the clear, transparent thoughts of a man with a motive; what had been lurking in the shadows of the mind, waiting, stalking, was suddenly now out in the open. The moment of truth had finally arrived.

I paid off the auto and began to run into the airport.

“Sir, do you have a ticket?”

“Err...no..actually I came to see someone off...”

“Sorry sir, only passengers...”

“This is for the information of all...”

“...are allowed..”

“passengers traveling to New York by Air India flight...”

“...beyond this point.”

“IA 690. Due to technical difficulties the flight has been....”

“But sir...I have to, have to meet this lady....”

“delayed till 7:30 pm”

“Wait...is this announcement about the flight that was to leave at 6:30?” I asked, sudden fountains of hope springing inside my bosom.
“Yes sir. Now will you please step aside and allow the passengers to enter?”, said the guard, politely but firmly pushing me aside.

There it was. I knew now that the love of my life was inside that building. I knew she was waiting, no not for the flight, but for me, for that was what Destiny had meant to be. Yet, all that remained between me and my destiny was this stupid guard, who just wouldn't let me in.

I came out restless and impatient. I had to get in somehow. I stood there making and discarding plans in my head when for some reason I turned to look at the lounge on the other side of the road, and in the far corner, speaking to the guard, was a young lady. Through the large glass windows of the lounge I saw her; the same hair falling on her shoulders, which I saw now were the darkest of black, the same quivering fingers. Another place, another hour. But the same. The very same. Her fingers shook even as she spoke shyly to the guard, clasping and unclasping each other in a fervent nervousness. I could see her eyes now too, wide open in childish wonder, staring as if even into the depths of mediocrity, her lips, opened into a slight timid, yet gentle smile. She wore a simple pink tee over blue jeans; her entire person gave no indication of any unnecessary adornment or jewelry. Unnecessary because even in the harsh white light of the airport lounge, she looked beautiful, far more beautiful, in fact, than when she had stood there behind the window, setting her hand on the window sill. It was as if the delicate melancholy that had pierced my heart then had crystallised now in her face in so beautiful a manner that all the goddesses of heaven seemed to converge into her, quiver as she quivered, stammer as she stammered.

A car honked and I realised I was standing in the middle of the road: I had walked a considerable distance while still watching her. I sprang off the road, my person electrified by her sight, the air fragrant by her presence. I had found her! And there she was, behind the window again, but now I could reach out and grab her hand. But first, there was the question that remained...

I half ran, half hopped to the door of the lounge, and caught hold of the guard just as he took his seat.

“The lady who just talked to you. Is she travelling to New York?”

“I..I am sorry sir... I don't know if I can give you that information....”

That was enough. That was it. She was real. All those questions that had been burning my heart and soul for all these days had suddenly vanished in a miraculous swipe of fate. She, she of whom I had thought day and night, dreamt even more, was real, and within my reach.

In the electrified ecstasy I was in, I walked gaily up to her.
“Excuse me”, I said gently.

“Uh..”, she began, turning suddenly as if from a dream. She paused a moment, looking timidly at me. Then, “Do I know you?” She asked it more as a question than as a demand for an introduction, as if she were wondering about the question herself.

“I don’t think you do. You see, I live in the house opposite yours.”

“Oh”, she said, with feeling. “I am sorry I don’t venture out so much.”

“Yeah I know”, I replied, “I haven’t seen you much myself. I saw you today leaving with your parents in the evening...they are your parents, aren’t they?”

“Actually no”, she said, easing up a little. I noticed that she had stopped clasping her hands, which now lay freely by her side. “They are my uncle and aunt. I had come here for the winters.”

“You live in New York?”

“Yeah, kind of. I mean, my parents live there, so that means I do, of course..but I do come here sometimes.”

“I get it you are travelling on this 6:30 flight everyone is crying about?” I asked. She laughed softly, but her laughter rang out throughout the airport lounge, which had grown silent, or so it seemed to me. “Yeah. Though I am not exactly crying about it you see.” She looked at her watch. “Umm..I think I must leave now. If I don’t get through with the customs check now I probably never will make it to the plane.” She took up her bags and started to leave.

“Wait”, I wanted to say to her. “Why do you stand by the window in the night?” I wanted to ask. “Why do you cry softly? Why don’t you come into the light? Why don’t you laugh as you laughed now? What grief do you even now hold deep in your heart?” There were a million unanswered questions that I wanted to ask. Yet I asked none. I offered to help her with her bags, but all she had was a handbag and a small valise, so she declined. I muttered a feeble bye, and she smiled in return, but none of the million conversations that were banging inside my head played out. All I did was watch her leave, her person leaving an indelible mark on my soul.

That meeting, however, had cleansed my soul, so to speak. The knowledge that she was real, that she was part of the sane part of me somehow seemed to imply that everything else did too. In the days that followed, my thoughts of gloom and conspiracy, the murky world of my mind had collapsed, replaced instead by this brand new world, colourful, brilliant, vivid, in which I played that eventful airport
lounge conversation again and again, in a million different ways; always seeing her, her lips, her eyes, her fingers, and often her fingers pressed against the glass. It was a relief to my mind to know its love was true; and it was all it needed. I recovered rapidly, or got cured rapidly. And all the time the psychiatrists looked at me and marvelled at their proficiency, I thought of her, I thought of her when someday, next winter perhaps, she would one day fall into my arms.

It was about 3 years later that the Malhotras came to dine at our house. The Malhotras, in case I haven't told you, is the family who live opposite our house(yes, the very one). It was some function, I remember; I think it was my brother's thread ceremony. We were dining at the table, and Mr. Malhotra was seated right opposite me. “Sir”, I asked, unable to contain my curiosity, “Is your niece still in New York?”

“Pardon?”, he asked, looking up.

“Your niece. Is she still in New York?”

“I don't know who you are talking about”, he replied, “I don't have a niece in New York.”

The sun sets behind me now as I write these words, making vivid red patterns of light and shadow on the wall in front of me. I look at them and wonder. Are these real? These shadows that flit now hurriedly across the wall, contorting themselves into weird shapes, are they anything real, or just a figment of imagination? Perhaps they are neither. Perhaps life is so too. Neither true nor fantasy, but both, a splash of imagination on the canvas of reality.

Questions remain, questions that perhaps must be answered, questions I am afraid of. Yet as I sit here thinking of all this, I relive again my heart's tremulous beating as it saw her shadow, and again when I spoke to her at the airport, even if she wasn't the same. Who was it at the airport? Who did I fall in love with? These are questions, perhaps, that are best left unasked. It is best, perhaps, to let that small flickering lamp of love burn within my heart, no matter who it burns for.

Bharath Hariharan, with ideas from Pragun Goyal.