

It Must've Been Love, but... A candid contemplation into the caprices of human mind and emotions.

It Must've Been Love, but...

By Asha G Kumar

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A candid contemplation into the caprices of
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Asha G Kumar



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About the Author



Asha G Kumar

A writer, educator, dreamer, thinker, and an eternal optimist, I would describe myself as a flawed fantasy, a resilient hope that springs eternally against all odds. My Masters in English Literature and 14 years experience as an educator, and heading English department dovetails with a lifelong enthusiasm for literature. After chasing deadlines, negotiating nerve wracking schedules and trying to infuse love towards the written word during the course of a day, it is the world of books, the land of fantasy and the fervour of writing that keeps me motivated.

Asha G. Kumar

My debut collection of poems, Meandering Expressions, published in October 2020 is available on Amazon-as an ebook

* <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B093CJPZWM>

* <https://www.amazon.in/dp/B08L6MFSTQ>

Besides writing, my interests extend to public speaking, travel, bird watching and photography. My Tedx Talk entitled, “Waxing Eloquent not on the Wane,” is focused on the importance of accuracy and precision in communication:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=II4waoDX9Zk>

My Youtube Channel, The Writer Talks! Engages brilliant, award-winning writers as well as indie authors from across the world, as they share their works, writing process and love of literature.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cVu-h2phrA&t=18s>

My blog, Sane and Single, kindled the courage to publish my writing. It features my opinion columns, poems, and my book reviews

<https://ashagkumar.blogspot.com/p/embarking-on-journey-begins-with.html>

I was recently interviewed by the prestigious Fasihi, International Literary Magazine

<https://fasihimagazine.com/?p=999960723>

At the recently held International Educators Conference by uchi.ru in April,2021, I spoke about the relevance and need for

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Section One:

Thoughts

1

Life is a quirky mix of melody and mayhem, chaos and charisma.

We were seated on the couch comfortably, cheerily smiling at each other. I love her smile, something truly mesmerising about it. Makes me want to hope again... She looked at me with passion, admiration, an all-consuming look that was fixedly gazing at my face. I saw her eyes gleaming in an inexplicable delight. Although alone up to now, I was happy to be with her, another of her unexpected visits, that too on our Tamil Puthandu¹!

Excitedly, I opened my mouth to explain what Puthandu meant for us when suddenly, in one quick swoop she felt my lips with hers and stayed there as she held me in a close embrace. I could smell her perfume, CK Eternity. I could feel her intensity, sense the warmth rising in her body and wondered: Why me?!

¹ Celebrated on 14 April every year. Tamil is the South Indian language.

I mean, she did not ask me! She didn't take permission. I recalled the regular chides from my fast friends who have teased me for decades. "Aww, c'mon Pikshu, you can't always be so proper!" Or, "Pikshu, stop being such a prude!" Their words echoed in my ears and I loosened up, letting myself be kissed. I was beginning to savour the moment, the warmth of her breath, her tender caress, but my mind was clouded by that eerie memory from my turbulent past.

This is not the first time! Yes, it is my first time with Shalu, but it is not my first time ever! I distinctly, acutely recall an equally stunning, equally unsolicited, sudden swoop outside the precincts of the University library. It was late afternoon, past 4:30 pm long past the lectures, past the library hours, outside in the lonely open parking lot we were the only two graduates leaning across our two wheelers, facing each other animatedly discussing postcolonial theory, even as we were admiring an ominously overcast sky, brooding over us accompanied by a cool, almost cold breeze just before the annual summer torrent...

In one quick swoop, I was startled by Rajini's sudden embrace and a lasting kiss on the left side of my neck. As I staggered back, the memory of her smell stayed with me, something very distinct about it. She looked at me teasingly, smiling with a hint of trepidation, mouthing the words, "I love you!" I love that disarming smile, it is infectious, makes me genuinely happy and soothes my worries away. Dazed, confused and slightly alarmed, I gently moved away, and suggested: "Shall we go and

have a tender coconut, before it starts pouring?” I have to go home, mom is not well again, she and Papa might have returned by now, from the tests.”

The unexpected, unusual, piercing thunder roused me back to the present. Tender moments with Shalu had stretched on until it came to an abrupt halt with this uncharacteristically loud thunder, in an April afternoon sky in Bombay. We parted briefly, stared at the inexplicably bright sky. Shalu looked at me, smiled and resumed as I loosened up this time. I could feel the softness of her lips, the tenderness of her touch, the yellow rim of her sleeveless arm fascinated me and shook off the ominous memories of my first kiss outside the University library.

Somehow, I still could not place my feelings, still uncertain, distracted and mildly preoccupied with thoughts of my mom's possibly last few days and trying to make sense of what is unfolding right before me, rather with me...

“Is this for real? Why did Shalu kiss me? I mean, is she not a very dear friend?”

Oli: “Really? When did she really look at you as a dear friend, Pikshu?”

“But... this is again amiss. She is ...well, this is not really a problem, in fact I am glad that she is older, but damn it! She is married, a married woman with two sons!”

“And so?”

“Oli, What do you mean, so? Did you hear me? An *affluent, married woman, with two sons!* Married for over two decades! Getting the point? She is straight, is she not?”

Oli retorted sharply: “Did you ask her that?”

“Well, I did! In fact, I have sent her three articles, one is a research-based article probing sexual orientation among women closer to menopause.”

“Seriously, Pikshu! You really stopped... and handed her articles to read!”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous! I did not *hand her* the articles, but I sent them via mail. I did stop though and suggested we have coffee, as she told me she enjoys coffee. Strange, because I have always seen her having tea, but she drinks coffee with me.”

Oli sighed, her usual sigh of exasperation! Both of us laughed, we know each other far too well. Over two decades of friendship surely enables us to read each other’s mind.

“Now what? Did you suggest that she visit a psychiatrist! I will not be surprised if you have done that.”

“Hey, I would not offend her, nor would I be disrespectful like that. Maybe she is a tad confused... Do I look like a boy?”

“Pikshu!” Oli growled.

“Definitely not!” I answered my own question. “I have grown my hair, it is a lovely bob, nothing about me suggests that I look like a boy. But, I have to do the right thing,” I insisted more to myself, rather than to Oli. “I do not want to ever endure that again! I do not want to be “someone’s experiment!” Rajini was enough!”

“Stop referring to that worthless girl, Pikshu!” Oli ordered angrily. “She really has damaged you, hasn’t she? You have serious trust issues. This is not Rajini, she is Shalu, an older woman, Yes, but sensible and mature. And you said so yourself, *caring too.*”

“Well, yes, but...how is this possible? Why me! There is a feeling of disquiet rising within me, a strange conflict. I am drawn to her, but it is not like that...”

“Sorry Pikshu, there is an emergency case at the hospital, I have to dash off. We will talk about this,” Oli promised.

I shook my head, so typical of Oli. Always ready to be of service, always selfless. Just as I ended the call, it started ringing again.

Shalu...but she left just a while ago.

“Pick it up,” I told myself.



“**Hello...**” I chimed...Silence! More silence, after several hellos from me in varying tones-lovingly, in wonder, confusion and eventual exasperation-there was a muffled sound. Sound of — sobbing. Yes, Sobbing!

I intoned in surprise and concern, “Hello, Maya...” That’s my name for her. Shalu, as she averred, “Is far too common a name, and I am not too fond of it either.”

So, given her appearance and her approach, I called her Maya, *my Maya?* Perhaps.

“Maya, are you okay?”

Now there was a definitive cry. “What happened?” I urged. “Are you alright?”

After several repetitions she finally relented. This was a relief akin to walking into a perfectly cooled chic restaurant that shields you from a blazing Bombay Sun through the year. The cessation of her crying brought this same wave of relief. I cannot be more unnerved than I already am. I enquired again. “Maya, are you okay? What happened? Why are you crying?”

After many, many minutes, she finally spoke, “Just missing you! I am close to Western Express Highway now.”

“Missing me?” I was puzzled. “I get the Bombay traffic, hee..hee... and of course, your rather slow driver. But it has still been only 30 mins...” I tried to cheer her up and lighten the mood that became a ritual throughout our relationship. Be it after a prolonged crying, post an angry argument, after an intimate moment, or just routinely. Seeing her smile is one of my greatest joys.

“Hey, Mysterious Maya...” Both of us loved alliterations, and this one she particularly enjoyed.

“What happened? Why were you crying?” She retorted with her everlastingly favourite word, “Nothing!”

“What?! How can you cry over *nothing*?!”

“Nothing at all. I just cry like that. Forget it. What are *You* doing?”

“It would be nice if you could tell me what happened. I am concerned as to why you are crying?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it”.

If there is one thing about her, she’s quite resolute! Tough ice to break through.

She repeated, “What are *You* doing?”

“But, you said you missed me!” I asked her, perplexed.

“Yes that too! Okay, I will keep the phone now,” she said quickly.

“Wait...” I interjected, “Strange that you will not tell me. Again, that is you, Mysterious Maya!”

She laughed, “Whom were You talking to?”

I was taken aback. “Oh! I was... talking to Oli, one of our regular conversations. Moreover, she had called to update me about my Mom. How do you know?”

“I tried your number, it was engaged. Thought you were avoiding me when you didn’t call back”.

“AVOID YOU?! No! Why...? I didn’t even notice, sorry. You know me, I am not one for multi-tasking. I wouldn’t avoid you.”

“Hmmm...”

It turned out to be my *hamartia*. I wish I had, when I actually could. But, I am extremely naive to the oddities of love. My sole point of reference was the disastrous experience with Rajini. Rajini Manoharan hailed from a family of renowned Chartered Accountants and they were devoutly conservative. Quickly, I shrank away from that reference and focused.

“Maya, I sent you the articles via mail, did you read it?”

After a pause, she crooned, “I love your writing, love your eyes-twinkling with delight! There is hope in them, your happy, youthful face pulsating with mischief yet innocent, and that teasing smile...It is so difficult to be away from you. Feel like flying to you.”

How can anyone resist such intense emotions and attention? I loved the attention, appreciation and warmth that she showered on me. Almost swooning, I persisted, “But, I didn’t write much in that mail, I mean, did you *read* those articles?”.

“Why? Did you write those articles?” she shot back with a hint of sharpness.

“No, not at all. Obviously not me, I mean, I... I am asking you for a reason”.

Unmindful, she carried on, “I am referring to your letter. To the time we spent at your house.”

“Ah, Yes! True, of course, lovely time! But strange that you sat watching me through the night and stranger still that *you cried* reading my letter,” I laughed.

“Not everything can be explained. Some things need to be felt, understood.”

“True but communication is the key, there needs to be transparency...”

She cut me mid-sentence, “I will read it later. Have to take this call”.

“Why? Who is it from? *Kothai*?” (meaning Where? I used it as a nickname to refer to her husband). She laughed indulgently, “Bang on! It is an ‘update me’ time. I will call you back, quickly”.

I actually wanted to say, it is okay, but refrained. Instead, said, “Alright”.

She cut the call to update *Kothai* of her whereabouts and I sipped water thinking of my parents. Papa’s words were chilling and I couldn’t imagine mom enduring all of this for no fault of hers. “The doctor has recommended a catheter”.

I scrolled down the recently called list to call him, but Maya called again. So quickly!

Laughing, she shared her “update conversation with *Kothai*.” I probed, “But, if you are so disillusioned, how come you have been living there for 24 years! And you never thought of moving out of your marriage?”

She mouthed the common excuse that most married men and women give, “There was no reason and publicly we are seen as an ideal couple. Moreover, Ms Single, it is far too complicated. Not as easy as you think.”

“But, what we are having, is that easy?” I questioned. She trailed off...



3

“**Life** is cruel..I am near Worli Sea Face now. One of your favourite places...”

“Ah, of course! It is my love for the sea that brought me to Bombay. It is beautiful, I love walking there or just sitting there watching the waves lapping the shore until eternity. It is absolutely soothing. You are lucky as you live in proximity to Sea Face”.

“Me? Lucky? Ha...ha... What is the benefit of living in proximity to Sea Face or anywhere for that matter? I’ve never come here,” she announced to my utter bewilderment!

“What! You live in Mahalakshmi² and you’ve never come here!! You go past Sea Face at least twice everyday enroute to Juhu³, impossible that you’ve not been to Sea Face. How is that even possible?!”

“See! Can you believe it? Despite this I’ve never come to Sea Face to sit, walk or anything like that. Yes, I go past it, as you said, everyday, but it is not the same,” she responded calmly.

“Oh! That is truly strange. My mom and I used to drive down quite frequently. We love the Sea. It used to be Sea Face or

² An upmarket location in South Bombay.

³ Another plush western suburb in Bombay

Marine Drive. Oftentimes, it would be a late night drive as there is no bothersome traffic then. We would come for dinner, then sit by the sea. There are many times when we have come here just to have the Angoori Rabdi⁴ at IC Marine Drive and then walk across the road to watch the sea. One of the best things about Bombay I guess..." I stopped abruptly realising that I am talking away incessantly.

Mom and I, a synonymous phrase in my life. Mom has been such a constant feature in my life, lives for me, inspires me and ensures that I am on the right track, yes, like all moms but mine is rather special. Her world begins and ends with me. I've never needed any companion, she's there after all. And I always asserted, "Nothing will happen to you mom, as long as I am there." She would calmly respond, "That is what parents often tell their children. But I would want you to be strong and fine, once I am not there.." The very thought shook my inner foundations and I would shut it out, "You're not going anywhere! Don't you want to see me reach my goals, make you proud?"

"You have made me proud, and the rest, I'll watch you from up there...but it is vital that you stay on course and not be distracted. You need to be prepared for the eventuality," she would respond unfailingly. I would end the conversation just as I did yesterday, "Mom, nothing will ever happen to you, as long as I am there."

⁴ A North Indian milk-based dessert that is in the form of small-rounded balls of cream and milk.

“Hmm...so where did you go away?” Maya lulled me back to the present.

“Ah,” I quickly recovered, “So, Sea Face, Marine Drive... our favourite places. You say you’ve never been there for a late night stroll?”

“Late-night stroll? Ha..ha.. We have to be in bed at 10.30 every night! We have a scheduled time for everything! It is a different matter that I don’t sleep, but yes, we are in bed at 10.30.”

I wanted to say something cheeky, thankfully, I checked myself.

“How can you not sleep then? It is not good and especially in your case, it can be dangerous too”.

“Oh, so you read up about epilepsy?”

“Yes, I did. Never knew much about it besides that Julius Caesar had it too! Do you take your medicines regularly? You must be carrying your emergency medicine too, right?”

“Yes, I do. So, what else did you read up on?”

“I mean, I still do not get it! You don’t sit by the Sea Face? Watch the moon and the tides? Experience the breeze...you’re such a good poet too, I’m sure this affords great scope for your photography skills as well”.

“I told you I’ve never. Are you going to badger me about it now?” she was irked.

“Sorry, that is not what I meant. I was just too bewildered that you haven’t. Okay, the next time I go, I will take you along and follow it up with midnight coffee at 4Seasons. It will be wonderful!” I promised.

She jumped in on the idea, “Why sometime Ms Writer? Why not today? It is Friday and anyway we’re not working tomorrow being Saturday.”

I was a little startled, was not planning on going to Sea Face tonight, had to complete all this marking still, being an examiner came with its own frustrations. Plus I was worried about mom, actually very tense about it. Knowing the eventuality does not always help.

Suddenly, she responded, “Sorry I’m imposing. Sometimes I am impulsive. You go ahead with your things, and I am near Mahalakshmi station now, closer to home”.

I was ashamed at having drifted off again and quickly promised, “Hey, Mysterious Maya! I was planning our evening, you cannot cancel now. Plus spontaneity in life ensures excitement, that is what living is all about. You cannot go about like a robot and function like a clock!”

She agreed, “Oh, I get whom you are referring to! That is another reason why I am silent at home. There is nobody to talk to, there are no conversations. I end up working late into the night and there is so much to complete anyways. Are you sure you are free? You have to come from Andheri after all.”

“Of course I am!” I insisted, “Remember I suggested this.”

The thought of returning to the sea, the thrill of a midnight coffee was exciting. Plus, she’s wonderful to talk to. It still seems incredulous that she had never gone for a walk to the Sea Face despite going to Blue Sea⁵, for her umpteen exhibition visits. She is a puzzling character, but truly nice to talk to, truly nice to be with and am floored by her adulation.

Attention and compliments are not new to me. Being an only child there was no dearth of this. Parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, friends, students...I have a long list of people who appreciate me. In fact, hailing from a smaller town like Mysore, being a self-made person living by myself in Bombay, I am independent in every sense of the word, like quite a few modern Indian women. Adulation is something that I have come to expect now. But Maya’s adulation is special, she cherishes me, she hangs on every word I say! The way she looks at me — is it possible to love someone so deeply, so devotedly in such a short span of time?

⁵ A bungalow that hosts exhibitions

One of my childhood friends cautioned me the other day, “Maybe she’s bored in her affluent life and she is lonely. She’s looking for a respite and this novelty appeals to her. Do be careful Pikshu.” It was unsettling. Just as I was contemplating it, my palms vibrated vigorously and I saw “Papa Calling”. In half a ring I answered the phone, tears welled up my eyes, my palms sweated profusely, still I managed to reassure him, “Don’t worry, we have to try everything. If it gives her a chance, then it is worth it right? After all, it is Mom, she is a fighter, given her resolve, she will overcome this health issue this time too. By the way, Happy Puthandu, Papa!”

He laughed his hearty, full-throated laugh and greeted me asking the usual question, what had I made and what did I eat? I replied adding that my ‘new’ friend paid a surprise visit again, and had brought me “kheer⁶”, which I explained is our equivalent of a payasam⁷ and that she is a good cook too.

Tamil Puthandu is distinct from the Chandramana Ugadi⁸ or Gudi Padwa⁹ that is celebrated in Maharashtra. Our Ugadi is always on 14 April and heralded a New Year, invariably associated with delectable goodies like mangoes and paal

⁶ A milk-based dessert

⁷ A liquid milk-based dessert that is termed thus in Tamil.

⁸ Ugadi is based on the Lunar Calendar, celebrated in states like Karnataka, Maharashtra.

⁹ Ugadi is based on the Lunar Calendar, celebrated in the state of Maharashtra.

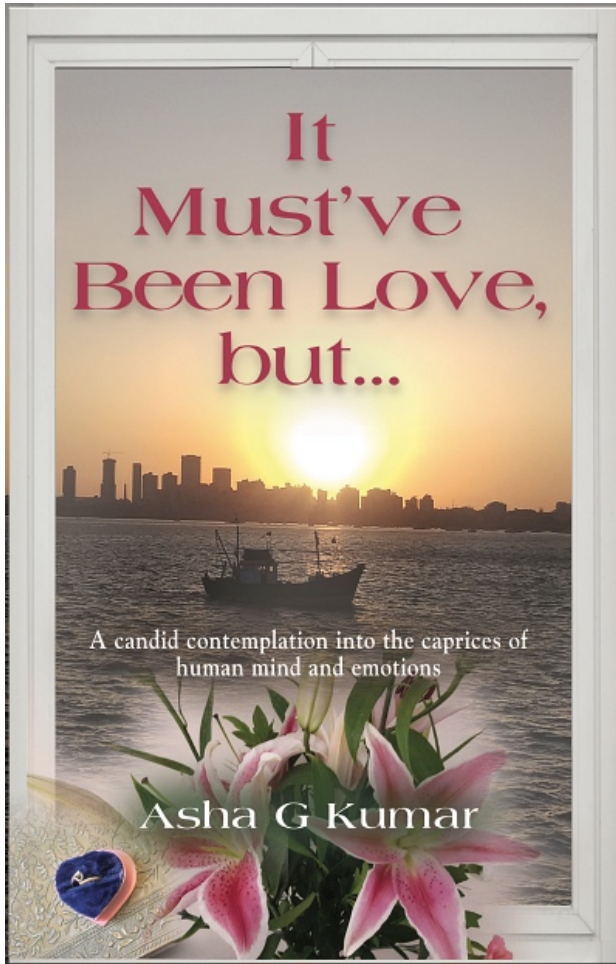
payasam¹⁰, Pappa's speciality and a few years back, it also rang in the Kerala Palakkad Iyer festivity of Vishu¹¹ - "Wish you a Happy Vishu," Rajini would laugh mirthfully. Wit always cut ice with me, but I never imagined her wit and vile were packed in equal measure.

Papa noticed that I was quite excited each time I spoke of my 'new' friend and he gently said, "It is nice, but do be careful with people. Nowadays, one never knows. Here, your mom wants to talk to you..." Very unlike him to say this of *anyone*, considering he is the most trusting, most gullible soul on this earth!



¹⁰ Milk Kheer/Milk Dessert

¹¹ Vishu - New Year celebrated in Kerala and by the community, Palakkad Iyers, hailing from Palakkad in Kerala.



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