

The Stories I Told Hiruko

I was to meet Hiruko at the café.

The streets were filling, with almost everyone up and about, including the late risers who got their exercise struggling through waves of slow moving people and racing across intersections as the lights changed. Bangkok is a modern city to me, though it's difficult to escape the weight of tradition and religion. Hiruko was here, somewhere in this city of millions declared and undeclared, and I wondered if she had changed since we had last spoken.

I met Hiruko because I was a teller of stories, like this one. I never spoke of my accomplishments and failures, but rather I wove tales of people and places into dreams that Hiruko could remember. My father, since the days when I could recall standing with my head as high as his knee, had always told stories. They were stories of our family usually told, and although I never dared ask what was true and what wasn't, it made no difference. These stories became the history, the motion pictures, the links to the chain of people that connected me to myself. In the thirty odd years I knew him he had never repeated the same story once. I know that sounds impossible, but it might give you a clue to the kind of man my father was.

Hiruko and I had been in love. Those were days in a different city, and while they were happy days with the exception of arguments about nothing, and our being surrounded by an amazing abundance of people dressed in the same shades of gray and brown, the relationship had not ended well. By the time she departed for Bangkok, we knew too many intimacies about each other which became burdensome.

That was three years ago. I hadn't spoken to Hiruko during that time.

It was only two days ago that I came home to find her voice on my answering machine: Can you come to Bangkok?

And so here I was.

Life is about how we deal with our memories.

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The story of how we met

To be honest, I'd be telling you tales if I claimed to know anything about love. The evening I met her, Hiruko's dress was claret, and the movement of her hair wrapped upon itself reminded me of the whispers of old women behind closed doors in Arabia. She hadn't been at her

Embassy very long. Hiruko had skin the color of opaque white marble, and immediately I was hypnotized by the contrast of my hand on her bare shoulder as I interrupted her conversation to introduce myself. The first story I told her was the shortest I have ever told in my life: I said I was our Ambassador.

"You don't look like an Ambassador."

"I'm undercover."

"I think you're a person who tells stories."

"Do I look like someone who would do that?" I said, starting to smile.

"You look like someone who would be bad for me."

"Some people say bad is good."

"I don't."

"You might think about it tomorrow and decide differently."

"Is this the way you always introduce yourself?"

"Sorry," I said, holding out my hand, "Anand Koduri."

And that was that. It's easy to think that such important moments in one's life should be the best of all stories, but it's arrogant to believe so. Most special moments are exactly the opposite. We make up tales because we need something to be magical. But you know, it's all fiction around us, and when you first realize that, things either become very clear or very depressing.

We passed the rest of the evening chatting and making jokes. Hiruko leaned toward me when she laughed, and I enjoyed the easy way she looked at me from behind her wine glass. It wasn't that she was beautiful, but sometimes you find yourself in a dance which decides to lead you, to spin you about and who can say why?

I took Hiruko's hand as we waited for the valet outside the Embassy, surrounded by drifts of azaleas and young dogwoods.

"I'm not sure I want this," she said.

"Neither am I."

We agreed to meet the next day.

Hiruko and I spent that first day walking the streets of Washington naming things. There is the large man who drinks two whiskeys at 6pm every Friday. Do you see the busy Chinese woman who makes brie sandwiches with sprouts and honey mustard sauce? This is the escalator that only goes down. Over there, a house of many barbecues and a strange gray cat on a leash. These were photos of us that I knew would last longer than any snapshot. I watched people watch us as we walked, and felt I could look into their souls.

Over the next months, Hiruko and I vanished into ourselves. We became strangers to our friends and basked in daily examinations of our surroundings. Sometimes dinners would last well into the night because there was simply too much to say, too much to inform each other about.

We wanted to know exactly how each of us had become who we were. Sunday mornings I would find her lingering over the newspaper, her hair pushed to one side, one leg crossed under her body, and I would think, "What is this thing that makes me want to say to the world, "Yes! I am a part of you!'" I slept well and dreamed of possibilities. On the most perfect days, I found my fingers tracing the flatness of her belly as she lay with a sheet draped across her chest, like some river of cloth built of shadows and small folds.

My father told me once that all stories contain a point where everything changes. I didn't realize that he was talking about life as well.

On the day that Hiruko found out she was being transferred to Bangkok, she gave me a heart, forged out of metal, with small bells and chimes inside. The heart would ring each time I moved it. The sound of her calling my name.

The Story of How We Unmet

How does one fight against time? Time corrupts, not only physically, but in a hateful manner. Hiruko refused to talk about Bangkok. It existed "over there," and it was unknowable to us beyond travel guides and friends' impressions. Bangkok became something that each of us held on to in our own way. Something to jealously guard, like a secret you should be ashamed of, but liked deep down. I wanted to believe that she was just afraid, but I had a tendency to assume the world thought as I did.

In those bleak times, we made the most of that last survivor of a dying relationship: our bodies. My appetite for sex grew as my desire for conversation shrank. It became a way of asking questions, of asking "Why? Why? Why?" You see, in our search for knowledge and reason and explanation, it becomes difficult to recognize that there are many things we don't wish to know. Out of necessity, I continuously ignored parts of reality in order to remain sane. Hiruko didn't understand this. To her, knowledge was the end in itself.

I asked her, "Why is it so necessary that I know so many things?"

"You don't have to be an expert. But it would give you a sense of seriousness."

"You mean an air of seriousness."

"Fine. Whatever."

"Seriously?"

"Just forget it," she said. "Sometimes I honestly hate talking to you."

"Look, why should life be so *much* thinking? There's enough noise in my head already. It's as if I'm constantly reading the New Yorker, and realizing that there's this abundance of important things--poetry and politics and art-- and frankly, it's overwhelming."

"Then stop reading."

"I'll stop reading if you don't leave for Bangkok."

It was the closest we ever came to talking about the future. After that, we spent many of our final few days in silence. I made up story after story in my head, while Hiruko packed her life into boxes.

On Hiruko's last night in Washington, we both drifted in and out of sleep.

"You're awake," she said finally, close to morning.

"Yes. I was thinking about the number of ceilings I've stared at in my life."

"How many?"

"206."

"You're making that up. Tell me something true."

"Ok," I replied, my voice hanging in the blue-black light of the room, "this is a story told by generations, by fathers of fathers, about a relative of mine long, long ago, and the woman he loved who didn't love him back."

"Anan---"

"Just listen."

Some men live an entire life based on a single moment. Pankaj was one of those men. Pankaj fell in love with a woman he met only for a day, as she passed through his small village at the base of the mountain. It was an unfortunate thing, but such things happen. How they met, what they said, how they parted – those are stories within stories and long since forgotten. What is important to know is that Pankaj's heart was captured in those few hours he spent with her, and also to know that she did not share his feelings.

Each day after she had gone, he wrote a sentence about her. Only one sentence, usually in the morning or late at night when the moon was thinking about its sleeplessness. In this way he filled fifty volumes about her, completing one per year. When the fiftieth had been closed, and the pen put down permanently — his hair long since turned the color of lightly-trodden snow — Pankaj gathered a small pack of warm clothes, a bedroll, and a long stick for walking. He stood in the early light, facing the mountain as we gathered around.

Please, take something more with you, we said. At least take enough food, some hunting tools, a canvas to cover you from the wind and the elements.

"I have spent fifty years feeling my heart break. Each day a little piece, like a crumb, has broken off." He looked at us and up at the mountain. "Today, there are no more pieces to fall. They have been gathered outside my body in fifty volumes and I give them to all of you."

He breathed. "I feel light."

We watched as he walked into the low hills, making his way toward the steeper slopes. Those of us who were young then, and less clear sighted, only tracked him for a few minutes. He seemed to disappear, but every so often someone would shout suddenly, "I see him there! Yes, there he is still!" and we all strained our eyes and pretended that we too could see. The last one to remain watching was an old woman who lived in an apartment near the riverbed. She stood long into the evening, with a blanket thrown over her shoulders by sympathetic neighbors, crying out well into the night, "Wait, he still goes! Yes, I see him! Do you not see?" She went on through the dinner hours and darkness, interrupting people in mid-swallow and early sleep. My father went to check on her and to lead her home during the cold pre-dawn moments, but decided to leave her be. By then she had lost her voice from the chill in the air, and he had found her in the road, occasionally mouthing words, "---! ----- --!" with eyes large and runny from the wind, and whether she saw or did not see him we never knew.

As for the fifty volumes he had left us, no one dared touch them for months except for my father, who one day opened the first page of the first volume, but could read no more than that. He returned that day to our home pale and silent, and said not a word.

The Sun Dragon appeared soon after, on the day of the winter equinox. Its scales shimmered like the early morning ocean, and it soared on the currents that roamed the mountain and landed upon the peak. Once there, the Sun Dragon sang, its voice only slightly heavier than the wind, and full of the sound of our bodies. Some complained that its voice was nettlesome, that it ached too much, but to most of us it seemed a music vibrating with our own spirit.

For the entire day the Sun Dragon sang the fifty volumes of heartbreak, weaving the tale like a ribbon through the cold air of that day. Some quickly returned indoors and shut themselves behind walls and blankets and earplugs of thick cotton. But most of us sat quietly and listened, or went about our work in silence a touch slower than usual, feeling our hearts, collective and individual, fall away little by little. On that day each year that followed, we watched as we disappeared from each other as the Sun Dragon would return and sing; the wind dancing through the shell of who we were.

"I'm not sure I like that story," said Hiruko when I had finished. "It's a little too tragic, don't you think?"

"What's wrong with tragedy?"

"It's so European."

"That's bad?"

"Not necessarily. It's just not you."

“Well, you may not like the story, but it's absolutely true.”

She laughed a little. “Telling the truth about things is now very important to you?”

I wanted to tell her that telling the truth was not so important as *wanting* to tell it. To me, the truth was very clear: she was leaving and I would not be leaving with her and she would not ask me to. But I wished for something else, something that was out of my reach. I wished that she had the courage to explain to me why love was not big enough to hold both of us in its arms.

Hiruko shifted, and turned her head away from me to look out her window at the new light falling between the buildings. Her hair filled the hollow between my neck and collarbone. The smell of pears and ripening fruit.

“I can see where the sunbeams end,” she murmured absently. “Is it too late for a person to believe in sun dragons, Anand?”

“I find it easier to believe in nothing.”

“Is that why you've had one foot on the floor for the last half hour?”

I remember now the sound of the floorboards creaking as I closed the door behind me. Hiruko remembers it too, I'm sure. Once outside, I looked up and watched the last, brightest stars disappear.

Sometimes people tell stories without even realizing it.

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While I waited for Hiruko in the cafe I saw the reflection of the sky train shooting by, looking like a slim candy cane in the large glass shop windows. This was a city of make-believe, and I wanted to look down upon it from some high perch where I could see the mingling of the colors of the Tuk-Tuks and the patterns of silk with the evening sun.

Hiruko arrived at the café and sat down hurriedly after brushing my cheek with three fingers. We spent ten minutes in silence. Of those minutes, we looked at each other for only two. I imagined many things. Fish gulping for air. The smell of macaroons. How Hiruko used to tug at the sleeves of her sweater, before pulling it over her head. My hand on a round, pregnant belly. Do we ever outrun our hopes?

We started then, slowly, to tell stories. One after another, she and I and the characters that occupied us danced in the watery Bangkok air, and soon our stories began to wrap around themselves in the same way that Hiruko and I used to embrace. And soon, in between the tales of who we had become and what we had been, I began to lose track of the connection between events and the play of language. Silence drifted

over me, even as my lips moved in response to hers, and all I could hear was a faint humming within my body.

Can it be that we are all full of sound? I feel that I resonate. If so -- and I think it is true -- then I am the sound of a cello, and I am a wondrous mixture of melancholy, mistakes, and peace. I create my own vacuum of vibration, and I am able to shift forms at will.

I am a teardrop sliding down Hiruko's face.

In that unnamed café in Bangkok Hiruko and I listened to the sounds of our hearts until our coffee cups were empty and the stories finished, and then we left each other for good.