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### Lotus Flower By Anju Kanwar

Stroking his still-unfamiliar early morning bristle and short hair, Baljit thought fondly of mummyji and daddyji, and of *her*. Then, quivering his nostrils over an incipient yawn, absent-mindedly, he reached for the telephone screeching like a plane about to land.

*Laila o laila laila, aisi tu laila . . . Push it good*

Over the grinding Bollywood “masala” mix, Baljit yawned into the phone, “Whazzup?”

*Har koi chahe tujhse milna akela . . . Push it real good*

“Billy . . .”

The agitated voice on the other side quickly aborted Baljit’s yawns in a deep swallow. Coughing to relocate his breath, he looked around the sparse, tiny one-bedroom that he had shared — till recently — with an Indian student studying Engineering at the local university. Having asked the young man to leave on very short notice, he was now waiting for the arrival of the permanent replacement. Busy fiddling with his thoughts, he could barely hear Jenny. So his “Yes?” burst out like a convict impatient to get out of jail.

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It was only three days ago, after a dinner that Jenny had cooked — as usual — to celebrate Baljit’s new greencard, that Jenny had found out the truth. He had been edgy all evening and insisted he couldn’t stay over that night. When she called him later to check if he was okay, almost defiantly he asked, “Why shouldn’t I be?” And then, in a rush, told her about his wife back in Delhi. “Her name is Kamaljit. I call her Kamala.”

“Kamala?” At her faint echo, he explained, “It means lotus,” as though she had asked for the word meaning; nothing sarcastically-clever or graceful or bone-breakingly funny came to her mind to ease the pain of the moment.

How did she never guess? Since that moment Jenny had lacerated herself with thoughts of a faceless woman called Kamala. She should have guessed. They had spent most of their free time at her apartment where they had been practically living together for eight months. During that time he had grown from gaunt to easy well-being.

And in this newfound state, he had frequently flattered her feminine form. “I love how soft and lush you are,” he said.

“Others don’t describe me so,” she laughed.

“Trust me, mine is the only opinion that matters.” When she laughed at his audacity, he said he loved

how she made him feel so comfortable. Over time her laughter grew more natural, for she too had found contentment and liberty within the relationship. She now wondered what Kamala looked like. “How does a lotus look? And does *she* know?”

But on this vampire morning, under a sky spread out like a shroud, with sufficient free language lessons, Baljit was able to throw out a term signifying agreement as a question. Or, perhaps, fear had just made him deaf. And what of her? She was unable to get warm and felt powerless before such cold disregard. Her pitiful response made her look at her own body with a new awareness—a sad, shabby thing with a rather feeble structure. Jenny put the phone down, unable to continue.

Two days later, Jenny was still trying to answer the question for herself while working on an overdue school assignment: a theory about the construction of the self (moi) in relation to the other (autre) and the Other (Autre). Interpreting human experience like linguistic structure seemed like one more foolish human attempt to simplify the complex, to tie down the infinite, to comprehend the incomprehensible. *How come the other students accept the Saussurean algorithm, and only concern themselves with its application?* she wondered.

Clutching the blue knit scarf that she had bought Baljit—coconut oil and Chaps, individual not blended, still clinging faintly, she remembered the past months in staccato frames. The same way in which they had been lived. He had of course needed to save every penny to send home. He always protested her generosity, briefly, and always accepted all she did. Money was important. *His* money.

Wearing shorts and a white tee shirt emblazoned in red with a classmate’s version of the construction

theory, she wrapped the powerful torment inside and set out towards the downtown area. She really must get the paper done, but before that she must understand the reasoning behind the formula. Soon she could see streets teeming with local residents, some out-of-towners, the swagger of old students, and the excitement and nervousness of new students. Laughter and noise filled the air. Jarred by the sounds, ignoring the blazing reflected heat of the dry earth, the craters and splits in the black tar top, she hurried past the surreptitious activity around the adult toy shop, to the family-style Thai restaurant, to the bars—where Baljit had taught her about the loveliness of the body in the Punjabi *bhangra* rock dance: first shrug your shoulders, then hold one hand up and one hand down and twist both simultaneously in opposite directions, as though screwing and unscrewing a light bulb. Past the food stalls, the fortune teller, and circular clothes racks lining the pavements, she turned into a side street where she could smell the animal food: fried elephant ears vied with corn dogs, and other smells, here. Her stomach growled in challenge. Screams from the parking lot housing the rides and the spinning octagonal House of Horrors invaded the air. One year someone had thrown up inside the House of Horrors while it was in motion. As vomit ricocheted from its walls, the screams grew louder—the piped hair-raising music merely provoked hysterical patrons inside to press their backs harder against the walls while the structure spun round and round and they tried to avoid the unexpected horror of the projectile. Jenny’s favorite antique store was close by but she crossed the train tracks and kept walking, on automatic. *Did he think that telling her about his wife was enough? Did it end the matter for him, his telling her?*

“Hey, you not see me?” someone shrilled.

Jenny looked blankly into dead air before lowering her gaze to an old Chinese woman carrying a big

straw basket like a Mei Tai. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see you,” she quickly apologized.

“You look around. See me. Others too, you know. Place not just yours.”

Mortified, Jenny looked around at unknown street names; she had lost herself in the town grid. The houses all looked unfamiliar. Still, it was a small town and she should be able to find her way back.

Face red with misery and anger, ignoring loudly muttered comments about people with no consideration, she was glad when a large drop of rain made the woman hurry away. Jenny felt a drop spread through her hair, and seep into her scalp. More drops splashed upon her face, soaking in gently before running down its contours. Busy with her thoughts, she had not noticed when the sky suddenly clouded over. It was one of those oppressively humid days when the sun often shies behind dark clouds, playing hide and seek. The corn fest downtown would most likely be ruined. For many new students it would be a rotten start, but not so for the area farmers.

Rushing to take shelter in the doorway of an old Victorian house, Jenny tried to stay away from the stream of water mixed with leaves and mud as it left the gutter where it was slightly separated on the side of the sloping roof. Turning away from the inviting patio chairs, Jenny remained standing just under the roof ledge. Behind her, someone lifted the lace curtains off the front room window to peek at her, then let them fall away. Automatically, she stuck her hand out, fingers closed, supporting each other. A few large drops plopped on her hand and then slithered into the runnel between her fingers. She turned her hand over, letting the water drop down. It disappeared at once into the hungry pavement, three steps below her. The cement absorbed the water to quickly spread and stain the ground,

revealing hundreds of cracks. Like the tiny lines on the hand, some connected, some not. And all in seeming hurry to get somewhere.

For a moment Jenny stared at those connected cracks, seeing herself walking alongside them. She wanted to stop them. Childish babble caught her on her hands and feet, examining the cement, fingering the unconnected cracks. Turning around self-consciously, at the curtained front room window, then across the street, she spotted a little girl sheltering in another doorway with a man, perhaps her father. As normally as she could, Jenny waved and smiled at her, but the little girl huddled closer to the man and buried her nose in the pink cotton candy in her hand. When the child raised her head again, she had a pink fluffy nose.

Then, just as suddenly as it had disappeared, the sun came back out, allowing the man and child to continue on their way. “What if he knew . . .?” Jenny wondered. Would he then understand or blame her? For some reason, it seemed important to her to stop the strange man and explain herself, shout out her normalcy.

Feeling the early August sun on her body, Jenny shivered, rubbing the bumps that rose like geese on parade upon her arms. The beautiful Wedgewood blue of the house behind her was beckoning. Standing close had revealed it was stripped only in a few places. A little work would make it as good as new. She *must* go. In the grip of something, she shivered.

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There was a big snow storm the day she had met Baljit. It was late January and Jenny had to go into Chicago to attend a conference. The sky had scrolled back and the snow had begun to fall in late afternoon. Soft, feathery flakes that had soon transformed into more substantial pellets, and then

into bigger balls of snow. Cursing the speaker who had gone well over her time limit, she rushed to catch the train to Geneva. The worsening snow condition had slowed down the train schedule, so that by the time it pulled into the train station, there were very few vehicles outside. Her ride nowhere to be seen, unable to get a cab, she rushed towards the station, only to find it being closed for the night. Cursing herself for allowing vanity to prevent her from carrying her bulky Motorola cell phone, she frantically rushed to call her friend on the public pay phone. Readjusting the hood of her overcoat, she first wrapped her thick woolen scarf around her neck, securing it firmly in a knot in front. Then taking off the glove from her right hand, she fumbled around the push-button dial with fingers that were fast going numb. Just then a voice at the next booth asked her, “Anything wrong?”

Standing almost alone under an eerie silver-white, bone-chilling sky blowing snow, perhaps she should have kept quiet, but she didn't: “I have to get home and I can't find a cab.”

When the heavily-bundled stranger found out that she had to go to DeKalb, he laughed good-naturedly and said that was perfect because he was going to its twin city, Sycamore. It seemed he had come to pick somebody up from the station, but the person had obviously missed the connection in Chicago. In her relief and delight, Jenny forgot to be afraid.

As they moved into the rapidly emptying car park, Jenny noticed two cars head-to-head with each other. Under open hoods, their engines were clamped together by heavy wires. The repeated clamor of an engine revving sounded unnaturally lonely and loud. As the stranger moved towards a cab, she quickly got into the back. Outside, the wind had picked up, and the snow was showing signs of turning into a mild blizzard. The radio confirmed it.

Once out of town, visibility was poor and the road was slippery, so Jenny settled back for a slow ride. All around, the landscape had turned white. Soft tendrils of snow hung delicately from high and low branches. As the wind blew the white dust away, fresh snow took its place. Great globs of snow blew flatly against the windscreen, to be wiped clean by frantic wipers, only to reassert themselves. Every time a big eighteen-wheeler came up behind them, it sped past mockingly with a loud extended horn. Raising huge amounts of blinding filthy slush, and forcing them into the icy second lane close to the slippery slope of the deep ditch on the side of the road. Each time the cab skid, the driver maneuvered into the skid before bringing them back on track again. Jenny did not say anything. She just grit her teeth and held on to the cloth-covered seat in front.

On the final stretch, surrounded by nothing but sprawling farmland under a soft white shroud, Jenny noticed how stalactites were beginning to form under farm shed roofs. A car lay abandoned on the side of the road. Mutely she wondered about its driver. A little further down, there was another car lying precariously head down in the ditch. A cop car defiantly flashing blue through the caking snow and ice was by its side. They seemed to be waiting for a tow truck. Suddenly she felt conscious of being with a stranger on a very lonely stretch of road. As though sensing what she was feeling, the stranger fixed her briefly with his dark-eyed gaze through the rear-view mirror, then returned it to the white road.

“We'll get there soon.”

“It's fine,” she said firmly, while winding her silver chain round and round her finger till the aquamarine cross pendant suspended from it was hopelessly tangled. Her father had given it to her when she left home. Kankakee seemed very far away right now. Outside, the wind seemed to pick up momentum and begin howling plaintively against

the windows, slapping coldly against the glass, as though begging to be let in.

“My name is Baljit Singh Dua, Bill is alright too” the driver suddenly spoke, imperceptibly nodding his neatly trimmed beard to her in the rear-view mirror. His long hair discreetly tied back with some kind of string bobbed up and down.

Not wanting “Bill” to take his eyes off the road, she quickly answered, “Oh, I am Jenny. Jennifer O’Shea.”

“Irish,” he grinned.

“You recognize the name?” The gentle breeze of flattery overpowered the roaring wind.

“And the red hair and green eyes.”

Jenny blushed. She was like a flower all wrapped and tied, not used to being noticed.

They had been almost crawling down the road — the cab buffeted by demons, skidding a little, but remaining, mercifully, on track. Only when they made the steep ramp of the exit to the town, they breathed freely. Soon they were in town, and Baljit had parked outside the door to her block of apartments.

When Jenny asked how much she owed him, Baljit turned red as though insulted. He had offered her a lift, it was not a business transaction, he said. Even when she protested that he ran a cab, and he had been expecting a passenger, and she had availed of his services, he refused.

“I’m not really a cab driver,” he said oddly.

“Oh?”

“I have a Bachelors degree. Also, I’ve taken courses in computers.”

Jenny looked discreetly at the meter. She had not meant to offend him, but she did not want any favors. “Are you a student at NIU? What department are you in?”

“Oh, nono. I’m not a student.”

Baljit told her he had started driving the cab to get his greencard. He had come to the country five years ago on a work visa, working for a computer company as a technician but the company folded; unable to find another job in his field, he had made the practical decision to take up this job. “What do you do?”

“Shouldn’t you hurry?”

“It’s alright. I live just a few miles away.”

“In this weather that can take a long time.” Unaware of anything missing in her life, she looked around: “It’s quite peaceful here. Tranquil.”

“Tranquility can be overrated, it certainly demands a price.” Impressed by the secret depths of this not-a-cab-driver, Jenny confided, “I work as an administrative assistant in the English department here, and take graduate classes part-time. Cuts the cost.”

“College is very costly in this country.”

“Yes.”

“Then you are absolved of its sin,” he bantered.

Laughing at his quick uptake, Jenny wanted to know, “How come I don’t feel relieved then?”

“Because the sin still exists,” he shrugged. Then proclaimed loudly, “My aunt, my mother’s sister, her cousin actually, teaches in the English department

in a college in the University of Delhi. That's where I studied also."

"I see." It sounded complicated and faraway. Parked in the driveway of her block of apartments, the windows of the cab were now thickly coated white with snow.

"He will have to get out and clean them before driving on," she thought.

"Once I get my greencard, I'll be doing something else too."

"What about a proper computer degree part-time?" she said for something to say.

"Once I get my greencard."

This time when Jenny made a move to get out, he did not stop her. She quietly slipped a twenty dollar bill on the seat beside her.

But the first thing he had done when they met again was to return her that twenty dollar bill.

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The clash bang of a metal band signaled their readiness. When the announcer screamed provocation, "Are you ready to have some fun?", the excited crowd shouted their readiness. "What was that? I can't hear you." The crowd screamed louder. But the announcer said even more loudly, "I CAN'T HEAR YOU." This time he held his mike towards the crowd as the scream of the crowd rose to a deafening roar of anticipation. The hard metallic sounds helped Jenny retrace her steps.

That evening, the coffee house was noisy with the sound of guitar music and loudly exchanged conversation. The tray of day-old discounted baked

goods now lay empty, and late-coming students hung sulkily in line for full-price pastry. Baljit's face carried a similar look as he entered the café. Jenny was already seated at a somewhat-clean table overflowing with sections of the dailies. Shoving a newspaper to the floor, Baljit immediately began stealing nervous glances at his watch and the exit. He looked uncomfortable. He hadn't sounded uncomfortable when he had called her a few days after their harrowing cab ride all those months ago. If anything, he had laughed and said he had looked her up in the directory. Momentarily seduced by fond memory, Jenny asked him how he was. He was fine, he said; he looked fine.

"What's going on? Why didn't you tell me?" she asked huskily, her tone intimate and still in tender thrall of the memory of Hindi film love songs he had often translated for her, line by line.

"I never said . . ."

"For eight months?" Voicing loudly her resentment for how she had been duped, and for how long, made Jenny abruptly lose her tenderness.

"Those months were good."

"They were based on a lie."

He looked at her. He had been afraid to look at her, at what he might see. He did not want to take any responsibility.

"For a man and a woman to have any kind of relationship, there needs to be honesty."

"I was honest."

"When?" she asked in a sharp voice.

"It's not as though I used you for a greencard . . . I didn't need to."

That did not make her feel better. It was another hurt, not being needed, not as a person, not really, so she hid it in a sneer, “Sure”.

“In the start, it was too soon . . . you know that.”

“I don’t, never did.”

“Trust takes time.”

“And like all things must begin at the beginning.”

“If you were only honest with yourself, you would see that it was . . . just . . . friendship between two healthy, thirty-somethings.”

He looked like a petulant child ready to throw a tantrum over wanting to play in the water and mud while complaining of her being a cultural anomaly — in not wanting to do the same; it made her dizzy with anger. The hazy film covering her retina and obscuring her vision till now gave way to nostrils pulsing red with hot air: “*Just* friendship?” She wanted to understand but he made it so difficult.

“It wasn’t . . . isn’t personal.” Baljit’s gaze was turned away from her discontent and wandering around the room with some scorn. Finding a mirrored wall, he acknowledged his image. As Jenny watched him, for a moment he did nothing, said nothing. Only stood transfixed by his invented twin in the tailored jeans and crew top. Then he lifted a curl off his forehead and placed it back again, carefully. Jenny followed his practiced motion. *What is he thinking? Is he thinking? Of her?* Or her? She had to ask, “What do you intend to do about this?”

“What can I do? It’s not my fault. Suddenly, *mummyji* suggested it. She thought I might be feeling lonely. Something missing she heard in my voice, she said. She knows me so well. Anyway, long story short . . . *she’s* flying in next month. There’s no reason not to. Not now.” Baljit spoke thick and fast

as he whined to his mirror image. So the almost muttered words seemed to hit her twice.

Jenny did not want to cut the story short, *wanted* to question his mother’s hearing ability. But he was still confessing about his wife, praising all Kamala had done for him. It was as though now that his secret was out, he could not stop talking about it. As though the very knowledge of it erased the days and nights he had spent with *her*.

“We got married quite early, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know,” Jenny almost responded tartly. “You didn’t tell me, remember?” But Baljit seemed to have progressed to a level of intimacy with the man in the mirror. The one who repeated everything he said, simultaneously, as he said it.

Also, confiding to Jenny was no more than what he was used to doing. “She gave up her own studies and interests to make a life with me. She’s very smart. She could have been something, too, but . . . she’s always been there for me. Always listened to me. Supported me. In right and wrong. Through college mishaps and work blunders. No matter what happens, no matter what muck I land in, she is there for me. Waiting. Forgiving. Always. She is like a flower that somehow retains its essence despite its surroundings. Her purity and beauty are like a tranquil beacon that always guide me home. She is a true woman.” As Baljit mouthed words like dialogue from his beloved popular films, he seemed to believe his own propaganda for a woman whose very existence he had never even hinted at in all the months he had known Jenny.

Listening to his practiced speech, Jenny felt weary. She was tired from all the emotion of the last few days. She was tired from all the energy it took to gather courage. She was just tired, and wanted to stop talking and go home and get under the covers. But she rearranged her shoulders in her green dress

and turned her gaze to the customers filling in, writers, poets, wannabes with dreams about the kind of world they wanted to live in.

The distant sounds of a lazy, hazy, crazy day of summer ringing in her ears made her dizzy, a little nauseous.

When the announcer came on to introduce the literary section of the evening's program, a man of middling years walked boldly up to the podium. He had a thick growth of dark brown beard and clutched convulsively first at his round-rimmed glasses and then at a sheaf of papers in his left hand. A budding poet, he spoke of love, or loss, or some such effluvia. Suddenly, sitting in the tiny café, on open-mike night, Jenny realized that for the mystery woman in a land far away she too must be a mystery.

The doors of the café stood open and unashamed. A large woman of indeterminate age walking through them held her attention; Jenny did not know her name. In the five years she had lived in this town, she had seen the woman get on to one or the other of the university buses and go around the town. When the bus returned to its starting point and began its journey again, the woman would keep sitting and go around the town again. She sat all alone in the front, in the long seat facing the driver, and stared periodically at the other passengers. Sometimes she talked to herself. And ate. Now, the woman joined the line in front for a piece of pastry and a drink.

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Abruptly Jenny realized that there was no mystery around Baljit. In the background, Baljit pompously continued to declaim, "She has no other life without me, her life would be over without me. I am her husband." *Had he always sounded like that? Had she ever really known him?* Absent-mindedly fingering her neck chain, Jenny gazed fascinatedly at the

trembling bead of sweat on his upper lip. Her downward gaze was momentarily held by his right hand jingling pocket change, while the left hand lay plainly exposed clutching the back of the empty chair next to him. She looked down at his nervously tapping foot, then fully straight at him. He looked like an immature boy to her, awkward and naked. Naked down to his very soul. He seemed to have worked himself up for his projected role as hero and god of the beautiful Kamala.

Returning her gaze to Baljit's face, Jenny leisurely picked up her coffee cup, and deliberately said, "Okay." Baljit grinned happily, holding out his hand, and leaning intimately towards her body for the first time that evening, "Yes, isn't it?"

"Go."

Baljit pushed back against the strength of the blow. Being thwarted only made him more determined. So he quirked his lips in a smile and offered seductively, "It doesn't have to be right away."

Jenny smoothed her hand surely down the silken weave of the vibrant orange and yellow blooms lying face up on her cotton clad thigh in an assumption of dignity. Then nosing her fist into her purse, she quickly thrust it into his automatically reaching hand.

At the first touch of her hand, Baljit's face flamed and his body seemed to shrink like the evil eye under the forehead sporting a black spot; he immediately tried to thrust her hand back. But Jenny insisted quietly, turning resolutely to the poet. Flushed, Baljit began to say something then sidled hastily away, out into the street, his fist clutching the shivering twenty dollar bill to his side.



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