



Madhurika Sankar

Crouching Liar, Hidden Flagon

There are unfettered moments from our youth that stand out like shiny stones, little smooth pebbles glistening in a flowing brook, perfectly formed and brilliantly capturing the joy of those times. These moments were rare for me in my young adulthood and so, that rock collection of precious anecdotes is small and invaluable. They are visible to me in instances, in the glistening photographs and funny emails exchanged with dear friends, in mementos collected on trips, but mostly in my memories, the moments encapsulated in a cauldron of the singular emotions felt. Of youth. Of freedom. Of happiness. Unfettered.

One such moment is this: My childhood best friend Vinod and I are running at breakneck speed, on a brisk spring afternoon, in our

sandals, down 123rd and Riverside Avenue in New York City. We had challenged ourselves to race to Riverside Park. I won. We were both terribly unfit, with slim bodies but the decadence of rich, western fast food and cheap red wine flowing through our student veins, making us gag for breath. I was truly happy at that moment. Unfettered.

I can think of another instant with Vinod. We are on a trip to Kerala and visit the cultural center, where he is promised an Ayurvedic massage by the beautiful manager of the center. I am sent quickly back to the hotel. Hours later he returns, recounting the horror of what he thought was promised, and what was delivered: two burly men strapping him down and massaging him! I laugh with abandon. Unfettered.

On the same trip, we also had a scary moment when the tourist taxi that was ushering us to a restaurant for dinner didn't reach its destination for far too long. We were taken down sinuous roads and past empty fields and we feared an abduction was afoot. I held Vinod's arms in mortal fear and we prayed. The driver finally turned the vehicle around and quickly drove us to the right spot. A change of heart? We will never know, but we never spoke of it, again. Riding on the backwaters in our houseboat, the waves gently lapping our dangling feet as we chugged beer and listened to pop music – joy was the prevalent emotion, in the end.

I am reminded of the lyrics, at this moment, of a Jann Arden song: A bird will break its wings like a heart will cut the strings..." Perhaps, in order to feel *unfettered*, Vinod needed to unshackle himself from my friendship, for the person sitting in front of me now, I do not recognize.

There are droplets of sweat making their way down his alabaster forehead even as the air conditioning in the restaurant is on full swing. He smiles at me in a way that I have become accustomed to, in over fifteen years – strained and bristling with tension. It's hard to imagine a time when he was actually fond of me. Was warm.

I'd arrived at the restaurant a few minutes before him and had ordered a drink. A Virgin Mary. Who am I kidding? It had alcohol in it. I wasn't going to suffer the evening without liquid courage.

Vinod starts by asking me: "So, how are you?" He is looking at me like I'm a person in distress. The question is loaded, in my mind. For my life had been hard for much of the past fifteen years. The period that overlapped with our distancing. I retort, "How are *you*?"

"Great," he says, looking around the restaurant, distractedly. "I'm switching jobs. I've been made CEO of this company."

"How's the family? Kids?"

"All good." We seem to have nothing more to say, and this is just the first few minutes of the evening. I sip my drink.

Vinod is a puzzle to me. A puzzle with a piece permanently missing for I've never understood why he lost interest in our friendship. And that lack of clarity was the beginning of the end for me. I've analysed it best I could and this is the most comprehensive conclusion I've been able to come to: When people go through life events like marriage, having children, they unwittingly go through inflection points in their personality. Like a filter, they subconsciously leave the things out that don't seem necessary to them, anymore. I think I was one of those things, with Vinod. A redundancy.

Rejection hurts. But I could have lived with it if it weren't for the fact that the idiot hasn't worked these things out in his mind, as yet. He just sees me and acts defensive, which translates into harshness and rudeness. It's all unanalyzed and reactionary. And, during my hardest years, I had to put up with this abrasive behavior, as well.

"So, Vidhya, do you have any friends in Chennai?" he asks. I wanted to pour the drink on his head.

"Yes."

"Who are they?" he asks, as if it is his right to know.

But, strangely, I go on to answer him. It's as if there is a visceral presence, telling me to try and impress him, even belatedly. Posthumously. For that girl doesn't exist anymore. I have changed also, but unlike him, would have let him through my filter, if he had but stayed my friend. But he didn't. And now, he is interrogating me like a criminal.

“Good, good, I'm glad you have some friends,” he says, patronizingly. This alludes to the fact that he cannot possibly imagine being happy at forty, single and unmarried. Good that I at least have the dregs of some friendships, even if they are not his. Life would be too unbearable otherwise, right? The pompous ass.

The truth is, the last few years of my life have been good. In the words from another Jann Arden song: The sun has dried those memories, like I knew it would.” I can barely recognise nor relate to that pain and suffering. The difficult part is convincing those around me that I am fine. You'd expect your few close friends to be the ones who'd understand. Not in this case. I apparently, was re-auditioning for my friendship with Vinod. Bad times were a black mark against me.

But, coming back to the moment, we had decided to meet to try and sort out some of our issues, ostensibly. Instead, that visceral presence surfaces again. “So, you see, I went through a bad patch, but I'm fine now,” I find myself explaining. I hated myself at that moment.

“But, I'm not so sure of our friendship,” I blurt out. “You abandoned it, Vinod. Forget about not being there for my tough times, you disappeared entirely. Why?”

“Vidhya, life got very busy. I may not have been able to give the quantity of time to our friendship that I could in the past but I tried to maintain the quality.” Lies. He was in denial. There was no point.

I take another sip of my drink. He is enjoying his vegetarian burger without a care in the world.

The more I try to find the words the more I fail. It was a discomfiting feeling. How do you tell a friend to see the obvious

when they are filtering their world through an entirely different mindset, at that point? He didn't feel he had anything to explain.

It was the harshness. The warmth had gone. That was it. Those were the words I wanted to say! I was about to, when he says: "I spoke to your brother the other day. We might catch up in Ooty this summer. Our kids are around the same age, as you know."

I freeze. Any warmth I'd felt disappears. I was trying to fight for our friendship and he was making more of an effort with my brother! It was all too much.

There is being taken for granted and then, there is being invisible. I felt invisible to him.

I stare in silence at the red cocktail in front of me and take an aggressive bite of the celery stick floating in its midst, holding back the tears.

I think of the years in between when I could have used a laugh. His laugh. His biting humour. His fundamental goodness. I think of the letters of friendship we have exchanged and the words of encouragement in our youth. But, I was a sinking ship in his eyes, and one that didn't deserve the care and tending it once did.

We ask for the bill. In my distraction, I find Vinod has reached for it. I quickly protest, wanting to pay so as to cover the alcoholic beverage's surreptitious purchase. It's too late. He stares at the bill and looks up at me, blankly. He quickly settles the bill and we bid each other goodbye, going separate ways in the lobby. He needs to take a phone call. I leave the restaurant building, glad to escape his judging presence.

So what if I'd had a drink? It didn't undo the veracity of my words: That I was doing fine. That life had improved. It was a skewed data point.

Then, I think to myself. Maybe I am seeing him through skewed data points, too. Maybe, just maybe, he regrets the loss of our bond.

Maybe his harshness is just a veneer, beneath which lies the deep well of what was once our friendship, intact.

Delusions. Too much has happened. That brook which contains the pebbles of our youthful experiences, has grown into an enormous river of misunderstandings, egos, bruises and bitterness. There would be no coming back from this.

I am reminded of another lyric of Jann Arden: “Life is simple, like the wrinkles on my skin.”

Perhaps, all this is just a function of Time. People let go just because they can. And, I am left wanting to be red faced and breathless, waiting for the next time I race down a street with a friend. Carefree and unfettered.

Madhurika Sankar

Madhurika Sankar is an impact investor (vistariventures.com) and freelance journalist whose work frequently appears in The Hindu, India’s leading national newspaper, in the Op Ed. She’s an engineer and holds a Masters in Biotechnology from Columbia University, New York. She loves to write but lives for music. She plans on pursuing her PhD in Cancer Biology, soon. She lives in Chennai, India. Madhurika’s short fiction and nonfiction has appeared in literary journals and magazines such as The Bangalore Review, The Bombay Review, Tether's End Magazine, The Dillydoun Review and Visible Magazine.



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