

Masturbatory

by Ajay Nair

Back when I was fifteen, Svengal, Mohammed and I used to scamper up to the roof of our sixteen story apartment building and use it as our Masturbatory. We called it that because it served as a sort of observatory where we could diligently perform our recently discovered self-pleasuring act. Svengal was fourteen and a half when I turned fifteen, and I remember that because our birthdays always fell in the centres of the opposite halves of the years. Mohammad was sixteen, but he was the smallest of us, barely four and half feet tall even when he wore thick-heeled boots.

From the roof, a big chunk of the city sprawled out in front of us, but we were not really interested in it because the spectacular view had been rendered boring due to repeated use. Besides, at that age, there were other things that held our interest. The apartment at the top floor of the building across the street for instance. Every morning, just as the dawn-sun grumbled its way up the sky, lighting up the slums at the eastern rim of the city, the three of us would line up near the four feet high wall that skirted the roof. From there, we would watch the sole object of our interest in that apartment.

The fine muslin curtains there would always be pulled close but they only heightened the effect of what we saw every weekday. And what is it that three teenagers liked to see? A girl in a state of undress, even if the girl was just a silhouette observed through the curtains, and even if the state of undress was as much guessed at as ascertained.

We'd see her go through the motions. First, she'd walk up to the window wearing some kind of a robe. Then she'd strip that off and admire herself in what must have been a full-length mirror, maybe one which had pieces of enamel fish lining its rectangular borders. She'd preen and pout for a full five minutes before she picked up her

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underwear from the chair nearby and slipped it on, followed by her bra. Then, some days a skirt and blouse, other days, a dress, still others a shirt and trousers. The outline of that shadow promised a voluptuous girl, one that drove us crazy with desire.

While she followed this routine, the three of us stroked ourselves furiously with a ferocious mechanical synchronicity. Mohammed used to let out little grunts as he did this, as if he was a little piglet being poked with a stick. Svengal usually finished first, just when she picked up her underwear and I was mostly last, when she was putting on her make-up.

When we were done, we'd wipe our hands off with newspaper sheets we'd carried with us and sit down with our backs to a different part of the wall. No one would say a word for a few minutes, but this was not due to any guilt or shame, merely due to the earned tiredness of gratification. Then Svengal would hand out cigarettes and after smoking them, we'd walk down to our apartments to get ready for school.

We never spoke about our ritual when we'd meet again in the evening; it was like a secret that could only be preserved through an unbroken pact of silence. I have often wondered why we never bothered to find out the identity of that woman during the two months that we did this — was she a dizzy fifteen year old school-girl discovering herself while we discovered the effect that she had on us or was she a vivacious thirty year old career woman preparing herself for the day's battles or maybe she was a well-maintained widow trying to capture in her reflection some slices of what had passed by. It would have been easy enough for us to stake out her apartment building or even go up to her house and knock on the door under some pretext. There's little curious boys can't do if they set their mind to it. But perhaps, we didn't want to really find out and break the beautiful spell cast through the half-revealing-half-hiding curtained veil. When you are young, you are more inclined to

let good things be; it's only with age that you develop the compulsion to bore into each little thing and pry it apart with your eyes and your mind and your words.

Then one day — I think it was the end of summer and the morning sky was buzzing with the electric expectancy of impending rain, or maybe that's just a romantic fancy I have invented later to explain what happened that day — things turned out differently. She had just finished putting on a dress of some sort; Mohammed was squealing gently, I was yet to reach my climax while Svengal was just about done when she suddenly whipped the curtains open. Mohammed ducked instantly; he didn't have a long way to go. But Svengal and I watched dumbstruck - like hunters with empty guns being stared at by a former prey - our shorts down at our ankles.

She was magnificent; better than anything any of us could have dreamed up to stir our fantasy-prone minds. Eighteen perhaps, or twenty, but with wide, deep eyes and an oval face carved with the arcane logic of beauty. And then she smiled at us — a smile that was a key to all the mysteries of our adolescence, unlocking the confusing boxes that were piling up haphazardly in our growing, partly formed minds.

I don't know what she thought we were doing. Maybe she thought we were just neighbours enjoying the morning breeze, three friends gathering memories that we could draw energy from later in our lives. Or maybe she had always known we were there and she felt we were hopeful lovers waiting for a glimpse of her gorgeous face. Or perhaps she knew that we were just three kids floundering between the lanes of love and lust that were opening up in front of us, not knowing which was what and running here and there like abandoned pets.

Whatever it was that she was thinking, I remember how I felt the moment she smiled. The sweet physical ache that was inside me was

replaced by a bittersweet longing for something I didn't fully recognize, but I know now it could only have been the first pangs of love. Svengal felt it too — I saw it in his face, though we never spoke about it later. She soon withdrew from the window, tossing her dark hair at us, like a parting wave, leaving us helpless, in a state of raw, fragrant melancholy.

Mohammed drew himself up and asked us what happened but we dismissed him. We never went to the roof again after that day. My family and I moved from there three months later.

I sometimes visit Svengal who still stays there. We talk about those days — games of football we played or arguments we'd had or girls we'd chased together. We talk about Mohammed who has left the city and from whom we have not heard from for the longest time. But we never talk about the girl who smiled at us and made us fall in love with just that one act. I have fallen in love since, but I am always searching for that elusive something that I felt at that moment that day, something that I have never found since and I fear I never will again.

