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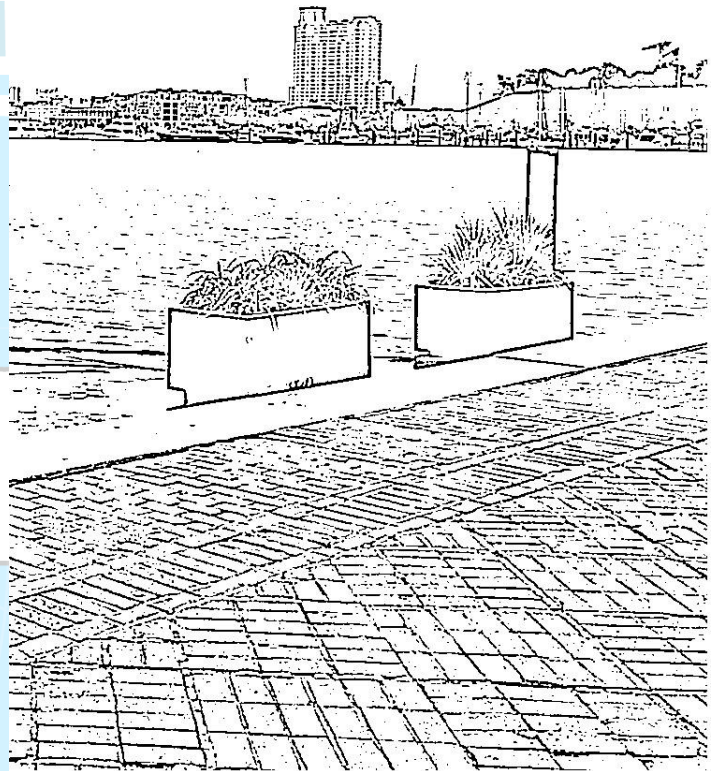
PENILESS LAKSHMI IN AMERICA

Anita Nahal

“No need to send it to us. We did her cremation many years ago.” Priya couldn’t hold her tears back at the curt, though seemingly resigned words of Lakshmi’s mother.

About a month earlier, and a day before Diwali, as the sun was almost setting, Priya was taking a breather from her brisk walk at one of the benches overlooking the water at the Inner Harbor in downtown Baltimore. At some distance, on her left, she noticed a slim, tired looking young woman...in her mid-thirties, maybe, with her hand outstretched. The young woman went to three different folks but got nothing. They weren’t rude to her but shook their head and walked away. Priya couldn’t make out her ethnicity in the dimming light. Were the folks she asked from of a different ethnicity? Or were they just in a hurry? Or they didn’t want to give? Or have any change to give? She wondered if folks had a greater inclination to help a homeless of their kind.

The young woman looked around deciding, or so Priya conjectured, whom to ask next when she saw Priya. Priya was wearing sweat pants and a T-shirt with a light shawl around her neck. The shawl had mango leaves embroidered at the corners...very Indian design as mango leaves are considered auspicious as patterns on clothes, ornaments etc. Priya could not pull her eyes away from her wanting gaze. She slowly walked over and spoke to Priya in Hindi. Priya was shocked.



“Can you help me please?” Because she did not ask for money, Priya thought she needed something different.

“What kind of help do you need?” Her mind telling her not to engage. If you have some cash, give it to her, she thought. But Priya wanted to know more. She had never seen a homeless from India in the US.

“Just...if you have some money. I have not eaten...”

Priya rummaged through her Fannie Pack and found five dollars, handing it over. But, Priya couldn’t just let her go.

“Do you have family here?”

“My family all died in a car accident fifteen years ago.”

“Oh...that’s so sad...”

“Since then, my situation became worse and worse till I became homeless.”

“Are you a US citizen? Perhaps you can go to Social Services and they might be able to help you in securing a job or temporary living place.”

“Yes...yes...I went there last week, and they have given me time to go back. BTW, you know no one wants to give work to a homeless.”

Priya shook her head and could have left the conversation there. Let her walk away. “If you don’t mind, can I have some contact information for you? Maybe I can be of help in some way?” The young woman gave her name and a telephone number saying that it belonged to Social Services where she will go next week.

That evening Priya got immersed in cleaning the statues of Lord Ganesha (remover of obstacles) and Goddess Lakshmi (harbinger of wealth) for Diwali puja the next day. She washed and washed the statues, again and again, to make sure they were shining. Some Indians play cards and gamble a lot before Diwali believing a good outcome in card games might have Goddess Lakshmi blessing them with huge fortunes. Some folks leave doors and windows of houses open, so Goddess Lakshmi can walk in...you know... inviting wealth to step in. Priya did all, but not gamble. Isn’t that too much pressure on a God or Goddess to gamble in their name?

The next day her family celebrated Diwali in the best way they could in America. Praying, lighting up candles and walking through the whole house, to each room, including the bathrooms, porch, garage and garden with a decorative plate with idols of Lord Ganesha and Goddess Lakshmi, some fresh flowers, some sweets, some fresh water in a copper urn, some fruit and a lit candle in the middle... to bless the family’s living spaces. For a few weeks after Diwali, Priya got wrapped up in life.

About a month later she went over to the Social Services office, inquiring about the young woman she had met at the Inner Baltimore Harbor. No one seemed to know her. Priya felt guilty she had not reached out earlier. Wondering where she could be, she started to leave when a lady came out of the office in the back. Priya heard murmurs...

“Hi...the woman you are talking about...was she from India?”

“Was...? Yes...”

“Are you a relative?”

“No...I actually met her asking for help near the Inner Harbor about a month ago. I just wanted to help her...”

“Oh...sorry to tell you but she passed about four weeks ago.” That was the day after she met Priya...on Diwali.

“She just collapsed on the floor...right here in this office...we rushed her to the hospital, but they declared her dead.”

“What happened?”

“They told us she suffered a massive clot in her heart that led to a heart attack. She had come in complaining of pain in the chest and we thought it was acidity...”

“Did she have any family here? Or maybe...a contact in India? Who performed her last rites?”

“Her body is still at the morgue...” Priya managed to get her last known contact in India. The next day she went to the morgue with a letter from Social Services giving her permission to have her body cremated. She took a new urn along for the ashes. Priya had not been in India for the last rites of her own parents. Her tears fell freely onto the urn, and Priya washed and washed it again and again, wiping it again and again, making sure it was shining. She didn't know what exactly to do and got vague tips from the internet, and from relatives and friends. She had some *mauli* at home. *Mauli*, a sanctified cotton thread dyed in red and yellow colors is used in various Hindu customs. The literal meaning is “crown” and traditionally it is tied around the wrist in various Hindu festivals. However, she had seen priests tying it around the neck of urns in weddings and other pujas. So, she tied it around the neck of the urn too and chanted the *Gayatri Mantra* (a traditional Hindu prayer) at the crematorium.

“Hello! Hello! Is this.....?”

“Yes...Who is this?”

Priya learned that the young woman had left home when she had just turned eighteen. She fell in love with an NRI (non-resident Indian) who had been on a visit home. Despite their efforts, neither they, nor the police could find her. Immigration records led them to the NRI who told them he had left India without her. It never came to be known how she got to the US and what happened after wards.

Her name was Lakshmi.

BIO-NOTE

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