SHORT STORY

The Music Woman plays Infinite Strings

by Rhea Malik



"Andalusian Blues I" by Helena Barbagelata

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As the sun set on the evening bazaar, it overcast the young couple's reconnaissance of a different land. The attraction of little universes woven into fabrics of names that would turn on even her grandmother's tongue (certainly her mother's);

names familiar to her in the Hindi heartland, but carved in processes and the things' journey there, existing not for the functional fittings she was used to hearing Hindi in the metropolitan, but only to express a kind of thoughtful embellishment, like a spiral on a dog's tail, wilted into a vapid shopping session.

Baandhani, badru, ikat and *tukri,* and figures of walking women depicting harvest seasons, assembling blocky leitmotifs on shawls, shawls in stores, stores in the streets, and faces on the bend that had fascinated them only shortly before, but now began to fatigue them. They had walked by banners and posters of 'every article rupees hundred', 'sardar ji's wah wah kachori', and 'spend more time with your loved ones: dilate time around you and live your fullest life'.

The last had been the dated and yellowed pamphlet of Turntuler Technologies. They remembered that the company had nearly a year ago invented some sort of serum (or was it a lotion?) that broke the intellecasts with the declaration: *"the greatest application of special relativity since self-tying shoes*". They'd said it could exploit the principle that great masses like celestial bodies could bend space-time around themselves, exaggerating mass differences to let the person wearing it dilate time around *themselves.* An exhilarating consumer invention at the time; nearly as hot as the self-tying shoes. Of course, the glitches in practice had earned the thing the reputation of a gimmick and its ads had long since gone out of print. Old towns.

At dusk, just as they threw in the towel on the careful retail juggle of necessity, money and skillfully rejecting persistent salesmen passing off wholesale textiles as the hand-children of devout craftsmen, a set of tablas caught their eye, and they both knew that the evening of exchanges had only just begun.

They walked into the music store and met the woman at the counter. Browsing through the string instruments, the girl asked where they were made.

"So many corners of the world, how many can I take you to?" the woman said in a warm, welcoming decline.

"Ah, well. Do you play any of these?"

"No, I just sell."

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The couple, who spent their time collecting bits of news and fun facts to share, aided by their smartphones, and later intellicasts, who seldom ventured out without hoping for consummate fulfilment, felt their magnetic interest drop slightly, but the boy added, “you have an amazing collection,” before it could become palpable. They asked the names of all the instruments they picked up before trying each out.

When the boy started on the saarang, the woman walked over and adjusted the inclination.

“This is not played like the guitar- let each vibration breathe.” She played a slow melody to demonstrate.

When the girl struggled with piping the shehnai, she took over.

“This should not graze,” and dived into a different note, this time playing for long, blowing enviable bouts of air and producing robust, smooth music on what a moment ago seemed like a listless, stubborn stick.

With the *morchung*, she might have been disdainful if she did not find the boy’s toying amusing instead.

“You have never seen this before, no? You don’t clench it in your teeth- it’s the lips, see?” She strummed a chord. “And the music comes from the tongue.”

She broke into a tune that was strung together with the characteristic sound effect reserved for moments of absurdity in slapstick Hindi cinema. Toinggg.

While the girl could still hear the *morchung* from the other end of the aisle, the music woman came and handed her a mouth aid for the shehnai. She accepted with a stunned smile and fit it on. The woman’s uncanny ability to tend to them both in the bare skipping of a beat reminded her of her mother in the evenings, juggling her classes, the dogs’ food, and whatever appointment she and her siblings had, with routine precision. The only difference between them was how devoutly the music woman delved into her own art, how thoroughly immersed she looked while playing, while her mother seemed always to be striking balances between the variables of the material and spiritual worlds.

With each instrument, she suspended the air about herself, her music transporting them to forests, monasteries, and corners of this very bazaar they hadn’t experienced, but knew by the ear would belong here, underneath the top skin that the city shows to passing travellers. The music woman almost seemed to vibrate herself with the strings she played. On their way out with three instruments, the travellers saw she wasn’t going to haggle, and neither would they. This had been too special.

“You said you didn’t play anything! But you’ve mastered half the store,” the girl said.

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“Bas, I just play enough for business, only know enough for business; the rest is for the gurus in classes and stages- and people like you,” she said, lowering her gaze onto their full hands.

“Come on, you play better than we could hope to. Why don’t you perform?”

“Well, look around you. My life is what you can see. I work here in the day, and then go home to my family in the night, and the days tick on. The slow life is good. What will I get disrupting this? Anyway, I would be carried away by my senses if I let myself play music all the time.”

“Oh, what time do you usually shut the shop?”

“Right now, I’m half an hour late.”

“Oh no…”

“Don’t worry!” she said, touching her heart. “You two came along- you were so interested in the store. It’s good to bend rules sometimes. What will we get becoming the slaves of clocks?”

The boy suddenly remembered his smartphone, panicked with the inexplicable separation anxiety that smartphones gave him, and eased himself out of it.

They couldn’t compete with her causal wisdom, and so they resigned to formal warmth.

“It was lovely to meet you, didi. It was the highlight of our trip.”

“I am glad. Keep practising the morchung.”

“Oh definitely.”

“Really, it will get frustrating. Don’t give up. There is no shortcut to learning.” The timeless Indian platitude conjured the girl’s mother again. “At least not yet, let’s see what they come up with next!”

The couple laughed with the amiability of fond strangers and walked out. She locked the door after them and left too. They saw her go across the road to the old Science Ministry building which looked like a consummate marble palace, as all buildings in that city did. They hadn’t seen her run, nor could they imagine her running very fast in her saari, but she had reached there when they barely stepped out.

They walked to their homestay taking turns with the flute.

The two were supposed to take a train back home the next day, but were heavy-hearted leaving the city they had just begun to know, with wonders at every turn. Perhaps

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intentionally — prolonging each shower, each goodbye, every bite of food at lunch and their Uber booking — they missed their train. Half disappointed, half smiling when they heard it had just left, they knew where they were going before they knew how they would deal with the delay back home.

Back at the shop, they spent another couple of hours playing with strings and woodwind, the bongos and the harmonium. Better than yesterday, the music woman thought, but they were still getting the hang of things. Some moments their playing around would actually sustain something that resembled music.

As the girl played the *ikhtara*, she glanced at the woman and doubted her eyes. Though it was usual for her to make it seem like the music was a part of her — each vibration an extension of her very breathing — now she saw a wave of blue pass through her with the note she held. It was too brief to ask her partner to see it, but too certain for it to be a trick of light. It wasn't a glint but a whole wave of blue, deep and electric, and it was synchronised with the sound.

She blinked hard. But well, stuff like that happens, she told herself. Coins looked shallower than they were in buckets of water, and images of bandits from dreams sometimes stuck on in waking life, transposing themselves on the faces of decent people. She didn't have the most trustworthy eyesight, either. On their way back, seated between two dahi kachoris, the boy asked her

"So, I know this will sound strange. But did you see didi at the store become kind of…ethereal in the shop today? Like she was magnetised?"

"Oh my God."

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The two spent the night thinking about what could have possibly led them to see the same inexplicable blue wave arise from the music and run through the woman. The lighting in the shop? Cars outside?

They headed back again the next evening. They reached early, when the elves of the tirelessly churning bazaar were all stepping out around clusters of little thermoses for a chai break. They went to the store to wait outside, but found the music woman at work, even though the great collective shopkeepers and salespeople had all suspended animation to cluster around tea and banter over pickings off the grapevine (mostly each others' wives).

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“Never a moment’s rest?” The kids peered in.

“Oh, hi. I got done with my tea earlier, just doing the accounts. What are you going to try out today?”

They could scarcely respond- which was perhaps good, given that they were here to solve a puzzle before they could think of going through more instruments- before a man came into the store and stood at the threshold. Familiar, yet not expected, from the look on the music woman’s face.

Visibly dumbfounded, he stammered, “How did you get here? You just served me tea at home. Did you come behind me?”

The travellers awkwardly pretended to read their intellecasts as the music woman composed herself from sudden fright.

“Arham, I wasn’t expecting you here. You were supposed to be back at the garage.”

They felt the tension in the air that was more accustomed to reverberating music. It would have been best to leave — this man’s curiosity defeated theirs’ hands down — but the man blocked the only exit, too consumed in the questions rushing through him to notice them.

“What is this place? Why are you behind the counter?”

“Well, this is my shop.”

That didn’t help him.

“Remember how I told you when we got married that I had always wanted to run a craft shop?”

“Maybe, but...”

“I did! Something with the charm of craft and the security of running a regular feature in a bazaar. But I didn’t have the time before. And my parents would find it too strange to ever let me.”

“You don’t have the time now either. Nor the permission: you never brought this up with me.”

“You see.”

Arham continued suturing questions before her murmuring answers could reach him.

“Forget that, how are you even here? How is it possible? Do you come here every day?”

“Yes.”

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“What about the kids? Who is home with them?”

“I am. Well, I am, for long enough, effectively. They can barely notice I’m gone- the intervals are too small. I work here and be with the kids. And do everything at home. It’s still me.”

Arham only looked foggier and the girl secretly thought he could use some of that tea.

“Sit down.”

He did.

“It’s the serum.”

“The one they made last year. It was a big deal — we talked about it at the time.”

“But that flopped. It could never work. The news said they stopped trying.”

“I couldn’t give up on the idea. I met with the engineers at the company when all of you were out; I started going every day. I told them I was researching. It didn’t work initially, but when they realised it was a lost cause for a patent, one guy told me the story. How it was supposed to work, why it couldn’t. I asked if I could take some of the serum and he said they couldn’t be bothered anymore. He told me not to waste my time, their best men couldn’t make the mass conversion effective enough to be practical. Nothing on the earth scale was heavy enough for the dilation to work on humans.”

“So, are you the great scientist who beat the company? You should have told me earlier. I would have taken your place grinding atta,” he said, in either disbelieving sardonicism or meanness — it was hard to say which.

“Fine, don’t believe me. I’ll just come up with a lie.”

“Alright, alright; I don’t, but tell me anyway- how did you solve the puzzle? And what did you do with it?”

She thought about what to say next.

“Can you imagine managing a household- cleaning, cooking, sourcing food, tracking repairs, and the practical needs of six people, along with all their day’s burdens- God knows Aamir has more than a child’s fair share- and also manage to research a complex field you had never been able to study?”

“Are you fishing for praises? Which woman doesn’t? Except the last part, which you brought upon yourself.”

“Tell me — forget all *women* for now, can *you*?”

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It was probably the disbelief earlier, for he paused, deflating himself out of the snappiness that constructed his visual villainy.

“No, actually, I can’t imagine.”

“The scientists were looking for great masses on earth whose proportions they would exaggerate, masses that people could practically carry. The burdens that women carry have supplied me that great, unfathomable mass. The serum worked on me because I, like other women like me, was being acted upon by forces much greater than any animal on earth is subject to.”

“Hogwash. I have not read about all this, but I know the fears of your children being scolded in school do not make the masses that twist physics. No scientist has ever said such a thing.”

She smiled.

“I knew you wouldn’t believe this. But look at me. I have already been home in the time we have been speaking and given the children dinner. There is daal on my hands.” There was, indeed, some aachaar too.

“You cannot imagine weight existing out of cars and houses, inside the breathing impalpable. Not in the lightness of transporting music nor the crushing weight of stress in getting your child vaccines against the will of the man controlling the money.”

She raised her hand and felt some serum between her fingers.

“It is the impalpable that has made every woman possible, and I am no exception”

She stretched towards him, looking at him resolutely, and rubbed some on his cheek. Before the travellers could tell what was happening, they were led out of the store and saw that the door had been locked, and the couple was already far down the other side of the road, engrossed in slow conversation.

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