

A Rendezvous At Habba Kadal

Maharaj Kaul

Today, I have laid out my new night suit on the bed,
After carefully ironing it with rice starch.
Also, I have spit-polished my leather shoe to its best wet shine.
Both to be worn late in the afternoon to visit Habba Kadal.
Habba Kadal is the Third Bridge on River Jehlum, in Srinagar.
It is a hub of commercial and social activity.
Filled with grocery vendors, bookshops, and general merchandise shops.
Dr. Chagtoo, a prominent physician, has an office there.

During the day Habba Kadal is a busy town square,
In the early evenings it takes more of a social stage.
Men and women, boys and girls, come out here to
Buy things, to converse, and often just to see and be seen.
Young people come to meet their gender opposites for a whiff of a romance,
Superficial in happenings yet real in desire, longing, and hope.

I donned my new night suit with elegant ease
And combed my hair with thick linseed cooking oil,
Creating a lustrous curl-flip rising from the forehead
And dancing down to the mid-ridge.
I marched with controlled excitement for a chance rendezvous with Bimla.
Who schools at the neighboring Vasanta Girls High School,
Where my aunt is the Headmistress.

We met once fleetingly at the school picnic.
She is coy and serene, self-conscious and lovelorn.
She took considerable pains to avoid meeting my continuous gaze on her.
We have never talked and never written to each other
But yet it seems to me an invisible candle has been lit between us.

Today, at four-thirty in the afternoon, I joined a throng of boys
Lined up on one side of the bridge, waiting for the bevy of girls to
Walk on the other side of it.
Here were two groups, separated by gender,

Who had come to see each other
But pretended to be out on some errand.

The corresponding gazes of each couple locked in
While their legs just carried them on.
Occasionally, the couples looked ahead of themselves
To give a semblance of a regular bridge crossing.
Not surprisingly the people bumped into each other
When losing track of what was ahead of them.

The bridge romance was as real as romance could be
Those days in Kashmir.

Love surge of youth had to find an outlet,
Circumventing the terrible taboos of the day.
God created love but man created morality.
Like a summer brook love found grooves and byways
To flow and flood the virgin ground before it.

I searched for Bimla in the crushing stream of girls.
After an infinite waiting I finally found her pair of eyes
And held them into an eternal lock with mine after her response.
Mesmerized thus the two of us walked the entire bridge
Like two zombies lost to this world.
The time thus passed seemed unbounded
And the place we were at did not exist.

The end of the bridge ended our trance
As the paths following it were divergent,
Breaking our gazes, ending the romantic rendezvous.
Afterward, I folded my night suit with diligent dexterousness
For the next gaze-crossing
And wondered how would my unbearable romantic tension end.

Years rolled by and I never met Bimla's eyes again.
I heard she was married and lived happily not far from the bridge.
I also now wonder if she knew my name.
Much as I muse about my run with the flame,
I realize that all I am left with now is a pair of eyes.