

WAITING FOR JONATHAN KOSHY

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INTRODUCTION

JONATHAN CAME to me in my worst moments. He burst in on me with the enthusiasm of a teenager announcing his first date. Those were troubled times for me. The litigation against my debut fiction collection, *Breathless in Bombay*, had taken a turn for the worse, and I was slowly waking up to a conspiracy that threatened to keep me away from my family and my writing, a conspiracy that occupied my full attention. I had decided, of course, that I would stay with the writing; but the big question was what kind of project would be engaging enough to take me “out of myself” and hold my interest for the next few years. The project I had begun—a novel on the eunuchs of Mumbai—was too dark for my current state of mind; it threatened to drag me down further. What I needed was a character larger than myself, a character bigger than my crisis, who would keep me entertained, challenged, inspired, and amused, even while I waited out the verdicts in the courtrooms of Mumbai, Madurai, and Kodaikanal, where my cases were being fought.

And so he arrived unannounced: Jonathan, a verbal pugilist, a paradox, “a stew seized of extraordinary flavors,” a bit like life itself.

Meeting him, I knew I was hooked. He would take me to places I had never been, say things I would not dare to. In return, I would help him find those things that seemed to evade him, things like parental love, family support, and deep, kindred friendship. It was a very reciprocal thing, and it worked well for us—author and protagonist—once we got the fiction out of the way and started seeing ourselves as real characters, real friends. And because he was so mixed up, so humanely mixed up—bright and yet so bungling, idealistic and yet so basic, so raw—he opened up, for me, immense possibilities of form and textures. He chose the events of his life, and all I had to do was follow suit, obey. At the same time, I knew I had to invest in him a larger responsibility than what was apparent in his idiosyncratic nature. He had to be a man of ideas, the last indignant voice of a lost generation of thinkers, a generation that carried the spirit of rock ‘n’ roll in their veins, that questioned *everything*.

And because Jonathan was too complex and too angry to be seen through my eyes only, the biased eyes of a writer, I had to bring in other voices, other friends, in other words, the collective consciousness of the first person plural:

We! And the “we” was simply each of us who had a story on him, who had zealously guarded the fragments of his life, in a way that was unknown to him.

No doubt this was tricky ground to navigate—and ambitious, in retrospect. But then how do you weigh in on a larger-than-life character like Jonathan without sharing the responsibility of creation, without jointly mourning for his failures and unanimously celebrating his triumphs?

The setting, too, came naturally. It had to be Bandra. Quaint, charming Bandra, going through its own harsh metamorphosis, its old bungalows torn down, its footpaths occupied, its traffic problems worsening by the day, its bakeries and family stores flattened by glitzy malls and jewelry arcades, and amidst all that, the daunting realization that its very fabric, its quintessential community feeling, was fast eroding, fast disappearing.

And yet it needn't be so! In a vintage bungalow in Pali Hill, delicious tidbits of history come alive and the Bandra of old, the Bandra of strong community feeling and neighborly ties is excavated and revered.

Whether I have succeeded or not in drawing out a compelling story is not for me to say. What I do know is this. In Jonathan I found a friend who led me through my darkest days, into warm spaces of light and laughter. His company—part heroic and part quixotic—kept me enthralled, even amused; it kept me writing, yes; and I hope that I, too, might have done him some similar service, the least being make him interesting to you.



ONE

JONATHAN KOSHY was an old friend, a younger man, greatly appreciated for his wit, his effervescence, and his indignation, which was feigned most of the time and delivered for effect. Fast on the draw, faster on the uptake, he enjoyed wearing the airs of an outraged intellectual. He enjoyed turning theories on their head, disrupting a serious discussion, flaying smug-faced individuals who—he maintained—looked better on their backs, flattened. This was his style and he relished it. He made no bones about it. He was a slayer of institutions, a contrarian, a throw artist, the small man in a large crowd, who got noticed.

Jonathan had the advantage of size. No one thought he was capable of it: the throw, the speed, the mental salvos, from where he stood, at five feet nothing. When he wasn't shocking people, he made them laugh, he made them think, he whipped up emotions that were cataclysmic. Even when he questioned people in authority, it was without a trace of malice. You could tell it was part of his style: spontaneous, insightful, and funny. You knew then you had to answer to him; you were, in some way, accountable. With him, what you took away at the end of an evening was not slight but friendship, a tinge of admiration, for sure. At parties, he was the ultimate entertainer, sparing no one, not the host, nor the hostess, certainly not the bar and its contents. He wore his appetites on his shoulder and was loved amply for that.

Physically, he was slow and measured in his movements. A soft tread, a slow smile, eyes large and liquid-brown, searching for action.

Hair: tossed in curls. Smile: childlike. Teeth: small and crowded, a one-time white, punished by years of smoking. He weighed eighty kilos in shoes and dressed well, always in chic casuals.

What did he do for a living? Frankly, we knew not. He said he was in the ideas business. He was a growth facilitator. He made people and ideas grow. He said he helped people to recognize their true potential. People needed him more than he needed them.

How come he was always broke, always owing people then? We were too polite to ask. Chekhov once said: "Good breeding is shown *not* by not upsetting the sauce, but by not noticing it when someone else does." This was how we defined our relationship with Jonathan. We heard his problems, we sympathized. We advanced him money when he wanted it, and forgot to ask for it in return.

After a while, the sums got larger, the excuses breezier. But we never blamed him. He was our buddy, a chip of our youth. That made him eligible for a higher understanding. Easily we could tolerate his lapses and excuses.

Jonathan had a routine. Every few years, he'd land up in Mumbai, from Kerala, his ancestral state. He would arrive bright-eyed and smiling and declare, "I am back and I mean business. Believe me, guys, this time I am here to make money. Loads of it!"

"How was it in Kerala, Jonathan?" we would ask, and he would say, "Good! It is home-turf, after all. Home to the Gods, if you like that kind of serenity, if you can take to it and vegetate. I say, how much thinking can a man do in paradise? Kerala spoils you. It reduces you to a nature junkie. Something about those coconut trees, those backwaters, those endless groves of dark green. The beauty overwhelms you, stuns you. You can't think. You get paralyzed. You don't want to work, at least not commercially. Everything that had to be created in the universe has been created there. It's there in the sun, the soil, the air, the water, the clouds, and the small little canals frozen in time. Kerala is *the* place you come to in order to die released from earthly bonds. But it is not big enough to hold me and my ideas. You guys know me. I am a big-picture man. I want beginnings, not endings. I want strife and struggle. I want chaos. I want to be challenged. I want to build and create. And I need a platform and an audience. That's why, fuckers, I am back."

He would look at us fiercely, as though in possession of a secret body of knowledge. His eyes would be riveted. Were we going to challenge him? Remind him of past failures, when he had to return to his roots, thwarted in his attempts to gain recognition as a man of ideas? His eyes seemed to say: I know how things work in Mumbai. This city can crush you, destroy you. It can change people, make them cynical. Everyone is suspect, until proven otherwise.

The truth was: Jonathan was too precious to challenge, too childlike to thwart. So we would say hesitatingly, "We would like to hear your ideas, Jonathan, when you are ready to share them."

His face would relax; a smile would appear at the corners of his mouth. "All in good time," he would say. "Everybody is going to need a little something of me. No one can ignore my ideas."

We wouldn't press him to reveal those ideas. Those would flow in the course of an evening, over rum, vodka, and other no-nonsense beverages. We would sit up all night, drinking. Conversation would flow fast and easy. Theories would be tossed up and debated. Men of stature would be flayed mercilessly; they would be dismissed as con artists or cop-outs. Unsung heroes would be dug out and worshipped. Knowledge about them would be shared vociferously. Occasion-

ally, we would lapse into silence, stirred by our own intellect, convinced about our singularity. It did not matter what we were drinking. The truth was that we connected at every level, and the idea was to stay connected. That way we could survive; we could see the future. We wanted to rule the times, considering the time we had devoted to understanding the higher arts—literature and films—but it wasn't that easy. It had something to do with where we were starting from and where we wanted to go with our ideas. Success or fulfillment, call it what you may, it seemed to evade us. It seemed to change faster than what we had defined it to be at one point in our lives. Although in our forties, we were struggling with questions of identity. We were trying to find our artistic voices, our niches. In this, we were hoping to rise above the multitude and sound right and real and lasting. We were hoping to resonate, into the future.

Now it was friend Prashant who told us that Jonathan was coming back. After three years of being away, our friend was returning to Mumbai. He was coming by train, braving a twenty-four-hour journey in the midst of an unsparing summer. "He seems to be in trouble," said Prashant, worried.

"What is the problem?" I asked.

We were under the impression that Jonathan had settled happily in Kerala. We had not been in touch with him, except on our birthdays, when we would get a terse one-line email from him, saying: *Have a rocking good one*. It always made us smile, for we could not ignore the fact that it was sent at one minute past midnight.

"From what Jonathan told me," began Prashant, "he had shacked up with an actress whose mother was the mistress of a local politician. The actress was years younger than him and inches taller. A beauty, so to say.

"At some point Jonathan hit upon this idea of becoming her agent. He began to market her. Began to charge her fans for introductions and photo ops, and got her advertisements and endorsements. Unknown to her, he would divert fifty percent of the earnings to his bank account.

"She thought he was doing this gratis, out of love for her. In the bargain, she would pick up all his expenses. So when she found out, she called him a cheat and a fraud, and you know our Jonathan? He hates being accused. He told her she would be living the life of a non-entity were it not for him. It was he who helped her to stay in circulation, to stay viable. Without him, she was nothing. Simply a bimbo with a body!

"Hearing this, the actress burst into tears and phoned her mother, who, at that moment, was entertaining the politician in bed.

"The actress was inconsolable. No one had spoken to her this way, called her a bimbo. Her mother was unable to console her, so the politician took charge of

the situation. He asked her to leave Jonathan that instant and move in with her mother. He promised he would make Jonathan pay dearly for every word he had spoken, for every tear she had shed.

“Once the actress left, the politician had two of his henchmen call on Jonathan. These guys—dignified *dhoti*-clad killers, it seemed—called on Jonathan with the intention of roughing him up, of breaking an arm and a leg. But Jonathan opened the door with a joint in his hand. He was smoking top grade marijuana, pure Idukki Gold, and these guys happened to be smokers too, from the Idukki district, where it was grown. The conversation shifted to ‘authentic sources,’ which were drying up, thanks to the ‘polluted shit’ coming in from other states. A quiet connection was made, and Jonathan, rising, gave them two sample packets of marijuana. Lovingly and generously, he patted these into their shirt pockets, which embarrassed them no end, for clearly they were there to commit violence, to inflict bodily pain.

“The goons smoked two joints; then declared brotherhood with Jonathan. They told him they would have to hurt him in some way and send a picture of him injured to the politician. The burden of proof was on them, they said, unhappily.

“The phone network was bad; I could barely hear him. But Jonathan did manage to say that the goons had gone easy on him. They did what they had to and then put him on the train, saying he was not to return to Kerala for another five years. He did not sound like he was in too much pain, but he *was* mighty pissed off at being pushed out of Kerala. You know what he always says? *You can take a Malloo out of Kerala but never Kerala out of a Malloo.*”

We all fell silent. We, as in the four of us, who were Jonathan’s closest pals in Mumbai.

“I bet the goons took a real liking to Jonathan,” I said. “I hope they haven’t messed him up too badly, though.”

“We will know that only once he arrives,” said Prashant. “But, yes, he is deeply upset. He says he feels violated, being evicted from his home state. You know our friend, how proud he is.”

“So what do we do now? Where do we put him up?” said Dhruv, our actor-friend, worried.

We all knew the answer, but did not wish to suggest it.

Anwar, eldest among us, was the only one with the space to accommodate Jonathan. While we all lived in two-bedroom apartments, with just about enough space to accommodate our families, Anwar stayed in a bungalow at Pali Hill. This was 104 Pali Hill, where the road dipped sharply and the vehicles had to slow

down to maintain a grip on the road. There were other bungalows in the vicinity, but, as far as we knew, all roads led to 104 Pali Hill. Many were the evenings we had trudged up its slope, letting ourselves in through the squeaking half-gate, buoyant with the hope of having a wonderfully good time. And we hadn't been disappointed. We would emerge hours later, drunk, overfed, and smiling. It seemed fair that Jonathan should bring his troubled self to 104 Pali Hill.

