

Kelly and Friends

In a town like this, there wasn't much in terms of options when one wanted a place to take shelter from the rain. The public library and attached community centre were technically supposed to be open until five, but there had never been enough people working or going there for the working hours to be enforced. There was something about the soft yet bold orange glow breaking through the edge of the sky combined with the gentle rhythmic pitter-patter of raindrops hitting the earth and asphalt which activated the component within the most ancient part of humankind's brains, driving them to want for nothing more to go home.

It was the same for Arjun. The sounds, sights and even smells pulled Arjun the same way humanity's ancestors were pulled out of the elements and into their caves. Yet, Arjun continued walking his usual pace, simply because home, for him, was very, very far away.

He was walking down the same road he had walked every day, yet, for the first time in a long time, there was something he had never seen before. Amongst curtained storefronts and cozy houses hidden behind fences and shrubs, there was an unpaved path halved by townhouses, ended by bright porch lights, the universal symbol for 'please, come in.'

Upon his first step through the doors, he felt the rain and darkness washed off him by the friendly smell of dry dust usually found only on well-kept but rarely used books.

"Welcome to Kelly and Friends." He could hear the age and energy in the voice, but could not discern its origin through the stacks of leather-bound books, wooden clocks ironically lost to time and the few porcelain dolls, looking back at him with ivory smiles.

"The best antiques store this side of the delta," the voice continued as its source finally came into view in the shape of an old man descending a set of spiral stairs as filled with oddities as what was below it. "Well, the only one, too. So, what are you looking for?"

"To escape the rain." His honesty, once a defining part of his character, now a word reserved for when his relatives describe how he was like as child, surprised even himself.

“That’s fine, friend,” the old man sat down on an old leather chair, a cloud of dust bursting from the creases. And, as the dust settled, those same lights revealed an identical couch, right across from the old man. “Feel free to just have a seat and rest your legs. But, also feel free to take a look around, maybe something will interest you.”

Arjun intended to walk over and sit by the old man, either to converse or to hide from the rain in silence. But, with every step he took, another foreign trinket would welcome him to explore them further with the same aged mannerism as the old man. “Are you Kelly?”

The first part of the answer came in the form of a shake of the head and a subtle smile. “Nah, I’m Ralph, Kelly’s my wife. She was a collector, traveller too. All this stuff was given to her on her travels, ‘mementos from a lot of good friends,’ she used to say.”

Mementos. It was a strange word, or at least it was for Arjun. He would never call himself a traveller but he has travelled. Though, he’s never kept much in ways of souvenirs, not anything other than memories. However, maybe these little objects meant the same to Kelly as what his memories meant to him, just showing up in a different form.

He picked up a tiny stuffed elephant, roughly stitched together with linen and dyed completely grey. Turning it in his hands, he tried to find any indication of where or how Kelly could have acquired it in so he could better imagine what memory this might have meant for her. But the only thing he could find was a tag saying ‘For Kelly.’

But as he was putting it back, he noticed a tear on the flank of one of the back legs, small enough for him to never be able to find if he wasn’t already subconsciously searching for it. He felt a warmth on his back and neck. The sun hidden behind clouds mere moments prior was now shining down around him, coating him in a golden hue only a child could see.

The same stuffed elephant appeared before him, though now it was giant and he was tiny. He instinctively sat on its back and heard its trumpet, though he knew the sound wasn’t real, the exhilaration still was. Tau Devi Lai Park, he finally remembered. His family had

taken him there all the time. He could see them before him now, but it's been long enough he could no longer make out their faces. It was more a natural sciences park than an amusement park and they always wanted him to grow up to be a scientist. The grass and trees never interested him, though it was different during Diwali.

Under the golden lights only he and the other children could see, people would travel from villages to set up stalls for food and games, but the one he would spend the year waiting for was always this old couple who would bring a few linen-covered animatronic animals for the kids to ride. His favourite was the elephant. Though after a while, it broke while he was still on it. He waited patiently as the couple made a small cut on its flank to figure out what it was that made the elephant refuse to move. They never did but Arjun didn't want to ride any other animal, even if this one could no longer take him places. When night came, it was now Arjun who refused to move, fearing if he left now, he wouldn't see the elephant again.

Sensing his fear before his own parents, the couple promised to try to fix it and, even if they couldn't, bring it back next year. And they did. He would visit the park to ride the same broken elephant and enjoy the lights from his immobile steed every single year without fail. At least until one Diwali, Arjun had grown too old, and simply forgot to go.

"Ralph?" He never saw the old couple again, but here, at Kelly and Friends, the best antique store this side of the delta, he saw the elephant again. "How much for this elephant?"

"Uh, I'll think of something," Ralph shrugged. "You want to pick out anything else?"

Arjun looked at the little elephant, its little incision and its little legs. He wondered whether this elephant, too, once walked but no longer could. He did not know what memories it brought up for Kelly. But he now knew what it brought up for him.

"No, thank you, just this one for me."

This elephant was the same memento for Kelly as it was for Arjun, but it was of a different memory, from a different friend.