

Conversation Pieces
Volume 18

Of Love and Other Monsters

A Novella

by

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For my non-Euclidean friends, especially L.R.



My body I shall make a lamp,
My blood the oil, my life the wick;
And in its light I will see
The face of my Love...

Indian Sufi poet Kabir (1389 – 1518
A.D.)



When I think about him I remember a wave I watched near a beach once, a big, beautiful, smooth wave, perfectly rounded, like molten glass. It came into a narrow channel from the open sea, muscular and purposeful, hardly breaking into surf. I thought it would climb all the way up the end of the channel, wash over me, and carry on, unbroken, till it crossed the entire Deccan peninsula. But it met the sand, rolled over it, little traceries of white disturbing its smooth, translucent aspect. Touched my toes, broke up into little tongues of froth, and dissipated. So I like to think of him—Sankaran, I mean—like a wave that came out of the ocean for a while to fulfill some purpose (whatever that was). Then he was lost to me.

Physicists have a name for that kind of wave. It is very unusual, and it is called a soliton, or solitary wave.

When, as a young man, I met Sankaran for the first time, I thought he was the one I had been searching for all my conscious life. But as the poet Faiz says, there are more sorrows in the world than love. As soon as

I had settled into a certain youthful complacency, the world and its attendant sorrows got in the way.

The study of minds, soliton-like or otherwise, is my particular passion. Mind-sensing, mind-weaving—these extraordinary abilities set me apart from other people. I like to go into a gaggle of housewives bargaining over turnips or a crowd at a cricket match. I drift about, trying to determine what kind of entity the crowd has the potential to become. I take the embryological possibility of the meta-mind, make a joining here, a parting there; I wave my baton like the conductor of an orchestra and sense a structure, a form, coalesce in the interactions of these knots of persons. The meta-mind I construct has a vague unity of purpose, a jumble of contradictory notions, and even a primitive self-awareness.

Which is why I am so disturbed by solitons. They walk into a meta-mind as though nothing were there, and they walk out, unaffected. They give nothing, nor do they take away.

Such was Sankaran-with-stars-in-his-eyes, Sankaran the astronomer. This is not his story, however—his is just one thread in the tapestry, one voice in the telling. This is my story, and it begins when I was (so I am told) seventeen years old.



The first thing I remember is fire. The next thing: a pair of big, strong hands stroking and kneading me. A woman's voice, saying "Come now, be so, be still..." I was lying on a bed of warm ash, with sharp bits digging into my back.

I have no recollection of my life before the conflagration took my memory and identity. What I am now began with fire, with a woman called Janani, on a summer night in the remote outskirts of a small town in Eastern India. Later, when I came to my senses the stars were out, and the air smelled of roasted coriander seeds and cow dung, as it does most nights over there. I was lying on a cot in the little yard behind Janani's shack. Everything, including my lean, dark body, was unfamiliar to me.

My rescuer, Janani—a widow who ran a toddy shop—took me in and helped me face my predicament. The first thing she did after I recovered was to give me a name: Arun, which (like everything in those early days) sounded strange to me. “It means ‘red,’” she told me. “You were born of fire.” In those days I could sense the ghost of my past self very faintly: I saw symbols, words, numbers, shapes, as though scratched in damp clay. “Who am I? What happened to me in the fire?” I asked her. My voice sounded rasping and unfamiliar. The Hindi syllables felt strange on my tongue, but the words were there in my mind, waiting for me.

“I cannot tell you,” she said. “There was a fire in an abandoned building, and I rescued you. You are not a local. That's all there is to know.”

Without an identity I had nowhere to go, no family. Nobody in the area recognized me. So Janani gave me a home. I slept in the front of her hut, which was the toddy shop. Oh, the strangeness of those days!

It was like learning to live again. She had to show me how to take a twig from the neem tree behind the hut and use it like a toothbrush. I learned how to use

a toilet, how to chop onions, how to talk to customers. Janani made a living not just from selling toddy but also by dispensing herbs for ailments from stomach aches to unrequited love, and I had to learn the lore enough to know which bottle to bring out when she asked for it. I had to learn to recognize my own face in the mirror—I would stand before the little mirror on the wall and pull faces until she yelled at me: “Arun, you fool! Did I pull you out of the fire so you could admire your beauty all day?” And she would set me to work washing glasses or chopping herbs. The ghost of my past self stayed in the shadows of my mind, and I found myself thinking less and less of what my old life might have been. At that time all was new, strange, and endlessly fascinating—not least of which was my ability to sense minds.



I was idle by nature and by the nature of my ability, which was distracting to say the least. Janani insisted on educating me; from her I learned my letters and arithmetic, which seemed to come very easily to me. She also got a retired clerk who frequented the tea-shack nearby to teach me a little about history, geography, and the rudiments of the English language. I would have liked nothing better than to loiter all day in the marketplace, but Janani’s sharp tongue kept me at my chores and lessons, at least until her back was turned. She was stocky and strong; she moved with the cadence of a large, slow river, sweeping up everything in her path. Her customers, work-worn laborers and ne’er-do-wells, feared her and confided their woes to her.

Only once did I see her take a man into the dark room behind the shop where she slept. After several hours he came out, staggering, smiled vaguely at me, handed me a ten-rupee note, and left. He never came back.

My favorite place, where I learned and practiced what I considered to be my art, was the market; here the vendors squatted on the ground before their baskets full of gourds, peppers, eggplants, and onions, shouting, “Rob me! Loot me! Only three rupees a kilo!” I grew to appreciate the sweaty housewives with their glinting eyes, their bright sarees hitched up in readiness for battle as they began insulting the produce. Pride, honor, and desire amidst the tottering, shining piles of luscious fruits and vegetables—how could I resist? I sensed the convoluted topography of each mind, its hills, valleys, areas of light and darkness, the whole animal mass trembling and shifting with emotional fluxes. After some practice I was able to draw the minds into a kind of net, to weave the separate threads of jangling thought-processes into—not a tapestry, I was never that skilled—but a jumble of knitting wool, such as a kitten might do. There was little awareness among the separate minds that they were, at this point in space and time, tentatively the members of a rather confused meta-mind—how many cells in your body, but for a specialized few, are aware of themselves as part of a higher consciousness?

I once tried to draw Janani into a meta-mind with a couple of her customers, but she came into the back of her shop and cuffed me. “Don’t you try that on me, you good-for-nothing! Is this how you repay me?” I had already guessed (from the fact that nobody had

tried it on me and that my subjects seemed to be so unaware of what I was doing) that this ability of mine was unique, but I didn't know that Janani knew I had it. Later she explained that she did not possess my ability—indeed, she had come across only one other person who did—but she was a sensitive. She could tell when someone, especially a crude beginner like me, was trying tricks.

“Who's this other person?” I asked, intrigued.

“You don't need to know anything about him,” she told me. “Just somebody I met once. He wasn't a nice man.”

She wouldn't tell me more. But I realized then that the world was more complex than I'd thought; at least one other person had my peculiar talent, most didn't, and some could sense my mind reaching out to theirs.

I spent all my spare time wandering about the narrow green lanes of my neighborhood under the gulmohar trees, scuffing up soft, silken dust with my bare toes. In the muddy by-lanes I gambled at marbles with other boys and gawked with them over the calendar of dewy-eyed film stars hanging in the neighborhood tea shack. I learned about sex and desire by watching the pariah dogs in the streets and the way the older boys looked at the unreachable, uniformed schoolgirls passing by with pigtails swinging. My own longings were nebulous. I could look at the tea-seller's daughter—a sloe-eyed vixen with a sharp tongue and a ready vocabulary of swear words—and tell that underneath it all was a mind as fragile as a spider's web, tense with fear and need. I felt drawn to her, but then there was also the barber, a thin, clean-shaven young fellow, shy and sub-

duced to all appearances. He distracted me every time I passed the place where he had set up shop: a mirror hung on a wall by the street with a chair in front of it, where he sat his customers down and ministered to their heads or beards. His mind was luscious, imaginative, erotic; I could not read his thoughts, but I could sense the nature of them: desire flowed with the rise and fall of his fingers, the shy caress of his hands on the cheek of a customer. Both my mind and body responded to the needs of such men and women around me; sometimes I would get aroused simply walking down the street, feeling the brush of their minds like feathers on my skin. Due to the crowded, public nature of our lives and the narrowness of convention, there was little hope of physical consummation—only the occasional groping in dark alleyways among us boys—but I could reach out with my mind and make a bridge, a connection as tangible to me as a touch. Most did not have the ability to sense this, but once the tea-seller's daughter looked up at me, startled, her eyes as clear and honest as a small child's, as though she too had felt the electricity between our minds. Then her habitual aloofness slipped over her face like a mask, and the moment was gone.

There was a game I liked to play: I would lie on the broad branch of a large neem tree that grew near the tea-shop, close my eyes, and try to guess who was passing below me from their mind-signature. If the person was a stranger, the mind-signature told me nothing of their identity, not even if they were male or female—but a well-known person was like the familiar topography of the street you grew up on.

Despite my persistent questions Janani refused to tell me about the other person she knew who had my ability. “I hope you never meet him,” she would say with a shudder.

Then one night he found me.

I had just finished sweeping out the shop, when I sensed something odd, as though a tendril had insinuated itself into my mind; at the same time I became aware that there was someone outside the door, just standing and waiting in the darkness. Janani must have felt it too, because she looked at me in sudden apprehension. I felt the tug of a mind far more sophisticated than my own, pulling me into the labyrinths of its own consciousness like a fisherman drawing in his line. I got up and began walking toward the front of the shop as if in a dream. Janani, who was obviously less affected than I, grabbed me and pushed me out the back door, into the quiet darkness of her vegetable garden. “Arun, you fool, get out of here!” she whispered fiercely against my cheek. I willed myself to put one foot before another. I climbed across the bamboo fence. Every step I took made me stronger and more able to resist.

When I returned, Janani was sitting on the shop floor, rocking to and fro. Her hair was unkempt, her sari crumpled, and she kept saying “Rama, oh Rama,” in a soft monotone. A great wave of anger and fear swept over me.

“Who was that? What did he do?”

“That was Rahul Moghe. The only other person I know who has your talent. He is dangerous, and he wants you, God knows for what terrible purpose. You

must avoid him. You will know him not by his appearance, which can be deceptive, but by the way he drags at your mind without warning.

“He has threatened me. Now this place is no longer safe for either of us. I must think what to do...”

That was the first and only time Janani took me to her bed, to the comfort of her dark, Himalayan breasts that smelled of cloves and cinnamon. She was like an earthquake and a tidal wave rolled into one. Afterwards, I heard her mutter to herself: “surely it doesn’t matter with him, he’s different...” In the morning she flung me summarily out of her bed and began to pack.

“This is a sign that we must part ways. I have taught you what I can. You will go out into the world and make something of yourself, and keep away from Moghe. I have some money I have been saving for you. Meanwhile I will sell this place and go live with a friend in Rishikesh. Keep in touch with me, because I want to know how you are faring. I have some of your things in a safe place. I will send them to you when I can.”

“What things?”

“Things from before the fire. Don’t worry about it now. You must go to the next town and get a job. I know a place...”

Which is how I found myself living in a tiny room over a tailor’s shop in the neighboring town. It was a tranquil time for me. I helped the tailor with deliveries, and after a while he made me a pair of pants and a shirt so I could look like a respectable young man instead of a drifter with holes in his clothes. Eventually (prompted by a barrage of letters from Janani) I got a job as a clerk at a computer training institute. Here my quick

brain and my lessons with Janani and the old clerk paid off; over the next year I improved my English and began to help the system administrator with computer maintenance work. The work was enjoyable and came to me easily.

“Arun, foolish one,” Janani wrote. “You are no longer a street waif with few prospects. Here is your chance to make something of yourself. I’m sending money for classes. Learn computers and get a proper job; every idiot is doing it.” So I registered for a couple of classes and found that I had a knack for programming. Numbers, symbols, instructions, logic—it was as though I had once known this or something like this, in my old life. Encouraged by the students, who looked upon me as a project of their own, I began to study full-time. Although I had no formal education and was unused to discipline, I made progress with their help. In the hot, dusty little classrooms with the squeaky ceiling fans and traffic sounds from the open windows, I was able to shut out other minds and concentrate. Slowly I began to write, decipher, and debug computer code. In a few months other students were asking me for help. My life changed.

Back in my bare little room I would lie on my sagging bed and listen to the voices from the shop below, the lulling rhythm of the sewing machines, and play at making meta-minds. “Arun,” I would tell myself. “In two years you’ve come a long way.” But my laziness, held at bay by the unaccustomed intellectual stimulation, reasserted itself eventually. Instead of pursuing a full degree I opted for a mere diploma, which greatly disappointed Janani as well as some of my teachers.

But the change in my life, in this short, intense period, had opened me up to the possibilities of the world. I read voraciously in Hindi and English, learning about foreign countries and customs, and the wars and plagues of history. From lurid Hindi science fiction to paperback English romances, there was nothing that was not grist for my mill. I came to realize that sensing other minds through the written word was almost as interesting a skill as my unique, innate ability to sense them directly. Writing—whether English or Hindi or computer code—was the key that opened the doors to other minds, other lands. Like a monk on leave from the monastery, I was agape with wonder. For the first time I realized that there were many ways to be a foreigner; losing one's memory, being poor, being illiterate, were just some of them.



Meanwhile I continued to get letters and packages from Janani. She was now a seamstress in Rishikesh. She wrote that she was gradually retrieving and returning my things, such as they were, from before the fire. The things made no sense. There were some photographs that she had apparently taken herself: a great, dazzling wall of flame, an enormous log in the foreground, glowing with the heat. Pieces of abstract ceramic sculpture, remains of etchings. Had I been an artist? There was nothing remotely artistic about me now. I looked at my hands, my body, clean and healed by Janani's ministrations. I did not even have any scars. I looked at the other photos she had sent of teenage boys looking into the camera. One of them was me.

The others looked vaguely familiar. Had they been my friends in that unknown life?

But I was too busy with my new life to pay much attention to my erstwhile possessions. Not long after receiving my diploma, I got a job checking software for defects and moved to the great, crowded metropolis of New Delhi. Janani was ecstatic. “A great step up in the world, Arun!” she wrote, exulting. And in many ways it was so. Flush with success—the job was easy for me and not too demanding—and with a new sense of my place in the world, I settled down in my new life. It was during this time that I began to explore my extraordinary mental abilities in a more methodical manner.

One of my early discoveries was that there were minds that were completely closed to me, different from the kind of mental resistance I’d felt with Janani. There were people who would be standing with the crowd outside the cricket stadium, apparently as excited about the impending match as anybody else, but they did not register on my radar. I was greatly troubled by such minds—blanks, I called them. I feared and distrusted them. It seemed that my skill had its limitations. But the solitons were different. I sensed them, all right, but I could not draw them in. Their minds moved through my jumbled meta-mind the way a man walks through a large, empty field on his way home. Quickly, cleanly, with his attention elsewhere. Taking nothing, leaving nothing behind.

The first one I experienced was at a rally at the Red Fort in Delhi. The prime minister was up on the ramparts in a bullet-proof box, speechifying about the latest war. Seventeen thousand people with nothing

better to do—college students, farmers with harvests lost in the drought, clerks on their way to important errands, unemployable sons of rich men and other wastrels, street people and pickpockets—had been rounded up by the party men. As the prime minister's rhetoric became more passionate, I sensed the minds, at first relaxed and disjointed like a bunch of loose rubberbands, becoming like angry bees buzzing in concert. Not very interesting—too simple, but also dangerous. I put my hands over my ears, but I could not shut them out; it was as though I were being blinded and deafened at the same time. Stumbling away through the crowd, I was pushed and cursed as I pressed on. And the realization hit: the meta-mind had formed of its own accord. I had not done it. That is why I couldn't make it stop. What such a self-generating meta-beast could do, who knew? The crowd surged around me, thrusting and clawing at me. I imagined the monster going out into the streets, maiming and killing, crying for blood. As my own mind dissolved into chaos, something strange and wonderful happened. I sensed a deep and momentary stilling in my mind, as though I had crossed a great, noisy battlefield into a waterfall of peace. Just for one glorious moment. Then the bees hummed in my head again, and it was all I could do to stagger about like a drunk at the fringes of the crowd, looking for that person. Useless, of course. Who walked so cleanly through the mad tangle that was the meta-beast, like a monk striding serenely through the sinful glitter of the world?

I learned later that there are only a few people like Sankaran, and that for very brief periods of time, all

people are like that. But some sustain that state of mind for most of their waking life. A cobbler mending shoes in front of a cinema hall in Mumbai. A mathematician walking, seeing not the world but equations and things. A mother, single-minded about her ailing son. A lover in a dusty old garden, oblivious to roses. Yes, later I understood this state of mind.



Life in the big city was never boring. There was scope for my abilities, and they led me into unexpected adventures. One time, while strolling through the fort city of Old Delhi, I came upon a young girl standing in a doorway. She was a waif, barely in her teens, incongruously dressed in a bright red salwaar kameez that was too big for her. The narrow street was full of people and noise, bicycle bells and the calls of fruit sellers, and the light had the dazzling clarity of high summer. Seeing her in the dark archway of an old building with the sunlight washing her thin face, I felt the anguish of her mind like a blow between the eyes. I sensed a hopelessness so absolute that instinctively I moved toward her. She drew back from me, and a man appeared out of the shabby darkness of what I then realized was a brothel.

That was how I met Dulari. My rescue of her involved most of my meager savings (her price) and a local women's group. She was eventually given a job at a clothing shop that employed dozens of emaciated young women to sew name-brand clothes for overseas markets. I went to see her occasionally, but most of the time, guilt made me stay away. Although her life was

better than before, it was still no life for a fourteen-year-old girl. But I was now a member of the middle class. I had to pretend to a certain decorum. Besides, I lived in a tiny room sublet to me by a large and boisterous Punjabi family. Dulari had no place in my life.

But I could not hide from myself the fact that I could have loved her. She was a child, and it was not appropriate, but I saw past her painfully thin, broken body into her mind. She was like the proverbial lotus that grows in murky water; its roots are soiled, but it climbs upwards, bifurcating into petals that open to the sky. Under the scars, a part of her was untouched by the privations and humiliations of her life; there was intelligence, hope, and layers of wonderful complexity and potential that perhaps would never find expression.

My colleague Manek was another matter entirely. He was well educated, had prospects, and was earning a reasonable salary. His mind—I could never look upon a person as simply a corporeal entity—was clean and simple, like an orderly room, and his thoughts and emotions were often quite transparent. One day, I sensed that he was depressed and asked him about it. In his simple, direct way, he told me that he was in love with a young woman he could not marry. There were caste and class issues, and his beloved's family was keeping guard around the clock so the couple could no longer meet. To make matters worse, his parents were now looking for a suitable girl for him. Naturally I became Manek's confidant.

That summer my landlord and his family decided to go home to their village in Punjab for the holidays. They padlocked all the doors in the apartment except

for my room, the kitchen, and the bathroom and left me to a peace and privacy I had never before enjoyed.

So Manek came to see me at home. One day he was near tears, and I put my arms around him to comfort him. After that we became lovers after a fashion. He was not gay, he said, but he wanted me to pretend to be a woman, to be held, caressed, and comforted. In his mind the illusion was so complete that as I lay with him, I could almost feel the swell of my breasts. Meanwhile I touched his mind with my own, furtively, tentatively. I think our occasional mental contact helped him relax, although he could not directly sense the tendrils of my mind. With his face buried against my bare shoulder he would whisper the names of all the women he had loved from afar, ending with Anjana, his beloved.

Later there was Sheela, a quiet mouse of a woman, the older unmarried daughter of a couple who lived in the flat above. Her sisters were married off; she was the plain one, apparently, so there was not much hope that she would find someone. In her love-making, as in her mind, she was bold, imaginative, and tender, but everything she said was by touch or glance. During our few assignations she never spoke a word. Once I broke our pact of silence by uttering the word *love*. She sat up on the bed, stared at me, her wide eyes filling with angry tears. "Don't you dare say that word ever again," she said fiercely. She leapt upon me and began to pull off my shirt. The dark places in her mind deepened, trembled, caves opened like mouths, rivers of emotion roared in the gorges, the hidden places of her soul. She was fascinating, but she did not want me. Ultimately,

fate in the form of a divorced man looking for a wife took her away to some far city and another life.

Sometimes I worried about how different I was from other young men. I looked and dressed like a man, but I did not understand social conventions about what it meant to be a man or a woman. I could go out with other young men to seedy bars and drink beer, but I did not know that the women there were for flirting with, or that I should out-shout the other men in a bid to impress. I would sit down with a woman and ask her about her work, or about the embroidery on her blouse. Women colleagues found that when I was the only male present they could talk as easily about “women” things as if they were by themselves; once I took part in a discussion about their periods, even though my role was only that of interested questioner. “God, Arun, you’re too much,” they would say, suddenly remembering I was a man. I watched cooking shows with as much curiosity as cricket and wrestling. My ability to sense minds enabled me to see human beings as entities beyond man-woman categories. I decided, after some months of informal study, that rather than two sexes there were at least thirty-four. Perhaps “sex” or “gender” isn’t right—perhaps a geographical term would be more appropriate—thirty-four climactic zones of the human mind!

But my peculiarities occasionally made me wonder about my future. My colleagues were falling in love, getting engaged, getting married. To me, each job was like a temporary resting place before the next thing, as was each relationship. Would my restlessness be my undoing? Janani dismissed my fears. “You are young,”

she wrote in a letter. “Learn about the world, Arun. Embrace it. Love as many people as you can, but don’t let anyone keep you like a bird in a cage.”

By the time I met Sankaran I had learned a lot. Never to go to political rallies, for one thing. Or religious processions, although temples, churches, gurudwaras, and mosques were all right in small doses. I had also learned that contrary to what you might expect, families do not generally make good meta-minds. There is too much pushing and shoving about. They coalesce and come apart. Maybe they maintain a dynamic rather than a static equilibrium, because they are, after all, with each other day in and day out. Perhaps a meta-mind, indefinitely sustained, eventually goes mad.

I also did some experimenting with animals. There was a herd of cows that foraged in the street outside my apartment complex. They stood in the midst of traffic like humped, white islands, peacefully chewing cud, or waited with bovine patience for people to dump their kitchen refuse at the corner garbage dump. I sensed their minds but did not always understand the nature of their thoughts. One night, returning from work, I saw a magnificent bull standing in the middle of the road, on the median. Traffic swept by him on either side. In the luminous dust under the streetlamps, he was like a great white ghost. Across the road the cows lay regarding him with indifference. I sensed his mind as clearly as if it had been visible. He was calling to the cows with all he had, a long, soundless low of desire. The cows’ response was, in effect, *not today, pal, we have cud to chew*. It was then that I realized that ani-

mals could not only sense each other's minds, but also communicate mentally.

I continued my experiments with human minds, learning all kinds of interesting trivia. For instance, odd numbers, especially primes, make more stable meta-beasts; even numbers are less steady, especially if there are only two people involved. Couples are really dangerous, because there is nothing to balance the connection between the minds, no push to counter the pull, if you know what I mean. Which is why, long before I met Sankaran, I had decided never to fall in love.