

Raji Pillai
Forget-Me-Not

Part One, 2036.

She is kind to me. She smiles a lot. I am sitting in a beige chair with wooden arms. She is sitting in an identical chair next to me. We are in a room with many other people. They are all sitting in chairs like these. The room has a lot of light. There are many big windows, and through them, I see tall trees. There are double doors that lead out to a garden. I glance at them.

"Would you like to go outside?" she asks brightly.

I hesitate.

"Come," she says, gently taking my hand. "It's nice outside. We could take a little walk."

"Okay," I nod.

I place my hands on the arms of the chair and push down with my feet. Now I'm standing. She takes my hand and we walk outside. There is a light breeze blowing. The garden has different kinds of flowers. Over on the right there are many purple flowers. Tall spikes of them. On the left, pink flowers.

"Shall we walk down the path?"

"Okay." I say.

We walk together down the path.

"Look at those redwood trees!" she says, pointing ahead. There is a stand of very tall trees in a circle.

I turn around to look back at the room where we were. I see it there.

"We're not far," she says in a reassuring voice.

"Okay."

"Let's walk around the loop," she says. "It will take us around and bring us back."

"Okay," I say.

We walk along the path. She points out more trees—weeping willows by a pond. The branches are swaying gently in the breeze. There are ripples of water in the pond. I see two benches facing the pond. As we near one of them, I stop walking.

"Do you want to sit down?" she asks. "Look at the water?"

"Yes," I say.

We sit down. The bench is made of slats of wood and has green metal arms. It is warm from the sun. A few birds fly between the trees, chirping loudly.

"It's a nice view, isn't it?" she says.

"Yes," I say.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

"Oh, look at those lovely blue flowers!" she exclaims, pointing to patches of them growing here and there between us and the pond.

"Forget-me-not," I say.

She looks at me, startled.

"Oh yeah?"

"That's what they're called," I say.

"Where did you see them before?" she asks.

"I had them in my garden," I say. "I got them from a neighbor."

"Oh, which neighbor?"

"I don't know her name," I say. "She moved away. To Oregon."

"Oregon!"

"Yes, after she retired. Someone else taught me the name of the flower. A friend."

"Oh yeah? Which friend?"

"I don't know her name. We were in college together, I think. There was a patch of them near the pond."

"A pond! Like this one?"

"Yes. I told her how pretty they were. She told me they were called forget-me-not. Then she plucked some and gave them to me."

The kind woman is looking at me, her eyes soft.

"But I forgot her name."

"That's okay," she says. "We could look at some photos in your album when we get back. Maybe we can find out her name."

I get up from the bench, bend down, and pick some of the small flowers. I come back and sit down again. She smiles at me. I smile back and give her the flowers.

Her face changes. She is not smiling anymore. There are tears in her eyes. She takes a tissue from her pocket and blows her nose. Then she smiles brightly and nods.

I hold out my hand. She takes it, and we rise from the bench and begin walking toward the room.

"What is your name?" I say. "Tell me your name again. I don't remember."

"Helga," she says. "My name is Helga."

We walk inside through the open double doors. A pleasant young woman greets us.

"It's almost dinner time," she says with a smile.

"Are you hungry?" the kind woman Helga asks.

"Yes," I say.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

"You go ahead to your dinner, then. I'm going to head out now, and I'll see you again in a few days, okay?"

"Okay," I say.

Part Two, 1988.

Karina is my dear friend. She is from Indonesia. She has come to college in Massachusetts by way of London. She's a junior, and I a senior.

It is a lovely spring day in New England. Karina and I wander from the science center past the botanical garden, toward Paradise Pond. There is a bench where we sit, looking at the pond. It is an unforgettably picturesque scene. We wander along some more and plop down on the grass.

"What pretty flowers," I exclaim. They are small, blue, with a white center, in a bed of bright green leaves.

"You know what they are, don't you?" Karina seems surprised.

"No, what are they?" I ask.

"Forget-me-not," says Karina.

"Oh!" I reply. "I've heard the name but never seen the flower before."

We sit for a while, soaking in the view, talking of what lies ahead in our lives. Suddenly, she plucks a few flowers and offers them to me. Her eyes are serious, earnest. I take the flowers and look back at her, equally serious.

"I never will," I say.

In a few months, I will graduate from college. I will move across the country to California, and there I will stay, ever after. On the first day in the graduate dorm in Los Angeles, I will meet Helga.

Part Three, 1988.

A woman with freckles and a big smile is in the cafeteria line next to me.

"Hi, I'm Helga. What's your name?"

"Maya. Nice to meet you, Helga."

"What do you study, Maya?"

"Biochemistry."

"Oh!"

"And you?"

"Modern dance."

Helga and I become friends. One day, I walk over from the Center for Health Sciences to the dance department where she is rehearsing. She moves fluidly as she dances and stops precisely, arresting the end of every movement in perfect, complete stillness. I come to recognize the humor in her choreography: a small movement exaggerated just enough to elicit

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

laughter from the audience. The head turned, brow furrowed a little to convey confusion or exaggeration. I learn from her about modern dance and dance theater.

Part Four, 1990.

I have four impacted wisdom teeth that require extraction. I am put under general anesthesia at the UCLA School of Dentistry. In the recovery area, I do not regain consciousness in the expected time. The nurses appeal to my friend Helga to help wake me up.

“MAAA-YAAA!” she calls out loudly, striding toward me.

I am partially awake and weeping loudly. “I have to finish my experiment,” and then, “My parents are so far away!”

She tries to break through the tears.

“My name is HA-RRRY!” she mock-roars, “and I! am a MMMonnn-sss-TUH!”

I smile weakly at this familiar and always hilarious act. She continues, arms stretched over her head, hands clawed. “I am big and STRRRONG!”

Attention now focused, I add softly, “And fuh-fuh-fuh-furry TOO!”

Everyone laughs. I am out of the woods for now. I have come out of anesthesia.

Part Five, 1992.

Helga choreographs a piece about friendship. Two bodies moving, sometimes flowing, sometimes lurching, sometimes one struggling while the other supports her, sometimes switching roles. Their contact is never broken, and through it all, I see closeness, distance, joy, and pain. She titles it Maya. I am deeply moved at the piece—and the honor.

The piece is prophetic. Over the next few decades, our friendship mirrors the dance. The connection is easy at times, strained at others, but never breaks. In some years, Helga moves to the Bay Area to build a profession in teaching movement. A few years later, I move up for a fellowship.

Part Six, 1999.

Helga and I are seated at Berkeley Repertory Theater, looking at a stage with a pool as the centerpiece. We are watching a Sunday afternoon performance of Mary Zimmerman’s luminous play, *Metamorphoses*.

The old tales are mesmerizing, the new depictions even more so. Here is Phaeton, son of Apollo, floating on a yellow rubber raft, in a session with his therapist. He tells her about his absent father, the bullies at school, and his mother, the nymph Clymene, who encouraged him to visit his father. Petulant, entitled, he asks his welcoming dad for the keys to his car—the sun chariot. Apollo cannot refuse. Phaeton drives recklessly, and

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

out of control, sets the earth on fire. Zeus takes him down.

We are wide eyed at the novelty, the imagination with which the stories are transformed, yet the age-old pathos retained. Helga is struck by the choreography, and I am immersed in the words.

But the saddest of tales is that of Orpheus, the greatest musician of all time, and his great love, Eurydice. The story is told twice.

The first movement is straight out of Ovid. At the end, Orpheus, needing to know if Eurydice was still coming, turns back. "Farewell," she cries, as Hermes leads her back to the underworld, Orpheus's sadness entwined with hers for eternity. This final scene repeats on a loop, wrenching our hearts.

The second movement, inspired by Rilke's poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.," is unexpected and shocking.

Eurydice has been changed by death, by the underworld. It's as though she is with child—she has withdrawn into herself—is full, even content. The world outside is fading. She barely knows it anymore.

She is walking with a god on a road through fields, following a man. She does not know or remember who the man is. She does not know why she is following him, leaving the comfort and quiet of the underworld. He is a stranger, unrecognizable.

When the stricken god stops her, saying, "He has turned around," she is puzzled.

"Who?" she asks, before turning and walking back down the road, her graveclothes trailing. No longer aware that her heartbroken love stands in the distance, grief-stricken that he has lost her forever.

She was his great love. And he was hers. But Eurydice had crossed the river of forgetfulness. Sinking into the underworld, she had forgotten Orpheus. She didn't know—or care—that they were lost to each other forever.

The saddest of tales.

Part Seven, 2005.

They have to cut my abdominal muscles to get to the uterus. It will take a long time for the muscles to heal. The cut is made at the so-called bikini line.

In the operating room, exhausted after hours of futile labor, I recall being conscious when I feel the sensation of a cut in my belly just above the pubic bone.

"I can feel that," I announce, somewhat deliriously.

Every movement and sound in the room stops.

I'm immediately put under and learn later that my husband was made to leave the ER right away.

I lose a lot of blood. It takes me quite a while to come out of anesthesia,

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

to regain consciousness. I come to, hearing my voice being called out in a very specific way. "MAAA-YAAA!"

"He-e-lga," I say weakly, trying to match my response to the call.

When she comes into view and asks how I am doing, I say, "I didn't think I was going to wake up."

Part Eight, 2005.

It is just a few weeks after delivery. I have not been walking at all. I have been lying down or sitting, making my way through the pain. Feeding the baby, who is the greatest wonder.

"Let's go for a little walk," Helga says. We do half a round. I'm exhausted.

"Let's go back inside," I say.

"How about we finish the round?"

"Okay," I say reluctantly. We keep walking.

I want to stop, but she wants me to keep walking. She's calm, encouraging. She tells me that walking more is how I will build my stamina back, recover my respiratory capacity.

Over the next few months, my husband and I will take the baby out in a stroller. Or he will carry her in a baby carrier. It is red and black. I can carry her, too, when I'm stronger and cleared to. Those were happy days. The wonder and joy of the new baby. The happiness of new parenthood. The baby was a ray of light coming through the darkening clouds.

Part Nine, 2013.

I have long fingers. Over the years, several people have looked at my hands and asked if I play the piano. No, I have replied ruefully.

I decide I want to learn how to play the piano before my hands turn arthritic and stop working. I learn of a neighbor, Rita, who is a piano teacher. She gives lessons at her house, around the corner from mine. I send her a message on the neighborhood app Nextdoor, introducing myself, and writing that I would love to learn to play the piano from her. "I can't," she writes back. "I'm moving away in five months, to Oregon." She has found a retirement home she loves and has booked an apartment there. I ask if she could teach me until she leaves. "Be at my place on Tuesday at 7 p.m.," she writes back. I'm delighted.

Dennis and Amelie bring me a keyboard they no longer want.

"We have two more in the closet if you want more," they say, rolling their eyes. They have three sons. "The boys barely used them."

Rita teaches me every Tuesday for about an hour. She gives me music books, "The Older Beginner Piano Course" and others. I set up the keyboard in my bedroom and practice diligently. The keys have a rich sound, and I feel exhilarated when I get a tune right. Not tunes I knew or grew up with, but quite lovely. *Au clair de la lune* is one, *Down in the Valley* is another.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

Over several weeks, Rita and I talk of many things—our lives, children, work. A friendship is forged. When the time of her departure draws near, she holds an estate sale. Once that's over, there are still several potted plants that remain.

"Take what you like," she says to me, knowing that I too love to garden.

I take a hydrangea, two cymbidium orchids, two wooden planter boxes with some succulents, and some small plants with bright green leaves and small blue flowers. "Forget-me-not!" I exclaim.

"Yes!" she responds. "They'll die off in the winter, but they're self-seeding and will grow back in the spring."

I plant them in a few places in my garden. And sure enough, year after year, they keep coming back. When I see them, I remember Rita.

And Karina, who taught me their name.

Part Ten, 2036.

The kind woman Helga has come to visit.

"Shall we go for a little walk?" she asks.

"Okay," I say.

We walk half a round.

"Shall we finish the round?"

I stop and turn to face her.

She smiles at me. "It's just a little further."

"Like after the baby came," I say, wanting her to know I remember.

She looks puzzled. And then her eyes clear. "Yes. Like after the baby came. Finish the round. Walking will make you stronger. Build your stamina."

"Okay," I say.

"There they are," she says with a smile. "The little blue flowers! Forget-me-not."

She plucks a few and hands them to me, still smiling, her eyes soft.

"I will try," I say uncertainly. "I want to remember."