

My Complement, Ganda

Ebtesam Elias
November, 2007
smile855@hotmail.com

Ganda, as I baptized him (though he was actually called Kanda), was a very interesting individual I met during my short stay in India. Though I shall not be able to demonstrate or rather convey to you all of his interesting features, I shall try my best through this tool of writing to bring out some attributes that made at least some difference to my life and hopefully all you readers, especially people that know me, shall agree.

The last thing in this world I desired was to fall in love again (or so I thought). Sometimes, I wondered if my prior relationship was anywhere close to these so called amazing, ready-to-do-anything-for-this-person and that entire flower blossoming, red-rose surprises, mislead expectations, ooh-I-love-him-so-much comments in every conversation with extra stress on 'so', all the pretension crap feeling of love (trust me, I can go on for a while). There was a time when love (essentially between a young man and woman) had absolutely no meaning to me due to the lack of experience as an amateur, if you may, today's society where infidelity is dominant (trust is a thing of the past), and then the terrible experiences that took away a little over two years of my life. Following the consequences of my one and only supposedly love affair, I concluded, or rather satisfied myself, it was a mere convenience due to the various conditions we were both in (perhaps). As a lesson from it all, I decided never to commit this grave stupidity ever again. (Thinking or talking of him still angers me as you can clearly tell)

And then, I was in India, the land of ancient cultures, civilization, intense history and Kamasutra. All of these attributes are irrelevant to the story I am to recite but I still would like to believe somewhere somehow my life has been intangibly influenced by it all.

The summers in the subcontinent are usually accompanied by heavy rains, hence terming them the monsoons. I am about to give detailed descriptions of a short period of my life involving the monsoons.

Monsoon 2007

The monsoons had arrived. It rained almost every day for hours together. Sometimes, it rained for a few minutes but with the same intensity. The sky poured its might with water onto the earth, the winds blew everything that came in its way, and the leaves danced with joy and celebrated their heat relief. It was a different experience to sit under a tin roof and hear the music of the rain. The earth was wet and happy. The grass glowed with color, the flowers bloomed in happiness, children drenched in the rain, and young boys relished the game of cricket. At nights, the crickets sang, the fire flies glowed and the frogs croaked. Their music was so prominent. Sometimes, lying back in my patio, I wondered if these little natural beauties ever existed in the city where I lived, or did it just get diminished by the city hustle bustle.

Certainly, I wasn't in India to acknowledge the beauty of the monsoons or the natural environment but was on a business trip, a rather long one. As soon as I had arrived, I frowned and predicted about how horrible the next few months were going to be. I cursed myself to even accept the offer. Seriously, a few months of international professional experience was not going to make a

drastic difference to my resume or my, for right now, stable career. I had a choice to stay home on an extended leave but for some unknown reason I refused to and landed amidst this stranger of a city that I watched on Indian films with people that looked like me yet very different in every walk of life. Soon enough I realized, there was no turning back and I had to survive through the four months of who-knows-what-in-good-lord's-name-was-in-store.

In general, I love to travel and discover new places (though haven't had much of it apart from the various states in the US) but considering living a daily life and making a living in an environment one has absolutely no idea about, was a whole different story. I had to change my lifestyle in every aspect to adapt to my new temporary home.

I met Ganda on the 6:15 ride. The 6:15 ride, pardon the repetition, was essentially a jeep or SUV arranged by the employer to drop off employees to train stations, or bus stops, or any landmark to ensure the safety of employees to and from work. In my case, since I was a guest employee, I was dropped off and picked up from the comfort of my short term home.

The jeep was an old white TATA Sumo (I am not aware what model) that was shaped like a square with prominently displayed right angular characteristics. Its driver, Raju, I believe, tried to keep his vehicle moderately equipped with decorations according to Indian standards. All vehicles in India, or to be more specific, Mumbai, will have an idol or idols of any god, over decorated with flowers, or garlands to honor the idol, an Indian flag and a mobile phone. Our Raju had a small idol of Ganesha, the elephant god, one fully bloomed carnation which he changed every morning and two Indian flags attached in a cross. The seats had additional brown check covers on the covers that were standard, which I didn't have the honor to witness. He would take the trouble to change them from time to time. The vehicle has been designed just enough so it could do its job of accommodating passengers. The floor was metal, the gear was implanted on the base which was naked, the doors had tough cloth hinges, screws were embedded in places without care of beauty, seat belts were just present, I seriously doubt it contributed to safety, the speedometer barely functioned, the odometer gave a reading which I doubt was accurate at all, operations were manual, door knobs chose to lock or not, seats were placed on steel rods, wheel protrusions inside the vehicle were naked and somewhere inside there was place for a small fire extinguisher. It was as though one was sitting on a shaded, motorized park bench which was planned for safety in case of fire.

Ganda seldom missed the ride and always took the front passenger seat (Later, he confessed he made sure he was on the ride just to be able to see me). I usually sat right behind him, not intentionally but for convenience when getting off. He would turn around half way and chit chat with me till I was dropped off home. I believe I did most of the talking as I was deprived of human interaction after working hours. He patiently listened to the entire random, irrelative mumble jumble. I often wondered, perhaps he sympathized with my human-less evenings and weekends and did a favor by pretending to listen to me. Ah well, that didn't stop me.

During the first week of my stay, I had drawn the conclusion people were not as friendly as they were back home or even as per my expectations. I blamed the environment, the population and definitely the recent acquisition of a smaller company of a bigger one (I was from the smaller company and was working on an assignment for the acquired company for an overseas branch). These conclusions were essentially drawn to satisfy myself but most importantly forced to have very

low expectations, anticipate obstacles in my way and give myself the courage to be a survivor as I claim I am. At times I wondered if time would start slowing down.

Surprisingly, Ganda introduced himself on the first day and made small conversations here and there. I say surprisingly, because usually I am the one introducing myself and doing all the talking and most people there are too tired or busy to make new friends.

Ganda was a south Indian, from Chennai, grew up in Karnataka, currently goes home to Bangalore and himself is settled in Mumbai. I was a little taken aback when he mentioned he was south Indian. Personally, I dealt with a lot of south Indians when growing up. I wouldn't exactly say they are my cup of tea when it comes to having crushes or dating. Their men aren't very handsome (pardon me) have a distinct tasteless dressing style, always has moustache as a sign of being men, definitely not my taste nor are they interested in women outside of their community. Also, the number one turn off, if considering them, is their accent, which is extremely flat and indescribable.

Ganda, on the other hand was nothing like what I had in mind of south Indians. He was decently tall and handsome, spoke with no accent other than the regular Indian one, spoke wonderful Hindi and can count only to twenty five (which south Indians avoid speaking or do a terrible job at it), dressed well, most importantly had no moustache. In short, Ganda was a south Indian guy that I would personally tag 'handsome' for the first time.

When Ganda spoke to me, I tried my best to be as polite and brief as possible, trying to avoid any negative reaction. I also made sure I didn't display any behavior that would shout out "I am an outsider", though everyone around me was very aware of the fact. Later, however, I realized, as Ganda confessed, I failed at it since he labeled me as "the-desi-American-stuck-up-snob-chick". So much for all the effort!!! Perhaps, it was how I dressed according to Indian standards that yelled out "I am a snob".

In spite of being a stuck up snob in his mind, he did feel sorry for me and volunteered to show me around one weekend. Honestly, I wasn't looking forward to it, reason, I do not know. That Saturday I spent all morning debating if I should call and cancel on him but finally returned the pity feeling and went with him anyway. We rode on his motor bike and he took me to the hills on the outskirts of the city in where I lived. The view was breath taking. It took away all the frustrations I had clogged in me since my arrival in the country. The city looked like a valley surrounded by green hills with waterfalls here and there. The clouds covered the tip of the hills. The air was humid but bearable. It was much purer relative to the streets down below. The ocean was close by and its fragrance filled the atmosphere. Sea gulls were visible in the distance. I was glad I didn't bail out. Later, that evening, we went to the city and walked by the beach after a play. Dinner was at the ever so famous Mickey D's.

Ganda and I entertained each other with our backgrounds and life experiences. He introduced me to the diversity of Mumbai with food, cultures, people, places etc. I made an effort to do the same but for obvious reasons was limited to stories from my lands. It was not long before we met almost every other day for coffee or dinner or beer or cricket. Whenever we decided to meet, he would refresh himself to his best. He would tend to dress up whilst I would be skeptically casual. Sometimes, it disturbed me that I wasn't making an effort as him but the thought got lost somewhere along the way.

One evening after dinner, we walked out of the restaurant satisfied with food and beer. Facing us was a street which stretched away and became a point at a distant. There were trees on both sides of the street all the way up to the point particle. They spread out their green leafed branches providing shade to the street. Walking down the street gave me a royal feeling. The white paint on the road that indicated lanes, diminished somewhere along the street and towards the point. There air was filled with mist and vision was slightly foggy. There was a mild breeze which barely felt on the skin. It had just rained and the moisture in the air was comfortable. The air was filled with the scent of wet earth. The sky was lit up with stars and the moon smiled down on to us. The night was simply beautiful.

We strolled down the street. In general, I don't fancy walking and definitely not in Mumbai. I always owned a car and would use the damn machine to go to the Pathmark that was across the street from the huge apartment complex I resided in. The drive would essentially be in the premises of the residential area rather than on route one (the highway on which the complex was located). But here in Mumbai, I was walking down the street, I named after my father (that's another story) without any hesitation, more so taking pleasure of the weather and company. I am stressing on the weather, nature, company etc as these features are not likely of me. I wasn't aware either of what brought the unusual degree of comfort whilst in the act.

As we were walking and sharing various incidences of our lives, Ganda was blushing and continuously smiling. Did his jaws not hurt, I wondered. I was totally aware of his "massive crush" on me. From time to time, our hands came in contact. I remember, that week MSN had "You know your date likes you when:" tips on the homepage. One of the tips mentioned was about the hands coming in contact or just slightly coming in the others way when walking. Both these so called tips were in play. According to MSN, I was sure now Ganda really liked me. As for me, I love the attention I get and to add cream to it all, I had an IIT (Indian Institute of Technology, a prestigious institution strictly for nerds and book worms) kid taking so much interest in me. I love intelligent individuals. I think, and I am stressing on 'think', it is a turn on for me.

A heads up: the restaurant we dined at was roughly about ten blocks or more from my temporary home. The walking, talking, limbs coming in contact and smiling continued. I walked more than ten blocks that night and was totally unaware of the fact. Time flew by. Before I knew it, we were at my apartment. I surprised myself but suppressed it. I hugged him, kissed him on his cheek and parted for the night. He didn't expect the hug or kiss as the custom doesn't quite exist in that society, which struck me later. That explained his cold attitude and surprised expressions to both actions.

And hence, started our casual so-called-dates or as he liked to label the regular dinners or coffee shop visits. I refuse to comment on his behalf, but this was a little new for me even though I reside in the west. For some reason, I never had a chance to experience or rather play this dating game. As far as I can remember, I was busy with school work and useless projects or I was determined to make my unworthy love affair successful. I was enjoying the game and played along. Just an FYI: with my one and only love affair, there was no dating scene, it merely jumped to a steady relationship that would surely, or so I reckoned, result in marriage. Damn we Asians and our cultures!!!

Another such incident in the dating game that is a memorable one was another dinner we went to together. Prior to the dinner, Ganda offered to show me his decently well sized crib for

reasons I am not aware even today. The reason why I mention this is because usually a young guy would invite a young girl to his crib perhaps to get some time alone so he could attempt to kiss her or perhaps get a little more intimate totally away and hidden from the social visibilities. Our character however, I would say, failed to do so. He invited me to see his crib alright. Over time I had learnt as to the kind of individual he was and was positive he was not going to misbehave at any cost. I did hold the authority to ruin him, was my confidence. In addition to that, I also knew he didn't have the guts whatsoever to even think of making any sort of move on an American-desi-snob-of-a-chick.

I was merely studying his behaviors. His soft corner for me was very obvious and my indifference to it was a result of my cold response. I wasn't cold to be rude to him but only to avoid any wrong ideas. I noticed his tension, his uneasiness, his desire to hold me, his efforts to gather the courage to confide in me and his failure to do it all. He took the pain of playing my favorite songs perhaps to melt the ice. Again, I was merely studying the behavior of the opposite species, a male, from a different region, towards me, a female, and how far this gentleman could actually go. Now, if this was in the USA, I can guarantee within the time we spent in his crib and considering all of his feelings for me, assuming I am right, he would have definitely attempted to kiss me. But Ganda still held back. Finally, we decided to have dinner and walked out of his apartment. As much as I feel guilty about the situation, I enjoyed it to the zenith. Once again, I proved to myself how much attention I starved for and no matter the amount I get, never satisfies me.

The restaurant was not a fancy one, more in the casual, everyday type category. It was called Kobe Sizzlers. There was something different about it however. As we entered, I noticed the place was lit up with candles. Every table had a centre candle stand with a candle burning in still air. Every candle looked like it was a picture in a book. They all had still fires. Most of the tables were occupied by young couples. Their faces were half lit from the candle light while the other half was in a dark shadow. The walls had very limited decoration, mostly paintings, barely visible. Everyone almost whispered to the other in conversation. All heads turned towards us as we stepped foot in the premises. It was as though they were expecting our grand entry.

To be honest, I was a little flabbergasted at the environment. I was almost in doubt if this was purposely done only for me. The waiter led us to a table and lit the candle on the stand. Now, I was expecting someone to just appear with a violin or guitar and play some romantic music from some Indian movie theme song. Here, I went a little too far in anticipation. That didn't happen.

Ganda was smiling. I smiled back at him. His face glowed with excitement perhaps. How did he manage to keep smiling all the damn time? Don't his face muscles hurt, I often wonder? His eyes sparkled in the candle light as he looked into mine and asked me if the restaurant was worthy enough for me. He went a little out of the way with that question but I entertained it anyways. Not everyday do you find an intelligent, handsome man like him would try so hard to flatter me. Often I fought his glance and looked away, pretending to notice or study something that was very normal. At the moment, all that mattered to me was what kind of food was served. My tummy growled loudly for carbohydrates.

And then, suddenly, the room lit up with lights. There was a power failure and hence all the candles, I realized then. My heart sank a little and then laughed at myself. There is no limit as to where I could seek attention. I need to simmer down. Now, I was relieved I didn't express all these

stupid thoughts to Ganda. Just spared myself some high degree of embarrassment!!! I sighed at this thought.

As we were waiting for dinner to arrive, we continued chit chatting. Somewhere along the conversation we involved ourselves in calligraphy and drawing activity just like kinder garden children. I started off with writing our names in different languages and he overly praised it, which was entirely unnecessary but again fabulously flattering. He displayed some of his similar skills. He has wonderful writing for a man. We then drew pictures of everyday scenery ranging from a house, huts, trees, children, river, both farm and pet animals, bridges, flowers, boats, moon, birds, sky, grass, hay, bullock carts, etc. Before we knew it, we had a perfect picture of an environment we both would someday like to live in. Astonishing as it was, we had almost the same picture in our minds. It was a poster of the perfect place in the world that perhaps doesn't or will never exist. Ganda retained the poster.

Beer, cricket and the boys were a perfect combination for a good laugh and definitely hang out activity. The activity was at its peak when the well known rivalries, India and Pakistan, played against each other and I boldly supported Pakistan while the boys supported India. (Boy, I had the guts for it. With alcohol in the blood, perhaps anything is possible.) I was lucky enough for India to walk away in victory as the excitement it created was inexplicable. The boys were jumping and dancing with joy, only they didn't know the ABC's of dancing. I have to confess, I have never seen such blunder so far. The sight of three, very good looking, intelligent, engrossed in a cricket match and massively drunk men, including one intoxicated by pineapple juice, dancing like uncivilized tribal individuals was rather interesting. I am convinced I will never, in my life, again be able to experience those moments. I only hoped for more wickets on Pakistan as the game progressed, for mere entertainment. (FYI: I am a Bangladeshi hence I do not really care for Pakistan or India. My prime goal was priceless entertainment)

Then, it was the responsibility of these drunken men to ensure the lady, that would be me, reaches home safe. At first, there was debate as to which one of them would take the responsibility during which Ganda took full interest and finally won. Ganda was to take me home and ensure I was safe. So the situation now was apparently as follows:

Beer consumption: Lost count of number of bottles consumed. Some whisky was consumed too. Over excitement resulting from the cricket match caused the uncontrolled drinking.

Condition after intoxication: Arguing over a cricket match with a woman (that would be me), in the verge of losing their gentleman manners, accusing each other of being drunk while considering themselves to be just a little tipsy, walking in the middle of the street, in the middle of the night trying to find an auto rickshaw and there was no sign of any.

Decision making skills: "Let's walk. The weather is fine. I wish it would rain."

An auto rickshaw was found parked in a plaza and the driver was requested for a ride. I wonder if Ganda took control or if I did. Surprisingly, he remembered his manners and did allow me to seat myself before he did. May be he wasn't drunk, just a little tipsy.

The auto rickshaw is a small motorized three wheeler that has an alloy base and a cloth roof, mostly in black and yellow. Usually, the mid chest and above of passengers are hidden by the roof. I

have never quite fancied a ride in an auto rickshaw but due to the fact that it was the easiest and most commonly available mode of transportation in that part of the world, I was bound to accept it. Due to its light weight, the vehicle gets extremely vulnerable for a flip over. Also, the drivers aren't really concerned about passenger safety and drive recklessly. Its velocity isn't quite very much but just because of its light weight and being the smallest vehicle on the street was a good enough reason to raise concern. The pot holes all over the streets and highways increased the risks of topple over. Now that I sit back and recollect the memories, it doesn't seem as bad. Like they say, necessity is the mother of invention. Damn right it is!

Ganda and I made ourselves comfortable for the ride. As the auto rickshaw rode down some big empty street with a landmark of a man riding a horse, he put his hand around me. He was continuously smiling and confirming he wasn't intoxicated to the point where he would lose control. While we spoke, we faced each other such that there was very little air space between us. And before I knew it, his lips were on mine. He was kissing me. I found myself reacting very positively. I confess I was decently intoxicated. However, my positive reaction was not the result of the intoxication but more of an approval, I will confess.

Ganda has a very special quality of creativity. As he was learning me, he gathered a few of our conversations and painted a beautiful picture for me. I am bound to mention this fact because as a girl who at least appreciates nature and art, I was surprised as to how far an individual can leap to convey his message through simple things in life. The picture he painted for me was very simple and had elements of everyday life but the meaning it portrayed was deep and exclusively for me. Every time we met, there was something or the other he surprised me with and I wondered, why was I drawing a barrier between us? Perhaps, there already existed a barrier I refused to see it purposely.

A few days later, this young man surprised me by speaking to me in broken Bengali. Sometime during the process of the-getting-to-know-each-other-game, I had mentioned innocently my mother tongue was an important part of and to me. He made an effort to learn it to very simply convey I was important to him.

Indeed, my stay in the great city of Mumbai was very refreshing. My expectations were very low hence perhaps it increased the marvelous memories I brought along with me when I left it behind. I made wonderful friends, met kind people and visited beautiful places.

I met Ganda, who taught me to let go of my past and encouraged me to learn to live again. He made me feel beautiful and like a special person again. All the attention he gave me was unnecessary as for a long time I didn't respond to it, but my indifference didn't quite stop him. He continued his effort. The night before I was scheduled to leave, he gathered the courage and confessed of his love for me. He held my hand all the while and looked into my eyes when he said those words "Sam, I am in love with you" His eyes were partly frightened, perhaps from the result of his behavior, and partly filled with passion. He was nervous and was shaking. He was surely aware I was there for a few more hours, yet he confided. He suggested I give 'us' a thought. His voice still rings in my ears and they bring joy to me. I wasn't sure if he meant those words but certainly it did make a difference to me. As much as I wanted to give 'us' a thought, it is next to impossible for 'us' to come true. Nothing is perfect in this world and 'us' would be just perfect, hence unachievable.

Time has passed by since I parted from Mumbai. I received a letter in the mail from him. My first love letter! He chose the right paper, the right ink and displayed the best writing. He conveyed,

once again, his love for me. I stared at the letter for hours not quite knowing what was going through my mind. A part of me felt extremely close to him and was delighted while another part of me was insanely far away from him and in immense pain. I cannot describe accurately how I felt.

I was/am always searching for love everywhere and in everyone subconsciously, perhaps. I conclude, however, I always get into the wrong kind of love, the kind of love where happiness is not an element at all, especially for me. The kind of love where I am always heart broken or eventually shall be. I didn't put myself into it purposely but for some unknown reason I just find myself deep into such love before even realizing I am getting engulfed. Sometimes I think, perhaps Shakespeare was right, Love is blind. I however refuse to believe it, or not. Moreover, with Ganda, it isn't love or is it? It is infatuation perhaps, or a strong crush. Am I not too old for crushes? I am not a teenager. But then again, is there a designated age for crushes? I could find numerous justifications.

Yes, I didn't want to fall in love again or believed strongly I wouldn't but I realized love is not something one can control. When talking to friends about Ganda, I fight any comments when directed towards love for him. Subconsciously, I think every human being seeks for love in different places. Matters of the heart catch you at unexpected moments, sometimes unaware. Love is both a feeling and ability. Love is also a huge risk. It will come in life and we should be able to hang on to it or else it will go just like time and perhaps never return. Maybe, his love is the love I have been looking for, or anticipating, I do not know or rather choose to be ignorant. Maybe, I still haven't discovered love or maybe I am running away from it. Maybe, I shall never find love. Maybe, I shall never meet Ganda ever again or maybe I shall never know. Perhaps, I might lose him to marriage. However, I do find myself waiting for his phone calls or emails just to know how he is doing. Perhaps, I shall waste another few years of my life trying to find love, again, in him, or perhaps not.

Indeed, Ganda is my complement or not? He defines the missing part of me, or not? He completes me, or not?

Some things are better off unnoticed and unplanned, perhaps, or not?