

# ILA & THE DEMON DAYS

VACATED STREETS AND COVERED FACES WOULD BE AMPLE TO KEEP THE VIRUS AWAY, THEY SAID.

DID ANYONE PERCEIVE SOMETHING CALLED SOCIAL DISTANCING EVEN A YEAR AGO? COULD ANYONE FROM THEN COMPREHEND OUR LIVES NOW? THE WORLD WAS THE SAME, AND YET SO MUCH HAD TRANSMUTED.

NOT SO MUCH IN THIS VILLAGE IN INDIA WHERE YOUNG ILA LIVES.

IT'S TRUE THAT COVERING YOUR OWN FACE ISN'T ANYTHING NEW HERE- AT LEAST FOR THE WOMEN. ILA HAS GROWN UP SEEING HER MAA AND HER DAADI AND ALL THE OTHER WOMEN IN THE VILLAGE ALWAYS CARING AS MUCH ABOUT THEIR 'PALLUS' AND THEIR 'GHUNGHATS', AS ALL AND SUNDRY PRESENTLY DO WITH THEIR MASKS AND THEIR SHIELDS.

ILA IS FULL OF LIFE. SHE IS SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T CARE ABOUT WHAT OTHERS MAY OPINE, NOT WHEN SHE KNOWS SHE'S EQUITABLE. LIKE SHE KNEW WHEN SHE DECIDED TO STUDY FURTHER.

SHRIEKS OF HURT AND PAIN...OF FAMILY...

...OF FRIENDS...

ILA WONDERS IF THERE'S ANYTHING SHE CAN DO TO STOP THIS LUNACY.

BUT ILA DOESN'T ATTEND COLLEGE TO LIVE UP TO TEDIOUS TRADITIONS- ESPECIALLY THE ONES THAT DO NOT COME WITH ELUCIDATION.

BUT SHE CANNOT CENTRALIZE CONTROL OF HER STUDIES OR HER MATTERS EVERY NIGHT- WHEN FROM BEHIND DOORS SHUT, HORRORS OF VIOLENCE SEEP THROUGH TO RING THROUGH THE DESOLATE STREETS.

...SHE CAN'T LOOSEN, NOT WHEN THIS MONSTROSITY RESIDES INSIDE EVERY HOUSEHOLD, EVEN HER VERY OWN. SHE FEELS VULNERABLE. SHE FEELS VEXED.



THAT NIGHT, AFTER HER BAPUJI HAD GONE TO SLEEP, ILA PUT HER MAA TO REPOSE AND LOCKED HERSELF IN HER ROOM.

SHE SAT UP LATE BY THE WINDOW WATCHING THE CLOUDS SAIL OVER THE WANING CRESCENT MOON, YEARNING FOR A SILVER LINING.

WITH ALL SHE HAD LEARNT AND HAD ALWAYS ASPIRED TO PRACTISE- WASN'T THERE ANYTHING SHE COULD DO? WHAT GOOD IS IT IF SHE CANNOT IMPLEMENT THEM IN HER ACTIONS? SHE KNEW SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE, AND IT HAD TO BE DONE SYNCHRONOUSLY. THE STAKES WERE TOO HIGH.

THE PANDEMIC HAD STOPPED ALL THE USUAL CONGREGATIONS AND ASSEMBLIES AT THAT WOULD ENSUE ALL OVER THE VILLAGE AROUND EVENINGS.

THE ELDERLIES DON'T SIT UNDER THE BIG BANYAN TREE TO SORT OUT THE PERILS OF THE PLANET. THE CHILDREN DON'T RUN AROUND THE FIELDS CREATING CHAOS. THE LOVERS DON'T SECRETLY MEET ANYMORE BY THE LAKE. NOT EVEN THE MARKETPLACE GETS SO LOUD ENOUGH TO DROWN THE CRIES OF THE BIRDS RETURNING TO THEIR NESTS.

AND ALL THIS HUSH DID WAS FAIL EVEN MORE IN SUBDUING THE BAWLING OF ILA'S KIN. SHE KNEW IT WAS DIFFICULT TO CONVENE ALL HER FRIENDS AND COME UP WITH A RIPOSTE IN THIS CIRCUMSTANCE.

WEREN'T THEY TENDING TO THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE MIGRANT WORKER FAMILIES WALKING THEIR LONG WAY BACK FROM THE METROPOLISES?

IF THEY WERE COMPASSIONATE ENOUGH TO LISTEN TO THEIR PLIGHT WHEN VERY FEW ACTUALLY CARED, SURELY THEY WOULD AT LEAST HEAR HER OUT?

BUT WHAT ILA ALSO KNEW WAS THAT THEIR COLLEGE WASN'T PADLOCKED!

ILA MESSAGED TWO OF HER BEST FRIENDS, ASKING THEM TO MEET HER ON THE CAMPUS THE FOLLOWING DAY.

MAYBE IT WAS WITH THE BREAKING OF DAWN THAT ILA WENT TO SLEEP. UNDER THE FIRST LIGHT SHE SLEPT SOUNDLY FOR THE FIRST TIME IN WEEKS, HER RESOLVE TO DEPOSE THIS SAVAGE RAKSHAS, FIRM AS A MOUNTAIN.



THE PLAN WAS SURE-FIRE!

NUKKAD NATAK!

THAT IS WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE. THE PEOPLE AROUND DESPERATELY NEEDED A MIRROR- FOR THE MONSTERS CRAWL PROUD HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT. AND WHAT BETTER WAY TO HOLD THAT LOOKING GLASS IN THE COMMUNITY'S FACE THAN THE WAY OF ART! THE VILLAGERS NEED TO SEE THEIR OWN LIVES PLAY IN FRONT OF THEM- FROM THE GOOD BITS TO THE UGLY BITS. STREET PLAYS WILL UNMASK THE DEMONS HIDING AMONG HUMANS.

AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE SUFFERERS DESPERATELY NEEDED INFORMATION ON SUPPORT SERVICES LIKE NGOS, POLICE AND HELPLINES.

NOW ALL THIS NEEDS IS THE OFFICIAL SEAL OF APPROVAL. SO ILA AND HER FRIENDS MADE WAY TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE- A GANG WITH A GOAL!

LITTLE DID THEY KNOW THAT THEY WOULD BE GREETED WITH SUCH DEFEATISM.

THE GANG WAS DETERMINED NOT TO INVEIGLE.

THE COLLEGE WASN'T INTERESTED IN ISSUING THEM A PASS FOR THEIR PLAN AT ALL. THEY DIDN'T DEEM THIS TO BE AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE! ILA WAS ADAMANT. SHE DIDN'T COME ALL THE WAY HERE TO GIVE UP WITHOUT A FIGHT!

IT TOOK MORE THAN AN HOUR FOR THEM TO CONVINCE THE GRIM FACES OF THE AUTHORITIES. ILA WAS AGHAST TO HEAR WHEN SOMEONE CLAIMED NOT EVERY WOMAN THEY KNOW IS ENSHROUDING THEIR WELTS. IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ONLY LIMITED TO PHYSICAL EXPLOITATION? WHAT ABOUT THE PASSIVE CASTIGATIONS SHE HEARS PERENNIALY ALL AROUND HER? WHAT OF THE YEARS OF PHRENIC ABRASION THAT SO MANY SHE KNOWS HAVE ENDURED? HOW MANY WOMEN HERE HAD FINANCIAL MANUMISSION?

ILA'S CONTRETEMPS BROUGHT DOWN A VEIL OF SILENCE AMONG THE PEOPLE OF THE COLLEGE.

...MAYBE THESE JUVENILES WEREN'T SO JEJUNE AFTER ALL!!!



FOR TEN DAYS ILA AND HER FRIENDS ACTED THEIR COLOURFUL PLAYS IN THE STREETS OF THEIR VILLAGE.

THE PERFORMANCE CAUGHT THE CURIOSITY OF BY-STANDERS. THEY WOULD STOP BY AND STAND TO WATCH THEM SING THEIR FIERY SONGS AND DANCE THEIR BLAZING ROUTINES. AS SOME OF HER OTHER FRIENDS VOLUNTEERED TO MAINTAIN ORDER AND DISTANCING, NOT A SOUL IN THE VILLAGE COULD DENY THAT A CROWD HAD TURNED UP!

IT WAS THE SECOND DAY OF THEIR ACT. HER NEIGHBOUR KAAKI TURNED UP IN A TRICE TO TELL HER THAT HER HUSBAND HADN'T ATTACKED OR BERATED HER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN WEEKS AFTER WITNESSING THIS LITTLE PRODUCTION ONCE. ILA WAS SURE SHE ALMOST GASPED WITH FERVOUR WHEN KAAKI WOULDN'T EASE HER EMBRACE...

ILA COULDN'T HELP BUT FEEL PLEASED ON THE BEHALF OF HER FRIENDS, AND OFCOURSE HERSELF.

...AND THAT WASN'T THE LAST TIME EITHER. AFTER EVERY PERFORMANCE THEIR TINY CAST GOT TREATED LIKE STARS BY THE WOMEN OF THE VILLAGE- ALL COMING WITH A SIMILAR ACCOUNT! SINCE THEN ILA AND HER FRIENDS HAVE BEEN SHOWERED WITH LOVE AND ADMIRATION.

ALL ECHOED THEIR CRY AGAINST THE VIRUS OF DOMICILIARY SADISM- STILL REELING IN SHOCK AT THE CHANGES THE 'JUVENILES' HAD UNLEASHED. FOR THEM, THESE YOUNG WOMEN REALLY WERE STARS WHO HAVE FALLEN TO EARTH- ANGELS HERE TO REALIZE THE WISFUL DREAMS THEY WERE DREAMING FOR AGES.

AS FOR ILA AND HER FRIENDS, THEY KNOW EXACTLY WHAT STRENGTH LET THEM ACCOMPLISH THIS INSURMOUNTABLE FEAT, AND IN SUCH A SHORT TIME. IT WAS THE POWER OF ART ALL ALONG, AND THEIR UNFAILING LOVE AND FAITH IN THAT. FOR IT WAS ART'S PUNCH THAT LET THEM KNOCK DOWN ALL THIS BRUTALITY AND LUNACY, FOR NOW, AND IN SUCH STYLE!