

THE LOVE QUEEN

of MALABAR

Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das

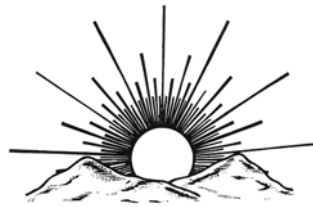
MERRILY WEISBORD

The Love Queen
of Malabar

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Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das



Merrily Weisbord

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For Kamala Das, long may she reign.

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K E R A L A



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ONE

Cochin, Munnar, Kovalam, South India
1995

when I walked in
I feared that you might hear my heartbeats thump

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The Stranger and I

Perhaps every new place has to humble you with its nature, customs, history, bacteria, something that exhausts, confounds, or lays you low. In South India, it is the heat – the oppressive, overbearing heat. Moisture dries briefly after a shower, which is perhaps your third or fourth, and enfolds anew. Heat presses in like an unwelcome, cloying lover.

“When are we moving?” my friend Angie asks when I stir. She’s ready for action, a documentary film director, fresh off the plane from England. I am half here in India, half dreamily in Nepal where I was recently trekking in the Arun Valley hills.

“Should we phone ahead?” Angie asks.

“What schedule do you envisage?” she nudges. “How do you plan to proceed with Kamala Das?”

At the mention of Kamala Das, I snap awake, alert as a tiger with her cub. Beloved, notorious Kamala Das, India’s honoured writer and great contemporary love poet, read by millions, revered and reviled, is largely unknown in the West and to me, and feelings about our meeting are too delicate to share. I have seen pictures of her, a dark-haired beauty with eyes a lover could swim in, and have read accolades to her courage in life and art. Her gorgeous poetry enchants me, and her ground-breaking autobiography transports me to another world. She was the first Hindu woman to write frankly about sexual desire and would not back down when attacked. “I fling arrows at the uncivilized brutal norms of life for women in Kerala,” she challenged, “I tweak the noses of puritans” – a response that inspires me.

Angie’s questioning make me nervous. Standing on a lime-green marble floor in an eighteenth-century palace off the Malabar Coast, I am on unfamiliar turf with no parameters to gauge what happens next. Kamala Das is the reason I have

flown into this South Indian heat, and I have no plan except to proceed spontaneously with all my antennae quivering.

It's been a month since I left Canada, running away from a memoir I wrote for over a year. I'd been writing professionally for decades, and was using the memoir to survive an uncommunicative phase with my companion, talking myself through on the page. Then one day my companion patted my head lovingly, and I didn't feel anything because I was typing angrily about the day before. When I realized that the memoir had become more real than life itself, I abandoned it. I saw then that I was free and alone in a way I hadn't been for years – my kids living independently and my companion consumed by his work. I longed to fly out of myself and into a larger world. I felt that if I stayed put, comfort and familiarity would close around me like a shell. Writing a travel book seemed the perfect escape, and Kerala, a small tropical state on India's southwest coast, beckoned.

Brochures promised waving palms, sandy beaches, canals and backwaters, stunning mountains, exquisite cuisine, and generous hospitality. Centuries ago, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Chinese, Dutch, and finally British traded in Malabar, the Spice Coast of India. Jews had lived in Kerala since the first century AD, Muslims claimed a mosque from the time of Mohammed, and Christians believed the Apostle Thomas converted Kerala Hindus in 52 AD.

Not only was Kerala beautiful and cosmopolitan but it had the lowest infant mortality and highest literacy in South East Asia. Kerala Nayars were matrilineal, and in a country where female fetuses were aborted, Kerala was the only state in India to have more women than men.

I lingered over pictures of the wildflowers and wildlife on the seaward slopes of the Western Ghats, and photos of the wild, blue-green Arabian Sea. Kerala was the destination I hoped for, but I didn't want to write a superficial travel book, and I couldn't imagine a way to journey more deeply into another culture. And then, in my foot-high research file, like a siren calling, was Kamala Das and a poem so beautiful it made my body tingle.

Welcome me, lying down, dear love,
And remain so,
I shall shut the window
for, upward floats the leper's tremolo ...

And when I read her autobiography, *My Story*, I saw that Kamala Das was also writing to comprehend, remember, reinvent, and transcend her life, a life so fascinatingly different from mine that her need to write was all I could truly fathom.

I was intensely drawn to her as are millions of others, to her vulnerable longing for someone to love, “like alms looking for a begging bowl,” and to her great, wild hunger “to take in with greed like a forest fire that consumes all that comes my way,” a fire I could feel igniting in me. Even though Kamala Das was a grand celebrity, short-listed for a Nobel Prize, her confessional tone encouraged me to think I could know her. I wanted to smell the wind from the Arabian Sea as she described it, walk the Malabar Coast, taste a Nayar feast, see the poet whose sensual love poems stirred the heart of modern India. Above all, I wanted to know the woman who could cry out –

... Rob me, destiny, if you must,
Rob me of my sustenance, but do not, I beg
Of you, do not take away my thirst ...

I had never dared to publish a memoir as personal as *My Story*, but I too wrote intimately about my life. When Kamala Das revealed why she wrote, I sensed she was a kindred spirit and began to dream of meeting her.

I went quite far in this Kamala/Merrily fantasy. My idea was that I could visit Kamala and learn about her life, through her. And, if the idea pleased her, she could visit me with the same intentions. I started to believe that if she and I were in each other’s countries and in each other’s lives, we could travel beyond cultural stereotypes, perhaps into friendship. I could go to Kerala and see Kamala’s world through her eyes, and she could come to Canada and do the same with mine.

The only trouble was, Kamala didn’t know I existed.

Angie and I take the ferry from Bolgatty Island to mainland Ernakulam, and an auto rickshaw to an efficient, downtown hotel near Kamala’s apartment. We unpack, and Angie watches bemused as I hesitate, obfuscate, and circle the phone. I am on edge and concerned about bringing a friend, whom I invited for company and support on this fledgling, sans-family journey, to my first encounter

with Kamala Das. When I realize I don't have to include Angie, I get up my nerve and make the call.

A Malayalam speaker answers, and I ask for Kamala Das.

"Hello, Kamala, it's Merrily."

"Where are you?" she asks.

"In Cochin."

"Just come over. I will not take my nap. I am not stirring today. Come any time. I am very informal."

"How are you?"

"Fine, considering."

"Uh ... considering?"

"The world we live in, Merrily," she says.

In Canada, after having read all Kamala's available work, I faxed her name to Ellen Coon, a colleague researching a film on development models in Kerala. Ellen wrote back within days:

Yesterday I met Kamala Das in her fine, high-ceilinged old bungalow painted terra-cotta and turquoise. She is queenly, grandiose and aggrieved. She wears white saris, her hair is graying, wavy, worn loose and she is quite fair. I got the impression she makes revealing personal pronouncements in order to conceal herself and is used to being slobbered over without being nourished.

She is hurting right now because her husband died two months ago. She invites you Merrily to come and live with her for a month.

I had faxed Ellen saying Kamala was someone I "discovered" in my reading – a *possibility*, an *idea*. And now, too suddenly, she was accessible. I would need time to go gently to her world from mine ... "I see birds rising over sentry stalks of bare, black maple. Lichen fluorescent against the rain-stained rock. I have, alternately, a great growing power and a frightened mortal aloneness."

Ellen helped me begin the necessary correspondence.

Dear Kamala Das,

Even though you don't know who I am, you have been in my mind for over a year. I have been thinking about us both – professional writers, with children, husbands in my case, husband in yours, a predilection for questions of desire, unconventional within the bounds of our own cultures. I had planned to write you, formally as befits my respect for your work, and suggest we meet. My idea was that I could visit you and learn about your life and your culture through you, and you could visit me with the same intentions, if the idea pleases you. I thought then we could create a joint memoir. I thought such a memoir might cut through the layers pasted over our respective cultures.

It is amazing to find you are real. Not my construct. You live, breathe, suffer. And you invite me to visit. I feel like I was performing a shadow play and the screen disappeared to reveal me gesticulating in the light of day.

I would receive three subsequent letters from Kamala Das. This was the first:

Ellen this afternoon gave me your letter. I gulped it down hurriedly and later reread it at night facing it as though I was facing you.

Yes, we must meet. But I do not know when. After my husband's death writing for a living has become distasteful to me. But there is no other activity that I can live on. From my eighteenth year I have spent half the night constructing stories that were saleable. Now I am exhausted, weary. I want to be normal, ordinary. I want to be able to sleep the night away. Talent perhaps is only an abnormality, a sixth finger.

You must visit me. My home shall be your home. My sons have grown out of their need for me. When my husband was alive I could feel useful, washing him and giving him his medicines. I have so much of gentleness within me but none to offer it to ...

Kamala's letter arrived when I had hurt my back on a cross-Canada book tour for *Our Future Selves*, my book on sexuality and aging, and was beset by problems

troubling my children that I was powerless to fix. Yet Kamala's warmth and vulnerability reached out and drew me to her. I felt I could go to her and she would welcome me. I tried to touch, intrigue, distract her, from a distance.

What a pleasure to hear from you. I hope someone has made you smile since you wrote to me.

I was away for a few days and am now back in my home on this granite shield called the Laurentian Mountains. I have summered here, 40 miles north of Montreal, since my deluded paternal grandfather bought this land to farm. Four years ago, my youngest child turned fifteen and I left our city home and came here to write. I'd had children to care for since I was nineteen. Finally, I could continue where I left off.

I tell you this so you will perhaps understand why I am so happy to know you. I am not you, nor do I pretend to be. But you are caught up in concerns I share – the way writing-for-money leeches energy, the conundrum of adult children, how we express love and create intimacy. To these questions, now the air you breathe, I would add my personal interest in who I am and how I grew.

Your letter filled me with joy. I am so happy you exist.

Soon after, on my birthday, I received a fax and a birthday poem, from Kamala.

Your second letter was as cherishable as the first. It reminded me once again of clear skies and of the feeling of being wanted. Although miserably inadequate as the traditional Indian wife, I loved him more than all and wanted his arms around me whenever I felt insecure. Now I feel that I am rudderless. Even boatless. I shall have to swim. The question that comes up so often since his death is: Where are you swimming to? Is it worth the swim?

I am sick and weary with artifice and the foolish talk of the wealthy. I need to rest. I need to stop thinking. I need to clear out the glands of the mind before I can fill them again with healing thoughts.

The birthday poem she sent me reads:

Our passions,
like paper flowers,
tremble at window sills,
cursed with immortality
in a gaudy, gaudy world ...

An Introduction

I hail an auto rickshaw and direct the driver to Kamala's apartment in Ernakulam. The rickshaw negotiates extreme traffic on the main thoroughfare, MG (Mahatma Gandhi) Road, and turns into a rutted side street. It careens around motorbikes and potholes and drops me facing the smudged plate-glass window of Astro Vision Computerized Astrology. There is a beauty parlour next door, and I think at least I could say, "You don't have to go far for a pedicure," because the building, although inhabited by doctors and lawyers, is utterly charmless cement. I am scrolling through the directory when a woman spots me and takes me to Kamala's apartment. The door is opened by a maid. I take off my shoes, place them near the entrance, and look up to face a large apartment, a little child, someone in the background, in the shadows, coming forward.

... I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one ...

Kamala holds me at arm's length. I see a round, nut-brown face, luxuriant dark hair, full lips, diamond nose-stud, and pools of black behind thick glasses, taking me in. On the phone I had confessed my nervousness, and she said, "It's like an arranged marriage, each hoping the other will treat them with the kindness due." She studies me leisurely at a distance, and with a slow smile deflects her face teasingly away from my eyes. And then we embrace, a heartfelt, on my part, acknowledgment of the talent and courage of this enigmatic, attractive woman.

Then, immediately, I am swept away – through an improvised receiving room where nothing matches. "No frills, spartan," Kamala says, leading me past an

ornate antique daybed, a modern little kitchen table, a life-size painting of a nude (“I’ve done a series”), to a concrete kitchen to meet the vegetarian cook. Then she hustles me quickly out of the apartment to beat the inevitable influx of writers, supplicants, admirers, friends.

I trail in her wake, soaking in sound-bites of her current life – her long fast after her husband died “hoping for a painless, blameless end,” her son’s insistence that she move to Cochin to live nearby, her founding of a legal organization that defends abandoned women and investigates mysterious female deaths, her responsibilities as patron of the writer’s workshop and mentor to the young women who come for support “and curl around and cling like creepers.” Visitors arrive constantly unannounced: “What can you do?”

We hurry downstairs, and as soon as we step outside, Kamala’s old white Ambassador, India’s roly-poly touring car, cruises into position. The driver stops at the entrance and opens the back door. Kamala is inching along the back seat when a clean-cut young man darts from the shadows, notepad in hand.

“Interview, Amma [Mother].”

“Please, another time.”

Undeterred, the journalist moves closer. “Amma,” he persists, “do you agree with poet Giri’s comment that feminism is a bunk?”

Kamala translates the Malayalam, asking what I’d answer, but the journalist’s head is through the window and I am busy manoeuvring around his backside. Anyway, his goading has worked.

“That is his opinion,” she says to me, “good poet but not a great thinker.” Then an angry stream of Malayalam, hands flying, as she gestures the journalist away.

But he’s holding fast to the door. “And those women you are defending who say they were raped. How do you know they are not prostitutes? Do you have proof?”

Kamala retreats into a corner, wrapping herself in her shawl. “If you were to say my mother is a prostitute, I have no evidence to say she is not,” she retorts in Malayalam.

The young man releases the car door and scribbles furiously.

Kamala rolls up her tinted window and turns to me. “My mother is eighty-five years old, a celebrated poet, the last word in respectability, they adore her.”

We begin to move, and the young man runs alongside the car like a news hound in a 1940s movie. Kamala sighs, upset at herself. "Tomorrow they'll print that. I shouldn't let myself be provoked over last week's controversy."

"Doesn't it tire you?" I ask.

"Who else would do it?"

"Yes," I say, "British writer Geoffrey Moorhouse described you as the South's most famous living writer after Narayan."

"Narayan would be pleased," she says.

That early afternoon in Cochin, all I know about Kamala Das is what I've culled from articles and readings available in Canada. It's enough to appreciate being with her, but not enough to explain the star treatment that I just saw, extraordinary for a writer.

My research notes read:

Kamala Das is an upper-caste Nayar.

The traditional cosmetics of the Nayar woman: dab of turmeric on the cheeks, sandal-line on the forehead, collyrium in the eye, betel in the mouth.

Kamala's great-grandmother was the daughter of the Raja of Punnathore Kota, her mother the daughter of the Chittanjur Kunjunni Raja.

Kamala spoke English in Calcutta, and Malayalam, the South Dravidian official language of Kerala, with her grandmother in Malabar.

She was married off at fifteen and has three sons.

In 1984 she was short-listed for the Nobel Prize for Literature along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing, and Nadine Gordimer.

Poet Balan Chullikkad calls Kamala Das "the first feminist emotional revolutionary of our time."

The Indian tabloid press calls her "The Love Queen of Malabar."

Kamala sails into the Renaissance Room of Ernakulam's Avenue Regent Hotel, me in her wake, dazzled by her unpredictable utterances. She veers right to the corner banquette and sits with her back against the wall, surveying the scene. "When I was younger, I wanted to possess what I loved," she says, hands grabbing

and enclosing a hypothetical being, “but there is freedom in letting go.” She points across the starched white tablecloth to an extravagant buffet across the room. “I don’t have to take home the silver trays to enjoy my lunch.”

By mutual consent, a tape recorder whirs on the table between us, as it has from the moment we met, and I’m grateful I can review the array of topics it registers during that first lunch: an introduction to her mother, the distinguished Malayalam poetess who lost her memory and is being helped by the five-thousand-year-old healing system of Ayurveda, said to cure chronic diseases like rheumatism and arthritis; an introduction to the Hindu god Krishna, Kamala’s true beloved; and a discourse on the joys of no longer being a sex object but an Amma, Mother, a woman of substance – “not devalued for losing that erotic image as American women are, lifting up the breasts, lifting up the behind. I have climbed the rungs of a woman’s dignity from Chechi [Elder Sister] to Amma, and become stronger. Now I can speak on platforms and ask questions society has to answer. Now the soul takes over. The body was everything, now the body is just a witness.

“Merrily, eat something,” she says. “Are you not going to eat something?”

The buffet is laden with regional specialties cooked in coconut milk and unfamiliar sauces. I take bits, lots of familiar pineapple, so I don’t appear befuddled, but I am too keyed up to taste. I am trying to take it all in – Kamala’s young women visitors as “creepers,” her relief at no longer having “to feed the hungers of the body,” memories as “light luggage.” The metaphors jolt my mind. My mind heaves, and inside I laugh with joy.

“Do you like spicy food?” I ask, to say something.

“My husband used to be fond of such things. That’s another kind of life, when my husband was alive. We lived in a huge place, five servants ...”

We are interrupted by an elegant, older Malayali in leg-revealing *mundu* (a sarong-type garment, worn by men and women in Kerala) and western silk shirt, introduced as B.A. Raja Krishnan, a wealthy industrialist with a string of newspapers and magazines.

“How many publications?” Kamala inquires.

“Nine.”

“You want to see his office?” she asks me.

In a blink, I am to be picked up, taken somewhere (I should reserve the day),

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