

The Poet

By Barnali Saha

Matthew Jacob was a man of very few words. He was an ordinary, uninspired gentleman who lived his life based on certain indistinct rules that his mind had written for him decades ago and he had been following them without questioning like a well bred myrmidon. For so many years, he did not exactly know how many years; he had been waking up at a certain hour in the morning, eating cereal and milk for his breakfast and walking a good seven and half block from his home to his office. Jacob worked at a private car insurance company called *United Auto Insurance* in their customer service department. Jacob's whole day would revolve around the telephone. It is strange how an omni-directional device devoid of any element of life could be so dear to somebody. But Matthew Jacob loved his job. Everyday his heart would buzz as he would wake up at his fixed morning hour and sip in his dark coffee wondering who would make the first call to him. It was not that the calls that he received through out the day were happy calls of Christmas wishes or holiday greetings, in most cases the calls he received happened to be unhappy or unpleasant calls when people would talk about an accident in the highway or a car wreck near the central park and if the day were good, about the procedure of procuring the insurance and how much coverage would a certain annual scheme offer. You see, there wasn't anything in those calls to look forward to, but it was the sheer joy of using the telephone and talking into it that made Matthew Jacob yearn for more. It was these modest elements of daily life--the waking up in the morning, the walking to office, the short nap in the afternoon in the privacy of his cubicle, and talking on the phone that made Jacob's life the way it was. In one word an outsider can sum up his life as serene. People in office often wondered how Jacob managed to be so calm and unassuming while living in a city that is known for its exhilarating tickles, fashionable lives, nighttime parties, discotheques and hot carnal pleasures. It seemed odd and even uncanny that when the dusk light lathered up the city Jacob would walk back home alone in the darkness while his co workers and the rest of the New York City would plunge in a sea of new found pleasure. But Jacob laughed at their quaint ideas of clichéd New York life in his mind. It was not that he did not love the city or did not care about the incessant revolving faces that thumped the Broadway, it was just that he associated himself to the other side of the city, to that other character of the town that nobody would dare talk about. Matthew

Jacob was more like the cold snowy evenings of winter when the whole city covered in a blanket of white snow would look so sad, so secluded. Many a times on those lonely evenings Jacob would look out his apartment window and stare at the snowy alley laid before his eyes and try to hear the hidden voice of the city. There was something in that snowy cover that made the city suddenly seem vivacious to the eyes of Matthew Jacob. He wondered if the city had a living heart, if it was a being of flesh and blood forever trying to make its human entry in the consciousness of its inmates. Thus, even if people swooned over some hot new bar, a new restaurant or the lights in the Times Square, Jacob forever adored the secluded wet look of the city.

It would be wrong to say that Matthew Jacob had no knack for entertainment. There was a certain kind of hidden pleasure that he had been indulging in for quite sometime. It so happened many years back, Jacob forgot exactly how many years back, after a very bad day he had returned home from office. Beleaguered and totally frustrated, Jacob started doing a self appraisal of his life and what he lived for. After a terrible one hour of self examination, he discovered, to his surprise, that there was nothing, absolutely nothing whatsoever to live for in his life. He realized he had no friends, he hated going out, and he hated talking to the idiots in office who nagged him forever and that he had no girlfriend. After dinner that night Jacob spent ten minutes before the somewhat dusty bathroom mirror to discover that he was getting old and wrinkly. His hair had started to thin and there were unattractive bags under his eyes. That night Jacob could not sleep. The fear of dying alone in a city where no one knew him weighed heavy on him. In the moment of despondency, he brought out his diary and started writing a poem which he named *On My Life*. In the poem he wrote about his fears, his pains and his still unfulfilled desires. Jacob's pen went on, unruffled, for an hour or so and when it finally finished, he discovered to his disbelief that he had written ten complete pages about his own insignificant life. Jacob read what he had written, again and again. He felt a heavy weight that had just been removed from his heart. The next day he went to his office in unusually good spirits. To the surprise to his coworkers, he cracked jokes, ate donuts for lunch with them and even ogled at the pretty PR lady. "Is everything alright with you, Jacob?" a co-worker asked surprisingly. "Well, everything is just fabulous," Jacob replied with a big grin.

That very week Jacob procured a beautiful brown leather bound diary from the posh stationary store around the corner which cost him eight dollars and seventy five cents and a

Parker pen to commence his new journey of being a poet. Every evening, after dinner, Matthew Jacob would sit on his bed and stack the two pillows one above the other to make a desk and write. Some nights when he was in mood, he would look at the starless city sky and write about love. In high school a girl named Mary Hopkins was his first crush. She was beautiful and had soft blonde hair and red cheeks. Jacob had adored her and had kissed her once, on her left cheek. But the girl was never serious; after high school she left Philadelphia and went to the South with her parents. Jacob never met her again, but in his imagination she often came sometimes like a femme fatale, sometimes like a benign Southern belle with deep blue eyes and he would write about her in abstract poetic verse. Jacob was never good with rhyming. When some poems dealing with mundane subjects like the advent of Christmas spontaneously rhymed well, other poems, especially those dealing with love, never rhymed.

Matthew Jacob suddenly felt a strange emotional transference at the age of forty five. He was never meant to be a poet, although on several occasions during his school and college years he had fondly spent his hollow time with Wordsworth, Keats and Robert Burns and being inspired by their mellifluous lines, often scribbled, mindlessly, a series of poetic lines, but those pedestrian lines never showed his genius as a poet. During his adolescent years he had wanted to be a preacher, and then after a long hiatus, one day at the age of forty five, he did a whirlwind and found a new vocation: he chose poetry to God. Those of you who think that an actual creative nature develops during the developing years should come down to Central Park just at the hour of dusk and soak in the play of magical colors in the horizon and feel the gentle breeze brushing your face. On such moments you would feel your heart spontaneously singing paeans to the last lights of the dying day. Whenever Jacob left his office early, he would rush to the Central Park and imbibe the setting of dusk in the New York City. And as he would stare at the sky his heart would compose lines of poetry, lines he would write down when he went back home.

One weekend, two and a half years later, Matthew Jacob composed his masterpiece. It was a six page poem about a lost traveler's journey back to his home. It was wonderfully written, the lines rhymed, the tone was consistent and soothing. After writing it he felt proud and realized that it was time that he let people know about his innate talent. At office that week Jacob met Marcus, his boss, a prosaic, portly, red skinned British gentleman who had no interest in the romantic aspects of life. "Marcus" Jacob said "Do you read poetry?" Marcus was

One unquenchable North Star rests high above, looking down at the earthly grace
The molten lava of the last rainy season ooze from the sinews of the mud
Unbeknownst to me I have been delighted, cradled and nurtured
When the weary feet stomped on the pricks, I saw brambles, new aspirations align.”

After Jacob had finished reading he looked up to see the faces of his friends. There were no reaction in the beginning, they all blankly looked at Jacob, and some of them were smiling without any reason. “It was good, did you write it?” Marcus asked from behind. “Of course, he did,” said another colleague. “You should get these published in the New York Mirror. My daughter once said that they publish poetry on Sundays,” said Rob another co-worker, and as soon as he had spoken those words, the whole office began pressing Jacob to send his poems to the New York Mirror. Jacob had never wanted his works to be published and felt embarrassed, even insulted, by the behavior of his colleagues. He tried his best to turn them down, but failed. Marcus soon found out the address of the New York Mirror and Rob and few others made him copy some of his poems and write a cover letter. After a few hours, they accompanied Jacob to the post office to make sure that he sent the document to the right address. All the while Jacob followed their instructions, without questioning, he even thought that his friends were trying to help him be a published poet. But as he was leaving his office that evening, he heard loud guffaws coming from Marcus’s room. He went near the room drawn by the conversation, where he thought his name being mentioned a couple of times. “It was fun, isn’t it?” some body was saying. “Yeah, I laughed the whole day. Did you see his face when he wrote that letter?” “I hope the New York Mirror derives a good laugh of his poems too.” “I know they will,” Marcus said, “Uncle Jacob is getting all mushy and poetic, can you believe that? I think he copied them from somewhere.” “Yeah, he must have,” some one said. Jacob couldn’t stand any longer; he felt warm tears soaking his eyelids. He rushed out of the office feeling dejected and sad. Never in his life had he felt so much like a failure like he felt that day. He realized he shouldn’t have shown his colleagues his poems in the first place and allowed them to laugh at his talent. That night Jacob tore up the pages of his diary and threw them in the trashcan.

Few weeks later a guest, namely the flu, decided to visit Matthew Jacob’s home. After the guest had attacked him, for several days he coughed and sneezed and lay paralyzed all day

long wishing that somebody would come up and take him to the doctor. As the fever increased, he lost his ability to think straight. His organs burned in fever and he hallucinated. He saw that he was getting a Nobel Prize for his poetry and to his surprise; it was Marcus who was giving him the award. Then he saw himself reciting his poem, naked, in Central Park to a group of zombies. He suffered for five days and on Sunday, June 11th 2001, he breathed his last. A couple of days later somebody from the apartment building called the police when the person realized that she had not seen Jacob come out of his room in a week, and there was a terrible rotten smell reeking in the corridor. The police discovered Jacob's half rotten dead body from his apartment. His face was yellow and his body was swollen. No body came to his funeral and the police cremated him with the unidentified dead bodies. They had informed Marcus about the sudden death of Matthew Jacob, but had not heard back from him. Within a week a new person occupied Jacob's seat in the office and just like that, the whole office forgot about Matthew Jacob and his poems. They got back to their usual routine and hardly talked about him except when they explained the duties of a customer service representative to the new man who joined the office.

On the following weekend, the New York Mirror published Jacob's poem in their poetry section. They thought it was a brilliant piece and even sent a congratulations letter to the poet. Rob Marshall saw the poem in the paper and brought it to the office the following day. At lunch he shared the news of Jacob's publication and laughed at it saying that the "copy-cat" had finally found a page in a paper to show off his writing skills. After the laughing session was over, they balled the newspaper clipping and threw it in the bin. That night it rained in torrents and the New York City life was stuck for sometime. At some unknown corner, in a pile of garbage, in the rain soaked city, a news paper clipping of a beautiful poem lay abandoned. The paper was almost frayed; the ink had dissolved in the water. Like the poet who had once composed the poem, his work was also annihilated by the cruel city which had once inspired him to be a poet.

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