

Love in the time of Bombay

urban legend



meher marfatia

"LOVE me or leave me!" I heard from the table beside. Moons ago, but dramatic declarations like this echoed within the cosy confines of Samovar till it downed shutters last month.

A clutch of such little eateries intimately saw hot and heavy romances go from bloom to gloom. In the days we faced, not Facebooked, the object of our affection. When reading a text meant a beau whispered tender verse from a book into your burning ears. When breaking up was to suffer seeing tears fill a beloved's eyes, not done saying "It's over" the wimpy way of short messaging.

How did we date in Bombay not yet Mumbai?

Our grandparents often met at a quaint "tea dance", precursor to the afternoon jam session kids now laugh to hear of. Young women exuded everything from cool innocence to smouldering passion in ways so suggestively sensuous, today's in-your-face



(Above) Cafe Samovar. (Below) Cafe Wayside. FILE PICS

sexuality pales. Demure to daring, some snuck wilder moves in cafes that throbbed with big band sounds.

In the current throttled live act landscape, it's hard to imagine a city once dotted with haunts which boomed sizzling jazz for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Never just cafés, those joints jumped, rocking to a peaking demand. Each laid a welcome mat for affaires de coeur, becoming both a magnet and metaphor for generations who lived and loved.

Music ever the food of love, Bombay played on brassily. The Ambassador Quartet debuted at the eponymous



Churchgate hotel in 1947, as if to celebrate that watershed year striking India's finest midnight hour. If its Greek owner Jack Voyantzis didn't have a huge Havana between his lips, he dropped a gentle kiss on the

mouth of customers' wives visiting The Other Room black-tie restaurant. The ladies seldom minded, we're told. (Listen up, ye moral cops.)

The original Gaylord ensemble was helmed by

India's only jazz violinist, Ken Cumine, with his daughter Sweet Lorraine at the mike. Napoli introduced Bombay to a jukebox blaring tons of trippy tunes. By 1950 as many as 65 smoky-toned bands gloriously serenaded regulars in places like Volga, Venice, Berry's, Bistro and Bombelli's.

A haven away from home for courting couples, the Breach Candy branch of Bombelli's became one harrowed Gujarati bride's getaway space. Overwhelmed by ceremonial rituals she rushed solo to Bombelli's, wearing her wedding finery, assuring a waiting groom and guests "I'll be back". And she was, calmed by me-time moments sipping her favourite soda. Across the street near Scandal Point my parents marked a personal milestone. Dad proposed, mum accepted and off they trot to Bombelli's to seal the deal with vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce.

By the time our dating days dawned, the vote went to iconic Café Naaz. It hugged the Malabar Hill slope with loads of character and gave us achingly familiar comfort. Open to a breathtaking Bombay panorama, the view from Naaz was unmatched. No wonder we wept when marauding municipal authorities claimed it.

Coming to college in the island city we spread our wings, shared our souls and bared our hearts. Excited to

bunk class we enjoyed sneaked moments of ardour as screen magic rolled in half a dozen cinemas within walking distance. Oh the pleasure of patronising Brabourne, the go-to café address if you desperately wanted to impress the light of your life talking movies with its film critic proprietor Rashid Irani.

Warmly affordable Wayside Inn of Kala Ghoda offered a level field for not so secret rendezvous. Tata directors and leading lawyers held hands with shy ladyloves opposite artists and collegians making bolder strides, fortified by real beef (not buffalo) sandwiches. I've been popped the question at bustling Leopold and the quieter Tea Room. The proposal I accepted was over coffee after a Wayside Inn mixed grill meal.

Back to Samovar a bit before... One evening I dashed there from the weekly magazine office where I worked, to steal an hour with someone special. Rain drizzled softly outside. Chai and pakoras barely served, my friend swerved his gaze guiltily from mine to what hung on the wall above. Looming large, dangling down at us was a framed lyric written by my poet editor — on love in the monsoon.

Meher Marfatia loves Mumbai.

And adores Bombay.

Reach her on:

mehermarfatia@gmail.com