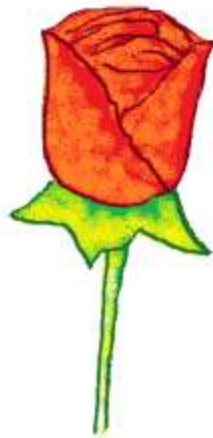


*Tales
From My
Heart*



By Arghya Dey

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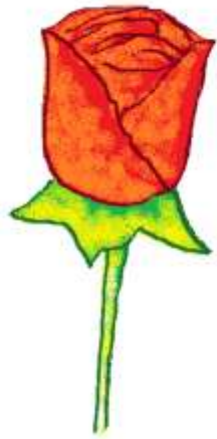
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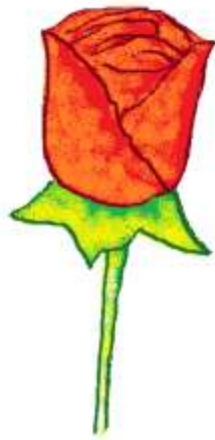
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FLASH FICTIONS



Loveless

Swapan boarded on the train and got an empty seat beside the window. There were more people pouring into this little compartment. A young couple was sitting opposite Swapan. The young man had his hand around the lady's shoulder. The lady had swollen eyes. It seemed that she had cried a lot some moments ago.

They were sitting very close. It was so close that the seat for three people could easily occupy five. The man was staring at the window pane, not blinking at all.

Swapan was thinking that watching only the young couple in the whole crowd was not decent. He looked at the other people with his peripheral vision. No one seemed to give him any special attention.

The man was wearing a half-sleeve white shirt, so was the lady. It seemed that it was some kind of uniform of an institution. It was possible that they were the students of the nearby engineering college. But surprisingly, the color of their trousers was not same. It was navy blue for the man and black for the lady. Swapan assumed that the institution they studied in was really not that strict in dress codes.

Now the lady was seen uttering something slowly in a low tone. Nothing could be heard due to the cacophony of the moving train and a loud cry by the nut-seller. But the man was listening to it with his whole attention. They both had their palms placed gently against each other. Although some people watched them a few times, nobody seemed to be much concerned.

Swapan also was not concerned at all. But still he was staring at them with a weird astonishment. The man had a touch of serene softness in

his eyes. It seemed that they were submerged in a different universe-known only to themselves- where nothing from the outside could enter without their permission or disturb them.

The train was approaching fast, leaving behind the stations one by one. There were many misty memories and sorrows of emptiness crowding in his mind slowly. His consciousness was intoxicated by a sudden mirth. He did not know what caused this amusement. Wasn't he feeling a little bit of jealous also?

Swapan did not wish to think about it more. He just kept his eyes on their love for the last time; he just tried to feel it once more in his heart. The train was preparing to halt at the station, which was his hometown. Swapan left the seat behind to get up.

Now Swapan remembered that he had a duty to perform. He had to rush home early and write a love poem. An editor of a little magazine had told Swapan that he would send a worker in his house to fetch it anytime soon.

Plagiarism

Ratan wanted to be a writer. It was not his childhood wish, but a sudden desire. His two friends were established in Bengali literature. One of them was Bimal Bose, a whimsical poet. Another one was Sunil Bera, who was a novelist by profession.

He was encouraged a lot by these two young guns. Ratan sometimes penned poems. But he faced great difficulty when he was about to write stories. He always feared that his story might have some similarity with any of the stories he had read before.

One day Ratan was writing a story on the ghosts of Bengal. After reaching the midpoint, a feeling of suspicion began to irritate him. He stopped writing and read it from the beginning. His fear was justified. It had a subtle similarity with a Shirshendu Mukherjee novel whose name he could not remember.

Another time he started to write a fable with the following sentence 'Once upon a time, there lived a king.' He could not proceed anymore because he had heard these words somewhere.

Ratan was very anxious about this. He told his two friends about his problem but they did not seem to bother. They told him that it was nothing serious. Sunil advised him to think about these things only after completing a story. Bimal reasoned that many writers wrote about the same things. They would definitely help him to overcome it if Ratan showed them his stories.

That day Ratan was stunned to read a piece in a little magazine. The central character of the story also suffered from the same anxiety.

Ratan looked at the name of the writer. It read, 'Maharghya Tarkalankar.' He understood that it was the work of either Sunil or Bimal. This type of name was obsolete in Bengali. It must be the pseudo name of either one of them.

Ratan quarreled with his friends a lot. He was more exasperated to notice that none of them took its responsibility.

He was extremely hurt that his character was copied by the same person who had promised to help him in writing original stories.

Ratan wrote a letter to the editor of the magazine expressing his anger.

In reply, he got the following letter:

'Dear Ratan,

You have wasted my valuable time with baseless allegations. The story was an unpublished work of my grandfather Late Maharghya Tarkalankar, penned fifty years ago.

I request you to never irritate again.

The Editor, 'Kalarab' magazine'.

Missing

Neera was very busy in that evening. Her house was filled with relatives and guests. There was a festive turbulence in the atmosphere. It was the day of her daughter's wedding.

Neera's daughter looked like Neera in her youthful days. She had the same beautiful eyes and silky hair.

Neera had a huge responsibility. She was performing a lot of duties. She had to rush here and there, looking after the guests and arranging the ceremony.

Suddenly she heard a jubilant cry in chorus, 'here comes the groom'. The ambience turned more exhilarating with noises of holy conches. She felt the presence of tears glittering in her eyes. She was sad that her child was moving out of her paternal house. But Neera was also very happy at her daughter's new life which was about to begin.

Neera's daughter was looking gorgeous in her wedding dress. The flamboyant Benarasee saree, sandal-paste painted on her round face, extremely well designed earrings and heavy golden ornaments- all added to her gracious beauty. She resembled an angel without the wings. Neera herself was captivated to see her own daughter in such a dashing avatar.

Neera's son-in-law was also very handsome. He was settled in a foreign country. He worked in a large multinational company. Her daughter would definitely be very happy with him.

The main wedding ceremony would begin a few moments later. She was busy again to take care of the guests. The priest was ready to begin the ceremony with Vedic hymns. Suddenly Neera saw her childhood

friend Sukhlata coming to her hurriedly. 'Your daughter has gone missing', she whispered in her ears.

Neera was shocked. But she did not reveal her inner tension in front of the guests. She started to search different places thoroughly. Gradually the news spread all over the house.

There was a lot of hue and cry in the air. Neera was calling her daughter loudly by her nickname. But all her attempts were in vain. Her whole body was quivering in a sudden fear of something unknown. She searched the balcony, rooftop, verandah and several corners. But there was no trace of her. She felt a horrible loneliness in presence of the crowd. Her dream was shattered.

Neera woke up in palpitation on her hospital bed. She touched her belly with utmost care. There was something missing. Her unborn daughter had been murdered successfully in the name of female feticide.

The Artist

Swapan had almost 500 friends in facebook. Most of them were from school and college. But some of them were those whom he had befriended through facebook. Many unknown men and women used to send Swapan friend requests. He used to accept some of them just based on his intuition. There was no fixed rule in this matter.

One day he got a friend request from a Chinese. His name was 'Wang Chuk'. Swapan viewed his profile. There were many pencil-sketches. Some depicted human beings, others were of beasts and nature.

Swapan used to post his amateurish paintings on a facebook page named 'Drawing Pencils Art'. It was possible that Wang Chuk was also a member of that page. Swapan did not contemplate more before accepting his friend request.

Wang Chuk and Swapan used to chat sometimes via facebook. One day Swapan asked Wang Chuk, 'Why don't you post anything in 'Drawing Pencils Art'?'

'I will definitely post. I am drawing a picture with color pencils. I will post it tomorrow', informed Wang Chuk.

The picture was amazing. Swapan was captivated to see its beauty. The content was not anything great. It was a picture of some leaves that were trying to hide large guavas hanging from a branch. But it was so immaculate that it was hard to distinguish the picture from a photograph.

Within a few moments, comments started to flood the 'comment-section'. It was full of 'Please learn to draw before posting a fake photo', 'It's a fake', 'You can't befool me' etc.

The next day, more hate comments poured into the section. But Wang Chuk did not reply to any of them. His indifference angered Swapan more.

He sent a facebook message to Wang Chuk, 'Why are you silent in spite of these insulting comments? Don't you have anything called self-respect? If they said this kind of words to me, I would have proved my integrity by showing them the drawing copy which contained this picture.'

After a long time, Swapan got a reply from Wang Chuk. 'Next time I will post my art step by step so that no one can question my honesty. But I won't do anything about this picture. Let the things be the way they are.'

'Why?', Swapan was very curious.

'Those sarcastic hate comments are an honor to me. Some people think my creation to be a real photograph. I don't want to hurt their misconception.'

True Love

Suman was waiting for Neela for a long time in the park. He was looking at his watch perpetually. Neela was never that late before. He was wondering if the rumour was true. A sudden fear began to startle his mind.

He could see Neela from a long distance. She was coming to him slowly. She was wearing the blue saree which was his favourite. But Neela's eyes were looking very anxious.

'Suman, I am really sorry. I did not inform you as I could not figure out how to tell you about this.'

'What does he do?'

'Software engineer. He has his own apartment in Dumdum. His salary is also sufficient.'

'Oh', Suman tried to bring an indifferent smile to his face.

'I still love you, Suman. But how can I go against my family? Please don't misunderstand me, dear.'

'There is nothing to misunderstand. I am jobless, he has a decent job. You have taken the right decision. You will be happy with him, Neela.'

'Take it. It's the invitation card. Our wedding is scheduled to take place after seven days. Please attend the ceremony. If you have ever loved me a bit, don't try to create any scene to interrupt our marriage.'

Neela's eyes turned teary. It was possible that she was struggling hard to suppress her emotions. She began to walk quickly towards the main road.

Suman kept staring at her footsteps. Neela took a turn and completely disappeared from his view. Suman realized that our lives are just like the roads. Only the bends are important. Some people find a better way to walk in those turns; others become prey to road-accidents.

It was the night of Neela's wedding. Suman decided that he won't visit her. He was not confident about himself. He might actually create a scene if he went there. He was feeling tired. He went to his bed early and closed his eyes.

Suman woke up from his slumber. He found several missed calls from Neela's number in his cell phone. But he had been unaware as the phone was in silent mode.

Again a call was coming from the same number. Suman faced a great difficulty in deciding whether he should respond to the call or not. Neela might still have a soft corner for him. It was possible that she was worried as he was not coming. What should a real lover do in this situation?

Suman vowed to himself that he would not respond. He did not want Neela to have a soft corner for him even after her marriage. It would ruin her life in future. But he was also not certain for how long he could be true to his vow.

Neela once again called Suman from her mobile. The groom was not present yet. According to the Hindu customs, she would have to remain unmarried for her entire life if the groom did not appear in a given time. There was a sombre atmosphere in her house. Only Suman could save her from this situation. Neela knew that Suman would respond to her call if his love was true.

TV Serial

Eminent author Anindya Halder could not decide how to react after receiving the proposal. He looked directly into the eyes of the famous director sitting next to him.

‘Mr. Halder, please think about my offer in a broad mind. Your story will reach every household of Bengal. Even the people who don’t read literature will get to know about your story. There is a lot of speculation going on about this upcoming venture’, the director said politely.

‘I understand. But personally I don’t like to watch TV serials. They run so slow that I lose my interest. Some mega serials run endlessly over years irritating the viewers.’

‘Please don’t worry, Mr. Halder. You can have faith on my direction. I will present your story as perfectly as possible. But I need some artistic liberty to change some of its incidents for added drama.’

‘I don’t have any problem if the presentation is well’, said Anindya Halder.

The shooting for this serial began as scheduled. The director requested Mr. Halder to visit the shooting spot one day.

Mr. Halder was mesmerized to see the fantastic location chosen for shooting. The old palace of the landlord, transparent water of the large pond glistening in sun, the gigantic lanterns hanging from the ceiling, the mysterious temple- everything of the set made him awestruck.

He felt a bit comfortable to watch two children acting in a mischievous manner. He realized that the story had almost come to the climax. They must be the children of Jeet, the central character of his story. Mr.

Halder was surprised that most of the shooting had been finished in just five months. Now the story won't seem so boring on television, he thought.

After the director said 'cut' and okayed the scene, the whole shooting unit encouraged the little actors with loud claps. Mr. Halder was also pleased at their performance. He called the director and told him, 'Wow! These kids are so cute! They look great as Jeet's son and daughter.'

'You didn't understand, Mr. Halder. Actually they are playing Jeet and Madhavi.'

'What? But my story begins with the marriage between 20 years old Jeet with 18 years old Madhavi', he seemed to be agitated.

'Mr. Halder, your story is good. But it lacks the background of its pivotal characters'; the director said indifferently, 'I am trying to give your story a proper background. In the ninth season, they both will turn nineteen. Then eventually I will come to your original story.'

Identity Crisis

Swapan cannot recognize the person standing before him in the mirror. He is looking very peculiar to himself. He is more astonished to see the reflection of his finger in the mirror. Swapan has stains of blue ink on the index finger of his left hand. He looks at it from different angles. But he can't get out of the trance state.

Swapan is 18. He went to the polling booth for first time to cast his vote today. He had a feeling of maturity and responsibility. He had been thinking of himself as a responsible citizen of this great nation since his name was published in the voter list. When he went to the polling booth, he could feel that his age and experience both were increasing rapidly.

Swapan did not know how much aware he was about the society. He did not know how much awareness can generate inside a person from only the news papers and TV news channels. But he was confident that he would be wise while choosing the candidate who deserved his vote. He did not suffer from any dilemma.

Swapan had updated his facebook status in advance in the morning. It read, 'Cast my first vote'. He had to do it because his internet data pack was going to end a few minutes later.

He was stunned when he was about to enter the polling booth. There was a huge line of voters. He could see the police and central forces also along with the cadres of various parties. It seemed a grand arrangement.

Swapan was about to cast his vote by pressing a button on the EVM, suddenly his hand was grabbed by another one.

'Boy! This is not the right symbol. Press here.'

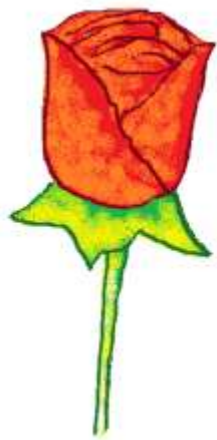
Swapan did not object. He just did what he was told to do.

'Yeah! That's nice. Now go home', the man was visibly happy.

Swapan is looking at the mirror sadly. He has tear in his eyes, just like the person in the mirror. The 'Swapan' caged in the mirror is also bearing the stained mark of democracy. The 'Swapan' residing in facebook also has become a first time voter. After returning home, Swapan had tried hard to unmark his finger using soaps and oil. But he could not get rid of this mockery.

For next few days, Swapan will have to lead his life with the identity of an elector in the world's largest democracy.

SHORT STORIES



Untimely Death

It was not monsoon in Bengal. But still it was drizzling continuously for a long time. Reshma was watching this untimely rain from the balcony. It seemed that the dark clouds were striving hard to share all their pain with the whole world.

The trees of the garden were looking fresh in the sudden shower. Some crows were cawing endlessly expressing their discomfort. There were no bangles in Reshma's drenched hands like the other days. Her face was also not covered in rich make up. She was happy that she did not have collyrium in her eyes; she would have looked ugly if it amalgamated with her tears flowing down the cheeks.

Reshma was surprised to touch her wet cheeks. She found it hard to believe that she was actually weeping. It was not meant to happen at all. She hurriedly entered into the adjacent room.

It was the day her father died. Reshma had always known her father as a cunning politician submerged in unfathomable lust to gain more power. He was a human being sans humanity. He could do anything to safeguard his political career. Reshma also knew that the unholy nexus between his father and the local goons was more than some figment of a publicity-seeking journalist.

Reshma tried to remember when she had actually loved her father for the last time. Was it before her parents' separation or after? She could not recall properly. But some old memories of her girlhood days were wandering to and fro in her restless mind.

She was ruminating about her brother Reek. He was just two years younger to her. So he must be in the ninth grade then. Reek and her

mother might be aware about his death as the news channels had already aired this incident with huge coverage.

She was thinking what Reek and her mother were feeling at that moment. Were they able to control their emotions? After the separation of their parents, Reek and Reshma had cried a lot. When everything was distributed between the couple equally, Reek had chosen his mother and Reshma had chosen her father as their legal guardians. Reshma had to repent for her decision afterwards.

The word 'freedom' was alien in Reshma's universe. Sometimes she felt like a fettered bird choked to death in a golden cage. But she did not complain to her father about this. She knew from past experiences that it would result in nothing fruitful.

The friends in her school often passed disrespectful remarks about her father. At first, she used to be angry and protest loudly. But as the time passed, she herself started to believe the rumours. She did not have the courage to talk about this to her father.

Sometimes she wished she could ask him, 'Papa, are my friends telling me the truth?'

Reshma's father would say in her imagination, 'No, dear. What they are saying are all baseless. They are jealous because of my wealth and influence. You should know that the common people always like to believe the rumours centered around a powerful person. You must not pay heed to them.'

Then Reshma would hug her father tightly. He would embrace her affectionately and kiss her forehead.

Reshma's imagination did not find a ground in reality. One day she heard on her own that her father was giving instructions to his followers to kill a leader of the opposition party in a closed door meeting. After two days, Reshma got the news regarding the mysterious death of that leader from a leading daily.

When Reshma's father died of a massive heart attack that day, Reshma did not feel the urge to shed tears. There were many little known and unknown relatives present in her house to do the noble act of crying bitterly. An unknown aunt tried to show her solidarity by weeping hysterically almost squeezing her; Reshma had a tough time to set herself free and escape from the scene.

Reshma once again took in her hand the red diary that was lying in a corner of her bed. It was very old and full of rusty pages. She had got it from a stack of old objects when her father's acquaintances were searching his life insurance policy for Reshma's future use.

The diary was written by Reshma's father. She was astonished to see his fantastic handwriting that was glistening like a wreath of pearls even after so many years.

Most of the topics in the diary were about her father's personal life. It was full of useless narrations like how he had first met her mother in a bus stop, which teacher in his college had the hottest temperament etc.

Reshma would need some time to read the whole diary. She did not know if there were more diaries hidden in various corners of her house. But she was certain that the diary was having an impact on her mind judging by the teardrop gleaming in a corner of her eye. In a few moments, it would drench her soft cheeks once again.

The diary had some short poems scribbled here and there. She did not know about their standards, but it seemed that they had been penned with utmost care and overflowing emotions. There were some maxims of various great people and holy texts in between his own writing. The quotes began with Ernest Hemingway's 'There is no friend as loyal as a book' and ended with Mao Tse Tung's 'To read too many books is harmful.' Reshma was also sure that her father had not used it on a regular basis.

There was a cutting of a newspaper joined with a page using adhesives. It contained a smiling picture of her father in his younger days. He was looking very cute with a bandage in his head. 'Police Beat Students Mercilessly', read the large fonts printed beneath the picture. Reshma read the news attentively. The columnist had described how her father had received a serious injury while trying to save one of his friends.

Reshma understood that the author of this diary had died much before her father. All of her tears were only for that young selfless student.

Reshma could hear the dialogue from the popular movie 'The Dark Knight', directed by Christopher Nolan in her imagination, 'Either you die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.'

Detective

‘Do I look well in this dress?’, the detective asked me. I looked at her with amusement. ‘Yes, pretty lady! You look marvellous.’ The detective was wearing a blue saree with black blouse. She had the charm to look gorgeous in any dress or even without it.

I looked at her blue eyes and blonde hair. ‘You have a similarity with Anna Chapman. Have you ever considered being a spy?’

The detective burst into a musical laughter. It seemed like a cocktail of ethereal notes expressing celestial divinity. Any man, living or dead, would fall in love with her.

But I could not. I had a serious work to do. I was walking alongside her, my hand entwining hers gently. ‘You did not answer my question, detective’, I said to her.

She took her time. ‘Well, it’s a great compliment. But I still don’t think that I want to be a spy. Don’t you like me as a detective?’

I obviously liked her. She would conquer the world one day with her popularity. Besides, I myself always preferred Sherlock Holmes to James Bond. There won’t be any problem if she did not become a spy.

We went to a coffee-shop. The waiter greeted us gently. We took our seats beside each-other. There was a man sitting alone in a corner looking outside the window. I thought that I had seen him somewhere.

We ordered coffee and some snacks. There were some people staring at my companion. I scolded her, ‘You are a detective. You must be able to get entangled with the crowd without snatching any extra attention.’

She was not bothered a bit. Suddenly she touched my face with her hands and kissed on my lips. She kept kissing me for some minutes until I gasped for fresh air that was blocked by her fragrance.

Now the people seemed to gaze sideways. They got the feeling that I was her lover. Surprisingly, the man sitting in the corner never glanced at us. He looked submerged in his thoughts. I asked the detective, 'Can you say something about the whereabouts of the man sitting there?' I pointed my finger at him.

She watched him attentively. 'Just a minute', she said and left the table. She went to the man and said something in an inaudible voice. The man shut the window-pane. The detective came nonchalantly to sit beside me again.

'What did you tell him?' I asked her.

She smiled heartily, 'It is raining outside. Can you please shut the window? I have got cold.'

'Why did you say that?'

'Just to have a better glance upon him. He is married, has two kids. He is waiting here for his wife.'

I was stunned. I thought she was joking to me. 'How could you get all these information in a few moments?'

She stared at me, not blinking at all. 'You have read all the detective stories of Sherlock Holmes. You should not be so much astonished. It's simple. He has a wedding ring on his finger. You may not have noticed but his wallet is left on the table in open. It contains a picture of a boy

and a girl. He must be very forgetful person. Anyone can pick the wallet from the table.'

'Yes, it's not difficult at all', I said, 'But how were you so sure that the photo depicted his own children? It could have been a photo-print kept within the wallet by the manufacturing company. It's also possible that it's a picture of his childhood days.'

'No, it's not. The companies use a different quality paper. Besides, it has a heart sign drawn with a marker at the bottom. Why would someone mark a photo-print of two unknown children without any reason? The tint states clearly that the photo was taken recently. So it doesn't have any relation to his childhood', she said.

'But it's possible that the picture is of his nephew and niece', I argued.

'Yes, it's possible. But it's very unlikely to have such an uncle nowadays. Look, his wife is going near his table', she diverted my attention to a chubby woman.

'But how could you.....', I could not complete my sentence. She put her finger on my lips mischievously with a gesture requesting to be silent. 'Let there be some mysteries intact. A good magician never reveals his tricks', she said.

We were out of the coffee-shop in a few minutes. The more I was knowing her, I was getting more attracted. It was feeling great in the cold weather. The rain had stopped. Cold breeze coming from the south was the only thing to disrupt the pin-drop silence.

Suddenly, there was a hue and cry at a distance. We heard some gunshots along with screams. We rushed to the spot immediately.

A man was lying on the road, badly injured. 'Who did it to you?' the detective asked, pushing the crowd aside to get nearer to him.

The man tried to look at the inquirer. He was in a deep pain, trying hard to flee from the inevitable death. I could see a doctor rushing towards him.

The man uttered, 'K.....K.....' He died before saying anything more.

I looked at the detective and asked, 'Can you solve the mystery?'

'Yes, of course', she seemed determined, 'So, will you give me a chance?'

'Ok, let's do it together', I said, 'Please help me whenever I am stuck in a situation.'

'I will', said the detective.

'Do you need any assistant?'

'You can come along. I will solve mysteries and you will weave them. You can also glorify me by narrating the story as a partner with less intelligence.'

I got back to the writing desk happily from my imaginary world. I had got the heroine of my upcoming thriller. I promised her that she would get a chance to solve this mystery in my new detective story.

Ever Love

The place did not seem strange to me anymore. When I had first come here, I had a deep fear in my mind. I was uncertain if my wife would feel comfortable there. But time played an important role to cast my doubts away. The doctors and nurses were very responsible and dutiful. I was happy that my wife was recovering fast in this mental hospital.

My wife had been suffering from acute depression for a long period of time. Recently she had displayed a desire to commit suicide. She needed proper medication and regular treatment. Some of the top doctors had advised me to admit her in this hospital for a certain period of time. I did not disobey them.

The term 'mental hospital' conjures up an image of a very filthy and unhealthy place in Indian minds because of incessant negative publicity in the leading newspapers. It seems to be a dark island infested with dangerous insane persons out of the 'logical' world; a destination of the unfit lesser mortals.

I possessed the same thought before taking my wife to the hospital. So, when I found out that the premises were very clean and the hospital authority did not compromise with the standards, I was extremely elated. The doctors and nurses, even the ward-boys were very modest. They all assured me that my wife would get well soon.

Today I visited her cabin and spent some time together ruminating the old days. She was looking very beautiful. Her eyes did not seem languid. She did not use lipstick on her lips, but still they were shining in a pink aura. I could not remember if I had seen her more sprightly in the past few months.

'I feel an affection towards the old woman in the adjacent cabin. She has a lot of scars that time could never heal. I can understand. She pretends to be very happy but her eyes can't hide her inner pain', my wife said.

'Oh! Is it that lady who waits for her husband every night and doesn't go to bed until dawn? You had said it earlier.'

'Yes, that lady', said my wife, 'Her husband had died almost two years ago. But the hapless lady could not recover from the sudden shock. Her sons drove her away afterwards.'

'Oh my God! I did not know about this part. Her sons are very cruel indeed. Who told you about this incident?'

'The doctor told me. Even the nurses are aware of it. Do you want to hear some more about her life?'

Actually I never felt any curiosity about other persons' lives. I had no interest to get out of my comfort zone and know more people. There are billions of people on earth and each one of them believes that he or she has at least one interesting story to tell to everyone.

But I could not say 'no' to my wife. Her eyes were gleaming with a wish to tell me about the old woman. I told her in dismay, 'Is the story interesting?'

'I don't know. But I think I should tell you about her life. It will give you inspiration.'

Meanwhile the doctor entered into the cabin. 'Did I interrupt your privacy?' He asked.

'No, not at all', I said, 'My wife was telling me about the patient in her adjacent cabin.'

He took his seat in the chair beside the bed.

'Doc, when will you discharge my wife?'

The doctor looked at me and smiled, 'In a week. I have arranged everything.' I was very happy.

'Doc, it will be better if you tell him about her life. In fact you were the one who took her from the footpath and admitted in this hospital. Even the closest relatives don't do it anymore for near and dear ones', said my wife.

'No, Madam. Please tell your husband yourself. I have to go to another ward to visit a patient.'

After the doctor's departure my wife started to tell the story, 'The lady was brought up in a rich family. She had married a poor swain in the same village. But she repented about her decision afterwards and came back to her paternal house. Her father arranged her grand wedding after a few years to a rich urban family.'

'Did it go down well with the mindset of the orthodox society?' I asked.

'It did due to their money and influence. After her remarriage, she continued her studies and went to the college. Her second husband was very helpful and supportive. She became a graduate in English literature. She was one of the very few female graduates of that era.'

'The lady seems very progressive. Did she get a job after her studies?'

‘She refused some of the prestigious jobs to look after her family’, my wife ceased her talk.

‘Why are you standing at the door, Doc? Please come inside.’

I was so engrossed in the story that I did not notice him. ‘Didn’t you visit the patient in the other ward?’

The doctor smiled embarrassedly, ‘I still have enough time in hand. I thought I would listen to it in your own words.’

‘Please come’, my wife called him inside, ‘Please be seated here.’

‘Correct me if I am wrong somewhere’, my wife continued her story, ‘The lady had sacrificed a lot for her family. After some years, their economic condition was not same as before. Her husband had lost his job. At that time she came out to rescue her family by starting to income doing a meager job. She sent applications to various sectors for those jobs which she had denied earlier. It is said that the danger never comes alone; he takes all his brothers and sisters with him. The lady felt hapless to find that she was rejected everywhere. But she raised her sons and educated them well. Their socio-economic condition improved a lot after her sons got government jobs.’

‘It’s strange that they did not look after her in her old age’, I said.

‘Strange indeed. But the lady seems more astonishing to me than her life story. It never occurred to me that she was insane or loony. In her waiting for her deceased husband, I don’t find insanity. What I find is a true love that was never meant to be born in this material world. It is that celestial flower of the paradise that lost its way to descend upon the earth. I can see the evergreen rays of hope in her eyes to meet her

husband once again. I don't care what the rest of the world thinks about her', said my wife.

The doctor broke his silence, 'Would you mind anything if I add something more to the story?'

'No, not at all', we said in unison.

'Ok. When I saw her sitting in the footpath, I felt agonized. Besides, I thought that I had seen her somewhere.'

'Do you know her?' asked my wife.

He nodded his head. 'Yes. At first she could not tell anything. But after proper treatment and medication, she began to disclose her tales one by one. Her memory was coming back to her. At one point, I was certain about her identity.'

His eyes were glistening with tears.

'I am her first husband. When I had married her, I was seventeen and she was thirteen. She has not recognized me yet.'

'What?' We both were shocked.

'After she left my home, I was very unhappy. I had a deep hatred for her. But somehow it was a boon to me because I was determined to prove my mettle to her one day. I studied hard and beat the best of the best to get a chance to study medical science. After I became a renowned doctor, I searched her in many places. But I could not find her until recently.'

'Does your present wife know about her?' I asked.

'I didn't remarry. I always believed that she would come to me one day and repent for leaving me', the doctor smiled, 'As a doctor, I should always hope that she spends the rest of her life with her grandchildren happily. I should wish that her sons come to take her with them and see that she is mentally stable now.'

A narrow cascade of tears moved slowly down his cheeks. He tried to hide it with his hand, 'But I can't. I have a secret desire that she leads her life with me forever. I feel very glad to take care of her. I know that I am being selfish. It was possible that I had taken her to the hospital because she looked very familiar to me. Would I have done the same thing for a completely unknown person? I don't know.'

I looked at my wife. Her eyes were also teary. She said, 'Doc, do you know that you are a noble man?'

He didn't reply. 'I should get up now', he said and started walking to the door slowly, 'The patient is waiting for me.'

I too bade adieu to my wife. I felt a sudden mirth in my heart. I could see the sparkle again in her eyes which I had seen so many years ago while proposing to her. Who knows where she had hidden it for such a long period? Or maybe it was always in her eyes; I didn't notice properly.

The Love Letter

‘Do you really love her?’ Swapan asked to himself.

‘Yes. Why are you asking? Do you have any doubt?’ Someone in his head asked him back.

‘No. Nothing like that.’

‘Then why aren’t you telling her about your feelings?’

‘Sometimes I feel confused. Is it actually love? Are you sure it’s not an infatuation or a crush?’

Swapan tried to concentrate on the biology book residing on the study table. He had read nothing for more than thirty minutes. His private tutor would come anytime soon. After his arrival, his heartthrob Bipasha would also enter into the study. Bipasha used to come twice a week to his house to take lessons in science.

After the departure of their teacher, Bipasha used to stay in his study for some time. Her father was very busy and hence always late to take her home. She used to kill time by gossiping with Swapan regarding various topics.

That day Swapan was having a tough time to freeze his attention on the biology book. He was staring at Bipasha repeatedly from the corner of his eyes. She was wearing her favourite blue churidar. Swapan knew that she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

Their private tutor was teaching an interesting topic. It was ‘The Reproduction System’, a very important chapter in biology. But Swapan was totally ignorant about it. His mind was reproducing the same thoughts that had been disturbing him continuously for some days.

‘Should I propose her today? Or any other day? What will happen if she says ‘no’? Then I will feel extremely hurt. Our friendship may be ruined completely. She may complain to my parents also.....’

Swapan felt that someone was calling him by his name. ‘Swapan, why are you silent?’ It was the teacher’s voice. Swapan suddenly got his senses back. ‘Yes, sir’, he responded.

‘Didn’t you listen to my question? Go kneel down. What do you keep thinking all the time?’

Swapan could see Bipasha hiding her mischievous smile with the biology book. It was not the ideal day for him to tell her about his feelings. He vowed to improve his impression the next day.

Knelt down, Swapan continued his thought process. What would happen if he gave her a love letter? Swapan used to help his school friends in writing love letters. He possessed a profound knowledge in literature. He was also very good in grammar and spellings.

Swapan discarded this idea. If he proposed her verbally, there won’t be any evidence. If Bipasha complained to his parents, he could deny the allegation. But in case of love letter, he would not be able to save his back.

The tutor took an early leave. He had to visit a relative’s wedding ceremony. After he left the room, Bipasha asked Swapan, ‘Do you want to tell me something? You are looking very anxious.’

‘No.....nothing’, Swapan smiled sheepishly. He restrained himself from disclosing anything.

Swapan did not know if he could gather courage to write her a love letter. But it seemed great to imagine about it. It would be a letter written in scintillating handwriting with words from the depth of his heart. Three quotes by Tagore and two lines by Wordsworth would add a literary value to the letter. His stylish signature at the end would look nice.

The next day Swapan was very happy. He had written the letter at last. It took him almost a day to write, rewrite and edit the letter. Along with the quotes, there was a poem in it. 'My first love poem', Swapan whispered to himself. He was reading the chapter about the reproduction system attentively. The tutor would arrive soon.

Bipasha was stunned to see that Swapan had read the chapter thoroughly. It was nothing less than a miracle. He answered correctly to every question asked by the tutor. 'Wow! Swapan, you are a genius!', Bipasha whispered in his ears.

After the tutor left the study, Swapan got up to take the letter out of a secret place. 'Bipasha, I'll be back in a minute', he said and turned to leave.

'Swapan, wait!' she said.

'What?'

Bipasha looked very happy. Did she somehow know that he was going to fetch the love letter written for her? He thought that it was quite possible as the girls know well how to use their sixth sense.

'Just a minute', Bipasha kept ransacking her bag before pulling out a piece of paper. There was something scribbled on it in a very bad handwriting. 'My first love letter', she giggled.

'Amit gave it to me today. It's so nice of him', she said holding the folded letter. Swapan took it in his hand and looked carefully. The handwriting was almost unreadable. It looked like an inscription of an ancient civilization that was yet to be deciphered. But the message was clear. Swapan remembered that he had helped Amit to write this letter a couple of days back. Amit had lied that it was for his lover who lived in Delhi.

'Did you accept his proposal?' Swapan said suppressing the torrent in his heart.

'I said yes', said Bipasha.

'Oh....'

'What? Are you not happy, Swapan? You are my best friend. You should be excited to hear this news.'

'I am extremely happy', Swapan said with a fake smile. 'Just a minute', Swapan said and was about to leave the room.

'Swapan', Bipasha called him again, 'When you come back, please help me to write an answer to his letter. I know you are very good in it.'

'Ok', Swapan left the room and decided to tear his letter in pieces and throw it in garbage. But he was in a dilemma about helping Bipasha in writing her reply. He knew that it was tougher than writing his first love letter.

Disturbance

1

Everyone in that area used to call that old man 'Jyoti Dadu'. He was a very thin aged man with white hair and hot temperament. He was a celibate and lived alone in his large two-storied house. For a few days, he was feeling a little bit of ill. But Jyoti Dadu was not concerned about it. After all, it was just an effect of old age.

Jyoti Dadu had insomnia. He had to take a sleeping pill before going to bed every night.

That morning he was certain to continue this daily routine. But in the evening, he changed his mind. He had been suffering from acute depression for a few months. Sometimes he had a desire to commit suicide. But he used to suppress this wish and make his mind understand that everything was ok.

But that evening was a different one. He took his time to think about it properly. It was evident to him that no one would be affected if he passed away. So he planned to die that very night. He would devour all the sleeping pills at once.

The night was stretching its dark arms all over the city. The darker the night was getting, the more Jyoti Dadu was feeling a dilemma. He looked at the starry sky over the window. He stared at the bright stars affectionately. They would be there once again shining brightly the next night, but he would not be here to see them. He tried to enjoy this celestial beauty for the last time.

It was true that he had been watching them since his childhood. But it was not the right time for him to get nostalgic. He prepared himself. He took the leaf of the sleeping pills in his quivering hand.

But something was definitely missing. He remembered that he used to swallow the pill with water from a bottle. He got up to fetch it. He would have to go downstairs to the dining room.

Suddenly he heard his telephone ringing in his bedroom. Who could call him at this odd time?

It might be his last chance to put the receiver near his ear. He was certain that he would take the pills after taking the call.

2

‘Hello, Jyotirmay Dutt speaking’

‘Are you the postmaster Jyoti Dadu?’

‘Yes. Who are you? Is it a time to call someone?’

‘Actually I am in a big problem. I have written a letter. But I don’t know if the spellings are correct. Can you please help me? You are a Bengali, aren’t you?’

‘What the hell are you talking about? You should consult a psychiatrist immediately. Don’t ever disturb me. Go to hell!’

Jyoti Dadu put the receiver down. He was feeling exasperated. He had planned to die peacefully. But this awkward phone call made him very

angry. It must be the useless son of his bosom friend Asit. Asit also liked to irritate people.

But it was also possible that he was someone else. There was no dearth of young loafers in his locality. They always got happiness by causing pain to others' lives.

He waited patiently for another phone call. He knew the nature of these prank callers very well. He decided that he would teach him a lesson before his death so that the prank caller would not dare to disturb him again.

'Tring Tring Tring', the phone rang loudly. He was sure that it was him. While responding to it, he found out that his prediction was true.

'Dadu, how can I write a letter to the aliens? Do they understand Bengali?'

'Do you want to get beaten up? What have you started? Do you know who I am?'

'Please don't take it personally, Dadu. I think the aliens don't have post office. Is it true, Dadu?'

'*@#%^**#* Go to hell. If you ever call me from this number, I will be compelled to inform the police. Is there nothing called law and order here? What do you think of me, *@\$%##***?', the old man prepared himself to use some more foul words.

'Dadu, my brother is very naughty. I had told him to find someone who would check the language of my letter. I am very sorry for this disturbance', it was a sweet voice of a young lady.

'**^%\$###** put the phone down.'

‘But Dadu, you should not have used these slangs on me. I am deeply hurt. I know that my brother is mischievous. But you don’t have the right to treat me like that.’

‘I have done the right thing’, Jyoti Dadu put the receiver down.

But something was stuck in his heart like a thorn. The lady was actually right. He should have behaved with her with modesty.

He looked at the ‘display’ and dialed the number. He could hear a mechanical voice, ‘The number you are dialing does not exist. Please check the number and dial again.’

He waited once again to get a call from the other side. But nothing happened. The more surprising thing to him was the lack of existence of the number.

3

Actually the number belonged to ‘Shiver 105’, an FM channel. RJ Sayak used to prank call various people. The call records were supposed to be part of a popular program ‘Glad To Disturb’. The female voice was a suitable example of his versatile range. That night, Jyoti Dadu was the prey to his prank call.

That night Jyoti Dadu could not die. He vowed to commit suicide one day. But he had a duty to perform. He would apologize to that unknown lady over the phone before his death.

Beware of Dog

The place was very lonesome. There was standing a large house in a corner of the village near the foothills. It almost looked like a palace. A small family lived there.

That night was a special one. A theft was about to happen in a few minutes. Jack was ready to trespass the house and test his fortune. Jack had stolen for the last time long ago. It was the ideal time to prove his capability again to himself.

The night was stretching its blanket over the hills slowly. He had a low possibility to get caught as it was very dark due to the new moon. He had been keeping a careful watch over the house for a few days.

He looked at it for the last time using his binocular. The writing engraved on the gate was shining in neon light. It read, 'Beware of Dog'.

Jack smiled sarcastically reading those ridiculous words. He knew that there were no dogs in the house. He did not see any dog in the last few days. It might be the idea of the house-owner to write something deceptive to keep the thieves away from it. Surprisingly there was no guard also to protect the house.

Jack went surreptitiously towards the house hiding behind the bushes and shrubs. He was a modern thief, well-equipped with gadgets, a knife and a revolver. They would come handy in need.

He was able to reach the barren field behind the house. There was a glass window facing the field. Jack lighted his torch and found out that the glass was broken a bit near the latch. He entered his hand into it to open the window from inside.

Suddenly he screamed loudly in immense pain. He felt that an unknown beast was piercing its sharp teeth into his hand. The torch fell down from his other hand. He strived hard to free himself but all his attempts were in vain.

‘Help! Help!’ he cried out. He brought out his revolver and fired some shots into the window with his left hand. Suddenly the whole house was illuminated with lights.

The revolver ran out of bullets missing the target by a large margin. Someone scolded loudly, ‘What’s happening? Leave him now. I ask you to leave him now.’

A hellish wild voice rumbled and suddenly stopped. Jack felt that the beast had released him. He brought his hand out of the broken part of the window. He was still in deep pain. Two powerful hands were squeezing him from the behind.

‘Tie him tightly with the ropes to the post’, a female voice ordered, ‘We will hand him over to the police.’

The man squeezed Jack with more power. After a few moments, the lady came in the scene with a rope.

Jack looked at her face facing towards the light. There was a mysterious smile lingering in her lips. ‘Let me see your hand’, she ordered Jack before touching his hand tenderly, ‘Oh my gosh! The flesh is about to get out of the skin. Why did my father bite you so harshly?’

‘Your father?’ Jack was terrified as well as astonished, ‘Are you all werewolves?’

Everybody burst into a frightening laughter.

'No, he is mentally ill. He thinks himself a dog. But we never imagined that his dentures would be so sharp.'

Jack was thinking that 'Beware of Man' would have been a better warning.

The End

