

Neumonia and Other Sketch Stories



Dhimant Parekh

Preface

A Sketch Story, as defined by the authoritative Wikipedia, is “a piece of writing that is generally shorter than a short story, and contains, very little, if any, plot.”

It continues to say, “the sketch itself may describe impressions of people or places. They may focus on individual moments, leaving the reader to imagine for themselves the events that led to this occasion and to wonder what events will follow.”

I have found my stories to mostly adhere to this definition and hence have termed them as “sketch stories”. These stories have not gone through any formal editing procedures, and I have put them here in the manner in which they evolved in the original manuscript.

Whatever you feel about this work, I urge you to leave your thoughts at this e-book’s website: www.sketchstories.com

Dhimant Parekh

December 2008

Dedicated to my Father



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First Edition: Jan 2009

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Neumonia

"Your test starts now", hollered the class teacher.

"I will speak out the word, you have to write it down on your paper.

And remember, leave one finger-space distance between each word.

I will say the word only two times", the teacher screamed while looking at Amit who was seated in the first bench.

"The first word is Physics (pause) Physics".

Rajani scribbled down "Fysics" on her paper.

"Next word is Biology. Biology".

Rajani wrote down "Biology" on her paper.

After Chemistry Chemistry, History History, Social Social, Independence Independence, the teacher reached the end of the list of words.

"The last word is Pneumonia. Pneumonia."

Rajani's pencil lead was almost about to break as she managed to write down "Neumonia".

She had remembered the spelling vaguely and knew that her answer was correct.

The bell rang five minutes later and she placed her pencil and the broken lead in her pencil box. The box, originally a bright red one, was shaded gray at many places due to pencil shavings and broken leads.

She put her bag on her shoulder, carried the lunch basket in one hand and started walking down to the school gate.

The auto-man at the entrance was piling everyone's lunch basket onto the handle of his rear-view mirror.

Rajani used the railing of the auto-man's seat from behind and hauled herself into the auto. Her friends were exchanging their

ribbons and she didn't have one today. She was wearing a hair-band, a colourful plastic hair-band. She had cried the other day for that hair-band but now she no longer liked it. She wanted ribbons. The ones that her friends were exchanging. Not bothering to speak to her friends, Rajani sat quietly in the auto until her home arrived.

She jumped off the auto, picked up her heavy lunch basket and climbed up to the first floor of her apartments.

Sunrise Apartments was a new building in this part of the town and was built exactly opposite a slum.

Rajani's maid, who lived in the slum, opened the door and received Rajani by removing her shoes and socks and getting her evening glass of milk with Bournvita ready. Rajani's mother was in the balcony cleaning the rice. Rajani dropped her school bag on her bed and changed into her favourite black frock. She wanted to buy ribbons from the store located at the entrance to the slum.

The maid's daughter, Shruti, was Rajani's best friend. Shruti worked with her father at the dhobi-ghat located at the farther

end of the slum. Rajani skipped her glass of bournvita milk and rushed down hurriedly towards the dhobi-ghat.

She had one rupee in her pocket from last week and knew that Shruti would be able to help her use that money to buy a ribbon. At the dhobi-ghat, she saw Shruti watching a huge tanker unload water into a big shallow tank. The water was gushing out of the tanker and creating a mist-effect around the tank. Rajani, with a smile on her face owing to this wonderful sight, walked up and stood beside Shruti.

"I need to buy ribbons", she said, turning towards Shruti.

"What? Can't hear in this noise", Shruti screamed back as the sound of the water filling the tank submerged the noise of the street.

After about 10 minutes, the tank was full and the water tanker had begun to leave.

Rajani showed the money to Shruti and told her about the ribbons.

Shruti, who spent most of her time washing others' clothes, was not too excited about colourful garments or ribbons. Instead, she wanted to swim in the recently filled tank. The tank was only 2 feet deep and was more than 20 feet wide.

Shruti jumped into the water and asked Rajani to join in. Rajani smiled and wanted to but there was a problem. She was wearing her favourite black frock. She couldn't let it get wet.

So she sat down at the edge of the tank, dangling her legs against the water surface while Shruti swam from one end of the tank to the other.

After about half an hour, Shruti got out of the tank, shivering in the cold and laughing uncontrollably. It was 7 in the evening and time to go home.

However, Rajani wanted to buy the ribbons. The scene in the auto was fresh in her mind. Tomorrow she wanted to exchange ribbons with her friends. She persisted Shruti to buy them for her. Shruti, fervently shivering by now, contemplated going home and changing into dry clothes. But then, her home was on the other end of the slum and the ribbon shop was on the other. She

decided to skip going home for now and instead went along with Rajani to buy the ribbon.

At the store, there were 3-4 customers buying cigarettes, paan and other assorted items of daily consumption. The shop keeper had blue and red coloured ribbons. Rajani, after a few minutes of conflicting views inside her mind, decided to buy the blue ones. Shruti paid the shopkeeper, sneezed once and ran home. She was already feeling the cold gripping her.

Rajani held the blue ribbon carefully in her palms and headed home. A warm soup and bread was waiting for her. It was cooked by Shruti's mother, who worked as a maid and as a cook at Rajani's home.

Shruti, in the meanwhile, reached home and changed into drier clothes. She also reached out for her old blanket and decided to lie down for a while. The sneezing had become more frequent.

The next day morning, Rajani and her mother were sitting in the balcony. Rajani's mother was tying the blue ribbon onto Rajani's hair. The watchman from below screamed out that the maid would not be coming that morning.

"Why?", screamed back Rajani's mother.

"Her daughter has caught pneumonia", yelled the watchman.

"Pneumonia. Why can't these maids ask their children to be a little more careful?", she said aloud to herself as she tied the knot of the blue ribbon.

Rajani touched her blue ribbon gently.

As she picked up her school bag and walked down to wait for the auto-man, the word Neumonia kept running in her head. She was quite confident that her spelling was correct.

Raw Mangoes

"May I come in", the 14-year old boy peered from behind the curtain and asked the man sitting inside.

The hut was an old one and light forced its way through the dark paper sheets pasted on the areas where windows were supposed to be. The result was an orange-ish hue that lit the small hut in certain areas and allowed darkness to rule in other areas. Incense burning in a corner enhanced the divinity that the hue was trying to build.

Chacha was a 40 year old man. He had remained a 40 year old man for everyone in the slum for many years now. His familiar white vest and blue checkered dhoti fluttering in the mornings was a part of the slum's landscape. No one knew his real name. Not even Uncle Anthony who had a star hanging outside his hut right in the middle of the slum, adjacent to the shanty Lakshmi temple. The temple was built next to Uncle Anthony's home by the rioters, thinking that this would drive him away. No one dared to harm Uncle Anthony. He was the favourite of everybody and

the eldest member of the slum. Miscreants had propped up a canvas using bamboo sticks and placed an old calendar carrying a picture of goddess Lakshmi. No one had the courage to remove this rickety new place of worship and thus the temple had come into existence. That was last year.

"Come in beta, you have come at the right time. Your mother was supposed to send you last evening but I had some other work. Your brothers rarely visit me these days. I hear they are making good money out there in the bad city world", he coughed and spluttered.

"Yes Chacha, both of them are now earning Rs. 50 in a day! My mother is very happy. She even has money to buy bangles this Diwali", he gleamed with a boyish happiness.

Chacha nodded his head in a smile and looked upward and murmured a thank you and a god-bless in one breath.

"Chacha, I have now started playing cricket with the school boys. They agreed to let me play after I smashed the ball into the walls of those apartments."

"That is very good beta, but now its time you started earning more for the family and cut down on your games".

The little boy nodded gravely and understood. He had to also share responsibilities with his other brothers. He was earning only Rs. 10 in a day. But games were fun. Pictures of him hitting the ball loftily into the mango tree conjured up in front of his eyes. He could smell the mangoes fallen down and saw them wispily appear amongst the dust that moved in a stream of light across the hut. Everytime Chacha spoke, the dust particles in the ray of light fluttered around angrily and settled down once he became quiet. It was clear that the dust didn't like Chacha speaking.

"Have you played cricket Chacha?", the boy asked and thought about Chacha holding the bat in a queer manner. The boy mischevously smiled at himself at the funny image he made in his mind.

"Ofcourse, I was the one who taught every kid here how to play the game", Chacha grunted and bellowed. The dust particles were clearly unhappy and took a lot of time to settle back into

their mundane activity of going from one end of the light ray to the other.

"Will you teach me also Chacha? I can hit sixes but I get out very easily. Everyone laughs when I hit a six. Why do they do that Chacha?"

Chacha was busy opening his old cloth bag. It was, in its early days, a bag with blue and yellow stripes running horizontally across it. Now it just looked plain grey. Chacha removed a bottle of orange liquid and placed it on the mat. He then removed some tools and a few pieces of cloth.

The little boy still saw the image of fallen mangoes amidst the patterns made by the flowing dust particles. He wanted to reach out to those fallen mangoes, pick them up and smell them. They were his. He had hit the six, after all.

Chacha got up and brought a small flat piece of rock from the corner of the hut, below the old plastic table with three legs, and placed it at the centre of the mat. He sat down next to it.

"Chacha, have you ever eaten raw mangoes? My mother says adults don't eat them. They are not good for the stomach. Is that true?"

Chacha continued working with his old tools. Occassionally, he looked at them with disgust and occassionally he looked heavenward for some sort of support.

"Beta, come here now. Its time". Chacha made the boy sit on the mat and placed both his little tiny arms on the rock. With one swift swerve of the axe, the work was done.

Swabs of cloth and tincture were applied immediately and the boy continued crying. He cried for long, eventually ending up in an occassional shiver.

"You can now earn 50 rupees beta, just like your brothers. People will shower more sympathy on you. A little kid with no hands always earns a lot. Your mother will be very happy now. All her 3 sons earning so much", Chacha smiled with satisfaction and praised the lord.

The little boy was happy to hear that. 50 rupees in a day. That was too good to be true. Although the tears covered his face, the happiness started making its presence felt.

He could never a hit six again though. The fallen mangoes lay still amidst the dust. He could no longer pick them up.

But adults don't eat raw mangoes. Mother had said that. He didn't need those mangoes anymore. He was an adult.

He smiled and hopped out of the hut.

Churchgate Fast

"8:10:23" said the digital clock hanging between two metal rods from the asbestos roof.

The two ":" and the last number continued to flash every second and seemed like it would be the last thing to stop on this planet.

Anil climbed down two stairs at a time, making it to the platform just in time for the 8:13 Churchgate fast. Borivali station at this time in the morning was a sea of people. A sea that converged towards the railway tracks when the train arrived. A sea that went into a low tide the moment a train departed. Colours blended within this sea. An individual, for a change, took solace in being a part of this sea. There was a strange sort of comfort in being a part of this fluid mass of aspirations and disappointments.

"8:12:55" flashed the digital clock. The lady on the speaker system announced the arrival of the next train. He stood at the same spot. A spot he had marked out well in the past 2 years.

Two steps to the left of the chai-shop at the back. That's exactly where the entrance of the train would position itself. The train slowly made its grand metallic entry and the crowd bustled, many entered the train, many got out of the train. Within a few seconds, the train began to pull itself away from this crowd which seemed ready to cling-on to the train if given such a chance.

Anil boarded the train in the same fashion as every other day. A lunch box in one hand and the Marathi newspaper in the other. His cellphone in the right pocket and the wallet in the left. He always kept them that way since it was easier to verify periodically, just in case a pick-pocket decided to try him.

Going a few seconds back in time to the scene at the station just moments after the train's arrival. Raju and Shankar were two kids living in the small kuccha houses along the railway lines. Raju was 14 and Shankar was 13. They both walked along the rail tracks every day to pick up plastic bags. The kids made fun of Raju since his surname was Gandhi.

"Full name", they would ask.

"Raju Gandhi", he would say and they would burst out laughing.

"Gandhi picking plastic bags! Who has heard of that?!", they would scream and laugh.

That was a joke heard often along the railway tracks.

Raju too would join in the laughter, not quite aware of the significance of his surname in this country.

Today, the two boys stood between the last and the penultimate bogeys of the train. The metal rod connecting the two bogeys was in front of them.

"What are you doing?", Shankar asked him.

"Tying this thread between the two bogeys", Raju replied.

"Why?"

"Shut up"

"Tell me why."

Raju quickly tied a small piece of thread from one end of the metal rod to the other. The string appeared to be connecting the two bogeys.

"Today evening, after picking up the bags, we shall wait for this train and check if the thread is still there", Raju said.

This made Shankar very happy. Happy for a simple reason that he had something to look forward to in the evening.

Anil held the railing in the train with one hand, while his other hand held the lunch box. Sandwiched between his arm and his body was the newspaper. He waited with a little impatience for the train to reach Andheri. Around 6 months ago, he had seen her board this train at the Andheri station. She had noticed him too, but never bothered to acknowledge his presence for over 2 weeks. For 2 weeks the two exchanged glances, and a little bit of tentativeness. Finally, he had made the effort to talk to her when she disembarked at Churchgate. That was 6 months ago. A week later, they had their first meeting near the nimbu-pani walla at Flora Fountain. A month later they were officially girlfriend-boyfriend, as the boys in Anil's building termed such 'affairs'. But today was different. In fact the past one month had been different. She was always too busy to meet him. And whenever she did meet him, she always came along with a colleague.

"Busy cant meet 2day" was the standard SMS that flashed on his cellphone every day for the past week. Today she didn't board the train at Andheri. He bent a little and looked through the sliding bars of the windows of the moving train. No sign. He

dialled her number and rested his cellphone between his ear and shoulder. Busy tone. 5 minutes later, the same SMS.

"I don't think it is going to work out Anil", she had told him a few weeks ago

"But why?", he had stammered and clenched his fist in frustration.

"I just don't feel it. That's why."

"What do you mean you don't feel it? What about all those walks? Remember our conversations every evening at Juhu? What was that?"

Silence.

"What was that dammit. Why dammit. Why?", Anil was a sensitive person.

"That is how it is Anil, and please stop screaming."

"Screaming? That is a bother? Oh, sorry, I didn't know that"

"Behave Anil. We are mature adults".

"Oh, ofcourse we are. We are bloody adults. We do such things nonchalantly"

"I had never seen this side of you"

"What the...? I am at fault here? Wow, this is great. I am sorry for my flaws lady"

When he lost his anger, it was a little late. She had left in a huff. After that day, it was the same SMS. Every day. No phone call, no conversations.

She was a nice girl. Conservative to the extent that conservatism was demanded by her family and society. Outgoing and the so-called modern girl. Hard-working and a typical Bombay girl. She knew how to get her way around in this city of mazes. She had risen the hard way to be an assistant sales girl at the fashion boutique in Churchgate. Anil was a nice guy. But not really the kind she wanted. She liked him initially, but he turned out to be a very soft-spoken, docile guy.

She had developed a liking towards him, but was never able to turn that liking into something as powerful as love. After debating a few days with her own self, she had finally broken the news to him.

"18:14:43", the watch at Borivali continued to do its work. The train from Churchgate arrived. Raju and Shankar waited for the train. The bogeys aligned themselves perfectly so that the metal rod connecting the last two bogeys was exactly where the two boys were standing. The thread was intact. Both took pride in it. An unexplainable thrill overcame the two kids. Their creation had

worked. A thread tied by them was actually still there even though the train was out the whole day. Incredible. A rationale mind or the mind of an adult would have been unable to comprehend this strange source of joy. But for the children, this was special. It was something they had let out in the bad world and it had returned un-harmed.

Anil was now frustrated. The whole trauma was taking its toll in his relations with his family and friends. For one last time, he messaged her if she would see her the next day.

She couldn't convince herself completely that she didn't really like him. She knew she did. She thought about it all day and finally messaged back - "Sorry for past behavior. Want to meet you. Miss you."

He replied stoically, "When. Where."

"Chrchgt stn 5 pm" came the reply.

Anil wore his special shirt. The one that he had got stitched last year just before his first job interview. The lunch box in one hand and the newspaper in the other, he waited at the Borivali station.

"Let me tie the thread today", Shankar said.

Raju looked at him and stepped back. Shankar tied the thread, muttered a prayer for its safety and stepped back.

The train left the station in an eagerness that seemed to reflect Anil's sentiments.

Andheri arrived. No sign. A frantic call from her - "Sorry sweetheart, got late. Will reach office late. See you in evening. 5, don't forget".

He accepted the apology. His heart settled down to beat at a normal rate.

She had to cook for her younger brother today since her mother was visiting the temple.

"This delay had to happen today", she muttered to herself. The train was missed and so she waited for the next one. During the day, there was unusually high traffic at the store. Many people shopping for the upcoming festive season. 4:30 and no sign of the end of the day.

5:00 and she was talking to a customer.

Evening came fast for Anil. He reached the station, glanced at his watch and at the big digital clocks all around. 5:00:01 flashed the clock, with the ":" blinking irritatingly with precise regularity.

She wanted to call but couldn't. Anil waited. He knew this was it. She didn't want to meet.

Boarding the next train to Borivali, he shut off his cellphone in disgust. The train reached Borivali and the kids were there, right next to the tracks.

With smiles on their faces, the two boys ran towards the last two bogeys expectantly. The thread had snapped and was not to be seen. Shankar felt dejected. Raju was disappointed and swore to himself that he wouldn't allow Shankar to tie it tomorrow.

The train left the station in a slow fashion.

Anil walked back trudgingly towards the overhead bridge.

Raju and Shankar loitered back across the tracks, kicking each others plastic bags in turns.

All three blended into the surroundings and it was difficult to distinctly identify anyone in this sea of people. A sea which gave that much needed solace.

The Final Enclosure

A pencil nestled cozily between his left ear and the slightly balding head. A black frame of spectacles, plastic, rested on his nose and peered at you intrudingly. His hands were holding a canvas, trying to fix it on the easel.

The nearby table was old and had numerous cracks on its surface. Each of the gaps on the table depicted a unique color, caused due to those drops of colors that failed to attain their life's eternal goal of being impressed upon a canvas; and instead just meandered away aimlessly through the table's undulations. Like lives that never made it to wherever they were intended to. Like lives that left a colorful memory behind, but not quite like the lives that many others know and praise about. He fixed the canvas, looked at it ardently for two full minutes and then nodded as though the world was now known to him. A few moments of silence passed by, during which the sun light streamed in as fast as it could, as though rushing to catch the start of a performance.

The pencil was brought out and rested back in singular motions of the left hand. Sketches were made, erased, made and erased

again. Memories of his life flashed in his head, faded away, returned and faded away. Perfection was just a flourish-of-the-hand away. Yet, that was the most difficult part to attain. After hours of toiling in the studio, with the fan switched off lest some of the colors should dry and lose their luster, he stepped back to watch what his pencil had done. The black strokes of graphite had managed to carve out an enclosure on the white canvas. An enclosure that looked like a small room with brick walls. Just four simple brick walls, no windows, no doors. He looked at it and smiled. This was what he wanted. An enclosure, a safe place from the exceedingly vulgar white of the canvas. The canvas was vast, was too white and was strange - all at the same time. The enclosure that he had sketched, however, was a finite area, a place within which he knew every contortion of the fabric, its every layer and every minute detail. The four walls drawn depicted a room as seen at an angle from above. The sketch was done with a few furious strokes of the pencil. This time, colors were not needed. The black of the pencil had done the job. Any more color would have dragged his creation into the borders of profanity.

Black and white it had to be. That was how it was meant to be. The colors come in, make their presence felt, and then bid

goodbye. The final truth, however, continued to lay in the two distinct shades of life. There was nothing gray beyond a point. That point had finally arrived. He laid down his pencil, removed his spectacles, folded them and placed them on the old table. A table that had witnessed decades of life's colorful moments. Sad moments, happy moments. Now was the time to abandon the canvas, and to accept that little enclosure. An enclosure which promised peace and eternal security from the garishly white of the canvas. He had to leave the canvas, he had nothing more to do there. He embraced the four walled room, lay down on the cold white floor, and took his sleep. A sleep devoid of any colors. Just a four walled enclosure which carried him away from the canvas. And the usually moist palette never wept again. It never bled again.

One Fine Day

This was a long time ago. An era of less problems and more life. Yeah, that long ago. It was a rainy evening and the rickety woody tea stall was right next to me, spewing warm steam which immediately diffused into the sheet of rain drops. Or perhaps merged with what was its own, after all.

A few minutes passed, some more rain drops fell, and the tea cups were plonked on the bored aluminium tray, which lay mutely on the wooden plank serving as a makeshift table top. A grey coloured torn and wet cloth lay alongside, seemingly in grief with the tray. Every now and then, spattered drops of water would perk up the tray and the cloth would just stir up, absorb the drop and go back to a lull.

The tea cups were sticky, with unwashed stains of unknown ages. It was sticky not to the extent of being annoying. It was sticky to the point of making one feel comfortable. The tea was sweet. A sweetness which, in any other scenario, would have made one cringe, but here it made one feel glad. Perhaps it was

the steam, the rain, the cups, the tray, the cleaning cloth or the tea itself. The gamut of things were just right for a perfect sip. And then, there she was. A little over 5 years old hopping around in a dirty frock which had the word "beautiful" arranged in the front. The letters were broken at places, but the word was conveyed nevertheless. Perhaps it is the character of any child to wade through all veils.

She hopped up, placed her little fingers on the tray and looked at us. Another beggar, the thought sprang up in the head and was doused by another sip of the sweet tea. The evening was too precious to be distorted by a blip such as a beggar usually is. The tea-cup holding hand lay the cup down, went inside the warm jeans pocket, fumbled for a coin, carefully analyzed a two rupee coin against a one rupee coin, and brought the latter out in a serving gesture towards the child.

The child looked at it, didn't understand what was going on and looked back in earnest. For the first time perhaps, the outstretched hand of a giver was embarrassed, not benevolent. The tea sipping was resumed and the child broke into a smile. It was not an evening of hierarchy. It was an evening of equal right to a wonderful evening.

She looked at the glazed plastic bottle filled half way with toffees. She looked at us and commanded for a chocolate; a gesture that was not supported by pleading or guilt. It was a rightful request, like a child makes to a parent. The tea sippers obliged and the toffee was devoured. With the same hop and skip, she turned around, dropped the wrapper nonchalantly and walked away in the evening. The kettle steamed a bit, whistled a bit and the last sip of the tea was the sweetest.

A Flying Tryst

"Indian"

"Indian", read the second line as well. He went further down.

"Indian"

"Jet Airways". Ah, there it was. He narrowed his eyelids to follow a horizontal line from that word. "ETD" - he found it and then saw the time "20:30" next to it and the word "Delayed" hanging in there.

A good 2 hour delay in his flight. And he couldn't see a smoking lounge anywhere in the vicinity. He picked up his backpack lying against his feet, lugged it on his shoulder like a school student in a hurry, and searched for a chair to sit. The airport was mostly full and the announcements over the microphone made it seem as though there were double the number of people than actually present.

The chair next to him was not occupied and instead newspaper pages were strewn on it in a distraught fashion. Probably someone pissed about a delayed flight, he thought to himself. He picked up one of the pages and started reading about Hyderabad's page 3 circuit. He noticed that the same pictures were in the Bombay edition of the newspaper as well. Giving no further thought to that, he looked around for a coffee shop.

Scanning the crowd, he noticed her furtive looks. That was a worried face, amidst the sea of tired and all-knowing faces. She would look around and then touch her bag lying beside her, more so to ensure that it was not stolen, yet. He stared at her and she repeated the act of throwing furtive glances around and touching her bag for assurance.

He found it amusing and timed his next gaze at her after precisely 5 minutes. And there it was, that worried look and that by-now customary reaching out to the bag. He allowed himself a smile. At the same time, her eyes fell on his smile. She didn't quite understand why he was smiling at her, but caught off guard, she let a smile escape her worried face.

He hadn't expected this and didn't quite know what to do next. In a momentary lapse of thoughts, he looked right through her, as though he was smiling at someone else.

Instantly he realized it was a stupid thing to do. An opportunity lost.

He started rummaging through the newspaper pages, occasionally stealing a glance with increasing curiosity. In a manner that appeared to be solely to assure him, she continued to check on her baggage with alarming frequency.

"Maybe a schizo", he thought to himself. "But a pretty schizo", he nodded to himself.

"Is someone sitting here?", the voice came from above him. He looked beyond the horizon of the newspaper and there she was, the worried face replaced with a question.

"Er. No."

"Okay, I was just looking around and found that you look like a dependable guy. You atleast don't look like a thief"

"Excuse me?", he tilted his face a little, indicating that he wasn't sure what he had heard was right.

"Yeah, you don't look like a thief. What time is your flight?", she enquired with more authority than he had expected.

He had no reason to answer that, he thought to himself. But before that thought was processed and churned out by his brain, his mouth had already released the words "Eight thirty".

She looked at her watch in a singularly fast motion and blurted "Good, I can leave my bag with you, you don't mind?"

"Yeah", his mouth was no longer relying on his brain to dictate terms.

She kept her bag right next to his legs and told him she would be back in half an hour.

"Okay", he said, and at the same time was shouting inside: I don't even know this person, What the hell am I doing, What if it is a bomb or something like that?"

But all that came out on his face was a smile and a nod. She walked a few paces in the direction of the coffee shop, stopped, turned around and with a concerned expression came jogging back to him.

"Would you want me to keep the bag on your right side? I can do that if you want"

"No", he smiled. Schizo was indeed the word. "Perfectly fine here".

"Sure?"

"Yep!"

Feeling relieved she walked away and he found himself glancing at the bag. Maybe a baggage note with address/phone number? No such luck. He continued reading the newspaper and suddenly she plonked herself next to him, fuming.

"All okay?", he ventured slightly

"Can you believe it? They do not have an internet cafe here! I mean, this is an airport for god's sake. And no internet!"

"Yeah, I checked. No internet. Had some important work?"

"Yes, but its okay. This is pathetic, what a city!", she was serious and fuming. Her eyes glowered with anger and all he could do was continue his quest for unraveling the personality sitting next to him. He smiled again.

"You can use the Jet Airways lounge there, they have an internet kiosk. You can use my boarding pass to get in, I can wait out"

She turned towards him with a jump and a turn. The chairs shook a bit.

"No thanks. It is very nice of you to offer, but I don't want to trouble you that much", she looked at him and gave a wide smile.

He didn't know what to say, and as an act of the messiah, a squeaky voice blared on the microphone with some announcement. That was enough time for him to gather himself.

"What do you do?"

"Me, teacher. I mean, I am a teacher in a government school in Kolkata", she said hesitantly and then immediately added, "Of course, before that I was a software engineer".

She always added that last line. A teaching profession was usually considered as one which people ventured into only as a last resort. But she was different and wanted to convey that.

"Okay, so you going to Kolkata", he added for want of anything better to say

"Yeah, I missed my train today"

"Oh! How did you miss your train?"

"I always miss my trains", she said nonchalantly and pulled her bag from his side towards her legs.

He smiled, partly for that statement and partly for that act.

"What do you do?", she finally returned the favour, much to his relief.

"I work in a BPO, you know, call centre stuff"

She started gazing at his hair, and used her fingers to push his front locks backwards. He leaned back a little, with absolute surprise in his face and thoughts.

"You work in a BPO?", she asked while still fixing her gaze on his head.

"Yeah, why?", this was getting stranger than what he had expected.

"Because all BPO people lose their hair very fast. I have read that. My brother is also in a call centre and he has no hair. But you don't have any such problem", she expressed with a confused look.

He broke into a light laughter. He found that innocence extremely appealing. He used his palm to brush against his hair and said, "Maybe I am not that efficient at my workplace, so my hair is still in place", and again broke into a laughter.

The joke was lost on her and she was busy listening to the announcement. It was her flight and it was time to go.

"Thanks a lot for helping me out with the bag!", she said to him.

"Bag? Oh yeah, no, I mean no problem. Time for your flight?"

"Yes, got to go now"

This time he had to think fast and thought to himself: I have nothing to lose anyway.

"Hey, let's stay in touch. What's your phone number or e-mail?"

"Sure Mr. BPO with a full head", she said with a smile and removed a pen from her purse.

He checked his pockets and pulled out his boarding pass. She wrote down her e-mail id on the back of the boarding pass.

"I won't write my number please, you know I am concerned about my safety and all that, even though I know you are a nice guy", she shrugged and smiled.

"Absolutely., absolutely. I understand. Besides, e-mail is great!", he smiled, flashing the boarding pass back at her. She turned around, keeping that bag close to her and jumped away into the sea of travelers and their colorful bags and suitcases.

The entire conversation went in a loop mode in his head and he couldn't stop himself from smiling at various junctions. Especially the part about the BPO and the hair bit.

Shortly, it was his flight's turn to depart. He lugged his bag on his shoulder, stood in the long line, looked around for one last time just in case she had missed her flight and then reluctantly boarded the bus that carried him to the aircraft. He got off the bus, stood in the long queue, casually handed the air crew member his boarding pass, who tore it at the perforated edge, and returned the smaller section back to him.

He sat down in his seat, buckled himself up, turned the boarding pass around. The e-mail address was gone, it was written in that section which was torn by the air crew member while boarding. How stupid of himself he thought.

In another flight, on board to Kolkata, she decided to check her mails the first thing upon landing. Just in case, she thought, he had managed to go to the Jet Airways lounge and sent her a welcome mail. She smiled at this thought before letting sleep takeover her anxiety.

A Full Circle

He walked out into the open verandah and sat down on his favourite arm chair - a 1940 London made resting chair. Gifted to him by his brother-in-law on the day of his wedding, it now occupied a corner of the red-oxide coated floor of the verandah. In its prime days, it had occupied centre stage in the living room and was the prized possession of everyone in the family.

The verandah was a large area opening into the front garden and facing the single creaking gate of the house. It was covered by a sloping roof which was made of layered mud bricks and supported by two metal rods on either ends. The arm chair was on the left most corner and a rice cleaning casket lay fallen at the centre of the verandah.

He sipped on his coffee tumbler and called out to his wife Sujata, as was his habit for many years now.

But today was different.

"Is the phone ringing?", he asked towards the kitchen. At the age of 68, his ability to hear had dwindled a bit and his dependence on Sujata had increased greatly.

"No. That's the third time you have asked in the past 10 minutes", Sujata screamed back from the kitchen.

"Why do men always treat women as messengers", she muttered under her breath as she scraped the last remains of the coconut and put them into a cooking pan. A small burst of smoke erupted and vanished in seconds as Sujata covered her mouth with the end of her saree. The crackling of the mustard seeds and the rain outside enhanced the smell of her dish.

"Why can't he call? She has been in the hospital since yesterday morning, and yet he has not called even once today", he spoke with an aim of trying to get some comfort from his wife.

"Why are you always so impatient? Why can't you wait like normal people? Such matters take time", she raised her voice to conquer the sound of the rain and the cooking.

"What has patience got to do with this? You will never understand. All I am saying is that he should call. It's about time."

"How do you know it's about time? You men are the limit. Expect everything to be done your way", Sujata stirred the pan with a spoon and put the stove onto a medium flame.

"Can you come out please? I can't shout all the time in this rain"

"Two minutes and your snack will be done"

The rain continued to fall incessantly as it had done in the past few days. Sujata came out from the living room into the verandah with a plate of snacks.

"Why aren't you eating?", he enquired while gingerly tasting the offerings on his plate.

"I will. But later. Only after he calls", she stated in a manner that made her look like she was admitting to a crime.

"See? I told you. It is about time. He should have called", after a pause he continued, "If only he was here right now, I would have shown him what responsibility is all about"

"What do you know about responsibility? You haven't brought back our umbrella from that no-good friend of yours."

"Don't talk about Dutta like that. It is not his fault. This rain has prevented me from going to his place to collect it"

"Why can't he come and return it? It is an umbrella after all, he can surely come in the rain under it!"

"You women will never understand what it is to adjust and compromise for others' needs. It is always about you and yourselves. That is why so many homes break apart. Learn to adapt and adjust and the world will be so much nicer."

"So now it's Dutta who takes precedence over me? I never thought that would ever happen. It's my bad fate. My father was right. You were never going to be a good family person", she broke into one of her usual complaining moods.

"See? Again. Again making this whole issue out of nothing. Please check if the phone has been kept properly. Maybe he is trying and unable to get through"

"I checked it when I got out of the kitchen. You think it doesn't matter to me?"

He kept quiet, deciding that arguing further would be of no use.

The rain clouds were showing no signs of slowing down and the pattering of water on the verandah's roof created a humming orchestra that filled the silence created by the lack of conversation.

After a few minutes of silence, as he finished the last sip of his coffee, the phone rang. A sudden rush of adrenalin filled his legs and he got up from his chair. Sujata had by then reached inside to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello Ma, everything is fine. It's a baby girl", said the voice on the other end.

Sujata smiled as tears of happiness flowed down her eyes and she found herself unable to say anything. He took over the phone from her and heard the news from the voice on the other end.

He had decided he would scold his son for not keeping them informed all this while, but the news overwhelmed him. He was a grandfather now and all he wanted to do was to see his beautiful grand daughter.

"They are coming in two days time. Both mother and daughter are fine", he quivered and lay his hand on Sujata's back. That gesture of his hand had been his most explicit display of affection in public towards his wife. She took his hand in hers and said, "Let us get the room ready for them".

He walked back to the verandah to pick up his coffee tumbler. The rain continued to fall heavily. But the rain drops from the edges of the verandah's roof fell down at a slow pace. The drops fell at a very slow rate against a back drop of heavy and fast rainfall.

He suddenly thought about his life. It now felt detached from the rigours of others' lives. From the travails of others' youth. His life seemed to him like the slow drops falling off the roof edge. He smiled to himself and hurried back in as Sujata shouted out calling him a lazy husband.

The Yearning

"Indira nagar, 1 ticket", she said to the conductor.

The bus was full and she was running 5 minutes late.

The conductor ripped a ticket with apparent belligerence from the pile in his hand and thrust the crumpled piece of paper into her hand.

She opened it, saw the "Rs. 5-50" on it, folded it neatly and slid it under the strap of her watch. It was going to be at least 20 minutes before she reached the mall.

With a blank mind, she saw three bus stops go by. People climbed in and some people climbed out. An eerie sort of camaraderie seemed to have developed between the regular bus-travellers on that route. No one spoke. Yet, everyone seemed to know everyone else.

It had been six months since she had taken up the job at the mall. Her elder cousin had managed to get her that job as a sales girl.

Her stop arrived. The familiar people got down with her at her stop and she glanced at her watch. 10 minutes late. The staff was supposed to be at the mall half an hour before it opened. She started walking briskly towards the other end of the main road, with her cheap leather-looking plastic hand bag hanging on her right shoulder and her high heels maintaining minimum contact with the asphalt.

Cars sped by behind her as she opened the door of the store and the air-conditioning enveloped her into this new world for the remaining part of the day. She quickly changed into the saree which was a part of the uniform and put her name badge on.

Coffee was served to all staff members in small plastic cups. She gulped it down and rushed to the women's jeans section. The picture of a petite fashionable woman loomed large behind her. "Goodness Jeans" screamed the banner above the woman with the punch line "For today's woman of substance".

She knew spoken English and had tried in vain to understand how the word substance fitted-in with the woman on that poster.

"Size 26, straight fit please", said the girl to her while looking in the distance. The girl was in her teens, roughly the same age as her daughter. She visualised her daughter wearing jeans and a smile of happiness momentarily passed her face. Rummaging through the pile of size 26 jeans, she found one with a straight fit and handed it to the girl.

The girl had walked-in holding hands with a guy of around her age. She looked at the couple and wondered how it was to be in love. How did it feel to hold the guy's hand whom you looked up to and felt comfortable with. She had never had the luxury to feel that all-encompassing emotion. She had got married at a young age and after years of never understanding her husband, her husband had fled leaving her and a young daughter to fetch for themselves.

Love must be wonderful, she thought to herself as she looked further in the pile of jeans to find another color. Around the same time, the guy came up with a popcorn bag for the girl and smiled

and put his arm around her. A warmth engulfed both the girl and the lady.

She wanted to ask her how it felt. Although she knew she would never get to experience it, she just wanted someone to explain to her how beautiful it really is. The intimacy of the couple left her in a state of unexplainable happiness for a long time.

Her thoughts went back to her daughter. She was now of a marriage-able age. Life would now change for her, just like it had done for her mother so many years ago. She didn't want her daughter to be deprived of being in love. But alas, she knew that people of her stature could not afford to dream of a luxury like love.

Love, for her, was defined and exemplified in this huge mall which had hundreds of couples spending a lot of money. Her exposure to this fine concept of love happened for the first time when she took up this job. Her neighbourhood did not seem to have any trace of it.

The young couple walked on, hand-in-hand. She sighed and put the pile of jeans back onto the rack. Her parents had found a suitable boy for her daughter. She had to work overtime to earn

that extra money to be able to arrange for a decent wedding. Suddenly, she was grateful that her daughter had not seen this world of love. Else, it might have been difficult to convince her to get married.

The by-now-all-too-familiar words filled the thinking voids of her mind and her work for the day went into full swing.

"Size 28, regular fit, boot-cut, how much, Size 26, where to bill, excuse me, comfort fit, low-waist, black color, lighter shade, alteration, trial room". All these words were her companions for the day.

The word love never appeared. Never would.

She was, after all, just a sales girl in a mall.

The New Star

"Yes"

"No", said the boy who was wearing corduroy trousers that didn't fit him. The beedi that he was smoking made him look a lot younger.

"I am confident", said the boy in rags.

"How do you say that?", spoke Corduroy.

"I know for a fact that that spot there shall have a star when I die", Rags mumbled as he pointed his index figure up at the sky.

"And?"

"And that...and that stars govern our fate"

"And?"

"And that star next to my empty spot is my mother"

"Go on"

"The brighter one, there, is father and the one right next to it, glowing dimly is my brother".

There was a small pause which seemed like a light year as smoke meandered through Corduroy's mouth up into the seamless sky.

"You do remember seeing your family go up in smoke don't you? At the factory furnace?"

Another pause. Some more beedi smoke in the air. The sky looked hazily white for a moment until the smoke cleared.

"Yes, and that is why those stars can be seen now. Those stars were not there before the furnace blast", Rags let a tear roll down and perch upon his artificial smile. A smile that he had learnt to deploy against his inner urge to scream out in sorrow.

"Tough luck pal, it could have been anyone".

"No, it had to be my parents. My brother. It had to be them".

"Why?"

A hesitant moment passed by as the siren of the factory rang out its shrill shriek in the background. The 12:00 o' clock train chugged by and the rails seemed to have livened up temporarily.

"Why? Why do you say it had to be them?", Corduroy repeated, lighting another beedi.

"I had sinned", said Rags as the last carriage of the train crossed the visible horizon.

"What did you do dammit?"

"I know it was because of my sin that they died."

"Care telling me what you did instead of going on like this?", Corduroy flicked the ash onto the wild grass below. A single blade withered and ended its existence.

"I smoked a beedi for the first time that day", Rags admitted, with a rouge of shame on his face.

Suddenly there seemed a deafening silence. The rambling of the train could be heard yet again even though it had travelled a few miles by now.

Corduroy tore open the muteness with a raucous laughter.

"Your parents had to die because you smoked your first beedi?", he blurted amidst seemingly endless chuckles.

"Yes"

"No"

"That is how it is. You commit a sin, your near and dear ones pay for it. Someday, sometime. But they pay for it".

The laughter died down gradually and the smoke hovered around for a moment in anticipation of further conversation.

"You telling me that this fourth beedi that I have smoked is a sin and my family will pay for it?"

"Yes"

"No"

"Yes ofcourse"

"No ofcourse. You forget that I don't have a family. No parents, no siblings. Nothing. Everyone dead before I came here".

"Then maybe your close friends will pay for it. Who is your close friend?"

"You", Corduroy spoke and burst into laughter yet again.

"Then I have to pay for it. I am glad to know. I want to get back to mom, dad and brother soon. I am grateful to you", Rags smiled his first genuine smile since a long time.

"Listen, enough of this nonsense".

"This is not nonsense. Someone has to pay for every sin. Otherwise there will become more of evil than good. That will not be good."

Corduroy looked at Rags with a little suspicion.

"You okay?"

"It will not be good. The world can't have more evil than good", Rags continued talking to himself.

"Alright, alright. Hey, listen. Okay, fine, someone will pay for me smoking my beedis. Now, let's go home".

"You remember the furnace don't you? The smoke?", Rags stared into the distance and spoke.

"Yes"

"You know, I don't remember that. I remember only the screams."

"Listen, please lets go home. Its too late"

"Yes its been late enough. I still hear the screams. In my dreams, or should they be nightmares? No, they are not nightmares. Because in nightmares I don't get to see my parents and brother. I see them only in a dream right? A dream where they all scream and die."

Corduroy went up to Rags and held his hand.

Rags brushed it aside and continued looking into the distance. The screams were getting louder. He looked up and the stars seemed to be flickering with more gusto than before.

Corduroy was sweating by now and wasn't able to get Rags out of his trance-like stance.

"Evil cannot be allowed to be more than good", Rags chanted on.

"Shut up will you?", Corduroy slapped Rags across his chicken-pox scarred cheeks.

Rags looked at Corduroy and smiled. The 1 o' clock train was approaching and the rails were busy once again.

"I will pay for your sins brother. And don't forget to look at that empty spot. I shall be there soon", Rags whispered and threw himself onto the rails. The train was just in time.

Corduroy screamed in horror. The beedi fell from his fingers. The train too joined in the mourning with its clangorous bellowing.

After a full 30 seconds, Corduroy looked at the remains of his close friend. A close friend who had to pay.

He looked up at the sky at the empty spot. Nothing. He looked harder.

A faint glow appeared. A star flickered at that very spot. The ones around it suddenly seemed to be glowing brighter. Corduroy fell on his knees and wept.

He wept as the millions of stars in the sky above looked down at him.

A Minor Affair

"Hold the bags", Rachna told him.

Amit was holding a cigarette in one hand and his car keys in the other.

He took the bag from Rachna while she opened the door to their home.

The house was in an up-market residential area and had a small lawn at the entrance. The couple had moved in here after Amit got his new job.

Rachna laid the bags on the open kitchen's platform. Amit picked up the day's mail and called out to Dai ma.

Dai ma was a middle aged lady who lived in the outhouse which was in one corner of the backyard of the house. She had an 8 year old son Raju who lived with her in the outhouse.

Dai ma got tea for Amit as he glanced through the day's headlines.

"Shiv is coming today for dinner. He is in town"

"What? Why does he keep visiting us so often?", Amit frowned.

"Come on, he was my best friend in college"

"Yeah, he was indeed your 'best' friend", Amit laid out some sarcasm as he read the Happy Diwali Offer advertisement and sipped on his tea.

Dai Ma asked Rachna for some crackers for Raju on the eve of Diwali.

"I will get them, since Rachna madam is going to be busy with a friend of hers", Amit said stoically with his eyes fixed on the news.

"Come on, he was your good friend too, wasn't he?", Rachna cosied up to Amit and sipped on his tea and gave him a silly smile.

"Sure he was. Used to hang around with you more though. Anyway, I think since he is coming we will have to get some liquor as well. And yes, I will buy the crackers for Raju."

"Come to think of it, we haven't bursted crackers since the time grand dad passed away three years ago".

"Yeah, we haven't. I think I will make Raju's day. We'll burst crackers with him", Amit said and proceeded towards the main door.

Rachna started preparing dinner while Dai Ma got down to cutting vegetables and cleaning up the kitchen floor.

Raju went to a nearby school and Amit paid for his education. Rachna and Amit took good care of the maid and his son. They treated them as family.

Amit returned home with a bagful of crackers and with Raju following him with a gleeful face. Raju was wearing brown shorts, which were made after altering to a large extent Amit's old

college trousers. His shirt was half-sleeved and he wore a black thread around his neck.

Dai Ma looked at his son and felt proud. Proud that she was able to give him a decent education and a good place to stay.

Amit lit another cigarette as Raju took the bag of crackers to the backyard.

"So, when is your darling friend coming?"

"He must be here any moment. You know him, always late".

"He isn't late when he has to meet you"

"Will you cut it out please? He is going to be here and you would do well if you behaved a little more civil than that", Rachna frowned and wiped the batter from her hands on her apron.

Within minutes, the door bell rang. Amit opened the door and Shiv was standing on the door mat with a bunch of flowers in his hand.

"Your friend is here", Amit screamed to the kitchen.

Rachna came out of the kitchen as Shiv and Amit hugged each other and Amit led him to the living room.

"Hey baby, you looking as beautiful as ever", Shiv said as he gave her the flowers.

"And you haven't changed one bit I must say", Rachna smiled.

Amit lit a cigarette and switched on the television. Cricket was a solace in times like these.

Time passed by and the conversations between Rachna and Shiv could have put Britannica to shame in terms of volume.

"And remember our date? Dinner at that small little restaurant", Shiv chuckled.

Amit looked at Rachna with a raised eyebrow. He had heard this before a million times.

Rachna ignored Amit and continued giggling with her friend.

The wine bottle came out and all three raised a toast on the eve of Diwali.

"I think I will go out and burst crackers with Raju". Amit left the living room.

Rachna and Shiv continued talking about their college years. Amit could no longer stand her best friend.

Raju was sitting alone counting the number of flower pots in the small box.

Amit smiled and got the matchbox and incense sticks ready. Within half an hour they ran out of crackers.

Amit returned back to the living room to find that the conversation was on the same old plane - Their numerous dinners, their drives and so on. Sometimes Amit wondered as to why Rachna hadn't got married off to Shiv in the first place. Atleast he wouldn't have had to go through this torture.

Brushing the thought aside, the only way he could quell his anger was by burning a cigarette. He lit his cigarette, tried to make his presence felt and then went back to the backyard.

Raju was sitting alone, this time counting the number of burnt sparklers lying in the corner. Amit called him and asked him to go join the boys on the street. Atleast that way Raju would have a better time.

As Raju started hopping towards the main door, Amit called him back and gave him a 500 rupee note.

"Go buy whatever you want".

As soon as he gave the money to Raju, Amit didn't feel good about it. He knew that he hadn't given Raju the 500 rupees out of genuine care. It was more out of anger towards his wife and her best friend. The little child ofcourse had no such idea and that made the feeling worse.

Raju pocketed the money and ran towards the street. However, the boys had finished bursting their crackers and instead were now collecting paper and making small fires.

"Do you have any paper with you? We are making a fire here. A big fire.", one of the boys asked Raju.

Raju looked at the fire burning the wooden twigs and bits of paper. He removed his 500 rupee note and threw it into the fire. That was the only contribution he had.

The 500 rupee note immediately started curling itself up as if it was trying to protect the face printed on it. Before the note could curl itself completely, the printed face was burnt to ashes.

"Happy Diwali" screamed the boys and Raju joined the little dance around the fire.

Amit lit another cigarette as Shiv bid his goodbyes.

"Happy Diwali", said Amit looking straight into the distance.

"Happy Diwali", said Rachna as she smiled and put her arms around Amit.

As Amit and Rachna stood at the doorway watching Raju dance, they realised that most of the lights in their home were switched off.

The small fire on the street created a faint glow on their faces. Life continued to make its journey through myriad emotions and moments.

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