



SHORT STORY: SUBHASH CHANDRA

A Practical Joke

Year 1985. Locale Govindpuri, a lower middle class colony in South Delhi.

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Tarshi and Shirish had married four years back and were full of zing. They were always joking and playing tricks on each other and then laughing uproariously together. They were a fun-loving, vibrant couple for whom life was a never ending sport.

She taught English to senior classes in a nearby school, not from compulsion but for the joy she got out of being with the prankish children. She herself was childlike. Her laughter was crystal and tinkling; her heart brimmed with love. She was the daughter of a wealthy business family who had initially objected to her choice because Shirish as the Accounts Officer in a private company did not match up to their status. However,

they gave in to their pampered daughter's – an only child -- wish, accepted Shirish and the wedding was performed on a grand scale.

One day she said to Shirish, "Let's play a practical joke on her."

A girl used to call their number, asking for the landlord's son.

"How?"

"She seems to be a moonstruck girlie. You know sometimes I have heard their conversation from the extension in the other room," Tarshi said.

"But that is unethical."

She ignored him and went on, "Their talk is so cute! He whispers sweet nothings as you used to in our courtship years. Why did you stop? I miss them. I don't like you."

"Then do one thing."

"What?"

"I will call the boy from downstairs. You imitate his girlfriend from the extension in the bedroom. He will fulfill your desire."

They lived on the first floor as tenants and were one of the few in the neighbourhood who had got a landline connection – it was a rarity at the time. Even their landlord had not got it. Sometimes people came with humble faces to make a call. Though it inflated their bill, they did not mind.

"You rascal!" she said and pounded his chest with a fist. "I have the opposite in mind."

“What?”

“You’re an excellent mimic.”

“Oh, I get it.”

“Bright boy, you can masquerade so well.” Tarshi said. “And you can invent things off the cuff.”

Shirish became thoughtful. Then he said, “This can be dangerous, Tarshi.”

Actually Shirish was reluctant as he did not trust himself. So often his eyes would drift towards pretty girls while driving the scooter, with Tarshi on the pillion. At times he even turned his head. But she was too trusting; she could never imagine he could cast an erotic glance at any other girl. However, he believed in marital fidelity and maintained it. Adultery remained only at the level of thoughts.

“What do you mean?”

“Suppose I fall for her,” he laughed.

“I will kill you,” she aimed an imaginary pistol at him – in the manner of children at play. “Now seriously, I trust you more than I do myself.”

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A couple of days passed. He thought about it and realized his heart was not into it. Apart from his vulnerability which he feared, he also had moral scruples. It was prying into the young things’ feelings. He made another attempt.

“Tarshi, remember the guy who was hiding behind the ramparts of the building in Lodhi Gardens and watching us kiss. How did you feel?”

She went quiet. The idea was dropped. For a few days neither of them talked about it. But then one day, she brought it up again.

“Look here Shirish, we are not doing them any harm. In fact, we have been helping them through our telephone. And I am asking you to do just for a couple of times. Imagine what a conservative couple living here with a telephone would have done. They would inform the boy’s father and he would have made pulp out of him.”

“And what,” asked Shirish, “if his father gets to know that we have been playing cupid between them... abetting their affair? You know he is a loudmouthed crude fellow. He would insult us in front of the neighbors and throw us out of his house. Will you like that?”

“How can they find out? The children never will. ”

He became reflective. Tarshi took his silence as acquiesce.

“Now remember what you have to do next time the girl rings up. Tell her in your own voice that you are going to call the boy. Let a few minutes elapse and then become him,” she instructed him cheerfully.

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He thought he would exercise restraint in his conversation and do it only twice or thrice. But there was a flutter in his heart. Flirting with another girl, young and nubile,

even though as somebody else, was a prospect which made his blood course faster in his veins. Their own days of courtship were four years stale. Besides, Tarshi was never great with amorous verbal responses. Whenever he said anything erotic, she would go all coy and pink. And that was about all.

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"I will call him," Shrish said, cupped the mouthpiece and waited. Tarshi rushed to the bedroom to listen in on the extension.

Then he spoke impersonating the boy's voice in his sing-song style, "H-a-i-llo. "Why didn't you ring up all these days?"

"Mom was at home in the evenings also."

"Oh, when are we meeting?"

"We do it every night."

"What do you mean?"

"Okay. Disconnecting. Somebody is at the door."

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After four days, she called again around 6:00 PM, as usual. Her mother went out to spend time with her friends in the neighbourhood and gossip with them. Shirish was back by then from his office.

"Yes, you were saying ..." Shirish said.

"I remember. I meant I see you in my dreams."

"But what do I do? I hanker after you every minute of the day.

"Simple."

"What?"

"You dream about me," she laughed softly.

"That is hardly a consolation," Shirish whined.

"Then talk to your parents. That's the only way."

He did not respond.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"I know. You don't have the guts. And one day your father will lead you by the neck and you will marry somebody else."

"Never. I will sooner die than do it."

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

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After six days.

"H-a-i-ll-o"

"I warn you never to speak bad things."

"Achha, now I am bad"

"Don't be mean. I don't like you to talk about dying and all. Promise you will never say such things again."

"Okay."

"Just okay?"

"God promise."

"You know sometimes Saraswati Ma blesses your tongue and what you speak comes true."

"You are always scolding me," Shirish said in mock complaining tone.

"Don't be angry. Here, I will cheer you up. Pout and I will give you a kiss," she said.

This sent a sexual flutter through his body. He thought about it. What was he doing? But he actually pouted and told the girl about it. There was a smacking sound from the other end. He began to tremble with desire and got overwhelmed by the moment.

"Come on you have not thanked me. You don't like it."

"It is not full kiss." What was happening to him he wondered?

"What do you mean?"

"You are stingy. I would have liked a lip-lock."

"Okay, here it is. Pout again." And this time the smacking sound lasted longer and was louder.

"Ah! What celestial pleasure! Make it like this always," he said.

"Greedy pig. I won't. You will be spoiled."

"No, no. Promise." He had slid into another persona altogether. Tarshi did not exist, the house did not exist. Only she and he, somewhere in the ethereal space.

"I will think about it," she laughed.

"That is the problem. You think too much."

"*You* do that. Not I. And the bloc is on your side. I have no speed breakers in my way. I know, Mom will agree when your parents bring the proposal."

"I am waiting for the suitable opportunity."

"Don't spend a lifetime waiting for an opportunity. You have to press matters. I can't live without you."

"You see, I can tackle Mummy," Shirish said. "It is Papa who is rigid and authoritarian."

"You are a grown up for God's sake. Show some spunk for a change."

As soon as the conversation ended, Tarshi rushed into the drawing room and kissed him wetly. "You are fabulous, sweetheart!" She had forgotten that she had asked him to do it for a couple of times. She was enjoying it all hugely. Shirish, of course, had begun to long for the call. He savored her delectable voice and words.

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After five days.

After a half an hour conversation, she said, "Okay, we have been talking a long time. What will Bhaiyya and Bhabhi think? It is so embarrassing. He wanted to tell her they didn't mind.

"When will you call again?"

"Soon."

"How long is that soon going to be?"

"Greedy pig!" she said and disconnected.

When Shirish put down the receiver, he heard a whoop of delight and clapping. Tarshi rushed in, radiant and beaming. "You are terrific! You better try your luck in Bollywood. I am sure you will cause sensation."

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Again in two days on a Sunday morning.

"Mom has gone to the nearby temple," she said. "Will be back in ten minutes."

"Oh." Shirish exclaimed disappointedly.

"Just wanted to tell you next Friday, my friend, Rishika is getting married. I will be leaving home around 10:00 AM. Can you meet me at this time in the market in front of the chemist shop?"

"Sure. See you tomorrow, sweetheart."

Tarshi came into the drawing room gamboling. "You're doing a splendid job! Really, she never got a whiff of what was happening."

"Thanks a lot."

"Now what? Will you go?" she asked mischievously.

"Are you crazy?"

Today was Friday. Tarshi left for her school, as usual. He also got ready and left after ten minutes.

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In a long while, the girl had not rung up. "Hope, everything is alright with the girl," said Tarshi.

"Yes. It is rather unusual."

After two months. Tarshi said, "What do you think could have happened?"

“Three possibilities. They might have seen through our game. Secondly, his bullish father could have fixed his marriage somewhere. Thirdly, they might have hatched a plan to elope.”

Tarshi felt bad that she had lost her regular fun. “How I wish, she would call again.”

Strangely enough he never referred to the calls and his impersonation. In fact he had gone unusually quiet. Tarshi thought that perhaps, he felt pricked by his conscience that he had been doing something wrong. After all it was she who had forced him into it. But then another development took place. Shirish started coming late from office once or twice a week.

“Hope, everything is alright at your office?”

“Lots of work. All the financial issues have to be closed. Balance sheet has to be prepared. I am sorry.”

She swung from his neck. “Silly boy! Why should you be sorry? Don’t I know you? I am sure, it will last only a month or two.”

“Oh, yes, yes.” But it became unending.

He remained quiet and spoke only when Tarshi asked a question. She worried for him.

One day he said over dinner, “The new Boss is making my life hell. He wants me to put my signatures on transactions that are illegal. This is how these bosses go Scott free, and get their subordinates into trouble, if there is an expose.”

“Don’t sign those things. What can he do?”

“Lots. He can make it impossible for me to function. Pick holes in whatever I do. Further overload me with work and then complain to the head office that I am inefficient. He can make me lose my job.

“Oh.”

“As it is he has burdened me with examining the audit reports of last ten years to see whether all the objections raised by the auditors were met. This imprisons me in office when he and the others have left.”

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The atmosphere at home has become heavy and somber. There has not been any call from the girl in months and they have almost forgotten about her.

One evening, the boy comes up. He looks morose, downcast. Tarshi feels sorry for his woebegone face. She sits him on a chair and serves him Pepsi in a glass.

He keeps staring at the glass for a long time. Then without taking a sip, he raises his head and says “Bhabhi, I feel sorry for you.”

“What? Why?” She is stunned.

“Bhaiyya is a bastard!”

She gawks.

“He has snatched my girlfriend.”

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