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If Only She KnewSubhash Chandra

Lipi curses herself. She is responsible for what has happened. He has turned into a vegetable. No interest in anybody, anything. There is an alarming desolation in his eyes. They are bereft of hope. He spends most of his time on a chair in the balcony where he is brought by Lipi. Left to himself, he would keep lying in bed. He is on long medical leave from college.

If only she had not been crazy. If only she had realized the rationality of his arguments. But the idea had taken hold of her and she had not been open to logic. Now, he inhabits another world – she has pushed him into it.

But regret is a futile feeling.

#

“Where’s he?” she mumbled half-awake when in the dead of night she turned on her side and found his part of the bed empty.

She looked around the house. The door of the bathroom was ajar. In the kitchen, the zero watt bulb was straining to keep the objects faintly visible. He always switched on the tube light when he made tea for himself at the unearthly hour of 3:00 or 3.30 AM. He had this habit of visiting the washroom once and was unable to go back to sleep. Then he would settle down with a book and the cup of tea in the drawing room. In panic she rushed to the balcony.

“Aah!” Thank God, there he was, standing still with his hands on the iron grill, bent forward a little.

“What’re you doing here at this time?” she asked him a little more stridently than she had intended to. Then in a contrite voice, she said, “You gave me such a fright!” and gently brought him to the bedroom. He did not speak a word.

#

“Why can’t we buy a car?” Lipi said.

“Because we don’t have the money and you know that.”

“We can take a loan from the bank. It’s so easy.”

“But we will have to pay EMIs and the interest is hefty.”

“So what? We have just one child. She’ll start school only after two years. By then we would have paid back a good sum.” And after a pause she added, “So many of my colleagues are dropped off at school in cars by their husbands.”

“Why should riding a scooter give you a complex?”

“And a couple of them drive their cars to the school themselves.”

“I’m sure many come by buses, too. Do they also feel inferior?”

“For all you know they do.” Lipi’s voice was becoming edgy.

“You are being mulish.”

“And you are stuck in your small town mentality. This is not Chhapra. In Delhi people upgrade themselves all the time. Here you’re judged and treated by what you possess, what you wear. A petty constable abuses and slaps a rickshaw puller for a minor traffic violation, but the same constable is respectful, if you are in a car.”

#

She had touched a raw nerve by referring to Chhapra. He had got selected as a lecturer in Hindi in a Delhi University College. His poor parents and relatives had rejoiced and blessed him. After four years of teaching, one day his friend and colleague, Manu, in the English department at college took him to his house in Lajpat Nagar. Pinak met his sister and got attracted. Lipi was exceedingly pretty and he began to visit Manu more frequently. She taught Maths in a public school and was fond of reading Hindi literature. During their meetings, they talked about literature and life and current issues for hours, without realising how time flew by. He would now look forward to Sundays. Lipi also got fond of him because of his vast knowledge of literature, his shyness and simplicity.

One day, Manu offered Pinak his sister’s hand, but added hesitantly, “Pinak, you know, we are not well off.”

“No worries. I don’t believe in dowry, anyway.”

#

Lipi and Pinak started life from the scratch. He was happy to get a smart Delhi beauty for a wife and she was glad to have a college professor as her husband.

Lipi was vivacious and frank. When she accompanied Pinak on their first visit to his home after marriage, people in the village were in awe of her. Pinak’s friends were deferential to her but teased him in private.

“A village bumpkin has got lucky.”

“We thought you were a burbak.”

“He acted like one. But he is cunning.”

Pinak just kept smiling.

“Do you people go to parties?”

“Do you dance there?”

These were their notions about Delhi life.

“No parties. We just visit our friends, sometimes.”

#

“Okay. I’ll find out from the bank,” he said reluctantly.

Those were the early years of Maruti 800 – the mid-eighties. He applied for a loan and mopped up the savings to deposit ten thousand as the booking amount.

After one year, they got intimation from the dealer in Connaught Place about the delivery of the car. Though he had taken driving lessons, he did not want to take a risk. A colleague agreed to drive the car home.

Pinak put a few things in his bag.

“Don’t act crazy. People will laugh at you,” Lipi said.

He was not listening. He also picked up a small idol of Lord Ganesha.

Lipi was taken aback. “Would you erect a temple inside the car?”

He did not answer and left home.

When the keys were handed over to him, Pinak broke a coconut, drew a Swastika on the bonnet with vermilion, placed the Ganesha idol on the dashboard, lit a joss stick and offered a prayer, unbothered with the amused onlookers.

The homeward journey began in a brand new white Maruti 800 which floated soundlessly on the road. It was a new and exhilarating experience for him. Many eyes turned to admire the white swan floating by.

But for the friend, the 14-kilometre drive to Kalkaji became a torture and he resolved never to enter Pinak’s vehicle again. Pinak sat on the edge of the seat all the way, bent forward, looking at the road hawk-eyed and giving him repeated instructions to be careful.

“Prabhat, drive slowly. Avoid ditches. Keep to the right, near the divider, so that one side of the car will be safe... be careful, don’t pass too close to that cyclist. If he loses balance, he might fall on the side of the car, leaving it all scratched up.”

Once, Pinak broke into a sweat. Prabhat had to apply sudden brakes to avoid a dog that suddenly dashed across the road.

“Prabhat, sudden braking is no good. It strains the engine and reduces its life. Besides, somebody from behind might have rammed into our car.”

“But the dog would have been crushed to death, if I had not braked.”

“So what? Their population has, in any case, exploded in Delhi.”

After that Prabhat drove at a speed of about twenty kilometres, remained glum throughout and heaved a sigh of relief when they reached Pinak’s house.

“Prabhat, come up for a cup of tea and snacks. We will celebrate.”
They lived on the first floor.

“No thanks,” he said tersely and walked off.

#

The car became Pinak’s obsession. He was under excruciating stress all the time, fearing it might get scratched, dented or worse, stolen. Even though it was insured, Pinak knew that the insurance company did not reimburse the full amount, and reclaiming the money involved police hassles, dealing with glib insurance agents, and a daunting amount of paper work.

#

“You made us a laughing stock at the function,” Lipi said irritated. They had been invited to the wedding anniversary of a colleague of Lipi.

“How?”

“Everyone noticed what you were doing.”

“I was feeling stuffy inside and went out for a whiff of fresh air. Is that a crime?”

“No, but slipping out every few minutes to check out on the car is certainly bizarre.”

“Even so. How did it harm anybody?”

“It didn’t. It entertained them; it gave them a good laugh at our expense!”

“Let them go to hell.”

#

He had started getting up an hour earlier in the morning. He would remove the tarpaulin cover and wash the vehicle and then polish it. The cleaning done, he bent down, examined every centimetre of the car to ensure there was no scratch. Then he would cover it again, go up to their flat and prepare tea for Lipi and himself.

The quality of his lectures deteriorated, as he kept thinking of the jhuggi children who were little devils. They loitered around in a group, one or two of them with a twig, or a discarded wire, or a sharp metal object which they ran against whatever they passed. Nobody could catch them, as they were swift on their feet. And if somebody succeeded in grabbing one of them and chastised him, hell broke loose; almost all the men and women in the slum gathered and hurled abuses and sometimes even stones at the very houses where the women worked as maids.

The next morning, those women walked in nonchalantly to do the work; they knew they were secure, as they did not replace one other, whatever the temptation. That was a pact amongst them.

Pinak's colleagues noticed the lost look on his face. When a friend asked him what was bothering him, he did not answer.

But actually he had begun to suffer from OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). Lipi did not know he was suffering from a mental condition and, therefore, would chide him for behaving childishly.

"What will happen, if the car gets a scratch or two? After all, you take it out every day to drop me off at school. Someday somebody might scrape against our car, or there might be an accident."

He looked aghast, as if an accident had occurred.

"You must take your words back."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I said take your words back," he shouted. "How can you utter such ominous things? Often what is spoken comes to pass."

His acrimonious tone unnerved her.

"Okay, done. Now relax."

But he did not.

"No, mention the words you spoke and then say you take them back. You have to do it properly."

Stunned, she obeyed, but felt terrible. He had become foolishly superstitious. He did eccentric things. He started putting his left arm into the sleeve of the shirt first. While bathing, he began to apply soap to the feet first, and then to the upper body. The day he deviated from this routine, if per chance something untoward happened, he blamed himself for that.

And then one day disaster overtook their lives. They had gone to Lajpat Nagar market to buy a readymade quilt. He parked the car on the kachha pavement. When they came back, the car had vanished. He let out a gasp so loud and frightening that some people rushed to them to ask if all was well. Lipi felt terribly embarrassed.

"It is gone! It has been stolen. Now what? All our money gone and we will have to pay instalments."

He was profusely sweating though it was December. Then a pavement *panwari* told him, with an expression hovering between a smirk and amusement, that the traffic police had towed their car away.

“Where’d I find it?” he asked in a shaking voice.

“At the local police station.”

They rushed there. Their car was still swinging from the crane when they reached the gate. Then it suddenly hit the ground with a thud. A man had unhooked it.

“O God, they have broken the axle, I am sure,” Pinak wailed aloud.

He talked to the traffic policeman. His pleas that there was no ‘No Parking’ sign and, therefore, he should not be challaned fell on deaf ears of the Harayana Jat who seemed singularly devoid of any feelings.

When Pinak went on and on, the policeman said blandly, “The ‘No Parking’ sign was very much there.”

“But that was not visible from where I parked.”

“You have weak eyes. Get them checked.”

Pinak changed his stance and said in a soft voice, “You see, I am a professor of English in the university. Please help me.”

He had told a lie; he thought the policeman would be impressed by an English professor. He somehow wanted to avert the challan. A hundred rupees was a big amount those days.

The policeman recalled the caning and slapping by his English teacher, Varyam Singh, at school because of his inability to memorise the meanings of the English words. “You have *bhoosa* (hay) stuffed in your head,” the English teacher would often shout at him.

“Show me your licence.”

“I don’t have it with me. I forgot to pick it up.”

The policeman announced, “Another hundred rupees fine for driving without licence.”

Pinak groaned.

But the policeman had not yet got even with Varyam Singh. “And where is the Registration Certificate?”

“That’s also lying with the driving licence,” he said, his voice quivering.

“Another hundred for this.”

Pinak almost fainted.

“You can’t do this to me!” Though Pinak’s tone was despairing, the policeman took it up as a challenge to his authority.

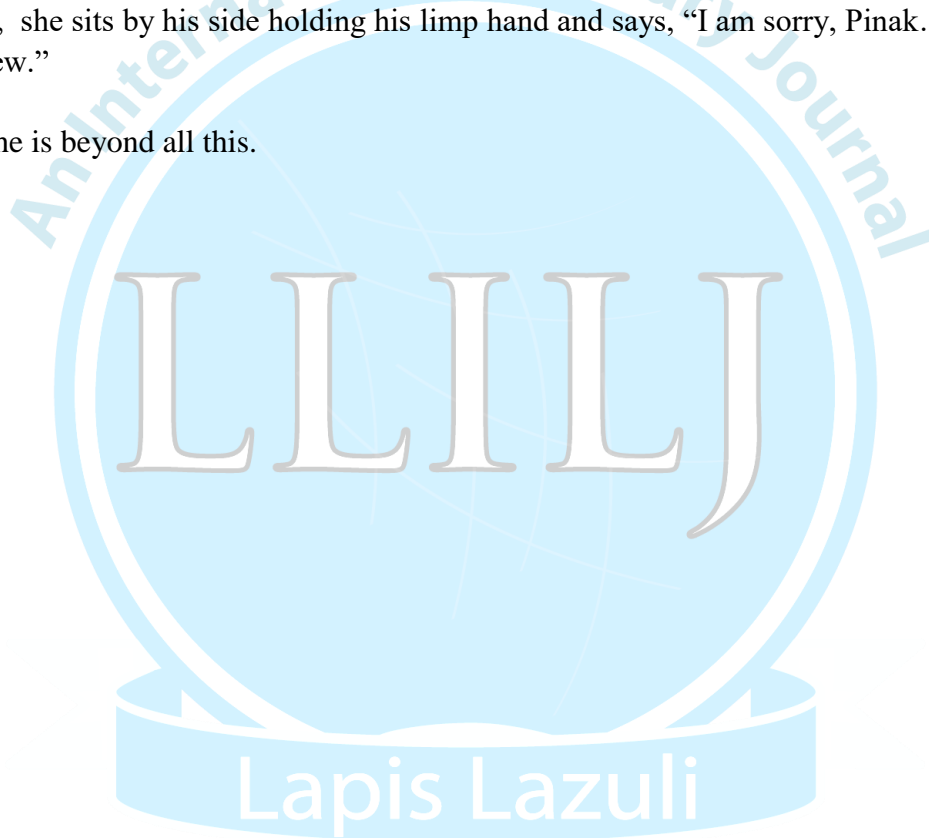
“Fish out three hundred rupees and don’t pick on my brain. Or else I’ll impound the car. Then you will have to run from pillar to post.”

Pinak was absolutely devastated as the policeman thrust on him the challan for multiple offences. He had fully avenged himself against his English teacher.

#

The balcony faces the main road. There is incessant flow of life: marriage processions, protests by workers waving red flags and shouting slogans, religious yatras with music and bhajans, and sometimes fights between motorists. Whenever Lipi gets a little spare time, she sits by his side holding his limp hand and says, “I am sorry, Pinak... If only I knew.”

But he is beyond all this.



BIO-NOTE

Subhash Chandra retired as Associate Professor of English from Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi. He has published four critical books and several research articles. He has also published short stories in Indian and Foreign journals. His maiden collection of short stories titled “Not Just Another Story” was published by LiFi books in early 2017. His second collection of short stories appeared earlier in 2018, titled “Beyond the Canopy of Icicles” by Authorspress. He is on the advisory board of the e-journal, “Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific” (ANU, Canberra).

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