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You Are the Villain, SirSubhash Chandra

“Sir, I want to talk to you,” he said as I came out of the classroom. He had been waiting for me.

Pranav was a gentle and courteous young man, serious about his studies. I never saw him loiter around with the idlers who bunked classes, teased girls, or created ruckus in the canteen.

I took him to the canteen. He looked around nervously. Students were milling around and there were teachers too.

“Sir, not here. It is too crowded. Can we meet somewhere else?”

“What State secret are you going to discuss, by the way?” I said good-naturedly. But he looked snubbed and subdued.

I felt bad and asked, “Okay, you tell me where?”

“Can I come over to your residence, Sir? I mean if you don’t mind,” he said hesitating.

I lived close to college. But my bachelor’s den was generally in a mess. Clothes, books, magazines were strewn all over the drawing room and a huge pile of old newspapers – for sheer laziness did not dispose it off -- stood in a corner of the room. I hesitated but agreed.

“Coming Sunday. Around 11:00 AM?”

#

“Coffee?”

“Please don’t bother, Sir.”

I prepared two cups. Luckily, I had some Wenger’s cookies at home.

He was downcast. He would not look at me straight and his hands were restless in his lap.

“So?” I said with a smile to encourage him.

“Sir, I don’t know I how to put it.”

“Well, try.”

“I wanted to tell you, Sir that you are... I mean ... you’re the villain in my life.”

This was a shocker!

“You sure know what you’re talking about?”

“Sir, Sheoli and I have been in a relationship for over two years, ever since we met in the first year. But she started drifting away from me after you began teaching us in third year.”

His words were laced with hurt and pain. Both of them were students of English Honours.

A disconnected thought flashed in my mind. He was handsome and his face was expressive and mobile. He could become a very good actor, if he joined National School of Drama or better still, films.

“Jesus. But what makes me the villain for you?”

“Sir, she began by praising your teaching. I, too, joined in. Of course, you are one of the best teachers we’ve had until now. Then she started admiring your dress sense—your neat and natty appearance. And then she was bowled over by the sparkle in your eyes and the tilt of your head when you stress a point. Not long before, she started going gaga over everything about you: your looks, your slim, athletic body, lively nature and most of all, your smile. She pronounced you the handsomest man on the planet. I sensed danger and I was right. She told me last week that she had fallen in love with you!”

“Oh! I didn’t know I was so attractive! Anyways, she remains your girlfriend, doesn’t she?”

“No, Sir. Lightning struck me when she said you were reciprocating her love.”

“What!”

“Yes, Sir. She said she could read the male gaze.”

“But you, too, are present in the class and witness everything.”

He kept silent. “Let me tell you, Pranav. It is her misperception. As for me, such thoughts have no place in my mind. I consider teaching as sacred.”

There was a case of moral turpitude in college four years after I joined. A teacher had indulged in inappropriate behavior with a girl. The Governing Body recommended stopping of five increments and I, as a teacher representative on the GB, strongly supported the decision.

“I know, Sir. But she has quoted several instances: when you smiled at her in a special way while quoting Fanny Brawn, ‘Love is my religion - I could die for it,’ or when you focused your gaze only on her while explaining the lines: ‘My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains/My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.’

“Pranav, she is absolutely mistaken. When I teach I am looking, but not seeing. But don’t worry. I will set things right. This can’t be allowed to go on.”

“I’d be grateful to you, Sir ... forever. She told me she was going to meet you one of these days and confess her love for you.”

“I won’t wait till then. I’ll scotch this madness right away.”

For some reason, he did not look reassured. Did he doubt my integrity? Did he think, I was a man of slippery character? Anyways, soon everything would be crystal clear.

“Thank you ever so much once again, Sir,” he said without looking at me and left.

#

When the class was over, I motioned to Sheoli. She gave me a broad smile and her face was aglow.

“Yes, Sir,” she said cheerfully.

“Sheoli I want to talk to you.”

“Oh great! When, where?” she bubbled.

“Can you come to my place?”

I did not want our conversation to be interrupted which was not possible at college. I did not want to take her to a hotel either. That would have looked like a date.

“Sure. What time Sir?”

“Around 10:00 AM. Coming Sunday?”

The doorbell rang. When I opened the door, a stunning beauty stood in front of me. Draped in a flowing crepe sari, her jet black long hair, framing her creamy face and cascading down, shimmered. She looked taller and statuesque, like a ramp model. Her eyes were impish grey-black. I felt a strange disturbance inside me.

“Hi, Sir,” she said, waving her hand in front of my face.

“Oh hi, Sheoli, please come in.” Not a good beginning to what I had planned.

As she floated into the drawing room and delicately lowered herself on to a chair in the room, I tried to keep my gaze away from her, but it often strayed to her ruddy lips, slightly open mouth and the droplets that diamonded her upper lip. She was not the Sheoli I had seen at college.

“Coffee?”

“Sure.”

As I headed for the kitchen, she followed me. “I’ll make it, Sir. Tell me where the stuff is.”

I should have moved out of the kitchen, but I lingered on. A heady smell of a blooming body held me in thrall. I pretended to look at how she went about making coffee. But a girl’s instincts are the strongest. She knows when a man is sexually attracted, but remains pokerfaced. However, Sheoli was not the coy type.

“I am not going to ‘Sir’ you,” she said chirpily.

“Why?” I said tersely.

“Because we are not in the class, nor at college,” she said and let out a tinkling giggle.

This was the time to stem the tide. I should have snubbed her. I should have reminded her of the teacher-taught relationship. But I did not, as everything around faded almost to non-existence. There was only a breathtakingly beautiful young girl and me together.

“Then what will you address me as?”

“By your first name. Just as you do. I don’t like surnames, yours especially, Chandiol.”

She was boldly appropriating intimacy and I was letting her do it. “What is wrong with the surnames?”

“They are so funny! Most of them, like Chitkara, Minocha, Bhui, Thind, etc. etc.”

I walked out of the kitchen and sat in the drawing room.

“C-o-f-f-e-e-e,” she sang as she waved the tray to the table.

The air in the room was charged. She had infused the primal feminine aroma into it. In the beam of the sunlight, filtering from between the parting of the curtains, tiny particulars were dancing promiscuously and melting into each other. I felt we were two of those particles.

While sipping her coffee, she was constantly looking at me over the rim of the mug, with a mild smile flickering around her lips.

I said, “Look here, Sheoli, I want to talk about a grave issue.”

Unexpectedly she also turned serious.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t like what you told Pranav about me. That’s not true.”

She gave me a piercing look. “Are you sure?”

“What do you mean?”

“That you don’t have such feelings for me?”

“Well ...No.”

My tone betrayed lack of conviction and the two words stood meek and vulnerable.

“Aadarsh ...” she said and after pausing for a split second to see my reaction continued, “Aadarsh, you don’t know what you want. Or maybe you do and are scared. You love me but lack the courage to admit. Don’t be untrue to yourself. Don’t be a hypocrite. You have taught us to be authentic beings. You can’t teach one set of values and practice another.”

I never imagined, she could be so mature! So sorted out!

“Let us not forget, I am a teacher. Yes ... your *teacher*.” My voice was noticeably anorexic.

“What kind of junky morality you are weighed down with? Do you cease to be a young normal man because you are a teacher? Would it be the first affair ever between a teacher and his student?”

I don't know what my eyes communicated when I looked at her. But I had lost control over myself. She came over and held my hand, patted it warmly and then kissed it. I shivered visibly and did something against my will. I reciprocated the act!

“I'd be coming over again,” she said and went away.

But she did not. It was the last week of teaching before the preparatory holidays for the final examinations. Both Pranav and she absented themselves.

I began to miss her and longed for her. I felt a strange constriction in my chest sometimes which caused restlessness.

But slowly, imperceptibly, looking back, I started to feel ashamed of myself. I lost self-esteem and the longing was replaced by a feeling of guilt. During examinations I avoided invigilating the room the two were seated in.

Time passed, and the episode paled in my consciousness. After graduation, students dispersed and I learnt Sheoli went to Kolkata to join her parents.

#

After about six months, I had an unexpected visitor. When I opened the door, I saw Pranav.

“Oh, Pranav, please come in.”

Settling down in a chair, he said bashfully, “I am grateful to you, Sir.”

“For what?”

“For our marriage.”

“How?”

“Sir, during our arguments, Sheoli had declared that she was in love with a perfect human being, one with no flaw. Then I proposed this plan and told her if she was proved right, I would walk out of her life.”

Suddenly, both of us began to feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. He stood up, thanked me again and left.

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 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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