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Sunday LunchDeepa Agarwal

If Amma hadn't called to remind him, or rather checkup if he'd confirmed the lunch with Dina aunty, Manan might have wriggled out of the plan. There were so many excuses he could cook up. Meetings piled on meetings, the Delhi traffic, inability to fix a time convenient for both of them, or just that she hadn't answered the phone.

When he had called his mother to tell her, about a fortnight ago, that he might be going to the home country on work, there had been a significant pause before she reacted. A pause that had buzzed so insistently over the air waves that it seeped into the pit of his belly. If only he could hear Amma's thoughts!

'Are you there?' was shaping on his lips when she spoke, startling him, 'Where?' she asked.

He was tempted to reply with a pause too. Because a rill of thought was already speeding through his mind. He had not wanted to go, but this meeting was important for the company. His boss had sought him out especially for it. It would seem almost whimsical to refuse.

'Delhi...' he had replied, as expressionlessly as he could.

'Delhi...' his mother had drawn a quick breath.

'Yes, Amma...Delhi.' He had forced the words out through his teeth.

Inevitably, the conversation veered to the purpose of his visit and the duration of his stay. Amma had sounded almost dispassionate, as courteous as a stranger as she elicited the details from him.

She ended with: 'Isn't it odd that they never sent you there earlier?'

He shrugged, despite the fact that she could not see him. 'They've opened an office there recently. I guess Pete felt that I'd be the right person for this meeting.'

Actually, Pete had asked, rubbing an earlobe absently, 'You speak Hindi, don't you, Manan?'

Manan had smothered his astonishment. Had his boss just assumed this? No, he seemed sure. Probably, he had overheard him talking on the phone. Perhaps that had clinched his decision.

'My boss knows that I speak Hindi and felt it was important,' he had continued.

She didn't comment whether it was a good thing or not that he had this opportunity, drifted on to another subject, which made him a little uneasy. They had nattered on about this and that and only when he was about to hang up that she said, 'Manan, you must meet Dina while you're there.'

He hoped she didn't hear him swallowing. 'Is-is she still there—in Delhi?'

'Yes, I'll share her phone number.'

'Oh...okay, Amma. Talk to you later. There's someone at the door.'

His mother would know that he was lying. That this conversation was becoming intolerable for him. Actually, his brow was beginning to feel clammy and a faint tremor building up inside him.

Resisting the impulse to pour himself a drink, he had collapsed into a chair, hidden his face in his hands. Only when the shivering stopped did he rise and open the cabinet. It was time for his evening drink, after all.

Amma was far from being the conventional Indian mother, always making demands on her offspring, turning the emotional screws to get her way. She would be justified if she did, he often thought. At others, he wished she were more interfering. Yet, inexplicably, she maintained a cautious distance from his day to day affairs.

Grow up, man, he scolded himself. It might be interesting to meet Dina aunty after all these years. There were so many unanswered questions that he had been careful not to trouble Amma with. But what really knocked him out was the thought that Amma had been in touch with her all along and never mentioned it to him.

Once they left the old country, they had never wanted to return. Neither Amma, nor he. Perhaps that nagging fear lingered, that if they did, he would find them somehow, drag them back, though in truth it seemed ridiculous to nurture those apprehensions...

And now, he had to call Dina aunty and make a plan.

‘Manan!’ The burst of emotion in her voice shook him, and the ancient pain made his eyes water.

‘Yes, aunty, it’s me. How have you been?’ How stilted and false he sounded in comparison!

‘Fine, I’ve been fine...just getting older.’ Even at the age of nine he had loved that reassuring clarity in her voice. She sounded like a woman who meant what she said and was always sure about what she wanted to do. It had taken his mother some time to achieve this.

‘So you’re having lunch with me on Sunday, aren’t you?’ He didn’t know whether to smile or feel exasperated. The two women had conspired, already made plans for the one day he was absolutely free.

Don’t be such a coward, he exhorted himself. Outwardly, he gushed, ‘Of course, aunty, we have to meet!’ Amma had sent a few small gifts for her. A couple of books, some lotions—some oddly feminine toiletries he couldn’t associate with Dina aunty for some reason. The assortment seemed niggardly now, considering everything.

When he reached the restaurant, he discovered that she was already there, even though he had decided to arrive early. He had figured it would be easier for him to recognize her, considering the amount of growing he had done during the last twenty years. She had occupied a place by the window and was gazing at the trees outside. Somehow it felt just like her, to get hold of one of the prized tables. But how could someone etch themselves so vividly on a child’s mind, he wondered, in the space of two short days?

Untidy grey hair, but a stylish looking maroon kurta and dark lipstick. He stood still for a moment, still nervous, but she had sensed him and was turning around. That—brilliant smile, he would have recognized it anywhere.

‘Manan, it’s you!’ She stood up to give him a hug, then took a step back to take a good look at him.

He felt himself stiffen, a little embarrassed that he couldn’t be as natural as her.

‘Sit, sit! How lovely that work brought you here. And...how I wish your mother could have come too. I’ve been asking her to visit for years.’ Her eyes grew shadowed. ‘It would do her good.’

‘School is on,’ he said quickly. ‘But yes, she really should visit.’ He paused and cleared his throat, ‘It is long overdue.’ Understatement of the year, the thought whispered in his mind.

Dina aunty sighed and looked out of the window again. Had she deliberately chosen this seat to have this escape? No, it didn’t seem like her. But how much did she know her, in truth. ‘She should come when she feels ready for it,’ she remarked quietly, then changed the subject. ‘Let’s order lunch, shall we? And then you must tell me all about your job.’

It struck him then, that he wanted to know all about her too. As a child, traumatized as he was, he had not questioned his mother. Trustingly, he had gone wherever she had taken him. And later, when they were somewhat settled in another way of life, he had not wanted to probe that memory. Those nightmarish days of transition. Who was she actually—Dina aunty, with whom he was having lunch today, as though she were family?

‘And shall we have pineapple pastries for dessert?’

The moment she said that, something gave way inside him—like a tightly wound spring uncoiling. The sweet yet tangy aroma of pineapple overwhelmed him, and the decadent comfort of whipped cream against his tongue.

It was sometime after they had entered her small and tidy apartment, stealthily, like the fugitives they were. He had perched uneasily at the edge of the straight backed sofa, ready to get up and run again. She had turned her round, compassionate eyes on him. ‘I’m sure you’re hungry,’ she said. ‘I have something that boys love.’

And the pastries had appeared from the fridge along with the cups of tea. He had no appetite, though lunch had been skimpy and it was time for his evening snack. The events of the day had wrung it out of him. But some kind of politeness bred into him had compelled him to silently move to the dining table, pick up a spoon and take a mouthful of the pastry. And the moment he did, he realized that he was starving. He had eaten two pastries in quick succession, a little ashamed of his greed, but unable to stop himself.

Amma had fixed her eyes on a framed print on the wall, trying not to stare. She had smiled apologetically at Dina aunty, who had said, ‘I love to watch a young boy do justice to food. Come on, your tea’s getting cold.’

He put the stopper on these memories at once, something he had become adept at, early in his life.

The food began to arrive. Mechanically, he talked about his job, about Amma's job and she listened, interjecting now and then to keep the conversation flowing. And it came to him in a rush—what a good listener she had always been.

That first night at her apartment, Amma had sent him to bed while the two of them conversed in low voices. But how could he have fallen asleep in a strange house, under those terrifying circumstances? The scraps of conversation his keen ears had captured had outraged him. How could Amma share their shameful secret with a stranger, a total stranger? He had been too enraged to cry, even. His throat had jammed so tight that he could barely breathe. He wanted to yell at Amma to shut up, but the words wouldn't emerge. Instead, he had furtively stroked the bruises on his arms, pressed them to feel the pain.

'It-it started soon after we got married,' he had heard Amma whispering.

He couldn't catch Dina aunty's reply. It was Amma who flooded her with a dark stream of words, drowning him in sadness.

Remembering, suddenly, Manan could not bear the charade any longer. 'Dina aunty,' he said, somewhat stiffly, 'what a good listener you are. It's hard to find people who will listen, rather than talk.'

She let out a full-throated laugh. 'Son, it's my job—to listen. It's become a habit. I've been counselling people for a long, long time.'

He cleared his throat, braced himself as though for a leap off a cliff. 'Is that why we came to stay with you?'

She looked pensive. 'It was more than that. At that time, I worked for an organization that-that helped women in distress. My place was a kind of a safe house.'

He nodded, wide eyed. Memories unwound rapidly like a fast forwarded film. That day—the night before actually, Amma had whispered to him at bed time to fake illness in the morning to miss school. Her eyes had been so anxious that he had nodded without questioning her. He trusted his mother more than anyone in the world.

Once his father left for office, she had thrown random clothes together, whatever she could squeeze into a small hand bag. She had smiled conspiratorially, though her eyes flickered around uneasily. When the maid went for her bath, they had slipped out into the street and hailed the first auto that came along.

He had been bloodless with fear, and bruised—from the shaking dad had dealt him the night before when he made a feeble attempt to protect his mother.

When they reached Neelam aunty's house, Amma had already begun to shiver.

'Hello!' her friend opened the door at once, but her bright smile had faded in a second. 'Are-are you okay?' she had asked, her eyes wary.

'You have to help me, Neeloo,' Amma had clutched her arm in desperation.

Aunty looked around hurriedly, then hugged Amma. ‘Of course, come sit. You too Manan. I’ll get some tea.’

He’d held the glass of juice tightly in his hand, as if he had gone catatonic. His whole body was closing up. Even their voices were faint and distant. He was longing to pee but couldn’t ask. Only when he reached the stage when the fear of soiling himself became acute, he was driven to clutch his mother’s arm.

‘What? Come!’ She had rushed him to the toilet.

After they had picked at their hastily hustled up lunch, ignoring the curious glances the maid sneaked at them, Neelam aunty’s phone had rung.

‘No...no!’ she had answered, flushing. ‘I haven’t spoke to her at all this week.’ Her face became stiff. ‘Okay, I’ll ask Jyoti.’ She put the phone down carefully.

Amma’s breath was coming quick, like someone who had been running a long distance. Her eyes were wide with fear.

‘It was him,’ Neelam aunty said grimly.

Amma pressed her lips together hard.

‘Come into my room,’ Neelam said, throwing a sideways glance at the maid.

Inside, Amma had burst out. ‘I’m so sorry, Neelam. Suppose he lands up here? We need to go somewhere else. Maybe...the railway station...leave the city...’

‘Listen,’ Neelam said firmly, catching hold of Amma’s hands to stop them from trembling. ‘I know someone who can help you. She’s kind of social worker...’

‘But how can I trouble a stranger?’ Amma had wailed.

‘Because he’ll never connect her with you.’

They had got into her car and she had driven them to Dina aunty’s.

‘Oh...’ Manan said. He drew a deep breath, his eyes stung as he said in a choked voice, ‘How lucky we were that Neelam aunty knew you.’ He licked his suddenly dry lips then smiled wryly. It took a bit of courage to ask, ‘Did anything happen after we left? Do you know?’

Dina drew her eyebrows and replied, ‘Your father...he went to Neelam’s place. She told him she didn’t know where you and your mother were.’ She closed her eyes and shuddered. ‘He didn’t believe her. He hired a detective to watch the house. She tried to ignore it, but it was terribly unnerving. Fortunately, he didn’t get on to me.’

‘We were lucky,’ he said expressionlessly, ‘so very lucky.’ Thinking of the train they had boarded—a three-day journey to a remote place in the south. Amma managed to get a teaching job in a school with Dina aunty’s help. They were always on tenterhooks, worrying that he might track them down. After a couple of years, they were able to move to the Middle East and eventually got to the U.S. ‘How can I ever thank you!’ he said fervently.

‘I was so glad that I could actually help you,’ Dina aunty said gently. ‘Your mother stayed very strong, and that made all the difference. So many women collapse and return to the same situation.’

Something twanged inside him. Three years ago, Amma had told him, ‘Manan, your father is no more.’

He had not known how to react. With sorrow for a relationship that went so wrong that he could not mourn his father, or relief that he had finally gone from their lives?

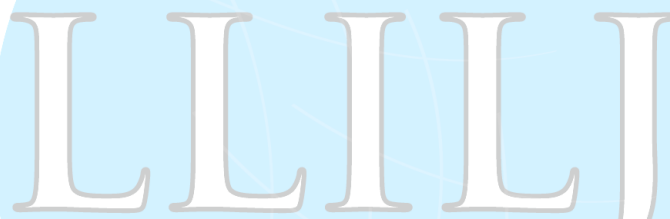
Had the past been exorcised? And yet there were times when he wondered if he was carrying those destructive genes, when those uncontrollable rages overpowered him. The shrink had tried to reassure him. Now he asked Dina aunty, ‘Can genes for violence be inherited?’

Her mouth worked as she placed a cool hand on his. ‘Son, your mother removed you from that environment just in time—trust me.’

He smiled as he tucked into the comfort of a pineapple pastry. ‘You know, I was a little nervous about meeting you,’ he confessed.

‘But I was very keen,’ she smiled. ‘You and your mother were one of my rare triumphs. If I can use the word.’

Triumph. Recalling the conversation on the flight home, he realized how appropriate the word was.



BIO-NOTE

Deepa Agarwal, nee Rawat, was born in Almora, Uttarakhand, a small town in the Himalayan region of India. Her father was a doctor and her mother a schoolteacher. One of six siblings, Deepa spent her childhood in the picturesque Kumaon region which forms the background of many of her books. Childhood escapades have provided material for stories like "Fire", about an incident when she and her friend accidentally set the pine forest around her home on fire. Deepa's family history too, has inspired books like CARAVAN TO TIBET. Her grandfather belonged to a nomadic tribe known as the Shaukas, who traveled to Tibet to trade. When he converted to Christianity and married an indigo planter's daughter, he had to leave his community and settled in Almora. Deepa did her master's in English from the University of Allahabad, where she met her future husband Dilip. She taught English in a Delhi University college for a few years, then opted to become a homemaker. In the mid 80's she took up free-lance writing and eventually made a name in the genre of children's literature. However, she writes poetry and fiction for adults as well and has translated Hindi classics like CHANDRAKANTA into English. At present Deepa lives in Delhi, India. She has three daughters, Garima, Sonali and Geetika and five grandchildren: Adya, Kartik, Aanya, Anika and Ahan.

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