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Whose Story?Subhash Chandra

Himesh and I had a long argument -- not acrimonious, thanks to him. He never lets arguments reach the tipping point.

“Nihaar, I advise you to not bring them into our lives.”

“I thought we were talking of one person.”

“She is not an orphan,” he said.

He was right. But I persisted, “Why are you against my decision, Himesh?”

“It could be harmful, even dangerous, both for them and us.”

“In what way, pray?”

He rubbed his chin and reflected for a while.

He is never in a hurry to counter, speaks in measured tones and chooses his words carefully. At times, he takes ages to complete his response stressing my patience and irritating me no end. It was for this reason I said ‘NO’ when he proposed during our courtship.

However, we continued to meet and I understood him better. I thank my stars for that. He has sterling qualities.

“They lead deprived lives. But they adapt themselves to the lacks. They trim their needs to the bare minimum and manage somehow. But they do have desires and dreams that lie buried deep inside them. If they get exposed to opulence, luxury, and excess from up close, those dreams could begin to pulsate... That’s not good.”

“Why do you love to harangue all the time?” I said. My tone was getting churlish, but he continued phlegmatically, as if I had not spoken.

“You see, the ignited but unfulfilled desires tend to generate physical aggression. Since their childhood, they have to fight for survival. The fittest often tend to be violent in thwarting situations.”

My anger boiled over and raising my voice I said, “Cut out your plagiarised socio-psycho mumbo jumbo.”

Immediately, I regretted inwardly, because I knew he was a man of impeccable integrity. He was known to be the best in the Department of Psychology, whereas I was an average Political Science teacher.

However, I petulantly announced, “I am taking her along. Period!”

He smiled. “Okay, as you like.”

How I wish he had been more assertive, even aggressive.

“But please keep an eye on her. Make her sleep in your room. She is young and the wedding atmosphere is generally free and ...err somewhat promiscuous.”

Then he paused and added, “Oh yes, one more point.”

“What?”

“I want to tell you that Freud believes all humans are bisexual by nature. If the latent lesbian in you ...”

He is serious by nature, but occasionally he attempts bizarre humour with a straight face.

“Oh shut up, you rascal! How can you be vulgar?” I said pounding his chest.

#

Finding a good maid is a stroke of luck. Most of them are exasperating in one way or the other – some talk back, some bang utensils or doors when upset and worse some of them dig into men’s pockets or pilfer stuff. Meena had come as a blessing. She was sweet-tempered, honest, and regular. She followed instructions to the T and sometimes did things on her own. She had been working with us for four years and made my life hassle free.

I had decided to gift her two light gold bangles on her wedding.

One day she overheard my phone conversation with my cousin in Mumbai about her marriage.

The next morning, Meena said, “Didi, can I ask you for a favour?”

“Yes.”

“Can you ... I mean... take me along?”

I saw no issue with that. One more II AC ticket to and fro Mumbai. The rest was on my cousin’s family – board and lodging at a hotel, local transport, everything.

“Okay,” I said promptly.

She squealed with delight. “Oh, thank you *so, so much*, Didi.”

#

The wedding went off well. Meena enjoyed to the hilt -- flitting around in her new *shalwar-kameez* I had bought her -- a smile in her eyes and *gajara* in her hair, and happily running errands for everyone. She was the female version of Man Friday. Everybody became fond of her and thanked me for bringing her along.

She was pretty and her youthful body could compete with women in Khajuraho sculptures. No surprise, Armaan, my cousin’s brother, got besotted with her and was giving her the glad eye. His

gaze chased her and he would ask her to bring him water, or tea, get his dress ironed or some such. Meena, too, was reciprocating his clandestine smiles and winks. I thought of cautioning her.

#

Then the dreaded happened. I was absolutely whacked after the day's myriad ceremonies and customs and plunged into deep slumber the minute I flopped on the bed. When I got up in the morning, Meena was still sprawled on her bed with tell-tale signs – hair dishevelled, clothes crumpled, and lipstick smudged all over her face.

When we got back to Delhi, I reflected whether I should talk to her or tell Himesh about it, but did neither, thinking she had a one off fling. She was grateful in a silent way and slipped into the grooves of work, doing things more energetically. At times, I heard her softly hum a romantic filmy song.

Every time she saw marriage *pandaal* being put in our Housing Society or watched a *baraat* passing by she got excited.

“Somebody is getting married, Didi” she would cackle.

I looked at her closely. “So?”

“Nothing,” she would smile and get busy with work.

“I will tell your mother to look for a boy for you.”

Her mother also worked in our Complex

“No, no Didi,” she said.

“Why?”

She did not answer.

“Oh, you have a boyfriend?”

She nodded bashfully. A vague misgiving flitted across my mind.

“Here in Delhi?”

She shook her head. “In Mumbai.”

Alarm bells clanged ominously.

“Armaan?”

“Yes,” she said with bent head.

He must have professed love and promised marriage to take her to bed.

“Have you two talked on the phone?”

“I gave him a call. He said he was busy and would call back.”

“Did he?”

“No. But he would, I know”

“When was that?”

“Umm ... about fifteen, twenty days back.”

“Look, Meena, don’t be an idiot. He won’t marry you; he can’t. ”

“But, Didi, he swore by God.”

“Don’t wait for his call.”

But she paid no heed and continued to ring him up, though he started cutting her calls. Then he changed his mobile number.

#

Meena had been downcast. Her face had lost colour and her eyes were dull. Now, she got late in the mornings often and looked lost. Sometimes, I heard her talking to herself. That was disturbing!

One day her mother appeared and squatted on the floor.

“Bibi ji, you’ve destroyed my girl.”

I was nonplussed.

“Now please talk her out of the madness. This love *shuv* is not for the likes of us. She is refusing to marry the boy we have found for her. She says if her love is true, that relative of yours will marry her.”

I was unnerved. “Okay, I will speak with her. Don’t worry.”

But my voice had no conviction.

#

One afternoon, I told Meena to listen to her mother. “Don’t forget you are a maid. Armaan’s family is wealthy. Reality is not films.”

She kept listening.

“He has got engaged. Women are exploited and cheated all the time. You are not the first or the last. Forget about him and move on in life.”

Suddenly, she burst into racking sobs. I placed my hand on her heaving shoulders. Copious tears continued streaming down her face. Then she stopped crying as suddenly, got up and left without a word.

#

After two months, her mother came again.

“Meena has agreed to marry.” She folded her hands and thanked me.

“Oh, good news. Congratulations.”

“The marriage is next week on Friday. Please do come, both of you, to bless the couple. Meena will be happy.”

I promised, but kept away. I gave her two thousand and one hundred rupees as *sagan*. (a token for good luck)

“From tomorrow, I’ll come to do the work.”

I did not want to keep her, but could not refuse. I wanted her and Meena and everyone connected with her out of my life.

#

Three days before Meena’s wedding, the doorbell trilled. I lost my wits to find two policemen -- an SI (Sub-Inspector) and a woman constable.

“Nihaarka Sarma?”

It was woman’s voice, which came out of a masculine-looking body.

“Yes.”

She pushed past me and the SI followed. They made themselves comfortable on the sofa.

“Yes?” I asked all aflutter inside.

“It is about you, Maddum,” the woman said.

“Me?”

The man took over. His tone was polite. “Yes, Madam. Your maid has committed suicide.”

The sky crashed on my head.

“She worked for you.”

“But she worked for four other houses in our Housing Society.”

“You’re right. We have recorded their statements. Found nothing incriminating against them. But you were very close to her. She was almost a member of your family.”

The woman kept looking daggers at me, as if I had killed Meena. Left to her, she would have hanged me without a trial.

“Well, not exactly err... not a member ...”

“But you took her along for the wedding of your cousin in Mumbai and paid all the expenses. For four days she was with you and your close relatives.”

“Okay, but what is the problem there?” my voice increasingly losing equanimity.

“You are a suspect for abetting her suicide.”

“What?”

“Yes, Maddum,” the constable said with a sneer. You will have to come with us to the police station.”

I rang up Himesh.

“My husband is coming. Please wait a little.”

“O Maddum, we are not your servants.”

The SI suggested, “You accompany us. Tell him to reach the police station.”

#

It was a gruelling session. The man interrogating me was stone-faced. He had angry, piercing eyes and his gaze bore into me. He asked myriad questions, but kept repeating one, differently phrased - why I took Meena along. According to him, I did that because I was in cahoots with my cousin's brother who made a false promise of marriage and sexually exploited her. I was complicit in her suicide.

I came out sweating and collapsed in Himesh's arms.

He patted me. “Nothing will happen. You have not committed any crime. Relax.”

The SI told Himesh, “Her answers will be evaluated. If a case is made out against her, we will have to arrest her. Meanwhile, you can arrange for a lawyer.”

After a week, only the woman constable came.

“Maddum, come to the police station.”

They arrested me and put me in the lock up. The next day I was presented in the court where our lawyer argued for immediate bail. But the Prosecutor succeeded in getting me remanded to one day's police custody.

I experienced what hell was like.

#

It is three years we have been attending the court. Today we have waited for half a day and then the judge adjourns our case, because the Prosecutor is feeling indisposed.

Life revolves around home, work place and the court. I would have joined Meena for sure, but for Himesh.

Not once has he alluded to our argument. Not once has made me feel guilty. Or alone.



Dr. 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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