

Unconscious Affection

S H A M I T B A G C H I

Bagatur Aslobian Kubit sat on the bench in the desolate park; sparkling green from the rainfall an hour back, the seat was still wet and the rust had mixed up with the water, creating a strange concoction that now gave off a metallic smell akin to that back in the factory where he worked. The water seemed to feel cool and calming on his backside, as he had flopped onto the bench, but he didn't mind; after the days of work, today he had left early, it was not yet five in the evening and the park was still calm. The sun had started to set, as if spreading its rays ever wider as it came closer to the horizon.

He knew that within a few minutes, children and adults, couples, drunkards and older folk would start straying into the park and it would get noisy; it had been that way ever since he was a little boy. He remembered the days back in time, when he would come here with Sasha every evening, at about six; about an hour left he realized as he glanced at his battered, grimy watch, that now ran five minutes late – he had been too lazy to set it right. Sasha was his playmate back then in school, someone he confided in at times; mostly too timid or too shy to speak to anyone else in school except when the teachers insisted they do a class discussion which he hated. And then he remembered the winters when snowfall would block off the approach road to the garden; he and Sasha, who was also his neighbour would sit in the little room in Sasha's house; that he remembered looked like an enormous mansion in front of their little dwelling just beside; and play monopoly or chess that Sasha's mother insisted they play – it would grow some grey cells she often reiterated – he never figured back then what grey cells would help him achieve. And then, when he was in class four, he recalled, Sasha and her parents had left – they were shifting to Krascow, is what her mother had told him. “Bye Bug” was the last of Sasha's sweet words that rang in his mind, as he had waved goodbye, at the large car and Sasha leaning out, grinning.

Her thoughts had suddenly flooded in. It was all triggered off after he had strayed into an old tattered album at his place in a dusty trunk, yesterday and also because of Misha. In the album there were pictures of his mother and him, in another photograph their uncle Gregory Tashkov, and aunt Pristinaa; and then as he turned the last page there was a photograph of him and Shasha standing together with their mothers beaming large radiant smiles on either side. Sasha had been so friendly unlike the other class mates who often bullied him or sneered at him, calling him names – thats the reason he had liked her.

He had felt the same with Misha too, whom he had first seen as she was walking down the road as he walked past, going to pay some bills one morning. He was in his late thirties, and she had been slightly younger, he would see her twice a week walking down the same road, but never gained the courage to speak to her. Only on that fateful day when it had started pouring and they all had to take shelter in front of that Indian Handicrafts showroom,

that they had first spoken to each other. She seemed to have had a sweet and docile demeanour and had asked him if he worked in the machine factory down the road seeing him in the overalls, to which he had answered yes, though he never could gather where she worked. He had felt a strange urge to know her more, to ask her if she would join him for a coffee at 'The Regal' on the 4th street, and yet his tongue seemed tied, fastened to some immobile part of his mind, the thought just staying in his mouth, not popping out, disappearing when the moment was nigh, choking of fright or maybe shame; a premonition playing out in his mind, that something embarrassing would surely happen. It was not that he had never been alone before, he could not make out if he was feeling lonely, his mother had died a few years back when he had started drinking but had been able to give up on that habit soon after. His father, he had never seen. He often navigated the hidden and unknown realms of his mind, and yet those dark streets never made it clear, whether he was looking for a companion or was missing some essential component - probably just a friend. They met on the same road a couple of times and had gradually become good friends, one afternoon even having lunch at the big red Chinese restaurant, on her request.

As he sat there children came in and started playing various games forming circles and groups, men and women of all ages came, walked around, sat on the benches, sat around the flower carpets and beside the trees, some just chattering, some glum and reserved, some jovial and laughing out loud; in all a bustle of activity. And then the sun had set and as he stared into the dark, unmoving, still at the same bench, the wet earth reminded him of his life till now and its so many long lost bitter-sweet memories.

Three months back he had met Misha for the last time. He had unconsciously, as if almost in a trance, blurted out, "My sister died young when she was just eight and I was maybe ten, I miss her a lot and see her image in you. She was a cheerful little girl named Sasha"
"Oh", that's all she had said and had excused herself, saying she had some other work which she had remembered and had hurried on. He never spotted her on the street, or at the restaurant, never again at any point in time, never again.