

Missing

SHAMIT BAGCHI



"What made him do this?", asked Gita, clutching a woolen sweater in both her hands, as if she were actually feeling the person in question. Gita Choudhury, Narendranath Choudhury and Gita's brother Dhiren Choudhury, sat at the table, Dhiren sipping a cup of coffee - it was cold outside and night had fallen, it was about seven in the evening; all the more a chilly wind was blowing outside, rattling the windows of the house.

"He will be back, you know how fickle his mind is", Narendra tried to console his wife, patting her on her back, secretly himself hoping and also praying that his words would come true. There was complete silence for the next few minutes. Gita sat there, pushing back tears from her eyes; last two days she had not been able to control herself, continuously crying - her initial reaction had been that of shock and she had not been able to cry for the first few hours after the news about her son broke. He was working in a multinational company for the past three months. He was earlier working in another firm for the past four years. "We were discussing about his marriage the other day over phone, you know?", Gita said abstractly staring at the ceiling, "Baba told me to get him married and when I mentioned this to Shishir, he just brushed it away mumbling something about his grandfather having gone crazy on account of his old age". "We thought he was always telling things like that and was bashful, or may be he was busy with his current work, not thinking about

anything else”.

“This is definitely something to do with his frustration with the job, money does not come for free, I dare say but I feel they must have been making him work like a slave or a donkey”, said Dhiren meekly, smoking a cigarette and simultaneously juggling with his coffee, with an air of final judgment. Gita shot a look of anger at her brother and then seemed to lower her eyes, as if what he said might have some truth in it. “But what donkey work did we make him do – why did he do this with us – he never once thought about us, what our state would be once he ... ”, she broke down again, getting up and hurrying into the adjacent bedroom, sobbing loudly. Naren went in with her and came out after sometime, to find his brother-in-law staring at a painting of Nandalal Bose that Shishir had copied, in water colours.

“Naren da, Shishir used to paint well isn't it”, remarked Dhiren without turning around.

“Yes that was one of his hobbies, apart from poetry; one of his books on a poetry collection had got published just last month”, remembering how happy and full of joy he had been when he had announced the news.

“Why, I never heard of this from didi, she never mentioned it to me I would have got it published from a better publisher, he would have got more publicity, more glamour you know...”, Dhiren got animated, explaining how these MNCs exploited people, making them do some menial computer work, weaning them away from the arts, literature and creative fields and said his sympathy was with them, and he hoped for the best. Then the phone rang, a definite STD tone, Naren picked it up, and spoke over the phone to Gita's uncle, he had heard this recent news and wanted to come over as he was anyway coming to Pune for some work and would also visit them for a day or two. “Who was that? Mrinal mama – he would come and give all his fart advice to you, big words, thats all a rich man can offer, anyway I'll leave now, bye”, said Dhiren, rising from the chair, pressing some buttons on his mobile phone.

“Dhiru, talk some sense, he is coming to sympathise with us and you seem to be unnecessarily criticizing him” said Naren and bade him farewell for the day. Bangalore was a place of great development, a silicon valley of riches; a legend among the greatest cities of the world. And this family had lost their son amidst this maze of development.

Mrinal Kumar Ganguly came two days later, a economist of repute, he was a self made man, who came up to the stature that he was now, by his sheer brilliance and perseverance. A thorough man with a great mind and an equally kind heart, he was also involved in a few NGOs and social organizations, working for the welfare of children and tribals near his hometown in suburbs of Calcutta. “God bless you, Ma, it seems to be an irony that I am giving you these blessings in this hour of grief”, said Mrinal, as Gita touched his feet seeking his blessings.

“He just did this the last week, see this, just, just read it, see how stone-hearted he could become” Gita gave him a crumpled letter, a pale white sheet of paper. “Let *mama* come in and settle down then tell him everything” Naren said seeing Gita's impatience.

Mrinal came in and had a bath and settled down at the dining table, over a dish of rice and fish curry, the special variety of fish called the *Bhetki* as Gita served them. “He loved *Bhetki*, he used to ask for more whenever I prepared it, he was always reclusive and upto himself, but this kind of a feeling was developing in him I didn't know”.

After the meals, Mrinal in a *panjabi*, a form of kurta and pajamas sat down at the bed, Gita wearing an old sari, sitting on an adjacent chair and Naren twirling his mustache, standing and looking out of the window at the roof of their neighbour's house, lit up with the bright sunlight, the tall upright papaya tree and the varieties of flowers and all the potted plants – everything seemed to have come to a standstill, there was not a trace of wind and the afternoon lull seemed to have pervaded all over, silencing the snores of afternoon siestas and all sounds of the day's hard work.

Gita was pale and of a fair complexion, her hair slightly greying, looking more

pale today, Naren with a slight bulge at his waists was rubbing his hands and Mrinal slim as a gymnast gave off a stifled yawn as he read the letter that Gita had handed over to him as soon as he had entered. They sat for some time and discussed the tragedy that had befallen them.

All of a sudden as the noon died out, clouds formed out of nowhere and a drizzle started. The two men were in the other room and Gita had come to her bedroom and lay down on her bed. Her mind went on to those days when she was just married and the travel from Bengal to Bangalore amidst the crying of her brothers and sisters in her joint family – she had never thought she would get married and come to such a far place as Bangalore she had earlier never gone out of Bengal, Orissa or Assam even though she was born in Orissa, then her mind drifted on to the time when she was supposed to give birth to her first child.

Drops of rain fell and immediately flowed down the tilted glass pane over the window, the mild sun from under the clouds made each drop glisten as it fell. One drop fell on the pane and stayed on as it is and did not flow down, then another fell and joined the previous one, then another and then another; yet the drops stayed together and kept sticking to the window pane as though by some magical force. Finally another drop fell and the whole thing dropped down in a split second. She stared at the distant clouds looming like imaginary giants; some dark and gruesome almost menacing, some light and fluffy, some like imaginary deities. As she turned around and took a look at the wall clock her eyes fell on the calendar photograph. She kept staring at that photograph and her eyes shifted down to the bold dates below and a shudder ran down her spine and a sorrowful expression spread across her face as thoughts crisscrossed her mind. The calendar showed a Saturday today.

That day too it was a saturday, then it had happened. She was healthy and glowing and her maid servant used to say “Have you fed the little angel today, give him enough nutrition or he will complain to your husband when you are asleep”, and she used to wave at her servant as if making a gesture to slap her. “Don't move around too much, or the little angel will be hurt”, was another

regular quip of the maid, a warning she would repeat everyday, when she left for home after work, making a serious and grim face as if some calamity would strike. And calamity had indeed struck. That very day after a bath, coming out of the bathroom as she was about to cross the threshold calamity had struck, she had slipped and fallen. Later the doctors had tried to assure her that time would be a healer, and that had indeed been so. That is when after a year, Shishir had come, a fragile little baby nurtured with great care and attention who had now done this to them, leaving them in the lurch. She felt disgusted, almost obnoxious and her stomach gave a turn as she could no longer bear this torment.

That evening Dhiren; who had shifted to Bangalore a year back to earn a decent living away from the nasty wasteland as he referred to West Bengal and those babbling rascals as he referred to the communist rulers of the state, and was working as a cashier in a bank; came in at about five thirty in the evening. "What divine grace", he said as soon as he came in, "It rains any time nowadays, we sinners are all blessed". "Where is Amartya Sen ? There ?" he said in a whisper pointing to the next room, to Gita who had opened the door. "What Dhiru, how are you", came a quip from the next room as Mrinal Kumar came into the hall room, his glasses in hand, his face lit up.

"I am fine how are you *mama* ? As usual, globe trotting".

"No, just came down from Pune", he said as they all sat down. The sun was setting in the western horizon and a red halo had spread out streaking in from the windows. The lights were on and Gita brought in steaming cups of tea and they settled down at the table - a grim lot.

"I heard about Shishir and came down to console Naren and Gita; what else could I do, the search through the police has been useless till now, they have not been able to trace anything I heard, did you give advertisements in papers?"

Naren nodded in affirmation.

"No news, he also had very few friends and did not feel at home with the younger generation and did not mix too much with them, so the few of them he knew, too could not tell much. God only knew what was going on, in his head"

said Naren.

“Yes I know I was telling Naren da that its all the company's fault and they should be taken to court”.

“But how can you prove anything, this is something more than work pressure”, added Mrinal.

“Was he always reclusive or in tension, I have my doubts on some psychological reasons now that you mention he was not socially active even after being in a leading international firm”.

“He was a reclusive fellow interested in poetry and reading too, he used to read the works of Vivekananda a lot and often visit the Ramakrishna Ashram” started Naren. “May be he was influenced by the concept of giving up everything, he used to mention it sometimes in his light jovial manner, but if you see it he took up the wrong meaning, as Vivekananda has himself written, that there are many ways of salvation or mukti, just running away from home isn't one of the best way you see” he continued.

“I agree with you Naren, but then this very concept or conflict has tormented sages and saints since ages and it is the inner self that tries to gain freedom and will do anything for it, also renunciation is extolled in almost all spiritual texts”, said Mrinal spreading both his hands and making a gesture of helplessness.

“I never thought he could have been this irresponsible, the parents who brought him up with so much dedication and care he just ditched them, in an instant of mindless thoughts, he is going to be a Sadhu, by paining his near and dear ones, no way. He will have to come back, let him wander about and feel the pangs of hunger, loneliness and being uncared for; a Sadhu is it? Lets see...” reasoned out Gita, as words came out of her mouth without a pause, she was depressed but definitely composed now, as if she had a definite idea of what her son would do and predict his every move. But the very next moment she seemed paralyzed with fear, what if her words did not come true ?

“Moni, do not fear, we will find him, he is actually had very good intentions, with very mature thoughts, he actually took such a step shows his intent – he

will be practical enough to come back or let you know his whereabouts; but it would have been beneficial to you and him and many others if he had taken a different outlook, there are so many destitute children and impoverished millions who can be given some form of succor and help – he could have joined a social cause or some NGO – why did you never tell me that he was of a different mindset – I would have spoken to him, anyway I was very busy for the past few years and couldn't come down to your place too, it sometimes happens that we get carried away by our own problems so much...”.

“We sometimes thought we would speak to you, about him but it never materialized”

“Do you feel the current trend of over-burdening in the professional life has anything to do in this case, I have a strong hunch, though I am not suggesting that he was not a capable person”, said Dhiren looking directly at Mrinal Kumar.

“That is not a sure reason, firms do extract more than what they pay you for, it's a question of choice, you want to work, work; else you quit; the world is moving at a fast pace but the majority in our country are getting left behind in this rat race, a social upheaval is definitely underway for empowering these masses, it is perceived as if a small group of people gain all the money, the difference between the haves and have-nots is growing, power divide, digital divide are not just words”

“It may happen that someone may work and earn lots of money but may feel stifled, as he is not bringing any real development in the society that he is living in; the same pain that Gautama Buddha felt when he saw the rampant poverty and disease and death all around. He felt an angst; a feeling of despondency ultimately giving up his kingdom and went into the forests to understand and discover the real meaning of life, the true cause for so much suffering and ultimately attaining nirvana or the truth”. “For some it may all seem stupid and unpractical but the ancient sages and great saints like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and many others had all given up worldly pleasures and turned to the path of renunciation and it would be great to remember your son too as one of them Moni, but only the current society will not accept. Currently a successful person is one who stays and fights through the worldly troubles and tribulations and yet succeeds through the path of karma, a Karma Yogi.

However, I can understand what you must be going through”, Mrinal said touching Gita's hand.

“It can also happen that all the temptations and sensory distractions of the present age make some people behave as recluses or introverts, they are not able to mix properly with other people of their age and a feeling of abhorrence, an allergy may creep in from within and they cannot accept the circumstances and remain solitary, up to themselves”, concluded Mrinal

“The neighbours and others in society will make all sorts of comments and may never understand what you say, they will say he was involved in criminal activities or was mentally retarded or went astray and fell into wrong company and on and on”, lamented Gita. “All the more he was never even overburdened at home and hardly had any responsibilities at home, it will look like we had made him or forced him to do so much work, that he could not even remain comfortable at home and thus ran away, gossip is the only thing that people are interested in nowadays”, Naren thought out loud.

“That you need not worry about, as the fact that all that they say is not true, should give you comfort; responsibilities must be given from a younger age itself, or else the person as he grows up may become irresponsible and too carefree”, reiterated Mrinal Kumar, picking up a More cigarette from the packet that Dhiren held out for him.

“Well I am not suggesting this in Shishir's case but what if someone is actually not able to mix socially and is not able to accept the fact and runs away from the whole framework, again may be he is socially autistic, a psychiatric problem wherein a person is very much absorbed in self and thus cannot communicate and treat others as equals – some superiority or inferiority complex. It is most unfortunate as it happened to us; as even Arjuna wanted to run away from the battlefield and Krishna gave him the advice to stay put and fight; the essence of Bhagavad Gita”, mentioned Dhiren.

“What you are telling is possible but the problem with us is we will always focus on the negative aspects or possibilities and never accept the positive side of things, it is a form of skepticism that has become inherent in us. You mention Bhagavat Gita, what Shishir has done, requires tremendous courage too”.

The argument went on ...

A gusty wind from the windows made the letter on the table fall on the floor and written on it was the following:

Baba and Ma, I am leaving for the Himalayas ...

Please do not search for me, I will try to come back.

- Shishir

epilogue



The day was just getting into its beginnings, the sun had risen, and the chirping of the birds emanated a sweet natural orchestra, the red-orange rays of the sun, spreading its warm glow all across the Ganges. The steps near the bathing ghats were already filled with the daily worshipers as they chanted prayers, some shivering in the morning cold and some in the the scalpel-like cold of the clear waters of the ever flowing ancient river; the dingy lanes visible from the river bank were still getting lighted, as if getting cleansed by the rays of the sun once again. The pebbles and cobblestoned streets smoothened out by the feet of so many devotees and sages and saints and people since ages, had yet another person on the way to that universal glory. Away from home in search of that

elusive 'joy' that joy which is more joyful than any other joy, meditating in one corner atop the steps in saffron robes, free from all cares that had tormented him always, sometimes threatening to tear him apart; now as if ready to merge with the all pervading, focusing and speaking to, directly in contact - communing with the almighty – that ocean of bliss. Benaras, en route to the mighty peaks and snows of the mighty Himalayas – the imaginary abode of the gods, that place of infinite spiritual inspiration since eons.