

The Song

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Staring at the mirror diagonally opposite him, self pity seemed to envelope Keshab babu. He turned away from the mirror. So many years of being a school teacher in a government school, had left him with nothing but, loneliness, a lack of satisfaction, success had been a whiff of imagination; he thought - no one cared for education, it was all just plain boring, no dedication whatsoever from the younger generation. He turned to find his wife humming a tune and combing her hair in the mirror, it was clear she did not know how to sing, why bother with humming a tuneless tune, he just stared at her foolishly. She had grown so frail and was only a stack of bones, she had lost that sprightliness that she had had, even a few years back. As if he were in perfect shape, he too had grown fat and round, and almost completely bald. He stared at his fingers that were already getting gnarled and in a few days they would become like pieces of ginger – disfigured and totally shapeless, he looked away in horror, unable to bear. No longer the handsome young man, that people used to appreciate and felt envious of. Also lately he had started forgetting things, randomly, almost everyday. Just today he had felt so humiliated when his daughter had reprimanded him regarding the keys for the cupboard, he had misplaced them; totally unable to recollect where he had left them, he had actually kept them on the drawer or was it near the television cabinet, no no where was it - the window sill? She had found it finally and told him to rest for a while, as if he did not know, the doctor had also advised rest, she did not have to reiterate that. These youngsters what do they think of themselves?

He opened a book full of pictures of distant places around the world that her daughter had bought a few days back. It had buildings and their beautiful architectural details. She was doing a course on interior design. He had wanted her to become a doctor, but she had not done well in her examinations, how could she, never concentrating, always busy in frivolous activities and she always wanted to do something related to interior design or fashion and textile etc. She was good at drawing, he had to agree. So she had taken up this course and studying - god knows what was there to study in interior design, he could never fathom. As he was staring into the photographs of the interiors of a famous museum in Paris, he heard a melodious voice singing a bengali song, who could

it be ? He looked around to find his wife was not in the room and had gone to take bath. He walked down to the window on the right side of room and peeped out, to see if it was coming from the neighbouring house. No not here. He went to the verandah and looked out to the house opposite his in the lane. Must be that house - there was a beautiful young lady who had moved into that house. How beautiful, just like a figurine, tall and fair, almost straight out of some European painting. He was straining to catch the lines from the song:

Aaami tomaar shonge bedhechi aamaaro praan, shurero baadhone,
Tumi jaano naa, ami tomare peyechi ajaana shadone,
Aaami tomaar shonge bedhechi aamaaro praan, shurero baadhone ...

Which translated in English to:

I have tied my life with you in a knot of tunes,
You dont know how I have found you in this unknown dedication,
I have tied my life with you in a knot of tunes ...

Such melodious singing; beautiful, full of nectar, he thought. As his wife came out and asked him, what he was doing in the verandah, he said he had been sitting and reading the paper whole day inside; so he thought he might as well soak in some sunlight - it would do his health some good. The song floated in for some more time and then it stopped, he was left thirsty for some more of that sweet voice. It was lunch time. He had lunch and afterwards lay down on the bed; hands clasped, eyes closed, reliving those moments that had sent a shiver no a torrent of joy through his body, he could still hear that voice; he was desperate to hear it again:

Aaami tomaar shange bedhechi aamaaro praan ...

She was the wife of an officer who had moved in a few days back. A happy couple, newly married maybe who knows, which his wife had denied. He had seen her the day they had moved in; they made a perfect couple is what his wife had told him. He had not paid much attention at that time, neighbours came and neighbours went, it was a seemingly endless cycle. But now, that song, had plucked a string in his heart – a heart which had turned so barren - almost approaching death with his age. Ah! how could he think of anything like this? Was he even in just thinking that way, inflicting a hint of betrayal; no, how could that be - he had been married for more than twenty five years now. He opened his eyes and stared; the dull room stared back at him. As if wincing in pain he

closed them. He fell into a light sleep. After a while, as if a fluid honey-like world came into view, he could see himself wearing a kurta with colourful and intricate threadwork design and pyjama being invited by a lady into her house; she was welcoming him. And later he was sitting on a mattress on the floor, a chandelier lit up the room and a beautiful lady; sat with him on the mattress on the other end; he was resting his hand on a pillow and was enjoying the music, she was singing in the same full, resonating, female voice - melodious almost divine. How do you sing so well he was asking her and she was smiling coyly at him as if unable to answer the question. Who was that lady who sang so soulfully and with such ease. He was unable to make out. After a while he recognized – wasn't this the same girl whom he had known in his youth, Nondini, she had been his secret desire. She used to stay near his house and every evening she used to sing, accompanied by his master, who taught her various ragas, thumris and all those Rabindra Sangeet and Nazrul Geeti. She had smiled at him once, he vividly remembered, and now she was here singing to him as if giving his cravings, a new life.

She had started a new song in what was it Raag Piloo, or was it Raag Behaag, he just stared at her and enjoyed; his hands moving as if in automatic rhythm. That was the first day and then on, everyday he started going to her house and she entertained him with such stirring vocals, memorable days, there he was experiencing a time of his life.

His daughter came back home, tired and was about to switch on the television, sipping water from a glass of water in her hand, when her eyes fell on the bed. Her father was lying on it and his hands were moving as if he were conducting some concert; sometimes the right hand was playing out a distinct rhythm beating the mattress. She was just amazed and could not believe her eyes, she gave a big smile and called for her mother. Both of them were surprised and the amusing scene made them burst out laughing, hearing which Keshab babu woke up. What was this, the same old house, the same people - the brilliant chandeliers, and the singing maiden had vanished.

Were you singing in your dreams asked his wife, to which he mumbled something. His daughter told him that she never knew he had a penchant for singing. To this he replied that many people had many hidden desires and they never expressed them. Were you dreaming of a singing courtesan or what, asked his wife to which he took offence and told them not to disturb him and allow him to sleep - it was just four in the evening he could manage an hour's sleep, yet.

Keshab babu's obsession for the officer's wife grew and whenever he saw her he wished her, and she wished back. However, he could never ask her whether she practiced singing at home and wanted to refer to the day when he

had heard her sing, but never managed to gather the courage to do so. A week passed by and again the next Sunday, when he had just settled down on his rocking chair, with the newspaper open in his hand; he heard someone singing. His curiosity got the better of him; this time he walked down from the first floor of his house and walked up to the officer's house making sure no one was watching him. Unmistakably, she was singing - the same nightingale-like voice, as clear as the stream of ganga jal. He got so engrossed that he never observed that the officer's wife was observing him standing there - dhoti clad and an umbrella in hand listening keenly. The lady came out and asked if he wanted something.

"Ma, you sing so well, where did you learn, must be from a guru of some learned gharana".

"Oh that, it was a program that comes on the Sunday Channel every Sunday, a competition actually, these participants are so talented; come in, please come in".

"No, no, I will leave, was just passing by when I heard the song and thought you were singing", said Keshab babu and slowly walked down the street towards the sunday market – bazaar haat – muttering something to himself. The sun was shining bright and he could buy some cheap vegetables, today.