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Edited by Babli Moitra Saraf

Weapon

Chitra Mudgal

He was still engrossed in the menu. Her eyes followed his gaze... searching, sliding up and down, and then glanced off, distracted. She could barely control her rising exasperation. *At his age, to take so much time to choose, that the craving to eat is lost? The listing of food items on the menu was not so elaborate that one would be spoiled for choice!*

He knows very well, how difficult it is for her to extract a moment out of her densely woven time so that she can have him to herself. The moment she wakes up in the mornings, she begins to think of the chores she has to finish through the day to meet him in the evening. There have been days when unable to find time to meet, she has had to be content with a phone conversation. He, however, is not satisfied with talking on the phone. He then begins to resent her job. Why can't she tell her boss once her tasks are done, that she needs to visit him? Which law can prevent her from meeting him? What kind of an office is it? In his office, the girls after signing in, would disappear. Listening to him peeve, she tries to deflect his attention with her little queries about his cold, sciatica pain, or the new book he may be reading. Engaged thus, he is all surrender: "What should I do for this cold?" Like a wise one, she begins to advise him, "Get some Vitamin C tablets from the chemist. Put a towel over your head and inhale steam, twice a day." From the tremor in his voice, she senses he is febrile. His response assures her a little. She need not worry so much. He does feel feverish but it does not show up in the thermometer.

How lonely he is and that too at his age!

Rsethi

She recalls that he has six months to go for his retirement. He could get an extension of a year or so, but he is not inclined to make any special effort for it. If it comes to him in the course of things he would not mind continuing with his job. He is confident that his consistent hard work will be taken into account.

It had been difficult for her to meet him today as well.

The peon, Mandle, had given her the happy news when he came in to collect the files from her table, "Kapoor *Sahib* left after lunch, Madam. He had to catch a flight for Kolkata, at four-thirty. He will return only day after." This meant she could finish the remaining work tomorrow. Quelling her obvious joy, she had asked Mandle why Kapoor *Sahib* had to suddenly leave for Kolkata. Mandle had smiled mysteriously and informed her that his wife had filed a divorce case against him for which he had to appear in court the following day. "His wife doesn't want to live with him. She doesn't find him man enough!" Her joy evaporated. She had wanted to ask Mandle whether Kapoor *Sahib* had any children.

Her fingers moved to dial the number which she knew by heart. He had answered the phone himself. She told him that she could leave her office around four and could be at Gaylord, Churchgate by 4:20 p.m. She asked about his plans.

He replied, "Saxena's first cousin had a heart attack this morning. Saxena has taken leave to visit him at the Bombay hospital. I have his share of work as well."

"Ok," she says, pursing her lips.

"Oh! Don't be upset. Listen, you reach Gaylord. I'll be there by four twenty. I'll get Pathak to handle the work."

She likes this about him. He can't say no to her. Work is important to him but not more than her.

What she really appreciates is that he never wants to know anything about Ma, from her. The time he spends with her is only about her childhood.

Why did he not marry again?

Marriage is for one who is overwhelmed by loneliness. Her presence was with him all the time in his home. Her pictures hung in every nook and cranny of the house. Each time he entered the house she could jump out from any photograph to welcome her father, arms clasping around his legs to say, "What have you got

for me, today?" He would pull out her favourite chocolate and *put* it on a mantle in the drawing room where a photograph stands of her eating a chocolate. Chocolates pile up and when he meets her, he gives them to her. She eats the chocolates one after the other, in his presence, and doubles up in laughter at the fantastical story he tells her about the game of cricket he played with her the night before, in the drawing room itself. Her fierce bowling had gone on to crack two window panes in the kitchen, and topple the bottle of Contessa rum standing on the tray. Even before he could clear away the broken glass spread on the kitchen floor, she jumped and hid in her photograph with a cricket bat taller than herself. That picture in a golden frame, stands beside his bed. The little devil had been scared—what if her mother scolded her for that unruly bowling?

Who says he is lonely!

Every time she is home late after meeting him, she has a standard excuse—"For some reason the Ambernath local was suddenly cancelled." The excuse about the delay of the local is an effective one and is a perfect defence for all who run behind time.

Her stepfather works as a small official in a shoe factory in Dombivli. His very person makes the house reek of the unbearable stench of leather. Perhaps that was why Ma always leaves the incense sticks burning in the kitchen *mandir*. He is often late home and uses the same excuse—the Mumbai local train. She wondered why her stepfather's reason for coming home late always struck her as an excuse. Ma however, would never confront her.

It would sadden her to hear Ma sob behind the bolted door of her room and her words piercing through the walls, about his affair with another woman in the factory, because of which he comes home late. The local train keeps getting cancelled for his convenience. She comprehends it all. She is full of regret. How could she have allowed herself to be taken for a ride by this widower and leave her home and family? Even after being warned by his dead wife's sister—Sunita had not died in an accident, she had set herself on fire.

"Would you like to have cheese fritters with the ice cream Cassatta?"

"You took all this while to choose that." She could not keep out the irritation in her voice.

"You've liked Cassatta since childhood."

"Childhood has long been left behind."

"Not yours." He sounded serious.

"Preferences can change!"

"If it had changed I would have chosen something else, your latest preference." He signaled to the waiter to come.

"What makes you think so?"

"The moment we sit down, you push the menu to me. You are sure that you will like whatever I order."

She laughed—a shower of jasmine spread on the table!

He went on, "If that isn't so, choose for yourself."

She could not stop laughing. She was now enjoying his persistence. "Please, order now."

After ordering the food, he turned to her again, "Why did you laugh?"

"I am not laughing at you."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm laughing at the thought of arguing with you. The truth is that I want to eat what you choose for me. I know that you take so long because out of the ten odd things I like, you want to figure out what to choose so that it's different from what I ate last time. Am I wrong?"

His face clouded as he sighed, "No, you are not, but *she* would never think as you do...."

"Not everyone needs to think alike."

How did Ma suddenly come up? She never did, otherwise.

He was almost annoyed, "Are you taking sides...so be it... but then the other person should also not have expected me to think the way she did, or do what she liked."

She felt she could not deal with this circumlocution! She felt that she must go up to the counter and lodge a complaint that the same old number of 'Come September' being played today, was the one she had already heard last week, when she was here. Did they not have anything else in their collection which they could play every now and then? There was still sometime for their order to come. It was imperative to change the tune. She knows very well

that there would be no questions why she had just headed towards the counter. Not that he never asked any questions. He did... sometimes. She is still to answer the question asked almost three months ago. The question wasn't a simple one, nor the answer to it! It is related to her *being* and that being so, she has to let her *being* assume significance. A responsible person cannot be irresponsible, either to herself or to another. It was a dilemma holding her back.

He knows that she loves him deeply. He had pleaded with Ma...that she could walk out on everything...he was ready to write whatever she wanted...he did not like a legal mess. But it would be difficult for him to live without the child. The moment she was born he had felt with all his being that he could not live without this little mite struggling to open her eyes to look upon the world. When she turned eight, he had shared his feelings of the moment with her—how her grandmother had remarked looking at the newborn baby: "Munna, this girl looks just like you! When I first saw you, a new born in the arms of the midwife, you were stretching yourself just like this, with your eyes barely open."

Upon her request the music had changed. The shrill sounds of the air-conditioned restaurant softened with the waves of—*pyaar hua ikraar hua hai, pyaar se fir kyon darta hai dil...*the lilting, caressing, touching melody, from Raj Kapoor's film *Shri 420*. The new melody goaded him to hum along.

"Tanvi!"

"Yes Pa."

"Old songs are like old values, isn't it?"

"Old songs are powerful. They are like poems." She wanted to avoid the word *value*.

He could gather that she did not want bitterness to drown the moment.

The waiter walked in with their order. The steaming hot cheese balls, pakoras to him, were laid out on a large plate, the Cassatta ice cream was served in two plates. He slid one towards her and started biting on a cheese ball. He could feel the twist of age in his teeth. Last month, he had had an extraction on the right side of his lower jaw.

"A strange trend, every restaurant you walk into plays only Western music."

"The trend of restaurant dining has also come from the West."

"Why? Didn't we have our *dhabas* and sweet shops?"

"Yes, we did but they were never associated with music."

"It's possible that Western music is being played there too."

He laughed.

"Next time, let us meet at one of the local *halwai* shops, where you can only hear the music of utensils clanging." She joined him in his laughter.

The cheese balls are really crisp and delicious. The Cassata is hard because of the ice. She digs her spoon into the ice cream to cut it. Picking at it is sure to soften the hardness. She doesn't like melted ice cream either, rather have *rabri* or milk. Pa following her, also starts picking at the ice cream to soften it. *Does one ever pick at the ego?* She watches him have his ice cream. The skin around his neck has begun to shrivel. He does not work out anymore. Earlier he was very regular. He would ask her to punch him on his well-formed muscles. After a couple of deep breaths, he would draw in his muscles to his back. Then he would hold her in his arms and planting a kiss would say, "Look the muscles have disappeared, they are scared of your punches."

She had shifted with her mother into her stepfather's house.

Before she began school, her father had made her memorise the phone number and address of her house. Children should always know it by heart, it helps in times of trouble. On the third evening, in this new house, when Ma had stepped out with her stepfather, she had called her father on the phone and spoken with him. It was as though he had been waiting for her call. He had not been to his office for three days. He had been drinking all the while. Hearing her voice he had raved, "I'll come to Dombivali tomorrow to get you. I cannot live without you, my child."

"Pa, you said I am not your daughter."

"Who told you this?"

"I heard you say that in your quarrel with Ma."

"I said that only to show her down. I was blind with fury."

"Then why did you let me go with Ma?"

"I bowed to her will. I also thought that such a young child

might not be able to live without her mother. Can you live without your Ma, tell me?"

"No I can't. Please get her back too, with me."

"Now I can't. We have a formal agreement. She cannot leave that man. Had she wanted to leave him, why would she go leaving all this here?"

"But Pa I don't like that man."

"And what about him? Does he like you?"

"No, he doesn't like me either."

"Don't cry my child, tell me is your mother not upset about this?"

"Yes Pa, she is."

"Then?"

"She makes me sleep in a separate room. Pa, I feel very scared alone."

As she sobbed away, she had told him that the door bell had rung. It was probably Ma and her stepfather. She would call him again, as soon as she got an opportunity.

How these thirteen years have gone by. No, they didn't just go by. They dragged on, day by day. She never let Ma know when, how and where she was meeting Pa. Ma declared that she would see her father, or have anything to do with him only over her dead body. She had been shocked to hear her Ma talk this way. How much hatred did she carry within her? It seemed a bottomless pit. Did Ma never think of the young child forced to call another man her father? She never spoke to her stepfather even while living in the same house. She immersed herself in her studies, day and night. She always stood first in her class, which enabled her to get a job with the Railways.

His sneezing caught her attention.

"What's the matter? Is it because of the ice cream?"

"Probably the AC. It seems too cold."

"The temperature is the same, it's the ice cream that has not been good for you. You are susceptible to colds."

"Come on! I can't stop eating ice cream for fear of catching a cold." He replied carelessly.

True, he was slurping up his ice cream, but he gazed unblinkingly at the creases of the curtains before him, lost in thought.

Whenever he got this way, she could sense that even as he was with her, he was elsewhere confronting himself. After such a confrontation he would become distant, seem a little feral, which he was not. Violence had never been his trait.

"You know, your mother's suspicion about him is not ill-founded."

Licking her spoon she asked, "I don't get it, about whom?"

"About the one, who comes home late every night, from the shoe factory. There is a Maharashtrian girl in his life."

She was caught off guard. How does Pa know about it? She has never told him anything. He has never even asked. Then, that means he knows everything about Ma. Even after the parting of ways, if he knows everything about her, then she has to accept the truth. She can't hide it if he already knows everything. Does mother's sobbing leap over the walls of the house to reach him?

"Yes, Ma is quite disturbed these days," she confessed.

He scoffed, "She should put up with it silently as I did, even when I knew that she was going around with that leather guy."

"Now she would know, how dangerous it is to be abandoned." He continued as though it were not I but Ma sitting before him, and he had grown tiger claws.

She could not read his face. Ma's agony seemed like balm on his festering wounds.

"That leather guy is much less than her, even in age, six years younger."

She cannot take it anymore. This ferocious man is not her father. Even if he were, he is unacceptable to her, caught in a time warp, like ancestral foes.

The waiter brought the bill on a salver.

She leapt to pick the bill from the plate. Despite the protests, she paid the bill—for the first time ever! She earned, but his paying off the bill was like a guardian's protection. At home, she never took money from her mother for anything, handing her instead a thousand rupees every month. By the time she was in class eight, she was already giving Hindi lessons to two pupils. Her paying the bill today upset him. They walked through the automatic doors to step out on the footpath.

"When are you coming back home?" His question began to

nudge her silence. The humidity outside has increased. It has distracted her. She cannot bear humidity. She hates the humid days but it is also true that it doesn't affect her when she is with her Pa. She wonders why the situation has reversed today. Even in his presence the suffocation is rising, and continues to rise, and now the salty moisture of tears dissolves and makes her catch her breath.

She knows he cannot bear her silence, while walking together. He can tick her off any moment for this. He also wants an answer to his question. The question is not a new one. About four months ago he had asked her to hurry up and decide when she would move her stuff from that shoemaker's house. He had also prepared his will. The sole inheritor of his beautiful two-roomed flat would be his only child, Tanvi Gupta. His last wish was that she returned home, now that she was an adult.

She wonders once again, who am I, to myself, to him or to Ma!

Ma had said, "I am not going to leave Tanvi with you under any circumstances. I know you will yearn for her, cry and beg, bang your head against the walls. Do it all your life...."

One evening Pa too had said, "The day you will return home, she will be left with no one to wipe her tears."

"Tell me Tanvi, when are you coming home?" His voice has become impatient.

"Whose home?" She can feel the humidity streak down her earlobes.

He smiles at her question, "Your home, who else's?"

"That's your home, Pa."

He is a little irritated, "The one where you live, whose home is that?"

"Ma's." She says without hesitation.

"This is what I am saying, child, come back to your own home."

"I have decided, Pa, I want to stay in my own home."

"Then what is the problem?"

"The problem is to find a house."

"What does that mean?" He growls.

"Pa, it means that I am an adult now and I wish to live in my own home. Somewhere near you. I'll take a room and a kitchen on rent."

He would get down at Matunga, and she at Dombivli. Azad Maidan would be the shortest way to reach Boribandar or Shivaji Terminal. Holding him by the left elbow she now led him across the road. She was surprised that he did not try to shake off her hold. Dragging himself like a stubborn child, he followed her across the road.

Translated by Rekha Sethi

