



The Mural

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The exam season was about to return, this time around it was a lot more important for me as it was going to be my tenth grade board exams. I had been going to tuitions to prepare for them and on this beautiful summer evening I headed there for what would be my final class before a two week study break. I was both nervous and excited, the pressure to do well had almost peaked but I could not stop pondering about what I would do after. I was fantasizing about how I'd spend my holidays, should I waste the days indulging in video games and playing football? Perhaps an adventure out of Bengaluru city? Maybe just at home and wisely spend my time making

decisions regarding the future path of my education? I hadn't decided on anything yet. Should I pursue computer science or commerce? I suppose it would depend on my marks. I wonder if any of my school mates would end up in the same college as me. Filled with countless thoughts as I slowly walked my way down the path I took almost every evening for the last few months to attend my tuition classes, for the most part it was a boring twenty minute walk from my home but there was one thing I would always look forward to.

Just as I was thinking about it, I arrived at an intersection that is a part of my daily route. The intersection was such that if I took the road to my left, I would find myself in a posh residential bubble, in the midst of which my tuition was located. If I turned right and took the opposite road, I would find myself standing before one of the many entrances to a local slum. What interested me about this entrance was the grey concrete brick wall that stood there like a ruin, it looked like it was once a part of a house and stood at about ten feet tall. It is of course not this wall itself that interested me, nor was it the countless butts of cigarettes that lay on its feet, or the other plastic that were littered around it, it also wasn't the furry brown cat that found its peace napping on top of the wall. What interested me was the beautiful mural that was painted on the wall.

The Mural was depicting a very colourful butterfly in a dark, completely black background. It was quite large, large enough that it almost encompassed the entire wall, only leaving its edges to reveal its original grey brick form. Every time I pass by this route, I pause and take a moment to admire this beautiful art. How could one not? This large surreal looking butterfly, its mesmerizing wings that were a result of multiple bright colours which were spread out and combined using the most abstract and psychedelic strokes, only separated by a slim purple body that was left undetailed to contrast and compliment the complex and explosive eye candy that were

it's wings. It was sure to move anyone who laid their eyes on it. This evening I found myself gazing at it a little longer than I usually would, I even took a couple of pictures of it on my phone as well, as today was my final class and I wasn't sure when I would be able to walk this path again.

It only took me a couple of minutes of more walking to reach the three storey building where my classes took place. The neighbourhood was quiet as usual and the small bakery opposite the building emanated the strong aromas of freshly prepared samosas and burning cigarettes. I opened the gate of the building and made my way up the stairs to the second floor. I could already hear the noise of all the chatter from my classmates as I approached the entrance of the room.

'Dinesh!!' my close mate Ronny over dramatically cried as I entered the room. 'I am going to miss you!'

'Me tooo!' I squeaked as I attempted to mimic his overreaction and horribly failed at that. I proceeded to sit on the first bench next to him, as I have for the past many months that I have been coming here. I did not know Ronny before I enrolled here, nor did I know any of the twenty other students who came from different schools and different backgrounds, but it was easy to be friendly with them, we had a very good time despite sharing the immense pressure of having to prepare for our board exams.

'Hey Dinesh,' the girl sitting on the bench parallel to ours, Revathi, tapped on my shoulders as she called my name 'you're joining us, right?'

'Joining you where?' I had no idea.

'The boys didn't tell you?' she stared at a group of boys sitting behind me.

'We just put it up on the whatsapp group and assumed everyone would see it,' one of the boys replied.

‘What are you guys talking about?’ I was confused. I hadn’t checked my whatsapp messages for the past couple of days, and plan on continuing to keep away from it until I’m done with my exams.

‘Nothing much,’ Revathi answered, ‘Since it’s the final day and all, we thought why not group after class and head out to that new biryani spot on fifth cross. Are you in?’

‘Sure,’ I replied, ‘But I will have to leave around seven thirty.’

‘Yeah, all of us will leave around then.’ said Ronny, ‘It’s exam time, we cannot overstay like we used to.’

‘All of us?’ The question came up in my head. I wondered if THAT girl is coming as well.

I slightly tilted my head to see if I could spot her in the corner of my eye and see if she was present, and there she was, like any other day, sitting quietly in the corner of the room, all by herself in the last bench, completely isolated from the rest of us. Prema was like a ghost among us, nobody talked to her, she was unpopular as they come. The boys thought she was unattractive, the girls made fun of her voice and started a rumour that she smelled bad. As for my problem with her, well...

‘You should invite your darling Prema.’ Ronny whispered in my ear out of nowhere, ‘She isn’t in our Whatsapp group.’ he giggled. I responded by striking my elbows to his ribs.

‘Oww,’ he squeaked in his usual over dramatic voice, ‘Relax, it’s the last day.’

That is my problem with Prema, it isn’t her fault, but getting teased with the most unpopular girl was uncomfortable for me, I do not know how it started and initially I did not mind, but over a period of time I understood that the teasing weren’t just jokes about me, but it also revealed how my friends thought about me, from then on it wasn’t simply harmless fun for me, but also sheer mockery.

‘Okay, class,’ the tutor – Ms. Malini rushed into the room. ‘It’s our final day, how are you guys feeling?’

‘Sad, ma’am.’ the class answered in synchrony.

Ms. Malini smirked as she dropped her handbag on the table and adjusted her dupatta. She was a young and talented teacher, also strict, but all of the students liked and respected her very much.

‘So class, today is our last day, I hope you guys have prepared well and are feeling confident about your upcoming exam, from here on out you shall only do revisions.’

‘Ma’am, let’s not talk about all that,’ Ronny wasn’t in the mood to listen to anything related to the exams, ‘It’s our last day, we should have fun, let’s have a surprise party or something.’

‘You’re half right, Ronny’ Ms. Malini smirked again, ‘we are gonna have a surprise, not a party, but a TEST!’ she pulled out a bundle of question papers from her handbag.

The class was shocked and everyone groaned with disappointment.

‘Ma’am, how can we have tests on the final day?’ Ronny argued.

‘It’s is on your final day that you should be tested, we will have a party after your exams when all of you pass with flying colours.’ Ms. Malini made herself clear and proceeded to distribute the question papers.

‘Do not think that just because this is the last day that you can write some rubbish and get away with it.’ The tutor warned as she went by desk after desk and handed out the papers. ‘I will only allow you to leave once you get your answer sheet corrected by me, not only that, I will also notify your parents about your performance, so you better take this seriously.’

The noisy class turned silent and their faces did not hide the nervousness of the situation. I wasn't particularly nervous, I looked at the question paper which was mixed with questions from each of our six subjects and I knew the answers to most of them, I was confident that I could fare decently well at the very least. I put my pen to the paper and started doing my best.

Just as I finished answering a couple of questions, I heard a persistent whisper. 'Show, show, show,' Ronny began pleading for answers, his left hand covering the movement of his mouth and his desperate eyes going back and forth between trying not to get caught by Ms. Malini and getting answers from me. I slightly tilted my paper so he could see, but we were caught in the act.

'Dinesh!' Ms. Malini called out.

Ronny and I turned away from each other and put on an act like nothing had happened, but Ms. Malini wasn't buying it.

'You two shouldn't be sitting together, not the first time I've caught you two co-operating during our tests.'

'Sorry, Ma'am,' Ronny apologized, 'We won't do it again.' I nodded my head in agreement.

'That's what you said the last time I caught you,' Ms. Malini wasn't ready to accept our apology. 'You guys aren't fooling me again.'

'Dinesh stand up!' Ma'am ordered. I hesitantly stood up, unsure of what she was going to do with me.

'Shift to the last bench.'

My heart stopped for a moment. Sit next to Prema? No way I could do that, this whole situation suddenly got a lot more awkward for me.

'Sorry, ma'am. Let me sit here, please?' I begged.

‘Are you going to go there yourself or do you want me to throw you?’ Ms. Malini raised her voice to sound as stern as she could get, but I stood still, hesitant to make a move.

Ms. Malini stormed towards me, snatched my paper and placed it on the desk of the last bench. I knew I had no way out of this, I slowly and hesitantly walked towards the bench, put my head down to avoid eye contact with those giggling as I made my way through. When I got there, for a moment I looked up and my eyes met Prema’s, I noticed she smiled pleasantly, I immediately turned away and sat down, proceeding to continue with the test, but I could barely focus. All I wanted was to get out of here as soon as possible.

Thirty minutes had passed and I didn’t write a single word since I transferred to this bench. I killed my time staring at the setting of the sun through the panes our class window, it’s orange rays came through and shone brightly on our desks. I leaned back and was lost in thought, imagining the various ways my friends would tease me while we had biryani after class, I would have never guessed my final day would be so cruel.

Suddenly a noise of an object falling down disrupted my thoughts, the noise startled me and I sat up again, wondering what it was I looked to my right and found Prema looking at me, she moved a bit closer to me and whispered, ‘I dropped my pen and it’s now under your feet, can you pick it up and give it to me?’

I looked down and there it was, right under my shoe, I picked it up and as I handed it to her, I noticed something in the corner of my eye, I turned to the boys side and was immediately embarrassed. All my friends were looking at me, giggling and gossiping among themselves without the tutor noticing, their wicked gaze alone was enough to invoke an uneasy feeling and shame in me.

I got up and walked toward Ms. Malini. I handed her my paper in which I had written maybe two or three answers at most.

‘Already finished?’ She looked surprised.

‘No, ma’am, I’m feeling a bit nauseous’ I wasn’t lying.

‘Oh my, why are you sweating so much?’ Ms. Malini gently placed her hand on forehead to check my temperature.

‘I’m not sure, maybe I have gotten a fever.’

With a worried look on her face, Ms Malini replied, ‘Okay, you can leave, you must take care of your health more carefully during exam season.’

Ronny stood up, ‘Ma’am I have a fever too, can I also leave?’

‘You will get a fever when I call your parent’s now, then you can surely leave’

The class exploded with laughter, I thanked my tutor for excusing me. She wished me good health and offered her best wishes for me to do well in my exams.

I walked down the stairs, the smell of the cigarettes and samosas from the nearby bakery still lingered strongly in the air, and off in the sunset, I sped away from what I believed was an embarrassing evening.

A month and a half passed by, not only were my exams done, but the results had also arrived. It only came out a day ago and I feel like a large boulder has been lifted off my shoulders. I was quite happy with my marks, I passed in first class with just a few percentages off distinction. I did not expect anything more or less and I knew this was enough to get me into a decent pre university college with the subject of my choosing, which is a decision I’m gonna have to make soon, but not before I head over to my tuition today, it was around noon and I was heading there as Ms. Malini asked the class to come by, it seems she wanted to treat us as everyone in the

class had passed the exams. I was a little worried about meeting my friends again after what had happened the last time, but I was betting that they would have either forgotten or just wouldn't have the chance to bring it up as had so much more to talk about – our results, our holidays, our future. There was a lot to look forward to this after-noon, but perhaps the most important reason for my excitement was the chance to once again see the mural. That beautiful butterfly, it's been a while since my eyes were fortunate enough to witness it's exquisite wings, and just the thought of seeing it again filled me with uncontrollable joy. Of course every now and then I looked at it in the gallery of my phone, but it did not invoke the same feeling of seeing it on the wall, in it's flesh, full of life, posing majestically. The walk from my house to the mural was the longest fifteen minute walk I've had in recent memory, I just had to see it again, I was craving for it, But as I reached the intersection, I was in for a shock.

The art was no more, completely covered in white paint, All the joy and excitement I had just a moment ago, completely faded away and all I was feeling was disappointment. Like a secret treasure, someone has buried the gold under nothingness, only if I could scrape away the paint and unearth the butterfly again, but I stood there completely powerless and overwhelmed with sadness.

'What are you staring at?' suddenly a question from a familiar voice came from behind me.

I turned around and noticed Prema, standing right next to me, smiling as she always did. I was quite shocked to see her appear out of nowhere, I guessed that she was on her way to the tuition centre as well.

'N..Nothing,' I turned around to walk away.

'Did you like the butterfly that used to be here?' she asked.

I was quite surprised to be asked that, I stopped and looked back at her.

‘Yeah,’ as I responded I realized even if just a few words, talking to her was a lot more normal than I’d expected. ‘but too bad it’s gone now, did you also like it?’

There was a pause for a moment, Prema turned away from me and looked at the wall, ‘well, sorry about that’ she turned towards me once again and looked directly at me as she said, ‘I hope you’ll like my next one as well.’

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