



## Two Weddings, One Murder and Words to Keep

Keshab Das

It was Sunday, maybe eleven in the morning. I had got up late, partly because I had slept quite late last night, but also I knew that Usha – the help – would not come. The family was away for a few days. For once, I thought I was free, relaxed, without a thing to do and none to hurry me up. I was about to make some tea and the doorbell rang. Who's now? Not expecting anyone.

When I opened the door there was Rashmi – Usha's daughter – with unbelievable looks. Dressed up like a queen with a glimmering red-and-yellow long skirt, matching blouse and scarf, golden and plastic bangles, red and green, through which the maroon *mehendi*

drawings were seen and not seen. But with that all-decked-up attire something was amiss. She had sweat running down her forehead and cheeks messing up with the cosmetics that covered her face.

I was a bit perplexed – never seen her like this before. She often accompanied her mother to help her out in the myriad odd chores that awaited them every morning at our place and a few others'. Almost by the clock, seven thirty every morning, Usha would arrive with or without Rashmi. Tidying up the house, cleaning, dusting, mopping and washing would be followed by hot tea and little snacks that we savoured together in the kitchen. That's also the time and op to share titbits and updates of their lives, losses, plans and hopes. And a topic that often came up lately was Rashmi's wedding – how, when, with whom and so on.

Yes, with my memory playing truant, I began to realise that it was the bride-to-be at my door, as if in a hurry. I put up a brief smile on my face and asked the most obvious, "So, is it your wedding today? Your mummy never told us the date. Or, did she?"

"Yes, she told you and mam, two months back. This boy delivers filtered water bottles to houses in three areas. His father is helper at a carpenter's and younger brother goes to a factory. Their house is slightly on the outskirts of this city, twenty miles from here. All these she had told you both. And you promised to give two thousand rupees for the wedding." Her reply was sharp and clear.

"Two thousand rupees! Of course, I must have told about giving you cash as gift, but two thousand? Are you sure?" I was wavering.

"Yes, on that belief, I got these dresses and jewellery on loan and I'm yet to pay the beauty parlour lady. Please give me the money, now, people are already there at the *mandap*, at my house. I've no time to wait. I've come running as mummy was busy," she was getting chafed.

"Oh! Is that so? But why didn't you tell me earlier? There's no one home and I've no cash to spare, right now. Two thousand rupees...? That's big money!" I was going in semi-circles.

“It’s my misfortune. I thought you would remember. Now what shall I do?” Her eyes welled up threatening to crack up her bridal make-up.

“Just wait. Don’t cry. Let me see how much I may have here.” I rushed inside and rummaged through my bag, purse and the *almirah*. Voila! Seven hundred rupees! I could place my hands on all currency notes that were there then.

“Seven hundred, I have here. Take this now. Rest I will give you tomorrow evening,” I declared in victory.

She stood still for a while as she clutched the notes. “Ok. That’s fine. But tomorrow evening you must give me thirteen hundred. Or else...how will I pay them?” she looked straight into my eyes, smiled eerily and whished past me.

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In a few months, we had shifted to a new house, our own. Though not very far from the old rented place, it was not possible for Usha to come all the way to work for just one house. We had to make alternative arrangement for domestic chores. Usha did try a month or two, but it was just not working out. She had to leave work at our place, but would drop by occasionally. And stories about herself, her ever-jobless hubby, wayward boys and, of course, Rashmi got updated, lately, intermittently, but surely!

One idyllic afternoon on a hot summer day someone pressed the doorbell. As I opened the door there stood a young man, lanky but well built, with a thin moustache and kind eyes. “Who are you looking for?” I asked.

“Sir, my name is Abir, from Darbhanga in Bihar. Someone told me that madam is looking for a cook. So I came. I can cook veg and non-veg and can come as per your timings, morning and evening” he spoke softly but firmly. It was unclear if he really had some culinary skills, but we were not choosy either.

I asked my wife, Ranu, if we should give Abir a chance and she thought it was fine as we did not have any alternative. So, Abir started work at our place. He cooked reasonably well, had a sense of hygiene and was punctual. Abir was somewhat shy, spoke only if needed. His replies were brief and pleasant.

After about a month, Abir said, “I need to go to my village for twelve days. I will come back for sure. For your cooking here, my friend Bhajan will come regularly till I return. There will be no difficulty for you.”

Ranu asked, “Why this trip? Is everything fine at home? Are your parents okay?”

“Yes, madam, all are fine. It’s my marriage coming Friday. That’s why,” Abir said rather quietly.

“That’s good news! Where’s the girl from? Is she from your village or afar?” Ranu wanted to know.

He said, “She is from the neighbouring village. My uncle’s friend’s daughter. Everything is arranged there. Only I have to reach. They were waiting for me to have a job here.”

“Would your income be enough, if your wife joins you here?” Ranu posed the tough question.

“Madam, including your house I cook in five more houses. I share the room with my friends and we cook together. So, not much expensive. But wife will come for a short while every year; she will be with my parents’ most of the times,” Abir explained.

“Ok. Enjoy and bring your wife to our place when she’s here,” Ranu said happily.

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By the thirteenth day, since Abir had left, he was back, chopping onions, boiling lentils and frying round slices of brinjal in our kitchen. He looked happy and was generally quiet.

“How did the wedding go? And when is your wife joining you?” Ranu asked with interest.

Abir was a bit shy, but was pleased at the questions he was waiting for. “I’ve brought the CD. It was all recorded. Ruby will come after two months as there are some rituals to do at village.”

“Where’s the CD? Let’s see,” Ranu was keen on that.

That evening, once Abir was through with cooking, I played the CD on the computer. It was all dusty, musty and misty, I mean the scene there. Looked like twilight when the small crowd of a score got ready to walk up to the bride’s place four furlongs away. Leaning on the table, Abir said, “That one with the white crown is me. Behind me is my mother and those are my two sisters. Those six lads are buddies, ready to dance anytime.”

As the CD swirled, the groom party had begun the journey along with the cattle that was returning to their sheds after an arduous day, literally, kicking the dust. With gradual sundown the darkness grew and it was really difficult to make out who the groom was or who was the buddy or who was the dad. The only thing that remained clear through the haze was the sound of a couple of drums that signalled the groom’s progress.

But a miracle happened en route. From nowhere, there approached a make-shift van-like vehicle what may perhaps be described as the non-descript mobile facility. It was the DJ-dancers team on a trolley that precariously held on to four swerving sound boxes and a sound-mixer that was endlessly being manipulated by the DJ owner to let out Bollywood songs screeching and screaming but driving all crazy with excitement. A few colourful lights balanced on a small pipe tied to the trolley top were flashing intermittently and two girls dancing with gay abandon. The scene suddenly turned topsy-turvy (or, shall we say, ‘tipsy-turvy’?) and the guys – now more than six –

joined in merging with the blinking lights and dozy dust. With a few break-dance moves by the dexterous now even the uninitiated had turned ground-breaking step-makers – the old, the young and all in-betweens had their moves to make over-enthused by the wobbly ambience.

In a little over an hour the groom and his entourage had reached the bride's place. The DJ team's heat, light and dust had melted meanwhile and the crowd had thinned. It was foggy and fuddled as the little brown platform in front of the mud and thatched house was graced by the wedding couple. The priest managed to lit a the *homa* with few sticks pouring spoons of ghee. The couple put garlands on each other's necks and there was some drum-beating and the ululation filled the air. The evening darkness had taken over, but then there was light from two petromax lamps hanging at a height with bamboo sticks held by two youngsters. Very soon the wedding ritual was over and everyone sat on the veranda for the feast to begin. With that the CD had reached its end.

Ranu said, "Oh, it was nice. But why there were no lights? It was quite dark around."

"Madam, we have no electricity in villages there. And renting dynamo is very costly," Abir put it plainly.

"It was nice, in fact! So, bring your wife someday," Ranu changed the topic.

"Yes, madam", Abir slowly paced out of the house.

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Almost three months later, one morning around eight o'clock, the doorbell rang and we knew it must be Abir, his usual time. Yes, he was there but there was also a young lady with three-fourths of the face covered with the border of the saree. Before anything, she was

almost about to touch my feet when I exclaimed, “Ok. Ok. Please don’t do that. Is that Ruby? Be blessed. Come in.”

Ranu was just there and was very happy to see Ruby. Abir went straight in to the kitchen and started setting up the lentil curry.

“How long are you here?” Ranu asked Ruby.

“A week or a little more. My in-laws would be upset if I stay longer. I’ve lot of work to do there,” Ruby explained.

“But you should be with Abir, now that you’ve family here,” Ranu continued with the conversation.

“Madam, we’re lucky that you gave us job. Abir is very happy working here. He told me you both are very nice people. In crisis, who else would we go for help? Won’t you help us?” Ruby put it modestly.

“Oh, yes. Of course. Surely. You need some money or something?” Ranu asked.

“No Madam. I didn’t mean any money. Only asking for your kindness and blessings for both of us and our baby when we have one,” It was as if Ruby’s innocent eyes were speaking more than her lips.

“Don’t worry, Ruby. We will be of help whenever needed. Rest assured. We’re there for you,” Ranu promised.

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Time had passed since. Life seemed normal. Meanwhile we were told that Ruby had delivered a baby boy and, in fact, she had called up Ranu a couple of times and conveyed her desire to move here to Abir’s place for her family to be together. But that was not quite possible soon as Abir shared the small one-room apartment with four others like him. He had to save enough to reach a stage to rent a place, however small, for his independent family. It appeared he

was trying hard cooking in seven houses a day. He had become very quiet and spoke only when it was very necessary. But he cooked well and came on time daily.

One day when Abir came in, despite his placidity Ranu was certain that he was drunk. On confronting, he admitted to the misconduct by alluding to the pressure by his newly acquainted friends with whom he had partied quite late last night.

“Don’t forget that you’re married. Your baby is taken care practically alone by your young wife. Be careful of such friends, I say. And, yes, one more thing. Never come here drunk. Never. You can go now and come only tomorrow.” Ranu was unusually terse and minced no words. She stood there watching Abir return with evident discomfiture.

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A couple of months had gone by and, again, everything seemed fine, usual. Diwali festivities were about a fortnight away and we knew that Usha would drop by any day. In advance, Ranu had purchased a saree for Usha and dresses for Rashmi and the younger one.

Like most weekends one Saturday Ranu and I were watching a Hindi movie on the TV, an old suspense thriller peppered with foot-tapping songs. And the bell rang. It was Rashmi at the door. She was almost another person. For a moment, I couldn’t be sure.

Shocked to see her tattered clothes and scruffy look, Ranu nearly screeched, “Rashmi, what happened to you? Are you okay?”

Rashmi came in and sat down on the rug. I got her a glass of water. “Yes. Now everything is sorted out. Much of the mess is over,” she blurted out after gulping down the water.

I slowly moved away from there after switching off the TV. I sensed, she might have something private to tell Ranu. But in the next room I could overhear every bit of the conversation.

Ranu asked again, “What happened? Why do you look so dishevelled?”

Rashmi started unbundling her story as much had happened during the several months since she had met us last. “I was two months into pregnancy when the trouble started. My elder brother-in-law asked us both to look for another place. It was in a *chawl*, but there were two rooms and tap water was just across the corner of the road. You know I go the masala packing factory. It was so easy to get into group auto-rickshaw for me to go for work. Even for my husband Debesh it was the right place to move about for his job.”

“But why did the brother-in-law want you out?” Ranu enquired.

“He feared we would occupy more space, cut into their income and burden of work would increase for his wife. We had frequent fights, abuses and the unpleasantness grew by the day. With the baby inside me I couldn’t take so much insult, fight and even hunger at times,” Rashmi was eloquent and clear in her speech, not interrupted by any emotion.

“So, what did you do?” Ranu put the fretful question.

“What else? There was a limit to my tolerance. Debesh and I shifted to another *chawl*, maybe six-seven miles away. I had to stop my job due to pregnancy and we had to pay a big advance for the new shanty. The old debts from wedding are not over. We are still paying big interests. My mummy’s gold chain is pledged with the moneylender and that’s gone forever, I’m sure. This was new place and we knew no one. I was getting anxious about the delivery, without any family support. People were saying that a delivery would cost many thousands of rupees. I checked with mummy but we had not a clue left,” Rashmi detailed.

“So, when was the delivery? No one told me,” Ranu asked.

“Mam, there was no delivery. I decided to kill my baby. I have no baby,” Rashmi’s voice sounded like a cracking rock. Her eyes started filling up and in no time two thin streams of tear started

rolling down her cheeks. She covered her face with the crumpled scarf but the heaving within was too loud and clear to miss.

Ranu didn't know what exactly to do. She put her arms around Rashmi and said, "Don't cry, please take some money."

"I have come here not for any money, but I wanted you to know all these." Rashmi was not crying anymore.

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A few days later, as usual, Abir entered the kitchen to prepare the curries and rotis. As I came in to tell him not to put so much salt in curries he looked down and said, "Ok, Sir, I will reduce salt. Sir, I've bought a new knife for the kitchen. This is very sharp and good for slicing tomatoes. A guy from Mumbai was selling these and many different types of stainless steel knives at a low price. I thought of the blunt knife here and purchased this."

"Oh, that's very nice of you. This one looks quite good. How much you paid for this?" I asked.

"Only twenty five rupees, Sir. You need not pay me now. I'll take it from Madam someday by adjusting for raw spinach that I get often," Abir smiled and got involved in cooking.

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About four or five days later, at office, maybe around three in the afternoon two persons came to see me in my cabin. I had never seen or known them before. I signalled them to sit and asked, "Sorry, I can't place you. Would you please introduce yourselves and tell me what brings you here?"

"We are from the police department. We are here in connection with an investigation of a crime. We have a few questions for you", the non-uniformed visitors sort of stunned me with their

introductory remarks. I was a bit baffled at the utterly unexpected conversation that had just begun. “I’m quite unclear as to what you are telling. You say you are policemen and have questions for me about a crime! What crime? Who did what? I’ve no idea. I hope, you’re not mixing up,” I tried to put things straight.

“Abir cooks at your place daily twice, doesn’t he?” the older looking one asked. “How long has he been employed with you?”

“Abir, yes, yes. He cooks for us. Close to two years now, I think. But what’s the issue? Why this question? Has he done something?” I was getting a bit anxious.

“He and three of his friends have murdered a fifty year old lady last Friday. They stabbed her several times and ran away with her jewellery. But the escape was caught on CCTVs in the apartment building. That news was there all over media, papers and TV,” the younger policeman came to the point without beating around the bush. “This is where Abir also cooked. His friends plotted with him to kill this lady of the house when she was alone, her husband had gone away for a day on work.”

“Oh! That’s unbelievable! You mean Abir was part of the murder act? But...but he looks so shy and soft. I can’t believe this. So, is that why he’s not come to cook for last two days? Have you arrested him?” I was getting worked up.

“Yes, Sir. He was part of the act. Now, we want to know from you if he had any relatives or contacts from his village here. Also, we need addresses of houses where he worked in the city,” the policeman came to the point.

“I only have his mobile number, but I don’t know where else he worked and no idea about his relatives here,” I thought I spoke convincingly and scrupulously.

“Ok, then. We’re leaving. But we may come back if needed.” They just got up and made their way.

For a moment, before my eyes, there was a flash of that knife Abir had bought for our kitchen.

I stood dumbfounded and the first thing that came to my mind was to call up Ranu and narrate what had just happened.



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