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NAKED MAN

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For the past four days, the naked man has become the center of discussion in the central market area of the city and the adjacent residential neighborhood. Every morning, around eight o'clock, he appears near the lamp post. With long, tangled hair, a face buried in a grey beard, a well-built brown body, and opaque, indifferent eyes, he gives the impression of being mad. He either walks the streets or sits leaning against the lamp post, completely oblivious to the world around him. He survives on leftovers given by shopkeepers and sleeps on the bare ground. His nakedness seems neither strange to him

nor inappropriate for others—as if he were the first man ever to walk this earth, free and unashamed.

One

A group of girls, laughing happily, were on their way to college. The Girls' College is about a kilometer north of the town. Suddenly, the naked man appeared in front of them. Their laughter stopped abruptly. Avoiding him, they moved to the footpath.

A few young men approached from the opposite direction and blocked their way. The girls hesitated.

The naked man stood there, unaffected.

One of the young men sneered, "See, they feel ashamed."

Another mocked, "Take a good look—it's no crime!"

A third made a vulgar comment, and the group burst into loud laughter.

The shopkeepers and passersby looked on, astonished, then quickly turned away. No one dared confront the unruly youths—who knew what might happen?

Some of the girls' eyes welled with tears. They walked past the naked man hurriedly, heads lowered. One girl, walking a little behind the group, paused. In a clear, calm voice she said to the young men, "You are more naked and shameless than he is."

One of them charged at her, enraged, but his friends held him back. As a few people started coming out of the shops, they quickly fled.

The naked man crossed the road and returned to his usual spot.

Two

Arjun Choudhury was standing at his gate, chatting with Indra Sonowal. Both had retired from the same school, just a few days apart, three years ago. They often met in the evenings for a short walk. That day, Sonowal had come to see the house being built by Choudhury's younger son, Bapdhan.

Every time the house came up in conversation, Choudhury changed the topic. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that Bapdhan had been a student leader just two years ago. It had barely been a year and a half since he started taking small contracts. So how, they wondered, could he afford to build a mansion?

Choudhury himself had begun to suspect the worst. He remembered a boy—years ago, during an army operation—who came in the evening carrying a large suitcase and a canvas bag. He claimed to be from Guwahati and left before dawn, empty-handed. The suitcase and bag were left behind. Choudhury never heard of the boy again. Later, when the situation calmed and newspapers reported large sums of money being recovered, Choudhury thought of that incident again.

He never dared ask his son. Even if he did, what answer would he get? Once, when his wife showed him the house plans, he asked, “Where did he get the money to build such a big house?”

She replied that Bapdhan had gone to the tea company's head office in Kolkata and secured a contract. He'd earned a lot of money from that deal. She insisted it was all legitimate.

But Choudhury remained unconvinced. As the house neared completion, he felt as if he himself stood naked before the community's suspicious gaze.

“What are they thinking?” he muttered.

Sonowal's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Nothing much—just that times have changed. What's become of people these days?"

"You're right," Sonowal replied. "Mr. Ghosh's daughter fainted the other day. A naked man stood near their bathroom while she was bathing. The neighborhood boys caught him. A mad boy, apparently—his house is near Kalibari. But I'm shocked to hear about this naked man in the market."

Just then, a motorcycle pulled up. Bapdhan got off and approached.

"How are you, Uncle?"

"I'm fine. But what's that in your hand?"

"Oh, just my watch. The strap tore while beating that rogue."

"What rogue?"

"The naked man! The girls from the law college pass that way. He was standing shamelessly under the lamp post."

Bapdhan strode into the new house, head held high. Choudhury whispered to himself, *Who is truly shameless?*

Indra Sonowal sighed, "My sons have turned so immature."

"At least," Choudhury mumbled, "they haven't made you feel naked."

"What did you say?"

"Let's go for a walk."

Three

As the bustle of the evening dies down, the naked man returns to his near-permanent place beneath the lamp post. The air is still slightly chilly. The weather doesn't seem to bother him. Perhaps he remembers nothing—no past, no future—only hunger. He devours the scraps the shopkeepers give him.

Mason Ramcharan and his teenage helper, Birender, were passing by. Birender was shocked to see the man urinating near the drain. When the man returned to his spot, Ramcharan took the gamocha from his head and said in Hindi, “Wear this.”

The cloth was too small to cover his waist. The man simply rolled it into a ball and sat down as before.

Ramcharan was speechless. He turned to Birender, “You fool! How many will you save from shame?”

As they walked away, Birender kept glancing back.

“You’re still a kid,” Ramcharan said.

Four

The Officer-in-Charge of the local police station was tense. A witness in a murder case had disappeared, and the hearing was only two days away. He was berating his subordinates when the phone rang.

He picked it up, expecting an update. His expression soured.

Self-styled reporter Singh was on the line.

“What are you doing?” Singh demanded.

“What do you mean?” Rahman asked curtly.

“For four days a naked man has been wandering around the market! Women have to see him—”

“What do you expect me to do?”

“Don’t you have a responsibility?”

“The whole country is full of naked men. What can I do?”

“Rahman sahib! What are you saying?”

“I’m just telling the truth. Sorry, I’m busy. I’ll call you later.”

After hanging up, Rahman muttered, “The courts let the madmen out of jail, and we face the consequences. Families send them in, the courts let them go. We arrest them today; they’re released tomorrow. And who pays the price?”

“Who was on the line, sir?” asked the constable.

“Who else? That fake reporter who prints a newspaper every six months filled with ads, collects money for newsprint, and spends his evenings begging for liquor. He should be made naked!”

Then, turning serious, he said, “Call Saikia.”

Five

The naked man was missing for a full day. Perhaps he was resting behind some shop or lying in a dry drain, aching from the beating he received at the hands of Bapdhan and his followers. Or maybe he’d wandered to another part of the city. Twice the police van came looking for him but returned empty-handed.

On Sunday morning, he reappeared in his usual place. It was market day. People gathered to buy and sell fresh goods.

Kripa Neog arrived with his son, Gobin, to sell the last of their orchard’s oranges and pick up some household items. He was stunned to see the naked man leaning against the lamp post.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed. Approaching him, he shouted, “Hey! What’s your name? Where do you live?”

The man didn’t respond. He gazed at Neog with empty disinterest.

“Why are you naked, son?”

Gobin groaned. “Why are you bothering that madman? Let’s go. We’re already late.”

“Who isn’t mad?” Neog muttered. “Oh God, look at the state of this world!”

He looked around. A government banner was hanging from a tree. He tore it down.

Gobin cried, “Father, don’t! That’s a government banner—can’t you read? ‘Literacy Mission—’”

“Mission!” Neog retorted. “This too is a mission.”

As Gobin watched in disbelief, his father tried to open the knots and wrap the banner around the man’s waist. The madman instantly tore it off. People gathered, some laughing.

The madman began shouting, “Inquilab Zindabad!”

The laughter grew louder.

Kripa Neog stood there, stunned. A police van arrived silently and parked nearby. Several constables tried to lift the man into the van. He clutched the banner tightly to his chest and began sobbing.

“Ah! He must have remembered home,” an old man said, wiping his tears with a gamocha.

The police hurled the man into the van along with the banner. People slowly dispersed.

“Good,” someone muttered. “Shameless creature.”

“Who is shameless?” Neog mumbled. “And who decides?”

His eyes filled with tears. The naked man would go to jail again. Someone would clothe him. One day he’d be released. And again, he would roam, nameless and naked, through the streets of another city.

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