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Height

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My supervisor was upset with me. All I regretted was that he had expressed his indignation explicitly, and I could not lie to him with an air of verisimilitude. The most unpleasant of all was that my face utterly, involuntarily assumed an idiotic smile. On my way from my department to the canteen, I caught sight of Nilanjan, and my eyes widened. The unease I had felt while meeting my supervisor vanished in an instant, but this time a different nervousness took hold of me. I felt my heart pounding faster and faster; a cutting wind was racing inside me, howling and giving my head no rest. My face must have gone unnaturally pale. I had never imagined that I would

ever see him like that inside my university campus. At this moment, he stood a short distance away, leaning to one side.

During off periods, students from different departments streamed down that path to the canteen or the fast-food stalls, pushing carts, to get something to eat. Dodging through the crowd, I glanced around, trying to look at him without being seen, when he suddenly met my eyes. I pretended not to recognise him and turned my head away, hoping to pass by, but he shouted my name and stepped in front of me. Like a defeated soldier glancing fearfully toward the enemy's ranks, I kept looking at him, and he, with utmost eagerness, embraced me publicly.

“You don’t recognize me? I can make out. After so many years, you have seen me! How can you possibly recognize me? But I recognized you the moment I saw you. You’ve grown stronger, more handsome. I’m so proud of you”, he said in one breath, and as he kept talking, he grew emotional. I felt overwhelmingly unprepared. Out of a faint sense of propriety, I offered him a forced smile and inwardly searched for a way to escape.

I always remained acutely conscious of whether my presence, words, gait, dress, and status made any impression on those around me, which left little room for spontaneity in my behaviour. But what happened to me when I saw Nilanjan was entirely spontaneous. In the university environment, surrounded by the stares of students from various departments, I had no objection when Nilanjan — his hair unkempt, his face hollow, his long beard uncared for — hugged me tightly. Because I knew that such behaviour would make me more popular among the students and increase my glamour. And when I hugged him, I realised — my knees went weak. The moment I saw him, I thought — “He’s been studying secretly here at the university.” As far as I knew, real researchers looked exactly like him. That thought suddenly

awakened an old fear I had not felt in many years. And I found myself becoming uneasy. Dangerously.

After almost ten years, I saw Nilanjan today. The moment I saw him, I recognized him. Even seen from behind, I probably wouldn't have had any trouble identifying him. He was tall and thin. At first, it seemed as if he had grown taller. Only when I hugged him did I notice — he had become even thinner than before. That's why he seemed taller to me.

From classes 11 and 12 through the BA, Nilanjan and I studied at the same college. With tutoring in almost every subject, I somehow passed my Class 12 final examination in the first division. But he, without taking tuition in a single subject, who used to sell dried wood and betel nuts at the nearby marketplace to pay for his own studies, secured fourth-place state rank in that examination. That instantly gave him statewide stardom, which inflicted a sharp envy in me I couldn't contain.

On the day the results were announced, our college was in a festive mood. The boys and girls shouted and cheered. That day, I was the first to hug Nilanjan; I lifted him onto my shoulder and carried him screaming. That performance of mine was just my brilliant acting, known to no one except my family. That night, I came home exhausted and cried for hours; around midnight, I prayed to God that he should fall ill and die soon.

After much thought, I enrolled in the B.A. programme with Assamese as my major. Nilanjan enrolled in the science stream with chemistry as his major. My curse did not affect him. Many people came forward to help him financially. But he refused help from anyone. He was fiercely proud. Apart from selling dried wood and betel nuts, he had recently started giving tuition. Soon, all the boys and girls from the small town began crowding around him to study. I was sinking deeper into despair. Yet he had placed me on his list of well-wishers.

In those days, Nilanjan's clothes were in poor shape. Between classes, he would sometimes sneak off to smoke; the smell of cigarettes often clung to him. Still, he was the centre of attraction at college. Not only in academics, but he also won first prize in every literary and debate competition held during college week. The prettiest girl in my department was Seema. I tried everything to attract her. I wore expensive, eye-catching clothes and fragrant cologne to college. I rode a flashy bike whenever I could; I kept myself fit with regular exercise; I sat close enough to be noticed. Yet, to my despair, she would light up at the mention of Nilanjan's name. His name became, to me, an utterly disgusting word. With the badge of friendship, I watched Nilanjan obsessively. I had been trying steadily to make my handwriting look like his. Tuition brought him some money. He was able to rent a simple house on the outskirts of town. He brought his younger sister and ailing father from their remote village to live with him. I visited that rented house many times. His small study room was like a peculiar library. Open books lay scattered across the table, on one side of his untidy bed, on the chairs, and even across the floor. Every leftover rupee of his tuition earnings, after keeping his household running, he sacrificed to his passion: books. I was still unworthy of reading certain books he used to read then.

When I was in my second year of undergraduate studies, I was desperate to beat Nilanjan in literary competitions. In the end, I managed to defeat him in only one contest: the essay competition. No one could tell how Nilanjan's essay disappeared. Even he did not question it. Based on trust, the competition secretary had to hand me the file of submitted essays for only five minutes. He had to get busy with some other work. That was all the time I needed to crumple Nilanjan's essay and slide it into my pocket.

Nilanjan congratulated me for my so-called victory. I could say nothing.

Meanwhile, a terrorist outfit emerged in my state. Gaining wide popular support, it grew stronger as it attempted to liberate the state from the country by armed struggle. Even ordinary members of the group were admired by people. To crush the organization with a firm hand, the central government launched an operation in the state. At times, in the name of searching for members of that outfit, the authorities rounded up and punished passersby. I lived in constant fear; I flinched whenever I saw the military.

One night, returning home on a bicycle late after tutoring, Nilanjan was stopped by the military and questioned at length. As he answered, their anger rose, and he began arguing with them. He was not someone who could be intimidated. In the end, the soldiers took him as a member of the organization; they beat him severely, so much so that they had to take him to the hospital. They feared he would die. He didn't die. He spent almost a month in the government hospital before returning home. His friends, including me, paid all his medical expenses. I had to maintain the illusion of friendship.

The moment I realized that Nilanjan could no longer study and truly wouldn't be able to sit for the upcoming examinations, I breathed a sigh of relief. After recovering a bit after many months, he had to become a life insurance agent. I was happy. After that incident, the boys and girls in town also stopped coming to Nilanjan to study. I obtained a first class in my BA. After that, I went to university for further studies.

I had never known poverty. I grew up in abundance. My father was once a famous contractor. I was not at all concerned with what was happening in my state, who was doing what, or who was dead. I only worried about my own prosperity. I, too, wanted to become a contractor. The terrorist groups and other organizations kept their eyes on these contractors. That's why I was thinking of taking a different path. But the success of a poor boy like Nilanjan unsettled me. Compared to him, I

couldn't stand being insignificant. I studied day and night, relentlessly, to become an assistant professor. My perseverance finally bore fruit: I became an assistant professor, that too in the most reputed university in my state. My dream came true: I became a source of pride for my college. I proved my superiority.

Yet in the past ten years, I had proved myself to be a bad teacher. Often students skipped my classes. So what? I knew I was not meant for this profession. But I needed the status. I got it. That was more than enough.

I was awaiting promotion to associate professor. Restlessly. I needed a PhD to qualify. I couldn't manage creative writing, and even six years after enrolling in the PhD, I hadn't been able to submit my thesis. If I did not submit it within two months, my final deadline would pass. A teacher without that degree was valued less at the university. There was a constant mental pressure on me. Feelings of inferiority had ruined me.

The very book I desperately needed to conclude my thesis was one I had never heard of. That's why my supervisor scolded me a short while ago. Blushing, I walked out of my supervisor's chamber to hunt for the book. As I was coming to the university canteen, I caught sight of Nilanjan, and a jolt ran through me. My feelings of inferiority suddenly intensified. It had been many years since I had any news of Nilanjan. I had not felt any need to keep track of him.

But now, the few assumptions that immediately started maddening the nerves in my brain were these—Nilanjan was completely well; he had resumed his studies; after finishing his MA at another university, he was doing research at this university. No sooner had I felt that than a question popped out of my mouth of its own accord, "What are you doing here?"

"I am not doing anything like you. I am just a lowly person compared to you," he said.

He spoke in a modest tone with an ordinary smile, but his words pierced me. To escape from that, I said, “I really need a book. I must get it today, by any means; I’ll meet you later. I have to go now.” Before I had finished, he asked eagerly, “Which book? Tell me the title.” I thought his studious phase was long dead, and doubted he would even recognise the title. Suddenly, I became eager to flaunt my superiority. I gave him a dismissive glance, letting a sneer bleed into my voice as I uttered the title with a measured dose of condescension. I also could not resist the temptation to explain exactly why that book was crucial to my work.

When a lost thing is suddenly found, the joy it brings is unmistakable. My uttering the title seemed to give him that joy. Excited, he said, “I can give you that right now. I bought and read it while I was studying for my B.A. I’ve brought all my old books and am selling them over by the bank. I couldn’t complete my studies, but I want to educate my sister—even if I have to sell everything we own. I’ve brought my entire collection of books to sell, so that I can raise money for her education. Here, I know, there will be buyers of old books. Already a few are sold—come along, I shall give you that very book; but you will not pay me.” He practically dragged me to the place by the bank where his countless old books were stacked. From among them, he pulled out the book I needed, handed it into my hands with a pure, unclouded smile, and said, “If you get your PhD, my pride will grow; I’ll be able to tell people, ‘My friend has obtained his PhD.’ I’d feel guilty taking money from you.” For a few moments, I stood there staring at him in amazement; then I grabbed him by the shoulders. From the depths of my heart, a feeling that never wanted to surface rose like a flood and burst through the corners of my eyes.

But when he said, “I want my sister to do her MA here, at your university, in your department. She might get first class in her BA with honours in Assamese from the very college we both

attended”, a shiver ran down my spine, and the great feeling that had just risen inside me for him suddenly subsided. I made an excuse about being terribly busy, said a brief goodbye like a boy, and slipped away from his side.

As I trudged back to my quarters holding the book clumsily, the image of Nilanjan haunted me, so much so that I felt he was in front of me, with a genuine smile on his face. That smile filled the quiet recesses of my mind with a pang of shame. I felt wounded, heavily. When I first caught sight of him today, I thought he had grown taller. Now I realized from the core of my heart— the tallest person I had ever met was he, there by the bank, completely himself, every part of him, just as he had been then. And I...

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