

Ranjan

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The room always smelt like this. There always was a small fire held on the cup-shaped stone lamp that contained some exotic essential oil, most likely sandalwood oil. In front of the lamp a bunch of incense sticks were lighted. The scent of the ivory smoke rose from the sticks, infused with aroma of the oil, to permeate into the still air to create a flavor that the peace-seekers would certainly adore. This ambiance had been thoughtfully and tastefully created. For a calming effect.

In the last one year, Ranjan must have visited this place, an *Ashram (hermitage)*, almost once every week on Friday evenings after work, sometimes twice, despite the fact that it was more than seventy miles from his office. He had nowhere better to go after work. No real friends, no zeal to make new acquaintances. He craved for some calm, which this place offered.

There were rectangular mats laid on the floor at equal intervals forming a larger rectangle, blown up in dimensions, of course. He always sat in the same seat, half way down the hall. When it wasn't occupied, that is, but it was mostly available. The meditation hall was rarely

crowded, and that particular seat was the most hidden from entrance and from anywhere for that matter. He went there to hide. Hide from everyone.

Ranjan sat there as silently as he could and closed his eyes, as he always did and as was expected of the place. The settings were just perfect. After a few deep breaths, his mind slowly began to relax. His mind meandered to a sea shore, where waves didn't make any sound. Along the beach were thousands of casuarina and coconut trees; their leaves rustling quietly. The deep lines on top of his brows started relaxing into the deepest tranquility. The anxiety and fatigue that had accumulated in the week slowly gave way to a wholly unhurried state. Before long he had fallen into a sleep feel, even while sitting in his cross legged position. A lingering sound of the gong bell woke him up. He was rejuvenated and ready for the loneliness of the next two days in his house.

Back in his room, he sat down to write a little in his diary, a habit since the last few months. The diary granted him some quality time, with himself. Relaxed he slept, beating five days of insomnia at a stretch. He awoke just before noon, that also because someone was knocking at the door. In the last year, not many people visited his place. The knocking had a familiar beat about it. The knocking stopped. For a minute. Then the knocking resumed with the same rhythm. He hesitated. Normally his wife was the one in the house who opened the door. That is when she stayed with him in this house. Now that she had moved out, he had to open the door.

“How have you been?” Inquired the visitor. It was Phalguna. His friend from school days.

The question had no answer, so he kept silent. Questions like this have an answer when things are going right.

Phalguna watched Ranjan as he entered the kitchen, where he made some black tea. An extra cup for the visitor. He came out holding a tray with two cups on it and a knife hanging along the edge of the tray.

“Some lemon?” Ranjan asked as he started cutting the lemon into thin and round slices.

“Good idea. Why not?” Phalguna said “I packed some pasta for both of us on my way”

The two men ate in silence. Ranjan’s eyes were fixed on the plate of pasta, as if he was meditating over it.

Phalguna lit up a cigarette with a match, exhaling in short and uneasy breaths. Ranjan never liked the smell of tobacco, but he was so absorbed that he hardly paid any attention to the visitor, who was left with nothing else but to smoke and gaze around the house. It looked very normal except that the place felt emptier than before. No sound, no new color, totally lifeless.

Back in college Ranjan was a very popular person. He was an expert dancer, a standout stage performer while he tried to copy the signature moves of his role model, Michael Jackson. He was short, with small limbs with oddly fat thighs. Still he was very nimble. His popularity soared more because others found him funny. He didn’t mind people

making fun of him and got along easily with all. Phalguna was a sheer contrast to his friend. Taciturn, unsociable and exceptional in studies, he had hardly any friends, barring Ranjan.

Now when he was reminded of how he was in college, he fully understood why people found him funny. Over the years he had changed much. Especially after moving to the US. He remember that both of them had moved out of India to California around the same time. Phalguna's confidence expanded with success that he found in his career. He became unrestrained and trendier. The change had been nothing but drastic. For both of them.

Phalguna finally got ready to leave "We should spend more time together" he said "It can get frightfully lonely in this place. I've somehow managed to adjust. I am worried for you"

Ranjan didn't say a word. Just a subdued smile. So subdued, that Phalguna could not notice.

He fell silent again and went back in time and started picturing the various events in their lives, which ran in parallel.

As with everything else in their lives, Phalguna had got married around the same time, some four years after both of them had arrived in the US. Phalguna to Roopa and Ranjan to Bhoomi. A gap of two days between the marriages was the reason why they couldn't attend each other's wedding. But soon their new families shifted to similar houses in the same neighborhood in San Jose, CA.

Within two-three months the new wives had managed to get jobs in the foreign country. Life was good and exciting. The newly wed couples would spend a lot of time together. After two years of their marriages, Ranjan got concerned. About his friend. Something had gone wrong in his friend's family life.

He remembered, he had tried to discuss the subject of marriage "Phalgun, I hope all is OK between Roopa and you"

Phalgun couldn't respond. He didn't know what to say and if a response, at all, was expected.

After just a few weeks, Phalgun informed him that Roopa had sent divorce forms to him. She had already moved out.

"I am supposed to sign these forms and send them back right away!" Phalgun said with a hysterical laugh, when he met him. It was all mysterious but Ranjan had no wish to unearth it.

The next he heard from him was when his friend told him about his decision to move out of their city to Texas.

Ranjan's life went as usual, well, at least for the next one year. He'd been married now for more than three years. He'd spend more than half the day at work. As expected, he did well in his job and got regular increments and performance bonuses whenever others got it in his company, sometimes even when a selected few got it.

Bhoomi was busy in her job as well. She'd made new friends at her Zumba classes. These new friends filled in the hole

that had formed after Roopa had moved out. She joined morning *Yoga* classes soon after. She also had made some male friends. Ranjan was not bothered, rather happy that his wife didn't nag him for time like many of the Indian wives did.

A year passed like this. When going is smooth, you don't notice how a year passes.

Ranjan was happy that someone from India had come to visit them. It was Bhoomi's mother. The wife of a famous goldsmith in their hometown, she was a little old fashioned in her ideas, but that was understandable as most of the Indian women of her age are who obsessed with marrying their daughters to a rich guy and then enforcing a timely child-birth.

An elaborate meal of *Poori*, *Subzee*, Indian sweets was laid on the table next morning in place of the regular cereal breakfast. Ranjan often missed Indian food and it was available in plenty now. He was delighted.

"Your mother is the best cook in the world. I hate to admit that she's even better than my own mom" Ranjan said.

"Four years into marriage and no kids?" Bhoomi's mother complained to the couple.

Both of them didn't offer any explanation. For the first two years of marriage they took extreme care with contraception. Then one day the care was abandoned. Bhoomi was now ready for a baby.

For the next six months they made love now only for procreation, whenever and wherever possible. Bhoomi would take tips from her close friends. She would pass on the knowledge to Ranjan on the most fruitful days of the month for conceiving. They even consulted a doctor.

“There’s nothing wrong with you guys. Just relax and keep trying” was the expert advice.

Back at home that evening, they laid on the bed, next to each other with their legs stretched. And they talked, rather she talked and he listened sipping a glass of scotch. She looked more attractive than ever, probably more than how she appeared when he first saw her. Dusky and enticing she always was, now she had turned very chic and polished. She spoke with an acquired accent these days. And as she spoke her fingers and hands moved in an effortless feminine intensity. She looked so self-assured.

Ranjan thought “How different are we? She was the opposite of me”

Before long, her feet brushed against his fine and before they actually knew a passionate act of love was played. Fierce and passionate. Refreshing.

Over the next few weeks they had sex with a renewed vigor. A new determination.

One fine morning Ranjan could not get up from the bed. He had developed a chronic backache, quite possibly because of the inordinate physical exertion he had gone through in making his wife pregnant. Even that could not stop the couple. Someone suggested a few back friendly positions

and they resumed again. All this and more, yet after one year into this project there was no result to show.

Ranjan had lost all his sexual desires. He decided to take a little break. Soon the news spread about the trouble the couple was having. It reached Bhoomi's mother, who had four children of her own. She consulted an astrologer, who advised Bhoomi to visit the temple of Shiva, the most potent Hindu god, every Monday and offer milk and three *Bel* leaves, which was a rarity in that part of the world. Ranjan didn't approve of the idea but for the sake of her wife conceded. Even divine intervention didn't help.

Finally, the mother decided to take things under her own control. This is how she had landed at her daughter's place. For the first month or so, there was ample bonhomie in the house.

One evening, exhausted after twelve hours of work with the existing condition of backache when Ranjan returned home, Bhoomi's mother commanded "Today is full moon night, a very special day. Go and do her. She is waiting. How can you have a child if you don't do it?"

That was as offending as it could be, but Ranjan didn't say a word. He went inside bedroom and spewed out his anger for her mother's actions on the daughter.

"I'd had enough of all this drama. Ask your mom to mind her own business, else leave our place" he said

"How can you even say that? She's doing all this for our sake." Bhoomi defended her mother.

“Then I leave this goddamned place” he said as he stormed out of the room.

“Our relationship isn’t exactly . . . normal.” Bhoomi shouted as she followed him

“Not exactly normal.” Ranjan repeated her words without knowing what they meant.

The relationship which was already hanging on an awkward cliff slipped down further. It never improved from that point, even after the mother left. Bhoomi decided to move out, away from Ranjan, who made many attempts to bring her back but to no avail.

Now it had been almost six months that the two were living separately. This is when Ranjan started showing signs of acute depression. The only reason to continue in the foreign country was his job.

A few days later, one Friday evening Phalguna called up Ranjan “I am shifting back to San Jose. I sense I’d enough of staying away from you.”

By Sunday morning he was standing in front of his friend’s home. The wooden signboard on the door read: Bhoomi & Ranjan’s world.

Their world had changed, almost beyond recognition.

Since that day, he had been visiting Ranjan frequently and without fail over weekends. They stayed a few miles away.

The next weekend, Phalguna came to his friend’s place, a regular feature in the last eight-nine months.

“Ranjan, I don’t know how to say this...”

“Tell me exactly how it should be said”

“Well... Bhoomi had called me up. She wants to initiate the divorce proceedings”

“Good” Ranjan said and he fell silent.

“She said that she would be sending you the necessary divorce forms soon and wants you to sign them and send them back to her as soon as you can”

“I’ve not told you this. I am jobless now. This house is all I own and I don’t mind giving it away to her. Please tell her this”

“Sure”

“And yeah, I’ve decided to move back to India. Dad is seventy-nine now and needs to be taken care of”

“Have you already decided?”

“Yes, booked the tickets as well”

The divorce papers and other formalities were signed and ready to be sent to the ex-wife in three days.

“Phalguna, handover these papers to them and ...”

“Will do”

“And yes the house keys as well. I’ll move out tonight. Ask her to move to this house. It’s solely hers now”

Ranjan had decided to stay a few days in the *Ashram* before leaving for India. Around seven in the evening, as he settled at his familiar seat for some peace, the place was drowned

in stillness and silence. He also sat still and silent, but in the tree was mind, there were scores of itchy imps. The gong bell rang ever so silently and it was time to get up. He had to book a room in the guesthouse of the Ashram. It was a weekday and rooms were available.

In the room's silence, that was part of the larger designed scheme of the place's silence, he could hear his heart beat, a heavy and hopeless sound. There was a new kind of pressure building up within. There was a strong urge to write something. He unpacked his suitcase.

“Where is my diary? Oh, I think I kept it in the bedside drawers.”

His skull cracked with anxiety. He wanted his diary back.

It was around eleven o'clock when he reached his place. It was dark and he lit up the torch from his mobile phone. The signboard on the door was untouched. It read: Bhoomi & Ranjan's world.

He always hid a duplicate key under the flower pot just outside the door. As before, he hauled out the key from under the pot and opened the door. It made no sound.

His house was in the same fashion he had left. There was a light glowing in the bedroom. He always took care to switch off the lights before leaving the house.

“How did I leave it switched on?”

He stepped towards the lighted room. A smoke emitted with the soft light. It had the unmistakable whiff of tobacco, which he hated so badly.

The door was open, as he'd left it earlier.

He could see a girl mounted on top of a man. The hips were rotating vigorously. He could not see the face of the girl, but the hair, the spine, the hips and the thighs. There was no doubt in his mind who she was. Like the hooded *Shesha Naga* serpent, on which Lord Vishnu rests, she had uncoiled herself, she was all over him.

And who was the man?

It was again a very familiar face. It was the pronounced face of Phalgun, his old friend. His old friend on bed with a woman, who was his wife a few hours ago.

Ranjan lowered his head, shut the bedroom door softly and left the house. He didn't know what else to do. He was in no mood to see more of it.

Phalgun pushed his bedmate aside and rushed outside. From the glass window in the living room he could identify Ranjan, as he was rushing away in hurry.

Ranjan wasn't the type who naturally fathomed what was brewing up in the background. He never could imagine that his friend could do this to him. Had he not come to his house like this, he might never have detected what was going on, while he was completely unaware.

The next day, Ranjan packed for a trip to India, for good. When the flight took off, he closed his eyes. He had no bitterness for anyone, no grudge. He had forgiven and forgotten.



Debasis Tripathy has had his writings featured with several reputed journals. To make a living he is stuck in very crowded city called Bangalore, where he is a married man with a clever son who asks difficult questions

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