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The Stardust Child

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My life would have been easier without having to deal with Rohith Vemula.

Since the day he hung himself, he's everywhere – placards, banners, posters, t-shirts, bandanas, flags, bags, buttons. Perhaps in some hearts, but we'll see.

Every time I see his picture, my eye brows come together in a scowl. Not in distaste – though that's what he would've been used to – but in disbelief. The picture is of a child with wheatish skin, chubby cheeks, wavy hair, and a carefree smile. A Mala dalit? Really? Does that even seem believable? Have you ever seen one of those with enough to eat to have those kind of pinchable cheeks? And his skin? Like he had never spent a day in the sun. They are farm labourers, you know. That's their place in the Vedic roulette. But he never never broke earth under the May sun in Guntur even for a day, if you ask me. And his carefree smile? That should be a dead giveaway. They never smile. What's there to smile?

He wrote a letter too. A fancy one that no dalit I've ever come across could even begin to conceptualize. They're not very

smart, you know. It's the way of the world – some people need to run farms and clean latrines, while others decipher the stars. What would you need smartness for while ploughing someone else's field, or sweeping someone else's excrement?

But that happens when a university allows them inside and lets those who don't need it, think. And protest. They may claim to be intellectuals picketing and going on bhook-hartals for dignity and their rights as Ph.D. scholars, but blood will tell, and their hands ache to pick up instruments that are heavier than mere pens. In this case, a rope, looped around till there was no chance of the knot opening when it suddenly supported a grown man's weight.

Parts of his letter also surface sporadically. When he put that noose around his neck in Uma anna's room, they printed it in the papers. It is morbid, if you ask me, the extent to which they go to fill up column inches they aren't able to sell. A suicide letter in a newspaper that people like you and I read. Our children read. What will be its effect on them? Should they all suddenly believe in all the nonsense a dying Mala conjured up?

"Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust."

Stardust? Really? The nerve of the child. Of course, he wasn't made of stardust. Not many are. And the ones that are are the ones who visit the university leading packs of people with those placards and banners and posters and t-shirts and bandanas and flags and bags and buttons now, much after they should have. They are the ones where stardust congregated. It didn't trickle down too much, though. Not one

grain made it to a mere Mala child. Children gaze uncomprehendingly at the games the stardust-people play. They have their roles too, but that's the only true thing in that letter – "the value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing."

Of course, that is the value of one of us. What else could it be? What else can one even attain? Foolishness, to think otherwise. You can bring hundreds of such children together, group them in an Ambedkar Student's Association, let them run their marches and their julooses and their dharnas and their relay hunger strikes. It won't amount to anything because there is a natural order in the world. Can you stop the rain from falling? Would the clouds hold their loads if a hundred misguided children stood and shook placards? And when you lose the game you didn't even know you were playing, you decide to be a poet and pen your last elegy?

"My birth is my fatal accident."

Clever child – did you think of that all by yourself? You must've been so proud. But you know what is not a fatal accident? What one does after the realisation. How you grow up and understand that you need to be the sludge that finds a way to creep insensibly, and not the stone that lies firm and in the way of people avoiding the foul stench. Sludge inches forward – not all the way where pure water would reach, and not with the pride of the determined stone – but at least, some way ahead. It does so by blending in, so even sensitive noses can't figure out where the stench is emanating. That's the only way when you don't have any stardust. Blend and disappear, so they don't remember to show you your place.

Do you know how to change your name in India? Anyone can do it. One of the few things that anyone, truly, can. It's a three-step process – one, file an affidavit in court, two, take out an advertisement in a local language and an English daily and three, publish it in a national gazette, preferably in Delhi. Seven hundred rupees, the cost of the entire procedure to excise the vile appendage. Make the 'h' in your name invisible, and replace the suffix with an innocuous and ambiguous 'Kumar', and begin your life away from the games that stardust-people play. Even a Ph.D. student with a stipend could afford it. I know they stopped the stipend, but you died with a debt of forty thousand. Another seven hundred wouldn't have mattered.

It wouldn't have changed everything, or perhaps anything. But it would've allowed the sludge to blend a little. Perhaps flow just a little longer.

I try not to discuss these thoughts with others on the taskforce that the Ministry of Human Resource Development constituted to examine the way his self-inflicted death absolved everyone else of any responsibility. These thoughts do not align with the popular discourse. The official position, unofficially, is that we sympathize with him, but the current stardust-people are always correct. I have been drafted into the task force for a reason too, I know, but I do not share. External appearances for the junta-janardan, you know. It tells me that I haven't blended at all, really. They just don't say anything because I toe the line and I die every day to hold on

to the lucky streak on the roulette that has let me flow, for some time at least, up. But, back to the task force. We are investigating and will continue to do so till they tell us what we have found. Evidence? Don't be foolish. You sound like you haven't been on my shoulder, poking and prying my conscience for the last thirty years.

There is one part of the letter that does resonate with me. I reluctantly admit it. Rejoice, child. You got me to agree with one of your beliefs.

"People may dub me as a coward. And selfish, or stupid once I am gone. I am not bothered about what I am called."

Yes, I do dub you a coward. Actually, more stupid than cowardly. The part you got right was the last. What you didn't get right was the timing. The equanimity of not bothering about what people call you shouldn't start after you die. It should begin with your birth. When your mother gives you birth in the dinghy corner of the primary health center because that's where Chamars deserve to be put. In their place. See, propagating like vermin. Again. You see, they're not very smart – after all, what smartness do you need to fix someone's chappal that broke on their way to the temple. The same temple, mind you, which you cannot glance at for fear of being lynched. They are fine touching you then.

Or when you reach school and sit, as a matter of fact, outside the classroom for your lessons. Like a present-day Eklavya. He was a Chamar too, in a manner of speaking. They called them Nishad at that time, though. A role model to look up to – sacrificing his life's joy for the casual indifference of yet another stardust-person. He had also learnt, I'm sure, like all

Chamars and Nishads do. Maybe the first day he went to the Gurukul, we would have tried to step inside the classroom with the Pandavas. But after they left welts on his back that never truly healed, and rubbed his nose in the filthy earth next to the toilet, a firm shoe on the back of his head, and washed the classroom with Gangajal to purify it, he wouldn't have dared to step in again. Look in from outside, and grasp whatever little diffuses out.

Or when you pass through the hallowed portals of the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, the training grounds for the bureaucracy that runs the biggest red tape machine in the world. Grateful for the little upward-flow your caste finally gave you in the entrance exam. A giant recompense, you are told many times, after centuries of pulling you and your ilk down. Scared and hopeful at the same time. And then you realise that people look only at your skin and underfed body, your inadequacy and the scheduled caste reservation card. Where you learn to hold your tongue because you realize that the people who were inside the classroom when you were playing Eklavya got the dose of stardust that you didn't. And it shows.

Or when in your first posting, you reach your District Magistrate office a little early one morning, eager to do everything that the books had told you was your dharma, and find that members of your staff were cleaning the room with Gangajal. The same holy water that Eklavya had seen out of the corner of his swelled eye when his face was being rubbed in the ground. When people from upper castes cringe and scowl if you walk into the room where they are petitioning your staff, even when only you have the so called authority to

decide. When things come to pass, and the local leader of the upper cast sangh makes you get off the stage in the administration event celebrating your nation's independence. And when your boss looks at you in distaste and just says 'so what?' when you try to complain.

Or when you finally decide to file an affidavit, give out an ad in one local language and one English daily, and publish in the national gazette. When you take your new name to a new posting and become insignificant in all you do or say, hoping that people forget you, the way they forgot Eklavya once his thumb was extricated and he was no longer any threat to the Pandava ego. You dream of admiring him. Of how he stayed away from the turmoil of the eighteen-day Mahabharata war, safe. Flowing like sludge. Thankful for his streak of luck. Losing only what he loved most.

Like Eklavya, I learnt how to blend and flow many many years ago. Perhaps there was a bit of stone in me when I was a child. But I do not remember it. Maybe I was lucky that I was born accepting my nature. If I had remained the stone, despite a childhood of erosion, perhaps I would've been on those placards and banners and posters and t-shirts and bandanas and flags and bags and buttons. And then where would we be? An inconsequential life, cut short. A few columns in a newspaper. Propagating foolishness against the natural order even after the neck snapped.

Perhaps I'm harsh on him for not having learnt fast enough, and not having the opportunity to learn now. Maybe the stone

inside him was harder, less prone to erosion. It may not have been his fault. Perhaps this is a different world than when I learnt my lessons those decades ago – one with more hope. Perhaps this gentle wave will pick up strength. But I see his plump face and carefree smile wherever I turn.

And then I remember the letter – “from shadows to the stars”.

I pressed my thumb on the biometric attendance system terminal reserved for people like me and stepped out of the building housing the taskforce’ office in the evening. The day had been humid and hot, the way it is just before the advent of monsoons in Delhi, and a light evening breeze was beginning to rustle the dried grass the lined the footpath around the parking lot. By the time I reached my car, parked towards the far side of the lot, the sheen of light sweat on my forehead had dried.

By the time I parked and locked my car outside the officers’ quarters where I stayed, the breeze had strengthened enough to pick up dust and dead leaves and swirl them around in increasingly fast eddies. Even with the impending dust storm, I paused at my threshold, as I always do, and looked at the nameplate. Ramakant Kumar, IAS, the stranger stared back.

One of the eddies strengthened, and a particle of common-variety dust flew into my right eye. As my eyes watered, I took off my glasses and rubbed the palm of my hand on the eye. Through the painful blur, the letters on the nameplate morphed and coalesced, for a moment, into Rohit Kumar.



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Swapnil Bhatnagar is a writer based in Delhi, India. Ever since he wrote his first school mystery story (unpublished) in grade 3, he has been hooked to the joy of creating new worlds on paper. His short stories have been published in magazines such as Out of Print, Indian Review, Juggernaut, Spark etc. A short film, Sleep, based on his story and screenplay was screened at the 2018 International Short Film Festival, Mumbai, India.



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