

Milo Gets Alzheimer's

Dr Anirudh Kala

Beyond the giant glass pane it was the regular Noida skyline, as Kaps waited outside Milo's apartment on the third floor landing. Cranes swung their loads lazily against the late afternoon sun which was preparing to set across the river. From the door of the other apartment on the landing came strains of harmonium, elegant and awkward in turns. A post school music lesson for a weary adolescent, Kaps presumed as he braced himself to face Milo after twelve years.

Light steps coming towards the door and he senses, somebody looking through the glass eye. The door jerked open and a woman in a house gown, stood peering at him unbelievably. Kaps takes in the shock of rust brown hair, the crows' feet crinkles and the taken aback expression on the graceful face. Fluffy and Kaps stand across the door for a few seconds and then there is this awkward hug. Faint aromas presumably erased, get recalled.

"Oh, it is you, indeed," she said in a voice laced with reproach, "You have changed."

"Who hasn't?" Kaps the tact-less replies.

"You should have called," Fluffy complained with a tinge of bitterness after letting him in trying to pat her hair in place and failing as always. "It has been so long, you see. And there have been other reasons for not expecting you." She completed the sentence, "or the others."

"It is far," Kaps said feebly, pointing in general direction of the metropolis across the river. "It is like going to another city. I happened to be this side for a meeting and Petite Barbie, called up to remind about Milo's illness and said that I should look him up." It did not feel awkward to call his own wife by the ridiculous short name. During the fifteen years that all of them were together, these were the only names they used even at home, then and as a matter of habit even now, but of course not in front of outsiders. It was customary for young officers in air force to have nicknames, but for the wives to be called by short names was the group's very own innovation. "Petite Barbie isn't even short," She had complained, but that was the way it stayed.

"She heard it from Barbie when they were together for the wives' meet at Kochi, last winter. You could not go, I presume." Kaps regretted saying that, the moment it was out.

"No, with so much going on here." She waves generally at the Persian carpet under their feet, the limited edition Van Gogh print on the far wall and the complex crystal chandelier covering half the ceiling, "And you forget that Milo and me are not on the list. He was not honourably

discharged, was he?" She said caustically. "But I am glad the Barbies got together.

Was Cherry there too?" A little wistfully, she asks.

"No, not this time. Joe had his angioplasty around then, you know."

"How would I know Kaps, please? You forgot to mention it during your daily phone calls to us. Didn't you Kaps?" Fluffy could be withering with her sarcasm, Kaps remembers a bit too late. Even for small things like his apologising for having forgotten to ask if she needed something from the town, when Milo was out flying. "We will survive Kaps, don't fuss. In fact, it would encourage me to be self-sufficient, thank you. It is just that you asked every time."

He hated being where he was, worked upon by Petite Barbie and prodded long distance, by the four who were probably still in their beds on the other side of the globe. He resented being loaded like a donkey with the guilt of five others, as if his own was not heavy enough and herded here, just because he happened to be in town for a meeting. Then his mind turns around and resents the guilt. It was not as if he was the one caught stealing. All that he did not do was to root for Milo with the committee.

They sat at two ends of a sofa. The last time he had seen Fluffy, she was in jeans, coming out of the head-quarters, on the verge of crying, along with Milo in civvies. They had on seeing him, turned back to use the other exit. He remembered her black pullover and the stiff back, as they walked away, Fluffy holding Milo's elbow in solidarity

against the whole world including the 'group', which had kept neutral, and that from Milo and Fluffy's point of view was the worst kind of back-stabbing ever. He remembered Fluffy's hollow laugh on the phone, when he had called, "A fare-well? Go, f...k yourself all six of you. And never, never call."

Construction sounds filtered through the glazed windows. Steel bars being shaped to furnish scaffolding for a new roof somewhere. As each sound of the sledge hammer hits its target, a long drawn vibration of the glass panes followed.

It was not as if it was only his and the others' fault. Kaps continued to feel put out, marshalling his defence in his own mind, although Fluffy had not pointed any finger yet. It was not as if Milo was dyed in wool, honesty personified, a shining god or something, he argued to himself. None of the six had ever even remotely mentioned the 'issue' in the presence of Milo or Fluffy, even when drunk. Every one gingerly tiptoed around it. And it took effort since everybody else in the unit and the mess and the colony was talking about just that.

"He may not recognise you," Fluffy preparing Kaps. Kaps in turn just felt responsible for the grey roots of Fluffy's hair and wished he had called before coming. He felt rotten for the cool relief on being told that Milo may not remember him from Adam.

"Although there are times when his mind is crystal clear about fine points even I have forgotten, like what I wore on the day he flew his first solo to Siachen. Even the purple

whorls and the blue vine pattern on my 'sari'. Said he remembers because it matched his uniform, but that was like a photograph which flashed and then flitted away. It was brought on while we watched on the TV a random scene of a MiGs formation flying over mountains.

"Of course most of the time, he does not even remember that he was ever in air force, even when shown old pictures. For two years, whenever, I have tried to jog his brain by bringing up any of you, he has returned a blank stare. But sometimes he sees....," Fluffy made quotes around "sees" with her fingers,

"....images from the past which he tells you about if prompted. Images of places where we were posted, people we met, including the six of you. He can tell the tiniest trivia, like the color of Cherry's bangles on a picnic in Dalhousie. Of course, he does not remember her name, or what was it that he or Cherry or the rest of us were doing there. Apropos nothing, during dinner, he talked about a woman wearing a skirt and green bangles, running along a lake. Cherry was the only one who wore a skirt and glass bangles. Well, you have to work it out. And if the thread of conversation breaks, the whole image thing gets wiped off forever. Apart from such stray images, he does not remember anything, not even what he just said or did himself."

"Even before the illness, he never mentioned a word about those days on his own, but that was the seething anger which never waned. You two were so thick. I used to wonder in the beginning, if it was fury against you, which

consumed him, but the doctor said Alzheimer's has nothing to do with anger. That, there are plaques and things which show on his scans, that his brain is aging faster than the rest of him.

"He was bristling when we left Delhi. Kaps could have gotten me out of it. He is Group Captain. The bastard did nothing, as if speaking for me would have soiled his crisp white reputation", that was Milo after several beers, the day we shifted to Noida. Then he started avoiding any talk about air force, which was so difficult since every other man we met at any party in Noida turned out to be a retired air force officer, the town is so full of them. Milo said they come here to crash like moths."

And she went on to tell him about how, the fact that Milo flew a forty seater to a hill station four days a week, weather permitting, for a company which had just one plane, did not help either. Because he had to go to the airport, which was teeming with ex air force pilots working for private companies, and all of them knew about Milo.

"Tea. Here, no sugar. People give up sugar with years. You never had any to start with." Kaps flinched at the hint of familiarity underlined by hurt. And he had not even met Milo yet. But he remembered that Milo would not remember and relaxed.

The maid who had brought the tea had an apron tied over a white dress and looked a nurse more than a maid. And then he noticed, sitting from where he was, a door at the far end of lobby, bolted from outside. Fluffy noticed the gaze, "Yes, that is his room. If we leave it open, he roams all

over the place undressed.” Kaps found it difficult to imagine Milo walking naked in his drawing room. Milo, the fussiest of cadets at the academy, obsessing for hours about what to wear when, down to the tie pin, those were tie pin days. And as an officer, Milo was a terror for freshers, who would reach for their tie knots and straighten their belt buckles when he entered the mess.

Within the gang of eight, as they were sometimes jealously called, Milo was the exact opposite, tees and shorts, cheer and ribald jokes. The heart of every outing. Also Milo, the doer, the organiser. Is the circuit house booking confirmed? Ask Milo. Do the jeeps have enough petrol? Milo would know. Did we bring packs of cards. Milo would have. Barbie, Petite Barbie and even the taciturn Cherry, adored him. It was a long run of fun filled years, at least that is how it felt two decades post-facto, especially the outings. Munnar from Kochi where Milo and Joe were posted, Dalhousie from Pathankot where Arty and Kaps were posted and the River Camp from Bagdogra where all four were posted and there were more. It was all a blur of jeeps careening around hillsides, quaint rest houses, long sessions of rummy and endless drinking. Kaps drank the most and Milo won the most, inciting others to blame him for cheating, all in good humour of course and to remind him of the origin of his name. Milo was the youngest mess officer the squadron ever had and coming from a traders family, consummate at bargaining with suppliers and contractors. Those were the years when Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" was a craze at air force bases, and the dashing mess officer with sharp negotiating skills and an eerie

business sense, being named after First Lieutenant Milo Minder binder of the U.S air force seemed natural. Of course, no body implied at all that Milow as crooked. That came much later, but when it did, it fitted neatly with the name. The name, Kaps thought was part of his undoing. The others got their names for much less literary reasons, Kaps short for his last name, Fluffy for her hair, Cherry for her complexion, Barbie because she was thin and Petite Barbie because she was even thinner. Arty was named for his impromptu pencil sketches and Joe simply for Joseph, his first name.

Of course, all of them had over the years many other friends, even outside the air force. Doctors, teachers, civil service officers posted in remote locations and hungry for company with curious children wanting to see a fighter plane up and close. People, who called them by their proper names. And there were long years of domesticity like other couples of their age, years during which children were born, brought up and sent to boarding.

“Ajay’s company has finally agreed to transfer him back to India. I do hope that you remember Ajay,” Fluffy, clearly continuing to be tart. “I told him I needed respite, two years is a long time to do this alone and nobody else to talk to.” Kaps nodded. Fluffy had always been tough. Even when Milo’s aircraft had lurched back into Indian airspace after being hit and he was in the hospital for six months, it was she and not so much the physiotherapists, who was responsible for putting Milo on his feet and then back in the cockpit.

As if reading his mind, she said, "Physical illness in someone you love is far simpler to handle. You share the pain and it works in a way. The impairment binds you. It is very different here. This thing makes you strangers. For me, he is someone unknown. And for him I do not even exist."

Kaps stiffens. There is a persistent knock from other side of the bolted door. Rhythmical. Two quick ones, then after a pause, a loud thump, as if with the palm. Like jungle drums. But getting impatient and louder.

"Keep sitting. Donot move. "Fluffy whispers. As if a Doberman was to be unleashed. From whatever he had heard, people with Alzheimer's were harmless, if not somewhat docile actually.

"But you said he will not even remember me," Kaps reminded her.

"That he wouldnt'.But he might take you for somebody else, somebody unsafe for him. "She turned back and pulled up the sleeve of her gown, upto the shoulder to show a purple mark, which from a distance looked like a funky tattoo but turned out to be a splotchy bruise. But it were the eyes which showed the real hurt.

"He thought that I was a hired assassin sent to kill his wife. There are days, he thinks I am his mother. I am outright sick of it. You take all this, and in his mind, the credit goes to my mom-in-law who hasn't come even once. She is not that old. I mean there are three direct flights in a week and she has money. "

The knocking was now furious. The door was pulled in with a jerk the moment Fluffy slid the bolt. This is somebody else, it is all a con, Kaps almost screamed. The man was half the size of Milo as he remembered him. Clean shaven, including the head, no tell-tale beard, no trade mark moustache, much thinner and oddly shorter, which of course had to be because he was standing a step lower. As he walked nearer in a pair of cargo shorts and nothing else, Kaps looked at the glistening face for any expression of recollection. Milo's gaze paused at his face for a fraction of a second and moved on to something behind him on the wall and then to Fluffy whom he asks as if she is a stranger in a park, "Have you seen my wife?" turning her pale. And then without waiting for an answer he went to the front door, which apparently had some automatic lock, as it did not budge when he tried to turn the handle.

As he turned back and passed in front of the window where the light was better, Kaps recognised the tattoo on Milo's left biceps, a clumsy replica of a Mig-22. Kaps also carried one under his button down shirt. They had got it done together, hopping stalls at a village fair while posted at Hindon and had promptly regretted it blaming each other and the beer. It was so unlike air force officers, more like sailors, they had complained to each other.

"Milo dear, do you remember Kaps? He has come to look us up."

Milo seemed interested, came near, looked straight into Kaps eyes for long seconds, making him feel queasy and

then muttered distractedly, " I have sent the cheque. Deducted the money for the paint."

"He thinks we are still tenants here and you are the owner come to collect rent. Come to think of it, there is a freakish resemblance, except that it has been eight years that we bought the place."

"And my tap needs fixing". Pulling Kaps gently away from the sofa, Milo escorts him to his room. Surprisingly tidy, is the first thing that comes to Kaps' mind. A large bedroom, looking even more spacious because there is just this single bed with a small table next to it. The tabletop is clean without a clutter of medicines that one would expect in the room of a man, with a chronic illness.

"His brain stopped being able to make out day from night a year back. So, I sleep in another room." Fluffy had followed them.

Milo stood perplexed in the middle of the room, having forgotten about the leaking tap and perhaps Kaps being the landlord, too. Kaps, on an impulse unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it down his shoulder to show the tattoo to Milo, which interested him no end. He came towards him, drawn as if by a magnet and passed a finger over its edges, redrawing it. And as Fluffy stood fascinated, did the same to his own .All of a sudden, looking as self-conscious as a new cadet, he picked up his shirt from the back of a chair and buttoned it on neatly.

Milo goes as if it was twelve years back, the two of them having completed a round of golf on a Sunday afternoon. "Would you mind a drink?"

Fluffy said she had never heard anything as normal as that for two years. She was not even sure if he was allowed a drink.

"That would be nice Milo, I could do with one." Kaps replied mechanically, so taken aback he was by the casual affability.

Fluffy disappears to rummage for the bottle of whiskey which Ajay had brought when he came last, and found it dumped in the storage under her bed.

This is like old times, Fluffy said as she raised her glass, "Sorry no soda, Kaps". She remembers, Kaps thinks. Kaps soda, Joe water, Arty and Milo 'half-half', all the women red wine, except Cherry who did not drink.

Milo, after an initial sip had lost interest in his glass.

"Milo, do you miss the air force days, the flying, evenings in mess, the outings?" Kaps stopped himself in time, before he could add, 'comrade-ship'. Fluffy putting too much faith into Kaps' visit, as if an exorcist had come to smoke out amnesia from Milo's brain. And to give him space to conjure up his act, she excuses herself, 'to rustle up something in the kitchen'.

There was amusement in Milo's eyes as he looked at Kaps, "How can I miss things which I do not remember?" And for that moment, it was the old Milo, precise, logical and condescending towards stupidity. Kaps recalled some

claptrap about strong emotions stirring up memories. Fluffy was nowhere in sight. So he says more to continue the conversation, "Do you remember me? Kaps? Group Captain Kapani?"

Milo took another sip. Probably a part of his brain found the taste familiar and he gulped down the drink in one go, leaving a clump of matted cubes in the glass, "Please ask again. I forget what you asked but I remember that you asked something."

So, Kaps feeling rather stupid, repeated the question.

"No, I do not. I just remember my name, Milo. But your face feels familiar. "Milo emphasised the word 'feel', as if apologising. As if he knew that feel was not good enough, but that was all he had at the moment.

"Do you feel angry when you look at me?"

"Not at all. Should I be feeling angry? Was there a reason?"

"You were very offended with me once. There was a case, an enquiry. You had to leave the air force because of that. You thought that I could have helped you and I did not."

" Was it something to do with an imposing white building and somebody looking like you in a blue uniform coming down the steps?"

"This is swell, Milo. That was the headquarters building and yes that was when we met last. Well you did not say hello. You were angry because they had just asked you to leave."

Kaps wanted to shout out to Fluffy about what he thought was a personal achievement but he was wary of upsetting

Milo by causing an excitement. "It is great that you remember it so clearly. You told it exactly like it happened."

Milo seemed already disinterested in the proceedings, "I donot remember telling you anything."

Kaps tried frantically to pull him back, "You mentioned a building, a big building, an office, stern men in uniforms. The air force dismissed you over a small matter". Several lacs of rupees was not a small matter, but then nothing was ever proven conclusively. Otherwise, there would have been a court martial.

"I donot remember. I want to go home." Milo said trying to get up.

How could Fluffy even presume that he could handle Milo all on his own, Kaps wondered," Milo, this is your home. Please keep sitting. I am the one visiting."

Kaps decides to pour another drink for both of them, telling himself that he had a driver. He also decided to try another track. Smiling man to man, hush hush, as if not to let Fluffy hear "Milo, you were a charming philanderer way back then. Whom were you with last before you left? I promise I wont' tell Fluffy?"

Milo waited for a couple of seconds, but it seemed much longer to Kaps who wondered if he had forgotten the question meanwhile. He had not.

"A slim woman, with very long hair and a biggish mole over the right cheek bone..."Milo said his gaze fixed at the 'Starry Nights' on the far wall.

Very few women that Kaps knew from then had long hair. Cropped at the shoulders was the vogue at least in airforce. And Petite Barbie was the only one Kaps knew who had long hair, a striking mole on the right cheek and was slim, even slimmer than Barbie. Why, that was the reason she was called Petite Barbie.

"...and also one on the left thigh, quite uppish." Kaps felt something cold move up his spine. In his ridiculous state of mind, he thought there was a hint of a smile on Milo's lips while it was likely a grimace caused by the bitter whiskey.

It is ranting of a demented man, Kaps tells himself. He had started it as a half joke but found it difficult to keep up the humour. "How does he even know, about the one on the thigh?", the bewildered, befuddled mind of his insists upon knowing. For all the outings, they had never gone swimming together. Petite Barbie did not even know how to swim.

"I hope you donot mean my wife, Petite Barbie?," Kaps managed after several seconds.

"Where is the wash room, please?" Milo asks politely like a well-mannered child in somebody's drawing room.

Kaps pleaded "You cannot do this, Milo, tell me you are still angry, tell me you are taking a revenge." And then fiercely, his glass shaking "That you have forgotten nothing. That your disease is a hoax. That you are a fraud, always were one. The air force threw you out rightly. Tell me that you donot see any damned images. You make up things."

He would have carried on the tirade but the unmistakable smell of urine and the wet patch on front of Milo's cargoes stopped him. Fluffy seemed to have heard Kaps and came rushing.

"Oh, I am sorry, I was cooking up some starters, the way you liked".

She sniffs the air, "I will handle it, it happens rarely. Probably the excitement. Let us shift to the dining room. Please carry your glass." She was shocked by the look on his face, as if he had seen a ghost "Are you alright?" Kaps muttered "Have to go. Got a call. There is an emergency."

That night, Petite Barbie, walked out on Kaps, her husband of twenty-five years, not because what Milo had said was true, she explained painstakingly, but for Kaps believing even for a short while that it could be. She also said that Fluffy had seen the birthmark on her thigh many times. The wives changed together on the outings and there were even jokes about such things, and she could have passed one on to Milo.

The psychiatrist whom Kaps saw later for clinical depression said that there was something called 'state memory' and Milo could have remembered under the effect of alcohol what he had seen or heard under the effect of alcohol many years back. Whether this worked as well in those who had Alzheimer's was not well documented, she clarified. She also explained that remote memories were the last to go, having been inscribed when the brain was fine while the recent ones did not even get registered.

How could Milo have managed to protect that nugget of information for two years against the onslaught of amnesia and used it at that exact moment was intriguing but now just academic. The important thing was wittingly or unwittingly, he had managed to have his revenge.

Dr Anirudh Kala is a Clinical Director, Mind Plus. Dr Anirudh is a psychiatrist based in Ludhiana, India. An anthology, 'The Unsafe Asylum: Stories of Madness and Partition' is being published by Speaking Tiger Books in June 2018. In addition, several short stories have been published at other places. He likes Urdu poetry, hiking and semi-classical Indian music.

He had been an active participant in the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) for forty years and had raised awareness about mental health legislation and related issues among Indian psychiatrists.

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have a book review on a book, send it to us. We will publish it free. We don't charge any fee for publishing. The quality of your article will decide whether your article will be published.

If you want us to review your book, we charge for this. We have a good number of review writers with us. We have different review writers for books of different genres. Our reviews are gaining recognition among the publishers, journals and academia for fair and high quality reviews.

Write to: [clrijournal\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:clrijournal(at)gmail.com)

[**Contemporary Literary Review India**](#)