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The Parakeet Who Called Her Name

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Malati swung her feet out of the window and invited the drizzle to caress them and soak the lower end of her saree. *Borobou* being away, her days were now fairly vacant, considering the fact that *borobou's* pregnancy, solely, was why she was in the house.

Having spent a meagre fifteen years as an earthling, Malati was as old as the youngest daughter of the Mahajan family; the family for whom she worked and whose house she lived in. Spending every afternoon on the terrace, disentangling *boromaa's* (the first lady of the family) salt and pepper curls and tying them into neat braids, Malati saw lads of the neighbourhood throwing a racket in the name

of playing, exploiting the most of their teen spirit. She could not help but think of her own carefree days in the village of Purbasthali, like a veteran swimming across the old days in a reverie. Such was her distance from her past that she often referred to her days in the village as “*Aami jokhon chhoto chhilaam...*” (when I used to be a child...) and ended up being a source of amusement to the elderlies of the household.

Not that she minded anything. The Mahajan family loved her enough for a maid. She used to eat whatever they ate, had a comfortable mattress to sleep in, had comfortable clothes to preserve her dignity. The Mahajan family gave her everything her own family could not give her. Yet, they failed to give her a family.

Malati was said to have “swallowed” her mother as soon as she was born. Careless delivery (or maybe a less careful one) landed her mother in a state of delirium within hours of giving birth to Malati. Her body burned up like a red hot iron as she picked up a puerperal infection. The hot body withered and shivered for few hours and ultimately fell cold as ice.

Malati’s father, Haresh, had never been bitter to her. Rather, he tried his best to fill up the space her mother left vacant. He manned his grocery shop during the day and read out Bangla classics to little Malati at night. A caring father, as he was, he often had difficulties in making ends meet. Nevertheless, it was a contented family of two until the fateful time arrived.

Haresh, pained by the condition of the villagers, found himself in the middle of a whirlpool of politics. He started organising rallies, meetings and went to the end of his capabilities to make the villagers realise their situation. The atrocities of the middlemen towards the farmers, of the police on the locals and of the opportunist assembly members on every common person were stripped naked by Haresh and his associates in front of the people’s eyes. And, he was probably doing a very good job as, one day, as he was returning home from his shop, he was rewarded by a deep incised wound across his throat severing the carotids through and

through. An orphaned Malati was soon picked up by Balaka, a fellow villager and the chief housemaid of the Mahajans, and was taken to her new home.

Malati's days had slowed down to a sloth's speed since *borobou*, wife of the eldest son of the family and her prime responsibility, was off to her paternal house to deliver the baby. As she stretched out her hands from the window and received the rain like a blessing, a vehicle approached, roaring, in the portico.

Malati swiftly ran her wet hands over her face, feeling the drizzle and breathing in the petrichor and then ran for the courtyard. Devkanta Mahajan, the youngest son of the family, has returned from Calcutta. Surprisingly, he was not alone; he pulled out a cage of about three feet in height and handed it to the bearer. The cage contained one of the most beautiful birds Malati had ever seen. It was a green bird with a yellow head and deep blue freckles all over its head and neck. By that time, *boromaa* along with the other two maids had also appeared on the courtyard.

“It is a parakeet. One of the most intelligent birds ever found. A client of mine gifted this to me today.” declared Devkanta.

Devkanta was a doctor of fairly good repute and often had to go to Calcutta in order to advise on various cases. The parakeet was a reward for one such case.

Malati found the bird irresistibly interesting. As the bird was carried upstairs and kept on a mahogany table on the balcony, Malati followed it with curious eyes.

“Isn't it beautiful, Malati?” said *boromaa*.

“Yes, maa! I've never seen something as beautiful as this.”

Devkanta marched up the stairs to the first floor balcony and beamed, “*Dekhecchho maa? Ki sundor pakhi ekta!* (Did you see, maa? How beautiful a bird it is!)”

“Yes, certainly, Debu! This bird has added to the glory of the Mahajan villa.” answered *boromaa*.

After complimenting various features of the bird, all of them left the balcony, one by one. Malati stood there, mesmerised by the beauty of the bird. Gathering some courage, she inserted her finger into the cage and attempted to stroke the bird’s head gently. The bird retorted with a screech and pecked her finger in a reflex.

“Ouch!” screamed Malati, as she brought the finger back and started sucking onto the wound. She rolled her eyes mockingly to the bird and retreated to *boromaa*’s room just as she gave her a call.

Despite initial hardships, Malati and the parakeet developed a connection. For an instance, the bird would only eat if the grains were delivered to her by Malati. Her days started to speed up again as she started spending a good portion of them with the parakeet.

Malati would take the bird with her, whenever she went to the terrace. As she would disentangle the curls in *boromaa*’s hairs or man the *papors*, *boris* and *aachaars* basking in the sun, the bird would sit quietly in its cage, scratching itself or pecking the frame.

Beside that, Malati spent most of her days trying to teach the bird new words. The bird was quick to learn the words like *boromaa*, *baba*, *chotobabu*, *borobabu* and phrases like *khete de* (give me food) but it never was quite able to call Malati’s name. She tried and tried but the bird refused to call her name. Nevertheless, she was always hopeful that the bird will learn her name someday.

As days passed, a lonely Malati grew more and more dependent on the bird’s company. She spent most of her day with it and whatever remained was distributed into managing the household chores as per instructions and envying the children playing outside at their leisure. “The life of a servant,” Malati thought, “is no better than that of a prisoner.”

Gradually, Malati started feeling her envy being reflected on the bird. Every afternoon, as she took the bird to the terrace, she felt the

bird despising its confinement. Whenever flocks of birds flew across the sky, the parakeet started screeching and slamming its wings on the cage. From this observation was born a feeling of kinship, in Malati's heart, with the bird. They were both trapped.

With *borobou* still in her paternal house and hence, Malati not having much to do, she was assigned a new chore of accompanying the cook, Madan, to the market every morning. That morning not being an exception, she went with Madan to the *bazaar*. As Madan was bargaining over fresh Rohu, Malati noticed a man across the street staring at her.

It took her a few minutes to recognise him but, as she did, her heart filled up with joy like she had not felt for a long time. It was Tamal *kaka*, her father's arm in arm comrade in all of their political ventures. Tamal had been immensely affectionate towards Malati all throughout the time they were in touch. She excused herself from Madan and went leaping across the street. As she neared Tamal, she flung herself into his arms, laughing and sobbing at the same time. Her past used to feel so distant that she lost all her hopes of coming across its fragments. Yet, here she was, in the arms of Tamal *kaka*.

"How are you, dear?" asked Tamal, only to address her as *maa* or mother, as he always did.

"I'm alright, *kaka*. How have you been?"

Reminiscing together, they sat on a bench of a nearby tea stall for hours and finally left for the villa. In the meantime, Malati introduced Madan to Tamal and Madan, being one of the friendliest persons ever born, ended up inviting Tamal to Mahajan villa for lunch. He excused himself to the villa as the uncle and niece duo kept on catching up.

Tamal was left open-mouthed when Malati showed him around the villa. As they were wrapping up the tour and passing across the parakeet on the balcony, Tamal said, "Such big a house! My God! Who knew our little Mukti would end up in such grand a place!"

Reflexively Malati initiated a smile which froze midway on her realising the name by which Tamal called her.

Mukti. Freedom. The name her father gave her a few days after she was born, hoping her to be his escape from the grief of his wife's death, was now lost to oblivion. Mahajans had a tradition of renaming every single servant who set foot in the villa as they believed being included in the Mahajan family was fresh start for them; a rebirth. So Mukti was named Malati.

Probably they were right. For the resurfacing of the name invoked a strange feeling in Malati's mind; a feeling of remembering a distant blurry past. A genuine past, yet so unreal. A past she could never imagine herself to be a part of. Only when she felt a salty taste at the corner of her mouth, did she realise that her eyes had set a few drops of tears free down her cheeks.

Tamal hung around for a few hours after lunch. As he left, teary eyed, he promised to come and check on Malati whenever he would get time. With one of her best days rapidly rolling to nightfall, Malati climbed the stairs to the balcony and sat by the parakeet.

She recalled how unintended their encounter had been today. Tamal, on a chore for his political party, incidentally came across Malati in the morning. When her father died and she was taken by Balaka to the Mahajan villa, Tamal was on the run to save his own life. When he returned, he came to know that Malati had been appointed as a servant by a wealthy family somewhere and she was living with them.

Malati thought, how by a twist of fate she had landed in her present state. Being a carefree girl, bubbling with energy, in her childhood, she had never imagined living a life like this. A life which would be spent watching the local children playing and shedding tears of despair and envy. A life that would intend to erase whatever link she had with her past life, even her name. A life of imprisonment.

Malati looked towards the parakeet and saw it staring straight at her. With trembling hands she unfastened the lock on the door of the

cage and rendered it wide open. The bird hopped out onto the table and looked around. Malati extended her hand to the bird and in response, the bird hopped on her arm. Malati, now weeping, kept on caressing and stroking the bird's head and beak gently.

Suddenly, the bird let out a screech and took off. An indifferent Malati, looked at the bird, circling around her head, affectionately, partly hoping it would stay, certainly knowing it would fly off. Just then, it let out two syllables, loud and clear, three times in a row: "Muk-ti, Muk-ti, Muk-ti," and flew away into oblivion.



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