

I first noticed his anxiety last evening. And with morning came his hunger strike. Nothing to eat or drink. He made breakfast, sent the kids to school and Anand to the office.

Then he came and leaned against my door and asked, "Shall I leave some fresh juice in a flask?"

Raising my head could mean that the carbon under the sheet would move but I took the risk. Some interruptions have a sticky odor about them like the smell of a smoking wall.

I looked up to find what I had expected, a troubled, restless face.

He was usually cheerful, buoyant if somewhat self-contained, but untouched by the kind of restless energy which derails people from their paths. Though it is a tricky question to decide which is better; fate or restlessness. And should people choose to rot, penned in self-containment?

I swear by restless energy. I saved the self-confinement of my class by this very same unrest. Then I had started to think that not just the joints but my very bones had rusted under which lay captive my impassioned but pathless creativity.

And when I had finally started out, clutching the corners of my unrest, the moss caked over me for years had split like cracking soil in an earthquake. I had then decided to finish my interrupted education. Even though Anand had resented it. He was really irritated — 'juvenile antics at mid-life.'

When I arrived suddenly at the office of the Head of the Department he had just stared at me. My plump body, the stubborn rolling flesh at my waist, the middle aged frames of my glasses and the chipped nail varnish — his slow gaze took it all in. And with it dawned a new vision of myself in my own eyes — embarrassing.

"A job? You must come through the right channels!"

"No, not a job. I want admission."

SHORT STORY

Face to Face

Rajee Seth

Translation from Hindi : Jasjit Purewal

"You mean...in what?"

"In M.A.!"

Before lowering his eyes he had glanced over me yet again. "Please sit!"

It was obvious that the chair was offered as acknowledgment of my advancing age. I noticed that he was much younger than I, perhaps closer in age to my younger brother. His face was still scarred with the discomfort of my standing in front of him.

"Admission?" he had blurted out, "Now? I mean at this age..."

"Yes! How does it matter at what age?"

"No. I mean...I hope nothing is wrong...."

I couldn't respond immediately. Yes! Everything is fine. My husband has a job, a wonderful house, two lovely children in a fancy school! All fine. The status, the closets of saris and shoes, the wall of mirrors...and yet so worthless.

"Have we met before?"

"Yes, at the Mehrotras' party." He too remembered.

"But doesn't one lose the knack of studying after so long a gap?" he asked again. "My wife says it's such a luxury to stay at home...."

"She's right." And he nodded, smug in the knowledge of the reasons which drive women away from the comfort of housewifery.

"No one can really predict fate I guess," he whispered his uncertainty and pressed the bell on his table. Then retreating into his grim sobriety he said, "One should be prepared... anything can happen anytime."

That talk of happenings tore at me. What did he know of those happenings or mishappenings which don't always knock one down on the crowded streets of life but wait in invisible silent corners? Like an unending but silent invasion. Nothing happens anywhere and yet it is happening. Like soundless, slow death. First it's just placid, then silent and finally all frozen! Like the hot lava flowing in my veins and slowly cooling and then the breaking away. And that moment of losing one's self-worth suddenly surfaces — ugly, brutal and infinite. You don't know what happens then or why or what awaits!

I totally forgot that he was still waiting near the door. I had just journeyed my own distances even though he had sparked my reverie but I was too self-absorbed to have room for anyone else.

"What were you saying?"

"Shall I fill the flask with juice today?"

"Yes! Do."

He was still waiting.

"What is it?"

"If you would eat now...I have to go somewhere. I may be late coming back."

"Where do you have to go?"

He didn't reply but kept staring at my enquiring face.

"Where do you have to go?" Inside me the brutal coward had already raised her head.

First he seemed to weigh the odds, then he said, "I have to see...the Seth has called me...at 11:30 in Paschimpuri."

"Which Seth?"

"The factory owner. He has an opening for a driver... The starting salary is Rs 500."

"You know that it will be a round-the-clock job," I said, though my words sounded hollow to my own ears. Either way there never was a question of night or day for him. In my house too there were endless dinners and the drudgery of unending social events.

"That is all very well, but..." he was still very gentle with me.

When this issue had been first raised a few days ago, we had hoped that though we had wasted Rs 300 in training him to be a driver, he wouldn't look for another job yet. His growing awareness would have to await our consent. Right now he would do nothing to jeopardize our domestic balance which seemed to be just hanging off a cliff.

Anand has a foreign training course coming up, the children had exams. My novel was waiting mid-way. I couldn't possibly take on the responsibility either of the children or myself... He would have to handle it all — efficiently and patiently. For the children to grow into a bright future and for me to continue as a good writer, he was integral. Critical for keeping our dreams and ambitions within reach.

After all these years we had convinced him that he was really an unformed stone who would be polished into a gem by us. Developed by us for a life of slavery.

"Haven't we already explained that to you once?"

We had explained to him that we would teach him to drive and pay him an extra Rs 100 to retain him in our matchless domesticity.

He didn't reply. His face said clearly that he neither understood nor



wanted to understand our reasons. An audacious pique was obvious from the tension in his posture.

"Go now...we will send you when we have the time."

He didn't move.

"I said, we will see to it later." I wasn't really perturbed because I was certain that what had been there so long would simply continue. He will finally give up because he had been sufficiently housebroken.

We had bought his loyalty, when we tended his broken foot after he fell off a bike. And when we sent Rs 75 for his ailing father. Then we had been able to restrain him from going home also by explaining that his mother did not need him but the money.

We were convinced that we had bought him. Especially since we sold him the illusion of well-being with a few worn shirts and trousers that we gave him. For us he was totally ours now...our chattel.. Then why this?

His expression has now hardened, glinting and sharp, a knife waiting in its sheath.

"You were the one who said..." his voice broke.

"What did I say?" I don't know why but I was suddenly unnerved — restless to escape the captivity of my own careless words.

"Didn't you say that no one should sit around and waste away.. .you were telling Pinki Didi.."

Seeds that we had sown were now germinating — those evening chats

with the kids while he hovered in the background slowing the pace of his work and listening. Our liberalism had always squirmed from banning him from those moments.

His face was now pale. The round full lips, childlike despite his twenty years, were drawn in a pout like a child who knows that he has no one to take out his anger on.

His clothes suddenly seemed really dirty and his hands rough.

"What happened to those clothes that we bought you?"

An inexplicable helplessness flitted across his tearful face. He couldn't connect the conversation earlier and my comment now. "This is fine at home," he said, tugging the corners of his coarse shirt, "I need to wear those clothes at the driving school," and some of the calm returned in his voice.

"You let Pinki Didi..."

"Why are you going on about Pinki?" I said, irritated. I couldn't bear the way the winds were blowing at me from all sides and stripping me in my own eyes. What do I want — his competent slavery? What does he want — his realization, his feeble but determined effort to get to the next step...inspired by my teachings... by hailing me his Guru...by disorienting Trie? Once like him, I too had rebelled against Anand's anger and oppression and had won through sheer stubbornness.

"I'll talk to my husband," I'm not sure if I had just put him off or perhaps something softened in me.

"No! No! Not him! Don't say anything to him," he sat down on the floor trembling, "he'll never let me go...never...not until you say..."

His eyes were wet, "Will I always...stay...this way?"

He covered his face with his hands.

"Do you want to quit...I mean this kind of job?"

I was sure he would say no. He would never get another job where he was treated so fairly and made to feel a part of the family 'like a child'.

"Yes! If you don't mind. I will return all the money you spent on me...."

This version of my domesticity resting on his shoulders suddenly scared me because I saw what was threatening it. It wasn't unfurling like a soft new leaf but had the sharp tensile core of a deep root. The kind of root I knew and remembered so well, which can live quietly embedded in the earth but when the soil above doesn't relent it can tear through that control and sprout free.

I felt that if one's control is threatened then one must immediately relent. But what about the price of this benevolence? The walls of the house seemed to be crumbling around me and I was choking on the smoke of my own words. I had often explained to my kids that self-growth must override all. I had often argued that nothing must ever stop one's right to grow. One must rise out of the reach of these demons or there would be no place for us in this spiralling world. Not even with a good husband (and I had especially tried to explain this to Pinky). Even if there's a good home, money and fame...not even then.

"What then is one's individual self apart from these things?" Pinky had argued. That day he had looked up from where he was squatting on the floor, his eyes shining, "We should start to feel that we are someone.. can do something.. isn't that right madam?", he had said.

What he said had turned my calm into nothingness. I was not thinking of the individual now but the teetering state of my domesticity. About my half-finished novel, about the kids' exams, about the chores of city life and about those guests at Diwali.



He had so easily shaken this carefully constructed individual in me. So what should I call this self, this individual who is precariously balanced on other people's toil and who can easily be imprisoned in her own principles?

His face dropped, disillusioned, sad.

"What do you want?" My anxiety turned into irritation.

He paused for a moment, "Why don't you tell me what you want?"

We were finally face-to-face. And I had the option of benevolence. Actually the issue of an individual's self was solved right then. You can only give something away if you have it within you. How can those who are bankrupt give away anything? My exclusivity teetered pathetically on his charity!

"I want you to wait a few days...until things are easier with everyone here. I mean maybe we will find someone else...no?"

He left the room shuffling his feet and my ears followed that sound around the house. My hands fell away from the papers, inert.

In the next moment there was the sound of dishes clanging in the kitchen. Without asking me he brought me my cup of coffee.

"Wait!...bring me some biscuits." I wanted to stem the lifelessness of his feet with the naturalness of my order.

The sounds of the kitchen floor being washed and the other chores slowly drifted in and by the afternoon he sounded quite normal.

When I had my evening chat with the kids he did not sit on the floor but stood near the door. His face seemed to speak out but unlike other days he didn't say anything. Usually he was the keenest to ask questions unlike the self-centered musings of private school children.

I was certain that he would ask me. In some form or the other he would question why, what was right and essential for our kids and for us was not right for him? But...

It was a sheer relief to me that he was watching us all wide eyed, devoid of the urge to ask us anything now. □

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