



He was a Good Man

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I

The Buddha in Kartik's dream was not the pure white marble Buddha he had seen in the Professor's room. It was mottled. His white stocky body was covered with thick, black, granular rashes. It did not have the tranquil gaze, the calm presence and the enchanting spark of enlightenment in the eyes, it looked deformed and green, the green of putrefaction. The green and black grew darker. The white was fading away when he awoke with a start. The left side of his head hurt intensely. Sleep still filled his eyes. One end of the blue polka dotted quilt he had used at night covered his legs the other end lay crumpled on the floor. His phone plugged in for recharge rang insistently.

Chachi - the screen told him.

What, all of a sudden, had brought him to her mind today...and why? Annoyed, he turned the phone face down.

When it rang again he took the call irritably.

Hearing no sound from the other end for a while he said 'hello, who is this,' a little harshly intending to disconnect the call. Just when he was about to disconnect the thin voice of Chachi floated in like a thread of silk. "Babaji ...has left us"

"What! Where did he go?" His voice was still deliberately rude. Then, he was taken aback. Various snippets from the conversations at home from the last week buzzed in his ears. Babaji's image sprang to his mind-his body like pine-wood, his perforated yellowing banyan

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the toothless mouth like a sucked out mango, vicious mother-sister abuses on his tongue, a sharp knife in hand. But a prone figure not upright. Eyes closed. Nostrils closed with cotton balls like corks on a soda bottle. He sat up on his bed with a thump.

“Kartik.... Kartik, are you okay, child?” Chachi was pushing out words from a choked throat.

“So suddenly.... Papa told me the day before yesterday that it was only low sodium...” Kartik replied sorrowfully.

“He had a heart attack last night. I even asked if I should come. But your father doesn’t let others have their way.” Chacha was on the line speaking in a flow.

“He must be trying to not trouble you. I see several patients here who recover even after two attacks. What did he know that this soon....” The strong connection of blood made him say it.

“Anyways, my child! It wasn’t my fate to see my father towards the end... we will get to your hostel in ten minutes... get ready soon...”

Kartik took a deep breath. Like the steam puffing out of his mouth memories began to get foggy. When he was a kid, Babaji used to pick him up from the bus stop. Wearing his woollen cap, even in the heat of July, with the sun at its peak, eating slices of apple that he cut with the knife. Whenever anyone pestered him or even tried to do so, Babaji would threaten them waving the knife- If anyone says a word against my Karti I will chop off their ears.

Maa often told him that when he was a kid, he would start screaming at five “Babaji, I have come....Babaji ..I have come” And placing him on his shoulders, Babaji would take him on long walks in the park. He sat him on swings, played hide and seek, catch and run with him. Brushing his teeth with the twig of the neem, chewing on the leaves of ‘sadabahaar’ to fight ‘diabetes’, the only inheritance of his family.

He felt as if a fountain of tears will break forth from his eyes any minute... But nothing happened. A ball of pain kept tormenting him in the middle of his chest.

The next minute he recalled that he had to pack. He opened the godrej almirah. In the fit of distress, he randomly shoved whatever clothes he could lay his hands on. He heard the honking of the car outside and the feet began to walk. His mind was lost somewhere else.

II

There was an old familiar smell of fuel in Chacha's car. A golden photo frame of Guru Maharaj in his white robe. The driver switched on the blower as soon as he entered the car. Chacha was sitting next to the driver in front. His hennaed hair had white and orange strands. A locket of Guru Maharaj in his hands, and rexine shoes instead of leather on his feet as instructed by Guruji. No response to Kartik's greetings. Chachi in her square frame glasses nodded.

A while later, as they neared I.S.B.T, Chacha said grumpily, "You could have changed the shirt in the least."

"What?... Did you say something to me?" Looking outside the window, Kartik asked absent mindedly "What happened?"

"You don't wear red when someone dies, beta ji!" said the driver in his cab driver's blue uniform grinning at him in the rear view mirror. "Change your shirt the moment you get home." Chacha dictated.

Kartik said nothing. He began staring out the window again gnashing his teeth.

He was surprised that grief had not swept over them enough to make them overlook the colour of his shirt. But pain had loosened its clutches on his chest as well. He had grown bigger and Babaji got dwarfed before the new needs that sprouted in him. Their relationship had shrunk to checking on each other. Or he would tell him which brother of Dadi borrowed money from him on which day of which month in which year and hadn't returned it despite many letters of

reminder. Or which daughter of which Bua, with that spot on her forehead and who wore cut-sleeve blouses (I was so dumb, ... I should have guessed at her waywardness) had spread herself like a carpet for the sake of getting a son-in-law..

Had it only been about needs turning into un-needs or about the ruthless hands of age crushing his bones, Babaji would have become a Liliputian but at least, he would still have existed for him. It was the foulest of abuses that he hurled at Dadi ever since Kartik was small, so small that even calling someone a 'dog' felt like a crime to him, that did it. It was those letters he had found in the hidden corner of his father's almirah in which words such as, slut, immoral, whore, affair, affair, affair were written repeatedly like someone learning a new language would do for practice (that his father had snatched away as if it were a lump of burning coal). It was in the winter vacation of his second year college when Babaji had threatened Dadi with his hand raised against her as she sat sunning herself that had made him want to hurl the potted plant nearby at his head that did it.

"Well, it is all for good..." Chachi was about to say something. She stopped abruptly.

"What for the good? ... we were ready ... to get him treated here...Money was never a concern". Chacha interjected.

"Not everything is about money, Vighnesh... also about the patient's pain... there is an exhaustion of hopelessness as well...what I have learnt after losing my father that breathing on a ventilator is so meaningless ..."

"Everyone has only one father"

Once again silence squatted in the car. Kartik did not know how to remember Babaji. When he first heard the news, the pain had felt like a cat's claw that held him like fluttering pigeon in its a grip. He hadn't even remembered even a bit of all that was rotten in Babaji. But now as time passed by and he was getting closer to Babaji, all those stories came back to him in which Babaji was a cruel father or a husband. Although, he loved Kartik a lot but how could he forget that he

eclipsed the life of the one woman Kartik loved the most. He thought of his grandmother. He was about to call her. He dialled the number. Then he disconnected. He doesn't know how to face her.

What will he say? It is bad that he left or it is for the good that he went away with such ease. That he is happy that the eclipse of Dadi's life was finally over. Or that he was unhappy that he did not suffer at all in dying like he did not suffer in his life.

"They will have only a hawan, right?" He addressed his Chachi after moments of silence.

"Whatever your father says... I said we should get Guru Maharaj's hawan done...why have other frills? Chacha replied instantly.

"Guruji's Hawan..." Kartik raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

It was almost twelve and he hadn't eaten anything since morning. In fact, he had hardly been able to swallow any food last night. He was about to have a spoonful of dal chawal when the damp odour of urine mixed with semen emanating from the thighs of the professor, hit him and he threw up. Nothing...no no, nothing happened with the professor... it was consensual...his mistake that he had gone to him...whatever happened had happened, what was the point of thinking about it now....

He closed his eyes. He was sure that whether anyone else understood him or not, his father and Dadi have immense sensibility. They would understand, his love, the palpitations of his heart. They will hold his hand firmly and tell him that this is only a phase of life, the early 20's are whirly like this, and he would start to feel that it is possible for him to lead an ordinary life.

As he came out gasping from the professor's room, he was filled with clamminess. He felt that he was not a human but only a body, a young body, a warm young body. He had only gone to talk to the professor. To understand himself and his attraction for the other. How will he spend his life all alone and without love.. But before he could say anything, the professor sitting beside him had started kissing him. It was not like his body wasn't aroused by the touch of the professor's

soggy lips. It felt like someone had touched the strings of an old veena rusted and gathering fungus, with his masterly fingers. Just sit quietly, I will do whatever is needed. You just enjoy it, the Professor had whispered in his ear. The sensation in his ears vibrated his whole being. A hurricane began gathering in his body.

Once again his stomach growled with hunger. He wanted to tell his Chacha to make the car stop at some shop where he could at least buy some snacks, but in front of this large void of death the grumpiness of his hunger had no significance even if the colour of his shirt did.

III

The same silence reigned in the house. Silence that was customary, that had social etiquette, that had monotony, the way he had felt in the car for four hours. All faces downcast, eyes welling up with tears, delirium in every voice. No red bindi on Dadi's forehead, no bangle on his mother's wrist.

The red sofas of the drawing room, covered with the slovenly white sheet, were moved to the corner. Mattresses were spread on the floor in the middle, covered with the gaudiness of white. On them were seated the women from the neighbourhood and his father's friends.

Surrounded by them sat Dadi. Narrating the sequence of episodes. Twice. Thrice...

He was fine last night... in fact, he walked to the hospital himself...had attack there...Babbu told me only in the morning.

He was a good man....clad in suits and sarees, handkerchiefs in their hands embroidered with flowers, their sandals going clackety clack, groups of women trooped in and repeat the same narration melodramatically- Saw him walking yesterday, fetching milk in pail, at the tea stall in the corner...then suddenly... simply unbelievable. He was a good man.

Dadi responded to their curiosity with the same theatricality... really difficult to believe. Yesterday, he cooked his dal himself. Never had

any salty-spicy food. Never put even a single grain of sugar in his mouth. He was perfectly well till last night...and then, the same sequence ending in the same refrain ...he was a good man. Whenever Dadi found that the women were satisfied with her reasoning and her pitiful voice, she would gather the residues of her self-confidence, and not forget to add cautiously in an undertone - he was a good man...for his brothers, children and grandsons.

Kartik felt irritated. What's the need of this futile drama? Pain is not some sweet milky tea that one can down in a gulp; pain is a cup of poison that one has to hold in the throat, because there is no alternative to swallowing it and one does not have the courage to let it mingle with blood and flow in the arteries.. Why not simply hang a placard outside the door narrating the event of death (and not forget to mention that he was a good man) and that would be that. Even better, circulate a whatsapp message with all the details. RIP and Om Shanti, anyhow, are trending these days. The work will be done easily and it will save unnecessary waste of energy.

Death in his imagination was different: Like a celebration, a plaintive symphony being played on a violin, only four-five very close people will be present. Those who want to cry would have the freedom to cry. Those who want to laugh would laugh. Those who wanted to sit quietly would sit still and immobile. Experiencing comfortable silence. Illuminated with the blue enchanting glow of grief. Throbbing with heartbeats. And everyone will remember the one who has left - like a full human, in each shade of life. Only through such deep grief would they find salvation.

Dadi was wearing a baby pink suit. Without worrying about the women around, he stood in front of her. She saw his clenched fists with a side glance, then signalled to him to go to his room. When he kept standing there, a wave of gossip spread in the group of women —kids these days...care two hoots...so what if he is a doctor...to hell with customs, sanskar...look how they change the moment they step out...look at him with earphones plucked ...wearing a red shirt too...Oh my, kids these days...when the whispers started Dadi said sternly, “You go to your room”.

Stung, he remained standing there.
Looking at him standing there, Dadi's voice took on the sharpness of shards of glass, "Go! Didn't I tell you..."

He was stunned. Dadi perhaps wanted to remain sunk in the pit of vulgarity he was trying to pull her out of. Had she herself forgotten the abacus of liberation she had herself taught the girls in her college such long years ago and accepted darkness as the reality of her life?
IV

His mother was perched on a heating pad on her bed. Cream coloured socks on her feet. Boy-cut hair. Busy prescribing medicines to her patients in the hospital on the phone. She also explained to them that she will be in her OPD only a week from now.

"Why a week?...I thought only hawan ...as it was at Shalini Mausi's"

"That was a young death. That too of a daughter-in-law. On top of it she had died of cancer. For them winding up with a hawan was easy...papa has lived a full life...no one will agree."

"Isn't that even better... no risk of him haunting the next generation as a ghost of a discontent soul ..." Kartik said a little sarcastically.

"No, my son...why are you talking like this? ...He used to do so much for you...when you were a kid.."

"So...maa, these hypocrisies will do nothing more than filling up the bellies and pockets of the pandits."

"They help the departed soul rest in peace"

"The one who didn't let anyone live in peace all his life, you think, he will find peace this easily. Did he spare anybody ever...from the nurses below to the people working at the top...even Dadi's family...your family...created scenes at each festival...don't you remember last Diwali..." Kartik's voice was rose in its pitch.

"What is the point of accusing him now?"

“You can say it so easily because you didn’t have to suffer anything...”

“The one you have given a clean chit to has been no paragon either. You don’t know this but I have seen how she used to scream at him. For the last one week babuji had been ill, I had been asking her to make kachori for papa but would she do it... . Look at her audacity. It takes two to clap...”

“Do you even understand what you are saying?”

“You are still a child...don’t you see how your father and I compromise perfectly...when one is angry the other keeps quiet...”

“When does papa abuse you or your family...when has he handed out your character certificates?”

“Why go on like a stuck needle...one should let bygones be bygones. Forgive and Forget.”

“The injured have no forgiveness in them.”

Maa repeated the same words that middle class parents have rehearsed, “You are still a child... will understand gradually” Then added, “Also, what is the point of this futile discussion? Everyone makes their own choices. They should also be ready to live with them.”

“Then what’s a family for?” Asked Kartik but ignoring him, maa busied herself in her mobile and her patients.

Just then, father entered the room in his dust coloured tracksuit. Ignoring his “hi, papa” he started chiding maa, “Give some attention to those outside. His Chachi is talking to the guests and here you are.” Maa kept her phone aside to hear him out but as soon he stopped talking, she busied herself with the phone again.

When his father had no influence his mother he turned to Kartik. Bloodshot veins in his eyes, sweat on the wrinkles of his forehead, his hair messy and dishevelled “Have you seen Baba ji?” he asked pointing towards the outer room.

“No... I won’t be able to see”

“You won’t have your say in everything. Go see... seek his blessings”

“The man who did nothing good for anyone, what good will his blessings do?” Kartik’s anger was at its peak.

“You only know Dadi’s side. You know father gave away our share of land. You know why...because his younger brother needed it. He had lost his job, his children were growing up...in our household we were both employed.”

“If you start talking of intentions even a rapist would not be at fault...if he does not get it at home he looks for it outside...pouncing on anyone...” suddenly Kartik felt that he was talking about himself. He fell silent awkwardly. He continued after a while, “You couldn’t pursue D.N.B because of all these bickerings ... how will you justify that?”

“What...D.N.B....when babbu?” Chacha entered the room with Baba’s locket swinging around his neck.

“What is the point of digging old graves? And let’s suppose that I had done that D.N.B. ... and had settled in Delhi...would that have changed anything significantly? Everything would have remained almost the same...all this is fate”

“Only pessimists are such fatalists” Kartik thought but said nothing.

“You don’t even want to understand. You always think about rights ... it doesn’t work like that in a family...”

“Poor man! He did so much for his siblings...in spite of that, he endured insults. He told me on the phone to ask my maa to cook kachori for him...” Chacha said clearing his throat.

“Arre bhaiya...so many times I said that...so many times he did...but her audacity...” Maa joined the argument in her theatrical style.

“That man made her life hell and you wanted her to also cook puri-kachoris for him... wah... wah! What kind of justice is that!” Kartik screamed.

“If she was that unhappy, she should have left him way earlier. Our lives would have had some less drama,” Maa twitched her eyes.

“Just keep quiet.” Father shouted suddenly that sent shivers down Kartik’s body. “When you don’t know anything, what is the meaning of this unnecessary commentary?” Maa was ready with a tit for tat but when she saw the look of surprise in Chacha’s eye she retreated gnashing her teeth.

Kartik had usually wondered why Dadi didn’t separate from him. Dadi always gave him the same explanation that any ordinary middle-class woman of those days had, that it just wasn’t done those days. It would have been terrible for the children. Or that you had to make a compromise to live anyways so how did it matter whom one made that compromise with. But Dadi wasn’t ordinary—she was educated, worked in a college, earned well, she made almost double of what Babaji did. Then why...

Gradually, he began to think that he won’t tell anyone about the professor. What would he say when he himself hadn’t yet understood himself at which moment the professor’s touch turned from being exciting to disgusting. The way his father is defending Babaji, isn’t it a possibility that he may actually question Kartik contemptuously why he had gone there in the first place... his mistake...hundred percent his...that if he hadn’t aroused the professor had that middle-aged man with a family gone insane to behave like that?

V

Kartik felt like a useless penny. Insignificant and invisible. For his doctor parents he 'existed' only when he won awards at the state or national level quiz competitions. For friends, he 'existed' when they would need him like when they wanted him for cheating at exam time or needed his notebooks for the holiday homework. For society, he 'existed' only once — when he secured admission in a prestigious medical college.

When he walked about in school hugging his books to his chest bouts of laughter from a group of boys behind - taller than him and with denser hair- would lash his back, he just wanted to dissolve like alum disappears in water. When his teachers in the coaching places laughed at his questions he wanted to sink into the ground. In college when he had innocently mispronounced 'gucchi' as 'gussi' people laughed at his rusticity as if he had claimed to be from America instead of India, he wanted to be the invisible man.

Then it occurred to him that if he found people, society, so dated (pixilated) why did he want them to stamp an approval of his existence? When the question raised its head in his head he began to feel that he 'existed' a little for himself. He began to 'exist' a little more for himself year after year as he distanced himself from society. Yesterday it was that 'existence' that the professor had broken with a hammer. Today his own family, his very own people were raining small blows on it to completely pulverize him.

He recalled his conversation with the professor. After the round of the wards, he had sat down to work at his thesis. He had planned to finish four chapters before going to sleep. Just then, the bell of his grinder rang. He answered the call hurriedly. There wasn't any profile picture. Neither was anything written on the profile. After he replied "what's up" to the 'hi', there were a flurry of messages-

You are very close

Wanna have some good time

Are you interested

Tell me

Reply fast

For once he put his phone face down. He never did like such desperate people. Then, there were non-stop messages of 'reply fast'

His heart was beating faster than a generator. He just wrote - Only casually.

There was no response from the professor. He only sent a thumbs-up emoticon. Then, suddenly another message popped up- Now come fast.

Where?

Then that sudden reply - Anaesthesia block, room 418.

In the campus? That too in an office? Could it be a scam? Kartik stopped again.

When he didn't reply anything suddenly the professor messaged- It's safe.

Outside?

Trust me.

An expert in his game, the professor knew how to get hold of these newbies. He then sent 'trust me' messages in a row. When all the fluids of the body began to rage, when desires began to hiss like snakes, what alternative did he have? Calming his racing heart he wrote 'I am coming' and walked to the Professor's room.

He knocked at the Professor's door. Glancing at the name on the black nameplate in a golden frame, he recalled something. Dr. Aviral Ranjan. Arre! Every resident's favourite doctor! He was often abroad

presenting papers on new modes of pain management in different countries. Minds his own business. A totally no-nonsense kind of guy. No toxicity at all.

Thinking of it he felt relaxed. The continuous argument of yes-no, yes-no, yes-no in his mind settled down. By then the door had opened. A man stood in the doorway, average in height in a French beard. He smelt of musk. There was Baby's Tears in a white pot whose delicate leaves he had tried to touch when the professor laid him face down on the table pinning him down with his heavy body. He had pushed away the bust of a pure white marble Buddha throwing it on the floor hoping that someone outside could be warned.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. It was his Mausi in her boy cut hair and maroon Bata slippers. Not his, his father's, Mausi, whose home he used to visit in the summer break with his Dadi. He opened the door, touched her feet half-heartedly, and was about to close the door, when Mausi started saying gesticulating with hands, "Karti, you are a darling son. What happened to you....you don't even want to see your Dadaji's face?"

Before Kartik could assume the tone of a child and say that he is afraid of death the elder Maami, in her belt around the waist, arrived. Following her was the younger Mausi with her neatly arranged flicks. Both had spent their lives bereft of any ideas still managing to differ in opinions. They were ready to beat him with the sticks of their questions – "Red shirt? ...What happened, son?"

Gradually women who were not satisfied with the distasteful story of the death began to gather around. Behind them followed that friend of maa who had a PhD in vocal music, but who had forgotten the difference between Bheempalasi and Bageshwari or Chaiti and Thumri while teaching in a Haryanvi college of girls in a nearby village. Cleverly she began to caress Kartik's head- and said- Beta, don't be upset....those who come have to go at-least don't waste the time you can get with Dadaji.

Kartik removed his red shirt immediately. Not removed- his shaking hands began to work on their own with eagerness.

Pushed ahead by fear his feet began to move on their own as well and didn't stop till he had touched Babaji's feet.

How had Kartik forgotten that even if these fools had no brains their muscles packed a lot of punch.

VI.

He was made to sit inside the room to watch over Babaji's body. The Mausi with boy cut hair who walked with a wiggle and wanted to make an impression with some phrases of English she had committed to memory had whispered in his ears – the body is never left unattended.

Body - what a squishy word. Kartik had goosebumps as if a new light shone on the reality of Babaji's death and it gleamed before him. So, Babaji won't demand poori-kachoris on festivals and festive occasions now? He would never again place his magnifying glass on a news piece on Ayurvedic medicine asking him to read it out. He would never again bother him with the sound of his throat rattling at five in the morning or with his habit of not flushing down his urine in the commode?

He took out Babaji's crumpled photograph from inside the polythene bag on table. Om Prakash Aggarwal. That same woollen cap, dust coloured Nehru jacket, cataracts in his eye. He held on to it like he would a precious gem. Hearing someone come round, he hurriedly slid the photograph into the pocket of his white kurta.

Whenever people lifted the brown flowered blanket from Babaji's body to look at his face Kartik had a glimpse of it. Pale, toothless and scabby. Yellowed like a parchment, mouth open, sunken cheeks. Wisps of white beard. Every time he looked at it, the face would appear to be not his but that of the professor. The shape of his eyes and the sharpness of the nose and also the lips tilting sideways. How

did a face that was so dear come to look so much like that of a stranger?

The way the faces of people in love for a long time begin to look alike, does hatred also leave its marks on faces in the same manner? Whenever a page of Babaji's atrocities opened even by mistake, all the members of the family would turn into statues made of wax. Especially, his father. Provoked by Kartik's grumbling ifs and buts Dadi would once in a while speak up a little. She always said the same things, like how a man thinks of a woman as a galauti kabab, only the episodes varied, the story remained the same. On top of it Dadi had bursts of talent and even earned double of his income. What weapons did the man have to hit her with—except for insults, rudeness, character assassination? Listening to all this, Kartik's heart would be ready to explode like a grenade.

It there was no blast it was only because he had the satisfaction of knowing that nothing physical was involved in it. Then, Dadi would begin to say something in an undertone, his father would be jolted by a shock of 440 volts. He would become restless. Then, he would start to scrape floor with his toenail. Then suddenly he would gather some courage and say glaringly-No, no, nothing of this sort ever happened.

Kartik used to think that physical violence is the worst. Then, why does he feel that the professor with the French beard has raped him when he had actually escaped it. Although, by the skin of his teeth. He had felt the professor's belly moving against his back. The Professor had kept his fingers in Kartik's mouth. He pulled them apart at both ends like a piece of paper. Bending close to his ears, he whinnied like a horse. Kartik could have screamed. He could have screamed. But, he kept lying like a dead body. Taking deep breaths. Surrendering to fate.

It was another thing that just then landline had begun to ring. His hold had weakened. The penis grew flaccid. Kartik ran away. As he ran he won in the eyes of a court and society. But, his heart, his mind, every nerve, each muscle of his being had testified against him. He was **defeated**. Defeated very badly.

VII.

His bewildered father kept standing there. His dwarf like friend with a face of a pahadi potato came in and told him that the pandit he knows has asked for fifteen thousand rupees. The wood, the sandalwood will be 'ours'. The second offer was from one in reebok sandals for twenty thousand all inclusive. The third one wasn't a friend, he was the compounder in the hospital downstairs, but his deal was the cheapest - Doctor sahab, why to waste so much money. Everything will be taken care of in twelve thousand rupees.

His father was standing amidst them with all eyes of people standing around trained on him. Like a kid licking a lollipop father chose the most expensive offer instantly.

The Pandit reached there in ten minutes. Had it not been for his dhoti and tuft, he looked totally like a bodybuilder. Twenty five or twenty six year old, a swelling chest under the white shirt, well toned hairless arms.

He said nothing, silently kneaded flour in a plate and started to make large balls. A mouse of natural attraction tickled Kartik. On the pretext of helping him he stood behind the pandit. A pomegranate of desire exploded in his heart whenever the elbow of the pandit involved in kneading flour touched Kartik in the abdomen unwittingly. He felt as if he was a galloping deer come to a standstill before the headlights of a jeep that carried his hunters. Even then, he would not stop. In spite of the episode with the professor. On the contrary he wished to have been taller, for then the touch would be closer to his legs. Then, instead of one, a thousand pomegranates would have exploded inside him.

The pandit started tying bamboo sticks with a rope to make the bier. Till then, Babaji's sisters had gathered around. Sitting on a durrie in the lobby they had been sobbing for long and had now fallen silent of exhaustion. Looking at the bier, the youngest sister who was also the shortest in height and whose voice was like the horn of a bus started crying again. Hayeee... beer ji has left ...beer ji has left forever. The cry infected everyone like a sneeze. Both elder sisters...then, Kartik's

mother...then, father...joined in as if it was necessary to prove one's intimacy with Babaji in such a vulgar exhibition.

Some people looked at Dadi with expectation in their eyes, the way, a monkey is expected to imitate in a circus, but then, Dadi went inside with an excuse of some work.

He had seen his father crying for the first time. Getting closer, he held his father's hand. He felt as if the father started crying even more bitterly. But the moment the men from neighbourhood began to stare at him father put on his mask of courage again and pushed Kartik away.

Panditji said that Babaji had to be bathed. Almost anyone and everyone gathered in the room. Panditji first poured drops of gangajal in the four corners of the room. Father began to remove the dust coloured kurta. Babaji's hands were getting cold. There was some stiffness too. Kartik remembered Nysten's rule. In twelve hours rigor will set in completely. Then, the body would be stiff like iron.

Chacha loosened the knot and removed the pajama. When he was about to remove the underwear, Kartik felt like throwing everyone out of the room. Whenever he asked patients to open their legs to put a foley in the emergency or asked the others to loosen the knot, even unconscious patients would put up an involuntary resistance to the intrusion on their private parts. With what ease, in front of everyone, his Babaji was being stripped. This was not so different from the violence on the body in the mortuary... the only difference was that here clothes were not being cut open or ripped away but were being removed and those doing this were not the drunken attendants of the morgue but people who knew him.

The sight of Babaji's hippopotamus like penis brought the professor to his mind. When the professor had tired of kissing, he had taken off his belt. With one hand he had pulled his mouth to his penis. Kartik could have stopped there had he wished to. He could have squeezed his lips shut tightly but he hadn't stopped (or couldn't stop). When he put the penis in his mouth the sourish smell of urine, the sickening taste of its skin, the drumming sound of arteries on the surface of the

organ pulsing with blood had made him feel so strange. He had then wanted to stop. But the professor's hand on his head, the penis coming towards him in a fixed rhythm, would not let him go free as if he were a silicon toy to be used any which way.

He stared at the pandit standing close to him with a tattoo of Shiva on his arm. Dreadlocked. A blue Shiva with a snake draped around his neck. He wanted to slide towards him. Wanted to touch his penis. Wanted to place his lips on the taut breasts peeping through the shirt. Wanted to lick the dirty sweat dripping from his underarms, knowing fully well that having done this, he would think of it as his biggest mistake. He would hate his body. He would regret the unruliness of his desires. A truth would metamorphose into a lie. But that would happen only after he had savoured the moment. Would the regret of not tasting it ever let him live in peace?

He remembered what Raghu, a PhD student of Biochemistry had told him, the one he met in the **D.N.A.** lab. Kartik had said to him "I don't want to go to Grinder app. I try to control myself. When the app opens, even by mistake and I see some hot guy, I go crazy."

"All these things mean nothing. Such attractions are momentary. It burns out like a matchstick. If you get carried away by such feelings, you will always keep jumping around like a monkey.

"Why do you...?" Kartik asked suddenly but Raghu signalled him to lower his voice "Why can't you leave it then?" He whispered.

"Look at me, and look at the other people my age. You will know if you will compare us."

"What?" He asked innocently like a small child.

"Arre bhai, ...look...everyone is stable ... everyone has a home, wife...some even have kids...and look at me..." Raghu had put his sample in a centrifuge that began to rotate noisily.

What could he have asked after that. Even his parents are stable. So are Chacha Chachi. That professor and his wife must be too. He has

always visualized his parents like roommates. Talking in measured tones. Whenever something begins to spin out of control they take refuge in lies. Friends with benefits. Not friends literally but friends of popular slang who scream 'trauma trauma' and never forget to put out a story on instagram everyday, hashtag friendship goals

VIII.

Babaji was put on the bier after the bath. The ritual of offering chadars began. At first, the Mausi with the wiggle covered him with her sheet. Folded her hands. Then, both the brothers of Dadi did it. The younger one kept his hands folded for a long while as if he was in a competition. Then, Kartik's parents. Chachi, an electronic engineer by profession whose list of achievements could amaze anyone had been safe till now by virtue of being part of the crowd. Chacha's paunch on which his blue checked shirt seemed to be overstretched hadn't got any special attention till then. When, his name was announced the spotlight turned on him. He had forgotten to get a sheet. Both moved to the front, as if they were on trial in a criminal court and stood there, at a loss. Dadi sensed the mood and immediately intervened with "Our families are the same. Just touch the sheet lying above and take his blessings."

The antenna of the Mausi with the wiggle went up all at once. "Didi, it is the result of your leniency. If they won't learn the rituals what will they do when we aren't around?"

"All this useless drama will be over...what else?" Kartik felt like saying but the allure of the epithet of 'darling child' was so magnetic that he remained silent. Instead, he asked her in his small child voice, "Mausi ji, what is the significance of putting this white sheet?"

Mausi was speechless like he knew she would be. Poor woman, she fell silent after some uuuuh...aaanh... Mausi, known for wasting everyone's time, began to make an excuse of being in a hurry. "We should hurry up, son, cremation time is at 1:30 pm."

The midget bua finished another round of wailing, only with her voice as if a whistle was stuck in her mouth and not a single drop of

tear. Father had long ago learnt how to escape this kind of theatrics. The rituals demanded that Babaji be taken to the hall for 'Antim Darshan' but father simply did not lower the bier from his shoulders. He started climbing down the stairs hurriedly.

There was room for only three in the van. Father sat in the front. Friends eager to sit beside him moved to the front hiding Kartik and Chacha with their backs. Kartik wished for Chacha to go along in the van. He understood the inferiority complex that engulfed him whenever he came to his brother's house. In the beginning he used to wonder why he should address him as 'Chacha' when his father and he were twins. In his mind, Chacha did not simply mean being younger in age but also lower in status. Like being the left hand instead of the right. When as a student he slept late Dadi would accuse him of becoming like his Chacha. Becoming like Chacha felt like an abuse to him. He would get up immediately and start studying. He doesn't want to have an expensive education in a private institution like his Chacha had to have. He would much rather go to a government college like his father did.

The compounder in the Reebok sandal, who never addressed anyone with the honorific 'aap', came running to them and began speaking in a voice louder than necessary, "Doctor shaab is calling both of you."

Kartik was on the cloud nine. Bumping deliberately into friends standing in front he reached the van. Looking at his wrist watch, his father said sternly, "Karti... hurry up. We have to get there by 1:30 pm." Sitting in the van he looked at everyone, in fact stared, and a smile full of sarcasm spread on his lips.

When Chacha began to get in papa asked irritatingly, "Where are you lost?"

Chacha didn't reply. The van started to move. Chacha kept gazing at Babaji. He held Babaji's face in both his hands with the tenderness of a child.

Suddenly he began screaming “Bablu.. bablu.. papa has left us. Papa has gone.” His pupils dilated in fear. Watery eyes. Open mouth. He began to rub Babaji’s hand... “Karti, rub his hands...how cold they are getting.”

Father stretched his hand behind and laid it on Chacha’s hand. He did not look back....Kartik looked in the mirror and noticed that his eyes were blood shot. Father tried to take out his handkerchief but just then the driver stared at him and he froze. Only through his hands kept sending all his energy to Chacha.

Looking at him tears began to flow from Kartik’s eyes. Even if for a few moments he became part of the family. It was grief. Grieving. The heart rending pain of losing one of your own.

IX

People were overflowing outside the cremation ground. Over a hundred, nearly a hundred and fifty people were there. Several long rows of Scooties, Aactiva, Pulsar bikes. From Fortuners to Altos all sorts of small and big, cheap and expensive cars in red, black and grey crowded the place. So many people? Kartik was surprised.

They hadn’t even got down from the van when many shoulders were ready to hold the bier. He remembered his father’s words - “To live in society you have to live like them. They are the ones who support you in illness, in life and in death.”

Once, Kartik had said to him his nostrils flaring in anger – The middle class is so afraid of death that even enemies would come visiting immediately.

Taking in all this Kartik began wondering. Who will hold his body? He will have to die alone. The love he wants to live, the experience of which he wants to resonate in his being, that love would be over in a few moments. Like that experiment with a cat and a lighted candle in a belljar. Marriage brings stability. It brings along a community. It brings ears that hear you. it has consoling eyes. It has

the comfort of a warm body. It has stability. Settled life. Does he have the courage to relinquish it all?

Four people shouldered the bier. Kartik was handed a pot of water brimming to the top. Walking ahead the pandit was giving instructions. When they entered the cremation ground, some more people were waiting and seeing the bier, they started arranging wood in a pit fetching them from a pile of wood close by.

The Bier was kept on the bed of firewood. Another pandit with a grey head arrived. He first made them do a small pooja. Then he smeared a mark on father's forehead. Things for the hawan were put in the pit. Ghee was poured into Babaji's mouth. The young pandit kept chanting mantras all the time.

A mesh of criss crossed firewood was soon in place on Babaji. Father was given a pot brimming with water to hold and was asked to make his round of the pyre. But instead of breaking it, like he had seen them do in the movies, the pot was taken aside to be kept in a corner once the round was over. A wooden stick was dipped in the ghee and was set alight. With their hands on each other's shoulders Chacha and father locked together. At first father set the pyre aflame at the end where Babaji's head lay. Then the pandit took the torch and set fire at all ends.

Flame by flame the fire began to rage. For some time all of them stood there. There were crackles, clouds of smoke, particles of soot spreading around.

Kartik looked everywhere. Dadi wasn't there. But mama in whose car Dadi was supposed to come was there. Was she outside? Should he call her? Would she come? If she didn't, he would drag her by force. But then, wouldn't his image of a good child be besmirched?

She must see the violence of this fire. The dance of death that the roaring flames danced on the body of that man. Her restive mind might get some peace. The Dopamine rush of being free at last.

He rushed outside. Outside in a sultry room the women guardians of society had encircled, their purses and phones in their hands like weapons. He leaped in like a Marvel hero. Holding Dadi's hand he began to pull her up to take her outside.

"Where are you taking me?" Dadi was bewildered.

"Come in therelook at everything with your eyes..."

"Inside.... No...no..." As expected the Mausi with the wiggle said.

"Chalo Dadi... looking at that blazing fire will give you relief."

Kartik felt that Dadi was about to get up from the chair when the flock of sheep began to bleat some argument or another dredged up from their herd mentality. Dadi suddenly sat down more firmly, with greater strength than before and stuck to her chair. She tried to signal something to Kartik with her eyes but he ignored it. Glaring at Kartik the flock of women grew happy now. How many fronts they had battled and won in a day.

Kartik's existence suddenly transformed into non-existence. When he was running from the professor's room, he had missed Dadi. Her memory alone had lent him courage. Closing the door to his room when he broke down burying his head under a pillow he had felt her soft touch in it.

Kartik felt like crying. He came back silently. The crowd was stirring now. Some were looking at the watch, some at messages on whatsapp. Standing next to him his father's friend started to ask him something.

Babaji ceased to exist so easily that he was unable to believe it. He stood very close to his pyre. The fire raged so hard that his face glowed red like blood. A thousand embers shot up from the of blazing wood and shimmered in his eyes.

He felt restless. He felt strangely suffocated. Would he too...? His body too? Like this... suddenly.. bhakk! Just a life away is death from him.

A mysterious energy began to flow in his veins... He felt as if he 'is'. As a whole. Unbroken. He stood in front of the young pandit. He felt the warm breath of the pandit on his neck. He started moving backwards. He would never be trapped in the false ritualism that held his Dadi a prisoner. He will live the truth. His truth. His pure unvarnished truth.