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MIRAGE

(A Story)

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*"Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter,
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter."*

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 87
Addressed to the "Fair Youth"

With less than a month left before the start of the second year exams, Agni knew he should be concentrating hard on the stacks of photocopied and hand-written notes scattered in front of him. Although he had ritualistically surrounded himself with tottering piles of texts and reference books, that evening he found the mere task of studying for over two minutes to be unbearably tedious. For every time the conscientious student in him attempted to discipline the wandering mind, a stubborn restlessness got the better of him. Again and again, Agni looked up at the wall-clock above the wardrobe, waiting for the doorbell to ring.

It's almost 7:45. "Late as always", thought Agni, sighing with some irritation tinged with a sinking feeling of sadness. It is difficult to explain why he associated that peculiarly hollow, yet heavy, sensation with the experience of drowning.

After fifteen more minutes, during which the clock hands had become veritable snails for Agni, just as he was panicking about whether or not to call or send an SMS reminding about the rendezvous, in case it was forgotten, the calling bell chirped in its recorded bird-voice. It was as if the sound cut through his tense body as he jumped off the bed to get the door. But before he could get out of his room, he heard the clinking of his mother's bangles as she went and undid the bolt.

"Arey, Neel! How are you, beta? Long time no see. Completely forgot aunty, huh?"

Neel laughed. Agni felt a refreshing wave of relief wash over him at the sound of it.

"Nah, how can I forget you aunty? Who will make me tea then?"

Agni thirstily drank the mischievous smile in Neel's voice as he teased Mrs. Sen.

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"Badmash, the moment you enter the house you send me off to make chai in this heat! Go tell your friend to make it for you", said Mrs. Sen in mock peevishness, lightly slapping Neel on the arm.

"That's unfair! You know no one makes tea better than you," quipped Neel faking outrage, "Agni at home?"

"Bas, bas, don't have to flatter anymore. Yes, he is in his room. Studying the whole day! Exams from next month. You know how he is. Go, go talk to him. He can use a break too."

"Sure, sure. I wonder if Mr. Studious even remembers to breathe before his exams."

Both of them laughed. Agni felt a twang of jealousy. He knew it was unreasonable, but he couldn't help it. He quickly returned to the bed, and sitting crossed-legged, started humming a random line, swaying slightly to and fro. He didn't want Neel to think he had been waiting for him with baited breath. He wanted to punish him- just a little, though- for being late.

Neel walked into the room, stood before the wardrobe mirror and casually ruffled his hair. Turning to the aquarium, he then bent to see the fishes.

"You know, this thing needs to be cleaned once in a while. I can hardly see your Oedipus and his buddies!" Neel ventured a joke, trying to gauge the extent of the damage.

Agni "hmm"-ed in reply, still not looking up from the notebook on his lap.

Though he pretended to be engrossed in Shakespeare's characterization of Antonio, he was acutely aware of Neel's presence and movements in the room. Funny thing is he knew he wasn't fooling Neel. It was just a matter of time before he looked at that heart-warming smile and started smiling himself. Oh, how sorely he had missed that smile, that voice, that cool smell which reminded him of fresh mountain mornings!

Neel pushed aside a tiny tower of books and slumped beside Agni. Leaning against the wall, he stretched his legs and crossed them at the ankles.

"Why do you call it Oedipus again? I didn't know an albino goldfish could be a Greek tragic hero!" chuckled Neel.

Finally looking up, Agni said, "Because it has no eyes. And I too didn't know 8:00 is the new 7:30." Though he had every intention of sounding serious, yet a small laugh bubbled forth from the depths. Neel smiled and said, "Well, it's 8:10 now."

Assured of his victory, he slipped an arm around Agni's waist and gently pulled him against the wall, their shoulders touching. Neel's always a graceful winner. He didn't know how to handle failure. Out of his element, he behaved clumsily, becoming almost hostile and aloof. Knowing that, Agni let him win. Agni's better at dealing with losses. Or so he liked to believe. In any case, he really didn't mind. "Better to have a smiling Neel than a sulking one", thought Agni.

He held Neel's chin and turned his face this way and that. Neel fondly indulged him as if Agni were a kid. He wasn't completely wrong, though. With a child's fierce possessiveness, Agni scrutinized Neel's face- the sharp nose, amused brown eyes, and Cupid's bow lips, a shade of light mauve. He made sure that what was his had returned to him unharmed. Unchanged. Untouched.

"You look handsome in this rugged, bearded look", complimented Agni, getting up in response to his mother's call from the kitchen.

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"So I've heard", said Neel with a puckish smile and wink, as Agni went out of the room to get tea and snacks.

On returning, he set the tray on the side table and sat on the cool marble floor. "So how was physics camp? Did you get to see Mysore?" he asked.

Neel sat up, and taking a sip from the cup said, "Hmm... it was damn exciting! You learn so much in a camp than a classroom, you know. And we had lots of fun too. Sightseeing, picnic, late-night adda". Stooping closer, he added in a hushed tone, "Even got to try premium quality ganja! Oh man, if you only knew how divine it felt! And the people, all of them, professors and students and research scholars, such fucking awesome and intelligent guys. I didn't even realize the month flew by until I was back home today. Guess I'm still having a bad hangover."

Taking Neel's left hand, Agni traced the thick twining veins that snaked up the thin arm. He read a map in them of flowing and branching rivers, with banks the colour of ripe wheat. Still looking at the hand, Agni said in a thin voice, "Sounds great." Then added, "I missed you. I wanted to call but didn't know when you would be free to talk."

Neel dropped his eyes to where Agni's finger halted its voyage up the arm. "I too thought of calling. But with so much happening..." a note of embarrassment lingered even after Neel's hesitant effort at a laugh trailed off, the sentence unfinished. "You didn't find time", completed Agni, returning down the arm.

A few moments passed before Neel spoke again. Tenderly, he asked, "Why do you look at my hand like that? As if it's... precious?" Agni looked up to see if he was trying to change the subject. But there was genuine curiosity in those eyes. They held their gaze a little longer. Then Agni looked away and shrugged. "Suddenly you ask. Why?"

"Just remembered something", Neel said as he drew his hand out of Agni's and came down to sit beside him. "Come, see the pictures."

Out of the many he saw, Agni was intrigued by only one of them. It was a wide shot of Neel and a girl in a sprawling garden, with tall fountain sprays fanning out behind them. The girl featured in quite a few group photos, but Agni clearly couldn't care less about catching her or anyone else's name. Nothing mattered except Neel's voice and his warm presence there at that very moment, after one long month of separation. Nothing mattered. So it seemed until that picture came as the quiet, unexpected, firm quake of the earth beneath.

Only saying that it was taken by a prankish batch mate at Brindavan Gardens, Neel hurriedly swiped to the next picture. But Agni could hardly see anything anymore. That fleeting glimpse was enough to burn the image into the back of his eyes. There was a mesmerized cautious softness in the manner Neel and the girl smilingly conversed and looked at each other. Surely, this choreography of attraction was also evident to the photographer, for why else would that person capture them unawares in that posture.

Trying to sound as casual as possible, Agni asked, "So, did you meet anyone special?" Neel laughed embarrassedly and replied, "You noticed." He didn't need much prodding. For shortly after, all Neel could talk about was that girl. It seems that although Shikha was his classmate, they hardly knew each other until they went to the camp a month ago. There, having been paired for

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giving a presentation, this acquaintance quickly grew into friendship which, in turn, promptly led to that initial stage of "something more": not yet love, but threatening to be so.

Neel, who used to rail against virtual social networking, had even downloaded Whatsapp to talk to her more often. That bearded look was on her suggestion, and she too liked to caress the veins of his hands. She had said they reminded her of interlaced roots- of strength, stability and nourishment. Having revealed so much, he went on to admit that he was late because he had lost track of time while talking to her.

Agni listened with a dry smile pasted on his ashen lips. A smile that didn't thaw the tight coldness of his eyes. Frozen eyes that dammed the shattering storm within. He spoke little, afraid of losing his hold on himself.

Lost in narration, Neel grew oblivious of the change in Agni. Something he would definitely have noticed before.

Around 10:15, when Neel got up to leave, Agni felt both relieved and pained by such a feeling. After locking the door for the night, he took a towel and headed for the bathroom. As the water drummed into the empty bucket, Agni sank on the wet floor. While outside the burning May relentlessly pummelled the parched chest of the dusty earth, rain gathered and fell in fat drop from two eyes, even as a storm of grating sobs choked a throat. But you couldn't hear it. For the water cascading from the faucet drowned it all.

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