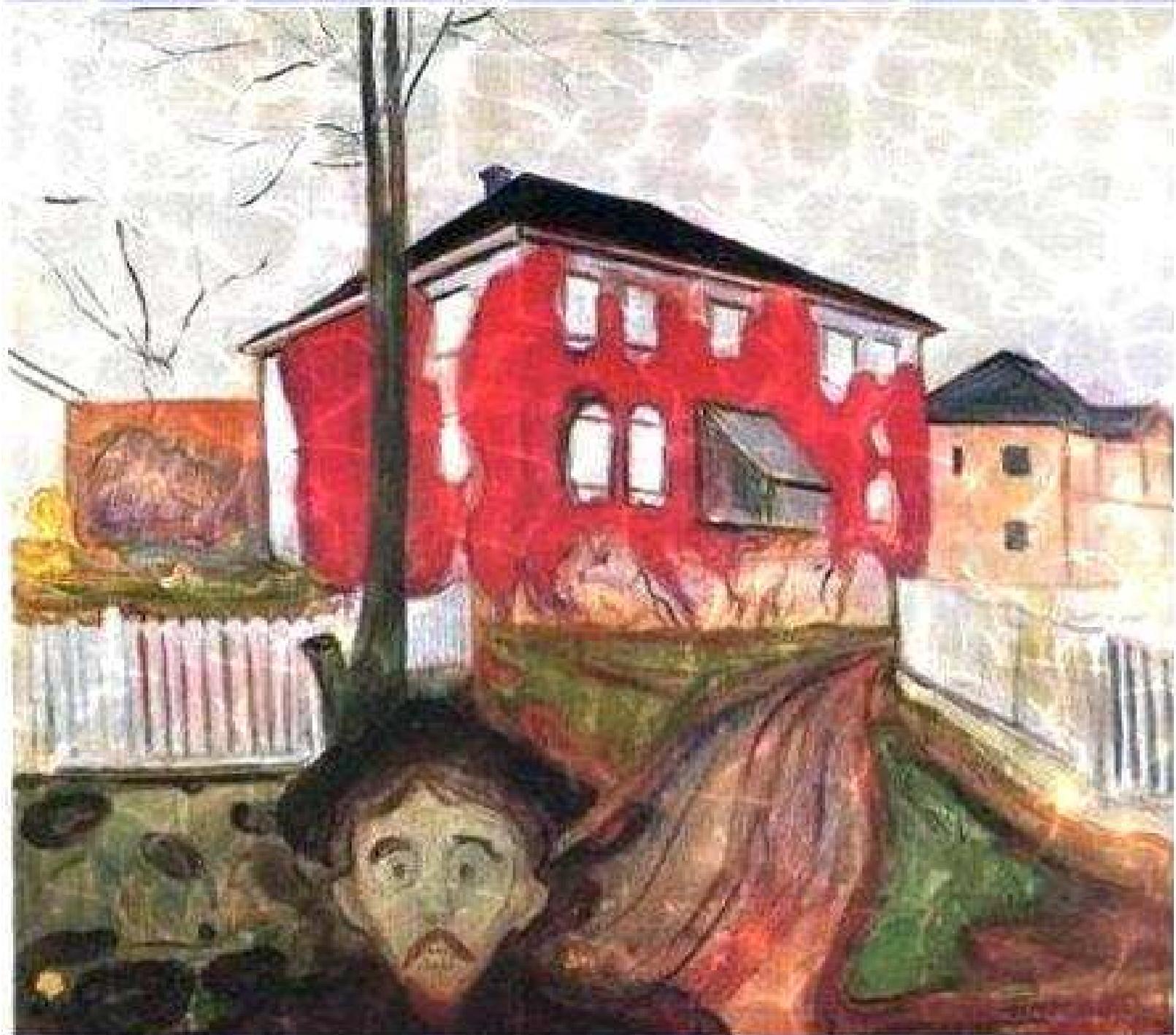


Tears For Rabul Dutta



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Tears for Rahul Dutta (A Collection of Interconnected Stories)

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Author's Note

This is a short collection of interconnected stories that form one larger narrative and ought to be read in the given order. The story, 'Tears for Rahul Dutta' was published in *Danse Macabre*. 'Rahul and Kishore' and 'Rahul' were published in *Birkensnake* and 'Last Wishes' was published in *Zero Ducats*.

Tears for Rahul Dutta

He had just awakened, seated halfway up on his bed, finding it difficult to believe that what he thought was only a momentary hallucination was still persisting. The reflection of Rahul Dutta hung across the mirror on the wall. His chest looked a lot larger, closely resembling that of a woman's. Never before had it given such an impression. He was just about to touch it, when he realized that it would be embarrassing had someone come in; so he leapt out of bed and made for the door. He then gazed out of the window to make sure no one could look in from the outside, knowing that he had done this many times before, and had already confirmed that as long as no new building came up near his, he would remain undisturbed.

He leapt onto the bed to see his reflection again. He placed his hands on his chest and gently pressed. As he got closer to the mirror, he noticed a blush appear on his cheeks. He wondered from where it came. He removed all his clothes and started to dance, jumping around the room. Amidst his reverie, however, he caught a clearer reflection of himself, causing him to come to a sudden halt. He jumped back into bed, covered his head with a blanket, feeling that this was the only way to shake this dream, haunting him in the early hours of the morning.

From the last row of an auditorium, he saw himself seated on centre stage. It was dark, save for a fluorescent bulb hanging from a high ceiling. His shirt was removed; his hands were tied to a chair; a group of men watched. Rahul, sitting in the back, was at first surprised, never expecting himself to have been so bold. He then grew to enjoy it, taking pleasure in every caress he received from the audience. Then his body started to hurt. He looked towards the stage and saw that they had tilted his chair. He heard himself scream and cry, so loud that he woke up, panting.

He slowly approached the mirror, relieved to find that nothing had changed, and was soon getting ready for work, gazing out of the window while preparing his tie. He remembered something. His face appeared confused – an expression of a happy man

suddenly cast down, hurrying off to work with a hat resting on his head and a long black overcoat draping his skinny legs.

He reached work late, hung his coat on the rack outside, and was making his way to Mr Lucky's office, when Mr Lucky himself came out. 'You're late again sonny.' He asked him to take a seat but before he could, Mr Lucky shouted loudly. Rahul, scared, realizing what was inevitably in store for him, felt that he ought to tell Mr Lucky that he would happily quit, for never before had Mr Lucky addressed him in such a manner. He concluded that if he were to resign in time, he would avoid the embarrassment of ever getting fired, and on this note, in a calm and proud voice, he hissed out, 'I quit.' He put his hat back on, which he had left in the corner of his little cubicle and walked out of the building, freely roaming the streets as if on holiday.

At a house he rang a bell and was awaiting an answer, when a voice asked, 'Who's that?' 'It's me,' replied Rahul. The girl snorted and then on a more serious note remarked, 'How am I supposed to know who that is?' Rahul wanted to say something offensive but instead only said, 'It's Rahul.' The door opened and he walked in. The girl whom he had come to visit lived on the top floor.

As he was making his way upstairs, he caught a glimpse of Rupa, standing in a corner. Upon seeing him, she pressed her breasts and said, 'Hey Rahul.' Rahul bowed his head and hurried past her. 'You little child! Why do you come here anyway? She does not care about you!' Rahul was tempted to lash out – she ought to at least have recognized his voice– but instead suppressed his anger, walking past all the others, some of whom did not notice him, owing to the frequency of his visits.

Upon entering her room, he saw her breasts and turned away. 'I don't believe this! We make love every day, and you're still ashamed to see me this way?' Rahul tried to explain but found that he really had no reason. Nadia grew angry; she kept on pushing the question. 'Why? Why do you feel ashamed? Oh, poor child!' Rahul was mumbling; he knew that he had no reason and was now trying to invent one, to stop her from her insistent interrogation. He tried to hug her. She pushed him away. He fell on the floor and grabbed her feet. She tried to let herself loose. 'Let go, let go! Let go, Rahul, let go!' and with raised shouts, she managed to kick him in the eye. She brought some

ice and pressed it against the wound; she stroked his long hair. 'I've always loved your hair, please don't ever cut it!'

Rahul's tears had dried up.

At home, dinner was waiting. He had no appetite and so told his parents that he had a difficult day at work and wished to sleep.

The new morning had arrived. The sun shone on Rahul's face as his eyes opened slowly. He immediately got up, looked at himself in the mirror while walking towards the bathroom, and felt revived. It was a 'new day' he thought to himself. Within half an hour he had finished taking a shower and had started putting his clothes on. The clothes seemed new. He'd been gifted these clothes about two years ago but had never felt right in them. He then walked down the stairs in a slow fashion, clomping loudly. His parents, sitting at the dining table, were twitching their noses and eyes. He finally reached the foot of the stairs.

'O, Rahul, said his mother, 'you're looking like a new man' – she clasped her hands and smiled. 'I feel like a new man, mama!' 'Pancakes today,' said his mother. Rahul sat next to his father who had remained quiet, and then in a soft yet powerful voice spoke, 'Why son?' 'Why what?' asked Rahul. 'Why the clothes?' 'For no particular reason, papa.' 'There must be a reason!' Rahul sat in silence and stared at the wall. He couldn't understand why his father was being so inquisitive, and why did there have to be a reason. He finally said, 'Because it's a new day, dad'. His father stared at him and then broke into a smile, feeling proud that he understood what his son had meant and was now waiting for Rahul to smile back. Rahul, who couldn't quite figure out why his father was smiling, continued to eat, staring at the maple syrup spread across the pancakes. He ate quickly, took a sip of his coffee and left the house. He was nearing the tall metal gates, when his father got up and shouted, 'Seize the day, son,' still smiling.

Rahul waved goodbye and walked on out. His father sat back down. 'The kid's in love, Aruna,' he said to his wife. 'I didn't notice anything of the sort, Kishore,' Aruna remarked. 'Well to be honest,' said his father, 'I don't think even he knows it yet. The

look in his eyes when he said “It’s a new day, dad”; I just knew it right then. He really does underestimate us, doesn’t he Aruna? Aruna?” He turned around and saw that she had left. He returned to his coffee and said, ‘Oh, well,’ with a blank look on his face.

While Rahul was making his way to The Café Khargosh, he thought of how his father had smiled, and how he had expected him to smile in return. He feared he had missed the occasion, that in fact there was something to be shared. He then started to recollect other such instances when his father had smiled in much the same manner, expecting something in return; it was not just an acknowledgement. He wanted Rahul to share in his triumph. Rahul often realized the desires expressed in such gestures only later, and so tried to make it a point to catalogue them, so that if they were to occur again he would know when to smile, snigger or perhaps laugh. It was not that he didn’t want his father to cherish these moments – far from that. He just never knew when his cue was.

He now diverted his thoughts forcedly to the newspaper advertisement, sitting in front of him, stating:

Desired
A keen aspiring journalist
Does not need prior work experience
154, Koocha Rahman

The content of this advertisement naturally interested Rahul, for it had not even been a day since he lost his job, and what would one render this but a good stroke of fortune. He didn’t need experience, which meant that his soon to be employer would not investigate his past. It occurred to Rahul this might be the opportunity to start anew, perhaps even a ‘career’. He shouted the word, cherishing the sound of its syllables, looking around to see if anyone was listening. Without thinking, he left some money on the table, gathered his stuff and started heading towards Koocha Rahman.

After walking for an hour or so, he found himself standing in front of an office building. In one of the offices a clerk asked him to take a seat and assured him that it wouldn’t be long before he would be asked to come in. He then said, ‘You’re here for that

new job, aren't you?' Rahul assumed the clerk was referring to the job he'd arrived for but was not sure. He avoided taking up the matter any further than needed and returned to the fashion magazine sitting on his lap. 'Because,' said the clerk – Rahul raised his eyes so that they were facing the clerk's – 'the deadline is already up and you seem to be the only one who showed. Well congratulations Mr.?' 'Mr. Dutta,' said Rahul. 'Well congratulations, Mr. Dutta! You are asked to report here at 10 am tomorrow.' Rahul thanked him by merely smiling. The clerk smiled too.

It was not even 10. In fact it was long before 10, but for some reason Rahul was standing outside the office building. A few shopkeepers had arrived and were opening their shutters. Although Rahul was early, no one could have known it. It is quite natural for others to notice when someone is early, as the latter has usually either mistakenly done so and is angry at himself for not having paid attention to what time he was scheduled to arrive, or is angry at someone else who didn't show at the time he had promised to; so either they display a certain irritability, by pacing up and down, looking at their watches, staring at the people on the street or they bicker, feeling warranted in doing so, as they sometimes persist in cussing, yelling and throwing all sorts of tantrums. Rahul was neither irritable nor loud. He was in fact well composed, silent, and fit into his surroundings much like a telephone pole. The clerk was walking down the street and although Rahul had seen him, he had not seen Rahul. In fact he almost bumped into Rahul, when he suddenly came to a halt, 'Oh Mr. Dutta, I didn't see you! Pardon me!' Rahul waved his hand, waiving off the ordeal. The clerk opened the shutters and walked in. Rahul waited outside. It was not 10 yet.

The boss, Mr. Mahmud, arrived shortly at exactly 10, which was when he invited Rahul to come inside. Their conversation was brief. He told Rahul that he didn't want anyone with experience, for he already had many of that sort, and now wanted someone fresh. He also made it a point to say, 'And besides, this will be a fresh experience for you too.'

Rahul had already said goodbye to his boss and was leaving the office premises when the clerk tapped him on the shoulder and asked, 'How did it go, heh?' It immediately became clear to both of them that their exchange yesterday had opened a vista to more intimate relations, as they both paused, realizing that they were not

addressing each other with 'Mr.' but with 'heh.' They then continued to talk. Rahul told him that he had already received an assignment, 'a most dangerous one, one involving great risk.' He told him that he was meant to investigate the underground gang wars in the city; he said that he had been advised to try meeting the dons, if he had the nerve to. He told him that Mr. Mahmud expected much from him. He then grew silent. The reason was obvious. It was about who he was. It was not an impersonal request nor advice but rather a confession, an opinion on the nature of his character. Rahul, having been in the business world for some time, had come to realize – though quite slowly – that people often lied. He was, however, convinced that each individual, no matter how corrupt he had become, had a little human honesty. The problem for him, however, was how to distinguish the truth from lies. He would start by thinking about the person and convince himself temporarily that he was honest – for that's what he wanted him to be. New doubts would surface; the thinking would go on.

After thinking hard, he saw how far he had come out on to the street. He laughed a little and then grew silent. He lit a cigarette and muttered silently to himself, 'I smoke to misery,' as he broke out laughing, growing suddenly silent again, looking around to see if anyone had seen him. He then returned to the cigarette, this time laughing silently.

When he got home, he went to his closet and opened the bottom drawer. He pulled out a pistol, wrapped in a felt cloth. His eyes were fixed upon it; it frightened him but at the same time, thrilled. He felt a sense of power, of meaning, that finally an opportunity had presented itself for him to show to others that he was not useless. He got ready in a black suit without having considered the heat of the afternoon sun. He left abruptly – for there were still some more preparations to be made – and took the bus to Zehad market, an area where Mr. Mahmud had advised him to go. He felt that Rahul could get the necessary information he needed, provided he used his 'gift of the gab', as Mr. Mahmud had rendered it his most natural quality. Rahul suddenly felt flattered but was soon reminded of an earlier compliment and had successfully, at least temporarily, blocked this one out. He got off at the bus stop and made his way into the bazaar.

This area was particularly well known for the food it offered the rest of the city. There was a large variety of kebabs and sauces. Rahul had always loved the food here,

but today there was no time to eat. He did feel odd however, overdressed. Even the beggars, ironically enough, avoided him in spite of his fancy clothes.

He felt that people were staring at him; he then suddenly turned around to see whether they actually were; he thought he saw them turn away. He continued to do this sporadically while walking through the bazaar, but felt that they were too fast for him, that every time he turned around, he could not even get so much as a look. His only consolation was that they, too, could only see him the same way. This, however, was not really a consolation, since it was he, who had come to see these people – people who oddly enough were everywhere yet seemed to have nothing to do with each other. Rahul found that, just like everyone else, he had nothing to do with anyone.

Just then someone started to walk towards him. He was fat and had a long beard. Rahul was panting; the sun had made him nauseous. He was, however, relieved that finally someone had arrived, well at least was making his way towards him. He decided to stop and wait. He stretched his neck upwards and closed his eyes; he felt his whole body burn. When he opened his eyes, he saw the bearded man standing in front of him.

Rahul then pulled the trigger.

At this point, Rahul simply vanished. Perhaps he merely wandered off into the bazaar, and the further he went in the quieter it became, until he reached a neighborhood with empty yellow houses, dusty windows, and an occasional abandoned shoe or football resting quietly against a wall. Perhaps he kept on walking until he was no longer there. Perhaps for days to come the people of the bazaar – witnesses to the crime – when asked about Rahul, would respond with puzzled faces, as if it weren't quite certain whether they had simply forgotten him, what he had done, or had never known.

His mother insisted on a funeral for her lost child's memory. She said she couldn't go on living, waiting on a miracle. She said she needed this, like any other important ritual, to allow her to come to terms with reality. The clerk tried to dissuade her by suggesting that especially with Rahul, one could never be quite sure. He sent her an endearing letter concluded by, 'You might just bump into him, Mrs. Dutta.'

Rahul received a funeral later on that year, when leaves crowded the streets. Family from different parts of the country had flown in. Mr Lucky, Mr. Mahmud, and the clerk were some of the first to arrive. Nadia had come with Rupa. They didn't introduce themselves to the family, in fear of spoiling the child's memory. Instead they appeared inconspicuous – much like Rahul, himself – standing in one corner, crying. The clerk whispered into his boss' ear, 'Premature ... premature,' with a sigh.

The mere fact that so many were present gave one the feeling that a great man had passed. There were many tears shed that day, tears for Rahul Dutta.

Last Wishes

Aruna had killed herself in a hotel room. The man whom she was sharing a balcony with was breakfasting outside. He found a note in her hand with my name and number and with the instructions that I be responsible for the corpse.

I arrived shortly after. The receptionist gave me a key to Aruna's room. On the way I lost myself but a cleaning boy helped me find the door.

The man who called in the morning was still breakfasting outside on the balcony. The television resting on the table opposite the foot of the bed was made of plastic. The chimes that hung from the ceiling were glued together and didn't produce a melody. On the wall was a poster of a woman breastfeeding a baby and underneath the image was written: *mother*.

I looked at Aruna – her head was resting in my hands – and feared that if I stayed here too long, the building would crumble and all who were inside would emerge from the debris as miniature men desperately searching for Aruna's corpse but would not be able to find it.

I fled immediately – my thoughts only of mother. At the police station I asked to speak to the head constable. The junior policemen led me to believe that there was no such hotel anywhere in the city. I told them of the suicide – though I think I should have mentioned that first – of Aruna Dutta, daughter of Kamal and Vimala Dutta, but they didn't seem to have heard me. I grabbed one of them by his hand and started to run. On our way to the hotel we grabbed whomever we found.

When we arrived, the sun was setting. It seemed as if the whole town was standing outside the hotel. They were staring at its grand structure. Construction workers had left their sites; shopkeepers had rolled down their shutters; businessmen, firemen, doctors, lawyers had received news and had come to see the spectacle. Policemen were making announcements on loudspeakers.

'All of you in there, surrender, otherwise we'll fire!'

There was no response. I saw the man breakfasting on the balcony. Others looked towards him with their fingers pointed to the sky.

'Have you seen this building before?'

'I've lived across the street all my life'.

There was a mist of whispers hovering over the crowd. How had a building sprung to being overnight?

The hotel compound, due to a growing darkness, was soon lit up with floodlights. Street vendors arrived, selling the last of their wares. Some people went back to their cars. They invited others, whom they didn't know, to sit with them. Some families were sprawled out on the ground. Some mothers were breastfeeding their babies. There were also some who were clearly stuck to one place, still staring at the spectacle. For some reason, the townspeople saw this building as their last hope.

People soon slowly began to disappear. As is inevitable, some lasted a little longer. In a week's time, however, the hotel compound was entirely deserted, save for food wrappers, bottles and other trash left on the ground.

The Foundling

It was late in the evening; the streets were clearing out. Rahul was making his way home after a long day at work, when he was suddenly accosted by a man wearing a white coat. 'You need to see this, you need to see this,' cried the man. It seemed as if anyone would have sufficed and that this man had chosen Rahul only because he was the first person he saw.

He tightly held Rahul's arm and started to run. They went through a door and began to race up the stairs. The man was going so fast – still holding onto Rahul – that Rahul's legs started flailing upwards, straddling the air for a few seconds and then landed hard, bouncing on the wooden steps. They then stopped, having arrived at a door. 'Brace yourself,' said the man, as he reached over and flung the door open. A gush of sand hit their faces. Rahul, initially squinting, opened his eyes and saw a large field in front of him. In the distance stood a small hill.

He then started to walk towards a sand pit that lay in front of him. It was covered by a green metal roof, from which hung a hammock running horizontally across. In the hammock lay a child. It then became clear to Rahul that this man was a doctor and the child was his patient. Rahul moved towards the child and suddenly turned away. The little boy had no legs.

Rahul looked at the doctor and saw that he was convulsing. He put his hand on the doctor's shoulder, 'Dear doctor, it is a tragedy. The poor boy has lost his legs, but please do try to be calm.' The doctor immediately stopped convulsing and instantly regained poise. He cleared his throat, 'My dear friend, you obviously don't have the slightest clue of what I'm talking about.' Rahul was trying to calm the doctor, who had started to convulse again, when the doctor flung him aside and demanded, 'Open your eyes, you shithead.' Rahul walked up to the boy and looked at him once more.

He stood there still. It was only a moment ago when he thought that he had completely understood the boy's predicament – that this tragedy was a result of some sort of accident. It was now no longer clear. For although it was certain that the boy had

no legs, he nevertheless had something else instead – two wooden sticks attached to his torso. They were thin, shaped somewhat like hockey sticks with slight curvatures at the ends.

‘Look how peacefully he sleeps, doctor.’ He then turned around and found that the doctor had already left. He went up to see the boy again. For some reason he looked familiar. He touched his forehead with his hand. A slight breeze began to blow. The faint sound of a gun shot could be heard.

He began running down the stairs; he bumped into a young woman trying to find her apartment keys in her purse. ‘Can I use your phone, ma’am?’ asked Rahul. ‘Sure, just let me get my keys out.’ Rahul volunteered to help her find her keys and within a moment they were in her apartment.

‘What is the matter?’ asked the woman.

‘Who are you calling?’

Rahul grabbed her by the hand. The phone was left off the hook. He led her up the stairs – much like the doctor had led him. They burst through the doors. The sun was shining even brighter, beating on the sand. A strong wind seemed to be coming from the direction of the hill.

The woman walked up to the hammock and as soon she set eyes on the boy, she grew still. Rahul tried to shake her out of her reverie – for there is such a thing as a silent reverie of shock – by holding her cheeks and kissing them violently, much like what a man does to his wife upon receiving news of the death of their new-born.

‘I know it’s bad ... I know,’ said Rahul.

‘Rahul, Rahul,’ she cried. ‘My baby boy, Rahul ... that’s him right there. I had lost him as a child.’

Rahul wiped the tears from her cheeks and kissed her profusely.

Rahul And Kishore

Rahul had a dream—of someone who wasn't his girlfriend.

Rahul thought it was bad to have such dreams. He woke up and paced the room.

He then closed his eyes and went back to sleep. He had another dream—of his high-school English teacher. She was in his room—dry.

Rahul opened his eyes. He was still dreaming. In his dream, his teacher behaved a lot like his girlfriend. She was going away, she said, forever. Rahul's eyes fluttered open and shut. "What does this mean?" Rahul asked his dream. "And why was she dry?"

A long silence followed.

When he opened his eyes again, he found that he was still there.

"What if a porn star had the face of a child?" Rahul asked, staring into a computer screen.

He could only see who her old friends were, who her new friends were. He could not get on to her wall.

"Dear Nadia," he wrote, "You don't know me," and the thought of all the people who knew Nadia, and how, in comparison, she knew very few of those, came to his mind.

He decided to change his name to Sirtaj for Nadia's sake.

He called his girlfriend and told her that Nadia was his new name for her and Sirtaj was his new name for himself. He still needed a name for his high-school English teacher.

She could be Nadia too, Rahul thought.

He went to bed before his mother awoke. When she came into his room, she found a piece of paper pasted on the wall over his head as he slept. He had drawn a large stick figure with permanent marker, under which was written: "Me, Sirtaj."

When he awoke, he went downstairs. He sat at the dining table; his mother sat next to him. They waited silently while the bread toasted. The chair on his right-hand side was empty, but a vanishing crack on one of its legs indicated that the fat man who

had once sat there had disappeared. The crack, more like a cut on skin, was mending as the sun's rays gave luster to the chair, the freshly toasted bread and the white tablecloth.

“Mama, I changed my name to Sirtaj.”

His mother's face was like round, flattened white bread.

“Mama, I changed my name to Sirtaj,” Rahul said, loudly. He sipped his coffee, swallowing some of the grime, and left the house. Before reaching the tall metal gates, he turned around to see if she would herald him good-bye. She was staring at him from the kitchen window.

Kishore then walked into her view.

Kishore and Rahul stood at the gate, one on either side. Rahul and Kishore waited for Rahul's mother to come out.

Her head finally peeked out of a window in the roof. From a distance it seemed as if a bird had just landed.

“Kishore,” she shouted.

At the door, his mother flourished Kishore with kisses. As for Rahul, she plucked his cheeks with her fingers, barely grabbing any skin. They sat down at the table. Kishore sat on the empty chair.

When they finally walked out through the tall metal gates, Rahul's mother smiled at them through the windowpanes. She went back to her oatmeal, which had grown cold. She tried reading the newspaper. Folded in it was a yellow brochure. She tried reading it but it didn't make sense. She went into the garden to see how her flowers were blooming, to check on the maid, what was she busying herself with. Finding no one there, she remained standing outside the maid's room for a few seconds, staring at the door. She then returned to the dining table and started reading the brochure again.

Meanwhile, Rahul and Kishore had made their way to Narjis's house.

Narjis's sister, Nida, was seated on a sofa, making calculations. She was good at arithmetic. Narjis was running her fingers through the many gowns they had designed to sell at their exhibition tomorrow.

The sisters were busy, running around the house, leaving Kishore and Rahul alone. Rahul and Kishore kept themselves busy by posing in front of the many mirrors in the house. Getting bored, they began to stare at each other.

It was getting late. Narjis was not around, neither was Nida. Kishore and Rahul decided to leave. They wanted to say goodbye but couldn't find the sisters anywhere in the house. They waited some more. People walked by on the street alongside the river.

“Doesn't it look like we are in Siberia? The white patches of snow drifting in the river.”

“But it doesn't snow here.”

Kishore's eyes followed one patch until it was no longer in sight.

He wondered where that patch of snow will go. Will it settle down somewhere? Will it keep on going? Perhaps there is no such thing as the world. Perhaps there is only going. And if there is something like the world, it too, is also going. The world, like many other things, is going.

He wondered, when will it all be gone?

They both stared in silence at the patches of white.

Soon they were walking down a street. Trees were lush, dogs were bathing, children came out to play. Kishore wanted to play too. Rahul allowed him to do so but at the same time reminded him that he would only be a reflection of himself. Rahul laughed at this so loudly that he became the center of himself. Rahul looked unto himself and found an empty center.

He held tight onto Kishore's arm.

They kept walking down the street.

Kishore told Rahul that he had dreamt he had died on the roof.

“Did you wake up when you died?”

“No, I just waited. I was dead.”

They turned a corner, then reappeared.

Upon reaching the tall metal gates, Kishore waited for Rahul's mother. Although he could hear her voice, he could not see a bird perched on the roof.

In his room, Rahul soon found that his mother had removed the piece of paper he had pasted on the wall earlier that day. She had replaced it with a note: "Your sister has had a baby girl. Her name is Leela and she weighs six pounds."

There was no drawing of a baby anywhere.

He went out to his balcony and looked at Kishore on his own. He lit a cigarette. Kishore lit one too. He showed him his mother's note but Kishore merely took out an imaginary piece of paper from his pocket.

Rahul went inside.

Kishore knew something had stirred. He paced the length of his balcony and talked to himself at length. He tried to get some sleep. Then all of a sudden he left, coming out of a tree's cover.

Rahul sat on his chair. He thought of his sister and suddenly an unexpected glimmer of joy, like a warm sun, cut through his frame. He stared for some time at the empty chair downstairs.

Missing Parts

“People just are, Kishore. Why do you want to go about trying to figure out why they are there or how they are there or whether they are there?”

Kishore muttered something underneath his breath.

“What was that Kishore? Did you say something?”

Kishore turned his head around and stared at the clock.

“Oh, we better go, Rahul, it’s getting late. Narjis and Nida will be waiting for us.”

“Yes, Kishore, but what does that have to do with it?”

Rahul and Kishore thought that they heard someone at the door. When Kishore opened it, he found no one outside.

“No one is here,” Kishore shouted, while Rahul sat on a chair in the living room.

“That’s what I thought. Now back to what we were talking about.”

“Oh, no, we’re going to be late again.”

“No we won’t. They’re never there.”

“Do you think, Rahul, that we get the time wrong?”

“Absolutely not, Kishore. I always make it a point to write such things down.”

Rahul reached into his pocket and was looking for something.

“I guess you didn’t write it down this time.”

“I did,” shouted Rahul, his face turning red.

“People are not just are,” Kishore fumbled over the words while Rahul’s face turned happier.

“There is a reason why the chair you’re sitting on is touching you. There is a reason why, Rahul, the bulb shines on your face when you sit underneath it when it is lit.”

Kishore pulled Rahul’s cheeks apart.

“Yes, Kishore,” Rahul said with difficulty. “I’m sitting on this chair because I’m sitting on it.”

“It’s quite simple, really. Things are just the way they are. And if they were not the way they are, how would they be then?”

Rahul’s face vanished and didn’t resurface again.

Things between Rahul and Kishore got a little bad when Rahul got a girlfriend.

At a café, Rahul forgot to talk to Kishore, as he was busy looking at his new girlfriend.

What about me, Rahul? What about me, Kishore wanted to say but instead merely stared at Rahul, looking at his girlfriend through the corner of his glasses.

Rahul and Kishore never got into physical fights with people on the street. But they did like to boast to their mothers about how strong they were and how they had both slept with many interesting women.

Even though Rahul and Kishore had the exact same fingerprints, the same things which happened to Kishore happened to Rahul as well, even when they were apart. Kishore wondered whether this was predetermined – written down somewhere. But nothing of this kind is ever written down, Kishore, nowhere. Time is always arriving, always new.

How is it that we never arrive, Rahul? How is it that we’re always stuck in the same place.

Rahul lay Kishore on a bed and measured Kishore’s entire surface with a measuring tape. Kishore did the same. There is no difference, they exclaimed.

If Rahul and Kishore owned two cameras, they would take photographs of each other simultaneously, hoping that at least one camera would accidentally produce an image of an entirely new Rahul and Kishore.

As Rahul and Kishore grew older, they forgot what it was like when they didn't have names, when they were not Rahul and Kishore

Kishore and Rahul were hired as assistants to a land surveyor who told them that he would call both of them either Rahul or Kishore and that whenever one of them made a mistake on the job, they would both be punished.

The land surveyor was their old boss who claimed to have never met them before. We are your old assistants, Rahul and Kishore shouted. Perhaps you are mistaken, said the boss. It may very well be that you have confused yourselves with another such pair.

Rahul and Kishore were sick of being themselves. Rahul said I'm sick being of Rahul. Kishore said I'm sick of being Kishore. They couldn't imagine what it would be like to be each other, instead.

There was not enough room in the room in which Kishore and Rahul lived. There was not enough room for both of them. One of them had to go, one of them had to die. There was not enough room for both of them to die.

Rahul shot Kishore accidentally in a dream while they were both sleeping in the same room.

Rahul and Kishore liked things. They liked their watch, their wallet, their knife, their pen, their table, their glass. They liked these things because they came in handy. Sooner or later when they would leave this world, their things would remain hanging about. Their watch, their wallet, their knife, their pen, their table, their glass, completely useless now.

Among these things was Kishore's finger which he had cut off accidentally while trying to cut the french beans. Rahul rushed him to the nearest hospital to see if it could be put back on, but the connection between Kishore and his finger had already been

severed. This finger would outlive Kishore. It would lie abandoned on the table near the pen and the glass.

But what to do, Kishore? How do we get these things out of the world so we can take them with us when we leave? There is no way getting things out of here once they're already inside.

Rahul

Rahul wanted to have a look. *At what?* Rahul asked himself. Rahul looked around and couldn't find anything to look at except for himself. He couldn't stop himself from doing this. He thought the only way out was to not think about it.

Rahul spent the whole afternoon thinking of not thinking about it while looking at his whole person.

He asked his girlfriend to have a look but she wasn't there to have a look. So he cut himself off completely and dried the blood with what was once himself.

No one sitting in the room where Rahul cut himself off can possibly be in the position to even think of asking, even themselves, whether there was someone in the room.

Rahul failed to understand how something can be bad for you. How is something bad or good when you, yourself, are nothing.

Rahul did at some point, however, think that he was not nothing.

He once thought that things would never come to a happy close.

He thought of his mother, who died too young, whom Rahul could have easily said goodbye to, alive.

There is nothing you can do, Rahul. Absolutely nothing, and perhaps also no one to share this with.

There is no point to even try to begin talking to the dead. They will not give you peace.

Rahul wished he had never received news of her death.

As long as he never returned home, she was still around.

Rahul switched his cell phone off and never switched it back on. Instead he stayed away.

At a café (away) while he was sipping on his coffee, his stomach started to gurgle because of the coffee. He knew that it was the cause. He kept thinking of his gurgling stomach and then thought of what it would be like had he not had the coffee. Would his

stomach still gurgle? It was possible that it would not. He never knew what pain felt like unless he found himself in a painful situation. He wondered whether it was possible to feel pain in a situation which didn't give rise to it.

A storm blew over. Nothing, anywhere, changed its usual position.

Rahul looked around. It appeared as if he couldn't tell the difference between himself and everything around him.

There was nothing to hold onto.

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