

## FICTION:

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A new over-bridge was being built. Concrete and glass structures, most of them identical apartments and shopping malls, concealed from view the old, now mite bitten, carpentry shops lined along the road. The makeshift laundry shop, as luck would have it, a permanent one in the vicinity, was no more there. During the days when she used to enliven at the sight of the dhobi and his speciality, a special kind of chana mixture, things were different; things were familiar. Every evening, they would talk over the price rises and his granddaughter and laugh over trifling stuff, like the creaking sound of his wooden ironing plank. He would throw some mixture into his laughing mouth and continue his reminiscence and she would listen to him intently. The other customers frowned; sometimes reprimanded him for not ironing the clothes sincerely.

She must have met him, her quiet lover, for the first time there, where the partly built bridge now stand like a steadfast unromantic father looking down upon his daughter. No, the dhobi never acted like a father. He would ask her, like a most faithful servant- "Should I press the skirt this way" and when she nodded briefly, almost carelessly, he further nudged her to speak- "The sky looks sad, doesn't it?" She retreated from her

those days...

It wasn't an unusual day. She packed her Tiffin, bid her byes to her hostel mates and her warden and left for school. As always, she waited in front of the telephone booth, for a trekker to arrive. And as always, she prepared herself for the worst, her thoughts going as stiff as her body: the busybodies who would rush in and try to take the empty spaces for themselves; the shoving and elbowing, sometimes deliberately; the perverts. She wouldn't ever board an empty trekker though. She was new to cities; new to strangeness. Until then her life had been thoroughly sheltered. She only knew of familiarity; she sought familiarity.

Many trekkers went by; didn't stop for her. Most of them were packed. It was already getting late for the morning assembly and she was to read the news that day. As minutes drifted, her stiff posture botched and gave way to an insistent vulnerability; anxiety mocked at caution. Then, a trekker stopped. Caution was back in the anxious face but anxiety ruled, on top of that indecisiveness too- the only empty seat left in the trekker was beside the driver. The handyman gave her reluctance a sharp glance, as if saying- what's keeping you from getting in? So, she sat beside the driver; squeezing herself to avoid



danger and the defending skill she could use against each. Once, during a bus ride to the city centre, she had to literally thrust a hand away from slipping down her thighs. She felt like slapping the man's face. She couldn't.

The next day, the same events repeated: sitting beside the driver and the fantasy rehearsals.

On the fourth day, again the events repeated: same trekker, same driver, same seat, and the rehearsals in her mind but the passenger on her other side did not seem very gentlemanly. She shifted closer to the driver. He scooted over slightly to make place for her so that their thighs may not touch. She relaxed.

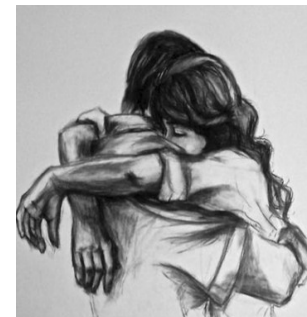
On the fifth day, as the pattern of events continued and probably meant to continue, caution was replaced by curiosity. She stole a glance at the driver. It was the hardest face she had ever seen in all the seventeen years of her life, with eyes intent on the road and yet drawn away from the world and lips as merciless as a mausoleum. She cringed. He stiffened. His stiffening took away some of her doubts. She relaxed.

On the sixth day, as he waited for some passengers to board the trekker, he stole a look at her but was caught. His ears turned red. She smiled at the road. It was now their secret- the road's and hers.

The days though usual turned unusual for her and for him as well, perhaps. If she arrived earlier, she wouldn't board other trekkers, even if less crowded. In case he arrived earlier he would wait for her to pull in, despite the stoppage being bereft of any expecting passengers; despite the complaints of the on-board passengers. The passengers frowned. The handyman smiled. But the

driver's face remained blank, even when she wasn't punctual. He didn't look at her with disapproval; neither with concern nor with affection. He didn't look at her at all. He always remained blank; his eyes on her road, on their road.

He let the handyman take fare from her but between them, he and his handyman, they had a deal- to not let any man seat beside her, although that meant leaving one seat, towards her left, empty; although that meant sparing some of his earning, albeit a



small amount, almost every working day for her sake. She knew about it.

On most days, he wouldn't move away, after dropping her at her stop, until she disappeared from his view and into the building.

The summer break appeared as the baddie in the scene. Their road awaited in anticipation of more silent romance; in anticipation of a climax.

With the break over, the trekker, her seat, his face- the abode of familiarity and comfort now, overwhelmed her and stiffness was replaced by a pleasant awareness of primal scents; of thighs meeting



thoughts and listened to him hum a happy song instead. Rebel! She laughed despite herself. He did not open his shop in the mornings; the mornings were for washing and drying the clothes and the evenings for ironing and chatting, otherwise he might have liked playing the role of a father, she thought. She also used to think of other things often, during

touching his arms and thighs. She remained stiffly aware throughout the journey.

The next day, the same trekker arrived earlier than any other, so she boarded it. Like the previous day, she sat beside the driver, as it was the only empty seat. Her caution and stiffness saw no change. In her head she would run through every possible



thighs. The naturalness of it surpassed all familiarities. For the first time in a city, she saw trust flying in and making a nest in her heart, to stay. Some softness was restored in his face, while his lips remained sealed and as grave as ever. The handyman whistled, oblivious to the occasion but she saw the road smile, in knowledge.

Then, one day, she had to leave for her hometown all of a sudden. It meant missing school for a few days. However, it didn't disturb her as much as the fact that she wouldn't be able to convey a message to her self-appointed guardian about her absence. She wished she could confide in someone. But she trusted no one. Not even the dhobi, for he would then

and once again found herself waiting in front of the telephone booth. She trusted him to appear; to take care of her. He appeared, looked her way briefly but he didn't stop. He drove away without stopping for her. She was hurt. Her stiff posture returned. She boarded a crowded trekker after a long time. She became conscious of the scents; of male scents, of predatory scents, which were not pleasant at all.

The next day, he stopped; as always, his eyes withdrawn and on the road, his face hard. Her familiar handyman was not present. There was a new one; a lanky stranger. The stranger made her a little wary. Yet, she did not sit beside the driver. Defying his protection, she preferred

off her seat and took the one next to him, which he had left empty for her. It felt natural. To her, at that moment, it felt like the most familiar and safe place in the world. He knew it. He looked at her briefly, for the first time ever since she met him. She said- "I had to go home all of a sudden". He nodded, as he turned his eyes from her face to the road and steered the wheel again. Wordlessly, they moved closer to each other; the sides of their arms and thighs pressed inmutually acknowledged familiarity. Their breaths caressed each other, albeit the distance, as if to let the warmth of unspoken reverence for each other sip in to their life; their eyes, still on the road.

When her stoppage appeared in view, she pulled out a five rupee coin and handed it over to the handyman, as always. The handyman kept on

pierced her back.

The next day she waited for him to appear. He didn't. She repented for her lack of tact and prayed for another chance to heal his soul; to take care of him in her own way, as he took care of her; to be his quiet lover, as he was to her.

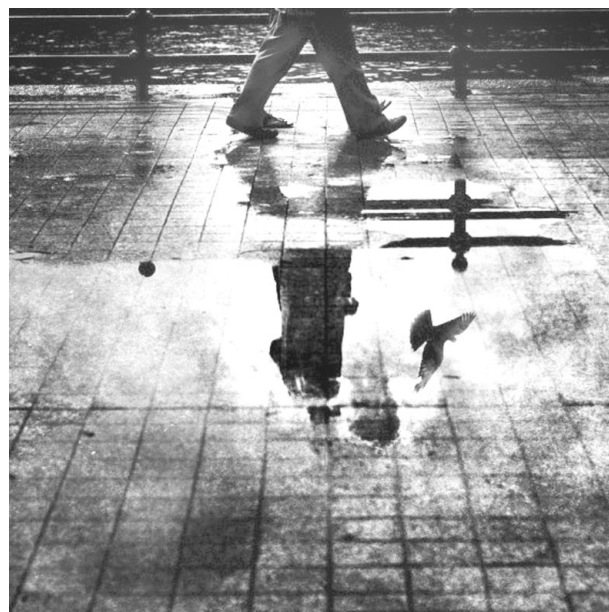
The next day she again waited for him to appear, at the hazard of missing her classes. He didn't. The strangeness resurfaced and familiarities died.

On the fourth day, she knew that he wouldn't come back. She stiffened in fear; fear of the unknown, fear of the known.

On the fifth day, she left her hopes and prepared herself for the worst.

On the sixth day, the usualness reappeared.

She must have met him, her quiet lover, for the first time there, where the partly built bridge now stand like



scowl at the absurdity of it all. Self-appointed guardian! Huh! He would say- "Beware of men! They gain your trust first and then take advantage of it." He would then turn to a father. No, she just needed friends and quiet lovers.

She returned from her hometown

to squeeze next to another stranger by a window seat, in annoyance of course. She saw him look at her in the mirror. He looked much older and tired. Suddenly, she felt like an old woman too. She regretted her action.

When he stopped for some passengers to board the trekker, she climbed

eyeing her salaciously and reproved her for not knowing that prices have risen; that she ought to give two more rupees. As she forwarded her hand to hand over two one rupee coins, the driver held back her hand and folded her fingers over the coins. She looked at him. She was dazed and scared too. Yes, scared. His eyes blazed with contempt and hatred, for the handyman, for himself, for the world; with the heartlessness of poverty and the tyranny of labour; with the afflictions of a past, and perhaps a present, she wouldn't dare know. She shouldn't have let her admiration travel beyond materiality; she shouldn't have started caring for him. She almost jumped off the trekker in tenderness of the realization and hurried away. Their eyes met briefly before she left. He saw the fear. He remained there, watching her, until she disappeared from his view. His wounded gaze

a steadfast unromantic father looking down upon his daughter. She used to think of other things often... of one thing, constantly: insanities are momentary, sooner or later, one gives in, albeit remorsefully in favour of sanity but oddly enough insanities are the only things eternal, the only things which aren't transitory. Just like her dhobi's makeshift laundry shop.

The dhobi migrated long ago and with him his special chana mixture; his stories; his laughter. Things aren't any more familiar. There stands a classy unisex parlour in the place of the telephone booth and trekkers no more stop at that stoppage. Nothing remains familiar but she doesn't seek familiarity any more. She has adapted herself to strangers; lewd looks and obscene acts, so that the unfamiliar always reminds her of the familiar: her quiet lover and their road.