

Monsoon of '79

It was one of those days when the scorching heat of Delhi meets the first shower of the season. And that is when I go into an absolute thinker mode comparing parched earth to an old haggard that gets released from the curse and transforms into a pretty damsel, all by the touch of a charming prince. Those first droplets eagerly falling onto the soil, first invoking a heat and then a nostalgic muddy fragrance never fail to get me into that mood.

It was during one of those days when Shukla family moved in the house opposite to mine. No, the house was not actually mine, I was just a tenant. Although I was still a bachelor at that time, my landlord was kind enough to rent me the place. Firstly because landlord was my grandfather's friend, secondly he lived in another city for most part of the year.

Anyways, I was standing in the balcony sipping my late Sunday morning tea, watching pearly droplets making music with everything that it embraced. A carrier truck stopped below followed by an ambassador car. Top of the truck was covered with a transparent plastic sheet, with dark wooden furniture showing beneath it. Rain was getting aggressive at that point of time. A middle-age man emerged quickly from the car and paced towards the entrance followed by a shy young woman walking slowly, her head carefully covered by the Pallu of her sari.

I was working in an automobile company in Delhi, IT had still not happened to the most countries by then. Life was as relaxed and pleasant as it could be. Sundays were spent either in bed watching back-to-back movies on the VCR, rented from a nearby video shop or at friends' place devouring fried chicken & drinks. I belong to typical Brahmin family where

alcohol and non-vegetarian food is strictly prohibited but when you live hundreds of kilometers away from home, it's pardonable to break some rules or so I think.

It continued to rain in the following weeks so I remained inside the house over weekends, maintaining my family values and philosophical dispositions. I saw Mr. Shukla leaving in his car and the timid girl-like woman watching him from the door. She looked no more than 20, a delicate frame added to her vulnerable looks.

He had hardly gone a few meters when his car stopped suddenly making a screeching noise. He got out mumbling a few unpleasant words. He opened the bonnet of the car and examined like a musician would do in a chemistry lab.

On- the- go car services were unheard of in that pre-mobile phone era. Being an automobile engineer, I could use some skills to solve the problem. Besides, I had nothing much to do on the lazy day. I went downstairs and offered a helping hand.

"I am Amol, Amol Sharma staying in the opposite house."

He looked at me somewhat sternly, wanting to know the reason for my introduction. Still, he extended his hand and introduced himself.

" I watched from balcony how your car broke down. I am from automobile industry so thought I could help you."

With a thoughtful expression, he accepted the help as if obliging me. I worked diligently and within next few minutes car started again.

"There was jamming in the brakes because of water-logging."

I told him as a matter-of-fact as my chest raised with pride over the achievement.

He chuckled gratefully, showing a row of paan-stained teeth.

"Very good. You will be a good mechanic."

His gratitude fell heavily, leaving a dent in my self-respect.

He meant no ill when he said that, I knew after a couple of further interactions with him. He was used to people doing favors for him, working as a supervisor in CPWD recently transferred from Lucknow. He told me about his recent marriage with a young Madhu.

Madhu, her name; true to its meaning, always leaves a sweet pain into my memories. She was frail as a feather that a strong wind could blow her away or a heavy rain could dissolve her. She had waist-length hair; I noticed when she used to stand on the roof after washing them in the morning.

After I volunteered to do the job of a mechanic that day, Mr. Shukla placed me into the list of his favorite neighbors. Other reason was that I also belonged to Brahmin family like him so he could share a meal with me occasionally. He invited me for lunch one Sunday and I accepted it hesitantly.

"Delhi is full of non-vegetarian Punjabis. I can't trust to eat in these restaurants where they cook chicken and Dal in the same kitchen."

He remarked stuffing his mouth with a big morsel of Roti and Dal.

My hand faltered for a second as I dig into spicy jack-fruit, reminding me of a chicken leg. I wondered if he would re-use utensils if he found out about my eating preferences.

"Madhu, serve Kheer to Amol Babu."

She obeyed him, her eyes lowered to the ground. Food was delicious. Her fingers were brown and sleek like chop-sticks.

Monsoon had decided to stay a bit longer that year. It was mid-august yet it rained though as it was only the beginning. I had just stepped out in the street when I heard Mr. Shukla's voice.

"Amol! Come and sit inside. I will drop you."

He peeped out from the window and offered me a lift. Before I could say anything he spoke again.

"Perhaps you can guide me the route to New Delhi railway station. Also, if you can do me favor by driving it back to my home."

It was a win-win offer; saving him from parking hassle and me from drenching outside.

He was going to Lucknow for a week for some official work, he told me on the way.

When I came back in the evening by his car, I thought of handing over the keys to his wife. I did not want to give him false impression that I used his car in his absence.

I knocked the door and felt a slight stirring inside me.

"Who's there?"

"Amol. Need to give back car keys."

The door opened and I saw a young woman wearing a long gown-like dress. I was not sure if she is Madhu as I had never seen her face directly until now. Besides, Madhu always wore sari, covering her head without fail.

Her cheeks turned red as the color of her dress and she wondered if I will tell Mr. Shukla about her experimental outfit. She looked beautiful with her long locks brought to one side. No, she was not as thin as she appeared earlier. Or perhaps it was the changed attire that accentuated her profile.

I came back, her image still flashing in my mind. It was wrong to think about a married woman; even worse when Mr. Shukla trusted me in a special way.

Next morning while I was about to leave, she was standing outside.

"There's a leakage in our bathroom. I don't know if there's a plumber nearby."

First a mechanic, then a driver and now a plumber! Shuklas have decided to use my services for almost everything! I said to myself.

"Ok, I will ask the plumber from the hardware store to pay a visit shortly." I said while running late for the office.

Soon after, I was back with a plumber. I could not trust a stranger to pay her a visit when she was alone. Why was I bothered when her husband was not? Or was this suspicion a reflection of my own intents?

My manager scolded me publicly for reaching late in the office. I decided to take an off next day to pacify my wounded ego.

I planned to spend the day leisurely, watching movies and feasting on hot Pakoras with tea. But Gods of the heavens were not happy with me it seemed. Or were they in particular? There was a major power-cut in the area when stormy winds shook off some electric poles out of their place. I spent nearly half of the day listening to radio, changing batteries of the old transistor multiple times.

I left in search of food in the late evening and returned back carrying chicken curry and a bottle of wine. I saw her silhouette against the door in the dark holding stack of steel boxes.

She hesitated for a moment and then forwarded the boxes towards me.

“There is some food for dinner.”

"Actually, I have got non-vegetarian stuff.”

“Really! It has been ages since I had that!” Her eyes lit up as she said that.

I gaped at her in awe and spoke in a low tone.

“You can join, if you want.”

Man, she was daring! It was so inappropriate of her to agree for joining me, considering the circumstances. Though more inapt was to invite her in the first place.

She had an early dinner at my place that evening. The way she relished chicken made me wonder what will happen if Mr. Shukla came to know how I made his wife to sin with me. But the bigger sin followed within few minutes and I never thought what anybody would think.

She was a strange woman, I never understood if she was shy type or bold. I saw extremes of her both sides. Don't know if it was alcohol or lonesomeness or the dark, we lost ourselves to each other. Getting to 'we' from 'I' was so spontaneous that I don't even remember who made the first move. Her light weight body clinging against my muscular frame complimented it as if she could never befit anywhere else. Lying on the single mattress in my room, we heard the tapping of rain against the windows. Like a long separated lover, she kept leaning against me in the flickering candlelight as I stroked her silky hairs.

"Why did you marry a man double in age?"

There was wrath in my voice as if she had always belonged to me and had betrayed me by marrying an ageing Shukla.

"My father worked as his sub-ordinate. He helped us financially during my two elder sisters' marriage."

She paused for a moment as if judging the words.

"I am his second wife. He left his first wife because she could not bring him a child."

For a moment, all the little regard that I held for the revered Shukla disappeared. I kissed her moist eyes and tightened my grip around her. She left around midnight, disappearing into the absolute darkness.

I woke up with a heavy head next morning. As I recalled last night's events, a part of me was filled with ecstasy yet the other one remained remorseful. I had deceived Mr. Shukla. He too had deceived two women in some way.

Does that justify what we did?

Another thought that kept occurring at the back of my head was that what if she demands some kind of commitment from me? I was a moral coward, I knew since that day.

It stopped raining from the very next day as if Rain-God had accomplished his mission. Mr. Shukla returned after two days. I did not see Madhu again in his absence don't know if it was out of fear or shame. Neither did she try once to contact me but that too made me restless.

In the coming week, I was transferred to the Bhiwadi plant of the company. Collecting my few belongings and some bitter-sweet memories, I left Delhi. An evening before I was to leave, Mr. Shukla invited me over tea. I could not gather myself to gaze at Shukla couple sitting together. Madhu was as unruffled as nothing ever happened between us. There was no regret in her eyes nor was there any delight. Or is it the natural ability of women to remain disguised in varied circumstances? I almost felt insulted for I was suffering from a guilt-induced discomfort.

Just for once, I wanted to live that moment again when she became mine, even if for few hours. The possession I held over her for those few hours was something that remained with me throughout the life; snuggled coldly in a deep dark corner of my heart.

Changing several jobs in last thirty something years, I travelled across nearly half of the globe. There is a sense of contentment after having earned a fair share of success and prosperity: becoming the Executive Director of one of the leading automobile companies and a proud father of two daughters.

Spending last 10 years in Germany, I was called for presiding over the launch event of a new model of car that is supposed to be 5-times more eco-friendly than its previous model. It is a kind of revolution in the automobile industry and I am thrilled to be a key part of it.

When I stepped in Delhi after many years, it was drizzling lightly. I was taken aback by the change; it has metamorphosed enormously. Contemporary look of the city enhanced further by tall buildings, an efficient metro rail network and elegant shopping malls.

For once I wished to go back to the place where I had spent my initial years of youth. Where life was simple and relaxed; where I had lived a monsoon affair. Not that she is living there anymore. Few years back, I got to know that Mr. Shukla joined politics after his retirement. Madhu associated herself with several NGOs and is a well-known social activist.

Event was a big media affair; many celebrities and activists associated with green cause congratulated me for the success. As the event came to an end, I headed towards one secluded lobby of the hotel to catch a few breaths; I am an ageing man now after all. An

elegant lady, wearing a crisp cotton Sari looking radiant with her short salt-&-pepper hairs smiled at me. God! It was Madhu!

Disappearance of long tresses was a disappointment for me barring the fact that she looked more beautiful than how she looked in her prime age.

“How are you?”

“I am good.”

I felt shortage of words at first.

Then I asked about Mr. Shukla and she told me that he left for heavenly abode five years back. She asked me about my wife and children. I had wanted to ask about her children, clearly remembering the reason for Mr. Shukla's second marriage. A ringing interrupted my thoughts as she excused herself to take the call.

“Yes, it went very well. Waiting in the left-wing lobby. See you.”

Five minutes later, a young couple approached us and smiled at her. She introduced him as her only progeny, her son Ansh and his wife Anu.

She got up from the comfy sofa leaving me sinking with my weight. I followed as the young man extended his hand towards me.

“I admire you so much Sir! You are my role model.” He said in a single breath.

“I am honored! What do you do young man?”

“I am an automobile engineer working as an assistant manager in.....”

I could not hear him fully, too captivated by his so familiar mannerism and expressions.

As they moved towards the main gate, a sense of abandonment hovered over me. I could no longer stand the melody of pitter-patter falling against the transparent glass wall. As I left in my luxurious big sedan, I felt hollow and miserable against her enormous self. My phone beeped pulling me back into my world. It was my wife.

“ Would you like to have chicken Biryani for dinner tonight?”