

SHORT STORIES

THE CONCLUSION

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PART I

Apurbakrishna is on his way home from Calcutta with his newfangled B.A. degree.

The river is narrow and tends to dry up after the rainy season. But it is mid-August and it is full to the brim, its water kissing the foundation of the village's fencing and the earth beneath the bamboo thicket.

The sky is cloudless and the sun has shone brightly after days of deluge.

If we could peek into the mind of Apurbakrishna sailing on that boat we would have seen a similar sight, for his soul-river is full to the brink, glimmering and laved.

The boat moors at the jetty. The concrete roof of Apurba's home is visible through the trees. He hadn't informed anyone of his arrival. So there is no one to receive him at the riverside. The boatman comes forward to help Apurba with his luggage but Apurba motions him and takes the bag himself and disembarks quickly. There's a spring in his step.

The moment he gets down Apurba slips and falls on the slippery mud with his bag. As he falls, the shore erupts with a melodious high-pitched laughter startling the birds on the nearby banyan tree.

A visibly embarrassed Apurba regains poise and looks about himself. He spies a girl seated on a pile of fresh bricks unloaded from the money lender's boat, in splits of laughter.

He knew her as Mrinmayee, the daughter of their new neighbor. They had a home far away by a walloping river and had migrated here two or three years back when their river banks breached.

Her name had been associated with an amount of infamy. The menfolk called her moonstruck, but the wives of the village were worried sick by her feral disposition. She always played with the boys and looked down upon the lasses no end and she came across like a free-booting Maratha cavalry upon the village kids.

Her boldness stemmed from her father's indulgences and her mother never missed an opportunity to complain about this to her own friends. But Mrinmayee's mother

never hurt her feelings mindful of her expat husband's affection for his daughter and how he could not stand to see her cry.

Mrinmayee is dark-skinned. Her somewhat short curls stroke her back. She has a boyish countenance and her two dark fulsome eyes betray neither modesty, nor fear, nor dalliance. She is tall, able-bodied, healthful and strong, but no one thinks twice about her age, for if they did they would have found fault with her parents for not marrying her off. When perchance a feudal lord from a far off place arrives in his boat, the villagers get all worked up and women who happen to be at the river bank draw veils over their faces like a set of curtains hanging down to the ends of their nares. Mrinmayee nevertheless rushes to the riverside holding a naked child, waltzing her curls over her back and observes the new arrival with curiosity like a fearless fawn of a land sans hunters and predators and finally returning to her own band of boys gives an elaborate account of the nuances of this newly-arrived creature.

Our Apurba has looked upon this free spirit on several prior occasions during his vacations and has meditated on her not only in his leisure but at other times as well. Each day we come across so many faces, but a few of them manage to plant themselves right inside our minds. And that is not just by virtue of beauty, they have some attendant talent. I suppose that talent is lucidity. Human nature fails to mirror itself amply in most faces. But the face that abundantly draws out the mystic cave-dwelling inner being is most noticeable and forthwith leaves its mark on the observer's mind. A romping nonconforming feminine nature bespeaks itself and pulsates unceasingly in the eyes and aspect of this girl like a swift free-roaming wild antelope and makes her vibrant face unforgettable.

Readers, it goes without saying that however mellifluous Mrinmayee's frolicking laughter may have sounded it made our hapless Apurba feel awkward. He quickly handed over his bag to the boatman and made for his home, red-faced.

The frame-up was near-perfect. Riverside, overshadowed by trees, birds singing, the morning sun, of twenty years age; agreed that the pile of bricks wasn't as much praiseworthy but the personage who occupied that seat pleasantly cast her grace on its hard arid constitution. Alas, what can be more ironical than this twist of fate from poetry to the downright burlesque at the very first step.

PART II

Apurba reached his home walking along a path shaded by trees with an earful of that laughter emanating from the summit over the pile of bricks, his shawl and luggage daubed in mud.

Apurba's unexpected arrival gladdened his widowed mother. At once servants were sent out far and near to fetch dense sweetened milk, yogurt and rohu and the neighborhood was abuzz.

After dining, Apurba's mother broached the topic of his marriage. Apurba was all prepared for it for such a topic had been broached earlier too. Just that the son in question had courted neoteric ways and vowed not to wed till he obtained his bachelor's degree in arts. His mother had been patient so long owing to this reason, and so he had no more excuses left.

Said Apurba, "It will be decided after I meet the girl" to which his mother replied, "We have seen the girl, don't trouble yourself with that." Apurba was quite eager to trouble himself with that and said, "I won't marry a girl without first meeting her." What unheard of outlandish nonsense thought the mother but she gave in nonetheless.

That night, as Apurba put out the lamp and retired, he lay awake cloistered in his bed and a free-flowing melodious high-pitched laughter seemed to fill his ears from across the sounds and silence of the rainy night. And his mind tormented itself looking for a way to prevent his foot from slipping in the morning's incident. The girl did not even get an opportunity to know that I, Apurbakrishna have assimilated considerable learning, have lived in Calcutta city for a long time and despite having somehow slipped on slippery ground and fallen over, I am no ordinary village youth to be laughed at scornfully.

The following day Apurba is all set to visit a prospective bride. The place is not far, their home is situated in the neighborhood. He dresses up going for a silken gown, a roundish turban, and a pair of varnished shoes and a silken umbrella, instead of his habitual loincloth and shawl and sets out in the morning.

The moment he steps into his prospective in-laws' house they crowd around him to give him a grand welcome. At long last, the nervous girl is brought before the groom all painted and polished and wrapped in a colorful sari made of fine cloth, her hair done up with brocaded cloth. She sits silently at a corner bringing her head somewhat close to her knees and an aged servant-woman appears behind her to provide encouragement. A kid brother of the prospective bride observed the turban, watch guard and even the newly-grown beard of this intruder to their family. Apurba stroked his mustache for some time and finally asked in a demure tone, "What do you study?" The pyramid of modesty clad in cloth and ornaments did not answer. Following a few repetitions of the question and after much patting from the servant the girl answered softly and swiftly without stopping to breathe, "Elegant Reader—Part Two, The Essence of Bengali Grammar—Part One, An Account of Geography, Arithmetic, The History of India." At that moment there was some commotion outside and in an instant Mrinmayee entered the room running and panting, her locks swinging freely. She started pulling the bride's brother Rakhal by his arm without even glancing at Apurbakrishna. Rakhal was engrossed in his observation and refused to get up. The servant started censuring Mrinmayee as severely as possible without screaming. Apurbakrishna mustered as much demureness and glory as he possibly could and sat tall with his turban-clad head and stroked his watch guard close to his belly. Unable to persuade her companion, Mrinmayee slapped his back and quickly pulled the veil off the bride's face before running out. The servant growled at her and Rakhal starting laughing seeing his sister's veil suddenly removed. He had no grievance at being slapped on the back, being used to these kinds of exchanges. In fact in the past Mrinmayee's hair was long enough to cover half of her back and it was Rakhal who had stuck a pair scissors into it. As this happened, Mrinmayee herself snatched the scissors and mercilessly cut off a considerable length of her long hair in a fit of anger. Her locks fell to the ground like a heap of dark grapes. These were the terms of their child's play.

Hereafter this silent examination did not last long. The girl who was the heap of modesty rose laboriously and returned to the inner chambers of the house assisted by the servant. Apurba got up content in his demureness and stroking his faint mustache. But when he arrived at the exit door, he found his varnished pair of shoes missing and none could tell where they were.

This greatly embarrassed the hosts who were therefore very vocal in their criticism of the offender. After a failed search Apurba was forced to borrow a pair of old oversized worn-out shoes belonging to the host and headed for home walking gingerly on the muddy village road neatly dressed in his pantaloons, gown and turban.

When he reached the pondside, he once again heard that abundant high-pitched laughter. It was as if the lighthearted lady of the forest suddenly could not help laughing at Apurba's incongruous footwear.

Apurba stopped abruptly and looked around himself unobstructed when all of a sudden the shameless offender emerged from the dense foliage and took to her heels after placing his shoes before him. But Apurba swiftly grabbed her arms and took her captive.

Mrinmayee twisted and turned and did her best to free herself but could not. Reflected sunlight shone on her amused mischievous and rotund face surrounded by her curly hair, from beyond the branches. Just as a curious traveler bends down to gaze intently at the bottom of a clear stream brightened by sun-rays, Apurba looked deep into Mrinmayee's upturned face and her two restless eyes reminiscent of lightning and gradually released his grasp as if failing in his responsibility by letting go of his prisoner. Had Apurba thrashed Mrinmayee, she would not have been the least surprised, but she could not fathom the meaning of this gentle comeuppance in the middle of a secluded road.

And the restless laughter seemed to fill the skies like the jingling of anklets of prancing nature. Apurbakrishna returned home slowly, engrossed in thought.

PART III

All day long Apurba fought shy of his mother on various pretexts and did not enter the inner chambers of their home. He had an invitation and lunched there. It isn't easy to savvy why an educated reserved and thoughtful individual like Apurba

would torment himself so much trying to recover his lost grandeur, to fully lay out his inner glory in the eyes of a plebeian lass. What does it matter what a crazed rustic girl thinks of him. What has he to lose if for a moment she considers him laughable and on the next she goes out to play with a dull illiterate child named Rakhal, oblivious of him. What need has he to prove to her that he is a literary critic associated with a monthly named A Lamp to the World and that his possessions include perfumes, shoes, Rubini's camphor, colored stationery, a book named Learning to Play the Harmonium and a filled up notebook waiting to be published like the morning sun waiting in the night's womb. But it is difficult to argue with feelings and therefore Apurbakrishna Roy, B.A. refused to be vanquished by this loony village girl.

Apurba entered the inner chambers of his home in the evening and his mother asked him, "Well Apu, what do you think of the girl? Don't you like her?"

Apurba replied somewhat boldly, "Yes Ma, I have seen the girls, and I like one of them."

Surprised, she says, "How many girls did you meet!"

After plenty of stalling it transpired that her son wishes to wed Mrinmayee, the daughter of their neighbor, Sarat. What an outcome of so much education!

Apurba was initially quite shy but when his mother objected to his choice vehemently, he displayed resoluteness saying that if she didn't allow him to wed Mrinmayee, he wouldn't wed at all. The more he tried to think of the other girl who looked and behaved like an inanimate puppet is the emptier the prospect of getting married appeared to him.

After two or three days of arguments, fasts and lost sleep, Apurba prevailed over his mother. His mother consoled herself thinking Mrinmayee is just a little girl whose mother lacks the capacity to educate her and that she herself would successfully counsel her daughter-in-law to eschew her wayward ways. She also convinced herself that Mrinmayee had a pretty face. But when she achieved this her heart filled up with despair as she came across Mrinmayee's short hair in her train of thought, but she hoped that this too could be corrected by the application of hair oil and by tying up her hair tightly into a bun.

THE CONCLUSION

The neighbors termed this choice a wonderful choice, the groom's name meaning wonderful. Many of them loved Mrinmayee, loony as she was, but none of them would be willing to have her as a daughter-in-law.

Mrinmayee's father, Ishan Majumdar was informed in good time. He worked as a clerk for a steamer company at a far-away station by a river bank and his job involved selling tickets and supervising the loading and unloading of goods which he did from a tiny cottage with a tin roof.

Teardrops descended from his eyes as he received news of his Mrinmayee's wedding proposal and it is impossible to tell what proportion of his tears stemmed from the apprehension that he would miss his daughter or which ones were the teardrops of joy.

Ishan requested his employer abroad for leave but the latter regarded it as a thing of no consequence and refused him. So he requested that the wedding be deferred till the festival of worshipping goddess Durga when he was likely to get a week's leave anyway. But Apurba's mother was unwilling to wait and she decided that the wedding would have to take place in that very month, there being an auspicious date.

When both his prayers were refused, Ishan cheerlessly continued in his role of weighing goods and selling tickets.

Thereafter Mrinmayee's mother and all the elderly women in the village took to counseling her on her future duties day in and day out. And they very successfully gave the whole affair a monstrous mien by severely discounting sporting ability, swift movement, laughter, the habit of playing with boys and eating according to one's appetite. And Mrinmayee was ill at ease wondering whether she had been awarded a life sentence with a death sentence to be executed following the completion of the former.

She stepped back like a wild pony and insisted, "I won't marry."