

It's You!



Shankar

short stories by
Subhashish Bhadra

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I'd never felt emptiness as I felt it that day. Sitting in the room, the AC's wheezing the only sound. I wanted to scream, to run, to jump, to hit myself, to kill someone; I just wanted to escape my own life. All of a sudden, my life seemed like one not worth living; the burden of expectations felt like a noose around my neck. I wished I hadn't been what I was; I wished I was less successful.

I'll tell you an analogy to make my situation simpler to understand. We live in a capitalist world, right? And yet we don't quite understand it, or feel it, till we're much older, and by when we've become so entrenched in the system that its survival is in our interest. Similarly, while growing up, I never felt something in my life was amiss. I did well academically, I was the proverbial 'good boy', my parents were happy with me, I had lots of friends, and a very dear brother. It won't occur to a child what he can demand, right? I can't blame my parents either; they saw me happy, so why would they want to change anything? I didn't question why *success* should be the *raison-d'etre* of my life. I won't bore you with the details of my life, but I hope you get the general picture.

So, running this race, I entered College. It was the first time that I got to stay away from my parents; and oh boy, was it exciting! I was freed from constant scrutiny. As long as I kept scoring well (which I did), I wasn't answerable to anybody. There were so many 'friends' around me, that I didn't have to care much about offending them – after all, if one went, another would come right in to replace him. I came to

College with an open mind to experience everything in life, and I was raring to go.

First, of course, came the alcohol. I'd grown up being told how terrible alcohol is – how it makes people behave irrationally. But this time, I *wanted* to behave irrationally. Alcohol is amazing, especially when you want to do things and not have to take responsibility for them. I remember my first time with alcohol quite vividly.

'Oye Shankar! Go easy, man' Anurag said when I picked up my fourth glass of beer. Chilled beer in the Delhi heat – bliss!

'I'm barely feeling anything. I can take more' I said valiantly.

'Dude, it's going to hit you all at once. You should drink slowly.' By then, I had already gulped down the glass 'Oh man! You're going down today!' Anurag shrieked.

'If you really want to feel it, beer won't help' Sid said, sipping on a bottle himself. He kept the bottle on the floor, got off the bed and went to the cupboard. There, from under a layer of winter clothing, he took out a bottle of

'Vodka shots!' he exclaimed 'Let's get piss drunk, guys!'

'I'm out of it' Anurag said 'I'm happy with beer.'

‘What about you, kiddo?’ Sid said, keeping the bottle in front of me.

‘Open it’ I said sternly.

He smiled, and then he opened the bottle. ‘I have shot glasses. Wait, I’ll just get them’ he said.

He went back to his cupboard. But I wasn’t interested in holding back. At that time, I wanted to experience the highest possible level of drunkenness.

I took the bottle and started gulping it.

‘Oh bhai!’ Sid exclaimed on seeing me. Anurag lunged forward, and took the bottle from my hands. My lower lip got slightly bruised in the melee. A bit of my blood dropped into the bottle, which was only half full now.

‘*Saala* ... Do you want to die today!’ Anurag said.

‘Seriously! You wasted one entire bottle just like that!’ Shankar said, examining what was left of the alcohol.

Finally, I felt a strange sensation within me – the sensation I’d been waiting for. It felt as if a lot of blood was pumping into my brain, and my heartbeat felt faster. I leaned forward on the edge of the bed; and then I fell off the bed.

'Out ho gaya!' Sid laughed, sitting back on the bed, and taking the vodka bottle in his hand 'I'm going to drink this. I hope you don't have AIDS.'

I didn't reply; I lay on the bed, watching the fan in its ceaseless motion. The fan, and the faded white roof – slowly, slowly disappearing.

Next morning, I woke up on a bed, clad only in my underwear. I turned to the side, and realised that I was back in my room. I sat up, trying to remember what happened last night. Then suddenly, like an great uncontrollable river, my throat swelled up and I vomited.

A highly viscous mix of alcohol and some food now lay on the bed. I quickly tried to get off the bed, but as soon as I put both my feet on the ground, I fell flat. The effort just didn't seem worth it, so I lay there on that dirty floor of my room. My head was beginning to feel heavy.

I stay there for over an hour with my eyes wide open, before Anurag came into the room.

"Oh fuck! What have you done!" he screamed.

"Don't ask" I said "I can barely get up myself."

"Arre yaar! Who asked you to drink that much?"

“Yeah, dude. Never again” I said, looking at the ceiling “Now will you give me a hand to get me back up?”

“You mean that hand dipped in puke?”

“Shut up and just help”

So I got up, bathed somehow. Then I came back to my room, turned the mattress around and slept on it for the rest of the day. When I woke up in the evening, the hangover started fading. So I decided to go out on campus for a walk.

I walked through the mess corridor, noticing the beautifully carved arches for the first time. Then out to the front of the College, taking rounds of the lawns. I took off my shoes, and walked on the slightly wet grass barefoot. Then I sat under one of the lights.

“Hey”

I turned. It was Arushi, my friend. “Hey,” I smiled at her.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“No, sure. Please have a seat.”

She sat down on the grass next to me. “Why didn’t you come to class today?” She began playing with the grass, uprooting it slowly and making a pile of grass at one place.

“Was a little hungover from last night”

“Ah yes, I heard”

I turned around and looked at her “You did?”

“I suppose the entire class knows. You didn’t expect Sid of all people to be hush-hush about it, did you?” she said “Anyway, how is your head doing”

“What about my head?”

She stopped her play with the grass, and held my chin with her hand. She turned my face, in the manner of an examination. Then she brought forward her other hand ...

“Ouh!” I felt a sharp pain near in my head.

“Just a bit of a clot, it seems. Nothing serious” she said, taking her hands away.

I touched the point myself, more warily however. “Wow! I didn’t notice this till now.”

“Shankar said you hit your head against the window when you fell in the bathroom last night” she said, resuming her grass play.

“Hm”

“Aren’t you curious why you were in the bathroom?”

“Puking?” I asked.

“Well, that too” she laughed “But Sid said you started crying really loud, so they had to take you away from the rooms to avoid waking up people.”

“What? Me? Crying? Why?”

“Ask Sid. This is all that he told me.” She looked at her watch “I think I should be heading back now. My block door will be closing in some time.”

“I’ll come with you till your block”

“You should keep sitting and enjoy the breeze” she said, getting up and dusting the grass from her jeans. Then she walked off the lawns and out of sight, towards her block.

I stayed for another half an hour or so, and then went to Sid's room. It turns out that after I lost consciousness, I began to mumble something and then started crying all of a sudden. So those guys took me to the bathroom, but the exertion of being carried made my head spin and I vomited all over myself, and them. They tried to get me to bathe, but the moment they left me, I fell down and hurt my head. So they just took off my vomit-covered clothes and took me to my room and put me on my bed. Quite an adventure, eh?

So, that was that and then life moved on like nothing else happened. Classes went on fine, I studied intermittently, scored well and thus my parents kept off my back. It helped that unlike school where they understood maths, science and English, my graduation subjects were now well beyond them. Also, it wasn't hard to convince them that University-level education was tougher, and hence lower-scoring. The only thing they now understood was my class rank.

One fine day, when I happened to score quite low in one of the exams, I got tensed. I feared that my new-found freedom would suddenly be taken away from me.

Afterwards, in the mess, Anurag asked me "Wassup, dude? You seem tensed."

"The test" I said glumly.

"And you care because?"

“Mom and dad care.”

“So don’t tell them. Simple” he said.

“It’s not so simple. They’ll ask” I said “If I don’t keep feeding them some numbers from time to time, they start getting suspicious.”

“Then lie to them” he said nonchalantly “Not like they’re going to come to College to check.”

That was a little revelation. As I said, the process of questioning the *system* under which you’ve been living your life is quite insightful. Lying to my parents about my results wasn’t a bad idea – after all, they’d be happy and so would I; and it’s not like those marks counted for much anyway.

That evening, I had a very pleasant conversation with my parents. My mom called, asked me what I had for breakfast, for lunch, for snacks and what I planned to have for dinner. Then about what I did all day, when I slept, when I woke up, whether I took a bath, which soap I used ... okay, the last one was a bit of an exaggeration. Then it came to the classes, teachers and tests. Then I said that I have to return to my books, and it was over then. A smooth conversation where I just had to say either ‘Hm’, ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. Not telling mom my real marks saved me well over fifteen minutes of conversation.

College, I believe, is a time when we deal with the world under the *assumption* that we know how to do so. It is that brief time when we're too big for our shoes – when we're raring to go change or conquer the world, but know very little about the world itself. I too had wrong ideas about what mattered and what did not. *Success* was not only an ambition, it had become an addiction – a part of the system that I no longer questioned.

“You have to look at Mark’s CV to believe it! I’m just so glad he’s a senior, and not in our batch!” I said on the way to the market near College.

“Really? What has he done that’s enough to surprise you?” Anurag asked.

“National topper, violinist, club President, scholarships etc. etc. ... Oh, yes, and just the very fact that he comes across as so smart.”

“I won’t be surprised, Shankar, if by the end of College, you’d have surpassed him” he said.

For Anurag it was probably an off-hand comment that he wouldn’t remember an hour later. But for me, it was something that guided me for the rest of my college life. I saw it as destiny, *my* destiny, to be the best that my College had produced. I knew that in the larger scheme of things, being the *best* in a tiny College wasn’t a big thing; but I had an obsession with being the master of all that I surveyed.

To get somewhere, you have to do things; and very often, not pleasant things. It was the beginning of our second year in College already, and that is typically when student clubs appear to be important things.

“Did you hear?” Anurag came barging into my room while I was busy studying.

“What?”

“Sid is supporting the history guy for College President elections”. I left my studying for a moment, and leaned back.

Anurag continued “Apparently, the guy offered Sid the Secretary’s post if he wins. Isn’t that amazing? We’re going to have Sid as Secretary of the Union! We can get away with a lot of things!”

My roommate, Ram, jumped in “You think this history guy is going to win?”

“Of course he will!” Anurag said “Especially now that he has Sid on his side! Sid’s popularity with the juniors is already very high!”

I didn’t say anything. Just closed my eyes and imagined the future. The victorious Sid being hoisted on his supporter’s shoulders, him giving speeches on special occasions, the Principal calling him out for distinctive performance. Wait, it didn’t end there. Sid being the star of

our batch, landing all the top jobs, the best universities ... I couldn't allow that; just could not.

“You know what ...” I finally said “... the other candidate, that guy from physics, he'd asked me a couple of days back to support him.”

“So?” Anurag asked “I thought you weren't interested in the Union”

“I'm not” I clarified “But I don't think that the history guy is the right leader for our Union. Don't get me wrong ... I think both of them are quite stupid; but I'm just thinking of who is the lesser evil.”

“Then let's talk to Sid and get him to switch sides?”

“I don't see the point. That history chap has offered him a deal that our guy can't.”

In this way, my skirmishes with Sid started. I was as jealous of his success and popularity, as I was convinced of my *destiny* to be the best. That feeling anguished me so much that I spent the next two years slogging to come out victorious; and in all fairness, I did. I got admitted to the best universities and I got the top jobs.

The day I got the job, I should have realised something was amiss. Here I was, at the pinnacle of my success; but there was nobody who came to celebrate with me – a few congratulatory texts, and nothing more. Anurag was busy preparing for job interviews the next day and

with Sid I had already burned my bridges. I sat alone, in a defiant self-congratulatory mood, in my room. At night, my phone rang.

“I sent you a text!” Arushi screamed at the other end.

“Yes. Thanks a lot!” I said.

“You don’t sound too happy. What’s wrong?”

“No, I’m fine. Just a little tired with the interviews.”

“Is that it? Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes” I insisted “Anyway, I think I should sleep now. I’ll see you in class tomorrow” I said as I kept the phone.

A few minutes later, I received a text from her – “Congratulations again. You’ve been an inspiration to me, and several other guys around here. Many of us here care about your happiness, and you should be happy; if not for yourself, then for them.”

And yet, I’d never felt emptiness as I felt it that day. Sitting in the room, the fan’s chirping the only sound- I wanted to scream, to run, to jump, to hit myself, to kill someone; I just wanted to escape my own life. All of a sudden, my life seemed like one not worth living; the burden of expectations felt like a noose around my neck. I wished I

hadn't been what I was; I wished I was more selfish and less successful.

I hated my job, my life. But I couldn't do something else, because it would be a 'downgrade' for me. Given my success, people expected me to earn a lot, to be climbing the corporate ladders quickly. A part of me wanted to scream 'no!' and escape that world, but the other part – the more worldly part of me – quickly put on a façade and carried on. That very freedom that seemed so precious while in College was now lost!

I cried that day. Cried my guts out. I listened to some old Bollywood songs of love and redemption. In an alien land, among people I didn't know but was now supposed to work with, far away from those who anchored my life – I was lonely!

The next day, my boss asked me “You look exceptionally glum. Is everything alright with you?”

“Yes, just feeling a bit out of sorts.”

“Hmmm...” he contemplated “... it's been a long time since you've been stationed here. Why don't you take a couple of days off and go visit your folks? Will help cheer you up!”

To him, he must have sounded helpful. To me, it sounded as if he was doubting my ability to work in harsh conditions. “No, I’ll be fine” I politely said and refused the offer.

The work got tougher, the hours got longer – and to top it all, I didn’t enjoy what I was doing. It was only the money at the end of the month, and the reputation that my company provided, that kept me going; or at the very least made me happy on some days.

One day, at midnight, when returning from work with the rest of my team, my old cellphone rang. It was unusual for someone to call me on my College number. I scouted for it in my bag. It was Anurag.

“Hey, wassup?” I said.

“Long time, man! Where the fuck have you disappeared?”

“Work. Just a lot of work.”

“Everyone has work, dude. But everyone doesn’t stop talking to old friends. Anyway, where are you? Which city now?”

I felt angry, violated, at the suggestion that everyone was in my condition. Not everyone I knew was working as much as I was; and some were in a genuinely happier place. Sid was abroad, studying and enjoying himself – still basking in the lightness of student life. Anurag himself was enjoying working at his family business. It seemed kind of

unfair too – I'd worked the hardest, achieved the most; and yet I was the unhappiest of the three of us.

“Hello? Shankar, you there?”

I didn't feel like talking to him anymore. I just cut the call, switched off the number and kept it back in the bag.

“Fighting with your girlfriend?” my boss muttered.

“No. Nothing like that”

Then there was silence. Nobody to either pester me about a hypothetical girlfriend or to genuinely enquire on what is wrong. My sadness was gathering force with each passing day.

We reached our guesthouse soon enough. “We're heading for a drink, Shankar. I'm assuming that you'll head to your room like always?”

“No. Will join you guys.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

I drank that night. Glass after glass, bottle after bottle. I was trying to escape.

“It’s great spending time with you guys after a hard day’s work” my boss said.

I nodded.

“I also wanted to let you guys know before I tell others at office. This is going to be my last month with the company.”

“What? Why?” my colleague asked.

“I’m just very tired.”

“Then why don’t you take a few weeks, maybe months off?” he asked.

“As long as I keep doing something I don’t like, I’ll feel tired” he said “and I realised that I might be spending the prime years of my life doing things that don’t completely interest me; and by the time I muster the courage to do something else, it might be too late. I don’t want to regret anything later.”

I don’t remember where the conversation went after that. I remember waking up in the morning, with a note lying on my bed.

We’ve left for work. You ended up in bad shape last night; take the day off today. Call us if you need anything!

It's now been a week since that night; almost a year since I started working. I am typing away furiously at this story even as I'm contemplating ending my life. But then, I keep going back to those who've loved and encouraged me – Anurag, my parents, Arushi. I don't know if I can redeem myself after spurning their love so explicitly. Today, I'm going to either end my life, or I'm going to quit this rat-race and go back to a simple life where I'm not *destined* to be exceptional. Where I won't have to answer questions on why I quit such a good job. Where I won't fear the ridicule that people will shower me with. I want to escape this vicious cycle that I've grown up in – with every success I've had, I've been increasingly fearful of failure. I want to have passion like fire, flow freely like water, melt like wax, sing like the wind. This cycle will break today – either in my resignation, or my death. I want to be reborn. Either way, it's going to be the end of Shankar as the world has known me.

Adios!