

It's You!

Volume II



Sajal

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It's You!

By Subhashish Bhadra

I am the man you walk past on the street every day; yes, the same one who you don't take any note of. You walk past me as if I were invisible. If we bump into each other accidentally, the greatest acknowledgement that I can expect from you is a 'sorry', never would you turn to me and look me in the eye while saying it. But I should be fair to you. Life is a difficult journey and you have too much going on in your life; your mind is constantly buzzing – sometimes with regret, which turns to anger; sometimes with hope that vanishes into a haze of disappointment; maybe love that transitions to heartbreak; from the ethereal to the financial, from the profound to the trivial – you are too busy with the matters of your own life to notice me. Who cares if I too have a story to tell; a story that might have interested you had you bothered to listen?

I am twenty eight; live in a rented apartment in Gurgaon with two other 'friends' about who I know scant little. Every morning, I get up at six to go out and run before the city wakes up and a cloud of pollution and dust descends on the millennium city. That I was once chased by a stray pig was the most remarkable thing that had ever happened to me; but I suppose that for residents of Gurgaon, that isn't necessarily a special occasion. Anyway, I return home at seven-thirty sharp, drenched in sweat mixed with dust. I take a quick shower, eat the food cooked by the maid (I have not spoken to her in the two years she has been working with us, but God bless her for her dedicated service) and get ready for work. My *wonderful* work hours are preceded by a few minutes of verbal sparring with the autorickshaw driver; the most challenging task of my day is to try and bring him to come down to

‘only’ double the metered rate; I have succeeded eight times in two years. Not bad! Moving on, I land up at office, and like sheep being led to the butcher, we take the elevator up the swanky multi-storeyed building, enter our office and take our place at our desks. Then, we receive commands through the day and execute them at a pace that would put Usain Bolt to shame! Sometimes at office, I day-dream. I recollect all those Bollywood movies I see where the hero and the heroine bump into each other while taking a coffee break. I walk over to the coffee vending machine. The heroine of my life isn’t ever waiting for me there; all that greets me is the sight of dust, traffic, ramshackle houses and pigs outside the gates of our complex; and of movie theaters, coffee shops and a big new mall on *our* side of the gate. Dejected, I return to my desk. Work usually ends at ten, the company cab drops us home and I retire immediately to my bed. Oh, I forgot the dinner waiting for me at home. My flatmate ‘friends’ tell me that our *invisible* maid cooks very good dinners; I wouldn’t know, since our dustbin eats more of that food than I do.

I could tell you more details about my ordinary existence – as my boss puts it, ‘to the next level of detail.’ But I guess you aren’t interested in it. Actually, when was the last time you were *genuinely* interested in the stories your next-door neighbour told? You probably were, but only when the stories evoked some feeling – jealousy, pity, desire or hope – in *you*. Accept it. It has always been about *you* and the way you feel. If the story didn’t make you feel a certain way, you probably wouldn’t spend a minute of your life listening to it. I have a little story too, but am not sure how you’ll respond to it. Will it make you dislike me? Or

maybe respect me? What if you don't agree with what I did? Or worst, what if you are indifferent? That would truly be the worst, but thankfully I will never know.

In this story, I take a day off work. Yes, the corporate machine finally breaks down. I realised that my motherboard (or did the old people call it 'soul') needed some repairs. I woke up in the morning, and I switched off the alarm and went back to sleep. I got up at ten, and saw about two dozen missed calls from colleagues at work. Thankfully, my boss hadn't called. He probably didn't even realise I wasn't there – we were all replaceable machines anyway. It was a sunny winter day, and I felt like I should head out. Not to the malls that had mushroomed around Gurgaon like wild trees; but instead head out to Delhi. Somewhere where I could be alone, far from the maddening crowd. So, I took the metro and landed up at the *Purana Quila*, the old fort.

Tourists had just started flocking to the zoo that was right next to the fort. Children grabbing the fingers of their fathers, some of them perched on their shoulders. How I wish, sometimes, that I had never grown up. Anyway, I made my way through that crowd and landed up at the entrance for the fort. Expectedly, there weren't too many people waiting to enter the ruins. I bought a ticket (cheap for Indians, expensive for foreigners), and made my way under a beautifully done gate to enter the fort. The monuments inside were in much better condition than the absolutely ruined ramparts outside. But I had been to the fort earlier, so I took no pleasure in looking at the monuments again. I made my way, through a narrow passage, to the top of the

ramparts. In the distance, I could see the tomb of Emperor Humayun, its marbled dome and red sandstone body attracting far more tourists than this patch of near-wilderness. There were other structures near the tomb. Some of those individuals would have been part of the elite back then. But today, they are like me – ordinary. Nobody cares about them, and nobody cares about me. I felt better about myself.

I stared into the vast expanse of Delhi spreading around me, till as far as my eye could see. Somewhere in the distance would be the *Qutab Minar*, one of the highest stone minarets of the world. Perhaps on a clear day, I could have even seen it from here. Or maybe the *Quwwat-ul-Islam* mosque, the first mosque in the subcontinent, built on the ruins of hundreds of Hindu and Jain temples? On one side, the India Gate would adorn the heart of central Delhi, a reminder of our selfless service to our British masters in their hypocritical pursuit of freedom elsewhere and subjugation here. Then the colonies of Lajpat Nagar and Chittaranjan Park, with some wise old heads that still bear the scars of the partition. And then somewhere, statues of Gandhi and Nehru, exhorting the countrymen to greatness. Somewhere, someone protesting against the government. I felt like an ordinary, inconsequential part of a very extraordinary city. If I had died there that day, nobody would have taken notice. One out of over a dozen million. Who cares!

My solitude was disturbed by the sound of someone coming up the same passageway I came up through. At first, I could only see a head – the hair gleaming in the sun, neatly done in a bun at the back of the

head. There was vermillion in the parting of the hair. Then the face. Old, round, with lots of *kajal* black around the eyes. It would have been a very pretty face, I suppose, had the tears not smudged the *kajal* so much. Panting, the woman pulled her body to the top of the rampart. She was clutching at something in her hands, and wiping her tears with the back of her closed fist. She stood at the edge of the ramparts, a few metres away from me. I guess she too looked through me; not once did she turn towards me and wonder who else would have climbed to the top. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then, almost as suddenly as she appeared, she jumped off the rampart.

Her body landed with a thud, and I can assure you that I felt the ramparts shake. I was shocked, and kept staring at where she had been standing. It was probably for a few seconds that I was frozen, but so many incomprehensible thoughts came to my mind at the same time. I was awakened by the babble of voices coming from below me. I looked down to see over twenty people gathering around the body of the woman. Her head was bleeding profusely; there was no way she was going to survive this. I regained my senses and quickly withdrew, so that I could not be seen by those people. For all I know, they would think that I pushed the old lady and would hand me over to the police. Or worse, dish out some ‘justice’ to me before handing me over. As I lay flat on the ramparts, planning my next move, my heart was pounding faster than it did on any of my runs. Like a lizard, I started crawling to the entrance of the passage to take me downstairs and then out of this God-forsaken fort. But as I took my first few steps, I felt something in my hands. It was a piece of paper, folded but crushed. I

opened it and saw something written down in a very beautiful cursive handwriting. It must have been what the woman was clasping in her hands! I was in possession of a dead woman's suicide note. My heart beat, and my self-worth, went up. Now I was too involved in the case to get up and leave. So I sat cross-legged, still out of sight of the people down there, and started reading what the woman had written.

Dear Amit,

First things first. I have cooked dinner for you, and have kept it packed in three containers in the fridge. Take it out, heat it in the microwave and have it. If you need pickle, I had bought a new jar yesterday and it is in the cupboard right above the microwave. From tomorrow, I have asked the maid to cook for you for a month or so. Beyond that, you should learn to cook! Till when will you depend on someone else to do it for you?

By the time this letter reaches you, I would probably be gone from this world. I know you will be very upset about it, but I hope you understand that what I did was the best for both you and me. A flower can enliven a room with its fragrance; but a wilting flower has nothing to offer to this world. It is a reminder of a past glory, and a morbid future. I was being sad, and making you sad too. It is best I leave. You will struggle for a few days, but remember -

the sun may have set, yet by the shadow of stars you'll find your way.

This was a difficult decision. I have lived the most wonderful life, and in no small measure because of you. Do you remember the first time we met, on that bus to my college? Whenever you were back in the city from your army school, you used to sit on that last seat with your gang of boys, and I was right at front with my girls. I never liked your friends much, but you were always the perfect gentleman! Like a lotus in the midst of all that muck. And then how we once talked when my friend had fainted in the heat and you helped us get her to the hospital? And then those countless walks around Mehrauli, Red Fort, Hauz Khas and India Gate? And then when you asked me to marry you at the Purana Quila? Remember how much I had blushed then? It was the beginning of a new life, the most beautiful part of my life; and that is perhaps why I will go to Purana Quila to finish this existence. Because I want to soak in all those memories one last time. I want my last thoughts to be good, happy thoughts. And nothing makes me happier than those memories.

The first few years after marriage, they were bliss. Abhishek's birth, and the feeling of holding him in my arms – I can never forget that moment. Did I ever tell you

how wonderful a father you were to him? Always there to take care of him when I felt tired, always eager to get him whatever he wanted. I could see at that young age that Avi loved you so much.

But fate and nature are wild, untamed beasts. And try as hard as we did, there is no way that we could have escaped its ravages. Bad times spare none, Amit, and we were unlucky to have been in the path of bad fortune. Please do not blame yourself for whatever happened.

Nobody can change what has been written in our destiny, and Avi's suicide was just one of those things. I didn't tell you because I saw that you were equally (or more) in pain; but I used to wake up at nights and go out in the cold and cry. There is no pain in this world greater than the sight of your husband lighting your son's funeral pyre. I pray to God that no woman ever has to see that. We tried to move on, we tried everything we could to make peace with what had happened. But a part of me; rather, the most of me, remained stuck in that one moment. I could never extricate myself.

There is something I must tell you now, and you must promise not to blame yourself over this. Remember how we kept trying to figure out what lead Avi to do it? I had known all along. I wanted to tell you, but when I saw you

putting your life back together, I didn't have the courage to tell you. I saw that you had moved on well, and I didn't want to bring you back to that dark moment. I kept it within myself; but like a poison that keeps boiling within, it made my life miserable. I thought I was leading two lives – one that knew, and another that didn't. And I could never reconcile the two.

Avi loved you perhaps more than even I could. Remember how anxious he used to get when you refused to speak to him as punishment for his misdemeanours? So, when he realised that he's gay, he came and confessed to me. I, in a moment of infinite misfortune, told him that you would never accept him like that. Because I knew, and I still know, that a proud army man like you would never accept a son who was gay, or in your words a 'hijra'. I told him to give it time, I told him that maybe it was just a phase, and maybe he discovers an attraction to women eventually. I tried never to bring up that topic again, tried to pretend that he never told me, that he never happened. But as much as we try to swipe the dust under the carpets, when the rug is pulled, there will be a storm. Sometimes, he would try to talk to me about it. I would tell him to wait. I didn't realise that, instead, destiny had planned an infinite wait for me.

The guilt has been building up within me since then. How is it that I couldn't find enough love in me to love my son unconditionally? Why is it that I wanted him to be a certain way? Another part of me, the more rational one, argued that what I wanted was best for him and for the family. Society would have never accepted him like he was, and I didn't want our son to spend the rest of his life as an outcast from society. These gay people, I heard, often lead lonely and unfulfilled lives. They roam around those streets littered with broken hearts and broken promises. I didn't want my son to be like that.

A part of me blamed you, Amit. I knew that I could still fight this world for the sake of our son, my son. But I knew, and he knew, how you would react. You would have probably first hit him, then refused to talk to him for weeks (or months), and finally asked him to never come home from his college hostel. You would have still loved him; you would have probably parked your car outside his college gates and contemplated whether to go in and see him. But I know, and he knew, that your pride would eventually come in the way, and that you would turn around and come back. Your heart would ache for any news of him, but your pride would have never allowed you to ask me about him. You would not have mentioned his name in front of our relatives and friends, even if he fulfilled all the hopes we had about his career. He would

have become a bleeding sore on your heart that wouldn't have let you live in peace, neither let you die 'with honour.'

It is this conflict between the part of me that loved you, and the part that blamed you, that made my life over the last five years miserable. But today, I have finally resolved it. The part of me that loved you has won, Amit, and hence I am doing what is best for you. This letter will reach you, it will take you back to that moment five years back when you held his lifeless body in your arms. But I know you will get over it, because you will not have to see me every day. I would have reminded you of your guilt every day for the remainder of our lives. In me, you would have seen Avi ask you uncomfortable questions. With me gone, Amit, you have a chance to rebuild your life, and I am sure you will.

You have always been the stronger one. Perhaps a bit too strong for Avi.

Always yours,

Aarti

I kept the letter down. I felt connected, in a way I have still not been able to understand, to this family. It was like all these people suddenly

came to life. The woman was no longer just another middle-aged woman, she was Aarti. There was Abhishek and there was Amit. These were no longer just unknown names.

I don't know what stirred within me that day, how I could feel something (I still don't know *what* exactly I felt) for those people. I looked down at the piece of paper again. I stared at it for a couple of minutes. Then I tore it up, and let the breeze take away the shredded pieces of paper to the distant corners of Delhi.

Aarti was wrong. The people who have 'moved on' the best are often the ones whose hearts are still the most vulnerable. The men who walk with the masks of normalcy are the ones who hide souls that are the most scarred. Amit didn't need to know that he was, in any way, responsible for his son's and his wife's deaths. Not knowing would trouble him, but knowing would kill him. Aarti was gone anyway, so it didn't matter what her last words were. I was protecting my friend Amit here.

I know you don't agree with what I did. But I'll tell you something – I know them better than you do, and hence I made a decision that was best for everyone involved. In any case, I will go back to my ordinary life now, and you will never know who I am. As I said, I am the man you walk past on the street every day; yes, the same one who you don't take any note of. You walk past me as if I were invisible.

“Let’s go up there and see if she has left a suicide note” a voice called from below. I made a quick exit, back to my inconsequential existence.
