

The Cleanliness Drive

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I was supposed to see Asha Oberoi smiling at me as she used to do in college; yet the only thing that was looming before my eyes was the disgusting face of my boss DK with his python-like smile. Nobody has ever seen a python smile other than Ruskin Bond. Yet, sometimes a python and my boss melt into one and the same entity, as was happening now.

This wasn't expected to happen and I was supposed to have dreams that would make me happy, at least temporarily (like Asha Oberoi smiling at me); yet the cocaine tablet wasn't having any effect, although it did have a familiar taste. It was an experiment devised by Roy – he had procured three tablets of cocaine from somewhere and distributed them among Ravi, SP and myself. He wasn't to take one as he was there to note down the effects of cocaine on each one of us. Half an hour had elapsed and yet there wasn't any feel good sensation in me; only my boss and his thrashing during the past week were repeating themselves like the newsreels of *The World This Week*. Suddenly all my dreams got jumbled up by the shrill siren-like voice of Ravi breaking into his characteristic *Saharanpuri* abuses. Even he wasn't having happy dreams. Roy was busy meticulously noting down the barrage of abuses and other effects of cocaine on Ravi, when SP too joined in the cussing – and all of their volleys seemed to be targeted towards Roy. They had jointly discovered the fact that the tablet wasn't actually cocaine but an antacid tablet – and that we had been collectively duped off five hundred rupees for just three tablets of Gelusil.

The experiment was adjourned and was given a status of inconclusive, and we set off for the marketplace for the daily dose of eating junk food and watching girls, something that diverts our mind off the ordeals of the week and keeps us happy, at least temporarily.

It had been almost six months of our stay in this bachelor accommodation in Jorhat and we were gradually coming to terms with the ups and downs of life in this foothill city. Life had fallen in some sort of routine track, where, for the five days of a week, we got pounded daily by office work, fired by our bosses and bullied by our staff – and then, from Friday evening to Monday morning, did whatever we could to recuperate, rewind and replenish ourselves to bring our energy level up to a ground state. This cocaine experiment was part of that rehabilitation process that, however, had gone hopelessly awry.

Roy was probably in the most pathetic state among all of us. Throughout the week, he had been appointed as a duty officer to some foul-tempered senior visiting dignitary, and his basic job profile consisted of leading the said dignitary to the toilet, getting his dressing gown, finding out if his bed sheets had been ironed and explaining to people that this fellow wasn't smoking in a No Smoking Zone but just chewing a pipe devoid of any tobacco just to show off his importance. This he endured for the first three days of the week. Then, on the fourth day, he turned up in sunglasses reporting an attack of severe conjunctivitis and was

sent back immediately on forced leave. From then onwards he stayed at home, in a permanent sort of sulking mood, trying to figure out whether he should give up his job or tear up his M.Tech Diploma in Applied Geology from the University of Roorkee.

It was probably the effect of his downcast frame of mind that made Roy suddenly realize that our accommodation was in some sort of filthy state and that weekend should be spent to clean it up. It was true that our rooms were getting dirtier and dirtier by the day; it had ultimately reached a level that where even Roy – who had the privilege of being unanimously considered the dirtiest among us – had realized that the house was filthy enough to require cleaning. So, that evening at dinner, when he expressed his opinion about our house looking a bit dirty, everybody at the table felt that it really was high time to get our accommodation cleaned.

However, this was not the only factor that triggered our decision about tidying up. Also added to this realization were the orders of the retired major and landlord of our house who lived across the street. He had somehow firmed up a conclusion that it was easier for him to live in any “bloody battlefield than beside our damned house, and given any damn chance he would really pack his bags and head off to any damned war in any damned country rather than living across us as our damned neighbor”. Anyway, we cared a damn for him until he began accosting us on our way to and from office and lecturing us endlessly about the art of cleanliness, about how we lacked discipline, about how really and utterly hopeless we were, how our lifestyle was shattering his mental peace, and how given a chance he would set us straight within a day or two – and many other such things which were likely to make even a dead man get mad and bored and walk away from his grave. Fraught in all these sermons of discipline and cleanliness were also the age-old woes and anguish of an old, antique, primitive man that we were a generation wasted and rotten, and how things, so beautiful, principled and flawless in their time, were fast deteriorating, since our generation began.

The major was not alone. There was his dog, too, that added to our distress – a terrier or something like that, of a foreign pedigree with an eternally gloomy and sad face bearing an expression of perennial disgust about everything he saw around him. Somehow its looks had always appeared familiar to me although I could not place it properly to any particular individual. It was only on my last visit to a conference in Kolkata that I realized that my erstwhile guide in IIT also wore the same look in his face whenever I saw him.

Anyway, my guide may be left alone to rest in peace, but both the major and his dog shared a common dislike for us and never hesitated to express their displeasure whenever we met – only the dog did it in a more vocal and a more violent way. Every evening and probably in the early mornings too (we never got up that early to see early mornings) the dog took the major on his walk and on his way back relieved himself on our lawn and then barked aloud to declare his achievement. Anyway, this had continued on for quite some time without any apparent effect, until that evening, when things reached a flashpoint after we had to withstand a whole hour of the major’s gruesome and tiring lectures and his dog’s

disgusted looks, that left us with a lot of insights about our being hopelessly idle and utterly dirty and also a temporary loss of appetite for junk foods and watching girls.

The next morning was a Saturday and like all other mornings breakfast was a horrid affair of bread, butter and jam. The shop that provided us breakfast probably knew of no other edible configuration or incarnations of bread; sometimes it appeared that most likely we had the distinction of being the greatest end user of bread in Jorhat or probably Assam or perhaps the entire North-East India. Long ago, during our school days in St. Xavier's, it was mandatory for us to recite a prayer that went like "Our father in Heaven... Give us today our daily bread". Now, I am not a firm believer, but had never expected that these lines would turn such horribly true. Next time, if I were to be given a chance, I would ask to be allowed to recite it as "Give us today a different version of bread".

Anyway, the happenings of the previous day prompted us to conclude at breakfast that our house needed to be cleaned that weekend. However, right there was the most difficult part of it, to devise the means of cleaning it up. Nobody among us had any idea of cleanliness or had the experience of cleaning anything up including his own self and neither did we expect anybody among us to do such a thing. SP came up with an idea of a brainstorming session, in which everyone was to speak up about his ideas and plans of getting our house cleaned.

First it was Ravi's turn to storm his brain to get an idea, but this did not work out quite well. Ravi was in a particularly foul mood, as a result of the compounded effects of the major's lecture, the cocaine experiment, and a traffic policeman who had robbed him off two hundred rupees as a bribe to get away for pillion riding – considered illegal from a security point of view at that time – in the marketplace. So when we asked him about his ideas, the only output was in the form of very high quality expletives with particular reference to one's mother and sister, liberally aimed at everybody including us, his boss, the major, his dog, the traffic policeman, the prime minister of India, the president of US and everybody that came to his mind. He stopped only when he ran out of his stock of expletives and persons to direct them to. Although his brainstorming didn't get us anywhere in our cleanliness drive, it did acquaint us with a lot of abuses from around the world.

Subsequent to Ravi, it was Roy's turn to enlighten us with his ideas. Now Roy always dwelled in some abstract plane with a lot of ideas and philosophy, none of which were distinctly or distantly practical. Most of his cerebrations were spent on many important issues, like Ho Chi Min's policies regarding Viet-Nam, or how Hrittik Ghatak was a better film director than Satyajit Roy; he appeared to find it a bit demeaning to think about something as insignificant as cleaning up our house. This time though, he spoke confidently for half an hour about his methods of getting our house cleaned, none of which I could comprehend and am sure the others couldn't too. His speech or whatever was full of statistics, analogies and euphemisms, and appeared more like an address given on the floor of the UN General Assembly which very few people do understand but is always mandatory to clap. Here too, I was a bit tempted to clap at the end of Roy's elaborate and incomprehensible deliberations,

but then thought it more prudent to restrain myself as of now. At the end, however, Roy's ideas added very little to whatever Ravi had explained a few moments ago in his highly ornamental speech.

Anyway, after Roy it was my turn to express my ideas or whatever I thought of as a proper means of getting our house cleaned. This I found a bit difficult, the basic hindrance being that ideas never came to my mind unbidden and I found it too much complicated to think about anything when told to do so. Whenever I was persuaded to think about something, I suffered from a sudden and severe constipation of thoughts and thus always depended on others to think something for me. In other words I preferred to outsource my thinking facilities. However, given that now I had to think and say something, I pretended to do so but found it was not easy, and hence gave up after a few moments. Since I was required to say something, I took the safest way out and said that I fully agreed with what Roy had said and I was also actually thinking on similar lines. As expected, nobody seemed to bother about my thoughts, and it was all left to SP to think and get a proper way out of our cleaning problem.

SP was the best thinker among us; he would cautiously, logically and methodically think out everything and then give us a very elementary solution, which most of the time turned horribly wrong. Well, that's a different issue altogether, but at present he did come up with the solution that we needed a cleaning lady to clean up our house. This seemed a good idea, and Roy added that whatever he meant to convey with his half-an-hour idea was actually what SP had proposed; and since I had agreed with Roy earlier, I agreed with SP too. Ravi did have some objection about getting a cleaning lady, pointing out that we do have to pay her also, but since he always objected to anything and everything that is decided by others, we chose to ignore him. Nevertheless, it was decided that we needed a cleaning lady to clean up our accommodation and we emerged to the next step of finding one out.

Getting such a cleaning lady, however, turned out to be an easier process than deciding to get one and it was all courtesy the major's wife. She was a nice, kind, caring motherly lady with a lot of genuine concern for our wellbeing and she had already thought ahead of us and had arranged a maidservant to get our house cleaned. Ravi, however, felt that her concern was more for her husband who was planning to leave Jorhat because of us. Anyway, Ravi always thought in the direction opposite to others – so we ignored him again. We were told that the lady would arrive at 9 o'clock on next Saturday morning and we should be ready for her.

I still don't know where the major's wife got this cleaning lady from, but the lady had the attitude of a field marshal. She arrived dot at the time she was supposed to and began banging our door so fervently that it woke us all up from a peaceful and heavenly Sunday morning sleep at that an unearthly hour. I was on the banks of Subararekha in Ghatsila happy with Asha Oberoi, but the racket landed me back in Jorhat sans Asha and sans happiness. None of us, however, bothered to get up to open the door, each expecting any of the other three to take up the ordeal or rather the person bothering us to get frustrated and leave. This

did not happen and the door banger turned out to be more persevering than we had expected. Ultimately it was Ravi who was the first to run out of patience; he got up from his bed and, like a professional somnambulist, walked up to the door, opened it, and without caring to see who or what was at the door, retraced his steps back to his bed and immediately fell asleep again.

The person at the door, none other than our new cleaning lady, probably had been a bit shocked at this type of welcome, but soon regained her faculties enough to decide to take this type of behavior as an insult to her persona. Marching in behind Ravi and finding him asleep, she began to scream and shriek, protesting the dishonor meted out to her by such ungentlemanly attitudes of us. She carried on with such a dreadfully screeching voice that we all thought it sensible to get up. Until that moment, we all had believed that Ravi was gifted with the most terrible voice ever; when he shouted or even spoke, it was like a philharmonic orchestra of a thousand crows cawing with sore throats. Yet that day, our knowledge about the most appalling voice got updated: Ravi wasn't the only talented one around; he really had a tough competition from the lady visitor.

Anyhow, it took a lot of the HR skills of SP to pacify the lady and explain to her that all her insult was unintentional and that it was just a misrepresentation of the situation. Whatever she understood of that I really couldn't say, but she did end her verbal tirade and everything became cool again. The very first thing she demanded was an inspection of our house to which we obliged sleepily. She examined every corner of it with the demeanor of an army general inspecting his troop, arriving at the conclusion that we were really dirty people and in her entire life (most probably spanning about 40-45 yrs) she hadn't come across creatures who lived as shabbily as we did, to which observation also we readily agreed. Then she provided an ultimatum that if we wanted her to clean for us, we must clean up everything within Monday. It was more of a command, and then she left us indicating that she would come again on Monday for another inspection. Long after she left we stood there bewildered, wondering why we did think at all about cleaning our house and that, too, with a cleaning lady.

The impact of this short cameo visit was so astounding that momentarily it left us standing with a lot of 'shock and awe'. Roy described it – in his own diplomatic way – like the declaration of a national emergency where our civil liberties were being grossly dishonored. What he meant by civil liberties was the right to sleep, and any violation of that really did make him very upset. Ravi was more direct in his protest and used his flowery *Saharanpuri* language in his wonderfully high pitched tone to voice his displeasure. SP was thinking about something, probably about the means to keep Ravi quite, and I was trying to make a mental calculation of how much garbage we had to clean out for tidying things up. This meant that the whole Sunday was to be spent in cleaning up our house – which really seemed to be a Herculean job. Even Hercules would have refused to do it on a weekend. Yet, we decided that in the best interests of us and of our neighbor, the major, we needed to sacrifice the Sunday in the name of cleanliness.

It didn't start well. To begin with, it was a really difficult job to distinguish between what was essential and what was garbage; often we – and especially, I – were trapped in the indecisiveness of whether to keep an object or throw it off. Most of the my belongings seemed to fall in this indecisive category, and in effect I ran around first throwing my things away and then collecting and restoring them. On top of that, the major was angry, again, that we were making the entire *mahalla* dirty by our earnest efforts to clean our house, and kept sending repeated orders for us to stop immediately.

The worst part of it was to get Roy to clean his room. Roy was the type of guy who would sleep continuously for about 7 hrs, get up only to declare that he was tired after sleeping so much, and sleep again for 5 to 6 hours. His room resembled the primordial state of the universe in which everything was in a disorderly way; nobody had any idea what was in there. He did have a dustbin, but it was the cleanest object in his entire room (including him), adding itself to the gamut of things so wonderfully displayed on the floor of his room. Roy lived in equilibrium with his environment; nobody expected him to change the status quo or to allow any of us to do so. Nobody ever dared step inside his room for two reasons – one, there was no place for anyone to step, and secondly, Roy told us it was dangerous to do so without any protective wear. The cleaning lady's stern orders, however, changed everything; Roy was eventually seen coming out of his chain of slumbers and making serious efforts to get his room cleaned. The entire day was spent like that, cleaning up our house; when we finished, our limbs ached. That fateful weekend had made us even more tired than the weekdays.

Our cleaning up operations ended abruptly at sundown when the major came up with his dog, commanded us to stop immediately, and complained that we were highly irresponsible, lazy and filthy people, and that we were solely responsible in dirtying up the surroundings of his house. His dog, he mentioned indignantly, had relieved himself in his yard, and for that, too, we were responsible; the dog, however, showed no displeasure like his master but bore the satisfied look of being able to shit at his master's house. Surely enough, our bachelor's accommodation did look a bit clean, but during the cleaning process we had managed to convert the whole of major's front yard into a terrible type of dumping ground.

The effects of that Sunday were longstanding. We were never again lectured on better ways of living. We never attempted another cleaning up job throughout our stay in Jorhat. The major, however, didn't leave Jorhat for some battlefield, but managed to stay on as our ill fated neighbor, ultimately coping up with the fact that we really were hopelessly irresponsible, lazy and filthy people. As for the lady, she never turned up. Probably she couldn't overcome the shock of seeing the dirtiest house of her life and the dirtier inhabitants within. Although, it must be said, she did manage to get us waste our weekend.