

English Story



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Knock - Knock

Ranjini looked to her left; the bus number 1B had just gone past, the lane seemed safe enough to cross. Standing on the divider she again looked to the right, a fiat was passing by at a slower pace, but she waited for a few more seconds since there was no other vehicle that followed it. Age had given her enough experience and the pace of her life had too slowed down. There were lots of wrinkles on her forehead and not all of them were due to her age. But there were lots of anxiety coupled to it, and the reluctance in her body language was distinct. It was a summer afternoon and not many people were sighted on the street.

She looked up to the twelve-storied apartment, cringed her face once more, opened he hand bag and had a sip from the bottle which she had filled from the tube well in front of her house in *Lokkhikantopur*. She bypassed subtly the *darwaan* (doorman) who was busy chit–chatting with a passing-by lady utensil-seller. Men are men, always on their heels to knock on the wrong doors. She didn't take the lift, since automation and sophistication were not very familiar to her. Her destiny was the 6th floor; though her knees were not strong enough but her will was. The common staircase was not much used by flat owners, so that she was not noticed by anyone there.

Panting and gasping for breath she reached the 6th floor and slowly her searching eyes discovered flat number 6C. She moved up to the door and sighed with relief. Finally she was able to come up to the door, to the house to which she had made prior two visits. She slowly moved her hand over the brass plate and then against a name on the third row. Sniggering to herself, she then consciously looked to the left and the passage to the right. She could not notice anyone.

A thievishness was working up in her.

Again there was reluctance in her arms, but she knew it had to be done.

She raised her arms finally and knocked on the door of the flat number 6C. Initially it was gentle and then impatiently vigorous for the successive rounds.

The door opened after sometime...

And opposite to her was standing the same person whom she has come to meet crossing সাত সমুদ্র আর তেরো নদীর পার (*seven seas and thirteen rivers*)...

“কে?” (*Who is it?*)

“কেন, চিনতে পারছিসনা? আমি রঞ্জু... মাত্র তো বারো বছর আগেকার কথা...” (*Why, can't you recognize me? I'm Ranju... It has been just 12 years...*)

“কে রঞ্জু?” she asked vehemently “আমি কোন রঞ্জু বলে কাউকে চিনিনা... আপনি ভুল করছেন... Please দেখুন বাড়ীতে কেউ নেই, disturb করবেন না... না হলে আমি কিন্তু security ডাকতে বাধ্য হব” (*Who Ranju? I know no one by that name. You are grossly mistaken... please, no one's*

at home now, don't disturb... else I shall be forced to call security)

“আরে তুই কি বলছিস সোনা, তুই কি সত্যি আমায় চিনতে পারছিস না?” (*Can you really not really recognize me?*)

“আমার নাম সোনা নয়... SUDESHNA ROY... MRS SUDESHNA ROY”; (*my name is not Sona*)... The emphasis was much on ‘mrs’.

Ranjini hesitated for a while; she doubted whether she had really changed so drastically from the time she parted from Suhana. Yes she did, poverty and tension had changed her but not to that extent where she cannot be identified.

She firmly fixed her hand on the door. There was firmness from the opposite end also.

“ওওও, বুঝেছি... তুই নিজেকে লুকোতে চাইছিস... কিন্তু আমার চোখ কে ফাঁকি দেওয়া তো এত সহজ নয় রে...” (*Oh... I understand... You are trying to hide yourself... But it is very difficult to deceive my eyes*)

She did not want to continue much discussion in the common passage; so she pushed passed the opposition.

“কি কি... কেন... এটা কিন্তু ঠিক হচ্ছেনা...” (*What... Why... This is not done...*)

The door was slammed. The guard who had returned to the chair looked upwards.

Ranjini and Suhana were the best of the friends and rivals in profession. Both were the daunting queens of the dingy lanes of North Calcutta's *sovabazaar*. The professional ethics are all the same everywhere and so it was with them too. They cared for each other at times of trouble which used to hover over

them quite often and also at times of ill health. But they were the best client-servers of their times. Lights of their rooms used to be put-off first and then the others followed. They were the apple of *Mohinimasi's* eyes. The apples in Mohini's eyes changed from time to time; now someone else had occupied that place.

Trade ethics again.

Ranjini rushed herself, but slowed her pace later. She looked up and her eyes revolved across the dining room. She envied again. For a long time this envy had been cultivated. She envied Suhana for the first time when she found that Sujalbabu, a trader in *barabazaar*, had stopped his frequent visits to her. And then Ranjini sighted Sujalbabu the next morning walking out of Suhana's room. The volcano erupted after successive displacements.

The dining was furnished with wooden furniture and the table had paw-shaped legs with glass topping. The linen on the window was costly too. Everything was in its proper place. Ranjini again walked to the adjacent room; it was a bedroom. The posters, tables, bed sheet, cricket bat at the corner, the haphazard arrangement of things indicated that the kids resided there.

She moved again; Sudeshna followed her everywhere. Strangers are never welcomed indoors. But she was left with no options.

“আরে, কি হচ্ছেটা কি?” (*Hey, what's happening?*) Sudeshna could have made a telephone call for help (but she didn't).

This room was the “husband ‘n’ wife's” bed room, furnished with expensive things. It had an appeasing look, pleasing and

with ambient temperature. She gravitated towards the bed where she finally dumped herself for the time being.

The bed was their old work place, common habit of the lower income group.

“এক গ্লাস জল খাওয়া, ভীষণ তেষ্ঠা পেয়েছে” (*Please get me a glass of water, I am very thirsty*)

Unwontedly Sudeshna had to obey the order. The glass of water was produced; it was cool, yet soothing to the throat. The single glass could not quench her thirst, so the second one followed.

“আরে বোস না, দাঁড়িয়ে আছিস কেন” (*Why, have a seat!*)

With hesitation and disgust Sudeshna took the chair before her.

“কেমন আছিস জিজ্ঞেস করবনা, ভালো তো আছিস বুঝতেই পারছি... তোর ঘর বাড়ী দেখে... ওরকম করে মুখ করার কিছুই নেই... আমি বেশ বুঝতে পারছি তুই নিজেকে লুকিয়ে রাখতে চাইছিস... কি হবে বল... কেউ ত বাড়ী নেই... তাই নাটকটা না করলেই কি নয়?” (*Don't have to ask you how you are... It is evident from your household that you are fine... Don't pull such a face... I can understand that you want to keep yourself hidden... What's going to happen... there is none else in the house... Why don't you come off the acting?*)

Sudeshna didn't feel like answering. Her face was still in despair and anguish (Yet silent before the intruder???)

“তোর তো একটা ছেলে আর একটা মেয়ে, তাই না... দেখেছিলাম একদিন... ভারী মিষ্টি হয়েছে দুজনেই... মেয়ে বড় তো?” (*You have a son and a daughter, right? Saw them once... both are very sweet... The girl is older, right?*)

“হ্যাঁ, দু’বছরের difference....সার্থী আর ঋজু” (*Yes, it’s a difference of two years, Sathi and Riju*)

It is still a convention that a girl child is not as welcome as the male counter part. Still people try for a second and even third chance. Families with an elder sister will usually have a younger brother to follow her. We say we are modern; but we are yet to modernize our mind-sets.

Suddenly Sudeshna rose from her seat and rushed to the table. It wasn’t much clear to Ranjini, the reason for such an abrupt movement but it was to hide something, something Ranjini was not supposed to see. She opened the drawer of the dressing table and pushed the target object and turned the key round.

Woman are always more inquisitive then men but Ranjini had to shelve it for the time being.

Sudeshna thought she was giving more space to the stranger so she raised her voice by two scales higher and made it a little grave.

“আপনি কি বলছেন আমি বুঝতে পারছিনা... অনেক ক্ষণ ধরে আপনার বাজে কথা শুনিছি... অনেক হয়েছে, ব্যস্ আর না... এবার আপনি আসতে পারেন... আমি কিন্তু বাধ্য হবো security কে ডাকতে...” (*I don’t understand what you are saying... I have been listening to your rubbish for long... enough is enough... you can leave now... else, I shall be forced to call security*)

Little did Ranjini feel like heeding to the pretensions of threat.

“আমি তোকে একদিন তোর ছেলে আর মেয়ের সঙ্গে...” (*I saw you once with your son and daughter...*). She started to describe how she had followed her and found the flat in which she resides. But

Ranjini was very disappointed and surprised when she checked the names in the letter box. But she opined that Suhana might have changed her name too. Her comprehension paved the way to stubbornness and finally one fine evening Ranjini found Suhana standing in the balcony of the same building. She counted the number of floors and planned her visit in future. Afternoon on a working day would be best, kids go to school and so does the working man if otherwise unlucky.

Sudeshna was not much moved by the discovery Ranjini had outlined; but her face was still in despair. Yet behind her muteness Ranjini could see the roaring and restless sea.

Seating opposite to Ranjini, she knew she had to listen; she had no escape at least this afternoon. So she was lost in her memoirs and indulged in it. And Ranjini too was lost in her conversation of those olden days.

Ranjeet Roy was in those days young and rich. But he was not like the traditional rich Bengali families; they were in construction business and wealth was of one generation only. Hence the ethical culture was not imparted to him. Soon he started indulging in the most heinous ingredients of life, liquor followed by women. In those days he used to go to those dingy lanes of *sovabazaar*. And it was from there he scored many 'girlfriends' and finally settled with one later in life. His fathers' demise made him to take the reins of the family, and more responsibility was shed on his shoulders when his daughter Sathi followed by a son Riju were born.

The conversation and thought roaming was continuing in its own pace when the door-bell rang. Sudeshna's thought was abruptly terminated. She was terrified of this new stranger and rushed out to see who it was.

Ranjini gazed out of the half open window, through which she would see the sky. The half open window was enough for her to be lost in her own thought. She went back with time.

Ranjini had come to the profession earlier than Suhana, obviously not willingly. Along with her mother, she had two younger brothers to look after and be sent to school. No other profession would give her so much quick money to fulfill the needs other than this. She ascetically took it up. Truly it was noble in its way. The volumes of money that she scored every night made her forget the scars made by destiny. She was dark in complexion, yet sharp in her features and she ruled the streets and hearts of customers.

Suhana was a bengali-muslim from the Nadia district; she was led to this trade for the want of fast money. She never cared for the family she belonged to and left them and joined the vicious trade. She had a perfect hour-glass figure and conventionally she was very attractive. God had been kind to her in this facet and had given her the language the body must speak in such a profession. With her advent in the market Ranjini's bidding went down to some extent and a cold rivalry started to brew between them. Yet they were in the same boat so often that the vested interest worked in times of need for both.

Ranjini had fallen in love with a man in those days and girls – in whatever state they are – crave for a prosperous household. But it never occurs in reality. Ranjini left the trade much earlier than Suhana for a prosperous home. But the remaining part of the story was not known to many of the near ones there.

Sudeshna resumed back to her place much more irritated than before.

“অনেক হয়েছে আপনার... আপনি এবার আসতে পারেন” (*I have had enough of you... now you can leave*)

Ranjini realized that she hadn't spelt out the reasons for her visit.

“শোন, আমার তোকে ভীষণ দরকার... মানে আমার কিছু টাকার দরকার রে...” (*Listen, I need you... I mean, I need some money*). While saying so she remembered how she used to beg for money in the past from Suhana when the police raided her room and took her into custody.

“আমি আপনাকে টাকা দেব কি বিশ্বাস করে, বলতে পারেন? আর আপনি আমায় ফেরত-ই বা দেবেন কি ভাবে, বা কেনই বা দেব একটা অপরিচিত মহিলা কে, যাকে আমি জানিনা, চিনিনা” (*On what faith shall I give you money? And how will you repay it? Or why should I give money to a completely strange woman money?*)

“তুই আমাকে তোর পরিচয় যতই গোপন করিস, কিন্তু তোর ভুরুর কাছে যে দাগটা আছে সেটাকে কি ভাবে অস্বীকার করবি... মনে পড়ে অনিল তোকে বোতল দিয়ে মেরেছিল?” (*However much you try to hide your identity, how would you deny the mark near your eyebrow? Remember, Anil had struck you with a bottle?*)

Sudeshna had to justify; she brushed the scar near her left eye brow and said, “এই দাগটা আমার পড়ে গিয়ে হয়েছিল, কেউ বোতল ছুঁড়ে মারেনি... আপনি ভুল করছেন।” (*I got this mark when I had fallen down; no one threw any bottle at me... You are mistaken*)

Ranjini sniggered because she had nailed her on the right place.

“তুই নিজেকে লুকিয়ে রাখ আমার তাতে কোন আপত্তি নেই... না আমি তোর বর কে বলতে যাব যে তুই আগে কি করতিস... আমি কোনদিনও তোর খারাপ চাই নি, আজও করব না... তুই please আমাকে কিছু টাকার বন্দবস্ত করে দে... আমার একটা মেয়ে আছে, তার ভীষণ অসুখ... হাসপাতালে আছে” (*Keep yourself*

hidden, I have no problem with that... Neither am I going to tell your husband what you used to do... I never wished ill of you, and shall not now... Please just arrange some money for me... I have a daughter; she is very ill and in the hospital now...)

Sudeshna was not much interested with the versions told to her; she looked at the clock impatiently. It was already four past ten. Within another twenty minutes, children will be dropped in front of the building and then by another five minutes they will come upstairs.

She had to, by some way or other, get rid of this unwanted guest within fifteen minutes. For every solution you just had to spend a couple of bucks.

But Ranjini was at her own pace.

“তুই জানিস না আমি কি দুঃখ কষ্ট করে দিন কাটাচ্ছি... আমার বর আমাকে বিয়ে করবে বলে ওই নোংরা ব্যবসা থেকে নিয়ে গেল... তখন আমার মেয়ে আমার পেটে... আমি একটা বাড়ী ভাড়া করলাম শহরের থেকে অনেক দূরে গিয়ে যাতে ও আর আমি ওখানে থাকব... ওই সব বন্দোবস্ত করে দিয়ে ছিল... আমরা কিছু মাস একসঙ্গে ছিলামও বিয়ের পর, কিন্তু তার...” (*You don't know what struggles I am going through daily... My husband brought me out from that dirty business after promising to marry me... I was already pregnant with my daughter... I rented a house far from the city, so that we could live there... He made all the arrangements... We were together for a few months after the marriage, but then...*)

Sudeshna became impatient “কতো টাকা লাগবে আপনার?” (*How much do you want?*)

“শোন আমার পুরো কথাটা” (*Hear me out*). Ranjini was in a dire condition to tell the remaining story to Sudeshna. She had long

waited for this. But she had to cut it short since the purpose for the visit seemed to be met.

“এই তিরিশ হাজার টাকা... মুন্নির জন্ডিস হয়েছে... আর খুব serious অবস্থা রে”
(*About thirty thousand rupees... Munni is suffering from jaundice, she is in a serious condition*)

Though Sudeshna was ready to part off with that money but still she bargained, “তিরিশ তো আমি দিতে পারবনা, কিন্তু কুড়ির বন্দোবস্ত করে দিতে পারি...” (Cannot give you thirty, but can try to manage twenty somehow)

Ranjini’s face lit up; anticipating the bargain she had hiked the price by another ten thousand. But she could not express her feeling. “চলবে আপাতত” (This will do for the time being)

“কিন্তু আপনাকে একটা সর্ত করতে হবে, যে আপনি কোনদিন এই বাড়ীতে আসবেন না... কোনদিনই না এরপর... টাকা আমার ফেরৎ চাইনা, তাই আপনি কোনদিন কিন্তু আসবেন না” (But you have to promise me that you shall never return to this house... never after this day... I don’t want the money back... so, you must never come here again)

There was a prompt reply. “হ্যাঁ” (Of course) But she didn’t mean it from her heart. She knew promises are made to be broken, and let’s save it as a blank cheque for future use.

Sudeshna went to the balcony and looked down; the school bus had not arrived yet. It must have got into some traffic-jam. She sighed that she had some time yet. She rushed back to her bedroom, opened the almirah, and counted the two bundles of 100s from the locker inside it.

With utmost reluctance she handed over the two bundles of hundred to her.

“আমি তোকে কি বলে যে...” (*How can I...*), Ranjini started. But Sudeshna terminated the dialogue, “অনেক হয়েছে, এবার আপনি আসতে পারেন... এখন যান এখান থেকে।” (*Enough is enough, now leave*)

Ranjini stood up since the reason for her visit was finally fulfilled. She reached the main door and looked back with expressionless eyes; may be, she wanted to thank Suhana for saving her every time, but this time she didn't, she left it open and again retraced her way back.

Sudeshna closed the door and wiped her face with the tail-end of the sari and walked up to the balcony.

She looked down, but she could not locate Ranjini and waited for her to go out of the building and her life forever. She located Ranjini finally and kept her in contact of eyes till she finally disappeared in the crowd.

She laughed to herself boisterously. She went back in time to complete the story where Ranjini had left.

It was during those days Ranjini was dating and finally decided to leave the trade after she came to know of her pregnancy. But evil practices don't part off so easily. While this man had settled down with Ranjini, yet after some time he started to visit the same place where he used to go before. Already Suhana was burning in ire about Ranjini's happy household, though the expressions and wishes were falsified. And it was her old foul practice of diverting Ranjini's client. But this time she diverted her husband, Mr. Ranjeet Roy.

She went back to her room, turned the keys of the drawer and pulled it out. She put her hands into the drawer and pulled out

something; it was a framed photo of her and Ranjeet's. She brushed her hand over the frame and laughed sinfully.

The bell rang. The kids have come back from school.

She opened the door.

“আরে সোনা, এসে গেছিস তোরা... এত দেরী হলো কেন? আমি কতো চিন্তা করছিলাম বলতো?” (*Oh, hello, dear, you have reached... why so late? I was getting worried...*)

She took off the bag from her son's shoulder, smiled again to herself and closed the door.

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