

SHORT STORY SECTION**AND THE RAIN FELL**

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The day my father announced his desire to buy a microscope the sky was covered with dark umbrella shaped clouds, smiling seemingly benignly. There was a moment of startled silence, as we had spoken about how we could not afford it a couple of months ago. Then mother asked, in her quiet way, "Do you know how much it'll cost, dear?"

"Yes", replied father, without any hesitation. "About ten lakhs".

After another long moment, where the silence, was only broken by the drizzle, that had just started, beating on the windowpanes, I could not help asking, "Do we really need it, dad?"

Father smiled indulgently, and having finished his breakfast, stood up, and clearing his throat, said, "Well, you talk about it, and tell me what you think, when I return."

That is how father was: always asking others for suggestions, though I now think that it was no more than a calculated gesture to appease us --- and it succeeded, as we were left with a sense of importance --- as he never took us seriously, and kept his own counsel.

It was a couple of minutes after he had left that I realized that he had not answered my question. I opened my mouth to say something supposedly witty and scathing, but somehow thought better of it. Instead, I gobbled the dry toast in silence.

We completed breakfast without talking; each of us, apparently mulling over what dad said, to the accompaniment of the tip-tap-tip of rain falling.

"Don't be a kid!" We were talking about what father had said at breakfast, and Sruti was excited at the prospect of our acquiring a microscope, and I was pricking her hopes, as I could see that she was salivating at how she could brag about the microscope. "Anyway, what else can one expect from a giggling girl of sixteen," I added.

"Oh ho! Don't pull all that 'High and Mighty' stuff over me! After all, you aren't that older than me. Just two years... In fact, not even two years, only twenty-one months! So don't go ordering me about", she retorted.

I was about to make a fitting rejoinder, when my twenty-two year old cousin, Prakash, entered, completely drenched. Eight years ago, Prakash's parents had died in a car accident, and he had made his home with us from then on.

"Ooh! This rain! Didn't expect it to come down as it did. Just looked like a little drizzle when I went out; but now..." he remarked, taking a towel and rubbing himself vigorously.

He suddenly paused, probably noticing our surly looks and asked, “What happened, Sruti? You are not quarrelling again, I hope.”

Sruti, who had been, I suspect, waiting all this while for such an opening, immediately launched into her version of the quarrel. Prakash listened silently, with a good-humored smile pasted on his face.

“Tale Bearer!” I muttered under my breath.

“Ratan, what’s the problem?” asked Prakash, turning towards me, after Sruti stopped, apparently running out of steam. “Why don’t you want uncle to buy the microscope?”

“Well”, I began, rather inexplicably finding myself unable to put my thoughts into words. “All these years, dad had not any... I mean, do we need it? You see, dad had worked all these years without any microscope, or... and operated on a number of patients without hitch, so...”

“So, why should he now buy it?” completed Prakash. “That’s it, ain’t it? You raised a similar doubt at breakfast too, if I remember correctly. Didn’t you?”

I nodded.

Taking a deep breath, as if he was a bloody lecturer, Prakash began, “First of all, you’re right. Uncle does not need a microscope to help him. But --- and it is a big ‘BUT’ --- he needs it, to compete with the new generation of doctors that are now appearing on the scene, with every new sophisticated implement under the sun to help them. And, you see, most of uncle’s patients being villagers, they, rather naïvely, get attracted by such...such tools, so...” He shrugged, and continued, “Also it isn’t such a dead investment either, as you’ve got a seat in medicine now, and it’ll be useful for you too, in future”. He paused for a second, and then asked, “Well, any doubts?”

Sruti giggled gleefully, as I slowly shook my head, very much resenting Prakash’s barging in.

Father decided to buy the microscope, and it was a month later that he brought a cheque for rupees five lakhs home, intending to hand it over on the morrow.

He stomped in and threw down the bag. His foul mood was obvious when he whined, “This is a silly business. Bugger sat there watching while I signed it, and then coolly says that they accept cash”. He paused and then spoke in a high-pitched falsetto – probably what he supposed was the agent’s voice: “Only cash, sir, if you please. Bounce, you know. Bounced in the past.” He laughed aloud, good humor restored, as he was unreasonably proud of his acting prowess. We joined in, relieved. That was enough for him to come up with a mirthless joke: “Have to be careful now with this bag, eh? Someone can just go to the bank with the cheque and whoosh. That wouldn’t be nice, would it, Ratan?”

It was too silly, and I walked away.

“We’ve got to pay more than a lakh extra, as interest,” he said, that night during dinner. He looked meaningfully at all of us, and as none of us took the hint, he continued, “Of course, when we are paying out the remaining five lakhs over a period of five years, we’ve got to pay interest. I understand that! But a lakh and a quarter...”, he paused, rhetorically.

Sadly for him, because he always loved an argument he was sure to win --- as when he was sure of his position, and his opponent was on tricky ground --- none of us took the bait. With a grin, that barely masked his disappointment, he added, “Yes, we can pay it at one go; but explaining it to the tax guys would be difficult. So...”

The next day, I woke up with a slight fever, and not wishing to aggravate it, decided conveniently to skip college, and not venture out in the cloudy weather. I napped in my bedroom upstairs, listening to the bustling of Sruti, and the hustling of my dad, as they both left --- one to the college, and the other to clinic.

It was some twenty minutes later that I heard Prakash's voice saying, "I'm going out, aunt. Do you want something?"

"What? In this weather?" exclaimed my mother.

"It is hardly raining now", pointed out Prakash.

"Yes, that's true. But... why don't you give Ratan company? He must be feeling bored. Of course, if it's urgent, well..."

"It is, aunt."

"Oh! Where are you going?"

"To Sai's house".

"Well, take your raincoat along."

"Okay."

He left, and I lay thinking about the conversation; instinctively feeling that there was something amiss... something that did not ring true, in what I had heard. But what...?

I could not tell.

The eerie silence that precedes a storm, this little nagging doubt, and my headache, all combined to put me to sleep; for suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard the raised voice of my father, trying to compete with the howling of the wind outside, and the pattering sound of rain falling on the roof.

I slowly got off the bed, and climbed down the stairs, feeling extremely shaky, to see what it was all about.

Father was pacing on the floor, looking flustered, while mother stood at the kitchen doorway watching him.

"I kept it here. Just here", he mumbled, pointing to the divan.

I looked at him, feeling all at sea. 'What does he mean?' I thought.

After waiting uncertainly for a moment, I asked, "What happened, dad?"

He looked at me, as if noticing for the first time my presence, and replied, "The cheque! It is missing!"

"Missing..?" I repeated, not understanding what he was saying.

"Yes, missing! I kept my bag here... here, on the divan, while I went to wash my hands. After that, I took it with me to the clinic, and now when I opened it, the cheque is gone... Stolen!"

"You're sure you haven't misplaced it?" my mother put in mildly.

He stared at her vacantly for a second, before answering emphatically, "No! I'm sure. I saw it with my own eyes this morning, when I opened that bag to put the car keys in it, you see..."

"Did you notice whether the cheque was there, when you took out the car keys?" I asked.

He thought for a moment, and then looking sheepish, admitted. "No, I don't think I noticed it then. But then..."

“Did you leave it anywhere else?” I queried, trying vainly to sound intelligent.

“No... Ah! Well, yes. In fact, I left it in my table drawer at the clinic, when I went to the washroom for a moment; but... But I locked the table drawer. Nobody could’ve stolen it from there, of course.”

“But it’s just a cheque. Not cash. So...,” I thought aloud.

That was it. He turned on me, as if I had something to do with the missing cheque. “Just a cheque, eh? What do you know? I signed it, you fool. And..and it is a bearer cheque.”

I was tempted to smile at his fury; it was so silly and typical. However, I masked it by fiddling with the refrigerator door.

“You’d better call the bank, and tell them not to accept that cheque”, advised my mother. “You see, if it is really stolen, we can at least stop the person who had stolen it from cashin...”

“Yes, Yes! You’re right!” he cried out, racing towards the telephone.

He fumbled with it, ringing up three wrong numbers, before, finally, getting across to the bank, and then fidgeting, obviously waited for someone to answer.

“Hello”, he began, speaking into the receiver. “Is it Naresh?... it’s me, Kumar... Yes, Dr Kumar... Yes, yes. Good Morning! bu... Ah! yes... But, did someone come with a cheque for five lakhs from me?... No?... Oh! You weren’t there?... Yes, I understand!... Yes, yes! I’ll wait!... Hello?... Well, did she?... My God!... Eh?... Nothing... No problem... Er... Don’t worry. By the way, does she remember who ca... No?... Oh, I see... Yes, yes. It’s okay!... Yes, thanks! Thank you!”

He hung up, perspiring, looking every inch a beaten man.

I did not have to ask what he had heard to realize that the five lakhs had been stolen.

It was at this juncture that Prakash came in, beaming.

Immediately father eyed him sharply and asked, “Where have you been?”

“At... at Sai’s house”, he stammered, frozen in his step.

“But Sai’s out of town!” I cried out, suddenly realizing what had been nagging me all this while. “He has... in fact, their whole family has left for the States, last week”, I explained, as both, mother and father, looked at me strangely.

“Well... I forgot”, Prakash murmured, staring at the floor.

“How can you, Prakash, when you, too, came to the airport to see them off, along with me” I asked pointedly, feeling vainly triumphant.

“Well, I forgot!” he repeated, still staring down.

“You forgot?” spat out father, and there was a queer edge to his voice.

“Yes, uncle, I forgot”, insisted Prakash stubbornly.

“Shut up! Don’t lie!” burst out father, flushing with anger. “Tell me what you have done with the five lakhs?”

“Five...five lakhs?! What five lakhs, uncle? I... I don’t understand”, he replied, apparently bewildered.

“Don’t act the fool! You know as well as I do what five lakhs I’m talking about. The five lakhs cheque in my bag. Didn’t you take it?”

“No, of course not. I didn’t take anything!” he answered, seeming faintly scornful as he looked up.

“You didn’t, did you?” sneered father. “Then who took it? The clouds? The rain?”

Prakash looked at him silently, with pursed lips.

“You were alone in this room for quite a while, when your uncle and Sruti were hurrying about. “Weren’t you?” asked mother, gently.

“No. I... I was upstairs in...”

“No, you did not!” I cried out, gloating cruelly. “You did not come up! If you did, I would have heard you! But I didn’t, so...”

“Return it, Prakash, and we’ll forget that this ever happened”, said my father.

“But, I didn’t steal it. I tell you, I didn’t!” There were tears in his eyes, as he said this, and for all reasons he looked as innocent as a lamb.

But we were not convinced.

For the next seven days, while the wind howled, and the storm raged, we three of us, kept badgering him; but after the first two days, he clamped his mouth, not even opening it to protest. Sruti was the only one who was not convinced of his guilt. She could not believe that our cousin, Prakash, could have stolen the amount, and insisted on calling in the police.

Rather surprisingly, as I foolishly thought, my parents did not fall in with this idea. Mother was vehement in her opinion that one could not very well turn in their own relations to the police.

On the eighth day, Prakash disappeared.

“Left to enjoy the loot”, I remarked, to my shame.

“Probably, he wanted it for his laboratory. He always wanted to become a scientist, you know”, suggested mother.

I laughed disgracefully, on hearing this; and Sruti, looking at me severely, objected sensibly, “Shut up! We don’t even know that he has stolen anything, do we?”

“Don’t talk rot!” father exploded. “Of course, he has stolen the five lakhs. That’s why he had run away. Otherwise, why would he? After all, it isn’t that we didn’t treat him well. We did. It is only that we had all this while been nursing a snake amongst us. A Venomous Serpent! --- That’s what he is! In fact, I’d say ‘Good Riddance’, if not for the money.”

Sruti left the room in a huff, looking disgusted with us, and the storm continued to rage on, both inside, as well as outside the house.

Twenty-three years have gone by since this happened. Poor father never knew what had transpired on that fateful day. He took his grievance to the grave five years ago, and it was only last year that I got to know what exactly had happened. Someone had told me at that time that Prakash had vainly proposed to a girl he was in love with on that day. I did not want to believe that story, and persisted in blaming and cursing him.

But mother finally put an end to such idyllic interpretation. On her deathbed, she confessed that she had given the money to her never-do-well brother to extricate him from some mess caused by one of

his many hare-brained schemes. She shrunk from asking father for the money, as she knew that he would bluntly refuse.

I expect it shocked me a bit; however, I understood her – and that bothered me.

But I now had a bigger problem: finding Prakash. Although seemingly insurmountable, I thought I was up to the challenge, and sought the help of my friends and colleagues. For a long time nothing happened; no one responded. I had almost given up hope of ever knowing what had become of him, when one of my friends, a psychiatrist, suggested in his off-hand manner: “Have you chequed the loony bins?”

He was joking, of course.

But I wrote to every psychiatric institution in the country that I could think of – and got a response from one of them saying that they had someone with them for the last twenty odd years, who matched the description that I had sent them. They emailed a file picture of the patient, which was taken when they had inducted him.

It was Prakash.

I cancelled an operation that I was supposed to perform, and fixed an appointment for the next day. The institution that he was in was located in a different city, and I needed to take an overnight train to reach it. Luckily, I managed to get a ticket. I had no clue as to what I would do when I met him, except for a hazy idea that I will acquaint him with the facts as told by mother. I was not sure if I should – but that was mother’s wish. Soon it would be gratified, or so I thought.

Waiting at the station, for the train, I bought a newspaper to arrest my thoughts. It was a bad idea, as I saw his picture unobtrusively placed below a massive report on the effect of a disastrous cyclone. It was in relation to an accident at the psychiatric ward that Prakash was in. A schizophrenic had turned violent and killed two inmates. My cousin was one of them.

What must he have gone through? I did not want to think about it. But he had found peace -- at last; and so had mother, as his death had released her.

Self-pity is silly. Actually, it is worse.

But have I got a choice?

Staring at the darkening skies, I felt like confessing.

But to whom? Sruti?

I fiddled with my mobile, and watched the battery splutter and die as I got drenched in the rain.