

A Rain-Washed Note

Ketaki Dutta

The waves lashed on the shore. I sat on the beach with my mother. Father was pacing up and down the beach with Bob, my only brother. All on a sudden, Bob prescribed, “A nice medicine for your aching limbs is walking, incessant walking. “Ha, ha’, guffawed father and Bob too sprang up to his feet to accompany father on his walking mission. I sat back with mother and watched the sky turning blue from livid, ashen from onyx. As evening tiptoed, the bauble-shops and tea-stalls bristled with customers. I cast my gaze at the diadem that topped every crest of wave, gulping every streak of moonlight, to add extra glow to its otherwise-meaning exterior. Mother said, “Teeti, Won’t we be back before dinner?” I said, “I can’t free myself from the hypnosis of the beauty. Let’s stay here for an hour more, please.” Mother seemed to lose herself, in her train of thoughts.

I looked around my eyes fell on a charming svelte young woman hanging around a haberdasher’s shop nearby. Her bluish eye-balls, the dun hair and the diaphanous knickerbockers gave her a cosmopolitan air. But, somewhere there was a touch of simplicity in her. I rubbed shoulders with the Americans at ASRC, Hyderabad, where I went as a Research Scholar. Naturally, there was no curious look in my eyes. Rather, her standoffishness bore some significance to me.

When evening wore on, father came wearily and asked us to join him. We put up at Digha Tourist Lodge, at a stone’s throw from the beach. He strained his knees to walk up the way to our resort. But after crossing the perilous triangular zone where buses, jaywalkers and rickshaws run every chance of ramming into each other, we heaved a sigh of relief. The neon-bulbs cast a luminous glow on the sleek, macadamized road.

After a brief at the lounge, when I was going upstairs to bring father’s shawl, as he was feeling chilly, a face familiar to me beamed on the staircase. I saw her somewhere, I tried to recollect. Ah, yes, the lady on the beach!

“Hi”, a musical falsetto was wafted to my ears. I leaped down the staircase and looked straight to her “Hi”! Anyway, my steps slowed down, I restrained my brisk pace. Stopping, I said, “Are you from Germany?” At the abruptness of my query, she snapped, “No, from France. Today only I came from Calcutta.” Her stress on ‘T’s was feeble and that was enough to prove that her origin was not pure English. I came down the steps to stand a rung higher than her and smiled and said, “You see, I’m in a hurry. More when we meet again. Anyway, what’s your room number? Are you alone?” My impatient queries hardly perturbed her. She politely rejoined, “I’m staying in a cottage just behind. Yes, I’m alone, I intend to stay here for a month. I come to Tourist Lodge everyday to have my dinner.” I smiled and started moving down. I liked the innocent conversation, I loved her immaculate look.

I came downstairs, handed the shawl to father, but I saw her nowhere. After having frugal dinner, my father suggested a night-walk. When we were coming out of the narrow vestibule, that cute lady popped up to view again. She was walking ahead of us. I accosted her, “Hi, I forgot to ask your name.” Flashing an intimate smile, she replied, “Michele, Michele Ridoux”. I said, “I’m Prateeti.” She tried hard to pronounce it. She

succeeded after three broken attempts. I came up with an overture readily, "Please call me Teeti."

Next morning, I introduced her to my father, mother and brother. They liked her and she too joined us on an evening-walk. While walking, mother and Michele exchanged their views on Depardieux, French painters, French wine and French cuisine. Michele was ebullient with joy. On the illuminated plaza, overlooking the crest and trough of the rowdy waves, we relished puchka, samosa and fried prawns. We ordered the shabby puchkawallah to prepare puchkas without that dingy tamarind-water for "Memsahib". Michele interrupted, "No, I'll take exactly in the same manner as you Indians do." Father admired her stance. On return to the Lodge, mother and Bob were all praise for Michele.

During our stay at Digha, Michele became our joyful companion. One day, she came to our room with a shopping-bag and to our utter surprise took out gifts one after another ['mementos', according to her]. A torch, nice flambeau to dispel darkness, for my mother; a small radio for my brother and a cute umbrella for me! Wherever we went she used to accompany us. We hired rickshaws for Chandaneshwar sojourn. Father asked, "Go ask Michele whether she'll go there with us." It was about 25 kilometers from Digha and was known for its age-old Shiva temple. I rushed to her cottage. But I discovered for the first time, Michele in a wan face. She sat on the balcony of her cottage, legs akimbo, her gaze lost far-off. When I hailed her out of stupor, she was visibly stirred. On repeated entreaties, she agreed to join us. However, we had to put much effort to coax that jolly old self out of gloomy Michele. When asked about the abrupt change in her, a tear or two glistened at the corner of her blue eyes. Her sight turned misty, I could not make out anything. Father looked concerned, mother sympathetic. However, Michele folded her knees and prayed devoutly to Lord Shiva at the Chandaneshwar Temple. On our way back, Michele fixed her gaze on the casuarinas trees and lost herself amidst the dense grove. I sensed something was invariably wrong with her. Her usual jovial self was strangely missing. I felt irked.

During the rickshaw-ride, I inquired, "Why do you look so unhappy? Is something wrong with you?" She rejoined, "Oh, it's nuh-thing."

"Won't you tell me even?" I pressed her.

"Absolutely nuh-thing", she jerked her blonde head more than thrice.

The green backdrop, the blue awning overhead and the sleek thoroughfare came to draw the pall of silence firmer than ever before.

That evening, mother presented a shell-necklace to Michele. She put it on and it looked simply magnificent on her. We were sitting on a boulder that lined the beach. The waves followed one after the other. I simply listened to the sobs, sighs, croons and whimpers of the splashing waves. All on a sudden, Michele sprang to her feet and staggered forward, as if, in a trance. She did not look back, paid no heed to my call. She went near the sea and silently kept enjoying the proximity to the vociferous, regurgitating water-columns.

Next morning, we planned to leave for Calcutta. But, father wanted to stay back for the day. We readily agreed. In fact, a deep friendship which had recently started mellowing into a deeper one, the mesmerizing backdrop of the waves, the blue horizon, the ostentatious milling crowds that flew on and on like an ever-flowing river caught me in its grip. I felt like staying back not for a day or two but for a long week. But who'd listen to me? I packed up some clothes in my bag and kept some in the wardrobe. My brother

was engrossed in a thriller, mother was busy in hair-do, and father had surely gone for a walk. I felt utterly flaked out, and sallied out to the balcony to catch a glimpse of the ash-blue-silver waves that roared and rammed on the shore. I tried to find a meaning in everything. From far, I could see a daintily dressed skeletal contour running up the graveled path that led up to the Lodge. Yes, it was none but Michele. She waved to our balcony and yelled, "Teeti, will you please come down?" I smiled and waved back and changing into a blue salwar-suit, in perfect tune with the Nature outside, rushed downstairs. She said, "Hey, let's go to the sea." I seemed to hear poet John Masfield who wrote Sea Fever, speaking through Michele.

We walked and sat on two boulders, joined neatly to form a seat. The sea, as a chameleon, was changing colors fast. The sun shone aslant on the waves. A group of dance-enthusiasts tried every trick on the rushing and receding waves. I sat close to her. She talked her heart out that day. Mute Michele was turning loquacious, shedding off the cocoon that engulfed her!

"Teeti, I love India. In fact, I revere Indian values. I had a father, who I saw years ago, my mother left me in the lurch when she found a suitor of her choice. My father and mother had been separated just after my birth. I was reared up by my mother's mother. In Louvre, I stay in her country-house. She too passed away a year ago. I work in an office. I got married twice, both of which ended in smoke," Michele got lost in a trance again, perhaps.

I chipped in, "I want to have all your words written in French, please write them for me...here and now."

She fished out a torn piece of paper from her reticule and scribbled something which seemed Latin and Greek to me.

"I have nothing to say. Whatever I wanted to tell you is written here Get it read by someone who knows French." Michele spat out.

"Are you angry with me?" I asked.

"No point I see," she said with a sad smile.

I did not take bath and skipped lunch that day. I cast a disinterested look at the sea, the horizon, the swinging branches of cedar trees and the sky above. Michele got on to her feet silently and made her way to her cottage. I walked beside her in silence. I was dying to know what was written on the paper.

Next day, amidst emotional exchange of valedictory words, kisses and greetings we left for Calcutta, with an awning of nimbus overhead. I leaned back on my seat as I felt sleepy. Yesterday's weariness was washed off by a light drizzle and the whizzing of the bus-wheels. Coming home, busy schedule made me forget about the piece of small paper.

Last week, Suneeta took the bag I kept the paper in. It lay uncared for, in a snug corner. While Suneeta was coming to return it, slinging it on her shoulder, it got drenched by an afternoon-shower. When I got it back, I disemboweled the contents on the divan. Heigh Ho! Here was the small note by Michele! Horrible gobbledygook!! Luckily, I remembered Freddie who only could decipher the message, as he used to attend the French classes at Allianz Francais, meticulously. I took up the phone and dialed. But he was not at home. I rang him up again after a couple of hours. I invited him to our house next evening, tempting him with a nice memento from Digha. He promised and of course kept his word. By the by, the matter arose. I brought the chit. Unfortunately, the rain had eaten away all words from the left corner of the note. He was inquisitive about the relevance of

the billet , but I was reluctant to quench his curiosity until he read out the stuff. On imploring, he went on,

“Teeti,

I have fallen headlong in love with you and your family. But you know, I am a wretched bastard, who had little schooling and mostly lived in hand-to-mouth plight. Now, I am an office-clerk. But, the boredom of the job keeps me shuttling between London and Paris. This is the first time I’m paying a visit to India. My second husband died of AIDS a year ago. My days are numbered too. Though it is insidious , it’s yet to spread its tentacles in my within. But I doubt, I’ll live for long! I’ll never forget you, believe me!!

With love,

Yours ever,

MICHELE”

Freddie’s blinking, humorous eyes screwed up, I told him everything then. But I was wonderstruck to learn that Michele’s life would come to an end so soon!! Now I came to understand why she remained mute and sad most of the time. Now it stood crystal-clear to me. However, I wrote to her and got a beautiful picture-postcard within a length of fifteen days . Later on, I heard from her no more. Happy memories were there to ruminate and two drops of tears to course down the cheeks, That was all! Was that only so?!