

## The Scarf

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You are as light as a thin strand of white hair, as invisible as a common face. The back seat of the Honda where you rest is hardly perturbed by your weight. The wind smelling of rain-soaked frondescence sets you adrift in a procellous stone-strewn water body with perilous waves. You are lifted and then thrown back by the waves gushing into deep dark labyrinthine chambers, sometimes you touch the stony dead ceilings and sometimes you are under the water, rolling and turning in the mysterious whirlpool which emanates a nebulous haze. You are never wet, never soaked, never bedraggled. You are as dry as lips in winter, as land in desert.

They sit in the two front seats, she in the driver's cushion and he on her left. Her lips are painted red, her nails are painted black. His curly long hair tied in a braid reminds you of the swinging bony tails of the cows grazing in the valley. The car that has been swiftly moving downhill now moves away from the centerline of the narrow road and stops at the side to allow a honking red tourist bus to pass.

After the bus had passed she reaches out and hugs him and then kisses him on the mouth. "Why do you talk about pain all the time," she says stroking his hair, "it's such a beautiful morning, and we are finally married, there won't be any more pains...ever."

"You are silly, Rumia, there will always be pain" he says disembracing himself and finger-combing his disheveled hair.

With a mischievous girly smile she moves back to her seat.

I know there will be pain," she says removing the smudged stains of passion around her mouth with a tissue, "but I refuse to be sullen anymore. I have got all I ever wanted; I have got you...honey. What's pain to me?" She turns to him with a beaming smile. "*Sokhi, bhabona kahare bole, sokhi, jatona kahare bole?*" She quotes the two lines from her favorite Tagore song nodding her head and blinking childishly.

He smiles.

"Hey, you are blushing," she says, "Oh, my god! I can't believe I made you blush. Ha...ha."

"Come on, Rumia; don't pull my leg, drive on. There might be another car behind us; I thought I heard the tyres screech," He turns back. You gasp and move close to the window. But he doesn't see you. He inspects the narrow stony comma shaped curved track their vehicle has driven down and says "Be careful with the brakes, Rumia."

The car starts once more.

How unnatural it is to see him with her, you think. Yet why, you can never tell. Their faces come to you like faces in vintage sepia-tinted photographs partially dissolved in historical undercurrents staring at you blurred from some half-torn album. Sometimes you think it is all part of an extensive dream; a dream whose maze of metaphrastic mystery has engulfed you such that you can never walk out of its reverie-generated miasma. Who are you, why are you here drifting like some dead tree leaf in the air, caught in the net of communication between a

newly married man and his wife, privy to their conversation, their lovemaking, their sorrows? Why, why, why?

"It's so awfully quiet," she says, "what are you thinking about? Shall I play some music? The radio isn't catching any signal." She rotates the knob of the audio-player but only spurts of broken songs accompanied by wistful mechanical burrs and hisses are heard.

"Let me see," he says. He rotates the knob slowly and after a little effort finally manages to catch a FM station. The morning show is on and a mushy Bollywood song is heard. The clichéd 70's tune doesn't please her. She switches off the player.

"Horrible! I can't listen to such trash. Let's talk," she says shifting the gear, "hmm... let's talk about something happy, something nice that happened to you."

"I can't think of anything."

"Why? Aren't you happy that you married me?" A hint of displeasure resonates in her voice.

"Of course I am, honey, but you must understand that I am not a very assertive person. Unlike you I cannot talk about my feelings."

"Never mind," she says and turns away. "I think you ought to be a little more appreciative. There's no good dwelling in the past. Sometimes you just make me feel that you didn't want to marry me at all."

"You know it's not like that," he says stroking her hand, "I do love you, only I can't mention it time and again like the others." His clean-shaven intellectual Bengali face looks abashed.

"Sing to me," she says with a smile in her choked up voice that strikes you as a seven-hued rainbow on a rainy morn.

He begins to sing a modern canticle to love.

Like some faint childhood memory the tune strikes as familiar but forgotten. Somebody dedicated this song or some song very similar to this one to you with a pledge of forever love. Somebody said he could look at your face forever and sing it to you. The sky is an extensive stretch of flat-bread unevenly lathered with dollops of white cloud. No, you cannot remember the song, but you heard it, you did hear it, you know that.

At noon the car stops at a gas station. The same red tourist bus seen in the morning is seen replenishing itself by one of the two fuel dispensers. The dark, mustachioed, pot-bellied driver in red and blue check shirt and dirty grey trousers is talking to the staff. One of them stands holding the nozzle-mouthed long tube attached to the browser that is inserted into an opening on the side of the bus.

She gets out of the car to talk to one of the men who tell her that the other browser is not working and that she must wait in line. "Whenever I think of vehicles filled with fuel I think of blood transfusion," she says with a laugh leaning against the open window of her car.

"Well, it is transfusion all right, not blood though but certainly liquid that propels the life of a machine," he replies intelligently.

She laughs and walks to the side of the browser to inspect the figures on the digital clocks.

"Oh my god, you got to come down and see this!"

"I can do with a bit of stretching. How long is it going to take?"

"Come down and see for yourself."

She drags him by the hand as soon as he steps out. "Let's bet how much the bus is gonna pay."

"I can't say."

"Take a guess."

"Five thousand," he says after a little thought.

The actual amount on the rolling clock that stops with a click as they reach the browser is Rs. 13,000. "You lost, she says" "I need my gift."

“You are next, madam” one of the staff says to her.  
She hands him the key and says, “Do the car, will you. I need to use the restroom.”

You find yourself in the little convenience store sandwiched between the office and the eatery which smells of ghee. You walk around with him; you stand behind him to inspect the tchotchkes he picks up: a cow figurine, a wooden key ring, tile coasters, and a cheap fridge magnet that says home is heaven. You wish he could listen to you, more than once you speak to him and tell him not to take such garbage for her. But he is like a figure in some fiction unmoved by your presence, unperturbed by your absence. Your amnesiac existence doesn't bother him; his life incidents aren't woven in due consideration to your wishes.

After some more fiddling he sees in a corner-stand a few viscose scarves. He picks up one of them; a teal colored one which you hate. Eventually he puts it down and plunges his hand into the heap of hanging scarves: scarlet, yellow ochre, burgundy, fuchsia, vermilion and baby pink. Your eyes are glued. The baby pink, the baby pink, you say. He takes the baby pink scarf and seeing her approaching by the side window, rushes to the payment desk.

“What are you buying?” she asks as she enters the store and sees the plastic bag the salesman behind the counter hands him. He folds the receipt and putting it in his pocket says, “I lost the bet, didn't I? Here” She tears away the Christmas-colored wrapping paper and brings out the scarf. As you see the scarf now you imagine it has a cigarette hole just to the left of the paisley that is printed in the center of the fabric. Like the several other things you think you know very well, the scarf too strikes you as a familiar and dear object. You look up and see that her face has turned pale; her red lips seem to have in a second lost all their brilliance. She now looked like a mime artist with dramatically painted features.

“I don't feel very well, please let's get back home,” she says.

“What's the matter? Didn't you like the gift?”

“The gift is all right, it's just that I don't feel very well.”

“Do you need some water?” She nods. He asks the man behind the desk to bring some water. She rapidly drinks from the stainless steel glass without checking the cleanliness of the utensil.

“You seemed all right just a few moments back, what happened so soon?” he asks.

“I can't tell you,” she says. “I don't want to drive anymore today.” She gets up from the wooden stool and rushes to the car. He picks up the scarf and the packet and goes after her.

“Do you want me to get something else for you,” he asks.

“I just want you to drive me home,” she says raising her voice. He gets into the car and throws the packet in the back seat. The viscose fabric hits you and you wish for once you were somewhere else. Why are you always, always with them? What invisible ropes chain you to these two human beings, why does their life drag the weightless weight of yours? You wish you could ask some divine entity, some supra-mundane agency, some otherworldly intellectual for what extraneous purpose are you here. Nevertheless, in the absence of such an oracle, you tether to the carriage, you gulp the salty sea water; you let yourself be drifted by the wind, splashed by the waves. The lush green scenery spreading underneath the coiling tracks is a Persian carpet with unusual thread-work. The cool air is soured with stagnation, nobody speaks.

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They lie on their bed with their backs to each other. The room is a chiaroscuro. Her face his hidden and he lies awake with closed eyes.

“I did it for love, you know,” she whispered.

He opens his eyes. “Did what for love?” he asks softly and turns and embraces her.

Her eyes are burdened with tears which pour down her cheeks like stillicides from the eaves of a roof.

“Everything,” she replied in a voice mingled in equal parts with adolescent silliness, futility and pain. “I did everything for love. I do love you, I love you a lot.” The downpour turns torrential.

He smiles and says, “I know, but sometimes I don’t understand you. What happened in the gas station? Tell me, did you really hate the scarf?”

“No.” she says. “She had one very similar.”

“Did she?” he frowns.

“Yes.”

He sits up, wipes his face and sighs. “Yes, I think she had one very similar.” He turns to her, “But I really didn’t remember that when I got it for you, believe me I didn’t want to hurt you. You are my future, Rumia, she is dead.”

“And yet you have her picture in your wallet.”

“I will remove it. I don’t see it, I promise,” he implores. “It has been there for a long time and I didn’t realize...I will remove it and all the others tomorrow. I promise you.”

She gets up and rubs her hand on his back. “Get back to sleep, it’s nothing. I was just, you know, a bit surprised to see the scarf. I didn’t know what to think.”

“It was a mistake. I really didn’t intend on hurting you.”

“It’s okay, get back to sleep.”

His faint breathing gradually gives way to his usual stertor. You see him lying supine, his heaving torso relaxing under the peace of restful slumber. She is awake though, her eyes are focused at the baby pink scarf that rests on the settee close to the bed. You suddenly remember the cigarette hole. It seemed as if she listened to you for right after you had the thought you see her rising from the bed and grabbing the fabric.

The hole is there, where you imagined it would be. A small cigarette hole it is, almost invisible but very much present like a scar hidden under make up, presently absent, absently present, like you. Her hands are cold; she stands immobile listening to the cardiac organ unleashing a dreadful lub-dub inside her machinery.

Presently you are lifted, drifted, thrown back, and hurled. You think you are lifted high up in the air and then dropped. Your weightless speck of a body dancing to the will of some invisible conjurer is juggled back and forth in time. A small patch of mountainous terrain floats before your eyes, manifesting and vanishing like some photic illusion, and then sleep comes. Sleep comes as you enter the countries with vanishing aspect where in the darkness you notice deep below a flare-path which momentarily illuminate your vision. Gradually the somnolence solidifies and you lose track.

You hear the strumming of a guitar, at first faint and indistinct and then loud enough to plunk you out of slumber. The musically generated vibrations pulsate down your somniferous system and you realize that once more you are an observer to a new movie, another telestically generated vision the likes of which so often come to you sometime in piecemeal and sometime in full. You sigh and decide to endure.

You see a room that looks like a tiny hill-side café, more like a shanty tea-shop with a tin roof and a few benches strewn around a damp little chamber. The floor is cold and wet; it had rained. You see him sitting on a wobbly wooden stool, one foot on the crossbar of the stool and another on the floor. He is tapping his foot to the rhythm of his self-generated music. He nods his head, bites his lower-lip, opens and closes his eyes like somebody deeply sunk in music. The tune is fast-paced with certain slow segments thrown in to add variety. Before him a group of six young men all dressed in heavy winter jackets, pullovers and caps sit nodding their bodies and tapping their fingers. A half-finished bottle of whiskey and another

of brandy and several tumblers sit on a low wooden table next to them. Their eyes are droopy, their voice muffled. The middle-aged proprietor of the establishment having just informed them that the roads are blocked because of the landslide sits close to the lamp and hurriedly gulps a tumbler full of raw alcoholic beverage. The lamp-wick crepitates; the room is about to sink into darkness.

At the back of the room, away from the crowd you see two women sitting on a bench positioned closed to the wall. One of them is she, and the other one is the one caged in picture frames sprinkled about the house. A black and white picture of her with a bright red vermilion *bindi* dwells in his wallet. For some reason the face of this woman is more familiar to you than the other faces you think you know by heart but can never fully recognize. Wrapped in ribbons of fond memory, this face like all the other undisclosed faces is hidden away under heaps of buried treasure never to be exhumed.

"The smell, it's stifling," she says to her.

"But you do drink, don't you?" the other woman asks.

"I do, but not every day. What a nasty weather this is; it seems we can't get out until tomorrow," she says.

"But he seems to be enjoying himself," the other woman smiles and says.

"Is he always like this? I mean he is famous, doesn't he reserve his talent and entertain a chosen few?"

"Shekhar, reserving talent, oh you make me laugh. Don't you remember the story of him singing the whole night to a bunch of elderly ladies who were holidaying in that resort where we stayed for our honeymoon? He is always like this; music-mad is what I call him."

"Isn't it hard to live with a husband who loves music more than his spouse?" she asks.

"It's exasperating at times, but thank god, I have my school and my chores to keep me from being depressed. And it's not that he loves music more than he loves me; I didn't tell him about taking this break. He just came up and said your doctor says you need a change of scenery to recuperate quicker; we are going to the hills."

"And you dragged me with you, best friend coming to service...I shall miss another day in office," she sighed and said. "Anyway, how are you feeling now?"

"Much better. Today is better than other days," the other woman says.

They sit in silence for some time listening to the music. She is feeling nostalgic. The crepitating flame makes her think how in life one needs to take appropriate action to guarantee the fulfillment of one's own deepest desires. She looks at her and says, "Let's go out for a bit, I am sure the smell isn't good for you."

They get up and the other woman brings out a light pink viscose scarf with paisley print out of her bag and tying it around her neck says, "Do you think I should tell him?" She replies in the negative and says, "We'd be back before he notices that we'd left."

They stand on a patch of stony land that skirts the mountain. A smell of coolness, of ferns, of gloomy tress and soaked moss is wafted on the dusk-time breeze. The sky is a lady sullen with grief wearing a purplish gown trailing behind her. The sound of crickets is a constant



drum-beat penetrating the sheer curtain of torpor that hangs in the still mountainous terrain in the evening hour. The guitar has struck a new tune, an impatient track. "Let's climb up," she says to the other woman.

"Climb up?"

She looks around and says, "I am sure the landscape will look more breathtaking from above; and it's not a difficult climb. Come on!"

"I am not sure if I should and I am scared of heights too," the other woman says.

"I will help you, come on. Don't you trust me?"

They climb up, she before the other woman, her rock climbing and trekking skills add to her agility. She grabs the other woman's hand and pulls her up. The other woman is panting, her mouth is dry. Finally they stop. The landscape down has turned from green to brilliant black. Tall trees in the forest that clothe the hill stand like depressed sentinels guarding a derelict mansion. The patch of land where they stand is like a wooden stage held in the air. The surrounding peaks are about to be dyed with the evening's moribund pastel colors. The day is on its last legs; the sun has set. The guitar strum is a faint tune from another world.

The other woman has handed her the scarf when she was climbing up. She now stood behind her and kneaded the fabric in her closed fists. "The view is awesome; let's climb down now," the other woman says. She doesn't reply but awkwardly drops the scarf on the ground and press her sweaty palm against the other woman's mouth and her nostrils. The other woman staggers, she tries to free herself. She moans and tries to breathe, but she presses on, harder and harder. All the energy of her body has concentrated on her muscular arm's grip. The other woman is weak, but she fights to free herself. She can't but finish the task she has long thought of completing. The thought emboldens the pressing palm.

You want to supervene, but you have lost all your energy, the energy to speak, the energy to intervene, the energy of life. You watch with your lackluster gaze and like a patient under an attack of sleep apnea you feel your breathing too have become abnormal. You too feel stifled by a sweaty palm. Eventually you notice the other woman has freed herself and is running towards the slope. She runs after her and grabs her shirt. She lays her on the ground and stuffs the scarf into her mouth pressing the fabric deep into the open hole. Her hand once again obstructs her nostrils and her mouth. The other woman wriggles and moans. The struggle continues; a loud plunk is heard. The song has stopped. The other woman isn't dead yet but she is close to her final unconsciousness. She hurriedly extracts the scarf from her mouth and rolls her body down the steep slope. There isn't any protest; the body disappears in the dark forest underneath. She fancies she hears a thud and starts. She walks back and hides under a tree like a child who has stolen something and is scared of her mother's remonstrance.

Presently she gets up and starts to pant. She is feeling warm; her body is soaked in sweat. She notices the scarf she is holding, the other woman's scarf on which her cigarette had crafted a hole the night before. She pats on her trouser pockets for her cigarette lighter. She looks around and then lights the fabric; the viscose burns with unusual rage. You watch the flames; the warmth scorches your cheek. She kneels and collects a big stone and places it above the ash. Then she gets up still panting and rests for a second with her back against the tree trunk. She takes some deep breaths and listens. The strumming is still audible.

The scene hasn't changed inside the tea-shop when she comes back. Nobody has noticed her departure or her arrival except the bench now shorn off its other occupant and the clumsy tin-roofed room. The smell of alcohol is more intense. The episode is over.

The invisible camera that is fitted to your eyes now zooms in and you see before you another illusion, another scene. A lean man in ill-fitted khaki colored police uniform sits behind a cheap wooden desk and writes something. He and she both tell him about the other woman and that they last saw her in the previous evening. She tells the officer that he has been

playing his guitar all evening entertaining the crowd of young men and the tea-stalls proprietor and that she was with the crowd all the time. She too was inebriated and hadn't noticed the other woman's whereabouts. They tell him that they have searched for her the whole night but hadn't traced her. The officer tells them that the search party hasn't discovered anything either and that as soon as the weather clears up the head office in the town will be informed.

You see him sagging under the weight of the other woman's absence. You see his dark eyes welling up with tears. You see him drinking the foul tea-colored liquid. You see his house littered with empty cigarette cases; you see his guitar has a carpet of dust on its surface. You learn that a month has passed. You learn that a telegram has come followed by several telephone calls. You hear a man in dark grey suit and a striped royal blue tie tell him that the body is half-rotten, half-eaten and pawed by beasts. He tells him that she may have slipped from the top. His alibi is strong; she testifies he never left the room. The investigation is halted; the court dismisses the case for lack of evidence.

The movie of the mind is interrupted. The room and its accessories and the voices start to melt slowly and nimbly and then finally disappear beyond a wavelike hill of cumulus clouds. The tessellating pieces of the puzzle are thrown in the air. They roll and then rest on a marble floor. You see yourself back to the couple's bedchamber; you see him lying supine, you see her sitting on the bed with the scarf lying like a dead cat on her lap. Your mouth is filled with gall; a pungent liquid seems to be pouring down your throat. You feel giddy. You try to recall all that you've seen, but memory fails you like always. You feel like a refugee suddenly shorn off all the blessings life had given her and thrown into a sad country where death awaits her. The futility of your shadowy friendless existence makes you want to cry, only tears never come to your eyes; you are as dry as lips in winter, as land in desert.

Next to you she sits holding the deep secret in her heart and wishing to apologize to you for stifling the life out of you. Her meta-voice remonstrates with her. She is scared, the scarf that she had burnt has returned to her with your memories strewn in every strand of the fabric and she cannot even burn it this time. He didn't know that the other woman, that you, had that scarf with you on the day you died. He hadn't noticed the loss. He sleeps humbly, finally resting after a year and half of pain and misery thinking that this time may be the pain will surely diminish. The clock's ticking continues to gently remind her of the dark hours of the night. She is frozen to her seat; you feel sleepy. Your eyelids heavy, the caged photographs of the other woman stare at you ruefully. You know another illusion awaits you.