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Death of a Queen-Bee

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I press the break hard at the last bend so that the tires rub on the gravel and make terrible noise. There ought to be some way I must let them know I am more anguished than anxious. The crowd at the gate are reading the expression in my face before I park the car under the Flame of the forest and get down. A cop in white vest sticking to his lanky body, wearing kakhi pants and kakhi canvas is at the gate supervising. They bring her out on a stretcher and lay her on the lawn. They look up closing their ears with both hand. the swarm of angry bees are beginning to move in search of new house. Leena's face is red and swollen in a way the spite in her smile is suppressed.

For a longtime I must have sat on that cane chair in the verandah. Paint has faded off in those parts where my body comes into contact with the chair. A familiar pain wears on my hind muscles, the way it always happens when you sit in one position for long.

I wasn't sleeping though. I wasn't awake either, exactly.

I wake up because a street dog distracts me from my attentiveness to a de-je-vu induced stupor. It's a female dog with thin, white coat and gory, black spots upon its face near the eyes.

The lame woman who maintains the garden in our front-yard informed me once, that when a street dog delivers litter, the males are taken by the village folks immediately and the mother is left with the female pups. She addressed the male pups as 'studs', 'stud-bulls' if translated vernacularly, it took time for me to really grasp that word. The woman seemed pleased when I showed interest in chit-chatting. I was surprised to learn from her that male pups are preferred when it comes to dogs, rural folks are wary of adopting female pups. I asked her why.

She giggled as she explained. 'Folks don't like to maintain bitches in their home. It attracts too many male dogs when time comes', she said. She giggled fondly at my ignorance over elemental things.

Later late in the night after dinner, Leena goes to sleep by ten, I got a fair idea what was it all about. Looking at a pack of dogs roaming in the street light. They were growling and running, seven of them, six males pursuing one solitary bitch. It made sense, what the lame woman hinted. It would be a big sulk to have a bitch as pet inside your fence and all the street dogs on earth wanting to have a go at her. A bitch has many challengers but only winner. Or one during the heat.

I am good at analyzing worldly things when I sit alone without my clothes on in the bed room balcony. The soft moonlight tanning my body has a way of provoking rational thoughts, strange fantasies under my skin. I heard Leena switching the night-lamp on, it was time for her piss, so I quietly put on my pajama and slipped into the bed. She said she blankly when she finally

returned, that she is feeling cold. I hugged her from behind giving my warmth, that's what she wanted I guess. Though I said, 'Let me take you to aUro, it might be urinary infection'. She said, 'Rubbish'. I took care not to let her know, I had a hard-on.

The black spots give the dog an eerie look.

The mongrel runs in south-west direction trotting like a Bedouin horse after completing a sweaty race in old desert sand. Often turns to look behind at its own lean, athletic posterior. I wonder if animals take pride in their looks.

Because Leena wastes plenty of time before the dressing table. Admiring herself. She does it every day +before going to sleep at night. She wants, perhaps, to be sure that she looks good in her dreams. She does it at times she wakes up in the middle of the night. She has a mirror fitted on to the backside of the door in the bogs, in front of the water closet. The clinking sound of her pee wakes me from deep sleep, night after night. I never get back my sleep thereafter. One of the reasons I stopped loving her is because of that noise of urine striking the porcelain.

How would dogs react to the image of themselves in front of mirrors? How would dogs react to the image of themselves while peeing?

This poor mongrel would never know those murky spots on its face makes it uglier and so much displeasing to a man. Old bitch, it must have given birth to several litters.

The saggy teats sway limply like waves slapping the reservoir bund on breezy evenings. The last sap from the teats suckled off, the hound looks around hungrily for food. The heads of discarded mackerels perhaps. I hate to address female dogs as bitches. Bitch allows coitus only as long as it isn't conceiving.

I say aloud, 'It's alright' - allow myself some measure of happiness. Then stretch my muscles without really getting up. One of the best ways of sitting in one place is to shift ass without really shifting. There's some relief, but not fully. My eyes squeak in joy as I rub my eye-lids.

I have been wallowing in self-pity for over three months now. It's the last thing I want to think about.

Today I would break the silence.

My forehead feels cool as beads of sweat vaporize in the mild afternoon draught. The clouds hang quite low, which rises vicious heat from the soil. It might rain this evening. It might or might not.

I must break the silence with Leena.

I walk up to the rose plants close to the wall and under the shade. It's the typical Indian pink variety from which scent called *attar* is extracted. It is called *Panner Roja*. The balmy fragrance waltzes faintly despite heavy air. The flowers aren't as fresh as they were at

sunrise. Few petals have fallen off and they litter the pristine lawn. I pick one of them and chew. I like chewing rose petals.

I wish she is here in the afternoon when things are quiet. Right now, it would be easy to speak.

In the evenings the streets are crowded, the sound of civilization from TV shows make things unreal, difficult and submerged. Now it is quiet and heavenly.

A while later I go inside, into the kitchen.

I place an unwashed porcelain cup inside the Microwave oven, filling it carefully with water. The tap-water is relatively warm; it comes from the overhead tank. So I set the cooking time for 1 minute instead of the usual 1 minute and 30 seconds.

The carton containing tea bags is empty. I should have known. Ginger and Honey flavor is my favorite. In the tea shops one gets only over-cooked tea mixed with milk. I crush the Tetley box with silver foils inside with the anger of a hyena dispossessed off the carcass it was devouring. Gently throw it into the garbage can.

The Micro hums and makes those moans. The dim light flickers inside as bottom plate gyrates.

The haversack is ready in the corner of our bedroom. Filled with my things. Nothing much really. No keepsake to remind me of her. Or us together.

I learnt this from my dad. When my mom died, I was six then, he cleaned the house of anything that would remind him of mom. He always stated he loved my mom. He said that even when he returned in the mornings from the concubine's house and prepared me break-fast and milk.

I open the buckles and check once more to see if the shaving gel is inside. The rich lather is too exciting not to miss. I fasten the strap again and swing it over my shoulder like a foot-soldier.

I think it would be unfair. Leena told me, before she left home for office, to remember to take out her clothes from the washing machine and put them to dry. I pull out her wet clothes from the washer, put them in the drier and switch the equipment on. I stretch out on my back, feeling the comfort of the hard mattress with soft cushion. The drier takes about half an hour, I decide to wait till it is over so that I can fold and arrange the dry clothes in her wardrobe. I would have loved to dry her clothes in the sun, I love to secure her undergarments to the strings, putting plastic clips on the exotic places. She has a place for everything, even for her panties. Strangely her panties have designs of hearts on it, red, pink, scarlet, even violet hearts. Hearts in place of flowers. If I were a fashion designer, I would bring out panties with pictures of brains in place of heart. Cerebrums and cerebellums It would signify the modern women better.

Before I close the door, I remember to pick up the toy which blows bubbles. I bought in the village fair. The vertical ring at the rim of the beaker meant for blowing bubbles. The bloke who hawked, sold me a spare bottle of that liquid. A compound of comprising soap water and coconut

oilin delicate proportion. He uses a secret USP. I do not know if he uses spit, for the liquid is sticky. All spider webs are.

The door makes no noise as I lock the house definitively. My doors never make noise. The freedom to slip unnoticed is a great thing.

Bubbles spread around wearing rainbow attire sparkled by sunlight, they float all over like delightful gnomes. The cloudy day allows them longer life than usual. The last one to burst is under the shade of the Margosa tree. I like the short, aimless life of bubbles.

I hide the key bunch under the large, light, brown quartz stone under the granite bench near the bee-hive. We have a garden bench with breadth broad enough for two young lovers to sleep, a large white slab like a tombstone. One moon-lit night, I am more acquiescent during moon-lit nights, Leena and me agreed between ourselves that the first one to die will have the privilege of having that slab on our grave. I wrote crazy epitaph for myself assuming I would be the first one and showed her the lines. She said the lines are too Narcissistic. She said we could agree on a simple, crispy, common line for both. "Rest in Peace". RIP.

I said Okay and wanted it to be slightly altered. 'Rest is Peace'. She didn't quite understand because we made love that night.

Apiary was her idea.

My cocker spaniel developed fleas. All the vets in my district couldn't do anything to ward them off. Leena hated dog-fleas, said they nauseate her. I couldn't ask the dog-fleas their opinion about her.

Leena actually hates dogs.

She wanted my sweet angel with those sweeping ears and droopy eyes to be put to sleep because the fleas wouldn't go off. We had to take the boy to the same vet who tried his hand last. The boy was suffering, I consoled myself.

The fleas left the moment he died. Before I could bury him under the Papaya tree. He used to pee on its trunk, so it was alright to bury him there. He didn't have to get up to pee. I grumbled because the tree bore large fruits after that.

What a silly idea to kill dog just to chase the fleas. As I said Leena hated dogs. Mine was one man's dog, he loved me.

And later she came out with idea of setting up an apiary. To start with one hive, she expounded, and when it succeeds, to have more of them, a battery of sky-scrapers of bee-hives. The idea of living amidst the throng of insidious, crazy insects humming with crude mandibles didn't appeal. The landscape has enough flowers, she argued, the plants needed pollinated.

We could even make the apiary commercially viable, she said and brought an old Kurumbatribal chap from the foot-hills of Yercaud to inculcate the intricacies and practicality of bee-keeping. To teach me how and when to collect honey.

Leena said she will take care of the selling part. Her plan was to prevent me from lazing without anything to do. The day the bee-hive was commissioned, one of the worker bees that came with the queen bee struck. It planted the tip of its armory on my biceps. It was really hard, I mean the sting.

The mandible had embedded in my left haunch, near the green colored mole which the authorities refused to record as my birthmark for identification purpose, before the biometric came into being. I had a tough time, could not sit properly until the red fiery looking object was extracted with a help of a pair of Leena's eye-brow tweezers. A horny looking, big-boobed nurse from the corny government-run health center did it without causing much pain. She slapped my bums later under the pretext of wiping the blood from the spot. Big hospitals do not entertain patients with insect bites. I sort of enjoyed the slap. So I asked her if the blood stopped oozing. She slapped once more and asked me if it did.

Truly, I would have loved bee-keeping as a hobby, had the first strike been on Leena's ass. The apiary project never took off the way she planned, the only good thing that came out was that I developed a taste for green tea with honey instead of sugar.

Coming back to the present, I inspect the hive from a distance of about ten feet, safe viewing distance provided one does not do anything stupid.

Fewer insects hover as it is day time. The Queen bee is asleep after the mass fornication in mid-air. Male bees die immediately, as if screwing is the purpose of life. Some of the worker-bees hanging around are either sick or too old to go out or just busy jerking.

I amble towards the main gate determined to leave Leena, not really knowing where to go or sleep in the night.

On a sudden impulse, I come back, thrust my left hand into the cubby door-hole of the hive and grope inside until my fingers find the queen bee.

The podgy empress sitting on its own fat, fed day-in and day-out by her Beaus, doesn't move or try to escape.

Once the queen comes under my grip, I squeeze it hard till the juice flows on the back of my hand. Other bees begin to sting me raising protest incomprehensively, my hands, wrist, even my elbows. I am used to stings by now. I have been getting used to Leena's, sort of. I always use face mask, the face is where the damage is uncontrollable.

She will know where to look for the house key when Leena finds the house locked.

We had an arrangement.