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## **The Threesome**

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Whenever it was time for their weekly meeting, Aniket would begin to feel uneasy. This had started ever since they had chosen the new meeting point after the closure of their regular haunt, the Indian Coffee House in Connaught Place.

Aniket Bhattacharaya, T.S.R. Natarajan, and Suhas Ahuja were no-holds-barred chums. They had nicknamed each other: Aniket was Chattering Chimpanzee, Suhas was Braggart Panju (Punjabi) and Natarajan was Rasam Nut. They shared their profession and bachelorhood, but nothing besides; they were as different from each other as chalk and cheese. They were journalists; Aniket was about thirty six years old, while the other two were on the cusp of middle age – thirty nine each.

Aniket was intuitive and believed in ghouls, ghosts and unredeemed souls, wandering in search of a home. He had taken part in séances and planchet sessions. He also subscribed to the power of Tantra and told the other two that it was used to do good to the society. He was an expert on South Asian political affairs with a foreign weekly whose articles were syndicated in many newspapers and magazines. He was often invited by television channels for debates on India-Pakistan relations.

T.S.R. Natarajan was curious, rational and fiercely logical. He subscribed to the cognitive reality, dismissing the rest as hogwash, invented by the frauds, fakes and phonies, out to bamboozle others for profit or personal pleasure. He was an investigative journalist with a mainstream leading English daily; his news stories provoked wrath of the corrupt politicians and earned him regular threats from the sand, builder and mining mafias.

Suhas Ahuja was a namby-pamby who stood on two stools. He could not deny the existence of spirits – as a child he had witnessed a spirit possessing an old woman and then leaving her after four days -- and yet was logical and found rationality appealing. Often he would join Natarajan in mocking Aniket for his beliefs, but inwardly subscribed to re-incarnation and the power of black magic.

He was a free-lance journalist who specialised in unearthing scams in the government offices and sold his scoops to a channel that bid the highest sum. He raked in big amounts and bragged about being the best of the lot professionally, which irritated the other two. But what riled Aniket and Natarajan the most were his pretensions to being a creative writer, though he had published just about twenty short stories in mostly mediocre journals. Both of them heartily disliked his offloading on them the crappy stories he wrote, which were pain-in-the-ass read. He forced them to comment on each one of stories in writing and still worse, wanted them to say good things about them.

Whenever the topic came up during their weekly meetings, Suhas would simper, “Friendship has a price, he, he, he.”

“Some price!” Aniket mumbled crossly.

Natarajan fumed, “I detest being a fake. I can’t call the stories by their proper name, that is, shit.” He then challenged Suhas, “Comne on, you Braggart Panju, have the balls to face the

truth. You go around unearthing scams, but you are the biggest bloody scamster! What is the big point of getting false commendatory comments you insist on?"

"They pump up my creative adrenalin, he, he, he."

"Why the hell do you want to live in illusions?"

"Don't underestimate the value of illusions, Buddy. They are life-sustaining, he, he, he."

"Stop your silly giggling," said Aniket. "It is so damned irritating!"

"Yes, don't piss us further," seethed Natarajan.

They had frequent fights and violent disagreements; they constantly needled and riled one other, but they also had warm affection for one other. They were bound by an umbilical cord as it were. None could do without the other two; each wanted the others to be well and happy. Their weekly meetings were a source of intellectual and emotional sustenance which Natarajan said were essential for physical well-being too.

Aniket was filled with a strange sense of foreboding when they were at the Cafe Coffee Fresh. He got an eerie feeling and felt lost. He did not enjoy his favourite Mocha, nor did he pay much attention to the freewheeling, serious and also fun-filled conversation. This was noticed and commented on by the other two, because he being the Chattering Chimpanzee used to hog the conversations earlier.

"What's eating you up, CC?" Natarajan once asked Aniket. "You have hardly opened your trap today."

"Nothing."

"He has hooked a new chick, believe me, Buddy," said Suhas, the muscles around his mouth ready to spread in a grin.

"You have a bloody one track mind. Stop watching too much porn on the Net. Once SAPE gets into the ass of your system, not even Quick Heal would be able to deal with it," Aniket snapped.

"And you might contract Aids from your sexual perversions with the female escorts you hire for your Goa jaunts," Suhas flared up.

"Shut up both of you! Can't you talk normally?" said an irked Natarajan.

"What is wrong with the Bong today?" said Natarajan when Aniket was twenty minutes late in joining them at the Cafe Coffee Fresh.

"I'll call him," offered Suhas. "Where the hell are you, Chattering Chimpanzee?"

"Who is that... Braggart Panju? I am in a shitty jam at ITO (Income Tax Office) Bridge," answered Aniket.

"He is fibbing. Bong blighter. I know he does that often," said Suhas to Natarajan.

"But why?" he asked.

"He doesn't seem to like this place, I don't know why."

Aniket was worried about himself, and about Natarajan and Suhas.

"I don't like it here," he had told them in one of the meetings.

"Why?"

"It is so small and claustrophobic. I find breathing difficult in here."

"How can you turn into an idiot overnight? Air conditioning purifies the air and makes it lighter," Natarajan said.

"And it is never overcrowded. We've always found only a couple of customers when we come here."

Another time Aniket had said, "There is something eerie in here."

"You are a bloody psycho!" remarked Natarajan disgustedly.

"Besides ...." began Aniket.

“What?”

Aniket had wanted to tell them, he could palpably feel a kind soul floating inside the jaunt. It was sending him signals to stop coming here. But he changed track and said instead, “I don’t like that girl.”

“What is wrong with her?” asked Natarajan, amused.

“Oh, come on, she is the sexiest thing I have seen. I can’t take my eyes off her XL boobs, when she bends to place the coffees on the table,” quipped Suhas.

“I agree with the lewd Panju for a change.”

“You always do inwardly, Rasam Nat, he, he ...” Suhas stopped short when he looked at Natarajan’s face.

“Bongs are like that,” said Natarajan. “They believe in all kinds of crap. Even your Numero Uno director Satyajit Ray made spooky movies and G-u-r-o-o-d-e-v wrote ghostly short stories. Anyways, why don’t you like the sweet thing?”

“Rasam Nat, you can’t touch the hem of Ray’s and Tagore’s dhotis, pseudo-intellectual that you are.” Aniket lost his shirt.

“Oh come, come. I know nobody can say a word against the three Rs – Robindranath, Ray and Roshogolla. But anyways, tell us why don’t you like her?”

“She smiles too much.”

“What is wrong with that?” asked Natarajan.

“With her perfect statistics, the smiles make her more fetching, if anything,” added Suhas.

“I think, she has a plan up her ...”

“Blouse? Or down her skirt?” cut in Suhas.

Ignoring him, Aniket continued, “Up her sleeves. She is out to trap you to bed, shoot a video and blackmail you.”

Aniket knew he was being stupid in making her the reason for not meeting at this place. In fact he, too, salivated at her hot figure. He knew they were too intelligent to believe this kind of shit. But he did not know how to dissuade them from meeting at this Cafe.

“One shitty writer is enough, for God’s sake!” said Natarajan.

“Why are you afraid? You might lose control and masturbate right here?” said Suhas.

“I think, she should be a major reason for our coming here. You need someone like her to fantasise,” suggested Natarajan. “As for her smiling too much, only a dunce wouldn’t know that she is in the hospitality business. Her smiles mean nothing!”

“And the perfume she wears causes havoc in my crotch,” said Suhas.

“This is the second time I agree with the Braggart Panju,” said Natarajan.

“I won’t mind being blackmailed by her, if she leads me to where you said she might,” leered Suhas.

Squirming in the jam, Aniket resolved that today he would tell them everything. He would talk about the spirit which had been signalling about the blighted nature of the place. The spirit had once conveyed to him, the Cafe was constructed on a couple of graves and had displaced the spirits whose home it had been till then. Yes, they would mock him to death for this kind of talk but so be it. Today, he was not going to keep back things from them.

“You think there is chance of your getting here today?” asked Suhas on phone.

“Yes, I can see the vehicles have started moving. I think, I will be with you in about half an hour.”

“For all you know, he may be avoiding coming here,” said Suhas.

“Why?” asked Natarajan.

“He knows and we know the girl is a ruse. There is something else at the back of it.”

“What?”

“He thinks the place is spooked.”

Natarajan became thoughtful.

Aniket had been too optimistic. The python-jam moved and stopped alternately. Vehicles crawled now and then. It took him one full hour to make it to the place. But when he did, he stood petrified!

What had been Cafe Coffee Fresh minutes earlier was reduced to a heap of rubble. The furniture lay in cinders, smouldering; metal pieces had twisted into ugly, angry shapes; the two coffee machines were gurgling out milky water. The flavoured curds, stored in automatic vending machines, had created a mess all over.