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Appearances

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‘Okay students! Now I call it a day. Tomorrow will be your holiday because of my being out of town.’ Leela said to her students after one hour’s English Tuition class at her home.

All the students except Mohan left the room.

‘Yes Mohan! Have you any doubt or any query?’

‘No ma’am, I have brought my tuition fee that you asked me to submit. But...’

‘But what Mohan?’ say unhesitatingly.’

‘But ma’am it is just fifteen hundred rupees, the half of the fee. My father said that he would pay the rest amount next month. If you want to talk to him his contact number is 895...’

‘It’s ok dear, no need to talk to him. I understand.’ Leela said interrupting and stroking Mohan’s head lovingly.

Mohan took out three notes of Rupees five hundred each and handed them over to Leela. He wished her good evening and asked for his leave. She blessed him and he went out. After his departure she sat in her chair and unfolded the notes. She put them in a line on her study table in front of her.

She left her body loose in her chair and closing her eyes she started talking to herself.

‘Rupees fifteen hundred in hand, fee of the third semester in college is twelve hundred rupees, that is to be submitted till the day after tomorrow, and tomorrow is Rahul’s birthday...if I save twelve hundred rupees for the fee, I’ll remain with a balance of just rupees...in these three hundred rupees I’ll have to buy a gift for him and the travel charges . . .’she was becoming restless when her stream of thoughts was disturbed by a phone call.

She picked her cell phone and it was a call from Rahul. She received the call.

‘Hello Rahul.’ she said.

‘Hi Leela...is your tuition class over?’ asked Rahul.

‘Yes dear, I am free now. How are you?’

‘I am not fine Leela, I am angry with you. It is my birthday tomorrow and you have not arrived here yet. Are your classes more important than my birthday?’

‘Please try to understand me dear. Students’ house exams are near so I could not take two days leave. I have given them leave for tomorrow and by the first bus in the morning, I’ll be with you my love.’ Leela tried to persuade him.

‘Why from the first bus tomorrow? Why don’t by the next bus today itself? Sun is still shining and you can reach here before the night falls.’

‘I have to buy a present for you Rahul.’

‘Listen Leela, there is no need for any present and if you want to buy something, just buy a new dress for yourself.’

‘But I don’t need any dress Rahul, I have already three pairs.’

‘You call them dresses, Leela! They have become rags. On coming to my birthday party you will meet my friends. You would feel embarrassed because of your looks.’

‘I am coming there for you Rahul. I always look myself through your eyes. No matter whether I am in rags or in a beautiful garb, when your eyes fall on me I feel myself the most beautiful.’

‘Reality is different from Romance Leela. We understand each other but society has a thousand mouths, anyone can comment on your looks. I don’t understand why you didn’t accept the dresses given by me. They were the top branded dresses brought to order.’

‘I wish you would have understood me Rahul.’ She sighed and added, ‘Don’t worry dear; I’ll buy a new dress of your favourite colour for me. Now smile please.’ Leela tried to bring the topic back in the present.

‘Thanks Leela . . . come soon dear. I miss you and love you so much.’

‘I’ll come soon Rahul. I Miss you and love you too. See you soon.bye dear.’

Leela disconnected the call and put the cell phone aside.

She stood up and went into the inner room where a single bed was lying in the corner. A rusted *Gordrej* almirah stood beside it. She opened it to have a look on her dresses which were *rags* to Rahul. Staring at the dresses she sighed and said ‘*Why the realty can’t be romantic Rahul.*’

She closed the almirah and came out of the room. She picked her cell phone and three notes lying on the table. She put them in her purse and came out of the house. She locked the main gate and walked towards the road.

She boarded the city bus to reach the market. Throughout the way she kept repeating...*dress, gift, and admission.*’ There was a great conflict between her head and heart. If she would listen to her mind, it said “admission must be the priority for the present and for the future. Study is the only way that can change the destiny of the poor.”

On the other hand her heart said “Rahul would be happy to see me in new dress. He wants to introduce me to his friends. He belongs to an aristocratic society, I should look decent. I shouldn’t make him feel embarrassed because of me.”

The conflict between head and heart perhaps dates back to the rise of civilization. However in this war mostly the heart comes victorious. Heart persuades mind by giving several options to it. History repeated itself in case of Leela.

She thought that for the admission she would approach her favourite teacher, Sarita, in the college. At the moment she decided to go with the heart. She got off the bus and reached the cloth market. She entered a boutique and asked for a ready-made frock-suit in pink colour.

‘What range will suit you ma’am?’ asked the girl in charge of the boutique.

Leela knew that she had only fifteen hundred rupees. She kept two hundred rupees for the bus fare, three hundred rupees for the gift and two hundred rupees for any emergency.

‘I have eight hundred rupees, if you have any dress in this range . . .’ Leela said looking around in the shop.

‘Let me check ma’am.’ Said the girl and went into the basement and after a moment came with a frock-suit.

‘This is the only one and the last piece in pink, ma’am. But its cost is nine hundred rupees.’ the girl showed the dress to Leela.

‘But I can pay only eight hundred rupees for this.’ Said Leela and after a long bargaining she bought the dress for eight hundred rupees.

Now she had to buy a suitable gift for Rahul. She knew his likings and disliking. She turned to the book market and there she entered a shop of stationery.

‘Have you a Parker pen, sir?’ she inquired the shopkeeper.

‘Yes, we have a wide range of it from ninety rupees to nine hundred rupees. Let me show you some of them.’ The shopkeeper replied.

He showed her many pens of Parker Company. She chose a pen which had a key ring free with it. She got it packed and paid two hundred and fifty rupees to the shopkeeper.

She returned home .She was exhausted by her day’s labour.

She went into the kitchen and found some food she prepared in the morning. She ate her breakfast as dinner. She set an alarm for 4:00 a.m. and went to bed.

Alarm made her get up in the morning. First of all she took her cell phone and typed a text message:

‘Good Morning and Happy Birthday Rahul...May all your wishes come true...after a few hours I’ll be with you...I love you dear, God bless you with all the happiness of the world.’ She sent the message and started getting ready for her journey.

She took bath and wore the new pink dress. She reached the bus stand at 6 a.m. and took a ticket to Gyanpuram. She boarded the bus and sat on a seat near the window. The bus started moving.

Leela was happy and excited at the thought of meeting Rahul. However, subconsciously, she was anxious about her admission tomorrow.

‘What will I do if Sarita ma’am remains on leave, even if she comes how will I ask her for the money....’ many *whats, whys, and hows* kept her restless throughout her journey.

When the bus arrived at Gyanpuram bus stand, she got off the bus. The sun had not reached at its full flames yet. There was calmness in the weather. She called Rahul to come and receive her.

In the mean time she sat on a bench at the bus stand. She started thinking about her miserable past, from her birth to the present, including the abuses by her father, death of her mother and her tuition classes to earn money and all the hardships with which she completed her graduation in Arts from Meerabai P.G.College, Prempuram and her admission in M.A.English in the same college.

The only period of happiness in her life so far was that of her three years of graduation when she was in the company of Rahul. He became her friend and later this friendship developed into a love relationship. She felt herself the queen of the world when she was in his company.

After graduation, Rahul cracked the entrance exam for admission in Post Graduation in English and got admission in Vivekananda University, Gyanpuram.

Leela because of her poverty and family problems couldn’t apply for any university department. She continued with her registration in the same college and got admission in M.A. English. She was very sad the day when Rahul was leaving for the University. However she was thankful to God that even one of them was going to study in a university campus.

Leela was so deeply sunk in her thoughts that she didn’t notice Rahul coming towards her. It was only when he shook her shoulder and said ‘*Leela!*, she came to know that she was on the bus stand and Rahul had come to receive her.

‘Sorry I was lost in my thoughts...Happy Birthday Rahul.’ Leela said coming closer to Rahul. Her eyes became bright and she forgot all about her sufferings. She wanted to hug Rahul but hugging publically was unsocial in Gyanpuram. They shook hands.

‘Thanks Leela. It’s very pleasant to see you here. You are looking gorgeous.’ Rahul said noticing Leela’s new dress.

He took her to the university campus. He wanted to show her his room in the hostel he was living in. But it was a Boys Hostel and girls were not allowed to enter it.

‘Let’s have some breakfast first. There is a cafeteria in our campus, known for its coffee and *Momos*.’ Rahul offered and informed Leela.

‘I don’t know what *Momos* is. I would like to take tea if it is available here.’ Leela said innocently.

‘O come on Leela, don’t be so old fashioned. Let’s have some coffee. I have organized a party in the evening and all my friends are coming. They all are of modern tastes and culture. There will

be all types of fast food, soft and hard drinks. You are not supposed to say that you don't know *what this is* or *what that is*.' Rahul gave her many instructions.

'I understand Rahul. It is your birthday today and I want you to be happy. I'll do as you ask me to do.'

'I love your devotion and innocence Leela. Thanks for always being so nice to me.'

Intellectuals are always in love with innocents. As innocents do not know arguments. As long as innocents are devoted, Intellectuals feel satisfied and remain in an illusion of love. However, if any innocent starts arguing with an intellectual, the monopoly of the later will be destroyed, leading to the destruction of the illusion of love between them.

Leela was too innocent to argue. She followed Rahul as his shadow throughout the day. In the party she was praised for her beauty and good looks. Everybody presented gifts to Rahul. Leela also gifted him the pen she brought for him.

'Your love is my biggest gift Leela.'

'Really Rahul?' asked Leela looking in his eyes.

'Have you any doubt about me Leela?'

'A girl knows only love and love has no room for doubt. I love you Rahul.'

'I love you too Leela.'

Party was over and it was time for Leela to return home. Rahul thanked her again and again for her coming. They didn't want to depart. They decided to walk the distance from campus to the bus stand.

Evening was pleasant. The campus was rich in greenery. A mild breeze was adding to the pleasant effect of the nature. Branches of the trees were swaying as if saying good bye to Leela. She had imagined that on meeting Rahul she would talk a lot with him....but now they were walking quietly. The only thing she wanted then was that the time would stop and she lived forever with Rahul.

However Time stops for none. Night was approaching speedily.

They reached the bus stand. Bus for Prempuram was ready to leave. She had much to say but her throat was choked. She just said good bye to Rahul and got into the bus. Rahul kept standing there until the bus left the bus stand and then he returned to his hostel.

Leela reached home late night. The whole town was asleep. The only sound she could hear was that of barking of dogs. She opened the door and entered the house. She felt as if she had travelled to a fairy world and now she was back again in the world of reality. She lay on the bed and recalled the workings of the whole day. She didn't know when her consciousness turned into unconsciousness and she slept soundly.

She got up late in the morning. She performed her daily ablutions and other morning routine. She reminded herself that today she had to submit the fee for admission in the third semester in college. She had to approach Mrs. Sarita, her favourite teacher.

When she was getting ready for the college she received a call from Rahul.

‘Good morning Leela. How are you dear and what are you doing?’

‘Very good morning Rahul. I am fine. I am getting ready for college.’ said Leela, opening her almirah and taking her old suit out.

‘All right, we will talk later dear’ he said and suddenly added ‘Leela! You were looking very pretty yesterday. Go to college in the same dress today. I am sure that everyone’s eyes will be on you.’

‘Okay Rahul, I’ll. Now bye, see you later.’ Leela disconnected the call and put the old dress back in the almirah.

She wore the pink dress and started for college. She was anxious to see Mrs. Sarita. Many friends met her on the way. So far they had seen her in simple dresses. Today she was in a party-wear. They complimented her on her beautiful appearance.

She had never felt embarrassment because of her cheap dresses but today these compliments on her good looks made her uneasy.

She approached directly to the staff room and she felt relaxed on finding Mrs. Sarita there. She was busy in conversation with her staff members. Leela entered the room hesitatingly and wished good morning to all the teachers present there.

Mrs. Sarita recognized her student and said ‘come Leela. How are you my child?’

‘I am fine with your blessings ma’am. I want to talk to you for a moment in private. Leela said timidly.

‘Sure my dear’ Mrs. Sarita stood up and said to her colleagues ‘excuse me everyone, I’ll be back in a moment.’

She came out of the room with Leela and asked ‘Is everything all right Leela?’

‘I am sorry to disturb you ma’am. But I am in need of some money. It is the last day for submitting fee for my admission in the third semester.’

‘You need not to worry my child. What amount do you want for the fee?’

‘One thousand and two hundred rupees, ma’am.’ Leela replied.

Mrs. Sarita opened her purse and took out the whole amount that she had in it. They were all hundred rupee notes. She started counting them, ‘*One, two, three, four, five, six, and seven.*’ All notes were transferred from her left hand to the right and the amount summed up in seven hundred rupees.

‘Why didn’t you tell me yesterday, Leela? Today I have just seven hundred rupees with me.’ She said giving the amount to Leela.

‘I was out of town yesterday, ma’am. What should I do now, ma’am?’ Leela said miserably.

‘Don’t worry Leela, take these seven hundred rupees and I’ll manage the rest amount.’ said Mrs. Sarita putting her hand on Leela shoulder.

‘Our colleague Sh. Karan Singh Tyagi runs an NGO for helping needy students. His office is in Room no.39 on the first floor in the Arts Block. Go to him and give him my reference.’ Mrs. Sarita suggested Leela.

‘Ma’am, would you please make a phone call to him and recommend my case.’ Leela requested.

‘Sure my child, you reach there, I am making a call to him.’ Mrs. Sarita took her cell phone out of the bag and searched for the name Sh. K.S. Tyagi in the phonebook and dialed the number.

‘Hello, K.S. Tyagi here.’

‘Good morning Tyagi ji, I am Sarita Chaudhary speaking from Department of English.’

‘Very Good morning Sarita ji, how are you and your family?’

‘Fine, sir; What about you?’

‘All is very well Sarita ji.’

‘May God keep showering his blessings on you sir! I have sent a student named Leela to your office. She is a poor girl. She needs some money to submit her college fee. It will be nice of you if you help her.’

‘It’ll be my pleasure Sarita ji, send her here.’ said Mr.Tyagi.

‘Thank you Sir, she’ll be coming in a moment. Bye sir.’ Mrs. Sarita thanked him.

‘Welcome Sarita ji. Bye.’ Mr. Tyagi disconnected the call.

Leela was climbing the stairs with a very heavy heart. She reached at the first floor and after turning to her left, she found herself standing at the gate of room no.39.

‘May I come in sir?’ asked Leela bashfully.

‘Yes, Come in.’ Mr. Tyagi replied.

‘Sir I want to meet Sh. K.S. Tyagi. Are you...’ Leela left her sentence incomplete.

‘Yes, I am K.S. Tyagi. Are you sent here by Mrs. Sarita?’ inquired Mr. Tyagi.

‘Yes sir. My name is Leela and I am a student of M.A.English in this college, sir.’ Leela said in weak voice.

‘Mrs. Sarita said that you are in need of money?’ Mr. Tyagi said in questioning tone.

‘Yes Sir. Today is the last date to submit the fee to get admission in the third semester. Total fee is one thousand and two hundred rupees. I have taken seven hundred rupees from Sarita ma’am and I need five hundred rupees more.’

‘What is your father? Is he not able to pay the fee?’ asked Mr. Tyagi .

‘My father is a drunkard, sir. He does nothing. He comes home once in week or two.’

‘Mother?’

‘She is dead, sir.’

‘How did you get admission in the college? How have you managed to continue your studies so far without any source of income?’ Mr. Tyagi inquired further.

‘I have been giving tuition for the last four years, sir. This time I didn’t get full fee from the students and the amount that I received has already been spent.’ Leela explained her case.

Mr. Tyagi looked at her from top to toe in a suspicious manner. Noticing her party-wear he said:

‘But your appearance doesn’t corroborate your words. Isn’t there a possibility that your father might have given you money for fee but you spent it on your looks? How can I trust you?’

Leela was completely taken aback by his remarks.

‘There is every possibility open, sir. Appearance matters a lot after all. You are not forced to trust me.’ Leela was almost in tears and started to leave the room.

‘Stop! Do you really need the money?’ Mr. Tyagi asked again remorselessly.

‘No sir.’

Leela quit the room and burst into tears. With each stair she descended, her heart went on sinking. Everybody was noticing her but no one dared to ask what her sorrow was.

She was about to exit the main porch of the college when her cell phone rang. It was a call from Rahul. She answered the call and said:

‘You were right Rahul. *Everyone’s eyes are on me.*’