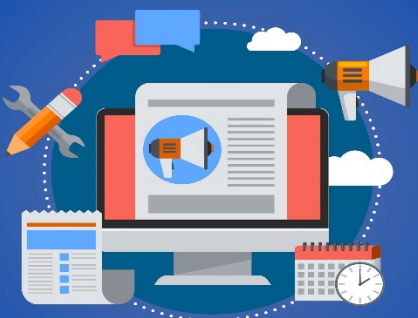


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Loss

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The incessant screams of the sparrows alighted on their coffer under my slanted roofing ceased my sleep. I lay awake watching the petite chicks persistently growling in hunger while their mother was endearingly feeding them one by one with soggy stems, perforated leaves and slyly hoarded worms. How lucky these fledglings are to have a parent who wouldn't probably abandon them before teaching them the necessary survival skills of foraging and feasting. I sprang out of my bed hastily hearing the whistle of the garbage collector and wormed my way through the living room with the overflowing dustbin on my left hand to find the main door with withering green paint and rusty knob, wide open, like every other morning. The waste picker rummaged through the discarded materials with bare hands and flung the scrap iron, half-broken toy pieces, segregated shards of glass into a plastic bag dangling from the handle of his van. Without exchanging a word, I tossed the contents of my dustbin, littering the eco-warriors van, and stayed back for a few minutes to see him salvage through the newly gathered waste. The elements in the plastic bag were going to get a new lease of life, but unfortunately, not all frayed edges can be sewed.

Getting back into the house, I opened the window of the kitchen, a greasy space infested with a mordant smell. While rinsing the overnight's dishes in the sink stinging of palak paneer, I started bickering with myself over the menu to be cooked. A delectable aroma perked my nose, perhaps my neighbour was cooking red meat. The mutton curry that my mother used to prepare with the succulent parts of goat, freshly chopped onion, garlic and ginger still lingered on the fringes of my taste buds. The first time when Maa had prepared mutton curry for me and my sister, after my father passed away, she had streamed out a pool of blood, by unconsciously slicing her finger.

I tossed the peeled pointed-guard snipped at the edges into the immaculate frying pan, amalgamated it with diced onions, tomatoes, sprinkled some salt and left it unstirred on a substantially low flame. Almost exasperated with the weekend blues I walked into the living room and folded the floor mattress making it stand upright in a dismal corner of the room, because Maa

never bothers herself with the household chores. Next, I stacked a bucket on a pallid plank of wood and balancing it against the sink switched on the aqua-guard. There was a time, when I was unacquainted with these turgid switches brazenly on display on the thermo-setting plastic boards. One afternoon when Maa had gone to the nearest electrical appliances shop to call an electrician for fixing the ineffectual regulator, I attempted to fix it. My mother was trying to cope up with the bereavement and the extra encumbrance it escorted with it. My venture was motivated by two intentions, firstly to exhibit the panoply of my talent, secondly as an entreaty to treat me as a grown-up. That day I received a spine-tingling experience, that the human body is a good, rather excellent conductor of electricity. I made a forgotten promise to my mother that I shall never don a façade of being mature more than my chronological age! The promise has faded like my ever-receding hairline.

I turned off the gas, letting the fine assortment of vegetables tossed in spices cool in coherence and switched on the rice cooker instead, allowing the rice to ferment. Stretching myself on the bed I allowed the tangerine rays of sunlight piercing through the periwinkle curtain to intrude my privacy. Meanwhile I revelled in thought that atleast something has forayed my unfrequented room. The squeals of multitudinous birds in sync with the polyphonic human drama on the streets, tried to lull me back to sleep in the late summer's morning. I like the weekdays better, when I can sail my way through the river of commuters exchanging awkward gesticulations with them, unmindful of my drudgery. Familiar faces in the office provide me a sense of peace, though I never make a conscientious effort to talk. Vikky the only friend I had before whom I could unabashedly rant, is now strapped in a wedlock. When he was a bachelor, I had the privilege of sneaking into his terrace to bond with him over alcohol. Swaying between moderate doses to large pegs we had successfully evacuated a plethora of negative emotions. Progressively he distanced himself from me like I did from alcohol.

I picked up the withered petals around my father's and sister's portrait and replaced them with clusters of incensed white jasmine. I packed the cooked food in two containers, flipped them into the shopping bag and marched my way towards the railway station. The birds were rebounding towards their abode probably due to the deepening heat sponsored by the fierce sun. While crossing the market I saw civilizational beings clustered orderly in myriad orbs surrounding the linchpin like vendor selling seasonal fruits and vegetables. I have walked down this street for the umpteenth

time but for a solitary human like me, it was a treat to my eyes. I swiftly drifted my way through the crazy constellation of people. Suddenly my eye caught an eye ogling at me, the familiar face froze my heart yet again. I took a deep breath and smiled at Anshu and waved at her daughter. Anshu reciprocated with the same alluring calm on her face. Memories bounce back, but I don't dare to talk fretful of rekindling the lost rhythm. We had been in love; I had even promised to make her my wife once I secured a job. But the unfortunate events transpired followed by a series of losses, the only thing I could acquire is a job. I even approached her family, but they weren't munificent enough to bequeath their daughter into a house infested with adversity. Anshu was adamant enough to leave her parents for my sake, but I didn't want her to repent, therefore I stopped contacting her without any explanation. The fact that I had abandoned a girl who loved me without any complaints or demands goaded me with guilt. The guilt however dulled away when I encountered her several times contended like never before, but I could never confront the question of marriage.

I reached the platform; the railway staffs were accustomed with my visits. They know how hard I manage to look composed and placated, concealing the raging depression engulfing my soul. Wriggling out of the mob huddling towards a down train, I saw Maa at her usual place mumbling something under her breath, surrounded by the stray dogs wagging their tails relishing on the warmth of her love. Something that I am deprived of. It has been twelve years now, since she has chosen the spot returning home only at night. I saw her there with the same clumsily tied bun, the nape of her neck clammy with sweat, apparelled in a printed chiffon sare and her quivering eyes vigilant in a vain search. Her face has lost all the traces of gleefulness it once had. She keeps searching for my sister, the sister whom I have lost. Her name was Poorna, she was returning from work, travelling on the footboard when she fell losing her balance owing to the overcrowded compartment. She succumbed to major head and spine injuries on the spot.

I handed over the containers to her and headed towards the exit. As I turned around to see Maa in her dishevelled state once again, I found her opening the food loaded boxes and offer the stray dogs one by one before gulping down her part, just like she used to feed me and my sister before quenching her hunger.