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That Magical Encounter

Rituparna Mitra

How many times have we yearned to go back in time and fix that one particular incident that brings us nothing but shame; shame at failing ourselves and succumbing to lowly temptations? We all have a fair idea of what we would and wouldn't do, don't we? We know- or at least would like to believe- that we do what are those core values that we would never ever put at stake. But all it takes is one stroke of vulnerability for all to come crashing down upon us. The opinions and estimates we have of ourselves pierce us like tiny shards of glass with jagged edges; mocking us of our delusions and demolishing all that we were so certain about. We appear, in instances like those, as strange to ourselves as animals to humans-animals that are not bound by conventions, ethics and traditions.

Nitara Dutta has always been a little too sure of her ability to need nothing more than the beautiful memories she had of Rishi, her paintings and their bougainvilleas. Their beautiful story, the journey of more than 15 years and the love that she carried in her heart for him even after 2 years of separation all had started with those beautiful bougainvilleas. She was in 8th grade and Rishi happened to be her first crush. There was something about him that called out to her. She felt at home around him. She felt like she could spread her wings and fly away to distant lands filled with marvelous surprises. He was not her escape for she never needed one. He was her chance to explore, to navigate and to discover. And she couldn't ask for anything more.

She still remembers that day and the unbridled joy that it brought it as clear as the broad daylight. She had prepared a make-shift bouquet of her favorite bougainvilleas-hoping it was pretty enough to bring a smile to Rishi's lips- on his 14th birthday. Tucked amidst the bright blossoms were not mere words but the pure, sincere and somewhat sacred emotions of a 15 year old girl not truly understanding the depth of her feelings yet acutely aware of their significance none the less. Rishi's shy yet definite reciprocation sealed a deal that continues to run its course even after his sudden and excruciatingly tragic demise. It has been two years now since Rishi passed away in that dreadful road accident. Two years of physical separation from the man who was her first and would be the last.

That's exactly what Nitara had decided for herself. She had vowed never to give another

man the space that Rishi had carved for himself in her heart. For two years, nothing could put a dent on her resolution that was set in stone. It took but one evening for both her resolution and her will to break into a million pieces; pieces she would never be able to retrieve and patch up.

It started out like any other ordinary Sunday evening with Nitara preparing Rishi's favorite-*Masor Tenga*- that she later planned on savoring alongside Rumi's poems and some of Nora Jones' soulful creations. Both were things that Rishi relished and could never really get enough of. Just like what he loved to call his soul food-*Masor Tenga*. Just the mere thought of how excited Rishi used to get at the slightest mention of *Masor Tenga* filled Nitara's heart with delight. That man was something- something rare, something incomparable. No wonder, she never even had the minutest of inclination towards reconsidering her decision of never marrying again despite constant urgings from both her as well as Rishi's side of the family. She had a love that was so whole in its being, so fulfilling that it left no any space within her to build something new with someone new. She was as much happy as she was content and she had no any desire for anything more.

Little did she know nothing would remain usual about that Sunday that she had been looking up to for the entire week courtesy to the chiming of her doorbell that didn't bring a visitor but an intruder. A disruptor, a usurper whose uninvited presence would shooting a thousand arrows straight through her beliefs dislodging each from the very root; rendering her absolutely defenseless. Nothing could've prepared her for what happened that day. Neither, can she ever turn back from the events of that calamitous evening.

Standing outside her door was that very neighbor who had been contributing remarkably towards the gossip quotient of all the community ladies ever since his arrival- Mr. Vashist. She had heard a lot about him. To escape the dreadful and the undesirable ennui, one often assumes the role of a pseudo-author imposing his imagination on someone else's situation; cooking up tales that often are mistaken as reality. Nitara had experienced, firsthand, the amount of attention one could attract towards oneself owing to a single stroke of fate. Two years ago, the community was as much interested in her life as they're now in Mr. Vashist's.

Apparently, the man had a "troubled" marriage. His wife kept moving in and out of the house. Sobs and screams communicated to the neighbors a saga of unsettling distress that made

Mr. Vashist a favorite pastime of many such unoccupied voyeurs Nitara often ran into and had to endure for decency's sake.

The cause of Mr. Vashist's visit turned out to be her a little too kind neighbor-the community did have its fair share of pleasant people as well-Mrs Kalita. The sweet lady happened to have breathed in a word or two to the man about her interest in painting piquing his curiosity. He came with a request to get acquainted with some of her creations.

Nitara was taken aback by his request. Not every day, someone came knocking at your door asking you to put up an exhibition of your art for them to get a thrill out of. She was a little embarrassed had Mrs. Kalita been too generous with her words. But at the same time, the opportunity to talk to someone about something she was extremely passionate about and not having to explain how her life was not as "lonely" and "incomplete" as it seemed to most people excited her a little too much to turn away the earnest looking man.

She invited him in and guided him to her tiny studio. Mr. Vashist- Prateek- looked like a kid inside a candy store. His enthusiasm and amazement flattered her beyond she could put into words. Prateek was eager to know the inspiration, the story behind each of her pieces. No one, absolutely no one with the only exception of Rishi, had ever been so enthralled by her art-work; so captivated, so keen on exploring. It did feel refreshingly good. The warmth in his eyes when he praised her made her a bit greedy and she ended up inviting him to stay for dinner.

Nitara realized her foolishness only after extending the invitation. Did Prateek even like *Masor Tenga*? Should she make something else? But what exactly? She had no idea what the man liked. Couldn't she save the invitation for some other day? Such an idiot she was behaving like in her giddiness. She was 30 for heaven's sake. This kind of behavior hardly suits her.

However, much to her surprise Prateek enjoyed the meal as much as he enjoyed discussing her paintings with her. She couldn't recall the last time she rejoiced so much in someone's company. Everything about the man from his childlike laughter to the genuine compliments he kept showering upon her made her revel in seamless joy. How could a man like him be the cause of any woman's sobs and screams!?! A shiver ran down her spine along with that line of thought. What was she even doing!?! How could she even dare to forget!?! Prateek.....Mr. Vashist was married. He was bound to someone both by law and by custom. He was someone else's. Forget

about him. What about her? Hadn't she vowed to be Rishi's eternally? How could she stoop so low just for a moment's happiness? How would she ever face Rishi? How would she ever face herself?

In a quiet voice she requested P... Mr.Vashist to leave. He had an ocean of questions swimming in his eyes but asked none. He asked none. He simply said, "Urmila is bi-polar. We've tried everything. But to no avail. I can't turn away from her but I dread being with her too. I've never said this to anyone. But this feels right. Take care Nitara. I shall never forget this wonderful encounter. Thank you so much."

She could only hold her tears till the door shut firmly confirming the departure of what seemed like her only chance of retrieving pieces of herself she'd lost somewhere in her adamant quest of redefining love and loyalty. For a few moments she'd broken free of the shackles she'd forced upon herself and tasted freedom-refreshing and uplifting brand of freedom. She knew every day she'd jostle much more than a little with her unavoidable guilt to trace the remains of that very invigorating taste that would linger, perhaps, for an eternity. Such was the magic of that wonderful encounter.

Bio note:

Rituparna Mitra, 24, holds a postgraduate degree from Cotton University. She is extremely passionate about writing short stories and poems and has been published twice in both online platforms such as Indian Periodical as well as offline platforms like The Assam Tribune (an extremely popular state-based newspaper.) She aspires to explore the innate reality of man in her creations.