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In the Light of Darkness

Sreelekha Chatterjee

In the dim candlelight, I could barely discern the staircase. It was my classmate Ruby's house, where the stairs originated from one corner of the living room up to the corridor of the first floor of the building.

"Go on, Rita..." Ruby said, observing my hesitation.

Nodding my head, I proceeded towards the stairs, and took the steps facing backward with a candle in one hand and a six-by-six-inch mirror in another, where I occasionally peered to glance at my sixteen-year-old innocence.

"Bloody Mary!" I whispered thrice while my body trembled and a portion of the hot liquid wax fell, burning the fingers of my right hand.

I reached the top of the staircase, but Bloody Mary didn't show up. Agitated with the interminable delay, I was about to descend the stairs when I saw a faint light in the mirror. Hoping that I would get to see my future husband, I kept staring intently. The light loomed bigger and closer, persistently wavering until it formed the figure of a human being, its imperceptible body absorbing my entire reflection. It was a lady with black curly hair, a repulsive face—resembling that of mine—emanating an unearthly gloom, wearing a long white gown of some bygone century. Dreading the sight, I closed my eyes and reopened after a while to find the lady in the mirror had not much of a face anymore—no nose, no cheeks, and no lips. The claws of some dark entity had scraped the tissues away, distorting her face; her mangled flesh barely clung to her exposed skull, and from gnarled crevasses glittered two glowing, palpitating eyes that held me. A shiver stole along my spine, my heart into my mouth, and slowly, my faculties seemed to abandon me. Globes of dark-brown blood throbbed in the exposed veins. Suddenly, a waterfall of blood gushed out in a little purple jet, welling out of the holes in the veins, camouflaging the woman's face in a crimson mask. The blood pouring out formed a large pool on the floor. From the depth of silence originated a cry, starting as a sorrowful moan, then growing into a tremulous shriek—as the eyes in the mirror assumed an expression of savage, ferocious joy—and intensifying as violent groan that tore apart the night, indicating an advent of catastrophe.

Shuddering at the thought that I'd confronted the consequences of a hazardous expedition, I took a few tottering steps down the stairs, trembling to the tips of my fingers, feeling my cheeks quiver. Averting my eyes from the mirror, I found that the face had no

existence in the outside world, external to that of the hand mirror. With the thought in mind, I shook uncontrollably as I turned towards Ruby, and we stared at each other in abject terror. Sensing drops of blood fall from my chin, the grip of my hands loosened abruptly, and the contents slipped onto the floor. The candle extinguished on its own after falling onto the staircase and the mirror tumbled down and broke into a thousand pieces.

“What happened?” Ruby shouted, her voice echoed unpleasantly in the vacant house, reverberated in the corridor, and came back in a voice that was unlike hers.

Fear of imminent death and unimaginable distress engulfed me in the pitch darkness, my brain reeled from the accumulated experience, and I fell into a swoon.

When I regained my senses I discovered myself in a strange place facing a glass barrier, illuminated with bright yellow rays of broad daylight. I looked at the glass from top to bottom, with unsteady eyes. Surprisingly, I could see Ruby’s living room from where I stood—the bleak, dreary area had a sofa-set made of beige-colored fabric that was a few feet away from my position, at the middle of the room; with a center coffee table adorned with a silver flower vase having bright red roses; a costly, embroidered carpet on the floor; a fireplace at one side of the wall; a small window beside the main door; and from one end rose the stairs to the first floor of the house. I was numb, paralyzed, as if frozen like ice, and dared to make any movement. For a moment I thought that it was a result of fear developed from my own horrifying experience the previous night, a hallucination born of absurd reasoning of my unstable mind. A glance at my rigid state dispelled my thought in a flash, as it was the embodiment of all possible human fear, a curse that had befallen me, and there wasn’t a capability to flee or a single impulse left to free myself from its vengeance.

Realising that I’d succumbed to evil influences, I waited with bated breath wondering whether I was somewhere in the passing phase, post-death to another life, unsure of how much time had passed, when Ruby’s father came before me.

He kept on adjusting his tie, looking at me as if scanning me.

“Uncle, uncle...” I called out but my voice trailed off.

Expressionless, he left the place after a while.

What was he looking at? Was there a mirror? I recalled that there was a big rectangular, immeasurably old mirror on the wall, beside the window of the living room, an antique piece, probably a family heirloom, that took into its expanse the entire place, including the stairs, and where one could see one’s whole reflection from head to toe. Perhaps I was embedded in that noiseless enclosure—dismal, lonely.

At the end of a boundless period, a thick veil of darkness descended upon me after the dull orange-grey daylight ceased to flow in through the window. Weary of standing in the same position, I perceived someone enter the room and switch on the lights, indicating the advent of evening. I didn't care to see, as I was unable to comprehend where exactly I was. After some time, Ruby's parents assembled in the living room. Unexpectedly, my parents also turned up and sat on the sofa.

"When did this happen?" Ruby's father asked my parents.

"It has been almost seven days that she is in a coma. The doctors have advised us to take care of her at home." My father replied, his voice heavy and breaking with uneasiness.

"And we don't know whether we will ever get her back..." My mother started crying, seized with a sudden paroxysm.

Who was she talking about? I shouted out loudly but my voice died in my throat.

Ruby came in abruptly, assailed by worries—hair dishevelled, eyes lowered in shame as if regretful of some crime that she committed.

"If we hadn't played the game... she got so frightened." A look of vague terror lingered in her eyes.

After some time all of them left and I returned to the solitude of that room in complete darkness, grappling with an invisible foe—everything incomprehensively sinister, silent and motionless. My whole body ached and twitched from the discomfort of an endless wait in a static position for hours together. I'd been in a state of trance when suddenly I was jolted out of it in the middle of the night on hearing a noise somewhere near the sofa. I continued to gaze at the sofa, and I fancied I saw on it a pale, misty outline of a human figure. On looking carefully, I detected the silhouette of a man. As my eyes got accustomed to the darkness I clearly saw an elderly man, probably in his seventies, with unkempt grey hair and a brown beard, but neatly dressed in what seemed to be a dark suit. Strangely, he looked at me, eyeing me with curiosity.

"I am Ruby's grandfather. I couldn't comb my hair and beard for so many days you see." His voice seemed to originate from an empty barrel.

But he had passed away a few days ago. How could I see him?

"If you promise not to play such games ever again, I can help you go back to your old form." His gestures were hopeful, exuberant. "You have to swear that you will never try to see what the future holds for you." He resumed, smilingly.

“Yes, I’ll never do that again.” I kept repeating that countless times when suddenly I felt myself being shaken by an external force. On opening my eyes, I found my mother stooping over me.

“Thank God, you are alright!” She said while tears started streaming down her eyes.

“Where am I?”

“You are in your own bedroom.”

My eyes wandered to all the known objects in my room and paused at the dressing table mirror. I staggered up to where the mirror was. Startled, I found my reflection along with that of Ruby’s grandfather through the depths of the looking glass. I kept staring at the fiery, piercing glance of his eyes, holding me spellbound, as he smiled and winked at me before vanishing into the intolerable light of fantastical visions.

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Author’s Bio:

Sreelekha Chatterjee’s (she/her) short stories have been published in various magazines and journals like Ink Pantry, York Literary Review, Mad Swirl, Tell Me Your Story, Flash Fiction North, Friday Flash Fiction, Borderless, Usawa Literary Review, The Wise Owl, Different Truths, Storizen, Five Minutes, 101 Words, Bulb Culture Collective, Prachya Review, Creative Flight, Literary Cocktail Magazine, and have been included in numerous print and online anthologies such as *Fate* (Bitterleaf Books, UK), *Chicken Soup for the Indian Soul* series (Westland Ltd, India), *Wisdom of Our Mothers* (Familia Books, USA), and several others. She lives in New Delhi, India.