

The Juvenile Love Letter

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It's my life-time regret that I could never read my juvenile love letter, delivered to me at my fifteenth year, which was as thick as at least my Ph.D thesis; the meaning of which I understood after I actually submitted my Ph.D thesis years later.

Life had got over me, by then.

Did I hate that letter? I mean at least the touch and feel of that letter? Honestly, no.

What was there in the letter that I faced that with such bewilderment, looked around like a mirror, and in evanescence it even surpassed the bubbles that figure on water?

This story may sound somewhat ornamental, a make-believe one, or almost a lie. But it's true, like the rain drops or the moonlit nights. At that time my world was just a child's play. I was never torn between faith and infidelity, the existence of that letter never mesmerized me; yet I was caught, trapped in fancy's snare.

Ever since Samal Sir handed over that book to me, (yes, I thought it was a book !) the meaning of all other books were laid bare. Since then the cuckoo has stopped singing songs of love and happiness in spring. All other birds have been bearing with storms, rains, heat and cold patiently in the seasons of pain, waiting for spring when the cuckoo will sing them the songs of love and happiness again.

But since then the earth has seen only five seasons, sans the spring season.

Thirteen is always my number, be it good or bad. I saw him, I mean Samal sir, when I was thirteen, in class IX in our girl's high school. Our batch was the smartest batch, as the teachers would say. We were happy-go-lucky kind of girls, always doing *masti*; of course in studies, and in extra-curricular, we were the best, always making our teachers proud whenever there was an inter-school competition. I had a special privilege in the school, first, for being the topper and the literary champion of the school, second, for being the daughter of one of the teachers.

I was in section-A, but most of my friends were in section-B. My best buddy Saloni was also there in section-B. Anyway, at that point, we were not best friends, were only formal friends, even though we used to be best friends during our lower and upper primary classes. When we were in the primary school, we were deeply attached. The moment we reached the school, we would go behind the bush and exchange our frocks for the day. How I loved her sweat-smelling frocks, which were much better than mine in texture and quality! She was from a rich family, her father could afford good frocks for her. Mine were always those cotton frocks made of floral-patterned, bold coloured clothes, with no embroidery, no frills and no lace. My mother used to buy an entire rim of cloth from Sahoo Vanijya Pratisthan on a wholesale rate, and frocks were stitched for us sisters in similar pattern with the same clothes. If any cloth was left over, it could very well serve the purpose of being a blouse for Maa or hankies for Baba. We never liked it. Anyway,

nobody laughed at us as most families followed the same. Saloni loved my frocks. We would wipe our noses and sweat in each other's frocks throughout the day, and during the last period, again go behind the bush and change, wear our own frocks before going home. Things changed once we came to the high school. Our sections were different, so was the friend circle. Initially we both shed tears, but later on her *makara* (a way of addressing the best friend) and other friends convinced her that I was arrogant since I always stood first; and since my Maa was a teacher in the high school, hence I had every reason to be proud.

Anyway, years later, during our graduation, again Saloni and I became best friends, friends for life.

Back to high school, I was a cool kid, completely tomboyish, *bindass*. I lived life with a careless care in the sense that I was casual about everything else except academics. I could never tolerate if anyone got even half a mark more than me. I was not certainly jealous, but my revenge was in getting at least ten marks more than that person in the next examination. Ours was almost a joint family, always relatives or friends of my parents coming home at the wrong time. Sometimes even Baba would forget which girl was in which class, perhaps due to over-population; and of course he had a busy schedule being the only man in the household.

In class IX, a new girl came to our school from Bhubaneswar. Sonalika Das. The only daughter of the Branch Manager of State Bank of India. She was fashionable, she spoke with an accents, and became the darling of the school within no time. Even my childhood friend Saloni left no stone unturned to be in her good books.

Before that, my friends in section-A, like Nirmalaa, Gita, Saraswati, Tripti and everyone else used to pamper me. I helped them with studies, and in return I was bribed with pickles, sweets, berries and delicacies from their homes. Since Sonalika came, she became the only attraction, everybody tried their best to please her, be her close friend. Nirmalaa went to the extent of crying to draw her attention, and got bag full of berries, chocolates and pickles for her. Suddenly I became secondary for them, even though Sonalika herself had respect for me .Because she was told about my accomplishments by her parents and the principal of the school.

The worst thing had to happen. She managed to get one percent more than me in the half-yearly examination since she had opted for Sanskrit as an optional subject which is a mark-fetching subject. I went under depression for a week , shut myself in the small room upstairs in my house, and went on crying. Maa was not upset about it since both I and Sonalika were selected to appear in the forthcoming National Talent Search examination to be conducted after four months, covering the syllabi of both IX and X classes. Maa knew that I was very self-motivated; after crying for a few days, I would come forward and study. During such moments, she rather told my sisters and father not to interfere with the stubborn girl. I never liked anyone nagging with me or being questioned. Exactly that's what happened. I didn't take a moment's rest till I got two percents more than Sonalika in the next examination. Anyway, she left our school because her father got a transfer to Cuttack. Till today I keep searching for her on the Facebook, not to take any

revenge, of course. Just to see how she is placed in life now, the girl who defeated me at one point in life, even though momentarily. Last year when Saloni's sister Mama told me over phone that Sonalika is a house-wife, perhaps I was secretly pleased. Human nature, after all.

Back to the school, the National Talent Search (NTS) examination in class IX was going to cover the syllabus of even class X ! My parents, as a policy, never sent us out for private tuitions, because they themselves were teachers. That is a separate issue that they never ever helped us with studies at home. I was worried, how to cover so much within such less time, and which chapters were important since there was no guidance. I was good at literature and social sciences, but science was my trigger. We didn't have a trained science teacher in the school; Sonalika, Saloni and every one else was dependant on the private tutors. Thus, my condition was hopeless.

At that point of time, Samal Sir joined our school, as our new science teacher. A fresh M.Sc graduate from the University, he was sent to us. Poor thing, a young male teacher in a school of all girls and most female teachers, including the principal. You can imagine his condition.

Samal Sir's first class with us ended up in a disaster. He wanted us to introduce ourselves, telling our names and hobbies. Everyone wanted to give her best bio-data seeing a good looking, new male teacher, only to rag him. When my turn came I told, "I am Nandini, my hobbies are elocution, debate, reading books and cooking".

"Sir, she is our Hindi teacher's daughter."

"Sir, she is our class monitor and literary champion."

He tried to calm us down, but in vain.

Then Saraswati asked, "Sir, what are your hobbies? Apart from teaching in our school, I mean."

"IIdon't know. Not sure Ok, let's start with chapter -5 today. Open your Science books."

"Sir, what's the hurry? Please talk to us for sometime *na!*"

"See, I may complain the principal if you all do not cooperate. Science syllabus is vast, please concentrate!"

At that point, the bell rang, and all the girls burst into a laughter, as loud as possible. He instantly left the class, leaving the attendance register on the table due to nervousness. He was sweating; his fair cheeks had become crimson, eyes protruding from under his powerful glasses. I felt pity for him. "Girls, you should have behaved! Now, what was that? Do you behave like this with other teachers?"

"Oh, seems like you liked him a lot, *han?*" said Tripti.

"No....I liked him. Spare him for me, ok?", snapped Saraswati.

Saraswati was the eldest girl among us. Her womanly features, blooming breasts, seductive smile, long hair and sensuous walk made her eye-catching, which I understand now. At that time, looking at myself, I would only think sometimes, how can a girl be like her, just a woman! Some girls told, '*she is an aunty*'.

The coming one and a half years, till we completed class X and left the school to join the local college, Sarswati tried her best to draw Samal Sir's attention. She would wear blood red suits and lift her *dupatta* up to her neck during school picnics and roam around him. She would stare at him with moist eyes in the class while he was teaching. Would drop a pen or pencil and lean down to pick it so that he can look at her. She would sing love songs for him during *antaksharis* on occasions like *Ganesh Chaturthi* or *Sripanchami*. One day, she even dared to go to his bachelors' mess in the pretext of some doubt in studies, which, that poor gentleman had to clear standing on the verandah beside her while all the passers by glanced meaningfully. Because he didn't like to call a girl inside a bachelors' mess.

This was the talk of the class most of the time – that Saraswati was head-over-heels in love with Samal Sir. I always rubbished it. “We are here to study, to get a first class, and make our parents and teachers proud. Not to fall in love with teachers, right?”

“Don't be a Mahatma Gandhi. We all know that these days Samal Sir is going to your house every evening. Your Maa is a teacher, so it's easy for you, no?”

They were right. It was not much difficult for me to have him in my house, because he had respect for a senior-most teacher like my Maa, who invited him to our place.

In fact, it was not Maa's idea, it was Baba's and my eldest sister's idea that since I didn't go for a tuition, and I had to cover a vast syllabus for the NTS examination, the new Science teacher from our school can be contacted and requested to come for an hour in the evening to our house and clear my doubts till the examination was over. Later on, he can be paid in kind if not cash.

He agreed.

The science-teaching-sessions from five to six in the evenings started.

Four to six in the evening was the play time for all, but I had to sacrifice an hour for the home tuitions. Samal Sir was a very good teacher. His concepts were clear, so was his diction. His only problem was he was nervous. He had never had the guts to have eye-contact with me at home, sitting on the same table with me, even though in the class he would always spot me the moment he entered and would smile. He was quite formal with all of us, both at home and in the school. He spent his spare time in the staff common room reading some bulky books. One day I asked him, “Sir, what do you read during the break time in the school? You are always with a story book!”

“No, I don't understand stories, or literature for that matter. I am preparing for the Bank P.O. examination and other competitive examinations.”

“But you have to leave teaching for that! You are our best teacher. How shall we study without you?”

“But by the time I qualify in some competitive examination, you would have completed your X Board exam. You would be in the college and get much better teachers. Then you will forget me.”

“No Sir....no teacher would be as good as you. I shall never forget you. You are the best.”

“You mean it?”

That was the first time he directly looked into my eyes during our private classes. That was when my eldest sister entered the room with two cups of coffee for them. She was older than him, was doing her M.Phil in the University at that time. She had come for the summer vacation. We all were scared of *didi*, may be because she was the eldest. And there is something in her personality that is awe-inspiring and she is seriously, definitely authoritative.

“What’s up? Studies over?”

“*Namaskar didi*. When did you come?”

“ I came yesterday only. So, how is your student doing? How many days left for the examination?”

“One more month. Her progress is remarkable. She is thorough with all the chapters by now.”

“Oh! Then why are you teaching her more? She need not be spoon-fed.”

“No, we are revising. She has to compete with the best students of every school.”

“That’s fine. But don’t make her over-dependant on you. We had never had tuitions, and we did well every time.”

He kept quite, sipping coffee. I was uneasy, *why is she talking to Sir like this? He is most respectable.*

“By the way, your name is Samarendra Samal, right?”

“Yes, *didi*.”

In the evening I heard her asking Maa, “Is this Samal a Brahmin?”

“No, Samal is not a Brahmin surname. Why?”

“No, just like that.”

There was only a week left for the examination. My workload was more. Studying for the regular classes, doing class work, home work and also preparing for the NTS examination. Samal Sir was a great help. He used to prepare charts for me from each chapter during his break time, and bring those for me in the evening. I was eagerly looking forward for the evenings for the charts, notes, classes, and for him (??). He had become a daily habit, even though he hardly ever spoke to me ,not even a word, after an hour of study. He would abruptly get up and leave the room before I could thank him for the day. He was a thorough gentleman. He was good, if ever anybody was. In the clay-like mind of a fourteen years old girl, his sincerity, clean fingers, gentle smell, shining teeth, spectacles, sharp nose, curly hair, slim, tall and fit personality, everything had an impact, even if I didn’t comprehend that then.

Because I was no dreamer at that point. A very practical and ambitious student, my only aim being to be the topper.

That day before leaving he told me, “By this time next Sunday, you will have no more tuition with me.”

“Why Sir?”

“Forgot? Your exam is on Sunday morning, after that you don’t need tuitions anymore; you’ll study on your own, madam has told.”

My heart sank in.

Perhaps my eyes were moist, perhaps not.

I started doing *tip-top tip-top* with my tip-top-ball-pen restlessly, thinking something which I don’t remember now.

Suddenly he stopped me by gripping my thumb, took the pen away, put it gently on the table and still holding my thumb, he said, “Don’t do this, don’t be restless. At this time you need to be patient. You have to qualify and get this scholarship, for my sake, for our sake.”

Our sake?

I snatched my thumb after a few seconds, and suddenly felt my mouth was dry. I felt like vomiting. A bottomless feeling. I didn’t know what it was. Told, “Yes Sir, I am trying my best.”

He got up to go. Had one last glance at me, intently, and left.

I guess, since that day he started his adventure -- of writing a nearly five hundred pages love letter!

My evening classes were over. NTS examination was over. Within a few months we were promoted to class X. A new Science teacher joined that year who took over our Science classes. She was a senior and good teacher again, and Samal Sir was forgotten by most of us. Of course Saraswati didn’t.

Saraswati was trying her best to go and meet him in the staff room or the corridor in some or other pretext, and to her utter disappointment, he was always the same old expressionless, stony, ruthless man.

And I didn’t. I, never, can.

But I never spoke to him, except on a few more occasions. Like, there was a Science Exhibition in the district head quarters and I was selected from our school to represent. I prepared a project on the seven colours of the rainbow, called *Varnachakra*. The day I went to the district headquarters, which was two hours by bus, he accompanied me. The school sent him as he was a competent and responsible science teacher. Two other juniors were with us, Saibali Pal and Tanushree Mishra. We three sat on one larger seat and he sat on the other side, where my face was reflected directly to him on the rear view mirror. To his advantage, it was not visible to the other two girls. All I could know was two moist eyes were intently, painfully, sagaciously looking into my eyes through the mirror, and this time I was quiet, expressionless. On the way back, he ensured that we three girls reach home safely, never volunteered to drop me home alone after the other girls had left. On the other hand, he told the juniors, “let’s drop the senior girl first, then you two can go together since you are neighbors.”

Every day we had a prayer class before the day began, where the girls of different classes would queue up separately, and one senior could sing a solo *bhajan*, line by line, and others would follow her. My turn was on every Monday. I was almost a fine singer, if not good. Every Monday I found him waiting much before time in the prayer class while he skipped it on other days of the week. I had told him sometime that white was my favorite colour. Now all his shirts were white, off-white or shades of white. Of course that suited his clean personality and innocent countenance.

He made friendship with a teacher of my father's school who was our distant relative, a cousin. But I am sure that he never told him anything about me out of fear.

Now I can realize how choked he must be feeling, and how restless. But it was not reflected on his calm, peaceful eyes, like the *Buddha*'s. It seemed as if his gaze was always fixed on the distant horizon, looking through things, not looking at them.

Such a strange man he was.

Today I am writing his story confidently, because I am sure that he must be a bank P.O. or a Branch Manager in some bank by now, who must be least interested to read literature, forget about a short story from a literary journal. He might have even forgotten that I wanted to be a Professor of English.

After the test examination of class X, we were given preparatory holidays. Most of us stopped going to the school in order to study at home. I am sure he must not be feeling like going to a school where I was not there. I was the centre of his world; I had inadvertently sowed the seeds of the moon in his heart. I was his only wish, without uttering a single word. His words might be in some other form, fully drenched, fully wet, deeply drowned, wrapped in illusions or completely nude, but never articulate. I was his gorgeously decorated goddess, wild enthusiasm, burning incense. For him it was enough to light a lamp in front, be the candle and the light-worm himself. He was running aimlessly in a solo-faced tunnel, with the knowledge that he would have to run back all the way as there was no opening in the other side of it. Still he loved running in complete darkness, alone. Now I wonder, quite often, what made him fall in love with a girl like me, with no looks, no sense, no understanding of love, a flat-chested, wheatish-skinned, ignoring Saraswati, a complete woman, with body language of a classical beauty and hair like Shakuntala's.

The reason can be any or many.

I knew that he hailed from a family of all boys; even his mother was dead. He had only his father and brothers. He must have been very studious, given his standards and academic career. He joined a girls' school at an young age as a teacher, and the girls started leg-pulling, harassing him. Perhaps he saw respect for him in my eyes, and admiration. I made him comfortable and feel at ease with me during those few months of private classes. I was the first girl he spoke to, ever, and instantly he fell in love with me. He must have discovered a similarity between him and me, which I realize now. We both were fun-loving, studious, both were eager to learn had a scientific bent of mind, were

foodie people and lovers of music. But there was a binary opposition too. I was talkative, extrovert, he was quiet, introvert ; and he didn't know how to express himself. That is why, perhaps, he was a science teacher and I am a teacher of literature . Opposite poles attract, which he realized the year he met me, and I realized now, after two decades, after I learnt all the lessons of life. Love is the last chapter for me; unfortunately, it was the first chapter for him. I climbed all mountains, steeped on every slope; thought love was a desert, hence best avoided.

Finally I got swayed by the river. Love never came to me, the wild stream.

That year was a glorious year for me; I came out with flying colours in the Board exam. I was in the news papers, my family was proud, excited, my friends were happy, and all of us got busy with preparations for the +2 admissions. I faintly remember, my parents sent Samal Sir a packet of sweets and a suit piece, since he never accepted any money for teaching me all those months.

My cousin told me that Samal Sir went to the temple for the first time in his life, that day, for a thanks-giving.

I had +2 admissions in a fortnight. My classes started after another fortnight. I enjoyed my classes, made new friends, and a few of my old friends were also with me.

The college was three kilometers away from our house, and I had to go by walk since I never learnt cycling. Days passed by. My memory about the school days slowly became faint. I had new pastures now, new wings to fly.

But undoubtedly, there was something at the back of my mind, a concealed sensitivity, conceived, but never nourished. A seed, never watered, which never ever bloomed into a sapling. That feeling cannot exactly be called guilt-consciousness, since I was guilty of nothing.

So was he, I guess.

Every morning, my classes started at ten, so I had to start from home at nine. One of my friends showed me a short cut route, a lane, to reach the college in just fifteen minutes, rather than crossing the main market .

After taking that route, my journey to college became easier. Start at 9.45 and reach at 10, sharp. Because I had to cook in the mornings at home.

Some days I felt that while going to the college some one was watching me from a distance. Two visibly invisible eyes! An imaginary face! Was it real? Was someone walking behind me? Or it was just an illusion?

The first month was fun-filled. We got to know each other, got introduced to the syllabi, to the college teachers. College teachers were so different from the school teachers. The

personal care and involvement was pretty much less. We had a good English teacher, Professor Hota, whose classes were the most engaging. I never missed his classes.

After the first five months in +2 first year, we started missing classes, sitting in the canteen or coming home whenever we felt like. The secret road was most convenient since the teachers or classmates couldn't see me. We had one Odia teacher, a lady teacher, whose classes I used to attend sometimes with my friends even if I had not opted for Odia, just to give company to my friends in leg-pulling the teacher. She used to powder her sagging cheeks very carefully, and her oily curls were arranged over her head with such care that even a bucket of water could not displace them. The Board exam was scheduled for the second year, so it was ok if we were not very serious in the first year.

Came July, came the rainy season, and we had no other choice but to wear skirts to the college. Because if the *salwars* got wet, it was difficult to stay like that from ten to four in the classroom.

That day everything seemed to have come to a stand still, all movements suspended due to heavy rain from 12.00 noon to 5.00 pm, continuously. The college was situated near small hillocks, mango grooves around. Nature was kind and bountiful. Mountain rains can be dangerous, so was it that day. Water crept into the ground floor classrooms, and Odia madam had to suspend her class willy-nilly, raising her eye-brows so much that her temple had the curls like rain water outside. The water in the fields was glassily still, the air had a suspended movement, trapping 80 students in a gallery in a sluggishness that made even the simple act of breathing into an effort.

I remembered that there was a function at home that day; we had some relatives out there, and I was asked by Maa to come back early. I was getting worried, even though I was enjoying the rainy day. Then it was discovered that the flood was coming through the college gate, sealing us in and everything else out; anyway, we were more jubilant. We were sure that no classes could be held now and at least a week had fallen like manna from the heavens, along with the incessant rain that preceded the floods. Thunderous clouds, more and more chaotic wind, lightning, all got together to design a brute beauty around.

Nasreen, a friend, had brought the most amazing lunch of *paranthas* and kebabs. But she hardly got to eat them. We all opened our lunch boxes and had a picnic, indoors. It was five in the evening; the rain subsided. We just jumped into the water clog and started homeward.

I walked as fast as possible. Was someone following us?

I was with three other friends, who had to depart after one or two modes and I took my short cut route to reach home early.

Now I was sure that someone was following me. I didn't dare to look back as it was near dark and the lane was free of a single soul except me due to the rainy weather. I felt the footsteps were too close now, and I had to look back.

There he was, as I had always expected. My sixth sense had been telling me that the invisible eyes following me everywhere were *his*.

"Samal Sir! You?"

"Yes. How have you been?"

"I am good. What are you doing here at this time?"

"I shifted to a rented house in this lane after you left the school."

"Oh!"

"And I see you every day, twice, crossing this lane."

I kept quite, slowly walking.

"That makes my day. In fact, my life."

I still managed to keep quiet, unresponsive.

"Take this umbrella. You can give it back tomorrow."

"No Sir, I don't need it. I am already wet. I can reach home in ten minutes, anyway."

"Why? Why you don't need it? Why you don't need anything from me? Why don't you understand that everyone needs something, someone? Why are you becoming a goddess? Why not a normal human being? A normal girl, who can understand, read the feelings of the other person? What wrong have I done to you? Am I so bad?" He was shaking.

"No, Sir, you are not at all bad. Who says? What happened?"

I was nervous.

"Since one and a half years, I have been struggling with myself. I tried to hate you, a girl for whom my feelings have no meaning. For whom all that matters is her career. But I failed. Terribly failed. This very virtue of yours that disgusts me has trapped me into a snare. I would die without you!"

What was he telling?

What was the snare? And why was he talking of death? I had expected that he might have qualified some competitive examination by now and must have left the school.

I must control myself, since he was uncontrollable. I didn't want to hurt him.

"Sir, have you not qualified the Bank P.O. examination as yet?"

"Yes, I have. And they have given me a date. The last date of joining is coming week. But I am not going to go. I am not leaving this place."

"But it had always been your dream!"

"Oh god! Again you are talking of dreams? Now I have a greater dream my dear! I wish I would have told about it to you earlier. You are my dream."

"Sir, it's getting dark. I need to go now. And please don't try to speak to me in future. My family will not like it."

"Please, listen to me. Before taking any such decision, please read it once. Then decide if we should meet in future or not."

He handed over a polybag which had something like a book inside, as big as my Ph.D thesis, and disappeared into the dark. Before leaving, he told, “I shall wait to know your reaction at 10.00 am tomorrow morning here. It’s the question of my life and death.” What book has he given me? And how can he expect that I can decide about his life and death by reading a book?

I rushed it into my bag hurriedly and went home. The function was postponed as it was a rainy day and most of the guests couldn’t reach. Maa was cooking, my elder sister and aunts helping her in the kitchen. Younger sisters were playing outside with paper boats.

I took a cup of tea and went upstairs with my college bag. I was eager to read the contents of the book. The book, which someone who had influenced my life, character and personality, had given me after so many months.

I discreetly opened the polybag. But they were loose sheets, at least five hundreds, neatly arranged with dates on each one, the last date being today’s date, I mean the date of that day.

What are these? Letters? Love letters? So many? Addressed to whom? Me? Was it some kind of an archive? A novel? Written by a person who never read even a story? A man of sciences, who was far away from any kind of narrative writing? What was there?

I was sweating. My lips were dry, just like that day two years back when he held my thumb and asked me not to be restless.

I took out the last sheet and started reading

“My dearest one! See what a destiny I have got! I love you since two years now, write letters to you every day, store them in a folder, but I hardly do have the courage to go in front of you and hand them over.

And see your destiny! You are the loveliest soul god has created, you are my most loved one. Be sure, no one will ever love you the way I do, no one will care for your well being the way I do. But you hardly realize that.

There you are sitting on the high platform, seeing the ferry lights crossing, criss-crossing the big river. Here I am, the wild bird, sitting on the deck of the ship, living many lives in this life. My voice is like the sea waves, my dreams are like descending rain clouds....”

Oh! I could read no more. No more! I turned the page and looked at the last few lines, “... Redeem me. Heal me or kill me. I cannot bear the burden, the weight of these undelivered letters, unspoken words anymore. My life is lit with the fire of a single flame, lit from your pious hands. You don’t know dear how grateful I am to you. Innocently, unknowingly, you have taught me the greatest lesson of life when I was teaching you your bookish lessons. You taught me a syllable that orders the world,

constructs history and builds civilization. It's 'Love'! You taught me love, you made me a real man. Oh! How dearly I love you...."

Stop it! I must not read this anymore. It will turn my world upside down. It will swallow my earth like a wild sea swallows the islands.

I rushed downstairs. Went to the kitchen and called my eldest sister. She could guess that something was wrong. I took her to the bed room and handed over the packet.

"Didi, Samal Sir has given it to me."

"What is this? Letters? God! Are you still in touch with that man? I had expected it. Are you also writing letters to him? How long is it going? Did you read those?" She had a thousand questions. I left the room quietly, with tearful eyes. I was utterly disturbed.

Maa and didi were very angry, annoyed; they were grumbling.

"She is just a child. Had she read these rubbish stuffs? Had she been misguided? Trapped? It's good that she showed the letters to me. She just reached home and handed over the letters to me. Hope she hasn't read them in the college. Thank god!"

The next morning I was asked to stay at home at least for a week, and collect class notes from my friends later. In the evening he was summoned to our house. Baba was sent to the market, we sisters were asked to stay in the bed room and not come out. He reached at 6 pm, without fail. Perhaps the letters were thrown on his face. Perhaps, he was rebuked. *How can you try to misguide a child? How dare you? We can file a case of adultery against you. We can hand you over to the police. How dare you? How dare you??*

All I could hear, or overhear, was his calm footsteps, going out of our house. All I could see or peep, was – that was the last time I saw him, ever – he holding the same packet of letters, close to his chest, face, down, eyes, swollen, going out of our house. He left the town, quitting the job, the next day. After more than twenty years, today all I can think is – I am not sure what was wrong or what was right. Who was wrong and who was not. I am not going to judge. Only that, I missed reading a masterpiece, perhaps more potent than someone's heartbeats, more life giving than breathing and more honest and true than the creation.

Those few lines that I happened to read remained in my memory in the form of the silence of the fallen dew. The roots of those silent letters have been piercing my earth, sucking the rivers flowing at the middle of the night, till today.

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