

SHOBHA DIWAKAR

They Were Two

They looked so similar. If you saw them apart, you could mistake one for the other. Rumors galore surrounded them...they were three in a family and by Jove they would never ever look you in the eye. Secrets, secrets, secrets...tucked deep into their hearts, impenetrable, deep, dark and mysterious; what exactly circled around in those heads was like treading on unknown territory...unfathomably as deep as the deep blue sea beneath which lay innumerable oysters and tucked inside...pearls.

Yet, how can anyone forget pearls are bright and shiny like the stars in the sky. Unlike them the secrets buried like those oysters, were densely overshadowed by the goodness they may have shown occasionally, you see not all is well that ends well.

The older and the younger were split beans. Thoughts exchanged and gobbled up were twined rapidly with no considerations. Like one would say herding towards a blind alley with a passport to no return. Fixed, stamped and glued to the skulled brain with fevicol—a glue to bind—as to a bench cushion.

Time and again I made an attempt to screw up my eyes, look pertinently intelligent and scratch my head with a rough brush to decipher these hidden traits and logically arrive at some conclusion as to how the two could be mismatched in some way...was just like solving a jigsaw puzzle...I gave up. You know how curiosity kills the cat.

Aha, one day I caught the bear. Yes the bear..., I'd call one of them that. Oh no...I think calling the other a man-eater....Not of Malgudi...but of my native place would be better understood. By the way I haven't given any names so let me call one, King of Hearts and the other, jack-of-all-trades. The third...Little Jack

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Honor...for he always sat in the corner unless mildly kicked, 6 butted and saddled.

So now, the story begins after this brief introduction.

Long, long ago all these characters lived together in an ancient dull dwelling, more like a mud hut but cool and somewhat cozy to a...little extent. The house was clustered around with similar houses and orthodox women who peeped constantly at the newly wedded couple, cracking silly indecent jokes they were used to sharing. It was then that Neeta realized what it was to be educated and what it was to get a good upbringing. She was startled at the coarse manner of gossips she overheard and exasperated, wondered whether the marriage had taken her for a ride.

Neeta belonged to a highly well-established and educated family where father's word was law and all children were disciplined and never crossed borders within which they remained. Suddenly her train of thought was jerked as she heard a roar of voices emerging from the other end of the shadowed room. The deep grunts fumed the air. She realized not all was well. Something was amiss. "Why?" Neeta said to herself, "What's cooking?"

She silently slipped out of her room and stood by the door...yes true...walls do have ears. She stood there tense and heard someone say...probably it was Jack of all trades..." you know what there's no money. You have to collect that gold chain and the rings and whatever Neeta has got...it's all borrowed stuff and has to be returned." Neeta stood stunned. She could not believe her ears. The gold she was decked up with, the engagement chain...no question of a ring...and the...whatever she had been given as *chadao*¹ were plain borrowed feathers to offer a bride, without any guilt! Not a day had passed and there was the

¹ Gifts given to the bride from the groom's family.

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demand to return everything or forcibly snatch away from the 'new-found' bride. Yes 'found' because she hailed from a reputed family...while they themselves were mediocre.

True. How come her father (she hopelessly wondered), did not find out anything about the family except that the King of Hearts was well settled, yet little did he know that the termites were gnawing the entrails of his profits. There was nothing to do but to eavesdrop and listen to the entire uproar. Harsh noises still emerged in the still of the night even as she felt ashamed that neighbors might be listening to this racket.

Soon she realized that this was not anything new. The far and near were quite accustomed to this trio's squabbling. For them, it was an everyday affair so no one paid heed....But..., what a bridal night for the bride who was soon to be divested of not only her borrowed feathers but also all that she had got as her dowry from her own family. There was still more to come. The expenses that had incurred. The King of Hearts was cheekily handed over some pending bills; Jack smacking his lips passed the sheaf to the King while little Jack Honor, sat glum and pinned to his seat. He was a dummy...although the prop...or better still the supposed prop that had been manhandled, demoted, and uprooted by jack-of-all-trades. He sat silent. He knew the moment he opened his mouth a barrage of bullet words would be thrust down his throat for better or worse.

Neeta's dream world crashed like thousand pieces of shattered glass. She retreated into her room wondering what her life was going to be. Even as she pretended to smile behind her tears as the King tiptoed in, she brushed aside a solitary tear that hung by. "So, why are you crying? Missing your parents?" Neeta simply nodded her head waiting for the crash moment when she would be politely asked to hand over the decked feathers. So now, she was going to become a dressed chicken bereft of her plumes.

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Neeta had been taught neither to question, nor to demand nor to argue. There was nothing she could do. The fatal moment arrived as the King softly whispered (so no one could hear), “Neeta, can you remove that jewelry and let me have it? You see it is not ours; it was borrowed and must be returned. Everything was arranged so fast...I mean the marriage that there was no time to get your ornaments made.” Neeta said nothing. This was her first day at her in-laws and she had already received a taste of her new life. She wondered what else would be demanded of her to give up, but simply kept her temper and tongue locked down, and removed the borrowed feathers. The sly jack-of-all-trades had stood shamelessly behind the door all this while. As soon as the King unlocked he grabbed the booty hungrily like a starved lion and disappeared into his cave.

A year or two later Jack decided to marry. The year had passed with the king parting with his earnings to support the two Jacks. Now this marriage was to become another ordeal. Jacks were bereft of money, as were the girl’s parents. So finally it was decided and planned that all arrangements were to be made by the King including the bridal feathers, dowry, (the girl’s parents had nothing, gave nothing, did nothing). The only expenses that could be saved were by giving away Neeta’s dowry and displaying it for the public to see how much the girl’s parents had showered upon their daughter. Neeta’s jewelry was gone, her dowry was gone...everything her father had lovingly given her had vanished shamelessly. The king of hearts rejoiced his loyalty was confirmed while the jacks rejoiced how cunningly they had befooled and fleeced the king.

The story did not end here. Year after year, the king struggled to keep up his standard and his kids well and year after year, the two jacks plucked all his plumes. Their business never grew, never flourished, and they never had enough to keep body and soul together. The king felt vainly proud he was supporting his own family and the two jacks and jack-of-all-trade’s wife. God,

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Neeta felt had not done poetic justice. This jack and his wife were thoroughbred cunning rascals. You could never understand their ifs and buts or their cunning schemes to loot and fill their coffers. They grew, they flourished; like Julius Caesar they conquered, but at heart, they were Brutus and Cassius. They cheated, they looted, they dug into the king of hearts...heart by shedding crocodile tears to grab and confiscate the little pleasures of life he himself could have scraped for his own family.

While jack-of-all-trades was a farsighted eagle, little jack honor a mere rubber stamp, king of hearts lived in some pages of ancient history that made sense only to himself...not to his family. This game of beg, borrow and steal rapidly increased as years rolled by. By additions to the family Neeta noticed that demands bloated up like a tireless football, all ready to kick and bounce on the other side of the net. Of course, the king of hearts was always a recharged ever-ready battery full of spunky power, energetic, hyper and a spinning yarn yearning to wrap around the fibers of genteel love for the jacks...who never stopped swindling him.

Neeta racked her brains after so many years of patient endurance as to how long was this plucking still to be endured. Neeta's father, king's friends and well-wishers warned the mighty king that he was being grossly cheated over all these years and it was time he stopped making a bigger fool of himself now. King answered "but you see jack is my own kith and kin the only one I have, how can I see him in distress?"

"Well", some other well-wisher chimed in... "your jack is taking you for a ride. Do you know the number of trades he has under his belt? Have you ever cared for your own children, your wife, in short, your family? Do you have a house of your own so that when you retire you have a place to shelter yourself and your family?"

King of hearts swooned to realization. House hunting began with a bang with none other than his foxy jack. No sooner did king of hearts strike a bargain when, jack's house was robbed of all the cash and stuff. What now? There was no money to buy food for the family so jack was rescued out of this mess by a gift check...The dream house collapsed before it was built or bought ...thanks to the eagle-eyed fox. The tales of woe continued even as Neeta's heart burst with agony. It was now time for her to stand up and fight her battle.

It was a bright sunny day when the blubbering jack-of-all-trades happened to walk in slyly with a big cheesy, buttery grin spread across his face. Although surprised, king of hearts welcomed him with a similar grin. "Aha," Neeta mumbled to herself, "Now starts the cat and mouse game with a catch me if you can stuff. The trap is ready let's see how craftily king gets cornered like a fly in a spider's web." With these churning thoughts grinding her within, she sat down with a thump on the couch.

The tale began. There was a brand idea of a new biz jack that had pounced upon the problem was who was going to finance the deal? The loan could be availed on the condition that the king become a partner in the enterprise and partly finance the project. Since Jack himself had pledged his property, king must pledge his and sign the mortgage. "What a thrilling idea it was that the king's family would now also roll in money, and be on the same scale as a sound businessman," so thought the less far-sighted king. Dropping this... drop in the ocean risk jack disappeared like the polluted storm that leaves behind a stench you are forced to bear a while. Neeta stared at the king who was deep in thought wondering how to support this enterprise. "What are you thinking?" She rudely asked. The king looked up with a frown. "Don't talk to me in that tone. He is my split bean. I have to help him." The decision was final.

Neeta stamped out of the room in a rage hastily realizing that now they were doomed. Jack would twist and twirl him round

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his little finger as always supported by Jack Honor and the two together would emotionally blackmail him.

The next morning, the king disappeared early without a word. He returned triumphantly in the afternoon with a broad, broad sunny smile. I halted wondering what the surprise was. "Let me sit down right now. I am tired. I will shortly tell you everything." Neeta's heart raced and beat like a drum in panic. Then she relaxed thinking she was just dreaming something foul. Perhaps the king might have won a lottery against the ticket he had recently bought. Then came the bombshell. "You know Neeta Jack is into a prosperous project and you will be an equal partner. I have mortgaged the house for a loan..." Neeta collapsed before she heard the entire story....

Without a word, she walked out, cuddled the children lovingly and wept for the king's brutal folly. Who knew what the future held for her and her children and the king's fate? He had locked it himself...but enough was enough. Neeta brushed aside her tears and the mild, quiet Neeta now became a wildcat in the interest of her family. She fought like never before until finally the king realized his folly and cancelled the deed....The project failed. The king was saved.

Split beans, Neeta realized were now gradually drifting apart like the two shores of the ocean, albeit the trickster did not stop fleecing the sheepish king of hearts for he always struck the iron while it was hot. If it was not him, it was little Jack Honor who did the twisting and the warping.

Finally, the beaches become dry, the sand fly across the threshold and get into the eyes...but the eyes are dry and cold...the drifting wind is drawing the beans apart the ocean of life, as the sheep can no longer be fleeced. His coat has withered.

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