



Blood Debt

Sarthak Sharma

Part 1

The first time I really noticed Ashu was when he sat on the floor of our living room as we watched TV. He found the TV far too exciting and whenever rarely it was switched on he would sit at the floor and watch with concentration at whatever stupidity that went on in that screen. Before I asked for his name I asked him why he won't sit on the bed by my side. To that he smiled awkwardly, spoke something inaudible and continued to sit down. I stared at the screen but noticed that a smile lingered on his face and his eyes lingered on me.

Ashu's skin looked like dark soil. The only whites on his dark skin were the signs of deficient calcium and his smile. He did chores around the house and played silly games I failed to understand but he never spoke a word to anyone. At max he murmured something ridiculous. After some more times of him awkwardly smiling and murmuring monologues while sitting on the floor I challenged him to a bout of stone, paper, and scissor. I don't remember who won but the next day he smiled and murmured but by my side on the bed while we watched TV together for what felt like really the first time.

Later I learnt that his smile-laden whispering was a language in itself; a language spoken only by Ashu. The dialect of this language was his silence and the grammar to this language was his smile.

Ashu smiled but never responded to half the stuff; to most stuff honestly and my father would tell him to speak something or speak louder when he did speak but Ashu didn't need to because without using words he expressed more than them. Ashu answered for the different question than what one asked but his answer was always right. He never raised his voice to speak anything which came above a whisper. Like kids his age he would be excited, intrigued, and fascinated by things but he would wrap his emotions in a smile and some silence. So even his tone of excitement was just whispering but with a bigger smile.

His presence was unnoticeable like a ghost except for those times in the morning when he went about banging ridiculous music ridiculously loud on his mother's keypad phone. He would sing and shout along to the music that played ridiculously like a donkey till our house was filled by his cacophony. Those were the only moments Ashu raised his voice.

As we grew closer his whispers grew a bit louder and I started to get a certain grasp of that unknown language he used. Ashu

spoke softly, slowly, smilingly, and rarely even with me. He talked too less but said so much. Ashu did not need words because he talked better in his smiles, whispers and silences.

Ashu was 9, less than half of my age and yet I liked him which was weird because I hated kids of all kinds. I thought of kids just like I thought of pet dogs only sometimes besides being noisy, attention seeking and dependent the dogs proved to be loyal at least when they grew up.

Ashu was different. It was almost as if he understood and knew life even though he was yet to learn the alphabets properly. Ashu didn't have the time for school or even any interest in it. He couldn't count to a hundred in English yet he knew and told me about the various varieties of pigeons, plants, flowers and insects. Once he sold something on the roadside and earned a couple of bucks when he wanted to buy some chips and his mother had refused to give him any more money for chips.

When he wanted your attention he didn't pester you like most kids rather he did something which would make it hard to avoid him. Some mornings I would be too sleepy from the previous night's smoking up to wake up when Ashu came over. Once when I woke up tired and red eyed he said smiling sneakily that you're high. I was taken aback so I tickled him till he ran away to his half blind mother who was by then done with cleaning the last of the dishes. You see, Ashu was our maid's son.

He was always snacking on something and whatever he ate he shared with me. He got me lollipops, jellies, toffees, bubble-gums and other such peculiar stuff. He would blow bubbles out of his mouth while chewing gum and challenge me to do the same. I didn't know how to do that so I used a bubble blowing toy instead and effortlessly blew bubbles bigger than his. I always won the challenge until I gave that toy to him.

If Ashu saw me on the streets he would smile loudly, wave, offer me whatever snack he was carrying and then leave again with that smiling face.

Once I was eating Maggi and I devoured it all without offering anything to Ashu who was sitting with me. Just then Ashu got a sandwich which he divided into two equal halves and placed one half of the sandwich on my empty plate where there was Maggi some moments ago.

After that I always shared fairly with Ashu.

He drank chai and I drank milk which was funny and ironical for I was above my milk drinking age and he was below his tea drinking age. Once we sat together on the floor to eat something and I quickly ate my share of the snack. He saw this and with his own hands he fed me his share of the snack. There's no way to explain some moments after you have recounted their occurrence and there's no way to explain the love that lies in the hand that feeds.

During the winter, one wishes to lie in a warm blanket and do nothing. Ashu didn't have the option of lying or doing nothing so in the winters Ashu felt very cold. He would be out with his mother from early in the morning guiding her through her half blinded-ness house after house so he had to find ways to warm himself.

As I slept my blanket would be falling and stretching over to the floor from one side of the bed. In the morning cold Ashu would come and sit on the floor by the bed and wrap himself in that falling blanket.

I didn't know that for long. I could never notice his presence which was what he intended. He must have been very cold someday when he sneaked inside my blanket and felt warm finally. I sensed some movement near my legs and rose awake

only to find that it was little Ashu asleep and cosy. Seeing that I drifted back to sleep; my legs warmer this time.

From that day Ashu sneaked in, wrapped himself in a curve and slept beside me in my blanket every morning. He liked the blanket and I liked him in my blanket. In that warm safe space inside my blanket he would smile when I asked him how you even get inside?

When no one could find Ashu he would be found only in my blanket. My blanket was warm. I wonder if the blanket he had to get out of early in the morning everyday was as warm.

When I was busy he would follow me around the house and do exactly as I did even trying to lift my heavy dumbbells which were about half his weight. When I was tired he would give me long head massages. Sometimes he would play aimlessly with my hair. He used his school stationary to play small mindless games or scribble on his hands. That was all he used his school stationary for. Once he doodled all over my arm while I slept. When I woke up and noticed his art on my skin I smiled.

I was fascinated by crackers but always scared of them. He would bring crackers long after Diwali had passed and we would burst them together. As I saw him fearlessly throw burning bombs away with his bare hands I pulled some courage and tried to do so myself but failed and instead blew one close to my body. The sound deafened my left ear but from the right I heard Ashu laughing. I joined.

Once Ashu's mother threw away the marbles he loved playing with. That day he stood in the balcony; silent but not smiling so I went to him and gave him some marbles I had. His silence resumed but with a smile. We were friends. It was an equal relationship.

Other times he would stare at the world from the balcony for very long. I wonder what he wondered as he looked at the world.

Ashu liked me and I liked Ashu. He was a beautiful child who spoke little but smiled big. I wished to understand his smile but I realized maybe some beauty lies in not understanding.

Once I rose awake to a war waging between my mother and Ashu's. My mother refused to pay her the previous month's due for my father's salary was yet to be credited, she told the same to the maid. Ashu's mother had a sense of urgency in her voice which was later revealed to be because Ashu's father had a terrible case of piles. She said she had already bought a lot of medicines at credit and the chemist refused to give any more meds until the dues were cleared. My mother still refused she said she was helpless because we had no money and I looked at the whey protein I bought from that same chemist for cash yesterday and felt guilty. Ashu's anxious eyes caught mine who was watching this from afar behind my mother's back and he waved me a smiling hi to which I couldn't reply.

My mother told her she wasn't dying without the money, ironically neither were we I thought while my mother counted to her all the 'favours' she had done for her. The maid burst out and said we don't ask for those 'favours' and left with Ashu who often shared his chips with me which I never asked for.

My mum came to me and cursed first the maid and then my father's boss. The rich are oppressive she said. What the rich does to the middle class, the middle class does to the poor I had now learnt.

Ashu and his half blind mother never came back to our place, not even for those 2000 bucks we owed them and I don't know if his father's poor ass ever stopped bleeding.

A couple of days later I saw Ashu on the streets and I called out to him. He had a bundle of chips in his hands and he offered me a packet which I declined politely. I was ashamed.

Later at night I wondered why and how did he get all those packets of chips.

Part 2

Years later I would still spot Ashu, now close to the age I was when we first met. I would spot him at the same park where me and my friends smoked up years ago. Once Ashu offered me some drags of his joint but it only made me cough now.

Ashu grew up to be a petty thief, still somehow I couldn't bring myself to dislike him. He wasn't a good thief the police officer who caught him often told me. The police officer was a friend of mine and secretly probably even of Ashu's.

Once the police officer called me which he did only when someone brought Ashu in. When I reached I saw a familiar lady with a bleeding ear. I was shocked, a wave of rage took over me as I looked at my own mother's bleeding ear. This time there would be no saving for him I thought as the Officer let me into Ashu's cell who had no clue whose ear he had snatched the earring from and left to bleed.

I went to him ready to throw punches and abuses and I was just about to when I heard my mother loudly tell the officer that the single earring was worth more than 2000 bucks and I remembered something about some 2000 bucks from ages ago which Ashu and my mother didn't.

Ashu smiled seeing me through his tears and showed me the earring I saw every day. He told me his dad was sick. The problem was in the ass again. I put my hand over his which held the piece of jewellery and gripped it tightly. Then I went back to my mother and told her to go to a doctor while I made sure the thief was punished adequately.

After she left I asked the officer to release Ashu without any complaint. The officer said nothing, left and returned with him.

We left to get medicines. Me for my mother's ear. He for his father's ass

Outside the medical store I asked him how much would he get for the earring and he said maybe around 2000. I told him I would buy it because my mother had lost a very similar looking earring very recently. He offered it for free but I handed him his 2500 bucks and took my mother's earring. What belonged to my mother was with me and what belonged to his mother was with him, finally.

I had after all those years paid off my mother's debt with interest and some of her blood.



Sarthak Sharma

Sarthak is a writer and artist working towards creating a body of work that stretches beyond the confines of his own world and touches everybody equally.

He currently is pursuing a Master's in Filmmaking and works at Kunzum Bookstore.

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