

Dr O. P. Arora**If You Play with Fire**

She would be up there, everyday, at 10 a.m.. After her brother left for his office.

I would be there already, most of the days. And if I got late, a minute or two, she would be furious. Angry young girl, sweet sixteen, or seventeen, or eighteen. Her actions and impatience confirmed that she was a teenager. What a girl! No, she wasn't a beauty, but she was very beautiful. Her heart always throbbing, her mind always thinking of the ways to communicate her heart, and her eyes twinkling and dancing and spilling love. I liked her, liked her immensely, for her gestures and gesticulation, for her language of the hands and the eyes. She had perfected the art, of conveying her words without ever speaking a word. Her eyes spoke so well, her hands gestured so clearly, and her body turned and twisted so beautifully that I never felt we had not talked. She would be there for an hour or so daily, and this one hour was full of talk, passionate talk... I knew everything about her and her family. About 11, her mother with arthritis would come and occupy the balcony. She was intelligent to read her mother's steps and a few minutes before she actually

arrived, she would withdraw and go into her room. No, not near the window, but far removed from it, and the mother would shout for her. How clever of her! No question of my being there when the mother was on the scene.

I became desperate. I wanted to meet her in person. Wanted to take her in my arms, kiss her, and , if possible, make love to her. But she always said no. Strange! So eager, so crazy and so mad, and yet so distanced, so controlled. No, she said through her sign language. No, not that I don't want to come out and meet you and be in your arms. I would give anything to do that, but my brother would kill me if I step out, go out. He smells out things. Very nosey. Already enough of problems with him. I can't even go to school. I am not allowed the mobile phone. Strictly no. No question of having a boyfriend. Only my girlfriends come to my house, that too only a few selected ones. No, don't be desperate. I shall find some way. Maybe, some special occasion or... But why are you so keen to meet me? Male psyche! You want to hug me, grab me, turn me around, lift me, and if possible,... That is what every man wants, at the earliest, immediately. Can't wait. So impatient you are! But yaar, don't I love you? I love you so much, isn't that enough for you? Don't be so impatient. We shall have a very romantic life together. Sail with the clouds. Watch the sunrise at Kanyakumari or Kausani and sunset at Mount Abu. No, don't laugh. I know all the beautiful places. One of my friends is a great lover of Nature, and has visited most of the famous places in the world. Next year they are planning to go to Switzerland. Will you take me to Switzerland. It is such a

romantic place. You know something, romance is the essence of a happy life. But you men! You don't understand it. You find romance only in the body of woman. Centred only on her cuts and curves, playing with her boobs and trying to reach the goal. And after that you don't find her interesting anymore. That is your romance. Very bad. Expand your imagination. The entire universe is full of romance. Look at the moon and the stars, snow-peaked mountains and the stormy seas or the rafting on the swollen Ganga. I am yours, no doubt. You will have me to your fill. But my body is just one part. My mind and soul, they are full of love for you. Love is the real romance. I am full of love. In fact I am nothing but love. Let us celebrate love together. In fact I want you to be immersed in love, 24x7. You smiling! No, that is true, if you want to taste life. OK, OK, I understand your passion... Don't worry. OK, that too would happen. We shall be together, forever and ever. And then if you want it so, I shall always be naked, completely naked, for you, lying with you in the bed, lolling over you... That too is romance, I know...

And then suddenly she stopped coming onto the balcony, without any warning. I waited there fixing my eyes on the balcony, desperate to have a glimpse of her. My God, I never knew that the addiction had become so intense. Was it love? Love! Love, so killing! So passionate! That you lose all reason, ready to do anything. I even thought of walking into their flat, whatever be the consequences. Love! My God, How one girl becomes your universe.... Nothing else, but that girl. As if... I thought I would die if I didn't see her for another day. But something restrained

me. Nor did I die the next day or the following day. I laughed at myself. I started rationalizing : Maybe, she was unwell. That brought fear performing a macabre dance before my eyes. Dengue was so much in the news. Bloody mosquito. It must have chosen her, to smite me. But then I must find out. She must have been admitted to some hospital. ICU? Who knows? How could I get the information? I could go to their house as a meter-reader or as a corporation employee. But they must have seen me many times—I go on gazing at their balcony every now and then, just to steal a look at her, out of her fixed time. Man is crazy. Once you love someone, she becomes the nucleus, centre of all your thoughts. You think of her only, nothing else matters. What is it that drives man so crazy? Is it sex or some emotional disturbance? It must be this sexual urge, the strongest in man, that disturbs the entire equilibrium of man's character. Rest all—emotional, spiritual—is humbug. Nature's creation—through sex, nature serves its purpose of creation. I thought over it for days and concluded that love, a maddening passion, primarily physical, was turned into a higher form of idealistic notion by the thinkers so that man-woman relationship gets a rainbow colour. I convinced myself that it was a normal thing for her to be busy with certain other, more pressing things. Maybe, she had gone out to some relatives or ... She would be back soon. Man, a strange creature indeed! If he wants to avoid certain inconvenient or unpleasant actions, he can easily rationalize and find cogent arguments to justify his inertness. The reverse too is equally true. In the present situation, I even argued that

maybe, it was just her fancy. She enjoyed eyeing me for a few months. Had her fun, and went over to some other catch. After all, what was it all? I didn't know even her name. Why should I risk my reputation for the sake of an anonymous girl? Maybe, even she refuses to recognize me in the presence of her family members.

I relaxed. My waiting too became shorter. Of course I would be there at 10. Something in me would coax me to be there. No, it wasn't the habit. Something more intense, more commanding. A very strong yearning. I couldn't help being there at 10.

One day , she was there. Sad and gloomy. Not her usual self. Her dusky face tense all over. Her eyes were moist, but determined.

There were drum-beats in the house. I could hear them clearly. Like the hammer-strokes on my heart. I knew there was something very wrong, extremely disturbing.

Today, she was clear and perfect in her sign language.

Meet me tonight at 10 p.m. near Haldiram joint. We shall leave this city in one of my friend's car. We shall never return here. Make whatever arrangements you have to.

I was terrified. What is this? So sudden! How could I leave this city forever? I have a job here. My obligations. What shall we do after we leave? What future? How shall we survive? And they will hound us out. Certainly. What will be my position? And you can't decide these things in one day. No, really not. She has gone crazy. Damn her madness.

You, a lover or a calculator!! You rogue, if you play with fire...

I thought I would explain myself. But I never got the opportunity.

Next day again I was in the balcony.

The drum-beats had got fiercer, beating my ear-drums.

She came, furious and burning. Her eyes blazing fire. Her face like the goddess Durga. Her sign language—every word like a bomb.

You are a coward. A liar. No lover. A coward has no right to play with the feelings of others. You don't know what love is. You are like other street-Romeos who just want to have fun. It was my fault. I didn't understand you. I had too much faith in my love. But my love is all right. I still have faith in love. Only you are not worthy of it. You betrayed me.

She looked around. Looked up at the sky, and with a dash made a big jump from the balcony.

A big thud and all was over.

People gathered, as usually happens. They all said a lot of things—both palatable and unpalatable.

I too was there. Her eyes were still blazing fire, accusing me of betrayal.

About the Author

Dr O. P. Arora is a renowned poet, novelist and short story writer. Seven volumes of his poems have endeared him to the readers and critics alike. His love for Nature, his penetrating social insight and his philosophical profundity lend a unique charm to his writings. His poems have been published in almost all the leading literary journals and have been generously included in most of the prominent anthologies. His three novels and a collection of his short stories have been highly appreciated as the true portrayal of contemporary India.



He has an excellent academic record culminating in his Doctorate in English Literature from Panjab University, Chandigarh. He has taught in Delhi University for nearly four decades.

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