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Hope

Ripon Handique

She played like she was... and he didn't know how to express it, describe it. But something... something happened. Deep inside. And there was nothing he noticed after that. His eyes were rooted.

'Why are you so silent?' It was his friend. 'Come, we have to leave'.

He stared at his friend, as if it were some alien.

'Hey! Come'.

He looked around: everyone was leaving. He turned around. Where did she go! 'Where?'

'What? Who?'

He ran towards the stage. Some looked at him; some swore at his rushing, brushing. He jumped up and went behind that curtain where was pasted 'ROCK FEST 2009'.

But there was no one.

Instruments, equipments and empty bottles spread out. And only the silence made more stark, heavy and deafening by the disappointment of not even having a

glimpse of that diminutive but mesmerising figure with a guitar.

The night sky spread out, embellished by shimmering dots offering an odd view of beauty to this realisation of an already unbreachable hopelessness.

Why is Akbar the Great such an important figure in this age?

Covered in layers and layers of warm clothes to ward off Shillong's december, he contemplated the question by staring out of the window. The morning sunshine lit up those green hills jagged here and there by white, pink, yellow buildings, and a grey road, flanked by trees and shops, that disappeared and appeared.

Could it be that she would appear all of a sudden? A cold draft slapped his face. He started writing.

By the time he was walking down that road, people were still enjoying the warmth of a clear day. But his eyes were darting off from one to the other face: someone sitting, someone standing; someone walking, someone riding; someone... . What if she passes by and he doesn't... . 'No! It can't be.'

Those seven days of bone-chilling december that he spent warmed by an almost-forced belief that he will be able to see her after three years, finally, seemed like an eternity when he walked from Police Bazaar to Dhankheti to Laitumkrah to Don Bosco Museum to... to...even places and roads became nameless. And fruitless, after all.

It stood like an immovable object. Perched on a hillock surrounded by ravines and the innumerable pine trees dotting a slope; it was massive. Like an octopus spreading its tentacles, concrete structures massed around it. He sat in the main lobby, feeling really minute.

But even here his hope searched everywhere.

There were numerous faces-some sick, some healthy, some tired, some confused. His eyes scanned every nook and corner to find that face he had last seen six years ago. While he wished that he didn't see her in a place like this, his hope had been given that extra wing by a photo of hers he had recently seen in a popular social media site.

Maybe?

He looked here and there as he walked up that flight of steps. 'Now what was the colour of that chair?' Should he check that photo again? He flipped out his phone.

There was no network!

He looked up and sighed. Then smiled sadly. 'Maybe, even this time...' An old, frail lady sat in a wheelchair right in the middle of the corridor. She seemed very tiny, and very tired. It was a hospital, after all.

Finally, he was there. In a university to sit for an exam. But he didn't really ask himself if it was the course that had interested him, or was it something else? Maybe by now he was embarrassed before...even himself?

But he told himself he liked the campus!

'I mean look at the greenery! The roads branch out into small arteries as you enter the campus. Those departmental buildings, secluded from each other, shaded by individual trees, like sages in contemplation.'

But with this type of observation, and recording, he knew he wasn't going to be selected by the English Department. And so his eyes were busy again. 'Surely this time!'

But who comes to a university at 7 in the morning! So he waited by a road. 'Maybe she will ride through this road?' Then he walked wherever hope carried him. 'There's still time.'

It was 10. When the bell rang, it was 12. Interview was from 1 onwards. The two hours he passed walking up and down that department - 'where she works' - didn't feel like 2 hours. How hope can expunge time of its moments.

He went in at 3. He came out at 3:04. Quite an interview!

Even as he walked down through the department of Political Science, he knew his result. There were two stairs going left and right. The right would take him out on a straight line towards the main gate. The left would also take him towards the main gate, but in a circuitous manner past the library. 'And before library...is that department'.

There were some outside the department. But he knew, as soon as he came out and saw them, she was there. And he felt as if it was 2009, all over again.

She had long hairs now, and she wasn't in jeans and t-shirt. 'Obviously!' There was a brown sweater and a traditional sarong. But he was frozen. Once again he didn't have the precise word to express what he was seeing after 8 years.

But he was happy: 'So much so that I feel like screaming and running to her and hugging her and lifting her up and... .Who's that!'

A small kid, a girl, holding her hand. She was introducing her to them. Maybe she is...?

But he was...without words again. And for once it didn't matter if there were no words with him. How could they possibly be useful, after all? He turned around and walked back. Then he took the left stair out.

'Hello! What is your name?'

The kid held on to her tightly.

'I think she finds us strange, Kate'.

'She is soooo cute, Kate'.

She smiled. 'She's my niece after all.'



Ripon Handique

Ripon Handique (b. 1983) has lived in Nagaland, Assam and Delhi. He has worked as a teacher and Assistant Professor. Some of his poems have been included in Contemporary Literary Review, Taj Mahal Review and Ashvamegh. Interested primarily in the little things that constitute life and its big things, not to forget character and circumstances, this one is his first short story.



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