



Broken

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Love. That was the last thing Ankit should have been thinking about. And yet...

The previous month's rent was still unpaid, and the landlady was getting openly insulting. And yet...

All his attempts at finding a suitable job had come to zilch. The dream that had brought him from the fields and open vistas of his hometown to the narrow, winding lanes of the Old City in Hyderabad seemed destined to remain just that—a dream. And yet...

There was no reason *anyone*, let alone a girl, should see anything in a tall, gangly, bespectacled youth dressed in unfashionable clothes

that were beginning to show the wear of hard living, a fellow with no job, no physique to speak of, no charisma, no nothing. And yet...

And yet, when she had come up to the terrace of her house next door a few minutes ago, her eyes had sought him out. And for the first time, there had been a whisper of a smile.

He stood on his own terrace outside his modest rented *barsaati*, trying not to stare as she settled to her chores, slicing *bhindi* in quick, expert cuts, studiously avoiding his gaze even as she kept up a self-conscious conversation with her young nephew who was playing with his toy truck around her *charpoy*.

She was dressed in her close-fitting cream *chikankari* salwar kameez that day and she wore no dupatta—was that intentional?...for him?...no, that was wishful thinking...was it?...yes, of course it was, he had to be a moron to think otherwise...and anyway, why would she bother with a dupatta when she was only coming to her own terrace to cut vegetables?—and her hair, tied in a careless ponytail, fell forward over one shoulder onto the curve of her breast as she bent over the cutting board.

The gap between the houses was so narrow it could be forded with one long stride from the wall of his terrace to hers. So close. So impossibly far.

“There,” her voice came lilting across to his side, as she tacked the sticky end of an okra stalk to her nephew’s forehead, “you’re a rhinoceros.”

The child laughed in delight and she joined in, and she knew he was watching, and he knew she knew from the way she pinned a stray lock of hair behind her ear and avoided looking his way.

The moment lengthened impossibly, like a delectable strand of *sevaiyaan*, and he savored every inch of it.

Then, someone called from downstairs, “Sunaina! Where are you?” And just like that she was gone, through the door and into the

unreachable depths of her home where his gaze could no longer follow.

As Ankit turned away in disappointment, his hand caught the vase on the ledge of the terrace wall and sent it crashing to the floor.

“*Dhat!*” he muttered. It had been a painted porcelain vase, a trinket he had picked up cheap from the Thursday flea market at Jummaraat Bazaar during his initial days in Hyderabad when his stocks of optimism and funds had not yet run low and he had been careless enough to indulge in such whims. He had brought it up to his room, filled it with water, and put in a money-plant stem. It was a small thing—the thriving little plant in the colourful vase—but it had made the meagre room seem a little more like home. And now he had gone and broken it.

Cursing under his breath, he got down on his knees to clear the mess.

And then abruptly, he stopped.

There was something about the broken porcelain fragments, the play of light and shadow on the roof terrace, the money-plant lying helplessly in the little puddle of water, that snagged on his heart.

After a long moment, he rushed inside to his easel and began to paint feverishly. He was oblivious to his surroundings—his unmade bed taking up most of the space in his rented room on the terrace, the open trunk in which he stored his art materials and other meagre valuables, the open shelves where his clothes were stacked or hung haphazardly, the harmonium on a corner table, and various other canvases, some completed, some half-done, lying around.

Picasso squawked in the background. The scarlet macaw had belonged to the previous tenant. How the magnificent bird had come into his possession, Ankit did not know. Eventually, though, the fellow had found himself a job in some Gulf country and left the bird behind. When Ankit had first arrived, the bird had been in a bad shape, emaciated, squashed into a cage too small for it, and left hanging outside the terrace room, exposed to the elements.

The landlady had stoutly refused to have anything to do with the bird. She lived on the ground floor and had three small children and an absent husband who “worked in foreign”. She was a tall, bony woman, full of sharp edges, though the sharpest of all was her tongue.

“Such a racket it makes all day,” she had complained about the bird, that first day when she was showing him the *barsaati* room. “I would have sold it, but who knows if it’s legal or not. I don’t want any police *khich-khich*. The damned bird won’t fly away even if it is set free, it just sits around the house and squawks all day. Don’t I have three children to make noise, without a bird to add to the nuisance? I’ve put it here where it’s out of the way at least. The room comes with the bird, take it or leave it. Anyway, it probably won’t live long.”

That last part was evident—it didn’t look like she was bothering to feed it.

“What’s he called?” Ankit had asked.

She had shrugged. “Mithu, I suppose. What else are parrots called?”

After she’d left the room, the first thing he had done was to take the bird out of the cage. It had been terrified and tried to get away but all it could manage were a few pathetic hops. The reason it would not fly away was obvious—its flight feathers had been clipped. Not that it would have lasted long on its own in the city skies. His first days in the city had been spent nursing it back to health, and this preoccupation had prevented him from feeling too homesick. Slowly he had won the bird over, and the first time the bird came to him without hesitation, he had christened him ‘Picasso’ after the name of the first painting book he had owned as a child. The book had had nothing to do with Picasso or any of his paintings—not that Ankit would have been very impressed by actual Picasso reproductions at that age—and had in fact been a simple paint-by-numbers book gifted by a distant relation on a visit. But by the time Ankit had gotten to the last page, he was hooked.

By the end of Ankit's third week in Hyderabad, Picasso, the macaw, moved confidently about the room though he rarely ventured out on the terrace, doubtless still harboring unpleasant memories of his incarceration there. He spread his luxuriant red, yellow and blue feathers and used his impressive repertoire of sounds to respond to anything Ankit said. Picasso was his first friend and companion in the city.

And now, the bird was hopping around the easel curiously as Ankit remained submerged in his work.

When Ankit was finally done, he rolled his stiff shoulders, and stepped back. "So, how do you like it?"

The bird flapped his wings and squawked.

"Yes," Ankit muttered, gazing at the canvas on the easel. "I agree. It's easily my best work yet."

'Dreams,' he named it, that painting of shattered pottery and crushed leaf and tangled root.

#

With his heart in his mouth, he went to meet Naidu. In his early days in Hyderabad, he had been told about the agent who took on young, unknown artists and sold their works to malls, corporate houses, and hotels, and got them displayed in art studios and exhibitions. Ankit had approached him eagerly with his set of paintings and sketches. Naidu, a well-built man dressed in an outdated safari suit and sporting a luxuriant moustache that compensated for his receding hairline, had looked over Ankit's rural sceneries—fields, courtyards, mango orchards, children splashing in the duckpond—then shaken his head.

"You are good," he had stated. "But these won't do. These themes are so commonplace they're almost clichés. You need to do something different if you want to stand out from the crowd. Create a niche for yourself."

A niche. And how was he to do that? Ankit had no idea. All he knew was that this painting ‘Dreams’ was unlike any of his previous ones.

Naidu unrolled the canvas and held it out at arm’s length. He was quiet for a long time—studying, appraising.

“Yes,” he said, finally. “This is good. I’ll see what I can do with it. Bring me more like it.”

#

Ankit wrapped a note around a stone and threw it onto her roof. From the safety of his room, he peered through the window slats, watching her read it.

“What do you think, Picasso? Will she come?” he muttered.

The bird clicked his beak and made what sounded uncannily like a disapproving grunt.

“Huh! What does a bird know of girls anyway!”

But the next evening, as he waited at the Hussain Sagar lakefront clutching a small bouquet of red roses in his hand, feeling more ridiculous with every passing moment, he still had no idea if she would come.

‘Dreams’ had sold for fifteen thousand rupees. Naidu had deducted a commission and a retainer fee, but that was okay. It was Ankit’s first earning as an artist, and he wanted to make it special. So, he had gathered his courage and made the first move.

Just as he was on the verge of giving up, a bus pulled up, and she stepped out, and all the uncertainty and stress he had endured was at once forgotten. She wore a simple peacock-blue churidar, but she had left her hair loose, he noted with a secret twinge of delight, and long silver *jhumkas* hung from her ears, framing her oval face. She smiled in delight when he gave her the bouquet. They entered the Eat Street food court and found a corner seat overlooking the water. He would have liked a simple, crispy *dosa*, but they ordered pizza and ice-cream as that seemed more appropriate for a first date. In the

distance, boats ferried tourists to the large Buddha statue at the center of the lake, and the music on board wafted across the water to where they sat.

He had expected the burden of conversation to fall to him while she maintained a shy silence, and had rehearsed the things he would say, but to his pleasant surprise, outside the confines of her home, she was quite outspoken. She chatted candidly about her family, her mischievous nephew, her second-year exams that were a few months away, the latest Bollywood release she wanted to see. She had a teenager's notion of romance that allowed him, despite his own inexperience, to feel mature and worldly-wise. A part of him wondered if she had come simply so she could tell her friends she had gone on a "date". Still, he couldn't help but be charmed by her open innocence. He, in turn, told her about his art and how he had run away from home to pursue his passion, and if he happened to add a few embellishments and exaggerations to the story to impress her, he assured himself that the occasion demanded it.

Afterwards, they walked along the lakefront and sat on the lawns, side by side, though not touching or holding hands. They posed before the 'Luv Hyd' sculpture and asked a passerby to click a photo on Ankit's phone. They loitered and lingered until they could tarry no more.

Then, they made their separate ways home. He knew she would get rid of the flowers somewhere along the way—she could hardly take them home without raising eyebrows and inviting an interrogation. But the spark that had been lit that evening crisscrossed across the short distance between the two houses over the next few weeks, charging the air with electricity.

They had exchanged phone numbers, but Sunaina's phone was not private, not with her nosy sister-in-law and her strict father about. So, they developed an elaborate code of covert communication—they learned to interpret the language of each other's eyes; innocuous gestures took on meanings only they understood; and a window left open or closed, a light turned on and off, a green or red

towel hung out to dry indicated whether or not the coast was clear for a rooftop rendezvous. Like young lovers everywhere, they were convinced they were being discreet, though, of course, the world had only to glance in their direction to be able to see the truth writ large on their young faces. Incredibly though, for the time-being, nobody on those busy, crowded streets was looking at them. And so, they continued their duet of stolen glances and hidden smiles in peace.

In the meantime, energized by love and success Ankit was working on his art. His rural scenes had been rejected by Naidu, and so he decided to try his hand at the urban settings around him—the spires of Char Minar, the prayers at Mecca Masjid, the dazzling bangle shops of Laad Bazaar, the tall heaps of dry fruits in Begum Bazaar, the hand carts full of the glass bottles of the attar sellers, the cafés dishing out kebabs and Osmania biscuits and steaming cups of thick Irani chai. He spent his days soaking in the atmosphere, capturing scenes and moments with his phone camera that he would later try and replicate on canvas.

One after the other, though, the paintings were summarily rejected by Naidu.

He glanced at them and clicked his tongue. “Do you know how many such paintings are sold every day to tourists at Char Minar at fifty rupees apiece?” He looked up at Ankit. “Now, something like that broken vase painting you brought last time, *that* I can sell.”

Ankit did not argue with the man because he knew he was right. The truth was that none of these paintings had made Ankit feel the way he had felt while painting ‘Dreams’. Despite his best efforts, there was something lacking.

Meanwhile, he had burned through the money he had got for ‘Dreams’ much faster than he should have. Art material was expensive, and he had splurged on the best paints and canvases. Besides, he was meeting Sunaina on a regular basis now, and he could hardly let her foot the bill on their clandestine dates.

The rent was due again and the landlady was up in arms again. Just to get to his room each day, he was forced to run the gauntlet of her curses and insults and aggressive demands to vacate the room. Even his meals—sloppy, watery affairs at their best, but nonetheless a part of the rental agreement he had worked out with her—had been stopped; it seemed she followed the same strategy to get rid of birds and humans alike. He was now forced to fend for himself, subsisting on the oily fares of the cheapest food carts.

“Don’t worry, young man,” Ramesh Madala said, clapping Ankit on the back. “Have faith in your ability, things will work out.”

Madala was the other friend Ankit had made in Hyderabad, and this too was thanks to Picasso. Ankit had been clueless about macaws and their upkeep while trying to nurse Picasso back to health, and somebody had pointed him to the elderly shopkeeper whose love for birds was well-known in the neighbourhood.

Madala’s shop of religious paraphernalia had been easy to find—the storefront sported a colourful display of wall hangings, the stained-glass Buddhas, Ganeshas and Virgin Marys with the Infant Jesus all rubbing shoulders in cheerful camaraderie. Inside were display units lined with wooden *pooja ghars* and holy book stands, prayer rugs and mats, incense sticks and candles, brass lamps and bells, prayer beads and prayer wheels, bronze and stone figurines. Madala himself was a jovial middle-aged man with a shock of thick, white hair and twinkling eyes edged with laugh-lines. When Ankit had explained his problem, Madala was more than happy to help. He began his day, he told Ankit, by feeding the pigeons at Kabootar Khana every morning, and spent his weekends watching and photographing birds at the lakes, marshes and urban forests in and around Hyderabad. His knowledge of birds was vast; and indeed, there was a whole row of books by Salim Ali, stacked incongruously amidst the various tomes on spirituality and religious teaching that lined one wall of the shop. Madala had guided Ankit in Picasso’s care and the two had become good friends. The cool, shady shop soon became Ankit’s refuge, a sanctuary of peace in the chaotic city.

The atmosphere of calm in the shop and a conversation with its jovial owner never failed to lift his spirits.

“Think of how you made that painting you say the agent liked,” Madala advised. “There must have been something that inspired you. Try to replicate that.”

So, on Thursday, Ankit went back to Jummerraat Bazaar, where he had first found the vase. The weekly flea market was a hive of chaotic activity with tarpaulin sheets spread on the ground on both sides of the street, displaying merchandise. Clothes, shoes, bags, electronic gadgets, old coins, books, machine parts, utensils, jewelry, decorative items, antiques... at Jummerraat Bazaar, the merely old and tacky sat cheek-by-jowl with the genuinely ancient and regal. Some of the artifacts were in fact quite valuable. But a lot of merchandise here was of dubious origin and therefore inexpensive. Not that Ankit had even a little cash to spare. Which was why he had come prepared. Thinking that perhaps the problem was with the pictures he took with the phone camera, he had brought his sketchbook along. On his previous visits, he had always been attracted to a beautiful carved wooden globe, set on a brass stand, and that was what he sought. He found it at last, standing amidst a collection of brass hookahs, hand mirrors, lanterns and other antiques. He moved it to a corner and settled down on the pavement, opening his sketchpad and satchel of colours. He didn't get far, though. The dealer would have none of it.

“*Kya karte, miyaan,*” he demanded in a nasal Deccani. “This is for buying, not looking only. You are sitting there and blocking way for genuine customers. *Lete tho lo, nahin tho niklo.* Buy it if you want or keep moving.”

So, Ankit had to make do with a photo once again. And he knew even before he took the painting to Naidu what the latter would say.

He returned home dejected, his painting rolled up under his arm, only to be met by the sound of a big crash from his room. He rushed upstairs and stared aghast. The room looked like a hurricane had just been through. Picasso hopped about squawking wildly in terror.

Ankit's clothes lay heaped on the floor, his paints were scattered, his easel lay on its side. But what he couldn't tear his eyes away from was the harmonium that lay broken and splintered on the ground.

The landlady stood in the center of the room, arms akimbo, a smug look on her face.

"I have done half your work for you, you shameless fellow," she shouted. "Now, pick up your stuff and clear out of my house! Right away!"

He stared at her and the anger and frustration of the previous weeks boiled over. For the first time, he screamed back, matching her insult for insult. Taken aback at this unexpected resistance from the gangly young man she'd always taken for a doormat, the landlady finally beat a retreat down the stairs.

Ankit sank to the floor and ran his hands over the harmonium. It was damaged beyond repair. His grandmother, the only person in his family who had understood his inclination for creative arts, had given it to him when he was a child and taught him to play a few songs on it. Music, ultimately, was not the art form that quickened his pulse, but nonetheless he had enjoyed playing it every once in a while, and the low, deep, comforting notes of its music had soothed his loneliness. The broken thing in front of him felt like a violation of his very spirit.

He sat there, unmoving, staring at the broken instrument, its wood splintered, its keys broken, its bellows askew.

And then a thought entered his mind, slowly clearing the fog of his despair. He got to his feet and straightened his easel.

#

When 'Music'—a broken harmonium cradled in a nest of cracked musical notes—sold for thirty thousand rupees, the thought that had struck him became a nagging question. Could it be...? Was it possible...?

He hunted around his meagre possessions. At the bottom of his trunk, in a wooden box, were a bunch of medals. He gazed at them, then in a moment of inspiration, he ran down the stairs and out into the street, all the way to the end of the market.

The man at the cart selling roasted corn-on-the-cob greeted Ankit familiarly. At the center of his cart was the wide metal pan with charcoal on which he roasted the corn. A stack of corn cobs was off on one side and the plastic containers holding salt, red chili powder, *chaat* masala, butter and lime juice were lined up on the other. A metal brazier with hot pieces of charcoal stood on the ground beside the cart.

“*Do bhutte*, extra masala?” the man asked, preparing to shuck the usual two heads of corn that Ankit bought to keep his hunger pangs at bay in the late afternoons.

“No, not today,” Ankit told him. “Today I need to borrow something.”

He carried the brazier of hot charcoal back to his room carefully. He placed it in the center of his room and, one by one, put his medals over the hot coals. The ribbons burned first, turning black and fraying off. Then the plastic of the cheap, custom-made medals began to melt, the paint flaking off—gold, silver, bronze. The first competition he’d won in school—a drawing competition. The 100m dash on Sports Day, after which his father had been so proud of him, he had taken him straight to his favorite *mithai* shop and bought him everything his heart desired, with the added bonus of skipping school the next day thanks to the resultant stomach upset. The cricket match against the team from the neighboring village when his team had carried him on their backs around the school yard after he had, by fluke, hit the winning six. The *kabbadi* team prize. The growing number of art awards....Finally, all that remained was a half-molten lump, sizzling softly on hot coals, filling the room with an acrid smell.

He knew even as he was painting the melting school medals and their charred ribbons lying on a bed of hot coals that this painting

too would have the same character that had set ‘Dreams’ and ‘Music’ apart. His pain, his sorrow over the loss—no, the willful destruction—of something precious and beautiful—seeped into the canvas and gave the painting a palpable poignancy, a life and story of its own. *That* was the missing ingredient he had been seeking.

‘Childhood’ sold for fifty thousand rupees. And Ankit knew he had found his niche.

#

Ankit walked home in a buoyant mood, the wooden globe from Jummeeraat Bazaar under his arm. It had given him great pleasure to look the rude dealer in the eye and buy it without deigning to negotiate the price down.

“You are beginning to get noticed,” Naidu had told him earlier that day when Ankit had gone to him with his latest work. “I have had people asking after your work.”

Ankit hummed a carefree tune. He could look forward to a quiet dinner in the comfort of his room. The landlady had become noticeably friendlier these days. The meals had resumed and, though he wouldn’t go so far as to call them tasty, they were now actually edible. Things were definitely beginning to look up.

As he entered the market street with its familiar row of shops, he saw a crowd gathered up ahead near Madala’s shop. Over the shoulders of the bystanders, he could see Madala speaking agitatedly to a couple of policemen, gesturing at his shattered storefront window.

Ankit stood amidst the murmuring crowd.

Such a shame...nothing was stolen...but see how it has been vandalized...and to target Madala of all people... yes, the man has no enemies...been here for ages...who would do such a thing...so inauspicious also...very true, those vandals have no fear of God, or what?...

Ankit briefly contemplated pushing his way through to Madala, but Madala was busy with the police and perhaps this would not be the best time. He backed out of the crowd and walked on towards his rented quarters, his pleasant mood rapidly dissipating. It took a further downturn when he reached home and found Sunaina in his room. In itself, her presence was not unusual—she often crossed over the terrace walls at night when there was nobody around to see, and they spent long hours together in the privacy of Ankit’s room till the sky began to lighten and she slipped back home. Even Picasso was so used to her by now that he ate out of her hand. But she had never before come so early, not when there were people around.

One look at her eyes swollen with tears, and he knew.

The world had finally looked their way. And skewered them with its gaze.

“Ankit, Baba says he will get me married off immediately! He is so angry he won’t even wait for me to finish college!” she sobbed in his arms.

“Don’t worry, nothing like that will happen,” he said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

“You must do something! Call your family. Have your father speak to him. I know you ran away from home, but surely now...”

He stroked her hair and soothed her and spoke reassuring words till at last she had calmed down. It was only after she left that he sank down on his bed and held his head in his hands in despair.

Whom could he turn to? Madala was the only elder he knew in the city who could intercede with Sunaina’s parents on his behalf. But...no, he couldn’t go to him for help. Not now.

And Sunaina wanted him to call his father! What help could he expect from the man who had scoffed at his dreams? It had not been a lack of resources that had been the main obstacle in Ankit’s path—his family was well-off, with dozens of acres of red, fertile land to

their name—but a lack of vision, the inability to think beyond tradition and social stricture. They were a family of hardy farmers, his father had told him, sternly. It was ploughs and sickles and the good red earth that put food on their plates, not some dainty paintbrushes. Painting was for pansies, it was not what real, hardworking men did for a living.

Like many before him, Ankit had found himself torn between a passion that wouldn't release its hold on him and a world that always—every single time—valued the practical over the beautiful. And like many before him, Ankit had paid a heavy price for his art—his father had cut off all ties with him after he had stolen thirty thousand rupees from the cupboard and left home in the dark of the night.

As he often did when he thought of home, he reached into his trunk, and took out the bundle of letters. He unknotted the string that held them together and read the letters once more, though he knew them by heart. His mother was long dead, and after he had left home, his grandmother was the only one who had continued to keep in touch. Week after week, her letters came, bringing with them the sweet petrichor of home—they spoke of when the paddy had been planted, when the rains had started, the groundnut crop their fields had yielded that year, how his younger brother had fared in the school exams, the latest scandal in the village....And then, all of a sudden the letters had stopped. He had assumed that his father had found out and forbidden his grandmother from writing anymore. But then, many weeks later, a letter had come—from his father this time—a brief, cold note that informed him of his grandmother's death after bout of illness, and the date and time of her funeral ceremony. Ankit had not gone home for the last rites, knowing if he did, they would find some way of making him stay. Instead, he had bid farewell from afar to the person he had loved more than anyone else in the world. There had been no more letters.

No, he knew he could not look to his family for support.

He sat on his bed all night, cradling the letters. Then, at dawn, he tore them one by one into little pieces. His eyes blurred with tears as he painted ‘Family,’ but a week later, Sunaina had a small diamond ring on her finger and Ankit was walking in through the main door of the house next door—alone, his own spokesman, but with his head held high.

Sunaina’s sister-in-law bustled about plying him with trays of tea and snacks. All the while, Sunaina’s father, an imposing man who worked as a security guard at an apartment complex in Banjara Hills, kept Ankit pinned under a steady gaze but did not say a word. Ankit squirmed uneasily under such relentless scrutiny, but he knew that the silence could only mean acceptance, for the opposite would have spoken much louder. Perhaps it was the ring that won Sunaina’s father over, or perhaps it was the young love he saw on their faces. Or maybe it was something else altogether. Perhaps he had seen in Ankit that elusive thing that is immediately recognized in poor neighborhoods everywhere—the invisible aura surrounding a person who is made for better things, a person destined to escape the clutches of the neighborhood and make a life for himself in the world beyond.

#

Sunanina’s father was not wrong. A few months later, Naidu arranged Ankit’s first exclusive exhibition. It was titled ‘Broken’. Naidu had managed to gather Ankit’s entire collection in one place; even the earlier ones that had already been sold were on display.

There were the colorfully poignant ‘Dreams’ and the touching ‘Music’ with prominent ‘Sold’ signs across one corner. Accompanying them was the heartbreakingly beautiful ‘Family’.

There was ‘Brotherhood’ which showed a splintered, broken wooden globe hanging askew from a bent brass frame. Within a few hours of the exhibition’s opening, the painting had been snapped up for a whopping two lakhs by a real estate developer who wanted to display it in the reception of his newly opened hotel. The man stood

beside his proud possession, conferring with Naidu on the possibility of commissioning more of Ankit's work for his other buildings.

Then, there was the much-loved 'Childhood' that had recently been prominently featured at a symposium on child rights held at the Hyderabad International Convention Centre and had garnered a lot of attention for the young artist.

And, in a corner of the exhibition, a clutch of people stood around 'Faith', admiring the stunning depiction of golden frames lying askew amidst shattered stained-glass in which one could just barely discern the outlines of a Buddha, a Ganesha, an Infant Jesus.

#

"Ta-Da!" Ankit said, opening the door with a flourish.

He ushered Sunaina into the furnished apartment he had rented in an upscale gated community in one of the new, modern neighbourhoods of a fast-growing Hyderabad.

The move had been inevitable. In the months after the success of the exhibition, Naidu had begun pestering Ankit about the need to begin moving in the right circles if he wanted to become an established name in the art world. He had to make personal connections, attract the attention of potential patrons. The time was ripe, Naidu had stressed. Ankit's latest work 'Companionship'—an orgy of red, yellow, and blue—had been picked up for ten lakhs by a private collector of considerable repute. It was a sure sign of ever-greater success that people in the know of things had started collecting his art.

Ankit did not need much convincing to see the last of the landlady, though he did feel a twinge of nostalgia for his *barsaati* and the good times he and Sunaina had shared there. They didn't have to hide from prying eyes anymore. Nobody in this chic apartment complex cared, or even noticed, who came and went from his

apartment and at what time. On the other hand, the heady thrill of meeting in secret and stealing moments of privacy was gone.

Still, Ankit took pleasure in her awed expression as she took in the sleek white furniture, the flat-screen television, the lavish bedroom, the bar in dark mahogany, his studio leading onto a spacious balcony that commanded a spectacular 20th-floor view of the swanky new Hyderabad of glittering malls and mighty skyscrapers and classy tech parks.

Everything was going as he had envisaged till she looked around suddenly and asked, “But where’s Picasso? I don’t see him anywhere.”

“Um, I had to give him away.” Ankit turned away, busying himself with the contents of the refrigerator.

“What! Why?”

He flinched at the shock in her voice. “It was against the rules,” he said, keeping his face averted. “The housing committee here does not allow pets.”

“Oh,” she said. There was a long pause. “Even birds?”

“You know how fussy these upscale societies are,” he said. “But don’t worry about Picasso, I gave him to a friend who will take good care of him.” He carried the tray with their drinks—beer for him, cola for her—and a bowl of salted nuts, out to the balcony, avoiding her gaze.

They sat on deck chairs and sipped their drinks. She looked thoughtful, her earlier enthusiasm gone.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, unable to hide the tinge of irritation in his tone. “You don’t like the apartment?”

“No, no, it’s beautiful,” she said. “It’s just ...” she swept her arm across the view, “this is all so very different from the Old City. It’s difficult to believe we are even on the same planet here.” She made to say something more, then hesitated.

He sighed inwardly. Not this again.

“Sunee...”

“I’m running out of time, Ankit,” she said, looking him in the eye. “An engagement ring can go only so far, you know. I’ve graduated from college, I’ve even started this stupid CA course just to give the impression that it’s my studies that’s holding up the wedding. Baba is worried. My relatives make pointed comments about the extended engagement. Even my sister-in-law keeps asking me intrusive questions about us, and as for the neighbours...” Her eyes teared up. “I’ve never bothered about everything that’s being said about me, Ankit, you know that. But now... if you don’t...”

He put his finger on her lips. “You know how much I love you.”

“Then what is this delay for? We even have this house now—”

“Sunee, I have explained it to you a hundred times. I am still not an established name. I’m only as good as my last painting. Two or three bad ones, and all this will vanish from under my feet. I don’t want to give you that kind of insecurity in marriage.” She looked away, but he took her hand in his till she turned back and looked into his face. He went on earnestly, “Right now, it is still what is on the canvas that counts. But the day will soon come when it will be my signature at the bottom, not the art itself, which will matter more. That is when I...we...can feel secure.”

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, she sighed. “Okay...I’ll wait.” She looked at him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin the mood...”

“It’s okay,” he said, getting to his feet. “I know just the thing that will set it right again.”

He led her inside and took out a large, flat box from the closet. Inside, lay a beautiful white off-the-shoulder dress, shot through with silver threading. Sunaina gave a cry of surprise. He shook it out with a flourish, held it in front of her and turned her towards the full-length mirror on his dresser.

“You know I’ll never be able to wear this back in the neighborhood, don’t you?” she said, but her tone was teasing and Ankit could see she was mollified.

#

The reason Ankit gave Sunaina for putting off their wedding was true enough, but it wasn’t the only truth. He didn’t want her living with him, for then she would discover the increasingly torturous process behind the creation of his art.

Among his latest paintings was ‘Heritage’, a depiction of the gateway arch of the Dewan Devdi, a sad remnant of the magnificent place it had been, now tangled in a web of telephone and cable wires, plastered with posters and advertisements, engulfed by the chaos of commerce around it.

And there was ‘Progress’ that showed the axed remains of a row of avenue trees, their naked stumps the only reminder of the sun-dappled shade they had once bestowed, while in the background rose the concrete girders of yet another overpass rearing its head over the city.

Both the paintings had sold for a decent price, and the new-found friends in his growing social circle were lavish in their praise as usual. Naidu, however, never hesitated to call a spade a spade.

“Your work is slipping, Ankit,” he’d said. “People have come to expect a certain standard from you. They may not say it to your face, but they are noticing. Whatever the matter is, you must put it aside and focus on your art for now.”

Ankit knew what the matter was. His engagement with ‘Heritage’ and ‘Progress’ had been merely intellectual, not emotional. He had felt no personal loss, no private culpability for the scenes he had portrayed.

The thing was: with his growing success, something was changing inside him. He no longer looked at the world with wonder. He bought all kinds of expensive objects home—chandeliers, clocks,

cut-glass cutlery, antiques—things his former self would have coveted and found magnificent. But when he broke, damaged, destroyed them, he felt nothing. And so, the paintings turned out as bland as the watery stews his former landlady had specialized in. Often, he tore them up himself, unable to countenance their presence in his studio.

If Sunaina ever saw him at work, breaking things, then tearing up his own work in a wild frenzy, what would she think? That thought worried him no end, but the thing that kept him awake nights was a different beast altogether. He splurged on the best art materials, he scouted for the best subjects, but in work after work, the secret ingredient was missing. And there was nowhere in the world he could buy *that* from. He had to find it within himself. But what if it was gone for good? Was his best work already behind him? Would he spend the rest of his life trying ineffectually to reach the pinnacle he had already fallen from? Would he never paint anything like ‘Dreams’ or ‘Faith’ or ‘Childhood’ again? He took to drink, hoping it would help him sleep. He kept the bar in his apartment well-stocked and often drank straight from the bottle.

But come night, the monsters in his mind prowled and shrieked and would not be quieted.

#

Ankit parked his car and strode through the arched entrance of the Taj Falaknuma Palace, once the residence of the erstwhile Nizam of Hyderabad, and now a luxury heritage hotel. It was Sunaina’s birthday, but he was nearly an hour late and in no mood for the romantic lunch date they’d planned.

As he hurried down the winding path that led to the inner palace buildings, he hoped he didn’t look as disheveled as he felt. His mind had been in wild turmoil since the discussion he’d had with Naidu the previous week. A global tech giant had set up a development center in Hyderabad, and they wanted to commission a whole set of paintings to be displayed across the buildings on their sprawling

new campus. Quite apart from the substantial income Ankit would make from it, Naidu told him, a high-profile project like this would catapult him into the upper echelons of the art world. It was not an opportunity to let slip through his fingers. Naidu's words churned in Ankit's stomach. A whole set! He was hard-pressed to produce even one decent piece of work. What was he going to do? Such a project would surely expose him for the talentless imposter he was, and all his success so far for sheer luck that had finally run out.

The past few days had passed in a haze of alcohol. He was drinking steadily even as he attacked canvas after canvas with frantic strokes. But the awful certainty that he was painting utter garbage penetrated even the fog in his mind. In the middle of one night, he had hurled his easel, canvas and all, against the bar cabinet. Paint, wine, glass and splintered wood had splattered all over. His beloved colors had blended with the alcohol that was the companion of his evenings and become one in his mind. And from that night, finally, had been born another painting worthy of putting his name to. He had named it 'Sanity'.

He turned a corner and saw Sunaina. She had decided to wait for him in the gardens instead of going inside to their reserved table. There she was now, her back to him, seated on a marble bench taking photos with the iPhone he had gifted her, of the vistas visible from the palace's elevated location. As he approached, he noticed she had worn the white dress he had given her, her shoulders exposed, her smooth, long legs crossed. She had left her hair loose, the way he liked it. She shifted in her seat to scroll through the pictures she had just taken, and presented him a side profile, her hair partially veiling her chiseled cheekbones. She looked so very beautiful—

He froze in his tracks, his face a mask of horror.

A few minutes later, when she looked in the direction of the entrance, he was gone.

#

He did not answer her first call. Nor her second, which rang more persistently. All through the ride home, his phone buzzed like an angry bee, stacking up notifications in a rising pile of accusation. Not allowing himself to think, he sent her a single message: “It’s over. We can’t see each other anymore. I’m not the right person for you.” Then, he switched his phone off and threw it deep into his closet. He drank till he couldn’t see straight and fell into bed, giving in to blissful oblivion.

When he woke, his head was clamped in the torturous vise of a giant hangover. At first, he thought the ringing was in his head; it took him a while to realize it was the doorbell. Was it morning already? He forced his eyes open. It was dark outside, and it was pouring. When had the rain started? What time was it?

He struggled to his feet and went groggily to the door.

Sunaina stood outside.

#

The exhibition drew numbers far beyond the expectations of the organizers. The crowds in the gallery swirled and pooled and collected in clots of conversations.

...have you heard? Shastri sold his Ankit Kumar painting for a whopping thirty lakhs!...He’d bought it for what? 20K? 25?... Yes, and only a few years back... Huh! he should have waited longer, the price would have gone up further... All the controversy is certainly proving a bonanza for some at least... Oh, what a mean thing to say... Only the truth....

Inevitably, the tide of both people and conversation veered toward one direction. A painting which mesmerized everyone who saw it, even leaving some teary-eyed.

The painting occupied the pride of place at the center of the back wall of the gallery, highlighted by an array of LED spotlights and cordoned off from the crowds by a red ribbon perimeter.

It showed a young woman in a wet white dress that clung to her body. Anger blazed through the tears pooling in her eyes. Her mascara ran in dark streaks down her face. Her skin was blotchy, her hair was a wet, windswept mess. She was beautiful in spite of—no, because of—the ravages of love on her face.

Some still insist it was murder... She dumped him, that's what made him do it... No, no, it was he who dumped her, I read somewhere...She was a gold-digger, I'll bet... No, they knew each other before he was famous... devoted to each other...Nah, he was just stringing her along... Murder? People will say anything, it was clearly suicide...It's obvious he loved her, just look at the painting... What?! Just look at it, it's the very antithesis of love... But so hauntingly real...By far his best work... Will be flown to London soon after this exhibition... Not London, the buyer is a Saudi royal...No, a collector from New York, they say...Ten crores!...Still a steal. It's Ankit Kumar's last painting after all...

Had Ankit been present, he would have smiled. 'Love' was not his last painting, he would have told them. His last painting had, in fact, never been recognized for what it was. By now, it had probably long been incinerated. He had painted it the same night he'd made 'Love'.

That night with Sunaina, it was his words that had done all the damage. Harsh, bitter words that had battered her trust, violated her love, slashed at her very being. And yet, a part of him knew those cruel words were kinder than any new promises he could have made her, promises he would never keep. She had left, broken, and then he had painted her. Every brushstroke was pure agony, steeped in shame and grief and when it was done, he was left an empty husk. He had looked at 'Love' and he had known at once, deeply and instinctively, that he would never make one like it ever again.

And that's when he had made his final painting. It had been the easiest of all, literally painting itself as his wrists drip...drip...dripped on the canvas at his feet. He had rested his head on the table and watched in fascination as the swirling red patterns made and unmade

themselves, till there was no white left on the canvas, and the painting had to be continued on the floor beyond.

With the last dregs of consciousness pooling in his brain, he had named it 'Life'.

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