



The Constant Shadow

Nagma Sinha

While cleaning her bookshelf, Divya found an old pile of letters kept between two books. She slid those out and saw a set of revenue stamped letters addressed to her. The letters were twenty years old, and her mind travelled back to that time. Those handwritten letters from Roshan were very special.

She sat down to read the letters one by one by carefully taking each of them out from the envelope and reminiscing

the good old days when she was head over heels in love with Roshan.

Divya had met Roshan during one of the college festivals. Both were giving stage performances and competing against each other. It was during that time that Divya's eyes fell on him. He was the lead vocalist performing at the centre of the stage and the crowd cheering for him in unison. When Roshan's college won the first prize, she gathered up courage and waded through the crowd to congratulate him.

"Hi! Congratulations on your win. Just wanted to say that you were amazing". Divya exclaimed and they shook hands.

"Thank you. I am Roshan" he said with a smile

"I am Divya. I participated from Sydenham College"

"Yes, I saw your performance. It was quite good. Congrats for the third prize"

"Oh...thank you but my colleagues were eyeing the first prize. So, they are a bit disappointed", Divya laughed

After a few formal pleasantries, he invited her to the festival being hosted by his college in the coming month. Divya started counting the days until it finally arrived.

She happily participated along with her colleagues in the festival but was nervous and jittery whenever she was around Roshan. In comparison to her luminous expressions, Roshan appeared to be slightly reticent.

"Thank you for coming to our festival. Hope you enjoyed yourself?"

"Ahh yes... absolutely...." Divya giggled

"Great! So, are you staying until the end today?"

"I can't. I need to be home by 9pm. So, I will leave early."

"OK, enjoy until then and once again thanks for participating"

"Oh! My pleasure"

Just before leaving Divya got restless with the thought of not meeting Roshan again.

She took quick steps to locate him.

"Hi again!"

"Oh, Hi... So, leaving now?"

"Yes, I just wanted to invite you to my campus. My college canteen is very popular"

"Of course. Thank you. I would love to. Your canteen serves the best samosa"

"Absolutely, no question about it!"

Divya gave a beautiful smile and stared at Roshan.

They exchanged their email addresses and parted.

They seemed to have struck the right chord and Divya plunged into writing emails to him once in every two weeks and gradually Roshan too picked up the pace and it went back and forth.

During the summer break they, along with a group of friends decided to go for morning jogs by the seaside. After a few days most of them backed out. Finally, it was just Divya and Roshan together in the mornings. Divya, who was otherwise not an early riser, would rise at five am effortlessly with the

excitement of meeting him and spending at least two hours together.

It was the month of June now and Lord Indra showered his blessings with a downpour of rains all around. The dry lands were filled with pearls of water and intoxicating aroma.

On one of the occasions, they were caught in a heavy rainfall without their umbrellas. They rushed under a nearby shed in front of a house. Divya's long flowing hair was dripping drops of water on the floor and her clothes were partly drenched. She tried to hide her lean figure with folded arms around her chest as her tightly snuggled wet clothes made it more conspicuous. She stared at Roshan from the side of her right eye. He was standing still and looking at the downpour. He turned towards her and smiled.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah"

After about twenty minutes the rain stopped, and Roshan pulled out Divya's hand and held it until she crossed the flooded waters by stepping on the shapeless stones that were placed for people to pass through. Divya's heart was beating faster than before with the touch of his hands.

By the time they graduated, they had become close friends and were amid applying for higher studies. After two weeks, Roshan called Divya and exulted that he had secured admissions for post-graduation in a college in Hyderabad.

"Congratulations! Are you happy?"

“Yes.... It has a good faculty and hostel facilities are good too. What about you?”

“I will be joining a college in Pune”

“Wow! Congrats to you too. We are not going to be very far”

Divya had mixed feelings. She was upset that she had very little time left to see Roshan in person. After they joined their respective colleges, there was not much hope of meeting each other again.

“Can we hang out tomorrow?”

“Yes, I will call you”

“OK, good night”

“Good night”

Before they parted, they saw each other four times. One outing was to the college canteen, two were to their favourite restaurant and the last one at Roshan’s house where he had invited a few other friends over for lunch.

Divya and Roshan kept in touch through emails and letters which they wrote to each other every two weeks. The topic varied from stories of their respective colleges, hostels, faculty professors, new friends, new movies to their emotional distress. They also made landline calls to each other through their respective hostel numbers once a month.

Two years passed and one day Divya received a message from Roshan saying that he has got an opportunity to be in Pune for a few days for a college event. She jumped with joy and thought of opening her heart to him. She wrote down a long letter expressing her unconditional love for him. On the D day,

she dressed in the best of her clothes and went to the restaurant they had planned to meet.

She was very nervous and excited at the same time to see him after two years.

They instantly hugged each other and then sat down for a cup of coffee.

"So, how are you?"

"I am fine... it's so nice to see you"

"Me too. I was so happy when they said I need to be in Pune"

Divya was hiding her nervousness and couldn't wait to tell him.

"Rosh, I need to tell you something"

"Ok, what?"

She cleared her throat and took out the envelope containing the letter.

"I can't speak about it here. Please read this"

Roshan looked apprehensive, he took the envelope from her hand and opened the letter to read.

He read a few lines and within ten seconds closed the letter and looked up at her.

"Divya, I don't know what to say.... I didn't have any idea that you had all these feelings for me... but I am sorry, I can't. You know, being a Parsi, I'm expected to marry a girl from my community. I can't go against my parents. I am very sorry."

Divya did not know how to react. She felt as if the world had come to a standstill and there was nothing left for her to live her life ahead with.

She nodded and went completely speechless. They had the coffee quietly. They got up to leave.

"It's a bit late now, wait I will drop you till your hostel"

Roshan had hired a motorbike and with Divya sitting behind him, they rode on the road now lit with streetlights. Divya rested her palms on the rear steel handle to prevent from falling on Roshan. Her life seemed shattered and empty as the street they were riding through.

The motorbike screeched next to the hostel gate. Divya alighted and said bye to Roshan without making any eye contact.

She could not sleep a wink that night and cried endlessly.

She wondered whether Roshan ever had any feelings for her and grew envious of his future wife. She could not fathom that after all these years of being so close to each other and a confidante to each other, even an insignificant amount of love never blossomed in Roshan's thoughts for her.

Next morning, she went to the railway station to catch supposedly the final glimpse of him before he boarded the train.

"Ahh you should not have bothered"

"It's fine. I wanted to give you this" She handed him a greeting card stating best wishes for his future life." She gave a plastic smile and said, " Happy Journey!"

"Thank you. And I just want to say sorry again. You are a wonderful girl, and you will soon find a suitable match for yourself. Please try to move on." Roshan appeared phlegmatic and his unsolicited advice fell into deaf ears.

Divya cried bitterly after the train whistled past the platform.

She wrote several emails to Roshan, but he never responded.

Many months passed in deep sorrow and after one and half years, she got recruited to a private bank in Mumbai.

After a failed arranged marriage of ten years with Namit, she was now in Wapi reading those letters from Roshan.

Tears rolled down her eyes after reading all of them. She kept everything back into the original place and went to the kitchen to prepare lunch.

A few minutes later, her phone rang. She rushed to answer and saw it was Namit calling her. She hesitated first but then answered it.

"Hello?"

"Hi Divya, how are you?"

"Hi, I am good.... Everything ok?"

"Yes, very much. Listen, I won't take much of your time. Do you remember the name of that guy who had helped us with the Europe tour package?"

"That was a long time ago...but wait I might have his contact number"

"Great. Please send it to me in case you find it. No hurry. Take your time"

“Absolutely, I will.... So, planning a trip?”

“Ahhh..yes...with Ayesha”

“Oh. Wow! She will love it.... I will find and give you the number ok?”

“Please... thank you so much... take care, bye”

“Thanks. You too, bye”

She sank into the sofa and was pensive about how after ten years of relationship, Namit moved on. He didn't seem to carry any remorse about calling and telling her about his fun trip.

Time changes everything but why can't she move even after two decades?

Divya got up and walked straight to the bookshelf and removed all the old letters. She glanced at these one by one.

She questioned herself, “Do these letters mean anything at this time and age? No”.

“Did Roshan ever care about how I am, or did he ever bother to contact me all these years? No”.

“Did Roshan ever love me? Well, that only he can answer but he had declined when I proposed!”

There was a large envelope on one of the shelves. She collected all the letters and put them inside the envelope and dumped it into the garbage bag.

She wondered how he was coping with his life. Roshan was the stronger of the two and she must have been either forgotten or remembered dispassionately if ever he did.

She cried uncontrollably and with a deep heavy sigh accepted her unrequited love.



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