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“String of Woe”

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Biting and sucking his upper lip inside his mouth, Olan pressed his palm on the door. As the door swung open, a loud exhale escaped his mouth as his eyes met darkness. He stepped in and closed the door behind him. Though grateful for it, the darkness was eerily daunting. He stood still to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The streetlight sweeping through the window and the slit below the door enabled him to navigate through the rooms without bumping into any objects or walls. Turning on the light was not an option. What if his father wasn't asleep? What if he was waiting for a sign that his son was home? Olan wasn't in the mood to talk to him. He didn't have the energy to answer his questions. He didn't want to see his face.

His eyes!!

Olan paused outside his father's room. He slightly bent over the closed door and listened. He was dreading the sound of familiar coughing from inside. Silence. Breathing a sigh of relief, he tiptoed to his room.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, Olan opened his eyes. Through the door laying ajar, he saw a figure standing outside his room.

“You didn't eat your dinner?”

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At the familiar voice, he closed his eyes again.

“I ate from outside,” Olan murmured

“Liar. You didn’t,” His aunt retorted.

Olan didn’t bother to reply. His aunt knew him better.

“Liar”

“Don’t worry about me. Go. To...sleep”

“Liar”

“Don’t...Worry,” slurred Olan.

Olan felt his arm being shook. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes. His room was draped in sunlight. Olan groaned and closed his eyes again.

“Don’t you want to go to your office?”

Olan didn’t respond.

“You will get late”

For what? Olan wondered bitterly.

“Olan, don’t make me mad!”

Olan knew better than to make his aunt mad. He also knew he should be up to keep up with the pretense but he desperately wished for the night to fall again.

“Did you lose your job?”

Olan’s eyes flew open. The distorted and hazy world danced around him without his glasses. He sat himself up.

“Better”

As his hand searched for his glasses on the bed, he heard the retreating footsteps. When his black rimmed round glasses were propped on top of his nose, he found himself alone. Before he stepped into the bathroom, he paused on the threshold. Suddenly he felt completely drained of energy. The daily dreary round of waking, eating, pretending to go to work, making several rounds to recruitment firms, worrying about his father constantly, dreading a call from home and returning home disappointed was getting on his nerves.

How long he'd have to pretend to go to work? Not very long he would lose all his savings. Even the idea was bothersome but very soon he'd have to tell his father the truth and start using his pension money. Or find a steady job as soon as possible. But whom was he lying? The chances of finding a job in Nagpur was getting slim day by day. Only if he could escape from the confinement of his hometown.

Only if I didn't have an ailing parent to take care of!

Olan smacked himself on the face lightly at the thought and entered the bathroom.

As he approached the dining table, his house maid placed an aluminum plate with *roti* and *potato curry* on the table. For a brief moment, the aroma of the spices wafting from the curry made him jettison the dread usually snaking over him. After greedily galloping a few bites of his breakfast, he felt the looming presence of his house maid. Taking a sip of his lukewarm tea, he turned to her. He smiled apologetically.

“You were late last night”

Her remark smothered Olan's smile. He nodded and resumed his eating.

“If he continues to be hostile and sarcastic, then I don't think I can continue to work here”

The churned food inside his mouth took some time to be pushed down his throat. Olan sipped his tea ignoring the maid's presence.

“Was he angry about anything?” Olan managed to ask.

“Angry?” The maid asked incredulously. She pulled the chair near him and sat on it. “He wasn’t angry about anything in particular but bitter about everything”

Olan nodded again as he finished his food.

“And you were late yesterday. I cannot stay here longer than 6 pm. My children were waiting for me by the time I reached home. They were hungry. My husband scolded me so much.”

Olan’s eyes fell on the kitchen platform and lingered briefly.

“Is there more curry?”

Olan made the mistake of looking at the maid. Her eyes had a sharp edge to them. Olan realized she was trying to swallow back the abuses meant for him bubbling within the walls of her pressed mouth.

“My husband scolded me for coming home late”

Olan hated how people around him kept repeating the dialogues.

“You have to be back at home before six. That’s as far as I can manage.”

“I was caught up in a meeting,” he lied.

“After six I will go home”

“I’m paying you extra to look after him”

“And I’m working for that money”

The slighted tone was not lost to him.

“I didn’t say you don’t”

Olan hated this. Hated the fact that other people always had the upper hand in a conversation or rather argument. He never held the reign in a conversation and always ended up feeling either indignant or chagrined.

When he didn’t get any response, he looked at the maid. Another mistake. He found himself looking at a woman who was holding herself not to spit on him. Both of them pulled back their chairs simultaneously and got up. The maid walked to the kitchen.

“Did papa eat his breakfast?” he called out to her.

The response came a bit late as if the maid was struggling to decide whether to respond or not.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

The bedroom door was ajar. Relief washed over him when he saw his aunt sitting on a chair near the bed. His father was reading a newspaper. Olan sat on the edge of the bed. His father didn't acknowledge him when he entered the room. The musty smell hanging in the air in his father's room always made him uneasy. The familiar sensation of the tightening of his chest made his eyes prickle with tears. To find solace and a grip over his emotions he looked across the bed, at the steely eyes of his aunt. That did the trick. The unsaid words from his aunt told him that he wouldn't want an unpleasant situation if he let a tear slide.

The ruffling of papers made his head snap towards his father. The melancholy eyes of his father surrounded by shadows underneath met Olan.

"How is your job?" The authoritative voice that Olan dread since as a child hadn't diminished with his advancing age and declining health.

Olan wanted to gulp but he didn't and that took him some time to form any response.

"Yes," He nodded for emphasis and gulped looking away.

"I wanted to believe you," his father said.

Wouldn't that be your fault that I actually lost my job?

"I really want to believe that"

Please, don't...Repeat! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU ALL?

Olan glanced at his aunt.

“You are coming home late nowadays,” his father reproached.

“Just yesterday.”

After a violent coughing attack that lasted for almost a minute, Olan’s father took a few deep breaths and said, “Yesterday. Last Monday and Thursday. Monday and Friday the week before that. And also on Saturday”

Olan looked incredulously at his ailing father and then at his aunt, whose lips were curved into a thin smile. Is he serious? his eyes conveyed to her.

“I thought that your Saturday’s were off”

He is not senile yet.

“I had gone to meet my friend”

“Friend!!”

Olan winced. His father’s remark sounded as if the idea of his son having a friend was preposterous to him.

“Nishant”

His father nodded followed by a mirthless laugh. The action made his fat stomach wobble up and down.

Olan didn't realize that he was smiling until his father's next remark.

“The last time I remember he moved to Hyderabad”

Olan got up and shuffled towards the door. He turned and briefly looked at his aunt.

“What? You didn't answer me”

Olan didn't look at his father. Instead he shifted his focus from his aunt to the headboard and to the half empty glass in the bedside table.

“I'll try to come on time today”

“You better. I cannot stand that maid of yours”

“She is OUR maid”

“You employed her,” his father spat his words, “She is a very unpleasant person to be around. She is mad”

“Trust me, the feeling is mutual,” Olan mumbled while he walked away.

Standing in the balcony, he watched clusters of people huddled around a tea kiosk across the street. Since he had two more hours to kill, he decided to join the cluster of tea-drinkers.

Nuzzling a warm styrofoam cup, he looked across the building he just descended from. It was his third visit to the second floor of the white building. Olan watched the people walking the cemented path leading to the building. The ground floor remained closed with a channel gate even in his first visit, the first was a private bank and the second, the recruitment firm. Unlike other recruitment agencies where they asked to submit a certain amount of money in order to find jobs for the candidates, this recruitment firm didn't have such requirements. Though they didn't disclose it openly, Olan doubted if they recruited for any other jobs except for non-technical positions in BPO and IT service companies. The last thing he wanted was to interact with strangers incessantly over the phone for more than eleven hours. He was done with such jobs.

The recruitment firms do cheer him though especially the one he was standing across. Here he could see he was not the only soul miserable in its existence. He thoroughly enjoyed the twenty minutes he had to wait for his turn to come. His eyes revealed beautiful female HR trainees and their supervisors and the throngs of candidates seated nervously in their seats. He was also listening, carefully. Quelling his mind, he focused only on his hearing sense. Most candidates held degrees in engineering like him. Most had CGPA above 8 but were unemployed and desperate for a job. Just. Like him.

Olan looked down at his empty cup. Olan had also worked in Hexaware, a BPO and IT service company till two months ago. The eleven hours of work, five days a week had gradually started to take a toll on his health after eight months of working. On top of that his father was getting sick often and required several rounds of hospital trips. In the end, he was diagnosed with COPD. Sometimes in the middle of

the day he would get calls from his aunt or maid that his father fell unconscious. Apologizing to his boss he would rush home and take his father to hospital. Unsurprisingly, one day his boss expressed his displeasure with Olan's performance and excuses. Olan gave his resignation letter the next day.

Olan walked over to the tea seller and ordered one more cup. Disdainfully, he glanced over a group of boisterous boys, loud in their review about a latest released movie. The boys were taller than him with looks and bodies to envy. But Olan didn't envy them. He was done with envying for so many years. When Olan remained 5'3 at the age of 19, his father's remark would always be, "He takes after his mother". Died when he was four years old, Chiraiyu didn't have any memory of her. In the formative years of his development, Chiraiyu would leaf through the family album to see her. He did hear enough stories that his father never wanted to marry his mother.

He was in love with another woman. A beautiful Air hostesses! But your grandfather was against the marriage. He believed that the woman was too outlandish. Also characterless! But your father never stopped loving her. Even after she was married off to another man," his maternal aunt told him without breaking into any emotion on her face.

'Your Pranjal aunty hated your mother! His maternal aunt told him over the dinner when he went to visit her one summer vacation. Admitted! My sister wasn't good looking. She was petite and some even said she had a sickly pale look. Just look at the mirror to see her," His aunt looked chagrined for a brief moment. When Olan didn't release his hurt and remained unexpressive, a trait he adopted from his paternal aunt Pranjal, his aunt resumed her blame-game. *'Not that she was ever harassed by her in-laws or husband.'* She paused again to smirk, *"How can he? He barely looked at her. She was just a decorative object in that house. Like that painting which only ignites confusion and makes the viewer wonder the meaning behind the art and the sanity of the painter.*

Olan still remembers the discomfort he felt with her talking and eating, simultaneously. He never dared to open his mouth when he was eating. Neither his paternal aunt nor his father tolerated the idea of talking while eating. The vicious scolding, he received in his formative years was enough for him to keep his mouth shut whenever he indulged in his food. He never even bothered to break that rule during lunch in school.

“But eventually my sister won her right. No one was blind to her kind nature. After three years of marriage, she suddenly became visible to your father. Then you came along....”

From street lights to headlights every artificial light snapped to life with the setting of the sun. A cue for him to thread back home. Reluctantly, he crushed the empty styrofoam cup and dumped it into the trash bin nearby. He looked over the second floor of the white building, now brightly lit. Two HR trainees he saw earlier walked out of the main door, smiling. *Happy that you could successfully lure and manipulate vulnerable candidates to accept non-technical jobs that they would come to regret?* What he regretted now was not wearing a sweater to ward off the chill creeping into the night air.

When Olan crossed the threshold he watched the relief rush into the otherwise scowling face of his house maid.

“Glad that you listened to me. I have made dinner.....”

Words were lost to him as he sauntered towards his father's bedroom. Olan looked down at his sleeping father. A wheezing sound escaping from his father's each breath made him look vulnerable. At least in his sleep. Olan moved and sat on the chair near his bed. He peered over his father. Olan watched his father scowl in his sleep and after a moment or two his eyes flew open. His father turned his head towards him and Olan held his gaze.

“When did you lose your job?” his father asked nonchalantly.

Olan didn't respond but kept on looking at his father.

“Where do you go all these hours? Did you go to the hospital? Did you visit your aunt?”

Olan looked away as a tear slid from the side of his face.

“How could you?” his father whispered.

“What's the point?”

“She brought you up since the death of your mother. She raised you as her own child.”

“Why are you telling me this? It's not news to me”

“She loved you more than her own two sons—

“I know—

“And you didn’t bother to even pay a visit to her”

“She’s in comatose from past three months! It’s not as if she will know my presence,” Chiraiyu said angrily and turned his gaze towards the door.

His father didn’t respond to him. Chiraiyu didn’t dare to look at his father and kept looking at the door.

“They are going to remove her from life support tomorrow. You know that, right?”

Chiraiyu burst out crying. He could no longer bar the torrent of guilt and repressed sorrow he carried with him every day.

“Stop crying like a girl! Instead of crying, go meet her for the last time”

“I can’t. I see her every day.”

Olan’s father took a loud exhale, “Oh. I see. You did that when your mother died. You kept believing she was alive and pretended you could see her. But she was dead. My sister will be dead as well soon”

“I... will...be.... alone...without.... her,” Olan managed to say between the sobs.

Olan’s father didn’t bring the fact that since he was alive Olan wouldn’t be alone. But since he and his son never shared a bond, he couldn’t dish out a sentimental lie, “Get yourself a wife. You won’t be alone then”

Olan looked at his father, his teary red-rimmed eyes suddenly devoid of any emotion. He pointed a finger at himself, “Look at me. Who will marry me? I carry lots of baggage and burdens. I cannot even hold a single job for long. I’m a mess.”

Olan’s father’s lips curled upward and straightening his head he closed his eyes. Olan knew he provided his father justification for his lifelong censure towards his child.

“It’s all your fault,” Olan muttered under his breath.

~~End~~