**THE LATENT AILMENT**

**-Aadityaamlan Panda**

"The reminiscence of those days bestirs my imagination. I know it is dead but...", Oliver said looking at the patterns engraved on the roof of Notre Dame. "Those arches, I know, are integral for its existence, but I feel as if they are hinting at some old frivolous figment of my fancy synthesised by a crooked cacophony cursing my corpse. Yeah, none but the steps where it all started."

"Enough now, spare it, man. Your pilgrimage to the sands was six months afore. Now you are far severed from the dread of the dead. The prowess of the present is pragmatic enough to plague the prevalence of the past. And for you, tie your toque to taste. You might be summoned to lead the Bocuse d'Or scheduled six months from now", Merlin cautioned him while the duo strode off the frosted de Fourviere.

During his flourishing days, Oliver Dumont pursued the career of a renowned chef based in L' Auberge du Pont de Collonges, Lyon, France or more commonly the Paul Bocuse's. Besides being a culinary expert, a grandmaster connoisseur and a clever chef, he had registered himself in the world of competitive cooking at the very early age of sixteen with his appearance in the Young Chef Olympiad. But the breakthrough in his career came when the local boy was nominated to lead the French team at Bocuse d'Or. The finals remained unforgettable. Norwegian chef, Betty Jensen satiated the kids' appetite, pushing the national team into a daunting dilemma. But they came back strongly with the fish, and the Norwegian stars were forced to resign. The glory they brought charmed the climate of Lyon. The streets were full of people celebrating the victory and no doubt honouring their pride, Oliver.

But at least this was not the incident the Gothic arches were trying to portray. Probably it might be his safari to the Egyptian Sahara that instigated the darkest phase of his life. But he remembers vividly the arches of the step pyramid of Djoser. Because this is where he was trapped, enslaved in the clutches of the Egyptian Sherden, the paramyxovirus EGYX-47 led to a major disease that could be temporarily suppressed as an epidemic, but the victims who witnessed its impact might convey some better explanation for it. Explanation? It cannot be narrated, only be suffered; cruelly left to part with the past; lose some capabilities, some very vital. How much vital? As vital as differentiating between bitter and sweet. Ah! Not only the sea of feelings I am mumbling about. But the cutaneous buds, the centres of gustation, or simply taste buds. But for a cook, they are as essential as water for a fish. Under normal circumstances, the damage could be healed. Oliver was one of the unlucky patients who suffered damage to that tissue of his tongue, which gave him the power to his sense of flavour. But his luck was worth further cursing, as the doctors found unexpected results with him. His ageusia was worsening day by day.

But sadly, he was unaware of this at that point of conversation. Rather, he relied on the false hope of some miracle which might have been scheduled or in a better way based on some odd premonition of time. And doctors had revealed the facts in half-broken statements and veiled hints to him, to enable him to contain hope to gather strength enough to sustain his career. However, in some shattered piece of imagination, he felt that he was gripped by the infamous aftermath. However, his suspicion became his reality as it displayed its ugly face at a local event where he failed to judge the dishes based on taste. Bocuse d’Or was getting nearer at an unusual pace, or as if he felt that time was getting nearer. Where will he discover his taste? Can he ever get it back?

The day ended with humiliation. It was not intentional neither a fault but an erratic convergence of time and misfortune.

“Sorry, I had never thought to express this, but I must step back. I cannot let my nation suffer my ambition”, said Oliver in reverberating tone, patched with spots of despair, externally firm and internally fatigued, apparently bold but differently shattered. “It is not the end. But it is your evaluation by God. Accept it. We still have time.” Oliver came in touch with Merlin, when the latter accompanied the former from home, after the prolonged treatment which had made him intensely weak. Oliver was a bachelor and had nobody to look after him. So in these tough days, he used to part some of his time with Merlin, who could be found smoking a cigar in front of the Basilica.

“We can still get your taste back. Try to recall your past culinary journey. Some odd taste that plucked your taste buds in an idiosyncratic way. Where you have felt the necessity to rediscover taste, much like what honeybees feel when they are introduced into a new floricultural asset”, Merlin provoked Oliver to retrace his forgotten journey to remember his art back “. I have felt the variety of tastes all around the world. Taste is no less than a science that needs to be comprehended, discovered or if not invented. The laws are redefined, re-narrated and in some odd circumstances the loop goes to eternity.” Oliver reiterated his past instances.

Merlin continued, “Each bulb of a taste bud is made of stratified epithelium. See you have tried all kinds of treatment. So, it can never have an overlying cause. It is an underlying issue, something related to the core of your body.”

“Something related to proteins?”

“Maybe. We have not achieved that level of investigating into the depths of how tastes function.”

“If it is related to animal nutrients then I can narrate some of the most awkward experiments with taste.”

“My expedition to the far East has been the epitome of diminishing sanity of the sea. I was served with Tuna eyeballs fried in garlic in the ancient izakaya of Yokohama. And even that I felt was low, when I saw chopped tentacles of a squid on my table in a Korean restaurant. But the Chinese dish got its mettle ratified when I was made to inhale ammonia in the name of gulping the century eggs. Yeah, I even ventured into Southeast Asia to search for other frugal delicacies. At the gateway, i.e. Laos, I was pretty satisfied with the sweet soup I sipped at my lodging before I was informed of its truth. They were made of ant eggs! And further strange happenings occurred in Cambodia when I ignored the counsel of the old monk of Vientiane, who had warned me of tarantulas of the Kambuja. It was not from their bite but rather ours!! Oh! I will choke myself if I clock back to the Americas. I was baffled by the vacillating taste of the Canadian jelly, later realising that the prominent beefy taste was at the cost of the sacrifice of a moose. That too its nose! But I experienced an improved salubrious taste when I chomped guinea pigs in Peru. I even ate tamales filled with corn smut and found it quite safe. But taste cannot always go hand in hand with health. So, I was summoned by the wild savage Europe. I was intoxicated with poorly fermented hakarl at the Nordic festival of Thorrablot. After reviving from the ammonia intoxication, I set out to Sweden to taste the sour herring. The taste shivered my spine. Oh God! I might be dead than suffer the aftermath. But I remember how I survived the extinction enforcing maggots which thrived in my intestine after I got obsessed with the Italian cheese. These are the weird tastes I have experienced around the world. I cannot remember something more peculiar than these.”

“So, I would suggest you re-experience these dishes to check out if these weird sensations can torment your taste back.”

Oliver finally decided to reproduce all these dishes in his kitchen, with even effort. The herring disintegrated the aura of his kitchen while the hakarl and century eggs haunted the air. Eyeballs traced the floor of his kitchen while the killed moose’s nose pleaded before for another day. Guinea pigs imported from Mexico, were even not spared, though their glances were capable enough to imprison any man’s heart. But he seemed no more a man but a demi-monster. However, he cannot be blamed, but be sympathised with as these numerous smaller sacrifices might count towards the prevention of a bigger sacrifice.

But his attempt disgustingly failed, devasted, dethroned to the dark. He failed to sense the flavour of any. The most astonishing of all was that he remained unmoved by the sourness of herring which possessed the strength of engulfing a healthy man’s appetite into flames. Tears rolled down his icy cheeks while he sobbed on the bank of Sarnes.

“Look don’t get disheartened so early, we still have three months in hand, we can find out some way”, Merlin said, “Let me know, have you noticed some odd counsel like the one you heard in Laos or some rare instances which canst provoke in you an instinct to find out some other heal?”

“A strange dialect did cross the faith of my ear, some strange heal which the monk in Lhasa told me that lies in the place where Phoebus soars over the crown of Ceres. I voyaged to the far east for that purpose only but found no trace of it. He even clearly mentioned that such a culinary experience would alter your mindset of taste. It is above taste, a convergence of mind and soul.”

“I see, he must not be hinting at the far east.”

“But I felt that the crown of Ceres were mountains. And the fire of Phoebus might have been the flames of Fujiyama.”

“It is not that complicated; if we focus more on mountains, the better part lies in Lhasa itself. The whole of North and North-East of India is spanned by the Himalayas. And the sun can never soar over Lhasa’s crown as it is more of a valley.”

“So you think it is a peak? Like the Everest.”

“Not Everest specifically, but can be eastward in India itself, like the Dong, the point of sunrise in India.”

“But I feel it is no less than a valley.”

“Yeah it is a valley, I know. But have you heard of the myths of the secrets of those intriguing mountains?”

“No.”

“It is said that they contain the most astonishing medicines which you would find nowhere. Then can paralyse the strong, empower the weak and enliven the dead. They might be there. Hidden. They might even provide with you some remedy.”

“So, we must plan out a trip to those frosty ranges.”

The flight landed at Lokpriya Bordoloi airport in Guwahati on a misty morning. The sky, overcast with dusk-brawny clouds brutally suppressing the shafts of Phoebus encompassing them, aroused a mixed feeling of suspicion and excitement, which got strengthened with the anxiety in the air. They further boarded to the Pasighat airport, to carry on their mystical journey.

Miles and miles upstream, the hills testing them, the vales disturbing their dare. The snow cannot be trusted, the weather can neither be relied on. They love altering their forms. Not to harm but with the notion of playing holy pranks with passers-by. And beware of avalanches. They barely spare you a second to shed tears as you are deprived of other options then. They scrutinised every shelter, every cave. When their confidence gave in, they found themselves unconscious on a cane bed that lay inside a meagre hut. Frightened, they looked outside. It was a village. Yeah, a village that had grown within the snow.

“How are you feeling son?”

“Quite better. May I know about you?”

“I am the headman of mauraun or the New home in the Ahom language.”

‘Are we in India now?”

“Yeah definitely, but this place is not included in its map. We are a group of warrior clans and descendants of the ancient Ahom, who once guarded their northern front against the Mongolian attacks and played a major role in the battle of Saraighat. But one of our ancestors betrayed his commander during the Burmese invasion and our entire tribe had to pay the price of it. We fled to our self-esteem and never returned. But we had extensive nursing abilities. But why were you wandering on those snow caps?”

“Fine Sir, let me tell you. I have come to get well, get healed, get back to my normal life.”

The headsman had secretly kept them under house arrest to investigate the reason for their coming. He called for the village doctor.

“Sir, I returned from Egypt with a defect in my body which affected the progress of my career. I lost my taste without which it is hard to cook and impossible to judge. My tastebuds have lost their functionality.”

“May you be served with nam-chu-det-nuk”

Oliver was made to drink syrup. Merlin found that it was not a syrup but a gaseous entity, a suspension of air that flamed the body from inside. But Oliver felt colder enough, colder than the polar ice. He got so frozen with frostbite that he was made to swallow hot water.

“It is not your taste buds, but the root of taste, the leptin that has got affected. The promotor of fat storage has got rather some more intrinsic and subtle functions. It acts as a binary switch and primarily goes for a negative feedback mechanism.”

“How does that relate here?”

“You have been intoxicated with something, which has increased your Leptin level tremendously. You have grown broader have not you?”

“Yeah, I feel”

“This is an ejaculation of own village pride, the flame bird, det-nuk. It unveils the truth hidden in darkness. It unveils poison consuming a healthy person from inside.”

“But who would intoxicate me?”

“That you need to find out. Some odd habits which you have developed. You need to spot them. We can heal you temporarily. But we can never bar you from getting into trouble again.”

He made him smell gas from some plant. After that, he remembered nothing. When he woke up, he found himself lying in his bed. It was January already, maybe a few days more left for the event. He instantly rang up Merlin, but the reply said that no such number exists. He got up and licked the spoon of peanut butter kept near his head and to his surprise, it tasted, hard, buttery, a little dense and chocolaty. Ah! He had got his taste back, his yearned taste. But he could not find the plants which he had grown on his balcony and ate their leaves every day.

Merlin, who was a spy of the lost Himalayan village, was bestowed with the task of investigating where their sacred nau bao was. Merlin was the saint in Oliver’s account but there was some crooked guy who came into his life after his African safari who had sold him the same plant when he came to know about the visible symptoms. The same plant healed him in the village itself. But it acted either way. But Oliver clearly remembers that the man was wrapped in a black gaberdine, with a tiger etching on the back.

As expected, Oliver judged the Bocuse d’Or. He noticed something familiar with one of the other judges. He was Betty Jensen. Particularly, his jacket looked strange. And the stranger was his behaviour of sticking to his chair throughout the event.