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Translation (English): Aadityaamlan Panda

              ପାରନାନୀ (Para Sister)

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Death is inevitable. It is life’s solitary and ultimate truth. Who is unaware of this veracity! How intensely painful it is to survive life at the juncture of life and death, only a victimized soul can cogitate those feelings.

Bhai, my elder brother, lay senseless on his bed with a weary, feeble, and pale countenance. The body is now just a few bones and fragments of shrunken ribs. Only the narrow stream of air, gradually undulating through his lungs, serves as his last means of persistence. Indeed, there exists only a meagre gap like that of a thread between life and death! As per the doctor’s prognosis, he would survive at most a month more. In the meantime, fifteen days have already elapsed. Ah... my eyes got closed. Reverberating through my ribs, a sign of grief tore through my chest. A stream of searing tears rolled down my face.

How much is he aged! Just three years older than me. attained fifty-one on the recent Magha Sri Panchami. Is this an age to depart! Every one said that he had incarnated Lord Kartikeya’s embodiment, blessed with wisdom by Goddess Saraswati. Ah, which catastrophic planet had its evil eye on you! Again, my heart strobed, and tears drenched my soul, grieving at his pain. I covered my face with either of my palms.

My father (Bapa) is lying on his bed in the drawing room. Afflicted with paralysis, he is unable to do his daily chores. Glancing blankly through his benign eyes, he seemed like a piece of withering wood or merely a stationary statue of stone. Ah! How can that be judged? One who had to lend the shoulders after his departure is furthering this event towards egress. The episode of the merciless death of a son before an old, aged Bapa. My goodness! There may never be anyone else cursed with the same agony. My mother (maa) is completely engrossed in her prayers, begging before the Lord to save her son at the cost of her despondent, vulnerable life, restricted to the vicinity of the unextinguished flame lit by her. The condition of my sister-in-law (Bhauja) is further miserable and inexpressibly pathetic. Her world is on the verge of devastation! Devoting herself completely to his hospice care, she is neglecting her health completely. She has already vomited twice today, and adding to that, she collapsed from vertigo. The doctor has given her an injection. Perhaps it is the cause of inducing her to sleep. I briskly covered her with a blanket. A light sleep might comfort her.

Bhai is the father of only one boy, Pupun, who has joined a new occupation after completing his engineering degree at a private company based in Hyderabad. He has already visited thrice during this period, departing last week itself. Considering the dwindling health of Bhai, Bhauja had again made telephonic contact with him yesterday. He will be there tomorrow morning.

I am guarding Bhai, silently sitting beside him. He has not been able to ingest anything for the last two days. Intermittent doses of glucose water are something he is swallowing at maximum. Pancreatic cancer is the most gruesome and hazardous amidst all known kinds of cancer. At the time of diagnosis, the ailment had already attained its fourth stage, indicating the ultimate stage of cancer! But being so educated, capable, and wise, how could Bhai neglect his health to such an extent? Moreover, Bhauja, being so conscientious, could not even detect anything!!

However, as per Bhai’s version, these are all incidents from just six months. First of all, in fits and starts, he perceived gastric pain. He used generic medicine, underestimating it as mere acidity. Gradually, with the augmenting pain, he realised that his worsening health was followed by a rapid decline in body mass. Ignoring his opposition and forbidding, Bhauja took him to Delhi. After various kinds of tests and concomitant inspection at AIIMS, it was discerned to be cancer, already malignant and encroaching beyond the restrictions of the pancreas, spreading to the stomach, liver, gall bladder, gall gland, etc. At this stage, surgery was not possible, and resorting to chemotherapy was the only hope. That too only when it is complemented by the availability of the best treatment, guaranteeing the opportunity to live for six months at most.

This unforeseen news had completely shaken our family, leaving Bhauja shattered. This made me travel to Delhi in order to restore her confidence. We solaced each other and explained our cognizance. As per the doctor’s instructions, chemo began. Ah, the wrath of chemo! The pain appeared on his face in a perverted state. He lost half of his strength after the first round of chemotherapy. This restricted him to bed. After three weeks, followed the second chemotherapy, which left behind severe anaemia, excess alopecia, and consequently buccal ulceration and vomiting, which barred him from eating meals. What he ate! Medicines, injections, and saline became his solitary source of survival. Three bottles of blood were infused into his veins prior to the third chemotherapy. This led to a climax of pain and severe, ruthless jaundice. The doctor said that further phases of chemo cannot be administered if the disease does not subside. Diminution was unfathomably beyond; jaundice began to exacerbate day by day.

Now, Bhai's patience was starting to break. Up until now, he had been enduring all the pain by keeping his mouth shut. With lachrymose eyes, he prayed: "The torment is unbearable. The consequence is no longer hidden from anyone. In no way do I want to die on this cancer bed. Take me out of here. In my village, in my home, glancing at my parents, I want to part with my last breath. Do mercy on me."

We all got drenched in tears and grief.

The doctor said, "By our moral sense, we never discharge an extremely serious patient until life persists. But I personally feel that we must honour a patient’s will at the penultimate stage."

No more scope existed for any sort of conversation or conflict of mind, inflicted or desired. We traversed with Bhai all the way back to our village, our home.

Bhai is now lying in his own room, on his personal bed. The room is the dumb witness of his teen agility, the profoundness of his young age, and his gloomy reality.

Our village is located in the region of the bygone territorial regime. My great grandfather had served as the diwan of the erstwhile king. Our family is highly revered in the nearby villages. Post the days of kingship, our demeanour got passed down to posterity. Hence, grandfather (Jeje Bapa) and Bapa, despite their educational qualifications, never gave a single spark to the thought of travelling away from our village for employment. Bapa was the only son of Jeje Bapa. Bapa only had two, me and bhai.We live in an era of constant transformation. Bapa had made up his mind that Bhai must study hard to pass the Civil Service exam. Thus, he was very cautious regarding his studies from the beginning itself.

During those days, our village was dependent on wells and ponds for water. Water for daily use was drawn from a well by Nira aunty. She was called “Nira Gouduni” by the entire village. In good or bad times, she used to help maa with her household chores. She was widowed at a very young age. She had only one daughter, Parbati. Though she was studying in my class, she was two years older than me, so I called her “Para Nani” ("Para" sister). She was a pageant of beauty, blessed with the sparkling hue of gold flakes, a smooth physique, and evenly circular, communicative glances decked with firm eyelashes. Sharp nose, lips resembling blooming petals. charming, attractive temple. Along with this, she had dark, dense hair. She seemed to be the Goddess’ idol at the Dussehra festival. There was no other girl in our vicinity as enticing as she.

Bhai was a meritorious student. I was a far cry from him, being able to just pass my classes with much difficulty. Using my old books and dresses, Para Nani was much ahead of me in terms of studies. So as per Bapa's instructions, I had to study with her. Habitually, in the evening and often in the afternoon, especially on holidays, Para Nani used to visit our home. We laid carpets in our backyard and studied there. This activity suited best during the sunny afternoons because Para Nani carried with her raw mango, tamarind, salt, and chilly. Even thinking about it makes my mouth water.

During Bhai’s matriculation, I was a student in the ninth standard. During those days, matriculation exams used to be over by February. Our exams were scheduled to be held in April. Bapa imparted stringent instruction to him not to stay away from random sports, and focus on helping me with my lessons after his exams, as far as possible. After all sorts of ineffective mumbling and grumbling, he had to unwillingly sit near me. The steadier he was, the unsteadier I was. He used to teach with dedication. But my mind had nothing but punk. I understood little while getting perplexed at rest. But Para Nani used to absorb everything he taught. When he appreciated her effort, I used to stare red-eyed at her. I used to think, “This way you are not grasping the concepts well, but rather finding ways to get me scolded. After the class, let Bhai depart; I will trounce you on your back." But such a thing never happened. She used to affectionately pat me and explain elegantly, “Frisky! If you pay a little more attention, then!! I have brought all these for you. Eat them slowly while I explain the entire lesson again." Honestly, she used to blend the texts and pour them into my brain. “Ah! Which element are you made of, my aureate Nani? I used to hug her tightly and kiss her.

Exams were finally over. Preparation for that year reached a temporary halt. But Bhai’s habit of coming to our backyard did not change. sometimes out of concern for our well-being, and sometimes for some other random reason. And sometimes he would even come to the mango cultivars or the temple compound under the pretence of searching for me. By then, I had transitioned from the age of skylarking with straws into the days of demeanour and dazzle. Thus, I could comprehend a few things. Para Nani glanced at him without practically glimpsing. She saw him, and her countenance got resplendent with some unstated pleasure. The enthusiasm of an influenced student on her face had transformed into the customary adroitness of youth! Profoundness!! Venturing courage!!! Hidden from the green eyes of society, the acquaintance and relationship between Para Nani and Bhai rejuvenated gradually. But within me, there evolved a mixed feeling of dread and contentment—contentment because I loved both of them abundantly. Bhai was no less than half a life for me, while Para Nani to me was an ever-virtuous fairy of paradise. But what I feared were the aristocracies of our family: Bapa’s zero deviation from stern traditional propensities and Maa’s incomprehensibility of duty.

Para Nani was an expert in designing braids. She also had dense hair like me. With great care, she used to comb and tie up my hair into twisted plaits. Bhai would deliberately ask, “Ah, you don’t even possess the prowess to bake straws. Who has combed your hair with such beauty, Rini?” I used to frown. No, I rather jokingly teased him. I used to say, “How many times a day do you want to hear her name?” Bhai plucks my hair. I would scream loudly, “Will you leave, or I will call Maa? Mind it; I will reveal everything to her.” Bhai would then grasp my mouth. Plead through his glance signalling to offer bribes. Ah! The unforgettable memories of an irreversible past soaked me in tears.

Bhai ranked himself among the top ten in the matriculation examination. Honestly speaking, it felt as if we welcomed a festival in our village. In those days, matriculation was followed by two years of I.Sc. and three years of B.Sc. After that competition- based preparation for I.A.S. and lodging in Delhi for the same; Bhai had a long path to traverse. Bhai left our village. But eternal was his relationship with Para Nani. Time was ever faster than the stream of earthly emotions. Two years later, I too had to leave our village after my matriculation, for Cuttack to continue my higher studies. Para Nani completed her matriculation with a first-grade performance. But due to the consistent ill-health of Nira aunty, she lost all hopes of studying further. Bapa lobbied to get her an employment at our village Aaganwadi. All three of us could then meet only during summer vacations or Dussehra vacations. It all would go through me; with great prudence and restraint, I would help them meet each other. The touchstone of time matures love while separation strengthens it. I could at least commit this to my heart when I perceived the fresh relationship between Bhai and Para Nani.

Once, Bhai bought us a pair of gold-plated brass bangles. To avoid any kind of suspicion regarding the indistinguishability of the bangles, instead of wearing them, I hid them in my trunk. But Para Nani wore them immediately on her wrist. The two pieces of bangles, in apple-pie order, perfectly suited her magnolia-hued hands!!

Equivocation cannot screen the truth for long. Tittle-tattle and all kinds of gossip spread everywhere. The hearsay reached Bapa’s ears. I got all messed up in fear. I had surrendered my hopes to God. But that day, it so happened that neither Maa nor Bapa inquired of me regarding that incident. Rather, I discovered them indulging in late-night conversation, behind the closed door, in their room. The next day, Maa called Nira Aunty and revealed everything to her. She started pleading before Maa. Without stretching the issue any more, they decided to arrange for her marriage on the next lunar day. Bapa assured to bear expenses and find a groom for her. She returned home, thanking us heftily.

I did not have the courage or strength to open my lips before Bapa. After much thought and delusion, I gathered all my courage and spoke up before Maa.

“Maa, both of them love each other a lot. Bhai’s heart would shatter if Para Nani married someone else.”

“Shut up! It is all your drama. You did not inform me, even though you were aware of everything. We are hearing the truth after the cat is out of the bag.”

“Bhai had promised me, Maa. He had assured me that he would inform you about everything once the right time stamped its arrival.”

“What would he have said?" Ancestors of a revered Brahmin family are served and prayed for by a Gouda woman. Where do these kinds of unrealistic things occur?”

“How far has civilisation progressed! You are adhering to ancient casteism. Try to understand Maa. Please extenuate it before Bapa.

“Will I tell your Bapa? Have you gone mad? Your Bapa will tear me into pieces at first sight. I am warning you, Rini! Do not dare to open your mouth!!"

Nope, Maa did not understand. I gave in. Bhai was in Delhi. During those days, no such telephonic facilities as exist today, were available. So, letters were the sole mode of communication. It was a fact that every letter would reach Bhai through Bapa only. So, I was deprived of all alternatives to bringing the matter to Bhai's attention.

That day, I tried my best to disengage myself from Para Nani. I will not be wrong if I say that I was not able to muster the courage to face her. The next day, she came and hauled me to the basil grove in our backyard. She combed my hair as gorgeously as she used to before. But I was not able to glance at her face. Few moments passed in silence. After that, she plucked my head by the chin. Quietly, she said, “Look at me, Rini”.

No, I could not see, as if either of my eyelids had been pressed down by a mountain of grief.

“I can understand your mental state, Rini. But if you are overpowered by apprehension, who will soothe him? Who else do I have other than you? Tell me! Knowingly, I had stepped onto the slippery path. I had striven for the moon while being only a dwarf on earth. He had thought that after qualifying I.A.S., he would politely ask Bapa’s consent. He had faith that Bapa would surely agree. But before the arrival of that period, this traumatic situation arose. Leave all that apart. I have a deep attachment to him, so I am also responsible for the honour of his family. Our society has still not evolved from tradition and caste-based customs. And without the consent of our family and society, we must not take any unpleasant decisions, my golden sister”

Ah!! She is not only beautiful but also well-mannered and intelligent. I looked up to Para Nani. Her big eyes turned lachrymose. She was looking into the vacancies of the vast ether and desperately trying to consume the little dangling globule of tears, but she was constantly failing. My chest gasped from suffocation. I cried. I clasped her palms and said, “Cry out openheartedly, Para Nani; lighten your heart from the load. Else, you will perish alive, dear. I know Bhai loves you very much. By the time he would know, everything would have been over here. I am not able to imagine the situation after that.”

The two brass bangles slipped down her wrists and got wet in my tears. She raised my head and wiped my tears away. Placidly, with great love, she tightened the bangles on her wrist and said, “Rini, though it got discoloured, yet it can never be broken.”

Ah… Does even a faded smile embed so much mercy! Do ever lips cry to that extent desperately!! I felt for that single instance, not even eyes, none but lips are the azure lakes of eternal tears!!!

Bapa, if he wished, could force the impossible to happen in reality. Only within a short period of fifteen days was the groom chosen, the date ordained, and the marriage performed with all kinds of rituals and arrangements. Decked with red vermillion, red bangles, and red pedicure, Para Nani went to Kolkata, where her husband was working in a factory. The faded brass bangle rested in her hand beside all those red ones! I could not take my eyes off it. With nothing more than a sombre sigh, I had to express my sympathy for her. Right after her daughter’s wedding recessional, Nira aunty passed away within a month or two. Bhai could not get even a hint of all this.

After a few days, Bhai returned home during his holiday. On his return, I deliberately stayed away from home, taking shelter under the mango tree in the temple compound. I knew that after failing to find me at home, he would surely arrive there.

“You are here, Rini? You know, I have been searching for you everywhere at home.”

I remained silent.

“Are you angry with me, Rini? Is that the reason behind your abstinence from writing to me?   If you needed something from Delhi, why didn’t you tell me! Now, if you don’t tell me, how will I know!!”

Still failing to get any reply from me, he sat down near me. Redressing my tangled hair, he said, “Wait; you will witness how I would scold your Para Nani today. What is so important that she is finding no time to decorate the braid of my cute golden Tapoi bhauni (younger sister)! Let her come!!”

My heart shuddered in grief; eyes thrust upon the verge of pouring down. In the hands of gentle condolence, I cried profusely!

“Rini!”

Placing my head on Bhai’s lap, I wept desperately!

“What has happened, Rini?” Anxiety could be heard in his voice.

I conveyed everything firmly. He listened patiently. He sat silently for some time. Then he calmly said, “Let’s go home. Maa might be worried”.

Returning home, as if Bhai had pledged to remain silent for the whole day. He reverted back to Delhi a day later. Bapa looked worried. Maa was strained. Yet both of them thought that it all emerged from a blow to the delicate heart. Everything would get sorted out by itself in a day or two. The prowess of time will dwindle the impact of every ill instance of the past. But nothing as such happened. Time’s suppression of the past was not complete; rather, it wiped off every streak of smile from Bhai’s lips. It blanched all hues from his life and rendered it faded.

Bhai cracked the I.A.S. examination in the very first attempt itself. Bapa got elated. Maa wrapped her saree around her neck and prostrated before God. But I could not mark even the slightest amount of contentment in Bhai’s face. He got posted in no time. Bhai joined the job impassively, as if he had turned into a passionless humanoid.

Bapa married me to a suitable groom. Bhai did not show even a trace of laxity in the responsibilities of a brother. During my departure, with a subdued voice, I told him, “I am not able to bear the pain of your desolation, Bhai. Please do not torment yourself for all this. Promise me.” The gust of the reverberating gasp, beelining his ribs, blew against my temple, but I could not receive any reliable assurance from him.

A plethora of proposals came for Bhai. Whenever I go home, Maa would show me images of beautiful virgins, but I don’t know why the appearance of every girl resembled the countenance of Para Nani. Like she was condoling, “Let it not be in this birth—surely in the next birth, I will be your bhauja and daily tie your braid. Do not get disheartened.” Attempting to hide my tears, I used to get away from the place with some other excuse.

Maa used to post letters, enclosed in envelopes, that further embodied photographs of the most beautiful, educated girls to Bhai. She pleads, “The requirement of time be at the zenith, glided grace. Your age for nuptial rituals has arrived. We are ripe fruits. When we might wither, we don’t know. Everyone hopes—before his or her demise—to see the faces of grandsons and granddaughters. Express your choice, dear:”

Bhai’s reply would be, “I have not seen any photos, nor do I desire to see any. You wished to make me an I.A.S. I became. Now you want me to get married. I will. But I want to vividly express one thought: I have lost any personal choice. Whoever you choose, I am ready to marry. The only thing you need to do is let me know the day and date. I will arrive there right at that time.”

Maa pressed upon her head in despair. Bapa could sense the dreaded apprehension. Perhaps, both had anticipated that they had pierced deep into the heart of their dear son, who was dearer to them than their lives and whose incessant gore had blocked all visible possibilities of healing. Ah! It seemed as if without any resistance or remonstrance, Bhai was requiting his revenge in an ever-dauntingly ruthless manner.

Flamboyant, educated Bhauja stepped into our home as the forebearer of our lineage. Every ritual was carried out in proper festive mode. But Bhai remained lost and detached. Bhauja was shocked. She looked worried. Seeking an opportunity, I persuaded Bhai to follow me to the temple compound. Joining my hands, I pleaded before him, “Do not torment the girl for the mistake of Maa and Bapa. What is her fault? You used to pull my braids, as they had been shaped by Para Nani. Even now, when her thoughts come to mind, I wave my hands over my head in despair. Put your hands on my head. By the grace of Para Nani, swear that you will behave like this no more with bhauja. Past indiscretions cannot be improved. If you do not understand this small thing, two lives will be ruined simultaneously, Bhai!"

He placed his head instead of his hand, as if a torrent gushed out of the firm rocks. Ah, where had Bhai subdued so much of his tear?

Even though it was not a complete transformation, Bhai tried to be a bit normal. Bhauja smiled. Perhaps she thought that she had married a decent, quite engrossed, and utterly emotionless person. I prostrated before God.

Pupun was born two years after their marriage. Bhai was posted in an outlying state. Transfers occur within a year or two. Maa and Bapa were repeatedly getting sick due to chronic geriatric diseases. Whenever Bhauja came, she would persuade Maa and Bapa to go with her. But they were not ready to abandon their roots. They would return after a month-long stay with Bhai. Again, they were reluctant to stay at my place for more than two days, as they would consider this their daughter’s home.

That year, on visiting home during Dussehra, Maa informed me that Para Nani had returned. I had no information on her whereabouts after her marriage. Hence, I rushed to her house. We both hugged each other and cried a lot at length. After getting acquainted, I saw her empty temple. Quickly I glanced at her wrists; those two blanched brass bangles were the only ornaments with her. Noticing my acute bewilderment, she narrated her five years’ experience in a span of five minutes.

The more unintentional Para Nani's marriage, the more painful her subsequent life. Within a few days of her nuptial rites, she came to know that the employers of the industry considered the wives of employees as their private property. And if the wife were beautiful, even before the completion of Ashtamangala, she must be offered to them; she had to bear their offerings. This unstated ordinance, this undeclared declaration, was compulsory and had to be followed by everyone. Attire, appetite, and address forced many to tolerate, even against their will. But Para Nani could not subdue herself under the suppression. One day, in the midst of darkness, she left her home and husband and fled from that place. But where would she have gone then? She had pledged that she would not return to her village till my and my brother’s marriage. After much pleading, she managed to get a peon job in a small school and sustained her survival by her frugal means in a small, single-story house in the school's periphery. To keep herself busy and engaged, she began providing free tuition to poor, neglected kids. Seeing her extraordinary capabilities, the school regulatory committee said that if she would bring her matriculation certificate from her village, they would permanently employ her as a teacher. But Para Nani could not overpower her endearment for her soil, for her village. She was continuously in touch with the events in our village. What she had been waiting for was that after the completion of the marital rites for both of us, she would return and educate village kids. She had returned on this note. But to provide her the means of sustenance, neither Nira aunty nor her job at the village Aaganwadi existed. However, instead of getting discouraged, she used some of her retained wealth to restore her ancestral home, and then she began teaching young kids. She is much beloved and revered as Para Nani by everyone living in our village.

Para Nani inquired about my well-being. She heard with keen attention about Bhai, Bhauja, and Pupun from me. Her eyes showed no signs or colour of jealousy or envy. Rather, she prayed at the will of God for their happy life. She truly is a one-of-a-kind on the planet.

Last year, Bapa underwent his first stroke. After a month-long surgery at Cuttack Medical Hospital, he recovered but the left side of his body got paralysed. Bhai was in Mumbai at that time. After applying for a long leave, both came and stayed with Bapa. They yearned to take him along with them after his discharge. But Bapa was firm in his point, “I won’t abandon my village”. Due to her old age, Maa was also not capable of taking care of Bapa. So, they appointed servants and attendants in our village home itself.

But Bapa got completely confined to bed. The aftermath of incapacitation made sanitation a tough job. Gradually, servants and attendants dispensed with their help. Para Nani came to their rescue at once. As if Bapa were her own son. Without hesitation, she took upon herself all the chores of Bapa. Warm tears of repentance rolled down Bapa’s cheeks. He had even lost the capacity to wipe out his tears. Like a maa, she wiped out his tears with her saree. Maa sometimes said, “We are not even worthy of being cursed, Para! Of which birth are you compensating the debt!!" She used to hug Maa close to her chest and comfort her. She often wrote to me, "Do not worry about maa and bapa, Rini. Do not tell these to your bhai or bhauja. I am here to manage everything. Your Para Nani!” I would soliloquise, are you a person or a paragon, Para Nani?

When Para Nani heard that Bhai was sick, she broke down right away, even though she had always been able to deal with whatever life threw at her. Her vital force got shaken. She stared cluelessly at me, expecting the progression of his health. And yesterday itself, I found her crying at the temple compound, when she handed me a drop of holy water to feed to Bhai.

With a vague shriek, Bhai opened up his eyes. I got my consciousness back. Ah… I had been engrossed and captivated by my thoughts for a long time. From the days of soiled subtleness, each and every moment flicked upon my inward eye and created a panorama of nostalgia that was heavy for me to shed. Bhauja is in a deep sleep. Is it the sleep of arrhythmic death!! An impulse of fear wriggled through my spine.

I fed Bhai a spoonful of glucose solution. He turned his face away. The water ran down the corners of his lips. Sometimes he gulped, sometimes not. His pupil moved in all directions. He closed his eyes again. Whom is he searing? Intermittently he is opening his eyes and closing them time and again. Before the soul abandons the zone of mortality, is Bhai having some unfulfilled wish?

Now he is no longer moving his eyes, only swivelling his head from side to side. I am sure he is seeking something. Who knows him better than me! One of my cousins, Tulu, was near Bapa in the other room. Maa had fallen asleep while praying in our temple room.

“Tulu!”

“Nani!” Tulu came running.

“Have a watch on bhai for some time. I am coming from the pond side. Do not wake bhauja up. She would come to, once the spell of the medicine gets over. If I am not back within ten minutes, feed him another spoon of glucose water.”

“Yeah, Nani.”

I rushed within a single breath. The pond was situated next to our backyard. Para Nani’s house was situated within 100 metres along the fringe of the pond. Seeing me, she grasped my fists. Perhaps she thought that everything had gotten over.

“Para Nani!”

She glanced at me with eyes bare of hope and then plunged her face into her saree. To control herself, she thrust herself against the wall and sat down.

“Have patience, Para Nani. Bhai has not departed yet. I feel he wants to see you once, at his last stage. Without it, he will not be able to die peacefully. Please, come with me.”

With passion and utterly deep emotion, Para Nani touched the brass bangle on her wrist to her lips. Sadly, she expressed, “Throughout our life, without even having a glance, we have felt each other strongly. The glance at the culmination of death would hurt him more. I have even lost all my strength, Rini. It may happen that I might fail to control my emotion. Can you imagine the condition of your bhauja after that? He wants to see me. Fine, turn back. Quick!”

Her tears slipped into my hair. With her weeping, she decorated my braid. She said, “Go fast. You have to reach him before his reversion." I understood. With all my prowess, I rushed back.

“Nani, Bhai is not drinking water anymore. With alarming lapses, I woke Bhauja. She was sitting here, when Pupun rang up. Perhaps he will reach tomorrow morning. So, she is busy conversing with him outside.”

“Okay, I have come now. You go and be with Uncle.” Tulu went off.

Tulu was right. He is not dropping his eyelids anymore; he is only moving his eyeballs. I could hear Bhauja’s reverberating cry on the porch. She must have failed to contain herself during the telephone conversation with Pupun.

His eyes were still by now- not at my face but fixed upon my braid!!! His sharp look was fading eventually. Two drops of tears were dangling at the brim of his eyes. His lips were vibrating. I bent over him. My braid hung over. Applying all of his residual strength, he pulled my hair, he held Para Nani! Before extinguishing, the candle burns with full vigor!! Gradually, his eyes went wide open and became still. With great fear, I shouted, "Bhauja...Bapa...Maa...Tulu!!!”

Maa lost her consciousness. Bapa was crying like a new-born baby, gripping a support. Tulu came running. The house heaved at the cacophony of cries, with Bhauja complaining, "How could you depart so hurriedly! Pupun is coming tomorrow morning. Go after an exchange of glances with him at least. Open your eyes, dear!!!” His hand had slipped from my braid by now.

x     x      x

The whole of the night was occupied with visitation and farewell of people. Almost everybody in the village as well as some from the nearby villages, had come to pay a last homage to bhai. Pupun came early next morning. Another wave of gloom, yell and heart-breaking cry followed his visit.

As per our culture and tradition, fried paddy and seashells were spread when Bhai was carried on his terminal journey. After the cremation ceremony, Pupun returned home, facing unidirectionally. All the female members of our house headed towards our backyard pond. After the dip, we returned in those wet, unsquashed clothes. Bhauja was deeply hurt; her wound can never be healed. It was tough to control her. So, all the women had encircled her to console her and bring her home.

The smaller staircase was some steps ahead. Women belonging to Gauda Lane and the nearby locality used it for daily activities. Glancing over the steps of the embankment, my eyes flew over to the next staircase. Who is sitting on the bank? Everyone else had stepped far ahead with bhauja. I stayed back and traced my path to the other staircase.

Presently bathed, Para Nani was sitting upon that bank in her wet, watered clothes. With drenched, unbarred hair and a barren back, she was sitting there. Tears incessantly rolled down her eyes like a cascade. For a moment she joined her hands and looked up toward the sky. Then, pressing her lips, she cautiously took the bangles off her hands, put them to her lips, and slowly sailed them into the deep waters.

Ah… What name can be bestowed on these unexpressed emotion’s! Eternal affection’s!! Unblemished affinity’s!!! Unfabricated endearment’s!!!!

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