

Oh Dear, Dad!

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Translated from Bengali by **Chhanda Chattopadhyay Bewtra**

It was an auspicious Wednesday evening, no unlucky stars or ominous constellations in the Heaven, nothing inauspicious, when Somesh suddenly disappeared from home! Wife Indrani looked for him everywhere but no luck. It seemed a real mystery. Further inquiry revealed that Somesh had recently taken three months medical leave from his office. But nobody thought that he had shown the slightest sign of any illness. In fact, he had appeared to be in great spirits while applying for the leave. He had even playfully tugged at the ponytail of Jennifer, the office steno. After getting out of the office first he had a sweet paan, then he left, but where to, no one could tell. He did not take the car provided by the office. At home, he left a mysterious letter—“Indrani, I had no choice. Excuse me. Que sera, sera! Whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see.” And in his diary, in big bold letters, he had written a line from Shesher Kabita—“If someone waits for me eagerly, she will make me grateful.” In the writing pad in his office, he had written “The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I leap.” The last word is wrong. Indrani worried over that too. Somesh had given necessary instruction at the bank, left the checkbook of their joint account, left three authorization letters for withdrawing his salary during his absence, and he left an envelope addressed to the Calcutta Police—“Please do not look for me. Rather look after my family. I’ll be back in time.” Indrani’s older brother worked in the Police department. He glumly took the note and put it in his pocket. Later he met with the director of the office Mr. Ghosh, Chauhan and Ronu Banerjee for advice. It had been a month now but the police still had no clue. Indrani was berating her brother for the incompetency of the police. He could only reply, “We are really trying, and trying everything. Now it is our expertise and your luck.”

But, neither of the two seemed very successful. Now it was almost two months.

Indrani now kept wondering and repenting. Yes, she should have said ‘yes’ at that time. At least he would have stayed home. He pleaded with Indrani, even knelt before her, but could not make her agree. Ah! That was Indrani’s stupidity. She did not hear anything Somesh said, but kept on sobbing hysterically, “Oh my God! How can that be possible? What will our parents think? Bantu, Mintu, Shontu, what will happen to them? What will neighbors and friends say? No, no no! Never. This is ludicrous. I’ve never heard of such scandalous stuff in my life. Shame!”

Somesh had read books after books through the nights and tried to make Indrani read them after him. “In last twenty five years, there have been so many such cases. Even in India. Here is Farah Rustom in Bombay...”

Somesh gave one book to Indrani and she immediately threw it out of the window. The book landed in the neighbor’s yard next door. Somesh called—

“Bantu, Mintu, Sontu!”

“Coming, dad.”

“Go to the back yard, next door, please.”

“Bringing it right away, dad.”

Somesh cleaned up the book and put it away on the shelf. But Indrani just would not read it. “No, no, no! I will not allow such scandalous stuff in my family. I would rather die...”

Somesh tried long and hard to make Indrani understand. “Why are you worrying about your parents? Nothing will affect them. Both of us will be right here for them just as before. As for the neighbors, let them say whatever. We just have to ignore them. The children will get the same love, care, education, everything as before. The only person who might suffer a loss is you, Indu. That is why I am pleading before you. Can you not bear this one sacrifice for me? You are from the country of wives like Sati and Savitri, wives here have performed such great sacrifices for their husbands.”

“I don’t care who did what for whom. I can’t say ‘yes’ to such a shameless, pointless demand. Never. I just can’t!” Indrani remained obstinate.

“Please Indu, can’t you see how ugly your husband has become? I can’t show myself in my underwear, even had to stop going to the swimming pool in the club. Can’t you feel my pain? Can’t you just once say yes?”

Yes. Now Indrani could understand. But at that time she did not. Now two and two are easily making four!

Somesh always had a girlish sweetness in his looks. Lately, his behavior too had become embarrassingly feminine. “You are becoming too girlish.” Indrani would scold him. The other day he really wanted to chew the green stems in the vegetable. He was chewing the stems and piling the discards next to his plate, just like the

women did in the old Sharat Chandra classics. But even worse than that was his behavior with any female guest. Somesh would be gushing all over her, “Wow! What a gorgeous sari! Mrs. Gulati, let me see, let me see. Is it an organza print? It’s fabulous!” Or, “Hey, Mrs. Roy, when did you get these new bangles made? Haven’t seen them before. Good detail work! How much gold did it take?” All this used to irritate Indrani no end. How female-ish can a man get? Even Somesh’s voice was becoming sweeter like his looks. Sometimes Indrani confused his voice with Jennifer’s on the phone. Plus, lately Somesh was becoming too emotional. His eyes would get wet at the slightest reason. Everyone had noticed that.

Indrani really was kicking herself for her own decision. Somesh wanted a chromosome test but Indrani would not let him. Somesh became so obsessed that while reading the news paper, he would doodle on the margin $X+Y$ $Y+Y$ $X+X$ etc.! Indrani would argue, “Why do you need proof? Look at your sons, aren’t they proof enough?”

“But that is the past. I want to know about the future.”

“Then lets go to an astrologer.”

“Not astrologer, Indu, I need a doctor. I need to know, understand what is happening in my body. These are not deliberate events. I must know a scientific...”

Indrani kept wishing she could take back her harsh words. Truly, this was not his fault. It just happened, bad luck. Why couldn’t Indrani agree to go to a doctor at least? Why did she have to be so pig headed? If she had relented a bit at that time, perhaps this disaster could have been avoided. Now he was gone. Perhaps to the Himalayas, perhaps committed suicide, perhaps could not tolerate the changes anymore. Who could blame him? Well, the Himalayan probability was stronger, as all his winter boots, gloves and coats were missing from his closet. The constant worrying and crying caused premature cataracts in Indrani’s eyes and she had to get new glasses. Now it was three months, still no news of Somesh. At last Indrani pulled out the muddled books and started reading them—biography of Christine Jorgensen, dialogues of Jan Morris, description of Fara Rustom—she decided to ask her police brother and place an ad in the newspaper, “Somesh please come back. Blood test permitted”. Just then she received a telegram—“Somesh Chaudhury expired three months ago at Dr. Changingkar’s Nursing Home.—Soma.”

Indrani collapsed on the sofa. Then started the mourning and the tears. It was non-stop. At last the doctor gave a sedative to make her sleep. Just before falling asleep Indrani remembered, “Who on earth is that Soma?”

When she woke up she saw her ultra fashionable sister in-law sitting by her, reading “Femina”. Sohini was an airhostess and lived in Mumbai. Sometimes, she landed in Calcutta without any notice. She loved to roam around. Indrani was happy to see her, “You? When did you arrive?”

Her visitor raised her perfectly plucked eye brows, fluttered her blue colored eyelids and gathered mock rebuke in her improbably long eyelashes.

"Shame Indu, that's not how you should address me!"

—“Oh my God! It is YOU?” Indrani gasped.

Somesh smiled coyly, “Of course it is I. Who else?” His shocking pink colored lips trembled in that smile, as did Indrani’s heart. Who was this person? Perfect blue dot between perfectly arched brows, shampooed, boys-cut hair, and matching shocking pink nail polish in ten fingers delicately holding the fashion magazine. Next to the bed was a tall glass with frosted orange drink. Somesh brushed the loose hairs off his brows and said, “Well? How do you like me? My name is now Soma.”

“Oh, so you are that Soma. I was wondering...” Indrani felt a little bold. He was looking pretty good. Not like those ugly half women who sang and danced in the streets. In fact, he was looking very much like his sister Sohini. And Indrani always liked Sohini.

The forever girlie Somesh had really become a beautiful woman now. Under the transparent blue nightie, his vital statistics made the mother-of-three-children Indrani positively envious. She too was known to be beautiful, but nothing like this. Wow! How slim was his waist! Like a wasp. Somesh could easily compete in any beauty contest and win. It was like he had become twenty years younger. Indrani felt downright jealous. She asked grumpily, “Where have you been all this while?”

“I told you in the telegram. I was in the nursing home of Dr. Changingkar. They not only do the surgeries there, but also all the after care classes. Famous beauticians and models came and taught us how to dress, make up, how to walk, talk, everything. All in three months. How do you like that? I look good. Don’t I?”

Indrani asked without replying, “Then?”

“What do you mean ‘then’?”

“What do you plan to do now? Be an airhostess like your sister? Or pose in fashion ads?”

“Forget it. I’m too old for that kind of work. Besides, my medical leave is ending. Got to go back to work on Monday.”

“You mean the same work? Same office?”

“Of course. Why change a good job? Indian Constitution guarantees equal right for both sexes in employment.”

Indrani was speechless.

What he said was factually true. If the prime minister of the nation could be a woman, why could not he be the senior executive of an advertising agency? In fact, with his new attractive looks, he might even qualify for a promotion. Indrani felt some relief and asked coyly, "What do you want me to call you now Soma?"

“Why? What you called me just now. Or, you can call me Soma too.” Somesh laughed with a cute dimple on his cheek. The familiar smile, now wrapped in shocking pink lipstick, somehow looked strange to Indrani.

“My relationship with you will not change at all. Don’t look alarmed.” Smiled Soma Choudhury, “Actually the problem will be changing all the paperwork, legally changing sex, name, identity, all that stuff. I will have to do this at my job, in the passport, everywhere. Got to get affidavits for all the certificates in court, have them all signed again—changing identity at forty years of age is not going to be easy! God!”

“Am I then going to be Mrs. Soma Chowdhury? Is it legal for a woman to be married to another woman?”

Somesh became serious. “Perhaps you could divorce me. But I don’t know if that is compulsory. But, Indu, you aren’t going to leave me, are you?”

Indrani was reassured to hear some concern in Somesh’s sweet girlish voice. At least he still cared for her.

“Where are the boys?” Asked Somesh.

“They have gone to my parents’ place for the weekend.” Said Indrani. It was partly to console her parents too.

“No need to call long distance. They will be back by Monday.” Indrani said with some relief.

“And your dad’s cataract? Did you do something about it?”

Ah! At least he still cared for the family! Indrani thought thankfully.

“Yes, he is planning to. Both the eyes have matured. All because of worrying about you! Did you have to run away like that?”

“Well, then my running away did achieve some good.” Somesh smiled and nudged Indrani in a girlie way.

On Monday Ms. Soma Choudhury returned to the office. This was a real convenience of the modern era. No need to write Miss or Mrs. Definitely not Mr.

A pandemonium broke out at the office. Only the Anglo-Indian steno Jennifer did not show any excitement. Everybody else was completely taken by the new Ms. S. Choudhury. She stepped out of her Mark 4 Ambassador car in an airy pink chiffon sari, wafting French perfume and looking perfectly desirable in her expertly made up eyes, lashes, and lips. The doorman Bahadur tried to stop him, but let go after glancing at the car. He even gave him a salute, out of old habit. Somesh too saluted him in return, like the old times, and left poor Bahadur agape.

“Oh God! Is it Choudhury Saab?” His eyes bulged out!

The old elevator operator asked, “Which floor please?”

Somesh replied, “How are you Ibrahim?”

Ibrahim flopped on his stool forgetting to hit the floor buttons, he slapped his forehead instead. Then touched his ears.

“Inshalla! Chodhury Sahib? Tawba, tawba!”

“From now on, not Sahib, call me Madam Choudhury. Got it?” Somesh smiled sweetly, “Come on, the elevator?”

From the elevator he entered his room without any more obstruction. Nidhiram was not in his designated seat outside his door. After awhile, Ms. Choudhury rang the bell for him. Nidhiram was so surprised to see a beautiful lady in his master’s chair that he even forgot to object. Tons of work had accumulated in last three months. Without looking up Somesh said, “Some water please.”

“O my God!” Nidhiram exclaimed, “How is this possible? This is the end of the world! O Lord! What are we going to do?”

His loud moans instantly attracted other co-workers in the office.

Chauhan jumped in first, “Good gracious! What a lucky find! Mr. Choudhary has set all our hearts aflutter. Just like Zeenat Amman or Saira Banu. Somesh Choudhury is gone, long live Soma Choudhury!”

Mr. Ghosh said, “Now I am regretting. Wish I wasn’t in such a hurry to get married!”

Smart alek Ronu Banerjee put in, “Absolutely ravishing SC. May I have a date with you this weekend? Let's go dancing. Shall we?”

Moving sexily in the pink sleeveless blouse Somesh said, “Thank you Ronu. I’ll think about it.”

Only the elderly PA, Radhakrishnan, was not impressed. He was a serious man. He had worked under a white boss before, now it was a brown boss. Similarly before it was a male boss, now it is a female. What difference did it make? He sat in front with a notebook and pencil and a serious face without a trace of surprise. “Yes Sir? Sorry, yes Madam. Shall we begin?”

In the mean time a tsunami of excitement was sweeping through the entire office building. Everyone was talking and running around. Nobody was sitting still except Somesh Choudhury himself.

Soma Choudhury returned home walking on air. Indrani was still unsure as to how to handle the situation. She visited the beauty parlor, and got her hair and nails done, at least for the sake of comparison. But the problem was her figure. No quick fix was possible. In that category, Somesh was undisputable winner. One beauty received the other at the door. In typical feminine way—as Sohini would have done—Somesh hugged Indrani and bussed her cheeks, “Hello, Darling.”

“No, no! Don’t do that!” Indrani blurted out. Somesh winked, “It’s nothing.” Then raised the perfect brows, “You look awesome Indu! Where did you get your hair done? Facial too? They did a superb job!”

Indrani ignored the compliments. Adding sugar to the tea, she asked, “So? What did your colleagues say?”

Somesh first washed, changed, lit his Havana cigar and relaxed in the armchair, sipping hot tea and cozily wrapped in a cotton sari. Then he started his tale; “You have no idea what happened in the office today.” Bahadur, Ibrahim, Nidhiram,

Chauhan,, Ghosh, Radhakrishnan, Ronu Banerjee, he did not omit anybody except the glum faced Jennifer. Indrani was shocked to hear Ronu Banerjee's offer.

"What? You are going dancing with him? Oh dear God! How much more humiliation..."

"Nonsense! You are too gullible!" Somesh cast a killer glance at Indrani, "It is just a courtesy, like saying 'thank you'. Got it?"

The maid Haridasi entered, "Mr. Ghanashyam has come to see you Babu." She said. Both she and the cook GangaThakur were trying to avoid Somesh as much as possible. Obviously they were embarrassed. They felt humiliated in the servant community of the neighborhood. The head of the family had turned into a woman! Whoever had heard of such a scandalous affair, let alone actually witness it! Both of them had been with the family for many years, since Somesh's parents' time. Both of them had helped in Indrani's wedding. Both were totally indispensable for the family.

"Oh, Haridasi, again? Didn't I tell you not to call me 'Babu'?" Somesh knit his plucked brows.

"What shall I call you then? Ma? Then what do I call Ma?" Haridasi looked up naively with her cataract opaque eyes.

"That is true!" Somesh had to bite his cigar and think for a minute, " Well, you can call her 'Ma' as before, and call me 'Madam'. OK? No 'Babu'."

Haridasi looked from one to another, then smiled her toothless smile, "OK. Mr. Ghanashyam has come to see Madam. Happy, Babu?" She smiled a mischievous smile, and added, "Madam?"

Ghanashyam was Somesh's old friend, from grade school. Every evening, before dinner, they would play a game of chess. This was their ritual from their college days. As they both lived in the same neighborhood, the habit continued even after their marriages.

Exuding French perfume, swishing her hair, Somesh gave Ghanashyam the surprise of his life.

"Ugh! What have you done to yourself?" Ghanashyam screamed, "Good Lord! Didn't I tell you so many times not to go through with this? This is India, not America. You will suffer horribly. Why couldn't you listen to me? Why do you always have to be so bloody obstinate?"

“Why Ghona? Don’t I look good?” Somesh was a bit subdued.

“My foot! You look like a clown!” Ghanashyam avoided his friend’s eye and got busy putting away the chess pieces.

“You are putting them away? Don’t you want to play?”

“Play what?”

“Stop acting up!”

“I say who is acting up? If I come here everyday to play with you, what will our friends and neighbors think? Oh no! I’m not getting into that. My Mrs. will never allow it. Besides, the kids are growing up, what would they think? No. sir! I’m not getting into the flirting game with you.”

“What are you saying Ghona!” Somesh cried out desperately, “Are you going mad? We have been friends for twenty years! Why would anyone object to us now?”

“Forget it. The past is past. You can now come and play snakes and ladders with my wife every afternoon. I will not object.” Ghanashyam’s voice almost choked, “Stupid, traitor! I told you so many times...”

Tears flooded Somesh’s eyes. He tried to dab it with the sari. Ghanashyam fled out of the room crying “Shame, shame”.

Just then a car horn sounded downstairs. “It must be the kids.” Indrani ran at the door. Somesh wiped his tears and forgot about the loss of his old friend as he too stood up eagerly with the cigar in his hand and all the love and affection for his children in his mascara smeared eyes. Surprise! The kids did not know about their father’s return.

“Dad!”

“Dad!”

“Dad!” All three rushed in running, shouting, gleeful and excited. They had smelled their dad's favorite cigar as they entered and could not hold themselves any longer. It’s their dad’s smell ! It’s Dad!

As they stepped in the room, they shut up and stood still like statues. Completely stricken by what they were seeing. Five year old Shontu burst in tears, “Where is my dad?” Somesh ran towards him in his sari but Shontu turned away and buried himself in Indrani’s arms. Indrani picked him up and pointed towards the glamorous Somesh.

“There is your dad.”

“Nno, nno! He isn’t my dad.” Shontu kept sobbing. His small body tried to shrink back even smaller. Bunty was in eighth grade. He had just acquired a shadow of a moustache. Pretty Mintu was in sixth grade and looked like a frilly butterfly.

Outside they had all smelled the familiar cigar and expected to see their dad. But who was this lady sitting in their dad’s easy chair? She looked familiar, like Sohini auntie but not exactly. Someone else. Who was it?

Extending ten nail polish colored fingers Somesh called them to him with all the affection he could muster, “Please don’t cry Shontu, sona, come, come and sit here in my lap. See, what all I have brought for you! I have missed you all so much...”

Shontu didn’t budge. Neither did Bunty.

Mintu took a tentative step. “Hey? Come, come to your dad.” Called Somesh again, “See, here is another surprise...” He grabbed the purse next to him. Shontu did not move.

“Go. Go to your dad.” Now Indrani pushed her sons, “Don’t misbehave now.”

“Come on kids, go to your dad. He is calling you.” Said Ghanashyam. Nobody had noticed when he had come back. “You must listen to your dad. Whether he wears a sari or a dhoti, a dad is always a dad. Go, go to him.”

“What do you mean ‘dad is a dad’? How can they call him dad now? Don’t they have to call him ‘ma’ too?”

Haridasi spoke out from the door.

“How do you want to be called now by your kids, Babu? Oops, sorry, Madam. You want them to call you Dad or Madam?” Haridasi kept cackling in the background. Somesh remembered reading about John Morris when he became Jan Morris, He too had grown children But They maintained the family relationships as before. There was no lack of warmth or empathy amongst them. But what did Jan’s children called him? Jan or Daddy? The autobiography did not mention that. Somesh thought anxiously. There were dewdrops of sweat on his brow, which he mopped delicately with his scented handkerchief.

Shontu stuck to his mother and said firmly, “No. I will not go to her.”

Bunty kept silent and just stared at his dad. He had a purse hanging from one hand, gold bangles in the other, a lighted cigar smoked between his fingers, an orange Dhonekhali sari, matching orange bindi between his plucked brows, mascara smeared eyelashes, sleeveless blouse, smoothly bare waist— Bunty shut his eyes. He didn't want to see any more.

Only Mintu took another step. She had always been a bit spoiled, specially by her dad. Now she said to her mom, “Bapiya is smelling so sweet mom, nice perfume!” Even as a child Mintu had already feminized her father's name ‘Baap’ (daddy) into a feminine ‘Bapiya’!

Haridasi was entering with a tray of snacks. She stood at the door and gave a big toothless grin. “There you go! Problem solved! Bapiya! Bah! Sounds just right. come on, kids, don't stay away anymore.... now go to Bapiya. You mustn't stay away from your Bapiya any more... she is your father, after all!”

Published in Parabaas, April 2015