

THE AURA

BY
DIBYARAJ SINHA



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The tea is steaming hot. I keep it at the edge of the table to cool it down a bit.

Meanwhile, I switch on my phone and surf through all the notifications.

I find a very amusing food vlog and pick up the cup of tea, planning to take a sip as I watch the video. Just then, the phone rings, my 'Far from Any Road' ringtone filling the room.

The name on the screen is very familiar. Prakash, my old college friend.

"Hey man! How are you doing?" I take the call excitedly.

The voice on the other end does not meet my level of excitement. As I hear him speak, I silently sip the hot tea, oblivious to my tongue getting scalded. As I hang up ten minutes later, I run my fingers through my hair. I feel numerous beads of perspiration gathering on my forehead. I desperately try to understand everything he had said.

Anuj and Rajiv were best friends from day one of college. They used to do everything together. Trips, college contests, performances during college fests.

The thing which both of them loved a lot was travelling. They remain best of friends even now. Two days earlier, they had reached Dhanbad and checked into a hotel close to the railway station.

Last afternoon, Prakash had called Rajiv. Rajiv had given him a brief idea about the food they had had. He had asked Prakash if he had the contact number of Tewatia, a mutual friend who lives in Dhanbad.

Prakash had called him back fifteen minutes later with Tewatia's number, but instead of Rajiv, Anuj had picked up the phone this time. Anuj had sounded very distressed and had said that Rajiv went somewhere and hadn't returned yet. Prakash didn't understand and had asked about details.

Anuj had hung up abruptly. Prakash had called them again and again, but every time the mechanical voice had told him that the devices were switched off. Prakash had called up all the hotels around Dhanbad station. He had struck gold in one. The receptionist had told him that they indeed had guests who went by those names staying in his hotel in room 303. He had also checked and had informed Prakash

that their room was empty except for their luggage. Prakash had told him not to clear the room. Finally, he had called me up in the evening, me being his closest friend from college. I agreed to go with him to Dhanbad and look around a bit before going to the police. Maybe it's just a prank, we thought.

Prakash calls at night saying that the tickets have been booked. I go to bed, and even after an hour, I find myself gazing at the ceiling.

As the train slows at a station, I check my watch and look outside. A small station with the signboards saying Andal Junction.

Prakash keeps his phone in his pocket and looks outside.

"The train is running fifteen minutes late," he says.

"Shruti?" I ask, referring to the call he had just received.

"Yes." He smiles awkwardly.

We both look outside to get over the awkwardness.

"What do you think of the new Coldplay album?" Prakash desperately changes the topic.

My watch says twelve when we reach the hotel. Prakash talks with the receptionist and gets to know that the receptionist he talked to over phone isn't here yet. He will start his shift at two pm.

We decide not to tell this new receptionist our story and instead just ask for the keys to room 303. We lost our keys, we say. He asks for our names and phone numbers which we answer accurately. We have been calling those numbers so many times that they were etched in our memories by now.

The damp smell hits me as I open the door. I quickly pickup a can of room freshener placed on a table and spray it all around. Prakash looks at me with a strange expression.

We keep our bags and check the room. Two beds, a desk, three huge cupboards and a chair are all the furniture in the room. We check the bathroom. I pull open all the drawers of the desk. Nothing. Prakash starts opening the cupboards. One has a few glasses in it. The second is empty. The third is locked. I search for a key but it's nowhere to be found.

I find a bag in one corner of the room. That's all the luggage? I open the bag and understand it's Rajiv's. Dresses, deodorant sprays, two books. Where is Anuj's luggage? We don't find it anywhere. It's already twelve thirty and I decide to take a shower.

Thirty minutes later, I sit on the edge of the bed as Prakash takes a shower. The damp smell, yet again. I spray the room freshener and return to the bed. What is in the locked cupboard? I try to think of options.

"It's two pm," I say as I shove a piece of chicken into my mouth.

"Let's eat fast." Prakash takes a huge bite of the burger.

I am about to say 'let's pack these' when a person approaches our table. I understand it's the person who we have been waiting for.

"Please sit," Prakash requests.

The uniformed man takes a seat. I notice the name of the hotel printed on the identity card hanging around his neck.

"Your friends never interacted with the reception except when they checked in. No room service. No complaints," he says blandly.

We nod.

"Are you thinking about contacting the police?", he asks.

"Yes", I say.

Prakash nods in the negative. "No."

I'm taken aback.

"Firstly," he continues. "Do you have CCTVs in the hall outside the room?"

The receptionist looks at both of us and senses the disagreement. Then he looks at me.

"We can't allow others to view our footage," he says grimly.

"Understandable", I nod in agreement. *We're not the police.*

Prakash shakes his head vehemently. Then, my eyebrows go up as he pulls out his wallet and keeps it on the table. He opens the wallet, pulls out a five hundred rupee note and slides it across the table, towards the receptionist. I watch in awe as the man smiles, picks the note up and gets up.

"Meet me fifteen minutes later." He leaves.

Prakash smiles at me and makes a gesture that screams 'That's how it's done' concentrates on the food.

I should be feeling good that this worked, instead I feel a bit of anger inside me. *Inferiority complex?*

"There he goes," says the receptionist.

"It's Anuj!" Prakash exclaims and looks at me.

Then he concentrates on the screen.

"The timestamp says 16 09! I tried his number at four, I remember, it already said switched off by then!" Prakash looks at us, like a brilliant detective at work.

I clench my teeth.

"Enough!" I shout and slam my palms down on the table.

They both gasp in shock and watch me as I shout.

"You're not a detective for God's sake! You're wasting valuable time! We should go to the police. *Right now!*"

The receptionist shrugs. "But we have clues now. Just think how much time the police would hav-"

"Shut up!" I snarl at him. "You're not with us! You did what you did because you took money. So just keep your mouth shut."

"Hey," Prakash says softly as he touches my elbow.

I slap his hand away. "Don't you dare. Your detective games can cost their lives! Grow up, Prakash!"

Prakash's eyes light up.

He barks. "Don't you tell me to grow up, Raj! *All* of us know who's the immature one among us."

Then he storms off.

I glance at the receptionist one last time. He averts his gaze quickly.

I wait for a few seconds. Then I walk off.

"Hey," Prakash says softly as I enter and close the door behind me.

I raise my hands up. "Sorry."

"I'm sorry too," he says softly.

"It's okay." I stop him.

"Okay," he says. "Let's see what details we have till now. After that we'll go to the police. First we should exhaust all the resources we have at hand."

I feel his gaze. He's waiting for an answer.

I nod in agreement. He exhales tiredly and falls on the bed. I sit on the edge of the other bed, staring straight at the cupboard.

Look at all his soft demeanour. What does he think he is? He acts all the time like he is in charge!

'Come on, Raj, cool it'. 'Come on Raj, it's me who's great'. 'It's me who's decisions are perfect'. 'I'm the cool detective'.

Rubbish! It's obviously clear that I am the one who's talking sanely.

Look at us, wasting time sitting and sleeping in a hotel room when we should be searching the city for our friends, with help from the police!
I shake my head and stare harder at the cupboard.
The damp smell again.

I get up to get the room freshener again when Prakash's phone starts ringing. I turn and look at him, half expecting him to exclaim in joy and shout 'It's Anuj! They're okay! It's nothing! They had just lost their way around the city!'

But he looks at the screen and then at me, his expression turning awkward. I understand and look away. *I was going to get the room freshener.* I start to spray it.

"Hey." I hear Prakash speak softly into the phone.

"No, nothing yet. We looked at the CCTV footage and found.."

Suddenly, in that small damp room of a cheap Dhanbad hotel, I feel something in my chest. A wave. A wave of sadness. A wave of longing. A wave of despair. I transport back sixteen years. The only thing which stays with me through the

journey is the damp smell.

We were in second year then. It was a warm summer day.

I see everything. The light drizzle just after sunset. The cab arriving. I see myself laughing with joy, with pleasure, without a single shred of doubt in my mind.

And there she was.

Beside me, laughing and gazing out of the car window. The rainy evening, the people scurrying for cover, the raindrops pattering down on the car windows and blurring the neon signs at a distance. The cab whizzing through the ancient city, the driver a distant alien. The two passengers, creating the tiniest of universes. I was thrown back into the past.

"I hope the food is as good as he mentioned." I laugh.

"He's well known for his recommendations." She giggles wildly.

"Come on, Shruti!"

We laugh hysterically. I turn to look out of the window again. Suddenly, I feel two hands clutch my shirt and pull me towards them. The car slows down to a stop, the raindrops become bigger and everything worldly becomes just another drab piece of blur. Nothing remains except a big warm

smile and the ethereal lingering of a sensation on my lips.

Like a thunderbolt, everything changes around me. The cab changes into a birthday party. The rain into glitters. The silence into loud music. The neon signs into party lights. I am standing with Anuj, laughing.

Then, as if someone blended two incidents into one, the atmosphere changes, yet again. The music stops, everything becomes very still, everyone stops in their positions, time stops. I gulp down a knot in my throat.

I watch and watch, and watch the two figures. Then, time starts again, people laugh and talk around me, the music changes and people dance to the tune. I still watch those two figures near the table.

Oblivious to everything around them, like that rainy summer evening. My closest friend, Prakash. And Shruti.

Right then, another thunderbolt slices through my reverie. A distant soft laugh.

That same laugh which I yearn to hear, even after all these years. I am thrown back into reality. Prakash laughs back into the phone.

"Bye," he says softly.

I feel his gaze turn towards me.

"Raj? What are you doing with the room freshener again? Listen. As I was saying. We need to put everything together."

He stops to think. Then he continues.

"They have lunch at around two. Then they return to their room. I call Rajiv at three. We talk. I call him again with Tewatia's number at half past three. Anuj picks up and says he can't find Rajiv. Then he hangs up. After that, his phone is switched off. At nine past four, Anuj walks out of the room.

"We have watched the footage till then. We never saw Rajiv get out of the room, did we? Raj? Do you hear what.."

The arrogance. The ego. The air of all-knowing. I turn around. I can see the look in his eyes.

Bewilderment.

I walk closer to him.

"Hey..," he says softly.

I lose it. I raise the room freshener and hit him on the head.

Fear.

I hit him again.

He tries to raise his hands and protect his head.

He fails.

Pleading.

I feel my hands trembling.

I hit him again. I feel some liquid hit my forehead.

It's blood.

I can't see his eyes anymore. Just blood.

I hit him again. And again. I feel the tears on my face mingle with the blood. The saliva, the sweat.

Everything blends into one and drips down my chin, and falls on the mangled face in front of me. I still hit the deformed mass of flesh and blood and bones in front of me.

The bottle of room freshener is distorted and caked with blood. I throw it away in disgust.

I sit on the floor, my head reclining on the edge of the bed. I am in a trance. What is that sound? Is that a radio? A television? I look around.

Everything is hazy. I finally find the source of the sound. It's Prakash's phone.

I half expect someone's call yet again. And I see it's

true.

"Hello," I speak softly.

"Guess what I just found? It's-"

The eager voice on the other end stops as she recognises. "Raj?"

Suddenly something changes inside me.

Everything clears. I look around the room and all the blood around me. My throat dries up and I feel my heart beating thunderously.

"Listen," I almost whisper, my voice trembling, "Prakash went somewhere and hasn't returned yet."

"What? What are you saying? I talked to him just ten minutes before!"

It takes my mind a moment to register the mistake I just made.

"Please, Raj. What happened? Answer me, please."

I hang up. My hands tremble. I switch off the phone and take a moment to calm myself.

I go to the bathroom and wash my face and hands.

I pull Prakash's body from behind the bed and clean up the blood in front of the door. My hands still trembling, I open the door and leave the room.

I have to find the key. I'll stuff the body into the

cupboard. I rush across the hall to the reception. As I come out of the room, I glance up and see the CCTV camera pointed at me.

The receptionist smiles.

"Um," I clear my throat. "Do you have a key to the cupboards in the room?"

The receptionist nods and is about to search the desk when he stops. Then he turns to me. His expression has changed.

"Your friend. Mr. Anuj. He also asked for the same key yesterday. I completely forgot about this," he says animatedly.

"Okay." I try to be as normal as I can be.

Then I pull out my wallet. I tuck in a five hundred rupee note into the receptionist's pocket.

"I want to see the rest of the footage," I tell the bewildered man.

14 09 hours. Anuj leaves the room. He comes to the receptionist. Asks for keys to the cupboards. 14 13 hours.

Anuj returns to the room. 14 27 hours. Anuj leaves, a bag with him.

"Oh my God!" The receptionist remarks. "He left yesterday! He didn't pass by the reception though.

I am sure of that. I was here."

I try to behave as normal as possible, even though my hands are trembling.

"Do you have any other exits? Are there any CCTV cameras there?"

In another ten minutes, I see it all. Anuj leaves through the rear exit. He asks the security guard at the exit something and then waits. The guard leaves and returns another ten minutes later, with a taxi. He hands the guard a few notes and leaves.

I look at the receptionist. He nods understandably and picks up his telephone. In two minutes, the security guard comes up to the reception. The gentleman yesterday asked him to arrange a taxi to Kolkata, he says, frightened.

I run my fingers through my hair and wait. The receptionist hands me a set of keys.

"These are the last keys I've to those cupboards," he says.

I nod and rush off with the keys without looking back. I lock the door and pull the body closer to the cupboard. I put the key in and unlock the cupboard.

The smell hits first. Then the sight. It is Rajiv. That curly hair is the only thing by which I can recognise him. I look at the body near my feet and the one lying in the cupboard. Ignore the dresses and the hairstyles and you have two identical bodies.

I stand blankly for a minute.

Then with a grunt, I pick the body up off the floor and stuff it into the cupboard. My hands are trembling again. I throw the bloody can of room freshener into the cupboard. Then I lock it up and go to the bathroom. I flush the keys down the toilet. Then I return to the room and pick up my bag. I stop for a moment.

What is guiding me through all this? Who is making all these plans for me? I look around the room. My eyes fix on the cupboard. No one got the smell of a decaying dead body? Even Prakash did not get the damp smell. I stare at the cupboard. A thought hits me out of the blue. I should get going.

I lock the door and hurry. I run to the emergency door and race down the stairs towards the rear exit. There's that camera, just above the exit. The

security guard looks at me, astonished. I have the note ready in my hand. I push it into his palm and blabber.

"Taxi. Kolkata."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dibyaraj Sinha. He likes to read a lot but writes occasionally even though he has a lot of plots ready. Guess he is just lazy. Besides writing, Dibyaraj loves to cook and travel. He wants to become a chef someday. He is also a doctor.