# Partners In Crime(All 7 sins)

My brother came before me. So even though he was literally the beginning of my memory, I was figuratively his own. He always aligned events with respect to my birth. ‘This happened before her birth’. ‘That happened after she was born’. Like I was his own personal Christ. Before Chestha or After Chestha. BC or AC.

Even though I was the younger one, I was always the more reckless one, a little too eager to jump headlong into trouble. It was me who always nudged him awake from his naps, in the ungodly afternoon hours, when jinns and kidnappers roamed the city, guiding us as we went out for our day’s shenanigans. We would invariably scale one of our neighbours’ walls to steal fruits from sullen trees that drooped with their weight. I would stand guarding, while he deftly manoeuvred his slingshot and brought down our treats. The fruits weren’t ever ripe enough and we weren’t ever really hungry enough and every time we bit into them, our faces convulsed into badly written O’s. We gluttonously relished them anyway, overstuffing ourselves a little too much, the thrill of the day’s exploits sweetening them in our mouth.

We hated doing chores and even when we lazed around all day, lying like sloths in front of the T.V, we would come up with ingenious ideas to defer helping our mother. Sometimes we would invoke the help of each other in doing these chores. Each such ‘helps’ would be carefully entered in a mental ledger to be used later to invoke similar ‘helps’, as and when needed. We were both skilful accountants, the two of us, keeping a dexterous watch over the credit and debit column, never failing to tally the two.

Most days we would fight. Only some days these fights would go beyond a day. On occasions like these, the days would stretch before us, in spells of uncomfortable silences, each minute of the day demanding to be counted. We would secretly wish for this spell to be over and as if in our answer to our prayers, we would hear the neighbourhood kids hollering about seeing a stray kite cut loose. We would look at each other, forging a temporary alliance with our sidelong glance and run bolting out of our house. Our paths would fork and meander as we chased, but it would always meet and in the rush of the blood that rose to our faces and our jagged, euphoric recountings of the chase, I would know our anger is behind us.

As we got older, chasing our different dream-shaped and opinion-shaped kites, our paths forked and meandered further and further. And sometimes they never even met. As we scuttled after our little kites with long tails, negotiating between our wants and our greeds, our haves and have-nots columns grew longer and longer. While one of us settled in a happy marriage, another just pretended to, secretly lusting after an unrequited love his whole life. While one fearfully treaded through the ever-changing and underwhelming bouts of business, the other slumbered in an equally underwhelming but somewhat more stable government job. Sometimes when we went through our mental ledger, these disparities in our circumstances baffled us. Growing up in the same household, eating the same food, wearing the same clothes, revelling in the same privileges, we had always expected similar outcomes from our life. When that didn’t happen, we became irritable and spiteful. Worms of resentment started infesting the pages of our ledger. They gorged on the un-tallying pages and grew fat with envy. We plucked it from between the pages, little green worms, soft but insidious, and gifted them to our children and our spouses, who bred them with their unsuspecting sincerity. The envy corroded our insides and ate at our memories of each other. Our mutual Beginning of Memories.

When the first attack came, I went to visit him in the hospital. Our legs had turned wobbly by then and our envy had gone cold. Where there had previously been teeth, now stood gaping black holes. Pride stood guard, as words, fat with unshed tears and unacknowledged emotions, tried getting past the flimsy barrier of teeth. Most of the words were obscenely healthy and got stuck between the teeth and only a few perfunctory ones trickled out. The kind of useless words that fill silences but never really mean anything substantial. I sat next to his bed, shifting gingerly in my seat, both of us trying to mould the silence between us, make it a little less uncomfortable, a little more bearable. No kite cut loose in the sky that day and so the silence remained. He passed away the next morning, succumbing to a second attack.

When we returned with his body for one last time, the darkness in the house threatened to engulf his shrivelled form. He looked so small. I carried a fat folder full of his medical expenses, each crisp white bill, acutely putting a price on everything that had kept him alive for the last twenty four house. The bills summed up to an exorbitant amount and yet not enough to account for the helplessness in his children’s eyes or the hollow in his wife’s cheeks. I wondered wryly how all my accounting skills could help them.

That night, I dreamed of us two, chasing a yellow kite across a blue sky, our faces stretched into smiles against the wind, our feet lilting over the ground. Our old, papery skin rippled in the afternoon sun. We looked almost comical and extraordinary in our pursuit- two old people running after a stray kite in defiance of their ages. Something transpired between us and we both started fighting, animatedly throwing about our limbs in the last of the day's light. By the time I woke up, memory had already wrested me out of my rightful victory, but something told me we had reconciled on a peaceful note. I smiled to myself. Just then I noticed two pearly, little eyes peering in from the door. The face looked hungry. So much so that it had forgotten to be sad. His mother must be fast asleep from the exhaustion and grief. I picked up the dangly, little bandicoot, hoisted him on my shoulders and headed out to make some fluffy pancakes.

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