

The Burning Arun Shravan

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The burning

We don't really remember how it all came to this. The last we remember is us lying down and having some sleep. We were finally having some time alone together. I was looking at her sleeping peacefully. I kissed her forehead and decided to finally sleep. I was so happy. I could feel the happiness in her too. We were even synced in our breathing and it was like the world could end right at that moment and we both have everything we ever needed.

This thought couldn't have been more wrong. It was a good thing our room were at the fourth level. I woke up to the sounds of breaking glass and smell of burning rubber. Being in my arms, she still didn't realise something was wrong around us. I wiggled my arms around and got free. Went near the windows to see what the commotion was about. There were cars upturned and someone trying to get into the upturned car. The person was struggling to get into the car. After a few moments of struggle, she got into the car. There was a sharp shriek and sudden loss of that noise. The woman came out with and she was holding something in her hand. I couldn't see properly but seemed like a smaller person or a child. I rubbed my eyes to see properly. A heavy gasp came right next to me and I almost lost my breath. "For god's sake baby! Stop doing this to me!" I said. She has this habit of surprising me. "What the hell is that woman doing to that baby?" she quivered by closing her mouth with her hands and hugging me tight. I looked up to find that the woman was holding the child but it was unlike I've seen anyone hold a child. Only then I realised that she wasn't holding the baby to either feed it or sing a lullaby but biting into its neck. The woman's eyes were yellow and blood was dripping from her mouth. She was eating the child.

I was in shock and couldn't move a single cell in my body. "Oye!" she shouted and I got to reality. Turned around my head. "Come here. Sit down they are saying something in the news." I walked like I have forgotten how to walk and just fell on the bed. A lady in the news was talking frantically; her pitch was all high and could've very well been compared to being hit on the face with a trombone.

"This is still the repeat of the report that came in a few hours ago. There is an outbreak of a virus that is causing hysteria. We still do not know how or where this virus originated from. If you feel that you are safe at wherever you are right now. Please stay right there. Or move to higher altitude. The army is still scrambling more people to get people to safety. The conundrum of the future of the infected individuals is still not solved. We will be back with more news as it develops." The news started repeating itself. With that I started to close my eyes and pinched myself hard to get out of this nightmare. What is going on here? Is it only here? How are our families doing? Are they safe. I could feel her head on my shoulders. I caressed her hair and smiled at her. She was worried and trying her phone non-stop to contact her parents.

The news was still repeating the same. I closed the windows shades and looked out from the bathroom opening. A small slit was enough to tell me how insane it is outside. It was like street of a war torn nation. Just two days ago when we came in through the exact streets. It was with kids playing football and cutting through the fog that was rolling down the hill. I cannot fathom what is running on her mind. It was our first trip since the relationship and we were happy

enough with each other to seal it with more than just a kiss or even a ring. I just hope I can take her to safety of her family before something worse happens to anyone. I don't even know what to say to my parents. They don't even know I'm here. What if it's only here? Why couldn't the news be any clearer?

"Why the hell are they not picking up their phones? I really hope nothing has happened to them. They should've been moved to a secure location by now. They just wouldn't have taken their phones with them. My god! What have I done? I should've left two days ago. I called him here. I just wanted to know, if he's ready for someone as insane as me. He never even hesitated a second. He just wanted to spend time with me. We walked around the streets in the dark just last night. I have never felt safer in my life. His hands in mine and my head on his shoulder I was ready to fly to space right there. He hit every single right spot whenever I wanted him to. But now if something happens to him, what will I tell his parents? Nobody except I know he's here. Moreover, he is dumb enough to give himself up to save me. He just loves me that much. I really hope I can get him back to his family before something worse happens to anyone. He cannot even call his family. What if it's only here? Why couldn't the news be any clearer?

I walked back into the room. She was fiddling with her phone still trying to contact anyone in her family. "They will be alright baby. Don't worry. These infected people are all around the building as far as I can say. I feel it is safer for us to just stay here and wait for some help" he said smiling and caressing my hair. "I guess so baby. Did you try calling your parents?" she said with a quivering voice and a nervous smile. "I did. No answer. I hope they are also safe like your parents." She pulled me to the bed and we lie down hugging each other while holding our phones tight in our hands hoping one of them rings very soon. I could hear her sniffles but could do anything. I kissed her forehead and asked her to sleep saying it will be alright by the time she wakes up. She couldn't sleep neither could I. We both were right there but far from each other held by a tiny string of hope and strong love for each other. Without us knowing, we both fell asleep.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I woke startled at the noises and felt it very near. I didn't want to wake her up to face horror without me. So I walked to the door and hear the door being banged. But it wasn't erratic or like someone out of control hitting it. With my voice quivering but assertive in tone I asked "who is it?" A low growl was heard from the other side. I saw a streak of light from the bottom of the door. Only way to confirm the other person on the side (if they were still a person) is visual. I get down and tried to peek through the small opening. There was heavy breathing or wheezing of air through a hole. Could be any fucking body! Then a sudden thud was heard and a drop of liquid hit my face. I realised that it wasn't any liquid but a dark liquid that was once someone's blood. I wiped my face immediately. And ran far away from the door and realised my breath was just as heavy as the breathing as the other side. I turned around to see her sitting in shock; she has seen the whole thing. I closed my lips and asked her to not make any noise. The banging on the door was still there. Right at that moment, the TV started to crackle to life. It made the movement outside to flounder. With one swift move, I got to the remote and was able to hit

mute. The whole floor went silent other than the heavy breathing on the other side of the door. The unseen horror was much worse than the lady making the toddler a customized Big Mac.

Then there it was like a bullet through a silent theatre. The TV downstairs started going crazy and shout of that there is good news. The news anchor was blabbering something about the local airports being brought back into control and we can move out. And as far as the news they have this is just a really strong variation of flu. I couldn't hear anything more. There was a shriek outside and I closed my eyes to concentrate.

I woke up not remembering anything I saw. His body warmth was all I ever wanted. I had all the doubts in the world about him. He was always too good to be true. He will never accept and say that I can do so much better. But he still never gave up on me, always trying to make up for my mistakes and anger by being there and saying sorry even when he doesn't have to. But these thoughts were broken by the bangs outside. I woke up to find him not being next to me. I woke up startled to see him down on the floor trying to look outside the door. Then a wet thud which was clear to me that it wasn't normal, like a fish being dropped on the floor. He turned around immediately shocked and I saw red liquid on his face. I don't want him to die, not here, not now, not in front of me. He ran towards the other end of the room. I wanted to ask if he was alright. But he didn't want to make any noise. He is so calm and composed even when literal death could be just behind a plank of wood. He even thought of the TV and mute it. We both jerked to the noise of TV downstairs. Only then I remembered, the host of out BnB is downstairs and she also has a baby. Trying to not think about the thought of the baby or our own demise outside I decided to focus on the news. The army is apparently trying to take control of the situation. They will be bringing a battalion around every major area of the city to take people to safety. I looked at him, he was still contemplating the options. I didn't want to move from the room, it felt safe here with him and the door between life and death. But he made gestures stating we have to leave immediately. I hesitantly nodded but I am not really convinced how safe it is outside.

It's so clear. We have to get to the junction a few streets from here. The streets were a mess. I literally cannot think of taking her through these streets. She cannot even take a crowded street, how can I expect her to walk through this? Then it was another thud on the door but with a baby crying. "Please open the door. They are not here. Please!!" I jumped to open the door. Praying to the gods that don't exist, I creaked the door open. The host was fine and so is her baby. "Get in mam. How did you get around those things?"

She put the baby down kissed his fat cheeks a couple of times and took some toiled breaths. "They are quite slow for their thirst. I was able to crank the volume and distract while I snuck behind the store room door and walked up here slowly and silently." She finished. I was still looking at her knowing thinking she knows the next question. "Yes. The door is closed for now. But it is quite weak with their constant banging. We can use the terrace to get to the junction."

"Then let us not wait anymore. The news said at 11, we are already 10.30 now. We need to assess the situation and move." We took a look at each other faces. Took two minutes bathroom breaks each and made sure the baby is silent and doesn't make much noise. I took a bar of soap and hid it in my pocket, never know what could be of help where. I hugged her tightly and gave a kiss on her forehead. Even at this moment of truth, she giggled and blushed

at my kiss. I smiled back at her and waved saying let's make a baby soon. She blushed even more.

We walked slowly to the door of the terrace, fortunately it wasn't making a noise like most doors in the house. We went to the terrace to take a better view of the condition. It was much worse than anyone can put into words or even imagine. It was street full of junk and a butcher shop in operation with the worst butcher at work. There was blood and flesh everywhere, with the brainless corpses wandering about trying to get a hold of their next victims.

Without concentrating on it, we decided to walk to the edge of the street by hopping across each house's terrace. There were people around doing the same. It finally took a super flu to bring people together and be silent and united among themselves. I would've expected fights to erupt across different people saying their option is the best to follow, or maybe that already happened and only the best are out and about. We are the fittest to survive after all, of course the ones below may survive better but we will still survive longer. With all these thoughts and with the help of some make-shift ladders and bridges across the terraces, we were able to cross three streets. In the house before us, people were already taking some rest after moving along multiple roofs. We nodded and decided to move across without waiting. The host and her baby crossed and she just moved across. I was crossing with ease when I heard a faint bang and scratching in the other side of the house. Wondering it could be the worse, I moved as quick as I can to the next roof. There were four people on it already and was about to move the bridge when a half eaten hand from the window beneath us caught my hand. It was gripping me very tight and its nails were clawing into my skin. I pulled a bar of soap from my pocket and bite deep into it and shout out into it. With all my might I pulled my hands out, it was all bruised but I can pull through. I put the bridge to the other side and felt the movement downstairs tracking our movement. It was eery but slow to not alarm us. We moved through another set of houses without any "incident".

The junction was in sight and the crowd was getting tighter across the last few houses. The host was exhausted with the weight of two and stress of many more. Her husband was in another town and she can't even contact him. I can only imagine how it should be. Without knowing how he was, I cannot even imagine to have crossed the threshold of the house. But we were so close. The buzz was quite large here but the general populace kept their silence knowing what was at stake.

The buzz started growing wilder suddenly. The ground started shaking. There was some movement ahead of us towards the junction. The cavalry was getting near. But with them, the infested was also following them. Slow but steadily growing in numbers. They were not even trying to hit them with anything. Only then I realised that it wasn't a cavalry at all but just one jeep garnering attention itself. They were literally trying to get all the attention to one single point. I could feel the vibration getting more and more aggressive and constant fluttering of wings. There was a chopper also around but it too wasn't hitting anything. Their movement didn't seem like any strategy that I have encountered across my life. Albeit my only encounters with such "strategies" have been only from movies and games that I have played. So literally no practical experience. But in between all these thoughts, their plan started to become very clear.

They have decided to bring all of them here around the least populated area and take them all at once and minimum collateral damage. A few around me were able to realise what was happening and were clearly bound in shock. What can we do? Pretty much nothing else but to hold on to our loved ones for the last few minutes. That's what I did. I just held on to her as tightly as I can and started crying. She understood what was happening as soon as hearing me cry. I whispered "I love you" to her. She mouthed the words "I love you too" and seeing the tears on her eyes brought me to my knees. It then hit me suddenly. We can still get through this. We just need brave people. I asked her to sit down and started to build around her with everything I was able to get my hands on. And made some noise to show the others around us, what I meant. A few got and others were made to understanding in a few seconds. The vibration was getting very close.

But we did not have much of anything. The old started to close around the babies. We cried and made the mom sit with the baby and tried to start a cocoon around her. She cried but decided she cannot keep her baby safe this way. Someone needed to sit with the baby. I asked her to sit with the baby, this way the people both the host and I love can be saved. She cried and said she cannot. I smiled through the pain and asked her to tell my parents that I loved them. She was pouring tears from her eyes but sat down reluctantly. More people in the house we were in decided to join us to save the baby. The toddlers were the ones to be saved, the future generation. Knowing the cocoon was safe enough and waited for the jeep to become close enough. I could hear it being just a few metres away and I started shouting at the top of my voice. The bangs on the doors started getting very intense. The others around in the cocoon also started shouting. The bangs were followed by a sharp thud and hurried footsteps around us. There was wet noise of flesh being ripped off of skin and crunching of bones but none of us moved. My back knew the warm feeling of trickle was definitely not sweat. I was smiling at her and she was crying. I started saying, "Do not ever forget me. I might die today but I will always be near you making sure you are happy and comfortable. I love you so much."

The last I remember before the blinding light and heat around me was his love for me. He didn't just say it he even showed it. All left of him when I was out of the cocoon was his smile. He was literally dying happy that I lived. The baby couldn't take the heat and passed out. I came out to see that a few of us survived. The mission, 'the burning' they called, was a success for them but in the end it doesn't even matter. The sun came out to greet us, but its heat wasn't even hurting me. I'm hurting more inside with my love burning and my lover smiling.