

FICTION

Except for a few grey hairs lurking from the sideburns, Anish hadn't changed at all. He was still lithe, exuded that easy-going charm that I found so alluring and he still made my heart race so vehemently that I had to make every effort to stop that blush rising up my cheeks.

At Rishi's wedding, the moment Anish got to speak to me alone, he delivered a shocker.

"I have been waiting for this moment for such a long time."

He wanted to sound earnest but ended up sounding rehearsed.

I would not be honest to myself if I say I wasn't waiting for this moment too. I tried my best to keep my face expressionless. I don't know how much I succeeded.

"Now I will make everything right," was his next statement.

I found it appalling that he actually thought it was possible to reclaim those lost years, make up for the hours I spent asking the universe "Why?"

"Can we talk about this later?" I said a bit curtly.

"Tomorrow, meet me at the coffee shop we used to frequent before. I will tell you everything that happened to me. Reyna, give me a chance."

I winced.

Leaving was his decision, coming back was his decision — where did I figure in this? He had perhaps expected me to dance in joy because the man I had loved had finally returned after 13 years. How dramatic!

On the contrary I was happy that my heart had gone back to its normal rhythm. I was determined not to be swayed by his charm again, but I was sorely mistaken. He had his ammunition ready.

When I met him the next day at the coffee shop, I had already called up the detective agency and asked them to run a thorough check on him. They were charging me a bomb but I was willing to shell out the amount. I wouldn't allow this man to take me for a ride again.

Sitting at the café as I ordered my cappuccino, I told myself I would hear his version of the story. I would also get the version of the detective agency, then I would arrive at my conclusion.

At one point of time, this place by the window was my favourite spot in the café. From where I was sitting, I could see the pink and white bougainvillea creating a canopy on the main door. I remembered how Anish had once plucked those flowers and tucked them in my hair. His small, romantic gestures that I found so irresistible.

I hadn't stepped into this café for a long time because I had deliberately wanted to leave those memories behind. But I realised no matter how hard we tried, memories were like zombies in horror movies, impossible to shrug off.

The café was thronging with women. An elderly group sat in one corner, a few college-going women in another, and an office group with their laptops occupied another table. The only two men present in the café looked hemmed in. Perhaps these ladies, looking so boisterous and carefree on the surface, were

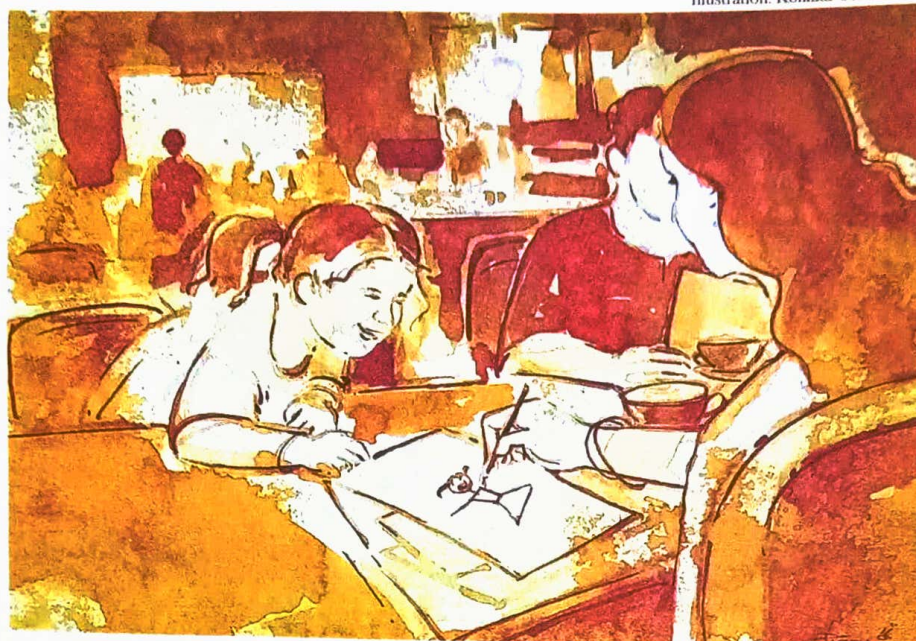


Illustration: Kolkata Coffee Man

THE REVELATION

juggling contradictions within, just as I was.

Anish walked in with Alvira. Instantly my resolution to keep the interaction like a corporate client meeting went out of the window.

I loved children, I got along with them famously. People who knew me well knew this side of me.

With large dreamy eyes, a smile that broke into a dimple, and a voice that had nothing but childish spontaneity, Alvira straightaway made a place in a warm corner of my heart.

I took her to the confectionary section and bought her brownies.

"I want her custody," Anish told me, when his daughter had settled down in the adjacent table with a sketch book and colouring pencils.

"Chandana won't be able to bring her up, she isn't a responsible mother," he said.

I didn't want him to launch into a tirade about his wife. I wasn't really interested in what went wrong in his marriage, rather I wanted to know what went wrong between us. I went straight to the point.

"Why did you leave?" I asked.

Anish hadn't expected me to be so terse. Especially when a moment ago I was fawning over his daughter.

"My father had a very close friend in Durgapur. He helped my father financially at one point of his life and pulled out our family from



MY HALF-BAKED HOME by **AMRITA MUKHERJEE** CHAPTER 7

the brink. So, he was always grateful to him. Unknown to me he had given his word to his friend that I would marry his daughter Chandana. Trouble started when I told my parents about you and refused to marry Chandana. Every time I went to Durgapur my father used every emotional manipulation trick he knew to ensure I listened to him."

To me, this story sounded like a direct lift from a Bengali serial.

"How come you never told me anything about this earlier...?" I asked.

"I thought I would be able to handle it. I didn't want to make you insecure."

I smirked. What an irony! "Finally, he threatened me that if I left Durgapur without marrying Chandana, he would commit suicide."

Anish looked grim. Impressive acting chops, I would say. I suspected I would have to depend on the detective agency more.

"There was no way I could face

you after the marriage," he said looking down.

"I had gone looking for you in Durgapur. You, your entire family had disappeared."

"My parents moved to their ancestral village in Burdwan and I took Chandana to Arunachal Pradesh with me."

"Arunachal Pradesh? Why Arunachal?"

"Actually, while working in the travel agency, I had developed some contacts there. They told me a café was coming up in Ziro and they were looking for someone to run it. I took the plunge."

"A year, two years later, you could have contacted me. Told me this. I would have got closure. What you did was totally unfair. I sometimes thought you had died and mourned you."

Anish made an attempt to speak, then withdrew.

"Do you still run the café?" I asked.

"Yes, it's become big now. I am a partner in the business. There are a lot of tourists, business is good."

"Your wife. What does she do?" He cleared his throat.

"She is a homemaker. Actually, since we both were literally forced into this marriage we just went with the flow. We are like chalk and cheese, very different from each other. We never got along; parting ways was inevitable. She left me

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and Alvira in Ziro six months back and came to Calcutta. She's living with relatives who have put this in her head that she should settle for nothing less than ₹1 crore as alimony. That's insane. I don't have that kind of money."

"What will you do then?" I asked matter-of-factly.

"I am trying to convince her for an out-of-court settlement. If that happens, I will be free quickly."

Anish's smile reeked of insinuations that repulsed me.

"So basically, you are a coward. You couldn't face me; you couldn't tell me the truth. Now that you are getting a divorce you have suddenly mustered the courage to get me back in your life."

He kept stirring his coffee, maybe mulling over the right answer.

"Can I sit with you?" Alvira asked from the adjoining table.

"Yes dear, please join us," I said affectionately.

I was feeling jilted and angry. Alvira's shift to our table was a necessary distraction.

"Auntie can you draw?" She passed me her sketch book.

I was good at sketching. My drawings helped me score well in biology and geography. Later in life, it came in handy in my profession. Now I mostly doodled while making to-do lists.

I drew a girl with two pony tails and two cute clips. This impressed the little girl.

"Wow! Wow!" draw some more she said, clapping her hands.

I drew Mickey Mouse.

"Can I come to your house? You can teach me." Alvira looked excited.

"If auntie invites you, I can drop you there anytime," Anish said.

"Tomorrow! Can I come tomorrow aunty?" she asked me innocently.

Once again, a decision had been taken for me and I couldn't say "no".

With every passing day I was realising that this was my greatest weakness. I couldn't say no, especially to the people I loved.

Anish knew me too well. That was why he used his daughter as his ruse. One mistake he made. He thought I was still the same person he had left behind.

My feelings for Alvira were genuine, I didn't want my feelings for this innocent child to be tainted by the past I shared with her father. But I had, so far, survived in the hardcore world of advertising, where you learn never to miss an opportunity.

Getting to know the daughter better could also mean finding out more about the father.

(To be continued)

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