

# *Impermanence*

a short story

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*“Love is too young to know what conscience is,  
Yet who knows not conscience is born of love?  
Then, gentle cheater, urge not my amiss,  
Lest guilty of my faults thy sweet self prove... ....”*

- *William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616)*

*“From the body of one guilty deed a thousand ghostly fears and haunting thoughts  
proceed.”*

- *William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850)*

*I dropped the gun on the floor as I walked out of the room. I did not run. One pair of eyes followed me as another just stared into vacuum with a dark dead blankness. I was still aware of the stunned silence the burden of which had made the gun in my hand unbearably heavy. Just moments before I pulled the trigger, I wanted to drop the hard metal onto the floor and leave. Unfortunately, its weight could not outweigh my heart which brimmed with an overwhelming passion. Well... Pulling the trigger made neither of them lighter. But it broke the heavy silence and spat on it with the loud explosion it engineered.*

*I headed straight to my room in the campus which was a few lanes away and stood there waiting. It was done. I knew that I would kill only one of them, leaving the evidence and the witness alive. One of them would definitely lead to me. I picked the jug from the table and filled the glass tumbler with water. I moved towards the open, wide window, with the tumbler in my hand. I did not switch on the lights. The darkness in the room seemed darker than that which filled the dull ignorant city. My story of love, as I thought about it in this serene satisfaction of accomplishment, seemed complete. But was it only a story? To me, it was the only one. But to her, it was just one of many...*

“You do not drink?”

“No... I do not.”

It was Sam’s birthday. The entire batch of students was there at his home. Sam was my closest friend and he could see no sense in my excuses. I had to be there.

I hated parties. They seemed to me as just assortments of coloured faces, giggles and ostentatious stupidity. This was my first party since I came to the city. I owe my admission into the college to a special permission secured by a father with friends in influential places. I had missed the first three months of the graduation course, and everyone eyed me with misplaced curiosity. They did not know that I was leading a dull sad lonely life. The party only strengthened my intense loneliness.

“Why is that so?” I finally turned in the direction of the intrusive persistence. She held a glass and stood staring right into me as if trying to peep into my depths. Those searching eyes... they were not exceedingly beautiful, not intoxicating. I kept looking into them to find the right word. I sipped from my glass of juice when I found the right word.... ‘Curious’. Her eyes were curious, questioning. I looked at her dress. It was clear that she had spent considerable time in dressing up for the party. Her face was made up. It was unnecessary. I wanted to reach for my handkerchief and relieve her face of the layers of pink colour. A few seconds passed. She was beautiful but mysterious. I suddenly realized that a good number of eyes was fixed in our direction. I turned around and tried to meet each of them so that they knew that their stares had not gone unnoticed. Some turned away while some continued to look at us with painted smiles. As I turned back towards her, at my far right, I noticed a person who continued staring sadly at us. There was something extremely sad in his expression. It was clear that he was not crying, but there was something....

“Does he know you?” I asked her lifting my hand in his direction.

“Who doesn’t?”

“Well... I don’t.” I replied. “Anyway, I think he is in love.”

She immediately turned. When she faced me again, I noticed that her smile had disappeared.

“Is he?” I asked.

"He wants me to believe so."

"So what about you? Are you in love with him?"

"No..." she added with a wink. "I have never been in love."

I did not like the game she was playing. She probably wanted me to smile. I did not. I realized that I was getting attracted to her, and I was trying my best to not fall...

"Do you know what love is?" I asked.

"No." she replied stressing every word. "I have no idea what it is."

"Then how do you know you're not in love?"

I did not wait for her answer. The party was coming to an end. I finished the drink and left.

“Why don’t you stay with me at my house?” asked Sam. We were in the college canteen. Our *dosas* had not arrived yet.

“I am fine here in the campus. Anyway, I get to spend my nights in the library.”

“Any difficulty with what you missed?”

“Nope”

There were few people in the canteen. The canteen was located at the exact centre of the campus, with all the streets leading to it. The boys’ hostels were located in Steve’s end, and the girls’ in Carol’s end. They were at diametrically opposite ends. The academic buildings and the library were located in the unimaginatively named Academic end. I loved the seventy-five year old campus with abundant greenery. It had lakes with benches flanking their banks. I spent many peaceful evenings feasting on the stirrings caused by the violence of the winds announcing the imminent rain.

This was a week after the party at Sam’s house. The *dosas* finally arrived.

“At the party, I met a girl.” I informed Sam.

“Yeah. I saw. I wanted to warn you, but I was too drunk.” He smiled.

“Warn?”

“Yeah. She’s Sanjana. She’s armed and dangerous.”

“Armed?”

“With her beauty.”

“I did not find her particularly beautiful.” I replied. “But yes, I realized that she is dangerous.”

“Be careful.” Sam said and added with a pause, “You have not been your usual self for the last one week. Yesterday, I noticed you observing her during class.”

“Yeah... I don’t know. I think I expected her to try to talk to me. I am surprised she hasn’t.” The *dosa* was good. “By the way, is she in a relationship? I saw someone staring at us that evening.”

"Many were."

"But there was one person in particular. He was actually not looking at me, but at her."

"Oh... That must be Vinay. Second year... He loves her."

"What about her?"

"She doesn't."

"How do you know?"

"From the horses' mouths."

"Who's the horse?"

"Both. He tells everyone that he loves. She tells everyone that she does not love."

We walked out of the canteen. I threw a stone into the lake disturbing the surface reflecting the red setting sun. The stone bounced a few times on the surface before sinking. It was a lot like love. One can't cling onto the safety of the surface for long.

"You carry on. I'll move to the library then." I said and walked towards the Academic end.

“Keats? But why?”

I was in my usual corner in the library. The leaves of the huge banyan tree in the courtyard brushed against the window pane. The part of the sky which was illuminated with a bright red colour a few minutes ago, now slowly covered itself with the blanket of darkness. A book on Keats' great odes lay open on the table. I lifted my head expectantly in her direction. I had recognized her voice.

“Why not?” I smiled.

The chair beside me was empty. She did not sit down. I did not ask her to.

“Why Keats? He was only a deluded kid.”

“Delusion? You mean ‘love’?” I asked, intrigued.

“I feel he is too young to write about it.”

“Then... are we too young to talk about it?” I tried to not look at her. We were talking again, after a week.

She placed her books on the table and settled in the chair.

“We are older.” she said.

“By just two years.”

She remained silent for some time. Then she said, “What you said the other evening... Do you think it is not possible to know you're in love if you don't know love?”

“Precisely”

“So, do you know love?”

“I think I do.” I smiled at her and looked at the notes again. I knew that she wanted me to explain. I did not.

“So, what is it?” she asked.

“You see... I believe that love is a power game. When you play the game, it's all about control. The one with the control drives the relationship. It's a race to gain control.” I added after a pause, “The key is to not lay all your cards on the table.”

"Oh..." She looked at me, surprised. "So, how do you know you're in love?"

"When you realize that you're playing."

I was just mechanically noting down something from the book, with nothing entering my head. She was observing me.

"I am going back to Carol's. Would you walk with me?" she asked.

I turned towards her. *Armed and Dangerous*. I smiled.

"Were you ever in love?" she asked.

"Interesting question."

"You haven't answered the question."

I smiled again. "I am unable to walk with you today. Please do not mind. Assignments..."

She smiled as she stood up. "You have your cards too close to your chest."

"Are we playing?"

She looked unperturbed by the question.

"I'll get the answer to my question. Bye for now." She said as she waved. I waved in return. My eyes followed her as she left the library.

“It’s been more than a month” she said, “I couldn’t wait anymore.”

We were on our way out of the classroom, after a late evening lecture on *Postmodernism*. The Academic end, once you pass through the big black gate and turn around to face it, always appeared like a haunted house with its sculpted pillars. A wide cement path led to the centre with the canteen. It was lined on its sides by large old trees whose branches formed a dome over the path. The shadows of the branches granted to them by the delicate moonlight decorated the path with artistic patterns.

“I am delighted that you couldn’t.”

Her steps slowed and almost came to a halt. The pattern before us lay there waiting.

“I waited for you to make a move.”

I smiled. “I want to walk with you till Carol’s” I said.

We resumed walking. The dull cool serenity of the moonlit night steadily fed the warmth of the blood from my dangerously stubborn heart.

“How’s your project work going on?” she enquired, “What’s the topic?”

“Keats and Shakespeare – Whose love is more real?”

“Interesting.” She said. I remained silent. A few seconds passed.

“Do you want my opinion?” she asked.

“Sure...”

“I think it’s Shakespeare. His love is more.... what is the word... let us say... *tangible*.”

“Is love tangible?” I asked.

“Why shouldn’t it be?” she said. I kept thinking. She continued, “What is your say? Who do you favour?”

“Keats... actually. His love is more real but *intangible*.” I winked.

She laughed.

I continued. “You see. Shakespeare’s love is dramatic. Bassanio loved Portia, Romeo loved Juliet. There is nothing abstract about their love.

At least Romeo's appears to be very deep. But Bassanio's, it's just peripheral, might also have been guided by Portia's wealth." I continued, "Keats' love has a deep melancholy which is the real fabric of love... Devotion, Despair... these seem to be absent in Shakespeare's plays. You can attribute this to the form of his art – drama. Whatever it is, it does not seem real to me."

We took a right turn from the centre, towards Carol's end. I had never been there before. I walked slowly.

"You never answered my question."

I answered after a pause, "I have never been in love."

"So, if we fall in love, then it would be the first time for both of us."

The tender winter breeze brushed past us. We walked side by side, our steps producing rhythmic music, rising and falling almost in unison. There was no sound that disturbed this music except that of our controlled conversation.

"We are both clinging onto the surface... trying very hard to not fall."

"Yes." She agreed

"I am afraid only one of us is going to succeed."

"I am afraid none of us would fail." Saying this, she moved faster, stepped in front of me and pressed her lips against mine. Time stopped, not a leaf moved. She stood looking into my eyes. "I am not afraid of failing" she said.

The fragrance of her breath filled me. I could still feel the softness of her lips on mine. Her eyes searched deep into mine in expectation. I pulled her closer, as she lifted herself on her toes. My hands caressed her face and stroked the back of her neck pushing aside the dense strands, as my mouth covered her lips, slurping the nectar of their sweet submission. My inner eye behind the closed ones guided me as I reached into her depths. I felt that I was breathing my love into her as I tried to draw hers into me. I realized at that moment that it was not just love I was giving, but my life. I released her as I gasped for breath.

She was still standing on her toes with her eyes closed. I patted on her shoulders as I removed her from my grasp. She ran her eyes around and said, "I hope nobody's watching."

I heard a hurried rustle in the bushes a few metres away. A dog appeared strolling towards us, unmindful of the thorny crackling bushes whose dry leaves wailed under its feet.

“Oh... it’s only a dog.” she sighed.

Only a dog...

“Who’s that?”

It was Sam’s birthday. I was in a plastic chair in a concealed corner of the garden unpleasantly illuminated. This was my escape from the noisy chatter and the hideous dancing in the house.

“I don’t know his name. It seems he is from the first year batch.” she replied as she sat in the chair beside me.

“Stranger?”

“Ofcourse. I haven’t seen him before.”

“You have been talking to him for some time. I saw you as I entered the hall. You didn’t notice me?”

“No... I saw you just seconds ago. I was wondering when you came.”

“Interesting. You were so engrossed in talking to a stranger.”

An uncomfortable silence followed.

“Are you suggesting something?” she asked after some time.

“I love you.”

“Yes. I know that.” she said.

“Do you love me?”

She remained silent.

The stranger came towards us slowly, hesitantly. “Am I intruding?” he asked.

“No... No... Not at all.” I replied.

“Sanjana. Would you like to dance with me?”

She turned towards me and replied to him, “We are actually discussing something. Sure, I’ll join you, but after some time”. The guy looked embarrassed and left.

“Don’t do me favours” I said.

“Why are you talking to me this way? Do you think I dance with strangers?”

"I am not sure he is a stranger."

She rose from the chair angrily and left.

It was around 8:00 pm. There was high humidity in the air, and my shirt stuck to my back. I just picked up a glass of water and poured it on my head. I repeated it with another. I was not hungry. I picked a piece of the cream cake and took my seat back in the plastic chair.

Sam walked towards me with a glass of water and settled in the chair she jumped out of a few minutes ago.

"I think it's time we talked about it" he said.

"Even I feel so."

Sam waited for me to continue.

"That guy..." I said pointing in the direction of the stranger, "is no stranger to her. I have seen them together many times before. I even saw her lay her hand on his shoulder as she spoke to him." I added, "Ofcourse, she does not know that I know."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes. I do."

I took the glass of water from Sam's hand and emptied it in my mouth.

"From the horse's mouth", he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I was beginning to realize something. His silence, though disturbing, was pregnant with answers.

"History repeats itself" he answered. "Do you remember our senior Vinay?"

"Yes. I do."

"He is leaving for Mumbai tomorrow. This is your last chance to talk to him. Ofcourse, I can answer your questions. But I do not want to. Meet him tonight. He is at *the Grand*."

I did not move. *Vinay*... I never thought I would hear the name again.

Sam stood up and as he left said, "*I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviours to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own*"

*scorn by failing in love*". He continued, "Looks like Shakespeare has a better understanding of love and of those who fall in love."

“I hope I am not disturbing you.”

Vinay looked much neater and I realized that he was extremely handsome. He did not seem that way to me the evening I first saw him.

“Don’t...” he said, “She has changed you too, I see.” He continued, “From what I heard about you, I thought you are frank, unapologetic and independent. But now, I see someone different.”

“Who do you see now?”

“Myself... A not very old version of myself.”

He seemed unaware of this condescension as he walked slowly towards the table and filled half of his glass with a colourless liquid. He added, “As a matter of fact, I was worse.” He sipped from the glass, paused for few seconds, then filled the other half with the same liquid and took his place on the sofa.

“Are you sure you don’t want to have anything?” he asked.

“I am coming from Sam’s birthday. I am full”, I paused and added, “It was in Sam’s birthday that I saw you for the first time.”

“I remember... I remember.” He looked straight into my eyes and said, “I remember that day well. I was there. I could see that she was trying her best. Seeing her that way hurt me.” He sipped the liquid and spoke as if in a trance staring at the wall on the opposite side of the room, “I was not even sure if she had seen me when she was talking to you. I was there at a corner, not far from you... looking at her, into her eyes. But they were busy luring you. All the while, there was one question that troubled me. ‘Did she love me?’” He laughed. “I had asked her that many times. She never said ‘Yes’. But I always believed that she loved me, though she never admitted. It seemed impossible to believe that she never loved.”

“I have a question... I do not know how it would sound.” I hesitantly asked, “Did she ever kiss you?”

He turned towards me and considered me for a few seconds. The fan whirred steadily above us. He did not smile. “I am sorry, brother. What has she done to you? What have you become? Fight it... Fight it. There is something you should know.”

He continued without answering my question, "The first time I saw her talking to you... That night, after the party, on the way back home, she told me that you had proposed to her, and that she had told you that she had no idea about love and was not interested. I was afraid that she would see in you something which I did not possess – some superior quality.

I had begun to feel insecure much before that. The feeling was killing me. I always felt that she was slipping out of my hands and I clung on to her with all my might. I saw her talking to you in the library again, as I was passing by. I tried to listen to your conversation but failed. Later she informed me that it was you who sat beside her at the table and asked her to reconsider. After that I wanted to warn you but she made me promise that I would do no such thing. She told me that I was her best friend and she considered herself lucky to have someone like me love her. But she never loved me. So, I had no right to feel possessive. In her words... I was only a best friend.

You were good. For over a month, I did not find you talking to her. Finally, one evening, I saw you walking with her at Carol's. That evening was what saved me."

"Saved you? What do you mean?" I asked. I knew the evening he was referring to.

"I was mad with anger. I was following you without your knowledge. I was not close enough to hear your conversation. The night was brightly lit by the full moonlight. So, following you was not difficult. I moved from tree to tree flanking the cement path. And then, I stopped when she kissed you. I had placed my heart in her hands, and she tore it into pieces with that kiss. I wanted to kill her with my pocket knife. As you pulled her closer, I moved and stood right beside you, ready to plunge my knife into her. Neither of you noticed me. Not that it mattered to me at that time.

"At that moment, something happened to me. Enlightenment, I guess. I realized what her love actually was. I hurriedly jumped behind a tree as you released her. And the first words that came out of her were, 'I hope nobody's watching.' I could not help laughing to myself. This was the girl I was in love with."

When he finished the narration, he became aware of the glass in his hand. He finished the drink and placed the glass in the sofa beside him. None of us uttered a word for some time.

"Be careful, brother" he repeated. "She is dangerous."

"Did she really tell you that I proposed?" I asked.

He nodded.

I stood up.

"I shall leave... Thanks. "

He followed me to the door. The bolt opened with a creak. I pulled the door and stopped it as he closed it on me.

"I want to ask you three questions. Think carefully."

He looked surprised. I continued, "Why did you want to kill her, and why not *me*? Why did you not try to kill me? Ofcourse... Now, at this moment, you probably think you were wise in not acting. But think... Were you really?"

He was silent.

I added, "If you face a similar situation, would you still not act? Think... Why would you want to kill? Is your motivation hatred or a need to punish?"

"Finally.... Would you still want to kill the same person?"

I stood there waiting for his answer. He kept staring blankly at the floor.

“At least finish it before leaving...”

I was with her in the canteen. This was two weeks after meeting Vinay.

“No... it’s already late. Jenny and the others are waiting.” She said as she stood up.

“Who are the others?”

“Do you want me to list out all the names?”

I smiled. “I am asking only out of curiosity. Frankly, I don’t mind even if you don’t answer.”

“Whose name are you looking for?”

“Stranger’s” I replied.

“I have stopped talking to him.”

I did not ask “why?”. I knew that she would continue. I sipped the hot coffee. *Delicious...*

“He proposed to me. It seems he is madly in love with me.”

“And?”

“I told him that I do not believe in love, and have no idea what it is”, she replied.

She continued, “He once asked me about us. I told him that you are my best friend.”

“How many best friends do you have?”

She looked angry. She pushed the chair aside, picked the mobile phone on the table and dropped it into her handbag.

“You are my best friend. Why do you want to know if there are others?”

“How many best friends do you kiss?”

“Enough. I am leaving. Don’t try to make me feel guilty.” She added, “It is true that I was attracted to you. I admit it’s true. But it just stopped there. I do not love you. I am sorry to say this. But I repent having kissed you. I shouldn’t have. I was just too attracted. If I had not done that, you wouldn’t be suffering this way.”

“Do you want me to tell you that I am not suffering and that I am fantastically happy?” I did not get up from my chair. I continued to sip the coffee. We were at our usual corner in the empty canteen.

She did not answer. She just left.

I knew where she was going. Jenny and her other friends had gone on a vacation.

“I’ve read your paper. I am recommending it for publication in the University Journal.”

I was with Prof. Anthony at his office in the Academic end. Prof. Anthony was Editor-in-Chief for the University Journal.

“Thank you, Sir.” I rose to leave.

“Please be seated. I would want to discuss this further.”

He continued as I settled back in the chair. “This is an important question, isn’t it? I mean... ‘Why do we punish?’ Is it out of love or anger?”

“I argue that it is difficult to choose between the two.”

“Yes. I know that. I’ve read the paper, haven’t I?” He passed me the cup of coffee brought in by the office boy. I dutifully accepted it. He asked, “Does punishment work in redeeming a person?”

I remained silent. I had not considered the question till then.

After a few seconds, I answered, “I feel punishment would work if it can make a person repent.”

“How do you know if someone’s repenting his deed?” He continued, “Do you believe anyone who tells you that he repents having robbed, killed... or even loved someone?

Or just think... What do you think makes a man feel guilty? When a man feels guilty, where does his heart lie? In the past, present or future?”

“The past. He cannot change his past and he feels guilty that he has wronged someone.” I quickly answered.

The Professor stood up from his chair, walked towards me and affectionately patted me on the shoulder. He moved towards his bookshelf, tried in vain to find a book, and returned to his chair at the table. “I am afraid I do not have the book with me. I shall share it with you later...” He added, “The heart is in the future.”

He continued, “Man gives the greatest importance to *reputation*. It is man’s reputation which decides his social relations and societal exchanges. This is an important characteristic selected for us by nature in the process of our evolution.

“People do anything to maintain a good reputation. If a man’s deeds cannot in any way affect his future, he does not repent doing them. Just think about this. People say many things to influence the way others behave with them.”

“Sir. I understand what you’re saying. But how is this relevant to my paper on the nature of punishment?”

“You should figure that out for yourself. There is something more. Just consider this. Is there anyone in this world who is impervious to guilt? Can punishment be a means of making someone feel guilty?”

I placed the empty cup on the saucer in the tray. I thanked him for his time and walked out of the room.

“Rahul has given the keys to his room in the city. We can go there.”

I was following them, hiding behind the trees on the sides of the cement path. They were walking towards the gate. It was quarter past six in the evening. The sun had set and the spherical bulbs on the pillars glowed with an artificial aura.

She turned towards him and kissed him on his cheek. His arm tightened around her waist. My fingers circled the gun waiting in my coat pocket.

“How far is it from here?” she asked.

“Just two kilometres. We can walk.”

“Do you know something?” he continued, “You are the first one I kissed.”

“Me too. I have never kissed anyone before.”

They walked out of the gate and turned right. I knew Rahul’s room. There was no need for me to follow them. I jumped into an auto and reached the room before them. I climbed the stairs and waited in the darkness.

Killing them there would be easy, but it would be too dark for them to recognize me. I wanted to see their faces. I wanted them to look into my eyes as I pulled the trigger.

I climbed onto the cold stony terrace ...

The bullet struck him right between his eyes, and his body moved back with a jerk; his head slammed against the wooden table, and brushed against her as it dropped to the floor. She just moved back. Not even a gasp escaped her. She stood there looking at me. A few seconds passed. I knew that she expected me to kill her too. I did not.

*I wondered whom Vinay would have killed. He had not answered my question.*

*Dark clouds hid the numerous constellations that decorated the disinterested sky. My eyes, now accustomed to the pervading darkness, stopped on a few dogs standing under a tree in conference. They stood staring at one another in eerie silence. The group increased in size gradually, and all members of the group followed the code of silence. How would they react if they heard a gunshot? Would they run away in fear or look at me with eyes peeping from stubborn stony expressionless faces. Why did she not seem afraid?*

*Did I expect her to run after the shot?*

*My room was at the extreme right end of Steve's with every window opening to perfect scenery of the lively sea. I noticed that the other windows of the room were shut. I opened a window and slowly moved towards the wall to switch on the fan.*

*I heard hurried footsteps on the stairs, followed by a banging on the door. Sam pushed me aside as he entered, and emptied the jug of water in his mouth.*

*"I have terrible news." he said, "I don't know how to say this."*

*I asked him to sit down and ambled casually towards the open window. I waited for him to announce that the stranger is dead.*

*He shouted from behind me, "Sanjana killed Ram and then shot herself in the head."*

*I turned around.*

*"Yes. She is dead." he added.*

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