

Pieces. . .

- Adithya Chakravarty M

I paused for a few seconds... She waited. I wanted answers. She remained silent...

"Please do me a favour... Please destroy the letter. Tear it to pieces." I said.

"Are you sure?" she asked with no emotion.

It pained. I wished she had said, "No!"

"Yes... Please." I replied.

"Now?" she asked.

"Yes."

The letter shrieked as it tore. I could hear it. I wanted to end the call. I wanted to throw the mobile...

"To smaller bits..." I said.

"Okay"... Lifeless, emotionless.

The shrieks continued. I imagined the numerous pieces the letter was being reduced to. Did she feel no pain, no remorse... no love?

"Done?" I asked.

"Yes." she said, "Anything else?"

"Yes, my love... Remember, it's not just the letter you reduced to pieces."

The wet road glistens under the streetlight. It's not raining anymore but it's there. I know it is. I can sense it, feel it. The streetlight stands alone on the long road. Are the others not working? Oh... but wait... are there others? No, I can't see any. There are none. Yes, it is alone... all alone... in the rain... drenched, just like the road below it, like the trees in the garden behind it, like the sea that seems to be a black mass merged with the sky, like the terrace I am standing on, like the clothes on me, like the body my soul carries. Wait... Is my soul carrying my body or is my body carrying my soul? Is there a way to find out? No... I walk away from the edge. No, I do not want to die today. She's coming here. I am waiting for her.

The streetlight reminds me of her. Reminds... Have I forgotten her? Do I need something to remind me of her? I smile. The streetlight shows me something from the past. But in what it shows, there was no streetlight, just the lone light outside a shop where we were standing close, very close to each other. She had actually said something, and was waiting for my reply. I was considering what I had just heard, wondering if she really meant what she had said. "You broke my heart... It's in pieces." Pieces... I looked at her face, trying to find a non-existent sinister smile, something which showed she was joking... Was she? Wasn't she? I kept looking at her. The light from the bulb above us fell only on one side of her face leaving the other side hiding in the shade. Was the other side smiling? Was it?... She had learnt from someone that I was in love with Archana. *My heart is in pieces*. She thought I loved Archana. I thought about it... for some time... for a few seconds. She was waiting. I imagined a sculpture, a painting with the scene captured, as we looked into each other, as I searched for signs of love, in her face, in her eyes. "I am actually in love with Archana." I lied.

I am at the *get-together*. I know that she would come. It's been five years since she left me, since she tore the letter. My friends are waiting in the second floor but I could not stay there. I came up because I was getting restless. I wonder if I am still in love with her. Possible??? Quite. I look at the watch. It says, "seven-thirty". She is late, as usual. *I am always late*, she said when I had said that I was in love with Archana. I continued looking at her. My heart beat fast. I could have held her and said that I was lying. But I didn't. I let the moment pass, let the lie live, let it become the shield, the dark garment that veiled the affection the object of which, she would later come to realize, was herself.

I have grown old. I surveyed myself in the mirror, for an hour in the evening, trying in vain to see myself as the lively young man whom she had been in love with five years ago. As I saw myself in the mirror, I wondered if I could do something to make her repent her decision of leaving me, of walking away, and of getting married to someone. I wondered if I could make myself look better enough to break her heart again... to pieces... innumerable, uncountable, infinite.... Break her heart... I smile to myself. Funny... Do I think it's her punishment... for leaving me??? I think... It was her decision. She wanted to go. I let her go.

I start walking. It's better than standing at one place and surveying the road, expecting every vehicle to stop, searching every stopping vehicle for her. It rained heavily. I see puddles everywhere. I step on them. Water splashes onto my pants. I don't care. She never did too. She would jump into the puddles and ask me to do the same, giving some reason. *Water should never be stagnant. Mosquitoes breed in stagnant water.* She always gave such lame excuses... Lame excuses for everything. *I don't know why I do not feel love. Yes, Yes, I believe I was in love with you some time ago. But for me that love is only a memory. I do not feel that now.* I remember... I gave her an excuse too, once... *Why did you lie that you were in love with Archana? "I lied because I was afraid"*. I never told her the real reason... *afraid of what.*

Fear... Does everyone in love feel it? I felt it, I am sure; and I could never ask her. People wrongly feel that only cowards feel fear. I am sure she would have called me a coward had I told her of my fear. Actually, I am afraid even now, at this moment. I am afraid that she may not come. She is late. But something inside me is sure that she would come today. I want to see her. Five years is a long time. Yes... But what if she does not come? I stop walking. I hear the horn of a car. There is some commotion. I can hear voices. I can look down from the edge, but I wait. I want to recognize her voice. Is it her? Do I hear people call her name? Do I? Do I hear her voice? I try to remember how her voice sounded during those days of love. My heart shivers. My hands tremble... The unmistakable sweetness of her voice... It has not changed, has it??? Joy... Is it joy? What I feel now, at this moment – Is it joy? What is this sudden warmth in my body – rush of adrenalin? Have I fallen in love again? Or have I never come out of it? Have I been, during all these years of hating, secretly in love with her?

There is no doubt that she has arrived. But I wait. I should not go immediately lest I should give people or even her, the impression that I have been waiting for her. I decide to spend some more time here on the terrace. It's cold now, not very pleasant. The trees have stopped swaying; there is no breeze to render the weather bearable. There is still only the lone streetlight glowing on the road. It's not safe driving or walking on such roads. The authorities seem unconcerned. The sea is very calm. I do not see any waves, even near the shore. Yes. It looks like it is going to rain again. It's better to go inside before I catch a cold. I reach the stairs and start climbing down to the second floor, for the party, to her, for her.

“Hi... Hai... How are you? It has been a long time.” She says.

“Yes. Indeed.” I smile.

“Meet my husband, Rahul.” I turn towards Rahul. He pulls me closer, hugs me, shakes hands with me and says that it’s a pleasure. I laugh and assure him that the pleasure is mine. I look at her and then at him again. I smile. I tell them that they make a wonderful couple. He looks delighted. I smile, excuse myself and walk towards the food.

“Will you promise that you’ll never marry anyone else?” I remember her question. “Yes... And you?” “You don’t have to ask” was her reply. I never knew what her reply meant, actually, but I never cared to ask. I should have... She is happy. I can see that. Yes, she has definitely married someone else... *I should have asked her.* Would I probably not have loved her so deeply had I learnt that she would so remorselessly tear the letter and leave me for someone?... But why does this pain so much? I do not know. It is surprising because I have always known that she is married, and I still find it difficult. . . I can hear her voice. She is laughing with her friends. I hear his voice; he is laughing too. I do not know what I am doing here. I should not have waited... I should not have come.

I look at the food, but do not take any. I make my way through the friends and find a place in a corner. I wave at a few friends, crack a few jokes with a few others and slowly turn in her direction. He is still with her, talking to a few women, laughing with them. I look her thin delicate hands – the hands that I held as we walked side by side in the gardens of the college, the palms that I kissed as she spoke softly, with her head resting on my shoulder. She is in a beautiful green sari, definitely her selection. *I’ll wear a green sari for our marriage... green silk sari. What is your favourite colour?* I lift my head towards her face. Our eyes meet. She turns away. I turn towards Rahul who is still engrossed in some discussion with the friends. I turn towards the red curtains on the windows and stare at them for a few seconds. I lean forward in my chair and place my elbows on my knees. I look at the floor. Our eyes met... Yes, they did... And she turned away. Like the old times, when she thought others might notice. But now, there’s something missing and something else in its place. There’s no love... There’s fear.

This, I am sure, is my last letter to you. It is strange that the only letter I write to you is the last. We have reached the end of our relationship. The end... the way you wanted it.

But what surprises me, my love, is how after these years of being in love, you have so easily made the decision to leave me? The end began suddenly. You started saying that you do not love me anymore. How did it happen? I know that I would not get answers to any of these questions. But there are two questions I really want answers to. Please do answer.

That evening, when we stood under the light, when you said your heart was broken, did you really mean it?

Today, at this moment, are you leaving me out of fear? Are you afraid?

Please be honest.

That was my last letter to her... on a green paper... her favourite colour... the letter she tore to pieces.

She is afraid, now. I know. I have seen it. Does she want me to leave? Should I leave? I look at the watch. It shows eight-thirty. My mind suddenly takes me to the past. A beautiful garden.... She was beside me with her head rested on my shoulder and her palm in mine. *Why did you lie that you were in love with Archana?* I laughed, "It was a joke. I just wanted to see your reaction." *Tell the truth. Please. I want to know.* She said through her pouted lips. "I only wanted to misguide you." *Please... I know very well that you're lying. Please tell me.* . We had to return to our homes. I knew I had no choice. I had to answer. "I lied because I was afraid. Don't ask why... Don't ask of what." *Of what???* "That's it. Let's go. It's late." *Please... Please...* "Of you." I lied... She laughed.

I decide to leave. I stand up. I know that she is still watching me. Why is she doing that when she is really afraid? There is a sudden cool breeze escaping into the room from the curtained windows. I look at her again, making sure that he is not watching. Our eyes meet and she turns away. I turn towards the painting on the wall. When I told her that I was afraid, I was infact afraid of falling in love. I was not in love with her at that moment under the light outside the shop when I said that I was in love with Archana. Love happened later and as I feared, it came with pain and grief. But I never let her know that. I never told her because I wanted her to believe that I was in love with her when I had lied. She was happy. Yes, I was in love but I was always afraid... Now, I see fear in her eyes, for the first time. What is it she is afraid of?

I walk towards her. She sees me coming and starts talking animatedly to people around. I smile at her. "Bye... take care. I have an urgent work. I am leaving now." "Sure..." she says, "Nice meeting you after such a long gap." I turn and start walking. I see her husband come towards me. He calls after me and I turn around. "Shall we talk?" he says. "You see, Rahul. I have urgent work. Later?" "Only a few minutes. Let's go to the terrace." We reach the terrace. It is wet... The puddles haven't dried up yet. Still, *Stagnant water...*

We slowly walk towards the edge... Rahul starts, "I have learnt from people here that you were her best friend in college. I want to discuss something very personal with you. Please do not let anyone else know. I would not have discussed this with anyone. But this has been really troubling me and I am afraid this is straining my relation with her." He pauses. I look interested. He continues, "A few months ago, I found her reading a letter in secret... She saw me and immediately tore the letter to pieces. I was shocked. I did not know how to react. I asked her numerous times but she never revealed who it was. She always said that it was just something she had found in her books... An old school love letter... I picked up the pieces from the dust bin. It was on some green coloured paper. She had actually torn it to small pieces but I could understand what the letter conveyed... about love... about leaving easily... about questions... about answers... I am sure it is not an old school love letter." He waits for a few seconds, stares ahead at the dark, calm and opaque sea. He continues, considering his words as they came out, "Did she have a boyfriend when in college? Is she by any chance still in touch with him? We haven't been talking properly from that day. I want to put an end to this trouble. If she wants to leave with him, I have no problems. I do not want this torture."

I look at the lone streetlight – alone, deserted. The trees in the garden sway rhythmically to the gentle breeze. The signs of rain have disappeared. I turn towards Rahul and say, "There was this guy I knew. He actually said that he liked her very much. Loved her even, but I always knew that he was a coward, afraid of love. She never liked him. She had told him categorically that she never believed in

love." I paused and continued, "There was never any response from her. This drove the guy crazy. He actually wrote her this final letter telling her of his love."

"Where is he now? I'd like to meet him.", asks Rahul.

I pause for a few seconds and say, "He is dead." I look at my watch. I tell him that I am in a hurry and that the work is indeed urgent.

I climb down the stairs. I wait at the second floor. I look at the door. She is inside, with the others, talking, laughing, probably waiting... For whom??? For me? For him? I do not open the door. I stand outside. I do not hear his steps. I wait... *Today, at this moment, are you leaving me out of fear? Are you afraid? Are you??* I turn around and continue to the ground floor. I walk towards my bike. I move fast, stepping into the puddles. The water splashes onto the edges of my pants. I reach the bike. I stop. I find the rear-view mirror broken and its pieces on the ground, near the tyre. The evening has ended and the night's young. I look into the puddles – they reflect the darkness. I stare at the pieces... *innumerable, uncountable, infinite pieces... of the mirror... of the letter... of my heart.*

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