

# *Troubling Silence...*

*By  
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## I

*An ordinary story...*

*She was Sruthi.... my English teacher*

*And yes, we were in love.*

After years of separation, at a time when I do not know if she is still single or married, alive or dead, the words above come out as a matter of fact, as something that once happened and which is not unusual. Seven years ago, when I was in the staff-room that evening, looking out of the window as she arranged books into the cupboard, while the green eucalyptus leaves moved rhythmically as the droplets of rain fell on them and rolled down their thin, slippery faces, I did not find the sensation of falling in love casual or commonplace. It seemed to me surprisingly sweet and wonderful. The aroma of the occasional but heavy winter rain swept through the room which was rendered dark by the unannounced power-cut and by the dark clouds melting and pouring down to the ground. The splashing of the rain droplets as they battered onto the rippling water puddles was the only sound other than that of the books being arranged in the cupboard which slightly disturbed the silence in the room. I always loved the embarrassing silence of our meetings because though embarrassing they were, they – I believed- made us think more of each other's presence. I wanted the arrangement of books to stop behind me and felt that the lack of action would make her think or at least say something that could break the silence in the room. It had been a few months since we had last spoken to each other following an unfortunate incident for which I was held the culprit. However, I was happy it happened because it made our eyes meet more often; and though they met without much love, the few seconds they held each other brought me immense joy. I had come to the staff-room on the pretext of submitting an assignment and I was sure that the book I had placed on the table as I entered the room, was surely one of those being arranged. The wooden sound behind me stopped and I wanted to turn around to see her. After some thought, I decided against doing that and continued looking out of the window at the countryside getting drenched in the evening rain. It was five-thirty in the evening and it was getting darker. I was certain that she could not leave until it stopped raining.

"I really had nothing to do with that incident" I said with my chin still touching the wet window railing. I could hear a surprised shuffling of feet and the screeching sound of a metallic chair being drawn. Silence prevailed for a few seconds until she asked, "If not you, who'd write that on the pad?" "Why do you think it's me?" I asked. "Because I know your handwriting and because it spoke about you and me", she replied. I had not moved from where I was standing and was all the while looking out of the window. Without turning back, I said, "Would you please come here?" "Why?" she asked. "I want to show you something." After a few seconds I could hear her step slowly towards

me. She stood silently beside the window. I could see without turning in her direction that she was looking straight at me. I placed my hand on the iron railing in the window and slowly brushed aside the thin line of water covering it. "I am not a coward to express my love for someone by stealthily scribbling it in third person on a piece of paper." I added, "I know who wrote it but I cannot reveal it to you." I glanced at the water getting accumulated in the railing that I had just cleaned, and then slowly, hesitantly turned in her direction. She looked younger than me as the feeble light from outside the window fell on her face and I knew, as the rain and her anger started getting weaker, that she knew that I was in love with her. "Just look out... for once." I said. She moved slightly closer to me and as she looked out asked, "What's there?" At that moment, I knew that she had forgiven me for a mistake I had not committed and accepted an apology I had not offered. A few seconds silently slipped on the wheel of time. I finally said, "Do remember this day..."

I moved away from the window and as I walked towards the table near the cupboard, I noticed that my book was still lying on the table unarranged with the others. I reached the table and picked it up but then, after a few seconds' consideration, returned it to its place. There was a suffocating silence in the room which cried out to me to divulge the love that grew heavy with unexpressed emotion. I took a few steps towards the door and turned towards the window. She had not moved. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", I said and walked out of the room.

The world outside the building seemed lighter and less troubling. It had neither the overpowering silence nor her ever-questioning presence, and the rain had almost stopped save a few droplets that still continued to slip out from the shrunken clouds. I started walking out of the college with my bag on the shoulder, and cautiously skipped over the water puddles formed in the muddy path that led to the exit gate. Was she still standing there at the window? If she was, then she was definitely thinking about *us*. A brown puppy on the path, a few metres to my right, jumped into the puddle of water, rolled sideways in a pattern until it got completely wet and then clumsily climbed back out of it. It stared into the muddy water for a few seconds and again jumped to repeat the performance. The world around was slowly getting noisier as the birds came out of their nests chirping, twittering and frogs jumped around on the dirty path croaking. Making sure that I did not step on any of these, I ambled out of the gate onto the neat newly laid road that led to the bus stop more than a kilometer away.

The first time I had spoken to her, I was not even aware of the fact that she was a teacher. She was very young and seemed to me just another student. It had been raining that day. I ran into her at the stairs. I informed her "There's water on the stairs. Be careful! I have just slipped." I did not wait for her to react and just quickly made my way to the classroom to attend to some unfinished work. I heard her "Thank you" as I entered the classroom. I turned around, smiled in acknowledgement and moved inside. My nonchalance was only a façade under which I hid my racing heart. I had to hurry

away from her because at that moment, when I stood dangerously close to her and urged her to be careful, I felt an intimate connection with those deep, blue eyes and those thin lips separated in a puzzled phase in the formation of a complete expression on her beautiful, round face. The blue cotton dress that fluttered defiantly even as she tried to arrest it with those tiny fragile fingers and that dark hair that swayed behind her ears were beginning to set in me a vibration of an entirely new kind.

That occasion was also the first time I had seen her. She had come as a replacement to our then English teacher who had resigned from college as she was getting married and was supposed to move to her fiancée's place after marriage. It was only the next day when she entered the class and introduced herself did I know her. When I introduced myself along with other classmates as we went through the ordeal one after the other, I tried to appear as casual as possible. Even she displayed no signs of recognition. That was how our eyes met for the second time but the knowledge that we had shared an extremely close moment on a rainy evening seemed to me something exceptionally special. Though such a sentiment, that evening as I walked towards the bus-stop alone on the wet tar road, seemed childish in retrospect, I forgave myself because it was the first time I experienced such feelings.

English literature was never a language in which I had much interest, and always held the opinion that English was for artists and that artists were a mediocre species with no technical cells in their brains; but then, the new interest I found ignited in me was probably because of the person who was imparting us knowledge in it. She liked saying, "Poetry is not what results from lines of rhyme or grouped stanzas. It is in fact an assortment of those words you utter when you close your eyes and talk to yourself about your emotions. If you are emotional, then you are a poet whether you try to write these words or lines down and try to arrange them in rhythmic order or not." As I read poetry of various forms and learned about different poets, I began to see the reason behind her unusual opinion and idea. I started reading classics by Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, and began sympathizing with the sensibilities of their innocent and vulnerable male protagonists whose existence hitherto seemed impossible to me. I indulged in these activities because they somehow made me believe that I was slowly and steadily entering her world.

As I allowed this transformation to come upon me, there was a constant intense turmoil inside, questioning the morality of my literary efforts, trying to show me that the inspiration behind my latest interest in English literature was a result of unacceptable feelings for a teacher. There was a movie in Hindi I had watched in my childhood, a movie in which a child in his teens falls for his teacher and considers it to be a sin. He gets frustrated whenever he sees her with her fiancée but is unable to express his feelings for her. The only person who understands him and what he is going through is the person whom she is getting married to. The movie had many touching elements but this was something that, I felt, was most heart-rending. After the movie, I asked my mother the reason behind the child crying in the church. Why did he consider wrong entertaining feelings of love for his teacher? Mother told me that *loving your teacher* is the

most dreadful sin that can ever be committed. She sternly added that it has been written in scriptures that a teacher is an incarnation of God and harboring such feelings for a teacher is unimaginably wicked and sinful. The main reason why she hated the director of the movie was that he could even dare to show such things happening in the world. My mom's view troubled me. I really did not find her explanation convincing. Probably it was written in the scriptures. However, the fact that she could not even bear the mention of such things happening in the world made her annoyed scared me. How would she react if she knew that her own son was on the track that may lead to what she so hated? Giving serious thought to the precarious situation I felt I was in, I stopped staring at my teacher in the classroom or letting our eyes meet whenever we crossed each other's path. I began concentrating more on my technical subjects. I tried my best not to think of that rainy evening when I had first spoken to her, or of those round blue eyes or of that silky dark hair. Days passed by. Two months later, we spoke again.

Another evening... I was returning to the classroom after a laboratory session and she was on her way to the staffroom. I noticed her from a distance and so, with eyes cast down, I headed straight to my classroom just a few metres away. But as we crossed, she called out my name. I stopped and turned towards her. There was a gentle breeze from the west and we were surrounded by young, thin-stemmed trees that rocked gently as the wind whistled through their leaves and fragile stems. The evening sun was peeping at us as it went down in the horizon from behind the thin line of clouds that had neither rain nor weight. I looked straight into those arresting eyes and with a smile of greeting, with a slight flutter of eyelids, in silence, asked her the reason for breaking a routine that we had been following from the day we had met. I realized that the last few months, in trying not to think about her or look at her, I was all the while conscious of her presence whenever she was there and was always swaying in the cadence of her engaging voice whenever she delivered the lectures. *What was happening to me?*

"You were absent yesterday. You missed my class on La Belle Dame Sans Merci, the most important poem in the curriculum. If you come to the staff-room in the evening tomorrow, I shall explain it to you." She had said that not looking at from me but at the plants flanking the path. I was delighted that she had noticed my absence but was not completely oblivious to the possibility of her offering this help to every absentee. I badly wanted to accept her offer and spend an evening in her presence in her staffroom and listen to her lecture on poetry, but something made me wait and think. I took a few seconds before answering with a smile and with an effort to not sound rude in turning down her offer, "I am extremely grateful to you. But I want to see if I can understand the poem without help. I shall try to make sense out of it on my own." And I added, "Thank you very much." She nodded and added as she left, "Do let me know if you need help with it."

As I had earlier stated, I had given up reading English Literature and for the last two months, had not read anything related to it, and so, it became slightly difficult for me to *get into the groove*. But then, the poem really held my interest and after finishing it, I read it a few more times. It was La Belle Dame Sans Merci by John Keats. The poem seems

easy to understand as a passerby asks a knight roaming on the *cold hill side* the reason behind his solitary loiter. The Knight's answer seemed simple. I prepared my own notes on the poem, the flow of idea in it and the confusing contradictions in certain stanzas. The next evening, I reached her staff-room to have a discussion with her on the poem. The poem, to me, seemed a ticket for our relationship.

It was four-thirty in the evening and I stood outside her staff-room trying to while away time before entering the room. I wore my favourite dress and had my notes on the poem in one hand and my bag on the other shoulder. The door was closed but not bolted; I waited for a few more seconds and then knocked on it. The voice from inside responded in a casual manner, "Yes... Come in." As I opened the door and admitted myself in, I noticed that she wore the same blue dress of our first meeting. I closed the door gently behind me and smiled as I looked at her.

"Are you busy?" I asked as I moved towards her.

"No... not at all." She added, "I was expecting you."

The staff-room was too big for two people (the other madam was absent) and the side of the room near the window was empty. I walked towards the window and remarked that the room was beautiful. The window opened onto the vast green countryside.

"Did you read the poem?" she asked.

"Yes." I replied hesitantly, "But there is a lot I do not understand." Assuming a sense of security which often resulted during the course of the next few months in my brushing the set limits of a teacher student relationship, I added, "By the way, what do you think of the poem?"

"First I want to know what you think about it."

"Confusing... Puzzling.". Slowly moving towards her table, I asked her if I could sit. She apologized for making me ask and then said, "So, you have doubts, don't you?"

I paused for a few seconds as I watched the pen she was spinning in her hand for some time and then her beautiful eyes. The fan on the ceiling made a whirring sound and the paper on the table occasionally flapped on the sides of the weight placed on it.

I continued, "The lady in the poem seems an evil spirit whose objective is to destroy those who get attracted to her... But then why does she cry (*'And there she gaz'd and sighed deep, And there I shut her wild sad eyes'*) when she takes the Knight to her elfin grot? Even here, the poet uses elfin grot which means a cave of an elf which is a mysterious, mischievous tiny magical spirit." The pen still spun in her hand. "In the fourth stanza, he says that her eyes are wild and this too has many meanings – agitated, unrealistic, angry or mad look. So, what does the poet want to convey?" I paused briefly and then continued, "I feel that he wants to say that she is agitated and worried. But if she's really sad, why does she do what she does? The Knight has a dream and in it he finds men who warn him of this lady with no mercy... But of what value is that warning when he can do absolutely nothing about it? He wakes up from his dream and finds himself on the hillside – the same hillside he sees in the dream. So, this must mean that the men he found in his dream were her victims and now, he's one of them too... But where are they, why is he alone on the cold hillside? Are they dead? (*Pale warriors, death-pale were they all*) If they are, then is he also resigned to death?"

I stopped there as I felt I was going too fast.

She smiled as I stopped. There was a tinkle in her eyes as she placed her hands on the table, bending forward on the table towards me. She said, "Nice... I see you've given some thought to the poem after reading it. Your analysis is interesting. First the answer to the simple question...The Knight is not resigned to his death but in the poem, the poet does not offer a concrete reason for his roaming in the hillside. I believe he is searching for her in the woods and wants to see her again. Otherwise, there is no reason for him to be there. Eventually, he may die like her other victims." She paused and then continued, "The other question is tougher to answer... Why does she cry when her ultimate aim is to destroy him? Well, it is possible that her ultimate aim is not to destroy him. This is something that you have not considered. It is possible that she is helpless. She loves the Knight but at the same time she knows that he'd be destroyed like the other victims. She is probably sad that she cannot save him. She is aggrieved by the finality of the situation that even this Knight would be one of her many victims. And yes, the men he saw in his dream are her victims."

"What about the warning? Isn't it of no use?"

"Yes. I agree with you. There is no way he can heed to the warning."

"But there is something really sad about the poem, isn't there? The Knight knows that he is going to die searching for her. But he continues searching because he is hopeful of finding her. The lady knows that warriors like the Knight whom she takes to her grot would fall for her and end up like the Knight wasting their lives but she still does it because she cannot help it. Another thing..." I stood up from my chair and sat in the chair just beside her and placed my elbows on the table. I continued, "You see... The title of the poem is *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Does it not mean The Lady without pity or mercy? The poem is always in the view of the poet and according to him the lady is without pity. If it is so, then she's not crying for the Knight or for her victims and also, there cannot be a sense of helplessness in her. So, the question 'why is she sad?' is unanswered. The only valid conclusion I can make out of it is that *she is evil and the sadness and the deep sighs are but her pretences*."

I suddenly realized that as I was speaking, I had moved very close to her and she was looking at me straight into my face. There was something in the way she looked at me – some sort of emotion unexpressed, being suppressed. "There is something that I did not understand in the poem" I said moving back into the chair and slightly away from her, "In the seventh stanza, the Knight says that she told him in a strange language that she truly loved him. (*And sure in language strange she said, I love thee true.*) How did he understand her language when it was strange to him? Was this guy completely deluded? Had he been all the while convincing himself that she loved him?"

She smiled apologetically and said, "I am afraid I can't answer. I had not thought about that."

There was a strange silence as she finished talking. It was true that until a few seconds ago, the room was vibrating with my analysis of the poem but now an overpowering silence had taken over. Few more seconds passed. We were just silently looking at each other when it suddenly dawned on me that there was something which was always

there and I could better understand by asking her. I turned my eyes to her tiny fingers which were no longer spinning the pen but were holding on to them as tightly as ever. "Did you ever fall in love?" I asked not raising my head. Terrible silence... I felt suddenly that I had crossed an indiscernible line. "Why do you ask such a question?" she asked. I did not know then what I actually expected from her with that question but I wanted to make her uncomfortable. I wanted to make her talk; the silence in the room was unbearable. But what answer would I give to her question. *Why did I ask her such a question?* I did not notice that considerable time had passed since I had entered her room. The room had become significantly darker. I stood up and walked towards the switch board and looked at her. "Third from the left" she said. I switched on the light and walked towards the chairs in front of her and then stopped unable to make a choice 'where was I supposed to sit? In the chair close to her or the one far opposite to her, at the other side of the table.' I chose none of them and stood at the chair close to her, and rested my arms on it. I decided not to answer her question as I felt that answering would not be as effective as silently refusing to provide one. "Time for me to leave. Please do think about my questions. I somehow feel that if she is indeed a La Belle Dame Sans Merci, then she's not helpless... .."

"I think she is helpless" she responded even before I could finish my sentence. Her eyes fixed on me, peering straight into mine. The same look she had given me when I had spoken to her that evening for the first time at the stairs. A few seconds passed as I realized the possibility of her thinking about me from that evening. Whatever happened to me when I spoke to her would probably have happened to her too as I held her deep blue eyes that evening. "If she is helpless and if she knows that she is helpless, then why does she take these victims and shower such kindnesses on them?" I asked.

"Because even falling in love with them may not have been in her control." She replied without batting an eyelid.

I realized, at that moment, that I was in love and there was no turning back. My heart was beating extremely fast and my body was shivering with a strange awareness. I went to the table and slowly pushed the notes on the table into the bag. "May I take some water?" I asked. "Yes... yes..." she said as I helped myself with the bottle on the table. She stood up and walking towards the cupboard said, "Good analysis. I am happy that you've read the poem. I am sorry for being unable to answer all your questions. They are somewhat new to me and you know that I am new to the profession." She smiled as she finished the last sentence. I smiled too because I was happy that she regained her composure as the situation was getting increasingly difficult and uncomfortable. I remained silent. I was in love. She continued to smile. I took her leave and walked towards the door. Just before leaving, I felt like saying something. I stood there for some time wanting to utter something that could make her think about me. The words just came out of my mouth. "By the way, this is the same dress you wore that evening when we spoke for the first time. I still vividly remember that evening. It changed something in me."

After returning to home, I kept thinking about her and the discussion we had on the poem and tried to understand the reason behind my approaching her with the questions. I did not expect her to provide answers to them. I told myself that I wanted to know her opinion on the poem or whose side she took while answering the questions. The simple and obvious reason was that I wanted to see her and avail myself of the opportunity of being able to spend sometime with her. Our arms had been at touching distance on the table as I spoke to her on the wickedness of the lady who victimized vulnerable warriors who adored her and who fell for her deceptive charms. I was talking not to her but to her eyes as my eyes were but fixed on hers. However, there was once question that still remained. Why did I start to leave the room when I realized and felt assured that I was in love with her? Was it fear?

It was fear; I was afraid of what I was doing – *falling for a teacher*. The sort of commotion I felt inside me as I spoke to her, or as I moved in her presence was something I had not experienced before and it was true that I had never loved anyone's presence more. However, I wondered what turn things would take when I revealed to her that I loved her? I was sure that she was thinking too and this brought me delight but of what good was it if it were to result in only pain and agony. Or was she actually angry with me for behaving with her in this manner? I realized that I had not called her "ma'm" and she would have surely felt wronged as it may have seemed to her that I were not treating her as a teacher because when I had first spoken to her, when I had searched deep into those blue eyes, when I had swayed in the rhythms of her dress as its ends waved in the cool rainy breeze and when I had plummeted into something that would later turn into love for her, I was not aware of the fact that she was my teacher.

But then, I allowed these contradicting emotions to slowly subside by feeding them thoughts of her. I thought about her all the time. Every evening, I waited for her at her bike and as she reached it, I smiled at her in greeting. She smiled in return. We had weekly discussions on poetry and various authors. Her favourite literary figure was Lord Byron, she had said on more than one occasion, because, according to her, there was a sort of simplicity in whatever he wrote. Mine was John Keats. In the classroom, I would be watching her from my seat and she would divert her eyes away as soon as they met mine and every time they met, they invariably increased the warmth in my heart. Whenever I asked a doubt in class, there was always a visible change in her expressions. The classmates, after the class, usually friendly teased me with her references. I was in love and never revealed it to her through words but tried to let her know by my affectionate actions. Everything seemed going well until one afternoon she showed me her notebook with something written on it.

It was three months after that discussion on La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Her behaviour in the classroom that day was very odd and disturbing. She deliberately held her eyes away from me and was extremely serious, even when she explained a hilarious segment in one of the stories of our textbook. After the lecture, she signaled to me to come out of the class and then showed me what was written on her notebook. Someone had found it necessary to inform her that I was in love with her. The words on the page said that I

loved her. I was utterly distressed. I tried to explain that it was not my doing. She did not care to listen. She just left me on the corridor and walked away even as I spoke.

That rainy evening, as I returned from the college, after talking to her at the window in the staffroom, walking slowly in the darkness of the moonless sky on the path that led to the bus-stop, I felt repeatedly that she was in love with me too. I was in fact, a little angry with her for not compromising on an issue that threatened to break our association forever. I felt as if I could hear her heart beat when she stood beside me in the window watching the rainy countryside. The very awakening of the memory of her form beside me brought certain sweetness to my feelings and I wanted to run back to the staff-room and find her still standing there in the window. So sweet was the sensation of being in love! But it seemed sadly one-sided. The Knight in the poem was lucky. At least he was sure that she was in love with him.

But... Why was he roaming in the woods after she left him? *Was he still searching for her, waiting to find her?* I was considering these questions when I heard in a distance behind me, the slow hum of her bike. I knew it was hers. The bike steadily moved past me and gradually disappeared along with its rhythmic hum. I continued walking slowly with the picture of the rainy countryside, as I saw it from her window, in front of my eyes.

## II

It was around eight in the night when I reached home after I left college that evening. I took my time, walking slowly, humming songs of love and thinking about her. The traffic jam because of the heavy downpour in the evening did not help matters either. So, it took me around two hours to reach home and all the while the question that I was pondering on and trying to find an answer for was ‘*When did I fall in love with Sruthi?*’ After taking bath, I lay on my stomach on the bed under the ceiling fan and allowed myself to think about her and my first meeting with her. Was it then, in the ignorance of the fact that she was my teacher, as I searched into those deep eyes, did I fall in love with her? The very memory of that evening made me feel a certain joy in the inside and a certain emotion that flowed from inside my stomach spreading warmth across every part of the body it touched as it reached upwards towards my mouth and transformed into a smile. The sensation of being in love was so sweet and I felt in me a desire to talk to her and find out what she was doing. I was not fortunate enough to possess magical powers to transfer myself to her home and find her like me sleeping on her stomach and thinking about the rainy evening that had just passed with us both struggling to suppress emotions. The room was cold but I did not want to get up to switch off the fan and so, I picked the blanket on the other side of the bed, spread it over and cloaked it tightly around me enjoying the warmth emanating from inside and that presented by the thick blanket.

There were myriad questions storming my mind. When did I fall in love with Sruthi? If it was when I had seen her for the first time on that evening at the stairs, then what is it that happened to me in the evening as I stood beside her at the window? Was it possible that I fell in love with her at that instant at the window? If it was, then what was it that I felt for her until that moment? Was *that* not love? Even more puzzling was the realization that there was no way I could be sure that even then, at that moment, what I felt for her was love? So, the sad truth was that I did not know what love was. But then, there was something between us, something happening in that room which, I felt, was beyond our powers to control. I believed it was love. As she stood beside me, I had felt an urge to take her hand into mine and say something that would drive her anger or whatever that had prevented her from talking to me for the past few months. I had said something, of course, but there was a lot more that was left untold. As I continued to think about it, the more certain I felt that I had hurt her in my effort to stimulate feelings in her. She was kind enough to come and stand beside me when I asked her to and instead of showing gratitude I had behaved as if I was blaming her for whatever that went wrong. And then I suddenly remembered that I had called her a *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* on my way out of the room. Ah! *Such a stupid act...* I found myself smiling. Sruthi always said “*such a stupid*” – this was an adjective she would invariably attach to anything that she did not find acceptable. She would laugh correcting my analysis of any poem prefixing “*such a stupid*” like *such a stupid analysis* to *such a stupid poem*. I always laughed whenever she used that and I felt it brought her a lot closer to me.

But here, I was indeed stupid to have behaved in that manner. I wanted to go to her and apologize but I could not do it that night because I had no means of reaching her. The only way was to speak to her when I would meet her at college. But then, I realized that talking to her would not be possible for the next two days because they were Saturday and Sunday. I decided to talk to her on Monday and apologize for my behaviour.

But it did not happen as planned...

After taking the ticket from the conductor, I continued staring out of the window that winter afternoon as I set for Sriharipuram to find out the reason why she had not come to the college for the past one week. There was no way I could wait any longer because the winter holidays had already started. If I were to wait, then I'd have waited for an entire month. But a month without the knowledge of her whereabouts would have become utterly unbearable. The bus had started just a few minutes ago and I was one of the very few who found it necessary to travel on a holiday in that direction and whose number was almost nothing when compared to its value on a working day when I would be one of those standing in the aisle sandwiched between others. It was a winter morning and the sky was overcast but the humidity in the air was very high and my shirt was already half-wet with sweat. There was a vast stretch of greenery on either side of the road and it extended to the foot of the hills a few kilometers away but distinctly outlined against the grayish white sky. As I rested my head on the window pane and stared sideways at the world outside, everything seemed to move fast in the opposite direction. *Everything moved extremely fast.*

I had been badly missing Sruthi since the day we last spoke to each other. As days passed one after the other, I felt that my longing for her kept increasing and made me want to find her everywhere I went. Just two days before that journey by bus, I felt I had seen her somewhere near my home in the evening when I had gone out for a plate of *paani-poori*. A lady, of average height and build, was entering a beauty parlour and the dress she wore seemed like one of *hers*, and I would have made a complete fool of myself had I not realized, just seconds before uttering something, that I was mistaken. The lady entered the parlour taking no notice of me, leaving me stunned on the elevation just outside the entrance. I waited for a few seconds trying to appear less foolish and then walked away wondering what was it that was coming on me. When I reached the wheel-cart where *paani-poori* was served, I found that it was already full with customers and realized that I would have to wait for at least ten minutes before my turn. The happening a few minutes ago at the parlour had ruined my temper and making sure that I made no impolite or uncivilized gestures, I walked away from the cart and towards the empty bus-stop that stood at the end of the lane just before it opened onto the main road.

The bus-stop was just a raised platform on the footpath with some steel chairs and iron railings at the sides, and I sat on one of the chairs beside an elderly gentleman engrossed

in his daily-newspaper. As I stared at the clustered trees on the other side of the road, the image of the lady at the parlour moved about in front of my eyes, and I could not help telling myself that I had just been saved from falling into the most embarrassing situation of greeting or talking to that lady. But it was undeniable that she was strikingly similar to Sruthi. *Sruthi* - this name I had been uttering to myself whenever I sat alone involved in isolated reflections in my room. I did not know the reason why I kept saying that name. It seemed very weird and strange to me. Nevertheless, it was something that kept me occupied during my solitary examination of the events that had happened between us. Her favourite phrase "*such a stupid*" kept ringing in my mind and it had again succeeded in bringing a smile on my face... such a stupid lady she was, Sruthi, my teacher who stopped talking to me because of a few lines on a piece of paper...

I did not know why she had not come to college after that incident that rainy evening in her staff-room, and I had no way of finding that out. The gentleman sitting beside me on the bench turned towards me and asked what time it was. "*Six-fifteen*". The dull light of the setting sun was just enough for me to watch the man's eyes as they peered out from behind his thick spectacles and the dull gleam on the metallic chairs slightly rusted at the ends which the person responsible for cleaning them had left untouched. It was my routine to sit at the bus-stop whenever I felt dull or bored, and watching the vehicles as they carelessly sped past brought a fine relaxation to the mind, but Sruthi's absence was bothering me at that moment. I stood up from the chair and started walking, hoping that an action of some sort would lessen the burden of being unable to find the reason for her absence.

I was very hungry and as I turned around, I noticed that the *paani-poori* vendor was now relatively free of customers. By the time I reached him, a few had already started ordering and so, I waited for my turn by the side of the wheel-cart. The place had become darker and the street lights were still not switched on. Helping himself; the vendor switched on his double-tube battery-run bulb. This immediately brought Sruthi to my mind. It was just an insignificant incident that occurred a few months ago when we were on *talking terms*. She had once asked me to fetch her pen from her handbag as we stood at the table discussing the solution to a small riddle (we also solved riddles when we found time). When I opened her handbag, I found along with many other things, a double-tube torch, which, she said later, her mother always forced her to carry. The torch was a funny metallic piece with tapering edges and her name sketched in black on it. When she saw that I was examining it, she hurried towards me, pulled it from my hand and throwing it inside the bag, with a shy smile remarked, "*Such a stupid torch.. And you don't examine things in my bag.*" Ah... There was such tenderness and affection in her admonishing smile that the memory of this incident suddenly seemed to make the burden even heavier and I quietly walked away from the vendor. On the way back home, I made a decision to go to her home, talk to her and apologize for my behaviour; I badly wanted those beautiful days back but then I realized that after the discussion we had, things would not become normal again. There was something that had changed forever during that half-an-hour in the staff-room.

I had obtained her address from the clerk in the administration block after a long struggle requesting, pleading and finally deceiving him into believing that it was extremely important for me in for the completion of an internal assignment. The bus was going pretty fast and I observed that I would be able to reach my destination, which was around thirty-five kilometers from the city, in another twenty-five minutes. As I thought about it, I felt awfully doubtful about being able to meet her and talk to her because it seemed to me possible that she would have gone to her grandmother's place in Chandigarh. I wished she was at her home, waiting for me, wanting me to come and explain to her everything that I was going through and that after listening to every thing, she'd hug me and tell me that she loved me too. But I was not even sure that whatever I was feeling for her was in fact love.

There was something else I was unable to understand... I was unable to understand the reason behind her annoyance on learning from the lines written on her notepad that I was in love with her. I had, from the very first day of our meeting, always given her reasons to believe that what was going on between us was something much more than casual talk or just literary discussions. I had directly told her that I felt very happy whenever I met her and that the time spent with her was the happiest of the day and that I felt immense pain at having to leave her for the day but always longed for the next day meeting with her. She had, on more than one occasion, remarked that our little meetings sometimes made her forget that we were just a teacher and student. She would sometimes hit me on the shoulder whenever I made a silly remark, or attempted at making a foolish analysis of some text. An incident that occurred on one such meeting came to my mind as I thought about these happenings between us. It was an afternoon and we were talking about a poem on love and I had asked her again "Did you ever fall in love?" "Why do you want to know? This is the second time you've asked the question." "I just want to know. It's something I've been thinking about for many days." I had said. She had waited for a few seconds and her child-like face had turned red as she blushed deeply. She then asked, "Let us not talk about that. It makes me uncomfortable." I had thought about that for a few seconds as she was waiting for my reaction and then had replied, "Ok... we'll not. But I was just wondering about how you write poems on your own without ever falling in love. Your understanding of the poem is definitely good. So, I felt you must have fallen in love before." She took some time before answering, "I don't know why I am telling you this, but the fact is that there was a guy I liked when I was in school, in my twelfth. I did not know if it was love. It was probably attraction but I never told him about it and I did not see him after school... That's it... There it is." She had waited and then had continued, "One thing you must know is that you do not need to experience everything to be able to understand an emotion. You must be imaginative enough." It was nice to have got an answer from her because I would have been hurt had she not answered my question. But then the answer she had given me also made me appreciate the improvement our relationship had made from the first discussion we had that day when we analyzed La Belle Dame Sans Merci. She had finally answered my question.

But it must have been clear to her that I was much interested in learning her personal life; and so, it really surprised me when she reacted the way she did when she saw those writings in her notepad. Why did she get angry at something that just directly stated whatever I had been trying to convey to her indirectly through my every action. I had on one occasion given her a greeting card on a particular event and in the signature said, "With lots of love, only yours" followed by my name. If I had believed that she was just a teacher to me, I would never have done such a thing and it, I felt, was enough for conveying this to her. And moreover, after showing me her notepad, she had not even waited for my explanation. I was sure that at that moment, I would have given her a more understandable picture of my feelings for her. But she had just walked away... *Was she afraid that she would have to frankly face something she had been all the while escaping from?* I was going to find my answer...

I got down from the bus when the driver announced that we had reached Sriharipuram. The sky was still pleasantly overcast but the humidity in the air was actually becoming unbearable. It was an uninvited addition to the frustration that resulted from imagining the ordeal ahead of trying to find her home. I had the address in hand but still was really not sure if I would be able to reach her and actually find her at her home. Her father's name was Balakrishna and he was the local school headmaster. I asked people around and was patiently guided by them with the directions; and I finally reached the colony where I was told that the grayish blue gated house was the one I had to call on. It was probably because of the humidity that I was extremely thirsty and I found myself constantly wetting my lips and palette with my tongue. The sight of the wide lane with huge, old trees lining the road and bending on to them providing them with a cool shade seemed very welcome and refreshing. I walked very slowly not to miss the grayish blue gate. As I moved along, I found a small park on the left side of the road where some children were playing on *the swing* and *the see-saw*. And some others were sitting on the light-yellow painted cement wall surrounding the park and eating colourful candies. In the centre of the park, I could see a fountain with the pool filled with water but which perhaps had stopped working. Some children were bending into it dropping some plastic toys and helping them swim through the waters. I slowly moved ahead and as I strained my eyes straight, I could see in a distance at almost the end of the lane, a grayish blue gate. I did not increase my pace and continued to walk as slowly as possible trying my best to control my racing heart-beat. My already parched throat began to get further dry and I was growing tensed. How would I introduce myself to her parents if she was not there at her home? I continued slowly and steadily towards the gate and on reaching it, as I placed my hands to open the gate, I noticed Sruthi on the steps at the main entrance looking straight ahead and our eyes met, held on to each other until I looked down at the gate searching for the bolt to open it. She wore a cream-coloured night dress, and she looked, as always, beautiful and much younger than me. The house had a green garden that stretched from the entrance to the metallic gate and was bordered by a tall brown brick wall. A cement path from the gate led to the door and was just wide enough for three people to walk side by side. The house was a dusty

brown structure and the wooden door behind her, painted chocolate-brown, played a perfect contrast to her as she sat staring at me. Her expression was a mixture of surprise and an anger which I foolishly thought she was trying her best to conjure up to hide her surprised elation. I was not sure why I always believed that she shared my feelings too and that even her heart was heavy with a sense of longing and a desire to see me. I walked towards her on the cement path and dropped down beside her on the steps. Turning not in my direction, she asked, "Why did you come here?"

There was something in her voice and it was not what I was prepared for. The cement path which I had just used to reach her was lined on either side by jasmine flower-pots and was bordered by coloured symmetrically arranged bricks. On noticing the plastic water-tube beside the steps, I realized that she had just finished watering the plants, and the wet patch at an end of it seemed to testify to it. I did not know what to say because whatever I wanted to say, at that moment, did not seem to me would fall on ears ready to listen. There was certain harshness in her voice as she asked me her question "*Why did you come here?*"

"I wanted to see how you were. You didn't come to the college for many days."

"Why should you care?" she asked with a look of irritation. Waving her hands in a helpless fashion, she continued, "I mean.. I really don't understand. It is sort of annoying why you behave in this manner."

I was shocked. She continued, "Please leave immediately. Do not disturb me in this manner. I have had enough. And do not forget that I am your teacher."

The world around was getting significantly darker and the woman in the opposite building came out to take the clothes which she had probably hung from the plastic strings for drying after washing them. She just looked at us casually and went inside after finishing her work. It was just eleven-thirty in the morning but the sky turned as dark as it would just after dusk. Sruthi had turned her irritated eyes away from me and was now looking down at the water tube beside her. I slowly got up from beside her and cursed myself for not asking her permission before sitting down... she was my teacher, after all. I tried my best to not betray any emotion and was afraid that my choking voice would break as I uttered something. It was very important for me to stay under control. I expected myself to be very angry with her. But, I surprisingly felt like the Knight in the poem. At that moment, I was not angry with her. Was this her mistake in any way?... no it wasn't. It was mine... entirely mine. *It is sort of annoying why you behave in this manner.*

"Ma'm. I am sorry. It has never been my idea to annoy or disturb you." She was not looking at me. I continued after a brief pause, "I promise never to disturb you... again." I walked slowly out of the gate, bolted it behind me and did not turn back as I moved on the deserted road, and as the full drops of rain struck me on the head and shoulder and in seconds rolled down my face, arms and ended up as streams dropping from the edges of my eyes, nose and fingers.

The water seemed unbearably cold but I continued walking slowly trying to punish myself for setting out for her without considering the obvious possibility that probably she was not in love with me and that she did not want to see me. How crazy I was in

imagining her thinking about me, and longing to meet me! The drainage by the side of the road overflowed with water and as it was blocked at one end, all the dirty waters flowed on to the road, where I was walking, and washed my feet with their dirt and filth. The park, in which a few minutes ago, children were merrily playing now seemed like an empty, abandoned space. It appeared a lot like my heart which until a little time ago, until she broke it with her heartless words, was full of love and yearning to sit beside her, talk to her and take her hands into mine, but which was now void of feelings of joy and happiness. All that was there was just repentance – not for falling in love but for expecting it in return. In the park, by the side of the fountain, was a dog that lay looking helplessly into the waters. Dripping wet in the rain, I jumped over the wall and stumbled onto the green uneven land in the park. The land was slippery and I fell down as I tried to get up. My pant got dirty and turned into brownish red colour – the colour of the clay under the grass. I toddled towards the dog and sat beside it looking into the waters of the pool which took the greenish colour of the marshy floor covered with green algae.

I had finally got my answer – the Knight was not searching for *her*, but was waiting for his imminent death disappointed, dejected, defeated.

### III

It has been more than seven years since this happened but I still distinctly remember the pain I endured in the days that followed.

I was unable to understand how I had foolishly concluded that she was in love with me and had gone uninvited to her home to meet her and to let her know of my feelings. But was I really at fault? Was it not love in her eyes that fated evening when I had felt for the first time that I was madly in love with her? With no regard to my feelings, she had said that she did not want me to disturb her anymore, and that my behaviour to her was annoying. With the level of maturity that my age granted me at that point in my life, that was the only direction in which I could consider things. But, for the first time in my life and after falling for the first time in love, I was trying to understand what love actually was. When I cursed myself for going to her home, expecting her to receive me with love, was I still in love with her? People have, for many generations, tried to understand this feeling of love but have never been able to provide appropriate or adequate descriptions of the emotions it causes. They are not to be blamed for their inability to ably describe it... And I know why.

I realized in those few days after the insult at her home that love is not necessarily care and affection but also something that seemed close to anger. I was exasperatingly angry with her for having no warm regard to my emotions or feelings and for carelessly throwing away all the love and affection I was offering her. But I foolishly expected her to walk through the gate of my house and find out how I was. She did not have my address but she could get it if she wanted to, or try to call me at my home and find out if I was strong enough to endure the pain she had so carelessly caused. To tell the truth, I had expected this love to drain away from me and hatred to take its place. On the contrary, day after day in the loneliness that this unrequited love blessed me with, I found my emotional attachment with her growing stronger. I could not help it and I constantly saw her beautiful face, and imagined sleeping with my head in her lap, with her hands warmly caressing my forehead.

Love is this perfect assortment of all sorts of emotions, and it is true that anger which I have described earlier is one of them. My every day during those unendurable winter holidays started with the memory of that afternoon at her home when she had asked me to remember that she was my teacher. After bath, as I relaxed in an easy-chair allowing the air from the ceiling fan to cool my body, I thought about that beautiful rainy evening of the dawn of the first emotions of love on me. And then, any reference to love in any TV show or in any movie or in any topical discussion caused my mind to run at tremendous speed to reach those memories of lively lovely discussions I had with her on the emotions driving poets towards their scribbling – but scribbling, it was not; it was art. But whenever the memory of that humiliation awoke in my mind, I always felt an immeasurable hatred towards myself and towards the object of my affections, followed by an honest admission that it was my mistake to go to her home that afternoon. What to do! *I was still madly in love with her. Such a stupid joke!*

A month passed and the college re-opened. I did not want to face her but it was something I could not help because there was a minimum percentage of attendance to be maintained in every subject. I attended her classes but made sure that our eyes never, not even on one occasion, met. I did not know what she must have felt when she daily found me bent into my books in her class as she delivered her lectures or conducted discussions. But did she really care? I was just trying my best not to annoy her or disturb her by my behaviour.

I had entirely given up my literary activities and had gone back to concentrating on my technical subjects, but in doing all this and in trying to completely avoid her, I was but thinking much about her. I was no longer calling out her name to myself but I was trying to relive those evenings, or imagining her feeling for me or smiling to myself remembering her affectionate way of calling me *such a stupid*. But where had all this affection gone when she had heartlessly sent me back on that rainy day? I did not know the answer. I was not ready to accept that she did not care for me, or that the beautiful girl I was in love with was so unfeeling and cold. These feelings made me sad in the evenings, after college when every day without talking to her seemed to question and torment me for the emotions of love I had nurtured (in me) for her. Every evening, after college, after making sure that she had left, I followed a new routine of walking by the lane beside the college where she returned to her home on her bike. This would be for an hour and during this time I spent recollecting all the lovely times I had shared with her, and the stories narrated to her. The lane joined the main road after half a kilometer and it was only wide enough for three two-wheelers moving side by side. After having stopped talking to her, this was the time I considered to be the best hour of my day. It gave me the time and the privacy I always needed for my stirring thoughts – they always filled my heart with a sense of joy at having fallen in love with such a beautiful and charming lady, but they invariably ended with the sad realization of being humiliated at her home. There was no running away from it.

One such evening, after around two months, we spoke to each other again.

The lane, on one side of it, had a lake where *dhobis* sat in the evening chatting and washing clothes; they were the only ones that usually gave me company at that hour in the evening; occasionally, a bike would speed past me but that was the only company I had. That evening too, as I walked slowly by the side of the lake on the lane, I was thinking about Sruthi and badly wanted to see her. I was avoiding her so much and was afraid of meeting her eyes that I completely stopped crossing her path. I had never seen her from the day we last spoke; even in class, all I would do was just listen to her voice, paying no heed to the lectures she was delivering. Though I was escaping her, I was all the while desperate to talk to her and would have done anything to have an affectionate chat with her. As I was walking with my mind filled with her thoughts, I was dragged into the world by a jolt caused by the sound of a bike stopping behind me. I turned around to find Sruthi on her bike looking straight at me. It was not very dark and I could see her blue eyes shine as she saw me. I apologized – I did not know why – and

tried to get away. She called out my name and I stopped. It was wonderful to hear my name from her after such a long time.

I shall stop here to describe what went through my mind when she stopped me in the lane that evening, after two long loveless months. What I felt at that moment was a mixture of feelings, emotions, the constituent sentiments of which are mutually contradicting and seem exclusive. As soon as I saw her, I felt an urge to run away. I did not want to hear another reproaching word from her but then I realized that, at least in the past few months, I had done or said nothing that could inspire such a response from her. And so, I stopped. After I turned around and saw her, I felt a glimmer of hope rise in me and badly wanted her to say something that could make things normal between us. There were women and children at the lake a few meters from us washing clothes and laughing at a joke that had just been cracked by one of them, probably at me and my stupid optimism that everything would get back to the confused but sweet happiness that was our relationship.

She said, not looking at me, "You haven't submitted your last two assignments inspite of multiple reminders."

The way she delivered that one line crushed all those hopeful feelings in me, and in the silence that followed, I realized that I was expecting her to feel sorry for what had happened and to apologize; and if she was unable to bring herself to say sorry, to atleast utter few words of love. But this impassive utterance resulted in a sudden surge of anger in me from inside and I badly wanted to remain unresponsive and silent. And this was something I could not do. I wanted to still let her know that I was in love with her and also to awaken feelings of love in her.

"Ma'm. I am not interested in English literature. I really don't want to spend time towards it. I am really sorry."

She lifted her head and our eyes met for the first time after a long gap.

"But if you do not submit your assignments, I'll be unable to award you marks for the *internal*."

The final exam had a component of marks for Internal Assessment and the assignments we submitted constituted a big part of it.

"Ma'm. Please give me the marks I deserve. If I do not submit assignments, then do not give me marks for them. You know better than me." Saying this, I started to leave.

"Don't do this. These marks will help you." She said behind me in a voice that seemed to plead.

I stopped. I did not think. I did not want to think because I was afraid of revealing my feelings.

She continued to look at me. Even the women had stopped washing the clothes and observing us with keen eyes. But they were too far to listen to our discussion. There was always something in the silence that surrounded us – it was deafening, it was questioning, it was frustrating.

I slowly walked towards her. I found some sort of emotion in her voice, something that was absent that day at her home.

When I reached her, I stopped and looked straight into her eyes said with suppressed emotion and in a low voice said, "Ma'm... The truth is that I don't want to think about English literature again, not about my favourite poet John Keats who loved a woman elder to him. You please do not worry about me. Just think that I am an arrogant student who has no interest in the subject but who stupidly believes that he's in love with his teacher and is foolish enough to think about her all the time and believe that she's in love with him too."

She did not move. The women were still looking at us but I was sure that they were unable to understand what was happening. I turned around and as I began to step away from her, I said, "I am sorry ma'm. I am not a good student and I do not deserve your care. I'll pass the exam and I don't want anything else in your subject. *And, I very much remember that you are my teacher.*"

The twilight was slowly fading away and darkness was enveloping the world. I walked slowly away from her, on my way in the same lane that I had been walking on pointlessly for the past few months just thinking about her, and now trying to hear the sound of her engine and expecting her to pass in that direction, but at the same time hoping that she stayed at the same place a few moments thinking about whatever that had happened between us from the evening I spoke to her for the first time... that rainy evening...

As soon as I heard what I had heard, I turned to my left to find a pair of blue eyes staring at me intently waiting for my reaction. I turned back towards the dead view of the city from the glass window and continued looking out. I felt like crying out loud. I just took a glass of water and emptied it in my parched mouth, unable to do anything else.

After that evening in the lane, nothing changed and though I had not expected anything to change after that, I had in fact loosened my stance and allowed myself to observe her. Occasionally, without any conscious attempt our eyes would meet and instantly turn away. I knew that she had seriously thought about me after that evening. Days passed with nothing happening at all and I was thinking about talking to her again unable to hold myself when suddenly someone announced in class that Sruthi had met with an accident. The person later added that she was out of danger but had her leg fractured. She would be in hospital for another two days because she was very weak. Everybody had decided to go and see her that day. But I did not join them. I had made up my mind to go to her the following day which was a Saturday and a holiday, and I had believed that at least I would have time to spend with her with lesser people around when I would meet her at the hospital.

I had arrived at the hospital in the morning at around nine o' clock and after enquiring at the hospital, I set for room number 112 by the stairs. The door was opened by her mother and she led me inside the room where I saw her on the bed looking at me with surprise, showing a customary smile when I greeted her in the presence of her mother. The walls of the room were painted white with a belt of green at their intersections with the white marble floor. The iron bed on which Sruthi lay was in the centre of the room and was painted with a dull grey; the wooden table at a corner of the room was of a light brown colour; the ceiling fan was pale yellow - everything seemed as dull as the one I loved, the one looking straight at me trying to read my emotions. Her mother had asked me at the door if I was Sruthi's student and I had nodded in agreement. And then, as I stood at the window looking out, she said, "Sruthi would not come to the college again. Her leg would anyway take one full month to heal. Moreover, we are planning to get her married in another five-six months." This was what I heard.

When I turned towards Sruthi, I found her staring at me trying to read my reaction. It was evident that her mother knew nothing about anything that had happened between us. I turned towards her mother. *Auntie, I love your daughter. Please give her to me.* Auntie was peeling some oranges and beside her was a huge netted basket of fruits. I was unable to bear the thought of Sruthi getting married to someone else and I had never, until that moment, considered that possibility. There was something trying to force itself out of my throat and my nose, and I could feel my clenching jaw arrest the circulation of blood in my head. I held my breath not to let the surge of emotion turn into tears in my eyes. I wanted to run away. I could not blame Sruthi and could do nothing but feel sorry for myself. Auntie kept talking but I was not listening. I just nodded my head once in a while to let her know that I was listening. I kept staring out of the window.

After a few minutes, Auntie asked me if it would be possible for me to stay for another hour. She said that she had to go out to the medical store and to attend to some other important work, and until then, she wanted me to stay with her daughter. I replied that it was alright. She took an empty plastic bag from the table and walked out, pulling the door behind her. The door did not get bolted; it stopped a few inches from getting completely shut. Again I could feel the familiar silence surround us. Surprisingly, I felt sorry that her mother had left because her incessant chatter was better than the heavy silence which now gave us company. "Do you want some water?" I asked her not looking at her. "Yes." She replied. I walked to the bench where her mother had been sitting until she had left, and picked a glass tumbler from beside the basket of fruits. I washed it under the tap and then carefully bent the jug of water into it. I replaced the jug on the table and walked towards her with the glass of water. To avoid looking at her, I kept staring at the tumbler of water in my hand. When I reached the side of the bed, I extended the tumbler without looking at her. She tried to lift herself from the bed and struggled in the process. I could no longer escape it. I placed the glass on the wooden stool by the side of the bed and signaled to her to wait for a second. I bent over the bed and holding her shoulders gently, I helped her to slightly lift herself. Then I placed a pillow on the iron railing of the bed where she relaxed her head. I picked the glass of water and gave it to her. While she drank the water, she kept looking at me and I felt her piercing stare intolerable. I turned away from her and started to move to take my position at the window. But then... in the silence of the airy hospital room, she held my wrist and signaled me to sit beside her on the bed. I stood there watching her for a few seconds, emotion rising inside me and the words of her mother ringing in my ears '*We are planning to get her married in another five-six months*'.

I pulled the chair, which was resting against the wall, towards her bed and still allowing her to hold my hand sat on the chair. Still holding my hand, as if afraid that I would pull it away, she lifted her other hand and held my palm. She then released my wrist and pulled my palm towards her, holding it between her hands. I moved closer, bending forward and slowly dragging the chair behind me. "Thanks for coming. I really wanted to see you." She said. I did not know what to say. I tried to smile but it stopped without forming into a complete expression. She was looking at me. I wanted to say that I was happy, but was I really? Her mother's words still kept ringing and I wondered if I would really lose her. "Please do not hate me for whatever happened." she said. "What happened?" I asked her. "I am sorry for the way I behaved that day at my home." I kept looking at her. The silky hair that I noticed the first time I saw her, now covered her entire forehead and lay disorderly on her face almost falling into her eyes. I lifted my left hand and slowly brushed the hair from her forehead. I let my hand rest by the side of her face. I was bent forward in the chair looking straight into her eyes as she held my hand between hers. "You don't need to say sorry" I said. She closed her eyes when I said that and as she opened them, I could see that they turned red with tears. She pulled my hand closer to her face and kissed it still holding between her hands. "I felt very sad when you did not come yesterday. But thanks for coming today." "Don't thank me so much. I have not come for you, but for me. I came because I wanted to see you." I wiped

her tears as they rolled down her cheek. I realized that my Sruthi was deeply in love with me.

We sat that way silently for a few seconds when she asked, "Can I call you Chinnu?" "Anything... your wish"

She continued, "The lady in the poem... she was helpless, chinnu. She loved the Knight and wanted to be with him. That's why she took him to her *grot*. But she knew that her love was bound to fail." She took a brief pause and continued, "Chinnu, I am afraid... I am afraid that we'll fail too." Her eyes were still red. "The world and our parents will never accept us. A teacher and student... this will never happen." She waited as if expecting me to say something. I continued to look at her silently. She continued, "That day after you left in the rain, I cried for us. I wanted to stop you and tell you what I felt for you. But I was afraid. I am still afraid, but I am more afraid of losing you. Chinnu, what will happen to us?"

*What will happen to us?* She was deeply in love with me and this is what I found in the depths of her eyes. But at that moment, as I tried to answer that question, it was this love that made me think about giving her the right answer. I did not think about what was going to happen to us. I was more afraid of saying something that would make her lose faith in me and confidence in the love she felt for me. The depressing truth was that I did not know the answer to her question. I did not know where we would go from there, from the state we were in, from the moment she took my hand and lovingly kissed it. I had seen in movies people falling in love, talking to each other, trying to be with each other and then at the end getting married to each other. But is that what was going to happen to us? I had, then, no idea. But then, the immense love with which she kissed my hand was so delightfully sweet and her thin wet lips as they touched my palm, filled my heart with such joy and pleasure that I really did not want to say anything that could disturb them.

But in that silence that ensued after her question, I felt that for the girl on the bed holding my hand in hers, I could do anything in the world. I strongly felt that I would be able to go to any extent in the process of winning her. I bent over her and lovingly kissed her forehead and with my hand still tightly held by hers, I said, "I do not know what'll happen to us." I took a pause and then continued, "But remember this. I'll never leave your hand." She was looking at me affectionately. I wondered if that was the moment I was all the while waiting for. "Nothing in this world can make me lose your love." I said.

She smiled and said, "Me too..." and then let out a slightly louder laughter. It was clear that she was extremely happy and I was very satisfied.

"I'll be going to my mother's place and will only return after a month. But even after that I'll not come to college. My mother does not want me to work anymore. I am thinking about doing my MA in English Literature. And believe me I'll not get married against my interests." Saying so, she gave me her number. "Call me whenever possible."

Within few minutes, she fell asleep still holding my hand. I slowly removed my hand from her grip without waking her up. Her mother was supposed to be back at any

moment.. I returned to her bed and carefully placed the chair at a permissible distance, farther from where it had been, from her bed. I returned to the window. I had heard her mother call her *Pinky*. I liked it. I decided to call her the same. I turned in her direction. She was sleeping peacefully with her lips separated from each other. I turned away. I felt like kissing her...

## IV

Whatever people say about falling in love, or in whichever way they try to describe the sensation of falling in love, though they may not be completely successful in describing what they feel, they would surely feel the effort needed to be much simpler than in trying to describe the joy of being loved and explaining what metamorphoses the emotion resembling the attachment with the object of his or her affections undergoes at each stage of the relationship. Love is such a complex phenomenon and the deeper the person goes into it, the tougher he finds it to express and explain his feelings because no words can aptly describe the sensations associated with it. The sentence *I love her* is not sufficient to express even the least segment of the sentiment one shares with the person he loves. Even though I know the inadequacy of this phrase to describe my emotions, I can use nothing else to express what I was going through... *Yes, I was deeply and madly in love with her.*

In the days that followed our meeting at the hospital and the delicate divulgence of our feelings, we came closer to each other with every passing day. It had become a routine for me to call her in the evenings from a public telephone booth after returning from college. I could not use the landline phone at our home because it offered no privacy at all, and I had no mobile. In the first few days, our discussions were a bit formal and we mainly spoke about our subjects and her recovery. She was at her grandparents' home; there was no way we could meet and there was no way I could look into those deep blue eyes while talking to her. But gradually, she grew casual and began affectionately scolding me on my food habits or teasing me for the way I spoke. There was something very unique in the way she addressed me. Whenever I called her, without waiting for me to say *Hello*, she would call out to me in joy "Chinnnnnnuuuuu...." stressing every syllable of the word. And she never accepted if I did not respond in the same way repeating the performance with *Pinkkkkkkkkyyyyyyy*. At the end of each conversation, she would kiss me lovingly and would not hang up until I kissed her. I never knew that there was so much joy in being loved and such pleasure in doing things that pleased her. She never let me feel that she was elder to me, but she always said that she would be the dictator in our relationship. She always told me that I had tears in my eyes when she had had my hands in hers in the hospital, but I knew that it was the other way around. I once told her that I never cry even in the toughest situation possible. I wanted to appear strong and wanted her to believe that she could always rely on my shoulder for support. I did not know how fast that one month passed.

Then she returned to Sriharipuram and we had decided to meet the next day at the bus-stop. She wanted to take me somewhere.

I had been at that bus-stop before. It was on that rainy afternoon, after being humiliated by her, when I sat there waiting for the bus that took me home. But that morning, as I waited for her, the bus-stop seemed much different and more inviting. There was a small tea-stall on one side of it and the couple which ran the stall was attending to the

customers. It being very early in the morning, the customers were not many in number and they seemed to be in no hurry. It was around seven in the morning.

I had reacted with surprise when she told me that we were to meet so early. She replied that she could not wait to see me and also added that meeting so early would in fact result in a greater number of hours of being together. I had not seen her after the conversation at the hospital. I really wanted to see her... then, after we knew that we were in love with each other. I reached the tea-stall and asked for coffee. There were people standing beside me with heads buried in newspapers while some discussed local politics. My coffee arrived sooner than I expected. I took a small sip and moving a few meters away from them, observed the old, ruined bus-stop. The walls of the bus-stop were covered with newspapers and advertising sheets, and there was a cement bench right at its centre. Four middle-aged men sat on it reading a single newspaper. The bench had cracks which were clearly visible to me from that distance and I wondered for how many more years it would hold up. Just beside it, on the opposite side of the tea-stall, there stood an old banyan tree with its branches stretching out a long way laterally into the air. The tree had a stony platform encircling its trunk to a certain height; and there were some elderly gentlemen seated on it, discussing some serious issue. Everyone seemed very much involved in their activities while I stood there waiting for her, drinking coffee.

After around half-an-hour Sruthi arrived in an auto and waving from inside, asked me to get in. She wore a red sari and she looked more beautiful than ever. As soon as I got into the auto, she took my hand into hers and pressed it hard. "After many days..." she said, laughing. I smiled in agreement and asked her as to where we were going. "Not far... But don't ask... Just wait."

A few minutes passed and she commanded the driver to stop. "You pay..." she said as she got out. I did as ordered and as the auto left, I tried to figure out where we had come to. The road, I was standing in the middle of, was built to run around an average-sized hill. I found Sruthi bending at the edge of the road looking down. "I should not have come in this dress." she said as she tried to jump over a rock. "You can remove it if you are really uncomfortable. It's alright with me." "Such a stupid joke!" she said blushing. I followed her over the rocks, holding her handbag. After struggling on the rocks for sometime, we reached a small cave concealed at the intersection of two rocks, and it gave the impression that it were hanging there from the edge of a mountain cliff. Even in a sari, Sruthi was very light on her feet while I was finding it extremely hard to maintain my balance. The rocks had a thin cover of sand, shining in the morning sun and had a thin stream of water interspersed in the gaps between them. When we reached the cave, she pulled me inside. "*She took me to her elfin grot!!!*", I exclaimed as we entered, quoting a line from the poem. "Shut up... you don't need to link everything to the poem." We sat at the edge of the cave with our feet extending out as the warm rays of the morning sun touched them. "This is where I come whenever I am free."

"Alone??" I asked.

"I used to come here with my friend but now, I come alone. She's gone to Hyderabad...married."

She then opened the handbag and produced a steel box. She told me that it was a sweet she had prepared in the morning for me. The sweet was delicious.

As we ate alternate spoonfuls of the sweet, she said, "My friend got married two years ago. It was an arranged marriage."

She suddenly became serious as she spoke, "Do you remember the madam who was with me in the staff-room?"

"Yes.. Kiran ma'm."

"She was in love with someone and they had a really tough time trying to convince their parents. They struggled for around six to seven months."

"What happened to them?" I asked, handing her the box for her turn.

"Separated... They could not win."

I did not say anything... she continued, "They finally met one evening and decided that it cannot go any further. The boy's parents were fine but the girl's parents did not accept."

"Why?" I asked.

"Caste... The boy was of a lower caste." She continued, "So, finally, they called it quits. She told me that she suffered a lot. But now, she's happy."

"So, you two do discuss personal matters."

"Yes...We do."

"So, what did you tell her about us?"

She did not answer to the question... She was staring at the white dry clouds hurrying across the blue sky.

"Chinnu" she called still looking out in the same direction, "What would you have done if you were in the boy's place?"

"I would not have given up..." I said without even taking a second to think.

"So, you would have fought... But what if the girl feels that it cannot go forward... What will you do then?"

"I'll try to convince her that this can be solved....that we could somehow win."

She did not turn in my direction but continued looking out. "Things will get really tough, chinnu. When I was there, last month, they tried to convince me for a match. I could finally manage to make them understand that I want to do my Masters and only then would I marry... So, I can buy two years... But after your engineering, you must get a job immediately and ask my parents."

"Yes madam... I'll do that. Don't worry."

"Chinnu... believe me, it'll get very tough. For the first time, I feel it'd have been very nice if I were much younger than you... and not your teacher..."

"Then we would not have met, Pinky..."

"Yes..." she said as something dark and sad threatened to get on to her expressions I wanted badly to change the topic.

Her feet shone in their fair complexion as the warm morning rays touched them. I slowly moved towards them and lifted one of them and placed it in my lap. She was watching me with interest. "I love the sound your anklets make whenever you walk." I loved the sweet intimacy our months of association and the revelation of love granted

us. I turned towards her and found her smiling at me trying to understand the reason behind my action. I bent down and kissed the part of her foot just above the anklet. She laughed, immediately pulled her leg away from me and hid it under her red sari. "Such a stupid idiot..." she said trying to show anger but only with her smile dominating her expression. It was so nice to see my Pinky again laughing and affectionately scolding me.

"What are we going to do now? Are we to sit here all day long?" I asked.

"No... we are going to a temple."

"Temple? But why?"

"Why does anyone go to a temple?"

"But why now? You can go tomorrow Pinky."

"I want to go with you. If you don't want to come, I'll not ask you again." She said...

"Ok... We'll go. No problem." I said.

We struggled back on to the road, stumbling over rocks. I asked her why she came here when it was so dangerous on the rocks. She told me that it gets a lot easy when you get accustomed to it and that she loved the view from the cave. And I had observed that it was only I who struggled and she was agile even in a sari.

The road to the temple was covered on either side with a cement pavement, painted in alternate rectangles of red and white, and with a sporadic cover of dry leaves. The temple was located on the same hill and since we had already travelled half of the distance by the auto, we just continued walking. She in fact wanted to climb the steps but that now did not seem feasible and I felt relieved to learn that we would not get down the hill and then climb up again... on the steps. The hill seemed very steep as I looked down from the edge of the pavement and could not imagine how we had gone to that *cave* and returned alive. On the way to the temple, along the pavement, she suddenly asked, "Chinnu, do you love me?" "Ofcourse, I do." was my immediate answer. "But... Why?" she asked, "Why do you love me?" On one side of the entrance, there was place to park vehicles and by the side of it was the *chappals-stand*. We removed our slippers and placed them on the stand, carefully inside. On the other side of the entrance, were some shops selling coconuts and flowers. She asked me to buy a set and then followed me holding my hand. Soon after the entrance, to the immediate right, there were some taps. We washed our feet under them and moved further in. Luckily, the temple was not crowded and I was surprised because it was a Saturday and I had expected it to be overflowing with devotees. We entered the main temple and we stood beside each other in front of the idol, with our hands folded. The *purohit* was chanting some mantras and she whispered to me in a low voice, "Stand to my right... Wife should always stand to the left side of the husband." This seemed exciting to me; I quietly smiled not showing my delight and moved to her right and then, she signaled me to put vermilion on her forehead using my thumb. I followed her directions and after that she said, "Now, it's my turn." And smeared my head with vermilion and every powder she could find in that plate. I could see the *purohit* smile at me in pity when he looked at my face. "Now, you look good." she said as we stepped down from

the elevation. She wanted to sit there for some time and so, we sat down on the cold stony floor. As I looked around at the small number of devotees, she asked, "Why do you love me chinnu? I am asking again...you are not listening..."

"I don't know." I said.

"You don't know? So, you love me without even knowing why?"

"Do you know why you love me?" I asked.

"Oh yes... I do. But you must answer first."

"I really don't know the answer...." I said.

"Atleast try to find out why... think about it..." she said.

After five minutes, we stood up and started walking back. The chappals luckily were still there and we headed back after collecting them. We spoke about many things. She told me about her relatives, her friends, her parents' friends and I told her about my family. We were talking about many things when she suddenly said, "Chinnu... please promise me that you'll never leave me... Whatever happens..."

I stopped and looked straight into her eyes, "Pinky. I'll not leave you."

"You did not ask me why I love you." She said smiling...

"Tell me... Why do you love me?"

"Even I don't know, you idiot..." she laughed. And then, as I kept looking at her with a smile, she planted a kiss on my cheek pulling me lower. "My God... You are tall" she said.

"No... you are short."

She teased me about how I looked that day at her home when she had asked me to *get lost* and that she would have agreed that day itself had I pleaded with her for sometime. We laughed about it and after some time we left for our homes.

"Call me in the evening, chinnu... I'll be waiting." she said getting into an auto.

I waved and nodded in agreement.

I was extremely happy and when I reached home, the picture of the temple, our sweet talks on love filled my mind. I kept thinking about her. In the evening, I called her but she did not take the call. I thought she was probably busy.

The next day, in the afternoon, there was a call at the landline, asking for my father. My father took the call and I could notice a change in his expressions as he spoke. After placing the receiver on the cradle, he asked, "Where did you go yesterday?"

"To the college" I replied.

My father looked at my mother with extreme seriousness. My mother did not know what was going on. "What happened?" she asked.

"Your HOD saw you at a temple with a lady who is." said my father turning towards me and after a pause added, "your teacher".

My mother looked at me unable to believe what she had just heard, and my sister in the sofa and watching TV, turned it off and turned in my direction with questioning eyes. Everyone was waiting for my explanation as the afternoon sun's heat seeped through the brick walls of the house.

## V

I have come to the last chapter of the story, the story of love that I have so far narrated trying to capture my emotions at every stage of my relationship with Sruthi... my Sruthi... my sweet Pinky. But now, as it nears the end and as I see the impossible past, no longer trying to forget it but struggling to conjure up every image and every expression or feeling of love from the untidy heap of evenings of sadness and pain, I find it extremely difficult to move further. I want to stop and say that, yes, my story ended in pain and that we did not live happily ever after, but deep inside my uncompromising heart, there is a desire to see again what happened after that lovely morning with her at her *elfin grot*, and then at the temple. My Pinky had kissed me on the cheek and laughed as I stood surprised. But then within days, everything changed... There was no love, no sweet sensation of being loved... There remained no "*my Pinky*"...

When my father got the answer he knew he would get, he dropped into a sofa with the slightest hope that my HOD was mistaken vanishing completely from his eyes. He wanted me to tell him that I had not cheated them by going out with some girl, lying to them that I went to attend a special class. My mother took her place beside him, in the same fashion – dropping lifelessly into the sofa. I told them that I loved her and she loved me too... My mother cried, "She's your teacher for God's sake..." For God's sake, she was my teacher and my lover too... Nobody spoke to me after that... for two days. I tried to reach her on phone but it was always unavailable... switched off. My father, after two days, arranged a meeting with my HOD and he warned me that I would be rusticated on grounds of indiscipline and unacceptable conduct. I remained silent. I wanted to talk to Pinky. I did not know what she was going through... but I could not reach her.

One day, my father called me to his room and told me about the values of family, the rules that the society and our ancestors had laid before us – rules that have to be followed if one wants to live with respect and honour. He said, "Whatever happened has happened... Forget the girl and tell your HOD the same. He tells me that the girl has already given you up." "Father, I want to hear it from her." I said. He told me that it was not possible as they had already left the city. They had already left the city? I had to find it out for myself. The next day, I went to her home again and found that it was locked. I tried every way to reach her but in vain. I wanted to talk to someone who knew her but nobody was ready to help me. Moreover, we had no common friends. And one day, unable to bear the intolerable sessions with my father on the value of family relationships, caste and honour, I told him that nothing in this world would make me give her up. We never spoke again until mother took the matter into her hands. One day, she drank poison and was rushed to a hospital.

I ran to the hospital when I learnt about it. I was in the college when it had happened. There were people sitting outside the hospital room – none of them knew the reason for this. As I tried to get into the room, I was stopped by my father at the door. He told me

that she was alright but did not want to see me. My voice choked as I asked him, "Why?" "Don't you know the reason?" my sister asked sounding of accusation, "Are you not..." she stopped without completing the sentence. My mind completed it for me *Are you not the reason for everything that has disrupted our family?* I wanted to run away from all of them. I wanted to go to my Sruthi. I walked to the window in the wall at the opposite end of the room, away from those accusing eyes and ignorant relatives. It was on the fifth floor and I considered for a few seconds the idea of breaking the glass and jumping down. I never thought it was so easy to die. There were children playing in the ground just a few meters to the right. It was a game of cricket. A teacher of English in my fifth standard had told the class - *some day in your lives, you'll fall in love and you'll feel sorry for yourself at your inability to win it.* She added, "Love, my dear students, is destined to fail." Probably, she had suffered too. Perhaps even she stood by some lone window and considered jumping down an easier option than giving up your love. My father came and stood beside me. I turned and looked straight into his eyes, and there I saw a question, a question I did not want him to ask – *Do you love her more than you love us?* How could I answer such a question? The question Pinky asked me in the cave, "What would you have done if you were in that boy's place?" I had answered it without taking a second's time. I had all the while thought that I would be able to do anything to win her but there I was struggling to even survive the pain of answering a question that, for the mercy of God, had no answer. "Father, what do you want me to do?" I asked. My father continued to look at me with the same stony expression and that harsh question in his eyes. "I leave that for you to decide." he said and walked away. I ran away from the hospital.

The next few days passed quickly and I did not think as I did what I did. My HOD got what he wanted and he got it in writing along with my signature... *That I was not mature enough to make such decisions... that it was the English teacher Sruthi who had suggested to me the possibility of such affection between us and it was, owing to her advances that I got into entertaining any sort of feelings for her, that I strongly believe that it's a sin to fall in love with a teacher To me, she was nothing but a teacher...* I had betrayed Sruthi... my love... my dearest Pinky. My father told me that she had given a similar thing in writing to the HOD. He asked me if I wanted to see it and I told him that it made no difference anymore. My mother chose not to talk to me for a month after that incident at the hospital; sister told me that she forgave me and my father had his respect and honour untarnished. All the while, I could not shed a tear... I was sad and broken but I could not cry.

"When Judas reached Jesus, he said, 'Hail Master, master' and kissed him. Jesus said unto him, 'Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?' But why did Judas betray the lord?" asked a teacher when I was in probably sixth or seventh grade. "For money..." we shouted. The teacher did not seem surprised. She just asked, "Ok... Now, what is betrayal?" "Cheating..." some of us shouted. The teacher gave us a relaxed look and a gentle smile. She said, "Cheating is not exactly betrayal. Ofcourse, you can say that it is a lot closer in meaning to *betrayal*. When you betray someone, if you allow

yourself to think about what you have done and analyze your actions, you'll surely feel a twinge of guilt and regret which is much more hurting than what you feel when you cheat someone." She continued, "You see... Judas betrayed Jesus. When Jesus asks him if he is betraying Jesus with a kiss, Judas realizes his folly. He feels the pain of betrayal. He runs to the priests, returns their money and begs them to release Jesus. But this does not work and unable to bear the guilt, he hangs himself. There is also another version that he does not feel any guilt and later dies in an accident in which he dies a brutal death." She waited for us to understand this and then continued, "There has always been a section of people who sympathize with Judas and feel sorry for him on his sad death. Judas is not inherently bad. But it was probably greed for money or a very urgent need for this money. Remember that in all our lives, there will be situations where one's actions result in a betrayal. It'll be completely upon you whether you'll perform that action or not." She again took a brief pause and then continued, "There is something else I want to tell you. In the story, it is not Judas alone who betrays Jesus. You see... After *The Last Supper*, Jesus tells Peter that before the rooster crows twice, he would disown Jesus thrice. Peter argues that never would he do such a thing and that even if he were to die with Jesus, he would never disown him. Jesus tells him that it is bound to happen... When Jesus is dragged away by the soldiers, Peter follows him. Outside the court, he is recognized by a maid servant. She declares that he is one of them. But he denies it saying that he does know that man. In this way, he denies thrice and the rooster crows twice after his last denial. Peter runs away from the place and weeps bitterly." At that age, the story seemed very interesting and we were actually listening to it for the first time. She continued, "The story does not ask you to judge, but I want you to... Think about it... Which is the worse betrayal Judas' or Peter's?"

Now, after everything that has happened, as I think and wonder which is worse, I realize that there are never degrees of betrayal. If I were writing the story and if I were to decide Peter's fate, then I would have made him hang himself too, just like Judas. For me, Peter did not betray Jesus and as a matter of fact, betrayal is not a word that is used while describing Peter's role in the story; it is called *disownment* or *denial*. Peter betrayed his devotion for his master. When Jesus told him that he would disown him thrice, there must have been some inner conversation between his devotion and his self which resulted in his argument that never would he deny his identity as Jesus' follower, even if he were to die. This story and the words of my teacher seem to me absolutely correct that if you allow yourself to analyze your actions, you'll surely feel a twinge of.....

For the first few days, I tried to forget what I had done. I tried not to think about it, not to analyze my actions. But as days passed by, I found myself waiting to hear from her, talk to her or meet her at college. It finally became so unbearable that one day I decided to go to her house with the hope that she might have returned. But as I walked through the colony of her house, as I looked towards the end of the lane, trying to make out the grayish-blue gate, a sudden fear took hold of me. I stopped a few metres from her house unable to move forward. Then, in the isolation of that street, in the shade of the tall, old banyan trees, near her home, I realized that I had betrayed her and that I had no right to reach her or talk to her. The realization was hard and sudden. It filled me with remorse

and pain, but I wanted to find out if she was still sitting outside the house on the steps waiting for me. But as I reached the gate, I found that the door of the house was locked from outside and the gate was open. I wanted to go inside but did not. I was afraid that she might suddenly come out and that I would have to face her and look into her accusing eyes. But I still stood there imagining her in her cream-coloured night dress. "The house has been vacated." I heard the lady's voice from the opposite building. I turned around and started walking back. There was no rain, nor were there any children playing in the park as I passed by it. The compound wall seemed to invite me inside but I kept walking forward. Deep inside my mind, I imagined her running towards me from behind calling my name. I turned back. She was not there... The half-open grayish blue gate showed the pots of flower plants that lined the path that led to the steps. I did not go back to the house. That was the last time I went there.

I wondered for days after that as to why I could not cry after I had betrayed her. There was certain sadness in every way I saw the world and in everything I looked at. The thought that I had betrayed my love... my Pinky, kept running in my mind. I wanted to cry in exasperation but it never came out. The miserable truth is that I could not cry. I kept walking in the lane which had a lake to its one side and where the washerwomen washed their clothes. That was where I was stopped by her and was asked to submit my assignments. She did not need to care for me, but she did. She could have left me to suffer, but she didn't. In the evenings, after college, I walked alone in the lane thinking about her and our little meetings after college, the prolonged analyses of poems and most of them were on love. On one of the evenings, as I was walking, some of the washerwomen's children called me to join their game. I did not. I did not because I was sure that the melancholy that I wore so large and clear on my face would creep into their game and spoil their fun. I sat beside them and watched them play. They were playing a game where one of them hid a small wooden piece deep inside the sand at a particular location without the knowledge of the opponent who was supposed to later pull it out. As they were playing one of them asked me to find out the piece one of them hid. I tried... I kept trying for around ten minutes. Then they said that it was alright but I did not want to give up. I kept trying... I kept trying... I could not find the small tiny piece of wood hiding somewhere beneath the sand and laughing at me, at my inability. My mother spoke to me after a month. She said that I'll forget *that girl* soon. My sister gave me just a week.

Days passed without my noticing them. I found nothing interesting in my subjects and I studied only to pass the exams. My days without my Pinky were worth nothing to me, but I did not want to end my life. I must admit that I had considered it an option but somewhere in my heart, there was a voice asking me to fight it and understand the meaning of whatever had happened... Whatever had happened, happened because I was not courageous enough. I was Judas... I was Peter.

One day, Sruthi came to college. My classmates were talking about it. They wanted to go down and meet her at the staff-room. I surmised from their discussions that she had come to collect her certificates and that she would not be coming there again. My heart

cried from inside but I smiled in encouragement as they got ready to meet her. Did I have the courage to see her? No, I did not. I told them that I was not well and would not be able to come down. They did not notice anything abnormal in my behaviour and none of them knew our story... our story of love and betrayal. I waited in the class. There was a power-cut and the room was pretty warm. The light breeze from the window could not prevent my shirt sticking to my body and droplets of sweat forming on the top of my lips and forehead. I desperately wanted to run out of the room, towards her and tell her that I did what I did because I had no choice... My own words rang in my mind... *Nothing in this world can make me lose your love...* But I had betrayed her and my love for her.

When the students were standing in front of her, I wondered if it was possible that her eyes would search for me in those young guileless faces, in those ignorant eyes that did not know what happened between their teacher and the one sitting alone in the classroom, the one who was not courageous enough to face her and apologize for his cowardice. But...But did she really need it? As I waited in the classroom, I silently hoped that they would not tell me when they enter the class that she had asked for me. Then nothing would have stopped me from reaching her. But I, in the corners of my mind, also hoped that she asked for me... a selfish hope that she still wanted to know how I was. A few heavy, torturous long minutes passed before my classmates entered. I did not ask them anything but heard them say that she would be leaving that evening to her grandparents' place never to return again. I ran out from the classroom... That was my chance to see her one last time and yes, I could finally muster enough courage.

I reached the station on time; I already had with me the details of the train and the time it would leave. There were twenty minutes left. The directions for the passengers read platform 3 corresponding to the train number. I ran on to the platform and carefully passed through the crowd outside the train. I hoped that she was on the platform, and not in the train. And then, as I moved through the crowded multitude, I saw her mother – *Auntie* – animatedly taking leave of her friends. Beside her, standing and running her eyes in the crowd was my love, my Sruthi teacher, my Pinky. I stopped where I stood and kept staring straight at her. There were only ten minutes left. I stood there hoping that she would look at me once and that atleast once our eyes would meet... But I did not want her mother to see me... she would recognize me instantly and disturb everything that could happen when our eyes would meet. On the platform, as I stood and watched her, I kept wondering as to why I had fallen in love with her. It was not exactly beauty... there was something more. As I thought about it, I felt certain that I had fallen in love much before that situation in her staff-room when we were both looking outside. If it was not then, then it was when I had warned her – the first time I had seen her and the first time I had spoken to her. But the question was not “when” but “why”. Why did I fall in love with her? Just as I brooded on this, but still waiting for her to turn in my direction, our eyes met. I was not very far from her... just a few metres... few hundred centimetres... three arms length... probably, *her ten lovely feet* length. But our eyes did not meet as they usually would. Her eyes actually stopped on me and it

happened as if they struck something and came to a state of zero motion and what they struck were my dark, lifeless, gutless eyes. They were indeed searching for me. And as usual, a terrible silence engulfed us. Silence... Silence with so many people around... on such a noisy platform... And then, a sudden realization came upon me. It was this silence that had made me fall in love with her. It was this silence that was actually not lack of sound... it was lack of conversation... lack of words. From the first moment of the beginning of our relationship, our meetings always had an overwhelming, questioning silence marking them. The question was always carefully avoided by both of us... we never chose to answer it. As I stood looking out of the window in her staff-room and as she arranged the books in the cupboard, it was this silence that surrounded us. In the lane, as she stopped me trying to convince me to submit the assignments, it was this silence that crept in and wanted us to answer its question... *Where would we go from there?* Our relationship was forbidden... We always knew that people would not accept it but we wanted to be together... we wanted each other.

The train rang its signal and then her lips opened ever so slightly, the same way they did when I had seen her for the first time near the steps on that rainy evening. As she looked into the space between us, and as her eyes tried to reach and read mine, I realized that it was this piercing look, which pleaded me to break the questioning silence that I would now so badly miss. I also felt as I tried to look deep into her blue eyes for the last time, that I would never be able to see her again. She turned around to get into the train, people shaking hands with her for one last time and at that moment, as she again lifted her eyes in my direction, there was no longer a question, no longer an appeal asking me to break the silence but what was there was just a silent resignation. She was helpless and I had once called her a *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Aah... I remembered, at that moment, that she had said that the girl was helpless and that she loved the Knight but could do nothing to save him. But I, on the contrary, had commented that her sighs and sad eyes were just *evil pretences*. How childish my analysis of the poem was!!! She got into the train after her mother and waited at the door, looking at me. The train started moving and people on the platform were waving at those inside. There was a lump in my throat. I realized that finally I was about to cry; tears were filling my eyes but I did not want to cry in front of her... Even then, on the platform, the last time we were seeing each other, I wanted to make her believe that I was strong enough to bear the grief and pain, and that I had a strong shoulder for her to lean on. I had already betrayed her once... I looked at her with shame and love. I did not run after the train as it left the platform and moved slowly out of my sight. I dropped onto a bench beside me and I could hear the whining sound my throat made as it relieved itself of the heavy lump, and I could feel my hands feverishly wipe the tears as they incessantly rolled down my cheeks. I had failed her... I had failed my love.

Seven years have passed since all this happened and the image of my Pinky is slowly getting blurred. I sometimes feel that I see her in her correct form only in my dreams... When I sit alone, in the silence of my room or my garden trying to picture her sitting beside me, I do not see her complete face. I see it only in parts. "Why?" I question

myself. Why does this happen? I do not know the answer. Like the face that is slowly disappearing from my active mind, is it possible that the memories, still so fresh in my mind, would also fade away? Then, can I still be in love with someone who is not part of my memories anymore? The answer to the last question is "No." and this, to me, is unbearable. From the time I had lost her, I had been dragging my life with the simple belief that I was still in love with her... And I still am...

Recently, I saw her in a dream... In the dream, I was at a restaurant paying some bills and someone from behind laid a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to find a *married Pinky* greeting me in between her hearty laughter. As soon as I saw her, I ran. Ofcourse, it was a dream and fortunately, I had not seen her in reality but I could not understand even in the dream, even as I ran, the reason behind my running away from her. Was it love? Was it fear? I really have no answer. For days, I told myself that it was love... that I was still madly in love with her and could not bear the sight of her married self. But then, somewhere from inside, I heard myself correcting me that I ran because I was still afraid of facing her, still guilty of my betrayal. And I must admit to myself and to those reading my story that I still feel guilty and I am still afraid of facing her.

My story is now coming to an end... (I never wanted it to end). There are very few lines that can now be formed with whatever is left in the tale. For days, after she left, I wanted to go back to the first meeting and from there, to see our story through her eyes. I wanted to know what she had felt and when, at exactly what point, she had actually fallen in love with me. I had realized when I had seen her at the station that though I never believed in it, I had fallen for her the first time I had seen her and the troubling silences of our meetings had brought us closer. But then, after everything happened, I felt sad that I would never be able to know how she had felt during those days of love and those evenings of rain. How and when she had felt for the first time that she was in love with me.

One morning, at the same temple – the temple I had visited with Pinky the day she kissed me on my cheek, I met Kiran ma'm, the person she shared her staff-room with. She immediately recognized me as the student who visited the staff-room often. She had left the college during the first year of my engineering itself. We were having some casual talk and I asked her my question, disguising it as one of many harmless casual questions, "How's Sruthi madam? Are you still in touch with her?"

She replied with a smile, happily digging into her memories, "We are not in touch... not at all... but, I remember her very well." She waited for a few seconds and then continued, "You know, she's such a wonderful girl... but very silly... very weird actually." She settled down on a bench and continued, "The first time we met was on one evening when she walked into the staff-room and I was actually correcting some papers at my table. She was smiling to herself. I was firstly surprised to see such a young teacher – she later told me that she had only finished her BA in English and wanted to do an MA later – and secondly, she was sitting at her table, looking vacantly, smiling to herself. I finally asked her what it was... At first, she hesitated but then she told me that a guy at the stairs had warned her to be careful as there was water on the steps. She then told me that they stood so close to each other and the way he was looking into her eyes,

she completely forgot to even thank him. But as he was about to enter the classroom, she had shouted her gratitude behind him. And he had just smiled in acknowledgement." She again took a brief pause and then continued, "She was so friendly and open. I teased her about it that incident the entire evening and she told me that she was feeling something strange happening to her which had never happened to her before. I told her that it was *love*. She just laughed and dismissed that idea. But on the next day, when I entered the staff-room, I found her sadly looking out of the window. She seemed depressed. I went to her and asked her what had happened. She replied that the one she had met the other day at the stairs was her student and that she was *miserably* in love with him."

I listened to all this with growing emotion and speeding heart-beat.

She looked straight into my eyes and then said, "Tell me one thing... Be honest. I always wanted to ask you this. You were the one who came to the staff-room often. You always spent a lot of time together. I asked her once but she did not give me a straight answer. Tell me. Are you not the one who she was in love with?"

I sat there beside her on the bench and looked at the surrounding hills. The vast greenery on the stretch of huge hills was so appealing to the eyes. I remembered something... I wanted to leave.. I wanted to go somewhere. I had then learnt the answer to my question *When did she fall in love with me?* It was weird that I did not feel sad when I learnt this. I kept smiling to myself. We both fell in love at the same time but never knew it. I kept thinking about the discussions we had. Kiran ma'm was waiting for my answer. She was not used to our *silences*... Our troubling, questioning silences. But I continued silently watching at the world in front of me. I wanted to visit my Pinky's *grot* once again, stumble on the rocks and sit there looking at the blue sky and the dry clouds floating along. I stood up and as I began to leave, I turned towards her. I do not know the reason why I smiled... She had already got her answer. She asked, "So, what happened?" I left without an answer...

I hurried towards the part of the road beside which, in between the rocks, was the cave – her *grot*. The rocks did not seem too slippery this time and infact, I did not care. I just wanted to enter the cave. The afternoon sun was beating down hard, burning the world with its harsh heat and the rocks with the particles of sand on their surfaces absorbing the heat seemed to set my toes on fire as I slipped my feet on them. I reached the mouth of the cave, and holding onto a rock inside it, pulled myself in. I moved further inside, leaned on the rock at the inner end and stretched my legs out to feel the heat of the sun. The heat was, as expected, harsher than that on that winter morning when I had gone there with her for the first time. I pictured her sitting there beside me and watching the hot, bright hillside and swaying in her feelings of love for me...

*Chinnu... Tell me... Why do you love me?*

"Why do I love you?" .... I laughed... *Such a stupid question...*

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