

# Unforgiven

- *Adithya Chakravarty M*

'I am here today to help you understand something... something that should be told... About Understanding... about Responsibility... and I start by apologizing for the delay.' The full audience in the hall listened in attention. My assistant, a few feet away from me, on the dais shouted at the top of his voice, 'Why are those dogs barking at this hour of the night? Bloody disturbance!!' I nodded in agreement and turned to face the audience again. 'I feel that the time has come for me to reveal it and explain the intricacies involved.' To my dismay, I realized that the mike was not working. A few members in the audience stood up to leave and it occurred to me that most of them had already left. I started shouting at the top of my voice, 'It is true what you heard... What I am telling you would shake the foundations of your beliefs.' A beautiful lady, one of those who were leaving, turned around and laughed at me. I could sense anger rising in me. I wanted them to atleast know that I was angry. I pulled the mike from its stand and hurled it on the floor, kicked the podium in disgust and walked angrily off the stage towards the people behind the curtain staring at me afraid of the consequences of what happened there. I recognized one of them to be my assistant's mother who hugged me and said, 'Well done, son. Wonderful speech.' I smiled at her and then I could feel that I was indeed happy with the way things went on the dais. I had given them what they wanted. I had delivered the speech I had prepared with great care. The staff shook my hands as they said, 'We never had a writer here before. We knew that it was the best decision to invite you here today.' I laughed and made my way to the bathroom.

The bathroom was dark and I started to grow restless and angry. I was alone there and I could hear voices from outside. Rendered blind, I felt the wall with my fingers for a switch but found none. As I tried to get used to the darkness, I recognized the mirror hanging on the opposite side of the room. It was my mother's. I could recollect how I had once dropped it to the floor and had broken its plastic border. Yes, it was the same one. But it had not been my fault. I could remember that it had already been a little broken before it had fallen to the ground. The open window to the right allowed moonlight to enter and fall on the mirror and helped it to illuminate the room. I realized that the bathroom was not very dark after all. I stood there for a few seconds allowing the room to get brighter. I walked slowly towards the mirror and examined its broken border. I remembered that mother used to carry it in her handbag all the time. I tried to pull it off the wall but found that it was tightly fixed in place by a piece of metal. At the same time, I felt a warning inside me that removing the mirror from its place would make the room dark again... I stepped back from it.... 'You are afraid of darkness, aren't you?' asked a person walking from the side of the urinals. I suddenly realized that he had been standing there even before I had entered the room. 'No, I am not.' I said trying not to look concerned. He walked towards me and washed his hands at the tap. When he turned towards

me, I saw that there were tears in his eyes, 'I am very sorry this happened', he continued, 'It was my mistake. I thought everything was fine. I had assumed it to be so. But now... I know that I failed you. How embarrassed you must have felt there!' I looked at him for a few seconds and then replied with suppressed anger, 'It is neither your fault nor mine. There is no point in blaming yourself. It's a bloody mike. But yes, you should have checked it.' I immediately felt that I had not really shown him that I was indeed hurt. I waved my hands in resignation and slapped the wall as I walked out of the room.

Outside the room, my assistant's mother was waiting for me. As soon as she saw me coming out, she reached me and said, 'Come home. It has been many years.' She did not wait for my answer and walked towards the car in the parking lot. I followed her. At the car, I found the assistant waiting along with the driver. He asked, 'When will you be back? The train leaves early in the morning.' 'It is not far. I'll be back soon.' I replied as I sat in the car in the front seat beside the driver. The lady sat in the backseat. As we moved out of the building onto the road, I realized that it was raining. The roads were wet and empty. I had never been to that city before and I felt sad that I had no time to explore it and know more about the people there. As we moved along, I felt that it very closely resembled my father's place. I asked the driver, 'At the end of this road, is there a temple?' 'Yes', he replied. 'Stop there for a few minutes.' I said. 'No... Let's move on. It's already late.' The lady instructed the driver. He looked at me. 'Do as I say. Stop at the temple.' The lady said nothing. I recognized the temple from a distance. It was the same one. I jumped out of the car even before it stopped and hurried towards the gates to find that it was closed. The lady walked towards me. On reaching the gate, she said, 'This temple has been closed for many years.' 'Why?' I asked her. I saw that she had almost reached the car. I wondered why there was no guard there. There was an old man sitting on a lone bench, smoking. 'Why is the temple closed?' I asked him. He started talking, 'I was not old when I was young. I loved. I was loved. But now..... My farm is not very far from here. But they do not want me there. They say I am old and I cannot work. They say I do not know work. But how can I live now? No work... nobody to care. No. No, I don't want your money. You are rich... you are a famous writer. People read what you write. People hear when you talk... But give me your money.. yes, I need it... I need to live. I should get strong. I should reach my farm. I was not old when I was young.' The man continued smoking. I walked towards the car. The lady shouted from the car, 'Come inside. It is already late.' 'I am very sorry.' I said as I took my place beside the driver. I felt very gloomy and sad. 'Go straight and then take a left. You'll see a lake... Then just follow the road.' I said with no emotion. The driver nodded and continued driving.

The road ran parallel to the lake on its one side and had large stretches of cultivated land on the other. It was very late in the night and since there were no streetlights, it was extremely dark and difficult to drive. The driver was straining his eyes to avoid large pits on the road created by the heavy buses and the passage of time. On either side of the road, I could not see any house in the visible darkness. After a few minutes, 'Here we are', said the lady and got out of the car. I looked out of the window to find a tiled house in a huge empty courtyard, a few metres from the car. On the other side of it, stood another similar tiled-house. I stepped out and

looked around. I lifted my head to find the star-lit bright sky of my childhood. I turned towards the house and immediately recognized it as that of my grandparents. I hurried towards it and I started feeling better with every step. I removed my shoes, left them in a corner at the verandah and lied down on the wooden bench at its centre. I felt very relaxed and was slowly drifting into sleep when the lady shook me and said, 'Come inside... finish your dinner first.' This time I recognized her to be my aunt and realized that I had not seen her for more than ten years – a reason for being unable to recognize her at the theatre. 'How are you aunty?' I asked. She did not reply. I silently followed her. We kept moving through dark rooms and corridors and I felt we were moving in circles until she finally opened the door to the kitchen which had, in one corner, a wooden stool with a plate and a bottled-kerosene torch on it. 'Nothing has changed as you can see' she said as I sat at the stool. The food looked delicious but I could feel a certain heaviness slowly descend on me. 'Why don't you say anything?' she asked taking her place in front of me, waving a plastic disk, trying to fan me, struggling to make me feel comfortable. 'It's alright.' I said. 'No... it is not.' She said, wiping her tears with the ends of her sari. She continued, 'It is not... You must be used to the comfortable city life. This village... this food...' she paused and continued, 'things have not changed with us... we have been like this for quite some time. Why do you want us to change?? Why?' I interjected, 'I never asked you to.' She just continued as if she had not heard me, 'We cannot change and you do not want to see us anymore. Your uncle... do you know where he is? No, you don't... He has gone mad, your uncle. He spends time at the temple. The farm – it's no longer ours. But your uncle wants it. He wants to work in it. He says he'll buy the farm back. But can he work in it? He cannot.. he's weak... wasted.' 'What do you want me to do? Do you want any money?' I said trying to console her. 'Nobody wants your money', she said moving away. 'Who cares for your money? I want you to be with us. We want you to come to us frequently. See us.. talk to us. Or do you feel so insulted to be with us, live with us?' I angrily pushed the wooden stool and got up. She continued, not even looking at me, 'You are angry because I am telling you the truth. You want me to lie and tell you that everything is alright. You want to believe that you are not responsible for anything.' I could hear her words behind me as I walked out, 'No, we do not need your money. Money does not buy love. But still we need the money. Yes, we need money to buy the farm back... to cure your uncle.' I walked swiftly out of the house, towards the car trying my best to not run. The driver had already started the car and was waiting for me. I took my place in the backseat behind the driver. The lady was waving from verandah. The car began to move. 'Why do these dogs keep barking at this hour? Do you have anything to hurl at them?' the driver asked. I did not answer.

As the car moved out of the village, I began to feel happy and relieved. The cool breeze enlivened my spirits. There were still a few hours left before the train's departure. I asked the driver to stop the car after we reached the town. He stopped it at the side of the road and I asked him to leave, and to inform the assistant that he can come directly to the station. The car left.

After a few steps, I reached a huge old stone construction which stood at the centre of a big junction. I almost immediately recognized it. It was my school library. I climbed the steps and walked into the hall which had symmetrically built pillars with sculpted forms of various deities. The ceiling was very high and all the walls converged to a single point which must be the tip of the dome that stood at the top. There was a dim white light seeping through the glass windows in the walls. It was still raining outside and the droplets battered against the windows. I could find a small gap in the wall in a corner of the hall. When I reached it, I found a cement staircase leading to the first floor. I could feel inside me the longing to reach the first floor and get into the library. I climbed up the stairs and reached an open empty space. The floor was no library. All there was, was just an empty space. I felt a sense of disappointment which was only momentary because at one side on the floor I could see a lady standing in the window, looking at the wet roads. I realized that I knew what she was looking at. There was an ice-cream vendor who came to the school every alternate day. I could distinctly recollect the sound the bell of his cart always made as it passed by the class window. I ran towards the window. She turned around and I stopped. She was the same girl who had laughed at me in the theatre. I could feel anger surge from inside. She stood there staring at me fixedly. I felt I could hear the bell from the cart in the background, and there was also the constant barking of dogs. Everything around seemed dark and gloomy. I was angry and I walked towards her slowly, asking as I moved, 'Why did you laugh?' She did not answer. The rain outside was accompanied with whirling winds and they made strange whistling sounds. As I reached her, she asked, 'why did you leave me?'

Compassion filled me. I stood beside her and looked outside the window. It was still raining heavily. 'Why did you leave me?' she repeated. 'I had to', I said. She held my hand tightly in hers. I kept looking out. 'I hold your hand so because I am afraid that I'll lose you... that you'll leave me.' I knew that she was crying. She continued, 'After you left, my father got me married. He did not wait long. I cried and cried. I told him that you may come back... and that you'll be unable to bear it. But you never came. Why??? Why did you even leave me? I once told you that it's not possible. I only said that... and you left.' I felt very sad and unhappy. But I liked her touch. I realized that she was holding me the same way she held me for the first time – afraid of letting me go. 'It was you who asked me to leave', I said turning towards her. She turned away, 'This has always been the problem with you. You always want to believe that you are not responsible. That you are in no way to be blamed for anything. Always running away. Yes, the way you ran away when you had to fight. I thought you'll come. I prayed that you should. But no, it did not happen. Now, it is over. I am married. I live with someone else. But there is something in me that did not change. I tried to change it but could not. I haven't been able to.' She waited and then continued, 'I would like to believe that you have changed and that you were not like this before. But it is even much more saddening to realize that you have always been the same and the one I loved so dearly is the one you actually are.' She added, 'And yes, unfortunately, nothing changes.' She left my hand and slowly walked away. I felt very sad. I looked outside the window. It had stopped raining. I could hear her footsteps down the stairs. From the window, I wanted to see her leave for one last time. But it seemed as if she did not go

out of the building. I waited. And as I waited, I started feeling heavy and dull. And my throat seemed to choke and pain.

I waited for a few more minutes and then climbed down the stairs. She was there neither on the steps nor in the hall. She could have left by some door which I did not know. I walked out of the building and I started to feel better. Not much time left. I could recall a short-cut I knew for the railway station. I went back inside, to the corner of the hall. I noticed the staircase with steps going down. I stepped down and reached the underground railway station. The assistant and the driver were already there at the station. The assistant looked at me and said, 'I am going to kill those dogs in the morning tomorrow. Why do they bloody bark at this hour of the night?'

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