

THE SWEETEST GIFT EVER

Well what to say, though it didn't start with a flash. Of course, I knew I was a teenager but one with a soft moustache and an innocent look. Most importantly I'd started shaving a month ago and I was about to get a driving license that dad had promised me to give it on my birthday. But among my friends I still found myself as a small kid who rarely deciphered their code languages; for sure I was a mama's boy and a complete son to any father. They had their bikes, pricey mobiles and everything else to impress girls. Oh! Don't get me too far on that. Well...girlfriends, it was like a passion for them, something like a trophy that they would boast upon. For me it was something I always desired to have, but never mustered the courage.

Numerous girls and boys I saw, hands in their hands, heads on shoulders, and sometimes on a long drive on a bike. And as if a craze spins through their minds, in no time I would find new couples as if they only lacked designer dresses. Boys having spikes, a Levi's T-shirt and all sorts of blustering assets. And girls, the ones who never showed up without suits and had lived throughout with a Behenji tag, now walked around in jeans and tops. Not to mention in my aspect, I was hell of a boofhead, and relationship remained a territory where my tongue stuck and my heart beat would hasten to a thousand mach. Nevertheless I dearly needed a girlfriend to stamp myself as an individual among my friends. And so it all started with my coaching classes.

I hardly ever talked to girls, though I liked many and one of them was Tanya, a girl with a long aureate hair and a skinny face, a sweet and innocent girl who rarely talked to others. And anyone who tried to have a go at her, like once Vipul did then one expects nothing but a thundering slap glued on your cheek. And why shouldn't, her father was the senior SP of the same area. So I swallowed my throat and used to sit as if she didn't exist.

Her height...Well...I would have preferred it to escape but as honest as I am, I must say that she was 5 inches taller than me. Hey! Wait before I proceed. I mean a 5 feet isn't that bad. Ok I think I must change the topic. Yes, I was a bit good at studies and often my friends consulted me for any problems related to our course. At least that was the only thing that I could blow my own trumpet to gain others' attention upon me. And to my delight something unanticipated did happen with that when Tanya talked to me for the very first time on Thursday...Yeah of course I remember the day. And I was like dancing on any tune, watching songs and hailing flowers, butterflies, dogs, cats, garbage, moon, Venus and every other stuff to make a mother's life hell.

"Yuck! The weather's not good," said my Mom.

"But look at the flowers spreading its aroma all along with it, mom," I replied

And her eyes widened, almost fainting and I gazed through the window unperturbed of the hell I had just laid upon her. The following few weeks went astray until she came again and

asked for my notes and to my delight she asked my phone number and it all kicked off from there. Asking questions...Sharing thoughts...Sharing problems and finally sharing a lot of our times together in classes, then parks and then anywhere...Wait again!!...Not home of course, my dad's harsh enough on rules and regulations. I stood tall among my friends while they took hiccups on the thought;

How I even had a go at the girl?

Naturally, I took pride on it.

"Brother! You need to be a bit masculine, something like a tough brat...Make muscles for yourself," sputtered a friend of mine

And with that I joined a gym, lashing all my study hours. In a month or so I had gained a multi layer muscle and bunked multi hour classes. Nevertheless, I seemed a bit manly and Tanya used to gaze at me incessantly with praise or dislike I didn't know. But I got the answer soon. There was a boy in her locality that often eve teased her and she despised it the most. Nevertheless, I was once standing at the balcony of my class when I saw him tracing her all the way to the coaching class. He caught her hand beside the deserted gate.

"LEAVE ME!" she retorted but the villain had a different intention. She casted her hand for a slap but it was arrested by his hefty grip.

"Leave me," she tried hard but surrendered soon.

And I saw those precious drops of tears rolling down from her eyes. A monster roared inside me and I galvanised to action, hurling out through the middle of the class. I seized a rod from somewhere on the way and in no time landed it on his ankle. The boy fell backwards and Tanya moved a few steps forwards.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" I yelled and with that I aimed it on his head but was stopped by Tanya.

"No! Let the pig head go," she finished and the boy escaped.

We didn't utter a word and altogether we went inside the class, even though a scene had already been created in front of the entire class.

"Why you did that?" asked Tanya after the class.

"I don't know but I can't see those tears in my best friend's eyes,"

I replied and she smiled at me with admiration and thereafter the bond we shared became stronger and warmer. There was not a single day that would go without our chatter.

"You're my best friend," She once said and that elevated my heart to new heights.

But was I really what she meant or what I considered her? No matter, but for my side I got the answer in no time.

My birthday arrived and all my friends were at my birthday party. Tanya's father never allowed her to leave the house after eight at night and so went off my birthday, a bit dull in her absence. That really angered me. The next few days I ignored her only to show my anger and that was something a bit harsh on her part. She tried a lot and I just let it go. Tanya was like hinting apologies the whole day and I was like taking fun at her misery, as if I desired something else. She would wait for me after the class and I would prefer a coffee with my friends. She would call me and I happened to disconnect the phone on the pretext of being busy.

"Tanya's gone crazy man!" one of my friends told me once.

"Oh! What happened?" I queried, a bit interested.

"She's one of those dumb girls! Smriti told me that she was asking her awkward questions," he said.

"Like," I said.

"Like what exactly can make a boy happy and all that. What should I do if he is my friend? I don't know what's wrong with that girl these days. I think you've got hot days coming up for you boy!" he said.

And I knew I was excited the whole day waiting for her sudden response. After one more week of my ignorance, finally her desperation broke loose and she held my hand in the class in front of everyone, forcing me out in to the park. She twisted my face and pressured my lips on her, our bodies close as it shouldn't be. And we both stood there regardless that we were somewhere in a public place.

I felt her wet lips and I just felt as if I was in heaven. My eyes closed palpating every bit of her. In a jolt she let me loose, lowered her face and ran away. I stood there thwarted by her act, stunned and motionless while she ran away. The entire night passed preoccupied in her thoughts...She kissed me and I had seen tears in her eyes, a fire that had been incinerating her because of my ignorance. A girl trusted me, a soul different from mine needed me. Her innocent face reverberating relentlessly and I realised how tough it would have been on her part to get over to such an extent. That was indeed a sweet poison.

The next few days she didn't come to the classes and I didn't have the courage to call her either. And it was the first time I realised that she felt embarrassed in front of me. She didn't arrive until the first day of June. I turned and just gazed at her face that adorned nothing. Her black eyes gleaming with guilt and her face fixed at the floor, as if she had been sobbing all her nights, burdened with the responsibilities of her lifetime.

"Tanya!" I whispered but she didn't reply and she wouldn't talk to anyone else either, except for a few chatters with her friends, only to portray that she was normal.

The entire class went through numerous controlled shouts at her from my side. But there came no reply and as soon as the class ended, my frustration just came over me and I held her hand while the others were leaving the hall.

“Are you fine?” I uttered but silence prevailed.

Instead I felt the shortness of her breath trying to relieve her captivated soul from the jinxed thought.

“Leave me, I’ve to go,” she merely resisted.

“What’s up with you all these days? No calls, no classes. Why’re you doing all this?” I demanded.

For a moment no one spoke, until I saw tears dribbling all throughout her cheeks.

“Tanya,” I whispered

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she nearly sobbed.

“What?” I replied pretending to be innocent.

“I mean,” and with that her eyes flushed with tears, “I shouldn’t have done that.”

She finished and wrapped her arms around my neck, and as a duffer as I am I didn’t know how to react to it. She was crying incessantly in the empty hall. My stomach twisted and my heart beat raced. She trusted me so much and while the tears trickled down, my intentions didn’t let me go the other way.

“Tanya, what has happened?” I asked in desperation.

“I shouldn’t have done that Sagar. My family trusts me. I’ve responsibilities to fulfil. That day when I kis-” and she didn’t had a go at it. Indeed she was a nice Indian girl.

“I just felt I broke the strands that bounded me to my family,” she said and my grip on her hand loosened.

“Nobody cares for me as you do; nobody loves me as you do because for my father I’m just a burden left behind by my mother,” she said emptying everything that had gathered inside her all these days.

“My father’s an SP, everyone defer to him and yes I belong to an esteemed family. But all is the same,” she said.

We stood there in the same position though sometimes I felt her soft hug going tight unevenly.

“That night there was a serious fight among my parents. I tried to hold them back but he grabbed my neck and threw me to the other side of the room. My mother was begging for his forgiveness but he hammered her head with the chair and since then she hasn’t spoken to me.

She lies there in the hospital, paralysed but she wouldn't speak to her daughter, as if I'm motherless. I'm an orphan Sagar! My father holds me back every time, despising the presence of his daughter only because he wanted a son. Every night he would come back drunk and in dubious condition, his hands smelling blood with the million of enemies he had made for himself and I would find myself caged in a lion's den, an object to sooth his anger. I'm all alone and trapped and can't let you be a part of my agony. He will kill you. Forgive me Sagar; forgive me for ruining your birth day party. I implored him every minute of mine to just allow me to go but he slapped me and locked me inside my room. I wanted to explain all this to you but I never wanted to be a weak girl. I am not tough now though. I shared everything with you. You are the best thing to happen to me ever. Sagar-I-I love you. You're a true friend to me but again you're a boy,"

And these words just galvanised my nerves. She tightened her hug as a baby does to his precious thing. I felt a drop of tear in my eyes and she wouldn't leave me either.

"Had I been a boy I'ould have fled to a different world. But I've some responsibilities. I have to be a good girl,"

She squared her shoulders and with a final sigh she left me, arranging the creased suit she was wearing.

"I kissed you, I hugged you. I may not be that good now but I love you as a true friend. I never wanted you apart from me. So I thought that it would be the only way to make a boy happy, to show my trust. But-but-" she erupted again and hugged me as tightly as she could. As if perplexed completely in her thoughts and I stood there as a moron doing nothing to sooth her.

She frayed her face on my chest to rub off her tears while that childlike touch was hammering me from within. A world where I saw girls who loved to be the dummies of boys, always ready to let them have a go at them just for enjoyment. And here I had a girl who loved me still bounded by the yarn of the society. A girl who wanted someone where she could lay down her face and lash out all the agonies of her life and not a boyfriend who just desired her as a tool, as I did.

My heart ached and for the first time I felt as if I was sinful. Indeed I was a provoked guy who wanted a girlfriend as a trophy to boast among my friends. I craved her beauty and that was attraction not an emotional indulgence that she had for me. Yes, she loved me but as a friend, and I did the same but overwhelmed by my desire.

"Tanya," I said but without a further word she departed leaving me all alone.

Her soft hug that embraced all the trust upon me weighed down, while the guilt just rose up and I felt a monster swirling inside me.

A TRIP ON TRAIN

The railway station was never so haunting, for the day still stalks me. Years passed and I still find myself bounded along the edges of that night. Thoughts of everything before that are vague, but I can recall everything of that journey. Except for few of those night shifters and the reminders of the train timings by the announcing lady, there was not a single sign of life. The weather was chill and shadowy while those dark clouds still shrouded the whiteness of the moon. I turned and saw not a single passenger waiting for the train. Well, I was in Kolkata and I had to be in Delhi within two days to submit my registration fees for the second semester. But for my misfortune, I failed to get the reservation for the following day. And to be there on time I couldn't find a better train than Purva Kranti, cheap and best. I easily got a reservation for that day through my travel agent in the sleeper class. I saw the time and the train was already late by ten minutes. I checked my ticket and the name Shishir was clearly mentioned on it.

“The whole system's wretched!” I cursed.

I bent my head and I saw an old gentleman at a distance waiting probably for some other train. It provided me some relief. I sighed and coughed out my frustration. The wind croaked and hurled through the straight track of the railway and swirled swiftly at the platform.

A wind slapped my cheeks and a frisson shot through my body. Soon a thunder roared through the clouds that twisted my heart in fear. Now it had started to rain with the wind going intense. For sure it was too early to lose heart by witnessing a lifeless station that is usually jam-packed. But again that day was different because in few hours was the arrival of the New Year. I raised my head at the sky. Those cloggy clouds resembled a serpent fleshing out its tongue to suck every bit of optimism that I tried to arouse. I stretched my clothes to cover every bit of my body until the announcement hollered the station. Purva Kranti was standing on platform number 4 and I rushed for the place. Well, not to my amazement I was the only passenger to board the train; nevertheless, I mustered the courage and entered the train. I rolled out the ticket to confirm my berth that happened to be number thirteen. My heart sank with ominous rumblings of discontent.

The train kicked off in fifteen minutes and I shuttered the window, though peeping through it occasionally to witness the fury of the nature. For sure the night was frightening and the thought of being alone in the entire train indeed seemed strange. I took out a novel and tried to engross myself, stretching my back on my berth. It did make me feel better and I was lighter than before. Suddenly, I felt someone standing beside me. My heart throbbed and I felt a warm breath. I galvanised to turn back.

“Good evening Sahib,” one of the pantry car servers greeted me, “Would you like some tea?”

“No-no,” I replied flatly.

“Ok sir,” he finished and moved forwards. I suspired trying to lash out the blows my heart was taking upon.

“But sir,” the man came back and I barely managed my torso to turn to look at him, “It seems an odd day to sell tea, not a single customer...”

The man said sarcastically. He smiled and I replied back similarly.

“Still I’ould like you to be cautious...I hope it doesn’t reiterate but I must admit a year has passed since that sinister incident. So hold down your nerves!” the man laughed and moved on just adding something adverse to my anxiety. I wiped off my sweat trying hard to divert my mind.

The next few hours went uneventful. Not a single pantry-car server came back, not even to ask for the dinner. I continued with the novel though getting frightened sometimes by those cracking thunders. Soon the lights fluctuated and in a flash it was all gone. Silence prevailed and I felt like standing beside a swampy river bank. I turned around; there was no sign of life except the atrocious rumblings of remote thunders and splatters of the rain drops. The exit door burst to open wide and my heart lost a beat. The cold breeze arrested my lungs and I felt being suffocated to death. Suddenly, the chillness of the weather was dwarfed by an ominous darkness. No sign of light: moonlight and the weather became more insensate. Within the darkness something shone brightly beneath the berth beside the exit door.

“Who’s there?” I probed and went closer.

An underage girl sat there, waiving her feet, unperturbed. I slewed and then moved slowly towards that innocent-looking girl. She beamed in the vivid darkness, untouched by the treacherous weather. The girl raised her head with a soft smile, her eyes so enamouring.

“E-exc- excuse me-w-what’re you doin’ here?” I asked in a trembling voice.

The girl’s smile widened and I saw her eyes going pale. She opened her mouth to say something but the splashing sounds prevented it from reaching.

“S-sorry but I couldn’t get you,” I said.

The girl stood up and screamed in such an atrocious voice that I staggered and the next moment the lights reappeared. Traumatized by it, I startled to get back to my senses. The girl had vanished. Trembling, I rushed to cross the path where the girl had sat. My heart paced enormously as if it would burst out any moment. I hurled and closed the door. I felt the sweat soaking my entire face. I came back to my seat, rather I changed the seat uttering out all the phrases and songs of God that I managed to recall. I opened my eyes and somehow felt better, making myself believe that everything was fine and the girl was just a hallucination.

I threw myself on the seat trying hard to close my eyes but even the slightest of sound was resonating with my heart beat. Well, Purva Kranti had only three stoppages on its way and no one was to board the train except in Kanpur. The rain arrived Kanpur around 3 am at night

and by then I had already recited the Hanuman Chalisa 11 times! Initially no one was in sight but soon the train got jam packed by a hoarse crowd.

With ladies, children, beggars all around and I was forced to let 5 people accommodate on my seat. Nevertheless, their presence was better than to have no one on the train at all. I was like throwing some awkward smiles at them.

On my front sat a young lady of around 20 year's age and an old man who probably seemed to be her grandfather. My eyes just got stuck on the lady who was incessantly staring out of the window. The weather was still hazy outside.

"Are you all going to Delhi?" I asked especially to the young lady and her grandfather.

"Yeah of course," she replied.

I turned around to have a better look of the crowd. Everyone appeared settled. On the lower side berth sat a fat lady wearing a black sari and on her lap slept a motionless child. The lady continued gazing outside the window. Indeed that dressing sense and her tantrik-ish way of sitting along with that child seemed unusual.

"Strange," I uttered on which the lady smiled.

"You seem to be in a trauma already...I think the journey has drained you off," she said and I just took it as a compliment. I smiled back at her, delighted that the lady was giving me special attention. For a while no one spoke.

"Excuse me," I said and stood up for toilet.

I managed my way through the scattered crowd all over the floor. But my eyes struck somewhere. On the adjacent coach sat a bride dressed all in red and her face concealed by her sari. I ran my eyes and observed something strange. The groom was nowhere in sight while the entire family seemed to be a sullen Barat. Not a trace of happiness was visible on their faces. Some of them cried in an inauspicious manner. I continued moving forwards.

I knocked the door of the toilet just to make sure that no one was inside and as I was about to open it someone came out from it.

"Oh sorry!" I apologised.

But that someone just passed through my body unperturbed. My mind rung the bell and I was like hammered to the bottom. *It had passed through my body.* I turned back but there was no one in sight. I palpated my body; it was young and alive as it was moments ago. *Then what was it?* My eyes widened in disbelief. I decided to go back to my seat and this time I saw the bride's face. It was all white; her eyes fixed on the ground and from her eyes dripped something. The night had brought numerous unusual things to sight but yes I wasn't prepared for this.

