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Remains of the Moonlit Night

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Meetali's ascent to the terrace was like a journey in itself,
A small odyssey that took her from the watchful clamour
of her confinement to the serene heights above.

In a span of seven to eight minutes, Meetali crossed about nineteen steps to the terrace. The first leg, a mere three minutes to the landing, was but a prelude to the subsequent three to four minutes climb to the balcony. With each step, her breath grew heavier, her presence announced by the laborious gasps that cut through the silence, that anyone nearby would hear it aloud.

Upon reaching the balcony, she leaned against the wall, a temporary respite as she drank in the fresh air. The cool breeze, a balm to her exertion, revived her spirit. As her breathing steadied, she lifted her gaze to the sky— which looked like a canvas of blue, splashed with patchy clouds, wandering like eerie foams on the brinks of an invisible sea.

It was a moment of tranquillity, a brief interlude where time seemed to pause, allowing Meetali to savor the beauty of the world from her elevated vantage point.

Despite the soothing embrace of the cool breeze, Meetali felt an unusual dryness in her mouth, a parched sensation that clung to her throat. The glass of *Horlicks* she had earlier, along with the water taken at intervals with her medicine—a tally of one and a half glasses in total— seemed to have vanished, although all these she had a while before. She realized that the scuttle up to the stairs had taken more than just time; it had drained the moisture from her, leaving a desert-like thirst in her throat that pleaded to be quenched.

Trapped in the confines of her own thoughts, Meetali stood solitary on the terrace. The idea of calling out for help was quickly dismissed by the distance and her reluctance. She feared that even if her voice managed to pierce through the quietness, it would only invite a barrage of questions, a scrutiny she wanted to avoid.

For them, it's defiance of the doctors' dictums, a silent rebellion against the strictures to which she adhered. She was instructed to seek help for the simplest of tasks, even if she wished to go to the washroom, not to speak of the terrace she had climbed up, a crime probably committed minutes before.

Meetali craved a moment of autonomy, even if it was just a breath of fresh air on the terrace. Like a bird caught in porridge, she observed life from her perch—muffled, restricted, yearning to soar yet unable to spread her wings. The commotion of the world below was a distant melody, a reminder of the freedom she once knew.

This has been over three weeks in a row, but how long can she confine herself tied to the solitude, a lame duck attached to the crib, watching the reluctant hour hand dragging its feet – every trick, mocking her inertia, a reminder of the time slipping away through her fingers, Yet, a wounded bird she has been, deceived by the dins of the outer world.

Chirp...Chirp...Chirp... a bird on her return path flashed before her eyes like a glitz of lightening amidst the dark clouds and disappeared in a whizz into the horizon to some unknown destination, leaving the fragrance of freshness and freedom, A reminder that freedom still existed beyond her confines.

Meetali was uncertain about her future, the uncharted path that appeared endless and frightening. The turn of events in her life brought her to a crossroads, where the freedom to choose was both her right and a challenge. She is seventeen now; she can make decisions on her own about what is good or bad for her. Thus, she went on to fast for a day.

At first, she felt little pain in her lungs, then reeling, and gradually felt suffocated; the day passed by, but the next day, she felt a severe fever coupled with unbearable pain in her chest. The physical toll was unexpected and a reminder of the delicate balance between mind and body. Her kith and kin, all omniscient, went on advising remedies, friends, sympathizers, and doctors, and a swarm of well-wishers with their respective antidots made her life miserable.

“Meetu, take some milk”, “Meetu, take some water” Meetu, Medicine, this that, Meetu, Meetu..." *Ah!*... whom to listen and to whom not; she often dwindled between loads of concerns on wild display.

Engulfed in her reverie, Meetu had been adrift in the tranquillity of the terrace for a span of an hour and a half. The serene ambience was her silent companion until an intruding voice ended her peaceful solitude.

It was the familiar one; like any other mother concerned for her child, her mother, Aparna Devi, asked, "Meetu, there you are! How could you be so careless to stay dumb not to hear my call? I have been searching for you for a long What has gotten you, child?"

The volley of inquiries came swiftly, each layered with the unspoken fear of mother's concern and love. But much to her worries, she received no answer from Meetali.

Meetali never expected her mother at this stage. Her eyes stuck to her mother's face, wanted to wade away from the seriousness of the matter, and quietly asked- "Mom! Give me some water; I feel thirsty".

"Ok! I will get it for you, but tell me, what made you come up to the terrace? Are you crazy? Don't you remember what the doctor advised? Are you willingly inviting troubles to yourself? This time, Aparna Devi's tone was a little different than usual; unseen fears often colour our imaginations, and in the list, parents come first.

In a while, Aparna Devi went down to bring a bottle of water and some medicine stripes in hand; she came up still grumbling all the way. In order to put a break to her mother's upsetting accusations, Meetali swallowed the pills and, most importantly, the bottle of water as if she had been thirsty for years.

"Mom, do you remember? You once said, 'Fortune favors the brave.' Don't you?" Meetu whispered, yet it carried the weight of her conviction. Her eyes, bright with the fever's remnant fire, sought affirmation in her mother's gaze.

Aparna Devi paused a little to locate a long-lost thread of her memory. "Yes, my child, I did," she replied, her voice softening. "And I believe it more than ever now." She asserted with conviction.

"Come, come down with me, and remember! not to do such a blunder in future". Aparna Devi was in no mood to relent, but she never enjoyed reprimanding her child like any parent. Behind the toughness of every parent lies an ocean of love, compassion and care for their children.

Emboldened by her mother's words, Meetu regained her strength. The illness had been a crucible, testing her resolve, but she knew that the path to her dreams wouldn't be free from troubles beyond her strength to fight. It would certainly test her mettle; maybe for her entire life, she would struggle to chase. The world is not short of opportunists, though, and at this stage of her life, she was mature enough to understand that.

Days turned into weeks, and a couple of weeks later, she could gain the courage to venture out of her confines. Curious to see and know as much as she can, as if she would swallow all those before her in a morsel. She tried to learn the rhythms of the market and intricacies of negotiation; she knew simplicity was no less a barren hen all along than she had been. Travelogues taught her the tricks of sustenance, colours of perfidious smiles while on the go, and the shades of a long march that perhaps awaited her for the rest of her life.

“Don’t worry, Mom! Am fine now, a little better than the other days, please! let me stay here for some more time... I will call you if required or when I feel like going down.” Meetali pleaded before her mother for some reprieve, at least a couple of hours of being with herself on the terrace. A caged bird free from the detention seldom returns to the frames. Aparna Devi was reluctant to allow her to stay there, but her parents often succumbed to the obstinacy of children and their own love for them, so Aparna Devi said, 'Ok!'.

She went down to the ground floor, leaving Meetu alone but with a line of caution: “don’t come down alone, I will come after one hour”.

Meetali watched her mother disappear down the stairs, the sound of her footsteps fading into silence; she got back to her lost pages, gazing at the horizon where the sun was beginning to hide, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink. The terrace, her sanctuary, was live again with the chatter of returning birds. She took a deep breath before being lost in her fancies.

A faded smile flashed on her lips as if a long overdue after a prolonged illness; she laughed, thinking about some past events she shared with her friends. Memories often crawl in, claiming their relevance at unusual hours. Her eyes were still fixed on to the sky, and her heart swelled with the mixture of nostalgia and freedom.

She will be alright in a few days and shall be back with her usual chores. Well! she would probably miss her half-yearly exam, but can manage with some extra hours in her study, she thought. More than studying, friends and fun occupy prime at this stage of life, and Meetali was no different a girl not to have such thoughts. The shared moments and imagined comradeships appeared too close, and now she can plunge in.

"I will catch up," she whispered to herself, a determined glint in her eyes. "A few extra hours each day, and I will be back on track." Her illness, a mere pause in her study, she can resume afresh, and she was firm to do so. She looked up as the stars began to twinkle overhead; Meetali made a silent promise to herself. She would not let this setback define her course. She would

rise, stronger and more determined, her spirit unbroken by the trials of life. A renewed zest for life, ready to embrace all the joys and challenges that awaited her.

An hour passed unnoticed. She could hear her mother's voice calling out, gentle but firm, "Meetu, are you there? it's time." Meetali had to come to sense; she felt a little lighter now, and her mind refreshed than before. She stood up, ready to face the world below, carrying with her the peace of the terrace and the promise of return.

Back in her room, things didn't appear redundant as before. A newfound freshness in her mind brought a sense of ease with everything around her. She took her medicine, knowing that probably in a couple of days, she would be celebrating every moment in anticipation of the reunion with her friends, Mili, Rupa, Lucy, and Joseph. "Joseph! No, never; He never visited me," she quipped; maybe she was struggling not to utter that name any further. How can the world be so self-centred, she thought, remembering how she used to fondly call him *Jo*.

Mili's infectious smile, Rupa's advice, and Lucy's comforting presence have been consoling and lively experiences for her, but *Jo*!

Jo never felt like paying a visit, a shocker for her; she hardly imagined. She remembered the days when all her friends would pass comments at her and how she felt shy to see $Jo+Mi = JoMi$, scribbles of jealousy on the walls. She would willfully avoid seeing but can't deny that she enjoyed all those internally. Often, a passing remark by people connects us to the subdued sepulchres of our life, where memories lay in quiet repose, waiting for the touch of thought to revive. Each word, like a key, unlocks the gates to those fancied gardens of the past and wishes to wander amidst the shadows once we relished at ease.

We tend to roam, celebrate those sacred spaces, and converse with our former selves, scratching every now and then, nipping the buds of suffocation; solace is all we need to live a life, listening to the hushed whispers of the heart.

Meetali tried to control the quiet reflections of her mind, an obsessive effort to heal the deep wounds inflicted by the one she was pretty possessive. She tried to rest the wannabe thoughts before returning to her bed and taking a glass of milk Aparna Devi had kept for her on the table close to her bed.

Meetali reached for the glass, the warmth of the milk energizing her spine as if promising the better days ahead; slowly, she took sip after sip, letting the warmth spread through her. With each gulp, she felt the heaviness of her thoughts lighten, allowing her to breathe a little easier.

The night fell still, an ally she found in the stillness of the night; the deepening darkness no longer frightened her, no longer seemed menacing, but instead offered a blanket of anonymity to hide the uncertainties. She should let go, she thought; it's no sign of weakness, though, but an act of strength. She placed the empty glass back on the table, a silent vow she made to herself to overcome the shadows.

Meetali quietly covered herself, her mind growing calmer along with night, the progressive depth of the darkness meekly pushing her to its grip. She closed her eyes and drifted slowly to sleep. She is possessed now and no more possessive; she is free, no longer wounded, but the whole, a moment of surrender, cherished long, she is now in the cradle of absolute bliss.

Meetali slept with all her excitement about meeting her friends the next morning as informed by one of her friends about their plan to visit her the next day. She was eager to meet Jo, who would be part of the group. The morning was as usual as before, and it was 8 o'clock in the morning. They all arrived as planned. It was a reunion, and there was a celebration on everyone's mind, including how to do things and what. Every one of them had their own proposals. Seeing all her friends at once, Aparna Devi was overjoyed. She greeted them warmly while asking them to be seated in the drawing and asking them to wait; "wait here, am getting some snacks for you all" while leaving towards the kitchen and giving Meetali a call "Hey Meetu... see! All your friends are here ... get up! You have been too late. "After a while, Meetu's mother came with a bowl of *Pakoda*, which Meetali's friends usually like most. And this has been a regular affair whenever they visit her house to meet Meetali.

The savoury smell of the *Pakoda* was salivating, but Meetali was nowhere to be seen with her friends. "Mausi! Where is Meetali? Please call her. We would like to share this with her," enquired Jo. This time, Aparna Devi was a little annoyed despite her several calls; Meetali had not turned up yet to meet his friends. She went into her room to call Meetali again. Meetu, Meetu! Don't you hear my call, Meetu! And she tried to shake herself up, assuming she was in a deep sleep and was weak. Suddenly, there was a loud scream from inside, and hearing that, all visiting friends of Meetali rushed to the room. All of them had one question: "what happened Mausi?" see ... see... Meetu is not responding, replied Aparna Devi in a choked voice; all joined the chorus of calling Meetali ... Meetu... Hey! Meetu... see, am here ... Jo! But the clarion call of all around could not wake her up from slumber...

All of them stood stunned and speechless beside her bed; none of them had any desire or stuff to say, "Meetu! Can't you forgive me, Meetu? You wanted freedom, but I never knew you would

choose the absolute one. You wanted to meet your friends; they are all here, Meetu!" Aparna Devi was inconsolable while caressing Meetu's forehead and moaning and babbling.

Probably, Meetu did choose the path of absolute freedom from the sickles of expectations, doctor's dictums; the freedom she sought amidst disciplines many, at every step chain attached to the heel; the attentions she craved for, now shall no longer fill her heart with anguish, no more needs of approvers to praise her actions or deeds. She did choose to walk alone, a realm where her spirit would dance being free from the world's judgements; no longer shall she be tethered by societal demands. She has found solace in the stillness of solitude afar the horizon; her half-full dreams shall be filled by the emptiness to make it full, and the remains of the moony wishes she nourished long shall couple with the vastness of the absolute oblivion.

Bio notes:

Dr. Sachidananda Panda, an Associate Professor at XIM University in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India, has over two decades of experience in teaching and training at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He authored literary works in national and international journals that examine various facets of literature and the humanities. Beyond academia, as a poet and writer with a keen eye for life's essence, he delves deeper into the predicaments of life. His poems and fictional compositions resonate with motivational and realistic undertones and connect him to a wide array of readers.