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The Caretaker

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The mellow breeze of an old Bollywood song wafted through the yellow-tinged dusk as Maala leaned against the window sill caressing her coffee. She looked around to find its source and noticed the partly closed door of the school opposite her house. The song was coming from there. Someone staying in the school? Weird. Or a late-night practice for some students' show? 'Ye mera prem patr padhkar ki tum naaraz na hona...' Nah, that can't be part of any show. She drew the blinds and walked inside. At the door, she turned once again. A portly middle-aged man was sitting inside the room. He wore a khaki shirt and shorts.

"Sometimes some government officials put up in schools. You know schools in India can double up as a lot of things – election booth, calamity camp, guest house... must be one of those guys, fond of old Hindi songs, probably caressing a peg of rum too," her husband said when she mentioned it to him the next day.

'Mere sapno ki raani kab aayegi tu...' She loved that song. This was the third day she was hearing songs at night from the school. It was quite romantic – catching melodies scattered in the air while she drank her hot black coffee. The khakhi image of the man who played these songs stuck with her. Some days, she would see him sitting idly on a chair in one of the classrooms listening to the songs, while on the others he would be strolling in the front yard of the school.

One day she had her coffee half an hour earlier – around 6:30 p.m. – and she saw him watering plants in the school yard. So he was the schools' watchman-cum-gardener-cum-caretaker! She watched him as he watered the plants, sheared a few branches here and there – oblivious to anyone noticing him. He looked in his fifties – pot-bellied, balding – and he seemed in love with the plants. She decided to watch him properly that night – at the same time wondering whether he had been around all this time and she had missed him, or if he had recently been transferred here after the much-publicised reshuffle of grade D government employees in the state. After watering the plants and chipping and embellishing a few branches here and there, he opened the classroom in which he usually played his songs. He switched on the tubelight, disappeared inside the room for a few minutes as he started the music, and then settled on his perch to listen to Kishore Kumar. 'Kuch toh log kahenge, logon ka kaam hai kehna...' She watched him shake his head and drum his fingers in tune with the music. She realised she was humming along – and for a brief moment, she felt liberated, free from the prison she had to call her home. The darkness that she was forced to recline in, the depression that threatened to take her away with it every day, a group of people united by blood but separated by their own walls, the emotionless, drab existence of her everyday life, punctuated only by the coffee break with old Hindi melodies. And the not-so-stranger caretaker. She felt like walking across the road to sit and listen to the songs with this man. But her father-in-law's voice broke her bliss – "Maala, where's my tea?" She felt violated at having to let go of her quality time with her school caretaker. Her caretaker. The caretaker of her sanity.

Her coffees became incomplete without the accompaniment of the caretaker's choice music. Occasionally, when the school had a holiday on Fridays or Mondays, the man would not be seen for the whole extended weekend. She guessed his family and home were outside the city – perhaps even outside the district. Initially, she felt morose on such days, but then she began playing old Bollywood songs on her mobile phone. But there was something unpredictable and mystical in listening to the songs someone else played.

A year must have passed – or more, Maala wasn't sure – since the caretaker's music became a permanent part of her evenings. The urban local body election of her ward was held in the school. Maala's husband couldn't understand why she was fidgeting so much before the polling.

“Are you okay, sweetheart? What's the matter? This isn't your first vote...”

“Nah, nothing. I'm just worried that lunch will be delayed today because I'm going out to vote.”

“Silly girl. That's okay. Not like you're doing anything personal and not making lunch.”

She did not really care about what will happen to the lunch. She was finally going to see her music player (it sounds funny, I know, but that was what he was to her) up close. Would he smile at her if she smiled at him? Would she be able to make small talk with him while she stood in the polling queue? Would I even be able to see him!? What if he has been sent away on holiday like so many other staff members? Of course she was fidgety.

As she entered the school premises, she noticed the beautiful plants he had been tending to. A gentle fragrance of jasmine pervaded the air. Rose, bougainvillea, jungle geraniums, periwinkle and hibiscus adorned the school compound; ornamental plants like orchids and flowering cacti stood proud and smiling; non-flowering shrubs like crotons and red *Alternanthera* waved to their own music. Did the songs help the gardener in nourishing these plants? Or, did it boost the growth of the plants? She was mesmerised – and did not realise her turn to vote had come.

“Madam, you next,” someone behind her pointed out. She walked inside disorientated, pressed her vote for the candidate who had a flower as his symbol, and walked out.

There, right in front of her, carrying glasses of water on a tray, was her caretaker. A smile bloomed on her lip instantly – she waited for the man to look at her, say something to her – she ached to ask his name. But he did not even notice her. He carried the tray into a room of poll officials and disappeared from her view. She walked forward when her husband came calling for her.

She was morose for the rest of the day. The next day, and for a few more days, there was no music from the school. Her gardener wasn't around as the school had closed for summer holidays. She waited for him with a cup of coffee every evening, for two weeks. After two weeks, she saw someone in khakhi tending to the plants in the school. It was not her portly uncle. She felt restless, agitated.

She could wait no more. She hesitatingly walked out of her house and across the road to the school. She ignored her father-in-laws screams after her. When the gates creaked as she tried to enter the school, the gardener turned and looked at her enquiringly.

“Where... uh... is the previous gardener? The portly man?” she mumbled.

“Oh, Bairappa. He left, madam. He is retired. He has gone back to his family in Davangere,” the new gardener said.

There. His name was Bairappa. He lives in Davangere. And he was around 60 years old. He didn't look that old. And now he was gone. He would never even know that she noticed him.

“Did you know him, madam?”

“Uh... yes... no. Nothing.”

She walked back home. It was tea time.

About the Author : Namitha Varma is a media professional based in Mangaluru, India. She is a voracious reader, a music enthusiast and an opinionated social observer. She has publishing credits in over 15 literary journals including Sahitya Akademi’s journal Indian Literature (May/June 2014), eFiction India, Hackwriters, MadSwirl, Spark The Magazine, Writers Asylum, Manushi, FIVE Poetry, A Story in 100 Words, Postcard Shorts and Microfiction Monday Magazine. Her micropoem was read out on NPR Radio as part of the National Poetry Month 2014, and a poem of hers features in the Authorspress anthology ‘Resonating Strings’. She blogs on narcissistwrites.blogspot.com and tweets via @namithavr.