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Aftertaste

By Tushar Rai

There was no aftertaste. No lingering sense of smell either. Maanas sighed. His torso fell back as if it had got bored of the constant need of a perfect straight posture. There was almost never a slouch in his gait. Whenever his urge for sitting at ease tried to manifest itself, an elusive neuron of his unsuspecting mind would bring forth words of his mother: "Manu! Good gait, good Shani." As to why a God would be bothered about his posture, he had no idea. But then, with mothers, these topics are not normally up for discussion. His upper body now rested against leather bound, red-dyed lounger. It was placed purposefully by the glass window overlooking the 'Nariman Lane' which was being lashed by a long session of slithering rain. His view of the street was shared – at least in parts – by others sitting on other loungers stacked up neatly in a line. The loungers would have been perfectly identical but for the vagaries of life exhibited in forms of multicolored stains, random scratches and little dangling shreds that seemed to give them sort of a flawed identity.

A bowl of mixed-fruit custard lay in front of him with a silver spoon. He didn't like mixed-fruit custard, but that didn't stop him from coming to the café every Wednesday at 13:14 pm and ordering it. It was always his first order. Attempts, since that day, at salvaging that horrendous taste always fell flat. Today was no different. That day was June 24th 2009. It was a Wednesday. It was an ordinary day- the sultry sun made people mad; pigeons crammed themselves in remote corners of old buildings and ants got trampled by dust-smitten shoes and high platform sandals- except that Maanas had lost few of his senses. Mixed-fruit custard was the last thing he ate before it happened; it was the last flavor he remembered.

The café lied almost on the intersection of the marine drive that ran parallel to the south-west coast of Mumbai and the 'Nariman lane' that connected the inner recesses of the city to the sea. There was one window in the café from which a narrow stretch of sea waters was visible and Maanas was looking out of it. The sudden roughness of the sea attracted his attention. It was as if it picked up a muted suggestion from the rain, which intensified. Waves splashed against a five feet wide concrete wall that separated the adjoining side walk from the sea. The wall ran alongside the marine drive, not leaving its side till the Raj Bhavan. The Chief Minister lived there. Raj Bhavan had a beautiful triangular shaped garden overlooking the sea. The grass of the garden was getting drenched too along with the casual bystander on the sidewalk. The immediate fate of the garden or the bystander was not even the last thing on Maanas' mind. What occupied his mind was a certain kind of displeasure. The kind, that arises out of a sense of loss. He missed the dastardly taste of mixed-fruit custard. He missed any kind of taste for that matter.

The rain made a racket, while Maanas was quiet. His view shifted to the steel fork that was lying on its own on the edge of the table which was draped with a plain red cloth. He picked it up and brought it down slowly to the table, allowing it to rest on one of its teeth. He then slowly loosened his grip leaving just his forefinger on the edge of the handle. The result seemed to please him. The fork was now precariously supported between his stout forefinger and its leftmost tooth that pressed against the table. He then rotated the fork with his thumb. After about three rotations, he gripped the fork; picked it up and brought it down swiftly on the back of his left hand. The fork's teeth pierced his soft tissue just below the webbing of his forefinger and middle finger. Blood oozed out. He watched it casually and increased the pressure. Fork ruptured the skin and found

its way deeper in the flesh like birthday candles sliding in a freshly baked cake. After a few moments, he released the fork as it lay embedded on the back of his hand. He picked up a few tissues, removed the fork and pressed the tissues against the puncture wounds. He didn't enjoy messing up the table cloth. He had a thing for cleanliness but then; he had to make sure. He had to ascertain whether his sense of touch had returned.

"How does it feel?" steady words said in a low pitched voice found their way to Maanas through a slew of steady murmur. He was startled. It was as if he were walking down a crowded street and someone had suddenly confided about their tabooed, dirty secret in a hushed voice before disappearing into an endless barrage of nameless faces. He looked to his right to find a girl reading a book with blue cover. Even with his minor eye affliction, he could still make out the word "Joyce" written in black on the bottom of its blue cover. Of all the tables in "The Royal Cardigan", hers was the only one that had a favorable viewing angle to witness his escapades.

That can't be right,

I was sure the table was empty. When did she come?

Maanas was at one end nestled against the bottle green wall and the entrance was at the opposite end of the café.

There is no way I could have missed her.

He was trying to make sense of it. He looked at her again. She looked a tad older than what she appeared to be at first. She cut the picture of a book worm oblivious to her surrounding. His raised eye brows went back to their original positions and he went back to soaking tissues with his blood.

"How did it feel?" There was that whisper again. He turned his head almost instantaneously to find the girl looking at him, except that the girl now had the features of a woman in her mid thirties. He turned to the window pane, to catch a glimpse of his own reflection. His faint reflection reflected the same features that he last remembered.

"What do you mean?" he finally said.

She pointed at the fork smeared with red.

Maanas shrugged.

"When we are cut, we bleed and then comes the pain," He said.
"Hmm, but that's not what I asked," she said. "How does it feel to stick a fork in your hand? Deep enough to bleed and watch it casually as it is happening to someone else."

"I feel like all other creatures of flesh and blood," he replied.

"How can you be sure?"

"Of what?"

"That you feel what everyone else feels and that everyone feels the same." She

said.

Does she know?

He dismissed the thought almost immediately. He had not told anyone; not even his girlfriend. Neither did this small albeit weird cosmic event flutter any feathers. It did not make the news nor did it find its way in rumours or folklore of old men and housewives. He woke up one Wednesday, to find his senses missing. It was as simple as that. There was no fever, cold or even a single ailment out of the ordinary. He had a full body check-up. The results were normal. His doctor's face didn't twitch when he told him that he was in perfect condition. This was his secret, or perhaps it shouldn't be categorized as a secret. A secret requires the involvement of at least one confidant or at the very least; an action which weighs either on conscience or on the pervasive human nature of letting people in on a curious event. Even then it wouldn't be a secret. A secret needs to see the light of the day; it needs to be shaped with words that warn against spreading them. A secret sometimes also needs a denial. Maanas, under this unexpected scrutiny by a woman who read Joyce, was on the verge of giving birth to a secret. He was going to acknowledge that he indeed felt pain as was the way of all creatures and deny the fact that he didn't.

"I don't feel pain." He said.

"You mean you have an unnatural threshold of pain," she said.

"No, I mean, I don't feel pain at all. I don't feel anything."

The woman who read Joyce was silent. Maanas couldn't help observing her. He looked at her like a watchmaker would look at an antique clock with intent to retrace its journey through its passage in time, being interested more in the journey rather than make and form of the clock. Even with that intent, her beauty was undeniable. Apart from the mild traces of crow's feet at the end of her oyster shaped eyes, there was nothing in her face that had been claimed by withering youth. The message on her black polo neck t-shirt read "Like ice Like fire". There was silhouette of a man holding a guitar fitted with a harmonica on the front. She wore a red and white bracelet on her left hand that rested on her thigh. The red checkered bracelet was shaped in form of semi circular twin dragons joined at the head and tail. Something about that atypical bracelet that rested against her dark blue stone-washed jeans arrested his attention. The original purpose of his observation seemed lost somewhere in between her looks and clothes.

"Do you like what you see?" She asked.

"Huh?"

"I got it from a monastery in Leh." She said circling her bracelet with her index finger.

"Oh yeah, it's a curious thing," he said.

"Curious thing," she repeated.

"At least you still have it in you to appreciate the deviant." She said.

"Yeah, thankfully the gift of sight and sound were not amongst the ones lost"

“Amongst ones?” She sounded perplexed “What else did you lose?”

“I can’t smell either.” He said.

“Wow that’s fantastic.” Her iris gleamed in excitement or may be it was the neon light reflected from one of the cars passing by on to her iris.

Maanas was not sure whether she was mocking him or that she found his predicament amusing. Perhaps she was one of those people who loved imagining themselves in other people’s shoes and enjoy their misfortunes and assets in the same vein. He was not one to gather sympathy or even empathy but her reaction felt like a derisive contemptuous jab at his station. He felt an anger swelling somewhere within him.

“Am sorry! Its just that I use the Mumbai local train to travel. A loss of sense of smell would be amazing in this sultry weather. You know, traveling in a compartment full of sweating people. It would deprive me of the obnoxious odor” She said apologetically, almost reading his mind.

Maanas was still barely controlling his anger from exhibiting any sharp reactions. “It is what is it is” he muttered under his breath. He picked up a glass of water and drank it slowly. It seemed to calm him.

“Do you like mixed-fruit custard?” He asked.

“Not particularly.” She replied.

“Taste it.” He offered her the bowl.

“Well?”

“It’s awful,” she said after having a spoon fill.

“I hate it too, not just the way it’s made here. I hate everything about it, the way it’s prepared, the way fruits are diced in a thick milky liquid and its taste. It’s just absurd; absurd, just like the name of this place. The difference being that a name is something that is thought of and ascribed to an entity. If that entity is a restaurant and the name ascribed to it is “The Royal Cardigan”, one can comprehend the absurdity of this name-assignment and the stupidity of the people involved in giving such a name to a place like this. A custard, however is a different proposition altogether. One can’t pronounce judgment just on the basis of its name or how it looks. Sure you can use the looks to make a strong point but the basis of your hate, distaste –whatever you might choose to call it- has got to be, taste. I don’t need my taste buds to know that ‘The Royal Cardigan’ is a stupid name but I sure darn need it to bash that little inconsequential thought that brought mixed-fruit custard into existence. I know it tastes awful, I just know it but without my taste

Maanas voice tapered away as his fingers curled inwards and made a fist.

“So you need your taste buds to make a point?” She retorted

Maanas shook his head. He picked up a menu card, went over and sat across her.

“Look at this, tell me what you see.” He said, almost shoving the menu card in

her hands.

“I can see Chicken Cordon blue under main course which am very tempted to order. Oh! there is death by chocolate too!” She said.

Maanas still couldn't get over the feeling that she was mocking him but by now he had crossed the line of silent retreat.

“You know what I see! I see words spewed in fancy colors and fonts. That's all there is in it for me. For me, lobster is something I chew and soup is something I swallow without moving my jaws too much. I can't have fish without bleeding profusely from my mouth. When I stick my head out of a moving train, my clothes flutter but I don't feel anything. I don't even feel the wind. Isn't the blowing wind one of the most basic source of sensual pleasure? You know I have not even shaved on my own since it happened. I wouldn't know the right amount of pressure required for a normal clean shave. It would be as easy to peel off a layer of skin from my neck while shaving as I strip a potato with a knife and I still wouldn't feel anything.” Maanas said as he let out a dry chuckle.

“I am a person who loved to travel. Sights of new places filled me with new zeal, it recharged my spirits. It made me realize that my world doesn't just involve waking up to 7 am alarm, rushing to office and returning home after an eleven-hour slug fest and that my life is not just about a monotonous routine where everything seems planned in advance.” Maanas paused to have some more water.

“A new place surprises you by its mere existence. Stumbling upon one is like a chance encounter, a reminder of the inherent randomness of life and a temporary departure from the skewed view about life. A view that says that we are born and we live eventually to die.” He said after finishing his glass full of water.

“But, isn't that the truth?” She asked.

“Truth? What is truth? Everything around us is in a state of flux. Things which change can't be the truth. Death is more of an absolute eventuality rather than truth. Isn't truth supposed to deliver us from fear and teach us how to live? Does death do that? Life in itself is the truth. Our journey on this earth starts and finishes but life goes on. We happen to life rather than life happening to us. And what is life without experiences? We exist to experience. Take senses away from a man and you'll find a man without purpose, a man without spirit. Every place will look the same to him. Just another monstrosity made of concrete filled with people caught in a monotonous, dreary routine.” Maanas went silent; his face was that of a man trying hard to excavate something from deeper corners of his mind.

“You know,” he continued. “I used to think at least subconsciously, that how a place looks is all there is to it. It has actually more to do with its smell. How a place smells is something we overlook. It's hard to see two places as different, otherwise. Have you ever been to Varanasi?”

“No, I haven't.” She replied.

“The river Ghats there have a distinct smell. Without that, sitting on the Ghats of Ganga is not the same. It's not much different from sitting at the edge of a lake. The implicit knowledge that you can always inhale slowly to catch a whiff of the

place and that you can run your fingers over grains, blade of grass or, or a moss ridden wall whenever you want, goes a long way in making an experience authentic. “

“I always used to think that sense of smell was expendable. “She remarked.

“That’s because we are so used to it that for us it almost doesn’t exist. We need it for breathing. It’s almost always functional. We are always conscious of our sight. Close your eyes turn around and open your eyes again and your world changes. Same goes for sense of hearing. Our experience of here and now will change if I dropped a fork on the floor. Our experience of odors and aroma is much more subtle. We only become conscious of it in situations of sudden outbreak of sharp odor.”

“Like traveling in a local train full of sweaty people,” she chuckled with a hint of mischief in her eyes.

All this while, when Maanas was talking about his predicament, he had lost sight of her. He did not loose sight of her in a factual sense rather he lost track of the relation between her features and the fact that those features made her beautiful. Now when he was finished, the reality and meaning of those features dawned upon him. The perception of her in his mind was starting to take form. He saw it coming before even he could revel in the beauty of that perception. He knew, she was not just beautiful but was beautiful to him too. Her smile had triggered something. He didn’t know about its shape or form but he felt it in his veins. A sense of discomfort overcame him. He knew this feeling. The core of it was not physical in nature. He thought of his girlfriend. He felt like leaning back and resting against the recliner. Suddenly, almost on instinct, he looked down to find a leg stroking his inner thigh. He shot a look at her. She had an unperturbed look of a shepherd counting his sheep. Her expression revolted against everything that was happening under the table. Maanas swung his right hand. It struck his half-filled glass of water. The glass flew off a tangent, found a window pane in its way and got smashed to pieces.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” Blood rose till his eyes. “What gives you the fucking right? What?”

“Maanas!” She let out a plea and placed her hands over his.

“Go away! Leave!” Maanas screamed, momentarily stopping the steady murmur of ‘The Royal Cardigan’.

“Maanas” She pleaded again.

“Wait! I never told you my name. Who are you? Who the hell are you?”

He stormed out of the cafe, the woman who read Joyce followed; after leaving behind a few bills on the table. He was now heading towards the sea. His five foot eleven frame was pacing heftily with scant regard to the rain, and the overflowing drain which was the source of a steady stream of muddy water that flew down the slope towards the city wreaking havoc on the messy but peaceful world of stray cans, tissue papers and polythene bags. The rain continued to fall and the lnd pasta lane by now was flooded by umbrellas. They were everywhere and in every possible colors - Green, blue, black, blue, green, black, blue, blue. Finding some meaning or pattern in an otherwise random occurrence of umbrellas of a particular color might have been one of those pleasurable activities with no tangible benefits, but then no one had the time, apart from the

ATM security guard who was killing him by making circles in the little puddle in front of him with his boot. The heavy rain seemed to have brought some semblance of uniformity to the chaotic randomness of south Bombay but no amount of rain could have washed away the chaos and turmoil in Maanas mind. He was swaying to and fro to avoid the umbrella spikes, of which he had a phobia. It was probably the only thing that he feared, apart from death. He took a right after reaching the intersection of Nariman lane and Marine drive. Sight of a wooden bench stopped him. He sat on it and held his head in between his palms.

How did she know my name? It's not possible.

Did she say my name?

Maanas was sure he had heard her speak and saw her lips move in perfect coherence to spell out his name. He had learned to trust his remaining two senses even more. Still, things didn't seem right. He remembered that he thought of his girlfriend in the café. His hands frisked for his phone over the left pocket of his blue denim. It wasn't there.

Maanas was one of those people for whom habits tended to quickly morph into second nature. His tendency to put mobile phone into his left denim pocket was one of them. In the slipstream of life, major events are at times shaped by the presence of an aberration or a triviality in the time line of the event. Without that aberration, the eventuality would be far different and in the context of the original event, trivial. An extra lingering moment spent in savoring a ginger tea in an otherwise normal routine might lead to a chain of events that are unrelated but occur nonetheless. The aftermath of those events might cost some people; time, if they're caught in a traffic jam and it might cost some; their lives, if they happen to be in that place of death at that very precise moment. Our grip on reality is similar in that regard – It gets affected by a trivial event that seems unrelated at first. The absence of mobile phone was one of those events. Maanas grip on reality was loosening by the moment. He didn't know her; he didn't understand how did she know his name; he couldn't fathom why she reminded him of his girlfriend and his phone was not where it was supposed to be. He fumbled for his phone in other pockets. He finally found it in the inner pocket of his suede jacket. He pressed one till the name "Jane" flashed on the screen. Maanas waited. Her phone was switched off. He was unnerved. He left a voice mail asking her to call him back. He had met Jane four years before his misfortune happened. They had been going out for more than three years. She was a field reporter working in one of the local news channels. He hated the fact that he didn't have any of her colleague's number. He clinched his fist and looked at the sea. It was violent, vast and familiar.

"Are you what you seem?" he said looking at the sea. No one heard him. The rain made sure of it.

"It is what it is."

Those were not his words though. He was sure he had not uttered them.

"I paid for the glass," the words came from behind him, probably from the bench behind him that was joined to his and faced the opposite side. It was her.

"You," he exclaimed.

“Hmm,”

“How did you know my name?” he asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Leave me alone.” He said

“I’m worried about you,”

“I’m doing well with my sight and sound. Thanks!” He said.

“You know it’s more than that,”

“What are you talking about?” He said.

“Let me help you,”

“I don’t need your kind of help,” He said

“That was sudden, but I....” her voice faded away in the rain.

“Don’t you see,” he said. “A person like me is beyond help.”

“I guess I was just born under a bad sign,” he continued “to be turned into a man of two senses. Mebbe, its freakin’ evolution. Who knows? Science says that I am normal; healthy even. As perfect specimen of anatomy and metabolism as they come. Yet here I am, sitting on this bench under this downpour like it were a beautiful November evening with clear skies tainted by a few deft strokes of crimson-red near the horizon. There is something wrong with this picture. Huh! Even that sounds ironical. Pic-ture. You know your life is not your own when even innocent metaphors about your own life fall flat. ‘Life is a metaphor’ now who said that?”

Maanas had no instincts left whatsoever - that latent ability that makes sense of subtle movements, odors, direction of the breeze, dilation of pupils, breathing patterns in a fleeting moment and urges the body to act even before the mind can begin to comprehend as to why the body acted on its own accord. Even without his instincts, he couldn’t get over the feeling that she was smiling under his breath. He sighed. His heart sped normally. There was no anger coming forth. His situation was amusing, laughable even, perfect for a weird plot. He had now accepted the consequences of his disposition. The present had marked the end of his struggles with his past and culminated in a kind of muted despair, one that does not revolt against ridicule or mocking, one that is born out of acceptance- An acceptance of one’s frailties and of one’s shortcomings. His curiosity had turned morbid and pale. It was as if he had decided that his curiosity was expendable. He knew that from this point on his life would just be a succession of three dimensional images that will choose to speak at random times. He despaired with a sense of calm and was calm in his despair.

“Maanas,”

He turned around quickly to find the woman who read Joyce looking back at him. He was disappointed.

Why was I sure it was Jane?

He looked at his phone there were no calls from her. He turned around to face the sea again.

“Do you like movies?” She asked

“Yeah,” he said dryly.

“Tell me one you have watched and enjoyed recently,”

“I saw Shawshank,” he said.

“Does it get better with every viewing?”

“Hmm,”

“What did you like about it?” She asked.

“The portrayal of hope and how it lingers somehow in the human heart even under a cloud of despair. “Maanas stopped as if to find a perfect combination of words.

“And how the character is grounded. He doesn’t have whims or fancies about freedom. He knows exactly how hard the task is. His grip on the harsh reality while carrying hope is inspiring.”

“Hmm, it’s a good movie.” She said.

“Do you think you would have enjoyed the movie as much if you had to share the same environment as the characters in the movie?” She asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if you watched the movie not from behind the screen, but as a part of the movie itself,” she said.

“No, I guess I wouldn’t have” he replied.

“Why?”

“Because of the prison conditions, the heat, the stench.”

“but would all that have mattered to you now?” she asked.

“No, I guess am just speaking for normal human beings, unlike me,” he said.
“But why are you asking me all this?”

“No reason, just trying to have a conversation.”

“Wait,” He said suddenly. “Are you trying to suggest that I’m better off without senses because they bring pain and discomfort along with them?”

The woman who read Joyce was silent.

“We are not as configurable as we think we are. The good comes with the bad. The origin of something good comes from its inherent flaws or drawbacks. It's not optional. My sense of smell, taste and touch is what makes me human. I would gladly accept pain if I could feel again, smell life again.” He said. “But how would you know? No one can.”

“I disagree.” The woman who read Joyce cut him short.

Maanas' lips twitched as if he wanted to say something, but he didn't.

“Whatever you lost, reminds you of your mortality but it does not define you as a human being.” She said.

“But aren't we all mortals?” he retorted.

“We are in essence, but so is everything and every one that breathes, walks and eats food to survive. We don't just have a skin we live in; we also possess ideals and objectives. We have the faculty of speech, we can rationalize, we have the capacity to start wars and inspire millions. We have the ability to take our lives on a whim or protect other's life by sacrificing our own.” She said.

“Huh! What good are goals and objectives if one can't enjoy the basic pleasures of life?”

“What are the basic pleasures of life? Haven't you heard Mozart or Bach or Dylan or Fateh Ali Ahan or Ali Farka Toure? Haven't you seen a dole of doves in distant horizon? Haven't you ever allowed your consciousness to diffuse away into the night while sleeping under a starry sky? You tell me that all places seem the same to you and the concept of place is lost on you. But its not. There are these places of the mind you know – different, unique, and pleasurable. Places where no-one intrudes. Places where biases are rendered powerless. Places where society doesn't hold any sway. Places for which routes can't be traced. But you also know they are still there. That's because you have been there many times. Like the last time when you heard 'Nessun Dorma' or first few notes of 'Andante' or when you witnessed the final scene of “Cinema Paradiso” or saw the carefree smile of a child who found a washed away paper boat. You've been there. You still go there. Places that we are carried to, on notes of a symphony or by a fleeting moment of beauty.” She said.

Maanas watched her lips move as the rain abated. He didn't need whatever he didn't have for her words to sink in. He knew his struggles were struggles against his lack of a sense of mortality. It was just that somewhere along the way he forgot that whatever he was left with was an untainted potential for purity of existence, thought and purpose, a potential that was not shadowed by concerns of survival heightened by discomfoting experiences resulting from sense of touch, taste and smell. He was offered an opportunity to achieve something remarkable, an opportunity to live with his mind without the harsh reminders of his mortality and of his physical being. Her words had lightened up a little corner of his heart. The effect of her words would have perforated his being further if it were not for an uneasy feeling, a feeling which surfaced at the sight of her hair.

There was something about the way her hair fell on her shoulders that reminded him of a wooden lodge. It also reminded him of a stray sign lying in a garden that read “Only for kids”. This made him uneasy.

What was that place?

Maanas pondered over the nature of the imageries in his mind triggered by her hair.

She rose, came around and sat next to him.

Who are you?

Maanas queried his deep rooted memories for an answer. He allowed his consciousness to dip deep into the sea of his swirling memories. He felt, he had not visited them for a long time. Soon, images stormed his mind. They were stills of curled locks drenched in sweat, of dragon bracelets, of entwined legs, of red lips and of clothes lying on the wooden floor with a food menu nestled in between them.

The menu,

Brown in! the menu said Brown inn! but,

But That's not possible!

The thought jolted him. He went to the brown inn with Jane 3 years ago.

"What's not possible?" She asked after hearing him mumble.

"No! Nothing." He said while trying to remember Jane's face.

"Maanas, there is no way I can put myself in your shoes. All I am trying to tell you is that it's not all that bad. Your life now is like life at the movies, except that you are in it. With no reminders of mortality, you might be able to overcome one of the greatest obstacles of human existence- coherence of thought and action. "She said.

"Do you enjoy sex anymore?" She asked. "You know, with Fermones and all apart from the obvious."

He didn't reply.

Sex, when did I have Sex?

He couldn't remember. He thought of Jane again but all he got in his mind was a body draped in red knee-length cocktail dress.

Why can't I remember how she looks like?

He became restless.

When did I last see her?

No answer was forthcoming.

How does a rose smell like?

No answer.

How does it look like?

Nothing,

It's her

A voice spoke in his head. It was becoming harder for him by the moment to dismiss the possibility. He searched for Jane again in his memories. He saw a faceless figure again. He kept looking at it until it started developing features. It was as if a sketch artist in his mind suddenly sprung into action from a long deep slumber.

It's her

The voice spoke again. The face was visible now. It was looking back at her.

"Can I use your phone?" he asked her.

"Oh, it's switched off. Guess the rain got to it." She replied.

She's Jane

Maanas smiled.

"Maanas, you remember me now?" She said as she reached out and placed her palm on the side of his face and her fingers curled slowly behind his neck.

He couldn't feel her fingers but his own heartbeat was not lost on him. It was picking up. Something about the present, the bench, the sea and the rain felt exalted. He was like an artist whose muddled painting has been taken off the stand and replaced by a fresh canvas.

How long? How long has it been?

His face was devoid of any conflicts now. He placed his hand on hers as he brought his lips closer to hers.

His phone, which was resting on the bench in the space between them, was vibrating. A name flashed intermittently on its display. It said 'Jane.'

Thirty-year-old **Tushar Rai** was born in Varanasi, India. He was in IT for seven years before leaving to pursue writing. His stories reflect a common man's constant quest for an elusive purpose and his desperate effort to reconcile his purpose with his social responsibilities.

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