

It was a cold winter night, and the gushing rains were accompanied by lightning and thunderstorms. Certainly not the best time to be anywhere outside, but Vikram's predicament was even worse.

A mechanical engineer with a construction company, he was returning back to his hotel room from an important project that had to be launched in the next few months. He was known for his extreme commitment to work, and he spent the entire day at the site in spite of it being a Sunday. Work always came before his comforts, and he had already forgone the last two Sundays.

However, tonight he wished he had taken the day off. There was no way he could have driven a foot further, the gusty winds and rain lashed at the Mahindra Bolero, and the visibility outside was next to none. Vikram decided to push his luck and drove further, relying entirely on his gut, after all he had driven along these roads enough times during the span of the project. But even the brave succumb to the fury of nature, and he decided to take shelter along the tea estate bungalow which lay a few hundred meters from where he was.

The estate bungalow was a beautiful sight along the way, and he always wondered who stayed there. Usually, there wasn't a soul around the premises, and the bungalow looked old and worn down. He wondered if anyone ever stayed there.

Mustering his courage, and fighting the odds, he managed to push himself to the limit and climbed up the road that led to the gate of the bungalow. He hardly expected anyone to guard the gate at such a god-forsaken hour. He was right, the gate was unguarded, and was partially open. But all around there was pitch darkness, and the only sign of the bungalow was a faded glimmer of light which appeared at the distance. He ran for dear life, the weather was getting more ferocious, and the storm was howling with the fury of a thousand demons. Finally, he reached to what resembled the entrance of the bungalow.

There was light inside the house, but it brightened only one room, which appeared to be a large room. As he stopped at the doorstep, the chilling cold took over and he began shivering feverishly. The wet overcoat didn't seem to help too much.

He had to get in, and with the desperation he rushed to the door and began knocking. When there wasn't any response, he knocked incessantly with intensity. Just when he was about to give up and faint with exasperation, Vikram heard the latch give way and the door slide open.

"Who are you? And why are you banging at the door?!!" shouted a lady's voice from the other end.

"Sorry ma'am, I'm Vikram, an engineer at the Gauri-Prayaag dam project. I was driving on my way to my hotel. The condition outside is bad, and I had to take refuge somewhere. Can you please accommodate me till the rains subside?"

He sounded genuine and he looked the part. She opened the door and led him in to the room that was dimly lit and warm with the heat of the fire-place. "Wait here", she ordered before rushing in to an adjacent room. "Here, is a towel. In the meanwhile I'll fix you a hot drink".

After drying himself and taking the overcoat off, Vikram approached the fire place to derive some heat; the room was colder than outside even with the hearth. He felt some relief near the hearth and took a proper look of the room.

The living room was spacious, and had an old world English charm to it, probably built during the British era, he gauged by the architecture. By the fire place was a large bookshelf filled with an assortment of books, which looked old. The kind of books you would inherit, not read, he thought.

Before he could explore any further, he was interrupted by the lady of the house. "I see you are back on your feet! Please seat yourself while I pour hot tea for you. The tea is from the estate and is the best you can have in this part of the world."

The tea lived up to her claims, and he felt much relaxed after a few sips. Taking another sip, he looked towards the lady who was fixing another tea for herself. The lady was slender and well shaped, and could have been in her 30s. She was very fair, almost pale, and had the appearance of an English woman. She is probably an Anglo-Indian, he thought. He wondered if she was alone at home.

“Herbert, our caretaker has taken ill, and here I’m alone.” , she interrupted his thoughts, almost reading his mind.

“Sorry for being rude earlier, a lady alone has to be on her guards”.

“On the contrary ma’am, thank you for hosting me and for the wonderful tea.”

“Ahh, my pleasure. John is particularly fond of this tea, and took a box of these with him to London!” , she exclaimed.

“Who is John?”

“John is my husband, he is in London on official duty. But I tell you, he loves this estate and this place more than anything else, and he can’t wait to get back. And so can’t I” , she ended the sentence with a smile.

But the smile seemed to conceal a grief, and her eyes had a hint of sadness.

“So when is he coming back? If I may ask” , he asked with a little hesitation.

“He has to attend to some official matters in New York. He is on his way to New York by the Atlantic from Liverpool which departed on the 20th of March. I believe there is also a stopover in Ireland.”

Is on his way? Its 2nd April today! Even with the stop over, he should have reached New York. He wanted to probe further, but he didn’t know if it was right of him to ask.

“I hope you are feeling better Vikram. How about another cup of tea?”

“No, Thank you ma’am. You’ve been very generous. May I ask you something?” he asked before putting the cup down.

“What is it?”

“I don’t usually see anyone around this place as I drive down to the project site.”

“Ah well, we don’t have too many visitors.”

“I was an orphan. John and I first met in Simla, where I was a nurse. When we declared our intention of marrying, John’s parents vehemently opposed to the alliance. After all, he belonged to an aristocratic family, and they wouldn’t have expected anyone less regal.”

“And well, John defied them and married me, cutting all ties with his family. We haven’t heard from them ever since”, she sighed.

“We had to start from scratch, and build up our lives. John is a resilient man you know. He is also a very generous man, and is popular with the locals here.”

“Yes it’s never easy under those circumstances”, he empathized.

“Anyways, I keep myself busy with the gardening and sketching. Here is something I was working on.” she said before extending a small piece of paper with a sketch on it to him.

“Beautiful! Amazing, it’s almost lifelike!” he was amused. *Something is very familiar about this sketch!*

“You can keep that. It’s getting late now”, she interrupted “You need rest Vikram. You look tired”.

She led him across the hallway which was very dark, save for the room they entered that was brightened by the full moon light.

“This is the guest room and it hasn’t been used for a while. I’ve cleaned up the room for you though. I hope you find it comfortable for the night.”

“Good night Vikram. Have a good night’s rest”

“I will ma’am. Thank you and good night”, he added before she left.

He sunk himself on the soft bed and felt relieved. After an exhausting day of sorts, and the tempestuous weather, the bed felt like the lap of luxury. But somehow the lady’s thoughts never left his mind. There was something amiss, he could feel it, and he couldn’t say what. He kept thinking about her,

her husband. He felt pity for her, her loneliness, but there was something else about her which bothered him.

He brushed it off eventually. *Maybe I'm just imagining things. Besides, she has been generous to a stranger. If it wouldn't have been for her, I would have been stranded outside.*

Maybe I should think of something else. He diverted his mind to the project, and the launch plans and soon sleep prevailed.

He woke up with a start, gasping for breath, beads of sweat trickled down his throat. *What a cryptic dream, no! ghoulisn nightmare was it!* He trembled at his very thoughts. It was cold and yet his body perspired from the fear of his own imagination. *Whats going on with me?*

His throat was parched, and he needed water to calm down. He guzzled down half the jug of water, dripping some over his body, before calming down and heaving a sigh of relief.

He glanced at his wrist watch, it read ten minutes past ten. *But that's impossible!*. Then he realized the seconds hand wasn't moving. *It must have stopped working when I entered the house. It was half past nine when I left the Bolero. Must have been 2 hours at least since then.*

He tapped his watch, hoping to revive the clockwork, but in vain. *Damn!*

He tried getting back to sleep but the thoughts filled his mind again, and try as he might, he couldn't divert this thoughts.

He sat up and looked towards the large window that lay towards his left. The window was naked, without a curtain and featureless. The glass however was clean, and spare for a few scratch marks, it gave a clear view. There was an old tree outside. It was a full moon, and the hazy moon light spread over the tree canopy like a dream.

And then, he saw something that had his hair rise on both ends. The swing tied to the tree was swaying, *Wait! There is someone swinging on it.* He shuddered, as he thought.

But who could it be, swinging at such an hour??

He raised himself higher on the bed to get a better view, his heart beating faster, and what he saw sent a chill down his spine.

The lady of the house was on the swing.

And she was staring at him, her eyes transfixed. She stretched her arms and said something in a voice so faint, it blended with the rustle of the leaves. Then it became clear to Vikram. *No! She is calling out for me.* It appeared as though she was floating towards him, trying to reach out for him.

Never in his life was he so mortified, so dazed, he felt the ground beneath him slip, he felt claustrophobic, the room closing in on him. *God! Nooo!! I musn't see her, I must get back to sleep, I am seeing things. I need to pray, I must pray.*

He closed his eyes and chanted all the diving hymns, he chanted to deities he didn't even care about until now. Such is the grip of fear that even the most resilient of mortals want to flee from it.

Day broke with the pleasant chirping of the birds and the rooster crows in the distance. The sun rays fell on Vikram's face through the window waking him up.

He could smell the morning, and he was glad it was day. *What a night! What a nightmare! The stress is getting to me. I need to take a few days off!*

He woke up, hands outstretched, eyes wide awake and he took a look of the room.

His eyes widened in horror.

The room was worn down, dilapidated and ancient. There were cobwebs all over, there was no mattress on his bed, and a broken mirror that looked like it wasn't used for ages.

He got on his feet, and rushed out of the room into the living room.

The living room was nothing like he had seen last night, there was dust, cobwebs, broken down furniture, an unused hearth. No sign of habitation anywhere.

But this cannot be, I must be going mad!

He was scared, dizzy, tired, confused. He felt his gut wrenching and felt the presence of something sinister. There was only thing in his mind and there were no two ways about it. *Get out of here!*

He scurried like a man on fire, bumping against the walls, running over creaking floors before finally reaching the door.

It's locked! I must break through it.

Fortunately for him the door had worn down over the ages and it would have taken only a nudge to break through it. He slammed it open and rushed out into the open.

He ran for his life, running past the estate, out of the gateway, past his *Bolero*. He kept running, and running before he stopped and collapsed on the earth that was still wet.
