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Songs of the Night

“I like you.”

How many times has SP Shaurya Verma been on the receiving end of such simple yet deeply fulfilling words? In his line of work praise and condemn could very well be described as the two ends- opposite ends- of the same rope. When tied together, it added a kind of complexity to the practitioners of this profession that allowed scope for ambivalent narrations. And somebody once told him if life was a candle narration its flame.

SP Verma was looking for an appropriate reply and decided against the formal and polite, “Thanks mam. I’m much obliged.” For heaven’s sake, he was not talking to a senior or colleague who happened to be congratulating him on a job well done. The situation demanded for something a little more.....intimate.

But when was the last time he had been intimate with a woman? Any woman for that matter. Does he even remember what it feels like to be intimate with a woman? Does he even know how to be intimate with a woman anymore?

She looked to be in her mid twenties. 28 at most. He could very well be terribly wrong. Some women looked forever young. They had what he had once heard his colleague describing as “baby face.” Yet her cherubic features held a certain air of solemnity enunciating her old soul; a soul that made her seek him out in a room full of deceptively colored faces. Colors of bitterness, of resentment, of abuse, and of infidelity.

“I really don’t know how to react to that,” he opted for honesty. The least favorable of all.

He was rewarded with her laughter-a sound he was never going to forget. How many men had made her laugh like that before him? Were they all her lovers? She didn’t look like she would settle for anything less. Why did it take her so long to find him? She was very, very late. He wanted to get very, very angry. But that goddamn laughter! It was making everything so very, very difficult.

“How about we go someplace a little quiet and I teach you?”

He would’ve followed her to the end of the world in that moment. Had she asked.

“Please do I am so eager to learn.”

*

The quiet place turned out to be a music café. He had heard about the place from a few of his friends. Read about the place too. All 5 star ratings. He had been wanting to check out the place too. For quite some time now. But Jyotismita never approved of her musical preferences. Music was just one of the things she never liked about him. The list was too long to be covered in one night. Also, this was not her night. It was for him and him alone. She could have the rest of his life.

Call him selfish. Call him a cheater. Call him whatever abuse you can think of hurling towards him. But this one was his. No holding back for him tonight. He was hungry to learn all she had to teach. He was desperate to be of worth to her. He needed it like you needed your paycheck.

“Do you want to pick the first song? And yes, please don’t use the worn out *ladies first*.”

“That’s exactly what I was going to say. But now I can’t.”

Her raised eyebrow posed a challenge Shaurya wanted to win. Badly.

When was the last time he and Jyotismita had agreed on a song? Any song. Initially, both of them had tried. He had made a list of artists she had an inclination towards. He had even liked a few of them. She had hummed to the tunes of *Piya tose naina lage re* and *Na jiya lage na* a couple of times too.

But that was just an explorative phase. After a couple of months he had gone back to Lata Mangeshkar and she to Bryan Adams. The again had nothing to talk about.

Enough of that. Shaurya chided himself. Tonight, he had stolen from Jyotismita. So, why must he allow his mind to drift back to her?

Besides he had a challenge at hand at present which demanded the whole of his attention.

He gave it some thought. And decided on *Yeh raatein nayi purani*. And sent a silent prayer to anyone listening she liked Classic.

Perhaps, it was his night for the twinkle of surprise in her eyes and the approving smile adorning her rosy cheeks gave her all the encouragement he needed to stretch out the night beyond the oblong coffee tables and rotating discs.

*

“So you have a penchant for the Classics?”

“Can’t recall exactly when I heard the word last!!”

“Which one? Classics or penchant?”

Her laughter was dangerously intoxicating. It reminded him of flowing fountains he had only seen in pictures. Pictures in travelogues he bought every Sunday.

“Both actually. Must be living in some sort of up-dated company, no?”

He regretted saying that right off the bat. What if it was too much? After all, women have always disapproved of his harmless teasing. Although it has always been good natured humor.

“And yet we are here. Enjoying outdated songs.”

Maybe he had finally found the one. The one woman who not only understood his humor but shared it too.

“It’s your turn now.”

“Yes. Of course.”

She chose a song he could never make Jyotismita like. It was too cringy for her. He had stopped singing it at one point.

Tere chehre se nazar nahi hath ti nazara hum kya dekhe.

*

“What’s her name?”

Was it that easy to read him? Or, perhaps the scars had started to show now. Or, it could also be so that she was good at seeing things that oft went undetected by the naked eye.

“I don’t really want to talk about her tonight. Sorry.”

“But she is a part of you. So intricately entwined you both look a masterpiece together. Am I wrong?”

A mirthless chuckle escaped his throat. All these years they’ve managed to dupe everyone into believing that they’re quite the power couple. A law enforcer and a public attorney. A match sealed by noble intentions. Blessed by the benefitting masses. All it took was one sharp gaze to tear through all their dazzling lies. Lies that bound them together in a loveless, lustless marriage.

“So, we’re not going to cheat tonight?”

“But you never wanted to, did you?”

“And what did you want, hun?”

“The hero of my final movie. I think I just found him.”

“Final? Is he that bad?” There was a soft smile playing upon his lips. Small yet genuine. And genuine was few and far in between these days for him. So, he decided on enjoying it till it lasted.

“Oh! He is going to be the best one, hun.”

That felt genuine too. But she was so very, very late. It is going to be one heck of a challenge to not let allow the anger overpower the happiness. But he was up for it.

“So, it was just a creator looking for some inspiration. And I thought you actually like me. What a sham!”

“Serves you right for having no any intention to cheat. Do you have the slightest of idea how exciting that would have been?”

This time his chuckle held both mirth and pleasure. His companion had both humor and sass.

He decided on *Mera chand mujhe aya hain nazar* this time.

How could he let her go without telling her how beautiful she was! Her smile was all the encouragement he needed to pull her towards him for one last dance. The one where no words were needed. At least not the uttered ones.

*

Jyotismita was done packing by the time he reached home. He had told her he would be coming home early the moment he wrapped up work. It was one of those rare days when everything agreed to happen at decided time. He wanted to take her out. If possible, to the same music café. He just couldn't get the place out of his head. He felt like it has been calling out to him since the last few days. He was even willing to try out her choice of music.

But turned out she had plans of her own; plans she felt was not necessary to share with him. Plans that reminded him of the one thing they could never have and the one thing Jyotismita had put over everything else including the relationship they had built gradually but steadily over the years. A child.

Sometimes, he wondered how much importance could an individual assign to anything that has never been with you in flesh and blood but merely teased you mercilessly in provocative dreams! Dreams that always acted as an arch rival of reality. Dreams that always taunted and traumatized. Dreams that always made the reality and, thereby, cower in shame. Unnecessary and unjustified shame.

Under the frenzy of all stubborn dreams, she had decided to final take up on Swati's offer and hence all the packing. It was Swati's second child and Jyotismita was to play the charming godmother. Her first pregnancy ended in a life-wrecking turmoil. The child died in the womb for reasons even doctors were unable to explain to the heart-broken couple. Ravi had made several rounds to the doc's chamber in hope of some semblance of a closure. At the end, he gave up more for his wife than his sake. Jyotismita often talked of how caring and compassionate of a man Ravi was with a fond smile on her lips and-what Shaurya interpreted as- longing in her eyes. In moments like those, Shaurya felt cheated. How could she bring another man into the equation and complicate things even more!

Besides, why did she feel the need to constantly compare him and Ravi? From the finite interactions he've had with the man all he could make out was that his submissive nature empowered his wife to an extent that she felt treating him like a slave was her birth right. Shaurya couldn't be that even if he tried. His upbringing, profession and everything else that united to form his identity would always revolt against it. Of course, there were moments when he felt drawn to submit to his partner's urgencies-both in and outside the bedroom- but that was about it. Everything had to be balanced for the course of life to run smoothly. That was Shaurya's philosophy in life.

She was explaining what was where and which bills needed to be paid at the earliest. If she expected him to stop her, her face wouldn't reveal. Neither her eyes. Those were very much dead these days. He wanted her to go and stay as long as she wanted. He dreaded looking into her dead eyes constantly blaming him for her disastrous state these days. Probably, the unborn child will bring her back to life. Probably, Swati could help in salvaging their broken relationship. Ravi was a constant in their relationship then why not Swati? Who knows something good might come out of her divine intervention. He simply nodded his head in silent acknowledgement and wished her a safe journey. Like a caring and compassionate husband.

She didn't slam the door on her way out. Neither did she refuse his offer of carrying her suitcase outside. There was no unnecessary drama. That was the one thing Shaurya had always admired in her. He was trained to break criminals and not fix damsels after all.

He allowed the tantalizing silence to wrap itself around him: caress and pet him. Not that there were any real conversations holding Shaurya and Jyotismita together these days. He couldn't even bring himself to recollect the last time they sat down discussing origami for hours over steaming mugs of filter coffee. Something they had once enjoyed thoroughly.

Jyotismita was more interested in reading film magazines these days. Especially the gossip columns. She was carrying those everywhere she went. There were hundreds of those scattered haphazardly all over the house. It looked like a editor's house than that of a public defender's. Now that she was away, he wanted to pick up one and search for something.....anything that kept calling out to her. Keeping her glued to them.

He regretted it almost immediately. Tucked securely between the colorful pages was news he wished had never reached him:

Famous film-maker dies at the tender age of 29. Sources reveal a never-ending battle with loneliness and recurring bouts of depression forced her to put an end to her life at such a young age. Her last movie "Songs of the Night" is being hailed as a modern classic. It blends love, life and music in an unforgettable celebration of art at its grandest form.
