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PIPE DREAM

Tamizh Ponni VP

The last time Atul listened to Bill Withers's "Lovely Day" could have easily been 20 years ago. Mirror balls adorning the well-lit fresh Christmas conifer glistened under the moonlight's graceful intrusion into the living room. Numbers from the carefully curated playlist wafting through the vents of Echo Dot reaffirmed his wife's good taste in music. It invoked some insipid nostalgia but memories were plain recollections now. Holidays to him were occasions that demanded his duty-bound attendance. Wine Glasses and Beer bottles became extensions of his anatomy, brimful of elixirs that supplied some spirit to deal with people, especially family. He got used to being everyone's dearest killjoy. That included both analogue and digital spheres. Like the meme with a little girl flashing a devilish grin backgrounded by a burning house, he enjoyed witnessing chaos. 'Why to partake in the theatre of the absurd when you can be a mute spectator, grab some popcorn and watch all the drama unfold?', he always mused. "Hon, are you okay?" Swara's voice broke his distraction. He hated every time it happened. Privacy and pre-occupancy have become unapproachable pleasures for him in recent years. Forcing an artless smile, he pulled his gaze away from the snow-clad scenery behind the bay window and turned around, oblivious that he was answering after Swara had asked thrice. "Hmm?", he replied nonchalantly. "I think you need to either get your ears checked or tell me what the hell is going on, Atul. You've not been yourself lately. It bothers me, us!", Swara responded in an exasperated tone adjusting the festive cap on their 4-year-old. The sharp reaction was the effect of the tension brought in by Atul's frequent remissness. Mihira was comfortably tucked under a windflower-patterned quilt and watched the mounting tension through her angelic eyes. Swara squeezed out the moisturiser and bedaubed it on the child's chapped cheeks. Winter in Sweden that year was cruel. With an unmistakable sigh of frustration, the devoted wife patiently waited for her husband's response. She was hoping to clear the air before it festered further only to ruin their 10th anniversary of togetherness due the following week. Each year, after documenting a list of her carefully curated expectations, Swara would expect Atul to surprise her in a way she wanted to be surprised. At this point, not even an effective couples counselling session would save their marriage let alone, a rooftop romantic dinner. Atul was miffed by the unforeseen accusation. "What do you mean? I am right here.", he shot back. "Yeah. Physically at times. Emotionally never.", Swara complained. The tone of her voice was quick enough to push all the wrong buttons in him. "So let me get this straight.", said Atul taking a deep breath, giving into his swelling rage unawares. An eerie smirk possessed his face swiftly hinting that he was waiting to be provoked this way. "I am supposed to work a nine-to-five job...no..no...a...profession as you'd like to call it thanks to the dreams I'd sacrificed for fat cheques to provide for this family, then put on the game face, pay the bills, plan vacations, be available, be in love, be in sync and never lose my cool come what may? Is that right? Did I get it right?" Swara gave a blank stare. She needed a couple of seconds to recall and process that unforeseen retort. "What?... I did NOT say that. What makes you think you're the only one slogging day and night? Shall we switch roles? Are you ready for that game?... Oh wait..that can't happen because being around your child makes you uncomfortable!", she yelled. It felt spontaneous yet premeditated at the same time. Atul had given up long ago. He just didn't dare to say it out loud. They had lived together long enough to be oblivious to the transformation of a loving couple into captives of their situations, high school sweethearts-turned-live-in lovers-turned-bitter partners. In addition to that, the unplanned pregnancy hit the final nail on the coffin. Atul believed what rules were to BDSM was Carrot and Stick policies for the Corporate he slaved for. What irked him the most was witnessing the authorised exploitation of his fellow fancy degree-holding sycophants-products spewed out of genteel institutions. People's obsession to exercise control over someone all the time, according to him, percolates through all kinds of relationships. Hope, to him, was the most dangerous drug of all; a slow-killer. It pushed him to practise Stoicism 5 years ago only to end up becoming an unapologetic Nihilist. "You think it's fun to work for those egomaniacs dressed in their..in their crisply ironed Cordones?". Atul ignored Swara's open role-reversal challenge and continued... "I am talking about downright

menacing creatures confined to their cubicles and plotting each other's downfall day in and day out. It's a fucking Animal Fight Night out there. I am losing my mind but I still do it to put food on this table", he said, pounding the maple desk nearby sending shockwaves into the fish tank it held. "What...I didn't..Atul...What's ..what's happening?". Swara fumbled for words. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "If something's wrong, you know that you can always talk to me. Why can't we have normal conversations like we used to have?", she asked. Desperation clouded her eyes. "As if that's going to help the both of us", Atul scoffed. "What do you feel every time you enter this house you call home, Swara? How long do we have to keep up this pretense? Look at us, we are in our thirties and it already feels like a lifetime. Whatever we had between us ... It had evolved, failed to survive and now expired. It's all a matter of time and sacrifice. Are you truly happy? Because I am not. I want to break free but I am suffocated by guilt." Swara was breathing fire and brimstone. What hurt her most was the way he kept using air quotes carelessly to prove a point as if their most cherished feelings meant nothing to him. For the first time, she had no clue what to say. She felt as if Atul had composed and rehearsed that script all his life in a way it didn't give room for a perfect comeback. It made her furious because it made sense. "You need help. Find yourself a therapist. Is this some sort of stupid mid-life crisis moment? Get your selfish ass to bed when you come to your senses. You are a stuck-up manchild and a selfish prick!", is all she could say before storming out of the room taking Mihira who was dearly holding on to her Sunflower Rattle. This was one of those temporary outbursts bound to happen on all special occasions. Swara was okay to play the emotional punch bag as long as she found purpose in raising their gorgeous little mistake; her bundle of happiness. Mihira was her world now and being a Single Mother was the last thing she wanted. She wasn't ready to get into Double Parenthood too. Dealing with Atul was easier than dealing with her parents and the cultural standards she was expected to live by. Inured to her husband's indifference, it seemed like a wise decision to keep the family intact till the young one was mature enough to leave the nest, however long that took. For Atul, the fourth bottle of Tuborg did what it ought to do. That severe purgation was followed by a pleasant feeling. A peculiar relief after an emotional throw-up, so to speak. He'd blame it on the Beer when they'd have a sober conversation later. Ironically, the aftermath of their emotional kickboxing always had Swara playing the role of both the opponent and of the cornerman. She would perform the cutman duties of treating Atul's fresh wounds in their bedroom. The Oxytocin refill after a physical reunion did have its temporary effects. Occasional one-night-stands on dating sites didn't assert Atul's manliness anymore. Neither did the blue pills or purple films. There was a constant feeling of unknown unseen energy leaving his body in small doses. 'Is this what soul-draining feels like?', He wondered. Normalcy would be restored shortly. Wearing the most concocted expression of joy they'd pose for the Christmas Card photoshoot. Perfectly touched-up pics would travel far and wide; reach friends and relatives in India. After substantiating the happiness and wholeness of their family to the world, life would go on. They'd carry on as a perfect couple leading separate lives under the same roof. Killing the room lights, Atul slammed his Macbook shut without bothering to save the random Smart Art process diagram he had created that morning. The screen went black, masking the words on 3D shapes that said, Birth----->Call out each other's hypocrisies----->Death. Along with it, under the mild moonshine, glowed a framed wedding photograph carrying a golden inscription at the bottom that read, "Couple Goals".