Cemetery Gates

Ashish Rastogi

It was just another cold wintry morning. Newspaper delivery-men were on their way, delivering tabloids and journals, keeping the world alive and aware. Thoughful husbands, having left two cups of water on their stoves, were opening the doors of their houses’ balconies to let in the ambrosia that comes with early morning air. Young children in polka-dotted night suits were nonchalantly brushing their teeth, awaiting yet another day at school. Executives with jam-packed schedules, having collected their boarding passes, were sitting in waiting lounges reading latest editions of the Fortune magazine, awaiting that ‘last and final call for passengers’. Servants with drooped shoulders were walking drowsily towards the Mother Dairy with three-liter jugs in their gloved hands; periodically rubbing their eyes. Watchmen with mufflers around their faces, having opened various entrances and activated certain circuits, were cycling back to their homes in haste. Upcoming computer scientists, in the company of sag Irish hosts ¹ were furiously looking at the debugger windows, disgusted with the incomprehensibility of their program’s latest flaw.

It was at this time that Nirmala could be found squatting under a tree in a particularly isolated place. With her arms around her knees, she would gaze at the serenity in front of her. It was here; in this wilderness that she lived most of her life; this small niche of hers. Early in the morning, when everyone rushed and sped and made their way to move up, Nirmala would come and sit on the grass that today had an unusual amount of dew on it. Nirmala liked this place for several reasons. She liked it for its silence, its peace and its wide-open spaces. Sitting there for hours sometimes, she would stare with amazement at this concluding port and ponder over these people’s next destinations. She would trace and memorize ages of the roses and bouquets that were placed there and wonder about the exact time when they lost their beauty and turned pale.

Nothing was different this morning. She looked at the cemetery with the same hope as she did always. In more ways than one, this cemetery was comforting to her. In moments of despair and helplessness, she would find solace in the inevitability of ending up here. In moments of anxiety and nervousness, she would look at the cross that stood indignantly by every grave, and find self-assurance and belief. In happier moments, she would simply imagine herself in another world, a fantasy land, where she was the queen, and the graves, her knights and subjects. She would hold her court in great style, take perilous decisions with remarkable spontaneity and come out triumphant.

¹A sag Irish host, is an anagram for Ashish Rastogi, author’s signature on the text.
Nirmala was not a Christian, but she was not a strictly religious girl either. To her, religion was something very personal. It was her own set of beliefs and an assurance that let her be herself, a faith that let her make mistakes and learn from them, a faith that gave her freedom and the courage to act by desire. In her religion, Nirmala was all that she could not be. In such a way, this religion of hers was something that existed only in her mind.

On this particular day, Nirmala’s thoughts turned to a point in time several years ago. She was sixteen then. Half way into July, the weather had an extra-ordinary stillness to it.

The tenth class results had just been declared. Our Nirmala here had secured a very respectable eighty-three percent. The school had handed out forms to the promoted students, asking them to submit their preferences for the eleventh. The school authorities would then allot streams to the students on the basis of their performance in the board examinations. Apparently, the most coveted stream amongst students those days was ‘Science with Computer Science’ (see Outlook, June 30 1997 Volume 7. No. 13 - Information Technology: A Salivating Salvation for the Young in this context.)

Sitting in that rickety bus, Nirmala, thought, rather inchoately, about her choices. She was unsure and had nothing more than a vague idea of what she wanted to do. Nothing was clearly defined or acknowledged. Later in life, Nirmala wanted to be a translator. She was enchanted by the languages. ‘How is it that small children pick up languages so easily without ever being consciously aware of it, while when I try to pick up a language at this age, it is so much more difficult?’ she would ask herself. As a child, she had picked up German in school and was always eager to look up the dictionary for meanings.

After wandering in that wilderness of the mind for a while, she opened her bag and pulled out the board mark sheet that the school had had laminated for its students. She started noticing the mark-sheet for inconspicuous details. She noticed how the serial number, ‘0249476’ in her case, was printed half an inch above its allotted space. She read the titles and the subject codes, and then read their hindi translations just above them. Code - 001, Subject - English Course A, Theory - 091, Practical - XXX, Total - 91, Total in Words - Ninety One, Positional Grade - A1. The first entry in this grade grid of her’s left her with a subtle smile of accomplishment.

Later that evening, when the joy and felicity of Nirmala’s accomplishment had subsided a little, she went and sat next to her father, who was watching the evening news in the drawing room. Nirmala’s father was a man of modest means. He was working as a Manager in the State Bank of India, and his life was predictable to the minute. Every morning, at eight-thirty, he would leave for work, and at five-thirty, he could be seen parking his scooter in the small porch that led up to their house. Earlier in his life, he had been an aspiring young boy who had tried hard to climb the ladder of success. He had prepared sedulously for engineering college entrance tests, but managed only to make it to the waiting lists,
and now that wait had manifested itself into the hope that someday, his daughter would do him proud by making it to those very colleges.

‘Papa, we are supposed to fill in these forms indicating our preference for the choice of subjects in the eleventh’ said Nirmala as she handed over the form.

After studying the form for a couple of minutes, the father said with marked composure ‘You have done well. There is really no choice, except for the fifth subject. With Science, they say, they are floating Biology, Computer Science, Economics and Mechanical Drawing as available fifth subjects. Which one do you want?’

Suddenly, Nirmala felt cramped for breathing space. Her thoughts were inchoate and she found it hard to express in words what she felt at that point in time. There was certainly a sense of discomfort that embraced her. Things were moving too fast. She took a deep breath, and after a moment, interrupted her father with reluctance, ‘But Papa, is it necessary to take up Science?’

Her father, taken aback, said without a hint of vexation, ‘If not Science, then what else will you take?’

Stuttering and stammering, Nirmala managed to string the words together and said ‘Maybe I could give Humanities a thought.’

The father, now a little concerned that his daughter was loosing perspective, straightened his back. He pushed his specs back up against his nose. She is a sixteen year old, vulnerable girl, he thought. She needs to be guided.

‘Beta, this is an important point in your life. You have just cleared the first milestone and at this point, we have to take a decision. As an instinctive reaction, it might be easy for you to think that you want to take Humanities, but we need a more mature perspective. Have you considered all aspects?’

Nirmala hadn’t thought of all aspects involved, but she felt her decision was not merely impulsive. After a few moments, she said ‘I haven’t really thought it over, Papa. I just want to be in touch with the languages. I don’t know, but...’ and she stammered failing to complete the sentence. ‘That’s just what I want to do’ she mumbled under her breath.

‘Very well,’ resumed the father, ‘so you wish to remain in touch with the languages. And you think Humanities would help you do that, while Science wouldn’t. And you haven’t thought about your future, have you? Have you thought of the career opportunities after Humanities. Taking up Science, you can work hard through your eleventh and twelfth and make it to one of these very respectable engineering colleges. That way, you can earn a passport to peaceful existence for the rest of your life. As a young girl, you might not pay any heed to these issues, but let me tell you Beta, these are important things. I’ve seen a lot of people struggle later in life.’
Nirmala seemed to agree. All that her father was saying was making sense, but she was not completely convinced.

The father continued, ‘Let us assume for a moment that you do take up Humanities. You may do brilliantly in your twelfth, but then what? You can at best look at getting into one of these Delhi University colleges, and get a Bachelor of Arts degree. With a BA in English, lets say, what kind of employment opportunities are you left with? Its all good to say that you want to be a translator, or a writer, as you have been saying since you’re a child, but let’s be practical Beta. We live our lives by small, practical truths. In a better world, people might get paid for their interests, but in our times, if your interests are of no use to others, you are going to be left a vagrant.’

‘Okay, Papa, I think Science is an okay option. For the fifth subject, do you think Mechanical Drawing is fine?’ said Nirmala. She was impressed with her father’s understanding of this world.

Wearing a white salwar with a blue kameez sparsely embedded with tiny mirrors, Nirmala walked languidly towards the cemetery. She felt as if her life was receding away before her own eyes. All she had been was a silent observer, an innocent bystander, a distant spectator.

As she walked through the cemetery gate, Nirmala’s eyes fell upon a man who sat still kneeling by a grave. Intrigued by the presence of another (for since two years, not a soul had shared this cemetery with her in the couple of hours that she spent here), Nirmala gazed at the man. An old man with white hair on the side of his scalp, he stood by the grave (whose epitaph Nirmala quickly recalled as Unhappy, but Significant) with great dignity. His eyes were closed and his palms were interlocked against each other.

Suddenly, an inexplicable urge overcame Nirmala and she went and kneeled just next to the old man. She closed her eyes and offered whatever little she could with her limited understanding to that strange manifestation of divinity that was yet to become her own. After a few moments, strangely expectantly, frail fingers tap her shoulders. She opened her eyes, and saw the old man observing her like a small child observes a stranger in the house.

‘Hello Uncle’ said Nirmala with a few stutters and she tried hard to think of something to say.

‘Namaste Beti. This is an unusual place to be in at six in the morning. Did you get lost or something?’

‘No, no, not at all. Infact I come here every morning.’

‘Oh, do you, really? Why?’
‘Precisely because it’s an unusual place to be in. So I have it all by myself. Not today though. You’ve come here to pray? I’ve never seen you before.’

‘I’ve come here to spend time with my son. It’s a strange thing, this business of living.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘Oh, it’s nothing to be sorry about. My son went down fighting and I’m very proud of him.’

‘Your son, he...’

‘My son, Rajeev was in the Army. He died fighting for his country - the Kargil war.’