

THE HUSBAND & THE CAT

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It happened because of Shanjukta

When I read Indira Didi's novel Ranmaya few years back, I was impressed with her style of writing. Complexity in literature is one thing I can not identify with. As an ardent reader, I always believe that expressions are more effective, in simpler words.

I remember that I had told her if Ranmaya could be translated in English and marketed abroad, there was no reason it would not be as popular as Taslima Nasreen's Lazza. I don't know if she took me seriously, but I really believed in what I said.

Then I got an opportunity to Read "Usko Logne ra Biralo"(original of this translation). She took me by complete surprise. I had a pre conceived notion about her writing after reading Ranamaya but I had to admit that she was versatile by the time I finished this one. I told her that I wanted to make a feature film on this novel. I even had some discussion with our film makers but they have still not hatched from the so called commercial aspect of film making. Everyone found it unsafe that way. I still believe we can make a on this subject which can be proudly flaunted in any International film festivals.

It was a cool morning at Patan Durbar Square. Narendra dai, Indira didi, me and my wife Shanjukta were waiting for a friend to arrive with a video camera. Narendra dai had arranged for an interview with Mr. Satya Mohan Joshi in regards to write his biography. He had invited us to join and we didn't want to let it go. As we were waiting for the camera, the discussion diverted to Indira didi's novel. She wanted someone to translate Usko Logne ra Biralo as a publisher was after her. It was Shanjukta who told Indira didi to hand it over to me.

"He can do it."

She was confident, I was apprehensive.

In fact it is Shanjukta who has more faith on me and surprises me by discovering my capabilities unknown to me often. Indira didi completely believed in what Shanjukta said and started forcing me to accept the assignment. I said that I would try.

I am not a professional translator though have tried my hands at writing in English occasionally. But this one seemed tough because most of it was a self analytical and philosophical from a woman's point of view. I could never feel what Indira didi could as a woman and I did not believe in literal translation.

I translated the first page, took a print out and showed it to Shanjukta, whom I consider to be my best critic. She liked it. I read it again and even I was not disappointed. Then I gave it to Indira didi for her reaction.

She said that it was more than what she expected in a translation and that fueled me to go ahead. I have to confess honestly that I still don't know where I stand as a translator technically. But the lines have come straight out of my heart. The guidelines of Indira didi's content were always there but at times I have tried to express certain things in my words (with Indira didi's due permission).

Blame me if I have failed; credit Indira didi and thank Shanjukta if you enjoy the reading.

waZeesh ..

"They stood before the alter and supplied
The fire themselves in which their fat was fried"

• **Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary***

"The ancient saying is no heresy,
Hanging and wiving go by destiny"

• **Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, II, 9**

Day Eight and Nine

September 17 & 18

It is just the eighth day but it marked an end to a phase, a chapter of her life. It is pouring outside. Neela loves rain. The sight and sound of water always enthralled her. It always came on top of the list of her fascination. Yet as she grew older and realized that water could be ferocious contrary to its cool outlook, she gradually started feeling similar to a mentor whose creation has turned destructive. As she witnessed on Television, the calamities of water which flooded and swept away thousands of lives and left others homeless her obsession towards the water decreased. Yet, for her, it was like a handsome, grown up but irresponsible progeny.

Watching the rain drops from her window, she was feeling a strange amalgamation of marvel and melancholy.

If only the rain knew what she was feeling.

When she thought that the greatest achievements of humankind can be demolished in a moment by the devilish force of the water, she felt bitter.

The speed of the downpour had decreased a bit. The rain water collected on the roof was finding its exit through the eaves. It continues for a long time after the rain stops and Neela despised it. She hid herself inside a newly bought Korean blanket. But the harsh sound of the rainwater hitting the ground through the eaves chased her. The smell of the new blanket hit her nose. She can never cover her face for a long time. She feels suffocated. She removed the blanket and inhaled the fresh air breathing deeply and felt relieved. The disturbing sound of the water was still there as if trying to drown her with it, but the fresh smell of the blanket was a saving grace. It is all in the feeling. One can go down to the dumps or rise to the peak without much difficulty.

She is sprawled on her bed and watching her new room. The one bedroom apartment has everything required for a single person. A small kitchen, attached bathroom, Television, refrigerator, oven, washing machine and a computer with email and internet connection will take care of all her basic needs. She is not computer savvy and was reluctant about it at the beginning. It was Smrity who forced her to acquire it.

"Mamu, if you do not have e mail connection, it will be very hard for us to communicate once I go to England."

It was Smrity, who advocated the benefit of having e mail and internet. She gave in to her daughter's demand. The only thing this small haven lacks is arrangements for guests, if any. She is not bitter about it for no guest has ever given her any moments to cherish. To her, guests are those species who celebrate your sunny days and vanish when you are down. Therefore she made a point that not even a corner is spared for them. Brokers had shown her some bigger houses. It was not that she could not afford them. She settled for this because her only daughter going abroad for her further studies had preferred a smaller place.

Till yesterday she adored the warmth of a relationship of a human being. Today she has realized that the same warmth burns you when you live with it. The bitter taste of relationships has landed her in this self imposed seclusion.

It is said marriage, parenthood and construction of a house depend on other factors apart from your wish. She believes in the third one. She had wanted to buy or construct a house immediately after her divorce with Darpan five years back. She could not find a proper house at that time. Something or other prevented her even after that and she had to rent a house. She could afford any place of any standard, but she somehow could never feel the sense of belonging. Thus, she spent half a decade amidst the indifference of a rented house.

A broker Ramji Sharma arranged for this deal for her to buy this house day before. He had been recommended by one of her colleagues. Not only the deal of the house, Ramji even helped her to get it furnished as per her requirement. She just had to pay for it and everything was taken care of.

She has finally become a proud owner of her dream house.

It is almost dark. The surroundings lack greenery yet she can hear the chirping of sparrows. She loves the noise birds make in the dawn and the dusk.

The huge premise of Aabhash's house contained some big trees. She could find nightingales, doves and crows among many other birds there. She had bid them a silent and woeful farewell yesterday with a heavy heart.

Compared to this congested locality in the center of capital, Aabhash's residence was palatial and sprawling. He could be called affluent as he was the only son of a wealthy family. He had some vast ancestral property in the Terai.

The house he inherited in Kathmandu was more like a museum which contained his father's paintings and sculptures. His father had lived a full, long and prosperous life. Even after his demise, he seemed to be alive in his creations which were scattered all over the house. Beginning from the doorway and the corridor till the attic, they found place in every nook and corner, every wall, every room of the big house. That was what she felt when she entered the house for the first time. She could not feel that the house belonged to Aabhash. It belonged to his father. She felt suffocated at the first glance. She wondered why on earth Aabhash piled all those in his house.

Being an extrovert, she could not conceal her feelings. She disguised her thought in other words as she spoke,

"Don't you feel awkward living here? Aabhash, this house would make a good museum rather than a home."

Even then, she felt that she should not have commented on his father's collection on the very first day of her entry to the house. Aabhash might take it personally, maybe he would get hurt.

"Oh these are only some of his personal favorites which even I admire. It's a pity that the government does not preserve such artistic creation in our country. There are lots more. When we go to our village in Terai, I will show you all of them."

She was relieved to note that his voice had pride while he spoke.

"I did not mean that he did less. All I wanted to say was these should be preserved in a museum, not in a home."

Again she was trying to disguise her indifference towards the art.

"It's easier said than done Neela. These are priceless. The government can not pay me for these, nor can they take good care of them. No one can treasure my father's creations the way I can."

She could feel the excitement mingled with sentiment in his voice.

She was not at all convinced to what he said. She felt pity for Aabhash.

"Poor you- How can you survive without your identity and existence in this house?"

She had thought solemnly.

She never brought up the topic or commented on it after that. She felt more like a tourist visiting a museum of arts rather than Aabhash's soul mate in search of affection and love. She had no

interest in sculpture or paintings yet she tried to indulge herself in his father's creations by watching them for hours.

It came to no use.

It is not that she had moved in with him without knowing him. Aabhash was no stranger. In fact he was one of the friends of Darpan - her ex husband. She knew him from long before her marriage to Darpan. Afterwards, an incident placed him apart from his other friends. During Smrity's delivery, she needed blood transfusion. There were no blood banks at those times. Patient's family was responsible for the arrangement of the blood and Neela had a rare group. It did not match with anyone from the family and immediate relatives. It was a crisis.

Aabhash was the one to donate it.

Neela came to know about it afterwards from Darpan. She met Aabhash after five months at the function of Smrity's *pasnee* (rice feeding ceremony of an infant).

"Thank you. It was a big favor. If only it was not for you, I would have been...."

She was emotional.

"Oh please do not mention it. It's just that we do not have a trend to donate blood in this country. It is very normal abroad. Anyways, you survived and my blood was not wasted. So forget it."

True, as it was but Neela hated the way he spoke. His arrogance and high headedness offended her. Her voice was quivering with emotion while she expressed her gratitude but Aabhash paid least attention to it.

"Why such a man without compassion had to donate blood to me."

She had felt disgusted.

Although Aabhash dropped in occasionally with Darpan's other friends, they never crossed each other's path after that incident. To be honest, she did not even look forward to it. Still, his blood ran in her veins in what so ever capacity and that made him stand apart from others.

A young Neela believed that she could maneuver her life the way she wished. Time and age proved her wrong. As she matured, she was compelled to bury many of her belief and prejudices so deep that even she could not fathom them when required.

Life is unpredictable.

Indifference could turn in to a strong bond; destination could be at the end of a path never considered worth exploring.

That is what her relationship with Aabhash later on proved. It turned out to be a stunning butterfly which was an ugly caterpillar not very long ago.

She grew in such a society which gave a man unlimited freedom in straying. Even her mother tolerated seven wives of her husband with full loyalty and dedication. Yet, Neela could not accept Darpan's one night stands behind her back. She could never come to the terms with his intentions of keeping a wife only as a prized possession at home. She could not compromise on a marriage which was a farce. She could not accept a hollow marital life. She failed to understand how people continue on a matrimony which is like a piece of decoration displayed on a showcase. Her self respect made her bold enough to get over it even at the cost of cracking Smrity in to pieces.

The shrill sound of the doorbell brought her back. She looked around. It was already dark. She almost staggered to the wall, not adjusted to the darkness of a new room; new house. The milky whiteness was of immediate relief which washed away the black as she switched on the tube light.

She then peered from the peek hole on the door after switching on another light on the corridor outside. A boy who appeared just in his teens was standing there. She wondered who he was and what he was doing outside her door at this odd hour. Then she saw a shopping bag hanging across his frail looking shoulders.

Earlier, Ramji had shown her a shop near her house. He had instructed the Indian looking owner of the shop to home deliver her daily necessities after introducing the new neighbor. The shopkeeper had smiled flashing his dirty teeth stained with paan,

"It will be my pleasure madam. Just let me know your requirements."

Ramji had looked at her inquisitively. She had said after thinking for a moment,

"A liter of milk, bread and about half a dozen eggs will do for tonight."

She assumed that he must be the errand boy from the shop and opened the door. He handed her over the bag before the door was fully open,

"Madam, here are your stuffs"

There was urgency in his voice. She brought the bag inside and checked to find everything was according to her order.

"You want anything for tomorrow morning madam?"

The boy asked apprehensively from the doorway. He was dark; his hair was oiled and combed neatly. He was tidily dressed. For the first time Neela looked at him carefully. He looked sharp.

"What is your name?"

She smiled, trying to make him at ease.

"Krishna"

He was curt.

"Okay Krishna. Here is the list for tomorrow morning."

She handed him the list and the money.

"What time you want me to bring these?"

Krishna pocketed the list and asked in an unnaturally dull voice. She was startled to find that otherwise such a fine lad had a dull voice. She had felt certain uneasiness when Krishna spoke, but had not been able to pin point the exact reason. She felt sad and revolted as she wondered why nature discriminated like that. She pushed her thoughts aside as she closed the door after Krishna. She reached her bed and lied down mechanically.

She had no appetite because of the late lunch that afternoon. She wanted to go down the memory lane and evaluate her life.

She had come to an identical crossroad five years back. It was not very difficult for her to choose the right track at that time. But her experience did not help and she was disillusioned now. She had just ended her week old marital life. She should have been relieved but rather felt a disturbing silence which screeched. Life is not a mathematical problem which can be solved as many times as you want once you know the formula. It gets more complicated with your knowledge.

Once bitten twice shy did not apply to her. Maybe she should not have entered into another relationship after she ended her previous long matrimonial life. Maybe she should not have walked out of it again after giving in. Her heart was trying to contradict her head.

She was feeling ridiculed by this phase in her life when she went to meet Smrity earlier in the morning. She felt safe when she was with Smrity, especially after being tormented by the silent piercing eyes of people around her. She had felt many times that Smrity was her mother, not a daughter.

She would have been a complete loner if Smrity was not in her life.

She had felt that many times before. She never had faith in God because life had often punished her for sins which she never committed. But whenever Smrity's affection soothed her, she believed that Smrity was a blessing for all the good deeds she must have done in her previous life.

"Smrity, I can not live with Aabhash."

She nearly broke down while breaking the news to her.

"As long as you are happy, I just damn care what you do or whom you live with mummy."

Smrity had embraced her. Once again, her understanding and maturity moved Neela. She felt that a flood of tears was ready to break the damn of her eyes.

"Please mummy, I can not bear your tears."

Smrity had said with moist eyes and Neela had controlled her emotion.

"I have some good news for you."

Smrity tried to be cheerful as she continued,

"Your dreams have come true. I got the scholarship. Next week I will be in London. I will miss you a lot mummy but I know this is what you wanted. It is just a matter of four years. Time will just fly away. Promise that you will take good care of yourself in my absence. You know what. I will come to stay with you day after tomorrow and we will talk the whole night."

Smrity had kissed her good bye with that promise. While coming back, she had felt like getting out of a cool shadow in a scorching heat.

Smrity was just twelve when Neela separated from Darpan. She had a tough choice to make between her parents, but she chose to stay with Neela. It was not easy for Neela to send her to a good boarding school. But she was solely responsible for her good future and she realized it. Neela wanted to give her all the happiness she herself could not get. But sometimes she wondered if she was making Smrity go through pains alien to her.

Her life was an open book for Smrity. She had even discussed her affair and later her decision to marry Aabhash. Smrity had said,

"I have no objection if it makes you happy mamu. You know men better than me. Do you think you can spend your life with him?"

That was just fifteen days ago.

"Mummy, why do you need a man in life? Why do women marry and become unhappy afterwards? I think that is the reason lesbians are growing. Even I do not think I can marry a man."

Smrity's thinking had sent a chill down her spines.

"Don't talk stupid."

She had nervously looked at her face to find out if she was serious about what she said. She had preferred to believe that it was just an outburst of a confused teenager. She was completely besotted by everything about Aabhash at that time. But thinking about it today, after her hallucination of Aabhash was over, Smrity's questions seemed like sarcasm to her. She had a feeling whether her daughter's approach to life was more mature.

Smrity matured faster than her age. She was always balanced and focused. Sometimes Neela felt guilty for her. Whenever she saw other happy kids with their parents, she felt maybe she should not have separated her from her father. She did not have the right to snatch away that aspect of her life for her differences with Darpan. She felt a pang of sorrow whenever these thoughts crossed her mind. Once she had expressed her feelings and Smrity had said,

"It is just because you said that he is my father. Anyone could have been a father but only you could be my mother. I could have been a test tube baby; someone could have donated his sperm for my birth for all I care. I do not even remember that I had a father. Please do not act like a traditional orthodox woman. Try to be a man mummy."

Neela was astonished to find that her daughter had such a revolutionary perspective. Smrity's pleading for her to become a 'man' always chased her. Despite she had surrendered to her daughter's mental maturity, she could never become a 'man.'

Neela was just sixteen when she fell in love with Darpan and married at eighteen. She was trying to find similarities when she had once asked her daughter,

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

It was last year when Smrity had come for vacation, and she was sixteen.

"Shit, mummy, not again the same old shit. Can't you think anything than boys? What boyfriend? I have a lot of girlfriends and I enjoy their company. I don't have boys in my friend's circle. They are dirty. Don't waste your time thinking about them."

Smrity had smiled pretending not to understand what she actually meant. Neela had made a direct approach,

"I am not talking about general boys. I mean someone special."

"Don't be childish mummy. I don't feel the need of what you mean. I do not believe in so called love. My career is the most important thing for me. If I have to marry, it will be only after I have really settled in my life, that too with a woman, not a man."

Neela had shivered again. She had said,

"You have to marry a man. You can not go against the law of nature. What you intend is also against the rule of humankind and religion."

"I don't believe in your age old religion and social rules which are different for male and female. It's high time someone revolted against the biased religion. It's time to move on. The world has reached very far and your religion is still sleeping under a tree like a confident hare."

Neela had been speechless when she had heard things which she could not even imagine. She had felt her daughter had a more practical perspective in life. She was delightedly defeated by her daughter in debate. Only if I could have utilized my time like her; she had thought remorsefully. In a way she had felt envious.

Neela tried to push away the memories. The noise of the vehicles on the road had decreased. The cuckoo popped out of the wall clock to announce ten. Neela felt hungry. She went to the kitchen to boil some milk and egg. This was going to be her first lonely dinner after a week. It was not that she was not used to eat alone. She had spent countless lonely evenings and nights during last year. But during her short span of wonderful life with Aabhash, she never imagined those days will recur. She felt deserted.

She had met Aabhash accidentally in a departmental store about a year back. She had tried to dissuade him pretending not to see him. It was Aabhash who had come up to speak.

They had just exchanged formal pleasantries. Coincidence made them cross the path again next day. Neela found him standing in front of her counter in the bank where she worked as a teller. She had handled his transaction and after some formal conversation, he had gone.

Urmila, her colleague had inquired immediately,

"Do you know him Neela? You know, he too is a divorcee."

Neela was astonished.

"How do you know him Urmila?"

She had asked ignoring her question.

"Oh. He is our neighbor. His wife dumped him and the children are in boarding school. He lives all alone in such a huge house. Sometimes I feel sorry for him. Even my husband sympathizes but he is so strange. He seems to live in isolation. Just utters some words if we come face to face. Did you notice how he ignored me now?"

Urmila had grumbled, which let her know few more things about Aabhash. They became occupied in their job after that and nothing more was discussed about Aabhash.

Next day when they were having their lunch, Neela found herself compelled to ask about Aabhash,

"Do you know why they divorced?"

The fact that both of them were divorced had made her explore some common grounds in their life.

"God knows. As far as we know, they were good to each other. She was educated and from a well to do family. It was a love marriage. They seemed perfectly compatible. Although I hardly talked with him, I got along fairly well with Rupa. She was well cultured and jovial."

Urmila had summed up.

"How long has it been?"

Neela was curious.

"Must have been three to four years."

"He did not marry after that?"

It was a useless query. She regretted it as soon as the words escaped her mouth. Why should she be concerned about his marital life?

"No, he didn't."

Suddenly there was a twinkle in Urmila eyes as she excitedly said,

"Why don't you two get married? Both of you are divorcees. I think Aabhash needs someone like you. How come it never crossed my mind?"

Neela had felt as if she had just woken up from her sleep. Urmila was garrulous,

"I think you two will make a real good couple. I should have realized it long ago."

She was looking at Neela in a mischievous manner. Neela tried to be cross as she contradicted,

"Are you out of your mind Urmila. I am just being curious. It does not mean that I am trying to see him as an eligible groom. If you feel so strongly for him why don't you marry him?"

"If I was available like you, I would not have thought twice. But I have a permanent spouse and it closes the chapter. I am offering you a good husband material in a silver tray. You should be grateful to me honey, not angry with me. You only live once dear and should grab the opportunities which come your way."

Urmila had said in an affectionate manner. That ended their conversation.

Few weeks had passed but Neela could not push away from her mind what Urmila had said. They remained in her thoughts like an obstinate tenant.

Urmila had come up with an invitation one day,

"Neela, we are throwing a party to celebrate my husband's promotion. Please join us for dinner tomorrow."

"I would have loved it but I can't stay out late in the evening. Please pass my heartiest congratulations to Sudesh Jee."

Neela had refused.

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Neela's sleep was disturbed by a honking car on the road below. Living in congested city area had its own pros and cons. Neela could not remember when she had fallen asleep last night rewinding her past. She could faintly remember the cuckoo chirping twelve.

She picked up the white curtain and peered out of the window. It was twilight as the dawn was ready to break. She could see buildings stretched infinitely. Vehicles passed occasionally and few pedestrians could be seen.

The thought that she had to go to work made her lethargic. But she could not compromise with her responsibilities. As she was about to drag herself out of the bed, she realized it was Saturday; public holiday. She felt relieved. The cool morning air which found its way through the window was moist and refreshing. A spring morning in Kathmandu is always pleasant. She remembered her previous morning which was in the palatial residence of Aabhash. But she felt relieved to have escaped the painful moments which came in package deal with the luxury. She surrendered herself to the warmth of the blanket and closed her eyes. But she could not go to sleep again.

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"We have arrangements to drop you home."

Urmila was adamant and Neela had joined the get together at her place that evening, elegantly dressed and made up. Needless to say, Aabhash was one of the invitees. He was reserved as usual but once they got some privacy, he had said,

"Neela Jee, you look prettier than before."

She had felt very awkward. At the same time she enjoyed the compliment from a man after a long time.

Urmila had made a deliberate arrangement for them to be together in a separate table. Aabhash had become emotional after downing three pegs.

"I don't know what went wrong between you and Darpan. I don't even know how he looked at a woman. But, Neela, I loved and respected Rupa a lot. She could never understand it. She treaded on my feelings to abandon me. She has married again, but I still miss her. I know I don't have the right but I can still love that Rupa who was mine. Can't I?"

Aabhash had wept like a little child.

"Aabhash jee, a man should not be weak like this. Let bygones be bygones and start afresh in life. You know, Darpan has married again and has two kids from it."

She had tried to console him.

"Every individual is different Neela. It's not that I haven't tried. But I could never find someone who could replace Rupa."

He had said with the gulp of his fourth peg. He did not drink after that. He had shown a keen interest in her life after Darpan. They had talked for a long time. Urmila joined them occasionally, pinched Neela and moved towards attending other guests. It was a well arranged party where only close friends were invited. They were the only odd figure as everyone else were married couples. Sudesh had a silent question about them but after Urmila told him about their prior acquaintance, he had felt at ease.

Neela had been surprised to see a different face of Aabhash that night. She had noticed that alcohol made him very vulnerable, sensitive and emotional. She had strangely enjoyed a male attention and company. In a way, she had felt a frenzied intoxication.

"Can I drop in at your place sometimes?"

Aabhash had asked while dropping her home that night. She had noticed that he was trying to break some barriers between them. She liked it.

"Why not? Please do."

Aabhash had stared at her for a long time. Neela had felt a sweet fear as she got down from the car,

"Good night."

She had hurriedly entered her house, without turning back.

As soon as they could get some privacy next day, Urmila had asked her about last night.

"Your party was good, as usual."

Neela had answered casually.

"Don't act smart with me sweetie. Didn't I notice how well you guys were hitting off? You were like teenagers last night. Aabhash came back very late after he went to drop you. Tell me what happened."

Urmila was excited.

"I swear nothing happened. He just dropped me home and I don't know where he went after that."

Neela had told the truth. Urmila looked at her for a long time as if trying to figure out whether or not to believe her. She had made a long face,

"All I can tell you is that he is a big fish. If you let him go, you will regret. That's why I tried to match make."

"It seems that you guys have renewed your honeymoon. I can still see the hangover."

Neela had tried to divert the ball back to her court.

"How I wish it was true." Urmila sighed,

"My man was drunk like a fish. I had to fantasize the whole night."

The sadness in her face had made her realize that Urmila didn't have a satisfying physical relationship with her husband. She had felt sorry for her.

"I don't want you to share my destiny Neela. I thought maybe if I can be pivotal in finding you a complete companionship, God will reward me with the same. But I am doubtful if anything will develop between you two."

She was proved wrong three days from that. It was seven in the evening when Neela's door bell rang. She had opened the door to find Aabhash. He had spent a long time with her that night. They had everything in common. They had found happiness in sharing similar dilemma, void and anguish trying to fulfill each others emptiness. They had a strong desire to spend rest of the night together. When they had to part, they had to use all their will power.

Aabhash had gone home content. That night fuelled her stagnated life. For the first time, a man had satisfied her like that. She could not know if it was because of a long gap of a man in her life or it was something else. But it was a wonderful experience of such a strong pleasure never known to her.

A lot many men had tried to come close to her after her separation from Darpan. Some of them were newly introduced and some, from old circle. Most of them were middle aged married men who ogled at her but ignored her like a plague when their wives were around. Once out of their eyes, they transformed to very sympathetic and loyal. She could feel that they had a tail which wagged for her. They were identical to Darpan who had not spared her friends, maid servants and even relatives. Neela detested those lecherous men. They thought that a single woman was an easy prey and slandered her when rejected. Some of them even went up to the extent of questioning her womanhood. Thus, she had buried her desires but her encounter with Aabhash had made it erupt like a volcano inactive for a long time. Such was the force of it that she had felt herself totally swept up in the tide. Nights after that incident seemed torturous without him.

Neela pushed away her thoughts again. The day had broken outside. She went to the bathroom and was in the middle of her shower when the phone rang. Nobody knew the number as yet. She thought it must have been a wrong number while she picked the phone.

"You bought a new house and did not even bother to inform us. How very mean of you. Even Aabhash said nothing about it."

Urmila was shouting at her on the other end.

"How did you get this number?"

She was surprised.

"Ram jee gave me this number. He had come to the bank to cash your check. Why did you guys move in to a small flat when Aabhash has such a huge mansion? Is it a special way to celebrate your honeymoon or what?"

Urmila asked naughtily. The same twinkle in her voice would tickle her few days back but now it was irritating. A lot of things change with time.

"Urmila, we will talk when we meet. I am little preoccupied now."

She had hung up before Urmila could reply. She had yearned for Aabhash for a year and Urmila was the witness. She was a bridge between them but little did she know that their relationship had

been damaged beyond repair in a very short span. She was still celebrating her perfect matchmaking.

Neela felt like having a cup of tea but Krishna had not yet arrived with the tea leaves. She looked at the wall clock. It was six thirty in the morning. She tried to read a day old newspaper but her thoughts wandered to the turmoil her life went through in recent times.

Aabhash was not very keen on marriage. It was Neela who felt the urge to legalize the relationship which was getting stronger. The skeptical society was slowly starting to affect the harmony of their bond. In a way she had forced him to marry. The marriage took place in a temple with minimum of formalities. The god was the only witness. A day prior to this she had accompanied Aabhash to his children's school. They reminded her of Smrity who was about the same age. Aabhash hardly talked with his son but spent a longer time with his daughter. Afterwards all four of them had been together for some time.

"Anshu, she will make a very good mother. You will not feel lonely when you come home next time."

He had assured his daughter.

"Papa, if that makes you happy, it's okay with me."

Anshu was almost in her tears as she consented.

She had kissed Aabhash and waved to Neela, tears in her eyes while she went. Biwek had followed his sister. Neela could not forget the pain in her eyes which she had tried to hide behind the forced smile.

After exactly thirteen month of a torrid affair, Neela had entered Aabhash's house as his wife.

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The shrill sound of the door bell rang. Krishna, the errand boy was there smiling with bags. Neela had started liking the boy. She smiled and asked him in. She asked him to sit down but he did not. He handed her the bill silently. He smiled nervously as he took the money from Neela and went. Neela prepared a cup of tea. She felt relieved sipping the hot tea. The waves of her memories slowly swept her again.

Marriage was just a formality, a social obligation for them. Otherwise they had completely accepted each other. Both of them had started to feel the burning desire growing inside them. She had visited his house for the first time a year back. One thing which had caught her immediate attention in his bedroom was a huge picture of a white cat. It was mounted on the wall facing his bed. True, people liked paintings, deerskin or their own pictures to decorate their rooms. Even she had enlarged her engagement snap with Darpan and framed it in her room. Some even had suggestive or provocative pictures in their bedroom. But she was surprised to find a huge picture of a cat.

"I just adore cats. This one was my pet when I was a child and my dad clicked this picture. How do you like it?"

Aabhash had explained after finding her staring at the cat.

Neela could not figure out what his obsession was. Was it because of his love for his pet or was it because his father had clicked it?

Later when they made love, Neela could not enjoy it like before. She had a strong bizarre feeling that the cat was between them. The cat had made her feel awkward and conscious. Later while going out of the room, she had not even felt like looking at that picture.

They were having tea in the drawing room afterwards.

"You know Neela, in my forty five year's age; I have had seven cats as my pets. The first one was Nainkala, and then Chua, Hendry, Banshee, Rupesh, Manamati and the recent one was Ananga. What do you think of cats?"

Aabhash's abrupt explanation and the question had jolted her. She had not known what to say.

"I have no experiences about cats. They seem to be beautiful creatures. But I was never interested in pets. So I can say nothing."

She had answered.

"What I wanted to know was, you don't hate them or are afraid of them?"

"Why should I fear such a tiny little thing? I am not afraid of Tiger forget about cats."

She tried to act valiant.

"What about me?"

Aabhash naughtily asked as he took her in his arms.

"Not even you."

Neela had giggled.

"Yeah, that is true. I should be afraid of you. You know that you are like a wild tigress."

He rubbed her hands on his clean shaved cheeks as Neela blushed at his remarks. Their eyes met and both of them laughed. Suddenly some odd lines of anguish appeared on his face.

"Rupa despised them. She even tried to poison Anang. She could not stand cats."

It took her a moment to register that Anang was the name of a cat mentioned few moments back. Aabhash was now lying with his head rested on her lap. He continued in a heavy voice,

"I begged her not to hate my cats. Many times I told her that I could not stand anyone misbehaving with my cats. I love them. She never cared for my feelings. She was literally after my poor cat. But I continued adoring. I doubt that Manamati did not die a natural death. She was in a perfect healthy condition when I left her the previous night and next morning she was dead. I mourned for days but Rupa did not even cry. I did not suspect her that time. But later when she tried to poison Anang, I knew who the culprit was."

She had felt sorry for Aabhash and furious with Rupa at the same time.

"How did you know she poisoned Anang? Did he die?"

"Anag fell ill immediately after he licked his food. I had gone looking after him accidentally. Anang was in a bad state. He was panting and writhing. I took him to a vet who made him vomit and informed me that Anang had consumed poison. I came back home after buying all the medicine prescribed by doctor Kayastha. Anang's poisoned food was missing. Servants pretended not knowing anything about it. Rupa accepted that she had given the food to Ananga but she ignored my question if she had poisoned it. She was merciless. It was only after she had gone from this house; I found a bottle of pesticide in her room."

Aabhash was disturbed. Neela had found herself sympathizing with him. She could feel his pain and she hated Rupa for what she did. Rupa was indeed a cruel woman; she had thought while she held Aabhash close to her.

"Where is Anang now?"

She wanted to see the poor little thing.

"He died two years after Rupa left this house. In fact tomorrow is his second death anniversary."

His eyes were closed and he was trying hard to control his tears. After that, they never talked about cats. But Neela could never come in terms with the huge picture in the bedroom. It kept bothering her. She could never sense the fulfillment of their relationship in its presence. After knowing Aabhash's sentiments with the cats, there was no way she could ask him to remove it.

Day One

September 10

It was the first day of Neela's marriage to Aabhash. Although being married was not a new experience for her, yet she was jovial, excited and anxious about what the future had in store for them. Beginning of a new dimension in any relationship always has a difference in similarities.

Both of them marrying for the second time had wanted to avoid any unfavorable comments which would mar their pleasure. That was the reason Aabhash and Neela had invited only Sudesh and Urmila for dinner that night.

"My wishes are granted Neela. I pray for your harmonious married life."

Urmila had told her with a bear hug while leaving their place.

Later, in bed, Aabhash had taken her in his arms and said in an emotional note,

"You have fulfilled the void in me. You have set motion to my stagnated life. I will always love you for this Neela."

"Even I feel that I am reborn. There is now way I can express my gratitude for what you have given me."

Neela had said dreamily.

"I have a friend in District Office. He has gone for a week long vacation. As soon as he comes back, we will register our marriage in court as well."

He had held her closer.

"There is no need of it. We have been married according to the religion. The god is our witness."

"As long as we live, there is no need of it. God forbidden if anything happens to me..."

Neela had covered his mouth with her hand, stopping him to complete the sentence.

"It's you that I need. What do I do with property without you? Don't talk like that on the most important night of our life."

Her voice had quivered as she sulked. Tears had come to the edge of her eyes, which Aabhash had kissed,

"I didn't intend to hurt you my love. We don't live in a jungle and the society has a certain way of functioning. All I wanted to say was, our relationship should be legally proved since everything is asserted by law. "

Aabhash had tried to prove his point. After that they had not discussed about it.

They had let themselves to be carried away by what both of them had yearned for. Even on those moments when nothing else should have mattered, a pair of gleaming eyes seemed to be gazing at her on the dim light. She had pretended not to be bothered by the cat's eyes and tried to soak herself in his shower of love.

She had awakened in the midnight. Those eyes were still staring at her. On the silence of the night, those green lifeless eyes looked spooky. They frightened her. Aabhash was asleep. She switched off the night bulb. The darkness made her more petrified. She reached out for Aabhash and snuggled close to him. She felt relieved but there was a strange feeling that the cat's eyes had popped up from the picture and glued between Aabhash and her. She held him tightly and tried to sleep.

Day Two

September 11

"Neela, I love traveling. When you will be with me, it will be even more blissful. We are going to Narayanghat. It has been ages since I last visited my Mauja."

It was early morning when Aabhash had announced it. Neela had passed Narayanghat occasionally while going to Birgunj.

"I have to join the office day after tomorrow."

She had informed.

"Don't worry. We will be back by tomorrow afternoon."

They had an early lunch. Aabhash had packed everything required for the long journey in the car.

On the way to Narayanghat, Aabhash had clicked countless pictures of Neela. He stopped the car every now and then to make her pose in front of anything he fancied. It was not a new experience for Neela as he had clicked many more pictures of Neela since they started getting along.

"Why do you click so many pictures? What's the use of so many similar pictures?"

She had asked once.

"Not one of them is similar to the other. Everything keeps on changing with every passing moment in this world. You might not notice but there are so many variations in you within seconds. I want to capture as much as possible."

Aabhash had explained.

He had clicked her head, hairs, eyebrows, lips, nose and full figure so many times. He had made her pose with as many different objects as he could. Neela had been surprised to know that a person could be photographed like that.

The one hundred and forty eight kilometers to Narayanghat, which would normally take four and half hours had taken more than nine hours because of his obsession to photograph Neela.

As they had entered the premises of his ancestral property in Narayanghat, Neela had been delighted to find it thickly surrounded by various trees. Aabhash had informed her that it took more than thirty minutes in a car to explore the whole area. She failed to guess how much of land they had.

As they entered the main hall of the old rustic building, Aabhash had made her stand in front of an abstract painting of his father to click one more photograph. To Neela, it looked like a landscape with mountain peaks and trees. Aabhash saw a lot of cats in it.

An old servant Saryug took care of everything in Narayanghat. He was a very friendly middle aged burly man. His three generations had served Aabhash's family. Neela had instantly liked him. His wife and his daughter in law were delighted to see Neela and treated her like a queen. Saryug was worried about who would serve the family after him because his only son had died of liver infection recently. In fact they had got him married after knowing his incurable disease few years back to have a grandson. Man proposes; god disposes, was exactly what had happened to them. Saryug was worried about the fate of his young daughter in law and felt guilty for her.

Saryug and his family had a mixture of their Terai originality and Aabsh's aristocratic family culture.

"My wife prepared gundruk tonight because Raja loves it."*

Saryug had proudly declared at dinner that night.

"It is superb. Please ask her to cook bamboo shoot and white beans for lunch tomorrow. It is only Kaki who can cook such irresistible food after my mother's demise, Neela."

Aabhash had said while devouring the food.

"We do not have anyone except Raja now. She has entered the kitchen just because of Raja. Otherwise we eat whatever the daughter in law cooks. Rampratap took away our taste and appetite along with him."

Saryug had almost choked with his words as he remembered his son. Saryug's wife had entered the room with one more dish of Aabhash's choice.

"Kaki, I have eaten like this after a long time."

Aabhash had said. Neela had agreed wholeheartedly too.

Later on Neela had found that Saryug had taken good care of the house even though no one stayed there. It was well maintained both inside out. Everything was impeccable. Neela had felt like a dwarf in front of her husband's wealth.

Although the house in *Naraynghat* was totally different from their house in Kathmandu, there was a striking similarity. Even this one was cramped with artifacts.

Neela had been staring at the heaps and piles of them after Saryug and his family had retired to their quarters late that evening.

"Dad preferred Naraynghat. But there were no big schools here. No one like the idea of me staying in a hostel. It was because of my education mom stayed in Kathmandu."

Aabhash had opened another chapter of his childhood for her.

**(dried and fermented vegetable leaves)*

"I can understand your dad's feeling. It is such a lovely place. Don't you agree?"

"I liked it as a kid. But now I am used to the lifestyle of a big city. Occasional weekends are fine but I can not imagine living here permanently."

"Given an opportunity I would stay here for sure."

They had already entered the bedroom.

"In that case even I would stay here because heaven is where you are for me."

Aabhash had said in a romantic mood as both of them fell on the huge bed. Both of them had suddenly felt the urgency of the burning desire. She had closed her eyes as he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Even Rupa liked this place. As soon as the schools were closed for the vacation, she used to force me to come here."

Neela had felt her desires die premature at the mention of Rupa's name at such moment.

"Anyone will love such a beautiful place."

She had pushed him away. Suddenly she had felt sleepy after a long and tiring journey.

Later she had come out of the bathroom in her night dress after a refreshing shower. She had lied down and pretended to be asleep when Aabhash brushed her lips with his forefingers tenderly. The touch seemed to spark the desires again. A sweet sensation had slowly spread through as his hands gently explored her body. She had opened her eyes for a brief second to find that his eyes were locked on hers. After that nothing interrupted the pleasure which followed and lasted till the

wee hours of the morning. She had felt asleep thinking about how blissful life could be when you are truly loved by a person you love truly.

Day Three

September 12

Something cool brushed her cheeks tenderly to wake her up.

"My dear princess, it is almost mid day."

Aabhash had kissed her pouring the remaining of the previous night's affection on her lips. She looked at him with half open eyes to find that his hairs were wet and he had just come out of a bath.

"Why did not you wake me up?"

She had complained while garlanding him with her slender arms and pulling him closer to her.

"How could I dare to disturb your sleep? You looked wonderful and serene. It's a pity you can not see the most beautiful sight of the world because your eyes are closed at that time. "

He had replied in a romantic manner.

"I never knew life could be such a joy. I am indebted to you forever. How I wish we could freeze the time here and remain like this. Do you feel the same?"

She had said in an equally romantic manner.

"You have given me more than what I might have given to you. You have made my life like a dream. There is no way I can repay you for this."

Neela had felt that she was in cloud nine.

They were having their tea in the garden when Saryug kaka had arrived.

"Would you like to pay a visit to the villagers Raja? The peasants would be delighted."

"Sure."

Aabhash had looked towards her,

"Why don't you join us Neela? You have not seen our village."

"Give me a moment."

Neela had agreed and had gone inside to change.

Neela had dressed casually and joined them on a tour to the small village which consisted of about a dozen small huts belonging to the peasants who cultivated on Abhash's ancestral lands. Neela had watched with admiration while Aabhash exchanged pleasantries with them. They seemed to be delighted to find him amongst themselves. Neela had also watched with remorse while people of his grandfather's age almost bowed down to the ground. Neela had felt bitter for the materialistic approach of the world. A lot of women bowed in front of her. She had felt that they were paying the penalty for being poor.

"I think we should now go back. Neela is not used to walk. Are you tired my love?"

Aabhash had spoken taking her by her shoulders. Indeed, she was tired on the humid afternoon of terai but Aabhash's touch had a magical effect on her and she felt she was being recharged. Aabhash had abruptly removed his hands. Neela had felt like she had seen a mirage. She had looked at him with disapproving look in her eyes as if to protest it. Aabhash had read her eyes and replied silently making her aware of Saryug kaka's presence. Even she had felt little embarrassed realizing what he meant.

"There is only one house left and it's not even far. Should we go up to there Raja?"

Saryug kaka had pointed out at a hut few yards away.

The moment they arrived at the hut, Aabhash noticed three new born kittens prancing around their mother.

"Oh my God Neela look at them! What beautiful little creatures."

Aabhash's eyes had gleamed with joy as he had exclaimed. Indeed, the little creatures with white and brown stripes were lovely.

All animals are lovely when they are small.

Neela had thought solemnly.

"Are they yours?"

Aabhash had asked the man standing in front of him.

"Yes Raja. They are mine. If we do not have them, the rats will finish everything. She had given birth to six. The male killed three. I have saved these with much difficulty."

The man picked a kitten hanging it by its back of the neck with his forefinger and thumbs. Neela had shrieked. She had been terrified for the small poor creature.

"Don't be frightened Neela. That's the proper way of lifting them. Even their mothers lift them like that."

Aabhash had reassured her.

"Jasbahadur, Give one of them to me. I will take it to Kathmandu. I think it can drink milk now."

Aabhash had taken the kitten from Jasbahadur. It mewed in a meek voice. The mother, too, had come near his feet and mewed. The remaining small creatures were also mewling as if they had sensed the parting of a family member.

"Don't you think it is too small? I think we should take it after it grows bigger."

Neela had protested feebly not wanting to part it from its mother.

"You know nothing about cats Neela. This is the perfect age to train them. The smaller you take them, the more loyal they will become."

Aabhash was mentally prepared to take it home.

Jasbahadur had offered him one female along with it as if in a 'buy one get one free' offer. But Aabhash had been content with the male one.

"No, thanks. I don't want a female. It's very tough to save the children after it gives birth. The male one kills them all. That was the reason I could save none of the kittens from Hendri. Manamati died before she mated once."

Aabhash had almost revealed the history. He had handed over some money to Jasbahadur. Neela could see the joy it brought on Jasbahadur's face.

The mother followed them till some distance and returned back to the remaining two. She had made a woeful noise which hurt Neela. She could identify with the pain of separation of a child. She had looked at Aabhash with a complaining look. Aabhash had not realized what she was feeling. He had looked very content. His face looked bright. In fact Neela had never seen such a

glow on his face. He was walking briskly with the kitten held close to his chest as if he had won a fortune.

It was time for the journey back to Kathmandu.

Saryug kaka had arranged a small basket made of bamboo stripes for the cat to travel. He had put in some cotton cushioning for the comfort. However; Aabhash was not quite satisfied as he had said,

"Neela, do me a favor, please carry this cat with you. I would have done it myself but I have to drive."

She had not liked the idea of carrying such a small animal with her but gave in for his happiness.

'If that makes him happy, I will do it.'

She had decided solemnly. After all, relationship comes with lot compromises of different size and shapes. It's just a matter of how much you can cope up with.

Aabhash wanted to click a photograph with the cat on her lap. She did not fancy the idea of being photographed with the cat because Aabhash's prime object was the cat, not her. But again she gave in for his happiness. He was so excited that she could not protest.

They had bid farewell to Saryug kaka, his family and the villagers and proceeded. When they reached the Narayani River, Aabhash had stopped the car.

"Neela, please click one snap of me and the cat with the river in the background."

While she clicked, she had noticed a strange feeling of satisfaction on his face. Aabhash made her click about four to five snaps in different pose. During their year long courtship, he had hardly clicked two or three photographs with her. In one of the pose, Aabhash had held the cat so close to his face that it made Neela almost jealous.

"What should we name him Neela?"

Aabhash had asked heading to the car with the cat closely held to his chest. Neela had followed him almost dragging herself.

Aabhash took the driver's seat and handed her the cat once again,

"Oh yes. I have decided a beautiful name for him. Can you guess? I will give you a clue. The name is related to us in a way."

Neela had been least interested in his talks as the cat in her lap made her conscious.

"Tell me, what might I have decided?"

His twinkling eyes were focused on the cat.

Neela had found the conversation irritating because of the fuss he was creating over a silly topic. Yet, she had pretended to be interested,

"No guess."

"Stupid, can't you guess?"

His eyes had moved to Neela for a brief moment and they went back to the cat again,

"He will be called Milan (unity). How is it? It is a symbol of our unity."

Aabhash put his left hand around her shoulder. The touch had immediately ignited her feelings again. She had liked the name because of the importance given to her.

"It is really a good name."

For the first time, she had tried to like the cat.

She had been lost in her thoughts as the car was speeding on the highway.

"Stop. Stop the car Aabhash."

Neela had shrieked suddenly and Aabhash had slammed on the brakes, startled.

"What happened?"

Neela had suddenly found herself wet.

"I think it has littered."

Aabhash had taken the cat away and Neela found that it had really littered on her sari which had gone inside up to her petticoat.

"Oh shit, it has spoilt my dress. What to do now?"

"Wipe it with the tissue paper and wash your hands with the water. In about two hours we will reach home."

Aabhash had replied as if nothing had happened.

"Damn it, it is stinking. I can't stand this smell. You and your whims."

She had grumbled while trying to clean herself with tissue. She had been annoyed and she had almost puked.

"Should we put him in the basket?"

Aabhash had asked meekly. Neela had felt that he was still expecting that she would carry it on her lap. But he could not force her. Neela was a novice driver and there was no way she could drive on the snaky hilly highway.

They had proceeded after the cat was firmly put in the basket. The highway was not properly maintained and had a lot of pothole. The bumpy ride on the winding roads flung the basket to and fro. Neela could feel Aabhash's concern but she had ignored.

"I think we should stop for sometime. Milan must be tired."

Aabhash had pulled the car to a side after they had crossed Mugling. The cat had made her dirty and she had expected a bit of concern or sympathy from Aabhash. But Aabhash was fondling the cat with affection. He sat down on the side of the road with the cat on his lap,

"Poor Milan is exhausted. He must be hungry. Don't you worry; we will reach home in about two hours."

Neela had expected him to say,

"Poor Neela, you must be tired and hungry. Don't worry my princess, we will reach home soon."

"I think he is very uncomfortable in the basket."

Neela paid least attention to his anticipatory remark.

They had covered the remaining distance in silence. The two hour's drive seemed very long and tedious. Aabhash looked calm like usual but Neela could feel he was disturbed. It was the same highway, the same road which they had covered a day before but the journey was not. Time used to fly away when they were together but suddenly it was dragging at a snail's speed. It had been the most miserable time for her after she had started seeing him.

The first thing Aabhash had done when they reached home was to shout,

"Sher Bahadur, get some warm milk for Milan."

Sher Bahadur had observed the small creature and had asked,

"It seems to be very small. Should I bring the milk in a bowl or a feeding bottle?"

"Bring it in a bowl and if he can not drink from it, we will try the bottle."

Aabhash had entered the house ignoring Neela. She had expected,

"Why don't you become fresh honey so that we can have some tea together?"

Neela had felt humiliated while she followed Aabhash inside.

Neela had found him busy with the arrangements for the cat when she had come out of the bathroom after a refreshing shower. A small pram was placed on the side of their bed for Milan. The pillows were moved to the bottom of the bed so that the pram could be watched while sleeping. Neela had tough bitterly,

'As if the huge picture was not enough that now I have to see the pram all the time.'

"Oh, you have already been fresh?"

Aabhash had noticed her finally as he ordered Dal Bahadur for some tea.

"Milan does not look well. It must be because of the long journey. I think I will have to call doctor."

Aabhash had called doctor Dutta's number who had arrived by the time they finished their tea. He had checked Milan thoroughly after which Aabhash had led him to the drawing room. She could hear them murmur for about an hour and could make out that it was about Milan. It was almost ten in the night when the doctor departed.

"Rani saheb is waiting for you for the dinner."

Dal Bahadur had informed him.

"Oh, I have not even taken my bath. By the time I do it, arrange for some milk for Milan. Manamati's bottle is in the cupboard. Clean it properly."

He had shot orders before rushing towards the bathroom.

They had a very late dinner. Neela had lost her appetite by that time and hardly touched the food, which Aabhash had not even noticed.

Neela was expecting him to ask,

"What happened? Why are you eating so less? Are you all right?"

Neela had followed him to the bedroom silently.

Aabhash went up to the pram and felt the cat. He was worried as he said,

"I think Milan has fever and the damned doctor said everything was okay. I will call him."

Neela had lied down as Aabhash was trying to contact the doctor. She was used to a longer travel but the journey today had exhausted her. She wanted a sound sleep but closing her eyes did not help her. She could hear Aabhash talking to the doctor who wanted to prescribe a medicine on the phone. Aabhash was adamant that he paid a personal visit once again.

It was almost mid night when the doctor had arrived again. Aabhash had barged in to the bedroom with him. Neela had not liked the idea of some stranger roaming around in her bedroom in the middle of the night. She pretended to be asleep as the doctor injected some sedative to the cat. The doctor had occasionally glanced at her quickly thinking that she was asleep.

"Don't worry Raja; this will help it to sleep peacefully."

Aabhash had guided him to the drawing room. He had not let him go and made him come and check Milan after another thirty minutes.

It was three in the morning when Aabhash had come to the bed. He had felt asleep as soon as he hit the bed. Neela was wide awake. She had felt deserted.

It was almost dawn when Neela noticed that the cat was breathing very fast. Its tummy was moving up and down with the speed of its breathing. The tip of its tongue was protruding from its closed mouth. She had thought that the cat was dying and wanted to wake Aabhash up. He was in deep sleep and looked so vulnerable that Neela decided against her initial ideas and went to the bed again. This time, she slept.

Day four

September 13

She was surrounded by pigeons, lots of pigeons. In fact thousands of pigeons were around her. It was a steep hill. Aabhash was with her. Pigeons started to cover Aabhash slowly. Finally, Aabhash disappeared in the mass of those pigeons. She was suffocated as she was searching for him frantically. Suddenly she woke up. It was a dream. She looked around to find that the day had broken. Rays of the morning sun were trying to pierce through the heavily curtained window panes. Neela felt relieved as it made her escape the terror of the pigeons.

Aabhash was not in the bed. She went up to the window and opened the curtains. There was a white laced curtain behind those heavy fabrics. Sunlight poured inside the room, filling everything with brightness. She looked at the table clock which showed nine. Her looks shifted to the pram and it was empty. She was startled as she remembered the sight of it earlier that morning. She hurried towards the drawing room to find it isolated. She reached the main hall where Mangal Man was cleaning the sculptures.

"Mangal Man, have you seen Raja? Where has he gone?"

"I saw him in the garden with the cat ma'm."

She had been in a way relieved to know that the cat was alive. She had retired back to her room. She took a shower and changed. Aabhash had still not come. Neela went to the drawing room from where she could see the garden. Aabhash was relaxed on one of the wrought iron chairs. The cat was roaming near his feet.

"You were asleep and I didn't feel like disturbing you. Look at Milan, he looks fresh and fine."

Aabhash had said later when he came to the room. He was carrying the cat close to his chest.

It looked cute cuddled to Aabhash but Neela did not like it. Neither could she express her feelings nor could she feel what Aabhash felt.

"Are you going to the office today?"

Aabhash had asked her.

"My leaves are sanctioned till today. I will join tomorrow."

"Okay. Did you have your breakfast by the way?"

The question hard hurt Neela even more. Since when did she start eating alone? Aabhash seemed to be a stranger while asking such question. She had become speechless. Aabhash had not realized the anguish caused to her by his questions. He had spoken to Mangal Man,

"Take Milan to his room and look after him properly. Remind me to give him his dose of medicine at eleven."

He had handed over the cat to Mangal Man, who accepted it very carefully. Neela had felt relieved to see the cat transferred to Mangal Man from Aabhash. Mangal man opened the door of a room which was in between their bedroom and the drawing room. Neela had never entered the room.

As if reading her mind, Aabhash had spoken,

"You have not seen that room. It is the cats' room. Dad had designed it for his studio. But he was an occasional visitor to this house so the idea never materialize. When I started fancying the cats, mom gave me the room for my cats."

Aabhash had led her to the room taking her by her arms.

"See, it has everything for a cat. This is the cat's cupboard. That is the cat's bed. These albums have all the precious photograph of my cats. We will go through them some day."

Neela had been shocked to see the huge piles of albums. The room was as big as their bedroom. It had various toys for the cat's amusement including some artificial stuffed rats. All the windows were shut thus the room had a moist smell.

"Mangal Man, you never clean up this room or what? Look at the smell."

Aabhash had reprimanded him. When Mangal Man had put the cat on the floor to open the windows, Aabhash immediately picked it up,

"My sweet little dear Milan."

His face lit up with joy as he held the cat close to his face. It had an equally adverse effect on Neela.

'Even knowing that Aabhash adores it, why can't I build a liking for it?'

She had questioned herself and got no response.

"I have heard that cats can cause rabies."

Instead, she disguised her dislike for the cat.

"That is not true. Cat's hair can cause diphtheria to small children, but adults have nothing to fear. Rabies is caused by dogs and monkeys."

Aabhash had defended. After shooting some more instructions to Mangal Man for Milan's care and safety, they had gone to their bedroom.

"Why don't you watch television by the time I finish my bath?"

Aabhash had handed her the remote control. Neela had surfed the channels but nothing excited her. Aabhash had come out of the bathroom humming a song. The melody seemed familiar but Neela could not remember the words.

"Let's go to the dining room for breakfast."

Aabhash had announced. He was in a very ecstatic mood and Neela had followed him. She had a weird feeling that she was a guest in the house rather than his wife.

"Bring us some breakfast Dal Bahadur dai."

Aabhash had ordered.

"I was preparing an early lunch because Raja didn't have breakfast on time. Or Raja plans to go out?"

Dal Bahadur dai had informed and inquired humbly.

"I am not going anywhere. Milan's medicine is due at eleven. How long will it take for the lunch to be ready?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Okay then, we will have lunch after giving the medicine to Milan. What say Neela?"

He had inquired. Neela gave her consent,

"It is okay by me. I am not even hungry."

They stayed in the drawing room. Neela was feeling melancholic; Aabhash was feeling jubilant. In a way she had been used to be the centre of his attraction for such a long time. She felt that overnight, it was being snatched away and her rival was a cat.

Aabhash had spent the whole day with the cat. Doctor Dutta paid a visit in the afternoon to find out about its health.

"You have made me indebted to you doctor. If it was not for you, my Milan would have died last night."

"That was my duty Raja."

Dutta had replied modestly. Aabhash had invited him over the dinner that night and he had accepted it happily.

Aabhash and Dutta drank whisky while Neela accompanied them with soft drinks that evening. Dutta was on high after his fifth peg.

"Our income does not allow us to drink such fine liquor. Its only occasion like this we can devour them. I have a rule set for myself. Never drink cheap stuff. This world is full of bloody snobs Raja. You know what, last week our director, doctor Pant held a reception to welcome new secretary and bid farewell to the old one. All bottles with red label and black label were filled with local whisky. Everyone was gulping and singing praise for doctor Pant. But one sniff was enough for me to find out the truth. I said nothing, but refrained myself from drinking it. I said I was on anti biotic."

Dutta was near sputtering stage.

"Rani saheb is not taking anything?"

"She does not drink."

Aabhash had replied for her. He was on his third peg and very controlled. After gulping down his sixth peg, doctor Dutta stammered,

"I think I am drunk Raja. I will go home now."

"What about dinner?"

Aabhash had inquired.

"I can not eat anything Raja. I had enough of snacks. I will go home and sleep."

"I don't think you are in a condition to drive. I will drop you home. You can collect your car tomorrow."

Aabhash had volunteered. It was almost eleven in the night. Dr Dutta apologized for drinking like that as Aabhash went to drop him home.

The evening had been monotonous for Neela. Aabhash and Dutta had talked about Milan and his health most of the time. On top of it, she had to wait for Aabhash who went to drop doctor Dutta. The silence of the night annoyed her. She had felt that it was ridiculing her.

"Mangaley, have you fed Milan?"

That was his first concern when Aabhash returned home.

"No Raja."

Mangal Man had replied. Aabhash had rushed to the cat's room.

"Stupid, warm some milk and bring the bottle. Poor Milan must be hungry."

Aabhash had entered the drawing room with the cat. Mangal Man followed with the bottle. Dal Bahadur had requested him to have the dinner,

"Raja, Rani Saheb has been waiting for you. Why don't you have dinner? Mangale will feed the cat."

"No way. I can not depend upon Mangale. Can't you see that he kept my Milan starving? We will have dinner after I feed Milan. Is it okay Neela?"

Neela had nodded affirmative as Dal Bahadur left the room. Mangal Man was standing in a corner like a culprit. Aabhash was feeding Milan from the bottle. Milan was on the sofa and Aabhash was on the floor. Nothing else seemed to be important for Aabhash. He was not even aware of Neela's existence, which disturbed her. After being satisfied that Milan was properly fed, Aabhash had handed him over to Mangal Man.

It was almost mid night when they had retired to the bedroom after their dinner. Aabhash had looked at the empty pram and had gone to the adjoining room to come back with Milan. He had placed Milan properly in the pram and changed.

Neela had been waiting for him. She was yearning for those moments when Aabhash would be only hers. Aabhash had taken her in his arms. Neela had felt that all her grudges were vanishing.

"After all the most important thing is we belong to each other. I am the most important person in his life. How I wish I could stop the time here, so that I could be in his arms forever."

As she was surrendering herself to the mood, Aabhash had whispered in her ears,

"Now I am relieved that nothing will happen to Milan. You slept last night but I was so worried for him that I could not even get a wink."

Neela had felt like wailing on top her voice. She was not the subject of his concern even when she was in his arms. Aabhash continued,

"Milan wakes up very early in the morning. I have to take him for a walk. What to do Neela, I can't depend on anyone. I think I will try to get some sleep."

Neela had felt suffocated in his arms and she freed herself from it.

"I am exhausted."

Aabhash had said and after few moments he was snoring. Neela had felt pathetic as she watched him on the dim light. She felt like crying.

She could not cry. She could not sleep. She lay awake, squirming in the bed.

Day five

September 14

"Mew! Mew! Mew!"

Continues mewling of the cat had awakened her. She had found that Aabhash was already by the pram. The room was brightly lit on the milky light of the mercury which Aabhash must have put on. Neela glanced at the clock; it was four in the morning.

"What happened to my dear little Milan?"

Aabhash was trying to pacify the cat as usual, held close to his chest. Milan had also been quiet immediately like a baby with its mother. Neela had closed her eyes to avoid the uneasiness the sight always created for her. Aabhash put the cat in its pram after sometime and snuggled to the bed. The cat started mewling again. Aabhash picked up the cat and walked out of the room. Neela felt very lonely. She was expecting that Aabhash would come back after putting the cat in its room. She waited for him to return, but he didn't.

The dawn broke, the birds chirped gleefully, the sun rose and Neela was still waiting for Aabhash to come. She had not been able to sleep and was feeling lethargic. She knew that she had to attend the office. The leave could be extended. All she needed was to call and inform at the office.

'Why and for whom should I do it?'

She found herself asking the question. She got up and went to the bathroom.

Aabhash was nowhere in the sight by the time Neela had prepared herself for the office. She went down to the drawing room and as she was about to inquire about Aabhash, the main gate opened and their car entered. She was surprised to see Aabhash on the driving seat. Mangal Man was with him.

"I took him to Dr. Dutta. It is a case of viral infection. Doctor says that we will have to continue the medicines for one more week."

The cat was close to him as usual and Neela despised the sight.

"I am going to office."

Neela had informed in a defeated tone. It made no difference as Aabhash asked,

"Did you have your breakfast? I guess you will have your lunch in the office."

Neela just nodded for the second question. Aabhash thought it answered both his queries. For the first time she was going to the office hungry. She had wished Aabhash would take her in his arms and say,

"Please come back soon. You know this house will be empty without you."

He said nothing.

She had expected that he would drive her to the office. He would hold her hands for a long time before parting. Even Neela would find it difficult to go get out of the car.

"Hem Raj, drop Rani Saheb to the office."

Aabhash had ordered the driver, picked up the cat and entered the house. Neela had gone to the office with an ailing heavy heart.

Urmila had squealed when she had seen Neela in the office.

"How was the honeymoon? Why did you join the office so soon? Stupid, you should have taken a longer leave. After all you only live once and you should enjoy the life at its fullest."

Urmila had said with a naughty wink. Though they had made their marriage a secret affair, she found that Urmila had already spread the news in the office.

"Neela, this is not fair. There should be a grand celebration, a big party."

Her colleagues had complained. Neela had found herself in a strange fixtue. She should have been overjoyed at such stage of her life. Instead, she was in a lookout for an outlet where she could pour out her anguish. She knew that she could not share her grief with anyone. She pretended to be happy with a synthetic smile plastered on her face.

The rush office hour had acted as an antidote for her tension but came lunch hour and she was the centre of attraction once again.

"Neela is radiating like an electric heater."

"Neela, we won't spare you until you throw a big bash."

"Please bring Mr. Neela with you tomorrow."

"Where did you go for your honeymoon?"

"We have heard that he is filthy rich, must have been Pattaya, or Santosa."

Tongues were wagging non stop. The forty five minutes lunch hour stretched till eternity for Neela.

"Is everything all right Neela? You look gloomy. It seems that you have not slept well."

Urmila had asked after the lunch hour when they had some privacy behind the counter. The sympathetic note in her voice almost penetrated her wall of silence. Yet she controlled herself,

"It's nothing. I am having a headache, that's it."

"Why don't you take some cetamol?"

"I have already taken it."

Neela was tired of her fake smile which could not reach her eyes. Finally the day came to an end.

"Chauffer driven car will come to pick her up. It's not like us who have to cramp in a bus."

Someone had remarked. Indeed, a car came to pick her up at six. Some of the colleagues on the way out had smiled at Neela. Aabhash was driving the car. Neela was overjoyed to see him there.

Urmila had nudged her,

"Rush baby rush. It must have been very hard for him to be separated from you for a whole day."

She had winked vulgarly. Neela moved towards the car.

"I never knew it would be so painful with out you Neela. The day seemed never ending."

That was what she had expected Aabhash to say while she opened the door and climbed in. Aabhash smiled formally put the car in gear and said,

"Hem Raj had already started the car when I noticed that Milan's medicines were finished. So I thought, I will buy them and pick you up as well."

Aabhash had explained the reason of his arrival. At least he could have lied that he came to pick her up. Or he could have said nothing so that Neela could have understood it as she wished. Why did he shatter her expectations? She kept staring at the road ahead as he continued completely unaware about her feelings,

"He should have been given the dose at six. We are already late."

He was worried about the cat. Aabhash had hurriedly bought the medicine and speeded home. It was getting dark when they reached home. Neela had suddenly felt very tired and retired to her room while Aabhash went to the cat's room. Neela had flung herself in the bed without changing. She had not felt like doing anything. She had almost fallen asleep when Dal Bahadur's son Suresh had come to call her,

"Rani Saheb, Raj wants you to join him for tea."

She dragged herself up and moved out of the room like a machine.

Aabhash was seated on a sofa; Mangal Man was playing with the cat on the floor nearby. Dal Bahadur had entered with the tray and Neela prepared tea as usual. She had realized that she was still in her office uniform. She had expected Aabhash to ask,

"Why haven't you changed?"

But Aabhash did not notice it. They had tea in silence. Aabhash reached out for the remote and turned the television on. He was engrossed on the channel Animal Planet where they were showing about cats. Neela could not concentrate on the channel despite her effort. She looked at Aabhash. Everything was same as ever but she saw a stranger in Aabhash today.

"Neela, you have made my life wonderful. I can not imagine my life without you."

Neela hallucinated. She got up and left the room.

Aabhash caught hold her hands and pulled her by his side,

"Where are you going my love? Stay with me."

How she wished it was true. She looked at Aabhash from the door; he was glued to the screen. She felt, for the first time that her existence made no difference for Aabhash. That hurt.

Later, at the dining table, she had been playing with the food, appetite suddenly lost.

"Is something wrong with the food Rani Saheb? You have hardly touched them."

Dal Bahadur had asked.

"Nothing is wrong with the food dai, its just that I am not feeling like eating."

She had expected Aabhash to notice her remark and ask,

"Are you feeling all right Neela?"

But he paid no attention. They were like two passengers in a long journey eating in a restaurant sharing a table.

Instead, he had said,

"Dal Bahadur dai, please prepare the milk for Milan. It's time for his medicine. Put some more milk in the bottle than the morning."

Neela silently stood up and moved towards the bedroom whilst Aabhash, towards the cat's room.

Neela had been in deep sleep when Aabhash woke her up. She found him lying besides her. He had cupped her face in his hands and was asking,

"Are you asleep my princess?"

Indeed, his touch had worked miracle on her as usual. Neela surrendered herself to his strong arms as their bodies met. The void suddenly seemed to disappear as both of them started exploring each other gently at first and ferociously with every passing moment with the mounting

desire. That was what she had been missing since which had appeared to be eons. Neela was swept in to the tides of ecstasy with every move Aabhash made. She responded to him with equal eagerness. The only concern was to please and to be pleased. The tides of pleasure grew higher and higher and Neela thought life could not be any better than this. The golden pleasures snatched away from her were coming nearer and nearer.

"Mew, mew mew....."

As she was about to explode with elation, the cat mewed and Aabhash sprang to his feet, detaching himself from her abruptly. Neela felt that she had crashed to earth from cloud nine.

"Something is wrong with Milan, give me a moment honey"

Aabhash had said and concentrated on pacifying the cat. Neela could not even stop him from going away at such a time and remained there burnt with the unsatisfied desires. She had felt dejected, insulted and humiliated.

"Must have missed his mother, I popped up the nipple of the bottle and he is quiet now."

Aabhash had said after he came back. As if pushing a play button on a paused movie, he had resumed the act. But nothing could ignite her senses which were extinguished. Aabhash had traveled the one way journey to his destination and fallen asleep.

Neela had silently burnt like a candle for a long time before finally succumbing to sleep.

Day Six

September 15

"Neela, there is a call for you. It's Smrity on the line."

Aabhash had awakened her in the morning.

Neela had jumped to pick up the receiver.

"Mamu, how are you? Are you okay mamu? I saw you in my dreams. You were laughing. Remember, you had said once that it's not a good sign to see someone laughing in dream. I don't believe in these things but was a bit worried for you. Are you all right?"

Neela had been at the loss of words.

"Smrity..."

It was all she could utter.

"Mamu, come to my school at the lunch time."

Smrity had said in a serious note.

"Ask the principal's permission and we will talk."

The line had gone dead. Neela remained still for a long time. Tears were rolling down from her eyes as if they had suddenly found an outlet. Smrity understood her completely. Such was the bond that she need not utter a word and Smrity would understand. She was always concerned about Neela's happiness. Neela had felt guilty for never thinking about Smrity's happiness.

"I have been a selfish mother. I never ever thought about her. I always ran after my dreams, my pleasure. But happiness to me has been like a mirage."

She was also regretting her silence with Smrity.

"The poor girl must be worried about me. They won't call her on the phone. Why do I always make mistakes and realize when it's too late?"

She decided that she would meet Smrity at the lunch hour. The decision made her energetic and she went to the bathroom.

Aabhash had come back from his morning duty of the cat by the time she was ready for office.

They had breakfast together.

"I will drop you office."

He had volunteered. Neela felt juvenile immediately. She was surprised at her own emotions which would change with such small things.

She had almost pranced to the car along with Aabhash. The cat had followed them. Aabhash had picked it up and said,

"Milan wants to go for a drive too. Let's take him along so that he will be accustomed to the car."

That was enough to spoil what Neela had felt not long ago.

Her bright face had suddenly become gloomy.

'He can not live without the cat for a moment. He is crazy.'

Neela had felt antagonistic.

They had reached her office in silence. The cat was seated between her and Aabhash. Neela got down. Aabhash was smiling at her. She waved to Aabhash forcing a smile on her lips.

"Mr. Neela is very handsome."

"She is very fortunate to have a dashing guy with loads of money."

Few colleagues who had witnessed her arrival commented as she entered the office building.

Day Seven

September 16

The rays of sunlight had pierced through the thick curtains, filling the room with brightness when Neela woke up next morning. Her eyes roamed towards the other side of the bed.

It was empty.

She had not even known when Aabhash had waked up.

"My dear princess, wake up. It is almost mid day."

Aabhash had kissed her affectionately. That was not very long ago. In fact it was on the second day of their marriage.

Yet, the memory seemed very faint as if eons had passed since then. She looked at the wall clock. It was past eight.

"I will bunk the office today."

Neela thought indolently. Neela sluggishly picked up the telephone by the bedside and called her supervisor, Raghujee and informed about her absence for coming two days. She felt a bit relaxed after that.

Wondering what Aabhash might be doing, she went up to the window looking at the garden. Aabhash was engrossed with his cat. The garden was blooming with seasonal flowers. Morning sun in this season is always heavenly. However she realized that everything related to one's state of mind. Nothing could be juvenile under depression. The sight of the blooming flowers and the morning sun could give her no happiness. She felt like weeping when she saw Aabhash with the cat.

She came back and plopped herself in the bed again.

"Neelu, are you alright?"

Aabhash had entered the room in haste.

Neela once again had expected that he would come by the bed, feel her, take her in his arms and say,

"Let's go somewhere, maybe a long ride, just you and me."

But all Aabhash had said darting to the bathroom was,

"You must be getting late for the office."

Neela had remained idle till he came out from the bathroom.

"Come on, get up, be fresh and join me at the breakfast table. I will go and feed Milan by that time."

He had rushed out of the room without even looking at her properly. Neela had expected that he would come back. Kiss her all over her face and say,

"The morning without you, was a torture for me."

It never happened. Suresh had come after a long time to inform that Aabhash had his breakfast. He had gone to the doctor as Milan was not feeling well. She had dragged herself to the bathroom aimlessly.

Suresh had come to inquire about her breakfast. She had informed him that she would skip it. As per her old habit, she tried to meditate for some time. Her mind was in turmoil. She could not concentrate.

"All I want to see is your happiness."

She remembered what Smrity had told her.

"Can I be happy with Aabhash?"

She was asking the question for the first time in their companionship. She searched all the nooks and corner but neither her heart nor her mind could answer it. She was still trying to find an answer when Suresh had come again,

"Raja is waiting for the lunch."

When she joined him at the dining table, he had already started eating. Even then, he did not notice that Neela had hardly taken any food in her plate.

"I had gone to Doctor Dutta. Milan is very feeble. He has not been eating properly. Dutta prescribed some medicines but I could not get them anywhere. I will search at Patan and Bhaktapur after the lunch Do you want to join me?"

Aabhash asked, revealing his great concern about the cat's appetite.

"I think I will stay home and rest."

She refused. Aabhash was engrossed in his own world.

"Ranisaheb, you have not eaten properly since you came back from Narayanghat. Is there any problem with the food? If you don't like them, please tell me what should I prepare? After all I don't know about your taste."

Dal Bahadur dai had humbly inquired. He seemed worried and that hurt Neela even more. If only Aabhash had noticed it.

"Nothing is wrong with your food. They are splendid. I am not feeling like eating."

"Are you all right Ranisaheb? Maybe you should consult a doctor."

"It's not that serious Dal Bahadur dai."

It should have been Aabhash who was eating quietly. He had not even paid any attention to their conversation. It was same Aabhash who had dragged her to a dentist when she had complained about swollen gums.

"You should never be careless about your health matter."

That was before their marriage.

They headed towards the bedroom after the lunch. Aabhash stopped in front of Milan's room.

"Milan has made my life wonderful again. The world seems to be different since I met Milan. I had felt the same bliss with Manamati but Rupa could not tolerate it, she snatched away my happiness. I will not allow anything to go wrong with my Milan. I will always keep him close to me; In front of my eyes. The poor creature is very innocent. Look how he adores me."

Indeed, the cat had run to his feet upon seeing him.

"My dear little Miloo."

Aabhash had picked up the cat. Neela could not tolerate the pleasure in his eyes. Instead, she had run towards her room.

Once again, the question started haunting her,

"Can I be happy with Aabhash? Can I accept the cat which has suddenly appeared in between us? He loves and cares for cat more than me. How can I accept it?"

Countless thoughts were crossing her mind.

"What should I do? Is this life better than my single one? Can I take this all through out my life? Can I ask Aabhash to choose between me and the cat? Can I compete with a cat? I hate the cat and that makes me no different than Rupa for Aabhash. If I can not accept the cat, even Aabhash can not accept another Rupa."

She was disturbed.

"Do I need his wholesome love or his wealth? How can I beg with him to love me instead of the cat? Even if he does it for me, can I be satisfied with the donated love? If I continue like this and compromise, I will never be happy."

She decided that there was no future together for them. Since they were not married legally, there was no question of a legal divorce. There could be an amicable decision. She knew that she could never justify her action and nor anyone understand the reason behind it. She also knew that people who knew about their marriage would laugh at her. They would even jump to the conclusion and blame her for the failure of her marriage to Darpan. She knew that she would have to be well prepared for that brick bat.

She had decided to take everything by her stride because she was craving for her identity.

"You are only answerable to yourself at the end and I know what I am doing. It makes no difference what others think about me."

She had felt relieved when she reached the conclusion.

The shrill ring of the telephone had shattered her thoughts. It was Ramjee Sharma, the broker.

"If you remember madam, you had asked me to find a house sometime back. There are few good properties. Would you like to pay a visit?"

Even the professional warmth and affection of his voice was soothing to her ears. Neela was in double minds as he said again,

"It's very tough to find suitable house. Therefore I would prefer if you see them today."

"Where do you want me to meet you?"

"I will meet you at Balkhu crossing at one. Will that be suitable for you madam?"

Neela had looked at the watch and agreed. She had felt enthusiastic when she had gone to see the houses with Ramjee Sharma.

"I thought you said that you would stay home."

Aabhash had said when she had returned. Had the missing affection in his voice returned? Or it was a figment of her mental state?

"I had gone to a friend's place."

She had not felt like telling him that about the house she not only bought but finished the formalities of registration as well. She had lied for the first time and it gave her a strange sort of happiness.

After dinner that night, Aabhash had gone towards Milan's room as usual.

"I will not disturb you. I will come after giving him medicines."

Aabhash had said.

"Aabhash can never belong to anyone except his cats."

Neela had reconfirmed as she went to sleep.

Aabhash's hands exploring her body had waked her up.

"I love you Neelu, I love you."

She had found the words mechanical. Even his magical touch on her bare skin had lost its effects. It failed to stir any emotion. She had not felt responsive. Aabhash had not noticed the change.

It had been Aabhash boarding a plane which, Neela knew would never reach the destination. He took off, glided till he wished and crash landed on Neela.

"Oh Neela, I can't even tell you how much I love you."

"More than Milan?"

She could not stop herself despite knowing what his answer would be.

"I love him too. You can not compare. I told you about my obsession to cats. To tell you the truth, I can not live without Milan."

It hurt.

Aabhash had almost drifted to sleep when she broke the news,

"I had gone to buy a house and I am moving there tomorrow."

Aabhash had sprung on the bed.

"What? What has happened? Have I done something? Are you not comfortable here? Or this is a joke? Please don't do this. I love you too much."

Aabhash had pulled her close to him and kissed her. It had no effect on her,

"The most important thing is peace of mind and sense of belonging. I could find none from you Aabhash. Even I love you but I could not be content with you. I can not pretend and betray both of us."

Neela had poured out. They did not discuss further. Neela did not know when or if he slept, but she fell asleep after sometime.

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"Neela, can't you reconsider?"

Aabhash had meekly requested the next morning.

"Aabhash, we are very good friends and it should have been restricted to that. We have made a blunder and should not live with it. I want to rectify the mistake. We have our own respective lives to live. I have decided that we should set each other free."

Neela had summarized her verdict as mildly as she could.

"I had never expected this from you Neela."

Aabhash had said in a defeated voice.

“Neither did me.”

Neela had thought silently as she had stared at Aabhash. She could not decide what he looked like. He looked like a stranger. A person, whom you know, but can not connect to, a person who possesses you yet you don't belong to him, she could not decide. She had looked away.

Marriage to them had been mathematical problem. They knew the formula but could not solve it. She knew that Aabhash would never fathom the reason.

Hemraj had driven her to her new house.



Life continued.

Other Novels by Indira Prasai

- **Bishwamitra**
- **Ranamaya**
- **Shikha**
- **Usko Logne Ra Biralo**