

MY SCHOOL BEAUTY QUEEN

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There had been low pressure in the Bay of Bengal. The incessant rains had been lashing for the last three days. But can the nature keep a hungry stomach at home? Can it stop an unemployed indoors. I had no choice but to take a bus to the venue of interview. I dressed myself as expected by interview norms and waited for the bus. I had done badly in all my interviews earlier. And this was a chance to get a job in a private engineering college. At least this could save me from being jeered at by my villagers who considered education nothing but waste of time. My dad had mortgaged almost everything to educate me. I did MA in English from a Govt. College. But how could I compete with those English firing MAs from the towns. I could draft applications in English and read English Dailies but stammered as I spoke. It was almost impossible to be a communication instructor in any engineering college. But I hadn't given up hope. And there was pressure to support my family. And the jeering from the villagers was too much to take. I can't plough my father's land; after all I'm an MA. I had got through all the exams conducted by banks but in interviews...and I could not go for a job as police constable despite having a good physique because that was only for the tenth passed.

The bus came, it was packed with people. Some were going to offices, some to shops, some to market to sell vegetables, some to colleges, some to factories and some to nowhere. When the bus stopped at the Sponge Iron Factory a mass of labors got down and I found a seat next to a young girl. The moment I saw her I felt as if I had seen this girl somewhere. Perhaps that's the usual feeling that comes to a boy when a he sees a good looking girl. She had a vanity bag of course a battered one and was looking odd at the hand of a beautiful body. But she was well dressed in her pink salwarkameez. Or may be, I liked the dress more than the girl, some boys just can't but only admire the beautiful dresses these wonderful beings wear.

Most of the time she took out a China made cell phone and spoke in suppressed voice. Outside it was raining and wherever the bus halted there was a drenched passenger getting in. The bus was packed again. "*Chhatri na khol barasat me bhig jane...*" her phone rang again. I thought that was quite romantic for a rainy morning.

"Hello...," she said.

I don't know who was on the other side.

"Yes Madam! This is Reena speaking."

I for the moment I forgot that I was going to attend an interview and tried to recall every person whom I knew as Reena.

As I was on my recalling process I saw her take out pen and a small diary and note down something. She suddenly felt my unwanted presence and became cautious of my prying eyes as she noted down.

"Yes madam... 10 o'clock at Jyoti's ... one o'clock at Rohini's and four o'clock at officer's apartments... but will you be able to excuse me from the evening assignment I've to come back home and take care of my ailing mother. And you know this is my first time so..."

I don't know what was said from the other end. But she was almost in tears as she uttered the last words. I wanted to strike a conversation, which young man does want to talk to a beautiful girl? I waited till she composed herself.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Yes..." she looked at me.

"Aren't you Reena... Reena... Reena..., I forget the surname."

"No... I'm not," she said in a stern voice and then tried to smile.

I could see the effort she was making to smile. I didn't give up. 'Never give up' has become the motto of my life.

"May be I mistook you for one of my childhood infatuations. Did you study at Goomerpur Govt. High school?" How foolishly the boys act in front of girls?

"Yes Rakesh..." she said and smiled, this time effortlessly. "But now I'm ..." she paused but continued to smile.

The boy Rakesh in me instantly took me to the world of my high school. Reena was the most beautiful one among the girls in my class. I dreamed to make her my life's heroine. A teenager always tries to think as a man. It was the effect of beautiful girls on the films shown in my village. And I thought a man wasn't a hero until he trapped a beautiful girl. She was just cute and the films I watched had inspired me to write a love letter to my heroine. To be frank, to me she wasn't less than a Madhuri Dixit. But this also had landed me in trouble because she had rejected my love letter and she had brought the matter to the notice of the head master. She was not only beautiful but she was the one who stood first in the class. Every boy in our class wanted to be her friend, for her beauty as well as her brain. She looked just perfect in all avatars. Be it in school uniform or in the ordinary clothes, she was the person everyone looked at.

We both began to recall our life in school. We happily recalled our days in school, our class rooms, teachers, and friends and fun we had in those tender times. I also expressed how I was infatuated with her. We discussed what our batch mates were doing, the friends who had settled down in good positions and married, the boys who were struggling for jobs and brides, the girls well placed and not well placed waiting for marriage. In that jovial discussion I asked, "What do you do these days?"

"I..." there was a pause. Without giving any attention to her answer I asked, "Are you married?"

"There is no *sindur* on my forehead and no *mangalsutram* round my neck so you can make out, I think." she said. We both laughed at that.

"So what do you do?" she asked.

"Just hunting for jobs. You know how poor I was at studies."

"But now you are an MA no... I could not complete my graduation. Family problem no, mother is seriously ill, no money so no marriage. Boys love you but they don't marry for nothing?" she just said in a breath. Girls never seem to track the achievements of boys but they actually do. Goodness gracious! She knew I was an MA.

"I will marry you" I wanted to say but I could not. How could I, I didn't have a job. But her beauty could certainly arouse a thought of nuptial night if not of marriage. Boys are not that stupid you know... they don't marry for nothing.

"What are you going for to the town?" I asked.

"I have a job."

"What kind of job?"

"To sell..."

“What?” But I don’t exactly remember what the gravity of my ‘what’ was. She laughed sarcastically and said, “I’m a sales woman for a company. You know door to door selling.”

“Selling!” I said “Girls are good at that, companies recruit only girls.”

“Men are the buyers no...” she said and laughed again. “Today is my first day and I’m little nervous about it.”

“New things are scary at first but I’m sure you will get used to it.” I tried to show little concern.

“I think so, even my boss told me the same thing,” she said. Her face became pale. She looked as if she had nightmare last night.

When Basudev College of Engineering came I said...“I think my station has come...I’ll have to go.”

“How nice! You can get down wherever you want to but I can’t, I have a long way to go.”

“Thank you” I said “I really enjoyed your company. If you don’t mind... your phone number...”

And I struggled through the crowd of passengers and got down from the bus. I rushed to the window seat and said... “Your number...!”

“You’ll not need that to contact me.”

That day I don’t know how well I did at the interview. But I got an assurance to be called back for a couple of demo classes. As I took the bus home, I was looking for someone, may be Reena. Yes finally I managed to get that job. After a few months in my job I wanted to get married, not all men want to do that. I thought of Reena. I hope of getting her cell phone no. at least. But I could never meet her again.

One day, when I waited for the bus to get back home, I saw her. She was walking alone and the people were staring at her. Some were jeering at her and passing some lewd remarks. I rebuked a few of them and they looked at me a bit confused. Some even smiled at me. But I never understood why. I heard some men say, she is beautiful and out of her mind.

I saw, she was wearing the same pink dress she had worn that day. I wanted to call out and stop her. But I couldn’t. But she stopped and turned towards me and smiled. And I took my face away from her eyes and looked away.