

## A SLICE OF DIGNITY

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In the 29 years that Tulika had nymph-ed about on the earth, she had sparingly nibbled about domestic life and its labyrinth. Manjushree (Tuli's mother) the typical Bengali round-matronly housewife, till Tuli's early 20s had buttered her frills with the expected refrain, "Once married, she will have to do all, let her enjoy her life," wiping a tear with the corner of her cotton sari in anticipated departure of her dear kid from under her wings to the shores of zillions chores. But then life is not always straight from the pages of expectation and commonality. Majushree's castle was electrically barbed as Tuli stepped on the other side of 25 a time when apparently Tulli discovered her fun-loving, restless 'twin', thus increasingly refusing to be the quintessential domestic bird. Soon Manju stood radically morphed - forced to redefine her traditional understandings by her daughter's vocabulary: 'liking someone's company was not love'. 'It was natural to be addicted to chatting to a dude on the face book without serious desire for commitment'. 'It was necessary to test the water before wading through it, so it was cool and logical to fall in and out of love.' 'Boys could be just frienzzs and no more.' Manju was stumped. With passing time, rapidly and stupendously, Tulika stickled with her nine to five job deadlines successfully having the occasional 'sex on the beach' (before reaction, it's a cocktail), though Manju was never sure whether it was actually the name of a cocktail or some coded language in Tuli's dictionary that she failed to decipher!

Curiosity and concern egged Manju to seek ant holes to enter into her daughter's life. But least had Manjushree suspected it would be a ball! She was entertainingly taken to 'day outs' by Tuli on weekends from one shopping mall to another all over the city. Manju had triumphantly patted herself in becoming a companion to her daughter's outings, she was sure this would allow her to keep a tab on Tuli's life/thought and prevent flips... hmmm....Tulika, on the other, tailored these outings that suited her tangerine politics of liberty and woman-dom. It gave her the ultimate high when her mother lapped up those day-outs with pleasures which 'only her dear Tuli could give'. Need it be said that it was a tactical strategy adopted by Tuli to curb her mother's vision of coaxing and gloating domesticity down her. Further, it most skillfully, mosaically aired Manju's latent, low lying bits of wishes with pomp and show on those 'day outs'. The now retired, Sadhananda, Tulika's father quietly toed the line becoming the keeper of the house on weekends. It was unsaid but written large and clear: Sadhananda had his everyday outings to the bazaar, banks, post-office and in his career as the manager of a small financial company for thirty years he had had the princely pleasure of jostling in sweaty crowded buses, had non-athletically panted after speeding buses and when late for office after a sumptuous meal had luxuriously though bleatingly cribbing over the expense had taken a cab to office while Manjushree stayed cooped up in the house had ping ponged with challenging household chores

with the afternoon tele-serials and the odd woman's Bengali magazine *Sananda for company*. So now it was Manju's turn....

By Tuli's 29<sup>th</sup> birthday, life had become twined with snide remarks from sides and fringes: pitted against (un) neighbourly news of how the 'now blushing domestic' Mukerjee daughter of Tuli's age was happily married to the pot bellied honcho from some MNC to the slight parting of lips asking, "Anyone special?" at various family dos (If the muted mind voice box of these people could be put on loudspeaker mode, the jar could be heard loud and clear: 'Do you think some \*\*\* prince charming is waiting round the corner to sweep you away, hah?!') It triggered Manju's restlessness as the jibes became more pinching with passing days. Manju had had imagined a Bengali bridegroom for Tuli when she fancifully bought some jewellery each Dhanteras, then with passing time reconstructed her thoughts to 'any Indian boy' and finally crawled down to just a 'man'. Unperturbed, Tuli on the hand, remained unplugged.

Tuli had had enough: she needed to prove to herself and to her parents and above all to the side dishes who stickled about her : that running a home or looking after oneself was not about 'married terrain' and that she was single jovially and without regret or sucks pathos. It was one battle of dignity for which she put on her boxing gloves! So over a usual, Sunday evening cup of coffee, Tulika darted her plan onto the unsuspecting family, "Pa, when was the last time you took mom out on a vacation?" The bomb placed, the wait was for a blast. Sadhananda burped with the gulp of coffee in his mouth that almost violently threatened to spur out because of the coughing that was triggered as he knew well that the aftermath of the question was to be expectedly violent. Coerced into giving a response, his whistling voice helplessly came up only with a somewhat non-comprehensive blabber: "Vacation?" 'Yes...' Tuli began, seemingly with casual but dangerous emphasis: "Why don't you and mom take a break? You have hardly been outside Kolkata. Hmmm, you can begin with some pilgrim place: say Haridwar, Dwarka, Vaisno Devi..." Tuli had belled the proverbial cat, it was sure to purr furiously. Bingo! Years of suppressed devout desire to visit the abode of the lords whom she had worshipped in frames in the tiny 'thakur ghar'(a small worship place in a part of the house) spoke groaningly: "Ha, who do you say and talk to? Your father!! The last time we had been out of the city was to Digha." (On that visit, Manju had been so tinged at the sight of the vast sea that Sadhananda had to parrot to the many unnecessarily inquisitive relatives at the marriage that his wife was a little slow, so took time to deck up. Two hours later when twinkled-toed wify had entered the centre of activity and food with sand littered at the edge of her sari, it had been one grainy sight!!) 'That too because mercifully, one of his cousins, was getting married there. His and mine relatives throng and rot in and around Kolkata and we have romped about only in dear old Kooolkata – from Belegkata to Bhramapur,' the bellowing Manjushree completed her story of many ouch! pains. Sadhananda netted, his inaptness exposed, struggled to fight with the last weapon in his kitty: 'We are old now. How can we....' His words fizzled out as Manjushree's eyes thundered over him. 'Why, dada (elder brother) is on a break after his internship, he can accompany you.' Tuli had placed her words strategically. Ritabrata who had been lazing on the divan feasting his eyes on a magazine full of models in the midst of the brazen conversation; instantaneously, felt the pinning heat of uncanny discomfort and 6 eyes: two angry, two questioning, two pitifully beckoning 'help, rescue'. 'Ahhh, I mean. Well hmm... I mean' Ritz had staggeringly begun the search for rescue when lo he was fenced again! 'Ok, then it's done, Dada will accompany you', Tuli declared with a tone of conformity and victory. Decision thrust, Ritabrata purred and could have scratched anything violently. Roasted in the blow hot high handedness of his younger sibling, he was not willing to give up so easily, he hurled his dice hitting below the belt (with a

look that said ‘all’s fair in war’): ‘But you Tuli?’ and then waited with a delicious notorious sly smile. Ritz placed his self on the rocking chair. He was expecting to be back to playing the ‘on the fence audience’. Now it was Tuli’s turn to face 4 eyes – 2 suspicious and questioning and 2 tinged with sly victory smile (nothing needs to be said of Sadhananda –they were blank). Tossing her head casually, a non-chalant Tuli returned the blow with a punch that looked defenseless to begin with, ‘Why I stay back, can’t take a break, my appraisal is due’.

SILENCE. Stiffening pause: cracked by the movement, the responsible mother could not ever think of letting her young, single daughter stay in the big bad city A-L-O-N-E.... Manju instinctively and routinely went about picking the flying lying Sunday newspapers all over the room and got about her monotonous work with resignation and a pinch of breath that mingled the air with ‘sacrifice again’. Though, her act nevertheless, gave oxygen to Sadhananda and Ritz his eyes back to browse on the magazine when the unexpected blast took place. Tuli growled back, ‘Pa, would you say the same for Ritz? You would allow him alone in the house, right.’ Tuli hurled at Sadhananda bag full of lectures of gender equality that he had once proudly smeared his daughter’s vocabulary in her growing up years under the terrible liberating effect that had tickled and stroked his mind in the college campus of the rebel 70s. Sadhananda wanted to say ‘dammm’ aloud but found no space or voice or at best no courage. Slammed and stickered on the wall, he puked his lessons in obliged reaffirmation like the truant kindergarten boy suddenly caught off guard and forced to recite a lesson in which he has been blissfully and forgetfully erring: “Girls are like sons....” A hapless Sadhananda minced under the breath ‘and boys are like...\*\*\*’ leaving Ritz reeling in the aftermath of the gender session. Tuli unrelenting and ferocious prepared to rope in more ‘lessons from childhood’ while Sadhananda tersely feared for his own sanity. The debris of a vanquished castle, hurriedly lead him to squeeze hard the arm of Ritz in want of help and association that could probably save the day for him. Dragging and nagging along with his son, he deafeningly pleaded at the feet of Manju to visit the Lord who was waiting only and only for her homage. Mushy devotion blinded Manjushree’s mortal responsibility as a mother. Thus the first part of the mission had been accomplished.

The family packed off for two weeks, Tuli surveyed her newly won domain. She breathed in peace, solace and turned the home theatre that instinctively burst forth: ‘It’s a holi holiday...’ Most importantly there was no voice to knock the solitude: ‘So what are doing Tuli?’ It had irked her always when it has been invariably expected of her that every waking moment be defined and measured by work, reason and utility. This new space had come after a few more flutters. When the docile and provokingly uncomplicated neighbours, Duttas were told over the common boundary wall that looked over through the kitchen widows of the two houses, ‘Didi, Tuli will be by herself for two weeks. Do put in a query now and then.’ Manju had tried to put in as casually as she was able to. The frail Dutta wife took it first as a hoax but when she realized it was to be indeed then had not come unlike herself with any spontaneous assurance, actually she had been too stunned to give one!

Tuli drew the strategies of her battle. She would sleep in one bed, clothes would go to the laundry and just to nudge and pamper her curiosity and ability, she would put 3 bits of clothes in the washing machine to find how the machine worked. In fact, it was her humble self that had glamorously added the machine to their daily lives after the suave male salesman at a mall had successfully proved theoretically that the machine cleaned the best. Being the technology supporter, she had been impressed by data, technical jargon and most fabulously the colour of the machine that matched the curtains of the room. And yes, the bits of other works could be shoved off by the efficient Basanti, the maid. She would cook on weekends, refrigerate it through

the week, warm it in the micro oven and have it. Simple! She stocked bread, cooked paneer, got tinned salami (an act of blasphemy if her mother had been around to see her have it with so aplomb). She had almost accidentally tipped with salami in hand into the Lord's Room (thakurghar), when divine intervention and interruption had taken place as Kanahiya, the milk man, rung the door bell. Phew! a close call indeed. She had out of gratitude taken an extra helping of milk and paid him promptly a perk of rupee ten. Kanahiya thereafter had put forward his best teeth forward each day when the door opened but with no luck through the week. He cracked his brain to find the reason but with futility.

Life in the first week was blazing. She was the queen! At office, she was more alert and light leaving the boss pleasantly happy, managing to get even an assurance of hike. Wow! The weekend was well deserved and in a number of years, Tuli was not cribbing to rush out of the confines of her home on a weekend! She rested on the rocking chair even as Basanti mopped the room and beneath her chair. Basanti had been a fleeting presence through the hurried schedule of the week. It was only now that Tuli looked and realized that Basanti was wearing a torn sari. Teeming with a new sense of responsibility, patronizingly Tuli began, 'Basanti, I will get you a new sari. What colour would you like?' Basanti retorted at a baffled Tuli: 'No, didi, I am saving my good and new saris.' She further coyly responded to her young mistress's blank look: 'I am going to my husband's'. Basanti's biography as reported Tuli found was straight out of common cliché poor ghetto life and happened to be one of those predictable chapters: Married (sold would be a right word) at 14 to a man twenty-five years her senior, she was quickly brought to mother two sons and a daughter. By twenty, she was no of interest or desire to her man. He was soon up and arms into another luscious woman. By sixty, he had become unmarketable and stinking, so he seemingly gave in to the litigation fears of the local club but the truth was he was most importantly glimmeringly delighted and pulsated at the prospective of a presence of a woman in his life again! In the mean years of desecration, Basanti had survived working as a maid in some households in the neighbourhood. Even as Tuli waxed her tongue to lecture on female dignity, honour, rights and more when she was cut by another off beat coy question from Basanti: 'Didi, what do you use to make your skin glow? You wash your face with something?' Tuli helped, 'Oh! Face-wash!' Once again she thought she was helping like the Good Samaritan, 'I'll get you one, tomorrow'. Tuli poured onto the newspaper thinking the conversation had ended. Basanti briskly walked up to Tuli from the corner of the room and politely thrust a piece of paper in her hand: 'No, Didi, why would you buy me face... face wash? I work in a number of houses and earn enough. You write the name. I will get it.' Tuli looked up into the dignified eyes of Basanti. Dazed...scribbling was the only thing she could do numbed for the moment by Basanti's response. De-centered, she thought she heard voices that laughing hysterically said, 'Dignity, Dignity DIGNITY'. It only got louder. Tuli collected herself and fluttered: 'Basanti, how could I not have thought of having Maggi all these days?' A baffled Basanti watched Tuli prance into the kitchen to make Maggi - the sign of liberty and quick fulfillment. The water boiled and the content of the packet was put in. As the Maggi began to look cooked, Tuli took a few deep long breathes and felt assured that the centre of her dignity had not gone completely bonkers! The mobile rang persistently in the background. Tuli picked up the cell to answer her mother but was surprised by her own eager query, 'Mom, when are you returning?' She somehow wanted no more this huge space all by herself; rather she was ready and wanting to accommodate and share. Basanti had been quietly standing by the kitchen door, all the time. Tuli wiping the last fog on her mind's frame, said jovially, 'Come, Basanti, let's have the maggi. Bring two bowls'.