

## The Last Encounter

“ From Where did you come?”

"From mother's womb."

Sarita started laughing loud. Before I joined her, I stared for a moment at the unknown youth who asked the question. I felt elated at being able to render the young man, who appeared to be at least two or three years elder than I, speechless with just few words. Then I became rather impatient expecting him to ask something more. He blushed. I remembered Deepak then.

Though he was not thin; he was slim and tall. His eyes dipped with innocence in his somewhat long face. According to his features and manners he could not be compared in any way with Deepak who was in love with my elder sister during her school days. Yet I felt that the two of them had some similarities. Most of the time when I remember my sisters old rejected lover I feel sorry for him. On this occasion, however, before I could feel sorry, the youngster spoke again.

"I meant whether you were from same college."

"We are from a weaving school. Bualas! Now even that is closed after foreign goods started coming ... just see, can't you see? Everything is foreign" indicated Sarita with my eyes. He looked at her with a new interest. She continued to laugh.

The two of us were seated on the steps leading to the conference hall of Ravenshaw College. We came here accepting the invitation of another student named Meeta to listen to a lecture entitled, " The Responsibilities of Youth."

Before us did tall buildings surround a quadrangle on all sides. About hundred students who had come in the evening for various extra curricular activities like games, cadeting and drill were grouped here and there. Some were going around without any aim. When college was in session where about three thousand students moved about, there were few unable to erase the feeling of paucity. Though we heard the voices and laughter of the children we could not see the hostel from where we were seated.

The youth's glance was not directed at what Sarita wore- Imported Jeans and the stylish shirts- but at the shapely three brows, the rosy cheeks and the pale pink lips of her face. Her hair was cut just below the shoulders. I watched the youth's eager eyes and Sarita turning aside her face being unable to bear their intensity. Subsequently I became the object of his scrutiny. Perhaps those male eyes must have been looking for some external differences between Sarita and me.

I wore a pale blue and white striped lace frock with shoulder straps. My hair was combed, parted in the middle with a slide at the back. My complexion was medium-tan, neither dark nor fair. Whatever it was, unlike Sarita, I did not cower down at his challenge but responded to his eyes with mine and stood on my ground.

"What is your name?" Was his next question. I pouted sarcastically and looked at Sarita. As if talking was to be my job, she started to laugh again.

"Whose?" I asked

"Of the two of you"

"Why do you ask?"

"To know."

"After 'knowing?'"

I saw that Sarita wanted to say something. But she could not speak. She was laughing. Realizing that he was feeling embarrassed I felt satisfied; maliciously satisfied. I allowed him a few minutes to offer an answer. He was speechless. He turned around and looked away expecting someone to beckon him so that he could leave us honorably without further embarrassment. After inquisitively following us for sometime and then starting a conversation with us, I was afraid that he would leave us quietly, because of the lack of any encouragement. He should not be allowed to leave so easily, I decided.

"If you really want to know, I'll tell." Placing my hand on my friend's upper arm I said, "She is Malini - Malini Mohanty 'Am Devika.'" Sarita renewed her laughter. Then his lips too moved in a slight smile. Drawing the lips in I closed my mouth tight and looked far, across the empty ground, as there had been no talk between us. After a moment as I

raised my head, our eyes - his and mine met. "Not Devika, Am Menaka. She - you would have heard of course - is Sonia Gandhi."

Sarita embraced me. Her face was on my naked shoulder. Part of her hair was down on my back. I was hardly able to continue my laughter to myself.

"Tell the truth!"

The words were like an appeal. His voice, like his looks were pleading. Though I was beginning to feel sorry, I decided not to show him any sympathy. I became happy to see a male reduced to helplessness before us. Sariia whispered in my ear, "Sin, Aney" and took her head away from me. I glanced at her from the corners of my eyes.

"Then we should tell the absolute truth, shouldn't we?" Am Kusum, she is Sabita Behera..." Not being able to suppress the laughter any longer, in the end, I too could not complete what I wanted to say. The two of us, pressed against each other, laughed as if in competition. Her eyes were moist and face was flushed. He too would join us at anytime now, I thought. What nonsense! He had clearly a very annoyed look. He took our behavior as childish and was watching us displeased.

"Even though she is Kusum, she doesn't have a boy yet, "Sarita added, quieting down to some extent.

A spineless fellow like that could be caught out of a coconut frond," I -said sarcastically looking at him, as if, I was saying, "he's not second to that."

"Don't try to be, expensive," he said as if he did not understand me." "If you are reluctant to tell your name, say directly that you can't tell, 'In stead of giving ropes." "Oh God! I who said I can't? Was it one? How many names did I tell you now?"

Sarita continued to laugh.

"I came to talk to you two, for a while not rot - about an important matter.'

"That's it." I stared at Sarita and pushed her away with my shoulder with an assumed anger. "Coming here to laugh till the sides split instead of answering the serious questions that are asked. Hereafter, I'll answer for myself only. Why should I be the proctor for anyone else? Isn't that so, aney?" I ended by addressing him. He did not seem to care for my joke. "You must be tired standing for so long. Look for a suitable place and sit down," I indicated the steps with the chin.

He gave that innocent smile again and looked at us separately as if to decide whom was the less dangerous of the two. After hesitating for a while he spread a hanky on Sarita's side - but about two feet away from her and sat down. He looked over her head and smiled again with me. I bent my torso a little forward and asked, "Do you really want to know the name in a friendly soft tone.

Without removing his eyes from me, he hesitated at that wondering, whether to believe in my sincere tone or not,

"Why should I hide? I'll tell you, o.k. ? But only my name. Her name you must ask her."

"Don't you want then ?"

Frightened that he would be judged a fool by what he would say in reply to me, he hesitated again.

"Then I'll tell.... Sarala ... Padmini ... now remember. I'll tell only once, ok ? Padmini Sarala Bohidar ... Mamata ... Saraswaty ... Sarmistha.... How many now? Seven, no? one out of those seven. If you are clever enough, find the correct one".

"In the 'Book of names' do you get only those seven ?"

I pretended not to have heard what he said. He was looking at me directly as if trying to find out what sort of a person I was, according to my physical features. With or without the intention of giving him the opportunity to scrutinize me, I directed my eyes far away. The next minute or two we remained silent. Only Sarita giggled on and off.

"What has happened to this child?" I jabbed her with my elbow and said 'm a complaining tone." Are you trying to get your name in the Guinness Book of Records by laughing so much?

"Yes, aney, I laughed so much today that I am afraid of. I don't know whether I" would have to cry when I go home." Right at that moment from the two rows of buildings near the conference hall appeared Meeta. She came to the open area and looked about. When she was about to notice us I exclaimed. "There, she is looking for us. Let's go. " I quickly got up, pulled Sarita by her hand and stood up in a hurry, let's go."

"Wait for a while, she saw us."

"No let's go", I pulled her and walked quickly towards Meeta.

"Then somehow you quietly slipped away, eh," we heard from behind us. Sarita turned around and looked. "Come, hey!" I said being displeased. I was keen on preventing Meeta coming to us because she would have mentioned our names in the presence of that person."

Many years latter when Sarita got married, she moved to New Delhi immediately. So I could not meet her husband during marriage due to my examinations. Last summer when they visited my house, her husband said "Ho Madam! At last I got your name." Sarita told me he was the same guy whom we had encountered before,