

Insomnia

Chapter I – Doctor, doctor go away

She had been having trouble sleeping. She had been thinking of taking an extreme step in her book - consulting a doctor, but somehow managed to push the decision away. She had a sort of revulsion about doctors. With the natural antipathy of a healthy spirit towards anything to do with doctors, she had always tended to downplay any minor ailment she suffered from. And the one time she actually had fever and against her better judgment, went to the doctor for a quick remedy, he had insisted on sticking her with needles!

Yes, ok, it hadn't hurt much but she suspected that it was needless, and the doctor could avoid doing it to her if he wanted, but deliberately didn't. He had cut her protests short, refusing to be charmed by her and went ahead with the tests. As it turned out she was right about the pointlessness, all she had was some minor flu. She had come out of the session with an enduring mistrust for the male species called doctors. Bastards!

Her sister had pointed out that there were better doctors, and not all of them were men. But she had had enough of doctors. And so, although she had been having trouble sleeping, she had been reluctant to consult a doctor. Or was her reluctance because she dreaded some secret, which she couldn't guess, would be out? If it was some secret she was nurturing within herself, she didn't want to give it away to anyone in a moment of weakness. No, she would deal it with herself. She had been on her own for most of her adult life, and needed neither her baby sister nor him to clean her own mess.

She shuddered. Thinking of him chilled her for a moment. Some suppressed emotion threatened to come to the surface which she subdued with an eerie ease. There was something to do with him, some half-remembered complication that could be important, but she pushed the thought away as soon as it came. For now there were two subjects she wanted least to think about. Doctors! And him!

Chapter II – Flirting with the past (him)

He couldn't remember exactly how it started or when. He guessed he had sensed it long before it manifested itself so openly and horribly. But like a man besotted, he had ignored the symptoms and let himself be fooled.

They had an ideal courtship, and a picture perfect marriage. After their first encounter at the picture gallery, where one of her exhibitions was going on and he had just stepped in for a whim, he had not thought it possible that the two of them could hit it off. She had noticed him trying to take in those paintings. Many weeks later she had told him that she had laughed at his impatience to go to the next frame without trying to get the subtle essence of those shapes and colours. However, the forced intensity with which he gazed at them although clearly he understood nothing, had made her conclude he was not hopeless, she had added.

He smiled ruefully remembering the many dates he had endured listening to her lectures on paintings, their schools and history and importance, until she had given up on him as a hopeless student of the fine art. But their love had already grown stronger. And with time, he introduced her to his own great passion – gardening.

As he sat in his chair, brooding over the past, the silence and the darkness suddenly seemed more pronounced. It was long past midnight, and he was alone in the bedroom, but couldn't bring himself to go to bed. She was also awake, he knew.

Nowadays he didn't sleep in this bedroom, overlooking the garden, anymore. The couch in the library sufficed for the few hours he managed to nod off. No, the only time he entered this room was when he wanted to brood, which was almost everyday these days. He would just sit on the chair and imagine himself transported back in time.

There were so many memories. There she was, looking outside at the garden. She was very proud of the garden. They had built it together. While he instructed and guided her, she had done most of the work. He had dropped back and let her experience the thrill of helping nurture life. This was his gift for her. He admired and respected her creativity, but to him, painting was too cold and lifeless. He preferred creating with his garden. It refreshed and soothed him, and he was pleased at her taking to his hobby with so much enthusiasm. And the mango tree! She had prepared the soil for the sapling with meticulousness just as he had taught her. This would grow with us, she had said.

And as it grew outside into a tree and the shade it gave became thicker, a shadow had also started to steal into their life within the house!

Chapter III – Sleep troubles and missing links

She remembered most things clearly. There were only a few details, she suspected they were prime ones, which she missed. It was a possibility, she had grudgingly come to accept, that this condition of selective memory might have been the result of her having trouble sleeping.

She stifled a yawn, and then a series of yawns, as she sat on the roughly made bed. It wasn't that she wasn't tired; the problem was her fitful periods of troubled sleep never coincided with the time of the night when half the world slept. No, when she actually managed to fall asleep, it was already well into the morning. But, however tired she might be, normal sleep eluded her.

She shuddered a little. For quite some time now, she was aware that she felt a little disoriented when she started to reminisce. It was true even the present was not all clear to her, but the past was where the devils lurked behind creepy shadows. She shuddered again.

One of the things of the past memories she remembered in great details was of him. So her resolution to try avoid thinking of him was never going to last. One thought that nagged her mind was if whatever part she couldn't remember clearly had anything to do with him. She suspected so. She was almost certain that she hadn't seen him for days, or maybe weeks. It was unthinkable! They were inseparable! They were two of a kind!

But, while she didn't recall exactly what had happened the last time she remembered being with him, she had a vague feeling that there was the usual heated argument followed by the actual scuffle and it had all resulted in something awful. It was embarrassing how much they managed to fight these days, though she shrewdly guessed it was her who mostly did the brawling. He was always the patient one. The next thing she knew was that she was waking up from a deep but troubled sleep.

It was not how she normally slept – dreamless. She was plagued by something, some thought, some memory, some dream, or some nightmare.

It was the first thought that came to her as she woke up. He was gone. And, soon, this bedroom, the house in whose eastern corner it sat, and the tiny

garden outside with its gnarled old red hibiscus and the half-grown mango tree they had planted together, all those would be gone as well. It was the strangest feeling ever.

It was then she had wanted to scream, but no sound would come, as her waking thoughts replayed in her head in an infinite loop!

Chapter IV – Flirting with the past (her)

She had been trying to clear her mind of impressions and surround it with cold hard facts. She felt while feelings and instincts were good guides, facts and patterns, and connecting dots were ultimately the chief architect of successful solutions.

There was a throbbing pain in her head, the back of it was a little swollen, like she had hit it somewhere hard. There were some puncture marks on her forearm, that hurt her too, but she predictably couldn't remember anything about them. She was sure she wasn't a drug addict. There were some marks like her hands and feet were tied, but she couldn't say for sure. Also when she woke up she was in a small room with a small window and door locked from outside. She couldn't recognise where she was, nor say with any confidence how and when and why she got there.

Only if she had a friend, a confidant to discuss her findings, she was sure she could get to the bottom of all the mystery. For a brief fleeting moment she thought of her sister, and then dismissed it. They had been close after their parents had died early, and it was she, who had taken up the mantle of caring for and looking after her. She was her pet and an emotional fool, never good with problem solving.

On the other hand, he was perfect. He had been her best friend, maybe her only friend. She had never had anyone to confide in, and had never needed anyone. Only after he came into her life, she had realised and come to appreciate and accept the importance of a friend. Someone you can share your moments of triumph and glory, and also your innermost secrets, deepest insecurities, illogical fears, but especially the good things, which had till then felt perfectly alright to enjoy on her own. But after him it never felt complete until she had shared.

No, she didn't want to go down that path of her memory. She wished she could forget those early days with him, those days of magic, and also the

times they had laughed, covered in sweat and earth, as they planted their garden. It was his house, but as she had moved in, and within the first few days of their marriage, it had always felt like she belonged, and she had just come home.

She remembered vividly the first time he had asked her to stay the night, he was so afraid she would laugh her little derisive laughter and say no. Little did he imagine that she had been waiting for weeks to be asked. For some reason she hadn't wanted to be the first to ask. Inexplicably she had felt diffident about taking the first step for she knew it would be a defining moment of her existence. It was not always like this. In the past she had started and ended relationships, even had one night stands, as casually as one might swat a fly. But this she felt and knew was different.

She forced herself to come back to the present. She had slipped to the ease and safety of her fondly cherished memories. But the early days didn't help her much in remembering and finding a closure, a closure which she felt was essential in getting to the roots of her insomnia and curing it.

She wanted to understand exactly why and how her beautifully planned life, structured and devised as meticulously as the minimalist school of post-modern paintings she made, had crumbled down. Every time she started a painting, the process of it and when she finished, she would feel thrill, power and orgasmic euphoria engulfing her. She felt so much in control, and then when he had become a part of her, she flourished to a sense of harmony that she hadn't thought possible in her wildest fantasies. Gardening with him had also complemented her painter self.

And then came the fights. But, for the life of her, she couldn't remember what exactly those fights were for. She only remembered the bitter aftertaste it left. She would later cry for hours in secret, not wanting him to find out, and couldn't sleep dreading he would leave her, or worse, ask her to leave. Surely no man could take so much.

His profession already took a lot out of him, and though it was the only thing she held against him, she couldn't bring herself to loathe it, only because it was a part of him! Still if she had to guess, she would say that the work he did might have had sown the seeds from where the tree of their disputes sprung. But again, for the life of her, she couldn't remember what exactly it was all about.

What she could indistinctly decipher from the hazy memories was that the

long and irregular hours he kept was most probably the deciding factor why she had started to get lonely, even as the honeymoon period of their marriage wore off. She had started devoting more time to the garden, and her paintings were increasingly stunning pieces of work. But the loneliness wouldn't go away, growing undetectably and casting furtive shadows, however she might delight in their shared moments and he might enthusiastically participate. Anyway, she wasn't sure these reminiscences had any point, it was all just useless psychoanalysis – definitely not her style!

Chapter V – Divided they stood, together they fell

He looked at her through the slit on the door. He had spent many hours each day standing and looking at her like this. It was unsettling to see her like that, sitting on the narrow bed, her head cocked a little to the side, thinking about something intently. She almost seemed normal, and he longed to go inside and take her in his arms. But then she would start mumbling to herself, and her gaze would rove round the room without actually taking in anything. The wild look he had seen in her eyes in those moments when the deep subconscious part of her came to the fore, unknowingly to her, that he would shudder and realise that her normalcy was deceptive.

She looked up from the bed she was sitting on. For the first time, or maybe she had done this many times already that she couldn't remember, she looked around. This was not the house, their house. This was not her bedroom, their bedroom. The window was too small and she was sure that if she looked out she wouldn't be seeing the garden, but some sordid view that would tear the fabric of her sanity. And with a cunning that came with her understanding, she knew she must not look out, so that the resulting revelation wouldn't be able to hurt her.

He had seen her many times look at the window, but she never went to peep outside. He wondered why. The woman he knew was full of curiosity and zest of life. She wanted to be in control of everything and would always try to take the first step to seize control. No matter how much he kept reminding himself that this was not her, but the shell of her self, he couldn't help comparing the woman he knew and the woman he saw. He had often tried to will her with his mind to go and take a look. He had thought the view of the garden she had so lovingly built might have a healing effect, but she never looked.

He could hardly control the despair he felt. It had been months now since he

had entered the room himself. Last time he went in was also the first time his mentor had come, and against his better judgment, but bowing to his superior knowledge, he had allowed her to be locked up. He had felt so guilty that all his expertise couldn't read the warning symptoms in time and prevent this from happening. He had not practised psychiatry since.

He had, of course, noticed her increasing mood swings, and the dark marks under her eyes. But he had told himself that she was only working hard at a series of paintings that she dubbed her masterpiece. She had claimed the series to be the painting of her life, their life together and put her soul in completing them. He, who never understood much about painting, let alone her particular style and content unless she explained about it, and had decided not to interfere. When they had their fights, started by her and stoked by the shadow of her hidden self, he had come to know the other side of her for the first time. There was insecurity and suspicion that almost made her seem like a hurt child to him, violent but vulnerable.

She had accused him of infidelity while she slaved away at her masterpiece. She called him names with a disdain and nonchalance that was disquieting. Still he managed to find excuses for her raving and ranting. He had thought that everything would return to normal once she finished her paintings, and the pressure would have gone. He had also decided that he would have an informal session with her to discuss some of her issues, which he thought were deep-rooted in her subconscious, only coming out because she lost her usual self-control by investing too much into her work.

He looked into the room again as his mentor entered with his assistants.

A sudden sound had startled her into reality from her reverie. It was the sound of a key turning inside a lock. All her senses sharpened to heightened alertness as an old man entered the room flanked by a couple of sturdy looking guys, and with a shock she registered that one of them was actually a woman. She decided to keep an open mind and try picking up clues from their words or behaviour.

She looked into the eyes of the grey haired man, who was definitely a ringleader of some sort, and was wary at the expression of his face that could only be described as kindly. He beamed at her knowingly. The alarm she had felt at their intrusion revisited her, for the benign looking but sinister smile she recognised. This must be a doctor!

He looked on trying to cling to the hope that things would be better this time.

He had been trying to tell this to himself everyday, but it was starting to become more of a habit than any rational conviction. He knew he wasn't alone as he stood there, but he didn't look at the figure that had joined him. He was too intently watching and listening.

Chapter VI – The conversation

“And how are we doing today?”

The falsely bright tones jarred her ears, but she kept a level tone while answering.

“How am I supposed to know how you are doing? I am not clairvoyant.”

“Well, Well. I suppose you're still having trouble with your memory. And did you sleep last night? Or did you have trouble with that too?”

She looked up with some interest. How did he know? Had she ever talked to him about her condition? She didn't remember, and from the look of him, he didn't appear to be someone she would normally confide in. he was looking at her pointedly, as if trying to gauge how her mind was working. It was uncanny, it was obscene.

“And what if I did?” She sounded extremely wary even to herself.

“I could help you there by finding you some answers.”

She didn't like what he said. She didn't like the cryptic nature of his remark. She didn't like him. Period. But she couldn't shake away the feeling that if she played along she might get some answers.

“I want to go out for a walk.”

He was not at all taken aback at this sudden change of track in the conversation. He nodded as if he expected nothing else. But when she decided to interpret his nod as acquiescence and made a move, he took back a few steps shaking his head vigorously and let his companions move up towards her until she backed off.

“Why not? WHY NOT? AM I A PRISONER?”

“Now, now. You must try to calm down a little. We can have a reasonable talk.”

“I don't know what you are talking about. I don't understand your cryptic

comments, you bastard. I am sick and tired of this game you are playing, you asshole. I want to leave. I want to... I want to..."

Suddenly she couldn't go on. She felt exhausted and all she wanted was to lie down and go to sleep. And in the ensuing silence, she definitely heard someone standing outside trying to stifle a groan, like someone going through the torments of hell and the fortitude to deal with such situation was too much to bear. She felt sympathetic to whoever was outside. Hadn't she felt the same way too?

"That's better. Was it too difficult to calm down? Now I want you to answer some general questions. First, do you know who you are?"

She was indignant at the triviality of the question asked with that annoying patronising tone.

"Of course, I know. I ... I ... I am... a painter."

She was feeling disoriented again. She just couldn't think of a name. The name that actually came to her mind, but she was wise not to speak it aloud, knowing it was not her own, was – Uma.

"You got that right. Yes, you are a painter. But what about your name? No? Ok, I will ask another question, an easier one this time. What day is today?"

She was staring to splutter it out when she realised that she had no idea. She didn't know the day of the week, or the month it was. She vaguely remembered a date 31st December, but knew better than to say it as a guess. Her head started to throb.

Chapter VII – Prelude to sleep

His mentor was finishing. The assistants held her down as he administered the drug to sedate her increasingly violent behaviour, and also to help her sleep.

In the beginning, when he wanted to look after her on his own, and in a berserk fit she had attacked him, not recognising or knowing that it was he who pinned her arms trying to stop her from inflicting injury to herself, he had felt hot tears of anguish flowing down his cheek. He had to tie her down for her sedative shots. He had soon realised that he needed help with her. She was too much a part of him, and if he continued he would only go mad himself.

He didn't know what he would have done if he had to continue living in that big house, with her, locked up in one of the guest rooms on the other side, as his only companion. He was grateful that Uma had come and taken charge. It was she who had called his mentor for help, fearing him near a nervous breakdown himself. He had pulled through, but she, his soul mate, was lost!

They were going away. The strange man and the others. The door was closing and there was the unmistakable sound of a key turning inside a lock. She felt drowsy and a little pain on her arm. They had injected her with something.

She felt a kind of momentary lucidity as the door closed and the faces of a couple standing outside came to focus through the slit. It was him! And her!

They were standing together, and she seemed to be trying to console him as he stood there with his face contorted with grief. She felt something snap inside her head, and then everything seemed to go back to normal and started to float in tranquillity. She shook her head to get control of her mind. She was feeling numb and sleepy. She felt she could go and sleep forever, but did she want to wake up again. She didn't want to remember, she didn't want to know. She was scared.

Why was it that sleep after lack of it was a relief, whereas memory after forgetfulness was a torment?

She slept on. Dreamless!

He entered the room and walked up to the window. The view of the garden it commanded was like an ache inside him. The sound of her steady soft breathing calmed him. The mango tree was coming up nicely!

THE END

DC

Office, PG, friend's laptop, office guest house.

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