

A Nutty Breakfast

(*Roopali* is a very popular South Indian restaurant in Pune, India. Each of us carries in his/her heart a version of *Roopali*.)

The siren of the auto factory near his house rang exactly at 7:30 in the morning and at that time Deepak opened the door and proceeded to get out of his house.

"Deepak, did you have your breakfast?" his old mother called after him.

This is a standard routine at Deepak's house. There is really no breakfast ready at home and his old mother is not in a position to cook anything. But still, she insists every morning that he eats breakfast before leaving the house. If he agrees, she asks him to eat stuff like sweet *laddos*¹⁵ and oily *chiwada*¹⁶! Who in the world eats these things for breakfast?

¹⁵ Laddos - Ladoo is a sweet the size roughly of a ping pong ball.

¹⁶ Chiwada - Chiwada is a spicy mix of puffed rice, dry lentil, chili powder, etc.

"I will eat something in *Roopali*, mother! I am in a hurry!" Deepak answered her call while rushing out of the house, and mounted his scooter. He ignited the small engine with a push-button and took off.

Deepak's mother doesn't like that he eats his breakfast in restaurants every day. But he cannot help it. His sole aim every morning is to get out of the house as soon as possible. His first lecture is at 9:30. Whether or not his students at the Fergusson College have any interest in learning from him, he always prepares diligently for every lecture, tries to get himself in a proper mood for the lecture. And for that reason, he needs a more *conducive* environment like *Roopali* for his mornings.

He parked his two-wheeler in the narrow space between two bicycles standing in front of *Roopali* and started walking to *Roopali's* main entrance. It was 8 in the morning, and so, the traffic on the road was rather light. There were more pedestrians on the road than motor vehicles. The college-going young populace of Fergusson Road was yet to get out of their beds. Right in front of *Roopali*, there was the skinny security guard wearing a blue navy cap, and twirling around himself at a leisurely pace. People are yet to figure out what his job is supposed to be. He seems to busy himself with scolding people driving two-wheelers and telling them where *not* to park. He doesn't really mind if they ignore him; he just goes about giving them his opinion.

"Hello Sir, can you not park your scooter a little straight? We can fit another scooter there if you do that!" He threw this piece of advice in Deepak's direction. Although he used the polite address of "*Hello Sir*", it really sounded as if he had said "*You idiot!*"

Our public life in India is full of such subtle or not-so-subtle insults. They are quite commonplace really. Just a few days ago, Deepak had been to a State Bank branch for some routine work. He walked to a table where an imposing woman sat officiously. He waited patiently for her to cast a favorable glance in his direction. There was no queue – people just walked to the table and acted as if they were the first to arrive. While Deepak waited, a number of such people came by, got the goods they desired, and went away. He continued to stand there like a good schoolboy, hoping the woman would turn her favors on him. Suddenly, as if stung by an ant in her seat, the woman sprang from her chair with an agility that belied her considerable figure and began to walk away. Since Deepak was blocking her path, she had no alternative but to ask him, "What do you want?"

Even before he could reply, she continued, "You will have to wait or come back later."

"Oh, why is that?" he naturally inquired.

"Can't you see mister? It's the lunch hour!" the woman spoke with obvious indignation!

So, there you have it! That's the kind of public life we have in India! It is quite natural that people become thick-skinned and learn to bear insults. They have no alternative.

In that same spirit, Deepak ignored the comment of the security guard and continued walking towards *Roopali*.

There were several people in sweaty T-shirts standing around in small groups near the main entrance and chatting enthusiastically. Rich and well-to-do people living in a radius of about 1 or 2 kilometers from *Roopali* sweat it out by playing

tennis or badminton early mornings and then come to *Roopali* to attack *Idli or Dosa*¹⁷. Some of these people are fat, some look quite fit. Some of them come in expensive BMWs and Hondas and some ride their rickety bicycles. These people chat endlessly. No sooner does the *Idli* or *Dosa* calm their hungry tummies than their tongues start wagging. They chat while eating, they chat while sipping coffee, they chat standing outside *Roopali*, they chat even while taking their vehicles out of parking.

Deepak entered *Roopali* and checked if the outside open-air patio had any tables available. And what luck! A couple was just preparing to leave their table. He quickly went and stood near their table as if to announce his claim to it. This patio area of *Roopali* is like Wimbledon's center court! It is the most coveted area for people to sit in *Roopali*. The patio is lined along its outer boundary with beautiful plants which create a protective barrier from the road traffic just beyond. One can sit in the patio and watch people driving or walking on Fergusson Road. The plants block the dust and pollution. When it rains, the *Roopali* staff unfurls Italian-style umbrellas over each table.

Due to its popularity, it is not easy to find a free table in the patio. But, there is an interesting unwritten rule at *Roopali* which comes to your aid. If you are alone, you can simply go and occupy an empty chair – if any – even if the table is already taken by other people. The protocol is to just give a questioning look to the current inhabitants before sitting down, and more often than not they will let you take that empty chair!

Since his table was in the far corner of the patio, Deepak had a complete and clear view of all the tables and their occupants. He had a great view of all the action.

¹⁷ *Idli* and *Dosa* – these are popular breakfast items in the South Indian tradition.

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"Hey Deepak, how are you? I have been looking for you!"

This was Hari, a friend of Deepak's, who promptly dropped in the chair across the table. This guy comes to *Roopali* only if he wants to see Deepak. He is not in love with *Roopali's* breakfast like Deepak is. In fact, he might be the only person in the city who says, "I don't like *Roopali's* coffee!"

Deepak is a *regular* at *Roopali*. He is usually alone and so, this friend of his comes to *Roopali* whenever he wants to talk with Deepak. Actually, *Roopali* is so noisy most of the time that it is quite difficult to hear the person sitting across your own table. As a result, customers new to *Roopali* raise their voices, which adds further to the noise! But, of course, the *regulars* are not affected by this problem. They are able to chat in normal voices and are still able to carry a decent conversation.

Deepak's friend started talking and Deepak started to respond in monosyllables while watching the goings on at *Roopali*.

At least half the people sitting in the patio were *regulars*: they visit *Roopali* practically every day. Some come in small groups, some in pairs. They all look very happy, relieved; almost euphoric in a way. Several "senior citizens" are even seen clapping and waving cheerfully as if they had just been released from prison. They wave at their friends sitting at other tables and give occasional "high fives" to those sitting at their own table. Their joyous mood is comparable to that of people sitting in bars sipping beer. (By the way, beer is not served at *Roopali*.)

Deepak does not have such a clutch of friends for himself for his *Roopali* visits. He doesn't even have a steady partner to

make a pair. When he watches these happy couples or groups, he does feel strange sometimes sitting alone. But, all these people know him and they give him nods and unseen smiles and show recognition in their eyes. They don't put him down by saying, "Who is this idiot who is always alone!"

Just a few seconds after Deepak and his friend Hari had settled down at their table, one of the *Roopali* waiters dressed in clean white appeared out of nowhere, placed two glasses of water, and asked with his eyes, "What do you guys want?"

Roopali's waiters appear to be very close to the *enlightened* state. They betray no trace of common human emotions, only the famous empathy of Buddha. When they approach your table and stand there saying nothing, they actually mean to inquire, "My dear, what sort of food might help mitigate your sorrow?"

The *Roopali* waiters also have an amazing perception of what kind of service their customers need. If you want just a quick bite before going to work, you get the most expedited service. If you are in no great hurry (like the *regulars*), you are left undisturbed at your table.

Deepak sent his waiter off with an order of *Idli Wada*¹⁸ and started his daily reconnaissance. People were arriving hungry and leaving satisfied, plates of *Dosa* and *Idli* came out of the kitchen floating in space, trays carrying 15-20 cups of coffee glided about. There were the usual *regulars*. Then there were one or two groups of young college women, who evidently had been unable to sleep and had thus checked in for an early breakfast. There were one or two elderly couples who sat quietly watching other people. They had probably run out of things to say to their partners.

¹⁸ Idli wada – another popular South Indian dish that comes with sambhar and chutney.

Then, he spotted an interesting trio of women. They seemed different from each other in every respect: the style of clothing, their physical appearance, the length of their hair. But, they were so engrossed in themselves that they might have been bosom buddies.

After some more time, another couple came and sat at the table next to Deepak. The woman's body language lacked any enthusiasm or energy. She appeared awfully bored – from the way she yawned every few seconds and made no attempt to cover her mouth. Whether the man with her was responsible for this condition of hers, heaven knew!

Deepak turned his attention to the steaming *Idli* in front of him and started mulling over his lecture plan for the day. Today, he was going to teach Economics to the second-year students of BA for two periods straight. He knew already what he was going to discuss. He was going to introduce Amartya Sen's brand of socialist capitalism to the class. Amartya is a famous Nobel Prize winner, but, Deepak found him very tiresome to read – his essays just seemed too verbose. Deepak's challenge for the day was to present Sen's ideology succinctly and objectively, without betraying his personal feelings about Sen.

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Just when Deepak had pushed his fork into a piece of *Idli*, he heard a musical and playful laughter, and so he looked up. He noticed a couple that had just entered *Roopali* and was walking towards a table some distance away from him. Instinctively, he placed the fork down and started observing their actions. The woman sat in the chair facing him. She had beautiful brown sparkling eyes with sharp eyelashes, a light

complexion, a slightly plump build, and a pleasant, toothy smile that matched her musical laughter. She wore dark sunglasses which were presently pushed up on her head. Her boy-friend now sat with his back towards Deepak, such that, Deepak was just about 20 degrees off from her direct line of eyesight.

Seeing her proportionate facial features Deepak decided that the woman's name was *Rekha*¹⁹.

Rekha sat down in her seat and threw her head back, and with her hands stretched behind her head she attempted to gather together her beautiful black hair going all haywire on the wind. Women are not aware of how much joy they are able to create in men's hearts even by such mundane actions. While tying her hair together in a tight band, Rekha narrowed her eyes and watched her boyfriend with great intensity and affection. She seemed oblivious to her surroundings, to the people around her. It meant that Rekha was happy and stable in her personal life.

And then, by pure serendipity, Rekha glanced casually in Deepak's direction. Their eyes connected for a long second. Deepak didn't know what it did to her, but, in that instant a pleasant electric tremor traveled through his body!

First, it seemed like a purely accidental eye-contact. And Rekha must be quite used to such accidental eye-contacts, because, men are always fishing to catch the attention – even if for a split second – of beautiful women like Rekha.

But, accidental or not, the eye-contact made him restless. There was something different in the way Rekha looked at him.

¹⁹ Rekha literally means a line; but as a female name it bestows on its bearer a proportionate, beautiful face.

He had just begun to eat his *Idli*. There was still plenty of time for college. His friend sitting across the table had no clue of what was going on in his head, and so, his chattering was in full progress. Deepak was responding with just *yes* or *no* by simply listening to the sound of Hari's voice, and his responses (as a result of considerable practice) were sufficiently accurate.

And then, he caught Rekha looking at him once again after a few seconds. Their eyes met once again. And then he wondered: "*Were Rekha's beautiful eyes interested in saying something more? Having a chat maybe?*"

In order to confirm his suspicion, he needed to convey to Rekha his own willingness, even eagerness, to go along. So, he abruptly increased his interest in Hari by a few notches. He bent closer to Hari and tried to catch the words that escaped through the bites of *Dosa* that he was chewing on. He started bouncing some of Hari's own words back to him while shaking his head vigorously. He even threw his hands up once to dramatize his support for Hari's ideas. Hari must have been quite surprised at the sudden change in the intensity of Deepak's interest in his story.

This trick worked perfectly! Rekha's peripheral vision caught the sudden surge in activity at Deepak's table and, quite as a matter of reflex, she glanced again in his direction.

This was a critical moment, the deciding moment. What will she do now?! Rekha's reaction was difficult to predict. Would she accept him as a partner for a chat, or would she consider him just another representative of the amorous and opportunistic male species?

After a very long minute, Rekha looked at him for the fourth time! He was beside himself. The sapling of his hope,

which lay weak and uncertain in the basement, grew suddenly by 10 stories like the Chinese bamboo. Their connection was all but established.

"Hi!" He began the conversation, speaking with his eyes. There was no question of introductions.

"Hi", Rekha gave a hesitant reply. Like someone standing next to a diving pool, not sure whether to plunge into the water or not, Rekha was unsure of how to proceed. This was understandable since in the adult world there is always the risk of making a wrong judgment.

"Don't worry if you don't remember me! It's been so long!" Deepak continued with a most pleasant smile. (It was like saying to the diver, "Go ahead, jump right in! The water is quite warm and soothing!")

After the exchange of several such feel-good lines, Deepak was able to persuade Rekha to join him in the conversation. Her stiffness dissolved, her body relaxed, and her face flourished like a fully bloomed Dahlia. The trust she felt in him at the very first glance and of course her own instincts were surely important factors in her decision to take up Deepak's invitation.

Then Rekha also increased the tempo of her conversation with her boyfriend while throwing glances at Deepak every now and then. She started communicating through a variety of gestures. She raised her eyebrows to question something he said, she laughed freely to appreciate a joke, she nodded her head to agree with a point. Without creating the slightest suspicion in the minds of Deepak's friend or Rekha's boyfriend, they started to skillfully pass back and forth glances that carried various

messages. Every glance was electric, every message was priceless.

"Yes, really, it has been so long since I saw you!" Rekha responded to his earlier remark. (In reality, she had never seen him before in this life-time!)

"Young men like me have to work hard. No time for fun!" He said, concocting a pained smile.

With their conversation in progress, every bite of the *Idli* now tasted better and better. Deepak took each piece and alternately dipped it in the *sambhar*²⁰ or stirred it in the delicious and famous chutney of *Roopali*. His friend Hari, with no inspiration coming from anywhere, continued to push his *Dosa* into his mouth mechanically and with no apparent enjoyment. Deepak felt sorry for him!

One aspect of the playful conversation Rekha and Deepak were having was that it could not be done without the help of proxies. He was freely using Hari as his proxy and she was using her boyfriend as hers. In that deal, everyone was happy! It was a win-win arrangement.

"I feel so wonderful seeing you here!" Rekha rested her fingers below her round chin and said with a slight blush.

"Me too! You have no idea how boring it is to sit among these senior citizens and listen to their sentimental drive!" Deepak responded. (The *regulars* would kill him if they heard him say this!)

²⁰ Sambhar is a fiery spicy liquid that goes with Idli.

"This *Roopali* is quite a place, isn't it?" Rekha said after gulping a spoonful of *Upma*²¹.

"No question about it! It is a fantastic joint! But, you know, it would be even better if I got to see you here every day!" He said while winking at Hari.

Rekha raised her eyebrows in admonishment.

"Ok, ok! I will be happy even if you dropped by once in a while!" He said in appeasement.

After some time he made a request, "Rekha, can you please do that thing with your hair again, that thing you did earlier?"

Rekha laughed loudly and said, "If you insist!" She then threw her head back and untied and tied her beautiful long hair behind her head with her hands.

There was a sudden noise, and so, they looked around to check what it was. A big group of *regulars* had just finished their session and was leaving. They had put 2-3 tables together and had run what seemed like their own private conference. This is also a daily occurrence at *Roopali*. The *Roopali* waiters help these guys move the tables together, and then immediately bring large trays full of coffee glasses. Some of these people have different, sometimes peculiar coffee habits. One likes very strong coffee, another likes it light, and still another wants his coffee without sugar. Deepak knows one guy in this group who orders 3 glasses at once – one containing strong coffee, one containing just hot water, and one just cold water. He then takes a fourth glass – an empty one – and proceeds to make various mixtures of these 3 drinks and enjoy them for a long time!

²¹ Upma is another famous and commonplace south Indian breakfast item.

After this group left, *Roopali* suddenly started looking very empty, like a business not doing too well. This is another peculiarity of *Roopali*. Throughout the day *Roopali* looks quite full of customers some times, and quite empty and in dire need of business at other times.

Deepak turned his attention back to his *Idli* and to Rekha.

There were intervals when Rekha ignored him completely as if haunted by some unholy suspicion. And that made him all unhappy, restless, miserable. Fortunately, such intervals were few and short. Soon enough, a pleasant thought would enter her mind and clear any shadows of doubt. She would once again start smiling at her boyfriend and at Deepak alternately.

Once, her boyfriend got up from his seat and went to the restroom. He had to turn around and walk a few steps in Deepak's direction before turning to the restroom. As a result, Deepak had a good look at him. He looked quite classy, even handsome: curly hair, stylish pair of glasses, dark blue shirt with a tiny logo and tucked in neatly in his khaki trousers. For a moment, Deepak thought he faintly resembled a college-friend of his. The guy, of course, had no inkling of the amount of interest Deepak was taking in him. He walked briskly with his eyes trained way above Deepak and went straight to the restroom. After he had thus marched off, Deepak asked Rekha, "Who is this fellow?"

And that was a big mistake!

Rekha immediately lost the color of her face and looked away. She indicated complete displeasure at his question. And she was perfectly justified in doing so. He had violated one of

the most important rules of the game – never to ask personal questions!

Deepak had to apologize in several ways, literally bend forward and backward, to mollify her and persuade her to forgive him.

They had such a short time that they could not really afford to be mad for too long! Rekha simmered down soon.

They played this beautiful game of “catch my eye” for almost half an hour. Using the language of eyes they had such a wonderful conversation! They forgot their social status and job titles and conversed at a very human level. They transcended the ordinary and experienced a sort of metaphysical connection between them. In this game, there were no promises made for the future, nor was there the fear of creating a past.

Deepak realized that in all this time, Rekha had only eaten *Upma*, and nothing else. The man sitting across from her, on the other hand, was feasting freely. While Deepak watched he had finished off a whole tomato omelet, followed by a large *Dosa*. Was she on diet, Deepak wondered with some concern. But her beauty appeared to glow even brighter as she sat there eating nothing.

"You didn't eat anything! Please, why don't you order something?" He begged her earnestly.

"Oh no! I am quite full already. I feel so fulfilled!" Rekha replied with a mischievous smile.

By this time, Deepak had had at least three glasses of coffee. Just when he was taking the last sip, Rekha and her friend got up to leave. The whistle had been blown to signal the end of

game! Just when the game was getting interesting it was over! Deepak felt very unhappy and sad. Of course, he knew the end was inevitable. Rekha also appeared glum as she rose from her chair. He looked at her one last time taking in her beauty and affection. While straightening her chair, Rekha looked at him one last time and said a mute "Good bye", and then she put her hand around her boyfriend's arm and walked with him into infinity.

Deepak paid off his bill, whispered to himself: "Today's breakfast was a complete one!" and left *Roopali* with a full stomach and a rejoicing heart. As he walked to his parked two-wheeler, the security guy in navy cap gave him some friendly advice, which he didn't even hear. He just shook his head in agreement.

He had hardly noticed when Hari, who was sitting at his table, had left, nor did he remember the final things he had said. But, rest assured that Hari had no clue of what had happened in that enchanting half hour at *Rupali*.