



*The Tawang
Files*

Jayanta Chakraborti

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presents
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‘Joy, have you heard about the Bermuda Triangle?’

I looked at Abhijit. He was sitting in the sofa just opposite to me. Nandini was sitting next to him. She looked as ravishing and beautiful as she had been in the college days. I felt a silent rage run through my body and soul. Nandini should have been sitting beside me.....she should have been my wife, not his....if that incident didn’t happen in Shillong....

‘Yes, Abhi, I know about Bermuda Triangle. It is a place in the Atlantic Ocean between Bermuda, Puerto Rico and Florida. Many ships and aeroplanes have gone missing and untraceable in that area. Some of the ships and boats have later been found floating in the water without any crew members or passengers --- the people seemed to have just vanished into the thin air!!!’

‘You are right, Joy, the Bermuda Triangle is off the coast of Florida and covers about 500,000 square miles. Within this triangle, there is the Puerto Rico trench, the deepest part of the ocean that is upto 28,373 feet deep. That could be an explanation why the debris of the aircrafts and ships are never found!!!’

It was now Nandini speaking to me. She was always good with numbers, and still retained that skill. However, what I liked about her was the deep, husky voice that used to send thrill down my spine. I was seeing her after lot many years, but I knew deep down in my heart I still loved her.

'I also read somewhere that there is a strange fog that engulfs you when you fly or sail across the Bermuda --- Even Christopher Columbus has written that he had seen strange lights in this area on a particular night during his voyage of 1492. The ocean suddenly became calm but the water started rising without any wind. The compass was also giving erratic readings, making everyone stricken with fear!!!'

'So you know a good deal about Bermuda Triangle --- Joy, I didn't know you were so well read and updated --- You have changed a lot!!!' She smiled at me with those pearly white teeth. The lovely lips...I felt a strong urge to take her into my arms and crush her in my embrace. I might have actually done that if Abhijit was not sitting with her!!!

'Joy, do you know that there is a Bermuda Triangle in India?' Abhijit's sombre voice broke my trance.

'A Bermuda Triangle in India? Are you kidding?'

'Well, it does really exist. It's in an area between Bomdila, Sela Pass and Tawang. At least sixty six persons have died in air crashes in this area in the last ten years. That includes high level officials like the ex-CM of Arunanchal, Union Ministers and an Army General.'

'Nandini, you must understand that the weather conditions in North East are quite unpredictable. At Sela Pass, the weather changes every five minutes. Suddenly, it becomes very dark with zero visibility. There could be sudden gusts of cyclonic winds that can toss and turn the helicopter like a kite!!!'

'Joy, that day also it had become very dark. The weather changed very fast at Mawsynram. We could not save her!!!'

I clenched my fist. The muscles on my face stiffened. There was anger in my eyes!!!

'Joy, you know the area of North East very well.' There was a strange eagerness in her eyes. 'We need your help.'

'Nandini, you know why I left Shillong and came to Mumbai. I will never go back to North East!!!'

'Cool down, Joy!!!' Abhijit tried to comfort me. 'We all know you didn't kill her. The police might suspect you --- But we don't, not even for a split second!!!'

My mind raced back to Shillong....Five years back....

At the age of twenty-one, I had left Shillong and gone to Delhi to study MBA. I had enrolled myself at a very reputed college. And the first day in class, I fell in love with Nandini. She wore no make-up, yet she was flawlessly beautiful. She was dressed in a simple salwar kameez, yet she looked like a princess. The curly locks of hair added an ethereal glow to her face. She had a bewitching smile that set your heart on fire.

The Statistics teacher wanted us to do a project in groups of five. The condition was that each group must have at least one person who was good with numbers. Nandini was a gold medalist in Mathematics. I decided to latch on to her. So the group was made --- it was me, Nandini, Abhijit, Ishika and Rahul.

While doing the project, we became good friends. Nandini was a serious girl who was mostly immersed in books. Abhijit was the technology geek. He could do wonders with the computer.

Ishika was a stylish Bangalore born girl who wore heavy make-up and very short revealing clothes. She had her hair pixie cut, wore false eyelashes and her legs were always waxed. She wanted boys to admire her and get charmed by her hourglass figure.

Rahul was the spoilt brat, coming from Mumbai. His father was a banker who gave him huge pocket money. But Rahul was fast becoming a pervert. His hostel room wall was plastered with pictures of semi-nude models.

There was a strange chemistry between the five of us. I doted on Nandini, but she ignored me. Nandini admired Abhijit, but he never had time for girls. Ishika tried umpteen times to hit on me but I always teased her as an 'artificial beauty' and repulsed all her advances. Rahul was crazy for Ishika and waited for the opportune moment to bed her, but she always managed to slip away. But, despite all these differences, we gelled very well as a group.

'Nandini, today is Saturday.' I told her when we were sitting in the coffee shop.

'Yes, I know.' She was wearing her reading glasses and going through a book called 'Straight from the Gut' by Jack Welch.

'Shall we go to the disc today evening? I mean, you and me, just the two of us....'

'What is a disc?'

'Ah, a disc is actually a disco....where young couples go in the evening.'

'What do young couples do out there?'

'Well, they actually dance.'

'I don't know how to dance. And now please excuse me, Joy; I have to go to the library to return this book.'

That evening, I went to Daryaganj and bought 'Straight from the Gut'. I tried hard to read it on Sunday morning but gave up after struggling for a while. 'Damn on you, Nandini, I would now start dating Ishika rather than read these utterly confusing books!!!'

I got delighted when the four of them --- Abhijit, Nandini, Rahul and Ishika --- expressed desire to go to North East. It was a God-sent opportunity for me to get closer to Nandini. I booked all the tickets. We flew from Delhi to Guwahati. From Guwahati, it was a three hour car drive through the mesmerizing hilly tracts and meandering roads to reach Shillong. It was late evening when we reached Shillong. We had booked rooms for ourselves at Tripura Castle.

The night was spent in thorough enjoyment with dance, music, eating sizzlers, momos and drinking wine. Rahul danced with Ishika and Nandini danced with me. Finally I could feel the warmth of her body close to my body. My heart was beating faster. She was also enjoying those intimate moments, perhaps under the intoxication of alcohol. She finally let me kiss her during the dance. It was a deep, passionate, sensuous kiss that sent reverberations through my body!!! Abhijit lit a cigarette and went out for a walk in the lawns. Rahul and Ishika also disappeared from the dance floor --- God knows where!!!

Nothing more exciting happened that night. The girls retired to their room and closed the door. Abhijit, Rahul and I were sharing a triple bed room. I could not sleep the whole night --- partly because of Rahul's heavy snoring and partly because the thoughts about Nandini that were lingering in my mind!!!

Next day morning, after having breakfast, we went to Mawsynram --- the wettest place on earth. The weather condition was fine in the morning but as we approached the destination, it was becoming dark and cloudy. The lush green foliage, the snow-capped mountain peaks, the roaring waterfalls and the colorful orchids added splendor to the picturesque scenery. Everyone was feeling excited. But by the time we reached the waterfall, it was pitch dark!!!

It started raining heavily and we lost each other in the thick darkness. Ishika and I were walking faster and the others had fallen behind. After a while, I could no longer see Ishika. I called out her name. There was no response. I shouted 'Ishika' at the top of my voice. There was no response!!!

The rains stopped after a good three hours. I could find Abhijit, Nandini and Rahul, but there was no trace of Ishika. We raced towards the edge of the waterfall. Then we saw her lifeless body lying sprawled at the bottom of the ravine!!!

Her dead body was taken to the hospital for post-mortem examination. The autopsy report was startling --- Ishika did not die accidentally --- She was strangled to death and then thrown down into the valley!!!

The police suspected me of the crime. But the fingerprints did not match. Nandini stopped talking to me. I left Delhi and relocated to Mumbai. I took up job as a flying instructor at Santa Cruz Airport. Rahul also dropped out of the course and went away. Only Abhijit and Nandini finished their MBA and got married. The vibrant friendship between the five of us ended on a tragic note!!!

Five years later....

‘We always knew Rahul had killed Ishika. He was a sex-crazy pervert. We never blamed you for the incident, Joy!!!’ Abhijit was again reassuring me.

‘So, what do you want from me?’ I asked Abhijit and Nandini.

‘Joy, you know how to fly planes. You have to fly us in a four seater single engine aircraft from Guwahati to Tawang. The flight path will be through Bomdila, Sela Pass and finally culminating in the Tawang helipad.’ Nandini spoke in a cool voice, although the huskiness was still there.

I hated to go back to North East. But I could not say no to Nandini. I still loved her.

‘But why do you want to fly this route?’ I posed this question to Abhijit.

‘Because we want to experience India’s Bermuda Triangle. We want to unravel the mystery that’s hidden out there.’

‘Do you know what you are asking? It’s dangerous to fly in that zone. We could die out there.’

‘We are not afraid to die. We want to know the truth. Does a death zone like the Bermuda Triangle exist in India?’

‘Crazy people!!!’ I shook my head in disbelief. ‘Anyway, let’s go.’

‘I told you he’ll help us out!!!’ Abhijit let out a wry smile. ‘After all, he still cares for you.’

Nandini bit her lips. I felt a silent rage pass through my heart!!!

Five days later....

I pushed the throttle and the four seater Cessna 172 Skyhawk plane flew into the azure blue sky. Nandini was sitting beside me, Abhijit was in the seat behind. I was getting the feel that Nandini was exalted by the snowcapped mountains and lush greenery that lay below us as we climbed eight thousand feet above sea level. She did not like expressing emotions but today her face was beaming with a lovely smile.

The weather started changing the moment we crossed Bomdila. We were wading through thick dark clouds. The visibility was dropping very fast. There was also a strong gust of wind that was making the aircraft quiver. I tried to take the plane up but the visibility did not improve.

As we entered the zone between Sela Pass and Tawang, all the instruments started behaving erratically. It was as if we were hit by a magnetic storm. The clouds were thicker and darker here. There were flashes of lightning whizzing past us in the pitch darkness like balls of fire. And then, with a sudden thud, the engine stopped!!!

‘What happened?’ Abhijit asked in panic stricken voice.

‘We have been hit by lightning. The engine has stopped. I am afraid we all are going to die!!!’

‘So, the curse of Tawang is true!!!’ Abhijit spoke in a hushed tone. ‘There indeed is a mysterious Bermuda Triangle type area hidden in this air pocket. That explains the accidents and mishaps.’

‘It’s great that your hypothesis has been proved correct. Now prepare to die.’

‘Why should we die? You must be having parachutes?’

‘No, I don’t have parachutes.’

‘What? Joy, are you sure you don’t have parachutes?’

‘No.’

‘Why? Are you crazy?’

‘Abhijit, understand this very clearly --- I want us all to die --- And all of us surely will die --- but before that I want a confession from you --- Who killed Ishika at Mawsynram?’

‘I did.’

‘Where is Rahul?’

‘I finished him off. He was witness to the murder.’

There was fear and surprise on the face of Nandini. The plane was now in a free fall. All of us would be dead very soon.

'Why did you do it, Abhijit?' There were tears in her eyes. 'I loved you so much!!! I trusted you!!!'

'Forgive me, Nandini. That night, at Tripura Castle, when you kissed him, I was burning with anger. You were my girl and he was trying to snatch you away from me. I wanted revenge. And the best way to take revenge was to make him a murder suspect!!! Everything worked according to plans. Joy moved out of our lives...we got married...until now...'

'Thanks for the confession, Abhi; I desperately needed that to get the load off my chest.'

I put the Auxiliary Power Unit in action and the engine roared back to life. The free descent got checked and the plane was slowly gaining in altitude. The dark clouds that had gathered were also clearing off. We could see a clear view of the Gorichen peak and the Tawang Monastery.

Abhijit was sitting with his head hung in shame. Slowly, he unstrapped the safety belt and got up from the seat. I observed him carefully as he walked to the door. I knew that time was running out but suppressed the urge to check my watch. I took a deep breath and started counting in reverse under my breath. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

He opened the emergency door of the plane and jumped out. Nandini watched in horror. She was too frightened to speak.....His body disappeared in the terrain below...

Later, in the evening, we were sitting beside the Sangetsar lake. There was a cool breeze blowing, making us shiver. Nandini had wrapped a shawl around her. I was wearing a long overcoat, with my head covered in the hood. Her hands were clasped in my hands, her head resting on my shoulder.

'Joy, why did he do it? Didn't I love him enough?'

'Nandini, my love, it's the Bermuda Triangle in our mind that is difficult to fathom. We can never comprehend why someone we love betrays us and someone we despise actually falls in love with us!!!'

Slowly, the darkness descended across the lake and engulfed us in its silent solitude!!! We walked hand-in-hand towards the Tawang Monastery with gentle steps....

THE END