

The Whisper of Time

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It was during the first week of July, the dawn of a new academic session at Bhadrak Autonomous College. The air carried a blend of excitement and nervousness as freshers stepped onto the campus. Their faces beamed with joy, looking fresh as the morning dew.

This year was no different. One could see freshers everywhere, roaming around the buildings, searching for their classes and of course making new friends.

The lush green lawn of the college campus sparkled like a carpet of pearl as the rays of the morning sun danced across it. The green canopy above, swayed gently in the breeze, as if whispering its age old secrets to the young minds. The subtle aroma of jasmine and the earthy fragrance of damp soil—still moist from last night's drizzle—filled in the air with a magical spell.

I think the time was around 10:00 AM. The Sky was clear and it was a sunny day. The road near the college was very busy with the hustling and bustling of the students. It felt like everything was moving on its own- the students chit chatting, the vendors hawking and little birds happily chirping.

Amidst this, the rhythmic footsteps of a young girl made its way. She moved with elegance in her neatly pressed uniform. Her Khimar flowed effortlessly around her head, framing her gentle features like an artist's masterpiece.

Her voice was as soothing as the lullaby and her laughter - as if the melody of a wind bell. Clutching a notebook in hand and talking to her friend Shabnam, she walked towards the college. She was a fresher of Commerce stream. Her name was Arshi.

While walking towards the college, her eyes locked with another pair of deep eyes. A tall and well built young man, in a red Polo t-shirt and blue trouser, unkempt hair, standing at the narrow

lane that connects the college road and Banka Sahi, kept on looking at her. There was something so deep and magical in his eyes that neither Arshi could take her eyes away from his face.

For a fleeting moment, time stood still. The rustling trees, the bustling students, the street vendors' call —everything dissolved into a profound stillness. she felt as though she lived an eternity within that one second. Time resumed its rhythm only when they shyly looked away, as if nothing ever happened. The next day too Arshi found him at the same place, as if waiting eagerly for her arrival. Somebody called him from behind "Asad, your coffee is ready."

Days passed and Asad found himself drawn to the same place again and again, like a magnet drawn towards the iron, like a river towards the ocean, like a devotee towards the mosque. Even Arshi would secretly pray for a fleeting glimpse of Asad as she passed by. Days passed, and Asad found himself seeking glimpses of Arshi whenever he could. But time, as always, had its own way of bringing souls closer.

It was a late afternoon, the sky suddenly darkened, clouds enveloped the sun, casting a dusky haze over the campus. A strong wind blew through the trees, making the dry leaves swirl in the air. Thunder roared in the distance, darkness fell over the campus.

Arshi and her friend Shabnam had just come out of the library, with books in their hands, when the first raindrop splashed on the ground. Within seconds, the drizzle turned into a downpour. The campus, once lively with students, was now deserted. The heavy downpour blurred their vision forcing them to search for a shelter.

"Arshi, let's rush to the café!", Shabnam shouted over the roaring wind.

Arshi hesitated but nodded and they ran through the rain. Clutching their books tightly, with soaked shoes and dupatta, they pushed the door and stepped inside.

The café was dimly lit, unusually empty, except for a few boys at the back, whose voices were barely audible due to the heavy rain. A sense of discomfort took over Arshi. The empty chairs and absence of girls made her conscious and awkward. She rubbed her palm trying to shake off the unease. And then, amidst the unfamiliar faces, she found a pair of eyes, which were familiar to her.

It was Asad.

With a steaming cup of coffee in front of him, he seemed lost in some deep thoughts. The faint glow coming through the window accentured his sharp yet gentle features. At that moment, Arshi felt an odd sense of safety.

Asad looked up, and their eyes met again, this time not fleetingly, but with silent recognition. A subtle smile bloomed on his lips. He noticed their discomfort. After a moment of hesitation he stood up and walked toward them. In the background, the soulful ghazals of Gulzar played softly, creating an almost poetic atmosphere around them - where time moved slower, where eyes spoke louder than the words.

“Excuse me,” he said, with a voice deep and sincere. “I can see you both are uncomfortable. Would you mind if I sit with you for a cup of coffee?”

Arshi hesitated, her fingers gripping her damp dupatta tightly. A part of her wanted to decline and a part of her wanted the time to stop till eternity, but before she could decide which part of her heart she should listen to, Shabnam, chuckled and said, “Of course! We would love to.”

Asad nodded and signaled the cafe staff for three cups of coffee. As he sat down, a sense of comfort and warmth took the place of the initial awkwardness.

“I’m Asad,” he introduced himself. “And you two are the newly joined students, right?”

Shabnam broke the ice, introducing herself and Arshi, the conversation flowed effortlessly. Asad spoke about his college life, about his recent graduation and his ongoing quest of professional exploration.

As the conversation unfolded, Arshi found herself relaxed in his presence. There was something soothing and calming in his voice, a sense of comfort in his mannerisms, almost as if she knew him since the beginning of the time.

And then, she noticed a small, leather covered diary resting on the table. The diary sparked fascination in her. She was tempted to know more about it but she stopped herself, assuming, it might be too personal. She glanced away, focusing on the downpour which has reduced a bit.

After a few minutes, Asad's phone rang, interrupting the pleasant conversation. He reluctantly stood up and with a gentle sigh said: “I have to go, It was nice meeting you both.”

He gave a parting smile and walked away. But in his hurry, he left something behind.

The diary.

Arshi's eyes widened as she noticed it lying there on the table. She picked it up with a little hesitation. She could feel the rough texture of its leather cover. A battle waged within her—should she open it and discover the countless secrets hidden within the pages ? The temptation was strong, but something inside her stopped her. It wasn't right.

"I'll return it to him tomorrow," she murmured, tucking the diary inside her bag.

That night, as she sat by her window, with soft ghazal floating in the air, she brushed her finger across the edge of the diary. While she was lost in thoughts, dreams took over her.

The next day, she saw Asad again, standing under the Gulmohar tree, near the café . He looked restless as he scrolled through his phone.

Arshi walked up to him, pulled the diary from her bag and gave it back to him.

"You left this yesterday," she said.

A look of relief swept across the face of Asad. He gently took the diary from her hands, his fingers wrapping around it, as if it were something precious.

"Thank you," he said. "honestly I couldn't sleep the whole night, thinking you might have read it."

Meeting his gaze Arshi said, "I didn't."

Asad exhaled, his shoulders relaxing. "That's a relief."

They both laughed and went inside the café.

Time passed by, they became instant friends. Their conversation lasted for hours. During holidays, their morning used to turn into evening and they still had topics to talk about. As they spent more and more time together, they realised, they were tied by a powerful bond called love.

One day, as they sat beneath the pink blossoms of the gulmohar tree, Asad asked, "Arshi, will you ever take off your Khimar?"

She smiled, looking at the rain-laden sky. "Not now. But definitely on the first night of our wedding day, for it would be the happiest moment of our lives. I will save this moment for that special night, when the sky will be dark and the rain will sing a lullaby celebrating our

union, when thunder will roar and the wind will carry us close to each other—then, I will remove this Khimar and show you my face.” Both smiled.

Time ticked on, each passing moment bringing them close to each other by the force of pure love. A love that wasn't built upon the transitory beauty of the body but the intense adoration for each other's soul. But everything in life, good or bad, is often at the mercy of time.

One evening, Asad asked again. “Arshi, please. Just for once, can you not remove your Khimar and show me the beautiful face that you have hidden behind it?” She shook her head, in her soft yet firm voice she replied. “Be patient, Asad.”

That evening, Asad drove back home with a heavy heart. The sky was filled with dark clouds and the moon hid behind the veil of mist. An overpowering stillness could be felt in the air. Even Arshi felt a lingering ache in her heart as Asad left for his home.

The next day, Asad did not come to meet her. Arshi assumed he must have been really upset to not show up like that. She went home that day but something kept egging on her and although she wanted to avoid it, she could not. Neither did he come the following day. By then, she was impatient and decided to meet him at his house. Although she knew where he lived, she had never been to his house. Her heart was beating fast the whole way. When she reached near his lane, she saw a crowd gathered. Women wept, men murmured condolences, and an intense grief engulfed the air. “Asad.....a terrible accident.... Hospital...”. Arshi stood there, completely frozen. Everything around her became hazy and blur. Her throat felt parched while her lungs crushed by a massive weight.

Yelling and screaming was heard from inside the house. Upon enquiry, all her fears came true. Asad had a major accident the previous night; he was hospitalised for sometime before he left for the heavenly abode. For a few minutes, Arshi could not believe her ears.

She ran—her feet barely touching the wet ground—toward the graveyard. Tears were rolling down her cheek. Suddenly the sky became dark and it started raining, as if the sky joined her in the mourning. Thunder roared and lightening flashed. A fierce wind screamed through the darkness pulling away the Khimar from Arshi's face. Arshi fell on her knees as it reminded her of something. And that's when, from the depth of silence a voice emerged: "Time, my dear, is the greatest playwright. When I wanted to see your face, you were covered and now when you want to see mine, I am covered. Do not be sad, because it is only the game of time and we all are mere puppets playing our roles."

The voice faded, the rain softened, the storm calmed.

Days passed by, but time didn't heal anything. At least, not yet. The world around Arshi carried on, indifferent to her loss. But the world inside her had stood still since Asad walked out of it.

One evening Shabnam came to meet her, to share the unsaid pain that Arshi is going through. She sat beside Arshi for some time uttering nothing and then she handed her a leather covered diary.

"This was found at the accident spot", she whispered.

Arshi's finger froze as she touched the diary. It felt familiar, too familiar.

It was the same diary that he had left in the café that day, the same one she had returned to him under the Gulmohar tree. It was a silent witness to their countless memories. Now that he had left, the words that he once treasured so dearly were hers to read and re-live.

With shivering hands she opened it and what she found inside it was beyond her belief.

It was Asad's diary, but every page, every line, every word was about Arshi. He had poured his heart and soul into the pages, capturing every memory they had created together. Their first glance, their first conversation, their first meet, the way her laughter sounded like the chirping of a bird, how remembering her felt like Ibaadat and how she carried an entire universe in her eyes.

Even though he had never seen her face beyond the Khimar, he had composed hundred poetries in praise of her beauty, beauty that was beyond the body, the pristine beauty of her soul.

He had dreamt of a beautiful life with her, about growing old as husband and wife, living in a world created by them with love and happiness.

As tears rolled down her cheek and fell on the pages, Arshi held the diary tightly to her heart. Though he had gone, his words were immortal. Though their love was short lived, she refused to let it lost into oblivion.

And so, months later, a book found its way to the hands of readers. A book that seized their eternal love, a love that time could never forget.

On the night of its release, Arshi sat under the same Gulmohar tree, gazing at the sky in absolute silent, while holding a copy of the book tightly to her heart.

As a soft breeze touched her face and the pink blossom of the tree were showered upon her, she felt as if Asad is reading the book and watching her from above.

And may be, just, may be, he was smiling.

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