

Tara

Sameer was at a shop which dealt in second hand (used) as well as new books and periodicals. He had cleared his annual examination for Class VIII and was now in Class IX. The new academic term in the school was to commence in a few days, and earlier in the morning that day, he had found his Hindi textbook for Class VIII lying in his drawer. He had probably forgotten to sell it with the other books of Class VIII. He had come to the shop to sell the book, excited at the prospect of getting some money in return, with which he could savour some *chaat-paapdi*.

He handed over the book to the book seller, who, on examining it thoroughly, returned it to Sameer. 'The book is in a tattered condition... Some pages are missing too. I will not get a buyer for this book', the shop-owner said in a brusque tone. Sameer was stepping out of the shop with a dejected face, when he heard a just-then arrived customer asking the book seller if he had the Hindi textbook for Class VIII. The book seller was busy attending to another customer and Sameer seized the moment. 'Sir, I have the book you are looking for. You can buy it from me', said Sameer politely and handed him the book. The man took the book and handed it over to his young daughter, who was trying to hide behind him. 'Tara, just take a look at this book, dear... See, if this is the one you wish to buy', the man lovingly asked his daughter. Sameer was looking at the young shy girl, intently. He had never looked at a girl as fondly as he found himself looking at her. He was too young to adjudge and appreciate beauty at the age of fourteen, but there was something about the girl that had captivated Sameer's sensibilities.

The young girl was turning over the pages and examining the book, when she saw the torn pages in between and looked up quizzically at Sameer. She found him staring at her wide-eyed, and though she did not understand what she read in those eyes, she heard herself telling her father: '*Baba*, let us take this book.'

'How much are you asking for this book?' Tara's father asked Sameer.

'Whatever suits you, Sir', Sameer replied. *A new book costs 25 Rs... Even if I get 10 Rs for this used book, it shall be a great bargain*, he was contemplating.

Tara's father handed him a twenty rupee note. 'Sir, I do not have change to give you back', said Sameer.

'No, you keep it', said Tara's father.

Sameer's happiness knew no bounds. He felt as if he was a rich man. The amount he had at that moment in his trouser's pocket was twice his monthly pocket-money. With his spirits soaring high, he climbed on to his bicycle and was about to pedal, when he found that the chain had come off. He dismounted and was setting the chain, when he happened to look towards the book-shop. Tara was still at the shop with her father, and was looking amusedly

at him. Sameer's heart began to beat faster and beads of perspiration streamed down from his forehead. Carelessly, he wiped his forehead with his grease-stained hands. There was grease all over his face, and Tara could not help smiling...

He came back home but could not stop thinking about Tara. He had liked her; she had, after all, deliberately purchased his torn and tattered book. Next day, Sameer, during his mid-day break in school, went to the vendor selling *chaat-paapdi*. He ordered a plate of the sweet 'n sour snack and took out the crisp twenty rupee note given by Tara's father. At the next instant, he changed his mind. He cancelled the order and kept the note back in his pocket and walked away.

Days flew by, and five years later, Sameer met Shweta in the University. He was a student of Science, while she was pursuing Arts. They had fallen in love with each other almost instantaneously and parents on both sides had given their approval too. They had married and two years later, were blessed with twins. They were living happily.

One evening, Sameer looked up from the book he was reading and asked Shweta: 'Hey, listen... was wondering if there is really anything like *love-at-first-sight*? You have been a student of Literature. What do you think of infatuation in one's childhood or one's first love? Does it have any significance? Do you believe in romanticism?'

'Is there something I need to know?' Shweta had raised her eyebrows and, winked mischievously. The next instant, she burst out laughing. It was as if she had remembered something. There was a sheepish look on Sameer's face. 'No, I was just asking, my dear... Have you ever found anything amiss in my love for you?'

Shweta grinned, and replied: 'No, I believe in our true love... I was just teasing you'.

'However, there is something I wish to talk about now', said Sameer, with a grave expression. 'You can even call it my confession but, I must share this with you'. He told her everything about his meeting with Tara... a meeting that had lasted for not even five minutes, but he had not been able to forget her till date. He told Shweta that how he had not shared even a word with Tara and yet, had felt something like love. 'And then, I met you and experienced true love. How is this possible if one falls in love only once? I love you truly and deeply, and yet, I have not entirely forgotten that one look of Tara, when I was barely fourteen years old. I am so confused...', and saying so, tears welled up in his eyes. He added: 'Do you know I have still kept that twenty rupee note which her father gave me for the book.'

Sameer looked up at Shweta expectantly. He was afraid that she would feel dejected after this confession of his. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, as she looked intently at Sameer. *She is probably wondering whether our relationship is true or not. Perhaps, I should not have told her all this...she looks shocked*, Sameer was already blaming himself. And then, wiping her tears with the back of her hands, Shweta said: 'You have confessed. Now, I must

tell you about my first experience of love. That tattered book, with pages torn from inside is still safely kept with me. I could not separate it from myself', and saying so, she blushed.

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