

# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	5
Dream .....	9
Bench .....	13
Park.....	17
Platform .....	21
Zoo .....	26
Swapna .....	33
Home .....	36
Beach .....	41
Parnab .....	48
Paris .....	56
Costco .....	64
Lab .....	74
Post Office .....	80

<b>Amazon.....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Desert .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Peherwa .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Padma .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>School .....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>Las Vegas.....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>Museum.....</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>New York City .....</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Shobit .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Pakistan .....</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>Train .....</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Chandigarh .....</b>	<b>170</b>

# Parnab

And thus, they began sharing their lives with each other. As if... as if this is what they had been meaning to do for a long time.

They were happy. Even though there was a possibility that the other one was nothing but a figment of his/her imagination, a kind of subconscious disruption, a mere ghost, they had found someone who played no role in their lives, and yet was ready to lend his/her ears.

And isn't it a kind of bliss? Finding a person who listens to you, talks with you... with whom you can spend a few hours of calm contemplation. Someone who does not play any role in your life, except for the most important one: that of listening?

Parnab lived with his wife in a small house near the railway station in a small town called Faizabad in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, and was posted there as a divisional accountant.

But originally, he was from West Bengal, and had spent his childhood in the clean and spacious campus of IIT Kharagpur where his father had worked as a *safai-karamchhari* from the age of nineteen to sixty-one when he died of uncontrolled diabetes.

Parnab had studied in a government school; and was an average student. He was one of those who always sat at the front desk, tried to copy everything, paid attention to the teacher and did homework on time, but never really scored well in exams. And he always wanted to become a loco-pilot... “the chug-chug of trains and the horns of their engines give me a high,” he once said, sitting under a broken bridge of a stranded city with colorful lights, while Swapna looked at him with kind eyes.

He would sit beside the crisscross mesh of railway-lines, near the trainyard, in early mornings and late evenings... and spend many lazy hours... listening to the engines and bogies lugging and shunting, and speaking with each other in indescribable languages of shrieking and grating and hooting... and snaking along the snake-like lines. And there were also birds twittering and crows cawing, hovering around in search of food in discarded plastics and refuse and deep-green groves of trees.

“I have spent countless evenings by that yard... bathing and immersing in the miasma of red and orange evenings, and imagining myself in one of the engines of a chugging train... pulling its lever of acceleration, pulling chains for horns, pressing buttons. I never once imagined that I would end up working as a clerk in a closed office, and worse, that I would actually enjoy it.”

He was happy describing his life. He was particular about details like names of places and things. He had done so in front of Padma before... but with Swapna he was a little more articulate, a little more confident.

“O yes, one of my father’s friends was a loco pilot. How could I forget him?! Debu kaka... an excellent person, big

grey mustache, strong muscles. I would take his lunch to him whenever he had to haul an express out of Kharagpur towards Delhi or Bhubaneswar and he had no time to go to his house. His children were small then. Jolly old fellow. Told me many things about trains, and I guess, he was the one who inspired me to want to be a loco-pilot.” Parnab said.

He appeared for the loco pilot exam a total of three times. He was able to clear the written entrance every time he appeared for it, but when it came to clearing the hurdle of physical tests, he always managed to fail. He was weak and frail. He could not run and he could not jump over hoops like others. He ended up as a government officer, a divisional accountant; which was not a bad job either. Even though he never took any bribes, he was living a comfortable life. He was a success story in his family...

While describing his life, he was going through something which could only be called as peace, something akin to mental satisfaction. Something which - he suddenly realized - was lacking in his life before. *Does the act of sharing something with new people give it new meaning?* he wondered.

He didn't have a kid. Even before their marriage Padma had made it explicitly clear, “I will have kids only after the publication of my first book”, which was kind of odd, because one could have expected from someone like her - someone who wrote stories for children - that she would enjoy having and raising kids.

But being childless was not the reason he was uneasy with his life. Because of it he was sad, maybe. Surely. But sadness is different from uneasiness. Uneasiness is more general, less empirical. It does not need a specific reason, and its absence cannot be explained. It comes from acute understanding. Or

an acute awareness of a lack of understanding. Uneasiness is widespread. Everyone is uneasy.

Perhaps he was at peace with himself even before. But when Swapna came into his life, he managed to reach an altogether different level of tranquility, such a level of tranquility that the past seemed to have been without peace. His present had created a small crater in the past which otherwise was full of good earth.

With Swapna by his side, he was beginning to get in touch with that part of himself which was adventurous. Which wanted to haul humongous snake-like trains across plains and plateaus, through fog and clouds and storms. Which wanted to shrug off his desk life and pick up the tools of construction and see the limits of the world.

Presently, he was studying the waves of froth lapping at the ocean shore.

The turquoise of the sky was blinding and calming at the same time. You could not look at the sky and the stars for more than a few minutes. You had to move your eyes away. In fact, you felt uneasy with so much calm. ‘How can someone be so peaceful?’, you start asking yourself. *How can someone stay quiet for so long?* Even beauty has an extreme then. It can be enjoyed only in small doses.

The turbulent waves copied the turbulence of his thoughts. He felt closer to them. He found a friend in them, a long-lost friend from a previous life perhaps...

Swapna placed her palm on his shoulder and asked: “Are you happy in your marriage?” Her voice was full of genuine concern.

And it was a warm palm. With long bony fingers... and

when they touched his shoulder blades, he felt something incomprehensible; as if a current had coursed through his body, making him stand on edge. It had no precedent; it was something different. It had a flavor of intimacy, as if the same fingers had rendered a similar evocation in him before, a long, long time ago. He felt he knew that palm, from somewhere. He wished they could remain there, forever... her palm and fingers on his shoulder... There was comfort in them, a kind of secretly satisfying self-exhaustion.

But she removed her hand at once. Not because the idea of touching another man in a dream while sleeping with one's husband was guilt ridden. No. She was way past that.

It was because she too had experienced a current pass through her fingers, a mysterious tantalizing current; and she also felt that this shoulder she had caressed before. On such a shoulder she had, in fact, laid her head once upon a time. "I think I would like to take a walk now... you... do you want to join me?" she said, standing up. She didn't want him to join her.

"No. You go. I prefer to sit here itself, and watch the reflection of the moon on the water."

He had a feeling that she didn't want him along. He could tell from the tone of her voice, the inflection hidden behind the word 'you'... the second 'you'... that her invitation was a kind of appeal: please let me be alone for a while.

She had not given him a chance to answer her questions either: 'Are you happy in your marriage?' Not that he wanted to.

Swapna had spent the last three days in a sort of trance.

She was walking by the shore, looking at the dark grey waves - with a glint of silver and deep blue - tumbling over

each other.

A maze of blue green yellow orange colors from the lighthouse and unknown sources was dancing over their surface. In the sky, across the ocean, the full moon hung like a lover, bereft of his beloved's love.

She has never imagined that she would find herself in such a situation. There was a brittle tall man in his briefs... alternately looking down at his feet and gazing up at the moon, into the dream; and there were crabs and shells by the shore, on which her naked feet crackled.

The cold moist particles of sand tickled her feet. 'Tomorrow I shall sleep in my bathroom slippers,' she said to herself. Now sure, that she would have to walk again on naked earth in her dreams.

And suddenly, an intense desire gripped her heart, to run. To take a sprint on the pebbled, moist, salty earth of the sea. She had never been to a sea-shore before. And even though it was just a dream, she could count it as her first ever time. The sensation was so real after all! 'And what is life if not a series of sensations? And what can we do but make those sensations grand?' She muttered to herself.

She had seen people running by the shore, on television. She wanted to be a part of that experience, live those moments.

*Most of our hedonistic pleasures come from copying others, anyway. Every one of us wants to do the same thing. Our sources of satisfaction are mostly copied. They are fashion and subject to change.* A flurry of thoughts tumbled through her mind.

He was watching her the whole time. There was something about her - in her, which pulled him in her direction. No, he was not a bad husband. He loved Padma and was completely



devoted to her. But there are times in our lives when we cannot control what passes through our mind, when we don't even want to. These are called 'weak moments', and are as 'weak' as the functions of a brain that does not itself know what it is capable, or incapable of.

But he would not have defined them as weak... those moments. The way he saw things, the two of them shared a private space which was exclusively their own... which no one could apparently invade. He felt he owned this new world so much, that he was loath to even move his eyes away from her.

It was as if he had acquired a right now. And he could look at her any which way he wanted. As if he had divided his world into two separate halves: the one of reality and the other of dreams. And what he did in one world did not have importance in the other.

Swapna was a full-figured woman. In her green salwar kameez under the effect of the silver moon, she was looking extremely beautiful. The kind of 'sexy' that he admired.

He argued with himself, 'every man looks at other women and every woman looks at other men. It is not wrong in itself.' But previously, in the non-dream world, when he happened to throw a glance at a woman in the marketplace or in the office, he would feel guilty. That he was somehow betraying Padma. And he would immediately change the direction of his gaze, away from an attractive woman.

Today was different. There was nothing of that sort. No guilt, no sense of betrayal. In fact... when he narrowed his eyes on the outline of her bust, he had a feeling akin to euphoric contentment. And something told him that if Padma comes to know about it, she would not mind. 'Don't

worry. She won't mind.' This is what he muttered to himself, as he examined the contours of the woman near the beach picking up sand and stones and crabs, and throwing them in the direction of the oncoming not-so-furious waves.

And then it occurred to him that he should join her.

How did it matter that he was in his briefs? The night was not so cold, and he could swim. Yes, that is what he would do! Swim in the dark ocean of his dreams under a silver moon. It was way better than sitting for hours in the office reading through unending accounts.

He stood up and began walking in her direction, but... but what was that?

Was she running? Yes, she was running... and how her posterior moved... 'posterior' is the word he used in his mind... not 'ass'.

And the next moment he found himself transported to his bed in his room, beside his wife, and started feeling a worm-like organism creeping into his head through his ears, the worm of guilt.



# Paris

Padma's head was snuggled against his hairy chest.

He turned his neck sideways, at the clock on the bedside table. It had a Mickey Mouse on its dial; his protuberant nose, oval shaped eyes and never fading smile perking it up. The time was three thirty. Parnab could hear the rattle of a train fading into oblivion, rapidly chugging away as the timid seconds sloughed through the late-night air. He knew the train. It was going from Patna to Lucknow, and oddly, was running on time. He muttered its name under his breath and turned his attention to his wife.

Her head was snuggled against his chest. He picked up her head, like a thief, like a surgeon handling his scalpel, placed it on her pillow, and sighed a long sigh of relief, a guilty sigh. He slithered out of the bed-covers, stood up and stretched his body. He looked out, through the window, at the blotched darkness of the night, which was a tree, an old neem. And then suddenly, an alarm started ringing in his heart.

He felt a smirched, blind coldness pricking his chest. He forced himself not to panic, and hoping that it was all his imagination, looked down.

Yes, there were drops of water. Cascading down, dancing... in the sparse hair on his chest. Time paused

temporarily. He looked at the drops for what seemed like centuries. They sparkled like tiny pearls in the all-pervasive darkness of the room, a gluey white darkness. White darkness peculiar to early mornings and drab moods.

He gave into panic.

He couldn't help it. A lightening dab of fear coursed through him like a bolt. *Was it really happening? Had the dreams begun to seep into reality already? Had the ocean from his dream tag along with him into his real life? What's reality? Was he awake, or was he still asleep?* He was befuddled by fear. By the slowness of the night, and the dampness of its memories.

In time, fear was replaced by an absurd melancholia. A yearning for self-destruction, coupled with remorse. The water drops were a symptom of troubled sleep. They were mere sweat, an episode of palpitation. He came back to his senses, through reason.

He washed himself. He ate breakfast: bread heated on the gas stove, a layer of pineapple jam on it, coupled with a cup of strong tea. He avoided his wife, he tried to. He didn't look her in the eye when she bent to place a cup of tea on the table in front of him, and ran to the office without bidding her goodbye.

In the office he tried to lose himself in office-files and folders and invoices and bills... to forget the dream, to forget the images of his dream girl running on the beach. He tried to forget her voice traipsing over the muffled whisperings of the ocean, the images of her body, her way of speaking.

And he tried to placate his conscience by meaningless acts. In the *jalebi* he bought for his wife, in a little circular box of scented kajal of the brand she loved. He tried to palliate his guilt in a new blouse he ordered for her.

He could not. He thought he had lost something, something important.

But later that night, when the dream of another day began and he was in a green T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, standing with Swapna in the middle of an expansive high-ceilinged hall, golden, golden everywhere... and there were no other humans with inquisitive guilt-feeding eyes staring at him, he forgot his shame.

He decided to block everything out. Anything which did not belong to the dream, all emotions, fears and arguments, were pushed away. And without holding any kind of official discussion with himself, he concluded that there was nothing wrong in what he was doing. It was absolutely okay. He started caressing her with his eyes, as if she was his.

“What place is this?” he inquired... after they settled into the new world that their new dream had offered them. His eyes were drowsy, bloated with red branches of lightning, and wide open.

“It’s the famous railway station of Paris,” she replied... the pounding of her heart hurrying toward non-existence, from a previously rattling speed of a late night express, screaming through unknown forests and empty villages.

“Paris? Is it in Kashmir?”

“No... it is in France. Have you never heard of France?”

He hadn’t.

She smiled. Her smile had ‘power’ written all over it. She had gained one more point over him, and her smile was saying: “this is how it is then, and this is how it shall be for the rest of the game”, and yes it was a game!

And he was looking at her smiling, smirking face, confused befuddled and delighted; and he was looking behind her at

the vast enormous insides of the dome under which they were standing... and at the words and numbers running on a green-grey screen on one of the yellow walls, in a language which was unknown to him.

He tried to read them, hoping that reading them out loud to the air might help him understand what they were saying. But his lips didn't move, they remained pursed in awe of what was before his eyes.

He had never been to such a place before. There were gold-hued little shops scintillating with colorful objects of all kinds, machines, little toys, food and bells and books all around... and there were no people.

There were no people, and perhaps that was the point. 'With humans, a railway station looks breathtaking. Without humans, it takes your breath away.' He said to no one in particular.

Was it even a railway station? Yes, it was! Since Swapna had said it was a railway station, it had to be one; even though it did not look like one from any angle. Its new and enlivening scent found a place in his heart.

Not the eggy rotting stench of Kharagpur, his most favorite railway station in the world... with its tang of burning coal and dusty tepid redolence of cement on rainy days. *Ah, Kharagpur! That yard... those water pipes, smells of oil and... and the smell of fresh watery air.* He was in a new world now, a world he had never even known or anticipated in his dreams. And a warm enticing aroma of cake and chocolate and many other scents which he was experiencing for the first time made him forget to question if such places even existed in the real world.

The spirits of ketones wafted into his nostrils and he felt

drowsy with happiness. He felt like leaving everything aside for the Gods to judge and just lie there, and forget everything and sleep... and the woman in front of him... her too, he forgot for a while.

When Swapna woke up after her visit to the beach and found her body lying beside the truck driver of a husband, the first thing she did was go to the kitchen and pick up a spoon.

In the spoon, in the thin glow of the shamelessly rising sun, she tried to find herself.

She was dim, the glow was dim... but she could see it clearly... she understood it. That she had found a new direction that she should not have looked at, she should not have started walking upon.

It was not guilt. It was definitely not guilt. *Then what was it?* It was nothing. It was just one of those emotions which come and go and never really die. She wanted to find her past in the convex surface of the spoon, even though she already knew that she had already lost it; even before she picked up the spoon.

She telephoned the school and took a day off. She spent the rest of the day in front of the computer trying to find people like her on the internet... those who had dreams like her, had gone through incidents like hers in which one meets strangers in their dreams. She also tried to find out if Parnab was real... the man from West Bengal, the divisional accountant from Faizabad.

But all her attempts were futile, and she was relieved that they were so. In the depth of her heart, she really didn't want to know that the real and the dream had a connection. She wanted them to be separate, she wanted to live two separate

lives which had no connection with each other. 'Except herself...' But who was she?

And step by step, she wanted to know more about the man who had come to occupy so much space in her heart in just two interactions that it was impossible, to call him a stranger.

She couldn't put it into words. She only knew that there was a part of her which she was totally unable to comprehend. Not that she really wanted to.

The clock at the railway station in Paris starts chiming. The clocktower stands in the middle of the station, on a tower... looking outside into the city like a sentinel. From this clocktower, standing on one of its Roman numerals, you can look at the Eiffel tower. You can quench your wander-thirsty eyes with the golden, mesmerizing, blue-tinged night... smearing and enveloping bejeweled Eiffel tower.

And there are no people; not even a single human soul wandering the lanes and alleys and parks surrounding the Eiffel: the emblem of love, the scenic spot in front of which everyone wants to have a photograph with their love... a token of a memory, a symbol of love.

The sound of the bell goes deep into the air. The depth pierces through their minds like a knife through a really hard sponge. The two stand alone, surrounded by the emblazoned walls of the station. Four times it strikes, four times... it is four a.m. And after those four strikes, everything stops existing, for a while. For a century.

Swapna feels like wandering out of the station. She wants to breathe in the scent of Paris. She feels like holding the hand of the man standing by her and walk in the streets of



empty Paris for hours without any words. Eiffel Tower... yes... Eiffel Tower would be nice; she speaks aloud to herself. Wasn't it her dream all along?

"What?" he says and brings her back. To where?

"Nothing..." she replies, and they drown themselves again... in the unknown regions of silence... both confused and elated, alive and lost.

But one of them gets conscious of the quietude and says: "Why did we come out of our dream? What happened?"

"Maybe we have a time limit." The man in the green t shirt says. He tries to sound composed. He does not want her to know what is going through his mind, not that he himself knows.

"No, I remember. We spent a much longer time in the zoo."

"Then what?"

"I have a theory. I think it has to do with the distance between us."

"What do you mean?" He is really confused.

"I mean when we go beyond a certain distance, we come out of the dream."

"What is that distance?"

"That we need to find out through experiments."

"Okay then... let's do it." He does not know what makes him say this. He just wants to talk with her. Even if the topic is totally lost on him. He is just following her, saying what he feels she wants to hear.

They start walking away from each other, slowly step by step, sometimes looking at each other and sometimes not... counting those steps. So that using the number of steps and measuring the average length of one step, they can calculate

the distance between them, the threshold after which their common dream loses its intensity, its grip on itself; after which the thread binding them to the dream breaks off and they emerge out of the parallel universe in which they enjoy floating so much...

When Swapna came to the dreamless 'waking' so-called real world, and found herself sleeping by her husband in an unromantic non-Parisian house, she realized that she might have lost the only chance of seeing the Eiffel tower her life may ever present to her. 'I should have seen more of Paris rather than wake up to this drab reality,' she muttered to herself as she made her morning tea. Her husband was still asleep, and the sun was still hiding behind the other hemisphere of the earth, Paris maybe... sigh...



# Costco

They continued seeing each other.

It was not very different from having a friend, really. Even though they met only in the ambit of their dreams, they were no less real to each other. Dreams were not forgotten, and neural records of those dreams became part of their memories. And then those memories became part of their lives, their 'real' selves. On one occasion, they discussed and decided that they would not tell their partners about each other. It was simpler, easier that way. They didn't want any complications, no one does.

A routine formed. In the morning waking up, check listing the day's same old chores one by one, living a life in the daytime. And in the night waking up again... into a new, different world. A world which was more romantic, more idyllic, more pastoral by virtue of its being so impersonal... where they could roam about in parks and forests of concrete, freely, in deserts, in the valleys of mountains, in libraries, empty stores, an airplane in the hangar, amusement parks, caves, cemeteries... living another life.

If Kundera knew about them, he would have said that their waking world was the world of heaviness, in which they were leaden with the monotone of familiar faces and