The Florist

“Dude, you woke me up at seven in the morning!...No, it isn't. It's going to start at nine....And they're not going to be here till ten!...It's a fucking marathon, for God's sake! What on earth is there to cover?...Okay, I know it is a charity thing..When the hell did I say I won't cover it? I will, but....Listen....Okay, okay....Okay, it's fine, chill..Ok”

I ended the call and took a deep breath, taking in the chill air of a winter morning that bit against my face and stung my lungs. It was hardly half past seven yet, and to the east the sun was still a low, large disc suspended over the horizon, its cool, orange glow setting afire the clouds above. The streets were all empty at this time of the day. This was a half-baked market, and on one side of the street a series of tiny shops stood shoulder to shoulder, staring with a stoic emptiness at the lifeless street. The other side of the street was dominated by a sequence of large apartments, and the security guards guarding the gates came out and stood, hands inside the pockets of large windcheaters, watching the day take shape. To my right, surrounded by the apartments, there was a school; its gates were still closed, though in a half-hour's time the school buses would arrive, amidst the pandemonium of blabbering children, and put the still silence of the street to an end. Just outside the school, under a tree that had cropped out of the middle of the footpath, a florist was setting shop. His age I guessed to be at least 60; his face was wrinkled, his back bent, and his hair a thin silver veil over his scalp. He was bringing his flowers from a cache that was hidden from my view, and placing them beneath the tree in a practised order, halting now and then to survey the effect. Now he would scurry behind the tree and bring out a flowerpot or a bouquet, now he would stand with one hand on top of the other, his back bent, staring through cataract ridden eyes, like an ascetic on the verge of attaining salvation. One final set of flowers and he brought out a folding chair for himself, folded it out slowly and deliberately beside the tree, and sat down, staring at the ground.

I sighed again, and looked at my watch. It wasn't my dream thing of course, being a reporter, especially one who has nothing to do but interview the psychopaths running the marathon; but it was the early morning wake-up call that had really pissed me off today. My long spell of observation had lasted no longer than five minutes, and the one or two hours I had to wait before the first of the marathon runners came to this crossing stretched out dismally before me. On impulse I crossed the road, and sat on the footpath beside the florist.

“It's a chill morning, is it not?” I said. I waited for him to answer, but he did not, so I went back to watching the sun gradually grow in power as it brought about the day. My eyes wandered to the flowers that, as it were, now stood behind me. I admired them one by one, the roses, the lilies, the tulips and then those that I did not know.

“Why are there so many orchids?”

The old man turned his face slowly to look at me, bewildered.

“The orchids, why are there so many of them?”

We stared at each other for a couple of moments. I suppose I was expecting an answer; but the old man just looked at me awkwardly, as if what I had asked was obvious enough to consider a rhetoric.

He turned back to the street then, as if the stare was too much for him to bear.

“Because she liked orchids”, he said, his low, husky voice hardly audible.

A gentle wind picked up, and I pulled my jacket tighter around myself. It twirled the dried leaves lying beneath the trees, and the streetsweeper winced as the dust billowed out again. “I was younger then”, he began, as an answer to my rather innocent question. “Not as young as you, but young enough to be a bit more able, a bit more enthusiastic about life. It had been quite some time since I set up shop here, though why I chose this spot I cannot say. I guess I thought this
market nearby, and these apartments, would mean good business. They didn't, of course; all the people in this area then were either school kids or old middle aged ladies: flowers appealed to neither. The crowd of teenagers with their white and yellow and pink roses, those were not to be, and day after day I remained idle, everyday bringing new flowers, better flowers, hoping that some day business would improve.

It was a summer afternoon, that, and at the moment in question I was sprinkling water over all my flowers. You have to sprinkle water over them, see, more often in summers than in winters; or they will wilt easily in the dry summer heat. So I was standing, with my back to the school over there, holding a little mug in my hand, sprinkling water, and I turned, and there she was.

Those orchids there, I didn't pay much attention to them then, they just stood there by the side. And there she was, hand frozen in mid-air, holding an orchid, wide black eyes fixed on the apparition staring at her. 'You'll have to pay for that, dear', I said, smiling. She just kept staring, alarmed to see a stranger in front of her. I guessed her age to be around 4 or 5. She was dressed in school uniform, her hair tied neatly in two pigtails that fell on her shoulders, her skirt neatly pleated and shoes polished till they looked new.

'You want an orchid?' I asked her and picked out another one, but she shook her head, keeping her eyes on me all the time. She clutched the orchid in her hand tighter, as if I was going to take it from her, depriving her of her possession.

'Niharika!'

We both looked up at the voice. 'Mummy' she screamed and ran away, to a tall figure standing by the school gate. A brief scolding ensued, and the tall lady came striding up to me, pulling her daughter behind her. 'There', she said to her daughter, 'Say sorry'. 'Sorry', Niharika whispered, looking at her feet, and still clutching the flower in her hand. 'It's okay', I said, kneeling, and looking into her eyes. There were a hint of tears in them.

'How much does it cost?' asked the mother.

'5 rupees ma'am, but...'

'No. She should learn not to take someone's things just like that', she said, addressing her daughter and simultaneously placing a 5 rupee coin in my hand. She turned towards me and sighed. 'Children', she said. 'I wonder how they manage to slink away so easily. Anyhow, sorry for the trouble. Good day'.

'Good day, ma'am'.

The next afternoon, and there she was again. This time I had fallen asleep on my chair. She came by my side and tugged at my shirt. I don't know for how long she tugged, I guess it was some time before I woke up.

'Will you give me that flower?' she said, giving me a 5 rupee coin and pointing to the orchids. 'Sure', I said, and led her to them. 'So, did your mother ask you to pay me?'

She nodded in assent, her eyes fixated on the flower I pulled out and handed to her.

'Your mother hasn't come yet?'

She shook her head.

'Can I sit on that chair? Till my mother comes?'

'Sure, you can', I said. She sat there silently, looking at the floor, swinging her feet to and fro, humming a tune, till once again her mother called out her name, and out she went bubbling with joy.

From then on, every day she would come. It became a ritual for her, and for me too. As it neared one-thirty in the afternoon, I would keep my eyes on the school gate. She would come out and run towards me, holding the five rupee coin high up in her hand as she came down the stairs as fast as
she could. She would hand me her coin, and I would give her her orchid, and then sit her on this chair. Sometimes, she would be silent, lost in the myriad unusual beauty of the orchid, but sometimes she would start talking, babbling rather, as if she was talking to herself. 'Should I tell you a story?' she asked once, her legs swinging, her eyes turned on me. 'Sure' I said and squatted in front of her. She began her story, something about a tortoise, a monkey and a crow. She said it in great detail, even putting in a description of a tortoise. 'A tortoise is an animal, you know, it has four legs, and a shell, and when it goes into its shell, it looks like a stone, and you can never tell a stone from a tortoise'.

By the time the story ended, her mother had come to pick her up. 'Did you like the story?' she asked as she jumped out of the chair. 'Yes, of course. It was wonderful.' 'Would you like to listen to it again?' she asked, her face radiant with pride. I swallowed a laugh. 'Sure, dear.'

And so, every day she would buy her orchid, sit down on her chair, and wait for me to squat before her, and in much the same words, recount to me the story again and again. I would sit before her and watch her eyes grow wide in the really important parts, her small hands as they gesticulated to and fro to draw me a tortoise, and explain how it looked like a stone. I would watch her swing her legs to and fro and thoroughly enjoy herself, sometimes even forgetting the orchid which she usually held tightly or placed on her lap. A week later of course, she tired of it; when I asked her to tell the story again, out came the rebuke: 'Oh, but aren't you fed up of it?'

It was nearing eight, and the first of the school buses turned round the corner. Painted in the traditional yellow and green, I watched as it came to a stop outside the school gates, and out came the children, the youngest first, running through the gates with cries of 'Me first', then the older children, holding out copies and comparing notes and homework. A part of me wondered which, if any, of them was Niharika.

The school was not the only place to have awakened. The city was waking up from its slumber. Men and women in suits and saris rushed to work, driving out in big luxurious cars or finding their way to the bus stop, running sometimes to get a foot on the footboard even as the bus started to move. Here and there a few shops were open too, the bakery shops for an emergency supply of bread and butter, the stationary shops for that homework left incomplete till the last minute.

"I asked her once", said the old man, and I turned to him. "I asked her once why she likes orchids so much. 'Oh' she said, 'don't you know?' She took out her bag with great effort, and pulled out a large book. 'There' she said, opening it. 'You don't know this story?' She began to narrate me the story, going page by page, picture by picture in fact, for it was mainly pictures, explaining each and everything in them. 'This here is the prince', she would say, 'and this the queen'. And then she came to the picture that showed the orchids, in the king's forest; hanging in bunches above the prince's head. They played no role in the story, of course, but they looked remarkably like the ones I had. 'See, you have their flowers', she told me, 'and you don't even know. Did you ask them before taking it?"

Every morning I came here, thinking of her, waiting for her. For what else was more important than her? I was married, but we didn't have any children. Do you have children, Sir? I guess not. You are too young. Somewhere down the line, you know, you get fed up of living. Thirty years, forty years, fifty years. The years pass. They bring their share of joys, sorrows, successes, failures. You laugh, you cry, you smile. And then it all ends, the heat, the passion, the restlessness. You don't want to live anymore. You want to drift, to let the world take you where it wants you to go.
But then, but then you have your kids. You look at your children, and you look through their eyes at this world. You look at what a wonderful place this is, how very new, how very strange, how very bizarre. In their little day-long desires you fulfil your lifelong ambitions. In their quarrels, easily resolved, you find your battles, long given up on. In their fruitless obsessions you find your own habits and passions stowed away. With them, in tiny steps, you venture anew into the world.

And that was what she meant to me. It seemed a brand new world I was seeing, it was a brand new world she was showing me. With her I didn't worry about where my money was coming from. With her I didn't worry about whether business was slack, whether my flowers sold. For that half hour or so, with her, I lived her world, inhabited her life, her life of princes and kings and tortoises and monkeys. Her world where nothing could ever go wrong, where the evil sorcerer lived in a castle, and the young boy could defeat him, where the ugly duckling became a swan.”

The old man became silent. His breath sounded hoarse; it came out of his airways in a loud hiss, and I wondered if he was alright.

“But my situation wasn't so good. We weren't making money, and my wife was sick. Very sick. They said she had TB, and that I was very late in calling the doctors, but what could I do? I did not have enough money to support the medication, or the doctors; we just hoped her coughing would stop, as it stopped always. But this time it didn't, and she went on coughing. Her eyes became hollowed, her face, already wrinkled, became a sickly gray. She couldn't get out of bed, and it was winter too, and what could I do but pray?

We couldn't afford any doctor, so we just waited it out. She kept getting worse and worse. A time came when I abandoned the shop and stayed by her night and day, hoping, praying that she would get well, knowing in my heart that she wouldn't. The winter worsened, the wind came in through the windows and chilled the air inside, no fire kept us warm. I was losing her, and losing her fast.

Then one morning she asked me to open the shop once again. I protested, but she said we needed money. Which was true, of course, but the flower shop wasn't going to provide us with any. But I went nevertheless, a flower shop in what was undoubtedly the most formidable day of the winter; overcast, and ravaged by an unearthly wind.

Niharika came that day. 'Why didn't you come for so many days?' she asked. Her eyes were wide, not worried exactly, but not happy either; disappointed.

I couldn't look into her eyes without breaking into tears. 'It's my wife', I said. 'She's....' I wondered what I should say. 'She's leaving.'

'But she will come back, won't she?'

'No....no, she won't'

'She won't?' Her eyes opened wide in disbelief, as if it was an unheard of thing to leave and not come back. 'My father leaves everyday, but he comes back', she said, staring at the floor. I looked at her and found myself moved beyond words. There was so much this child had to discover. Maybe, maybe a time would come when her father would die too, leave her forever. It would shatter her world. Her beautiful world where nothing could go wrong, where people who leave always come back.

'Give her a flower', she said, looking up, her eyes bright. 'Give her a flower and she will come back' I smiled. 'Do you think so?' I asked. 'Of course she will' she said. She placed in my hand the five rupee coin, and ran to the orchids. She picked out the most beautiful one, and handed it to me. 'Here, take my flower', she said. 'Give it to her'
I looked at her, the five rupee coin in one hand and the flower in the other. I did not know what to think or say. What could one say to that little angel standing beneath the tree, bright joyous eyes looking at me, that warmest of smiles on her face? What could one say to that little mind that thought it could take on the world with a single orchid in her hand? What could one do but hold her and say that yes, this orchid would bring her back, bring her back from the dead, my dear, exactly as you say?

I held that flower in my hand for a long time, staring at its petals, not seeing, not thinking. The sky turned gray, then black, and a freezing rain came peltering down. Thunder and lightning gripped the night, the cold winds drenched the empty streets. I rushed towards my hut, flower in hand, protecting it against the wind and the rain in the folds of my shawl. I walked to my wife's bed. She was hardly breathing.

'------'
She stirred, opened her eyes slowly, as if it took a lot of effort.
'I have a gift for you', I whispered and held out the flower.
'From whom?' she asked, taking it into her hands. I wondered what to say.
'She could have been your daughter', I said.
She smiled wistfully. Her wrinkling, dying hands caressed the flower, held it close to her face.
'It is beautiful', she said."

He paused.

"'It is beautiful'. Those were her last words."

The day was at its peak. It was nearing ten; the winter morning's easy languor was gone. The city was alive: cars honking, drivers screaming. People looking at shops, surveying wares, bargaining. Autodrivers arguing. Policemen blowing their whistles.

I sat beside the old man, looking at it all, saying nothing. I looked at my camera. Soon the marathon runners would arrive. I would have to run too, catching hold of those elite few, industrialists and actors and so on. Ask questions. Click pictures.

"I never saw her again. For so many days after my wife's death, I waited for her, I waited for her to come and ask for an orchid, to come and place that blessed five rupee coin into my hand. She was an angel, do you see, she was my angel and I wished her to come, wished her to bring me that half hour of joy, as she had done so many times.

She didn't. Maybe she changed schools, found another florist.

Maybe she just grew up."

The first of the runners crossed the corner. Without a word, I got up to go.

"You ask me why I kept so many orchids. I keep them because she likes orchids. Just in case she comes."