

Toy

Nabarun Bhattacharya

Mithil and Mimi never left Toy alone at home. Not for a long time at least. There wasn't even a plan as such but Mithil called Mimi from the office to tell her that Mahendra was screening Tarkovsky's 'Nostalgia' at his place on VCR. They asked Amitadi to look after Toy. No one lived in the top floor of their remote three-storied apartment. In their frugal looking apartment, there was only one flat on every floor. Toy and his family lived on first floor and Amitadi on ground floor. Before going any further, let's get to know about the aquarium.

Last year there was trouble at Mithil's workplace. Mithil's boss in his division retired. Someone came from Bombay to replace him. He was in a Tata Concern there and the moment he joined, a whole series of ego-tussles began. There were disagreements over trifles all the time and Mithil became increasingly anxious in the process. He started doing Yoga: Pranayam¹ and Shavashan.² Mithil's Yoga teacher asked him to buy an aquarium. He was a devotee of Aurobindo³ and Mother Teresa.⁴ He told Mithil that Mother had observed somewhere in her writings about the calming effect of watching fishes in an aquarium. He also said that this had really worked for a lot of people. This is how an aquarium made its way into their home for a therapeutic reason of sorts. It wasn't huge and didn't contain a great number of fishes. Swordtail, Guppy, Angel, Black Molly, Gourami⁵ and so on. The cat fish came later. The snails were kept in the bathroom under drops of water. It was a difficult arrangement to make and so dry foods started to come. Toy had joined Mithil in his obsession with the aquarium even at the cost of watching television. Mithil and Mimi bought Toy the book *Multicolored Fins* from the book fair. One day after reading the book, Toy asked:

— Papa, why isn't there a fighter in our aquarium?

— No point. They'll fight each other to death.

— But the book says they don't kill each other; only tear each other's wings and the wings grow back as well.

— Have you read that right?

— Yes. Do you know what Angel's real name is?

— No.

— Terofilus Amikei.

That evening Mimi had explained clearly what Toy was supposed to do hour by hour: Complian⁶ at seven, fruit custard at night; there could even be a surprise gift waiting for Toy.

It would've been good to have a children's program on TV that evening but there wasn't. Toy was expected to do his studies after drinking Complian. Amitadi would come and see him at eight and the apartment security guard would also be careful. Unless it was a known person, he would ask all others to come later even though no one was scheduled to come. Mimi and Mithil would be back by nine fifteen. Toy was so quiet and well behaved that there was no reason to worry about him. Mimi boarded the mini bus from the nearest bus stop. Toy waved to her from the veranda. Mahendra's place was just a matter of four stops.

Toy counted the cars from the veranda for quite some time. He played his favourite game of predicting cars. The winter hadn't set in at the time although the sun was setting early and there was a faint trace of fog around the light. The game of predicting cars was Toy's own invention. No one else knew about it. It's time for an ambassador now. And there it came. One nil. Now Maruti. In came a police van instead. The score was one all now. Another Maruti. Now it was two to one in favour of Maruti. Cycle, two wheeler, bus, mini— they were not counted in this game. All the three rooms in the flat were well lit. After winning 45-37, when Toy had his Complian, it was five minutes past seven. Mithil and Mimi called at seven fifteen. Everything all right? Yes. Are you afraid? No. The home-task of five sums must be done. You can do the handwriting exercise tomorrow morning. Toy disconnected the phone and sat with the sums. The last of them was big and difficult. There were so many multiplications and divisions! And just as Toy geared up for that one, the doorbell rang. It was Amitadi!

— What are you doing Mr. Toy?

— I am doing my homework. Maths.

— Such a good boy! Are you afraid?

— No. Not at all.

Amitadi gave Toy four Hajmola Candies.⁷ Toy kept two of them on the table for himself and the other two on the bedside of his parents. He couldn't quite solve the final sum. It was ten minutes past eight then.

Toy went to the bathroom to pee and after he was done, he stood up on the commode and opened the box fixed on the opposite wall which was deliberately kept out of Toy's reach. The moment he opened it, a beautiful aroma combining the Eau de Cologne and aftershave filled the air. When Mithil went on tours, he took a cute miniature immersion heater with him. He used it for shaving. Toy silently brought it down.

Mithil and Mimi came back exactly at nine thirty and Toy was watching TV with rapt attention. It was Pink Floyd live from Australia on cable TV. Psychedelic and smoky light

everywhere; waves of long hair in slow motion; flashing lights like lightning on the cords of the blue guitar. They had brought ice-cream for Toy. So Toy didn't have fruit custard after dinner. He went to bed and Mimi had also fallen asleep telling him stories. Mithil was still awake. The candle lights of 'Nostalgia' were all around him. He felt that familiar restlessness returning in his head, as if to save the lonely candle's only light. Sitting with a cigarette in front of the aquarium sounded like a good idea.

The light in the aquarium was on. The lid was open and a pencil was placed horizontally to maintain the gap between the lid and the glass wall. The small immersion heater was hanging from it. All the fishes were dead. Because the heater was on, there was an invisible wave inside and an up and down of hot and cold water. The dead fishes were afloat within that invisible wave, flipping back and forth and constantly skidding from one end to another. The water was still quite warm. The silver bubbles were coming out from the diver's half-open mouth. Tiny bubbles were also coming out from the surface of the immersion heater.

Toy didn't go to school the next day. His parents took him to the psychiatrist Dibyendu Mukherjee. Mimi's father knew him well. Mithil and Mimi were sitting outside. Dr. Mukherjee talked to him for almost an hour before they came out with an Amul chocolate in Toy's hands and smiles on both faces.

— Mr. Toy. You sit and read this picture book. Let me have a little talk with papa and mamma.

Toy nodded gently. Dr. Mukherjee said, oh what a great chat we had!

Inside Dr. Mukherjee had said this to Toy's parents.

— I don't think the incident is as serious and macabre as you think. What impressed me the most in the conversation with your son is that he doesn't have a bone of aggression in him. He is such a soft hearted boy. I'd simply ask you to ignore what happened. It's not a problem. He is perfectly normal. Sort of curiosity, you can say; it's almost scientific...

Sometime after the incident, Mithil read an article on children with criminal propensities from England and France in an overseas journal. An interesting debate had emerged from the discussions. One French psychologist said that these children had described their crimes in such a calm and cold blooded manner that one could almost detect a scientific attitude in it. Mithil read it out to Mimi.

Toy's parents stopped being concerned about him after that.

-----Translated by Arka Chattopadhyay

Glossary:

¹ An exercise involving inhaling and exhaling

² Another yoga exercise that involves a supine position respectively.

³ Aurobindo (1872-1950) was an Indian nationalist leader, yogi and poet.

⁴ Mother Teresa (1910-1997) was a Roman Catholic religious sister and missionary who spent most of her days in India.

⁵ The names of various tropical fishes.

⁶ Complian is a popular energy drink for boys and girls in India.

⁷ A popular brand of digestive candies