

ARTICLE

A GOODBYE

BY UTKARSH KASHYAP

This morning, the garden was very quiet, with only the cold breeze rustling a few leaves now and then. The sound of the rustling of foliage seemed to be the sound of silence yet to be touched and assimilated. Today, the garden was empty—not just of people, but of presence. I can't remember the last time it looked so deserted. No one cleared the dry leaves from the benches or pushed the swings. I don't know how to count, but the trees also seemed to have as many berries as yesterday. Only the chilly wind touched them and dropped some berries down, but it didn't change the appearance much.

Sometimes when I look at these pigeons, I wonder how happy they are with each other. They're never alone—sitting together on branches, eating grains side by side, and chatting with the breeze. In a flash, they fly far away, but always together. And here I am, wandering alone—a *stray* as the 'mature people' used to call me or an *innocent*, as the 'immature ones' who come here often, call me. I wonder if I even have a name. They call me with strange, different sounds. Sometimes, they shout suddenly to scare me, maybe because it's fun for them. But I get frightened, and a scared yelp slips out of my heart. Often, they toss me food they don't want. Other times, I just look at them with hopeful eyes, waiting. I keep hoping until the last bite, but well... *My world is just the corners of this garden.*

Most of the time, people don't notice me or bother me. They are immersed in their own activities of both monotony and joy, which is why they come to the garden. But Mr. Ray, an old and kind man, is altogether different. He used to come here just to read his books quietly. He is the one who often gave me bits of food. He loves to travel, and I overheard him talking on the phone with some people that in a few days, he's leaving for Kolkata for a few months, where his family lives. Though that's his birthplace, he regrets knowing so little about it, and this trip will help him learn more.

But today, it's completely silent. Not a single person has shown up, even though the sun is high overhead. Whew! Let's see if there is any water to drink.

Did I just hear someone laugh? I listened carefully—no, there's no sound. Wait, somewhere nearby, a few people are laughing. I can hear them. That laughter sounds eerie, almost

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frightening. Along with that eerie laughter, I could now hear loud, stomping footsteps. As the terrifying laughter and earth-shaking steps grew louder, I felt more and more scared. It was clear this was a group. I quickly slipped into the hole I'd dug behind the bushes and hid, waiting for them to come closer. There were few people. Their clothes were badly covered with dust, and they stumbled as if they might fall any moment, yet every time they managed to save themselves. They held glass bottles in their hands, their eyes half-closed as if eager to sleep, their hair messy, and their faces smeared with grime. But their teeth—they could clearly be seen through their frightening laughter.

As they approached, the air was filled with an intense and strange stench—it was the sharp smell of alcohol, and these men were drunkards. All of them sat in a circle on the grass, placing the bottle of liquor in the middle. They started picking it up, drinking, laughing, and talking loudly.

One of them spoke, "Wanna know who's a real pal? Gambling shows ya, plain as day. Them guys who said they were my best buds—they showed what they're really like, today. Got no cash in your pocket, then why the heck you showin' up to gamble, huh?"

Another one said, "But we're not deceitful pigs like them, my friend. That's why we're here, sticking by you through all this."

"Yeah!" the first one shouted.

"Not... not you, my friends—those... those leechers of the gutter! Those who lose at cards and run off, tossing the deck!"

"Forget them, friend!" the third one chimed in.

"Taste this nectar and curse them out till your heart feels lighter."

"Ha, ha!"

They all burst into loud laughter.

They pulled out glasses from their pockets, quickly wiped them against their shirt sleeves, and started pouring drinks, clinking their glasses together and shouting, "Cheers!"

"The garden was better off deserted than disturbed by these people," I thought.

"Buddy, can you help me with something small? A piece of food has been stuck in my teeth since morning, and it's driving me crazy. Grab a thin twig from that bush over there so I can remove it."

"Absolutely, friend, I'll get it!" the other replied.

He is coming right towards me. What do I do now? Where do I go? They'll see me!
But they should not hurt me for no reason, right? But, they're all drunk.

The man was now standing right by the bushes, directly in front of me, but it seemed he didn't notice me. He was looking for a thin stick.

"Yes! Found one. This'll do the job," he said. "It'll get all the bits out."

Phew, he didn't see me. I was worrying for nothing.

But then he shouted, "Hey, friend, come quick! I think there's someone behind the bushes. I'll check."

How did he know? But why should I worry? Maybe... They'll give me some food!

"Look, friends! It's been hiding here, listening to everything we said!"

"What? I think it too, wants some nectar, huh? Come here, buddy — let me give you a taste."

As soon as I sensed danger, I started barking at them, "Go away!" I barked, but... they didn't listen — or rather, 'they just heard'.

I had to run, so I did, with all of them chasing after me. But where could I go? In the end, a wall blocked my path, and I had to stop. All of them stood in front of me.

"You ran a lot, little one," they said. "Where are you going to run now?"

One of them grabbed me by my tail and dangled me upside down. It hurt so much. My back was in agony, and I didn't even have the strength to scream. I tried with all my might, but my voice choked. Pain and panic made my heart race. My throat was dry, and I could barely breathe.

Just then, a loud voice came from the garden's entrance:

"Hey, loser! Have you opened a circus or what? Listen, If you've got the guts, come to the big banyan tree. Bhaiya's ready to beat you. It took a lot to convince him—nobody wants to play with a cheat like you!"

Hearing this, the man loosened his grip on my tail, and I crashed to the ground. The moment I was free, I bolted toward the bushes desperately, crouching low. I don't know where that sudden burst of energy came from.

Hearing that challenge, the man got angry and smashed the bottle of nectar he was holding. The pieces of the glass bottle scattered everywhere, though I can barely see them. Then they grabbed their belongings and left.

My legs were too weak to carry my own weight after the fall. I limped along, stumbling—falling face first a few times, sometimes flipping over, sometimes forgetting my injured leg and trying to use all of them and each time, a muffled, pain filled yelp escaped me. I licked the wounds on

my legs, belly, and tail to ease the pain a bit, then crawled into my hole and fell asleep. That's all I could do.

"Aaaaah!"

A loud scream startled me awake, making my heart race again. Can't these people just keep quiet for a while? Why does everyone have to bother me? A piece of glass had pierced a boy's foot, but the wound wasn't too deep. Anyway, why do I care? I know they all come to trouble me. I licked my tail and belly again and went back to sleep.

There was a boy sitting on a bench, sobbing quietly. He wasn't crying out loud, but tears streamed down his face, and he didn't blink. Hesitant and limping, I slowly crept out from the bushes. He glanced at me, then turned his face away, not showing any real change in his expression.

At first, I thought about going towards him, but I didn't want to risk getting in trouble for myself. So I limped past him towards the neem tree where my bowl was, hoping to drink some water. But my limping seemed to draw his attention. Dodging the scattered pieces of glass, I reached there and as I looked into the bowl—it was empty.

A moment later, water started pouring in, filling it up. I looked up and saw it was the same boy, pouring water from his bottle into my bowl. Now a slight smile on his face showed kindness. For a while, he watched me, then checked to see if the bowl was full. Once it was, he went back to the bench and sat down.

I started drinking the water. After quenching my thirst, I turned back toward the bushes. As I limped past him again, he was carefully collecting the glass pieces and piling them on the bench so they wouldn't pierce the feet of anyone walking by.

While passing through him, he asked softly, almost sadly, "Do you want some food?"

I hesitated, unsure how to respond. Then he pulled out some cookies from a packet and showed them to me. I slowly moved towards him. Seeing my reaction, he said, "I knew you wouldn't understand my words, but you sure understand these cookies."

With that, he placed them on the ground, and I started eating.

"It's so peaceful here," he added.

I listened to him while eating, but his words didn't mean much to me. My body was still tired and sore, and all I wanted was to rest in my hole. I quickly finished the food and limped towards my spot.

The boy watched me limp with a mix of surprise and pity. When I reached the bushes, I saw him scratching shapes onto a nearby tree trunk with something sharp, completely absorbed. After glancing at his drawings for a bit, I curled up in my hole and fell asleep.

A while later, soft, pained sobs woke me up, making my ears perk. What now? I thought, annoyed, opening my sleepy eyes. The boy was quietly whimpering again. What's his problem? Why is he still here when everyone else is at home? Why hasn't he left?

I stepped out of the bushes. When he saw me, he went silent. After a moment, he held out some cookies to lure me closer. Honestly, he could've called me without that bribe. I felt no danger, so I went to him. I ate the cookies and sat on the ground near the bench.

"How did you hurt your leg?" he asked. "Oh, I forgot—you don't understand human words."

That wasn't true. I do understand humans, as long as one is around, like this boy.

He looked at me for a bit, then went back to carving some shapes on the tree trunk. Humans have strange hobbies—they find 'art'—as they called it—anywhere they want. This boy might become an artist someday. My leg felt a little better, but the tail still hurt.

"Let's play a game!" he said excitedly. "It's called fetch. I've seen it in movies. The rules are simple."

He picked up a thin stick and said, "I'll throw it a little way, and you run to bring it back, okay? In return, I'll give you a cookie."

I understood the rules, but I sure wasn't going to run for it.

He threw the stick a short distance and looked at me with hopeful eyes. But I, confused and unsure, just sat there. Thinking I didn't understand, he made strange gestures to explain, waving cookies to tempt me. How could I tell him the problem was something else?

After several tries, he shouted, cried, and gritted his teeth, saying, "Everyone's selfish! No one wants to play with me. I'm the worst!" He started cursing himself, tears streaming down. When that wasn't enough, he started slapping himself incessantly, sobbing and calling himself names.

I couldn't stay still anymore. I couldn't run, but I limped over, gently picked up the stick in my mouth, and placed it on the bench in front of him. His crying softened a bit, and as promised, he gave me a cookie.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know you don't understand my words, but maybe you feel my sadness. I'm not mad at you. I've had some experiences that have shaped me in this way. Even though you won't understand, I want to share some things. My mom says it makes the heart lighter."

He then began speaking...

"I used to have lots of friends. Every evening, we'd come to this garden to play. One day, I suddenly got a sharp pain in my stomach, and it started swelling. It happened often. When I stayed hungry, I felt fine, but if I ate a full meal, I'd vomit, and the pain and swelling would

start again. The doctor said I had a bowel obstruction. The part connecting my small and large intestines was getting narrower, making it hard for food to pass. Because of this, I couldn't digest solid food and had to rely on liquids. I became weak and frail. For six months, I took medicines and followed a strict diet. That's why I stopped playing or meeting friends. Every day, I ate tasteless porridge, watery lentils, and other bland things. I couldn't eat what I wanted and had to stay home. No festivals or celebrations happened at our house and everyone just prayed for my health.

Slowly, those painful days passed, and I started getting better. I began eating solid food little by little, and I felt stronger and more energetic. My face started to glow again and I was gaining weight. Everything was improving, and my mother had promised me that today she would cook and feed me my favorite dish. I was happily eating and went to the balcony. But what I saw brought back clouds of sadness. In those six months, so much had changed. My friends had made new friends whom I didn't know. They all went out to play cricket often—oh, how happy they always were! They looked like they didn't need anything—or anyone, not even me... One of them glanced at me but then turned away. Why? Will they never fall prey to any disease in the future or haven't suffered from the same in the past? Feeling hurt, I came here and found you. Maybe you're alone too, with no friends. I have a proposition—Why don't we become each other's friends?"

I couldn't believe someone wanted me as a friend. And suddenly all my pain seemed to vanish. He stood up and carved more shapes on the tree trunk.

"Let's play some more!"

This time, I ran fast, fetching the stick with excitement.

A new energy—friendship—surged through me. We played other games too. Sometimes he'd hide cookies, and I'd find them. Other times, we raced each other. I'd never felt so happy or full of life before. We were both exhausted and sat on the bench, resting and eating cookies.

"My friends left me without saying goodbye," he said, "but I promise I'll never do that to you. We'll always be together. I'll come to play with you every day."

I wagged my tail in agreement. We were so tired that we fell asleep right there on the bench.

A little later, when I woke up, I pictured us running, falling, and laughing together, everything feeling perfect. It was like a dream. But was it? To check, I looked at my friend beside me—but... no one was there.

Was it all a dream? No, the cookie packet was still on the bench, and the stick was there too. I searched the whole garden, every corner, every spot. He was nowhere. He'd promised he'd never leave without saying goodbye. He gave me his word.

New shapes had appeared on the tree trunk, ones that weren't there before I fell asleep. After

the last shape, he'd stuck the sharp object into the trunk. But where did he go? It wasn't even evening yet. Everything except my thoughts had gone still. The joyful atmosphere we'd created together was now completely gone.

Evening was settling in, welcoming the night by scattering stars throughout her path in the sky as the day faded. When my thoughts began to quiet, the peace turned into silence. The winds were turning cold again. After the darkness in my heart, the environment around me was growing dim too. The sharp, chilly gusts scattered the glass pieces he had carefully piled on the bench, spreading them all around. Dry leaves began to swirl in the wind again.

Will he come back tomorrow? He said he'd come every day, that we'd play together... Has he gone forever? But he didn't say goodbye, so that means he'll return. That certainly means he'll return, and I'll wait for him.

After that day, the boy never returned to the garden. Due to a lack of proper care, poor food, and the harsh, hot weather, the little animal waited and waited, dying within three or four weeks. On that tree trunk, the shapes the boy carved are still there, and the sharp object remains stuck after the final shape. Until now, no one had noticed those carvings. After a long trip to Kolkata, Mr. Ray returned to his residence and came to this garden. Today, he coincidentally sat on the same bench where that incident happened months ago. As he settled to rest, his eyes fell on the shapes carved on the nearby trunk. To a conscious mind, they were no longer just shapes—they had become words. Mr. Ray began to read them—

Who is a friend?
Thou art — I know.
Who is the love?
Thou art — I know.
But...
Doth it endure,
Till the dark eyes do grow?
And then...
We shall meet upon the canvas,
“But I am painted blank,” it always sighed.
GoodBye, my friend—
Thy death hath died.

