

With My Little Eyes

Tarun Kanti Mishra

: I spy, with my little eyes...something that begins with a 'D'.

: Is it a Doll?

: No.

: Is it a Door?

: No.

: Is it a Dressing Table?

: No.

: Is it a Dog?

: I can't see a dog in this room.

: Then what is it?

The little girl closed her eyes slowly; her eyelids heavy and tired. Her tiny lips trembled like the quivering petals of a withered flower in a light breeze.

She opened her eyes and looked around. The plastic coated walls, indifferently swaying curtains on the window, dry magnolia branches and the dull sky beyond, the carpet with enigmatic design, a schoolbag, and medicines arrayed on the bedside table.

She had already taken her quota of medicine, before breakfast and after. Maybe, she had now to take yet another pill after a cup of milk. The rest could wait till dinner.

She felt uneasy; somewhere inside a disquieting restlessness was bothering her. She took a deep breath.

A draught of breeze suddenly brought life to the pages of the 'Mathemagics' book peeping out of her dusty schoolbag. They fluttered for a while and then fell motionless like the wings of an injured bird.

: Then what is it?

The boy sitting at the foot of the bed enquired. Not really a boy, a seventeen year old young man.

: It is a dream. She said, without looking at him.

The girl had her eyes fixed at the sky dotted with grey clouds.

: Dream?

: Yeah, it begins with a D.

She closed her eyes again. A few lines appeared on her delicate brow, like the footprints of a beautiful dream, shattered by a sudden jolt.

The young man said nothing. His searching eyes swept across the room, then settled softly on the girl.

: Shall we have Horlicks now, Seema?

Her pale face looked pathetic, as if she was offered a cup of bitter poison. She did not speak, only the hint of a quiver appeared on her lips.

: What is the time now? She enquired after a while.

The young man glanced at the wall clock and then checked his wrist watch.

: Eleven twenty five.

The girl stared at the wall clock, as if trying to figure out a difficult sum.

: But the clock says it is a quarter past eleven!

The youth had already noticed it.

: Well, my watch says eleven twenty five; but it runs ten minutes fast, always.

: Why? Why do that? Is there any point looking at a watch that gives you incorrect time?

The young man fumbled for an answer. He mumbled something vaguely.

: Which means you cheat yourself all the time. Right?

The young man was silent. In search of an answer.

: Oh it is fun cheating oneself! Exclaimed the girl, as if disclosing a great mystery.

: Sometimes I do the same thing. Try to cheat myself! ...get caught at times, not always though!

: Get caught? By whom?

: By myself! Who else? I'll tell you how. I manage to split myself into two - me and *she*. Both of us start playing clever games, one trying to outdo the other. It's very interesting, you know!

The faint whirr of an overhead aeroplane found its way into the room. The child stopped talking and looked out at the sky, trying to catch a glimpse of the 'plane. The heavy curtains, trees and cloud blocked her view.

The noise melted away, like an ice cube dissolving in a bowl of water.

: Do I get the Horlicks now, Seema?

The little girl pressed her forehead with both hands and let out a sigh.

: Are you okay, Seema?

He sounded worried. The girl did not answer.

: You seem to be in pain. Can I help you?

She was silent again.

: Please do have your cup of Horlicks and take your pill. I'm sure it will make you feel so much better.

Before she could reply, the phone rang in the other room.

: That's mama! Tell her I'm asleep.' She said still pressing her palms to her forehead.

The girl closed her eyes. The youth tiptoed to the other room.

: Alok!

A woman's voice echoed from the other end of the line.

: Yes Aunty, Alok here.

: Is Seema asleep?

From the corner of his eyes Alok could see Seema. He said nothing.

His silence was meaningful.

: Give her a calmpose along with cardioxine. Has she had her Horlicks yet?

: She'll have it just now Aunty.

: Did you collect the report from the Pathlab? What does it say?' He enquired after a moment's silence.

A weary sigh answered him from the other end. The receiver felt cold to his fingers.

: Alok, I have packed lunch for you in the hotcase. Don't forget to have it, please...

: Don't worry, Aunty, I'll take care of myself. Shall I expect you before evening, Aunty?

: I hope so. I will try... There is so much work to be done before I leave, I can't really tell...

The line snapped; probably she was calling on a mobile.

The young man waited for a minute; then he came back to the girl.

She was trying to go to sleep, her forearm covering her eyes.

: Seema!

The telephone rang again.

Eyes closed, Seema whispered: Dad's phone. Tell him I'm in the washroom.

: Surely not your dad's. It must be two o'clock at night out there.

The youth went out to receive the call. It was the same voice again.

: Alok, please have your lunch early. I forgot to tell you, there is ice cream in the freezer.

: I am very comfortable, Aunty. Please do not bother yourself about me.

The voice at the other end sounded faint and weary.

: I know, Alok, I am giving you so much trouble. Your entrance exams are drawing close and there is so much to study. I am helpless, I just don't know what to do!

: What ice cream have you got for me today, Aunty? Vanilla? Butterscotch? I shan't be having vanilla, for sure.

Aunty gave out a faint laugh. 'We have butterscotch today, Alok. You can take the extra block for the kids when you leave for home in the evening.'

: Did you receive any reply to your application? For grant of leave, I mean.

: They refused. I think I have to resign. But I need money you know...for Seema.

She wanted to say more, but was interrupted by another phone call. 'I'll call later' she said and hung up.

Alok went up to the girl.

: Yesterday night I saw daddy in a dream. He had grown so old. His hair was all white, just like Santa Claus'.

: That means you had also grown up, too. I'm sure you had become a famous Professor or maybe Vice President of a big multinational company.

: No, I had not grown up at all. I was just like myself now. Only I did not walk. I was simply floating everywhere...

: Really? Then maybe you can teach me how to float.

In fact, Seema had taught Alok quite a few things. Come je come, nursery rhymes, Tick-tack-toe, even a mini magic show with cards. But she was strangely reluctant to talk anything more about the 'floating' of her dream. Her melancholy eyes drifted out of the window to the magnolia tree and beyond, far away.

The girl probably knew or maybe did not know that her dad was not coming now. Maybe he would never come...

They were talking to their respective solicitors. Only submission of the papers to the court was pending.

: I think I shall go to the washroom.

The youth walked up to her and gently offered his hand to help her get up.

But the girl was motionless on the bed. Closing her eyes, she was breathing heavily. Restless, she turned her head towards the window.

: Not now. After a while, I think.

The youth returned to the chair.

: How about watching Cartoon Network? We can see Tom and Jerry up to their usual pranks.

: No.

: Perhaps you would like to listen to the new cassette Mama got for you - *Yeh Mera India*.

: I don't want to hear that old song. It's no good.

After a moment's thought she added, 'I love that song *Breathless* by Shankar Mahadevan. It's marvellous! You know he goes on singing for full three minutes and 15 seconds without breath? Well, I was taking time on the watch.'

: Shall we listen to that now?

: Not now.

She became pensive and quiet.

: You know, I can never sing like that. My lungs would burst halfway down the song.

She stared vacantly all round the room. The portraits on the wall, the heavy window curtains, the dull sky and the blazing midday sun.

The young man was watching the girl, a soft and tender look in his eyes.

: Seema, what are you looking at?

: Shall I tell you? I would love to, but I don't think you would be able to see what I can see...

She beamed suddenly, and before Alok could find an answer to what she just said, sang out playfully:

I spy, with my little eyes!

The youth was startled at this sudden change in the child's demeanour. He cheerfully continued the game.

: Something beginning with...?

: Beginning with a D.

: Is it a dream?

: No.

: Is it a door?

: No.

: Is it a drawing?

: No.

: Is it the dimple on your cheek?

: I can't see my face.

The young man paused for a moment. He looked around the room.

: Then what is it?

: It is death. It begins with a D.

The soft lips of the little girl looked like the petals of a wilting rose. Almost motionless.

(Translation : Sunanda Mishra)