

## THE TOUCH

By the time I had arrived, Dad was lying on a cot facing the wall. I left the slippers at the doorway before entering, but I heard no sound of my arrival. I neared the cot and whispered, "Are you resting?"

"Who's there?" He turned around and saw me.

"Come, and sit here," he said, his body still stretched out on the bed. I drew a chair and was about to sit on it when I heard him say, "Why are you so far away? Come over here." He rose, sat on the bed, and tapped on it inviting me to move closer.

I rose and sat on the cot's rim.

Dad groped my back with his and slid his body sideways on the bed, saying, "You may now sit down."

I moved a little further away and cleared my throat.

He fumbled around, clutched my hand and held it between his two hands, saying, "I have been looking for you every day; how is everybody?"

"Fine," I heaved, gently.

He became silent and continued to stroke my hand.

This happened a long time ago; I was then young and Dad and I were riding on an auto. The seats were wide and comfortable, but I remember I was leaning toward one side.

"Be careful," Dad warned me. "Sit straight, or you will fall down."

I inched closer, still feeling shy.

I remember how, starting from the moment, I was initiated into a ritual to begin my formal education. I had grown up under Dad's strict compliance; he commanded with those wary eyes and scared me with his formidable solitude; he always seemed remote – either while addressing me face to face or helping with my home work. The fear was so pervasive I hardly had the nerve to learn anything from him. I cowered in his presence - as if I was always looking at him in forbiddingly ceremonially pure clothes. How could I now, all of a sudden, cling to him?

What do dads normally do when their children return from school? They would cheerfully receive them, make fond enquiries about their school day and answer, patiently - this or that question –all with only one aim: to make the children feel their dads' company as fun and enjoyable; what happens when a father demands to know, in his grumpy voice (as soon as the child is at the doorway): "What's your math score?" or 'Did you bring your mark sheet today'? The children would be frightened as if to death; that's how I lived – constantly dreading Dad's encounters for twenty years; that fear hasn't completely vanished.

Dad is now past eighty; his age didn't do him much favor when he had an eye operation. He is generally in good health but his

acute eye problem took a heavy toll on his physical condition; he has been bed-ridden for the last two years.

My mother-in-law – living in this town - has recently taken ill - so my husband and I have come here to give her company. Luckily I am also able to visit my parents; every time I come here I would spend talking with Father for half an hour.

It has been always my childhood dream to have Dad hug and invite me into his inviting arms; now that he's actually holding my hand, there's a revival of those poignant moments when I had, desperately, sought Dad's touch. Now my eyes turn teary and I feel my voice choked. Could Dad have ever known that I was pining for him to hold me close?

We both have been corresponding with one another but, I am afraid, all that warmth and adoration exchanged in those dispatches suddenly evaporated under the dazzle of Dad's majestic posture, the fierce eyes constantly scrutinizing me. Soon I learnt to stop looking at those intense eyes – like the sun's rays blinding one's steady look. Now, I am fully aware those lights are dimmed, still why can't I bring myself to recognize them for what they are?

During the earlier times when I visited him – awkwardly perched on the cot's rim – I noticed a few bed bugs crawling over it. I threw a couple under my foot and crushed them.

Afterward, my husband noticed a bed bug at our home and went wild asking me how it happened. I told him maybe that bug had entered my sari when I was sitting close to Dad. The next time I

headed to see Dad my husband told me I should keep myself at a safe distance from Dad.

That day, when I drew the chair away, Dad insisted that I come closer and sit beside him. How could I refuse? He was not satisfied till I complied and sat just as he wished – with my hand touching his

Dad had always wanted sons but ended up with us – daughters. There was an heir – a tall fellow, the only son – but he had a premature death. That was Fate! I dreaded standing in front of Dad - as if I had committed some heinous crime- and retraced a few steps back. I wanted to hold him under my arm and raise his spirits with the words, “Daddy, don't cry; I am here!” But I was afraid even to touch him; that's how I had been reared.

One day, following my chit-chat with Dad, I was asked to trim his nails – in hands and feet. Mother was never accustomed to such an undertaking, and brother was out of question; the nephews might have helped but no one was immediately available. Sister-in-law could have handled it but she wanted me to do it – maybe she thought I must do her bidding. I took my task very seriously – like a badge of honor - and trimmed the nails to my satisfaction.

Something must have distressed Dad because he said even as he went on stroking my hand, “I wish you would come to live in this town; then I could come and live with you.” I looked at him helplessly – fully aware he wouldn't know what lay behind it; none of my words would ever assure him.

Afterward he became silent and sat there on the cot stroking my hand. It was the moment when I thought all my privileges – education and job – were only adolescent fads. I sat there for some more time and then took leave of him.

Dad's touch continued to haunt me all the way home in the auto. The eyes, swelling with tears, obscured the whole path ahead of me.

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(Original title: *Sparsa*)