The Intruder

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Abstract
Leave me alone,' Ravin said and rushed out of the house. He did not know where he was going nor what he could do to calm down. He found himself at the Beira Lake, he stopped, and sat down at the water’s edge. He could not think coherently. He sat staring at the water, at the distorted reflections of light in it.
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‘Leave me alone,’ Ravin said and rushed out of the house. He did not know where he was going nor what he could do to calm down. He found himself at the Beira Lake, he stopped, and sat down at the water’s edge. He could not think coherently. He sat staring at the water, at the distorted reflections of light in it.

His mind flashed to the scene that had just taken place in his house. He despised his mother. ‘Please try to understand,’ she had pleaded with him, her eyes raised to his, sorrowfully.

‘I am very lonely and I am still a young woman. You are out with your friends all evening, and sometimes I must talk and laugh with someone. I did not mean to get involved in a love affair. It is not that I have forgotten your father, it’s just that I can’t bear this loneliness anymore.’

He flushed angrily. He felt ashamed that his mother could speak in this manner. A young woman, she had said. How could she make such lame excuses? Why couldn’t his mother be more like Sudu Nanda? Sudu Nanda was a widow too. But how pious she was, unfailingly dressed in white, so wholeheartedly involved in temple activities and meditations. He wished impetuously that he was old enough to be independent of his mother, and of that parasite who lurked in the house that had been his father’s. And just four years since his death too.

He was very cold and very lonely. There was a great emptiness in him, a void, as if his mother too, like his father, had died suddenly. He shook his head in denial. But she had always been there – whenever he had turned to her. Like when he had sobbed at her breast, missing his father after the funeral and she had held him tightly and stroked his hair, until he moved away comforted. Like the pride in her eyes when he had brought home his examination results. But he supposed now that he had never really been enough. He felt cheated. Betrayed. She did not belong any more to him. If only his father was alive, he wished passionately – if only. But no, he needed no one. At seventeen years one was no longer a child but an adult. He would get used to this change too, just as he had got used to living without his father. He would go abroad, he thought. His mother would be free of him then, he would be in the way anyway when she got married. And Nihal would not wish to be burdened with a stepson. It became darker, there was a chill in the air, lights trembled in
the water. He did not want to go home. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Homes got broken up anyway, he thought, when children grew up, they moved away someday.

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She stood by the window waiting. How many nights had she waited thus, until her son came home? How many sleepless nights had she spent thinking of him, worrying about him, wondering all the time if she was bringing him up right, planning his future with so much care? Trying to be both mother and father to him? And now she knew that she had failed. She felt defeated. What love had she, that was greater than the love she nurtured for her son? But now there was Nihal. She wished she could be angry with her son. Anger would be easier to endure than this hurt she felt, this feeling that something infinitely precious to her, had been destroyed.

Was it really her child who had looked at her with so much hatred smouldering in his eyes, who had spoken to her with such scorn?

‘All my friends are laughing at me, why did you not tell me? Why did you let me find out from them?’

Would it have been easier, she wondered miserably, if she had explained to him? Still, Nihal had not as yet discussed marriage. So what was there to tell him? She knew it would come to that, of course. And then this problem would have had to be faced anyway. Susil, she sighed, why were you taken away from us, you kept us all so safe, so happy together. But she must find her son, she could not stop worrying, he was so young. Where had he gone? She felt helpless. Perhaps if Nihal himself could speak to him and explain...

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Nihal placed an awkward hand on the boy’s shoulder. He saw the tears in the confused eyes. The wet cheeks. He sat down next to him and cleared his throat. What am I doing here, he asked himself wryly, what have I to say to this boy, who accuses his mother of destroying his illusions?

‘I have come to take you home,’ he said. ‘Your mother is very worried about you, she asked me to look for you.’

‘Just leave me alone, will you, I can look after myself.’

Ravin’s voice rose boyishly, hysterically, he made as though to stand up but found it required too much effort and remained angrily silent.

There was a suffering about the youthful face that smote Nihal. We have wronged him, he thought.

‘Listen Ravin,’ he said, ‘you are behaving like a child. I am sorry for all this, we never meant to hurt you, your mother and I. Someday you will understand, someday your mother will explain it all to you.’
But what other explanation was necessary? Something snapped in Ravin. Desolately he watched as his childhood passed away before him. He heard cars rushing past behind them - all going somewhere. People walked by, carrying flowers to offer at the island shrine in the lake.

‘She could, at least, have told me,’ he sobbed.

He is so confused, Nihal thought, he understands nothing. What difference could it have made had he known earlier?

‘She wanted to tell you many times, Ravin, it was I who persuaded her not to. Because, actually there was nothing to tell. Perhaps if we were planning to marry, if there was some future in this... affair, then she would have told you.’ He realized that his words rang hollow. He felt burdened with an unnecessary problem. He owed nothing to this boy. What need was there then - for explanations or excuses? She had walked into this with her eyes open, he had not forced himself on her. He felt irritated, slightly bored even.

‘You mean, you have no intention of marrying my mother?’ Ravin whispered.

‘But she told me... I understood...’

His voice trailed away. He stared at Nihal in disbelief. But she actually believed that he would marry her. How would she take it? There had been such hidden hope in her eyes as she had said to him – ‘Surely there is room in this house for you and for Nihal’ that he had felt excluded. And now she would be heartbroken. He was filled suddenly with an overwhelming pity for his mother. I must go to her, he thought.

‘Does she know that you will not marry her?’ he asked Nihal, feeling adult suddenly, and very mature.

‘I don’t know whether she knows, we never discussed it really.’

In that instant Nihal knew that it was over. She was demanding now from their relationship, more than he was able to give to it. She was making too much of an interlude, his thoughts continued, of an unguarded moment. He shrugged. It had been for him, from the beginning, only an escape from boredom, really. It was she who had believed in love.

‘So, go home to your mother.’ Nihal stood up. ‘She needs you. You have always come first with her. She needed me just for a while, really. It is you - you are her life. Don’t judge her too harshly. She is not only your mother, she is also a woman. Say goodbye to her for me.’

He wished now, only to escape from this too serious responsibility. He must get away, he was thinking, before he got involved too deeply to pull away. He wanted to be alone, to plan his tomorrows. He had never been anything but an independent man.

Ravin walked with him to the car.

‘Nihal,’ he said defensively. ‘I am sure my mother would never have married you, even if you had wanted to. You could never measure up to what my father was.’

Well, thought Nihal, amused, let him keep his dreams.
'Yes,' he said kindly, 'Yes I know. So try to forgive her and go home—it is very late.'

He drove away. Ravin stood watching the vanishing car. He did not know if it was a deep relief that was growing in him, or sorrow or understanding. His face set into lines of resignation and the beginnings of maturity. He felt an immeasurable sadness for his mother. He hoped she would not be too grief-stricken. He began to walk, slowly at first and then faster and faster towards his house.