Song Without End

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Abstract
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Finally, Room Number 12, the last in the row of private wards, and Dr. Mehta’s favourite.

The patient sat up in bed. ‘May I borrow your spirit, doctor?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘What I mean is—may I borrow some doctors’ spirit from you?’

Dr. Mehta couldn’t help laughing. ‘What d’you need it for?’

‘Oh, just as a cleaning fluid. See this record of mine?’ He reached out a hand and lifted a worn-out LP from the bedside table. ‘It’s got a lot of dust in its grooves. I’m trying to clean it up.’

*Song Without End*—read the doctor on the sleeve of the record.

‘In fact,’ confessed the patient gleefully, ‘I even went down to Civil Lines, looking for some record cleaning solution and a new needle for my old stereo. Couldn’t find either. Obsolete gadgetry, I was told.’

Dr. Mehta’s face grew stern. ‘You left the hospital?’

‘Yes. In defiance of all your commands.’ The patient grinned.

‘Damn you, Narendra! Who gave you permission to leave this ward and go hobnobbing about the town?’ demanded Dr. Mehta, wrathful.

The patient knew just how far he could stretch the bonds of old friendship. ‘I don’t need anyone’s permission once I’ve set my heart on something.’

All the interns were having trouble keeping a straight face. These little exchanges every morning and evening enlivened the rounds. But Dr. Mehta was not amused.

‘I see,’ he said drily. ‘And how exactly did you go on this ... excursion?’

‘I walked.’

‘Walked! And however did you negotiate the traffic? You aren’t even steady on your feet yet.’

‘Easy. I had my stick. I even thought of fixing a large L on my back.’

Here everyone burst out laughing, Dr. Mehta too. And when the merriment subsided, Dr. Mehta marshalled all the severity at his command. ‘You’re not to repeat this sort of thing!’

‘Why not?’

And the doctor answered with his patent cardiologists’ quip: ‘The heart has its reasons.’ Then he said more earnestly, ‘Look, Narendra. You’re on the wrong side of sixty. The finest case of Mitral Stenosis in recent
Song Without End

months. I’m not too happy with that last valvotomy we did on you. Looks like the enlargement of the diameter isn’t all it should be. I’ve been wondering whether ... Anyway, I’ll let you know what we’ve decided in a day or two. Meanwhile, do curb your excesses. Listen to your music, read your books, but just take it easy.’

‘Hish! You’re like a nagging wife, Mehta,’ protested the patient.
And as the doctor turned to go the patient called after him, ‘Don’t forget the spirit, Mehta!’

‘I shan’t,’ called back the doctor. The juniors knew that their chief always left this particular ward cheered.
The next morning Dr. Mehta found the patient tinkering with an ancient contraption on the table.
‘What’s this?’ he asked. ‘Why, an old turntable record player! Battery operated?’

‘That’s right,’ said the patient. ‘I sent for it – and a batch of my old records.’

‘Ah,’ remembered the doctor, rummaging in his pocket. ‘That’s the spirit, man.’ He handed over the bottle of spirit.

‘Thanks,’ said the patient. ‘Now I can get the old things turning smoothly again.’

‘But what an old ruin!’ exclaimed Dr. Mehta, examining the record player. ‘I had one of these about thirty years ago. D’you mean to say it actually works?’

‘Occasionally. Let me get my records polished and I’ll play them for you. Do you have any time to spare today?’
The doctor reflected. ‘I can manage a quarter of an hour, maybe.’

‘Good, I’ll have my Mozarts all cleaned up in an hour.’

‘See you at one-thirty then,’ said Dr. Mehta. There was something disturbing that he had to break to this patient. Tactfully. Nothing like doing it gently, with a bit of music playing.

‘And how about a glass of juice out of the old flask, Mehta?’ offered the patient when the doctor appeared at 1.30. ‘It isn’t infected.’

‘I hope it is,’ smiled Dr. Mehta.

‘Eh?’ The patient looked puzzled.

‘With your special vitality virus,’ complimented the doctor, settling down. ‘What’s this now?’
The patient selected a record out of the dozen strewn on his bed. ‘This, my dear Mehta, is the Turkish Concerto.’

‘Oh, oh!’ mocked the doctor affectionately.
The old turntable creaked into motion. It swung its shining black weight in unsteady, wobbling circuits and a breath of music fluttered into the room. Little trinkets of melody went reeling on the floor. Whimsical phrases of tune somersaulted up to the windows. The patient closed his eyes, enthralled. And when the disc swirled to a final stop, he opened his eyes and said slowly, ‘D’you know, Mehta, I once went all the way to
Vienna to stand by this man’s grave for a moment. Yes. It was in a remote cemetery called the Beidermeyer cemetery of St Marx. A slow-flaming Austrian autumn, all the leaves glinting in a slanting gold drizzle, a lotion of sun tipped over the boughs. The air like a fine membrane, cracking like unfolding cellophane as one walked through it, looking for that grave. A large, lonely cemetery, entirely baroque, with cherubs and angels leaning over mildewed crosses – cast iron benches – shaded avenues smoking in a sifted dust of light. And that particular grave – a pillar with his name on it – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – in a small bed of flowers. And all round it, under the branches, such an inlay of faint sparkles on the ground. I thought I had to say something to him but I felt such a fool. So all I said was: I’ve known your music for years. I’ve loved it. Thank you. I even visited his home. 5 Domgasse was the address; and the name of the house, Figarohaus. A house with an ordinary enough approach through two arching doors up a narrow stone staircase and then a polished door with that name again. Into a beautiful inner lobby with pink frescoed walls. And in large glass cases his work, scribbled on yellowed sheets in his own hand. A small, slanting, elemental code. It was funny, coming straight from the grave of an absent man to the physical presence of his work. I thought: Here’s the music he composed, and there lies the hand that wrote it all – decomposed ...

It was at this instant that Mehta thought fit to pull his patient’s leg with a teasing interruption.

‘Good God!’ he breathed in gentle malice. ‘But what a wretched poet you are!’

The patient looked immediately abashed. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘No poet – but I do get carried away at times. Did you like this piece? It’s my favourite.’

‘Very much indeed,’ said the doctor. ‘But I do wish you’d change this old record player of yours. Get a better music system, a CD player, maybe.’

His companion was incensed. ‘Whatever for?’ he demanded. ‘I’ve been getting this one repaired for years whenever it breaks down. It isn’t going to change the notation, is it?’

‘No, but a superior music system shall make the same notation shine through better. Like a healthy body ...’

‘Rubbish!’ dismissed the patient. ‘I can’t discard my obsolete old frame, can I? I keep getting my valves repaired and the old heart keeps pumping pretty well.’

The doctor was amused. ‘That’s what I am, am I? A mechanic?’

‘Exactly. But the other day I tried cleaning up Song Without End – that was a film about Liszt – with a nasty acid powder recommended to me by a friend. It ruined it, erased the music entirely. Makes you humble, doctor, to remember how all that magic is contained by a physical object after all. And when it’s damaged ...’
‘But other cassettes continue playing the same music, you know.’
‘That’s some comfort. And the notation’s all written down somewhere.’

‘In our genes, who knows!’
The patient took a long quaff of juice and pulled the doctor’s leg. ‘You and your wretched medical textbook mind, Mehta!’

And the doctor laughed, enjoying himself, and retorted, ‘You and your wretched decadent European mind, Narendra! What’re you doing here anyway? In India’s sprawling cow belt?’

‘Nonsense, it was a cow belt when the Aryans came down and spoke to sun and rain and wind. It remains a cow belt still. Rather more reliably pastoral. Along with the cows and buffaloes in the streets, the men and women look bovine too!’

The doctor held his sides and roared with laughter.

‘No, honest.’ The patient wiped away the tears of merriment from his glasses. ‘I feel quite at home. Quite an Orpheus, in fact.’

‘Good. Strum your lyre while Rome burns, man. What was that fellow’s name now? Orpheus, wasn’t it?’

‘Your ignorance, Mehta, is quite shockingly abysmal! That was Nero. Cardiological theory has undermined your cultural quality. Well, well, well. Look at me. A retired teacher. Financially low class, culturally high class. On the whole I flatter myself. I insist it’s better than being financially high class and culturally low class.’

Never in this hospital had Dr. Mehta laughed with a patient more. ‘What a snob you are, Narendra!’ he exclaimed.

‘Oh, absolutely. Not that I’m above middle class and middle brow conversation, Mehta. Drink up now. What’s it to be? Politics? Films? Are you for Bikram Singh or against him and his party?’

‘He’s dicey.’

‘So what? He’s a fine candidate. Not distinguished for any excellence but not remarkable for any vice, which, you’ll grant, is the right chemistry now for a tolerable candidate.’

Suddenly Dr. Mehta looked at his watch. ‘Good heavens!’ he cried. ‘It’s past 2.30! I must be off. Thanks for the juice. Oh yes, before I go – we’ve decided to operate on Friday – 8 a.m. Let’s try giving you a synthetic valve this time. It’s your third operation, you know, so …’

The patient had tensed. Dr. Mehta rose to his feet and said softly in an altered tone, ‘Not to worry, Narendra. Leave this third operation to me. I’ll see you through. We’ll have you – how d’you put it? – fit as a fiddle.’

He gave the patient’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. For a long moment neither spoke. Then, the old roguish grin returned and the patient asked playfully, ‘Are fiddles fit, Mehta?’

And Dr. Mehta grinned back, relieved, and asked, ‘Medically or musically?’

They laughed. The patient shrugged. ‘Who cares’, he whispered. ‘Not
Operations are your line. Opera’s mine.’

‘Both, my dear man, need a theatre!’ remarked Dr. Mehta. At the door he paused, embarrassed by his own emotion. ‘Remember what I said, Narendra. Friday. 8 a.m.. I’ll see you through with this.’

It happened that night. They tried hard at the hospital to keep the news from him but such things cannot be hidden. The hospital went into deep mourning for a day. It was in silence that he learnt that Dr. Mehta had died of a sudden heart failure.

It was in silence too that he received the news that he was now to be operated on by the young Dr Venkat Rao, no less a surgeon nor a man.

And it was in silence that he was wheeled on his hospital trolley to the Pre-Operation room, seven o’clock on Friday morning. All he heard, lying on his back, was the trundle of the wheels on the uneven floor. ‘Tumbrils!’ he thought absurdly, and stopped in amazement as a little click sounded in the interiors of his brain and a familiar voice scoffed, ‘Tumbrils! This wretched, decadent European mind of yours!’ It was of course his own mind, he told himself, playing out its accustomed circuits of preserved tones.

The solemn light came on. The masked faces gathered round him in a gentle, radiant hush. The anaesthesia awoke him slowly into sleep and his far-flung mind resumed its several secret lives.

That was when they heard him quarrelling in a broken mutter. ‘What an astonishing old joker, really. Well, thanks very much for the pleasure ... of your company, Mehta.’

They did their best but he hadn’t a chance. The scribble of the electrocardiographic tracing on the cardiac monitor scripted the draft of his living continuity like the score of a wayward composer. He slipped away, still under anaesthesia, out of the dark, damaged grooves of his own recorded being and beyond their repair or recall.

None of them ever knew who it was who performed that operation. Or whether the patient recognized his surgeon. Or another like him who helped him across. Or when the operation ended and the audition began. They laid down their instruments and stood speechless in mute, orchestrated unison. The lit up theatre stayed still as theatres do, just for an instant, before the ovation explodes.