

Senorita

Subhrajit Samanta

Chapter One: The Butterfly

It was late afternoon in August. Sophie languished on a rocking chair. It was her favourite moment after a tiring day. She let herself go and thought of how she spent the day. Her chestnut hair fell in several folds. The sun was ruddy in the face. She was tired, done with her duties. The garden and the landscape were bathed with confusing colours of crimson and approaching indigo.

A butterfly was hopping on the window sill, trying to make up its mind. It alighted on a hibiscus, perching on a pot beside a pile of books.

‘Hi! A fig for your thoughts. Tell us what are you pondering on’.

‘Hello’, Sophie responded. ‘Nature has blessed you with purple and white tints. So dainty and cute. I was actually thinking of Dexter.’

‘Who is he?’

‘He is my fiancé’. Sophie explained.

‘Yes, I have seen him. He often hovered around you. Do you love him? Where is he now? I don’t see him here’. The butterfly gasped, after saying so much.

‘I was wrapped up in my thoughts’.

‘Dear Dexter, when I think of you, I get lost in time’, she said.

Sophie started writing.

‘Dear Dexter, it’s all about you. Believe me. I have no other person in mind. No one else. Men may come and go away, but you will always be with me forever’.

‘Dear me, don’t get lost all of a sudden. The butterfly asked ‘Now, now. Tell me about your Dexter. How did you meet him?’

‘Well. I came across Dexter at an evening party in Delhi, when we were both in our first years at St. Stephen’s College. I was attracted to him by his unusual take on different matters like career, love and family. Unlike me, he was not much good in studies. He did not get good grades. Classmates were quite taken aback on our opposing personalities. We never seemed to think alike.’

‘Yet his eccentricities mattered to me. If I liked cold coffee, he would opt for something hot. If I got good grades, he was never so serious in competing with me. He was nonchalant, bordering on insouciance. He was often hiking, travelling to remote, exotic locations. He could not study at a stretch. But if you invited him to camping, he was all set to follow’.

Sophie was not a saint by nature and yet she had a different perception of characters, who are found in ancient legends and myths. Kalidasa for instance, wrote extensively about the love affairs of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. She had even read a paper on the subtle dialogues between the natural and the human.

It was the first day in college after the second year at St. Stephen's. During the evening there was a coming-together of friends at a party where the sophomores and past students met together.

'You are blessed with a strange name. I guess you are Dexter', Sophie picked her words.

'Stunned! It's my luck to come across such a beauty.'

She grew ruddy in her face. Sophie was perspiring. Yet it was not so sultry.

'Now, don't misread. I am not so weak. I was in full control of my emotions. I was not so passionate but meeting Dexter did have an impact on my mind. Indeed, it was the moment. Also, it was his comment that wafted my equanimity.'

At this moment the butterfly winked at me, 'Did Dexter ever kiss you?'

Before I could answer, the sun dropped out of the horizon. The moon with her placid smile, entered my life. The evening was still.

Chapter Two: Morgan

Now, let me tell you about my life in Canada. I was a post-graduate student of Psychology in the final year at Hermes University. I love to write and have been published several times in journals and magazines. It's not that I have won many prizes. But readers in Canada have appreciated my portrayal of characters especially because I have placed them in-between the boundaries of the actual and the extramundane.

On December 17th Sophie was invited to attend a workshop on Criminal Psychology at Ontario. It was one of a kind held annually to acquaint the readers with new budding writers. She liked such literary events, and she was often escorted by her classmate, Morgan. He lived in Canada and was quite fond of her. He confessed that he was happy in her company.

In the workshop, she read a paper on Criminal Psychology along with Morgan. As she read out the relevant points, Morgan showed the accompanying slides. Just after the conference, she received a call from Dexter.

'I want you to return to India. My mom has been suffering for quite a long time. She wants me to get married and see me settled,' Dexter was insistent. His summons had an urgency.

'Do you remember our conversation at the Bistro grill. Please do make arrangements for return. I shall wait for your answer,' said Dexter.

Chapter 3: The Bistro Grill

The cafe, Bistro Grill was at the corner of fifth street at Campari. A fat, young boy was hanging out at the entrance to the café.

'Hey you, I want to get in. do you mind moving aside?'

‘Not at all Mister’, he shifted his butt to his left, leaving me a small space to squeeze inside.

‘Your girlfriend, I see.’ He gave me a wink.

Looking at Sophie, he shirked his shoulders. ‘Nice guy to fall in love with’, shuffling to his consort of friends in his out-sized shoes.

‘Let’s take the table at the corner. We can have a good view of the harbor,’ I said.

‘Toot’.

A schooner at the harbor sounded its fog horn before embarking. The smell of sea water, a slight fishy smell hovered at our nostrils. It blended with the aroma of coffee and pizzas.

The ambience was just endurable- kind of sultry as there was no air conditioning inside. But it was a place we both often frequented. We liked its aura, at once irking but soothing with an old-world charm.

Dexter and myself patronized this place as it were quite homely-a place where we ironed out our differences. Now, our thoughts often took opposite directions, much to my chagrin. Somehow, we didn’t. But, of course, we jelled out together in rare moments.

It was very much so in the months of March and April. Our government put us under house arrest due to the pandemic virus, COVID-19. Sans togetherness, we were deprived of periodic hang-outs. It was only in the later portion of May that we were permitted to wander out of our houses along with due protection.

As we huddled together, we had a lot to say and mull over. As I looked for the waitress, I saw a new colored post with a profile of a young girl. Under the figure was inscribed-

“Never go all the way. You have all the time in the world. Take care.”

The inscription hung heavy under the scenic beauty beyond the bay windows. A change of lifestyle to be sure. But we found the inscription a bit odd. We had so much to talk about.

Today, the topic on our table was how and in what respects do love situations become invasive.

‘Now’, I said, ‘How do you identify certain situations in love which might turn invasive?’

‘To that extent, I want to respond by reminding you that the sentiment of love is always volatile,’ Dexter quipped.

‘From the Hunchback of Notre Dame to Haruki Murakami, situations in love have never been stable,’ I added.

‘Moreover, it is indubitable that of all emotions, love is erratic and sometimes fluctuating. Remember what happened to the lead characters in Love Story or to the protagonists of IQ84 or The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle.’

I brought out a copy of Murakami’s IQ84. Flipping through the pages, I reached the end. I read out the passage that made me cry.

In the worlds of Aomame and Tengo, ‘the flow of time-and rules of reality-have been subtly altered’.

Since the novel blurs the distinction between the possible and unreal, linear and non-linear time, fiction and reality, fate and free will, any finality in love relations become untenable.

Smell of vanilla arrested our palates. We ordered a brief lunch, bordering on pizza and coffee.

‘Huh, figuratively, let us make ourselves an example. I don’t know or can never properly define how do I feel about you, I said.

‘Come on, Sophie. Do you deny that you love me? Then, why at all are we here’, asked Dexter.

‘Well, all I can say is that we like each other’s company. We find a lot of common topics between ourselves. We could talk the whole day. And then we could ask ourselves, let the evening come and go but let’s ask us do we love each other?’ Sophie questioned.

Question answered with another query, I interjected.

‘I don’t want to say what I want to say’, she became more mysterious.

‘Why? Do you love somebody? Then our locus standi has shifted.

‘Not love exactly, but crush is a better word’, She explained.

‘You didn’t tell me before that you had a paramour’.

‘Well, not exactly a lover. I was not that enamored of him. But we did spend some time together. He has a way with girls. He has a soft personality, a sort of enervating sense of surrender to the charms of another.’ Sophie suddenly stopped.

Dexter was not quite the man supposed to be. He was lost for an instance in a maze of speculation. A moment’s hesitation and he withdrew his hands from hers.

Short of answering, he caught on to an anecdote.

Up the far slope, she was almost lost at once in a host of trees. She was in an animated tête-à-tête with an athletic man, broad sculpted frame, wearing a light checkered suit, munching a sandwich. He was her. He was taller than me. Yet he was not quite the macho man, having an air of nonchalance, bordering on insouciance.

Sometime ago he was in an animated conversation with Sophie. From the distance which was great, from India to Ontario. I was peering through a telescope. I could watch each movement of limbs and perceptible gestures with a tremendous clarity and which was beyond my imagination.

My reverie broke as the waitress traipsed in with a tray of food. Aroma of pizzas, over which we faced each other. A couple was having sandwiches to our left. They were quite aged. Their togetherness has stood the test of time. On our right was an empty table with the words ‘reserved’ emblazoned on it. A lovely lavender was displayed on it.

Dexter looked at Sophie.

‘You seem to be far away. What is going on in your mind?’ Sophie asked.

Dexter smiled. But he was far away in person. His body was tense. Flickers of images crowded his mind on a Sunday afternoon. In his confused brain, he was at amiss to pinpoint any definite emotion. So passionate was he that his pulse raced more faster than the seconds ticking away. He suddenly laughed amidst a bevy of puzzling thoughts. He could not explain. It was a sheer suspension of ideas.

He stared at Sophie.

‘What’s going on, I say. Why are you chilling off suddenly? Did I say anything amiss?’

‘No, no, Sophie’, Dexter remarked. ‘There’s nothing wrong with me. Don’t fret. I won’t freeze. You are so close’.

Yet everything was terribly wrong. His ideas grew big within him. He couldn’t chain them to my conscious self. His self. A self which he adored. It was not any self. It was his poor self.

Dexter felt naked. He had a feeling that someone was tugging at his clothes. As if he was running in a tunnel. At one end of the tunnel stood Sophie, giggling and pouting. At the other end her boyfriend was lounging in a checkered suit. Now, now, what was his name.

He gestured to Sophie. ‘What was his name. I meant your companion at Ontario’?

‘Morgan’, she said. ‘He has made my stay at Hermes University tolerable. Due to my sterling performance I was hounded on by fellow classmates. There were several ploys to degrade me on and off. He trashed those attempts. Everyone listened to him as he was a local student. That was how we came close’.

‘Close? Was your contiguity a form of intimacy’?

‘Well, you are free to form your conclusions. But, to be fair, I never put him in your position,’ Sophie explained. ‘At least I was honest in my admission.’

‘Was it an admission or a confession?’

Now, let me show you some snaps to illustrate my track record of my contiguity, which you termed “intimacy”. I am so sad.

Saying thus, Sophie opened her iPhone and displayed the gallery of pictures at Montreal. Morgan acted as a sort of guide. “He showed me around the place,” she said.

Dexter glanced at pictures of herself and Morgan in the Insectarium, Planetarium and the Biodome. It was a lavish display of diverse array of plants over 75 hectares. I saw them in animated conversation.

To confess, I was not jealous but somehow the sight of two of them among petite tulips and gorgeous roses cast a shadow on my relations with Sophie. Frankly, I could not get over their closeness. Of course, I did not know what they said to each other’, observed Dexter.

‘My thoughts started converging and diverging. Sure, I was taking a bit too strong. It was not my absence, but their animated faces which imprinted a message on my mind forever. It was indelible’.

Dexter commented, ‘Tide of human discourse. So many faces to accost. So many hearts beating together’.

Sophie was furious. Her face became ruddy. She remained silent.

‘Insulting’, she commented.

She stood up all of a sudden and walked out of the café.

Dexter sat still. He did not get up and attempt to pacify her. He was cooped up in his own thoughts. His emotions violently rocked him. He was at a loss. He got up after sometime and left the café after paying the bill.

When he ventured outside, there was no sign of Sophie. He bent his head. He did not seek her. He refrained from calling her. An icy cold draft gripped his soul. He was clearly not himself at all.

Chapter Four: Volte-face

After the end of last semester, Sophie had a heartrending farewell on the last day on the premises of the university. With dim and tearful eyes, Morgan bade her farewell. He left a promise to visit her and her future husband in India. The next morning, she boarded an American airways flight to Gujarat.

It was a dulcet morning. The sky was overcast. The cab sped towards Montreal airport. Sophie was escorted by Morgan.

She had to check in at the instant she landed at the airport. Clutching her bags, she waved a dolorous goodbye to Morgan.

The air passage to Gujarat took more than ten hours. Exhausted, she could just make it to the immigration and thereafter she meandered outside where her father was waiting.

It was a hot day. But distant clouds huddled on the horizon. Her father was happy but Sophie's heart was heavy with foreboding. She could not pinpoint her sadness. Her heart felt heavy. It was likely that she was ensconced in her memories during the past two years. And there were always the helping hands of Morgan.

Her father was trying to say something but she shrugged off, saying that she wanted to be home right then.

As she were sitting in the comfort of her home, her father said, 'Dear, I have some news for you'.

'Whom does it concern. Is Dexter in the news. What has he done'? Sophie asked.

'But this news about Dexter is terrible,' her father added.

'Don't hesitate. Just tell me,' she said.

'Dexter passed away'.

'What did you say? Dexter is no more? But two weeks back I did talk to him over the phone. He also left a message for me in WhatsApp.' Sophie started crying inconsolably.

'What happened, father? Tell me the details. How did he die?' She asked.

'He was the victim of an accident on the National highway leading to the airport. He was driving his Jeep. The accident took place in the wee hours of night-around ten. Since there were very few people I on the highway at that time of night, he bled profusely and expired on the spot. He was grievously wounded by a Volvo bus, which lost control as he attempted to overtake it'. Her father reported.

Sophie ran to her room and closed the door.

Chapter Five: The Sequel

The next morning Sophie was sitting under the shade of a mango tree in the garden. She was flipping through a sheaf of newspaper cuttings, detailing the news and report of the carnage on the highway, which killed her fiancé. As she read the accounts one after another, she felt miserable.

She felt desiccated. She seemed to wither slowly in her innermost being. Paralyzed was the expression. As she glanced at the fragments of her life, she didn't know which pieces she should pick up. Wet with tears which poured like the rain, she was stunned.

'How can such a thing come to pass? How can human life be so vulnerable? Can human life be so cheap as to wither away without notice?'

Amidst her deepest sorrow, she suddenly noticed a butterfly hovering around her.

'Hi. You seem to be very sad! Do you remember me?' accosted the butterfly.

Sophie cast a desiccated look at the fragments of her life and turned to face the butterfly.

'Haven't you met Dexter yet? Did Dexter ever kiss you. Why are you crying? Can I steal your grief and post it elsewhere?' Questions asked by the butterfly, which I was unable to answer.

As Sophie sat petrified in the terrible ebb and tide of love, she couldn't find any answer to the questions of the butterfly. Of course, she mused, passion was the motivating force in human hemisphere but it could also be its bane.

Sophie sat quietly, often glancing at the butterfly, which hopped around her. Her past came in waves, drowning herself in the agony of her pain. Her angst couldn't be denied but she couldn't face it either. In the concourse of life and love, she could never find the meaning of her destiny. In the afternoon discourse with the butterfly she could only think of what has been and what might have been. She could not trust her destiny.

In the silence of the evening, she was often caught unawares by her destiny. There was a feeling which haunted her. It came and went.

'Now', she asked herself, 'if I believe in the transmigration of souls, then can I meet Dexter in the afterlife?'

'Where do we all go after being interred or burnt to ashes?'

She found no answer in the stillness of the evening., evenings made sonorous by the buzzing of crickets and the eternal homecoming of birds.

Life, love and hope was all so mysterious.

'However, sometimes I had a feeling. Well, it was only a supposition. Could it be that the butterfly was an incarnation of Dexter? Was a belief in the transmigration of souls at all possible'

'Was the butterfly an incarnation of Dexter?'

Yet everything was silent.

The stars came out one by one in their eternal pilgrimage in the violet sky.