

The Postman Who Came Too Late

by, Abhishek Dutta *

“Do you have B positive blood? ... B positive ... anybody with B positive blood ...”, a doctor frantically asks a group of people gathered around him. Alok pulls up his sleeve and says with tearful eyes, *“Take all you need, I have no reason to live now.”* As the doctor inserts a needle in his vein, a shrill of pain runs into his body; everything around him begins to shake violently, the nearby walls and ceiling collapse; Alok gets propelled out of his dream world and wakes up into reality with an intense gasp.

Alok rarely dreamt and when he did, his dreams never made any sense; this dream was no different. Alok got off his bed and splashed some cold water on his face. His eyes were still red and mind still recovering from a seemingly irrelevant but frightening dream. He takes a sip of strong black tea and begins his day by checking email. He had just one new email; an email from US Geological Survey (USGS) Event Notification System (ENS) with a subject, *“2013-08-04 04:13:20 (mb 7.9) NEPAL REGION 27.2, 84.9 (3e76f)”*.

Alok's fingers trembled as he dialled his parents who lived in Kathmandu. The call did not go through. He checked the Nepali news websites but they were still showing old news. All the Nepali on-line radio stations were calmly broadcasting eerie silence. His social network news feeds were exploding with nervous questions but Nepal was silent. He switches on to a news channel on TV: *“Few hours ago, Nepal was hit by a 7.9 Richter scale earthquake with epicentre near Hetauda – a town in central Nepal. We do not have any visuals to show you but soon our reporter in Kathmandu will join us via a satellite phone ...”*. Once again, he tries to call his parents but the telephone network appears to be dead forever. Fearing the worst, Alok decides to travel to Nepal. He quickly books a ticket and starts to pack the bare essentials. As he picks up his passport from a drawer, he notices a pile of unread letters.

“Papa, why do you still write me letters when we talk almost every week over the telephone.”, recalled Alok complaining to his Father every time he received a letter from him. *“Why don't you use email? It is much faster ...”*, said Alok. After his Father politely insisted on writing letters, Alok replied angrily, *“OK fine, you can write to me as many*

* <http://abhishekdutta.org>

letters as you want but I am not going to read them. I hate to read hand written letters.” This pile of unread letters was a proof that Father never stopped writing letters predestined to end up in Alok's drawer.

Alok packs all these unread letters in his bag and rushes to the airport. He checks in for his flight to Nepal and is the first passenger to board that flight; his restlessness and disconnect from his surrounding is visible in all his actions. While the flight attendants are busy explaining the usual flight safety instructions, Alok begins to read all the unread letters from his Father.

“Babu¹, I know that you will not read these letters. But I still write them for my own pleasure. Although I write these letters, it also has the feelings of your Mother. Right now, she is sitting beside me and guiding me as I write this letter. We feel immense pleasure in conversing with you in this way.

The day you left home, we suddenly started feeling too weak and old. When I hugged you tightly, I felt my own heart skip few beats. It was because my other heart was so close and beating happily. After you left, your Mother confessed that she had been silently praying for cancellation of your scholarship to study abroad. On the day of your departure, she even prayed for a cancelled flight as she silently packed your bag. She is so selfish, isn't she?

Do you remember what you said to your Mother before leaving home? “Pyaari², don't cry.”. Funnily, your tears had a greater speed than ours. We still laugh when we recall your words. When will you stop calling your Mother Pyaari? You are not a child any more. Go and find your own Pyaari; she is my Pyaari ... ”

As the plane floated over the clouds, Alok was absorbed in listening to his Father. The hand-written words spoke in his Father's voice; subtle changes in the handwriting silently spoke of his emotional state. As a bonus, the fountain pen's ink had smuggled the fragrance of his parents – the Letter had something for all the senses. Alok was deeply disturbed by not being able to contact his parents after the earthquake. The words crafted by his Father helped calm his anxiety to some extent. He opens up another letter.

“... Today, we visited a temple because it was your birthday. In spite of your absence, your Mother carried out a full Puja in the

1 in Nepal, often parents affectionately call their children Babu

2 a Nepali word meaning “My love”

temple. She bribes the God so much that if God had a choice to pick between us, he would probably prefer to pick me up first; Thank God. For so many years, your Mother has been making the same prayers and God, by now, must have learnt them by heart. This day comes every year and reminds me of the moment I held you in my hands as a newborn, for the first time. You looked curiously at me and I stared at you as our eyes did the talking. We never realised that you would grow up so quickly until one fine day when I accidentally picked up the telephone and a sweet girl's voice asked for you in a nervous tone. After giving you the telephone, I slipped into the kitchen and told your Mother about what had just happened; we looked at each other and smiled. That was the moment we realised that you had grown up ... ”

There was a smile on Alok's face. “Excuse me”, said Alok to a flight attendant, “can I have a paper and pen, please?”. As the flight attendant walks away to bring a paper and pen, Alok opens up another letter.

“... I hate these news channels. Every time they report an accident or death, our heart stops to beat and we nervously check the city in which it happened. Only when it is not the city you live in, does our heart come back to normal. Babu, never over-speed or overtake other vehicles when you drive. Also, when you board a train, mind the gap between the platform and train. I know you are always in hurry and I fear your legs might slip into that unnoticeable gap. You are so far away that I sometimes feel helpless and worry about your safety. When you forced us to buy a sports motorcycle during your teenage years, I once contacted a motorcycle workshop to enquire if it was possible to remove the higher gears, making it impossible to over-speed. They all laughed; possibly none of them were a Father.”

A cheerful flight attendant comes to Alok with a paper and pen. He begins to write a letter to his parents. After dipping words into his current emotional state, he lays them down on the paper and keeps this letter in his shirt's pocket. This style of conversation with his parents relieved Alok of all the anxiety brought to him by a dead communication network and soon he falls asleep.

“*Cabin crew, prepare for landing*”, announced the captain over the PA. A flight attendant comes to Alok and tries to wake him up. “*Excuse me Sir! Sir ... Excuse me Sir!*”, said the attendant “*Please fasten your seat belt, we are about to land in Kathmandu. We expect a bumpy landing as yesterday's earthquake has destroyed most of the runway.*”

Rubbing his eyes, Alok looks out of his window and is shaken by the scale of destruction. The city's landscape resembled that of a demolition site erased to the ground by carefully planted explosives. This bird's eye view of destruction appeared as if God's own dump truck had mistakenly offloaded a massive amount of crushed concrete over the Kathmandu valley. The beautiful surrounding mountains and the mighty Himalayas looked helpless and ashamed at their Mother's reckless behaviour.

The Air Traffic Control (ATC) tower was completely destroyed and the makeshift ATC was unable to handle the airspace over-crowded by international aid planes, rescue helicopters and passenger planes. After hovering over Kathmandu for about an hour, the plane is cleared for landing. The plane lands safely – thanks to the arrogant brakes that stopped the plane from shooting off an already short runway cut further short by the earthquake. Alok hurriedly exits from the airport.

Outside the airport, there was a huge crowd of passengers fighting off for a few taxi. Alok has no desire to fight for anything. So he begins to walk towards his home. An eerie silence follows him as he walks through the unrecognisable roads. The only living humans he saw were a crowd of military and police workers tirelessly trying to reach the dead. The dead bodies recovered from the rubble lay all along the road side like a victory medal of the God. Pulverised concrete had turned the whole city into a dark and grey place. As Alok entered inner parts of the city, roads turned into small mountain of rubble; motionless hands, legs and expressionless faces peeked from these rubble. All the human remains were completely washed with powdered concrete dust and they silently recited the violent tale of furious Mother nature. Bricks had broken free from the tyranny of cement and lay scattered everywhere while naked concrete pillars shamelessly displayed their steel skeletons. A mist created by pulverised concrete floated everywhere like a recently freed spirit and, without any remorse, it flirted with strong smell of decaying human flesh. Stains of dried blood splatted over broken concrete spoke of the bloody feast organised by the Gods. Amid this aftermath of the festival of death, some hope emanated from the light of the pyre of some fortunate dead bodies whose relatives had survived to offer them the last Hindu rites.

The city's landscape had changed beyond recognition. As Alok walked towards his home, he lost the sense of direction. Suddenly he hears a temple bell; God had spared its abode and this bell signalled that somebody's faith had survived yesterday's earthquake. Alok recognises this temple which was just a stone throw away from his home. *“The temple*

entrance is in this direction, so my home should be that way", says Alok to himself as he runs towards his home. He is greeted by a small mountain of rubble. Somewhere in it lay his home which too had given up against the mighty forces of the 7.9 Richter scale earthquake. He falls on his knees and breaks down; the mountain of rubble had already tasted blood, now it was feasting on tears. As he kissed the rubble and sobbed, the reply letter slipped from his pocket and hit the rubble; possibly it was trying to reach his parents lying buried somewhere in the rubble .

At some distance, Alok hears cry of a doctor frantically looking for a donor of B positive blood. Alok walks to the doctor, pulls up his sleeve and says, *"Take all you need, I have no reason to live now."* The puzzled doctor grips his hand and rushes him to a nearby Red Cross camp. Inside the camp, faint candle light provide a glimmer of hope to hundreds of injured lying on the floor and waiting for a treatment. The doctor asks him to sit on a chair as he inserts a needle into his vein; through a narrow tube and into a packet, a stream of blood rushes out from Alok's body. With a sigh of relief, the doctor explains:

"The blood bank of TU Teaching Hospital (TUTH) is now the only blood bank in Kathmandu; we have lost every other blood bank to the earthquake. Yesterday, we recovered a lady with crushed legs from nearby rubble. She has suffered heavy blood loss and is still unconscious. The TUTH blood bank has no remaining stock of B positive blood and is already struggling to cope with the increased demand for other blood groups. Thank God that we found you; she has now a greater chance to survive."

Lost in his own sorrow, Alok looks at the ceiling with an expressionless face. After about 10 minutes, the doctor is satisfied with the quantity of blood collected in the packet. He pulls out the needle and rushes towards the injured lady lying in one corner of the camp. *"Come here and help me"*, says the doctor *"hold this packet of blood at this height. I am going to attend other patients"*. As instructed, Alok holds the packet of warm blood and takes a quick glimpse at the lady receiving his blood. Not believing his eyes, he takes a second look and exclaims, *"Mummy!"*.

Although the postman was late, the son was right on time. The blood too had completed its pilgrimage; it returned back to where it came from.