CLAYFACES

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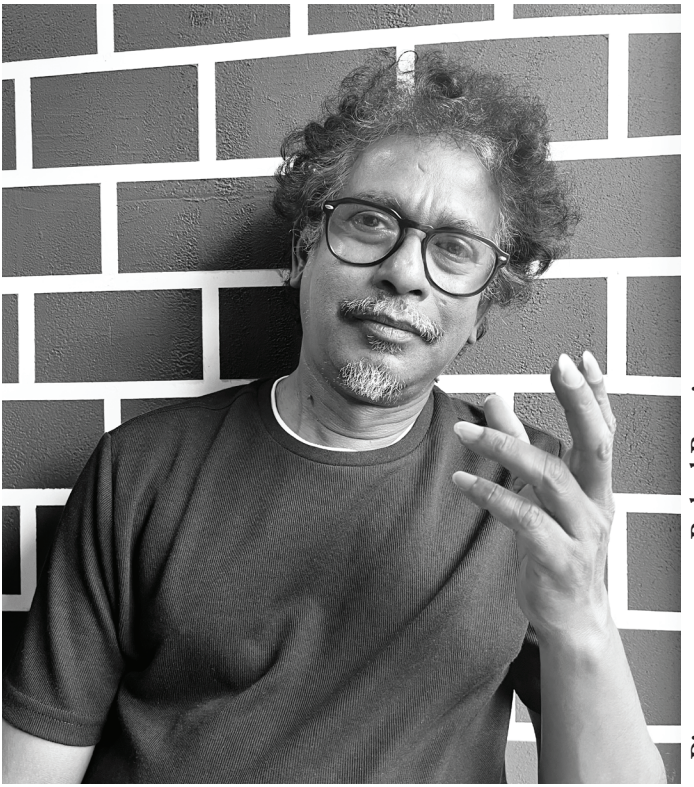
BLUE PENCIL



Picture courtesy: Rahul Barui

Shiladitya Sarkar

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shiladitya Sarkar is a writer, painter, and art critic based in Mumbai.

His previous books include *Thirst of a Minstrel*, *Abstract Reality,* and *Day's End Stories: Life After Sundown in Small-Town India*, an anthology where he is one of the featured writers.

He has contributed essays on art, politics, and culture to leading publications, including the *Times of India, The Telegraph, The Indian Express, Art India, Art Affairs, The Hindu,* and *The Statesman.*

His monograph on contemporary Indian art was published by the University of South Asia Studies, Austin, Texas, USA.

Sarkar has also served as an assistant editor for *Art India* and as a consulting editor for *Art Journal.*

He has exhibited his work in a number of solo and group shows in the United Kingdom, Singapore, Hong Kong, the USA, South Korea, the West Indies, and various private and public galleries across India. He also participated in several workshops, such as at the Austin Art Fair in Texas, USA, the India Art Summit, and the Kochi Biennale.

He is an invited faculty member at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, and the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute of India (SRFTI), Kolkata, where he lectures on various topics in the fields of literature, art, and culture.

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A Novel

Shiladitya Sarkar

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DEDICATION

Sima Sarkar and Basabdutta
You two are my tuning forks. My reasons
for enduring every turn of fate. Thank you
Ma and Didi for always being there.

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Disclosure

Memory is such a winding metaphor.

A phase of my past that had greyed like an old oil painting returned on a Tuesday afternoon after a disclosure unsettled the recollections I had of Khudu—a diminutive man, only three and a half feet in height, someone whose tongue carried the sharpness of a cutlass.

I encountered his malevolence first at the house of Nayan Sen, a writer whose address had been difficult to come by.

Before that crucial midday, I had visited bookshops and called upon publishers and editors for the writer's whereabouts. I was politely advised to renounce the pursuit; their counsel seemed like a ritual imposed upon them by Nayan to keep his few ardent readers at bay.

Seclusion wasn't a difficult choice back in the last decade of the previous century, a decade giving way to a new millennium. Facebook was unheard-of. Googling was a new experience. The sound of twittering birds hadn't yet filled the air. Writers who preferred being inaccessible could remain so in their private dens without being trolled or hounded for bytes by the media.

For a winning closure to my hunt, I had no option but to depend on spadework. In time, after many failed attempts, I located the address by bribing a typesetter in a dingy press who claimed, while counting the money with ink-stained fingers, that he took the galleys—a beautiful word, even if

anachronistic—to Nayan's country house.

One clammy day I arrived at the entrance, overlaid with bougainvillea flowers. Standing before the imposing filigreed gate, I, however, panicked, wondering, what if I was at a stranger's home, misled as I could have been by the greedy compositor.

I wasn't a temerarious youth. Rather, a shy, bookish girl in her twenties who plaited her hair and relied on words—only words—to confirm her identity.

I guardedly pushed at the gate. It opened to my mild thrust, a surprise since I had expected the entrance would be locked from the inside.

At the far end of the courtyard, I saw a dwarf shaving a slab of wood with a knife. Alerted by my footsteps, he held the tip of the blade against his fleshy lips as though to warn me of danger ahead.

He wasn't Nayan Sen. I had seen the writer's photograph on the dust jacket of *The Useless Hymns*, the novel that I had recently finished reading, gorging on it like an ant on a cube of sugar.

The dwarf could be a watchman. I supposed.

"Come over," he said graciously.

Unsure of the intent, I stayed put. As a gesture of assurance, he pocketed the knife and gathered the wood flakes into a pile. Rubbing off the sawdust against his trousers, he said with the exigency of a man eager to make friends, "Call me Khudu."

"I am Brinda. Is Mr Sen home?"

"What's the urgency?"

"As the president of the literary society of my university, I am here to invite him personally for a seminar on the contemporary novel."

Khudu spat out in disgust, as though I had uttered something profane. Thinking I hadn't been understood, I repeated the reason behind my visit.

Leaning back, Khudu moaned theatrically. "Ah! Literature. The word makes me sick—especially when someone shows up at my door using it as an excuse."

Khudu sounded tetchy by choice. He was perhaps bored from his unpleasant duty of shooing away determined readers keen on meeting Nayan using the clichéd alibi of a resolute admirer. I remained calm, hoping to win over the stressed doorman with my honest plea.

The wind scattered the wood flakes all over the portico. The house beyond it, with lemony walls and brown windows, looked both inviting and foreboding—why it seemed so to me, I couldn't account for, but the feeling lingered.

Khudu clapped to draw my attention.

"Give your legs some rest," he said, pointing towards the solitary chair in one corner of the verandah.

"Mr Sen—is he home or away on tour?"

Khudu bunched his tubby fingers into a fist. "Why risk ending up in a devil's lair?"

The tangential remark confused me.

"Meaning?"

"Nayan is like jackfruit glue," Khudu informed innocuously, and then, after a pause, added, "it's not easy to shake him off once he has spread his claws."

I read the sly warning as a ploy to trick me into leaving.

"I need his consent for the seminar. That's all."

"Hmm," he muttered, frowning. A signal he hadn't accepted the veracity behind my appeal.

Before long, he asked, "Aren't you thirsty?"

The summer sun had drenched the landscape with molten ochre. Even so, I decided to ride out the heat, fearing he might spike the water and lull me to sleep. "No, thanks."

"Fruits?" he quizzed like an affectionate host.

I declined the offer.

"What about mutton rolls, fish cutlets, and black coffee? I am sure you don't play any sports."

"Games don't interest me."

"You find sports boring? Why?" Khudu moaned, punching the air. He cited names in quick succession, names far removed from my consciousness.

"Heroes," Khudu said with a touch of reverence. "Great

athletes. But my real idol is the *chatak* bird. Can you guess why?"

"How would I know?"

"It drinks water only from the rain clouds. It wouldn't drink from any pond or river. That's what I call stamina. Resolve."

Restless by the turn of the conversation, I asked impatiently, "Why aren't you informing Mr Sen that a visitor is at the door?"

"Let me offer you something first. Come with me."

I stood my ground. "It's fine here."

"Don't worry," he said in the manner of a resolute guide keen on convincing a resigned traveller. "To test your patience, I won't ask you to walk over thorns."

After shooting off the sardonic riposte, he walked towards the rear of the house with a stick in hand.

I cautiously trailed after him.

A pond came into view, reflecting the greenery around it. Beyond the pond, in the middle of an open lot, a cluster of mango trees had cast a pool of dense shadow.

Khudu whipped one of the low branches with the stick. Of the two mangoes that fell on the parched ground, he offered me one. I squeezed it discreetly to ensure it was ripe enough.

"Sure, the skin looks green. But it's sweet from the inside."

Even so, I didn't bite into the fruit; I kept it sheltered between my palms.

Smiling wryly at me, he sat under the shade.

"Is Mr Sen due to arrive soon?"

"I don't time my life by anyone's watch," Khudu replied while peeling the skin off of the top half of the mango. While I stood apart from him, he sucked on the fruit with sinful pleasure.

The scent of unknown flowers in the air—intoxicating fragrance heightening the afternoon's stillness.

Khudu shattered the silence with an inane question, "Do you read fashion magazines?"

"Glossies have no place on my bookshelf."

"What fills up the racks, then? Classics?"

"What else?"

"Hmm... the love of words. Nayan rakes his brain all day long for words—big, fat words. I see no fun in the exercise. There is more joy in doing simple things, like milking a cow. Do you have the experience?"

"I don't live on a farm."

Undeterred by my tart response, the loquacious man launched a detailed description of the process as though I were an intern in a farmhouse and needed tutoring about the procedure before entrusting her with the delicate responsibility of milking a bovine.

"When a bucket fills up with fresh milk, bliss overcomes me," Khudu said. "It's similar to how I feel when I watch a sprinter straining every nerve to break the tape."

I lacked an eye for sports, and I never understood the enthusiasm they elicited. To change the conversation, I asked if readers often showed up at Nayan's door uninvited.

"The house isn't a temple. Why should it attract blind pilgrims?"

"Readers do meet the writers they admire."

"Maybe. But Nayan? I see no reason why hummingbirds should flock to him."

The resentment in Khudu seemed deliberate, as though he had willed himself to deride authors, above all Nayan.

"Has Mr Sen hurt you?"

"He cant," Khudu retorted. "He is a weakling. I can squeeze him like a tube of toothpaste."

The arrogance was overwhelming.

"Do you know the writer you have been insulting?"

"Nayan is my brother. Like parallel lines we never meet."

"Brother?"

"A tall, weak enemy."

The revelation silenced me. Before long, I sensed a raw sibling rivalry, one that seemed to have transcended Khudu's teenage years. I asked if he would wish to talk about Nayan.

"Oh," Khudu mumbled, scornfully. "What do you want to know?"

"What has triggered this loathing?"

Khudu circled his index finger in the air as though looking for the precise words to profile a man he had come to regard as his *bête noire*. His face tightened like an inquisitor, and he spoke in the cynical tone of a confident adversary.

"Nayan is smart at crafting myths about his life and talent. Such pretence fails to win me over. Deep down, he is a selfish man, aware only of his own importance. He keeps his real persona veiled because he enjoys cultivating the image of a dyed-in-the-wool artist burning the midnight oil for art when, in truth, he lusts for glory and name, if not money. I don't deny his faculties. He once had it—or such is the legend about him. He has lost it because he didn't labour enough to keep the coal in him burning. A talent washed away also because of his ego, his stubbornness, and his desire for a place in the ivory tower."

A stern appraisal.

"Is that why you are keeping me away from him?"

"I am not a jailer. You are free to meet him. Not today, though. For the moment, I can offer you a gift. To have it, lend me your pen and any book that you might be carrying with you."

I handed him my copy of the *Useless Hymns*.

Pressing the book against his knees, he ran my ballpoint in one smooth sweep on the title page.

"Take a look."

"A fake autograph," I protested.

"It will fool Sherlock Holmes."

Seething with anger, I tore out the page and turned it into a crumpled ball.

Khudu stretched his arms. "It's time to have my forty winks."

I slowly made my way out, hoping I wouldn't have to encounter Khudu ever again in my quest to meet Nayan.

Events, however, unfolded as though by happenstance.

I formed an intense friendship with Nayan in the same country house with its grilled gate and bougainvillea flowers —a work of slow chance and passion that shifted the axis of my life for seven years.

During those years, Khudu never retracted from warning me of Nayan's flaws. He kept the tempo alive with the speed of a roulette ball, a dizzying spin into which he would push me as a routine to rupture what he thought were my illusions about his brother's life and work.

I would ignore his spiteful review because Nayan's position—either towards me or his craft—remained a far cry from the scoundrel that Khudu would make him out to be.

In time, Khudu and I inadvertently turned into silent foes, both unwilling to relinquish our differing impulses towards the man with whom we shared the same house.

Khudu achieved his victory, seemingly, when, after seven years, my friendship with Nayan slipped away like money during a recession. A play of chance, again, over which neither Nayan nor I had any grip since we were battling separate demons. He was failing, despite his arduous efforts, to bring an unfinished work of his to a conclusion, while I was struggling to find a voice of my own.

Khudu offered a piece of unsolicited advice: a scathing memoir from me, perhaps hoping that at length he would have an ally to knife his brother, a pleasure he alone had been indulging in for years.

I rejected the counsel. Such a book would have served Khudu's need for vengeance more than mine.

In a month's time, I opted for a teaching assignment in a hill station far away from the city.

There, amidst the wooded hills, I remained sealed off like a seed in a kernel for five years, a continuity that snapped when my mother's illness forced a return to the city I had once left with a bruised heart and a wheeled suitcase.

The homecoming was overshadowed by a staid routine—a string of mundane days marked by constant attention to the sick.

I didn't anticipate any break in the pattern. Nayan had expired a year ago, a passing that had irrevocably curtained over not only a phase of my past but also—so I believed—the tormenting hyphen between us.

A misplaced faith.

Khudu was to return as an absent presence—an arrival that shifted the contours of my life.

He resurfaced first like a shadow, a blurred picture, hemmed in by hearsay and counterbalanced by one singular truth: nine months after his brother's death, he, too, had expired.

The rest of what I heard about him in the ensuing days was through coincidental conversations with those who had once crossed paths with him or at least knew who he was and what his attitude was towards his brother.

A litany of fleeting remarks that corroborated as well as reversed my impressions of the man.

Then came the clincher: the little, big man had acted out of his skin in the year of Nayan's death, a year in which the brothers had holed up in the country house for a purpose that had remained a mystery since they had blocked off communication with everyone, including the members of their family.

The information was disclosed by his uncle, a man with a fondness for cloying poetry, during an inadvertent meeting at the metro station from where I was to board a train. Before waving goodbye, he said, "Who could have predicted such a turn? Maybe the separate devils in both eventually agreed to a handshake."

The victim embracing his nemesis. The vindictive bonding for a new love.

Why? Why? Why?

The fury inflamed me further when I heard from an ageing journalist—he would edit the book review page of the periodical to which I would once contribute articles—of a new buzz in the book trade.

Khudu had commissioned Pratik Sanyal to write his brother's official biography.

"I am not sure if the news is beyond doubt," the journalist said with a tiring, apologetic tone. "But you never know. The world of culture offers tales of machinations befitting a thriller."

In Khudu's choice of Pratik, I perceived nothing more than a boyish urge for one-upmanship, as though Khudu had settled

to view those in favour of Nayan, me in particular, as playmates with whom he had gone sour and wanted to needle them by forging a deal with a biographer known for ridiculing Nayan's writing in public and his dissident attitudes in private.

My misgivings about Pratik were personal.

An obstinate suitor, he had once shadowed me, a pursuit reminiscent of a kid running after a falling kite. Pratik had been on his annoying quest since the day we met at a book launch.

His overtures sank like pebbles in water on account of my denial.

Pratik had an axe to grind. Had Khudu used the spurned lover's grouse to strike a deal?

The questions howled. They rose in sync with a tide of green. Was I hallucinating? Did I hear correctly? Was the fictionist in me being marshalled by the imaginings of her own making?

The heart is a covert savage. In the ensuing days, I was to discover the stealth of a hunter in me through a shifting scale of rapacity and ambition.

CHAPTER TWO

Being Khudu

The two parallel lines—for what purpose did they converge—to form a new cult, to find a new way of life, a new routine, or to discover a new way of squaring off? Was this coming together under someone's command?

I rummaged through my memories for hints that might have forewarned me of an eventual bond between the incompatibles.

Khudu's dislike for Nayan stood out like anthills in the landscape of my bitter memory.

The singular attitude ran alongside Khudu's other fixation: a passion for offbeat goals. As if under the spell of a genie, Khudu would strive for aims far beyond his reach.

I had witnessed one such mad rush in him for months. It circled around his desire to make a sprinter out of Anamika, an orphan girl.

He had first noticed her skills at a sporting event organised for the children of a few orphanages in the city. That afternoon, amidst many amateurs, Anamika's sprint convinced Khudu of her latent talent, and his faith soon found the support of Haldar, a PE teacher by training.

She returned their confidence by winning a competition at the junior level. Thereafter, the friends took it upon themselves to mentor her, believing—as Khudu would so often claim—she would excel further under their guidance.

They had anticipated the success. Their zeal outshone Anamika's own passion for sports. Khudu, the restless guide, couldn't hide his frustration about his protégé's lack of focus. Often, I had to be a reluctant listener as he would rant against Anamika's indiscipline and her proclivity to obliterate her raw talent by associating with people Khudu despised: failed athletes, corrupt officials, petty hacks thirsting for by-lines, and the revellers she would befriend in the nondescript downtown bars.

Khudu would repeat like a mantra: "She can win a race or two because of her natural flair... but constant practice is the key to glory."

Driven by his faith in the efficacy of labour, Khudu set the same norm for Anamika.

Skipping training sessions, however, became Anamika's defining habit.

Annoyed, Haldar decided to quit mentoring an uninspired athlete. Khudu, the resolute believer, wasn't willing to free her from their grip without a fight.

"I am bringing her over to the country," Khudu informed me one day while I was changing the ribbon on Nayan's typewriter.

His aim was to rein in Anamika's restiveness before exposing her to the training regimen at a famous sports academy.

"I will have to cut her off from the glitz of the city for a while," he declared with a messianic resolve. "Or else she will keep drifting towards failure like a somnambulist."

Every day I would hear Khudu repeatedly blowing on a high-pitched whistle in the wee hours of the morning, a jarring rite he had initiated to force Anamika out of bed.

An open lot was in view from the terrace of Nayan's bungalow. Standing on the rooftop, teacup in hand, I would watch Khudu holding a stopwatch, urging Anamika to run ever so quickly, even when she would complain of fatigue.

Khudu would be more exacting on those days when he had Haldar by his side.

Tall and muscular, with curly hair and a timid voice,

Haldar was a contrast to Khudu's boisterousness. Although a qualified coach, Haldar would seem willing to toe Khudu's line of training—an unconventional approach that surely none but Haldar knew defied the rules of a standard coaching manual.

Their morning schedule attracted the attention of the locals. Many would line up to enjoy watching a dwarf in a tracksuit bellowing orders to a lithe girl, whom he would often censure with cuss words after having failed to complete a race in the lap time he expected.

Anamika detested the schedule. Since her coach was a dwarf, she, perhaps, felt humiliated.

Once she came to my room after quitting her training midway, despite Khudu's protests.

"What do you think of my legs?" she asked, taking off her sneakers.

They were like sleek columns, rising up from her ankles gracefully.

"I am sure I will look stunning on a ramp," Anamika said, much to my surprise.

"You don't want to be a sprinter?"

"No. I love fashion. I love films. I hate being in the sun, running. I don't want medals. It's so hard to win one. A hundredth of a second separates a loser from a champion. Becoming a champion athlete is more difficult than writing books."

The trite comparison exposed Khudu's tetchiness towards writers, an attitude that would mark his every conversation with me. Khudu would be the cruellest to his brother. He regarded Nayan as a dampener to his spirit, which valued the commonplace.

"Nayan lives in a box—an ivory box—strapped on all sides by deep, dark ideas, heavy and burdening to my mind that loves the leap of everyday."

Once, I contested his appraisal.

Khudu replied smugly, "Sportspersons give more joy than Nayan. Visit a football stadium and watch how thousands live the moment as the players create an unscripted drama with a

simple sphere made of leather."

Nayan had no awareness of sports, but sometimes he would stand by me on the terrace to watch Anamika's training. Silent, impassioned, and never eager to comment on his brother's barmy passion, Nayan was the type of spectator Khudu neither noticed nor accorded importance.

The brothers rarely conversed, anyway.

Their presence in the same room would make me feel like I was amid the envoys of two enemy countries enduring one another with the repressed desire to howl.

My interactions with Khudu also remained within the bounds of tense civility. Like an impish adolescent, he did enjoy putting me in a tight spot, especially when Nayan wouldn't be around.

One afternoon, Khudu rushed to the kitchen, brandishing a broomstick, while I was making chicken cutlets. He was after a rat, a vermin that gave me the creeps. Jumping onto a chair, I screamed, urging him to chase out the rascal.

He upended every jar and pot in the cabinets—a maddening concern that turned the kitchen into a ravaged battleground.

The rat remained untraceable.

The cutlets, meanwhile, had charred on the pan. Jabbing at them with his tubby fingers, he said innocuously, "Today is April Fool's Day. The rat is in my pocket. Don't worry. It's made of rubber."

I threw a stainless steel bowl at him.

Grabbing it with the agility of a seasoned cricketer, he wolfed down one overcooked cutlet with delight.

Khudu also had the knack of shooting odd questions at me, often when I would be writing or cleaning my typewriter—a prosaic labour whose worth he never acknowledged.

He wouldn't inquire about my family, my childhood, the school I attended, or the friends I played with as a young girl. He lacked curiosity about either my vocation as a writer or my culinary skills. If I ever asked him to read any of my book reviews, he would squirm as though I had asked him to swallow a bitter pill.

Whenever I would be in the kitchen cooking the food both Nayan and he loved—*mutton kasha* in particular—he would enthusiastically scoop out a spoonful from the boiling pot and savour the flavour with the eagerness of an epicure, but never would he ask me about the secret recipe.

Contrasting such denials and exuberance were also moments when he would throw questions at me that betrayed his penchant for the unusual.

Would I ever set a cat among the pigeons? Would I freeze in panic or walk to a police station after seeing a man hanging upside down from a tree on a lonely road? Would I make crank calls to upset a friend's enemy or fake illness to let a weak competitor win a game? Would I willingly clean the pus leaking from the wounded leg of a leper or peel oranges for the infirm in a sanatorium far away from my city? What tricks would I employ as a child to reach for the things beyond my reach? Would I stand on a stool, use a ladder, or climb over the dining table to fetch a jar of cookies or a bottle of jam? One rainy evening, he asked me to describe the joy I would feel each year wearing a new pair of shoes, different in size from those that I had worn the previous spring.

Many of his questions reflected his anguish and hurt at having to bear the burden of being a dwarf, an identity that was reinforced for him by his brother's tall physique and apparent fame—a disparity that, I was certain, had deeply bruised Khudu. But he had far too many barbed questions for us to have a relaxed conversation. And when his questions would turn personal, sparks between us would fly, inadvertently, as they did at the farmhouse of Sagar Chatterjee, a bestselling writer.

Khudu joined us in the morning when we were ready to leave for Sagar's farmhouse on a blue Volvo bus with the excuse of exploring Sagar's exotic garden.

"Sagar is used to gatecrashers. He wouldn't mind," Khudu said casually as he settled into a window seat.

To commemorate his new book, Sagar welcomed us by uncorking bottles of rare wine.

Once the guzzlers grew boisterous, Khudu called me aside.

"These drunks will soon be at each other's throats," he said. "Most men are like wolves, jealous of each other's success. It comes out more when they hug the glass. Why waste time listening to their arguments based on fiction? Literature stinks like a skunk just as much as sports when one talks about it too much. Let's sit under a jackfruit tree and discuss something far more important."

"What do you want to talk about?" I asked reticently.

"Nayan and his misconduct."

"No, not again."

"Hasn't he bled Afsana enough to fulfil his reckless love?"

Afsana was Nayan's ex-wife.

Khudu shared a fellowship with her and viewed every woman in his brother's life as a needle determined to prick Afsana's heart. I, too, had crossed the path of his wrath.

I had tried and failed numerous times to persuade him that Afsana and Nayan were estranged long before his brother and I gravitated into each other's orbit, a schism visible to their respective families. Khudu, the lone ranger, denied my judgement. He reiterated his stance when I repeated the same line of argument.

"Really? Does Nayan think Afsana isn't the ideal partner for him, eh? Tell him to stop analysing her as if she were a character in one of his damn novels. Remind him that he also needs to hear her side of the story. It will chill his blood if he cares to listen. He has sucked her dry like a leech. Why do I have to remind you, always, that men like Nayan aren't better than parasites, feeding off other people's sacrifices to give a philosophical turn to their private pains and personal pleasures?"

"I don't know why you are holding on to these delusions."

"Why would you? Blinkered eyes don't see much, anyway. Let me remind you. Afsana isn't a mere oasis in the life of a thirsty writer. She is real and full of warmth and simplicity, unlike Nayan, a man as complex as budget reports."

"I wish you also had the same virtues as the woman you

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