

All Fall Down

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She touched the scab gently with her nail, feeling around it for some weak spot where it had dried. She looked out of the window and down below, at the hostel quadrangle where she saw them playing. There were three of them, dressed in long shapeless skirts, almost like bags: pillow covers. "Pillow covers," she said, "and they are the pillows, these children, nice and soft, little pillows nice and soft..."

Imitation

Imitation is the simplest method of learning. Children learn their mother tongue by imitating the speech of their parents and siblings. Deaf infants, having lost the faculty of speech imitation inevitably become dumb as well. In fact, children imitate most other things adults do. When children animatedly act out the nursery rhyme

*Ring-a-ring-a roses
Pocket full of posies
Atishoo! Atishoo!
We all fall down*

they are actually imitating a situation that occurred more than 300 years ago: the Great Plague of London. During the Plague, a sneeze (Atishoo) was taken to be a sure sign of the disease and hence – of certain death.

They were playing house; she could make that out. One was the husband, the other was the wife while the third child doubled up as all the other characters necessary for their play-acting. She watched the little wife cook and the little husband see the news on TV. Soon dinner was being served. The quaintness of the scene struck her...

And she smiled.

Far away she heard a roar build up. Slowly at first and then fast till it reached a crescendo: a high whine. The kids, used to it, barely looked up. She turned to the clock in her room. "Two minutes off today," she said, wondering whether to re-program it to give it the right time. "Doesn't really matter, does it!" Far away she saw the plume of smoke and the metallic glint of the spaceship as it caught the sun, rising sharply above the trees and beyond. Slowly the noise died out. The children were still playing.

Clotting

Clotting is the process of blood coagulation in which red and white corpuscles and blood platelets are caught in a network of fibrils consisting of fibrin. Fibrin forms when skin is broken. The normal clotting time is about four minutes.

She gave a gasp and looked down at her hand, at the dark red scab in one hand, which had initially been a slightly bloody, aching patch. She removed the piece of dry red skin which had covered the wound, dropped it out of the window and saw it gently fall and disappear out of sight.

Below, the game went on. The third child was now playing the part of a caller; a doctor, perhaps. She looked at the wound: red, shiny and translucent. She touched it gingerly. No blood, she thought. No blood at all, it's dried up totally.

Excerpt from a notice in Meera Hostel, dated 1st August 2013

Girls may be allowed to attend to callers for not more than half-an-hour per week. During that period they must not be dressed alluringly nor wear any items of jewelry... They may not leave the hostel except to attend classes or go shopping and that too with the prior permission of the College authorities or the Warden. Defaulters will be punished severely.

Time to get ready, she thought. She went into her room, took off her neat sari and put on a coarse skirt coming down to her ankles. She tried to smooth out the wrinkles with her hand. She looked at herself in the mirror, slowly wiped out the traces of lipstick and eye-shadow with a piece of damp cloth. She looked wistfully at her haphazardly cut hair, ran her fingers through them, trying to arrange them in some manner.

Her heart beat faster as she took off her tiny white earrings and clenched them in her fist. "Today I'll do it, she said silently to herself. "Yes, today." There, outside the gates she knew he was waiting for her.

She heard the faint cries of the children playing below, and then, the hum of the lift bringing Nani the warden upstairs. She ran to her desk and punched a few keys at random. The earrings, concealed in her sweaty palms, felt slippery. Calming herself she walked to the window and, looked down. Something was wrong with the little wife. She lay inert, her legs twisted at a strange angle, stiffly held out. The whole scene looked frighteningly real. Then she calmed down. "It's only a game," she said, "A game played by kids."

The door opened. "Are you ready?" The voice was taciturn. She almost jumped, even though she had been expecting it.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, ma'am."

Nani walked in, picked up the sari from the bed and put it in the almirah. "Why don't you keep your room tidier? So... all ready for the visit, eh? Let's have a look at you."

She turned around and faced Nani. Her body was cold with sweat. Don't look at my earrings please, she prayed silently. Not at the earrings.

"Why are you so tense?" asked Nani. "You look positively scared."

With senses finely honed by experience she asked, "What is it? What's wrong?"

She was frozen. Her mouth was dry. Nani caught her arm. "What is it?" she asked again. And there it was for all to see: a pair of tiny white earrings.

The slap rang out loud in the room

"You fool! Stupid, stupid fool! Want to preen yourself, do you? What do you think your parents have sent you here for? And of our responsibility have you ever thought of that?"

Partial transcript of a program on Doordarshan's Breakfast TV, dated 6th July 2006

Reports of the mystery disease were first obtained in New Delhi. The press dubbed it "the fourth wave of God's wrath upon a permissive society" as it followed syphilis, herpes and AIDS. But what is most puzzling is the way in which the disease spreads. Scientists at the AIIMS say: "We have provisionally named the virus as the ELIDiS—

Emotion Linked Immune Deficiency virus. When a person feels a specific emotion—say love or affection, in this case—the hormones then secreted seem to trigger off the mechanism leading to the development of the ELIDiS virus. So, the disease is partly in the mind and partly in the body. ELIDiS would therefore be a ‘romantic’ lover’s disease as opposed to AIDS, which is a sexual lovers’ disease. The AIDS virus is spread only through physical contact, while the ELIDiS virus develops due to a mental condition. And until a cure is found, I’m afraid the only step that can be taken to stop the spread of this disease is to withhold your emotions.”

She ran to the bed and stood there, tears in her eyes.

“Girl,’ Nani said, almost pleading, “Why don't you realize what this means. You could get yourself killed, catching ELIDiS...” Nani stopped. Then her voice returned to normal: “Permission for trip cancelled for next three weeks. Moral Instruction classes one hour per day. You will stay in your room except while attending classes.”

She moved to the window as Nani walked out of the room. The scab in her hand was burning with renewed vigor. Behind the bars of the window, she saw the little doctor and the little husband confer and turn towards the wife who was lying on the ground. The husband held her body as the doctor began to strangle her. She saw Nani come out rushing and shout and the three of them got up and ran away.