



AS THE NIGHT DEEPENS **(A Bengali short story by Pracheta Gupta)**

Translated by
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The doctor remained silent for a while. Then he lifted his face and said, “Stop studying at night. Don’t read at night.”

Frightened, I replied, “How can that be possible, doctor? Old habits die hard. This habit of studying deep into the night has stayed on since the college days. Life will take turns if I give up the habit.”

The doctors are usually sparing in laughing. As if their personalities will take a beating if they do so. Sometimes patients get to their nerves if they watch a doctor smile too often. They talk unnecessarily more than what is needed. My doctor laughed a little. Perhaps he enjoyed my frightened face.

“You are mistaken, Swapanbabu. You are no longer a college student now. You are teacher. You teach in a school, don’t you? You can’t have the same lifestyle you once had in the college. This will be quite out of place with you at present. It is not possible too.”

With a nod, I said, “I don’t keep myself awake till late at night these days, doctor. I remain awake till it is one or one-thirty at night. That’s it. Then I retire to my cozy bed.” I paused a little. This is not true at all. Sometimes it becomes two also. It depends on the subject-matter of the book. This decides how long I shall keep myself awake. The more the topic becomes interesting, the deeper into the night I’ll stay up. Keeping this matter a secret, I laughed reluctantly: “I have got no trouble of sleeplessness. I am that sort of guy who sleeps as soon as my head touches the pillows. I sleep continuously for six to seven hours. I don’t even wake up in the middle.”

I thought that the doctor would take up this matter lightly, watching me smile. Will he cancel his previous suggestion of not waking up late into nights reading books. Or at least he would partially cancel his suggestions. But things did not happen that way. The smiling face of the doctor became at once serious. Lowering his face, he spoke out, “All I can say is that you need to do away with this habit. You need to be early to bed at night. It is better for you to sleep at ten. But you can’t do it overnight. Let it be eleven for the time being for the present. Try it out. It is equally important when you sleep and for how long you sleep. Having gone to bed, you can listen to some light music and that’s it. Nothing more than that. You do not seem to have major trouble inside your body, Swapanbabu. You have a bit of a digestion



problem. Acidity is developed from that. You seem to be stressed up, though that's not too much, but I feel that it is due to your overstay in the night. This may lead to multiple physical ailments if you do not change this habit right now. Now you are young. You can change yourself you like. This will turn into insomnia later. Then you will have to remain awake all night."

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To speak the truth, I did not accept the offers of a job or two when I learnt that I needed to wake up early in the morning. It was not possible for me to leave my house as early as seven or eight in the morning. I felt on the top of the earth when I got the job of a school teacher in Palashpur. The school started at eleven. One could be attached to bed till 9 a.m. It is no harm if one lay on the bed till it was nine-thirty. It was hardly a fifteen minute cycle ride from the place where I lived right then.

"How can I leave an age-old habit so easily, doctor? Besides...besides, I don't get much time these days. A considerable amount of time is spent at the school."

The doctor seemed to be a little irritated. Then, lowering his face, he uttered, "Bad habits should be given up."

Having two days leave, I came to Kolkata. I had some trifling work to do. Having finished, I came to see the doctor. It is not such that there is dearth of doctors in Palashpur, but one could rely on a well-known doctor. If I knew that the doctor would advise me to sleep early to get rid of indigestion and belching, then I would not visit here. The doctor scribbled a prescription on a piece of paper and handed over to me.

"Here you are. I prescribed one medicine for digestion problems and the other for sleeping troubles. Have the tranquilizers only when there will be acute sleeping problems. Else, don't take them. Follow my directions for a few months. Be early to eat and bed at night. Wake up early in the morning. Have a morning walk daily, There are plenty of trees there, aren't they? It is not as polluted as Kolkata. You will feel more agility and freshness in a few days. You will get the results within a short time. I bet the problems of indigestion, headache and waking up till late night will be over."

I did not have much trouble in waking up till late night. But it was useless to make it known there. I got up from the chair nodding my head like an obedient patient. I had to catch the train to Palashpur in the afternoon. I had to resume my school duties from the next day. I was a new employee, so there was hardly any room for any sort of negligence. To top them all, I liked the job very much.

The doctor told me that it would take a couple of days to cure. It, however, did not take too long to get over my ailments. My problems like indigestion, belching, headache and stomach



ache vanished within three days. I continued the act of reading till late night hours with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. There was no problem at all.

The problem occurred on Saturday. Saturday night to be exact.

It was hardly half past twelve at night. It had been drizzling outside continuously for quite some time. The rain was beating down neither too hard nor too soft. One would become habituated to continuous rainfall. One could hardly differentiate the sound of the raindrops then. It would become a normal sound then. I would take up books on different subjects at night. I would pick up the book that I liked the most. I did exactly the same on the Saturday night. I was deeply engrossed in the book. Suddenly I

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felt out of sorts. I had a little uncomfortable feeling. I thought I had fallen ill once again. Lifting my face from the book, I waited for some time. Nothing seemed to trouble me then. There was no problem in my body. I poured my mind back to the book. It was really an interesting book. It was about mesmerism. In other words, it was a book based on the power of human attraction. I was deeply involved in the contents of the book. The secrets of the art of mesmerism lay in three secret skills of vision, touch and will-power. One who would master the three arts very nicely, could become a great master in this art.. The book dealt with countless number of ways to mesmerize others. Dr. Mesmer, Dr. Braide, Mr. Libon, Mr. Burnheim, Prof. Binny were some of the famous practitioners.. Some of them used electrical waves on the body; some held a source of light near the forehead, while some others commanded something. The procedure of Dr. Isdeli was apparently strange. The President surgeon of the Viceroy of Calcutta appointed him. He built a hospital to cure the patients with the power of mesmerism. The patient would be laid down on a bedstead in a dark room. Then he would induce the patient to sleep by blowing on his or her eyes and head. The patient would be operated upon as and when he slept. How strange it was!

I paused after having read up to this point. The uncomfortable feelings set in again. Then, I could feel that the uneasy feeling was not of any internal origin. It was external. I seemed to feel uneasy as if someone stood at my back. I could slightly feel the breathing in and out on my shoulder. This was coupled with the coarse sound produced by the friction of the pieces of clothes. Who's there? I turned back.

Nobody was there. There was no possibility of anyone being there. Who would be there in my bed-room at such late hours at night? I looked at the door. The door was shut. I would bolt the door for a few days when I arrived at this house for the first time. Then afterwards, I would not do so. Suddenly I thought one day, "Why do I bolt the door when the entrance gate of the house is locked?" The entrance gate was not only locked, it was chained up too. It was, therefore, meaningless to bolt the door of my bed-room. There was another door at the back of the house. It was a door type window. It had double locks in it. Heaven knows how



long it had been locked. The locks have been rusted. There was a story of the possession of this house. Having arrived here, I spent a few days at a hotel near the station. It was not a good hotel at all. It was obvious that I would not find a good hotel at a place like Palashpur. The food items served were worse than the hotel itself. I had a firm belief that my problem of indigestion originated from there. I had no other option to stay. I could not speak out my problems of accommodation to other teachers. They would laugh at me and call me 'a Babu from Kolkata.' So I started searching a rented house vigorously. I could somehow manage to cook for myself. I could cook dal, rice and fish curry. I needed a somewhat civilized place to live in. I told one or two persons, "Inform me if you have found one." After ten days, a staff of the hotel came forward to inform me. His name was Ganesh. One evening he arrived at my room when I returned from the school. He said to me, "There's house. Will you see it?"

I said him," I won't see if there's too many people or if the area is overcrowded. I can neither stay near the station nor near the market place. I feel suffocated even at this place of yours. I find the rattling

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Sound of the trains and all sorts of unwanted noises. These trouble me till night. I can hardly concentrate on books here.

Ganesh said, "The house is a little way off the town, sir. You need to cross a lake to reach there. Its surroundings are not crowded at all. I know that you study deep into the night. I think this will stand you in good stead."

I said. "What's the rent?"

Ganesh said, "The owner of the house lives in Kolkata. I'll tell him to arrive here on Sunday if you give your consent. Let him come, talk to you and show you the house. The rent will be finalized then. It will hardly be too much. The house has been closed for the last five years."

I said, "Closed? For five years? Why? Doesn't anyone stay there?"

Ganesh paused a little. Then, lowering his head and voice he added, "No, sir. They stayed five years back. The owner used to stay there with his wife and daughter. Thereafter...thereafter they closed the house and shifted to Kolkata. Now they prefer to offer the house on rent. Otherwise the house may be dispossessed by them. But, there's none here to have such a big house on rent. One Nantu takes care of the house here on behalf of the owner. I met him in the market two days ago." He said, "Ganesh, the owner wants to offer this house on rent now. Inform me if you have one. I shall also leave this place and settle in my native village. I would be better if I can do something with it before my departure."

Being excited I asked, "How many rooms are there?"



Pausing a little, Ganesh resumed, “It’s a one-storied house. He will give the entire house on rent.”

I was a little shocked and said, “The entire house! Oh my God!”

Lowering his voice, Ganesh said, “If the rent isn’t too high, then, what’s your difficulty? It will be good for you. You will get the entire house on rent, sir.”

I said, “What shall I do with the entire house, Ganesh? I am a single person. I don’t need more than one room.”

Scratching his head, Ganesh said, “Today you may be a bachelor. Tomorrow, you may have a family. Then you will need more space. You will be benefitted if you arrange for this beforehand, sir.”

Laughing a little, I said, “Forget what will happen in future. Should I take such a big house on rent for future?”

Ganesh uttered, “It will be an excellent place for your studies. No one is going to disturb you over there. Moreover, it’s better to remain single than to be with someone.”

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I could realize that Ganesh was trying to force me to take the house on rent. I frowned a little. I said, “What’s the matter, Ganesh? Is there any problem with the house? Come on, speak out the truth.”

Ganesh was awestruck. He paused. Then he said, “No sir, why should there be any problem with the house? I informed you as you had been in search of a house. If you don’t like it, then, leave it. I shall inform you if I get another one.”

I could not avoid the house though Ganesh gave me an option. To speak the truth, I could not resist the temptation. I was fully excited to think that I would live in a big house in a quiet atmosphere without any trouble. To speak the truth, the assumption of Ganesh of having a family life soon, couldn’t be overlooked also. At home, they had been pressurizing me to get married soon. I came to learn that my mother had started to search a suitable daughter-in-law secretly. I did not say anything. I had some serious thought about marriage. Will any woman prefer to see me studying till late night hours? Nobody will. Then I would not marry too. She should not only be beautiful, but she should also be able enough to adjust with my bad habit.

One day I accompanied Ganesh to see the house. I offered to take the house on rent within three days also. The owner of the house was Mr. Dhananjay Sanyal. He could not arrive there from Kolkata due to his physical ailments. Nantu detailed everything on his behalf. He wanted me to talk to Mr. Sanyal. It seemed that the gentleman was a bit serious by nature.

“Swapanbabu, why have you taken such a big house? You could have got a room and near the market area or the station. The rent also would have been less.”

Smilingly, I said, “I was searching such a house so that I could stay away from the hustle and bustle and live a quiet life.”

Pausing a bit, the gentleman said, “The surrounding of my house is really calm and quiet. I built this house willingly to stay a little away from the town. Now-a-days there is too much hustle and bustle in the suburban areas than in big cities. I, however, decided to dispose of this house. But Sritama’s mother did not agree.”

I asked curiously, “Who is Sritama?”

Pausing a bit on the other end of the telephone, Mr. Sanyal said, “She’s my daughter.”

I said, “I can’t pay you more. Perhaps you know that I am a school teacher....but I liked your house very much indeed.”

Mr. Sanyal said, “Don’t worry about the house rent. I am telling Nantu all about this. He will tell you everything. Pick up all your belongings and come here.”

I could hardly think that he would be ready so easily. In a vague tone, I said, “Thank you very much.”

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Mr. Sanyal said, “May I ask you one thing, Swapanbabu?”

Curiously I said, “Please go ahead.”

“Will you not feel uncomfortable to live in a big house alone in a quiet atmosphere?”

Being awe-struck, I said, “Where’s the problem? I wanted to have a quiet place indeed. This place may be a little far away from the markets and shops....what’s there in it? I have a bicycle. What else may be the problem?”

Perhaps the man on the other end of the telephone stopped a little. In a low and quivering voice, he said, “No, I am not talking about that difficulty. I thought you might be afraid..you hail from Kolkata.....”

I laughed a bit. I said, “What’s the fear? Did you mean of thieves and robbers? There’s really nothing with me to be robbed off.

In a murmuring voice, Mr. Sanyal said, “That’s great.”



The old man Nantu moved around the house and showed me the entire house. Showing the window type door, he said, “Would you like to have the key to this door? This is the backyard of the house. There are bushes there and a boundary wall at the end.”

I did not take the key. What shall I do with this door? Who will pass through that door? The more the doors and windows are opened, the more they need to be shut. It had been three months since I entered this house. I became oblivious of the window-door. Not only the door, I did not even take the small room lying by the staircases. Apprehending a regular and vigorous routine of dusting, I did not take that room. I heard that there were old chairs, tables, books and a broken table-fan there. The room had remained closed for a long time. There was a grill door attached to a wooden frame on the staircase. It could be said for sure that it was really impossible for anyone to enter the house after unlocking so many locked doors.

Then? The thieves and robbers would not stand at my back in the bed-room.

A water-bottle lay on a corner of a table. I drank water from that. I wondered why there was an extraordinary sensation. I didn't know why I had felt that someone was standing at my back! Could there be so much hallucination? It might be possible. It was possible that my body had been tired internally. So, I might have felt that way.

Having closed the book of mesmerism, I stood up. I forgot everything as I slept after switching off the lights. I slept longer and woke up the next morning. I forgot the uneasy feeling of the last night.

I could remember that just after two days.

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I was reading a book on ‘Palash’ flower. Its title was ‘Palash-Katha’. Many things were described about the flower. Perhaps this matter attracted me the most as I read after having arrived at Palashpur. I was utterly surprised as I went through the lines. So long, I knew that ‘Palash’ flower was very beautiful to look at. I also came to learn that it had multiple qualities besides its good looks. In France, the ‘Palash’ flower is known as ‘Aare-un-llokoyan.’ I said to myself, “Wah. I need to remember the name.” The school students would be much amused if they were told so. The moment I drew the pen on the table to scribble the name on the corner of a piece of paper, I felt that someone walked past the opened door of my room. Even in darkness, I could see that it was a woman. I was frightened. The table clock was indicating that it was ten minutes past one. That meant that it was one. My clock ran faster by ten minutes.

I had never believed in ghosts. I left my chair and stood up. Leaving the room, I came to the dining room outside. I switched on the light there. I saw what I had expected. There was



nothing there. There was none there. The empty room seemed to wake up suddenly when I switched on the light. I came to my bed-room. I sat at the table. Last Saturday I felt uneasy. Having switched off the light, I slept. I decided that I would not sleep like that on that day. I should keep myself awake a little longer. Such a feebleness of mind was unacceptable to me. One should not yield to such a situation also. I read 'Palash-Katha' for half an hour more. Then I went to sleep.

On other days, I would sleep immediately after switching off the lights. But, on Saturday, I did not feel like sleeping. I changed sides on my bed restlessly. When I dozed a little, I felt that someone had stood near my bed. She wore bangles on her wrists. Some tinkling sounds were coming from the bangles.

I searched for Nantubabu on my way to school the next day. I could not get him. He had already gone to his native village. While returning from school I thought that I should ring up Mr. Sanyal. But immediately I thought what I was doing. Why should I ring up the owner of the house? What should I ask him for? Who walked around your house at night? What is the problem of your house? Fie upon me. There must be a limit to foolishness. I was angry with myself. Should I keep telling this from person to person that I was terrified on two occasions at night? Shirking off everything from my head, I came back home and took a nice bath. I cooked rice, dal and egg-curry and relished them happily. Then I sat down with the morning newspapers. The house was free from troubles indeed. There was none to disturb once anyone would enter. The noises of the moving vehicles would not come as it was a little way off the main road. Only the sounds of the crickets would come once the window was opened at night.

Besides the news of murders and robbery cases, some good news could also be found. Some interesting news could be found. I was deeply engrossed in such a kind of news. A retired teacher donated all his savings to the school. It was a nice thing to think over. Would we ever do that? I thought it was impossible. The biography of such a person should be there in the text books of the children. Such news would refresh anyone's mind. In such a pleasant state, I could feel that someone was walking ! Someone was walking silently inside the house. Removing my eyes from the newspaper, I sat straight. Who was walking?

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Who it was? It would not be wise to leave the chair and wake up just as I did the other day. I got up slowly. I ensured that there should be no sound of the chair. I heard the sound of walking once more. Was it a cat or any other animal? I went straight to the door very carefully. I decided not to switch on the light on that day. I waited in darkness till I could bear it. It was hardly a moment or two.



I could see the woman in darkness. She was wearing salwar-kamiz. A veil was attached round her neck. She disappeared into the room by the staircase.

I could not remember how long I stood having bolted my bedroom door.

I told Nantubabu that I had no need of all the keys of the big house. But I kept the entire bunch of keys from him. Next morning, I drew out my drawer and took the bunch of keys to open the door of the room that lay by the staircases. I opened the room. One should correct the errors by oneself if they were committed earlier. Therefore I decided I should see the room by myself. Having opened the door with creaking sound, I discovered myself on a heap of dust. The room was filled with broken items all over. This could truly be called a godown. There were tables and chairs on one side. Some books were lying on the table. Having crossed the broken suitcase, the sewing machine and the harmonium, I went near the table. When I opened one exercise book, a layer of dust covered my hands. The pages turned yellow and crinkly. I turned over the pages. With the help of faint light that came through the door, I found that it was an exercise book on history. The handwriting seemed womanish. On the cover page the name Sritama Sanyal was written. She was the daughter of Mr. Sanyal ! Was this the study room of Sritama indeed ?

I tried to behave normally in the school. But I failed. A sense of unease had already crept in my mind. Then, I could feel that everything was not my hallucination. There were some problems with the house. What was the problem? I decided that I would meet Ganesh after the school hours. Ganesh might know this. I went straight to the old hotel on the bicycle. Ganesh was not there. He had gone to Kolkata. He would return the next morning. The Manager of the hotel could perhaps apprehend something from my grim face. He said, "What's wrong, sir? Is there any trouble?"

Controlling myself, I replied, "No, nothing happened. I thought I would talk to Ganesh regarding the house-rent. Let it be. I shall come tomorrow or the day after. Now, I feel that it would have been better if I could lower the house rent a little....."

"Please have a seat. Have a cup of tea."

I said, "No, thanks. Let me get back home."

The Manager did not pay heed to my words. He forced me to have my seat. He fetched tea and 'samosa' for me. Once he said, "Is everything fine in Mr. Sanyal's house?"

I was startled. Did the man know something about the house? He might know. He was a local fellow, after all. Should I ask? No, let it go. It would be a foolish act if I did so. Everyone in Palashpur would know it. I would become an object of ridicule. Everyone would call me a timid teacher from Kolkata. I was

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timid indeed. There was no worth expressing my unease over what I had seen at night on two occasions.

With an artificial smile, I said, “Why should I pray? Why there should it not be alright? It’s a nice house indeed.”

Biting on the ‘samosa’, the Manager said, “It’s okay if everything is nice. Have the ‘samosa’ please. Else it would get cold.”

Returning home, I could feel that the Manager hid something from me. What was it?”

I heard the piece of advice of the doctor for the first time. Leaving my habit of reading after my meal, I went to sleep. I took a sleeping pill also. There was really a hidden stress inside my body. Why could a man see a woman in an empty house? What was the harm if I could follow the doctor’s advice for a day or two? Heaven knew why I locked the door of my bedroom after a long time on that day. Even I bolted the door nicely. Looking on the roof of the dark room I thought that the members of my own house would be ready if I talked about marriage at that time. These are the troubles of being alone. The problem meant a hotchpotch of everything. Even my habit of studying at night would also come to an end. It was; therefore, better to have a life-mate. Thinking so, I slept within a while.

I could not say when I woke up at night. Through the gap of the door, I saw that some light was there. This was the light from a bulb. How could there be light at late hours at night?

I did not know how I got down from the bed and opened the door. When I stepped into the parlour, I saw that the light was coming from the room lying next to the staircases.

For a moment, I felt weightless. I would surely fall down. Holding on to the door, I controlled myself somehow. It took a long time to come back to the senses from that spell. Thereafter, I thought that I must have put the switch on while locking the door the other day. What else could there be? I said to myself, “That’s what it is. That was surely the case.” Gaining strength on my feet, I walked to the room.

Not only the room was lit, even the door was put ajar. Through the gap, I noticed that an innocent teenage girl was reading sitting at the table and on the chair. She was moving sideways while reading.

I could not remember what happened afterwards. Losing all my strength, I fell on the floor. While I was falling down, I could somehow realize that somebody held me lightly. Who was it? I came back to senses in the next morning. I found myself lying on the floor near the room by the staircases. The door of the room was locked as I had done the other day. While getting up I realized that strangely enough, I did not receive any severe injury. Keeping myself as quiet as possible, I got out of the house. I wanted to meet Ganesh anyhow.



I could not meet Ganesh. He had not returned from Kolkata. Then I pressed the Manager for some information. He gave a detailed description of everything. It was a simple and small story.

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“At first, I thought I would tell you about the house when I came to learn that you were going to shift there. Then I thought, let it be. You might have thought I had told you for my own benefit. You might have thought I wanted to hold you back. But I have not heard anything foul about the house.”

Pressing my teeth hard, I said, “Tell me the story, please.”

Sritama, the daughter of Mr. Dhananjay Sanyal was not only ravishingly beautiful, she was also equally good at studies.”

I asked, “Was...it means..?”

The Manager said, “Yes, she was. She used to read much. She used to keep herself awake till late at night like you. One day, a good marriage proposal came. The boy belonged to a well-to-do family in Kolkata. They had three houses in Kolkata. Sritama was noticed at a marriage party and she was liked too. She was not of a marriageable age. Her parents, however, could not resist their temptations. At first, they tried to make her realize it. Then they forced her. But she was adamant. She decided not to marry but to continue her studies. This resulted in a regular family trouble. Sritama warned them that she would either fly away or hang herself. At last, she committed suicide with her veil instead of a rope.”

I remained silent. The Manager said, “But there is nothing uncanny about the house. Mr. Sanyal can't help selling the house only because it bears a memory of their daughter. May be he can sell it one day or else it will lie in the same way. If a crazy people like you who prefers to stay alone.....

Having finished his speech, the Manager smiled a little.

I went back home riding slowly on my bicycle. The moon rose. It spread its light everywhere. Even Sritama's house was well-lit. I would change it the next day. I had told the Manager that I would like to come back to the hotel. The shops and the market area lay too far away. It was becoming increasingly difficult for me. I had to search for a new house after a few days. But I would get the room by staircases cleaned before I left. All the dust had to be cleaned. A little girl reads till late hours at night. Should that room be so dirty?