

NING-THEM

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NING-THEM



FIRST TOUCH

As the final bell rings and the drum beats start at the assembly ground, young boys and girls jump out of bed half asleep. They hurriedly put on their track suits and shoes, and without washing their faces or brushing their teeth run out of their dorms towards the assembly ground where other students are already standing in line. After the drum beats stop and the roll call starts, some students run towards the assembly where the PT teacher shouts 'fast' in his high-pitched voice. Some of the new students, who met each other just the previous night after their parents and guardians dropped them in their dormitories, giggle at someone whose hair is ruffled strangely on the right side and another whose left cheek has been painted black; both are unaware of this. Their track suits are new, some oversized and some too tight, and their new white canvas shoes are clean and pure white as compared to the dirty brownish ones worn by their seniors.

In the east, the sun has risen and its first streak of light falls on the PT teacher's face standing in the elevated corridor with white walls

behind him. On his announcement, the students proceed for their morning run. After the run, eight different groups of boys and girls for the four different houses are formed at different spots. On the instructions of their respective house prefects, they start exercising; the new students are clearly out of sync. After 20 minutes or so they are dispersed.

On the way to their dormitories, the new students are intrigued to find out that some seniors who were reported to be sick at the assembly have already finished their baths before the rush to get tap water, and some are still comfortably sleeping. In a while there is a rush in all the bathrooms in the dormitories, and soon the water in the taps runs out. The young boys come out holding their buckets and stand in a queue to fetch water from the single tap in front of their dormitories. By 7, boys dressed in white shirts and grey pants, walk to the dining hall to have breakfast in small groups, each holding a plate, a glass, and a spoon; some just have a spoon, and two of them will eat from the same plate. Breakfast is a small serving of plain rice fried in overcooked onion slices and peanuts, which is slightly oily, and diluted milk tea. Someone with a good appetite will surely be left asking for more, though it appears that only the super seniors can ask for as much as they wish, and the mess workers oblige without a question, while the juniors are left wondering at the partiality. Back in the dormitories, they leave their little collection of utensils, tidy up their uniforms, check their neck ties in the small mirrors hanging on the window bars, pick up their bags and leave for class. Some of the newly joined students take out eats from their locked trunks and carry them to the academic block.

Half an hour after the assembly, no teacher has come to the classroom. The new students, already divided into groups, are engaged in lively conversations, but not all the groups speak in the same language. In one of the groups, a boy named Pari with slightly curly brownish hair, the shortest of all, smooth skinned and fairer than most with a yellowish skin tone, speaks to the other three about his previous

school and his gang of friends, their bicycle rides across the city after school hours, and the weekend video games they played at one of their friend's house. He narrates his previous school life with such interest and excitement that it gives the rest of them the impression that he had a fabulous friend circle in his previous school and even back home.

Alex, the biggest of the new students, with black gelled hair, neck tie loosened, and shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows clears his throat and speaks in a hoarse voice about his girlfriend back in his school, and how now that he has joined a new school, he wants to get a girlfriend here too. He looks around and points to a girl on the first bench in the other row and announces, 'Maybe her, the one you were talking to this morning after the assembly Ningthem. Since you are a bit girly, you can keep the other girl who acts like a boy. That will suit you.' Ningthem is embarrassed by Alex's joke though the three look at the girls and giggle together.

Alex leans on the desk behind him, puts his elbows on the edge, tosses his Vaseline up in the air and lets it fall on his right palm and says, 'You don't believe me? You will see soon.' Just at that moment, the principal walks in, and the students hurriedly get back to their benches and stand up to wish him, 'Good Morning Sir.' He quickly announces that they all must go to the store room, get their books and stationary items, copy the timetable put up on the notice board, and come for regular classes from the next day. He leaves after making the announcement. The students pick up their bags, rush out of the classroom to go to the store room. There is commotion at the door. The store room is next to the principal's office, so the students are slightly wary of speaking too loudly. Nevertheless, a loud murmur is heard across the elevated corridor in front of the assembly ground where a long line is already in place. Instead of standing in the line, Arjun goes to the principal's office and comes out with his stack of books and stationary. Everyone stares at him and when Pari asks, 'How come you got them from the principal's office?' Arjun smiles and says, 'I am his son.' As he gets out of the corridor, he bids goodbye to

his new friends, crosses the assembly ground and walks towards the quarter, where they are all convinced the principal lives.

The campus is situated on a hill slope. The dormitories, administrative block, dining hall, teachers and principal's quarters and the playgrounds are built on flattened ground at different levels. When the sun sets in the hills in the west, darkness envelops the campus faster than the town in the valley. At night lights appear like distant stars in the east as seen from the window of Pari's cubicle on the first floor of the dormitory building. The cubicle is small separated by eight feet high walls on two sides where about 20 double decker iron beds are kept in the dormitory. Each cubicle has a single reading table, a chair that the senior who stays on the lower bed uses while the junior on the upper bed keeps almost everything on his bed except for his trunk, shoes, and slippers, which are pushed under the bed along with buckets, some of which are broken and hidden behind the trunks lest they get stolen.

The eight feet wall on one side of the cubicle holds hangers made out of nails of unequal size and length fixed on wooden boards or rods nailed to the wall. The wall space is also mostly used by the seniors. Just when the three boys reach Pari's cubicle the lights go off, and the entire dormitory becomes dark except for the faint evening streaks of light entering through the windows of the cubicles. The three boys climb to Pari's bed and chat huddled till dinner time. Pari continues talking about his bicycle rides and video games, Alex talks about girls while Ningthem mostly listens. Like the three of them, other young boys too sit in groups on one of the beds and chat away, waiting for the lights to come back so that they can go to the dining hall.

The three boys are getting to know each other, and for now there is a sense of cordiality and newness to their friendship. Every day as they spend more time together, they learn more secrets and stories about each other. Ningthem who has been silent starts talking more freely. For the first few days the three are inseparable till Alex starts mingling with seniors, leaving Pari and Ningthem to each other's company.

One night after dinner, with nothing to do in the dark, Pari and Ningthem lie in bed waiting for the lights to come on; Alex has stayed back with the seniors at the dinner table. Brother Sam who sleeps below comes back from dinner and tells Ningthem to go back to his bed and summons Pari to sleep with him on the lower bed. Both of them are surprised by this. Their silence is followed by the senior repeating his order. Realising that it is an order not to be questioned, Ningthem gets down from his bed and reluctantly goes to his dormitory. Pari is even more shocked, but he does not move from his bed till he is asked for the third time to get down and sleep in the bed below.

At dawn, Ningthem is awakened by repeated knocking on the cubicle's window. He opens his eyes, leans towards the window to see who it is, but he can't make out in the darkness outside. He pulls up the thin blanket and lies down to sleep again. Then he hears someone saying, 'Ningthem, open the door.' He wakes up and in confusion says, 'Pari ... what is it?' Pari replies, 'Just open the door first.' He climbs down with great caution so as not to wake his senior sleeping below him, wears his Bata slippers and goes towards the dormitory door. As he opens the door, Pari gets in quickly and without even looking back goes to his bed. Ningthem locks the door and climbs to his bed. Even though it is summer, early mornings are quite cold, and the boys use a thin blanket. Since the two boys had not planned to sleep together, they have no choice but to share the blanket. When Ningthem wraps the blanket around Pari and lies down beside him, Pari turns towards him, and out of the blue puts his left hand underneath Ningthem's shirt, holds him tight and breathes a deep sigh. Ningthem is stunned, but he remains motionless. Pari's hand is cold, but he does not utter a word or move.

As he lies there motionless listening to his own breathing, Pari tightens his grip and his jaw is now leaning against Ningthem's left shoulder and his groin pushed against Ningthem's bum. The two boys fall asleep like that just before dawn. At 5 when the morning bell rings the two boys are still sleeping peacefully just the way they have fallen asleep an hour back. When the noise in the dormitory gets louder with

boys climbing up and down the beds, opening and closing trunks, and taking out and keeping back buckets, Ningthem finally wakes up. He turns towards Pari, and looks at his small yellowish but fair face, its smoothness accentuated by slight curls of his hair covering his forehead partially and tiny eyebrows above his round eyes. Just when he is about to wake him, he sees a reddish mark on the left side of his neck that looks like a scratch, though he is clueless about it. The morning gets more surprising when he feels the tip of his penis slightly wet. He puts his hand inside his underwear and checks with his index finger; it is wet and warm. Ningthem wonders at the newness of this morning since the moment Pari put his hand beneath his shirt. It's like discovering something new that he had not dreamed of before, but when it happened, it felt natural and familiar.

There is nothing he dislikes about it, but it's surely new. He gets under the blanket and lies on his back. The warmth between their bodies gives him an electric sensation that sends current-like sensations throughout his body. Enamoured by this new-found sensation, he moves closer to Pari unaware of the noise in the dormitory anymore and oblivious to the sun's first rays passing through the window with the broken glass panes. Like a fire ignited and not to be doused Pari comes every morning and knocks at the window, thus keeping the flame of their young bodies and souls burning each morning at dawn.

MONSOON

Barely a month after their session started the monsoon arrives like an unexpected guest. The bright sky turns cloudy overnight; the storm blows away clothes hung on window bars and plastic ropes outside the dorms. The initial rain washes away the dust that covered the freckled leaves and grass, leaving it greener and with renewed freshness. On the first day, the air smells of dust, but soon it settles down making the erstwhile dusty playground muddy and the concrete pavements

clean and slippery. The town far below appears like a clear panoramic photograph on sunny days. The weather turns from hot to pleasant and then to cold and rainy. The boys and girls are mostly tucked in their beds, some reading, some sleeping, and some chatting away in groups eating the last portions of their sunflower seeds and *mangan*. Wet uniforms that refuse to dry hang on staircases and window bars of the dormitories. White canvas shoes are stacked on window sills waiting for the sun to come out but end up being greeted by more rain.

Morning PT classes are cancelled, and most students sleep joyfully till they are pulled out of bed reluctantly by the 7 o' clock bell from the dining hall. There is quite a rush in the cubicles and bathrooms on such mornings as students hurry to the toilets and bathrooms before running to have breakfast and then to their classes. Even the assembly is cancelled, and that gives the boys and girls some more time to get ready despite how late they wake up.

The onset on monsoon also brings ailments; some students catch a cold and some get skin infections after using the tap water that is now muddy and many get throat infections. Some of them take free medicines from the school supply, but many take sick leave and go home. The day Pari's senior gets a mild throat infection he leaves for home. Pari comes to Ningthem's cubicle in the night just at dinner time and happily announces, 'Brother Sam has taken leave and gone home, let's sleep in his bed, the mattress is nicer and it has a mosquito net.' Ningthem laughs and closes the book that is lying on the trunk by the corner of his bed, which he uses as a reading table, and says, 'When will he come back?' 'No idea,' Pari replies.

After dinner, which is eggs cooked with a lot of potatoes and a few tomatoes, the two go to Pari's cubicle. Pari sits on the bed and Ningthem on the chair and both open a book each. Soon Sir Joseph, the house warden and their PT teacher comes for the routine check and on seeing Ningthem in someone's else dormitory, he asks, 'What are you doing here Ningthem?' Ningthem replies in his usual polite tone, 'Sir, just studying.' The warden looks at Pari who appears to be reading the book in front of him, though one is not so sure if his mind

is actually in it. Then he wishes both the young boys, 'Goodnight, study well,' and goes to the next cubicle. Pari grins at Ningthem. Just as soon as the warden goes out of the dormitory, Alex pops in and asks both of them, 'Where is Sam? Has he gone home?' Pari nods his head. Alex sighs as though he was expecting to see Sam but is disappointed to find that he has gone. Before he leaves, he takes out a cigarette from his pocket and tosses it in the air bossily for his two friends to see his symbol of adulthood and indulgence, catches it and puts it back in his pocket and leaves.

The two are surprised by their friend revealing his secret that they do not share nor endorse, but he has left before they can say anything. Ningthem curiously asks Pari, 'Is Alex friends with brother Sam?' 'Yes, they are, they hang out together. I don't know what he is up to with these seniors,' Pari replies. Ningthem does not say anything and goes back to his reading. But Pari closes his book, puts it on the table, pulls down the mosquito net above his head and suggests they go to the toilet to pee. After they come back from the toilet, Ningthem switches off the light and they go to bed together.

On days when the sun shines bright the playgrounds dry up and the temperature shoots up. Days are warmer and humid, so the two boys decide to bathe in the afternoons after lunch. But the tap water continues to be slightly muddy, so the two put soap and shampoo sachets in a bucket with towels and a few clean clothes and head out to search for cleaner water. Behind a new dormitory under construction they come across an open temporary water tank filled to the brim with rain water. Finding the water clear even though sand and tree leaves have accumulated at the bottom, the two boys put down their buckets and quickly take off their clothes. When Ningthem wraps a thin towel around his waist covering his underwear, Pari pulls it away. Ningthem struggles to hold it, but Pari snatches it and puts it in the bucket filled with clear water. The two boys then joyfully bathe and wash their shirts and shorts after they finish.

On some days during their routine bath, Pari splashes water at Ningthem as he tries to wrap the thin towel around his waist. Soon

Ningthem gives up. The two boys spend their afternoons like this, in each other's company away from the eyes of their classmates and seniors. It is as if they are secretly going out for their adventures filled with mischief and not letting anyone know about it. This adventure brings a sense of comfort and closeness between them. Soon they start wearing each other's clothes without really minding, though some of Pari's clothes do not fit Ningthem, and the latter's are slightly bigger on Pari. They are often seen studying together as the first mid-term approaches.

SAM'S SECRET

Meanwhile Sam develops a new habit. He starts drinking liquor and smoking which he gets every Sunday from town. Going out on Sundays for seniors like him is hardly a problem, and he gets liquor and cigarettes almost every week. As his drinking and smoking routine becomes more regular, he starts following the two boys. He comes and checks on them at odd times, sometimes during bed time or early in the morning before the others wake up. He often calls Pari to his room on different pretexts. His behaviour intrigues Ningthem. Sam is one of those seniors whose command and influence on campus is well-known, and no one dares to question his actions. But he mostly drinks and smokes alone and is careful enough not to be caught. One late night Ningthem cannot find Pari in the dormitory, so he goes to check in the prefect's room. As he takes the stairs, the lights go off. In the dark he manoeuvres his way to the prefect's room. The door is shut, but he hears a strange sound like a child crying. It worries him. He peeps through the gap between the door and the frame. He can barely see anything except for a beam of light like from a torch flashing across the room. He goes towards the window on the other side and tries to get a glimpse. Out of the blue, the lights come on and what he sees startles him, and he jumps and accidentally nudges the window glass

with his elbow. On hearing the sound, the prefect falls on his back on the bed, hurriedly pulls the blanket, covers himself and looks towards the window. He sees Ningthem as he tries to hurriedly step away and run.

What is going to happen next is a question in both their minds. Sam decides to get Ningthem to leave the school lest his secret be revealed to the world as that will also mean that Pari will be just his. Ningthem too ponders about this possibility. He fears being ragged severely by the prefect. But the turn of events surprises him.

On a late afternoon, a few days later during the remedial class, the class teacher abruptly comes in and asks Ningthem to come to his quarters after the class. Ningthem is intrigued by these unusual summons. After class, he goes to meet his teacher alone; Pari has not come for the remedial class. When he reaches the tiny living room, the teacher is already waiting for him with his wife seated on the sofa. The principal is not present for the meeting as if he has deliberately given the task to the teacher. Once they break the news, Ningthem silently walks out of their quarters, takes the shortcut to the dormitory and goes straight to his bed. A little later Pari comes in and is surprised to find Ningthem seated on the bed still in his uniform. Puzzled by Ningthem's unusual silence and sulking face, Pari climbs to the bed and sits beside him imploring him to speak. Owing to Ningthem's refusal to speak both of them skip evening tea, and only when everyone has gone to the dining hall does Ningthem finally break down.

He sobs painfully, and the words get caught in his throat. Pari embraces him and lets him finish crying after which Ningthem tells him in a hoarse voice, his nose running, 'I have been expelled from the school.' The words echo in the dormitory, but Pari surprisingly remains calm and composed.

It turns out that the prefect along with a bunch of other seniors on his initiative sent a letter to the principal demanding Ningthem's expulsion from school on alleged grounds of indecent behaviour. The principal was forced to agree since the bunch of seniors especially the prefect have close connections with the District Students Association

whose influence has spread across educational institutes in the district. Ningthem's family does not take his expulsion well, and the copy of the letter makes it worse. The patriarch's words break Ningthem. He often calls him 'homo', and no one dares to stop him. The punishment that follows is confinement at home except to go to a school nearby. His mother goes and requests the headmaster of a private school to admit her son. After a lot of coaxing and a full payment of the entire year's tuition fees on top of the admission fee, Ningthem is admitted to the new school at an unusual time in the year. At school, his classmates treat him differently because of his effeminacy and untimely admission. New friendships do not work out or are less pursued by him as well. He keeps quiet and mostly to himself. His youth, enthusiasm, and spirit dissipate slowly.

But one thing keeps him alert and occupied—his longing for Pari. He writes letters and makes phone calls, and every time he does this he feels alive, happy, and hopeful. Even though his family does not allow anyone from his earlier school to visit him, and he is not allowed to go there either, they continue talking on the landline whenever Pari goes home for a short break. Months pass and at some point a dreadful thought begins to bother Ningthem—what does Pari think of the expulsion? Why has he never brought up the incident and tried to know the truth? This small idea slowly grows into a powerful one disturbing his thoughts, and he can no longer overlook it or brush it aside.

In time, Ningthem not only withdraws himself from everyone but also from Pari. The phone calls and letters also stop with time. He fills his diary with words of his longing, pain, and memories of their time together and the chaos, conflict, and contradictions in his life.

RE-UNION

They haven't seen each other for a few years. The long phone calls have stopped. Time and distance have indeed pulled them apart. After

both of them finish their Class 10 examination, Pari continues to study in the residential school while Ningthem has to leave his home town to study humanities in Class 11 in a school in Imphal.

It is the last week of June, and the rain shows no sign of stopping leaving various places flooded but Ningthem has to go and hunt for a rented room and move in before classes start in July. His family has neither relatives nor family friends in Imphal who can keep him in their house or help him find a place. Given the situation at home where no one is resourceful enough to perform this task, Ningthem is clueless. Lying in bed one night after dinner, he starts worrying about what will happen if he does not find a rented room soon. Outside its still raining, and there are daily power cuts at night; the inverter charge is also low, so a candle is lit in one corner that fills the room with its dim light.

The landline phone suddenly starts ringing at the other end of the room. He reluctantly gets out of bed to pick it up. When he picks the phone and says, 'Hello,' the voice on the other end replies, 'Ningthem?' The voice is striking and familiar. As he answers, 'Pari!' his eyes beam with an expression of both surprise and joy; his cheeks blush as he listens to the voice on the phone. Pari asks how he is and where he intends to study, 'How was your exam result? Which school are you going to?' Ningthem pulls a plastic stool near the phone, sits down composed and calm as he reluctantly tells Pari his exam results, which he feels could have been better. For almost half an hour they go on about one thing or another. Finally, he overhears someone calling through the muffled speakers of the phone, 'Pari, dinner is ready, come.' Pari abruptly reminds him of what he has already said, 'Come, I will help you find a rented room near my house,' and hangs up the phone. After he puts down the phone, Ningthem remains where he is, musing about the unexpected phone call. The thought of living in a rented room near Pari's house brings a smile to his face; the pangs of isolation of the last few years vanish and suddenly hope and excitement brim his thoughts.

An unexpected surprise has come from nowhere, and Ningthem cannot stop blushing, but he is caught unaware when his brother walks

into the room. In a moment of confusion, he picks up the torch from the table, lights it, gets up and opens the old wooden wardrobe with broken glass panes where his clothes are kept folded and pulls out a blue T-shirt with a round neck, black jeans and a slightly torn black leather belt. He places them on the bed beside the pillows and goes to the bathroom to pee before going to bed.

As the bus approaches Keishampat, the pouring rain suddenly stops, strong winds chase away the dark clouds revealing a clear blue sky and a bright but pleasant sun. All of a sudden, the weather turns perfect with a breeze which sounds like soothing music as it gushes in through the open windows. The moment he gets down at the bus stop a hand taps him on his right shoulder from the back. Ningthem turns to find Pari. For a moment they look at each other, both smiling and their eyes fixed on each other. Pari takes Ningthem's hands in his and squeezes them lightly. Then he pulls Ningthem closer and gives him a really tight hug, which leaves Ningthem embarrassed and yet elated. But it is the kind of reunion he has imagined many times; embracing each other passionately and not letting go until they are tired of the fierceness of their embrace. As they stand on the roadside like two intertwined bodies, a storm starts from nowhere bringing dust along with it, dark clouds envelop the blue sky as fast as the storm, and then the lighting comes followed by a roaring thunderstorm. But the two of them stand there unaware and unaffected till the sudden gush of heavy rain hits Ningthem's cheeks, forehead, and his eyelids catch the droplets.

His eyes open to a dark window pane wide open and the curtain flying high as if it is struggling to be free. A white streak of light flashes across the dark sky, then the roaring sound from the sky shakes the roof. Thereafter, strong winds gush through the open window bringing droplets of rain that hit his face, sending a chill through his body. He lights the torch beside the pillow and checks his watch; it's 4.30. He gets off the bed and shuts the window properly, then tries to get back to sleep, but a vivid image of Pari, taller and bigger now, smiling at him while his hands are clasped in his just the way in the dream, flashes in

his mind. He pulls the blanket till his neck and closes his eyes. 'What a dream I just had,' he says to himself.

Unable to fall asleep again, he wakes up in the dark, goes to the bathroom and freshens up. He then makes milk coffee, warms two slices of bread and has his breakfast silently in the kitchen lest he wake up anyone in the house at this hour. After breakfast, he gets ready to go to Imphal. He has already heard a bus passing on the street, so he decides to catch the second one. Before he gets out, he checks his wallet; he has two hundred rupees, enough for the day even if they go out to eat chowmein somewhere in Imphal.

After 10 minutes, the second bus comes, it has, besides two other passengers, fisherwomen taking their catch to Imphal before sunrise. These women are mostly from the vicinity of Loktak Lake where the primary occupation is fishing. They are huddled in the window seats wearing thick woollen shawls to keep themselves warm in the unexpected storm and rain this morning. He takes the third seat from the front; the slightly torn leather seat feels quite cold. As the bus starts, the cold wind seeps through the corners of the window panes and the partially open door. After the conductor has taken the fare from Ningthem, he falls asleep, his head swinging sideways and jumping once in a while each time the bus jerks. He wakes up at Nambol. Realising there are still another 20 minutes to reach Keishampat, he closes the half open window and goes to sleep again. This time when he wakes up the bus has already reached Kwakeithel. He gets up and tells the conductor to stop at Hotel Excellency as he has to walk for five minutes from there to Pari's house. He gets down from the bus and takes the road on the side of Excellency. The small road has so many potholes filled with muddy water from the rain earlier this morning that he has to choose his footing carefully.

As he approaches Pari's house, he realises how early he has come and gradually a sense of embarrassment takes over. But the excitement that has been building since the previous day also makes him blush. He takes the last 90-degree turn, and now the house is just some metres away.

The gate is wide open, but no one is there in the courtyard; he calls Pari twice but no one answers. He goes inside and calls Pari again to which a woman's voice answers from the kitchen, 'Who is it? Come inside.' Ningthem realises it's Pari's mother. He goes to the kitchen and finds Pari's mother doing the dishes in the sink. Before he can say anything, Pari's mother looks at him for a second or two and exclaims, 'Ningthem!' She pauses for a while and speaks again, 'Sit, sit! How are you? It's been so long!'

Happy with this welcome Ningthem replies with a smile on his face, 'I am fine,' and sits on one of the dining chairs.

She leaves the dishes, wipes her hands with a towel, comes and sits down beside him and continues, 'This early in the morning, where are you headed ... have you come to see Pari?'

Ningthem smiles and replies, 'I have some work here in Imphal, which Pari and I are supposed to do together.'

Her eyes have a slightly mischievous look, and she teases him, 'I forgot that you all are grown up boys now and have personal work at this time in the morning. But Pari has just gone to the airport to drop someone, you should wait for some time. And I must finish doing the dishes and start cooking lunch. Let me get you tea while you wait for him.' She goes to get a cup in which she pours tea from the kettle on the gas stove.

While she takes out biscuits from the cupboard, he casually asks, 'Airport, at this hour Mama?'

She sighs as if she has doubts or does not understand something fully, 'Oh yes, airport at this hour. I told you, you all are grown up, and we no longer know what is happening in your lives. The other day one of your seniors from his school came and stayed with us for two nights saying he was going to go to Delhi today. So Pari has gone to drop him at the airport.' She puts down the tray with the tea and a few biscuits on the dining table.

Ningthem takes a sip of the tea and picks up a biscuit. As he takes a bite, he asks, 'Which senior Mama?'

She picks up the last few crockery items from the sink, and without turning towards him replies, 'Sam or something, not even a Meitei.'

The name shocks him. For a moment, he stares at the tea cup, transfixed at a thought. At his silence, she asks, 'You don't know Sam?'

Ningthem replies in a fuzzy voice, 'I know him, I know him.' As he utters his name, he feels angry, perplexed, and irritated. The next moment, he starts asking himself what on earth that wretch has been doing in Pari's house. But he tries to hide his feelings and makes sure she does not read his mind. But then can he really fool her?

Probably sensing his turmoil, she enquires, 'What happened Ningthem? You are silent.'

'Nothing, nothing,' he replies.

'Then you have your tea and wait, I am going to start cooking,' she tells him.

Silence envelops the kitchen except for the clanging noise of the utensils as she prepares to cook. The momentary feeling of being welcomed dissipates in the silence. The mention of Sam's name and perplexing thoughts about Sam and Pari's closeness start bothering Ningthem. After he finishes his tea, he starts feeling awkward and out of place. Pari's return from the airport and their inevitable reunion irks him now, even though this has been a moment in the making for a long time. He sits for another 5 minutes or so but a sense of perplexity, anger, and jealousy slowly overpower him. Finally, he gets up and says, 'Mama, I will come back later. I think I should go and finish my work first.'

The abruptness of his decision must have made someone of her age curious or aware of the young boy's change of thought, so she cleverly replies, 'Isn't it still very early for any kind of work to be pursued, that too without Pari? Will it be too much to wait a little longer and go together?'

The young boy does not catch the nuances of her words, so he simply re-affirms, 'I will come back later,' and forces a not so convincing smile on his face.

She has no doubt realised the intensity of his thoughts disguised beneath his smile, so she decides not to coax him but be a sweet mother and lift his spirits, ‘Okay then, but I am making lunch for you as well, you must eat together with Pari. I will tell him to wait for you. Don’t be too late, after all it’s been many years since you came to our house. And go safely, crossing roads in Imphal can get risky during office hours.’

Ningthem still has the same smile as he gets up to go. As he walks along the same road towards Excellency, instead of the earlier rush of excitement and happiness his thoughts are mired in a perplexing mix of anger, confusion, and jealousy.

Ningthem stands at the bus stand contemplating about Sam’s visit to Pari’s house and their companionship. The morning sun has become hotter, the traffic has increased, and he begins to feel this moment of contemplation out of place. A few minutes later he gets in a bus at Keishampat and takes a window seat. At the same time Pari reaches home. He goes to the living room, sits on the sofa and dials a number and speaks to someone on the phone. Then he goes to the kitchen and casually asks her, ‘Mama, what are you going to cook for lunch today? Can you ... ?’ Before he finishes his mother cuts him short and tells him in an inquisitive tone, ‘Ningthem came when you had gone to the airport. He waited for a while, and when I told him you had gone to the airport to drop Sam, he looked a little confused and abruptly left. I told him to wait, but he was adamant. Where were you boys planning to go?’ Both of them are silent. Pari breaks the silence and gives a clever reply, ‘We had to go for some very important work for him. I am sure he must have got late and left without waiting for me. I will meet him later surely,’ and he quickly goes out of the kitchen and goes to his room. He looks out of the window towards the gate in case Ningthem has come back, but there is no one there. He sits on the bed and wonders if his old companion has been hurt and has left without saying a proper goodbye.

SOME YEARS LATER IN DELHI

Them is unable to decide whether to trim his beard or not. So he trims his eyebrows, peels off the orange facial mask, and goes to the bathroom. He shivers lightly as the water from the shower hits his body. November morning is slightly cold for an early morning shower. He sings, 'My mama told me when I was young we are all born superstars ...' but is interrupted by a phone call and then a loud knock on the front door; his friends are here.

Them and his new set of friends are high spirited this morning. As the cab takes the turn from Connaught Place's inner circle towards Barakhamba Road, the four of them on the back seat and the fifth one on the front seat sing loudly with their hands swaying slightly in the air. The cab stops near the red light just after the metro station where a crowd has gathered and police personnel are guarding the perimeter. They get down from the cab and walk towards the red light. The drum beats get louder, the laughter, rush, and fanfare even bigger as they mingle with the crowd. Two of Them's friends are holding placards which say, 'The Future is Genderless' and 'Gender non-binary people exist.' People with different racial features, ethnicities, regions, skin colour wearing all kinds of costumes and some with masks make up the crowd. For a while Them does not feel comfortable wearing high heels and a *phanek* in public for the first time. Even though he wears just lipstick and no make-up or wig, the *phanek* and high heels make him look different from everyone else, and that kind of uniqueness in appearance and a radical re-invention and expression of one's identity in public bothers him. The previous night Them kept saying in the closed Facebook group that he had a feeling of slight anxiousness and also shame to be out in public and making oneself visible in the way he was in his private and close spheres, but everyone sweetly told him that the first time was the toughest and yet the most memorable one and that he would be with them throughout the pride march. A little later, they showed selfies of what they would be wearing at the pride march and that gave Them new strength.

The heels surely trouble Them, but the spirit of the crowd, the drum beats, the dance and songs are overpowering. After 15 minutes or so, the crowd finally starts walking, and the pride march officially starts. As the crowd slowly moves ahead, Them realises he is getting unsolicited glances from people in the crowd. His momentary euphoria gets a little shaky with each glance eyeing him as if he is being scanned purposely to find a flaw. No one says anything to Them, but the sharp glances steal his confidence. At some point, Them tries to join the shouting of slogans and shaking his leg to the drum beats like most of the others in the crowd, but he feels a lump in his throat and heaviness in his legs. So he walks quietly observing the crowd and the rest of his friends who are indulging in the fanfare quite freely, dancing, singing and shouting slogans.

Near Janpath market as the crowd takes a slightly narrow road, people stop to buy cigarettes, water, soft drinks, and snacks. Them goes to a less crowded vendor where four men are busy picking up water bottles and snacks. He waits for his turn. Them sees a tall man with curly hair put his left hand on the shoulder of the shorter one with blond hair and try to kiss him as they wait for the shopkeeper to return their money. The blond person releases himself quickly in embarrassment and turns around to check if anyone has seen them; time freezes, and the bright sky turns hazy for a moment as he meets Them's eyes.

THE SECRET

Pari is seated on the wooden chair placed in the corner of the room. Sam is in bed, lying on his back, covered with a blanket from neck to toe. His hands and body move clumsily underneath. Pari's eyes are fixated on Sam, but he does not say anything or move; he fidgets with the torchlight on the table. Coincidentally, the lights go off. Pari flashes the light on Sam who pulls off the blanket, flips over and bends

on his legs and hands. He faces the wall, and his ass is covered by a red panty, which is in sync with the red push up bra as he turns to face Pari. Pari focuses the light on his tight butt. Sam starts swaying his ass and moans in a shrill but soft tone. His left hand pulls the edge of the panty and stretches it to show more flesh and skin. Pari strokes his crotch with one hand. Seeing the hardened crotch, Sam turns over, bends on his knees, cups both sides on the bra in his hands and bites his lips. Out of the blue, the light comes back and in two seconds a sound from the window startles both of them. Sam falls on his back on the bed, hurriedly pulls the blanket and covers himself and looks towards the window. He has seen Ningthem's face as he tries to hurriedly step away and run.

TAKE A BOW

Raindrops thump on the roof, splash against the glass window pane, and the temperature drops. Sam remarks, 'Rain at this time, isn't it unusual?' as he adjusts the black stockings and the push up bra carefully and watches himself in the mirror. His waxed chest now appears round, smooth, and voluptuous with pronounced cleavage. A smile beams on his face. He bends down to pick a lipstick from the pile of cosmetics scattered on the dusty table on which the large unframed mirror also stands, leaning against the wall. He chooses the blood red lipstick and starts applying it gently on his lustrous lips, and at that moment he catches Them's eyes watching him intently. He puts back the lipstick, pulls the bra strings on both sides and releases them with a force that makes both his male breasts bounce. Sam applies foundation and red lipstick and puts on a black wig. Them glances at him, but does not say anything. Seeing Them's gloomy face, Sam asks, 'What are you thinking?' Them exhales smoke, pauses, and speaks softly, 'Memories have a way of resurfacing on their own, and I do not have much control over this. There is a lot on my mind, you know that,'

and he takes another puff. Sam lights a cigarette and speaks to Them without looking at him directly, 'Every time you talk about memories, it unleashes a sense of guilt in me. I wronged you once, and that is not changeable, but I also desperately wish that both of us move past that and nurture the friendship we have. Not just friendship, I see it as a family in fact, our own kind of family, and I will always try to make up for my past mistake and never hurt you again.'

There is a short pause before Them speaks. He just says a few words, 'I understand. Let's go down, I have booked an Uber. The party starts in half an hour.' As Sam goes to the bathroom, Them gets up and checks his slightly crumpled frock in the mirror. The crack though fixed suddenly reminds him of a line from a song 'Trust is like a mirror, you can fix it if it's broken, but you can still see the crack in that mother fucker's reflection.'

When they get in the cab, the driver steals glances at both of them. As the cab gets out of the crowded NCC gate in Humayunpur, the November rain has stopped, leaving the air chilly. Them opens the window; the cold breeze kisses his reddened cheeks. He takes out his phone, puts on the ear phones on and plays 'Take a Bow' as the cab drives on the rain-washed street. On the way they hardly talk, Sam is busy with his phone and Them with his thoughts.