

Sonny meets Ash a little after 11 a.m.

She had beaten up her seven-year old maid after a violent argument with her husband over their two sons. Later, when the little girl turned up outside her bedroom door with a bruise on her lower lip, she gave her an old bottle of nail polish and lip-gloss to distract her. The maid is the asylum of flesh and bones in which Sonny often seeks refuge. She is also an expert at convincing her dying mother-in-law that what she is eating – usually sliced potatoes with a mild garnish of salt, pepper and the strongest sleeping pill Sonny is able to get her hands on – is different from what she ate a while back.

Sonny is already irritated by her sister-in-law's presence in the house and her elaborate narration of her dream over dinner. She spent the entire morning brooding over last night, so much so that she even forgot about the highlight of her day. She doesn't like being late for her daily pilgrimage of hate with Ash. Her fists are still pulsing from the blow on her maid's lower lip. She will strike her on the upper one as well if the gloss doesn't adequately hide the bruise – to give the whole pout a uniform distension. She doesn't want her husband, Madaan, to know that she has an emotional safety-valve in her young, orphaned maid.

Sonny is old enough to be Ash's mother. But unlike mother and son, this pair is bonded by its love for hating almost everything. They usually choose this hour as all the men are in their offices and the housewives are busy with their daily

chores. More significantly, because Ash's brother has also left for office and his mother is busy cleaning up his father before throwing him to another pointless day of existence.

She is late by ten minutes.

Ash doesn't know how to express his anger. Rather than saying anything, he punches himself hard on his thighs. When he can't feel enough pain, he clenches both his fists and knocks the knuckles hard against one another.

That's better. I must not harm myself. I have to live for my father. When the signal doesn't reach his brain, he repeats, I have to live for my father.

He makes sure that Sonny does not notice him. She is striking an ivory-handled cane on the ground. The pockets of her sweater are bulging with odd shapes. She taps him on his shoulder.

Don't you see anything unusual?

Ash doesn't say a word, turns around and starts walking. She races to catch up with him, when she sees an old man across the road. He is slouching behind the fencing installed before the boundary wall of the old Army hospital, pissing and heaving a sigh of relief. Sonny crosses the road, picks up two bricks lying in a

heap of garbage and burnt leaves next to the road, and mounts them in front of the small vertical space in the fencing. She feels jubilant and basks in the glory of this accomplishment. Now he'll have a tough time getting out. You can't do things so easily. You can't escape when people like me can't. I had such a difficult day and it's barely noon. Why should he feel so relaxed?

The old man looks back with an embarrassed smile. Sonny wonders how he can smile now. She looks at him, then back at the two bricks. Why isn't he noticing the obstacle? Is he trying to pretend that I don't exist? Do people ignore difficulties? Is that a way to escape from them?

She responds with a smile. But when he turns back to zip up his trousers, she adds two more bricks to the tower of her hate. She is not happy with the result. But she hopes he has a difficult time. Like she did. Like she always had.

Ash stares at the bright yellow coat of paint on the army tenant's quarters on top of House Number 6. He remembers the house because of their driver who ran over a litter of abandoned pups for two consecutive days while reversing the cars out of the driveway. Their limbs were so frail that they couldn't move and the driver had parked the car in such a way that, when he reversed, the tires went right over their bodies. The pups cried for their mother, meeting their fate one after the other.

Are army men paid well? Ash wonders. It's not even festival time. Then why have they painted the house? Do they have so much extra money?

Ash squirms when Sonny walks back and catches up with him, breathing heavily. She is stocky, but her height saves her from seeming obese. She wears loose, baggy pyjamas and a white kurta, with an extra large Nike or Reebok T-shirt, which her son used to wear to the gym, over them. She completes this odd look by wearing thick-rimmed spectacles and a pair of grey Adidas shoes. In contrast, Ash is lanky, his hair falling all over his round face, his eyes droopy and drugged, his walk wayward and unsteady. He is wearing track-pants, flip-flops and a T-shirt with 'Cult' inscribed on it in gold.

They have just started their walk when Sonny notices a sparkling new Chevrolet standing regally next to House Number 10's old Honda Accord. Are they that rich? She wonders.

Let me check the number plate. I'm sure it's not theirs.

Forget it, Ash says, but a large part of him wants her to check it.

A dark-complexioned man, with keys dangling from his finger, accosts Sonny. Sonny turns her jealous gaze away but Ash motions her to confront him.

Whose car is this? She asks.

It's my boss's, he replies tersely.

Sonny is not satisfied with this information. It won't give her the necessary social ammunition to get back at them. Knowing whether this car belongs to them would give her a better idea about their bank balances. For the last year, this particular neighbour's old Honda Accord was her only solace when she looked at her own two second-hand cars. She tried her best to ask their maid if she could find out whether they were paying for their purchase in instalments or not. That would have brought her even greater comfort – that the neighbours were still not the legal owners of the car.

All that the maid was able to disclose was that the couple had an eleven-year-old, recalcitrant son who had already decided that, when he grew up, he would buy a helicopter after selling this house and go to Manali every month. He is still being tutored privately as no school is willing to take his nonsense. The parents have told everyone that he is a genius who will work for NASA one day and will be the first Indian to walk on the moon. The maid also told her that when his elder sister got married, he raised hell till he was given money equivalent to that spent on the two functions and the dowry, and forced his broke parents into a cruise trip – to Singapore first and, then, to New Zealand. Sonny was ecstatic.

Every house should have a son like this, she had screamed in delight, handing the maid a crisp ten rupee note.

I recently got booked by the traffic policeman for a wrong number plate. I want to see these new number plates just to make sure, she tells the driver.

The driver doesn't know how to turn down Sonny's request. He must have been involved in several accidents, Sonny thinks. She sees a scar on his left cheek and wonders if it has been inflicted by a knife. She forgets the purpose behind approaching him and entertains this new fantasy - the driver with the permanently scarred face. Next time, when someone asks her why she doesn't have a driver and has to trudge through the crowded streets of Delhi on her own, she can cite this driver and say that they are raucous and pick fights for small reasons. To an unbiased eye, it's clearly the small incision of a blade.

He shifts away from her while she is still thinking about his scar and how she could use it to make her web of lies more intricate.

Go ahead. Look at it.

It is a moment of suspense for Sonny.

Ash is thinking about the paint. Do army men earn big bucks? They've wasted their money anyway. The paint on the house looks terrible to him, even though his room is a similar bright yellow. Maybe the identical yellow. The weather and the pollution must be giving it a different colour, he thinks. No it's not the same as that of my room. He wrestles with his conscience, or whatever is left of it.

Going behind the Chevrolet to check the number plate, Sonny prepares herself for yet another defeat. Years of fruitless existence have made her a pessimist.

Suddenly, voices are heard from inside the main gate. Sonny doesn't want to be embarrassed. Facing the car she sees the initial HR and not DL on the number plate of the Chevrolet. She feels victorious and nods joyfully to Ash.

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The two are walking side by side in the cold breeze.

Sonny wants to be closer to Ash but she doesn't know how he would react. They speak very little, but at times this silence generates a telepathy of conversations.

She wants to know why Ash attempted suicide. After all, she came to know about him when the doctor at the hospital in Naraina consulted her husband after the lavage was completed. Madaan was so excited that there was a suicide

attempt in the neighbourhood. Now, I'll have a permanent source of income. These suicidal bastards hardly get over their medication. He advised the most potent medicines for Ash which led to severe headaches and stomach troubles – all so that he could make some extra money. After Ash was discharged, his mother stopped buying medicines from Madaan Chemists and so Sonny doesn't know what he's taking. If they are the same medicines, he must see a new doctor.

Please, Ash. Talk to me. I'll give you the names of medicines that have hardly any side-effects.

Years later, she saw a pallid yet beautiful boy walking in the field with his two dogs. She hadn't been able to take her eyes off him. One day, she simply stood outside the new post-office building and waited for Ash to approach her. He did. He told her that he felt very lonely and wanted to have friends in the colony. But he never talked about his suicide attempt.

I don't know, was all that he said when Sonny questioned him. I was very gregarious in school. I don't know what happened after I gained puberty.

What? She had asked.

I don't know.

She feared losing him. Still, she wanted to know the cause of his aloofness and he continued to evade her.

They see barricades, checkpoints and maps for the defence area after turning right from House Number 20. Suddenly the road becomes smooth and more even. Sonny rubs the cane on the road to feel it. She starts talking about Madaan. His chemist shop is in the low-profile Mansarovar Garden in West Delhi. When people ask her where he works, she gets enraged. She starts hating him for being a middle-class chemist and making her responsible for two unsuccessful sons. But she tempers her hatred because, as much as she would like to otherwise, she has to live with him.

Okay, so tell me the details, Ash says.

Twenty packs of condoms – five small-sized, three flavoured, rest regular, she replies. A lot of Viagra, she adds as an afterthought.

Ash gets upset. He can't believe that people he doesn't know are still having sex.