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A Guardian Signature

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Dong..dong..dong...eight times and with it a thud on the table with the falling of a thick grammar book that blew off the dust of chalk. The English teacher Alex D’Souza took off his specs and blared out, “Pankaj, if you want to avoid my cane, you must learn the adjective phrase properly.” Then placing the specs again on his Roman nose he shouted before going out of the class, “Tomorrow I’ll see the home-task on the adjective phrase I’ve given you...and don’t forget the signature.”

Pankaj looked at the clock hanging on the pale yellow distempered wall of the class room that announced the breaking up of school quite faithfully. Then he looked down at the copy where there were innumerable scratches of red spots—a big zero out of ten. But the thing that scared him most was below the right corner of his copy—guardian signature.

In the pull-car Piku crouched in a corner with his head hung utterly downcast. Rishov, his class-mate gave him a

push with his bony elbow and said in his usual stuttering voice, "Hey, what happened?"

Piku gave no response. His face remained buried in his school bag. After a lot of persuasion he lifted his face just to reveal a pair of sleepy eyes and a red spot on his left cheek caused by the chain of the bag on which he had dunked his face so long. The tip of his blunt nose became reddened too. Though Pankaj and Rishov were from section B of class six of the city's most renowned Christ Church Senior Secondary school, they belonged to different benches. If one had Rishov displayed his progress card where more than ninety percent marks adorned it, on the other hand Piku's progress card could only display barely forty percent, though he never regretted it. He always justified himself by saying, "I did my best. If teachers don't give me marks, have I anything to do?" But one thing was common in both the students that made them the best ever pair in the school. The two had a sheer interest in mischief and playing pranks. But Piku being poor in study became the victim of the teacher's violent outburst while Rishov's outstanding performance made the teacher ignore all his pranks.

On knowing the reason of Piku's worry Rishov patted on his shoulder gently so as to encourage him and said, "Don't worry, just tell your father the truth and get the signature."

"Just tell your father and get a signature," imitated Piku. Then changing the tone his voice he snapped, "It's not as easy as you think. Father will beat me black and blue..."

"...and if you don't bring the signature Alex will do the same," warned Rishov and continued, "who knows he might call your father too. Does he have your father's cell phone number?"

"Yes," replied Piku in a suppressed voice.

"This Alex Sir cannot be t..trusted", said Rishov almost rolling his eyes and then continued, "you know last Tuesday he called Jiko's father!"

"Why?" Asked Piku breathlessly.

"He was trying to copy the signature of Anthony Sir instead of learning the format of formal letter," Piku was reported. The reporter continued, "When Alex Sir snatched away his copy his eyes almost came out of their sockets to his horror that the last page of his English copy was totally jotted with the copied signatures of Anthony Sir, an exact specimen of fine arts! Do you know how did he reward the artist?"

"How?" he asked as though expecting something sinister.

"He took out his cell phone quickly blind in anger and called his father to meet him in the office the next day." Rishov supplied the reply.

Now, this panicked Piku so much as to have his heart in his mouth. He was not at all prepared for such an outcome. He felt as if he could see his father's rolling eyes spewing fiery cannon balls. Then he thought of his grandmother, who always took him under her protection whenever any calamity befell on him. Even his father could hardly raise

his voice before grandmother, who never liked little children to be scolded harshly. But it was not a suitable time for him, as his grandmother was on a tour to Puri to visit the Lord Jagannath and would not return in less than a week. Piku thought how he was missing his grandma in such a critical situation, who could surely have managed to procure a signature from his father in a peaceful way.

“Do you like English grammar?” suddenly asked Piku looking embarrassed.

“Of course,” Rishov replied promptly. “It’s one of my favourite subjects after Science.”

The very word SCIENCE left him quite ill at ease. It was also one of his dreaded subjects for how much he disliked to learn the definition of cell, photosynthesis and learn the periodic table of chemistry. He never succeeded in producing a fair copy before his father whose spectacled eyes got habituated browsing over ‘do it again’, ‘not done properly’ and so many ‘very poor performance’. Sometime Piku thought to smash the head of Adheer Bose, who was likely to be too miser to give Piku a little more than pass mark.

No sooner did Piku step into the house than his eyes fell on the wall clock which was comforting him by displaying a ten past two. He still had more than seven hours. He became desperate to find a way out to escape the punishment. Therefore, before he departed for his private tuition he took out his school English copy from his bag and hid it under the mattress of the bed of his grandmother in his room lest his mother should come

across the copy while taking out the tiffin-box. Piku slept with his grandmother, who supplied limitless store of anecdotes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Arabian Nights and other countless folk tales. Before he left the house he glanced back at the bed with a little speck of suspicion in mind whether the place was secured enough.

On his way to tuition he pondered about how to escape punishment. He felt as though he was between the devil and the deep sea. If his father was to supply the signature it would only be in the exchange of his being beaten black and blue by him. On the other hand if Alex did not get the guardian signature he would not hesitate to use cell-phone to tell his father all about it. Now he wished he had given a wrong phone number to that vicious English teacher. But it too would not work for him to avoid punishment. Alex might even come to his house to get the phone number and then the matter would be quite serious. Then Alex would get an excuse of being given a wrong phone number.

At the tuition he sat beside Rishov, who would help him with solving the class works and home works. The tutor Kalishankar, a tall, wheatish, corpulent man in his half sleeved shirt and jeans was occupying most part of the white-board. His skilled hand was swiftly running on the board, as he was giving the notes from the chapter of The Delhi Sultanate. But Piku lagged behind not because he was as slow as a snail. In fact his eyes fell on Jiko sitting at the farthest corner of the room. Piku saw him munching

bubble-gum. Suddenly he hit upon an idea. No sooner did the idea come to his mind than his face lit up. He hoped, as if he had got a way out to escape punishment.

“What an idea!!” his leaping heart gave out an inaudible shout.

“Piku, stand up,” suddenly shouted the tutor.

Now, quickly shifting his eyes to the man standing before him in horror that suddenly replaced his spirit capering just a few seconds ago Piku got up to his feet.

The tutor scrutinized Piku’s face for a little while. Then threw his question, “Who was the founder of the Slave Dynasty?”

Piku remained silent hanging his head unable to answer the question. He roved his eyes on every corner of the book kept open on the desk to scrounge the answer. He failed.

A fellow raised a hand. It was Kathleen Gomes, a fair complexioned, slender girl with her head full of black curls. She was the second position holder of class six maintaining her rivalry with Rishov, the first boy. She was from the Indian-Christian community.

Kathleen turned her head towards Piku and smiled what the latter ignored flatly.

On getting the nod of Kalishankar Katheen promptly answered, “Kutb-ud-din Aibak” and he let her sit with a smile on his face. Piku prepared to be scolded and ultimately received it.

The idea that suddenly bloomed in Piku's mind gradually started spreading its petals. But he still did not have enough faith in his newly found idea. He turned back the pages of his history copy and browsed over his father's signature for all his copies were full of them. Then lifting his head he looked at Jiko, his rival in school cricket team. It was almost indigestible for Piku to be bowled out in duck in the semi-final of the inter-school cricket tournament by Jiko, the fast bowler of the school cricket team. Jiko, too disliked him for being smashed out in many occasions when the captain of his team Biplab dropped him in slog-overs in some vital matches.

Therefore, to seek help from such a fellow was beyond his dignity. But he felt too helpless. For a moment he wanted to ignore the talk of the whole school, their rivalry. After the tuition broke up Kathleen came up to him. She gave him a piece of delicious fruit cake that her mother baked at home and asked when she noticed that he was not so willing to take the cake what he was fond of , "Any problem?"

Piku remained silent.

"Piku", she nudged him, "do you have any problem?"

This time he looked at him grimly. On being compelled he told her the whole story.

"Now, what to do?" asked Kathleen showing her anxiety.

"I...I've an idea," faltered Piku, as if he was losing faith in his once glowing idea. "I think Jiko can help me to get a signature of my father."

“What!” Kathleen rolled her eyes in surprise. “Piku, this’s cheating...an act of forgery. You can’t do this.”

Piku, who was still an innocent boy and had never ventured to commit such an act before looked at her expectantly to get a reply in favour of his action.

He walked up to Jiko and asked falteringly, “Can you do me a favour?”

Jiko, who was chattering about computer games with his friends turned his head in utter surprise, as if he could not believe own ears, “What!”

The others broke out in laughter.

“I need a favour from you,” Piku repeated the question downhearted.

“What favour?”

“Can we meet alone?”

Then turning to his friends he bade them good bye who left reluctantly.

On their way back to home both Piku and Jiko were walking holding their cycles followed by Kathleen. When the three neared the church gate they halted.

“Can you promise first to keep it a secret?” asked Piku tensed.

“You’ve not yet told me the matter.” said Jiko looking straight at Piku, his rival.

“Alex Sir’s ordered me to bring guardian signature tomorrow,” Piku gulped down his breath and continued, “Can you do it for me?”

“You know it quite well that it’s a cheating,” replied Jiko curtly.

“See,” now Kathleen intervened for Piku looking straight at Jiko, who was still munching the bubble-gum menacingly “as Piku doesn’t have any other way, he needs your help. Now tell me whether you’ll help him or not.”

Jiko without giving any quick reply thought of the matter for a few seconds. Then he cast a sly look at Piku, his arch-rival, as though he sensed the time to be the best opportunity for him to take revenge. At a glance those humiliating moments flashed before his eyes—square-cuts towards the boundary; a straight-drive through the best fielders in the team Irfan and Jacob, chasing in vain; a series of over-boundaries; the umpire’s unceasing waving and lifting of fingers and above all getting scolded by the captain in slog overs followed by shameful defeat in the inter-school final.

“Shame on you, the best bowler of the team!” Jiko’s silent grudge on himself could not be seen on that day.

He brought himself out of the trance and replied looking straight at Piku, who was standing like mute spectator beside Kathleen, “On two conditions I can help you.”

“What’re they?” suddenly asked Piku impatiently.

“The first is that,” continued Jiko in a way so as to threaten him, “I need the Warship Battle, FIFA-18 and GTA-5...”

“But, don’t you have those games?” snapped Kathleen. “I think Piku can’t give you,” She finished to defend Piku.

“It’ll be better you don’t come between us,” now Jiko shot through his gruff voice looking menacingly at Kathleen.

“Ok, you’ll have it,” Piku suddenly agreed assuming that to be an easy bargain in comparison with getting the duplicate guardian-signature and asked in no time, “What’s the other one?”

Now, the ominous silence that loomed there for a little while, was broken by Jiko’s gruff voice, “You’ve to make a promise.”

“What promise?” asked Piku.

“I think,” Jiko continued, “you remember the inter-school cricket match. On that day you got the man of the match trophy.” Then Jiko clenched his teeth and said, “Now it’s my turn.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kathleen raising her brows, as she knew Jiko’s nature of foul-play.

“What I mean is a very clear fact,” snapped Jiko boldly. “If you promise to be bowled out in my over throughout all the matches against our team, in the coming inter-house cricket tournament I’ll do that.”

“No...no it’s not fair,” Kathleen protested vehemently this time. “You can’t take advantage of.....”

“You better keep your mouth shut,” Jiko threw his rude reply eyeing straight at Kathleen. “It’s a matter between us. Who told you to poke your nose?”

Now, Piku knew that if he could not play well in the coming matches, he would lose the stamp of being a ‘saviour’ of the team that was stuck on him after his miraculous performance in the last month’s inter-school cricket tournament. How he smashed an ace fast-bowler like Jiko was the talk of the school. Even the corpulent Principal, whose double chin almost covered the knots of the neck-tie giving a very sombre look, who often instructed that students must not go beyond the precincts of literature, science and mathematics, once called him and patted on his shoulders referring him to be the little Tendulkar of Christ Church Senior Secondary School. It was indeed a reward for him. And now he realised that it was only on account of a guardian-signature he would have to lose all those he acquired by dint of his skill and dedication. After committing such a thing he would certainly lose his position in the team. His dream of becoming a good batsman and one day play for the state-level matches must be shattered. The face of Danny Brown, a tall, well-built, red faced man, the coach of school cricket team all at once flashed before his eyes, who once told his father, “This boy has great potential for being a good batsman. I’ll make him a star. Please let me train this boy. I don’t want such a talent to be wasted.” His father had readily agreed to Brown’s proposal and bought him a cricket-kit for rupees six thousand.

Piku came out of his trance and heaved a painful sigh. He nodded in agreement accusing himself for being the destroyer of his own dream.

Eventually, it was decided that the next day during the second period of Hindi madam Radhika Das, whose powerful specs very often slid up to her nose-tip while she relished occasional nap, would be the best time for the act. Jiko also promised from his side that he would take only two or three minutes for the trial-signature and then on his English copy there would be installed a perfect signature of Piku's father.

"What if Alex catches the trick and...?"

"A year's hard work will never go in vain," Jiko assured Piku while munching bubble-gum. "I'm as expert in it as I'm in bowling. That Alex can never suspect it."

Then Jiko hastily took out his Social Study copy and showed him pointing to a corner of a page. When Piku was looking at it he asked, "What do you see here? I've done it...exactly like my father...look at the teacher's signature below...even it didn't come into his mind that it's fake!"

Now the deal was done.

It was seven thirty when Piku reached the house. He was staring at the mattress of Grandmother's bed but dared not take it out lest he should be caught. Sitting at his study table he was jotting down some vague lines and shapes on the last page of his math copy and was wondering about Alex and his vicious cane. In less than a five minutes

the whole page was covered with scribbles. He was trying to copy his father's signature but could not even go near it. He cursed himself and thought how God had deceived him of this talent what his friend Jiko was endowed with.

Time rolled on. After a long, tensed wait Piku saw his father's spectacled face over shadowed with the fatigue of the day's work. Piku tried to gulp down his fear the moment his eye met with his father's. At the dinner table he was eating like a sparrow and left the place with a pretense of stomach-pain. But still he did not get respite. His mother poured some draughts of Decolic, exact 5ml. "Thank God," he wondered, "had it been more, it could certainly have affected me." How he disliked the syrup since he had been very little. But when he thought of his being very little he presumed that the time was not as bad as the present one. No doubt, at that time there was no Alex D'Souza in his life.

The clock chimed at ten thirty. The bitter taste of Decolic still had not gone. Piku dared not take out the English copy from under the mattress lest such a real hidden place should be discovered if anyone of the house happened to notice him doing so. Staring at the photos of God and Goddesses, he fervently prayed for bringing him out from the fresh trouble he was entangled into. He remembered the story of the Ramayana his grandmother often told him. How fascinated he was hearing the heroic exploits of Rama, who killed the demon queen Taraka with the help of divine weapons given to him by the sage Vashistha. Now the boy wished how badly he was in need

of such divine weapons through which he could successfully get himself out of the trouble he got into. Had he possessed such magical weapons he could have vanquished easily the existence of monsters in his school.

Next morning Piku woke up when the faint sunlight streaking through the window rail washed his face. The sound of gargling of his father was coming from the bathroom. Piku peeped out of door and saw his mother busy cooking his breakfast. He took out the English copy from under the mattress of the grandmother's bed and thrust this into his bag in no time.

No sooner did he get into the car than he whizzed open his school bag and took out his English copy to discuss with Rishov about adjective phrase and take the answers down on the copy. But the moment he reached the very page he was looking for something happened that left dumbstruck.

What he saw was almost beyond his imagination: a perfect guardian signature.

"How's it possible?" he wondered. "I had kept the copy under my grandmother's mattress...did any one see me while hiding the copy there? Who could have seen it?"

He lifted the copy and rubbed his eyes once more to see whether he was dreaming or not, as after all it was no less than a blessing of God. But the moment he lifted the copy a slip of paper slid down on his lap from his copy. Piku picked it up and read:

Don't try to be over smart. Alex D'Souza rang me up today and told me everything. I knew you'd do something. I think your grandma's mattress is not as good a hiding place as you think. This time I'm taking down my signature but be very careful in the next time. It'll not be quite easy for you to have it.

Your father

Piku winked his eyes and peeped out his head. What he could see was a vague, tiny figure standing at the door of his house. It was his father.



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Debasish Banerjee was born and brought up in Durgapur, West Bengal. With an intense desire for English literature, he finished his Master's degree in English from Burdwan University. Some of his short stories have appeared in a local tri-monthly English magazine BORDER VIEW. Presently, he is a teacher of English language and literature in an English medium school based in Mathura, U.P.



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