

Photo

Azra Tabassum

What is that, of which we see only one facet? A photo.

We had gone to look for a bride for my brother. We brought back a photo and showed it to him. My brother likes girls with long hair. The photo was clicked from the front. The girl in the photo had thin lips, eyes that were wide spread. She was short and fat. She was quite pretty to look at. *Bhai* took the photo in his hand and asked Yasmin, "How long is her hair?" My younger sister said, "Very long and thick, she braids it". He flipped the photo over and said, "I can't see that!"

This set me thinking. When we see a photo in which there is a boy and a girl, we usually think they are romancing. We start applying past or imagined time to that photograph. When we can see the back of an object, then why not of a photograph! Our whole being is contracted into the photo. They say a photograph captures our being, our memories, our time, our expressions. But even after being captured, there is no claustrophobia in the photo. Earlier, people used to believe that getting a photograph taken lessens your life. I'm really not quite sure how true that is. When I ask, they say, "That's what elders say".

Some people are very photogenic, and their photos are so real, it seems they will emerge from the photo. If a mirror and a photograph are the same, why are they considered different? What is the difference between a mirror and a photograph?

Sewer Line

Lakhmi Chand Kohli

This is the story of a man who is always drunk while working. He is educated, but he goes inside sewer lines to clean them.

Where I live, the sewer line has always been a problem. It's always blocked, always over-flowing, and always uncovered. So the whole lane is always stinking. Of course, the reason the sewers are always uncovered is because the drunkards in my neighbourhood are particularly compassionate towards us. They don't leave a single lid – big or small – intact.

Since the sewers are blocked, the drinking water we get is also dirty. So dirty that forget drinking, we can't use it for any thing. Why the sewers are blocked also has a reason – the people in the neighbourhood, and the fact that all the garbage is disposed off in the sewer lines.

Once our sewer line was totally blocked. So the drinking water flowing from our taps was so dirty that we couldn't even bear to smell it. Everyone in the lane got together to lodge a complaint. When we reached the office, we saw a man. He attended to us. He was very thin, and looked like he was well educated – because he was writing very well in English. We filed our complaint and returned home. The next day, the cleaners came with all their instruments – three nine-foot long wooden poles and two thin iron rods that were a little bent at the tips – to clean the sewer. There were five men in all. Also among them was the man who had taken our complaint. Today he looked very dirty. He was wearing dirty, stinking clothes. And he had had a bit much to drink today. I was surprised to see him in this condition. I thought, why is such an educated man dressed so badly? I was looking at him with wondering eyes. The four men who had come with him were looking into the sewers, while he was standing to one side. The four men were

telling one another that all the sewers were blocked. Then they looked at the last sewer and –

They said to Ashoki: (Ashoki is the name of this man I have been telling you about) Ashoki, go into the sewer and see what is blocking it.

Ashoki said: Ok, I will take a look.

(Seeing him enter the sewer, I was really surprised. I thought to myself, “This man is no officer, he is a low employee”. The four men who were with him were probably less educated than he was, because it is Ashoki who registers the complaints at the office.)

Ashoki entered the sewer and cleaned it thoroughly – he pulled out some clothes and some garbage. Now our sewers were absolutely clean. After the sewers were cleaned, all the people in the lane got together and collected two hundred and fifty rupees and gave it to the cleaners. Then they went back to their office. After they were gone, I thought I must speak with that man and I went to his office the next day.

That day he was wearing clean clothes. But he had drunk a bit too much that day. When I tried to speak with him –

He said: (His hands folded) Oh please, brother! Who are you and why are you chasing me? Leave me alone. I don't want to answer your questions.

After saying this much, he told me to get out like he would a beggar. I went out quietly. What else could I have done? He was too drunk. As soon as I got out, I saw a man looking at me. He stopped me and –

He said: Son, come here.

(So I went up to him and greeted him politely.)

He asked: Son, who are you and what do you want to ask him?

I said: Sir, nothing. I just wanted to get to know him, and why he is the way he is.

So he said: Son, I will tell you why he is like that.

I asked: Sir, what is your name?

(He was fat and dark. He didn't ask me anything, not even where I was from, why I wanted to know about Ashoki.)

He told me: My name is Hari Singh.

I asked: Sir, why does this man drink so much?

So he said: *Bhai*, what do I tell you! I have advised him so many times not to drink, but he doesn't listen to me. Instead, he turns around and chases me away with his abuses.

I asked: Sir, doesn't anyone in his house stop him?

He said: *Beta*, he lives alone. All his family members live in the village, so he comes here drunk everyday. He will surely lose his job because of this.

Sir, can I know something about you?

He said: Yes yes, ask. But what will you ask me?

I said: Nothing much, sir. Just something about your work.

He said: Ok, ask.

I said: Sir, how much time since you have been working here?

He said: Around ten to twelve years.

I asked: Sir, how do you feel about working here?

He said: *Beta*, work is work, no work is bad. A worker likes his work.

(Then I thanked him and tried asking some more questions about Ashoki.)

I said: Sir, don't your officers say anything to him?

He said: What can you say to someone who refuses to understand? Yes, sometimes they do speak to him, but to no avail. So many times they

have even threatened him with suspension. But he just doesn't pay heed to them.

I asked: Sir, will it ever be possible for me to speak with him?

He said: No, it is pointless speaking to him. He will just hurl abuses at you needlessly. It isn't good for you.

I said: Alright sir. Never mind. If not with him, it was nice to speak with you.

Then he asked just as I was leaving: Listen son! Tell me – where have you come from and why are you asking all these questions?

So I said: Sir, I am from Ankur society, and want to speak with some people, want to now about them and their work.

(Saying this I went from there and kept thinking I couldn't speak with the person I had come to speak with, but at least I got something done.)

I, Ashoki

Lakhmi Chand Kohli

This is the story of a man whose name is Ashoki. He is thin and dark. Sometimes clean, sometimes dirty. He enters sewers to clean them. He is 30-35 years old.

I am Ashoki. On Thursday, in response to a complaint that had been filed with us, we went to clean sewers in Dakshinpuri. We had gone to clean the main line. As soon as I entered the lane where we had to clean the sewers, I stood to one side quietly. I had to go inside the sewer. So I had come wearing dirty clothes, and was a little drunk. People who live in the lane had come out of their houses and were telling us that the third sewer was blocked. They said this was proba-

bly because a new house had been constructed near it and when cement was being mixed for it, it was flowing onto the drain. Maybe it flowed inside.

My colleagues were opening the lids of the sewers and checking them. I was just standing, quietly. People were looking at me as if I were mad. And some were disgusted by me. I know because when children would come towards me, their parents would scold them and call them back.

The boy who had come to file the complaint was also there. He was looking at me with surprised eyes. Maybe he was thinking that when he had come to the office, I was wearing clean clothes and talking to him like an officer. But today he was surprised at seeing me in dirty clothes. I was laughing within. In his eyes, I was first an officer, a *sahib*. He had called me sir. But what would he call me now? Maybe he was also thinking of the same thing.

Then my colleagues told me to get inside the sewer. Hearing this, his surprise probably only increased. In his mind, he must have been thinking, "This is no *sahib*, but a lowly employee who enters sewers and cleans them".

When I was going inside the sewer, people were looking at me as if I wasn't a human being like them. Don't know how dirty I am. This, when it is their filth that I clean. I wonder why people think this way. And when I cleaned the sewer and came out, the happiness on the same faces had to be seen! But some people were still disgusted by me. Because now I was even dirtier – wet clothes, covered with filth. Then I washed my hands in front of a house and started towards my office.

But I was thinking, I clean their filth. Then why am I treated like an animal? Why? Am I not a human being like them? Then after some moments, my heart would say, "Forget it, it doesn't matter. This is how things are".

Then we reached the office. And that thought got left behind in the same lane.

Azad's story

Sangeeta Kumari

This is from a long time ago. I must have been 12 or 14 years old then. At that time, a man named Azad used to live in our lane. And with him, his wife Bimla. Azad was always drunk. And he had explored every substance one can get high on.

Azad and Bimla had two children. Azad was a thin man. His height was five feet two inches. And his wife was much thinner than him! Thin as a blade of grass. Her height was five feet four inches. They had two sons. One was twelve, the other fourteen years old. Both the boys were extremely scared of their father. So whenever Azad used to beat Bimla, they would just watch. Maybe it was just that they were too young to say anything.

Their house was dilapidated. Its walls were plastered using mud. And the roof was made of tiles.

Whenever Bimla would try to explain things to Azad, asking him to consider his behaviour, Azad's temper would fly through the ceiling. And he would beat her to a pulp. She would be covered with blood. All the neighbours would stand and watch the show. No one would intervene. And in any case, who interferes in someone else's fights these days? And this fighting was an everyday affair. Everyone was bored with this daily fighting.

Whenever Azad would beat Bimla, she would scream, shiver and shake, and try to shrink into a corner of the house. What could Bimla possi-

bly do? It was the same story day after day, everyday. Azad would spend the last paisa of the house on getting himself drunk. He wouldn't leave Bimla with any money. There was nothing Bimla could do. Azad was ready to go to extremes to get his drink.

Azad is the kind of man who would neither earn himself, nor let his wife earn. How could household expenditure be organised? After all, they couldn't possibly remain hungry. Sometimes they would ask people who lived in their lane for food. But who would give them food on an everyday basis? And they would feel ashamed asking everyday as well.

To save the family from hunger, Bimla would work in big houses. But as soon as she would come back, Azad would beat her up outside in the street. Neighbours would try and explain to him, but he was a very bad man, and would turn around and hurl abuses at them as well. So everyone would abuse him back. But no one would beat him, because they were scared that one blow, and he would surely pass away.

But the daily fights! If we would step out to watch them, my mother would scold us and say, "Go sit inside". Tired of their daily drama, people who lived in the lane chased them out of their house. They sold their house and went away somewhere else.

Azad's Story, Again

Sangeeta Kumari

This is from a long time ago. I must have been 12 or 14 years old then. At that time, a man named Azad used to live in our lane. And with him, his wife Bimla. She was always drunk. And she had explored every substance one can get high on.

Azad and Bimla had two children. Azad was a thin man. His height was five feet two inches. And his wife was much, much thinner than him! Thin as a blade of grass. Her height was five feet. Some of her teeth were broken. The rest were rotting. She would always wear torn, dirty clothes. Their sons were both four feet two inches tall. And they were really scared of their mother. And Azad was also terribly frightened of her. Bimla was forever drunk. She would be willing to even kill to ensure this state of affairs.

Her house was dilapidated. Its walls were plastered using mud. And the roof was made of tiles.

Whenever Azad would try to explain things to Bimla, asking her to consider her behaviour, her temper would fly through the ceiling. And she would beat him to a pulp. Azad would yell, shiver and shake, and try to shrink into a corner of the house. What could he possibly do? It was the same story day after day, everyday.

Bimla would spend the last paisa of the house on getting herself drunk. She would really beat Azad for money. After all, what could Azad do? There was not a paisa in the house. What could they eat? He used to get very angry with his sons. And would also pity them a lot. Bimla was the kind of woman who would neither earn herself, nor let her husband go out to earn. Now, they couldn't possibly remain hungry. Sometimes people who lived in their lane would themselves give them something to eat. But who could do that on a daily basis? To save the family from hunger, Azad started going to work in some big houses. Some cash began to flow into the house.

But all this was not agreeable to Bimla. She would accuse Azad of all kinds of things. "Where do you get this money from? Who is she who favours you and gives you money?" And she would say, "Why don't you go to her, the one who gives you money?" Azad would fume when he would hear all this and would say some things of his own as a retort. He would say, "I don't sit at home like you, blowing money on booze.

This is money I have earned. Try and earn something, then you will know. You just know how to sit in the house and talk rubbish”.

Listening to all this, Bimla would get even more furious. Her temper would reach the sky. Then what? Bimla would pick up a brick and chase Azad. And Azad and Bimla would begin circling the park as if they were celebrating their wedding anniversary by circumambulating around the fire like they had for their wedding ritual. And a crowd would gather to see the show. As if it were a non-ticketed, free show. Some people would feel sorry for them, and others would roll over with laughter.

Once or twice she even cracked her husband's skull. Police had arrested her a number of times. But she would not mend her ways. Not only would she hurl abuses at her family members, but she would not even spare her neighbours in this great act of hers. Her neighbours would hurl abuses back at her. But they would not hit her because she was thin as a blade of grass. One blow, and she would surely die. But tired of these daily antics of hers, they finally asked them to leave the neighbourhood. Now they don't live here anymore.

Laila, O Laila

Rakesh Kumar

When I think about Laila, my heart becomes restive. I loved her dearly. Without her, my life seems incomplete. Without her, my heart grows uneasy. Even today when I remember her, I smile to myself, I forget myself. I wonder if she misses me. But I miss her. Her eyes! Maybe they still wait for me. My Laila, innocent, dark. When she speaks, I can't understand her. But I feel her. When she stands and raises both her hands, I feel so much love for her.

I still remember the day I took her to the forest. We both loved one

another. I trusted her a lot, and she trusted me a little. That's because I used to scold her in anger sometimes, and so she used to stay a little annoyed with me. But when I would try to make it up to her, she would understand quickly.

In the beginning, she used to roam around with me. When she was with me, she would not feel scared, as she used to when she was alone. That day I took her to the forest, and we roamed through the green trees and bushes. (There was a neem tree there. I used to eat neem leaves in the morning because that keeps the blood clean.) When we reached the neem tree, I said to her, "You stand here, I will pluck some leaves". She nodded her head in agreement. I left her there, alone, and climbed the tree. When I climbed down after some time, what do I see? Laila wasn't there! I was worried. I got scared. Where could she have gone? She is a stranger to the forest. Where must she be wandering? My heart was anxious.

Where should I look for her? Like a mad man, I called out for her, running all over. I screamed loudly, Laila, O Laila... And what do I see, she comes running towards me. She knows that my voice, filled with my love, has drawn her to me. She came and wrapped herself around me. I lovingly stroked her head with my hand, started kissing her face, and said to her, "What if something had happened to you?" But she was looking at me with love-filled eyes. What I said to her made no difference to her. But maybe she was trying to understand what I was saying. Then I took her home with me. We lived together, in the same room. But we slept separately. But sometimes at night she would come and sleep next to me. When I would wake up in the morning and find her sleeping next to me, I would get really angry. But her innocent face would pacify me.

We spent many nights together. But she had one bad habit – when I would scold her, she would tear my or my family members' clothes and sometimes the bed sheet in anger, sometimes she would bite and cut our shoes.

Her beautiful eyes, those lovely lips, big ears, that small, sweet nose. There was a beautiful chain around her neck, and in it small bell, which would tinkle when she walked. When I spoke with her, she wouldn't say anything back. She would just quietly look at me. I was the one who would keep speaking. She would jump up and down, expressing her happiness to me. Sometimes her long nails would prick me, but it didn't hurt – because the nails touched me in love.

Just one thing makes me sad. I wish she could speak, that would have been so great. We would have unburdened our hearts to one another and consoled each other.

I can't forget her to this day. I simply couldn't! She is part of my life. So what if she is a dog, she is part of beautiful moments of my life.

Dear All

Yashoda

I have taken some headlines from a newspaper. Some of what is here is from conversations with people around the headlines, and some is my own banter...

(1) Comfort for a short while, or trouble for life?

I spoke with many people about this line, most of whom were men. At the mention of this line, the first vision before their eyes was that of their wives. The biggest problem to them, they say, is their wives. They say, "*Bhaiya*, marriage is a moonlit night only for four days. Then it's darkness. This is that poisonous sweet which if you eat, you repent; if you don't eat, you greed after". Well, that's what they think. But what do you want to say about this?

(2) A stick of fragrance, for the price of a dime!

This line makes me think I am stuck in the push and shove of a crowded bus. Along with bodies hitting against one another, is the clashing of one another's smells as well. Sometimes perfume wafts to your nostrils, otherwise the journey entails bearing each other's odours...

(3) Beware... True love has a short life.

I spoke with a girl about this line. Her name is Chanda [name changed]. Chanda is the owner of an ordinary face. She has in her nothing that could be called extraordinary. She told me it was precisely because of this special trait in her that a boy loves her madly. I asked, "What specialness does he see in this speciality of yours?" That is when she told me that he says, "If you had in you something special, you may not have been with me. Because I know what my face and form are worth".

So when I told her this line, she immediately nodded her head and said, "That's absolutely right". Looking at her I asked her how. Smiling, she said to me, "Yunus [name changed] doesn't want that I get a bad name, and I also don't want my family to be hurt by this. So neither of us will tell our parents and both of us will marry according to their wishes". I was not surprised at all to hear this, because this is how it usually happens. But I asked her nonetheless, "Then what is the meaning of this love of yours?" She said, "It isn't necessary that love is only that in which there is a union. If you were to look at our love as an outsider, you would think it is short-lived. If you look at it in our hearts, you will realise it is endless..."

(4) Rallies after rallies – fairs or trouble?

On reading this line, Ramlila Grounds flash before my eyes. Whenever there is a rally at the Grounds, traffic on the roads gets blocked and pamphlets from the rally fly all over. Sounds distorted by loudspeakers

echo everywhere, and loud and tuneless noise from vehicles caught in the traffic jam spreads all around. It's difficult to make out if people attending the fair in the Grounds are listening to the lecture, or eating *puris*, sleeping, or repenting having come there!

In Yashoda's news you will find truth hidden in the dust storms accompanying explosions!

But not yet! I will return after a short break, with more news from the public and from me, news that will confuse, or itself be confused, that will explain, or which will be incomprehensible...

Ting Tong...

See you later...