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## Black is the Colour of Ecstasy

**Subbaram Danda**

A gleaming white car screeched to a halt at the Statue of Labour on the Marina of Chennai. A fair lass in her late teens stepped out of it, stark naked. She was ravishingly beautiful. The vehicle moved on in slow speed. The young woman ran behind it. After three solid minutes it stopped again. She caught up with it. A burly man came out of the car and dragged her inside amidst loud giggles from its occupants. In a jiffy it sped away.

The time was about 6 a.m. The sun had just risen spreading its soft crimson rays all over. The morning walkers on the promenade of the world's second longest beach watched the entire incident in shocking disbelief. They could not make head or tail out of it. No one cared to call the Police or the media.

The young adult was Pratima, an M.B.B.S. student doing her final year in a reputed medical college. After the episode she got dropped, fully-dressed, at the hostel, where she was staying, as if nothing had happened. None of her room mates came to know of it. Days and weeks passed.

A brilliant student from a small town down south, she had been a class topper. The college dean had been hoping that she would score the first rank in the university. But her performance started slipping gradually. Her health appeared to deteriorate. One day, a team of doctors examined her and found to their utter dismay that she had become a drug addict.

Her parents rushed to the city and got her admitted in a de-addiction and rehabilitation centre. There she disclosed how it all began. Her initial curiosity, kindled by senior classmates, took her to a rave party, where she had her first brush with mild intoxicants. Subsequently, her progress to "getaway substances" was fairly fast. Finally she became a slave to addictive drugs. She had experimented with all types of hallucinogens. She had inhaled a few, smoked some, orally consumed several and got injected many others. They had generated in her feelings of exotic fantasy, elevated excitement and incredible euphoria.

She had finally reached a stage where she could not remain without drugs on a regular basis. When she ran out of money, she would beg with drug peddlers for free supplies. They would ask her to do demeaning things and she would obey them helplessly to get the substance she badly needed. The horrific three-minute streaking incident was one such.

Fortunately, she responded well to the treatment at the de-addiction centre. Her recovery was miraculous. Within a few months she became almost normal. Her rehabilitation programme too

did not pose any problem. With an unusual determination she got back to her studies, completed her degree and joined the centre as a doctor. She devoted herself full time to the care of addiction patients and also research. This gave her an opportunity to understand the changing contours of the drug demon.

Pratima was distressed to learn that young professionals in India, particularly in the Information Technology industry and call centres, were increasingly falling prey to the temptation of drugs. The segment of women in this horrendous circle was not insignificant. New-found affluence, unbridled freedom and peer pressure were the prime contributing factors. She was shocked to learn about another emerging trend. Illegal outlets calling themselves pharmacies offered drugs online and arranged for their delivery by couriers.

Over the years, the types of drugs consumed had undergone a dreadful transformation. In the past the most commonly-used drugs were naturally-derived mood changers like opium, ganja, and hashish. In course of time synthetic substances took over the reins. Every city in the country had its preferred potion. Mumbai raved wildly on Ice, Delhi on Ecstasy, Chennai on Ketamine, Calcutta on Meth and Lucknow on Yaba. The last one, highly popular in Thailand, was supposed to be four times more powerful than some of the others. There were also “designer drugs.”

Pratima, an erstwhile drug user herself, was aghast at the new developments. This redoubled her resolve to be of unstinted service to her patients and wean them away from drugs permanently. Her attention was drawn to a male inmate, whose case history made unusual reading. He was Victor, a handsome youngster. He hailed from a respectable family. His grandparents and close relatives enjoyed good reputation in the society. But his father was a jarring exception. A steam engine driver, he had fallen victim to drug abuse. He refused to undergo treatment and became a critical consumer of hard drugs. The most shocking part of it was that he constantly used Victor, even when he was a small boy, to run errands for him and fetch drugs from peddlers. In course of time he passed away but Victor partly acquired his habit. Fortunately he took drugs only occasionally.

After graduation the young man got a job in a call centre. His position involved working in different shifts, including night. Long hours of grinding work, abusive callers and rigid targets made him a distraught person. He turned to drugs on a regular basis.

Pratima took pity on Victor. She paid special attention to him. She reasoned that a young man, wrongly introduced to drugs by his own father, should not be allowed to destroy himself. She counselled him frequently. She narrated her own story to wean him away from the bad habit. He appeared psychologically convinced. Gradually, a strange chemistry developed between them and blossomed into love. As his condition improved, they went out often together. Their

relationship grew from strength to strength. She also sought his cooperation to realize her dream of working towards eradicating the menace step by step in co-operation with the authorities. He helped her, while still undergoing treatment inhouse.

She drafted a plan of action and got it approved by the board of directors of the de-addiction centre. Accordingly, it adopted a five km radius area around it and sought to make it a drug-free zone. Schools, colleges, civic authorities, district administration, corporate entities and the police were roped in to clean sweep the area of drugs. Public lectures, distribution of leaflets, surprise checks on suspected vendor outlets and stringent punishment started showing results.

At an international conference on “Drug Eradication: New Challenges” held in New Delhi, Pratima’s pet project came in for appreciation. Several non-governmental organizations offered to adopt it as a model for implementation in their respective areas. The Union Government announced special grants to the centre for sustained action. “On this occasion I swear it will be my endeavour to drive the drug traffickers out lock, stock and barrel,” an emotional Pratima declared.

On return, one day she was on her night shift. While going on rounds around midnight, she heard a cell phone ring. It was from the bed of Victor. He was fast asleep. The mobile instrument lay by his chest on the bed. After ringing for ten seconds it went off. Half a minute passed. It rang again. He was still in his deep slumber. With trepidation, Pratima picked it up but before she could answer, it fell silent. Could it be a very important call for him? It rang again but differently. This time it was an SMS.

Pratima read the message. It said: “Operation White Rose will begin at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow. Do as planned. No failure or slippage will be tolerated – Red Rocket.” Something flashed in her mind. The name was familiar to her. She strained hard to recall her drug days. Yes, it was how the chief drug handler in South India was known in his circles. In fact, she remembered, it was this rogue and a few others of his tribe that had forced her to run mercilessly behind the car in the attire of the primeval beings for three solid minutes on that fateful day.

She started thinking feverishly. What was Operation White Rose? What role Victor was going to play in it? Certainly, it should be a major assignment. Otherwise, the local chief’s call-name would not have appeared at the end of the message. She wanted to find out everything -- in her own way, discreetly. This was very important to her because at stake was her relationship with him. She went to her room quietly without disturbing him.

Next morning around 7:45 a.m., when she was getting ready to go home, Victor entered her room with a strange smile on his face. “Good morning, doctor madam! Today I am in a very

good mood. Let us go out for a walk in the park round the corner. I was told that white roses are in full bloom there. It will be exhilarating to take a stroll by them.” A bell rang in her mind.

“With pleasure,” she replied without displaying any anxiety on her face. She was sure something terrible was going to take place there. She was prepared to face any eventuality. Following the SMS message the previous night, she had arranged for two private detectives to shadow Victor and report to her all developments. Now she would also be going with him.

The road was deserted. As they kept moving on the sidewalk heading for the park, a white sedan with tinted glasses fully raised stopped suddenly by them. A tall brawny figure emerged from the driver’s seat, rushed towards them and stood in the front blocking their way. It was Red Rocket. With a derisive laughter, he growled at Pratima: “Hey, you think you have become an angel? Recall your past. Don’t imagine you are smart. You want to remove us from the scene? Forget yourself. Victor is your death knell. We have planted him in your centre. He is our man.”

The head trafficker’s face turned ghastly. “We are in the process of kidnapping you. Soon you will be dead and Victor will be rewarded....” Before he could complete his monologue, the two security guys pounced on him and immobilized him. Strangely, Victor did not try to escape. Nor did he try to go to the help of the drug chief. Soon he and Red Rocket found themselves behind the bars of a police lock up. A pistol was recovered from Victor.

That night, when Pratima entered her room at the de-addiction centre, she found a letter on her table. It was from Victor. He should have discreetly left it before they went out together for the fateful walk, she thought. It read: “Dear Pratima, first of all my apologies to you. You have been taking good care of me and I know you want to make me turn a new leaf. I am beholden to you. But now, I am in a mess. Drug Handler Red Rocket, whom you also know well, wants me to trick you and hand you over to him. Yes, I have been planted here by him. Twice in the past, I managed to foil his attempts. But he has threatened to kill me, if I fail this time. I am putting into place a plan of action to save you and myself. Trust me. My pistol will not betray me.”

This development perplexed Pratima. Should she help him out of the present mess? She decided in his favour. His letter became a key document. During interrogation Victor co-operated well with the police and disclosed everything he knew about the drug distribution networks around the hospital, near his residence and his call centre. This led to many arrests and seizure of a variety of substances. In the special narcotics court, no charges were framed against him and he was cited as the main prosecution witness. The case progressed fast. Ultimately, the kingpin Red Rocket and ten others were sentenced to life term. The judge commended Victor’s role.

Yet, Pratima was not prepared to trust him in full measure as in the past. Could he be playing a game? She wanted to wait and watch. After rehabilitation sessions, he was discharged from the centre. He tried to keep in touch with her, but diplomatically she managed to maintain a safe distance from him.

Victor felt happy that he had come out of the muddle unscathed. However, he had a major battle to win. Now his plan was to join hands with Pratima and lead a contented life. He formally proposed to her to tie the knot but she sought time to respond. She was in a dilemma, whether to marry him or not. Though his credentials had now been proved, there was a new complication. Every drug cartel was well-entrenched and had its own international connections. After a setback it would lie low for a while but soon would rear its head in some form or the other. Once a man had testified against a drug setup, she knew, it would track him down ruthlessly and kill him sooner or later. Victor was one such person.

Her thoughts continued. For all she knew, she had disappeared from the hunter's radar. If she moved closer to Victor now, she would also be targeted. Her dream of eliminating the drug menace would be shattered. After days of agonizing deliberation, she decided to stay single and devote herself totally to the cause very dear to her. Her desire was to live to serve the afflicted humanity and deal a death blow to the perpetrators of the drug crimes. This threw Victor into total disarray.

One day, when she was in the Out-Patient Ward, a disheveled man in tattered clothes with an overgrown beard was brought in a stretcher. He had been found lying in a semi-conscious state behind white rose plants in the park near the hospital. It was Victor. He cried out looking at Pratima, "Don't save me. Your rejection of my hand was the least I had expected. Though the drug lords have apparently wound up their operations in this part, they have been after me to taste my blood. I could go nowhere for support or solace. I decided to end my life, instead of facing their bullets. I have consumed a heavy dose of sleeping pills."

He gasped, paused for a few seconds and resumed his talk in a feeble voice, "Don't let your vigil drop. They can set shop again at any time. Please carry forward your good work with renewed zeal. May God be with you!" They were his last words. (Ends)