

THERMOS FLASK

Published in “ 9 Men And Their Stories on Women”

e ebook link - <https://www.amazon.in/9-Men-Their-Stories-Women-ebook/dp/B085TBK2ZM/>

(A short story based on a true incident)

That year I was preparing for my postgraduate examination after completing the stipendiary training in medical college. Postgraduate trainees in Calcutta, those days, did not get any salary; so I'd taken up a job as the residential medical officer in an upcoming cancer hospital on the outskirts of Calcutta. The job fitted the bill well for a temporary one. Not well remunerated but with a quarter to stay and food from the hospital kitchen, it was cushy enough to allow me the time and solitude to study and to attend special classes on some days when a local practitioner kept watch. The hospital was yet to take its full shape and consisted of only two wards - male and female, with twenty odd beds in each ward, in a small nice country-house type building with thatched ceiling under a sloped metal roof. A metalloid road skirted the front side through which a public bus shuttled once every hour from morning to evening. It was winter when I took up my duties there. The days were all bright and sunny and many of the patients would come out of the wards to sit around the pond and bask in the morning and afternoon sun of winter. I grew familiar with some of them, knowing more about them, much more than a bed number or even a case history would tell.

A fiftyish old woman, unusually smart and always elegantly dressed, used to come to attend her elder brother, who was suffering from colon cancer and required medical intervention every week for a dose of chemotherapy. A spinster with no family of her own, that lady bore the burden of her young nephews and did most of the talking about their father. We met often and grew quite friendly. Some days I would find her waiting for the bus to go back at the nearby bus stop in the evening where I would also go every evening because the bus stop housed also a small roadside tea shop. The hospital kitchen that served our food observed some strict rationing. For tea, it was a rule of three cups per day. So, every day after evening rounds I walked down to the tea stall. We met there and talked as she waited for her bus and I drank my tea.

I learned that she was now retired but she had worked as an air hostess. Air hostesses those days were not allowed to marry. One day when she asked which cancer was most difficult to treat, I mentioned lung cancer and how smoking had been found to be related with it.

“I know,” she said softly as she kept her gaze fixed to some distant object.

A couple of weeks later, she asked me the same question again and in particular, wanted to know if women too can grow lung cancer.

“Yes, from passive smoking,” I told her. “If a woman’s male companion smokes a lot in her presence.

“Oh!” She turned towards me looking somewhat startled.

That evening as we waited for her bus I told her how I missed a cup of hot coffee or tea when I study till late during those cold nights. She looked at me with a stare that was both affectionate and amused.

"Has it occurred to you," she asked, "that there is a very simple solution to your problem? Buy a thermos flask and get it filled here when you go back."

"Yes, I can do that but I have to first find out how much would one cost," I said patting the purse on my hip pocket, which in those days had not much to pat on.

Just then her bus arrived. As she proceeded to board the bus, she looked back. “Really!” She said looking a bit coy and then added, “Well, that can be taken care of.”

I did not see her for some time after that evening as her brother was discharged and not admitted again. About two months later I found the nephew of the lady who worked in airlines waiting outside the ward.

"Pishi (paternal aunt) has lung cancer. She cannot breath." He informed me curtly. Apparently the lady was ill for some time but refused to see any doctor. “But for the last two or three days, she developed breathing problem and we had her shifted to a local nursing home. After some tests, the doctors diagnosed lung cancer. And quite well progressed, they think."

After drawing out some fluid from her chest she slept through the night. Her nephew came next day with an old X-ray plate and a prescription. "Ma found these amongst her things this morning." The X-ray plate was three months old. It clearly showed a lesion in the left lung and the prescription dated around that time had two entries. One was for some general medicines for chest congestion and advice for an X-ray chest, the second one referred her to a cancer hospital. By afternoon the nurses had propped her up on the bed. She was able to talk and alert enough to understand the unspoken question in my lips. She shrugged; then bending her head towards me as far as she could, said, "It wouldn't have made any difference. Lung cancers, you told me, cannot be treated."

As I left her bedside she asked, “Did you get yourself a flask?”

Her disease had progressed enough for any effective treatment. The woman did not want to stay in the hospital either. She wanted to be discharged to be admitted to the nursing home near their home.

A month or so later her nephew came to see me. 'This', he said handing me a box-shaped package wrapped in a newspaper; "Pishi had asked me to bring this to you. Could not come earlier... her last rites... father was also not well."

The package contained a beautiful blue coloured thermos flask with an eagle perched over a globe painted on its body.