PANKAJ KUMAR

Why i burn like an Oak

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Dedicated to

The patriotic Indian Soldier who demands next to nothing when he can ask for the Moon.

Author's note

'Why I Burn Like an Oak' was conceived as a short story twenty years ago. It grew into a novel over the next ten years. It has been read (presumably) by almost every publisher's editorial team in the country and of course shown the exit door. The reason as I was told by a lot of enthusiastic readers was simple, 'this one is from the heart and for those who have one'.

I have always believed that there is something unusual about 'Why I burn like an Oak'. Even more than me my wife Alka and daughter Pranjala believe in its uniqueness. Their unwavering faith in the beauty of the story is the cause of this book to be published.

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Sameer alighted from his car, straightened his 'Service Dress' and opened the gate to 43, Burton Road. Even after the long drive he looked as fresh as ever, but missing was the child like grin from an otherwise ever smiling face. In its place, there was an undefined measure of pain and a lot of apprehension. Once inside, he closed the gate behind him, stood for a while and studied the layout.

The huge compound added to the silence of the damp afternoon. All was silent, except for the creaking of a rusted iron swing. He marched up the path on the beats of the rhythmic creek. Tiny saplings of freshly planted salvia and daisy lined the pathway. White wild rose plants, as tall as a mulberry tree filled one end of the compound. The old gardener worked silently at the rose bed. He looked up at the visitor with interest for a while then resumed his gardening. Nearing the end of the pathway was a girl sitting on a swing with her back to the pathway. The creaking and the footsteps stopped at the same time. There was a period of nothingness, followed by a period of expectancy and then things began to happen.

The girl on the swing turned to look straight into the eyes of the intruder.

Sameer saw her turning into a beautiful face and froze like a statue. It was sudden, the meeting of their eyes. The turn flung her silken hair all over the face. From behind those black strands of hair, her ocean deep, big, dark hazel eyes questioned him. Intruder! They said. He stood motionless for what seemed like eternity, mesmerized and a bit unnerved by the sudden turn, but re-composed himself soon.

It was her! His mind was working like an offset printer, words finding their form, accepting and proceeding ahead. She could be no one else. 'Oh, her eyes are mesmeric!' The twinkle in her eyes

was sparkling; they held him like magnet. The way Aryan had said, 'You don't notice her face till she closes her eyes, in fact you just can't'. Aryan was right, Sameer waited for her to blink. The neatly chiseled face lighted up, like marble glowing in moonlight. Her thin delicate lips having the natural colour of rose filled his eyes. He was blinded. The radiant soft skin spread a magnificent aura and her thick flowing silken hair glowed in the morning sunshine. Her face said it all. It was she! She was an angel, Aryan's angel and her beauty matched the description that he had formed in his mind.

He was not here to admire her looks! How could he be so irresponsible at an occasion like this? Her beauty was only her identity. He went through the process of the identity check once more; every detail conformed to his blue print which strengthened his belief. There was no doubt in his mind. It sure must be embarrassing for the girl though. He spoke nothing on the issue of identification and asked her no such questions to confirm who she was. It was unnecessary. He came to the point straightaway.

"I am sorry miss; I have sad news for you." He took a step forward and said as gently as he could, bending his huge frame in the process, whispering the words into her ears. She was fragile, harsh words could hurt her.

She stood up with a start! Unwanted Intruder! He was for sure, and what was it that he said? 'Sad news!' she repeated his words in her delicate mouth.

"Aryan is dead." He did not want to beat about the bush and make her anxious.

"Dead?" Her speech was almost mechanical, said without thought or emotion. It seemed like coming out of a tape recorder on the press of a button.

"Yes, he is dead." He repeated. There were no expressions on her face. That's her way of reacting to the shock, he thought. Different people react differently. Silence followed! After a little fidgeting of his feet during which time he could think of nothing but bite his lips, he heard her speak. She spoke in a soft hushed voice, almost to

herself.

"Aryan...?" Her face showed strains of the effort she put in trying to recollect the name, not mechanical any more. "Who was he?" She asked very politely almost apologetically, not wanting to offend the stranger.

Sameer stared at her in disbelief. 'Aryan!… Yes, that's what I said, Aryan. 'Has my speech betrayed me', he thought as he bit his lips once again. 'You don't remember Aryan?' He wanted to say it in those many words, but held himself back. His face was in any way saying that loud and clear. He just continued to stare at her in disbelief. Her eyes stared back at him for the first time; all confused and puzzled; a big question mark on her beautiful face. Of all the reactions he had anticipated, this was not the least. He was totally unprepared for this. How long could he keep fidgeting with his feet? As her reactions sank deeper into him, his knees buckled; he could hardly hold on to his huge frame. He could not turn and go; that would be most uncivilized on his part. Could he give up so easily? Was that the end of everything? Had he committed a grave mistake somewhere in the whole process? He felt unsure for the first time that morning; what next? He had to make a quick retreat to make up, if there had been an error of some sort on his part.

"Miss Sara Singhania?" He was extremely polite, confirming her credentials. That is all he could think of.

"Yes, that's me." She said and her twinkling eyes pierced him to ask, 'Now, how do you know my name?'

The questioning stare was relentless. The sparks from her eyes began to penetrate and hurt him. The beauty of her face was lost in the glare. Sameer would have run for his life; alas, he was a soldier. He repeated her words again and again in his mind till they completely sank in. Then it hit him hard. The earth began to move from under his feet. A volcano burst inside him. He could feel sweat run through his body from head to toe. He clinched his fists and pressed them so hard, that they began to hurt.

"Is anything the matter?" Sara asked very courteously seeing him

lose colour. She realised the severity of her looks. It was not in her temperament to be rude.

The agony was of his own creation. She was very gracious in showing genuine concern to a stranger who didn't look quite comfortable. "Please come and sit down, I will get some water for you."

"No... no, it's okay," he mumbled, "I think I have the wrong address." Obviously he lied, only hoping what he just said was true. He took a step back, the old gardener coughed loudly. The face of his dead friend appeared in front of his eyes. 'Sameer, I will not regret dying any more, not since I held her in my arms.' He could almost hear Aryan's voice right in his ears. Aryan had told him each and every detail of his first encounter with Sara. It was like a fairy tale. Aryan's words continued to ring in his ears, 'You would say the same if ever you fall in love with someone like her.'

Standing on the narrow path, in front of Sara, a hundred thoughts crossed his puzzled mind. There seemed no answers to his endless questions. Never would he know the truth, he thought. His mind was unable to cope with the unexpected happenings. Words deserted him. "I am sorry, I troubled you," was all that he could say.

His mind was not in control, he did not want to stay a minute longer. Turning abruptly he sped down the pathway. In the confused state of mind and eager to get back into his car, he collided with the girl who was just entering the gate at that precise moment. He did not even remember to utter an apology to the young lady. The gardener was at the gate, almost blocking his exit. But that was not his intention. He grinned with his half decayed tobacco filled teeth; "I retired from the Army twenty years ago, sir." Sameer paused and returned his salute, but said nothing. The gardener took a few steps towards the car expecting a few kind words. Sameer drove off leaving behind a disappointed man. 'May be twenty years was too long a time and things had changed!' Thought the old gardener.

Sameer was disturbed beyond words. It was something he could not understand. He headed straight towards his aunt's house where

he was staying. He took the wrong route for his house. Despite knowing that he was committing a mistake, he didn't bother to ask anyone for the right route and circuited round and round for half an hour before finally reaching the correct address. When he reached home, to his utter annoyance he found the entrance door locked. It made matters worse. He sat in the car speculating what to do. Then he faintly remembered something about the key, he dug into his pockets; luckily Mira aunty had given him the duplicate keys of the house in the morning. He opened the house and dumped himself on the nearest chair. Ever since the death of his friend, his whole anxiety and fear revolved around meeting Sara. 'How would he ever convey this tragic news to her, what would he say to console her?' He had rehearsed all possible contingencies over and over in his mind.

When it came to the act, it was a totally different story. A story where there was no Sara at all! The anxiety turned into a huge embarrassment. All along he had carried the burden of being the lone custodian of his friend's dreams. Those dreams lay shattered and the burden weighed heavily on his back. He looked up in exasperation; 'Oh dear friend why did you do this to me?'

He had known Aryan Vajahi for a very long time. It was incredible that Aryan had fabricated a story. And what of those letters..... Does a dying man ever lie?

Aryan had always followed him wherever Sameer went; school, academy and the battalion. They were two friends inseparable, till death did them part. Their friendship began by a mere stroke of coincidence. Mrs. Butler White, their primary school teacher, put them on the same bench at school. Mrs. Butler White was so different from all other teachers. She always wore long skirts that had flowers on them. Sameer and Aryan sat through the years on the same bench, learning their geography and sciences together. Aryan was six months younger, so they had to briefly part after school. He was under age for the Defence Academy. Six months later he was right there, but as his junior. It was so much fun.

At the National Defence Academy they were in rival squadrons. Always competing against each other. It was the finals of the inter squadron boxing championship. The last bout of the day, they were pitted against each other. The winner would lift the trophy for the squadron. There was a hushed silence as the friends faced each other before the start of the bout. Every one secretly thought that the winner had already been decided amongst the two. But no one knew who it would be. As the fight began, the stadium was on its feet. Not an inch was given this side or that. It was the fiercest battle of the tournament. Eventually Aryan lost by the narrowest of margins.

In the hospital with swollen and bruised faces both occupied adjacent beds. Aryan joked with the nurse, 'I wouldn't have spared him if he had lost, thank God he won!' Aryan always had this feeling that Sameer had a protective attitude, having become his senior, which he never could appreciate.

Sameer was commissioned into the Royal Guards Battalion a whole six months before Aryan. The vast geographical distance and sea change in their life style almost did not allow them to maintain their bonhomie during that period. Aryan wasn't sure which Regiment to opt for on commissioning; he was more inclined towards the Para commandos, Sameer insisted he joined the Guards. In the end it was the Royal Guards for him.

There was no looking back there after. 'The two devils', as Baldy, their second in command always lovingly called them.

Sameer was on a long-range patrol when Aryan had informed him about Sara. Back from leave, he couldn't hold himself, breaking signal procedure he had aired on the VHF,' Hello Sira, great news, I spell Sira Alpha Romeo Alpha.'

Sameer cut short the time of his patrol by walking all night long without a break. When the two met, Aryan narrated details of the face that could launch a hundred ships with such excitement. Sameer knew for sure Aryan was in love for the first time in his life.

It was sometime in January when Aryan had narrated the tale of his love. Five months later Aryan was going on this mission and he

had told him, 'Don't worry Sameer, I will come back even from the jaws of death. If not for anyone else, for Sara I have to.' Sameer had felt miserable lying on the hospital bed with a fractured limb, while Aryan went on a mission that was scheduled for him.

It was not an ordinary mission. A mission where everything was uncertain, the place, the time, the enemy, life or death! All that was certain was the mission; it had to be accomplished at all cost.

Sameer had known the hopelessness of the mission the day it was conceived. He knew the terrain just too well. It was extremely difficult to dislodge an enemy sitting on a cliff. Silently he prayed that Aryan should not be tasked to go on this mission.

'Sir, this is unfair, Aryan going so often,' he had told Baldy, the day he came to know that Aryan was being selected to lead the mission.

'All is fair in love and war,' the old veteran had smiled.

Sameer therefore cheated, when after great persuasion Baldy finally agreed to draw lots to decide who should go. Diverting the attention of everyone he marked the chit with his own name and promptly picked it up when the lots were drawn. But Baldy had caught on. 'You cheated,' he asked Sameer, later in private.

'I can explain that later sir, but let me go now.'

'Are you sure you can explain your conduct?'

'Believe me sir, I can explain everything,' he had told the Second in Command. For some strange reason Baldy had believed his words.

But providence again! The very next day Sameer fractured his leg during the fitness exercise. It was early in the morning at first light, when Sameer took his boys over the Burma Bridge, in a rehearsal of the operation. The rope gave way. Sameer was the first one on the rope as always and down he went without a warning. Perforce Aryan had to go on the mission in his place. He did go and go forever. Sameer thought of his dead friend's last wish. 'Give this letter to her' Aryan had scarcely managed to convey before dying.

He could not fulfill that one last wish of his friend. Shattered by burden of the depressing thoughts, he further sank into the chair.

What was he to do? Where could he go and find all the answers?

It struck him suddenly. The letter!…. He remembered the letter, the one that he could not deliver. The letter must hold the secret. He dug into his pocket and pulled it out. With great anxiety and fumbling hands, he opened the letter and read it.

'My dearest Sara,

This will be my last letter to you, but probably the first that you would ever read.'

Sameer read the first line and stopped. Had he read it correctly? He read it again. Yes, he had not missed a word. His heartbeat grew louder as he read on. 'Ever since we parted on that cold January morning, my mind wanders off to an unknown dream land, with you beside me. My heart believes that it is true for you too, or else your nimble feet would not have danced so merrily with mine. Love is a mystic attraction, a joy that sprinkles from the eyes. Your eyes have sprinkled that joy on to me. Can I ever forget your lovely hazel eyes locked with mine, unmindful of the world around?

Each night I sit and write to you, and the mere thought that someday you would read about my love electrifies me. But alas! An unknown fear holds me from my feelings reaching you. The fear, that I will be unable to convey the true intensity of my love to you.

I had wanted to deliver my letters to you personally, and watch you read them; feel them, word by word. All these days I had been waiting for such an opportunity. But it never could come. And here I am writing my last letter to you, if ever you read this letter, it will be all too late. It will reach you when I am gone...

It is common for many a love stories to die before they are born. But it is not so common to die without being able to express your love. Ironically our love story has met such a fate.

Now that I am dead, I have no fears. I can write to you without sparing a thought of the consequences. Nor do I want you to read this letter with passion or pity. Or feel each and every word of my letter as I had earlier intended. I do not want you to share the intensity of my love. All I want you to know is that these last few

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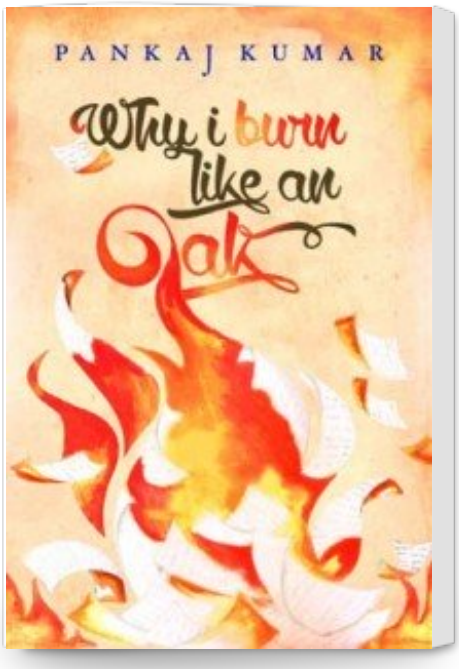

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