He had very soft hands; the palms of which had cupped her nose once, and had then ran through the knots in her hair a few seconds later, before stroking her face. Her face had reddened with amusement. She watched those curious eyes observe her without fear or trepidation, but instead, with a sense of recognition.

They had not seen each other before, yet today, it felt like a long forgotten story would re-kindle again. His lips curled just like she remembered, and parted slightly, now and then, to soak in the air that they both shared. His aquiline nose, a remnant of the genes of a man she had once loved, was so distinct that it appeared almost peculiar on the well-rounded, chubby face of the five-month-old.

She saw him again, and stared at him for a while, before she collected herself, and pulled him out of the cot into her arms, and held him tight.

“I am sorry,” she whispered into his ear, even as the baby continued to pull and play with her hair. “I am sorry,” she repeated, as her eyes welled up with tears.

At 60, her life had come full circle. To love a man she could never forget, to see his reflection in his grandchild, she wished could have been her own. She did not know how she happened to come here, and was reminded of the night that was their last.

“We cannot be together,” she remembered telling him.

He did not ask why, because he had already known what had just befallen them.

“Don’t leave,” is all he could muster up, and then, having realised that she really meant it, he uttered those words again like an obstinate child, “Don’t leave…please don’t leave…don’t leave.” He choked as he heard those words resound in the midst of the uncomfortable distance between them. She did not respond. Silence breezed in and out for long.

They were sitting at the bottom of her stairway, and it took her some effort to get up, before she finally lifted her numb body, and walked up quietly, without even once looking back at him. He shriveled. It was over, and how.

Looking back now, she felt the same familiar pain in her chest-, as she had back then. If only she could tell him how much she loved him. If only, he was as honest in mind, as she was in heart. In the rapidity of her thoughts, she had forgotten that the baby in her arms had begun to wail.

A knock on the door drew her back into the present. On seeing “the other” enter, she halfheartedly placed the weeping-child inside the cot.

“You can hold him,” the other said, “He would have loved that.”

She nodded; her lips breaking into a thin smile, trying to contain the blush.

“I received the letter yesterday,” she said, “I was not in the country.”

“Yes, six months too late…he really hoped you would come,” the other said, slightly unconvinced with the excuse.

“I am sorry.” Tears streamed down her eyes.

“It is okay,” the other said, drawing a tray with tea and biscuits, toward her, “Please sit down.”

By then, the baby’s wail had become disjointed, he was caught between sleep and weariness and it would be sometime before he would quieten and shut his small pair of eyes to sleep.

“He died well. We were around him,” the other said, as she sat at the edge of the bed.

“Did he suffer too much?”

“No, it happened so fast, that he was spared the pain. He refused chemo too. So it was just a matter of weeks before cancer took him away…,” the other’s voice choked, “from all of us.”

“Yes, he mentioned it in the letter.”

“What else did he say?” the other enquired, “He never really told me what happened between the two of you. Lovers for eight years, and then you both simply parted.”

A wave of silence impinged on the air. She wished that the baby was still awake, it would have eased the tension in the room. She relapsed into the past, to the night that was their last.

“Why did you have to do this?” she asked, “It was going fine; we were doing alright, and now this.”

“I did not mean to hurt you, but we need to move on,” he said. “We can start afresh. We love each other enough to start anew. Forget what happened.”

“No, we can’t. We cannot be together,” she said. The last few words that she had said to him kept ringing like a bell.

“You know, I always thought it was me,” the other said, breaking her thoughts again.

“So did I?” she said smiling.

“Did you?” the other asked, amused.

“No, not at all. But you married him after we broke-up. So, everyone thought it was you. My parents, my friends…they all blamed you. After all, you were friends with him way before we started dating.”

“I won’t deny that I loved him, but I was always the other. He never considered me until years after you split. So it could not have been me.”

“Yes…not you.”

“Then, who?”

After a long pause, she said, “He wanted to marry me.”

“What? And you…and you, left him?” she asked, shocked.

“You know what happened on the night that was our last,” she questioned, unwilling to give her an answer just yet.

“No.”

“He learnt I was carrying a baby inside me,” she said, without revealing an ounce of her emotion, “And he thought he should marry me, to save me from the ignominy.”

“But, that was just no reason to leave him. You two were in love; everything was going well for the two of you. The baby happened…so what? It was just another reason for you to be together. If I were you, I wouldn’t have hurt him. He carried this pain for far too long. You were always his first love,” the other ranted, and would have continued, if she had not stopped her.

“The baby…it was not his. He knew…”

Suddenly, the baby woke up and as if shaken by a terrible dream, he wailed. His howls consumed the air, and never stopped until she left.