

A blurred background image of a classroom. A teacher, seen from behind, stands at the front of the room, facing a class of students seated at their desks. The teacher is wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark skirt. The students are also seen from behind, wearing white shirts. A clock is visible on the wall above the teacher.

# ***The English Teacher***

**By  
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# *Waiting to Board flight home*



The flight was scheduled to take off at 10 pm. According to the requirements of the airline he was to reach the airport with two hours in hand. He made it even earlier. He reasoned that the moment he checked out of the hotel he could assume he was on his way home. Being away for about a week, thirty-eight-year old Subir was desperately home-sick. His work took him away from home about twenty days a month, and he never liked it.

But then, it was a long time to spend at the airport. He never believed in whipping out his laptop at every leisure moment. And his phone was meant for communication, not for playing games or listening to music. He preferred reading.

A book of verses, contemporary or classic was his first choice. He ascribed this to the profound impact his English teacher in school had on him. He often left home on tours with his latest literary acquisitions in his brief-case to take care of his dull moments. And if there had been none he would buy a proper English story book. His idea of a proper English book was that the book had to be written in classic British English. He would flip through a few pages and notice if the text had the spellings of words like 'honour' and 'valour' with the alphabet 'u' in place. And then he would buy it. Somehow the American spellings infuriated him. This trait in him was also the effect of the English teacher he had in school.

Unfortunately, the book stalls at the airport hardly had books of his choice. He had been an avid cross-word player earlier. But lately he had taken himself off the pastime as he had found that all the cross-word puzzles in the newspapers were framed by Americans using the spellings they were accustomed to.

He put his luggage on the belt, got his boarding pass and went to the book shop. This time he found one that he liked. He paid for the book, put it into his hand-luggage and looked for a seat in the lounge near his designated gate. He found one and settled down.

As was his habit, he started by reading the back cover of the book and saw what the critics and the newspapers had to say. Then he saw the front cover again. He had seen it when he bought it, but then he wanted to see it in details. The essentials like the name of the book and the name of the author were written quite attractively; but then to draw the attention of the buyers the publisher thought it wise to include the picture of a semi-clad woman with desultory eyes and a mysterious smile. He knew from experience that the picture would have nothing to do with the story. He turned the page and read what the author had to say about the story, before starting off with the real matter.



# Coffee for an unknown co- traveller



An hour went by and he had not noticed that a crowd had gathered in the meantime and all the seats had been taken. It was still another hour for departure and the public address system had not announced anything about the flight as yet. He thought he would have a cup of coffee. He shut the book, put it into his brief-case and debated whether he would go to the coffee counter and risk losing his seat. Standing for an hour before emplaning just for the sake of a cup of coffee was not distinctly alluring but not having coffee for the sake of a seat was also not an appealing alternative either.

He looked around wondering what to do. If he wanted to have his coffee, he had to get up. And if he got up; he was sure that one of the persons who had not got a seat so far would grab his. Being engrossed in his book he had not noticed that a charming lady of an attention-grabbing age was sitting next to him. Prim and proper in dress and deportment, she was sitting there looking straight ahead and doing nothing; like people often do at airports.

“Would you mind keeping a watch on my brief-case while I run down and get myself a cup of coffee?” asked Subir. The lady smiled and approved of the scheme dispassionately.

Happy, Subir went and positioned himself in the queue at the coffee counter. It would take some time to get his portion he thought. He looked around to see if the lady was still there or whether she had gone away or worse still had gone away with his brief-case. He admonished himself for not bringing his brief-case along with him. He could have left the book on the chair signifying his ownership on the piece of furniture for the time being. A loss of a book would have been minimal compared to the loss of his brief-case with all the documents inside. But then he found that the lady had put her own handbag next to his brief-case on the vacant chair and had continued to do nothing as she was doing.

Subir thought that it was stupid of him to suddenly doubt the lady when he had complete faith in her when he kept his baggage in her custody a few moments ago. He thought it would be nice of him to take a cup of coffee for her as well. It was not difficult for him to convince himself that he was not exactly trying to flirt; he was just being chivalrous. He however did not know whether the lady liked coffee at all. He thought he would take a chance.

With a cup of steaming hot coffee in each hand Subir walked back and announced, “I thought you might like to have a drop of coffee and so I brought it for you. Would you mind?”

The lady looked up and saw the Subir standing with two cups of coffee. She removed her handbag and also his brief-case as she saw that both his hands were occupied and said, “Usually I don’t go for coffee, but it’s okay now. It’s cool you brought a cup for me too.”

Though disapproving of her language which implied of what he called unnecessary Americanism, he handed her the cup as he sat down. But his male prejudiced outlook could not dissuade him from assuming that her agreeing to accept the cup of coffee in spite of her distaste for the brew was a direct reference to his handsome countenance and winsome behaviour.

***"You are  
the father  
of one of  
my  
children."***



The lady took the cup. For the first time he noticed that the lady was young and looked beautiful. He smiled as a courtesy.

She looked at him a little curiously. She looked at him for probably a moment too long and asked, "Excuse me. Have I seen you somewhere before?"

Subir remembered that this was often the opening line in many of the celluloid romances of yesteryears. He wondered whether the lady harboured some ulterior motives and was taking advantage of the cup of coffee which he had brought just out of gentility. He did not want to motivate her further into a conversation without being presumptuous himself. So, he said, "No. I don't think so."

He started looking for the page where he left off while deftly holding the paper cup in his right hand. And busy with these two activities he did not notice that the lady was studying his profile with concentration.

After a while the lady spoke again. "I think we have met somewhere before."



Trying to halt the embarrassing conversation Subir stated with courtesy and firmness, “Madam, I work for a living that requires me to travel quite a bit. I do not doubt that you might have seen me somewhere, but that does not mean that we have met before. And even if we had, I do not remember it now.”

He turned another page, but found it difficult to take his mind away from the conversation he just had. What was she trying to say or imply? He tried to look back as far as he could, trying to remember whether he had seen her at any meeting that he had with clients or whether he had seen her at any airport lounge or whether he had seen her at any office party. His brains could not come up with an answer and so he put the whole issue aside till the lady spoke again.

“I think you are the father of one of my children.” She said that with no trace of disrespect or anger.

Dumbfounded Subir looked at her. He almost dropped the book he was reading. What was she talking about? he thought. What was she aiming at? Subir wondered how many children did she have and whether she was not sure of who fathered which one. Does she look for easy gullible gents at selected venues and then go on to blackmail them and exhort money at suitable times? Is she going to reach his home and meet his wife with a cock-and-bull story and ruin his reputation? Or is she going to start a drama on the spot and attract attention by putting her arms around his neck and proclaiming that she had found her long lost husband who had deserted her years ago?

Quite inadvertently he stroked the back of his neck. He thought he felt a muscle pull there. He wished and prayed that the announcement should come soon asking the passengers to board the flight. Though he thought that he had thought about all these things for a long time; the entire thought process had taken only a minute or so. It fitted well within the punctuation pause that the lady had made before she continued again.

She repeated, “I am sure you are the father of one of my children. I forget which one. I am trying to remember.”

# *The English teacher*



Subir found that his lower jaw suddenly dropped. He gaped at her in awe and disbelief. Does she not remember the names of all the children that she has? He weighed the options of shouting and yelling for help before the lady tried anything drastic. After all he had a charming wife at home. Their matrimony was anchored on faith and belief. He never wanted that to be destroyed. He had a son, eight-year-old Ayan, the apple of his eye. He certainly did not want that his son grow up in the shadow of his disrepute, true or otherwise.

She started again much to the discomfort of Subir, her only listener at the moment. “I am Anita. I now remember your son Ayan is in my class. I am his English teacher. I met you at the parent-teacher’s meet last semester.”

“Oh! Thank God!” thought Subir.

The cloud cleared. It was not long after that that the announcement was made for the passengers to board the plane. There was little small talk, but Subir was thinking all the time, “Why the hell did she use the word ‘children’ when she meant ‘students’? That had caused all the confusion. But then she was not wrong either. Many young students are often talked about as children by their ever-affectionate teachers.

He suddenly remembered that his favourite teacher in school who instilled in him the love for English literature had always called him ‘my child’.