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Bepin Choudhury's Lapse of Memory



0849CH04

Before you read

Do you have a good memory? Has your memory ever played any tricks on you?

Forgetfulness often puts you in a tight spot. But forgetting a part of your life completely may drive you crazy. In this story, Bepin Babu goes nearly crazy because he cannot recollect his stay at Ranchi. He has never been to Ranchi, he insists, though there are many witnesses to the contrary. What is the suspense all about?

I

Every Monday, on his way back from work, Bepin Choudhury would drop in at Kalicharan's in New Market to buy books. Crime stories, ghost stories and thrillers. He had to buy at least five at a time to last him through the week. He lived alone, was not a good mixer, had few friends, and didn't like spending time in idle chat. Today, at Kalicharan's, Bepin Babu had the feeling that someone was observing him from close quarters. He turned round and found himself looking at a round faced, meek looking man who now broke into a smile.

"I don't suppose you recognise me."

"Have we met before?" asked Bepin Babu.

The man looked greatly surprised. "We met every day for a whole week. I arranged for a car to take you to the Hudroo falls.

idle chat:
unnecessary,
routine
conversation

meek:
quiet; humble

bawarchi. Mr Mukerji stayed with his sister. You had a big argument about the moon landing, remember? I'll tell you more: you always carried a bag with your books in it on your sight-seeing trips. Am I right or not?"

Bepin Babu spoke quietly, his eyes still on the books. "Which month in '58 are you talking about?"

The man said, "October."

"No, sir," said Bepin Babu. "I spent Puja in '58 with a friend in Kanpur. You're making a mistake. Good day."

But the man didn't go, nor did he stop talking.

"Very strange. One evening I had tea with you in a veranda of your bungalow. You spoke about your family. You said you had no children, and that you had lost your wife ten years ago. Your only brother had died insane, which is why you didn't want to visit the mental hospital in Ranchi..."

When Bepin Babu had paid for the books and was leaving the shop, the man was still looking at him in utter disbelief.

utter disbelief:
complete
surprise

Comprehension Check

1. Why did the man stare at Bepin Babu in disbelief?
2. Where did Bepin Babu say he went in October '58?
3. Mention any three (or more) things that Parimal Ghose knew about Bepin Babu.

II

Bepin Babu's car was safely parked in Bertram Street by the Lighthouse Cinema. He told the driver as he got into the car, "Just drive by the Ganga, will you, Sitaram." Driving up the Strand Road, Bepin Babu regretted having paid so much attention to the intruder. He had never been to Ranchi — no question about it. It was inconceivable that he should forget such an incident which took place only six or seven years ago. He had an excellent memory. Unless — Bepin Babu's head reeled.

(his) head
reeled:
he was
shocked and
confused

Was he losing his mind? But how could that be? He was working daily in his office. It was a big firm, and he was doing a responsible job. He wasn't aware of anything ever going seriously wrong. Only today he spoke for half an hour at an important meeting. And yet...

And yet the man knew a great deal about him. How? He even seemed to know some intimate details. The bag of books, wife's death, brother's insanity... The only mistake was about his having gone to Ranchi. Not a mistake; a deliberate lie. In '58, during the Pujas, he was in Kanpur at his friend Haridas Bagchi's place. All Bepin Babu had to do was write to — no, there was no way of writing to Haridas. Bepin Babu suddenly remembered that Haridas had left with his wife for Japan some weeks ago, and he didn't have his address.

But where was the need for proof? He himself was fully aware that he hadn't been to Ranchi — and that was that.

The river breeze was bracing, and yet a slight discomfort lingered in Bepin Babu's mind.

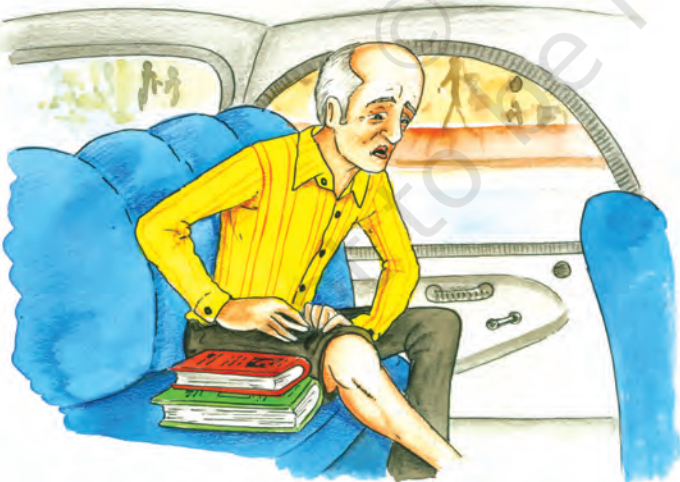
Around Hastings, Bepin Babu decided to roll up his trousers and take a look at his right knee.

There was the mark of an old inch-long cut. It was impossible to tell when the injury had occurred.

losing his mind:
becoming mad

intimate:
very personal and private

bracing:
stimulating



going nuts:
going mad/
crazy

getting into
people's hair:
interfering
with and
annoying
people.

Had he never had a fall as a boy and cut his knee? He tried to recall such an incident, but couldn't.

Then Bepin Babu suddenly thought of Dinesh Mukerji. The man had said that Dinesh was in Ranchi at the same time. The best thing surely would be to ask him. He lived quite near — in Beninandan Street. What about going right now? But then, if he had really never been to Ranchi, what would Dinesh think if Bepin Babu asked for a confirmation? He would probably conclude Bepin Babu was going nuts. No; it would be ridiculous to ask him.

And he knew how ruthless Dinesh's sarcasm could be.

Sipping a cold drink in his air-conditioned living room, Bepin Babu felt at ease again. Such a nuisance! Just because they have nothing else to do, they go about getting into other people's hair.

After dinner, snuggling in bed with one of the new thrillers, Bepin Babu forgot all about the man in New Market.

Next day, in the office, Bepin Babu noticed that with every passing hour, the previous day's encounter was occupying more and more of his mind. If the man knew so much about Bepin Babu, how could he make such a mistake about the Ranchi trip?

Just before lunch Bepin Babu decided to ring up Dinesh Mukerji. It was better to settle the question over the phone; at least the embarrassment on his face wouldn't show.

Two-Three-Five-Six-One-Six. Bepin Babu dialled the number.

"Hallo."

"Is that Dinesh? This is Bepin here."

"Well, well — what's the news?"

"I just wanted to find out if you recalled an incident which took place in '58."

“’58? What incident?”

“Were you in Calcutta right through that year? That’s the first thing I’ve got to know.”

“Wait just a minute... ’58... just let me check in my diary.”

For a minute there was silence. Bepin Babu could feel that his heartbeat had gone up. He was sweating a little.

“Hallo.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got it. I’d been out twice.”

“Where?”

“Once in February — nearby — to Krishnanagar to a nephew’s wedding. And then... but you’d know about this one. The trip to Ranchi. You were there too. That’s all. But what’s all this sleuthing about?”

“No. I just wanted to — anyway, thanks.”

Bepin Babu slammed the receiver down and gripped his head with his hands. He felt his head swimming. A chill seemed to spread over his body. There were sandwiches in his tiffin box, but he didn’t eat them. He had lost his appetite.

Comprehension Check

1. Why did Bepin Babu worry about what Parimal Ghose had said?
2. How did he try to decide who was right—his memory or Parimal Ghose?
3. Why did Bepin Babu hesitate to visit Mr Mukerji? Why did he finally decide to phone him?
4. What did Mr Mukerji say? Did it comfort Bepin Babu, or add to his worries?

III

After lunch-time, Bepin Babu realised that he couldn’t possibly carry on sitting at his desk and working. This had never happened in the twenty-five years he had been with the firm. He had a reputation for being a

sleuthing:
investigating
(an event)

carry on:
continue

conscientious:
careful and
correct

**head was in a
whirl:**

(here)

confused and
unable to
think clearly
**gather his wits
together:**

make an effort
to become
calm and
think clearly

**having a
rough time:**
having a lot of
problems
**turning up
like a bad
penny:**

appearing at a
place where
one is not
welcome

**didn't beat
about the
bush:**

came straight
to the point

off and on:
now and then
**throw your
mind back:**

think back
and recall a
past event

tireless, conscientious worker. But today his head was in a whirl.

Back home at two-thirty, Bepin Babu lay down in bed and tried to gather his wits together. He knew that it was possible to lose one's memory through an injury in the head, but he didn't know of a single instance of someone remembering everything except one particular incident — and a fairly recent and significant one at that. He had always wanted to go to Ranchi; to have gone there, done things, and not to remember was something utterly impossible.

At seven thirty, Bepin Babu's servant came and announced, "Chuni Babu, sir. Says it's very important."

Bepin Babu knew what Chuni had come for. Chuni had been at school with him. He'd been having a rough time lately and had been coming to see him about a job. Bepin Babu knew it was not possible to do anything for him and, in fact, told him so. But Chuni kept turning up like a bad penny.

Bepin Babu sent word that not only was it not possible for him to see Chuni now, but not in several weeks.

But as soon as the servant stepped out of the room, it struck Bepin Babu that Chuni might remember something about the '58 trip. There was no harm in asking him.

Bepin Babu hurried down the stairs and into the living room. Chuni was about to leave, but seeing Bepin Babu appear, he turned round hopefully.

Bepin Babu didn't beat about the bush.

"Listen, Chuni - I want to ask you something. You have a good memory, and you've been seeing me off and on for a long time. Just throw your mind back and tell me - did I go to Ranchi in '58?"

Chuni said, "'58? It must have been '58. Or was it '59?"

“You’re sure that I did go to Ranchi?”

Chuni’s look of amazement was not unmixed with worry.

“D’ you mean you have doubts about having gone at all?”

“Did I go? Do you remember clearly?”

Chuni sat down on the sofa, fixed Bepin Babu with a long, hard stare and said, “Bepin, have you taken to drugs or something? As far as I know, you had a clean record where such things were concerned. I know that old friendships don’t mean much to you, but at least you had a good memory. You can’t really mean that you’ve forgotten about the Ranchi trip?”

Bepin Babu had to turn away from Chuni’s incredulous stare.

“Do you remember what my last job was?” asked Chunilal.

“Of course. You worked in a travel agency.”

“You remember that and you don’t remember that it was I who fixed up your railway booking for Ranchi? I went to the station to see you off; one of the fans in your compartment was not working — I got an electrician to fix it. Have you forgotten everything? Whatever is the matter with you? You don’t look too well, you know.”

Bepin Babu sighed and shook his head.

“I’ve been working too hard,” he said at last. “That must be the reason. Must see about consulting a specialist.”

Doubtless it was Bepin’s condition which made Chunilal leave without mentioning anything about a job.

Paresh Chanda was a young physician with a pair of bright eyes and a sharp nose. He became thoughtful when he heard about Bepin Babu’s symptoms. “Look, Dr Chanda,” said Bepin Babu desperately, “You must cure me of this horrible illness. I can’t tell you how it’s affecting my work.”

must see about consulting:
(here) may have to consult

Dr Chanda shook his head.

“You know what, Mr Choudhury,” he said. “I’ve never had to deal with a case such as yours. Frankly, this is quite outside my field of experience. But I have one suggestion. I don’t know if it’ll work, but it’s worth a try. It can do no harm.”

Bepin Babu leaned forward anxiously.

“As far as I can make out,” said Dr Chanda, “And I think you’re of the same opinion — you must have been to Ranchi, but due to some unknown reason, the entire episode has slipped out of your mind. What I suggest is that you go to Ranchi once again. The sight of the place may remind you of your trip. This is not impossible. More than that I cannot do at the moment. I’m prescribing a nerve tonic and a tranquilliser. Sleep is essential, or the symptoms will get more pronounced.”

Bepin Babu felt somewhat better the next morning.

After breakfast, he rang up his office, gave some instructions and then procured a first class ticket for Ranchi for the same evening.

tranquilliser:
a medicine to reduce stress and anxiety

procured:
got (with a little difficulty)

Comprehension Check

1. Who was Chunilal? What did he want from Bepin Babu?
2. Why was Dr Chanda puzzled? What was unusual about Bepin Babu’s loss of memory?

IV

Getting off the train at Ranchi next morning, he realised at once that he had never been there before.

He came out of the station, took a taxi and drove around the town for a while. He realised that the streets, the buildings, the hotels, the bazaars, the Morabadi Hill — with none of these had he the slightest acquaintance. Would a trip to the Hudroo Falls help? He didn’t believe so, but, at the same time, he didn’t wish to leave with the feeling that he hadn’t tried enough. So he arranged for a car and left for Hudroo in the afternoon.

At five o'clock the same afternoon in Hudroo, two Gujarati gentlemen from a group of picnickers discovered Bepin Babu lying unconscious beside a boulder. When he came round, the first thing Bepin Babu said was, "I'm finished. There's no hope left."

Next morning, Bepin Babu was back in Calcutta. He realised that there was truly no hope for him. Soon he would lose everything: his will to work, his confidence, his ability, his balance of mind. Was he going to end up in the asylum at...? Bepin Babu couldn't think any more.

Back home, he rang up Dr Chanda and asked him to come over. Then, after a shower, he got into bed with an ice bag clamped on his head. Just then the servant brought him a letter which someone had left in the letter box. A greenish envelope with his name in red ink on it.

came round:
regained
consciousness



Above the name it said 'Urgent and Confidential'. In spite of his condition, Bepin Babu had a feeling that he ought to go through the letter. He tore open the envelope and took out the letter. This is what he read —

in retribution
of:
as a
punishment
for

Dear Bepin,

I had no idea that affluence would bring about the kind of change in you that it has done. Was it so difficult for you to help out an old friend down on his luck? I have no money, so my resources are limited. What I have is imagination, a part of which I used in retribution of your unfeeling behaviour.

Well, you'll be all right again now. A novel I've written is being considered by a publisher. If he likes it enough, it'll see me through the next few months.

Yours, Chunilal

When Dr Chanda came, Bepin Babu said, "I'm fine. It all came back as soon as I got off the train at Ranchi."

"A unique case," said Dr Chanda. "I shall certainly write about it in a medical journal."

"The reason why I sent for you," said Bepin Babu, "is that I have a pain in the hip from a fall I had in Ranchi. If you could prescribe a pain killer..."

SATYAJIT RAY

Comprehension Check

1. Had Bepin Babu really lost his memory and forgotten all about a trip to Ranchi?
2. Why do you think Chunilal did what he did? Chunilal says he has no money; what is it that he does have?

working with the text

1. The author describes Bepin Babu as a serious and hardworking man. What evidence can you find in the story to support this?
2. Why did Bepin Babu change his mind about meeting Chunilal? What was the result of this meeting?
3. Bepin Babu lost consciousness at Hudroo Falls. What do you think was the reason for this?
4. How do you think Bepin Babu reacted when he found out that Chunilal had tricked him?

working with language

1. Look at these two sentences.

❖ He had to buy at least five books to last him through the week.

❖ Bepin had to ask Chuni to leave.

Had to is used to show that it was very important or necessary for Bepin Babu to do something. He had no choice. We can also use 'have to' / 'has to' in the same way.

Fill in the blanks below using 'had to' / 'have to' / 'has to'.

(i) I _____ cut my hair every month.

(ii) We _____ go for swimming lessons last year.

(iii) She _____ tell the principal the truth.

(iv) They _____ take the baby to the doctor.

(v) We _____ complain to the police about the noise.

(vi) Romit _____ finish his homework before he could come out to play.

(vii) I _____ repair my cycle yesterday.

2. Here are a few idioms that you will find in the story. Look for them in the dictionary in the following way.

First, arrange them in the order in which you would find them in a dictionary.

(*Clue:* An idiom is usually listed under the first noun, verb, adjective or adverb in it. Ignore articles or prepositions in the idiom).

To help you, we have put in bold the word under which you must look for the idiom in the dictionary.)

(i) at/from **close** quarters (close: adjective)

(ii) **break** into a smile (break: verb; look under 'break into something')

(iii) **carry** on (carry: verb)

(iv) have a **clean record** (you may find related meanings under both these words)

(v) **beat** about the bush (verb)

Now refer to your dictionary and find out what they mean.

3. Study the sentences in the columns below.

A	B
I saw this movie yesterday.	I have seen this movie already.
Bepin Babu worked here for a week last year.	Bepin Babu has worked here since 2003.
Chunilal wrote to a publisher last week.	Chunilal has written to a publisher.
I visited Ranchi once, long ago.	I have visited Ranchi once before.

Compare the sentences in the two columns, especially the verb forms. Answer the following questions about each pair of sentences.

- Which column tells us that Bepin Babu is still working at the same place?
 - Which column suggests that Chunilal is now waiting for a reply from the publisher?
 - Which column suggests that the person still remembers the movie he saw?
 - Which column suggests that the experience of visiting Ranchi is still fresh in the speaker's mind?
4. Given below are jumbled sentences. Working in groups, rearrange the words in each sentence to form correct sentences.

You will find that each sentence contains an idiomatic expression that you have come across in the lesson. Underline the idiom and write down its meaning. Then use your dictionary to check the meaning.

One sentence has been worked out for you as an example.

Jumbled sentence: vanished/ The car/ seemed to/ into thin/ have/ air.

Ans: The car seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Idiom: **vanished into thin air:** disappeared or vanished in a mysterious way

- Stop/and tell me/beating about/what you want/the bush

Ans: _____

Idiom: _____

(ii) don't pay/If you/ attention/you might/the wrong train/to the announcement/board

Ans: _____

Idiom: _____

(iii) The villagers/tried/the crime/on the young woman/to pin

Ans: _____

Idiom: _____

(iv) Bepin Babu/orders to/telling people/under/loved/doctor's/eat early/that he was

Ans: _____

Idiom: _____

(v) the students/The teacher/his eyebrows/when/said that/all their lessons/raised/they had revised

Ans: _____


Idiom: _____

speaking and writing

1. What do you think happened after Bepin Babu came to know the truth? Was he angry with this friend for playing such a trick on him? Or do you think he decided to help a friend in need?
2. Imagine you are Bepin Choudhury. You have received Chunilal's letter and feel ashamed that you did not bother to help an old friend down on his luck. Now you want to do something for him. Write a letter to Chunilal promising to help him soon.

Or

A prank is a childish trick. Do you remember any incident when someone played a prank on you or your friends? Describe the prank in a paragraph.


There was an old woman
Who lived under a hill,
And if she's not gone
She lives there still.



The Last Bargain



A bargain is an agreement in which both parties promise to do something for each other. Someone is looking for work, waiting to be hired. He strikes a bargain but thinks it worthless. He tries twice again but doesn't like either. Finally, in the last bargain, when he is hired for nothing whatever, he is happy as never before. What is the bargain, and why is it the best?



“Come and hire me,” I cried, while in the morning
I was walking on the stone-paved road.
Sword in hand the King came in his chariot.
He held my hand and said, “I will hire you with
my power,”
But his power counted for naught, and he went away in
his chariot.

In the heat of the mid-day the houses stood with
shut doors.
I wandered along the crooked lane.
An old man came out with his bag of gold.
He pondered and said, “I will hire you with my money.”
He weighed his coins one by one, but I turned away.

It was evening. The garden hedge was all aflower.
The fair maid came out and said, "I will hire you with
a smile."

Her smile paled and melted into tears, and she went
back alone into the dark.

The sun glistened on the sand, and the sea waves broke
waywardly.

A child sat playing with shells.

He raised his head and seemed to know me and said,
"I hire you with nothing."

From henceforward that bargain struck in child's play
made me a free man.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

working with the poem

1. Who is the speaker in the poem?
2. "The king, sword in hand" suggests
 - (i) wealth
 - (ii) power
 - (iii) more power than wealth.Mark the appropriate item in the context of stanza 1.
3. The old man offered the speaker a lot of money.
Why did he turn down the offer?
4. Find in the poem, lines that match the following. Read both one after another.
 - (i) I have nothing to give you
except goodwill and cheer.
 - (ii) Her happiness was no more
than sorrow in disguise.
 - (iii) The king's might was not worth much.
5. How did the speaker feel after talking to the child on the beach?