



Colours of Discord

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Just when I thought I had sorted out all my relationships in this world, in comes this call from a neighbour I've known for a couple of years. I've never been comfortable slotting neighbours: as friends, more than friends, acquaintances, buddies, floor-mates, people to turn to in the hour of need, or people you know for their sheer nuisance value? I've had neighbours from all these categories, so I feel it is best to call a neighbour a neighbour.

This neighbour, to whom this piece is dedicated, is not particularly dear to me, but her son is, to my son. My son enjoys her food more than he has enjoyed any edible in his own house. He believes that my neighbour looks after him better because she has this bewitching habit of doling out toffees to this little fellow the moment he enters the house, and when he is leaving from there. This last one, I have complete control over, and it invariably gets dumped into the bin, but God knows how many more land inside his tummy. My son believes that the cartoon characters look funnier on her television, and that Bournvita tastes better on her dining table. This son of mine also believes that his creativity gets extra fuel when he puts his crayon to paper at her house. And so you see, it is not all that easy to avoid her.

Every once in a while, I make a courtesy phone call to enquire if my son is behaving himself, that I hope he is not troubling her, that the spell she has cast on him, I wish I could do

the same with him. Her entire being gloats as she tries to reconcile these sudden bursts of praise with my usual indifference towards her. Should I send the bua to get him back? No, no, she insists, adding that my son is like her son, and that she is happy to have two sons who can't live without each other. I press further saying, yes, yes, I understand, but they could, perhaps, show their inseparability at my place too, to which she replies that my son tells her every day that he likes her house better. I disconnect thereafter, and get back to my magazine.

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To tell you the truth, I couldn't be happier with a neighbour like her. Barring the pains of seeing my own flesh and blood defecting, the rest is not all that bad. I get my afternoon nap, so does the bua (who manages more hours than I do), the floors don't need an extra hour of scrubbing every evening, the walls in my house still look like walls, the upholstery doesn't bear brutal scissor gashes, we don't have to dash to put the house back in order every time the intercom buzzes announcing a visitor. (Actually, this last bit is not true. On a rainy day, my clothes dry on the lines in my drawing room, so you can imagine!)

And so, her call came. Please note that the nonchalance is mutual. While she could have very well ambled down the lift-landing to ring my door bell, she preferred to phone me instead. But I understand, as these things are better not discussed face-to-face. Without any perfunctory