

Forty Kilograms

The receptionist at the front desk rolled her eyes and threw her free hand up in the air in frustration; apparently from being screamed at by the person on the other end of the telephone line. She would have loved to hang up and before doing so, would have surely told that fireball where to go and burn. In no uncertain terms, but could not, for fear of losing her job, especially in these difficult times. Many of her friends and family members were getting laid off with no prospect of getting another job.

A small droplet was trying to make an appearance from the ever so slow rising, and about to spill, lake of tears in her eyes across the nose and left cheek. She had hooked the telephone between her left ear and shoulder to keep working on the computer; partly to tune out the greyhound, who would become a poodle in the examination room in front of the doctor, and also to finish her day's work, lest her off-site manager presumed tardiness.

The line at the check-in counter had gradually become five deep. A lean, partly balding man in a well-ironed light green shirt with a pen in the left pocket, ironed light grey pants and patiently-polished shoes, was at the head of the line. The shirt matched his unusually greenish eyes which were highlighted by the backdrop of his white hair.

A light brown pair of glasses magnified and framed the lively green, kind eyes. He had Indian features but, with the fair skin and green eyes, he could easily pass for a Caucasian. His wrinkled forehead betrayed the worries he was trying to hide with his twinkling eyes while making jokes with people behind him.

His keen sense of observing others in distress picked up the anguish the receptionist was experiencing. He pulled out a tissue from the facial tissue box for the receptionist to wipe away the droplets before they embarrassed her by spilling over the mascara in front of now seven persons fidgeting to sign in and start the long wait before seeing the doctor, for maximum five minutes.

This was the first time he had come to the office and had never met the receptionist before. As much as he wanted to help her, just as he always would go out of his way to lend a helping hand to the needy, he folded the tissue into his palm as he was well aware of the strange laws of presumed

sexual misconduct in this new country. He used the outstretched hand to pick up the pen tied to a string and wrote his name in the sign-in sheet in a neat, straight handwriting—Prem Luthra.

He had been quite content with the diagnosis from his family doctor in Calcutta, India. But his son, Raj, who was now settled in New York, insisted “Papa, you must come and get a second opinion at Joan Harding Cancer Center, they are the best. Unexplained weight loss can sometimes be the first sign of a hidden cancer.” Prem had no desire to waste his newly settling son and family’s money. His wife, Shashi echoed Raj’s idea of second opinion in the USA. Prem was content staying in Calcutta, busy with work and fun with friends. Shashi was fond of traveling—the reason for her being jokingly called butterfly by family members. She also had deep desire to spend some time with the children, grand children and other family members settled in the USA. Finally Prem reluctantly caved in and got persuaded to come to New York.

Prem had come half an hour early, a childhood habit. He was never able to figure out the origin of this reflex. No matter where he had to go, he set the alarm clock two hours before the departure time. He made check lists, prepared a series of questions and revised them till he was satisfied that every possible situation had been considered, mentally sorted out and put on legal sized paper in neat double spaced lines. Before taking the final step out of the house, every item had to be checked and marked off.

The fancy waiting room filled with leather chairs, high definition television, coffee with assortment of Godiva chocolates and cookies, on one hand made him relaxed and confident that the doctor must be caring and compassionate while on the other hand might be very expensive. After all, the customer pays all the bills. Having no insurance was also playing on his mind and was one of the reasons he would rather let the unexplained weight loss play out its course than bankrupt his hard working son who had a wife and two children to support. Prem found a comfortable chair away from the blaring television. He closed his eyes and started the long wait for his turn. As always, he started worrying about the amount of money, magnified by dollars converted to rupees.

Raj had again refuted the argument by saying “Papa, remember, you used to forego all the pleasures of your life so I could have anything I wanted, needed or not. You never said no, not once. It is my turn to pay back, especially when we feel guilty leaving you and Mummy behind in India, alone.”

Over the last two years or so Prem had noticed a gradual decline in his weight. It used to be steady 40 Kilograms in his college days and for a few years afterwards.

And then he got married. The excellent cooking and company of his wife made him eat more in quantity, quality and regularly. The cheeks as well as the abdomen puffed up, reflecting prosperity in happiness and wealth.

At an early age he was old enough to observe and feel the stress his father, addressed as Pita Ji, was going through from raising and educating eight children single handedly. That number is daunting by itself. To top that, the hardships had multiplied due to the unforeseen partition of the country, resulting in the family becoming refugees. The family had lost their home and steady hefty income from farming in Khanewal, India which, all of a sudden, was now part of Pakistan.

In May, 1947 the family had come to a hill station called Sabathu, 20 miles south of Shimla, for summer vacation. Mata Ji was pregnant with what turned out to be the last of their ten children. Two children could not survive small pox before hitting double digit age. Anticipating the partition, Pitaji had purchased this summer home in March 1947, which now became a much needed refuge.

On August, 15, 1947 the country got partitioned based on Muslim majority areas to be included in the new country called Pakistan. The boundary between independent India and newly carved out Pakistan was decided by a line drawn by an English bureaucrat Cyril Radcliffe. This was based on hurriedly collected data of the number of Muslims against mix of Hindus and Sikhs in Panjab. Lahore was considered to be given to India. But it got allotted to Pakistan because another big city of Calcutta had already been allocated to India. Gurdaspur was part of Pakistan for a couple of days and then reverted to India. Such was the fluid nature of events, arbitrary basis and destiny of millions of helpless affected people in that region

Under these tumultuous times, unfortunately Luthra family's ancestral land, home and part of the country, where three generations had lived, was suddenly not their home any more.

It was sad and horrendous event but they were blessed in one way. They already had at least a roof on their heads and were safe in newly freed independent India and all safely together. Unlike the 12 to 14 million people who underwent violent migration on both sides and about 1.5 millions were

massacred or starved trying to migrate.

Prem had frank discussions with his father about getting a job. Pita Ji was not happy with this idea. But he reluctantly agreed resulting in Prem getting a job in Madras to supplement family's meager income.

The positive effect of such a huge physical distance, in the absence of telephones or easy way to travel, was a fantastic lifelong habit of writing letters. The letters became the connecting threads to the family for the isolated Prem.

Letters became longer and more frequent to make up for the vast distance created by the move to Madras. Prem had a unique ability of visualizing the intended recipient on the pages of his long letters, wiping away the physical gap, which made him less homesick. He then simply talked to the intended receiver of his letter as the pen automatically displayed his words and feelings on the paper.

Being the only one flung hundreds of miles away, he wanted to bottle up and store every possible semblance of an object that connected him with the separated family. The other members were not deprived of the family structure and therefore never realized or comprehended the pangs of separation that Prem was going through. They did not write back as frequently as they received his frequent and voluminous letters. The letters were his life-line for survival and he hung on to all the letters he wrote and received.

He started a unique habit of making a three ring binder for each member of the family, friends and even strangers who he wrote to or received a letter from.

Meticulously, he made copies of every letter that he wrote and filed them carefully into the binder. He went even farther by making an index page showing the date and summary of the main subject of the letter. Then he patiently waited, checked the mailbox once and sometimes twice a day just in case he missed a post card stuck to the bottom of the familiar red box.

Sporadically as they trickled in, the original letters from the family members, which he had so longingly awaited, were read and re-read, and then lovingly filed in the appropriate folder.

At the first possible opportunity he sat down on his usual chair and table, with his ink filled pen and legal size papers and shot off another monologue to the face he clearly saw on the paper. He made copies, meticulously stapled them together and finally placed in the appropriate binder. Before mailing the thick envelope, he fondly caressed and kissed it with loving eyes and soft fingers.

The collection of his cherished memories traveled to Calcutta when the job brought him to the new and life-long residence.

One person who added the most to his collection of letters was his soon to be wife, he fondly called Bille. They promised to write a letter to each other everyday from the time they got engaged in December 1959 till they got married on October, 8, 1960.

Marriage not only brought prosperity to Prem's cheeks and abdomen, now a healthy 70 Kilograms, but also added weight to the ever increasing collection of letters written and received by him to another group of relatives who came with his wife.

As lives became busier, postage more expensive, incomes shrunk, lack of expected replies, the rate of weight gain of his collection of letters slowed down. The final nail in this decline was the invention and rapid explosion of internet. People started forgetting the art of writing letters and seeing faces in the blank pages.

He and his grandchildren, Disha and Tanuj one day marveled at the life-long collection.

"How much do you think all your letters weigh, Babu Ji?" asked Tanuj.

Prem, in his usual manner, wanted to place a bet with them about the weight of the mail. The one farthest from the actual weight would do 21 salutes in front of the friends at the Saturday Club. Excitedly, the grand children took on the grand father, fondly called Babu Ji by them.

To the children, the massive pile, without the binders, looked huge and they bet it was 50 Kg. Prem underestimated it and placed his bet at 35 Kg.

Children and also Prem got excited about this new adventure. Prem had an uncanny quality of

transforming to the same age or mind of the person he was interacting with in the moment. A flurry of activities started. He also joined in the process of getting all the letters out and make accurate piles. The children ran down and begged a shop keeper near their home to lend them a large weighing machine. Actual weight turned out to be astonishing 40 Kilograms, the same as Prem used to weigh in his college days.

Grandchildren were surprised by the coincidence and Prem in his mind quietly wondered about its significance. His inquisitive mind always wondered about each and everything. This figure of 40 Kgs of his college time weight and the current, ever slowing rate of growth of the mail made him wonder if there was a hidden meaning of nature. To confuse the matter even more was his own decline of weight over last two years to 49 Kilograms. He wondered if the convergence of the almost stagnant weight of the letters and his own declining weight had a mortal significance. The question bothered him but he put it aside to be solved at a later date. He anticipated the victory salutes of his grand children at the Club. With that thought creating a smile on his face he sipped a perfectly chilled beer, resolved to solve the mystery later.

"The doctor is running late due to an emergency at the hospital", Prem heard in half dream state in the comfortable chair as the nurse made an announcement in the waiting room. Having read every conceivable book, medical and otherwise, he knew that the doctor was held back in the golf course and the announcement of an *emergency* was just a cover up. He was willing to wait, only hoping that the doctor had not celebrated his victory with a beer at the club's bar.

The waiting room was full by now. Some of them looked fairly healthy and out of place in the cancer clinic. A couple of them were emaciated to the bones, again raising the questions in Prem's mind about the possibility of cancer silently growing, evading every conceivable test that his family doctor, along with the two greedy specialists had done in India. This had resulted in similar loss of the weight of his wallet and he would jokingly say "I will die when these sharks have stolen every paisa. My wallet is squeezed out of money and life is squeezed out of my body."

After another 45 minutes wait, the nurse shouted out over the sound of television and a constant chatter in the waiting room "Prem Luthra!"

Prem had made sure in the morning to put a new battery in his hearing aid. Despite the noise, he

heard it clearly and nervously made his way to the examination room pointed by the nurse.

The folder full of copies of the reports and a long list of questions was carefully held in his right hand. She is really pretty, he thought as he followed her, being careful that she did not notice the direction of his sight which admiringly followed the curves of her body. The age and perceived sickness did not bar him from appreciating the beauty when he saw it and he saw beauty more often than not.

As ordered, he took off his clothes and donned a thin, worn out gown and felt conscious about his thin body with wrinkled skin, even though he felt like a sixteen year boy in his mind.

The nurse did the preliminary tests of weight, which was 47Kg, pulse and temperature, both of which had gone up a notch at the touch of the beauty that was so close to him. She noted down the chief complaint of unexplained weight loss over the last two years. She also made a note about Prem's question of possible link between the convergence of weight of the letters and his own weight and whether a life ends when the purpose to live is no longer there. Prem knew that this was not really a medical question but rather a philosophical debate, but he still respected medical professionals for their knowledge and insight of the unknown.

She inquired about his medications and recorded them in his chart.

"Do you have any allergies?"

"Yes," Prem said, adding "Couple of my ex-friends in India and doctor's bills."

Already running late, the nurse had no time for silly jokes and didn't even smile. Having done the preliminary work up, the nurse assured him that the doctor will be in shortly and she was sorry for such a long wait.

He pulled out his thick folder along with the list of concerns and questions and nervously started the waiting game again. This time it was only 12 minutes, which was still long enough to start a shiver from the nervous tension, loss of muscle mass and cool temperature which the doctor liked in his clinic, forgetting that the patients were sitting almost naked, barely covered by the old, flimsy

gowns.

Doctor Huffman appeared to be in his early fifties. A few grey hair expressed the reassuring experience to the nervous patients. He was well dressed in a tailored blue striped suit and a cheerful red necktie. He did not wear the dreaded white coat to prevent the additional anxiety for his already scared patients, most of who were stricken with some type of cancer. He had an easy reassuring smile, an unhurried manner and a warm hand shake.

"Good morning, sorry I made you wait so long."

"Good morning, Doctor. Wait never bothers me. After all, where are we going to go anyway, rushing around raising our own blood pressure and also those of others around us? My wife and I use such time to make friends with strangers and have some fun along the way for ourselves and who will soon become strangers again. But memories linger and that is what life is all about."

Dr. Huffman gave an appreciative look of being in company of a wise man. By now he had pulled a leather chair next to the examination table and was scanning through the chart. As always, even having read the notes written by his nurse, he still wanted to hear from the patients their complaints and history of illness. Patients, especially males, had a way of giving only patchy history and needed prodding to come out with the details. They tried to trivialize some of the complaints, whether out of denial or pride that *nothing can go wrong with me*. That is why he proceeded slowly and tried to get to know the patients more intimately and also make them comfortable with sharing their deep fears and concerns about disease, and mortality.

"So, what nationality is that, Prem? Did I pronounce it right?"

"Oh yes, you did fine . You can't mispronounce that name. It is not like some other Indian names such as Juginder, poor fellow, my brother in West Virginia, who gets mercilessly hacked by getting called Huginder, Jugainder and many times simply—what the hell is that?"

My name is Prem Luthra, call me Prem just as James as in James Bond. Delete the S and that is how Prem is pronounced and you did a fine job with that. I am from India and visiting our son and daughter-in-law who now live in New York."

"What brings you to see me today?"

"I told my son that there was no need to make this appointment because I know my diagnosis but they insist that I be examined by the best in the best cancer institute in the world."

"Oh, you already know you have cancer?"

"No, I know I don't have cancer but they feel that with my progressive weight loss, and in the absence of any other detectable cause, the bugger must be hiding somewhere. I have been put through the hide and seek game by some necessary and many unnecessary tests in India. My son feels that you guys are the best detectives to seek out the sneakiest hidiers. That is why I am here, bankrupting his family."

Generally serious minded, this evoked a chuckle for Dr. Huffman

"Hm, If you know you don't have cancer, then you must know why you are losing weight and why you are worried about the impending death?"

"You see doctor, everyone needs a purpose in life to live. Nature puts us on this earth to become a piece of the giant jigsaw puzzle. Each one of us figures out the ingrained purpose. They makes up or simply believes in divine destiny and finds a purpose which makes them feel useful and the life becomes useful.

That's interesting, said Dr. Huffman, looking at his watch.

Once Prem starts, it's hard to stop. "You might know about the studies at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago in 2009. That along with other studies are now scientifically showing that if you have a purpose in life and lead a meaningful life, you live longer. You take away the purpose and the man withers away. As if nature is saying 'I don't need to waste any more resources on this useless piece of flesh. Let it perish and convert the atoms into something that will add value to my purpose.'

After a short pause Prem slowly, almost in a whispering tone, said "And I have lost my purpose in

life. As if directed by nature, my appetite is diminishing and accordingly I am not eating enough, resulting in weight loss, but no one believes me."

Dr. Huffman listened to this interesting man and his self-made diagnosis. His curiosity was getting the better of him. He knew that he was already running 45 minutes behind schedule but he had never been more curious and eager to learn even more of this patient's unusual story. He made a mental plan to give Prem a complete physical examination now and, at no charge, later have him come on another day when he could easily spend time without worrying about the angry looks from 12 sets of eyes in the waiting room.

With help of the nurse, who had just walked in indicating with her hands and eyes to hurry up, he removed the flimsy gown from Prem's thinning body where the loose skin was folded in places. The glowing skin at one time used to be smooth and taut to cover the abundant muscle mass.

After all, Prem at one time was the best badminton player in his college and for many years after that. Girls hawked at his swift movements and muscular contractions easily seen through the sweaty white cotton tee shirt. The looks and the victory ribbons made him practice even more and he stayed number one badminton player through out his college.

The muscles were now just a faded memory, though the silver polished victory cups still reminded him, his son and grand children the golden days of his body.

Dr. Huffman methodically, like he had done thousands of times before, examined Prem from top of the head to the small toes. His keen eyes were looking for clues about any hidden enemy. Fingers were palpating all the tissues they could reach. Percussion, even though being displaced by fancy scans, was still a part of his armamentarium. Stethoscope again was on the verge of becoming extinct, being replaced by well paying and presumably more accurate echo-cardiograms and C T scans.

Dr. Huffman still believed in these gadgets because they added to his diagnostic skills and also gave him a chance to spend time with and touch the patient. There is an imperceptible healing force in doctor's touch. He listened with his instruments but more importantly listened to the patient very carefully. He knew that almost all the time the patient, in some verbal or non-verbal language, was

going to tell him the diagnosis.

The reason doctors are becoming more dependent on the tests is that a time consuming examination does not cover the expenses. It also does not leave behind a trail for the insurance companies and lawyers that all that could be done *was* done. Monetary gain by the doctor may also be a reason for ordering tests.

Dr. Huffman had decided to cover all the angles by a brief current history of weight loss and past history of coronary bypass surgery in 1992, and an exhaustive comprehensive physical examination. Even though this was not the protocol of his system, he decided to just go through the examination at this time and planned to do a detailed, non-rushed history taking at a later date.

The physical examination failed to reveal evidence of any obvious disease that would explain the gradual, progressive weight loss. Prem had made sure that copies of the tests and reports of examinations done in India had been carefully catalogued, placed in a folder and arranged date-wise. The front sheet enumerated the date, name of the test, results and the name of the *Thief* who ordered and profited from the test. This was Prem's way of getting even with the *thieves* as he described some of the doctors. Even the amount of money stolen from him was entered with varying number of ? marks next to the entry. Huffman carefully and at times with a smile reviewed the reports and copies of some of the scans that Prem had coaxed out of the doctors. They were reluctant to do so for fear of getting caught having misread the test or someone really finding out that the test was not indicated at all.

The tests and the reports did not show any indication of the lurking enemy. Huffman asked the nurse to arrange a couple of more modern cancer detecting tests not available in India and a scan of the kidneys. Kidney disease sometimes can cause no obvious symptom and yet cause unexplained weight loss. Noting that Prem had no insurance and also the fact Dr. Huffman had liked his friendly nature, he directed the nurse to have the billing clerk give a 50% discount on the visit and also on the tests he had just ordered. Prem loved discounts and bargains. He promptly said, "Since I am getting 50% off, it means I can have my wife examined for free. Like the signs we read in the shopping mall—pay for one, get second free!"

Bille had survived an Osteoclastoma, a bone cancer, at a very young age. She had been given a

grave prognosis. Miraculously, decades had gone by without any recurrence. She was finally given clearance of cancer on October 23, 1972 at the Postgraduate Institute Chandigarh, India. This was a divine intervention for which Prem thanked God, although many times he debated that there was no such thing as God. "God is too busy to manage everyone's daily lives and every move. If you count all living beings on earth and who knows where else, God is not going to watch and rectify their every single act."

In later years his opinion was changing toward accepting the existence of a power beyond the physical body. He had started going to the Ram Sharnam in Panipat at every chance he got.

With a smile, Huffman said good bye for now and asked the nurse to make the next appointment for Prem, making sure that he was the last patient of the day in case the story got more interesting.

The nurse left him alone to get dressed and asked him to come out to the front desk for billing and next appointment. The dates for the tests and visit were arranged on a Wednesday afternoon when his daughter-in-law, Reena, would be free from her job in the music recording studio.

Prem knew that the examination would be negative for any cancer but still felt a sense of relief that the best detective of cancer agreed with him. No matter how safe we feel, a visit to the doctor is always a nerve wrecking experience. You never know, whether correctly, negligently or just to make up a presumed diagnosis to order tests at the facility where they have financial interests, the doctors will add a dose of anxiety and additional bills. Sometimes the doctors add a pill here or an injection there just to treat a symptom or to make patient feel that doctor did something to help them. Placebo effect is not to be under estimated. Some minor findings did need intervention and some would have resolved even if no treatment was given.

Prem loved the cartoon where a doctor is leaning over a patient in his bed and the doctor is saying "Mr. Jones, we did the operation just in the nick of time; two more hours and you would have cured yourself!" The cartoon can be funny as long as it is just that but the fear of yourself being the hero of that cartoon is real when you are in the examination room, completely at the mercy of the trusted doctor.

Prem loves to read at least two books a week. Any subject is welcome but he truly loves legal and

medically oriented books. Everyone knows that there are good and bad lawyers and doctors, but somehow they all believe that their own is the best in the whole world. Most of the times they are trusted as much or even more than God. Huffman fitted the description of being the best in Prem's mind.

Having made the appointment two weeks later, settling the discounted bill and wondering if he would use the savings for a nice chilled beer before heading home, he said goodbye to the receptionist. With the additional help having arrived and the office machinery moving smoothly, she seemed to be calm and collected. In addition to the discounted charges, she gave a generous smile to Prem. His gesture earlier to help her tears was duly perceived and quietly appreciated by her.

Folder was carefully closed and tied. He wished that the doctor had more time to discuss the history rather than spend time on the examination.

Doctor's office is one place where he, like most patients, are tongue tied out of respect or fear of offending the life saver. Any other place he would have told the guy to sit down and listen, especially when he was getting paid a hefty amount of money just to listen, but not to a doctor. When paying the expensive dollars he said only in his mind "They are all the same, here or in India. At least here I am getting a 50% discount." But his mathematical mind quickly found a flaw in his reasoning. Here he had to pay in dollars and even with the discount it translated into a big bundle of rupees.

Slowly he made his way out of the office and sat on a bench under a canopy to start the wait for his son who was to pick him up during lunch break.

Lunch break reminded him of his friends in Calcutta. Long leisurely lunches, chilled beers, making fun of strangers and friends with bets on every conceivable subject. Malik, Rajpal, Singh...all came alive in his mind. His friends had called to wish him luck for the upcoming visit with Dr. Huffman. They would have even placed a bet whether the doctor would be late by more or less than one hour, spend more or less than 5 minutes in the room, the doctor would give Prem more or less than 5 years to live etc. Malik would even jokingly tell Prem that the doctor will never let him die before he paid the bill and therefore the best way to live long will be to not pay the bill. Laughter would be in the air for hours.

There was never a dull moment except one fateful day when someone in the group jokingly told him " Prem, don't you realize that no one is sending you letters any more. *Internet thaan ik bahana hai (Internet is just an excuse.)* People are just not interested in receiving your same old letters and don't want to waste their time writing back hoping that this will put a stop to your long time-wasting letters.

No one is going to give a shit about this massive hoarding of letters you have wasted all your life collecting in binders."

This was said in the spirit of jest but somehow Prem took it to heart. Even though he was told repeatedly "Come on Yaar, this was just a joke. You are taking it too seriously."

No one should make fun of something so close to the heart, something that has become a purpose of life, a reason to get up in the morning, get dressed, go to the office, less for work and more for seeing the faces of your loved ones in the white striped pages, something Prem had done practically all his life.

This one sentence pierced through his heart. He wanted to believe that it was just a joke but then he wondered in the wee hours of sleepless nights that where there is smoke there must be fire. "Someone must have told my friend just what he repeated to me", he would muttered under his breath for fear of not waking up Shashi and letting her know how a single sentence had changed his life forever.

That was the day when he started wondering if there was a link between the stagnant weight of the mail and his own declining weight. Behind closed doors he started weighing himself daily and sometimes twice a day. His appetite became poor resulting in eating less and declining weight. His analytic mind connected the dots between the mail getting stalled at 40 Kg and his weight having come down from 70 to 49 and falling. He got convinced that the mail was the purpose of his life and it was nature's signal that when his weight would also reach 40 Kg, that would be his last day on earth.

He even envisioned a scene where there are two pyres burning side by side. On one is lying a 40 Kg male and on the other is a pile of 40 Kg. mail. Here he saw a merger between a completed life and a

completed purpose.

"First thing first, let us rule out any medical illness causing the weight loss", Bille had emphatically said to him. To appease his wife and just to be sure that there indeed was no cancer or such dreaded disease, he had made an appointment with his friend, Dr. Minocha. Initial examination was negative but Dr. Minocha did not want to take a chance of missing anything serious, especially in a life-long friend. Two specialists and many tests later Prem was relieved that there was no cancer. Following that cruel comment he was convinced that unless either he puts on weight or the mail started growing, his days were numbered.

His letters, now scanned through the internet, started reaching quarters covering much wider audience and farther than the snail/expensive mail ever did. The responses were generic and short in this fast paced life. Most were in the form of emails. These did not count as letters according to Prem's definition. The pace of physical weight decline had continued even after he reached USA.

Honk, Honk!! Prem suddenly jolted from his mental journey to India and his friends, looked around and saw Raj waving near the gate leading to the parking lot, asking him to come over. Raj was saving the minimum \$5 parking charge, otherwise he would get an earful "You wasted Rs. 250 just for 5 minutes of parking. I am still strong enough to run, let alone walk across the road. When I was your age, the whole family could buy food for one month with 250 rupees."

As he stood up he felt a little dizzy, held on to the end of the bench, rebalanced himself and then started a slow, slightly wobbly walk towards the car. A tear welled up in Raj's eyes as he watched the scene and also recalled the badminton games the father and son used to play years ago. Gradually, with will power, the pace picked up and the gait became steady. He hopped into the front seat and methodically placed the seat belt. In India, one could get away with a bribe of 10 rupees or it may have gone up to 50 by now, but in the USA a ticket could be an expensive lesson.

To the expected question from Raj, Prem said " See, there was no need to feed more money to the already rich doctor. I am totally fine and the big C has not made its home in my body."

There was a distinct relief in Raj's demeanor, which could be seen on his face and now relaxed shoulders.

"I am still glad that the best of the best has checked you. A few dollars is worth the peace of mind", said the loving son who wanted to hang onto the umbrella between himself and his own death, a thought that had lately started creeping in his mind.

After a few quiet moments, Prem said that the doctor wants to see me again. Then, with a smile, said that he had charmed Huffman into not charging even a penny for the next visit. Also some of the tests to be done will be discounted. There were still a lot of good people left in this world, he thought. Reluctantly, he even entertained the idea that all doctors are not just money hungry vultures.

After supper he pulled out the folder and carefully placed all the documents in their proper places, wrote a summary of the day's events on a single sheet of paper and stapled it with the medical reports. Bille got an extra tight hug of relief and dreams of long life together, only if he could somehow control the progressive weight loss.

With that thought and a book by James Patterson in his hand he turned to one side and before long the book fell down. Bille carefully pulled away the glasses, lovingly rolled his grey hair back, covered him with a soft blanket and sat up for her regular meditation session in her bed. She said an extra thank you to Ram and called it a night with a smile on her lips.

What a wonderful life in spite of all the ups and downs of their lives. They were just as young today, together as when they were courting many decades ago, which felt like it was only yesterday. Few blinks of eyes and boom, the years flew by. She felt happy that they had not only filled those years with open and private affection for each other but also that they had enriched and filled many a heart with their genuine care and love. Each member of the family had a piece of Prem hibernating in their hearts. They could see him, silently talk to him, listen and get gently encouraged by him.

They filled their days with books, walks, visits to monuments and museums, mostly in company of Neena and Neil. During weekends they interacted with Raj and Reena's friends and strangers.

Two weeks went by fast. The weather in USA suited them well, not that they ever complained of the oppressively hot weather followed by ocean pouring down from the monsoon clouds over Calcutta, choking the fragile veins of the city's drainage system.

The flowers in the park were in full bloom, all the lawns in their development were manicured better than most heads of many of the youngsters they saw in the shopping malls.

Trips to the malls were purely recreational and for exercise. They had never been fond of accumulating material stuff but lately even a mention of buying one more thing could trigger a massive headache.

Buying gifts for Neena and Neil was a whole different story. Children need the bubbly excitement and use of the gifts, he often said. Even a small trinket given with hugs to a child is more valuable than a luxury brand gift to a senior.

Some things never change. It was no different, when at the age of 25, Prem felt old enough not to need anything for himself. Almost half of his pay went for a monthly check to Pitaji. It was much appreciated and used for the running expenses at 2 Model Town, Panipat. It was the newly adopted permanent home three years after the partition. About a quarter was used for living expenses and the remainder was splurged as gifts for the four younger brothers, age five to sixteen. The youngsters, growing up in poverty, never were allowed to feel any less than the most well-to-do folks around them. Prem's every visit to home meant boxes upon boxes of gifts. Braino, Mechano, playing cards, cricket set, mouth organ, Murphy radio, transistors for constant cricket running commentary, an electric clock, among numerous others, kept children occupied and happy. He even taught us games like 21, which we learnt later, is called Black Jack. He taught us In-Between, and above all he taught us to laugh. His tears of joy made the children laugh and say to him " Make up your mind, are you happy or sad?"

Pita Ji passed away peacefully at home in December 1976. When Mataji, died in February 1990, several of Prem's gifts were spread between his siblings to keep in their homes, reminding them of the glorious childhood. A south Indian temple made from the pulp of bamboo shoots and a large sea shell which had adorned the cupboard along with the picture gallery of the family, are now prized possessions of Juginder and Dolly. The brown electric clock on the wall across from Mataji's bed was always in demand in Panipat as no one other than Pita Ji had a watch, found home in Prem's youngest brother's home.

Keeping up with the age-old habit, Prem and Bille were always on the look out for gifts for their grand children. One day before his visit with Dr. Huffman they bought one thank-you card for the doctor, one for his staff and seven picture post cards with a resolution to write to Neena and Neil every day for a week, even though they were living together.

Just the idea of leaving them to go to India made him sad. He wanted to leave traces of their own lives behind in those cards.

Appointment with Dr. Huffman was at 3.45 pm. Prem asked Reena to drop him off at 3.15 so he had enough time to organize his thoughts and the thick folder for the doctor.

He had not heard the results of the tests that had been done a week ago. No news is good news, especially when it relates to the report of the test results, he thought. Blissfully, he was oblivious of the fact that many doctor's offices do not call back with the results because they don't have a tracking system to follow up on the tests which had been ordered. If the lab does not send the results or the reports get filed away in wrong chart or lost, doctor would never know to call the patient. Some doctors wanted to discuss the report in person especially if it was going to be a bad news but many times just to collect fees for another visit.

Another gnawing thought making Prem nervous was 'What if Dr. Huffman is the kind of doctor who treated people for cancer when in fact they didn't have any. Or he kept treating cancer patients even when they were in remission.'

He had read about such a doctor who, after years of such practice, finally got caught and was serving jail time. But it was no consolation for the hundreds of victims who suffered due to the doctor's greed and poor monitoring system.

Now he cursed himself for reading too many medical books.

He brushed away this thought with firm belief that Dr. Huffman was the best cancer doctor in the world. And he would never even think of using patients as money pits.

At 4.00 PM Prem was escorted into the examination room by the pretty nurse. His pulse rate went up a little but he did not care as there was going to be no examination and nobody will know or

suspect an old man having any naughty thought. He even escaped the embarrassing gown. He used to say that such gowns are like insurance companies; they guarantee coverage but leave many cracks open in critical areas.

Dr. Huffman soon followed and pulled a chair close to the one occupied by Prem. "I am so happy that you came back at the end of the day", he said as he shook Prem's hands without first washing them. Prem made a mental note to not touch any part of his body till he had thoroughly washed his own hands at the conclusion of the visit. He had read that about 98,000 Americans die annually just because they were in the hospitals. Number one reason was cross infections spread by providers who did not wash hands between patients.

Huffman reviewed the test results in the folder and with a reassuring smile said "All the tests came back negative. One of these tests is super sensitive about the presence of any type of cancer in the body; even at the very early stages. So, we can safely say that your doctors in India may have run a few extra tests but were correct in their conclusion that the big C has not chosen your body as a host. Now let me hear from you about this conjecture of relation between your end of life and weight of the mail in your possession."

Prem carefully opened one of the many folders he had brought along and pulled out the index cards. Each one had the name of a relative or friend on the spine of the binder and on top of the page. Underneath was a carefully made Excel style sheet made with a pen. It depicted in chronological order the date the letter was written or received and a short note about the contents of the letter followed by any special comments. Some index sheets ran several pages long. Each index sheet was inserted in the three ring binders containing copies of the sent and originals of the received letters. Some letters were dated as far back as 1952.

No one goes through such laborious work unless they are convinced deep in their hearts that the efforts are worth the trouble, will make a difference to someone's life, may become an accurate source of history of the family, the city, the country and the world. Effect of inflation was documented from the prices of various fruits he loved to eat. Daily life happenings having different faces over the decades stored joys and struggles over the years.

Carefully keeping the sheets and some folders on the examination table, Prem gently caressed his

treasure and then with a sad smile said "You see doctor, these letters have been a purpose of my life, something I look forward to do every day. It makes me look forward to living fully. For various reasons, the amount of out-going but mostly in-coming mail is rapidly declining. Coincidentally or by nature's design, my weight also started to decline at about the same time.

My belief is that nothing in this universe happens by chance. Everything is governed by a plan, unseen it may be, but surely there is a designer creating the design."

He took a short pause and then with sadness expressing through moist eyes he continued "Once the weight of the mail got almost stagnant at 40 Kg. and my weight declined from 70 Kg to about 49, and now 47, the meaning is obvious—end is near, only 7 Kg away."

After a pause, he continued "The comment of my friend jolted my inner core. It made me doubt my *purpose* of life."

Huffman had diagnosed and treated thousands of patients but today he was stumped.

He did not know whether to whisk away this stupid notion that we all are pawns in the grand scheme coordinated by the unseen hand with unseen powers. What if there was a real message coming or was there a place for placebo effect playing a role here.

Mind can be programmed into sickness or health based on the data fed into it. It is effective as long as the mind believes the data to be real. Even if there are no external chemicals, the mere focused, firmly believed thought will generate internal chemicals which actually affect cells and organs in a constructive or destructive manner, depending on the basic nature of the thought.

Dr. Huffman was aware that about three fourth of all major illnesses like cancer, skin disorders, cardiovascular disease and even backache are related to mind and behavior. Stress is perceived to be a psychological problem but it has very real physical effects. Increased secretion of adrenaline, steroids and other chemicals cause acceleration of heart beat, greater tension in the muscles, slower or improper digestion. Increased inflammation markers such as C-reactive protein and sedimentation rate are the results of such physiological changes. Blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels may rise, blood may thicken making it more prone to clot formation. This in turn

increases the risk of heart attacks and stroke.

Dr. Huffman could sense that in this patient the self destruction was in progress. Simply telling Prem "What nonsense, there is nothing wrong with you. Go home, stop wasting your money and our time" will not solve the problem.

He leaned over and put his hand gently over Prem's left shoulder in a sympathetic and almost fatherly manner, even though he was two third of Prem's age. The chair one sit in adds years to one's demeanor, aura and authority. Every the words delivered have several times more weight compared to it coming from someone without the authority, saying the same thing.

"I fully understand your dilemma, Prem. I am sure you and your family are as happy as I am that you do not, I repeat, do not have any organic disease, including cancer, causing your body to wither. Your friend was obviously joking when he made comments about your declining mail. You took it much too seriously and let it get to you."

Then with a mischievous smile, he continued "May be now you will get burdened with the guilt of affecting many innocent people who were the butt of your jokes and pranks. I am only kidding." They both had a big laugh of relief and joy.

Prem took out a clean white, ironed handkerchief from his right pocket, took off the glasses and wiped away the tears. He shed tears whenever he was sad, but mostly after a laughter when his naughty, twinkling eyes could not cope up with tears of joy.

Dr. Huffman in a firm reassuring way continued

"Now you go back to your life and remember that a purposeful person will always find a niche where nature is calling for help. you wouldn't want to miss your grandkids' weddings. You have so much more to add to the lives of your family and friends. Having lived a full life, devoured every book you could get and accumulated wisdom, what is one advice you can give to us? Prem contemplated for a few seconds and said "Face the problem immediately. If you don't, it will come back multifold. A hill crossing will become tedious mountain climbing." After a pause he said "Surely you see it in your field. An early cancer diagnosis compared to a delayed stage four monster."

They shook hands and Dr. Huffman made Prem's day by saying that there was no charge for today's visit.

Prem said "Thank you. Even if you had billed me I would not have paid any way. You know why? Because once a doctor gave a patient 6 months to live. The patient did not pay his bill, so the doctor gave him another 6 months! You have given me way more than six months."

They both had a hearty laugh as they went their separate ways, both feeling happy with the results and sad that they might never meet again. Prem's handkerchief was again in his hand.

Jyoti was in the waiting room and could not wait to hear every word that was uttered behind the closed doors. On receiving the good news, she let out a loud 'yipee' startling some lingering patients and their families in the waiting room and the staff behind the glass window.

Happily, Jyoti and Prem left the office to head home and celebrate the good news by going out for drinks, dinner and ice cream.

With new lease on life, the first thing Prem did next day was to buy a new legal size note pad, a new pen--made in China, and sat down to write every detail of the story plus all that was happening in the lives of Disha, Tanuj, Ashit and Jyoti as well as the Nation. After 21 pages, with tired hands and smiley face, he walked over to the fridge, pulled out a chilled-to-perfection Heineken, put his feet up and looked out of the window at the white fluffy clouds gently rolling across light blue sky. He kept up this routine for several days.

One day, just as he had taken the last sip, Jyoti walked in with a large plastic bin with the markings of U S Post Office and placed it on the table.

"You wouldn't believe, Papa. I got a call from the post office that the amount of mail to be delivered is far too much to fit in our small mailbox. They asked me to come and pick up the box full of letters from all over the world."

Unknown to Prem, Dr. Huffman, with the help of Bille, Ashit and Jyoti, had taken the addresses of all of Prem's family members and friends. He then dictated a letter stating the diagnosis of mind

over body playing tricks with Prem and the obvious treatment was to increase the weight of the mail. This in turn will encourage Prem's mind to tell the body to eat and exercise more, drink a little to keep up with the increasing load of letters. He ended by typing

Rx: This is Doctor's order, please comply.

And signed.

Every member of the family, including grand children and circle of friends, not only wrote letters making sure that they were not of the kind which said "I am well and hope you are the same. Rest all is fine."

They were long, juicy, full of news of themselves, their work, family, hobbies, good news and bits of sad news they wished to share. More letters went out and more boxes were carried in periodically, initially in USA and then for many years in Calcutta.

Several years ago he and Bille had acquired Green card immigrant status. Their plan was to get their only son become immigrant and make better life in the USA. In order to follow the guidelines, they travelled to the USA every year or two.

Finally two years ago Ashit got the green card, a nice paying job in New York followed and he, with his family, settled in the USA.

That goal was accomplished and now it was time to move on.

Prem remembered from his extensive reading that there is higher pull to place where ancestors lived. Another one he recalled was where organisms remembered their ancestral environments and adjusted easier there than in a new environment.

Prem, seven years older than Bille, started having pangs of missing his home. His desire to go back to Calcutta was gaining strength everyday.

Not that Ashit and Jyoti left any stone unturned to make their parent's stay as comfortable, filled with love and care by them as possible. The grand children did all they could to keep grand parents with them too.

Prem at times felt as if he was the tail following where ever the children went. At social parties they tried to mingle with youngsters but were fully aware that their children's friends were just being polite, but were itching to mingle with their own kind. More over there were no persons around their age at these gatherings.

His own persona was diminishing and many days he felt like a hollow body walking and talking. This is not how he had visualized their old age.

Couple of months after the final visit with Dr. Huffman, Bille and Prem told Ashit and Jyoti "We know you love us beyond imagination and you take out time for us in spite of a busy work and home life. We can feel your deep love. You make us sit on a pedestal."

Then with his handkerchief out, "But we feel like King and Queen in our own house in Calcutta."

Ashit and Jyoti, with choked throats tried to counter the conversation, but no words came out, only tears flowed.

Next day Ashit made pleas and arguments to convince them to move to the USA and live the rest of life with the family. This fell on deaf ears, virtually and literally, and the family got separated with promises to meet again soon.

Couple of weeks later Bille and Prem flew back to Calcutta.

Time was moving on nicely for them, folders got heavier and their numbers multiplied. Another steel almirah was purchased to store the treasure.

Ashit, Jyoti, Disha and Tanuj struggled with their future plans. After two years they had just started to feel at home in the long coveted land. Good job, financial security and better education helped.

But the mere thought of having their parents be alone in their old age in India shuddered their inner core. The false alarm of cancer will not be false next time. After struggling for several weeks, they decided to move back to Calcutta

Prem had put on some weight, but never reached the plump 70 Kg. He had regained his old happy life style. More so now that Ashit, Jyoti, Disha and Tanuj had moved back into a home two minutes walk from theirs.

Time was spent watching sports on television, chatting with family members, now spread all over the world. Writing letters became more vigorous, always starting with My Dear—Hi and ending with Fondly yours, Prem.

Paper books were coming from and back to the library. Some were read twice. Their reviews were noted in a note book. Life was unending bliss.

Bets were floating via What's app, Facebook and Twitter whether Prem, who was by now 99 years young, will make century or not. Bets of all levels were being placed, various permutations and combinations brilliantly thought out by elders of the next generation. The betting person's name was kept secret, only the numbers for and against were known.

At age 99 and 11 months a century was being considered a safe bet. With all the bets in, the fateful day of June 1, 2031 was being awaited with great anticipation. Over ten lacs of rupees had been placed in the kitty and everyone was making plans how to spend it.

Jyoti was busy preparing a gala unique 100th Birthday celebration for her loving Papa. Guest lists were finalized and everyone had been told that they must attend.

And then, at different times, in different time zones, in different countries, the news traveled via telephones or email, Facebook, What's App and Twitter in the form of the following letter.

My Dear Family,

Obviously it is impossible, but wishful thinking has no limits or boundaries. I wish Mataji and Pitaji were here. Even after decades, I see and feel them as clearly as when I was young.

Bets have been placed. 99% are betting for the century up. But the desire to win the bet, to get out of the frail, hurting body and fear of becoming a burden on others are telling me that as much as I

would love to always be with you, it seems that the innings is over.

I did have a cancer for a number of years that was not easy to detect and fortunately was very slow growing. But now it has finally permeated every cell of my body.

I have no regrets now, had some as we were going through life, but in some strange ways it all evens out. The blessings were way more than the shortfalls, balance sheet was overfilled with abundance.

Looking back, I would not change a thing, may be I should not have worried as much. Blissfully, I was granted a positive attitude and outlook to life. I loved to focus on only the good qualities of everyone I came in contact with. My inner passion was to learn about others' lives, and helping wherever I could.

My love of writing letters started to mitigate loneliness created by separation from the family at my young age and later it became a purpose of keeping the family connected.

Love has been my guiding force in life. Money has some value but love trumps it all. Excess money tends to cause more problems than it solves.

I never believed in it but now I do want to believe in reincarnation and hopefully will see you all again, soon. At the next FGT, or when you see a long letter, hear thunder or see lightning in the sky, a sunrise or full moon, a cold beer, a loud laughter, a zindabad shouted out somewhere, it may just be ME! Or may be one of the great great great grand child of Mata Ji and Pita Ji.

Lots of Love and Goodbye.

Fondly,

Prem

The above letter had been written several weeks before he died. He had instructed Ashit to post it only when Papa took his last breath.

This is how the family got the news of the outcome of the bet; via a letter with slightly shaky writing but still beautifully crafted and still not a word crossed out or re-written. It was scanned and sent as an attachment.

On the night of May 30, 2031, two days shy of the century, the giant, the life, the glue of the family, Prem Luthra said good bye to the family. He passed away peacefully with a smile on his face, holding one of Bille's hands who held Amritvani and a Mala in the other. Ashit, Jyoti, Disha and Tanuj sat near his feet, sadly happy witnessing a wonderful life taking the last breath in peace.

The family decided to celebrate his life with the hope that they may imbibe at least some of the number of qualities that came so naturally to him. Without having a firm belief in God, he indeed was blessed. So was the Luthra Parivar to have had such a love-filled and love-giving person, appropriately named Prem, in their family.

Prem was the only one who had placed his bet against the century being up and ended winning the last bet of his life. He had directed this pool of money to be equally divided between every member of the Khandan of Vidya Wati and Kundan Lal Luthra, right down to the latest addition of Mataji, Pitaji's great, great, great grand children.

No one wanted to spend this money on themselves.

They decided to arrange the largest family get together (FGT) of all times. On the final day, they rented a movie theater, provided abundant drinks, including chilled beer, and bags of popcorn.

Regular movie was stopped right in the middle, the lights were turned off, making the hall pitch dark.

A pre-recorded short movie started. Lightening and thunder lit the screen ending with sounds and sights of rain. Letters showing his writing, envelops, mixed with flowers started descending with a picture of Prem filling middle of the screen. A caption gradually descended over the picture and stopped below it.

Presented Fondly for Prem Luthra.

A voice commanded everyone in the audience to repeat three times—

Prem Bhaba Zindabad, Prem Chacha Zindabad, Prem Mama Zindabad, Prem Papa Zindabad, Babu Ji Zindabad

Prem Bille Zindabad

Red rose petals gradually started falling over Prem from the computer generated hands in the photographs of Mata Ji and Pita Ji. They gradually descended and stopped on each side of Prem's picture, and they said in dubbed voices—

Prem Beta Zindabad,

Prem Beta Zindabad!

His grand children had orchestrated this portion of the movie.

There were no dry eyes in the theater. Sorrow and joy painted the cheeks.