**Forty Kilograms**

Barbara, stationed at the front desk, rolled her eyes. She threw her free hand up in the air in frustration. She tried to interrupt the person screaming on the phone, moved the phone away from her ear for a few seconds. She would have loved to hang up. And before doing so, tell that fireball where to go and burn. In these difficult times, she was afraid of losing her job. Many of her friends and family members were getting laid off, with no prospect of getting another job.

A droplet of tears became a stream, rolled down across the nose and left cheek. She had hooked the telephone between her left ear and shoulder, to keep working on the computer. It helped tune out the barking greyhound as she carried on with her work.

The line at the check-in counter had gradually grown to five persons. At its head, stood a lean, partly balding man wearing a well-ironed light green shirt, crisp pants and bright polished shoes. The shirt matched his striking greenish eyes, magnified by a light brown pair of glasses and highlighted by white hair.

Though he had Indian features, his fair skin and green eyes could easily make him pass for a Caucasian. Wrinkles on his forehead suggested the worries he tried to mask with his smile and jokes with people behind him.

His keen sense of observing others in distress noticed the anguish Barbara was experiencing. He pulled out a tissue from the Kleenex box for her to wipe away the stream—before it embarrassed her by smudged mascara.

It was his first visit to this office, had never met Barbara before. Although he wanted to help her—he hesitated. Folding the tissue into his palm, he remembered the legal cases he had read about the strange laws about presumed sexual misconduct in this new country. Instead, 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. Barbara mouthed a “thank you” and gestured for him to take a seat in the waiting room.

He had been content with the diagnosis made by doctors in Calcutta, India. But his son, Raj, who was now settled in New York, insisted “Papa, you must come here 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 son’s money. However, his wife, Shashi, echoed Raj’s idea of second opinion in the USA. Prem was happy staying in Calcutta, busy with work and fun with family and friends. Shashi was fond of traveling—affectionately called ‘butterfly’ by the family members. She also had deep desire to spend time with the children, grandchildren and other family members settled in the USA. Finally, Prem caved in and got persuaded to come to New York.

He had arrived half an hour early, a habit ingrained since childhood. He set the alarm clock two hours before the departure time. He made a list his concerns on a legal-sized paper, prepared a series of questions and revised them till he was satisfied that every possible situation had been considered. Before stepping out, he checked off each item.

The waiting room was fancy. It had plush leather chairs, a high-definition television, and the inviting aroma of freshly brewed coffee. An assortment of Godiva chocolates and cookies made the room inviting and relaxing. On one hand, the opulence reassured him, suggesting the doctor must be caring and compassionate. On the other hand, it raised concerns about the expense—after all, the patient ultimately foots the bills. Lack of insurance weighed heavily on his mind. It was one reason he had hesitated to deal with the unexplained weight loss, preferring to endure it quietly rather than costing his hardworking 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. As always, he started worrying about the money this visit and possible recommended tests might cost. Each dollar seemed out of reach when converted to rupees.

Raj had once again refuted the argument,“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. That also, when you didn’t have much money to spare. It’s my turn to pay back, especially when we feel guilty leaving you and Mummy alone in India.”

Over the last two years, 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 companionship of his wife made him eat more—in quantity, quality and regularity. The cheeks as well as the tummy puffed up, reflecting prosperity in happiness and wealth. While happiness was welcome, extra money bothered him— it made him feel selfish. There were so many people around who could use the surplus, even though it wasn’t much. He made sure to share it with his needy family members and poor children in the neighborhood.

Sufferings from poverty was familiar to him. He had witnessed the whole family, with bare hands, sifting through the dark open sewer. One child had thrown a one rupee coin in the filth.

At an early age, he was old enough to observe and feel the stress his father, addressed as Pita Ji, endured by raising and educating eight children—single-handedly. That number was daunting by itself, the hardships were compounded by the unforeseen partition of the country, when the family ended up as refugees. They had lost their home and steady hefty income from farming in Khanewal, British India—land which, all of a sudden, became part of Pakistan.

In May1947, the family had travelled to Sabathu, a hill station 20 miles south of Shimla, for summer vacation. Mata Ji was pregnant with what would turn out to the last of their ten children. Tragically, two had succumbed to small pox around age 6. Anticipating the possibility of partition, Pitaji had wisely purchased this summer home in March 1947. This, now became a much-needed refuge.

On August, 15, 1947 the country was partitioned, with Muslim-majority areas forming a new country called Pakistan. The boundary between independent India and newly carved Pakistan was determined by a line drawn by an English bureaucrat, Cyril Radcliffe. He based the location of the infamous line on hurriedly collected data of the number of Muslims against mix of Hindus and Sikhs in different areas of Panjab. Initially, he allotted Lahore to India. Later, under pressure from Muslim league, he switched it to Pakistan. The reason— Calcutta, another big city, 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 decisions, and fate of millions of helpless affected people in that region. Irony was that the exact location of the boundary line was declared two days after Independence Day.

During these tumultuous, uncertain and violent times, Luthra family’s ancestral land and home, where three generations had lived, suddenly were no longer theirs.

It was sad and horrendous event, but the Luthra family was blessed in one way—they already had a roof on their heads and were safe in the newly freed, independent India—all secure, together. This was unlike the 12 to 14 million people who endured violent migration on both sides with about 1.5 millions massacred or starved, trying to relocate.

Prem decided to halt further education and get a job. Pita Ji, a staunch promoter of education, was not happy with this idea—reluctantly agreed. Prem got a job in Madras to supplement family’s meager income.

The positive effect of such a long 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 that kept isolated Prem bonded to the family.

Another reason of writing letters was the deep hurt he had experienced in 1949. It came in the form of a post card, dated 29.5.49 in which his father, Pitaji, had written:

‘Dear Prem,

Received your letter after a silence of nearly one month and that only because you needed money, which shall be sent through P.N. Bank tomorrow…’

There was no scolding, only hurt. Much later, in his own words, Prem said “No matter how many letters I wrote after that letter, nothing could erase the guilt of having been neglectful in May, 1949.”

Letters became longer and more frequent to bridge the vast distance created by his move to Madras. He was blessed with a unique ability to visualize the intended recipient on the page as he wrote his long letters. In his mind, this closed the physical gap with each word. Since he was having conversation with the receiver of his letter, he felt less homesick.

Being the only one flung hundreds of miles away, Prem wanted to preserve every object and every event that connected him with the separated family. The other members—not deprived of the family structure—never realized the pangs of separation felt by Prem. They did not write as often as they received his frequent and voluminous letters. The letters were his lifeline 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 family member, friends and even strangers who he wrote to or received a letter from.

He started making copies of every letter that he wrote and filed them carefully into the binder. He went even further by making an index page showing the date and summary of the main subject of the letter. Then he 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, he read and re-read, and then lovingly filed them in the appropriate folder.

At the first opportunity, he sat down on his usual chair and table, with his ink-filled pen and stack of legal size papers. He delivered another monologue to the imagined face he clearly saw on the paper. At the end, he made copies, stapled them and placed them in the appropriate binder. After sealing the thick envelope, he paused—ran his soft fingers along the edges. He gave one final look, kissed the envelope and dropped it in the mailbox.

His collection of cherished memories traveled with him to Calcutta in 1953, as his job transported him to the new and lifelong residence.

The person who added the most to his collection of letters was his soon-to-be wife, Shashi—he fondly called her 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 the additional group of relatives, who came into his life with Shashi.

As lives became busier, postage more expensive, incomes shrunk, replies less frequent,

the rate of weight gain of his collection of letters became slow. The final blow to the decline came with the invention and rapid explosion of internet. People began to forget the art of writing letters and seeing faces in the blank pages.

On a lazy Sunday morning, he and his grandchildren, Neena and Neil, marveled at the lifelong collection.

“How much do you think all your letters weigh, Babu Ji?”asked Neil.

Prem, in his usual playful manner, proposed to place a bet with his grandchildren about the weight of the mail. The one farthest from the actual weight would perform 21 salutes in front of their friends at the Saturday Club. The grandchildren jumped with excitement, accepted the challenge from their grandfather, whom they fondly called Babu Ji.

To the children, the massive pile, without the binders, looked enormous. They bet it was 50 kg. Prem, however, made a more conservative bet at 35 kg.

Children as well as Prem were elated about this new adventure. Prem had a quality to transform to the age and mind of the person he interacted with. A flurry of activities started. He joined in the process of pulling all the letters out into accurate piles. The children ran down and persuaded a shopkeeper to lend them a large weighing machine. When they weighed the collection, the actual weight was astonishing 40 kilograms—exactly what Prem weighed during college. He shared this information with Neena and Neil.

The grandchildren were surprised by the coincidence, while Prem quietly wondered about its significance. His inquisitive mind always wondered about everything. The forty kilogram—his college-time weight and the declining growth of the mail made him wonder if there was a hidden meaning in this occurrence. Over the last two years, his weight had declined to 49 kg. 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 for now.

Anticipation of victory salutes by his grandchildren at the Club brought a smile to his face as he sipped a perfectly chilled beer.

“The doctor is running late due to an emergency at the hospital, “Prem heard in half-dream state in the comfortable chair. This was the second time the nurse had made the announcement, he missed the first one.

Having read every conceivable book, medical and otherwise, he wondered if the doctor was held back on the golf course instead of hospital. He was willing to wait—only hoping that the doctor had not celebrated his victory with a drink at the club’s bar.

The waiting room was full by now. Some of the patients looked fairly healthy—almost 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 in his body. Sneaky one might be evading every conceivable test done by his family doctor and the two specialists in India.

This had resulted in similar loss of the weight of his wallet. He often chuckled, “I will die when these sharks have stolen my last paisa. When they are done squeezing all the money out of my wallet, they will squeeze life 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!”

In the morning, Prem had made sure to put a new battery in his hearing aid,. Despite the noise, he heard it clearly. He got up with a jolt and made his way to the examination room pointed by the nurse.

He carried the folder, full of copies of the reports and a long list of questions, in his right hand. *She is really pretty*, he thought as he followed her, being careful she did not notice the direction of his gaze, which followed the curves of her body. The age and presumed sickness did little to bar him from appreciating beauty when he saw it, and he saw beauty more often than not.

As ordered, he took off his clothes and put on a thin, worn out gown. He felt conscious of his thin body and wrinkled skin, even though in his mind, he felt like a sixteen-year-sturdy boy.

The nurse did the preliminary tests: weight, which had dropped to 47 kg, pulse and temperature. Last two, had gone up a notch by her touch.

She noted the chief complaints: unexplained weight loss over the last two years and question of possible link between the convergence of weight of the letters and his own weight. She underlined: whether a life ends when the purpose to live is finished. Prem knew that this was not really a medical question, but a philosophical debate. He respected medical professionals for their insight into mysteries of life—whether physical or beyond.

She inquired about his medications and recorded them.

“Do you have any allergies?”

“Yes,” Prem smiled, then added “Couple of my ex-friends in India and doctor’s bills.”

Already running late, the nurse had no time for silly jokes—didn’t even smile.

“Doctor will be in shortly. I am sorry for the long wait.”

He pulled out his thick folder along with the list of concerns and questions. Waiting game re-started. This time it was only 12 minutes—even that felt too long. His body started to shiver from the nervous tension, loss of muscle mass and cool temperature, which the doctor liked in his clinic. He wondered why the doctor forgot that the sick 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 added a touch of reassuring experience to the nervous patients. He was well dressed in a tailored blue-striped suit and a cheerful red necktie. Not the dreaded white coat which adds anxiety to the already scared patients—most of whom had cancer. He had an easy reassuring smile, an unhurried manner and a warm handshake.

“Good morning, sorry I made you wait so long,”

“Good morning, Doctor. Wait never bothers me. After all, where are we rushing to go anyway. Running around, raising our own blood pressure—also those of others around us?” Prem replied with a chuckle.

“My wife and I use such moments to make friends with strangers; have some fun along the way for ourselves and those who soon would become strangers again. But the memories linger—and that, Doctor, what life is all about.”

Dr. Huffman gave Prem an appreciative look of being in presence of a wise man. He settled in a leather chair next to the examination table and started scanning the chart.

Even after reading the nurse’s notes, as always, he preferred to hear complaints and history from the patients. Over the years, Dr. Huffman had observed that patients—especially men—gave only patchy history and required prodding to uncover the whole story. Invariably, patients spill the diagnosis if doctor asks the right questions and listens carefully. Patients try to trivialize some complaints, out of denial—*Nothing can go wrong with me,* or ignorance of link of symptoms to the diseases. That’s why he proceeded slowly and tried to know the patients more intimately. Dr Huffman was famous for his ability to pacify patients enough to get to their deep fears, 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—take my brother Juginder for instance. Poor guy, lives in West Virginia, hears his name butchered constantly. He has been called Huginder, Jugainder and many times—what the hell is that?

My name is Prem. Like James as in James Bond minus the ‘S’. You did a fine job with that. I’m 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 already know my diagnosis. But they insist that I be examined by the best in the finest cancer institute in the world.”

“Oh, you already know you have cancer?”

“No, I know I don’t have cancer,” Prem replied with a smile. “But my children feel that—with my progressive weight loss, and in the absence of any other detectable cause—the bugger must be hiding somewhere.”

“They are right, many cancers don’t have any symptoms other than weight loss,” the doctor interjected.

“I’ve been subjected to a game of hide-and-seek by mostly necessary and some unnecessary tests in India. My son believes you and your team are the best detectives to bring out the sneakiest hiders. That is why I am here, bankrupting his family.”

Dr. Huffman, generally serious-minded, couldn’t help but chuckle at this remark.

“Hm, If you know you don’t have cancer, then you must know why you are losing weight—and why you are worried about dying?”

Prem leaned forward slightly, and said in a serious tone. “You see, Doctor, everyone needs a purpose to live. Nature puts us on this earth as part of a piece of the giant jigsaw puzzle. Each one of us has an ingrained purpose to discover and follow. Some people create it with their efforts; others believe in a divine destiny. Either way, having a purpose makes one feel useful—and that usefulness makes life worthwhile.

“That’s an interesting perspective” said Dr. Huffman, glancing at his watch. He made a move as if he was getting up from the chair.

Once Prem started, it was hard to stop him. “You might have heard about the studies at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, back in 2009,” his voice becoming more animated. “Those, along with other articles, have scientifically shown that having a purpose and leading a meaningful life helps people live longer. Take away the purpose—the person withers away.”

Dr. Huffman agreed, “That’s partly a reason why I chose to become a doctor.”

Now nothing was going to stop Prem, “As if nature is saying ‘I don’t need to waste resources on this useless piece of flesh. Let it perish, its atoms can be recycled into something more useful’.”

He paused, his voice dropping to near-whisper. “And I have lost my purpose in life. It feels as if it has been noticed by nature. My appetite is diminishing, I am not eating enough, and that’s causing the weight loss. But no one believes me.”

Dr. Huffman patiently listened to this interesting man and his self-made diagnosis. This was unconventional and thought-provoking. His curiosity was getting the better of him. He knew that he was already running 45 minutes behind schedule, but he could not get away from this fascinating patient. He made a mental plan to have Prem come back for a longer consultation—free of charge; on a day when he wouldn’t have to deal with the impatient and angry glares from patients in the waiting room.

The nurse stepped in quietly, signaling with subtle urgency that the next frustrated patient was threatening to leave. He helped remove the flimsy gown from the man’s thinning frame. Prem’s skin, once taut and smooth over a well-muscled body, now hung loose in folds.

“You were an athlete, weren’t you?” Dr. Huffman asked, noting the faint remnants of what once had been a strong build.

Prem straightened up, smiled “Best badminton player in my college. Girls gawked at my swift movements and muscular contractions, easily seen through the sweaty thin white cotton tee-shirt. The admiring looks and the victory cups made me practice even more vigorously—I stayed number one throughout college.”

The muscles were now a faded memory, though the silver-polished cups and medals still reminded him, his son and grandchildren, the golden days of his body.

 Dr. Huffman methodically examined Prem from head to toes. His keen eyes were searching for clues about any hidden ailment. Fingers palpated all the areas they could reach, seeking any abnormality. Percussion, even though being displaced by lucrative scans, was still a part of his armamentarium. Likewise, stethoscope was on the verge of becoming extinct, being replaced by well-paying and presumably more accurate scans. But he still listened to the body and its whispers.

Dr. Huffman believed in these tools because they added to his diagnostic skills and also gave him quality time with and a reason to touch the patient. There is an imperceptible healing force in doctor’s touch. He listened with tools and conversation. Invariably, the patient—in verbal or non-verbal language—was leading him to the diagnosis.

The reason for more dependance on the tests was that a time-consuming examination did not cover the expenses. The tests provided extra information, generated extra revenue and also left behind a trail for the insurance companies and lawyers, showing all that could be done *was* done.

Dr. Huffman covered all angles by a brief current and past history of coronary bypass surgery in 1992, and an exhaustive comprehensive physical examination.

The physical examination failed to reveal evidence of any obvious disease that would explain the gradual, progressive weight loss.

Prem had come well-prepared. He had meticulously arranged copies of the tests and reports of examinations and tests performed in India. The front sheet listed the date, name of the test, results and the name of what he called ‘Thief’, the doctor who had ordered and profited from what he thought were unnecessary tests.

The amount of money stolen from him was entered with varying number of question marks, indicating how much, in his mind, over-charging was done. Dr. Huffman, carefully, and at times with a smile, reviewed the reports and copies of some of the scans Prem had coaxed out of the doctors.

The tests and the reports did not show any indication of the elusive culprit. Dr. 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. “Since I am getting 50% off, it means I can have my wife, Shashi, have the same deal.” Dr. Huffman chuckled at Prem’s humor in the midst of a possible serious illness.

Shashi had survived an Osteoclastoma, a bone cancer, at a very young age. Doctors discovered the disease at an early stage. Appropriate radiation treatment put the cancer in remission. Even though the long-term prognosis was poor, decades went by without any recurrence. Shashi claimed it was a miracle. She thanked God for divine intervention, but Prem debated against existence of such an entity. “Even if present, God is far too busy to micromanage countless living beings on earth—and beyond.”

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.

Dr. Huffman bid 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. “Please come to the front desk for billing and arranging next appointment.”

The dates for the tests and visit were scheduled on a Wednesday afternoon, when his daughter-in-law, Reena, would be free from her work in the music recording studio.

Prem felt a sense of relief, even though he was sure that Raj was wasting money. Having confirmation from a trustworthy and skilled specialist was reassuring. He didn’t deny the anxiety which accompanies visit to a doctor—a nerve-wracking experience, no matter how secure one might feel.

There is always a lingering anxiety whether, intentionally or not, a doctor could add to patient’s worries. Whether for sake of thoroughness, fear of malpractice or a financial interest in a facility, the doctors can add additional test, a dose of anxiety and additional bills.

Prem also knew that some doctors add a pill here or an injection there to treat a symptom or give an impression that doctor actually did something to help the patient. Placebo effect was not to be underestimated. Some minor findings did need genuine intervention while some would resolve even if no treatment was given.

A cartoon Prem liked - showed a doctor, leaning over the bed, saying, “Mr. Jones, we did the operation in the nick of time; two more hours, you would have cured yourself!”

It was amusing—as long as it stayed as a cartoon. It’s a whole different matter when you are in the exam room, worried and at complete mercy of the trusted doctor. The fear of becoming hero of the cartoon feels all so real.

Prem loved to devour at least two books a week. He welcomed any subject, but had immense fondness and curiosity of legal and medically oriented books. Like most people, he understood that there were more good and few bad lawyers and doctors. Yet, he noticed, all patients believed their own to be the best—trusted as much or more than God. In Prem’s mind, Dr. Huffman fitted the description of being the most compassionate, talented and trusted doctor.

After scheduling the two-weeks appointment, settling the discounted bill, he fancied the idea of using the savings for a nice chilled beer before heading home. He bid goodbye to Barbara, her name tag visible on her white uniform. With additional help, office machinery moving smoothly, she was calm. In addition to the discounted charges, she gave Prem a generous smile—a subtle acknowledgment of his earlier kindness. His thoughtful gesture had been noticed.

When paying the expensive bill, he thought, “They are all the same, too expensive, 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 converted into a big bundle of rupees.

Prem carefully closed and tied the folder, thoughts still lingering. He wished the doctor had spent more time discussing the history than on extensive examination.

Doctor’s office was one place where he, like most patients, was tongue-tied—out of respect or fear of offending the life-saver. Any other place, he would have told the person to sit down and listen. But not with a doctor.

He made his way out of the office, taking slow steps. He sat down on a bench under a canopy, to start the wait for his son, who was to pick him up during lunch break.

Thought of lunch break brought out memories of his friends in Calcutta—long, leisurely lunches filled with sizzling prawns and chilled beers—poking fun at strangers and friends. They enjoyed placing bets on any imaginable subject. Malik, Rajpal, Sunil, Singh…their faces and voices came alive in his mind.

If the cost of making phone calls was not prohibitive, they would have called to wish him luck for the upcoming visit with Dr. Huffman. They would have placed bets whether the doctor would be late by more or less than one hour, spend more or less than 5 minutes in the room, give Prem more or less than 5 years to live, etc.

Malik, in his usual jovial way, would have told Prem that the doctors never let patients die before their bills are paid off. Therefore, the best way for Prem to live long would be to not pay the bill. Laughter would be in the air for hours.

There was never a dull moment with his friends—except one fateful day, when Sunil, with a mischievous smile, remarked “Prem, you do realize that no one sends you letters any more. Internet is just an excuse. People are just not interested in receiving your same old long letters and don’t want to waste their time reading or writing back. May be they are hoping this will put an end to your long time-wasting letters.”

Sunil leaned toward him and whispered in his ear—“And honestly, when you are gone, no one is going to care about the binders, full of your letters, you have wasted all your life hoarding.”

Though this was said in the spirit of jest, Prem could not help but take it to heart. Even when Sunil assured and apologized repeatedly, “Come on yaar, this was just a joke. You are taking it too seriously.” The searing words lingered. They reverberated in his mind and left a deeper impression than intended.

The impact seeped into his daily life—affecting his sleep and appetite. When writing letters to his loved ones, those words swirled endlessly, obscured the faces he wanted to bring to life. Minutes went by, not a word flowed from the pen to paper. Crumpled sheets of partially written letters filled the trash bin. Ink on some words got smudged. Even when he was able to shake off those words, the letters became much shorter and lacked the easy transfer of love, which used to flow like lava. At times, when alone, he broke down and openly cried, not sharing his distress with anyone.

No one should make fun of something so close to the heart. Something that had become a purpose of life, a reason to get up in the morning, get dressed, go to the office—less for work, more for seeing the faces of loved ones on the white striped pages. Prem had followed this passion practically all his adult life.

Those few sentences pierced through his soul. He wanted to believe that it was just a joke. However, during sleepless nights, the comment haunted him—where there is smoke there must be fire. He talked to himself. “Someone must have told Sunil what he repeated to me,” he muttered under his breath. He lay awake at night, careful not to disturb Shashi, hesitant to let her know how a few sentence had altered his life forever.

That was the day when the images of his grandchildren and him weighing the letters resurfaced in his mind. He started wondering if there, indeed, was a link between the stagnant weight of the mail and his own declining weight. Behind closed doors, he started weighing himself daily, sometimes twice a day. His appetite became poor, resulting in eating less, which translated to weight loss. His analytic mind connected the dots between the mail getting stalled at 40 kg and his weight having come down from 70 to 49 kg and falling. He got convinced that the mail was the *purpose* of his life. It might be nature’s signal that when his weight reached 40 kg, that would be his last day on earth.

He even envisioned a scene of two pyres burning side by side—on one lay a forty kg male, and on the other a pile of forty kg mail. In this imagery, he saw a merger between a completed life and a fulfilled purpose.

One cool morning, while having steaming hot tea with Shashi, he mustered enough courage to share his deep thoughts about the comment and fear of his own mortality. His voice faltered as he verbalized the emotional and physical turmoil he had been enduring. She put the cup down, with tears in her eyes, walked across the table, sat down in his lap and gave a gentle, reassuring kiss on his lips. They hugged each other tight, caressed each other’s back, transferring their deep love. Silence said it all.

“First thing first, let us rule out any medical illness causing the weight loss,” Bille suggested. To appease his wife and to be sure that there, indeed, was no cancer or such dreaded disease, he made an appointment with his friend, Dr. Minocha. Initial examination was negative, but Dr. Minocha didn’t want to take a chance of missing anything serious, especially in a life-long friend.

Prem was seen by two specialists. The first, a very busy oncologist, ran every possible test— needed or not—many of them in his own large clinic. He even called Dr. Minocha, “What’s your rate of referring a patient in lieu of sharing my profit.” Dr. Minocha was furious, “Don’t you dare check or do any more test on Prem. You and your kind are a disgrace to the entire medical profession. You parasites prey on patients for your filthy profits.”

The second specialist turned out to be a kind, sympathetic one. He examined Prem and thoroughly reviewed the already-done-tests. His concluding remark was, “ We have examined you thoroughly and reviewed all your tests. Cancer should be your last worry.” In a reassuring way, doctor came around the table and gave him a tight hug. This relieved Prem’s mind. For less than a day.

He was unable to shed the impact of the comment by Sunil. His mind was convinced that unless he put on weight or the weight of the mail started increasing, his days were numbered.

His letters, now scanned through the internet, started reaching quarters, covering much wider audience and farther than the costly snail mail. The responses were generic and short in the fast-paced life. Most were in the form of emails. These didn’t count as letters, according to Prem’s definition of a letter. The pace of physical weight decline had continued even after he surrounded himself with their children and grandchildren in the USA.

Honk, Honk!! Prem suddenly jolted out of his mental journey to India and his friends, looked around and saw Raj waving near the gate leading to the parking lot—signaling for Papa to come over. Raj was saving the minimum $5 parking charge, otherwise he would get an earful, “You wasted 250 rupees 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 used to buy food for one month with 250 rupees.”

As he stood up, he felt a little dizzy and unsteady. He 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 his frail father struggling. He recalled the badminton games the father and son played only a few years ago.

Gradually, with will power, Prem’s pace picked up and the gait became steadier. He hopped onto the front seat and methodically buckled the seat belt. In India, one could get away with a bribe, but in the USA, a ticket could be an expensive lesson.

To the expected question from Raj, Prem smiled, “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—visible on his relaxed face and shoulders and a loving smile. He held Papa’s hand and leaned across to hug him. “I am still glad the best of the best has checked you. A few dollars is worth peace of mind,” clinging to the umbrella between him and his own mortality. A thought which had lately begun bubbling in Raj’s mind.

After a few quiet moments, Prem said “The doctor wants to see me again.”

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, “I charmed him to waive the fee for the next visit. Some of the tests will be discounted too.”

As the car picked up speed, he rolled his window down, felt the cool breeze and relished the passing glorious colorful summer scenes,“There are still a lot of good people left in this world.” With some hesitation, he even entertained the idea that vast majority of doctors are not money-hungry vultures.

After supper, he pulled out the folder and methodically placed all the documents in their proper places. He wrote a summary of the day’s events on a single sheet of paper and stapled it with the medical reports.

In the comfort of their cozy bed, Bille got an extra tight hug of relief. Dreams of long life together rekindled—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 left side. Before long, the book dropped to the the floor. Bille gently pulled away the glasses, ran her fingers through his grey hair and patted them flat. She put the book and glasses on the side table, covered him with a soft blanket and cherished the moment through relieved moist eyes. She sat for her regular meditation session on the bed. She said an extra thank you to Ram and called it a night, with a smile on her lips.

What a wonderful life it had been, despite all its ups and downs. They were just as young today, together, as when they during courtship many decades ago—which felt like yesterday. A few blinks of an eye and *boom*, the years flew by. They felt happy that they had not only filled those years with open and private mutual affection, but also enriched many hearts with their genuine care and love. Every member of the family had a piece of Prem hibernating in their hearts; they could see him, feel his presence, converse, and get gentle encouragement from 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 the USA suited them well—not that they ever complained of the oppressive hot weather or torrential monsoon downpours in 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 heads of several 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. Lately, even a mention of buying one more object for him triggered a massive headache.

Buying gifts for Neena and Neil was a whole different story. “Children need the bubbly excitement and use of gifts. Even a small trinket, given with smile and hugs, to a child is more valuable than a luxury brand gift to an adult.”

“Your handkerchief is always wet when you see kids jump and run with joy. They rip open the box. Can’t wait to see what’s in it,” Shashi agreed.

Some things never change. At the age of just 25, Prem realized he didn’t want much for himself. He started sending money orders of half of his salary to Pitaji every month. It was a lifeline for survival. Pitaji used half the money for living expenses at 2 Model Town, Panipat—the newly adopted permanent home, three years after the partition. The other half was splurged as gifts for the five younger siblings, age three to fifteen. Despite growing up in poverty, Prem made sure his younger siblings did not feel deprived of a golden, fun-filled childhood.

Everyone became alive with excitement when Prem was expected to come home. Mataji prepared black lentil, okra—Prem’s favorites. She put wood twigs and logs in the clay oven. Pitaji brought milk cake from Bosa Ram. Children ran from school to get home before arrival of the train. After hugs, kisses and laughter, bonanza of gifts kept pouring out of his bags—Braino, Mechano, playing cards, cricket set, mouth organ, Murphy radio, transistor for constant cricket running commentary, an electric clock. Children couldn’t wait to get their hands on newly-found treasures. These toys kept them happy, occupied and opened new horizons of knowledge.

In addition to material gifts, he entertained them with new card games like 21—which children learnt later, was called Black Jack—and In-Between. Above all, he taught the children how 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 the age of 70, at home, in December 1976. When Mataji, died in February 1990, age 78, many of Prem’s cherished gifts were distributed among his siblings, reminding them of their glorious childhood. A south Indian temple made of bamboo pulp and a large sea shell, which had adorned the cupboard along with the picture gallery of the family, became prized possessions of his younger brother’s family in West Virginia.

The brown electric clock on the wall across from Mataji’s bed, found home in Prem’s youngest brother’s home.

Keeping up with the age-old habit of making children happy, Prem and Bille were always on the look out for gifts for their grandchildren. One day, before his visit with Dr. Huffman, they bought one thank-you card for the doctor, one for his staff and twenty picture post cards. They resolved to write to Neena and Neil every day—despite living together.

The thought of leaving grandchildren to go back to India made them sad. He wanted to leave behind their love and memories with the grandchildren through his writing post cards.

Prem’s appointment with Dr. Huffman was at 3.45 pm. He asked Reena to drop him at 3:15, allowing him enough time to organize his thoughts and the thick folder he had brought for the doctor.

He had not heard the results of the tests. ‘No news is good news,’ he thought, especially when it related to medical test reports. It was a blessing, he was unaware, that many doctors’ offices don’t convey the results because of lack of a tracking system. If the lab failed to send the results or the reports got filed in wrong chart or got lost, doctor would never know to call the patient. Some doctors wanted to discuss the report in person—especially if it was a bad news—others made follow-up visits merely to collect additional fees.

Another gnawing thought made Prem nervous: ‘*What if Dr. Huffman is the kind of doctor who treats people for cancer, when in fact they don’t have any. Or keep treating cancer even when it was in remission*.’

He had read about a doctor who, after years of such practice, finally got caught and was in prison. But it was no consolation to the hundreds of patients, who suffered due to the doctor’s greed and poor monitoring system.

Now, he regretted reading too many medical books. He brushed away this thought, firmly believing that Dr. Huffman was the best cancer doctor in the world— he would never even think of exploiting patients for money.

At 4:00 PM, Prem was escorted into the examination room by the pretty nurse. His pulse quickened a little, but he didn’t mind. There would be no physical examination and nobody would suspect an old man having any mischievous thoughts. He even escaped the embarrassing gown. He used to joke that such gowns were like insurance companies—they guaranteed coverage but left many critical gaps exposed.

Dr. Huffman entered the room a few minutes later and pulled a chair close to Prem’s. “I am so glad you came back at the end of the day.” He shook Prem’s hand without washing his own.

Prem made a mental note to wash hands before touching any body part. He had read that about 98,000 Americans died annually because they were in the hospitals. Leading cause was cross-infections, often spread by providers who did not wash hands between patients.

Dr. Huffman reviewed the test results in the folder carefully, then with a reassuring smile, “All the tests came back negative. One of these tests is highly sensitive to detect the presence of any type of cancer, even in its earliest stages.” Based on these results we can safely say, “Your doctors in India may have run a few extra tests, they were accurate in concluding that there is no trace of any cancer in your body.

Prem heaved a sigh of relief, “Thank you doctor. I was pretty sure of that, but having your confirmation will put my family’s minds at rest.”

Curious, Dr. Huffman inquired “Now, tell me about connection you have drawn 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. He pulled out a set of index cards. Each one had the name of a relative or friend on the spine of the binder and on top of the page. Beneath the name was a carefully crafted, pen-drawn Excel style sheet. It listed, in chronological order, the dates the letter were written or received, summarizing the contents and any special comments.

Some index sheets extended over several pages. Each one meticulously catalogued and inserted in the three-ring binders that contained copies of the letters he had sent and originals of the ones he had received. Many letters dated as far back as 1952, but the oldest and most treasured one was a post card dated May 25,1949 from his beloved *Pita Ji.*

*“*No one undertakes such laborious work unless they are convinced deep in their heart that the effort is truly worthwhile. It has the potential to make a difference in someone’s life. The letters become reliable source of family history. State of affairs of the city, the country and the world is documented.”

“That is true, Prem. What are trying to prove?”

“The effects of inflation gets captured through the prices of fruits, vegetables and other necessities of daily life. The faces of daily life over decades, along with the stored joys, struggles, successes and losses of the family get captured.”

Then with a triumphant voice, “The letters keep the family glued together.”

He placed letters and some folders on the examination table, Prem softly caressed his treasure. With a sad smile, “You see, doctor, these letters have become a purpose of my life—something I look forward to every single day. They give me a reason to live.”

Looking at his watch, “what’s the problem then?”

“For various reasons—the amount of mail—especially the in-coming ones started dwindling. Coincidently or by nature’s design, my weight started to decline simultaneously.”

“That’s absurd.”

“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 forty kg and my weight declined from seventy kg to forty nine and now forty seven – the meaning is obvious—end is near—only

seven kg away.”

Dr. Huffman knew this man has some sort of a psychological problem, not sure what?

After a deep sigh, Prem whispered “Final blow was the comment of my friend, Sunil. It jolted my inner core. It made me doubt my *purpose* of life.”

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

He didn’t know whether to whisk away this absurd notion—we all are pawns in the grand scheme. Could there be a real message here? Was nocebo effect quietly playing a role in Prem’s mind and body?

He knew that mind can be programmed to create disease or health in the body, based on the data entered. It is effective as long as the mind believes the input to be real. Mere focused, firmly believed thought will generate internal chemicals, which affect cells and organs in a constructive or destructive manner.

Dr. Huffman was aware that about three-fourth of all major illnesses—cancer, skin disorders, cardiovascular disease and even backache—are related to mind and behavior. Stress—often dismissed as a psychological issue—has real physical effects. It Induces secretion of chemicals, which cause acceleration of heart rate, greater tension in the muscles, slower or improper digestion. Even blood chemistry changes due to stress. This, in turn, increases the risk of heart attacks and stroke**.** Mindhasenormous poweroverbody.

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

He leaned over, 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 on adds years to the demeanor, aura, authority and power. Every word spoken by this person has significantly more impact than the one coming from someone without the authority.

“I fully understand your dilemma, Prem. I am sure you and your family are as happy and relieved as I am to know that you do not—let me emphasize do not— have any disease, including cancer, causing your body to whither. Sunil was clearly joking when he made the comments about your declining mail. You took it far too seriously and let it affect your inner core.”

Then, with a mischievous smile, he continued “May be now you will feel guilty of making comments to others during your life. You never thought about their effect, did you?”

Prem pondered over the question and realized, for the first time,“You are right doctor. In my youth, I loved jokes and pranks. They were never intended to hurt anyone. If they did, I truly feel sorry now.”

“There is no point beating yourself up now. No one is as sensitive as you are. Most likely, they understood it was in good fun and didn’t take it personally. Now go home, chill out and enjoy the newly earned freedom.”

Both had a big laugh of relief and joy.

Prem took out a clean white, ironed handkerchief from his right pant pocket, took off the glasses and wiped away the tears. He shed tears whenever he was sad, but even more after a hearty laugh—when his naughty, twinkling eyes could not cope with overflow of joy.

Dr. Huffman, in a firm reassuring way, continued, “Now you go back to your life and remember this: a purpose-seeking person will always find a niche where nature needs help. You wouldn’t want to miss your grandkids’ weddings, would you? You have so much more to contribute to the lives of your family and friends.”

The mention of grandchildren’s wedding lifted Prem’s spirits. “Doctor, you are as good a psychologist as you are a cancer specialist. I love that idea. But still, nothing beats connecting with family and friends through exchange of letters.”

“You have lived a full life, devoured every book you could get and accumulated wisdom. What is one advice you can give to me?” Now it was Dr. Huffman’s turn to seek advice.

Prem contemplated for a few seconds, thought of several—picked one, “Face the problem immediately. If you don’t, it will come back multifold. What starts as a simple hill-crossing can turn into a grueling mountain climb.” After a pause, he added, “I am sure you see it in your field—an early-stage cancer compared to a delayed stage-four monster.”

They shook hands, Dr. Huffman brightened Prem’s day by saying “There is no charge for today’s visit.”

Prem said “Thank you. Even if you had billed me, I wouldn’t have paid anyway. You know why? Because once a doctor gave a patient 6 months to live. The patient did not pay his bill—the doctor gave him another 6 months! You have given me way more than six months.”

They both chuckled as they walked their separate ways; both feeling content with the results and sad that they might never meet again. Prem’s handkerchief was once again coming out.

 Reena sat anxiously in the waiting room, eager to hear every word that was spoken behind the closed doors. On receiving the good news, she let out a loud ‘Yipee’, startling the lingering patients and their families in the waiting room, as well as the staff behind the glass window.

Reena and Prem left the office, full of joy—ready to celebrate the good news by going out for drinks, dinner and vanilla ice cream—Prem’s favorite flavor. Before leaving the office, he went to the rest room and thoroughly washed his hands and area around the eyes.

With new lease on life, the first thing Prem did next day was to buy new stack of papers and a pen—made in China. He sat down, started writing every detail of his story about the weight loss and self-created fear of cancer. He updated the family about all that was happening in the lives of Neena, Neil, Raj, Reena and Shashi. He included current political news of USA and a random funny anecdote, an integral part of every letter.

After twenty one pages, with tired hands and satisfied smile, he walked to the fridge and took a perfectly chilled Heineken and sat on the chair. He propped his feet and looked out of the window at the fluffy white clouds, against the famous blue sky of New York.

This became his routine, savoring every moment of almost perfect life.

One day, just as he had taken the last sip of a local beer, Reena staggered in with a large plastic box. It had sign of U S Postal Service. With much effort, she placed the heavy box on the table.

Struggling to catch her breath, “You wouldn’t believe, Papa. I got a call from the post office. The amount of mail to be delivered was far too much to fit in our small mailbox. They asked me to come and pick up the box full of letters.”

“Wow, where did this treasure come from?”

Reena shuffled the letters with her hands, “When I scan the contents of the box, I see letters from all over the world.”

Unknown to Prem, Dr. Huffman—with the help of Shashi, Raj, and Reena—had discreetly collected the email addresses of Prem’s family and friends. He composed a letter explaining that Prem’s condition was a classic case of the mind playing tricks on the body.

The doctor’s prescribed treatment was: Start writing letters to Prem and increase the weight of the mail. This will encourage Prem’s mind to direct his body to eat proper meals, exercise regularly and enjoy his usual one beer a day. The goal is to prepare Prem to handle the growing load of letters. And revive his purpose of life.

He concluded the letter with the directive:

Rx: This is the doctor’s order. Please comply.

And he signed it.

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

The letters were long and juicy, filled with updates about their lives, work, families, hobbies, happy moments, and a few bits of sad news they wished to share. The most cherished letter came from his friend, Sunil, whose innocuous comment had been taken seriously. It said “You made jokes on everyone, but couldn’t handle even one! Shame on you—just kidding, my sensitive friend.”

As Prem responded to each letter, more went out, and periodically, Reena carried in more boxes, keeping the cycle alive.

Shashi and Prem finally felt relieved to see everyone’s life back on track. Raj, Reena and grandchildren were well settled in the new country. Their efforts had paid off. All parents want to see their children do better than they had done.

Several years ago, Prem and Shashi had obtained Green card immigrant status. The plan was to get their only son get settled and lead a better life in the USA. To comply with the residency guidelines, they travelled to the USA every year or two.

Finally, three years ago, Raj received his green card. A well-paying job in New York followed, and he, with his family, decided to make the USA their permanent residence. The four of them were thrilled to embark on this exciting new journey, to enter the land of opportunity where dreams could be fulfilled through hard work and determination.

Yet, a quiet guilt lingered—the remorse of leaving behind elderly parents and a large, close-knit extended family. They comforted themselves with the age-old cliché: To achieve something, you have to sacrifice something. At the crossroads of life, one must choose a path, accepting its mix of flowers and thorns.

After a few months, reality began to set in. While they adjusted to their new surroundings, they struggled with homesickness and the emotional weight of their decision. A flicker of hope emerged when a colleague shared some advice—bloom where you are planted. Around the same time, a wise man told Reena and Raj, “God’s plan is greater than yours. He knows exactly where you’re meant to be. Serve by doing your best wherever you have been placed.”

Their children, with the brilliant minds, eagerly embraced the knowledge and opportunities offered by their new schools and new environment.

On the surface, everything seemed to be going well for Raj and Reena. Yet, the images of their homeland, their family, and especially their parents, remained ever-present in their hearts.They started using the parent’s names in the commonly used passwords on their important computer apps.

Through it all, they remained deeply thankful to Mummy and Papa, whose sacrifices had laid the foundation for their prosperous life and the opportunities the nuclear family enjoyed.

After receiving assurance that there was no cancer and with the prospect of several more years ahead, Prem and Shashi began planning the next phase of their lives. Their long-held goal of seeing Raj settled in the USA had been accomplished.

During one of their recently resumed evening walks, Prem shared his thoughts with Bille. They felt it

was time to consider returning home. However, they found themselves caught in a mental tug-of-war—should they spend the rest of their lives with their children in the USA, or go back to their own home, surrounded by family and friends? Each option came with its own set of benefits and challenges, making the decision far from easy.

Prem remembered from his extensive reading that there is higher pull to go back to the place of birth and where the ancestors used to live. Another study he recalled was of organisms which retained the connection of their ancestral environments—they 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 getting stronger with each passing day.

Raj and Reena had left no stone unturned to make their parent’s stay as comfortable, love-filled—as possible, with genuine care. The grandchildren did their best to keep grandparents with them.

In the absence of ability to drive, they had lost their freedom. Prem, at times felt as if he was a tail following the children wherever they went. They were losing their identity—they were known as Raj’s parents. At social parties they tried to mingle with the youngsters—but were keenly aware that their children’s friends were just being polite. They were itching to mingle with their own kind. Moreover, no persons of their age group were present at these gatherings.

Children went to work, grandchildren were busy with their own lives—school, homework, sports and their own social life. His own persona was fading. Often times he felt like a hollow-body walking and talking. This is not how he had envisioned their old age.

Couple of months after the final visit with Dr. Huffman, over a delicious dinner, they said to Raj and Reena, “We know you love us more than words can express. Despite being very busy with work schedule and responsibilities at home, you spare time for us.”

Raj and Reena knew where this was leading, as Prem continued. “We do feel your deep concern for our well being. You make us feel honored.”

With his handkerchief out, “But we feel like being king and queen in our own home in Calcutta. We also deeply miss our siblings and friends. It’s time we go back home.”

Raj and Reena, with choked throats, tried to counter the argument. But no words came out, only tears flowed.

Next day Raj made pleas to convince them to move permanently to the USA and live the rest of their lives with them. This fell on deaf ears, virtually and literally, and the family was set to separate, with promises to meet again soon.

Couple of weeks later Shashi and Prem boarded the plane, wondering if they would ever see the pieces of their flesh again.

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

Raj, Reena, Neena and Neil struggled with their own future plans. After three years, they had started to feel at home in the long-coveted land. Good job, financial security and better education helped. They had become accustomed to the luxury of money, clean air and water.

But the mere thought of leaving their parents alone, in their old age, in India—shuddered their inner core. The false alarm of cancer may not be false next time. They had similar concerns about Reena’s parents as well.

Prem had put on some weight, but never reached the plump seventy kg. He regained his prior happy lifestyle, surrounded by familiar atmosphere, family and friends. There was glow on his face, he regained his springy style of walking. He cleaned the dust-covered camera and put it to use again.

Ten month later, their joy knew no bounds. They could not believe their eyes when they received the letter from Reena and Raj. What captured their hearts was —‘Money and material goods are important for a comfortable life. But when the soul is sick, body and mind feel superfluous. Since the day you left, living life has become just an existence. In addition to missing you immensely, we miss our extended love-filled family. And our country.

Air is cleaner, but lacks the warmth. Land is well developed, but doesn’t feel like home. People are nice, but never feel like our own. Even after three years, we feel being outsiders.

After much soul searching, we have decided to move back to Calcutta and be near you. You struggled to get us the Green card—thank you, but we would rather have your love instead of the luxuries of America.

Don’t worry about our bank balance. Nothing beats living with you and our loved ones—in our own country, on our own land, among our own people. Love has trumped money, which is a means to live but not life.’

Next day another one came from Neena and Neil. Highlight was—‘We miss you more than we know how to write, Dadi and Babu Ji. And we love you from here to moon!’

Shashi and Prem started searching for a house near theirs. The third one they saw was perfect in every way. Spacious, comfortable, but most importantly, five-minutes-walk away.

After winding up their attachments and children’s schools— Raj, Reena, Neena Neil returned to where their hearts belonged.

Shashi and Prem spent time with newly received gifts of family, Rotary, watching sports on television. It had become a routine to watch cricket, analyze the matches and players with family and friends.

Tennis was the other favorite for Prem—Federer and Nadal were his all-time favorites. Watching their matches, he got deeply involved, shouting loud comments with racing pulse.

They were happy to get back into the old habit of having tea in the veranda, followed by chatting with family members—now spread all over the world. He started writing letters with more enthusiasm, always starting with—My Dear——Hi, and ending with, Fondly yours, Prem.

Printed books were flowing in and out of the library. Some were read twice. Prem kept index cards for the books he had read. He wrote their reviews—*Worth a read, excellent—highly recommended, trash—waste of time*. Life flowed along and it was an unending bliss.

Bets started circulating through What’s app, Facebook and Twitter: whether Prem, who was 99 years young by now, will complete the century or not? Wagers of all levels were being placed at various permutations and combinations, brilliantly thought out by his remaining siblings and the next generation. The betting persons’ names were replaced by coded first letter of the name, the amount for and against were known.

At ninety years and eleven months, reaching a century was considered a safe bet. With all the bets in, everyone awaited the turning of clock to June 1, 2031. Over forty lacs of rupees had fattened the kitty and everyone made elaborate plans how to spend it.

Reena was busy preparing a grand gala of a unique 100th Birthday celebration for her beloved Papa. She finalized the guest lists. Everyone were told that the attendance to this once-in a-life time Family Get-Together (FGT) was mandatory. There was palpable excitement In the air among the planners and all the attendees.

Across different times and countries, the news spread at lightning speed through telephones, emails, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter in the form of the following message:

My Dear Family,

Even though it is impossible, wishful thinking has no limits or boundaries. How I wish Mataji and Pitaji were here—my head in Mataji’s lap and Pita Ji’s hand caressing my head. Even after decades, I see and feel them as clearly as when I was young.

Bets are in—90% are betting for completion of century. My desire to win the last bet is strong. But that means prolongation of misery of the frail body, way less than forty kilograms—in constant pain, some days bad, most days intolerable. I have become a burden on others, although they don’t complain. As much as I want never to leave the loved ones, it seems my innings has come to a close.

It was not easy to detect, but a blood cancer was confirmed in 2026. Fortunately, it was very slow-growing type. I refused any intervention. Now it has permeated every cell of my body.

I have no regrets now, had some as we were going through life. In some strange ways it all balances out. The blessings far outweighed the shortfalls, balance sheet overflowed with abundance.

Looking back, I would not change a thing—may be I shouldn’t have worried as much. I was blessed with a positive attitude and bright outlook to life. I loved to focus only on the good qualities of any situation and 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 was started to mitigate loneliness created by separation from the family at my young age. Later it became a *purpose* for keeping the family connected.

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

I never believed in reincarnation, but now I want to believe in it. I will love to see all of you again, soon. Perhaps, at the next FGT. Or when you see a long letter, a golden sunrise or a bright full moon, a cold beer, a loud laughter, a ‘Zindabad’ shouted out somewhere; it may just be me! Who knows, I may show up as one of the great great great grand children of Mata Ji and Pita Ji.

Lots of love and goodbye.

Fondly yours,

Prem

The above letter was written several weeks before he passed away. He had instructed Raj to post it only after his dear Papa had taken 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 single word crossed-out or re-written. It was scanned and sent as an attachment.

On the night of May 30, 2031, two days short of the century, the giant—life and glue of the family, Prem Luthra—said goodbye to the family. He passed away peacefully with a smile on his face, holding Bille’s hand, while her other hand held Amritvani and a maala. Raj, Reena, Neena and Neil sat near his feet, had bitter-sweet feelings, as they witnessed a wonderful life take his last breath, in peace.

Everyone came to Kolkata, as already planned. The family decided to celebrate his life with the hope that they might imbibe even a fraction of the number of qualities that came so naturally to Prem. He didn’t have a firm faith in God, he was indeed blessed—so was the Luthra Family to have had such a love-filled and love-giving person, appropriately named Prem, in their lives.

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No one wanted to spend this money on themselves. Instead they decided to plan the grandest Mother of all FGTs starting on 1st June,1931. On the seventh day, they rented a movie theater, provided abundant drinks,—including chilled-to-perfection beer—and bags of popcorn for everyone to enjoy.

The regular movie was stopped in the middle of a love song, the lights were switched off, making the theater pitch dark.

A pre-recorded short movie started. Lightening and thunder lit the screen, ending with soothing sounds and sights of rain. As the rain tapered, images of letters and envelops showing Prem’s handwriting, started descending with a picture of Prem filling middle of the screen. A caption gradually descended over the picture and stopped below it.

Fondly presented for Prem Luthra.

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

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

Prem Bille Zindabad

Pictures of Mata Ji and Pita Ji appeared on the upper corners of the screen. They showered red rose petals gradually falling over Prem’s face from the AI generated hands. Their pictures gradually descended and stopped on each side of Prem’s face. They repeated two times— Prem Beta Zindabad,

Prem Beta Zindabad!

A resounding sound follows—“My name is Prem, which means love. Always remember that love is the driving force which has kept us glued together. I have received unconditional love from all of you, I have loved each one of you. Your love made my life beautiful. Even though you don’t see me in physical form, I am and will always be in your hearts. You will feel me, see me with closed eyes, in your mind. I have become your integral part. You and I are inseparable, bonded by love.

Forever.”

His grand children had orchestrated this movie.

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

Juginder Luthra

Prem Luthra was born on June,1,1931 in Thatti, British India.

In 1947 it became part of independent Pakistan. He died of Esophagus cancer on

February 18, 2014, at the age of 82 years in Calcutta,

now called Kolkata, India.

(A purposeless life is a slow death)

Anonymous