**Forty Kilograms**

The receptionist at the front desk rolled her eyes. She threw her free hand up in the air in frustration; clearly from being screamed at by the person on the other end of the line. She would have loved to hang up. But before doing so, tell that fireball where to go and burn—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, l with no prospect of getting another job.

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

The line at the check-in counter had gradually grown to five persons. 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 and his jokes with people behind him.

His keen sense of observing others in distress picked up on the anguish the receptionist was experiencing. He pulled out a tissue from the Kleenex box for her 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. A visit which might last five minutes.

This was the first time he had come to the office, 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. Having read many legal cases, he was well aware of the peculiar laws surrounding 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.

He had been quite 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 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. However, 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 and 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 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. He mentally organized them and wrote on a 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 was filled with plush leather chairs, high-definition television and coffee with assortment of Godiva chocolates and cookies. On one hand, this made him relaxed and confident that the doctor must be caring and compassionate; on the other, it suggested that the doctor might be very expensive. After all, the customer pays all the bills. Having no insurance was also playing on his mind. This was one reason he would rather let the unexplained weight loss take its course rather than risk bankrupting 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 once again refuted the argument, 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. That also when you didn’t have much money to spare. It is 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 more regularly. 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 was not much. He made it a point to share it with his needy family members and poor children in the neighborhood.

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, but the hardships were compounded by 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—land which all of a sudden became part of Pakistan.

In May1947, the family had travelled to a hill station called Sabathu, 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 children succumbed to small pox before reaching double-digit age. Anticipating the possibility of partition, Pitaji had wisely purchased this summer home in March 1947, which now became a much-needed refuge.

On August, 15, 1947 the country got partitioned, with Muslim-majority areas forming a new country called Pakistan. The boundary between independent India and newly carved out Pakistan was determined 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. Initially, Lahore was considered to be part of India, but was allotted to Pakistan because 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

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 they were blessed in one way—they already had a roof on their heads and were safe in newly freed independent India, all safely 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 had frank discussions about halting further education and getting a job. Pita Ji was not happy with this idea, but reluctantly agreed, resulting in Prem getting 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 connected 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, this Monday…

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 had a unique ability of visualizing the intended recipient as he wrote his long letters, closing the physical gap with each word. Since he was having conversation with receiver of his letter, he felt less homesick.

Being the only one flung hundreds of miles away, he 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 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 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, carefully stapled them and placed them in the appropriate binder. After sealing the thick envelope for mailing, he paused—ran his soft fingers along the edges. Finally he gave one look and kissed the envelope.

His collection of cherished memories traveled with him to Calcutta in 1953, as his job brought 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 started forgetting 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 nis grandchildren about the weight of the mail. The one farthest from the actual weight would have to perform 21 salutes in front of their friends at the Saturday Club. Excitedly, the grandchildren 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, 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 and mind of the person he was interacting with at the moment. A flurry of activities started. He joined in the process of getting all the letters out and making accurate piles. The children ran down and persuaded a shopkeeper to lend them a large weighing machine. When the letters were finally weighed, the actual weight turned out to be astonishing 40 kilograms—exactly what Prem used to weigh during his college days. 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 each and everything. The 40 kilogram—his college time weight and the slowing 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 to be solved at a later date.

He anticipated the victory salutes by his grandchildren at the Club. That thought brought a smile to his face as he sipped a perfectly chilled beer. He 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. This was the second time the nurse made the announcement in the waiting room, he had missed the first one.

Having read every conceivable book, medical and otherwise, he knew better. He was certain that the doctor was held back in the golf course. He was almost sure of the announcement of an “emer*ge*ncy” beingjust an excuse. 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 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 his family doctor and the two greedy specialists had done in India.

This had resulted in similar loss of the weight of his wallet. He would jokingly say, “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.

The folder, full of copies of 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 she did not notice the direction of his gaze, which admiringly followed the curves of her body. The age and presumed sickness did little to 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 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-boy.

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

She noted the chief complaint: unexplained weight loss over the last two years. She also noted Prem’s 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 rather a philosophical debate. He still respected medical professionals for their insight into mysteries of life—whether physical or beyond.

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

“Do you have any allergies?”

“Yes,” Prem said with a smile, 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. Having done the preliminary work up, the nurse assured him that the doctor will be in shortly and she was sorry for the long wait.

He pulled out his thick folder along with the list of concerns and questions. Waiting game started again. 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 had forgotten 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 adding a touch of 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 ease 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 handshake.

“Good morning, sorry I made you wait so long,” said Dr. Huffman.

“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. By now he had settled in a leather chair next to the examination table and was carefully scanning the chart.

Even after reading the nurse’s notes, as always, he still preferred to hear from the patients their complaints and medical history. 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 gave away the diagnosis if the doctor asked the right questions and listened carefully. Patients try to trivialize some of the complaints, whether out of denial or innate belief that *nothing can go wrong with me.*That is why he proceeded slowly and tried to get to know the patients more intimately. Dr Huffman was known to have ability to make patients comfortable enough for them to share 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 Luthra. Just call me Prem—like James as in James Bond. Drop the ‘S’, and that is how you pronounce it. 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. I’ve been subjected to a game of hide-and-seek by some necessary tests and many unnecessary ones 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 figure out. Some people make it up; others believe in a divine destiny. Either way, having a purpose makes life feel useful—and that usefulness makes living 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”, he said, his voice becoming more animated. Those, along with others have scientifically shown that having a purpose and leading a meaningful life helps people live longer. Take away the purpose, and the person withers away. 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, as is my body. I am not eating enough, and that’s causing the weight loss. But no one believes me.”

Dr. Huffman 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 give Prem a thorough physical examination now and schedule him to come back for a longer consultation—free of charge; On a day when he wouldn’t have to deal with impatient and angry glares from twelve sets of eyes 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 loosely in folds.

“You were an athlete, weren’t you?” Dr. Huffman asked, noting the faint remnant 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 white cotton T-shirt. The looks and the victory ribbons made me practice even more vigorously—I stayed number one badminton player through out college.”

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

 Dr. Huffman methodically examined Prem from top to toes. His keen eyes were searching for clues about any hidden ailment. Fingers were palpating all the areas they could reach, seeking any abnormality. Percussion, even though was 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. He still used it to listen to the body and its whispers.

Dr. Huffman still believed in these tools, partly they added to his diagnostic skills—they also gave him quality time with and 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 going to tell him the diagnosis.

The reason doctors were becoming more dependent on the tests was that a time-consuming examination did not justify the expenses. It also did not leave behind a trail for the insurance companies and lawyers, showing all that could be done *was* done. Monetary gain by some doctors might also be a reason for ordering those tests.

Dr. Huffman covered all angles by a brief current history 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 come prepared. He had meticulously made copies of the tests and reports of examinations done in India. The front sheet enumerated the date, name of the test, results and the name of what he called ‘Thief’, the unscrupulous doctor who had ordered and profited from the test.

Even the amount of money stolen from him was entered with varying number of question marks, indicating how much, in his mind, unscrupulous the doctor was. Dr. 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 errors of interpretation discovered, or someone finding out that the test was not indicated at all.

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. 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!” Dr. Huffman chuckled at Prem’s humor in the midst of a possible serious illness.

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 Shashi and Prem thanked God, although many times Prem 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 judge and rectify their every 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.

He quipped, “So, can my wife have free consultation in the discount?”

 Without answering, with a smile, 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 and asked him to 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 despite already being confident that the examination would not reveal any sign of cancer. Having confirmation from a trustworthy and skilled specialist was reassuring.

Still, he could not deny the anxiety that accompanies any visit to a doctor—a nerve-wracking experience, no matter how secure we feel.

There is always a lingering anxiety whether intentionally or not, a doctor could add to patient’s worries. Whether by cautious approach, fear of malpractice or a financial interest in a facility, the doctors would 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 did something to help them. 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, and 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 read 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 good and bad lawyers and doctors. Yet, he noticed, they all believed their own to be the best in the whole world—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 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 Prem a generous smile—a subtle acknowledgment of his earlier kindness in consoling her. His thoughtful gesture had not gone unnoticed.

Prem carefully closed and tied the folder, thoughts still lingering. He wished the doctor had spent more time discussing the history rather than focusing 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, especially when he was getting paid a hefty sum of money just to listen. But not with a doctor.

When paying the expensive bill in 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 converted 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.

Thought of lunch break brought memories him of his friends in Calcutta—long, leisurely lunches filled with chilled beers, poking fun at strangers and friends, with placing bets on any imaginable subject. Malik, Rajpal, 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, the doctor would give Prem more or less than 5 years to live etc.

Malik jokingly would have told Prem that the doctors never let patients die before they paid off the bill. 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 someone in the group jokingly remarked “Prem, don’t you 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 a stop to your long time-wasting letters.”

That friend leaned toward him and whispered in his ear—

“And honestly, when you are dead, 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 his friend 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 were swirling endlessly, obscuring the faces he wanted to bring to life. Minutes would go by, not a word flowed from pen to paper. Crumpled sheets of partially written letters filled the trash bin. Ink on some words got smudged from uncontrollable tear. Even when he was able to shake off those words, the letters were 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 but more for seeing the faces of loved ones on the white striped pages. Prem had followed this passion practically all his life.

This one sentence pierced through his heart. He wanted to believe that it was just a joke, but during sleepless nights, the comment haunted him—where there is smoke there must be fire.

He talked to himself. “Someone must have told my friend 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 single 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 was a link between the barely changing 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 resulted in 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 40 kg male, and on the other a pile of 40 kg mail. In this imagery, he saw a merger between a completed life and a fulfilled purpose.

One 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. They hugged each other tight, caressed each other’s back, conveying their deep love. Silence said it all.

 “First thing first, let us rule out any medical illness causing the weight loss,” Bille 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, or any other life-threatening disease.

Following that cruel comment, he was convinced that unless he puts on weight or 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 allowed. 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 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 him 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 could buy food for one month with 250 rupees.”

As he stood up, he felt a little dizzy. 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 used to play few years ago. Gradually, with will power, the pace picked up and the gait became steady. He hopped onto 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, visible on his face and relaxed shoulders.

 “I am still glad the best of the best has checked you. A few dollars is worth peace of mind,”said the loving son—clinging to the umbrella between himself and his own mortality, a thought lately creeping up in his mind.

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

Then, with a smile, “I charmed the doctor into waving the fee for the next visit. Some of the tests will be discounted.” He rolled his window down, looked around at the glorious summer scene. “There are still a lot of good people left in this world.”

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.

In the comfort of his cozy bed, Bille got an extra tight hug of relief and dreams of long life together came alive—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. Before long, the book fell down. Bille carefully pulled away the glasses, lovingly ran fingers through his grey hair. She gently 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 it had been, despite all its ups and downs. They were just as young today, together, as when they were courting many decades ago—which felt like yesterday. A few blinks of an eye 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 hearts with their genuine care and love. Each 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 USA suited them well—not that they ever complained of the oppressively 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 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 material thing for him 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. At the age of 25, Prem already felt old enough to think he did not much 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—the newly adopted permanent home, three years after the partition. Pitaji used about half of Prem’s check for living expenses and the remainder was splurged as gifts for the four younger boys, age three to thirteen. Despite growing up in poverty, Prem never allowed the children to feel any less than the wealthy children around them.

His visits to home were eagerly awaited. They meant boxes upon boxes of gifts—Braino, Mechano, playing cards, cricket set, mouth organ, Murphy radio, transistor for constant cricket running commentary, an electric clock. They kept children occupied and happy.

In addition to material gifts he entertained them with new games like 21–which we learnt later, is called Black Jack—and In-Between. Above all he taught 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 the 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, are now prized possessions of Juginder and Dolly.

The brown electric clock on the wall across from Mataji’s bed—highly loved in Panipat—as only 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 grandchildren. 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. They resolved to write to Neena and Neil every day for a week—despite living together.

The thought of leaving them to go back to India made them sad. Through these cards he wanted to leave behind their love and memories with the grandchildren.

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 done a week ago.” No news is good news”, he thought, especially when it relates to medical test reports. Blissfully, he was unaware that many doctor’s offices do not call back with the results because they don’t have a tracking system. If the lab does not send the results or the reports get filed away in wrong chart or gets 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—others made follow-up visits merely to collect additional fees.

Another gnawing thought made Prem increasingly nervous: ‘*What if Dr. Huffman is the kind of doctor who treated people for cancer, when in fact they didn’t have any. Or kept treating cancer patients even when they were 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 did not mind— there would be no physical examination and nobody would know or 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 guarantee coverage but left many critical gaps exposed.

Dr. Huffman entered the room 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 said warmly, shaking Prem’s hand—without first washing his first.

Prem made a mental note to not touch any part of his body till he had thoroughly washed his own hands after the visit. He had read that about 98,000 Americans die 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, and with a reassuring smile, said “All the tests came back negative. One of these tests is highly sensitive to detecting the presence of any type of cancer in it’s 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. Some of his 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 deeply 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 may become reliable source of family history. One may be able to look at the state of affairs of the city, the country and the world. The effects of inflation got 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 were captured.”

Carefully keeping the sheets and some folders on the examination table, Prem gently caressed his treasure. With a sad smile, he said “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 fully. But for various reasons—the amount of mail—especially the in-coming letters started dwindling. Coincidently or by nature’s design, my weight also started to decline at about 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 deep sigh, he continued “The comment of my friend 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 did not know whether to whisk away this absurd notion—we all are pawns in the grand scheme, coordinated by the unseen hand with unseen powers. Could there be a real message here? Was placebo effect quietly playing a role inPrem’s mind and body?

The 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. 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—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 adrenaline, steroids and other chemicals, which cause acceleration of heart rate, greater tension in the muscles, slower or improper digestion. Increased inflammation markers such as C-reactive protein and sedimentation rate are the result of such physiological changes. Stress causes increased blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Blood thickens, making it more prone to clot formation. This, in turn, increases the risk of heart attacks and stroke**.**

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 in adds years to their demeanor, aura, authority and power. Every word spoken by this person has significantly more weight than 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 you do not—let me emphasize do not— have any organic disease, including cancer, causing your body to whither. Your friend was clearly joking when he made comments about your declining mail. You took it far too seriously and let it deeply affect you.”

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.”

“No point beating yourself up now. Surely, 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 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 up 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 has a problem and seeks 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 us?” Now it was Dr. Huffman’s turn to seek advice.

Prem contemplated for a few seconds and said “Face the problem immediately. If you don’t, it will came back multifold. What starts as a simple hill-crossing can turn into a grueling mountain climb.” After a pause he said “Surely 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 of his pocket.

 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 some lingering patients and their families in the waiting room, as well as the staff behind the glass window.

Happily, Reena and Prem left the office, ready to celebrate the good news by going out for drinks, dinner and vanilla ice cream—Prem’s favorite flavor.

With new lease on life, the first thing Prem did next day was to buy a new legal size-note pad and a new pen—made in China. He sat down, started writing every detail of his story about the weight loss. 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 21 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 lot of effort, she placed the heavy box on the table.

  “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. When I scanned the contents of the box, I saw letters from all over the world.”

Unknown to Prem, Dr. Huffman—with the help of Bille, Raj, and Reena—had discreetly collected the email addresses of Prem’s family and friends. He then 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 to “increase the weight of the mail.” This, he believed, would encourage Prem’s mind to nudge his body into enjoying his usual one drink a day, eating proper meals, and exercising more. The goal was to prepare Prem to handle the growing load of letters.

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 wanted to share. The most cherished letter came from the friend whose joking comment had been taken seriously by Prem. As Prem responded to each letter, more went out, and periodically, more boxes of replies were carried in, keeping the cycle alive.

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

than they did.

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

Finally, two years ago, Raj received his green card. A well-paying job in New York followed, and he and his family planned to make the USA as their permanent residence. The four of them were thrilled to embark on this exciting new journey. They were excited by entering the land of opportunity, where dreams could be achieved through hard work and determination.

Yet, a quiet guilt lingered—the guilt 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.

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 ours. He knows exactly where you’re meant to be. Serve Him by doing your best wherever He has placed you.”

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.

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 that 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—with genuine care. The grandchildren did their best to keep grandparents with them.

In the absence of ability to drive, they lost the freedom. Prem, at times felt as if he was the 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 around their age 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 and he often times 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. We do feel your deep love. You make us feel honored and give feeling of being put on a pedestal.”

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 is 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 permanently move to the USA and live the rest of their lives with them. This fell on deaf ears, virtually and literally, and the family were soon to get separated, with promises to meet again soon.

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

Time was moving on nicely 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 two years, they had started to feel at home in the long coveted land. Good job, financial security and better education helped. Clean air and water were luxuries they had become accustomed to.

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. After inner struggle for several weeks, they decided to permanently move back to Calcutta.

Prem had put on some weight, but never reached the plump 70 Kg. He did regain his previous happy lifestyle. There was glow on his face, he regained his springy style of walking. The dust-covered camera was cleaned and put to use again. All of the these joys got amplified when the children moved back to a home only two minutes walk from theirs.

Time was spent watching sports on television—Federer and Nadal were his all-time favorites. Watching their matches, he got deeply involved with comments and racing pulse. They were happy to get back into the routine of having tea in the veranda, followed by 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.

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 continued and it was unending bliss and years kept rolling.

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

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

Reena was busy preparing a gala, grand and unique 100th Birthday celebration for her beloved Papa. The guest lists were finalized and everyone had been told that the attendance to this once-in a-life time Family Get-Together (FGT) was a must.

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—99% are betting for completion of century. Desire to win the last bet is strong. But that means prolongation of misery of frail, hurting constantly body. I live in fear of becoming a burden on others. As much as I want to never leave the loved ones, it seems my innings is coming to a close.

I did have a cancer for a number of years that was not easy to detect. Fortunately it was very slow-growing type. I refused any intervention. Now it has finally 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. Blissfully, I was granted 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 started to mitigate loneliness created by separation from the family at my young age. 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 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 when his dear 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 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 held Amritvani and a Mala. Raj, Reena, Neena and Neil sat near his feet, had bitter-sweet feelings, as they witnessed a wonderful life take him s last breath, in peace.

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 dint 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. 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 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.

Presented Fondly 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 left and right corner of the screen. They showered red rose petals gradually falling over Prem’s face from the AI generated hands. The 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,1,1931in Thatti, British India.

It later was became part of 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