

Draft 1

“Give your loudest applause for India’s U19 team!”

Emerging from the locker rooms, I felt the grass beneath my feet and the wind in my hair – the trepidation had laid me bare. Why was I so scared? I didn’t know. I cannot explain why my palms were slick with sweat, or why my stomach was in knots. All the voices in my head, the self-doubt and dubiety culminated into a roaring sense of dread and concern.

“Will I be good enough? What if I let my team down? What if I let my mother down?”

Amidst the fiery crowd that filled the stadium, I immediately spotted the brightest flame. To no surprise, it was my mother. The familial gaze that always calmed me down in times of distress. Her lips did not move, but the look in her soft, hazel eyes spoke words of peace and assurance. Now, as in all the times I had ever felt my heart ripping through my chest, I brought myself back to the passenger seat of her car.

Bags in the boot, seat belts buckled, we set off to football camp. The roads in front formed a golden pathway from the debris of fallen leaves, and the atmosphere around seemed to mimic my mother’s softness and her adorning affection.

Everything felt normal. As usual, we spoke openly. We shared visions of the future, and she drew me pictures of her past. I listened intently, chuckling at her humor and nodding in agreement at her advice:

“It always seems impossible until it’s done.”

Thinking back, her stable, unconditional love is what shaped me and gave me strength. I watched families wading through multitudes of leaves as we drove past. Children ran, kicking up explosions of reds, yellows and oranges. Rosy red cheeks adorned a little boy’s smiling face as his father swung him with ease. My face grinned with nostalgia as I pictured myself as that little boy. It may not have been my father who played with me; however, I had someone who pushed me on the swings, ran through piles of leaves with me, and picked me up whenever I fell.

I had my autumn fun, too.

As my mother brought the car to a gradual stop, she placed her hands delicately on my cheeks. A pool of tears glazed over her soft eyes.

“There is one thing that I have not told you yet.”

She took a deep breath, and in that moment, I had a sense of what she was going to say. There I stood, learning about my father’s suicide. This explained my failed relationships, friendships, or the reason why I never felt my step-father’s unconditional love. Although her mouth spoke words of suffering, her eyes

beamed with strength. Throughout the years, it's almost as if my mother has been gender neutral - assuming the roles of both mother and father. I put in the hard work to get where I am now, but it was my mother who first equipped me with identity and purpose. I could've been angry that she withheld this from me throughout the years. But in that moment, I felt relieved. Clarity beamed through the clouds of trauma that we both endured. She shaped me, guided me and created the space for me to grow into the man I am today.

What could I ever do to pay her back?

So there I was, standing in the stadium, filled with newfound determination. Although I was the striker, I had only one goal. As the shrill whistle pierced the air, every pass I made, and with every stride I took, I felt the cheers that once scared me propel me towards the future my mother had always prepared me for. Any endeavor that I embark on, any challenges I face, I am confident that I can overcome them with the security of my mother's endearing love.

Draft 2

"And the winner is...Krish Jain!"

Those words; I've heard them so many times in the last three years. Standing atop the podium. Feeling the weight of a medal around my neck. Watching the proud tears glisten in my mother's eyes as I clinch a big debate.

The awards and accolades continue to pour in. I secured 8th position out of 800+ participants in Harvard's "Wolves of Wall Street " competition. The Mayor's office presented me with a Youth Empowerment Award. I am President and founder of the Financial Athletics club in school. I've aced countless quizzes and smashed hundreds of soccer goals at national tournaments.

I might sound like a cocky kid. But read on, and you'll know why these achievements mean the world to me in the light of my life's roller coaster ride.

The storms in my life weren't brewed in a teacup. Or even up among the clouds. They were tempests whipped up by life itself, bone-piercing and soul-scorching. Growing up without a father, only to learn of his tragic suicide when I was a mere one-year-old. Adapting to life with a step-father and his extended family, only to deal with a painful separation seven years later. Spending a traumatic year under lockdown, living with a bunch of angry people, unable to meet my friends or play soccer.

'I, a stranger and afraid in a world I never made...' I began to feel that Alfred Housman's words were written for me. Each time life seemed to be returning to a semblance of normality, a new wave would thrust me back into the turbulent sea.

Through all of this, no matter how bad the situation, and regardless of her own suffering, the one person who always had my back was my mother. Seeing her put on some lipstick and muster up a smile after a turbulent night was a lesson in pure grit. I remember seeing a defiant wildflower bloom under a boulder, and thinking how it mirrored her spirit.

“Day by day in every way, I’m getting better and better.” From the day she taught me to say these words to myself upon waking up, they have been my personal anthem. There’s no set number of times I say it; I just keep going until I can feel them course through my very being.

What also helps is to be able to help others ride out the troughs of life. I try to do that however I can. By lending a hand, an ear and a shoulder to those who need it. By writing articles on coping with personal loss, abandonment issues and dysfunctional family life.

We live independently now. It’s as if a storm in my life has finally lifted, and I can feel the warmth of sunshine on my shoulders once again.

The weighing scale lauds me too. I’ve dropped the 15 kilos I put on during the pandemic. Once the burgers and baklavas gave way to grinding 4 a.m. gym sessions and logging Strava miles, there was no looking back. Last **month (?)**, I was honored as the XC Athlete of the Year, leading a team of 20 across the city’s dense biodiversity forest.

Looking back, I’ve come a long way from the day I sat in art class, staring blankly at the topic: “My Father, My Superhero.” I now know that you are your own superhero, and those who love you are your wings. That no amount of therapy or counseling can compare to the lessons life imparts. To endure the harshest of hardships and emerge stronger—there is no foundation more solid.

Yes, I am a winner. And I wear my pride as a badge of honor; well-deserved and deeply felt.