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Author of the bestselling  
YOU ARE THE BEST WIFE

AJAY K.  
PANDEY

# You are the Best Friend

A True Love Story



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**Teehie Stack**



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# You are the Best Friend

A True Love Story

Westland

## You are the Best Friend

Ajay K. Pandey is the popular author of two bestselling books, *You are the Best Wife* and *Her Last Wish* . He is currently working with Cognizant, Pune. Although he grew up with the dream of becoming a teacher, destiny led him to the field of Information Technology.

His hobbies are travelling, trekking and reading novels. Travelling to different places has taught him about different cultures and people. It makes him wonder, how despite all the differences there is a bond that unites people and places. Trekking inspires him to deal with challenges. Reading is, perhaps, what makes him feel alive. Apart from writing, he wishes to follow his role model, Mother Teresa, and make some contribution to society.

His debut novel, *You are the Best Wife* , was based on his life events and went on to become a bestseller soon after its release. It charmed many hearts and inspired several others to live every moment with love, peace and happiness.



Techie Stack

# You are the Best Friend

A True Love Story

AJAY K. PANDEY

*w*

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First published by Westland Publications Ltd 2017

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ISBN: 9789386850553

Disclaimer: This is a true story. The author has tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from his memories. He may have changed some identifying characters and details such as physical properties, timings, occupations, dialogues and places of the residence of people mentioned herein.

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Techie Stack



*For Arvind uncle*

*Your smile is the signature of your personality*



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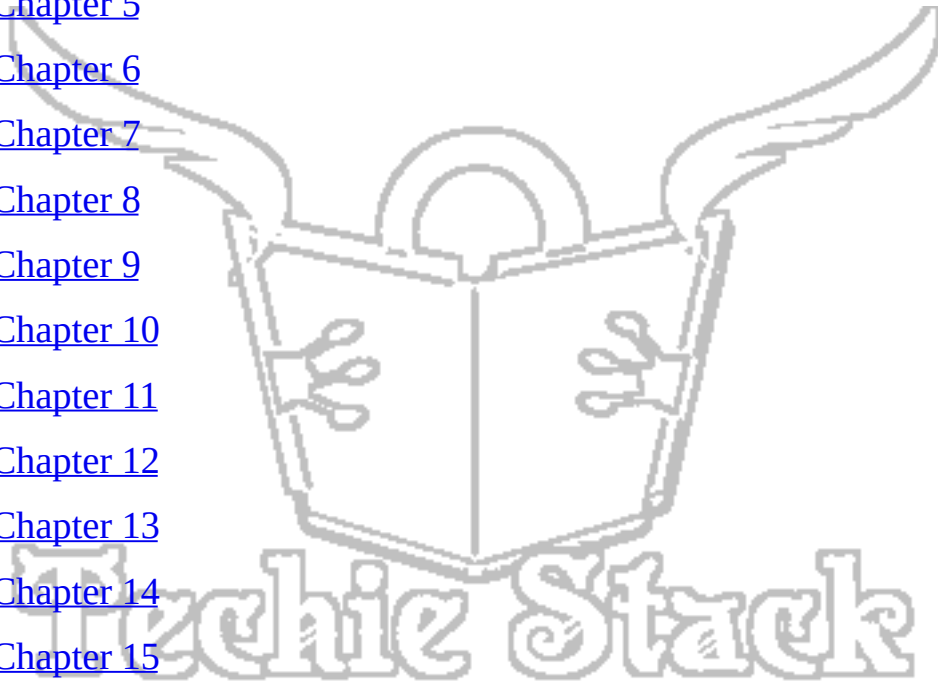
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*Today, you love your mom, tomorrow you will love your partner.  
When you love, you do not replace the person, you always add a  
new relationship. That is the beauty of love.*

– Mom



# Acknowledgements

I never wanted to share my life again, but many reasons led to it. I get several messages in a day, asking about me and my future. A few complain about the tragic end of my story. Friends, I am helpless about my journey. It was not something which I undertook purposely. I just walked helplessly. I hope you understand and continue loving me.

My gratitude to my entire family, who stood by me and decided to take each step together with me.

Thanks to my author friend, Priyanka Lal, for getting rid of the unwanted words and making this book a beautiful and smooth read. She is someone who knows how to change a regular girl into a dream girl. She has given shape and feelings to my characters and their emotions with her ‘wordsmithery’.

Thank you, Jayanta Kumar Bose and Arup Bose for standing by me when everyone else refused to.

Heartfelt gratitude to the exceptional team at Westland for the superb guidance. Special thanks to Sanghamitra Biswas and Deepthi Talwar who believed in this story since the start.

Many thanks to my friends from the writing world – Ajitabha Bose, Keshav Aneel, Vishal Anand and Arpit Vageria.

When I started writing my first book, *You are the Best Wife*, I never, even in my wildest dreams, imagined that it would win so many hearts. Thank you, readers, for accepting my crazy stories. I try to reply to each and every message and comment that I get. Believe it or not, it is you who has made me what I am today. I take this opportunity to thank all the wonderful hearts who stood in my support in their own individual way. Your reviews and feedback are the silent but efficient way to promote an author.

I would like to thank the following reader friends who have now become a part of my life, my extended family – Sheetal & Kiran Poojari, Anandhini Iyappan, Lalita Sharma, Lata Sharma, Mona Sharma, Pavan Sharma, Grishma Ninave, Aparna Jayaram, Ankita Kumar, Lavanya Rajanala, Heena Patel, Ranjithakrishna Mudradi, Huma Naaz, Vishakha Tiwari, Riya Ranjan, Nivetha Muralidharan, Shweta Desai, Sunaina



Kapoor, Sweety Chhatwal Johar, Shruti Kamla, Neha Yadav, Manjusha Gurajada, Abantika Chattopadhyay, Tania Chatterjee, Guru Priya, Merlin Felisha, Arpita Saxena, and Tasrina Nasrin.

To my friends from the film world — Satish P. Babu, thanks man for your help and kindness.

Special thanks to Subhagit Das who has read *You are the Best Wife* , almost three hundred times (unbelievable!).

A big hug to you all. Thank you for making me an author, though I would politely say – I am not an author, nor a celebrity. I am just your Author friend, who wrote something from his heart.

Never Surrender!

Ajay.



# Chapter 1

**February 2015**

*Two years, after Bhavna...*

*I look into the mirror. I see a familiar face. I have known him for thirty years. But today, he looks older than his age. He has a pot belly, a result of his lazy lifestyle. His fair complexion has turned pale, the beard which he can bring himself to shave only occasionally, looks ungroomed. His barely-open eyes suggest that he has not slept for ages, dark circles surround them. I am not very conscious of my looks, but it is hard to believe that the man in the mirror is me.*

‘Stop staring at the mirror. It’s you,’ my mom’s loud voice broke my contemplation.

‘Look at your complexion, Ajay. . .you used to be so fair,’ she said, with complete seriousness.

I knew she did not love her son blindly. She could see his defects and weaknesses, she had been with him through his downfall. I know I had looked good once.

The best way to avoid giving life to mom’s complaints is silence. My phone rang. It was a call from Rahul. Thank God! I could legitimately move away from mom’s recriminations now.

‘Hi, Rahul.’

‘Hey! Hope I am not disturbing you buddy. . .’

No one could disturb me anymore. ‘Not at all, please tell me. . .’

He asked hesitatingly, ‘How are you doing?’

Concern! By now, almost every friend had asked after my well-being. It was weird.

I mean, do you have any friends who call and ask, how you are doing? I missed the times when good friends called and said, ‘Oye. . .Mr. Tharki. . .Kamine . . .Moron. . .’ Now, everyone has sympathy for me. So does Rahul.

‘I am doing well,’ I replied, after a pause.

‘We are planning a family lunch at Lodhi Gardens. Would you be interested in joining us?’

‘Who will be there?’

‘Tanya and I. Another family...’

He mentioned family twice, in two lines. I felt awkward. I had no idea how to respond to his invitation.

‘No, yaar! You guys carry on. . .I have to go to *Shopprix* with mom.’

‘The mall?’

‘Yeah, for mom...’

I returned to my room, lay on the bed and buried myself under my quilt. I reflected on the call I had just received.

Rahul is a good friend. . .The manner in which he had asked ‘. . .would you be interested. . .’ He could have forced me to join them! Given me no choice! He should have ordered me to get dressed. . .threatened to come home and drag me out with him. I remembered the days when we used to roam around the Delhi lanes. The four of us, Bhavna, I, Rahul and Tanya. . .used to be so close-knit. Away from our homes, we fulfilled the roles and relationship of family for each other. Today, they had found a new family!

My status had changed from being family to a bachelor.

Let me take you back to my past.

Bhavna and I got married after seven years of courtship. We studied in the same engineering college. Together, we had laughed, cried, and lived unbelievable days. The world used to say that we were not a couple, but best friends. In the first year of college, I proposed to her. As personalities, we were poles apart. But we were sure that we were made for each other. Two-and-a-half years into our marriage, she suddenly contracted a blood infection, septicaemia. Septicaemia is a fatal disease. . .her organs started failing. . .After two weeks of battle, I lost her. She passed away in front of my eyes.

I have no unit of measurement to show you how big the loss was to me.

The feeling that she would never be back. I can never again see the beautiful smile that could heal everything. I cannot endlessly praise her eyes. I cannot tease her that she is getting fatter by the day. There is no one

with whom I can dance like crazy. No one who would shout at me for over-speeding while driving the car. I had no one who would hold my hand while watching an emotional movie. I had lost the beautiful person who would say, *Come on, Pandeyji! You can do it!*, especially when I was devastated.

When she went, she took away many things from me. My confidence, faith and happiness were all gone. . .with her.

The only thing I was left with was hatred for God.

Human beings are weird. We always find someone to blame. When there is no one, then there always is God. I blame God for taking her away from me. I have thought many times that I should forgive Him. But I could never bring myself to do it. After all, I am a human being.

I was buried under my quilt shutting out the world as usual, while my mom roamed around the house in restless abandon. She was impatiently shuttling from the drawing room to the inner room. I could sense that she wanted to vent. I knew what she wanted to talk about.

‘Wake up! We need to talk. . .’ mom called out, loudly.

I did not want to spoil my weekend. Whenever she said she wanted to talk, I knew tears would follow. First, she would discuss, then she would argue with no substance, and finally she would cry. I didn’t want all this to happen.

‘It has been two-and-half-years, Ajay, look at you. . .’

I pulled a significant portion of my body out of the quilt to face her. I didn’t sit up.

‘Why are you always confined in your quilt? Go out. . .meet your friends. . .find a life, and get. . .’

‘No mom, not again,’ I interrupted her.

‘Why not? You had a wonderful marriage! Only God. . .’ she hesitated, ‘. . .only circumstances ruined everything.’

A loving mom, making an excuse for destiny, but refusing to give up.

‘Mom, I don’t wish to talk about anything to do with that,’ I wanted this conversation to be over and be cocooned in my quilt again.

‘I cannot see my son swallowing anti-depression pills while faking that they are multi-vitamin tablets. I refuse to see my son sleep indefinitely

and die.'

She sat on the bed where I lay. I sensed that she was about to cry. I dragged myself out of the quilt to get closer to her. I looked into her eyes. She was silent, but her eyes spoke volumes. I don't know how nature created moms. They do not use logic, they do not know how to reason about things. . .they speak from their heart, which is enough for a son.

'Mom, I am happy. I may not have friends anymore. The same people who loved, cared or had been jealous of me, now treat me like a loser. They only have pity for me. I don't want it from them. So, I stay away.'

'But you cannot live like that forever!'

'Mom, I work in an IT company. I work five days of the week and at home I have my mom. What else could a son want from life?' I faked a smile. I was an expert at it by now.

'I am fine, mom,' I reassured her.

'If you are, then why did you Google search "life after death"? Why have you tried to find people who can connect you to her? Why, every night, do you mumble to someone? Why are you living in the past?' Mom had as many questions as I did.

Had she been snooping? How did she know about the conversations I had been having with others? She could not read English. How had she guessed what my searches implied?

I decided to ignore her. All I wanted to do was vanish under my warm quilt. Delhi's February chill and mom's constant nagging, left me with no choice.

She pulled the quilt off me, folded it, and began shedding her quota of tears. 'It's not just your own life that you are living, but also hers. Come out of this. . .' I had a feeling she wasn't referring to the quilt. '. . .and show her that you are a changed man, Ajay. Don't spoil her memory. You have the gift of life, son, live it.'

She had deliberately dragged Bhavna into the discussion. I hugged her tight. I didn't allow my tears to spill. A son can see tears in a mother's eyes – but a mother certainly shouldn't see them in her son's.

'Mom, I no longer have friends. Where can I go? I have lost my best friend. . .'

'If you go out, share a part of you, only then will you make a best



friend.’ I did not want to argue with her. Instead I said, ‘We can make friends, ma, but not a best friend.’



# Chapter 2

**March 2015**

*Dear Mr. Pandey,*

*Thank you for submitting your proposal titled, “You are the Best Wife” to Pushpa Publications!*

*We thank you for your submission, but unfortunately your book doesn’t fit into our publishing programme at the moment. Therefore, we will not be able to accept it for publication.*

*Many thanks again for considering us for this work.*

*Best wishes,*

*Editorial Board.*

This was the first message I read, on reaching the office. There were hundreds of official emails awaiting my attention, but for me, Gmail was more important. It was the tenth rejection mail for my book. I let out a sigh of disappointment.

I have written a book in memory of my wife. It is the story of my life, our life. How we met the first time, our struggle to get married. Our married life together and yes, the toughest part, how she left me, forever. This manuscript was on my laptop and whenever I could, I forwarded it to publisher after publisher. It has been a year since I had begun submitting the book, but the snail-paced publishing industry was taking its time to respond. Only a few of them had the courtesy to reply with formal rejection emails. Most of them did not even care to reply. With every passing day, publishing my book was beginning to look like an impossible dream.

Let me make it clear – I had never thought, even in my wildest dreams, that I could write a book. It was a selfish attempt on my part, to make her memories everlasting.

‘Did you see that email? How depressing!’ Sanju remarked. Sanju was a colleague who was also a good friend.

‘Yes, really depressing,’ I replied, almost in reflex.

My face changed from being sad to confused. My curiosity aroused, I

wondered how he had come to know about the rejection email. I stared at him.

‘How much increment did you get?’

‘Increment. . .’ I tried to frame an answer, unsure of what the discussion was about.

But Sanju progressed on his own train of thoughts, ‘Even a bank gives higher interest rates than the increment I got.’

I faked a sad face in empathy. I looked at the faces of my other team members. Everyone was showing their own levels of despair, depending on the levels of increment they had received. I saw a few smiling faces as well, which told me, that some of us had indeed got good raises. Or maybe, they had learnt the art of being happy to mock the others who had greater expectations.

I was the alien in office. I had very different concerns. My questions were, is there life after death? How does one deal with depression?

For others, the favourite topics of discussion were leave, holidays, promotions, escalations, shift-rotation, training, certification, job profile and onsite. For others, their favourite occupation was browsing websites like Naukri.com, LinkedIn.com, Facebook and Nasscom. Mine were Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the Isha Blog and Vivekananda.

I had lost interest in my job. My only reason to go to work was that I should have enough money to keep me from dying of hunger.

‘You are coming for the meeting, right?’ Sanju queried.

‘Meeting?’ I had no idea about a meeting. I was yet to tackle the unread correspondence in my mailbox. I had not even read the subject lines of a few.

Sanju misjudged my preoccupation, ‘Don’t get worked up about the increment. Perhaps we will have better luck next time. Boss has called for all of us.’ He was absorbed in the world of increments and salaries.

We assembled in the conference room. The ambience was one of depression. There were murmurs and whispers. For many moments, I thought that people were hurt beyond repair. I heard a few familiar sentences.

‘He committed to me last year. . .yet, it’s a repeat.’

‘Every IT company is the same. . .he even offered me a UK onsite.

My visa has not even been initiated yet.'

The air was filled with senseless discussions. I wanted to run out of the room.

One said, 'Did you notice, he booked a car for his daughter?'

'It's his third car this year,' countered another person.

I couldn't decide if they were discussing the boss or some garage.

Then, the man of the show entered.

'Good morning, sir!' the crowd crowed.

The depressed souls had turned into enlightened ones. It was as if he was not their boss, but he had become their Buddha instead!

'How are you all?' the Buddha asked his disciples.

'Good, sir. . .very good,' the crowd chorused.

'How are you, Ajay?' a concerned voice asked.

Everyone knew why I had been picked from the crowd. I could make out faces that didn't seem too happy with the attention bestowed on me.

'I am fine, sir,' I answered, politely.

The boss began with his much-practised speech, 'As you might be aware, the company's profits are going down. Margins are getting slimmer, day by day. The company heads have taken a call. Invest in a few, and have a huge reduction in costs. Err. . .you know. . .the meaning of cost, right?'

For a company, resources are the costs, the employee is a cost. Reducing the cost meant – job cuts.

Then the boss delivered the inspiring bit, 'I haven't got an increment as well! We have managed to reward a few with promotions, only because they have delivered beyond their capacity.'

Truth be told, I deserved a promotion. I was working beyond all my capabilities.

He continued his monologue for about ten more minutes. It was admirably delivered. He finished his longest speech to date. It was getting longer every meeting, inversely proportional to our increments. For the oldies, this was the same stale food, which had been served to them down the ages. They found it more difficult to digest, with each passing year. But

for newcomers, this was like the Oscar winning speech.

He was so convincing, I was worried that he would ask us to donate our increments to him. To compensate for the increment that ‘. . .even he hadn’t got. . .’

There was absolute silence in the conference room. If the same monologue had been delivered for the convocation of a college, it would have got thunderous applause.

The crowd began to disperse with varying degrees of emotional outrage.

‘Ajay, I wanted to speak to you,’ the boss pointed at me.

A few made faces and left. I had no such luck. Like an obedient pupil, I sat in front of the Buddha.

‘Ajay, how are you doing?’

The question was a familiar chant. This time, it had the mixed inflection of sympathy and concern.

‘I am doing good,’ was my practised and perfected response.

‘Why are you not replying to your emails?’

I refused to tell a lie, but I didn’t have an answer to his question.

‘HR escalated. . .you are not responding to their mails either. I understand what you are going through. I don’t expect much, Ajay, but at least you can avoid such issues,’ the boss looked like he was exercising extreme patience.

I nodded, but remained silent. I carried the unique aura of sympathetic misery on my face. It would melt any hard-hearted man. I was sure it had worked again.

‘When I was twenty-five-years-old, I lost both my parents in a car accident. I had millions of questions. . .why had this happened to my parents, they were good people. . .That was the first time I said, ‘I will never forgive God.’ But today, I can say, I have come a long way. I have travelled a long and arduous journey. I don’t say you are not making the effort, but you need to try harder.’

I nodded. He was a good man. He always cared for me.

During our conversation, he discussed the tools I could use to recover from depression, better time utilization and work-life balance. But I



appreciated his last few sentences, the most.

‘Ajay, take long leave. If possible, join the *Art of Living* . I have taken their session many times. The next one is happening in Rudraprayag. . .if you want, you can attend that. They have the silence programme for four days.’

The word ‘silence’ fascinated me. I nodded.

‘Anything you wish to ask me?’ The boss’ question meant that the meeting had come to an end.

I had hardly spoken the entire time. The question that I finally asked, could not have helped me do my job better, ‘Do you believe in God?’

It was certainly not a question that the boss had foreseen.

He smiled mysteriously, ‘You should definitely pay a visit to the *Art of Living* .’

\* \* \*

Back at my seat, I tried to answer HR’s email.

HR is the only department which has the talent of giving importance to all unimportant things. The mail asked me to update annual records. It was compulsory that I update them every two years. I clicked on the link and went through the details. I entered my new address, and several other trivial details. I clicked on the ‘Update’ tab. The pop-up box showed, it had failed to ‘Save’. It showed an error message – ‘Review family details’.

I opened the family section of the form.

It asked for my marital status. I scrolled, and the drop-down menu showed a number of options – ‘Single, Married, Widow, Widower, Divorced, Annulled’. It was tough, but the naked truth was, my official status had changed. It was ‘Widower’ and I hated it from the bottom of my heart.

I had not changed my Facebook status to date. It still showed that I was married. I thought of the day when I had updated those records the first time after our wedding. I had been so happy, positively ecstatic.

With a heavy heart, I reconciled myself to the truth. I picked the option, ‘Widower’. I immediately realized, with that, the spouse’s name vanished. It made me uncomfortable. A hollow formed in my chest, which no amount of deep breathing could fill. Hurriedly, I chose ‘Married’, and her name reappeared.

The computer was still waiting for me to decide. It had to update my status. I clicked on 'Widower' again. I was about to press the 'Save' tab, when a wave of memories flooded my mind.

Reliving them was tough.

My fingers hovered over the mouse for a couple of seconds, indecisive. A couple of salty drops rolled down my cheeks.

I changed the status from 'Widower' to 'Married' and clicked on 'Save'.



# Chapter 3

## Fort Hospital

I sat outside the psychiatrist's department, waiting. People who stood around, all of them must be facing some problem in life, just like I am, or why would they be here? I could sense something terribly wrong behind the smiles on every depressed face. A young lady sat beside me. This was not her first visit. I had noticed her on my earlier visits too.

World Health Organization says that India is one of the most depressed countries in the world. Nearly 36% Indians could suffer from depression at some point in their lives. Why had no one mentioned that while we were debating swine flu and dengue?

My eyes met the lady's. A small smile flickered on her lips. I said, 'Hi,' quite formally.

Depressed people do not share their troubles. Depression is considered a 'problem' in India. Normal people make fun of those who have this 'problem'.

As I sat there with the 'not normal' people, I was amazed by the beauty of this place. Not the physical beauty. The colours were all off-white with stainless steel effects. I was amazed by the realization that all of us present here, we had lost something in life. For us, life was an unexpected gift.

At least one ailment united all of us. The smartphone syndrome. The unlimited internet access made us frequent sufferers, I mean, frequent surfers.

Even 'problem people' like me were not unaffected. Presently, I Google-searched the relationship between sex and depression. The result had me quite confused. I guess, if depression and sex were a 'couple' on Facebook, they would update their relationship status as 'complicated'.

Depression can steal one's sex drive. Take away motivation, and deplete any desire one might have to feel attractive. On the other hand, sex can boost one's mood, and act as a buffer against depression's effects.

Why was I doing a search on this topic? Please do not ask. I would offer the excuse that it was because I was depressed.

I had been there sitting and surfing the net for over half an hour, when my turn finally came.

‘How are you doing, Ajay?’ When this man asked the question, I did not mind. Dr. Chauhan was a senior psychiatrist.

I have never met a doctor who said, ‘I am junior.’ The word does not exist in the hospital dictionary. I have seen senior physicians, senior paediatricians, senior surgeons. . .but no junior paediatrician or junior gynaecologist.

Dr. Chauhan was unbelievable. With the amount of sadness that came to him on a daily basis, he should have been the most depressed person by now. But doc not only faced the depressed faces, he patiently heard all their scary stories and stayed happy, energetic and extremely jovial.

I finally answered the question truthfully. ‘Not doing good, doctor. I struggle to sleep every night. Whenever I close my eyes, I see images.’

‘For how many hours do you sleep, usually?’ the doctor asked in a thoughtfully-happy tone.

‘Three to four hours. . .I read a lot of books to help me fall asleep.’

‘Hmmm...’

When someone does not have an answer, this is the best sound to make.

‘I might have explained to you in the beginning. . .but may have not told you many things. Let me explain the reason for depression. How this occurs. . .’

I have heard everything. I still did not know, what the end was to be.

‘There is a life inside us, which always wants to be alive. . .’ the doctor was saying.

The familiar jingle. I have heard this one more than once, for sure.

‘. . .your psychological problems will pull you down. I tell you, that life is not worth living. Your intelligence will counter this all the time. This controversy can lead to. . .suicide. You will always ask questions and find no answer. This leads to depression. I would say, it is okay, if you do not know answers to questions like. . .why did this happen to you? Why did you lose your wife? Why was she the one who had to go. . .’

It was not easy to forget the questions, the answers to which were so

essential. I don't deny that the doc was making sense, but something prevented me from understanding it in its entirety.

'One more thing, do not share with anyone. . .that you are depressed. Those who are not sensitive, they will make fun of you behind your back,' the doc harped.

'I know, doctor.'

The doctor smiled conspiratorially, as if he was about to share a unique joke.

'Let me tell you, depression is a problem of the intelligent. Fools never suffer from it!'

I smiled. This was a new one! The doctor was trying everything in the book to make me feel reassured.

'What should I do, doctor?'

'Depression is a result of loneliness. If you do not have friends, start writing a diary. Once you start noting down your blessings, you will realize that what you have lost is but little in comparison to what life has given you.'

The doc looked at me to make sure that I was paying attention.

'Avoid being in the dark. Face people. Be with friends. Choose a friend with whom you can share your feelings. . .'

'I am doing most of them. . .'

'That is great! I would suggest that you take a long holiday.'

'Is it advisable to go alone? I don't have anyone who can go with me.'

'A friend who can come with you would be good. If not, then going alone is not a bad idea either.'

I nodded.

The doctor prescribed a few more medicines. It was difficult to read their names, but I guess, the chemist would know.

'Which would be the best place to recover from this type of depression?' I got up from my chair.

'If you were a lady, I would have suggested that you go to a hill station. . .'



How could holiday destinations differ for men and women, in this instance? But the doctor always had an amazing explanation up his sleeve. I am sure, today too, he would have one.

‘What is your advice for a man?’

He smiled mysteriously. His look, only a man could understand. An engineering student who had lived in a hostel, would understand. Only two cunning men could understand.

‘I would suggest...Bangkok!’



# Chapter 4

## Early April 2015

Though the doctor had suggested a trip to Bangkok, I had no intention of banging my cock. It may have appeared from my state that I was not capable of taking decisions. But when I do take a decision, I will go ahead with it, despite even the doctor's advice. The destination I opted for, was the *Art of Living* in Rudraprayag.

I packed a few t-shirts, my shaving kit, undergarments, a track suit, my favourite pink shawl, one writing pad and a novel. Not a planner by any stretch of imagination, I tried packing all the things I would possibly need.

I had information; food and accommodation were part of the programme. I just needed some comfortable clothes.

There was a time when I used to spend weeks in planning travel itineraries – the hotel and the places for sightseeing. I used to share minute details about the places we could see, and spent hours arguing as to what to shop for and what not to do. We made huge checklists and spent hours adding and removing things, and in the end, followed what our hearts said. But this trip had none of that. No check-list. Just a few essential things.

The last time I had gone on a trip around three years ago, mom had added her dose of love and had packed tiffin. The world has its own reasons to be depressed. . . moms have their own. Her son's empty stomach is the biggest cause for upset.

'Why are you going alone?' mom asked, as she watched me zip my bags.

'It is a "silence programme" for five days. No one is allowed to speak, and all my friends are married.'

'There were days when you would argue about wanting to spend time with your friends. Now you just avoid them.'

Yes, those were the days when I had millions of friends, and they had billions of hours to eat my head.

'Those days are gone, mom.'

'If you wish, I can accompany you.'

I could see that she was in a dilemma. I might be over thirty-years-old but my stubbornly loving mom still thought I needed to be protected. I knew for a fact that mom had no interest in *Art of Living* . It was a mother's concern about having her depressed son travel alone.

My father worked with the National Thermal Power Corporation in Rihand Nagar and he lived close to his work location. He often visited me at my home. At this age, when my father was struggling with diabetes, mom had left papa alone, just so that she could care for a depressed son who may attempt suicide, any day. That was my illogical mom.

‘Mom, I can manage on my own. You need to take care of your knee pain. I wouldn't want you to exert yourself. You work all the time to take care of me. Now take a break. . .relax.’

‘No Ajay, I have an eerie feeling. My heart says that something might. . .’ I could see that she did not wish to voice negative thoughts, lest they come true.

I sat on the sofa, and pulled my mom down beside me. I wanted her to stop pacing the room. Her eyes were always full of love, but today, concern overrode all emotions. I held her hand between mine.

I voiced the thought I knew was always in her head. . .the thought that scared her all the time.

‘Mom, I have gone through the worst. I don't think anything worse could happen to me. I may have a reason to end my life, but I understand, I have far more reasons to live. Do not worry, I will never commit suicide.’

\* \* \*

## Rudraprayag

This place holds the top spot in Uttarakhand Tourism.

For obvious reasons, it was also a wonderful place to visit. The holy rivers, Mandakini and Alaknanda, glitter with importance. The epics state that Lord Shiva appeared here to bless Narad Muni. That was the reason why Rudraprayag has plenty of Shiva temples.

I arrived at Rishikesh by train, then got into a bus going to Rudraprayag. The journey from Rishikesh to Rudraprayag was full of splendid sights. The highway was amazing. The river ran parallel to the highway and the hilly roads made the pain of travel worth it.

I reached my destination late in the evening. It was a small resort,

which had a big signboard on the front gate, ‘Welcome to the *Art of Living*’. I was at the right place.

It was a riverside resort. The Alaknanda River, in its purest form, flowed 100 metres away from the resort gates. Tiny temples lined the side of the resort to the left. The temples which were the official homes of the lord, did not appeal to me. I was an atheist.

The resort had a small conference room which could accommodate around 100 people at a time. The calm and fresh air of the hills added beauty to the setting.

For me, the resort meant different things. I had made a trip to the mountains after three years.

I informed mom of my safe arrival. A form was handed to me. I filled it to officially register for the programme and walked towards the allocated room to rest. The attendees were allocated rooms, on twin-sharing basis. The programme was scheduled to start the next day. There was a little surprise for me here. The advanced programme was the next level after the basic. However, they allowed me to attend it despite my not having taken the basic course. My knowledge was limited. I had thought it was a meditation programme. But the brochure they had given me said that it had many more things to offer.

The logo for 'Techie Stack' features a stylized shield emblem with a crown on top. Inside the shield, there are faint, overlapping icons of a laptop, a smartphone, and a document. Below the shield, the words 'Techie Stack' are written in a large, bold, serif font with a slight shadow effect.

# Chapter 5

## Day 1

The programme was scheduled to start at 7 a.m., with yoga, followed by breakfast and then Guruji's session.

I had gone to bed early, and felt refreshed when I woke up at around half past six. The place was steeped in calm. For someone who was used to Noida's honking and yelling, and the harsh sounds of traffic. . .this was heavenly. There, everyone was always in a hurry. Here, I began the day without any hassle, with freshness in the air, adapting to the morning chill.

I wore the track suit and stepped out for a stroll. I was craving the all-necessary cup of morning tea and walked to the table where it was being served. That was when I received the first shocker of *Art of Living*. They were serving only green tea. I stared at the unfamiliar brew. It lacked the appeal that a hard-core *chai* held. I had no option other than to gulp it down.

I stepped outside the conference room and sat facing the temples. An old lady was cleaning one of them. She was wearing a thin saree which barely covered her body. I was covered from neck to ankle in my thick track suit, yet I was shivering in the morning chill. I was supposed to be a thirty-year-old, hot-blooded man. How did she manage with just that length of cloth?

Why had I noticed her dirty sari? Did she feel discomfort in the morning chill? Why had her dedication for work come to my attention? I had a strong urge to help her. Why? Would she say it was God's grace? I was calculative. I didn't want to do things that would affirm her belief in God as her provider.

Towards God, all I felt was hatred and anger.

There was contentment on her face, even in that pathetic condition. What made her happy? After watching her for ten minutes, the good human being inside me finally won. I stopped caring about being mistaken for God's brand ambassador, and made a move to perform the minimum I could do as a human being. I removed the jacket of my track suit and offered it to her.

The sixty-year-old refused to take it. But she could not hide her dirty clothes and shivering body. The chill did not support her denial.

‘Please accept it – it will make me feel happy,’ I made her take the jacket in her hand.

The warmth of touching the fabric might have made her change her mind, because she accepted it, holding the jacket closer to her body to feel its comfort.

The happiness on her face warmed me. . .then the words she said ignited in me the fire of hatred.

She said, ‘May God bless you.’

\* \* \*

A young woman was standing at some distance. She had observed the scene between the old lady and me.

I turned to go to my room, to fetch my favourite pink shawl.

We assembled in the conference hall at 7 o’clock, for the yoga session.

At the centre of the hall, was a picture of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. There was something magnetic about him. Everyone addressed him as Guruji. He had a long black beard, under which hid a genuine smile.

A genuine smile is the one a father has, when he sees his son achieving a high in his career path. The smile of a mother on seeing her daughter getting married to the right man. I couldn’t remember when I had last smiled, genuinely.

The hall floor was covered with several comfortable white mattresses. Incense sticks were lit, emitting a soothing fragrance. There was a chair for the moderator. There were over fifty participants in the room, male and female, of different ages. Youngsters were in minority. Seeing the demographics, I guessed that youngsters did not need such a programme. They have a unique art in their life. Only oldies found these programmes fruitful.

An instructor guided us in performing the *Surya Namaskar* , the different *mudras* , *Sudarshan Kriya*, etc. Most of the participants were already trained in the technicalities. I was among the few poor performers.

The oldies were making strange noises. Some were farting without reserve, a few came up with weird cries and moans. Most of them gasped like asthma patients.

My tummy was having a tough time. The previous day, it had

churned on the sharp turns of the road; and today it was rotating in all impossible directions. The session went on for an hour, and needless to mention, we were exhausted.

An hour-long break was announced. There were fruits for breakfast, along with *poha* and *upma* . There was a strict restriction on *parantha* or *poo* and to adding salt to food during the period of training. The food was also cooked without garlic and onions.

Frankly speaking, I did not notice the taste. I ate like a hungry panda. Actually, I eat when I am upset.

We reassembled after the break at 10 a.m. I found a place behind a young woman. I had had enough of listening to farts and cries.

\* \* \*

There was a silence in the room that indicated that someone important was about to arrive. We were waiting for Guruji. A forty-year-old man, with a black beard, wearing a white *dhoti* and *kurta* , simplicity apparent on his face, entered. He walked down the gap between the seated participants without making any eye contact. He pretended as if no one else was there in the room. Important people never notice anyone around them.

The man took the seat assigned for Guruji. He looked at everyone with a smile on his face.

I had never understood what a divine presence is. At that moment I sensed that if there was one, it could be similar to the sight I was seeing then. There was silence in the conference room. The presence of Guruji. . .the ambience. . .it was divine.

‘Good morning friends. I am Vinod. AOL gave me a name – Guruji. I am fine with any of the names given to me, or any that makes you comfortable while addressing me.’

‘We will call you “Guruji”,’ one enthusiast replied.

I could sense that he was completely drenched in the spiritual rain.

Guruji asked for brief introductions. He asked our names and the places from where we had come. A few were from Delhi, the rest had come from different parts of Rudraprayag.

Guruji took charge of the session.

‘Now let’s introduce ourselves to one another. Those who are new, let me explain the pattern of introduction. You have to go to each and every

individual in this room and say, “Hi. . .I am. . .your name, hailing from. . .and lastly, I belong to you”.’

Once Guruji finished the instructions, we began.

I heard, *I am Mukesh...Ramesh...Suresh...from Gadwal...Kumaon ... Madal...I belong to you.*

I was hesitant to approach anyone. It was weird. How could I belong to fifty unknown people?

My thoughts were broken by a girl. She was around twenty-eight-years-old. Her curly hair was tied in a high ponytail. A pinkish lip-gloss coated her thin lips even at this hour of the morning. The colour of her lips matched her body-fitting yoga jacket and ankle-length leggings. To me, the leggings looked too thin for this chilly weather, but yes, it accentuated the length of her long legs. She looked extremely comfortable, though. I guessed that hers was the youngest and freshest face in the entire programme.

‘I am Anisha, from Gurgaon. I belong to you.’

I was stunned, silent.

She repeated, ‘I am Anisha, I belong to you.’

I nodded and said with a tiny bit of hesitation, ‘I am Ajay, from Noida. I belong to you.’



Techie Stack



# Chapter 6

The advanced course was for four days. The second and third days were silence days and the last day was for a doubt-clearing session. We had nature-walk breaks between 5 to 7 p.m. every day, followed by *kirtan* . After dinner, one could go for a night walk for half an hour.

We were at our first session with Guruji. Today, we were allowed to speak.

One enthusiast asked, ‘What about botheration?’

The enthusiast’s query gave me the inkling that a few had attended the programme earlier. I considered every attendee an enthusiast, as they displayed so much extra energy! Which was missing in me. . .

‘I was coming to that. . .’ Guruji pointed to a small cardboard box, ‘. . .you can all put your questions without mentioning your name into this. Whenever we have time between the *kriyas* and *asanas* , one by one, we will pick these questions.’

The ‘botheration’ box excited me. It was difficult to believe that this kind of counselling existed. I liked this, especially because we did not need to mention our names. So one could ask any stupid question without being laughed at.

Guruji gave the next task. ‘Please form pairs. Preferably, of opposite genders.’

Everyone looked around to find a partner. I too, looked to my left and then to my right.

Anisha asked, ‘How about, us?’ Her round face was lit up by her smile.

I nodded. I was the obvious choice for her, since among all males, I was sitting the closest to her.

The crowd was even in number, so everyone found a partner.

Guruji instructed, ‘You have to ask two questions to your respective partners. First, who do you love the most? And the second, who do you hate the most?’

This was Anisha’s first conversation with me.

‘So, Mr. Ajay, who do you love the most, and who do you hate the most?’

For me, these were not difficult questions to answer at all. ‘I love my wife the most,’ I answered, in reflex. I have been dying to say that to someone for ages.

‘Oh! You are married!’

It was difficult to classify her expression.

I nodded.

‘Who do you hate the most?’ she asked.

‘God,’ I said, again in reflex.

Now, she was taken aback, and fell silent. I had judged Anisha to be outgoing, someone who liked to talk. Her face expressionless, she stared at me momentarily. She looked like she was thinking, *What the hell is this man saying ?*

I am sure that in some corner of her mind, she must have an idea that I may be mad. I however, chose to remain silent after my statement. That was the best part of the programme.

‘I do not hate anyone and I love God the most,’ Anisha answered in one breath. Her perfect bow-shaped eyebrows looked more curvaceous, as she frowned.

Our monologue, rather I should say, lack of dialogue, was interrupted by Guruji. ‘Did you observe the pattern? Your love and hatred are related.’

It was a strange thought for me. It was absolutely true in my case. I loved my wife and blamed God for taking her away from me. I hated Him, because I lost my love.

A few nodded, Guruji smiled.

‘Hate and love are nothing but our experiences in life. When our experience is good, we start loving the reasons for it. And when our experience is bad, of course, we start hating the one responsible for it.’

Guruji waited for the thought to sink in.

‘So, what is the conclusion?’

Guruji wanted to know if we had learnt from his wisdom.

It was the first day, so no one was too vocal. However, Anisha didn’t

disappoint. Like the student who pays maximum attention in class and has all the answers, she said, 'We should not hate the person, we should hate the experience.'

The participants cheered as if someone had solved the mystery of the black hole. Anisha's black eyes gave me a look as if to say that I was the one who had created that hole.

Was my hatred justified? My belief had been dented. I had hated Him for years, should I not have?

Before I could lose myself in the whirlpool of my questions, Guruji gave us another task. 'Make it a group of three.'

A man, who seemed about sixty-years-old, joined us. He seemed to be a very happy man.

Why did I say so?

Because he was smiling continuously, without any apparent reason. During the all-round introductions, I had learnt that his name was Arvind. His happy demeanour said he had lived a life without troubles. There seemed no botheration for him in the entire world. He did not make eye contact with anyone.

To me, he looked like an idiot lost in his own wonderland.

Guruji instructed us, 'Now, each of you have to state three materialistic wishes. The other members of the group have to question you and ask, "What stops you from achieving them?"'

Guruji chuckled and added, 'Your wishes should be practically achievable. . .they should not be like, I want to be the PM tomorrow.'

The crowd laughed. Let me acknowledge that Guruji didn't lack a sense of humour.

Asking Anisha was a formality. She stated her three wishes like a pre-programmed android upgrade. 'I want to marry a rich guy. Help a person without informing him or her. Roam around the world.'

I asked the pre-decided question, 'What stops you from doing these?'

'Nothing is stopping me. One day, I am going to achieve all of them,' she smiled haughtily, confidence dripping from her face.

Anisha's confidence was refreshing. Her way of speaking suggested that she came from a well-to-do background.

*Why was I becoming impressed by Anisha?* I wondered. I looked at her keenly. No, she was not the hottest girl I had ever met. Was it because I was talking to a young stranger after a long time, about matters we only discuss with people who are very close to us?

Arvind Uncle broke into my thoughts.

‘I am an old man. I have no materialistic desire. I have lived my life peacefully.’ I was right in my conclusion, about him. ‘It’s your turn to tell us, young man,’ he threw the ball in my court.

‘I want to publish my book. See my book as a national bestseller. . .’ Before I could come up with my third desire, Anisha interrupted.

‘Book. . . ? Are you an author?’ Her expression said that I was not ordinary. She might not know of my psychological depression, but her look said that she believed that I could only bore the world with my writings. She had interrupted, just to confirm, if I was a human being.

I clarified. ‘I am not an author. I have written a book that is all.’

I did not share any further details. With her inquisitive nature, it would lead to too many questions and cross-questions. I was not sure if I wanted to talk about my book just as yet. Her expression left me demotivated. I regretted mentioning the book.

News of the book must have been something out of the realm of reality for Anisha. She forgot to ask the stipulated question: *What stops you from doing so?*

Arvind Uncle remained lost in his own world of smiles.

# Chapter 7

## Day 1, 5 p.m.

It was time for the nature walk. Attendees were to walk in isolation. It was time to commune with nature.

Silence and nature have a mysterious calming effect – they allow the soul to be at peace with one's thoughts. The glittering Alaknanda River beckoned. I went to the riverside.

Living in a city like Noida, I missed the closeness to nature. The flawless river, with hills in the background, the unpolluted air, the cold breeze. . .was a novelty which the nature lover in me appreciated.

I walked a few metres along the riverside. I stopped in front of a rock. It would be a perfect place for a saint to spend hours meditating on his God. . .this unusual thought crossed my mind.

The place held allure even for an atheist. I sat on the rock with my legs folded. I could feel the cold of the rock in spite of the warm clothes I was wearing. I wrapped my pink shawl tighter around my body to trap all the warmth I could. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to take in as much of nature as possible. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw the most beautiful person in the world. The one who brought me smiles, and then tears.

Shall I tell you a truth? I am not writing this to bore you to death. I will keep the tragedy away as much as I can. I tried to stop the emotions from flowing, but I was unable to. I sat there, drenched in the silence, when I heard a voice.

‘Hi, Ajay!’

It was a voice which had become very familiar to me since I came here. It disturbed me. I opened my tear-soaked eyes with difficulty, not wanting to give away my emotional state. I looked at her and to me, she was one who had stopped a dead man from advancing to heaven.

‘Hi, Anisha...’

‘I have no authority to ask, but am curious. Why do you hate God?’ She came straight to the point.

I don't like to be rude. Especially not to a girl, no matter how

intrusive she is. After all, I am a man. Hope you, understand!

‘It is something very personal,’ that was the most dignified answer I could give her under the circumstances.

She stood there for few seconds, not satisfied with my reply. She had expected a straightforward answer, something like she herself would give.

I was avoiding her eyes. It was rude, but I could not share anything with her, at least, not yet.

She looked at the flowing river. Something in the river must have disturbed her, because she picked up a fist-sized rock and threw it into the river, with full force. Dealing with the river-demon to her satisfaction, she left the place. But not before giving me a look which said: *Go to hell, who cares!*

\* \* \*

## **Day 1, 7 p.m.**

It was *kirtan* time. I wanted to avoid it. It held no appeal for me.

We assembled in the conference room. Guruji came with a *dhol* in hand. A few joined him with harmoniums. This new avatar of Guruji was juvenile. His life had many shades. He checked the speaker arrangements, reassured himself that he would be heard. Then he began his performance. An unbearable performance. Let me tell you, he was a horrible singer.

He sang a song about his love for Lord Ram. Someone requested a Krishna song. There was no A. R. Rahman, but lots of Krishna and Ram.

It was an awful experience. I felt forced to participate in something I did not believe in. For the first time since my arrival, I regretted coming here.

A few had got to their feet and had begun dancing. The leader of the performers was Arvind Uncle.

His moves made it glaringly apparent that he was not a dancer, but that did not deter him.

Others danced around him, as if he was representing God Himself. At that moment, he actually belonged to everyone.

\* \* \*

## **Day 2, AOL**

I had high hopes of this day. The ‘silence’ was about to begin. Forty-eight

hours of silence. I was looking forward to them.

It's weird. I had enough silence in my life. I did not know why I needed more. . According to my doctor, this was one of the prominent symptoms of depression. I needed silence to feel my sadness.

There are two main categories of depression – major depressive disorder and dysthymia. I was an MDD patient. Sadness is a natural human experience. People feel it when they're going through a life challenge such as divorce, serious illness or the death of a loved one.

The second day started with yoga. Guruji picked up the 'botheration' box. It was filled with questions. I found all of them silly. Someone had asked, 'What is the way to be happy?'

Another's problem was, 'How do I tackle my wife?' If anyone had an answer to that one, I would appoint him the World Guruji.

One asked, 'How do I worship God?'

But the one which brought a tiny smile on my face was, 'Please suggest an asana to eliminate constipation.'

Guruji tried to answer as many as he could.

The best thing about Guruji was, he never said, God would help us. There was no mention of the Supreme Deity. Even though the programme was religious, Guruji was trying his best to give logical solutions in an illogical environment.

## **Day 2, 5 p.m.**

I went to my favourite riverside spot. I sat on the rock, much like I did yesterday. My mind tried to work out the best excuse to leave the programme. It was boring. I hated the *kirtan*. I was engrossed in hatching the great escape plan, when a familiar voice, spoke. Yes, it happened again! I think I was expecting her, because I was not surprised.

'How are you doing, Ajay?'

I opened my eyes. Anisha stood there, smiling at me. She had asked the same question the others had asked. She had realized that I was disturbed internally. How did she figure that out?

'Today is the silence day. We are not supposed to talk,' I reprimanded her.

'But you are talking to me too,' she challenged.

‘I am not talking. . .just answering . . .’ I replied softly. Surprisingly, today I was humble.

Though I didn’t feel like talking to anybody, today, I was not irritated with her. I must have been terribly bored. The only thing that was holding me back at this place, was this beautiful river. I didn’t want to leave it so soon.

‘Ajay, may I sit here, for a few seconds?’

‘You can sit anywhere, but people here are conservative. Someone might complain to Guruji, and that will be embarrassing. . .’

‘Don’t worry, I can manage that if it happens.’

Anisha was a genuine combination of beauty and confidence. I appreciated that. She may have sounded over-confident, but it made me like her more.

‘Ajay, I still want to know. . .why do you hate God?’

‘Why does it matter to you?’ I countered.

‘A thirty-year-old man who loves his wife. . .who has written a book. . .given his track suit to an old needy lady, but weeps during *dhyaan* . . .there must be something that is troubling you.’

Her observations were sharp. Had she been snooping? For a moment, she reminded me of my mother.

‘Sorry, it may look like I am intrusive. . .but I am just eager to know. Maybe I could be of some help.’

I could sense concern in her voice. She was a caring person.

‘What do you think. . .what could be a possible reason to hate God?’

‘As Guruji said, it has to be. . .some bad experience. That is the only possible reason I can think of. What was the experience?’

I had no desire to share my story. I did not want to add one more sympathizer in my life. I gave an illogical answer.

‘I hate God because there is no God. Humans have created Him.’

She was definitely not expecting this. She looked shocked.

‘Explain to me the reason why the popular, twelve Shiva *lingas* are here in India only? Why do we not have the Shiva *linga* in Canada, in China or in Pakistan? Shiva is the lord of the whole world. . .right? Or only here,



in India?’

‘He is the Universal God,’ she said with utmost belief.

‘Then why do we have him only in India?’

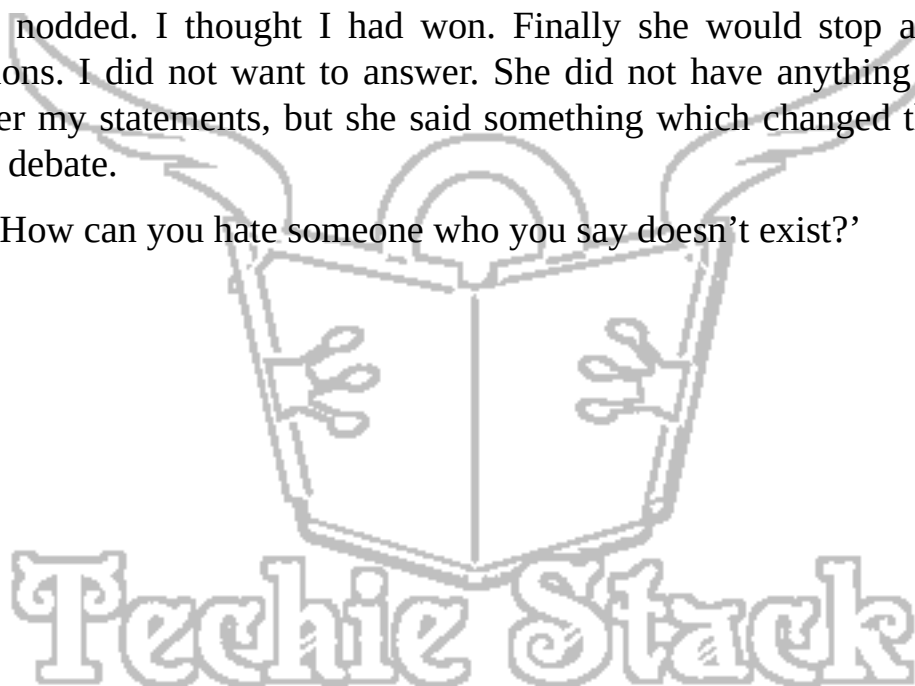
She had no answer to that.

It boosted my confidence. ‘Because we humans have created God and his temples. To make this show everlasting! Indians have created Lord Shiva. That is why all the Shiva *lingas* are in India. The same goes for other religions.’

She could find no counter-reasoning for this. She was in deep thought. ‘So you hate God because there is no God. . .he is man-made?’

I nodded. I thought I had won. Finally she would stop asking me questions. I did not want to answer. She did not have anything to say to counter my statements, but she said something which changed the course of the debate.

‘How can you hate someone who you say doesn’t exist?’



# Chapter 8

## Day 3, AOL

On the third day, after yoga and breakfast, Guruji picked some more questions from the 'botheration' box. One question in particular, caught my attention.

'Can an atheist, who doesn't believe in God, be a good person?' As Guruji read it aloud, I sensed a pair of eyes on me, making it extremely clear who had asked that question. I guess I was equally interested in the answer.

Guruji's expression said that he was not facing this question for the first time. 'A person who doesn't believe in God is actually a very strong person. He never leaves things to Him. That makes him. . .good or bad? Good and bad – is related to your inner consciousness. It's not about, God.'

Everyone in the hall listened intently. 'Many dictators believed in God. A person's character or moral values are not dependent on God. We should not mix morality and God.'

I was impressed with the reply. Not because it cast a positive light on me, but because the reply was logical.

'It's time to move onto the most important part of the programme. Forgiveness and happiness,' Guruji sounded excited.

*How are forgiveness and happiness related?* That thought invaded my mind. When you see your love dying, and no one can give a valid reason for why it happened, then forgiveness is only a theory, which has no practical relevance.

'And also, today is the last day of, silence,' Guruji reminded us all. He was the only one allowed to speak. The rest were busy fighting their inner wars in silence.

Silence is the sleep that nourishes wisdom. I was thinking the things I had to. Now I began to understand why the programme was designed to keep us silent. Silence is not the absence of something, but the presence of everything.

Guruji continued, 'Remember friends, only two things can make a

person happy. Acceptance and forgiveness. Accept the person the way he is, and forgive others.'

Today's activities were getting my attention. I was beginning to take interest.

'Close your eyes,' Guruji asked for all lights to be turned off. The pin drop silence was broken, by the mild, pleasant tune that played in the background. He was slowly changing the volume and the tone of the music. 'Please, make yourself comfortable.'

He asked us to focus our thoughts on our loved one.

'...try to talk to the person, listen to what he or she is trying to tell you.' Guruji's voice guided us.

She stood in front of me, smiling. She seemed to be asking, 'How are you?'

'Ask them the question, what should I do to become a happy person?' Guruji's voice was our only connect to reality.

'What shall I do?' I asked my love. We, together, in a different world.

'Forgive God,' she said, as if in reflex.

I opened my eyes in anger. A pair of familiar eyes stared at me. The others were engrossed in their inner dialogue, but she was looking at me. I closed my eyes again. A teardrop was about to escape. I summoned all my courage and mumbled, 'I will never forgive God.'

\* \* \*

I lost interest in the programme once again. I shut myself off from the others. I used to be an extrovert, but after Bhavna, I was not very open about things.

After multiple *dhyans* and *kriyas* which I was barely interested in, finally, the much-needed relief, the nature walk was announced.

I went to my favourite place, but someone else had already occupied my rock. Yes, it was Anisha. She looked at me challengingly. I was prepared to take her challenge. There could be only one lion in the jungle.

'Why are you sitting in my place?'

'Why are you not keeping silent?' she retorted cheekily.

A smile crept up to my lips. It was a repetition of the previous day's chat. Only the dialogues that had been exchanged between the characters

seemed reversed. I hid my smile, and sat on a nearby rock. I picked up a stone and threw it into the river.

‘Hey, are you upset with me?’ she couldn’t hold on to her silence.

‘No, it’s okay,’ I wasn’t sure if I was irritated, unaffected, or happy about having Anisha’s company.

‘Why do you always wear this pink shawl? Who does this belong to? Your wife. . . ?’

I gave her a look which said, *please, mind your own business!* Actually, she had guessed correctly. How could she have known it?

‘Can I consider you my friend?’

Giving no answers, didn’t stop her questions. The whole conversation that I am relating may feel filmy to you, but it actually happened. Were we friends? She definitely had shown more interest in me than the people I had called my friends earlier.

‘Yes, a friend,’ I replied. Being a man, how could I deny it when a girl herself approaches me with her friendship? That too, a girl like her. Whose mere presence was causing changes in my life.

‘I wish to know more about you. . .’ she made no effort to hide her curiosity. ‘. . .what is the book you have written? Why do you cry during *sadhana* ?’

Anisha was a straightforward girl. She hit straight, with the sharpest of questions. Now I could understand why she was occupying the lion’s den—my rock.

I took a deep breath. Then I told her everything. Bhavna. How we met. Our love. Destiny. I told her I was the man who had lost everything in life. I knew that after this open-hearted confession, I would also lose my newly-made friend. Her curiosity would be replaced with sympathy.

Let me confess to you why I shared my story with her. For years, I had been waiting for someone to share all my feelings with. But no one had asked me to, so far. Until now.

No one had been so intrusive, or pushed me to reveal myself. All had been polite. They never said, I want to know your problem. She was the first one who had offered a hand of friendship to a lost man. All had made up their minds—he is depressed, so the more we talk to him about his loss, the more we will hurt him.

She did not comment on my story. I could see her sadness. She stepped down from the rock, picked up a pebble, and flung it into the river. A silent girl has lots of things on her mind. Anisha couldn't be expected to stay quiet for too long.

'That's why you hate God so much.' She looked into my eyes. Her glossy lips trembled. 'Maybe you have expected too much from God. . .'

She was trying to keep too many words in check. She had blind belief in God. I often think that God had sent her to counter-question anyone who questioned His existence.

'When God could not help me when I needed Him most, to save my wife, I do not need Him now. I do not care for him,' I knew my heavy breathing was warm with anger and wet with emotions.

'Because He did not care for you?' She still looked me in the eye.

She wanted me to see reason. Believe in her belief. But I couldn't agree with her logic or the lack of it. She did not have enough reasons to convince me.

'This book is your own real story?' She changed the topic. Yes, her sensitivity stopped her from hurting a person who was in such a sorry psychological state.

'Yes, this book is my own journey.'

'Why have you written it?'

'Because. . .He tried to delete the most important chapter of my life. I will write an entire book.' I raised my voice, 'I do not want her to be forgotten.'

She smiled. It was a mysterious smile. 'You are a good man. She would be proud to see you.'

I asked her my favourite question, 'Do you believe there is life after death?'

She smiled softly, 'I believe in life.'

\* \* \*

We were friends now. When I came out of my room for dinner that night, I looked around for her. There was a delay in serving the food. Everyone had assembled outside the temples.

I found Anisha there, typing away on her cell phone.

‘I was waiting for you,’ she spoke first.

Hunger made me ask, ‘What’s holding the dinner?’

‘Dinner is postponed by half an hour.’

‘Why?’

We were looking at the moon as we talked. Silence was still on officially. But practically, it had never even been enforced.

‘Are you seriously not aware? Today is *Hanuman Jayanti* . All are offering prayers.’

‘*Hanuman Jayanti* ?’ My fingers curled into a fist. I resented missing on timely food for Hanuman’s birthday. ‘Why, do you worship, Hanuman?’

‘Can you be a little humble and say. . .Lord Hanumanji?’

I had forgotten I was with the Lord’s advocate!

Before we could enter the second round of argument over Hanuman and Ram, chants filled the air, accompanied by the clangs of bells and cymbals. Devotees were rendering thunderous claps in the cold atmosphere. ‘*Ram se bada. . .Ram ka naam. . .*’

Silence had been sacrificed to offer prayers.

In the programme, we were not permitted to talk to humans. But I guess we were allowed to talk to the one who did not exist. This upset me further. I felt trapped. I had been forced into a temple, amidst talk of God, *kirtan* , *dhyaan* . . .the entire gamut of religiosity that I did not believe in. I was an alien among the religious.

‘Are you trying to figure out why we worship Ram?’ Girls have their own way of probing to find out what’s going on inside a man’s head.

‘No one sees the wackiness of Ram and the *Ramayan* ? There are so many incidents which are not practically possible. Still, they worship God. And can anyone tell me, what is the logic behind, “*Ram se bada. . .Ram ka naam . . .*”’

My question did not come as a surprise to her. Instead, I saw that she was happy I had asked! It appeared that she had strong logic to support her belief. The irony!

‘I am blessed that you asked this. We do not worship Ram only because He is a God. . .’

Before I could say anything, the crowd crowed, ‘ *Ram se bada. . .Ram ka naam . . .* ’

\* \* \*

I now had a friend who was concerned and did not sympathize.

We officially broke the silence after breakfast the next day. We were free to talk. It was an amazing feeling. Normally, I am not much of a talker. But in the past two days, I had been dying to. It was the hypocritical human tendency – the more you control an urge, the more its thirst increases.

Guruji picked up the ‘botheration’ box.

I had thought that by now, it would be empty. To my surprise it was still full. Everyone had some all-important thing left to ask. There was a marked difference in the level of questions asked, from the first day to the last. No more questions on tackling constipation, or a wife who filed a case against her husband. Not even, the ‘my son is not willing to stay with us. . .’ type. Now, the questions were profound, like, what is the purpose of life? How do I forgive someone? What is the importance of culture in life? How do I manage tension?

After ten such questions, Guruji picked this one: ‘Is there life after death?’

Yes, it is obvious. That was my question. It’s not that I thought that Guruji would know the right answer. I just wanted to hear Guruji’s point of view. In some corner of my mind, I had still not accepted that I was not going to see her ever again.

Guruji took some time to think. He started in his signature style, ‘Frankly, I don’t know the answer.’

I smiled. My eyes wandered to Anisha’s. She definitely did not look happy.

Guruji tried his hand at an explanation. ‘If you believe that there is a divine life, a divine presence. . .If you believe in destiny, and God, and all the other things. . .Yes, there is life after death. If you believe in science, that there is no God. . .Then there is no life after death.’

Despite clarifying my doubt, Guruji put the bar on my head. How could I ignore science? I was itching to ask for details, but it would give the others the idea that it was I who had asked the question.

Guruji continued, ‘I don’t know who has asked this question, but I

guess he or she has lost their close one, to death. Your loved one will only be happy when you are happy. There is no need to wait for someone. Always choose life, because life is precious. Remember, if you are waiting for the soul, the soul might be waiting for you. Always choose forgiveness and life. If you are in unrest. . .a soul can never be at rest. It will not be able to rest in peace.'

Unintentionally, Guruji had made me responsible for her unrest.

It hurt. Everyone was interested in the next question. I had my own thoughts and feelings to handle first.

A few questions later, I was pulled into reality with, 'Why do we worship Ram? Is Ram a God?'

The attendees were stunned. I could guess easily, that almost all of them were Hindu. Someone was questioning their naked belief. I knew who had asked this question and why.

Guruji said, 'Frankly speaking, I don't know the exact answer. . .'

I heaved a sigh. Why do intelligent people have to pretend every time that they don't know anything?

'Let me try to answer, however. Suppose Ram was a real man. All his life. . .he was a struggler. He was forced to live in the jungle for fourteen years. His wife was kidnapped by Ravan. When he returned after fourteen years of struggle, because of political pressure, he was forced to abandon his pregnant wife. Much later, he ended up fighting his own kids. . .'

There was a deafening silence. It was a topic close to every heart.

'He struggled his entire life, but what makes him a great character in mythology. . . 'Guruji answered his own question, '. . .was that he never lost his calm or his respect for others. We should learn from Ram's life, not from Ram himself. That is why we say, *Ram se bada. . .Ram ka naam . . .*'

The mystery was solved!

The crowd clapped. Silence had died a natural death. Everyone was happy with the answer.

One person, however, was still confused. I summoned some energy and asked. 'Who is Ram then?'

'He is a character,' Guruji replied.

'So, he is not God?'



Guruji gave a sarcastic smile.

‘Frankly speaking, I don’t know.’



# Chapter 9

The four-day programme ended. It gave me many things. A few of which I cannot even mention, and a few were yet to come.

Those who had come from Rudraprayag and the nearby areas left for their homes. Those who had come from Delhi and far off places, decided to leave the next day. Rudraprayag to Delhi takes more than fourteen hours by bus. There were no trains. I was glad for the extra hours in this heaven on earth.

‘What is the plan? We have a full day,’ Anisha said.

When someone asks ‘what’s the plan’, it means they already have something in mind.

‘Nothing as such. I am going to sit on the rock and revel in the beauty of nature.’

She looked at me, enigmatically.

‘Don’t you dare! Don’t even think of sitting on my rock.’ I said in all seriousness.

‘Let’s go to the Sangam,’ Anisha suggested.

‘Sangam is in Allahabad.’

‘Not that one. We have a Sangam here too, in Rudraprayag. The Alaknanda and Mandakini rivers meet. You can appreciate the grandeur of nature’s beauty there. I have heard that it is a beautiful sight.’

Without waiting for me to agree, she hailed an auto. She had started behaving proprietarily, like an old friend. I had missed this in my life for a very long time.

We reached the Sangam after twenty minutes. I wondered if there was a place as beautiful as this! What had I been doing the last four days? This was a place straight out of dreams, very pleasant dreams. It was a holy place for Hindus. The Mandakini River merged into the Alaknanda River, making a confluence at Rudraprayag. The flow of the rivers, over the ages, had cut the rocks, to give the site an exceptional beauty.

There was a long queue to get into a cave. This cave housed a famous Shiva temple. The length of the queue told me that either the divine deity

was very powerful, or the priests of the temple were very convincing. I stood at the bay of the river, on a rock. I was trying to understand the river in detail, as well as myself. Nature made me connect instantly.

‘Will you come to the temple?’ Anisha asked.

‘Not interested,’ I said coolly. She was prepared for this answer. In no way was it unexpected.

‘Let’s visit, at least for the beautiful sculptures,’ she cajoled me.

‘Please do not say that Lord Shiva came here to implant this *linga* !’

‘Can you stop your mocking?’ her round face was puffed with irritation.

‘Sorry about that.’

I did not like seeing the chirpy girl turning grumpy in my company.

‘I am going inside the temple. Will be back in an hour.’

She took it for granted that I would wait.

‘In an hour! What do you plan to do? Make Lord Shiva come to earth from His heavenly abode?’

I was talking to someone with that kind of abandon after many years. Indulging in friendly banter. I did not feel the need to be guarded or to explain anything. The best conversations are the ones where you don’t have to worry about what you say. You can just be, you.

She took a long frustrated breath. ‘I will go shopping.’

Shopping? Here. . . ? Outside the temple? Before, I could exclaim these questions out loud, an old memory triggered. I was transported into a different world. Before I could get lost in the past, she pulled me back into the present.

‘I am a girl. We love shopping.’ That was an unnecessary confession. ‘I will purchase some souvenirs for the family.’

Words like ‘shopping’, and ‘souvenir’, were ladies’ mojo. I welcomed the thought. I could peacefully enjoy the picturesque beauty of the place.

She returned after half an hour with a huge bag hanging on one arm.

‘Souvenir for Gurgaon?’ I looked at her bag pointedly.

‘Big family,’ she let out a satisfied breath as she took her seat beside

me.

‘Tell me about your family?’

I realized I should have asked her the question way back. Here was a friend who knew everything about me, and I knew nothing about her. Only that she worked in Gurgaon as HR.

‘My brother is the eldest, and I have a younger sister. She is preparing for the IAS. Mom works as a teacher and father is an engineer,’ she finished in one breath.

‘Where does your brother work?’

‘He works in KPIT. He got engaged recently, and very soon, we will have a wedding in the family.’

The word ‘wedding’ reminded me. . .I don’t know why the question mattered. Seriously nothing wayward. . .I was only curious to know a little more about my friend. Why I was curious? Don’t ask, please.

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’

‘No, I don’t have a boyfriend. If I had, I would have dragged him here with me.’

I believed she would have.

I talked about my entire family, a little bit about Bhavna’s family too. Our college days. With Anisha, I re-lived some of my most beautiful memories. She was probably the first person with whom I shared my past without inhibition.

‘Do you think you will marry, again?’ she was point blank in asking this.

It was hard to face this question. I had not expected it from her. Suddenly she was starting to behave like my friends, who would constantly chant, ‘When will you marry again?’

I didn’t know how to react to them. It was as if marriage was the ultimate solution for every problem. I didn’t answer her. She understood my hesitation.

‘Do you, Ajay, believe that there is life after death?’ she asked.

I remained silent.

‘Hope you consider me a good friend,’ Anisha asked politely.

Now she was behaving like my mom! And the best part about moms, they didn't need permission to change topics. I nodded. I am not sure whether that swing of the head could be called a nod, but yes, I nodded.

'What if she is seeing you, and she is watching how sad you are after her demise? How will she feel?'

'Of course, this situation is bad,' I stated the obvious.

'Every person has some problem in life. They fight their own unique war. Your situation is not singularly the worst.'

I had enough of this every day. I was in no mood to hear this stupid, stale reiteration, which was not practical.

'Who do you love the most, Anisha?'

'My mom.'

'Suppose. . . your mom is dying in front of you and your best efforts can't save her. Every passing second, you are doing nothing, except, watching her take a step closer to death. How will that feel?'

'That is the worst.'

'Indeed, it is the worst. I have seen the worst.' I said, between gritted teeth.

She was taken aback with the way the discussion was going. I regretted mentioning her mom. She had taken it personally.

'In that case, you have not seen the worst as yet.' Her face was rigid. 'I know that what has happened to you was wrong. Still, it's not the worst.'

I did not like her taking my grief so lightly. 'Prove it to me.'

I was not arrogant. But maybe male egoistic shallowness did not wish to lose the argument, even with a friend.

'Tell me, who is the happiest person in this AOL programme?' she challenged me back.

I had a weird feeling about this. Why was she asking me this? I thought of the happiest person I had met on the trip. I had one name.

'Arvind Uncle.'

\* \* \*

As soon as we reached the resort in the evening, Anisha began looking for Arvind Uncle. He had not left yet. She found him in his room. He was

surprised to see two young, worried-looking people in his room.

We exchanged pleasantries and then came right to the discussion at hand.

‘Uncle, tomorrow we return to Delhi, and you, probably, to Meerut. Could I have your contact number and address?’ Anisha had beautifully plotted an emotional bonding. She was an expert at that.

‘Why not?’ He reached into his pocket for a visiting card.

‘Who are there in your family, uncle?’ Anisha asked, smiling brightly and looking at the card.

‘No one,’ uncle responded.

‘Means... ? Your wife...and everyone?’

‘I have no kids. And my wife. . .expired, two years ago.’

There was a smile on his face, but also emptiness. Today, I saw the same Arvind differently. For the first time I did not have bad feelings for him. I felt pity. I could identify with what he was going through.

‘Uncle, do you not miss your wife?’ Anisha asked, looking into his eyes and not hiding from them.

‘This is weird!’ Arvind Uncle smiled in his signature style. ‘Such young people, asking serious questions like these. Hope all is well?’

‘I am curious to know.’ I intervened, to ask what mattered to me most, ‘How can you smile all the time, even after losing everything? Everything, that’s called family?’

Uncle’s smile remained unwavering.

‘I am sixty-five-years-old. I have a limited number of days to live. So it’s better to smile, than to worry.’

People like him do not require learning in the *Art of Living* . They are the art for others. I was impressed with his explanation. I had a feeling though, that he was hiding something. But, I did not want to dig deep into his personal life.

‘Do you have any problem at all in life?’ Obviously Anisha didn’t think like I did.

‘No, not at all!’ Uncle chirped.

I smiled. It was a cunning smile. Definitely, she was not happy.

There was nothing left to discuss, I guessed. I wanted to lighten the situation. Uncle might not be letting on to what was really inside him, but unknowingly, we could have trespassed into his emotional space. That might have hurt him.

‘Uncle, if you are comfortable, can you share with us any inspiring moment of your life?’

For the first time, he made eye contact with me. It was difficult to look into his eyes. There was a strange depth, an ocean of pain. There was seriousness on his face. He took a long deep breath and said, ‘My wife was an inspiring lady. She was in the hospital for months. She understood that she had just a few days to live. I asked her one day, how I would live my life, after her. She replied, “. . .with a smile on your face. . .”.’

I looked into Anisha’s eyes. We understood that a different Arvind was sitting in front of us.

‘That is why, you always smile?’ Anisha asked another nonsensical question.

I had no audacity, no desire, to hurt him more. He said something which touched a chord in me.

‘There is a saying, “Your smile is the signature of your personality.” Never allow it to be washed away by your tears or erased by your anger. Life is best for those who enjoy it. It is difficult for those who compare it with that of others; and the worst for those who criticize it. Your own attitude defines your life.’

Arvind Uncle shared aeons of knowledge in those few lines.

I was silent. Sometimes, the most powerful thing you can say is nothing.

‘Can I have your contact number?’ Anisha broke the chain of silence.

‘Sure, the number is there on the card. But do not call me after six months,’ Uncle said with a smile.

‘Why?’ asked the ever-curious, Anisha.

Only a personality like him could have replied with a smile, ‘Because I am going to die soon.’

# Chapter 10

Arvind Uncle's kidneys were in poor shape and on the verge of failure. With every passing day and his old age, there was no possibility of getting a transplant. He was on dialysis once in a week. Slowly, this frequency would increase, from once to twice in a week and then on a daily basis. He had already had two heart attacks and doctors said he had a maximum of eight or nine months to live. He popped a dozen medicines, daily. Sooner or later, these medicines would become ineffective.

It was 8 p.m. and I ate dinner in isolation.

Sometimes, one creates a dynamic impression by saying something and sometimes by remaining silent. Anisha attempted some conversation but I avoided engaging with her. She might have guessed the reason for my not wanting to speak. She didn't try again.

I shut my room door and locked it from inside. My roommate had already left. He was from Rishikesh. Once inside, I felt I was small. Here was a person welcoming his death with a smile. I had many unanswered queries and many unaddressed feelings. I also had my anti-depression pill, Duloxetine. I went to sleep to avoid any unnecessary thoughts.

It was a tough night. My depressive state of mind was taking its toll. If you've clinical depression, you may have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep. There is a definite link between lack of sleep and depression. The deeper I think, the deeper I sink.

Arvind Uncle will die soon. Will he meet my Bhavna? An image flashed, which seemed to want to say many things to me.

Is there life after death? The same question popped in my mind, and this time, I knew a person who was going to enter her world. I always carry a pen with me. I searched for a piece of paper. I couldn't find one. It was 11 p.m. I stepped out of my room and the resort was still lively. I asked the caretaker for an A4-sized sheet of paper.

I started writing a letter. Perhaps it was due to the depression, but I wrote it. I wrote an emotional letter to Bhavna. You may find it weird. It was a letter from a man battling depression, to his late wife.

*Hello Mrs. Pandey,*

*It is all so weird. I never thought that I would write to you like this.*



*But this is the beauty of life. It never goes as planned. Recently, I met a wise man who said, if you keep on thinking about the soul, then the soul will keep thinking about you. If I keep on missing you, you are going to miss me too.*

*I am learning new things, and most important of them all, I'm learning about the different aspects of life. To sum up, I am happy. And so should you be. I don't know, dear, if there is life after death, or not. But one day, we will meet, for sure. How and where? I don't know. In which form this meeting will happen, I don't know. I don't want you to be sitting and waiting for this to happen. Till then, I will choose the path of forgiveness and love, and choose the path of life.*

*Love you, and you are the best wife.*

*Yours,*

*Pandeyji*

Needless to mention, my eyes filled up. I am fed-up of mentioning how many times and how many tears I have shed. I folded the paper into a comfortable size, precisely half of a postcard size. I had an envelope with me in which I used to carry my cards. I emptied it. I put the letter in the envelope. I went to the washroom and splashed plenty of water on my face. Wiping it, I looked into the mirror. Till then, I had mastered the art of hiding my tears. I looked into the mirror thrice, and tried a smile. Yes, a fake smile. I went out of my room again.

I walked towards Arvind Uncle's room. As I walked, I was uneasy. He did not know anything about my past. He would definitely want to know why I was giving this to him. I might require to explain myself him. I did not want to shed tears in his presence. I did not have the courage to share my feelings again. Before I could even knock on his door, a smiling face flashed in my mind. A smiling man, who had lost everything and was about to die. I decided I could not face him. I walked towards my friend's room. It was weird. But I had an excuse, that of depression.

A light tap on the door at 11.30 p.m. was not enough to rupture Anisha's sleep. She opened the door after the sixth knock. She wore a childish night suit with dancing bunnies printed on it. Her drowsy face, half-opened eyes and tangled hair said that I had disturbed a deep sleep.

‘Ajay... ? All well... ?’ her voice was grumpy, yet concerned.

‘Can I have a few minutes?’

‘At this time?’ She frowned. But she was attentive now.

A female voice came from inside. ‘Please, close the door, Anisha.’ That was Anisha’s roommate. There was a message in the tone of voice. ‘Go to hell, but please do not disturb *my* sleep.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Anisha whispered.

She closed the door. A while later, she came out. She had put on her smart track suit. That was the beauty of a true friend. No matter how much you disturbed them, they will stand by you when you need them.

As we walked down the corridor, we noticed that everything was silent. We stepped outside the resort building, and strolled out of the gate on to the quiet street.

‘What is the matter, Ajay?’

‘I need a small favour.’

‘Yes.’

I handed the envelope to her. She looked at it with hesitation. It was an absurd moment. A beautiful girl was being offered a handwritten letter on a chilly evening in dreamlike Rudraprayag. It could create confusion in any mind. But I was far removed from those mundane thoughts.

‘What is in this?’

Had she thought it was a love letter to her? At this age and that moment, I am sure she had not.

‘I want to give this to Arvind Uncle. I wrote it for. . .’ I paused.

‘Bhavna?’ My hesitation confirmed it for her.

I nodded.

She turned and stood facing me. She looked at me as if she was seeing an alien. Shocked beyond words now, she was fully awake. ‘This is a letter you have written to your wife, and you want Arvind to deliver it to her in heaven?’

I nodded again.

Her jaw dropped. The air around us felt heavy and breathing seemed difficult. She wanted to say something, but no one had prepared words for a situation like this one. Who could even write a letter like this? It’s the things that you least expect, that hit you the hardest.

‘I know this is not normal. I need your help. I can’t face him.’

‘You really want me to give this to Arvind Uncle?’

‘If I give it to him, then I need to explain everything, again.’

‘Hmmm.’ When they have nothing to say, girls use this specially created word. ‘That I will do. But are you really. . .serious?’ She still could not believe what I was expecting her to do.

‘If there is life after death, then surely he will meet her,’ I shrugged.

‘Suppose Arvind does get a chance to meet Bhavna, how will you get to know of it?’

‘It’s a feeling. Nothing more than that.’

I could see that she wanted to say many things. My dismal face and the letter in her hand stopped her from asking anything more. We walked for about a mile, then turned back towards the resort. She was silent. The sound of the beautiful river flowing freely, was the only thing we could hear at that late hour.

‘Can I ask you something about Bhavna?’ People always take my permission to ask something about her.

‘Yes, please.’

‘Can you share a beautiful and happy incident that you had with her?’

‘There are many. Which kind would you like to listen to?’ I had a strange enthusiasm in answering this question of hers.

‘Anything that you are happy to share.’

I did not realize that there was a smile on my face as I began to speak, ‘Once, I was to perform mimicry on-stage. I was nervous, since that was my first live solo show in front of five hundred people. She believed strongly in horoscope and numerology. I am not at all superstitious, and I hated her belief in such topics. Just before the show, she told me that the day was not a good day for Cancer. The zodiac. I hated that she told me this. However, I took it as a challenge. I gave my best shot and performed. I won many hearts. Later, she revealed that she had lied. She had said so to push me to perform my best. Motivate me to fight my fears.’

‘She seems to have been an inspiring woman,’ said Anisha, in amazement.

‘Indeed, she is.’

I used 'is', not was. I am sure you can understand my feelings.

'Did you notice the change in you when you spoke of her?'

'What change?' I looked at her confused.

'You came to me at 11:30 at night. You were burdened with negativity and gloom. I could not see any life in you. You even splashed water on your face, to hide the tears. . .'

'So?'

'Maybe you have not noticed. But the moment you started talking about the happy moments with her, you became happy.'

'What do you mean?'

'I do not know what you have written in this letter. . .' She waved the envelope in my face. ' . . .but the memories which are taking you away from your present happiness, get away from them. Carry happy ones with you. Don't live in the past with the bad moments. You may never know the value of a moment before it becomes a memory.'

This was new. I had been to a couple of doctors and they had explained my condition and asked me to do many things which were impossible to implement. Here was a girl who said something which touched the dark corners that no counsellor had reached so far.

I decided to change the subject. Else the bad philosopher in her would continue to bestow unwanted *gyaan* on me.

'You are right. Let's talk about something else.'

'Let's make a beautiful memory now,' her voice had a bounce in it.

'Now?' mine reflected confusion.

'Look around you, aren't you realizing something? You are walking here on a full moon night. Where would you find such a pleasant chill, a beautiful river, a breathtaking view, a comfortable walk, with a friend who is so beautiful?' her soft lips devoid of gloss, shone in a smile.

'Why have you added the word "beautiful"? A friend is a friend.'

'But a beautiful friend is beautiful,' she was making no sense. Perhaps the full moon had affected her brains.

I smiled, then giggled and then laughed.

She mock cried out, 'Why are you doing this?'

‘What?’ The sad person inside me had disappeared for a few minutes.

‘Nothing,’ she pouted.

‘Come on, stop being upset. You are the one who wants me to be happy.’

‘Could you please tell me what is there to laugh about? Am I not beautiful?’

‘No. I laughed because all beautiful girls are dumb.’



# Chapter 11

Anisha and I boarded the bus for Delhi the next morning. Arvind Uncle took a direct bus to Meerut. Anisha told me that she had handed over the letter to him, the first thing in the morning. I was satisfied. Being a late-riser, I had taken the right call in giving the task to her. Anisha had created a WhatsApp group, as suggested by Guruji, and added all the attendees of this programme. It was the best way to keep everyone connected. I knew it was not essential, but I got her number.

To see the same roads that had brought me here but with a different perspective, was an extraordinary feeling. I had a friend now, who cared for me. Who could make me laugh. I laughed openly, after a long time. Friends are medicines for a wounded heart, and vitamins for a hopeful soul.

Before I had participated in the AOL programme, I had thought that the other attendees would not be progressive people. I would be the only intelligent mind there, I thought. The truth I discovered was, everyone was much wiser than me.

The problem with intelligent people is that they are always full of doubt. Fools are over-confident. It was not an easy realization, I was the most ignorant person in the complete programme. I could not say that attending it had changed everything in me. But it did give me a much-needed, good friend.

‘So, how did you find the programme?’ Anisha asked, on the journey back home. She was dressed in dark blue jeans and a multicoloured turtleneck top.

‘Very good,’ I was smiling freely.

‘What’s the takeaway?’

‘I am taking it along.’

‘What is that?’ she looked at me mystified.

‘A beautiful friend,’ I emphasized the ‘beautiful’.

She made a face. She looked cute when she did that.

‘I have something else for you to take along,’ she smiled, revealing a dozen of her pearly whites.

She reached into her over-sized handbag. I tried to hazard a guess as to what she would conjure up from in there. It was too much effort to work out the mechanism of a girl's head. I stopped guessing and awaited what would emerge. Out came a plastic bag. I could see something fluffy inside.

‘What is this?’

‘Check for yourself. I hope you will like it,’ there was softness on her bright face.

It was not wrapped in fancy gift paper. However, it took me a few seconds to remove it from the pretty polybag. It was a pink-coloured sweater. It was a token that she cared. I was touched. Every gift from a friend is a wish for your happiness.

‘Thank you. This is really thoughtful. When did you shop?’ I was already feeling warm inside.

‘You like it?’ she asked enthusiastically.

‘Yes, of course. Did you purchase it when we were at the Sangam?’

She nodded.

I admired her gesture. I regretted mocking her compulsion to shop. An eternal truth dawned on me. The world would not be a good place without women.

‘I guessed that pink is your favourite colour.’ She was proud of her astuteness.

She had seen me only in my pink shawl. What else could she have thought?

The truth is, I hate pink. But it was not about the colour or the sweater. The gift was all about thoughtfulness. The implied kinship behind the gift had transported me into a different world. ‘I saw you giving your warm tracksuit jacket to the old lady,’ Anisha looked impressed.

‘Thank you for your thoughtfulness.’

I wished I had also been thoughtful.

I thought of gifting her something. Something that would be hard to find here. I had something in mind. Would it be the right gift? I did not know.

The beautiful landscapes were behind us now. We had arrived on the horrible road filled with loud noises, pollution and accidents. The bus

driver parked the vehicle in front of a motel. Delhi was still 50km away. It would take another hour for us to reach. Passengers could have some refreshments here. I walked around looking for a shop that would sell me a gift suitable for Anisha. I might have been over-eager, but there was a reason for it. Maybe this was the last time we'd be together.

I couldn't find anything. Finally I decided to execute the weird idea which had been in my head for hours. I put the gift in the same polybag.

We were in the bus again, gradually moving towards our destination. I was still doubtful about the gift I had chosen. It was not brand new. Would she accept it, I wondered. I was hesitant.

I kept looking ahead. I saw the huge sign board, which said that Ghaziabad was just ten minutes away. The point when I would have to step out of the bus was not far away.

'Anisha, I want to give something to you. Hope you will not refuse it. . .'

'Oh please! I don't need a gift.'

'This is not a gift. It is a token of respect for you.'

'I cannot take it. You really don't need to. . .'

'Who knows whether we will meet again or not? This will remind you of Bhavna and me.' I placed the bag in her hand.

She was surprised to hear me speak Bhavna's name. She put her hand in the bag and took out the soft shawl. She was silent. Her face went blank.

There were many questions on her mind, I am sure of that! When a girl is uncharacteristically silent, she is either over-thinking, or trying hard not to cry. I saw Anisha looking sad for the first time ever. Emotions had begun to play on her soft features. She looked like she was about to cry.

I failed to understand why she wanted to cry. 'If you feel sad because it's a second-hand shawl, I can take it back.'

'No, no...' she was fighting her emotions, '...does this...belong to her?'

'Yes. This is not just a shawl. . .'

The conductor announced my destination: 'Mohan Nagar, Ghaziabad.' I got up from my seat.

'This tells you how much I respect you.' I pulled out my overhead



luggage.

‘Why did you say that we will not meet again?’

I looked at her. The driver was honking impatiently.

I still remember the words she had told me just as I got off the bus.

‘Good luck for your book. We are definitely going to meet again.’



# Chapter 12

**April 2015, Noida**

I was meeting mom after a week. She was struggling with the TV remote and cursing for no apparent reason. She was engrossed in some Ekta Kapoor produced serial. I wondered why in all the soaps, the same theme was being created, again and again! Gaudily-dressed women having ample time on hand to discuss irrelevant things. . . Men with uncountable money, clueless most of the time, while the women wept their lungs out. The background score, a hit Bollywood number with extra-emotional new lyrics, made everyone, including my mom, cry.

I sat in a corner and watched her engrossed in the great Indian drama. On the TV screen, some wedding preparation was going on. In serials, someone was always getting married. I wondered why. Internally, I shouted out to myself, why did the universe only seem to revolve around marriage? I got some uncomfortable vibes from her and thought that I should get out of the room while I still had the opportunity.

‘Where are you going? We need to talk,’ mom’s eyes were still glued to the TV. Moms are different souls. Always busy, trying to finish a million jobs, but always free for kids.

The problem is, I get a shiver, when my mom says we need to talk. Because she would be the only person doing the talking. I will have to listen. I nodded.

‘All well?’ I began the pleasantries.

‘What about marriage?’

‘Whose marriage?’ I was not smart enough to hide my nervousness.

‘Oye, hero! I am talking to you. Whose marriage would I be talking about?’

‘Continue watching these serials, and you will have nothing else to discuss in your entire life.’

She ignored my remark. Parents are seasoned players. They know what their target is, and how to keep the conversation on track.

‘You are thirty-one. We are receiving proposals for your marriage today. When you are thirty-four, we may not get even one.’

If anyone had asked what my age was, she would have said that I was not even thirty. For this argument, I was thirty-one! It seems that without marriage, I was getting a year older every month.

‘Really? Who are the girls who are ready to marry me?’ I taunted.

‘The question is, are you ready?’

‘Mom, I am not. You are the one saying you have the proposals. I just want to know which girls are dying to marry your superstar son.’

‘Are you Shahrukh Khan, that proposals will rain on you from heaven?’

A mom’s anger and a son’s stubbornness can be bewildering. I know that I did term myself a ‘superstar’! If you are looking for logic in our conversation, you would never find it.

‘You didn’t ask about *Art of Living* .’

‘Do not change the topic!’ She glared at me, ‘How was your *Art of Living* ?’

‘It was good. I learnt different things. You should join too. You are a religious person. I am sure you will enjoy it a lot more than I did.’

‘Did you make friends?’

‘Ya...one.’

‘How did you make a friend? It was supposed to be a silence programme. I am guessing you were not allowed to speak.’

Amazing! She insisted that I make friends, and when said that I did make one, she was applying logic to it!

‘You are right about the programme, but I found a friend.’

‘A girl.’ It wasn’t a question.

What gave her that clue? I had deliberately been trying to keep that hidden.

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘I unpacked your bag. I found this pink-coloured sweater and. . .’

‘What does that mean? Men cannot buy pink sweaters?’

‘You hate that round neck. And then it is not pink. . .it’s red.’

She glowered at me as she said this. Her Sherlock Holmes look said,

*you cannot mess with me.*

‘Enough, mom!’ I bowed to my mother. ‘Yes, I made friends with a girl. You motivate me all the time, to go out and make friends.’

‘Nothing wrong in that. I just need to know one thing.’

I looked at her expectantly.

‘Is she married?’

‘Who?’

‘Your girlfriend.’

‘Oh, mom! Anisha is not my girlfriend.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Whatever’, is the most dangerous word in the world. It means, to hell with your explanation. I do not believe you.

‘She is not married.’

‘What is her name?’

‘I told you, it’s Anisha.’

‘What is her full name?’ I now understood why she was so eager to know the full name.

‘Anisha Gaur.’

‘Is she a Brahmin?’

‘No, mom! Not again...please!’

She ignored my helpless plea and said, ‘Whatever.’

\* \* \*

I resumed work. The IT industry had not moved an inch forward in the days I had taken a break. It began with the same old chorus. Client. Escalation. Not enough holidays. . .nine hours working, visa, onsite, profile and excel sheets.

I turned my desktop on. I had 500 unread emails. It was impossible to read them all. I selected all in one go and marked them read.

I moved to Gmail. One email sent from Coca Cola UK, asked me to claim a million US dollars. There were hundreds of promotional links, to download several apps, a few unwanted blessings. I ignored them. While scrolling down, I found the mail which was about to change my life.

It was from a publication house. I clicked on it. Suddenly blood started flowing fast, my heart started beating faster, and my eyes were ready to shed their tears again. I read the mail.

*Dear Ajay,*

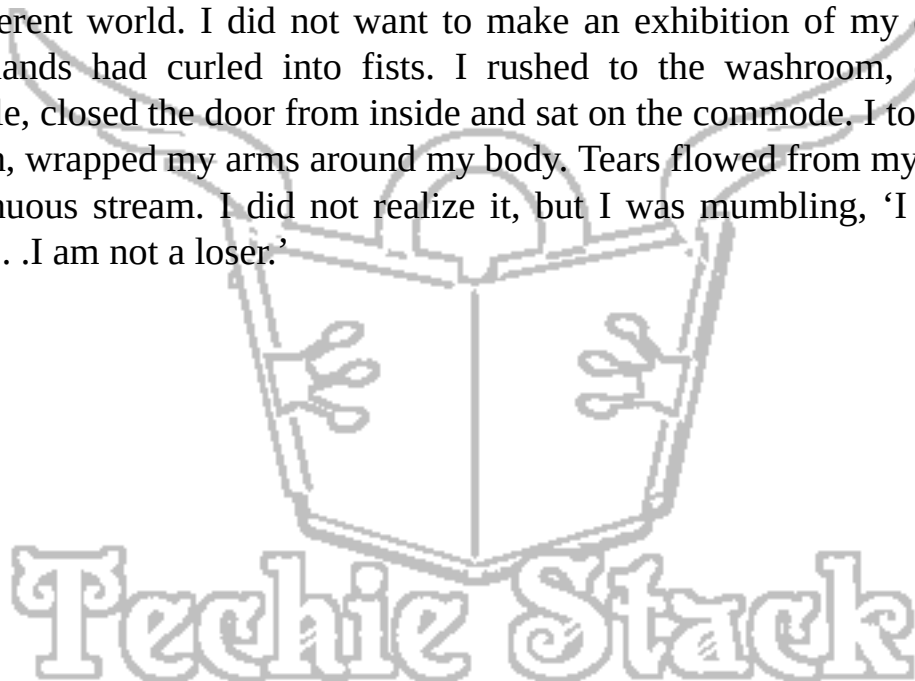
*We read your manuscript, 'You are the Best Wife' and found that it is written straight from the heart.*

*We wish to work with you on the project with certain changes.*

*Regards,*

*Editorial Board*

I could not believe it was actually happening. That email transported me to a different world. I did not want to make an exhibition of my emotions. My hands had curled into fists. I rushed to the washroom, entered a cubicle, closed the door from inside and sat on the commode. I took a deep breath, wrapped my arms around my body. Tears flowed from my eyes in a continuous stream. I did not realize it, but I was mumbling, 'I am not a loser. . .I am not a loser.'



# Chapter 13

**May 2015**

*Dear Publisher,*

*I really can't thank you enough for your kind opinion of my book and belief in my story. The story is very close to my heart, and letting the world read it, is my dream. I wholeheartedly thank you for helping me realize my dream.*

*It is a humble request, but I want a couple of photographs of mine with my wife, in any corner of the book. If possible please set the release date for 8<sup>th</sup> Nov, which is her birthday.*

*Ultimately, all the income from this book will be donated via some means. I have written it only as a tribute to my beloved wife.*

*Regards,*

*Ajay*

They readily agreed to the above requests. Today, I may write books for other publishers, but I will always be grateful to them for giving me this lifetime opportunity.

Now it was certain that my story would be published someday. The next task was, how to promote it. I did some research.

There are techniques to promote a book. Most of them, everyone knows. My extensive research gave me a few more techniques. These are not widely known. To say that I was shocked after reading them, is an understatement. It was an eye-opener.

On recapitulating everything that I learnt about book promotion, I was struck by a bigger question—how do I promote a book in a limited budget?

Anisha and I began chatting on WhatsApp for a few minutes, every day. She forwarded me an inspiring message every night, before going to sleep. I shared the news with her, that a top publishing house had liked my book and had offered me the chance to publish it.

She was happy and congratulated me. She found a new name, to address me by – author.

\* \* \*

A man from Noida and a girl from Gurgaon.

My apologies, for beginning like that!

A friend from Noida and another from Gurgaon. Connaught Place was the perfect area to meet. This is the way Delhi meets.

The metro is the perfect way to travel in Delhi. It was Saturday. As expected, the metro was flooded with a human sea. It had been long since I travelled via metro. I rarely go out now. I had confined myself to my home and to the office. Like a lethargic earthworm which refused to crawl.

Delhi outside the transparent metro walls, looked awesome. I couldn't remember the last time I had noticed my own city.

An air-conditioned, noiseless metro, newly-constructed buildings and fashionable girls. That is my Delhi. Let me confess – I was not in a state to observe girls. Still, Delhi girls have amazing fashion skills. After an hour, like all good things, even this ride had to come to an end. Everything ended at Rajiv Chowk. Bad faces, the crowd, the rush, and above all, the humid-as-hell weather.

I waited for her outside *Cafe Coffee Day*, the pre-defined landmark. After a few minutes of wait, my newly-made friend arrived.

I smiled and welcomed the cosmopolitan Anisha. When we were in Rudraprayag, she always wore track suits. Now she was in a so-called Indo-western dress. A red *dupatta*, draped stylishly over a long blue tee and black denims. She wore them with three-inch high heels. What more could define true intelligence? Delhi girls have the tendency to convert any western look into pure traditional *desi* style.

'Congratulations, writer *saab* !' This happens once you write a book. Your friends turn your biggest achievement into a teasing word – Writer Saab.

She was the first person who made me aware that I was an author. I had not even told my mom and family about the book. Two reasons. First, I wished to give them a surprise; and second, they would think I was struggling too much with my depression. An author is considered an unhappy soul on earth. When an author is already depressed, then he cannot impress.

Though I considered Anisha a very good friend, we greeted each other sedately.

She with a 'Hi,' and I with a 'Hello!'

You do not expect a thirty-year-old man jumping with joy on seeing a good friend and hugging her.

We found the weather appealing. So we went to the central park of Connaught Place. A big flag fluttered proudly in the cool breeze. It had been put up there quite recently.

Connaught Place is well-known for couples who come there for obvious reasons. The centrally-located garden is surrounded by retail showrooms and restaurants all around.

I was surprised, to put it mildly, to see what couples were doing in the peripheral areas of the park. It is difficult to sit in the garden all alone. You cannot sit and watch the show unless and until you have your own better half. Anisha and I sat near the fountain.

Anisha seemed blind to her surroundings. Unaware of the things happening around the park. It seemed to me that the fountain was the most important thing in her life. While I wondered how they were all lost to time and place, I also wondered if Anisha was used to such 'shows'.

We discussed life, job and family. She did ask me about my on-going therapy. Then we came to the topic which was our official reason for meeting today.

'I can't make up my mind. Should I promote this book?'

I wish to tell you, dear reader, I may have written a book, but I had no desire to become an author. I was a husband who was confused about whether I should promote the book or not.

'Is promoting your work a bad thing?' Anisha asked.

'No. But I have written for special reasons. If I promote the book, it will feel like. . . I am using my personal tragedy to become an author.'

'What is the main reason for your writing this book?'

'Fifty years later, when there is no Ajay and no Bhavna, people should read this book and remember a beautiful heart. One who was loved by everyone.'

I was unable to keep a grip on my emotions. Why did Anisha always make me emotional by asking such questions? I thought it was both a blessing and a curse, to feel everything so deeply.



‘Why should someone read your book fifty years later?’

Her question hurt me. I was not sure how to react. I diverted my gaze to the other things in the park. I did not want this newly-formed friendship to end so soon, by any rash behaviour on my part. She read my discomfort.

‘Ajay, please do not take this the wrong way. Let me reframe the question. If today you have to read a fifty-year-old book, which one will you pick?’

‘*Love Story* by Erich Segal. It’s a great love story. . .or any other similar popular book.’

‘Someone will read your book after fifty years, only if it becomes a bestseller today.’

She explained things so clearly and so simply. I mulled over her words.

‘Let’s make a bestseller.’

‘That is the point, man. What is your budget?’

‘Budget?’ It was a million-dollar question. ‘Fifty thousand.’

‘Fifty thousand only?’ She added ‘only’, as if it was a one rupee coin.

‘Okay, one lakh...’

She was not pleased.

‘Last, one lakh and twenty thousand.’

She smiled and understood my financial capability; or my limit in investing in the book.

‘Have you researched about how to promote books?’

‘Yes, I did. Newspaper reviews, blogger reviews, a few celebrity reviews, then author-signed copies, mass emailers, book launches, book displays, and Facebook page promotions,’ I rattled off.

‘These are the standard ways to promote a book. Which anyways every author will do. Tell me something unusual which an author can do to promote a book.’

‘Create a controversy like an issue around plagiarism. . .sue a renowned author. One author released a video teaser in a movie hall. A few authors distributed free copies to increase the reader base. I even found that a few had purchased their own books in bulk.’

‘Why would authors purchase copies of their own book?’ she was confused.

‘Just to increase the sales of their book,’ I said, as if it was implicit. ‘It will create a buzz that sales are increasing for that particular book. It will be followed by more sales.’

She made a face. ‘How disgusting is this idea?’

‘Ya, you are right.’

‘My dear billionaire friend. How will you manage all this?’ she moved her hands in a huge circle, ‘. . .in one lakh twenty thousand rupees?’

I had nothing to say. It was hard to accept, but it was the truth.

‘What is the royalty you will get?’

‘That will be donated.’

‘Hmmmmmm...’

She used her favourite ‘Hmmmm’. So, I understood that she had run out of ideas as well. I shifted my body, to get into a more comfortable posture. It was a cloudy day and the weather had begun to change. It looked like it could rain anytime. In a few minutes, she came up with the worst idea I had ever heard of.

‘Why don’t you mention in the book that all the royalty you get from it will be donated?’

‘That is bad. It will look like a selling tool.’

‘Wake up, man. You are not a saint. And second, people donate a rupee and shout it out from the roof tops, as if they have given their entire life. You have written such a beautiful book with such a pure heart and are behaving senselessly.’

‘I will not.’

‘Your love is pure and the intention is right. Believe me, it will work.’

Suddenly, it began to rain cats and dogs. We took shelter under a shed in the park. I don’t know why, but this promotion stuff was bringing out something bad in me.

‘You have not answered the question, Ajay.’

‘I don’t want to promote my book by the wrong means.’ I sounded

rude even to my own ears. 'I don't want to lose my self-respect,' I explained.

There was a silence. She had rested her argument. She shifted her attention to the other couples. A few stood with us under the shed, while a few others were enjoying the rain. It was a pleasant feeling, seeing others enjoying themselves in the downpour.

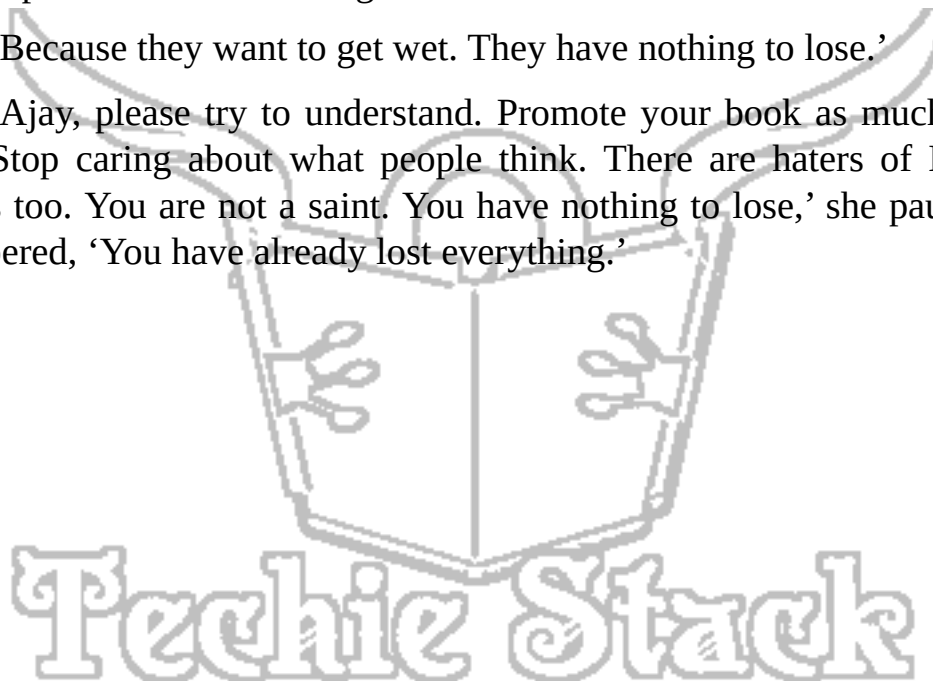
'Why are we standing here in the shed?' Anisha asked, quite seriously.

'Because we don't want to get wet?'

'Why do they not have a problem getting wet in rain?' She pointed at the couples who were dancing in the rain.

'Because they want to get wet. They have nothing to lose.'

'Ajay, please try to understand. Promote your book as much as you can. Stop caring about what people think. There are haters of Bhagat's books too. You are not a saint. You have nothing to lose,' she paused and whispered, 'You have already lost everything.'



# Chapter 14

**June 2015**

I have regretted many of my decisions made in the past and this was one of them. Why had I purchased a government insurance policy?

Life is short, and one can never foretell what the future holds. To make sure that the family is financially secure even after one is gone, one opts for a term insurance. A term plan helps to prepare for such uncertainties.

I was impatiently waiting outside the insurance company. Visiting the insurance office was a nightmare. While taking a new policy, they will never ask you to come to the office. An agent will come to your home, punctual to the minute. Then if you ask for stars from the sky, they will make it available to you.

You are only required to visit the branch, when you are in trouble. I had been a regular visitor to that office for the past two years. Every time, they had come up with a new, self-discovered problem.

Their first excuse was that the form had not been filled properly. The second time, they told me that the form was not signed by the proper authority. The third time, they said that all the forms should be submitted with the proper proof. The fourth time, they called me to their office because the photograph did not match the one I had submitted while purchasing the policy a couple of years ago. Beyond the tenth, I couldn't remember when and why I had visited their unproductive hell. Laziness is the mother of all problems and the people in this office were the grandmothers.

I sat outside the manager's office on a sofa which must have been purchased a million years ago. The fan was making an unbearable noise with every rotation. The walls were shabby and looked like they had never been painted. The company itself required a terminal insurance.

Was my experience the worst? Not exactly. There was a lady sitting beside me. In my unfortunate situation, I could relate to her reason for being there. If a woman visited the insurance office it meant she had lost someone who was meant to shoulder that responsibility.

Our glances met twice.

She was young. She had a very attractive face. But her presence was gnawing at me. It reflected that I was not alone in this world, as one who had suffered.

‘Why are you here?’ she asked finally.

I uttered a single sentence, ‘I lost my wife.’

Without me putting forth the question, she replied, ‘I lost him six months back.’

Despite being strangers, we had something to offer each other on our very first meeting – sympathy. But I sympathized a little extra with her. I pondered, in a concerned way, for how many months the poor lady had been following these lazy lizards.

‘How many times have you come here before?’

‘I am here for the first time.’

‘Oh! So, you have come to fill the claim form.’ I remembered the procedure in my head.

‘No, my claim has already been processed. I have come to collect the cheque.’

‘That’s good!’ I paused, then added, ‘...good news, I guess.’ Now I had sympathy only for myself. To her, I asked out of curiosity, ‘How come you are here for the first time, that too, to collect the cheque? I mean to ask. . .I have filled the claim and I have been following up with them, again and again.’

‘My father came once. The branch manager is very supportive. He made his people fill most of the forms and take care of all the formalities.’

Why was I not receiving this treatment? Why was I going through this struggle? Her case had come up after mine, yet it was already taken care of. If it is a widow, the complete environment becomes supportive.

I sat and waited for my turn. The great branch manager summoned me.

My frequent visits had made both of us very familiar to each other.

First, he would welcome me and offer a seat. Then as a mere formality, he would ask if I wanted tea or water. He was certain that I would say no. Then he would make an urgent call that couldn’t wait. And this call would go on, indefinitely, or so it seemed to me. After the call was

done, he would make some excuse and go out of his cabin. If I was lucky that day, he would return in fifteen minutes. By the time he would get back, I would have been in his office for more than thirty or forty minutes. Then he would say politely, 'Yes Ajay, how may I help you?'

'Sir, all the formalities are taken care of. You asked me to collect the claim amount from you.'

'Have you checked with Mr. Prakash?' he tried to rattle me with a name from his battalion.

'Yes, sir. I did the last time I visited.' It was a ritual, to visit Prakash or Mahesh or someone who was sitting in the same premises. He would talk about his staff as if they were sitting in different countries.

'Let me confirm a few things.' He made a call, shuffled through the top drawer and came up with an actual cheque in his hand.

'Your cheque is ready, Ajay. But I would like you to have a cup of tea.'

'Sure.'

He ordered a cup and handed over the cheque to me.

I was suspicious as I took the cheque from him. How did he suddenly become so sugary?

'How is life, Ajay?'

'I am accommodating the challenges of life.'

'Ajay, you are so young. You should start your life, anew.'

I nodded. He sang the jingle, which the entire world was singing to me.

'I want a small favour. Would you fill in this form, please?' The manager moved a paper towards me.

I understood why he had suddenly turned so humble. It was a feedback form. I filled the form the way he wanted me to, highlighting whatever he asked me to.

'It was a pleasure meeting you, Ajay.'

Once the feedback was over, I guessed he had little interest in me. It didn't matter to him, that the tea he had ordered for me hadn't arrived yet, nor had I finished drinking it.

‘Sir, may I ask you a question?’ I made up my mind to share my exact feedback.

‘Yes please. . .’ he raised his head with an effort, from his papers.

‘Sir, why does a lady have to wait for less time than a man, for claim settlement?’

‘No, it’s not like that,’ the branch manager emphatically denied my statement, ‘Yes, in some cases we are extra cautious. . .’

‘I don’t think you require two years to process a small claim like mine.’

‘Sorry for your experience, Ajay. But we were just extra cautious,’ he didn’t sound sorry at all.

I gathered that he did not have any answer and was therefore repeating the same line again and again.

Before I could leave he made his last remark.

‘Good luck, Ajay. You are indeed a lucky man,’ he looked pointedly at the cheques.

‘Good luck, Ajay,’ was okay, but this new title? A lucky man? This was not something I had faced before. Here I stood with a cheque for a few lakh rupees. . .that made him consider I was lucky?

‘Sir, it was not pleasant meeting you at all,’ I heaved a frustrated sigh, ‘but I wish you luck too. . .like mine.’

Techie Stack

# Chapter 15

## July 2015, First Week

July has always been special for me. It brought with it many reasons to celebrate. It was the month of our wedding anniversary, and my birthday falls in July too. But now, July was not the same anymore. Good memories have the power to disturb you. Like a tree felled after an onslaught of rain. The same rain which had nurtured the tree some time ago.

I had always wondered why we could not skip a month from June to August. Just like they do in buildings, after the twelfth floor, they have the fourteenth, without a thirteenth floor.

On the day of our anniversary, I did not log into Facebook. I knew it would be difficult to deal with. A marriage anniversary without a wife, is like a wedding without a couple.

On the previous anniversaries, I had posted a couple of photos with the message: *Happy Anniversary, Mrs. Pandey! Love you, and you are the best wife.*

It was weird. Why are we so accustomed to putting our lives out on Facebook? Why do we wish people for their anniversaries and birthdays on social media? Actually, we love attention. We want more and more people to wish us.

I seriously did not want people to wish me.

On this anniversary though, I had something special to announce.

I posted a picture of Bhavna that I had clicked three years ago and wrote, 'Happy to announce that soon, I will be releasing a book based on my life. This book will tell you the story of a girl who lived less in years but not in moments. A girl whose name was Bhavna. Love you, and you are the best wife.'

After putting up the post, I switched off my phone. I did not want any Facebook notification to bother me. I went to office just like I did any other day.

At night, around 11 o'clock, I was reading in the hope of finding sleep but I failed.

I played loud music, closed my eyes, switched off the lights and felt



like I was dancing with her. My mind was dancing, lips were smiling and eyes were raining.

To while away some more of the dark night, I logged into my Facebook account. There were more than 300 notifications. People had posted notes: 'Happy Anniversary'. A few were so lost in their own worlds that they had posted, 'Call me Bhavna. Your number was not reachable. . .'

It happens when you bypass humanity. When we only talk to our friends through Facebook and remain lost in our own boxed world.

On my timeline flashed a beautiful album. It had six images of the two of us with a generic message: 'We care for your memories. Please visit these memories, and if you like, you can share. This message is only visible to you. Facebook.'

I clicked on those pictures. One was of our trip to Goa. The next one was of our Ooty vacation, and so on. It was hard to accept the truth – that I will never ever see this girl whose cheeks dimpled when she smiled. I logged out of my account and logged into her profile, to check if anyone had left any message.

As beautiful as ever, her smiling face looked out at me from her profile pic. I wanted to say something to her. There were many messages which said, 'Bhavna, wherever you are, my beautiful friend, keep on smiling. We miss you.'

I wanted to talk to her desperately. I sent a text from my mobile Facebook app to hers.

*Happy Anniversary, Dear.*

The laptop on my bed blinked a notification. I clicked on it and the message from Ajay to Bhavna appeared.

*I typed on the laptop, How you are doing, Pandeyji.*

*I can't lie to you. Not doing good at all. Missing you. . .* I answered from the mobile.

*I can understand. Hey! Congratulations on your first book. Now you are an author. I want the first author-signed copy.* I typed from the laptop again.

*Sure, that is your birthday gift. I am releasing it on your birthday.*

*Thanks. Heard you have a new friend, Anisha.*

*Yes, but I am missing my best friend.*

*Why are you missing me?*

*Because there is no one to give me a surprise gift. No one is going to push me for a return gift. No one is going to wake me up at 12 o'clock, tonight. I have no one to hug me.*

My fingers hovered over the laptop keys, thinking of what Bhavna would say. . .

*Pandeyji, you have our beautiful memories.*

*And that is my problem. Why do I have those? I wish I did not have them. Why did you do that to me?*

*See, you are the same. Still fighting with me.*

I know that her lips would have curved to expose those dimples. *I am not fighting. . .you are fighting* , I wrote to her.

*Sorry...*

*How easily...you said sorry.*

*Sorry...for saying sorry, so early.*

I laughed at the situation. I laughed with tears in my eyes.

*I think I need some sleep. You too, take your medicines and sleep on time.*

*I will try...*

*Love you, Pandeyji.*

*Love you, and you are the best wife.*

*Never surrender, Ajay.*

I closed the laptop. Switched off the mobile. I hugged my pillow and wept the whole night. I kept on mumbling, 'I surrendered Bhavna, I surrendered. . .'

# Chapter 16

**November 8, 2015**

The scars which you cannot see take the longest to heal. It was her birthday. I still remember all her birthdays which we had shared. How she always asked what gift I had got her. . .I always planned something for her, and today, I wanted to tell her something. I closed my eyes, and said quietly, 'I have a gift for you. . .'

As planned, the book was released on her birthday. It was the best gift I could have ever given her. I never thought that I would write, but I had published a two-hundred-and-fifty page novel. I posted my book's cover on Facebook with a message: 'Happy birthday, dear. Love you, and you are the best wife.'

It was a Sunday. I had decided to hide the news from mom. However, my younger brother made it a point to reveal to her that *bhaiya* had gone one step more towards depression, and had written a book.

The doorbell rang. It was a courier boy. He handed over a package to me. I opened the packaging and my first babies were in my hand. The author copies of my book. It was an overwhelming moment. I went inside the bathroom and tried to stop the barrage of emotions that broke loose. But I failed. I came out in a daze, walked to the bed, and I sat down heavily. I felt cold. I slipped into the warmth of my quilt.

'Why are you lying here?' mom peeked from the doorway.

'No reason. . .I think I will sleep for some time.'

'Lie down with your laptop near you. I don't know why. . .it keeps making sounds again and again.'

The wi-fi was on and the sounds were of the Facebook notifications which were popping every second.

I checked it. There were 123 notifications. My book page was flooded with messages.

*Happy Birthday to Bhavna...*

*Happy Birthday to the great soul. . .*

A few said, . . .*you are a good human being*. The last message forced

open the dam which I had been holding back, . . . *you are the best husband.*

The WhatsApp on my mobile pinged. I read Anisha's message.

*Dear Friend, congratulations on your maiden attempt to immortalize your partner. I just pre-ordered your book. All I want to say is, you are a good human being and I am dying to have my copy signed by you.*

An author-signed copy! She was the first one to ask for it. No, there was one more. . .

It was as if a new energy was flowing through me. I put on a t-shirt and blue jeans.

Halfway out of the door, I called out, 'Mom, I am going out with friends. Something urgent has come up.'

'Today is her birthday,' Mom stated.

'You remembered the date... ?'

Ma nodded. 'When she came into the family, she asked for my birth date. I told her that no one knew my birthday. . . who remembers dates of births in villages? No one ever bothered to note the day any of us were born. . .' mom recalled her conversation with her daughter-in-law fondly.

'I know. . .' I smiled, ' . . . she had assigned a birth date for you.'

'Not only that. . . she sent birthday gifts without fail. For the last two years, I am missing my birthday gifts.' Mom spoke of her own great loss.

I was near tears again. I wanted to hug mom, but was surprised when she said, 'Don't come near me. I don't want to cry on her birthday.'

'Ok,' I tried to hide my smile as well as my tears.

'And it does not mean that you are allowed to cry in the bathroom.'

It's tough to hide any emotion from her. After all, she is a loving mom.

'How do you always find out?'

'When a son avoids meeting his mom's eyes, there can be only two reasons. Either he is guilty, or he has tears in his eyes.'

I could see the pain in her eyes. The prettiest smile hides the deepest of tears, and the prettiest eyes are the ones, that have cried the most. She was not my mom on that day; she was a mother-in-law who missed her caring daughter-in-law.

\* \* \*

I carefully placed the parcel of books on the empty seat next to me and started my car. In November, it is not very cold in Delhi. A pleasant sun warmed my face as I thought of her. She always used to sing something while sitting beside me in the car. Now, I blew a kiss at the seat next to mine, as vivid images of her sitting by my side danced in front of my eyes. There was no one to reciprocate my kiss.

I reached the Yamuna River bay. This was a site I did not prefer to come to. But today was an occasion.

I parked the vehicle and went to the lane which led to the spot. After walking for about 200 metres, I reached the bridge.

The same bridge from where I had immersed her ashes in the river. I looked at the black waters that was the Yamuna River. It flowed contentedly. It was as if the Yamuna had accepted all the muck as her lot in life.

I did not feel comfortable. I had bad memories of this place.

I picked the first copy of the book, wrapped it in a red coloured t-shirt. A girl's t-shirt. I thought I heard a strange voice. I am not sure what was going on in my head. I pulled the book out of the t-shirt. I dug a pen out of my jeans pocket and wrote on the first page,

*You are the best wife!*

*With love,*

*Ajay K. Pandey*

I repacked the book carefully in the t-shirt and threw it into the flowing waters below. Inch by inch, the Yamuna swallowed my creation. I smiled with tears in my eyes. My smile was a happy one because I had presented my first author-signed copy.

# Chapter 17

## December 2015

About ten thousand books get published in a year in our country. Thousands of authors dream of becoming full-time writers and all of them want to promote their books within limited resources.

Anisha and I had agreed on a consolidated book-marketing plan. There would be no book launches, as a new author does not have a fan following as yet. Moreover, a bookstore charges Rs.10,000 for a book launch. In addition to that, there would be the cost of travel and stay for every launch. Which would make it more expensive. We straightaway struck out this idea for book promotion. We had two ways to promote the book. Blogger reviews and Facebook.

A poor author like me could not afford to purchase his own copy or fund public relations firms to do the media coverage.

I gave my book to approximately fifty bloggers to review, since that was the best investment that I could make at that time. Then I waited desperately for the reviews.

Bloggers' reviews are important, because they read over fifty books in a year on an average. So their opinion would help me to take a decision, as to whether I should invest in further promotions or not.

After a few days, I got the first review, from Book Blogger Shweta.

*This is not just a book. This is the love of a best wife's best husband, who wants to bring his wife back into this world and meet different souls. I feel like I am lost for words while writing the review for such a book. I apologize to the author in advance, if I am making any mistake in rationalizing it. The finger shall be pointed at you as well, because you are the one who wrote such a book, that forbids me to think of anything, but the story itself. I couldn't note down any points while reading this book. The reader in me always craves for books like this. I thank the author from the core of my being, for penning his story. I couldn't rate this book either, because such stories cannot be rated. They are way beyond numbers. I think this very statement sums up my views on this book.*

I was overwhelmed by the review. Soon, my friends started sharing their views about the book. There was a lot of appreciation everywhere.

But book sales were not picking up.

Anisha called me.

‘How are you doing, Mr. Author?’ she asked, after exchanging pleasantries, ‘How is your book doing?’

‘Readers like it, but the sales are not picking up,’ I replied. I was at a loss for ways to make the book sell.

‘Hmmm. . .’ she replied with her patented response. It meant she was helpless.

‘Hey, I wanted to tell you, I got a request for an interview.’

‘Great! You’ve become a celebrity, I guess.’

‘Nothing like that. . .it’s just. . .I have to write about myself and my book.’

‘Great!’ I could hear the smile in her voice. ‘Answer them in ways that would make readers curious enough to buy your book.’

‘I will try. I was thinking of asking you, did you read the book?’

‘Actually, I did pick up the book. . .’

There was a pregnant silence. The human heart has hidden treasures which are sealed in silence.

‘What happened. . .you didn’t like the book?’ I prodded.

‘No. . .I loved the first half. The narration of things. . .everything, how you met her. . .the way you fought with your parents for her. . .and truth be told, for a girl, you are the best, er. . .character.’

Why had she said “character”? She could have used the word “person”.

‘Come on. . .you can be more frank, you are a friend! You didn’t like the second part, I guess.’

‘Actually, I did not read the second part at all. I know what you have written and you have narrated the story to me twice already.’

‘Oh...I understand.’

‘But Ajay, I have a question.’

‘Yes, please...’

‘It was so. . .difficult for me to read the book. How could you write it

all?’

‘For her.’

‘Hmmm.’ Her silence didn’t last long. ‘Sorry. One day, I will read the entire book and share my feedback.’

‘No worries, Anisha. I totally understand.’

‘One advice for you though. Try to reply to every message you get, always. Do not behave like other authors.’

‘But if I keep replying to all, they will take me for granted. I will have no importance. No one will respect me as an author.’

‘Mr. Ajay, you are not an author!’

‘Who am I?’

‘You are a husband.’

\* \* \*

I was penning down the answers for my first interview.

‘Hello Ajay, and welcome to *Book Love*, India! We are thrilled to have you join us for this interview. Can you please start off by telling us about yourself, your profession, your growing years and how you came about penning your first book, titled *You are the Best Wife*?’

I was excited! Someone had asked me questions as if I was a celebrity, for the first time in my life.

I ran my eyes down the next set of questions – these now put me off.

‘What has been your wife’s reaction on your writing a book that declares that she is the best wife? What was her contribution in your writing?’

P.S. If you are not comfortable with any question, you can ignore and change the question.’

I read the questions and went blank. How do I handle this?

I pinged the concerned person.

‘Have you read the book?’

The great blogger replied, ‘Indeed, it was an inspiring story. We have shared our review on Goodreads and on Amazon as well.’

‘How much have you rated it?’



‘Three stars.’

‘Thanks,’ I wished to counter the blogger with ‘How come your questions ask me to describe my wife’s reaction then?’ But I let it go. Maybe these were the standard questions for any author.

‘Hey, Ajay! We will be in Delhi for another author’s book promotion. We would be obliged, if you will come.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ I typed in response. ‘Thanks. I will try. Share the venue details.’

I was about to end the conversation, when she sent another text. It was the last nail in the coffin.

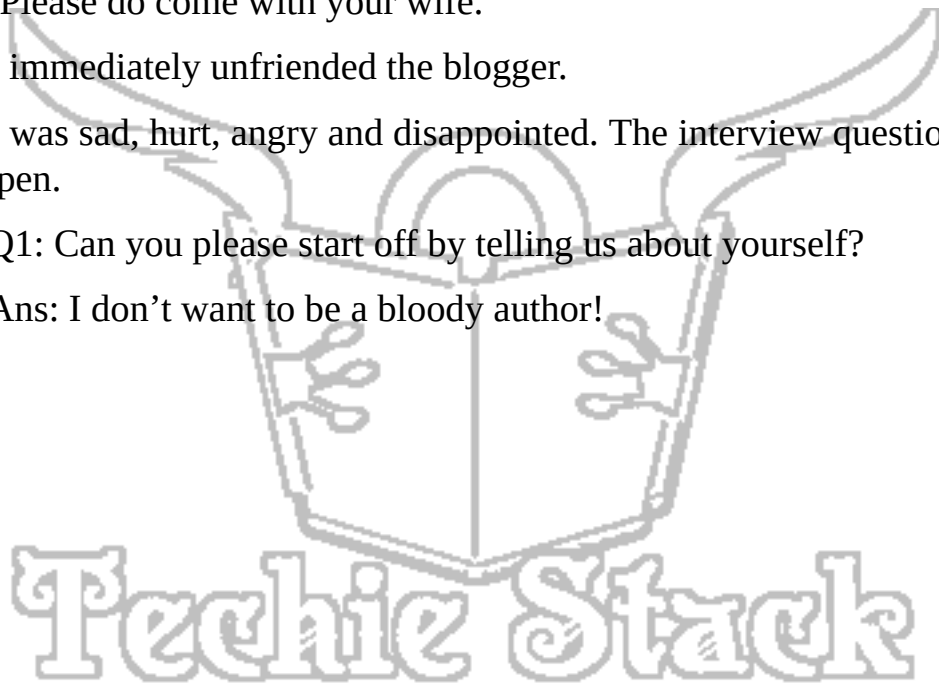
‘Please do come with your wife.’

I immediately unfriended the blogger.

I was sad, hurt, angry and disappointed. The interview questions were still open.

Q1: Can you please start off by telling us about yourself?

Ans: I don’t want to be a bloody author!



# Chapter 18

## January 2016, Dilli Haat

Dilli Haat is well-known for its ambience of a traditional village market, but it is better suited for a cosmopolitan audience. This food and craft bazaar is a treasure house of Indian culture, handicrafts and ethnic cuisine. In the heart of the city, this unique bazaar displays the richness of Indian culture on a permanent basis. One can buy inimitable ethnic wares, savour the delicacies of the different Indian states, or simply relax in the evening with the entire family.

I have no intention of promoting Dilli Haat. But those were the reasons why Anisha and I were meeting there.

I was waiting outside the metro.

Being a girl, Anisha stood by her *dharma*. First, she called me to hang out at a place like Dilli Haat. Second, she was late. Both reasons were sufficient to commend her dedication to womanhood.

I was lucky it was January. Delhi's summer would have drowned me in my own sweat.

After an endless wait of fifteen minutes, the beauty with brains emerged from the INA metro. She wore skinny blue jeans with a fitted brown t-shirt, which complemented her fair complexion. Over one shoulder on a metal chain, hung a delicate mustard-coloured purse. My eyes were glued to her six inch heels.

The intelligent part of me couldn't help but question: why did girls not wear comfortable clothing and footwear?

As soon as my friend smiled at me, my bewilderment with womankind disappeared. Whether she wore uncomfortable fashion, or was late, or had made me wait endlessly. . .these were inconsequential as we warmly greeted each other.

'Couldn't you think of any other place to meet? This place looks like an open-air shopping mart.'

We began walking, side by side.

'Only a boring man can say it's a shopping mart.' Anisha walked comfortably in those six inches. It looked like she was born with it.

‘So how would you describe this place?’

‘A hangout.’ She looked around as if the title was prestigious.

‘Seriously? You have come to hangout?’

‘No. . .I have to shop as well,’ Anisha declared.

‘OMG!’ I do not use ‘Oh My God’ as an expression ever. I am an atheist after all.

She ignored my cry of alarm and began the ritual.

She had a million enquiries about everything that the vendors had put on sale. She looked at them with all the care and love a puppy owner gives his puppy, but never asked for the price of any item. She had no intention of purchasing anything. Shopping was like yoga and *pranayam* for Anisha. From it she derived pleasure, which even Baba Ramdev never got after spending so many years practising yoga.

After one hour of looking at ladies’ suits, *lehengas* and gowns, she mumbled the naked truth. ‘You are so boring, Ajay.’

When it comes to shopping, yes, I am. How can someone enjoy this activity? I shop out of necessity. What is the fun there? Aloud I said, ‘Are you looking for anything specific?’

‘Yes, for an upcoming occasion.’

‘What is the occasion?’

‘My brother is about to get married.’

‘Oh, is it a love marriage?’ I asked thoughtfully.

‘No. Arranged.’

We stopped at the Assamese food corner and found ourselves a table. The place was buzzing with couples. The girls carried small purses which implied they were there because they loved to hangout and that they were not there to shop. Delhi has big shopping markets like Lajpat Nagar, Sarojini and Chandni Chowk. The rest of the places are to hang out at.

We ordered tea. In a few minutes, the fragrant steam from the cup in front of me rose to reach my nostrils, making me inhale in delight.

‘Hey, I have an idea to promote your book,’ Anisha exclaimed, as she took a sip of the piping hot brew.

Anisha was coming up with one of the best topics for conversation, in

my opinion. Tea and books. Believe me, I can talk about them for hours.

‘I am all ears.’

‘You say. . .people are asking you to remarry.’

‘Yes, every day. . .one or the other person pings me.’

‘I guess readers want to know more about you. Why don’t you have a session of *Coffee with Ajay*?’

It sounded like *Koffee with Karan*. I looked at her attentively.

‘Why don’t you call them to a café and share the story behind your book?’

‘Not a great idea. Who will be interested in meeting Ajay K. Pandey?’

‘We will not announce it as a book launch. How about. . .a date with an author?’ she proposed, after some thought.

Anisha comes up with ideas to which I always say no. She puts her all in, trying to convince me. It’s her never say die attitude, because of which I give in, in the end. Aloud, I said, ‘I have not heard of a worse idea. Have you read my book? It is a true story of the loss of love. Such promotions would look cheap.’

‘Hmmm. . .’ My helpless friend made her signature sound.

I took a sip. Tea is the only thing which can change my mood. There was silence for a few seconds. Then the lady came up with another masterstroke.

‘Let’s have this on Valentine’s Day. There would be many who would like to have coffee with an author.’

‘Who will come for it?’ was all I could think of.

‘The readers! Those who have read your book and want to know more about you.’

‘What is the use of calling the ones who have already read my book?’

‘They will come, be impressed by your personality and become your fans,’ Anisha was all enthusiasm.

I looked at myself from top to bottom. My personality? She was talking as if I was James Bond.

She was an intelligent girl. She corrected herself.

‘They will get attracted to your simplicity.’

‘What if the turnout is less, then?’

‘Then too, you will be a star on Facebook. Those who do not come, they will be curious. . .and the next time you announce such an event, they will be eager to come.’

Finally, the HR manager inside her had managed to place an ‘incentive’ carrot in front of an employee.

‘I have one more concern.’

‘Now, no more coming up with problems. We will call this, the Mini Launch.’

‘What if a huge crowd turns out to meet me?’

‘Where is the problem in that?’

‘Who will pay their coffee bill?’

She gave me a look. I could read anger, sadness and hopelessness on her face. I had become used to them.

‘You are such a miser,’ she announced.

\* \* \*

The book gave me a new life. I spent a lot of time reading it again and again, checking my Facebook status or replying to readers’ appreciation and thanking them for their feedback.

When we are involved in things where our heart is, we do not get the time to think of ‘those unanswered questions’. Being busy is the biggest healer. Time heals nothing unless you move along with it.

Sometimes, your circle decreases in size, but increases in value. One day, I got a call from a friend. I have few good friends and Rahul was one among them. ‘Get ready, Ajay. I am coming to your house. We will go out for a game of badminton.’

This is the way I want my friends to behave. A real friend never questions. They accept who you are and help you become better. I had seriously missed that.

‘No man. . .you carry on,’ I replied.

‘Why? Are you scared you will lose?’

Whenever, I hear the word 'lose' being related to me, I refuse to accept it.

'No, I am not.'

A voice said, 'You have lost everything. There is nothing to lose.'

For the first time my thoughts went to a girl who was not her.

I roared into the phone like an old, near-dead tiger, 'Come on, man! I will beat you in the ring.'

I watched the activity on the badminton court. I had been to this place many times. I realized that my way of seeing things had changed.

Men and women were playing. Some were being taught the game. A few were jumping up and down on the spot, to warm up. After jumping a few times myself, I tried a few dummy shots. After half an hour of waiting and warming up, I finally got the chance to exhibit my talent on court.

My senses had attuned themselves to the surroundings. The top light of the court seemed to say, 'Ajay, you can win the game.'

After three rounds and a healthy amount of sweat, I defeated Rahul by a narrow margin. He played poorly in the last few moments of the game and was unable to score.

I had played a good game after a long time. The effect was enthralling, like a drug being pumped into my system. I knew that sport was the best possible way to achieve that high. And winning in a sport was the icing on the cake. I knew from my doctors that it was the best reprieve from my depression.

Rahul and I were in the waiting lounge discussing our match. We were talking about the shots we had exchanged and the finesse we had exhibited in our game.

'How did I play?' asked Rahul.

'You played well,' I patted my friend's back.

'But you played really well. It was a big surprise,' Rahul spoke with a big smile, 'I am glad you have recovered.'

'Thanks,' I said, in reflex. I then added, 'What do you mean by that? I have recovered?'

'You have recovered from your loss,' Rahul replied casually.

I understood what he meant then. This was not something I was hearing for the first time, but if Rahul was telling me this, it was unacceptable.

‘You mean, if I play, laugh, or choose not to cry. . .it means all is well? I am recovered?’

‘I don’t want to say that. You are misinterpreting me,’ Rahul’s smile wavered and disappeared.

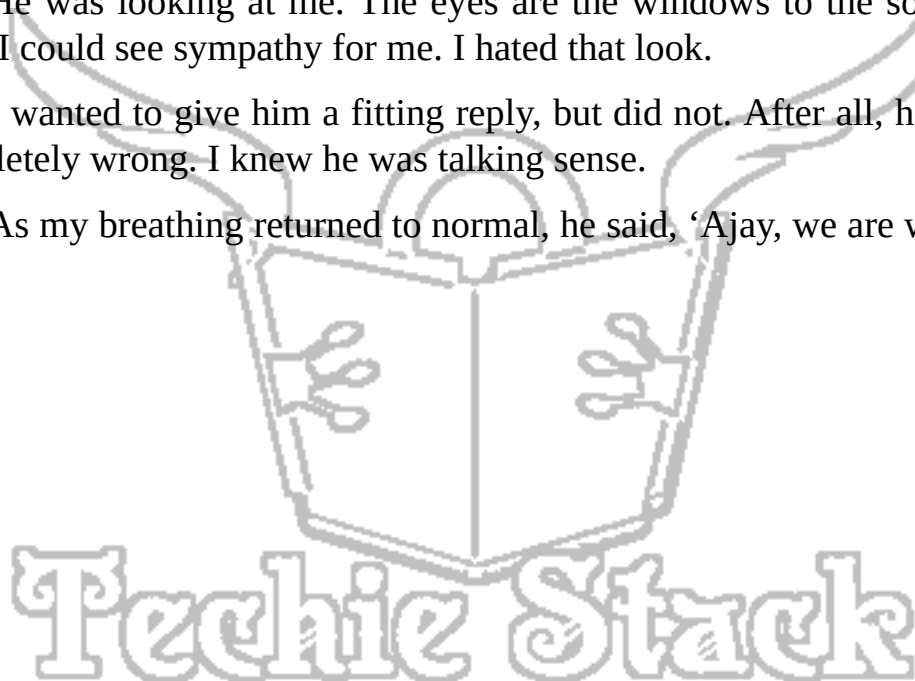
‘What does it mean?’ I asked softly.

‘All will be well only if you come out of your shell and interact with people. . .feel alive.’

He was looking at me. The eyes are the windows to the soul. In his eyes, I could see sympathy for me. I hated that look.

I wanted to give him a fitting reply, but did not. After all, he was not completely wrong. I knew he was talking sense.

As my breathing returned to normal, he said, ‘Ajay, we are with you.’



# Chapter 19

**February 2016**

*Valentine's Day*

Preparations for the Mini Launch were in full swing.

After what seemed like millions of photographs of me, we finally zeroed in on a photo in which I was sitting at a table. Anisha added the image of a coffee cup on my head. It looked like I was overloaded with caffeine.

‘You look like Tom Cruise,’ she said, after giving the picture some thought.

Let me confess a sin. I do not know if, after disclosing this, anyone will treat me as a human being ever.

I don't like coffee.

Why is the whole world crazy about coffee? I have often wondered why there couldn't be a show called *Tea with Karan* or *Vada Pav with Karan Johar* ! Why does it always have to be a tasteless drink with a cookie? At Rs.250, each sip costs Rs.20, and sometimes, it gets extended to Rs.300 when service tax and VAT is included.

If I had my way, I would invite my readers to *Tea and Parle G with Pandeyji* .

Anyway, before you start hating me and reach the conclusion that I am not a normal human being, let me tell you what happened at the Mini Launch.

I promoted it extensively. Anisha had named it *Coffee with AJAY K. PANDEY* . I even got two thousand likes on my post! I received lengthy messages, like:

*Sir, I wish I could be in Delhi, really going to miss this coffee with such a great author. . . .*

*Sir, CP is far from Gurgaon...are you not hosting anything in Gurgaon... ?*

*Sir, can I come with my gang of girls?*



*Can I come along with my boyfriend... ?*

Believe me, these messages can spoil any author's brain, any day.

I spent half an hour in front of the mirror. The mirror said, 'You are not at all depressed.'

I dressed up and sent a selfie to Anisha. I thought I looked like a dignified author, in my formal jacket with black trousers.

My phone began ringing immediately. Anisha had called to instruct me, 'Do not wear a formal dress. Wear a collarless t-shirt and an informal jacket.'

I mock-wept while talking to her, but followed her instructions. My weak aptitude for fashion and her extreme fashion freakiness, warned me to act intelligently and not mess with her.

'Where are you going?' my mom asked.

She was at her detective best. A well-dressed man going out on Valentine's Day. Enough to turn her into a quiz master.

'To the Mini Launch of my book.'

'Is that girl coming there too?'

'Which girl?'

'Anisha.'

Before she could shoot another question at me, I called Anisha. I acted shocked, pretending I was getting late, and rushed out. I could not mess with my mom.

\* \* \*

The venue of the great Mini Launch was CCD, CP inner circle. As usual, Anisha was at her best. To the unpractised eye, her clothes may appear over the top, but relax. They're not distorted versions of western clothing.

Anisha was at the venue looking the elegant hostess in a wine-coloured knee-length dress. Her curly locks were swept high into a ponytail, accentuating her graceful neck. A pearl pendant on a silver chain rested just between her collarbones. Her bare, slender arms glowed and looked too delicate for the chunky watch with multiple bangles on her wrist. The silver heels clicked as she walked about instructing the staff and taking decisions.

Anisha had updated the CCD staff about the launch. She was holding

five copies of my book. Which was enough to tell anyone that she was my wildest fan.

I entered the coffee shop. The seductive smell of coffee filled the air. The place wasn't just about getting the right look, or serving the best coffee. It was about creating an experience which not only shouts out the amazingness of coffee, but also makes people who come there feel good.

I may not like coffee, but I like the smell. I smiled at Anisha. Her perfectly-lined eyes sparkled and her shimmery lips smiled, as she walked up to me.

A waiter followed her closely. On realizing that I was the author he asked, 'How many people are you expecting, sir.'

'Ten, maybe...'

'Fifteen,' Anisha decided.

The boy arranged fifteen chairs in one corner, around a big table. The official time for the gathering was 5 p.m. and the watch said that it was already 5 p.m.

'Ajay, go out. Come in after ten minutes. It will give the impression that you are a popular and busy person. Important people always have scarcity of time.'

I was impressed with her crafty methodologies.

'But how will the people figure out that they have come to the right place?'

'Why do you think I am carrying five copies of your book? To let them know. We have informed the waiter as well.'

I was impressed some more.

'But where did you get the five books from?'

'Oh, my God! How many questions will you ask! Now go outside, before they are all here.'

'Ok, I am going. Will be back in ten minutes.'

'And. . .we don't know each other, keep that in mind.'

I nodded.

CP was buzzing with people in restaurants and showrooms. The boards outside the showrooms screamed the Valentine Day's offers in

bright colours. Couples walked in and out of them, hand in hand, without any shopping bags. They were just enjoying the ambience of the stores and time with their companions.

I watched a big flag fluttering. It looked like it was proud of the achievement it symbolized, and was enjoying its freedom. I felt a kinship with the flag. Even I was proud of what I had achieved. I looked at my watch. It was over twenty minutes. I had not received a call from Anisha. I decided to go back.

With every step I took towards the coffee shop, my excitement peaked. Images of being received with loud cheers, thunderous clapping, girls hugging me while boys bending to touch my feet. . . flashed in front of my eyes. I could feel the warmth of their emotions, as tears would roll down their eyes for having had the privilege of meeting a big celebrity such as me. The coffee shop staff would break into a dance sequence, happy to serve us. Maybe they would not even charge me for all the coffees, as I had got their store so much publicity.

With starry dreams, I reached the first floor and opened the door of the café. I found one follower with five books in her hand, sitting with fourteen empty chairs around her. The show had ended even without an opening. I checked my watch. It was 5:32 p.m.

My palace of cards had fluttered away in the first gust of wind.

‘The city is known for traffic delays!’ Anisha said, casually.

‘Not a single person could make it?’ I was shocked.

She did not even flinch.

‘I told you, this kind of thing will not work. Warned you not to have this gathering.’

‘Chill, Ajay, we will discuss this later.’

The waiter spoke from behind me. ‘Sir, do you want to order something?’

We ordered two coffees. Anisha requested the guy to click some pictures of us with the book. We clicked two pictures with him as well.

‘Ajay, this is for you,’ Anisha handed me a card.

‘What is this card?’

Frankly speaking, I was blank or it would have hit me that it was

Valentine's Day. But she did not display any emotion of that sort on her face.

'It's my brother's wedding invitation. You do remember, right?'

'Ya. . .Thanks for the invite,' I began opening the envelope to remove the card.

'Hey, you can open it later. It should look like you have received a Valentine's Day gift.' She explained her strategy.

I frowned.

Our last threads of hope were shredded by 6 p.m. I was sure by now that no one was coming. I was utterly pissed off. I removed the jacket and sat silently, watching the thirteen empty chairs in front of us. Anisha understood by now, that I was beyond repair.

'Hey, today is Valentine's Day,' she enthused, trying to cheer me up.

'Yeah, and you are on a coffee date with an author!' I smiled.

Suddenly, there was a drizzle in the parched desert. The waiter was pointing a guy towards us. He began walking towards me. He had a copy of my book in his hands.

Anisha and I were both worried. A few minutes ago, we were dejected because no one had turned up. Now, we exchanged a glance, dreading the reader's arrival.

'How are you, man?' I asked confidently, as we shook hands.

'I am doing good, sir. I am Rohan. You are Ajay K. Pandey? Author of *You are the Best Wife* ?'

'Yes,' I nodded with emphasis.

'Really, you are, sir? I cannot believe it,' he looked at me, enigmatically.

I was not sure what he was trying to ask, but I was not comfortable.

'Rohan, you are late. All have left,' Anisha took charge of the situation. She was the expert.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I did sense that everyone had left,' he looked at the empty seats.

We took few selfies together and I signed the book for him.

I left CCD feeling that I had been part of a dramatic tragedy and was angry.

Anisha tried her best to console me.

I think it was my depression that did not allow me to rest or feel comfortable.

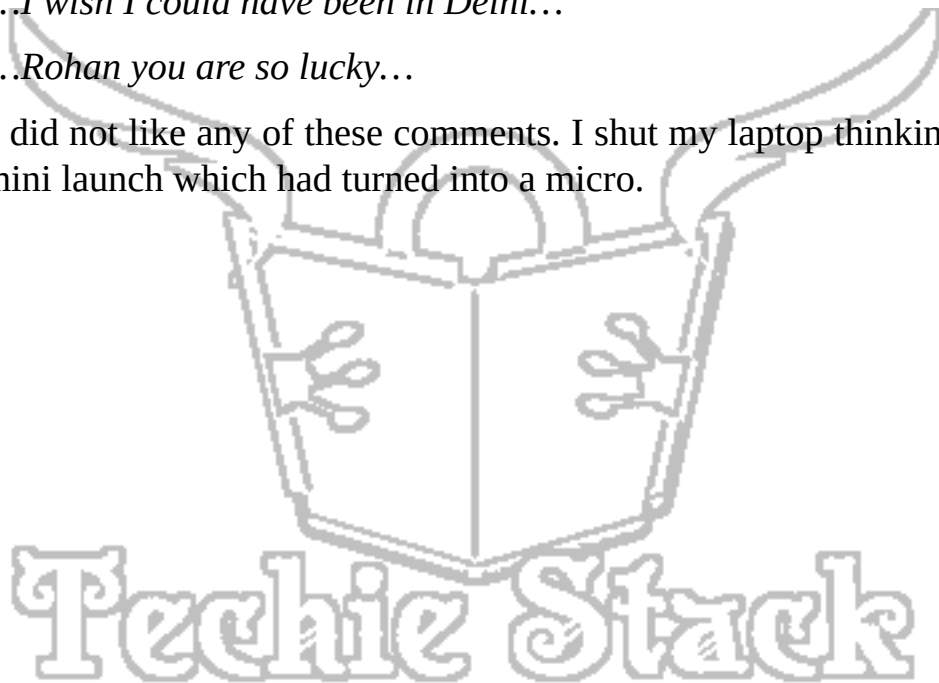
That very evening, Rohan posted on Facebook: *It was a dream come true, to meet the great author Ajay Pandey*. He even posted the selfies we had taken, along with the book's picture. I could see ten comments on the lines of:

*...I missed meeting such a great person...*

*...I wish I could have been in Delhi...*

*...Rohan you are so lucky...*

I did not like any of these comments. I shut my laptop thinking of my first mini launch which had turned into a micro.



# Chapter 20

**March 2016**

It'd been a long time now since I had lost interest in my IT job.

Then a kind friend offered me an opportunity to work with Cognizant. He said that there would be no difficult interviews to go through, because he would be the one who was going to hire me. If I lacked any skill, he would give me the necessary training. I would have grabbed the offer, had a thought not hindered me. I would have to change my working location and move to another city. My friend further explained that they would want me to be at the new location in six months. When I disconnected the call, I was thoughtful.

Life was taking a turn and I was at the point of make or break. This was one of those moments in life when you cannot react, but your senses are extremely alert. All was quiet, except for the fan making a sound as it whirled. I could hear the tick of the wall clock, even the mild beep of my smartphone. All else was silent.

I did not want to open the window shades in my room. I did not want any fresh air and was not interested in seeing anyone. I had an abundant supply of things that I needed. Books and medicines. I had a big box of medicines which was getting heavier with every passing day. There were all sorts of medicines – homeopathic, allopathic, and Ayurvedic. There was no science left for me to try. After all, I was staying with my mom, who pushed me to every possible source of remedy for what ailed me.

I took stock of all that had happened in the last couple of years. Keeping to myself, I had read over a hundred books. My mom often tried to break the 'silence' rule at home, but she failed.

One thing was sure. . .whatever the situation, I would always choose life.

It had been five months since my book's release and suddenly it began selling well. In fact, it had gone out of stock thrice in a month and the publisher had to go for reprints at short notice.

I was amazed at the responses I got. I often heard, 'I read your book. . .it touched me, it is the best book I have ever read. . .' People had started gifting the book to their wives and girlfriends. Every night, I got a

dozen messages related to the book.

Reviews poured in from across the nation.

I still get goosebumps when I remember the feedback of one reader: *I cried after five years of my father's death. . .*

I tried to reply to every message.

There was one particular question that kept recurring, *Ajay, did you marry again?*

My father suddenly lost a lot of weight and was struggling with an incurable disease. We can also call it a national disease – diabetes. My father had been fending for himself for the last two years. Mom was frequently shuffling living between her son and husband. Only a mother can do so without complaints and with happiness.

It was time for some decisions. I felt okay, at least from the outside. It was useless staying alone in a two-bedroom house. So I found a place in Indirapuram, a bigger flat on a sharing basis, and began preparing to move.

I remember the day when mom was going back to her own home. Though she had been living with me for more than two years, she was still reluctant to let me be all by myself. I had to force her to leave. After all, I was her son too and it was my duty to make sure that both my parents had some comforts at least.

I returned early from the office on the day she was leaving. She had packed her bags and her train was scheduled for later that night. We were all set to leave for the New Delhi railway station to catch the Prayag Raj express.

‘Ajay, can you summarize where I have kept all your things?’ My quiz master of a mother asked me.

‘Don’t you worry, mom. I am a full-grown man.’

‘So, tell me, where are your sweaters and clothes?’

‘They are in the bed box,’ I replied.

‘Which box?’

I considered for a few seconds, ‘The right one.’

I was worried. The more time I took to reply to her, the more would be her unwillingness to catch the train back home.

‘Ajay, listen carefully. The bed box on the left has all the things related to you.’

She heaved a sigh. I could now guess the contents of the bed box to the right. Before I could confirm with her, mom said, ‘The other box has all of Bhavna’s things.’

I nodded.

‘Okay, mom. Let’s move, else we will be late.’

‘Listen, come here to the kitchen.’

I followed her into the kitchen. She opened a few pans. ‘This is for tonight’s dinner. . .this is for the morning. This is the *namkeen* , which you can snack on.’

A mother can touch deep, with her gestures. The pain she undergoes just so that her child would have something to fill his stomach. Yesterday, today or tomorrow. . .a son is a baby always for his mom.

‘Mom, I am thirty-one years old.’

‘I know how old you are.’

I loaded her bags into the car. ‘Mom, let’s go.’

‘Ajay, I want one thing. Can you help me with that?’ Her face showed me that she had something unusual to ask.

‘What?’

‘You still have all her clothing. In some time, these will start becoming old and unusable. Why don’t you donate them all to some charity?’

‘Leave them alone. They are personal.’

‘Okay, as you say.’ Her voice lowered as she hesitated. ‘Can you at least give me her spectacles?’

I opened my cupboard quietly and gave them to her. I couldn’t bring myself to ask why she wanted them. She was too emotional at that moment. I did not wish to delve into the topic and risk her tears.

We were running late. We began our journey to the station. Mom was going on with her instruction check-list, which no son would ever implement. I kept nodding from time to time and concentrated on driving towards our destination.



The station was still far off and mom's list seemed endless. To divert her attention, I asked her the first question that came to my mind. 'Mom, why did you ask for her spectacles?'

She fell silent. I had asked the wrong question.

'When I had my cataract surgery, she stood by me and helped me heal. . .' mom could not complete her sentence.

'So, you are going to use her frames for your new glasses.'

'I don't like using rimless specs and you know that. I will keep these as a token of her remembrance.' Mom wiped her eyes with the corner of her saree.

I turned my face in the other direction and increased the volume of the radio. I did not want mom to see my tears. Both of us were playing a game of not allowing the other see our respective breakdowns. But she is an impossible-to-understand mom. A few minutes ago, she was instructing me to donate Bhavna's things; now she told me that she was keeping the spectacles as a token of her memory.

We reached New Delhi station half-an-hour before departure time. The train was already standing on platform number 16. I placed all her luggage under her allotted seat. All things taken care of, there were still a few minutes left for the train to depart. I wasn't grateful for those extra minutes because I knew what was going to happen next. I initiated a few irrelevant topics of discussion, but she did not respond. I talked about my younger brother, Monu's marriage. I thought that this topic would compel her to speak, but she continued to keep quiet. I was sure that, any moment now, she would start crying again. Sometimes silence is the loudest cry.

I left her alone and switched my attention to the mobile. It was as if I had received the most important message of my life at that moment. I could hear her sniffing. She had begun to weep. I wanted to comfort her and hug her, but that would break her more.

'Mom, everything will be fine. Don't worry.'

She gave me a look, her eyes brimming with tears and anger. There was no disappointment there and she refused to give up. I understood then that she wanted to say something. I was sure that I did not want to hear it. 'Mom, the train will leave any moment now. The traffic on the roads is going to be worse. I should start now so that I don't reach home too late. Take care.'

She held my hand. ‘Listen, the girl whom you met in Rudraprayag, she is a good girl. You should think of your future.’

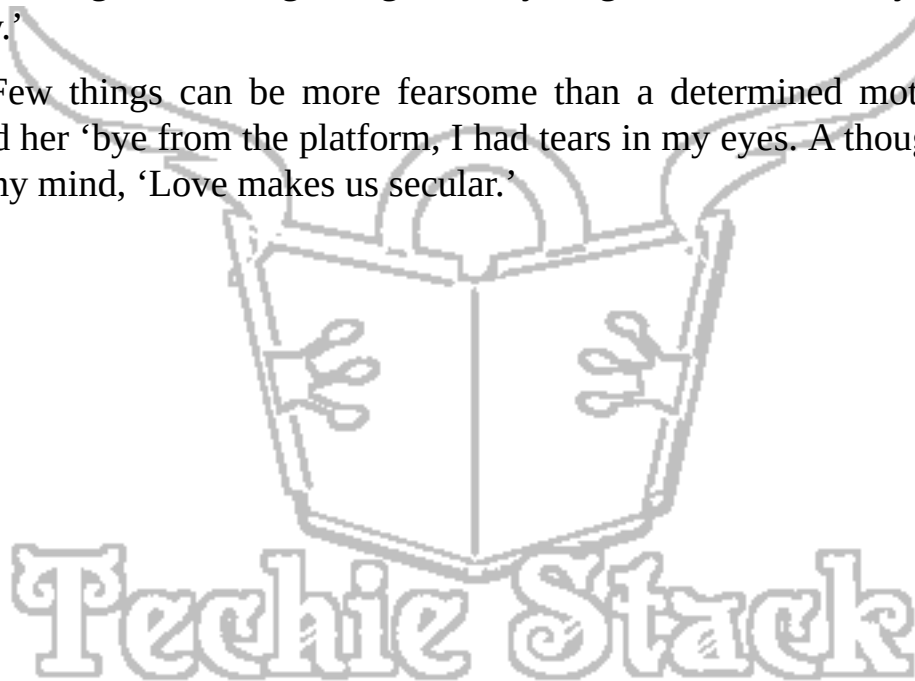
‘Mom, please,’ I was exasperated, ‘. . .how do you know that she is a good girl?’

‘Because, I can see happiness on my son’s face after three years.’

‘Then you should be happy that your son is happy,’ I patted her hand and got up to leave.

She took a long breath. She walked with me down the aisle, to the door of the compartment. She stepped out on the platform to see me off. She hugged me. Before letting go, she whispered, ‘Ajay, don’t bother with caste or religion. If that girl is good for you, go ahead. I want my son to be happy.’

Few things can be more fearsome than a determined mother. As I waved her ‘bye from the platform, I had tears in my eyes. A thought flitted into my mind, ‘Love makes us secular.’



# Chapter 21

**April 2016**

It's still a memorable day.

I was going through the AC Neilson ranking. *You are the Best Wife* was ranked fourth in the non-fiction category. I had given an interview in scroll.in on my book.

For me, the success of the book had become as important as oxygen is to an asthma patient. It was consistently topping the chart on Amazon under all categories.

I received a call from my publisher.

'Hi, Ajay, how are you doing?'

If someone asks me, 'how are you' it gives me shivers. But this was a professional call.

'Hi, sir, I am okay. How are you?'

'Congratulations! Our book is doing well, you are topping the charts.'

'Oh. . .thank you. How many copies have sold so far?'

'That, I need to check.'

'Which demographic of people are buying the book? What I am asking is. . .is it young readers, the middle-

aged, older. . . ?' I asked like a marketing CEO. I asked because I could think of nothing else to talk to him about.

'I have no clear idea, but the thing I know is, the maximum sales for your book are coming from Delhi. You are popular in this city,' my publisher divulged.

'Oh. . .good. Maybe because the story is set in Delhi?'

'Maybe. . .Ajay, the publishing house wishes to sign a contract for your next book.'

'Next book?' It was then that I realized – he was a publisher and for him, I was an author.

'But...will I write another book?'

‘You should,’ his tone was encouraging, ‘People like your book not just because it is a true story and it is a good story. They like it because it’s written straight from the heart. It’s a well-crafted book, Ajay. You have the talent. I would suggest that you work around a love story between a husband and wife.’

‘Ok, I will try...’

\* \* \*

## May 2016, Karnal

Anisha invited me to her brother’s wedding. The last wedding I had attended was four years ago. I have my reasons for not attending weddings. It was not just that I was an introvert by nature, and that compels me to stay far away from such functions. Weddings remind me of her. I can never forget her image when she had walked to me, with a smiling face, garland in hand. I remember the day. . .she had been so happy, she could have burst with it. The value of a moment increases when it becomes a memory.

In spite of all my strong reasons for not going to a social function, I could not refuse to attend Anisha’s brother’s wedding.

I knew vaguely that Karnal had some connection with Karna of the *Mahabharata* and with the astronaut Kalpana Chawla. But my connection with it was that of a guest under duress, going there to impress. To impress Anisha for our friendship’s sake, I was stepping beyond my comfort zone.

My journey to Karnal was an emotional one. Scenes from my wedding played in my mind during the time of my journey there. Twice, I bitterly regretted having agreed to attend the wedding. But Anisha was a friend who had stood by me for my passion. When no one saw the author in me, she believed in me.

I reached the wedding venue and dialled her number. In what could be the shortest phone call of mobile history, she informed me that she was in the salon. A woman in a beauty parlour. . .that is another story altogether. I gave up hope of seeing her soon. So the first person I met was her brother.

‘Hello, Mr. Writer. How are you?’

This was new! It was a new definition of me. I had been introduced to her family as a writer. ‘I am doing well, thank you.’

Wedding arrangements were being made at the National Dairy

Research Institute Staff Club, which could accommodate around a thousand guests at a time.

In the crowd and the buzz, I was feeling a little left out. Everybody was busy in rituals and arrangements. Well, it was something I should have expected. I can't complain. It was a Punjabi style wedding, but there was no non-veg and no hard drinks. According to Anisha, they were a simple family.

I wondered why then, had they spent lakhs on decorations and other arrangements. There was a colour theme, everything was pink. The glowing lights, the walls and the waiters. . .all of them were some shade of pink. Every flower petal that had been put up to complement the ambience matched the colour; food arrangements were made around circular tables covered in pink velvet cloth. The meticulous arrangements screamed of money and good taste and these people, by avoiding serving liquor were claiming, 'We are simple.'

I sat on one side of a circular table and waited for Anisha. I was hoping to meet her once. Then I would make some excuse and leave.

Finally, Anisha arrived. Her *lehenga* was the lightest lavender colour. The fabric and her slender, bare arms shimmered in unison. Her wrists looked exceptionally delicate, encased in the multicoloured bangles; there were so many of them tinkling like a hundred bells with the slightest movement. Her hair was swept up in a knot, while a few strands hung loosely around her glowing face. Her eyes extra dreamy, the lips sensuously glossy. The delicate pearl necklace around her long graceful neck looked expensive. She looked beautiful, is as simply as I can put it. She came close to me and the heady essence of her *mehndi* with the perfume she wore, wreaked havoc. On that day, for the first time, she had touched some part of my being without even touching me physically.

Human beings are very different on the outside and the inside. There is always a bad man in all of us.

'Thanks for coming, Ajay,' Anisha beamed.

'My pleasure. But I will leave early, as I have to travel back 200 kilometres.'

'Could you have come up with a greater girly excuse! You just came, wait at least till the *Jaimala*.'

She introduced me to her cousins, her mom, dad and a thousand other

people who I wasn't very keen to meet really. I hate introductions. I had to continuously smile without any reason. What was even more irritating was that Anisha kept adding, 'He is the author I told you about.'

When I found my token time with Anisha, I clarified, 'Hey, Anisha. I'm not an author. Why are you introducing me as one?'

'You have written a book, you are an author. Okay. . . ?'

Someone from the crowd called out her name.

'Listen, I am needed for a ritual. I will try to come back to you as soon as possible. I will send my younger sister to keep you company.'

I again wondered, *why had I come here?*

As I looked around in bewilderment, I saw a large picture of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar on a wall. I could sense the family's faith in the *Art of Living*.

I picked some snacks from a passing waiter's tray. I was planning to leave. I could not wait until the garland-exchange ceremony. Before I could execute my plan, I was greeted by a chirpy voice, 'Hi sir, I hope you are not getting bored.'

A tall girl, dressed similarly to Anisha, was standing next to me. I guessed she was Anisha's sister. We shook hands and she introduced herself as Manisha.

'So, you have written *You are the Best Wife*.'

'Yes, I did.' I confessed to being the alien in the Staff Club.

'You are a really good man.'

When anyone says that, I understand that they have read the book.

'So you have read the book . . .'

'Twice.' Her smile was as bright as Anisha's.

I was genuinely happy. The best way to make an author happy is talk about their books.

It may sound boring to listeners to hear about the same thing in different tones, but that is one topic that can give them the all-elusive, but much-needed orgasm.

'Which part did you like the most?' I asked my favourite question.

‘I liked that line, “...every problem is an opportunity...”.’

‘That’s good to hear. Can I ask you, how does your entire family know about my book? Have they all read the book?’

‘Not everyone, but most of them. The credit obviously goes to Anisha di.’

‘She likes the book, I guess.’

‘No, I think she likes the character in the book.’

Manisha’s outlook was difficult to understand, even by an observant author. There was always a defined character behind every actor. There was a deeper meaning to what she had just said. I understood it, but did not reply.

Suddenly a bunch of guests roared cheerfully, as the DJ started playing the hottest numbers of the season. Everyone was dancing, except for Manisha and I. Anisha joined the crowd on the floor, with a man I had not been introduced to. She was laughing uncontrollably at something he had said. For the first time, Anisha’s happiness was not pleasant for me to watch. The way the two of them were behaving, it looked like they knew each other very well. But she had never mentioned him.

‘You don’t like to dance?’ Manisha asked.

‘No, it’s time I left.’

‘Wait. I will be back in a few minutes.’

‘Anything in particular?’

‘Yes, just wait for fifteen minutes. Don’t go anywhere.’

I was alone again in the lavish party. Everyone was busy in celebrating their happiness, with a friend or a relative.

I observed the arrangements and the people closely. The lack of liquor had kept the environment decent. I looked at the guests and noticed aunties covered in tonnes of makeup, which did nothing to enhance their looks. Young girls were dressed in all possible colours, in the latest fashion, some of which made no sense. Only the men were the same. In every party, they wore the same dark suit, ethnic *kurta*, or *sherwani*.

My eyes were on Anisha. She was also staring back at me. One more pair of eyes joined her in looking at me. Anisha’s dancing partner was staring too. And suddenly, Anisha held the hands of the unknown friend as

if he was more than just a friend. It burnt half a portion of my heart. I guessed that she was telling him about me. Any remaining doubts were cleared when the guy started walking towards me.

‘Hi, I am Vicky.’

He was, what many would call, smart and handsome. He was wearing a pink-coloured *sherwani* . I think this description of him is sufficient.

‘Ajay,’ I said formally.

‘You are an author?’

‘To be precise, I have written a book.’

‘I read your book,’ he smiled.

‘Thank you, I am honoured. How did you get to know about the book?’

‘Your biggest fan, Anisha. . .she gifted your book to me.’

I emphasized, ‘We are friends, she is not a fan.’

It somehow became necessary for me to let him know of the friendship between Anisha and me. I don’t know why I did that.

‘Yes, she always talks about you.’

This was new, that they always talked to each other. With that, another portion of my heart had burnt. I summoned my courage and asked, ‘So, what exactly. . .did she say about me?’

‘She has told me everything...’

‘Such as...?’

‘How you are. . .struggling to promote your book.’

‘Oh. You know each other for long?’

‘No. Only recently, after this wedding was fixed. I am the bride’s cousin.’

‘It is really good to meet you,’ I did not want to carry this conversation further.

‘By the way, I am impressed with the way you have recovered from your depression,’ he was showing off his knowledge about me.

‘Who told you that I was depressed?’



I didn't need him to give me the answer. Suddenly I felt uncomfortable about everything I had spoken about with Anisha. Anisha should not have told him everything about me. Depression was a personal thing.

We can talk about dengue and swine flu, but for some reason, we refuse to talk about depression.

'Oh sorry. . .Anisha and I were just having a conversation and she mentioned it. . .' Vicky explained.

We exchanged pleasantries, information about my work and career, while he offered me a few good things to eat, in which I had no interest. I was all set to leave without even telling Anisha. I was heading towards the exit when a familiar voice hailed me from behind. It was Manisha.

'Are you leaving, already?'

'Yeah, actually, it's very late for me.'

'Can we have a selfie with the book? I want your signature on it too,' Manisha smiled. She looked excited about the whole thing.

'Yes, why not?'

She was an expert at selfies, or perhaps it was just a good quality phone. I looked good in the pictures too. I sat at the table to sign the book.

'You are leaving very early. Did you get bored?' Manisha sounded confused. Who leaves a grand occasion like this so quickly?

'No, I have been talking to Vicky.'

'Vicky *bhaiya*, he is a nice man,' she chirped.

I nodded, then bent to sign the book.

'Looks like, Anisha and Vicky are good friends.'

'Yes. *Di* has two good friends, one is a friend and the second is an author friend,' she giggled at her own joke.

It was weird. An 'author' was coming in between Anisha and 'friend'.

Manisha was delighted with having got my signature on her copy of the book. She opened it and made a sad face. 'Ajay *bhaiya*, can you please write a message for me?'

'Sure, why not?'

I thought for a few minutes and wrote, 'It's easy to make friends but difficult to keep them.'



# Chapter 22

**May 2016**

Things were not good at office. Colleagues were leaving for better prospects every other day, meaning for higher packages and secure jobs. These flip flops are routine in IT companies. The day I had joined the industry, I had heard a new word – recession. Recession is the culprit for all the problems we were facing now. The million problems which no IT professional has the audacity to mention when you are in the industry.

It was a bewildering question and has always nagged me—how great could the recession be? This was especially confusing since companies always seemed to have money for parties and team outings.

Well, the perks of being an IT professional includes the get-togethers held every quarter. The official reason was, to please clients. Unofficially, it was about the free forum to have the heavenly nectar. I did not attend such parties for two reasons. I don't drink and the second, they are too formal. When you look around, you see plastic faces; someone or the other laying all the blame for his life's miseries on the boss' shoulder, or simply complaining for no reason at all.

But today, I had no option to wiggle out from this unofficial party, as a close colleague had resigned and this would probably be the last office party with him.

**Noida, Radisson Blue**

I could hear the same voices. Everyone was discussing the typical topics – promotion, boss, escalation, increment, visa and blah, blah! There were various islands of engagements. People had formed their own groups. Everyone was holding the mandatory glass in their hand. Not even half an hour into the party and I had already been urged many times by various colleagues, 'Ajay, enjoy the drink man! Why are you not drinking?'

I felt a sense of not belonging. It would appear that I had committed a sin by not holding a glass. I picked up a glass of *Real* guava juice and walked towards Sanju, to enjoy the last official party with him.

'Hi, Ajay! How are you?' Sanju asked.

I was used to the various tones of this question, which was dependent

on how much that person sympathized with me at that moment.

‘I am doing well.’

‘How is your book doing, man?’

‘It’s doing well.’

An author has three kinds of friends. One who will read the book and appreciate it; the second who will never read it ever and so never appreciate it; and the third, who will only appreciate the work itself. Sanju belonged to the third kind.

‘Let’s not talk about the book. Tell me, how is life?’ I changed the topic, before he could delve any further into my life. His swinging eyes and unreasonable smile said a lot about what was going on in his head. A good friend who is drunk would play the same tune that my relatives have been for ages.

‘Humph! Life is not good. You are a lucky man,’ Sanju slouched in his chair.

Me, a lucky man! It’s weird. I have never thought of myself to be so. I couldn’t really blame him – he was on his ride to heaven. Without a concern in the world. According to me, he was the luckiest one.

I would suggest that you always listen to what a drunk man has to say. A drunk mind speaks from the heart.

‘What makes you think I am lucky?’ I prodded him.

‘Look at me,’ his wavering eyes tried to focus on me, ‘. . .every day I go home, worried sick if I will be able to provide sufficiently for my family. What happens at home? Wife comes up with a discussion, then we argue. . .according to her, I can’t do a thing right. Then nag, nag, nag. . .From night till morning, then I am back to this shithole office.’

Sanju gulped down the contents of his glass in one go and drowned all his disappointments. He smiled at me as if I was the symbol of Nirvana. ‘While you. . .you go home and find peace. No nagging, no responsibility. . .you are so lucky, man.’

Every friend of mine has their own version of me and my life. I never thought that I would be a case study someday, for so many. I did not counter what he said. Never argue with a drunk man. You never know when he will start making sense.

‘I think you should leave the party and go home,’ I considered calling

a cab for him.

‘Don’t talk of that place,’ Sanju jerked his hand, ‘I have something very important to discuss with you.’

I nodded to encourage my friend to talk.

‘We are trying to find a suitable match for my sister,’ Sanju raised his eyes to mine.

I understood where this was leading. I wanted to say right there, ‘I am not interested’. But he was talking about his sister. I could sense a concerned brother in him.

‘We will find the best match for her,’ I patted my friend’s shoulder.

‘You are a good man,’ Sanju was on his own ride. I don’t think he was even listening to what I was saying.

‘How do you know that I am a good man?’

‘You don’t drink.’ Sanju said it as if it was the most obvious proof of my goodness.

This was amazing! Here was a man refilling his glass, one after the other, drenched in alcohol from inside and outside, proclaiming that the person who doesn’t drink is a good man!

Aloud I said, ‘I don’t mean to offend you, bro. I have no such plans.’

‘Wait, let me show you her photos. She is very beautiful, talented and she works too.’

He scrolled his phone photo gallery and flashed a beautiful girl’s picture in my face.

‘Mona, that’s her name.’

Mona was flashing the ‘V’ sign with two fingers like she had won the world cup, and pouting too, like a beautiful pig. It appeared that any moment, she would come out from the cell phone and kiss me. And there was no denying – she was indeed beautiful.

‘Sanju, I do not think this is the right place or time to discuss this.’

‘Hey, did you see her picture?’

I was guilty of the crime.

‘Ajay, whether you want to get married or not, it’s your wish. Let me

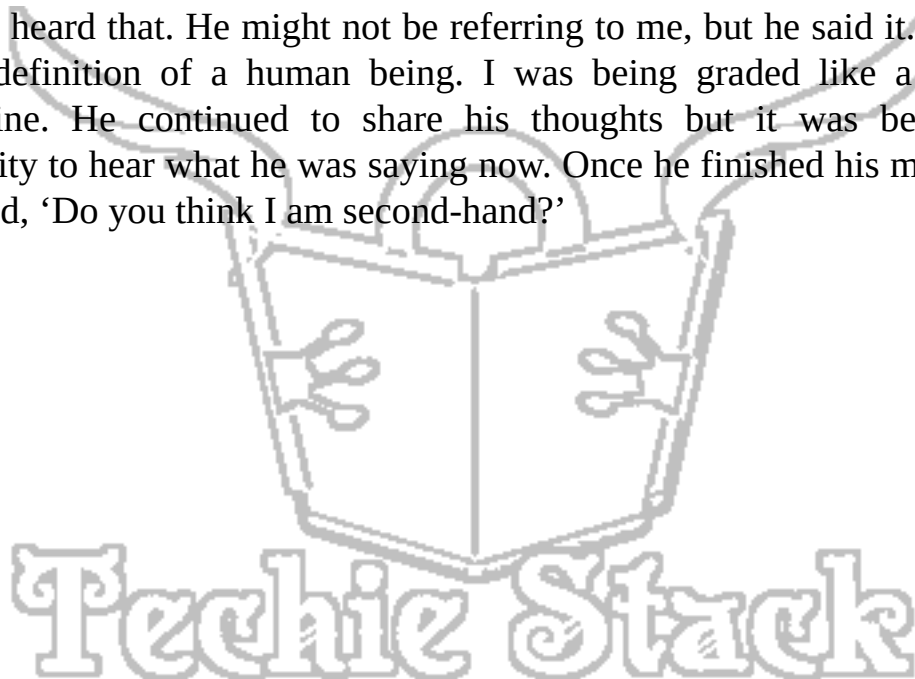
tell you, today you are young, it's easy to find a partner. A few years later, it will be difficult for you to find a girl,' Sanju said it in a manner as if he was giving away a grave secret.

His conversation with me was like a business deal – invest today, else regret tomorrow. I desperately wanted to move on from this topic.

‘Hey buddy, let’s discuss this some other time.’

‘Ajay, life is long. I suggest that you meet my sister once, then decide. The more you delay this, it will get more difficult for you to settle down. See, no other girl will marry you and finding love at this age is difficult. In the end, you will have to compromise. My sister, at least she is not second-hand.’

I heard that. He might not be referring to me, but he said it. I heard a new definition of a human being. I was being graded like a car or a machine. He continued to share his thoughts but it was beyond my capacity to hear what he was saying now. Once he finished his monologue I asked, ‘Do you think I am second-hand?’



# Chapter 23

## August 2016. Fort Hospital

I was waiting outside the doctor's cabin. I noticed that familiar face again. She looked confident, mature and beautiful. Confidence is the secret to all beauty. There is no beauty that is attractive without confidence. She was sitting next to me. I wondered how she could have a psychological problem.

We had spoken to each other before, we have chatted formally. I can say that we were familiar to each other, but I could not find the courage to initiate a conversation. Truly speaking, it was hard to believe that she was depressed. I knew that it was none of my business, but still, I could not curb my curiosity.

'Hi, how are you doing?' This seemed to be the popular question meant for depressed people, so I went ahead and asked it.

'I am not doing good,' she responded, much like I had so many times before.

'The doctor says that sharing will heal faster. If you feel like you can share your loss, that is. . .' I mentioned the word 'loss' outright. I just assumed that all those who were there had lost something.

'Why are you here?' she asked me.

'I lost my wife,' that was enough to make her understand. After all, we were sitting outside the psychiatrist's cabin.

She took a deep breath and said, 'I have lost my family's trust. And I am going to die, soon.'

'Everyone is going to die someday.'

I had faced death. It was not a theory. I had been through the toughest practical lesson of life.

'Actually,' she hesitated, 'I am HIV positive.'

This was astonishing. So far, I had thought that such patients existed in books and in advertisements only. I turned to face her squarely. 'So your family thinks that you are immoral?'

She shared her suffering with me. What I heard from her cannot be

put here in a line. It was not the first time that I was hearing about HIV. But meeting a person who had the condition itself was a novelty.

I was called in by the doctor, after a few minutes. I turned to her.

‘Ajay, I will leave now,’ the lady said, ‘I came today only to collect reports.’

‘It was good to meet you.’

I am not mentioning her name, and I hope you understand why.

I could sense that she wanted to say something. She had many things that she seemed to want me to know. We exchanged numbers. Before leaving she said, ‘I don’t know what you will think about me or people like me, but we are not sinners. An AIDS patient is just a patient.’

I mumbled, ‘That will be the moral for my next book.’

\* \* \*

‘How are you doing, Ajay?’ My doctor asked – finally the right question from the right man.

‘Doing good, doctor,’ I answered truthfully, in a long time.

‘I checked your report. You are indeed doing good. So, I am reducing your dosage. Now, you have to take the pills on an SOS basis. Sertraline (Zoloft), when you find it difficult to sleep or when you are upset.’

The doctor explained some more things, which I did not understand. I nodded like an obedient pupil. ‘Thank you, doctor.’

‘You’re welcome. Anything you wish to share?’

‘Yes doctor, apart from these pills, please suggest something that I can do when I am feeling down. I feel excluded. Humans treat humans differently. I have started feeling that this world is a bad place.’

Doctor smiled. ‘Please understand, Ajay. We are not here to correct others. Every person is good and bad in their own way. The world can never be a bad place.’

This time, I did not nod. It felt like the entire world was giving me *gyaan*.

The doctor was a perceptive man. He understood my disappointment. ‘You can do one thing. Whenever you feel like the world is a bad place, do an act of kindness. I am sure it will help you to understand the world.’



This time I nodded.

He also added one more instruction. 'We all have some guilt in life. When we do something good, it helps to recover from that feeling. A person without guilt has the biggest gift of life.'

Guilt? It was the first time that the idea was put in my mind, that I had a feeling of guilt within me. It was weird. I was puzzled and wondered, *What did I do wrong?*

I searched for the reason. Anisha was the only new addition to my life. Was my friendship with her wrong? My mind tried hard to answer this, but failed.

I left the doctor's chamber. At the pharmacy, I was purchasing the prescribed medicine, when an advertisement caught my attention.

**Give the gift of life and donate blood.**

*Most people donate blood because they want to help others. Donating blood a single time may help save the lives of upto three people. Yet, less than 10 percent of the Indian population does that.*

The gift of life! It was enough for me to make my move. I knew the location of the blood bank. I had been to the place a hundred times. It gave me the chills. It was where I had sat continuously for hours, thinking and praying to the useless God, for her recovery. God – who had never come to my rescue.

I made my way to the blood bank and went to the reception.

'I want to donate platelets.'

The person at the counter gave me a form to fill. I filled all the relevant details and returned it to him.

'You are donating for a patient?' the man smiled and asked.

'I am not associated with any patient. I am here for a random donation.'

He smiled again. This time, his smile was bigger. He took a sample. After fifteen minutes, he came back to me. 'We cannot take your platelets. Your platelet count is 1,20,000. It should be more than 1,50,000.'

This was insane. It was like someone was snatching an opportunity from me, an opportunity to be a happy man. We all have guilt, or might be guilty. The emotion is overhyped when you are in depression. There are

thirty-five conditions associated with anxiety. A depressed mood, mood swings and sadness, are a few of them. I did not know which was mine at that time.

‘No, don’t say that,’ I pleaded.

He gave me look. ‘Would you like to donate your blood?’

‘You can take my blood?’

‘Yes.’

I lay on the bed. A needle was inserted into my body and I closed my eyes. An excuse never saves a life. Blood donation does. In some corner of my heart, I had a soothing feeling.

I returned home. Mom’s absence was making me sadder. I sat down with a novel, but found it hard to focus on the story.

Sanju’s words were echoing in my head, jarring my nerves. I failed to understand how his drunken reflection should affect me.

I closed my eyes and tried to forget everything, tried to sleep. I could not. I then attempted to read the novel again, but failed miserably. I adjusted the AC’s temperature, popped the two pills as suggested by the doctor, but there was no respite.

The worst part of having memories is not the pain. It’s the loneliness. I opened my almirah, pulled out a woman’s t-shirt. I pulled it over my head, not caring about the size, fit or colour.

I hugged my pillow. The entire night I kept murmuring, ‘I am not second-hand. . .I am not second-hand. . .’

# Chapter 24

**September 2016**

Anisha and I decided to meet in Lodhi Gardens.

Spread over 90 acres, the garden is an eclectic mix of flora, fauna and of course, history. The uniqueness of the garden can be appreciated when you walk under the shade of the trees. Since there are so many plants, each with a different topiary, not only does the scenery change with a few steps, but over time, with a change of season, it appears like the garden changes its jewels.

A few families sat around in the central area of the park. The periphery was occupied by couples.

My favourite pastime was to lie on the grass and spend hours reading a book. I visit the gardens on weekends without fail.

Anisha and I were near the central fort, feeling the wet grass under our bare feet, our footwear dangling from our fingers.

‘Why did you leave suddenly and not stay on for the wedding?’ Anisha asked authoritatively.

‘Because you were busy and I was getting bored.’

‘Sorry about that. Hope it was not too bad. . .’

‘No, not at all. I was thrilled to meet your new friends,’ the sarcasm in my words couldn’t be missed.

She looked at me suspiciously. I did not understand what went on in her head. Girls are switchers. They can jump from one topic to another without reason or effort. Anisha does that when she is not comfortable with a topic.

‘Arvind Uncle was asking about you?’

My eyebrows shot up. ‘You are in touch with him? Does that mean he is still. . .?’

‘Yes, he is still alive but in a very bad condition. We are all connected through that WhatsApp group.’

‘Oh. . .Actually, I am not active on WhatsApp.’

‘Why are you not active on WhatsApp?’

The conversation was ridiculous! Every day, I chatted with this same girl on WhatsApp for at least half an hour. And she was questioning my activity! The best way to change her mind was with another question.

‘Shall I write a second book?’

‘You should!’

‘Don’t you think people will say that he is using his personal tragedy to become an author?’

‘Why do you think like that? Why don’t you consider, if you don’t write the next book, you may be termed a writer by accident! Ajay, you have gone through loss, pain, suffering. . .and have created a beautiful thing from that. A logical person will say, look at this man who lost his love and created a masterpiece! How inspiring that girl was, that in spite of her not being present, she has brought out the best in him. People will appreciate your Bhavna.’

She said all this as if she was reading an essay.

‘Okay...okay. Your explanation is scary.’

Anisha suggested, ‘Let’s talk while we take a walk. I have never been here before. I always thought that only lovers come to this garden.’

We started to walk through the lanes. The perfectly landscaped grass, flowers and ponds were beautiful. Every step brought us peace.

We crossed several yoga classes which were in progress. There were the evening walkers enjoying their daily routine, some chatting, a few relishing their own company. The corners of the garden, were however, booked by couples.

I would request you all to refrain from asking what they were doing there. To satiate your curiosity, I would just say this – I noticed a policeman hovering over one couple’s heads and shouting, flailing his *lathi*

.

‘Why is the cop shouting at them?’ I asked the question to Anisha.

Anisha had lived in Delhi all her life. She did not find the situation out of place.

‘Ajay, we are in a Delhi garden, and they are a couple. . .Do you require any more reason for a policeman to shout?’

‘Oh! Okay. . .the policeman is disturbing them,’ I smirked.

‘I don’t think so. The way those people are lost in themselves, no one can disturb them!’ Anisha giggled.

We decided to walk away from there. ‘That kissing couple’ as we named them, provoked me into asking, ‘Hey, how is your friend, Vicky?’

‘He is good. Isn’t he impressive? He is a nice man. We are really good friends,’ Anisha gushed.

I had only asked a simple question and she had added adjectives as if he was the last man on earth. There was a happiness on her face when she talked about Vicky. Of course, I didn’t like that. Please do not ask me why. After all, I am human too.

‘That I gathered. I just wanted to know, why did you tell him about my depression?’

‘I did not.’ Anisha said simply, ‘He read your book and asked me how you coped with the loss. Then. . .’

‘Then you told him that I was still depressed.’

She looked me with innocence. I understood her blunder. This time she tried to change the topic. She had a subject.

‘Next month, it’s my father’s 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. We need to shop. I need your help.’

It was the wrong thing to ask. Believe me, that was unsettling. A girl asking me to shop, which is something I hate. But a false sense of pride ensured that I did not reject the request.

‘I could come with you, but can’t you ask Vicky’s help?’

She looked at me. Her face was blank for a few seconds. Then slowly, her lips curved into a smile. The best curve in a woman’s body is her smile.

‘There is a difference between a good and a best friend.’

Women have a huge vocabulary when it comes to friends. There are best friends, so-called friends, formal friends, informal friends, fast friends, slow friends, girlfriends, boyfriends and a million undeclared and unnamed ones. Over and above all this, they will make a zone. If you are just hanging around, then you are in a friend zone. In Anisha’s case, there is a best friend and an author friend.

I understood that she was not comfortable talking about Vicky.

We had hardly walked a hundred metres, when we saw a guy lying on the ground, cuddling himself strangely. While everyone else was busy with a companion, this guy was lost and alone. He had covered himself with a bedsheet and was squirming restlessly. The sight was inhuman.

‘What is he doing there, alone?’ Anisha wondered aloud, as she looked at the man suspiciously.

‘Let me see. He may require some help.’

I walked towards the man. Anisha followed close behind. As we neared him, we realized that there were two people under the sheet. They were lying close together, entwined. They were so closely wrapped around each other, that they had appeared as one. They were semi-naked. It was a sight I had never imagined I would see in my life. I stared at them like a cop watching a corpse. Yes, they appeared like corpses. Even though they were alive, their senses seemed dead.

‘Don’t go closer, they might get disturbed,’ Anisha cautioned.

Suddenly the ‘dead’ bodies woke up. First, the man lowered his t-shirt while the girl lay there still, lost to the world. The man opened his eyes with great difficulty. It looked like he had been asleep for ages.

The man looked straight at us and suddenly got to a sitting position. Then he said, ‘Oh, for a moment I thought you two were the police!’ He shook his head as if he had discovered that the weather had changed. Then he said, ‘You guys can go there.’ He pointed at another spot which was relatively quiet.

I was gobsmacked.

‘We are not a couple,’ Anisha protested.

‘Then what you are doing in Lodhi Gardens?’ With that he lay on his back again and turned to his partner. His action stated, ‘Get lost’.

It was an embarrassing moment. But it was also the first time that Anisha and I had been thought of as a couple. We turned and left. There was an uncomfortable silence between us. The silence was asking questions beyond friendship.

‘What are you thinking?’ Anisha probed.

I shook my head casually. I was trying my best to hide my thoughts from her. We might be the masters of our thoughts, but we are still the

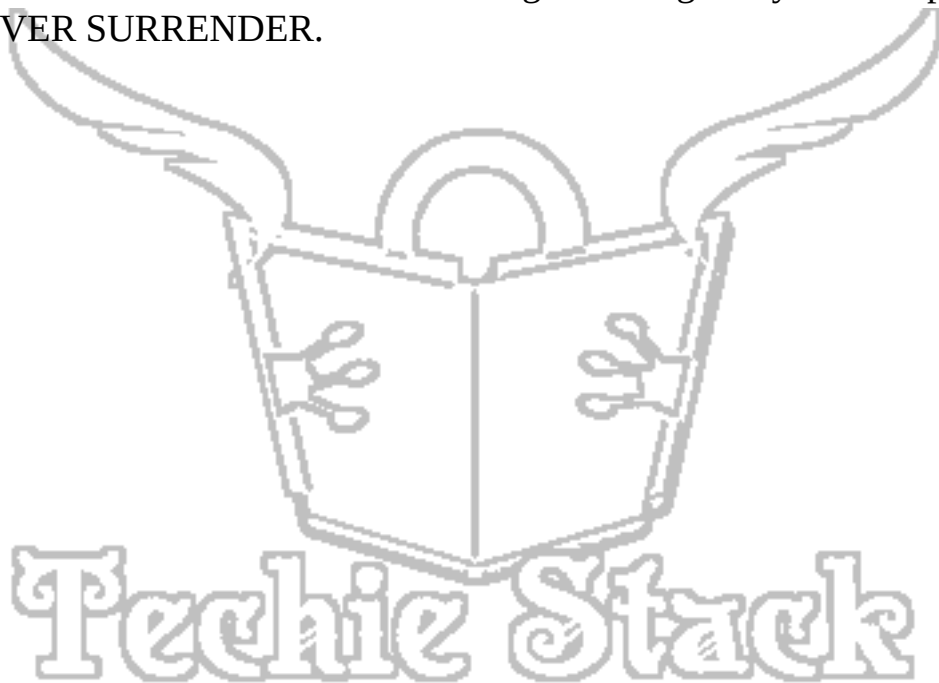
slaves of our own emotions.

I drove back to Indirapuram. After what seemed like ages, I played a romantic song on the stereo. I stared at my face in the side mirror of the car. I saw a happy man without wrinkles or dark circles. Many things still required improvement, but it was clear, that the man was happy. A face is the mirror of the mind, and the eyes without speaking, confess the secrets of the heart.

That same night, I was reading a romantic novel, when I received a message from Anisha, on WhatsApp.

‘Why don’t you ever put a status on WhatsApp. . . ?’

I had never cared for it. But that night I changed my WhatsApp status —NEVER SURRENDER.



# Chapter 25

**September 2016**

*Hi Ajay,*

*I have read your book and believe me, this was one of the few inspiring stories of the many I have read. It is worthy of being recommended to everyone to read. You have done a great job and I am delighted and honoured that all the income from your book is being donated in some way. I work as the principal of a college in Gurgaon and have already recommended that my students read your book. I would be glad if you could come to our college to address our students.*

*Truly,*

*Sudha*

I found this mail in my inbox. It was heartening. Every day, I received many encouraging messages. Believe me, friends, there were many times when I have considered quitting writing. But whenever I reached that decision, I would find a review, a message or a small appreciatory note that would exhort me to never surrender.

Thank you for those lovely messages.

I met my publisher to sign the contract for my next book. They welcomed me like I was a superstar. An author understands his real value at his publisher's. For the whole world, we are dreamers, motivators or in some cases, just characters. But for our publishers, books are bread and butter. And when an author does well, it's a sandwich.

The publisher's office was filled with books. There were posters, catalogues and many decorative items. On the wall was mounted a six-feet tall idol of Goddess Saraswati. I was not visiting for the first time, but many things had changed. The last time I had walked into their office as a newcomer who was more than happy about the smallest of things. Now an experienced, one-book-old author was visiting.

'Your book is doing very well,' the publisher said, with a sparkle in his eyes.

'How many copies have we sold till now?' I asked with a pleasant smile.



‘It has crossed fifty thousand copies, but the exact number. . .we need to check.’

The publisher adjusted his glasses, his smile mirroring mine.

‘When are you going to start writing your next book?’

‘Very soon. . .’ I nodded for effect.

‘I have a request from a print media, *Hindustan Times* . They want you to write an article about how you became a bestseller after six months of the release of your book.’

‘That’s really great news. But what shall I write. . .?’ I spread out my palms. ‘I mean, I have not done anything special. . .which can be categorized as a great promotional idea or strategy.’

‘Then what do you think is the reason for the success of the book?’

‘It’s an emotional story. . .based on real life. People get more connected with stories like these. . .’

‘Yeah, it may be so. One more thing, we have observed that the sales of your book picked up suddenly in March, which is otherwise the slowest season for the book industry.’

‘What does that mean?’ I hoped to gain some insight from this fact.

‘Maybe. . .a college or an institutional buyer had been purchasing your book,’ the publisher explained.

‘I did get a message from a college. . .’

‘That could be the reason then,’ he shrugged.

‘Will it be possible to get the address of the college or school which has purchased my book?’

‘That I need to check. . .I will share it with you in some time.’

‘Sure, thank you.’

‘I have a question. Will your next book also be a true story?’ the publisher asked, hesitantly eager.

I smiled. I had something in mind, but I was not sure if I should commit to anything. I said confidently, ‘I may write a story about an AIDS patient.’

\* \* \*

This month had one special thing to offer. It had the birth date of the

mother who had given me the most beautiful gift in life. It was *her* mom's birthday. I booked a ticket to Raipur, where Bhavna's parents lived. While I was booking the flight ticket, I was not sure why, but the doctor's words echoed in my head, '...everyone has some guilt.'

My visit to Raipur was a surprise. I was confident that she would be happy to see me. Surprising our loved ones lets them know how special they are to us. The last time I had been there was for Holi. Every time I go to Raipur I get mixed feelings. The place had many old memories, all happy ones.

Whenever I visited their home, I had received a son-in-law's welcome. But now, there were no formalities. Now a son goes to meet loving parents. I stepped into the house after many months, but the home held the same pain. It seemed like the whole house was missing her. The drawing room had this beautiful collage with the words, 'Dearest youngest. . .you will be missed forever. . .' I saw my face in the collage. It was our wedding picture.

Believe me, we are the victims of our own minds. I looked at all the faces closely. They all asked an unexpected question, 'How can you move on with any other girl?'

I understood the guilt. Guilt is not always about doing something wrong. It is a feeling of responsibility too. It dawned on me, why I had been upset for days. It had started after my trip to the *Art of Living* course.

A mother who has lost her reason to celebrate has nothing to look forward to. I had gone only to fulfil the promise I had made to my love.

We cut a cake and then went out to have dinner. The best celebration is having a relaxed dinner with family. Food tastes better when you eat together. On our return, Bhavna's father went to bed at around 10 p.m. like he usually did. He was a punctual man. He slept early and woke up at around 4 a.m.

It was late, but Bhavna's mom and I were still up. 'Mummy, you can sleep in this room. Papa has already slept. I know that you struggle to fall asleep.'

There was an invisible thread which is stronger than any blood relationship. In a room, a mother-in-law and son-in-law sat. . .the knot that had tied us together, was not there. The lights were out, and only a beautiful relationship was alive.

‘How is your writing career going?’

‘It’s doing good, Mummy. Rather it’s getting more amazing every day. I am getting messages, enquiries about Bhavna. They want to see pictures of her boy-cut hair style,’ I was smiling from ear to ear.

Mummy said, ‘You know, I recently created a Facebook account. Every day, I get friend requests. Initially I wondered who all these people are. I had a chat with a few of them and got to know that they had read your book and had searched for me.’

‘Oh, so you are famous, Mummy!’

‘You are famous. I am still a mummy, you are an author.’

‘I am still the same. You know, every day, some reader asks the question, “When are you planning to get married again?”’

I don’t know why, I brought up the topic.

‘They are right. You should marry again. It has been a long time.’ She was absolutely composed, as if she had been prepared for this question for a long time.

‘I am not ready...’

‘You will never be ready, my son.’

She looked me in the eye in the dimly lit room, ‘Every person has a special place in one’s life. Whether you marry again or not, she will be in your heart forever.’

She was usually not that philosophical. I don’t know from where she found those inspirational words.

‘I didn’t get you, Mummy.’

‘You need not understand what I am saying. But you need to kill your isolation. The biggest curses in life are too much free time and a bad experience. When you have time and do not know how to spend it, it can ruin you.’

‘No, I am fine.’

‘You have not seen yourself. I am a mom and I can see how you look. You are not the same boy who married Bhavna.’

‘How can you say this, Mummy?’

‘Your sad face, fake laughter, your inability to make eye

contact. . .there are many things which only a mother can see. I see them in you.'

I did not reply. I did not know how right she was, but she was not entirely wrong. There was always a hidden message when we decide to fake a laugh. She understood my silence.

Mummy continued, 'I want to tell you one thing. What you are going through, had it happened to her, I would have said the same thing. Marry again as early as you can, Ajay. Age, looks are on your side, else it will become too late.'

She too was a mom and for all moms, this responsibility seemed to be their greatest concern.

'I have many friends, two moms to take care of me and many loving memories. Why do I need to marry again?'

'Your moms will not be there after some time, nor will friends always be there for you. You may not accept this today, but it is the truth.'

'No Mummy, the world is beautiful. All my friends love me.'

'Let me tell you, when Bhavna left us. . .I used to get calls from everyone, every day. My relatives, old friends, her friends, neighbours. . .they all called regularly. Slowly but steadily, they all reduced, then vanished. After a few months, I found myself alone. With no one to talk to. I am not saying that your friends are bad. . .but you have to understand the difference between love and sympathy.'

'And how will I get to know which is love and which is sympathy?'

'The person who sympathizes will say ". . .we are with you. . .". The one who loves you will say, "I am with you".'

\* \* \*

I stayed in Raipur for two days. We had many such intense conversations. The best thing and the best medicine is, when two people sit together and talk from the heart. On the third day, I got ready for my departure. That's when Mummy said something which I could never have thought of in my entire life. Only parents can understand what I am going to relate now.

'Ajay, there is something I want to tell you. At this age, a parent does not require money. They do not have friends, no desire to live, nor the passion to form new relationships. We only wish for a visit from a son, and a call from their children. Those little pockets of time, helps us live through the day. Thank you for the surprise visit.'

I realized that she was about to cry.

‘Mummy, do not say that, I am always with you.’

But she was a mom and tears were made for them. She said through her tears, ‘And one more thing, something which I have never said to you. She was my child. Her chirpy voice always kept my house radiant. Someone like her is not easy to find. I have always felt that you were lucky to have married her. Today, I wish to say, she was lucky to have got you as well. People forget the ones who give them birth. . .bring them up with so many sacrifices. . .but still we love them.’ She took a long breath ‘You are still living with her memory. Try to add new memory.’

It was one thing to think, and another to hear the words said out loud. My emotions surged. In an emotional state, a mother also turned irrational.

‘What does that mean – add a new memory?’

‘On the day of my marriage,’ she paused to sniff, ‘. . .I cried my lungs out. I thought I could never love anyone more than I did my parents. Then I fell in love with her father. With him, I was blessed with children, and I found deeper love. . .’ The tears fell as she said these words.

I hugged her lightly. I didn’t understand why she was bringing this up.

‘Today, you love your mom. Tomorrow, you will love your partner. When you love, you do not replace the person, you always add a new relationship. That is the beauty of love.’

I finally understood what she was saying.

## Chapter 26

Friendship is the medicine for a wounded heart, and vitamin for hopeful souls. Anisha and I shared a unique relationship. I fail to categorize the zone, but Anisha would surely have a well-defined friend zone for me.

I could understand what was happening between us as a relationship, but I was still not sure what to name it.

Things had changed for me. When I read humorous WhatsApp messages, I smiled. When I listened to a romantic song, I cried less. And when I saw couples go about hand in hand, it did not bother me much. I even laugh nowadays.

My next meeting with Anisha was scheduled at Karol Bagh. A day to cherish for a loving daughter is always her father's birthday. And the official reason for our meeting was to help her shop for her dad's 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. But there were other unsaid unofficial reasons as well. Why else would I agree to go shopping with her? Hope you can understand what I am saying.

I washed my face twice. I opened my drawer and rediscovered my favourite perfume. On pressing the spray, the perfume thanked me for using it after such a long time. From the almirah, I picked out my favourite blue and white striped formal shirt and used my iron, which had been fighting against oxidation for long. I polished my red mixed leather shoe, which had turned dark brown now.

The metro was our chosen mode of conveyance. Actually, we should thank the Delhi Government for giving this comfortable means of transport. But I am sure if I mentioned the current government's name, I would receive plenty of unavoidable praise on Facebook. Let me clarify, I was not a Delhi voter and I was not a part of this sin.

We met at the Karol Bagh metro station. She was dressed in dark blue skinny jeans with a sleeveless short yellow *kurti* and the Delhi style *dupatta*. We took our meeting agenda extremely seriously and immediately got on with the job. She decided on a formal full sleeve shirt and a belt for her father. It was a great decision, considering that men have limited choices to shop for.

'You came from Gurgaon to Karol Bagh, to purchase only a belt and

a shirt?’ I asked Anisha.

‘No. I came from Gurgaon to Karol Bagh because there was an opportunity to meet you,’ she replied. This was quite direct. She was always straightforward. For her, things are very clear.

‘I am hungry. Can we try Karol Bagh *chaat* ? It’s very popular, from what I hear.’

‘Really? *Chaat* at Chandni Chowk is popular. . .’ I countered.

‘Could be. But right now, we are here at Karol Bagh,’ her hands travelled to her slim waist, and she was acquiring a threatening pose.

‘Why don’t we visit all the famous Delhi joints and try the different dishes? What better use of this metro?’ I suggested.

‘Not a bad idea,’ Anisha shook her head disbelievingly. As if hearing of such a clever idea from me was completely a surprise.

‘Which places do you wish to try?’ I asked.

‘Let us first go to Chandni Chowk. We will try the *Paranthe Wali Gali* there. Then the *Lala Babu Chat Bhandar* . . .the *gobi-matar samosa* is very famous there. Finally, the *fruit chaat* of *Bishan Swaroop* ,’ Anisha finished.

I stared at her with my mouth open. She had listed all these as if she was reading them from the Delhi tourism map, or a blog on the best places to eat in Delhi. How could I ignore such an invitation? The temptation of a beautiful friend’s company to explore the best things that Delhi had to offer!

‘What about the shopping?’ I asked.

She laughed without saying anything. Sometimes silence is the biggest nod.

‘So, all your food joints are in Chandni Chowk?’

‘No. After Chandni Chowk, we will go to Pandara Road for the famous *kulfi* .’

‘How do you know of all these places?’ I looked at her wonderingly.

Chandni Chowk is famous for wholesale markets and traditional shops. No *Haldiram’s* or *Nathu Sweets* there. In the narrow lanes, you encounter unmoving traffic all the time. The honking cars, ill-mannered rickshaw pullers and the three-wheeler autos make it impossible for pedestrians to walk.

In spite of all these negatives, it has the amazing Lal Quila and the famous Jama Masjid which are enough to make the visit worthy. And then there are the street food joints.

We entered the crawling Chandni Chowk and walked from stall to stall like foodies. Any vendor who offered anything different to eat, we gave it a try. When we looked at our watches next, two hours had flown.

‘Are you tired?’ Anisha asked. She looked exhausted.

‘Yes, I am tired as hell. I think that’s a valid reason for us to get back.’

‘Yes, we should. . .but my favourite *kulfi* ?’ Anisha spoke as if a child had been refused her birthday gift.

‘Can we have it when we meet next?’

‘No, no. . .I can’t wait until the next meeting. We are going right now,’ the exhausted Anisha picked herself up and hired an auto.

On our way to Pandara Road, she was unusually quiet. In spite of the silence, I got a feeling that she wanted to tell me something. An unusual question reverberated in my head as well. Why did she want to get everything done today? In twenty minutes, we reached the famous Pandara Market.

The famous *Krishna Kulfi* had *kulfi*, *rabri*, *firni* and various other Indian sweets on their menu. Anisha ordered a small *kulfi faluda* for herself and a *mastani* for me. Frankly speaking, I had reached my limit on this eating binge. I couldn’t really eat another morsel. My stomach protested, refusing to get tortured further. It warned me, ‘Continue eating like this, and an atheist like you will be very close to Lord Ganesha.’

My watch showed 8 p.m. Today was the longest time that Anisha and I had spent together. Anisha didn’t seem inclined to rush away. It was as if, when something good was happening, we were trying to prolong those moments and enjoy minute of it.

‘Let’s go for a walk to India Gate,’ Anisha suggested, as she licked the last of her *kulfi* .

‘I wouldn’t like anything better. But aren’t you getting late? It’s already 8 p.m., and Gurgaon will take two hours,’ I looked at my watch.

Anisha nodded. ‘Yes. But I would like to walk with you till India Gate. It’s just half a kilometre from here.’ She smiled, but I could see how



tired she was.

Unwilling to let go of her company, I gave in. I did not have the courage to deny Anisha her request. On reaching India Gate, we found a quiet spot in the garden around it. The gate stood majestic. It was lit by heavy halogens and it shone like the glorious soldiers in whose memory the monument had been constructed. It was flanked on one side by Parliament House and on the other, by the President's bungalow. The presence of VIPs had made this area extra secure.

I couldn't help but think that Anisha's behaviour was weird. She sat thoughtfully, as if there was a burden on her heart. She continuously stared at India Gate. It was as if she was trying to etch it in her memory forever. It was really disturbing for me. I wanted to shake her out of it, but sometimes it's best to stay quiet. Silence can speak volumes without ever saying a word. I did not disturb her, and allowed her to dwell on her thoughts. I too wished to soak in the fresh air and the magnificent sight.

Anisha's behaviour might appear weird to me, because I had been avoiding telling her something. I had focused on her because I had tried to stay away from my thoughts. I checked the time. It was 9 p.m. Our time together was reaching its end. I decided to share the bad news with her.

'Anisha, I want to tell you something,' I spoke while still looking at India Gate.

'Hmmm?' Anisha seemed too tired to even speak a word.

'I have decided to move to Pune,' I said, with a resigned sigh.

'What? Why... ? All good... ?' The shock seemed to bring her out of her preoccupation.

'I have been in conversation with Cognizant Technology Solutions for some months. Yesterday, the salary negotiations were finalized. I am awaiting the formal offer letter,' told my friend.

'That's great. . .It's really good news,' she chirped, but it rang hollow. I could sense that she was not happy with the news.

Then she said, 'I wanted to discuss something serious with you too.'

I was right! Something was brewing within her! But now that she was going to tell me about it, I was a bit scared. A girl sitting in such a romantic ambience, talking in such a serious tone, can be enough to rattle any guy. After spending the entire day having so much light-hearted fun,

why had she turned so serious?

‘Yes please,’ I said aloud.

‘What about you, remarrying?’

I was aghast. I had not expected this to be on Anisha’s mind. It was confusing.

‘What about it? I did not get you.’

‘Ajay, you are standing at an important crossroads in your life,’ she stated.

‘What does this mean. . . ? Are you talking about my age?’

‘No. I am talking about the situation,’ she let out a deep breath.

‘I don’t understand.’ I seethed, feeling helpless in my confusion.

‘I am just saying, very soon you will shift to Pune. You will be alone again. It will be a new place, no friends. . . you should have a friend. A friend for life. At this juncture in your life, you should not be searching for roommates. You should look for a partner. Hope you understand what I am saying.’

‘No, I do not. Why have you suddenly brought up this topic?’

Her facial expression and concern now assumed two totally different dimensions.

I said, ‘You were not yourself all evening. Is all well?’

‘Actually. . . my parents have begun to groom-hunt for me. After *bhaiya*’s wedding, I am now on their radar.’

‘Oh, so the groom-hunt has frightened you,’ I said with some relief. ‘Or is there something else that you are not telling me about?’

She paused for a bit and said, ‘They are planning a visit to my home on my father’s birthday.’

‘So you know the person?’ I asked with some curiosity.

‘Yes. It’s Vicky’s family that is coming.’

‘Vicky. . . a good friend for life. What else could a girl want?’ I knew my tone was a little sarcastic.

‘I have no particular wish to marry him. It’s just. . . my family is telling me to. They say that if there is no specific person who I want to

marry, why don't I consider Vicky?' she said, her palms outspread.

This was the typical situation that all girls are faced with. A confusion, which never helps anyone.

'Hmmm,' I made this special sound for the first time and asked, 'How is your marriage related to mine?'

'Ajay, it will not be possible to meet you like this after that. If I marry Vicky then our future together is fixed. I may need to spend my weekends with him. You will be alone after this, again.'

Then it dawned on me. I understood her wish to experience everything today. The finality of it all. Suddenly, everything felt ridiculous. The butterflies of love and romance that had been fluttering in my stomach were to get drowned soon. All was about to end.

'We are meeting for the last time?' Was that all I could ask?

She held my palm in her soft ones. I saw that mine were shaking.

That it was unexpected, is an understatement. I looked into her eyes. I could see an apology there. The sadness on her face seemed to say, 'Sorry, for leaving you all alone . . .'

'No. I don't think we are meeting for the last time. But the frequency of our meetings will certainly decrease,' she pulled her hand away.

It seemed like the signal of her departure.

'Ajay, you have to get married again.' She said it as if she was spelling out a rule.

This was highly disturbing. Absolutely frustrating. The girl who had been different, who had finally given me hope to move ahead in life. . .she had suddenly started pushing me like my parents did.

I know you will say that as a friend, she had my best interests at heart and was trying to do her best by me. It was my own insecurity which was making me think small.

'Listen, Ajay. If there was any possibility that Bhavna could talk to you, she would have asked you to do the same. Get married. . .for her.'

'Enough,' I raised my voice, ' . . .who would want to marry a "second-hand" person?'

'Second-hand!'

She shook her head, 'Did you just say "second-hand"? I don't believe this! Are you sure you said that?'

There is an insecure corner in all of us. We never realize that we are living with it. But then it surfaces. . .I had blurted out my frustration as a reflex. Now I was lost for words. I was certain that any moment, a big fight would ensue.

'Ajay, I have always had the most respectful feelings for you. You never show your feelings to me, however. You always try to keep a smile, even in difficult situations. But today, you have lost what was precious. You have lost my respect.'

I was still silent. There was nothing to say. All the feelings and emotions that had been putting a spring in my steps, suddenly had no relevance. I did not even care to offer a 'sorry'. But Anisha was not a person who could hold things back. Not with me, at least.

'You are not a commodity. She had not purchased you. . .and now you are not back on sale again. You were touched by love, which made you an emotional and a better person to be chosen as a friend for life.'

Sometimes, it's better not to say anything, than to say how you truly feel and make things worse.

'We should leave,' was all I could manage to say.

She nodded in agreement.

We reached the Rajiv Chowk metro station. We were silent. She stared at me, willing me to talk. But I was lost in my own depressed world. We reached the biggest metro station in India. I decided to drop her first. However, she refused, saying that she would manage. I however, still had some humanity left in me.

We were waiting outside the ladies' coach, and the display read, 'three minutes'. Our silence hid the million things in our hearts. She had said that it would not be the last time that we would be meeting. But a part of me warned that this could indeed be the last time I would see this girl. My last three minutes with her.

We stood facing each other. I wanted to say so many things. At least let her know what I felt for her. The digits on the clock changed. It read, 'two minutes' now. My mind was up against my insecurities, in a battle. Why was I in this unrest? It was the same feeling which I had had many years ago. An entire lifetime was behind me. The watch showed 'one

minute'. I had to express myself. It was now or never.

'Are we meeting for the last time?' I asked, stupefied.

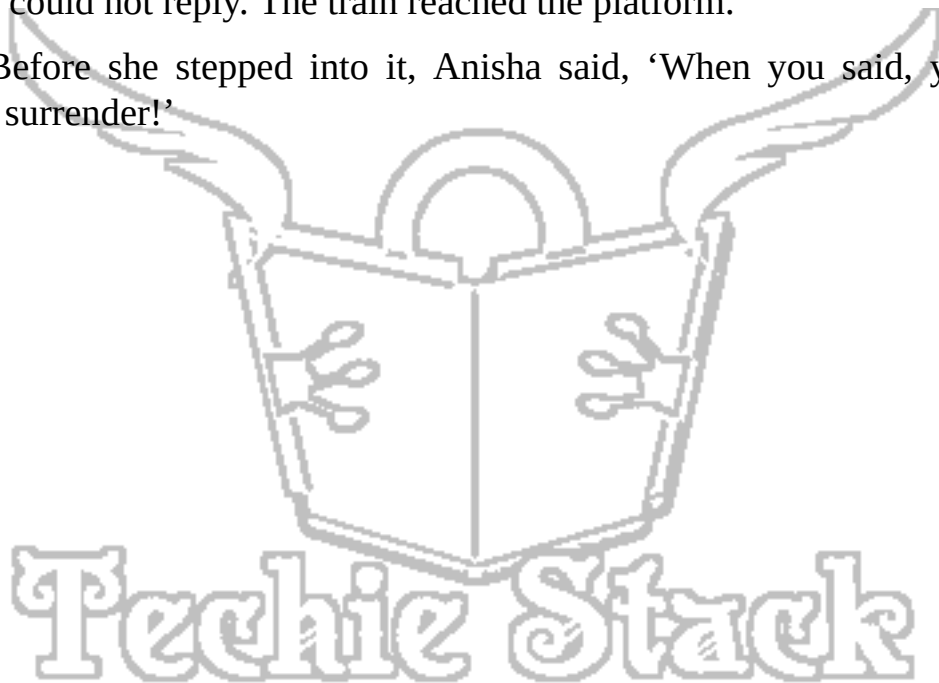
She did not reply. I could sense that she was hurt. A true friend's silence hurts more than an enemy's rough words. I knew that all she was itching to do was shout at me.

There was a rush around us. I could see the train coming. She stepped closer to me. She said, 'I finished reading your book. I had told you that I would share my honest feedback.'

She was looking straight into my eyes. 'Do you know which is the best part in your book?'

I could not reply. The train reached the platform.

Before she stepped into it, Anisha said, 'When you said, you will never surrender!'



# Chapter 27

**November 2016**

I returned to Noida by metro. Those three minutes that had passed back in Rajiv Chowk on the metro platform, had brought a surprising restlessness to my life. They had definitely answered many things. I certainly had feelings for Anisha. But these feelings were poles apart from the ones I had felt so many years ago. I was not jumping with joy. Rather, I was blank. I did not know where to go. Who could I discuss my feelings with? Something was stopping me. It was hard to accept, but it was the truth.

Life was no longer normal. I started to avoid chatting with her. I decided to end any emotional risk in life. Frankly speaking, I did not want to forge any new relationship with anyone. The fear of losing had won.

Who would tell me that it's not about getting a chance, it's about taking a chance. There were no messages to her, no calls, and no morning greetings. It was just me and my silence. I was busy with my books and replying to readers' messages. My life, which had found a straight path, had turned a full circle. A vicious circle.

I received an email.

*Hi Ajay,*

*With reference to your interview for the position Business Analyst, Business Development, we would like to schedule your last interview. A face-to-face round, tomorrow at 2 p.m., DLF Phase 2, Cognizant office, Gurgaon.*

*Kindly confirm that you are willing to relocate to Pune for work requirements.*

*Regards,*

*Corporate HR*

I was not ready to relocate to Pune. But somehow, I didn't feel a connect with this city anymore. I had lost any interest in living here. This was the same city where I had made countless memories. However, I had been told, that a change of location would help me recover from my depression.

One morning, as the cool breeze hit my face, I wondered, why Anisha had helped me? Was it solely out of friendship? Or was it a sympathetic

shoulder for a struggling man who had been fighting an endless war with his emotions? And suddenly this marriage came into the picture! All of it did not make sense.

I got a message from my publisher.

*Congratulations, Ajay. We are putting the National Bestseller Tag to our book. It's a rare achievement.*

*Oh, thank you, sir,* I responded.

I was definitely overjoyed with the news. It was a really rare moment in my life. I was overwhelmed. My eyes were wet. I had the overpowering wish to share my happiness. I picked up the phone and dialled Anisha's number. The screen flashed, 'Calling Anisha'. I disconnected the call. I did not want to take an additional emotional burden.

I started pacing the house. I walked the length of the house twice, but there was no respite. I desperately wanted to share my happiness with someone. Only Anisha's name came to mind.

In my head, I replayed my struggle to promote my book. I recollected the moment when we had sat at CP considering investing one and a half lakh rupees into promotions. How she had come up with the idea of the mini launch and had arranged it. All for my book. She had even distributed my book to all in her family.

I was not in the right frame of mind. I was filled with negative feelings. I did not want to call any other good friend. This time, I do not want to give you guys the excuse that I was depressed.

I pinged my publisher. *Sir, can you please tell me the address?*

*Which address?*

*The address from where a large number of copies of my book were ordered, in March.*

*I am not sure if this is what you are looking for. But I have an address where large quantities of your book were delivered.*

The few minutes of wait felt like an age. But finally, my phone beeped. I received a message. It read, *Trusted PG, Sector 40, Gurgaon, near Hudda market .*

I reread the address. A paying guest accommodation? I had been expecting a school or an office address.

\* \* \*

I had to visit the Cognizant Gurgaon office the next day, for the final face-to-face round. It was by video conference. They asked a couple of formal questions. It was not exactly an interview. I confirmed the earliest joining date at Pune, as per their requirement. I was done by 3 p.m. I had to return to Noida. I will confess that there was an overpowering urge to meet Anisha, but I refused to give in. I did not want to cross a line and suffer the consequences. I did not even want to look at the line.

I pulled out the address and decided to make a visit. I used Google maps to find the place, and my android phone said that it was just eight kilometres away. I drove on the pathetic roads of Gurgaon for fifteen minutes. The city looked haphazard. There were high-rise buildings cheek by jowl with rows of houses, and you never knew when you would find company for your vehicle on those roads. It was all a mix, with no match. I must thank my smartphone for having made my journey possible.

I parked my vehicle. I rechecked whether I was at the right place. A thought nagged at me. What was I doing here? Is it a crime to purchase someone's book in a large quantity? What would I do when I met the person? What would I tell them? The address could also be that of a seller office, where my book was being purchased in bulk to sell in grey markets.

I walked up to the building. I had expected to find a small shady outfit, but was shocked at what I saw. The board outside read, 'Trusted Ladies PG, Sector 40, Gurgaon, near Hudda market'.

So many orders had come from one ladies' PG? My doubts multiplied a hundred times in seconds.

I stood indecisively. A thousand things sizzled in my head. Finally, I decided to find the answer to the question that was topmost in my mind.

I rang the bell. It was an awkward moment. Standing outside a ladies' PG, waiting for some woman to walk up to me.

After two minutes, a short man opened the gates. I guessed that he was the caretaker. The patented 'Chotu' of a girls' PG, who does all the tasks from purchasing vegetables to cleaning the place, or standing in the liquor queue; and finally, the most essential job, that of leaking boyfriends' news to person in-charge of the place.

'Hi, mister. Whom do you want?' he did not make it a point to be polite.

It was another characteristic of these caretakers. Especially those who



worked in girls' PGs. It seemed like they took pride in serving the highest kind of human beings on this earth.

'I am looking for Anisha,' it was a wild guess.

'Anisha Gaur?'

I lost my voice. My assumption was right. I nodded.

'She is in office. Any message? Or you can call her. . .' he suggested easily.

'No. It's okay.'

'Who are you, by the way?' He looked at me as if he was trying to memorize my face for future reference. Who was I? I didn't want her to know that I had come here. I ignored his question.

'Are you an Amazon or Flipkart delivery person?' he hazarded a guess.

My formal dress, or maybe frequent Amazon or Flipkart deliveries had made him assume this.

'Yes, I am.'

'You can hand over the parcel to me.' 'Chotu' looked around for my delivery bag.

'No. I am supposed to hand it over to the customer only. Anisha.'

'Are you new to the job? I have received all her previous couriers.' He looked at me disdainfully.

'How many have you received?' I stared at him.

'Nowadays. . .nothing much. Earlier, it was almost one parcel a day.'

\* \* \*

It had been Anisha. She was the one who had been buying my book almost daily, sending the sales upwards. She had made it a mission for herself. It was unbelievable! That someone would go to that extent to promote my book. My heart now found a new set of feelings for her. A deep respect for Anisha.

This was the epitome of friendship.

Then, another thought struck me. Could this only be friendship? It must mean something more. . . ?

My time with Anisha replayed in my head.

The incidents – how had I met her? How did we come to know each other so well?

Then, the moment came to me. In our first meeting I had said that I wanted to see my book as a national bestseller.

Being the best friend that she was, she did all she could to make my wish happen. She was a friend who did things without letting you know. She was the friend who supports you even when the situation could not be helped.

Then the image of our last meeting flashed in front of my eyes. They had another explanation. Had it just been an attempt to make a crying person smile? Was it something far from friendship? It must have been sympathy. I understood, for sure, that it was not love.

In that light, everything began to make sense. How had all her family members known about my book? How did all her relatives have a copy of my book? Why had they all known of me as an author? How did she come to have five copies of my book for the mini launch?

It also made sense why she had wanted to experience everything that day. Why she had been adamant about the last walk and the last talk at India Gate. Because her task was done. She was moving ahead. . .My mind showed the picture very clearly.

But the heart came up with a different logic. It said: *she did all this, Ajay, because she cared for you. She had that last conversation, to give you a last chance to understand her feelings.*

I was utterly confused. Everything was going in circles. Who would want to care for a man like me? She had all the valid reasons to say no to a person like me.

What was my identity? I was a clinically depressed man. I was living in the past. I was four years older to her and a 'second-hand'. The negatives of my personality validated all her actions. I concluded that she had done everything out of sympathy.

I was lost in my mental debate when Anisha pinged. Sometimes, I feel that she knows me more than I know myself. She had pinged me on WhatsApp. WhatsApp is so amazing because it helps one avoid people if you want to. Or you could share everything without having to talk.

*Hi Ajay, how are you doing?* I understood the concern in her message, even though it sounded so formal, like we did not know each other well.

*Hi. . I am good, how are you?*

*Anything new in life?*

*Yes. I have the offer from Cognizant and will be leaving for Pune in a few days.*

*Oh great! You should be throwing a party.*

Was she looking for an excuse to meet again? Pity me some more. I did not want that to happen. I chose not to reply. The beauty of WhatsApp!

In a few minutes, I got another message from her.

*Hey, remember Arvind Uncle? He is critical. He has been hospitalized at Medanta in Gurgaon. Would you like to see him?*

I had guessed right. It was an excuse to meet. This time, she had come straight to the point. Arvind Uncle was the excuse.

For the first time, I didn't know what was on her mind. I would have wanted to see Arvind Uncle for sure, but a person lying on a hospital bed, about to take his last breath was not a visit I wanted to make.

I have seen it before.

*No, carry on , I typed.*

*No issues, I understand.*

Of course. She was the one who you do not have to explain things to. She simply understood everything.

*BTW, when you are planning to leave for Pune?*

*Within fifteen days.*

*Would it be possible for you to meet me once?*

That was Anisha. Straightforward. She always knew what she wanted.

But I had enough troubles in life. I did not want to complicate things, further. I was at the point where you no longer cared if there was a light at the end of the tunnel or not. I had had enough of everything.

*Is everything fine? Anything special you want to discuss?*

There was no reply for a few minutes. I knew that my query was rude.

*Nothing in particular. Can I have your address?*

*Ya, sure.*

I texted the address.

News of Arvind Uncle's health had shaken me. I recalled the day I had found out about his condition. Though I did not have any deep association with him, yet it gave me a familiar feeling. A feeling of helplessness. It was sad. It had unearthed some old wounds. Wounds heal, but they leave scars which are permanent.

I could not sleep. It was 2 a.m. I decided to go for a walk. November's cold was pleasant on my skin. I had an urge to do something for Arvind Uncle. I knew he would not recover miraculously.

I have seen a beautiful person struggle to breathe. I have felt the pain of departure.

I walked restlessly for hours in an attempt to exhaust myself. So that I would tire and fall sleep. I failed terribly.

Unable to find peace, I looked around in desperation. I spotted a very small temple. I was aware that the society park had a place allocated for worshippers, but I had never paid it much attention.

I walked close to the temple. I noted the idols. I looked at every eye. They were all beautiful, motionless and silent. I wanted to question them, shout at them and pray at their feet. Yes, I wanted to pray.

I sat there for a few seconds in silence, with my eyes closed. I wasn't praying for anyone. I just wanted peace for myself. But whenever I closed my eyes, I saw the most beautiful face, struggling to breathe.

I opened my eyes and they were ablaze with anger. I murmured, 'I cannot pray.'

## Chapter 28

The next day, I got a WhatsApp message from Anisha. I read the message. I sat there, my hands curled into fists, teeth gritted in silent fury. I was filled with desperation, anger and frustration. I read the message again.

*Hi Ajay, not to upset you but just thought I would inform you that Arvind Uncle went to her world.*

I did not reply. I was too blank to react. All the old bad memories came flooding back.

*Are you okay?* Anisha pinged again.

*Yes, I'm okay. May his soul rest in peace. He was a good man.*

I don't know how my mom always calls me when I need that call desperately.

We exchanged a few mundane details related to the maid, relocation, packing and few other things. She told me, 'Your father is coming the day after tomorrow, to help you shift.'

'No need, mom, I will manage.' I felt that something was amiss, so asked, 'Is he really coming for that?'

'A father is coming to meet his son. Is there something wrong with that?'

She was right. It was so simple. I don't know why I was reacting like this. 'No. How can it be wrong?'

'What happened? Why are you upset?' Mom asked.

'No mom, I am fine.'

'Do not play smart with me,' mom said.

'Seriously mom, I am just concerned about packing. . .and all the other stuff.'

She heaved a sigh. I knew that she would not accept my answer. The detective inside her always wanted to investigate every detail.

\* \* \*

I have a weird relationship with papa. We rarely talk. We are both equally responsible for this state of affairs. But he has maintained the gap between

us. A father enjoys his time with his kids, plays with them and goes on trips with the family. But my father was not that kind of a man. He was not expressive. All that mattered to him was rules and discipline. But one thing made him special. He was always there when I needed him the most. Yes, he was a silent but loving father.

I went to the railway station the next morning to fetch papa. I touched his feet, but truly speaking, I wanted to hug him and weep. Why? I was hurt somewhere, or maybe it was my depression which was making me behave uncharacteristically. But age brings barriers. I could not indulge in a crying jag. I wondered, why do we have to grow up? When we grow up, we start acting smart. We start hiding things. It's okay to share what you are going through. It is good to be a child sometimes.

He came with lots of blessings and love from mom. They were filled in the *namkeen* box, in the homemade cookies and sweets. These things made an Indian mom unbeatable.

We had some conversation around relocation and the shifting of goods. I could sense that he was not here to help me move. A father had missed his son.

My father and I slept in the same room, on two different beds. After giving up the flat, I did not have the privilege of a separate room. I did not want him to sleep alone either. He was here for me. It was another dark night. I had had many bad nights before. Thankfully, today, I had my father sleeping in the same room with me. He was asleep, but just the presence of a parent gives an inexplicable comfort. I went to the washroom for the sixth time. I don't remember the exact time, but I think it was 3 a.m. when he switched on the light.

My father was standing in front of me. I narrowed my eyes, shielding them against the bright light.

‘Papa, are you not sleeping?’

‘You are also not sleeping.’

‘Yeah...I will sleep soon.’

‘If you don't mind, can we talk?’ Papa asked.

‘Sure.’

There was genuine concern in his voice. I was wary. He would start to lecture me on marriage again. But he was not my mom type. He sat on his

bed.

‘Why have you been so upset for so many days?’

It was definitely my mom’s version of what was happening to me. Because, he had just come yesterday.

‘I am not upset. I am just a bit tense. It’s all about relocating to a different city.’

‘I am not happy to see you like this. I hope you are not hiding anything. However, if you don’t wish to talk, I will not push you.’

‘No, nothing like that papa. I am just disturbed. Actually, someone I had known, an old uncle, passed away yesterday. Sometimes we men are so weak. . .’

He understood that there was something beyond that. He turned off the light and this time, he lay down beside me.

‘A man can be weak, but I don’t want my son to be weak.’

‘I am not a strong person.’

‘Only a strong person can choose not to believe in God.’

I left the bed, drank a glass of water and lay down, again.

‘Papa, in difficult situation when a human being is helpless, if he is a person who believes in God, he can pray; at least he can let out his feelings. But look at me papa, I cannot pray to God, I don’t have belief in Him,’ I said with plain emotion. I know I was about to cry.

‘You are my strong son. Why are you suddenly feeling like that?’ He touched my back. I could feel his love and concern.

‘Actually, no one fully understands our pain. When a woman is upset, she can cry her lungs out and the whole world will come to console her. When a man cries, he is termed weak.’

‘The world is like that. But what does that matter, Ajay?’ My father had made up his mind that I should let the dam break.

‘Actually, we go through troubles, carry unnecessary egos. . .this is so terrible, papa.’ It was hard to speak. ‘People start judging me, if I go to the park, if I play any game, when I go to any social event, they judge me. They say, see, he has moved on. He has forgotten the past. Suppose a woman has lost a man, people feel differently for her. If a man loses his wife, they think his loss is less. These idiots say, “you are lucky”.’

‘Don’t be sad about this. The world is weird. Every man fights and struggles with his ego and with society. It is so easy to cry, but very difficult to smile in pain.’

‘Why are we so helpless, papa? Why can’t we control our life? Why do we have to believe in destiny and God?’ My eyes held tears. If mom would have been here, she would have hugged me and wept copiously. However, this was my father.

‘My son,’ he patted my back and explained, ‘. . .sometimes we cannot control certain things. When we lost Bhavna, I cried in isolation. There were many times when I drove my car, walked alone, spent time in the washroom, just to hide myself and cry. I scolded God, how could he have done this to my young and lovely daughter-in-law? She was so good.’ Papa sighed. He had tears in his eyes as well. ‘But then I see your face. I may sound selfish, but I was at peace thinking, at least I have my son. My family is everything to me. I have to make things right again. In spite of berating my God, I begged Him to give strength to my son. You are a strong man, Ajay. It requires courage to hate God. It requires a lot of strength to believe in yourself.’

I had always cared for mom, but papa too required a shoulder. I knew that now. I hugged my father hard. I realized that he had had gone through a tough time as well.

He kept on weeping and repeating, ‘It’s very difficult to hate God, Ajay. It’s very difficult to hate God. . .’

Techie Stack



## Chapter 29

Papa returned home. My years in Delhi were now mere luggage. Household items were packed in various boxes. The car and the scooter were booked to be transported. The amount of work that went into it all and the number of boxes that needed to be kept in mind, made me regret having accumulated so many things.

Delhi was the same city where I had walked hand in hand, with her. We had explored nooks and crannies together. She took her last breath here, and her ashes were part of the Yamuna. Her imprint was now part of the city, but this same city now suffocated me. The growing Delhi population only made the situation worse. Now, my years of association with the city were about to end. I was all set to start afresh, in a different place.

Hesitation of any kind is a sign of mental decay in humans. Many times, my heart tried to call Anisha. Not with the wrong intentions, but because we were good friends. The insecure person inside me said no. Her WhatsApp status was the unofficial but only communication for me. I was not active on WhatsApp anymore, but I read her status every day.

I was taking stock of my luggage and checking off my to-do list, when an unwanted noise diverted my attention. It was the doorbell.

I opened the door.

‘Courier for Ajay Pandey.’

‘Yes, I am Ajay.’ I looked at the courier boy’s hands trying to get a glimpse of what he had brought.

It was a normal envelope, but when I spotted the sender’s name, I was confused. It was sent by Arvind Uncle.

I knew who the real sender was even without opening the package. I opened the envelope, making sure I stayed emotionless. A familiar paper slipped into my hand. I unfolded the letter. Anisha must have sent this.

*Hello ~~Mrs.~~ Mr. Pandey,*

*It is all so weird. I never thought that I would write to you like this. But this is the beauty of life. It never goes as planned. Recently, I met a wise man who said, if you keep on thinking about the soul, then the soul*

*will keep thinking about you. If I keep on missing you, you are going to miss me too.*

*I am learning new things, and most important of them all, is about the different aspects of life. To sum up, I am happy. And so should you be. I don't know dear, if there is life after death, or not. But one day, we will meet, for sure. How and where? I don't know. In which form is this meeting going to happen, I don't know. I don't want you to be sitting and waiting for this to happen. Till then, I will choose the path of forgiveness and love, and choose the path of life.*

*Love you, and you are the best ~~wife~~ husband.*

*Yours Mrs. Pandeyji*

I read the letter at least ten times. This was not just a letter. It was a message sent by her. But the rational side of my mind told me: *you are the one who wrote this letter.*

It hardly matters how strong we are, as masters of our own mind. We are still slaves of our emotions. The feelings I had been hiding for months were about to explode. I kept thinking about Anisha the whole day. Our meeting at that juncture in my life and getting to be the good friends that we became. I decided to fight against my inner self which was holding me away from the one who I wanted to talk to.

It was a Sunday. I was sure that Anisha would be at her PG.

'Hi Anisha.' I called her.

'Hi, Mr. Writer. How are you doing?' She still called me this.

'Not good.'

'What happened?'

'I am leaving for Pune. But before leaving the city, I want to meet you.'

'Sure,' she said easily.

'I am leaving for your place right now.' I told her.

'Is this the last time we are meeting?' This was a valid question coming from her.

'I am coming to meet my friend. Whether it's our last meeting or not, I leave it to you.'

I didn't know whether she understood me or not. I did not even ask what the outcome of the meeting with Vicky's family had been. I took my time in dressing up. I checked myself out twice in the mirror. A voice from the mirror said: *So finally you are all set?*

I unpacked a box and pulled out two big bags. The bags which were the toughest to open.

I unzipped one of the two bags, pulled out one of her sweaters and placed it in the bag which had my stuff.

I carried the two bags to my car and headed towards *Sai Kripa*. It was an orphanage in Noida, sector 12. I often visited the orphanage to spend quality time with the children there. But today, my reason for going there was different. I met the children and distributed chocolates, which was my practice whenever I visited.

I was sitting with the caretaker.

'Hi, sir. How are you doing today? You are not going to spend time with the children?' she asked.

'No. In fact, I wanted to let you know that I may not be able to visit again.'

'Oh. . .what happened?' She cast a glance at the kids. She looked disappointed.

'I am shifting to Pune. . .Job transfer.'

'I understand,' she nodded.

'I wish to donate a few clothes.'

'Whose clothes?'

'My wife's.' I did not have the courage to say more.

She must have understood why I was doing this. How sensitive the matter was to me. She said a little hesitantly, 'Sir, actually. . .we do not take used clothes. And they are children, the clothes will not fit them.'

I guess I hadn't considered this. I sat there wondering what to do. The bags were not a burden. They were something beyond, which I cannot write here. I can't put the pain into words.

The caretaker looked at my face. She must have noted my dilemma. She offered, 'Sir, I know an orphanage where teenagers live. If you are okay, we can share these with them.'

I nodded, my face devoid of expression.

‘Please tell me where I should leave the bags?’

‘You can leave them here. I will take care of them.’

I looked at the bags. I was not happy with what was happening. It was like my life was inside those two bags.

‘No. The bags are a little heavy. Please tell me where to put them?’

I picked the bags and she led me towards a room. It was a storage room designed like a warehouse. It was filled with lots of stuff. Flour sacks, rice packets, children’s dresses, school books and bundles of stationary. I looked at the caretaker. I do not know what she understood, but she left me alone there.

My heart raced. The emotions were overpowering. I kept the bags on the ground and opened the zip. Every dress had some memory and each memory held pain. The worst part of holding on to the memories is not the memories, not the pain. It’s the realization that the moments will never come back. One by one, I touched her favourite dress, hugged the warmth of her sweater to me. . .The bright t-shirt, her jeans, the gown. . .I brought them all close to my lips in feather touch kisses. The suits still had her perfume’s fragrance on them. I breathed it deep within me. The tears ran down my cheeks, uninhibited. I hid my face in her t-shirt and wept silently.

But whenever I cried, a sweet familiar voice inside me said, ‘You are not deleting the person, Pandeyji, you are adding one more relationship.’

Techie Stack

# Chapter 30

Every pain has some pleasure hidden in it. Every pleasure has some pain in disguise. We may stick to only black or white, but the reality remains grey.

After *Sai Kripa*, Gurgaon was my next destination. I drove my car in silence, my emotions playing hide and seek with me. I reached the place. Finding the PG was not difficult. I had been there before. I parked my vehicle and stood outside the gates.

I picked up my cell phone, and messaged on WhatsApp, *I am waiting outside the PG*. I could have called, but I don't know why, I chose to WhatsApp her.

*Coming in two minutes*. I got the reply.

I looked into the car's mirror. I saw a man who did not look old. I knew this person. I have known him for the past thirty-one years. Today, he looked a bit younger than his age. He did not have a paunch. The sickly paleness had left him, and he had become the ideal model for a 'fair and handsome' cream. Clean-shaven, eyes bright, he appeared rested and confident. The dark circles had vanished.

I waited for two minutes. Those two minutes were the most awkward moments of my life. So much had happened in my mind since we had last met.

Bhavna's mom's statement played in my ears, '...there is a difference between love and sympathy. The person who sympathizes would say, we are always with you and the one who loves you would say, I am always with you. . .'

After a few minutes, a beautiful face came out. She was wearing the shawl I had gifted to her while returning from Rudraprayag.

I noticed that she was smiling more than was warranted. I could sense the bravery behind that fake smile. She was trying hard to keep the anxiety from her face. She stood quietly in front of me. I had missed her. I wanted to hug her close to me, but, how could I? She stepped closer.

'So Ajay? Is this our last meeting?'

'I don't know. It all depends on you.'

'How?'

‘I have received a lot of complaints. Your stories always make us cry. . .please write a story with a happy ending. . .’

‘Excuse me! I am not a writer.’ She tried hard to hide her smile.

‘I will write a book. This time, I want to write a happy ending. Will you be a part of my story?’

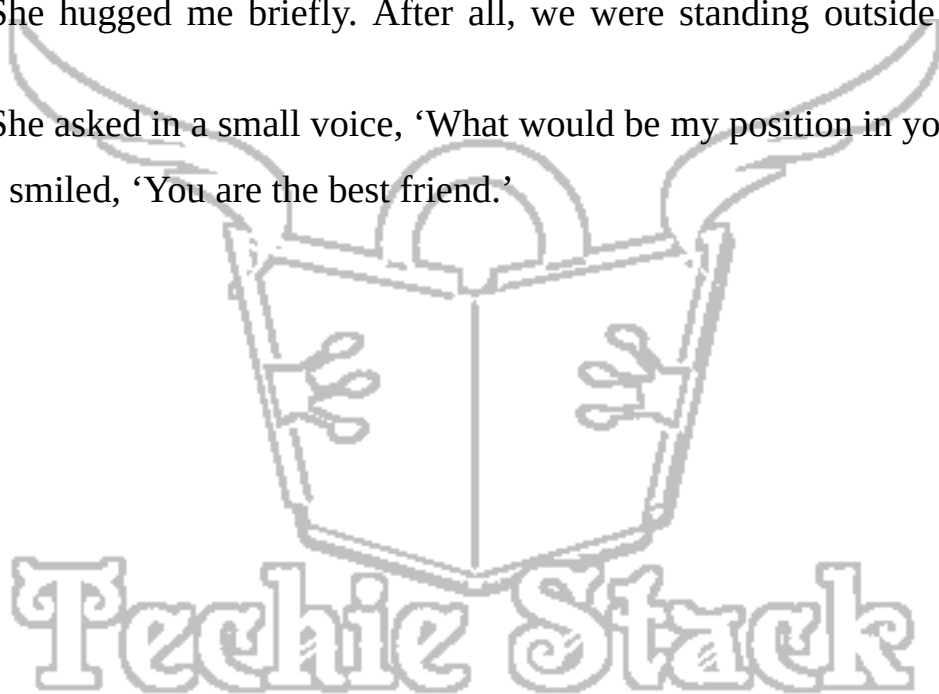
She smiled and said earnestly, ‘Don’t you worry. I am always with you.’

I smiled. Those were the only words I wanted to hear. I summoned all my courage and said, ‘Every person has a unique place in one’s life. The best thing is to have a friend for life. I want my friend by my side, forever.’

She hugged me briefly. After all, we were standing outside a girls’ PG.

She asked in a small voice, ‘What would be my position in your life?’

I smiled, ‘You are the best friend.’



# Anisha Speaks

Hi friends! Let me share my version of the story. Enough of depression, how to fight against adversities, and all that *gyaan* !

I am a blind follower of Sri Sri. But not so blind that I cannot apply my brain. I hail from a decent family. Struggles and tragedies are theories which I read about in books, or have watched on television. I have a simple rule in life. A good person should not be treated badly by destiny. Yes, I strongly believe in destiny and completely trust God.

When I saw Ajay for the first time, I saw a person who was helping a sixty-year-old lady who was doing her job. The strange thing was, he did not even have extra warm clothing for himself. All he had was an extra shawl. Yes, a woman's shawl. I concluded that he was a God-loving person, who was helping an old lady who was serving in a temple.

I was shocked when I got to know that he hated God. I decided that I needed to find out the reason. I could not allow a good person to get destroyed by rage and hatred. I believe that if you hate, you will receive hatred in return. Yes, I believe in karma and all the other stupid religious things.

Initially, Ajay was a case study for me. Really, does this kind of person exist? Who genuinely hates God? I was curious to know more about him. Then I got to know that it was all due to his bad life experience.

I was so confused. I asked Guruji: *does not loving God make a man good or bad?* Guruji did not give a clear answer. He said that a person's character was not defined by whether he loved or hated God.

After some time, I got to know that Ajay had written a book in memory of his wife. It was touching. In today's emotionless world, when every relationship is dying its own death, here was a man who had decided to make her immortal.

Believe me, he sounded like a flop hero who said, '...you tried to delete the most important chapter of my life, I will write an entire book.' But I had a lot of respect for this flop hero.

Everything was okay, normal. But then he gave me an unusual gift. A gift which only an innocent person can give. He gave me something which belonged to her. Which was a part of his heart. Yes, I am talking about the

pink shawl. It touched my heart which I hadn't even known about. That was the moment I said, 'Ajay, you may choose to surrender but I will not. I will stand with my friend till he recovers.'

Ajay had to find a motive in life to live. He had no desire left for anything. I wondered every day, what could lure him to fight again in the game of life.

I noticed an enthusiasm in him whenever he talked about his book. He had created that with plenty of passion and love. I could sense his attachment to the book. One thing was clear. I didn't know whether the success of the book could help him recover or not; but if he did fail, it would be impossible for him to even stand.

How could I allow my best friend to lose? I searched a million times—how do you promote a book? I found a unique way, but I knew that he would never agree to it. I chose the month in which books sell the minimum. It was March. March has board exams, the financial year ending and exam preparation leave. I decided to execute my plan in that month.

Please do not ask how many copies I ordered and gifted. Sometimes, you can run with a lie but you cannot hide from the truth. It will catch you.

Even a little jump in ranking, a small appreciation on Facebook, an emotional message. . . everything excited Ajay.

I found a strange energy in him where his book was concerned. He replied to all the messages he received on Facebook. I will confess, I created a fake Facebook account and pinged him as a reader. He replied! I was happy that he was not one of those authors who address their readers as 'fan'. There was no ego, no unnecessary pride. He was the same – the simple and grounded Ajay.

I discovered a confident man in Ajay. It was all because of the success of his book. But he was still holding on to his old memories. I could sense that he had feelings for me, but how could I expect him to accept them? Because he himself was not aware of them.

There was nothing between Vicky and me. I faked my groom-hunt news. I hoped that in desperation at least, he would express his feelings. But he said something which made me hate him that moment. It was a reflection of others' opinion of him. I could not accept that some stupid human being had addressed him as 'second-hand'.

He was the best man, fighting a battle with his own good and bad



memories.

He had lost his love. Only *she* had the power to help him heal. Only a message from Bhavna could have helped him heal.

A real friend will be kind but straightforward, caring but forceful, understanding but honest. I was afraid of sending him a courier like that, but I did.

He promised me that he would forgive God one day, only if he got her back in any form. Hope you understand what I mean. . .But that doesn't define him as a person.

Let me apologize for forcing him to write this book. He was reluctant to share the story of his life again. It was I who forced him to do that. I thought that if he didn't, it would look like he was just a one book wonder. That his success was just luck. That could ruin him again. I told him that you have to write again. You cannot leave everyone in tears. You cannot mark a trend of negative endings. After all, we are Indians. We believe in happy endings. If it is not happy, it's not an ending.

So, if you do not like this work and hate him for sharing his personal life again, then I am the culprit. If you like the work, then please drop a review and help your author friend.

You may wonder why he called me 'best friend'? And what had happened after that? This book was all about how Ajay recovered. He had already decided on the title, *You are the Best Wife* , for her story. That is one title no one else can touch.

Everyone has a friend during every stage of life. But only the lucky ones have the same friend in all stages of life.

I would love to be his friend for life. After all, he is not deleting the relationship, he is just adding one more friend, and there is no relationship purer than friendship. I am honoured that I am that best friend.



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