

PRITAM





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1. Glimpses Of My Childhood

Like every day, this morning felt exceptionally beautiful. It was a perfect spring day, with the harvested fields shining under the morning sun. Feeling like Superman, I started my grand adventure to reach the edge of the Earth. But after a minute or two of running, I got tired, and my childhood dream stayed just that—a dream.

I was born on March 17, 2001, into a middle-class family, which I believe is the toughest kind of life anyone can have. I was given the name Pritam. What they didn't realize is that my name represents a 'lover,' which I see as their biggest mistake. Who knows if my future will live up to my name.

Most of my childhood memories are from our small house, where six of us lived: my parents, my older brother, my younger sister, my almost a century older grandpa, and me. My mother only had a primary education. She was our first teacher and made us learn to write the alphabet. My father had some level of education, too. He even had a chance to go to America after landing his first job, but he didn't go because both of our mothers were against it. So, he decided to start his own business instead.

My brother, just a year older than me, was a genius when it came to studies. His favorite toy was a rifle, and I remember how he would jump from heights like a hero, shooting down all the imaginary villains. What started as a childhood passion has now become his career. He completed his bachelor's degree at the National Defence Academy and is now in his final year of officer training in Dehradun.

My sister, on the other hand, had nothing to do with studying. She's the youngest, so she's everyone's favorite, and no one dared to touch her—probably because no one wanted to deal with her crying all day. She looks and acts just like you'd imagine a youngest sister would.

We all had a habit of playing on our own, but I was the king of it. I had my own fantastic world of superheroes, and my whole day would pass by in these imaginary games. I'd pretend to be a hero like Vanraj from *Chandramukhi*, sometimes Shaktimaan, or even Dracula. And, of course, there were villains too. I was so deeply immersed in that world that almost every night, I'd dream of a villain. He worshiped Goddess Kali, and I was always prepared to be his sacrifice. I'd wake up in a sweat, asking for water.

We started school at a very young age. I followed my brother to our local school, bringing my imaginative world along with me. I often shared my stories with friends. At that time, we watched a lot of action movies, so naturally, I assumed I knew Karate. One day, a senior called us over to show off our 'skills,' and what happened next was hilarious. My brother and I both made 'knife hands' and started jabbing them into his belly repeatedly. He just stood there, smiling, while everyone else burst out laughing.

I don't remember if I studied much back then, but I was surprised to see a first division on my report card. I really had a fear of school since I never did my homework. Our teacher was quite cruel. One summer day, while I was sitting in class, the electricity went out. I picked up his attendance register and started to fan myself. When he saw me, he slapped me. I knew I had to take revenge for that slap. The next time he left the classroom, I took the register, tore out the latest page, and chewed it.

Our life was full of excitement. We had a group of kids, including neighbors and my siblings. Our mornings would start with either sneaking fruit from nearby trees or picking flowers. Sometimes, we'd walk long distances to explore new places. During the rainy season, we'd head to the nearby flooded areas, where a neighbor bhaiya would take us out on his boat to pick lotus flowers. Evenings were even more exciting. We'd play different games like Hide & Seek, Thief & Police, or run through the crop fields. It was the time I now wish for.

If I look back at my past and think about what I was good at, I'd say that if being a thief were a profession, I might have been quite successful. Everyone who knew me would probably agree. The reason is simple: I

had a knack for being secretive. I rarely spoke, and most of the time, I'd be talking to myself or lost in my imaginative games.

I was a sneaky little thief, and my father's pocket was often my target. I remember one incident when a worker at our house had a radium watch that fascinated me. I asked him how much it cost, and he said 500 rupees. Within a minute, I returned with the money in my hand, having, as usual, stolen it from my father. He started shouting for my mother, and I got scared. I quickly hid and destroyed the money.

Back then, snakes were common around our house. One day, I accidentally injured a baby snake. For the next two to three days, we had several visits from groups of snakes, which finally ended when my mother offered them a bowl of milk. Pandits said a "Nag" and "Nagin" (king and queen snakes) lived in our house, and I always believed those things. I even remember a young sadhu, dressed all in white, visiting our home. He looked at my hands and told me I would become an engineer one day.

There was a time when I fell seriously ill, and a pandit came to remove what he said was black magic on me. That night, I had the most terrifying dream—giant stones or iron spikes were moving around me, and it felt incredibly real. I woke up in the middle of the night and saw a big monkey hanging inside the house. It had a huge red mouth and a long tail, and it was staring at me. The moment I shouted, it disappeared. But how could a monkey have gotten inside? Surely, it was just a dream.

Like every Indian, I was exposed to religion and God from a young age. I had a deep belief in God, and that belief made me think He was the only way to achieve my childhood dream of becoming a superhero. But how would I reach Him?

One day, I decided to start *Tapasya* (penance) and tried to run away from home. Unfortunately, with my tiny legs, I couldn't even get past the gate in our backyard. So, the plan failed, but not my eagerness. The next thing I did was completely unbearable. I took different chemicals and pesticides, and mixed them together. I poured a small amount into a cap and went to the crop field behind our home. The smell was awful, but my desire to meet God was much stronger. And I drank it.

I can't describe what I felt at that moment. I was all alone, and the smell was unbearable. Within a minute, I started vomiting. I rushed back home and drank some water, only to vomit again. For the next two or three days, I had unpleasant burping, but no one ever found out what I had done.

2. Young Pritam In School

A new chapter began when I took admission in Delhi Public School. I was still in KG, and that's where I made my first real friend, Aman. We were very close friends. From class to the sports ground, he always accompanied me, and we would have our lunch together. His father was a wealthy businessman, and he often talked about this, but I had nothing to do with it at all. Instead, it was Aman who had to bear the consequences of my stupid act. There's an interesting story about this.

There was also a girl named Shivangi, who was the class captain and top student. Meanwhile, I was the kid who only knew, "A computer is an electronic machine... (silence)." One day, I took a piece of paper, carefully changed my handwriting, and wrote: "I love you, Shivangi – Aman," then slipped it into a girl's bag.

I can't believe a five- or six-year-old could come up with something like that! Afterward, I walked past that group of girls, acting very smart, just to hear what they were saying. One of them said, "I can't believe Aman could do this." Thankfully, nothing ever came of it. Poor Aman!

Every year during some festivals, we had stage events, and that year, there was a Radha and Krishna dance performed by the junior students. Since Krishna is often portrayed with a wheatish complexion, I thought I would be perfect for the role. But no one even considered me for it. Instead, our class captain from the boys' side got the opportunity to dance with Shivangi. Still, I knew that with my fear of performing on stage, I wouldn't have been able to do it anyway.

I remember my name being entered for some sports events, which I never wanted to participate in. First, there was the ball-and-spoon race. Lacking the patience to balance the ball, I ended up being the boy who stayed on the track the longest without finishing. During the high jump, on a scorching summer day, I jumped too early—before even reaching the rope.

My brother went to a boarding school in Bhagalpur City. From a very early age, he used to tell our mom that he wanted to study and go outside. I, on the other hand, always had complaints about the hostel—the food, the living conditions, or something else. I ended up following him there as well.

There, I made many new imaginative friends. My stories started to expand from Spider-Man to ghosts and vampires. While my classmates were repeating 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,' I was lost in pictures of fairies and dinosaurs in an encyclopedia.

I noticed something unique about my brother and me: we were the only ones who never got punished by the principal. Eventually, my brother had to bear the consequences of my tantrums. My wish on a shooting star came true, and we left that hostel within a year.

Next, my father sent me to St. Michael's School in Katihar with my sister, while my brother got admitted to New Brilliant School in our own city, though he stayed in the hostel. St. Michael's School was more a place of terror than a school. The principal was extremely cruel. But again, I broke the record of not being punished for more than 10 days.

The Principal was a Brahmin with an old-fashioned mentality, and he believed punishing students was the way to make them excel in studies. My handwriting was terrible, and that became a reason for my punishment. You won't believe it, but within two or three days, my handwriting became the most beautiful. I was asked to visit every classroom and show my handwriting to everyone. After that, the cruel principal started liking me.

He had two sons, and the younger one, named Sunny, was my classmate. We really enjoyed each other's company and became best friends. I remember one day when there was a cricket match on TV. I hated watching cricket, but Sunny and I preferred watching cartoons. While all the senior students were preparing to watch the match, Sunny came to me with the TV remote and switched the channel to cartoons.

As expected, everyone started shouting, but no one dared to take the remote from him. He said, "Pritam doesn't like cricket, so we won't watch

it." Everything depended on me. If I said to switch back to cricket, he would. I felt so embarrassed because everyone was staring at me, so I naturally said to switch it back to cricket.

Since Sunny was often in my company, it was natural for him to get pulled into my dream world. I strongly believed in the concept of souls. I used to think that after I died, I would gain superpowers, and we talked about this a lot. His dream was to break free from his strict father, and mine was to gain magical powers.

Eventually, we started making plans. One day, Sunny managed to get hold of two knives. The plan was simple: we would hide on the terrace, and once the doors were locked and everyone was asleep, we'd execute our plan by killing each other. Can you believe that two kids in first grade could come up with such a plan?

That same day, we already began feeling some fear, but we stuck to the plan. Once everyone went to bed, we hid on the terrace. A senior girl came and locked the door. It was a calm, clear night. At first, we were silent, then we started discussing: "What if we don't die? What if one of us dies but not the other?"

I can't fully explain what we were feeling at that moment. Eventually, we threw away the knives and started pounding on the door. Thankfully, no one ever found out about this, as it had only been 10 or 15 minutes since the door was locked, and we came up with a simple excuse. We never talked about it again, and during my first vacation, I never dared to come back.

3. Desire For Super Powers

My sister and I enrolled in NBS, where my brother was already studying. The environment was different, and I liked the school because we were no longer in a boarding school. The only thing I hated was the school van rides. Going to and coming back from school were the worst moments for me. Some girls would always make comments like, "He's so quiet," or "He never says a word," which made me feel even more uncomfortable.

Being an introvert, I wouldn't say a word. But they didn't know that I was a born devil, I stayed quiet only because my sister was traveling with me. My sister, however, was the complete opposite of me—she never stopped talking.

Between these horrible rides, I had a lovely moment as well. I was starting to have a crush on a girl named Alvira K. We would travel every day in the same van, but the problem was that my sister would sit between us, and they were good friends. I couldn't say a single word to her. So, something remained untouched before it could take shape.

As I grew, so did my thoughts. New superheroes and stories began to appear. I would make a cape using a towel and pretend to fly like Superman, while pillows became my enemies. I strongly believed that I could fly, just as I did in my dreams. Yet, I felt I needed to meet God to make it happen.

One day, my friend brought a thornapple from a Datura plant. It was Basant Panchami. Since it's a poisonous plant, it could have been enough to kill me. I tried chewing it, but luckily, the taste was so unpleasant that I spit it out. Maybe I wasn't in the mood to die that day, especially since that same friend was planning to show me the house of a girl.

On Republic Day that year, he had asked me who my girlfriend was. Being around 9 years old and single, I felt embarrassed and randomly looked around before settling my eyes on the most beautiful girl in our

school at the time. No one would believe it, but I was just in 3rd standard, and she was in 8th or 9th. I did it only to show off to my friends. Her name was Kajal, but I never understood why everyone called her Kimmi. As we had planned, we left school early, and my friend showed me her house, which I now realize was wrong.

My desire to become a superhero grew stronger over time. One day, I woke up early and headed to the railway station. I boarded the first train I saw, determined to find an untouched forest where I could meditate and gain superpowers—or, if that failed, die under a train. What I hadn't considered was what I'd do when I got hungry. I had a habit of eating every hour or two. By noon, I got off at a deserted station.

Now, I was completely alone. I wandered around the ticket counter aimlessly, and a man eating lunch nearby noticed me. Eventually, he approached and asked what I was doing there. I had no excuse, so I told him the truth—I had run away from home. He asked for my father's phone number, but I was too scared, so I pretended I didn't remember it. I did have a friend's number scribbled on my hand from the day before, but it had faded. The man tried several numbers but couldn't get through. Eventually, I gave him my father's number.

When he called, my father was already at the police station. The way he asked, "Where is your son?" made everyone think the man was a kidnapper. Eventually, everything got sorted out, and I went with him to his house. He lived in the railway quarters with his wife, daughter, and son. His wife treated me with kindness, even though I was a stranger. I finally ate some food and drank a glass of milk.

Later that evening, a man came in a car to pick me up. He had thought I had run away because of some romantic issue, but he was shocked to see that I was just a young boy.

On the way home, I started thinking of a believable excuse to tell my father. When we arrived, I made up a wild story about how a man had made me faint with a handkerchief—just like in the movies—and took me to the railway station in a van. I said I had regained consciousness on the train and got off at the next station. There were more questions, and I added more details to the story.

When we arrived, we first went to the police station, where my father explained the story I had made up while my eyes were fixed on the policeman's gun the entire time. When we got home, I was shocked to see a crowd of people gathered at my house, and my mother was busy performing a *puja* (worship). I had to repeat my story to them as well. I don't know if they believed me, but at that point, I had no other option.

4. Did I have talent?

My brother had to take the Sainik School entrance exam, so he took admission in Katihar. By this time, I had completed my 4th grade, and as usual, Papa sent me there as well.

It was 2012, and I was 11. Unfortunately, the school was just as bad as St. Michael's School. It was the worst school I ever attended. Interestingly, the principal was the younger brother of the principal from that school, and he shared the same rigid mentality. He believed that since I had been studying in a CBSE school, it would be difficult for me to keep up with the 5th-grade curriculum, which followed the Bihar Board. So, without even testing me, he placed me in 3rd grade.

I hated the environment there: poor living conditions, bad food, and a lack of quality education. I could hardly adjust. My brother was the only thing that kept me going. The students were even more irritating—almost everyone used abusive words. While I had some friends, Hasan N. became my friend because he was different from the others; at least he didn't speak like that.

During this time I received the shocking news of my grandpa's passing. Next, my brother cleared the entrance exam on his first attempt and left the school, which meant I was left alone.

Since the principal trusted me, I was allowed to stay with the seniors in a room that wasn't locked. I took advantage of this and made my way out of the hostel.

It was a dark night, and I didn't have the courage to jump over the wall into the jungle. Everyone used to say that the jungle had once been a burial ground for the dead. I was terrified. I woke up Hasan, and finally, I jumped into the jungle. I can't describe the moment when I found myself alone there. In an instant, all my fear vanished. From that day on, I no longer feared darkness; instead, I started to like nights more than the day.

By the time anyone realized I was gone, I was already at home, receiving a lecture from my mother. Thankfully, my father and the principal were both out with my brother.

Unlike every other time, I couldn't follow my brother to Sainik School until I cleared the entrance exam. I had no other option but to return to the same dreadful school. I was terrified about the punishment, but to my surprise, the principal didn't even ask me about it.

Maths was considered the most important subject at the school, and I initially struggled due to the Hindi syllabus. But since I had already completed 4th grade and was placed in 3rd, it gave me an advantage. Soon, I became one of the top students in Maths. There were three of us who were considered good at it: my friend Badal, Nisha Raj, and me. They became my competition, and being good at Maths made me a favorite of our strict Maths teacher, Mr. Amit.

During my time there, I developed a strong interest in space science. I would borrow seniors' science books to study planets, stars, their life cycles, and more. The topic that fascinated me the most was aliens. Another guy in my class, Prashant, shared the same interest. He would always bring new magazines about space and aliens, and I would stay up all night reading them.

My fantasy world began to blend with space science and aliens, shaping itself into stories. All my imaginative games were based on these stories and various superheroes. I remember sharing these stories with my classmates and explaining space facts to them.

Furthermore, I could draw amazing pictures and human faces. I drew many space diagrams, and once even created a drawing showing the process of cloning a human, which fascinated our science teacher so much that she asked me to draw one for her.

I also remember drawing a world map and adding various science facts about space, aliens, and more, which I pasted on the classroom wall. Many senior students came to see it, but they made fun of me because of the text I had written below: *'I am the great scientist Dr. Pritam Jaiswal.'* It was actually a line from the famous superhero TV show

Shaktimaan, which eventually made me take the drawing down from the wall.

Back then, I was a true devotee of gods and religion. I would worship every religion. Once, I started reading the Bible, which seemed more like a comic. It took me three days to finish it. Amit Sir also noticed me reading the Bible late at night, and somehow, I sensed that he didn't like it.

I fled the hostel for the second time after hearing that my maternal uncle has committed suicide, heading straight to Granny's house.

When I returned, no one even questioned me. I was sitting on the ground, feeling upset, when Soni ma'am came over to talk to me. Soni ma'am was everyone's favorite. She had a unique way of teaching—never getting angry and always encouraging us. Her presence alone made me feel better, even though I didn't respond much at the time.

I was often found in the classroom reading my interests, even during game time. That's when I became a target for some senior students. For some reason, they started suspecting me of being involved in the thefts happening there. Theft was common, and I always seemed to be in suspicious places. The reason was simple: whenever I got lost in my imaginative games, I couldn't control myself and would completely immerse myself in them without noticing where I actually was.

One day, I was flying and fighting my imaginary villains. I would use my fingers and sound effects to battle them. I was completely lost in my own world, unaware that Amit Sir and some students were watching me. Suddenly, when my fingers moved in their direction, I noticed them sitting at a distance, watching and smiling at me. Feeling shy, I quickly made my way to the classroom.

Although I used to say that I wanted to be a scientist. However, I was also a good singer at that time. I could sing well, which is why Amit Sir liked me more. He would often call me to sing for him. Arijit Singh was my favorite, and I often found myself singing his songs.

On one occasion, I was asked to sing on the mic. That was the first time I sang in public, and I chose my favorite song, *Tum Hi Ho*. I still remember Soni Ma'am being there. Unlike the other teacher standing next to her, urging her to leave, she stayed until I finished my song.

I still wonder what talents I had. Sometimes I thought of myself as a singer or a drawing artist; other times, I imagined myself as a storyteller or a scientist. But the place I was in was not meant for me. I wish I had been somewhere else.

5. Change Of Personality

During the vacation, I didn't want to return to the hostel. By then, my desire to die was at its highest. One night, while everyone was asleep, I woke up quietly. I remember crawling under my parents' bed and unlocking two doors without making a sound. I stepped outside into the darkest night I had ever seen—there was no moon, no electricity, just silence. I made my way to the railway tracks and eventually found myself standing on them.

I could hear the loud sound of a train in the distance, with its headlight shining far away. The train started moving and was getting closer. I was very scared. I stood frozen, and my heartbeat matched the sound of the railway track. Before the train could come closer, I ran straight towards home. Now, instead of fear, my mind was filled with a deep hatred for God.

Halfway home, I noticed my father following me. I continued on, and he quietly trailed behind until we reached home. My mother and sister were waiting for me. Sensing what was about to happen, my mother urged me to go to bed quickly, but it was too late—my father had already arrived, and I got beaten badly. I spent the whole night thinking about it.

From then on, my faith in God and religion began to fade. Back in school, I started to insult anyone who spoke to me about God or religion. There were students from different religions, and many of them became my targets. Eventually, I found myself in conflict with students who believed in God.

But as time passed, I began to see things more practically rather than through faith. I started focusing on my studies, and I remember scoring 99 out of 100 in Mathematics. But wait, this doesn't mean I was a genius. It was only because we were told to memorize every single word from the math book. And if you're taught the same book for two years, anyone can become a "genius."

I was in 5th grade at the time, and that's when I first discovered masturbation. And I was at least the first one in my class to break anyone's record, and as a result, I was often found in the lavatory.

I always imagined myself as Superman. Once, Badal asked me if I could fight anyone. Without a second thought, I replied, "Even if they all came at once." But soon, my belief was going to disappear.

We had two separate rooms: one for juniors, where I stayed, and another for students in the competitive class. A senior guy lived with us, and one day, he found himself in conflict with all the other classmates. I don't know why, but it was decided that there would be a fight that night between him and the seniors. All of us juniors were supposed to be on his side. Since we were triple in numbers, I agreed quickly.

But that night, something unexpected happened. The seniors came up with a clever plan—they realized fighting all at once would make too much noise. So, they decided to settle it with one-on-one matches. They chose a candidate from their side, and I was picked first from our side since I was tall for my class and matched the senior's height.

The fight started, and I never imagined my first fight would go this way. It was completely one-sided. He punched me one after another, and within a minute, I admitted defeat. Then another fight, and another—we lost all the matches. I stayed silent.

This might have been normal for them, but for me, it was my defeat in my very first fight. I started realizing how weak I felt in this environment. Naturally, I began pushing myself to adapt. This was when I first started exercising. After that, I had more fights, and, as expected, using foul language became common for me. In fact, it seemed necessary to survive there.

Everything was fine until one day a guy complained about me to Amit Sir. He was trying to irritate me, and I filled him with abuse. He then explained every exact word to Amit Sir. I wasn't worried about the punishment but about losing Amit Sir's trust. I could sense what was going on in his mind. The following month, he also left the school. We were now in the 6th standard.

As the exam approached, I focused on my studies and stayed up late to prepare. I felt confident, but during the exam, I realized I had only concentrated on Maths. What frustrated me was seeing the English version of the questions below the Hindi ones. Why didn't they allow me to choose English from the start, instead of wasting my two years? After the exam, I was sure I wouldn't pass.

By this time, we had moved into our new house. Now in the 7th standard, my principal considered giving me another chance. But all I wanted was to leave that school. Still, I took two more entrance exams for JNV and Sainik School that year but didn't pass.

While many of my classmates left, new students joined our class. Abhishek was one of them. He was kind, interested in science, and a good artist. Since we shared the same interest we became good friends. While he would draw amazing pictures, I had become a naughty artist by this time. I had a collection of naked pictures that I had drawn myself. They looked very realistic, but they weren't something to show in public. If I had dared to show them, I'd have received slaps instead of applause. Therefore, only some got the opportunity to see them before I destroyed them.

Among the girls, Farhat was different—she was open and friendly, which made her the only one I could talk to. Otherwise, there was a drought of girls; only a few were in the hostel. It seems almost impossible that during my entire time there, I never got seriously interested in anyone. After all, I am Pritam. But the school just wasn't my type. Maybe that's why I never got to be my true self.

Rahul Bhaiya, a college student, was around as well. He was sometimes a friend, sometimes a teacher, and sometimes a love mentor. He was a passionate cricketer and a successful lover. I shared a room with him and Ashish Bhaiya, the principal's son.

I still had a bad habit of teasing some religious guys. To them, I was a villain. There was a boy from the 5th standard, Taslim, who was the only one to stay close to me. Maybe he liked my company, so he would come to me frequently. I made fun of him for his religion. He was a good guy. I never heard any bad words from him. So, I didn't feel good about teasing

him. But when you're the leader of a bad gang in your class, it becomes your job to keep it up.

Gradually, coming here started to feel like the biggest mistake of my life. I realized how much I had changed. By that time, I had also lost my singing skills. There were no opportunities for skills or creativity. The only thing running through my mind was that I needed to leave this place and get admission to a better school.

6. My First Love

In every school, there's always that one love story that stands out, unlike any other, a story like mine that changed me forever. November 15, 2016, is an unforgettable day for me; It was the first time I took my first glance at her.

It was on the 14th that she arrived, and I kept hearing news that a girl had enrolled in the 6th standard. It seemed ordinary, and I didn't think much of it. Later I found out she was Taslim's elder sister. During the evening prayer, she was in the girls' queue, but I was too shy to look at her that day. The next morning, I tried again but couldn't gather the courage.

It was the morning assembly time when I truly looked at her for the first time. There she was, with a cute face and a lovely dress. She had short hair, kind of like Shraddha Kapoor in *Chhichhore*. The moment I saw her, it felt like everything started moving in slow motion. I wouldn't say it was love at first sight, but the feeling was... different. She looked truly amazing. Back in the classroom, I couldn't stop thinking about her, even though I didn't know why.

I didn't realize it yet, but my story of becoming Pritam had already begun. Nothing really happened, but something inside me changed; I stopped teasing Taslim. A couple of days later, I heard her name—*Umaiya Tasnim*. To me, her name is more than just a word; it's something very special. It's my entire world, my love, my happiness, and my obsession.

I don't know what true love is. But in everyone's life, there's always someone who feels different—you can't explain how or why, it just happens, and suddenly everything starts to feel special. That's what I started to feel. For the next few days, I couldn't understand why I couldn't stop myself from looking at her. It was the first time I'd felt something different for a girl. I often saw her passing by, and I started interpreting Newton's law in a new way—her every action seemed to trigger a reaction inside me.

It was as if there was something about her that set her apart from everyone else. Something special, the kind that makes your heart say, "She's the one you've been waiting for."

It was her very first Saturday there, and most of the teachers were absent. So, Rahul bhaiya took our class. We decided to sing a song. Since I was a terrible singer at the time, I didn't join in, but the others were singing. When it was Farhat's turn to sing, she didn't sing but said something I will always be grateful for: "Umaiya sings well." And the next moment, she was called.

I'll never forget the moment she walked into our class. With a smile on her face, she looked like Cinderella. She sat on the front bench, and I was two steps behind her. She started singing, 'Ae mere humsafar...', and I can't explain what I felt. Every single word from her voice was so pleasant that it felt like it was flowing through my entire body. It was the most extraordinary voice I had ever heard in my life. When she finished the song, the bell rang, everyone left the class, and I was still there, completely captivated.

I was changing my clothes, and a faint smile lingered on my face. Honestly, I had never smiled like that before. I rushed to the terrace to join Rahul bhaiya, Abhishek, and the others. They were busy talking, but all I had was that smile. Down below, she came with some girls to have breakfast, and as I looked at her, I whispered, "Umaiya's voice is impressive. How talented she is." Hearing this, Abhishek guessed my feelings and yelled, "Pritam.. Aren't you in love!" and everyone started laughing.

On Sunday, I was sitting alone in the classroom when she came with Taslim to talk to their parents on the phone. Since they were speaking Bengali, I couldn't understand a word, but I liked her voice. I tried to focus on my favorite subject, science, but I couldn't concentrate. I tried several times and failed. Eventually, I went to the terrace, and there she was again, talking with Taslim.

I somehow felt that Taslim was talking about me—or maybe it was just my imagination, since I was watching them. For the next several days, I don't know why, but I couldn't stop thinking about her. It became a routine to find them on the terrace, and I kept feeling anxious, wondering, "What if he's saying something bad about me?" It felt strange to watch her, but I couldn't stop myself from doing it.

Gradually, my happiness transformed into a headache. I started losing sleep at night. From morning until night, her name, her song—everything seemed to circle around me. I used to wake up early to see the morning star, but now I started seeing her face in it. The same thing happened during the evening prayer. It had been my habit to spot Venus at sunset, but now I kept my eyes open during the prayer, just hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

It was all new to me, and I couldn't bear the headache any longer, so one day I told Abhishek about it. He started laughing and said, "You might be in love." I said, "Umaiya sings well, and she's beautiful, but I have a wheatish complexion. There is no way she could ever like me." He replied, "If you truly love her, then you don't need to worry about your appearance." But that wasn't my real worry. There was something else, something I couldn't pinpoint, but I didn't know what it was.

It had only been two weeks since her arrival, yet my behavior had completely changed. After many sleepless nights and restless days, I finally had to accept that I was in love. I was sitting in class as usual, and I can't describe the happiness I felt the moment I admitted my feelings for her; it was as if magic had happened, and my headache vanished instantly. I shouted: "I love you Umaiya."

7. Steps To Her Heart

I then explained this to Rahul bhaiya. This wasn't new for him. He smiled, gave me a warm hug, and took me out of the class, explaining something about love as we walked toward the hostel.

That's when I found out that two of her classmates, Sonu and Prince, used to comment about Umaiya in class. A simple warning was enough for Sonu—he said he didn't know about me and wouldn't have done it otherwise. But I knew Prince well; he was rude. I didn't say anything to him because I didn't want him to drag Umaiya into it.

In any case, I had nothing to do with him or anyone else. For me, if someone loves her, they aren't my enemy—they're my friend. What matters most to me is Umaiya herself.

I don't know how, but within a short period of time, almost half of the hostel knew about this. Maybe someone was working against me behind the scenes. Even Aashish bhaiya found out, but why would he have a problem? And of course, Taslim knew too. The only thing left was to figure out whether Umaiya had any idea. Surely, by then, she had noticed me.

One Saturday, I asked Rahul bhaiya to call Umaiya. For the second time, she was called. Her entrance felt like a romantic song playing around me. She looked beautiful in her winter outfit, and my eyes remained fixed on her. I asked her to sing the same song, but she was clever. Instead of repeating it, she started a different song, *Kaun Tujhe*. And I was lost somewhere in her voice just like in a romantic film. Halfway through, she stopped and said she didn't remember the lyrics, then switched to another song, *GF BF* and my reaction was, 'I will be your bf.'

This time, Rahul bhaiya told me to sing. I hadn't sung for about three years, but I thought I could still manage, so I started my favorite song, "Tum Hi Ho." While I was singing, two emotions were bombarding me at the same time: first, regret for losing my voice, and another, embarrassment in front of Umaiya.

The moment I heard she needed the lyrics for the song, I jumped in to help. Since phones weren't allowed, Rahul bhaiya was my only hope for getting the lyrics. He had the song, but it wasn't a smartphone. Late that night, I stayed up searching through his thousands of songs, listening, pausing, and replaying it, as I carefully wrote down the lyrics in my best handwriting.

It wasn't until I finished writing the last line that I realized something: Umaiya didn't understand Hindi, and I, being born stupid, had written the entire song in Hindi. It was already late, and I was supposed to turn off the lights. That night, I went to bed feeling disappointed, and the song remained with me.

Next, I approached Farhat and told her everything. Thankfully, she agreed to help. That day, we secretly made a deal: I was supposed to help her with her crush, whom I knew very well. Within a day, she came through with two things. First, she gave me all of Umaiya's details—her family, her interests, her date of birth, and more, which I wrote down in my favorite science notebook and committed to memory.

Then, it was time to hear the second thing she had for me. Farhat had asked Umaiya what she thought of me, and her reply was heartbreaking. According to Farhat, Umaiya had said that I walked with my head down and that I was "black."

"I am black." My siblings had teased me about this before, but I had never felt as much pain as I did hearing it then. This is the harsh reality of life, especially in a country like India. Well, it's not your fault, Umaiya; this is just how the world is. That's why I refused to believe that Krishna was black. Have you ever seen a black-skinned Krishna on TV?

Afterward, I tried to distance myself from her, but how could anyone run away from their own feelings? For the first time in my life, I felt truly depressed. After two or three days of unbearable pain, I decided I wouldn't pursue her anymore. Frustrated by always hearing "Bhaiya" from her, I went directly to the same two guys from her class and told them I no longer loved her. I said, "Whether you love her or not, I don't care." Both of them seemed happy.

I was just walking away after saying this when I saw Umaiya coming at a distance. Like every day, she looked cheerful, and I felt frozen in place. At that moment, all my frustration melted into the same old smile, and I immediately went back to them, saying, "I was just kidding."

Hoping for some ideas, I went back to my true friend, Rahul bhaiya, and told him everything. He said something that not only gave me a boost but would change my life entirely. He said, "Think—why would Umaiya like you?" He continued, "Girls like talent, and you need to have some, just like Umaiya—she sings well."

That's when I started to reflect on what talent I had. It definitely wasn't good marks in Maths or Science. I once had a good singing voice, but I'd lost it. So, I went to him and asked, "Will you teach me to dance?" How could he say no? And there, my journey began the very next day.

I woke up earlier than usual, eager to start. Since Rahul bhaiya never got up before 8, I made him wake up, and he showed me a simple hand wave, telling me to practice. That was the first time I tried dancing. Day or night didn't matter to me—I kept practicing until I got it right. Then, I started to truly feel the movements. That's why body waves became my signature move; they were triggered by love rather than my passion.

8. Goodbye, Not Forever

As I started gaining confidence, I began visiting the girls' hostel every evening around 7. One day, when Umaiya seemed particularly happy, she gave me her best smile. Without waiting, Farhat seized the moment. While I didn't want to talk to Umaiya that day, Farhat pulled her toward me and began urging me to express my love. I didn't want to push things, but other girls started cheering, and then Farhat asked, "Say it—do you love Umaiya?" I had no choice but to say yes.

Umaiya went back to her room, and she seemed angry. After a while, Farhat returned, saying, "Please, say no. She's really angry." Just as Umaiya came back, I sensed her anger. She asked, "Say you don't love me?" I had no choice but to say no this time.

Since it was winter, I usually sat outside while Umaiya stood on the terrace. With my head down in a book, my eyes were always on her. She knew it well. I would often say to Abhishek, "Look, the moon is visible during the day," and he would search the sky before realizing which "moon" I was really talking about.

Every story has a villain, and in my case, there were several. One day, while I was sitting outside as usual, Umaiya waved at me for the first time with her sweetest smile, asking me to come up. Without thinking, I rushed up the stairs, not caring who might be watching. When I was about to reach the top, I found myself standing before her. But then, she said something that caught me off guard.

She asked, "Why did you say we're friends now? I never told you that." I was dumbfounded, unsure when I had ever said something like that. Just as I was trying to figure it out, Taslim arrived, and our conversation was cut short.

Later, I realized what had happened. Two days earlier, while chatting with my classmates, I had said something that didn't mean that. Prince, my true enemy, overheard it and asked Umaiya if she had made friends with me—his real intention was to ruin my reputation. It was too much to

handle, but I controlled my anger because I didn't want to escalate the situation further.

I continued visiting her every evening, and Umaiya responded with her smile. We often found ourselves going upstairs at the same time. One day, just as she was about to go up and I was heading there too, she stopped and, in her sweet voice, said, "I will not go." I can't explain how impressive that moment was. For the rest of the day, I couldn't stop smiling because of it.

Then I realized something—I was going to leave this school next month. I had to do something before that. I came up with a fantastic idea to propose to her on January 1st, 2017. It was a bit filmy and imaginative, much like Varun Dhawan's style in *Main Tera Hero*. Once again, Farhat helped me find out what her reaction would be if someone proposed to her. As expected, she had said, "I will go to my parents."

My story was going well when another problem found its way to me. Like every day, Taslim was sitting in my class, but neither of us said a word to each other. He was flipping through some pages in my science book when, suddenly, he left the room. One of my classmates then said he saw Taslim take something from my book. It was nothing but my death certificate! I remembered one day I had written my name alongside hers on a wedding card and kept it in my science book. That was the same card he had taken.

I still had a chance to save myself. I could have chased after him before he got too far, and I knew how to handle the situation once I had the card back in my hand. But I didn't move. If it were someone else, they would probably regret it.

Now, I knew what was going to happen. The strict Brahmin principal, who could punish a student for an hour just because he had asked a girl if she wanted to celebrate Teacher's Day, would see my case as an atomic bomb—a Hindu guy writing his name next to a Muslim girl's name.

Just 10 minutes later, a summon arrived. Principal ma'am was calling me. When I went there, I saw Umaiya and Taslim standing with Principal

ma'am, holding that card in her hand. I had thought Principal ma'am would react similarly, but instead, she said, "Why, Pritam? I never expected this from you. Should I tell Principal sir?" I simply replied, "No." And she let me go.

I was completely worried, and my plan to propose to her had failed. The next day, Farhat told me that Umaiya didn't want to complain about me, but Taslim had gone directly to Principal ma'am. Hearing that gave me some peace.

No story remains the same forever, and mine was also heading in the right direction. Now, I started to see some response from her side as well. Since we were in different classes, we didn't get much time to interact, but her eyes were enough to say everything. This gave me the confidence to make eye contact with her, though never for more than three seconds.

Every action of hers felt like a joy blossoming inside me. It became my daily routine to wait for her to come and have one last look from the window after dinner. While she studied in the classroom, I used to take a glance at her in the evening through a small hole in the wall. I wanted to play with her awesome hair while she was busy studying. I wanted to hold her hand, close my eyes, and feel every breath.

She was the girl who changed my perspective about religion. For the first time, I started focusing on my creativity and skills rather than just excelling academically. If her presence alone made so much difference in my life, there is nothing that I cannot achieve if she is with me. The line from a song best fits here: "Tum jo pakad lo haath mera, duniya badal sakta hoon main."

Time was drawing closer. I would have to go now. While I always wanted to leave this school, why was it becoming such a hard decision for me? But I knew very well that I had to go to improve myself. If I stayed there, I would never be able to become the Pritam I wanted to be. I had to leave for Umaiya—to change myself. Her words, "I am black, and I walk with my head down," still echoed in my mind. I admitted that this was when I started to discriminate against my own face.

I wanted to talk to her for the last time, but I couldn't find her. It was January 13, 2017, and my 60-day love story was coming to an end. I was leaving, but I knew one thing for sure: my love story had not even begun properly, so this could not be the end.

9. A Wrong Decision

I was rejected by Vidya Vihar for making an excellent impression in the interview and because I was considered too old to study in 8th standard. Fortunately, I got admission to Colonels Academy on April 2, 2017. The school was less than a kilometer from my previous school. My entry wasn't like a hero's. I felt weak in almost everything except Science.

When I first stepped onto the football ground, the feeling was amazing, but when the first ball came to me and I tried to kick it just like the others, hoping to swing it high, the ball didn't move at all. Instead, my foot got injured. It was the same for volleyball, then basketball—one after another, I kept realizing my inability to play. As I already had a fear of water since I had nearly drowned in Patna when my stepbrother saved me, I didn't go near the swimming pool when some seniors forcefully pushed me inside.

While I stayed with my roommate Rajeev most of the time, Aditya J became my school-time partner. He was the one who introduced me to other classmates: Shashwat, Shivanshu, Sameer, and Rashid. Among them, I really liked Shashwat's character. He was a young, funny fellow in our class.

To my surprise, most of the top students in our class were from the girls' side. While many girls in our class were talented, two of them stood out for their awesome characters: Sakshi P and Nourin. Among the boys, I liked Akarsh, Shivanshu, and Shashwat the most because each had his own unique character. Akarsh was a singer, Shivanshu was a photographer, and Shashwat was a good dancer.

My initial days were truly interesting; I felt very happy with them, but what I liked most there was our hostel seniors. Mrinal bhaiya was my favorite. He was the only one there who helped me learn football. I remember when he asked me after my very first class there, "Did you like any girls in your class?" How could he know that I already had someone in my heart?

We had two movie sessions a week, and my first movie there reminded me of something I had been ignoring until now. The movie was *Step Up Revolution*, and I remember how I held myself back from everyone while coming down from the auditorium, trying to mimic a dance move from the movie. It was just the beginning, and how could I forget about dance? After all, I wanted to impress Umaiya.

From then on, I kept practicing some steps. I learned a few moves by rewinding movie clips and some from the Dance Plus show. Despite my busy routine, I still managed to practice for at least half an hour each day. Although I wasn't a good dancer at that time, seniors frequently told me to show off some of my best moves. This was when I began diary writing.

Since my previous school was much closer, I could have gone to see Umaiya, but I had no idea if she was still there or not. It had already been a long time, and their exams were likely over in January or February. But I couldn't resist making at least one visit. For this, I needed help from the seniors to cross the school boundary. So, I revealed my love story to them—but nothing about her specifically.

Next, her birthday was approaching, so I somehow managed to call her, but unfortunately, it was her father's number. Still, I wasn't ready to give up. After many unsuccessful attempts, In August, I got another chance. It was August 16 when I finally made a successful visit.

It was raining, and I tried to climb up to the first floor. The window ledge was completely slippery, and it was too dangerous to go any further. With no other option, I went to the boys' hostel window and called on some of the trusted students. I was happy to hear that Umaiya was still there, but sadly, Rahul bhaiya and most of my friends had already left the school.

It was around this time that I went on my first school trip. Although it was meant for the 10th graders, I got the opportunity to go along with the hostel students. Our destination was Vikramshila University. The return trip was even more enjoyable. I danced until the very end on the bus, and Mrinal bro joined me. I can honestly say it was one of the happiest moments of my life.

There were many new students who later joined the class, and among them, Ankit, Priyanshu G, and Vikrant became my friends. Vikrant and I made a real terror of a pair. There wasn't a class in which we didn't laugh, and that ultimately became the reason for our separation too.

We had various club sessions, and Vikrant and I always found ourselves workless during these times. While our physics teacher, Mr. Vijay, wanted me in his science club, I had no interest left in science. So, we wandered one day into the sports club, then another day into drawing. I threw myself out of the pottery since the pot made by me really didn't look like a pot. Ultimately, we had no option left but to go to the science club, since we were being caught by the principal.

One day, our math teacher scolded Vikrant so badly that he had to go to the last row in the class. After that, we were rarely found sitting together.

Then came another event: Sports Day in December. While I didn't want to participate in the sports because I wanted to dedicate my time to dance practice, Rajkumar bhaiya signed me up for almost all the events. To my surprise, I turned out to be a good player. I got a good position in the cross-country race. Our house teacher, Samit sir, seemed very happy about this.

Though my football and basketball performances were poor, I managed to score well in Kabaddi and other athletics. That year, I made the longest jump and won the 200m race. For my good performance in Sports, Taekwondo and dance seniors gave me a new name, *Baaghi*.

I was happy there, but my father wanted me to go to Sainik School, so he filled out my form for the 9th standard. But I never passed the exam. When I went for the entrance, I met Taslim and others from that school. Some of his classmates were helping me, and that's when I found out that Umaiya was still studying there. After returning, I started thinking a lot about Umaiya again. I remember how I used to dream about her and how I started imagining her on top of the school building, watching me learn Taekwondo.

It was an exciting day, Basant Panchami in January 2018, when I danced in front of our German ma'am. But my real happiness was

something else—meeting Umaiya. I quickly jumped over the wall, making my way to her school. When I arrived, I tried to go upstairs directly, but the juniors quickly recognized me and started their usual shouting. Just then, Ashish bhaiya arrived. We talked a bit, and I asked him to manage a chance for me to talk to her. But Principal sir was there, and he denied my request.

I noticed some girls watching me from the terrace, and of course, Umaiya was among them. Even though it was dark, I could easily spot her in the group. I quickly came up with a plan. I pretended to leave to distract Ashish bhaiya, but instead, I took another way and returned through a different street.

When I came out, I didn't realize that Mona di (the Principal's daughter) was nearby, and all the girls started cheering loudly. I kept my eyes on Umaiya, who was pretending to hide. Only when I got closer did Mona di and I notice each other. I tried to hide my face, but she recognized me and asked how I got there. I just made a simple excuse and made my way back.

The following month, everyone in my class was celebrating Rose Day, Kiss Day, and who knows what else. But the most important was Valentine's Day. How could I wait to meet Umaiya? So, I made another visit to her school. Even this time, it was impossible to enter the hostel, so I had to return after speaking with one of my classmates there.

Hostel life was the best time—we all hostellers would agree on that. Our only job was to enjoy every moment. I remember we used to create challenges for adventurous activities, like climbing trees and crossing buildings. One day, I took on a challenge to cross to the library balcony. There was a 90-degree gap between the two walls, but I somehow managed to complete the challenge. However, I was terrified, as I found myself on the 2nd floor with my legs dangling over the edge.

That year, we didn't go home for the Holi festival; instead, we enjoyed it with the hostellers and teachers. Mrinal bhaiya tricked me and threw me into the prepared mud. While I enjoyed the moment, other feelings were troubling me.

Soon, I started realizing what I was doing—constantly trying to meet Umaiya and only facing failure. Her memory kept haunting me, and these distractions began to affect my academic performance. I didn't even have time to dance or study. I clearly remember being in my practice room, thinking about all of this late at night. Finally, I asked myself: "Either choose Umaiya or dance." That night, March 3rd, was one of the worst of my life.

How could I believe that I chose dance over Umaiya? I had started dancing only to impress her, and now I was making choices between them. It had become too difficult to keep crossing the school boundary, hoping for some response from her or just a conversation, and all my attempts were constantly failing. I cried bitterly as I came to terms with accepting the situation.

10. Facing The Truth

While all of this was happening, another story was unfolding—I was losing my friends. I remember feeling alone during the Mandar Hill trip with my classmates. When I decided to focus on dance, it became more of a necessity than a passion, as I was compromising my love for it. I began avoiding friends in class because the classroom was the only place I could find time to study.

As a result, one after another, my benchmates kept changing—first Ankit, then Priyanshu, followed by Vikrant, sometimes Aditya or Sujal, and then Rashid or Rohan. But I couldn't maintain lasting friendships with them.

After the 10th-grade students left the school and I was in 9th standard, I started feeling more anxious about dance. I was unhappy because I had no proper source to learn. Shashwat told me about dance classes, but it was nearly impossible to leave the school and attend them.

Determined to push through my school-time problems, I decided to move on—and surprisingly, it worked. I brought dance tutorial videos with me and started practicing in the auditorium. Aviral Bhaiya handled the music system, he helped me get access to it. A big broken mirror became my partner, and I even made some equipment like a knee pad and created a flipping area with a mattress. I began practicing flips in the swimming pool, and soon, I could do backflips, and my dance was improving a lot.

New students joined the hostel, and two of them were in my class: Nilesh and Jaydeep. There were a total of seven of us in the 9th standard—Nilesh, Pratik, Rajeev, Jaydeep, and the three Jaiswals: Aditya, Sujal, and me. Everyone had something special about them.

Nilesh was funny, and we used to call him "Sexa" after catching him to jerk off. But he was actually a really interesting guy. Pratik was often teased as 'Alien,' but he was studious and became the school captain during our 10th grade. Rajeev was my true partner and the star singer of our hostel. Jaydeep was a clean guy—who had never masturbated or

watched adult films. So, our job was to introduce him to those things. Aditya and Sujal were both excellent players. I spent most of my time teasing Aditya since he was much closer to me. And as for me, I still don't know exactly who I was.

I didn't want anyone to know about Umaiya because I knew how I would react if anyone brought her name up in any situation. But one day, Jaydeep secretly read my entire diary. When I came back after class, he kept saying things like, 'You're great,' and I was wondering why he was saying that. Then he said, 'I know why you chose dance over your love.' That's when I understood everything. From that moment on, I never spoke to him until we were about to leave school in the 10th standard. Later, I really felt sorry about this.

I was active in every sport, but I never really wanted to participate. The reason was that I got scolded more than I received opportunities. I remember when I first came here, I didn't know any sports, and instead of teaching me, the good players would just shout at me. Our sports teacher didn't do much either, except blow the whistle.

In volleyball, I was always placed in the back corner. While I would see players on TV participating equally, here only the players in the front got the chance to smash or block the ball. Then came the middle players, but the two on the sides, like me, just kept waiting for the ball. It was the same in football, but at least my running ability gave me some advantage. Kabaddi was the only sport where I felt like the king.

Things were going well until, one night after listening to some songs, my feelings for Umaiya returned. I barely managed to sleep that night before life played another prank on me. Just two days later, on October 31, I was in class. My class had this habit where, whenever a girl or boy entered, someone would joke by pairing their name with someone else's.

That day, a senior girl from the 11th standard came to our class on her birthday. Vikrant, who was sitting next to me, teased me by adding my name with hers. We both laughed, and I casually told him that she was my girlfriend.

From that day onward, I somehow started giving her more attention, and my friends began triggering my feelings. My bad times began when I actually felt some attraction toward her. Her name was Naina. It felt awkward for me to be involved with a senior girl, but things just unfolded that way.

Soon, I found myself looking for chances to either meet her or her friend, Samriddhi. I was happy in a way because it gave me a distraction from my feelings for Umaiya, and at least with this excuse, I was trying to think about someone else. But our story didn't last long. One day, she told me she already had a boyfriend.

Since I had taken this step, I had to face the consequences as well. As a result, I felt alone again. This time, I found a new company with Sameer, the laziest guy in our class. While I wanted to walk around the ground or play a game during break, I ended up sitting under the tree with him instead.

That year, my Sports Day performance was much better. I won the cross-country race, finishing in first place. I also made the longest jump in the entire school for the second time and won the 200m race again, securing first position. The Kabbadi match that year was the toughest. I remember my team getting into a fight with the opponents, but I didn't get involved since the teachers were around.

For most of the teachers, I was considered a good student. Karim Sir, our English teacher, became our class teacher in 9th standard. He was also our hostel warden and liked me. To him, I was a mastermind because I never got caught, even though I was often involved in various activities.

Once, during the mid-term exam, some hostel students leaked the question paper. Although I wasn't part of it, my classmates kept coming to me with questions. That's how I learned some of the questions, but I never cheated. When the results came out and I scored well in Physics, the Physics teacher suspected me of cheating.

Have you ever wondered what would happen if a character from your imagination came to life? Of course, nothing like that actually happened,

but I tried acting like a villain from my imagination—a horrible Joker. There was a guy from 8th standard, Sachin, and I chose him as my target.

One night after dinner, I went to his room. He was sitting with a few other guys. First, I started telling a horror story to set the mood, and he was listening very carefully. Once I felt the moment was right, I did my part. I pretended to be the Joker, bent myself backward like a ghost in a movie, and made a dreadful sound.

I never expected him to be so frightened! He started shouting, while everyone else around him was fine. He was terrified, even though I went back to normal and started laughing. He only relaxed after I left the room.

We hostellers always had plans ready for pranks like this. The next time I pulled a similar stunt on another guy, he nearly had a shock when I suddenly appeared behind him by crossing through the rooms over the tops of lockers. After that, I never did it again to anyone.

It was February 10, 2019, again Saraswati Puja, when my love for Umaiya grew even stronger. Without a second thought, I made my way to her school. When I got there, the first person I met was Mona di. We kept chatting until Umaiya came for dinner. I couldn't believe my eyes—she looked younger than me, and for the first time, I realized I was older than her by probably 4 or 5 years. While it didn't matter to me, it might have mattered to her. I tried waving at her, but she didn't respond. Even her friend was telling her to look at me, but she didn't.

That was enough to say it all. Before my tears could fall, I left the hostel. Back at my own hostel, I said I was happy to see her, but I knew what I had just understood. Umaiya never really loved me; her smiling at me was just her kindness. I had mistakenly taken it as a sign of love. Even today, I am nothing to her, and maybe I never will be. But for me, she is my whole world, whether she loves me or not. *For this Krishna, she will always be my Radha.* I didn't have the courage to face this truth, so I chose to forget everything about that day and returned back to my life.

11. The Last Lesson

I started focusing all my energy on dance and studies. Though my practice felt more like a punishment than actual dancing, I might have come to terms with the truth, but how could I manage my feelings for Umaiya?

One morning, while we were out running, we ended up on the same road leading to her school. Sujal insisted that I go, and I eventually agreed. We took permission from our sports teacher and went there. Unfortunately, the principal, ma'am, caught us. I said I wanted to meet a friend, but she knew my real intention and replied, "He's sleeping," so we had to go.

I was in 10th standard when our principal announced that now we can perform on the stage. Now I got a perfect chance to demonstrate my dance. I started making plans for this. But soon I realized I am not ready yet. That time Prashant sir came to help me. He himself had given me a perfect beat for practice, but by then I already had accepted my defeat.

Although I got many chances to go on stage, I always avoided them. Once, our class was preparing a drama performance, and Pallavi said that my personality was best suited for the role of an army officer in the play, but I didn't want to get involved in one more activity, so I withdrew my name. Instead, I clapped for them as they performed.

In my three years there, the only time I went on stage was to deliver the news headlines. The principal said, "You have a good voice. Why don't you start anchoring?" This is my old habit—hiding the things I'm skilled at and banging my head over things I don't know.

I had a good relationship with the juniors there. Ashad from 9th standard was one of them, and he was the one I trusted the most. I once asked him to observe my character and point out any bad habits. After a week, he told me he couldn't find anything wrong with me. Instead, after watching me develop my first HTML website, he said, "Is there any skill left that you haven't mastered?"

It felt like my problems were not enough, so another problem entered my life. I wanted to take a break from sports so that I could get the chance to practice dance. I was trying to get a fake prescription from one of my classmates whose father was a doctor. But to my luck, my dream came true. A strong pain started in my stomach, and the report showed that I had developed kidney stones.

Afterwards, I felt like I had gone mad. Late at night, I kept crying, and I seemed to be worthless for about three months. I remember how I tore the pages of my math book and threw them outside the window, and how I shouted on the ground at night. While everyone in my class was busy talking in the library and playing Truth or Dare, I found myself reading psychological books from the library.

One day, a ma'am noticed me sitting outside. She came over to ask why I had used kohl around my eyes, and I explained that it wasn't kohl, but rather my dark circles, which had appeared due to my distress.

That time passed, leaving two gifts for me—first, permanent marks on my face from the medication, and second, poor health. After that, I found myself struggling with my health more than anything else.

Before I could lose my interest in dance, something new started healing me—acting. Prashant Sir selected a few hostellers to make a drama video about an Army Officer, and I was chosen for the Major's role. Wearing my costume, I went to the mirror and tried to deliver my lines. That's when I first felt excitement for acting. It was more about my expressions than the actual dialogue. But soon, I withdrew my name because they were recording it at night. When the video was completed and Aditya J did my part, I realized what I had missed.

From that day onward, I started delivering dialogues to myself for no reason. I decided not to reveal this to anyone, so I managed to get the key to our hostel terrace. Every night after dinner, I continued practicing my new skill. My imagination came back to help me here.

Time changed, and so did the season. Of course, Umaiya's memory had to return. Once again, my immortal story began to unfold before me, and hope was awakening once more. Sadly, I could only seek her in my

dreams. It doesn't matter whether she likes me or not. After all, being together isn't always essential for love, right?

The ratio of boys to girls was about 2 to 1 in every class, so it was challenging to have a girlfriend. Yet, by the time we reached our final year, many of my classmates had their soulmates—or at least many were fully single—but I was the only one left hanging between being single or in a relationship.

Aditya J was our house captain, and he gave my name for all the sports. My poor health played its part. This time, I came in 11th position in the cross-country race, while Jaydeep secured 1st place. He had been working for it the entire year, and his hard work paid off. The same went for all the other games as well. Although I made the longest jump again, I was disqualified because my foot had crossed the line. What luck!

Our last time in that school was even more enjoyable. We hostlers had our own way to enjoy the moment. Sometime our destiny would be a new school building which was under construction, something it would be a party on trampoline. We really didn't feel frustrated about the exam, instead we would watch movies.

We had our last trip at that school, but I didn't go. I remember that day as if it happened yesterday. I was alone at the hostel and feeling lonely, so I put on my shoes and started dancing. Within a minute, I felt off and stepped outside. In front of me was a scene—the school building and some kids playing in the children's park. I sat on the ground, with a question echoing in my mind: "Why did I come here?"

I came here to improve myself, didn't I? I wanted to become worthy of Umaiya. I wanted to make friends, I wanted to shout, and I wanted to laugh. So why did I end up alone and depressed? Why did I give more importance to work over love and friendship?

I wanted to be part of my class too. So why did I always hide myself? I had skills like anyone else. I was good in academics, and even in sports. I was a good dancer, and I had a good voice. I could speak, but I always stayed silent in the classroom. Why? Just because I'm not good-looking?

Even today, if you search for photos from our sports day during my 10th there, you won't find me anywhere in the group except while receiving medals. A junior once came up to me and asked my name. When I told him, he said, "I know everyone in your class, just not you."

When I first came here, I felt like talking to the girls in my class. But after arriving, I realized that girls sit in a different row, and boys in another. During break time, even if by mistake you talk to a girl, remember, the principal will definitely be watching you. Forget about it, in three years, I didn't talk to a single girl.

I still remember when I was in 8th grade, Priyanshu told me, "You're perfect in every way. If only your skin was a bit fairer, you'd look like a hero." Funny, isn't it? Just because I'm not "good-looking," I can't be a hero?

I've always been a hero, and stupid Pritam kept trying to prove it. I didn't need to choose between my love and passion, or my academics and friends. They were all part of my life. And of course, I was good-looking. What I was lacking was confidence, not looks. If I had gotten the right opportunities and guidance, there's nothing I couldn't have done. But sadly, by the time I realized all this, it was already too late.

12. Could This Be The End?

Before I could think of doing something, the coronavirus played its part, leaving me at home with all my new passions. Starting in 2020, my life began to take shape on its own. While problems continued, I missed my friends and my love remained the same for Umaiya; now I found myself happy in my own world.

I had time to pursue anything I liked. So, I poured all my strength into my passions: acting, dance, and martial arts. A new world opened up before me—a world of glamour.

I continued my dance practice, and now I had everything I wanted. Although I longed to dance in person with actual learners, the lockdown left me feeling handicapped. Mihran K. became my dance tutor, while Steezy boosted my confidence in this pursuit. Since it was difficult to find a martial arts coach in my hometown, Master Alex started his classes online for his students, and I began marking my attendance there.

In acting, I went really crazy. Wearing my brother's school uniform, I tried to play the role of a policeman. I spotted some people a little distance from my home playing cards. The police often used to make them run away. One day, wearing my uniform and holding a yellow pipe, I attempted to chase them. Of course, seeing a single policeman in the distance, they showed no reaction. Instead, I returned home, and my neighbor lady said, "Won't you help me a little to chase some around my house?"

I began to understand what I needed to do. While I constantly practiced dialogues, Drama School Mumbai helped me work on my voice, and soon I started focusing on characterization. Sometimes the lights, camera, and action energized me, while other times, Stanislavski started to appear on my desk. To the children watching me practice monologues, I was a madman, and to the lady who always found me shouting my dialogues loudly, I was a lawyer.

Health continued to bother me, and I completely blamed our diet for it, along with the usual family matters. This time, I found myself struggling first with devotees shouting into loudspeakers. But I'm not one to stay quiet. I gave the man a solid lecture when he arrived at my house after I told him to stop using the loudspeaker. However, how could I really change anyone's mentality?

To save myself from further frustration, I approached a life coach. Although I couldn't pay her, Mrs. Shiwani Gurwara listened to me and helped me realize that my problems weren't the real issue—I had created them myself. She gave me a mantra: "I am strong."

The mantra "I am strong" came alive, giving me a new imaginary hero—Strongman. And that hero was none other than me. Whether it was raining outside or the scorching summer heat, I kept moving: sometimes walking alongside the river, sometimes scaling the tallest trees, or jumping from them. I slept in the jungle and swam in the river. I was strong, and I had found my true happiness.

Whenever I felt down, I made my way to the Ganga River. One day, I saw people heading to an island-like land that appeared in the middle of the river. Though it was far, I joined them. It became a completely life-changing moment for me to walk in the river without knowing proper swimming. While everyone returned, I stayed behind. I took off my clothes and stood naked, shouting, feeling the sun, and listening to the relaxing sound of the river.

While I continued to give a little attention to my studies just to pass the HSC exam, Adult movies were highlighted more than my lecture videos.

Without thinking about problems or worrying about my future struggles to become an actor, I took my admission at Kanpur University in August 2022. Though I wanted to pursue Performing Arts, choosing Mass Communication wasn't the wrong decision for me.

I was the one to stand out during our orientation with my excellent performance. This time, I wasn't sitting with my friends Priyesh or Dev. Instead, Riya became my classroom partner. Since no one could ever

take Umaiya's place, I had no fear. So, I didn't try to stay quiet, I didn't try to hide, and I didn't see myself as less than anyone.

I was real and I was confident. I said what I wanted to say, I did what I wanted to do, and magic happened. Within two or three days, I had more friends among the girls than the boys. Riya, Anamika, and Gungun were the closest. Soon, my friend list extended to the boys' side too.

There, my dreams seemed to be coming true. I felt so close. I had all my plans ready, whether it was to join a theater group or to think about FTII in the future. I even found a Martial Arts trainer, and soon, acting diploma courses were set to start at our university. Until then, I continued my acting classes through online sources and kept practicing. The library provided me with the books I wanted to read, and the sports ground was calling me to kick the ball once again.

One day, our Communication ma'am asked us to introduce ourselves, and I did my part. After listening to my voice, she said, "Your voice is good, anchoring will be perfect for you." This was the second time I had heard that. My constant practice was paying off.

Everything was going well when, suddenly, my body started swelling. I thought it might be due to staying up late at night since my roommate had arrived. But the edema kept getting worse. Then, the medical report revealed that I had a problem with my kidney.

I remember the day we had a visit to an acting workshop, and I so badly wanted to be a part of it. But I had to return to Patna to see the doctor. It felt like being hungry for something, and just when you're about to eat, someone pulls the plate away. Still, I came back happily, thinking it might just be kidney stones again and I'd be back in a week or two. Little did I know, my life was about to change from that moment onwards.

I don't even know when the month passed and when I reached the hospital. It was discovered through a kidney biopsy that I have *IgA Nephropathy*, and I am in the final stage. My kidneys had already failed, and I could see my future with painful clarity. Finally, my childhood dream was coming true. I'm dying.

Seeing my condition worsen over time, my mother lost almost half of her body weight, and my distressed father, leaving all his work, started visiting nearly every top nephrologist, hoping to hear just one line—"Yes, there is a cure."

Love beyond limits always brings pain, whether it's my parents' love for me or my love for Umaiya. Both cause pain. And that's exactly what happened. From that day onwards, there wasn't a single day when I didn't cry. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't even smile. I was dying inside, constantly thinking about suicide, only because I didn't want my loved ones to suffer because of me.

Finally, in Feb 2023, I had my transplant. Once again, my mother gave me a new life. But what about me? What am I now? I have nothing left. It felt like I lost everything all at once. Now, neither is my Umaiya with me, nor are my dreams. I can neither run like before nor be as happy as I once was.

It is Oct 2024 now. My story is the same, and I am the same. But instead of *Lights, Camera, and Action*, it's *HTML, Python, and Django*. Yet once again, a question is reflecting in my mind—Is this what I wanted to do with my life?

And I don't want to face the truth. I'm afraid to walk down that path again, where all I encounter is struggle. I'm scared to step back into Umaiya's life, fearing I might even lose the memories of her. Now, I dance when the mood strikes, act when the moment calls, and sing when thoughts of Umaiya return. And this time, my love, Umaiya, is with me. Just yesterday, I saved her from a giant alien.

Today, I miss Umaiya just as much as I did yesterday, and the day before, and the day before, and the day before that. I don't know where she is or how she is now. But for me, she's still the same sweet Umaiya, for whom I would give up my life just to see her smile. I wish I had expressed my feelings to her; maybe then, she would be with me now, not just in my story. I could wait my whole life for her, yet one question keeps circling in my mind—where my story begins with her and ends with her, I don't even know if I'm a part of hers. And if I am, how much space do I truly hold in her story?

Therefore, this was not the story of my prosperity but of my destruction. You can take five lessons from my story. First, never give more importance to your work than to your loved ones. Second, you can do anything, but not everything—more things bring more problems. Third, do what makes you happy, not what the world brings to you. Fourth, live in the moment. Say what you want to say and do what you want to do before it's too late. And finally, Never think of yourself as less than anyone else, even if any Umaiya says you are black and that you walk with your head down. You are the hero of your life.

Anyway, if I write the next part of the story, you'll know that something good has happened. And if I don't—well, what could be worse than this? I just hope the next chapter is "Pritam and Umaiya," not just "Pritam." Every story has a happy ending, but right now, there's no happiness in my life. Could this really be the end?

To be continued...

A Journey of Love, Dreams and Self-Discovery