

# **WISH I COULD TELL YOU**

## **E1:- Ananth Khatri**

'Everyone dresses up for the first day of work, beta,' says Papa.

'You will look good, Ananth. At least wear it once and see for yourself.'

Just once? For us?' says Maa, dangling a blazer in front of me.

'You made me wear a frock, said I would look good and took me to

Chachu's wedding. I can't trust your word now, can I?' I grumble.

'You were three,' says Papa. 'And you looked so cute, beta.'

'He looked like a pretty girl,' says Maa.

Papa looks at Maa and both their eyes glaze over. They smile and get lost

in the memories of me as a child. My growing up has been hard on them. If

they could, they would choose the three-year-old in a white frock over the

twenty-three-year-old they are struggling to get into a blazer.

'We should get the album out,' says Papa.

'If I see that album once more, I will burn it!' I tell Papa, who is a

nostalgia addict, an obsessive recorder and revisit-er of the past, and he stays

put. 'Give me the receipt, I will return the blazer on the way back.'

'I lost it,' says Papa.

'Your papa got it with so much love. Wear it once?' says Maa.

'It's unnecessary. And who asked you get it from Zara?'

Papa gives in and fishes out the receipt from the file he maintains of the

quarterly expenses. I knew he hadn't lost the receipt. There's a file for every

quarter of our lives. Despite certain sections of our house looking like a

government office with tall stacks of files held together by strings gathering dust and cobwebs, sometimes it's exciting to see receipts from grocers,

cablewallahs, and other regular expenses from the eighties and the nineties.

Every paisa we have spent over those decades has been recorded in those

files. The ink is fading from most, so every weekend Papa and I click pictures

and upload them to Google Photos.

'Are you sure, beta, that you want to return it?' asks Maa.

'Papa's not getting paid for the overtime he is putting in for the past three

months and he's behaving like a child,' I say.

'Fine, fine, I won't spend,' relents Papa.

'If you do feel like spending, buy a new briefcase. Yours is tattered and

torn,' I tell him.

'And throw away this lucky briefcase?'

Papa has been a junior engineer in the municipality for the last thirty-three

years. The briefcase is the opposite of lucky.

For a second, I wonder what Mohini would think of me in a blazer. She

would probably think it's stupid too. I brush away the idea.

Maa serves me a big helping of curd and sugar and doesn't rest till I have

scraped the bowl clean. We leave for the Vishnu Mandir after that.

At the neighbourhood temple, Maa—Papa are the only ones chanting out

aloud, making a spectacle of their devotion to Vishnu. Papa, 5'4" and Maa,

5'1", take very little space in the world. They let people get ahead in the long

queue to the water tank. They talk so softly that one can barely hear them.

They sit through the extended lunch hours at the government bank without

complaining. But here—in this little neighbourhood temple—they walk

around with furrowed eyebrows, arched backs, angry grimaces, like titans,

like the moody gods from the Vedas.

Maa—Papa's chants are louder, more fervent than the resident pundit's,

who looks around, embarrassed, as if caught in his subterfuge. He tries to

match my parents' shraddha, devotion, and falls short every time. The

quieter devotees stare at my parents' synchronized chanting, impressed. The

bells toll urgently in the background, as if swung by the strength of their

'You are named "Ananth" after the serpent Lord Vishnu rests on,' Maa

tells me like every time.

And like every time I watch them here, I imagine an enormous serpent

irritably stirred out of sleep, coiling and uncoiling around the earth, by the

alarm-clock like hymns of my parents.

Papa puts a tika on my head, closes his eyes and says, 'May you be the

best member the medical team at WeDonate has ever had.'

'Did you thank Mohini in your prayers? She's why you got this job,' says

Maa, thrusting prasad into my palms.

'She's the only reason?' I ask, faking anger.

'I...'

I laugh. 'I'm joking, Maa. Of course, I did. Did you think I wouldn't?'

When they leave the temple, Maa—Papa return to their natural,

unintimidating selves, burdened with taxes and everyday struggles like

potholes, spoilt milk and moulded bread. Papa pulls his trousers right up to

his navel because that's where he thinks they should rest. Maa pulls the saree

over her head because the sun's too bright. They both accompany me to the

bus stop, struggling to keep up with me with their short steps. At 5'10", I'm a

giant to them; but they don't forget to remind me how un-cuddle-able I'm now.

'You don't need to come,' I tell them.

They chide me, say I'm careless, that I will trip and come under the wheels of the bus. That shuts me up.

There are other children with their parents at the bus stop too. None of them are over thirteen.

The chartered bus turns around the corner. Maa slams her hand on the side of the bus till it comes to a complete stop.

'I will call the police if you drive an inch before everyone boards,' she uncharacteristically threatens the bus driver who had done nothing wrong.

She makes sure I'm the first to get on.

If there's one thing she hates more than bus and truck drivers, all of them murderers in Maa's eyes, it was Papa's scooter. It was the only topic they argued about. For ten years, Maa had asked Papa to stop driving the scooter and take a bus instead. But he wouldn't budge. He loved his two-stroke grey scooter.

The day I turned eighteen and expressed the desire to drive it to college,

Maa—who didn't know how to drive a scooter—dragged it for miles and left

it to rot under a flyover. We didn't find the scooter for years after that. She

threatened to leave the house if either Papa or I even talked about it. Later

when we needed the money, she led Papa to the scooter. It was hidden but

clean and well-maintained. She used to wash it twice every week. Maa—Papa

still share a good relationship with the ones they sold the scooter to. They live

two colonies away from us and Papa drives it sometimes on Sundays.

'Sit behind the driver,' she shouts. 'That's the safest seat in the bus.'

Papa adds, 'Don't throw away the ticket.'

'And don't do tukur tukur on your phone too much. Concentrate or else

you will miss your stop,' says Maa.

They wait at the bus stop till the bus drives away. A few children on the

bus giggle as I take the seat Maa—Papa asked me to. The middle-aged woman

sitting there shifts to make space for me.

As the bus turns around the corner, Maa calls me and starts to sob. She

tells me it was just yesterday that it was my first day at school. 'How awfully

you cried and how heartlessly we pushed you inside the gates of the school!'

'And look at you now, you're happy to leave us behind,' says Maa.

'I will be back by 6 p.m.,' I say.

'Go now, do your job,' says Maa, angrily.

'Dream job, my foot,' says Papa.

'Papa—'

The call's cut.

'Parents, eh?' says the woman sitting next to me. 'I have a thirteen-year-old and he makes the same face you just did.'

'I'm twenty-three. They need to learn to spend a little time without me,' I say.

'First day?' she asks.

I nod.

When I'd told my parents about WeDonate's joining date, their faces had fallen. In another family, that might have been a reason for celebration—not in mine.

My restraint gives away after ten minutes and I send a group text 'will miss you'. And like petulant teenagers, they read my message and don't reply.

Google Maps shows the office is another forty minutes away. I will have to eventually find the right combination of metro and chartered buses to minimize travel time.

I type WeDonate.org in the address bar on my phone. I read up on all the medical campaigns they are running on their website. I take notes on how the stories can be told better. I share the stories on all my social media profiles, urging people to donate for the medical procedures of people who can't afford it. When I'm done, I update my LinkedIn profile: Ananth Khatri, Campaign Manager, Medical Team, WeDonate. I met most of the team on the day of my interview, so I send them friend requests.

Helmed by Sarita Sharan, WeDonate was one of the first crowdfunding platforms in India. The concept was too simple for it to not exist. People who need money—for medical purposes, for college projects, for creative enterprises—sourcing money from everyday people. An online version of chanda ikkhatha karna, collecting donations.

The woman sitting next to me—she works in the HR department of a call centre—is intrigued when I tell her about the organization I'm joining and wants to know more.

'Two weeks ago, they had a case, that of a twelve-year-old girl who needed 15 lakh for a kidney transplant. So someone from the medical team wrote her story and the campaign went live. People shared and re-shared it on social media, thousands of donors read the story, took note and contributed,' I

tell her. ‘There were young people in colleges and schools parting with pocket money for a girl they didn’t know and will never meet.’

‘Anyone can contribute?’

‘Yes, not only that. If you can’t contribute, just share the story with others

on social media. It might reach someone who can. The girls’ parents got the money in ten days. Can you imagine? Everyone who gave a little was a hero!’

‘And you’re joining this team?’ she asks.

‘Absolutely, bang in the middle of all the action, like in a whirlpool of

good karma. Matching people who need money the most to these heroes.’

She takes my number before alighting at her stop and wishes me luck. I

might have made my first office-commute friend.

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WeDonate is on the fifth floor of an old building in Paschim Vihar. It’s an

unlikely place for a start-up. Sarita Sharan, the pied piper of the

crowdfunding industry, wanted to keep the costs down and pump every

available resource into scaling the business.

Vishwas ji, at the guard’s post, looks up from his cell phone and waves at

me as I walk out of the elevator.

'Stud lag rahe ho (you're looking like a stud),' he says.

'Aap se kam (less than you),' I answer.

Vishwas ji smiles. He would have been quite a stud, middle-aged no doubt,

with his bright smiling eyes and the dimpled cheeks had his teeth not rotted

with gutkha. But I don't tell him that.

Last week, Vishwas ji chatted me up when I was waiting for my interview.

He told me how WeDonate had crowdfunded 5 lakh for his daughter's

engineering studies when he had given all up as lost; she's now in second

year, mechanical engineering. We shared my lunch after the interview.

'Did you get the books I couriered?' I ask.

'Haan ji. My daughter told me there are notes on the margin too—that's

really helpful.'

'If she needs anything else, will you tell me?'

'Of course,' says Vishwas ji. 'Aur bhabhiji kaisi hai (how is the sister-in-

law)?'

I tell him she's fine. Mohini and I aren't married but I don't correct him.

Girlfriend kaisi hai wouldn't have the same ring to it.

Twenty pairs of eyes look up from the laptops and phone screens, flash the

briefest of smiles, synchronized more tightly than the Olympic swimming

teams, and get back to work. The medical team sits in a far corner of the

room. That's where I will be sitting from today. My hands are clammy from

nervousness.

Nimesh Arora from IT is scratching his head, making dandruff flecks rain

on his keyboard when I find him.

'Don't mind him,' says Nikhat Shaikh.

'Been there, done that,' I say and Nimesh flashes me a thumbs-up.

I had mistaken Nimesh and Nikhat for siblings. They are dating—I found

out when Karunesh had made me meet the team after my interview. Nikhat

and Nimesh are older than I am, but with their small round faces, big,

surprised eyes, turtle shell eye glasses perched a centimetre too low on their

tiny noses, and big ears jutting out from their faces, they look childlike. The

only difference between the two is that Nimesh towers over Nikhat. At 6'4"

he's the tallest boy I have ever met, while Nikhat is diminutive at 5'1".

These two—graduates from NIT Surathkal—are amongst the dozens of

employees who had responded to Sarita Sharan's call for applications to join

WeDonate, and make a real difference.

Nikhat makes me sign a form and hands me my work laptop. Nimesh and

Nikhat handle the back-end of the website. Legend has it that they haven't

left the office in two years.

I feel the weight of the ThinkPad in my hands.

'Always wanted to have one of these. This one has a great keyboard,' I

say.

'Finally, someone recognizes that!' says Nimesh and looks up. Both their

specky eyes light up.

'They do, Ananth, they do,' says Nikhat.

'I have to tell you guys this. You two look great together. You guys are

custom built for each other—just revoltingly, unbelievably cute,' I say.

They smile and retreat shyly into their shells. I want to keep them in a little

glass box in my house.

'Go see Sarita first. She's expecting you. It's regarding your department.

'There has been some change,' says Nimesh.

'You and Mohini look great too,' says Nikhat as I'm leaving.

It is my turn to smile shyly.

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Sarita Sharan's laughably small cabin is a mess. There are papers and boxes

of her protein supplement, Glutamine, BCAAs strewn all over, and there's a

strong stench of cheap perfume. She doesn't look up when I enter her cabin.

'I'm glad to be here. Thank you for giving—'

Sarita cuts me with a smile. 'I'm assuming Nimesh and Nikhat have

already set you up with the laptop. I know you wanted to be a part of the

medical team but as it turns out, the management feels it's best if you start off

with something lighter.'

'Lighter?' I ask.

'I am putting you under someone from the entertainment division. You

will be trying to get music albums and movies funded . . . that sort of thing.

Karunesh will tell you more. It's our fastest growing vertical.'

The words don't register; this is unacceptable.

'It will be a good start for you,' she says.

'But Sarita, I was told—'

'It's what the company has decided,' she says.

'Can you please put me in medical? There's nothing more I have wanted

—,

'The decision is final. You can talk to HR but I don't think that will help,'

she says and gets up.

She thrusts her hand out and I see no option but to shake it. As my hand disappears into hers, my metacarpal bones crumble to dust.

'Best of luck,' she says.

'Thanks.'

The finality and the tenor in her voice, the broadness of her shoulders, keep me from saying anything more. By the time I reach my desk, my new mail ID already has a bunch of Excel sheets with the list of all the entertainment-related, successful and unsuccessful, crowdfunding projects. I feel nauseous; this is a mistake.

When I find Karunesh who heads my team, he has industrial strength

headphones covering his ears and is bobbing his head to someone's demo.

Some say he rejected an offer from Google to work here.

'Hey?'

'Hey! Welcome to the team,' Karunesh says brightly.

'I watched the last one you produced. It was phenomenal. I loved it!' I lie.

I haven't seen what he's made, but creative people lap up any

encouragement. He's smiling like a labrador after lunch, glowing like the sun. He seems like a nice guy.

'So now we can—'

I cut him.

'About that, Karunesh. I wanted to be in the medical team so if you can

talk to Sarita and make that happen, it would be great.'

It takes a few seconds for him to register what I have said.

'Ummm . . . Ananth, that's either her or the HR's decision, not mine. And

don't worry, you will be fine!' he says. 'Look, why don't you start off by

watching a few things we have done in the past. Maybe you will warm up to

it?'

I realize the futility of the conversation. I turn and go back to my seat.

With every music video, with every short film that I watch produced on

crowdfunded money by WeDonate, it becomes clearer to me that this

division should shut down. The money for these projects should be diverted

to people who really need it; the entire team should be dissolved.

Why are people paying to get these made? Just last month WeDonate had

collected 1 crore for entertainment projects and it was the second fastest

rising category in crowdfunding.

I drop in a mail to Ganesh Acharya in HR for a meeting. He doesn't reply

till the evening when it is time for me to leave the office.

Once home, Maa notices my sour mood. Maa–Papa sit me down for one of our family discussions. It started when my father read a self-help book a few years ago written by a Western writer. It said that a family should sit and talk, peeling off the layers of the problem to its bare bones to solve an issue. It's not the Indian way. We do not discuss issues but let them build up over years, over decades, take it to our deathbeds, even.

They grill me till I spill everything.

In a bid to be fatherly, Papa tries to relate his own experience to mine.

'It's like when Sharma ji wanted the Shalimar Bagh road to be repaired, but Mandal bhai sahab wanted the funds to get more machines to replace manual scavenging.'

'More or less,' I say.

'Sharma ji had a lot of support. He lives in AP Block. You should see the road in front of his house,' he says.

It's not the sixth standard. Maa–Papa don't have to revise reverse-angle-bisector-theorem just because I have an exam, and yet they spend the entire night watching the short movies and the videos WeDonate has helped make.

Through the paper-thin wall I can hear them in the living room, watching and discussing every video. It's not a wall really. It's an MDF board erected in

the middle of the room to make a one-room kitchen into a one-bedroom

house. Our landlord—Jasveen Makhija—on her monthly inspections calls the

house a one-bedroom apartment to justify the higher rent she charges. She

lives in Chandigarh and comes every month to shop at Emporio and collect

the rent from six of her houses in Delhi.

Every month after paying the rent, Papa talks like he has savings, a fat PPF

somewhere, an LIC policy about to mature, and talks about moving from this

rented house.

'The plots in Najafgarh are cheap,' he says.

Papa—the youngest of four siblings—who had been swindled out of his

ancestral property, of his office lunches by colleagues, of his scooter by his

own wife, is a perfect target for conmen. Sometimes, he comes home with

brochures of infrastructure projects in Greater Noida. 'It says the handover is

in 2025 but I'm sure we will get the possession earlier,' he says.

Maa and I let him indulge in these fantasies. At his age, we couldn't have

rewired him to think differently.

But Maa and I know we are not leaving this house in a hurry. Anyway, I

like it here. I like sleeping to the murmurs of their voices. I like knowing

what Maa's cooking seconds after the oil starts to sputter. I like that I can

give Papa a handkerchief within the minute of his first sneeze. It's the house

where Mohini and I started our relationship. Where she met me and my

parents for the first time. How can it be someone else's?

This isn't Jasveen Makhija's house, it's ours.

'The movies are bad,' Maa says in the morning.

'You were right,' says Papa.

'I'm talking to Ganesh from HR. He has said he might be able to help me

out.'

I take my bag and turn to leave.

'Where do you think you're going?' asks Maa.

'We are coming to the metro station with you,' says Papa.

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## E2:- Anusha Sardana

There was no reception area at the bare-bones office of WeDonate. Just a

desk where the disinterested guard made me write down my name, the time

of visit and purpose.

'Vishwas ji, I have been waiting for two hours now,' I said to the guard

who was glued to his phone.

'Monday busy hota hai (Mondays are busy),' he said.

Vishwas ji didn't look up from his phone. I'm sure if I were a man he would engage me in a conversation. He seemed the type who would look at the girls working at WeDonate and grumble inwardly about their presence outside their homes. Pretty sure he went back home and beat up his daughter or wife, or both.

I thought of reporting his excessive phone usage during work hours to his security guard agency but assumed this behaviour was long-standing and tolerated.

WeDonate.org managed to beat other crowdfunding companies and raise 250 crore and yet they couldn't schedule an interview on time? I wouldn't be surprised if Sarita Sharan is caught siphoning money two years from now.

Why would an IIM Ahmedabad graduate with six years of consulting experience work here?

When Mumma called I told her I was still waiting for the interview. She thought I was lying.

'Did you get rejected?' she queried.

'No, not rejected yet. Arre? Why would I lie?'

'You tell me why you would lie? How am I supposed to know that?' she

said.

Mothers have a way of getting under your skin.

'I will talk to you later,' I said and disconnected the call.

This was my fourth job interview that week. After every rejection Mumma

would go on like a broken record asking me to do a post-graduation instead.

When I would ask her where the money would come from, she would mutter

incoherently about education loans. Who takes a loan to learn writing? What

course can possibly teach someone to write?

'Your Poonam chachi keeps telling me about prospective grooms. How

long do you think I can hold them off?' she would tell me.

Poonam chachi, that pockmarked pig, would like nothing better than to get

me—an only child—married, change my surname, forsake the house we

lived in. Mumma never took my suggestions of checking Surinder chachu's

phone history seriously. If she had, she would find a viewing history of a

multitude of jawaan devar-bhabhi (young brother-in-law-sister-in-law) sex

videos.

I waited for another two hours rehearsing for the interview before I was

summoned in by Karunesh Talwar.

'Hi!' said Karunesh Talwar and \*\*\*\*\* out his hand.

When he shook my hand, it felt like I had dipped my hand in a tub of Vaseline. Karunesh Talwar was more nervous than I was. He looked the kind of awkward man-boy who shares fat girl memes, and prefers skinny, fair girls with big breasts. Do I have any proof? No. Do I still firmly believe in that? A 100 per cent. People are the worst.

He walked oddly with his legs splayed apart—rashes from thighs rubbing together, I guessed.

The cramped open-plan office had around thirty people sitting on long desks, eyes on their computer screens. There were a few boys prancing about in their shorts. The girls were better dressed but I'm sure these boys in shorts would harass them if they too came wearing shorts to office. It's a universal truth—men are the fucking worst! Women are a close second.

In my white shirt and a solid dark pair of jeans—I was more sharply dressed than anyone around me—I looked like I was there to take an interview, maybe audit their books, restructure their debts. My relatives often told me my face didn't match the rest of my body. I was big-boned like Baba, but my face was a mismatch. Sparrow-like and fleshy; Mumma told me I looked like Durga. Not the high-jawboned, fierce Durga of the northerners,

but the soft, grandma-like, duskier Durga of eastern India.

Karunesh led me to the interview room and kept turning back to check if I was following him.

'There's not much to get lost around here,' I said.

We took our seats in the allotted interview room. I remembered my mother's words. At least pretend to like your interviewer.

'Good morning,' he said. 'So, you're Anusha Sardana.'

I smiled as widely as my cheeks allowed me. 'Good morning, and yes, as it says on the résumé.'

'You know what we do here at WeDonate?'

'It's a crowdfunding company. WeDonate collects money for people who can't afford certain things—medical emergencies, indie film projects, college start-ups and the like. Last year you raised 250 crores and beat out the competition by a margin.'

'Hmmm. What made you apply here?' he said, squinting at his phone. For someone who had prepared for the interview I found his questions quite basic.

'I want to be a writer,' I said. 'And being in the entertainment vertical will

help me be a better writer.'

help me be a better writer.

'What do you want to write?' he asked.

'I believe medium is irrelevant. Books, scripts, plays, they are all

interchangeable if the story and the characters are in place. I just like to write,

be it anything.'

'They say the best way to learn writing is to just start writing. Why haven't

you started doing that till now?' he asked as if he had himself been awarded

critical acclaim for what he had written. At best, what WeDonate has

produced till now is average.

'I have tried more times than I can remember. I will go back home and

write about this interaction too, how my day went, etc., just to practice. But I

don't have an interesting character to write about yet. I figured I need to live

a little more, see a little more, experience a little more. And while I do that, I

need to learn the craft of writing.'

'Why didn't you join a film school then?' asked Karunesh.

'I don't have the money,' I said.

Karunesh Talwar, the head of the entertainment division, kept asking

hackneyed, obvious questions and swiftly ran out of even those. So much for

being creative, eh?

The interview went infinitely better than the ones I had given earlier at publishing houses, newspapers and streaming platforms.

When Karunesh was done with his questions, Ganesh Acharya from HR joined us. He introduced himself, sat right across from me and did what HR people do best, indulge in split-second judgements. Like every HR person, he exuded a false confidence. I guess it helps them hold on to the delusion that their jobs are important.

He looked at my résumé, squinting and grimacing and smiling, trying to throw me off my game. I would wrap up this life, move to the hills the day I let an HR person outsmart me.

Ganesh made a dramatic gesture of keeping my CV to the side and said, ‘Tell me about yourself? Something that’s not on the CV. I have read of all this.’

I could see the pointlessness of this question reflect even on Karunesh’s face. Ganesh was asking to be screwed with.

I lowered my voice and said, ‘Ganesh, I thought you would never ask. But since we will work together, if we work together, and since WeDonate touts itself more as a family and less as a corporate, I should probably share with you what I wouldn’t in any other interview.’

you what I wouldn't in any other interview.

'Go on,' said Ganesh.

'Ganesh, my father's dead. He's been dead for seven years now. My mother and I haven't quite gotten over it. If you ever come to our house, you will feel like he never left. Of course, we don't talk about his departure, or the big hole he left in our lives. We just let it be. Like he was a guest who had to leave sooner than later. We have left it at that. What will we talk about anyway? It's done. We should get over it. What do you suggest we should do about it? Don't tell me we should visit a therapist. We can't afford one. Especially now that their rates have ballooned no thanks to everyone advertising on Instagram that they are going to a therapist. Life's strange, isn't it, Ganesh?'

I watched Ganesh's Adam's apple bob up and down in his throat.

'I'm sorry I shouldn't have said that. Do you have any more questions?' I asked.

'That's about it,' said Ganesh. 'Do you have any questions that you have for me?'

'I just wanted to know if ethnic wear is allowed on Fridays,' I asked.

On my way out, Vishwas ji was sleeping.

I was jostling for space with annoying little shits in the bus when they

I was jostling for space with annoying little shits in the bus when they

called to tell me that I had been selected and would be needed in office the

next week. I was over the fucking moon! In my happiness I even gave up my

seat to an old man who was pretending to be more tired than he was. I

regretted it immediately when he stared at every woman who entered the bus.

Why do I give them the chance to disappoint?

It was a big day.

At night, to celebrate, Mumma and I ordered Chinese. We put out a plate

for Baba. The chowmein on his plate swam in soya sauce and chilli vinegar.

Just like Baba used to like it. Years of smoking had numbed his taste buds.

We watched Arjun Reddy on cable TV. Baba loved the sharp cuts and rapid-

fire machine-gun storytelling of Telegu movies. He didn't understand the

language and often watched the movies on mute. Looking back, it seemed

like his life was a reflection of those movies—concentrated moments of

happiness, anger, work and love, and an abrupt departure.

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I could barely sleep the entire week. I spent my waking hours watching and

re-watching every documentary, music video and short movie WeDonate had

made in the past couple of years. When the day came, I was one of the first

ones at work. I went straight to Nikhat Shaikh and Nimesh Arora to pick up my office laptop.

Nikhat and Nimesh were amongst those handful of fools—including

Karunesh who's a bigger fool given that he was an IITian—who had given up better jobs to be at WeDonate. All for the greater good.

'You're giving me this?' I held up the Lenovo ThinkPad Nikhat handed over to me, heavy as a boulder, with a design aesthetic of a brick. 'Is there a password or do I need to sacrifice a lamb on this slab?'

Then I pretended to drop the ancient sundial they called a laptop. The faces they made. Classic!

'ANUSHAI!'

'Behind you,' said Nimesh.

'That's Sarita Sharan,' said Nikhat.

Sarita Sharan—standing tall over the troops she commanded—was calling

me from the other side of the office. I had seen every one of her interviews.

She was composed and sharp; the interviewer was the one usually fawning and bumbling. She looked older in person, more intimidating and very attractive. I felt a growing need to impress her, to be friends with her, to go to her house and cook her dinner, be in her good books, call her to my wedding

her house and cook her dinner, be in her good books, call her to my wedding, make sure the paneer's soft for her. I hated to admit it, but I liked her. I still harboured suspicions that she siphoned money from the donations, of course.

'IN MY CABIN,' said Sarita.

I followed her into her cabin which was a mouse hole for someone built like her. At 5'6" I was used to being taller than the average girl around me, but sitting across the table from her, she towered over me. When she rested her elbows on the desk, the veins in her forearms snaked like an intricate, unplanned roadmap. I could make out in incredible detail the place where her shoulder muscle ended, and her biceps began. A stern smile rested on her face, a striking resemblance to the Night King.

'I have some great ideas, Sarita. I was looking through all the filmmakers' works and I was thinking—'

Sarita spoke as if I wasn't in the middle of my sentence.

'You're in the medical emergencies team. I have mailed you the guidelines and cases where we have registered impact. Go through them as soon as possible. I will find you someone to work with. You have to hit the ground running, there's no time to waste,' she said.

What.

'I'm here to work in entertainment. I will be a bad fit in medical.'

'What made you reach that conclusion?' she asked.

'I'm not that type.'

What I really wanted to say was that when I saw their medical campaigns I

could only think of fraud. Twelve-year-old girl whose parents don't have a

single rupee left needed Rs 15 lakh for a liver transplant. Are you sure about

that? Maybe they do have a little tucked away in bank lockers? Where's the

wedding jewellery? What if they are trying to cover this expense through

donations while they have the money?

That's how I looked at the world. That boy in the school uniform in the

metro? Pretty sure he stole money from his father and snuffed glue. The auto

driver? Definitely rapes his wife every night. The boy who I shared the lift

with to WeDonate? Well, he could damn well be cheating on his fiancé.

That's how I saw the world, and in all likelihood that's how the world was.

'Anusha? I'm free the entire day to talk to you about how you think I

should do my job,' Sarita said, looking into her computer.

'Sarita.'

'Great, then. Ganesh told me about your father, so you know a good deal

about loss,' she said. 'So here's what we do in the medical vertical. We yet

the stories of patients, check the estimated costs with the hospitals and then the writers write out the stories. We check the urgency with the hospitals, talk to the doctors and then fast track them. The urgent ones get promoted on our social media channels. Most of our donors are the ones who have donated before. The stories need to be written in a way that even if it doesn't make someone part with their money it will make them share the stories on their profiles,' she droned. 'What you need to do right now is to edit them and iron out the mistakes. We are all looking forward to your contribution here.'

'Sarita, anyone can write these stories. I'm a writer and I think—'

Sarita squinted her eyes and my words dried up.

She said with pursed lips, 'I started here as a writer for the medical team, so when you say "anyone" you're talking about me, Anusha. I have saved more lives here than I would have in a hospital. So don't tell me this is a talentless job. Now get out of the cabin and do the job you have been assigned to.'

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I left her cabin.

Within minutes, Sarita sent me no less than fifty write-ups about sick

parents, babies, husbands and fathers to edit and upload on the website.

parents, babies, husbands and fathers to edit and upload on the website.

It was grief-porn.

The sadness poured out from the laptop and wrapped itself around my neck.

I started with a story of a seven-year-old child with a failing liver. There was a picture of him with tears streaming down his big, yellowed eyes, his mouth, half-open in mid scream, stared at me.

Mummy, will I live? Please save me, mummy.

Next.

A father—a penniless, auto driver—sat on the ground, holding his crying daughter in his arms. The three-year-old lost both her eyes to retinoblastoma.

She needed artificial eyes and two rounds of chemotherapy.

Everyone around me was unhappy I had a girl, but I was the happiest. I wanted her to fly but now I just want her to live.

Next.

Three-year-old bald, wasting boy with a single parent needed money for his cancer treatment. He believed he got cancer because he drew on the wall.

His mother loved his hair and now there was none.

Maa, I promise I won't be naughty. Please take me out of this hospital.

The stories were endless. Each more terrible than the last. Why would

anyone want to write and re-write these? Drown themselves in this brackish slime of sadness?

\*\*\*\*\*

'We saved three children last week,' Rachita Somani, the de-facto head of the

medical team, told me during the coffee break.

She unlocked her phone and showed me post-surgery pictures of the three

young girls on her phone. She clutched at my hand like a madwoman and

didn't let go. Rachita Somani had been at WeDonate for three years. The job

was leaving tell-tale signs on her face. The intricate crow's feet at the corner

of her eyes, the huge bags underneath, the despondent look on her face, it was

unmissable. She was only two years older than I was but the stamp on her

face was of a much older, weather-beaten woman.

During lunch, the medical team sat together quietly and forced food into

themselves. They mingled with no one. Their lunch break was the shortest,

their faces most haggard, they spoke little, their eyes droopy despite getting

in the most money for WeDonate.

Rachita Somani and the others in the medical team feasted on the feeling

of being holier than everyone, on their work being more important than

anyone else's.

I had planned to eat alone but Nimesh and Nikhat came with bright smiles

and sat next to me. Of course they didn't ever leave office. They spent bucket

loads of their time socializing with colleagues.

'By the end of the day, you will watch at least one of them cry,' said

Nimesh when he caught me staring at the medical team.

'They can't take it. Too much work, too many deaths,' said Nikhat.

'The doctors work twenty-four hour shifts in hospitals as your teammates

do here,' said Nimesh.

'I'm going to shift, they are not going to be my teammates for long,' I said.

To willingly be a part of this team is an act of masochism and extreme

stupidity. Their jobs are more unrewarding than even the doctors'. Unlike

doctors, the medical team doesn't have the luxury of not knowing the patients

and their families. The medical team knows everything about the person who's on the death bed. The person, their family, their history, their

desperation and their bleak future. It's their job to know everything and then

to glean out the most heartbreakingly details.

'We have a counsellor who comes every week and talks to the team. Sarita

had made it compulsory after Karan killed himself,' said Nimesh.

'Karan refused to live in a world that couldn't spare a few thousand to save a child,' said Nikhat.

How are people so naive? How can they not know that people are rotten?

They finish the story I had no interest in listening to. It was two years ago.

One of his cases were of twins, a three-year-old boy and girl, both needing

bone-marrow transplants, a cruel trick of genetics. Despite all of WeDonate's

efforts, they couldn't collect enough money for both. Karan, who got too

close to the family, pumped in his savings, even took a small personal loan,

and yet it could only cover one child. The parents chose the boy. The cancer

metastasized and killed the girl. The girl spent the last few days watching her

brother get better. The boy's went into remission. But six months later, the

cancer relapsed. Without his sister, the boy couldn't muster up the strength to

mount another fight against cancer and he too died. Karan ended his life the

day the boy was buried.

The rumour around the office was that Karan and Rachita were dating at

the time. It's said she blamed herself for not having worked hard enough on

the story. But as more people told the rumour it shifted. By the time it was

evening, the story had changed to Rachita was manic about the cases because

she had lost a patient she was trying to source money for and had nothing to

she had lost a patient she was trying to source money for and had nothing to do with Karan.

In every scenario, Rachita came out at the bottom; and every person in

medical had a story like hers.

\*\*\*\* the medical team. I didn't want to be a hero.

Later that evening, when I got home, Mumma was pretending to be busy. I

could see how much she missed me.

Apart from the minor inconveniences of having a gaping hole in the heart,

Baba's absence had also put a considerable dent in our social life. Mumma wanted me to be around her, to save her from the loneliness that consumed

her. It took me time to understand that. I was fifteen when I lost my father.

Baba left Mumma utterly and embarrassingly alone. How long can you

hold on to his smell in the bedsheets, his half-used shaving cream, his shoes

with mud still stuck to the soles, the four hundred rupees in his drawer, the

spare spectacles, the inhaler he left behind. What do you do of that four

hundred rupees Baba hadn't spent? Where would he have spent those? They

tell you that after marriage your husband and your family is everything,

neglecting to tell you what to do if one of them is not there one day.

After the aggressive mourning turned into a dull pain, Mumma's attempts

at forging friendships around the locality were met with hostility. 'Look at

at forging friendships around the locality were met with hostility. Look at her visiting neighbours; look at her smiling; look at her in the mall; look at her ordering food; look at her eating food', everything that she did was open to discussion and condescension. She was expected to walk with a bent head, talk little to none, never smile, live every day as a burden. She was supposed to hide.

The Sharmas, the Guptas, the Mandals, our friendly neighbours kept us at an arm's distance. We were harbingers of bad luck. It might have been five years, but the stench of being unfortunate women hadn't worn off. The women of our locality clutched at their suhaag, their married status, with a sense of pride because what else could they be proud of? Not their husbands, of course! All of them, walking bags of heart disease, disappointment and erectile dysfunction. I had legit reasons to be proud. They were still having sex days before it all ended, and not the married, tranquilized, once-a-month kind of sex, but sex that woke me up in the other room, the kind of sex that made them shy and look away from each other the next morning. None of the women who shunned her like a bad omen could claim that.

Now Surinder chachu and Poonam chachi waited for me to get married so they could make Mumma shift to a tiny flat and sell the house.

Baba's side of the family never once looked back. All the time Baba, Mumma and I, as a family, had stressed about what they would think about my clothes, my marks, my career choices, our investments, our car, our house was a waste. Even both of Mumma's brothers who would travel across the city to get rakhis tied would sparingly answer our calls, fearful that we would ask them for money.

That was our breaking point. We knew that niceness in people was an

illusion. Deep inside, everyone is a raging asshole. No one cared.

Being the oldest in my generation, all my cousins—all unsmart and talentless—were still in school. I had decided that I would introduce them to methamphetamines and cocaine the day they turned eighteen. That would be some revenge.

For the longest time, Mumma had tried to hide our ostracism by her friends from me. Every two weeks, she would dress up for her kitty party and leave the house. She would then read newspapers on her own at a Chinese restaurant close to our house and then come back. Once she knew I knew she stopped the charade and we never once discussed it.

'It was bad?' asked Mumma about my day.

'It was very bad.'

'What are they asking you to do?'

'Say I get cancer and you don't have the money—'

'I will slap you right now,' snapped Mumma.

'Say a girl has cancer and her mother doesn't have the money. She can

come crying to WeDonate, tell them her sob story, and they will reach out to

donors to help the mother out,' I explained.

'That sounds like a good thing to do. Why are you being so condescending

about it?' she asked.

'Mumma, I don't want to save anyone.'

'Beta, did you tell your boss that your heart is made out of stone?' said

Mumma. 'Did you ask to change your department?'

'I tried but she was scary,' I protested.

'More than you?' she asked.

Just because she was the first woman in her family to get an MA, only one

to teach in a polytechnic while her sisters bore petulant boys and insufferable

girls, she thought she could act cute with me.

'I'm talking to Ganesh from HR tomorrow. Maybe he can help,' I said.

I was hoping he would have decision-making capabilities and wouldn't

just parrot sentences Sarita Sharan asked him to, though my understanding

Just part of sentences Sarita Sharan asked him to, through my understanding

was that he was nothing more than Sarita Sharan's sock puppet.

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### E3:- Ganesh Acharya

Ganesh Acharya had taken a massive pay-cut to join WeDonate. Sarita

Sharan was the only reason Ganesh had joined the organization, but on days

like this, he hated his job.

Ananth Khatri is sitting in front of him, pissed, and Ganesh knows he can't

do anything for him.

Ananth says, 'Ganesh, there are two things. First, I want to be in medical. I

thought it was clear during the interview. And second, why are we wasting so

many resources at entertainment? We don't make anything good.'

'We understand where you're coming from,' says Ganesh. 'Did you tell

Karunesh about what you feel about entertainment?'

'I can't. He works hard at it; he's quite passionate about it.'

'Look, Ananth, today someone donates Rs 200 to a music band with a cute

boy singer. Who knows, tomorrow she might pay for someone else's heart

surgery. We need to throw a wider net, make people interested in helping

other people out,' says Ganesh.

Ganesh knows Ananth doesn't buy it but he nods his head. Ganesh didn't

entirely buy it as well.

'But can an exception be made and I be shifted to medical?'

Ganesh wishes he had taken those dramatics classes in school to really pull this off.

'Ananth, I will tell you the best we can do. You stay here at entertainment for a month or two, wrap up a couple of projects, and then we will look for a swap?' says Ganesh.

'But—'

'I'm sorry that's the best we can do right now,' says Ganesh with a sternness he has learned from Sarita.

He sees Ananth's face fall. If his opinion counted, he would have put

Ananth in medical. He thought of Ananth as someone with endless empathy, the chief requirement for the team. He was a nice boy who sought and saw niceness in everyone. He remembered Ananth being so polite to everyone in

the office on the day of the interview one would think he was a fake. But it was him—sincere and loving. You could see that in his eyes. The girls at

WeDonate had been whispering about him for days after the interview. Of course, they knew he was dating someone, and yet they talked about his

jawline, his eyes that had inhuman percentage of pupil—large black pools of

water, his short cropped but lush hair, and his slimness, like they were

entities of their own. Only this morning, a girl from the college project

vertical wanted to know about Ananth's skin care routine.

The team could do with people who would give it their all. And who better

than Ananth? He was prepared for this and yet Sarita thought different.

Ananth thanks Ganesh, gets up and leaves.

Not long after, Sarita calls Ganesh to ask him if it went well.

'Thank you, Ganesh,' says Sarita. 'We have a plan for him or I wouldn't

have asked you to do this.'

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