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A Thing Beyond Forever The reward for every true love is not love...

NOVONEEL CHAKRABORTY



PROLOGUE

THE GIRL WAS LEADING THE BOY like an inscrutable intuition that leads a decision.

Sometimes.

The girl was leading the boy. Where? She didn't know. Not that it mattered. The boy was with her, running along hand in hand, without an inch inquisitive about the endeavour. That mattered. That always mattered. Because... her existence was an adjective and he was her noun. She was the imprint and he, her nostalgia. She was the resonance and he, her emotional string. She was words and he, her language. She was music and he, her melody. She was the mood and he, her temperament. She was freedom and he, her respect. She was season and he, her change. She was the fever and he, her heat. She was monotony and he, her vacation. She was inertia and he, her motion. She was a crevasse and he, her depth. She was the parched earth and he, her monsoon. She was, above all, a creation and he, her destiny.

The girl had never witnessed anything like this before. The place, like future, was an arcanum but, unlike it, there was an air of democracy all over. The view resembled the surreal painting of utopia which the brush of her rapturous wishes had made on the canvass of her heart, since childhood. It wasn't exactly heaven but something more beatific and specific. It was a dream. And the ambience sprayed a déjà senti feeling on her.

Flirting with the jovial day sky were the smiling clouds. They also diligently separated the worldly illusion below from the cosmic reality above. The sun, like a guardian angel, made its omnipresence felt through its warm healing rays. The green meadows, beneath the couple's feet, stretched infinitely – north, south, east, west – like a magical carpet, mothering innumerable breeds of innocuous flora delicately interwoven into romantic designs. And the constant intake of their spiritual fragrance helped the couple's outer and inner self integrate. A range of mountains, standing tall and arrogant of their obtrusive virility, fenced the quaint scenery. They were busy making love to the soft snow embellished atop them and hence were apathetic towards the couple. Once in a while, few vibrantly coloured birds flew together from one tree to another. "Togetherness," the girl wondered, "is the elixir for romance." She looked at the birds,

once, while continuing her run. The harmonious vocal talent of the birds serenaded the surroundings with an overt sparkle, adding further to the feeling of being in a real fairy tale.

Most of the trees, erect like problems, were slender. The few big ones branched out like subplots of a prolix love epic, practicing incessantly the almost extinct art of altruism; burning in the sun to provide shade to others, all their life. Surrendering to exhaustion, the girl and the boy preferred to rest under the shade of one of the big trees. The boy, breathing more urgently than the girl, was smiling at her. He was smiling! That was it; her actual sunrise. It lit the candles of answers to every query of her life. It sucked out every ounce of ennui from her marrow and bathed her with an ethereal serenity, washing away the reluctant dirt of doubts and anxieties, from the very depth of her heart and mind. Living life graduated itself, when he smiled at her, from being a mere obligation to a prime responsibility as it mirrored, she thought and knew, the happiness in store for them. Future seemed not an unknown foe but an already subjugated slave. Love is definitely not business but it still works best in barter; his smile for her heart. The girl leaned forward impulsively and kissed the boy on his lower lip; moistening it. She did so in a trice and the suddenness of the act startled the boy. He stopped smiling. Closing his eyes the boy took a deep breath and tilted his face while making a slow forward movement. But his lips couldn't reach hers. Surprised, the boy opened his eyes. The girl was not there. He stood up anxious and went around the tree. There she was, standing few feet away beside the trunk of another tree, teasing him. The boy immediately sprang towards her with a replenished brio. She ran, he followed. She was his prize and he was her boon.

The chase carried on for sometime but when the soft naked skin of the girl's feet felt a hot rocky surface instead of the warm meadows, she slowed down. As the sound of water gushing down filled her ears more acutely, she knew a waterfall was nearby. And, it appeared the moment she turned left. The water was falling down boisterously onto the big boulders which were making its forward course rather complex. The girl, standing close to the waterfall, stretched both her hands out. The lukewarm water hit her with a sensual force. She slowly positioned herself under it. As the water bathed her, she felt the presence of the boy behind. He was close. Too close. She could feel his nervous breath upon the tender skin of her neck. The boy placed his hands on the girl's shoulders and rolled down her dress a little. Next he rested his quivering lips on her bare right shoulder. Somewhere something impending exploded within the girl. Her muscles stiffened as a reflex. She felt as if all her life got squeezed into that one moment nothing before, nothing beyond. No bracket of the past or the future. Only the delirious dot of a moment! Then there was another kiss: this time on her left shoulder. Her muscles relaxed. She turned around and gave the boy a slight push. He took few quick backward steps in order to balance himself and seeing the girl close her eyes, stood still. The girl placing her hands on her bosom, untied the first knot of her dress in a slow erotic manner. The boy wetted his lips. Period. The dress further loosened with the release of one more knot. Period. The boy swallowed a lump. The girl, with trembling hands, reached for the last knot on her waist. Period. The dress, free of bindings, fell down with a naughtiness of its own. The boy swallowed a bigger lump. There remained now only one piece of clothing, her shyness, that veiled the girl's mind from letting the boy see the way she had arrived on earth; stark naked. And as she opened her eyes apprehensively, even that bit disappeared drowning her soul into the lava of ultimate sexual freedom. The boy, breathing faster and with steps heavy of passion, advanced towards the girl. Both were under the *waterfall* now. Neither of them spoke nor moved. They simply looked at each other. Eye to eye. As if the eyes were the crystal ball of a magician through which they were trying to understand their own self and foresee the true reason of their being.

"Please gift me my identity." The boy heard the girl's rasp voice. He kissed her. Their tongues met. Their lips locked. Their bodies touched. Their souls mingled. And their being, stung deep by the sexual scorpion, immersed into the sea of unfathomable pleasure.

Having wings is one thing and flying another. Having eyes is one thing and dreaming another. Having a heart is one thing and falling in love, quite another. The girl thought as she closed her eyes again. After a minute of desperate discoveries their lips unlocked and the boy started to slowly descend on her body; with the warmth of love evaporating from within him and condensing into every inch of her frame. The feeling was velvet and the sensation, silk. Each touch made, each kiss implanted and each moan squeezed out was one complete season of eternal happiness.

There was something in the air, she knew for sure, which could only be felt. It was intangible and ineffable yet insanely insinuative. In the beginning it seemed as complex as the universe but after her surrender she realized it was actually as simple. And that very something soon copulated with all her senses, giving birth to an emotional orgasm within her.

The girl, desirous of sharing the surreal epiphany, opened her eyes. She was shocked. There was no one around. Where did he go? She looked above and kept gaping in disbelief. The morning sky had transformed into the darkest of nights. No stars, no moon, no hope. The water from the fall had also dried up tersely. She felt claustrophobic as the darkness seemed to close in. She quickly wore her dress and scampered towards the grassy meadow. The moment her feet met the ground, she screamed. The meadow was roasting hot with the intensity ascending every moment. She started running. And each time the flames of the inferno beneath tried to lick her skin, she intoned in defense, "I love you." Love indeed was the most amazing serendipity of her life. While everything before the *austere accident* was a celestial preparation to get her core puffed with the elusive aroma of the inevitable but everything since was about a sanguine surrender to love's immortal ripples.

The girl reached the spot beneath the big tree, where she was with the boy minutes ago,

only to find miles and miles of stark emptiness scripting her requiem. The eerie stillness all around made her hysteric and she yelled the boy's name with all her might. But what echoed back frightened the girl to unconsciousness.

I don't want to die...I don't want to...d...i...e.

Something crashed at a distance.

*

SECTION – 1

A DROPLET IN AN OCEAN...

CHAPTER - 1

Her body suffered an impulsive jerk. And the immediate second, as a response, she opened her eyes.

Innumerable times the dream had occurred to her. In the beginning it used to be vague but with the consistent drizzle of time it became vivid. And these days she could feel its haunting resonance even after it was over. But why doesn't the dream move beyond a point? It was, as if by a natural law, this particular dream ended at the same juncture; keeping her fervour for it in its adolescence.

Radhika sat up sure of a loud and sharp sound. Though the subconscious helped her guess the source still she thought of checking it up for security reasons. Thus crippled with laziness, Radhika dragged herself out of bed and without caring to switch on any light she walked like a somnambulist straight to the kitchen. As her eyes grew used to the dark she saw the cause of the sound scattered all over the floor. This time there were three: one dish and two porcelain cups, broken to pieces. The sight disgusted Radhika. The culprit, as her guess transmogrified into surety now, had to be her landlady's latest pet cat, Luchi – the reason for her forty winks from the past five nights.

The first night it excreted on her chair, on the second and third it dropped the bowl containing curd from the kitchen shelf while trying to taste it. The next day Radhika complained to her landlady, Mrs. Tejwani, an old self-claimed maudlin lady. She promised to take care of it. On the fourth night Luchi's presence didn't create any havoc but the possibility didn't let Radhika sleep well either. The following morning she found

the newspaper, which she had used to cover the glassless window pane, torn at the centre. Tonight though was the limit though. The broken dish and cups were a part of an entire set which her best friend had gifted last summer. Tomorrow I'll ask that old duck to immediately place a glass on the window. And if she doesn't agree...her thoughts were interrupted by the polyphonic version of a latest *Bollywood* song. Her mobile was ringing and simultaneously dancing to the effect of vibration atop her study table. Wondering who it could be at this unearthly hour, she rushed towards it. She switched on the table light before receiving the call.

"Hello?" Her voice was hoarse.

"Hello, ma'am; this is Suparna. I hope I didn't disturb you."

Radhika quickly glanced at her wrist watch resting beside the table light. At 2:15 am... disturbing? Humour me! "What is it?" Radhika spoke aloud; her voice was getting clearer every moment.

"The 203 patient is getting impatient, ma'am."

"Impatient? He was doing fine this evening."

"I don't know. He seems to be in some sort of pain."

"But my night shifts are only on for T-T-F. Today is Wednesday. You should be informing Dr. Barat about it."

"I tried his number many times, ma'am. It's out of range."

Rinky...she recollected the nurse's name...*that's where his range lies these days*. "Is there nobody else available?"

"I haven't tried the others yet. I thought if..."

"Alright. I am coming." Duty, moral responsibility...there are some bullshits you can't complain about, Radhika reminded herself. *Do it-forget it-move on*. Placing her mobile phone back on the table she took a deep breath and shook her head furiously once.

Steady. Taking out a bottle of *Kinley* from her Godrej refrigerator, Radhika quaffed its contents in no time. As the chilled water explored her guts she felt alive. Walking into the kitchen again, Radhika kept the empty bottle on a shelf and moved forward cautiously, on her toes, to avoid stepping on any of the sharp broken pieces of porcelain. She reached the wash basin. After washing her face she made her untamed hair into a bun. Next, with a broomstick, she swept the scattered pieces and heaped them near the dustbin. She went to the front room and opened the wardrobe. Standing there she changed from her night gown to a black cotton pant and a lavender coloured shirt. The moment she buttoned her shirt a funny feeling gripped her and she knew why. The bra

was missing. She doffed the shirt and opened the wardrobe again, riled. Why won't women be natural managers? We need to manage everything; from babies to social beasts to our breasts. She was fuming.

Finally the funny feeling was taken care of and Radhika was ready to leave. But where is my key? She quickly scanned the room. It was much smaller compared to where she used to reside earlier. But within four months, when the food provided increased her tête-à-tête with the toilet, she moved out. After checking out seven 'To let' options she had at last discovered *Vasuda's*; a working women's mess in *Paan Bazaar*.

Irrespective of being small, the room was sufficient for Radhika to fit in one wooden wardrobe, one folding bed, a study table big enough to serve her dinner table, and a small thirty-litre refrigerator. Since Radhika rarely had any visitor she was satisfied with it but for the last few nights.

A simple pan of the eyes didn't help so Radhika tried a frenzied manual search. Under the pillow – no. Below the mattress – no. Behind the door on the hook – no. Inside the wardrobe, between clothes – no. On the study table, inside the first, second or third drawer – no. Inside the shirt's pocket she was wearing – no. Inside the pant she was wearing, front pockets – no, back pocket – yes! The moment Radhika got the key she rushed for the door while picking her black leather hand bag and the white coat on the way.

It was a sweltering June night. No breeze, no respite. The outside, because of a sudden increase in humidity, seemed claustrophobic. The weather department had predicted rain, not monsoon, in a week's time. But that was last week and nothing, not even minutely encouraging, had happened thus far. People were aghast. Everywhere there were talks about the heat increasing year after year. Nature was surely getting angrier global warming! They discussed but never reached any solution. And when they were convinced that they wouldn't be around when the sun's rays literally consume the Arctic ice or burn the human race into ashes, the topic was conveniently changed. Man, probably in the November-December of his existence, still considers the world to be a public loo. I'll shit and there must be someone else to clean up.

Stepping out of Vasuda's, Radhika realized she had forgotten to apply talcum. Never mind, she thought wiping the perspiration on her forehead and neck with a handkerchief. Usually she took a rickshaw to the nursing home. But that was when she followed her routine; moving out by eight for the night shifts. At 2:35 am, though the rickshaws were noticeably chained on one side of the road but no rickshaw-puller was visible nearby. Without wasting time to wait for or search one, Radhika was already walking down the sleepy street; alone. And what a metaphor it was, she thought. Walking alone! From the last seventeen years it had been a way of life for her. There were times when she felt tired. Impossibly tired. Her legs ached, her mind gave up, the lungs refused to expand and everything seemed Sisyphean but even then she kept walking. Not with a hope of seeing some divine light in the end but with an obstinate attitude of crossing the mineladen bridge of life irrespective of whatever brutal darkness her destiny was in love with. And when Radhika's mind made a sudden dive onto the river of her past, everything seemed unreal. All of it. As if it wasn't she but someone else within her who made her face all the hard facets of life; eye to eye and masticate it well enough to move on. Probably that's what suffering does. It connects us with that phantasmal person within us who has, by default, all the necessary guts and might to fight life and force it to kneel down.

The eeriness of the night was tantamount to the one she dreamt about. And because it pushed her to walk faster she reached the nursing home few minutes earlier than was usual on foot. The security guard was more than pleased to see her. At forty five, it wasn't his wife but the young ladies, who gave him a hard on. He smiled but Radhika showed no intent. She knew he was a toad. Every second man is for they have one ball too many, she thought and entered the lobby in haste, heading straight for the reception. Signing the register – mandatory for everybody working in the nursing home apart from the visiting doctors – she dashed for the stairs.

*

CHAPTER-2

Suparna, with a persistent movement of her legs to ward off any *bona fide* mosquitoes, was anxiously leaning forward on the second floor aluminum balustrade guiding the stairs. Her ears were alert while her big round and forever expressive eyes were looking intently down at the reception. They twinkled with relief when Radhika stormed inside the nursing home. She turned a little towards right to watch Radhika climb the stairs after signing the register. As their proximity attained the reasonable degree necessary for a discourse, they exchanged smiles; while Suparna's showcased gratitude, Radhika's was plain synthetic. "Thank God, you are here. The patient was really getting out of hand till I twice promised him you were definitely coming tonight."

"Thanks. But don't do that in future," Radhika quipped. "I mean when it's not my shift. And one more thing, report Dr. Barat's absence to Mathur sir. He did this last week as well."

During their brisk walk towards room 203 Suparna briefed her about the situation. They slowed down near the room. "You go ahead and prepare the injection. I'll be there in a minute."

Apart from Dr. Veena, sleeping carelessly with her upper half indecently spread on the big centre table, the common room, as Radhika stepped in, was empty. She placed her bag on the other side of the table and took out her stethoscope. The table wobbled a little because of a feeble leg but it didn't wake her colleague. Radhika turned around and stood in front of the half-cracked mirror pinned loosely on the wall beside the table. Raising her toes a little, in order to fully appear in the mirror's frame and thereby adding couple of inches more to her five-feet-six-inch height, Radhika wore her white coat and straightened the badge on it. This was the only moment, wearing the coat, which demanded some extra time from her. And she, with pleasure, gave in. For it wasn't just a white piece of clothing. It was her identity, her purpose, her confidence, her anodyne and it was what changed her from Radhika Sharma to Dr. Radhika Sharma. A simple addition of two alphabets before her name and a renaissance was achieved. Though she had to be patient and prepare doggedly for twelve long years to realize the moment for the first time in her life but now, ironically enough, the entire war seemed to have been fought in the blink of an eye. And though she tried hard to cover her past with the heavy raiment of present but at times, with a lunacy of its own, it walked naked alongside her like the moon does when one travels on a lonely road.

Born to an English teacher of a public school and a nurse working at a Government

hospital, life guised itself like an angel; the one her mother used to read to her about from a fat book containing the picture of a half-fish girl. Though her mother repeatedly told her it was a mer*maid*, but four-year-old Radhika preferred to call her 'half-fish girl' for she was too beautiful to be someone's *maid*.

The money that used to come in, at the end of every month, didn't allow the couple to provide their only child with costly food or attractive toys, but they made sure she got the most precious of all nutrients; love and care, of exponential nature. That usually takes care of anybody's health.

What made their child unique was that she never cried, so much so, that many times they considered 'smiling always' as a probable abnormality. They even took her to a doctor for it. *Anything that's rare isn't abnormal Mr. Sharma. Your child is as normal as she should be.* Though some weeds of doubt remained but the couple, in their hearts, felt indebted to the heavens for gifting them with such a wonderfully *abnormal* child.

Happiness for the family wasn't locked inside any high priced material item. It was generated when simple things like sleeping together at night in the presence of each other, knitting a sweater for the baby during winter, dropping and fetching little Radhika from her kindergarten school, dressing the child and going out together for an evening walk in the adjacent park or when her parents kept aside a portion of their strictly decent salary for securing their daughter's future, happened. Mr. Sharma couldn't afford to take his family to a movie or for dinner in a costly restaurant every week but on his way back home, from school every day, he used to buy either samosas or pakodas of different kinds. Many times the guilt of not being able to buy sophisticated stuffs on a regular basis shadowed his conscience but whenever he ate those samosas and pakodas with the two miracles of his life, the light of a realization made the dark guilt disappear: the right ingredients make the food tasty but sharing the food with the right people makes it special. Really special. And his wife and daughter were just the right people who made him feel special by accepting whatever he brought with an ardent smile. Days passed coated with joy and time, like an elegant cigar, kept on burning completely oblivious of the fact where and on whom its ashes were going to fallnext.

On her eleventh birthday, Radhika's parents had gone to the famous *Kamakhya Temple*. The queue of the devotees was, as usual, a long one. Couple of hours later, with patience prominent as drops of perspiration on their faces and a little help from a middleman, Mr. and Mrs. Sharma performed the worship rituals successfully. The oblation was done in the name of their child. Satisfied, they stood outside the temple waiting for an *autorickshaw*. They got one and as they were getting into it, they heard a loud explosion. Astounded, their heads turned in reflex and a second later there was another explosion. No chance, no reflex and no reaction this time. The *auto-rickshaw* they were going to board flew high in the air and by the time it touched earth again life, dreams, hope,

aspirations, faith and whatever else around, as if working under the grip of an illogical black magic, changed into a terse nothing. All happened within an instant. The same instant of time which sometimes comes loaded with a boon and sometimes a bane, but rarely with any plausible explanation.

Breaking of the news was as inhuman as the news itself. "There was a bomb blast and it killed your parents." Her aunt had said, the next day, watching the little girl standing in the courtyard waiting for her parents' return. Within a week the essence of the circumstance cured Radhika of her childhood abnormality. *She always keeps smiling doctor. Not that we are bothered but...*

Occasionally, Radhika overheard the elders of the house discussing the bomb blast, the militants and how their fight for freedom was impregnating the state with fear. But never could she relate the talks with the death of her parents. The school says 15th August is the Independence Day of our country then why are these people fighting for freedom? Didn't anyone tell them this yet? Or did someone deny them freedom? Surely not my parents! They never denied me chocolates, how can they deny someone their freedom?

Radhika stayed with her paternal relatives for three months after which the ladies of the house, who saw her as a sign of ill luck, managed to hand her over to the maternal counterpart. The following six months saw Radhika turn into a reticent child. She neither played nor studied. Her *soi-disant* guardians deliberately kept her away from education to make her the pawn for their self-fostered *e-e-e* rule. *E*ducation yields *e*go. Ego breeds *evil*. Needless to say their children never qualified for it.

Apart from doing the daily household chores, which was her euphemistic rent in return for shelter and three meals a day, Radhika sat out the entire time either on terrace or in her room. She made an exclusive world of the bygone grand times within her and preferred it to the outside one.

Couple of months later, while carrying a bag full of vegetables and following her uncle in the market from one vendor to another, a missionary nun noticed Radhika. It took one day for the nun to learn about her history from the neighbourhood after which she did two things: one, discussed the case with the head of the charity organization she worked in and two, talked with Radhika's relatives. The former agreed on principle and the latter agreed on seeing an opportunity of washing their hands off her. It took another week to complete all the necessary paper formalities. Finally the charity organization took Radhika to their orphanage, The Home, whose prime objective was to take care of as many orphan girls as they could under the age of eighteen and provide them with free food, education, shelter and shape them into someone capable enough to lead their own life. The organisation was a sister concern of St. Patrick's School where all the girls of

The Home were enrolled as students.

Though the orphanage brought about a change of environment but, for Radhika life continued to be a case of lost appetite. No desire, no energy and no purpose other than an unaccountable inner lassitude to deal with. But as weeks passed and her interaction with other girls increased, Radhika realized she wasn't the only one hit by the poisonous arrow of solitude. The fact relaxed her but only abit.

The strict discipline of the orphanage didn't allow her to remain alone at anytime. The day started with morning prayer and breakfast together with all the children, then school (where she made more friends), back to The Home for lunch (together again), games in the evening (where only seriously sick children were allowed to sit out), studies and home work assignments (all together) followed by dinner, prayer and finally sleep. Studies, school, new friends, and the fresh ambience slowly helped Radhika transcend back from her personal to the real world. And the following year, during one of the health check-up sessions, arranged annually by the organisation for its children, it was time for vicissitude.

"What is your aim in life?" The doctor, placing his stethoscope on her chest, asked.

"Aim in life?" That was what Radhika answered only in exams. She could write an essay on it. But no one ever asked it on herface.

"Yes, aimin life. What do you want to become when you grow up?"

"I don't know." It was either an astronaut or a teacher when she wrote her essay, simply because the book with the collection of essays had nothing else to offer on the topic.

"You don't know?" The doctor was overt with his reaction. "Well, how about a doctor? The one who can save lives."

What appealed to her was neither 'doctor' nor 'lives'. 'Save' was the word that unlocked a series of visions and her appetite for life, after a feverish year, was instantly back.

"If I become a doctor will I be able to avoid bomb blasts?"

"You won't be able to avoid bomb blasts. Of course not!" The doctor was taken aback at

the child's flummoxing query. "But if you work sincerely and with utmost dedication then you can certainly save many injured by it."

Radhika thought for a while and then said aloud. "If that's so then my aim in life is to become a doctor."

"Inshallah!"

Destiny is the root of all limitations and a dream is the seed for all liberations. The dream of saving lives impelled Radhika to work hard with the grit of fate. And the next seventeen years witnessed her steel determination maul every obstacle out of its intended design. Now, as she wore the white coat, she once again became Dr. Radhika Sharma. A virago!

*

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CHAPTER-3

Inside room 203, the passing seconds were severely testing someone's patience. "Where is she?" The voice was soft but sweet and so the irritation it intoned seemed an obvious misfit.

"One more minute and she will be here," Suparna replied preparing an injection.

"No, you are lying. That's what you have been saying all night now."

"But it's the truth this time. My God! You have some cheek!" The injection was ready. "What will you be when you grow up?"

The patient giggled, infuriating Suparna. "After pestering me for the last three hours now you are giggling. Let Dr. Sharma come, I shall tell her that..." The door opened and Radhika entered the room.

Her aura always awed Suparna. Of all the young doctors she respected Radhika the most. It budded out not only from her knowledge about Radhika's past and her exemplary fight against impediments but also from the fact that the weaknesses she possessed as a human being somehow were non existent in Radhika. She seemed blithe and free of fear free, unfaltering in the face of the innumerable frustrating sacrifices and adjustments made at every crossroad of life, more so being a woman. Radhika had, it seemed to the middle-aged nurse, elevated herself to a level where the only thing that mattered was following one's inner compass. And it is that conscious upgradation, Suparna's repentance told her, which actually differentiates between a deprived existence like hers and an enriched living like Radhika's.

The grapevine, from time to time, transpired stories with Radhika as the protagonist. The sauciness of which would have given an instant raise to any Page 3 journalist. When one story dried up, due to lack of gravity, another shaped up; the diaphanous nature of the source being a constant. Thus Suparna gave in to none of it. Even if Radhika had anyone in her life, she thought and sometimes even argued with others, she has got the right not to discuss it. Nobody cared to listen and slowly Suparna also ceased to sip the tonic of gossip. If instincts have anything to do with truth, she was sure, the only men in Radhika's life were the ones with whom she worked; her colleagues. And each of them was just that, a colleague.

The quality of a song is judged by the number of souls it stirs. There were quite a few doctors, senior and junior, who were well stirred by Radhika's beauty. Though she seldom took any out-of-the-way care of herself but on her behalf, nature did. It bestowed her with a spotless brown skin. It was smooth, shiny and sexy. The nose, though a little blunt, was cute. Her lips, without any artificial lip gloss, glistened with passive lust. Her sharp curves together with young and unconquered assets could easily compete with the temptresses of a chick-flick or the perfect erotic female forms sculpted in The Hindu caves of Ellora. Even her attire was misanthropic. Unlike other female interns, Radhika never wore a sari or a salwar. It was always cotton shirts, pants or jeans for her. The men felt blessed for they could guess her outline better. And in doing so they felt the *torch of civilization* revolt between their legs.

The ne plus ultra of Radhika's appearance, though, was her eyes. They had a strange kind of imperturbable stillness which sustained a covert element of cold indifference. But this only helped second the label of an arrogant feminist. She was arrogant because, her colleagues wrongly believed, being a woman she dared to be a solipsist. She was arrogant because during free time she read and not added anything to spicy gossips. She was arrogant because she never gave any male a chance to even propose a date; never mind a one night stand. She was arrogant because she was a presumed virgin who spoke her mind. Also, she was arrogant because she was the aberrant; better than most of the young doctors. In fact, Radhika Sharma was the best. Not as an adjective but as anoun.

"Is the injection ready?" Radhika asked while studying the patient's report chart.

Suparna, reveling in a surreal admiration for the young doctor, nodded holding the injection.

"What about his parents? Aren't they coming?"

"They will, tomorrow."

"Where is his grandmother?"

"She is sleeping in the visitor's room below. She is a hypertension case so I didn't wake her up." A nervous hiatus followed. "But if it's urgent then I can..."

Radhika squinted her eyes a little going through the last portion of the report.

"Good." She reacted to the report while Suparna mistook it for appreciation. She

reciprocated with a grin.

"No, that won't be necessary. There is no urgency of any sorts. He should be discharged by tomorrow or latest the day after."

"But he was complaining of acute pain." Suparna said looking at the patient who had suddenly gone mute seeing the doctor.

"That's what is confusing me. Let's see."

Radhika approached the patient. As soon as she was near he put forward his hand. She smiled faintly and held it. An exact minute passed. The pulse is okay. Next she put the stethoscope on his chest. The patient started breathing deeply without being asked to do so. Heart beat - normal. Radhika got up and took the injection from Suparna.

"If you want, you can take some rest. I'll call you if need be," she said.

"Thank you."

The patient giggled as the door closed.

"What is it?"

"I fooled her. I got no pains. I only wanted you to come over."

"My God!" Radhika exclaimed, "Why did you do that?"

"Few days back you promised to tell me a story, remember? But till now you haven't."

"I don't believe this. You tricked both of us and ruined my sleep just to listen to a story? Such a prankster at nine! What will you be when you grow up?"

The patient giggled at the retort.

"Stop it. This isn't funny."

"The nurse also wanted to know the same thing."

"Really?"

Laye Barua was in Guwahati to spend two and a half months of summer vacation with his grandmother. His father, who wanted him to join the summer cricket camp, was totally against it.

Laye had a mind of his own yet he fully lived up to the cliché 'mamma's boy'. Whatever his mother said, he obeyed. Whenever she wanted him to do something, he did. No qualms. She couldn't recollect one single episode, since his birth, when she had to scold her son; never mind hitting. Of course, Laye didn't hate his father but nevertheless the relationship was of a strange kind. The former wanted the latter to be a follower whereas the latter was obstinate to make his own stride count. Hopefully time would help them realize their limitation without the other, his mother thought, and then a perennial proximity shall bloom.

This year, when the steep increase in temperature trumpeted the arrival of summer, Laye reminded his mother of their preceding year's deal. If he ranks within the top five in class then she would partner him to persuade his father for a visit to granny's place. Laye stood third.

"Alright!" Mr. Barua announced his surrender. "I shall do as you want me to but promise me one thing. You won't spend all your time there sitting with crayons or any stupid board game. I'll be in touch with granny over the phoneso..."

"I promise." His confidence soared because he knew his granny better. She was the sweetest person (after his mother) he had come across for she neither forced her wishes onto him nor asked him to avoid doing what he enjoyed; be it drinking three bottles of Pepsi at one go, having potato chips for lunch, guzzling an ice-cream in the middle of the night or drawing all day long.

It was the month of May when Laye finally arrived in Guwahati. His mother couldn't accompany him because her leave application wasn't accepted at the bank where she worked as senior equity advisor. Thus it was Mr. Barua who had to do the honours alone. Laye had no memories of his previous visit to Guwahati, six years back. So this time he was determined to explore the city afresh. And once his father left for Mumbai the following day, he made his plans clear to his granny. Every alternate day they went out for sight seeing. And wherever he went, Laye meticulously observed the ambience and once home he gradually uncorked his subconscious onto his drawing book. His granny was more than pleased with her gifted grandson. So each time he showed her a

drawing she gave him a *Dairy milk* chocolate.

One evening, while they were returning home from the nearby market Laye demanded an ice cream. His granny, for a change, didn't comply immediately. Out of rage Laye gave a sudden jerk and freed himself from his granny's clutches to run across the road in order to reach the nearby *ice cream walah*. And before he could realize anything, a speeding bike knocked him down on the road and he lay there bleeding copiously till his granny, with the help of passers by, took him to the nearest medical centre: Cognizance Nursing Home.

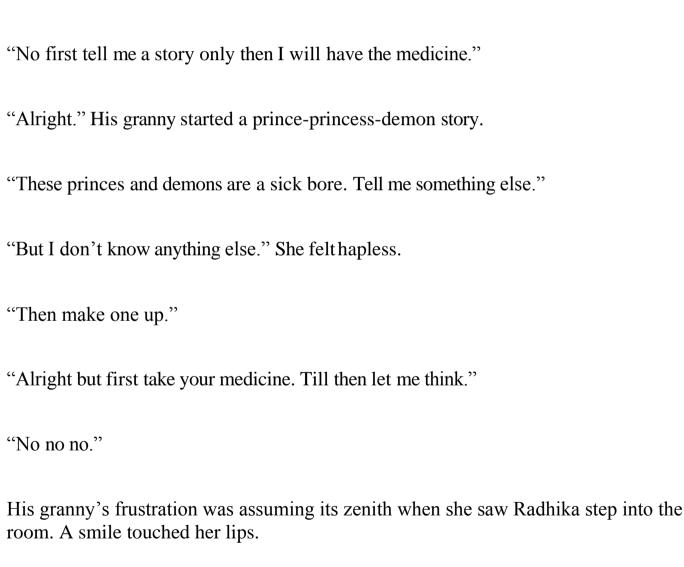
His parents were immediately informed. Mr. Barua couldn't arrange for any air tickets as half the flights were cancelled because of an indefinite strike by the airport employees. Reluctantly he went for the train. There too, the rush, owing to the vacation season was stupendous but still Mr. and Mrs. Barua managed to board the *Gitanjali Express* three nights ago. They reached Howrah station in Kolkata, last evening, from where they changed to the *Saraighat Express* that was scheduled to reach Guwahati the next morning at around quarter to ten.

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CHAPTER-4

Dr. Singh who was supposed to treat Laye had to leave for home to settle an urgent family feud. He was due to return shortly so his cases were, as a stop-gap, distributed among the younger doctors under him with Laye ending up as Radhika's concern.

Hours later, when Laye gained consciousness, he saw Radhika for the first time. They didn't talk. But lying innocently on his bed he studied her demeanour...the frequent wetting of lips, the squinting of eyes while reading, her strict face while talking to others, the frequent adjustment of the badge on her white coat, her one-cheek-stretch smile and her suave gait...everything was noticed. They only spoke thenext day.



"Why don't you ask your doctor to tell you a story?"

"What's the matter?" Radhika asked continuing her walk towards the bed.

"He says my stories bore him. Do you have anything interesting to narrate else he won't

take the medicine."

"Well," Radhika smiled at Laye, "I do have an exciting story to tell but not tonight."

"Then?"

"May be a few days from now. But only if you take all your medicines on time without troubling your grandmother."

Laye was quiet for a while. He analyzed the offer and suddenly spoke up. "Do you promise?"

"I do," Radhika lied. Two days passed and nothing happened as per the promise. Thus Laye hatched a plan.

But now, seeing Radhika upset, he realized his mistake.

"I am sorry if you are hurt." The innocuous voice rendered Radhika helpless. She let off a light sigh and caressed Laye's bandaged forehead once.

"It's alright. Don't repeat it," she said with a gracious smile. "Fooling people isn't an appreciable trait for a good boy like you."

"Am I forgiven?"

"You are," Radhika said rubbing the soft skin of his arm with a piece of spirit-soaked cotton.

"What is this? No injections, please!"

"Quiet. This will give you strength." Radhika lied with confidence. She put the tip of the syringe on the desired spot and gradually pushed its rear. Laye's lips pouted to a silent 'O'. The span of a second relaxed him. The ordeal was over. Few more minutes and Radhika knew he would be fast asleep.

"Now won't you tell me a story?"

Radhika, who was about to throw the used injection into the waste bin, turned around instantly and said, "After the act you pulled tonight you want me to agree?" She threw the injection and got busy writing the name and time of the injection on the report chart tied to the foot end of the patient's bed.

Laye, though disappointed, chose not to argue. "Bunk the story. Tell me, do you have a boy friend?"

Radhika's eye brows rose in a flash. Her pen's motion, on the report chart, paused abruptly. Laye noticed both and blurted out a sorry again.

"Well then do you have a girl friend?" he asked, a little careful this time. Radhika's eyes broadened. She gave him her sternest look.

"Well I have a girl friend." What was intended to be a proud announcement came out as an uncomfortable babble.

"You do?" she asked.

"Yes. Her name is Tina. We are made for each other. Whatever I like, she likes too. I like board games a lot and she is my partner at it. We also sit and draw each other's faces often. She is perfect at it but I end up making someone else's face." Laye laughed but soon checked himself realizing he was the only one doing so.

"Enough. Close your eyes now." Radhika was done with the report chart. "Good boys sleep at this hour." She switched off the light and came out of the room. Dejected, Laye closed his eyes.

"I have given him the injection. Just keep a watch." Radhika told Suparna who was sitting alone on the bench outside the room.

"I will."

"And I hope you remember what you have to tell sir tomorrow?"

"I remember, don't worry."

"Thanks. Call me if need be."

Suparna, stifling a yawn, sat back watching Radhika walk towards the common room. The moment Radhika surrendered herself to a chair, inside the common room, the cognizance of her acute exhaustion beckoned her. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. The scenes from the dream, like some frenzied screen transitions of a slickly edited movie, splashed on her mind. They were naked...he was behind her... sometimes squeezing her breasts and sometimes touching all over. The pious kiss, the urgent smooch and the nervous tongue duel...she felt a twitch on her inner thighs.

Opening her eyes she sat straight. The first thing she saw was the stethoscope of her colleague on the table. It had assumed the shape of a heart. Am I still dreaming? Within a flash she closed and opened her eyes again. No, she wasn't dreaming. Yes, the shape was of a heart. On an impulse, she pulled the leather bag towards her and unzipped it. Without searching the inside much, she took out a diary. It was a small one. The edges were stubbornly bent while the cover was discoloured throughout. It was hard to predict whether it was originally red or maroon. She turned its hard cover. The first page, transgressed by a covert yellow tinge, was blank. Radhika, with the inertia of a snail, turned the page and stared at the name written on the next. RAEN VERMA. One by one she focused on each of the alphabets constituting it. And in a trice all her emotional defenses knelt down. It wasn't for the first time she was experiencing it.

Whenever, in the last thirteen years, she opened the diary the same feeling overwhelmed her. It was like a visit to her grave with the word "love" written on the epitaph. Yet she never prayed and passed on. She deliberately used to exhume it - her grave – pulling out the corpse mutilated by her past. It was gruesome for her system and emotionally nettlesome. But once in love who ever died an emotional virgin? Those who are lucky are simply lucky but those who have been chosen to experience the *schizophrenic* side of love know their reward, in the end, will only be a shrug from the sacrifices they once made in order to hold on to what was never theirs.

The entire process of reading the diary was tantamount to touring a torture camp. It drained her emotions; nailed her hope, faith and belief against the cross of a reluctant capitulation; stripped her of every desire to meet the future and helped her past eat away the present. By now Radhika was well versed with the course the pages would take her

onto, the tumultuous contradictions they would generate within the marrow of her existence, the storm of unanswerable queries they would put her amidst, the whirlpool of confusions that would deracinate her soul and place it right at the epicenter of a quake which was both the cupid and the culprit that had once shook her, from head to toe, into someone new.

Still, she insisted on realizing the process whenever a chance conjured. Is there any woman in this world who doesn't know how much pain she needs to absorb in order to develop and later push a life out of her? And is there any woman in this world who, knowing the fact, doesn't want to give birth, at least once? The diary professed that kind of beatific and ecumenically sought-after pain for Radhika.

If someone had given her a choice between living her life and living the one *Zeitgeist* when she first fell in love, Radhika would have preferred the latter. *Anytime*. Such was her madness for the only true magic of life.

Love never comes with any latent or obvious options and yet, she wondered, one ends up making a life-altering choice; to keep it or not to keep it as one's guiding starforever.

Radhika turned another page and the first entry in the diary was before her. She was ready, for the umpteenth time, to read it. And as she started, something resounded in the air around her.

Tell me...do you have a boy friend?

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SECTION - 2

INFINITE RIPPLES...

30th May

Nights have a far deeper significance in the creation and continuation of mankind than many of us would ever possibly fathom. Didn't all our parents conceive us at night? Just think about it. No it's not vulgar. I am not asking you to visualize it. Just think about it. Not that I have any statistic to support my analogy. I am only "somehow" sure that more than half the world's population must have been conceived at night. Hence confusions! Had we been the children of day life would have been much clearer. By the way, is it darkness that gives light an identity or is it the other way round?

The realization of my analogy happened the night before yesterday, after I heard the newly wedded couple living in the opposite building groaning and moaning in pleasure (or was it pain?) It was probably one-ten at night and they didn't even care to close the window before inaugurating their obscene audio fest. Nobody complained. May be the sounds were helping every damn body in some goddamn way. Every damn body minus me. I was simply getting pissed off.

To tell you the truth I wasn't irritated by the sound as much I was thinking about the news papa gave me last week. It was about his promotion. He is now an Assistant General Manager. Great! And not only that, a transfer has also come along with the promotion. Hell! By the middle of this June we will have to shift to Guwahati. It was plain royal fuck when I heard it for the first time. And now, when I have analyzed the pros and cons of it thoroughly, the fact seems a plain cheap fuck. I can't leave Kolkata. No way! Not now at least, when all my classes are in full swing. It would suck the life out of my future plans.

More importantly the necessity to leave a school, in which I have been studying since grade one, and all of a sudden joining an unknown school at an unknown place, is something beyond my gumption. Teachers know me here, I have friends to help me out in case of emergency and above all I have got a grip on everything here. But if I agree to go to Guwahati, I don't know which school I'll land up in and then there's also the possibility of losing ample amount of time trying to acclimatize with the new environment. I still remember my class teacher's words. These two years, grade eleven and twelve, are the foundation of our career; more so for the science students. Whatever we do now will surely help shape our future either positively or negatively, depending

upon our devotion to studies. And look what I am into now. Pure dogshit.

I tried to reason it out with papa. I told him I could stay here in some hostel or mess or even as a paying guest but no, he didn't agree. He never does. Even ma also doesn't seem too inclined this time to coax him on my behalf but at least she knows how upset I am. Yesterday I saw a special series in the Discovery channel showcasing snakes. It said that an Anaconda churns and crushes its prey to death after swallowing it whole. And that's exactly what life is doing to me right now. Probably it does this to everybody. Imagine each one of us inside the voluminous gut of life, getting digested bit by bit. What a scary shit thought!

Anyways I am not going to Guwahati. I have another plan. And before implementing that I thought of at least filling the first page of yours. Though I wanted to scribble on all the pages in order to render you useless but I am no rapist (like destiny) so I thought of giving you a chance. After I go away my parents might wish to keep you as a souvenir of their younger son. Perhaps someday they would also read the first few pages and realize (especially papa) why I did what I am going to do now. Or if they don't want to keep you, in case you remind them too much of me, they might sell you off. Someone else, sooner or later, will get you and if I leave the other pages blank, you might as well be useful for that person.

This stuff was taught to me when I was in grade three or four, during one of my moral science classes. "Help others whenever you can with whatever you may." Back then I never took it seriously. Mainly because I didn't understand the subject: Moral Science. How stupid! If moral is science than intuition is reason. And to compete with the oxymoron present in the name was some smart-ass content. Honesty is the best policy, almost every page of the subject said. Honesty is the worst practice, the subject omitted. Pray once everyday, it preached. Prayers are never answered, it forgot to mention. Help others, it taught. Others will cheat you, it overlooked. Think about others first, it professed. And in turn get your bums screwed; it was left to us to discover that. Holy shark! I always thought if I had played cricket or made sketches or even had slept instead of gobbling up those obnoxious pages of utter bullshit I would have utilized my time better. But now...one second...it's almost three in the morning. My diary friend I need to end my jabbering right now because the time has finally arrived. No I haven't run out of ink. I have instead run out of options and also a strong reason to live. Thus exactly at three, I Raen Verma, son of Madhur Kumar Verma and Rohini Verma and the younger brother of Rounak Verma, will slash my wrist, resigning (not surrendering mind you), from life. And I have staged the moment at night because I believe its night that we come from and its night we should perish into. Bye forever.

14th June

What the fuck?

I just read your mind isn't it? No I am not any ghost and yes I was supposed to kill myself a fortnight ago but I couldn't. That night, after I bade good bye to you, I went into the bathroom to look for the new Gillette blade I had bought a day before. And guess what? I kept looking and looking and looking. The damn thing was simply not there! The *chosen-fucked* one that I am, here also my bad luck ruled. I sat inside the bathroom and cried. Did I cry because I was still alive or was it because I actually wanted to live but without facing the things I feared? I neither was nor am sure. Next I went to bed planning another attempt and swearing not to sleep. And by the time I opened my eyes, it was... nine in the morning. Fucking providence! Since then I neither had the time nor any ardour whatsoever left to kill myself (I am yet to find the Gillette blade). Perhaps surrendering (and not resigning) to life is what I am destined to do. That justifies why I am sitting on the 24th berth of the Saraighat Express right now, watching it happily racing towards... Guwahati.

Only I know what I went through in these last fifteen days. The fear of uncertainty and the trauma of separating from childhood friends ruined me of my smiles and sleep. I am already missing the big field...we used to play football there before the morning assembly, on free periods and after the school got over...the large banyan tree behind our school building...our gossip point...from Indo-Pak tension to the tension between our batch mates aiming for the same girl, from Swami Vivekananda and his supreme works to Victoria's Secret and its superlative models, from the latest computer software to our latest crush in the school (and outside), from the death of famous personalities to our own when the exam results were out, from over-the-top philosophy to below-the-belt filth...we used to discuss it all. *Used to!* What is it with good times lived? I never seem to have enough ofit.

The last day with my group was great. We went to Flury's and ate, chatted and recalled all the pleasant, ugly and embarrassing moments spent together in last eleven years by the end of which we all had wet eyes. Perhaps the moment of truth had broken not only mine but everyone else's emotional lock too. If life is divided into two parts, then one part is definitely about living it and the other, about missing the momentslived.

Frankly speaking, I am still not hopeful about Guwahati but in the last few days I have learnt one thing: 'let's see what happens' and, reacting accordingly isn't that bad a ploy to move on in life. Moreover, I really don't have any option but to accept things as they are. Acceptance is to suffering as realization is to spirituality. I guess. Bye.

23rd June

This place, Guwahati, isn't as bad as I thought it would be (my judgement about something almost always precedes the knowledge of it). The pace here though is in striking contrast to Kolkata. As the adage goes it's the land of *lahe lahe* (slowly-slowly). The people here are amiable and the language is also sweet. In the last few days when there was no television, no computer and no friends to pass time with, ma narrated interesting incidents that I myself never knew before about my ancestors. My dadu (ma's father) and daddu (papa's father) used to actively take part in our country's freedom struggle; helping the 'men of soil' with food, medicines, clothing or even at times allowing them to use their house as a hide out. Owing to which, they even had to go to jail several times. Jesus Christ!

During the partition they decided to cross over. They had divided themselves into groups such that there were at least three men in a group. One of the women was asked to feign sickness. She was then made to lie down on a cot which was carried to the station and later into the train. People crossing the border, from either way, were the subject of an unprecedented cavalcade of loot and vandalism. Thus during the entire journey, my grandparents stuffed their valuables, in the form of cash and jewellery, inside the stitched pillows used by the sick person in every group. It took three weeks for each member of the family to crossover to India.

My first reaction, when I heard all this, was of disbelief. My grandfathers went to jail and like thousands more, suffered harsh punishments just for their motherland! And what do I do on 15th August? Sit back in my bedroom and watch the latest summer blockbuster. Wow! Though there are also other erudite people who go to pubs, get drunk, eve tease and spoil theirs and others freedom. I guess before independence our country had an enemy against it and now it has an enemy amidst it. The extent to which one went to safeguard the interest of a fellow country man, ma told me, was unimaginable and unbelievable at times. I wish I was born in such an era. I would have also done something for my country other than just criticizing it when it loses cricket matches or singing the National Anthem only twice a year or read about Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose and so many great souls just to pass in an exam. Times change or people do? I think people's priorities change, on a mass level, which creates a delusion that times change. Had we been still fighting for freedom I am sure even today people would have woken up every morning with nationalistic sentiments in place of hedonistic ones. And perhaps then I would have filled you up from inside a state prison. HOLY SHARK!

27th June

I got two pieces of news for you. One is bad and the other one is real bad. Since my arrival in Guwahati, I have sat for five school entrances. The results of three were out today. That's the bad news. I haven't been able to crack even a single school entrance. Now it's either one of the two schools left or...I don't know...perhaps another Gillette blade.

The real bad news now. Papa and ma are looking for an institute for dada. I know, till now I haven't told you anything about him. Rounak, my dada, suffers from congenital cerebral palsy. He is four years older to me but that's only when you compare our birth certificates. Physically, emotionally, intellectually he is naïve. He always needs a wheel chair to move about. His entire body, apart from the fingers and wrist of his right hand, is involuntary. But he has one thing that I haven't seen on anyone. It's this constant life-enduring smile on his lips. The doctors say it's only a muscular tension and I say my middle finger! I won't lie.

When I was a kid, my friends and I often used to play in my room. And almost always ma used to bring dada there who, without any reason, constantly kept 'smiling' at us. It was embarrassing. I even complained to ma. Though she tried to explain me his condition but the asshole that I was, I never cared to understand anything. But now I do. In the beginning ma and papa had taken an emotional decision of keeping him by their side but now they are being more practical. At least that's how ma explained it to me yesterday. They have talked it out amongst themselves in detail. Not only that. They have also zeroed in on an institute in Pune. No dates have been finalized though. In case dada gets admitted to the institute he shall have to live the rest of his life there. Of course we would visit him from time to time but living in an institute? Living an *entire life* in an institute?

Do good and good will happen to you – there goes another chapter of moral science inside the gutter of reality! I don't know how it could have mattered to anyone if dada was normal? Sometimes everything seems bullshit.

Though papa is an atheist (I don't blame him for if everything actually is destiny and we really can't do anything about it then what's the use of God anyways?) but ma is a believer. Every day, when ma gives me *Prasad*, she tells me God shall take care of all the flaws of life. But there are also days when I overhear ma sobbing in the middle of her daily chores, while taking bath or sometimes even cooking. And never do I dare to console her. I want to but...how can I comfort anyone with words of hope when I am myself empty of it? Could you please tell me which is more consequential: The real existence of God or a simple ignorant belief that God exists.

8th July

The results of the remaining two schools were out today. This time I preferred to go alone to check them out. Its embarrassment to the power harassment, you know, to encounter failure in front of papa.

In Nichol's International, my name is second last on the list. In St. Patrick's School, my name is ninth on the list. Thank God! Nichol's International has called me for an interview on 10th July and St. Patrick's on 12th.

I had called Archit today from a PCO. Their unit tests are over. It's not as easy as class ten, he told me. And I know its not. I have to cover up a lot. Papa said he is talking with his colleagues for the best coaching institutes available here. "Let's see what happens." (Remember the ploy?)

Archit said everyone's already missing me in Kolkata. I miss them too, I told him. Very badly, I didn't tell him that. I miss Kolkata too. It's strange, when I lived there I used to lament about its traffic, pollution and what not. But now I am feeling like why the hell did I leave the city? Why do we fall in love more purely, and forgive all the flaws, when separation steps in? I miss some one else as well. Ritwika, I hope, is doing fine.

You know I always think about the word 'attraction'. What is it? Why is it? Is it just about testosterone and epinephrine, nothing more? I personally hate to think there is nothing more to attraction. I really do. Attraction which is natural, between a creator and its creation, I understand. But I am talking about that kind of attraction which is illogical, unreasonable, which there is no need of – urgent or latent – and yet no way can one avoid it. There is no explanation of that attraction and yet all the while the mind tries to unlock the mystery within it. Like the waves of a sea which come up unremittingly onto the shore, all day and night, just to caress the boulders around. What is it that makes the sea care about the boulders? Like the sun which rises, sets and rises again relentlessly. What is it that doesn't let the sun to revolt? Like the moon which acts as a cupid for all the young hearts. What is its interest in doing so? Like the earth which still has its arms open for any form of evolution. Why doesn't it turn infertile? Like the seasons which, as if projecting a movie in the theatre of nature, keep playing more or less the same scenes era after era. But what is it that sustains its passion to play?

And to think of attraction as the basis of every process in the universe, I don't believe, is an exaggeration.

Do you?

21st July

Finally! I couldn't crack the interview for Nichol's International but I was successful with St. Patrick's. I like its uniform: white shirt, grey and red striped tie and grey trousers. Today was actually my first day at St. Patrick's School. From the morning itself I felt my patience boiling inside me. I reached the school by 9:15 am. During my admission I was told Eleven Science was supposed to be on the first floor of the new building. But the problem was to locate a person who knew where the new building was. Not a single student cared to show me the right direction. It was reminiscent of what we (my group in Kolkata) did with new comers. And when I dared to find the building on my own I reached the girl's toilet instead. I swear I didn't see anything apart from the fact that the door was ajar.

There was nobody in the office also to help me out. I loitered around for few minutes and then, out of boredom, sat on one of the stairs of the chapel within the campus. And suddenly three girls came towards me smiling vibrantly. I kind of felt shaky as I stood up. The girl in the middle (she was beautiful) asked me what I was doing there sitting. I was about to stammer a reply when the boy, whom the girl had actually addressed, responded promptly from behind me. I, in order to avoid looking foolish, didn't sit. Slowly, acting as if I was tired of sitting, I stepped down the stairs and was back to being a nomad.

Soon I heard a bell and watched few students run towards the basketball court on the other side of the campus. Of course it was the call for assembly which takes place (I later learnt) on the court itself facing a pedestal. I tried following the others and in a hurry dashed against a girl. She was a little rude to start with but was the one who eventually showed me my class. The moment I entered the class all eyes turned towards me. It was damn embarrassing. I was neither an alien nor did I walk in naked so what was their problem?

The assembly was the usual—the school prayer followed by the National Anthem and the National Song. Then a student read the news and another read the thought for the day and then a boy, probably the Head Boy, asked every line to disperse. The periods followed one after the other. I like the Mathematics teacher. He is cool! Even the Chemistry teacher is good. Better than what I had in Kolkata. But the Physics sir is damn boring.

The class teacher asked me to collect the respective subject notes from the student who



CHAPTER-5

Radhika was staring at her own name. It was written by him, she wondered, someday. The emotional smoke that accompanied the thought soon made her vision translucent. She closed her eyes once and two innocent teardrops rolled down her cheeks eventually to meet, a second later, near her lips and become one. Without caring to rub her cheeks, she sat back gaping at the swiftly moving ceiling fan. Its motion, in no time, hypnotized her infusing life into her frozen past. The day, when she met Raen for the first time, was in front of her. Alive.

Back in The Home, the day began in a surprisingly beautiful manner for Radhika. She had, the preceding night, once again dreamt of being a doctor. The fervour of it made her wake up with a mind gravid with happiness. The unusually short line in front of the bathroom, an inconsequential thing otherwise but an allusive omen for her that day, further escalated her hope in the future. And when she was served with French toasts on the breakfast table, she couldn't believe it! It was her favourite. *Someday I'll be life's favourite*; she thought and gobbled up the steaming toasts in notime.

It took her twenty minutes to reach St. Patrick's School. As Radhika was walking briskly towards the new building, gaily humming a song, someone from nowhere dashed against her. It was a boy. She looked at him directly. He was few inches taller than her. His face was innocent with a sliver of timidity, complexion fair, hair was neatly combed with a right parting, his lips were too red for a boy and he had a faint moustache. The eye brows were little thicker than necessary and his eyes were eloquently dreamy. His features weren't sharp but he was distinctly different from the boys she had come across so far.

"Could you please tell me where Eleven Science is?" It was a meek query. Too meek for a boy of St. Patrick's, Radhika thought.

"Why? Are you a new comer?" she asked.

"I am." The boy maintained his meekness. Radhika looked at him from his shoes upwards. The shoes were old but his pant, shirt and even the tie was brand new. "What's your name?"

"Raen Raen Verma"

"Alright, follow me." Radhika started walking while the boy followed. But soon she noticed the boy was walking along side her.

"Do you want me to show you your class or not?" Shewas annoyed.

"Why, yes."

"Then just follow me. Don't walk with me."

"But..."

"And no questions."

read "Raen".

Radhika's purple patch for the day continued. The result of the previous week's Chemistry test was out and she secured the highest marks. She also submitted her Physics project that day, way ahead of the others, impressing the *hard-boiled* teacher for a change. All in all, when Radhika was back at The Home in the evening, she knew the day had been great.

Post dinner was always fun for the girls at the orphanage; more so for the seniors. They either used to play board games or simply gossiped about everything that yielded nothing. That night after dinner, the girls decided to play name-place-animal-thing. It was a simple game. One of the girls, chosen randomly, would cry aloud 'start' and the girl sitting on her right had to go through the English alphabets in her mind and the moment the former girl cried aloud 'stop' the latter had to say the last alphabet she had in her mind. And every one had to immediately write down — on a sheet which was divided into four columns — any name of a person, a place, an animal and a thing starting with the alphabet. If more than one person came up with the same name then their points were deducted. The process continued, one girl at a time, till all the alphabets were covered. The first alphabet was H. All the girls quickly wrote a person's name, an animal, a place and a thing starting with H. Next it was a different girl and a different alphabet; G. Then it was F, Y, O, M and X. The game continued. Finally it was Radhika's turn. A girl asked her to start; she did and then asked her to stop. She announced the alphabet. Every one, including her got busy filling the respective columns. When done, the girls started to

compare the different columns to assign points. Four of them had written Radhika under the name column so their marks were deducted. Two of them had written Rachel. Again their marks got deducted. Only Radhika's marks remained intact as her name column

23rd July

Holy shark! What a day I had in school! Radhika gave me her Physics and Chemistry lab books today without me asking for them. She was only rude on the first day but now she seems cool, not at all like the typical first rankers who act snobbish with new comers. Now back to what happened today. I met few students, four of them to be specific, who were absent both on 21^{st} an 22^{nd} . One of them asked me how many times I masturbated. What an enlightening question! I was taken aback for sure but didn't reply instantly. The guy wanted to know whether I wasn't man enough to do it or wasn't man enough to admit it. I still maintained a tight lip. More than embarrassed, I was angry. Had it been Kolkata, I swear, at least one of his teeth would have become history. Anyways, another guy soon came up who introduced himself as Insane. His real name is *In*quilab Hus*sane*. He also introduced the first guy to me. Guys call him Kiss and girls don't care! The other two are: Aditya Dash, Adidash in short and U-Nik for Nikhil Uberoi. They said they would simply call me RV.

We don't have any fixed seats in the class so, after the assembly, they made me sit with them. So it was Adidash, U-Nik and me on the second last bench while Insane and Kishore (that's Kiss's real name) on the last one. I won't say they are the best guys I have come across, I can't decide that on the first meeting, but they are much better than the rest. I say this because they seem to do or say things straight from their heart. I am actually a bit biased because this group reminds me so much of the group I had in Kolkata. By the way I only learnt during the English period why they actually cared to take me in their group. U-Nik told me that the English teacher was MMF. I was confused for as far as I knew the teacher's initials were PS and not MMF. When the period got over I asked him about it. Kiss overheard us and offered his explanation.

MMF stands for Miss Most-Fantasized. At the end of every week (on Fridays), they confess the name of the person, within the school, they fantasize most about. Last Friday Miss Payel Sinha, our English teacher, was unanimously crowned the MMF. They told me it was the first and the last time they had done such a thing for a teacher but I don't believe them.

I also asked them what they did when they had equal votes for a person. That's wheremy presence comes in. I help them make an odd number. And going by what Kiss said, voting every Friday isn't necessary. It's mandatory! Today is Wednesday. The day after tomorrow is...

Dogshit!

5th August

You remember the gorgeous girl who, on my first day in St. Patrick's, had come up to the boy sitting right behind me and I thought it was me whom she was addressing? Couple of days back I happened to see her again during interval time with her friends. I don't know why, but perhaps there was something in the air that made me turn back and look at her. And by chance, I mean purely by chance I praised her beauty. That was it. After the school got over I learnt that the girl is summoning her parents to initiate an action against me. And why is that? It's because Monsieur Kiss (that fucking altruist) told one of his commerce section friends that I am interested in the girl. That Einstein friend of his in turn disclosed the matter to a girl of the same section and told her that I am planning to propose to her. The girl, assuming to be the original Mother India, took the trouble of divulging it all to Savera. As per the girl I am madly in love and can go to any extent to get her. The 'any extent' part, I am told, was stressed. How can people be so ridiculously dumb! Kiss swore by the name of his favourite actress (he agreed upon no other name!) that he would by whatever means get through to the girl to explain the situation and apologize, if necessary.

I was really tensed this morning. But thankfully everything has been taken care of. I went to school well before time. Kiss was late. At least he turned up! When I asked him about the issue he said it was settled. I had no option but to wait. Throughout the day I didn't talk much; my inside was freaking out apprehending a call from the Principal's office. But nothing of that sort happened. Thank God! The case (however untrue it was) ends here. And believe me; never will I say anything about any girl to anyone. Except you!

Savera (that's her name!) had a hair cut today. I saw her only once during the morning assembly. She looked beautiful earlier but now in short, ear lobe length hairs she looked like a dream. The red hair band only accentuated her appeal. When the assembly got dispersed U-Nik told me her friends were trying to track me for her. I don't know they were successful or not (they must have been) but the first thing I did hearing it was check whether I was looking smart or not. But thanks to U-Nik again, he reminded me exactly why they would want to track me. And I was again numb with fear. But that thing is over now...and I won't lie...I definitely am in love with Savera. Anyways, its 1:30 pm and I haven't even changed so I need to go. My lunch is waiting for me! One more thing: Kiss says he has seen Radhika gaping at me during classes and thinks she loves me. I only showed him my middle finger. Take care. Bye.

7th August

Almost three weeks have passed since I got admitted in St. Patrick's School and already so many things have happened! But tonight I won't discuss about what all happened. I would tell you a little about my friends instead.

Let me start with the sadistic monster Kiss. Kishore Jain is his full name. He is studying in St. Patrick's since kindergarten. The school back then, U-Nik told me, was like a small house. It has grown many times since. Kiss on the other hand has remained the

same. Once in class two (Insane told me this) Kiss showed his index finger in order to ask permission for going to the toilet but when the teacher told him to use the little finger instead, he said his was bigger than the little finger. Again in class three a teacher was explaining unity-in-diversity of our country and asked Kiss to cite an example. He said people fart the same way everywhere. With Kiss you never know what is coming up next. In class seven he was expelled from school after he dared to propose to a young teacher. In the end it was his dad's money and influence which saved him but not before he went through a month-long 'involuntary holiday'. His problem is he never listens and is eccentric about sex. Sometimes I think if his head was an egg then sex had to be the yolk. He says jerking isn't just an urge for him, it's his birth right. Fantasizing about girls isn't his hobby, it's his moral obligation. Love isn't about camaraderie but KAMAraderie. Once Insane asked him the type of girl he would like to settle down in life with. The one who would respect his infidelity, he had said. Kiss is also the one who told me the reason why married couples generally prefer hill stations for their honeymoon. It's because the coldness of the place helps the man to keep it harder for a little longer. Ask him the antonym of terrific and the answer is terrifuck! And that's exactly what he is all about, an organism who revels inorgasms.

Inquilab Hussane or Insane as he is called is the He-Man of our group. He has a naturally strong physique and is as gullible as a babe. There is nothing much to tell about Insane. He remains quiet most of the time. He smiles when we laugh and is quiet when we smile. He is tall and broad and yet you won't feel his presence. I think he suffers from some kind of complex. His mother stays ill most of the time (Adidash told me) and his father has a mistress. That's why he stays most of the time at Kiss's place. He wants to take his mother abroad for medical assistance after he becomes an engineer. I hope his wish and God's will coincides. He used to play guitar like crazy. It was his father who had ignited the passion for music inside him but when Insane came to know about his father's other side he threw away his guitar. He hates his father as much as he loves his mother. His father didn't really ask them to vacate the house but Insane decided otherwise. He now lives in a small rented flat in the same locality. The rent, as well as his school fees, is managed by Kiss's father. Insane has promised him he would return every penny once he becomes an engineer (not that Kiss's father asked for it). When I

told his story to ma, she told me to watch out for this guy as he will, she said confidently, make it big one day. Amen!

Aditya Dash (that's Adidash) is the 'goodie-goodie' guy amongst the five of us. And the goodie-goodies are generally boring and at times irritating too. So is he. If the teacher asks the class to keep quiet he actually doesn't utter a word, if someone wants his notebook just before an exam he gives it even if he is only half prepared. In the last class test, the teacher as usual told us not to cheat and you won't believe he actually didn't. Not a single word! Come on this isn't a follow-the-rule age. For God's sake we are living in fuck-the-rule era so what is his problem? If a beggar comes around, as I have seen, he gives not one, not two but five rupees instantly. Ask him why? And he says one or two rupees is insignificant these days. Still, he is far better than some of the other douche bags around. I am told he suffers from piles. And the first time he realized it he thought he was menstruating from his ass!

Now about U-Nik, my best buddy in the group. He is a real Adonis. There is this infectious air of tranquility around him that, I am sure, would consume anyone approaching him. He is good at studies, a *Numero Uno* when it comes to sports, famous among the girls for his looks (in fact it's the girls who flirt with him and not vice versa!), great at extra curricular activities and (as if anything was missing) he is also a sweetheart as far as teachers are concerned. He is, as I hear it, the most favoured candidate to become the Head Boy of our school next year. I have learnt a lot from him. He not only seems to know everything about everything but also is humble about it. You won't believe how matured his outlook is towards life. He says failure is the power cut of life; it comes to go and it goes to come back. The important thing is whether we light the candles of preparation during darkness and live every moment when the power is on. My God! When I first time heard this I felt he would make a great youth icon. Perhaps that's why he is U-Nik (Unique!).

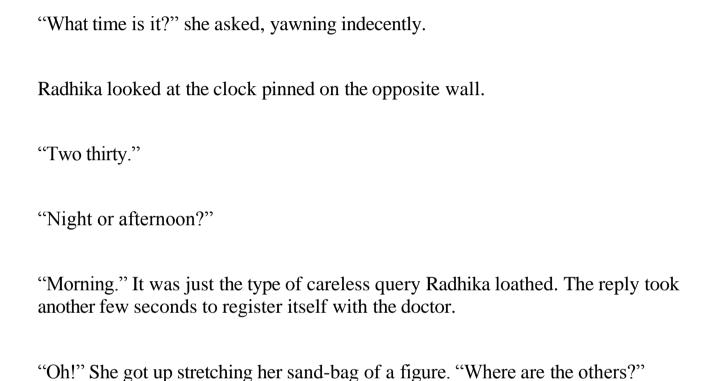
That was all about my current group. I have gelled in well. Archit had called couple of days back. He has met with a minor accident so is on bed rest. They are preparing ferociously for the half-yearly exams. I told him the environment here isn't as aggressive and competitive as it is in Kolkata. But I assured him things are going steady. And you know what? Neither of us, unlike the first time, mentioned we were missing each other. U-Nik is right, in the end everything moves on.

I am not closing here tonight. I need to write about another person. Radhika Sharma; she is different. When I say different, it means *different*. I have never seen a girl like her. Don't get me wrong. I am not Kiss. When I say I haven't seen any girl like her I mean I haven't seen any hardcore ambitious girl like her. Though she says she is preparing for medical but she already has finished with integral calculus, trigonometry and many other chapters in Maths which are yet to be touched in class. So much for a subject which she won't encounter in case she goes in for medicine. Now you know what her grasp would



CHAPTER-6

Radhika, seeing her colleague budge slightly, closed the diary on an impulse. Till date she had not shared a single word of the diary with anyone close or otherwise. And she wanted to keep it that way. Veena lifted her head from the table and opened her still heavy-with-sleep eyes, looking quizzically at Radhika. It took her few seconds to conjecture who the person in front was and when she did, an acknowledging smile labeled her face.



"I'll be right back," she said and walked out of the common room, with a baby elephant like gait.

"I haven't seen anyone yet," Radhika said desperately praying for her to leave.

The moment she stepped outside, Radhika sighed and kept the diary on the table. She took out the latest issue of India Today from her bag and opened it. Next, she quickly opened the diary once again and covered it with the magazine from outside. For anyone watching her from the front, it was India Today she was leafing through but for Radhika, it was an important part of her life she was traversing; in fact the most important and beautiful. Reading the diary with open eyes drowned her into Raen's world while a momentary close of eyes unveiled her own world at that time...

Radhika was the only one awake. The other two girls, with whom she shared the room, were already asleep. The lone source of light present in the room was on the study table in front of which Radhika was sitting with her left hand supporting the forehead and the right holding a pencil. Though her Biology book was wide open in front of her, she was lost in thought. This had never happened before; her concentration flickering while studying. She scribbled something, unmindfully, on the book. An instant smile embellished her face the second she read it. Mrs. Radhika *Verma*. It was happening – the only true magic – it was happening for the first time in her life. She could feel it caressing her mind. She knew it made her heart beat one extra, every minute. She could feel the rhythm of her soul dancing to the melody of the magic; the spectator being her awestruck senses. She suddenly felt supremely powerful as if she could stop time, as if she could turn any reality into dream, as if she could negotiate with nature whenever she wished to and as if she could design her own future to her liking. She, Radhika Sharma, was in love. And the magic got initiated from the first sight she had of Raen.

She didn't make her feelings obvious to him as yet or did she? Radhika wasn't sure. Though her friends had inquired as to why she often talked to Raen but she had comfortably shut them up with an excuse; he is a new comer so I am just trying to be helpful, that's all. Few weeks more and she knew, Raen would cease to be a new comer. Then what? Her face turned serious. She had witnessed many of her batch mates and seniors cry over their lost love. First love is always vulnerable if one doesn't take the right course of action. But what is the right course? Is it simply about following your instincts, your heart or are certain manipulations allowed? But how can I manipulate someone's heart to fall in love with me? Moreover I don't know whether Raen feels the same way I do for him, Radhika thought. Few seconds passed. Soon an idea struck her. She took a deep breath and switched off the table light. She stood up and sauntered up to the window. The night outside was quiet. Staring at the lonely moon suspended on the dark sky, she wondered; every night the moon admires the sky. Every night! Or was it the other way round? It had to be the other way round. Why else would the darkness increase in the absence of its muse? Radhika gaped at the moon and a while later closed her eyes.

And when they opened, the pages of the diary were waiting.

*

18th August

A miracle happened today...wait let me check...exactly an hour ago. As we (the five of us) were descending the stairs, after the last period, I suddenly noticed Savera and her friends behind us. I don't know what she was doing there. I only hope she keeps coming to the science building regularly for otherwise it's next to impossible to see her inbetween classes. So she was with her friends and I was with mine, well in front. And once I knew she was behind us, I just kept looking at her. (That's not the miracle, it's a routine). Though her friends were chatting amongst themselves Savera was looking at me. Straight at me! She knew of course that I knew she was looking at me but still... that's the miracle that happened today. I still can't believe it. I simply wasn't expecting such a thing to happen ever, especially after the 'I-shall-call-my-parents' fiasco earlier this month. But it happened! Does that mean...? O God! Please let my thoughts be the truth.

I am sure now Savera is the girl for me. After the look she gave me today I am dead sure she is the girl for me. A mere sight of her initiates a series of funny sensations inside me. It's so much opposite of what I felt for Ritwika. I am attracted towards Savera but I don't pass my nights fantasizing about her, like I did in case of Ritwika. But I do keep thinking about her (I am sorry I didn't tell you this before). Her face keeps coming to me all the time. Whenever I get a glimpse of her I go mad. As if there is something in the air, when she is around, that hits me with an invigorating force and affects the normalcy of my mind. Let me confess, no girl till today has made me feel that way. It might all sound bizarre to you because I am sharing my thoughts for her only today but believe me something happened from the first time I saw her. Something did happen. The air (or what was it?) told me she was mine though I was a little apprehensive to accept the fact then but now, I think I am in love. No, I know I am in love for the first time in my life. (Ritwika was just a crush). It's crazy, I know. It's only been few weeks that I first saw her. I haven't even talked to her till now. But does that really matter? There are so many people in our country, and may be outside too, who marry the person their parents choose for them. They neither know the person nor have they talked before and yet they give their consent for the marriage. Why? Because they believe in their parents' choice. Likewise, my heart has chosen Savera for me and I believe my heart. I don't know she has a boy friend or not (I shall find that out soon). I hope not. Please, God let her be single. If she is not then I don't think I shall advance. What the fuck is it with first love? So many ifs and buts. Damn!

21st August

This date, 21st August, never meant anything for me before. It came every year and ebbed away like other insignificant dates. It's Savera's birthday today! I realized it when she walked into my class with couple of her friends. She was wearing a full length pink dress bordered with white lace. Even her accessories were all pink; hair band, ear rings, necklace and her sandals. Oh! She looked like a beautiful flower. And I, like a fool, kept staring at her (Adidash told me I had my mouth open as well...shit!). I can't describe what happens to me when she is around. Once Savera was gone I asked U-Nik about her and he told me many things (they were in the same class for few years). She belongs to a conservative family. So what? I am not going to her house to propose to her. She doesn't have any boy friend or love interest. Just my luck! But there are many boys from various schools in line for her. Phew, my ass! No one has ever proposed to her before. Time for a change! Her father is a personal friend of the principal. I shall be careful! She has no siblings. I am least bothered! Her favourite movie is Titanic. Love story huh? Her favourite pastime is making soft toys. Interesting. She aims for chartered accountancy in future. Cool!

I was thinking about something amazing and yet stupid at the same time. Here I am dying to know whether one specific girl in this world would end up loving me or not? A girl with whom I haven't even talked yet, not even for a single second, a girl whom I know next to nothing about, a girl whose existence for me was a matter of indifference till now and a girl whose presence (mere presence!) connects me with a side which I never knew existed within me. U-Nik asked me a pertinent question today: Can anyone fall in love without knowing a thing about a person? Or is it all about body chemicals (that's what Kiss says) and love is simply their good name? Something struck me when I noticed the sun playing hide and seek with the clouds today in the afternoon. Let's consider the sun, the source of all natural energy, to be love and suppose we are the individual planets. We rotate around our axis (our problems) and in the process days and nights happen. When we shy away from the sun (love), it is night (life's gloomy) and when we happen to face the sun, day dawns on us (joy!) I guess that's exactly what I am going to do. I shall face the sun and embrace love. So I think I will propose to her on the 27th of this month. That's my birthday! Let's see what happens after that.

One more thing: I love you, Savera.

CHAPTER-7

"Excuse me." Someone called Raen from behind. He turned around to see Radhika.

"Many happy returns of the day!" She held her hands forward with a gift. He instantly felt awkward and his mind was in a quandary. He didn't want anyone to misinterpret the situation and he, for some unknown reason, didn't want to upset Radhika either. Wetting his lips nervously and still managing a smile, Raen looked around once. When he was sure nobody was looking he took the gift in a flash. "Thank you." They exchanged a set of hesitant smiles following which Radhika left. The moment he turned around, to keep the gift inside his bag, Adidash winked at him. Raen only shrugged with indifference. It was in-between the third and fourth period that Adidash divulged about Radhika's gift to Kiss.

"She gave you a gift?"

"She did. Some sort of cylindrical..."

"Cylindrical? Is it a condom?"

"Shut the fuck up." Raen took out a cylindrical shaped object, nicely gift wrapped.

"Dude, Radhika is yours," Kiss said, almost snatching the gift from Raen's hand.

"What the —" Raen stopped when Kiss showed him, as well as the others, the card taped on the gift. It read: Happy birthday, yours Radhika.

Of course it's a subconscious slip, Raen thought, and kept the card inside his pocket. By then Kiss had unwrapped the gift. It was a neatly rolled poster that once unrolled revealed a picture of a beautiful place with a jovial day sky, infinite green meadows, the ethereal sun, the virile mountains and alternating big and lean trees. But what caught everyone's eye was the line written on the bottom: *Love is the alarm that awakens us from a deep, deep sleep*.

During interval while Kiss, Insane and Adidash were gobbling up their stuff, Raen took U-Nik a little away. "Look there," he said pointing at the chapel stairs. Savera was sitting with her two friends on one of the stairs, munching her lunch. "Are you sure this is the day?" Raen nodded. "Alright. Best of luck. You go ahead; I'll take care of the three stooges." U-Nik walked back. Raen took a deep breath and started advancing slowly.

This was the moment he was waiting for from the past two days but now the wait seemed, comparatively, more pleasing than the fruition. And for the first time he understood why the future is best untold. 'What will happen next' is what gives life its fizz. Raen reached his destination. "Excuse me." All the three girls looked at him together. He could feel his heart pounding. He panned his sight from the left face to the right. "Hi! I am Raen Verma, Eleven Science." All three girls frowned together. Raen continued, this time looking only at Savera. "May I talk to you for a minute?" Nothing happened. Then the girl, sitting to the right of Savera, nudged her. She looked at both her friends. Reading their eyes Savera got up and together with Raen stepped down the chapel stairs. "I am Raen Verma from Eleven Science."

"You have already said that. Do you have anything else to say?"

"I love you."

"What?"

"Please hear me out. It will only cost you a minute. I am not a flirt. It's just that I really happen to be in love with you. Totally. Of course love needs time to grow. But I don't know why, your presence does something to my whole system. I feel frozen. I don't know you'll believe this or not something mystic happens to me when I see you. Something in the air, probably, makes it happen. It sounds crazy, I know, and a little flattering too but...it is true...all of it...I tried to excuse my heart with many explanations but I couldn't keep you out of it. You have, like a fierce wind, broken all the doors and windows of my heart; manipulating all my senses. You are neither my obligation nor obsession. In fact when I knew I was in love with you I realized you are my relief." Raen swallowed a lump, waiting innocuously for an answer. And it came soon.

"If this happens again, I will make sure you get thrown out of the school," Savera said placing a hard slap across his face. She walked off fuming. For seconds, Raen didn't move. Then he stealthily glanced towards the canteen. Kiss, Insane, Adidash, U-Nik and may be the whole world was watching.

The rest of the day Raen didn't talk at all. No one from the group dared to console him or inquire about the incident. Even Kiss was silent.

Radhika, meanwhile, had an exciting day. The Physics teacher commended her on the project. The vice-principal had called her after interval to inquire about her academics. Radhika also learnt that she was sure to be made the next Head Girl if she maintained

her academic tempo. But above all, the climax of the day was Raen's birthday. And when she lay on her bed at night, only one thought nudged her: Will he understand the 'vours' part was deliberately written by me?

4th September

Each of the last six days I told ma I was going to school but actually I roamed aimlessly in the city and returned home at my usual time. Not anymore though. I'll go to school tomorrow. Now what actually happened on my birthday? Nothing. Did I propose to Savera? Yes. Did she agree? No. Then what did she do? She slapped me in front of all my friends. I wanted to kill myself then and there. How could she slap me? Only one simple 'no' was good enough. I wouldn't have disturbed or harassed her anymore. But a slap?

Basically it's my fault. You know, I was so pathetically in love with her that I didn't even care to consider one important aspect; her side of the story. Just because some one doesn't have any love interest doesn't mean she will end up reciprocating to any first person who proposes to her. And her slap made me understand that I am more than anything for her. I am, in every sense, nothing. Sometimes I feel we should have some natural laws regarding love. No heart shall fall for any heart that won't reciprocate. Love shall never be a one-sided affair. Hearts shall have congenital immunity against pain and humiliation or something on thoselines.

Of course, it's her decision to like me or not and I can't force my desire or decision on her. That's why the fact that she doesn't love me isn't depressing me as much as her slap is. You know what it means? The slap means she questioned the purity of my love for her. If she did respect my love she could have easily said she wasn't interested or she doesn't like me or there are so many other goddamn excuses you know. And if I had still stalked her regarding the matter then she was most welcome not only to slap but also thrash me like a dog. I swear, I have fantasized about many girls but never for a single streak of time did I harbour any salacious thought or urge regarding her. Not for one single moment.

Will I be able to forget her? Will I be able to pluck out the thorn of love from my heart? Will my heart ever stop bleeding? Will I ever care about love again? Will I ever dare to be in love with anyone again? Going by the history of my luck there's no need toworry. I know the answers. I'll continue to be the chosen-fucked one. So just bunk it!

5th September

Papa lied to me about his official tour to Pune. He did go to Pune alright but to finalize dada's admission. By next week dada shall be shifted to spend the rest of his life in the institute. Does cerebral palsy make one an android? Won't he feel suffocated there? I argued for an hour with ma and papa. But they didn't listen. What's new? They said they aren't going to be there all life to take care of him and with time I too will be busy with my own life. Sure, they know more about life. But I know more about me, right? Papa thinks I am all words when I say I'll take care of my brother and when the time will come I shall mind my own business just like his own younger brothers did years ago. Like root, like fruit; he often says. After I finish my engineering studies and secure a job, I promise you this, I'll get dada to live with me; with or without ma-papa's consent. If he is their son, he is my elder brother too. If they can force a decision on him then so can I. I don't know what the hell will happen later on but one thing is sure: I am not going to allow his fucking disease to distance us. Instead of ma, I helped dada with his dinner tonight. Only seven more days ...though he looked happy. He always does. Guess that way he is not human!

After my dinner I was in the balcony, staring at the dark sky, and thinking. Eight times out of ten only those things happen which make us suffer in some way or the other. Is suffering really the DNA of life? Isn't there any way out? Fuck sainthood. I am talking of a way which won't take us away from our loved ones but at the same time will make things more acceptable. I know time is a way out. With time people accept many things but the only problem with time is it takes hell of a lot time. And by then acceptance or non-acceptance doesn't really matter. Sometimes family, relatives, friends everything seems a big farce. In the end we all have to shoulder our gall ourselves. How else can I explain my incapability of sharing even a little of the congenital curse of my brother?

When I was about to move to my room, ma joined me in the balcony. Without saying anything she started wailing. Don't ask me what it is like to see your own mother crying on your shoulder. The same shoulder which she has spent half her life infusing strength into. When I asked her why God makes people suffer she didn't reply immediately. For once I thought she missed my words but before ma left for her room she said she doesn't know.

Frankly, nor do I.

13th September

I came back this evening. The four of us were in Pune for three days. Dada is in the institute now. When I kissed his forehead, while he was about to leave, I felt his body temperature rising. I think he knew something was about to happen. Ma and papa had taken him to the institute for admission. I didn't accompany them. They returned after five-six hours. And when I asked papa whether everything went alright or not, he simply hugged me tight and sobbed. I had, till then, neither seen him doing that nor had I ever thought of him as a person who could do so. But now when I have seen his tears, I pray to God not to have me witness such a nerve-wrecking scene again. Please! It's horrendous. Also, I don't know after how many years, he kissed me; twice on my cheek and once on my forehead.

Papa has never hurt anybody's feelings (I can bet my life on it), has not thought evil of anyone at any time, has never done anything in an illegal or sinful manner, never used foul language against anybody; he did all his duties to the best of his abilities and perhaps even more. And after all this what does God do? Leave him with no option but to cry in front of his son. I hate you, God. Not because you are making a hell out of my life but you played with a person who deserved your blessing. You always do that, don't you? You tease the person who deserves your utmost care. You test only those who walk the right path. You design impediments only for those who have the capability of doing something in life. You screw those who are good to others and care to be human.

There are people who, even in today's world, place all their trust in you. And what do you do? Make a mockery of their trust, belief and faith directing them towards an emotional crevasse. Your best creation has become your favourite joke now, isn't it? Last night even I cried after a long time. I don't know what exactly triggered it but when I calmed down I realized I wasn't crying only for dada. I was crying for myself, too. For the slap and the humiliation, for parting from my Kolkata friends, for having to come to Guwahati when everything was going so smoothly in Kolkata, for having to witness my ma's tears and papa's and perhaps for being such a bloody helpless mass of life. I cried for anything and everything.

Doctors say dada is disabled. I believe, so is everyone in some way or the other. Else pain and suffering would not have plagued the society. I am feeling damn sick. I know life isn't a fancy show. Sooner or later all get jailed by it. It's up to them how they bail themselves out. I guess I got to find a way out too. But seriously I do have something to tell God: It's tough to be God, I know, but mind you it's tougher to be human in this crazy fucking world of yours. Fuck you. FUCK you. FUCKYOU.

28th September

I wasn't sure whether I would at all update you on my life again or not. But here I am. Something wonderfully motivating happened today. No, it wasn't any incident but few words and I got the exact version for you. Here I go.

"I hear it often, more often than my ears can take, people discussing the advent and scope of technology with awe. How it has shrunk the world, stapling everyone together from far and wide. But, trust me, I don't care. For I, quite recently at that, have realized the presence of another technology which from the inception of creation, as my own little research says, has been incessantly bringing people of different races, diverse cultures and distinct beliefs, together; weaving them all into one string of humanity. Do you know about it? Have you ever, even for one single moment in your life, been flummoxed by this quagmire? Or at least, perhaps accidentally, heard about its significance in history of our existence? But again, I don't care about any answers because I know this for a fact, even to this day, that same archaic technology still spins a magical web of illusion (or reality) on those who are possessed by it. And it leaves the others craving, though unceremoniously sometimes, for the ecstasy and the lunacy that it engenders. The feverish manner it arrests and enslaves the hearts of people, the eternal journey that it flags for the ones involved and the way it garnishes the passage of time as well as life of the persons stung by it makes it easily the most treasured discovery ever witnessed on the face of this planet.

To make things easier for those who are yet to encounter 'it' in their lives and right now are busy; either trying to guess what it actually is or getting bogged down by its inscrutable trait, let me tell you what the technology is called. It is Love; a balanced diet for the soul. It is perhaps the only technology as scientific as Energy and as artistic as Mother Nature. Of course, it surely is a turn off, I know, for those who equate everything with tangibility. Living equals money, happiness equals bottles of champagne, man equals materials, merit equals muscle and love equals sex. Please! How can one even think like that? Love is not a philosophical equivalent of sex. Sex is the production of life whereas love is the direction of life. It is also not for the realists, the self-claimed rationalists, who believe only in things which come out wet after being immersed into the well of logic, without really giving a second thought on what actually is logic but the limit of our brains. Consider this: Will a troglodyte, wishing to be always marooned, ever be able to acknowledge the warmth of being in a family? Can men, who prefer brain to heart and logic to emotions, ever feel and embrace the graciousness of love? Unlucky them! But then who am I to say such things? Just being a guy who is in love; madly, wildly and perhaps incorrigibly, doesn't really give me the authority to judge others. Does it? Again, isn't this an age of misuse? Misuse of rights, power, position, ideals, principles, virtues, trust and what not. Hence you can say I amsimply trying to be

in fashion and you are welcome not to take me seriously. But if you do, you are surely an exception. Just like love is."

I swear, when he finished, my mind was baffled to the power ruffled. Kiss was asked to write his own thought for the day and this is what he delivered to a thunderous applause from the assembly. What the hell is this guy? He also told me that girls almost always ignore guys the first time only to see whether, despite a denial, they are chauvinist enough for a second attempt. Girls like fighters. So he asked me to make another attempt at Savera. The most thrilling thing about love is the wait. It's like a kid who sees a toy in a shop and then keeps planning, night after night, about the things he would do once he gets it. That's love; a head dive into the deep sea of thoughts. Till the dare and the urge to head dive is on, love is on. So, if the possession is delayed and not denied, it's good in a way because possession generally decreases the shelf life of love as much as depravity increases it (if you truly love the person). In case of lust it's simpler though; fuck with a condom and forget withfreedom.

Kiss's talks did motivate me for another attempt, more so because yesterday I had a head-on collision with Savera inside the library. For a moment, we looked straight at each other! I wanted to freeze that moment. Her eyes said she wasn't upset with the collision. The incident made me re-analyze the slap issue. Any sane girl would have done that. She didn't know me so how could she judge the purity of my feelings. Just because I claimed to be in love with her didn't prove anything. She must have heard it from so many guys. The collision, I believe, was a reminder for me to woo her again. Yes! I sometimes think everything in this world and in our lives happens for someone to fall in love with someone. I made up few lines today but first my apologies to Coleridge sir.

"Love, love everywhere, Who doesn't want the *Crown*? Love, love everywhere, I guess it's time to drown."

My half yearly exams are starting from Monday so I shall be back within a month. Bye.

SECTION - 3

STRONG CURRENTS...

CHAPTER-8

Radhika dog-eared the page and kept the diary, mothered by the magazine, on the table. She got up, stretched her back a little and walked out of the common room. She paused, for once, in front of room 203 and looked in through the oval glass pane on the door. Laye was sleeping tight. Further down the corridor, as she walked past Suparna, she noticed her sitting indolently on the bench with eyes closed, head resting on the wall behind and her open mouth interviewing the ceiling. Radhika moved on.

She reached the ground floor and ambled past the receptionist and Dr. Veena without caring to wait or overhear their conversation. She went to the cooler, took out a plastic glass from the many clubbed together one above the other and held it near the nozzle. She pressed the button but nothing came out. She pressed harder and the glass filled up instantly with cold water. After slaking her thirst, she squashed the glass and threw it into the adjacent dustbin.

"Hey, Radhika!" Veena stopped her mid-way to the stairs. She turned.

"Have you heard the good news?" Dr. Jyoti had also joined the group. She looked overtly joyous; her usual self. Radhika never could surmise how she managed to do so – talent, tolerance, ignorance or whatever it was – she envied it.

"What news?"

"Sheetal is getting married, this August." Veena nudged the receptionist mischievously.

"That's so nice. Congratulations!" Radhika said, this time caring to come up to the receptionist's desk.

"Thank you." They shook hands. "And you know what?" Veena continued, "She is locating to California after marriage. Her would-be is settled there."

"Wonderful. I hope you have a great married life," Radhika said with a genuine feel for

it. *Married life*, her mind faced the drought of remorse. "Excuse me." Radhika immediately turned around and urgently moved towards the stairs.

"Vikas and I had an affair for the last three years and now...I can't believe this! I'll be married to him!"

"Any affair that ends in a marriage is true love dear," Jyoti quipped.

Is that true? Is marriage the ultimate parameter for measuring the purity of love? Anything that ends in marriage is true love; the words were slowly germinating in her mind. "What is marriage but an institute to tame man and direct his emotional and carnal urges towards one? It's a kind of software which doesn't allow you, not obtrusively at least, to gain access to anyone else's computer. What two people try to achieve in a marriage I have done that simply being in love with someone. Had I embarked on a journey, which supposedly should last a lifetime, with someone I didn't actually love, it would have been like settling for a two-room flat knowing deep within that a four roomer was ideal and given a chance I would have gone for it. Given a chance. That's the point! Marriage is cheap if it is used like an insurance policy or probably a tissue paper. And love is grotesque if one tries to lock its purity inside any manmade institution. Why would we need a set of rules and euphemistic institutions to police and correct our behaviour?

I loved Raen with all my heart and soul. But I couldn't marry him. Does that make my love for him worthless? Even if I, for a change, agree it was all rubbish then why couldn't I settle for any other guy? There were many who professed their intentions of dating me but I never considered their proposals. Why? I could have married an NRI, like some of my batch mates have done, and settled in Australia or America and may be had kids by now. But I couldn't push myself to do it. Why? When Raen was no more in my life, I could have looked for other options but my heart simply didn't agree to it. Simply. Didn't. Agree. Why? I felt like cheating myself even if thoughts of other men invaded my mind. Why? I incessantly fought against all the physical urges knowing well the pleasurable ways of satisfying them. Why? No one asked me or forced me not to hug happiness but I consciously chose to sleep with pain. Why? When all my friends-colleagues were losing their virginity because of lust and curiosity, I was on the vergeof losing my mind because of love. Why?"

Radhika was walking on the second floor corridor. She crossed Suparna who was still asleep. "The same funny game I guess." She walked past Laye's room. "You win some, you lose some. And if you win everything, that's love, you lose everything, that's your normal life."

Radhika entered the common room again. She sat down on the chair with a thud. Her mind felt clogged. Few deep breaths eased out things a little. She opened the magazine and then the diary to its marked page. "And still if people think marriage and true love are related, to hell with them. I know nothing was more important for me than loving Raen. And nothing can ever be."

She first rubbed the spot on the page where a tear drop had fallen and then she did the same with her eyes."

30th October

The exams are over. Yes! I wanted to fill you up on 26th night itself but fever had knocked me to bed.

Ma has developed a sudden abdomen pain. The doctor had asked her to go for a blood test but she has been postponing it since last week because she is afraid of asyringe. She had a bad experience the first time she had to take in an injection. And first impression of any kind, she says, is hard to negotiate with. Savera's face, I don't know why, was instantly there in front of me. Though later, I did decipher the reason. It's simple; she is the first one to sculpt my heart with love. And no way do I want to negotiate with this impression. I would rather be a connoisseur and preserve it forever.

You know both ma and papa have become quieter since dada's admission to the institute. They do perform their daily chores but almost mechanically. I really get upset looking at them. All our lives we ride the evens and fight the odds while time flies. Then a day comes when we realize each day was actually a step towards oblivion. Every moment is actually about a drift. This moment is also going away. Time never attains a stasis. Every tick is eating my future and adding onto my past (the present being transitory) till the whole of me becomes a past tense. Holy shark!

And the worse is till now I have done only two things in life: ate and moved on. Bullcrap! I need to live my life. But how? How do I live my life? What does living a life mean, anyway? Anyways, bunk it. All these days nothing much happened but for one

incident. While coming out of the classroom, after one of my exams, my hand brushed on to Savera's. I don't know she felt the touch or not. The funny thing is it was our skin that met but my heart got pierced instead. The touch never felt like a foreigner's. Absurd, isn't it? Alright, let me confess today. Whenever Savera passes by my side (sometimes even when I see her from a distance) an air of serenity embalms my mind. My self respect escalates. A mystic fierceness grips me, instilling a mercurial confidence within me and I feel, come what may, I'll defeat all the vagaries of life. It's her sight which acts as a feel-good drug for me.

Her presence does to me what the moon does to romance, what a rainbow does to the sky, what rain does to drought, what fresh air does to our lungs, what meditation does to the mind, what a number does to a phone, what a filament does to a bulb, what a fairy does to a tale, what tickling does to our face, what Tagore did to poems, what Shakespeare did to literature, what Da Vinci did to Monalisa and what Mother Teresa did to the world. I *feel* such things whenever Savera is around – kind of a big bang within the universe of my being. Savera is surely my destiny and I am hers. And I am an official nut case…happily so!

CHAPTER-9

"I don't care what you think. But, the truth is Radhika loves you a lot, dude." Kiss remarked.

"Whatever! I know what I know. And believe me right now I only care about whether Savera will give me another chance or not? Or did I happen to realize her presence on earth, just like that?" Raen turned towards U-Nik.

"No," U- Nik responded. "No one's heart feels for someone just like that. No one thinks of someone night after night, just like that. No one misses anyone, just like that. No one wishes happiness for someone just like that. No one gets attracted to everyone he sees. In all of St. Patrick's School why did you fall for Savera only? Why not someone else? You know Savera as much as you know any other girl in the school. Just like that? Come on."

"Exactly! There has to be something that makes us choose. There has to be something that makes us forgo other options. There has to be something that constructs our priority and makes us fall for someone in particular and not everyone we see, chat or meet. Something..."

"Do you want to get introduced to her?"

Raen and group together turned towards Kiss. "What if I ask Radhika to tell Savera about you? Her words have weight unlike any other of our batch. And if she agrees then not only you get to talk to Savera but we also know Radhika doesn't love you. What say?" Kiss after finishing saw Raen's hand lifting in a thumbs-up.

It was tough for Radhika; not so much hearing what Kiss told her but reacting to whatshe heard from him.

Kiss had stopped her near the main gate while she was going out with her friends after school. Normally, Radhika couldn't tolerate the sight of Kiss but as he started to talk, nothing mattered anymore.

"Raen has a soft corner for Savera." All the words were arrows poisoned at the tip with envy. They hit her hard and deep. Radhika gestured her friends to keep moving while Kiss carried on. "Though he proposed to her but there was some misunderstanding of sorts and he ended up getting slapped. But that was couple of months ago. Raen has come out of it and I guess so has Savera. If you don't mind, can you...I know I don't

have to explain what you need to do, it's just that will you do it or not...for Raen may be..." Kiss had a gut feeling the last portion might do the trick.

Radhika stood still but she could feel the snake of despondency crawling all over her. Her voice was brittle when she spoke. "Does he love her?"

"You got the point! He loves Savera." Kiss smiled but before he could clarify Radhika's will for the task, she was gone.

It was dinner time at The Home. All the students were present except one. Radhika. She had excused herself on account of nausea. It wasn't a lie. Raen loves Savera. The fact, as and when it sank within her, initiated an emotional whirlwind which made her feel sick. Sitting on her bed, with the room absorbed in stark darkness, Radhika was sobbing. Few years ago she had sworn never to shed tears again, but once again, life had defeated her and was demanding submission. Her cries grew louder. Someone, supposedly residing up in the sky beyond the clouds, definitely hated her smile, she thought as her grip on the bed cover tightened. The wall of her destiny, standing tall between her wish and grasp, made its vehement presence felt. A wall, which is transparent prima facie but as one is lured to cross it in order to materialize the wish, it suddenly strips its robe of transparency to reveal its hard, opaque and satanic self; something which in every way seems impossible to topple. Radhika's jaws locked and her breathing transcended normalcy. She got up suddenly and pulled the bed cover along with the pillow onto the floor with violent energy. Her eyes were steaming red with rage and her vigorously trembling body portrayed the zenith of her hysteria. "Destroy-destruct." Radhika yelled. The table light was grabbed and ferociously hurled at the door. The books kept on the table were torn off mercilessly; like life had shred her happiness. One half of the poster on the adjacent wall was gone.

And as Radhika kicked her school bag hard it flew and rested right in front of the feet of the first girl to enter the room. Then there were many who followed. They had left their dinner midway after hearing the noise. As they tried to reach Radhika, she was busy banging her hand on the wall. Couple of them caught hold of her arms and others held onto her waist but like a wild wind she kept hitting the wall.

"Leave me. I want to destroy. Leave me." But no one cared to listen. Sister Melinda, the warden, came up with a jar of water. She made her way through the awestruck girls and reached Radhika.

"Hold onto her. Tightly," she told the girls and immersed a piece of cloth into the jar and applied the wet cloth on Radhika's face. "Calm down, Radhika. Calm down." Her limbs, spent of might, slowly went numb as a phantasmal sheet of unconsciousness

covered her from head to toe. Sister Melinda asked one of the girls to immediately call up the doctor while she, along with the others, helped Radhika get onto the bed.

When she opened her eyes, Radhika felt neither dead nor alive. She felt extremely weak and she knew her body was radiating heat. She tried to get up, but couldn't. She wanted to move her hands; but failed. Her will tank was empty of energy; Radhika gave up. She wetted her lips and observed, averting her eyes a little to her left, the hand was bandaged. What happened? It was the first ray of thought to warm her mind. Her forehead suddenly felt cold. She noticed Deepali sitting beside her. The piece of cloth wet with cold water was placed by her on Radhika's forehead.

"How are you feeling, dear?" Deepali asked with a smile.

"Fee-vah-rish," Radhika said breaking the word into three pieces.

"You have hundred and two degrees of fever. But what happened? I have never seen you like this before?" Deepali, her room partner and best friend, asked. Radhika didn't reply. Instead she let her weak eyes pan across the room. The door was closed and everything was back to its normal place. The eyes closed again. What has happened to me? Have I gone crazy? I want to be a doctor and this is what my behaviour is like? This is what my tolerance quotient is? Damn. I should be ashamed of what I did tonight. Raen is just a guy, a human being. He is free to love anyone he likes. That doesn't mean he has rejected me. I haven't even confessed my love to him! Yes, if Savera reciprocates then I might have to reserve my feelings for him to myself. But then I am neither the first one nor the last to have such a fate. Probably everyone falling in love for the first time suffers the same luck. And even if they don't; if it's happening only with me still I shouldn't have any complaints. From how many days do I know Raen? Do I know him at all? I have my studies, the medical entrance is a little more than a year away and so are the board exams. Sister says and so does everybody else in school that success awaits me. I have to realize my dream. Have to. So many things have to be done, accomplished and procured. Why should I break down simply because Raen loves Savera? It's not the end of the world. It's certainly not the end of my life. Radhika, gently, took a long breath. There is more to life than just love! She thought and immediately started crying to the bewilderment of Deepali.

CHAPTER-10

Radhika's emotional outburst was so out of character that no one in The Home could resist the temptation of discussing it. Some of them had shared it with their school mates as well but no one, following the order from Sister Melinda, brought up the subject in front of the protagonist.

Radhika was on her bed, reading a novel, while the other students had gone to school leaving silence behind at The Home. At first she wanted to go along but realizing her desperate need for what the doctor had prescribed – a day's rest – Radhika skipped school. And lying on her bed, every time she finished a page from the novel, Radhika gaped at the sky through the wide open window that framed a chimerical romance between the feminine white clouds and the masculine golden sunrays. Nobody knows what the sky would be like in the evening or tomorrow morning. The colour of the sky, depending on its destiny of weather, keeps changing. And yet, it adjusts with such magnificent dexterity that it still inspires beauty in the heart of artists and atheists.

Radhika abruptly sat up. Her entire body ached as she did so. She didn't move for few seconds and then slowly got down. She kept the novel upside down on her table and put on her slippers. Dragging her feet she walked out of the room.

"Please come in, Radhika," Melinda responded to an apprehensive knock at the door of her study.

"Good morning, Sister.

"Good morning." Melinda smiled seeing one of her favourite students and asked her to sit down.

"How did you know it was me?" Radhika sat down.

"Experience and anticipation go hand in hand," she said. Radhika's affinity for Melinda was as instantaneously infusing as perfume is for air. It was Melinda who had tracked her when she was twelve and later arranged the transfer of her guardianship from her relative's to that of the Trustees. And over the years she had become her friend, philosopher and guide.

"I need to know something sister."

"What is it Radhika?" Melinda knew what was coming. "Sister, what is love?" Melinda closed her pen and kept it atop the notebook where she was taking notes. "Love can be anything." She got up and walked up to Radhika to sit beside her. Radhika turned a little to face her as she continued, "But as far as I know, love is realization." Radhika frowned. "A realization of truth and reality, of the infinite energy stored within you, of the limits that you can surpass once you let yourself go, of the immunization of the soul against pain and suffering, the denomination of the 'I' within you and the nomination of the spirit of 'us'. Most importantly love is the reason to find and know oneself." "I am in love with a boy from my class sister. Should I be ashamed of it?" "You should be if you feel you should be." "I made the mistake of falling for the person who loves someone else." "Who told you it's a mistake?" "My mind. It thinks..." "Only the devil thinks Radhika. Our mind is the devil. Do you know why it's said that the devil and God actually reside in each of us?" "Why?" "That's because every one of us has a mind and a heart. The former is the devil and the later; God. Tell me what your heart says?" "I am not sure."

"So you now know why you did what you did yesterday? You are living your life as per the devil's wish. Awaken your heart, Radhika. Let the God inside decide your journey." There was silence. Melinda walked back to her chair. She got up, few seconds later, went to the book shelf on the right and opened it. Radhika wasn't looking at her. She had her eyes fixed on the Cross kept on the table. And as Melinda sat down on the chair with a book in her hand, Radhika came out of her trance.

"Will I be happy, Sister, if I let my heart rule my life?" she asked.

Melinda let go of a sigh and said, "I can't promise you will. But what I can promise is if you let the God inside guide you throughout, then you won'tever have any complaints."

Radhika slowly absorbed the thought and it made her feel internally stronger. She got up. "Thank you, Sister."

"God bless", Melinda said and thought how badly Radhika needed it for she had taken up the ultimate dare from nature: to be in love forever.

5th November

It happened today! Goddamn it! Savera is sorry for the slap. Of course she didn't say it herself. I mean she did but via someone else. Radhika did it for me! Thank God. It answers two things: one, I still got a chance with Savera and Radhika is NOT in love with me! So fuck you Kiss. Situations definitely change. A few months back I wouldn't have even dared to dream of such a day. U-Nik asked me to start with friendship and then take it from there. Though Kiss argued if I start like a friend, I might end up being only a friend. But I think I'll do as U-Nik says. Though Savera already knows what I think of her still friendship seems a better idea. She didn't really say whether she will accept me as a friend or not but I agree with what Kiss says: it's always ladies first except in love, stupidity and onbed.

Since dada's departure papa's interactions with me have increased. I know I told you he talked less these days. That's constant. But whenever he does he makes sure he inquires about my school, studies, my future plans (this he rarely did before). To top it all, he even sometimes asks me to show him some of my sketches (this he never did before). I don't remember the last time he cared to talk to me about my stuff. It's as if I am again a new born for him! Talking about sketches, after a long time (three months to be exact) I have again started with them. I think I'll gift Savera a sketch ofhers.

The science students of classes eleven and twelve shall be attending an International Science Exhibition for ten days starting 14th November. And we are going to Kolkata for it. The exhibition is going to be held in the Science City campus in Kolkata! The moment I told papa about the exhibition he looked as excited as I was. He has changed, but pleasantly so! Anyways, the bad news is it's only a science exhibition so no commerce students. What a pity! It could have been the best chance for me to befriend Savera. But then best things seldom happen to me. So forget it. I had called Archit yesterday. Their exams are over. I told him about the exhibition and by now he must have conveyed the news to the rest. Vidya Ghar Academy, as I learnt from Archit, isn't participating but if I go to Kolkata, I'll at least be able to meet up with my pals. Thus I am looking forward to an exhilarating tour. I can visualize the scenes: meeting old buddies and visiting my old school. Chilly! And Ritwika? Well she doesn't matter anymore. Honestly speaking, I don't know when she ever mattered. She was only a crush; nothing more or less. Unlike what Savera is or will be. By the way Insane said he won't go because of the money involved but Kiss told us he would kick his butt if he doesn't come along. Kiss has already paid up on his behalf. Well until Ireturn, bye!

25th November

Hi! How are you doing? It was an experience that I won't ever forget. All of us had assembled in school on 12th. From there we were taken (in our school bus) to the station where we boarded the Saraighat Express at around 12:40 pm. Twenty five of us were in one compartment and twenty seven were in another. The train journey was really a piss off simply because Sister Blyth happened to be in our compartment - the 'terror in flesh'! Anyways, it was 5:45 am when our train arrived at Howrah Station in Kolkata. I always have this feeling, railway stations are the pulse of a city. When you step on one you know the kind of city that awaits you. At least it happens with me.

It took us almost half an hour to reach the hotel. But we couldn't rest. Sister Blyth kept pushing us for breakfast as we had to reach Science City by eleven. All the students, once inside the Science City campus, were allowed to mix with the others present. There were schools from all over India and few from abroad; mostly Russians and Koreans. But I can't tell you their names because I didn't get them. May be even they didn't our names but like us, projected otherwise. Most of the time it was U-Nik, Insane, Adidash and me who were exploring the different facets of the exhibition while Kiss explored the

different faces present in the exhibition; their short skirts, bust size, their curves, sometimes milky and sometimes chocolaty thighs and God knows what not! He said they excited the *vaginatarian* inside him!

The fifth day was good as we had to attend only couple of seminars and the rest was about an education fair. It not only helped us to scan our interests but also coaxed us to initiate a career plan of sorts. Radhika won an award for our school in an extempore on the second last day. She was, in one word, fantastic. The four of us didn't go to the exhibition on the last day. We took one extra dress with us as we were supposed to wear the school uniform daily to the exhibition. Once we were at Science City, we allowed few hours to pass by before going to the washroom to change. Then it didn't take us much time to slide past the main gate to meet up with my old buddies. And it was I who had planned up the entire scene. We took a taxi for Park Street where my old gang was waiting at Flury's (I had called Archit form the hotel a day before). I introduced my new group to the old one. Anyways, I enjoyed a lot and by five thirty we were back in Science City. We entered as normal visitors, changed to our school uniform in the washroom and came out as students seriously interested in science. I don't know how much enriched I got by attending the exhibition but I am sure if I hadn't gone, I would have definitely missed something. By the way I have completed Savera's sketch in the last ten days.

CHAPTER-11

Not for once did her mind agree to what her heart said. But the shackles of the oath she had willfully worn after talking to Melinda rendered her helpless. *No matter what happens, I will let the God – my heart – decide for myself; even if I have to perish for it.* Radhika kept chanting to herself. She wasn't happy to tell Savera about Raen being a good boy and that she shouldn't have slapped him. But when she did, a film of satisfaction coated her heart. Then the educational tour came up and Radhika knew it was an opportunity to bury everything and start afresh. During the ten days stay in Kolkata she talked very little to Raen and sometimes even consciously avoided him. She came back to Guwahati, believing she had overcome her emotional fragility. She soon realized it was an overestimation.

When Nikhil asked her if she could, during the interval, bring Savera near the chapel, she knew the reason. A current ran through her nerves unzipping all her past apprehensions again. The periods that followed kept her mind and heart busy. It was the same war; should she do it or not? Though the classes went on and the teachers taught but Radhika heard nothing. She was sitting in the class room but was present in her own world which resembled a gig.

The boisterous mind was pushing her off the edge of satisfaction into the net of synthetic happiness; don't do it. The heart, being true to its pious self, was trying to pull her out; do it if you really love him. The duel went on till the bell rang for interval. Radhika walked right in front of the commerce class, her heart was driving her on the gear of impulse. She called Savera out and explained the situation.

"Raen wants to be your friend." Her sight didn't blur while saying it; that was more than enough for her.

"Why?"

"Why? Come on, Savy, friendship isn't something forbidden. *Nor is love*. He wants to be your friend. *I wanted to be your friend Raen...and perhaps more*. If he wants a chance to be your friend then is there anything wrong? *If I want you to be my life then is that wrong?* I told you he is a genuinely good boy, trust me. *You are the one for me Raen, I know*. I hope you trust me?"

"Yes, I do. You know that, Rads."

"In that case, if you don't want to give him a chance, at least give one to the trust you have upon me." It was then Savera agreed. "Alright. Where is he?" *I know how choosy chances are. They don't rain on everyone.*

"He is waiting for you near the chapel." Radhika choked a little.

"Now?"

Radhika nodded.

"Okay."

As she watched Savera walk off the corridor, Radhika knew what she had dug. It was a grave to rest the corpse of her love forever.

At first Radhika decided not to go to the chapel. It was tantamount to a sin, she thought, to see Raen and Savera talk to each other. But when the visualizations of the scene began torturing her, she chose to commit the sin irrespective of the consequences.

It was worse than she had expected. Raen was smiling while talking; Savera was smiling back. It was there all over their faces. It was there in their body language. It was everywhere. Her life was getting amputated right in front of her. And suddenly she felt she had lost Raen; forever. The thought was quick and so was her realization of it. She ran and stopped not till she reached the girls toilet. There she cried till her tear glands could squeeze out no more. She cried till her heart could bear no more. And she cried till her whole system felt empty ofemotions.

"The bell has rung. Interval is over, dear. Aren't you coming to class?" It was Deepali.

"Yes...I" Radhika splashed some water on her face from the adjacent tap and stood awkwardly to avoid any eye contact with her friend.

"Is everything all right Radhika?" There was concern in Deepali's tone.

"Yes I am fine..." She turned around, her teardrops lost amongst the droplets of water.

"What happened to your eyes?" The red swollen eyes being the source of some hints perplexed her friend.

"Something obnoxious had entered...but now it's gone...come let's go." Radhika used all her energies to sound normal. She was walking towards the door.

"Were you crying?" The query braked Radhika's motion. She glanced at Deepali.

"Crying? No way! My eyes were sweating...that's all," she said and moved out of the toilet. Deepali followed her, not convinced.

*

30th November

Savera and I are friends now. Alright I repeat; Savera and I are friends now. Yes, you got me right; Savera and I are friends now! Remember I told you about the sketch I had made during my Kolkata visit? Well I took it to school today. When U-Nik came to know about it he asked Radhika whether she could bring Savera near the chapel during interval. And during interval Radhika did exactly that! Savera and I shook hands at first and after talking about 'how are you' kinds I gave her the sketch. She didn't accept it at first but when I repeatedly requested her to at least see it, she gave in. She liked what she saw and also praised it. If I could do an orchestration with words then it would have been easier for me to explain what or how I felt at that moment. But, as you probably know by now, I am not that good with words. Still, I can say she made the clock of my heart go berserk! We didn't talk much after that as her friends were waiting and so were mine. Moreover we were in the school premises. If somehow any teacher had got a hint of what was going on, I would be inhot soup.

And, yes, Savera inquired about my signature. Actually, after I am done with a sketch I sign on the right hand bottom corner of the page as RV-'R' horizontal and 'V' vertical. I have done that since I started sketching. The design of it made her curious and so I told her about it. All the while I was with her today, I intentionally talked slowly. I wanted to live the moment as much as I could.

There is a piece of funny news. Adidash claims to be in love with Piyali. I had introduced them in Kolkata after which they had spent some time together. Before parting they had even exchanged their email ids. They kept in touch and now he thinks he is in love. It's funny because Adidash always looked the types who rely on their parents to introduce them to love, that too sitting on the sofa in the drawing room of the girl's house. But I am happy for him. He even made me ring up Piyali. And what do I learn? She likes him too! Thank God for I think the essence of love stories, like life, is suffering to start with and enlightenment to end with. And in case your luck-cheque doesn't bounce, Adidash-Piyali kind happens. I hope someday Savy and I also live happily together.

Togetherness; that's the elixir for romance, isn't it?

6th December

Life is a big clock whose pendulum keeps moving...left-right, left-right, left-right...or right-left, right-left, right-left...then suddenly, without any premonition, it stops. With every left-right and right-left my life is also getting over 'little' by 'little'. No one knows how little or huge is this 'little'. Praveen sir is no more. I don't know the details apart from the fact that he succumbed to a heart attack. He was forty nine and has left behind two daughters and a wife.

All mid-term papers are out. I did fairly well. Kiss managed to pass in only two subjects this time: Hindi and Biology. He is sure the Biology ma'am has a soft corner for him as no other way he could have passed it but he didn't dare to comment on the Hindi teacher as it's a 'he' who teaches us Hindi. Radhika got 99 in Biology. No comments. The official report cards shall be distributed on 10^{th} of this month but we already know who holds what rank. I won't say who is 1^{st} , as that's obvious. U-Nik is 3^{rd} . I am 7^{th} , Adidash is 10^{th} and Kiss is 2^{nd} (from the bottom, of course).

The annual sports day is on 8th. Though class eleven-twelve aren't allowed participate but they are welcome to attend the function if they please. I will attend because Savy will. Kiss wants me to propose to Savy on 8th. But I am not sure. A bud becomes a flower not with determination alone but with patience as well. It's true I haven't been able to rise beyond the 'hi-hello' stuff till now but still... Kiss says I should ask for her phone number and keep in touch with her over the phone. But what if I ask her for her number and she gets cross with me? There is another disturbing thing Kiss has injected in my mind. Since Savy isn't showing any sign of advancing her relationship with me apart from giving me few faint smiles when we happen to bump into each other in the morning assembly or during interval or sometimes even in the corridor. It might be that she already has a boy friend or she fancies someone or may be (worst of all) she simply doesn't want to go beyond friendship with me. Or is it that she wants me to take the first step once again? If she has someone else in her mind or life I am not the kind to create any nuisance. Hatred can be forced not love. And even if one forces love it will be temporary. Did she ask me to fall in love with her? It happened. It JUST happened. And I believe this from the bottom of my heart when things happen, when things JUST happen, without planning or without one's consent or anticipation; something big awaits for sure. Good or bad? Let time decide. Bye.

8th December

Nothing great happened today. No I didn't propose to Savy. But we did talk for a while, especially about our family and all. Believe me when we were talking I thought I knew her from the time I didn't know her.

Nobody knows this but I think I'll let you know. I am attracted to Savy in the same manner as I am to ma. I know its funny-weird-absurd and everything synonymous still the fact remains I feel the same innate attraction drawing me towards her that bonds me with ma. Her presence makes me feel secured (I don't know which way) just the way I feel when ma is around. I think I can open my heart out to her like I often do in front of ma. Something tells me she would positively understand all my pains like ma does. When ma gets depressed, I cry. Isn't the heart connected with the eyes through pain? When she is joyous, I smile. Isn't the heart connected with the lips through happiness? How are Savera and I connected? Are we...at all?

I never dwell on her sexiness (I am sure other guys do) but I always find myself absorbed in admiration for her. But you only admire someone when you know the person, right? Her presence commands respect from the core of my existence. Since the first time I saw her, six months ago, I never thought of asking her out for a date. Instead I wondered how serene life would be if I get a chance to sleep with my head on her lap. Is this normal or is something wrong with me? I am sure, I love her. But...I am not sure how sure the sure is. Consider this:

I DON'T lust for Savy. (I know this because I have never fantasized about her.)

I DON'T hate her. (Obviously!)

I am NOT trying to pass time with her. (Else I wouldn't have desired the second innings.) And yes, I DON'T have a crush on her. (That's because my feelings for her aren't at the mercy of time.) So what's left? Love. What else? Perhaps confusion!

I have a gut feeling things won't remain simple from here on. I now believe Kiss is right. The best is I shall ask her directly what she thinks of me. After all, she isn't a kid anymore. Once I know she likes me, I'll propose.

Oh! God, what have I put myself into? I won't be able to forget her ever and if something ill happens, I won't be able to forgive my fate. Wish me luck ...I need that... exponentially.

13th December

Savera was absent for a few days so it was today when I met her after school I directly asked her what she thought of me. She tried her best to sugar coat her words but tell me something if I dip a knife in the Holy Ganges and then kill someone with it won't it amount to a murder? She said she likes me but only as a friend not as ...and that the possibility of something otherwise is zero....I didn't ask her how or why she was so sure. It was inconsequential.

Now, sitting in my room with the door closed and no one around, I can very well tell you how difficult it was to remain all smiles in front of her (which I did) and how much I cried after I came back home...but I won't stretch. It's insignificant. Tears, pains, prayers, hope, faith, premonitions everything is insignificant when you have a fucked up destiny to confront.

I would have tolerated if humiliation attacked alone. But her words...how does she know our friendship would never blossom into love without giving it a chance? There has to be something which tells her I am not the man for her. What is it? Family, society, her past, a boy friend or what? What is her damn problem?

Anyways, the more I think about it the more I'll feel the way I did standing before her absolutely empty.

I feel like running away from everything. The viral fever brought some change else it's the same old wake up, go to school, go to tuitions, same fucking laws of Physics, the stale Mathematical theories and the crazy shit chemical reactions. Sometimes it becomes difficult to breathe. Kiss says extreme happiness or melancholy gives life a hard on and then it fucks us non-stop like a stallion. I don't know how that asshole comes up with these lines. Either he reads a lot (not school books) or he is a sure schizophrenic vacillating between being a punctilious philosopher at one time and an indomitable sexmaniac at other times. Something dawned on me last night. Raen means night and Savera means morning. The two never meet or co-exist. One simply gives way to the other. Is it just a coincidence that we are named as such? Are we destined not to co-exist? If we actually were not destined to co-exist then isn't it a little silly on destiny's part to make me fall for her or even make me realize that she exists in the first place? You know what I think? Destiny has got the cheapest and filthiest sense of humour possible.

22nd December

Today was half day for us as the teachers were busy with the parent-teacher meeting of the juniors. We first thought of going to a movie but then Kiss asked us to come over to his place. No occasion.

This guy is rich. He has almost a palatial house. There was a Honda City parked outside and an Innova inside the garage. The drawing room as well as the dining place looked like some five star hotel's lobby.

Kiss's own room was in stark contrast to it, though. The curtains were thick and seemed untouched from ages. Kiss switched on the light (it was day still...). The walls were dressed with posters of skimpily dressed models. On his study table I saw recent issues of Playboy magazine and adjacent to it were kept two volumes of Plato. My presumption of Kiss's duality wasn't wrong! When I asked him how his parents reacted to the obscene posters and magazines, Kiss didn't reply. Kiss's mother was in the house (he told us so) but she didn't show up, not even for a single moment. U-Nik told me later, she is his step mom.

I had decided not to tell anyone about Savera but I did. Nobody said anything except U-Nik. He said whatever happened was for good (as if I had any other theory to conform to). Probably she wasn't destined to be mine and someone really good must be waiting for me (the same old cliché). I know he wanted to cheer me up but he couldn't answer my questions. Why (assuming I wasn't destined for her or vice versa) did I fall in love with her? There are so many people in this world. Why doesn't everyone fall in love with one person? Why doesn't one person fall in love with everyone? Why is there someone for someone? Why doesn't one initiate the same passion in everybody which he or she does in someone in particular? Please don't give the excuse of body chemicals or any other scientific shit for that matter. I have enough of it in school.Bunkit!

We enjoyed a lot at Kiss's place. He wanted to show us a sex-film (he has quite a lot of them) but the rest of us settled for Arnold's Commando. Then there came this moment when we saw Adidash, with his little finger inside a rubber-like material, dancing around like a joker. And when he tried to inquire about it Kiss beat him up as it was one of his condoms. (Kiss keeps the condoms with him so that when any opportunity knocks, he'll open the door wearing one of those.) All of us laughed till we had a taut stomach. My God...you should have seen his face when he had the thing on his little finger. None of us knew from where he got it (he said it was there under the bed) but his face... Jesus...even Jim Carrey would have appreciated him. All in all it was a good day. I

laughed; that was important. So important!

25th December

Whenever I open my books or do whatever, peculiar thoughts start appearing in my mind. If I did this —if Savera did that— if situations weren't so tight— if Savera was a science student— if I was a commerce student— if Savera was my neighbour— if I was a family friend. The funny part is, I know it's over for me (the Savera issue), and these thoughts only waste my time still, each time they appear I give in like an ass. I am not able to fathom one simple thing: here is a girl whom I happened to see (not meet) six months back. I have never had any long hours of chat with her. I have neither spent any special occasion with her nor has she encouraged me in anyway and still I am not able to forget her? What is this? Is this again one of those filthy jokes of destiny? What the fuck...I want to forget her, I want her out of my dreams, I want her gone from my heart, my mind and my life (well she was never in my life as such)...but...why the fuck it doesn't happen the way I want it to? As if I am indebted to her in some fucking way and the only possible method of pay back is by letting my heart get tortured and molested mercilessly by her thoughts. Fuck shit.

I was in the carnival few hours back and I experienced one of the most pathetic days of my life. I am ashamed of whatever I am going to confess now. I felt jealous today seeing a couple happily walking down the street. A burning breeze of humiliation smeared me when I saw love-mates of my age, sitting cozily inside a restaurant and talking; eyeto eye, heart to heart, listening intently what the other had to say. The scene made me restless and so I excused myself. U-Nik and others probably ate there but I came back. It never happened this way before but for the last few days. I envy smiling faces. I didn't tell you yesterday but today I won't suppress anything. I am not happy so I can't stand anyone who is.

Sometimes, I detest being alone and at times, that's the only thing I rely upon, in order to breathe alright. I can't tell you how the thought of getting rejected by the girl I love tends to coronate my mind with ripe frustration. It eats away the life inside me. When I meet or hear about people who are doggedly committed to one another I curse my bad luck and their good luck. Commitment; that's the word which churns my within and brings out questions to which there is only one response; bouts of depression. Whenever I see people sitting together inside a theatre or a park, the bell of pain relentlessly resonates in

my heart. Damn. Am I sick? Have I become a psycho or some kind of an animal? I always considered myself emotionally mature but look what love has done to me? Or does love connects us not only with our soul and inner strength but also with all our personal decadence and the acutely private flaws we possess as a human being?

28th December

Apart from Hindi and Biology (the inconsequential subjects for the aspiring engineers assuming one passes in both), the unit tests for other subjects are over. We have a week off on account of winter vacation. So school shall reopen on 5th January (next year!). Kiss has gone to his grandfather's house in Jorhat, Adidash somehow has convinced his parents to go on a vacation to Kolkata (the reason is obvious) while U-Nik left this evening with his parents and sister to Rajasthan. Only insane and I will be in Guwahati on the eve of New Year.

Jhanu sir, who teaches us Physics, told me yesterday that my name is being considered for the captain of the house. We have four houses in our school — Green, blue, red and yellow. I am in green house. Had Savera been interested in me, at least an inch, this news would have definitely excited me as girls are often impressed by badge holders. But now this news is no news for me. I have no interest left to impress or even try to impress her again. After all, there is something called self-respect. She slapped me once but still I tried. Not anymore. I have seen her glancing at me at times, from the corner of her eyes, but I am trying not to make it an issue. I may sound stupid or an idiot or even an asshole but I have decided not to try to reach her. If Savera has to come to me she will, somehow and if not...the best way of not allowing the past to become too sharp for comfort is to shut it out of mind to the best of ability. So from now on, I won't think, talk or write about her anymore. Case closed!

Papa is planning to visit Pune on 7th or 8th January; this time with ma and me. My wait for that moment has already begun. What is it with waiting? We know time stops for nobody but on the contrary when you wait for something it really seems to crawl. Funny. (What's not funny these days?)

I won't study tonight and I have my reason in the form of a mauled version of a famous poem:

"The books are damn dull and thick. But I got no promises to keep So I'll lie down and go to sleep, So I'll lie down and go to sleep."

Now that's what you call a Frost bite!

Bye.

31st December

It was ma's birthday today. She did everything she usually does on her birthday (or for that matter anyone's be it dada, papa or me), like worshipping for an extra hour after bath, distributing sweets and clothes to the needy children (she managed to get them via the maid) and fast the entire day. But one thing that always happened to be the hallmark of birthdays in our house was missing this time; she didn't prepare *kheer*. It's always been dada's favourite. Never had I seen him protesting to *kheer*. But now when he is not here ma did the right thing by omitting the preparation.

My school is reopening on 5th. Yesterday papa got three confirmed tickets for Pune. We are scheduled to leave on 7th and return on 10th. So my dear 7th January, will you please grace my life by arriving a little sooner?

By the way, when I went out in the evening with Insane today, I once again missed... I told you I won't name her. It's the other people's green life which makes me think of her more and more. This evening I really felt an impulse to ring her up and ask her to meet up somewhere but I didn't. I wish these holidays weren't there. At least I could have seen her once in the day. But now...forgetit.

Insane and I talked all evening while traipsing inside a children's park. I asked him whether he has ever experienced love. He told me about it. He and N.G (I didn't push him for the full name) were family friends. He is still clueless about how and when their childhood friendship ameliorated into love. Neither of them proposed for they had already accepted each other as their future life partner. But two years back, when his

father's affair episode was out in the society, N.G's father cut off all relationships with them. And a month later he sent N.Gsomewhere out of Guwahati.

It's always the ones who love selflessly that get screwed in the end. Look at the guys who flirt. I haven't seen one single flirt who has had a screwed up relationship. May be that's because they are never into one!

Sometimes I feel if I had proposed to 'her' with an attitude of a flirt life would have been better. But then everyone isn't that 'talented'. And thus everyone doesn't pay the price for loving someone for the sake of love and nothing else. I really feel bad for Insane but what to do; it's life – the grand old fucker. Tell me something; doesn't life get bored fucking each one of us the same way? I wish I could castrate that son of a bitch. But I am helpless...you are helpless...we are helpless...the world is helpless and even help is helpless.

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CHAPTER - 12

"My God! What's the date? 6th January, is it?" Two stentorian voices called out at one time. It was Naina and Sulagna whose perfervid expression alerted the others in the class as Deepali entered the room almost escorting Radhika; the birthdaygirl.

Unlike others, Radhika had never celebrated her birthday in school. But this time was different because something special was about to happen this time. *Something miraculously special*, Radhika reminded herself blushing as she saw her class mates checking out her white cotton pant, lavender coloured full sleeves top with a black collar and the soft ear lobes pinned with cute star shaped ear rings; their colour matching the top. Her entire appearance pronounced an exclusive élan.

The moment Radhika saw Raen come in, her breaths turned nervous and her heart increased its tempo of beats. Deepali was quick to assess the situation. It was she who had encouraged her to step on the accelerator after Savera rejected Raen, the second time. "Come on, Rads, it's not your fault that Savy didn't reciprocate his feelings. In fact, you did what you could to help him out but if something isn't destined to happen between them, what can we do? And now it's time to see whether something happens between the two of you. At least you can try. If it doesn't work, you lose what you never had. But if it does work, you win what you always wanted to. Fear of failure is insignificant in love, dear."

When Deepali saw Raen coming inside the class, she abruptly turned towards Naina, who unlike other classmates, stuck to Radhika.

"Hey, Naina, I need to show you something."

"What?"

"Come with me." Naina innocuously got up and followed Deepali who winked at Radhika before leaving the class. It made her friend more nervous.

"It's your birthday?" Raen asked.

"Yes." I love you. Should I say it now?

"Happy Birthday! You look lovely." They shook hands. And she begged the moment to last a lifetime.

"I need to go down. My friends are waiting," Raen said glancing at the clasp of their hands. "Oh yes. I am sorry." Radhika loosened her grip immediately. She watched as Raen kept his bag on his seat and a second later walked past her. Should I stop him? Sooner or later I'll have to tell him so why not now? By then Raen had moved out of the room. No, interval time is the best.

In the third period the class shifted to the Physics lab. The teacher was explaining a new experiment on the board while Radhika and Deepali were busy exchanging their thoughts seating in the middle row separated by two girls.

Should I tell him during the interval?

They didn't risk talking. Radhika wrote her thought on a rough page and passed it to Deepali. It was duly answered and returned.

Yes, idiot. Or when do you want to say it?

No, I thought we could wait till the school gets over. What do you say?

No! You are going to say it when the bell rings for interval. Got it?

Done.

Both of them tried to concentrate on what the teacher was saying. A minute later another note came for Deepali. *Deeps, babes, try to understand. I don't think I'll be able to tell him face to face. I am sweating even thinking about it. Please darling may I write it on a piece of paper and give it to him?*

Deepali looked at Radhika. Her reply was a little biased towards the pleading eyes of her friend.

Whatever! But you are going to give it to him during interval; "no" changes on that.

After reading the note Radhika smiled back. Two thumbs up! She flipped to a fresh page on her notebook.

Dear Raen,

This might be a shock for you but for me, I swear, it happened exactly as it does in romantic novels; at first sight. When I first saw you, I felt a chord vibrate within me and the resonance of it invigorated my days and nights with a renewed life. Your presence tickled a sweet (probably the sweetest) spot in me, but exactly where I don't know. It introduced me to a feeling which I never thought, for whatever reasons, could reside within me. Though the feeling didn't always let me be happy but whatever it made me feel, it certainly was enthralling. Some one told me love is realization. And thanks to you for making me realize the realization.

If this note puts you in any sort of pressure, I apologize. But then love and pressure can't be complementary. Thus, only if you have ever felt or feel anything special for me then please return this to me. You don't have to write anything. Simply return this note to me tomorrow, as it is.

If your heart or soul has ever talked to you about love then I assume you know it's not about the person but the feelings the individual imbues within you. It's not about reaching the edge, it's about the jump. A jump for onetime-the fall of a lifetime. And to be honest Raen, I have already made the jump. I love you. But please make sure your love for me (if it's there) isn't a side effect of my love for you.

Radhika

She repeatedly read the note. And each time she did so, the weeds of nervousness outgrew the saplings of hope. For once she thought of sharing the note with Deepali but eventually decided against it. It should be only between the two of us. Raen and me. *Raen and Radhika*, she thought and blushed to herself. Next moment the bell for interval rang and she felt choked with anxiety.

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I learnt three damn important things today. First I learnt how my *soi disant* friends can be a pain in the ass. Second, it was Radhika's birthday and she was looking (I dare say) sexy. And third, (this one is unbelievable) Radhika loves me.

Never in my wildest or weirdest imaginations had I thought a girl like Radhika would fall for me! She is a genius of a girl; a kind I have neither seen nor will ever see anywhere. I am nothing in front of her. It's not that the guy has to be better (in whatever way) than the girl to ensue any romantic relationship but at least they should be equal. You tell me how can I get involved with someone who will always give me an inferiority complex? Probably it's the first time she is encountering these feelings. May be its plain infatuation? One can easily misinterpret infatuation as love. It happened to me as well in case of Ritwika, remember? But do I think about her now? No!

But what I need to decide at present is how do I say no to her? She did so much to make sure something positive happened between "her" and me. She could have avoided doing so without being the subject of any blame. So whatever I do I can't sayno to her just like that and forget about it. In fact I won't. The best is if I talk to her. Talking helps. If I explain to her that she deserves someone much brighter than me she would get the point.

Look, I want her to be happy and mark my words any man (including me) would feel proud and blessed to have her in his life. But there are some things we need to deserve before desiring them?

I had called up U-Nik this evening and asked him specifically to tell Radhika I'll be out of station till 10th. Obviously he asked me why I intended to do so but I disclosed nothing. After settling this issue with Radhika perhaps then...or may be I won't ever tell this to anyone. Let this remain between the two of us.

I will stop now. Tomorrow I'll meet dada (really up for it!) and also, I got only three days to devise a way of telling Radhika she deserves someone better (without hurts).

Bye. Take care.

I am back. It was great to meet dada! I must say he has adjusted well. When he saw me he started banging the arm of his chair. He always did that whenever we met after a long time. Earlier 'long time' used to be me coming back from school but this time it literally was a long time. The institute is quite good. And yes dada looks really smart in his new 'army-like' hair cut. There were many people; some like dada, others somewhat better and quite a few of them worse. I don't know what will happen to them as time goes by. Even if their respective families take them home, will they ever be able to live a normal life? A normal life! What the fuck is itanyways?

A strange thing happened with me on the flight back home. The propinquity of the clouds from the plane made me interpret their outline as someone's face. Believe me, every night whenever I tried to think of a way to convince Radhika about me not being at level with her, I ended up appreciating her appearance. Lying on bed I thought about her cute nose, her artistic eyes, her prominent lips, her soft ears and slender neck. Oh God! I simply couldn't control myself from doing so. No, I didn't jerk off thinking about her. I respect her too much to degrade my feelings that low. And because I didn't feel like fantasizing about Radhika a question knocked at the door of my conscience: Can love happen more than once? Is there another Earth within our galaxy? If there was, suppose, then Earth would have lost its identity, its extraordinariness. Likewise, if love happened more than once then there wouldn't be anything special left in it to inspire lives and would have thus degraded itself to the cheap grades of anger, lust and greed.

I realized one more thing. There is nothing called I-deserve-you or you-don't-deserve-me in love. The fact that I love someone, I believe, is good enough that I deserve the person and vice versa. But whether I get the person to be by my side all life is completely a different story. If Radhika loves me she deserves me and I deserve her, no matter how much better she is compared to me. But there is a problem. Doesn't the same apply for Savera and me too? It seriously is fucking the wits out of me. I am slowly getting consumed by Radhika's thoughts and I still haven't thought of any plausible way of saying no. The funny thing is I don't know whether, in reality now, I at all would do it or not. I'll go to school tomorrow and then...let's see what happens.

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I have already told this to two people as of now. U-Nik and Archit (I called him this evening). And now I am telling you. I gave the note back to Radhika today. She was absent (I don't know why) but I gave it to Deepali (my classmate and Radhika's best friend). By now she must have got it.

Last night, after I went to bed, a thought kept pestering me. I am very much attracted to Savera and none of it is in a crude sense (you know what I mean). But she said no to me. And I don't think she is ever going to change her stand. Nor will I approach her again in my life. So that means it's all over between us. I mean whatever hope I had to initiate and elongate a relationship is dead and buried.

Now, talking of Radhika, do I have a soft corner for her? Well I respect her, I admire her and many times her endeavours widen my mouth and eyes with awe. But a soft corner? I don't know. If I hadn't known anyone by the name of Savera and then if Radhika had proposed would I have complied (keeping whatever I feel for her constant)? I think I definitely would have. So, why not now? I am not two-timing. Radhika knowseverything that happened between Savera and me whereas I don't have to explain anything to Savera for two reasons: one, it was I who loved her and two she doesn't give a damn about what I think or do. And if I say yes to Radhika, it no way would involve Savera. At the most she might think I never had loved her in the first place which – at least you know – is gross.

I didn't say yes to Radhika because of all the things she did for me when I was interested in Savera. I said yes because I felt something for her if not pure love. I think there are two ways of getting started with a relationship. First, you fall in love with a person because of certain appealing external attributes which push you (quite compulsively) to know the person better through interactions. Or second, you happen to know a person through a cavalcade of interactions and then you slowly fall in love with the person's appealing internal attributes. Perhaps with Radhika and me it will happen the latter way.

All my life (from fourteen onwards to be exact) I always thought what it would be like to spend time with that one special person. And today when it happened I felt...strange. From the morning itself, prior to the assembly, Radhika and I exchanged few nervous looks and blushing smiles. It seemed as if she could see me through. I felt naked! Gosh... it was damn embarrassing. We talked during the interval. And by that time the entire class had come to know about it; thanks to U-Nik - he disclosed it to Kiss and a grand thanks to him - he relayed it to everyone in the class. Some congratulated Radhika and others teased me. Some even blessed us!

Anyways, back to where I was. Radhika and I traipsed the entire school campus during the interval. I told her about my past (whatever little I have) and she talked about her past (there is so much). She wants to be a doctor. Though I knew this from the time we were 'just' friends but today I saw her eyes while she was talking about it. And if eyes have anything to do with determination and if determination has anything to do with success then I know she will be a doctor one day. Having made a trying journey through life, that too being a girl, and still nourishing an ambition with utmost discipline and determination is, I believe, an achievement in itself. Don't get me wrong. It's an achievement not because she is fighting it out being a girl. It's because she is fighting ina world where the rules have been written by men. And I know men...they are a fuck of a species.

She had so much to say and was saying it all with such avid excitement that for a moment I thought she had been forced to suppress everything till now and today it was liberation time. She didn't bore me though. In fact I felt relaxed (unlike what I felt in Savera's presence). I was 'myself' with her (just like I am with you). As though whatever I thought or spoke in front of her didn't matter. As if she'll never misunderstand me. As if we would perceive everything in the same way. God! Can I be that lucky? A human birth takes nine months. But I realized today a human heart needs only an instant to be born. It happens in the instant when one is oneself and is ready to accept any challenges of life. It happens in the instant when one falls in love. And it's not a coincidence that the two instants coincide. Wow! I have become quite a philosopher! So blame it on the philosopher then, for now I believe, though life fucks everyone for sure but not in every hole.

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The unit test marks are out (I forgot to tell you yesterday). I did fairly well in all the subjects. Radhika excelled in all, U-Nik did quite good, Adidash's marks have improved (thanks to Piyali he says) and Kiss failed in all except Biology (he is sure the Biology ma'am likes him – sicko!).

You know this evening I tried something different. With my canvas in front and with a pencil in hand, I closed my eyes and let myself loose. I allowed my subconscious to take over the conscious mind. It directed my hands and hence my strokes on the canvas. I knew a face was getting sketched but didn't have a clue to the identity of the person. It took me almost thirty minutes to complete it and when I opened my eyes I was disappointed. The sketch was far from being good. But that's not the point. The face resembled Savera's.

I am sick and tired of myself. I don't know what it will take for me to forget her. Honestly when I saw the sketch I felt like a cheat. More so because no matter what, I know, I won't be able to tell this to Radhika. It will surely hurt her and I can't do that. But then if one hides something from the person one loves, isn't that cheating? What's happening to my character? Till the last few days I claimed to be in love with Savera and now Radhika. Is there any guarantee that I won't fall for any other girl in future? No comments. Well neither can I go back in time and take corrective measures nor can I move forward and have a look at things to come. But I have a promise for you. No matter what, and I repeat no matter what, not even if Savera comes up with a proposal (highly unlikely) or if Radhika tomorrow decides that I am not the guy for her (though she loves me but I won't be surprised if that happens) I would still love Radhika. I have said yes to her and I did that not due to some 'heat-of-the-moment' phenomenon. I did that because I genuinely felt something for her. I agree I wasn't in love with her at first sight, so what? The truth is I do feel something for her now which too, I would like to believe, is love. And mind you I didn't do it because I wasn't sure of Savera. It was only when Savera's decision was clear to me, I considered my feelings for Radhika which, by the time Savera rejected me, had undergone a change. And trust me the change was so subtle that I myself took time to acknowledge it. Phew!

It was the most amazing day of my life. Day before yesterday I thought what it would be like if ma and Radhika meet up? And yesterday I invited my friends for lunch at my place. And today everybody came – Kiss, U-Nik, Insane, Adidash, Radhika and Deepali. Actually I didn't call Deepali but when Radhika told me Sister Melinda won't allow her to move out alone, I asked her to bring along Deepali. The girls were with ma and papa for most of the time. I don't know what they discussed but more importantly they looked happy talking to Radhika. Among other dishes ma also prepared *Palak paneer* (my favourite!). It was tasty to the power scrumptious to the power delicious to the power yummy.

After lunch I showed them my old albums. There was a momentary hullabaloo as it contained pictures of my nappy (and nude) days. They also saw dada's photos and later I narrated them about the tough times we encountered and the indecision we suffered from before sending him to the institute. We (the girls too) later decided to play cricket on the terrace though the girls preferred to only watch. I played today after a long time. Back in Kolkata I used to be the best batsmen in our team but today I scored only two. Probably, because Radhika was watching and I had to be the best in whatever I did, made me over conscious. The surprise package was Adidash who simply kept batting non stop using his legs, hips, bums, chest, head and what not. At last Kiss asked him if he loved Piyali truly then he will use the bat instead of his body. He did try and was out on the next ball.

Oh yes, Archit called yesterday. His father has decided to settle in America (Georgia to be specific). They might shift this August. He isn't sure whether he will lose a year or not but America...it's a wow news anyways! He asked me to visit Kolkata once before August. I didn't promise him anything. There is one last thing I want to share. I don't feel jealous seeing couples anymore or curse people because they look happy. I now believe it's important for every person to be desired by someone in particular. By desire I mean there should be someone for whom your existence matters. I am talking of someone other than parents. And if one is lucky enough to have such a person only then he is allowed the privilege of feeling, thinking and acting like a human being should, ideally. May be because that person offers a crystal moral mirror in front of us and before doing anything we automatically end up checking ourselves for decency and humanity. You won't believe every time I am with her I feel life is actually colourful. It's just that at times, for whatever reasons, I choose to be colour blind. I hope I overcome that. Hasta La Vista baby (yes, I watched Terminator 2: Judgment Day on Star movies few hoursback).

21st January

Don't ask me why I didn't fill you up for the last few days because I'll tell you anyways. On Monday Sister Blyth announced we will be having another set of tests this week and that's exactly what happened. Though they got over today but seriously the government should get the laws for child labour right.

I still haven't asked Radhika anything specific about Sunday though day before yesterday she herself talked about it. She liked ma-papa and missed her own parents after she went back to The Home. I didn't try to sympathize with her. It was eight years ago but time doesn't heal all wounds. I only hope she copes with it to the best ofher ability.

Kiss called up in the evening. He has had a pretty hot fight with his father. Kiss wants to study Chartered Accountancy and take up commerce in class twelve. They had made a pact after class ten, Kiss shall study science for a year and if he doesn't feel comfortable with it only then he would be allowed by his father to change to commerce. But today when he told his father, come this April, he would change to commerce his father thought he was deliberately trying to belittle him and hence the argument. I told him he could have avoided the topic till April. But he said if he would have kept this for April he would have never been able to pursue commerce. He knows his father better than me. True any day! From now on he will keep pressurizing him (and perhaps have the duels regularly). That's his best chance of getting into commerce. Well, best of luck to him.

But what I don't understand is why parents try to thrust their preferences and priorities on us? I am talking of parents in general. Though in my case it's a pure coincidence what my parents want me to become is my ambition too. Thank God! But when this coincidence doesn't happen I think parents should let the child decide. Of course, their blessing and support is essential but sometimes the consent becomes a little biased towards societal standards.

I won't go to school tomorrow. I need a break! We all do. The tests have bugged us enough so we have decided to go for a movie. Radhika isn't sure. She thinks it's not right to bunk school. I also understand it's not right but is it right to be obsessed with right or wrong? And anyways we aren't bunking school. We are simply not going to school. We shall directly go to the movie theatre. But it's okay – I don't want her to change just because she loves me. She should do what she believes in and same applies to me. So I am going to the movie tomorrow and now I'll sleep. No studies please, only Frost bites! Bye.

It was awful. I am not talking about the movie. The day was awful. I happened to see Savera there with another guy. They were laughing and their hands were clasped. Many people brushed past me, some asking me to give side and some simply pushing me aside but I stood there like a fool till Kiss literally pulled me inside the hall. I don't know whether she saw me or not and I don't know whether my friends saw her or not and I also don't know whether my friends saw me gaping at the couple or not. When I sat down my head was reeling. And to my fucked-up fate Savera sat three rows ahead, diagonally from me. I could see her any moment I wanted to. And so I did - all the while. People whistled and yelled when Shahrukh Khan came on screen while I had my neck turned sideways. Each time I tried to concentrate on the movie I felt like crying. Each time I looked at them (they were sitting side by side) I felt like breaking the screen into half. Post interval when I saw her head on the boy's shoulder everything seemed blurry for quite some time. Thank God, Radhika didn't come else what would she have thought of me? If I really love her I shouldn't have felt pathetic seeing Savera with some guy. Now, when I am telling you this, I am still not sure why I felt the way I did? Maybe it wasn't Savera and another guy that I saw but my own shortcoming as a person. My limitations and the realization of a truth – everyone doesn't deserve everything. But then who decides who deserves what? And how? No answer. I desperately wanted to know what extra did that boy possess which I didn't to deserve Savera? If destiny is the answer then why the hell is my destiny not letting me live in peace? Why am I being subjected to these stupid coincidences bringing nothing but ruthless humiliation for me? It's all a game for Him isn't it? My destiny is His dice with which he creates situations that, by the way, projects not the versatility of power but only His sadistic sense of humour. I really (from the core of my heart) want to forget Savera. My confidence gets punctured whenever I see her. Ask any boy who is rejected not once but twice by the same girl and you will know what I mean. I was well on my track to forget her till what happened today. So it's back to zero again. Please God no more coincidences of this kind. Kiss and U-Nik wanted to go to a restaurant after the movie but I excused myself on account of a severe headache. And I am still down with it, so bye fornow.

By the way I also saw them kiss. Lip to lip.

It's ten forty five in the morning and I am at home. I have much to complete in Chemistry and Physics practical files so no school today. Papa is in the office and ma has gone to the neighbor's flat. Yesterday Radhika pleasantly surprised me by calling from a PCO. She was curious to know what fun things we did on Friday. And what fun it was! I told her we enjoyed a lot and I missed her terribly. I know I lied. But then isn't it better to lie and encourage a significant construction than to speak the truth and witness destruction? Still, I am sorry, Radhika. This won't happenagain.

Last night, I had one single dream. I mean generally it's a hodgepodge. But last night was like watching a three dimensional movie. I was enjoying it so much till the alarm clock yelped. But when I woke up, I didn't seem to remember anything but only two things: I enjoyed it thoroughly and it featured Radhika.

From the moment I got up this morning, blame it on the dream, I have been thinking about her; how we met, how our friendship subtly kept growing, then how one day she gave me the note and the rest...it was damn engrossing to think about those things all over again. As if my mind was showing me some old priceless photographs. It was fun until my mind chose to change the 'how' into 'why'. Why did we meet? Why did our friendship grow? Why did she give me the note? Why? I don't know. I only know Radhika was the one who showed me the way to Class Eleven Science in St. Patrick's. At that time, neither of us knew that seven months hence we'll be in love with each other.

Sometimes I feel things eventually turn out the way they are meant to, as a part of a preplanned play and there are times I feel everything happens randomly, as in coincidence, without any reason. But there are also times I feel everything is a preplanned coincidence. If it wasn't for papa's transfer, then I would have been in Kolkata today. Just imagine; I wouldn't have known that someone by the name of Radhika Sharma existed in Guwahati. Ever! And once in Guwahati of all schools I ended up in St. Patrick's. Eerie! Of course, had I not chosen St. Patrick's then I would have definitely ended up in some other school. But the fact remains I didn't. Why? No idea. There are things which, no matter how much you try to out think them, don't allow you to leave the perimeter of a big yawning zero. Destiny is an example. You know, from the time I was ten or so, I always considered myself a part of someone's story. That someone was writing my script and directing me and my actions. As if the objective 'I' within me was lifeless. There was another person too (I learnt later) who thought almost likewise: Sir William Shakespeare. Bye!

27th January 28th January

Insane is no more! He is ...dead...

I am sorry for cancelling the previous entry. Insane is dead. He committed suicide yesterday at around ten at night. He was, of late, facing some monetary problems. Kiss told me he used to give tuitions to kids in the evening (I never knew that before). The money he got was just enough for his ill mother and him to survive. He not only refused to touch his father's money but also declined to take any more money from Kiss's father as he felt he was already more than indebted to him for sponsoring his studies. Insane had turned so much egoistic that he stood by his stand even at the cost of omitting the costly medicines for his mother.

His mother (a heart patient) died of heart attack yesterday in the evening and few hours later Insane hanged himself. Our whole group was there at his place today. I saw his father for the first time. I could make out from the way he was wailing he loved Insane for sure. But then why did he punish him like this? Why did he push his son's innocence off the edge? If he knew he had a high sex drive he should have feasted on whores all his life. No wife, no son, no family, no responsibility and certainly no dignity.

Oh! God! I won't ever forget his face especially the way I saw it today, hauntingly cold. You remember how I too had almost killed myself but for few interesting coincidences. I should be ashamed of myself. And believe me I am. Suicide is simply no solution. It only helps create an emotional vacuum for the ones left behind. Was life ever designed to give us pleasure? Was it ever meant to be a fountain of happiness? When we eat chillies we do it knowing it's going to be hot. But strangely enough when we actually feel the hotness in our mouth we go mad! Likewise, life's basic core is suffering and problems. We know it and still we (that includes me too) keep complaining. Is that the hallmark of intelligent beings? I think everybody should take tension-anxiety-frustration for granted and let life pleasantly surprise rather than believe in life's beauty, like a stupid romantic, and give it ample opportunity to shock the shit out of you.

To accept death is tough. One needs destructive courage to do so but accepting life with all its blatant flaws, unaccountable unfairness, boisterous sense of humour and sardonic sadism is much, much, much tougher. If there is one person on whom the effect of Insane's death has taken a visible toll, it is Kiss. I have never seen him so silent and depressingly pensive. I know it's difficult for him but still, I hope it doesn't change him. I am not going to school tomorrow. Day after tomorrow Insane's funeral is supposed to take place. That's enough for tonight. I am feeling a little sick. Everything's fucking bullshit.

Only Kiss and I attended the funeral. U-Nik and Adidash opted out as they thought they wouldn't be able to tolerate the process. And it turned out to be a smart decision. I wish life was final and not death. I wish life was permanent and not death. I wish life had the last laugh and not death. I wish life could deceive death. I wish life could escape the wrath of death. I wish...oh to hell with my wish. Life is surely a submissive slut and death is its most prized customer. So fuck you life. And fuck you death.

Since Insane's demise, a strange kind of fear has gripped me. I always keep wondering what if I die today or tomorrow. What will happen to ma and papa? How will dada react? Will he at all? What will happen to my dreams, my aspirations and to Radhika? I know these are fucking nonsense thoughts and probably irrelevant, too, but I can't avoid them. Every night when I lie alone on my bed, these thoughts fuck the peace out of my mind. Before getting up in the morning I swear to myself I won't think about them but all I end up doing is have more and more of these thoughts. I'll have to discuss it with someone (perhaps Radhika) else I'll go mad. There are instants when I solemnly decide to discuss and again there are instants when I feel why should I bother anybody with what's going on in my mind? Alright I agree Radhika isn't 'anybody' but she has had enough in her life already and I don't want to aggravate her pains by telling her that I am in pain.

I have also started feeling a bit scared. No terrified is the word. I sleep with my lights on whole night. When I go to the toilet I pee quickly and come out. What if Insane peeps out from the window in the toilet? I study with tube lights switched on unlike studying with my table lights on. I feel Insane is somewhere in the darkness that my table light can't illuminate. The thought squeezes cold sweat out of me. I haven't had a sound sleep in a week. Even the slightest noise, probably made by insects or anyone coughing or sneezing in the adjacent flats, wakes me up. And each time I do so only one question awaits me: where is Insane now? He has been buried but that's his body. Where is his soul? Does life after death really exist? Has he taken birth somewhere again? Is rebirth possible? Logically, no. But there are so many things still unanswered. I searched a lot in the internet yesterday but nowhere did I get any satisfactory explanation on what happens after death. Is death really the end? Or is creation a cycle of unexplainable, undecipherable and unaccountable elements which prefer to remain in darkness as long as the earth doesn't turn impotent?

Sorry for not filling you up for few days. Actually, study pressure has suddenly increased both in school as well as in tuitions. Last night I finished writing about fifteen experiments! The preceding days were similar, too; every time I had one subject standing tall between you and me. Today after school while Radhika, U-Nik, Adidash, Deepali and I were coming out, a familiar voice called out to Radhika. I turned around to see Savera. We waited and watched her say something to Radhika which made her smile and they shook hands. After few seconds Radhika was back. I didn't ask her anything but as far as my deduction power goes it's some good news. Whatever it is I don't think I'll ever ask Radhika about it. Though if she herself chooses to tell me then I would definitely hear it out.

Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. In fact, it is 11:40 pm now so only twenty minutes to go. But I'll have to wait till I go to school tomorrow to wish Radhika. Fuck shit! I can't even call her. There's nothing I can do about it. Rather there's nothing I can do about anything. U-Nik asked me whether I was taking Radhika on a date. Till that moment I never thought about it and since then I haven't thought of anything else. It's a great idea indeed. But who will persuade Radhika? I won't because I can't. And I can't because I won't. Her obsession with right or wrong will come in between and in the end she might agree but I really don't want her to compromise or adjust to her beliefs for me. I don't blame her because her fears are more about her insecurity. If I commit a mistake, I have my parents to support me and explain the pros and cons but if she commits a mistake, things might get out of hand. So she definitely needs to be extra careful with her preferences and priorities. Sometimes I feel the society has given very little ground to the females to base their existence on. Even if they stretch a little, just a little, they are accused of crossing their territory and limits. And the males; they thrive on 'stretching'. Society, I guess, is the creator's own shit hole. Anyways my job is to ask her for a date. If she agrees great! And if she doesn't - fine! No issues, no complaints, no regrets. You know after coming back from school I completed a sketch within an hour. First I sketched my face on it (looking at a mirror) and then I sketched Radhika's face along side (looking at my heart). I'll gift it to her tomorrow. And I'll also tell her something that I have, till now, told her with my eyes and actions. I claim to be in love with her and yet till today I haven't told her those three words which is the elixir of any relationship. Fuck me. I'll do it tomorrow. You are not merely a gift for me, Radhika; you are a blessing, you are a boon and you are a God send promise to me stating that my future is a beautiful one. Bye.

I did it. And I am happy, I did it. I wished Radhika in the morning (not in the class) and she only said 'same to you'. I know what she was afraid of. It's all right to roam together in the school premises on other days but on a day, when the television and newspapers get busy (a little grotesquely to my liking) marketing and thereby stripping love of its purity, even the slightest attempt of expressing your love (no matter how pure and harmless) might raise the eye brows of people with whom you really don't want to mess; the ones sitting inside the school office. Moreover I agree with Kiss on this. Why do we at all need to celebrate this day? We don't need a special day to celebrate love's presence in our lives (though Kiss also says love needs nights; I disagree!). Love will automatically get celebrated if we respect the people we know and care about people we don't know.

Anyways, it was only after the school got over and we were standing outside the main gate that I gave Radhika the sketch. She was visibly astounded. And before she could say anything I told her 'I love you'. She had wet eyes but I didn't ask her why. She was suddenly breathing heavily but I didn't ask her why. And she was gaping at me speechless but I didn't ask her why. For those weren't my point of focus. What I focused on was the austere smile that touched her face when I told her the three words. And for the first time (and perhaps eternity) I realized what it is like to have your life stand and smile in front of you requesting the air around to play one of its best pieces because two young hearts have finally been joined by the prophecy of love. From today onwards Radhika is not only a part of my life but also a part of my heart, my mind, my soul, my will, my zeal, my happiness, my tears, my depression, my excitement, my interests, my decisions, my character and my identity.

No, I didn't ask her out to a restaurant. After the soul-stirring smile that she gave me, I thought, it would have sounded cheap. Instead I asked her whether she would like to have some *Phuchkas*. She nodded and we walked (together with U-Nik, Adidash, Kiss and Deepali) a few steps before we got to the nearest Phuchkawalah and probably had the most ordinary (or simple you might say) yet beautiful date possible. All the while she kept looking at me and I reciprocated likewise. Physically, we were surrounded by friends, noise and pollution but somewhere deep within us, where we felt connected, we were all alone on the infinite grassland of love. I have to study now. I know it sounds boring every time I end up telling you I need to study but I can't tell my Physics or Chemistry books that I need to talk to you. They aren't as tolerant as you are. Bye.

It's six in the evening and I am dying to share with you an out-of-the-world experience I had few minutes back. It was something I never thought would happen to me so early in life. And definitely not today! Ma was busy with all the Saraswati Puja work from the morning itself. Papa had office so he was gone by nine thirty. It was around eleven that U-Nik, Adidash, Radhika and Deepali came as per my yesterday's invitation. Kiss had some work (he didn't tell me what and where) and I also didn't pester him further. The others who had come were here till five in the evening. Ma was pleased to see the girls and they even went ahead to help her with the Puja rituals. I gave Adidash a kindergarten picture of mine which also had all my Kolkata friends including Piyali. He thanked me in such a grateful manner as if I had donated him my kidney and saved his life. Basically we talked out the entire afternoon. Later ma also joined us in our chat session. By five fifteen we were out walking towards the auto-rickshaw stand. We had to cross a lane before we could reach the stand. It usually remains lonely and so it was. U-Nik, Adidash and Deepali were walking a little ahead of Radhika and me (considerate friends!) though we were not discussing any lovey-dovey stuff. But, yes, neither of us complained of the space they gave us (thanks!).

It was somewhere in the middle of the lane, when the others had gone out of sight taking a right turn towards the auto-rickshaw stand, Radhika suddenly stopped. There was no one in the lane; neither ahead nor behind us. She said something to me and let me quote her, "Thanks Raen for lightening up my life." It was alright till this moment. I was about to reply when Radhika came closer and kissed me. She kissed me! I mean as I said earlier I never thought it would happen to me so early. I just couldn't speak. I stood there as dumbly as a...as a cuckold perhaps. Radhika didn't wait for me to speak. She kept walking and I followed her. Even while walking back home, after they got into an auto and were gone, I couldn't believe what had happened. After the kiss, the only words we said to each other was bye; that, too, when she sat in the auto-rickshaw along with the others. It happened an hour back and you are the first (and the last) one to know about the incident. You know what? I still haven't rubbed my cheek (the left one). I can still feel her lips on my cheek. For the first time in my life, someone with whom I am not related (by blood) has kissed me and how it was...oh don't ask me about it because whatever I'll write will be an understatement. I have to go for my maths tuition now. Bye and no I won't rub my left cheek for as long as possible. But even if I do, I don't think it would matter for my heart has already sucked the impression into itself.

A thing that everyone secretly wishes to do either becomes an issue or gets pinned, fully framed, on the wall of society as a taboo. Radhika has told Deepali about the kiss. I came to know about it from her in school. And she also told me she was feeling guilty now thinking about the moment in the lane yesterday. More so after Deepali told her she could have avoided it at this point of time. It didn't upset me though. On the other hand, I thanked her for confiding her guilt to me. I told her what ma often tells me. When you do something because you felt a strong impulse, stemming right from within your heart, then there is nothing to worry about. The only important thing is to make sure whether it really originated from the depth of your heart or not. I asked Radhika whether she did it because she felt the impulse from the root of her heart or was it something else. She told me she always follows her God (for reasons unknown to me, she calls her heart her God) and that moment wasn't any different. When the school got over she was feeling much better about herself and the incident. Thank God the matter is over. But while coming back from school a question perplexed me: is kiss a symbol of love or sex? 'I love you' sounds so ethereal as if it fills up some important gaps within us while 'I want to have sex with you' sounds so blatantly insulting. Does love yields a desire to have sex? Or are the two incomparably different things? Isn't one only about a hole and a pole while the other about heart, its feelings, soul, nature and so many other things? I don't know what is what but I know when Radhika kissed me not for a single second did I feel anything in my balls (for records I am very much a man) but I felt a myriad of emotions clouding my heart. It was my heart at that moment on which the spotlight of love was. So any truth beyond that, I think, is none of my business.

Anyways forget all that. Papa and ma were a little tense today. Papa had called the institute at Pune. Dada has caught cold. I hope he gets well soon. No matter how many children one has, parents are always emotional towards the first child. I am not blaming anybody or feeling jealous or something. Dada deserves all the love in the world. I am just saying what is it with "first" things? We don't forget our first toy, first lively moment of life, first child, first day of work, first day when we learn something new, first day when we experience something different (positive – negative doesn't matter) and what is it with first love? Even if some one brain washes me I won't forget my first love. I hope Savera is doing fine (not that I have anything to do with her anymore). Alright, time for me to torture myself. Right – it's study time! Goodnight. And, there is a farewell party for our seniors coming up on 23rd. Bye.

23rd February

I came back from the farewell party at six thirty. I thought I would not do anything today but the thrill got the better of me. I am not talking about the thrill of the farewell party. The party was strictly okay. Somewhere in the middle of it Radhika wanted to go to the toilet. Since the other part of the school was deserted (that's where the toilet is) and all her friends were busy, she asked me if I could accompany her. I did. We walked up to the place, she went in, I stood outside and when she came out I quickly kissed on her cheeks. She stared at me and I thought I did something wrong. I was about to apologize when she kissed me on my lips. And what happened next was some sort of a pure magic. I must have opened my mouth or may be she pushed in her tongue I don't know exactly. I only remember our tongues met and we smooched. We smooched! When I used to see couples smooching in the parks or other places I thought they were being animalistic but when I did it myself today I thought nothing on earth can be more humanistic than this. Her lips were so soft and her tongue, so warm. It was kind of funny to taste her saliva. I am not sure whether she had her eyes open or close for I had mine closed. Oh, it was heavenly to say the least. I felt like something was levitating me between life and death. We smooched for almost ten whopping minutes! Gosh! Talk about time being a tyrant. Well for those ten minutes it resembled a dwarf. I was anything but myself and when she put her hands around my neck I thought of reciprocating. But instead of holding her I ended up caressing her back downwards. And when I reached her hips I could feel the fullness of it for she was wearing a cotton pant. That's when she suddenly broke off and almost ran towards the auditorium. We didn't talk after that. I hope she doesn't think evil of me. My intentions weren't of carnality. I swear not even for a micro second did the act seemed sexual in its conventional sense. I know it's weird for we were smoothing and now I am telling you it wasn't sexual. But that's what I felt. I don't know whether what we did was right, wrong or a sin. I know I enjoyed it a lot and will cherish the moment all my life. Also, I am proud of what I did for earlier I only thought I wouldn't be able to live without Radhika but now I know it. Before the farewell party started I filled up Radhika's slam book today and also gave her a photograph of mine (she asked me for it a week ago). My final exams are from 27th till 16th March. This time commerce and science students shall sit together during the exams (theory ones of course). I am not sure it classifies as good or bad news for me. I only know the worse part. Last time our roll numbers were assigned as per the first letter of our names. If that gets repeated then I am afraid, S comes right after R. Bye.

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CHAPTER-13

"Our time is over, dear. It's five thirty," Dr. Veena said intoning an obvious sense of relief. Startled, Radhika closed the magazine along with the diary. She quickly kept the two inside her bag.

"Oh! I am feeling so tired." Veena stretched herself and immediately got busy collecting her things that were lying on the table like orphans; a half filled *Aquafina* bottle, her stethoscope and a newspaper.

"I sure will sleep till late in the evening," she said yawning indecently. "Hey wait a minute" Her eyes suddenly got fixed on Radhika, "The last night was supposed to be your off, right?"

Radhika nodded while zipping her bag, "Since Dr. Barat wasn't here I had to fill in."

"Why do you always fill up for that bastard?" Veena, by now, had the thick string of her bag on her shoulder and was ready to leave. "I don't do it for him. I do it for the patients. Moreover I have asked Suparna to report it to the authority."

"That's better. Anyways, have a nice day." She left the room with the same gusto as she had entered it hours ago. Radhika was also moving towards the door when she saw Suparna standing by. "Good morning, doctor."

"Good morning. You are still here?" Both of them stepped out of the room together and were walking towards the staircase.

"Yes. I'll be here for an hour more. Laye's grandmother is in his room but he is still asleep."

"Don't disturb him. He'll wake up soon. And don't forget to report about Dr. Barat today."

Seconds later Radhika was out of the nursing home. Though the rickshaw stand was still deserted but after half a minute of idle walk she managed to get one which took her to Vasuda's within three minutes.

As Radhika unlocked the door she first picked up the two pouches of milk, kept at a side, and then the newspaper which had been slid from below the door into the room. She locked the door, kept her bag on the adjacent table and threw the newspaper on the bed. Reaching for the refrigerator, she kept one of the pouches of milk inside and with the other went inside the kitchen. Few minutes later she came out of the kitchen with a hot cup of tea. She kept it on the table and changed to a loose t-shirt and knickers. With her bag in one hand and the cup on the other she sat on the bed. She sipped once from the cup and kept it aside while unzipping her bag. Radhika took out the magazine from the bag and also the diary cocooned by it. Though there wasn't any bookmark but it opened, quite obediently, to the correct page.

8th March

Grotesque. Horrible. Pathetic. Disgusting. Gross. Nonsense. Bull shit. Horse shit. Dog shit. Camel shit. Donkey shit. Chicken shit. Crab shit. Cat shit. Crow shit. Pigeon shit. Shit shit. And I can go on about my luck. Radhika's seat in the exams is one seat ahead and Savera's seat is one behind me. I never knew my ass was that good! So, God, go on...keep screwing me. I had promised myself, if at all commerce and science students sit together in the same room during the exam, I shall not look at Savera once or even give her a chance by any means to assume I am still interested in her but when the first exam day came, all I managed to do was miss a heart beat after realizing Savera was only a seat behind mine. The fact made me so damn stiff. No, not down 'there' for Christ's sake! What I mean is my whole body got arrested by a strange kind of tension. It was ridiculous; the entire three hours in the exam room. Thank God, it was English else I surely would have done miserably.

What I don't understand is why the hell do I get attracted to Savera like this? I had told you earlier as well. I am attracted to Radhika because I love her. I am attracted to ma and papa because they are my 'ma and papa'. Every attraction has a reason but what is it with Savera? I don't think it's a case of plain obsession. For something to become an obsession you at least need to think about the thing. Alright there was a time (I confess) when I thought of nothing else except her. But that was at least four months back. And, believe me in these last four months I have tried my level best to forget her. I am not interested in her. Damn it! I am NOT interested in her. Even if I hear she is planning to run away with some guy or is going to get married, I won't waste any fucking emotion of

mine over it. But it's her presence that's so hypnotic. It makes me lose my senses. I just stop being myself. Pure bullshit.

I would have taken all this in my stride but there is something that's making me feel guilty. I'll tell you about it when the exams get over (that's on 16th). I haven't studied Hindi since half yearly exams so you know how much I need to cover up. Take care and bye.

16th March

The exams are over at last. Phew! And so is class eleven (come on, I'll pass). Whatever it is the climax will take place on 5th April. The final results shall be announced then.

That night (when I filled you the last time) after retiring to bed, I thought a lot about my (shit! Awfully sorry) Savera. As far as she is concerned I give up. Yes, I surrender. Henceforth I won't try (or even think to try) to decipher the reason for my attraction towards her. I shall continue to do what I did from the last three-four months: not talk, think or speak about her. Even if we cross paths in future I'll try my level best to be indifferent. That's final. Remember the guilt I was talking about last time? I realized, by getting myself consciously entailed into the unaccountable and phantasmal feelings that Savera excites within me, I was actually hurting Radhika's trust. It's true Radhika won't ever come to know of my thoughts but isn't that the real test of love – whether you are true to the person you love as you are true to your own heart. So my decision is goddamn ultimate and so now topic change.

Our plan got confirmed today along with the tickets. Tomorrow papa, ma and I are flying to Kolkata. I had told papa about Archit's scheduled departure by late May or early August. He then had a talk with Archit's parents and together they planned up a trip to The Sundarbans! I shared the tour plan with Adidash yesterday and today he came up with a birthday card and a gift as 24th is Piyali's birthday. Well...anything for love and everything for friendship! It's useless to state I'll miss Radhika. Even if I was here we still wouldn't have met, thanks to the strict rules of The Home. So I'll meet her next on 10th April, that's twenty five days. Christ! I requested her to call up at least once after 30th March as I'll be returning on the 29th. U-Nik, Kiss and Adidash have decided to go for a movie tomorrow. It wouldn't have mattered if Urmila Matondkar (my first crush) didn't star in it. You know whenever the exams are on I keep planning the things I'll do once they get over. But when they do get over my plans and priorities also get lost in the

relief it generates. But this time after I return, I need to quickly prepare myself to get admitted in a coaching institute for engineering. Then I need to buy my class twelve books. The official book list will be issued from school after it reopens but my tuitions will start from 1st April. Oh, so many things to do. I hope I can carry on sketching. Pressure will surely be far more this year but I'll try to stay in touch with my passion too. I'll definitely try to pick up this year. I'll share each and every experience of Kolkata and Sunderban once I come back. Take care. Bye.

2nd April

Results will be announced day after tomorrow and look, of all places, where I have ended up – in a nursing home! Yes I have been admitted to a nursing home for suspected Dengue. The fever hasn't subsided yet and now along with it I have lost my appetite, rashes have appeared on my chest and stomach. My platelets have gone down too and all the time I feel weak. So much so that I even have problem talking properly. I did one sensible thing though; I brought you along. The doctor hasn't said anything negative but nothing positive either. Right now papa has gone to buy the medicines the doctor prescribed this morning and ma is in the toilet.

I don't think I'll be able to collect my report card on Friday. Radhika or for that matter nobody from the group knows I am in a nursing home. Tomorrow I will ask ma to ring up U-Nik so that he can at least collect my report card.

About the trip? If I say I had the most unbelievable time of my life, it still won't be enough to express the joy of it. I swear I'll tell you every detail but not now, not today. Right now I am feeling like a dragon (my breaths are that hot). Radhika did call as per her promise and when we talked about time being a Concorde she told me something nice: The times that go away at the blink of an eye are actually the times which eventually get placed inside the safe of our most treasured memories. Rest after I recover.

Bye for now.

CHAPTER-14

Mrs. Verma, staring blankly at her son, was caressing his forehead. Her eyes were swollen red and face helplessly benign. And beneath the layer of compassion there was naked fear – the eagle of the anticipated truth was soon to perch on its prey.

Raen's condition was continuously deteriorating. The doctors did all they could but their efforts fell short of the desired result. He had become weak, pale and had not talked at all since the last twenty four hours. Once or twice he did open his eyes but it was for such a small span that couple of times his mother, in the middle of the night, had quite neurotically placed her ear on his chest. And when she heard the heart beats alright she cried. Her prayers had not been discarded.

Yet.

Sometime in the morning, Raen opened his eyes, feeling fragile and lost. His sight resembled the slit of a post box. He couldn't flick his eyelids as he saw Radhika standing in front with a red rose. A faint smile, like an accident, blessed his lips. Raen closed his eyes. Now he saw Savera standing in front. He budged slightly on his bed feeling uncomfortable. He felt a warm palm caressing his forehead and when he opened his eyes he saw Radhika leaning forward – her lips close to his. Raen parted his dry lips slightly and closed his eyes. A second later he felt a kiss on his forehead. It was Savera.

"Ma..." Raen's voice was rasp.

"I am here son." Mrs. Verma moved a little closer with her hand caressing the forehead faster.

"Nik...Nikhil..." His words were breaking.

"Yes I did ring up Nikhil yesterday. He was here but you were sleeping then so he didn't disturb." Mrs. Verma choked while talking.

"I want to see...friends...my friends."

Mr. Verma was witnessing the scene from the corner of the door. He didn't dare to step

inside. He had seen a lot in his life. Some tortured his soul others tormented his emotions but this one was above all; it was like life had its hand inside his mouth and was pulling his guts out. He took a deep breath, wiped his eyes, put on his specs and turned around. Something inside him screamed: anytime now.

Back at St. Patrick's, report cards were being distributed. Radhika stood first but for the first time her mind wasn't rejoicing the fact. She still couldn't believe what U-Nik told her in the morning. Raen was in a nursing home!

"May I come in, ma'am?" Everyone's eye turned towards the door. It was Kiss. He was not in school uniform and his face spoke of an unusual urgency.

"Yes."

Kiss went straight to the teacher without looking at anyone in the class and whispered something to her. The teacher looked at him for a second and then spoke aloud, "Nikhil, Aditya and Radhika, there is a call for you three from the principal's office." Kiss walked out of the room nervously while his three class mates followed him, coming out one at a time.

Mr. Verma, in his colleague's car, had come to St. Patrick's School. He knew the results were scheduled for today and so was confident of meeting all of Raen's friends there. Kiss, who was there to collect his character certificate and complete other school leaving formalities, recognized Mr. Verma the moment he saw him entering the school premises. It was only when he approached him that he came to know about Raen. He accompanied him to the principal's office. The principal agreed to allow the students to go with Mr. Verma in case they were willing. Half a minute after the three came out of the principal's room they were in the car on their way to the nursing home. Every one's mind was clouded by questions but nobody talked. Not even Mr. Verma. All preferred patience to disclosure.

Adidash, because of his comparatively small structure, was sitting with Mr. Verma looking straight but at what, he didn't know. Kiss was sitting on the back seat, by the left window, his head tilted and resting on the window frame; the speed of the car made the air hit his face ardently. Beside him was U-Nik, leaning forward and gaping at the picture of the Goddess kept on the shelf above the car stereo system. Something told him prayers won't help. So he was already begging. Radhika felt as if she had been shot right in the middle of her heart. She could neither think nor feel anything anymore. She was only left with one option; bleed. Sitting by the right window seat, Radhika's eyes were

constantly looking at the passing people, shops, roadside vendors, houses etc but they registered nothing. From time to time she kept muttering "Please, God!" to herself like a programmed computer.

The car came to a halt opposite the nursing home. Mr. Verma's colleague, who was driving the car, was swift to get out of it. One by one the others followed. But Radhika didn't move. Someone had chained her legs and no way was she able to break free. But when she saw the others looking at her from outside, the desperation peaked and suddenly her energy was back. They carefully crossed the road and entered the lobby of the nursing home. As Mr. Verma passed by the reception desk, the lady behind the desk cried out.

"Mr. Verma! Your wife was searching for you. The doctor is in the cabin. Please be quick."

"Yes...I" Mr. Verma was on his feet, "yes". The others followed. Their motion was interrupted as few men came down with a stretcher containing a dead body. They gave side to it but no one cared to see whose body it was. Mr. Verma continued his brisk motion. He was sweating and he could feel his heart throb like a hammer. He took a right turn; a second later they took a right turn. Next he climbed the slope which was made to ease the motion of the wheeled stretchers and chairs. Kiss overtook him and seeing him, Mr. Verma called out. "Fourth cabin, left." Kiss had already climbed the slope and had taken the desired turn. U-Nik and Adidash were next to finish the climb. Few seconds later every one was in the corridor. U- Nik and Adidash saw Kiss enter a room. They followed suit. And before Mr. Verma, his colleague and Radhika could reach the room a painful wail paused their pace momentarily. It was Mrs. Verma. Less than a second later another yell came out. It was Kiss. Then another; U-Nik and Adidash and in the end it was Mr. Verma's turn. Radhika stood a few steps from the cabin. The yells had turned her into a stone. She wanted to move but her knees felt weak and were trembling violently. Her eyesight, like an old film, was slowly fading out. Soon every sound died under the impact of the emotional stampede inside her and she collapsed on the corridor floor, unconscious.

At night when Radhika gained consciousness she found herself lying on one of the nursing home beds. She knew what had happened but wasn't ready to accept it as reality. It was a nightmare; she was confident. *Deepali would soon wake me up*. But instead she saw a nurse walking towards her bed.

"Don't worry you will be all right by tomorrow. Mr. Verma told me you are his son's friend."

Was Raen my friend? Only a friend? Radhika gave the nurse a blank stare. "I have something to give you." The nurse continued, "I got this diary from under the pillow of Raen Verma after his body was taken away. I wanted to give it to Mr. Verma but he had left by then. Sure, he will be here tomorrow. You just keep the diary and give it to him tomorrow." The nurse was walking away, "If I had reported it as a lost property to the authorities I swear nobody would have seen it again. People here are real...anyways sleep well." She was gone. Of all that the nurse said Radhika understood only three words: Raen, body and diary. She held the diary tightly to her chest and closed her eyes. This wasn't reality, she was sure. And she slept.

**

The remaining pages of the diary were empty much like her life since that day. Radhika flipped her body and was now lying on her back with the diary resting beside her, closed. She was lost, staring at the motion of the ceiling fan. Whom did Raen actually love? Savera or me? Is it possible to get attracted to one and love another with the same fervour? Not unless one, consciously or otherwise, feigns any one of it. But Raen did feel something genuine for me and at the same time something also connected him to Savera. Something hitherto undisclosed. There were two knocks on the door. Radhika with a resigning sigh was on her feet. She opened the door to find Ustaad standing there displaying all his thirty teeth. His appearance told her the time. Seven thirty.

"Aaji hokale toast aru koni ase baido." Ustaad, since the last one year, used to bring food for the girls in the mess and was as punctual as destiny. He was the delivery boy from the local motel, opposite Vasuda's, where all the girls had their accounts maintained on a monthly basis. But if someone wanted to skip meals for whatever reason they had to convey the message in advance.

"Aaji dinot moi bahirot khaam."

"Hobo de."

Ustaad sustained his simpleton smile and knocked on the opposite door while Radhika closed her door accepting the breakfast box; four pieces of toast and a boiled egg. Keeping the food on the table she thought, "first bath or breakfast or..." she eventually decided to have her breakfast first, then sleep for a while after which she would take a shower before going to the nursing home again. Radhika brought the newspaper from her bed, opened up the box of food and while leafing through the paper, within ten minutes, finished her breakfast. She drank an entire bottle of water and switching on the goodnight

mat went to bed. Her body relaxed feeling the soft mattress of the bed and when she closed her eyes her fatigue, physical and mental, teased her within. It was only a matter of time before sleep caressed her into the realm of dream.

The girl was running through a forest as dense as a woman's mind, with trees soaring as high as a man's ego, half capped with fog as insinuating as a child's cry. An ineffable fear of being stalked by her past fuelled the run and its direction got steered by an incorrigible compass; her heart.

The girl's urgent breathing made the ubiquitous silence, housing the dark night, porous. And when she saw an old worn-out building at a distance her motion slowed down. She stood still for a minute and then walked, with unsure steps, up to its iron gate. It was, she observed, corrupt with junk all over. It creaked suffering a slight push from the girl. Should I go inside? Her eyes perused a slab lying by her feet. The words engraved on it read: St. Patrick's School. What took you so long - took you so long - so long? The girl heard a voice that echoed. She turned around but there was nobody. Following the echo, the girl ambled forward and crossed the small lawn separating the gate and the building's entrance. Advancing with a sense of confusion and squeezing out rustling sounds from the dead leaves scattered all over the ground she reached the stairs inside the building. She soon was on the first floor. One look to her left and she saw a rich flash of light at the end of the corridor facing her. It resembled the vista of hope inside an optimist's heart. Follow the light...the light...light. This time the girl recognized the voice. But it can't be possible; she thought and moved towards the light. The brutal intensity of the light, as she approached the end of the corridor, forced her to shut her eyes momentarily. She didn't know what to do. Subconsciously she was waiting for the voice to guide her but nothing happened for a while and then... Hey! There was someone beside her. She could feel the presence but not see him. "Who is this?" The girl asked in anticipation trying to feel the person with her hands. Her within knew the answer but her without wanted to confirm it. Thirteen years must have been tough - must have been tough - have been tough. The voice echoed. But no worries now - no worries now worries now. I am back - am back - back. "Who is this?" the girl repeated herself swallowing a lump and tasting her own sweat which had trickled down her forehead in search of her nervous lips. You know me, don't you? The voice, this time, only hissed in her ears and cupped her breasts, over her clothes, from behind. A steep and sudden rise in passion made the girl close her eyes. "Oh!" she moaned and placed her hands above the figure's hand. She knew the touch and she could also relate to the fire it ignited within her. The figure took the zipper of her dress between his teeth and moved down. The dress opened up till her hips. He put the tip of his thirsty tongue on her back and slithered up like a sexy snake. And as he reached her neck the squeeze on her breasts became harder. He flipped her around in a trice and tore the front of her dress. She didn't complain for she thought it would, to her desperate liking, quicken the process of filling the gap within her - the gap which epitomizes womanhood. Thus instead of remonstrating she found herself helping the figure get rid of his shirt and then his pants.

Tears welled up as she rubbed her face on his naked chest. The figure caught her by her hair and looked at her. He, for once, was prominent to her and she couldn't believe her eyes! He descended and touching her breasts with his face reached the belly. He, with the ferocity of a caged carnivore, rubbed his cheeks on it and encircled her belly button with the tip of his tongue that was, she knew, poisoned with indomitable passion. This was the moment she was waiting for, not for years but eras. This was the moment why God made her entangle within the cycles of birth and death. This was the moment. This was it. For sex between them wasn't just about the friction of flesh but the coalescing of all their purpose, ambition, reason and soul. The figure, groping her back from neck downwards, put his hands on the base of her voluptuous hips. He mauled them as she cried out in pain. Suddenly he lifted her up and she reciprocated by wrapping her legs around his strong waist. Next, the figure took her inside the adjacent room which, like the end of the corridor, was brightly lit but with the white luminous bulbs of truelove.

*

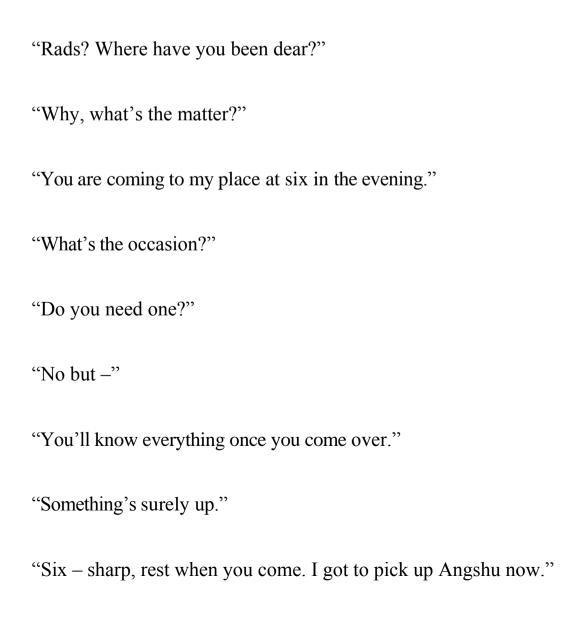
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SECTION – 4

THE STORM...

CHAPTER-15

The dream released its hostage – fifteen minutes past noon – into the world of reality. Radhika couldn't believe she slept that long. The ecstasy of the dream, present as a twitch in her inner thighs and as liquid further in, embarrassed her. She dashed for the bathroom deliberately trying to shut the dream out of her conscience. She took a quick bath and while drying her wet self heard something. Stop. She closed the tap to hear closely. It was her cell phone. She stepped out of the bathroom with a cautiously wrapped towel around her nubile bosom. As she reached near the table, where the cell phone was kept, it stopped ringing. Radhika was surprised to see three missed calls from Deepali. *At this hour*? She thought and dialed back.



"Okay. I'll be there. Bye."

"Bye."

Birthday? Anniversary? Neither. Radhika thought as she first dried her hair and then throwing the towel on the bed, walked naked to the wardrobe. And it's not even a weekend. She took out a black jeans and a white shirt along with a set of black undergarments. Then what is it?

Deepali and Bhushan's was a violins-played-when-we-met kind of love story. They saw each other, for the first time, during their second year in college and within two weeks neither could live without the other. For the rest of their college term they became two bodies-one magic. Marriage happened soon after their graduation and in the two years, following the wedding, they hit a bumper. The wrong treatment of Deepali resulted in a double jeopardy for the couple. One, she had to go through a forced abortion and second, she had to accept her inability to garner life again.

In the beginning neither Bhushan nor Deepali confessed anything directly to Radhika but using her woman's intuition and piercing through the philosophical connotations in the couple's words, she soon unmasked the truth. A person turns philosophical only when something's wrong with the most treasured thing in his life. It was Radhika who coaxed them to try a different doctor. They did. His thorough examination of Deepali made him rubbish the previous reports. His prescription for the couple was simple: plan a second honeymoon. A year and a half later, Angshuman was born. They were emotionally indebted to Radhika and she in turn thanked God for showing mercy, at least once in her lifetime, on people who swore by love. *Anyways*, *six-o-clock will tell everything*, Radhika, ready to leave, quipped to herself.

It was ten minutes to one when Radhika reached the nursing home. The first hour went by studying a patient suffering from a rare neuromuscular disorder, who was a subject for the young doctors from the past one week. It was a grueling hour for it was Dr. Dixit's class. Each and every word, that he spoke, came out like fire from a dragon and was readily jotted down by the students in their notebooks. No one was allowed to ask questions. Questions arise, he professed, when the teaching is diaphanous and according to him, his teaching was anything but. To top his attitude he had some serious diction problem too. The next three and a half hours, after a light lunch, went by making rounds as per allocation. Radhika adored the rounds, the interaction with different patients (though strictly on a professional level) and being part of the healing process; more so if the person, in the end, left the place with a smile. It's rare that a profession encourages one to influence a stranger's life in such a significant manner. She knew it couldn't be

only one's-necessity-other's-duty kind of thing. After all, to care is to cure, too.

At five forty, she finally broke free from her duties. She was signing the register, standing beside the reception, when she heard her name called out. "Hey, Suparna, I almost forgot to ask you. Did you complain about Dr. Barat's absence?"

"I did. Sir said he'll look into the matter and do the needful."

"I hope."

"The 203 patient was discharged few hours back. His parents were here, too."

"I know. But it happened before my rounds started so I didn't actually see him leaving."

"He left this." Radhika looked at the drawing book. "You should be depositing that with the authorities." Radhika said while turning and completing her formality with the register.

"I can't do that."

"Why?" Radhika, done with the register, faced Suparna.

"I guess he left it for you. Here look at this note."

Radhika frowned as she took the drawing book along with the small piece of paper. It read:

Dear Dr. Radhika,

Granny says when you like someone at the first meeting you should gift the person something. That way a beautiful friendship grows. I liked you so I gift you this drawing book of mine. I wanted to give you chocolates but I don't have them with me right now. Sorry.

The candle of a smile lighted her face. "Kids these days...alright I'll keep this with me." Radhika glanced at her watch, "Listen Suparna I need to go now. Thanks anyways."

"But it's Laye who gifted you..."

"I was talking about the complaint," Radhika cut her short, "Bye." She hurriedly moved out of the nursing home looking for an auto-rickshaw.

She reached Deepali's place fifteen minutes late.

"I am sorry, darling," Radhika said coming to terms with her rapid breaths.

"It's okay." Deepali stood by the door. "I anyways wasn't expecting you at dot six." It was a gelid remark.

"Oh, come on, you know doctors aren't robots. Sometime we do need to give extra time to patients."

"Don't say we. I am sure it's always you who gives themthe extra time."

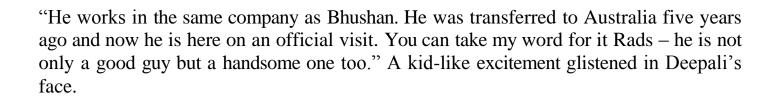
"Whatever!" Radhika kept her bag on the center table in the drawing room and walked towards the refrigerator. "Where is Angshu?" She gulped some cold water and joined Deepali on the sofa.

"I dropped him at my in-laws. He won't study if he is here today. I'll fetch him tomorrow."

"Why? Anything special today?"

"Right." Deepali moved on her seat in a way as if she was about to disclose a secret of national interest. "Bhushan is coming home with Sunil."

"Great!" Radhika said instantly and then thought for a while. "But who is Sunil?"



"That's good for him but who is Sunil?"

"His parents now want him to get married and settle down."

"Who the hell is Sunil?"

"That depends upon you now."

"What the hell... how many times do I need to tell you this, Deeps?" Radhika shook her head in disgust, "I am not ready for any relationship damn it never mind marriage." Deepali stared. Radhika, feeling visibly uncomfortable, couldn't stop herself.

"What is it now?"

"Even I want to know that. What is it, Rads?" Deepali was serious.

"I don't know. I told you before as well; I need some time."

"I am hearing that from the last seven-eight years now. Earlier I thought you really needed some time but now I am sure you are trying to avoid something. And you also know as well as I do what it is."

"What?"

"You are trying to avoid a fruitful future because of a pained past, goddamn it, don't you realize that?" Deepali distanced herself from Radhika a little.

"Perhaps you are right." Radhika sounded subtly philosophical.

"Perhaps? I am right, okay. Raen is dead! Excuse my bluntness but I believe thirteen years are more than enough for anybody to know that dead people don't come back."

"That's the problem. Dead people don't come back and their thoughts never fade."

"They do. The point is if you really want them to and not build yourself an emotional igloo with them." Deepali turned towards Radhika and clasped both her hands. She pressed them. "I won't be around physically every time with you dear. I told you Bhushan might get transferred to Johannesburg this winter. And I want you to settle down in any part of the world before that. You got to understand, baby, I love you and I simply cannot let you rot like this. No one is forcing you to marry Sunil but at least you canmeet him and see what happens.

"Rads!" Deepali gently held her friend's chin and turned her face towards her. "All I am asking of you is give life another chance. I know it's difficult but trust me it's not impossible. Just try, once, for my sake. You remember how I gave another chance to my life on your request?" Her words exhibited persuasive warmth. "I understood every time you said you weren't ready. I never cooked up an issue over it. Ever. But today I won't listen to anything."

Radhika didn't speak immediately. She allowed few seconds to help her imbibe whatever Deepali meant, after which she kept her hand over hers and with a vanilla smile nodded in agreement.

"Thanks," Deepali said softly. "Let me prepare some coffee for us and then I'll help you wear a gorgeous sari. Is that okay?"

"Yes," Radhika said, her voice soaked with realization. She knew this 'yes' should have come few years ago. What was she waiting for all these years? To arrive at a point in life when she'll successfully erase her first love from the core of her existence? Why didn't she ever, may be at the cost of being a little cheap, think about its feasibility? No one, she knew or read about, has achieved that feat yet. No matter how strong an individual is, the fervour of first love forces everyone to surrender; nolens volens. Man is born naked alright but the rest of his life goes *covering up*. A simple theme and it took her thirteen years to understand it.

[&]quot;Shit," Radhika spoke aloud.

[&]quot;What happened?" Deepali asked from the kitchen.

She wouldn't be able to love anyone like her first love - true - but doing so she wouldn't be an exception. The number of people who actually spend their entire life with the first person they ever loved is as negligible as world peace. First love and failure, most of the times, go hand in hand. The concept, as if, is an attempt to mature us so that we handle all our future relationships without getting emotionally axed. For if one can consume the loss of first love and still remain synchronized with life, one can then consume anything. Literally. If marriage is an institution then love – the kind that doesn't sprout because you marry someone but the one that makes marriage a natural consequence – has to be in its constitution. Any otherwise marriage turns into a hide and seek game: hiding the malignity of your own mind while seeking the truth inside your partner's heart. Whereas there is never anything to hide or seek in love; you expose everything about yourself and just be the person you are, knowing the other will accept you with all your flaws. That assurance isn't a guarantee in a marriage whose basic objective is to be on the sunnier side of societal norms. Thus people try to negate the pros and cons of such hide and seek with adjustments - major or minor. And so would she, Radhika thought and felt dolorously helpless. Many a times, in order to remain normal for people and society, one has to be abnormal from within. Else how could she explain her 'yes' to the God inside her? Sure, she might like Sunil but, no, she won't fall in love with him. It's the rule of nature: no one can inhale and exhale simultaneously. For someone to come, someone else has to go; completely. And she could, no way, deceive nature on that. Nobody can. Whatever happens tonight, Radhika decided, she will from now on try to really move on even if she has to forge her present for it; like everybody does.

"Come on, you can try the saris inside. I think the yellow silk one will look great on you. Yesterday I got some matching junk jewelleries, too." Deepali said sauntering across, towards her bed room, with two mugs of filtered coffee. Radhika followed, feeling heavy.

Sunil, escorted by Bhushan, arrived at quarter to seven. By then the ladies were done with their attire. For the first time since her college farewell party Radhika had worn a sari. At first she felt a little awkward. Every time she walked around the house she felt it was sliding down and after an hour of relentless fidgeting she somehow managed to walk carefree.

At first glance Radhika thought Sunil justified Deepali's words: a handsome guy. But Raen was better. *Hell! Why am I comparing?*

"Let's go through the introduction part," Bhushan said and introduced Sunil to Radhika.

"Nice to meet you." His voice had gravity and he spoke slowly allowing each word to come out clean.

"Same here." They sat down – Bhushan and Deepali on the two one-sitters respectively while Sunil and Radhika on the two extremes of the three sitter.

"Remember the last time you came to our place? Five years!" Deepali initiated, "Time flies."

"It sure does. Not for the ones in power though. The roads – sweet Lord – I almost had a gut transplant!" Smiles were exchanged.

"What else do you expect in a country whose people still prefer crossing the seas for personal enlightenment?" All eyes turned towards Radhika.

"I am sorry if I ..." Sunil was quick to apologize but was cut short by Deepali. "No it's alright. She prefers to speak her mind." She gave a hard stare to Radhika and continued with Sunil, "So how is life in Australia?"

"Exciting. The only reason being the new projects that come along."

"Speaking of projects" Bhushan said, "Is the Oriental Tech issue solved?"

"Solved? You must be kidding. First the project manager unnecessarily inflated the entire thing and now he is trying saving his own ass. Excuse the language please."

"So will it still be Australia or you planning a return?" It was Deepali again.

"One more year, may be. Both mom and dad don't keep well these days."

"Why?" Parents were always a soft point for Radhika.

"Dad has diabetes – type I – and mom has arthritis. And I have also had enough of this working-abroad-pie. It was all goodie-goodie at first. Not anymore. To put it simply, it's better to enjoy a simple meal at the end of the day with family than to stay alone and swell your belly out with beer in the weekends."

"That's true."

"Won't we have anything now?" Bhushan asked his wife.

"Sure. Coffee or tea?"

"Tea," Sunil said.

"Right." Deepali went to the kitchen and a minute later, as per plans, Bhushan excused himself too. There were three of them left in the drawing room now: Sunil, Radhika and a gauche silence.

Radhika moved slightly in discomfort. She knew what her friend was trying to pull up. She had to do something, she thought, else it was turning into an acute embarrassment. Suddenly she picked up the newspaper from the center table. Her eyes were reading the headline while her mind was whispering; is he looking at me?

"Your ear ring," Sunil said pointing towards her right ear. For a moment she thought he proposed. Shit! Then she fathomed the truth.

"Sorry. Actually I..." Radhika tightened her ear ring. "I have never tried these before." Sunil was impressed at the honest confession. "How are things going at the nursing home?"

Oh he knows about the nursing home. What else does he know? "Fine. At times a little hectic though. But when your passion and profession are the same even exhaustion is about satisfaction."

"I agree. That's why choices are so important. They either make us pay to life or earn from it. You always wanted to be a doctor?"

Radhika thought of the one annual check-up session at The Home years ago where the first seed of her dream was planted. "You can sayso. And you?"

"I wanted to be He-Man to start with then it was an astronaut, pilot, cricketer, President of our country and also a guitarist. But as I turned smarter and recognized life as the original Machiavelli I decided to go for engineering. End justifies the means and what else is the real end for us but money."

Radhika confirmed her assent with a faint appreciating smile. Seeing Bhushan back in the room Sunil spoke up.

"I don't see Angshu. Where's he? Going by his photographs he seems to be the perfect mix of you two."

"Ya! He is at my parents' place actually."

"Oh! I had brought some chocolates for him." Sunil took out a box from a plastic packet.

"Radhika likes chocolates too," Deepali said, appearing from the kitchen with a tray containing four cups of tea and some snacks. Radhika got up to help her with the tray and gave her a why-you-doing-this-to-me look.

"I didn't know else – well you can keep this one. I'll bring Angshu another." Radhika didn't exhibit any intent of accepting it. Deepali quickly gave the tray to her friend and took the box on her behalf.

"Wow! Swiss chocs! Her favourite." Everyone smiled except Radhika. "And mine, too." Deepali added looking at her friend's straight face.

The chat session continued over tea and couple of hours later, over dinner. Several topics were discussed and each opinion put forward by Sunil made the reluctant emotional bog, somewhere inside Radhika, shed its inertia. She had already experienced a storm before. An uncompromising and incorrigible storm of love. And this time only a tranquil process, one that gives time to maneuver oneself, could have given her what she lost thirteen years ago – an active eye of eagerness towards life.

The dinner was over and, because of Deepali again, the cell numbers were exchanged. Sunil left and half an hour later Bhushan and Deepali dropped Radhika at Vasuda's.

"How was he?" The question was whispered into her ears.

"A nice personality but I don't know." The reply came in another whisper.

"Alright! Does he know he has made it to the Guinness book of world records for leaving a mark on the great Dr. Radhika Sharma at the first go?"

"What? Who is Guinness?" Bhushan asked confused.

"My friend's pet dog."

"You two are discussing pets at this hour?"

"Yes we are discussing pets," Deepali winked at Radhika.

"Goodnight. We will talk tomorrow." Radhika waved as the car disappeared down the road.

"Why are the lights off?" Radhika asked the watchman standing idly by the gate.

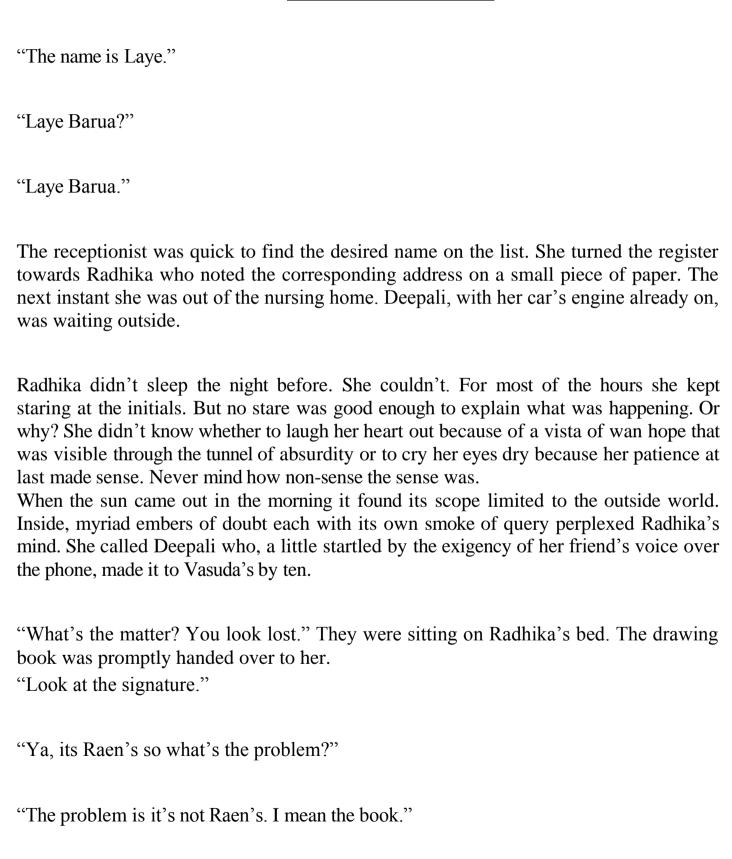
"Madam's cat died in the evening. So she asked me to switch off the lights early.

"I am sorry to hear that." God's great!

Only one obligation awaited her once she entered her flat. Sleep! It took her few minutes to freshen up, change and surrender her tired body onto the bed. A second later she realized the lights were still on. Damn! She got up but before she could reach the switchboard her eyes got hooked to the drawing book kept beside her bag. Somehow it had escaped her conscious till then. Radhika took the book in her hands and read the note again. Her reflex was a smile. She flipped the pages. They were nice drawings and Radhika was impressed by Laye's talent. She kept flipping. *Stop*. She frowned. Her face turned a little grave. *Observe closely*. A nervous impulse made her flip back and peruse the previous pages again. It was there, one after the other, in every page. What on earth made me miss it? Her eye brows became sinusoidal, her heart started pounding while her lips parted in disbelief. It wasn't about the sketches – her mouth went dry – but



CHAPTER -16



Deepali flipped the pages again. "Who gave you this?"

Radhika told her about Laye.

"I won't rest till I know what's all this about. Will you accompany me to his place?"

"Will I?" Deepali said with a cut-the-crap look.

Deepali, seeing Radhika rushing out of the nursing home, put her car on gear. "Lachit Nagar." Radhika ensconced on the front seat of the car.

"What will you say when you go there?" The car started moving.

"Let's see who opens the door. It must be his grandmother's house for as far as I know his parents live in Mumbai." Radhika recollected Suparna's words last evening. *His parents were here as well.* "Or may be his parents are here too."

"You know them?"

"No. His grandmother and I have talked few times. She should recognize me and then we have Laye's drawing book with us too. That will help."

As she spoke about the book a desire to look at it ameliorated inside her. She turned around and picked up the drawing book from the back seat. Yes it was written 'RV'; exactly as Raen used to write. She slowly turned the pages studying the drawings meticulously. Few minutes passed. Radhika was absorbed in her world where the past expressed itself as a murky sky and the present, as the loose earth beneath. Deepali, perspiring copiously because of summer and anxiety both, for once glanced at the book and spoke aloud, wetting her lips, "It's freaking me out, Rads." She changed a gear. Radhika meanwhile turned a page and her eyes squinted a little.

"It's freaky because -."

"Because?" Deepali, in a flash, turned her head towards left and then straight again.

"Because it's not a coincidence." Radhika tilted the book slightly so that her friend could see it without having to turn her head. One look and she braked on an impulse.

"Holyshit!" Deepali cried out. The picture depicted few steps and the area around the chapel of St. Patrick's School.

It didn't take them long to find the house. They only had to stop once in front of a betel leaf vendor who directed them towards the right lane. Deepali parked the car opposite to a house which Radhika thought should be the one if the address was dead right. They got down and crossed the road.

The gate, though looked aged, didn't make any obnoxious noise when it was pushed open. Following the narrow path, made up of square marble slabs, and admiring the different varieties of flora on both sides they arrived at the door. Radhika looked around and finally located the door bell. She pressed it and waited. Half a minute later a man opened the door.

"Yes?"

"Hi. I am Dr. Radhika Sharma." She flashed her identity card, "And this is my friend Deepali. Is this Mrs. Gayatri Kejriwal's house?"

"It is."

"Her grandson was my patient for a few days. I need to talk to her about something important."

"Ya, sure." The man said visibly confounded at why a doctor would need to follow up a patient to his home after being discharged.

"Please, come in. I am Ashesh Barua." He shook hands with both the visitors, "Mrs. Kejriwal is my mother-in-law."

"So Laye..." Radhika started but Ashesh completed, "He is my son." The two ladies by then had walked into the main room as Ashesh closed the door behind.

"Please, sit down."

They did. And as Ashesh sat opposite to them, on the sofa, he spoke up again, "I don't think we met in the nursing home, did we?"

"No, we didn't. Actually we work on a shift basis so I wasn't really needed as such during the discharge process."

"I see." He wasn't convinced.

Few silent seconds passed. "It would be nice if you please call Mrs. Kejriwal."

"She is not at home." Ashesh observed a sudden gloom eclipse the faces opposite him.

"She has gone to the market with my wife. They might arrive any moment now."

Radhika smiled appreciating the fact. "Is Laye home?"

"He is...ya...but asleep. I was told he needs rest."

"May I please see him? I won't wake him up."

"Would you please tell me what the matter is, really?" Ashesh asked, "All the monetary issues are settled, I guess?"

"Oh no, it's nothing on those lines. In fact I am here on a personal visit."

"A personal visit?" Ashesh frowned.

Radhika wanted to disclose and discuss the matter only with Gayatri but now the situation seemed to thwart it. She reluctantly handed the drawing book to Ashesh.

"Do you recognize this, Mr. Barua?"

"Please call me Ashesh." He took the book from Radhika. "Why yes, it's Laye's, absolutely." The two women exchanged an anxious look.

"He gifted me the book."

"He did? Why?"

"The note on the first page might help." Ashesh read it. "The reason is obvious, isn't it?

"That's why I wanted to see him. May be you can thank him later onmy behalf."

"Alright. Come this way." The women followed Ashesh to the bedroom. Laye was on the bed; sleeping taut. Ashesh and Deepali waited by the door while Radhika walked up to the bed. Sitting on the edge of the bed she gently caressed his forehead. Look wise he was a different individual, Radhika thought. What about otherwise? Her guts, for once, suffered a terse twist. She got up. Few crayons and drawing sheets were scattered on the bed, beside him.

"He likes drawing, isn't it?"

Ashesh nodded. *Raen liked sketching*. When Radhika found the other two were already moving out of the room she tried to catch up. It was then her eyes fell on something kept on the aluminium shelf beside the bed. It was a slam book. The first page showcased Laye's profile. She quickly went through it and was in the drawing room, the next instant.

"If it was only about a thank-you you could have called up. You must be having a busy schedule in the nursing home." Ashesh asked seeing Radhika coming out of the room. "I do, but —"

"May I have a glass of water please?" Deepali suddenly spoke up. "Sure. I am sorry I should have asked you earlier. Cold or normal?"

"Chilled, if possible," Deepali said with a smile.

"Right." As Ashesh disappeared inside the kitchen Deepali turned towards her friend.

"Dear, I am not having a good feeling about this. Let's get out of here."

"What?"

"You heard me right. I don't want to -" Deepali checked herself.

"Excuse me; I am really slow at these things." Ashesh entered the room with a tray

containing two glasses of water and a bottle, "The maid is on leave else I would have asked you for tea." He kept the tray on the table, "So for that you have to wait for the ladies of the home to return." He smiled and asked, "Do you work in the nursing home too?"

"No." Deepali said, "I am only a housewife." *Excuse! Think of an excuse damn it*. She was about to keep the empty glass on the table when her mobile phone rang. "Thank God!" Her inside shrieked seeing the number calling.

"Hello."

"Hello ma'am."

"I am calling from Airtel." The customer-care executive carried on, "I would like to remind you ma'am that the validity of your card is expiring tomorrow so kindly recharge in order to continue with all the Airtel services."

"Ya, I'll do that."

"Thank you and have a nice day, ma'am." The call was over.

"What? Alright I'll be there within fifteen minutes," Deepali continued.

"Ya, I am sure. Bye." Deepali feigned to disconnect the line. "I am sorry, Ashesh. We need to leave. There is an emergency."

"Don't mind me asking but is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. Just that my husband is home early so I need to go."

"Something," Ashesh thought looking at the ladies, "is wrong somewhere."

Within seconds Deepali and Radhika were outside the house, scuttling towards the car. "Is everything really fine? Why is Bhushan home so early?" Radhika got into the car.

"Nobody is home. I lied." Deepali started the engine.

"What?" Radhika glared at her friend. This was unexpected. Deepali reversed the car a little and then turning left changed to another gear. "And may I know why are you behaving," Radhika took a moment to choose her word, "weird all of a sudden?"

"They are a family, Rads. May be a happy family at that. The moment I thought of it sitting in the drawing room I felt sorry. We should have discussed this a little before coming here. What's the use of injecting unnecessary confusion in their mind and life?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you know what I am talking about. May be the drawing of the chapel stairs is a coincidence. Why may be? It *is* a coincidence! Laye might have visited some similar place or someone could have also told him about it."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"What about the initial on the drawing book?"

Hiatus.

"Isn't it possible we misinterpreted it? And anyways what motivated our visit? A goddamn initial of a child? Bollox!"

"We didn't come here following the initial of any child. We came here following the initial of Raen."

"Whatever!"

Hiatus.

"Frankly, we shouldn't have acted on the first chill. Were we supposed to meet Raen here? Crazy shit! I still can't believe what fools we were about to make of ourselves! I accept I am a dumb housewife but what happened to you, Rads? You are a doctor. You should have been the one to discard all this. People arising from the ashes...we all know...doesn't happen... cannot happen.

Now listen, we are not advancing on it any further till we have something other than just our moronic instinct as motivation. Are you getting me?"

She was, though slowly, but Radhika definitely was getting the point. My love for someone shouldn't be the reason to disturb a family. Oh! God, this is fucking mad. Why didn't I, even for a moment, think what Deeps just said? What the heck was I expecting to witness here? Raen standing with both his hands stretched out for me? And why? Because the initial – two simple alphabets – is reminiscent of Raen's. She sighed. I guess Deeps is right – what bullshit was I up to? Realizing her friend was expecting an answer Radhika replied, "I am gettingit."

The remainder of the evening passed in distress. She found herself amidst a tug-of-war between repent and repair. All attempts to finish the pending assignments were subjected to futility as her concentration assumed the trait of a wild horse. With the turn of every page in her text book a paragraph from her past echoed in her mind. When she tried to study a case or understand any concept Laye's words groped her existence instead. I

have a girl friend. Her name is Tina. She also loves painting as much as I do. We sit and draw each other's faces. She is perfect at it but I end up making someone else's face. Someone else's face...whose? Wish I knew.

Radhika, after dinner, sat down with books again. Like the other nights she wanted to shut out everything and study late till sleep numbed her senses. Only this time her desperation was steeper. For the first few hours her locked-jaw determination was the clear winner. She was well into her groove when she heard a whisper. Radhika turned around in a trice only to feel an ebullient breeze choreographing her long hair on her tender neck and soft ear lobes. She thought of taking a break. Tying a bun she walked up to the window. Down by the road side there were some rickshaw pullers playing cards and gossiping amongst themselves. She also noticed Ustaad sleeping on a cot outside the half closed motel. Radhika let go of a deep sigh. The night, with a hunger of silence, was growing on the place. There was certainly something in the air. She looked at the sky above and its jewels. What am I for a star? Another star? Does it look at me with the same awe as I do? Does it wish to be a part of me as much as I wish to be a part of it? Is it as curious about my secrets as I am about its? A gush of wind hit her face and Radhika blurted out, "Oh! I miss you, Raen." And each of those words had an emotion of its own. She must have said it aloud, she thought, as the men below glanced at her once. Radhika immediately moved away from the window and sat down on her bed with athud.

"Tell me, Raen, what will it take to forget you?" She covered her face with both her hands. "Please, tell me, Raen. Please." Her within was sobbing and her outer self was empathizing. Her nose felt blocked but her eyes remained dry for they were dead tired. All these years they had over worked with no prize. Thus, they were no longer interested in helping the beholder identify between illusion and reality.

On an impulse Radhika got up and dragged out an old trunk from underneath her bed. She opened it after wiping the thin coating of dust and cobwebs with her hand. She searched through her old clothes, books and other nostalgic belongings. There it was — Radhika was relieved — peeping from inside a book. She opened it and missed a breath seeing Raen smiling at her.

He had given her the photograph during the farewell party of their seniors. Time is the real master of disguise, she thought, feeling the warmth which the photograph still inspired within her. There was a time when she used to look at it every night before going to bed; it helped her knit romantic dreams. Then came a time when the picture was tantamount to a vista of memories that salted her wounds. And now when she was looking at it after several years, a geyser of humiliation exploded somewhere within her hypnotizing her senses with a sudden rage. Why was my purity subjected to the mockery of time? Radhika slowly tore the picture into half. How it could have mattered to anyone if Raen was by my side today? Four pieces. How can denying Raen to me be so important for God? Eight pieces. How the fuck did it matter to Him? She flung the pieces into air. And the breeze helped the innocent pieces of her life fly to various corners of the room.

"Shit!" Radhika banged her fist on the edge of the bed. "Ah!" It hurt. She was about to close the book, which had preserved the photograph for her thus far, when she looked at it closely. Once upon a time it used to be her slam book and once upon a time some one had filled it on her request. Radhika, quite stoically, turned the pages to the fifth entry.

Name: Raen Verma.

Friends call me: Raen, RV.

Your favourite pastime: Sketching. (But that's my passion too!)

Favourite fruit: Mango.

A vegetable you think you resemble: Cabbage. (Don't ask me why!)

Favourite cartoon character: Scooby Doo. Actor: Shahrukh Khan, Pierce Brosnan.

You drool over: Salma Hayek, Salma Hayek, Salma Hayek and Urmila Matondkar.

Best film: Jurrasic Park.

Cuisine- Chinese.

One person you look up to: My mother (always in all ways!)

Your aim in life: Professionally an engineer but would also love to be a painter all my

Your favourite place: My mother's lap.

Most embarrassing moment: Hard to choose.

Most memorable moment: Let me think.

Life is: Love. Love is: Life. Idea of first date: Just sit with you somewhere and "stare" at your words, "listen" to your face, "smell" your smile and revel in your presence!

Your thoughts about me: The same as the sky thinks of a rainbow.

Radhika caressed the page where it was signed Raen Verma. She closed the slam book and was about to put it back in the trunk when something walked her mind. She reopened the same page in the book. The favourite section. And each time she read aloud the answers her mind set forth, like electricity, to inspect the ones she had read in Laye's slam book earlier in the day.

I like mangoes a lot. I want to be a painter. Shahrukh Khan is awesome. Both Urmila Matondkar and Salma Hayek. Though I like to be with Tina but to lie with my head on ma's lap is something incomparable.

I can miss my school but not a Scooby Doo show! He is the best. Noodles "anytime". Hang around anywhere with Tina.

Same passion. Same likes. Same ambition! Same person? Radhika suddenly felt hollow. Her breaths became longer. In a desperate attempt to meet normalcy she closed her eyes tight. The mind, instantaneously, doffed all thoughts. Her senses numbed. All the cacophonies of her heart dissolved. Past, present and future – as in the beginning of time – seemed trivial. She felt consumed by a dark impermeable absolute where the bottom line for survival was to remain lost forever. Where any attempt to search for sanity was fatally deceiving, any wish to remain true to the crux of one's constitution resulted in an irrevocable punishment of a heinous kind and any intention of recognizing the purpose of the sublime absolute could cost one his identity. And yet...Radhika opened her eyes with a jerk. Her conscious witnessed a morning of realization; the amicability of which made her assemble the torn pieces of the photograph. I'll rejoin them. And when she did glue the pieces together, her soul - beaming after ages - cried out.

Laye is Raen.

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<u>CHAPTER – 17</u>

The bell rang twice but Deepali chose not to get up. Bhushan had, after a long time, made love to her past midnight. And the sleep thereafter didn't yet rejuvenate her enough. She heard it again and this time the shrillness piqued her irreversibly. Up on her feet and ambling up to the door, she opened it. The maid silently stepped in and went towards the kitchen. Closing the door behind, Deepali continued her somnolent walk back to the bed. And lying carelessly on the bed, beside Bhushan, she cared to open her eyes for the first time. "No!" The clock showed 6:25. Five more minutes before the start of her quotidian ordeal - wake up Angshu, prepare his breakfast, wake up Bhushan so that he can take their son to the bus stop, prepare breakfast and lunch for Bhushan, supervise the maid's work...Deepali, with sleep weighing on her eyes, looked at the clock again. Two more minutes. Disgust took over her and she got up. "Let's get over it. I'll sleep in the afternoon." She had to dangle the carrot of afternoon nap before her to get going.

It was only after Bhushan and Angshu left for the latter's school bus that Deepali relaxed. With a steaming cup of tea and the morning newspaper she settled cozily on the sofa. She was about to keep the cup on the side stool when the cell phone caught her attention. She had forgotten it there the night before. And as she picked it up the screen flashed thirty four missed calls. Deepali pressed a button and the caller section read, Rads.

"Hello." The voice was groggy.

"Rads? So many missed calls! What's the matter? Where are you?"

"One minute. I'll call you back." Radhika's head felt heavy and muscles cramped. She climbed down her bed and headed for the toilet. She wasn't aware when exactly sleep mounted her, may be three or even five in the morning but looking at her eyes in the mirror she turned cold. The naked eyes showcased her emotionally vulnerable self. She splashed some water on her face. Life thus far had repeatedly reminded her, in many allusive ways, the weight of a nature-defying wait is futile to carry. But now that same life was contradicting itself. And how? She came out to the main room and dialed Deepali's number.

"Hi."

"What's the matter, Rads? Are you all right?"

"We need to goto Mrs. Kejriwal's place today."

"Oh! Rads, I thought we settled the matter yesterday."

"As far as I am concerned it cannot be settled till I meet Laye once more for...-" Radhika shared her last night's discovery.

"It's nothing – two people with the same likes – it's just nothing."

"You are missing the point. It's not about two people. It's about one who is dead and the other who doesn't know why he is doing what he does." *I end up making someone else's face*, Radhika remembered the words. "Doesn't it suggest anything to you? Oh! Deeps, please understand. I got to meet Laye."

"But what next after you meet him?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Well then let me tell you. Laye is Laye for the society. He is a nine-year old kid and you are a twenty-nine-year old still single woman. Do you want the society to question your character in a perverse manner?"

"I don't care about the society."

"Oh, ya, you don't. But I do and I also happen to care about you."

"There's another thing I didn't tell you. It didn't strike me the first time I saw it but now..."

"Cut the tease, please."

"Laye's birthday is on 27th August. I saw it in his slam book yesterday. 27th August Deeps! Same date as..." Radhika choked.

"Calm down. Just —" The bell rang. Deepali asked her maid to open the door. "Some one has come. You just get a hold on yourself." The maid opened the door. Seeing Bhushan coming in Deepali lowered her voice. "I'll be at your place as soon as I can. And please stop crying for God's sake."

"Ya."

Keeping the phone back on the table Deepali turned to her husband, "Do you happen to know any good psychiatrist?" Bhushan was getting late for his office but the query ceased his motion.

"Why? Who needs one?"

"A friend's mother-in-law. Do you know anyone?"

"No." Bhushan moved to the bedroom and stripping down to his underwear spoke up.

"But Girish might. I'll ask him today and let you know." He locked himself inside the bathroom.

"Fine."

When Deepali, an hour and a half later, drove to Vasuda's, Radhika opened the door for her. They simply stood facing each other at the doorstep. A second later Radhika hugged her as tightly as she could with compulsive waves of tears rising menacingly from the red river of her heart and later traipsing the soft shores of her cheek.

"It's all right, dear. I am here." Deepali consoled her friend, "We will solve this together, okay?" She took her inside and closed the door.

"You don't know how I felt when" they sat on the bed, "when I realized Laye is Raen."

"It's like," Radhika spoke with long drawn breaths, "everything I endured till today was worth it. It seemed the years of solemnity were actually a run for the first prize."

"Sure." Deepali caressed her back and wiped the tears off her cheek. "Now take couple of deep breaths." Radhika did as told and felt in control.

"Better?"

"Ya."

"Wait; let me bring you some water."

"Nine more years and he will be eighteen."

Deepali stopped. It was a shocker. "So?" She looked straight at her friend as if piercing her mind to read its content. No reply.

"Rads, are you lusting for..."

"No!" A loud and instant denial left Radhika. "Oh! God, how do I explain it to you, Deeps?" She stretched on her back and with an insipid perusal of the ceiling continued, "I have nothing to do with Laye but everything to do with *someone* inside him."

Silence was the medium between them for some time. "I am sorry, Rads." Deepali gave her a glass of water. "I understand how you feel but I would request you to chase these thoughts out of your mind. He would turn eighteen in nine years! What is this? Do you even realize what you are talking about?" Radhika was quiet. And looking at her Deepali thought how vulnerable she had become in the last few days. Love does strange things to people. As if someone in love and otherwise are two different people. She missed the fighter Radhika; the one who looked at life eye-to-eye and whose pragmatic sense was a paragon for a way of life. But she also knew it was up to her now to find that old Radhika for her friend.

"If you wish we shall visit Laye's place this afternoon." The words brought relief on Radhika's face. "But you got to promise me one thing." *I hope Bhushan gets the best psychiatrist's name*. "From tomorrow you will do as I ask you to."

"I promise," Radhika said oblivious to the fact that pain was destined to be the melody of her love. And one can only, at best, face destiny...
...not change it.

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CHAPTER -18

"Hi. How are you doing?" Radhika said with a plastic smile hiding the vacillation of her mind. Few seconds passed before Gayatri recognized her. "Dr. Radhika! Please come in." They did. "Ashesh told me you were here yesterday as well." Deepali looked embarrassed while Radhika spoke with a little hesitation. "Ya, actually, I wanted to meet Laye but he was sleeping and moreover Deepali – meet my friend Deepali" The two greeted each other with folded hands. "An urgent work had come up for herso..."

"That's not a bother. I am glad you came over. At least I'll have some company over my evening tea." The ladies smiled.

"The last few weeks – apart from the accident thing – were real good. Laye definitely helped me forget my loneliness."

"Where is he?"

"Mumbai. Didn't Ashesh tell you? They were supposed to leave early this morning. And so they did."

"I see." Radhika said. Shit, she thought.

"Won't he come again?" It was Deepali.

"Well, this time he was here after five years so you see I am really not sure when will his next visit be. But don't worry," She looked at Radhika, "He knows you liked his gift. Wasn't it why you came hereyesterday?"

"Yes."

"You know what he said to his mother when he was told you liked his drawings? He said he likes you very much and wants to marry you!" Radhika immediately looked at Deepali and together they swallowed a lump.

"Never mind him," Gayatri was beaming, "At one time he wanted to marry me as well. That's the best part of being a kid I suppose." She stood up, "They can say many things and get away with them. Anyways, I'll be back with tea in a moment."

"Okay." Radhika managed a vanilla smile. She picked up the first magazine kept on the

table nearby and whispered, "Just my bad luck." Deepali shrugged. She got up feeling covertly apathetic and started to traipse around the room. The floor was covered – corner to corner- with a Persian carpet. Her feet dug in its softness. Though she was there just the other day but today she was noticing things. The room was proficiently decorated indeed. The ceiling was made of wood with artistic designs sculpted on it. All the side walls were covered with exquisite paintings and hangings. Though a little swathed by dust still they looked gorgeous. The lustrous teakwood showcase, kept beside the sofa set, had peculiar structures atop it facing different directions. Feng Shui, Deepali recognized easily for she had few of them at her place too. A white plaster-of-Paris statue of a warrior was kept on one of the corners. It was exactly the one she had seen in a shop a week ago; only this one was much bigger. The adjacent wall, helpingthe stairs, had a cavalcade of silver framed photographs hooked on it. Though the faces weren't distinct from where Deepali was standing but their smiles were.

The first one was of an old lady with a young boy. *Gayatri and that must be Laye*, she thought. The second one captured a smiling old couple with a baby in their hands. *Gayatri, perhaps Laye and may be Mr. Kejriwal*. The third photograph was of a happy young family. *Laye, Ashesh and probably his wife*. The fourth...Deepali's eyes panned back to the third photo in a trice. She frowned as she advanced towards it. The closer she went the nervous she felt. And when she stood right in front of the photograph a big lump developed in her throat. "Hell!"

"What is it?" Radhika looked up at her friend. Without averting her eyes from the photograph Deepali gestured Radhika, with a quick jerk of her hand, to come over. "What the hell is happening?" Deepali exclaimed; her voice was soft in magnitude but loud with fear. Radhika joined her to have a look. For a moment she was lost in the catacomb of time. And when she spoke her voice couldn't unbridle the horror within.

"Savera?"

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CHAPTER – 19

The traffic of vehicles outside and of thoughts inside was equally clumsy. Though both were chugging along their respective road, dying to pick up speed, but only the former had the knowledge of direction.

Deepali was driving quite mechanically. The bizarre discovery did astound her but she was in control. She had to be. Any vulnerability from her side, she knew, would only help her friend to lose herself more. And this time, may be, irreversibly.

Meanwhile, words from the diary kept resurrecting in Radhika's mind, one after another.

I love you Savera.

When she was talking to me I thought I knew her from the time I didn't know her. Will Savera give me another chance? As far as I am concerned Savera is my destiny. And I am hers.

I DON'T lust for Savy. I DON'T hate her. I am NOT trying to time pass with her. I DON'T have a crush on her. So what's left? Love! What else?

As if I am indebted to her in some fucking way.

I have a reason to fall for Radhika but I don't know of any damn reason why I am attracted to Savera.

I didn't tell this to any of my friends (I won't ever) but I won't hide anything from you. I am attracted to Savy in the same manner I am to ma. I know it's funny-weird-absurd and everything synonymous still, the fact remains I feel the same innate attraction towards her like I do towards ma.

The intensity with which she pulls me is equivalent to what my mother makes me experience.

How are Savera and I connected? Are we...at all?

But instead of answering any query they brought along a plethora of further questions. How can this be possible? How can someone take birth as the son of...she didn't dare to complete. She was continuously gawking at the photograph. Gayatri had given it to her on the first request. It had The Taj Mahal in the background but not once did she look at it. And not once did her eyes avert from the foreground. Ashesh, Savera and Laye were all smiles. Sometimes things are invisible and still we feel an urgent need to believe them and at times when things stare at us we don't dare. The car came to a halt at a signal. For some strange reasons it wasn't the motion but the sudden inertness that made her feel the excruciating bites of reality.

"What do I do now?" There was resignation in Radhika's voice.

"There is no need to panic as such." Deepali sounded tranquil. She was only trying though.

"I lost to Savera."

"What are you talking about?"

"It proves..."

"It proves nothing. We still don't know anything for sure. It might be..."

"Not sure? First the initial – you tagged it as a coincidence. Then the slam book – you said two people might very well have common interests. Now Savera – and you are saying you aren't sure. If it was only about the initial, I would have accepted it as a coincidence. If it was only about the slam book I still would have agreed to overlook it. But the initial, the slam book and Savera, all together? No, it's no more a coincidence." Red to yellow to green; the signal turned and Deepali started her car again. She wasn't sure of any reply. How can it happen? Someone coming back? Bollix! It has to be a coincidence. All right, may be one of those fate's own funny games but surely not rebirth. Laye isn't Savera and Raen's child. So it's biologically impossible for Laye to have Raen's traits. Oh, of course, it's a coincidence. And suppose – in the name of whatever – it's not...Deepali quickly changed two gears.

An acute tension was building within Radhika that no act of will was able to subside. Only answers to what-next could help. She felt like cuddling up in one corner – no emotions, no feelings, no pain and no suffering – like a lump. That won't solve things but at least help her bypass them. Man has invented so many things but why didn't he make any machine or medicine to wipe out the past? Why do we have to rely on age and Alzheimer's for that?

Love, life, quest, logic, loss – do animals concern themselves with these stuffs? Who loves whom, who mates with whom, who lost whom, who couldn't marry whom, who didn't like whom, who was born for whom? Then why curse humans? Why curse me? Even before I could appreciate life's beauty, I lost mom and dad. When I was about to conclude life-after-all-isn't-that-bad I lost Raen. And now, when I was on the verge of framing one solid answer for myself after years of torturing my soul to come out with what's wrong and right, what should be accepted and what not, what is worth a fight and what is just a passable fallacy, life once again is at its hunting best.

"Should I kill myself?" Radhika asked aloud.

"In that case I swear you would be killing half of me too and you got no right to do that. So I would request, for the last time, not to talk like a psycho," Deepali said pretending to focus only on driving.

"But I got to do something. What do you think I should do?"

"Why do you think something at all needs to be done? Why do you think this happened only to encourage an action from you? Why do we think, whenever in some distress, something needs to be done? Life is no movie where we need to necessarily get all things right by the end. Some things need to be simply overlooked, come to terms with or perhaps forgotten with the excuse of destiny."

"You think that's easy?"

"No; if you are a dumb-ass enough to screw your own life then it's not. Some wounds, especially of this kind, shouldn't be nurtured for long. For they eventually become bigger and more important than life. That's when all sorts of problems start. I thought the time you took for yourself would help you to understand these widely acknowledged facets of life but your despondency right now shows you are exactly where you were years back." Deepali slowed down before another signal. "It's high time you learnt to let go, Rads. Just. Let. Go."

Funny. They say life is full of pains. But it's not the entire life but few days that are. These few days, like pimples, seize our attention all the time and we forget about the smoother portions. Had I not lost mom and dad – one day – not lost Raen – two days – and probably not known Laye existed – three days – or he was Savera's son – four days – my life would have been totally different. May be it happens with everybody –the resonance of few days forming the building blocks for the rest of their lives – or may be not but I really want to pluck out those days. Am I being too demanding in wanting to live a life that isn't an echo of those four days?

What seemed like a profound bend in the road at first is now nothing but an insipid dead end. What are my options, really? If I show any interest in Laye, untoward or otherwise, I run the danger of being labeled as a paedophile. If I try to disclose the matter to Savera or anyone else from her clan I'll be charged with violating the peace of a family. If I talk about it with anybody outside, I'll either be prescribed a psychiatrist's name or worse still, would be tagged as an insanely frustrated nymph. Men, behind my back and may be in front too, would then fancy their chances of bedding me because according to them every twenty-nine-year old single woman is a feminist at the zenith of sexual frustration. And as far as the women are concerned, they would try and boycott me so that I don't end up attacking their spouses like a horny cougar. Enough! The easiest way, I guess and

hope, is the best way. Let me stop being myself for a change and be the social android. Let me fuck every question, for once, and forget all answers. Let me not, armoured by love for someone, fight my urges but surrender to them instead and live. Just live. Like the ocean of people around the globe do it, day-in and day-out, at the cost of two silly parameters; pride and honour."

A strident horn from an auto rickshaw made her look right for a moment and then straight again. In a flash she turned her head towards right again. Her eyes caught the sight of a building which, for her, exhibited the radiance of nostalgia. It was the St. Patrick School's hostel where she, Deepali and many others had spent some treasured moments of their lives all of which, now, seemed as delectable as wishful thinking. And suddenly her mind that was amidst an emotional desert found an oasis of a name. Radhika turned towards Deepali and said, "Is Sister Melinda still the warden here?" She was looking at the building and so was Deepali.

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CHAPTER - 20

The security room next to the gate, the big glass door as entrance, the corridor leading to the students' rooms above, the warden's room, her office on the right and the huge prayer hall on the left – though nothing had changed and yet, everything seemed a touch bridled. Or has my perception changed?

"May we come in, Sister?"

Sister Melinda, sitting behind her desk busy with some paper work, swiftly changed her reading glasses to the normal ones.

"My Lord! What a pleasant surprise!" Melinda sprang up on her feet. The women came forward and hugged each other.

"How are you doing, Sister?" They sat on the plastic chairs kept on either side of the table.

"How do I look like?" Her smile had the same spark of wisdom. Time had not smeared Melinda in any overt fashion, Radhika observed. It usually doesn't do that to genuine things. As far as the physical attributes were concerned only her hair looked different; from bold black they had turned gay grey.

"You look in great shape!"

"Really? Now that's unusual for people who are one stroke old."

Radhika was visibly amazed for Melinda looked anything but a valetudinarian. "When did it happen?"

"Four-five years ago. Never mind! So when was the last time we met? One second. Was it at Deepali's marriage function?"

"That's right. Long time," Deepali said.

"But seems like yesterday."

"I am a mother now – his name is Angshuman."

"Congratulations. May the Lord bless him! It feels heavenly to see you peopledoing well in life. What about you, Radhika? Wait...you must be *Dr*. Radhika now?"

Radhika nodded.

"Oh, you don't know how proud you make me feel. If I ever had a daughter I would have wanted her to be like you."

"But you do have me."

"Yes." Radhika saw her eyes glisten. "Of course!" She rubbed her eyes once. "This has been a great year for me. Aradhana came to meet me sometime in February. She lives in the States now with her husband and two kids. Couple of months later Nupur was here." She turned and picked up a medium-sized crystal idol of Jesus Christ from the book shelf behind. Look, she gave me this." Radhika took it in her hands as Melinda continued. "She stays in Delhi; happily married."

"It's really nice." Radhika returned the idol to Melinda. She was visiting Sister after so many years and that too for her selfish reason. The snake of guilt was doting on her when she heard Deepali speak.

"To tell you frankly Sister, we are here because of," she chose her words carefully "some problem of sorts. I hope you will forgive me for being soblatant." It could have waited for some minutes, Radhika thought.

"On the contrary" Melinda said maintaining her poise, "I won't call myself a teacher if I only help you share your joy and not the gall."

"Thank you, Sister." Deepali said and continued glancing at Radhika for once, "Do you believe in rebirth?"

Period.

"Why do you ask?"

"Do you remember anyone by the name of Raen Verma?" Melinda thought for a while. In vain.

"He was our class mate. Radhika used to like him a lot."

"Is he the same person," Melinda looked at Radhika, "you were once in love with?"

Once? "Ya." It was a soft confession.

"What about him?"

"He actually died of Dengue the year he joined."

"And?"

"And...?"

"And," Radhika took over, "the incident ate me alive. So much so that it even made myself alien to me. Initially, I did try — with every ounce of obstinacy — to doff everything related to him assuming it all to be some kind of a forbidden addiction but I wasn't successful at that. And later I surprised myself by reveling in the failure. Soon I got cornered, just enough, to start contradicting my own will. My existence consciously participated in a self-debilitating process as I chose to keep Raen alive withinme.

It was tough — unimaginably — to see myself die, each day, in front of me. But the process, on the flip side, gave me an opportunity to feel right about myself. And because that's what sense of life is about — feeling right about oneself — I, in the end, numbed all my intentions of fighting the process; forever.

Well almost forever till one day, suddenly, something seemed amiss. It forced me to compare. And seeing the normal lives of people around – to which earlier I was indifferent – the void, inside which my beliefs nested, got exposed. Loneliness became an involuntary state of my soul. It was pathetic and, considering my future, frightening too. I envisioned carnal communion at nights. The rhapsodies of it, from the purlieus of my jinxed heart, cried for a man who would plant the white seeds of promise in my womb from where a beautiful wait for the harvest of our progeny would begin. I, for the

first time, realized certain areas inside me also wanted to experience all that, like my friends, but...in the couple of years that followed, believe me, Sister, I had almost crossed all the deadly terrains designed for me, was somewhat steady after ages and was willing to start afresh when..."

Radhika, on the verge of a breakdown, let go of a deep exhaustive sigh. Melinda remained undeterred throughout. Deepali narrated her the turn of events with Laye's coming into the picture.

"So, do you believe in rebirth, Sister?" she repeated her query.

Melinda scratched her temple faintly and said, "No; if we believe what we see, if we believe what we read and if we believe what we hear, then no."

Deepali gave her friend I-told-you-so glance.

"But if we believe what we feel then I do believe inrebirth." eepali's jaw dropped. "You have felt someone-"

"Once, during my college days, I was traveling back home in a train. I saw a man, rather a boy, staring at me from the opposite corner seat. He looked like a teenager. I ignored his stare at first but later, from the corner of my eyes, I could tell he was constantly looking at me. In fact he did that all through the journey. It piqued me. An hour later I got down at my station. And as the train was moving away I happened to glance at the boy only to find him smiling at me. The smile was such an obvious reminiscent of my late mother's, the one she used to give me when I returned from school, that I found myself smiling back at the boy."

The creeping silence leaped back as Radhika spoke. "The boy was your mother?" Melinda shrugged. "I don't know for I didn't see him again." She leaned back on her chair. "I have always conformed to the world being one big house. But man, with years of exploration of the unknown and exploitation of the known still hasn't managed to move beyond the drawing room. At times disturbing noises are audible from the kitchen, the bedroom or attic and on rarest of occasions he has visions too. But something – perhaps his own limitation as a being – doesn't let him go past the drawing room. Science, as far as I am concerned, is the understanding of nature as it expresses itself around us. So aren't we playing ourselves into the hands of nature then? There is no doubt the wings of science have helped man, over time, to soar high in the sky of intellectual advancement. But shrouding that sky is a universe – dark and mysterious – which lies beyond the scope of any wings. And everything there might be as much

possible as it is impossible. Moreover it's the cry of creation, my child; when night falls, morning awaits."

"How can we be so sure that such a universe actually exists? Isn't logically, right?" Deepali asked.

"It's a question – perhaps the only one – which can be answered best with more questions. Tell me, have you ever felt that you were born for some particular reason; be it a person or a thing? Have you ever experienced your talent talking to you? Have you ever cried for someone who never actually had any prima facie significance in your life? Have you at times felt an indomitable urge to befriend someone in particular? Have you ever been compelled by, let's say, something in the air to make someone happy without any overt reason on your part and in doing so realized a deep ineffable satisfaction? And above all, have you ever wondered why, on earth, these things happen?" Melinda looked first at Radhika and then at Deepali. "Logic means reason but reason doesn't mean anything that's within the reach of man. Does it?"

"Can a lover take birth as the son of his love?" Radhika locked her eyes with Melinda's. The latter frowned. Deepali told her, in brief, about Savera and the associated complication.

"You see, Radhika, the words 'can' and 'cannot' are misleading by nature because there are lots of things that are not meant for us to decide or decipher. The ones who ruled the earth before couldn't care to do anything but eat and reproduce. Then we came – man – and sitting in the perambulator of science kept exploring and discovering. We hugged what made sense and ignored anything otherwise. Just like our million-year-old predecessors left it for us to discover wheel, gravity and relativity, may be we are also leaving certain things, nolens volens, for our successors to discover. Everything isn't necessarily designed to fit our gumption."

"Laye might be Raen," Melinda continued. "And so what if he is Savera's son? That shouldn't be your point of concern. Consider yourself blessed to even have recognized him. It's tantamount to what happens in refugee camps. Some get identified and others don't. That doesn't mean the latter's existence is a void. Who knows, may be inside everyone alive resides someone dead long ago...only waiting to get identified. Just that everyone isn't blessed enough to realize and recognize the long lost ones like you."

Deepali sighed. Her identity as a human being suddenly felt hapless. And she didn't know why Angshu's face flashed in front of her. Or perhaps she did. For Radhika it was a discussion of a lifetime. Why didn't I come here before? I could have lived more. Her world had, prior to her visit, turned upside down. She had come to The Home cursing her destiny but now, ironically, was feeling proud of it. "What should Ido now, Sister?"

"If I were you, I would have met Laye." Both Radhika and Deepali gave her a profound gaze. "Only once." She rested their inquisitiveness. "The virtue of world is motion and we got to respect that being a subject. Also, our love shouldn't be the means for destroying what isn't ours. Sometimes experiencing the climax instills in us the strength to let go." Melinda's warm hands, like the fledged rays of the sun falling on a callow snow-capped mountain, held Radhika's cold ones. "Your meeting with Laye should do exactly that: make you stronger like never before and help you finally let go. May be Raen had – call it the blemish of age or the zeal of it – misinterpreted his feelings for Savera. The objective of every pleasant encounter between two people isn't necessarily about falling in love in a conventional sense. Just look around, each day more than half the world commits that mistake and so each day more than half the world sits gloomy over the loss of what was never their game anyways. And the realization of the real significance of the encounter and the manner it shaped them occurs only when they settle in life with a personthey were destined to."

A sublime hiatus followed. At times a food needs time to cook itself without the chef having to do anything. Melinda, gently caressing her hands, gave Radhika that time, of which she made the most.

"Thank you, Sister" Radhika said. "I'll do as you said not because this is the only way out for me but I now know this is the only way love should be expressed and sustained... the way that brings peace to the maximum." Melinda's lips stretched with a smile of appreciation. Minutes later they took their leave.

Everyone is someone yet to be identified, Radhika was feeling better.

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CHAPTER – 21

It took them two days to confirm the tickets for Mumbai. Radhika, in response to her application, was granted four days of sick leave from the nursing home. Meanwhile Bhushan was told they were visiting a common friend who recently got diagnosed with a terminal illness.

"What is it with your friends these days? One needs a psychiatrist for her mother-in-law, another gets terminally ill. You take care of yourself, Deepsie."

"I will," Deepali said. I'll tell him the truth after I return, she thought.

Since no direct flights were available so they had to first land in Kolkata and then board a connecting flight. They took a taxi immediately coming out of the Sahar Aiport in Mumbai. The driver kept their luggage - two samsonites - on the front seat while the ladies sat behind.

"Hotel Pali International, Ville Parle." The driver heard one of the ladies as he adjusted his meter.

It was eleven thirty at night when they reached the hotel. They had had their dinner in the flight itself so once they were ushered to their already reserved double-bedded room all Radhika and Deepali cared for was a taut sleep.

It was nine in the morning when Deepali got up. The curtains of the room were slightly apart and a milky white light with a clue of yellow was eyeing a corner of the room. Deepali looked at her watch.

"Oh! God! Rads, get up it's..." She was startled to see Radhika sitting on the adjacent chair; all dressed up.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You are taking so much pain for me. I thought you deserved a sound sleep."

"Tell you what? Thanks! I am feeling refreshed. Wait. I shall be quick."

"Shall I order the breakfast here or will we have it outside?" Radhika asked as Deepali took out her tooth paste and brush from her bag. "Here."

Deepali read aloud to the driver from the slip of paper that had Savera's address as told by Gayatri.

"Axis Society?" The driver exclaimed. "Apun ekjact janta hai madam...tension nahi lene ka mayien barobar pouhchaega."

"Thank God, he knows the location." The women were relieved.

There were twelve ten-storey buildings that formed Axis Society. After paying off the taxi driver and filling the visitor's register at the entrance the two followed the directions of the security guard.

"This way straight" he used his hand, "the fifth building." They found out the flat soon. "I can't believe we are meeting again!" Savera was overwhelmed seeing her school friends. *And the reason, well...* Deepali smiled and hugged her.

"Mom told me about both of you but I simply couldn't believe!" There were, as Radhika noticed, some subtle but svelte changes about Savera. Her hair was a little longer than before with a shift in the parting from right to middle. The skin, seemingly waxed, was shining like victory. Though she had gained some pounds but an apposite distribution of it helped her mien assume the completeness of a woman. *And a mother*. The most significant change though was the presence of vermilion on her hair parting.

"Thanks a bunch, Radhika."

"For?"

"For treating Laye."

"You don't thank a doctor for treating a patient," Radhika said, "you only pay them." They stepped inside, beaming. A narrow passage led them to the front room. Though it had everything, Radhika observed, a normal drawing room should have and perhaps more, she looked around, but all of it was positioned with such finesse that it still managed to look spacious and hence elegant. There was a wide span of windows,

towards the balcony, looking at the scene outside. The room had cross ventilation and thus it gave ample opportunity to the subtle breeze, coming in through the open windows and doors, to play harmoniously with the wind chimes attached to the pelmets, holding the white semi-transparent curtains. The ladies eventually sat on a majestic looking wrought-iron couch.

"We met your husband before we met you!" Deepali remarked.

"Yes, he told me."

"Is he the same guy you used to go out with during school days?"

"Ya!" Savera blushed.

"Great!"

Someone, meanwhile, was watching from behind the curtains, his playful eyes fixed on Radhika. *Tina is right*, he thought.

The encounter with Dr. Radhika had confounded him like never before. She was supposedly a doctor but, on the contrary, had infected him with further sickness. Exactly how? He didn't know.

Laye, who had faked joy while leaving the nursing home, tried to jump off the roof of his granny's house the next day to make it there again. And he would have done it if the height didn't excite vertigo inside him. When he was told his drawings were appreciated by Radhika and that she had actually cared to come up to his place – *to my room* – he was ecstatic. But he soon realized, because he was asleep when she came, what a *chosen-fucked* one he was.

In the days that followed Dr. Radhika became his homework. She was present in the yolk of the egg in his breakfast, in the tip of the pencil he wrote and drew with, in the push when he sat on a swing in the park with Tina, Tina, Tin

Laye moved as the squeeze of embarrassment left his cheeks red.

"Which standard are you in?" Deepali asked.

"Third."

"Angshu only started going to school from lastyear." "Angshu?" Savera got up, turned the knob of the fan to maximum and took her seat again. "Angshuman, my son." "Hev when did vou get married?" "Right after college." Oh shit! She is looking at me; Laye thought and swallowed a lump. "Great! There's nothing as pure as marriage. And quicker you do it better are your chances to be happy for a longer time. What about you, Radhika?" "Hmm?" Radhika broke from a trance. "I said what about you? Committed?" "I am still single." If everything's about being physically with the person you love then I'll stay that way forever. "Why? I think someone like you should have been the ultimate temptation for bachelors!" Laye only got the temptation and bachelor part right. "The person you love might not be flawless but your feelings towards him should be. That's how relationships click. And frankly, I haven't felt that way for anybody as yet." She felt a surge of emotions choke her while squeezing out the last sentence. Savera nodded in agreement.

"Oh, sure." Savera glanced at Laye who instantly ran inside the kitchen. He took two

"May I have some water?"

glasses and quickly filled them up with water from Aquaguard. He wanted to pass this test of efficiency. Putting the glasses on a tray, he was about to walk into the drawing room when he stopped for a second. Idea! He dropped the tray and put his left leg on one of the broken pieces of glass. "Ah!"

Savera came running, followed by her friends. "Oh! My God!"

"There's nothing to panic. Do you have cotton?" Radhika was soon given a ball of cotton, wetting which she first cleared the wound on its side, took out the pricked piece of glass carefully, cleaned the rest of the wound and then, applying the antiseptic cream she used to keep with her, bandaged the spot with a white cloth. In all, four minutes. Laye, who usually cried like mad at the slightest injury, didn't shed a single tear. Radhika's nursing gave wings to his senses and they, for those four minutes, explored the sky of desires. For the first time he realized pains can be sweet too. And that some wounds are worth having again and again. Missionaccomplished!

Savera calmed down only after seeing her son bandaged. Radhika noticed it. Raen used to be desperate about Savera. Whatever he felt for her, she is feeling for him now; oblivious to the truth, of course. The thought awed her. What if she comes to know about it someday? But how would she? And would she believe it? Would anybody, for that matter, believe it?

"Day after day you are turning impatient. Why don't do anything slowly?" Savera took him to his bed. The calling bell rang and she excused herself.

"Do you want to tell me something?" Radhika came and sat beside him.

"No."

"Your eyes say you want to tell me something." Laye was quiet. "No."

"You once told me you and your friend often draw each other's faces and you end up making someone else's face. Remember? Will you show one of those drawings to me?"

"Sure." Laye sprang to his feet. It definitely resembles you, he thought.

"Not now. You must lie down else your mother will scold you."

"It's okay. I am stronger than what ma thinks." He limped towards his book shelf and searched the racks. It wasn't there.

"Have you moved any of my drawings from here?" he asked Savera who entered the room at that moment.

"No. Why?"

"I had kept few here but I cannot find them anymore."

"So, you have not only become impatient but careless too."

What has happened to her today? Why can't she talk of one good quality about me? Laye, making a face, got up on the bed again.

"It's alright," Radhika clasped his hand, "May be next time."

"I can tell you the face on the sketch was very beautiful," Laye said and swallowed a lump, "like you", he only thought.

"Come, let's go to my room," Savera quipped. "And you stay here," She added seeing her son get up.

Oh ma!

The two of them followed Savera into her room.

"So what made you two come here?"

"We are here because of..." Radhika only started. "My husband." Deepali completed.

"Your husband stays here?"

"No. He had some work in Mumbai so I came along too."

Savera looked at Radhika as Deepali continued, "And brought her with me. She had few pending leaves."

Radhika smiled nervously and nodded in agreement.

"Then you could have come here with your husband."

"Bhushan – that's my husband – had to complete the work today so may be some other time."

They caught up with each other's past during the next hour. Neither Radhika mentioned a thing about Raen nor did Savera ask anything. *She must have forgotten him*. Finally, when Savera excused herself to take a bath, they were back in Laye's room.

"What are you doing?"

"I was talking to Tina over the phone."

"Is she your best friend?" Radhika asked.

"Yes." Laye watched Radhika pull out something from her bag.

"That's my drawing!"

"I know. Do you know this place?"
Laye observed the chapel stairs closely. "No."

"Then how did you draw it?"

"Just like that. I draw many such things which I don't know about. That's why Tina often calls me mad."

"And what about this?" Radhika pointed at the signature.

"I do that when I finisha sketch."

"You don't know what it stands for?"

"No. Why? What does it stand for?"

Radhika didn't reply immediately. All unreasonable things have a reasonable reason and all reasonable things have an unreasonable reason, she thought. May be that's why the cues of our lives – significant or flimsy – exist neither amidst us nor beside us but somewhere in the *back stage*. As if our present life is only a rehearsal for the next. Why else, if this life is the only real thing, there would be so many anonymous gaps defining our existence?

Seeing Laye's expectant face, Radhika spoke up. "This sign," she indolently folded the drawing and kept it back in her bag, "stands for hope."

"Really? Which language is this?"

Love. "That I am not sure of but it gave me hope all my life and so I want you to promise me you would always keep this sign in yoursketches."

"I promise."

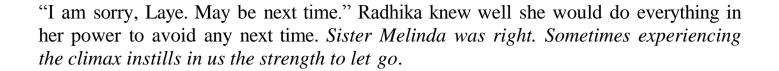
Radhika leaned forward and kissed him on his cheeks. She sighed -it ends here...for my job's done, Laye smiled -it felt so great and Deepali rubbed her eyes -I am proud of you, Rads.

Savera wanted them to lunch with her but they declined.

"Bhushan would be waiting, won't he?" Radhika asked Deepali. "O yes! We really need to go. But now that we have each other's number and address we will be in touch."

"Sure."

Laye thought Radhika would be there, at least, till evening. Seeing her getting ready to leave, he spoke up. "But you haven't met Tina yet! She would love to meet you."



They left.

*

After having lunch in a restaurant in Vashi itself, they headed for Marine Drive; the three kilometer long natural bay. The breeze there was refreshingly cool and when they sat on the thick cement boundary demarcating the city and the bay, they wished there was such a place in every city. Couple of hours went by in silence. Late into the afternoon, Deepali bought *bhel-puri* from a nearby hawker.

"It's good."

"Ya."

"Do you believe attraction is the missing link between souls?" Radhika was looking at the distant horizon.

"What kind of attraction are you talking about? Attraction that teases our physical needs?"

"No. I am talking about that attraction which excites within us emotions for a person whom we don't really know as such."

Deepali shrugged.

"What did you think when you saw Bhushan for the first time in college?"

"That I want to spend my life with this person."

Radhika looked at her friend. "That was your first thought?"

"Yes."

"So you have experienced that kind of attraction."

"Ya, but I don't know why it happened."

"Don't worry, that nobody knows. The 80-20 rule I guess. Eighty percent of known things happen because of an impetus from the twenty percent of the unknown."

Again she was silent. Deepali didn't talk either. And couple of hours later Radhika suddenly said, "Suffering is the process of bringing us closer to nature and that is where all our answers lie. Nature."

*

The return route, the next day, was same as arrival; Mumbai to Guwahati via Kolkata. It was an evening flight. And when the pilot announced he was ready for take-off Radhika inhaled deep. Finally, she felt, the flight of her present was ready to take-off from the ground of her past and into the unknown clouds of future.

"You know, Deepali, good experiences make memories and bad ones make up for good lessons. But the experience of love shouldn't be differentiated as good or bad for they go a notch higher to strengthen us. The fact that we fall in love is in itself a blessing of a lifetime and everything that precedes or succeeds it is as insignificant as we are in front of the cosmos.

Sister Melinda's words made more sense in Laye's presence yesterday. I realized many things. It didn't solve any problems as such but helped me understand them better. For instance, I now know – like never before – how necessary it is to save the money of love in order to afford alacrity of soul throughout. That I had Raen's phantasmal existence within me wasn't my mistake. But fighting it initially was. And so was assuming it to be a sin. Like I thought if I have someone in my life before I get over with Raen then it might be immoral. But yesterday awakened me to a truth: any act whose quintessence is humane can never be a sin."

"Veg or non-veg?" One of the air hostesses, pushing in a trolley of food, asked.

"Two non-veg please," Deepali responded.

The air hostess, without disturbing the smile on her face, forwarded two trays and moved on. They unpacked the food and with the first bite Radhika thought, *everyone is someone awaiting identification*.

"What if you discover Angshu is someone you or someone else knew before?"

Period. "I don't know." Period.

"May be I would have done something about it."

"Like what?"

"Like..." Deepali thought and said aloud, "I don't know. Ground water may help you correct your reflection but once they come down as rains you..."

"You know the difference."

"Exactly. They might excite a déjà vu feeling and some bizarre emotions but in the end the rain is only a euphemistic reminiscent of the ground water. Either enjoy it for a while and revel in the evanescence later or drench in it and let it off course you incorrigibly – it's your take, really."

Neither of them felt the need to talk further. It was only when the plane hovered over Kolkata, Radhika pulled Deepali over, "Look how beautiful the city looks from here. Like an ode to celebrating life!"

"Ya! But you go and ask the people in the streets and all they do is to complain about despair, heartaches and lassitude." The plane descended a level in air and Deepali jolted back to her seat.

Is that what we all do? Without considering the view from where life, for a change, might look delightful we keep lamenting instead. Is it because of plain ignorance? Or are we all masochistic to an extent? And if such a view exists in every situation and in everyone's life where is the view for me? Where is it?

The plane's wheel kissed the ground. Radhika took out her cell phone and switched it

on. The plane, from its monumental speed, slowed down. Radhika turned towards Deepali. "May I have your phone, please?" The crux of life is pain, she was thinking. With both phones in her hand she checked the name list on each. The crux of pain is love. The plane took a steady turn. The crux of love is life again. She reached the name she was looking for. The science of existence must be circular. The plane finally came to a still as the passengers got up to assemble their hand-bags. My life, whenever I felt my will weakening, has pushed me towards pain. She typed a number from Deepali's cell, which she had consciously deleted earlier, and gave her the phone back. In the debris of pain I understood the significance of love. She saved Sunil's number in her phone. The passengers formed a queue to leave as...and now in the palace of love the twisting-turning corridors of life are making sense...the doors got unlocked.

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CHAPTER – 22

"Radhika and Deepali were here today."

It was quarter to twelve when Savera joined her husband on bed. She immediately crawled into his arms. "I knew they would," her eyes closed, "more so after they cared to follow up Laye in Guwahati." The nervous love circles her fingers made on his chest helped Ashesh realize she was only physically present beside him. He switched off the light, kept the magazine he was reading on the rack clamped with the bed and finishing the half-spent cigarette with couple of hasty puffs turned towards his wife. He kissed the tip of her nose. It was unusually cold. "What is it?"

Savera looked at him and then responded, placing her soft lips on his chest. "Ilove you." "I love you, too." Ashesh smelt her silky hair which, exuding the perfume of bliss, were falling carelessly over his shoulder. He was in love with her for the past fourteen years and still expressing it felt liberating.

"I never thought I would ever tell you about it," Savera started.

"About what?"

"You'll know it tonight but please don't stop me in between. Hear me out first. I want to get done with this for once and always."

"Go on," Ashesh said adjusting himself to feel more comfortable.

"I was in eleventh standard at that time. By then of course you were in my life. There was a boy, Raen Verma, who had joined the school that year. He proposed to me one day. I slapped him then and there." She looked at Ashesh, "You remember we had a serious quarrel once?" Ashesh nodded, a little curious now. "And the proposal happened the following day. I was in such a wretched mood else I wouldn't have slapped him at least. I did apologize later through a common friend. We thought of becoming friends but he again proposed to me, few months later, only to hear a second no. I didn't hear or see much of him after that. Honestly, he was totally out of my mind. That is, till Laye was born."

[&]quot;What has our son got do with it?" Ashesh sat up.

"Please." Savera pulled him back and instead she got up. She walked up to the closet, and pulled out some sheets of paper and gave them to Ashesh. "Isn't this..."

"It's Radhika; each one of it. Laye made these a year ago. A child of his age can make drawings – alright – but how can he be so suspiciously specific? Look at the right hand bottom of the page." Ashesh did. "It reads RV. Raen Verma. I know this because he had once gifted me a sketch. And this is not all. There are more inexplicable things. Like the way Laye says, 'I love you, ma'. It has the same degree of edginess as was evident with Raen. My friends often said he was mad about me. Have you ever seen Laye disobeying me? Of course, you might say I am his mother so he should ideally be obeying me. But since his birth he has not even once said or done something against my will. Not even once! You are his father; tell me, does he always agree with you?" Ashesh kept looking at the drawings as Savera continued, "And Radhika's journey all the way to Mumbai, as far as I am concerned, is the final nail on the coffin. She didn't come here to meet me. No way! She was here to meet Laye."

"Did she know the guy?"

"Radhika loved him. Probably more than anyone can ever love someone."

Savera dug her face in his chest. "Radhika knows what I know else she wouldn't have cared to pursue Laye in Guwahati and now here. But I don't know why exactly she visited me. I felt scared seeing her today. Really scared. I thought she was here to snatch Laye from me. And when it didn't happen, I was ashamed of myself. How could I be so cheap?"

"Calm down." Ashesh caressed her back. He wasn't convinced of the way Savera perceived the matter. How can this be true...how can Laye be...hell why am I even considering it!

"If you had told me this before, you could have at least spared yourself the days of silent suffering." Are these the side-effects of the antibiotics she is taking for her menstrual pain?

"I didn't tell you about it because not only was it weird but also, I thought, it would affect your attitude towards Laye."

"We have together brought him into this world. He is our son. And that's what he is and will be no matter whatever coincidence disturbs you."

"It didn't disturb only me Ashu. It disturbed two people; Radhika and me."

"Okay! But you also got to understand that Laye is my son and there's no reason what you told me should create any gap between us." Few silent seconds passed. "What do you want to do?" Ashesh almost whis pered.

"That's the problem. You can change fiction but you can't change reality. Looking at Laye for all these nine years I have come to a conclusion that sometimes accepting things as they are and being happy with whatever God has given you is the best solution. There are times when life wants you to take action and there are times when life only wants you to sit back and witness its unusual play."

"Exactly!" Ashesh caressed her back. "Moreover, I still don't..."

"Ma." It was Laye. He stood at the door rubbing his eyes.

"Laye?" Savera, surprised at her son's sudden presence, wiped her eyes. "What is it, Gem?"

"I am not able to sleep properly tonight. If papa doesn't mind, may I please sleep here with you?"

"Why would papa mind?" It was Ashesh. "Come over. For a change you will sleep beside me tonight. Come on, Gem." Laye couldn't believe what a stone of serendipity he stumbled upon. Without wasting a second he climbed up the bed to cuddle into his father's arms.

As they say some questions are better not answered, Savera wondered. *Some questions are better not asked*, she corrected herself.

*

CHAPTER – 23

Radhika stood leaning on the railing that surrounded the terrace of a high-rise shopping mall. The top floor was a banquet hall where she had accompanied Sunil for one of his friend's anniversary party. One month had gone by and thanks to Sunil her present, much to her surprise, seemed tantamount to the thick layer of cheese between the breads of past and future.

Sunil extended his visit by two weeks when he learnt Radhika was interested to meet him again. He couldn't believe he would, at a matured age, fall for the teenager's fantasy; love at first sight. When he saw Radhika for the first time at Bhushan's place some lost rushes inside him seemed to edit themselves into one complete suave film; all by itself. Her presence was magical and magnetic. She excited him like no one had before. The women who had hitherto come in Sunil's life were of two types: same-in-adifferent way and different-in-the-same way. But Radhika, he was sure, was different in a different way. Her sex appeal wasn't one-dimensional. It oozed as much from her nubile mien as it did from her razor-edged intellect. Every time she agreed with him over an issue he felt more like a man and every time she contradicted him he got an erection. Her persona was as mesmerizing as any natural phenomenon, her demeanor was as captivating as the colour of the sky during a sunrise and her aura was intoxicating as success; enough was never enough. And in the end Sunil concluded Radhika wasn't how a woman is. She was what a woman should be like - always in the apparel of an impeccable magic that challenged men to look beyond his personal and prejudiced horizons.

Bottles of Champagne were getting uncorked, bouts of laughter and claps were heard and together with music from a band the entire scene got filled with the invisible foam of festivity. Sunil was busy chitchatting with his friends when, on a hunch, he noticed Radhika. She was standing aloof from the crowd. He excused himself to join her.

With each step of his the cacophony of the crowd was slowly ebbing away. And whenhe

reached Radhika, only a pleasant breeze remained that played the background score along with the distant sound of the traffic below.

"Anything interesting down there?"

Radhika only smiled faintly. Talking to Sunil for the last one month – over phone or dinner or during an aimless evening walk – helped form a bond of comfort between the two. And Radhika was glad that the titanic sea waves of interactions were silently eroding the shore of her past.



"You were right," Radhika looked at the dark sky above, "the state of virginity, for a woman who stands in front of a man contemplating marriage, differentiates her into either a slut or a saint."

"Honestly speaking, I never thought on those lines but yes I do have few male-chauvinist-pig friends who do. As for me, priorities make one a slut or for that matter a pig. An action is just a follow-up."

"What if I now say I am not a virgin?"

"I," Sunil scratched his head, "won't believe you."

"That's an opinion not an answer."

"In that case I am not a virgin either so that makes us even-stevens! Moreover why to go mad on something that gave you pleasure once."

"Did it ever occur to you, more than being an exciting moment of synthetic pleasure, it could also mean everything for someone."

Sunil took few seconds. "May I know who was it?"

"That's not the point."

"Okay. Allow me to tell you about mine first may be then you'll find it easier to share. I have done it with four people till date. First, when I was seventeen. I did it because my friends had already done it. Next, when I was twenty. She was one of the hotties of the college and I couldn't rest before pushing it beyond going-around. Third was just an office quickie. We both were tired and needed to vent out." There was no response from Radhika. "I am sorry if I was blatant. But that's my way of putting facts to face."

"At least you are honest about it."

A smile crossed Sunil's face. "So now will you please tell me his name?"

"Don't worry I ama virgin."

"Jesus!" An urgent sigh escaped him. "You saved my sweat glands fromoverwork!"

"If it's about having a tissue in place, then yes, I am a virgin. But if we consider the virginity of mind and heart then for records' sake I have been infiltrated ages ago. Andas far as I am concerned that's more challenging for any man."

"Than?"

"Than to infiltrate...let's say the tissue."

"And what makes you infer so?"

"Oh you know it, don't you?"

"Let's assume not."

"Sex is a silly pet of our body chemicals and almost always is an act of compulsion. Its need based. And I don't mean any cosmic need but a need which sprouts inside us because certain portion in all of us is a hardcore animal with flesh being its only nutrient. Does lust ever guide us like love? No! It merely imprisons us. We don't build the urges. It's they who build us and then what? The vicious loop of fuck-relax-fuck-relax-fuck-relax till the woman reaches menopause or the man becomes a passé. No big deal. Everybody with a normal sexual response can do that. But love, like an infant's temperament, is free. Thus to infiltrate and leave an indelible mark in someone's heart — more so a woman's — is tougher. Something that doesn't happen every Saturday night."

"I am afraid I lost you from the third line."

"Great!"

"I mean, why is it that you speak so lowly of sex? Having sex doesn't necessarily mean one thinks of the other as a pleasure deriving machine. Sometimes it's also about respecting and feeling the way nature made you. Don't you think that way sex is also an

important facet of a relationship?"

"Of course, it is. Somewhere down the line sex too is a manifestation of love; the most personal manifestation, perhaps. But what I am simply trying to say is that there might be hundreds who, given a chance, might thoroughly satisfy you sexually but there can only be one person, among thousands, who will love you like nobody.

"You really loved him, didn't you?"

"That's the problem. I really loved him."

"Did you say problem?"

"No true love ever escapes the claws of suffering."

"What according to you is suffering?"

"I always thought suffering was something this planet could do without. But that was till I met a nine-year-old boy, weeks ago. Now I know suffering is nothing but the process of getting closer to nature. It's important because that's where all our answers hide." Sunil nodded in appreciation and averted his eyes from Radhika to the traffic below. *She still loves him.* From the time he knew Radhika he thought she was single. But now he knew the matter was worse. *She actually loves someone like mad!* That imbued the weight of jealousy in his heart. Which man likes competition as far as love is concerned? He was quick to look at her again. "In case you are still in love with that guy do you seriously think you will be happy aftermarriage?"

"I am a woman. I'll adjust."

"And won't that be a little tough on the husband?"

"Eight out of ten couples end up marrying the second or third best person and spend the rest of their lives trying to find the first person they ever felt was theirs in the one they marry. So if I am also forced to join the majority, I don't think your accusation is justified. Moreover who knows I might also be the third or fourth choice of the man I marry!"

"Hmm..." Sunil was ready to open his heart to her, "what if you are the first choice of a guy? Won't you respect his love for you and give him a chance so that when you say those three words to him you might as well mean them? Won't you allow me one opportunity to erase your past for always?"

"No, because you won't be able to."

Sunil turned away his face in disgust. You won't be able to. I won't be able to? Had it been said only to contradict his views, he wouldn't have taken it seriously but it was a gross insult. Just because that guy got to her first doesn't mean my love for her gets dwarfed. What does she think of herself? She and her guy are the only goddamn people who are allowed to fall in love in the pure sense? And the rest of us only have the needs of flesh to satisfy?

And the audacity to say I'll adjust no matter how much the husband loves her! That's worse than adultery. To marry one man and love another is more immoral. Any day.

"When I talked to you for the first time I thought you were different. But tonight you disappointed me. Big time! You know the difference between a whore and a wife? A whore only offers her body for the purpose of business but a wife offers her body and soul, for the purpose of communion. You said it's a challenge for a man to infiltrate a woman's heart then hear this: if a woman offers a man only her body then it's futile to expect and impossible to extort respect from him. I am not comparing but all I am saying is if you keep that guy alive inside you even after your marriage, I bet, you won't be able to be a wife. And if I marry someone then I would, at least, want that woman to be with me as my wife. Nothing more, nothing less. For, I don't know about her, but I can't let my entire life be a waste because of her inexplicable feelings for someone else." Sunil simply turned the other side. Each word that escaped him, in the last few minutes, made his heart wear the mask of guilt but then there were certain portions inside him, rich with experience, which seconded his response. It's useless to push a relationship when only one of the two cares about its progression. Of course I respect her feelings but that doesn't give her the right to insult mine. Sure I love her and would like to marry her but that doesn't mean I'll accept her knowing she would, given a chance, rather be someone else's. I can't do that. I – Sunil heard Radhika sniveling. He turned to face her.

"Look" He held her shoulders but Radhika shrugged uncomfortably, "I am sorry. I didn't..."

"Hey! Sunil," a colleague called out, "look whose here." Sunil gestured him to wait and

looked at Radhika, who was staring at the dark emptiness above. "Please don't cry. Try to understand my position. I didn't mean to hurt you but how else do you expect a guy to react when you tell him, his love isn't good enough?"

"Hey, come over, lover boy." His friends teased him. "Give me few minutes." Sunil moved away to join his group.

As Radhika once again stood alone, the voice within her seemed louder than the pandemonium outside. God, how do I free myself of his love? How do I forget the person who is my life? Tears were rolling down her supple cheeks but she didn't care. What reason do I state so that I am allowed to preserve his imprints within me? What explanation do I need to come up with to keep Raen for my very existence? What are those words that would help people understand that love is a natural phenomenon and I have no control over it. Falling in love isn't an act of will then how can coming out of it be? And if...she looked down from where she was standing. The great height, she thought, was whispering something. A solution? Radhika dared to listen. A solution! She inhaled deeply, rubbed her cheeks and exhaled in a way as if she had finally got a concrete answer to everything...If one has the heart to fall in love with someone, then one must also have the guts to pay the price for it.

She climbed the railing of the terrace, in a flash, and jumped.

I LOVE YOU, RAEN.

She heard her own words roaring in the air like thunder.

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CHAPTER - 24

"Is that you?"

Radhika, on arrival, was immediately directed to the intensive care unit of Cognizance Nursing Home diagnosed with severe head injuries, broken hip bone, jarred spine and a dislodged neck. There were two drips on both hands constant for the last forty eight hours and the breathing process was taken care of by a tracheotomytube.

"Raen, is that you?" Her mind, under the spell of hallucination, inquired again. *Yesit's me*.

"Where were you all these years?" Radhika, lying on the bed with eyes closed, thought the words were actually coming out. "Why didn't you take me with you?"

That wasn't my decision. But luckily love is never at the clemency of distance.

"Then why are you here now?"

I thought you were trying to get rid of me.

"No! I was only trying to finishmyself...not you."

And what made you believe we are exclusive of each other?

"I didn't mean that. But, I missed you terribly. Why is love so important Raen if it can't stop us from bleeding."

Love is important not to stop but to take our mind off the bleeding.

"Do you think it was foolish of me to love you during your eternal absence? Do you also think I should have moved on?"

The most foolish thing in this world is to fall in love with someone without any

reason. But the smartest thing, once you are in love, is to respect that fall for ever.

"Thanks, Raen." The one who matters the most understood her. What else does she need? She felt like a queen. "I am glad I heldon."

Radhika Sharma, do you have the slightest idea how honoured I am and how worthwhile my love for you feels? I am, by far, the luckiest ever.

"No. We are by far the luckiest ever," Radhika added. They smiled. Their hands came closer and the palms caressed each other. The fingers tangled and soon their hands clasped together.

The difference between a mother and a wife is that we come out of the former and we go into the latter. It's like emerging out from one sea — wet with queries — and immersing into another; in the quest for answers. Lady, will you enlighten me... forever?

"I..." Radhika choked a little, "I will...forever..." she said, "and beyond."

Radhika felt his body pushing her onto the bed and then covering her slowly. She was living her dream again. Life and destiny seemed too small in comparison. There were only the two of them and nothing else. She felt the pain tearing her apart and at the same time she experienced ecstasy of a sublime dimension. It was like standing naked in Siberia while experiencing the tropic of cancer within. She tightened her grip on Raen. With each thrust something was steadily building up and dying to come out. She could neither take the pleasure nor the pain anymore. Something was coming out for sure. She could feel it. *Any moment now*. And when it did, everything stopped. It was her last breath. This was her reward. Just that to deserve it, she had to disappear into a fissure where existence is neither allowed nor called for.

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EPILOGUE

Providence, USA.

"She is inside for hours now. I hope there's no complication this time." John heard his mother-in-law as he greeted her outside the OT.

John and Heather, three months back, experienced their fifth marriage anniversary. The five years that they had spent together was secured beyond doubt but still wasn't a happy one. Heather had to twice face natural abortion and the third time, couple of years ago, they had a dead baby. They had given up hope and were seriously considering their options of adoption when both Heather's and John's parents along with some close friends coaxed them to give each other one more chance.

The door to the OT opened. Nothing happened for few seconds and then John stood up watching his in-laws already walking towards it. Two doctors came out talking amongst themselves. They stopped. "Where is Mr. Ferguson?" The older doctor asked aloud. His face was empty of emotions.

"Here," John took a step forward. "Congratulations, you are a father now. You all may go inside now." John could have fainted with joy. Somehow he managed to connect with his common sense and walked in.

The baby girl was in front of him. He took the little miracle on his lap and kissed her forehead. It felt heaven. Looking at his wife, who looked weak and pale, he said, "Thank you for this beautiful flower."

"Thank *you* for planting the seed." Heather only could smile faintly. John handed the baby to his in-laws and leaned forward to kiss his wife.

"We aren't just a couple now. Thanks to Elizabeth Heather Ferguson" John looked at the baby and then again at his wife, "We are a family now." They kissed. As Heather's parents were enjoying the presence of their grand daughter on their lap, the attending nurse spoke up. "Have you seen the small black sign on her left thigh?" Every eye in the room turned towards the nurse and then on the baby's left thigh.

"Look closely it's actually a cross. My momma says it's a lucky charm. God shall

always be with her." The faces in the room were beaming now.

"Have you noticed one more thing?" "What?" Heather sounded weak.

"The kid is smiling ever since she saw light. Abnormal isn't? But then my momma says anything that's abnormal need not be a matter of worry."

The End



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