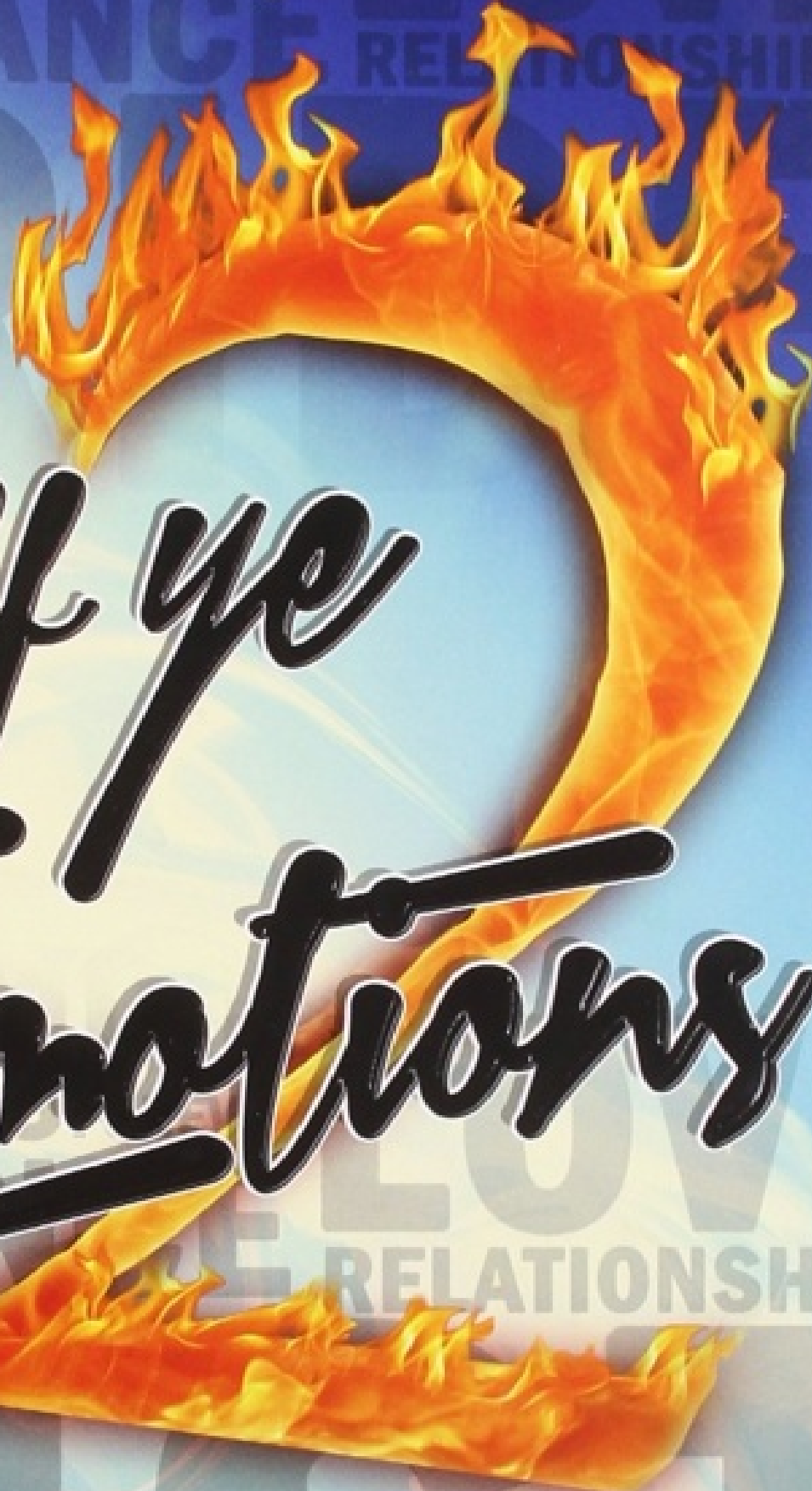


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India's most loved story book is back...



Uff ye Emotions

Edited by

VINIT K. BANSAL

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *I AM HEARTLESS*



... I Love you Rachu ...

Also by Vinit K. Bansal

I Am Heartless... A Real Confession

Uff Ye Emotions

Wo Chali Gayi (Hindi)

Uff Ye Jazbaat (Hindi)

Udeek (Punjabi)



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... I Love you Rachu ...

Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu

I thinks see knows my name

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Dedication

Dedicated to the girl who taught me the real meaning of love...

Editor's Note

Like always, I want to thank all my beloved readers for their never-ending love and support. My heartiest regards to all those who appreciated my work and also to those who found it worth criticising. All of you have inspired me to do better.

After the enormous success of *Uff Ye Emotions 1*, we decided to continue this series for long. After all, no other feeling is more precious than seeing a reader smile and be satisfied. Your love made my previous book the source of encouragement for many sparkling eyes having their stories published for the first time and debuting in the literary world. Apart from acquiring individual identity, we, the twelve contributors, were a team – Team UYE, and we are proud of being a part of this team. Personally, I wanted to live those moments again, working as a part of the Team UYE. That's precisely why we came up with this sequel and hope to receive the same love from all our readers.

Picking up the ten finest stories from hundreds of stories, which we received, was not at all an easy task, but we gave it our best shot in the hope of living up to your expectations.

I am very sure that all the readers will feel the same emotions, which we all felt while penning down these stories.

Further, I want to thank all the members and fellow contributors of Team UYE 2 – Azeemji of General Press and our entire editorial team for making it possible for me. I would like to pay my humble obeisance to Anoop Lather Sir for his blessings. Love to Saurabh, Vicky and Gagan as these three have been my strength. Kudos to Amol Karambe for such a beautiful cover design! Special thanks to our branding partner, JimmyEric Films and Media, and our marketing partner, Legendary Book Marketing Promotions by Author's Empire™.

In the end, my love and hearty regards to all my readers. Love you all!

—Vinit K. Bansal



Vinit K. Bansal

Vinit K. Bansal is the author of *I am Heartless... A Real Confession*, a novel, which has been continuously ruling the bestsellers' chart since the last one and a half years and has been acclaimed as one of the most touching love stories of recent times. He is fond of reading, writing and composing stories since childhood. He earned his Master's degree from Kurukshetra University and was bestowed awards both at the college and university level. He continues to nurture his dream of writing and has succeeded in giving shape to his thoughts in his books. As a voracious reader and an avid writer, his vision extends to the realm of social service too. At present, he is working with the State Bank of India in Delhi and loves to pen down his thoughts whenever he finds time.

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Story 1

The Client

Based on a real incident

Vinit K. Bansal

Mumbai – a city famous for being the glamorous and glittering queen of the Indian terrain. Glamour is something that Mumbai flaunts and probably needs, but in the shadows of this glittering and crowded city, lay many people who look for at least one soul to be with – strange, but true.

She was walking with her heels, making the clippety-clop sound that one could hear across the hall. She seemed younger than her age because of her exposed cleavage and make-up. Riva was 24, a young Nepali girl with fair complexion, height more than five and a half feet, sharp features, milky skin and expressive eyes. She was hard to read, and definitely, didn't look like a prostitute. She knocked on the door to room number 1714 of Hotel Central Plaza, Mumbai. Chandrakant Malhotra, a rich businessman, was her client for tonight.

She had to admit that the room looked exquisite and luxurious, especially due to the small, attached kitchen, a king-size bed and a television of size she had never ever seen before. It was huge. Chandrakant sat on the couch, watching 'Tom and Jerry' and trying to smile. She thought she'd have a bad experience – a bad physical experience as his stature revealed.

Nevertheless, he didn't seem to be interested in physical activities. He looked at her, and then, looked back at the TV, as if the cartoons were more tempting than her. It confirmed her thought – he was not interested much in physical activities, or say, in her. That hit her bad, very bad, and she wondered why she was approached if he wasn't interested. But, she remained mum. They had time, and time is the path to intimacy. This she knew to be true.

"Sit down," he asked her in his stern voice.

She followed his order because that's what she was meant to do and was to be paid for. They sat and watched 'Tom and Jerry' for the next few hours. Who does that? But, they did. They were just there, together, staring at the TV screen. This was her first client so far who was more interested in sitting glued to the TV screen than ogling at her

physical attributes. It was strange... really strange! She was baffled at what she was seeing, as it was very new to her. Although, no one taught her how to talk to clients – she was well taught to sell her body, suck tools and follow orders obediently. She was indeed good at her profession, but, this was quite different to accept, even for someone as good as her.

It was around 3 a.m. when he uttered, “Do you want some coffee?” He didn’t even look at her while talking. His smile wasn’t genuine, but there was something faithful in his gesture. She refused, and he got back to what he had been doing – watching television. She tried to divert her attention, but his strange equanimity was pulling back her heed to the weird ambiance of that room. At 4, she got enough of it and asked him if he’d like to initiate or want her to do anything for him. He didn’t speak, but handed out fresh currency notes to her – 5,000 rupees. She took the money, as it was what she had to work for, and after waiting for a couple of hours, at 6 a.m., she left, absolutely flummoxed.

Well, her puzzled state had a valid reason behind it. Prostitution runs for those men who are hungry for sex, but, her client that night was way different – he, despite paying her a good amount, didn’t even touch her! He just left her wondering at the reason that made him hire her.

Nights passed with Riva being ‘served’ to more than ten clients that week. Her life was going normal until her agent, Munna, who provided her clients on a commission of a thousand bucks, provided her the details of her new client of that night. Again, it was room number 1714 of Hotel Central Plaza.

She walked with her usual gait, her heels grabbing the attention and her cleavage attracting many. She walked through the hall, to the elevator, and then, towards the room. Same hotel, same room! It seemed normal to her, as some hotels keep a few rooms reserved for high-profile escorting services. As soon as she opened the door, she saw the same man sitting in the same stature and watching the same cartoon show. It was Chandrakant Malhotra, the only client in her ‘professional’ life who spent a night with her, paid her, but didn’t touch her. Her first encounter with him had already left a mark on her mind as being unusual.

She walked inside, mute and confused. However, unlike their previous meet, this time, Chandrakant noticed her, which subsequently made her think that maybe he’d *do* something this time. Coming back to her ‘professionalism’, she started walking towards him. Looking way hotter than she looked in the previous meeting and exposing her milky-white legs, this time, she tried to heat things up. She dropped her coat and heels near the door and walked towards him, hoping that her sensuous acts would seduce him and he’d pounce on her. But, crushing down her expectations, he got her out of her train of thoughts and didn’t even bother to look at her.

Food was already on the table. But she, having nothing ‘good’ to do, just took her side on the bed and started glancing through some of the books kept nearby. There were books – oh yes, classics and poetry novels. This was the presidential suite, after all, and it had everything you’d want of a room. She started playing the music, which prodded

her client to cast a stern look, that obviously meant that he was against music, and she was supposed to turn it off.

She immediately turned the music off and asked, “So, are you going to fuck me tonight or we would just sit and watch TV?” Finally, the confused state of her mind had played its role and didn’t allow her to stay quiet for long.

“We’re going to have dinner tonight. I have prepared it on my own. Would you like to have it?” he asked with a smile. There was a sense of guilt in his voice. He served her dinner and watched her eat, while he ate his food slowly. He was a good cook. They didn’t talk, not even a single word. They just ate, watched television, and after a few hours, doing nothing again, he paid her and she left.

It left Riva speechless this time. She had been with men who made her do a lot of things, which she shouldn’t have done, but she could never refuse. She was a professional at work and tried to satisfy her clients to her best. She could not refuse him as well, even if he had asked her for some over-expressive action. But, contrary to her expectations, he neither made her do anything nor hesitated to pay her for doing ‘nothing’. In fact, he paid her more for just sitting than people who paid for sex. She was getting her money without making her body commit that ‘emotional suicide’, as she did regularly. She should have been euphoric at being paid for doing nothing, but something in her heart would not let her do so.

A few nights passed again.

The next time, when her agent informed her that she was to go to the same hotel, she knew it had to be ‘him’. Though it wasn’t easy for her, she was mentally prepared for it. Yes, sex was easy as she used to do it every day, but sitting and watching a person sit wasn’t easy – not for prostitutes, not for any of them. She entered the room and found him dressed in a manner she hadn’t seen him before. He was standing and the television was turned off; this wasn’t normal for him. *Maybe he’d do it today*, she thought. By now, she wanted to have sex with him. It was turning into a sort of insult for her – regularly calling her, but surprisingly, not having sex, like he was not finding her worthy enough to be in his bed. He approached her and said, “Let’s go for a drive.”

She looked at him and said, “That’d charge extra.”

He smiled, but didn’t reply. Money was something he never cared for – he had a lot of it.

They sat in the car and drove towards the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, which tended to be the most peaceful and lonely area at that hour of the night. The car carried a bottle of wine and a few other things. “So, what’s your name?” he asked. It was the first time when he had asked her name, or for that matter, started some conversation with her.

“Riva,” she replied.

“I mean, your real name?”

She didn’t reply. *Prostitutes never reveal their real name.*

“I am Chandrakant Malhotra,” he said.

“I know. Munna told me.”

“I see...” he muttered as he lit a cigarette. He took a puff and offered her the packet.

She picked one for herself. They drove fast. He was concentrating on the road, and then, suddenly, he stopped the car in a lonely and barren land.

“I must be a real jerk according to you, isn’t it? I call you, pay you, but I don’t even touch you. I sit on the couch and watch cartoons when people can do that alone as well, right?” he said, looking directly into her eyes, which were full of isolation and pain.

She looked at him, but said nothing. There was nothing common between them to talk about.

“I don’t need sex; I need company. I just need someone to sit beside and listen to me. I don’t need advice; I need an audience. I’m a singer without an audience, an author without readers. It doesn’t feel good to pay for company, but I’m helpless,” he said.

Everyone has a story, he had one too. His son was studying in New York, the United States of America, and refused to see him, or in fact, was not even willing to talk to him. He was busy in his own life. His wife had abandoned him long ago. They had promised to stay together forever, and die together – but she died much before him, leaving him to suffer alone.

“People make use of what they have, and I’ve made use of my money. I need to get rid of this loneliness – anyhow,” he said, lighting another cigarette. He asked her about her identity, but she again refused to reveal it, abiding to the very important rule of prostitution – *a prostitute’s most precious jewellery is her identity*. And, it was absolutely impossible for her to take that ‘jewellery’ off.

“I’m rich and successful, but I don’t have people in my life. The absence of people hurts, and I am indebted to my work for that. Probably, my success is my greatest enemy and I’d end up as a lonely man in a palatial bungalow, without anyone to mourn my death,” he added.

She said nothing and kept listening to him.

He started to drive again.

They were now passing through the silent streets of Mumbai. Well, he was sort of loving the night, as he was, finally, having company – the company of Riva.

With the first ray of sunlight, without losing a second, he paid her off, and she left.

It continued for days. He would call her whenever he needed her to speak his heart out. *Strangers are good for making confessions, as they cannot harm you in any way. When you talk to a stranger about something, you know he or she cannot tell that to someone you know. It lightens you up and helps you pour your heart out. No man is an island; everyone needs someone or the other to share his feelings with.* He needed someone too and his fate showed up Riva as his rescuer.

One day, Riva, too, talked about herself. They were sitting near seashore. He took a gulp of his favourite Scotch and she was singing a Nepali song. Though, she wasn’t a good singer, he grew fond of her. They were very different from each other. He was twice her age, but something connected them, probably – their loneliness. They were comfortable with each other. No, they weren’t together; they were just there for each other.

She opened herself up for the first time that night. Though she didn’t want to, but she

began, "I am a graduate from Kathmandu. It's in Nepal."

"Yeah... I know," Chandrakant said.

"What? That I am from Kathmandu?" Riva asked surprisingly.

"No... I mean, I know that Kathmandu is in Nepal," he said with a smile.

She laughed.

"I fell in love with a school teacher in my town. He was an Indian from Hyderabad. He promised to marry me. I knew my parents were not going to accept us together, so, I decided to run away with him. That was the biggest mistake of my life," Riva said, with tears blurring her eyes.

Chandrakant wanted to ask *why*, but sensing the sensitivity of her emotions, he preferred to stay silent.

"The bastard didn't marry me. He sold me to this brothel, where I was forced to... beaten black and blue to..." and before she could complete her statement, she broke into tears. "After months and many kicks and punches from the people who bought me, I accepted it as my fate. I've been in this profession since I was 19 and had my first experience with a man who was older than my father."

"Isn't there a way out?" Chandrakant asked.

"I hate this profession, but I cannot quit. I cannot run. I know... I will either be murdered or these animals will come to Nepal to bring me back here. Prostitution is like a one-way road that can let you in, but later, wriggling out of it becomes virtually impossible. Initially, you accept it reluctantly; later, you do it because you cannot run away, and with time, it ensnares every bit of your entity in such a way that eventually you end up as a mere puppet to the profession."

"But there should be a way out..."

"I'd have to pay them a sum of ten lakhs to make myself free. You know, it's very hard to earn money. You might think earning that amount is easy when I charge 5,000 for a few hours, but then, the reality is different. I'm usually left with only 2,000 of that amount. My agent sucks up a thousand bucks and the brothel owner takes another two thousand, leaving me with only two thousand bucks. That's it. Probably, you earn more than that every minute. I presume that from the size of your car. But, life isn't as easy as what people think it to be. If it was that easy, I'd have been back home by now," she said, wiping her face and walking towards the car.

He followed her and they drove away, still without touching each other. Time was playing some unusual cards, because with every meeting, his addiction to her increased. She was in need of money to go back to Nepal. He was certainly in a condition to make her free and fulfil her most-wanted wish, but his own state and their growing connection prevented him from doing so. Since ages, he had been craving for decent company and some sound sleep. His sleep regularly ditched him, making him feel lonelier than ever. He missed his wife and son. He used to miss them like anything. And his wife was, probably, the only reason why he couldn't have sex with anyone else after her. However, things were changing with the arrival of Riva in his life. She was like an air of change, which could gradually blow away his pain.

The routine continued for six months. He would talk to her and she would listen, and often, vice-versa. They talked about everything, ranging from life, the hardships of being a woman in a male-dominated society, to her clients and their funny gestures. By now, they had grown familiar to each other's soul and felt alive in each other's company.

Things were going perfectly fine until that one night when he called her up again.

He had ordered the hotel staff to decorate the room in the best possible manner they could. He also brought a gift for Riva. There was something beautiful, which he was planning out for her. She arrived without expecting anything special or unusual. She entered the room and found herself surrounded with candles and balloons. She was amazed because she wasn't acquainted with this side of him. He stood, waiting for her to come closer. She came closer and they took their place on the couch, sitting close. He didn't talk, but kept gazing at her. Silence enveloped the whole room.

"My wife is dead, my son won't come back. I've no one to talk to. My employees are scared of me as I am their boss; my friends and relatives want to exploit me as I am rich. There is no future for me. I haven't had a good meal at my apartment for the last two years, but I'm tired of running away now... I want to settle down. I know we are different in many ways, but we both are incomplete people. The only thing that completes us is each other's selfless company. Will you marry me, Riva?" he asked her, with his eyes closed. He heaved a deep sigh and kept waiting for her answer.

Shockingly, without saying a word, without taking any money, she left the room and ran away. That wasn't what he expected. He had made such a wonderful arrangement for her. He had proposed her for marriage. He wanted to bring her out of the muck of prostitution, but she had simply left the room without saying anything. It was disheartening.

The next day, he called Munna, the agent, and said, "Send Riva soon."

"*Kya baat hai, sirji? Ye Riva ne to ekdum jaadu hi kar diya aap pe,*" Munna said in Hindi.

"Send her soon!" Chandrakant ordered.

"*Arey, janab, kabhi kuch aur bhi try kijiye... Russian se le ke American maal hai hamare pass. Arey kya rakha hai is Nepalan me. Ab to bore ho gaye honge aap. Koi aur maal bhejoon?*"

"Shut the fuck up and send Riva soon. Understand?"

Munna, finally, realised that Chandrakant was certainly not in a 'good' mood. "*Ji, sahab... ji. Riva ko abhi bhejta hoon.*"

In the next few hours, Riva was there in his room. The decoration of the previous night was still there. She gave a quick look at the flowers, which had now dried, the candles that had turned into masses of melted and hardened wax, and the stale cake, which was still lying on the table.

"Thank God – you are back," Chandrakant said and hugged her. It was the first time he had ever touched her.

Riva expected him to be angry, literally fuming, but here he was – soft, emotional and holding her with love. Yes, she was falling for him, or perhaps, she had already fallen

for him. On one hand, her heart assured her that this man loved her deeply and was the perfect man for her, someone she could spend her life with. She was sure that someone who had not touched her for months was certainly not like those lusty men out there. He was a gem, a true gem. For a moment, she wanted to hug him, kiss him and tell him that she loved him too, and that nothing in this world could be better for her than becoming his life partner.

But, her mind was not yet convinced. She remembered the man who had enticed her years ago in the web of fake love, the wily man who had brought her to Mumbai to marry her, but, ultimately, sold her. *'Yes!'* she said to herself, *'I will not trust anyone now. I will just make money, pay ten lakhs to the brothel and go back to Nepal. I can't trust people. I can't. They are not trustworthy.'*

"It is not possible, Chandrakant," she finally said. "I can't. I can't marry you."

"But you said you never wanted to be a prostitute. You said you want to be free. You said you do want a normal life." Chandrakant continued, "We can get married and start a new life. The fact is, I need you and you need me. We both can turn each other's life into heaven from the current hell we are living in. Riva, we need each other."

"There was this person who brought me to Mumbai, promising something similar, but look where I stand today – sleeping with men for money."

"You think, I am like that? You think, I am like that monster?"

"No, you are not, but I just can't. Please, forgive me. Please!"

"I don't understand what you want from life. I am here to marry you. I am here to make you free. What more do you want?" Chandrakant literally yelled, trying to convince her.

"I just want to be free from this hell and go back to Nepal. That is the only thing I want. Please, forgive me!" Riva said, being firm on her decision. She was not in a position to trust anyone. "Can you do me one last favour, Mr Malhotra?"

Chandrakant remained silent, but that silence had many unspoken words.

"Please, never ever call me again. Just never! I will be thankful to you. And I am really sorry," saying this, Riva left, with tears in her eyes.

A confused and broken Chandrakant sat in the chair nearest to him. His heart was broken, the second time. He didn't know what to say, how to react. He just sat silently, looking at the cake, the balloons, the ribbons... left alone with his shattered dreams.

Riva was back in her 120-square-foot room in one of the most 'famous' brothels of Mumbai, at the Grant Road red-light area. She was neither happy nor sad. She experienced a feeling, which she had never experienced before.

'Did I make a mistake?' she asked herself. *'Perhaps, no,'* she quickly answered. For an instance, she felt she had acted greedy as she should have thought about his feelings, but then, the thought of her first lover, who had broken her trust in the cruelest manner possible, made her decision of not trusting any man firm.

She took a break from her work for a few days. She asked her agent to stop bringing clients for a couple of days, making an excuse of health problems. She didn't even come out of her room until one afternoon, when she heard a knock on her door.

She opened the door and saw the owner of the brothel along with Munna, the agent.

“These are your air tickets to Kathmandu. The flight is tomorrow morning. You are free to go,” the brothel owner said.

“What!” Riva could not believe what she had heard. “I beg your pardon?”

“You are free to go and these are your flight tickets,” the brothel owner said and gave her the tickets.

“And what about the money, which I have to pay you?” she asked in a confused tone.

“*Arey, baby... tera wo aashiq tha na... wo Malhotra. Wo tere dus lakh de ke gaya... aur ye ticket bhi. Kya bakra fasaya tune, kasam se... maan gaye!*” Munna informed her that Chandrakant had paid the money to set her free.

“What!” She was surprised. “Where is he right now?” she asked, and then, without even listening to the reply, she ran out barefoot. She hired a taxi and asked the driver to take her to Hotel Central Plaza. Throughout the way, she kept on recalling the moments she had spent with Chandrakant, all those emotions they shared with each other and the silence – that soothing silence – which they savoured in each other’s company. By now, she had realised that Chandrakant was her man, the man she had been waiting for... a philosopher’s stone whose touch would convert her from a metal into gold, from a prostitute into a dignified lady. She was dying to meet him, to tell him that she loved him too.

She reached the hotel in a while and enquired the hotel staff about Chandrakant Malhotra. She was shocked and broken to know that a day before, he had checked out of the hotel. She, then, asked about Chandrakant’s details, his address, his mobile number – anything, but in vain. Neither the receptionist, nor the manager, provided her details of Chandrakant, as that was against their norms. She cried and literally begged, but they remained unmoved.

From the hotel, she went straight to Munna’s place and asked him if he had any information about Chandrakant. But she returned empty-handed, as he only knew his cell phone number, which was now *switched off*.

“Where are you?” Riva screamed, but there was no one to answer, not even her God.

Chandrakant, after being rejected, left for some unknown place in search of peace and solace, because that was something he had been starving for since long. After years, he had realised that Riva was the one who could provide him that comfort, that love, which he needed, but after she rejected his proposal, he was broken and found no alternative but to leave the ‘brutal’ city forever.

At Present

Riva did not go to Nepal. She does not desire to go back now. Time changes and so do people and their dreams. She, too, has a new dream. She is no more a prostitute now.

It’s been more than a year since she has been waiting for Chandrakant in the same brothel in the hope that some day he will come and fill the empty space in her soul; in the hope that some day she would get to pour her heart out to him and tell him how much she loved and trusted him, and how she wanted to spend her life with him till her last breath.

Even today, she tries to contact him, dialing his mobile number several times in a day. She never forgets to visit that hotel again and again where they both had met. Those sleepless nights and wordless conversations, which are now a part of her memories, clubbed with the faint hope that they will meet some day, have become a crucial part of her life. Time is running out, but she is still standing where she had been abandoned. With every passing second, she is dying, but only with a flickering hope.

But, when will this wait end? Will it ever end? Or would she spend her life dying with her regret of rejecting him and choosing her own selfish reason over his true love? Only God knows...

She doesn't know the answers to these questions, but she continues to wait...



Kunal Marathe

Kunal Marathe is the CEO of one of the India's fastest growing literary brands, Author's Empire™. He is also the director of Author's Empire Publications (P) Ltd. and Legendary Book Marketing & Promotions. He started his journey in the field of literature with the release of his first novel in early 2011.

He also writes articles on various issues in reputed Indian magazines and looks after his literary business. His upcoming novels are *The Internet Sensation* and *Tharki*.

Story 2

Moksha

Kunal Marathe

The road was blocked; there were police vehicles parked everywhere, which was pretty usual, but then, when you are sitting inside a police van, you don't consider it normal. I was handcuffed. There were cops all around me; there was one holding his gun as he sat next to me. Any normal man, who had never ever done anything illegal or never been to a police station before, would be scared to death to find himself in such a situation, but, I was not scared. This was expected – the police, the arrest and the massacre, I had been expecting it. Looking at the gun the cop held, I thought of snatching it and shooting myself. Yeah, it did seem justified. I glanced through the window as the cop had his eyes fixed on me. It didn't bother me in any manner; we were at the entrance of the Delhi High Court. There was a big gathering at the entrance. Men and women were burning hoardings displaying my name.

“You should rot in hell!” One of the hoardings had these words written on it, and it also had my photograph. There was this guy who spat on my photograph. The vehicle stopped suddenly as people had gone berserk. Stones, eggs and even slippers came hurtling at me to welcome me. The cops tried to drag me towards the courtroom, but things can not be easy when entire country is grouped against you. The occasion was being telecasted on every news channel.

SPAT! Someone hit me in the face. It didn't hurt physically, but then, I wasn't expecting a physical attack. People from women welfare associations held a placard asking the government to hand me over to them.

“How do you feel? Do you think you'll be convicted for murder of the woman you were in love with for more than fifteen years?” the question came out of nowhere.

A female reporter stood right in front of me with her portable voice recorder. There were other reporters trying to capture a glimpse of my face on their camera. It was like a movie set, but it was not a joyful watch. We marched towards the courtroom. The cops cleared the way, pushing people aside. I could see my brother-in-law at a distance, standing with his hands inside his pockets. He was a tough guy.

“Can you get out of this, Mr Verma?” a reporter threw another question at me, and it went unanswered. These people, who were actually ‘people’, were mere living beings

to me. There's a difference between people and living beings, as people mean something to you. The only person that meant something to me was dead – I had killed her.

I looked at my hand; the ring was still there. I couldn't gather the courage to remove it. It'd seem like a joke to the world, but that was the blatant truth. My fucking mind, my fucking conscious mind had the fucking courage to fire a fucking bullet at my wife, but I couldn't gather the fucking courage to take this fucking ring out of my fucking finger – fuck! That was the kind of bullshit I was feeding myself with.

They took me inside the courtroom, which looked more like a railway station of Delhi. I stood inside the trial chamber with my head bent low, as the world awaited the verdict. The world had questions – unanswered and unnoticed, though important. Life isn't about finding an answer to the questions people throw at you; it's about having questions of your own. Sometimes, answers don't change the circumstances, the outcome or the past, but they give satisfaction to the heart. I, however, wasn't looking for satisfaction. My wife was dead and I was being convicted for the murder of my wife. Ironical, isn't it? The people kept abusing me, some of them wishing that I was dead, while some wanted to put a bullet inside me as it would be an honour for them.

The lawyers began their argument. The truth remains the same, but people quarrel in the hope of altering the truth. The truth still doesn't change and people use their wit to buy the truth. However, it was not anticipated today. The lawyer threw questions at me. "Why did you kill your wife?"

The fight between my mind and my heart continued; my heart wanted the truth to come out, but my mind wanted it to stay. Confused and perplexed, I looked at the audience. It seemed like an audience, though it wasn't. They were people trying to judge me and mock me, perhaps.

The opposition lawyer said, "He shouldn't be allowed to live. If we let him out, it would encourage men like him to physically abuse women. We should punish him to set an example." The crowd agreed and applauded him. My lawyer tried hard to defend me, but it didn't bother me. I didn't have any desire to live. Concussion was the victory of the mind over the heart. My conscience supported my heart and I was about to tell them the truth.

I... finally... spoke. And here was my story.

* * *

We had known each other since we were kids. She was my neighbour and classmate. We played together and grew up together. That made us fall for each other. Initially, it was just a relationship and desire to be with each other, but over time, we were into each other and became inseparable. Those teenage years, those fruitful love affairs, we did it all. There were other girls who could have relinquished their clothes for me, but she was my catch. Probably, because we had known each other for a long time.

There were difficult days too – days when we used to fight with each other and have a conversational gap of a day or two. But, then, there were good days as well – days when we bunked classes to walk through the park, when we skipped sleep to talk to each other; days when we exchanged love letters and confessions. Those were the good days!

It seemed that they'd last forever.

We were deeply in love and wanted to get married, but marriages in India are never simple. It doesn't work the way you want things to work. The girl and the boy, they're mere spectators to the customs and traditions of Indian culture. I, being a Punjabi, was expected to follow certain rites and rituals. My mother wanted me to marry a rich girl from the same cast, a girl who would bring a lot of dowry, and probably, set high standards in the society. When I told my mother I wanted to marry Somya, it was like the beginning of the Mahabharata. That meant my end, definitely, my end. She could never accept a Bengali girl as her daughter-in-law, and more importantly, a girl who could not bring dowry. Somya was not the type of marriage material my mother would have ever dreamt of."

"Mom, I love her, and I will marry her. What will it take for me to explain this to you? It's pretty simple. I love her, she loves me and we want to be together. What's your problem with that?" I asked her, looking straight at her face. Arrogance was in our genes. My mother used to talk to my father like she'd rip his head off and I never failed to give her the taste of her own medicine.

"Beta, she is a Bengali girl. What will Rita aunty, Nani and everyone in the family think of me? Do you want your mother to be embarrassed? Do you want me to stand with my head bent low in front of them? What have I done to deserve such embarrassment? Don't you love me?" She went on and on with her emotional melodrama. The tricks a mother adopts to lure her child, I tell you! The attempts were good, but I was her son, after all. I was familiar with her tricks, and so, I didn't give up.

"What are you concerned about actually? My happiness or the snide remarks you'd have to face from our relatives? I won't fall for this. I will marry Somya," I said emphatically and tried to leave the room. She held my hand and started faking tears. I hated this emotional bootless drama. My mother was an expert at it. My feet wanted to walk away, far from my family. The irony about it was my father – he didn't seem to have any problem with my marriage.

"This is what happens when you sacrifice everything for your child. They mock you and leave you for some girl. She cannot love you like I do. I am your mother. Why don't you listen to me, Arshdeep? You're a handsome Punjabi boy, and you'll get marriage proposals from America, and they would give you a lot of money. Don't you want money?" Her words turned phonic with every sentence. She was desperate to convince me, but I wasn't ready for it.

Next morning, I rushed towards Somya's place. As per the plan, she was sitting in the small garden near her house; her bags were packed. We were about to elope, though it wasn't a good idea. But then, we had to do it. I couldn't imagine a life without her, and her without me. She was the sole reason of my happiness, the reason for which I carried a mobile phone, and the only reason why I believed in love. Love is a hard thing to come by these days, but when it comes to you, you shouldn't let it go.

India is probably the worst place for lovers; I mean, even when the entire world accepts the lovers, there will be someone or other ready to fuck things up. This time, the

person was my mother. Mother or lover – the choice was difficult to make, but my mother's greed had made it easier for me.

We eloped. It was scary, the entire thing. People talk about eloping as if it is easier than preparing Maggie.

We had decided on Mumbai as our destination. Somya looked at me, I looked at her. We made out as soon as we got married in a court. I loved making out sessions with her.

* * *

My past was now like a beautiful dream that I had lived. Those golden days of my life were no more there. I was back in the courtroom, my throat dry and wanting water. My eyes were drowsy, probably ready to leave the world and find its way to reach her. Basically, I could shoot myself to be with her. The judge looked at me, and the prosecution lawyer walked towards me.

"That was a beautiful love story, but how it relates to the crime you have committed. We'd be very glad to know more about your love story, but this is a courtroom, and we have other cases to handle as well. Can you get to the point, Mr Arshdeep? Actually, I don't have the whole day." The lawyer looked at me his eyes were suspicious, but that couldn't change anything. I could not give in to his little tricks.

"You can convict me for my wife's murder, but if you want to know the truth, you have to listen to the entire story. If you do not wish to, ask one of the cops to take me back to the jail," I said. I was speaking for her. She wouldn't want this to happen as she always wanted me to fight for myself and for what was right. I thought I had lost the spirit to fight, but she was still alive, somewhere in me, prodding me to carry on.

"Go on," the lawyer said and took his place.

* * *

In a few months, things returned to normal. My family had no problems with my marriage, and we started living together, happy and peacefully. Somya started working for her company and I joined my office in Delhi. We'd work during the day and spend the evenings with my family. Even my mother, now, seemed happy about the marriage. Actually, she was happy.

Everything was normal till that unfortunate evening when I was working with one of my clients. I got a call from home. It was my mother who sounded panicky and asked me to rush home as quickly as I could. There was trouble, I sensed it. My drive back home was fast and intense, I nearly escaped landing into an accident.

I reached home and dropped dead. The house was on fire. The entire house was on fire. I ran towards the gate, but the firemen wouldn't let me go. There were people crowding around. I asked one of the neighbours about the incident and they told me that my family was on the way to hospital.

I rushed to the hospital, and to my horror, found my family standing near the ICU. My eyes couldn't believe it. "What happened? Who is inside? Where is Somya?" I asked frantically. Mom looked at me, worried and sad. Her expression gave me the answer. It was Somya in the ICU.

"No, Mom, not her. What the hell happened?" I screamed at my mother, while the

others watched us. There wasn't much I could do about it. My hands were quick to react and it held her tight. The grip would hurt me as well.

"She was doing some work in the kitchen and there was gas leakage. She didn't notice it. Unfortunately, she was the only one present at home. I had gone to Pia *di's* place while your father was at work. What were we supposed to do?" she said. I walked away from them. My relatives looked worried, but they weren't actually worried. Damn, I knew they weren't worried. Her parents arrived some time later. Her brother looked furious and pushed me aside. Her mother couldn't stop her tears and held my collar. It wasn't easy for any of us.

We waited for the doctor to come out. I wanted to talk to Somya and the doctor. All kinds of thoughts ravaged my head – thoughts that could scare you off. My mind was planning to run away with her, to a faraway land. *It was a better decision*, I thought.

The doctor came out and asked me to accompany him to his cabin. I followed him.

"Mr Arshdeep, you have to be strong to bear this. It isn't going to be easy. She has suffered severe injuries and nearly 65 percent of her body is burnt. We are trying our best. Her face is burnt; body and many vital organs are injured. Please be strong as she needs you," he said and asked for my permission to leave. How ironic it was that a conversation with a random person could change my life to this extent. I walked down the hallway towards the ICU. My mother tried to talk to me; Somya's brother and father tried to talk to me, but nothing helped. We were on the verge of losing her. I felt I was on the edge of a cliff and it could not take me more than a push to vanish from this world. My steps became shorter and my body felt heavier.

I reached the ICU room and walked inside, my eyes half closed. My eyes opened and I saw her, covered with cloth; even her face was covered with dressing. She saw me and turned her face to the other side. I knew it was tough for her, tougher than it was for any of us. I looked at her and saw her face. The eyes were the only things visible to me. Her forehead was covered with white bandage and the little part exposed looked swollen and brown. Her flesh was visible at some points on her body and the fire had left her paralysed. She couldn't talk, but I could see tears flowing down her eyes.

I'd never expected something so difficult to face in life. I sat with her, trying to hold back my tears and hopes. Everything was, actually, falling apart, and this time – forever. I kept my hand besides her hand, I didn't touch it because it had all kinds of needles and bandages, and I was scared to hurt her. My heart tried to console my mind about the outcomes of cry, but then, I couldn't resist. I had acted strong for very long, and now, I couldn't do it any more. My eyes screamed through my tears. I screamed... my mother entered and hugged me.

She saw Somya, her eyes couldn't bear the sight and she dragged me outside the ICU. I stood near the ICU door, tapping it time and again. She was trying to console me, but it wasn't easy, or possible. "Can you guys leave? I want her to myself for now. I'm not letting anyone stay here," I said and slammed my fist on the wall.

Her brother followed me as he wanted to talk, but, I wasn't in the mood to talk, and probably, was not to be in the mood ever again. He kept his hand on my shoulder and

started talking. "This is hard for all of us, but you have to be strong. It's not the end. She might get better if we stay with her," he said. His eyes had tears.

My mother walked towards me. "Do you want to go home? I will stay here if you want to," she said, wiping away her tears. They were genuine tears, I could see that. She kept her hand on my hand in sympathy. They were all doing the same thing, all of them.

The next day, I entered the room to which she had been shifted. I hadn't left the hospital since yesterday, but I wasn't allowed to sit with her for longer than an hour. The burns needed healing and she needed rest. She could open her eyes and even move her head by the second day, but she couldn't talk. Her lips were burnt severely. The fingers could move, but not her hand. There were several issues with her body. My wife was gone; what was left was just her body. Her soul, her strength was drained away. I tried to remind myself of the good days, but nothing worked. It was difficult to concentrate on anything. I tried talking to her, telling her things about us and the world, but she didn't react. I had to leave the room, disappointed.

It remained the same till the end of the third day.

On the fourth day, when I entered the room, the doctor told me that she could speak, though her words wouldn't be clear. She could communicate with us. I kissed her forehead and looked into her eyes. The doctor, at once, stopped me because of the fear of infection.

"I love you, Somya," I said. "I know this isn't the best thing to say, but I cannot think of anything else at the moment. I want you to be fine and running again. Come back to me, please." She tried to smile, but could not. It felt good that she tried at least. It wasn't long back since we had been sitting with each other and talking. The last few days were indeed the worst days of my life. I stayed with her till she closed her eyes and slept.

The next day, I came in with flowers. I had taken a bath after five days, just to look presentable to her. I wanted her to feel that she mattered to me. I placed the flowers near her bed and took the chair. She was looking at her hand, probably the wounds. They weren't good wounds; they would have scared the hell out of anyone, to be precise. She started talking for the first time, since she had come to the hospital.

"Arshdeep," she muttered. It was hard for her to speak. "Do you remember our rabbit, Chiku? He was so cute. I am missing him today," she said, the words coming out slowly and calmly.

"Yeah, I remember him. You shouldn't speak much. Please, be quiet," I said and tried to close her mouth, but, she wouldn't stop talking. "Remember how he got bitten by a dog once? When we came back from our class and saw him suffering in pain, I told you he'd survive, but you thought he wouldn't. You were so stubborn, and when I said we should take him to a doctor, you said he'd not make it. I even remember how you killed him." Tears rolled down my eyes as she continued. "His pain was too much to endure. An instant death is always better than a painful death. He wouldn't have made it."

God! No!

I understood what she wanted. She wanted to die as the pain was too much, even for someone strong like her to withstand. I couldn't stand it. "And you said, you didn't kill

him. You gave him what he needed. You saved him from pain; you granted him *moksha*.”

I got up and left the hospital. My feet trembled and I found myself held aloft in space where I had two options – either to kill myself or kill her before killing myself. Both were good options and I wanted to give it a thought. My heart wouldn’t allow me to leave her alone.

The most important thing in my life was Somya, and my life was meaningless without her. I purchased a bottle of vodka and drank till my throat couldn’t take any more. I took my revolver and left again for the hospital. It was 2 a.m. I was drunk and busy thinking what I should do. My mind had some plans, but my heart had other plans.

I reached the hospital with the gun inside my pocket. The walk down the hall was the most difficult one of my life. Each step seemed like a step away from life – a step towards death. It was to end my reason to live as well; she’d take everything with her. The door of her ward was open and I entered without giving a second thought. She was fast asleep. I sat near her, looking at her, admiring the one I loved. She seemed to be at peace with herself, but I wasn’t. I got up and picked up a pillow.

I stood next to her. Her heartbeat was normal, but mine was berserk. I kept a rose next to her, placed the pillow on her face, and within the next second, shot her. I shot her dead. She left me, but I was still there, waiting and watching everything.

* * *

“So, Mr Prosecutor, I know this doesn’t change a thing. I don’t want to be spared, as a matter of fact. I did what I thought was right for her. It was my duty to free her from her pain; it was the right thing to do. She’d have been dead either way. I just saved her from a painful death. I served my purpose of life, and now, I’d be glad to be convicted as a murderer. It doesn’t matter. Nothing can bring her back, nothing can change our fate. I didn’t kill her; I gave her what she needed. I saved her from pain. I gave her – *moksha*.”



Mahi Singla

Three terms aptly describe Mahi Singla – ‘shopaholic’, ‘coffeholic’, and ‘voracious reader’. Mahi is a Law Graduate from S.D. Bhinani College, Sri Ganganagar, but she left her practice because of her increasing inclination towards reading and writing.

Her debut book, *12 Hours*, which is a short story collection, received rave reviews from reviewers and readers alike. It has even been recommended in various schools.

Described as outspoken, bubbly and extremely honest by her close friends, Mahi is extremely creative, being good at craft-making, painting, dancing, writing and cooking. Among all her hobbies, she finds writing as the best medium for conveying her thoughts. She specifically loves to write short stories, in which she tries to mix her experiences, observations and imagination.

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Story 3

When Destiny Strikes!

Mahi Singla

“Raju, please bring a glass of orange juice for me.”

Gunjan Parashar called out to her young domestic servant as soon as she entered her opulent bungalow, situated in the posh area of South Extension-II, in the heart of South Delhi. She was extremely tired after enjoying her kitty party, which her neighbour-friend, Yogita Singh, had arranged at the luxurious restaurant of the Leela Palace, a five-star hotel.

She was wearing a mauve-coloured designer sari, with heavy embroidery on its borders. Keeping her perfectly matched, dark-purple clutch-bag aside, she slouched on the sofa kept in the plush living room, which was brightly illuminated by a gigantic, crystal chandelier. Though aged forty-two, her flawless skin shone gorgeously in the light. She had ordinary features, coalesced on a pretty face. Her dyed hair reined artistically into a bun over her head. She wore minimum makeup and jewellery. She never needed them! Just a touch of an eye-liner, lip-gloss, and *bindi*, as the symbol of every married Hindu woman, was enough for her. A simple gold chain, with a pendant of Lord Shiva, graced her neck. She was a staunch believer of God, and destiny.

Happily married to a rich and successful textile industry owner, Aditya Parashar, for the last twenty five years, Gunjan was a lady of class, but had no signs of haughtiness or egotism. She was known for her benevolence and calm demeanour. When she had married Aditya, the only son of upper-middle-class parents, he was a struggling, yet hardworking, entrepreneur. Soon, lady luck blessed him and his long-stuck project, to start his own industry, finally received the necessary approvals. After that, there was no looking back for the Parashars, and Aditya never failed to acknowledge his wife's role in his success. He always admitted that it was *their* success.

Gunjan always felt blessed for having found Aditya as her life partner. Even more than that, she was blessed with a son like Shalok, whom they had sent to New Jersey to pursue his Bachelors and Masters in Business Administration. Shalok was respectful, soft-spoken and had a kind heart – qualities which he had inherited from his parents. He shunned alcohol and smoking, quite unlike the most boys of his age. He was a perfect son. Gunjan felt truly blessed.

After a minute, Raju, a dark-complexioned, young boy, aged twenty-one and dressed in a decent-looking trouser-shirt appeared in the living room. His hair was properly oiled and combed with side partition. He carried a tray, which had a glass of orange juice and Gunjan's favourite vanilla cookies.

Gunjan looked at Raju with a generous smile. Raju smiled as well and offered her the juice and cookies. Raju's father, Dindayal Awasthi, had worked for the Parashars for more than thirty years. When he died a year ago, due to an unfortunate cardiac arrest, leaving his only son and wife behind, Aditya had not only arranged the funeral rites, but also given Raju a part-time job at his home.

"Thank you, Raju," said Gunjan, giving a smile, as she held the glass of juice proffered by Raju. She took a sip of the juice, as Raju kept the bowl containing the cookies on the center table.

Gunjan glanced at the wall-clock. The time was seven-thirty and night was quickly approaching. The sky was still marked with the pinkish strands of sunlight, which, due to the long summer days, almost failed to die. She was expecting a phone call from Aditya, who had gone to China on a business trip.

"Please fill the bathtub with lukewarm water," Gunjan said to Raju. "My body is aching. I want to have a relaxing bath before dinner is served."

Raju nodded obediently and smiled, flashing his stain-free, white teeth.

"And, by the way, did you study today?" she asked him. "I hope you are not skipping your studies just because of the household chores."

"I am studying regularly, ma'am," replied Raju, earnestly. "I have my exams after a few months, and I am almost ready for them... just revising everything."

"Good! Because, if you will not score well in exams, your Aditya sir will scold you," warned Gunjan, a little light-heartedly. "He wants you to become a successful engineer."

"I will do my best, ma'am," replied Raju with enthusiasm. "I, too, want to prove to you and Aditya sir that your trust in me is not misplaced. After all, what you both have done for me and my family is hard to repay. You have given me a job and are also paying my engineering fees. I just can't thank you enough," he said, his voice emotional.

Gunjan smiled and said, "We are sure you will make us, and especially, your mother, proud one day."

"Thank you, ma'am. Let me prepare the bathtub for you," Raju said and went to do the needful.

Gunjan smiled again. She emptied the glass of juice and kept it on the center table. She took a bite from a vanilla cookie and started reading a fashion magazine. Just then, her mobile phone rang. Anticipating her beloved husband's call, she quickly checked the number. It was a call from Mr Udit Shankar, secretary of *Sarita Seva Sadan*, an old age home built by the Parashars ten years ago, and named after Aditya's late mother.

A bit disappointed that it was not Aditya's call, Gunjan answered, "Hello, Uditji."

"Hello, ma'am, how are you? Is it a good time to talk to you?" Udit politely asked.

"I am very well, Uditji. Yes, please tell me," replied Gunjan, keeping the magazine aside.

“Thanks, ma’am. *Sarita Seva Sadan* is organising a function and most of the ladies, who are staying here, are participating in one or the other event. It will be our honour if you could oblige us with your presence at the event,” said Udit, expectantly.

“That’s great news!” exclaimed Gunjan, excitedly. “It’s been a long time since I last met you and every member of *Sarita Seva Sadan*. On which date is this function to be held? I will definitely come.”

“Coming Sunday, 17th June, at 10 in the morning,” Udit happily replied. “We all will be so glad to have you among us. It will boost the morale of all the ladies as they all look up to you.”

“I, too, want to meet them for sure,” said Gunjan. “I will definitely come. Unfortunately, your Aditya sir will not be able to come as he is in China, and is expected to come by the month-end.”

“Oh, that’s okay, ma’am. Work is important too, and I know sir’s blessings are always with us,” replied Udit. “We all will be waiting for you, ma’am, and thank you so much for agreeing to our request.”

“Looking forward to the event, Uditji... Good night and take care,” said Gunjan. They both disconnected the call.

After the call, Gunjan set a reminder in her phone regarding the event before entering the washroom to refresh herself.

17th June, 10:25 a.m., ***Sarita Seva Sadan***

Gunjan, who was dressed exotically in a cream-coloured sari with heavy chicken-work, reached *Sarita Seva Sadan* in her chauffeur-driven, sparkling white Mercedes.

Built on a sprawling area of fifteen acres, *Sarita Seva Sadan* was situated near Chattarpur, away from the hustle-bustle of New Delhi. It had been inaugurated by Smt. Sarita Parashar, Aditya’s mother, almost ten years ago. And since then, it had become a symbol of hope for many old-age people, who had no one else to take care or look after them. *Sarita Seva Sadan* was a self-sufficient campus, which apart from housing the needy, also had facilities of an auditorium, a clinic, a shopping store, a grocery store, a park, a library and a temple.

Gunjan stepped out of her car, carefully settling her heavy sari as Udit came forward to welcome her with a broad smile and a bouquet. A few other senior people, who managed the old age home, also accompanied him.

“Thank you, Uditji,” smiled Gunjan, “I am so sorry, I was a bit late due to heavy traffic.”

“Oh, not a problem, ma’am,” replied Udit, genuinely. “The function is about to start and we were waiting for your arrival. You are our chief guest, after all. And we all know about Delhi’s traffic.”

Gunjan smiled again as Udit guided her to the beautifully decorated auditorium where the event was organised. She was happy to be there. The feeling that they were doing something good for the needy made her happy. Udit gestured to her to sit on the sofa in the front row, reserved for her. Gunjan placed the bouquet on the table in front of her and

sat down on the sofa. All the arrangements were set and the announcer took the stage to say that the event would commence with *Saraswati Vandana*.

A group of old people, a few with walking sticks and a lady in a wheel-chair, looking happy and smiling, appeared on the stage to worship Goddess Saraswati. Gunjan looked at them and smiled. Suddenly, her eyes froze as she saw a lady place a mike in front of these senior citizens. Dressed in a faded pink suit, she looked weak and pale, and she had dark circles around her dull eyes. Her skin was dark, with some wrinkles, while her hair carried streaks of grey. Her face held Gunjan's attention. *I have seen her somewhere*, she thought, and that lady quickly vanished from the stage, after adjusting the mike.

Where? Gunjan poked her memory, while the group on the stage started singing *Saraswati Vandana*. Gunjan was still trying to recollect where she had seen that lady. Her thoughts quickly travelled to the past and a name flashed in her mind – *Payal... Payal Rani, my childhood best friend!*

Twenty five years ago, District Jind, Haryana

"Mummy, Payal is my best friend and friendship has nothing to do with class or status!" retorted Gunjan irritably, throwing her bag on the bed. Dressed in a blue *kameez* and white *salwar*, she had just returned from school, and like every other day, her mother was objecting to her friendship with Payal, daughter of their neighbour's driver.

Payal Rani, an average-looking, dark-complexioned, yet sweet-natured girl belonged to a lower class family. Her father worked as a driver, while her mother was a maid, and they both used to work earnestly to sustain their family of five members. Payal had two younger siblings – a brother and a sister. She and Gunjan were best friends since their childhood. They had studied together in the same school and their friendship got strengthened as time passed. But Gunjan's parents, especially her mother, could not appreciate her daughter's friendship with Payal, who belonged to a lower class.

But for Gunjan, Payal was her closest and best friend, so much so, she used to happily give away her own dresses and suits, her bags and stationery to Payal, knowing well that Payal's family would not be able to afford them. Payal, on the other hand, was a better student than Gunjan and often helped her in her studies. They both were there for each other, through thick and thin, and each trusted the other completely... blindly!

Gunjan quickly changed her school uniform, and wore a black suit. She was reasonably tall, slim, with a fair complexion, which shone much more than her black dress. She had a gorgeous round face, with dark-black eyes, cute nose, pinkish cheeks and full lips. Aged seventeen, she looked beautiful, youthful and fresh.

"Where are you going now? You have just returned from school!" her mother questioned her.

"I am going to *Bhuteshwar* temple to seek Lord Shiva's blessings before my board exams," replied Gunjan, wearing her sandals.

"I hope you are not going along with that filthy friend of yours... Payal!"

Gunjan ignored her mother's derogatory remark against her best friend and rushed out

of her home. She knew that the longer she would remain at home, the meaner her mother's remarks against her friend would become. She took a rickshaw to *Bhuteshwar* temple, also famously called, *Rani Talab*. She reached there in a short time.

Surrounded by a pond of fresh water, *Bhuteshwar* temple stood divine, shining brightly in the midday sun. Gunjan removed her sandals outside the main gate of the temple, which was decorated with lively sculptures of Lord Ganesha, the sacred *Swastika* sign, a conch, and Lord Nandi. She waited for Payal, who arrived after five minutes.

Payal was dressed in a sea-green suit, which Gunjan had gifted her on her birthday. At 5 feet 2 inches, Payal was of average height and a normal build. Her face was ordinary, but her big, beautiful eyes were very expressive. To add to that, she had an alluring, heart-warming smile.

"Hey, Gunjan! So sorry, I am a bit late," Payal apologised, as she walked up to her friend. They both hugged each other. "But, what is the matter? You said that you wanted to share something very important."

"Yes, yes... but let's first pray to Lord Shiva for our upcoming board exams, and also to help us to get through in engineering college," said Gunjan, hurriedly.

"I am sure about my exams, as I am prepared for them. But I don't know if my parents will be able to afford my college fees," replied Payal, sadly.

"Don't worry. I am sure you will get a scholarship, as you are such a brilliant student." Gunjan motivated her best friend, as they walked on the path, surrounded by a pond, which connected the main gate with the temple.

After praying to Lord Shiva, they both came back to the main gate and wore their sandals.

"Now tell me, what you wanted to share?" asked Payal, eagerly.

"Well... there is a guy... who is regularly following me," Gunjan said, a bit hesitantly. "I often find him standing outside our school gate; sometimes in the afternoon as well. Yesterday, he followed me in the market, and today, I saw him wandering outside my house, when I was coming here. Whenever I look at him, he simply smiles. He is harmless though, but I find it very weird."

"Hmm! Should we report to the police?" suggested Payal, after a thought.

"No, no, I don't want to involve the police in this, as they will question my parents as well. And that will put all sorts of restrictions on me," replied Gunjan, worriedly.

"Okay, but you said that he is harmless. So, I guess, just ignore him," said Payal, as Gunjan called for a rickshaw.

"Yeah, he is harmless. He simply follows me, and smiles," replied Gunjan, and they both sat on the rickshaw.

"Lucky you, dear... at least someone looks at you and smiles. How's he, by the way?" asked Payal, playfully nudging her friend.

Gunjan giggled. "Well... he is cute, to be honest," she replied with a wink.

Payal laughed, and said, "Then you are really lucky! But, on a serious note, ignore him and focus on your exams. We have to clear them."

Gunjan nodded and they left the place.

After a few weeks, Gunjan and Payal appeared for month-long board exams. They both had studied hard and gave their best shot. Gunjan's mind, however, remained a bit distracted, as she didn't find that unknown guy stalking her anymore. For some strange reasons, she wanted to see him again. She found it weird, but she was disappointed to not to see him anywhere around her school, or her home, or wherever she went over since the last one month.

One day, after her board exams, Gunjan went to a grocery store. She had a long list and a basket in her hand, which was filled with the necessary groceries.

"I think you were missing me!" said a male voice behind her ears. She turned around and her eyes grew large with surprise. That unknown follower was standing right in front of her. She didn't know how to react or what to say. Her heartbeat increased, as she kept looking at him. He was a tall guy, with a decent build and good looks. Aged twenty-two, his hair was neatly cut and his light-brown eyes looked beautiful on his chiseled face. Dressed in a costly-looking check shirt and parallel trousers, he looked handsome.

"I said, I think you were missing me," he repeated, confidently.

"What? I mean... who are you?" Gunjan stammered nervously.

"I am the one who has been following you for the last three months, and the one whom you were searching for the past one month," he replied, with a teasing smile.

Gunjan looked into his confident eyes and bright smile. "I was not searching for anyone," she said, gulping down her lie.

"Really? Then tell me, for whom were you waiting endlessly outside your school gate... or near the temple... or wherever you went? Why were you always looking back, or here and there, as if you were looking for someone. I followed you, but you too were looking for someone," he winked. "Anyway, my name is Piyush Saxena," he offered his hand for a handshake.

Gunjan looked at his proffered hand. She found him cute, and yes, she had been looking for him, but everything was happening so unexpectedly that her nervousness grew manifold.

"Don't worry, I will not harm you," said Piyush, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Friends?" he then asked, his hand still waiting for Gunjan's reply.

Gunjan, after a long pause, simply nodded and shook hands with him.

"And, may I know your name please, if you don't mind?" asked Piyush, sweetly.

"I am Gunjan."

"Nice name... you are beautiful, Gunjan. Just stay the way you are... sweet, nice, shy and beautiful. Hope to meet you soon," said Piyush, and then, walked out of the store.

Gunjan stood rooted to the spot, awestruck. *This guy is really sweet, cute, chivalrous, and of course, harmless*, she felt.

After that first meeting, Piyush and Gunjan started meeting regularly and their bonding strengthened. Piyush told her that he was from Ambala, and had come to Jind to set up his own industry. He told her that his family owned an established business, but he wanted to stand on his own feet. Gunjan really appreciated his attitude and self-

confidence.

The board results had been declared, but Payal, even after scoring high marks, could not join college. Her poverty-ridden parents could not arrange money for admission to college, while Gunjan joined a college for her bachelor's degree.

Slowly, as days passed by, Gunjan's liking for Piyush developed into deep love and gradually they started dating each other. Piyush was the perfect man and the prince of her dreams. One day, she finally decided to tell Payal about him. She had been avoiding telling her best friend, as Payal was already depressed and Gunjan did not want to share her happiness when her best friend was going through a bad phase.

Gunjan reached Payal's small, one-bedroom house and found her friend cleaning the utensils.

"Hi, my *bestie*," cried Gunjan, and hugged Payal.

A brief smile appeared on Payal's glum face.

"What have you done to yourself, Payal?" asked a shocked Gunjan. "Look at yourself!"

"This is my destiny, Gunjan. My mother is a maid and I have no right to study! This is what I have to do... cleaning and washing, and this is my life," said Payal ruefully.

"Come on! If you didn't get through one college, that does not mean it is an end to life. You can still manage to study at a polytechnic. They charge very low fees and you are such a brilliant student," Gunjan said encouragingly.

"Hmm... anyway, let's change the topic. You tell about yourself," said Payal, as they walked out of the house to sit underneath a banyan tree.

"I have a very important piece of information to share with you," said Gunjan excitedly. "You remember, I had told you about a guy who had been stalking me constantly?"

Payal nodded.

"His name is Piyush Saxena," Gunjan continued with a gleam in her eyes. "He is from Ambala and is here to set up his own factory in Jind. He is rich, decent and down to earth. More importantly, he is in love with me!"

Payal noticed the excitement in her friend's eyes, "And, I guess, you are in love with him too."

Gunjan nodded, smiling broadly.

"Wow! That's some news! Finally you have found your Prince Charming," Payal said, hugging her friend.

"I have told him about you, as you are my best friend, and he wants to meet you," said Gunjan excitedly.

"Sure," replied Payal.

Next day, Gunjan took Payal along to meet Piyush. They all met at the *Bhuteshwar* temple, and had a great time.

* * *

The preliminary exams arrived and Gunjan got busy with them. She was determined to score well. Though they were not the main exams, she wanted to keep her parents happy.

She had decided to talk to her mother about Piyush once the results were out. She desperately wanted to do well, and hence, had told Piyush not to meet her till the exams got over. Piyush was very understanding. Meanwhile, Payal took up a small job of a tutor in a school, which was till fifth grade only.

After her exams, which went very well, Gunjan rushed up to meet Payal. She was drying clothes on the terrace.

“Hey, Payal, how are you?” Gunjan greeted her gleefully.

“I am fine. How did your exams go?” asked Payal, as she continued with her chores.

“Very well. I have planned to tell Mummy about Piyush, once my results are out,” replied Gunjan excitedly. “I am sure my results will make her happy, and that will be the best time to tell her about Piyush.”

“Hmm... have you met Piyush in the last one month?” asked Payal, her tone serious.

“No, what happened?” wondered Gunjan.

“Then, I think, you should not meet him in future,” replied Payal bluntly.

“Why!” Gunjan was shocked.

“Do you have the strength to hear the reality?” asked Payal, towelling her hands.

Gunjan nodded, expecting some bad news.

“Then listen! Piyush is a big time flirt! When you were busy with your exams, he was dating other girls... and many of them! He is cheating on you, and every girl he has dated, or is still dating,” said Payal, throwing the harsh reality at Gunjan, right on her face.

Gunjan listened to her, dumbstruck. Shocked! Broken! Shattered!

“You are dreaming to spend life with him while he must have already slept with other innocent girls! Just as he followed you, I surreptitiously followed him to find out his reality. He is a cheat. I could have told you everything earlier, but I didn’t want the news to affect your exams,” said Payal.

Gunjan broke down and started crying. Payal hugged her dear friend and consoled her.

“I will not spare him,” Gunjan yelled, and cried.

“No, forget him and concentrate on your life. You will get a much better person than him... a real Prince Charming, which you really deserve,” Payal said, consoling Gunjan. “It is good that we know his reality before you got married to him. You have been saved, my dear.”

“Thank you, Payal. You don’t know what you have done for me.” Gunjan hugged Payal. She felt a little better. She was heartbroken, dejected, but she was relieved that her life had been saved.

That day, when she returned home, her father told her that he had received a marriage proposal for her from an upper-middle-class family. He told her that the boy’s name was Aditya, and they owned a well-settled family business in New Delhi. Moreover, Aditya was smart, educated and extremely good looking. *Destiny!* Gunjan thought, as she thanked Lord Shiva for saving her from Piyush.

Gunjan happily got married to her Prince Charming, Aditya, after a month, and shifted to New Delhi. She was surprised to find that Payal did not attend her wedding. Later, a

bigger shock awaited her when she came to know that Payal had eloped with Piyush!

Present Day... ***Sarita Seva Sadan***, Chattarpur, New Delhi

Gunjan shook out of her reverie at the sound of claps that followed the *Saraswati Vandana*. Her face was expressionless, but her heart was full of emotions – emotions of love and pain for her long lost friend, Payal.

She quickly recovered her composure and turned towards Udit, who was wholeheartedly cheering the group that had sung the *Saraswati Vandana*.

“Uditji, do you know the lady who placed the mike on the stage?” she asked Udit.

“I am not sure, ma’am. I didn’t notice. Let me find out for you,” Udit replied obediently.

“Sure, I want to meet her right now!” Gunjan said impatiently.

“Okay, ma’am. I will be back in five minutes,” said Udit and hurriedly left.

Gunjan waited impatiently for Udit to return. He appeared exactly after five minutes.

“Ma’am, I have found out information about her for you,” replied Udit victoriously.

“Her name is Aakriti. She has been working here for the past four years and is now a permanent resident here.”

“Aakriti,” murmured Gunjan. *No! She is Payal*, she thought. “I want to meet her. Where can I find her?”

“She is resting in her room... room number 57,” replied Udit. “You want to meet her now or after the event?”

“Right now!” Gunjan stood up.

“Okay, please follow me,” replied Udit, as he weaved his way out of the auditorium.

Gunjan quietly followed him.

“This is her room,” Udit pointed towards a wooden door, with the number, 57, written over it.

“Thanks, I want to meet her alone,” said Gunjan.

Udit bowed his head and went back to the auditorium. Gunjan kept standing outside the room for a few minutes. She then took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Door is open. Please come in,” a hoarse voice said from inside.

I have heard this voice a million times! Gunjan thought. She pushed open the door and walked into the small room. As soon as she entered the room, her eyes fell on the lady who was lying on the bed. Her medicines, along with a water bottle and glass, were kept on the bedside table.

“Yes, how can I help you?” the lady coughed, trying to sit.

“Payal!” Gunjan froze on her feet. She recognised her childhood best friend.

“Who Payal? My name is Aakriti,” the old lady replied evasively, trying to cover her face with her *dupatta*.

Gunjan drew close to her and sat down on her bed, “You are my Payal! I know you... my best friend, my childhood friend. We have played together... studied together!”

The lady arose from the bed, limping a bit. She again tried to hide her face, coughed and said, “You are mistaken, ma’am. My name is Aakriti, not Payal.”

Gunjan walked up to her, turning her face towards herself, “Payal was and is my best friend, and I can recognise her from her voice. So, you don’t have to hide your face. I know, you are Payal,” she said confidently, looking into her tear-filled eyes.

Eventually, that lady broke down into tears, and instantly hugged Gunjan, “I missed you so much, Gunjan. Yes, I am Payal.”

Tears ran from Gunjan’s eyes as well, as she kept hugging her dear friend. After all, they were meeting after many years. Gunjan controlled herself and began to wipe her best friend’s tears. She looked at her carefully. Her eyes were no more big and beautiful. They were dull and had sunk deep into her face. She was weak and suffered from mild fever.

“What has happened to you, Payal?” asked Gunjan, worriedly, as she made Payal sit on the bed. “Tell me, I am your best friend!”

“I don’t deserve to be called your best friend, Gunjan,” replied Payal ruefully.

“Come on! You are, and will remain my best friend,” Gunjan smiled. But no smile appeared on Payal’s glum face.

“You will hate me if I will tell you the truth, Gunjan.” Payal again began to cry and Gunjan hugged her.

“Payal, don’t cry! What has happened to you? Why are you here? The last thing I know is that you had eloped with Piyush! I don’t know why you did that, but... oh! Is Piyush okay?” Gunjan asked in a single breath. “Why are you alone here? Is Piyush okay? Why is he not with you?”

“He is very well, Gunjan. In fact, I lied to you, and to everyone,” Payal said grimly.

“Lie?”

“Yes, I lied to you about Piyush. He... he never met any other girl when you were busy with your exams!”

Gunjan was shocked. “What!”

“And, I lied to Piyush about you too! I told him that since he was not well-settled, you agreed to a marriage with some other rich guy!”

Gunjan was flabbergasted. “But why? I mean... why did you lie? I can’t believe this!”

“Because... because, I always envied you,” confessed Payal, and started to cry again. “I envied you for your good looks, your upper class... for getting admission into the college... for getting a handsome man! For all the things, which you got! On the other hand, destiny kept me deprived of everything! Everything! What was my fault? I worshipped Lord Shiva too. I studied well too! Why didn’t I deserve a good life like you?”

Gunjan kept listening to Payal, completely flabbergasted. She had no answers to her best friend’s questions.

“When you took me to meet Piyush, I was instantly attracted towards him because of his money. I thought if a man like him came into my life, all my problems will be solved. That’s why I lied to you... and I lied to Piyush too!” added Payal, tears running down her face again.

“But... but, that’s okay. I understand... you lied, and you are confessing. I forgive you,

but where is Piyush now? What are you doing here? You should be with him... living happily!” Gunjan said, completely nonplussed.

“Piyush lied as well,” said Payal, glumly. “Yes, he hailed from a rich family, but his parents had already disinherited him! He was involved in all sorts of bad habits like alcohol, drugs, gambling. Thus, his family threw him out of their house! I don’t know why he came to Jind, but yes, he was following you because you were from a decent family! He had thought that he would extract money from you and your parents!”

Gunjan did not know how to react! She simply sat there, shaken.

“I lied to him about you, and he was disappointed. I took advantage and won his heart, with that hope to marry him! Of course, for money! We ran away and got married. I thought, he would take me to a nice, big house, but instead, he threw me into a dirty one-room apartment in Bahadurgarh! Initially, he was very good to me, as he thought that I was from a rich family, because I always wore expensive clothes gifted by you. But, when he found out my reality, he started torturing me! He would come home, completely drunk, and beat me, and hurt me, while making love to me! Love, it was not love! It was his way of inflicting pain on me! I used to work all day and earn money, while he used to gamble with that! My father, somehow, arranged money and gifted him a cycle, but he wanted a scooter! And then, when his greed for money increased... he... he...”

Gunjan noticed a dark horror in Payal’s eyes.

“What did that damned skunk do to you?” Gunjan couldn’t control her anger.

“He threw me in front of his hungry friends, saying that he will earn money from my body! I tried to escape... run... but, but they... they devoured my body... raping me... daily.”

Gunjan could not believe her ears. Payal was in tears of pain, helplessness and repentance.

“And one day, I just ran away. I tried to kill myself, but someone saved me! I changed my name, came to Delhi, and started working in a grocery store. Eventually, I found work at *Sarita Seva Sadan*. Destiny!”

Gunjan and Payal sat silently, both crying.

“I tried to make my own destiny, but I forgot that when destiny strikes, it makes or breaks the rules we have set for ourselves. It makes or breaks the lives we have defined for ourselves. That’s what happened with me. I selfishly tried to change your destiny, to make my destiny brighter, but the destiny struck hard, and stabbed me deeper... because of my lies, because of my jealousy. I had ditched my best friend and fallen so low, just for the sake of my own happiness,” repented Payal.

Gunjan once again hugged her friend. She had already forgiven her, seeing her sorry state and honest tears.

“Don’t cry, Payal. You have suffered enough because of your lies,” said Gunjan, still hugging Payal. She wiped away her own tears, and said, “Now, you have to stay with me. Come, I am taking you along.”

“No!” said Payal, instantly. “No, Gunjan, I do not deserve your love anymore.”

“Come on! I have a very big house, and a small family. My son is in America and my

husband remains out of India most of the time. My in-laws, unfortunately, are no more in this world. I am all alone and there are many rooms. You can easily stay in our house,” explained Gunjan.

“Gunjan, all my life I have lived on your kindness and your trust. But, I betrayed you, I lied to you, I envied you. I am here because of my own mistakes, my own selfishness and I want to repent till my last breath. That will make me happy... relieved,” replied Payal genuinely.

Gunjan understood her best friend’s words, as she quietly listened to her.

“It is my good fortune that you still consider me your best friend, but, let me stay here and repent for my sins. Whenever you feel lonely, you can always come to me, and I will feel good to be with you... after all, you are my best friend. You can always find me here... at *Sarita Seva Sadan*. This is my destiny,” replied Payal, with a glint of smile.

Gunjan smiled and they both hugged each other once more. They kept hugging each other for a very long time. Payal felt extremely light-hearted after telling her story and confessing her sins in front of her best friend. Gunjan, on the other hand, was happy to get Payal back into her life.

After all, it was because of destiny that they were together again.

... I Love you Rachu ...

Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu

I thinks see knows my name

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Shalini Katyal

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Story 4

The Woman Who Waited...

Shalini Katyal

Waiting is like hugging the smile of hope with sleep-deprived eyes. It's indeed a true saying – Who loves best, can punish best. This emotional story of mine is not just a story, but a tale that will leave you into a state of deep thoughts and stir your soul to its core. Before I take you into the world of Madhumita, around whom my story revolves, let me tell you an important thing, which many of you would have noticed too. There is a huge black hole in the depth of our mind where we throw away faces, which we have sworn to never forget. Behind our faces and gestures, we remain mute, often successful in hiding our pain, but there are times when our throat constricts, we feel as if we are suffocating and we can't stop crying.

It was a winter evening. Madhumita was sitting in the balcony of her house, in a pensive mood, holding her diary in one hand and a pen in another, feeling the moisture in the air and trying to figure out what wrong she committed, the price of which she was paying so heavily. With that thought, tears rolled down her cheeks, as if instantly hugging her after feeling the emptiness that enveloped her. She started giving words to her thoughts in her diary, which used to be her soothing companion in troublesome days of her life and ended up writing these words in her diary.

* * *

“I am in a whirl for last six months. I don't know why my life took that unexpected turn. I used to be so bubbly, so chirpy, but now, see how serious and reserved I have become! Even poetries, which used to be my refreshing companion, do not excite me these days! I think the only mistake I made was I hugged my sensitivity towards the feeling of love. But, I have no grievances. After all, our destiny has all the rights to open any unexplored chapter of our life, which could bring immense happiness or pain to us, without giving any plausible explanations.”

After writing that, her thoughts dragged her into her past, into the memories of Ashish, into that time when she used to be vivacious and oblivious from all sorrows of the world. She thought of that day when Cupid had hit her heart with his arrow of love.

It was during those days when she was doing English Honours from St. Xavier's College. She could remember it like it was just yesterday. A familiar whiff of fragrance

that makes one grow nostalgic almost immediately used to surround her whenever she used to get drifted away by those unforgettable waves of her past.

She had come out of her class after attending a lecture when her friend, Anushka, introduced her to two of her friends.

“Hey, Madhu, meet Ashish and Sourabh. They are in the office management section,” Anushka said.

Madhumita politely greeted both of them, but as she said ‘Hi’ to Ashish, she felt a strange kind of warmth inside her. She could not describe what she had experienced, but she felt like someone had stirred something in her.

Standing tall at 5’10”, Ashish towered over her by quite a few inches and the sharp contours of his face casted some mesmerizing shadows on her face at the very first sight. Though she was fairer than him, his eyes had that appeal... the appeal of sweeping her off her feet and into his waiting arms. Her imagination made it seem so real and so right.

As time passed, Madhumita and Ashish became good friends... close friends... the best of friends. In fact, they seemed to spend all their free time with each other. The growth of friendship was gradual and the growth of intimacy was unnoticed in both the hearts.

On the day of the college fest, she had taken part in a Shakespearian play. She had worn a long traditional frock, the sides of which were decorated with big laces. She had tied her hair in two braids. While she was rehearsing her lines at the back of the stage, Ashish heard her lines with utmost devotion.

*“Art thou gone so? Love, lord, ay, husband, friend!
I must hear from thee every day in the hour,
For in a minute there are many days:
O, by this count I shall be much in years
Ere, I again behold my Romeo!”*

Ashish came closer to Madhumita, and said, “Never before I was so very fascinated with poetries and plays, but from now onwards, I’ll start reading all of them. Your voice has a strange kind of magnetic charm that has made me fall in love with poetry.”

* * *

Suddenly, a blow of strong air hit her face and pulled her out of her past. A saddened smile played on her lips, as she tried not to think about it, but, at moments such as these, even the mind loses all its control over the heart. Her thoughts again started wandering into the murky depths of her past.

In just a matter of months, they had come so close to each other that they felt, they had never been strangers. Time flew fast when they were together. They enjoyed being together and their love was evident in the comfort they enjoyed with each other.

“Madhu, you are the reason why I smile. Every time I look into your eyes, I feel like drowning into their depth,” Ashish said, cupping her face in his hands.

“Ashu, if God had asked me what my only wish would be, I would wish only for your happiness. My eyes are beautiful because your image reflects in them,” Madhumita replied.

“Love, let me feel the coolness of your eyes over my lips,” Ashish whispered those tender words and while gripping her tightly, he brought her body closer to him.

The sensational feeling that shook almost every raw nerve of her frame made her lose her control over herself. Her meek heart was absolutely appreciating Ashish’s ways of expressing love.

That was the day when they kissed each other lovingly and passionately, feeling every inch of each other’s bodies; inhaling each other’s fragrance. The mutual absorption of each other’s souls made them proclaim their love even more strongly for each other.

The memory of that moment was so fresh in Madhumita’s mind that it sort of brought her smile back making her feel the same heat inside her body and taking her back to that same life again. It seemed as if she could still feel the same intensity and passion in her soul. This warm romantic feeling drenched her heart with the splash of past intense moments, which she had spent with Ashish.

She remembered that day when, at the terrace of her house, Ashish came so close to her that their breaths mingled in a delicate mixture of sentiments. He had come close to her, very close, close enough to feel her shuddering heart.

“My love, I always try to express my delight of knowing you, but words fail me. For your beauty is way above the limit and the power of words or any language. Hence, allow my kisses to speak for me. I am indebted to you for understanding me and the meaning of my existence.”

After saying these words, Ashish kissed her all over her face while making her surrender completely to him. He held her hand and placed her shivering limb on his heart.

“Feel every beat of my heart, as it announces your name with its each throb,” Ashish murmured giving her soulful goosebumps.

Madhumita was speechless, and without any need to express herself, she hugged Ashish as tightly as she could. And then, she felt the warm tingling touch of Ashish’s hands, as they roamed all over her body, experiencing her every possible curve. Her contented sighs and moans and beautiful smile under him kept echoing her delight of being loved the way that only Ashish could love her. The tears in her eyes could easily express how special she could feel in the presence of Ashish.

But then, those were the tears of another time. A long gone time! A happy time!

* * *

Suddenly, another reflection knocked on the doors of her fragrant past.

They had been meeting regularly. But, that fateful day she sensed something, which was troubling Ashish, making him completely restless. She inquired what was bothering him. She never expected his reply to be akin to a rug being pulled from under her feet.

“Madhu, I don’t know how to put exactly what I am feeling, but there is something, which I want you to know,” Ashish said in his anxiety dripping voice.

Madhu was confused with Ashish’s unusual tone. She asked in a perplexing tone, “I am unable to figure out – what is troubling you? It’s been over a year since we have been together; you have never sounded like this before!”

“Don’t take me wrong, but I have to be true to you, Madhu, I don’t believe in forced relationships. These days, I don’t feel for you. Even when you are around me, nothing excites me! I suppose, whatever happened between us was just an infatuation!” Ashish confessed.

Ashish’s sharp words sliced her heart into uncountable pieces. It was hard for her to soak such a revelation. She, somehow, gathered her senses and spoke out her heart.

“The day you proposed me by writing poetry, the way you celebrated my birthday so very wonderfully near the seashore in that musical ambience, each time when you expressed your discomfort when I was not around... you mean to say all those moments and words were just because of an infatuation?” Madhumita asked with tears in her eyes.

Suddenly, her chain of thoughts got interrupted with the continuous ringing of the bell on the door.

Ting tong...

Pushed back into the reality, she felt a little scared with that constant ringing. With a shaky hand, she opened the door.

“Madhu, are you alright? I was about to take help of the neighbours as you were not opening the door for so long, but then, thank God, you opened the door!” said Anushka in an annoyed, as well as worried, tone.

“Oh, I am sorry. These days, I fail to realise things happening around me,” replied Madhumita in a thoughtful voice.

Sensing her disturbed state, Anushka suggested that she should sleep. “You need some rest, sweetie,” she said. Madhumita went inside her room, but instead of embracing sleep, she gave words to her feelings in her diary.

“I am still figuring out what made you take that decision of parting yourself away from me. You loved me with true sincerity, with deep loyalty. How can I entertain those thoughts that it was just an infatuation? My heart denies absorbing those hurtful words that you said with such ease. You failed to notice how my broken heart was oozing tears when you were saying those shocking words. It’s enough now, don’t test my patience, come back in my life, I am waiting for you!”

She read the couplet she had written earlier.

“I know we’ll meet again, soon... very soon...”

I still remember, our love blossomed in the month of June.

I am tired of seeing your image in the shining moon...

Tears arguing with me, why I let them free completely, only in the months of monsoon...

I know we’ll meet again, my love, soon... very soon...”

Next day, she woke up when the morning rays kissed her eyes. But, no sooner she opened her eyes, her memories were already materializing her past, right before her eyes. She was lost in her memories once again.

* * *

“Madhu? Madhu? I am calling you in the kitchen from the last ten minutes, where are you lost?” Anushka asked in an irritated tone, shaking her completely.

Madhumita instantly realised her present state. “Oh... I... I am sorry, Anu.”

Anushka, sensing her depressive state, suggested her to accompany her to her friend’s party that evening so that she could feel better. Being insisted on, Madhumita, finally, decided to go along with her.

She opened her wardrobe to select something to wear. She saw her red evening gown hanging in the corner and something again rushed into her mind.

* * *

“Madhu, what is this? You are still not ready? How much more time do you need? Hurry up!” Ashish said. They were supposed to go for a party that evening.

“Ashu, 5 more minutes, baby! Don’t forget, you call me your princess, and a princess always takes some extra time to dress up for any special occasion!” Madhumita replied in a playful mood.

“Oh, yes! My Highness!” Ashish replied, choosing to play along.

After about half an hour, Madhumita came into the living room.

“So, how am I looking?” Madhumita asked with the tinge of self-appreciation in her voice, wearing a red velvety evening gown. The sparkling network of jewels around her neck was enhancing her elegant personality. Madhumita’s face had been glowing partly because of her innocence and partly because of the light touch of make-up. Her shining hair had been resting beautifully over her shoulders; the perfect shape of her curves had been exposing her feminine beauty.

As soon as Ashish caught a glimpse of her, he took her in his arms, saying, “You are my moon, my stars and my sky! My life shines because of your elegant presence.”

Anushka’s voice brought her back to the reality. She selected a simple dress and got ready to leave in flat five minutes.

* * *

You could feel the beats everywhere; the captivating melody absorbed everyone in its ambiance. Some of them were enjoying their drinks, while others were dancing.

“Hey, Anushka, I am glad you came, and thank you for tagging along Madhumita as well,” said Preeti, Anushka’s friend.

Preeti called out to some of her friends who were acquainted with Madhumita.

“Hey, Madhumita. Long time, huh? How have you been?” Vikram asked. Vikram had been quite smitten by her during college and always pursued her seriously.

“Umm... I am good, thanks,” Madhumita replied.

Madhumita was feeling quite suffocated in that environment, which used to appeal to her in the past.

“Madhumita, I missed you. Why do you always try to maintain distance from me? I still feel so strongly for you,” said Vikram, when no one was around.

“Vikram, you know pretty well that I love Ashish. During college days, you used to be in the list of his good friends, please respect that friendship bond at least,” replied Madhumita.

“Oh yeah, but he lost all his respect in my eyes the day he left you. He didn’t even bother to know how you are surviving after his departure from your life. You are wasting

the most precious time of your life while waiting for him. Live in the present; open your eyes and your heart. People who left you once can leave you again! He didn't love you, he himself said those words. I will love you for my entire life and won't ever leave you. I promise," Vikram said in an intense manner, staring deep into her eyes.

"Don't be so judgmental! For me, love is Ashish, and Ashish is love. It was he who taught me the perfect definition of love. I can wait for him for my entire life. You will see, one day, he will come back into my life. He has to – for my love for him is not so weak," Madhumita replied with a choked throat.

She felt a strong pang of pain. She, immediately, left that place and started running onto the road, without knowing exactly where her sentiments were leading her.

She stopped near the beach side, not because her limbs were aching from the sudden movement, but because the cloud of her memories was resurfacing and she needed time to breathe it in. She looked at the moon. How gracefully the moonlight was sparkling over the surface of sea. She compared that beauty with the emptiness in her life. Her eyes became dim with tears of the past. She, then, sat on the nearby sand, sobbing with her head in her hands.

She heard some faint voice, that voice was calling her name softly; pain could be sensed in that uttering! She, immediately, recognised it; it was a voice she had never forgotten. How many times had she heard it whispering passionate words in her ears! It was the voice of Ashish. After few seconds that voice became loud and clear. She ran towards the source of the sound, but all in vain, as there were too many vacant spaces on the beach. She was bearing her comfortless sorrow as best as she could. How desperately she thought of stopping the wheels of her life for a little while. Indefinable look of pain in her eyes could be very well seen. Her mind started playing the words of her diary.

*"Many leave us without giving any fair explanation,
They fail to realise the curse in the situation.
Past glimpses lead us into a state of desolation,
Tears mingle with blind faith that hugs us in wanting anticipation."*

Her cell phone vibrated and she realised that it was a phone call. She picked it up. It was Anushka. "Where the hell are you, Madhumita? At least, you should have informed me before leaving that place. I got so worried for you!" Anushka yelled.

"Oh, I am extremely sorry, Anu, but I was not feeling comfortable there. Moreover, nothing excites me now," Madhumita replied with tinge of sadness.

* * *

Another year passed. While waiting for the arrival of Ashish, she was still the same, as if she was just refusing to move on with time. Anushka used to try her best to infuse some liveliness and energy into her, but in vain.

"Madhu, why are you torturing yourself? Come out of this isolated state. Move on in your life," Anushka suggested.

"Anushka, you know what. When he was with me, he always took special care of me. How can I ever believe that it was just an infatuation? I am still confused. What made

him distance himself from me? I was never so beaten with anything in my life, but with his departure...”

“Madhu, look at yourself. How weak your body has become, how dull your face has turned. My heart cries when I see you like that. It’s been almost a year since you finished your studies, but you are sitting idle at home, doing nothing, just rotting yourself by rolling into past glimpses,” Anushka said with concern in her voice.

That evening, Madhumita came in Anushka’s room.

“I have taken a decision. I am going back to Delhi. I miss my parents,” Madhumita said. Her parents had been trying to make her come back to them since more than a year.

“I am glad that you thought about going back to your parents,” Anushka replied with a smile.

Madhumita’s brother arrived to take her back with him to her hometown. Everyone at her home knew about her mental state and her love for Ashish. They welcomed her with much warmth and love. They tried to make her comfortable and come out of her depression.

“Madhu *beta*, you can’t stop the circle of life. It has to move on! We can never disobey some rules, which God has created for our good. I never wanted to show how exactly I am feeling as I am looking at this miserable condition of yours, I always tried my best to hide my aching heart from you. But this time it’s hard for me to keep my emotions in control. Ashish is gone now. Come out of your past and try to be happy, at least for your parents’ happiness. Why don’t you take a job? You’ll be occupied in some work and will be able to give some rest to your disturbing thoughts,” Madhumita’s mother said with utmost care in her heart for her.

Madhumita really wanted to make her parents realise that she was happy. She applied for several jobs.

After a month, she got an offer letter from a company for which she had applied, and now, she was supposed to get the appointment letter.

On the day of joining, she went wearing only one jewel – her fake smile.

Madhumita went straight into the reception area and asked to meet Mr Ravinder Seth, the manager who had hired her. “Ma’am, his office is on the third floor. Mr Ravinder has already informed me about your arrival. You can go. He is waiting for you,” the receptionist replied politely.

As she entered the lift, she bumped into Ashish’s best friend, Sourabh. She stood still after noting his presence. “Madhumita?” Sourabh asked in a tone that suggested he was shocked.

“Sourabh? Oh... Umm... Hi, no... Where is...” she fumbled, while being overwhelmed with her emotions.

“Madhumita, how are you? What are you doing in my office? Why are you looking so dull?” Sourabh asked.

“Sourabh, I’ll give answers to all your questions, but first, tell me how is Ashish? It hurts me immensely that he has forbidden me completely – no messages, no calls, no news from his side!” Madhumita expressed her disappointment.

“Madhumita, are you still waiting for him? C’mon, it’s been 2 years now. I thought you must have forgotten him after what all he said to you,” Sourabh asked with inquisitive eyes.

“My eyes have stopped appreciating any beauty in life. My heart has stopped feeling any emotion. My shadow haunts me; my past hits me profusely with strokes of depression and loneliness. Now, you can judge how good my life is in his absence!” Madhumita replied with tears in her eyes.

Sourabh looked at her pitiful condition, and after taking some time to think, finally, blurted out, “Okay. I think, today is the day to reveal everything to you.”

“Reveal? What are you saying? Please don’t test my patience, I am already suffering a lot,” Madhumita requested.

Sourabh, after taking his purse out from the back pocket of his trouser, opened it and pulled a yellow paper out. He handed it to Madhumita.

“Here is a letter addressed to you – from Ashish. You must read it. All your storms of queries will settle down after reading it. And one more thing, Ashish made me promise him that I will give you this letter only when some day you come searching for him, else I will always have to keep this with myself. I have to go now. Bye!” Sourabh said and walked away.

Madhumita found it hard to figure out what was actually happening with her. Why all this now, when she had finally decided to move on in life? She kept that letter in her purse and unable to find her in a working mood, left that place immediately. Her mind was constantly bursting with uneasiness and with sudden turn of events, she found it hard to judge what her destiny wanted from her after snatching away the love of her life!

Soon, she reached her home, locked herself in her room, and started reading that letter impatiently with some hope.

Madhu,

The day you would be reading this letter, you will be giving life to my most unwanted fear, which I always wished never turned into a reality. That fear is that you are still waiting for me! I am sorry for letting you survive alone in this life. The actual reason behind my abrupt departure is I have a very limited time with me. As you know, I belong to a middle-class family. My sister’s marriage had been fixed into a rich family, which was demanding a large dowry. My parents were unable to arrange for such a large sum and the marriage was about to be broken. I realised it was my responsibility as a brother to make sure it didn’t happen. So, in a surge of emotions, I donated one of my kidneys. The sum I got from the client ensured my sister’s smooth marriage. I thought our lives would turn out better after that.

But, fate is so cruel. I don’t know how, but somehow after the surgery, I was affected by an infection in my other kidney, which turned into cancer. I came to know about the situation too late and the doctors whom I consulted gave me just a month’s time to live. I always loved you. For me, love is you, and you are love. I have been always true to you in the course of love. I so desperately wanted to touch

and feel you and leave my last impression on you, but I couldn't be so selfish! So, I decided to part ways by cropping the seed of hatred in you. See, I failed in that too! Forgive me – I am helpless! And, if you respect my feelings for you, then please move on in life! My soul will get rest only on that day when someone will be there taking special care of you. Give my share of love to that someone special! I know you will never let me down!

Yours and only yours in life and after that...

Ashu

Madhumita felt like drowning into the sea of melancholy. She cried loudly, scattering the pieces of her heart everywhere with the drops of her tears. She instantly recalled that moment when near the seaside, she heard the faint voice of Ashish. Suddenly, a fact dawned on her. Ashish's soul was restless and wandering in uneasiness, waiting to see her happiness before leaving this world.

As she thought this, something strange happened. She felt numb; all feelings left her; she became still! How long she could lay like this, she didn't know.

Her mother was worried, as she didn't come out of her room. Her brother broke open the door of her room. Her mother ran to hug her after seeing her in a deteriorating state and asked her brother to take her to the hospital. While she was lying in the bed, unconscious, she saw the blurred image of Ashish. He was shaking her strongly so that she could wake up from her deep slumber. She heard him saying, "No, you have to live your life! Don't let me down! You have to live your life happily with that someone special. My soul will get peace only on the day of your marriage! Wake up, Madhu, wake up!"

Madhumita, instantly, breathed heavily, her limp body started thrashing in the bed. On seeing her condition, Madhumita's brother called the doctor, but within a few moments, she was lying with open eyes in her bed, tears flowing effortlessly from her eyes.

*"True love has its own miraculous power,
Two innocent hearts tied with its thread,
Always enjoy their blissful shower."*

* * *

A Few Months Later

A mirror was reflecting the image of a woman, wearing a red sari. Her face was glowing like the radiance of a full moon; a *tikka* on her forehead could be seen adoring her beauty! Her hands were adorned with red *chura*. Yes, that reflection was of Madhumita. She was about to get in a sanctimonious relation as per Ashish's last wish. Before going to the marriage *mandap*, she wrote these lines in her diary:

'Some days of my life, I have spent in loving you, some days, while waiting for your arrival. Now, I'll be spending rest of my life in fulfilling your last wish. I am happy. People will always be reading you on my face because your image will always be reflecting in my eyes. I am happy in the thought that when you were present in my life, I

have lived the best moments of my life in your company!’

As soon as she finished writing her diary, she felt someone touching her from the back. She instantly turned around. There was no one... only curtains were flying high because of a heavy wind. Terrified, she looked again at the mirror and was stunned to see Ashish’s reflection in place of her own. She saw Ashish smiling with content, serenity filled in his eyes. Slowly, the reflection disappeared. Then, she heard herself.

“I know, today your soul will finally rest in peace, for I am about to complete your last wish! Today, I am tying the matrimonial knot with Vikram, your friend. He loves me a lot and he understands my situation well. And, I have realised that he will take care of me in the same way as you used to. And, I have to tell you one thing. I have always loved you and will always love you.”

After all, the marriage rituals got over, Madhumita, along with Vikram, went to meet Ashish’s parents, whom she and Vikram had invited. She could easily see the lines of pain merged with wrinkles around their eyes. She hugged Ashish’s mother and whispered in her ears, “Auntie, Ashish will always be alive in our memories. Don’t bind his soul with the chains of mourning. Let it free by embracing a smile on your lips. He always wanted to see all of us happy, but what we all did was contrary to his wishes. Let’s give his soul the peace it needs.”

That night, before going to bed with Vikram, she locked up her diary in her locker, ending one phase of her life and beginning another:

*“In the hope of capturing small glimpse of loved ones,
People wait all their life without complaints.
Holding on to the strength of love, kissing past happy moments,
Strong enough to overlook all difficulties,
Weak enough to cry seeing their pictures,
They acquire mastery over the art of forgiveness.
Their eyes drowned in the pool of sadness,
They always flow in the river of extreme sentiments.
Still living life question-less, isn’t it a big accomplishment?
Indeed, between life and love, for some there is no agreement!”*



Siddhartha Yadav

Siddhartha Yadav is from Kanpur, but brought up in Allahabad, the city of civil officers and intellectuals as it is the education hub of UP. He completed his graduation from ‘Oxford of the East’, Allahabad University in English literature and economics, and then, made it to the prestigious IIT, Allahabad for MBA. He worked in an insurance MNC at Varanasi, the spiritual capital of India. Some personal problems and other issues made him resign from that place and walk out in solitude. He reached an unknown corner of India for achieving tranquillity and spiritual healing. He returned after a year, but by now, he was a writer by circumstances. His writing is purely based on his experiences and observations. ***Penning with a purpose*** is his philosophy, as he wants his pen to pioneer a change.

Story 5

The Pale Pigeon

Siddhartha Yadav

It was 5 in the morning and he was lying distressed in the bed with his oculus wide open. There was no hint of sleep in the eyes of a person who was habitual of sleeping till 9 in the morning. The man, who had tackled all the hardships of his life with the million-dollar-smile, was severely depressed this time.

Next to him, his wife was in her deep sleep. She never knew what was going on in the mind of her husband.

There was one more double-bed in that small room, on which, a couple was slumbering. Two old fashioned wooden chairs, two recliners and two wardrobes were also there, making that room too congested to accommodate four people. Overall, the room was giving a clear indication that two couples, having no formal relation with each other, were living there.

All the bed sheets, pillow covers, curtains, covers for chairs and recliners, which once might have been snow-white, were now stained and dusty. The room was sort of signifying the life of people living over there. Graceful glow and gentle whiteness was vanished a few years back from both – room furnishings and people living over there.

Suddenly, he left his bed and started walking towards the door. He managed to open it while ensuring that no disturbance was created. He, then, walked out in the small lawn with despair. Walking in the lawn and down the memory lane made him nostalgic, and within no time, his nous started walking back to some 34 months down the line.

* * *

Mohit, who had already seen 62 autumns in his life, was a retired General Manager from a nationalised bank. He started as the probationary officer and scaled up to the rank of General Manager in 36 years of magnificent service tenure. His wife, Richa, 61, was also a banker. She took VRS at the age of 55 on health grounds from the designation of Asst. General Manager in a leading private bank. They both worked in different cities and states under geographical boundaries of India and brought significant differences to the life of people as bankers. They also had earned a good name and repute in the society and were highly regarded by friends and family members too.

They had three children, Aagstya, 29, and twins, Abhijatya and Asmita, 25. Aagstya

completed his MBA from Melbourne University, Australia, and started his own business in Bangalore. Abhijatya went for engineering and completed his B.Tech from IIT-Chennai, and got placed in an IT Multinational in Hyderabad. Asmita did her MBBS and MD from prestigious Banaras Hindu University and got married to one of her batchmates. They got settled in Lucknow and started a big hospital over there.

And, yes, it was a well-established family where children excelled in their respective fields and got settled even before the retirement of parents. Not serious responsibility or burden was left on their shoulders. It was an ideal example for society to be jealous of, but for parents, it was a paragon situation to hang their boots and relish for their rest of the years.

One fine evening, Mohit took his wife for surprise dinner date at Taj Krishna, a five-star hotel at Banjara Hills in Hyderabad, where he was on his last posting. They walked inside Firdaus, the dining paradise of Taj Krishna as well as the city, and ordered some starters before moving on to the main course. The frequency of surprise dinner dates was at least two or three every month, so, it was a normal course for her. But, for him, this was an out of ordinary date, as he just wanted to discuss something important that day.

“Today, I have a special purpose for this dinner date,” he initiated the discussion directly on a serious note. “GM Sir, after 35 years of marriage, you still have any special purposes for our dinner date... really impressive!” she replied with a pixilated smile. “Thanks, Richa, but your endearing smile still makes me forget many topics of solemnity,” he responded and she smiled.

“Richa, you took VRS some three years back and I am also on the verge of retirement. Some eleven months more and I will also be a free bird like you. You know that we have utilised almost all our savings in the proper education of our children and nothing much is left in our casket now. But, the most satisfying factor for us is that all our children are well-settled and we need not to be worried about them. The only thing, which we were not able to manage till now, is a house. Now, I am thinking of purchasing a flat from the savings left with us, where we can inhabit after my retirement,” Mohit stated the entire statement in minimal voice. He was stressed and stupefied that day thinking of his retirement and days after that.

“Oh...! Someone is too serious today, just chill and relax!” she said trying to make the environment light, even though, she had understood the gravity of their problem.

“Richa, it’s high time for us to be serious regarding this. Only 11 more months in the Government residence, and after that, we would need to find shelter for us. That is the biggest concern for me nowadays,” Mohit averred.

“Don’t take too much of stress – that is not good for your health. We have sufficient funds to afford a 3 BHK flat in any small town of UP. Your nationalised bank will offer you pension too to meet our daily needs, and we will not be burden on anyone. Why are you worried?” Richa, finally, was able to make the environment lighter and smile, finally, found the address of Mohit’s face. “That’s like my hubby,” she tried to conclude the discussion.

“Even I have made this calculation, honey, but which city of UP – is the main

question,” Mohit raised a query. “Either Kanpur, your native place where all your relatives reside, or Allahabad, where you have spent your first twenty four years and where all your friends are. The choice is very simple, Mohit,” she said giving him the options.

“If I make it to Varanasi, your native place and where you spent twenty three years of your life, the place where our love story blossomed and we got married, then? I just want to relive those first three years of our relationship in Varanasi. I want to walk down those colonies and *ghats* of Varanasi holding your hand once again. Those rickshaw rides, boating on Sundays and numerous things...” Her eyes filled with tears even before that spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings could get over. She tried to wipe those tears off with the corner of her *saree*, which he had also observed by then.

“I have got my reply and I will book a flat in Varanasi tomorrow morning only. Now, when the discussion is over, can we have something for dinner, honey?” stated Mohit and put an end to the discussion with a smile. The salty fluid was still there in her eyes, but she managed to smile back.

And they, finally, purchased a flat in Varanasi and got settled there after retirement. They were to start a new life, but destiny, perhaps, had some other plans for them.

One fine morning, their elder son, Aagstya, made a surprise visit to his parents’ new home in Varanasi all the way from Bangalore. He went there for some 5-6 hours only, for a special purpose. The important discussion started on the lunch table.

“Papa, I am in some serious trouble these days. My business is not at all fetching me any profits, plus I am in some serious debt trap. I have borrowed huge amount of money – both from banks and market on some forged documents. If I will not repay the amount within the stipulated time frame, I may be jailed too. Many of my post-dated cheques have already bounced, and as you know – it’s a serious offence. Only you can help me, Papa... Please help me this time!” Aagstya said with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Mohit and Richa were literally stunned. Their heart stopped and blood congealed. Being successful bankers, they understood the gravity of the situation and the offence within no time. They were staring at each other with empty eyes, as even they didn’t have the solution to the issue.

“How much money you require urgently?” Mohit enquired, while Richa was still in traumatized.

“Some 45 lakhs, Papa,” Aagstya replied instantly, as if he was waiting for this question only.

“45 lakhs... and how much money you have with you?” Mohit again raised a genuine query. “Papa, I already told you that I am under debt trap and I don’t have anything now. You have to help me for this, and that is the reason why I came here this morning,” stated Aagstya in misdelegant accent, as if Mohit was under any contractual obligation to pay the amount.

“Aagstya, behave properly and don’t forget that you are talking to your Dad.” His scratchy tone brought Richa back to her senses and silence reigned for some thirty seconds.

“But, Aagstya, we hardly have some 2.5 lakhs left with us, as you know that we have just purchased this flat from my retirement benefits. Rest of what we both had earned during our service tenures, we utilised in the brought up and education of you and your siblings. The amount you have told us is too big for us to replenish you.”

“Why don’t you sell this flat and move to Bangalore with me,” Aagstya replied even before Mohit could have completed his sentence. It looked like Aagstya was too eager to pitch his idea.

“Aagstya...” screamed Richa. Mohit signalled her to calm down, as he sensed that the volcano inside her was about to erupt.

“Richa, can you please bring a glass of chilled water, as I don’t want to have normal water now,” stated Mohit. His intentions were very clear that he wanted her to leave the discussion for some thirty seconds so that he could respond to Aagstya alone. He always knew that she will be anyways convinced by his decision. “Yes,” responded Richa and walked towards the kitchen.

“Aagstya, let me have a word with your mother first, and I will update you with our decision in a day or two. Till then, you can take two lakhs from me, which I have readily available in my account. Don’t tell this to your mother. Just SMS me the account number, and I will e-transfer the funds,” Mohit murmured, ensuring that the voice by no ways reaches near the kitchen.

“OK, Papa, you give two lakhs, but this will not do any word of good to me. Only the entire amount can save me. My destiny rests in your hands now,” he tried to use emotions to blackmail his father. In the meantime, Richa walked back with a glass of water and handed it over to Mohit. The father and the son were silent now.

“Mumma, I will be leaving this evening only as I have a flight at 4:30 p.m. I want to sleep for couple of hours,” he said to Richa and proceeded towards bedroom. “You came here just for few hours? Stay here with us for a day or two at least.”

“Mumma, I have many more things to do and I can’t stay here till eternity,” he interrupted his mother in between and responded without even turning back. Mohit signalled her not to reply and she went back to her chair.

“You will not give even a single rupee to him and that’s my decision. No arguments, honey,” the instructions came from Richa and Mohit nodded his head, indicating a positive reply. “Richi, I am planning to leave for the market and bring some delicious Banarasi sweets for your son and grandson. But, your approval is required and desired in this regard,” Mohit said with a smile. “Yes, you can,” she smiled back and he walked out.

Finally, at 2:30 p.m., Aagstya left for airport to proceed towards Bangalore, leaving Mohit in dilemma of his lifetime. Mohit and Richa walked back after seeing him off to the airport taxi.

“Richa, I wanted to discuss something with you,” he said in a serious tone. “I don’t want any discussion on Aagstya. He is an MBA graduate and if business is not working, he can always go for a job in any goddamn company. He came here for 3-4 hours, just for money and his way of talking to you was unpardonable. He is not going to get even a

single rupee from us. Discussion is over!” Richa went ballistic this time and Mohit was in the line of fire.

“Objection sustained, honey, but you are a mother and think like that too. If we won’t support our children, who else would do, huh?” Mohit wanted Richa to think over her decision again.

“Mohit, yes, I am a mother, but it’s just because I am a wife first. The toughest decision in the life of a lady is to choose between the roles of a mother and a wife, and we tend to make the decision on the basis of circumstances. At the age of 30, my decision might have been different, but at this age, if I have to opt between aforesaid options, I will go with the second one. Can we call off this discussion now, as I am not going to get convinced?” Richa gave a hint of emotional touch to the bombardment.

“Thanks for still sticking to me!” he responded and naughty smiles took over the discussion for some time. “But, from where things like choices, options and priorities came?” Mohit again brought back gravity in the discussion.

“After selling this flat, we will be residing with Aagstya in Bangalore. You are not much comfortable with him since past fifteen years, as your wavelengths don’t match. You prefer being lonely and lead simple, sober life, and Aagstya is just the opposite. I am a woman who is born in India to adjust only, but you will not be able to do so and it will be a disaster.” Richa anticipated the future within no time.

“Richi, our lives are on the verge of getting over now. We have already lived most of our days. I am thankful to the Almighty that our children still consider that we can help them. Richi, just rewind our lives for some thirty years, when you used to travel to your branch by autos, and even buses, despite being pregnant. Just remember how much we adjusted our lives in such a way that our children must not stay alone at home for a longer duration. We sacrificed all our personal plans, pleasures and even smiles to ensure the glow of success on their faces. I know that your sacrifices have been enormous throughout all these years. You have worked in a private sector organization, and many a times, I have seen all your pains and pressures going out just on one smile of our children. What I have observed you doing for them since last 30 years, can’t even be even narrated in a week. Richa, just don’t think about us now. We will manage living with Aagstya and we will be happy. If you are bothered about me, let me tell you that I don’t need anything except you. If you are there, the entire world is there with me. How many more years we will survive? Ten, or hardly fifteen! We will manage it, *yaara*... But, they still are our children, and it’s our primary responsibility to ensure their smiles. We have to take their tensions and burdens on us. That is why we are their parents,” Mohit put all his efforts to convince her.

“I am still not convinced, but like always, I will back your decision. And yes, Mr Banker, you just forgot to tell me that you have already promised to give the entire amount that we have in our bank accounts to Aagstya,” Richa said, leaving Mohit in the state of shock.

“But, how do you know that?” asked Mohit surprisingly. “A man, who is not habitual of drinking cold water will never ask for chilled water in the mid of such serious

discussion,” her smile went wider when she said this.

“You have completed your Ph.D. on me,” he stated with smile. “Yes, some thirty years back only, I think,” and she smiled back.

But, the decision was made; the house was to be sold. Though, Richa was not with the decision, but like any other Indian woman, she was with her husband. Her female gut said that the problems were there on the cards now, but she was never able to anticipate the gravity of the problems. Even in worst of her nightmares, if she had foreboded things to go that worse, she would have never ever let that happen. But, when destiny decides to play its part, all the other players are either out or retire being hurt.

Thirty lakhs and the deal got closed the very next day itself. It was the same amount on which the flat was purchased some nine months back. Richa was still not convinced, but the father in Mohit was driving him to do these things, while the husband had taken the back seat. The date was fixed and it was just three days from this day.

“Richi, just make a call to Aagstya and tell him the entire script. He is supposed to come here after three days from today. In the meanwhile, I am booking three tickets to Bangalore on the same evening. I am yet to send those two lac rupees to him, which I promised yesterday. Tell him that as well, please,” Mohit requested.

“Why don’t you make a call to him? Do it and tell him whatever you want to. Please, don’t involve me in this,” she replied in miffed tone.

“You are his mother and he is more close to you, it will be a good news for him and none can be better than a mother to make such an important point,” he tried to convince her.

“He is close to none, and you know it better. I know that you are avoiding him and you have reasons for the same, but no issues. I will make a call to him,” she replied and walked towards the table where the landline phone was placed.

Everything went according to the plan, and then, after selling their flat, they left for Bangalore with their bag and baggage. Entire furniture and some fixtures were donated to an old-age home nearby as they proceeded towards newer journey to unknown.

They reached late night and Aagstya showed them their room. Being extremely tired, they just walked there to slumber.

Next morning, when they came out of the room, Aagstya, his wife, Niyati, and his son, Daksh, was waiting for them over a cup of tea. Niyati and Daksh greeted them with a smile and received blessings in return.

“What would you people like to have for lunch?” Niyati asked. “Anything vegetarian, and I will help you in preparing it,” Richa reverted and smiles exchanged.

“Papa, you are getting pension, I think?” Aagstya inquired.

“Yes, dear, some 29,000 rupees,” Mohit replied.

“Papa, I am still short of some 13 lakhs and if you can take that much amount as loan, all my problems will – ”

“Aagstya...” Richa screamed, using her vocal cord to the maximum possible strength, even before the completion of his sentence.

“What’s wrong, Mum? This much you would have been easily disbursing in Varanasi.

Here, everything is for free, so, this will be your saving only. Why can't he do it?" Aagstya completed the sentence, referring Mohit as 'he'.

"Bring me a calculator, Aagstya," Mohit said, and Aagstya walked towards his bedroom. "Yes, we can do it easily and it's our responsibility to ensure that all his problems get resolved," he said to Richa and indicated her to calm down, to which she never responded. Aagstya was back with a calculator in his hand.

"13 lakhs' loan amount... monthly installment, Rs. 15,000... and repayment period of 10 years. This much amount I can get from my bank without any security. Will that be fine with you?" Mohit asked, to which Aagstya nodded positively. "Done," said Mohit and stood up.

"Thanks, Dad," Aagstya muttered. Richa and Niyati kept Mum, while Daksh was busy playing with spoons on the same dinner table.

This was also done and they started living there peacefully. Nothing drastic happened for the next two months. No hot discussions, no serious arguments between any two people and things were almost normal. Aagstya and Mohit never talked much and Richa was looking after both Mohit and Aagstya. Niyati was like an obedient daughter-in-law and Daksh was too young to create any trouble. In-short, everything was on track like an ordinary family and Richa also started believing that Mohit took a right decision by selling his flat off.

But, one fine day, something drastic and dramatic happened. It was dinner time and all the family members were on the dining table for the dinner.

"Mum, I am going to France for a client meeting and will be back in ten days," said Aagstya, which brought smile on all the faces. "It's a good news, all the very best," Richa responded after the small pause of 10 seconds.

"Thanks, Mum, and I was planning to take Niyati and Daksh with me, as they have never been abroad."

"That's a brilliant idea!" Mohit responded to Aagstya with his eyes filled with joy.

"Thanks, Papa, but I believe that you will not be able to live here alone. You are aged people and some health problems also come with the age. More importantly, Bangalore is not a safe city for senior citizens to live alone. That's why I have spoken to a friend of mine who owns an old-age home some thirty kilometers away from this place. If you can shift there for some fifteen days, we will plan our trip accordingly. This is just a matter of fifteen days and you will not face any problem as the owner is a very good friend of mine," Aagstya said, perhaps delivering his decision.

Richa was too stunned to react and she kept staring at Aagstya. Mohit was also dismayed, but he never let that come down on his face. "No problem, dear," Mohit responded, managing a fake smile on his face. "We will go there on Sunday, Papa. I have already made the payment of 10,000, which is sufficient for the stay of one month," Aagstya hit the final hammer and the meeting was disbursed.

"Honey, what's next?" flummoxed Richa asked Mohit, after walking into their room. "No idea, honey, let's see, but I feel that this is not the matter of just fifteen days," Mohit reacted in low voice, to which Richa nodded her head. "Can't we talk to Abhijatya or

Asmita, they are also our children?” Richa raised a question. “The answer is ‘no’ and the reasons you know,” Mohit tried to make a parody to make the environment lighter. There was no such need of stretching the discussion more, as they didn’t have the solution to the issue now.

Finally, the day came and Aagstya drove them to this old-age home where they are residing right now. This instance happened almost three months back and he never came back again. They were later told that Aagstya was a stranger to the owner and the monthly charges for the both from the succeeding month were to be paid by Mohit only from his pension. They were sharing the room with one more couple, whose only son had died in a car accident few years back.

Mohit came back from his nostalgia to present finally. He again was pondering over the problem still standing still.

Today was the day, which had been the most important day of the year for him since long. This was the day he celebrated like crazy fellows for last 38 years. Today was the birthday of Richa and he was not having even a single reason to make her smile. At least, since past 30 years, he used to organise the party for her, in which, children, family members, friends from society and colleges of both used to get invited. Today, with no reasons to party hard, no dear ones to hang around and not even children to bring smiles on her face, he, by himself, was also not having strength to wish her. He knew that retentions from the past could bring tears in her eyes and the entire day would spoil.

On the contrary, she was awake till 12 a.m., waiting for her tender birthday kiss, from which all her birthdays had started till now. But, when she never got that till 12:30 a.m., she thought that he must have forgotten the day in midst of all the drama happening in their life. She closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

She woke up at 9 a.m. and they both had a cup of tea together, but still, no wishes came. She was just stunned thinking that he had forgotten her birthday and hadn’t recalled it till then.

At 12:30, they had lunch together and again – no wishes. Her hopes were diminishing now, as he was even ignoring the eye contact for some valid reasons. He was even avoiding being in front of her this day and he, obviously, had his reasons for the same. He knew that it was heart-rending for her that he didn’t even wish her – but wishing her could have made things more tragic.

After lunch, she went for the afternoon nap, but he was still excogitating over the situation. Suddenly, something struck his mind and he just walked out.

He came back after some two hours, but she was still in her sleep. He stepped inside the room and started reading the newspaper.

It was now 5:30 p.m., the teatime – no wishes still. Her mind confirmed that he had forgotten the day, but her heart was not at all ready to conceive the same.

It was 9:00 p.m., the dinner time. As per the guidelines of the old-age home, all seventeen people staying over there were together on the dining table for the dinner. Radio was switched on and playing some old songs of 1960s, the time when these people were in their prime age.

And suddenly, a recorded message pulled the attention of everyone towards the radio. A very familiar voice saying, “Honey, it’s your birthday today and I know that you have been waiting for my wishes since morning. I never forgot this day, but, actually, was not able to gather the strength to wish you. This has been the most important day of the year for me since long. But, the circumstances were too adverse for us this year. And I knew that my wishes will hurt you more. I am extremely sorry that I was not able to make this birthday memorable. Please, forgive me for the same. Wishing you a very happy birthday once again. Love you!”

The message was over – no name, no reference, nothing. But, the people present over that dinner table turned silent. Tears rolled down the eyes of both Mohit and Richa. She left her chair and walked towards him, and he, too, walked out and they hugged each other tightly. Words were not at all needed at this point – they both kept mum.

Within no time, all the inmates made the contribution and the cake was managed. There was a small celebration, during which, everyone sung the birthday song for her. Then followed a small dance party and they all enjoyed the evening.

“Thank you, Mohit, for being in my life, I love you!” said Richa and hugged him tight. “Me too,” he replied holding her.

In the other corner of the same city, the message was heard by Aagstya and Niyati too. “Such a drama king he is – trying to emotionally blackmail me so that we can get back to him,” Aagstya explained to Niyati and switched the radio off.



Heema Shirvaikar

Heema Shirvaikar is from Mumbai, currently residing in Pune to study law at the Symbiosis Law School. She is 20 years old and reading books, writing stories and poetry are her passion along with studying law. Her articles, stories and poems have been published in many online magazines and forums and she maintains a blog at *snowontherocks.blogspot.com* where she writes her stories and poems. She wishes to be a lawyer, so that she can work for social justice and help the weaker sections of the society, especially women and children.

Story 6

Hickey

Heema Shirvaikar

Theirs was a wedding straight out of a fairy-tale book. I admit, for a long time I envied her. Not that I had a bad intention or something. I didn't even resent her, it was just the kind of envy you have for all the nice stuff your older sister owns.

I was very young when *Akka* got married. It was an arranged marriage, but it had been fixed with the approval of both the bride and the groom. The night before *Akka's* marriage, I remember crying profusely, asking her not to leave me. And she hugging me and promising that she would come over and meet me whenever I would want her to.

"But, why do you want to go and live with a stranger?" I asked her. "Why can't we both stay together?"

"Because someday you will have to go away and live with a stranger too," she replied simply.

"I won't," I promised, and she kissed me on my forehead.

"Maya, someday you will meet someone you love, and then, you would want to spend your life with him. And you will happily leave to start a new life with him," she said gently. She had tears in her eyes, but I couldn't figure out if she was happy or sad.

"Do you love him, *Akka*?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes."

And, somehow, I was both happy and sad at the same time. I wrapped my arms around her. "I love you too. So, stay here with me instead," I protested.

"I love you more," she laughed softly and held me in a tight embrace. And this time, I could see the sadness in her eyes.

The next morning, she got married with great pomp and show. The whole village talked about her wedding for months to come. It was exactly the kind of marriage I had imagined, when I read stories like Cinderella and Snow White.

Akka's Prince Charming was the only son of a wealthy business tycoon. Everyone said *Akka* got such a good husband only because she was exceptionally beautiful. They said *Akka* and her husband were a prize catch for each other.

According to the custom in our village, *Akka* was to visit us a week after her marriage and we were supposed to cook all her favourite dishes, and there was to be a small *puja* at our place in the honour of the newly married couple. It had only been a week, since she had left, but the house already felt empty.

I was eager to see her. Now that she was married, she was to be decked up in expensive jewellery and a rich *saree*, and I imagined her looking more beautiful than she ever had.

She did come decked up in the most exquisite ornaments and the most beautiful *saree* I had ever seen. But, that was the only beautiful thing about her. Under the heavy garb of those luxurious riches, she looked like a broken doll to me.

Nobody noticed her puffy listless eyes that had slight dark circles under them in just a week. There were small bruises all over her body and she looked fragile. To me, she did not look like the person who had left this house at all. She did not look like my sister. How had she managed to transform from a beautiful bride into whatever she had become now in just a week?

Our eyes met and she smiled at me. But, I couldn't look into her inert eyes. Inadvertently, I turned, averting her gaze like I just looked at something I wasn't supposed to – something grotesque, something I couldn't face.

I couldn't avoid her for long though, and I started to cry. She cupped my face in her brittle hands and kissed my forehead like she always did.

"*Akka*, you're hurt. Who did this to you?" I sobbed.

I couldn't read her expression. She examined her bruises. Wordlessly, she ran her fingers on each one of them.

Then she attempted to smile. "These aren't bruises, Maya," she said quietly. "These are stories."

"Stories?" I asked.

"Yes, stories."

"Like Cinderella's?"

"Yes, like Cinderella's."

"I don't understand," I mumbled. She held me close to her and kissed my cheek. She left a red outline on my cheek from her bright lipstick. She pointed to the mirror.

"There. You see that? I left a story on you," she said and smiled. "When someone loves you, they leave a story on your skin."

"Who left those stories on your skin?" I asked her.

"Prince Charming," she said.

"Why?" I asked her.

"So, everyone will know I belong to him," she said sadly. A tear escaped her eye. She was still smiling, but there was something wrong about her smile.

"Does it hurt, *Akka*?"

"Yes. But, it is a sweet pain," she said, but the way her eyes darkened indicated that there was nothing sweet about that pain.

"Why doesn't *Appa* do that to *Amma* then?"

Her expression changed.

“Enough with the questions,” she said roughly. “You will not talk about them, Maya. You don’t understand,” she said with somber expression.

I never asked her about the bruises since then. She kept coming home, and the stories on her skin kept getting longer, and darker, and more fearsome. I kept seeing her, and I kept crying. Maybe nobody else noticed her bruises. And if they did, they never asked her about them. And she never talked to anyone about them. And I learned not to ask about them too.

But, it was then that I realised the difference between a fairy-tale wedding and a fairy-tale marriage.

Time kept passing by, and life kept going on, and I grew up.

* * *

With a lot of persuasion by me and a lot of insistence by *Akka*, *Amma* and *Appa* allowed me to leave the village to pursue my higher studies in the city. It was a big leap and it all felt like a dream. I was probably the first girl from our village or for that matter, any of the surrounding villages to have even pursued a higher education and let alone in a big city. Of course, there was a lot of disapproval. Everybody kept telling *Amma* how the “city air” was toxic, not for my health, but for my character. How “modernization” would ruin me, and then, how nobody would want to marry a “spoilt and modern” girl like me. They kept telling *Appa* how there was no need for higher education for me in the first place, how I wasn’t a man to make use of all this education and provide support to them in their old age and that I would eventually have no use of all this education because after marriage, I would get busy looking after my husband’s family and my kids. How I was only a commodity to be sold off to the richest bidder and how educating me would make it difficult to find a husband for me, because nobody would want to marry an ‘over-educated’ girl.

I was almost sure, I would never be able to go to the city or even get a higher education, but in spite of all the reproach and displeasure that came their way, *Amma* and *Appa* readily let me go. Perhaps, it was because they too had noticed *Akka*’s bruises. Perhaps, it was because they had seen her silently suffer, after all. Perhaps, it was because they knew; deep down, that they had nothing to lose – that there was a chance I’d end up like *Akka* – and it was better to educate me and make me independent and then leave the decision to me than have me caged in a golden cage like *Akka*.

City life was faster than the slow, simple and quiet calm of the village, and like it does to everyone who knocks at its door, the city and its bright lights consumed me, making me a part of them, it felt as if we all were small sparks that kept the city alight, and the thought felt good. I was a part of the thousands of faces that walk by in a blur, trying hard to stand out, while fervently trying to fit in.

I was in the last year of my graduation, when that incident happened. But, I still remember it like it happened only yesterday. It is still etched fresh in my mind, as fresh as the sight of *Akka*’s bruised body, as fresh as the memory of our conversation.

That day, I was out with a friend who had agreed to accompany me to go shopping to

buy some *sarees* for *Amma* and *Akka* and a few cotton shirts for *Appa*, since I was to return home to my village the next day.

Rickshaws at that time were few and a luxury of the rich, so we decided to board the bus. It was a typical busy morning and we soon found ourselves squeezing our way through a crowd of men to seat ourselves on the only empty seat reserved for women in the bus.

I was sitting at the window, taking in the disturbing beauty of the city that I still couldn't get enough of even after spending more than five years, while trying to decide which colour of *saree* would look best on *Amma*. I turned towards my friend to ask for her opinion, just in time to see the man standing next to her grope and pinch her inappropriately, and then, in a matter of seconds, slither ahead to get down at his stop. My eyes followed him and rested at the place he last stood, rooted to the exit of the bus in horror and shock. Never in my entire life, had I witnessed something like this. I had heard about it from people I knew, and I had read about it in newspapers and books, but never had I seen it happen. Tears threatened to escape my eyes and I averted my gaze to the window instead of meeting my friend's eyes, just like I had refused to meet *Akka's*, feeling violated myself, like I had been privy to something, I wasn't supposed to see or know.

At the store, I watched my friend fight tooth and nail to bargain with the shopkeeper to reduce the price of the *saree* and I wondered why she hadn't fought with the man on the bus. I was surprised more at the lack of inaction by us rather than the action of the man. Why had she pretended as if nothing had happened? Why couldn't I look her in the eye as if somehow, she was responsible for goosebumps on my body from what I had witnessed, rather than the man? And at that moment, silent tears trickled down my eyes again.

When we reached our dormitory, I watched her change and my gaze briefly fell on the reddish patch of skin on her body. And this time, I knew the story behind it. I wondered if it was any different from *Akka's* stories. It must have hurt the same, but there was nothing sweet about this pain.

When someone loves you, they leave a story on your skin. I remembered *Akka's* words. Did that mean the man who did this to my friend loved her? No, he didn't. They had never seen each other before.

And that was the day, I learned that not all the stories on one's skin are written by the people they love or the people who love them. My friend had not asked or even assented for this story to be left on her skin. Why then was it done against her will? Isn't our skin our most prized belonging? Why is it then that it was used like a wall to draw a cheap graffiti on rather than a delicate paper to write poems together?

This made me wonder whether *Akka* had wished for or even consented for those stories to be written on her skin.

I ached to talk to her, but I knew that these stories were supposed to be personal. They were written on her and were, exclusively for her. And *Akka* had taught me that I wasn't supposed to question, so I kept quiet.

And more time passed by, and life kept going on, and I grew up a little more.

* * *

College was over and I made the decision to stay back in the city after I got a lucrative job offer there from a reputed company. I decided that I could send a chunk of the salary to *Amma* and *Appa* every month and planned to call them to come and live in the city, once I would have earned enough to buy a house of my own here.

I had, unknowingly, become a part of the city's callous and unforgiving environment and like several others, was drawn towards its unsweetened life, determined to make my living amidst its rocky and uncertain by-lanes that put up a charade of deceitful sophistication.

I met different kinds of people in the office. Everybody was nice to everybody on their face, and behind their backs, they all carried their best knives, neatly tucked inside their garb of professionalism. The people here were just like the city – you knew they were unreliable, unpredictable and yet you couldn't help, but get invariably drawn to their charming façade.

One of my colleagues here had just got married a few months ago. It was a love marriage and like all the newly married city girls, all she talked about was how amazing her married life was.

Almost every day, she would come to the office bearing an ostensibly large bruise on different parts of her body - her neck, her arms, her lips, her shoulder, and sometimes even on her ears. Everyone would gather around her excitedly and she would narrate to all of them, the juicy details of her previous night's escapades.

Almost everybody had gotten used to her bruises and thought nothing of it – everybody except me. I still felt like that backward village girl, who was too embarrassed to be able to meet her sister's eyes, who could not meet the eyes of a friend who had been molested, and who could not digest the sight of the bruises on other's bodies that made her recoil in horror and humiliation as if it were she who had been violated instead.

The first time I saw the bruise on my colleague's body, I was flabbergasted. Concerned, I'd asked her how she had hurt herself.

"I'm not hurt, it's a hickey, you silly!" she'd giggled.

"What's that?" I asked, perplexed.

"It's a love bite!"

"A love bite?"

"Yes, it's when your lover gives you a bruise while making love!"

"Doesn't it hurt? It looks painful."

"It's sweet pain." She winked.

"You don't mind?"

"I don't know, I don't really like it," she said thoughtfully. "But, as long as he does it out of love, I shouldn't mind, should I?" she concluded with her trademark giggle.

But, something about her giggle didn't seem right. It sounded phony, much like the elaborate stories she conjured about her marital life. I would have preferred for her to say that she liked it, or at least a simple confirmation that she didn't mind.

To hear that she just was not sure of how she felt about it made a familiar pit in my stomach. Had she not consented for those stories or had she just not opposed?

But, I had exhausted my tears by this time, so I just simply stood there and felt bad for her, and prayed that she would find a voice to tell her husband that she did mind it.

I never stopped by to ask her about them again. Nor did I ever stop by to listen to the intricate stories behind her bruises. Somehow, I was far too familiar with these stories to want to listen to a distorted version of them.

And she continued with the giggles and she continued with her stories, and I'd look at her sitting amidst a crowd of people, hungry for the gossip and when she'd say all these stories to them, I felt as if she wasn't talking to them at all. She was talking to herself – more like, trying to convince herself.

Whenever I saw her bruises, it reminded me of the ones I saw on *Akka* – even her expensive *saree* and her classy jewellery somehow had not masked the bloodcurdling bruises. *Broken doll they* screamed at me.

But, the routine went on, with fresh wounds on her skin, which were accompanied by fresh stories she wove to cover them up with, and more time passed by, and life kept going on, and I grew older.

* * *

Life in the city is something you don't consciously get used to, but you just do. The city is ruthless. It doesn't take your responsibility, and if you want to make it there, you have to keep your emotions aside sometimes and keep moving. Things keep happening all around you. There is violence, there is gore, there are people who will use you and never look back to see what became of you, and worse, there are people who will break you into smithereens before they leave to make sure they don't have to look back to see what became of you.

There are rapes and murders and abuses that keep happening. Who knows what that woman sitting next to you in the train has gone through? She won't tell you and you won't ask. Because you both are too busy in the complex web of your own life – both building this web and trying to keep from getting entangled in it yourself. Because who has the time to care about others' woes, when you have yourself to worry about? You read in the newspaper, and you watch on the television about all the violence that happens all around you, and for a while, you feel vulnerable. And you feel angry. And you even blame the government. You wonder, if you're the next victim. Sometimes, you even protest by lighting candles and participating in peace marches. And when you think you've done enough, that you've done your bit, you keep your emotions aside and you move on. Because, life moves on, and then, who cares how many years these cases keep languishing in the courts?

You become a part of this ruthless city and its ruthless ways and you take pride to call the city your own.

I had a well-established job by now and a house for myself, and I decided to ask *Amma* and *Appa* to move to the city and come and stay with me. I wished *Akka* could move here too, but I knew she had a completely different life now.

The job consumed most of my time and it had become difficult to manage the house and cook for myself, so I decided to hire a domestic help to deal with the burden of housekeeping, while managing my job. I wanted to hire the maid and set a routine for her, before I could call *Amma* and *Appa* to the city, because I wanted to make their lives as comfortable as possible. So a few months before *Amma* and *Appa* planned to shift, I hired a maid to do all the cooking and cleaning around the house.

The very first time that I met her to talk to her about work, I had noticed that she had a few bloody cuts on her face and her body. Not wanting to sound too intrusive on the first day itself, I did not ask her anything about them, instead I just avoided looking at her too much altogether and informed her about all the work that she would need to do.

I soon figured that she was a hard worker. In fact, she would end up working far more than what was agreed between us. If I'd asked her to sweep and mop the floor, she would also end up scrubbing the kitchen squeaky clean, wiping the bathroom tiles and dusting everything she could find in sight. She never asked for a raise, but she would only ask for more work, to buy herself some time to linger around, until it was absolutely time for her to go back home. She'd look positively petrified of going home, which only confirmed my suspicion that the reason for her injuries was at her house.

Days went on and I tried to keep myself as busy as I could, to not let the increasing number of injuries on her withering body perturb me. It felt wrong to not ask her about them. But, something inside me told me that these stories were personal. That I was not to ask questions about them, that they were private and intimate to the person on whom they were written. That was what I had been always taught, to ignore their presence, because it was none of my business and stories like these were to stay within the four walls of their minds.

And then, one day, she turned up at the house with a black eye. That was it and I decided to confront her about her injuries, to ask her what horrid person had done this to her and had been doing this to her, even if it meant intruding into her personal life, even if it meant asking discomfoting questions about the stories on her skin, even if it meant losing my super-efficient domestic help!

At first, she kept denying, she kept weaving fabrics of the same old stories that I had always heard, the ones that were made to mask the reality, make it less horrific than it was. But I'd had enough of it.

Akka had been a victim of marital rape and she had never realised that her husband couldn't use her body to write his stories on when she did not want them. She didn't realise that he couldn't just use her like a scrap paper just because she was married to him and because she 'belonged to him'. *Akka* never realised that her bruises were never a sign of love, they were a sign of brutality and each new bruise on her paper skin had crushed the sanctity of the relationship she was in. *Akka* never realised that she didn't have to be in love when she didn't want to.

And I had never realised that I could make her understand all of this... that I could help her because everybody around me had taught me not to interfere. They had taught me that these things were private, that they kept happening and it was 'okay'.

But I realised now, after all these years, that it was not.

It was not okay, that my friend who could argue with shopkeepers couldn't stand up for herself when the man on the bus had molested her. It was not okay that none of us could see eye to eye as if somehow what the man had done had been our fault instead of his. It was certainly not okay that we had to keep those stories hushed up, even though they keep happening around us, and they are wrong, and they shouldn't be written in the first place.

It was not okay that my colleague did not have the will to tell her husband that she did not want those bruises on her.

Sometimes, we express our love in a way that is not okay to the other person. And we don't have to accept it just because it is love. Expression of love in a way that left the other person feeling violated was not okay.

When she realised I wasn't about to relent, she broke down and confessed.

"Madamji, my husband beats me."

"Why?"

"I don't give him money to drink. We have two little children, I have to pay for their school and I have to manage the house. He doesn't earn a single penny, but he always asks money from me to buy drinks. When I refuse, he beats me."

"Why don't you leave him?"

"Where will I go, Madamji? This is the only house I have. I have two small children."

"Why don't you go to the police?"

"No, no! Please don't go to the police, Madamji," she joined her hands and pleaded. "He is my husband!" she wept.

And I realised the reason why I could not and did not help any of these women I knew – they didn't want help. They didn't know that they needed help, that what was happening with them needed to come out rather than stay within the four walls of their minds, that this wasn't supposed to be personal, that what was happening with them was wrong and it needed to stop, and they could stop it, that they had the choice to want it to stop.

I embraced her and kissed her forehead, like *Akka* always did.

"You deserve a better life," I told her simply.

The next day, she came up to me and told me that she did want a better life, if not for herself, but for the sake of her children. Not wanting to waste her husband's already wasted life, she refrained from lodging an FIR against him; but we did visit him along with a group of women working for an organisation to warn him that we wouldn't be so kind on him and we would definitely lodge the FIR on her behalf, if he ever tortured her. For now, the organisation is busy trying to arrange a place for her to live, and till then, she and her children are living with me.

Why did I do this for her? Because I was tired of being a helpless, passive witness of what had been going around me for several years.

Who am I? I am just another face in the crowd, a face who has her own anxieties, fears, insecurities and worries to deal with. I am one of you, the one who reads about

these things happening in the newspapers and TV channels and who feels utterly powerless, helpless and terrible that she cannot do anything about it... who wants it to stop, but doesn't know how, so she just feels bad about it till she can move on to find another thing to feel bad about. Because that is all we can do about others' woes, right? We can feel bad about them, but what can we do for them? Just pray that they get out of it? And when we are in the same situation as them, they'd do the same. But, it is the time that this needs to be stopped... that we do more than cry for others and feel bad for them. We need to extend our hands to them and try to get them to walk again, because somewhere, we all need to be fixed. We are all broken in our own ways, and we need one another. After all, we could all use a hand to get back up and stand.

I was just one of those hundreds of faces in the crowd who looked at these bruises and turned her head away. I knew what stories those bruises stood for and all I could do was feel bad for them, and cry for them, and at a point of time, I even ran out of the tears. But, never once did I try to erase them. Why? They were not my stories. They were "their" stories. They were personal.

And some of these stories were permanent and some could be erased, but I couldn't try to convince any of these women I knew, that we can choose to write our own stories. And we can choose what stories we want to be written on our body. And by whom we want them to be written. And that we can erase the ones that we don't want.

This is our skin and nobody has the right to crumple us like a paper only to find another skin to write on, and then, another, ruining people like they're pages, like they are somehow replaceable. It will leave our delicate and fragile selves into a tattered mess.

And to stop this, we need to make 'their' stories our own, because 'they' and 'we' are not really different at all. Because that is the only way we can help erase each other's stories and help write new ones the way we want it to be. Because we are meant to make stories, but our stories shouldn't determine who we are or what we'll be.

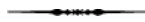
And as for the stories, maybe they are like a hickey. For a while, they may seem like a sweet pain, because as long as anything is done with the intention of love, it seems sweet. And that is okay, as long as we're okay with it. But, when we're not okay with it, we need to speak up, like my colleague should have, and say that we're not okay with it, because the person who loves us will always understand.

Otherwise, the hickey is no longer a trail of kisses that tells sweet stories, it is a scar.



Himanshu Chhabra

Himanshu Chhabra, owner of Purple Pen Blogs, is currently pursuing CA. He belongs to a pinpoint city in Haryana, Hisar. He is an explorer, a book-eater and a guitarist. His pen name is 'HAC' and he firmly believes that his writing won't steal or win your heart; it will simply HACK it. You can reach him on [Facebook.com/HACwrites](https://www.facebook.com/HACwrites) or HACTheAuthor@gmail.com.



Udit Pal

Udit Pal, a 17-year-old Standard 12th student is pursuing commerce in Bokaro Steel City, Jharkhand. She's obsessed with social networking and can be found online either sending one-liners or posting pictures of her, showcasing 'not so interesting life for her, but super entertaining for others'. You can reach her on [Facebook.com/UditPal](https://www.facebook.com/UditPal) or Uditapal96@yahoo.com.

Story 7

NCERT of L_O_V_E

Himanshu Chhabra and Udit Pal

“Here is your NCERT book,” she said cushioning the book on the unpolished wooden bench. It got my sudden attention. I lifted my chin up, ignoring the cross and circle game I was playing, and smiled at her. She saved me from losing another game.

“Thank you,” I said casually. I didn’t want to show how excited I was to see her after seeing her early morning in the prayer, but inside me, *Cadbury balls* of happiness were blasting. I held my smile and opened the NCERT book. She walked back to her seat, which was just two rows behind.

It was not just an NCERT book, but it was an envelope to our love letters. On 143rd page, she had put a paper slip, the uneven paper torn from the last page of a notebook. It read:

“Meet me at the terrace of the school after 3rd period.”

It was a group of the most romantic words for me. Why? Because, terrace was the honeymoon spot of our school. Student used to go there for little honeymoon moments. I didn’t go there ever, but had heard of it, just like Hogwarts... umm... 18+ Hogwarts, where magical moments used to happen without any wand.

I rolled the slip and put that in my pocket. A wave of happiness hit me and, suddenly, the man in me rose – along with ‘something’ else. It was for the first time that she had asked me to meet her there, and I had to make sure that it shouldn’t be the last time. I had noticed that seductive grin on her face when she passed the book to me. It was to be my first experience of that sort, and so, I kept preparing myself mentally to kiss her, or if not kiss, then, at least hug her. Soon, the period got over and she stepped out of the classroom.

“Can I go to drink water, ma’am?” I asked politely. That was the only way to unleash heaven. Teacher looked at me and I made the cutest puppy-face known to humans. She agreed and I stepped out of the classroom. It took me some nano-seconds only to run through the corridor to the terrace.

“You are late!” she said while standing near a wall, having her one hand in her hair and other on her waist. I, immediately, took the basic precaution and closed the door.

I acted to check my digital wristwatch and said charmingly, “We have 38 minutes to do

the things.”

“What things, *huh?*” she shimmered. Her cheeks were crayoned pink and her smile diminished to the sensuous one.

I walked towards her. “Look around what others are doing,” I said, circling my arms on her check shirt, and embraced her. I had never hugged any girl before. It was a mixed feeling of nervousness and love. It was our first time, and both our hearts were thumping insanely due to nervousness.

Ignoring my heart rate, which was as high as Sehwag’s strike rate, I noticed her eyes. Two crystals were looking deep into my eyes. The way she had left the whole world for a moment and melted in my arms, it was sheer beauty at its best. Certainly, she was my angel, correction – a ‘blue’ angel. She had a pair of blue eyes, a ponytail poking out of her head and the shortest skirt. She was the most beautiful girl of 8th C, and according to her, I was the most handsome one among the guys.

I, then, noticed the pink petals embarked by God on her face – her lips. I so wanted to kiss her, but then, you all must be thinking, *a kiss in 8th standard!* Maybe, it was too early, or maybe, it was too late. If anybody can ever specify the ‘right age’ to fall in love, if it takes just a true heart to fall in love, then, I was born to be loved and to love. If it takes to be responsible to fall in love, I could have taken the responsibility of her everlasting smile and never-coming tears. If it takes a life, then, maybe I loved her since my previous birth.

My knowledge of kissing was limited to the censored movies that used to get telecasted on television. I knew that kissing is an activity of touching a girl’s lips with yours. I had seen various actors kissing actresses. It was an easy task.

I reduced the circumference of my arms and brought her closer to me. She started blushing, and her eyelashes dropped. I could smell the perfume she was wearing. I knew that deodorants are alcoholic, but the fragrance she used, actually, had something unusual that made me lose my senses and feel drunk.

It took the hell out of me to cover the distance of ‘L-to-L’, not ‘Lip-to-Lip’, but from Learner to Lover. I bent my head and closed my eyes to live the moment and was expecting her to do the same. But, amidst the action, she asked, “Are you thinking of kissing?” Making my eyes wide-opened with her timing, she, literally, killed the moment too.

The question was so audible that even the other couples who were busy in living their memorable moments spared time out of that to gaze at us.

“Huh? Don’t be so lame. Allow me to kiss you,” I retorted. I can never express that feeling, but I was kind of ‘thirsty’ to touch her lips with mine. Maybe, I was intoxicated by her fragrance, or the moment had casted its spell.

“Are you sure?” she asked. I was getting a strong vibe that she wanted to kiss me too, but was hesitating. I had to clear her hesitation to lock myself in the heaven of kiss with her.

“Sure... about?” I asked, while cupping her cheeks and trying my level best to act mature and get the reward of it too.

“About the baby thing!” she said and bit her lips.

“I am certainly not. But have you ever heard that joke in which a K.G. boy asks his teacher something similar and she refuses, and then, he tells his K.G. girlfriend – *see, I told you?*” I tried to give her the best information as per my knowledge. However, somewhere I knew that it was the most idiotic joke as well.

“You are worst at convincing, Himanshu. But, you are cute,” while saying that, she pulled my right cheek and gave a little peck on the other one.

I narrowed my eyes.

“What? It was a kiss on cheeks. It won’t make babies. And I want you to come up with a good reason if you want to replace the cheeks with your lips,” she said winking and threw a flying kiss.

I used all my mind and knees to think and finally came up with another self-suicidal reason. “And I saw that commercial of protection too. They aren’t lip-shaped, so, anyone can conclude easily that kisses don’t lead to pregnancy,” I explained while trying to imitate the accent of our science teacher. Udit always believed teachers, and by doing so, I hoped her to believe me too.

“Then, what’s their shape?” she questioned as she always used to in our science class. Ah! How can I forget that?

“They are shaped like bananas,” I mistakenly said. I didn’t want to say that, but words were popping out like prison-breakers.

“But, why just bananas?” another unanswerable question hit my eardrums. I looked down and started blushing. I had the answer poking out of my body, but then, I didn’t want to reply.

“I don’t know!” I said and continued further while taking a long sigh, “Don’t you trust me?”

“I do. It’s just that I love you a lot and I don’t want to lose you,” she uttered and took the whole conversation in some altogether different direction with that ‘most-used’ sentence in every love story. “I love you a lot and I don’t want to lose you,” I murmured.

“Look around. See what others are doing?” I said, tightening my grip and bringing our lips closer. They all had been doing it since years, or might be, centuries. Our seniors did it there, their seniors did it there, and in fact, seniors of their seniors must have done there too. I was just trying to save our school’s ‘most lovable’ culture from extinction.

“They are kissing,” she replied, moving her hands from my shoulder to my neck.

And, finally, we kissed...

My lips perfectly settled in hers. Both the heads bent right, or rather, for a moment, everything bent *just* ‘right’. The Earth, the flying birds, the classrooms, the teachers, and the noisy students – everything just snoozed. There were just two things moving – our lips against each other, making the moment no less than a heaven on our planet.

Her lips were replying positively and the kiss was turning into a deeper smooch. My hands were moving on her waist and hers were cupping my face. My tongue was moving in her mouth and was incredibly playing with her tongue. We were so lost in tasting each other that the kiss was running as smooth as a lonely boat sailing in a sea with the

waves, or a couple dancing on soft music, having arms-in-arms.

“What are you both doing here!” she yelled. Oh wait! Her lips were sealed with mine, how she could say something. Our kiss came to an end, and I was pushed back to the real world. The terrace, which earlier had many couples, was now vacant. The scenario had changed completely somewhere between the ‘before-kissing’ and ‘after-kissing’ moment. Before kissing, I could see numerous couples kissing each other passionately, whereas, after kissing, it was just *a* couple – me and Udit – and our Hindi Teacher.

“Who taught you all this?” she shouted loudly. Her red eyes were fuming. I looked into her eyes for a moment and lost all my strength to look again. My eyes fell down, and before I could say something, I heard someone sobbing right next to me.

“These kids...” she roared and walked towards us.

My heartbeat paced up and I started sweating out of fear. My mind was blank, but then, I looked at Udit and all my worries just turned into care. Her cheeks were painted wet with her tears and her sobs were pinching my heart badly.

Without thinking much, I took a step ahead. I knew, Miss Ranjana was coming to slap us, and if I would go ahead, she would slap only me. But, I was more concerned about protecting Udit than getting slapped. I loved her and I was all ready, like a man, to take her responsibility.

Miss Ranjana started slapping me. One... two... three... four... five... She slapped me five times. I didn't utter any word. I didn't cry. But two steps behind me, Udit was crying badly. Her tears were more painful than those slaps.

“Come with me,” Miss Ranjana said and turned back to walk. We were supposed to follow her. However, I took my time. I rubbed my red cheek and looked back. For a moment, I was happy that I saved my Udit.

“They will call my parents. You don't know them. My Dad will kill me,” Udit said, sharing whatever she was feeling at that moment. I wiped her tears with my palm. “Nothing is wrong. Don't cry... please...” I begged. Her blue eyes were absolutely restless and dripping tears again.

Somewhere, I knew that a real big shit had happened. Yet, I painted a smile on my face, held her hand, and said, “Don't worry, I am here. I promise, nothing will go wrong for you.”

She nodded, and we followed Miss Ranjana.

As we stepped down the terrace, suddenly, we became the center of attention. Students knew the reason we were following Miss Ranjana and the path of our fate was decided. We were going to the Principal's room.

Miss Ranjana put that paper slip on Principal's desk. It was not supposed to take an Einstein brain to conclude that while going to the terrace, I dropped that paper somewhere in the corridor and Miss Ranjana found it, and then, it was so easy for her to follow the traces.

Miss Ranjana narrated the same to the Principal and she was absurdly astounded to hear about our deeds.

“I tell you, Miss Ranjana, these days kids are growing so fast and straying off their

path so easily. It won't be tolerated in our school. Call their parents and detain them for few weeks."

A vicious smile knocked Miss Ranjana's face and she took a paper from a note pad, which was there on the same desk. She asked us to pen down our parents' contact number. Things went worst indeed when our Principal got involved in the scene. She asked us to stay in her cabin and instructed our class prefect to bring our bags. She started going through our books and copies. Suddenly, she got hold of my biology copy. Letters fell from it, and the very same thing happened when she got the biology copy of Udit. She chuckled while looking at those letters and asked the prefect to take us out of her cabin. She reclined on her chair and started reading those letters that Udit and I had exchanged in past few months.

She unfolded some of the letters and took me back to the memories when those letters were fresh and I read them the first time.

It was just another school day. I had forgotten my water bottle on the dining table at home. When I was thirsty and had no water bottle, I made my way to the water tank. I had just bent down to quench my thirst and there she was, coming to me. It was our first meeting after deciding that we were in a relationship. She, too, drank water, smiled and dropped a well-folded piece of paper. Our Principal was about to read the very same letter, which read:

Himanshu,

LOL, your name reminds me of that show 'Khichdi'. I can't believe we are boyfriend-girlfriend. I mean that is something big people do, right? You are my first boyfriend and I want to marry you, but my Mumma says that bad people talk about marriage. What should I do? On a serious note, you are the most delightful thing that has ever happened to me. Each moment that you and I spend together is so enchanting that I catch myself amused for no reason at all. Think of this as a simple love letter, full of emotions I cannot express, telling you everything you should hear with the words only my heart could understand. You are everything, when I'm convinced that I should be nothing at all. I am simply putting a thank you for every second of your time, every ounce of your tolerance, every bit of your effort, and every drop of your love. Loving you is so weird that at times, I wonder WHAT THE HELL IS THIS FEELING?

Forever and always,

Udit

Her letter made me feel thirstier. I quickly wrote a reply and went again to that water tank area with her tiny feet following me.

After reading the first one, the Principal grabbed the second letter, which was actually my reply to Udit. That probably was the first time I had goosebumps when our hands touched for the first time.

Udita,

Love is a funny thing. It happens when we least expect it to happen. Look at me. I asked my friend to do some kind of 'setting' with your best friend, but look at us now. We are together and happy. I would always like you to share your feelings with me, and the moment you happen to feel like you want a separation, tell me, I would never back out from anything that would be able to give you happiness in life. Seeing you in any kind of pain would give me pain too. Relationships are incredibly messy, and at times, they are annoying too. They are like watching the same episode of 'Shin-Chan' repeatedly. They are like watching the repeat telecast of India losing a big match back-to-back. Love is extremely painful too – like hitting your small toe finger with a table's edge.

You say I'm sweet for remembering every little element about you. I'm not doing it to be called 'sweet', I remember because I pay attention. I pay attention because I love you, and I'm glad to be yours. I can give you my heart and my love right now and forever. I hope nothing between us changes, except my love for you, which would increase and get stronger with every passing day of our lives. You have no idea how much I love you. I don't want anything else... just love me back. And lastly, I just hate your teddy bear, as he gets a chance of sleeping with you every now and then.

*Infinity and beyond,
Himanshu*

The Principal was red angry as she took the third letter in her hand. She was about to explode. Meanwhile, Udita managed to cry aloud. She knew what was there in the third letter. It had some adult content. To increase our embarrassment, the Principal read it with an open mouth.

Himanshu,

My beloved! Watching you every morning and making your way towards me is so beautiful that I can't help myself from blushing. Then you come and ask me 'Why are your cheeks so red?' With each passing day, I'm falling in love with you. You are like watching the sun during winter mornings – so soothing! In few months, you have made a lot of promises, which we will keep because they are promises worth keeping, made by the hearts, which should not be broken.

Have you seen those sex movies? How can those didis do that? I mean, how those bhaiya can do that? I mean, can't they see those didis crying? I feel bad. My friend says every guy watches them. Do you? Promise me, you will not do anything like that with me. I hate crying... it destroys my makeup, and you know very well how much I love my make up! And yes, Himanshu, I love you for what you are, what you have been and how you will stay.

*Forever and always,
Udita*

Miss Ranjana was back after making calls to our parents. I knew my Dad would be slapping me hard, like he had slapped my elder sister when he came to know about her love relationship. Her guy was thrown out of our house. My Dad asked me to go to my room, and then, all I could hear was, cries of my sister. My Dad was shouting and beating her, until I dozed-off hugging my blanket and brown teddy bear.

“A number is switched off, Madam,” said Miss Ranjana. “7842 – whose Dad’s number is this?” she asked, turning her head towards us. “Umm... It’s 7642...,” Uditā whispered, but her words were not understandable from her sobs.

“It’s of my Dad,” I said. It was I who changed Uditā’s Dad’s number before giving the paper to Miss Ranjana. My Dad would have beaten me, but her Dad would have surely killed her. I had made a promise to her that I won’t let anything happen to her. Moreover, I was a man, as my mom says – I was a complete man of my words. I had taken her responsibility and I had to finish it my way.

Miss Ranjana narrowed her eyes and asked Uditā to go back to the classroom until her Dad comes. She asked me to stay as I could sense that she was cooking something in her mind. *‘Maybe, some more slaps. Huh? I can handle much more than this,’* I thought.

Miss Ranjana was unaware of the fact that Uditā’s Dad wouldn’t be coming. Uditā started walking out of the room. She wanted to stay with me; I could see the helplessness in her eyes.

“Uditā...” I called her. She got another reason to stay with me for few more moments. She turned and I hooked her bag on her shoulder. She had forgotten her rucksack.

She adjusted the bag and started walking out of the room. Her eyes followed me, until a concrete wall made it impossible. I was left alone with Miss Ranjana and our Principal. I started looking at the trophies on the shelves, and they engrossed themselves in reading our love letters.

I was happy that they were interested in reading my red romance and weren’t turning my cheeks red. On the other hand, maybe they wanted my Dad to do the honor. I knew what I had to do. I had a full-proof plan in my mind.

“Where these children learn all this?” Miss Ranjana uttered and picked another letter. It was her turn to read the letter of ours – a ‘not-so-private-love-story’.

Uditā,

You are in my mind now and I want to write it down. When I look at your picture, I feel my heart beat faster and I can’t help myself from falling for you all over again. For a second, I feel like we can define anything in the world, but then, again I look at you and I realise some things can never be defined. About the blue films, those are called porn movies, and don’t worry, Babu, those girls are trained. They love these things. You like such movies? You should. Nevertheless, I love you, and if watching them hurts you, then I won’t anymore – and that’s my promise.

Infinity and beyond,

Himanshu

The Principal and Miss Ranjana, who were lost in our romantic letters, were distracted by a call. I was sure that it was from the reception. My Dad was a fast driver, and my home wasn't far enough. I prepared myself for the face-off.

"Yes, call him in," the Principal replied to the call. She moved her chin up and asked Miss Ranjana to bring Udit in the cabin. Miss Ranjana, in no time, disappeared.

Silence prevailed. It was like the silence before a storm. The Principal was glaring at me, and my eyes were fixed on my feet. Those were the most awkward moments of my life.

My Dad was there. He asked the Principal if he could come in.

She narrated our perfectly romantic kissing adventure and about those mesmerising love letters – which were no less than a crime to her – to him. She'd get full marks if she dared to attempt a question, "*Give a brief introduction of Udit and Himanshu's love story.*"

She perfected it by passing him a letter written by Udit to me. He read it with all his attention. My Dad couldn't believe his eyes. He checked the paper twice, before reading it.

Himanshu,

Ummm... What's wrong with your handwriting? Seriously, it is gross. Baba! Look at mine. So beautiful! So enchanting, just like me! Kidding! You know my sister, too, has a boyfriend, and they do a lot of naughty things on messages. You know like all those things, which they show in movies. Won't my sister get pregnant? Though my sister deletes all her messages, but by mistake, she skipped a few and I read them. Should I tell her?

Also, Himanshu, I'm a weak person. Don't take me wrong, but I don't like arguing over trivial issues! I don't want that so-called misunderstanding problems. If I were a vehicle, I would've no problem in confessing that you drive me crazy.

Forever and always,

Udit

One letter didn't fill my Dad's belly. He read it quickly and picked up another one. I could sense his anger, which was increasing with every second. I got scared, the only thing, which was giving me strength, was my promise – the promise that I had made to save my love, Udit.

Udit,

Bad habit! You know, one should never check someone else's phone. Please, don't tell your sister. She will be fuming in anger. Achha, tell me. Want to try what your sister did? It is fun. In addition, you are such a kid! Children don't get pregnant by exchanging messages. You believe me, right? And, yes, I want to confess something. From time to time, when I look at you, I just feel like caressing you. More than

anything, I just want one kiss. A kiss to tell me that you trust your lips against mine, a kiss to show me that I can still see the world with my eyes closed, a kiss to tell me that actions do speak louder than words.

*Infinity and beyond,
Himanshu*

So, my Dad had, finally, read a letter written by me. He got up from the chair and walked towards me. My heartbeat paced up and I closed my eyes.

A massive slap and I was kissing something, unfortunately, it was not Udit this time – it was the floor. I stood up and closed my eyes. He slapped me again. I didn't fall this time. Tears rolled down my eyes and I was whining.

"Mr Chhabra, don't slap him. He is a kid, and kids make mistakes. Don't worry, he will understand."

"Please, Ma'am. I can see how you handle kids. This idiot deserves regular thrashing. Can I see his academic reports?"

The Principal, while ignoring his former statement, replied to the later one saying, "Come with me, I will take you to the staff room." She stood up and I was left alone in the Principal room.

My attention was now back on the trophies I was counting. I finished counting them, and now, I had nothing interesting to do. I collected all the letters splashed on the desk abruptly and put them safe inside my NCERT book.

"Are you alright?" Udit entered the room. She was scared – as scared as me. Her bag was still on her shoulders as we were virtually detained from the school.

"Yes, I am. What are you doing here?" I questioned.

"Miss Ranjana dragged me here. She thought my parents have showed up," she said, explaining and reminding me why Miss Ranjana had left the room.

"Where is she now?"

"Showing your Dad your unit test reports, along with the Principal," she replied, walking towards me.

"Fish! I got nine and half in the last test. Forget that... I was checking these letters, you didn't reply to my letter, this is really rude." I tried to focus on her. Her beauty always did that *taking-my-all-attention* thing.

"Himanshu, we are in deep shit and all you care about is – my letter. You are a douche bag," she said and hugged me. I was the one who got slapped, but there was something that hit her too. When you share love, you share pain too. Her hug transformed my pain into happiness.

"Yes, I want the letter," I said.

"It's in my bag," she said, pushing me away. She sat on her knees and opened her bag to pull the letter out. I held the letter in my hand and read it:

Himanshu,

That was so romantic. However, no! I don't want to try that messaging thing. We are

fine this way. What if I get pregnant? I'm so small, na? Achha, you never told me what you want to do when we grow up. Do tell me. Moreover, one more thing, I love you a lot. One can love million people, but I can love you in million ways!

Forever and always,

Udita

“You write pretty good letters,” I said after reading it when I almost kissed her.

“And look at my handwriting... it's so neat, unlike yours,” she complained.

“I will write even worse. As I want you to correct it, and love me.”

“Aww... that's cute,” she said and pushed her lips against my red cheek.

“My lips are painning more than my cheeks,” I said, winking at her.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” In addition, our lips met. It was our first kiss in the Principal office. Room was echoing with the passionate sound of our kiss, until the door opened again. It was Miss Ranjana again, shouting, “Stop it.” But by now I knew Udita was certainly right. We were now in deep shit – a shit called LOVE.

... I Love you Rachu ...

Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu

I thinks see knows my name

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Ishani Malhotra

She is a commerce graduate from the University of Calcutta and holds a degree in Mass Communication. She has worked as a correspondent with *The Hindustan Times*, Kolkata edition, for two long years. A voracious reader, she loves the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Dan Brown and Shobha De. Currently, she is working on her first novel and her writing style is casual and reflects the conversational tone of the present generation. Her other interests include reading, painting, music and social networking. Originally from the city of joy, Calcutta, she has now settled in Guwahati and has two sons.

You can get in touch with her: www.facebook.com/ishani.malhotra.5

Story 8

I'll Be There

Ishani Malhotra

‘I have seen you before, too many times to count. I have often held your hands and walked into eternity. But, why doesn’t it feel often, when I say I love you. Maybe, because I love you, will I be saying so till eternity?’

“Damn, two more hours in hands to submit my story deadline for tonight and I’m stuck with this mushy bullshit. What’ve I been thinking, while scribbling this on my personal diary? Why can’t I just concentrate on my monsoon story on the laptop screen, instead of writing these good for nothing lines? There’s none whom I can say these lines to,” Sheena blabbered to herself in a hush voice so that no one around could hear her.

She thought she was in a desperate need of a chocolate bar, if she had to submit her second feature story for the day. But, a chocolate bar was nowhere in sight. So, standing up once more from her chair, she thanked God that coffee vending machines were ever invented. While deciding on her seventh cup of coffee for the day, she hastily walked towards the office pantry. The pantry had a few more office staff, but Sheena was thankful to God once more that she didn’t have to smile at any one of them. She didn’t have many friends at her workplace. Actually, she had none except for one, Rashmi in the marketing department. With her instant coffee in hand, Sheena walked towards the main exit of the office floor. It used to lead to the emergency staircase of the building, where she had her permanent corner to sit and sip her coffee in solitude.

Sheena Sen loved her job. She loved meeting new people every day from different walks of life. She loved to write and keep up with the deadlines. And every morning, it made her enormously happy when her news reached the public eye. At 29, she was one of the most promising reporters in a leading English daily. Every week, at least once, her stories made headlines. Apart from her daily dose of news, creative writing interested her. Her personal diary was scribbled with poems and synopses of short stories, which she intended to convert into full manuscripts someday. On one hand, while Sheena kept on laddering the success, on the other hand, her relationships with men ditched her. Like every girl, she too wanted to be in love with a man who would love her forever. But, somehow according to *her*, she never met the right man. Although, it was always the men

who were at fault, in her circle, she was better known for dumping the town's most eligible bachelors. Well, not *almost, but always*. Sheena's relationship with her handsome boyfriend of one year came to an end, when she caught him red-handed in bed with some other female. She broke up with him instantly, while he stood stark naked in front of her. The breakup had destroyed her completely. Ever since that day, nothing had gone right in her life. While trying to heal her broken heart, she took a weekend off and sneaked away to Shankarpur, a lesser known, quiet, virgin beach town in West Bengal. And it was here in Shankarpur, she met Sahil Singh, the best looking and caring man she had *ever* met in her life.

It had been three months since her rendezvous with Sahil, but still his thoughts loomed at large over her existence. Sitting in the stairway corner with her coffee in hand, Sheena's thoughts drifted back to the time she had spent in Shankarpur.

* * *

Three months back, soon after Sheena's break-up, she left a note in her study: *Mom, right now I'm just too tired with everything around. So, taking some time off for my own good. Don't lose sleep on me. I'll be back in a couple of days. Love you.*

—*Sheena*

It took Sheena a five-hour-long journey in Volvo bus to reach Shankarpur from her home in Kolkata. She checked into the hotel and spent the day looking out at the Bay of Bengal from the window of her small, first floor room. There were only a few times, when she scribbled a poem or two in her diary. Late in the afternoon, she felt asleep and it was already eight in the evening when the furious beep of the intercom phone woke her up.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hello, this is room service. Would you like to order dinner? In another half an hour, we'll stop taking food orders."

"Umm... No. I'll come down to the restaurant. Do you have a bar?"

"Yes, Ma'am, we *do* have a bar. See you there."

Sheena hung up the phone and changed into her ink blue jeans and a black tank top. She looked into the mirror. Edging closer to thirty, she felt alone, stupid, broken and depressed. Soon, she made her way to the restaurant-cum-bar of the hotel.

The restaurant was pretty crowded and so was the little bar that was situated at one corner. The place bustled with families, couples and bunch of friends who were enjoying their vacations. She was the odd one out sitting alone in the bar, as she ordered her favourite cocktail drink.

"One screw driver, please!" Sheena said to the bartender.

"Can I have one whisky on the rocks?" a pleasant male voice said from her side.

She swayed her head lazily to the side where the voice came from and found a strikingly handsome man beside her. Sheena was left embarrassed, as he caught her looking at him. But, he pretended to be casual with it.

"Hi, I am Sahil. You're holidaying alone?" Sahil started the conversation with Sheena

casually, gazing sharply at her.

“Umm... Actually, yes. Took a break and ran away to Shankarpur alone. What about you?” she looked at him and his face seemed very familiar to her. But, she couldn’t make out exactly whether she knew him or not.

“We are birds of the same flock then. I too have been staying here alone for the past three days. By the way, you didn’t tell me your name.”

Sheena contemplated whether to reveal her actual name or not. After all, he was a good looking stranger and she was travelling single. Revealing her true identity could be too risky. Moreover, she had come there to mend her broken heart, and revealing her identity could mean talking about her life. And that was the last thing on her mind. Neither was she interested in talking about herself; nor interested in knowing about anyone else. She just wanted to submerge herself in the lap of nature’s beauty and fall in love with the sound of the ocean. So, she chose not to give her real name to Sahil.

“Oh. I am Riya,” Sheena said and smiled. She hardly could concentrate on anything else apart from the stranger named Sahil. *Gosh! How could women resist this man?* Sheena noticed that the whole bar and the women at the restaurant were staring at him with greedy eyes, but he had eyes only for her. She was confused why, but nevertheless, she let things go the way they were going.

“Would you like to go for a little walk by the beach with me?”

“Ah, I don’t think so. I’d better go back to my room,” Sheena said, finding it hard to believe that she rejected Sahil outright. But then, she had learnt from her last boyfriend that men who were too good looking, always had a nasty bite at the end.

“Okay! As the lady wishes,” Sahil grinned.

Sahil Singh was the most talked about man in Eastern India for his romantic movies. But, the hero, the heartthrob, was tired of the harsh lights, the artificial make-ups, and women and men who surrounded him 24x7. If he never made another movie again, he would be happy. He missed and needed something *real* in his life. Sahil was in desperate need of a slow pace of life, and hence, took a week off and landed from Kolkata to Shankarpur.

The morning sun reflecting on the sea waves in the east woke Sheena up the next day. Leaving her hotel, she walked into the cool morning towards the beach. At a distance, fishermen could be seen hauling their huge nets out of the sea from their boats. There was no hurry to compete with the rest of the world and she wondered whether a simple life like this would interest her.

“Hi. You already up?” Sheena’s thoughts were perturbed midway by a familiar voice. She turned back to see who it was. He was none other than the suave charmer from the night before – Sahil.

“Good morning,” Sheena said wrapping the pink stole a little more tightly around her. “I’ve not witnessed such a beautiful morning in a long time now. It’s so peaceful.” Her eyes still fixed on the sea.

“Yes. Absolutely beautiful,” Sahil said with his eyes fixed on her. Well, Sheena wasn’t traditionally beautiful, but there was something about her that attracted men to her. Her

small round face had always been labeled as cute and her clear skin was inherited from her mom. She was a smart lady, who didn't like to doll up and that was her USP. Her almond shaped dark eyes were by far her best feature. They spoke volumes without having her to utter a word. Sheena was passionate about keeping herself fit and worked out at least three days a week at the gym. And underneath those denims and dresses and tops she wore, hid a body, which even top-notch actresses would crib for.

"Want to join me for the jog?" Sahil continued.

"Nah... I'm not in my running shoes. You carry on." She declined him once again.

"Aha... Looks like, the beautiful lady has decided to refuse me time and again, huh." Sahil winked. But, Sahil enjoyed the fact that she refused him, because none, especially women, had ever denied anything to him. Her shyness, her blushes had already attracted Sahil.

For the latter part of the day, Sheena had been tucked in her room and ordered coffees at regular intervals. She had carried Dan Brown's latest novel 'Inferno' with her and was almost half way done through it. She, however, chose to take her lunch at the restaurant and walked down with the book in her hand. Sahil crossed her mind a couple of times, but she scolded herself for crossing that path once again. The restaurant was pretty full and her eyes scanned for the tall, good-looking Sahil. A part of her wanted to keep away from him, but then, again the second part of her wanted to see him and wanted him to see her. Nevertheless, her life was dull and boring and he was adding the exciting element to this small vacation. But, no, he wasn't around and as she ordered and waited for her lunch in a corner table; she got back to the book once more.

"Inferno! Interesting read. Dan Brown fan, aren't you? Can I join you?" Sahil's tall frame and handsome face with perfectly flowing raven hair nearly choked Sheena, as she gasped for some breath.

"Sure!" Is what she could manage to say, while quickly going back to her book and pretending he didn't exist. Sheena had to admit that Sahil Singh was someone she could've stared at for days, but she showed none of it to him.

"So, what are you doing in the evening? There's a small, but beautiful temple close by. I'm planning to go there in the evening and the lady's company will be a pleasure," Sahil chuckled.

"And, why are you so eager for my company?"

"Because you seem different and I want to know more about you, Riya," his piercing gaze made Sheena uncomfortable and in a jiffy, she gave a green signal.

"Okay, I'll be there in the lobby sharp at five," Sheena smiled and tried hard to hide her excitement.

After their temple sight-seeing, the next day they spent time taking walks on the beach and sitting by the poolside. Sahil was intrigued by Sheena from the first moment he met her. He couldn't exactly make out what actually captivated him about her. In the last couple of days, none of the beautiful women at the hotel or the beach could distract him from her presence. Even, when she wasn't around him, he was left thinking about her. Her joy over finding the tiniest shell or reaching a particular point of the Dan Brown

story kept him grinning every second in the last two days. And he didn't rule out the idea that *maybe, just maybe*, he had started to fall in love with her.

The weekend had turned out to be exciting for Sheena, and on the last day of her stay, Sahil asked her out for wine and dinner. And yes, he mentioned her that the dinner will be arranged at *his* room. Sheena knew what that meant. She knew that after a couple of drinks he would want to get close to her and taking the fact into account that he's *oh-so-irresistible*, she too wouldn't be able to keep herself off from his charms.

For the last time, Sheena wondered whether saying *yes* to Sahil's dinner arrangement was the right thing to do. But, then she told herself that she was on a vacation and she'll not have to see him again in her life. So, why not go for a little fling when Sahil was so much worth it? If she had a choice, she would be with him forever. He was just way too perfect. Letting out a groan, Sheena put her head on her hands. Sheena hadn't carried any interesting outfits, and hence, chose to wear a short black dress that had somehow accidentally fallen in her luggage. But now, she thanked God that it did. She packed her stuff in the trolley bag and was finally ready for the evening.

Soon, there was a knock on her door and she jumped to open it, as she knew who was on the other side. *Go, spend the night with him.* Sheena's heart told her.

"Riya?" Sahil's rich voice called out.

"Umm... Yeah, coming," Sheena dropped her head on the door for a moment, before she shrugged and opened it.

Sheena actually took a step back after her eyes fell on Sahil. Tonight, he could kill with those looks. His well-toned arms bulged out from his tee and his chiseled looks with a slight hint of stubble reflected the Greek-God kind of effect. Sheena thought that she stands nowhere close to this man and she could go to any extent of sin with him.

"Hey, gorgeous, shall we?" Sahil extended his arm in her direction. In the last few hours, Sahil had made up his mind that the stranger, who had refused her outright and was not intrigued by his fame, was THE ONE, who he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He wanted to caress her, kiss her and keep her nestled in his chest for a lifetime. Gosh! It's insane that he wanted her so much. He couldn't think of any real woman he met like her. Sahil knew that she was to go tomorrow morning, but he had planned to propose her early morning, before she leaves Shankarpur.

Sheena was amazed to see Sahil's room, which was on the topmost floor of the hotel. It had a huge king-size luxurious bed with a plush sofa, and she realised it was a suite. He must be a rich man, Sheena thought. But, before relishing her eyes on anything else, she straightaway walked to the sliding glass door, which opened to a balcony. The sight and sound of the ocean seemed ethereal from there. She thought a view like that is only available in movies.

"This is so beautiful," Sheena said softly gazing out of the balcony.

"Nothing compared to you," Sahil's hot breath fell on Sheena's neck. She shrugged a little. He understood the awkwardness and went inside the room. He came back with two full glasses of rich red wine.

"Here, sweet," he handed her the glass. "Cheers."

“Cheers to the days we spent together!” Sheena smiled.

“Well, it can be extended, if you wish to stay back, Riya.”

Sheena thought she was going to spend the night with a person, whom she didn't even give her real name.

“You know, I can't. Have to join back work,” Sheena sipped the wine letting the warmth slide down her throat smoothly. After a few more sips, she felt that she was finally loosening up internally. She looked up at Sahil and longed to kiss him. A whirlwind of emotions swept her from inside. She knew where this night was trailing to. In the last two days, the good looking stranger she met had been exceptionally good with her. He had quietly accompanied her to the long walks on the beach, made her smile with silly impromptu one-liners, and most importantly, hadn't pushed her beyond anything she wasn't quite ready or willing to give him.

In that very instant, Sheena gave in. All her doubts whether or not to spend the night with this man went out of the window. They both might not have known each other very well, but at least he understood her, what most men failed to see in her. He found her attractive and interesting. For tonight, she could give herself to Sahil, Sahil Singh, and she damned the consequences. Sheena stood on her toes with a tight pleasure. Sahil lowered his mouth and kissed her longingly on her lips. A riot of sensation gushed through her. He picked up Sheena into his arms and smoothly dropped her down in bed. The lights went off.

* * *

Sheena had a deadline to submit a story and had come back home late. She was still dreaming of a long walk by the beach holding a stranger's hand, when her phone vibrated vigorously. Being irritated, she received the call.

“Hello?” Sheena said hastily.

“Hey, today is my engagement and you're still sleeping!” the voice blasted from the other end.

It was Arpita, her best friend. She was getting engaged today with the man of her dreams and moving on with life. And there she was in her bed all alone with no man in her life and no idea where her personal life was taking her. Anyways, she chucked her sadness aside and tried to be happy for her best friend.

“Relax, Arpita. I'll be there soon. Ciao,” she replied and disconnected the phone, even before Arpita could blurt anything out.

The ring ceremony was to be followed by a cocktail party and looking blankly at her open wardrobe, she couldn't decide what to wear. Suddenly, her eyes fell on one short black dress. Sheena took it out and looked at it lovingly. It was the same dress Sheena wore the night she spent with Sahil. It had been three months and she had never seen him after that night, and probably, was not going to see him ever again. A rich smell of cologne crossed her nostrils and she wondered if it was the cologne Sahil was wearing that night. Few drops of tears accumulated at the brink of her eyes and in a few minutes, Sheena changed into the short black dress, which was a favourite of hers now. Within half an hour, she reached the elegantly decorated banquet hall of the Taj Bengal.

“You’re so late. My make-up is done and I didn’t even have anyone around to critic it when it was being done,” Arpita fumed at Sheena.

“Darling, trust me. You’re looking so ravishing tonight that I fear Dev would not want to wait for the wedding and kidnap you right away,” Sheena chuckled.

“Okay. If you insist,” Arpita smiled. “Hey, Sheena, just do me a favor. If you happen to find Dev, somewhere near the bar with his friends, give this ring to him that he’s supposed to put on my finger. We had bought both the rings together, and since then, it has been lying with me.” Arpita took out a box from the beautiful shimmery golden clutch that she had been holding.

“Sure!” Sheena took the ring from Arpita and walked towards the bar that was situated at the rear end of the banquet hall. She could see the back of a few men sitting on bar stools and overhear them talking. As she took steps closer to the bar, the voices became clearer and a familiar voice almost sent shivers down her spine. She felt as if her heart stopped beating for a moment. *Was it Sahil?* Sheena wondered. She could see Dev, but not the man sitting next to him. So, she took a few steps to her right to have a proper look at the man who sat beside Dev. Yes! She couldn’t be wrong. Sahil Singh was sitting and sipping beer with Dev. Sheena thought she would faint, if she stood there even for a second more. She quickly made her way back to Arpita.

“Arpita, the guy who’s sitting with Dev at the bar is the Shankarpur guy,” Sheena blurted out trying to catch a gasp of breath.

“No way! Shit! You want to tell me that you slept with Sahil? *The Sahil Singh?*” Arpita asked on a high pitch.

After coming back from Shankarpur, Sheena had told Arpita all about the weekend she spent with this handsome stranger. But, she had never mentioned his name for once to her.

“Why ‘*the*’ Sahil Singh? Is he that great?” Sheena asked in a low voice so that no one could overhear them.

“You idiot! Don’t you know who he is, or do you? No wonder that apart from news, television or movies had never interested you, especially, the regional ones. Sahil Singh is the hottest romantic star right now in this eastern part of the sub-continent. Women go fanatic to get a glimpse of him.”

Everything was falling in place. Now, Sheena understood why women of all ages at Shankarpur looked at him with beery eyes. But, he, *the star*, had eyes only for her of all people. He had made her feel so special and she had not even given him her real name. How mean was she!

“Look, Arpita, I need to leave right now.” Sheena grabbed her purse and headed towards the door.

“Have you lost it? You’ll leave my engagement, and then, give a miss to my wedding? Because let me tell you, Sahil Singh will be there too. He’s Dev’s closest friend.” Arpita grabbed her arms preventing her from leaving.

Panic struck Sheena and she wasn’t in any mood to hear what Arpita had to say. She took flight, but the unfortunate thing was that the way to the exit was through the bar. In a

whirlwind force as she was making her way out, the same familiar voice fell on her ear.

“Riya?” Sheena heard Sahil calling out for her. But, that was not the end of her trauma. She heard two more familiar voices calling for her.

“Sheena!” Dev and Arpita called for her together. *Totally match made in heaven*, Sheena thought. And she finally stopped.

“Sheena who?” Sahil demanded, as he turned to Dev.

“Riya who?” Dev demanded, looking equally startled as he turned to Sahil fluttering his eyes.

Sheena thought if she had a chance, she would open her shoes, clutch them and run from all this misunderstanding. But, somehow that was not happening and she gave a deaf ear to Sahil, Dev and Arpita and again started to walk towards the exit door.

Sahil realised that this was the woman who he had been searching for since the moment he had woken up to find her gone in his holiday at Shankarpur. He had demanded her name and contact details at the hotel’s front desk, but they were not willing to give. Sahil remembered each and every moment he spent with Riya. His *Riya*. He had finally found her. She was right there and in front of him and being called *Sheena*. He followed her to get all his answers from the woman who had been on his mind from the very day he met her. He followed her quickly.

“Hey, will anybody tell me what’s going on and who’s Riya?” Dev cried out looking towards the door, trying to go behind Sahil.

“Leave them alone, honey. You’ll get to know everything very soon.” Arpita grabbed Dev by his hands in a gesture to stop him to follow Sahil who zoomed off behind Sheena.

Sheena reached the parking and stood in front of her flaming Red Chevrolet Beat. Tears smudged her perfectly kohl-lined eyes.

“Sheena?” Sahil simply said standing behind her.

She stood still. He took a few more steps to reach Sheena and finally, she could *feel* him behind her.

“Sheena, why did you leave the next morning, that too, without informing?” He put both his hands on her shoulders from back and she turned to face him. Slowly, she looked up to the godly face that had left her insomniac for countless nights.

“Say it again, Sahil,” Sheena whispered.

“Say what?”

“Say my name again and again,” she insisted with her eyes fixed on his. And he couldn’t help, but let out a smile.

“Sheena. Sheena. Sheena,” he repeated as she closed her eyes and let out a sigh.

“I’m sorry that I left early morning and had instructed the hotel manager not to let out my details to anyone. And I’m sorry that I didn’t even give you my real name. I was travelling all alone, and was panicky when I met you,” Sheena said softly, remembering her days at Shankarpur.

“Only if you knew I wanted to tell you so much. You were the one who had made me happy and I felt real for the first time ever in my life. Those smiles and emotions that

came while being with you were all real, unlike the fake ones I've to deal with every day," Sahil said taking both her hands into his own. He wanted her in that moment more than he had ever wanted anything in his entire life. He knew he would give up anything and everything to get that one more smile from her.

"Sahil, I was in Shankarpur to supposedly mend my broken heart, and there I met a stranger who totally swept me off my feet. But, I was scared of the consequences. Couldn't have gone through all the love and lost pain all over again, and hence, decided it'll be good for both of us if I leave. I was sure we would never meet again."

"And, I was sure, I would find you someday." He locked her into his arms in the deserted parking lot. His body touched hers and she remembered his smell and essence.

"Hey, isn't this *the* dress you wore at the last night, while in Shankarpur? It still smells of my cologne," Sahil grinned and kissed along her neck making her shiver.

Sheena didn't have any more power to hold herself back. "Oh Jeez! You make me go crazy," she whispered into the autumn night sky and tip-toed herself to kiss those lips that beckoned her. She wanted him closer, so much closer for the rest of her life.

His lips kissed and sucked her in abundance.

"I love you, Sheena, and I'll be there for you. I've been sure of my feelings since the day I met you and wanted to tell you exactly this, but you were gone." Sahil's eyes shone with the depth of love and happiness that she had always longed for, always dreamt of, but never had.

"I love you too, Sahil, and I want to say this to you till eternity," Sheena said and nothing made her happy than saying it, as they wrapped each other into a hug.



Tarang Sinha

Tarang Sinha is a writer, pursuing a diploma course in creative writing at IGNOU. She writes short stories, articles, poems and book reviews. Some of her works have been published in magazines like *Woman's Era* and *Alive*. Originally from Bihar, she lives in Delhi with her family. She is an active blogger who blogs at tarangsinha.blogspot.in/

Story 9

Dilemma

Tarang Sinha

The café was unusually calm, just like the weather outside. Clouds were hovering, as if eager to burst into rain. Ronit was fiddling with his mobile phone. Ashima looked at him, while sipping her coffee and wondered, or rather astonished, about her own capability of understanding Ronit's expressions and body language.

"Want to say something?" she asked casually.

"Ummm... Mom called, this morning," he said and looked outside for a brief moment, perhaps to shed the uneasiness creeping inside him. "The very same and famous marriage issue. She attached a few pictures with her mail," he continued, while avoiding eye contact.

A smile played on Ashima's lips. "Then, go ahead. What's the problem? Did you like any of them?" she said, having a glint of mischief in her eyes, joshing him clearly.

He paused for a lengthy moment, just looking into her eyes, and then, released an exasperated sigh. "Will you please clear this cynical grin off your face?"

Ashima smiled widely, then lowered her eyes and concentrated on her coffee. "You know, Ashi..." Ronit started, "that I love you. I want to spend my life with you, but... you know..." he seemed to struggle for the appropriate words.

"...but your parents don't want a divorced *bahu*, right?" Ashima finished for him flatly. "See, Ronit, I love you too, but I don't want to create friction between you and your parents. I don't want to live a suffocated life. Not again. I've had enough."

"Can you live without me?" Ronit darted a direct question.

Ashima averted her gaze and hurried to get up. "I should leave now. My magazine is in the publishing process and I have lots of pending work. And see, the weather is not good as well. It's getting dark," she said, showing signs that indicated her denial of answering his question.

"You don't have to give countless excuses."

She smiled. "Take care, Ronit. Bye." Finally, she looked at him intently, as if she wanted to savor this sight.

As her scooter raced on the road, her mind raced too. She might have avoided Ronit's question, but she was doubtful about living without him. He had promptly become her

habit. He had literally filled the void of her life. Her heart shuddered with an unknown fear. Then an abrupt downpour distracted her wandering thoughts and somewhat washed her fear too. She loved rains, after all. And Mumbai rain was enchanting for her.

Ashima parked her scooty and rushed towards her apartment being completely drenched. She entered her well-furnished, one-bed-room apartment. A very familiar silence, which she liked immensely, was filled there. After a warm shower she made herself a bowl of noodles and sat on the couch with her laptop. After some time, she looked at the clock while heading towards the bathroom. She was shocked. It showed 1 a.m. She didn't realise that she had worked this long.

After a while, she started preparing herself for sleep, and then, her phone buzzed. *Who could it be at this hour?* she thought. An unknown number was flashing. Enveloped with suspicion, she picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hel...Hello, Ash...Ashima?" a shaky voice stammered that side.

"Yes," she said, trying to recognize the voice.

"Hi, Ashi. It's me... Vishakha."

"Vish? What happened? How're you? Is everything okay?" Ashima darted too many questions in a single breath.

"No, Ashi. I'm... I'm not alright."

"What happened?"

"I'm in the hospital."

"What! Why?" Ashima was bewildered. She knew that Vishakha was having some health problems, but she didn't know that was so serious.

"I have cervical cancer."

"What! You can't be serious?"

"I'm dead serious, Ashi." After a brief pause, she continued. "Can you... can you come and meet me? Perhaps, for the very last time."

"Shut up, Vish! What are you talking about?" Ashima chided. "Of course, I can come. I mean, I will. Is this your number?"

"No, I've borrowed this from someone."

"Can I call you on this number?"

"Maybe."

* * *

In last few days, whenever Ashima spoke to Vishakha, she sounded low and lost. Ashima was worried for her. She asked her many times, but every time she used to get the same reply 'everything is okay'. In her very busy life, she was extremely unable to think much.

After telling the name of the hospital, Vishakha hurriedly to disconnect the call. Of course, how long she could talk from a borrowed phone. She thought to call back, but this was an odd time and to top that she was in the hospital.

Ashima immediately switched on her laptop again and looked for the availability of an air ticket to Delhi. She had to travel to Noida after reaching to Delhi.

Next day, she reached her office early. It was difficult to get a leave. She couldn't sleep last night and finished a lot of work. After pleading a bit, she got a day's off. It was enough. At least, she thought so.

Her flight was scheduled for that evening. She called Ronit from the airport.

"What do you mean, you're going to Delhi? You didn't mention it yesterday," he said, almost shouting. Ashima closed her eyes in exasperation. Sometimes, he lost his temper.

"I didn't know about it then. I planned it last night," she said.

"And you didn't feel the need to talk to me."

"But, I'm telling you now."

"I wanted to meet you today. I wanted to talk about our marriage."

"We can talk about it later, Ronit. This is important!"

"But, why are you going to Delhi?"

"I'll tell you everything later. I'll be back tomorrow night. Okay, bye for now. Don't worry, I'll be fine," Ashima said and disconnected the call, as she did not want any arguments at that point of time.

After landing at Delhi Airport, Ashima hired a cab to Noida. As the cab approached its destination, her heart started to beat faster.

After two hours, Ashima was standing at the reception of the hospital asking for a patient named Vishakha. The receptionist sent her to the women's General Ward. The room was stuffed with people and suffused with clamor. How can people make such noise in hospital? Ashima thought irritably.

After wandering for few seconds, her eyes landed at the corner seat. Is she Vishakha? Scanty hairs, sunken eyes and dull texture of rough skin, it was her. But, her face was still yelling 'I was beautiful, once upon a time.'

Ashima trudged towards the bed. A little girl was playing with Vishakha's bangles. Khushi! Ashima recognised Vishakha's daughter. Last year, she had sent her some photographs. She stood near the bed. Khushi looked at her with big, beautiful and curious eyes. Suddenly, Vishakha opened her eyes. As she placed her tired glance over Ashima, her withered face lit instantly.

"Hi!" she whispered and wiped her dry lips with her tongue.

Ashima couldn't utter a word. She just held her hands with compassion. She had never thought that she would meet her this way. Vishakha told her that the next morning she was supposed to undergo a surgery.

Ashima looked around. Every bed was occupied. Every patient had an attendant for care and moral support. But, with Vishakha, there was a little helper who perhaps needed care herself. Vishakha took some money from her purse and handed to her saying, "It will come in handy."

"No one is with you?" Ashima asked frowning.

Vishakha forced a wan smile, as if it was a joke. Finally, she said, "Who will be with me, Ashi." And a drop of tear oozed from the corner of her eyes. Ashima scolded herself for asking such a silly question.

"But, you said there was a *masi*."

“They will come in the morning,” Vishakha said and closed her eyes tiredly.

Ronit called her up after a while. He scolded her for not calling after reaching Delhi. He scolded more, when he discovered that she was in Noida. To avoid any argument, Ashima wrapped up the talk hurriedly and disconnected the call. Vishakha genuinely needed her and Ashima was glad to be there for her.

Next morning dawned bright – as usual. An old couple came to visit Vishakha. She was taken to the operation theater. Ashima took Khushi in her embrace. After two hours, a nurse came rushing out of the Operation theatre. Ashima’s heart beat boosted. After some commotion, the doctors announced that Vishakha was serious. Time crept and nothing seemed to be in control. The old couple looked worried, but helpless.

Khushi was getting cranky. She was hungry, perhaps. Ashima thought to take her out and get her something to eat. Suddenly, her phone rang. Ronit’s number was flashing.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Noida.”

“But, you said you’ll get back today.”

“Yes, but I can’t come, Ronit. There’s an emergency.”

“What the hell are you doing there?” he shouted.

“Don’t shout at me. I’ll tell you everything after getting back. Trust me. I’ll try to come tomorrow.”

“I’ve talked to my parents about you.”

“Ronit, please, can we talk about it later? I’ll call you,” Ashima said, while trying to calm Khushi as she disconnected the call.

* * *

Khushi was playing on her lap, occasionally asking, “Where’s *Ma*?” Ashima did not know how to answer her innocent question. Though, she was not good at handling children she was doing quite well. She could do it for her friend. Vishakha was still being operated. Ashima’s mind started wandering in the memory lane.

They were friends, best friends, since ninth standards. Ashima’s love-deprived heart found affection from Vishakha’s mother. Her heart was full of love and care. It had to be; after all, she had to fulfill the void left by Vishakha’s father.

As they entered college, Vishakha fell in love with Viren. Viren was an orphan, who lived with his *masi*. Vishakha’s relatives, who’d not be of any help to her after her father’s death, suddenly turned extra careful and loving, and they even protested against her love for Viren. But, their love did not need their approval or acceptance. They got married, just after graduation, and shifted to Noida from Faridabad. Her family abandoned her, though Vishakha’s mother used to talk to her secretly.

Being raged by this disgraceful act of her friend, Ashima’s estranged father and her perfect step-mother chose an eligible, wealthy groom for her, who very conveniently chose another woman over her. Later, Ashima deduced that they had a long affair even before their marriage. After being tortured mentally and physically for over three years, Ashima decided to come out of that agonizing marriage and filed for divorce. In those days of trauma, Vishakha showed her support. Just after Ashima’s divorce, her husband

married that woman, as if he was eagerly waiting for it.

Ashima shifted to Mumbai and after pursuing an MBA, she landed a job in a publishing house.

Ashima and Vishakha occasionally shared their feelings through letters and phone conversations. Within two years of marriage, Vishakha became a proud mother of a girl child. Even in that moment of joy, no one from her family bothered to pay her a visit. But her mother's tender and affectionate heart could not resist showering her blessings on her granddaughter. But this blessing could not stay for long. The last string attached with Vishakha's family broke with her mother's death.

Vishakha always said that Viren loved her so much. She sounded happy. Her words showed them the height of misfortune. Ashima felt an ounce of pain, too. Viren died in an accident. Ashima visited her best friend and tried to give her some solace in the turbulence. It seemed that everything whirled, and finally, came to a halt.

* * *

"Excuse me?" A nurse interrupted her train of thoughts. Ashima just looked at her blankly.

"We need some medicines for the patient. Will you bring that?"

"Yes, I'll get it," Ashima said. She looked at Khushi, who was sleeping on her lap peacefully. The nurse handed her a prescription. After half an hour, she returned with packets of medicines. Khushi woke up moaning.

"Can we meet her?" Ashima asked the nurse, while giving her the medicines. She just nodded and went to the ICU. Vishakha was sleeping encumbered with oxygen mask and wires of monitor.

"*Ma!*" Khushi said loudly to see her. Ashima hushed her as she approached Vishakha's bed. She opened her eye and smiled.

"*Ma*, what happened to you?" Khushi asked innocently.

"I'm just a little hurt, *beta*."

"When will you come home?"

"Soon."

Time passed by and that eerie darkness engulfed the entire aura. And finally, it engulfed Vishakha. It swallowed up the future and happiness of Khushi mercilessly. When the nurse announced that terrible news, a stunned silence attacked Ashima. She clutched the sleeping little baby tightly. Emotions clogged her throat and her eyes started burning. She didn't know what to do. She took the contact number of Vishakha's *masi* and called them up. Within half an hour, a young man and the old couple arrived.

Ashima cleared the bill. Finally, after funeral, Ashima took Khushi to Vishakha's relative.

"We can't keep her, *beta*," the old couple said. "It's not possible as you can see we are very old and we can't even take care of ourselves. How will we take care of this little girl?"

"But, who will take care of this little girl then?" Ashima was confused and very disturbed. Her mobile was flooded with calls from Ronit and her office.

“I don’t know,” the old woman sighed. “What can we do after all?”

“Maybe, orphanage can be an option,” the old man suggested thoughtfully.

Ashima knew that Vishakha’s relatives were not going to keep Khushi and she couldn’t force them too. Her eyes were on the little girl, who was playing with an old radio. *‘How innocent children could be?’* she thought. Khushi cried and asked about her mother several times. Every time, Ashima made a false excuse and she innocently believed her.

She found herself in the quagmire of dilemma. How can she leave Khushi in this state of helplessness? She can’t be so heartless. But, what would she do with this girl? Maybe an orphanage would take her? She was confused.

Khushi giggled as Ashima’s phone blared. Office. She couldn’t stay there anymore. She sighed and picked up the phone.

* * *

After a few hours, Ashima was waiting at the airport with Khushi. She was left with no option. It was raining when she reached Mumbai with a cute little bundle. By the time she landed in her flat, her phone buzzed. Ronit again. *‘He can be really irritating at times,’* she thought, irritably. *‘But, maybe he is just worried.’* Actually, Ashima was irritated as Khushi was turning difficult to handle. She put the kid in the bed and picked up the phone. Khushi squealed to see a wind chime hanging at the window and approached to grab it.

“Hi, Ronit.”

“Where are you? What took you so long? And... who is with you?” Ronit assailed her with questions.

“Just reached home. And Khushi is with me.”

“Who Khushi?”

“My friend’s four years old daughter.”

“Your friend’s daughter? What is she doing with you?”

“Her mother died and...”

“So?”

“There’s no one to look after her.”

“So?” Intensity of Ronit’s voice increased.

“So what, Ronit? What will happen to this little girl?”

A lengthy pause prevailed. “I’m coming to your place,” saying this, Ronit disconnected the call and Ashima heaved an irritated sigh.

When Ashima was trying to make Khushi sleep, the doorbell screeched. Khushi woke up with a jerk and started to cry. Ashima opened the door and ran towards Khushi without saying a ‘Hi’ to Ronit.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked in frustration, as Ashima fondled the child in order to calm her.

“Shhh. She is sleeping. Can you lower your tone?” Ashima said in whispers.

Ronit’s frown deepened to its optimum level. “I can’t believe this,” he muttered under his breath. He stared at Ashima, who was struggling with the baby. She gathered Khushi

in her arms and took some easy rounds in the room, stroking her silky hair affectionately. This idea worked and Khushi slipped in the slumber again. After putting the child in the bed, she looked at Ronit.

“Finally!” he said. “Finally, you got the chance to look at me.” Ronit couldn’t hide his irritation.

“Don’t be silly, Ronit. You can see Khushi was getting cranky,” Ashima said and flopped on the bed. Tired.

“Then, what’s the need to handle this cranky child? I don’t understand why you...”

“Ronit, her mother was my friend... my childhood friend! She is no more and there is no one to take care of this little girl. Her father is dead already. I was not desperately willing to keep her, but I didn’t find any option. I couldn’t have left her just like that... on the streets!”

Ronit let out an exasperated sigh. “What’s next?”

“I don’t know?” Ashima shrugged.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Send her to an orphanage. There’s no other option. After all, she is an orphan,” Ronit suggested.

“How could be you so insensitive, Ronit?”

“What insensitive? Are you planning to keep this child? What about your life? Our life? Your job? Society?” Ronit increased his volume again.

Ashima was too tired to get into another argument. But this made her pondering. “Okay, leave it for now.” Ronit interrupted her thoughts. “I’ve talked to my parents. They want to meet you.”

Ashima smiled wanly.

* * *

Next day dawned with challenges for Ashima. Her phone blared along with the moans of Khushi. The call from her office burdened her with wariness. ‘*How am I going to handle this?*’ she thought. After all, she couldn’t skip her work.

She looked at Khushi and found herself trapped. First thing on her priority list, she had to head for office. Khushi continuously asked about her mother and Ashima made some stories. She had no answer at all. How could she tell this little girl that her mother was gone forever, leaving her alone. Ashima’s heart filled with pity and compassion for her.

After an hour, Ashima was standing in Blossoms, a crèche in her locality. She enrolled Khushi and headed for the office. Workload made her day hectic. In the middle of her work, Ashima’s phone rang. She got irritated to see the unknown number and preferred to ignore. But, that call was not meant to be ignored perhaps. Her phone rang again and she picked up this time. It was from the crèche. Khushi had vomited twice and was bawling. Ashima cursed the situation, but was left with no other option than running to the crèche.

She picked Khushi from the crèche and ran to the hospital. When doctor announced that there was nothing serious, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Next day, as she entered her office, as expected, her boss, Sushant, wanted to see her.

“What are you doing, Ashima? Firstly, you asked a leave for a day and you were gone

for three. And then again, you left the office yesterday without informing me. What's going on? Is there a problem?"

"No, sir. I was just..." Ashima left her sentence in between and shrugged.

"See, the time is very crucial and I can't afford anyone out of this office in the working hours. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." Ashima came out of the cabin, laden with throbbing thoughts. She called up Ronit and told him everything.

"He is absolutely right, Ash! How can you handle work and that... that Khushi together? Your work can't afford your vanishing acts."

Ashima exhaled a tired breath. "I don't know what to do."

"Look..." Ronit said with a bit unnecessary excitement. "I know a nice orphanage. This Sunday, we will take her there. It's the only solution to your problem. She is not your responsibility. Come on, why are you so serious about her?"

Ashima said nothing. She just listened, unable to figure out what to say.

"Okay..." Ronit started again, a bit cheerfully. "How about a coffee after office?" he offered.

Though the offer was tempting, Ashima had to deny. "Not today, Ronit. I have to pick Khushi. She is not well," she said and hung up, while departing to her cabin.

Days rolled on. Gradually, Khushi adapted herself, and to Ashima's much relief, started to enjoy her bright and colourful crèche. The frequent questions about her mother were sapped.

One day, when Ashima and Khushi were returning home, Khushi darted an instant question that left Ashima speechless. "Whom will I call *Ma*?" Khushi asked so innocently that it brought a lump to Ashima's throat. She said nothing, but Khushi was not going to give up.

"You know, in my school, everyone has a *Ma*. They show up every evening. Tell me, whom will I call *Ma*? Who will be my Mom?"

Ashima fought back her tears and forced a smile, "How about calling me Mom?"

"Really?" Khushi chirped. "Can I call you Mom?"

"Of course, sweetie!"

* * *

Time was strengthening their bond, but a very special relationship was on the verge of jeopardy. Ronit was very upset as she was procrastinating the meeting with his parents. She was not ignoring it. Apart from her hectic job, she was also playing a mom now.

That Saturday Ronit's patience exploded. "You have no time for me now."

"You know that's not true, Ronit. I'm just... We often talk to each other."

"My parents want to see you and you have no time. You know..."

"Okay, how about meeting your parents tomorrow?"

"And 'your' Khushi?"

"I'll take her with me."

"No way, Ashima. You can't come to my place tagging her with you. What my parents will think?"

“But, why? What’s wrong?”

“You won’t understand, Ashi. You are not realizing that you’re ruining our relationship for that girl, who bears no relationship with you. If you think you’re doing a right thing, then fine.” Ronit stomped out from there.

Was she really ruining her life? After a horrendous marriage and a disastrous divorce, Ronit seemed like a fresh air. He somewhat filled the emptiness of her life. She always dreamt of a peaceful life with him, but now, everything seemed to change. Khushi had turned her life upside down.

Next day, after pondering for whole night, Ashima visited an orphanage ‘*Apnapan*’. Many random children were roaming around. She took all the details, and finally, Khushi was sent to the orphanage. Khushi cried and Ashima’s entire persona trembled to see those fat tears. Khushi was again left with an unanswered question. “Whom she was going to call her Mom?” Tears refused to stay in Ashima’s eyes, as she came back home.

Her house looked like a desolate desert. In those few days, her house had become a home. A home filled with Khushi’s chuckles. Her innocent questions resonated there. She always yearned for a child, but before she could have tasted this bliss, someone else had taken her place and she had to taste betrayal. In last few years, she tried to keep herself busy, but solitude was inevitable.

Ronit was happy that Khushi was now not interrupting their outings. There was no hurry to get home for Ashima. Every evening he took her to the café or to the beach. In the meanwhile, Ashima met Ronit’s parents too. They approved her, though after innumerable cynical questioning rounds. It was quite obvious that they approved her just for the sake of Ronit’s happiness.

Ashima was pooling in every effort to be happy, but it seemed that something was missing. She used to envision Khushi wandering here and there carelessly in the compound of that orphanage. She wanted to go and meet her, but she did not want to trigger those innocent emotions once again. It could hurt her. She felt a connection with that child. But, she too had a life. A life with Ronit... Perhaps, a blissful life!

That Sunday evening, Ashima was at home. Ronit asked her out, but she refused politely, though she was getting bored. She wanted some solace and time to relax after a hectic week.

While browsing through some news channels, her hands stopped abruptly. Aversion gripped her entire persona to see that news. There was a man in his thirties, trying to hide his face. His crime was rape. Raping a six years old girl, a little poor girl! She was shocked. How could a so-called thoughtful human do this? Why don’t they just go to brothel? Ashima thought bitterly. After seeing the timid little victim, whose face was not visible, just at a reflex, Khushi’s face flashed in front of her eyes. Ashima got restless. She immediately called up the orphanage. The caretaker told that Khushi was sleeping. At that very moment, her dilemma seemed to melt away and Ashima took a concrete decision – a decision that no one could deter!

Next day, on the beach, Ashima revealed her decision to Ronit, hoping he would understand. But ‘no’, he roared instead. “Why can’t you just forget that girl?”

“I can’t, Ronit. She is just four years old girl. A little helpless girl, without anyone whom she can call her own in this whole world! She found love and care with me. And what did I do? I just betrayed her.”

“That’s not betrayal. There are so many orphan girls in this country. So?”

“That is different, Ronit. Khushi is different. I can’t believe that a man could be so filthy and cruel to rape... rape a little tender girl?”

“See, Ashi, it doesn’t happen every day.”

“But, it happens,” Ashima paused for a moment. “Wouldn’t you like to have children after marriage? We will adopt Khushi.”

“I do want children, but not now. I want to enjoy our life together. And whenever I decide to have a child, it’ll be my own. Not a ready-made child. You understand that?” Ronit said bluntly.

“But, I have decided, Ronit. I can’t let her wander alone in this hazardous world. I’m going to adopt Khushi and that’s it.”

“That’s it? Then listen. I don’t want an adopted child,” he said, taking a brief pause and Ashima looked at him blankly. Ronit’s tone suddenly sounded different. He continued, “I don’t understand – why you’re trying to mess up your life? Don’t forget you are a divorcee. It won’t be easy for you. Life can never be easy for a lonely, young divorced woman,” Ronit said, looking into her eyes. Ashima nodded.

Ronit was not done yet. “Do you have any idea, how have I convinced my parents to accept you? They have somehow approved a divorced woman for my sake, but they are not going to accept a ready-made adopted child. Do you understand that?” Ronit was getting agitated.

Ashima was still calm, noticing how many times he was emphasizing the word ‘Divorced’. “You say they won’t accept me with Khushi.”

“No way!” Ronit screamed.

Ashima smiled and said, “It’s okay then, I don’t care. Goodbye, Ronit.” She turned and headed for the ‘*Apnapan*’ orphanage to get back to that bundle of joy, Khushi, who inexplicably had become an important part of her life. She couldn’t wait anymore.



Saravana Kumar Murugan

Saravana, a software engineer by profession, a blogger by passion and a photographer by choice, lives under the hot sun of Chennai, and at 26, he aspires to become an author. He writes at '*Few Miles*' under the pen name, Someone is Special, as it is a sweet dedication to a dream angel.

“Writing is my passion and I am born in this world to express my dreams. I do so via poems and prose. I prefer poetry, as it helps me to rhyme what I love and attain peace,” he says.

He has also won a few contests in blogosphere. He is currently working on a novel titled, *Love of an Anonymous Soul*, which he is hoping to complete before the end of this year.

Story 10

120 Minutes

Saravana Kumar Murugan

They say, “Marriages are made in heaven.” That I second.

In earlier days of my life, I dreamt of getting married to an angel in heaven, and I lived my first quarter in dreams, but after getting married this year, I started enjoying the beauty of being loved in reality. In such a sweet period, God once tried to test my depth of love, which is what you are going to read now – the one hundred and twenty minutes that made me realise, how much I love my beloved wife, Isha.

Life of a software engineer can be summarised in twelve words: *in right and left click, they live a life without any life*. If not all, at least I fall into that category, especially when it is a Monday.

That day, as usual, I was lost in my hectic work schedule. I had almost lost my cool. That was when my program manager sent an email to our team to inform us to leave office early, as the weather conditions were turning bad. The very next moment, I called up my wife, Isha, on her mobile phone and informed her about the weather conditions. She confirmed that she had already closed all the windows and doors because of the screeching winds. I hung up the phone after teasing her with short and sweet ghost stories.

Unaware of the entire situation outside, I packed my stuff and started from office along with two of my colleagues. Everyone was sharing his or her bad experiences in the United States on how life was shattered into pieces by hurricane Sandy. I would commit that I was a little worried to listen to them, but somehow, I managed to ignore the warnings, as we were still under *Green Zone*. We walked to the nearby railway station but got to know that all the trains, *S Bahn*, were abandoned due to unfavorable weather conditions, and we were left with only one choice – to walk to the nearby bus stop and use the uninterrupted bus services.

After reaching the bus stop, my colleagues took the bus to their place. The howling winds blew strongly. It was dark like a hellhole. More than thirty minutes had passed. I was the only person standing at the bus stop and waiting for the one. All I had in mind was to reach my home safely and to hug my wife. Though I was scared a lot, still deep inside my heart, I knew I would get a bus to Ohlsdorf, from where I could get into a train

to Fulsbutt. After that, it was a matter of ten minutes by foot. I called up my wife on her mobile phone and enquired if everything was fine.

“I am worried about you. Keep yourself warm. Okay?” my wife said.

“There is no girl here, sweetie,” I said with my tongue out.

“I’m not joking,” she said. She was worried about me.

“I love you, Isha. Will reach home soon,” I said and hung up the phone.

In the meantime, an old man and his dog joined the ‘waiting’ club. He was shivering, and his dog kept sneezing once in every minute rhythmically, complimenting the howling winds. After exchanging a few words, I came to know that he was waiting for the same bus, which I was waiting for.

Soon, the bus that was to go through route number 172 was at the stop.

The driver signaled that the bus was packed with passengers, but on my request, he opened the back door.

I checked for some available space, at least to keep my feet. The bus was terribly packed. Fortunately, I could manage to stand near the door. But then, I looked at the old man who, too, was waiting for the same bus. He was shivering. Yes, he was not strong enough to sustain the ruthless weather. I changed my mind and walked out of the bus to let the old man and his dog in.

The old man smiled saying, “Thanks, my child. That was so kind of you. God bless you.” Some passengers standing inside, too, acknowledged. The door closed and the bus moved.

A chill nipped at my disturbed face. I shivered. Just to relax myself, I inserted my earphones to listen to songs. A couple of cars had buzzed away at a speed of more than 120 kilometres an hour, a young couple walked across the road holding hands, an old woman walked with her dog, and a cyclist passed like a lightening. Everyone was rushing to home or to a safer place, and, perhaps, I was the only one waiting at the bus stop and hoping that another bus would come and take me home.

After ten minutes of waiting, another bus – as crowded as the last one – reached the bus stop. This time, I was the only one waiting; I, at once, walked in without wasting even a single second.

Despite of having people waving hands to stop the bus, the driver did not stop at the next stops. A few stood dejected on seeing the bus leave, the rest started walking after losing their hope. The next five bus stops were vacant.

The driver took a left turn at the *Mainweg* signal and used the short route to Ohlsdorf.

Increasing my troubles, the bus stopped due to a heavy traffic jam!

A woman with a girl – not more than five or six years old – requested the driver to open the door. But, he did not. She requested again. The driver, again, said a ‘no’. The bus was packed with ‘humans’, but no ‘human’ cared about that woman and her daughter. Being a kind-hearted person, I could not see the helpless lady and her little girl suffer. Considering the fact that I was only three stops away from Ohlsdorf Railway Station, I pressed the ‘stop’ button to open the door.

I got down and asked the lady and her daughter to get in the bus. She smiled and

thanked me saying, ‘*Danke.*’

Winds were strong, and the bus, including other vehicles, was still stuck in the jam. I could see people walking and rushing towards their home. I, listening to a Tamil song ‘*Singam ondru purapatha*’, which meant, *a lion started bravely*, started walking towards Ohlsdorf Railway Station, *U Bahn*. I saw leaves falling off trees, floating in the air; a few people were clicking pictures standing outside their home, and some were smoking and drinking beer sitting in their balcony. “Crazy people,” I muttered and continued walking. I prayed to God that *U Bahn* should be in operation so that I could reach home without hurdles, and most importantly – soon.

In about ten minutes, I reached Ohlsdorf. I saw a train with all doors open. As the saying goes, “Man desires, God deny,” I desired to go in *U Bahn*, but God denied that. To my worst fear, the train halted there. The passengers got down. Some of them spoke to driver in German and requested him to drive till Fulsbittel Nord, so that they could connect elsewhere, using buses, but he denied and requested them to leave.

I kicked the floor in disappointment. *You’re a sentimental idiot, Sid!* I said to myself. Had I got into the first bus or just stayed inside the second one, I might have reached home by now, or at least, got into the last running *U Bahn*.

In the next moment, I saw hundreds of people standing in front of me. I was surprised. Most of them were women and kids, and a few were aged people who could not even walk properly. I smiled and wished that I should, at least, get into a bus that goes to Fulsbittel.

I called up my wife on her mobile phone and told her all that had happened so far.

“Okay, I am glad you helped two people, but... but please come home soon, idiot.”

I could feel her love in those words. I said, “I believe in ten or fifteen minutes I should be there, Isha.”

“Ninety minutes have passed since you left your office. I am really getting scared, stupid.”

Her voice gave me hints of her anxiety. I pacified her. “Do not worry, Isha. I should be there anytime soon.”

“Or else, come in a taxi. Shall I call and book a taxi? Shall I?”

“*Arey...* understand. If taxis were available, I would have reached home by now.”

“Okay,” she muttered and paused.

“Did you speak to Mom-Dad?” I asked.

“Yeah, I spoke to them in the afternoon,” she said in a worried tone.

“Okay, I need to rush now. They are making some announcements on the other side of the railway station. Perhaps, it is for alternate bus or train arrangement. Take care, dear. Love you.”

Well, there was no announcement at all. I lied to her so that I could cut the call and she could stop worrying. But, ‘how would I reach home?’ was still a big question.

I saw many worried faces irrespective of their age, colour, sex and nationality. A few sat there reading some books they were carrying, a few chitchatted about hurricanes and storms, and the rest preferred to keep mum. I stood alone. Out of nowhere, a man came

to me and spoke in a grave tone about his poor family – a wife and a three-year-old son – living across the seas. He must be in his early thirties, with dark black hair and a long face with small eyes. He had a strong built. He stayed in Fulsbittel Nord and had no clue on how to get there. He almost had tears in his eyes.

I told him to check with HVV Service, as I was shifted to Hamburg three months ago and didn't know too much about the place. He stood confused. A fat, middle-aged woman joined us with two other young men and informed us that U 1 replacements would be available soon. Hence, there would not be any problems in reaching Fulsbittel Nord. It brought an unexplainable smile on his face.

I wanted to stop thinking about Isha. Thus, I started admiring people around me to get out of that eerie feeling. I looked around. I saw a young lady police officer there in patrol suit – *POLIZEI* – ordering us to stand in queue. “The one who walk with four legs to go first, kids and their parents to go next, and all the rest to queue behind... replacement buses are on their way.” The way she was handling the crowd, the way she was answering the queries was commendable, and she, immediately, won my appreciation. For a moment, I froze and started wondering why we do not have such vibrant police officers in our home country, India?

Then I saw that little girl, for whom I got out of the bus some time ago, standing with her mother some twenty people ahead of me in the queue. She attracted me again with her innocent reactions, in fact, not just me but many other people who were standing next to her and listening to her words full of humor. Her big blue eyes complimented her round face and slim body. In short, she was a cutie pie. I wished to father a cutie pie like her soon.

A group of school-going kids were happily discussing their holiday plans and dates on weekend. They were bothered neither about getting late to home nor about the storm. I envied them, because once in my lifetime, I lived like them thinking, ‘there can be only one day, and that is – today!’

A young couple was standing in a corner, hugging each other tightly and kissing passionately. Though the evening was cold, I believe they must have been feeling hot.

I was literally staring at the couple when I heard a melodious voice somewhere from behind. It forced me to look back. There were two young women. Of course, that sweet voice was of one of the two. One of them was perhaps the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life. I looked at her from bottom to top. She was wearing a long coat with white shirt and black pant. A small heart-shaped pendant in a necklace around her neck increased her beauty. Her radiant face complimented her small, blue eyes, soft red lips, sharp nose and brown, shinny hair. She was, undoubtedly, a goddess of beauty.

So many people, so many faces displaying various emotions, having one thing in common – desire to reach home safely and spend rest of their evening with their family. I wished the same.

Isha called me up again on my mobile phone for enquiring about my whereabouts. This time, she was nervous after hearing my response.

“OMG! This is bad! Is there any other option to reach home ASAP?” she asked

worriedly.

“Isha, they are arranging buses, which should be here anytime soon. Just stay calm, honey,” this time, I said firmly.

“Do not lie, please. You are saying this for the third time now,” she said and started crying instantly, like an eight-year-old kid.

“Hey... hey... chill, Isha. There is no reason to lie or hide the truth. They are making arrangements,” I said and paused for her response. She did not say anything. I continued, “I will be home in fifteen minutes. I promise you. Okay?”

“Okay, I trust you. And I love you.”

Soon, my God accepted my prayers and made sure that the promise I made to my wife would be fulfilled. In no time, a bus arrived, which was to cover almost all the stops on that route. I was a happy man! I knew that the victory was just ten minutes away now.

People got in by the front and back doors. I waited for my turn and got into the bus by the back one. Within no time, I was on the way home.

The bus moved slowly due to heavy traffic jam near *Kruzer Square Road*. I was pissed off a bit because of the crowd. It was hard even to breathe. I could not complain as the bus was fully packed. I, like every other passenger, had to bear it.

I had just realised that the man standing next to me put his briefcase on my leg when I heard that melodious voice again. I turned back. To my surprise, it was the same blue-eyed girl. I think I was lost in her eyes, almost!

All of a sudden, my phone rang, which closed the doors of my imaginary world and brought me back to the real world. It was a call from my program manager. I answered the call. He asked if I had reached home safely, but after listening to my brief story, he wished me ‘good luck’ and hung up the phone.

All I wanted was to reach home, at least in another ten or fifteen minutes. But the traffic slowed to a crawl. Most of the pedestrians ran to nearby homes to save themselves from the storm. The driver was smart and quick. He took a shortcut to reach the backside of the Fulsbutt Railway Station. He informed everybody to leave the bus immediately and move inside the railway station, as the storm had started to ‘clean’ the city. With chaos and confusion everywhere, people started pushing others in fear. Some old-aged people fell down; some moved to nearby shops and the rest, including me, went inside the station.

There was fear in the air. Some people started crying, a few stood silent, a few became unconscious and the rest spoke like a news reporter.

Drivers were losing control of their vehicles on the road. The storm has started showing its evil and powerful face. The cars that were parked were getting thrown upside down. A big tree uprooted in front of my eyes, and many other trees followed the same. Some people claimed that there was nothing to worry as old trees are not strong enough to sustain such weather and there are chances of them being uprooted even in minor storms. But then, when the roofs of some buildings opposite to us started collapsing, we knew it was a matter to be worried about.

Yes, even I got scared to death. I was no super hero. I was a common man. And I was

scared... scared a lot. The storm was getting mightier with every passing minute. It was horrifying.

Someone among us said, "Meteorologists have pored over forecasts, satellite photos, and even the physical damage to try to get a sense of the storm and to improve TRP." A few claimed that it was going to be a super-storm, which could be dangerous and deadly. Minutes turned into seconds, and the whole area was cleaned up by the storm.

Whatever it was, all I wanted was to get home safely. My wife, the most important person in my life, was waiting me. I was assured that she was safe at home, but she could not feel the same for me as I was out, and I was stuck. I could understand her mental condition. I could understand her anxiety. I could make it out by her voice when she called me.

I took my mobile phone and saw her picture, which was the wallpaper. "I will be back soon, honey. I promise," I muttered with a drop of tear in my eyes. I wondered how much we loved each other.

Interestingly, ours was an arranged marriage. As soon as I came back from London, I was engaged to Isha, the only daughter of my father's best friend. And after two weeks, we got married. It was all unplanned and happened faster than I could imagine. In fact, we got no sweet time to interact and share our views with each other before marriage.

The first romantic moment we experienced was during our honeymoon, when I went down on one knee, at seashore of Trivanathapuram, and gifted her heart-shaped pendant. It was a magical moment for both of us. And that magic continued till today.

Somehow, I needed to get home in a few minutes. Home was just meters away, but the big question was – how. My heart said, "A couple of minutes of risk and I would be home." But my brain refused this idea and ordered me to stay where I was, as going out in the stormy weather was just like inviting death. I was confused whether to listen to my heart or brain.

I checked the time. All I had was five more minutes to keep my promise intact. I listened to my heart one more time, after a long gap. All I could see was a foggy road filled with debris. I ran between the cars, buses, uprooted trees, thrown away roofs and lots of other debris, as if I was running to win an Olympic Medal for my country. I was inching towards victory, and with just 150 meters left it was all 'gold-gold' for me... until... I was thrown away by the winds.

My knees were badly hurt and I was unable to stand up on my feet. I could see my home, but was not able to walk. I thought if I could crawl, I will reach home in a few minutes, but fate denied it, as a car, which was thrown upside down, landed before me. "Shit!" I yelled.

Now, I had only one option left, which was to get up, cross the road and press the doorbell.

I collected all the energy left in me and got up to cross the car. The winds blew stronger, and I was thrown again. I fell down and everything turned dark... Isha... our dreams... our married life... our honeymoon and that magical moment of our life.

All that had happened in last one hundred and twenty minutes, too, flashed before my

eyes.

What next? Can you guess?

Yes, dear readers, if you guessed it right, I fell down near the doorsteps of the most beautiful corner of the world, my home. I pressed the doorbell and turned unconscious.

Thank God, I reached home safely that day. Otherwise, I would not have this story published here in this book.

... I Love you Rachu ...

Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu

I thinks see knows my name

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Meghant Parmar

Meghant Parmar, hailing from New Delhi, is a born car and gadget fanatic. His love for books blossomed when he first came across *Tinkle* and *Champak* magazines. Later on, reading fiction became his forte and he is one of the fastest readers present around. He did his English Honours and now is looking for an opportunity to make a name for himself in the writing industry. He currently resides in Chennai. You can contact him through Facebook and his blog. www.facebook.com/meghant.parmar, booksallaroundme.blogspot.in/



Heena Ahuja

Heena Ahuja, a Mumbai girl at heart, is an avid reader. Reading fiction has been her fancy when she stumbled across Sidney Sheldon, Dan Brown and Nicholas Sparks books. After completing her Masters, she found her true calling in writing and has a lot of published poems under her belt in various e-magazines and columns. You can connect with her through her Facebook profile and her writing page.

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Story 11

Love and Sacrifices

Meghant Parmar and Heena Ahuja

Present

Kent, a 31-year-old single man; dwelled in a cottage somewhere in the hills of Scotland. The plains and the greens made him fall in love with Scotland. He was a writer by profession who blogged a lot. He was also working on his first book, titled, Love and Sacrifices. He had dedicated his life to his parents thereby, making marriage a mere secondary option for him.

Sitting in his chair with a coffee mug, he was flipping through the pages of the incomplete manuscript, when his gaze fell on one of his favourite poems.

*Here I come along with my soul,
Waiting to cord mine with yours.
You make everything allright,
Whenever it proves to be all wrong.
I wish to spend all my time with you,
You light up my life, when it turns blue.
With you around me, I feel alive,
Into any deep sea I can easily dive.
That's the effect of your presence my love,
Your love makes me feel like a flying dove.
Together let's waft away from this world,
To the warm cocoon of our dream world.*

He turned the pages of the manuscript and his eyes returned to the first page where it started. He tried to recall his mother's words. It had changed the course of life of many, across many lands. Love is a test, and its outcome will always depend on your sacrifices and the unknown bonds formed over time.

The Past

He looked at the dullness of the wall; it came back to him, his mother's words. The story

screened itself in front of his eyes.

My name is Kent Lane Patel. I was born to a Scottish father and an Indian mother. Clark Lane, my father, reached the shores of India on a voyage long ago, which left him mesmerised with the winds, the sands, the colours, the diversity and the enigma of the Indian terrain. When his convoy dropped anchors on the Porbandar Port in Gujarat, never did he realise in his wildest dreams that he would marry an Indian woman and settle down in India.

It took him three long years to pull off a deal, which would benefit him in future and also pave the path for the Scottish and the Indian culture to mingle. During this time, he fell in love with a local woman named Radhika Patel.

At first, Radhika ridiculed all his advances, but later, she, too, fell for the bait. With time, Radhika and Clark's secret tirades grew, until the time when Clark proposed to her with a love letter written in not-so-perfect Hindi and Gujarati. She cried in sheer joy and accepted it gracefully.

The lovers made sure that their relationship remained a secret, but some 'reliable' sources of Radhika proved out to be the major leak in their relationship.

Radhika was the daughter of the richest and one of the most powerful businessmen of Porbandar, Jignesh Patel, who doubled-up as a goon and a meticulous trader. Clark never realised what was he falling into, and later, Jignesh turned into the biggest nemesis of his life.

Radhika never cared about her father, as she was blindly in love with Clark. They both decided one night to hitch-hike a bus towards Ahmadabad and never return back to their city. They secretly got married in a temple where only Clark's close associates were present to bless the couple.

Jignesh Patel got a hint of the situation and he, along with his goons, lashed an assault against the Scottish. He ordered his hunch men to search every nook and corner of the city and leave no trail behind. His political influence indulged him in a brutal fistfight towards the Scotts. Radhika and Clark escaped to Ahmadabad in complete haste, leaving behind her furious father.

Jignesh considered himself above the law and he tortured Clark's accomplices to death. He got their tongues ripped off and eyes popped off. However, Clark's accomplices were loyal to him and they were mum. They paid the price of their loyalty.

When Clark and Radhika read the newspapers after a few days, they got furious about the treatment meted out towards the Scotts. Radhika even decided to go back to her father to stop the cultural war that had emerged because of them, but Clark was against it. He arranged a getaway for both of them in a cruise ship, which was leaving the port after a few weeks, and decided to move on and start a new life.

One night, when they were intimate, few people tiptoed towards their temporary room, which they had rented after paying a hefty sum, from one of the merchants in Gandhi Nagar, Ahmadabad.

The merchant, Girish Desai, had readily offered his blessings to the newlywed couple. But greed has no boundaries, his intentions changed when he saw a missing person's

photograph in the news and he racked his brains in order to connect the dots. His evil intentions got a boost the moment he realised that Radhika was the daughter of the business tycoon, Jignesh Patel. He immediately called the ruthless businessman and Jignesh reached Ahmadabad overnight.

They hatched a plan and waited for nightfall to strike down the couple. Clark and Radhika, after spending a tiring day, shopping for groceries and other necessary amenities, returned home and settled down on an oversized single bed, which was the only piece of furniture they owned, apart from a small study table and a chair.

Clark had love in his eyes, as he reached out to Radhika and kissed the nape of her neck. Radhika got ecstatic and bit her lips and responded back with a peck on his lips, as Clark went down to remove the piece of clothing present on the skin of Radhika's body. Her deep neck blouse with petite, those inviting bosoms and the charismatic blue eyes, the natural brown hair, made her look more foreigner than Indian. Her exposed navel with a hip chain and her long nails running through Clark's back was enough to explode their emotions.

Radhika bent down to uncover the manhood of Clark and he was occupied in the process of undressing her. They kissed passionately and Radhika moaned, when the soft and warm fingers of Clark moved moving her bosom to the navel and eventually between her legs, lifting her emotions to new heights.

She rubbed her lips over Clark's neck and snuggled on his bare chest, which was equivalent to a gym-toned body. He hugged her tight, and then, went on to thrust his manhood inside her body. After two unsuccessful attempts, his thrust caused uproar on Radhika's body, as she moaned and cried and laughed with every move he made on her. Their bodies swayed in tandem as Radhika licked the sweaty face of Clark and he just kept his pressure on her body.

Just when he was about to reach the prime burst, he heard footsteps approaching towards their door. His senses alerted him and he tried to alert Radhika as well.

Five men tip toed towards the main door, as three more covered the back door, and Jignesh himself was waiting near the stairs to teach a memorable lesson to Clark. They were armed with hand guns and swords. The only instruction given to them was to teach a lesson to Clark.

One of them kicked the main door so hard that it fell apart, where Clark and Radhika were sleeping together. Clark immediately reached for a small knife, while Radhika was horrified at the sight. Bullets were being fired from the main door and it hit Clark as he pushed Radhika to the other side of the bed. Clark stood up and threw the chair with full force towards the man standing near the entrance door.

But, by then, there was a breach in the back door too. Radhika went berserk seeing her husband's condition and took out a local knife; she kept it near her pillow for times like this.

She armed herself and moved towards the main door and swung wildly. The man standing near the door, who had just stepped his foot inside the room, got hit by the blade of the knife and his throat was slashed in the process. He fell down with a loud thud and

Clark got the opportunity to get hold of the gun from his hands. He started crawling as bullets were being fired from every direction. Two men were standing towards the left and right of the door.

Clark, like an expert marksman, aimed from the small hole pierced on the wall and shot one of the burly men, he fell down on his knees.

Meanwhile, Clark's vision got blurred as the bullets on his body marked their presence. He stumbled and tried to gather his strength. Radhika immediately rushed to her husband's rescue.

"I'm here, Clark. Please, don't ever leave me," Radhika murmured.

"Rads, I won't survive long. Please, run away from here," Clark insisted.

"No, Clark. I'm not leaving without you," Radhika said firmly.

"Go, Rads, go. Do you want our love to fall prey to these predators?" Clark asked in a depressed tone.

"No, Clark. But I can't leave you alone," sighed Radhika.

"Rads, it's not the time to argue," Clark said adamantly.

As soon as he finished his sentence, the back door got breached. He, somehow, turned around and moved over Radhika to fire at will. Five bullets escaped his gun and three people, who were approaching the room with their long swords, fell over each other, making a trembling noise.

As Radhika rushed towards him, Clark started feeling a severe pain, which made him senseless. She tore a piece from her Sari and tried to cover the wounds of Clark. Blood was gushing out from his wounds, as he clung on to Radhika's neck.

"Shhhhhhh. Don't speak, Clark. Everything will be alright," Radhika insisted.

He was fading quickly. She had to do something.

She heard footsteps approaching from the main door. She got up and pulled Clark out of the room, as she wanted to protect her husband from her father.

She dragged Clark through the back door and stumbled twice in the process. There was a rickshaw parked 500 meters away from the footsteps. The rickshaw puller was fast asleep.

"Brother, please wake up. I need your help," cried Radhika.

"Hmmm..." he mumbled something in his sleep and turned his head towards the other side.

"Brother, it's the matter of life and death," begged Radhika.

Bullets were being fired and she had to scream till her throat went dry. Meanwhile, she saw her father with an evil grin on his face, approaching towards her.

"No, father. Please, don't do this. I'm your daughter," howled Radhika.

"You are not my daughter. You are a shame to my tribe and the family," Jignesh said, arrogantly.

"Don't do this. Please, stop it," Radhika kept pleading.

"I won't, until I lay my hands on this dirty and filthy foreigner," Jignesh said, mercilessly.

He fired a bullet, which pierced the thigh of Clark and he instantly fell down with a

thud.

In the meanwhile, the rickshaw driver woke up after hearing the commotion. He had fear in his eyes and sat numb, when he saw Jignesh Patel walking mercilessly towards Clark. He had to act fast. There was fury and tears in the eyes of Radhika. She was pleading her case to her father. But, all her pleads fell on deaf ears.

The rickshaw puller swung in action, as he pulled Radhika with one arm into the rickshaw and kick-started it with force. Jignesh was caught off guard.

He raced his rickshaw making a sharp U-turn and among the scurry of bullets, he managed to pull Clark inside the rickshaw and turned around as fast as he could towards the dark. Clark was bleeding while Radhika held him tight. Gopi, the rickshaw driver, while looking behind from his mirror, kept assuring Radhika.

He had a tear in his eyes for the love he saw in the eyes of both Radhika and Clark. He kept driving the rickshaw towards an unknown location. After driving the rickshaw for half an hour, he finally stopped his rickshaw near a tattered clinic. He jumped out of it and slammed the door very hard. He kept slamming and the person sleeping inside the clinic nearly fell down from his chair. He murmured curses as he proceeded to open the door.

“Who is it? Don’t you have manners?” shouted Dr Ramesh from inside.

“Please, open the door,” cried Gopi.

“What do you want, Gopi?” Ramesh asked irritatingly.

“It’s a matter of life and death, sir. A person has been hit,” Gopi persisted.

Dr Ramesh opened the door and put on his glasses. The sight he saw on the rickshaw was enough to jolt him out of his dreamland.

He, along with Gopi, rushed towards the rickshaw and carefully pulled out Clark from it and carried him to his clinic. He made Clark lie down on his torn surgery bed and went on to work immediately.

A small curtain was there to maintain the patient-doctor privacy. He was covered with sweat, when he shouted out loud to Gopi to bring some of his instruments from the table. Gopi managed to register all the instructions in his mind, while Radhika kept sobbing silently sitting in a chair.

Her body had bruises all over, but it was nothing compared to Clark’s injuries. She continued to pray with her eyes closed and Gopi, too, kept consoling her. He even offered tea and eatables, but she silently refused. She waited patiently.

Clark had become unconscious because of the excessive blood loss. Dr Ramesh suddenly emerged out of his small surgery room and shouted, “Does anyone have A+ blood?”

Radhika opened her eyes and Gopi became alert. Both of them looked at each other, Radhika said a faint “No.”

“My blood is A+, doctor,” said Gopi, suddenly.

“How are you so sure about it?” asked Dr Ramesh.

“I went for a check-up 3 months ago; the hospital staff told me about my blood group,” answered Gopi.

“Are you sure about it?”

“Yes, doctor,” Gopi reassured.

“So, come on, you lousy moron, come over here and give some blood to the gentleman,” Dr Ramesh ordered.

Gopi, too, disappeared behind the curtains. Radhika waited endlessly. She stopped crying. Her disheveled hair and torn clothes made her look like a roadside beggar. She kept glancing towards the white curtain, which had turned yellow in colour because of its age and was hardly managing to conceal the surgery room. She could see shadows moving behind the curtain. She just kept praying to God to keep her husband alive.

After 2 hours of a long surgery, Dr Ramesh came out alone.

“I have managed to pull out the bullets from the patient’s body. He is safe, yet critical. His left hand is paralysed and we have to amputate it,” Dr Ramesh said, calmly.

She started crying again.

“But, I still can’t guarantee his life, as he is still unconscious. If he regains consciousness within the next 12 hours, he will live, else it would be on God’s will,” Ramesh said, depressingly.

She stood up from her chair and walked silently towards her husband.

Clark was certainly not in the best of the shapes and was still struggling for his health in the small dingy clinic of Dr Ramesh. Gopi was giving his best to help the young girl and her man in order to see their happiness, but the struggle was not over yet. Radhika’s father was on a lookout for his daughter. He had issued a warning that said anyone trying to help him wouldn’t see the sun tomorrow.

But, Dr Ramesh wouldn’t give up this easily on his patient. He made arrangements for Clark to be shifted to the city hospital that night. There was no other way out, as Clark’s heartbeat was fading and they were left with no other option. Gopi arranged for a van and they moved towards the clinic. There was a strict police vigil on the borders, as Radhika’s father was an influential man.

As they took a turn towards one of the main roads to reach the hospital quickly, they were caught at one of the check posts. Police were on a strict patrol and each vehicle was being checked thoroughly.

They were in a fix and Radhika started sobbing again. She was sensing the end of her love, but she was not ready to give up. Ramesh understood her dilemma and patted on her shoulder. There were fields to the left side of the road and Ramesh was struck with an idea, immediately, which involved a lot of risk. Radhika was willing to take any risk for her love, for her husband.

Ramesh removed the drip and the blood needle and quietly stepped out of the van on the side of the field. Police post was 800 meters away and vehicles were lined up in a straight line. Some constables and an inspector were giving orders, while trying to search for the runaway couple. They were holding their sketches and were pretty harsh in questioning the people.

Radhika and Ramesh shifted Clark towards the field. They dragged Clark in the field and deep into the sugarcane crops. Gopi was left with the van, as he tried to move

around the check post.

Clark was on a makeshift stretcher and Radhika and Ramesh were pulling it deep into the field to make it across the check-post and meet Gopi on the other side. Gopi had sweat all over his body, gulping down his fears.

One by one, all the vehicles moved and it was Gopi's turn. As soon as the Inspector approached towards his van, Gopi smiled nervously.

"Have you seen any couple here?" the Inspector asked.

"What are you talking about, sir? I don't know anything," said Gopi innocently.

"There is a couple on the loose and we need to check your van. Open the back door quickly," Inspector replied.

"Sir, but there is no one inside the van," replied Gopi.

"Open it quickly," Inspector ordered.

"Sir, but listen..." Gopi stammered.

"Silence or else you'll be behind bars for disobedience," the Inspector shouted.

Ramesh and Radhika were dragging Clark. It was difficult to make minimal noise, but still they were trying their best to make it through. As soon as they reached near the check post, Ramesh's foot got entangled in a barbed wire. He squeaked and kept a hand on his mouth. His movements ruffled the crops and the police got alert.

"Pandu, go and check who's there in the field?" yelled the Inspector.

Gopi developed cold feet. He closed his eyes.

"Hey, you, what is your name? Open the back door quickly," Inspector commanded.

"Yes, sir," said Gopi timidly.

Gopi got down from the van and slid the back door. The Inspector checked. Suddenly, his gaze stopped on something. He went inside the van and checked it. He licked it and came back out.

"What is the red thing on the seat of your vehicle?" asked the Inspector.

"Where is it, sir?" asked Gopi, innocently.

"It's there on one of the seats. It tastes funny," Inspector replied.

"Let me check, sir." Gopi replied back.

Gopi went inside and immediately went numb. It was blood drops from Clark's body. He tried his best not to show nervousness. His mind tried to think of some bright ideas. He felt something in his pocket and his hand stumbled across a blade in it. He took it out and thought of how to utilize it.

"What's taking you so long, Mister?" asked the Inspector, irritatingly.

"Coming, sir. Trying to figure out what it is," answered Gopi.

"Come out. I don't have all day," barked the Inspector.

In the meanwhile, Pandu got into the field and moved towards the field using his stick as a defense weapon. Radhika and Ramesh got startled and dragged the heavy stretcher further. There was muddy water all around, which was making their movement difficult.

Pandu shouted at the top of his voice, "Who's there? Come out or else, I'll arrest you."

There was no response, but as he heard some rustling sounds, he panicked.

"Who is there? Don't try to play with me," Pandu tried to gather momentum and moved

towards the source of the sound.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a dog came out and barked loudly. Pandu fell down with the thud and shouted loudly.

The Inspector and the others rushed towards him, leaving Gopi behind. Ramesh and Radhika had moved deep inside the field and crossed the barbed wire. But, while doing so, she had developed a lot of scratches, as Radhika laid upon Clark to save her husband from any bruises. Ramesh pulled the stretcher towards the other side with all his might, he wasn't successful in one attempt, but the second time he managed to do so.

The Inspector saw Pandu all dirty and saw a dog nearby, wagging his tail in innocence.

"What happened, Pandu? Who's here?" asked the Inspector.

"No one, sir. This dog is the root cause of the disturbance," said Pandu.

They all started chuckling behind the Inspector's back.

"Silence. Is this a joke?" shouted the Inspector.

"Get up, Pandu, clean yourself and get back to the check-post right now," the Inspector ordered.

Meanwhile, in the van, Gopi had made a cut on his hand from the blade. It was a deep cut and he had tied a handkerchief around it. But, before tying up a handkerchief, he ensured that drops of blood had fallen down on the van's seat and floor too.

The Inspector came back and saw Gopi standing outside.

"Sir, this blood is mine," Gopi replied, casually.

"How can it be yours? You seem to be fit and fine?" Inspector said with a puzzled look.

Gopi folded the sleeve of his shirt and showed the Inspector the tied handkerchief.

"How did this happen?" Inspector enquired.

"I was trying to mend a broken pipe in my house, but a nail stuck out and it made a deep cut. That is why, I'm going to get it checked," Gopi replied.

"Okay. Now move your vehicle quickly. You have wasted much of my time," Inspector said, annoyingly.

"I'm sorry, sir," Gopi replied with a guilty look.

"Open the barricade for this man," shouted the Inspector.

Gopi smiled at the Inspector, who gave him a cold stare.

As soon as Gopi started the van, someone knocked the window panel. He was dumbfounded when he saw the same nasty Inspector standing there. He rolled down the window panel.

"Yes, sir," he said in a polite tone.

"Why haven't you got the tail-light of your vehicle checked. It's not working," Inspector informed.

"Is it, sir?" Gopi sounded surprised.

"Tomorrow morning, get it checked, or else, next time you'll be fined. It's not wise to move around without lights in the night," Inspector suggested.

"Ok, sir. I'm sorry once again. I'll get it rectified tomorrow itself," Gopi assured.

This conversation gave enough time for Ramesh and Radhika to drag the stretcher towards the other side of the fence and far away from the check-post.

Gopi moved along, as he trudged his vehicle slowly, keeping his eye on the field. He moved his vehicle away from the check-post and out of sight of those policemen. After driving a couple of kilometers, he stopped his vehicle and turned the lights off and sat quietly inside the van. The road was clear.

Ramesh and Radhika saw the van halted on the road and moved quietly, keeping their heads down. Clark's stretcher was soaked in blood, while Ramesh had tied his shirt on his wounds to prevent the blood flow. Radhika held on to her husband and controlled her emotions.

After 15 minutes of struggle, they made it to the van. Gopi got down and immediately opened the back door of the van and helped them load the stretcher in the van. He immediately started off and moved away from there.

As soon as they reached the hospital, they saw Radhika's father's men standing near the entrance keeping a strict vigil and trying to recognize Radhika among the flow of patients.

Radhika panicked and started crying. Ramesh and Gopi were in a fix too. They had no choice, as the other hospital was too far and the way to reach it was no less than a suicide.

Clark was losing blood and Radhika too had suffered bruises. Gopi turned the van into the parking lot, while trying to avoid the piercing stare of the goons of Jignesh Patel.

"What should we do, Dr Ramesh?" asked Radhika, while crying.

"Don't cry, Radhika. I'll find a solution," Dr Ramesh reassured.

"Gopi, park the vehicle here and come with me. Radhika, you stay in the van besides Clark and keep your head down. Don't try to peek out or move out of the van. If we can't take Clark inside the hospital, let me arrange for some treatment inside the van itself. You need to be patient and support me," Ramesh said all of this at a stretch.

Radhika nodded and laid flat in the back of the van, while Ramesh and Gopi moved approaching the hospital. There were policemen on the gate, along with the goons as they were checking each and every person for identity. They let both of them pass after a few questions, and Gopi and Ramesh made their way inside the hospital pharmacy.

Ramesh knew the pharmacy store person and he gave him a list of medicines and other instruments in order to perform a surgery on Clark. The pharmacy person recognised him immediately and listened to his story in a gasp.

He promptly arranged everything and gave it to Ramesh and applauded him for his herculean effort. After they left, the shopkeeper's gaze suddenly fell on the newspaper besides him and he looked at the photograph of Radhika, listed as missing and a huge cash reward offered to the person, who would give the correct details of her whereabouts.

Pangs of greed hit him hard, and soon, he approached the main gate and narrated the whole story to the policemen, which he had heard from Ramesh. The goons and the policemen got alert. One of the goons went inside and made a call to Jignesh from the

hospital's landline.

As soon as Jignesh heard the information, he passed on some instructions to him and the goon nodded swiftly, while registering all of the information in his head. He had to wait for his master to come and personally finish the matter. So, they all approached the parking lot and surrounded the van from different sides and hid behind the other vehicles parked near the van.

Meanwhile, Gopi and Ramesh reached the van, and without wasting time, Ramesh started the required treatment on Clark. Gopi went to arrange some food, as they had been on a run for nearly 10 hours now and it was getting close to dawn. Gopi came back after 15 minutes with *roti* and *sabzi* for them, while Ramesh was working like a professional surgeon on Clark's body.

Radhika was holding her husband's hand, while Ramesh was treating the wounds and covering them up with bandages and appropriate medicines. He gave an injection to Clark to relieve him from the pain. Gopi was munching on the *rotis*, as he sat on the driver seat. Radhika refused to eat at first, but when Ramesh and Gopi pressurised her, she ate few *rotis* and sobbed quietly.

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the parking lot as Gopi with his hawk-like eyes, saw some awkward movements 500 meters away from their van. He, somehow, swallowed the last bite of the *roti*, when he saw Radhika's father approaching their van with a double barrel gun in his hand and his eyes got transfixed on the merciless face of Jignesh Patel.

He had to act quick and started the van with a jolt and reversed it blindly. The van hit another car, while Jignesh and his men fired a flurry of bullets on the van. The bullets shattered the mirror and the side mirror of the van and one of them even grazed the shoulder of Gopi. He howled in pain, but kept on driving past them.

Ramesh and Radhika were in shock at the sudden turn of the events. Gopi raced the van quickly towards the other road, which ended up on Ahmadabad Port Trust from where ships left for the other countries.

Jignesh and his men rushed to their jeeps and started chasing the van. It was a gun battle as shots were getting fired on the van from all sides. Gopi was trying his best to maneuver the van away from the assailants. He pressed his foot on the paddle to make the van reach its top speed and, suddenly, turned on to a secluded road, which was quite muddy and unfinished. The jeeps were still following, but he kept driving.

After driving for 8 kilometers and taking numerous turns, he reached the port and drove directly to one of the abandoned sheds of the port.

"Hurry up, Ramesh sir. Let the couple board one of the ships and save their lives," insisted Gopi.

"What are you talking about, Gopi? Are you out of your mind?" startled Ramesh.

"This is the best way to save them, sir. They are not safe here," said Gopi.

Radhika was not able to register a single word, but Gopi rushed to the ticket counter, while he saw two big ships lined up ready to leave the port with passengers waving off to their families. Gopi bought 3 tickets and rushed back to the shed to help Ramesh and

Radhika to pull Clark out of the van. He rushed Clark's stretcher on to the ship 'SS Vancouver', when the guard on duty, stopped them.

"Sir, we cannot allow a person on stretcher inside," said the guard.

"He's going for his treatment to Scotland, sir. Please, allow us inside. We have our tickets," said Ramesh in a polite tone.

"For that you need to take permission from the onboard doctors of the ship," informed the guard.

Ramesh went inside and talked to one of the doctors for 5 minutes. He came back to the main entrance and informed the guard about the same. The guard allowed them inside and the stretcher was loaded up in one of the emergency rooms of the ship. Ramesh turned to leave after ensuring the well-being of Radhika and Clark and checking on the other facilities, but was stopped by Gopi.

"Where are you going?" asked Gopi.

"My job is done, Gopi. It's time for us to leave," said Ramesh.

"But, I have bought 3 tickets and you are going with them," said Gopi.

"What?" Ramesh said in an astounded tone.

"They need you in this demanding hour," replied Gopi.

"I don't have anything with myself," informed Ramesh.

"I have some money with me. You can use it to fulfill your basic needs. It won't last long, but can help you in torrid times," Gopi assured.

"But, what about my clinic and other things?" asked Ramesh.

"Start a new life and make a name for yourself. There is nothing left here to worry about. As for me, I'll also go to some other place and start a new living for myself," said Gopi.

Ramesh had to be quick with his decision and he, finally, sighed and accepted his fate. He hugged Gopi and cried on his shoulders. Radhika, who had overheard the conversation from behind, became teary-eyed and hugged Gopi tightly.

"Thank you so much, Gopi *Dada*, for helping us in desperate times. Please, come with us. Don't leave us alone. I need your help and support," requested Radhika.

"I wish, I could come, but I have a responsibility here. I'll fulfill it and will be at peace. Dr Ramesh is here to help you. God bless you both," Gopi comforted.

The ship horned as the anchors were lifted and Gopi made his way out of the ship. He waved goodbye to all of them. As soon as he turned around, he saw Jignesh and his men making way through the crowd towards him. Ramesh saw them too and shuddered in fear, but there was little he could do about it. The ship left the port at a steady speed, leaving Gopi surrounded by the Jignesh's men, who stabbed him multiple times on his chest.

"This serves you right, scoundrel. Now, this will ensure that you won't be of any use to anybody," yelled Jignesh.

His muffled screams couldn't arouse a suspicion among people as he collapsed on the spot and Jignesh and his men quietly slid away from the scene.

After months of travelling, Radhika, Clark and Ramesh reached Scotland, which was

one of the stops in the long and tiring journey. Despite the utmost care taken by Ramesh and the on-board doctors, Clark slipped into coma.

Radhika didn't leave her husband's side and followed all the advices just like a robot. They reached Scotland, Clark's homeland and, immediately, shifted him to a bigger hospital. Language and money were the biggest obstacles in Clark's treatment, but Radhika's continuous prayers and will power led her to believe that one day her husband will come back from the dead and be with her once again.

Dr Ramesh, for his untiring help, was brought on-board as one of the doctors of the Scotland Multi-Speciality Hospital. He was given food and lodging by the hospital, and with time, he became one of the best doctors of the hospital. After 3 months of reaching Scotland, Radhika was informed about her pregnancy. At first, she decided to abort the child, but after being convinced by the doctors and Ramesh, her guardian, she decided to go for it. A healthy son was born to her and she named him Kent Lane Patel.

Back to Present Day

He reached the end page of the unfinished manuscript and was left in tears.

"It's been 31 years now and mom is still waiting to see my father alive once again. She has been on his side forever. Dr Ramesh passed away a year back because of cancer, but he didn't go down without a fight. He left a legacy behind, but never started a family because for him, mom and dad were his family. He raised me like his own son and helped me to become a better person in life."

"Mom, you never wanted to be a burden on me and got another house for yourself near the hospital to get the best treatment for Dad. Your love for him is relentless. You have never given up and you won't ever give up on Dad. If there is love present in this world, it's right here," Kent said to himself.

He saw some children at a distance, all excited and concerned and the way they held each other's hands, it reminded him of only one thing – Radhika and Clark's undying love, the unselfish sacrifice of Gopi *Dada* for the sake of Radhika and Clark, and Ramesh uncle who was no less than a father figure to him and a pillar of support to his family.

He picked up the car keys and hopped on in his truck. The car left a smoky trail as he started travelling to meet his parents and show them the story he was writing for them as a tribute to their love. In the car, he hummed another favourite poem from his book and a smile touched his face...

*A beautiful soothing night,
With the stars shining bright.
The sky is so pitch black,
And I am sitting near a shack.
Reminiscing the moments of you,
This takes me out of my blue.
Time ceased leaving me speechless,*

*This night made me so breathless.
All I wished was to have you by my side,
Walking hand-in-hand besides the tide...
Some relationships and love for people just keeps going on forever.*

... I Love you Rachu ...

*Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu
I thinks see knows my name
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Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu

I thinks see knows my name

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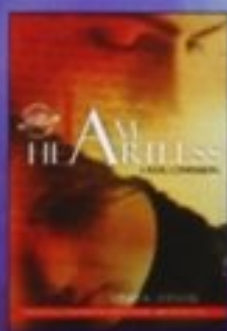
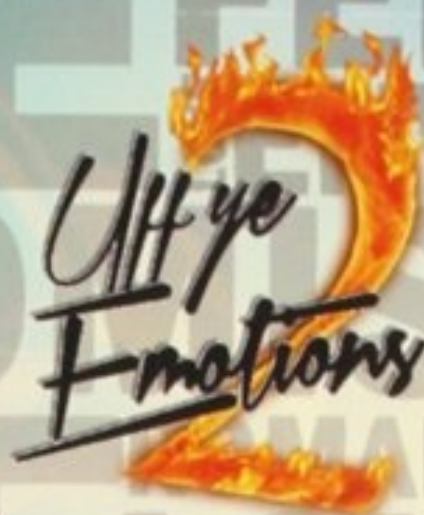
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