# TWO PLACES

# I BELONG

# This Book is

# Dedicated to Goddess Gayatri,

# whose divine presence has made this journey possible.

# ॐ भूर्भुवः स्वः

# तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं

# भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि

# धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to thank every single person who bought this book. You may not realise it, but a debut book holds a special place in an author’s heart. If I ever get the chance to meet you in person, I owe you flowers.

Thank you for placing your trust in me and choosing to read this.

A heartfelt thanks to my mother, once the book was complete, she supported me financially without a moment of hesitation, so I could bring this story to life. To both my parents and my brother, thank you for always believing in me. Your faith is what kept me going.

To Sree Manogna — when no one else was reading my work, you always did. You're the reason I discovered this side of myself as a writer. Thank you, truly, for being you.

[Our Notion Press Team]

**Author’s Note**

This book is written from three alternating points of view, unlike many stories with a single narrator. The narration is shared by three characters, each taking turns across the chapters.

There are twenty-one chapters in total. Each character narrates seven chapters.

1. Chapters 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, and 19 are from Saran’s point of view, set in the present, where he is on a search for his mother.
2. Chapters 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, and 20 follow Usha’s perspective, reflecting on their past. Each of her chapters includes a timeline mentioned in the heading.
3. Chapters 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, and 21 are told from Rohan’s point of view, continuing Usha’s timeline and filling in parts of the story she doesn’t reveal.

# Saran Chapter -1

## Bangalore,

2024.

Alpha Chai Cafes are the best ones. Tea there is unique. I felt happy seeing the same café in Banglore too. But my hometown one was something special. Coastline’s tides competing to reach my feet, Sudha’s non-stop talk, sunset, and watching kids playing. All these add up and make my Vizag tea the best. Yes, I belong to Vishakhapatnam, which is shortly Vizag. The one we frequently hear when there’s any update in the space field. You listened to this, “The launch of Chandrayaan-3 from Srihari Kota was a spectacle. It was a historic moment for India's space program. Enthusiasts gathered at the beaches of Vizag, their eyes fixed on the sky”. Yes, I was always among them at the beach. Loved rocket science. My alpha café is on the beach. The best part of drinking tea is when our thoughts wander with each sip. When you’re in a low-key mood, prefer not to drink tea with an empty mind. Thoughts might take control and go to the extreme, saying, “End your life”.

Let me borrow a newspaper and keep my brain occupied.

The table beside me has a middle-aged man in a well-dressed form reading a newspaper. Seems like he’s not attentive to the paper. Let me ask him.

“I’m reading, brother, can’t you see?” he replied, almost shouting but holding back.

The corporate world's frustration is applicable beyond its 9 to 5 timings. “Sorry, I thought you were done reading it”, I whispered, guilt heavy in my tone.

“Here, take this”, I heard a lady's voice behind me.

“Why are you being rude, Kamlesh?” she insisted, authority over him.

“Thanks for the paper”, I said. Though I have no clue what to do with it. It’s in Kannada. The one Kamlesh is reading is in English, and I wanted that. You can’t expect someone to give you a newspaper when they are into sports or film paper. Keeping aside the regional paper, I safely welcomed my critical thoughts.

If you were at the café, I would ask you about my expression. Are they very concerned about confirming that I am not okay? She proclaimed that I was struggling. Reasons for it might be me Keeping that paper aside and motionless stature with a constant stare, like the one absent-minded. My unpleasant health condition, cough, and cold added up, and while drinking hot tea, it sounded like I was crying with each sip.

She switched tables and sat in front of me. “Hey, are you okay?” concern evident in her tone. “don’t mind, Kamlesh spitted out the frustration of our fight”, she said.

Who is she? What did Kamlesh do apart from saying no? “Madam, thanks for asking. I’m fine”, I said uncertainly. Seeing the tattoo on my hand, written in Telugu, she confirmed we belong to the same state. “Are you from Andhra Pradesh?” curiosity sparks in her eyes. Happiness when you meet a native in another state hits differently. “I’m from Vizag,” I confirmed.

“Nice, I’m from Hyderabad,” she said brightly.

She turned back and said, “Kamlesh, see you tomorrow at the office. Bye”.

“What about tonight? Not coming home?” he said slowly, sorrow filled in his tone.

“Don’t come to my apartment either. I’ll not open the lock even if you sit at the door the whole night,” she said firmly.

Who are these? Aren’t they wife and husband? If they are, why are they living in different houses? The minute of my empty brain has these many questions filled in it.

She’s now back to me with her vague question bank and wrong validation. “Why are you here? Looks very young. Studying in Banglore?”. Her sentences always have questions and unrelatable answers.

“No, madam, I’m here to participate in an inter-college music competition”, I said, barely hiding my disinterest.

“Call me Usha,” she said, opening her name. “So, you’re here to sing, representing your college?”

“No, we are a band, and I play drums”, a slight smile and pride evident in my voice.

“All the best”, she added. “Have I seen you before? Yours is a famous band, or by any chance you come in television shows?” she asked with great interest as she’d known me for years.

Throwing my hands up, utterly clueless about this certification, “Usha madam, this is my first major showcase; not once have I been on grand stages, and you are claiming my television appearance. Unimaginable,” I spoke, nervousness creeping into my voice.

“Hey, you, okay? Don’t feel anxious,” She looked at me, wanting to ensure I was all right. “Come on, tell me where the venue is. I’ll be there for your performance and witness your first best performance,” her voice is encouraging.

I have no one to see my show. Sudha might come. Again, a voice in me said do not hope too much. It has been two weeks since Sudha decided to leave. That letter is not letting me find her, or it would have been a cakewalk to bring her back. Sudha, the love of my life, my first and only love. Baby me raised in her lap, listening to those mythological tales. Slept in the same lap, and that constant motion of her legs surpasses any comfortable mattress in the world. In childhood, I studied all subjects with her teachings. She’s intelligent. When I was an adult, I understood that academic subjects are never the ones anyone struggles with. We need those correct understandings and takeaways at different points in our lives. Experiences by default be the better advice. And there, Sudha had the best life lessons and a great past. At any point in my life, she has always been my saviour. Without realising, she made my life a lot easier. One day, I saw a letter on my bed; each word was part of Sudha. You find them laminated to the wall. The phone shows it whenever I open it. I carry the record of remembering every word in that letter.

Let me recite for you.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

Dear, I love you.

The same “love you” that I say every day before you go to college. But today, this is intensely dense. Tomorrow, you might not hear these before you leave home.

The basic requirements to live are all at your feet. Sudha raised you well.

Kanna knows how to cook food (All items are at the same place at which you help me pass them)

Kanna is well-educated. You’re a genius; let the rest of the world know about it.

Kanna is adaptable when the situation gets worse. Just remember you belong to the defence family.

Kanna can walk to a stranger and pull a conversation. Always build social connections.

He knows what to do. It would be new to do all these initially without me. But with time, you need to get adapted.

I belong somewhere, and you belong somewhere. Not in the spiritual sense, dear. You’ll understand this with time.

Please don’t search for me. Even if you find me, I know a child in you can’t pretend as if you didn’t see me. Then come to me and say, “I love you”. No “come back home” drama.

I love you, dear.

Missing you now, the pen hasn’t yet come 9 inches of paper. Even I am unsure how I’d live without you. With time, you’ll find the reasons for this decision.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

I love it when she calls me Kanna. Sudha is my heart. She’s always with me. Wish I could see my heart in real. Tomorrow at my show. Maybe the time she mentioned in the letter is two weeks. I need someone to record me when my performance is going on. What if she’s late to the show or confused with the address?

“Royal Hotel and Convention Centre”, my tone brightened with hope. Usha helps me film my performance.

“See you tomorrow there. I know you’re going to do well”, she smiled warmly. “we’ll party if they reward you”, her eyebrows moving playfully. I like it when people do this; how on earth do these people exist with one eyebrow lifted and the other lowered? Both should act in the same way, right? Expressions while doing this are worth watching. She also added to the list of exceptionals with unique eyes along with Sudha. I feel both have the same eyes. Much alike.

“Thanks for all these”, overwhelmed with a rush of emotions. “+91\*\*\*\*\*86, this is my number. Call me when you reach there.”

I like this woman. At first, I thought, why is she interfering overly? Now, I feel comfortable sharing. Every time, “time” doesn’t answer the quality of our relationships. Once in a while, these instincts help you to build a qualitative bond in no time. I like the way she’s. I experienced “being with Sudha”, though in a minimal amount. Now, even those tiny traces moments are what I crave.

We waved bye. Part of me was curious to know where she lived. If not at Kamlesh’s house, then where? Is she not married? One thing I’m sure she’s in his forties. Maybe 41 or 42. The appearance of her skin and enough facial wrinkles to confirm her forties. Hair colour technique is eliminated these days. Everyone puts dye. Her fashion sense made me firmly convinced that she was a middle-aged woman.

\*\*\*

Our performance for the song “Diladara” was fabulous.

The closed room environment sounded synchronous, and the crew singing with us made my day. I should often consider giving shows out of our town.

The team I’m with is outstanding. The beach performances we do on weekends have gotten splendid fame in a short amount of time. Phrases like “Team effort” suit us, but Madhav plays a crucial role in our band. His voice brings audiences in large numbers. His attractive looks add up, and more college girls scream, “Madhav”, “Madhav”... We used to have the best weekends. Music helps us as a stress buster; college life has never been easy lately. The first two years were joyful. We start our preparation for exams a week before. Still, ends up grading above average. My third year was full of chaos. Many things are added, and while prioritising them, the damage of losing the least itself would be enormous. I felt like I wanted all, but it never worked like that due to limited time. Still, to this point, we struggle to manage all at once. We have an exam the day after tomorrow and are far from the city today.

“We did a great job, guys”, I congratulated. “okay, what about the syllabus for operating systems?” I like ruining the continuous flow of the same emotion. “Idiot!” Madhav’s stoic expression was as usual.

“You said Sudha’s going to come to watch our show? Where’s she?” he asked, his eyes darting around the room.

Madhav and I have been close since our early years. He’s more like an elder brother. Just days old to me. This calling-with-name obsession started at our house. We both refer to Mom as “Sudha”. Legal tags “Amma” to me and “Aunty” to him have never been in our dictionary. Though I call his mom “Shwetha aunty”, Sudha is lenient. She allowed us to call her by her name. This is a definite flex because wherever I go, people see me referring to my mom by name, and they start their preaches as if I don’t respect older adults. I have some initial respect for everyone, regardless of age. And the intensity of it changes with their behaviour.

“Maybe she was stuck in traffic”, a useless lie to him because he knew everything about the letter. “Hey, Usha madam there”, my heart raced excitedly seeing her.

“I still don’t get the story you told me last night. Who are your relatives whom I don’t know?” his expression reflects uncertainty.

He’s right. I don’t know why, but we don’t have relatives. All celebrations of our family trips or occasions are with Madhav’s family only.

“Very, very distant relative, Dad’s side”, I said hurriedly to cover the lie.

This is the only way to make him believe. My dad passed away when I was in my 5th standard. Before 5th class, relatives are those who give a bunch of money and tell us to buy chocolates. So now I do not need to explain the “family tree” and show where Usha is. The answer now became simpler, “I don’t know who she is. All I remember is the visit to her house in my childhood”.

Suhana ran towards us excitedly, “Guys, they are announcing the winners. Let’s be at the back of the stage. Spoiler information: we got 2nd or 1st place, they are saying. Come, let’s go fast!” her voice sounded the same melodious she usually sings. But this time, that sweetness was due to the news she carried.

Suhana is another band member who sometimes takes charge of the team. Guitarist. She sings songs with Madhav that have female lyrics. Both maintain good chemistry while singing love duets. Maybe it all started like that: they decided to live in lyrics. Another couple added to the list of singing love duets and are natural lovers. Ours is a great trio. However, sometimes, their couple's privacy takes Madhav away from me. The only complaint from my side. Apart from that, I’m Happy for them. Both look great together.

While announcing prizes, it thrills you because they announce from backwards. Our band’s name was not heard till the last but three. What was ours 1st or 2nd? The adrenaline rush started in my veins.

“And the 2nd place goes to the “SMS” band from Visakhapatnam!”

This is an excellent achievement for us. I will never forget this day in my life.

“Congratulations, Saran”, the most awaited talk I’ve been waiting for has arrived.

“Thanks, Usha madam”, I giggled. “By the way, how do you know my name?” I never mentioned it before. One-day friendships without knowing basic personal details would be great. If they are more into you, their research on finding your name and place with the talk you had is impressive. But my one-day friendships never appeared and said, “I have been searching for you for years, and today I finally found you”. Wish one day I find one who says it.

“The host and judges screamed “SMS” band and said your names. Saran, the drums one. I remember that. One is Madhav. Effortlessly, I remember that name. I have other Madhav in my life.”, she said.

“The other is Suhana, we three together is “SMS” band. First letters of our names. Don’t ask me which S is mine, the first or third. It’s debatable to date.”, we laughed.

“You now have a new friend in this city. Call me whenever you’re here” Her words were full of friendliness.

“I decided to be in Vizag till my end semester exams,” I said

“Then?” she asked

“Maybe I’ll move to Banglore if all works well”, a flicker of hope in my voice.

“What about mom and dad? Are they having some transfer?”

“My father was not alive, and with my mother: I’m dealing with a weird sort of complex relationship with her” Sadness is apparent in my voice.

“Oo, I’m sorry” She paused for a while. “I’m there for you to be with me if you don’t mind. Even my house has been boring without any guests for years.” She’s so generous. I’m impressed with her offer.

“No, you never have to be sorry. I’ll be okay soon. Time gives solutions to all my problems, my mother said.”

“I feel like being with someone who makes my life meaningful. Have you heard of “Letter to Rohan”?” I asked

“The Rohan who fakes people and makes them believe that he made people better because of being with him. Author Rohan, huh?” her face flushed with disbelief as if it meant nothing.

“Yeah, the same one. I’ve read his books. Also, I listen to his songs. I like that guy. I feel like I’m completely lost. He’s my last hope,” I said.

“What happened to your life, which lost all its meaning at a young age? Maybe 20’s?”

“Enough exchange of words, madam. Not because I never trust you. I don’t want to pour my tears out remembering it.”

“Your wish!” a pause. Her voice is angry, “You come to me when his betrayal is done. Don’t forget this usha is there after your post-trauma session with bullshit Rohan.”

“Relax. I’ll call you when I reach Banglore. Nothing happens to me” Why is she so concerned? How is she so sure about that? Maybe she knew Rohan sir before.

We said our goodbyes. My Banglore trip was memorable. It brought Usha to my life. See you soon, lady.

# Usha Chapter -2

## Hyderabad,

1994.

After an intense argument with Mom and Dad, I made my decision win over theirs that I would join in BTech rather than pursue BSc. BTech colleges nowadays are rare. Lucky that we have one in our city. What doesn’t Hyderabad have? I see the evident technological changes here. Recently, I saw a 15-story building, multiscreen theatres, and malls…many are in their construction phase, and their preview images are astonishing. My city will be one of the remembered places when the topic is about INDIA.

Today is my first day at college. I have the usual thoughts that we all have while going to college as freshies. Will there be ragging? My first thought was that. How far will they go? What if I complain if I feel they have crossed their limits? Maybe they will keep that in mind and take revenge for another three years. These are the following thoughts. Come on, Usha, you are a strong woman; let them know who you are. I repeatedly kept saying to myself, “Don’t take anything seriously. Seniors are our helpers. They guide us in many aspects. Don’t lose them behaving childlike.”

My first class was perfect. No mentions, you know, I know. This only happens in the first class. We are attentive and make note of everything. From the next day, all topics all over the universe would be our bench talks with our friends. The first day was fun. Everything about the college exceeded my expectations. Wish I had my “ragging part” also done today. It would add some bitterness and neutralise my emotions. But no one did. Maybe seniors are busy with their exams. See you tomorrow, college.

On the first day, you should not be revealing your entire beauty. That’s a technique. So yesterday I was wearing an old dress which I bought years ago. And now I am in my “Geetanjali Dress.” Sorry, boys, don’t complain saying two eyes aren’t enough to stare at me. By the way, I like attention, but only if that doesn’t harm anyone. I would never talk to him if I caught one staring at me constantly. Talking, talking more, talking much more and then what? Finally, he blames me for being nice. Enough of all that melodrama. No boys in life means a peaceful life. But I like it when they see me, think about me, and their efforts while trying to talk to me. I enjoy all of those, but someone shouldn’t expect a return from me and continue their one-sided journey for these four years. And then, at the end of our college, if I find anyone who has been consistently sincere for years, I will show them to Mom and Dad and marry him. Life’s simple, isn’t it? We make it complicated, that’s it.

“Hey, you come here?” a distant voice reached my ears. Is he calling me? I slowly turned my face and put on my innocent mask.

I pointed my fingers towards me and confirmed whether he was calling me or someone else. “Me, sir?” girly voice that melts any boy.

He signalled with his hands, saying it was you. Slowly, I walked towards him. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Usha”, I said, maintaining the same tempo in my voice. His expression was unusual. “Usha, Sir”, I corrected.

“Which branch?”

“Electrical engineering, Sir”, I replied. “Which branch are you from, sir? What’s your name?” What did I just do? Who gave me the right to ask a senior about their details? Sometimes, our subconscious brain mistakes are never forgettable.

“You’re asking a senior his name?” a man next to him shouted. “Rohan”, the main one replied. His voice had no arrogance, not even traces. Every senior should be like Rohan, I thought.

“Sorry, I should not have asked,” I acted as if I felt too bad about it. But I think these jerks should not be overreacting by asking their names. Not you, Rohan. You are a good boy.

“Any interesting hobbies?” the other one asked.

“Nothing interesting, sir. I'm a boring person.” I giggled awkwardly, making my lie obvious.

“Oo, is it? This college will make you an interesting person soon. Go and find 20 students. Ask their name and specific interests by tomorrow”, he ordered.

“Yesterday was my first day, and I have not even met one till now. Could you please extend the time? By this weekend?”

“Tomorrow early morning before first class”, all there laughed at once.

“Could you please introduce yourself so my work is reduced? 20 becomes 15” thoughts becoming words aren’t taking time. I am intelligent, I thought.

“If I find you here for another second, I'll let you know the whole campus details, including the watchman” Boy next to Rohan is a real creep. “she’s asking for our details”, he responded sharply. The senior beside him jerked his head back arrogantly and said, “Tomorrow, you’ll know who we are.” His frustration was apparent in every syllable. One thing is evident: my behaviour today hurt everyone. Maybe this is not the way of talking to seniors.

“Sorry, sir, this is my first time in a co-educational institute. All my previous schooling had only girls. Sorry if I mess up talking ordinarily.”

“we’ve seen many like you” My genuine apologise fell flat. “You said this is your first integrated school, right? So all 20 members should be of boy's names” Everyone laughed, and the sound of them all at once was proof that I had been ragged. Ragging was fun. However, I didn’t feel bad. Still, there’s tomorrow left. I understood this was the beginning of something huge.

I continued my classes with slightly less motivation than the previous day, but it’s still enough to pay attention and note every class today. During break time, I did seniors' work, asking for details of the other boys. Our class strength is 45, and it has 33 boys. Finding 20 is not a big deal.

ROHAN!!. What the hell is he doing in my class?

“Sir, do you have a backlog?” paused, realising it’s not the way to be asked. “I…I mean, do you have a cousin who’s studying here?” I exhaled, my voice light with relief after fixing the mistake.

“we’re the same batch. This morning, they gave me a task to act as senior and behave to you accordingly,” he said with a modest smile. “I didn’t speak much, which left them unsatisfied. So, at last, my final task has been to make sure no boy gives you their details” There was a quiet pause, his voice softening with helplessness. “But don’t worry, I’ll help. I’ll give you 15 member’s details, and then it makes sense that we both did our work to the best,” he said, trying to help me out.

“Thanks, Rohan”, managed a false smile. My “ragging” phase begins. What will they do if I don’t collect 20?

\*\*\*

No matter what dress you’re up to college after you’re exposed as some outspoken one. Rohan asked me to come early, 15 minutes before 9 AM, so that he could give me a list of the boy’s interests.

I saw him there before I came, he’s in the class. Didn’t notice that he sits just 2 benches back to me.

“Hi Rohan”

Glancing at the paper of all names. I started reading a few of them, “Raman, want to be an actor!” wonder filling my expression for his grand dream. I guessed that some have this kind of plan after college. I hear people teasing each other “Hero” whenever they look good or recite a movie dialogue.

“Ganesh, get into the high-paying job”, typical one.

“Krishna Sai, start a business with computers.” Yes, here I spotted a genius. Nowadays, everyone is interested in computers, and he thinks of making cash from them.

“We got nice classmates, Rohan.” A smile spread as I read my friends' goals on paper. “I don’t find your name here”, I asked Rohan.

“If I write mine, they won’t believe I did my task honestly” he tilted his head, raising his eyebrows and gesturing appreciation for faking our seniors. I joined him, lifting one eyebrow teasingly.

“How did you do that?” he leaned forward as he questioned, “How can you do this, one eyebrow coming down following the other moving upwards?” he said, confused with the rarity.

“I don’t know” Is it that special? But he’s right. Both act in identical fashion for many. “don’t try to change the topic”, I said, doing the same exceptional thing, raising and lowering my eyebrows. “Tell me your interests. Trying to become a scientist, huh?” I asked

“Scientist me?” he let out a hearty laugh. “What made you think in that way?” he asked.

“Your spectacles are cringe. You look like a nerd.” I said boldly without hesitation.

“Thanks for your opinion”, he said with a flat expression. “Shall we go to seniors now.” he pointed his hands towards the door.

“Only if you tell me your life goal” I stood still.

“I want to become a writer,” I noticed a spark in his eyes saying that. “Now shall we go? Again, we must be attending class after the interaction. So come fast” he took me to the door, holding my hand.

I gave the paper I have. Rohan is not with me to strongly mislead seniors into thinking he’s not yet come to college. I see the same 4 members whom I met yesterday.

“Whom do you like the most?” one of them asked, analysing throughout the paper.

I didn’t even remember any of those. Hero one, what if I say his name? “Ganesh, Sir”, I blurted out. “He wants to become a hero. He looks like one,” forcing a smile to back up my claim. “I liked Ganesh,” I added with a giggle.

“Ganesh?” his face in utter confusion. “Shows he wanted the high-paying job”, one of them questioned.

“I got confused…it’s Ram...Ram…Ramesh…” I sighed in relief, remembering his name.

“Evening after completion of classes, you should be here with Ramesh”, he ordered. I genuinely get scared when someone warns with their fingers. Isn’t tone evident that you’re warning? Why hand movement? “You then confess your feelings to your hero” his smile widened.

“Sir, but...” they interrupted me.

“Now go to class”, they said, and we all dispersed.

I searched for Rohan. Not to seek help but to share what happened and continue our chat. “Writer Rohan, where are you?” “Writer Rohan” “Writer Rohan”…

“Hey, I didn’t tell anyone that before. Stop saying it aloud”, his face flushed red with embarrassment. “You don’t know how to keep a few private, huh? Especially when someone opens up about their future goals and plans.”

“When did my voice loud, Writer Rohan?” All 32 teeth were out teasing him.

“Never mind, it’s my fault for saying that to you”, he replied, leaning back to his position. Why did he take it too personally? I’m just kidding.

“Sorry”, my hands crossed, holding my ears. My favourite gesture for apologising. Over and over, a ‘Sorry’ rant is old-fashioned. Mine is a single word, ‘sorry’, and the rest of my expressions take charge. Innocent face, for real.

He looked at me and smiled. The smile that said he’s no exceptional being. Another one who softened with my Sorry. “What happened?” he asked, leaning forward. The bench between us felt like no distance.

“They demanded me to confess to Ramesh,” I said, scratching my head, shy all over my face. When hearing these, a girl who has never been in these sorts of things has shyness on her face and all over her body.

“Confess what?”

“Confess that he’s like a hero, and I like him.”

“Do you?” he asked with a weird expression.

“No, I don’t” paused. A long pause that’s enough to say every detail of his eyes. Elongated slang helps, and I started prolonging my sentence, “I…don’t… even… know… how… he… looks.”

“There's no Ramesh in the class,” he said, facing down and getting involved in the book he was reading.

My brain was blank for a minute. Slowly, I spoke, “What about those?”

“3 out of 15 there were correct who are my previous schoolmates, and the rest are my creational fake names and fake stories.”

“But why?” lowest voice of mine ever. Not because I’ve got all the patience in the world. It’s because of his surprising behaviour. Mr. Rohan is not even looking at me. “What if they know? They’ll kill me,” I added, my voice breaking with sobs.

“Yesterday, I’ve been busy doing something and didn’t have time to collect details, so I wrote some bullshit.”

“You are a real idiot. I know the moment I saw you. Yesterday, you holding my hand and taking me to the door? I hate this kind of action. Who the hell gave the right to touch me?” I angrily shouted for his stupid lie that made my soul fly.

“Go to hell”, I warned with finger movements this time.

“He’s Raman. Second bench, right corner one,” he pointed his finger. “I like seeing true shades of people. It’s always a matter of seconds and moments that bring our cruel inner selves. I will consider what you said. I didn’t like the way you called me writer Rohan. I am not prepared for it and not ready to expose it, and it felt very personal,” he said, lifting his head from the book.

“Don’t do it again. This time, my prank scares you much more.”

“I hate you, Rohan”

“You need to improve Usha. What is this hate and all?”

“Wow, said who? The great Rohan, who takes revenge like a child.”

“That's not revenge. It’s a small punishment for you not to repeat the same.”

Who the hell is this guy? First, I should punish him and teach him to talk to a girl with eye contact. What he’s writing? Is he making a note of whatever I said on his face?

“We’re good now,” he smiled.

“Okay, weirdo,” I said. Time for our first class to start. This conversation runs in a loop in my head for this class.

First-day lunch breaks are very odd. If you have a friend you know well, we can sit with them. But if everyone is new to you, the real struggle starts. Thinking about how much I should eat for each spoon, what to start a conversation about, and whether I should offer something to them or maybe it was only my old friends who shared lunch boxes. Every thought that comes then is unthinkable. I saw Rohan sitting alone on the last bench. The only person I knew. But I am unsure how he feels talking to me after today’s morning chat.

“Hii Rohan”, I smiled, that has both a greeting and an apology.

“Hey, come on. Sit here. Did you talk to Raman?” he asked.

“I should. They gave me time till evening. And this is the correct time to find him alone and overexplain my state.”

“Yeah, I feel the same. There he is,” he pointed to Raman.

“I want to sit with you” I paused to check with his expressions whether they were usual. They are. “Only if you feel the same”, I added.

“Sure, why not? But on one condition, don’t irritate me too much. I hate it when I have my meal with disturbed emotions. With peaceful thoughts, the body extracts more strength from the same food that we eat with unstable thoughts,” he said, shaking his head as we do while explaining unknown facts. “We’ll argue after our lunch.”

“You overgeneralise everything, right? Why would I irritate you for no reason?” irritation was all over my face. Is this all for calling him a writer? Are men out this sensitive? Daddy was strong. Poor Rohan!

“See…you being emotional. It's not the correct time, Usha. Have lunch first. Clean your mind. Talk about something. Maybe about your college expectations. How were they?”

“It’s not even been two days. Till now, it was great,” I said excitedly. Tell me about you…from what age you’re thinking of becoming a writer….and why only a writer, there are many other professionals” I’m curious why he’s too personal about his goal. It’s not bad being a writer, right? He didn’t say a terrorist.

“From childhood, I’ve been a movie buff. Not just to pass my time. It’s because of the connection I created with the story's characters. Many fictional characters taught me a lot and entertained me when I felt lonely. They always kept me engaging and immersing in their world.”

“Typical one you are,” I said. It all starts with watching more movies and then dreaming of making one like that.

“Maybe, but not many end up trying to create one.”

“Trying to become a film director then?” I asked.

“Anything that’s a creative art form. Suppose you ask me why, as a writer. It has relatively fewer additional obstacles. I don’t need one cameraman or find money to shoot it. It’s a pen and paper, that is all that I need. In the initial stages, this would be the better way for my stories to reach everyone.”

“The main goal is to create characters that inspire someone and help them achieve big. Many movie takeaways and involved characters' experiences teach us a lot.”

“Very nice”, he talks a lot when the topic is about stories.

“So when am I having your signature on the first book?”

“I wrote one, but it’s been rejected by many publication houses,” he said as if it meant nothing.

“Wrote a book? That sounds great!”

Two benches in front of us looked at us suddenly. “You can’t keep anything secret?” his expression tight with annoyance.

“That is the excited loudness of my voice. Sorry,” the same hands crossed technique I used.

“Many modifications needed to be made. Forget it. I think it never gets published.”

“Hey, don’t feel nervous. One day, it will be” the confident smile I put on my face. “How does it feel when you write a 200-page book without getting published?” I asked.

“While writing a book, I think of myself as pregnant. You are in love with the child within you. Child, here is my story. Healthy Baby is the same as getting my book published. With whom I’m in love with forever. Unfortunately, my first child died. We don’t find anyone blaming themselves for what happened. It’s destiny. Healthier, resilient babies to be born later.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing your children” We laughed at my cringe-worthy joke.

“Ha ha ha, hope they get your facial features” he’s more cringeworthy.

“Stop! Stop!” our cheeks reddening from the fun.

“what’s your first book about,” I asked.

“ugh..it’s complex to say in a sentence. I’ve put together many. Each character has something to say.”

“Everything should have some overview kind of thing. What would I say if I wanted to recommend it to my friend? There should be something to be told, right?”

“I don’t know like that. It’s about three friends, that is what I can say.”

“Fine. Bring me tomorrow.” My reading hobby, buried for ages, must be reborn soon.

“It's more than 200 pages,” he said with a proud smile tugging at his lips.

“I have time to read”, I interrupted, cutting him off mid-sentence.

After finishing our lunch, he took me to Raman and explained everything. He agreed to act and make me believe them as if he was listening to me the first time about my confession. Though we didn’t prepare each word of the conversation, it’s still better to inform him beforehand. Else, what if he feels that I wasn’t lying? Then the real problem comes.

“Do I look like a hero?” Raman's cheeks pinkened with shyness.

“Yes…maybe like Nagarjuna in Geetanjali,” I said. The only movie I have seen repeatedly, and I have no intention of comparing him with my favourite role.

He quoted a movie dialogue of Geetanjali. The movie was one of my favourites of all time. Similar dresses the heroine wore had great demand in the market with the name “Geetanjali dress”. I have many in my closet. Everything in that movie was new. I wish I, too, had some sickness that made me know my death date. All romance was at another level in there. The climax has intense emotional scenes. Let me rewatch it again tonight. Also, I should discuss this about Rohan and know what he thinks about the movie.

“Wow, well done, Raman. It’s exactly the way the hero tells in the movie.”

“Thank you…Thank you.” I like seeing people’s faces when they hear appreciation for their life ambitions and goals.

“So, how should I react when you confess to me?”

“React as if it was nothing…it should be evident that it means nothing”, Rohan said.

“But it’s not,” he said, staring at me. Wait, what the hell is happening? My heart started to beat fast. “Why would I reject if this kind girl proposed to me?” he added.

“Because you already have one girlfriend.”

“But I don’t” his expression was confused by Rohan’s claim.

“You don’t, but she does…if her boyfriend knows. Your hero goal becomes a side character for a legless villain in movies.”

I don’t even know that I have one boyfriend. Adding to that, it seems he has muscles. Muscles that are enough to make one never walk. Wow. I believed in Rohan, nodded, and faked him like I had one.

“Don’t mess with my hero, hero Ramesh” I like interrupting in between and warning people like these. Like the mother-in-laws in the TV serial shows.

“Sorry, Usha”, Ramesh added.

We went to our classes, and I didn’t ask Rohan about what he said.

After our classes, the whole batch was out at seniors. Today, Principal Sir was on leave, which gave them the freedom to do whatever they wanted.

“Usha madam...shall we start?” the same senior I hated called me. “Shall we introduce ourselves, Usha madam?” all laughed.

“Sir, as I said before, I don’t know Raman much…how would I confess to a stranger.”

“Hey, Rohan, find Raman and bring him to us”, he ordered Rohan, and within seconds, he flew searching for Raman.

“Excuse me, sir, did you call me?” Raman and Rohan arrived.

“You know her,” they asked, pointing towards me.

“I saw her in our class, that's it. I don’t know her,” he said.

“She has something to say for you,” the senior there said.

I’m bewildered about what to do… Rohan didn’t say further how to speak or escape from this state. Should I open up that I’ve one fake boyfriend? What if they ask who he is? No surprise at this point. They may even ask me to bring him to college. I looked at Rohan hopelessly, not knowing what to do. He’s with his chin down. I just started to confess to Raman, looking at him.

Heard a voice that broke the silence. “Sir, I would do anything you say, but let’s leave this here.”

“What happened?” a senior asked.

“I don’t like to see when people hurt Usha. It all started years ago. We both knew each other before. I used to travel miles to have a little talk with her. We care for each other and decided to live the rest of our lives.”

“Ahh…finally found love birds”, one of the seniors said. “That’s why you’re not saying anything to her yesterday. I wonder how this girl collected many names; again, it’s you, no Rohan, sir?”

“What a love story. We all look like fools. Isn’t it?” seniors caught between clarity and chaos.

“Is it true?” all of them looked at me.

“Together, living the rest of our lives is a lie. Didn’t we think till our soul flew to god? All lives that I have must have you in them.”

“Hey, could you guys please stop being romantic? Are we ragging or making matches for you people?”

“Sir, whatever punishment you give, impose us equally. I can’t see him suffering, only him.” I said so quietly.

“I love you Rohan”

“Sir, I Iove Rohan”

“Raman, I love Rohan”

# Rohan: Chapter 3

I didn’t meet her after yesterday’s incident. I want to know my thoughts after such a weird attempt. I’m an aspiring writer. Of course, I experiment with ideas so that the characters in my books would be genuine and relatable. Tomorrow, I will also ask her about the perspectives she took yesterday.   
“Rohan! Did I overreact yesterday,” she asked.   
“About what you’re talking about?” I acted as if yesterday was not my fault. But I expect her to be more shocked by my bold move, claiming her as my girlfriend.   
“About the book you bought”, she managed to hide the topic she was willing to discuss. “It was nice. I read the first two chapters,” she added.   
“Oh, whom did you like the most among the three?” I asked.  
“I think Nithya is the main character since it’s all in her point of view.”  
“Yes, kind of. But there’s much to know further you read.” The actual work of the artist can only be decoded partially. If the details he gives for every character and scene are fully unravelled, then his art piece feels less valuable. Though discovering more provides the artist joy, it’s only until one reaches the last piece of the puzzle.  
“I will read”, she said and paused, looking into my eyes. I shouldn’t have changed the topic abruptly. She’s about to open up something. I feel those silence and gaze one gives before some critical revelation. “If not me, then who first should read their boyfriend’s work,” she added.   
Oh my god! What’s happening here? Did she take that seriously? I just want to know how one would react to these surprising scenes.  
“I’m not your boyfriend, though.” I cut the sentence in the middle.  
“Okay, then we should go to seniors and open up about it.”  
Is she blackmailing me? Else it’s tit for tat for my yesterday’s prank?  
“I’ll say you forced me to say that,” I said with my head down because of my decisions, which put me in a non-authoritative position. I don’t entertain these conversations at all. What are we? Are we small kids to blame each other and have this time-wasting chat? I’ve more things to worry about. As soon as I cut this here, that peace I’ll save.   
“Both of us get punished,” she affirmed, confidently throwing her hands in the air. “Wow. From “You punish him, then take me for granted” to “If you punish me, then don’t leave him”. We’ve come a long way overnight. Great!” sarcasm peaked with her every word.  
“Friends?” I took my hand forward to shake with hers. Now, it is the best possible way to close this.   
“Only friends?” she asked, raising her eyebrow.   
“Only if you won’t fall for me,” I said confidently. One day or another day, people like me. My 20 years of experience gave me that confidence.  
“until the day your artwork will be about me,” she said.  
“Haha, it never happens that way.” why would I write something about her? Standards to reach that state must be vast.  
“let’s see.” who wouldn’t fall if One dedicates a book to them. I will never do that to Usha.   
“Shall we go to the class?” she pointed to the entrance. Since we’re friends, you should be sitting next to me, Nithya said”  
The dialogue she said was in the book I wrote. “ha ha ha. definitely Usha”  
we listened to the classes. Sitting alone makes me jump and get involved in my story for minimal disturbance. But today, it’s not like that. I listened to the classes well. I also need my academics to be good. No one should think of me as, since he had no options left, he chose writing as his career. Usha studies well, and with her help, I’ll excel in both. She’s also supportive of my ambitions. Three days of college introduced me to a great one in my life

I felt a sudden bicep grab. “Seniors Rohan”, she looked at me. Her eyes met mine. My chin touches the top of her head. She’s more than a girl's average height.

Every story I write demands romantic scenes. Most of what I imagine and write is seen in movies or real-life incidents. Even there, what I see is not completely portrayed. Movies don’t show in detail, and few smut-read books I read are beyond to be known romance. Soft romance, real romance, needed to be told in a proper way. Like the bicep grab she did now.

“They will be for three more years, Usha”, I said. Taking my hand back, I asked, “Does that mean you always do this forced affection whenever you see them?”

The smile on her face slowly faded with each word of my sentence.

“I Want to know your past”, she folded her hands. “Why do you always behave rudely?” she asked.

“Rude? Me?” I pointed towards me.

“Yes, you are abnormal”, she said, pointing her fingers towards me with a bold and commanding voice. “How do your parents bear you?” she tossed her hands into the air.

A few topics are susceptible to me. I don’t expect people to go there. One of those topics included ‘asking about my parents’.

“Enough. Not another single word from your mouth.” I warned her with a much louder voice than hers.

“Sorry.” All of a sudden, our conversation ignited like anything. “I’m afraid of the lesson you teach me for doing these unintentional things”, she murmured, feeling anxious.

“Hey, never mind. Sorry if I reacted inappropriately,” I paused and gave her time to digest my apology. “My mother and Shwetha, my sister, left me and my father”

“Shwetha, our senior. She’s my older sister.” I said.

“So you don’t talk to each other?” she questioned.

“No. We’re on good terms. My parents decided to separate, and Shwetha was with my mother. In fact, most of the stories I write are inspired by her different aspects of life. She’s a mess. Every small thing she magnifies and complexes it.”

“I want to talk to her,” Usha said curiously.

“She’ll be busy daydreaming about her crush,” I laughed.

“Who?” Gossip is the most interesting one. Even when one is sleeping, they wake up and make them attentive.

“Madhav”

“The senior one whom we met in yesterday's interaction?” she asked.

“He knows that I’m her brother. That’s why he picked me.”

“Wait. So, the entire college knows you’re siblings?”

“No one in our batch knows except you. And in seniors, only Madhav knows.”

“So, Madhav and Shwetha are good friends?” she asked.

“No, they only spoke once.”

“For how much time? Time enough to Reveal the entire bloodline?”

“No, she speaks to him daily. Shwetha writes a letter to Madhav’s hostel:” Listening to this, her expression went flat. She was in shock. “Though he doesn’t reply to any of those”, I added.

“Then what is the purpose of writing all those?” she asked.

“Answer to the same question worth writing books on the explanation she gives. That explanation helps me design some hopeless romantics in my story.”

“Don’t you feel selfish wanting her experiences for your story? Warn her not to do these so that her expectations are proper,” she said softly in an attempt to assist me.

“If one's suffering heals many hearts. Undoubtedly, I’d be ready to suffer. Same with my family,” I said with a bit of arrogance.

“Nice family, Rohan. No surprise your interest leaned towards art. Pain is evident in every inch of your soul.”

“I’m among the happiest people,” I said and smiled.

“Maybe from now on. Because you met me,” she said, saying she did her one-eyebrow play.

“seniors” I grabbed her bicep this time.

“Rules are only on me. Not on you, huh?” she said, tugging her hand away.

“I’ve never opened anything about my family to anyone,” I whispered, softly pulling her hand back.

“Which means?”

“Our friendship deal is the purest form alive on earth” I brushed her palm affectionately.

“What do you expect from me in return? Should I tell some of my personals now?”

“First rule of our friendship: not behaving according to the returns we get. A bit of unconditionality, if possible. Respecting each other’s space. Accepting the same me. I expect you to be bold, and you should be my best critic. Never think I might feel wrong if you defy my work. Like the one you said on the very first day, my book should have some outline. I expect you to be with similar honesty all the time.”

“Okay! Rohan Writer,” she said, looking at me. We walked, holding hands together. Seniors who saw us have no clue how far our relationship will continue. They presumed us to be true partners. The actual truth is only known to us.

Every day after college, I talk to Shwetha. When I go home, I will put the letter she gave me in Madhav’s hostel postbox. I always request that I read, but she won’t agree. Though she tells everything, she writes.

“Hi Shwetha, how did you write your exam?” I asked her.

“Not very good. A few questions that I left not studying appeared in the exam” As usual, shit that always happens.

“I’ve got a friend. Someday, you guys should meet,” I said.

She ignored my sentence since I always bring some boys, and no vibe matches between them. “Usha…” I paused, and my voice excitedly burst, “She’s Usha…”

“Oh…priorities getting changed? So, you have a girlfriend?” she reacted, expression frozen in surprise.

“Stop writing stories on us. You don’t know me?” I asked. My life is simple: achieve something big. Introduce my stories to the whole world. Be part of many new stories. But never struck by a single-story episode called “One Life”. I want to live many lives before I die. At least character-building gave me a feeling of living many lives. So, I love writing. Creating.

“That is what you told me. I don’t think a boy named Usha. One day or another, I should also have someone to tease you the same way you tease me with the name Madhav,” she said, scratching her head in confusion. She’s right. I tease her like anything. I call her Madhavi sometimes.

“Did I tell you that she’s my girlfriend? You’ll never find me going after a girl, leaving my ambitions. Those look good when they are shown stories. I create them, but I will never be them.

Passing the tiffin box, she offered me my favourite snack that mom used to cook, “Have them.”

“As a punishment, today I won’t give Madhav a letter”, I snapped my words angrily.

“Sorry, sorry. I’m really sorry,” she began trembling her voice with regret. No matter how much I liked them, she decided to leave us. Even if I have some respect, I’ll not eat what she cooks. “Did she tell you to give me?” I asked.

“No”

“Then….”

“I said sorry, no?” she tried to raise my chin.

“Sorry” only makes you not repeat this for the next time. But your “Madhav’s letter” makes you not repeat this ever. People don’t repeat the behaviour only if it is followed by unpleasant consequences” Word to word, I translated my thoughts.

“Okay, enough. Let us leave this topic here.”

“How about your day?” she asked, trying to forget what had happened before. We talked for half an hour. I like this part of my day. Every day, we discuss the day, though today’s discussion is not as expected, unlike every day.

“Bye, see you tomorrow,” I said, waving my hand.

“You forgot this,” she said, giving the letter to me.

“No, you forgot what I said” I left from there. Silly Shwetha. She thought I’d forget everything after a thirty-minute casual talk.

Today, I need not go the extra mile to Madhav’s hostel. The path to it slightly deviates from my home, adding an extra kilometre for me to travel. Shwetha lives in a hostel. Mom lives in a town very near here. She works as a teacher in a government school there.

“Daddy, I’m home” Without removing my shoes, I sleep on the couch we have in the living room. I don’t know what my father does, but the furniture in our home and how it looks says he does a high-paying job. Or does he own a company? I know we have a penthouse where they meet and discuss something. Every day, I see the same five members come in the morning, be there till evening and then leave. Some high work they do there with computers. My hypothesis says anything that involves computers brings some great wealth.

“We’re not watching a movie today,” I heard a voice from a distance. Both of us watch a movie every day. At the weekends we bring cassettes of different films, including English movies. Movie exposure for me at my age is unusually high compared to others. I don’t have one to discuss all these; no one I have met knows at least famous actor names. So again, with my father, I have those cinematic conversations.

I went to the penthouse and asked, “Why not today? Are you busy?”

“I have some extra work to do,” he said, sliding the other chair toward me.

Switching on the CPU of the other computer, he said, “Come join me. You can write tomorrow’s part, too.” I write my stories here, sitting next to my dad. We both watch a movie together and finish our dinner. Afterwards, I start working on my next book while he does his office tasks.

“Any letter from any of those publishing houses?” he asked.

“After giving an overview of my story, no one even asked for the partial manuscript of my first three chapters,” I said, sitting on the rolling chair. “Forget it getting published”, saying I rolled towards the computer and back to my work.

“Don’t worry. I might most probably go to Chennai in the coming week. Then I can meet a few of them to discuss this.”

“Yours is a good story. One day or another, you see your book in the bookstore” he smiled. Definitely a biased opinion. Just my father trying to be a father.

“Enough, let me write this new story”, I said, ignoring his words.

Sliding his chair towards my computer, he looked at it and asked, “And this is about?”

“I don’t know. This time, I’m trying to include some romance. Maybe a love story” I shrugged.

“Wow. It’s great. Write one,” he said, patting on my back.

“For some misunderstandings and reasons for the fight between hero and heroine, I’ll consider you. Help me tell them,” I said, looking at him.

His expression shifted abruptly, and he replied lowly, “I can also help with romantic scenes. Not only for trouble-making couples. How do you think you and Shwetha are born?”

“Okay, okay. I’ll consider you for everything, Daddy” I shouldn't have said that. But we both crack jokes on my mother. But when I initiate poking fun at her, he always backfires.

“Now I might also get some experience with these, and my genuine opinion gets words here.” I glanced at him to check his expression.

“how’s that?” he didn’t get what I said. “Found one?” he asked immediately.

“Ahh…not like that. But I like her,” saying I rubbed his face. I do this when the topic is vaguely unpredictable. Doing this helps me make my dad not think of anything new. So, I slowly insist on my opinion and make our opinion the same.

Holding my moving hand, he asked, “So, want to be with her?”

“Maybe,” I said with uncertainty.

“Cool,” he comforted me.

“If you say yes, then commit till the last breath. Not like your mother and me,” he spoke with a deep sense of shame.

“Definitely, Daddy,” I said, looking at him for a longer time and wondering why they each got separated.

# Saran: Chapter 4

## Present Day,

## 2024.

I’m tired of the journey. Physically and mentally. Sometimes, train journeys motivate me to become moneyed. Seeing railway stations crowd, crowder than anything. I feel half of the country is at my railway station every time. Seeing people rush, overly inquiring about their platform, asking me to adjust my seat so that someone’s kid shares mine. All these make me rethink once before I book a train ticket. I should start preparing for my exams today. We’re having preparatory holidays now, which means no college. Tomorrow is our exam, and one and a half days is only enough if I make the best of it. No time should be wasted, and sleep should be minimal to get an average score.

Every minute has less than sixty seconds when exams are going on. Only two exams are left. The two previous exams I wrote ordinarily. Today's exam was easy because I attended almost all classes and understood everything the professor said.

I always make mistakes in the quantity of salt I put in the curry. It’s either too salty or with less salt. Cooking is an art. Art is mastered with either experience or if you’re some inherent genius in it. I’m not any. In the afternoon, I eat at Shwetha's Aunt’s home, and at night, she invites me for dinner, too, but I deny it since Sudha’s primary goal is to make me independent, so I must behave like one. My day-by-day interest in living in this home is fading. I see an empty house, a motionless indoor swing, and an unplayed table tennis hall… all these make me demotivated to do anything. Sleeping alone outweighs all these and causes depression. Just two more days, I say to myself for every minute. I told Shwetha Aunty my plans and that I was willing to go to Banglore to meet Rohan, sir, and he would take care of me. She agreed to it. I thought the Banglore holiday for the inter-college fest would distract me, but it didn’t happen much. The moment I see the laminated letter on the wall, everything starts over, and I start worrying about Sudha. Where is she now? Did she eat anything? It’s 11 PM now. No matter what she’s doing, she stops when it is past 11. Now, did she sleep then? All these thoughts haunt me. Two more days, and Banglore is my last hope.

I’m done with my exams and booked a bus to Banglore. Madhav, Shwetha Aunty came to the bus station to give a send-off. I miss Madhav. However, I come here with Sudha for my graduation convocation. But I’m unsure when and whether I will find Sudha by then.

“Bye, Madhavi”, I teased him, changing his name. I do it often when he irritates me, but this time, I want to hear his scolding for one last time. Again, for days, I miss it.

“Idiot,” his face twisted in irritation, always the same word he uses. Idiot. Idiot.

“Bye, Shwetha Aunty” I waved goodbye to both of them.

I miss both of them. I don’t know where I’d stay in Banglore. I thought I was in a lodge and made them believe the same. But don’t I have a new friend in Banglore?

“Usha…it’s Usha,” my brain called out. It’s a week since we met, and she told me not to hesitate to reach her when I’m in Banglore.

“Hey, I’m on the bus to Banglore,” I texted her.

“Great! Done with your exams,” she replied immediately.

“Yeah! Wrote well”

“Suggest a few hotels so that I can rest there, satisfying the purpose of my visit,” I texted her.

“Why to be in a hotel? I told you that I’m the only one in my apartment. You can be with me.”

“Sure?”

“Where will your bus stop? And at what time?”

“Tomorrow at 8 AM at the old bus stand.”

“Okay, I’ll be there, and you are being with me, no second thought in it,” she texted me.

How much time would it take to adapt and be like normal? Staying in someone’s house is always challenging. From waking up in the morning to going to bed at night, I overinterpret everything while doing anything. The tricky part is having my meal. I’m one of those big eaters. When I’m in a stranger's house, I’ll act reserved, pretending “eating much” is not my type. But my original thoughts are emptying the offerings. Slowly, if I increase my eating for each meal, then she’ll get to know that I’m one of those food enthusiasts. Can’t wait for tomorrow. This part of my life feels like a new journey.

The bus arrived fifteen minutes early. I waited at the entrance.

Wooh…there I see Usha. She’s coming in a scooty.

“When did you arrive?” she asked. “So, I’m late? I set the alarm though, but it’s winter season effect,” she said, rubbing her body with her hands. “Aren’t you feeling cold?” she added.

I gestured with both hands, blinking all my fingers to signify ten. I crossed my hands and covered my body, indicating that I, too, felt cold.

“You don’t talk on Sundays?” she asked, wearing her bike helmet.

I made a hand movement on my teeth, trying to convey that I didn’t brush my teeth. I don’t say a word before I brush.

“Nice principles, Saran!” she said, adjusting a bit forward and signalling me to have a seat.

I am seeing very tall buildings. Vizag didn’t have any of them. Even the architecture of each of them is phenomenal. After 15 minutes of travel, we entered an apartment. It’s probably a 10 storyed building.

“How was your journey? Slept well?”

I smiled. I can only do that.

“Oh, you won’t speak, no? Sorry, sorry”, she helped my luggage to put in the elevator and tapped floor number eight.

On the eighth floor, just on the right side of the elevator with the number 802, I see the “USHA” name on the flat.

“Bath and all other formalities can be done even later. First, brush your teeth so you talk to me,” she laughed.

I smiled and searched for a bathroom, and did all my to-dos.

“Coffee for you is on the table”, she said, pointing to the table.

“No, I don’t drink.”

“Why? Feel this as your home. Comfort yourself. I’m like your mother,” she said, roaming the home. When mothers talk like this, moving from here and there feels nice.

“No, not like that, Usha madam.”

“Then…”

“I don’t know how to drink hot liquids. Once, while I was drinking, I took a whole sip at a time, which burnt my tongue. From then on, I’m afraid of drinking hot tea,” I said, my mind drifting back to the incident.

“Wait. Didn’t we meet in a café?” she paused and asked, “If I’m not wrong, weren’t you drinking some hot tea then?”

“Yes, sometimes I do, occasionally when I need some courage. I do those adventures,” I said, grinning widely.

“That occasional moment should be now. Let’s celebrate your stay in Banglore. Have it now. No excuses”

“Coffee there gets wasted. I’ll teach you how to drink. Take it,” she passed me in the coffee cup.

I followed her guidance and finished it successfully without hurting my tongue.

We both got fresh and were ready to leave home. She’ll head to the office, and I should find a way to go to Rohan’s house.

“I can drop you off if it’s on the same route to my office”, she offered me a lift.

“Fine, I don’t even know where to go. I’ll figure it out.”

“Anywhere you are, unless you are in Banglore, I can come to pick you up. Together we come home in the evening. Deal”

“Okay, Usha madam”, I said.

“Hey, tell me something other than this, madam,” I asked. Maybe I crossed boundaries. I asked whatever came to my mind. I hate calling madam.

“Don’t call me aunt. Anything is fine unless those names that make me feel age,” she chuckled.

“Can I call you Usha? Just Usha, no prefix or suffix words added”

“Why not? You can call me Usha,” she said, granting permission.

The comfort of calling someone by their name is so addictive. Once you habituate to it, regardless of age, you love referring to everyone by name.

She suggested I rest today since I spent the whole night on the bus. It’s not a train, so I slept well. Also, every day is essential to me. I should get over the things I’m dealing with. Either heal from what I’m going through or talk to someone in a good position to give advice. Then I came to know about Rohan. Today’s goal is to meet him. I googled his address. Though walking into celebrities’ houses without an appointment is never easy, I’ll try hard and do something.

I think Usha’s office starts at 10 AM. It’s 9:30 AM, and we decided to leave.

“Call me in the evening,” she said, walking to her scooty.

“Drop me at the place where you find vehicles for JP Nagar,” I asked, seeing the maps I had on my phone. Didn’t imagine that Banglore has these many roads. You can go there in many ways.

She took my phone and searched for some apps. She helped me book a bike. “Someone agreed to a bike share,” she said, showing the phone. I know that people in the city use cabs to share this way, but I didn’t think bike rides could also be shared.

“So it’s like an auto ride. In the end, I’ll pay him online?” I asked for confirmation. No one should think of me as someone unfamiliar with all these. Of course, I know apps like Uber and Ola. But didn’t use anytime.

“Yeah, the same way it works,” she said, quickly picking up her ringing phone.

“Coming, Kamlesh. 10 more minutes. Stuck in traffic,” she acted hurriedly as if in traffic.

“Okay, bye, Saran. Evening. Call me. Bye-bye,” she rushed. Maybe the office begins at 9:30 only.

After a few minutes, someone came and searched here and there. Seeing me standing there, he asked me if I booked a bike.

“Yes, that’s me,” I checked my phone and shown to him. He entered some OTP, and we started to JP Nagar. I asked him to drop at the exact location.

It took one and a half hours to get there. Most of the time, we’re still in traffic. Traffic here is enormous. Lucky that I’m on a two-wheeler. I would be reaching there by evening if it’s been a 4-wheeler.

“Thank you,” I told him and paid the fair online.

I saw a two-story building, probably a duplex. 7-foot-tall gate with a watchman guarding the house.

“Sir, I need to meet him. It’s urgent,” I went to the watchman to see if he agrees.

“you’re aware whose house you’re up to?” he asked, looking at the building. Maybe he’s checking to see if Rohan is watching him.

“Yes. I’m here to meet Rohan, sir. Writer, producer, lyricist..”

“You need to have an appointment, sir,” he said directly, straight to the point. I predicted a similar argument would go on between us.

“Sir, it is very urgent. I need him,” I pleaded with him desperately.

“No sir, many come like this. We have a set of rules, and we adhere to them. I’ll not allow you, sir,” he said bluntly.

I waited near the house, hoping Rohan would see me or the watchman would show his kindness and allow me in.

It’s more than 4 hours since I waited there. I intentionally didn’t go to lunch to make this scene spicier. But this watchman is not giving a thought about me.

In between, I saw Rohan through the window. He checked outside but didn’t notice me.

“I’m near JP Nagar. Where are you,” I received a text from Usha.

“Lane ½,” I texted back.

“What are you doing there?????” she texted. Are these many question marks necessary? I told her that I’d be going to JP Nagar.

“It’s a long story, Usha. Come fast, I’m tired. My legs are aching.”

I didn’t mention the exact house number. But she found me, and I saw her coming towards me.

“What are you doing here, Saran?” she asked hesitantly. “You know whose house is this?” she stopped mid-sentence, her face tightening with visible irritation. “That rogue Rohan’s?” she yelled, pulling my hand and directing me to sit so we could leave from there.

The situation got intense with her loud voice. Lucky or unlucky, but finally, I saw Rohan sir seeing through the window. No way that he listened to all this. It’s on the second floor, so it won’t be audible. Usha stopped for a while, looked at Rohan seriously, and the bike started to move.

“Why did you react in that way?” I asked, my voice barely audible to her because of the air caused by the bike ride. I’ll ask her during the signal.

Banglore without you stopping at a signal junction is not Banglore. There, I see the time 94 seconds on the signal board. And I’m sure that the next time we don’t reach the start, it will take one more halt to move from here. “You know Rohan before?” I asked and wanted to break the silence.

“Last time you complained about him as some fraud and all”, I paused and continued “, last time when I was here for a music competition,” I mentioned wanting her to recall the earlier conversation.

“And Now you felt frustrated at his house,” I checked her expression in the bike's mirror.

She didn’t speak anything. I’m afraid of her silence. What if he cheated on her? Maybe that’s why she’s uneasy whenever the topic is about him. Now, will she not allow me to stay in her house? That’s okay, and I feel bad only if I hurt her. She got hurt remembering some past they had. Speak something, Usha. My brain is occupied.

We reached the apartment. I waited for her while she was parking her bike. In the elevator, I helped tap number eight. I’m staring at her to deliver a smile. But she isn’t giving a glance.

With the extra key she gave to me, I opened the door. Straight, she went to the couch and sat on the sofa quietly.

“Usha, if you feel like sharing something. I’m all ears,” I said, sitting next to her.

“First, you need to open up about much saran,” she said, looking at me.

“How the hell are you related to Rohan?” she asked, lifting her head with a serious expression. “Please don’t tell me the same “life wasn’t easy” stories you told on that day,” she said, holding up her hand. “If that’s the case, tell me all your distress,” she signalled with her hand, urging me to explain.

“I need time,” I said, my voice trembling with nervousness.

“Okay then. I, too, need time to share about my past,” she said, walking off from the living room.

Did I overreact? It’s not the way I should talk to her. She’s sheltering me, and the way she talks and cares about me, everything is awe-inspiring.

“Tomorrow, give me a last chance, Usha. Even then, if he doesn’t react and allow me in, I’ll say everything about why I’m here,” I said, following her.

“Okay, but tomorrow, I’ll not come to pick you up,” she said, turning back.

She stopped and exclaimed, “Going there is the last thing I could imagine doing”, shaking her whole body with clear vexation.

“Sure, I’ll book a bike if you teach me how to,” I passed my phone.

She taught me how to do it, and the environment now seems clear. We watched TV for some time, and she said about her day. I talked to Shwetha, Aunty, and Madhav on the phone. Tomorrow, I’ll try one last time, and if the same thing happens today, I’ll tell Usha, and then she will suggest what to do next.

“Wake up,” she pulled my blanket.

“Oh…you already got ready, what’s time,” I saw the wall clock before me.

“Shit…it’s 9 AM??”

“don’t worry, take your time. I taught you how to go…fresh up and plan accordingly…breakfast for you is on the table.”

“I’m leaving…bye…it’s late now, 9 AM.”

“Bye, Usha... I’ll update everything. Bye”

I refreshed quickly and sat down with my bike booked for JP Nagar.

Today it took 2 hours for me to reach there.

“Sir, come on, sir. Sorry for the way I behaved yesterday,” the watchman said. I couldn’t believe what he said or what he was doing. What is going on? I was the same yesterday and today. What went wrong overnight?

“You sure? You are waiting to make me stand again all day, huh?”

“No sir, sorry sir. Sorry. Please come inside. Rohan sir is waiting for you,” he said, opening the big door.

“Have a seat, sir,” the watchman said, pointing to a lavish living room couch. I see multiple awards and certificates in Rohan’s name on the showcase. Typical influential figures house.

“I’ll call sir,” he said, going upstairs in the house. Spiral stairs duplex house is my dream. This is so good that I’m dreaming of having a similar one.

“No hurry. I made myself free the whole day. Let sir meet in his free slot,” I said, my palms brushing against each other in nervousness because of their surprising treatment.

“No sir, he mentioned to call whenever you come”, he said, walking out of the room.

Why did he wait for me? Did he feel that making someone wait all day without having their meal was terrible? But how did he know that? Security would never tell that and get him in trouble.

“Hi, this is Rohan,” I heard the voice of a giant personality walking towards me. “Rohan,” he said, signalling his hand to shake with mine.

I stood shaking his hand and saying, “I know you, sir” I paused and “In fact, meeting you has been my goal recently”, I added.

“Why are you interested in meeting me?” he asked and gestured me to have a seat.

“Do you have any story you’re working on?” he asked. His expression said he was ready to produce it if I said yes.

“No, sir. Nothing professional”

“I know that the proper channel to reach you is posting a letter on the website “A Letter to Rohan”. But I don’t have time, sir. Just wanted to hear your advice on one of the issues I’m going through” I spoke with complete transparency.

“No, I can’t do that. I need time to analyse throughout. All the people who attempted to stay with me might have healed only because they stayed with me. I never gave any advice to anyone instantly,” he elaborated.

“I’m happy to stay with you for days,” I said impulsively.

“Yes, but I’ve other letters to read. There are many left. I’m thinking of choosing one by this weekend,” he replied, looking straight at me. “Have you written one?” he asked.

“No sir, it’s urgent. So, I thought meeting you in person would help.”

“I’ll think about it, and before, clarify one thing”, he said, his hands pressing towards each other.

“Yes, please, sir. Go ahead,” I’m clueless, thinking about his question, making him stop and rethink before asking.

“Who is she?” he held his words, checking with my expressions. “I mean the one you were with yesterday”, saying he finished his doubt.

“Usha,” I said.

“Yeah, Usha…Usha”

“Sir, you know her?” I asked and continued, “She’s my friend.”

“Friend?” his face puzzled.   
“Yes, sir, we met two weeks ago while I was here for the first time for a music competition.”

“Friends means. Like an aunt,” no doubt he said that. Our age gap never makes anyone believe that we’re friends.

“Yes, sir, kind of. We stay together,” I answered with a smile.

“That’s great,” he said, smiling in return.

“So, what is the problem with you?”

“Sir, my mother is missing,” I said nervously, keeping my head down.

“Filed any police complaint?” he asked.

“No sir, she willingly decided to leave the house. And she also mentioned that she’d feel unhappy if I searched for her.”

“Oo… Usha and you are working together on this, and she sent you here?” he raised the unexpected question.

“No sir, Usha don’t know about this”

“You said, friends,” his tone like a detective unravelling a mystery.

“Yes, sir, but I didn’t mention it. She helps me share her home until I’m done with the purpose of visiting, which is finding Sudha.”

“Sudha?” he reacted with shook as if he was familiar with the name.

“My mother, sir. The missing one,”

“Okay…. I got it,” he said, shaking his head.

“You can stay with me starting tomorrow,” he said, standing ready to leave the room.

“Sir, is it true?” my face filled with joy. “I can’t believe this. Never thought you’d agree this fast” I was almost ready to jump and celebrate like a child. “Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Hey, Usha, listen... Rohan agreed that me being with him is no trouble,” I texted Usha while leaving the house.

“I’m so happy. I’ll tell you everything once I come home,” she saw the message immediately.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Saran. Where are you now?” I received a text from her.

“I just booked a bike to home. Coming,” I texted. For a moment, I didn’t understand what happened to her. I never expected this kind of language from her. All these incidents confirming me that they had some past. Maybe Rohan allowed me in only because he saw me with Usha yesterday.

# Usha: Chapter 5

## 6 months of college,

## 1995.

“Results are out!” screamed one of our classmates.

“it’s pinned in the notice board,” he said, and we all started excitingly moving out to see our results.

Every batch of friends has one bravest among them. He goes to see the result and only tells us if it crosses the limit we give him. In our batch, I’m that brave one.

“Give a smile if I’m among the top 5,” Ganesh said, pushing towards the notice board.

“Rohan, you?” I asked him.

“What do you think I get?” he asked me. After one of the exams, he was sure he would fail in that subject, and he did his best for the rest. Hopefully, if he passes that and maintains an average rest, he will end up in some 25th rank in the class.

“Maybe around 20s”, I replied, elongating my sentence.

“Seriously? I mentioned that I didn’t write circuits exam well, though you’re saying 20,” he tilted his head, a hesitant smile, and thought I was teasing him.

“Relax, baba! Everyone felt that exam tough” I adjusted his head, aligning his gaze with mine.

“As usual, I will stomp your feet if you rank below 25,” I said, rubbing his nose with my hand. Started to notice board. This stomping of each other legs began long ago. It was fun. Sometimes, he doesn’t listen to me. Then it’s the punishment I give him. Half of his shoes get damaged only because I do this.

I like seeing the list from downwards. I know my name will be in the top 5. But going from downwards gives a feel that I overtook these many. It boosts my confidence.

Ah...I see Rohan’s name. He’s 24th among 45. Woah, feeling sorry for his delicate legs.

Yay! I was 4th in the class. Ganesh…. yeah, here it is. 2nd. Cool. He said he didn’t write well and challenged me that I’d score more than him. Idiot.

I walked to them and tried to manage a sad expression.

With a wide grin, I let out a booming laugh, an exaggerated laugh dripping with sarcasm. “Topper Ganesh, please leave us alone,” I said, taking Rohan from there.

“What happened? Why are you worrying? I know I’d end up somewhere in 30,” he said. We walked towards the canteen.

I pulled his hand and grabbed his sleeve. “Now, what happened?” he burst out suddenly.

With a sudden move, I brought my foot crashing onto his leg. “OOWW…. idiot”, he pushed me aside.

“Idiot 24th. You are 24th among all” I leapt into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist. Landing in his arms with a laugh.

He moved my head forward. “Not lying, no?” he asked.

“No,” I said, moving back. From his shoulders, the world looks different. More beautiful. Safer.

“Okay! Get down…”

“You should set your arms free. Then you can say that.” His arms around me are tighter than mine.

“Canteen?” he asked, brushing my hair.

“Yippee! Your treat” I rubbed my ears with his. My favourite part of the hug.

“Okay. Get down. Professor, there is watching.”

“Let him notice. 4th ranker and 24th ranker romance. Nice title, huh?” I said, remaining still. The whole campus assumes there’s something between us. And we didn’t give a chance to anyone giving a thought that it was a lie.

“Aww…4th. Topper Usha. And what about Ganesh?” he asked.

“2nd. He fooled me by saying he’d get very low marks and was too low than me. Waste fellow,” I bit his ears. Displacement of emotions is the best thing one could do.

“Further, I can improve, I guess. Next time, we will aim for 20,” said Rohan.

“You will only if you write all exams well. No excuses.”

“Yes, I will try. Get down, Usha…it’s hurting,” he tried to pull me down.

“5 more minutes. Walk to the canteen. Let me sleep till then.” I closed my eyes, feeling that warmth.

“Today, should I come home?” I asked, looking into his eyes. I’ve been to his home 4 times before. His father was a carefree soul. One of my favourite people I met. Till night, I will enjoy with them, and then he will drop me off at my house.

“Daddy was not at home,” he said with a playful giggle. “You always like to visit when he’s at home”, he whispered, nibbling on my ear.

“Of course, we will be with each other while on campus anyway. Uncle is the main reason for me coming to your home.” I laid it all out.

“So today you’re not coming then?” asked he, leaned in, and planted a soft kiss on my forehead.

In a way, the thing we did. “Kissing” on the forehead is considered crossing limits per the rules. “Anything could happen if only we both end up together”, I spoke softly, running my hand over the place he had kissed.

“That’s true,” he said, rubbing my forehead. This is his satirical reply that I rubbed his kiss.

“What did you do on this one-month vacation?” I questioned.

“Nothing much. Finished my second book. And did a few modifications on 1st one,” he responded.

“Lovely, bring it tomorrow when you come. I’ll read it,” I replied, feeling a deep sense of pride in his actions. Finished his 2nd book. That’s great.

“Else, Dad is coming tomorrow morning. We all of us together read it tomorrow,” he suggested.

“No…No… uncle's reading speed is too low…he sees every page like a mathematics research paper. Again, you interpret in between explaining the detail of the scene or idea behind the writing,” I blurted out, interpreting his idea. I like listening to him when he explains the details between the scenes he writes. But when he’s with Uncle, they share more memories, and recalling for them is easy. While with me, he must speak about the memories too, since I was not in many of them. I like it when he goes back and explains the whole story behind writing that scene. The more time we spend together, the more words we exchange. Everything feels good, then.

“That we both will do. I like listening to it. But only both of us should be there,” I said, gripping him tighter.

“Okay… The main reason is that you should learn to cook from him. You both crack a few jokes on me. You love listening to the same motivating speech he always says,” he spoke his mind. He was correct. I love it when someone teaches me to cook food. I asked my mom several times, but she always didn’t let me learn, saying that it automatically comes to you when the time comes.

“Not bad…you know everything,” I chuckled.

He forcefully yanked me down. “You’re upset, aren’t you?” I asked, lifting his chin.

Pushing my hand aside, “The canteen has arrived,” he said.

“Why would I get upset? Even I love my dad. If you love him, it’s good. Everyone loves him except my mom,” he murmured slowly.

“Two cups of tea,” I said to the caterer at the canteen.

“I forgot to tell you this: last time, we were lucky enough that my father didn’t catch us.”

“Who are you talking about, and when?” he asked.

“When your dad dropped me at my house, listening to the bike sound, my father asked whether it was me on the bike.” I slowed down my words upon seeing the caterer approaching.

“Then what did you tell?” he inquired, raising his finger with a questioning look.

“Obviously, no. What else,” I broke off mid-sentence.

“From this time onwards, I’ll only go. No need for any help. If he catches it, it’s a big trouble,” I said while sipping the tea.

\*\*\*

“Daddy, someone has come home,” he said, stepping aside as the door opened to let Uncle see me.

“Awww, Usha…” He hugged me with a burst of energy.

“It’s been a long time, Uncle! How’s everything?” I asked him, my arms still around him.

“Great! And you are also doing well, I guess. Scored top in the class, it seems, said Rohan,” he patted my head in a gesture of blessing.

“Me top? I mean among girls. Yes, I am. But overall, I stood 4th in the class,” I said, tucking my hair behind my ear.

“Cool! Come…Come inside,” he let us in.

I approached the kitchen, asking, “Today, teach me to do poha…”

Seeing the well-organized kitchen with labels on each box, he cross-checked and answered, “I think flattened rice was not there…” I wonder how disciplined his house looks, though there are no women. He proves that even a few men are good at housekeeping. “Rohan asked me to read his book…come join us,” we left the kitchen.

“I started reading it. I’ll continue from where I stopped…you can carry on,” I responded. And the reason is very well known.

“Okay, then, any movie?” asked Uncle, seeing both of us. The usual thing that we do. First, he teaches me some new dishes. I have learnt and mastered preparing two types of Upma recipes the last few times. One time, I made some potato fried balls. Today, I thought of learning the poha recipe, but unfortunately, I could not find its essentials at home. With the food I prepare, we watch a movie together.

Uncle went to the cassette drawer at the television stand, and, checking them, he showed, “I had the ‘Bombay’ movie DVD with me. Yesterday, I bought it.”

“Bombay?” I questioned, sounding unsure. To my knowledge, it’s a city name. When it came out as a movie, I don’t know.

“Same one who directed your all-time favourite”, he showed the cassette tape he had.

With a flicker of excitement in my eyes, “Mani Ratnam’s?” I asked, leaning in his direction.

“Yes, with the same hero in the ‘Roja’ film,” he replied. Roja is also Mani Ratnam’s film. The last time I was here, all of us rewatched it. There’s something about the visit here and Mani Ratnam’s films. All three of us genre matches when the film goes slowly, solely based on soothing dialogues. So, every time, we pick one of his movies.

“Will watch...will watch”, I excited and took both to the couch. Another enjoyable part of Rohan’s house is this sofa. He promised to give me this couch when they decided to buy a new one. Though this old one is gifted, I’d happily take it. Whenever we sit, we can sense the depth of motion. Very smooth and spongy, I badly need this one at my home.

We started watching the movie. As usual, his movie songs are always exceptional. Music, lyrics, and video every aspect portray beyond beauty. And more phenomenal when it comes to the story. The movie we watch now tries to resolve a conflict when two religious couples fall in love. All these appreciations for his films are because he resolves complicated universal conflicts around that time. No doubt, as expected, I loved this movie too.

“How did you feel?” I asked Rohan. Asking for a review is more critical, though we will discuss it tomorrow.

“Climax was something. How well did Aravind Swamy perform,” he wondered, looking at his dad.

“Yes, tomorrow, write this climax in words”, Uncle gave Rohan as an assignment. Making a video format and expressing it in words are entirely different tasks. Writing as a scene is much more difficult. Expression of actor, tone of dialogue, location set up…everything should be mentioned appropriately. They do these homework tasks when scenes that attract Rohan and Uncle are deep. So that Rohan’s writing skills can be improved. And finally, Uncle comments on his work and suggests a few. This world would be safer if everyone’s father were like his. No mental stress exists for any son or daughter when parents encourage them in the career they want to pursue.

“Definitely…I’m thinking of the same, and you opened up”, said Rohan.

“Bring it to class. I’ll also have a look,” I said, looking at my watch. It’s almost 10 PM. “Uncle, shall we leave?” I thought about what to tell my dad if he asked about me being late.

Seeing the wall clock, he was also stunned, “Yes, you must…it’s almost 11,” he exaggerated. Elders overstating time never gets old. Even my mom says 9 when it’s 7:30 in the morning. Asking not to repeat makes a fake reasoning of adjusting time, them saying 1 and half hours is no time, it gets completed in a blink.

“Uncle, it’s 10, not 11,” I corrected him, handing the bike keys.

“You getting ready, going to your home, meanwhile traffic…all it takes till 11 Usha,” said the same expected exaggerated shit that my parents say. My house from here takes a 15-minute ride, no traffic at night, and God knows from when I start freshening up in this house. I’m clean and don’t have a closet in the house. Formal words he delivered, that’s it.

“Okay…Okay…more time we spent here make 12…Chalo…” we left. Hugging Rohan in front of Uncle is allowed. He’s a very mature man. Says nothing, and sometimes he joins us.

“Bye. See you tomorrow,” I hugged Rohan and stopped myself from biting his ears. I hate displaying affection publicly. That too near his father is worse than anything.

“Shall I drop today?” asked Rohan. I wonder when he learnt to ride a bike.

“No, you need more experience…not today…next time”, said Uncle. Gesturing me to take a seat.

“Aww…learning bike? Awesome…next time onwards, you’ll only drop me then,” I spoke, playfully tilting his head side to side. “Bye…,” I waved him goodbye.

“What is time?” asked Uncle.

“It’s 10:10” If overstating was their thing, understating was ours. It’s 10:20 PM.

“By 10:20, you’ll be home!” he said, accelerating the bike fast.

“If a similar thing in the movie happens, will you agree?” I questioned him to know his opinion. Will he accept if someone from another religion wants to marry Rohan?

“Which movie?” another elderly thing. Forgetting in the very first place. Especially when it comes to this kind of unnecessary entertainment.

“Ugh…the movie now we watched…what if Rohan loves a Muslim girl…”

“I’d happily agree with him. Rohan is good at decision-making. He won’t commit mistakes. Even if he does, he corrects it or adapts accordingly,” he spoke confidently.

“Yes…yes…most of the time I help him. You should know that” I giggled.

“I’m happy with both of you…As a husband, I failed. I'd regret it like hell if something I messed up in his life. It’s up to him whom he should marry. What if he says that my choice was worse, which ended up as a single parent?” he voiced his concerns with despair.

“Serious? Do you think he says that to you…. Never,” I spoke with conviction.

“I don’t understand women, Usha…I’ll never be involved in his matters when it’s related too personally to women. For Example, when the topic is about you.”

“About me?” I laughed and asked, “What does he say about me…”

“Many… many of our conversations include you,” adjusted the mirror in the front to see my face.

“He loves you…” said Uncle, glancing at me from the mirror.

I muttered, still in shock. Raising an eyebrow, I exclaimed, “Me?”

“I suggested him to confess…did he?” asked Uncle.

“I feel safe being with him. But I’m scared hearing these ‘love’ tagged relations,” I shared how I truly felt.

“Yes, I understand…you’re too young to deal with these phrases. But for experiencing them, age is nothing,” he commented.

“elaborate”

“you people are in love, Usha. I can assure you that. But when you look at your relationship, you don’t feel it’s love. Because love shown in movies is more fantasised. And yours, you feel like some struggle less bond with happy faces and happy smiles. That is what exactly love is. Not that you’ll ever suffer, but you stand with each other when that time comes. And the remaining time, yours is a happy life. In all movies or stories you hear, they try to solve conflicts. So, you have a myth that love is all of struggles and carrying over expectations. No, it is not,” he stated firmly.

“Are we in love?” I doubted, immediately correcting, “Yes, we are…but I don’t like confessing straight,” tried just to be a girl. Let him confess first.

“You don’t have to…read the 2nd book he wrote. You’ll understand everything,” said Uncle.

“50 changes she brought in me?” I asked, remembering the name of the book.

“Yes, while writing, every discussion and scene he wrote was directly taken from your life experiences.”

Thinking of a few, I said, “Yes, I felt a few similar.”

“50 changes she brought in me’ is about behaviour changes he underwent after meeting you,” he confirmed.

“Is it?” I’m almost to cry. I’ll for sure cry while reading it.

“Your home has arrived, Usha,” he said, stopping the bike a few metres away from my home.

“I will read the entire book overnight… Bye, Uncle…thanks for everything. And don’t be underconfident that you’re indecisive. You raised Rohan well. I love both of you. Together, we’re a family. My 2nd home,” I felt emotional. I waved Uncle goodbye. These people are something. I love them.

# Rohan: Chapter -6

“I’m home,” I heard dad’s voice. He doesn’t use the Colin bell since it reminds him of Mom. It’s their favourite melodious tune from some English movie.

“Coming,” I went to the door and rang the bell.

With a cold look, on the verge of breaking his patience, “I told everything to Usha,” he pushed me aside and went straight to his bedroom, slamming the door.

“What did you say,” I knocked on the door. It was open. He’s in the bathroom.

“What did you tell?” I asked repeatedly from outside.

“Will you please wait for a minute,” he yelled. “Let me take my shower peacefully,” sang those usual songs he always sings. I shouldn’t have rang the colin bell. Now he’s enjoying it and making me anxious.

“Peacefully?” I banged on the door. “Come fast…or just tell me what you said to her?” I questioned, nearly shouting.

“That the book you wrote is about her,” he replied.

“What the hell…why are you like this…did I mention that it’s about her?”

“Directly, you didn’t, but indirectly, you gave me many hints. So I took it for granted,” he opened the door.

“Daddy serious?” I asked, stopping him and looking into his eyes.

“Next time, never irritate me by ringing the bell,” he said, walking to the closet.

“I hate you,” I half shouted, my voice with thick emotion.

I went straight to my bedroom and shut the door hard. I jumped on my bed and pressed the pillow hard onto my face. It prevents me from crying. Otherwise, the tears flow and can’t be stopped.

I’m unaware of when I slept. The light was on. I didn’t put a blanket on me. I won’t talk to Dad for a day. He made me cry. But breakfast? No problem, nothing happens if I skip breakfast for a day. I freshened up and got ready for college.

“Breakfast? Your favourite upma…”

“I’ve some other work to do…”I ran fast so that the smell of upma or his convincing words wouldn’t tempt me. These egos don’t give anything, but sometimes I misbehave. Giving punishments is not new to him. In fact, I learned this technique from him. While experiencing these punishments, anyone will be in shock, and afterwards, revealing that it was not true feels like a flying soul coming to the proper place.

“Bye…”

I was a bit early to go to college. Surprisingly, Usha was there before I arrived.

“Hey, shall we go out and have breakfast?” I pulled her hand.

“Rohan…” she touched my cheek and gently rubbed my face.

“What? Did you dream about my death?” I asked.

She playfully smacked me. “Shut up,” she hugged.

“Then what…I’m hungry…let’s go, again first class is Aditya sir’s. Latecomers are not allowed.”

“Aww….reading my book, huh?” I took the book to see which chapter she was into.

“Cool!! You’re almost at the end?” I looked at her and asked, “When did you finish?”

“Last night, I didn’t feel like sleeping. So….”

“Cool…. complete it…complete it…” I decided to go alone. I can understand how one feels when we interrupt while reading something serious.

“Rohan…,” she called me.

“Is this book about me?”

“About you what?”

“50 changes she brought in me? Who’s she?”

“Fictional character,” I lied.

“Then why are most of the scenes I read directly taken from us?” she asked a question that had no answer.

“There are four ways for a writer to identify his stories. One experienced it. Two witnessed it. Three heard about it. Four read about it. Either of these 4 happened in his life, which gives birth to a story.”

“That’s it…. nothing more,” she asked, ignoring all my information.

“Experienced feelings written here have some extra words with your point of view added,” she said, tapping the book.

With no clue about her claim, I scratched my head in confusion and opened, saying, “Exaggeration may be…”

“Exaggeration? Sure?”

“What do you want me to say?” I hesitated.

“What you feel about me, maybe…”

“I’m hungry. That’s the only emotion I can think of now,” tapping my stomach, I walked away.

“Don't try to escape…the next topic between us will be the same unless you say something,” she shouted, and I acted unheard.

I wanted to ask my dad whether he said anything to Usha. But he won’t pick up the call during office hours, though he’s at home. I thought he was joking yesterday. But what if she herself identified that the story was about us? Very rare probability, but still, there are chances. The feelings I wrote all were true. Pure. No exaggeration. I want to confess straight, but all my insecurity about my life stops me from doing it. My career is a bit tragic. I don’t know what I need in my life. Ambitious but towards a rarely happening occupation. I want to marry Usha, but then taking care of her for the entire lifetime needs a properly settled source of income. All my stories or flirty lines may impress her, but they never buy home resources. One day, I’ll sure become a good writer. It brings home everything. But isn’t it a gamble asking for assurance while my future is unsorted?

“One masala dosa,” I ordered. Now it’s eating time and no space for any emotional thoughts. Only focus on the food, I said to myself.

“What did he teach in yesterday’s class,” I asked, pulling Usha’s notes.

She grabbed back her notes, saying, “Yesterday there was no Aditya sir’s class.”

“ugh…I mean, in the previous class,” I pulled her close towards me.

“it’s there in the book you wrote. 50 changes she brought in me,” sarcastic satire.

I leaned under the bench so the professor wouldn't notice, took her holding hand and kissed her on the hand.

“Who are you to kiss me?” she raised her voice, and all our front benches turned back.

We managed with a smile. “Who are you to kiss me,” she whispered.

“It’s in the book I wrote. Fifty changes she brought in me,” I kissed again.

“What if the professor sees?”

“I’ll kiss him too,” we laughed, and I kissed her hand again.

“Rohan…I like you a lot,” she said, pulling my bicep.

“So, planning to write a book, huh? 50 changes he brought in me?”

“I’m not as talented as you.”

“Says who? 4th ranker?”

“Who cares? You do everything creatively. I want to live like you for at least a day. Interesting life,” she looked into my eyes.

“If you stare like this for a second longer, I’ll kiss you on the lips.”

“Waiting,” she’s about to lean.

“What!?”

We both bent down, and it’s kind of peck. It’s not like I never tried it previously. Whenever I kiss her on the cheeks. Slowly, I move towards her lips, thinking she’s not noticing. But every time, she pushes me aside and says, “It’s going far.”

My first experience was not that good. I was tense since it was in the middle of the class.

“We should kiss properly,” I said without hesitation.

“Evening after all the classes are done. We both will be at the back of the college grounds,” she was way too bold.

\*\*\*

“How did you feel when you kissed me?” I asked her. We’re alone at the college backside, nearer to the washrooms. No one comes here. The only rarest case is when someone comes from a football team if the ball comes this way. Unless it is a safer place to do anything, I mean it, to do anything.

“It’s not my first time, though,” she pushed me aside with a smile.

What the fuck. Means, did she kiss anyone before? Isn’t she in a proper girls’ hostel? It might be that she kissed another girl…

Seeing my blank expression, she continued, “I once kissed you.”

“ughh..I kissed you many times…my question is, isn’t it your first proper kiss? On lips?”

“No, that is what I’m saying. I kissed you before,” she said, hardly rubbing my lips with her hand.

“When?” my voice raised in surprise.

“One day, we completed our lunch early, and you were sleeping on the desk.”

She shrugged and continued, “I couldn’t resist on that day…no one’s in class. So I tried and regretted later.”

“How was my expression then?” I asked in surprise.

“You were in deep sleep, Rohan. It’s less intense than our kiss today.”

“Ewww…then it’s not counted as a kiss,” I said, looking around and checking if anyone was watching. I pulled her closer to me.

“Do you want to know what a proper kiss feels like?” I asked, my lips almost touching hers. I can sense her breathing.

“You sure you know? I’ll teach, and you learn,” she landed her lips on mine. It felt like writing another book describing our kiss.

We kissed for minutes, maybe…it was very new. For the first time in my life, I hated my tongue. My brain assigns its actions, and its behaviour is entirely different. It danced in her mouth like anything.

We stop, look at each other and continue again. Kissing is like an infinite loop taught in our circuits course. Minutes became hours, and our parents waiting at home was the only reason our infinite loop ended. I’d share this experience with Dad if he’s talking to me. Maybe not today, but when we’re again on good terms, it’s worth sharing my experience.

One of my seniors approached us when we were ready to leave that place. He shouted my name and said, “Rohan, your sister is waiting for you.”

She has extra classes today, and I didn’t realise it was 7:30 PM.

“Coming”, I answered and decided to go to her class.

“Join us” I pulled Usha’s hand.

“It’s too late…my dad has our timetable with him. There’s no lab today, and he points me out for being late.”

“Only a few more minutes…. Please…please,” I requested, holding her chin.

We together went to Shwetha. I’m about to introduce Usha now as my girlfriend. Seeing her on the last bench alone, we walked towards her and saw her crying.

“Hey, what did mom say?” I acted typical. Blind hate towards her makes me think that she’s the reason why Shwetha cries.

She gave me an angry look and pointed to the dustbin. I went there to check if I found anything. Meanwhile, Usha is consoling her and trying to ask what happened.

I didn’t find anything strange in the dustbin. All were usual papers, chocolate wrappers…

“What the hell…why did he do this,” I heard Usha’s voice.

She ran towards me and picked the paper from the dustbin top.

“It’s the letter that she wrote to Madhav.” Her Madhav obsession never becomes old. I’m supposed to post this at his hostel.

“Today she kept at Madhav’s place…seeing it, he didn’t even open it and thrown straight to the dustbin,” said Usha, opening it.

“Hey, don’t read it,” I said, taking the letter and going to Shwetha.

“it’s time to understand something. He’s not into you. Try to understand it. He feels tortured when you do things he doesn’t like. Today’s incident is a proper example,” I said to her in a soft, sensitive tone, checking with her for every word. She’s sensitive like Mom.

“Okay,” she hugged me, crying.

Her crying sobs stopped me thinking and said not to speak practically. The real harsh ones are the facts. I evoked that I was there for her.

“Where did I do wrong?” she asked, crying.

“You never did. Stop thinking about it. He doesn’t like you in the way you think. And that’s okay. It’s not that everyone in the world should love you.”

“No, I never said that. What might be the reason behind all this hate? At least I need a reason to my heart.”

“Don’t think about it. Yours is a no-match, that’s it. Moreover, why should someone come to you and mention the reason for not loving you? It hurts even more, Shwetha. Try to understand.” I spoke words that I felt.

“I never understand these “that’s it” ending sentences. You frame whatever you like, and at the end, you put “that’s it”, that’s it,” she repeated the last words sarcastically.

“There are many men out there waiting for you to find them. Don’t get discouraged; you have many years ahead,” I tried to inspire her.

“Do those ‘many’ have Madhav in it?” she asked shamelessly. Does love make people dumb? To an extent, I agree, but many stopped thinking sensibly.

“I wanted to say something, but you never let me,” I spoke, pulling Usha close.

“What?” she gave us a strange look, seeing us smiling at each other at a very close distance.

“We’re much more than what you think,” said Usha with girly turns and head down.

“I know a lot about you. Also, I’m aware that you spend quality time together at my home.”

“Much more than that….,” I said, blushing.

“Much more what?” she hesitated. Previous Madhav’s impact was still there.

“We kissed,” I said, turning back.

“It was his idea, though,” said Usha, turning to my side. We both flipped again and faced Shwetha.

Her eyebrows are raised in shock. “When did you do these and why?” she asked.

“We discovered lately that we’re in love. Love is nothing but feeling like wanting for a lifetime. I feel about Usha the same way, and she feels the same,” I said, giving Usha a side hug.

Shwetha clapped and joined us. “Happy for you both,” she said, hugging us.

“Even my intentions are the same with Madhav. If he also agrees, we would have many double dates. Why God? Why?” she started again.

“Find someone. It’s not that only we four should go on dates.”

“Thanks for your suggestion,” she patted me. “Maybe he was not in a good mood today. Tomorrow, he comes with an apology,” her daydreams have no limit.

“On a serious note, I’m saying only for your good cause. Stop thinking about Madhav. I know it isn’t easy and can’t be done overnight. But at least give it a try. I’m trying to protect your mental health. Try to understand me, Shwetha,” I put my hand on her head and made it more receiving.

“Start trying new things that keep you occupied. When a thought about him pops into your mind, do something that distracts you. It’s time for you to move on. He never comes to you saying sorry. It’s his loss for missing a beautiful soul like you,” I hugged and locked my gaze with hers. “Please,” I almost begged with my eyes full of tears.

“Okay…,” I’m unsure whether she takes it to the fullest. But guiding her is my responsibility.

“Let’s Party?” I suggested.

Usha checked her watch. “You go home,” I added.

“We both will go to my home since today is Saturday. Shwetha goes home tomorrow morning,” I pointed to the STD booth, hinting her to call Mom and tell her. Mom agrees but feels guilty when she asks permission to spend time with her own father. It’s like that, can’t do anything.

“Okay,” said Shwetha, calling mom.

# Saran: Chapter 7

## Present Day,

## 2024.

“I’m home,” I shouted, seeing the door open.

I saw Usha sitting on the couch. She slowly raised her head and asked, “So you’re leaving?”

“Yes. I’m waiting for this moment,” I excitedly answered.

“I… I’ve waited to be with Rohan but not to leave this house,” I clarified.

“Why have you been very much excited being with him? Do you think all problems get solved being with him?” she asked.

“Maybe it doesn’t get solved completely, but I’ll finally understand something and figure it out. I just wanted to try it until my college convocation,” I replied.

“He listens to you and makes money out of your story. He either directs it or writes about it, adding a fictional ending.”

“All the previous ones who’ve been with Rohan said they are very habituated to be with him. He’s more like a best friend.”

“Anyone says the same thing if you make a film from their life. No wonder they say that. Maybe he gives some money for it.”

“No, I don’t think so…all the talks I felt were genuine.”

“it’s up to you then…you are not listening to me anyway,” she said nervously.

“No, it’s not like that, Usha…,” I said, sitting beside her and holding her hand. “Let me give it a try,” I added.

“Share with me,” she said, looking at me.

“My mother is missing,” I said, passing my phone to show her the last letter she had written.

She took a few minutes to read it and asked what my mother’s name was.

“Sudha…,” I answered.

“Full name?” she quickly asked.

“Changanti Sudha Murthy,” I answered.

I didn’t understand her expression. It was a mix of every emotion. She walked from there, went to the bedroom, and locked the door.

“Anything happened?” I asked, checking with her and knocking on the door every few minutes.

“Coming…leave me alone for some time,” she shouted.

I don’t know what I did do tremendously. I just mentioned Sudha’s name. She asked me for the entire story, but I don’t think she’s ready to listen.

I heard the door opening sound, and I walked towards the bedroom.

“All good?” I asked.

She brushed my hair and looked into my eyes. Her eyes were filled with tears. She hugged me and didn’t let me go away.

“What happened? Why are you crying,” I asked from the other side. I can’t see her facial expression in any case.

“Don’t go anywhere…we’ll together find where mom is.”

Gently, I pushed her and said, “It’s complicated, Usha. She doesn’t want us to find her.”

“Us?” she questioned.

“I mean any of us. You read the letter, right?”

“She was happy leaving,” I added.

“Yes, but where is she now? What about Dad?” she asked, crying.

“Dad?” I asked, puzzled. He passed away years ago.

“Srinivas?” she said dad’s name, which I hadn’t mentioned before.

“Yeah…how do you know his name? he passed away years ago.”

“When?” she was in shock.

“When I was in my 8th standard. In 2017,” I answered.

Keeping her hands at her mouth and stopping to cry aloud, she immediately sat on the floor.

“What happened to you…why are you being so dramatic?” I asked, having no clue about her abnormal behaviour.

“Why did no one inform me?” she started to cry aloud, beating the floor.

“How can anyone inform you without knowing who you are,” I said, consoling her. I have no idea what she meant. Who is Usha to me if I’m not at the café that day? Why would someone from my family would walk to her with my father’s grief news?

“You should not be here…go…go to Rohan,” she sobbed, pushing me aside.

“Minutes back, you were not letting me go, and now you were begging me to go…what happened?” I tightly hugged her and didn’t let her speak. All I can hear is her yelling through tears.

“No one likes me…everyone is happy without me,” her cry intensified.

“Who said that?” I got emotional about her claim. If you see someone crying longer, automatically, your brain provokes you to join them.

“I know very well…you, please go,” she pushed me harder.

“But how can I leave you like this and go?”

“I’ll be OK,” she said, walking to the restroom.

I waited till she was back. With her face washed, she tried to sound like before, though still a little sob could be sensed. “Don’t hesitate to contact me if you need anything,” she opened her arms, gesturing for me to hug her.

“I miss you, Usha…you are the best. If anything feels mean, I will run to you.” We hugged each other.

“Should I come to drop you?” she asked.

“Happiest person if you do that…”

She thought for a while and booked a bike from her phone. I don’t know what made her thoughts change in a fraction of seconds. Maybe it’s all with Rohan. I’m sure they know each other.

“Still, you didn’t open up what’s between you and Rohan,” I asked while entering the elevator.

“it’s complicated. You will understand with time.”

“Hey, don’t speak like Sudha…” I said, wondering how many words and behaviours match between both.

“Just to mention, I trusted you only because of the eyebrow play you did initially at the café, which reminded me of Sudha. She does the same playfully. I love it.”

With a stoic expression, “Shall we…,” she pointed to the apartment entrance.

“You are not talking to me?” I asked, seeing her not answering and expressing less for my talk.

“Angry with me for leaving?” I asked.

“No…why would I?” she lied.

“I’ll come home on the weekends. This is my home. Isn’t it?”

“Always welcome,” she said, smiling.

“Too good…you look beautiful when you smile. The previous girl I saw cry like a baby is not good.”

“Eat at the proper time. Sleep well. If anything feels isn’t right, don’t hesitate to contact me,” okay, okay I simply nodded.

“Last one, be careful with Rohan”

“Ugh…you will not talk about him more but warn me as if he’s some evil.”

“Maybe this weekend…”

“This weekend, what?” I questioned.

“you’ll have a few to say about him, and I share my past.”

“Deal!”

Seeing the bike arrive, we waved goodbye, and I started counting the days to the following Saturday.

The same security who didn’t allow me welcomed me with a warm smile. I saw Rohan Sir at the entrance doing some rituals to God that are done in the early morning. He gestured for me to sit inside. He came with food that was offered to God, the same tiny rock sugar crystals that mom used to give.

“I thought to contact you and say to come tomorrow,” he said, roaming the room with incense sticks. The fragrance of it is unique.

“Why any problems?” I asked, feeling a loss of face for arriving early.

“No…No…just that tomorrow is a good day to start according to the Hindu calendar,” he clarified. He’s very keen on all these related to God’s sentiments, and that’s why he’s in a good position, my brain thought.

“Should I come tomorrow?” I replied and never intended sarcasm at all.

“Should we need an appropriate time to start something new?” I asked, curious to hear his explanation about the question.

“Definitely,” he answered in one word. Now I’m wondering whether he told me to get out and come tomorrow.

“Okay…I’ll be leaving, then,” I said, making a sign like standing and hoping he would ask not to leave.

“I’ll drop you and pick you up tomorrow,” he said, walking to the bedroom.

I am unable to express how I feel now. A super producer, writer, and multitalented celebrity would drop me in his car and pick me up. Unbelievable.

After a few minutes, he dressed and asked me to choose the car among his three expensive cars. He had a driver, though, today he decided to drop himself. Why would he spare a 2-hour ride? Is he that free? Or made available for me?

Initially, we talked about some basic introductory stuff in the car. I started appreciating his works from a few books I read. I mentioned my favourite quotes from his book. Also, I asked him about his next album, which will be released soon. He’s a songwriter, too.

He asked me the exact location, and meanwhile, I texted Usha, saying I was coming back home.

“What? You serious?” I received a notification.

“Yes, I need keys...where are they?” I texted back.

“They are with me…I’m coming.”

“Come fast…don’t let Rohan sir wait. His time is precious.”

“Rohan??”

“Yes, he’s with me…I’m coming in one of the most expensive cars. All our neighbours get shocked seeing this on our roads.”

“Tell me you are joking!” she texted. I know it’s hard for anyone to believe.

“Hey, serious…okay, wait,” I decided to take a snapshot of Rohan driving the car.

Without him noticing, I quickly took a snap of him driving the car and sent it to Usha.

“Tell him that I’m not allowing him to my home,” text that I’m not prepared to see. What the hell is wrong with these people? How can I tell that to him?

“Hey, are you crazy?”

“You are crazy, Saran…who asked you to bring him home? Are you mad or what?”

“What happened now? I never planned to do that…it happened, that’s it.”

“You just tell him that I never want him to see around and that I asked him to leave. The rest he’ll understand.”

“Not joking, right?”

“You first say that”

“You know Usha, right?” my voice barely audible to him.

“Yes…”

“She’s suffering from a viral fever, so I request you to drop me at the entrance. Please don’t mind. Tomorrow, we’ll invite you if her health improves,” I tried my best to cover the actual scenario.

With a broad smile, “I understood,” he said. Still laughing.

Rohan Sir dropped me at the turn of the road since that road is risky. It isn’t easy to take back once a car is entered.

“Bye, and thank you so much,” my overwhelming feelings poured out.

“No worries…tomorrow afternoon at 2’o o’clock I’ll be here… exactly here,” he said, which meant tomorrow he’s not going to come home. The first time Usha denied it, he is now.

I waited at the elevator, hoping Usha would come. It’s been almost twenty minutes since I came home.

The elevator shows a sign up from the seventh floor, meaning Usha is in it. Eagerly, I’m waiting for her to ask about her behaviour, not letting Rohan Sir in.

It’s her. Outside the elevator, she searched around to check if Rohan was there.

“Why would I bring him when you rudely said NO,” I spoke nervously, snatching the home keys.

“Saran…I warned you initially, and I know this would be the situation. You didn’t listen,” I ignored her words, went straight to the bedroom, and acted as if I was sleeping.

“Coffee…not hot,” she pointed to the table. I slept for almost three hours, and it was evening, 5 o clock.

“Thank you…” I said, remembering the actions I did before I slept. It’s her house, and she can invite or deny anyone. I must be grateful for what she’s doing now.

“Sorry, Usha…,” I said, sitting beside her.

“You have his contact?” she asked.

“Whose?”  
“Rohan’s?”

“Yes, he gave his number.”

“Text him that he need not come tomorrow, and I’ll drop you at his home.”

“Really,” I asked with excitement.

“You first text that….”

“Sure. I’ll do it immediately.”

“Now you’ll receive a text from him saying that he’s not willing to see me at his house.”

“No way..he’s not like you…very grounded personality.”

“What should it do with personality? It’s a personal thing between us.”  
“message delivered. I bet he doesn’t reply like you said,” I saw him typing, and my mind is racing with what ifs.

“Wait…if he didn’t reply as you expected. Tomorrow, you should come inside home and talk to him, dropping me and telling him to take care of me.”

“That will never happen,” she neglected my words.

“Bet?”

“Okay, done,” she said, and I received a notification sounding like Rohan’s sir’s message.

I read out loud, “No problem. Tell Usha to take care. If she’s still sick, I have no problem coming to pick you up.”

“See, such a sweet person he is,” I said, rereading the text repeatedly.

“Fever?” she asked, puzzled.

“How can I tell him that you aren’t allowed? So I lied, saying you are sick.”

“Cheating. So bet cancelled and ask him to come pick you up tomorrow,” she said, walking from the room.

“It’s not fair,” I shouted.

“No more arguments, you’re leaving home tomorrow with him, that’s it. Discussion done.” She almost shouted.

“Okay!” I whispered uneasily, thinking how to message him immediately again, saying she was not coming. So I decided to text him in the morning to say that she had still not recovered from the fever.

# Usha: Chapter 8

## 6 months before graduation

## 1997.

“Don’t feel tensed,” I tried my best to pamper, keeping his head on my lap. It was the last day of placements in the first phase. On day one itself, I got placed. It’s Rohan’s 3rd interview, and hopefully, he cracks this.

“What should I say when they ask, ‘Why our company?’” he said, repeatedly looking at the same resume. “Everyone’s been asking the same.”

“Fake them like you are dying to get a job in their company. Mention a few facts about it, make them believe that the domain they were working on was very related to your study, and in between, say to someone that one day or someday you want to become like him” I gave him courage.

“Just believe in yourself. Everything goes well,” I patted him and pushed him into the placement cell room.

It’s been half an hour, which means Rohan was into the final round.

“Finally…I gave my best,” I heard his voice while talking to my friends who gave the same interview and were back.

“Congratulations…,” I was happy and almost jumping.

“Results are not out yet. Cool!” he grabbed me, putting me on his back, and we walked toward the canteen.

“You were not even confident about the previous ones. If your low self-esteem says that, then it implies that you gave your best. It’s yours, no doubt about it,” I confidently spoke, brushing his hair and kissing the possible ways I could.

“When will they announce the result,” I asked.

“If I am selected, I receive a company letter by this weekend.”

“They said mine will be coming by today…let’s see,” it’s been four days since I cracked the job at DE Shaw, the famous multinational company. Its branch was opened last year in Hyderabad, and we were their second batch, and mass recruitment was done.

“Two ice creams,” I asked the waiter, not getting down on his shoulders. I don’t know what people think about us. Initially, even I used to think cheaply when I saw couples around behave over-affectionately, like doing private things in public. And I understand lately that it’s not in their hands; it happens unknowingly. It’s natural to kiss him when I feel like kissing. Same with hugs. What’s stopping us from doing it? Their thoughts? Let them think. Here, his sweetness leaves me wanting to be closer to him. I don’t think of anyone’s thoughts.

“Not now…,” he pushed me down and told the canteen boy not to give ice creams. I pleaded and took from him.

We have a custom of eating ice creams until the half and exchanging them. Maybe he’s not in the mood to eat it. I still wonder why he doesn’t like ice creams. How can anyone be alive without eating them? They are absolute love.

“Eat mine too,” he walked away to our usual place behind the football grounds.

“Thanks,” I remarked with zero hesitation.

Every day, we talk for a while here. The beginning of our talk is a bit different; intense romance is involved. Now everything’s on the ground. He talks about his unpublished works, and I encourage him habitually. His book count now became four. The third one is a grand project with 56 chapters, which he took almost a year and a half to write. Yet unpublished.

“This job is essential for me. Who will wait for another two months till the second phase of placements starts? I’d peacefully focus on the writing once my job is assured.”

“Don’t worry, Rohan. You will land a good job,” I said, licking my favourite vanilla-flavoured ice cream. Whether to eat vanilla first or the chocolate-flavoured one is always a dilemma.

“How it feels being topped in studies, getting one of the high-paying jobs and commenting on others saying not to worry,” his sentences showed a slight shade of jealousy.

“It’s not like overnight I was this. It took me years. High-grade points and a few good projects helped me. You managed your interests and equally contributed to trying to study. You are great,” I said, not sounding proud of myself. He needs to hear this. He’s doing a great work.

“What’s the use? Where did it land me? Am I a writer or at least a job holder? Many got placed, but not me. All I have with me is my words and advice you people give. One day, you will also get tired of me.”

“Why are you talking like that?”

“Talking like what? The truths?”

“Let’s say you find a good-looking guy at your company who earns the same sum as you. Why would you choose me over him?” he asked one of the stupid questions.

“How often must I remind you that we’ll never have to search for reasons to walk away from each other? We fix things and have no other thoughts. There will be many who look good and rich. Commitment is the most important thing that we did years ago.”

“And why are you behaving strangely today, asking all brainless questions?” I sighed in frustration, clearly annoyed.

“Yes, brainless, jobless, untalented,” he murmured, turning his face away.

“Rohan…,” I pulled his hand, drawing him closer and reassuring him that he was all right. I stood, took him in my hands, and locked his gaze with mine.

“Things take time…who said you are not talented? I love every piece of your work. What are these successes and failures? My boy won at life on the day he decided to fight for his interests. I, Usha Chaganti, will be the wife of a great writer.”

“Patience is all we need,” I spoke slowly, kissing him on the forehead.

“Usha Kocherlakota,” he said, correcting while adding his surname. And that was the best moment of my life so far.

“Don’t ask me those foolish questions again” I hugged him.

“Sorry. I felt unconfident for a while.”

“I’ll always be by your side to cheer you up when needed,” I heartened him.

\*\*\*

“Why are you looking at me smiling,” I asked, seeing him turning over and over with the happiest face and a letter in his hand.

He handed me the letter, which I thought was a job offer, but it was not.

“Indialog Publications,” I nearly cried out in happiness.

“They asked me to send the whole book,” he responded cheerfully.

“Which one?” I asked for confirmation since he resends all his books, frequently changing the chapters.

“3rd one. ‘Madhuravani melodies’,” the book which has 52 chapters in it. A massive story about a girl named Madhuravani, her 2 boyfriends and her 2 fathers.

“Yeah. That is a unique story. The world will feel new. Perfect one,” I congratulated him.

“I guess they liked the story's synopsis coz they asked for my details. Maybe for the ‘About’ page for the author.”

“Cool. Things are on the right track. Even the company offer letter is supposed to arrive today, right?” I asked since it’s been five days since he’s been interviewed. I received mine days ago.

“Hopefully. Tomorrow, we will party if I get into the job. Make excuses that you tell your dad. Tomorrow, we stay at our home. Weekend, remember?” Dad has lately agreed that I stay at Rohan’s house all night. Because we belong to the same caste, Rohan’s father and my dad became friends. He trusts Rohan’s father, and sometimes, I hate it when my dad says to treat me like his daughter. That would make Rohan and me siblings, and I absolutely hate that.

\*\*\*

“Congratulations,” Rohan’s dad applauded him, opening the door.

“Hey, Usha,” he got excited since it’s been days. We performed our three-hug ritual.

“Got into J.A Electronics!” he patted Rohan’s back, and we hopped in a circle in excitement.

“Aww, party,” I yelled in happiness.

“Today shall we go out and eat something,” Rohan’s father offered a treat.

“No, you teach me to cook Biryani.”

“Not today, Usha, I’m tired. Some other day for sure.”

“Should I invite my parents too?” I asked, realising it was a weekend and they would be free.

“Why not?”

“Shwetha?” Rohan mumbled.

“I will go and bring her,” said Rohan, who leaned riding a bike a year ago. He’s doing many things on his own now.

“Leaving a lady alone at night doesn’t seem reasonable. Some other afternoon for lunch,” his words came out slow and heavy with regret.

“Shouldn’t I tell Mom that I got into a job? Please, dad,” requested Rohan.

“Yeah. I am inviting my parents too. It’s more like a family gathering,” I sparked something but don’t know what comes next.

With a clear expression of disinterest. “Could you pull triples on the bike?” he spoke, staring at his feet.

“Not hard,” Rohan cheered happily.

“The problem all comes when you set many expectations. Don’t be disappointed if your mother refuses to join us. Tell her that Usha’s parents are also being invited, and it’s the celebration of your achievements.”

“Dad, she won’t say anything. At least I’m sure Shwetha will join us,” speaking in a rush, he ran towards the bike.

“Then don’t. Either both or none,” Rohan’s father’s distant voice by then made no impact.

“Tell them to come to Naidu’s Kitchen.”

“Why always the same restaurant,” I asked, remembering many biryani boxes in their house that were used as spice holders.

“It’s exceptional. Observe Rohan's mother’s face; with much intensity, it glows when we go there,” his words made me wonder. Does he still love her?

Almost an hour later, Rohan succeeded in bringing both. My parents arrived twenty minutes before and were engaged in some talk on the common topic “CASTE”.

“Hi, Aunty,” I saw his mother for the first time. She got Rohan’s eyes and nose. I mean, he got hers. She’s cute, but maybe much more in her prime.

“Usha!” Shwetha greeted me with a warm hug. It’s been almost half a year since she graduated. She works for a startup in the same city.

My parents already know that they are separated and lead their own life, deciding to take co-parenting. So, all of us were more interested in how they welcomed each other. We three have been observing them and are curious about how they react.

They sat at the two corners with Rohan and Shwetha in between, and we shared the opposite seats. They hadn’t met each other’s eyes until now, and maybe they never would. Many times, I’ve asked what made them fight and go to divorce. Rohan’s answer is the same every time: he doesn’t know. He always says Uncle is so inexpressive and hides many things, which disappoints a girl. Up to this point, how much he earns is unknown to anyone. It’s an outstanding amount, but how much is it? He never reveals it. How would anyone feel safe when you are hiding too many? These are all my assumptions based on what Rohan said. Only God knows the truth; praying for them to be one wastes time since it’s too late and beyond repair.

All we ordered almost sounded the same since we don’t have many options for vegetarian food. Shwetha sat beside his mom, and Rohan sat near his dad; each pair decided to order different food. At least when it comes to placing an order, I expected them to talk and act normal. All observations and worries are because I would be part of their family one day. Happy if it is a complete family but not a broken family.

“Aunty, you and Rohan have many similarities. Same eyes,” I commented, breaking the silence before the food arrived.

Her broad smile didn’t reach her heart, an artificial one.

“What about me?” Shwetha blurted out, something irreverent.

Observing and trying hard to manage a fake smile, “Your dads”, I lied, not understanding exactly whose eyes she had.

“Rohan is my best friend! Uncle knows about it, and I like both a lot,” I said, holding eye contact with Rohan’s mom and observing her expressions.

“He guided me in cooking some dishes,” counting the numbers with my fingers “, both types of Upma’s, poha recipe, potato fried chips…and many more,” I continued.

Only I was the one speaking constantly. Maybe my parents are mature enough and know that talking less is the best thing to do.

“Mom cooks all these very well,” and finally, Rohan spoke and broke my anxiety. Uncle nodded slightly, signalling a yes.

“So, she taught you?” I voiced a thought that the world wasn’t ready for the answer.

“With practice, I mastered. But yeah, maybe the first ones she did,” I finally heard both complimenting each other.

“Aunty, who is your most favourite kid?” I asked her, fully aware it was a dumb question. And counter asking the same can’t be done because I was the only kid.

“Who was your favourite among both?” she pointed to my parents.

“I will not reveal, but I have an answer with me,” I behaved like a DE Shaw employee.

“Both are equal to me. Though he hates me,” she felt uneasy and sipped water from the table.

“Did I ever say to you that I hate you?” Rohan’s voice thickened with emotion as he addressed her.

“Sometimes you do,” Shwetha interrupted.

“So, all the dumb stuff I say for fun, you’ve been reporting it to Mom?”

“I thought you really hated her,” Rohan clenched his jaw tightly when hearing those words.

“I never hated you. Maybe sometimes I get angry, too, only because you left me. Why would I hate you? Don’t you remember me spending the whole night with you listening to those mythological tales you say? How many temples did we visit together?”

“Whatever. Let me have my meal peacefully,” he cut himself off in the middle of his rant.

It’s all my fault for bringing this up. Tomorrow, Rohan would kill me. Even my parents are giving a judgmental look for bringing this up.

The entire dinner was silent. No one said a word. My parent’s first impression of them was worse than worse.

In between, I maintained a smile while seeing Aunty. She smiled back. Maybe we were on good terms, but it affected them badly.

After dinner at the end, Rohan gave no sign that he would drop them at their home. And it’s almost late at night; it would be better if Shwetha and Aunty accompanied a man. I understood that would never happen. “Our house is on the same route. Shwetha knows very well,” I asked them to come along.

We booked a large auto and headed home. I know that a broken family sounds rough, but how bad can it be? Today, I got a taste of it.

# Rohan: Chapter 9

“I told you so! That is why I didn’t want them here,” said Dad as we returned home.

“Did she even congratulate you?” he’s fueling the flames.

“Shwetha did,” I replied and requested him to end the discussion here. My thoughts were stuck there on her false claims. Maybe I commented on her a few times, but I was never serious.

I still don’t understand what to call my parents. Deeply wised or immature. They never fought in front of us but got divided. My mom, who’s from a separated family, knows how the environment feels when parents scream and shout at each other. Marrying my dad unexpectedly happened, and in the first couple of years, they led a perfect life. Suddenly, they came to our room and opened up about the divorce. Coming from a broken family, all she learnt was not to fight in front of kids. Maybe broken parents have broken kids. Would having a proper conversation with Dad one more time destroy her? It won’t, but avoiding it left a deeper scar on us.

Maybe I’m biased, knowing she comes from the wrong family and the fault lies with her. I don’t know anything, and never did they open. One thing I can assure you is that I never hated Mom. It’s just like I don’t understand what happened between them, and I hate how it affected us.

“Don’t rush to sleep,” dad routine advice on the day we eat outside. He says it might hurt the stomach when eating more than adequate amounts.

“You think that hurts,” I tapped my stomach. “Then what about this,” I asked, pointing at my heart.

He was silent as usual. Tomorrow, he will give me a lecture. Dad was so mature, and I learned many things from him. If you ask why his silence is, he says, “You do when you mentally decide to attack. You will not be able to receive something, even if it’s true” So he waits for you to return to normal, and then you can take it. Maybe everyone didn’t understand his technique and blamed him, saying he quit and walked away.

“Sleep with me in my room today,” he offered to join him.

“Nightmares? All in my life once appeared on the day you walked into my room and asked our permission for divorce,” I spoke and walked toward my room, never intending to see his expression because I knew my words were too deep.

“Dad, please don’t bring tiffin from outside, trying to please me. I’m all okay,” He gets me my favourite puri the following day whenever I’ve had a dull night.

\*\*\*

“Sorry,” her usual morning smile turned into an apology.

“There’s nothing you could do about it. We are like that.”

“You still wish to have me in your life,” I poured out my deep thoughts.

“We will fix this,” she innocently said.

“I can assure you, that will never happen,” I’d do whatever it takes to restore them. But it won’t just admit it.

“So now what? Still want to be part of my family?” I continued.

“Whom will I stay with?” she pulled my hand and tried unnecessary romance. “With you, Rohan,” I wanted to say marriage is about families, not just you and me. Dad’s techniques were in my veins, and I decided to keep quiet, thinking that it would be when she’d be in a position of not listening to me.

“Let’s end this discussion here,” I withdrew my hand and returned to my desk.

Everyone congratulated me on my new job, but it wasn’t as fulfilling as I hoped. Deep down, unresolved thoughts still haunt me.

I chose to ignore Usha for a few days. The bad part of my relationship is giving reasons for all my decisions. Maybe not all, but definitely the ones that involve her. I felt like wanting a break, a real break from everything. Maybe I miss my mom.

“Usha, don’t contact me for a few days. I’ll be not coming to college,” I said, thinking of leaving it now.

“Why?” she asked the same predictable question.

“Everything feels scattered and out of place.”

“You said it’s beyond help,” she replied. Hearing her argue with me only makes my anger rise.

“Who is trying to fix them?”

“I want to live with my mom,” I spoke straight from the heart.

“Maybe for months. How about we share our year? Six months with dad and six with mom.”

“You serious?” she was curious about my sudden, unimaginable thought.

“Don’t know why I didn’t ask on the day they said about their divorce. Now I’m feeling bad” I held my head in my hands, barely holding back my tears.

“They walked up to us and talked about their divorce. Mom decided that Shwetha would stay with her while I would be with Dad” I nearly moved closer to her, rested in her arms, and was about to cry. “And I didn’t ask why?” saying that I broke into tears.

“Everything is their ultimate decision, huh? Don’t I have feelings? Don't I want to be with Mom? Don't I miss her?"

“As a girl, I think Shwetha needs women to discuss a few girl things. That’s why Aunty chose her over you,” she opened up about something she thought I didn’t know, but I already did.

“Okay, got it.”

“You know, right?” she gently ran her hand through my hair, tracing slow circles.

“Ice cream chocolate week?” I smiled, recalling her cravings from those days. And she laughed back.

“Understood. She can take care of herself now?”

“No worries. Not a big deal, but sometimes you feel like discussing,” she said, repeatedly nodding.

“She can talk to mom. All I wanted to do was to change our behaviour. They are still our parents, maybe not wife and husband.”

“Good decision” She set my tears aside and comforted me.

\*\*\*

“Please don’t say no, Dad. Even if you say, I won’t listen to you. She’s my mom, and I have every right to spend time with her,” I spoke while packing my bags like it was an extended vacation.

“Shwetha will come a few days later; we will spend three days together. I decided to take a leave for college.”

“What? Going for a vacation or something?” Dad asked.

“We have years of things to talk about. Wouldn't that take at least three days?” I started to go to her house and search for the bike keys. It’s with him.

“Keys?”

“Take care,” he handed me the bike keys with the same usual smile and silence he maintained.

“Again, when will you come?” he asked.

“Maybe in June, after spending six months,” I said firmly, ignoring his shocking expressions.

“January to June, with Mom and the rest of the year, I would be with you.”

“Bye, Dad,” my decision would either change my life for the better or completely ruin it; there’s no in-between.

\*\*\*

“See who came,” Shwetha shouted since it was a sudden visit.

Mom stood by the door, her face blank and said, “Any other party? Reached new heights, huh?”

“MOM,” I hugged her tightly, letting it say what I couldn’t. With uncertainty, she embraced me tighter. Mother’s love is like that.

“Any objections if I say I want to stay with you?” I was direct.

“You both fought?” she asked, her teary eyes locked onto mine.

“No, it’s just that I wanted to spend time with you.”

“You realised that after all these years?” her question didn’t have an answer with me.

“Six months with you and six months with Dad,” I said, looking at Shwetha and trying to tease her, gesturing that Mom is mine for now.

“When I am here, you will be with Dad,” I told Shwetha, motioning for her to join the hug.

“Many times, I wanted to ask Mom about Dad and spend quality time with him,” she also confessed what she had kept hidden.

“Don't you think we feel the same? But this is how it turned out. From now on, you won’t have to suffer because of us. You are free to be wherever you want," Mom said with deep emotion.

“I said to Dad that she would be coming the day after tomorrow. We spent three days together, and I have much to say.”

Mom welcomed me inside. It was a rented house near the city’s outskirts. Comfort here is not like Dad’s house. Food is beneficial and delicious.

“What about your book? Any updates?” Shwetha asked.

“Not yet. I couriered them the whole manuscript. Hopefully, within two weeks, they will reply to me with something,” I replied, shocked to see that Mom’s expression was regular.

“You know that I’m into writing?” I asked her.

“I read one of your books, too.”

“Which one?”

“The one you wrote about all the behavioural changes”

Long ago, I handed the ’50 Changes She Brought in Me’ book to Shwetha, saying it was the primary reason for Usha and me falling in love. Maybe at that time, she introduced the book to Mom.

“Cool. How did you feel?” I eagerly asked her.

“Good one. Many things Shwetha explained to me. Our day’s love was entirely different. I barely ever spoke to men. Beginning from my childhood, maybe your dad was the fifth or sixth person I spoke to because I didn’t have any brothers either."

“Interesting!”

“Yours is love marriage?” Despite her explanation about the interaction with men, I still behaved stupidly when asked this.

“I never believed in the concept of marriage.”

“The problem is with you or the concept of marriage? What do you think?”

"It's an individual choice. I was never fully prepared and made a wrong decision, half knowingly," she wasn’t fully prepared for the conversation.

“What did you feel while reading the book I wrote? Ours, is it a good match?”

“As I said, it’s up to you whether you are mentally prepared to take this. I was not, so it didn’t work, and I am facing the consequences,” she managed a weak smile.

“Should I invite her for dinner? You will learn about her” The words just came out, unfiltered.

“We three used to do like that. If you allow only,” I stressed in the last part of the sentence.

“Why not? Always welcome”

Now it’s time for me to make Mom and Usha friends.

“Should I invite her tomorrow?”

“Works. I don’t have any plans,” said Mom, and my leave for college has changed. I decided to go back again tomorrow. It felt like things, to an extent, got sorted.

\*\*\*

“You said you wouldn’t come to college,” Usha’s first words.

“Yesterday, I shifted to my mom’s place” saying it, I smiled. “She invited you to her home”, I added with an extra smile.

“That’s great! How about today?”

“Thinking the same. Mom said that she was free too” My happiness knew no limits.

“After college, we’ll head home together then.”

\*\*\*

“Hi, Shwetha.” Their bond is beyond formalities, and introductions are unnecessary. We walked in side by side.

“Usha”, I introduced her properly to Mom since their last interaction was not good.

“Namaste, Aunty” She bent down to touch Mom’s feet for blessings. And as usual, Mom didn’t let her completely bend down and touch her feet.

We four talked for hours. Photos of my childhood and many memories became the discussion topics. Hours passed in the blink of an eye.

“Tell Dad you will be with us tonight,” I handed our home landline to Usha.

“Hopefully, he won’t say to treat you like my mother,” both laughed at the same relational joke that uncle always uses.

Mom asked, looking at both of us, “So you both plan to marry?”

“Only if you approve”, I spoke with certainty, with no room for breaking my promise.

“What difference does my approval make?” she asked as if she was nothing to me.

“Don’t be silly. You are my mother, and this marriage should be under your guidance.”

“How did Dad respond?” she asked.

“He agreed and mentioned that he wouldn’t be a trouble, and it’s all on my family,” Usha blurted out, her voice carrying a mix of happiness and sadness.

“To be open, we belong to the same caste, aunty. That’s not a problem,” she took a sudden pause.

“Caste? For me, that was never an issue. Anyways, what’s the fuss about then?” mom hesitated.

“If you and Uncle aren’t together at the wedding, it will look bad in front of all my attending relatives.” Usha was exceptionally bold.

“If this is some sort of plan trying to make us one, trust me, it won’t work” Mom was about to stand up and leave.

“No, Aunty, not like that. Just ensure that you both make the wedding grand together, and after that, we will respect your decision to separate.” I froze for a moment, unable to process what she just said. It was never our plan.

“Yeah, you are correct, Usha. I promise we won’t let your reputation suffer in front of your relatives,” and I was more shocked when Mom agreed to the proposal.

“So we are going to marry Rohan” She hugged me tightly, but I remained frozen in shock.

# Saran: Chapter 10

## Present Day,

## 2024.

“Sir, she’s still suffering from fever and unable to come. So I decided to come alone and will be by 2 o’clock,” I texted with guilt.

“Tell her to take care. I’ll be at yesterday’s drop location by noon,” he texted back immediately.

“Usha,” I shouted, searching everywhere.

“Five minutes”, she was freshening up.

“Rohan requested me to take care of you”, I shouted from outside the restroom.

“What are you talking about?”

“Since you rudely, unfairly manipulated and disagreed to drop me, I lied that you are still sick.”

“So?” there wasn’t a flicker of regret in her voice.

“So? I don’t know, maybe you are misunderstanding him,” I said, crossing all the limits.

She opened the door, and with sarcasm, she spoke, “Thanks, now leave. I need to get dressed” She threw me out of the room.

“I made Puri as breakfast. Have them. They are on the dining table,” she told me to freshen up and eat breakfast. Puri is my favourite dish.

“Bye. See you on Saturday,” Usha said, starting to go to the office.

“Bye”

\*\*\*

“Hi”, I entered the second expensive car, a new one.

“Slept well?” Rohan Sir asked. For me, everything is overwhelming. Why would he care about my sleep? Maybe I should start acting normal. He’s more like a friend now.

“Can I ask you something?” I don’t know what made me ask this. I was so curious about the relationship between Rohan and Usha, and this bloody traffic made me do it.

“What?”

“How was Usha related to you?” I asked and looked away.

“She’s my ex-wife.” The answer is far from expected. I didn’t know that Rohan sir was married. No article said that. I thought he was single and heartbroken.

“Serious?” I asked just for confirmation. But why would a celebrity lie on these sensitive topics?

“Didn’t she tell you?”

“She always seemed uneasy when the conversation turned to you.” I felt stuck between both sides in their conflict.

“Oh, do you think I’m comfortable right now?” he stared straight into my eyes.

“Sorry, Sir, it’s my bad asking you about this. I didn’t know and will never repeat this” My apology was genuine.

“What can you do about it? I thought you knew before. Forget it here itself.”

“Maybe Usha wouldn’t be happy if it came out. I’m her best friend, yet she never mentioned anything to me,” I replied, unable to recall a moment where she acknowledged being Rohan’s wife.

“That is why I’m saying to act as if you don’t know anything” Rohan regretted sharing more than he should have.

“Okay, Sir”

“You call her Usha?” he abruptly changed the subject.

“I enjoy addressing people by their names, regardless of age.”

“Then you can call me Rohan” Most awaited permission has been granted. I’m tired of calling as sir. However, respect towards him is at its peak.

“Rohan, if you allow me, I’d like to spend my weekend with Usha,” I thought I would ask later, but now everything feels positive. We both were in a good mood.

“No worries. And remember the promise? You didn’t come across anything surprising today," he repeatedly stressed to ensure I would not behave abnormally in front of Usha.

We entered Rohan’s house with traditional customs several pooja’s with Hindu purohits. My forehead is filled with several tilaks. Rohan is deeply immersed in devotion to God.

He asked me to rest, and at 4 PM, he mentioned taking me to a film shoot where he was the producer. Now I can meet many actors and working cast. It’s all unreal. Why am I being blessed with so much?

I was not feeling sleepy, so I went to Rohan’s room. The big house now feels like mine. He owns half of the top floor, and the rest is mine.

“Can’t sleep?” asked Rohan, who was reading a book.

“What did I do today? Sitting in expensive cars and talking shit? I’m not tired,” I answered while sitting beside him on a double cot bed.

“Want to talk about something?” he kept the book aside and offered his time.

“What exactly is the procedure you follow? Could you please explain this idea of ‘A letter to Rohan’, how it started and all”

“Well, I love writing letters. As you know, I’m a previous generation one, and these smartphones did not evolve by then. We used to have STD booths, and most of the communication was done through these letters. So, I am fond of expressing myself through letters. And no one can call me and explain their situation through a phone call. I’m busy. All they can do is mail me, which is the same as writing a letter. But for me, reading letters and touching the handwritten old paper sounds crazy. So, I prefer letters” his explanation convinced me why he chose letters, but the question of why is unanswered.

“Do you think people happily get their problems solved after hanging with you for months?” I asked my second typical interview question.

“What made you believe in this?” he shot back with a question.

“People who were out with happy smiles. Those felt genuine, and the confidence they carried as if their life got sort.”

With a smile, he answered, “I don’t know the magic behind it. Maybe you should answer at the end.”

“What if you fail to make my life meaningful or nothing much progressive? Remember we have two months?” a tiny fraction of my negative thoughts pushed me to ask that.

“Maybe I would. But I’m sure you get partial answers” his confidence is vast.

“And you didn’t answer the reason behind starting this?” I reminded the sole purpose this discussion.

“I’m a writer in the beginning. Obviously, I need stories. My life didn’t feel exciting after I got separated from Usha. Besides, I always felt like needing someone at the end of the day to update my day and discuss something new. So I started this. I don’t know why people finally get their difficulties solved and leave me. One thing is for sure: I never leave them. I still am in touch with every person I’ve been in this letter’s journey.”

“So you do business out of their life tale?” Usha’s negative thought process is the reason behind this question.

“A pessimistic mind interprets it like that. Why can’t someone see those happy people out there who benefitted?” I was scared listening to the word pessimistic.

“Sorry…I didn’t mean that.” guilt was written all over my face.

“But just making a story out of their life solves problems? My genuine doubt.”

“We often don’t have time to analyse what we are doing. Telling someone from scratch and discussing things in depth will find many solutions. My guidance and my experience will also be added. We sort things out together, and I always help them. Sometimes, we need a correct companion. Maybe that’s the secret.”

“Hearing all this, I’m feeling a little confident. For me, finding Sudha is the pillar of strength. Help me in doing that.” I almost lay next to him, holding his hand out of emotion.

I observed Rohan’s and Usha’s marriage photo hanging in the corner of the room. “Lovely,” I complimented, staring at it for a few minutes. Both faces had no change from then to today.

“Aww, thanks!” his blush was transparent, seeing his rosy cheeks.

“Saran, you need to know many things. I am sure you will be stunned after hearing those,” he interrupted me while I was scanning all the photos in the room.

“About What? Don’t tell me you chose me only because you thought I was related to Usha,” I applied all my smartness and, flashing a smirk, I remarked, “I know it’s true.”

“And what about the relationship you think you have with Usha?” he swiftly asked, brushing off my attitude.

“Friends! We met when I gave my college music competition here.”

“Accidents don’t happen in life. Everything is properly destined,” for once, he appeared as a life philosopher.

“Yes, I agree. God’s plan made us friends. So what?”

“Only friends? You are sure?” he brought up an irreverent doubt that made no sense.

“Ughh…more than friends. I’m very grateful for what she’s. Come on, who allows someone to stay with them? She’s a real gem” My gratitude was sincere, and my appreciation was heartfelt.

“Let’s leave this topic here. Ask Usha why she is favouring you unimaginably.”

“You still hate her?” I asked, expecting an honest answer, confused about his feelings towards her. He requests her to take care when she’s sick and now doubts her for the care she’s been giving to me.

“Hate? Me? Why are you talking like that?” he was momentarily puzzled by my statement.

“You cannot digest the fact that she’s being nice to me,” I clarified my thoughts.

“Oh, you got me the wrong way. All I wanted to prove is that she’s related to you.”

“In what way?”

“Maybe you should ask her” he triggered something, and I wasn’t sure what insights it would bring.

“It’s almost 4 PM. Let’s go for the film shoot. Your brain has many thoughts in it. Let us distract them for a while,” I abruptly cut the talk and took him from the room.

Today I met a few film stars. Everyone there knew about Rohan well, and no one was surprised to see me. He brings different people in a while who are part of the letter’s journey, and this time, it was me.

He told me to meet a few knowledgeable, experienced old people. He believes that we don’t need a specific topic; just going in a flow and sitting with them initiates some random conversation, and we get enlightened by their great experiences. Great people have great stories.

We were there for almost four hours today at the film shoot, and I talked to three people. One spoke about the struggle behind his first film, and the other about their unnecessary luxuries now and emphasised that they missed being middle class.

“How did you feel?” asked Rohan while heading back home.

“It was one of my best days. Thanks,” emotion swelled within me.

“Why, thanks? You literally get many of these experiences. ‘A letter to Rohan’ package is the best.”

“Slowly getting the magic behind it” I looked at him with deep appreciation and heartfelt admiration, and I could tell he felt it.

It’s been three days since I was here. The first day, I was at a film shoot. The second day was usual, and I started to journal my story. The whole day, I was at home writing my life tale. And at the end of the day, I discussed all I had written with Rohan. He told me to do that when he was not at home.

I updated my day with Usha, too. But I didn’t talk about Rohan’s bold claims about her. I prefer speaking in person this weekend. What if she says she is my aunt or something? Like Sudha’s sister? I have also been observing many face similarities lately. Can’t wait to talk about this!

It was almost noon, yet I didn’t wake up. Breakfast for me is my choice. While freshening up, I needed to tell the chef what today’s menu was, and he prepared it before I bathed. In a way, I’m too enjoying my comforts within these two days, which are my whole life’s comforts.

“Puri,” I said, rushing to the restroom and seeing the time.

“Yesterday also you ate the same. Try something different,” the main chef’s words surprised me. It’s almost afternoon. At this time, If I say to prepare breakfast for Sudha, she either kicks me out of the house or prepares lunch. But I am being pampered, and they request a challenging dish.

“No, no, same puri, but try making a different curry” I framed my words as a request, not a command.

“Okay, saran!”

While eating, I read my today’s tasks. One asked me to write about the best moment in my life, and the other about my few problematic phases and how I overcame them.

My recent days were the best. Not the very these days, me enjoying comforts, but also those days with Usha. Her house is also something that I genuinely feel like my home. So, I decided to include the past two weeks as unforgettable days of my life.

And coming to the bad part, waking up and not finding Sudha is truly a nightmare. How did I overcome it? It’s still in process. I’ve come across miles only to find some solution. So, it has not been overcome yet. And the other one is me proposing to my college crush. It’s my very first year in college. I decided to be bold, thinking everyone here is so jovial and takes it casual. I walked straight to a girl and complimented her, saying she was so cute. It didn’t end. Also, I asked whether she was interested in a relationship with me. She was calm, and in the meantime, I asked her, “How come you still been single?” That was my last proper interaction with a girl. From then to today, I ignored her and didn’t glance even once. Later, I arranged an adequate closure and requested Suhana, Madhav’s girlfriend, to talk to my crush and clear the mess.

I decided to write about these. While talking to Rohan, my expression will go beyond these written words.

\*\*\*

Every day, my days had some fascinating to-dos. Also, Rohan shares his stories with me. The same questions he answers. The day before yesterday, while the question was about the destructive phase, he mentioned it was the decision to separate from Usha despite the thought that she was the perfect one for his life. What seemed like a love marriage ended up being a lie.

It was Saturday, and Rohan told me he would drop me at Usha’s home. Precisely one street beside Usha’s house.

“Shall we?” he called out, waiting near the car.

“Coming” we made our way to my second home.

# Usha: Chapter 11

## After 2 years in a job,

## 2000.

It’s been two years since I’ve worked in D E Shaw company. Our branch in the country got good recognition, and the MNC in India plans to extend and get my salary hike. I made many friends here and got accustomed to the environment. So, expanding my placement agreement and continuing in the same company is wise.

The phone rang while I was working, and the manager gave me a cold glance.

“How many times have I told you to put in silence?” My costly Nokia phone, which I bought recently, was the only thing my manager scolded me about. I’m too good at work, yet this is where he finds a reason to scold me.

“Sorry,” I went to the restroom with my phone.

“I’ll be late today”, he hung up after just saying that.

From last year, we started to live together more. The actual living, I mean we share a flat. Mom and Dad don’t know about this. Or they may partially know. All I said was that I had taken an apartment near the company, which was half true. The scarier truth is that I live with Rohan. Since his company is also nearer to mine, we shared a flat. For a year, I have been leading a healthy life. Physically and mentally.

It's almost surreal. It’s more like we are a married couple. Sometimes, he brings flowers and decorates our bed. Our best decision was to buy a sofa, and god knows how many movies we watched together the whole night and cuddled each other, staying on the sofa till morning. Life with him feels like a featherweight struggle. Now, he’s a published author. Three books written by him are in the market and are well-known. Two of them were ruling the fiction genre. I often advised him to quit the job and switch to a full-time writer. But he never listened to me. He believes that when all focus is on a single task, it can lead to disappointing results, as our heavy expectations grow solely around it, leaving no room for flexibility. He always advises me to parallelly perceive two or three big things in life, like he is doing the 9 to 5 job and a writer.

By 7 PM, Rohan and I will be home. He freshens up, and from 8 PM to 9 PM, he works on his next book while I cook food. By sharp 9, we gather at the dining table and discuss our day. I see myself as a responsible woman managing the household. On the other side, I earn my living by pursuing a career. Life was busy, meaning it was good.

Waiting for him is the other best thing I enjoy doing. The whole day is worth it only when I discuss it with him. Moments that feel nothing while doing gain some weight when I talk about it with him.

“I’m home”, I heard his voice, and my heart started to race with the same excitement even after a year.

“You said late, but this is beyond allowed” I tried acting seriously because it was almost 8. He was an hour late as usual, but my waiting felt like more than that.

“Extra work he allotted” he handed me his bag and landed a forehead kiss. The reason behind all my drama was justified. Forehead kisses are the best to show affection.

“I’m feeling hungry, do your work after we eat.” We decided to complete our dinner early today.

“Okay," he said, and I was confident that, in his priorities, I was second to none.

“Mom and Dad are asking about us?” I waited for the right moment and casually brought it up while we ate.

“They already knew that we wanted to get married, right?” many days later, he partially answered this.

“Of course. But a lot to be discussed. When, where and many…”

“I will talk to Mom and Dad. Happy?” he gave me a glance, which I didn’t understand. What does ‘happy’ mean? It was as if I was only concerned about this. “Now, will you let me eat peacefully?” It’s my bad to discuss these topics while eating.

“Peacefully? Do you have intentions of marriage?” his words nearly cracked my voice with emotion.

“Serious? How can you talk like that?” he attempted to justify himself.

“What does happy mean? You said we would be married after a year of work. It’s almost two years. You say something whenever I talk about this and end the discussion.”

“Accept that everything isn’t in our hands,” he started speaking philosophically.

“Then you tell what is in our hands. And you never explain the proper reason behind your postponement.”

He said nothing for ten minutes or until he completed his dinner.

“Every time you walk away, silent without solving anything.”

Asking, “Do you remember I have a sister?” he stood still.

“Of course. Shwetha,” I answered.

“First, she needs to get married. And no one is coming forward because of my divorced parents,” he revealed a bitter truth. “If possible, find a match for her, and on the same occasion, I’ll marry you too,” he concluded.

“You could have told me this before. I didn’t realise this was the issue. Sorry,” I made an apology.

“When did I consider you? I know what to do and when to. Go do your work and rest.”

“Oh, you didn’t consider me at all? Who do you run to ask for all your book reviews? Are those compliments fake about the taste of the food I make? Who are the ones paying house rent, groceries, and all other household expenses? Do my work? When did we stop caring for each other and focus only on ourselves?” I know many words he said are not meant, definitely not from the heart, somewhere from the mind’s junkyard.

“Sorry, Usha” he looked straight into my eyes, and they silently pleaded for forgiveness.

Since I’m in a good mood, everything has been solved. What if I was frustrated, and we ended up fighting and saying mean things to each other? This doubt always haunts me. Five years of relationship, and I sometimes still get hurt because of his inappropriate word usage.

“Please don’t repeat this. Think before you speak. At least with me.”

“You are correct. I don’t plan to do anything before informing you. And about Shwetha’s marriage, I always wanted to discuss it with you, but it’s my problem, and I thought not to burden you.”

“Yours? Rohan, we are a family. I will tell Mom and Dad to look for matches to Shwetha. Don’t worry,” I tried to ease his burden.

“Everything could have been fine if my parents were proper. Many times, I felt that I didn’t deserve you. You are too good, and I am worse. I mean my background,” he began to overanalyse.

“Who cares for a background? I wake up, live, and die with you. You wrote a book on me, Rohan. Remember? I feel glad that you are in my life. Love you.” I wrapped my arms around him. He was such a tall figure, yet it felt like hugging a child.

I decided to do something for Shwetha, not only because it became mandated for our marriage but also because she’s a very good friend and the fact that I know her very well. I can do two things: one, say to my office colleagues and the second, seek help from my parents.

\*\*\*

“I wanted to talk about something”, as usual, not only my work-related problems I’d share with him, but also personal ones. Vishnu, my thick and thin when it comes to office hours.

“Don’t ask for an extension for the deadline” My typical request was not the one I’m here for.

“No, No Vishnu…family-related”

“You know that Rohan has a sister, and I want you to help me find a bridegroom for her.” There is no need for elaborate explanations. He knew our love story, and I know his past stories. Maybe the only thing he’s unaware of is that Rohan had a sister.

“Rohan had a sister? All I knew was that his parents were separated. Where did her sister grow?” He displayed the same overly questioning behaviour as we do in our project assignments.

“Is this all needed?” I genuinely doubted whether he was helping me or making me feel worse.

“Just asking”

“Need a Brahmin who doesn’t care about the background story of her parents and takes care of Shwetha,” I clarified the actual requirements.

“Oh, Shwetha is her name…”

“So…why are you acting so strange?”

“Usha, My parents are also forcing me to marry someone. But I don’t want to marry some stranger, as shown by my parents. Spending quality time and understanding is compulsory for a relationship to be strong. If you don’t mind, maybe I feel it’s good to contact Shwetha, and we know about each other.”

I liked his boldness and honesty. Vishnu is a perfect guy and might be a good match for Shwetha. Both delusionals. Hopeless romantics. In the past, Vishnu was in a relationship for a year, and they broke because they were separated by distance. Now he’s okay and has finally moved on from her. Maybe the time for him to search for love has arrived.

“Lovely Vishnu. She also does a job here in Hyderabad. I’ll give her contact number, and you propose a date.” My excitement knew no limits.

“Date? Hey, it’s just like we know about each other, maybe through a few phone calls first.”

“Why Call when you have a chance to visit her?”

“Okay. You are sure that she won’t feel my request is overly direct. Please try to manage and play safe.”

“I will take care. Be ready for your date,” I couldn’t wait to share this with Rohan. Also, I decided to text Shwetha about this and send Vishnu’s photo. Definitely, she’s going to like him. Who can resist tall white guys?

It’s been half an hour, and I received an email from Shwetha replying, “How about tonight?”

Just yesterday, life felt like a mess, and now, unexpectedly, the answers are here. If a single day can turn things around, what makes someone believe there is no way other than ending life?

If Shwetha and Vishnu become a good pair and decide to marry, then I would be the happiest person on earth. Soon, Rohan and I get married and lead a happier life.

\*\*\*

“How was your last night?” I asked Vishnu, whose face looked like he hadn’t slept the previous night.

“We spoke till the morning roaming in the streets.”

“I thought I would take leave today, but I’ve work to do. I don’t have a choice,” said Vishnu with a drowsy face hinting he might faint within an hour.

“I will help. You rest” My work was completed prior, and I decided to help him. It’s not the time to ask about the detailed scenes from last night. He’s in no position to explain. Later, I ask.

Though we work in different sectors, all our work is interrelated. Mostly, my following piece or the prequel the others would be doing. So I understood Vishnu’s work, which was mostly done, and I helped fix a few and finished it. The manager wouldn’t say a word to sleeping employees. He remembers that on the day of the deadline and points out everything all at once if it is not completed.

“Lunch?” I lightly shook him from sleep.

“I’m not feeling hungry. You carry on,” My plan to extract all the information while eating has successfully failed.

He woke just before an hour before office hours ended. He submitted the work and left, saying they decided to meet tonight, too. People are faster than expected.

\*\*\*

“At least today you’d like to open up about something?” I asked Visnhu, as it’s been days since he replied. The last two days were weekends, and god knows how many days they roamed all the streets of Hyderabad.

“All good. Four nights of talking, and there’s nothing bad about her. I mean, she’s interested. Even I am. Isn’t that enough to start a relationship?”

“That’s great. So straight okay from both?”

“Maybe…I’ve invited her for dinner with my parents. If they react positively, we can proceed further.”

“So we are going to be relatives, Vishnu” I hugged him excitedly.

I asked Rohan for his opinion on this, and he has had no issues since he knew Vishnu. I also talked to Uncle and Aunty, and they are positive. All we need is acceptance from their family. Since he’s the only son, hopefully, their parents won’t deny him.

“Mom asked Shwetha’s birth time, day and all for astrological matching,” Vishnu’s first words made my day.

“Really?” I asked, struggling to believe it.

“I told you yesterday, right? My parents liked her. Who doesn’t? She’s like that.” Now I am in a situation where I need to know about my old friend.

“Haha. See, I said yours is a good match.”

“Thank you for leading me to my soulmate” he blushed. White face with pink cheeks, a good combination.

“That’s a bit much,” we shared a laugh at his exaggerated words.

Vishnu’s parents found nothing wrong in Shwetha’s horoscope. They correctly matched, and all was good. But we can’t just marry whenever we feel like marrying. An appropriate time, date, and all of these are far from today. And four of us decided to wait till the day arrived.

# Rohan: Chapter 12

After three months of long waiting, the wedding is now only three days away. Beautiful Usha is a lot more beautiful nowadays. Just last week, Vishnu and Shwetha got married. We requested all our relatives to stay for one week, and all arrangements demanded three years of our job savings. Implemented the ‘One life, one marriage’ rule. However, the marriage has crossed many limits. No one in our family expected that both my sister and I would choose someone and marry them. People who work in the corporate world are habituated to love marriage, but how can I explain this to my old uncles? Some of them commented that a love marriage for our family would be great since the arranged marriage of our parents led to an unexpected parting. Maybe it’s all about the partner, whether love or arranged marriage, if she is good, then the family is blessed. My good girl there, Usha, in a yellow saree. After six years of relationship, we are finally getting married. God has been fair this time.

“Rohan, where is Subbu mama?” For days, my job has been this: searching for my relatives.

“I don’t know. Fifteen minutes back, he was here.”

Seeing around, she kissed me since no one was in the room. All this romance is not new, in any case. Traditional love marriage includes no sex before marriage. But god knows how many times we made love. Until the fiftieth time, I tried counting, but then I understood it would not work like that. All our memories are of the rented flat we rented near our company. Our first home for real.

“Dad”, I tried to scare her.

“Where?” she shook. Innocent, she doesn’t know it’s beyond her strict parents’ actions. We will get married soon, and who cares if we kiss?

And yes, I kissed her, applying the theory I had explained. But not like her on cheeks, though. Mine are real, only on lips.

She pushed me aside and resumed her search for Mama.

Marriages are fun if you only see the good part around them. The rest includes people gossiping about unnecessary discussions, not getting satisfied with anything, complaining about everything and likely many. I want no part of this. I’d walk away, but not if it meant losing her.

Just trying to absorb the good part of the wedding. Maybe meeting old relatives, flexing my author career, job, salary, my love story…

My love marriage is not as expected, and it is never like in the movies. No one here is chasing one another or fighting. Everything is peace. All thanks to Usha’s parents for understanding their daughter. Uncle works as an army officer. And Aunty is a housewife. Srinivas and Sudha are a lovely, inspiring couple.

“Amma is calling you,” a distant relative, a small kid, screamed beyond his maximum voice, for children attending an occasion feel like Disneyland.

“What happened?” I asked Mom, who was tired of acting nice to Dad. It’s been almost a week, and they both are doing their best to act like a couple.

“Did the jewellery shop people deliver it? Go and ask them to make it fast and deliver by tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I should now go to the shop, an engaged, busy soul I am.

“Where have you been?” shouted my mother, seeing me around after an hour.

“You sent me to the shop”, I reminded, but it was useless.

“I told you to go immediately?” Her face was hesitant because I pointed her out.

“Go, everyone’s there searching for you. Purohit has come. There’s something ritual to do.”

“Okay. Going,” This time, the irritation was real. How can the same person be everywhere? I’m not an omnipresent superhero. Maybe ceremonies are like that.

“Where’d you vanish off to for every small interval?” the same question everywhere.

“Restroom”, I smiled, fake.

The wedding is beautifully organised. Many rituals are new to me, and I didn’t see them anywhere. Our brahmins are like that; they know exactly how to celebrate a ceremony.

And in two more days, we’re registered as a married couple.

\*\*\*

I understood how they seed love between two strangers in an arranged marriage. There is this staring into your eyes for hours, and elders around you talk about random things that make you laugh. So basically, you carry a smile on your face and look into her eyes for hours. She does the same. And exactly this is where you feel that you’re marrying a pretty woman. It’s all manipulation.

Today, her beauty bloomed even brighter. Yes, I am marrying the prettiest woman with the world’s best smile.

Save the date: 2nd of May, when our love life became more responsible. So it’s like we are going to raise babies together? Oh my god, excited!

“Om Eṣa vadhūḥ tava saṃmānāya varaḥ”

And that mantra meant that the bride is offered to you for acceptance, O groom.

Accepted.

“Saptapadi bhava sa mama”

This means that with seven steps, you have become mine.

Yes, you are already mine.

All mantras are soothing to my ears. One life, one marriage and only one time hearing all this. Today is one of my memorable days.

You may think it wouldn’t be exciting tonight since I spent many nights with her. No, it’s not like that. The way she looks in that saree and with all the ornaments. In fact, today, I feel more anxious.

And all the adult jokes, especially on this topic-specific “First Night”, are about to start.

I know everything is exaggerated. Spending decent quality time is what it means. Previously, marriages were done to complete strangers, so this is an opportunity for each to get to know the other. Since our marriage is a love marriage, there is no point in what our ancestors' purpose was.

“You look gorgeous”, I half-spoke, and I can write a book about her beauty in today’s saree.

“Thanks”, she moved closer, almost melting into me.

“Slow, huh? I’ll be here. You’ll be here. Nothing new. Slow, please” I acted as if I was not excited.

“Okay, shall we unpack the gifts?” My hints got wasted.

“Why not?” I said, and we started to unpack our presentations.

I don’t get why a few write their names on the gifts. Does it mean that whenever I see that gift, I should remember the giver? So here Raghav uncle gave a costly watch, I should remember it and give him a costly presentation when it’s my turn. This is what we are supposed to get when they write the names on their presentations.

“Hey, see this”, Usha excitedly showed a gift from her side relatives. Because the surname is clearly visible. “Chaanganti Vaari Bahumati” And this is the rest of India who are fond of surnames and caste.

“Oh, Cute”, my mind blew seeing a kid’s toy. That’s an indirect hint from elders saying ‘bless with children soon’

“See how cute it is”, she said, and their purpose worked. Now she talks about having children, if I’m not wrong.

“If not all the money spent on marriage, we would plan for children now”, said Usha. See, I know her, six years of relationship it is.

“Planning? God knows how many children we didn’t allow to come into this world,” I chuckled at my dark humour.

“Six months and then we’re having kids”, she firmly said, kissing my forehead, handing the toy gift to me. I agree, having kids is what defines a marriage, especially for some new attachment named “Father”

“Six months enough, you think?”

“Enough is enough. If we keep on thinking about the right amount which is sufficient, we will never have kids,” Usha spitting facts.

“True”, I couldn’t agree more. While growing, we’ll simultaneously make money, and we are confident that we have more than enough to afford all the needed expenses for a family of three.

“Boy or girl?”

“If god let me decide to choose, I’d say girl”, I said, smiling. The real smile that we get when we think of having kids.

“Expected answer,” she knew me.

“Gayatri, her name is”, I added.

“That’s it. Very short, no?” Generally, both of our families have long names. So I’m vexed with those and decided not to.

“Sree Gayatri, maybe”

“Cute”, she said, knowing the reason behind it.

“I thought you’d plan for five and have all the names of goddess Gayatri”, she sparked an idea, but I know it’s very difficult for a single childbirth, forget five.

“If you can”, I hugged her, hinting to close the gift mess so that we could spend quality time.

“Promise me you’ll give the best for all five without any compromises, then I’m ready”, she disclosed the main reason.

My dream is to have five children, and their names must be Gayatri, Savitri, Saraswati, Chandarshi, and Sreya. All forms of lord Gayatri, because I devote to her lot. I can still achieve it. I will have two, and Shwetha will have three children, so technically, all five are my children. I know the probability of this occurrence is too low, having all girls. But let’s hope for it.

“What are you thinking?” she interrupted my family tree, and I understood that the time for us to make love ritually had arrived.

“Nothing”, I said, landing my lips on hers.

We tried our best to justify the name “First Night”. Making love is the best part of love. I can’t draw a line between lust and love. Both are the same, nothing but passion. Love is a passion for showing affection to care. On the other hand, lust is a passion for having sex. Love is a broad spectrum, and it has lust in it when it’s between someone you really want to be with. I wrote a complex character in one of my books that deals with this confusion. And none of the people liked that book, including Usha.

“Wake up, we’re already late” The flash of the last night was in front of me.

“Time?” she asked with her sleepy voice. These are the second-best vocals in the world after K.S. Chitra’s.

“7:30” half wall occupied, the clock said it.

“Wake me up once you’re done freshening up”, it was out of our rules. Every time she takes a bath first, so that she can get ready for more than half an hour, while I take my bath, and together we go to our offices.

“First joke after our marriage. Funny,” I threw her in the bathroom.

“Should I go?” she prolonged, her voice barely audible from the bathroom.

“No need if you quit the job”

“I earn more than you”, this was audible, though I am in the corner of the room. Sometimes I really don’t understand why people take it seriously when my intention was a joke about it. I was silent. Maybe she was joking, too.

“Never ever say that again”, I acted serious. After a long fifteen-minute debate, I decided to softly warn her. If the words she said are accepted, then I’m scared that I would become habituated to those kinds of verbal disrespect.

“Say what?” She ignored me, searching her closet of fifty pairs of clothes.

“I decided to be in that job since it’s flexible, so that I can manage my writing career too”

“What are you talking about, Rohan?” I knew this topic was out of the blue, and she never expected this to come.

“That you are a businesswoman”

“Oh, businesswoman? Okay. Remember, the truths are always harsh. I didn’t mean anything that you think when I said those”

“I don’t care about your intentions. All I remember is the ones you’ve said”

“You don’t care? All these years you didn’t care?”

“So all these years you were thinking like that?”

“Are you mad?” she ended this useless, baseless, unintentional heat discussion. She walked out of the room.

What did it change after marriage? Is that I’m overly reacting? Everyone said to act like a grown-up, and these words would never be tolerated if I were to think like a grown-up. Imagine going to my parents and saying this: “I earn more than you”, and in the end adding “truths are harsh”. How did it feel? My parents would definitely scold me if I said that. Now I did the same. She deserves some punishment, and I decide to book a cab. Let her figure out how she goes to her office, the so-called businesswoman.

# Saran: Chapter 13

## Present Day,

## 2024.

“I’m home”, I shouted, searching all over for Usha.

“You didn’t wake up?” I kept shaking her awake.

“It’s 11 in the morning”, I directed her slowly opened eyes towards the clock.

“So what? It’s the Weekend. And yesterday there was a team party”

“Team party?”

“Yes, some new members joined the company, and we celebrated in a club”

“Oh, what are the activities they do in the club? I only saw them in movies,” I asked, curious to see many types of clubs I came across in movies and others’ experiences.

“We drink, we dance, that’s it”

“Drink? Girls, too?”

“What have we not done to drink?” she looked at me, her eyes were barely open, and her voice had that slow, husky drawl people get when they’re completely drunk.

“How much did you drink?”

“Just a little”, she almost fell from the bed. Shouted like a child.

“Headache!!” She was crying like a baby on the floor.

“So don’t drink from next time, then. No drink, no headache”

“Stop lecturing like the 40s. Today we’re going to party. Now go and bring me the white bottle which you see in the fridge,” I almost hurried towards the kitchen, seeing her suffering. I knew that drinking alcohol makes one sick, but I didn’t realise that sick was of this kind.

“What is this?” I asked her, handing over the bottle.

“Some fruit juice, which helps to digest better”

“But you didn’t brush your teeth”, and you know I don’t even talk before I brush my teeth.

“Everyone’s not like you, Saran”

“True though”, seeing this whole episode, I decided never to have alcohol. Maybe taking it might give a high. But what about the further consequences? The immediate ones are bad, losing control over their body. And the long-term consequences are worse, ruining their health. Why do people pay money and decide to behave like this?

“Habituate to this. Tomorrow we both are going to be like this. We should help each other,” she said, standing and leaving the room.

“Me? never”

“C’mon, you’re in your 20s. Have fun. Don’t be strict with yourself,” she said, trying to tell what everyone usually says. One bad thought and you get addicted. I repeatedly kept saying no to myself.

“I promised Sudha, that’s why.” I framed a lie so that I could escape from this.

“Even I promised. Did that stop me from drinking?”

“That’s more awful. You break promises, too?”

“You think Sudha is good? She’s worse and didn’t even stand by my side. Why should I still stick to her words and promises that I made to her?” she raised her voice in emotion. The same doubt, how did she know Sudha increased the room in my thoughts?

“You know my mother?” I blurted out.

She walked silently. She went to the restroom. I am stubborn and won’t leave this topic until it is answered.

35 minutes and no response. She’s still in the bathroom.

I knocked on the door so hard, and that made her wake. So she’s been sleeping for the past half an hour. There won’t be a worse situation than resting on a bathroom floor.

“Ahh, Okay. Fifteen minutes,” she shouted with the same drawl voice.

She was ready and started searching for utensils in the kitchen to prepare breakfast for me.

“I don’t want to eat”, I said. Momentarily, she shot an angry look.

“I’m preparing for myself, and why the hell won’t you eat?”

“I had. Rohan and I were eating on the streets. Street tiffins are good”

“Why is he making you eat all that unhealthy food?” She hesitated.

“Healthier than something which you took last night” was a perfect counter and immediately came to mind.

“Thanks”

“How was your week with Rohan?” she asked.

“Good. Great,” it felt awkward spending time with her. Maybe the morning ruined it.

“What have you done there?”

“I updated you every day”, my short answers said I was not interested much in talking to her.

“Yes. You did, but you can talk about them more elaborately.” I made her ask this, and I never liked it.

“Usha, how are we related?” I was straight so that my abnormally behaving brain gets settled once I get an answer to this.

“We met at the café and became friends”

“But whoever you meet at the café will be able to come to the house and take comforts as I did?”

“I don’t get you. So being nice is a problem to you?” She is right, she’s being nice to me, and I shouldn’t be complaining about this.

“No, you’re being too nice. And that’s making me think like this. What did you see in me or trust me so that you gave part of your home?” I nearly broke down, begging her to tell me the truth.

“I don’t have an answer for this. My initial impression of you was so good that it felt like we had known each other before.” I hate these no-reason facts.

“Why did it feel that way?” I asked an unanswerable question.

“I seriously don’t know,” she replied, and I understood she was helpless, figuring out why.

“Okay, I can understand, but how did you know Sudha before. Remember you said my mother’s full name, my father’s name and felt sad when you came to know that he died. Why all this? How are we related?” I kept asking question after question, hoping for an honest reply.

“Only Sudha knows all these answers” She tried to outsmart the situation and avoid giving a straight answer.

“I’m asking about how you know my mother.” Any distraction from her can be easily sensed, and I don’t care about these traps.

“Because she’s my mother too”

After a pause long enough for me to absorb everything she’d said, she went on, saying, “I thought you were asking about how we are related, and I have no answer for that”

“Only Sudha can answer that”, I clarified.

“I know,” she affirmed.

“But one thing I’m sure of is that she’s not your mother”, she stated a hard truth.

“Then who? Am I an orphan or some relative’s kid?” I asked her if she could help.

“I don’t know. Find Sudha and you’ll get all your answers. But don’t tell that you’ve met me,” she said, leaving the room. Also, I am mentally tired and decided to rest after all this.

Sleep is the peaceful thing that one can get without paying any rupees. But it costs mental peace, which is more expensive than all our money. Strange.

After struggling for 2 hours to get to sleep, I finally slept for 1 hour.

“Up for a walk?” Usha asked. I feel bored at home alone. So I decided to join.

“You’ll find a new pair of shoes in the cupboard. Come fast, I’ll be waiting downstairs,” she pointed to the almirah in the bedroom.

The beauty of walking together lies in the talking we do while walking. So I’ve many things to ask, especially about his ex-husband Rohan.

“You ready?” asked Usha.

“Where do we go?” I asked since our apartment is in the middle of the city. If it’s my hometown, Vizag, Sudha and I used to walk on the shore of the beaches.

“There’s a public park near. Inside, there is some basic gym equipment too. If you want, you can exercise”

“Yeah, I know that park”, I said, recalling yesterday’s breakfast I took with Rohan, which is near that park.

“Oh, so do you exercise too, along with walking?” I asked, seeing a body that was unused to workouts or morning jogs.

“Only on weekends”, she answered.

“Rohan does it every day. He has a whole gym setup inside his house with a personal trainer.” Finally, I smoothly connected and bought this topic.

“Because he’s rich”, she cut off the topic with a word.

“Yeah, the good thing about him is he won’t spend any money on unnecessary luxuries,” I’ve been checking her expression after every word I spoke.

“I know”, she said, and this is where I caught her.

“You know?” I asked.

“I mean, I’ve seen many of his interviews and I know he maintains a low profile and is a humble person”

“That’s it, you know about him?” I asked and am on the verge of breaking that I know a few sensitive facts.

“Probably. But I don’t like him. He’s selfish. Boring person. He doesn’t know how to make women happy,” and the last part of the sentence about women is the evidence that they’ve been together.

“Said who? Her wife?”

“No, he’s my college friend. We studied together,” she replied, and I was stunned at how quickly she came up with lies.

“Oh, that’s why you know him very well?” I wanted to confirm her lies.

“Yes. But I didn’t meet him after college. We didn’t have a good farewell”

“Oh, I see.” I wanted to say there’s a picture of you in his bedroom, with you and Rohan exchanging garlands. But since I promised Rohan, I have never said that and kept listening to Usha’s fairy tales.

“Did you expect Rohan to become a celebrity and his books to be read all over the world?” I asked her and aimed to make her admit that she’s Rohan’s wife.

“Yeah. He’s been into writing since his college days. And before graduating, he published three books, which were a decent hit”

“That’s great. Then you know him? Congratulated?”

“Yes, more than that. I used to give feedback before he sent it to any publications. We were very good friends”

“Only friends”, I asked and took a voluntary pause.

“Maybe we’re in a relationship, but we didn’t confess any day, which made our bond as if we’re in a relationship but with a best friends tag” She blushed, and it was almost a positive sign for me to proceed and ask further.

“Cool. College romance. You should’ve confessed to him, then you might be enjoying all those luxuries and celebrity life,” I said.

“No. I am happy with my life. But I don’t think he’s happy with his life. Because he always wanted a simple life without anyone monitoring. But now I think the whole world knows his next move,” she replied, which was correct.

“Yet he loves his life. Because he made it simpler,” I said, describing what I felt after spending a week with him.

“You know, once you become a public figure, though you feel you lead a low profile, you won’t. Everyone around you is fancy, and unknowingly you become one” What she said felt true to me.

I was silent for a while thinking what to answer, then I came up with “That’s why he started these letters, and he lives with common people, addressing daily life problems”

“Maybe, only he knows why he does this. He could have married another girl, had kids, and led a decent life. Instead of taking all other problems on his head,” Is this what Usha thinks? There, Rohan has many photos of them together.

“Maybe he didn’t move on from his past,” I wanted to shout. He didn’t move on from you.

“You sure he had one?” asked Usha.

“That’s why I said maybe,” I played smart.

“What do you think? You said he’s your college friend, no? Will you come home on Monday, drop me off there, and talk with him?” I asked, hoping she would agree to the proposal.

“No. Never. I told you we didn’t end up in a way that we can greet each other for the rest of our lives”

“Oh, what happened?” took a pause and then added, “If I may ask”

“I don’t know, I felt he’s not behaving like before after he got all that fame from his books. He’s filled with pride and doesn’t care about me. He ghosted me, and I hated that,” another bunch of lies she came up with.

“You talking about Rohan only? I am sure he won’t do that”

“Yes, the same Rohan who you think can fix you. Ensure he won’t break you and make you worse.” For a moment, I saw an old version of Usha who hated Rohan.

“Though he did you’re there for me,” I tried saying some soothing words.

“And one more question, what made you fight with my mother. She’s such a sweet person,” I continued, discovering more. “She is. I love her. I miss her. But sometimes I don’t know what to weigh more, whether an instance where she didn’t stand by my side and supported a stranger, or the instances where she took care of me since my childhood. I am built like that, won’t listen to any. A proper stubborn textbook example,” she replied.

“Even I am. Sudha’s one. We’re like that. Can’t help,” a family of stubborn people.

“Tell me this, then, we’re probably related to each other, right?”

“I told you many times. I don’t have an answer for this question,” answered Usha.

“Okay, Rohan and I will figure out something about finding this. Because now we have more information that Sudha isn’t my mother,” last hope mentioning his name so she opens up something.

And she didn’t react as I expected, so I asked, “Will you drop me off tomorrow?”

“No, tell him to do it,” was a straightforward answer. This week I planned many, but I’m heading off to Rohan’s place without finding any. At least I now know the fact that Sudha is the only mother who raised me, but the womb I rested in for 9 months is different.

# Usha: Chapter 14

## Just after the marriage,

## 2001.

Rohan is not talking much to me these days. It's been a week since our marriage happened, and I feel like going home and spending time with my parents. They say being with your life partner should feel like you're at home, but why are my thoughts of running to my house?

Many times before, I didn't like him in a few aspects, which included staying calm when he was supposed to speak, and the punishments he gave, calling them discipline, were just his way of doing whatever he wanted. These days, he's unable to take criticism after a few best-selling books he has had. Whenever I criticised something constructive, he said, "You don't know anything. With the same writing style, I have sold millions of copies. I know the audience's pulse," How rubbish? He only cares for positive reviews, and these days, an open community of book reviewers I follow discusses that Rohan's books are losing their value daily. People only buy expecting something, and ultimately, they are disappointed. How can I say this to him?

It's been a week since he talked to me properly. My only mistake was saying, "I earn more than you."

Should I call Uncle and tell him the whole story? It's fine because he's so close and gives us some advice. This post-marriage life is not as easy as we think, though it's a love marriage. But again, God knows how Rohan will react if he knows that I discussed it with his dad. If he doesn't want to talk, keeping this as an excuse, he'll extend it for months. I know him very well.

"How's your day?" This is the last time I can ask this this week, and the two days are followed by the weekend. There's no point in this question.

And there he walked silently again. How should I consider this 'Not replying'? How fair is it?

"Rohan, you know what happened in our office today?" My excitement made him walk out of the room he was in.

Life is feeling like hell. I just want to skip this part of my life. The only way to calm his mind is to write a letter elaborating on everything: the reason behind my behaviour, the implementations I will do in the future so that I don't repeat it, the significance of this punishment, and how it helped me. All this, and then he reads and forgives me. Life's hard for everyone? I'm unsure, but it feels worse with writers and over-emotional people.

We will stay together all day for the next two days, and I don't want us to act weird. So, with my eyes filled with tears, I wrote a letter apologising for not committing any mistake. This is where my thoughts began about whether I should reconsider him. Nothing hurts more than failing after years of understanding that end in misunderstanding. Your whole life is a lie. No one's good. Being with ourselves, spending a decent amount of time for entertainment, watching TV shows, meditating for 1 hour a day, weekends with parents…all this is enough, but then we choose to be with someone, and everything gets ruined. We lose our mental peace.

Every night, I look towards him with my eyes open, hoping he will turn to my side and we will sleep together. But he sleeps in the same direction as me, and every time, all I see is everything except his face, which I previously used to kiss all over. He knows how to cook food, which makes him more independent. Wish uncle hadn't taught him that; now there's nothing on which he relies on me. The art of overcoming basic needs like food, shelter, and sex has been mastered by him, and that's making him an inhuman human being.

For so long, I kept thinking he'd depend on me when it mattered, but there was nothing. He can live without me, but the reverse is unimaginable. Going to a state of enjoying one's own company is difficult, and once achieved, there's no turning back.

Oh my god, he's reading the letter I kept on the bed.

Ugh..after days, I saw his usual smile after evaluating my letter. I am not joking when I say evaluation. The letter will have underlined and circled parts added with his pen as if our school teachers correct exam papers. He stores it on the desk, and God knows why. Maybe it's for proof if I didn't change my behaviour as written. Luckily, I didn't come to see why he had preserved all those lies I had written so I could talk with him.

"I'm sorry. Never say that again. That day, I didn't mean what you thought. I'm extremely sorry," my hands crossed, touching my ears and apologising. Is this called domination? If yes, I hate that.

"At least you learnt something. Not to say those things even unintentionally," said Rohan.

"You know how much I missed you," was his second sentence, and he pulled me closer, and I knew now this talk would be for the whole night. This baby has a lot inside his head but can act as if he isn't missing.

If I do the same thing he did, ghosting, then he knows how to behave and act like he doesn't want me. How can he control this much love? Lovely, weird, Rohan.

"You could've talked to me, dear. How often have I asked about your day, and you've been quiet every time?" I broke down in tears after seeing his childlike excitement.

"But Usha, it won't work like that. We should accept pain to get discipline," said Rohan. And he thinks all this is discipline.

"Shall we go out?" I felt this was the right moment to ask him out.

"Restaurant? Naidu Gari Biryani?" he suggested, and that's the only food place where we never get bored.

The usual veg biryani we ordered. Meanwhile, he's constantly talking with me about his plans for this week. He's now into writing songs and gave a rough overview of what the song is up to and its progress. The lyrics were good, but a song only gets good responses when the right music is added. He approached a few music bands, and they agreed to collaborate. This is why I mentioned he can live without me, doing many things. If someone like me is in his life, he will discuss all the activities he did, or he will keep those within himself. But I'm not like that. Mine is a simple life, and I only want one person to share my day with who has nothing interesting to do. Boring life for real.

"If you didn't talk to me today, I planned to go home this weekend," I tried to convey my loneliness in a single sentence.

"Oh, shall we go together then?" This is the problem with him. Either he loves too much or acts as if he doesn't care. There's no in-between.

"Sure!!" My excitement knew no limits.

"It's been days since I met your mom", said Rohan, and he was equally excited as I was.

My mother and Rohan are best friends when we compare all generational gap friendships.  I don't know why, but Sudha likes him a lot. Because she's a reader, too. From the beginning, she dreamt of many things and wanted to earn a living independently. She had some business ideas, but my father didn't allow them. So she decided not to make me like that and permitted me as if I were a man. I grew like a man. Rohan's many characters involve working women with a good voice in society, and are well-designed characters, so Sudha significantly relates to them, and she likes his books. She knows more than I know about all books combined.

It takes half an hour to get to the place where we live. So early in the morning, we decided to head towards my home after breakfast. The primary reason was missing our physical intimacy, which led to an overflow of my hormones. I craved for it. Equally, he missed that, I hope.

\*\*\*

The pleasure we get while making love is immeasurable. That's why many relationships end because of cheating with others. Greed to be physically involved with many is more than sin. I can never even imagine doing that. Romance is life. The little things in it define its beauty. We gently start with a kiss, which ends so powerfully that it can give rise to a soul. This time, I'm not sure whether I'll take pills if I miss my period. Yesterday was something different. The longer the wait, the deeper the love feels. An evident affection, caring and well-nurtured scenario it was. Seeding a soul like that is a rare event. And if I get pregnant through this, I'm keeping it.

Parts of our romance life are sold as a million copies, and yesterday's love will be written somewhere in his future books. After reading that again, we recreate the same. Sometimes, we feel our stories to be told, and I'm glad he is telling every piece of my tale.

"We don't have time for breakfast", I made him rush, and it was almost 11 in the morning.

"Have a coffee," I gave him, along with biscuits, so that it would be like a half-breakfast.

"Call your mother and tell her to cook brinjal," he passed me the telephone.

"Even though I don't tell. She'll do that," I said. A few years back, Rohan complimented something like 'This is the best brinjal curry I've ever had' and the rest is history. Every time she cooks the same, he compliments, adding something extra, making it extra special.

"This time I will not hesitate to say anything on your father’s face," he mumbled. Many of their conversations were awkward. My father is overly disciplined and expects an answer for everything. And Rohan is a complete go-with-the-flow guy. He has plans, but doesn't have an answer when you ask what if it fails. My father then suggests Rohan to have a backup plan, and Rohan replies, ‘I’ll figure out something then’. The argument goes on for hours, and in the end, no one wins. Just as time gets completed and we start for our home. Both being straightforward people makes it worse; they say many mean things on the face, and still with a smile, they'll continue their arguments.

"Have you ever hesitated before?" I was surprised when he mentioned 'this time'

"Why is he like that?" he asked. How can I explain to him that this was teaching actual discipline, but not those punishments he gives and makes us write apology letters?

I wanted to say what I felt, but ended up saying, "You know he worked in the defence and that discipline is in his veins. Can't help it"

"Discipline? Bull shit" now in his nerves is this unnecessary angry.

"If I now say I'm writing songs, he asks who listens to songs and tells me to find another job. Discouraging is discipline for you?" Rohan spoke, his voice rising at the end. I’m sure my father won’t react as badly as he thinks. He might ask about the possibilities of success, but that doesn't mean discouraging. Constructive criticism should be taught to my husband immediately.

I was calm when he made those claims about my father. Not because they were true, but because I didn’t know what would happen if I said something wrong. Maybe this time he won't talk for years. I was scared. So I just smiled and nodded, pretending he was right.

We reached my home. Seeing our parents after a long time gives the same vibe whether you're married or not. Because this is your first home, and it feels the same every visit.

AMMA! The only hug that ever mattered. If you had to choose, who do you like more: your mother or your father? Everyone answers that it's difficult to comment on that. But I am sure that I love my mother more. A little more, maybe. My father is strict, which taught me discipline in many things, but the leniency she gave me defined all my life moments. I share almost everything with her. She helped in our marriage, convincing my father. I love her. Now I don't want to compare that with the love I get from Rohan. It's different. I'm supposed to share my life with him, and with my parents, I've given my whole time since childhood. When the timelines changed, the comparison would be vague. They played their parts in their time and cared for me the best they could.

"Hi, Uncle," greeted Rohan. He calls my parents uncle and aunt. I even followed the same naming format as his parents. Since we used to visit each other’s houses at college, we still feel them as friends’ parents, but not as my husband’s parents.

"Hi Rohan. How's life?" Excitedly, my father shot back. And there we go, the intense discussion is going to start soon. Time to leave this room with my mother and go somewhere. We have our girls’ topics to talk about.

# Rohan: Chapter 15

“Did something different happen, or is it just the same old arguments? You’re not complaining like you usually do, “asked my wife, on the way home.

“Uncle liked the lyrics I wrote for my new song” I was surprised by his response; I hadn’t expected anything supportive.

“I kind of knew he’d do that,” she responded like a little girl protecting her father from the blame.

“Even back then, when he said those awful things, you already knew he would?” I asked, trying to make her see that her father was kind this time, but not always.

“Forget it” She didn’t want to continue the discussion, nor did I.

“Shall we go to Swetha’s home for dinner?” I asked because I wanted us to balance time with both our families this weekend.

“Check with her if they’re home before we plan the visit,” Usha suggested. Seeing me drive, she called Vishnu on her phone.

“This time we work under the same manager, it seems,” she tried fooling Vishnu since they were working under the same company.

“Shut Up. Yesterday I received an email from my team about the project. What’s the matter? Where are you?” Wise men, Vishnu is.

“Just wanted to check if we could come by your place”

“We? Oh, you and Rohan? Yes, we’re at home. I’ll tell Shwetha too”

“Just about there, will reach in half an hour”

“Rohan, get the veggies for whatever dish you want me to make,” Shwetha interrupted.

“Okay,” said Rohan, and we hung up the call.

“Should we buy all the vegetables that are needed for biryani? Help her do it.” I wanted to eat it. Sunday without it is not Sunday.

“Okay. Stop at some market then,” we searched for a raithu bazar.

\*\*\*

“We’re home,” I saw Vishnu in the living room watching television.

“Hey, Hi,” Vishnu greeted me, still using those stiff, formal lines. Usha knows him well, not me.

“How’s everything going in the office?” was my next formal conversational question.

“All good. How’s your stuff going? Office, books... Many things you do,” he laughed, a sound that warmed me with pride.

“Ugh…Well. Everything’s going great. Wanted to add a few more new things to that list,” I like subtle flexes. Not loud, but they should still be noticed.

“Oh. Now, surprise me by saying you’re going to make a film with your stories,” he revealed one of my future plans.

“Wanted to do that for sure. But now I’m writing a few songs. Searching for a good music band to collaborate with,” I stiffened, sitting up straight, the kind of posture we take after revealing something big, that little shift that makes everyone glance at your face, and you pretend it’s no big deal.

“That’s interesting. You only sing? Or make others sing?” he asked.

“That hadn’t been decided yet. If my vocals suit well, I will release it as a private album. If not give I’ll give to the existing singers and make agreements over it”

“Years ahead and we see you somewhere unreachable,” He took a moment, processing the truth in his words, before speaking again. “Don’t forget us then”, he added. This I hear often, but why would I forget anyone? I might be busy, and the time I give them might decrease, but that doesn’t mean I have forgotten them. The same smile I get whenever I remember any memories stuck between us.

“Shwetha is my own sister, and you are my only brother-in-law. Why would I forget just like that? Never,” I reassured all their insecurities.

“That’s how he talks. Now that he’s reached heights, even a monthly visit feels like too much to ask, forget him if he becomes unreachable,” Shwetha added, stepping in from the kitchen and breaking our conversation.

“Then, should I stay with you or what?” I asked, unable to tell if there was sarcasm in her tone.

“If that’s possible”, she said, throwing her arms into the air. I couldn’t tell if she was joking or serious. Then she added, “We can live together. Built a duplex. Two floors, one for each.”

“Sounds good. Are you serious?” I asked, and honestly, I liked the proposal.

“Yes, Vishnu and I saw a plot with a decent price. We haven’t yet negotiated it, wanted to discuss with you,” She spoke while constantly nodding and looking at her husband, making it seem like they were speaking as one.

“Empty land in Hyderabad? Wow, that won’t last. Probably already claimed for a road expansion.” Even a child can understand this easily.

“No. It’s not like that. It’s in the centre of the city. But no one is buying it,” Vishnu answered.

Usha gave a look that said to be serious, “Reason?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, but someone told me there was a restaurant there before. It did so badly that the owner had to sell all his other branches to cover the losses,” Shwetha shared all that she knew.

“That’s common. Because he needs to pay the lease for this land, and it’d be huge. So he decided to do that,” my poor math brain said it.

“They were heavily fined after one food poisoning incident,” Vishnu said what he knew.

“Oh, that’s unfortunate”

“People are strange, they see this and build their own tales around it,” Shwetha interrupted.

“Like?”

“Previously, there used to be a small temple established by a nearby village. Then they made it a small-scale paper goods industry. There was a fire accident at that place, and it was a disaster. After a few years, it became a hotel, and even though it did not work well,” Shwetha explained the history.

Usha interrupted, “So everyone started saying, ‘Don’t mess with God, right? '” with a careless sentence.

“Exactly”, all three laughed in unison.

“That’s true. Never mess with the lord,” I firmed. That's just how I see it. He's the creator. You can’t just challenge Him. Even a small space meant for worship holds value. When we destroy it for our own gain, we invite the consequences.

“C’mon, Rohan. Talk like an educated person. You know how often there’s a room for a fire accident in industries, that too flammable papers,” Usha explained it using science.

“Educated? Education must do nothing in believing in God”

“I’m not complaining about your belief in God. But in those blind faiths and funny fairy tales that we make,” She carelessly laughed, thinking I was stupid.

I set my anger aside and spoke with patience, “Maybe those are not funny. And what about the food poisoning then?” I asked.

“A rare probability. Their time was not good then, that’s it,” Shwetha replied.

“I don’t think so”

“Okay. Okay, let us leave this topic here,” interrupted Vishnu and tried to cut this discussion halfway.

“True. Anyway, we are not going to buy it, and prolonging this discussion would lead to nothing new.” I didn’t hold back. expressed all my opinions boldly through this.

“We’re not buying it?” Shwetha spoke, her tone heavy with sorrow.

“Listen to me, Shwetha. You know me very well, right? It’s not good for us. We will buy some other land,” I responded with a softness this time.

“Okay,” her voice settled.

“What else? Vishnu’s how’s your post-marriage life? Intense romance filled? When am I going to become an aunt?” Usha tried to divert the discussion.

“You’ll become soon, maybe”, both blushed seeing each other’s face.

“Cool. Planning this year only,” Usha asked, surprised.

“Many times, I’ve told you there’s nothing like planning”, I interrupted because I hate it when someone says planning when it comes to having a kid. It should happen with flow.

“Ush…I’m talking to them, no? Keep your philosophical science aside. Anyway, I must hear those in our home,” my wife ignored me.

“Wow. New name for it. Philosophies. Great,” I felt this is not the right place and time to argue with her.

“How’s everything with you Usha?” Shwetha asked.

“See, we argue like this the whole day. A week later, he’s finally speaking to me kindly,” I didn’t expect Usha to tell all this.

“One week? That too, just after your occasion?” Shwetha shot a serious look.

“Rohan, are you mad? You know how it feels when no one talks to you. How can you leave her like that?” she raised her voice.

“Yes, I observed her in the office every day she was off. Even she didn’t share anything with me when I asked many times the reason,” Vishnu added fuel to this burn.

“How can you know that feeling. You have those books to write. Now what songs?” All of them targeted me. How can I say that busy life was also a curse, not a blessing?

“Everyone can not enjoy their solitude. Many want them to be checked once in a while,” Shwetha said.

“I know, but she did not tell the reason behind my behaviour.” The time to defend myself has arrived. Because there’s no one to do it.

“No matter what. Learn to forgive and do it,” my sister demanded.

“That’s why we’re back to talking like before,” I threw my arms in the air.

“But a week is still a long time. She’s already stressed at work and hopes for peace at home. Imagine coming back to this”

“Yeah. I get it. I will never do that again,” I quit. Don’t wanted to extend this discussion.

“My boy. Very good” Shwetha hugged me, and the elderly sisters’ advice is a blessing.

“I’ve kept this in for a while, Rohan. Those days were hell. I’m relieved we’re doing better, but don’t ever let me live through that again. That was the darkest it’s ever been,” Usha said.

“Understood. I will not,” I held her hand and apologised to her.

During our lunch again, the meal topic turned towards the land where we wanted to construct our house.

“How much does that land cost?” asked Usha.

“Two and a half lakhs, 7 cents land,” Vishnu answered.

“Oh, 7 cents would be huge for an independent house,” Usha exclaimed.

“We can have a garden, too,” Vishnu said.

“Nice. Two and a half lakhs is a way too good deal. If not, the same land price would cost around 5 to 6 lakhs in the centre of the city,” Usha continued.

“That’s why I’m thinking about it repeatedly. Limited deal, should be cautious before someone grabs it,” Shwetha interrupted.

“You’re good at making biryani, Shwetha. Tell me, Dad taught you,” I tried distracting the current useless topic.

“Yeah, dad taught me almost everything that I cook.” It’s my idea of being with both our parents; half a year with each was the reason.

“For me too. Same pinch” Usha pinched her.

“That’s why I can’t tell the difference between the two dishes you made. They both taste the same,” I said. Since the teacher has been the same, their skill have resulted in the same.

After our lunch, we four of us played cards. Talked about random politics, gossip, and without us noticing, the day had faded into evening. We decided to leave.

“Bye, Shwetha,” we said goodbye.

“I took the land contractor number, but I didn’t call because I was waiting to discuss it with you,” Shwetha’s final attempt to get us to say yes.

“I am on my word from the beginning. My decision is final,” I am stubborn.

“He talks like that only, Shwetha. You negotiate with the contractor. I'll pay our share,” Usha ignored my words. Not only words, but the whole me.

“You will pay?” I asked. Her words left me stunned.

“I mean us,” she grabbed my hand. “Let’s go”, I wanted to take my hand back.

What does the sentence ‘He says like that only’ mean? Are my words not considered? What the hell pronoun ‘I’ doing in the sentence ‘I will pay’? It’s supposed to be ‘we’.

I stayed silent the entire drive back home. I told myself I'd talk about it calmly once we got there. I avoid emotional conversations while driving; it's distracting, and I don't want to risk an accident. So, I keep my emotions in check until the journey ends.

“Rohan, that’s not what I meant, you misunderstood me,” She apologised without knowing what was on my mind, and there wasn’t enough understanding between us to even have a proper misunderstanding.

“Whatever I say now will surely make its way to Shwetha’s home. Still, it’s funny, you were the only one who felt lonely when we stopped talking. You have no idea how much I missed you,” I said it, and my eyes made it clear I meant every word.

“No, Rohan, I really have no idea how much you missed me. I thought you hadn’t. Because you act like that. If you had missed me, then what’s wrong with you to talk to me?” All my purpose of doing that felt useless after she spoke like that.

“Leave it, Usha.” I walked from there.

“See, this is the problem with you. Every time you walk away silently, expecting me to feel guilty for how I acted. But this time, I don’t. Go, go away! Give me your stupid punishments and make me write those useless letters. But this time, I’m not going to.”

I looked back at her. She was serious and silent when I looked at her. Just turning toward her made her go quiet, and my actions were the reason behind that serious look.

“You call yourself with the tag ‘Expressive’, no? Then talk about something. Do you only express your feelings in books? Not in real life? Then what’s the purpose of living?” Usha crossed all her limits.

She never understood the purpose. She thinks I can live without her. How excited I was when she talked to me. So this time, she’s really waiting for me to make the first move? Ego’s not the issue here. I just need to know she’s not the same as before, learning something that she shouldn’t be doing. Isn’t there any line between what stays in the home and what we drag outside for others to see? Not discussing with husband and taking own decisions is part of the Indian household? Very badly she behaved. Unless I see a change in her, I’m not saying a word, even if it takes months. I can cook. I can do each and every household thing. Dad raised me well.

\*\*\*

It's been eight days since I talked to her. Nothing feels right. Even for a small thing, I’m overlooking. I miss that Usha who takes care of me and guides me in every small move I take. These days, she’s acting like she doesn’t want me. I will make food that is sufficient for both of us, but she never eats what I cook. What did I do such wrong? At what point did I cross her threshold of bearing me? I was never truly harsh. I only stepped away for moments, always hoping we'd find our way back.

Eight Days became multiple weeks. Five weeks since it’s been we spoke a single word. Every day, I expect some paper to be present on my bed. This time I will never read it, immediately I’m going to hug her. All I want is for her to change that mindset, accept the mistake and act right. No matter what she writes in that letter. Just a single paper, Usha, I’ve many things to talk about. It feels like hell when the one person who talked to you the most now barely says a word. It wasn't just her, I used to talk to her a lot too and now that she’s no longer there to hear me out, it feels worse than hell. I feel both things at once.

Thirty-six days it’s been, and when I came to our bedroom, instead of a long paper, I found a slip. “I’M PREGNANT” was written on it.

# Saran: Chapter 16

“Hi Rohan”, I entered another expensive car.

“How’s your weekend?” he asked.

“Why do you buy these many cars?” I asked, unsure whether the same person who thinks 100 times to buy a small furniture item in his house would really buy this many fancy cars.

“No, many are gifted by someone, a few are suggested by my Chartered accountant. He changes in a while and arranges the bills accordingly. So that money is shown spent here, but we run a few non-governmental organisations to make our bills balance,” he said. I forgot that Rohan is super rich and has a CA to look after all this.

“You could donate or fund that directly? Besides, you’ll get a good name that you donate to the poor. Anyways, that’s so great of you,” I appreciated.

“When donations come through my hands, these organisations misuse them, thinking, ‘Oh, rich people have plenty to spare, they don’t know what else to do with money.’ But when it comes from common people, they treat it with care, knowing it’s someone’s blood and sweat,” he shared his way of thinking.

“Yeah. Feels Correct. You’re so great”

“That’s not my greatness, Saran. It’s the basic human thing to do,” he brushed off my compliments.

“Yes, but a very rare fraction behaves like this,” I said.

“If all your needs are of 10 thousand, but you have more than that, let’s say twenty thousand, then god’s intention is to donate the extra to the rest. You are just used as an intermediate to serve. He chose you so that through you, the money gets distributed. It’s not like you’re his favourite child or he didn’t like the poor ones,” another theory of Rohan, which felt so relatable.

“Everyone should have this thought process. Then this country won’t have a rich and poor bias,” I said what I felt.

“No, the difference should exist. Richness is earned. If everything is distributed equally, some might stop striving and simply enjoy the benefits. People with money should help those who don’t have enough but are trying hard to grow, but not to the ones who already have everything but just don’t want to work.”

“That’s true.” Whatever he’s saying feels right to me.

“I wrote all this exactly in one of my books. It became a good hit, but a very rare one takes it to mind and tries implementing,” said Rohan. I wanted to ask which book it is. But then, when he asks me whether I have read that, I don’t have an answer. Forget about that book, I only read his first book, not even his best sellers.

“What did you eat yesterday?” he asked after a long silence.

“Biryani,” I answered.

“Hey, if possible, would you bring it to me next week. I love the way she cooks it,” and this is not the first time Rohan has opened up about the love he has towards Usha.

“Yeah. For sure. Sudha taught her so it tastes good,” he gave a sudden look at me, unable to understand how I knew that Sudha was Usha’s mother.

“Did she tell you everything?” he asked, parking the car aside from the road.

“So you knew it before?” Dumb me didn’t realise that if Usha is Rohan's wife and Sudha is Usha’s mother, then Sudha and Rohan must have met before. It’s also the fact that the time gap between knowing these two facts was shorter. Yesterday I came to know that Usha is her daughter, and I was stuck on how Usha and I were related, but the thought that Sudha is mother-in-law to Rohan didn’t strike my mind.

Rohan stepped out of the car and gazed at the open fields, lost in thought and stood quietly for a few minutes.

I walked up to him, stood beside him, and asked, “Why are you both playing with my life?”

“She doesn’t accept that she’s your wife. You already knew that Sudha isn’t my mother, but you were calm all this time and fooling me, making me believe that you were helping me in searching for her.” I couldn’t digest the betrayal by him.

“Not fooling you,” He tried explaining things slowly, but it was already too late.

"Then what?" I nearly shouted in frustration, craving a quick answer, not one of those slow, careful replies.

“Even I was surprised when you came to me saying Sudha was missing. Sudha is my mother-in-law. And you said she’s your mother. So that makes something evident,” saying that, he slowly turned toward me and locked his eyes with mine.

“What? She’s not my own mother, right?” Everyone feels like a detective after stating this basic fact. I continued, “Knowing the age gap between us started bothering me from the day I noticed how young my friends' parents were compared to Sudha. Many from my childhood tried saying that, but I didn’t listen to any”

“No, not that,” he said, returning to his usual pose, staring at everything around, just not at me.

“Then what new lies are you up to?” I grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him to face me.

“You are talking to your FATHER,” he said, shaking off my hands from his body, and went to sit inside the car.

I was now in Rohan’s posture, figuring out everything that had happened in the past month. So Usha’s being nice to me because I’m her son. How many times have I asked her about our relationship? Why did everyone choose me to hurt? And this Rohan, if he knew in the very first place that I’m his son, why all this drama? He could’ve let me meet Sudha, and I would be happy. She’s what I wanted. I can’t handle all these new characters in my life. Bring my mother back, and I don’t want to know whether the rest would like to be part of my life or not. All these days I lived without them, and it was good. Only good because I had Sudha in it. So even now, she’s the key to my happiness. I promised my friends that I’d bring my mother for convocation, but here I’m stuck, unable to know who my mother is.

I stepped into the car. I heard Rohan saying, “Usha is your mother” If he’s my father and Usha is his wife, then even a small kid can understand that Usha is my mother.

“Sudha is...,” I interrupted. Now I understand the whole family tree.

“Grandmother,” I answered his million-dollar question.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” I asked. If he weren’t a celebrity, the betrayal alone would’ve made me want to kill him.

“I know that you’re my son from the very beginning,” I gave him a sharp look. I wondered if my mind still held the same respect for him as it did before all this.

“You weren’t the first one I noticed. I saw Usha from my window and asked the guard why she had come. The security guard told me it was the other kid who wanted to meet me and waited for the whole day,” he glanced at me through the rearview mirror.

“It was my mistake, I waited for you all day. That kid was me,” saying I lifted my hand, looked through the same mirror ahead, and thought ‘what a fool I must be’

“Do you think Usha knows all this?” I asked a genuine question.

“Maybe she sensed that I let you in only because you came with her. Everything else, she thought it could stay hidden from you.” With a shrug and arms lifted, he seemed to say, 'So, it’s all out now.’

I snapped my fingers. “But then I saw your marriage photo,” I said, the realisation settling in. I had finally pieced it together.

“Yeah, it all started there” He was upset they got caught. Otherwise, they would've kept playing for a few more days.

“You know how good I’ve been. Ever since I promised you I wouldn’t tell, I never brought up the topic or tried to make her admit she’s your ex-wife,” I said it anyway, though I knew there was no use in him knowing how kind I’d been through all this. In the end, I was just the clown.

“Yeah. But how did she tell that Sudha is her mother?” he asked.

“She said all this while drunk. But even before that, she had slipped many times, making me question who she truly is.” I remembered how I used to beg her to tell me what our relationship was, and every time, she avoided answering.

“You look more like your mother, but your eyes are mine.” He came closer, assuming I would forget everything and accept him as my father.

“Enough of this. Save those lies, I’m not the same person anymore. Just help me find Sudha, or I’m walking away.” I moved away.

“Can I ask you one thing?” he broke the silence, and this time, I’m scared of what question he comes with.

“Why do you think we said these many lies?” An emotionally manipulative trap it was, and I know the answer to it.

“Only to be with you for some time. Is that so wrong?” I knew this was going to be his armour.

“Yes, but I’m here for some different purpose, to search for my mother before the end of this month. I have only a few days left until my convocation. I came to you expecting you to do some good. But in return, you were selfish, and you want to spend some quality time with your never-seen son. Great. You rethink what you have done. I might not have all the knowledge as you to write books, but my mother taught me some ethics, and your behaviour with me is intolerable and unacceptable. Never justified,” every word I spoke weighed like anything, loaded with every emotion I was never ready for.

“It’s up to you, son. Usha never forgave me, and now you. Fine,” he looked aside, seeing outside the window.

“But why are you hiding the fact that you're my real parents?” I asked.

“I don’t know about her. I can give you my reasons,” he replied.

“If you could, that would be a great help, sir”, sarcasm filled in every syllable.

“Until the last two weeks, I didn’t even touch you before, saran. Even after your birth at the hospital. I just saw you from afar and could do nothing but just walk away,” he placed his hands on mine.

“We made agreements with your grandparents, Srinivas and Sudha, that we have no rights on you and will never try to meet you. Since Uncle was from a military background, he threatened us that if we tried to meet you illegally would take legal action against us”

“Is my dad that bad? Never seen this side of him,” though till my seventh standard he was with me, I remember him always as some jovial person.

“It’s not their mistake, Saran. They tried telling us many times, but we didn’t listen. During Usha’s pregnancy, every day she used to cry. Just imagine how her parents would have felt seeing her pregnant daughter cry daily. It pushed them over the edge and made them lose their nerve, reacting in ways they normally wouldn’t. Besides, ours was a love marriage, so it’s technically we who chose the partner. Finally, in the third trimester, we decided to get a divorce. But Sudha didn’t agree to co-parenting. She only gave us two choices: to be together, and the second one was to forget about the child and see our own ways,” Rohan explained the whole story.

It was not yet over, he continued, “This ended so dramatically that Sudha warned never to meet their family, and she even cut the connections with her own daughter”

After a moment of silence, “This is why I’ve respect towards their decision and still feel guilty about my mistakes, so I never opened up anything,” he concluded.

Sorry if I said anything mean. I didn’t know all this, and I’m kind of a fast reactor. Didn’t mean to hurt you,” I apologised.

“Happy that I’m spending some time with you”, he took me closer, hugged me.

“But why would Usha hide it from me?” I asked.

“I don’t know what she’s up to. You can ask her,” he said, as he mentioned earlier that she might have different reasons.

“I want three of us to sit and talk about this,” I suggested.

“I don’t have an issue doing that. You can text her to come near the toll gate if you want to,” he mentioned.

Usually, she wouldn’t come. Wait, what if I text like this: “Your husband is calling you, Amma”

TEXT SENT!

# Usha: Chapter 17

## After knowing that I’m pregnant.

He ran to my room and knocked on the door. And gently opened it. Slowly, he walked towards me. He sat on the floor, took me close, and kissed my stomach.

Being stubborn won’t help right now. These moments come once in a lifetime, and I don’t want to ruin them.

“Yes, I’m,” I nodded, tapping my stomach, understanding that he had read the slip I put on the bed. We hugged with such excitement that we nearly toppled onto the bed.

“Careful,” he said, making me stiffen. He really thinks the baby’s already in me. My sweet husband clearly skipped his biology classes.

“I missed you,” I held his face in my hands.

“You know, I always had these cute, game-style plans in mind for telling you I’m pregnant. I even planned to write clues on different slips and make it like a treasure hunt. But today’s office work was hectic, and I’m tired. Besides, I don’t know how you would react if the first slip had ‘open the refrigerator, you’ll find another slip there’ written on it. You would definitely throw that slip away. “So I just wrote it straight on a single slip: ‘I’m pregnant.’” I chuckled and blushed a little while explaining it all. Every girl dreams of planning something like this.

He kissed my forehead and softly said, “I’m sorry for not being there when you needed me most.”

“At least these nine months promise us peace,” I’m very particular about the pronouns.

“Us? Smart,” he wrapped his arms around me. Now that we are going to become a family of three.

He ran his hand over my belly and whispered, “Hope it’s a girl.”

“For me, anyone is fine,” I said, knowing his girl obsession.

“Should I tell everyone the news?” he asked.

“We’ll tell everyone once the second trimester starts. For now, you can let both our parents and Shwetha know. But for everyone else, it’s still a bit early,” I'm pretty sure about it. It's already been five days past my usual period date, and I still haven’t gotten it. That’s a clear sign.

“Okay, I will share immediately,” he ran to the other room to call them.

\*\*\*

“It’s been days since I ate the food you cooked,” his voice came from the living room.

“Missing my hand magic?” I questioned from the kitchen.

“Absolutely. Make something special today,” he responded. But I used to taste his food every day, quietly laugh to myself, and review each dish. The next day, I made the same dish, hoping he would at least compliment something about the food, like ‘it was better than mine’, ‘yesterday mine was the same curry’ or hoping he’d accidentally pick the one I made and feel like talking after tasting it.

Only God knows how many plans I’ve made in these eight weeks. The ultimate goal was to make him talk, without me starting it. But I always wanted things to be good between us, not tense or upset. I’m not even sure if he missed me half as much as I missed him.

Before giving him his favourite poha I made, I signalled for him to answer, “Tell me how much you missed me?” Otherwise, I wouldn’t give it to him.

He put the plate aside, got up, pulled me into his arms, and started spinning me in circles. “This much,” he kept saying, while I was lifted off the ground, analysing my living room blur, rotating with a speed of 30 rotations per minute.

He was unable to sense I was being serious and expected a genuine answer, not his playful romance.

I left the conversation unfinished, and if I attempt to revisit it, he doesn’t hesitate to remind me that I once said, “What’s the point of living if you don’t express yourself emotionally?”

“Hey, it won’t hurt the baby inside you?” he set me down gently.

“The baby isn’t formed yet. At this stage, it’s just a single cell inside me, unlike what you imagine: a whole body, head, and everything already there,” I explained his missed biology lectures.

“Obviously. I’m not dumb enough to assume the whole baby was in this barely visible stomach. I meant if rotating like this hurt you,” he responded. Thank God, or else he would have said it was the spin’s fault if the baby was born with a deformity.

“No, it won’t hurt”, I smiled and asked, “You could have done all this fun stuff in the past weeks as well” A part of me is dying to know how much he missed me.

“You could also have made many of my favourite dishes in the previous weeks,” he acted over smart.

“These two things never change, one, the beauty of the Taj Mahal and two, getting you to admit your mistakes,” I spoke, aware that arguing with someone who won’t listen goes nowhere.

“Yes. Two things that never change, one, the Taj Mahal, two, your inability to see my point of view,” he copied my theme and shot back at me.

“Thanks,” I mentioned as I saw it as a compliment.

“Wait, tell me one thing,” tapping on my stomach, I asked, “If this wasn’t a part of me, how many more months would it have taken you to come to me?”

“Takes as long as you take to come to me,” he answered instantly.

Seeing his usual ego-driven attitude, I asked. “What have you gained from being this way all these months?”

“That depends on what you’ve lost. Is your behaviour proper now? Have you let go of all those useless habits you had?” What the hell was that word ‘BEHAVIOUR’? Oh, now he thinks I’m the problem and is trying to teach me how to behave in society. If we leave him like this, he’ll end up saying everyone is wrong except himself.

“I’m the same person with no changes. And I never need to be corrected. I’m just fine as I am.” In anger, I hit the table with my leg, causing the plate of poha to fall to the floor. So now he goes to the kitchen himself, serves the food, and enjoys the poha made by the women he calls misbehaved.

These days, I often ask myself how I’ve been with him for six years, and what changed in these past two months that made life with him feel so different.

The answer to this is simple: it’s “MARRIAGE”. Not every transformation is smooth. During our four years at the university, we had many friends around us to distract us. In the past two years, though we were living together, it was with zero responsibilities. Almost every day in those two years, we were emotionally inactive; all we did was watch some romance movies, have food, sex, and that’s it. Even though I say something about him to others, it’s like me saying something about Rohan. But now it seems I’ve turned into a woman who complains about her husband and exposes our household drama to all the neighbours. The smallest things we did for fun have now become the most serious things. How many times have I teased him about his salary, saying he earns only half as much as I do, but saying it after marriage created a scene, as if I had turned against my husband and was trying to take control of the house.

I understand this overhaul and decided to take this slow. Give ourselves enough time and learn from experiences to become the best versions. I brought all my bedding into his room to show that it was the beginning of something new, but once again, I was the one making the compromise.

He arranged all the bedding neatly and made it a comfortable place. Now the question is whether he still loves the unchanged, so-called misbehaved Usha, or if his love is just for his new daughter, Sree Gayatri.

Being treated like a princess feels wonderful, but it becomes disappointing when you realise it was only given because they thought you were a real princess. That’s exactly how all of this feels now.

“Is it okay to make love during this time?” he asked. Here I am, worrying about how to fix our relationship, while he’s focused on having the same sex we’ve already done nearly seven hundred times. I don’t know what to say.

“Things are never the same as before, Rohan. I never thought I’d survive months without speaking to you. I don’t have a pinch of shame to admit that I’m completely dependent on you and can’t live without you. Just because I’m here doesn’t mean I’m okay. You can’t judge my well-being by my mere existence. Ever tried talking to me? If you had, I would have just broken down and cried like a child. Why are you behaving like this?” I expressed every thought without thinking it through.

“Why are you behaving like this? You are asking me? You slammed the table and reacted dramatically. You said so many hurtful things to me; you treated me like I was nothing. Despite everything you did, I stayed calm, hoping you’d eventually realise your mistake. And in return, instead of accepting it, you are blaming me now. Not you, I should ask you. Why are you behaving like this, Usha?” He uses the same copycat formula on me and tries to manipulate me.

“Should we give ourselves a little more time before talking again?” I asked so that I can come up with a solid solution and fix things.

“No, you need someone during this time. We will fight like this, but in the same room,” he proposed something that he never followed.

“Even that you don’t do, Rohan. After some time when I say something, you just stay calm carrying the worst theory you had: ‘While someone’s in anger they won’t be in a position of accepting anything’ Bullshit theory it is. First, try telling and then see if I really don’t listen, do not walk away like a coward,” I raised my voice out of anger.

“See, how many things are getting added to the hurt list,” he said, and this was something to boost my rage like anything. For the first time, I want more than just words; I want to slap him hard for making me feel mentally unstable and depressed.

“Don’t test my patience, Rohan. I’m not like you, I don’t know what will happen if you stay here. Please go outside, or come back after half an hour, or when I’ve fallen asleep,” I threw his pillow, gesturing for him to get out. The worst part is, we can’t sleep when we need it the most.

“Okay”, he said, leaving the room. If he just hugged me tighter and let me cry, everything would be okay. But I see him walking carelessly without having thoughts of fixing our bond.

I fell asleep, and in the morning, I found Rohan beside me. I have no idea when he came up next to me.

“Good morning,” I acted as if nothing had happened yesterday.

“Good morning, baby,” he said, kissing my forehead. He too acted well.

“Shwetha and Vishnu are visiting our home today,” he told.

“But they didn’t say anything.” This place is a mess. I need time to make it clean.

“When I called them yesterday to say your pregnancy news, they felt happy and decided to visit us today”

“Oh, Okay. At what time?” I asked.

“Maybe in the next hour,” he replied.

\*\*\*

“Congratulations, Dear,” Shwetha hugged me.

“Don’t talk to me. You didn’t say a single word about it,” Vishnu got upset with me.

“Tomorrow at the office, I wanted to say it in person, that’s why,” I extended my arms towards him, gesturing for a hug.

“I know Rohan is hoping for a girl. Long ago, he shared his hope of having five girls. In which three are ours,” she saw Vishnu, and they were like, we can do it, just three kids.

“Hopefully, she turns out to be a girl”, I said. The manifestation should be so powerful that, in the end, if it’s a boy, it turns into a girl.

“Five girls. With us confused about their names, and they are playing on the two floors together. Wow. Life is going to be good soon,” Shwetha dreamt. Now, only God can protect the house we took and kept hidden from Rohan.

Realising she’d slipped, she immediately bit her lip and shot Rohan a strange look.

“Two floors?” he caught the main point.

“The duplex we are going to build,” Vishnu interrupted, not having the idea that Swetha and I decided to keep this hidden from Rohan.

“Oh, in the same land that we discussed previously?” he asked, seeing all three of us.

“Yes, we bought it a month ago,” Vishnu whispered.

“Oh, you three are going to be there?” This was a bold way of saying something.

“Rohan, now you’re having children. You should have assets for security. Don’t behave like a child. Purchasing it helped us, now that this baby owns a property,” explained Shwetha, pointing to my belly.

“Yeah, I agree. We could have bought some good lands, no?” he continued.

“Who gives you 7 cents of land just for 2 lakhs?” she asked. I’m praying that this discussion will not turn towards me. Siblings should deal with this and close this conversation themselves.

“Don’t you have common sense to discuss with me before paying our share, Usha?” He abruptly ended the conversation and turned to face me. Suddenly, all the attention was on me.

“No. I don’t have common sense. As you said, I should change a lot and learn how to behave.” I gave a broad smile and attempted to quench his rage all at once.

“Can we talk about this later and spend some time with this couple?” I carried that smile while talking. “Please,” I requested.

# Rohan: Chapter -18

“I’m not sure what to say right now,” I said after taking one hour of time from the moment my sister’s family left.

“Then don’t say anything,” she answered carelessly.

“How do you intend to pay that?” I questioned. Even after all the times I said not to get involved in these, they still didn’t listen to me.

“In instalments, it takes two years to clear it.” My intention was not about the math behind it. But she explained in numbers.

I ignored her dismissive attitude and made a point clear. “I’m not going to be in that home”

“Now that you’re here, it still doesn’t feel like home,” she murmured, walking from the room. These days, she just speaks without thinking.

I kept quiet, once more. Years of your love is now complaining about your very existence. I don’t know which incident made her like this. She expects me to say something, but what am I supposed to say when her words are so hurtful? I’m the only one who can tolerate this; imagine any other woman buying something worth lakhs without informing her husband, how would he react? It would never be forgiven. He slaps her like anything and never trusts her. If all she wants is some reaction, I can do that. That’s not how I wanted to behave. We are educated and shouldn’t be dealing like that. So, I chose to make her understand by giving her time and forgiving her for the nth time. Additionally, writing things down on paper deepens understanding, and rereading them later strengthens your connection. Also, overthinking can be avoided, and straight solutions can be found. She disagreed with doing that. I have no idea what she wants these days. She complains about everything.

\*\*\*

No matter how often I try to speak with her these days, she ignores me every time. She wakes up so early, even before I finish freshening up. She goes to her office by herself and cooks her own food. Our last conversation was about taking a break for a few more days. Maybe she’s just following that now. I’m unsure how many days that few days mean. Usha’s stomach has started to grow, and I just want to spend some time with her, talking about everything and being together. All I need is her permission.

Two weeks passed, and things were the same. I decided to put this before our elders so they can help us find a solution. First, I spoke with my father and made arrangements to visit our home. Usha listens to my father.

\*\*\*

Coming home from the office, her face glowed as she saw my father in the living room. “Hi, Uncle!” she said excitedly.

“How are you, Usha. All good?” my father maintained the same excitement.

“Excellent”, she replied. However, that’s a false answer.

“Just came from Shwetha’s house”

“How are they doing? Though I see Vishnu every day. How’s Shwetha? It’s been weeks,” she spoke, taking a comfortable seat on the sofa. But not next to me.

“Yeah. They are doing great. They said they’re planning to have kids soon, so I might have two granddaughters within a few months,” my father once imagined how wonderful his future was going to be. I can’t correct him, but when he said they’re planning for kids, I felt the same dislike I always have for such talk.

“These people also constructed a house for your grandchildren. Don’t worry,” I interrupted. I hated my wife not sitting next to me in front of my father.

“Yeah, Shwetha told me. Very good decision. Proud that you’re having some assets in your name by a very young age,” he replied. So, it’s like they are all on one team that is playing against me.

“Good decision? You know why that land costs such a low price?” I didn’t hesitate.

“Previously, it was a temple. Rohan, come on. Don’t act silly. Opportunities don’t give any signs before they come, they just come like that, and we should sense them.” I was surprised to see my father talking like this. As you get older, you should become more inclined to believe in God.

“Yes, Dad, I’m the silliest person. A big fool. Enough about this topic. It already caused my wife and me to stop talking for months,” I remembered where all these misunderstandings started. “That’s why I said not to buy these lands,” I concluded.

“You stopped talking to me because of this land, and now you’re blaming the land for everything that’s happened. Are you out of your mind?” She raised her voice and went to the kitchen, probably to get some snacks and give me some space to talk to my father.

“What’s going on, Rohan?” My father asked, making sure she was not nearby.

“I don’t know, Dad. We haven’t really spoken in months, and that’s actually the main reason I called you. Seeking some solution to it,” I laid it all out.

“Why? There will be some reason, right?”

“We are different. Not meant to stay together,” I lowered my head in shame as I spoke.

“How did you manage for years then?” He asked the same question about where I’m getting stuck.

“Because there came something in between: MARRIAGE. And she never feels the same; she can be a girlfriend. But as a wife, I doubt it,” I lowered my voice, making sure my wife couldn’t hear.

“What is the difference?”

“The life of a wife has the mother’s role in it. And I doubt she could be a good one.” I didn’t hesitate to pick those words.

“You can’t say that. If she hears this, it will really hurt her feelings. Such words can be deeply painful for a girl. Never say that again,” he warned me, and it hit me that what I said was far too much. No girl deserves that.

“No, no, what I’m trying to say is motherhood begins when you start putting others before yourself. She needs to move beyond self-centeredness to be a good wife. There comes a point where you should be by your husband’s side, though the whole world is against you. Same with the child, you should not care to leave your job to spend time with him in his initial years. Now, ask her to quit the job and listen to what she says, and then you’ll understand why I’m talking like this:” I tried using simple words this time.

“Do you think Shwetha quits the job during her pregnancy?” he questioned, and I didn’t understand why he asked.

“Is it relevant?”

“Son, these days no one’s like you are thinking. Things changed. Happy that both are earning a livelihood. Get that positive perception. How would it feel when I ask you to quit writing?”

“Dad. Are you serious? How can you relate this to my writing?”

“It’s your favourite job. So that’s hers. Makes sense?” That moment I understood that even my father got brainwashed and is trying to fit into this wrong society, forgetting his roots.

“Okay. Talk to her about something and solve this if possible,” I requested him, having a tiny hope that his words would create some magic and fix us.

“Go and call her”, he demanded, though I asked him to do that.

“Not shouting her name from here. Go to the room she was in and bring her,” he ordered when I was about to shout and escape the task.

Slowly, I sat next to her and gave an awkward smile. “Dad is calling us,” the smile broadened.

“Us?”

“Yeah. He wants to talk to us”

“What have you said?” she asked tensely. The impression my father had on her shouldn’t be spoiled.

“I said, ‘What’s going on between us.’” I answered.

“So, this won’t come under misbehaviour?” She lost her nerve. Trying to win over me since I mentioned the word ‘MISBEHAVE’ when she shared it with Shwetha.

“About this, only he wanted to talk. Please come,” I took her hand and requested.

“Uncle”

“Both of you have a seat”, he pointed to the same sofa so that we could sit on the same.

“After your mother and I got separated, many times, I felt like going back to her. But I always wondered, “What if she doesn’t accept me?” So I never tried and just kept all those feelings inside” he opened up, though I didn’t know he missed my mom.

“Uncle, but we don’t have thoughts of getting divided. We just wanted to give some break,” she said, which was true. I always complained that she was not on the right track for now. But that doesn’t mean I will abandon her, I just want to see her change. And I hope she will.

“Taking a break for a long time is what divorce is”, he cut her long sentence with a solid reply.

“It starts like this, Usha, taking breaks, trying new things, and you know, this generation of people has many options. So you should be mentally strong. Not even a single thought of having breaks. Work on it, work on it. Don’t leave like that”

“I tried many times. He doesn’t cooperate” What the hell is wrong with this woman.

“Same dad, she never listens to me”, I added my side of the complaint.

“I can understand. It’s so new to accept the change. Soon, you’ll understand why there’s a saying, “Having a baby will save your relationship.” Believe me, it becomes so difficult when there’s no one to look after you as you grow older.” He gave us the pieces of knowledge he had.

“You may not believe this, but these days I’m working on getting back with your mother”, he said, and it blew my mind.

“Seriously, Dad? You used to hate her. Remember?” Being with him more partially created a negative impression on my mom, and for me, too.

“Yeah, only because I loved her. After you left me, I spent a few months with Shwetha. Then I understood why a woman misunderstood me, and how I behaved was not suited to them. It’s understandable. You can’t be the same to all Rohan. There’s a way. You can’t go to a kid and say the whole Disneyland is a lie, though it’s true, it hurts the kid” I didn’t understand why he started blaming his parenting. However, he may be partially correct because the age crucial to understanding everything was when I was with no women around and spent the whole time with him.

“So?”

“Sorry, Usha, it’s my fault. I don’t know how to raise a man whom a woman can like. He can’t learn that because I’m never good at that. A failed one,” he apologised to Usha.

“Dad, you’re blaming yourself for all this? Stop it,” I didn’t like him pleading with Usha for no reason.

“No son. These are facts. I can understand how Usha feels being with you,” He now believes I’m the reason our relationship is falling apart.

“Please, I beg you. My son will soon change, and don’t make this bond break,” with hands pressed together, he made a humble request. Hearing the word ‘beg’ made my mind go blank. What is his age? How much has he been through in life? Why is he lowering himself now, asking the wrong woman to be with his son? Is this really necessary? He wants to go back to my mother soon? Does being alone feel that terrible? Being surrounded by people is a blessing, but one shouldn’t forget how to live when alone. But my father became a very weak guy, and he’s scared that I’ll become like that. No, Dad, I won’t.

“Uncle, Cool. We are friends. Remember how close we are to talking about anything. Now I can’t imagine you talking to me like this. Leave this here, I will look after him and never leave him. Don’t worry,” Now Usha thinks it's up to her to look after me, or else I'd have nothing left. I’m sure I would’ve lost some happiness, but that doesn’t mean I’ll never be happy again. I’ll find new things. Maybe even become an artist. I wanted to voice it, but my father doesn’t take it well when I do.

“Usha, remember how we were in our university and that rented flat. I want those days back. No matter what it costs, I’ll pay the price,” I said, even though I didn’t mean it, just to make my father happy.

“Tell him twice, thrice, until he listens. If he’s not listening to you, reach out to me. We’ll talk to him together. We didn’t grow up around women, and maybe that’s why we turned out this way. Now that you’re with us, let’s stop this from continuing to the next generation.” My father concluded it. Lately, he’s stuck on the idea that we turned out this way because we never had a woman around to teach us better. Strange beliefs.

“Sure. Uncle,” she smiled, looking at me. That smile said it all: I’ve got my uncle here, so don’t try anything stupid unless you want your bones broken.

“Thanks for coming, Dad” My inner voice was something else.

“Bye. Uncle,” It was just a one-day visit, and since he had other work in my village, he decided to leave early.

\*\*\*

It’s been weeks since my father guided us in some random direction, and things were going great between us. All I do is simply talk. I’ve started opening up when she asks something instead of staying silent and assuming she won’t listen. She may or may not take it, but I’m making sure my opinion is heard.

Today, I took Usha to the hospital for an appointment to see the baby. This new technique came into use: ultrasound. Since ours is a big city, a couple of hospitals now offer it. It started just a few months ago; through it, we can see the baby and even know whether it’s a boy or a girl. I’m excited.

“See how cute she is”, she was thrilled beyond words.

“Madam, it’s he. You are going to be blessed with a boy,” the nurse corrected. She showed us how to identify. Basic body anatomy. Everything I hoped for was suddenly destroyed. We didn’t speak a single word during our whole journey back home.

“Sorry, Rohan” She took the blame and apologised, even when it wasn’t her fault.

“Hey, why are you saying sorry. It’s okay. We can try for more children. Maybe this time, God will bless us with girls," I hinted at whether she was ready to go through labor all over again, not just once.

“One more, even if it’s another boy. We can only manage two, right?”

“Trust me, Usha. The next two are going to be girls. I just know it,” I prayed to my holy mother, Lord Gayatri.

“Next two?” she asked, confused.

“Yeah, as we always thought. This house is meant for two girls,” I reminded her of all our dreams of having five girls.

“Rohan, tell me you’re joking”

“Usha, try to understand. I feel like the goddess herself is coming to us in the form of our daughter” I conveyed my beliefs.

“You think it’s that easy to raise three children? You need to know this. Vishnu’s family only wants one child. He’s made that clear. So what now? Planning to marry someone else, too?” She opened my eyes to a few new things. I didn’t realise that Vishnu’s decision would matter just as much, not only my sister’s.

“Oh, Okay. Fine. One last hope, and we bring Gayatri home” I rebuilt all my dreams.

“Sorry, dear” She gave me a comforting hug.

\*\*\*

Days are filled with me fulfilling her cravings, talking to the unborn child a lot, thinking about different names for the boy and us creating many sweetest memories possible.

I decided to discuss it with Usha to quit the job, since roughly one and a half months are left before the delivery date.

“Is it becoming hard for you to manage both your career and personal well-being?” I asked.

“No, it’s fine. There’s maternity leave, but I’m in the middle of a major project. They expect me to be there," she explained.

“Can’t they assign it to someone else? And honestly, I think it’s better if you quit the job. At least for the next two or three years,” I spoke my mind.

“Years? I’d understand if you said a few months. But years? Why?” she asked.

“Before he starts school, caring for him during those first three years is essential to raise him well”

“Rohan, these days, there are trained caretakers in the city, and he’ll have good friends his age there. What can I even teach him now, how to walk?” she added, throwing up her hands.

“No, you need to feed him and keep an eye on him every second,” I answered.

“Yes, I know. That’s why I’ll be home during the first few months. But you’re asking for years,” she argued.

“Yeah, for years I expect you to do the same”

“No. If that’s what you expect from me, then I expect you to quit that low-paying job, stay home, and continue your writing while taking care of him,” I hated it when she called my job a low-paying one.

“We’re not built for that, Usha. Some things, like a mother’s love, her warmth, and the way she nurtures, are what truly make a child smile. No matter how much we try, it’s just not in us,” I explained to her the fundamental laws of nature.

“Sorry. My promotion is around the corner, and I’m finally in a good position. Apart from taking my maternity leave, I can’t agree with any of your other suggestions.” She was straight and made her point clear.

“You’re being selfish. We’re a family, and when it comes to raising kids, you’re supposed to be the backbone. From the schooling years onward, fathers step in more; that’s how it’s always been. Don’t try to rewrite the rules now”

“I don’t know how things worked before, but today, we all need to adapt to how society functions now. Trust me, the baby care centres in our city are really good. Many parents send their kids there without a second thought,” she was stuck there at those bloody baby care centres.

“No, you’re not going to convince me on this. Either you quit the job, or I’m coming to your office tomorrow to speak with your manager myself,” I spoke, not looking at her.

“Are you crazy? Please don’t make a scene at my workplace. Fine. I’ll do that. But you’ll never understand. I told you I’m in the middle of a project; it will be completed in two more weeks. Besides I’m the one carrying the baby, I don’t get why that’s such a pain in your ass,” She answered, clearly frustrated. No matter which tag she gives me, it’s for a good cause, and she’ll understand this soon.

“Usha, watch these. I handed her a few historic story cassettes: Ramayan, Mahabharat.” Since she was feeling bored at home alone, she started watching random movies. But if she watched these instead, they would instil good values in the baby growing inside her.

“Are you serious?” she asked, having no clue.

“The baby inside can absorb that knowledge, too. Remember how Abhimanyu learned about the Padmavyuha while still in his mother’s womb? It’s true, Usha,” I convinced her with references.

“Fine. I never watched these before. I will give it a try and continue if they are interesting”

“How many episodes have you watched today?” I asked, having just come back from the office and found her sitting in front of the television.

“This is my second episode. Everything’s in the poem format. I am unable to understand and feel bored,” she replied. Those were old versions that contained everything in a song or poem format.

“Oh, try watching” I couldn’t tell anything other than that.

“Also, read our book ‘50 changes she brought in me’ so that the kids know their parents’ love story”, I laughed softly, thinking back to our past.

“Fine. You enjoy your work. My loneliness is growing day by day. Once you get used to working, sitting idle becomes unbearable. It feels like hell.” I can understand her feelings, but I can’t do anything. That’s part of life.

“Should I go to my mother’s place?” she asked.

“No, here we have good hospitals” Though there’s a tradition that the first delivery should take place at the maternal home, I chose to ignore it.

“But I’m feeling very lonely. Please, Rohan,” she pleaded.

“No, Usha. Stay here, anyway, I’ll come home after 5 PM. So no worries”

“At least promise me you’ll let me return to work in a few months… not years,” she desperately asked for my permission.

“How many times do I have to say it? My decision is final. It’s not going to change.” I raised my voice so she wouldn’t repeat this topic.

\*\*\*

This is the day in my life that I will never forget. I saw our book ‘50 Changes She Brought in me’ on the table. She’s probably reading that.

“Rohan, I want to discuss something important with you”, she asked for my time.

“About?”

“Rohan, this is never going to work. I don’t want you in my life” Listening to this all of a sudden made me cold.

“Shut up. Just because you read our old love story, doesn’t mean I’ve changed completely. People grow up. After marriage, you’re supposed to take responsibility. No one stays the same,” I gave the reasoning, thinking that the book made all this.

“I don’t feel safe with you. If I give in now, then after this baby is born, he’ll be the only reason we’re still together. And I can’t live like that for the rest of my life,” she said, as if living with me was dangerous.

“So? What about this baby then?” I asked.

“I talked to my mother. She said to come home now, and hopefully I will never return,” she spoke as if it meant nothing.

“Are you mad or what?”

“No, I’m serious. Come to my house and speak to my parents about starting the legal divorce process. I’ve been working on it since morning. I already spoke to your father, Shwetha, and my own parents.” So she’s been planning this for a long time.

“Maybe this would be an official end card to us”, she added.

“Don’t act silly”, I took her hands in mine and begged.

“No, I’m not. Leave me,” She pulled away like I was the one hurting her. And maybe I was forcefully holding on when she just wanted to go. I hate that. If she wanted freedom, I’d give it to her. I won’t run after her anymore. Not unless she finds her way back to me. But the kid… that’s what breaks me. She said Sudha will talk about it someday. And I’ll have to face that. Alone.

“Come, I’ll drop you there,” I offered her a ride.

“No, thanks. I can manage on my own. Come when you're free. But stop torturing me with your constant phone calls, telling me to read this, read that, asking about my job every single time...” She was fed up. I could see it in her eyes, feel it in her tone.

“Okay. I won’t. Happy journey,” I waved goodbye, not knowing that would be the last goodbye.

# Saran: Chapter 19

## Present Day,

She just read the text I sent.

Oh my God, she’s typing something.

“MotherFucker. Did he tell you everything? Where are you?” was her text.

“Told you she’d still be angry.” He spoke while reading the message over my shoulder.

“She’s also mad at my mother”, I recalled the times she lashed out at Sudha. She’s convinced she’s right and that everyone betrayed her. So now, in her mind, all of them are just villains.

“Near the NH-275 Toll gate, come find me… and take me home. I don’t trust him anymore” I sent the text right in front of Rohan. We planned it together.

“He left you…just like that?” she asked.

“No, I’m not alone. He’s with me, and I want a proper discussion with both of you together. Just be prepared for that.” I shared my current location with the message.

“Discussion? About what now?”

“About the betrayal you both put me through. You actually think I still care that I’d want to see the two of you together. Never.” I made that perfectly clear.

“Saran, calm down. I don’t know what he told you. But listen, come home. We’ll talk everything through. I know where Sudha is. We’ll go there together.” She replied. The fact that she stayed silent about my mother. That silence hurt more than all these lies.

“Wait… you knew? This whole time, you knew where she was?” I wanted to confirm.

“I’ll be there soon” She’s hoping that speaking face-to-face might soften the mess they made. Maybe it’s too late.

“She says the same thing, doesn’t she? ‘I just wanted to spend some time with you. That’s why I kept it hidden. I was going to tell you eventually.’ Same story, again,” I wanted Rohan’s take on it.

“Yeah, most likely. We missed you. You are our own kid. Asking for a little more time… is that really such a big wrong?” he asked the same doubt for the nth time.

“Only you knew, and you never told me. That makes it feel less like love and more like kidnapping. You knew where my mother was. The difference is small: they demand money and keep people from their families… but you? You asked for my time. It’s almost the same.” I spoke unfiltered.

“You’ll never truly understand this unless you’re in our position. Just leave it.” He ignored all the examples and analogies I tried.

We had half an hour before Usha actually arrived. In the meantime, we walked around, and I shared stories about my childhood with him; who I used to hang out with, and every little detail about my hometown. Now that he knows the people well, he can relate to how things used to be.

“Oh, so the Madhav you’re talking about is your best friend?” he asked as if he knew Madhav.

“More like a family we are”, I said, since his name kept coming up in all the stories I shared.

“Not more like a, you are a family”, he replied. Now the family tree has grown.

“Shwetha is my own sister”, he added.

“No surprise. Your whole family revolves around me without even realising it.” I wasn’t surprised. They changed my parents, after all. Nothing else could shock me now.

“Are there any other people I should know about? The milkman, the newspaper guy…they were also connected to our family, right?”

“Hahaha, we used to live in Hyderabad. I don’t know if you had the same newspaper guy in your city. By the way, I still don’t know why you all moved to Vizag” He didn’t pick up on my sarcasm.

“Honestly, up to this point, I always believed I was born in Vishakhapatnam.” Even my parents didn’t mention anything about my birthplace.

“Surprisingly, you didn’t see any of Usha’s photos from her childhood. They really don’t talk about her? At least somewhere, they could’ve mentioned something about her. Their only daughter, she is,” he enquired. And I don’t remember anything like that. Not a single photo of her was in my house. Even in Shwetha’s house, I saw no photo of Rohan.

“You know the reason that made them separate and develop so much hatred toward their only daughter, cutting off all ties?” I asked, hoping he would know, that he could only say this part of the story without being biased towards anyone.

“No, we had a fight, and one day she just disappeared to her home. She called me when she reached and told me not to come to her place unless she let me know”

“I respected what she said and didn’t attempt to visit. One day, just a week before you were born, Sudha called me to her place. She apologised and broke down in tears. “I tried convincing her so much, but she’s not listening to me. I’m sorry, Rohan,” were her last words to me,” said Rohan. But I don’t get the point of respecting boundaries here. If it meant being separated forever, then respecting them doesn’t make sense. He should have tried harder to talk to her instead of just staying silent.

“But you didn’t request Usha”, I asked.

“I did. But her father was firmly saying, “We’ll only send our daughter if she’s willing to go.” He always pretends to be this big man of values and expects us to see him that way. Idiot.” He was harsh with my father, and I really wanted to defend him, but his role in my life differs from mine. I can understand his frustration.

But I could divert the topic from my dad, so I said, “Many times, Usha mentioned that Sudha wasn’t on her side, and that made her angry.”

“That’s why I love Suha the most. She’s like that. She will never be biased and thinks like a grown-up. But all these others seem to think they should rule the world, and everyone should talk about their kingdom,” he concluded his rant, and I don’t want to extend this conversation. In my experience, everyone was good to me, so I can’t connect with what he’s saying at all.

After a few minutes of silence, he asked, “Do you know if Usha had any romantic or other kinds of relational affairs these days?”

“Yes, I guess so. Not Sure. Before I come here, she’s with Kamlesh, who works in her office. Married guy,” I told him what I know.

“This is what independence means to them. No one should stop them; they do whatever they feel like and convince themselves that their mistakes are somehow making them wiser. This is what your generational people follow, right?” He fired the question, annoyed and continued “Even your Usha feels young doing this shit”

“Not everything needs to be learned through personal experience; sometimes you can just listen to those who’ve already been through it.” He threw out some other life quotes.

“Sudha would have said no to the job too, which is why she became the villain, even after supporting Usha so many times, including when it came to our marriage.”

“Job?” I asked, confused.

“Oh, you don’t know, right? All of this started because her husband, who had a low-paying job, told his high-earning wife to quit hers.” I didn’t understand why he was comparing the pay.

“Oh, she used to earn more than you?” I asked.

“Not now. But yeah, initially her pay was almost double to that of mine?” he replied. I was shocked when he said it’s twice as much.

“Why did you ask her to quit the job?” I continued with the following questions.

That was when you were about to be born, so I asked her to quit her job for just three years to look after you,” he responded.

“Okay. But that’s reasonable. What else does she expect?” I asked, unsure if this was what led to their divorce.

“She expects me to do that. She wanted that job” What the hell, doesn’t he feel weird staying home while she works?

“How can a man be at home?” I asked because I genuinely wanted to know.

“It’s been twenty years, and people still think the same way. Or perhaps growing up with the older generation influenced your mindset in that way” He was happy that I shared the same opinion.

“Maybe. I don’t know. You acted right. You said it was just for a few years, not that she should give up her career forever, right?” I reassured him.

“Tell her the same, she’ll be here in a few minutes”, we ended our conversation and waited for her.

\*\*\*

I saw her coming toward our car on her scooty. She stopped and pulled out an old book from it.

“Hi Amma”, I addressed her, knowing now how much happiness this name gives her. She tightly hugged me, hearing me calling out that. She gave Rohan a top-to-bottom glance and then spoke. “Come, let’s go, we don’t need anyone’s help”, that ‘anyone’ there referred to Rohan.

“I’ll agree to come with you only if you take me to see my mother”, I demanded my side conditions since she mentioned she knew where my mother is.

“But I’m your mother”, she played smart.

“Either you accept being with me and Sudha, or you can’t be with just me.” Part of me liked Usha so much that I’d be happiest if she agreed.

“You can be with me, Saran”, Rohan interrupted.

“That’s never an option,” she blurted out, hesitantly.

Rohan began to raise his voice in response to her careless reaction. “He’s not just your son, and if you can break the rules, then so can I”

I subconsciously forgot that even Rohan has the right to me; I wasn’t happy with them fighting over me. “So we’re back to your original terms. Drop me off at Sudha’s place and act like we have never met.” I gave them another option so they would not hurt anyone.

“No, I can’t do that, I need you” Usha’s affection grew strong within just a few weeks. A mother’s love, once formed, is impossible to detach.

“See, your father doesn’t say that,” she pointed out to Rohan.

“If saying it were enough to make it real, I’d say it all my life,” he replied. Aww, it felt nice. Just because they aren’t expressive doesn’t mean they don’t feel anything in their heart.

“Write these cheesy lines in your book. Don’t manipulate him,” She dismissed those compliments in seconds.

“There’s some other option, you’re not thinking of that”, I hinted, having plans of making them together.

I took a moment and a deep breath and revealed, “You can be together, and I bring Sudha as well. So, we all can be a family”

“That’s never going to happen”, she responded in a split second.

“What’s the problem with you, Usha?” Rohan asked, genuinely concerned by her reply.

“You. What’s the new problem?” I didn’t see this side of unfiltered Usha. Speaking bluntly, without thinking about whether it hurts others.

“Twenty years it’s been, you still think about those 6 months we had after our marriage?” He asked, nearly in tears.

“Those six months were enough to ruin the past six years of our relationship and to make it clear that our future together wouldn’t work either.”

He walked close towards her and gently asked, “Did I really say something that harsh? Why do you feel so unhappy living with me?”

Immediately she moved away, showing the book in his hand, she whispered, “You know what this diary is?” took a pause, staring at his teary eyes, “It has every reason why I feel you’re not right for me. You’ve always said that writing brings clarity, so I used that approach to make my reasons clear”

“I meant sharing good memories or words, so that when we reread them, it brings us closer,” he touched the diary in her hand.

“I sensed the other side of the coin. So, whenever loneliness hits or I start missing you, I read through what I’ve written in this book. It helps me remember why we’re not right for each other.” She built up hate for him in a very organised manner.

“Can I read that diary?” I tried grabbing it to see what was in it.

“No, I don’t want to ruin your impression of your dad. It’s the way he behaved to me, it has nothing to do with your bond,” it made sense, and I let it go, not trying to grasp it.

“Even I don’t believe I did everything you mentioned there. Were those just your assumptions?” Rohan mentioned.

“Why would I do that? I’m not crazy,” she disagreed on that.

“Because you already had it in your mind to leave me, so no matter what I did, you saw everything in a negative light,” he explained the reason behind his claim.

“You don’t know how many times I tried convincing myself not to get a divorce. But I didn’t find any solid reason to live with you. I used to cry every day during my pregnancy, not able to figure out what to do. Meanwhile, my mother assumes you were something ideal and thinks I commit mistakes” Now I understand why she’s mad at Sudha.

“Now you understand how it felt when my father convinced me that I was at fault in our relationship. I acted and killed my attitude and stayed with you all those months” This part, I have no clue what they are talking about.

“That’s exactly why we chose to separate, for the best interests of both of us. And that’s one of the best decisions in both our lives. We are not meant to be together,” I understood that my plans of being together with both have no scope.

# Usha: Chapter -20

I’ve made everything clear; things will stay the same, even half a century later. I don’t want him, and that’s final.

“Okay. You don’t want to be with me, I understand you have your own reasons. But what makes me less deserving of having saran in my life?” he asked. It upset him more that I would have him than that he wouldn’t.

“Even I feel that being with Rohan, Usha”, the kid expressed his opinion. Seeing those fancy cars and the luxury house, he felt tempted. But the more time he spends with his dad, the more it’s clear that all he really wants is his mother. I’m confident. Or maybe he’s only bad at understanding women. For the rest of the world, he’s no less than God. This man is like that; either you hate him too much or love him too much, and there’s nothing in between.

“Fine. First, let’s see if Sudha agrees to this,” Saran added, which was true. That day, my mother made it clear: she firmly said, “If you’re not together, neither of you should have the child.” So, her agreeing to this proposal is almost impossible.

“If she agrees, then what?” Rohan asked.

I remembered the typical style of co-parenting and spoke out, “The same that you used to do with your parents. Half of the year he spends with me and the other half with you”

“Don’t worry much. For now, I haven’t applied for a job. After my convocation, I will search for one and I will settle in my job city. And always, my first home will be where Sudha is. If you will be together, then I’ll consider that as my second home, else forget it. One thing is for sure, these six months rule I’m against it” A part of me felt proud seeing my kid express himself so genuinely and boldly. That’s how my parents raised us; we share parents.

“Then forget your second home”, I responded without hesitation.

“Usha, we’re having him after years, and it’s our responsibility to look after him, do his marriage, and do many things in the future. How long should Sudha have that burden?” He has a point, and I feel the same, but what choice do we have?

“So in this way you plan to be with me, huh? I know one day this is going to happen. Only our son will be the reason for us being together” Part of me knew he wasn’t aiming for that, but I couldn’t find the words to end the conversation, so I just cut it off abruptly.

“Years passed, but I still see the same Usha. Selfish one, who doesn’t care about anyone,” hearing it, I felt delighted. After all these years, he finally decided to speak up to my face instead of staying quiet or discussing things with others. Unbelievable.

“Yes, as you said, I can’t be a good mother.” The word selfish always reminds me of this sentence.

“Who said that I said that?” he asked as if he didn’t say it.

“Tell me you didn’t say that?”

“No, I didn’t mean it the way you think”, he tried playing smooth, but it's useless now, everything already happened. My heart broke long ago.

“Whatever it is, even the basic meaning of it conveys too harshly”, I mentioned.

He came close to me, holding my hand “Usha, what I mean is…” For the first time, his touch gave a sense of irritation.

I interrupted, “There, I can see a policeman. I request you not to let me create a scene here” Truly, when he held my hand, it felt like a stranger forcing a woman.

“On the day, I made a phone call to Uncle to discuss that I wanted to continue my job. Then he spoke the same as you. He asked to discontinue for a few years. For more than half an hour, I explained everything about my project to him and told him that this was very important. I began to explain how I knew all of this.

“And in the end, he didn’t listen. I was still trying to convince. Finally, he said, “Rohan is right, you can never be a good mother” That was the moment I decided not to have you in my life. Now he doesn’t need the whole diary to know the reason for the divorce.

“Not yet completed. The worst part of my life didn’t even come close. It’s when I discussed all this with my mother; she almost said the same thing about quitting the job and supporting you people. And that is when I decided not to have her in my life. If no one supports my career, why did they spend lakhs on my study? I’m the one carrying the baby, I’m alright, but you all are so much bothered about it. I hated that,” I concluded, looking at Saran, regretting that the Sudha and Rohan he knew were not the same as the ones I knew. He knew a different side of Sudha and Rohan.

“And what did your father say?” Rohan asked, and he now blames him for no reason.

“You’re happy that he’s dead now? Always complaining about him, no,” He hates my father.

“Just give an answer”, he demanded.

“He supported me, he said, if you think you can manage both, just do it, he said” I remembered him, he was the only one who stood by my side when no one did.

“And what if you couldn’t manage?” he acted like my father asking for the second option.

“I didn’t get a chance, though”

“No, I’m asking what if you couldn’t manage. Remember, he always says to have a second opinion on everything:” Yes, I was correct; he’s trying to act like my father.

“So? That time he didn’t say like that, and I expect him to be on my side,” I answered.

“That’s the problem with you. You expect to be on your side, we stand on the right side,” he said, thinking he’s standing on the right side, claiming that I can’t be a good mother is the right side for him.

“There’s nothing right or wrong, it’s just perception. You feel it would become difficult to manage both my career and raise the kid. I was confident that I could manage, that’s it,” the cut off the conversation.

Maybe you can manage things, but it won’t make the child into who he’s meant to be. Values and discipline can only be taught in the early years. Society still puts the ‘motherless’ tag on him.”

Now to the hate dictionary, this ‘MOTHERLESS’ word got added, “You’re thinking too much. Also, as an alternate option, didn’t I mention the baby care centres?” I asked.

“Those won’t work, Usha”, he said as if he had gone to a few.

“Sudha will never be biased, and that’s why she didn’t support you, though you’re her daughter” Rohan supported my mother, and she supported Rohan; it was a never-ending story.

“Okay. I agree. But I expect to stand on my side. Otherwise, where’s love?” I asked.

“Love is not standing by your side though you are wrong. It’s about correcting you,” he replied.

The word wrong tries to convince me that I’m wrong, “I’m never wrong. Don’t manipulate me”

“Okay. Fine,” he ended.

“By the way, sorry for saying those words to you”, he added.

“Your sorry is way too late and can never fix any broken part of me. I carried those words for twenty years and will carry them until my last breath” I know how deep the cut was.

“Also, I always wanted you to say this: You can never be a good father.” Someday, I should get relief from stressing out everything inside of me. The words should find their home.

“Usha, it’s not like revenge. Since he said that, now I’ll say. What are you, a small kid or what?” Saran interrupted.

“Saran, stay out of it. Let us deal with it” His half-knowledge of our story could do nothing.

“Don’t get me in the wrong way, Rohan. I have seen all your interviews, and I still admire you a lot. You’re the best when it comes to writing, producing a film, making blockbuster music albums, and many more things you do…” I genuinely feel that way.

“Don’t just say to soothe me now. Fine. I don’t take your words to heart,” he interrupted.

“Wait. Let me complete it”

“Dealing with a woman is a different thing, Rohan. You lack those qualities. The first major part about it is understanding them. But you always feel you are right. You never want to be in that receiving position. You will listen but will not implement. You stick to your definitions, though they are outdated, and you never correct them. And this quality sucks and makes you a bad father. Because a father should first be a husband, and there you are, an utterly failed one,” I explained the reasoning as he did when he said I’m an unfit mother.

“Yeah, I understand”, I felt like a wonder seeing him accepting.

“Dad, you’re accepting just like that?” No kid wants to see his father fail.

“Your father has this rule, son. Now I am not in a position to listen since I am angry, so he stays calm and expects me to change. These principles are the reason for him being like that. Let him. He deserves this,” a slap followed by a slap I gave.

“You are too harsh”, Saran shot an angry look at me.

“Yes, only because I planned a whole life with him, and it turned me into a single mother” Every word came from the bottom of my heart, and I mean every single word. I made it clear.

“Goodbye”, I don’t want to stay long. Everything is now balanced. I didn’t want to say any extra words.

I saw a kid staring at his helpless father in a poor condition, “Saran, you are coming with me, if you want to see Sudha” I don’t want to see him like that. His dad should be a hero to him.

“Yes, I’m coming and decided not to be with any of you two”, he expressed his thoughts.

“Your wish, I feel like talking with my mother for one last time, I’ll drop you there and leave”, I said.

“Can I also come? Don’t know how many years she has lived. One last time, I too wanted to talk with her. She’s one of my favourite human beings,” he said. Both of them are very good friends, and as he said, we’re not sure how many years she’ll live.

“One last ride”, his eyes are entirely filled with tears. I didn’t realise he was crying.

“Okay”, I agreed, parking my scooter aside, we three started to Sudha’s place.

# Rohan: Chapter 21

“Where should we head? Where is she now?” I asked so that we could take that route, since it’s a highway.

“When I spoke to Shwetha, I realised she kept mentioning a particular place. It’s actually her birthplace. I know this because she’s talked several times about settling there with her brother. My uncle’s house is near a temple, and she had plans to live there and peacefully engage in spiritual activities.” Who knows better than her mother rather than her daughter?

“Oh, so you’re in touch with my sister?” I asked after hearing her name. I knew that Saran was staying with them, but how did Usha know?

“No. One day, I saw a contact named Shwetha Aunty. I took the number and gave her a call, hoping it would be her. She recognised my voice, and we talked for a whole day!” I’m sure half of that whole day’s talk was about me.

“You still don’t talk to her?” she asked.

“No, I never spoke after that day,” I replied. On our last day, when Usha’s parents invited me to their home, I brought my father and Shwetha along with me. I thought that, in case I overspoke or talked inappropriately, they would be there to handle the situation. That day, after all the frustration had built up, I ended up shouting at Shwetha. My last words were, “That cursed land brought us to this point. Now you’re happy that we’re separated. Don’t ever show your faces to me again. All of you go and die in that land”. Days later, I realised that was way too harsh. Days later, I often thought about meeting her in person to apologise, but I was afraid of how she might react. Besides, my life became so busy that I didn’t want anything hurtful to happen and disturb me. I have plans set for months ahead, and if something unexpected happens, everything could be ruined and my dreams shattered. So, I saw all of this as a distraction and ended up not meeting anyone, not even my father. My life lost its sense of purpose for emotional attachments once Usha was gone. Everyone laughs at me now because I haven’t seen them in years. Many times, I’ve talked about them in interviews and articles, saying things like, “They should be proud of me, wherever you are, I miss you.” But I don’t know how they actually felt about it. Maybe they thought, “He’s just saying that like any other celebrity would. If he really misses us that much, we’re just one flight away.” That was probably their opinion of me.

“Even I hadn’t spoken to her until a few days ago. She handed the land documents to me and said, “This land will never be the same for me without my brother.” That was the last time I saw her.” Everyone in our family has cut all ties and is living as if we never knew each other.

“Will you talk now?” she asked.

“Now?”

“Yes, what exactly are you planning when you say we’ll meet my mother? We are going to convince her, drop her off at Vizag, and then leave.” Seeing Saran through the front mirror, she confirmed, “Isn’t’ Shwetha’s place next to your home?” Sitting next to her in the car brought back memories of our old trips. After so many years, having a moment like this feels like a blessing.

“Yeah. It is,” he answered.

“Ok then, I will talk. What’s the big deal?” I made up my mind to beg if she refused to forgive me.

“You know what happened to that land?” she asked. If she’s asking like this, it’s definitely in a good position.

“You sold it and moved to Bangalore?”

“No, it is one of the top cafés in Hyderabad. I own sixty per cent of its shares,” she said, talking business. The car she was sitting in was worth more than her entire café. I wanted to point that out. Whenever she thinks of winning over me, she tries to prove something. I felt it wasn’t a good sign, so I decided not to buy it. It doesn’t matter to me, even if a ten-crore building is constructed on that land.

“The share value has grown enormously; even after accounting for inflation, I’ve benefited tenfold,” she said, feeling an unnecessary sense of pride.

“Wow. Congratulations. You’re too good at math and business” I faked my feelings.

“According to you, it should have been running at a loss, maybe even gone bankrupt…” she said, glancing at me. Then, with a proud shrug, she added, “But that didn’t happen.”

“Smiling, I said, “Happy that God stood by your side.”

“We could have been living happily there, spending our days playing with a boy, a girl, and Shwetha’s kids.” I hate these what-ifs. Who knows what is written in destiny?

“We can’t predict like that. Who knows?” I meant to bring her back to reality, not to take away her dreams.

“Yeah. True. I would not have this mental peace that I have now. Thanks to God again,” she misunderstood me again. So, not having me in her life brings peace. This is the nth time I’ve heard that. After all these years, meeting her again, there were no words like “I missed you,” but there were plenty about happiness and peace. You lost her. Accept it, Rohan.

Hours went by, and both of them fell asleep. As night approached, I decided to find a place to stop for dinner.

“Usha, Dhaba sounds good?” I asked gently, waking her. Seeing her close, I got flashes of all the fun we had. If she allows me for the last time, I want to grab her face, kiss all over it. I miss her face, fragrance, toes, lips, hands, bangles… whatnot?

“Okay. Why are you so close?” She suddenly got frightened when she saw me up close. Touching her hand she said I’ll complaint to police, now she files a rape case against me.

“Can I kiss you?” I whispered, slowly moving even closer. All I see is her innocent, independent woman's eyes who lowkey wants to depend on his man, but her ego is letting her not.

“One last time?” I put my hands on her cheeks, gently rubbing my thumbs across them.

Checking with Saran, we confirmed that he was in a deep sleep. “How much time do you take? Not like those college kisses. Just a peck,” she leaned in and whispered back. So she was also interested, and I don’t want to waste any second. Let me make it to the fullest.

Thinking for a moment, I spoke, “No. Then I don’t want to.” It’s been years, and I have a rough idea of how passionate it’s going to be. And if I disagree with her proposal, she gets angry and calls that misbehaviour.

“Then, don’t”, she turned aside. I kissed her on the cheeks. She shot an angry look.

“Enough. Sorry,” Sorry is for the impermissible kiss.

“Come, let’s go. Order some food first”

“You didn’t answer my question,” she pulled my hand.

“What?”

“How many minutes does it take?” This time, she moved closer.

“Until I feel like leaving, maybe I won’t. So, unless you throw me out,” in the mid-sentence, her lips were on mine.

It was never like a rush; slowly, I sensed each cell on her face. Her fragrance is the same after all these years. In one of my books, I wrote that dying together, wrapped with her, can only make this life purposeful. I thought of Usha while writing that. Hugging her for the whole day, resting on the same old couch, life was good then.

“Don’t let these weak moments pull us back together. That’s worse than staying for the sake of a child. Just go,” Her touch said leave, but her silence begged me to stay. She was absolutely right. Now it feels like we keep doing more, but once it’s done… it all feels temporary, like we were only meant to be together for a moment, not forever.

“What will you bring us?” She diverted the topic to food.

“Better if we have our food in an open place instead of in the car. Bring Saran with you.” I checked the conditions to see whether a woman can feel safe eating there since it’s a Dhaba on the roadside.

“Sir, family Section is this side”, the restaurant waiter said, opening the door to an air-conditioned room. The word family is sweetest. At least he believed that we were a family.

This was one of my most memorable dinners, not even comparable to those I had with prominent celebrities, wealthy people, movie heroes… none of it even close to this. I thought I would die before saying “Eat in a proper amount, have big pieces of roti”, this to my son. Glad that it came out today. Every day, I deserve this time and company with them, but I never understood why God only gave me a taste of this once in my whole life. Usha and Saran sat before me, and now the phrase “All I see is the whole world in front of me” made sense.

“What happened? Eat,” she said, seeing me zoned out of overwhelming happiness. So now, again, I continue with delusional thoughts because she asked me to eat.

“Thank you for this beautiful night, Usha”, I said, hugging her. Knowing this is going to be my last hug. Maybe she thought I was thanking her for the kiss, but all my happiness was at our dinner.

Seeing so close, being emotional with hugs, Saran spoke, “Why couldn’t you continue like this. Beautiful couple, yours is. Problems come with everyone; no one is perfect.” The kid became a man by saying this.

“You will understand if you stick with the wrong one” Her hand rested on his head with a helpless smile.

“Hope that never happens”, I hoped because man can’t live without a woman.

\*\*\*

“That direction”, she pointed to the right. We are almost close to our destination.

“Yes. That green colored house. It’s been the same for ages,” I remember she mentioning that all his summer vacation was spent with his maternal side relatives since she’s the only child, summer to her meant coming here.

“We have a keerthan Bhajan at the temple. Let’s go there first,” she asked me to park the car at the temple.

Oh, the lady who liked me for no reason. Always supported me. Like me, our vibe match despite our age gap is unexplainable. She is sitting under a tree with those hand cymbals, singing devotional songs with the crew. She sorted her life and knows what it means to be after growing older, ultimately reaching towards spirituality as the whole purpose. Just give up your life and dedicate it to the Lord. Instantly seeing her, Saran was about to run to her. Usha pulled him back.

“Let me go sit next to her. You stay with your father here.” She slowly went to Sudha without her noticing. She sat next to her. Sudha was still involved in the hymn.

Slowly, she placed her hand on her mother's lap. Pressing it harder. Sudha slowly turned her face, blank at first, and then froze in disbelief when she saw her daughter sitting beside her.

Usha gestured to continue the prayer, and I’m sure she can not focus on God like before. She will be thanking him a lot for bringing back her daughter.

After the Bhajan, without saying a word, she hugged her mother and stood still.

“Sorry, Amma”, she cried like a child.

“Can I go now?” Saran asked me, eagerly waiting to join them.

“You can” I wanted to turn back, take my car and disappear as if I had never come here. When Sudha sees me, she thinks we have reunited, and then she comes to know that we have not; again, she feels disheartened.

“Hey! Saran”, she was shocked, excited, all expressions at once.

“Your son, he is.” The old lady’s eyes were watered a little by the proud feeling of raising a kid for twenty years and handing him over to his birth mother. I love this.

“I know Amma”, she whispered, joining him in the hug.

These two ladies were something special in my life. None of them has a permanent place, in any case. What else can I do rather than have immense gratitude for them? People think love goes away when they hurt you. No, it’s not true; love stays the same, and some negative thoughts fill the room, making the love appear small.

“Tell me this time you are not leaving”, Sudha asked.

“No. Never.” The hug talked about many things that words couldn’t, which made her decide not to leave her son with his mother but to stay with them. Happy for them.

“What about Rohan?” the kid asked. If there’s anyone who cares about this poor guy, that’s only him. I love you, kid.

“Rohan?” Sudha, who is familiar with that name: his favourite child from another born mother, turned slowly toward me, hoping it was me.

Yes, that’s me, my friend. “Hi”, I waved. She slowly walked towards me, unsure if it was really me.

“Why did you stand here?” she asked. I can’t say the truth that your daughter won’t allow me into your house.

“How is life?” I smiled. The smile we get seeing our well-wishers.

“I know how yours is. You achieved everything that you dreamed. Congratulations. God bless you, child” If there’s someone who monitors me, that’s only her. From my first book to my last film, she knows everything, and if we were on good terms, she also discusses the thought behind it. Such a sweet, encouraging soul she is.

“Everything? You sure?” I asked, hinting to her that my life is in front of me, rejecting me.

“Okay, let’s go. Talk about something,” we walked far from Usha and Saran. It’s only us. That’s why Usha always complained, asking me if I had done some kind of magic on Sudha. No, I did nothing, with someone it feels that way, you feel safe around them, and equally, they do.

“Let these aged ears hear some good news. Decided to be together again?” she asked, not knowing more about her stubborn daughter who has stuck at a few words, not believing the fact that people change.

“No. I came to meet you. Take you to Vizag, and you three will be together” It’s hard to say this.

“What did she say?”

“Everything I said now was told by her only. She still doesn’t believe me,” I smiled instead. Crying isn’t something you can just do, not like that.

“It’s nothing to do with beliefs, Rohan. You are different, and that’s okay. Do you think we are the same?” If Usha hates someone apart from me, it’s her mother.

She continued, “No, not at all the same. Even though we argue a lot over many things, she decided to be with me, but with you, she feels it is a burden”

“Why? We can stay and fight and work through it.” Convincing Usha is, anyway, impossible; at least let me hear her mother’s thoughts on this.

“Why should she suffer all that, Rohan? I’m her mother. That love isn’t taught, it’s born, instinctive. And children don’t abandon that. But with others, it’s always a personal choice, so she decided not to go through all this” She was also on the same point, and it sounded reasonable. I couldn’t agree more.

“You are also using words like suffer” I was disappointed when she pointed out that our relationship isn’t a good pair.

“No, not like that. Let’s say you like something, but if I keep giving everything except that, will it make you happy? The same applies to your relationship; you have everything with you except what she wants. And that’s not your fault, either. Let it go”

After twenty years, she is convinced that we are different. But I still feel no two are the same; it’s on us whether to keep them in our lives or not. Usha’s choice was not to be with me, which led to our marriage ending in divorce.

“Accepted, Aunty” No more theories I wanted to learn.

“Your recent album was crazy”, she complimented.

“Thanks!”

“I’m always there for you. I thought it would be awkward if I were still in touch with you after everything that happened with my daughter. But from now until I die, I will review all your work. I’m your best critic, remember?” I was happy hearing that.

“Always. You are.” She won’t be biased; she tells her genuine opinion.

“Shall we start to Vizag?” I asked because I have other work. It’s already been two days since I cancelled all my plans.

“A few days, Usha will stay with me here in her uncle’s home, and then we all will leave” I wanted to join them, but now I have become some distant relative, not a family. Someday, I should leave.

“I have some other plans. Take care. Bye,” I walked fast towards my car to avoid this farewell thing with Usha. I can’t face her again. I request, she rejects.

“Be in touch. Bye”

The kid observed me and spoke loudly, “Dad, where are you going?” If he calls me dad again, I will stay, no matter what. Please don’t call me dad, saran. Here, no one is allowing that.

“Remember, we have a shoot tomorrow”, he knows my busy schedule well.

“Yeah. You should promise me a thing,” he asked, hoping that’s not about to be with him. I asked him what it is.

“Come to my convocation, it’s in fifteen days”, he always wanted me there.

“I want you, both my mothers, to see me receiving my college degree”, a very small thing he asked for.

“Done”, I agreed.

Usha joined us. “Bye, Usha”, I waved, and she didn’t ask me to stay.

“Bye, Rohan”, she replied. But this isn’t her last bye. Again, on the day of Saran’s convocation, a similar episode repeats. I hope for something, and nothing is going to happen. Stuck in this loop forever.

I have a lot of experience throughout my life. In the journey of letters, I interacted with many people, but this was an entirely new life lesson. I will plan to make a separate film or write a book about it. The lesson is simple: Any relationship stands on one simple truth: whether you genuinely want to stay, no matter what. If your heart was never in it, you’ll always find something to complain about. But if you want them and there’s no other option in your mind, then you’ll take them as they are. No matter what they do, how they behave… You stay, because you’ve already chosen them.

Our society should take pride in the fact that women today can take a stand and live independently, especially when they’re not valued in their own homes. In previous generations, there were many instances where husbands tortured their wives, talked rudely, committed domestic violence and several other things. But now this isn’t allowed; every woman out there has become so strong. I’m proud of my society. We talked about standing strong, but the truth is, many don’t know how much is too much. These days, even a few unkind words are enough to end something forever. The balance should be mastered well. You don’t leave at the first sign of trouble. You leave when it’s serious, when it crosses a boundary you can’t accept. Everything else? It needs compromise. That’s how real relationships work. Asking to quit a job for years for the family’s sake made it this far. Maybe now it’s sounding simple, but the way I chose to express it was harsh. So didn’t she? It’s just that our thresholds for pain were never the same. She gets hurt easily and holds onto it, carrying it in her heart forever. I, on the other hand, try to forgive, no matter how deep the wound. Maybe that’s why we could never truly be one.

I drove the car alone to my home, which is never a home, just waiting for fifteen days so that I can meet them soon. Hope keeps me going. Maybe one day she’ll think of me and give us a second chance. Maybe she’ll forgive me. And until that day comes… I’ll keep loving you, Usha. Let my busy life keep me distracted. I only pray, God, don’t leave me alone with my thoughts until she’s beside me again.

# Epilogue

“Amma”, I call, and two respond. I keep saying “Not you, not you”.

Shwetha Aunty and Usha talk endlessly, making up for all the conversations they missed over the years. Usha spends as much time at their home as she does at ours. She already knew Vishnu Uncle, too; he used to work with my mother. So with both of them around, their home feels almost like a second home to her.

“Saran, did I say the reason behind your friend’s name?” Usha asked.

“Madhav?”

“Yes, why Madhav? Why not some other”

“Stop, you’re not supposed to say all those…” Before she could spill the name, Shwetha Aunty pressed her palm over her mouth playfully, suppressing a laugh.

“If we were blessed with another girl, I’d also name her after my ex”, Vishnu interrupted.

“So your ex’s name is Madhav?” I wondered how the generations before me had so many stories from their college days. Even my parents fell in love during college.

“He was more than just an ex; she was obsessed with him. Even if he glanced at her by mistake, she’d spend the whole day talking about it like it meant everything. Literally die for him” I didn’t know this version of her.

“Your parents were no less, more than enough to die for each other” Usha went quiet, either remembering something from the past or regretting how things had turned out.

After the quiet that followed our sidetracked conversation, I finally broke the silence and continued this flow, “I know. Every room in Dad’s home is filled with their college pictures, wedding memories, and many albums of their life together.” Maybe I exaggerated a bit.

“You should call him Shwetha”, Vishu suggested.

“He talks when he comes. He likes to begin things his way. So just let him,” I said. I know how it feels when you’re waiting to talk to someone, but they reach you first and then claim, “I was the one who spoke to you first.”

“Alright. If he doesn’t make a move that day, I’ll do it myself,” she replied.

\*\*\*

“Daddy! You didn’t tell me anything about this” Shewetha hugged an old man who came with Rohan.

“Last week, he came to my place and took me with him. I’m staying with Rohan now. I wanted to surprise you today, so I didn’t say anything earlier.” If Shwetha calls her daddy, then he’s my grandfather.

“Oh, he wants everyone except me” Shwetha didn’t talk to him directly, but it meant about him.

“Get your bags ready. I talked to the movers, and if you and Vishnu are okay with it, I’m thinking of bringing you to Bangalore.” Finally, they spoke to each other. Siblings United.

“Also, say this…” My grandpa excitedly wanted to say something.

“What?” Shwetha asked.

“Had a word with mother yesterday. She’s agreed to join us.” So, after all these years, they’re finally going to be together again. To be honest, most of this is happening because Rohan is doing well: he’s rich, and they’re proud of him. If there’s any sadness left in him, it’s only because of his broken family and the relationships that fell apart. Even now, staying away from him doesn’t make much sense. They should spend some real, quality time with him.

“Now, many interviews of mine have proof when they ask about my family”, he’s the happiest person now.

“Vishnu, please don’t deny this. I talked to your company’s MD and he told him that he can transfer you to your Bangalore branch”

“You already did?” Vishnu got surprised.

“Yes, not just as part of the family, but as an influencer, a writer, someone people know and listen to.” As I said, he’s ready to use everything he has to make this work.

“That works every time”, Power is Rich.

It’s surprising how, after almost thirty-five years, a broken couple reunited. That’s when I realised what marriage really means: growing old together and not being alone in the end.

“Great Decision, Rohan”, Usha joined the conversation.

“It’s a big house. You, Sudha, and Saran could easily make it your own, too.”

“You know how small my heart is, right?” No matter how many different styles my dad comes up with, she simply rejects them.

“Maybe after years, we just find our way like my parents did” Seeing my father’s hope, I don’t know what to say. Dangerous addiction, this ‘Having Hope’ thing is.

“Rohan, we’re a different generation. Their mindset and ours don’t match at all. Honestly, it doesn’t even feel like this life is truly ours,” her reply firmly warned Rohan to stop hoping.

“Yeah. Just asked like that. I know it,” he smiled forcefully.

“Stop discussing the same things. So you are taking away my best friend, Madhav, from me?” I cut the topic. Usha is rude, and my dad accepts all those.

“Find a job in Bangalore, you can be with us”, he suggested.

“Ask Sudha too… and let me go back to living alone, like I used to” My mother is feeling some kind of jealousy or something? I don’t know.

“No, I’d never do that. I have no right over Saran or Sudha… not even over you anymore.” He replied softly.

“Fine. Fine. For now, let me graduate. I need to go there, they started distributing certificates” I walked over to where my friends were sitting.

“Saran Sharma Chaganti”, the chief guest called out my name.

Finally, I’ve graduated. The past two months have been a complete rollercoaster of emotions. Discovering who my real parents are. That’s been the true adventure. It’s rare to have a story like this. I may have felt like I failed as a son, watching my parents live apart, but I’ve come to understand that their choices are theirs. Their separation doesn’t change how much I love them, not even a little. I love them both deeply. And now, I’ve accepted a simple truth: there are ‘TWO PLACES I BELONG’

--- THE END ---