

Dedicated to My GrandFather, Whom we used to fondly call

Appa Ajoba

Preface

I would like to dedicate this book to my paternal grandfather, whom we used to fondly call Appa Ajoba. He was an idol for us, his grand-kids when we were growing up. This book is dedicated to his eternal charm and enthusiasm, which remained with him till his last day.

Ladakh, also known as the "Land of the High Passes", is an arid and mountainous region in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, India. Picture-perfect landscape, Tibetian Buddhist Monasteries, whitewashed Stupas and colorful fluttering Prayer Flags characterize this region. It is one of the most sparsely populated regions in India and its culture and history are closely related to that of Tibet. The Mountains, the Deserts, the Snow and the Oasis make it an unforgettable landscape. The travel requires one to cross torturous high passes and the roads usually open up from May till October for travel.

'The Ladakh Odyssey' is a story which revolves around Abhay who embarks on a road journey through a treacherous terrain. He is out to discover and explore the unplumbed depths within himself and to experience life outside the shell he had been living in. The protagonist decides to snap out of the suicidal thoughts post a setback in his life. The novel describes the travel experiences and the learnings which help the protagonist lead a better life.

I am thankful to Sumedh Hantodkar, Kundan Rajput and Aniket Bapat for helping me and guiding me to complete the Jammu-Ladakh-Chandigarh Circuit on my own bike. I had decided to experience the ride myself so that I could extrapolate the difficulties faced in the circuit to help create this story.

I would also like to thank Rajshree Shemrudkar, my sister-in-law for reading the first copy and suggesting me changes to improve upon, my parents (Suresh and Sandhya Agashe) and my sister (Ms Smriti Agashe) who kept encouraging me all through, and my friends Abhir Joshi, Sonali Banerjee, Dhananjay Joglekar, Amit Kane and Harshavardhan Lale who saw me through this book and for believing in me.

Lastly, A Big Thanks to my wife Suvarna Agashe, who patiently supported me through the arduous process of story writing and also for suggesting a

proper end to the story.

This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Names, characters, businesses, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

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It was 7:30 p.m. Abhay and Ananya were out for a casual stroll at Jogger's Park near Bandra, Mumbai. They frequented Jogger's park after work. They were poles apart, but liked each other's company a lot and balanced out each other very well. They would walk hand in hand many times. It gave Abhay a sense of closeness and comfort. He had missed out on the feeling of closeness and care of a mother in his childhood and being with Ananya sufficed that need. There were times when he would get a feel of motherly affection and warmth from Ananya, other times it was a feeling of romantic affection. In short, he felt complete with her. She was full of love and really cared for him. Being with her was the most fulfilling experience for him. He loved her with all her faults and weaknesses. She had become a part of his life and would never be forgotten.

It was the 20th of June, the start of the rainy season in southern India. The rains had just ceded for the day and the skies had cleared up. It was a good chance for a walk. Ananya had called up Abhay and they decided to meet up at Jogger's park.

It was unusually quiet in the park that day, possibly because of the absence of the usual crowd, owing to the rains. There was an eerie silence about Abhay as well. He looked greatly troubled and distressed, making Ananya uncomfortable and curious at the same time. Usually, being an extrovert, he was never tired of talking. Ananya too was never tired of listening to him, but today, he was lost in his own thoughts. His face was grim. The time was ominous. The hour was beyond apprehension. He had foreseen Ananya's response to his question. He was not prepared for her answer; for he knew that it would destroy him, but he needed to ask, for his life was hanging on an uncertainty. He was wondering if things would turn out fine for him or will he be an unlucky soul? It had to be asked some day. It was just that he was waiting for that day and now that it had come, he was filled with anxiety and all other kinds of feelings that really should not have entered his troubled mind. Just when his need for her was the greatest, this one incident could dent his situation and then he would, perhaps, never recover.

Abhay Joshi was an investment banker working for a multinational company and Ananya Dutta was working with a renowned real estate corporation,

Roark Estates, in Mumbai. Ananya was assigned the task of raising money for Roark Estate through bond financing, for its expansion, essentially making her a client of Abhay's. They had to meet regularly for discussions and formalities regarding the deal.

Both their offices were located in the BKC (Bandra Kurla Complex) area. Abhay resided in Andheri in a rented one BHK and Ananya born and brought up in an upper-middle-class family, in Mumbai, was a resident of a plush locality in Bandra. She stayed with her parents. She was a short, fair girl with the girl next door looks and at the same time had a confident and charming personality with a positive attitude. She had black eyes and carried an emotionless gaze, which was so intense that it made people uncomfortable at times as if they were being x-rayed. It had always been difficult for Abhay to read her. Abhay, on the other hand, was a simple person who disliked complexities in life. Ironically, his life had become quite complicated already.

He was a regular at Jogger's park, after office hours, on his way home, for a walk. Ananya too used to visit Joggers Park at times. They had coincidently met while on a walk, one such day, and sat down for a chat. She being his client, Abhay never knew Ananya on a personal level. It was the month of Jan when they first met unofficially in Jogger's park when the evenings in Mumbai were relatively pleasant. It was a beautiful evening with the cool sea breeze gushing through the trees in the park. They sat on a bench for a casual chat and had found each other interesting. Slowly they started meeting frequently and their friendship grew strong. They had their differences as she was born and brought up in Mumbai and so, was more practical and urbanized, whereas Abhay was born and brought up in a small town far away in the state of Jharkhand and had come to Mumbai for his education and career, yet his fondness for Ananya kept growing by the day. He had been in Mumbai for nearly 10 years now.

"Do you wish to talk to me Abhay"? "You look worried". Abhay was in his own thoughts when Ananya interrupted with a concern in her voice. "What happened Abhay"? "Is everything alright"?

"Are you in love with me Ananya"? He asked.

She was taken aback. "No Abhay, I am not in love with you. I am in love with someone else and you know it"!

Abhay walked with a poker face but her rejection had brought with it a license, which gave him the right to say all that he wished to and he was sure she won't hold it against him. He wished to be brutally honest with her to make her feel worse as he knew he had earned his immunity right now.

"Please Ananya, don't play with my emotions anymore". "I know you love to make me jealous and you like to see me going emotionally weak for you so that you can command a total control over me". "I am very serious this time and also am in a fragile state of mind". "Please let the truth be revealed as I am not in a state to take anything lightly today".

"No Abhay, I have always treated you as my closest friend, nothing more", Ananya responded.

"Then what about the time that we spent together"? "What about the flowers, the bouquets that you accepted from me"? "What about holding hands all the time"? "What about the hugs"? "What about the kiss that we had a few days before"? "Those moments had me believe that you are in love with me"!

"Abhay, I have always considered you my closest friend and I hug my friends so it's not a big deal and the kiss, yes there has been only one such instance but the gift you gave me was so precious and close to my heart that it made me emotional at that moment. You are not eligible for my love. You are already married". Ananya replied.

He thought of blurting out his ongoing divorce proceedings but he decided to hold that emotion back. He did not want her to say yes because he was available. He wanted her to say yes only if she was in love with him. He knew that she was the kind of a woman who would have been difficult to live with if she was not in love.

"Abhay, what happened"? "Don't go poker face". "It scares me!" Ananya exclaimed.

"I have been under the impression, till date, that you have been very much in love with me for some time now Ananya", Abhay replied. "You did not wish to do anything without me being there". "You always wanted me beside you where ever you go, whatever you do". "I too have been there for you all the time thinking that you need me because you love me". "I feel cheated today". "Tell me honestly; why is it that you that you reject me"?

"Please Abhay, don't take it otherwise". "I need you, and you already know

that I am in love with Rana, right"?

"Are you serious Ananya"? "The person you claim to be in love with is also married and I am sure he does not intend to marry you"!! "Then how does that make him eligible"?

"I can't explain this to you Abhay". "It's too complicated".

"Forget it Ananya. Let's leave". "I do not have any strength left to argue or discuss on this subject". "There's no point doing that".

On the way back to the place where they had parked their cars he saw tears in her eyes. He knew she cared for him. He knew that the tears in her eyes meant that she was feeling guilty of hurting him. He, somehow, had a strong feeling that she was actually in love with him but was probably in denial, for some reason.

On his way back home, a sad and a heavy feeling crept up on him. He wasn't able to make sense of anything anymore. His mind had gone numb. She too had left with a heavy heart. Abhay could sense her vibes. He always felt connected to her and this time, probably because of the heartbreak, he felt the need to be connected more, he sensed a sad vibe in her as well but did not wish to do anything about it. He needed to be alone at that moment. The sun had already set when they left for home. The sky had now turned dark and so had his life.

He did not even remember how he reached home. He remembered waiting for her to sit in her car and left only after she did. He always cared for her. Whenever they met he made sure that he left only after she had left. That day while returning home, he was unaware of the roads and the traffic. He had gone so numb that no other thought wished to find an entry into his vacant and disconsolate bearings. Probably his reflexes led him home that night. Oh! How he wished to get away from the hustle and bustle of life into nothingness.

Abhay sat by the window, alone, with tears rolling down his eyes, looking at the sky above with a blank expression. He felt so helpless, so lonely. He was at his nadir. He had lost everything that day. He had was left with nothing else to lose. He was in so much pain. He had given everything to that relationship and still it had failed. He was unable to understand why. He was wondering why fate had been so unkind. He was so devastated that watching

himself in the mirror became painful.

He spent all night crying by the window with silent tears and agonizing loneliness. It seemed like an eternity. Sleep had evaded him. How could she do this to him? He felt used. He felt dejected. He felt betrayed. He felt something in him die that day.

He was hoping desperately that she would realize her mistake and come back. He was waiting for that one phone call from Ananya. He was expecting her to accept his love, pamper him a bit and make him feel comfortable, but she chose to keep away from him. She had always been hard on him at emotional times. He was the one who kept coming back for her. He was the one desperate for her.

There were a couple of times before when he had asked her the same question with a flirty tone to it and she had laughed without saying anything. He assumed that her titillating laugh and her not saying anything might be an indication that she is thinking about him but had not made a decision. She had told him all about Rana. She always found Rana to be a charming person. She had also told him that they had been in love since their college days. He had got married under parental pressure but they were still going around. Abhay had a hunch that Rana never intended to commit to her and was just toying around with her. She, on the other hand, was blindly going around with him and Abhay did not wish to break her heart by telling her about Rana's probable intentions. It would have been of no use actually. She was too naively on to him to notice that she was being snookered. This had made Abhay more protective about her. He knew that someday she will realize and would need him to be there. It had been quite a few months that he was with her now. It was the time that he had asked her to marry him.

Abhay had met Ananya around one year after he got married. Abhay's marriage had not been a happy one. Abhay's wife, Divya, was not interested in him from day one. He had sensed it after he got engaged but he gave the relationship, a benefit of the doubt as it was an arranged marriage. Abhay had just crossed 35 when he got married. Divya was 4 years younger to him, mature enough to understand the responsibilities and commitment of getting married.

Divya had not let them consummate the relationship even after a few months of marriage stating reasons for her not being comfortable. One fine day, after being with Abhay for over a year, she suddenly packed her bags, ready to leave. He had to confront her and it was that day when she revealed that she was not interested in getting married but her parents had emotionally blackmailed her to get married. She just left home after a year with Abhay. She had asked Abhay for some more time to think. Abhay's father too had noticed Divya's odd behavior on his visits to Abhay's house but had let them be. He knew how arranged marriages were and it was best to let the married couple handle their problems, their own way. He used to come to stay with them for a week and go back so as to let his son and his wife be. On hearing this news, he passed away following a heart attack. Abhay had lost his mother when he was a kid. He had no siblings and now had lost his father as well. Divya did come back for the last rites but did not show any commitment to stay back.

Divya had left home a few weeks before Abhay had met Ananya. Abhay and Divya had mutually filed for a divorce exactly 2 weeks before. That's when Abhay decided to propose Ananya. He was comfortable with the idea as his marriage did not carry any meaning. He wasn't emotionally hampered in any way on getting divorced but Ananya's rejection broke him apart. He had lost every emotional connect that he had had in a span of a few months.

Tears started rolling down his cheeks when the sudden jolt of the plane touching down the airstrip at Jammu brought him out of his thoughts. Heavy with the emotions and clogged with Ananya's thoughts he descended down the steps of the airplane to set forth on a journey into an unknown land, all alone.

HITTING THE ROAD

It was already 3:30 p.m when Abhay landed in Jammu. The plane was late for an hour, for unknown reasons. The airport felt like a fortress being guarded by military personnel equipped with heavy artillery. He got down the plane and walked down a path surrounded by the heavily armed military personnel. It was one of the smallest airports that he had seen. He could see the boundaries of the airport with naked eyes. A concrete wall with wire fencing on top of it served as the boundary of the airport. Although the place looked small and inadequate, it was equipped with CCTV cameras everywhere. He could spot three parked airplanes in total, including the one he had arrived in. The place had an eerie vibe to it. No one was ready to interact. There was a lack of an eye contact overall.

Jammu has not been a very progressive place as it had been in the midst of a struggle since the day India was divided. It has had a heavy military presence throughout. Jammu Airport is just 14 km from the conflicted India-Pakistan border. Probably the airport's vicinity to the border was the reason for such a heavy military presence. The day Abhay landed in Jammu, there were no buses to pick up or drop the passengers to the airplanes. The plane had landed just around 500 meters from the doorway. Abhay walked down towards the doorway along with other passengers. Once inside, he realized that the airport was just the size of a four or five bedroom flat. The lobby had two security check posts on his left side where a queue of passengers was waiting to get past and on his right was the Departure Gate with primitive looks and a telephone booth nearby.

Due to the instability in Kashmir, the mobile networks worked in a constraint. Only the SIM cards bought in Kashmir worked. Abhay wasn't aware of this fact and so was stuck without any means of communication. It didn't matter though, as the one whom he would have loved to be in touch with, wasn't interested in him. He hadn't revealed his plans to Ananya until the last moment. When he told her, he was expecting her to stop him from going on the trip as it was not a planned trip and also because it was treacherous. He wasn't sure if he would come back alive but still had decided to go ahead. He just wanted to get away from the situation he was in. She too didn't stop him. She probably wanted him to be free of the heavy emotions in

any way he could. She just wanted to be friends with him and he could sense the sadness in her voice but was not ready to accept being friends with her. He was too emotional about her to be a good friend of hers and at the same time, he was unable to maintain a distance as he felt the need to be with her. It was an emotional need which he knew could never be fulfilled as Rana was a higher priority for her. Oh, how he wished he could own her and be with her and take care of her all his life.

He was filled with an implosive anguish that he knew, could blurt out unannounced, sometime, and he was unsure of how it would have affected his own self and also the people around him who really cared for him. He pushed away those thoughts as they had started overpowering his emotional state. He was there to overcome those thoughts. He was taking a plunge into the unknown just so that he could experience some calm and solitude to be at peace with self and the world around him. A few days to contemplate, travel, meet new people and learn to live without her. It was wonderful to be stateless, not within the meaning of being without a country or land, but in a state which was less and not about. Nothing was known, nothing was there to prepare for, nothing to follow routine and regimen, just being on his own.

Many factors could work to get him back on track, but travel into the unknown in the absence of any plan was the best that he could think of. He was an avid foodie and traveler. He knew that one of those two things could save him. He had lost the taste for both but he presumed that a decent distance from the world he was in might help him. Pulling himself away from home to an unknown location was in itself a departure from routine. He was definite that the place, the living, the food, the ethos, the facilities all new and unknown, would exact more from him than he had been used to and in turn give him a chance to be out of the mess he was in. He was sure that adjusting to an altered mode would take time and effort. Building the mind to change would be tough and time-consuming, under the given circumstances, but it would help him to move on.

There was also the anxiety of travel and what and how it would be tackled, the preparations for each day, finding the right paths at the right time, acclimatizing the body and the system to a new and different environment. It was important to assess and discover the way to continue to be happy as he was, before the rejection.

The thoughts in his mind seemed to delve into the past every now and then and so this statelessness was deserved. He just wished that the turbulence in his thoughts would cease to exist. It had been affecting every aspect of his life.

He was only carrying a saddle bag which served as his luggage. It was a black colored saddle bag with two pouch-like compartments on the sides and a flat wide belt like design in the middle. When the saddle bag was tied to the bike, the flat portion in the middle rested on the bike's rear seat and the two pouch-like compartments remained suspended on either side. The saddlebags are specially designed for carrying luggage during long bike rides. They are designed in a manner that the center of gravity won't get affected while riding the bike.

Each compartment must have weighed around 10-12 kgs. It had a long thick belt attached to both the compartments which helped Abhay carry it on his shoulders. Many riders who came to Jammu carried saddlebags with them. Carrying the saddle bag helped Abhay, as it gave him an identity of being a tourist rider making it easy for him to inquire about hotels in that terror-stricken area. He got to know about a Colonel who rented rooms in his bungalow to tourists through a poster stuck just outside the gates of the Airport.

There had been few stone pelting incidences in various parts of Jammu the day before Abhay landed, which had led to such an eerie calm on the day Abhay arrived. He now guessed the reason behind the heavy military presence at the airport.

He made a call to Colonel Arjun Raina through a Telephone Booth at the Airport. The Colonel gladly offered him a pickup in his car. The identity details were revealed by phone and the driver was sent to pick up Abhay. He sat in the Colonel's car and was driven down to the Colonel's abode in Jammu. It was a double storied bungalow in a calm and peaceful lane just off the main road and the room allotted to him was a shared room located on the first floor of the bungalow. It was a simple and well-maintained place. There were other riders too, who had come in a group to ride through the treacherous terrain. The group had occupied most of the rooms. Abhay had to share his room with one of the riders of that group. It turned out to be good for him as he got some instructions on the perils involved and the

workarounds to avoid the same during the course of travel.

Abhay was mentally exhausted by the time he reached the Colonel's place around 5 p.m. He had not got a chance to have food until that time. On knowing this, the Colonel asked his cook to prepare lunch. It was a simple vegetarian meal but had a stunning purity to it. It had been a long time that Abhay was even aware of the food served in front of him. Life had taken so much of a toll on him in the recent past that he had lost nearly all his senses which helped him enjoy and appreciate life. His appetite too was one of them. He did not even realize when he had started leading a robotic life, a life similar to a dead man walking. At times he behaved like a possessed soul, absorbed in his own thoughts, not realizing or acknowledging any presence of humans around him. He was actually a cheerful person who was fond of life, but Ananya's rejection had brought upon, what sounded like a curse, on him. Food too had been one of his potent weaknesses and he was made aware of his liking for food by the taste of the lunch served to him. He felt like he had come to senses after a long time after tasting the food, in Jammu. He could actually feel the taste of the food. He could actually appreciate the food after what seemed like ages. The spices and condiments used were bringing forth a distinct taste of their own, unlike the city food that he had been having so far. He was served bhindi kurkuri, alu gobhi, and tandoori rotis. It was the best alu gobhi that he had sampled in a long time. He pigged out on the food like there was no tomorrow, also because there was no one on the table or in the dining room to make him conscious of his gluttony. The Colonel had offered him calm and almost a spiritual dining experience. Just Abhay and the food in front of him, that's all. He ate to his heart's content and thanked the Colonel before he went back to his room to change into more comfortable, homely clothes. He realized that he had noticed the Colonel's presence now, an hour after interacting with him. He was glad to realize that he was gaining back his senses.

The Colonel was a 6-foot tall heavyset man with bulging eyes, a protruding belly, and a heavy mustache. He had a heavy voice and a commanding presence which seemed obvious as he was from the defense forces. Abhay noticed that the Colonel had lost two fingers on his left hand, presumably in a war. There were noticeable marks at the place where he had lost his fingers. On enquiring, Colonel Arjun told Abhay how it had happened. He was fighting a terrorist infiltration near the Jammu Railway Station and lost his

two fingers to a bullet while trying to save a civilian from the surprise terrorist attack. This happened 2 years before he was bound to retire and thus had to retire two years early. He originally belonged to a small town in Uttar Pradesh but since he had served for a long time in and around Jammu, he had decided to settle there. He, along with a few of his friends bought a piece of land and built their bungalows adjacent to each other to stay together. He also owned two canines of the Alsatian breed. They were not very friendly. Abhay too was not very fond of animals so kept away from them.

In the evening around 6:30'ish he decided to go ahead and get his bike which he had sent through a courier service a few days earlier. He had been intimated of its arrival in Jammu a couple of days prior to his arrival.

As it was a Sunday and also because of the stone pelting incidences in Jammu the day before, most of the shops were shut. One of the riders of the group staying in the same bungalow dropped him to the courier service's warehouse; so that he could collect his bike. The warehouse was around 8-10 km from Colonel Arjun's abode. Abhay tried to remember the way back to the Colonel's bungalow as he had to collect his bike and come back on his own. He tried to mark some shops and places as the landmarks for his return but knew that he would have to search for them as they all looked similar. The warehouse was located on the outskirts of Jammu. It was a filthy place filled with garbage and sludge around it. The search for the person in charge of releasing the transported vehicles took some efforts. The moment he got his bike, he realized that the engine was leaking oil. It was damaged during the transport. There was no point arguing with the transport person as he knew he was in an unknown territory with no help around. Tension set in him, as the night had already set in and he was far away from the place of stay. He had not planned for any such eventualities. There was no way he could have walked back with the bike at such turbulent times but fate had left him with no choice. He took the bike and walked along the unknown roads to search for a mechanic. It was already 7:30 pm in the night and the streets were deserted with dim or no street lights en-route. After carrying along his bike for around 1 km, he found a kid, probably 15 years old, who was standing in a deserted garage-like shop. He was wearing an oily and blackened T-Shirt (which might have been light green in color before its use) and blackened brown shorts. He was covered by dust and grease from head to toe. He looked malnourished and was holding a spanner and a screwdriver in

his hand. He claimed to be a mechanic himself and offered his help to Abhay. His name was Rafiq and he was an orphan. His parents were killed in riots a few years before and since then he started working with a mechanic friend of his for his survival. He wasn't even able to complete his schooling. Life's hard, Abhay mused. By 8:00 p.m, his bike was ready and Rafiq pointed him to a fuel station nearby and asked him to rush as it was time for it to shut for the day. Rafiq filled in some petrol in Abhay's bike for a price, which Abhay did not mind. Abhay quickly rode to that fuel station and filled it up to the brim. He started searching his way back to the Colonel's place. He reached the Colonel's place around 9 p.m.

Over dinner and drinks, he opened up a bit and told his plans to the Colonel and also discussed his security concerns. The Colonel assured him that the situation was under control and if there's a need he can go to an Army camp and ask for help.

The other riders had gathered in the hall after their dinner was over, for spending some good time. Abhay too was invited and he happily joined in. Sometimes it's better to be in an unknown company; as bias towards one is absent. No one knew what Abhay had been through so no one would sympathize with him, nor would any such subject come up. He was being treated like a fellow rider and the discussion and humor too reflected that. Abhay was sure that if he would have been here with his friends some discussion and sharing would have taken place for sure and that would have definitely put Abhay in an emotionally awkward position. This was the perfect way of being with himself, and being in a company of people; at the same time. All of them had a good time and they decided to call it a day around 11 p.m.

It was the 20th of July and the weather in Jammu was still hot and sultry with no signs of clouds or rain. The Colonel's place was tidy but was infested with tiny insects and mosquitoes. The fan in his room was squeaky and slow. The heat, the mosquitoes and the thoughts of Ananya were disturbing him all night. He was almost in disbelief as one after another thought crossed by, reminding him of the joyful days with Ananya. He never wanted to leave the thoughts, just wished to go back in time and live them all, again. He had all happy memories with Ananya, until the day he asked her that fateful question.

He somehow tried to push away those thoughts and managed to get some sleep for a couple of hours as he had a long ride ahead, the next day.

Abhay woke up around 5 a.m the next day with a start. He had had a disturbed sleep throughout. He got up, took a bath, tied his luggage to the bike, thanked the Colonel and started his journey to Srinagar. He realized how sleep deprived he was! There was still a desire for shut-eye, but the road lay ahead. The sky was just lighting up. The Jammu – Srinagar distance was around 300 km by road. He had decided to cover it in a day. As he rode ahead he realized that it was a tough road to travel on and it had a heavy military presence throughout. On the journey, he saw some other biker groups traveling along with him. The biker group that he had met the day earlier had plans to leave Jammu around 10'ish to reach Patnitop, a honeymooning destination. Abhay had planned to reach Srinagar before evening, so he left early.

The Jammu – Srinagar – Leh – Manali circuit is one of the most popular attractions for riders. The highway, when it passes through mountains is prone to landslides and avalanches during the rains and the winters. Thankfully, the sky was clear and bright with patches of white clouds, indicating no rains.

When Abhay arrived at the corner of Jammu Srinagar Highway he realized that it was impeccably made. It was a 6 lane highway with hardly any vehicles. Abhay was the lone rider for most of the stretch. He felt liberated. The feeling of being in solitude, in an unknown territory, was ecstatic. Big mountains lay in front of him with trees all around. The road wound through the mountains. A deep gorge with a river at the bottom of it was also visible while riding along the sides of the road. After a while, he stopped at a roadside dhaba, a little before Udhampur to have the famous alu parathas for breakfast. He made sure that he stopped only at those places where there were people around as the area was prone to terrorist attacks. After a yummy roadside breakfast he carried on to Srinagar. Although he was sad and lonely inside, he was happy to start noticing changes in him as the journey progressed. He was able to enjoy the taste of the parathas at the Dhaba where he had just stopped by. He was able to appreciate the beautiful surroundings, the wind, the weather, the roads, the ride, everything. The adrenaline rush had started to kick in. He was feeling excited that day. He realized that he had been dull and unaware of his surroundings until the time he reached Jammu.

It felt like he had risen from the dead to feel life again.

Abhay reached Patnitop in less than 4 hours. Patnitop is a famous hill station around 110 km from Jammu and is situated on a relatively flat part of the Shivalik belt of the Himalayas. It is located in the lower Himalayan Range near to the Pir Panjal range which is approximately 50 kilometers away from Udhampur.

He had to pass the Kud Market before reaching Patnitop which was supposedly a beautiful tourist location. The landscape had changed enormously in the past few km from a flat surface to mountainous with pine trees along the roadside and the weather too had become cool. As he had heard a lot about Patnitop the day before, from the bikers, he decided to visit the place before moving ahead to Srinagar. As he entered the small town he first encountered the marketplace and a sweet shop with a huge crowd. He enquired out of curiosity and was told that the shop was famous for a sweet made up of ChickPea flour named 'Patisa' which was a must try. He bought some for himself and packed it in his saddlebag. He reached the Patnitop village and found the place to be salubrious, calm and full of beauty. The green sloping hills, the winding narrow roads through the pine trees made it look heavenly. No wonder the rider group had decided to spend a day here. The place had almost a pure and a spiritual vibe to it. He decided to alter his plans and spend the night at Patnitop. He searched for a hotel, found a decent room for himself and checked in. It looked like a newly built place with freshly painted walls and an Apple orchard in its courtyard. There were tables and chairs laid out on the lawn. A fireplace built for lighting campfires was visible in the middle of the lawn. He went to his room, kept his saddlebag and came out to sit out on the lawn. Most of the tables were laid out under the trees. He called out the waiter and ordered a chicken curry, rice, and roti before he went in for a bath as he was dying to eat something. He came down after about half an hour and sat on one of the tables which were under an Apple tree. The waiter arrived with his lunch soon and he had a sumptuous meal. It seemed to him that he was the only one staying in the hotel so it was calm and peaceful. There were a few apple trees loaded with Apples on the premises. There was a garden with a variety of flowers too. He could see bees swarming by the flowers. It was lush green everywhere and the air was filled with a mixture of fragrances of the flowers and the Apples. Nature had the power to cure all emotional ailments, he mused.

He was informed about a 600-year-old Nag temple (Snake Temple) in the vicinity, by the hotel staff. He decided to visit the place once the dreariness of the heavy lunch wore out. He plucked an apple from a nearby tree and took a chair to sit in the hotel garden overlooking the mountain ranges. The apple smelled fresh. It was juicy too. By 3 p.m. the weather changed. It suddenly became cold and foggy.

The silence and solitude of his moments were suddenly broken down by heavy sound of bullet motorcycles in the vicinity. He could see around 15 riders approaching the hotel. He could see them as the Hotel was at an elevated position and the narrow muddy approach road to the hotel could be clearly viewed from the garden where he was sitting, enjoying the apple. He recognized one of the riders. He was the guy with whom he had shared the room with, in Jammu. The group was staying in the same hotel. He was more than glad to see them arrive.

Some members of the group came in, greeted Abhay, discussed his change in plans and his being in Patnitop, and went in to freshen up.

By 4 p.m he went for a walk alone and searched for the Nag temple. Abhay was not religious but the moments were such that he could not help but to go inside the inner sanctum of the temple and pray. All he could wish for was Ananya to have a change of heart. He promised to come back and pay a visit to the temple if that actually happened. He knew that it was impossible and also knew that what he was doing was utter foolishness, but his broken heart and the sanctity of the temple premises extracted irrationality out of him.

The evening was spent in a campfire playing games and chatting with the Bullet Rider team. It was a good mood diversion for Abhay, the weather too was peaceful, but the night went restive as Ananya's thoughts still clogged his mind.

It was 4:30 in the morning. Abhay couldn't sleep, another restless night, not a bright start to his day. It had been many days since the last time he heard Ananya's voice, many more days since he saw her face and held her hand. She must be doing pretty well he guessed, but why not him?

To wake up every morning, thinking of her was tormenting. Every morning he'd wake up and his first thoughts were: How on earth was he going to pass the day? He desperately needed to stop thinking about her. She did not love him. He shouldn't too. He had to be strong.

Oh, how he missed her. He missed her voice, the look in her eyes, the nodding of her head to every agreement, that face she made to every dislike, her cute nose, her luscious lips... everything.

Suddenly he felt his hand try to grip hers just in time to realize that she wasn't there for him anymore. It felt like he should just die that instant. He struggled to breathe, literally. It made him feel weak, emotionally as well as physically. He said to himself, "You deserve better. Everything will be alright." How he wished so!

He had foreseen this. He just wished he could have been more prepared to take it but how could he be more prepared? She was the one whom he had loved the most, ever. He tried to reason why everything went wrong. He wished to look for that one big reason which made her do it. He just could not stop thinking about it. Couldn't let it go.

Did he really know her? Understand her real self? Did she really understand him, for he too was an abnormal person with mystery and unplumbed depths within him which he himself couldn't fathom!

Was he making a psycho of himself? Clearly, he had become obsessed with her. Was that the reason she was not ready to be with him? Her rejection had clearly broken him beyond repair. For her, it probably was just like saying goodbye but for Abhay, it had been like one of his worst nightmares had come true.

Unlike her, Abhay considered her more than a friend. Loving someone too much could become one's undoing, he thought.

His mentally and emotionally exhausted mind had taken a toll. He had decided to get up early and leave for his next destination around 6 am but could not; as he had had a restive night and fell asleep around 5 in the morning. As a result, he woke up around 7:30 a.m. the next day. He quickly took a bath with cold water in spite of the cold weather so as to feel fresh and left for Srinagar around 8'ish.

THE DUSTY ROAD TO SRINAGAR

The Jammu Srinagar Highway starts from Jammu, passes through Udhampur district, Kulgam district, Anantnag District, and Pulwama district before reaching Srinagar.

The road from Patnitop to Chanderkote was a narrow tar road but the road from Chanderkote to Banihal was derelict. The road was dusty, slushy and replete with deep pits and potholes everywhere. Strewn with up to one-foot ditches, if the bad condition of the road there was resulting in jerking of knees to the two-wheeler drivers, the risk of four wheelers toppling in these ditches must have run high. Abhay was concerned that by the time his bike reached home it would turn rackety riding these roads! It was impassable and time-consuming but Abhay had no choice but to move ahead. The ghat section combined with the shabby roads slowed him down a lot. It took him over 4 hours just to cover the first 70 km. In the distance covered so far, his saddlebag had shifted twice from its place ruining the balance of his vehicle. Once while taking a turn as he leaned, the saddle bag shifted and he nearly fell off the bike. His slow riding speed on those shabby roads had prevented his fall.

He was exhausted and famished by now as he had skipped breakfast. He found a typical road-side dhaba on the way. It seemed famous for its preparation of Rajma Chawal(A Red Kidney beans curry and rice) as most of the people sitting inside seemed to be eating the same. He ordered for one and went over to the back of the dhaba to wash his hands and face as he was filled with dust. Surprisingly, the water was cool even though the outside temperature was high. He literally had to wash the dust of his helmet visor as it was reducing visibility. He knew that the clean visor would not stay over even for 5 mins because of the dusty roads but cleaned he did. He felt like taking a bath as the dust was really bothersome. The feeling of dust entering his respiratory tract was too deviling. The dhaba was a small place with a seating for around 30 individuals. It had 5 wooden tables with 6 chairs each. The tables were unclean and Abhay could guess what the previous diner could have had for his meal. The owner was a Sikh in his late forties, early fifties. He was wearing a dusty white turban and carried a tanned face. He was the one cooking rice and Rajma in a big container on wood fire. He had 3 helpers with him, one of them taking orders and two of them cleaning the utensils in a nearby pit. The washroom was at the back of the dhaba. Abhay had to pass a narrow alley to reach the washroom. The washroom was located at the edge of the valley. There was barely enough space for even one person to stand. There was a drum filled up with water and a used soap was kept nearby on the edge of the basin. He cleaned himself up as far as he could and sat on a bench. He was served Rajma Chawal, the Dhaba's specialty, with a tablespoon of ghee on top. There was nothing like a hot and steamy plate of Rajma Chawal, especially when one was so hungry, he thought.

The Rajma Chawal proved to be a heavy brunch for him. He had it as he wasn't sure when he would reach Srinagar. He was told that the road conditions beyond Anantnag were messy and that the traffic too was pretty heavy.

He left the dhaba and started his journey towards Srinagar. As a result of the high-calorie food that he had, he started feeling drowsy. He still had more than a 100 km to cover. It was dusty and the heat was tremendous. It must have been around 35 degree Celsius.

On the way to Anantnag, there was this heavily guarded Jawahar Tunnel in the Banihal region, the length of which was a little less than 3 km. It had a two-way ventilation system, pollution and temperature sensors, lighting system and phones to connect to the Border Roads Organization in case of emergency. There were heavily armed military personnel guarding the tunnel on both the sides.

The Jawahar Tunnel is present in the Pir Panjal mountain range which is the largest range of the lower Himalayas.

The ride through the Jawahar Tunnel was an experience in itself. The moment Abhay reached near the tunnel, he was stopped and frisked by the military personnel as it was a terrorist-infested area and the military did not take any chances. He was instructed to travel at a constant speed inside the tunnel to avoid any accidents, which he duly followed. Abhay came out of the Jawahar Tunnel and encountered a signpost which indicated that he was in the notorious Anantnag district. It was infamous for random terrorist attacks and was a risky place to drive through. Thankfully, he rode through without any unpleasant instance. Soon he entered a small village where a lot of vehicles were trying to overtake him as the roads had narrowed down. It

was tough riding in those conditions.

In that drowsiness, he went into a dreamy state. Ananya's thoughts started clogging his mind again. He was still unable to come out of the shock and sadness of the rejection. He started questioning his decision of completing the Jammu – Leh – Chandigarh circuit by bike. He wanted to do something different to get out of the zone he was in and here he was riding through villages full of dust and filth and sultry weather.

After Ananya's rejection, he had decided to let go of his life and be free of the emotional baggage he was carrying. He wanted to feel light and free, permanently, but something within him had stopped him from taking any drastic steps. So he decided to do something unusual and extreme and get rid of the heavy emotional feel that he was carrying.

Ananya had called him up the day after and he felt good about that, but the call was just out of a friendly concern and not out of love. He told her he was fine and kept the phone down.

He looked out for anything that could take him into the unknown. He wanted to move out of the state that he was in. He loved traveling, so he thought of touring Europe or US but somehow he was sure that it would not give him the kick or a push to feel good again. It was after a couple of weeks' search that he decided to embark on this journey. He read about a 31-year-old guy who had sold off all his belongings to explore the world, on the day he had started looking out for a travel. It gave him a trigger to go for a bike trip to some unknown place where he could be away from Ananya, experience the travel, the culture of a different far off place and also spend some time in solitude.

The preparation for the trip too was done in haste. He encountered a website while surfing the internet and the thought clicked. He tracked down a few biking circuits and decided to ride the Jammu-Leh-Srinagar circuit. He found that quite a few biker groups complete the circuit at least once a year. He sat down to track the circuit and select the best path and time to travel. He realized that the month of June-July was considered an ideal time for travel through the region. It was nearly the end of June so he started searching for flight tickets to Jammu and found a cheaper option in Mumbai-Delhi/Delhi-Jammu ticket. He booked it without a second thought as he had made up his mind for the circuit. He applied for leave after he booked the tickets. He was

sanctioned leave almost immediately as he had not taken a leave in a long time. He serviced his bike and bought a saddle bag to carry his belongings. He also bought rain gear and winter clothes that he might require for a trip through the world's highest motorable road, "Khardung La".

The main reason behind his whimsical decision was the treacherous and risky travel in an unknown region, which he was sure, would change him in some way and take him away from the mess he had put himself in. He wanted it to be much more than a journey. He wanted this adventurous journey to be filled with <u>irrefutable empowering energy</u>. He wanted to focus exclusively on the positive and give attention to getting rid of the negative emotional residue that had accumulated over time. He thought to himself, it won't make a difference to anyone if he does not come back alive as his parents were no more, his wife had left him and the woman he loved the most had declined to be with him. There was nothing to live up to and no one to live for. If he did come back from the journey alive, he might be a changed person. Why not take the chance!

Somewhere along the route, he had realized that being on that journey was something much more than Abhay had actually aimed for. It was about having the courage to forget the past and create a new life, his way.

He continued his journey through Anantnag, Awantipora, Lethipora, and Pampore towards Srinagar. As he was nearing Srinagar, the traffic increased tremendously. It was around 4 p.m when he reached Srinagar through the harrowing traffic.

The Dal Lake in Srinagar is a known tourist destination in Kashmir. The shoreline of the lake is around 15 km and is encompassed by a boulevard lined with Mughal Era gardens, parks, houseboats, and hotels. The temperature in the lake reaches sub-zero during the winter season and freezes the lake. The tourists cruise along the lake in colorful Shikaras. Shikara is a small wooden boat, around five to six meters in length, with a seating capacity of four, covered in tarpaulins. They are the main sources of transport and trade in the Dal Lake.

His room partner in Jammu had informed Abhay that a bike parking was available near Ghat 8 of the Dal Lake in Srinagar, so he could stay in a houseboat instead of staying in a hotel, the traditional way. The weather was hot and sultry and the temperatures were hovering around 35 degrees Celsius

when he arrived in Srinagar. He searched for the two-wheeler parking, easily found it and proceeded to get the saddle bag off his bike. He was exhausted by the journey and the bag had started to seem heavy. It weighed around 20-25 kgs. He was already feeling exhausted. He managed to untie and take off his saddle bag from the bike but was facing difficulty to carry it as it seemed too heavy to him at the moment. The heat had sucked out nearly all of his energy. He wished to lie down and rest. The ghat number 8 was more than half a km away from the bike parking and he was worried that he would faint if he stretched himself any more but he had to carry his heavy saddle bag for that long, in this heat. It might sound easy to walk half a km on a usual day with a 25 kg weight on one's shoulder, but consider a tough ride through a rough terrain for more than 8 hours, now it wasn't that easy. He was groggy by the time he reached the Dal Lake.

He walked till ghat 8 and then it struck him! In this struggle, he had forgotten to take the keys off his bike's ignition. Cursing himself, he walked back with the heavy saddle bag to the parking lot. He was worried, what if someone encountered the keys and stole his bike? He was in an unknown territory and did not have any acquaintances in the area in case something went wrong. He did not even have a backup plan! He just walked back to the parking lot in a hurry and located his bike. He was relieved to see the keys still in the ignition. He took them off and walked back towards the Ghat 8 again. He was profusely sweating by the time he reached there.

He was sure to get some space to stay as the tourist season in Srinagar ended around the 1st week of June and it was late July when Abhay arrived. He could still spot some tourists in the area, mostly newly married couples.

A Shikara owner approached him when he reached Ghat 8 which was near the parking. The Shikara owner took him to a House Boat named 'Chicago'. The House Boats found in the Dal Lake are primarily used as places of stay for tourists and the families of the houseboat owners. They are stationary boats made of the Cedarwood (found mainly in the Himalayas), moored at the edges of the Dal Lake.

It was 4:30 p.m by the time Abhay reached the House Boat he was staying in. He realized later that the rent of House Boats depended on where they were located. Some were located where there was a view of the snow-covered mountains; some overlooked the main road and some moored near the

floating markets in the Dal Lake. Since he had not read the reviews and booked the House Boat in advance, his spur of the moment booking had got him a House Boat which was overlooking one of the filthy parts of the Dal Lake but he was okay with it as he was too exhausted to admire the view. All he wanted was to have some good food and a nap.

As Abhay entered the houseboat he noticed the elegant wood carvings on the houseboat which gave it a traditional Kashmiri look. It was huge in capacity. It was the size of a five-bedroom flat out of which two rooms were used by the owners and the other three were given on rent to tourists. The interiors of the boat were all wood-based. The furniture had a traditional Kashmiri look to it. The entry to the House Boat was through its front open portion which also served as its balcony. The front room had a small CRT based TV, two wooden lounges, two sofa sets, and a big center table, all with heavy carvings on them. It also had a big hand woven carpet laid out on the floor. The carpet was huge. It felt comforting to walk on it.

He was assigned the third room which was the last one when walking through the corridor adjacent to the living room. The back of the houseboat was used by the owners as their residence. It was around 35 degree Celsius outside causing the wooden interiors of the room make him feel like he was sitting inside a pressure cooker. It was hot and humid. As Srinagar was supposedly cool during the tourist season, there were no fans in the houseboat.

Abhay's research had led him to realize that the highways in the Ladakh region open up around the end of June as the snow melted. Since Srinagar was located at the lowest altitude in the circuit, it was presumably the hottest.

He called for the houseboy, who he later came to know, was also the Houseboat owner's son. His name was Kamil. He was about 180 cm in height and had a lean built. He was a white-skinned boy around 18-20 years of age with dark brown hair, a sharp nose and a bluish tinge in his almost green eyes. He had model-like sharp features. He spoke broken Hindi with a Kashmiri accent. Abhay requested for a table fan. Kamil got him a one but it too did not suffice. Abhay was hungry so he requested some food as well. Kamil gave him a menu of some nearby restaurant which served authentic Wazwan Cuisine. Abhay ordered for Waza Kokur, a Kashmiri Chicken Specialty, and rotis. It was going to take around 1 hr for the food to arrive. In the meantime, Abhay decided to take a bath to wash off all the dirt that had

accumulated on him during the 8-hour ride. The idea of a shower seemed appealing at that moment.

He went to his room which had a double bed and dropped his saddle bag on the small table beside the bed. He had a nice refreshing shower in the attached bathroom. He took a sigh of relief as he was finally able to get rid of the dusty feeling he was carrying for almost 8 hours now. The food was already laid out on the dining table by the time he came out his room. The aroma was invigorating. The moment he smelled the Kashmiri Cuisine served to him, the glutton in him woke up. He was bowled over by the talent of the Chef who had prepared the food after eating just one morsel. He enquired about the restaurant from which the food was ordered and got to know that it was named Wazwan. Kamil told him that Waza Kokur was a chicken specialty prepared by braising a whole chicken in mild Kashmiri spice blend and saffron. The Chef actually cooked it on wood fire overnight in copper utensils leading to such an authentic taste. After lunch, he decided to take a nap. He wasn't able to sleep in his room as it was too hot. This was an odd time of the year, he thought. So, he went to the front of the Houseboat where there was some open space with a cool breeze flowing and went off to sleep. He was barely able to nap for 15 mins when the noise of other guests coming in woke him up. They had gone out for a tour of the nearby places, it seemed, and now had come back for rest after roaming around all day. It was nearly 5:30 p.m. now. He woke up and was sad to see a heap of garbage on one side of the houseboat, left over by the tourists. He had heard before that the Dal Lake had to be cleaned of garbage and the government was putting in a lot of efforts to do the same. He now understood why!

He decided to spend some time visiting the nearby places and asked the houseboy, Kamil, to book a shikara for him for touring the Dal Lake. Kamil warned him to be back by 9:00 p.m as the shikara availability reduced by that time and there was no other way to get back. A shikara arrived and he got down the ladder (in the House Boat balcony) into the shikara. The shikara owner was charging him by the hour to take him around the Dal Lake. The weather had started changing and it had become cloudy and more humid now, so sitting in the shikara was much better than staying in the House Boat as it felt cooler in the Shikara. He could see the snow clad mountains at a distance and was wondering how far he would have to travel in order to see the mountains from close by. The view was mesmerizing. The Shikara owner

took him to the floating market. Boats were made to look like shops. It was an entirely different experience. The main market felt like a mini shopping mall floating on water and the only way to go shopping there was by a shikara.

One needed to climb from Shikara to the floating shops to enter and buy stuff. Abhay was in no mood to shop but he liked being a part of a different ethos altogether. All the shop owners seemed eager to have the tourists aboard their shops to show them the goods that they wished to sell. The true essence of Kashmir (in Technicolor) was visible in the form of the floating market, which displayed all aspects of the Kashmiri Culture and its people. There were a variety of shops selling stuff like Kashmiri Shawls, Clothes, Hand Woven Carpets, Kashmiri Art, Kashmiri Handicraft, snack items, Kulfi and what not.

Aftab (the owner of the Shikara that Abhay had rented) was a poor, old and a fragile-looking man with a long white beard and the mustache shaved off, carrying a typical Muslim look. He was wearing a Pheran, a gown-like overcoat and a woolen headgear which resembled a monkey cap. He took Abhay to various shops and was trying to persuade him to buy stuff. He was probably going to get some commission out of it, Abhay thought. After a while, Aftab took him to another shikara like boat which did not have a roof. It was selling Kulfis and ice creams. Abhay bought a Mava Malai Kulfi from the shops and sat back to absorb the beauty of the place and the ride. Aftab then took him to Nehru Park which was in the midst of the Dal Lake. It had a beautiful flower garden and also had a Cafeteria on the premises. Abhay spent around 10-15 mins in the flower garden took a few snaps and then asked Aftab to take him to Ghat 8, near which, he had parked his bike. As the night took over, the coldness in the weather set in. The owners of the floating markets switched on the traditional oil lamps and electric lights, which gave an enchanting look to the place at night. All the lights and lamps and their reflections in the water, the cool breeze and the calm made Abhay feel cheerful and positive. He was dropped at Ghat 8 around 7:30 p.m. Abhay requested Aftab to pick him up precisely at 9:00 p.m.

Abhay mounted off the shikara as he wanted to have a look at his bike, fill up fuel and also have dinner at some place outside the lake. He went ahead to the bike parking, spotted his bike, unlocked it and took a ride to the nearest petrol pump. Most of the petrol pumps were closed and he was told that they

will open up around 9'ish the next day. That would have been too late as he intended to cover a 220 km distance the next day to reach Kargil and had to pass through Zoji La which was a difficult terrain. He knew, the later he left Srinagar the later he would reach Kargil. He also had to search for a place of stay in Kargil. That would have been possible only if he reached early. He kept searching and finally came across a fuel station and filled the tank up to the brim.

The hustle and bustle of the road and the restaurants nearby gave it the real feel of a tourist place. He also wanted to visit the Lal Chowk which was infamous for violent protests. He inquired and was told that there was a curfew-like situation in the Lal Chowk so was asked to avoid it. He then rode to the Restaurant 'Delhi Di Rasoi', had his dinner by 8:30'ish. By the time he came out of the restaurant, the weather had changed to stormy and rainy. He could hear the clouds roar now. The frequent thunders too were lighting up the night sky. He was worried and hoped that Aftab would wait for him at Ghat 8 as discussed earlier. Abhay quickly started his bike and rode towards the Govt Parking. The moment he parked his bike, it started pouring. The visibility suddenly fell down to near zero. Such was the strength of the rains and the thunderstorm that it felt like the world was coming to an end. A near zero visibility, strong rain, winds and no place for taking shelter; Abhay ran towards Ghat 8 after parking his bike in the rain. By the time he crossed the road he was wet to the core. Although the temperature of Srinagar was high, the rainfall suddenly made it cold. The rainwater too was cold enough to give Abhay a shiver or was that because of the thought that he won't be able to reach his House Boat that night and staying out would mean certain illness or death! He was sure that the rains would pass and Aftab would come. He had no way to communicate to Kamil or Aftab about his whereabouts as his mobile had no signal in Kashmir state.

He reached Ghat 8 and did not find Aftab there. There were only two shikaras at Ghat 8 and the owners were holding on somehow. He asked them for a ride home and his request was out-rightly rejected. No one was ready for the suicide mission. It was 9 p.m already. He was on time, but the weather had betrayed him. After about 10 mins as the rains slowed down a bit, he heard someone yelling nearby and there he found Aftab, nearly 100 meters away behind a few shikaras. He rowed his shikara out of the maze of other shikaras which were tied up together to prevent them from floating away in this

weather. He came to Ghat 8 and asked him to jump in. The moment Abhay sat inside, the gust of the wind made the shikara swing like a toy boat. Aftab asked him to sit tight at the center of the shikara as an inch of movement would have toppled over the shikara. If the Shikara toppled over it would have been difficult to survive as the weeds and underwater plants that fill the Dal Lake would have interfered with his swimming, especially since he only had the experience of swimming in a pool. There was a danger of getting entangled in the weeds below and drowning.

The calm and serene lake had suddenly become violent, ready to swallow them at the slightest mistake. Abhay sat in the middle of the shikara trying not to move and Aftab was carefully navigating it close to the walls of the ghat. As the weather subsided a bit, he dashed for the nearest houseboat and then kept it close to the houseboats so that there would be something to hold on to, in case the shikara capsizes. They somehow managed to reach the houseboat in 15 mins but every minute that they took seemed like a lifetime. Abhay thanked Aftab profusely for being there in spite of the storm and risking his life and shikara for him. He paid him a handsome amount in return for the good deed and asked him to come to pick him up again at 6:00 am to drop him off near the two-wheeler parking. He went to his room, quickly changed his clothes and went off to sleep. It was an exhaustive day. Sleep was still difficult to come, not because of Ananya's thoughts but with the worry that if the weather continues, it will be difficult to cross the mighty Zoji La. This was the first night in the past couple of months that he was not thinking of Ananya. He realized that there was more to life than he could imagine. He realized that somewhere along the way, after falling for Ananya, he had started living her life to impress upon her; in turn, losing his own identity and self-esteem as well. That was probably the reason he was unhappy with himself. He knew it through and through that, she wasn't in for him but he was the one who was clinging on to her.

He was glad that he had not taken any extreme step after his heartbreak which would have prevented him from enjoying that day's moments. Death, if it had to come to him, would come to him when it was time, he thought. It was not his choice. In fact, it should not be anybody's choice. Although he had come here with suicidal thoughts in his mind, he was now enjoying the solitude and toughness of the ride. He sure was in pain, but there was something inspiring and physically energizing in the travel.

He definitely did not wish to give away his life now. He wanted to live. He wanted to enjoy every moment of his life. This journey was always unfolding new adventures and experiences and giving him fresh insight into life.

THE MIGHTY ZOJI LA

Kamil had made Abhay aware, the day before, that the mighty Zoji La was a very difficult pass to cross as it was prone to landslides and slushy roads in the afternoon. He also told him that if he intended to cross the Zoji la safely, he needed to leave early in the morning and cross the pass as early as possible. This rule applied to all the passes in Kashmir. Come afternoon, the glaciers start melting because of the intensity of the sun and the roads become slushy. Ice cold water trickles down the glacier creating waterfalls intermittently throughout the road making life difficult for the motorists.

He woke up early around 5:30 a.m, took a bath and packed his luggage. He bade goodbye to Kamil and went outside to find Aftab waiting for him. Aftab helped him with his luggage and dropped him off near the two-wheeler parking.

The distance from Srinagar to Zoji La was less than 100 km and went through Sonamarg, another hill station in the vicinity, known for its heavenly beauty. The morning seemed good as the storm was gone and a beautiful sunrise was about. The weather had turned pleasantly cold. Abhay spent about 20 mins tying his saddle bag to the bike. He had had his problems with the loading of saddle bag before but as the days passed he had learned from his mistakes and would tie the saddle bag firmly to the bike so that it would not budge from its place and cause an accident. The saddle bag did move from its place as and when he rode through shabby roads but by now Abhay too was aware of the fact and had learned to control the bike in spite of the movement of the saddle bag. He had made a rule to check the status of the saddle bag every hour in case of good roads and every half an hour in case of bad roads and tighten it in case need be. That ensured his safety during the ride.

The roads were still wet from the earlier evening's spell and so he had to ride cautiously so as to avoid skidding in case the saddle bag budged. Kamil had told him to carry dry fruits along, in case he got stuck en-route, as they would

suffice as a good food supplement. Abhay had thus bought a variety of dry fruits and packed them in his luggage, just in case, the day before. He was also carrying with him, a two-liter water bottle. He used to replenish it at dhabas or restaurants that he encountered on the way. He was now all set to start the real journey as the next part of the circuit was a few thousand feet above the sea level.

He rode along the Boulevard road and then the Hazratbal road towards Ganderbal district which too was prone to terrorist attacks all the time. It's just because of the Indian Army's efforts that tourists were able to enjoy the beauty of Kashmir. He entered the Ganderbal district through a narrow road barricaded by the Army men. He was frisked thoroughly as he passed the barricade. He was carrying his identity cards in case there was an issue. Ganderbal district comprised of small villages en route. It was so good of him to have left early morning, less traffic to deal with and less time consumed. He observed that starting his rides early morning with a fresh mind helped him relish the beauty, peace, and calm of the places he traveled through and also helped him cover more distance in less time.

He was riding at a medium pace as the directions to Sonamarg were not frequently seen and he had faltered at a few crossroads. He had mostly taken decisions based on his gut feel, direction sense and at times asked the people he encountered to get a clear direction.

The weather became cooler after he crossed Wayul, Chiner and entered the Kangan area. The landscape too changed to reflect the real beauty of Kashmir. The snowy mountains on one side along with a meandering Sindh river (called Sindh nullah for some reason) and Chinars, Pines, and Poplars on the other side made him realize why Kashmir was called as the "Paradise on Earth". The road en route Sonamarg was movingly beautiful. It was mesmerizing. It was as if nature was at its creative best at this place. It was hopelessly impossible to describe the beauty of the route. It was a place to experience, rather than talk/write about. The view was simply surreal. As he entered Sonamarg, he was spellbound by the beauty. He could spot the snow clad mountains from close now. He could see the Sindh river flowing by his side. The serenity of the place gave him a positive feel for the first time in months. This was also the first time when he felt good about himself and the travel overall. Something about the place made him feel that his good times were about to start.

The Sindh River originated in the Machoi Glacier at an elevation of around 15000 feet, south of the Zoji La. Its cerulean view was a reflection of the clear blue skies above. The view was exceptionally clean, possibly because of the lack of pollution. Abhay felt like staying back at Sonamarg but he had already taken a day extra by staying at Patnitop and the risks ahead might need one or two more days off his itinerary, so he decided to skip the stay but promised himself that he would come back to Sonamarg again to stay for a few days and enjoy every bit of the nature here, which he had to skip this time on account of his tight schedule.

It was 8:30 a.m when he reached Sonamarg. He was hungry and thus decided to take a halt for a sumptuous breakfast. He went to a restaurant located opposite a snow-clad mountain so that he could enjoy the view along with his breakfast. He did not have enough time to spend there as he had to pass the Zoji La as early as possible. He ordered a double omelet with toasted brown bread and had coffee along with it. After having breakfast he came out and crossed over the road to sit in the green meadows overlooking a small glacier. He had not felt so much at peace since such a long time. Nature did have healing properties, he thought. He was lost in admiring the beauty of the place when he suddenly looked at his watch and realized that he had sat there for more than an hour not realizing the time. It was already 10:00 a.m.

He got up, crossed over the road and went back to the hotel where he had parked his bike. He checked the knots and clutches holding the saddle bag again and rode towards Zoji La. He could spot Army camps along the Sindh river en route Zoji La. He could spot many glacier-like small frozen water bodies along the route. He wondered how Sonamarg would look like, in winters! He wished he could stay more but at the same time realized that not staying back in Sonamarg will keep his hunger to visit the place again, alive.

He also spotted a campsite for Amarnath yatris around the Baltal town ahead of Sonamarg. As he neared Zoji La, just the view of the humongous mountain took him aback. It was a huge mountain that seemed to have carved edges which actually were roads cut through it. As he climbed up the roads, the tar road gave in to the gravel-based dusty road. The trees on the mountains vanished and a barren sedimentary rock formation took over. As he climbed up further he realized that the road narrowed down just enough for one truck to pass. Two trucks coming head on could not pass each other. His bike too had started showing the effects of a load of riding up towards the Zoji La.

The road would turn slushy if there were small frozen water bodies in the vicinity. Maintaining the balance of the bike, through the slush was becoming difficult by the minute as the climb went on from gradual to steep, especially if the climb was along the turns. He had a tough time negotiating the road at the edges of the mountain as it had no barriers. The barriers, if any, would never have held on under such conditions, he thought. The road was so narrow and vicious at places that he wondered how a four-wheeler could pass through! Getting the bike safely through such roads was baffling. It was scary and adventurous at the same time.

At one such instance, on one of the turns high up en route Zoji La, there was a glacier on his left side and a deep valley on the other. The glacier had started melting and water was gushing down the road. It had made the road slushy and slippery for a stretch of more than half a km. There was a truck ahead of Abhay which was trying to pass through the stretch of slush and was skidding. The driver was slowly and cautiously navigating through the slush. Abhay was right behind and wanted to overtake the truck, but could not as the roads were narrow. Balancing the bike at such slow speeds was difficult. Ahead, lay a narrow left turn with a steep upside gradient and the truck driver blocking his view. The truck's rear tires swerved in the slush spraying slurry on Abhay's helmet visor. He abruptly slowed and tried to clear the visor and lost the balance of the bike. He put his feet down in the slush which he had been able to avoid till now and tried to hold the bike steady. The saddle bag too had dislodged creating a shift in the center of gravity of the bike. Abhay stopped but could not hold the bike and it skidded back in spite of him applying the brakes, as the forward momentum was lost. There was no friction to stop the bike. It started moving back through the slush towards the deep gorge because of the weight of the bike and the saddle bag tied to it. In a moment he took a decision to get off the bike and let it fall so that it stopped skidding. This was the only way to save himself and his bike. The bike was tilted towards the gorge and he dropped it while trying to get off on the other side of the bike and hurt his right calf as it hit the bike handle. But he managed to get off the bike and dropped it in the sludge. The skidding of the bike stopped. He was shaken, but stood up for a moment, regained his senses, went around the bike and picked it up from the other side. It had fallen on the rocky part at the edge of the road saving it from falling off and getting dirty all over. The right side of the saddle bag was covered with mud though. He picked up the bike with a lot of effort as he had to balance himself and the

bike at the same time, but somehow managed and put it on its side stand so that it may not skid further. He waited for some time to gain back his breath. Once the truck was out of view, he tightened the saddle bag and started the bike. He was fortunate to have a starter button on his bike as it would have been difficult to kick start the bike with the sludge on his shoes and the kick, both. The kick would have definitely slipped and caused another injury. He managed to sit on the bike without falling over. It was tricky but he managed. He observed that the road was slushier in the middle but less slushy on the sides. Riding on the side of the valley was dangerous so he decided to drive by the side of the mountain. He was wearing a helmet which would prevent him from any injuries in case gravel fell on his head from the mountaintop. With some effort, he was able to get his bike running again. He was more cautious than ever now as he wanted to avoid the repetition of the fall. He slowly navigated his bike out of the slushy road on to the dusty road again. In some time he found himself in the midst of two melting glaciers on either side of the road. He washed his hands and the right side of the saddle bag in the ice-cold water. As he was wearing a pair of nylon running shoes, he washed them superficially to get rid of the excess mud so that the shoes do not get wet entirely. He had bought a newspaper with him. He folded it and placed it inside his shoes to cover his feet from all the sides and wore them to avoid the coldness of the slightly wet shoes. Getting sick was the last thing on his mind on such a route. Surviving through the incident itself was a feeling of achievement and adventure.

The coldness in the weather was increasing as he was climbing up and so was the intensity of the sun. The feeling was hard to explain. It was as if the cold and the heat both had struck at the same time. The heat and the feel of breathlessness were more annoying. Around a km from the top, he could see that the traffic had come to a standstill. There were a few bikers and a few cars parked and the tourists were waiting outside. When he reached the place he realized that a landslide had taken place a few minutes before and had brought the movement on the road to a halt. He was able to see a portion of the road ahead covered with debris from the falling rocks and water gushing past it. Landslides were a common occurrence in this part of Kashmir and the Indian Army was forever ready to get the road ready for transport again. He spotted a person driving a bulldozer towards the traffic. He blocked the road by parking the bulldozer in the narrow part of the road and got down. When enquired, he replied that the debris was spread over more than 200 meters on

the road and so it would take them around 3-4 hours to clear it up. He was thus stuck at 11000 feet above sea level where the air had thinned down considerably and the intensity of the sun was at its peak and no trees to take cover. Just standing there made him feel breathless. He needed to acclimatize to the lack of oxygen henceforth. He could see a valley on his right side with a pleasant view. The valley was deep and to its end were the snow covered Himalayan ranges. He was surprised that he could see clearly for long distances. This was probably because of the low density of air and lack of clouds, fog, and pollution at these heights.

He sat on his bike admiring the views from the top waiting for the landslides to be cleared up. He could see bulldozers and JCB's working from a distance to clear the debris. The traffic too was building up as the wait time increased. It was 1 p.m now and he had started feeling hungry. He took out the dry fruits meant exactly for such a time, thanked Kamil, in his heart, for advising him to buy some, ate them and drank water. He realized that his bottle was near empty and there was no water source nearby. The intense sun and its heat were killing.

A rider, who was definitely not Indian, approached him for a chat. He introduced himself as Greg Smith, a software engineer from U.K. He was a heavily built six feet man with an unevenly grown beard and a dust-filled tanned face. He was wearing a black T-Shirt and a six-pocket and seemed to be in his late thirties. Abhay guessed that Greg was riding around the place for quite some time without a helmet, hence the unkempt look and the tanned skin. They chatted for a while. Greg told him that he worked rigorously for 11 months and then took a month off to come to India and explore this beautiful country. His grandfather was a doctor working in India around early 1900's. His father too was brought up in India in the Northeast region before India gained independence. He had heard many stories from his father and so frequented India every year for one month since past few years. He had bought a motorcycle a few years before in Goa on his first visit to India and started his journey towards the south. He went up to Kerala in one month and made a deal with a mechanic over there to keep his motorbike in working condition till he came down next year. The next year he directly landed in Kerala, picked up his bike and rode till Orissa where he made a deal with another mechanic to take care of his bike until the next year. He had covered all the bordering states of India till now and had arrived in summer this year

to pick up his bike from Delhi for a trip through Kashmir. Abhay was in awe of Greg for his excursions through India. Greg had learned some Hindi as well. He was a loner who wished to tour the world on his bike. A few more tourists joined in to discuss and hear out each other's experiences. It was good to see people casually talking to strangers, especially coming from an urban area where humans are wary of humans. It was good to get acquainted with so many people. It was around 3 p.m now and the sun's intensity and heat had become overbearing. Frequent thirst attacks had depleted the water levels in Abhay's water bottle. He was desperate for water now. He asked around and realized that most of them were without water and some who had did not wish to share. Fair enough, he thought. It was a fight for survival. He decided to walk back to the glacier along with a few fellow riders and replenish the bottles with water trickling down the glaciers. He knew that it was not good to directly drink water from glaciers as they sometimes carried impurities which caused severe stomach upsets. They still went ahead and filled their bottles so as to survive dire conditions in case it arrives at that. By the time they returned breathlessness had started taking a toll. The thirst, the hunger, the Sun's intensity, the cold intermittent breezes and the lack of oxygen resulted in a headache and a dazed feel. The road was cleared up by 3:30 pm and the tourists started going back to their vehicles to get ready for the race to get past first. Traffic had been stuck for almost 5 hours and there were vehicles on both sides of the landslide eager to pass. Abhay was sure it would result in a chaos and he too didn't want to be stuck in one, anymore. He was one of the first few members who was stuck in the jam and was sure that he would be able to get his bike off the Zoji La earlier than others. As soon as the road opened up, there was a rush of vehicles to crossover, resulting in a jam. Abhay and Greg had found a way out from the side of a line of trucks which were going in the direction of Sonamarg trying to cross the narrow road in a queue formation. The road was so narrow that all the traffic had to stop to let the trucks pass. The trucks got stuck after a while as the road was covered with the vehicles on either side of the place where the landslide had taken place, halting the movement of traffic. Abhay and Greg had discussed the possibility after seeing the vehicle pattern in the jam and thus had decided to keep riding their bikes from the mountainside. When the jam happened, they realized that there was barely enough space for the bikes to ride along the mountains on their left and the trucks lined up on their right. They were riding with less than an inch of a gap on both sides. It also secured their bikes against skidding off as there were forces to stop this from happening on both the sides of their bikes. Small rocks kept falling down the mountain and at times hit them. As they were driving by the side of the mountain they had to pass through uneven surfaces. They had to ride that way for almost a km which took them nearly half an hour and then they were free of the jam. As they crossed the Zoji La, a few km through the dusty road, the pothole-riddled tar road showed up again, but this time it felt like a boon to ride on a road with some friction. The experience had exhausted Abhay and he just wished to reach Kargil asap. He had to ride along the bad roads for an hour to reach the town of Dras, which is the second coldest inhabited place in the world during winters, but was blazing hot right now, making him feel thirsty frequently. He stopped at a shop to buy bottled water. He was so thirsty by now that he just finished a liter of water in a jiffy. He then emptied his bottle, filled with water from the glacier, and filled it up with the bottled water. As he travelled towards Dras from Sonamarg, the lush green shades on the mountains speckled with ice got replaced with a rock and sand based mountainous terrain. Dras was a small town with barren land and sparse vegetation, with oasis nearby the river and glaciers. He could see snow around but there were no trees to take shelter from the sun. He started bleeding through his nose by the time he had left Dras behind. He saw a few children approaching him when he was cleaning up his nose. They greeted him and told him not to worry as that was a common problem faced by the bikers. The dryness in the climate was the main cause, they said. They asked him to moisten a kerchief and tie it on his face covering his mouth and nose to avoid it. He wore the helmet on top of it, thanked the kids and started his journey. His lips too had gone dry! He wondered what more would he have to face going ahead in that region. The ride had already become tough. The real adventure had begun, it seemed.

Dras and Kargil were near the Line of Control, one of the most disputed areas along the India-Pakistan border. They were strategic places for India to maintain a total control over northern part of Kashmir. Hence there was a huge military presence in these towns. There was a Kargil war memorial just below the Tololing top, which was the highest feature in the Kargil Drass sector. As he crossed Dras he was able to see the Tololing peak on his left side. He could recognize it, as 'Tololing' was inscribed on the mountains in letters big enough to be read from a distance. It was 5 p.m when he reached the Kargil War memorial. He knew it would take him at least 2 more hours to

reach Kargil, but he decided to visit the War Memorial anyway. Once he entered and interacted with a few soldiers, he felt a sense of pride within him. The vibe there was positive and patriotic. One of the soldiers told Abhay all about the Kargil war, showed him the captured ammo and bunkers. He could see the soldiers happy in spite of being away from their loved ones. He thought and felt immense respect and gratitude towards them and thanked each one of them who he had been talking to, for the service they provided to their country and protect their countrymen. He had some snacks in the military canteen and then proceeded to Kargil. The tar roads that he encountered in that region were smooth, wide and empty. Occasionally, he could spot military trucks going by.

On the way to Kargil, he could hear gunfire far away, sporadically. Having met the soldiers sometime before had made him feel braver somehow. He carried on, without worry, towards Kargil. He arrived in Kargil around 7:00 p.m and realized that there was still sunlight in plenty. He enquired for hotels nearby and checked into one of the budget hotels. Most of the good hotels were booked to capacity in spite of the off-season. Various biking adventure companies had booked the hotels in advance. He was sure to get a room as he was alone. He parked his bike in the hotel's parking and heard a siren in distance. He was still hearing some gunshots fired in the distance occasionally. When he was escorted to his room, he was asked not to switch on the lights till a dire need. It was not a blackout like situation. It was just for precaution, said the owner. The shops too were closed by sunset and an eerie silence took over. The hotel was kept in dark, except for the low light in the dining hall. There was a buffet arranged for the guests in the dining hall. Abhay took a bath and had dinner. His room was on the 4th floor and he could view the mountain peaks bordering the LOC. He wondered; what if the war started? The ether would suddenly change in this seemingly calm and peaceful town. He had spotted a lot of foreigners in this region on the way to his place of stay. He knew Greg too was in there somewhere. He had lost him when he stopped to buy a bottle of water in Dras.

He was exhausted by the heat and the feeling of breathlessness during his travel to Kargil but decided to go for a walk around 10:00 p.m. His back and his fingers were aching a lot due to the day-long ride which involved frequent use of clutch and brake lever and gear changes. It was dark and scary on the road and the visibility too had reduced to near zero because of the darkness.

He wasn't able to spot the moon either! It was probably a new moon day, he thought. After roaming aimlessly for about 15 mins he came back to his room and decided to call it a day. It was difficult to sleep with the firing going on. The next day morning Abhay decided to pay a visit to the legendary Plateau Baba Temple in Kargil before moving on to Leh. It was located on a plateau surrounded by mountains in the Kargil valley. The legend goes like this: In a broken-down hut, there once lived an old man who was believed to be senile by the villagers. He mostly spent his time amongst the plants and animals. During the war between India and Pakistan in the year 1971, his hut was in the direct line of fire between the warring forces. Any bombs that were launched onto the plateau would not detonate on impact if they landed nearby his hut. The unexploded bombs littered the plateau around the old man's hut. One day he went about the task of collecting the bombs and threw them into a nearby nullah one by one. Some of these bombs miraculously detonated within the nullah. He soon came to be known as 'Plateau Baba'. It was rumored that even during the 1999 battle between India and Pakistan when Kargil suffered tremendous shelling, the plateau and its enigmatic temple remained safe. Abhay believed that this miraculous story was more about faith than the element of supernatural for the soldiers, as faith and belief were the strength of all that humanity was about.

It was a small temple, nothing worth mentioning but seemed like it was frequented by locals and tourists alike.

He left for Leh around 8 in the morning. He hadn't had breakfast but decided to have it somewhere midway. He avoided having wholesome meals before the rides as it made him sleepy and if the digestion system did work up then it would have been difficult as there were no places en route to attend to natures' calls. It was going to be a time-consuming travel as the distance to be covered was more than 200 km. Considering the stoppages and the roads, he expected to reach by 6 p.m. He had to search for a place to stay as well. He decided to leave early in the morning so that in case of a delay like the one in Zoji-La, he could get to Leh in time. He stopped at the nearest fuel station and filled up his bike up to the brim as he was made aware that there won't be any fuel stations till Leh. He always made sure that he kept the bike's fuel tank full.

MEANWHILE.. IN MUMBAI

It had been more than a month that Ananya had not interacted with Abhay. She wanted him to get out of love with her so that they could be friends again. She knew that it would take time, and that time shall take its time to resolve because it was fair and honest. She was aware of his plans to take a ride through Kashmir, alone.

The news channels had been reporting a volatile situation in Kashmir for the past few days. She had heard about the skirmishes between the terrorists and the Indian Army on news channels. She had been, hence, trying to call him up for the past couple of days in vain. Abhay's mobile was out of range all the time. She was worried about him more than ever now as she wasn't aware of the network constraints in Kashmir.

She had a number of fights with Rana since the day Abhay had stopped interacting with her. Abhay had, in a way, become her all-time support system. He was her bridge to sanity. Her rejection had broken apart that bridge. Ananya was feeling sad by the day. Perhaps it was the pain of loss, of a vacancy, of building walls where there was no brick and mortar for it.

She was habituated of Abhay being around her all the time. Her want for Abhay rose with every fight that she had with Rana. She had slowly started realizing that Rana actually never cared for her. He was never around when needed, unlike Abhay. At times, Rana would not pick up her calls for days together citing reasons about a busy schedule. Till some time before, whenever she needed to talk and Rana seemed busy, she used to call up Abhay and talk to him. Now, in Abhay's absence, she had started feeling that Rana had been toying around with her. The fights were a result of this intuitive feeling that she had developed over the past few days, about Rana, but he seemed to care less. The more she missed Abhay's company, the more she tried to hold on to Rana. She had become pretty demanding which annoyed Rana more.

In Abhay's absence, it dawned on her that she had been taking Abhay for granted, all this time. How selfish she had been. Abhay had brought a sense of meaning to her screwed up life.

She was Abhay's client so she decided to visit his office to enquire Abhay's

whereabouts. No one in his office was aware of his situation, not even his close friends. One of Abhay's close friends, whom she had interacted with, on her official visits to his office earlier, told her that he had been terribly upset for the past couple of months as he was getting divorced. She was shell-shocked on hearing this. She didn't have a clue of what was going on in Abhay's life. Abhay had told her a few times about his strained relationship with his wife. She now realized why Abhay had proposed to her. She realized that his friends did not have a clue about Abhay's emotions towards her. It was not that she would have said yes to him if she knew the fact, but still, she felt bad to have broken his heart so bad. She began to feel like she had lost him forever. She had now started feeling guilty of letting him go but it was probably too late. She went home and cried her heart out.

THE SPRITUAL INTERVENTION @ SHANTI STUPA..

For the first few km after Kargil, the road was literally nonexistent. It was full of sand and dust. After about an hour of the ride, the Rocky Mountains started making an appearance in a very grand fashion. All Abhay could see were mountains of various shades of brown with snake-like roads slithering through them. Not a speck of green visible anywhere. The clear skies above were the perfect shade of blue with patches of white clouds in it. One could only see, brown mountains, black tar road and the clear skies above. He could not spot anyone else in the vicinity, not a single soul. It was one of the most solitary moments he could experience.

On reaching the Fotu-La top, which was the highest point on the Srinagar-Leh Highway, he switched off his bike and sat under the shade of the prayer flags fluttering in the wind, to listen to the sounds of silence. The air here seemed pure. Suddenly and for no reason at all, there was very little he could think or feel. It was like he had gone into some kind of a trance. He presumed this happened in the company of bliss and silence. He had only read about 'Absolute Silence', but had never experienced it in real life. No whirring of vehicles, no stray canines howling away to glory, no ramblings of the roadside hoi polloi, the absence of the cacophonic sounds of the roadside celebrations by hooligans (which was a frequent occurrence in Mumbai), not even the chirping of birds! It was one of those places in Ladakh, away from the commercial tourist spots, which offered you that "Absolute Silence". And more than the silence, the towering mountains of Ladakh leave one with a thought to reflect upon: we were but utterly insignificant beings in the greater scheme of things. One simply can't beat Nature! It was the most humbling experience ever - a must for all. Mother Nature makes one feel so tiny.

It was one of the most incontrovertible experiences he had because he felt like it was that one place in the world where he could be himself and feel good about it. It was that one place where heartbreaks, failures or achievements mean a naught. It was that one place where he could feel heavenly. The feeling of being alone in an unknown world full of bliss took over. It may not be too incorrect to state that the mind too attracted benefits when all the parts played well. Silence at times either lulls us to sleep or lets

our system rejuvenate. He felt rejuvenated, he felt himself rising from the debris relieving him of his painful past. He spent some more time in the vicinity of this calm and bliss before moving ahead.

The Lamayuru Monastery was a magnificent view even from a distance. Although Abhay could see the Lamayuru Gompa (Monastery) clearly, it still took him a long time to reach there. In the Ladakh region, the line of sight can be massive due to the lack of pollution and thin air. Abhay reached there around noon. It was one of the oldest and largest monasteries in Ladakh. It had become hot as hell by then. He was not prepared for the gut-wrenching road travel as well. Motion sickness and altitude sickness soon took over. Breathing became a task instead of a reflex. Getting off the bike and sitting back became exhausting. Even tying a shoelace was tiring. The sun too was bright and intense; hence it was too difficult to see with the naked eyes. There was a small canteen on the premises of the Lamayuru Monastery. He went inside the canteen and washed himself to let go of the feel of dryness. He literally poured water over his head to get rid of the heat. He then went in and ordered for thukpa, a Tibetan noodle soup, and banana fritters. Once his meal was over he decided to visit the Lamayuru Gompa. He went near the Assembly Hall and heard prayers going on. His curiosity led him to the inner sanctum of the Lamayuru Gompa where he saw many Monks chanting prayers. Unlike the rustic exteriors, the interiors of the Assembly hall were bright and colorful. There was an aura of serenity and happiness inside the hall. Abhay was told not to take any snaps and not make any sound and disturb the praying Monks. The visitors just sat by the sides of the wall to watch the Monks in prayer. He too just sat there listening to the chants with his eyes closed and meditated to find repose in the Monastery.

After a while, he decided to get back on track. The routine of checking the saddle bag knots before the start of the journey had become a reflex action by now. He proceeded towards Leh. Once he was back on the road he could see the Lamayuru village pass by, with all the houses, most of them white in color, amidst the mountains of various shades of brown. Abhay wondered how people survived in such a bleak environment. Leh District was like a huge canvas plastered in various shades of brown sprawled across the dry Indus Valley. Coming from a lush green land that received heavy rains for three to four months of the year, it was hard to imagine life in these parts. The grotesque landscape of Ladakh region appeared bleak, brown and empty

across the immense, lifeless ranges. Just when he started getting used to the mountains and the winding tar roads slithering into the horizon, he hit this amazingly flat stretch of the road just after a village named Alchi, flanked by mountains at the far end. This place could leave anyone in awe. There were no vehicles in sight and a long, straight road fading away into the mountains with barren land on both the sides of the road. It must have been a haven for bike racers, he thought. He traveled along the route for around 2 hours and reached a place called 'The Magnetic Hill'. It was a gravity hill located 30 km before Leh. He switched off his bike as instructed and saw it glide uphill to his amazement. It was probably an optical illusion but it was an experience of its own kind. It was nearly 7 p.m now and Leh was still 40 km away. He was already famished, bored and exhausted because of the ride. It had been nearly 11 hours that he was riding. The only food that he had was at the small canteen at the Lamayuru Monastery. He also had to search for a place to spend the night. Although the sun was invisible, it was surprisingly bright at that time. The darkness took over around 8:30 p.m in these areas. The days started as early as 5 a.m. In the next hour, Abhay reached Leh and found a homestay near the Old Market in Leh to take the night off.

The host welcomed Abhay to his charismatic place. 'Jullay...', he said. He was one of the sweetest people Abhay had met. His name was Mr. Phunstok Namgyal. He was a short-heighted, clean shaven, middle-aged man, with wrinkles all over his tanned face. A short and roundish nose and a broad jaw gave him a distinguished look. He owned a quaint weathered 2-storeyed house that evidenced a story of simplicity. The looks of the house suggested that it must have faced harsh winters and horrible summers. The upper floor was rented out to tourists. Mr. Phunshtok was an expert in travel and trekking. Every year he took a number of tourists from all over the world for a unique trekking experience in Ladakh. The way Mr. Phunshtok talked about the Ladakh region made Abhay realize that he knew each and every part of Ladakh like the back of his hand. The Ladakhis, he realized, were wonderful hosts. It was always welcoming when the host made the stay as comfortable and homely as possible. They welcomed the tourists as their 'home away from home'; and when they fulfilled that, it made it all the more comforting. This probably happened because of the scarcities of resources and difficulties brought about by Ladakh's geographical location wherein people behave more adjusting and caring, incomparable to the urbanized lot who have everything in plenty. Rarity has its own pros, he thought. He had lost the

count of the number of times he had been greeted and helped by random strangers during his travel, bikers/cyclists passing by showing a Thumbs Up sign to the other bikers/cyclists. Locals waved every time bikers/cyclists passed. It was all done as an act of encouragement. The tourists too turned helping as soon as they reached Ladakh. There was hardly any crime in Ladakh. The best thing about Ladakhi people was that they were content with their lives and were forever smiling, a big lesson to learn for people like us; the urbanized lot. He too realized that he had been thinking too much about Ananya. No one gets all they want, then why did he think he will!

It was already 8 p.m. Abhay was hungry and needed a shower desperately. He was provided with a towel and instructions, not to waste water. As the old market was near, he went out for a stroll. The market seemed clean, at least by the Indian standards, and the people too weren't as eager to sell their goods as he had seen in other tourist places in India. Paintings and Carpets showing off Kashmir and Tibetan touches were everywhere in the Old Market Area.

It had been a 12 hour ride day and Abhay had started feeling feverish apparently due to the grueling ride. He had dinner at a restaurant near his place of stay, took a painkiller and went off to sleep. Rest was more important than food that day. He had decided to take a day off and explore Leh the next day.

Abhay's Morning started with the greetings from the brightly shining Sun and the glittering Himalayan hilltops. He had woken up early to visit the Hemis Monastery which was around 45 km from Leh. He asked for tea and was served 'Kahwa', a perfect blend of the Ladakhi spices and black tea. He left around 7 a.m. and reached there by 9 a.m. It started raining as soon as he reached. The rains did not last long but made the weather cool and pleasant. After Hemis, he visited the Military Hall of Fame and finally decided to spend his evening at the Shanti Stupa, which was a little away from Leh on a hilltop in Chanspa. The white dome of the Shanti Stupa that houses the relics of Buddha at its base could be seen from far away. It is one of the most frequented places, by the tourists, to catch a sunset. From there Abhay could see the entire Leh city, the mountains and the monastery around.

As the sunset neared, the weather turned pleasantly chilly and calm. The Stupa had a blissful vibe to it. He sat there on the wall overlooking the Leh

city at a distance, devouring this enchanting beauty. The cool wind, blissful vibe and the silence again sent him into a trance-like state and his past life unrolled itself before him and there was his mother sitting beside him. He remembered very little of his mother as she had passed away when he was young. Mother's love and attention may seem to fade away with time, but in reality, it never does.

THE PAST

Abhay Joshi was a man born and brought up in extreme emotional dearth. He was born in a small, remote town in a mining district (Dhanbad) in Jharkhand with a total population of a few thousand. The area was famous for its coalfields. His father Rajiv was working as an engineer in one of the coal mines and his mother was a housewife.

He was in 2nd grade when his mother, Neena, passed away suddenly. The cause of her death was a full-blown respiratory disease. The town, being in the mining region, was polluted. A few of his friends were suffering from asthma and other lung diseases. Luckily he was not yet affected by it possibly because he was carrying healthy genes. His father and mother used to discuss this at home all the time. For the safety of Abhay, they wanted to move out of the town but his father's experience in mining left them with no choice. Neena had decided that she will agree for a second kid only when they move out of the small polluted town. While Rajiv was born and brought up in a village, Neena was born and brought up in a city. For her, moving down to a small place like this was difficult.

They were arguing about moving out to a city for better education of their child and for a better environment, over dinner, when it happened.

Neena had been complaining of a mild fever and fatigue since a couple of days. She wasn't able to perform her daily chores. She had to take some time off every half an hour. She was taking the usual medications prescribed for cough and cold but for some reason they were not working. On that fateful day, they were all having dinner when she started complaining of breathlessness. Rajiv immediately understood that something was not right. He dropped his son off, at his neighbors' place and called up the only doctor available in the town, Dr. Sinha who was by chance, a family friend. Rajiv requested him to come to the hospital immediately. There were no rickshaws in the town so he had to take Neena to the hospital on his own. With the help of his neighbors, he managed to make her sit on his bike and carried her to the town hospital.

Dr. Sinha had already arrived and was waiting for them with the nurses and a couple of ward boys. She was unable to breathe and her face was red with the

pain of breathing. After hearing the symptoms the doctor diagnosed that it was a respiratory disease and for her treatment, she had to be sent out to a city hospital in Ranchi which was at least 4 hours away from the place. An ambulance was arranged immediately. She was carried to the ambulance and before she was put in the ambulance Dr. Sinha realized that she had stopped breathing. They checked for her pulse but could not find any. So took her out of the ambulance and gave her a CPR but in vain. She was no more. Rajiv was too stunned to believe what was happening.

That incident changed Abhay's bringing up. His father became a workaholic and a disciplinarian. In order to bring his son up single-handedly, he thought of only one thing, discipline him. It took an emotional toll on the kid. He knew his father loved him, but somewhere he felt the need to be loved unconditionally. He knew, only his mother could have fulfilled that need.

One of the basic needs of one's childhood is love and an emotional connection. When one receives these, one becomes self-assured. Abhay had grown up without these needs being adequately met. This lack of connection had far-reaching physical and psychological consequences for him. This incident had somehow created a void in Abhay. He was left craving for love. Not experiencing a loving connection as a child lead to a feeling of deep yearning in Abhay in his adulthood. Unfortunately, trying to get this connection from others made him desperate for love, in a way. He had been holding a grudge against his fate, against the almighty, for bringing him so much of sorrow and un-satisfaction.

After his mother had passed away, it was Ananya who had shown him a lot of affection. All he wanted was to be with her all his life. He felt peaceful, calm and assured in her company, he felt complete being with her. Oh! How he missed her, how he yearned for her, how he wanted her, but he had to accept the truth that she was not ready to accept his love. The more Ananya avoided him the more possessive he had become. After all, she was the only one, who had shown him so much of affection. He was too scared to lose her and in his scared mindset, was in some way responsible for him not being able to make a place in Ananya's heart.

THE SPRITUAL INTERVENTION @ SHANTI STUPA.. (continued..)

He was brought out of those thoughts by the caretaker of the Shanti Stupa who had come to inform him that it was 9 p.m already and it was the closing time for the Stupa. He realized that he had a lot of negative energy accumulated over time and stored deep within his psyche. It was taking a toll on everything he did and in every relation he had had. He wasn't aware of its presence till that day.

He realized that the baggage of his past, including his recent past, was the main source of his negative energy and also was the one thing that had kept him unhappy. He decided to get rid of that baggage now. There had to be an expiry date to all the grudges. It was his choice to be happy. It was his choice to decide to remember the happy moments or the bad moments. He decided to remember the happy moments henceforth. It's not that he had been through only the sad moments! He could remember that he had spent happy and contented time with his mother. Although his father was a disciplinarian, they used to spend a good time together as well. He also realized how his father must have felt after losing his wife. He too must have felt the pain of losing his life partner and having to cope up with a responsibility! Abhay was a kid then. He might have had his own tantrums. His father had sacrificed a lot by not remarrying and deciding to bring up his son single-handed. It must have been tough to handle a male kid so he had to be a disciplinarian. Oh! How immature had he been to blame everyone for his misfortunes? That was plausibly why fate had been punishing, he mused. He knew that he was a good human being, but at the same time, he was also holding a grudge against everyone he was emotional about. That was one of his biggest mistake in life that he finally realized.

Were these thoughts a spiritual intervention? Were these thoughts a result of being there; at the 'Shanti Stupa'?, Or was it because he had, for the first time in life, felt solitude, which helped him connect with his own self? In the city life, there's no time for oneself. There's always running around for everything. There's a choice for everything. Too many choices take a toll, he realized. Too many choices about everything from food to clothes, to friends, to needs, spoils the fun. Too many choices in life make one feel confused and

shallow. One is bereaved of a strong connect with his/her own self. He had always been on the run for everything and everyone to satisfy his needs when all he needed was to be with self. Ananya was the only one he had who was devoted to him but in a friendly way. She made him feel complete because he himself was incomplete and emotionally unsatisfied. It was he who wanted to own her, possess her. He had made her life, his own, to please her, to be with her. She was the only one whom he did not have a choice for, in his life. This was the reason he was so deeply hurt. He realized that if he loved her, he had to set her free. He realized that he was the one clung on to her for his emotional needs.

For some reason, he wasn't feeling either sad or heavy anymore. This trip was bringing out the best in him. He could sense the baggage being lifted as a result of the realizations and he felt light and happy again. Today might come as being over, but the next day might bear a new mystery, he thought to himself. Fortunate are they who realize that 'Looking forward to the next adventure was what life was all about'! One lives for that and is also pushed for that. It is the fate of all humans; they take a long time to realize that the mystery of the next moment is what keeps them alive.

He thanked GOD, the Almighty and left for his homestay in Leh with a renewed sense of contentment, well being and happiness.

THE HIGHEST MOTORABLE ROAD ON EARTH

The next day morning, he enquired for the weather at KharDung La and was glad to know that it was clear. He was feeling unbelievably fresh and 'at peace' that day. It was like the long formed cobwebs in his mind were cleared off permanently. He was feeling contented and happy and realized that the pains in his travel so far, were actually an adventure that he had undertaken. He felt so good to have decided to travel instead of sitting back sulking with suicidal thoughts. One can be hurt a lot, but it was not right to stop the clock and die. This travel was a calling that he had to attend to. His strong gut feel (probably an intervention by his fate) had made him come here to these heavenly places.

He had plans to visit KharDung La and come back by evening. He picked up his bike, without any baggage either on the bike or on the mind and moved out of the homestay. He carried with himself the winter jacket that he had bought before he started his travel, from Mumbai. This was the first time he would need it. He was sure about that. He had breakfast at a roadside dhaba along the way. The staple food for tourists here was Maggi noodles and omelets. He had both and left for Khardung La.

Khardung La is supposedly the highest motorable mountain pass on earth, situated at a height of around 5.5 km above sea level. The oxygen there is less and hence the tourists are asked not to spend much time on Khardung La. It's around 40 km away from Leh.

The weather was cold as Abhay left for South Pullu, where one has to get a permit to travel to Khardung La. The road till South Pullu was a smooth and curvy stretch. Once he crossed the South Pullu area, the road was literally nonexistent. The road was composed of rock, dirt and ice cold water trickling down from the snow covered mountains peaks above. As usual, the ride up was difficult but adventurous. A few km before Khardung La he started feeling cold. He was nearing the snowy-white mountain peaks. The pass was under heavy clouds indicating either rain or snow. As he reached the top he felt the cold breeze biting him. The mountain pass was covered in a thick fog. He parked his bike and walked around. There were many tourists in the area

enjoying the cold breeze. It started snowing in some time. This was Abhay's first experience of a snowfall. He tried to catch the snowflakes and lick them. It was a beautiful yet an indescribable experience. Although it was ice cold, he sat down near a pillar to bathe in the snowflakes and the snowfall stopped. Although only for moments, he did enjoy the snowfall. He went inside the world's highest canteen to have a coffee break. He needed something to make him feel warm. He bought a cup of coffee and walked down to the military outpost to interact with the soldiers posted there. They were happy to see him and described the place a bit. One of them told him that during the start of the winter months the weather becomes horrible and unpredictable. They have to walk through snow all the time. They are so habituated to the cold that they can walk bare feet in the snow. Abhay showed his gratitude to the group of soldiers and saluted them for their hard work and dedication to protect their country, living away from their family for months. It was a hard life for them. The soldiers were moved to hear him and hugged him one by one and bade him goodbye. Abhay had spent an hour here and instead of returning back decided to explore the area on the other side of Khardung La. He rode down the pass and encountered a portion of the mountain covered with snow after a few km of travel. There was snow everywhere and water was trickling down the slope to form small ice-cold rivulets. He parked his bike again and sat on a nearby dry rock to enjoy the breathtaking view in solitude. He was smiling with a content that he had never ever felt before in his life. He wanted to etch this moment, this image, in his mind forever. He felt enriched. He got up as he had to return back to Leh and plan for the next day. He traveled back to Leh via Khardung La without any happenings. He reached Leh by 4 p.m and had a chat with his host regarding a visit to Pangong Tso.

He was told that there are tents available for night stay. Abhay jotted down the contact and called up the owner to book a tent for the next day. He got a bed in one of the swiss tents.

He went for a walk in the old market and came back by dinner time. He went off to sleep after dinner as he had to leave early for the next day's travel to Pangong Tso.

THE PRISTINE BLUE PARADISE

Abhay got up around 6:00 a.m the next day, ordered for the traditional 'Kahwa' and was ready to leave. The routine of getting up early in the morning, taking a bath and tying the saddle bag to the bike took less than 15 mins now. Abhay was out of the house by 6:30. He paid his bills and bade goodbye to the house owner and started his journey to Pangong Tso. The distance he had to cover today was around 230 km and he estimated that he would be there by late afternoon. The roads were good for most of the ride.

He was riding on narrow snake-like roads carved through the mountains most of the time, en-route Chang La, the world's third highest motor-able road. He was riding peacefully for more than 3 hours without a stop. Although the scenery was mesmerizing, the ride turned monotonous on the winding narrow roads high up the mountains after a couple of hours and drowsiness took over. He got sloppy. He was a few km away from the top (Chang La) when he saw a truck coming his way from the other end. He was on a narrow patch of the road. On one side were the mountains and on the other, he could see a deep valley, maybe a few thousand feet deep. He tried to avoid the valley side and went on to the wrong side of the road to feel safe. The truck driver noticed but he didn't give a heed, he kept coming on to him at the same speed and gestured him to go to the other side. Presumably, the truck driver too was scared to drive from the valley side. He didn't budge nor did he show any signs of slowing down or stopping to let Abhay go slowly past the truck. He came full on and Abhay had to take a last minute decision to change sides. He steered his bike towards the valley side to avoid getting hit by the truck driver. There was a patch of sand on the road. He missed to notice it as this was a split second decision. While crossing over to the other side of the road and avoiding to be hit by the truck, all at the same time, he rode through the sandy patch and lost control. The truck whizzed past as his bike went off the road by a few inches and he could sense himself falling over in the valley. The adrenaline and his reflexes acted up suddenly and he careened over to the other side. It saved him. It so happened that after he bent on to the other side, the bike instead of falling over came back on to the road and he was back in control again. He stopped and shuddered in disbelief at the thought of what could have happened if he would have lost control! A moment ago he saw his death clearly and next moment he was fine. He stood there in shock for some

time with tears in his eyes. He decided not to think about it and cross the mountain pass first. Too much of thinking on the incidence could put him into a cautious mode lowering his speed for the rest of the journey. A few moments later the bad part of the road began. He had experienced that the roads near the most of the mountain tops were bad and as he went down, the roads got better. This happened because of the melting snow at the top of the mountains. The water would take the entire road away with it no matter how many times it was repaired. Presumably that's the reason why the roads near the mountain passes were left as they were. They were maintained just enough for the traffic to pass. Hence, bad roads were an indication of rain or snow on the mountain peaks ahead and also it indicated the closeness of the mountain passes from the rider's position. He knew he was near Chang La. He reached there, trying to avoid the scary thought of his recent experience as far as possible. He noticed a simple coffee shop up there and decided it was time to take rest. He was still in a state of shock. He needed some rest to overcome it to enjoy the journey ahead. He went in, ordered Maggi noodles and a cup of coffee and took a 10 min nap. He was woken up by the person who brought him coffee. The food, although not tasty gave him enough energy to travel ahead. The power nap had also helped a lot. He was feeling feverish now. Perhaps, so much of strenuous travel was taking a toll on him. He was not habituated to ride so much. He had been riding for nearly 8-10 hrs a day every day since the start of the journey. Good food too was a rarity after Kargil. He had brought with him painkillers, which he used to take to feel better, as and when need be. After a cup of hot coffee and a plate of magi noodles he continued his journey towards Pangong Tso. As he got down from Chang La, he had to ride through a small river like patch, not too deep though. The good thing was that the base of the rivulet was not mud; it was pebbles, which were safer to ride on. He knew that he would have had to put his foot down to prevent a fall in case the bike skidded. He was already feverish due to exhaustion and it was icy cold water, so he stopped and took out the polythene bag that he was using to carry the dry fruits. Unfortunately, he only had one. He wanted to wear the polythene bag on his shoes in order to keep them dry in case he had to put his foot down. Since he had only one, he decided to put it on his right shoe as he was habituated to put his right foot down whenever he stopped his bike. He also made sure he sat with a little bit of his weight on the right side so that in case the bike skids, it will make him put his right foot down. That way he would be safe. Riding with an ice cold

wet shoe was a bad idea in this cold and unforgiving weather. He crossed over without any incident and took the polythene bag out to preserve it in case he needed to cross another rivulet.

The weather had turned cold and the surroundings had become beautiful. He could see Yaks grazing on the meadows near the rivulet. It was a beautiful sight, the Rocky Mountains with patches of grass and azure sky with patches of white and grey clouds. More white and less of grey. To an artist, it might sound a combination of odd colors, but on nature's palette, all color combinations look exhilarating. A yellowish brown surface with a tinge of dark brown and green patches in between, surrounded by azure blue with white and grey patches, nature's palette was unbeatable.

He rode down the hill back on to the tar roads again. By the time he reached TsangTse, a village en-route, it had become hot and dry again. Abhay realized that it was 1 p.m already and he was feeling the intense heat of the high altitudes. He noticed a sign which read "This is the only place in the world, where you can get sunburn and frostbite all at the same time". Must be the case in winters when the temperatures are sub-zero but the intensity of the sun is high. Weird, but interesting, he thought.

As he moved further and was nearing the Pangong Tso, the landscape started changing again. The mountains opened up and from a narrow hilly region, the surface became flatter. The roads were narrow and the path a little spotty. There was off-white colored sand and pebbles around the road. It looked as if the riverbed had dried up and left only clean sand/silt around. It was dry everywhere with sparse vegetation. As he rode along he saw a rivulet flowing at a distance along the road and green meadows on the other side of the rivulet with wild horses grazing on them. It was a beautiful site.

In some time he could see a bluish colored water body between two huge mountains. It was confusing as it was difficult to distinguish the color of the sky from the color of the water as they merged with each other. The Pangong Tso was still a few km away but it looked as if it was just a few feet away. The clarity in the ether was amazing. He reached the Spangmik village area in some time, which is the start of the lake (Tso – as it is called in the local language) and started enquiring about the tent he was supposed to live in. He wasn't getting any information. There were people swarming the place but not a soul knew where the tent was located. It was already 2 p.m. He knew he

could not go back and all the places of stay that he had enquired in the vicinity were full. He decided to ride ahead and encountered a sign prohibiting venturing out in the area. He stopped and was about to turn back when he saw an open jeep, full of school kids, dressed in colorful uniforms, returning home. He asked them and was told that the tent was, to his surprise, around 2-3 km ahead, inside the prohibited area!!

They showed him the way to reach the place and moved on. The kids were cheering out loud even though they were habituated to seeing the tourists swarming the place every day. Tourism was the bread and butter for the village folks.

The so-called "Swiss Tents" in which he had booked a bed, were open tents with a veiled toilet. There were eight tents in all, with two beds in each one. The tarpaulin used was white in color and thicker than usual. The tents were neatly kept. They also provided 4-5 inch thick quilts to protect from the cold. The lake was a couple of hundred meters away from the tents. He parked his bike under a bush near the tents and went on to inform the manager. He asked for water, a cup of tea and went into his allotted tent. He kept his luggage inside and came out to sit on a chair kept just outside the tent to absorb the colorful beauty that lay in front of him. The air was crisp and clean. In spite of the low oxygen levels, it was way better than the pollution-ridden existence back home, in Mumbai.

Pangong Tso is situated at a height of 4.5 km from the sea level. This picturesque 130+ km long and 5 km wide lake is one of the largest saltwater lakes in Asia. About one-third of this saltwater lake lies in India while the rest lies in Tibet.

He was the only occupant of the series of tents at that moment; however, he hoped to see some more people around at night, as sleeping alone, here, would have been a scary experience for him. The area was relatively silent. There were a few villagers that he could see nearby, but the main crowd was 3-4 km behind, near the start of the lake. It was blissful. He wanted these moments and the mesmerizing beauty of the surroundings to be etched in his mind forever. He sat there for over an hour when he was called in for lunch. The lunch was served in a bigger tent (around 100 meters behind these white tents) with well laid out tables and chairs. He was served fried rice and vegetables which were below average in taste. This time around, in spite of

the below average taste he ate a mouthful as he was hungry. By the time he was over with his lunch he could see a few bikers arriving. They were to stay in these tents. Abhay walked down to the shore of the lake and just stood there. The lake was a blue-green expanse of a saline water body that expanded as far Abhay could see. On a sunny day like that, the lake glimmered in its glory with subtle undulating waters. The sheer splendor of colors the lake shimmered in was soothing. The colors varied from electric blue on the far end to blue-green in the middle to turquoise blue on the shore. The water was icy cold. He tasted the water. It was salty. The topography of this lake too was unique. It was as if the Almighty had painted this place himself to brag about the beauty of his creation. The gushing winds were creating ripples along the lake which ended up on the shore like the miniature sea waves. The water was crystal clear and ice cold. He felt the rustle of the air in his ears as he walked along the shore. Despite the absence of life in the Pangong Tso, Abhay could spot many birds hovering around the lake. The mountains huddled together to cover the lake from all sides. It was definitely one of the most beautiful places on the planet.

Abhay was not in a mood to go back to the camp and rest. It was too beautiful a place to let go of the moments. It was now evening time. He ordered for Yak Tea and found it to be salty in taste. He wasn't able to finish it off but was content that he tasted something unique and different. As the sun started moving towards the horizon Abhay started feeling feverish again. He was sure that it was just due to exhaustion, the shock that he had been through, the lack of oxygen and the temperature differences he was experiencing while riding.

As the night progressed, the cold weather set in. The temperatures went down from 20 degrees in the afternoon to near zero in a few hours. Since the tents did not have a facility to exclude the occupants from the outer weather, it became a concern for Abhay as he was unsure if he would survive to see the daylight next day. Being in Mumbai, he was habituated to hot and humid climate. This was too cold for him to feel comfortable. The temperature variations that he encountered in the Ladakh region were huge. Around 20-30 degree Celsius, intense feel during the day to near zero degrees Celsius feel at night!

There were two thick cotton quilts on the bed, one to sleep on and the other to cover himself to protect from the cool winds. Unfortunately, just after dinner

as he turned back towards his tent, it started raining heavily. The dining room, around 100 meters away had a small generator, but the tents did not have one. He was guided by a caretaker to his tent in an umbrella bare enough to protect him from getting wet in this zero degrees rain. He reached his tent and realized that there was no light source. Strong winds were blowing outside accompanied by heavy rains. It made Abhay feel like this was the end of it. He felt bad because this was the time when he had actually started enjoying the moments and felt positive. He had a painkiller and tried to sleep, but it was too cold to fall asleep. In spite of covering himself with the quilt, he was shivering. He was sleeping in an open tent with cold winds blowing in. He was sure that the wind temperature would go sub-zero sometime late night and that would mean a certain illness. What if these strong winds uproot the tent? How will he spend the night in the rain or snow in that case? It was too cold; the rains were making the weather colder. Will he survive this weather until morning? The questions were not letting him fall asleep. The weather calmed down near mid-night and Abhay finally fell asleep.

THE JAW CLENCHING RIDE

The night at Pangong Tso was horrifying. Abhay woke up at 5 a.m and it was already daylight. He quickly freshened up. The water was ice cold, but he managed somehow. He came out of his tent and saw that the bare mountain tops the night before were now covered with snow. A couple of hours of rains had changed the scenery overnight. He had decided to reach Pang by night. He had come to know that there were some tents available for overnight stay in Pang as well. He had no way to book them but by now he had realized that these places adjust extra tourists who arrive and let them stay as the weather is too harsh to survive in the open.

Abhay skipped breakfast as he had a 12 hr travel ahead of him for the day. He started early around 6 a.m. His target that day was to reach Pang, which was roughly 230 km away. Although the night had been a bit scary for him, he did feel the pinch of moving out from such a place. He wished he could have stayed more and rested. He reached Spangmik, looked back for a moment, decided that he would visit the place again and moved on. The same roads that he had crossed the day before looked different as it had snowed sometime late night/early morning. He reached a few km before the Chang La and could see a jam from far away. He realized that the rains, the night before may have caused a landslide, which might take some time to clear up so instead of climbing up and waiting in the jam he parked his bike along the road far away from the jam and sat down in the shade of a big rock formation overlooking the Chang La. He decided to rest until the time he could see the vehicles move. There was a military cantonment of the Maratha Regiment in the vicinity. One of the soldiers, on spotting Mumbai registration plates on his bike called him in and started interacting with him. The soldier was from a suburb in Mumbai. He must have been a little below six feet in height and had an athletic built. He was wearing his uniform and carried an intense look on his face. He had a heavy native accent even when he spoke in English. After a formal introduction, he offered Abhay black tea and told him that it helped in such climatic conditions. They interacted for some time when he saw the traffic move along. He bade adieu to the soldier and went ahead towards Chang La. He again stopped at the café in Chang La top and had his breakfast. The Chang La Mountains were covered in snow and the roads with slush from the rains, the night before. It was around 9 a.m now, and the

temperature must have been in single digits in Celsius. He still had a lot of distance to cover.

He rode down the Chang La, the roads had become worse as the flow of water had increased. He took nearly an hour just to ride down the pass. He reached Karu (situated around 35 km away from Leh on the Leh Manali highway) around 1 p.m, stopped at the nearest fuel station and filled the tank of his bike up to the brim, literally. He had come to know that the next fuel station would be 370 km away before Rohtang Pass, in a village named Tandi, en-route Manali. He was sure that his bike would survive with the tank full for at least 400-450 km. It was a bit of a risk, but was worth taking, he thought. He then stopped at a dhaba and had lunch (Maggi noodles and bread omelet). Those were the only food items available at that time. It must have been 35 degrees Celsius at that time. It was hot and sultry and he was wearing thick inners as it was near zero degrees Celcius when he had left Pangong Tso. The weather had changed so much. He wasn't able to change clothes as he did not find a place and was wet with sweat in no time. He quickly finished off his lunch and moved on. Riding helped him stay cool, sitting at a place made him sweat. As he continued on the Leh Manali highway, the landscape changed again. He was now riding in a valley flanked by mountains on both sides of the road accompanied by a rivulet. No trees or any other form of greenery was visible yet. It was a barren look in every direction. The mountains featured various colors from brown to a mix of brown shades; to maroonish; to purple; to greenish. The greenish shade was not due to any flora, the rock formations were a shade of green and brown. It was a wonder. The rock formations too kept changing over the landscape. There were places where the rock formations were tower-like. It was as if they were carved to look similar. Nature had its own charm, he thought.

He moved along and reached near the supposedly the second highest mountain pass in the world named Taglang La. There were people waiting ahead and he already knew the reason why. To his surprise, it was not a landslide this time, it was an avalanche. Heaps of snow on the road had blocked the traffic. A JCB was in the process of clearing the snow. It was pushing the snow down the valley which made a thudding sound like that of thunder. This was again a firsthand experience for Abhay. The weather was warm overall, but this patch had cooled down because of the avalanche. He had to wait for half an hour till the snow was cleared. Once the traffic started,

people realized that although the snow was cleared, there remained a thin layer of snow on the road, which made the vehicles skid. The seasoned locals managed to cross the patch but riders like Abhay were in for a surprise. A few of them fell down as their bikes skid. Putting one's foot down too was not of use as the thin layer of snow did not provide any friction. Abhay waited for some time and then decided to ride on the tire marks left behind by the trucks as they had broken the icy layer. It was not easy to maintain the balance but he had had so much of riding experience in the recent past that it was fairly manageable for Abhay. It was just a few hundred meters of the patch. Taglang La was a few km ahead. He decided to take a break at the top along with other bikers and sat under the fluttering prayer flags. He had noticed that nearly all the mountain passes in the Ladakh region had small temples built on top surrounded by prayer flags, as he called them. He had a similar feeling like he had in Fotu La (on the way to Leh from Srinagar). It was a feeling of bliss. The roads in this region were wide and not as scary as on the passes before. It was nearly 5 p.m and he decided to move ahead as he still had nearly 60 km to cover. He moved down from Taglang La and stopped on encountering a dhaba. There were only two dhabas on the entire stretch. He was the only customer in the Dhaba that he chose to go in. He had a cup of tea when he was told by the owner to hurry if he intended to reach Pang, safe. He was told that as the sun sets in the area the temperature starts falling rapidly, around 7-8 degrees every hour until it reaches near zero or sometimes sub-zero. He quickly gulped his tea, paid and thanked the owner for the tip and moved ahead. It was around 6 p.m. It must have been 20 degree Celsius at that moment and he could sense the temperatures falling and decided to hurry up. Soon he entered a plateau-like formation with meadows on either side of the tar road flanked by mountains at the horizon, known as the 'Moore Plains'. As he rode along he could literally feel the weather cooling down rapidly. Within half an hour it had gone from pleasantly cool to freezing. The tar roads were in a good condition so he decided to race ahead but for some reason, his bike wasn't going beyond a speed of 65-70kmph which seemed minuscule compared to the conditions of the terrain. By the time it was 7.p.m his fists had already gone numb. The weather had turned so bitter that he realized he was riding with a clenched jaw. He had lost one of his gloves while riding from Sonamarg to Zoji La. He just had the right-hand one left now. He stopped, took out the glove and wore it to ride with one hand so that he could put the other hand in his jacket

pocket occasionally to feel the warmth. He also took out the polythene bag he used on the shoe some time back at Chang La and kept it inside his jacket as it was a good insulator. It was a terrifying experience. Around 7:30'ish, he must have been around 20 km from Pang when he saw thunder and lightning ahead in the direction of Pang. Now he was extremely worried. It was already freezing and any rains on top of it would just kill him, he was sure. His bike too was behaving speed limited. He too did not wish to put any pressure on the bike now as a breakdown would surely zero out his chances of survival. The only thing that he had in his mind at that moment was his survival. He just had to reach the camp in Pang. He could not think of anything else. It was too cold. His hands had now gone numb. He already had the pain extend from his hands to his shoulders. His eyes too had gone dry and cold and were paining. The temperatures kept falling and he felt like he was riding under sub-zero temperatures. He just rode along with a blind determination to reach Pang. The lightning and thunderstorms continued and he realized that he was the only one on the road now. All the riders had overtaken him at some point in time and probably had reached their targets. Not having any help around made him feel more determined. Although the sky surrounding him was getting darker by the minute, the sky far ahead, on the horizon, was already dark with the rain clouds taking over. He wasn't sure how far away the rains were, but he was sure that he would survive the day only if he reached Pang before the rains did. In a few minutes, which seemed like hours, he saw the more plains end and the roads winding down the mountains into the valley below. After some time he could see light at a distance. He knew those were the tents which he had to reach. With a renewed will he rode along the road without caring for the pain that had now spread to his entire body. His limbs too had gone numb by now and he was feeling dazed. He had realized too late, that the winter clothing bought in Mumbai was useless practically. He should have bought some while roaming around in the Leh market. They might have had the winter clothing to survive those places.

He reached the first camp around 8 p.m. He got down and touched the silencer to feel the warmth and get rid of the numbness in his hands but in vain. The silencer too was cold in spite of a 60-70 km non-stop ride, he somehow managed to rush inside the first tent that he could see, leaving the luggage outside on the bike as survival was more important for him at the moment.

On seeing Abhay's state, the caretaker of the tent immediately poured hot water in a cup and gave it to him to drink. He was told that the hot water helps in reviving the organs which come to a shutdown mode in such a cold. By the time he had two cups of water the owner covered him with a guilt for him to feel warm. Abhay just lied down on the couch until the owner prepared some tea and food for him to eat. After he gulped down 3 cups of hot black tea and dinner, Abhay started feeling warm again and decided to get his luggage. He had a chat with the owner and was adjusted in the same tent along with 8 other riders. Most were shivering except for a couple of them who had gulped down spirits to keep themselves warm. The guilts were not enough to feel warm but they helped in staying alive. Abhay untied his saddlebag with the help of the owner of the tent, as he wasn't able to move his fingers freely yet, and got it inside. The luggage had to be kept in the outer tent as the inner tent was a small one with just enough place for eight or ten people to sleep. Once inside the smaller tent, he realized that the camp did not have a base. Their mattresses were laid directly on the rocky and sandy ground and the tents only prevented the inmates from the winds and rains. It was not raining yet, but the lightning and thunderstorm continued at a distance.

Abhay was more than glad that he made it. He had been from near zero degrees Celsius in the morning in Pangong Tso to 35 degrees near Karu and back to near zero in the night. It had been two days that he had taken a bath. He was feeling filthy but had no choice. There wasn't a chance of him changing as well. He had to pass the night in the same clothes with shoes on and ride again the next day in the same state.

No one in the tent was able to sleep for more than an hour at night. It was freezing. The quilts were keeping them all alive but weren't comfortable enough to give them enough warmth for a sound sleep. All of the tent inmates were trying to motivate each other by either singing or trying to be humorous. One of the lady tourists in the tent started crying around 1 a.m as she was scared for her life. She wasn't able to adjust to the cold. Her partner was trying to calm her down. In spite of 10 people sleeping in a small tent less than hundred square feet in area, there was absolutely no warmth. The outer tent was open so there was no use of moving out to that tent. The owner too was asleep. A campfire inside the tent too was not possible as it had bare enough place for us humans. Somehow the situation was brought under

control after some time.

It was probably the first time when Abhay wasn't thinking about Ananya anymore. When one is fighting for survival, all the life's problems seem miniscule. The will to live is inversely proportional to the chances of survival. All Abhay could think was about surviving the night and the next day's travel. He still had a few days of travel left and not enough energy to complete the circuit. It was like an extended deadline which had to be met working overtime against will, in life-threatening situations. Such situations make one strong, mused Abhay. He was sure to emerge stronger by the time he completed the circuit.

Abhay must have fallen asleep around 4'ish in the morning and woke up around 5 a.m. It was daylight already. He came out and was given hot water for brushing teeth and freshening up. When Abhay asked about the toilet, he was given two choices; either he walks down a couple of km along the river and relieves himself there, in the open, or cross over the road and sits down on hole dug up in the ground nearby. Many people had been there before. It was full of rotting stool and had a horrendous smell. There was no way one could sit there for even a minute. The only benefit was that the piece of ground was surrounded by hessian cloth, so the feeling of defecating in the open two km down the icy river in this cold weather could be avoided.

He somehow managed and came back to the tent. He realized that the tents were the bare minimal modes of survival in that area. The tents were operational only for 4-5 months in a year as during the leftover time of the year the region would be under a thick blanket of snow, closed for travel.

Abhay had decided that his next stop would be Keylong if he could make it in time, else it would be Sarchu. Abhay had a light breakfast and started his journey towards Keylong. Keylong was just less than 200 km away from Pang.

As soon as he crossed Pang, he saw the tar road vanish into muddy, slushy path. It must have rained there in the night. Abhay was riding carefully. The road was good in patches, most of the time it was just dirt and slush. In some time he entered the 21 Gata loops, essentially 21 hairpin bends, carved through the mountains. The greenery had started to show up again after about 7-8 days of the barren landscape and his eyes felt relaxed. We are so habituated to see the flora that living without it causes an uncomfortable

feeling. The Gata loops were known for their bone-jarring roads as well as the stunningly beautiful scenery around it. He traveled along until he found a small temple-like structure with water bottles kept near it. He wasn't sure what it was but later on, when he reached Sarchu for lunch, he was told by the locals the story behind the temple. It went like: A few years before a truck driver and his assistant were driving up the Gata loops when it started snowing heavily and the truck broke down. The driver left the assistant to take care of the truck to a nearby village to get help. He wasn't able to come back for a few days as it snowed heavily and the weather turned worst. The assistant died of cold, thirst and hunger in the meantime. Once the driver reached back to this place after a few days, he found the assistant's dead body. With the help of the villagers, he buried it there. From then on there had been a rumor of a ghost begging for water near that place and is known as the Ghost of Gata Loops. The villagers built a small temple around the burial and offered water bottles to calm down the ghost. The travelers aware of the story offered a water bottle every time they passed the place. The travel through the twenty-one hairpin bends was exhausting and energizing, all at the same time. Riding through the slush and the narrow roads was exhausting but the scenic snow-capped mountain peaks and the cool weather were energizing.

Sarchu is located on the plains in the midst of snow-capped mountains. The Leh-Manali road passes through the meadows of Sarchu. The weather overall was cold and the sunshine was less intense as compared to what Abhay had experienced for the past 5 days. The pleasantly cold weather was making the travel less exhausting. Also, the proximity to the end of the circuit too was a cause for Abhay to feel better. He could now spot small shrubs amongst the meadows of Sarchu which made him feel like he was back on earth from what seemed like an endless time on an alien planet.

Abhay took a stop at 12 p.m in Sarchu and had a simple lunch composed of Alu Parathas and momos. He was comfortably breathing too. He had had tasty food after what seemed like years, now. He left by 12:30 and was on his way to Keylong. The road from Sarchu to Keylong was bewitchingly scenic. The weather was pleasantly cold, unlike the extreme weather conditions that he had been through, so far. Every mountain peak in the vicinity was covered in snow; the roadside was green, in short, a perfect definition of heaven (for nature lovers).

Abhay enjoyed every moment of the drive. He passed ZingZingBar (yes, a village of this name exists in the Lahaul-Spiti region. It's the gateway to Spiti valley) and the ether turned green. He could now see trees and bushes along with the meadows. The weather became like that of a hill station. The road conditions turned good. It was around 40 km before Keylong when Abhay encountered a waterfall flowing in its full glory over the road with a tremendous force. It seemed that the glacier somewhere above had melted and had caused this waterfall. The volume of water flowing was increasing every minute. The water was also falling across the road into the deep gorge on the other side of the road. It was impassable as the force of the water was so huge that it could have pushed Abhay down the gorge as the road was too narrow to avoid the waterfall. Abhay parked his bike, got down, went close to the waterfall and scanned the area for any chance to pass. The height of the waterfall was less than ten feet and the breadth of the road was around fifteen feet. On one side was a deep gorge and on the other side was the mountain from where the waterfall was originating and gushing down the road into the gorge. The tar road gave in to a gravel road beneath the area covered by the waterfall. The force of the water and a slight slip on the gravel would push him down the gorge to a certain death. He observed that the force of the falling water was more so towards the gorge as it was flowing overhead, but the water was coming down at a less force on the side near the mountain (the origin of the waterfall). He saw a cemented patch of the road under the waterfall, near the mountain and inferred that the force of the water had taken away what was plausibly a cemented part of the road on the side of the gorge. He also knew that there were no bikers or any form of traffic waiting, so they must have crossed, which boosted his morale to take a call and drive under the waterfall on the cemented patch where the water force was minimal. The breadth of the waterfall might have been just ten feet. He touched the water; it was cool, but not icy. He came back, took out the rain gear, wore it, started his bike and went with a speed of around 30kmph through the waterfall. He tried to ride on the cemented portion of the road as far as possible. It just took a moment and a great deal of courage to cross the road through the waterfall. He stopped with a smile of an achievement after he crossed the waterfall, took off his rain gear and shoved it into his saddlebag. He had anticipated rains during his travel and so had bought a water-resistant saddle bag. This was the moment when it was really useful. He drove on towards Keylong with a renewed confidence. He reached Keylong around 6 p.m and found a

small 2-story hotel on the side of the road. He enquired and got a room, parked his bike, untied his saddle bag, entered his room and directly went for a bath. It had been 2 days since he had taken one because of the weather conditions. The temperature in Keylong was pleasantly cool, must have been around 20 degrees.

He ordered for dinner and had a sumptuous buffet meal in the dining area before he went off to sleep around 8 p.m.

The next day was the last of the adventurous days of the circuit as he had to pass through Rohtang Pass, another one of the dangerous passes in the region. Rohtang was a highly dangerous pass to cross. Rohtang La, in the local language, literally meant "Pile of Corpses".

Many people had died to try to cross the pass in the past, hence the name.

MEANWHILE.. IN MUMBAI

Ananya had again got into a fight with Rana over him forgetting her birthday. She told him how Abhay remembered even the small things about her and celebrated her birthday. Rana had neither called her up nor accepted her call.

She had been also nagging him about their relationship as he was showing no interest in taking it forward. She sent him a message on her birthday about taking their relationship ahead to which he did not reply. She received a call a couple of days later wherein he apologized for forgetting her birthday and was able to convince her that he had been, as usual, busy with work and was able to completely avoid the relationship related topic.

She was uncomfortable with Rana's behavior but called him up for a candlelight dinner to celebrate her birthday. Sometimes our heart needs more time to understand and accept what our mind already knows. She intended to understand Rana's view about their relationship but before she could ask any questions, he casually informed her that he was moving out of Mumbai as he had been promoted and that it would be difficult for him to keep meeting her frequently, henceforth. She was angry and sad at the same time. She asked him what their relationship meant to him and he was quick to answer that he was her "Friend with Benefits". Thoroughly angry and irritated she got up, slapped him and left the place. She cried her heart out when she reached home. She was feeling sorry for herself and for Abhay as well, she had now realized what he must have been through.

The absence of Abhay was creating a void in her now. She realized how hopelessly he must have been in love with her to be there all the time and remember even the small things about her. She had found that habit of his annoying at times but now she realized how it made her feel special. She realized how selfish she had been with Abhay. She took him for granted and used to get annoyed at him often but still, he stood for her, with her, always. Little does one realize the importance of someone or something till it is lost, she wondered! She had spent so much time with someone so self-centered and hard-hearted when she had such an adorable and loving person beside her all the time. One who would listen to her patiently and accept her with all her whims and fancies in spite of knowing her love for someone else.

Abhay was still out of range and she needed to talk to him desperately at that moment. She wanted to apologize to him but it was probably too late, she thought. It had been nearly two weeks that she had been trying to contact Abhay, in vain. She was worried and was praying that he returns back alive and well. She wanted to apologize for her being on so hard on him. She wanted to hold him in a bear hug and cry out on his shoulder to be free of the guilt that she felt for him now. She had sent him many messages to inquire about his whereabouts in the past few days but had not received any answers.

THE LAST PHASE OF THE JOURNEY

Abhay woke up around 5 a.m. in the morning, carried out his daily chores and was out by 6 a.m. The feeling of breathlessness due to lack of oxygen was totally absent that morning. He was ready for the last leg of the adventurous path of his journey. The plan was to reach Manali that day, stay there for a day and then move on to Chandigarh the next day, where he was supposed to deliver his bike to be taken by a courier service, to Mumbai, and he himself planned to take a direct flight from Chandigarh to Mumbai.

The road till Tandi was good. Abhay was glad that his bike survived the gruesome riding conditions till that point. He had finally managed to reach Tandi without any fuel related issues as well. He filled up the bike tank with fuel and rode on towards the Rohtang Pass. The entry point to the mountain ranges on top of which Rohtang resided, itself proved to be tough; all slush and gravel, no road and heavy, polluting traffic. It still made him feel good as he was back amongst denser human settlements.

The road to Rohtang was slippery, jerky, full of slush, and difficult to ride but this time it did not matter to him as he was very near to the end the circuit on his own, alone and was near the end to his adventurous travel without any physical injury. He was more than glad that he was free of the emotional baggage that he had been carrying for so many years. He had outgrown his insecurities and had emerged a strong, contented and a changed man. He was ready to be on his own now. He need not depend on anyone for his happiness. He was at peace with himself and the world around him. He felt positive and loving. He did not feel any anger or resent against Ananya. He could let her go now. He knew he loved her and was able to accept that she did not.

He reached Rohtang around 12 p.m. It was full of tourists. The weather was foggy and cool. The visibility was minimal but he was happy to be back on to the tar roads. He parked his bike near a roadside Chola Kulcha vendor and had a late breakfast. He had a kulfi and then moved towards Manali, which was just over 50 km away.

Abhay reached Manali around 2 p.m and checked into a hotel on the main road. He had booked his stay in Manali in advance, before starting the journey, as his arrival and departure dates were fixed; one of the reasons why

he had to keep on traveling and not rest, even when he was not feeling well.

The phone network was available in Manali and as soon as he reached the hotel premises, he could see quite a few messages from his close friends and relatives about his whereabouts. He hadn't informed a soul about his plans; he wasn't in a state to talk to anyone at that time. He knew that people close to him wouldn't have allowed him to go on this trip for the risks it posed. Among those messages were a few from Ananya as well. She was worried about him as he was out of reach all the time and there was no way she could have known his status.

For the next two hours he individually called everyone who was concerned about his whereabouts and explained them in brief what he had been up to and that he would be back in Mumbai in the next 2 days and reveal them the details of his ride. He avoided revealing anything about the details of his emotional issues. He also called up Ananya and told her that he was fine; Ananya wanted to talk to him but he kept it brief.

He felt good to know that people really cared for him.

He roamed in and around Manali for a day and it was time to go home. He was exhausted with the ride now. The road from Manali to Chandigarh, though beautiful, would not offer the adventure that he had been through. It was a patch full of human settlements and traffic. He did not wish to spoil the taste of his ride experience by riding through these roads full of traffic and chaos just yet, so; at the last moment; he decided to carry his bike in a tempo and reach Chandigarh.

He checked out from the hotel he was staying in and asked around and was given a lift by a truck driver for a meager price. They both lifted the bike and shoved it in with the goods that the truck was carrying and Abhay sat beside the truck driver, Kartar Singh, a fat, pot-bellied Sikh in his fifties and his helper. Kartar wasn't very talkative. Abhay too kept the interaction limited and just told him a brief about the ride and where he was from.

They reached Chandigarh around 9 p.m. He already had a hotel booked for himself there as well and he reached there in no time, had dinner and went off to sleep. The next day morning he delivered his bike to the courier service and took a flight back to Mumbai, his home. The rainy season had already started in Mumbai. Most of the roads were already underwater by the time he landed. He managed to get home in spite of the flooded roads and traffic jams

as he lived just a few km away from the airport. He was too exhausted to unpack his luggage. He felt at home after such a long and grueling ride and thus lied on the bed with the photographs of his parents on his chest, peacefully. He was missing them both, that day.

THE ALTERED PERSONA

Abhay joined back a changed man. He had lost some weight after the laborious but enriching ride. His face was tanned, but his friends could notice a sparkle in his eyes. His smile seemed genuine and pleasing. All who knew him or had worked with him were surprised to see a different persona of the man.

The office routine started and his colleagues were intrigued to find Abhay so cheerful and at peace. Most of them wanted to know how he managed to change himself and also get rid of the stress that he was in. It was difficult to explain in words, said he. He could only tell them about the adventures and the near-death experiences that he had faced. The people he had met during the travel, their struggles, their hospitality, the gruesome travel, the locations, the solitude, it was all of it that had changed him.

Ananya too called him up in a couple of days and asked him to meet up. They met for dinner at Abhay's favorite restaurant where he came to know how Rana had finally ditched her. Abhay had a hunch that Ananya was, in a way, ready for such a day and hence she might have had recovered fairly quickly. She must have passed her painful time as she seemed calmed down now. He got to know that Ananya had broken up with Rana around the day Abhay reached Manali. Abhay was sure that it was a divine intervention but decided to keep the thought at bay. He did not wish to fill himself with any hope. He was happy the way he was.

They both had a friendly chat over dinner and a short walk through the hotel lobby. Ananya too had found him to be happy and at peace. She too was curious to know if Abhay had met someone during his travel. Abhay decided not to get into that discussion and avoided her question. He was at peace with himself now and decided to be just good friends with her. He started treating her like a friend. Ananya too was happy to get Abhay back as a friend.

LIFE'S GOOD..

Abhay and Ananya were still good friends but at times Abhay felt as if Ananya had started showing an interest in him. She would appreciate him more. She found him more mature than he had ever been; more cheerful too. She talked about her and Rana in as minimal words as possible. She had by that time, realized his sensitivity towards the issue. Abhay listened to what she had to say but didn't respond back. There was no point in doing that. If she was not in love, there was no point in thinking about it as he did not wish to enter the phase that he had come out from.

Abhay's efficiency at work too had improved which eventually led to his promotion and transfer to London for few years. He hadn't shared this with Ananya until the time the visa and all other transfer formalities were completed.

He decided to call her up a few days before he had to leave so that he could bid goodbye to her. They met for dinner again and Abhay told her about his moving to London for a few years and wished her well before paying the bill.

Ananya felt sad and asked Abhay to stay back, but Abhay refused and replied that he had no reason to stay back. He was doing well in his career and had thus accepted the promotion. He told her that the heartbreak and his past experiences won't hold him back anymore. He had decided to live a good life henceforth. He also planned to marry again. Ananya asked him if his marriage proposal was still open. She accepted that she was still not in love with him, but she would make it work as she knew that Abhay was the only one who really cared for her. She said she could wait, for she wished to give Abhay the time to think and take a call.

Abhay just smiled, shook her hand and promised to come back to meet her once he settled in the U.K.

THE END