

STAGGERED

A Short Story Collection

Jigyansa Mohanty

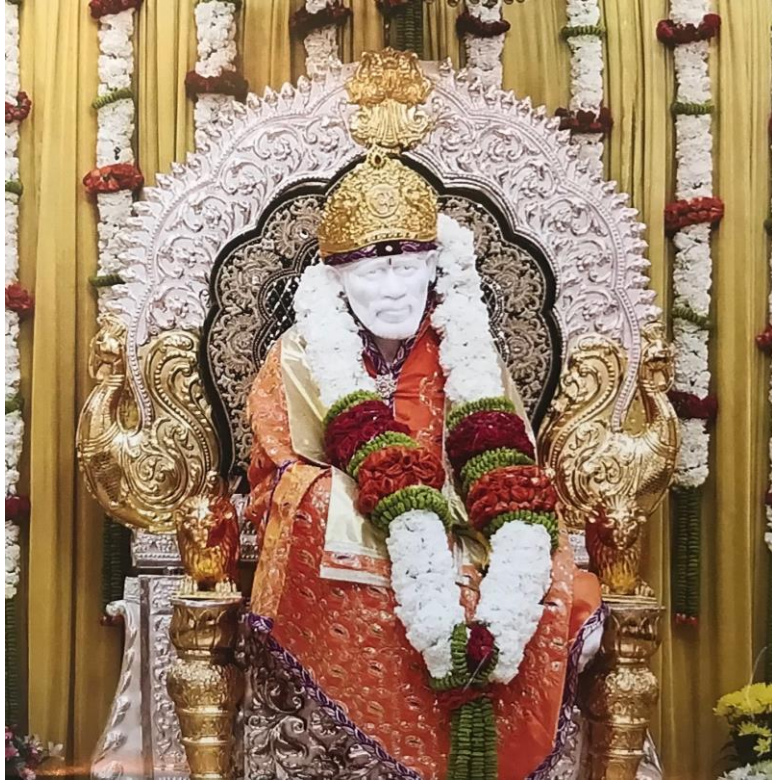
Staggered
(A Short Story Collection)

By: Jigyansa Mohanty

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*This book wouldn't have been possible without the
blessings of Shri Shirdi Sai Baba*



*In Loving memory of my beloved Bapa Er. Rabi Narayan Mohanty who
has always been my guiding force.*

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Table of Contents

1. Puchku
2. New Grandfather
3. True Love
4. A Long Ordeal
5. The AI in marriage
6. Uncle Vir
7. Final Clincher
8. A Kiss.....Surreal and Magical
9. Revathi Amma
10. Bitter Truth
11. Bebe
12. Mishti Dhana

Puchku

It was an open secret that Baba loved Puchku the most. From morning to night, he would utter his son's name a thousand times. Puchku also doted on Baba. He wouldn't go for his therapy sessions without hearing it from his beloved dad. He wanted Baba to be there with him all through. Starting from his morning chores to lunch to dinner; nothing would be the same without this jolly old man. At times, Baba would go low on energy and ask Puchku to do his errands on his own, but one look at Puchku's sad face and Baba would come to his rescue. After Mrs. Mishra's demise, Puchku and Mishra Baba had formed this special bond which was beyond basic comprehension.

Puchku was the third and youngest son of the Mishras. His two older brothers were smarter and excelled in studies. Sisir and Subodh were both working at reputed software companies.

When Puchku was due, Baba would often say to his beloved wife, "This time it should be a girl."

"Even I want a girl after two boys, but what if it's a boy again?" Mrs. Mishra asked. Baba would then smile and say, "Let's see what God wants."

When Puchku was finally born, both Baba and Mamma brought him close to their chests and were euphoric. Though he was a boy, the joyous news was still enough to fill the Mishra household with joy. As he was a chubby kid, Mamma would call him Puchku and soon that was his official pet name. However the happiness of this lovely family was short-lived as Puchku had certain developmental issues, which everyone slowly realized. He would complete his chores, but would require adult supervision while doing so. While Mamma was alive, she would always be there for Puchku, but after her demise everything fell on Baba's shoulders. For the last ten years, both Puchku and Baba had been the lone residents of Mishra Bhawan. One person who also had a pivotal role to play in Puchku's life was none other than Pravati. This caring lady has been associated with Mishra Bhawan since Puchku's birth. While Mamma would be busy finishing her chores, Pravati would keep an eye on little Puchku and the bonding that germinated then, only bloomed more beautifully with time. After Mamma's demise, Baba and Puchku totally relied on Pravati. As their sole hope, Pravati, now in her forties, took great care of Puchku and Mishra Baba. She stayed close to Mishra Bhawan and was just a phone call away.

"Kya hua Baba? Puchku Beta theek to hai na?" said, Pravati rushing to the home barefoot, the very moment she was summoned by this man, whose spirit at this age was commendable.

It was a different scene altogether, as until that moment, Pravati had never seen Baba roaming around the house in his lowers. Baba would always be properly dressed, covered from head to toe in a button down shirt and loose trousers. Seeing him bare chested wasn't acceptable to this lady who had immense respect and regards for this old man.

"From tomorrow save an extra hour of the day, to learn writing," said Baba, immediately baffling Pravati.

"Kya Baba, main yeh umar me padhaai karungi?" Pravati gave a coy smile and it took no time for Baba to read her mind.

"Kyun.... Kya galat kaha maine ? Sunita ne bhi tumhein kitni baar padhaai ke liye kaha tha." Swallowing a lump in his throat he added,"From tomorrow, you are sitting with me to learn how to read and write. Koi sawaal nahi.....the deal is sealed," he said. Pravati had already started biting her saree, a behavioral trait she was ashamed of. She didn't have the courage to answer back to Baba, and started wondering about the reason behind Baba's sudden unexpected decision.

Before she could utter a word, her eyes caught sight of Puchku struggling with his coloring book and she immediately ran to his help. That entire night seemed way too long for this lady who had tirelessly served for 20long years in Mishra Bhawan. In these two decades, both Pravati and Mishra Bhawan had been through many bittersweet moments. From her husband's death to Mamma's sudden demise, from Sisir's love marriage to Subodh's sexual revelation, Pravati had seen it all. But never she been in such a dilemma where her mind and heart were not on the same page.

"Kal jaake Baba ko mana kar dunga. Yeh umar me kya padhaai karu?" Pravati kept blabbering time and again.

The next morning, as soon as Pravati reached Mishra Bhawan, she was summoned by Baba at a hoarse loud voice to appear before him.

"Pravati! Let's start from scratch. Puchku, you too get your art book and colors to paint," Baba demanded. Pravati was speechless. She couldn't utter a single word. All her inhibitions vanished the moment she looked at Baba's radiant face.

"Pravvvv, sit-sit..." Puchku went on with his half spoken sentences, and Pravati gave him a tight hug. Baba spent an entire hour teaching Pravati the very basics of writing. Pravati sat on the floor and listened to Baba's words like an ardent student.

For the next two months, Baba left no stone unturned in imparting knowledge to his favorite student Pravati.

"Kya hua Maa? " Sneha asked Pravati in a curious tone. Sneha was Pravati's only daughter, who lived with her in-laws in a neighboring city and was paying her Mom a visit after a long time. Before Sneha could continue further, Pravati took her cloth bag in her hand and said,"Last sixty days se woh mujhe khushi ke saath padha rahe the, kal achanak Puchku ko pakadke rone lage. Kuch sahi nahi lag raha hai," Pravati ran and Sneha followed her Mom to Mishra Bhawan.

Netaji Road, the street leading to Mishra Bhawan, was swarmed with cars, as Pravati ran barefoot amidst this ongoing chaos. Her heart started beating fast as she raced toward the porch, ending up at the open front space inside this big bungalow that had suddenly become an active part of the grapevine. The place, which used to glow with flower planters and decorative lanterns, was suddenly bustling with all sorts of different noises and commotion.

Pravati couldn't believe what she saw. Baba's lifeless body lay there half clad in a white cloth. The man who used to roar inside this big bungalow had suddenly become silent. A person who hated sleeping during the day time was napping calmly, and no one had bothered to wake him up. The ever charming face was hardly visible as flowers of all colors had engulfed his visage completely. In the crowd, there was this twenty-something boy crying at the top of his lungs.

"Baba...uth, uth...colar, color," Puchku wailed. Pravati howled for Baba frantically as well. Sneha hugged her mom from behind, and the mother-daughter duo found solace in each other's arms. There was another pair of arms that came and touched Pravati, "Pravvv, biscuit, biscuit."

It took no time for Pravati to infer Puchku's words. She immediately hugged him close to her chest, and then hurried to grab some cookies for him from the kitchen.

"Hello Pravati..Can you say, Pitaji ko achanak kya hua?"The voice sounded familiar, and Pravati quickly realized that she was being probed by Baba's older sons, Sisir and Subodh. "Hmm... Theek to the kal!" Pravati said in a cracking voice.

"Kitne baar maine kaha Baba ko hamare saath jaane ke liye, par nahiunke to yahin rehna tha" Nisha was her usual self, shouting at the top of her voice, something which Baba didn't approve of when he was alive. Baba never liked Nisha, Sisir's vivacious wife. Sisir had a love marriage, and though Baba didn't like the girl, he preferred to stay mum just for the sake of his beloved eldest child.

"Please, dheere se bolo," Sisir seemed to have judged the tensed atmosphere perfectly well. "Kal tak to theek the, baba," Pravati couldn't hold herself together and yelled in a loud tone.

Subodh came to Pravati's rescue,

"We understand Pravati, Please take care of Puchku,"Subodh said. "It's difficult to imagine what he has lost. His loss is much more intense than ours. "Pravati transferred some cookies into a bowl and held Puchku's hand as she led him to the guest room upstairs. For Puchku, it was becoming increasingly difficult to comprehend things, and he preferred clinging to this loving lady as much as he could. The more Pravati tried to deviate his attention that night, the more unruly he became.

"If you don't sleep Puchku, I am going to complain to Baba," she threatened him.

Pravati's announcement came like a clincher. Like a small toddler, this twenty-year-old put his head obediently on Pravati's lap and tried to sleep. For Pravati, it was nothing less than a bad nightmare that she wasn't prepared for at all. Baba wasn't there, and Pravati was finding it difficult to digest this bitter truth. Pravati's swollen face and red puffy eyes bore testimony to how hurt she was by this unfortunate incident.

It was 7 a.m., when Pravati woke up to a loud noise.

"Who will take care of Puchku then?" Reny Maasi roared inside Mishra Bhawan. It took no time for Pravati to realize that along with Puchku, she had slept in while Baba's last rites had been completed by Sisir and Subodh.

"We didn't feel like disturbing you and Puchku. Puchku needed to rest for a while," said Subodh seriously.

"You didn't answer me! I am waiting," Reny Maasi said persistently..

Reny Maasi was Mamma's youngest sister and a practicing high court lawyer who lived close to Mishra Bhawan. She shared a great bond with Baba, and was deeply saddened by this extreme loss. A fierce lady in her own right, she never shied away from raising her voice. This was the reason why Baba admired her thoroughly.

Before Pravati could greet Reny Maasi, she said " I hope, You have now learned how to read and write, Pravati!"

Pravati had never expected this question coming her way from someone like Reny Maasi. Utterly baffled, Pravati didn't know how to answer. "Pravati is learning how to read? I mean, why?" Nisha said loudly.

"Oh really! That's news," Sisir added.

"You guys still haven't replied to me. Are you guys taking Puchku with you?" Reny maasi questioned.

"Maasi, how can I? I mean, he has special needs and it won't be possible for him to adjust," Sisir said, while putting the juice glass on the dining table.

Reny Maasi looked at Subodh's non-committal face and said, "That man knew this was coming. There can be hardly anyone like your Baba. He knew after his death, his two able sons would not be ready to take care of his beloved Puchku. *He was positive that his blood will betray him for sure.* That was the reason he has made this will."

Everyone was shocked. But Reny Maasi continued .

"As per your Baba's will, Mishra Bhawan's new owner will be Pravati. Along with Mishra Bhawan, she will take care of Baba's NGO activities. There is a trust in Puchku's name and Pravati can claim the interest on it," she said.

"But how can this be possible?" Sisir's annoyance was visible.

"Your Baba has decided this and I am no one to question him" Reny Maasi said. "He believed that after his demise, if anyone can take care of his beloved angel then it was Pravati. He had full faith in her. The only limitation in Pravati was that she didn't know how to read and write. But your Baba made sure she learned it, and that was the reason he has been incessantly teaching her for the last 60days.Pravati was speechless. She didn't know how to react. Baba had given her the responsibility of his darling Puchku. Baba had so much faith in her.

Pravati couldn't control and yelled, "Why Baba...why?" Suddenly two warm hands closed Pravati's eyes from behind and said, "ChhuppuPrav! Chhupu."

New Grandfather

Vidhi was in a hurry, as she had to pick up her daughter from school. Vidhi's daughter Aakriti studied in third grade and as Vinod was away on an official tour, it was Vidhi's responsibility to pick up her kiddo from school, on her way home from work.

Even after she picked Aakriti up, Vidhi was quite preoccupied with something else.

"Why is Maa not responding to my calls?" Vidhi kept wondering.

Vidhi's parents used to live in Dehradun, but after Mr. Potdar's sudden demise, Vidhi was determined to not leave her Mom alone. She called her to live with them in Mumbai. When Vinod and Vidhi would leave for work, Mrs. Potdar would spend her time watching TV and playing with Aakriti after she came home from school. It had been a year since Vidhi's Mom was in Mumbai, and in all that time, there hadn't been a single occasion when she hadn't answered Vidhi's call. "Today is Krish's birthday Mamma... I hope you are dropping me at his place," Aakriti asked her Mom in a soft tone.

"Hmm," Vidhi acknowledged her daughter.

"Is there any gift at home or should we give him a Visa card, Mamma?" Aakriti asked.

"Sorry Dear, I completely forgot! I think I have a couple of gift cards. We can give one to him. Nowadays, that's the best thing to do," Vidhi promptly replied. "You are becoming forgetful these days. I mean, yesterday night you got up and immediately went to Granny's room...Weird," Aakriti said curiously. Vidhi was surprised to hear that.

"I thought my princess was sleeping"

"I kind of know, when you get up somehow, "Aakriti said.

Vidhi had never been so disturbed in her entire life. Even when her dad was hospitalized, she behaved calmly. But today, there was a storm in her mind that grew more troublesome with each passing second. After her Dad's demise, Vidhi pressured her Mom to relocate to Mumbai, despite her Mom refusing at first. Vidhi loved her Mom dearly, and all her loved ones knew it. She had never seen her Mom in a bright colored saree after her Dad's death, but yesterday to her utter dismay, Mrs. Potdar was dressed up in a radiant red saree. The sudden act created a ripple in Vidhi's mind.

"Isn't it pretty?" Mrs. Potdar asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

Vidhi had never expected such a bold act from her Mom. Vidhi didn't know how to react and with a coy smile said, "Deep colors always look good on you, Maa!"

The day Vidhi first spotted Manohar Uncle's phone number in her Mom's mobile, she had mixed feelings. Manohar Uncle stayed on the first floor, while Vidhi's flat was on the fifth floor of Ujjivan Housing Society. Manohar Uncle's granddaughter Ashwini and Vidhi's daughter Aakriti

were best of friends. Manohar Uncle was also the treasurer of the housing society and spent a considerable amount of time sitting in the society's office. Vidhi had introduced her Mom to Manohar Uncle as she felt there would be someone to help her Mom in case she needed anything when Vidhi was not home. Vidhi knew her Mom was a shy person and expected it would take time for her to open up to Manohar Uncle, but to her disbelief the duo hit it off instantly. Manohar Uncle had an infectious personality which was like a magnet. Tall, strong, and stout with reading glasses, Manohar Uncle never shied away from wearing a cheerful smile on his face. It was as if he had an eye and ear for every problem. Even Aakriti's catchphrase was ,*"If you have a problem Mamma, then ask Manohar Uncle!"*

To Aakriti, Manohar Uncle was no less powerful than Harry Potter, and had a solution to every damn issue. The little girl was right in her own capacity in saying so, as on multiple occasions she had seen Uncle coming to their rescue in the most difficult times. From lending them their spare house key, to arranging a good maid, from resolving the society's water issues to arranging security in the premises, Uncle had done it all with pride and even Aakriti, a small girl, couldn't escape from his charms.

"What happened, Mamma? You have driven to A-wing!" Aakriti's question jolted Vidhi out of her thoughts. "Oh, sorry, sweetheart," Vidhi replied, while turning the steering wheel to the right. Somehow she didn't want to give shelter to the strangest thoughts that had been plaguing her to the core. "Maybe I am over analyzing things. Vinod is right when he says, 'Analysts have the habit of dissecting too much,'"

Vidhi took Aakriti's hand in hers and pressed the elevator button that would lead her up to the fifth floor. Once she was there, she opened the flat door with her key and was baffled not finding her Mom in the living room. As soon as she entered her Mom's room, what she saw took her by surprise. The closet door was wide open, and her Mom's sarees were scattered on the white floor. As she frantically searched for her Mom, her eyes caught sight of a white paper that was stuck with a push pin onto the soft board.

"Vidhi beta, please don't try to find me! I am safe and with someone special. I just need a couple of days, and then I promise I will be there in front of you to answer your questions."

Vidhi was left dumbstruck. Her worst fear had come true. She had never expected this to be coming her way. "Someone special! Maa had this someone special in her life.... Oh my God, how could she do this?" she frantically wondered. Vidhi was sweating profusely and didn't know how to react. Immediately she went to the society's office to check on Manohar Uncle, but he was nowhere to be found. Then in a state of rage, Vidhi went running to the first floor to check with Ruby, Manohar Uncle's daughter in law.

Though she had planned to accuse Uncle outrightly, she somehow gathered herself and spoke in a decent manner,

"Hey Ruby, can I speak to Manohar Uncle? I mean, is he home?"

Ruby, in her usual jolly manner, replied, "Baba is out for vacation. He is going to be back in a couple of days."

The phrase "*a couple of days*" started creating an ill feeling in Vidhi's mind. First her Mom mentioned "a couple of days" and now Ruby said the same phrase.

"What happened Vidhi, any problem?" Ruby seemed concerned about the bewildered look on Vidhi's face. "No," Vidhi said, swallowing a lump in her throat. "OK Ruby, I will catch up with you soon."

Her heart and brain were in battle. While her brain was sending her panic signals, her heart was encouraging her to be quiet and have faith in her beloved Mom.

Vidhi hurried toward the elevator and pressed the number five with full force. A chill ran down her spine and she could hear her heart racing. The moment she arrived home, Aakriti bombarded her with tons of questions.

"Spare me today, baby. Granny will be back soon," Vidhi hugged Aakriti close to her chest.

Mrs. Potdar's words were ringing in her ears. Her hands were shivering and deep within, she knew this was not a good signal. Last time she showed such symptoms, she had a severe panic attack. Thankfully, Vinod was there and he took care of her. This time it would be tough to handle in his absence. She immediately gulped down a glass of water and took her anti-anxiety medicine. Considering the state she was in, she felt it wouldn't be possible for her to accompany Aakriti to Krish's birthday party. She called Saylee, her neighbor, and asked her to take Aakriti along with her. Once Aakriti left, Vidhi yelled at the top of her lungs,

"How could you do this, Maa? How could you elope with that widower? What will I do? I can't call Vinod and explain things, it will be so embarrassing. I can't report it to the cops either as Maa is an adult or has gone voluntarily. What do I do..."

Vidhi's eyes were hooked to her phone. One moment she felt like dialing her Mom and then would immediately stop herself.

Suddenly, Vidhi's phone beeped with a message from her Maa,

"Don't be stressed. I will be back soon!"

"Stop it for God's sake!" Vidhi screamed, throwing her phone hard on the floor in a state of rage.

"Let it be," Vidhi roared like a wounded lioness. Succumbing to exhaustion, Vidhi fell asleep.

She was jolted awake the moment she heard the doorbell ring multiple times.

She tucked her curly hair behind her ears and went to open the entrance door. It was none other than Aakriti,

"What Mamma, you didn't come to pick me up? I thought you will come! It was such an amazing party. The cake was yum and the decoration was mind boggling," Aakriti said quickly.

Vidhi hugged her daughter and asked, "So my darling didn't miss her mom a bit?"

"Nope! When is Granny gonna come? I will really miss her bedtime stories," Aakriti said.

Suddenly all the bitter memories of the past five hours resurfaced in front of Vidhi and she rushed to grab her phone. The phone was intact, but the battery had died down. Vidhi plugged in her phone and went to take a shower. She stood under the water and tears started rolling down her eyes. She looked at her pale face in the mirror and was plagued again by the utterly disturbing thoughts that seem to have made a place in her brain and heart.

The following day, Vidhi took leave from her office and stayed home just to gather herself. She was looking weak and frail. Her mind was blocked with all sorts of bizarre thoughts and after Aakriti went to school she called the society office, to check if Manohar Uncle was there or not.

All of a sudden, the doorbell rang and it was none other than Vaishali Bai, the lady who worked at Vidhi's place .

"Aunty nahi dikh rahi....." Vaishali seemed curious.

"Maa has gone to her friend's place! She will be back soon. Tum apna kaam karo," Vidhi said sharply.

Utterly fatigued, she went into her room, took a painkiller and fell into deep slumber. When she woke up, it was already 4 in the afternoon. Vidhi, shocked that she slept in so late, rushed towards her room to get ready when the doorbell rang. As soon as Vidhi opened the door, she got the surprise of her life. The person she loved the most in this world, her beloved Maa was back. As she rushed to get that warm hug, Mrs. Potdar drew her attention to one more familiar face that stood solemnly. Her worst fear had come true. It was none other than Manohar Uncle.

Before Vidhi could say a word, Mrs. Potdar calmly said, "I know, there are many unanswered questions making waves in your mind. But be assured, I have answers to each one of them."

Vidhi looked at her Mom with wide eyes as Mrs. Potdar continued, *"Yes! There is 'someone special' in my life and it's none other than this man. A person who has brought a new meaning to my life. For the last thirty years, my only work had been to take care of your Dad and his family. Your father didn't want me to continue with my dance classes and happily I bid "bye" to them. I never looked back! But in these 30years, he never bothered to ask me if I was happy. My wishes and interests were unheard of. It was only his happiness that mattered. I gave my hundred percent to that relationship and expected nothing in return. Post your dad's death I was depressed to the core. After you and Vinod would leave for work, I would spend my day lamenting in this lonely apartment. It was this man who came as a surprise friend during this difficult time."*

"But Maa-" Vidhi uttered.

"Both me and Manohar Ji have immense respect for each other. We didn't have the courage to face you all as we knew we will be judged in different ways by different people. It won't be acceptable to our kids, near and dear ones, or the society at large. We didn't have the courage and hence thought of running away from this chaos to a place where we could ponder a bit about our relationship. We are sorry for disappearing! Please forgive us, beta."

Tears started rolling down from Vidhi's eyes. She hugged her Mom close to her chest and said, "I am sorry, Maa. I couldn't empathize with your plight. **I didn't realize that you too are a woman, and have your own interests and desires. If we as kids are allowed to make choices, then why can't you parents.** Please forgive me."

Mrs. Potdar forgives her and tells that everyone has their own unique journey in life, and that she is glad that Vidhi can accept her choices. **Everyone is happy living together in the same complex, especially Aakriti who loves her new grandfather.**

True Love

It's 5 a.m., and the entire P.K street seems to be in deep slumber, except for the occasional morning walkers who have begun to take strolls with a stick in one hand and a basket in another, barely missing any chance of picking and plucking any flower that came their way. The rhythmic chirping of winter birds and the devotional songs played in the nearby temple signals the beginning of a new day.

Standing on one corner of the porch and lost in her own thought is Sia, the pretty wife of Arun and the only daughter in law of the Das family. Last night had been really tough for this young lady. Unable to sleep, she had been taking turns in her bed, sometimes looking up the ceiling with eyes wide open and at times just pressing every possible icon on her smart phone, utterly confused and puzzled. Why did she come up with that untoward question, and that too for someone she considered so close? When Arun had asked her repeatedly not to confront her beloved Rama Di, then why did she do this? Varied thoughts started plaguing her, and she could not put her mind to rest even for a second.

Rama Di was Arun's aunt and Senior Das's younger sister. Tall, Dark with vermillion on her forehead, she was no less than a motherly figure full of love and affection. From their courting days, Arun has always warned Sia about his parents, who were strict disciplinarians. By the time they got married, Sia had developed cold feet and so called phobia as to her adjustment in her dream abode. Newlywed, Sia was hesitant to open up at her in-law's place, and it was until Arun asked her to take the help of Rama Di that she could find someone to confide in. When Sia stepped into Arun Niwas, there was this lady standing near the gate and blowing the conch shell at her loudest best, which marked that auspicious moment. From that day two years back to till date, not a single day had passed when Rama Di was not besides Sia. A lady who was always cheerful, happy, and with her pleasant smile could win the hearts of many. Sia's mother in law being a patient of osteoporosis, hardly did any household work. Even her basic daily activities were completed with the help of Arun's Dad and Rama Di. Arun's Dad, too, spoke very little, and being a literature veteran, was always into books and periodicals. At the age of 75, even after being operated on for cataracts in both eyes, he used to spend half of the day in the in-house library. Arun was their only son and a rainbow baby who was born after three successive miscarriages. Initially, Sia felt like a lonesome in the new place but gradually, on Arun's insistence, she started involving herself in the household chores, and in this fledgling stage of hers, there was this lady who stood like a pillar extending her hand any time Sia wanted.

One day post-nuptials, when Sia felt a slight discomfort after a heavy brunch, Rama Di's ambrosia Paan came to her rescue. Not only taste-wise, but the way it was rolled in the shape of a geometrical trapezium filled with cardamom, cinnamon, dry nuts, and presented with clove and cherry at the top was a treat to the eyes too. Sia was averse to this age-old habit of Rama Di and was constantly after her to do away with the same. Every now and then, she would try to counsel this lady but to no avail, and the very next day, looking at the light pink stains on the washbasin, she would be deeply saddened. Once, she discussed the same with her husband Arun, who joked it off, saying, "I hope u succeed but Rama Di giving up paan is like a mother giving away her

infant; still you try dear.” With each passing day, some hope of hers was lost, but still, she continued with an unceasing effort like a valiant warrior.

At this hour, she is so helpless. She doesn't have the courage to discuss her concern with Arun as she will be immediately rebuked, and she can't afford to displease him as Arun has always warned her to have control over her queer thoughts that keeps popping into her mind. Today as she has intruded into this personal space of Rama Di, she can hardly be at peace. Yesterday Rama Di was so happy as it was Savitri Puja; she had been gifted with a new saree and bangles by Sia's mom in law. Her beatific smile was enough to explain the state she was in. Sia, her mom in law and Rama Di together prayed and fasted for the wellbeing of their better halves. With her coruscating gaze, she touched and applied the vermilion on her forehead. Then why did Sia do this? There was a certain silence that followed when Sia asked.

"Where is Piusa Di? have never seen him; he doesn't care for you, it seems.

The vermilion box suddenly fell off from Rama Di's hand. With watery eyes and a choking voice, she took the box and tried to accumulate the ones that were scattered on the floor.

"Get a wet cloth, Sia, or else the stains will be there forever," she said.

When Sia returned from the kitchen with the cloth, Rama Di was not there; a slight door barging sound was enough to confirm that Rama Di had gone into her room. It was as if she had withdrawn to the untroubled quietude deep within her heart. Sia couldn't gather the courage to face her, and from that time, she was lost in guilt. She never doubted her actions, but today she felt like a culprit for whom her innocent Rama Di has been victimized. Sia remembered her Dad's words that an arrow from a bow and a word from one's mouth cannot be taken back. Deeply hurt, she too silently slipped into her room, though the door was not closed fully just to keep a watch that in case Rama Di comes, she will be the first one to run and apologize. But Alas! Rama Di's door was shut, and it seemed Arun Niwas has gone into a deep melancholy.

When Sia's eyes fell on the antique wall clock hung near the entrance, it was already 6.30 in the morning. Immediately she ran to take a shower, her saree falling apart from her shoulder sweeping the floor, hair curls rolling down the forehead swinging in linear motion, eyes swollen with mascara smudge and tears dripping down the cheeks. As soon as she entered her room, she found Arun in a deep sleep as usual. Silently walking on her toes, she reached her closet from which she took out a cotton saree and was hurrying to the rest room when her eyes fell on a white paper folded and kept on the side table adjacent to her bed. Grabbing the saree in one hand, she rushed to open the paper, which was aptly folded twice. With shaking hands and moist eyes, she opened the paper, and to her utter dismay, it was a note from her beloved Rama Di.

“Sia, Piusa is with his family, happy and content. When I was married off forty years back at the age of seventeen, I didn't know how to say no. I gave consent to an alliance that was fixed by my so-called elders in the family to a man who was twelve years my senior. Happily, I set to step into this new home of mine, but the happiness was short-lived as Piusa wanted to be with someone else and had agreed to this owing to parental pressure. *Within a year of my marriage, I came to know about it and all my dreams came crashing like a house of cards.* I left my in-law's place and came here, hoping one dawn will bring him back to me, but the waiting was to no

avail. He never came though in my teenage years, I always yearned for his love—a man whom I had loved from the bottom of my heart. Soon after, I heard that Piusa has moved on and married his sweetheart. That was a point of realization. I tried tricking my mind but failed.....

Rama Di”.

Sia was speechless. She threw her saree on the bed and ran towards Rama Di's room, but she was not there. She searched for her frantically and finally found her watering the tiny plants in the terrace corner.

She heaved a sigh of relief and gave a tight hug to Rama Di. It was the silence that followed. It took no time for Sia to realize the deep love Rama Di had within for Piusa and how selflessly she has been observing all rituals that sound synonymous with his well-being and bright future.

Maybe that's what is called true love; even though it's not reciprocated, it never fades away, she wondered.

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A long ordeal

Her face was pale, her eyes dull, and her lips had lost its tint of pinkness. Her hair looked messy, and her set of danglers were out of their dazzling stones. Her hands were as rough as sand. There she was, all alone in a small square room who like a loyal friend has been-there with her through thick and thin.

"Rani..... Why don't you call Verma?" Piya said with a smile.

"Nahi Re....." Rani quipped.

Piya knew how strong Rani was and hence giving a friendly nudge on her dearie's shoulder, exclaimed;

"Aise kaise chalega re? Yeh bimari ke dar ke wajah se apna dhanda band ho jayega!"

Rani couldn't be a deaf ear to her best buddy's words. After all, whatever she was saying made sense. If the chaos continued like this, she would be out of money in no time, pushing her to a future that looked bleak. Rani, in her extreme thoughts, had never envisaged a day like this. Life is no more the way it used to be six months back. The streets that dazzled at night now wore a deserted look. The by-lanes that bustled with the noise of the good, the bad, and the ugly silently stood like a mute spectator to this sudden chaos that seemed to have gripped the world. Nights are no more demanding, and evenings don't summon her to deck up as they used to earlier. Her lip gloss and red nail enamel have been pushed to that corner of the cupboard, where it's dull and dark. Her vibrant shimmery blouses that showed her perfect figure haven't seen the light of the day for long. Her eyes haven't shed a single tear which was way too unusual for sure.....

In the last five years, there hasn't been a single morning when this twenty-year-old has not wept behind the doors. Every night when she surrenders herself to an unknown stranger, her heart wails from within. When the bare hands intrude on her privacy, she closes her eyes with disgust. When the saliva floats on top of her bare skin, she feels the pinch within her soul. She had never wanted a life like this for herself. She, too, was small and had innumerable dreams. Born to daily wage workers, Rani had spent most of her childhood in Balasore, Odisha. Her parents struggled every single day to make both ends meet, and without any complaint, Rani spent hours in her tiny home, cooking, cleaning, and looking after her three siblings. In her free time, she would grab her book and read something, which didn't go down well with her Mom.

"Padhaai karke Kay karegi?" Rani's Mom would put this question in front of her time and again.

"Padhaai to karni chahiye na" Rani would quip.

Though due to financial problems, she dropped out of school, but in her mind she dreamt of becoming a sprinter. Her hopes got shattered when her Mom eloped with a man from the neighboring village, leaving Rani and her siblings in utter distress. Soon Rani's father too resorted to drinking and Rani had to run from pillar to post to make both ends meet. One chance

encounter with Nina Madam changed this teenager's life forever. Rani can never forget that ill-fated day when she had met this beautiful lady for the first time in the neighboring village. Rani couldn't escape Nina Madam's prying eyes,
"Kitni Sundar ho!" Nina Madam was truly vocal.

Before Rani could interrupt Rina, Madam continued, "idhar apni zindagi kharab mat karo, mere saath chalo. Tumhara life badal dunga. Do paise apne ghar ko bhi bhej paogi" It was difficult for a teenager like Rani to comprehend the real meaning behind Rina Madam's sugar-coated words. For her, Rina Madam was like an angel who had a solution to every problem.

"Madam sahi bol rahi hai. Koi naukri dila degi aur main ghar paise bhej paungi"

This idea itself was enough to create that ripple in this naïve girl's mind. She nodded in affirmation, and from there started her ordeal. Without her knowledge, she had started following a pimp, whose only work was to satisfy the affluent ones' guilty pleasure. By the time Rani could realize her mistake, it was too late. She was stripped, kissed, caressed, at the hands of a Man, thrice her age, and all she could do was to close her eyes in disgust. Her heart was torn to pieces, and her soul was buried in shame.

She didn't have any choice. Her cries were unheard of, and her cheeks were smashed on the hard floor, making her realize that it's a cage that she has dared to enter, and once in, she can hardly go out of it. The vibrant by lane was not only home to Rani, but many like her who at some point had dreams of making it big in the city, hardly realizing that it's nothing less than an Asphalt Jungle, which will push them into oblivion in a matter of few seconds. For the past few months, these streets have not seen a single customer. They are abandoned by the ones who, at some point, loved them the most. Their only source of income is lost, and they could do nothing about it. Whether she should be rejoicing with her newfound freedom or lamenting at her misery? Bewildered and perplexed, she stood like a log of wood.

All of a sudden, two warm hands embraced Rani from behind, and she was utterly shocked to see Alok before him.

"Aare itne dino baad.....Ek yug ho gaya re tujhe dekhe hue" There was a sudden twinkle in Rani's eyes.

"Haan... Bahut kuch ho raha tha zindagi mein, aane ka socha per" Alok gave a coy smile.

"Phir ana tha na tujhe" Rani was stern.

"Haan....aaj kisi maksad se aya hoon" Alok looked into Rani's shallow eyes.

For Rani, Alok was the only one amongst the lot who had dared to speak the truth. When Rani asked, "What brings you here?" (A question Rani used to put before every client.) Without blinking an eyelid, Alok had replied,

"I haven't come on my own. My parents have told me to visit this place." Alok's answer shocked Rani to the core, and she couldn't believe what she heard.

Alok was a rainbow child born to his parents after a gap of ten years. Alok's Mom suffered from multiple miscarriages, and after lots of effort, this ever cheerful boy was conceived. Alok's Dad was an influential Businessman and hence highly respected amongst his close quarters. Coming from an affluent family, Alok's parents left no stone unturned in giving him the best of all things. Though initially, Alok was too happy with this luxurious lifestyle; gradually, his preferences started to change. Though he had friends from both the genders, he always felt happy with the girls' group. He would color his nails and try out the dark lipstick shades in his Mother's absence. His preferences were different, and it took no time for him to realize this. His parents were terrified of their Son's choices. The moment they came to know about the same, they were furious. Instead of understanding their own blood, they forced him to shed his inhibitions and mingle with the opposite sex, which was hardly on his agenda.

"Take cash, Go and enjoy! Hope you will forget about this erratic behavior of yours" Alok's Dad's words were the ultimate clincher in the sorrowful tale of this young lad. When Alok's Mom raised her voice against this shameful suggestion, his Dad shouted at the top of his voice, "This might be shameful but I won't hesitate recommending it to my Son. These kids can't decide their sexual preferences. It should happen, the way it has been since time immemorial. Once he visits the place, he will change his behavior."

Despite lot of pleading, Alok's Mom was incapable of convincing his Dad. Alok didn't dare to defy his Dad and forcefully had to visit this dark place.

"Where are you lost, Rani Di?" Alok hesitantly asked.

"Mujhe jab Rani Di bulata hai to achha lagta hai. Main hamari pehli mulakaat ke bare me soch rahi thi"

"If you wouldn't have been there, I just don't know, what would have I done? You explained that life is precious, and we all have full freedom to live the way we want. We need not be afraid of anything. We can have our individual preferences, and still can be happy. It was only because of you that I got the strength to stand for my choices."

Tears started rolling down from Alok's eyes, and looking at his face Rani too became poignant.

"Mera bhola bachhaaaj kyun aya hai yahaan?"

Alok took a deep breath and, holding Rani's hands exclaimed,

"Dad passed away, and he has willed me all his assets. There's a big plot in the city's vicinity where he wanted to build a hotel that could cater to the elite class's requirements. Now that he is no more, and you know his Son's ability....." Then giving a coy smile, he continued, "You were the only one who held my hand when I was in utter despair. You showed me how to live life gracefully without feeling bad for your choices, which are completely one's own. I was lucky that I met you, Rani Di."

"Chal senti karayega kya ?" Rani said

"No, I mean it! Many like me are still afraid to come out in open. Those who come out too often have to go through immense social stigma. I don't want this to happen to another Alok. My partner Sam suggested we build a stress-free home for people like us, where in they can come, relax and be at peace." Alok said in one go.

"Good! Meri Kya help chahiye tum logo ko ?" Rani immediately uttered.

"We want you to be in charge of this place. It will be completed in a couple of months; once it's done, you can look after the place and the people over there."

Rani was shocked to hear this, and with tears in her eyes, she looked at Alok and said," Tune mujhe iske kabil samjha....Thank you, but"

"No, if's or but's Rani Di. You are joining us, and that's final. You be our guiding force, and we will pay you a handsome salary for this. Rani sobbed profusely and then said,
"Mujhe nahi pata tha , maine is dauran ek bhai bhi kamaya hai jo mere bare me itna sochta hai. Main jarur tum logo ko join karungi. Agar main kisike kaam aa saku to isse achha kya ho sakta hai "Rani hugged Alok close to her chest, and there she was, all smiles as she wanted to embrace this new dawn in her life wholeheartedly.

The AI in Marriage

Whenever Shantanu would smoke inside the house, Neha would sneak onto their terrace and take a big gasp of fresh air. Maybe this was an attempt to distance herself from that stench that used to fill the square room subsequent to his puff of smoke. Initially, Neha used to persuade Shantanu to leave this habit. Alas, however hard she tried, he was not ready to do away with it. So finally, she resorted to this technique of sneaking away to her own private space, rather than getting embroiled in some unwanted argument. Today being Sunday, Neha knew that Shantanu would get up late in the morning and would soon require his tea kept on the table adjacent to his bed. Neha had already made arrangements for making the tea. As Shantanu had a bad cough, she didn't forget to add ginger, Tulsi, and cardamom to the hot liquid, something she had learned from her Mom.

Neha had always been like this. Her caring nature always made her stand apart from the rest. When she was working, her laptop would be flooded with mail on a regular basis. In addition to her own work she would end up completing the work of her peers too. Her boss, Mrs. Dutta, knew that Neha was an asset to the organization and immediately approved her transfer request to Mumbai. But again, life proved to be an exam where the syllabus is unknown and question paper is not set. Within a month of her stepping foot in Mumbai, she had to pack her bags for the US, as Shantanu got an opportunity that he did not want to let go. Initially, Neha was reluctant to leave her job but as a new bride, she didn't want to stay away from her husband. Coming from a two-tier city in India, the idea of living close to the Big Apple was giving her sleepless nights. She was both excited and nervous. She was frightened, but at the same time cautious that her fear not get revealed in front of her husband.

Will Shantanu think, "I am married to a coward?"

This thought would bug her to the core until she would get a tsunami of courage to face every single challenge that came her way. Shantanu, a software professional, commuted to New York from New Jersey via the train on a daily basis. The exorbitant property prices prevented professionals like him from renting an apartment in one of the world's costliest cities. New Jersey was not new to Neha as Chhavi, her Gujju friend, had shifted here a long time back. She had seen glimpses of this beautiful city in Chhavi's Facebook posts. Now seeing everything for herself made her happy.

Two months after landing in this new city, she stepped out for the second time with Shantanu. Because of the excessive cold she had been indoors, mostly decorating their one bedroom flat with whatever little trinkets she grabbed from One Dollar shop. One of Shantanu's friends suggested this store and Neha couldn't stop thanking him. One dollar items were kind to her wish list and budget, so she didn't hesitate piling things in her cart.

"Nehu, Do you know this plastic sheet is \$2, I mean Rs.140. How can you want to have it?" Shantanu asked on one occasion.

Shantanu kept track of each dollar spent, like a human calculator. To prove his point, he would convert dollars into Indian rupees there and then. As soon as Neha realized this, she refrained

from spending a penny. Though she controlled her desire to a great extent, her heart would wail looking at the pretty stuff all around her. The moment colorful goodies at the big stores attracted her, she would touch them with her bare hands and then look at the price tag. One glance at the price: the thing would be back on the shelf. Shantanu had a home loan of forty lakhs and Neha was very much aware of that fact.

"Maybe after this home loan is over, Shantanu can heave a sigh of relief and I will be able to spend the way that I used to," Neha would convince herself constantly.

Soon, Neha started adjusting to life in the West. As a good wife, she would wake up at 5 a.m., take a bath, and then enter the kitchen to prepare breakfast and lunch for Shantanu. After he would leave for work, Neha would fall asleep once more. Once she was fully rested, she would get on her laptop and spend time exploring the various trendy goods available on the Internet. From dresses to sandals to home furnishing, she would hover the mouse on every possible option, and derive pleasure going through the same. It had become her daily routine, but she refrained discussing it with her beloved husband as she knew that it wouldn't go down well with him. A man who himself abstains from spending a penny can hardly relate to his wife's desires. Days passed by and Neha gradually got accustomed to this tiny world of her own, where she would derive pleasure looking at her wish list virtually. However, she longed for that day when Shantanu would be free from his debts, and bring back her good old days where she could shop for whatever she wanted.

"Nehu, let's go outside for Dinner today?" Shantanu asked jovially one Sunday. Something good must have happened- that's why Shantanu wants to celebrate "What happened, Shantanu? Did you clear the home loan?" Neha asked excitedly. Shantanu looked at Neha with curious eyes.

"Can't I take my wife out for dinner? Do we need an occasion for that?" Shantanu sternly asked. Neha didn't feel like arguing with her beloved husband, and silently gave her consent to Shantanu's proposal.

After a long time, she was stepping out to have dinner with her dearest hubby and that doubled her excitement. She took out a bright red dress and paired it with her black sandals that she had fetched from India. There she was, all set to accompany the love of her life. They went to an Italian restaurant where Shantanu ordered his favorite pasta and Neha got herself a mozzarella cheese sandwich.

"Hey Nehu, why a sandwich? Go for something else!" Shantanu said.

Neha didn't want to see the bill growing, so she softly replied "Hmm... But I like sandwiches the most." Shantanu smiled back.

While they were waiting for the food, Shantanu said, "You asked me about the home loan! Thankfully, in the last two years, I had saved enough to clear it up in one big payment. I cleared it a couple of months back-"

Before Shantanu could continue Neha interrupted,

"But you didn't tell me about it!"

"Yeah! I was going to tell you. It just slipped out of my mind. Sorry! I Should have told you the day itself," Shantanu said empathetically.

"It's perfectly fine, Dear! It's just that, I didn't know about it and that made me curious," Neha said.

"Hmm... I totally understand; but indeed there actually is something special today," Shantanu said excitedly.

"I purchased a piece of land in my home state and that's a reason to Celebrate too," he said. There was a different spark in Shantanu's eyes. Silence prevailed for a second and then Shantanu uttered, "Aren't you happy, Nehu? I mean we purchased a plot, and that's one more addition to our asset list "

"Sandwiches and pasta for this beautiful couple" The blue eyed waitress interrupted in a charming voice.

"Thanks! You can keep the food here. We will help ourselves," Shantanu said.

"Ohh... sure! Enjoy your evening and do let me know if you need anything," the waitress said.

"Nehu, pasta and sandwiches are here. I am so hungry..." Shantanu didn't bother to look at Neha's pale face.

"I don't feel like eating. You go ahead," Neha said sharply.

"What's the matter?" Shantanu finally looked into Neha's eyes.

"I don't know if I should be telling you this," Swallowing a lump in her throat, Neha continued, "I am happy for you! I am glad that our asset list has one more addition, but I am not able to console myself. I just can't compromise on my wishes anymore."

"Compromise...?" Shantanu put down his fork and gave a blank look at Neha.

"Yeah! Shantanu, the moment you told me that you had a home loan of forty lakhs and you are doing whatever you could to save and pay it off, I kind of took it as a personal milestone. I curtailed my wishes, and wholeheartedly tried to save every single penny. I didn't mind doing this, as I believed that after the repayment we could breathe easy. We can finally spend but you didn't even tell me...!" Neha said fiercely.

"I appreciate your frugality, Nehu, but it's all for our bright future... I thought you understood" Shantanu said.

"*The future shouldn't be rosy at the cost of a difficult present.* I left my job for your sake. I refrained from spending to the best of my ability, but I can't do this anymore. I can't sacrifice my wishes to gain some immovable assets, just for the sake of eventually owning it to add to an asset list." Tears started rolling down from Neha's eyes, and she quickly left the table and walked out of the restaurant to sit in their car.

Shantanu maintained his poise, and after paying the bill followed Neha to the car .

As soon as Shantanu opened the car door, Neha became a little awkward. "It's OK," Shantanu murmured and sat in the driver's seat. With moist eyes, Neha kept on looking toward her right, her mind plagued with all sorts of disturbing thoughts.

"I should have had control over my emotions. It wasn't nice talking to Shantanu in such a way. Maybe I reacted in a childish way. He was so happy today..." Her mind was not letting her face her darling hubby. After much contemplation, she gathered enough courage to look at Shantanu. To her utter shock, tears were rolling down from Shantanu's eyes. Neha had never seen Shantanu shedding a tear. She couldn't control herself and immediately apologized, "I am sorry, Love.....I shouldn't have spoken in such a manner."

Shantanu immediately stopped the car and looked at Neha.

"I am sorry, Nehu," Shantanu said in a timid voice. "Please forgive me. You are right with your words. Since the time I was a teenager, I had this belief in my mind that I would amass lots of assets and wealth. I had seen my dad struggle to make both ends meet. Even though he wanted to give us the best life, he couldn't as he would always run short of money-

"I understand!" Neha interrupted Shantanu with a choking voice. "I didn't want the same for my kids," he continued. "I wanted a secure life for us. But somehow I forgot that *there is one more person with me whose thoughts also matter*. I never knew that you had so many things on your mind. I should have thought about it sooner!" Shantanu was apologetic and Neha couldn't see him break down in-front of her in such a way. She immediately grabbed his face, and kissed him passionately. The smooch lasted for a minute. As Shantanu tried to withdraw, Neha held his face with her hands and said, "I love you so much. I too should have expressed my feelings before you. **In a husband-wife relationship, the 'AI' of Assumption and Inhibition shouldn't be there.**" Shantanu planted a kiss on Neha's forehead, and before Neha could utter another word, he said. "I am feeling hungry, my dear wifey. How about some pizza from your favorite spot? I know it's a bit pricey... but anything for you." Neha burst out laughing as Shantanu hugged her close to his chest.

Uncle Vir

For uncle Vir, it was just one more day in his office where he had toiled and invested a good thirty years of his life. 10 O'clock and uncle Vir is here, devoid of any stress, face shining as brightly as ever, head held high and body in perfect alignment. No postural deviations which project his balanced mindset and receding hairline with feeble vision just seem to add up to his wisdom.

Five years back, when I got my first posting as a Group B officer in the secretariat, someone danced with joy. It was my Dad for obvious reasons, but more than anything, he liked the fact that because of my job, one day I may get to work with Vir uncle. I must have been around 10 when I first heard this name. He and my Dad were alumni of the same university in western Odisha, Viren Rout, whom we lovingly address as Vir uncle was three years senior to my Dad. In those days when being placed in the second div was commendable, Uncle had managed to break records by passing in first division all through. For Dad, his name was synonymous with persistent effort, unflinching determination, and undying spirit. Vir Uncle's success was a touchstone to which my Dad would assess me and my brother's performance. Bhai joined the army, and I was left alone to prove myself.

"*Study Sunit or else how can you be like Vir Bhai*" My Dad used to blabber the moment he would see me in the kitchen talking to my mom. The effect of his heavy voice was such that my mom would panic, asking me to go and focus as if I was lined up to be the next star of our village to shine as bright as Vir uncle. Blame it on my Dad's belief or my mom's prayers, I managed a place in my first attempt. For my initial two years, I was rotated between various departments, and finally, three years back, I got posting in the same Department as that of Uncles.

That day Mom had made my favorite mutton Rogan josh. Red meat curry is something for which every Odiya heart skips a beat. I, too, couldn't resist and was 15 minutes late to the office. There was this tall, fair elderly man standing next to my table.

"Sunit Panda, today is your first day, and you are late. I hope you don't make it a practice."

"Sorry, sir, Bad traffic," I answered with a shivering tone.

"I think we are not in Mumbai where this excuse holds good. This is a Tier II city with a 10km radius. Please watch your words and all the best" Taking a red file from my desk, he walked away towards his cabin.

"Ohh, my God! this tenure is going to be the toughest" I thought.

6 p.m. and I was waiting for Nishant in the office park place when suddenly a hand touched my shoulder. As I turned, my heart sank, Vir uncle was standing next to me, and when I was about to apologize, he asked,

"Sunit, you are Pramod's son right, that man is a charmer and can convince any damn fellow. Long time both of us have sat together-"By that time, my mind must have gone through the worst scan of words to start my conversation with this man.

"Yeah, even we have heard a lot about you, sir," I said

"No sir, Young man, that's office protocol, but outside the office, you can address me as Uncle. I hope you don't mind."

How can I mind when without his knowledge, he has been integral to our morning tea and dinner table conversation. Without wasting a second, I bent down as a cultured Odiya lad, thereby touching Vir uncle's feet, and answered in affirmative, "Sure Uncle."

Hesitantly though, he smiled and walked towards his car. I stood there engulfed in my thoughts, analyzing his gesture, and wondering about my future as a mere subordinate to such superior.

What a man he is; in these three years, there has not been a single day when he has reported late. 9.30, and Vir uncle is at his desk analyzing and preparing a blueprint for delegating duties so that work gets completed in time. Not only that, even during lunchtime, one can find him in deep thought as he thinks ahead than any of us could ever. Despite his busy schedule, his chamber was always open for people like me, who needed his guidance on several matters. A thorough professional, it has always been "Work first" in Viren Rout's life.

Finally, a week back, when Sharma ji asked me to prepare a write up on Vir uncle, I couldn't hold myself back. The idea itself was giving me goosebumps, and the inquisitiveness within me was hard to surrender. I decided to have a word with the man himself and hence last weekend when all were busy packing their bags I stayed back to talk. Only three days left to retire, and this man is still slogging out till 7, I thought and barged into his cabin.

"Excuse me, Sir. Good evening. I just wanted to have a word with you."

"Sure, Sunit, Go ahead" Although the PC was playing its part in keeping him occupied, he took out his glasses and aptly putting them on his desk. He looked at me with full attention.

"Sir, you have been a source of inspiration for each one of us. We all know how much you love your work just wanted to know how you are planning to spend your post-retirement life" with utmost curiosity, I put the question.

"There's nothing as such post-retirement, Young man. For the last 30 years, I had been busy with files and folders; these have been acting as fodder to my existence. Now when Govt. has decided to relieve me off my duties fully, let's see what is in store for me, but first and foremost, I have to search for a rental home as I have to vacate the Govt. quarters soon."

Utterly confused, I didn't waste a minute before putting the next question.

"Yeah, then swallowing a lump in my throat I asked, Rental home, why Sir, I mean...."

"Oh, like every other person, you too finally came up with the question. I have spent the last three decades staying in Government quarters and had never felt the need to build something for my own. Whatever I earned was not enough....."

My next question was backed by a blank stare as I had started regretting my decision of joining the Government service, thereby comparing the same with my friends who had joined the IT sector.

"Oh! Ok, Sir, and how are you going to be busy? like spending time with family and all."

Suddenly Vir uncle's mobile beeped, and he seemed pretty disturbed.

"Any problem, sir."

"No, no.... You carry on," though he was pretending to be happy, his facial lines had a different tale to tell.

"No Family! *who would like to take the plunge with a man who is hitched to his job*, jokes apart I have five young siblings and hailing from a poor family my immediate concern was to educate them so that they become self-sufficient. Being the eldest comes with its share of responsibilities. In that race, I had no time to think about myself, so you understand what I mean" . Then, removing the coaster, he emptied the glass of water in one go, and there came a Huh!!! Which depicted his satisfaction well.

By that time, as I looked up, I saw it was already eight. Still, I was not ready to let it go and was armed with a volley of questions when Uncle interrupted, "Go, Sunit, we can catch up tomorrow; Panda must be worried."

Though my mind was averse to it, still, I said "Yes" and left his cabin bewildered.

That must have been the most stressful night of my life. I was forced to wonder what lay ahead. Are perks paid to a Government servant anywhere close to that of one in the private sector ? is my fate going to be the same as that of Vir uncle's, barring that I have a girlfriend who is ready to settle down with me the moment I ask her to do so. These thoughts kept coming on and off, which made me question my job choice. Not only that, Vir uncle's words were ringing in my ears. A class I government officer has no roof over his head to call his own. No doubt, he has done a lot for his family, but how can he forget about himself and who is going to take care of him now. All these thoughts were enough to trigger a migraine attack, thereby confining me to bed for the next two days.

Somehow taking some time out and feeding myself with two painkillers, I managed to prepare a speech on Uncle, which I was supposed to read in the evening function. More than me, my Dad was nervous, which was evident from the number of visits he was making to the loo since morning, a hereditary trait, and has been passed on to Bhai and me. Sadness had not gripped me, and my face bore testimony to the same.

Sharma Ji was busy, and so were all others. As soon as I stepped in, Sharma ji asked me to attend to some people who had come to meet Vir uncle. They had the visitors pass, and hence I made them sit comfortably in the lobby. Half of them were in their thirties, and rest all senior citizens. Amidst the bunch, there was one who was constantly wiping off her tears with her saree. I couldn't control myself and immediately asked, "What's the matter? Can I be of any help?" The lady didn't speak, maybe her grief was not allowing her to do so but there was this young man who spoke instead.

"*My mom is sad, not only my mom but there are many in Chatua village who are, and why wouldn't they be? Viren Mausa is going to retire. A man who has been there for us all these years. Mausa used to give free tuitions to many of us for whom studies, at one point, seemed a distant dream. Whenever we used to have any doubts, Mausa was there to guide us. Not only*

that, it was his dream to build a school in our village where poor kids would be given free basic education, with that purpose five years back he purchased land in Chatua and was about to start work on the same, but suddenly he came to know that he has been duped as the owner had previously sold the same to someone else. Mause was heartbroken, and so were we all. For the last five years, he has been fighting for the same, and tomorrow again, we have court dates. Let's see what lies ahead, but we all are with Mause"

I was speechless. Suddenly I was unable to hold myself together and rushed to the restroom to wash my face; maybe that was an attempt to get away with all the bizarre thoughts I was having about Vir Uncle for the past two days. I pitied my imagination as I thought what a great cause Uncle is working for. All these years, he has been doing so much for so many but still he didn't mention a word. So easily he mentioned about his siblings, but what about Chatua people. Maybe Dad knew this; **when a person resides in the hearts and prayers of so many, then how does it matter if he doesn't have an abode of his own.** Maybe the call the other day was related to the same lawsuit. He has been fighting battles throughout, and now when it's time to withdraw to the quietude, he is ready for the war. Deeply engrossed in these thoughts, I was wiping my face with the handkerchief when suddenly a familiar hand touched my back.

As I turned, it was Vir Uncle. I couldn't control myself and hugged him tightly. With moist eyes, I could just murmur, "Sorry."

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Final Clincher

Avanti couldn't sleep the entire night. Her migraine was giving her a tough time. A throbbing headache was continuously bothering her, and all she wanted was to lay down on her bed peacefully. For Avanti, it was not new and she was anticipating this since yesterday afternoon, the moment she had a fall out with Atul. Whenever she was stressed, this unwanted guest would embrace her tightly, and this time too she was not spared from its clutches. She didn't talk to Amma in the morning, which had been her daily ritual once she stepped onto this foreign land. Suddenly her phone beeped and it was none other than Atul. Avanti didn't feel like talking to her beloved husband, and declined the call. However, Atul was persistent. Finally Avanti answered, "Hello..."

"Hope you are doing good! I mean-" Atul's voice sounded heavy.

"Yeah! Just taking a nap. Sorry I couldn't make breakfast for you today" Avanti said. "It's absolutely fine. You gave me a chance to experiment with my culinary skills today. I was in a hurry, and didn't feel like disturbing you."

Before Atul could continue further, Avanti interrupted, "I understand!"

"OK, you take rest. I will see you in the evening."

Atul hung up as he had a meeting lined up. Avanti's sleep was disturbed and she didn't feel like resting anymore. She took her phone in her hand, tied her hair into a messy bun, and walked into the living room of their two bedroom apartment. She took a painkiller and gulped down a glass of water in one go. She didn't feel like putting the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, nor did she feel like cleaning the kitchen platform with a damp cloth as she normally did. She sat on the sofa and looked through her glass terrace door and at the blue sky. The day was bright and sunny. Fleets of birds moved in groups recreating geographical shapes. The old oak tree in front of her house had started shedding leaves due to the onset of fall. All these details failed to invoke any emotions in her. She looked at the wall that boasted her lovey-dovey pictures with Atul in a splendid way. In one Atul had held her close to his chest, while in another their hands were entangled as they embraced each other in front of the setting sun.

"*Why did Atul react this way?*" Avanti's thoughts got a jerk

Avanti had never envisioned this coming from a person whom she looked up to. After her Dad, one person she admired the most was her husband.

"Don't always shed tears saying the same thing again and again! It was our mutual decision, and on top of it, a single person's income in the US is far more than the combined income of a working couple in India," Atul said, aggravating Avanti's anger.

"How can you be so insensitive?" Avanti unapologetically asked.

"Insensitive? But did I say something wrong? We both used to earn three lakhs per month in India, while in the US my single income amounts to seven lakhs. Isn't it good for us?" Atul said.

"I understand! But what about me? Have you ever thought about how I spend my time sitting idly at home? My visa doesn't allow me to work here. For a person who was working tirelessly for the past six years, it's so difficult to stay at home"

Before Avanti could continue, Atul came a step closer and exclaimed, "Think about us, Avanti! Don't think about yourself only. Tomorrow, we will have our baby, think about the wellbeing of everyone!"

Those words kept ringing in Avanti's ears and she couldn't sleep the entire night thereby waking upto a splitting migraine attack. Avanti had never thought her loving hubby would be so aggressive toward her. What was her fault after all? Shouldn't she have the liberty to think about herself? Is it a crime to think about one's own interests? Did she make a mistake by leaving her job? She felt her patience dwindling.

Avanti had an arranged marriage with Atul, but they had both spent considerable time with each other before tying the knot. Atul's calm and sensitive nature made Avanti fall in love with him. When Atul had got this on-site assignment, Avanti was euphoric.

Tears rolled down from Avanti's Eyes remembering those special moments. They went to have Chinese food followed by a long drive to the beautiful Khadakwasla dam. Everything seemed perfect until Atul broke the news that shattered all the dreams of his better half.

"You will be on a dependent visa, Avanti, and I am afraid you won't be able to work there," he said.

Those words were enough to drive Avanti crazy.

"What? Then what am I going to do there?" Avanti asked.

Atul held his beloved's hands and said in a soft murmur, "I love you Avu... I can't live without you! If you are not accompanying me, I will say 'No' to this assignment."

Avanti knew how hard Atul had toiled to make this happen. She couldn't allow his dreams to bite the dust. Swallowing a lump in her throat she said, "I love you too! I will definitely come with you."

Since that day, so much has changed. In her two years in the US, Avanti had tried her best to adjust to this new set up. While Atul went for work early, Avanti's day would start late. She would spend hours exploring different cuisines on the internet, and try recreating them in her kitchen. She would put her sweat and blood into it, and wait for the validation from Atul. Initially a social media recluse, Avanti jumped onto the bandwagon, as she had become tired of

her newfound free time. No matter how hard she tried to adjust, at the core of her heart, she didn't like this new life of hers and would often regret her decision of leaving her job.

Avanti laid still on the couch like a log of wood. She wasn't able to take Atul's words off her mind. She loved Atul dearly and couldn't imagine a life without him, but again she couldn't afford to remain idle like this for long. Suddenly Avanti's eyes were drawn to a message in their Sunshine Apartment Complex's WhatsApp group. It mostly comprised of Indian immigrants who had called this society their home in the outskirts of Michigan.

"Would like to know about drawing classes for my two small kids! Please let me know if anyone teaches these classes in this society. Thanks! Renu"

"I don't know, Even my kids want to attend!" This message followed the previous one and was texted by Avanti's friend Sheetal.

Avanti knew there was someone who could help out these small kiddos. There was one, who had received many accolades in her life for her amazing painting skills. One, for whom art was like a burning passion at some point of time. Today she can't be a mute spectator to these eager Moms' queries. Avanti could hardly control herself, and without blinking an eye wrote, "Yes! I love painting and can definitely help the kids. Those interested, do DM me on my number. Thanks! Avanti "

No sooner had Avanti texted this, she received more than ten queries from interested parents. Forgetting about her migraine and her fallout with Atul, she started texting the respective parents. She grabbed her laptop and made an action plan as to how her classes will look like. What will be covered and how will the kids be distributed to different classes? As a perfectionist, it didn't take her much time and the whole schedule was ready in a few hours. It was 8 in the evening, when Atul arrived after completing a day in his office. Atul had got red roses and a pack of Ferrero Rocher for his beloved wife.

"I hope my tigress isn't angry anymore?" Atul planted a kiss on his wife's forehead and gave her the lovely flowers.

"Tigress will take some time to be calm!" Avanti said, while accepting the roses from Atul. "Tigress is actually going to take art classes for small kids, provided Tiger doesn't complain." Atul knew Avanti loved painting, and it would be foolish on his part to doubt her credibility. He immediately consented saying, "As you wish, my Dear!" Avanti gave a coy smile and was happy returning to her first love, Art, after a gap of eight years.

Soon Flat No. 301 in the Sunshine Apartment Complex started seeing kids of all ages. Avanti divided the kids into three groups and started taking their classes in the afternoon. Though she was playing her role well, she refrained from charging a single penny from the parents.

"Art is my passion! I am not going to charge anything. Kids are happily learning and that's my biggest satisfaction," she said.

These words of Avanti would baffle parents of the young ones. While some were happy on account of these free sessions, others were leaving no stone unturned in praising this young lady's selfless devotion. Avanti was happy and she was working with renewed spirit, solely

dedicated to serve these small kids. Avanti's skills too didn't get unnoticed as one day, one of the moms, Priyanka, suggested,

"I am so impressed with your skill, Avanti! Why don't you apply for the MFA program in the University. My husband was saying that if you are selected, you would get a full scholarship for this two year course."

Avanti had never expected this to be coming her way. Though she was aware of the existence of this type of program, she hadn't pushed her brains to think much about it. Without losing a second Avanti answered, "Thanks for sharing Priyanka! I will definitely explore it." Priyanka's words kept ringing in Avanti's ears. This new idea of going back to college was exhilarating to the core. She had toiled hard to meet the needs of her job. In between work and family, she had totally forgotten about her first love that was Painting for sure. The colors which painted her life once were pushed to a closed corner and now she was going to make them an integral part of her life again. The next day, Avanti explored the MFA program in the University and was elated looking into the course structure and the program requirements. She had to submit five of her best pieces and for the next couple of months she gave her sweat and blood in creating them. Finally, before the end of the year she was ready with her application. With full faith, she applied for the desired program in a couple of universities.

Fall had made way for winter and winter for spring. The oak tree in front of Avanti's house had started blooming and the pile of snow amassed near her garage door was melting with each passing day. Avanti was busy with the kids, when suddenly her phone beeped. Her inbox showed one new message and the contents of the mail blew her mind:

"Congratulations Avanti Varma! We are pleased to inform you that your application for our coveted MFA program has been accepted."

Tears rolled down Avanti's face as she ran at her highest speed to bow down in front of her Guruji's photo, and thanked her stars for giving her a new lease of life. **She could visualize a brighter tomorrow where there wasn't any scope for regrets, rather ample opportunities that stood with open arms to embrace her.**

A KissSurreal and Magical

Jenny was upset and it took Mrs. Patel a minute to realize that. Her pale eyes and puffy face were enough to prove that something had indeed gone wrong.

"I don't want to eat anything, Mom!" said Jenny while shutting the restroom door.

"OK, Darling! Just tell me, what's wrong with you? You have a swollen face. That's an indicator that you didn't have proper sleep. I mean--"

Before Mrs. Patel could continue further, Jenny interrupted, "Please don't behave like those typical Bollywood Indian Mamas, who portray how much they care for their kids. You don't have to do that"

"So rude of you, Dear! I have always been worried about you. After me and your Dad separated..." Mrs. Patel's pause gave Jenny the required opportunity to pounce back.

"I know all of those things, Mom! I just don't feel like having anything," Jenny said. Taking her bag in her hands and tying her hair into a poufy ponytail, Jenny went out in the cold, windy weather.

Once out of her house, Jenny took her mobile and tried to look into the messages that she had received the previous day. Her Inbox was loaded with hundreds of unread messages, but that one text she was eagerly waiting for wasn't there.

"Why are you not texting, Romen?" she wondered.

Whenever there used to be any fight between the two, it was Romen who would come and apologize. Jenny loved this behavior of Romen, and would call him her knight in shining armor. She would constantly giggle talking about him. Jenny would always thank her stars for her chance meeting with Romen in Central Park, New York.

10 October, 2017

It was a bright sunny morning, and Jenny had visited Times Square with her friends. Times Square had always been Jenny's favorite destination. Whenever she would be upset, she would ask her mom to take her to this vibrant place which used to awe her with its illuminated glowing signs and billboards. One stroll around this bowtie shaped place, and Jenny would be free from her woes. On this trip, her happiness was double, as she was accompanied by her best buddies, Nicole and Sam.

"Jenny, do you visit Times Square often?" Nicole asked.

"Not often! But yeah, whenever I feel low, this is the place I come to. It relieves me of my stress," Jenny said in a jovial tone.

"Oh... That's kind of cool. I also like this place. I bet this sophomore years are going to be the best." Said Nicole with a nod.

Before Jenny could add, Sam patted her back and pulled her to a corner.

"Jenny Darling, I want to take Nicole to Gapstow Bridge and show her the fall colors over there," Sam said.

"Gapstow Bridge? Where is it," Jenny lasked.

Sam looked into Jenny's eyes and said, "Don't tell me you don't know about it. It's one of the best places to view the fall foliage in the park. The vines and the surrounding trees of black cherry make it a favorite spot for photographers. Nicole has a penchant for colors and I know she is going to love it."

"Seriously, I wasn't aware about it," Said Jenny. "Anything for my best buddy Nicole. Anyways what am I going to do there?"

"Hey, you are going to be with us!" Sam exclaimed.

"I know, you two love birds will enjoy. But what about me?" Jenny gave a naughty smile. "That's the reason we have been after you to find a boyfriend, you know!" Sam came a step closer.

"Hmm, now I have to really think about it," Jenny joked.

Jenny, Nicole, and Sam took a cab to Central Park. Jenny had visited this beautiful place when she was in elementary school. Her Dad had taken a day off and she remembered going with him to the Central Park Zoo. She still has clear memories of the snow leopard, which she saw there for the first time. After coming home, she had drawn a picture of it and showed it to her Mom. That day was different. She was with the man she loved the most on this earth, her Dad. Jenny loved Mr. Patel dearly, and was devastated at the news of his divorce with her Mom. Her Mom told her that it's best if they go separate ways and Jenny accepted the fact. But that didn't convince her inner self completely. She never wanted her parents to separate. But as they say; certain things are not in one's hand. Jenny's parents divorced and this young girl was left with a scar which was never going to be healed.

"What happened, Jenny?" Sam and Nicole popped the question at the same time.

"Jinx... Ha. Nothing," Jenny said firmly.

They went inside the park and were taken aback looking at the fall foliage colors which seemed to have covered the park like a sheet of art paper. Red, yellow, orange, green, brown... It was magical, just like a kaleidoscope. The trio held hands and walked slowly, enjoying each and every spot in this vast landscape.

Suddenly, Jenny noticed Sam whispering something in Nicole's ear. Maybe they want to spend some quality time together, thought Jenny and said "Nicole and Sam, you guys carry on to Gapstow bridge. I will meet you here after an hour." "Nicole and Sam wandered through the park's bright path and Jenny went the other way.

After a brief walk, she spotted an ice rink and the very thought of skating excited her. She had gone skating a long time ago and wanted to give it a shot. She went to the rental center and grabbed skating boots. The idea was making her a bit nervous. Setting her inhibitions aside, she wore the pair of skates and went over to the rink. The rink was full of people of all ages. Some were so swift that Jenny got dizzy looking at them. With all hope, Jenny lifted her hands, and tried to balance her body weight on the skates. Barely four steps in, Jenny fell flat on the ground. Her legs got entangled and despite her best efforts, she was not able to stand up. All sorts of bizarre thoughts started bugging her to the core. Her Dad, her parents' divorce, and her singleton status- everything was driving her crazy and she felt like crying. Suddenly, she spotted a pair of skates coming close to her. As she lifted her face up, she could see a tall boy with a blue hoodie offering her help. Before Jenny could answer, the boy caught hold of her in a way that she got pulled close to his chest.

"Are you okay?" the stranger asked.

It was the first time Jenny was standing so close to someone from the opposite sex, and in a state of nervousness, she was tongue tied.

"My name is Romen and if you have any difficulty skating, I can help you," he said.

Those magical words still ring in Jenny's ears. Romen was tall, fair, and with muscular arms that any girl would ever dream of. On top of it, his blue eyes set the standards high. Jenny had always dreamt of someone like Romen to be her special person and this chance encounter gave her an adrenaline rush from head to toe.

"Can you hold my hand for a little while, until I master the art of doing it on my own?" Jenny asked.

"Sure. I would love to do that," Romen replied.

Romen held Jenny's hand tightly and together they skated in circles inside the rink.

Jenny kept smiling while Romen made her go in circles at the highest speed possible. The duo went on for 30 minutes and during this time, there was not a single moment when Romen left Jenny's hand. Jenny was blown away by Romen's integrity.

"I love the way you do it so swiftly. I mean, you seem like a pro," Jenny said.

Romen took a deep breath and said, "No, but I love skating and when it's autumn in Central Park, it's magical"

Jenny accompanied Romen to the nearby café inside the park where they indulged in some serious conversation. Romen was from North Bergen Township and he frequented Central Park in autumn to immerse in its liveliness. Romen was two years senior to Jenny and apart from being studious, he was a music enthusiast too. He loved playing string instruments. Their common love for strings brought them closer as they discussed many topics related to the same subject. Jenny was at her happiest self and loved listening to this wonder boy's talks. Suddenly Jenny's phone beeped and it was a message from Sam asking her to come to the Gapstow Bridge. Jenny texted Sam that she is busy, and wouldn't be able to make it to the bridge.

"Hey what happened?" Romen asked. "Don't you want to go back to your friends?"

Jenny couldn't control herself and yelled, *"I am weird. I should be happy for them but...they are in love, so they will enjoy their time more on the bridge. I don't feel like intruding into their privacy."*

Romen seriously said, "Jenny, you should be happy for them."

"I know! But I am 16 and I haven't kissed a guy yet. Forget sex, even a kiss is not there in my life. My life is such a mess," Jenny said sadly.

Jenny took her bag in her hands and started to leave. Romen followed her and dragged her close to his chest. He closed her eyes with his hands. Her heart started to beat fast. She came a step closer, and he pushed her hands to her back. The smell of his cappuccino was still lingering on his breath. He pulled her closer, and slowly planted a kiss on her curvy lips. He tried pulling back but she kept on playing with his tongue. His saliva was all in her mouth and her red lip-gloss on his upper lip. The smooch went on for a few more seconds until Jenny's phone beeped again.

Present Day

Jenny could never forget that day or that moment as it was her very first kiss. That day was the foundation of a new friendship between Jenny and Romen. The whirlwind romance which started at Central Park went on at full speed. Romen and Jenny lived only few miles apart, and every evening they would meet after school. There was not a single topic under the sun that didn't form a part of their discussion. Jenny loved listening to Romen, and Romen liked Jenny's unpredictable nature. Whenever Jenny got upset, Romen made every possible effort to bring back the smile on her face. But now almost 24 hours had passed and Romen had not called back yet.

Jenny knew she was wrong on her part to have spoken in such an offensive tone to Romen in front of everyone. She had texted him "sorry" many times but to no avail. Tears started rolling down from Jenny's eyes as she walked past the main road to arrive at Stevonn's Café, their usual hangout joint. She didn't feel like attending school today. She ordered a double cheeseburger and kept on looking at her inbox, with the hope that a message would pop in from Romen. All of a sudden, a call came from Nicole but Jenny didn't answer it. Shortly after, Nicole sent a message to Jenny asking her to come to Central Park.

"Central Park" the location sent a chill down her spine. The place she had met Romen, the place where she had her first kiss, a place so close to her heart. Today, she was not in the mood to go there. All she wanted was a call from her beloved Romen and nothing else.

Nicole didn't stop and kept on sending texts to Jenny asking her to come over at any cost. Annoyed, Jenny decided to go.

The moment she entered the park, she got goosebumps. Thought of Romen disturbed her to the core and she ran toward the Gapstow Bridge where Nicole had asked her to come. She ran at her highest speed, maybe in an attempt to get rid of the bizarre thoughts that were plaguing her since

her argument with Romen. To her utter dismay, Nicole was nowhere around. As she turned, she saw the same blue eyes which she was fond of, the same broad smile which drove her crazy, and the same hair which she loves running her fingers through.

Yes! It was Romen standing on the bridge with Jenny's favorite carnations in his hand.
"Romen, my love," Jenny shouted with joy.

Tears started rolling down her cheeks as she looked into Romen's eyes. Romen pulled Jenny close to his chest and sealed her lip with a long kiss. None wanted to withdraw this time and it went on like a sweet song. On top of the suspended bridge, these two love birds were lost in their own sweet world.

It was surreal.it was euphoric.it was magical.

Revathi Amma

Madhu was upset, and it was evident from the dark circles which had popped up under her eyes like an unwanted guest. She has never felt like this in last one year. She wants to run away to the quietude of her inner soul but she can't. She leans against the window panel feeling dejected and dispirited.

Since last 48 hours, she has been struggling, making peace with her mind. She wants to go and hug Revathi Amma, but she can't. She can't forget those two sentences which were enough to create a wound, deep in her heart.

"You guys are tenants, Madhu... so you won't be able to empathize with me. Owners have so much to look into..."

Revathi Amma may not have thought twice while uttering these words.

"Maybe she had not received her daily dose of calls from her two sons living abroad, and in a fit of rage might have spoken to you in such a way," Sumit said, while consoling her.

Madhu had never envisaged that she would get a Mom-like figure in Revathi Amma. She had lost her mom when she was in college, and post marriage, she had barely got time to interact with Sumit's Mom as they both had to pack their bags and leave for Pune, Sumit's place of posting. New to the city, Sumit wanted a place close to his office so that he could spend some quality time with his new wife. They went through lot of apartment complexes and were on the verge of finalizing one, when a friend suggested to check this house posted for rent on the company portal. Though Sumit was not interested, Madhu wanted to check it out, and finally they had landed up at Revathi Amma's pad.

When Madhu and Sumit saw the house for the first time, they were not only taken aback by its architecture, but also by the lush green trees around. Madhu fell in love with the place on her very first visit,

"Darling, we too will build a house like this someday," Madhu said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Sumit gave a sly smile and said "Why not? Definitely!"

From the design of the house, Sumit could easily guess the abundance of goods and riches on the part of the owner.

"Will they keep us as tenants?" Sumit murmured, while pressing the doorbell with anxiously.

Madhu was behind him, holding his hand, and looking at the door with curious eyes. Madhu had never expected that an old lady would come and answer the doorbell. Fair and petite Revathi Amma must have been in her seventies. The first meeting itself was enough to create an impact on Madhu. The way she said "Beti" in her Tamilian Hindi accent, was too adorable. She had no airs around her. Clad in a cotton saree and white slippers, she went around showing the entire house to Madhu and Sumit. The house tour was not limited to their portion; it was of the entire bungalow, including the outhouse.

With every corner there was a story that Revathi Amma would refer to. Starting from her late husband, to two sons, daughters in law, and grandchildren, everyone was there in Amma's heart and she took pride speaking about them. The tour lasted for an hour but that one hour was enough for Madhu to judge how affectionate Revathi Amma was. Despite Sumit's objection, Madhu decided and finalized Revathi Amma's house as their new pad. Finally, the much in love couple made Revathi Niwas their new address.

Since then there had been no looking back for Madhu. She stuck a chord with Amma and saw her as a guardian in this new city. After Sumit left for work, Madhu would finish her household chores and then would come to sit with Amma at her terrace garden. Amma's terrace boasted many different varieties of indoor and outdoor plants. Soaked in the afternoon sun, Madhu loved sipping tea with Amma. Sometimes Amma would get peanuts and Madhu would peel them off, and both would relish the same with a pinch of salt. With that Amma would share her life experiences so dramatically, that Madhu would be lost in them. Both the sons of Amma were settled abroad and she was the sole resident of such a big house. There was this maid servant Maloti who resided with her family in the outhouse and took care of Amma. Maloti would do all of Revathi Amma's household chores and in the night too would come to give her company as Amma feared to sleep alone after Appa's demise.

Whenever Madhu would cook something special, she would make little extra so that she could give it to Revathi Amma. Amma was no less either, she would instruct Maloti to prepare certain delicacies, so that she could send the same for Madhu and Sumit. Revathi Amma loved this new couple and Madhu too echoed the same feelings.

But since yesterday, Revathi Amma's words have been troubling Madhu to the core. She had never expected that Amma would call her a tenant. Yes, they were tenants, but being called the same in such a blatant way was something which Madhu had least expected. Moreover, Amma uttered the words without realizing that Madhu was not at fault. Madhu had forgotten to switch off the water motor, something which she always used to do on time. Water overflowed, and this triggered Amma's anger. Amma was extremely particular about water usage and had warned Sumit once beforehand. Yesterday when there was a delay on Madhu's part to switch off the motor, Amma had become furious. She might have repented later, but her angst was obvious.

"How can Amma say like this? How can she utter such type of word? *Are we just tenants and nothing else?* I look up to her as a motherly figure and she thinks we are ones who are residing in her house in exchange of money..." All these thoughts were enough to give Madhu sleepless nights.

She couldn't speak to Sumit as she knew, Sumit would have just one answer "either you stay here or if you want, we can shift to a different place!" There's no point talking to him, thought Madhu, and went to bring back her clothes from the terrace. Even with her ongoing struggle with the pile of clothes, she didn't forget to give that curious look at Amma's terrace. There was no sign of Revathi Amma; clothes kept hanging on the drying rack and newspaper was lying on the marble floor.

Maybe Amma has gone out, thought Madhu and consoled herself. Amma's words were pinching her to the core. It's been forty-eight hours now and she has not spoken to Amma. Previously whenever there had been any issues, she had gone and spoken to Amma, but this time she has made up her mind, that she is not going to break the ice.

"Do you expect Amma to come and say sorry to you" Sumit asked jokingly to which Madhu was furious.

"I never expect Amma to come and say sorry, but I just didn't like the way she spoke. I have always loved and admired her. Both of us have been so kind to her, from day one. Not only that, we have taken care of this house as if it's our own. Despite all this she says we are tenants, and we can't empathize with her. How can she think like that? I know staying alone in such a big space in old age is not easy. But that doesn't mean she can vent out her anger on me."

Then swallowing a lump in her throat, she added "Why doesn't she come and talk to me? I am like her daughter. She too can come and convince me. I mean..."

"Ohhh!! Calm down, calm down" Sumit said, while trying to pacify Madhu.

With each passing day Madhu's restlessness was touching new heights. She had so much to discuss with Amma but she couldn't. Somewhere within she was feeling the pain every second. "Why don't you speak to Amma?" said Maloti while watering the plants in Amma's terrace garden.

"Hmmm," Madhu said in a low tone, and was about to shut her terrace door, when Maloti commented,

"Do you know, Amma is not well? She is having fever since last two days"

"What?" Madhu bombarded Maloti with tons of questions.

Maloti hurriedly went inside without uttering a single word. Madhu couldn't tolerate any further. She couldn't hold herself back from visiting Amma. All her ego and self-esteem went for a toss, and it was Amma's safety which mattered the most.

Hurriedly she prepared a kadha, and rushed to her beloved landlady's house. Amma was not at her usual place, that's the living room where she watches TV often. "Maybe she is in the bed room, resting..." thought Madhu and went in quietly. To her utter surprise the room was closed from inside.

"Amma might be asleep, I shouldn't disturb her," Madhu murmured in a low tone, turned back and was about to return, when two warm hands hugged her from behind. It was the ever cheerful, Madhu's Revathi Amma. Tears started rolling down from Madhu's eyes.

"Sorry, Amma... I mean, are you ok? Hope you are doing good, Maloti told me you are not well?"

In her anxiety Madhu couldn't notice the blue cap and party glasses that Amma was wearing. Once she spotted the same, she became furious. "What is all this Amma? Maloti lied to me..."

Maloti came from behind wearing an identical cap and glasses, and was about to open her mouth, when Amma said, "My dear, Madhu... I only told Maloti to inform you that I am unwell. I knew, you would come running to see me." Then touching Madhu's hands and looking into her eyes, Amma continued,

"I know you are upset because of my words the other day. My intention was not to hurt you. I think of you as my daughter. I had two sons and now God has given me a beautiful daughter. If kids do something wrong then parents have full right to guide them. **Water is precious and we need to understand that. I never intended to hurt you, Beti!**"

The tears which had dried up started to resurface, as Madhu began sobbing. She was guilty of having misunderstood her ever cheerful Amma.

As she calmed down, Maloti dragged Madhu up, asking her to wear another pair of birthday cap and party glares. "*Today your Amma turns 72 and we three musketeers need to celebrate,*" said Revathi Amma.

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Bitter truth

Esha was her happiest self as she had got all that she wanted. Straight out from medical college, she has got her coveted degree, and the first person she wanted to meet was her GrandMother, whom she fondly calls Granny.

"Siya.... Let's go to the city center. I have to do lot of shopping," Esha said with a smile.

"That's perfect! But I wonder why didn't Granny make it to our convocation?" Shreya said while folding her graduation gown."

"You know what, Granny is an emotional person. Over emotional when it's related to me," Esha said with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Hmm... But it was nice to meet Uncle. Last time he made it during Diwali, and I wasn't there," Siya said.

"And where were you, Madam? Busy spending cozy nights with Akil..." Esha gave a friendly nudge on Siya's shoulder.

"Please, stop teasing me, dear. Diwali holidays justify my actions, but I salute your guts. Bunking Mrs. Sharma's anatomy class to be with Sid...Interesting," said Siya and pulled Esha's long braids." How long will you pull my hair saying this?" Esha said jokingly.

Esha and Siddharth both hailed from Delhi. They were like chalk and cheese. While Esha was soft-spoken and calm, Sid (as he was fondly called)was aggressive. Both understood each other, and their camaraderie was visible to their fellow friends. Apart from her Dad and Granny, if someone understood this curly-haired girl, then it was Siddharth. When Esha left her home for medical college five and a half years back, she was disturbed to the core. Granny and Dad both had different opinions as far as Esha's admission in medical college was concerned. While Esha's Dad wanted her to accept admission from the medical college in Dehradun, which was supposed to be the best her Granny had different plans. Granny didn't want to part from her sweetheart, whom she had nurtured like her own kid. The forced separation was sort of unbearable to this teenager. Esha had lost her Mom when she was a toddler, and since then, Granny has been like her Mom. Esha's Dad was a doctor and would spend days out looking after patients in Delhi and neighboring areas. Esha's Granny was the only person who stood with this girl through thick and thin. From school to dance classes to sports activities, Granny accompanied Esha, and she would be thrilled having her around. Esha and Granny were inseparable, and the whole neighborhood vouched for the same.

Esha, Siya, and Siddharth went to the city center for shopping while Esha's Dad rested in a hotel that was close to their medical college. The trio hopped every possible shop for that unique cardigan that Esha wanted for her beloved grandmother.

"Finally....." exclaimed Siddharth the moment Esha gave the nod to that particular pink cardigan.

"Happy! Now can we shop something for ourselves ya Esha Madam ki shopping hi chalegi" Siya was a little tired and spoke in a quirky voice.

"Sorry, Only because of me we got late. Let's move ahead and complete our shopping,"Esha said.

Esha was super happy to have got that pink cardigan for her grandmother, a person she loved the most in this world. The last time during her Delhi visit, she was wearing a pink sweater, and Granny had liked it so much. That very moment Esha had made up her mind to gift her something in the same shade. "Granny is going to love it! Hopefully, I can speak to her regarding Sid too. She can understand my feelings and will talk to Dad."Esha was lost in these thoughts when suddenly Siddharth pulled her close to his chest and said, "Apne hone wale saas ke liye kuch nahi lena. Mom and Dad se hotel me milne jana hai, yaad hai na". "Thanks for reminding me, but I have already kept a gift aside for them. So take a chill pill," said Esha.

"That's cool.....shopping ke baad hostel Jayenge and phir wahan se hotel. Mom and Dad convocation me hi tumse milne wale the but phir maine advise kiya ki hotel me milte hain" uttered Siddharth. The three musketeers finished their shopping and then went to the college hostel. Esha changed into Indian clothes as she felt Siddharth's parents might not feel good seeing her in western attire.

"After meeting Sid's Parents, I will straight away go to meet Dad; he must be feeling bored sitting alone in the hotel room." Murmured Esha.

Esha and Siddharth took a cab and went to the hotel where Siddharth's parents were staying.

"Please don't be a chatterbox in-front of Mom. She can sense things very easily." Siddharth said while looking into Esha's eyes.

"I know, dear! You have explained all of these to me a hundred times. I will take care for sure! " said Esha."My Mom too believes in the first impression just like me. Though Dad being a lawyer has his own way of analyzing things."Siddharth said while planting a peck on Esha's cheeks. Esha gave Siddharth a tight hug and prayed to the lord to ease out this first meeting with Siddharth's parents. Esha carried the gift box in her hand and followed Siddharth as they arrived at the Hotel reception, thereby proceeding towards the elevator.

"Wait, you always leave me and walk ahead. I don't like this!" Esha spoke in a timid tone.

" So sorry, I always forget! Today I should have been alert as you have come to meet Mr. and Mrs. Gabbar," Siddharth said jokingly.

"Please don't scare me," Esha exclaimed.

"Just kidding!" Siddharth said while patting Esha's back. The moment they arrived in-front of Room no. 407 Esha developed a cold feet. A chill ran down her spine as Siddharth knocked softly at the door.

"Great to see you, beta! She must be Esha" Siddharth's Mom's excitement was visible on her face. A tall, fair lady, she was the epitome of elegance. Her sweet voice and caring gesture were only accentuating her persona. Esha had never seen what a Mom's wrath was like; looking at Mrs.Verma's loving face, she couldn't control and gave her a tight hug.

"This is for you," said Esha while passing on the gift to Mrs. Verma.

"Bacon se kya hum gift lenge?" Mrs. Verma exclaimed. Siddharth's parents were happy meeting Esha, and they asked her to be comfortable. How lucky Sid is to have such loving parents. Esha seemed lost in these thoughts when suddenly Siddharth's Dad said, "You are from Delhi! Which place? I mean, what your parents do ?"

"I am from M.J Nagar Uncle, and my Dad is a Doctor. He is a reputed surgeon. His name is Subhash Tripathi," said Esha confidently. Silence prevailed for a second, and before Esha could add, Siddharth's Dad said,

"*Dr. Tripathy.. sounds familiar. Do you have a grandmother too?*" Esha never expected a question like this would come outrightly her way. She looked at Siddharth for a second and then exclaimed,

"*Yeah! Manju Tripathi. She is my Granny.*"

Though Siddharth's Dad gave her a nod, his facial expressions suggested a different tale altogether. Before Esha could ask him the reason behind his thoughtful face, he said "It was year 1998 or 1999, I am not entirely sure, but I had met Dr. Subhash Tripathi and his Mom. Dr.Tripathi wanted me to fight the case of his mother, who was accused of her own daughter in law's death. As I was busy, I advised them to consult someone else. "Esha couldn't process what Siddharth's Dad meant and looked at her best buddy in surprise. Before She could react Siddharth, like a good boyfriend, flew to the scene and, holding his Dad's hand said,

"You are too much Dad. Please take some rest as Mom always says."

Though Siddharth tried his best to lighten the mood of everyone present in that square-shaped room, still he couldn't. Esha was unable to gather herself. Siddharth's Dad's words kept ringing in her ears. Her heart started to beat fast, and she was unable to control her emotions. In a state of rage, she walked out of the room. Bringing her heavy dupatta to the front, she started taking big steps and in no time was in front of the hotel gate looking for a cab. Her face had turned red in disgust, and her mind was not sparing her for a second.

"How could Uncle say such things? Granny accused of my Mom's death...but again whenever I have asked Dad or Granny about Maa, they have always kept mum."Esha was lost in these thoughts when two warm hands touched her from behind. The moment Esha saw Siddharth, she

said in a loud voice," Please spare me! I want some time. I do have so many questions running through my mind. I don't want to enter into an ugly argument now. "Siddharth tried hard to convince his lady love but to no avail as Esha took a cab and went straight to meet her Dad.

Though initially, she thought of clarifying the same from her Dad, later, she refrained as she felt her beloved Granny would be the best one to clear her doubts. That entire night Esha couldn't sleep. All sorts of thoughts started making waves in her mind. Siddharth was continually sending her texts, and to avoid the same she switched off her phone. Though she was disturbed to the core, she refrained from showing the same in front of her Dad. While her Dad took a nap, Esha kept herself busy in packing to avoid the annoying thoughts that kept increasing with each passing second.

Esha and her Dad took the early morning flight and reached home around 9 in the morning. Throughout the journey, Esha was not in her usual self.

"How am I going to put this question in front of her? What will she feel? The person who only means the world to me can hardly go wrong. Maybe Uncle was lying; who knows" Lost in these thoughts, Esha rang their doorbell multiple times. Dr. Tripathi was standing behind his daughter, and his eyes too were hooked to the door. Even after numerous knocks when Granny didn't come to open the door, Dr. Tripathi got suspicious and said,

"Why is Mummy not responding? Let me open the door! Thankfully I have the spare key." Hearing her Dad's words, Esha got nervous.

"God! Granny should be safe," murmured Esha.

The moment Esha and Dr. Tripathi went inside, they were shocked to the core. Granny's body lay suspended from the fan in their living room as she had hanged herself to death. While Esha howled at the top of her voice, Dr. Tripathi rushed to check his mother's pulse.

"Mummy has left us, Esha" Dr. Tripathi broke down and cried at the top of his voice. Esha hugged her Dad close and sobbed profusely. All of a sudden, Esha saw a white paper kept on the table. She took it in her hand and shouted,

"Dad, Granny had left us a letter."

With trembling hands, she opened the letter and read it aloud,

"Dear Eshu, Congratulations! You are a Doctor now. Your Granny is so proud of you. I have baked your favorite blueberry cupcakes and have kept the same in the refrigerator. Please, follow your father's footsteps and be a good doctor. There's something I need to confess before you. 22 years back, a loving lady ended her life just because of your Granny. *Yes! She was your Mom, who committed suicide only because I misunderstood her and doubted her integrity.* I would shout and yell at her, but that naive girl hardly complained. Alas! If at all I could have understood her, then this misfortune wouldn't have stuck us," Esha cried at the top of her lungs as she read further,

"Your Dad till date believes in his Mom, but this old lady lacks the courage to face her loving son and granddaughter. That incident left a scar in my mind, which only got bigger with time. All these years, I was living with this guilt but now no more!

Please, Don't hate me, my dear bachha....."

Esha was devastated as she read the letter. In sheer disbelief, she could only murmur,
"Why Granny..... Why?"

Bebe

One look into her wallet and Sunita got a sweet surprise!

"A pale thousand rupee note nestled cozily in the left corner of her purse. As she took out the same, tears started rolling down from her eyes. All fond memories from last year surfaced before her mind's eye. How her beloved Bebe had given her this note and said.....,

"I sense something is not right. I won't force you to tell me but whenever you feel low, look at this. It will remind you of all the struggles your Bebe had been through all her life to earn this. It will tell you how to do away with your greatest fear, thereby instilling strength, hope, and confidence."

Sunita knew her Bebe well. She could have never parted with that note, which she always considered as a good luck charm. Sunita still remembers the day her Bebe had got it and how glad she was at the receipt of the same. Bebe had smiled after ages, and Sunita could hardly forget that day. After the sad demise of Sunita's Dad, the future of Sunita and her two younger siblings loomed in the dark. Bebe was devastated and hardly dared to raise her three kids. Their only asset is her Dad's truck fondly called "Dhanno," which stood like a log of wood after her Master's death. Sunita's Mom was afraid to go out and work.

"Ki kara Main.....How are we going to survive?" Sunita's Mother would lament time and again.

Sunita, an eight-year-old, then would ponder over this and would persuade her Mom to do something for their family's survival. But Alas! all her sayings would fall into deaf ears. But one fine day, something grave happened, which changed the world of Bebe and her three kids.

"Tu bhi teri Maa ke jaisi gawaar hi rahegi" These words were thrown at Sunita but it ignited the fire inside her Mom's heart.

"Nahi hogi woh mere jaisi" Sunita's Mom roared like a lioness, and the very moment decided to be the pillar of strength for her kids. There was no looking back then. She started with odd jobs, and finally, one fine day, dared to do the impossible.

Yeah! She became the new Master of "Dhanno." She would ride trucks and deliver goods in the neighboring villages. This thousand rupee note, being her first income, had a special place in her heart. "Mera good luck charm hai" Her face would light up at the view of this currency note.

Sunita was lost in these thoughts when suddenly her phone beeped, and Sunita got a jolt. It was Raj.

"Hello, won't be coming for dinner today!"

This was not new for Sunita. Every other day she would get a call like this, which would tear her to pieces. Sunita had never thought that a time like this would come when she would be in such a dilapidated state. After successfully completing her graduation, she had thought of applying for the state Govt. Exams, but as destiny could have it, she met Raj, an NRI, in Chandigarh and her

whirlwind affair was in the full spree. Tall, fair, and handsome, Raj was the brother of Sunita's best friend, Manmeet.

"I love you, Sunita. Will you be mine?" Raj's proposal was straight out of a fairytale.

Sunita had never envisaged that such a proposal would come her way from someone like Raj. Though she contemplated her career plans in her mind, she still couldn't say "No" to Raj. No sooner the duo got married, and Sunita accompanied Raj to the United States. Sunita couldn't have been happier, and she thanked her stars for the same.

"Can I work, Raj?" Sunita casually asked Raj the moment she stepped into this foreign land. "Why do you want to work? Moreover, even if you want, you can't as you are on a dependent Visa," Raj replied straight on her face.

All hell broke loose, as Sunita was unaware of this VISA and the restrictions it had.

"You should have told me before; Raj," Sunita seemed concerned.

"I didn't think that was important. On top of it, you are happily married, isn't that enough for You?" Raj was stern, and Sunita preferred to remain silent.

That day and today, it's been more than three years, and Sunita had spent most of her time confined to the four walls of her house. Raj, who seemed like a concerned person, once soon turned out to be a Casanova whose only guilty pleasure was to be with girls. Every day there would be texts and calls from unknown numbers on Raj's cell. Initially, Sunita couldn't resist and asked her beloved,

"What's going on? Why are these ladies calling you?"

"It's none of your business" Raj had rebuked her badly, and Sunita chose to remain silent.

Sunita knew Raj came from an influential family, and he would leave no stone unturned in making the life of Sunita's Mom and her two brothers miserable. The marriage which had shown her thousand dreams had soon turned out to be a forced cage from which she wanted to break free. The innocent love had made way for hatred and anger in no time. Every night Raj would forcibly throw himself on her, despite her wish. Once she resented and shouted back, "I want a divorce! I don't want to stay with you anymore." Raj grabbed her and said,

"Oh! Really! I won't give you a divorce. Do whatever you can....."

That day Sunita realized one thing for sure, " It won't be easy to get back her freedom; it's going to be a long haul."

Every day after Raj left for the office, Sunita searched for different NGO and support groups addresses. She would start typing a mailer to them, but Raj's dominant attitude and her family members' well-being would prevent her from sending the same. She would cry her heart out behind closed doors. She was no more ready to carry the baggage of this bitter relationship. Today this faded thousand rupee note did bring back the bittersweet memories in front of her.

"If Bebe wouldn't have worked this hard, then our lives would have been miserable; with so much conviction Bebe had handed me this last year, how can I not be strong enough to fight for my rights ?" Sunita thought.

With courage on her sleeves, Sunita dialed the number of a helpline group that she had come across once while exploring a particular site on the internet.

"Hello, Myself Sunita....." Swallowing a lump in the throat, she exclaimed.

"Yes.....Supriya Shah. How can we help you ?" The lady from the other end sounded concerned.

"Mam, Please, I need your help. I am on a dependent visa, and my husband seems to take advantage of the situation. "Sunita started crying like a small girl.

"Please, tell me in detail. We are there to help you. Deep breathe and speak your heart out" Supriya's words did motivate Sunita, and she started explaining her ordeal in front of her.

"I want a divorce, and I want to go back to India! My husband is not ready to cooperate. What do I do ?"

"Don't worry, girl! Just send me your details like full name, address, and contact details. We will get in touch with you within three to five working days" Supriya shah's words were like a ray of hope in this poor girl's life.

Sunita couldn't have been happier. She opened the terrace door and started dancing like a small girl. She couldn't believe her act as she had always been scared of her moves and its repercussions. Finally, she had endured the courage to fight for her rights, which gave her immense satisfaction. She believed and waited patiently for Supriya Shah's call. She behaved normally with Raj such that he doesn't become suspicious of her moves. Finally, after two days, that moment came for which Sunita had waited this long. Supriya Shah, along with her two associates, arrived at Sunita's place. Unfortunately, Raj was in the house, and that aggravated Sunita's woes

"What am I going to do now? Raj is present, and I hope he doesn't create a ruckus....." After coming this far, Sunita didn't want to be at the receiving end once again.

As soon as Raj opened the door, he was surprised to see three ladies asking for Sunita with a straight face . "What work do you have with Sunita?" Raj's curiosity was to the next level.

"We need to meet her! Please, can you call her; " Ms. Supriya exclaimed.

" She isn't there at home. Sorry! " Raj didn't think once before uttering this.

"OK, let us inside; we will see for ourselves," an older American lady associate of Mrs. Supriya said in a heavy voice.

"How dare you say that! You can't come inside; else I will be bound to call cops" By that time, Raj had become furious, and his eyes bore testimony to the same. Before anyone could react, Sunita came and hit a tight slap on Raj's face.

"Call Cops! Even I have so much to say. You have taken my modesty for granted, I suppose. I am the one who has sought help from Ms. Shah and her team. For the last three years, I have been a silent sufferer to your atrocities but not anymore; I can't be a coward!." Sunita took a pause and again continued,

"You won't give me a divorce! Fine. I am divorcing you. My Mom was a fighter, and so am I. I can't let her down. No doubt it took me long to realize, but today I can proudly say that I am a worthy daughter of a proud Mom."

Before Raj could even utter a word, Sunita shut the door on his face and went out with renewed spirit and morale.

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Mishti Dhana

Her big day was just a week ahead, and still, she was not out of her greatest grief. On top of that, it's she who has to do all the shopping, burying her sorrow for the time being. Seven days to her impending marriage with Anil, and there's so much to arrange. Grief struck; she knows that the void will be there forever. She doesn't have time to lament her loss. She has to rebuild herself for the sake of her Dad, whose last wish was to see his darling daughter taking wedding vows.

Marriage always excited Suvarna from her childhood. Her memory goes back to the day when she was all of four and had worn Maa's bright red saree posing as a newlywed bride. Baba was there with his old camera to take shots, and within a week, Suvarna found a similar image hanging on their bedroom wall. With time Suvarna too harbored feelings to be the perfect bride on her big day. But again, Life is an exam where the syllabus is unknown..... With Baba's untimely death a month back, Suvarna is hardly left with any choice. She is devastated and wants to run away from the chaos to her inner soul's quietude, but she can't. She has to do this for her Maa and Anil, two other people who love her deeply.

9.30 am Suvarna is ready to go bridal shopping.

"Hey Suvarna, Did u get your bridal outfit ordered?" Neha asks as she accompanies Suvarna to the city center.

"Hmmm, No," Suvarna answers awkwardly.

It takes no time for Neha to guess her best friend's mindset, and reluctantly in a firm tone, she quips, "it's not done dear, I empathize with you but please think about Aunt; she is already depressed and is on medication. Not only that, what about Anil? Have you once thought how difficult it would be for him to see you like this "Suvarna preferring not to answer gives a blank stare, and then suddenly gets through the main door to arrive at the reception of JK Jewelers, located in the heart of the city center.

"Good Morning, Mam..... Welcome to JK Jewelers. Would you like to see Gold or Diamond?" A saree clad lady sporting a charming smile questions Suvarna. Suvarna was about to answer when Neha comes rushing from the back, and in a loud voice utters, "We want to see Gold jewelry, mostly heavy ones like bridal sets."

"Oh! Sure, Mam, All our gold collection like necklaces, pendants, earrings are on the first floor, and our Diamond collection is on the second floor, just in case you want to check. Myself Sneha and let me guide you" Sneha's cheerful face made Suvarna smile a little, and they followed her to the first floor.

"Oh! My God, Padmavat collection Suv, it looks so good and heavy, " Neha exclaimed and turned to Suvarna, who by then had already marched few steps ahead, taking a seat opposite Sneha. Sneha unlocked the glass door and got hold of a heavy bridal neck piece displayed in the center, adding, "This is our Temple bridal collection which was recently launched, and it will

look good on you Mam. "Before Suvarna could answer, Neha interrupted and nodded her head in affirmation.

"Please don't show such heavy pieces, it's beyond our budget. Show us something reasonable, maybe within 30 to 40 gms." Suvarna added, signaling Neha to keep mum.

Suddenly Sneha's cheerful smile faded away, and without thinking twice, she immediately opened the lower cupboard with a key, thereby taking out fifteen to twenty sets. Then, leaving the pile on one end of the table, she showed every piece to the two ladies.

"These are the pieces we have with us, Mam.... within your budget, You may check and finalize the ones which you like." As Suvarna went on checking the pieces, tears started rolling down her eyes. She remembered when she had attained puberty, and Baba had got her a set of new bangles. It was so expensive that Maa didn't allow Suvarna to wear them to school and scolded Baba. But Baba was in no mood to surrender. With his jovial tone, he had said,

"Anything for my Mishti Dhana,"

Mishti Dhana was the name by which Baba used to call his darling daughter. "Today if Baba had been there, he would have danced with joy, but alas! he isn't there..... Moreover, Maa's pension is yet to come, and I need to be cautious with my spending ". in these thoughts and wiping her tears with a crumpled cloth, Suvarna shortlists three pieces and looks at Neha for her consent with eager eyes. Neha hesitantly answers, "What? Why are you looking at me? It's your call, so you make a decision. If I had been there at your place, I would have gone for those Temple collection Jewelry sets, so elegant and grand, but anyways I am fine with whatever you choose."

It took no time for Suvarna to decide, as her curious eyes scanned each tag cautiously22carat gold 35.67 gms, being the cheapest, stood out amongst the three.

"Yeah! This one," says Suvarna as she hands over the set to Sneha for billing.

"Mam, here is the Mirror; you can see for yourself how it looks on you," Sneha added.

"No, it's perfect; you may do the needful," Suvarna answered back, opening her purse.

By that time, Neha had moved to the adjacent seat and was engrossed in checking the Temple collection. "Come, Suv, just see how beautiful these look, especially this red one." Suvarna reluctantly looks but is immediately taken aback by the sparkling radiance of the rare piece. Red kundan polki set with heavy stonework is definitely going to add that spark to any bride's Life. She can't keep her eyes off it and immediately touches it with her bare fingers.

"Superb, Suv " Suddenly, Suvarna's thoughts gets a jolt with Neha's words, and she takes her hands off that exclusive piece. It seems Sneha was another silent spectator, who was eagerly waiting for this moment like a hungry cheetah and hence immediately pounced on adding, "Mam, this is the best! if you want, I can get a similar one for you from our main branch in Ghatkopar East."

Before Suvarna could answer, Neha fuming with her usual arrogance, said, "*Similar one, I mean, why not this one.*"

Poor Girl Sneha, keeping her smile intact, replied, "*Yeah, as this is for Mishti Dhana.....I mean Sudeep Sir's daughter*, he is our customer, and for last eleven months he has been contributing Rs.30000 every month in our monthly scheme. Last month when he had come to pay the installment, he had categorically asked me to keep this for his daughter's marriage, which is supposed to happen in a couple of days. I am expecting him any time, so please....." Then in rough voice she added, "Sorry, but I hope you understand."

Suvarna was speechless, her heart sank, and the composure she was maintaining went for a toss as she yelled at the top of her voice like an ignorant toddler pushing her vocal cord to the maximum it can. Maybe that was the only way by which she could express her emotions, which she has been holding back for so long. How has Baba selected the best piece for her? Why has destiny been so cruel in snatching her dearest Dad? And how is she going to spend the rest of her Life with this loss?. All sorts of questions were creating a storm in her mind, and she was unable to hold herself together until Neha held her tight in her arms.

Sneha, along with the entire staff came rushing to Suvarna's rescue when with watery eyes, Neha said,

"Sudeep sir is not going to come, but his Mishti Dhana will definitely wear this neckpiece."

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About the Author

Jigyansa Mohanty is a banking professional who resides in Indianapolis, USA with her husband and two kids. A person who played with numbers once, soon found her passion in writing. Apart from penning her thoughts Jigyansa shows interest in Dance and Food Photography. Her write-ups have found place in various online magazines like Indian Review, Induswomanwriting, Women's Web, Youth Ki Awaaz. Jigyansa was Orange Flower Award finalist for the year 2020.

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