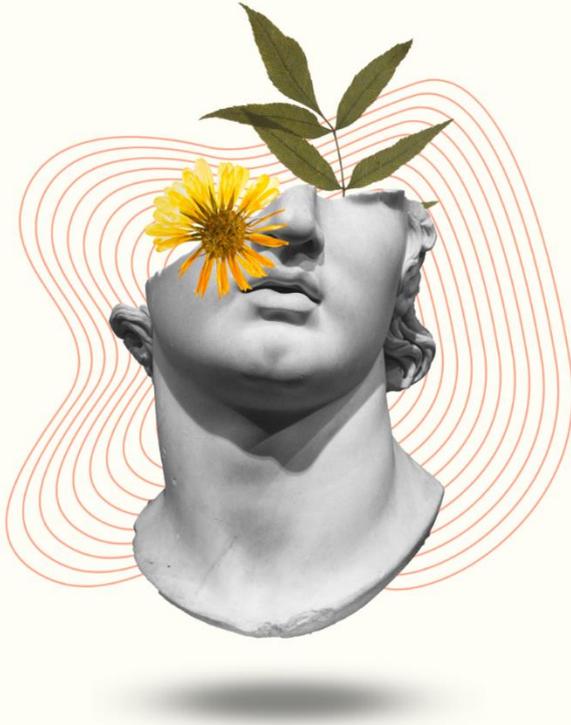


HAPPY ENDINGS



SUCHITA AGARWAL

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Blurb

It was the best thing that had happened to her. Who knew? Maybe the future. You do not go after dreams – but after goals. She let her tears fall.

He was the unlikely hero of this fantastical tale. Sameera, Mayank, Avantika, Urmilla and Pranjal have nothing in common – except a tragedy that leads to a happy ending.

Story Guide

[Sameera](#) [trigger warning: cancer]

[Mayank](#) [trigger warning: suicidal thoughts]

[Avantika](#)

[Urmilla](#)

[Pranjal](#)

Sameera

She was lying on a hospital bed, shivering not from fear or the possibilities of what a hospital visit could mean but from the sheer cold. She was under a blanket and had requested the AC be turned down but neither had helped. Maybe a part of her feared the implications of being here but mostly, she was hungry and wanted to go home.

Her father was sitting in a chair at the end of her bed; looking tensed yet calm – always the pillar in the face of chaos. Her mother was hovering around her head, trying to say something about the water and the state of her IV.

Sameera was oddly detached from it all. The ten-minute operation had gone smoothly, and even though this was her first experience of being a patient in her twenty-six years of existence, it had gone quite well. The last twenty-four hours felt like a whirlwind and seeing the fat Stephen King novel next to the water jug, a biscuit wrapper, her specs and a thermometer, made her feel calm and in control.

The air in the room changed at 3.30 PM when the surgeon walked into the tiny cubicle-like temporary room Sameera had been assigned. It was a day ward which meant patients were kept here only for a day. Patients had started trickling in an hour after Sameera's arrival at 6 AM and she had observed with curiosity all the goings-on of a hospital. Being an avid Grey's Anatomy fan, she couldn't help but compare how real life differed from reel life.

After a cursory look at her, deeming her fit for discharge, the surgeon, sensing the raw and abject fear of the parents nodded his head to the

side and the parents flocked after him like obedient children. But before they left, her mother patted her leg and told her they'd be back. And even though she knew they wouldn't leave without her, she felt comforted.

She was not actively trying to hear what the *adults* were whispering yet she caught all the words that she needed to hear; that she had known would be uttered as soon as she had decided to get herself checked out two days ago. Biopsy, lymphoma and chemo...and though she was well-acquainted with the word chemo, her Grey's Anatomy knowledge sealed the deal.

Sameera tried to feel something about the news but all she could muster up was relief – relief that there was finally a diagnosis, a clear path that needed to be followed, an end in sight to her pain and the knowledge that *now* she could get better. When her parents came back with slightly manic expressions, she chose to ignore the pain in their eyes and went with the smile on their faces. She had been discharged and they could go home. She focussed on that.

*

She met Dr. Punit Khera, a clinical oncologist, a month after her biopsy surgery. She remembered the day well because of the impact he had on her. As a child, she had always been wary of going to doctors. She had never been ill enough to visit them often but the three or four times she had, they had felt like people who were there to scare her with big words and sombre smiles.

But not Dr. Khera. Unlike her surgeon, for Dr. Khera, *she* was the adult and he addressed her so. Throughout the twenty minutes that

her father and she sat there as the world they knew meticulously shattered around them, Dr. Khera only spoke to Sameera. He smiled, told her not to worry, and that this would all be over in three months.

Once again Sameera had this out-of-body experience where she felt disconnected from what was happening around her but at the same time there was this sense that he would take care of her – that now Dr. Khera was in charge, everything would turn out okay.

Father and daughter were given a bunch of instructions, scary-looking memos to sign and a long list of what would happen next. But since the staff around them dealt with cancer daily, they were calm and efficient and forty-five minutes after stepping into the building, they were out on the road, with a clear plan of action charted out for them.

While her father dealt with the formalities and sent Sameera packing home, she called her mother. There were many important details to relay but all she could focus on was the gratefulness at having found a doctor who was smart, funny and competent but most importantly, who didn't hide from telling her what her next three months potentially looked like.

As Sameera tried to adjust to her new reality, her parents, the rocks in chaos, did not falter once. This wasn't their first rodeo...though they wished desperately that it would be their last.

*

Sameera was sitting at a dining table, her fat math textbook kept to the left, with four registers, filled with problems and solutions kept to the right. She had lied to her mother. She didn't need to revise for

her math exam, scheduled for the next day. She had been through it, as thoroughly as one could, once in school and once in her tuition class. She had probably solved more sums than were strictly needed to prepare for a simple secondary school math board exam. She was confident – a statement she had never thought she would say especially with regards to math – but she was. She had lied because she had wanted to enjoy the midnight silence.

The air was still, the blanket on her lap keeping her nice and toasty. After a long day of phone calls, helping her friends understand concepts, solving a problem for them here or there, she was thankful for this silence. Like a soothing balm, the silence enveloped her as she sat on the chair, staring at nothing in particular.

Silence...it was the silence in the dream that woke her up to the *beep beep beep* of her machine. She hated that sound *whirl and beep, whirl and beep* that delivered the chemo into her system as she slept, feeling nauseous, yet unable to do much about it.

“Ma,” she croaked, feeling guilty for waking her up and seeing how cramped she looked on that excuse of a bench that was provided by the hospital for the attendants.

“Yes,” said her mother immediately, always alert to sounds her daughter made.

“I think I’m going to throw up.”

Sameera’s mother brought out a pan from under the bed and held it as she threw up, feeling better for a moment before her stomach started to feel queasy again.

“Do you need anything?”

“Nah,” she said, looking at the watch on the wall. “It’s almost 6. The nurse will be coming around any moment to give me Pan and then I’ll be okay.”

Her mother laughed softly. It had become a joke between the nurses, Dr. Khera and Sameera. He often said that she was perhaps his most aware patient.

“Tomorrow, you get the second part of the dose,” her mother said, remembering the flowchart Dr. Khera had asked a nurse to make because Sameera had had questions.

Sameera chuckled. The flowchart was tucked under her pillow, creasy and a little bloody because she had read it so many times. Information about what she was getting had made the ordeal feel less like she was spiralling out of control and more like she could do this.

“At least now Dr. Khera won’t feel he’s giving me water instead of chemo,” she said, turning to her left. Her stomach lurched but settled down. She carefully shifted her IV hand as she waited for the clock to strike 6. The Pan injection would reduce the acidity and her stomach wouldn’t feel numb or like it was at sea.

Her mother laughed, remembering Dr. Khera’s comment when she had complained that Sameera was feeling more nauseous than usual. He had said in his inimitable way, with a twinkle in his eye, his regiment of junior doctors and nurses standing at attention behind him, the head nurse with a large red ledger and pen, “Well I hope she’s feeling nauseous – it’s chemo we are giving her, not water. I

have been wondering for the past three days why she hasn't complained!"

She was sure half the reason she hadn't lost her head was the doctor, who always seemed quietly confident. As she turned to sleep, her eyes fell on her daughter's bald head and shrunk body. A sob rose in her throat but she clamped it down. They were nearly at the end of the first chemo cycle. There were two more to go and she couldn't afford to take her eyes off the prize.

*

As Dr. Khera had promised her, it took three months of tests, chemo, hospital visits, tears and pain for cancer to leave her body. When he officially declared her cancer-free, the family had been stunned, quite unable to process that their ordeal was at an end. Sameera's friends rejoiced, sending dozens of hearts and well wishes on their WhatsApp group. The guards in her building gave her an extra-wide smile. The house help wished her well, made her favourite food and paid extra attention while cleaning her bedroom. Her father's driver, who had ferried her and the parents back and forth from hospital to home, was extra careful as he drove them home for the final time.

Sameera, as she laid her head on her father's lap, feeling nauseous in the long car ride home, was thinking about the manuscript she had left incomplete on her laptop. The job she had had to leave because the three months had nuked her body and when she wasn't at home or the hospital, she was asleep – not the circumstances under which she could hold a job. The books she had read through her entire therapy, Harry Potters mostly because she had needed that magic and escape.

She thought about what kind of hair would grow back now that they would be allowed to grow. If her period would come back and what it would mean if it didn't. She wondered if her eyebrows would look the same as they had before and what she would do now, now that her slate had been wiped clean.

*

It was two years later. Sameera's hair was in its wild phase and it was a delight to hear her mother say that her hair looked like her baby hair. They were still short so styling them wasn't an option. While she looked at the sleek hair of her friends as all of them got dressed for the wedding of their friend, she gave her curls a whirl and let them settle where they would. She had promised herself early on, even before her chemo had begun, that she wouldn't mourn her hair. And she hadn't. She wouldn't start now.

The day before had been the first time they had all met since her illness. The hugs had been warmer and longer and almost everyone had touched her hair and tugged it, calling it cute. She had giggled, feeling relieved that her illness hadn't marked her out among her friends. There had been no change in how they had greeted each other, crowding into one room, even though they had three at their disposal. Even the bride had left behind her relatives for an hour so she could gossip with them.

The six friends had settled on the bed, first talking about the honeymoon, then about the sex that would follow, lingerie, what each of them was going to wear, if they would put make-up, how they would...and Sameera had waited. She had waited for them to turn to

her and ask her questions. She waited to hear how they had all worried and prayed for her.

But the questions didn't come. Not until the bride's one hour away from the festivities had turned into four and she had started to receive threatening messages from her mother that she needed to get dressed for the evening's pooja.

Sameera knew what was coming when the room plunged into sudden silence and four pairs of eyes stared at Aditi.

Aditi, who had been sprawling on the bed, sat up like the kind of talk that would ensue couldn't be done lying down. She crossed her legs, pulled down the shorts that had climbed up her thigh and wiggled on the bed. She asked, "Do you mind, talking about it?"

Even though she had been prepared for it, she jerked. Then averting her eyes which were filling with tears – stupid – she said, "No. I have...been waiting actually."

"What do you mean?" asked Bindu. She was sitting on the floor, gracious as always, giving up the bed for the bride so she could rest up.

Sameera's breath hitched but before five pairs of arms could envelope her in a hug, she raised hers, stalling their eagerness. "Mom and papa don't like to talk about it. And I get it. When I got...when it was...I..."

She swiped across her nose angrily. "Cancer. There."

The bride, Gunjan, patted her back. She was sitting behind Sameera. "When you told us the first time, we were so worried. Do you remember when I flew down to meet you? Seeing you had been a

shock but then it occurred to me you were still you and the shock reduced.”

Feeling braver, Sameera said, “They don’t talk about it. But sometimes, I *want* to talk about it. I want to talk about how it felt, and what happened.”

“Well duh,” said Aditi. “You wouldn’t have had the time to process it at the time. Now that you do, you want to remember it and place it in your memory in a way it makes sense.”

Sameera nodded, her hair nodding with her. “It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

The five friends paused. They hadn’t expected that.

Before she could go on, the bell to their room rang, and rang, and rang. Gunjan huffed angrily and got up. She snatched the door open, but before stepping outside she said, “Don’t start without me.”

The five friends laughed. One hugged Sameera, another patted her big toe, the only thing she could reach without getting up from her comfortable place on the floor and another started a discussion on the food they would likely be served at the wedding function and the lamentable lack of alcohol. And because the bride had asked, they didn’t ask Sameera to explain that bombshell of a statement.

Once Gunjan was back, having extracted another hour from the wedding preparations, and promised on pain of death that she wouldn’t extend that hour to two...or three...she asked the question that the others had been pondering while she had been away. “What do you mean the best thing?”

And Sameera, always given to hiding herself and her emotions, spoke. She told them how the big C had completely shattered the foundation on which she had built her life. The worst had happened and she had come out on the other side. She had survived. And now she was thriving. She was no longer scared of life and that was the biggest gift she had received.

“And the hair,” said Bindu with a laugh. “Don’t forget the hair. They look sexy.”

Mayank

Mayank looked at his watch and grimaced. Twenty thousand down the drain; that was the price of his watch. He should have left it in the car. Somebody could have used it. There was no need to waste such a good timepiece. Then he laughed at his foolishness.

He shifted on his perch to get more comfortable. How long was he going to sit on this hard rock? He had already spent nine hours on it. Surely, he could spend another hour? But pain was shooting up and down his buttocks and back, his body stiff and crying in protest.

He sighed heavily and removed his mobile from his pocket. He had a Blackberry because at the time he had been looking to buy a new phone he had fulfilled all the necessary criteria to own one. He pressed a key and entered his pass code to activate the screen. Full battery and full signal. Yet no one, not even his boss had remembered him in the last nine hours. There was no message, no call, no BBM, no mail...nothing. Had no one noticed his absence?

He looked at the dark abyss in front of him. He turned around and saw the harsh streetlights twinkling in the breeze. He groaned, humiliated and angry. This was pathetic.

That morning had been no different than any other morning. He had woken up before the alarm had gone off; run for a customary hour on the treadmill in his bedroom; showered and changed. He had left his building holding a brown leather bag in one hand, a quick sandwich he had made in the other. He had backed out of his parking space and entered the early morning traffic of office-goers.

The only difference had been the car lane in which he had been waiting. Due to the heavy traffic around Mantralay, he had found himself in the wrong lane. In a situation like that he had only two options – change the lane and risk getting caught by a cop or drive up to Marine Drive and double back. He didn't like the idea of paying a hundred bucks early in the morning so continued to drive in his lane which took him in the direction opposite to the intended one.

One wrong turn on a road he had travelled every single day for twelve years and he had reached here. Seeing the sea to his left changed something in him and he decided he wanted to end his life. He had stopped his car in the no-parking zone and started climbing the rocks off Marine Drive which only the brave, foolish or those in need of privacy dared to climb. At the time, he had felt rather good about his decision; as if god's hand was blessing and guiding him.

As usual, Mayank had given god credit a minute too soon. He had been unable to take the final plunge. He had stood on that rock for fifteen minutes willing his limbs to accept the impulse of jumping that his brain was sending. His body refused to obey this command and he thought perhaps he wasn't ready to end his life just yet.

He had sat on the rock then and said to himself, *one hour; I'll wait for one hour for someone to call me. If not...then...*

Mayank had waited for nine hours for *someone* to call him and order him to stop his idiocy and get back home. His phone hadn't even buzzed *once*. Even his service provider hadn't called to tell him to start or stop a value-added service.

In the time that Mayank had spent on the rock, he had seen the most spectacular sunset. He had seen the sky go from blue to orange to red to pink to violet and then finally the inky black of the night sky. He had heard how sunsets inspired poets, lovers and even the commonest of people. Not him though.

Mayank had been untouched by the beauty and the magnificence of the sunset. He had been equally untouched by the starry night lit by a full moon. This came as a surprise to him because he was sure he was a romantic at heart. Weren't sunsets and moonlight the cornerstones of romance?

If anything, the sunset and the full moon night had made him sad. It made him yearn. What exactly he yearned for he wasn't sure but the sight of the sun dipping into the sea made him feel incomplete and restless. What was wrong with him?

It suddenly dawned on him that if he hadn't taken the plunge in the last nine hours, chances of him taking it now were miniscule at best. Hadn't he read somewhere that if you rationalized the suicide, you didn't go through the final act? He scowled, feeling ashamed and got up. He stretched, feeling the sweet sensation of blood flowing into his back and buttocks.

In the heat of the moment, he hadn't realized just how deep he had walked into the maze of rocks. The journey back was slow and tedious. He lost his footing many times because the rocks were slippery. Wouldn't it be ironic if he slipped and died now?

It was an hour before he climbed his last rock and returned to civilization only to realize his car hadn't been towed. Mayank had left

his car in the no-parking zone of Marine Drive for nine hours. Yet his car hadn't been towed. He had had no human contact since morning and the *one* traffic violation he had committed had been royally ignored.

Was the universe trying to send him a message? *We are ignoring you because you don't exist for us. Your time is up; goodbye, thank you for playing.*

Mayank rolled his eyes as he sat in his car. But before he could drive anywhere, he paused. Where should he go?

After battling with himself for five minutes, he decided it was best to head home. As Mayank started driving, he also started thinking. The question which kept doing the rounds in his mind was why did he want to kill himself? Why, on reaching Marine Drive and seeing the Arabian Sea beyond the rocks, did he suddenly think of ending his life? And the subsequent failure to end it didn't make any sense.

Was it because he was unhappy? But then, everyone was unhappy...they didn't want to end their life. If every time someone decided to take the plunge just because they were sad, there wouldn't be any humans left. Then why?

He used to love his job but now it was just a means to keep his bank balance in the credit. Why and when had things gone south? He couldn't even remember when he had stopped enjoying his work. He couldn't answer why he hadn't quit or done something to change his situation. He had stubbornly remained in the same office for twelve years, even when the growth opportunities had dried up.

He braked and let out a harsh bark of a laugh. It hit him that he was thirty-seven years old, stuck in a rut, a rut from which he probably would never be able to come out, had lousy friends (nine hours, not a ping – and he had over three hundred contacts on his BBM) and had no, nothing, zilch, nada legacy of his own.

The traffic light turned green but Mayank was so deeply intertwined in his thoughts that he didn't realize it. Someone honked from behind, forcing him into action. He drove on, took a left turn from the Air India building and saw a truck rumbling down the other side of the road. Another opportunity had presented itself...

*

When Mayank entered his apartment on the eighteenth floor, it was as if he was seeing it for the first time. Why were his walls white? He hated that colour. It was cold and it made him feel like he was in a sterile environment.

Oh of course, this had been decided by the interior designer. She had declared, "White is the colour for you Mr. Mehra because it's classy, crisp and sharp." He hadn't understood the adjectives she used but had allowed her to go ahead with it anyway.

He switched on the light in the kitchen and saw the same cold white colour. The modular kitchen looked right out of a magazine. He opened his fridge to see if there were any *personal* items or did it too look as if it was from an advertisement. He saw the things he had asked his househelp to buy. He felt relieved. At least he wouldn't die hungry.

He pulled out the cling-film-wrapped plate that was his dinner from the fridge. So, he was hungry. Was that a good sign or did it just mean that he was hungry? God, he needed to get out of his head for some time.

He entered his living room with the plate in one hand and recoiled when his hand unerringly found the light switch and the room flooded with light. Why did he have *red sofas*?! Had the designer listened to anything he had said?

He walked briskly to his room, settling the plate on the dresser with a clunk. At least the bedroom walls were blue, at least he had talked the woman out of taking a feather mattress and the bed wasn't a *king style with four posts* she had said was in vogue but the more *regular* kind.

He took a breath and let it out. He sat on his bed and untied his watch. He carefully placed it on his bedside table. He undressed and looked at himself in the mirror. He had a few wrinkles around his eyes. He had always been lean and tall. His hair was still black. All in all, he liked what he saw. Then why was he alone?

Mayank sighed and wore a pair of old jeans and a blue sweatshirt. He picked up his dinner plate and ate the salad and the sandwich. It wasn't as satisfying as eating an *aloo parantha* but it was something. After he finished eating, he didn't bother putting the plate back in the kitchen.

He looked around himself, feeling lost. When he saw his sneakers, he picked them up. He wore the shoes and a watch, an old black one his grandfather had given him when he had been ten; getting ready to

leave. Where he would go was a question he did not care to ponder. He'd get to it when he had to.

He left his car keys next to the watch on the table. He picked up his wallet, mobile and house keys. Just because he was going through a mid-life crisis didn't mean he should roam around without his wallet. He would need money to go to and from whichever place that took his fancy. House keys were simple too. He had already established he wasn't going to kill himself. Well then, he would need to get back to his stark, cold white walls when he got tired of roaming around.

Mobile, now that he couldn't explain. It was just that his Blackberry was a part of his arm. Wherever the arm went, the phone went.

Of course, he was too cowardly to admit even to himself that the reason he couldn't leave his phone behind was he still nurtured the hope someone would call him.

He stepped out of the apartment and the door closed behind him with a thud. The finality of that sound made him shudder. What would Mayank be like when he entered through the door the next time?

He started climbing down the stairs, hoping to burn off some of that restless energy. Round and round he went, his shoes making a faint squeaking sound.

When he reached the ground floor, even the guards were asleep. He smiled at the irony. He walked to the closed building gate, opened it and let himself out. He paused. Should he go left or should he take a right?

He was about to remove a coin from his wallet to toss but saw a dog saunter down the road towards the right. He decided to follow him. At least the dog seemed to have a destination in mind.

Now that the route was decided, he didn't know how he should be walking. Should it be a stroll or should it be a purposeful walk, the kinds he used to take some years ago every time he approached his boss' cabin? He made a face and started walking. Should he be overthinking about how to walk?

He walked on without purpose or direction. He had thought he was the kind of guy who needed to have a plan; the kind of guy who couldn't function without knowing where he was going or why he was going. But this new Mayank surprised him. Not only did he not have a plan, but he was on the road in the middle of the night and it didn't *scare* him. Should *that* scare him?

A white Mercedes with loud music whizzed past him. Because the night was so still, he heard the carefree laugh of the young. He suddenly felt very old. Mayank had never enjoyed Bombay's nightlife. A lot of people claimed that you hadn't seen the *real* Bombay unless you had bar-hopped into the wee hours of the morning. Mayank liked to believe that real Bombay was mere versions of different people.

At half-past one, his phone rang. He stopped walking abruptly. The vibrating phone in his right pocket felt alien. He removed the phone and stared at it. He couldn't make out the words or read the number so he just hit the button on the left. "Hello?"

"Hi darling how are you?"

“Mom?! Why are you calling me at,” he looked at his watch. “It’s 1.30! Why are you awake and why do you sound so chirpy?”

“Mayank, honey, are you drunk?”

His mother didn’t sound uptight or upset. She sounded like...mom.

“Anyways since you have forgotten; your dad and I just landed. When we spoke two days ago you had told me to call you once we landed.”

“How was the flight?”

It was a knee-jerk question. Mayank wasn’t interested in the answer. But he *was* glad that the only reason his mother hadn’t called him was she had been away. It gave him immense joy that even on his worst day the first person to call him was his mother.

“Hello? Mayank are you listening to me?”

“Yes mom I’m listening,” said he and let his mother talk. It was soothing to hear her voice. It made the night seem less bleak.

“Mom can I ask you something?” he interrupted.

“Of course.”

“You must have seen a sunset?” When she replied in the affirmative, he asked, “How does it make you feel?”

To his surprise, his mother laughed. “Oh Mayank have you already reached that age where you are turning a bit senile? Honey I don’t know what you are expecting but a sunset to me just means that the

day is over and the night is about to begin. When your dad was working it meant he would be home soon.”

Mayank smiled as he hung up. He hadn't expected that response but the fact that the sunset had made him feel empty bothered him. His first human contact hadn't been all that satisfactory. The conversation with his mother didn't give him any insights. It did however tell him that maybe his mother would miss him if he was gone.

Take that universe, he thought triumphantly.

Like most loving parents, Mayank's parents too had started on the marriage raga as soon as he had turned twenty-five. They had finally stopped when he hit thirty-five, reconciling to the fact that their son might never find the love of his life, might never settle down or the worst may never have children.

It was curious how Mayank had never felt the need to marry. He couldn't even recall the last time he had a girlfriend. Was the emptiness he was feeling a result of the absence of romance?

*

VIVANTA by Taj read the gleaming sign. While *Vivanta* had a white glow around it, *By Taj*, written in bright pink was just about visible underneath.

When had Taj President changed to Vivanta? Vivanta wasn't even five hundred metres away from where Mayank lived yet he had never once entered the hotel. His parents had gotten him vouchers for his thirtieth birthday but he had never gotten around to using them. He

thought of going inside now to have a look around but then seeing his clothes, he dropped the idea.

He made his way back towards his building but rather than stopping, he took the left that he hadn't because of the dog. He went to the park where he used to go for walks before he bought the treadmill. He questioned that purchase now. Why had he bought one when there was a perfectly decent park not so far away? When had he become so uninterested in humanity that he had made himself a prisoner in his own home?

The park gate was latched and the board clearly stated that the park was open to the public only between 6 AM and 9 PM. Normally he would have heeded the warning but not tonight. He could see the black sea beyond the fence, the promenade and the rocks. He was fascinated by the sea as he had never been in all his thirty-seven years so he unlatched the gate and entered.

He chose a spot that was away from the road so no guard would see him. He stared at the black sea. Beyond the sea, he could see the dim lights of buildings and hotels on Nariman Point. Like the sunset, the sight of the sea filled him with a profound sense of emptiness.

He had spent almost four decades on earth and yet the only person he *hoped* would miss him when he was gone was his mother. He remembered the triumph he had felt when he had taunted the universe. It seemed the universe still had the last laugh. He could almost hear it whispering, *your time is up*.

Mayank though refused to give up. He sat there staring at the sea. His mind was blessedly quiet and blank. He saw the sky change colours again turning from black to purple to dark blue to light blue.

He heard movement behind him and saw the early morning walkers and joggers and yoga enthusiasts. It was 7 AM; time for office. He got up from his place and walked back home. He had to get ready.

*

This time while driving to work, he was extra careful. He didn't want to go anywhere near the sea. It didn't matter that inexplicably the sea was calling out to him. He ignored the call and kept driving. Only once he had entered the lift in his office building and punched the number three did Mayank breathe freely.

He thought he would feel different after the tumultuous day he had had but he didn't feel anything. He made his way to his cabin and stared at the nameplate on the glass door for far longer than was necessary.

Mayank Mehra, DGM, said the plate. He was the only one in his team who had his cabin. Everyone else had a cubicle. He cocked his head to one side and wondered what he had done to deserve this deference.

"Good morning sir," said a voice on the left.

He almost jumped. It was only 8.30 and nobody entered this office before 10. He had hoped to get a peaceful hour where he could catch up on any work he might have missed due to his absence.

“Good morning,” he said. For the life of him he couldn’t remember her name. Wasn’t she too young to be working in this office? Why was she even standing there greeting him?

“I’m Gayatri sir, your market development intern,” she said, reading the look of confusion on his face correctly. “I have been working here for almost a month now.” This sounded like a rebuke – that the least he could do was remember her name and purpose of being in the office.

“Good morning,” Mayank repeated and pushed open his cabin door. “Why are you here so early?”

“Sir,” she said entering his cabin and twiddling her fingers, “I uh need to leave early today. My friend is coming from Pune and she has never been to Bombay before. I uh...”

“Of course, you can take a half-day, not a problem,” Mayank replied with a smile.

Seeing the look on his intern’s face it occurred to him this was the first time he had said *yes* for a half-day that too with a smile. He grimaced inwardly. Why was he painting himself to be such a monster?

“Thank you sir!” she said with a grin. “If there is anything you need, please let me know.”

Mayank nodded his head, sitting in front of his computer. Gayatri immediately left, closing the door behind her. *What is the point of having a glass door?* he thought then shook his head. He went back to his computer, amused for the first time in twenty-four hours.

He checked his email out of force of habit. He already knew there weren't any since his Blackberry was synced with his account. No one had missed him even in the office. How was it possible? He knew that he was a good employee then why did he have no emails, work-related or otherwise.

He picked up the phone to call his intern but then had to keep it down since he couldn't find the sticky note on which he had written her extension number. After spending a minute to find it, he got up and called out to her.

She walked in with a blue and white diary and a pen. He offered her a seat and asked, "What did you do yesterday?"

She seemed taken aback at the question. She quickly opened her notebook and flipped some pages. When she didn't immediately answer his question, he asked a different one. "Did Rajesh come to the office yesterday?"

"No. He had called to say he wouldn't and said I should finish any pending work and go home if you didn't need me."

"So that is what I'm asking – what did you do yesterday?"

"Uh..." she began but stopped short. Then gaining some confidence said, "I didn't have any pending work sir." She sounded proud and a little apprehensive about that achievement.

"What about the calls he had asked you to make to the people whose business cards he had collected at the franchise conference?"

"I finished making those calls the day before. I had emailed the excel sheet with the updated information to Rajesh sir and you."

“Right, well I’ll check that.” Mayank searched his mind for anything else he needed to talk to her about but couldn’t think of anything. He dismissed her again and rechecked his email to find the one that she had sent.

The morning hour came and went and Mayank got busy with work. The excel sheet Gayatri had sent still had some empty cells so he re-sent it to her with his comments and corrections and instructions to try and fill up the desired empty cells.

While waiting for an acknowledgement from her, Mayank looked out of his cabin door and the chasm between him and the rest of the world was starkly visible to him. Seriously, *when* had he become so antisocial? Did he even have a right to complain that he had no friends?

Lunch hour came and as usual, he had his lunch in his cabin, alone. His phone rang in between and he immediately picked it up. “Hello Rajesh,” he said, taking a sip from his glass of water.

“Mayank I need you to go to Nashik to have a chat with Mr. Ahuja. He has replied to the email Gayatri must have sent him. He wants to explore what branding options we can provide him. I’m coming into the office in some time. We can discuss it then.”

“Of course sir. Anything else?”

“Yes I was thinking you should take Gayatri with you.”

This request confused him. “Sir she is only an intern.”

“I’m aware of that. But her work has been impressive in the last one month.”

Even though Mayank didn't think her work had been impressive, he couldn't say as much to his boss. So, he changed tact. "Sir the confidentiality..."

It didn't matter what he told Rajesh. In the end, he had to agree to chaperone the intern so she could gain some *real-time* experience in the field of marketing.

At 2 when Gayatri came to his cabin to tell him she was leaving, he gave her the news that the next morning she was to accompany him to Nashik to attend a meeting. She said that she would be delighted.

She looked anything *but* delighted.

Except for the meeting with Rajesh and the little interaction he had with his intern, Mayank spent the time in the office cooped up in his cabin. It wasn't because he had a lot of work. He just didn't know what to do with himself. To pass the time, he had opened all the drawers and cupboards. There were hardly any personal items. He had only found some spare wires, a phone, a mouse and two empty pen drives.

Around 6 when he happened to glance out of his cabin door, what he saw made him pause in his perusal of the excel sheet Gayatri had emailed with some of the empty cells filled.

Why were his colleagues in jeans and converse shoes? Why could he hear music emanating from Savita's laptop? Why were so many people surrounding the said laptop? It looked like a picnic. Only instead of teenagers, he saw grown men and women, laughing, high-fiving and generally having a good time.

He checked his watch. Oh it was a Friday evening; well at least that explained the clothes. Mayank heard his colleagues making plans for the evening, but he knew that no one would invite him.

To his surprise, however, Kabir, the guy with the cubicle right outside his cabin, knocked on his cabin door. Mayank knew he was a married thirty-three-year-old but today, in his jeans and red t-shirt he looked twenty-five. Mayank returned his greeting and Kabir asked him to join the team for some drinks.

The *no* was on the tip of his tongue but instead, he found himself saying *yes*. If Kabir was surprised at this rare yes from Mayank, he didn't show it.

While driving back home, Mayank again steered clear of Marine Drive. He took the longer route because after spending fifteen odd hours staring at the sea, he had no plans to return to that obsession any time soon. The car seemed too quiet so he switched on the radio.

Changing into something *appropriate* for a pub, several times he changed his mind about his decision to go. Why exactly was he going? He had never accepted any of the invitations to his colleague's homes for family dinners. Being the only bachelor among them made him awkward and the butt of too many jokes. A pub seemed doable and for once he had wanted to do something spontaneous.

Spontaneity didn't come easy to Mayank. He couldn't do something without detailing it to death. But after the night he had had, he wanted to do things differently.

He didn't know how it would help but it seemed foolhardy to continue living his life in the same way he had for thirty-seven years.

The act of wanting to kill himself had to have a significant impact on his life right? How could he let such a thing not affect how he continued to live? Weren't such experiences supposed to bring about profound life-altering changes?

And it was because of this reasoning that he finally won the argument with himself and went to the pub for a night of *frivolity* and *spontaneity*.

*

"Good morning," greeted Gayatri. She looked, fresh, bright and so *young* as she sat in the car that was to drive them to Nashik.

"Good morning," groaned Mayank. His head was in his hands and even though he had swallowed a Crocin, it was still throbbing.

"You went clubbing last night." Not a question, a statement. When Mayank looked at her questioningly, she said, "You have a stamp on your hand," pointing to the blue mark on his right hand.

He cursed. Now his intern would think he hadn't showered in the morning. He hadn't remembered to get rid of it. He had been running late, a first of many firsts, and had no brain faculties to pay attention to something as trivial as getting rid of a stamp. He absentmindedly rubbed it, a testament to his stupidity. "Yeah. I was trying to be spontaneous. I had forgotten I'm old and that it was a bad idea."

She laughed. "It's a good lesson for the future. When you have a meeting the next day, don't go out partying!"

"How old are you?" He winced at the awkward question.

“Twenty-one.” She didn’t seem put out by the question. “I have just finished my graduation.”

“Wow,” he said. He hadn’t realized she was *that* young. She was practically a child. “If you have just completed your graduation, why aren’t you enjoying life? Why are you doing an internship?”

“That is a very good question,” she mumbled, which confused him. “I guess I want to know what field to choose once I do my MBA.”

“Only twenty-one and already planning for the future...you should be chalking up experiences.”

He wanted to laugh at himself. Who was he to be dishing out career advice? As if he had ever done any of those things. He had had a plan. And everything had gone according to that plan. He had made sure of that.

“That is exactly what I’m doing,” she bowed her head with a flourish. “I have worked in a special education school and I have a diploma in software engineering. Oh, and I also love to write.”

It was hard and Mayank didn’t try to hide his surprise. Software engineering? He must have never paid any attention to his intern before. She seemed to be living a rather colourful life or confused depending on how you looked at it.

“What do you write? Have you published anything?”

“I haven’t published anything *yet* but I want to be a writer. I have this dream of having a bestseller to my credit. What I write is a difficult question to answer. I don’t have a genre. I would love to write sci-fi

but that needs an idea which I don't have and..." she stopped abruptly. "I'm babbling," she said self-consciously.

Mayank shook his head and smiled, ending the conversation. His head still hurt so instead of worrying about the meeting, or briefing Gayatri on what she should or shouldn't say, he decided to take a nap.

*

When he woke up, they were an hour away from Mr. Ahuja's office. He turned to see what his intern was doing and saw her head bobbing, blue earphones dangling from her ears. He tapped her shoulder. Once she had removed her earphones and he had her attention, he asked, "Have you done any homework on the Ahuja Chemical Industries?"

She seemed hurt at the question. "Of course. Rajesh sir had sent me a file regarding that." She didn't add that half of the information in that file had been compiled by *her*.

"Excellent," he said. "Keep making notes on your phone, especially of the questions he asks or concerns he raises. It'll help us to pitch better in the future. And try not to embarrass yourself, or me. Or the company for that matter."

She rolled her eyes so hard at his mansplaining, Mayank burst out laughing. He apologized, then asked her about her teaching experience. As she started narrating incidents from the school, it occurred to Mayank he had just laughed at himself. And it felt good.

*

After a long time, Mayank was feeling good about himself. The meeting had gone as scheduled, his intern had seemed enthusiastic on the table, and he had a feeling that Mr. Ahuja would be calling soon to talk some more. It had been a good day.

In an inspired moment, he decided to treat Gayatri to some dessert. For a change, he didn't overthink this decision. He felt like doing something and *doing it* had seemed like the best plan.

Once they had placed their orders, chocolate mousse for Mayank, strawberry cheesecake for Gayatri, Mayank said, counting on his fingers, "So I know about the writing and the teaching. Why software engineering?"

"Umm," she said. This entire trip with Mayank had left her feeling on edge. One minute he was teasing her and the next minute he had retreated into himself. She was having a hard time playing catch-up. "Because I liked it, I suppose. I had done it in school as well so it seemed like a good idea at the time."

Mayank wondered if he had ever done anything because he had liked it. His curiosity around his intern's life choices made him pause but once again, he decided to go with the flow instead of constantly second-guessing himself.

"Why marketing?"

As he asked this question, he realized that he was building up to the one question he wanted answered but couldn't come right out and ask. Gayatri seemed like a bright person...maybe she could shed some light on it?

“Frankly I don’t know why Rajesh sir chose me. I had told him I wasn’t interested in marketing but he hired me anyway. He had interviewed a lot of people yet he chose me.”

“He must have seen something or you must have done something right.”

Gayatri gave him a broad smile and he realized his statement meant a lot to her. It again occurred to him how young his intern was and how important it was for her to hear such things being said about her.

Their dessert came and they focussed on their plates. After they had demolished half of their order, she asked, “So what happens next? You said this is just a *getting to know* luncheon. When does the actual branding begin?”

“Not for another two months at least.” Seeing the look of surprise on her face, he smiled. He could get used to this. “See to give you an analogy we are like a dish in a buffet. Mr. Ahuja has to decide whether he will take it or not.”

“But if he has come to us, doesn’t that mean he has some intention of taking us up. You don’t just go around having *and paying for* lunches with everyone and anyone.”

“Of course; that is why we are here. But intentions don’t get you business.”

“But why *two* months? It seems an awful lot of waiting time if in the end you’re just going to go ahead with it.”

“Marketing is a slow field, Gayatri. There are budgets and approvals and ROIs to be considered. Of course, once the ball gets rolling it’s a

difficult three-four months.” He took a bite of his mousse and said, “Also remember, we are venturing into uncharted territory here. That’s why it’s called market *development*.”

“This is boring,” she said, stabbing her cheesecake with vengeance.

It took her a minute to realize what she had said. She looked at him, eyes round with shock. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say...”

“Yes you did,” he said but not unkindly. He could see why his intern felt she wasn’t cut out for marketing. He was also sure that once her three months with the company were up, she would leave and never look back.

The conversation turned stilted. Gayatri kept shooting glances at her boss, praying and hoping she hadn’t offended him by her thoughtless remark. He had some sort of a look on his face and she didn’t know how to interpret it. Even though Rajesh was her boss’s boss, she felt more comfortable around him. Mayank sometimes made her feel like she couldn’t do anything right.

Feeling guilty and deciding her boss’s look spelled trouble, she said, “I’m sorry for that comment. It was stupid.”

“You’re a writer.” The statement came out of the blue, taking Gayatri by surprise yet again. She had barely registered what Mayank had said when he asked, “What do you think of the sea?”

He was shocked by his boldness. What if she thought he had gone cuckoo in the head? But the reason he had asked her and not anyone last night was because she was a writer. Weren’t writers eloquent, able to put into words the most exquisite things?

She was saved the trouble of answering the question when a waiter came to clear their plates. When he left though, Mayank repeated his question.

The look she had seen on his face which she had interpreted as trouble was back. This wasn't a casual question for him then. He seemed to really want an answer. So, she said, "Sometimes it makes me feel restless. Not because the sea is rough or anything. Even if the surface is calm, it still makes me restless."

"Sometimes, my mind goes blank and I don't even see the beauty, colours or feel the breeze. Those times I can just stare at it. It's like meditation. And at other times, it has this soothing effect on me. Like no matter what happens, the sea will always be there because it is unchangeable."

"I guess for me," she said, blinking as if waking from a dream, "it's more my inner reflections than the sea."

He nodded his head and then started shaking it. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean," he said.

"I think I project my feelings onto the sea. So, whatever I'm feeling gets reflected and hence it makes me feel all these different things."

Mayank digested that for a moment. Based on her interpretation, the sea making him feel empty meant he *was* feeling empty. But, he already had everything in life that he could hope for. What was troubling him then?

*

On the journey back, Mayank's head was buzzing with the realization he had had in the restaurant. It was all very well for him to ask his intern about her thoughts on the sea. To give her credit, she had given him quite a satisfactory explanation. However, the discussion with her had opened in him this hunger to understand the deeper meaning of life.

He laughed humourlessly at the last thought and Gayatri woke up with a start. She looked at her boss who started laughing louder. She removed her phone from her pocket and checked her face on the shiny, smooth surface. She didn't detect anything so she looked at him and said, "Is there a problem?"

"Why would there be a problem?" He was smiling like a maniac and perhaps he was scaring his intern but he was in a jovial mood after a long time and nothing could mar that, not even the look of horror on his intern's face.

"No reason." She turned to look out the window. It was too dark to see anything. "What is up with you today?" she asked finally. She would never have dreamed of asking such an insolent question but this trip had broken the ice between them.

Two days ago, I wanted to die but I couldn't do it. Now I have these...questions...and you are the only one here to voice these out to. He thought of this in his head and grimaced. "Nothing. I'm just tired I guess."

Mayank turned his head away, staring into the night, his jovialness left behind with the incessant turning of the car wheels.

Mayank had decided to revamp his home because he had realized he couldn't live in it till he got rid of the red sofas and the white walls. He had called Surbhi, his sister-in-law who also happened to be an interior designer, to help him. He knew it was a risk to involve the family in his mid-life crisis but he liked her work and if ever he needed a buffer between family and crisis, it was her.

The Monday after the Nashik meeting, Mayank had walked into his office and told Rajesh he needed a month off to figure things out. Rajesh hadn't made any comments. He hadn't offered any advice. He hadn't even tried to stop him. He had just nodded his head, reassigned the Ahuja project to Kabir and told him to come back in a month.

It had been as simple as that. He wasn't sure if he was happy or upset with his boss's cavalier attitude but walking out of the office building had seemed right. Had it been a wrong decision, he wouldn't have felt that, right?

After his leave had been sanctioned, he sat in his car and thought about his next step. He had driven aimlessly until chancing upon a charmingly small café that boasted of serving twelve types of beers. It looked good so he had gone inside. He had had some beer and listened to some good music. He had returned home rejuvenated and ready for a new project. The sight of the white walls and red sofas had prompted him into action.

Within three days, his living room had been stripped bare except for the dining table which he had grown rather attached to. The white walls looked even starker without the red sofas adding their colour and warmth to them but this time he didn't mind it. Like Surbhi had

told him, the white walls represented a blank canvas on which he could throw any colour.

Even though they were supposed to discuss it the next day, he was too nervously excited to sleep. He found himself sitting on the empty floor, looking at the long room. What could he do with this place? Surprisingly, the room didn't make him feel empty. It felt as if the room was waiting with bated breath for him to make a decision.

He was next to the French window, resolutely keeping his back to the sea. He hadn't realized it till he had emptied it but he could see the sea from his living room window. Wasn't it enough that the sea was haunting his thoughts? Must he now look at it too?

To avoid pondering on his useless obsession, he decided to focus on the canvas in front of him. He knew Surbhi would ask questions and he was feeling a little queasy at the thought of answering them.

*

"Juice?"

"Where did you find this?" As far as he knew, he hadn't bought any juice.

"Where do you think? I got it with me," said Surbhi, sitting down beside him on the floor. It was a good place to start. She could see the entire room from here.

"Any thoughts?" she asked when it appeared Mayank wasn't going to say anything.

He snorted. "Yes. I'm thinking how pointless this is. Did I take an off from the office for *this*? So I could redecorate my house? What for?! What purpose would it serve?"

Last night's enthusiasm seemed to have deserted him. Didn't they say problems didn't appear like problems in the morning light? Or was it the other way around?

Surbhi was surprised by his vehemence. "It's your home. You have every right to do whatever you please with it. And not every act we do has a reason. Sometimes we do stuff without any logic behind it."

"I guess," he said not convinced at all.

"Think of it this way. This may be pointless for you but you're giving me a lot of business," she said with a grin.

Mayank couldn't help it. He started grinning too.

"Do *you* have any thoughts?" he asked gesturing towards the empty room.

She was quiet for so long that Mayank started to worry.

"What's wrong?"

"Bhai," she started and then taking a deep breath continued in a rush, "Can I ask you something? If you don't want to answer just tell me to shut up and I will shut up."

His worry turned into a frown. That was a change of tact if ever he had seen one. He nodded nonetheless.

"What is going on with you?"

Mayank snorted. Was he that transparent?

“Look something is up and I want to know what it is. I know you won’t talk to your mother because she will get too anxious. With dad, it’ll be an ego issue and Sam...well Sam has the attention span of a flea so...”

Mayank laughed. “Flea?”

“Yeah because it’s small or whatever. Look you *know* you can talk to me. I’m not saying I’ll give you a solution but you can talk to me.”

“See I’m glad you decided to get rid of those obnoxious sofas,” she wrinkled her nose delicately, “but please, tell me, what is going on?”

Mayank turned away and looked out the window. He could see the glittering mass of blue-brown liquid. He sighed, the feeling of emptiness returning with a vengeance.

“What do you think of the sea?” he asked.

Surbhi stared at her brother-in-law, shocked into silence.

“See that is why,” he mumbled and made to get up, his glass still full of the juice that Surbhi had handed to him.

“No please sit. I’m sorry,” said she, holding his hand and pulling him back down. She took a moment to ponder Mayank’s question. “The sea...scares me.”

Mayank looked at her intently, silently telling her to continue.

“Every time I look at it, all I think about are tsunamis and floods and all the destruction they cause; that the sea can anytime swell up and come and gobble me. I know it sounds silly but...”

“It makes me feel empty,” he said softly. Then without thinking, he added, “Gayatri thinks the sea reflects her emotions.”

“Who is Gayatri?” asked Surbhi, interest immediately piqued at the mention of a girl.

Mayank rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t matter. Forget I said anything kiddo,” he said, ruffled Surbhi’s hair and got up. He looked at the juice glass as if he had forgotten he still had it. He gulped down the liquid without tasting it and walked away.

Surbhi looked at the retreating back of her brother-in-law. Mayank was her favourite person and he was suffering and she didn’t know how to help him. She knew she couldn’t do this alone and would have to involve Sameer. She also knew Mayank wouldn’t like it. But it had to be done.

*

When Mayank saw Sameer with a big parcel of food, he knew Surbhi had tattled on him. He asked his younger brother, “What are you doing here?”

“Thought I could also add my two bits to this room,” he said, opening a box of chicken tikka and handing it to his brother by way of a peace offering. He knew Mayank loved the stuff.

“I know what is happening,” he said, not accepting the apology but accepting the box.

“That’s good. We can dispense with the drama then,” said Sam practically.

“Come on out Surbhi, I’m not angry,” Mayank called out, knowing Surbhi was hiding in the kitchen.

She came out meekly, feeling guilty. She mouthed *sorry* to him and he shrugged. He sat down opposite his brother, took the plate Surbhi offered and started serving food for himself. He didn’t say anything, waiting for one of them to speak.

Sam didn’t say anything either and calmly started eating. Surbhi looked from one brother to the other, rolling her eyes at their passive-aggressive behaviour. She would have liked to knock their heads together but knew it would be pointless.

So she said, “You know you haven’t answered my question yet. What is up with you? And we *know* something is up.”

Mayank stared at the two sitting opposite him. Surbhi looked expectant and Sam looked only mildly interested. Sam didn’t fool Mayank with his nonchalance though.

He contemplated making up a story but didn’t have the energy to do that. Instead, he dabbed his lips lightly with a napkin and said, “I thought about killing myself.”

Two stunned faces greeted that declaration. There was a deathly silence. Then, “What do you mean *thought?*” asked Sam.

Surbhi looked at him incredulously. Why wasn’t he freaking out like she was? What did it matter what he *meant?*

“I was driving to work. I was at Marine Drive. I saw the sea beyond it and well I don’t know. I just decided I wanted to jump. I didn’t obviously; couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“Are you unhappy?” Surbhi squeaked. Seeing the steely calm on the faces of both the brothers scared her so much that instead of snapping, it calmed her too.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I hadn’t thought I was. But...” He didn’t know how to finish that statement.

“Are you lonely?” she asked, laughing nervously. Why was she laughing?

Mayank shrugged.

“What’s the deal with the sea?” she tried again. The non-answers weren’t helping with her equilibrium. She looked at Sam who was staring at his brother. How was he taking this news so lightly?

“I don’t know,” he said again, looking down at his plate. The food, good food, was getting cold. He stabbed the chicken with his fork and put it in his mouth. When Sam and Surbhi also started eating, he said, “The sea makes me feel empty. I have been trying to understand why and what it means. What do you think Sam?”

“Haven’t given it much thought. I don’t think it even registers,” he said, opening the rice box and handing it around.

“Gayatri thinks the sea reflects your inner turmoil.”

Mayank for a second thought he had said those words. Then he realized it was Surbhi who had said it. He shook his head, hiding a

smile. He was going through a mid-life crisis and yet the one thing that was important to Surbhi was the fact he had mentioned a girl's name.

Sam looked at her, confused. "Who the heck is Gayatri now?"

"That isn't important," she said slapping her husband on the shoulder.

Still confused, he looked at his brother and said, "I think you need a woman in your life."

"What?" exclaimed both Surbhi and Mayank at the same time.

"Look everybody needs somebody. Your emptiness is just that and nothing else. Human beings weren't designed to survive alone. Had that been the case, the universe would have found another way to sustain procreation."

Despite the seriousness of the discussion, both Surbhi and Mayank burst out laughing.

"You can laugh all you want. But that is my honest opinion. Maybe you didn't want to kill yourself. Maybe you just needed a change and that event was the jolt to set you on a different path."

While in bed that night, Mayank thought about what Sam had said. It sounded so logical and yet so mystical. Was this divine providence then? Had the universe guided him to Marine Drive just to force him to introspect? To finally accept that he was lonely? Had been in fact for the past fifteen years?

How the hell had he landed himself here he couldn't tell. He remembered the conversation from last night, remembered that he had seriously thought and then come to the conclusion that maybe for a change his brother was right and he did need a woman in his life but he couldn't remember agreeing to *this*.

Feeling foolish, he kept looking expectantly at every woman who entered the restaurant only to find them sitting at a different table.

Finally, a woman of roughly fifty years of age, with grey hair in a nice black suit walked up to his table and asked him, "Are you Mayank?"

He stood up and nodded, a lump in his throat. They shook hands and she introduced herself as Tamara. They settled down, looking everywhere but at each other.

"I wasn't expecting you," she said finally.

"Umm..."

"I mean someone so young. I thought you would be older."

He wanted to say he hadn't expected someone so old either but didn't think Tamara would like that. Instead, he said, "Well I am hungry. Should we order food?"

She smiled and nodded. "What brings you here?" she asked after they had given their orders.

"Family is concerned about me," he said laughing.

She nodded knowingly. She waited for Mayank to say something but he was studiously ignoring her and studying the table instead. She

huffed. When he had suggested they order food, Tamara had thought maybe the night wouldn't be an utter waste after all. Now she was thinking she was mistaken. She said, "You know you can ask me questions."

"What do you do Tamara?"

"I am a producer...was I should say. Left it about a year ago. Don't ask me why because I won't tell you. The past year I travelled a lot. What am I doing here? My family talked me into it. My mother is worried about me. She thinks I still have time."

Mayank snorted then covered it up with a cough. Frankly, Tamara scared him. He had thought he could have a pleasant meal with her and then they could go their separate ways. But no, she made him feel like a ten-year-old boy sent to the principal's office.

They mutually decided to part ways once their dinner was eaten and paid for.

Thinking about the evening when he was preparing for bed made him smile and then he started to laugh. He looked outside the window and could swear he saw the sea smile back at him. He didn't know how it was possible but that's what he saw. Feeling light and happy, he went to sleep with a smile on his face.

*

"No more," he begged, putting his head in his hands.

The colour palate was giving him a headache. It had been a week and Surbhi and he had still not settled on a colour for the living room walls, which were still the same stark white.

“You have to choose. You do realize this is the easiest part, right? The stuff that comes after is *much* worse,” commented Sam, slapping his brother on the back affectionately.

“I know I have taken an off from work. What is your excuse?” said Mayank belligerently.

“My brother is having a mid-life crisis. Couldn’t miss out on the fun could I?” he grinned and continued grinning even when Surbhi squeezed his bicep for being so callous.

“How have the dates been?” asked Surbhi, changing topics but that elicited only a groan from Mayank and a chuckle from Sam. She had hoped her husband would be a tad more useful than just making fun and laughing at his brother. She had been mistaken. There was a reason after all for the *flea* comment.

“Well considering he has asked you to stop, I’m guessing swell?” drawled Sam, much to his wife’s annoyance but it made Mayank smile which was a small reward.

Surbhi huffed in protest and left the room.

“Look at what you did,” said Sam accusingly to Mayank. “Now there’ll be hell to pay later.”

Mayank chuckled. How was his baby brother like this and he so serious? Why hadn’t he inherited some of his mother’s good humour too? It would have helped in his current circumstances.

“When do you go back to work?”

“Another ten days, I think. I have a reminder on my phone.”

“Do you miss it?” Sam asked after a while.

“I miss work. I miss having that kind of purposeful start to the day, you know what I mean?”

“You don’t hate your job then?”

Mayank thought about it and said, “No, I guess not.”

“There you go. This madness has finally yielded a good result. Now you know it wasn’t the job that made you want to...you know...”

Even though Sam had made light of the matter when his brother had confessed that chilling thought, it had still shaken him up. Since that day, he had sent a silent prayer to whoever up there was listening for saving his brother.

“That’s one way to look at it,” said Mayank, sounding very pleased.

Now if only the sea would stop making him feel so empty, everything would be peachy. He didn’t know why or how but he was *sure* that till he solved that particular mystery, he wouldn’t be completely...healed? Happy? Satisfied?

*

“Welcome back Mayank,” said Rajesh, shaking his hand.

“It is good to be back,” said Mayank, surprising himself when he realized just how true it was. Bless Sam but he had been right. The madness indeed had a happy ending. And here he had thought happy endings only came in fairy tales.

“I must say you look better. Whatever it is that you did in the past month, keep it up; the results are showing.”

Mayank wanted to say he hadn't done anything – his living room was still the same, empty with white walls and Surbhi was afraid it would remain that way – but he didn't. He went back to his cabin and was about to shut the door but left it open. From now on, he would make an effort to be more sociable.

*

It was a lazy Sunday afternoon. His father was asleep somewhere in the house and he could hear his mother singing tunelessly to herself as she washed the utensils in the kitchen. Sam and he had offered to help her with the cleaning but she had insisted on doing it herself.

Sam and Surbhi had left immediately after lunch but Mayank was at his usual perch, staring at the sunlit sea. The morning sea didn't make him feel as bad as the night sea. It was like in the mornings, there was a hint of promise but by evening, that broken promise brought back the emptiness in waves.

His work was going great; better than usual. He had become so used to his empty living room that he had stopped noticing it. Except now it offered an unhindered view of the sea. He had put up curtains but found himself leaving them off rather than on the window. It was like he was gaining some perverse pleasure out of torturing himself.

Unable to take it anymore, and feeling he was very close to solving this mystery, he went into the kitchen to speak to his mother.

“Ma I need to tell you something,” he began, feeling nervous all of a sudden. This was the stupidest idea he had ever come up with. How could he tell his mother not one month ago he had thought about killing himself? Which mother would be able to bear that news?

“Are you gay?” she asked completely unfazed.

Mayank’s eyes popped out in surprise. “What? Where...what are you even...do you think...huh?”

“I guess not,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron and sliding it out of her neck. She spread it out on the kitchen platform to let it dry.

Before his mother could make any more sweeping remarks, he decided he would tell her; not about the suicide part but at least the crisis part. “I am...or at least I was going through a sort of a...”

“I know what happened a month back honey. Surbhi told us.”

“Good god! Can that woman not keep her mouth shut?” In what moment of madness had he thought she would keep his secret? “Wait – us? Dad knows too? Why haven’t you said anything then?”

“Because we figured you would talk to us when you were ready.”

Mayank was speechless. Why had he wanted to confide in his mother again? Maybe he wanted her sympathy and pity? Is that what he was looking for?

“Mayank, honey, stop thinking so much. God I can almost hear those wheels turning. It doesn’t matter why she told us or why you want to talk about it. That is not what matters. What matters is are you happy honey?”

He thought about it for a long five minutes. "I know I am not unhappy. But that isn't the same as being happy, is it?"

"No, it is not."

"It is not work...it is..." Mayank turned around and his eyes came to rest on that hateful, hateful piece of a water body. He had never thought he would come to despise a piece of topography so much.

"It is just I have this...this thing..." he said, trying to find words. His right-hand fingers had curled into a claw and the hand was hovering somewhere close to the middle of his chest.

His mother took his hand in hers. She massaged it till his fingers stopped making that claw. Her poor baby was suffering and all she could do was feel helpless. "You are lonely," she said, a tear running down the length of her cheek. "I am not talking about a woman," she added hastily but was interrupted.

"Or a man," he said with a smile.

His mother slapped his hand and continued, "I don't mean romance Mayank. All your friends are married with children. I know you feel awkward around them, like they live in a different world, a world you know nothing about and hence don't fit in. I know you feel like everyone around you has taken the next step and you are still where you were fifteen years ago. I know you feel like you have missed the train."

In that moment Mayank wished he had talked to his mother sooner. He couldn't believe how easily she had put into words what he was feeling.

“Darling they are your friends; have been since all of you were fifteen years old. Some of them you know since even before. I know it is awkward but why have you let them slip out of your fingers? Your brother has a different life; your father and I won’t be around forever. Who would you have apart from them?”

“When you say it like that,” he said sounding gruff. No matter what he was feeling, he wasn’t going to bawl his eyes out in front of his mother. Even he had to draw the line somewhere.

“I don't mean to paint such a bleak picture but you did come to me and I will not be doing you any favours by painting a false one. You used to be such a happy child. Always serious mind you but even in that seriousness, you were happy. Somewhere along the way you gave up on life. You closed yourself off. I am not saying you didn’t have a good reason. I am sure at the time, you had very good reasons.”

Mayank shook his head. “For the life of me, I cannot remember those reasons.”

“Exactly,” she said, “because they don’t make sense anymore. Open yourself to the happiness again Mayank. I know it sounds cheesy and you can call it what you like but life is not all that bad. You just need to stop and smell the roses.”

“Oh come on mom,” said Mayank, only half-jokingly while his mother first hit his arm then patted it, a world of sympathy and understanding in that simple pat and Mayank nearly broke down.

That night, he again went for a midnight stroll. He came to the same park and found the same spot he had sat on that fateful night. He

looked at the sea and everything his mother had spoken that afternoon came flooding back. He could hold his tears back no more and let them spill. Once the tears started, he couldn't stop them.

Then the most wonderful thing happened. He felt the sea swell around him and cocoon him in its warm embrace. It was the same kind of sympathy and understanding that his mother's pat had only this felt so much more. It felt like the sea could feel his pain and was crying not only *for* him but *with* him.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there or how long he cried. But he was sure about one thing. This time when he looked at the sea, he felt nothing more than an overwhelming peace.

Everything was going to be alright.

*

"I want white walls."

"You have gone insane. Sam I am sorry to say this but I think your brother has gone insane."

"No, no, wait Surbhi...you have..."

Sameer couldn't quite put his finger on it but his brother looked like he had gone through an anti-aging process overnight. "Did you do something?" he asked cautiously.

"Yeah, I spoke to mom. Thanks by the way for spilling the beans," he added as an aside to Surbhi but he wasn't mad, not by a long shot. "I had an epiphany last night."

“And now he wants white walls. See, insane!”

“Surbhi, I thought you would be happy.”

“Give me one good reason why you want the walls white. I thought you hated that colour.”

“It’s just a colour,” said Mayank with a shrug. “I don’t hate it. It just...feels right.”

Sam hooted with laughter and Surbhi rolled her eyes.

“Hey I have grown fond of the colour.”

And while Sam tried to convince his wife that his brother hadn’t indeed lost his marbles, Mayank stole a peek at the sea and swore it was laughing right along with him.

*

“Mayank, I would like to introduce you to someone,” said Rajesh at his cabin door. “This is Gayatri. She is the new joinee. You were away when she...”

Mayank did not hear the rest. His smile though broadened. *Universe*, he said shaking his head.

“What, what is it?” she asked, looking flabbergasted when Rajesh left to let the two of them chat, catch up on work and get to know each other.

“Sorry. It’s just you reminded me of someone I used to know.”

*

He had entertained the thought, he knew the universe was not without its sense of humour, but Mayank never really got around to asking Gayatri out on a date. Maybe the similar names had him taking a step back. It wasn't strictly true but there was history with Gayatri the intern and he wasn't sure if he could go out with her namesake without that complicating the issue.

Maybe he had just about started on his healing journey and he didn't want to plunge head first into something that may hinder his growth. Maybe he still hadn't discovered himself completely. God knew he was still rediscovering his friends and all their children. It was hard keeping their names straight.

Or maybe the universe had something better planned for him.

Who knew? Maybe the future.

Avantika

This was her favourite time of the day. It was the afternoon and the library was quiet. The students would troop in at 4 to do their homework and assignments, the adults in the evening to hide from life outside work. She was surrounded by books, the silence and the running fans. There could be no greater bliss than this, she decided, as she sipped on her earl grey.

The library was a two-storey building that her grandparents had designed themselves. There was no roof separating the two floors. It was one tall space and the second floor had a railing around it. It had been dubbed the balcony because that is what it looked like from the first floor. The balcony had tables and chairs near the railing and bookshelves for walls. It was lit in the evenings but right now all the lights were off. Avantika's dadi was rather strict about energy saving.

The first floor had three long tables with chairs and stools kept neatly. The arrangement would change as soon as the students would arrive. There was also a small section next to where Avantika was standing behind her librarian's desk that housed four computers. They could be rented for a price. Dadi had not been very keen on the investment but Avantika had insisted. That had been two years ago and the investment had paid off.

Avantika was just about to pick up her current read, the Homeric Iliad, which a boy who had been trying to flirt with her had recommended. Even though they were technically only four years apart in age, he was still in college and Avantika was...not. She had history and baggage that the bright-eyed boy did not have. Flirtation

aside, the book was immensely readable and she hadn't been able to put it down since she had started it four days ago. She was at a critical juncture with Patroclus about to enter the fight when she was interrupted.

It was Poonam, a forty-year-old woman who had lived in Dehradun all her life. She had grown up here, gone to university here and married here. Now she was raising a family here. She was dressed in blue jeans and a long maroon sweater. She didn't look wholly comfortable and Avantika wondered idly if it was the jeans that were making her look like a deer caught in the headlights.

When Poonam didn't speak or approach Avantika, she cleared her throat. "Hi Poonam."

Dadi had taught this lesson to her early on. Call everyone by their first name. No uncle, aunty, sir, madam business. She had said that since Avantika was so young – she was twenty-five thank you very much – people would walk all over her if she allowed them to. The first name was a weapon. It told them that Avantika was in charge and if she asked for the fifty rupees late fee, you paid the fee.

Poonam didn't react to the greeting so Avantika abandoned her book, tea and perch and walked to the older woman. She placed her hand gently on Poonam's shoulder. It was like the woman woke up from a dream.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, I was..."

"It's okay. No harm done. Tell me how I can help."

It was a statement dadi had used three years ago when Avantika had called her, crying and disenchanted from the world and her dream of being a high-flying career woman. Avantika's reply to the statement had been a wail but it had been enough for dadi.

Dadi had told her to come home. She had said, "Take a break. You sound so unhappy. Come home, help me run the library. I'll pay you. You can give me rent for the room you'll stay in. Pay for the groceries. You can hide away under my pallu until you're ready to face the world again."

The offer had been so tempting that Avantika had only contemplated for twenty-four hours before saying yes to everything – even hiding under the pallu.

During her first month in the library, she had been excited, motivated, driven. The second month the drive had crashed and burned as it had fallen on the ground, breathing its last breath. It had been hard to swallow that the pace of the city did not compare to the pace of a small town – and even less to the pace of a library. Three months in and she had been ready to rush back to her city life. But just the thought of going back to the grind had so incapacitated her that she had felt a panic attack coming.

Once she had found her breath, and the panic attack had receded, she rushed to the library. Then something miraculous had happened. After fifteen minutes spent straightening her grandmother's table, and breathing in the scent of the library, a feeling of peace had engulfed her. An hour later, she realized she hadn't had a panic attack since she had left the city. Another hour after that she had helped a thirteen-year-old girl discover her love for reading.

That's when she understood why this library was so precious. Why so many people flocked to it. Why even though her grandparents had found it difficult to break even during some months, the library was still here, in better repairs than some of the homes in Dehradun.

It was a sanctuary. It was a place to learn. It was a place to hide. It was a place to pause and take a breath.

That day Avantika found a new dream. To continue to make this library what it was for her: a magical place full of secrets and mysteries.

Poonam looked at the smiling Avantika and some of her dread fled. She was safe here, she told herself, with Avantika. She wouldn't gossip. She wouldn't tell anyone that Poonam had stepped into the library in search of...god she couldn't even say it.

"Is there anyone here?" she whispered.

"No, no one is here but me," Avantika whispered back even as she started to make a mental list of possible things Poonam could be looking for.

After all, it wasn't the first time someone had stepped into the library looking for some *illicit* education. Dehradun may have grown by leaps and bounds in terms of construction since last Avantika had been here but in terms of understanding how the wider world worked, the town was still taking baby steps. She thought back to the young bride who had been no older than Avantika and already three months pregnant. She had asked her to explain what orgasms were. Avantika had been mortified at first but seeing the terror on the

young woman's face had melted her into a puddle. She had spent the next hour explaining everything she knew on the subject.

Since then, Avantika had inadvertently taken on the role of an agony aunt. Not that she wanted it but she knew it came with the territory. She tried to be as gracious about it as she could. And when she felt like screaming that she was only twenty-four and not built for taking on so many emotions, she fled to her friends' apartment in Delhi for a weekend.

"Would you like to sit?"

"No," said Poonam, clutching her purse. "No, I'm okay. Why is this so hard?"

"Take all the time you need."

The longer Poonam took to get to the point, the harder Avantika's brain worked. What had happened to render the woman so tongue-tied?

Poonam opened her mouth and then closed it. This was a bad idea, wasn't it? Maybe she could come back? But...she looked around. The library was indeed empty and she didn't think she'd have the courage to return later. She had to do it now. As soon as she decided that the words found her.

"What is LGBT? What does it mean to be gay? How can someone *be* gay? How can a thirteen-year-old know that he's gay? How does that even work?"

Avantika smiled ruefully. Of all the items in her mental list, she hadn't factored in a conversation on how sexual orientation worked.

“Tell me what happened.”

This time Poonam took the offer of sitting down on one of the chairs at one of the long tables. Avantika disappeared for five minutes to make herself a fresh cup of tea and brought out some biscuits for Poonam. The people of Dehradun didn't like her fancy tea and there wasn't enough equipment in the library to make masala chai. So dadi and she had come up with biscuits. They worked just as well.

Poonam picked up a biscuit. She didn't want one but her fingers were aching with how hard she had clutched her purse and she needed to do something with her hands before she injured herself.

“My nephew,” she began, “came out to us today. That's what it is called?”

Avantika nodded as Poonam's fear started to make sense.

“He said that he was gay and...liked boys? I don't under...”

“It means he's attracted to boys, not girls.”

Poonam's eyes went wide and her fingers demolished the biscuit into crumbs. “How does that work?”

Avantika found her ears turning red and warm with embarrassment. “Urm...it works. I uh...do you...I mean would you...I can find some literature for you that explains the *mechanics* I guess.”

Poonam got up, her eyes closed, crumbs forgotten. She gulped down breaths. She opened her eyes and looked at the exit longingly. Then she sat back down.

"I guess it's still early for that. I...how can someone like boys and not girls?"

"That's just how it works sometimes Poonam."

"You don't think it's all the things they read on the internet?"

Avantika wanted to correct her but let it go. "Maybe the internet helped him understand himself better, you know? He must have been scared coming out to his family like this."

"I don't know about him," said Poonam with a snort that turned into a fond smile, "but his mother fainted. Thankfully the men weren't there. I...I don't know how my husband or my brother-in-law would have reacted. I'm glad it was just us two."

She desperately wanted to ask why Poonam had sought out the library. She hoped it wasn't because they were thinking of abandoning the boy and were hoping for help from Avantika to get him placed somewhere. She wondered what dadi would say if she brought the boy home.

"You said your sister fainted. What about you?"

Poonam jerked. Her hands were placed on her lap but her eyes were far away. "I wish this hadn't come on me. I wish he had told this to anyone but me but...she isn't going to do anything. If I know anything about her, she will ignore it. But...I cannot. He was crying, Avantika. Like he knew we would...I want to help him, whatever that means. I want to tell him that he can count on me."

Avantika didn't even know she had braced herself for exactly the opposite and now, it was like her body couldn't hold itself anymore.

She wanted to throw her arms around Poonam and sob. But this wasn't about her. This was about helping an aunt so she could support her nephew.

"Come on. I'll help you find some books that can help you. And then you're going to talk to him."

Poonam got up. She seemed fortified – whether because the story was told or because Avantika hadn't reacted, she couldn't be sure – but Poonam looked more settled now.

"Do I *have* to talk to him?"

She thought she could risk it so lightly slapped Poonam's arm. "Maybe not about how gay sex works though you may have to have that talk later and tell him how to be safe. But you have to *tell* him he can count on you. He won't know until you..."

She felt Poonam's nails digging into her forearm. She winced. She probably shouldn't have said *gay sex*. Oh well... "Yes Poonam, being gay means, he will, eventually, if he wants, have sex with boys."

Poonam paled. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Hey, one step at a time, okay? When you say you'll support him that cannot be conditional. You cannot support him being gay but pale at the thought of him having sex."

Poonam took a breath. "This will be hard."

"Of course it will be. Just imagine how much harder it'll be for him without any allies he can trust. But you can't quit before you even begin, yes?"

She nodded. "Okay, let's go to the internet then."

Avantika led Poonam to the computers. Maybe it won't be so bad, she thought. She hoped to god it won't be.

*

The house that Avantika shared with dadi was perfect. It had a balcony connected to the long living room. The balcony had been turned into a mini-garden complete with real grass and plants and flowers and a corner that had two chairs and a table where they took their evening tea. They had separate bedrooms and dadi was almost a perfect roommate. She didn't ask questions, let Avantika have her privacy and didn't even get upset if Avantika sometimes went out with the few friends she had made in Dehradun.

She had ended up spending more than an hour with Poonam, helping her understand what she read on the internet. Thankfully at 4, she was called away but Poonam kept coming to her, to understand something or take a break from how completely her worldview had shifted.

It was thus natural for Avantika to feel so drained, cranky and hungry. She needed a hug from dadi, a nice champi and some warm food so she could shut herself in her bedroom after and have a good cry over Poonam's nephew's future...and how Poonam was *trying*.

She got the hug, champi and food but she didn't make her escape because as soon as she entered the house, Avantika realized that *something* was different.

She found her dadi in the kitchen, wearing white cotton pants and a bright blue top with white flowers. She had on pink lipstick, freshly applied. She was humming to herself as she made tea.

“Darling!” She gave her a big hug and a smooch. It was the only reason she reapplied her lipsticks. So she could transfer it to her granddaughter’s cheek.

“You look like you could use this,” she said handing over a cup and marching her to their little heaven on the balcony.

Avantika would have started on her tirade but she finally figured out what that something different was. One dadi was wearing perfume. Dadi *never* wore perfume. And two, her hair was in a complicated chignon and it had flowers in it.

“Dadi...why do you have flowers in your hair?”

To her utter surprise, dadi blushed. Intrigued, Avantika shifted in her chair and nodded encouragingly.

“My best friend is coming for a visit. Oh AV I’m so excited I can hardly contain myself!”

AV...thought Avantika wistfully. It was what her office friends used to call her. They had declared her name was too long and given her a pet name instead. Dadi had found it hilarious and started using it too.

Lost in her daze and seeing how animated dadi looked at the prospect of this visit, Avantika missed a lot of the vital information that was being imparted about this best friend. Had she paid attention, she would have learnt the best friend was a thirty-year-old man who had

gone to university in Dehradun. He had spent a lot of time in the library, lonely before he had made friends.

Instead, she assumed that the best friend was a dodderly old lady, quite like dadi, and allowed dadi's voice to soothe her into a good mood.

*

It was a Sunday afternoon and for a change, the library was a pleasant hum of humans and minds hard at work. Poonam and her nephew had hijacked one of the computers and were having an animated discussion in the privacy of the cubicle. A young student couple was sitting on one of the tables in the balcony. Everyone downstairs could see their held hands but for a change, no one created a ruckus. Three students were scattered on the long tables, ears firmly plugged against any noise that dare reach past their music to disturb the desperate balance between concentration and distraction. An old man was sitting on one of the rolling chairs, a newspaper opened, a cup of tea in front of him.

Avantika smiled as she saw the old man. He hated his house – his children and grandchildren were constantly making noise and he couldn't find a moment's peace. He had made a ritual of reading his newspaper in the library. That hour of peace made him a lot more tolerant of the noise that would greet him once he returned home.

She sat at the computer behind her desk. An Excel was open and she was trying to make a timetable for exam month when the library would have to be open for twenty-four hours. To ensure students got some studying done and didn't end up fighting for space, they would

have to allot study slots. It was tiresome work and mostly dadi did it because she had an instinct for it that Avantika hadn't developed as yet. But dadi was busy cooking – had been for the past *four* days – because her best friend, Raj she had finally learnt who was most definitely not a dodderly old lady, was arriving that Sunday.

She would be jealous, okay alright she *was* jealous because suddenly dadi's world no longer revolved around her. She had tuned out almost everything dadi wanted to tell her, angry at herself that she couldn't celebrate dadi's excitement because someone was trying to replace her. She was half afraid she'd be extremely rude to the man if he ever showed his face to her. She was not this person god damn it but she couldn't help her reactions.

So engrossed was she in her thoughts and the Excel, she didn't notice a shadow falling on her. She jerked when she heard a voice.

“You're not dadi.”

Avantika raised her head and found she couldn't breathe. It didn't take her long to guess that this was Raj, dadi's *best friend*. What dadi had failed to explain though was that he was gorgeous. Or maybe she had explained it. She, for the life of her, couldn't remember.

Her eyes moved past his eyes, to his smiling mouth, and stopped at his violently pink shirt. Her mouth quirked into a smile. Of all the stories that *hadn't* penetrated, this one had. The pink shirt had been a college dare given to him by his girlfriend. She had been trying to prove some point to him, Avantika couldn't remember the details, but the thought of the girlfriend made her pause. Hadn't dadi said he was married?

Oh well, she thought, still not saying anything, she could always look. There was no tax for looking.

“It’s the shirt, isn’t it? God had I known I won’t find dadi here I wouldn’t have worn it.”

That made her laugh. “I swear I’m not laughing at you. Dadi has been cooking for you so she’s at home.”

His grin knocked out her breath again. He looked so pleased and so happy; she almost missed the way his mouth was downturned. She didn’t let herself dwell too much on his mouth though – pink lips that looked soft.

“I told her not to but then you can’t say no to dadi, can you?” He extended his hand, “You must be Avantika, the granddaughter.”

Her eyebrows raised but she shook his hand. There was no electricity, shut up.

“She talks a lot about you.”

That mollified the jealousy monster.

She saw him turn, his elbows on the desk separating them. He was taking in the library. The grin was gone but so was the sadness on his face. Now he looked...at peace. She smiled. She knew what that was like.

“This place hasn’t changed one bit.”

The collar of his shirt was twisted and she itched to straighten it but stopped herself. It wouldn't do to be so familiar with an almost stranger.

"So, you talk to dadi a lot?" She hadn't heard much about him until his visit. She wondered if dadi was trying to keep him a secret or if he wanted to be a secret. The way he had said *she talks a lot about you* made her think they spoke regularly. She didn't like to admit it but she had thought dadi had been exaggerating when she said he was her best friend. Then why hadn't she heard of him before?

"Yeah," he said, turning back.

All the ease had evaporated from his face. The expression that had been open and inviting only minutes before was shuttering down as she looked. Curious, she thought. She made a mental note of asking dadi for an explanation and vouched to pay attention this time.

"I see you're busy." He nodded to the colour-coded Excel. "Sorry to interrupt. I only came here to say hi to dadi. I'll see you tonight for dinner."

He turned to go. But then turned back. "I mean...she invited me. I didn't mean to presume..."

Avantika would have laughed had she known he wouldn't take it otherwise. He had gone from friendly to closed-off to vulnerable in such quick succession she was having a hard time telling herself to calm down. But she couldn't. Suddenly, she wanted to uncover every mystery there was to Raj, much like she had uncovered the library's secrets.

“It’s okay. I’ll see you at home.” She cringed at how it sounded but soldiered on, “Sorry you missed dadi. She’ll be so happy to see you.”

At this, he turned into the excited boy of before. “I have missed her.”

The wistfulness twisted something in her heart. She could recognize that feeling. She had felt that same feeling when she had run to the city, away from the quaint existence of Dehradun and her grandparents’ life. And then when the dreams and reality had collided and left her broken, dadi had called her home. It was all of that and more for Raj, too, she could tell.

“We’ll catch up tonight,” she repeated.

He nodded, tapped his knuckles on the desk twice, and left.

Knowing her concentration was shot, Avantika went on a walk around the library, switching off lamps, straightening books, and making sure no one was using the library for reasons other than library reasons before coming back to her computer. This time, the timetable came together in her head long before it did on the Excel sheet. Now she knew why dadi hated computers, she thought with a laugh.

She was nervous, she realized as she closed the library at 5 that evening. She was rather looking forward to dinner and not because she’d finally be able to eat everything dadi had cooked.

*

She didn’t speak much that evening but she did listen – keenly as the entire story unravelled in front of her. Raj had indeed been married, to his college sweetheart, but they were taking a break to *figure things*

out. He hadn't wanted to stay back in their home or the city as he thought about what he wanted with his life so he had come to the place he had spent four blissful years, among the mountains and in dadi's library.

She had heard all that and though she knew he was, in a way, available, she didn't think it would be wise to pursue a man who may be emotionally unavailable.

"What about work?" Her first contribution to the conversation. She after all had some experience with upending her life and hiding in the hills.

"For now, I have taken two weeks off. I had the holidays and I'm hoping I'll get some ideas by then on how to move forward."

"Well," said dadi, patting his jean-clad knee, "I'm sure it'll all turn out okay, you'll see, in the end." She got up with the empty tray and glared when the two moved to help her.

When she was out of earshot, Avantika said, "She doesn't like me helping her. She told me it makes her feel old. I hover, hoping she'll tell me what to do and mostly she does. You get used to it."

He chuckled. He seemed relaxed with the way he was sprawled on the sofa but his face had not gone to its boyish enthusiasm of before. It looked like all the pain he had been trying to hide had burst forth after one of dadi's soul-crushing hugs. It hadn't even taken a full minute before he had started blubbering about why he had come to Dehradun.

Dadi had listened, and plied him with food and her fruit punch which Avantika knew had vodka in it. It was the first time she had seen the considerable force of dadi's affection directed at someone other than herself and she felt nostalgic, remembering how dadi had taken care of her when she had come back, broken and sad.

"I haven't come back since we left after college. I have so many memories...I'm pretty sure I have made up quite a few of them."

Avantika said, "No. You have just unleashed them."

"What do you mean?"

Dadi came back and seeing her two wards almost lying on the sofas decided it was time for her to retire. She could sense her granddaughter wanted to speak to Raj, adult to adult, about the life he and she had left behind. Dadi, though Avantika didn't know this, had noticed the oscillation between euphoria and despair she would occasionally go through. She hoped a conversation with Raj would help her.

Avantika chose to ignore the implications of dadi leaving the two of them alone. Instead, she answered his question. "The first time I went back to the city after living here for three months was like a cultural shock. I thought I couldn't possibly be remembering the chaos right. I have come to realize it's just your brain trying to help you cope by giving you selective information."

Raj had had too many glasses of punch but he was feeling so warm and comfortable that he felt his body, and tongue loosen up. He had removed his shoes, socks and eventually his belt as the evening had worn on. He put his feet up and laid down on the sofa.

“Why did you leave?”

Avantika watched him as he stared at the ceiling. “The reality didn’t live up to my dream.”

“They rarely do.”

She smiled but didn’t say anything. She knew what his next question would be and had been trying to find an answer all night.

“Do you regret it?” He turned towards her.

“I did when I came back to Dehradun after that first visit. But then I helped a boy of twelve find a gift for a girl he liked, like properly liked and not platonically liked and it just...became easier.”

Raj laughed. He noticed how she said easier and not that she didn’t regret it at all. There would always be twinges he supposed, all those *what-ifs* young people sometimes loved to torture themselves with.

He asked, “What happened with the boy?”

“What do you think? I gave him a book to gift her. He did and got a kiss on the cheek for his troubles. He was very impressed with me. For some time after that I became the agony aunt of teenagers in Dehradun.”

“That’s beyond cute. Also sad because kids still don’t feel comfortable enough talking to their parents about these kinds of things.”

She liked how Raj was looking right now. He looked drunk but happy and his eyes had that hazy quality to them that made her believe he would answer anything she asked. “I know what you mean. But then

I'm helping an aunt trying to understand what it means that her nephew is gay so...I live quite the colourful life you know."

Raj nodded and murmured, "That's nice." He went back to staring at the ceiling.

She was almost certain he had gone to sleep when he said something she had hoped she'd hear but hadn't thought it right to pry.

"Dipali...that's my...well I suppose wife would suffice for now. She and I started dating like within one week of first year. She never got why I liked dadi so much or coming to the library when our college had quite a decent, more modern..."

"Hey!"

He laughed. "Anyway. I don't know what went wrong. I think we just drifted apart. Instead of investing in each other, we ended up investing only in ourselves and now...the gulf seems too big to overcome."

"Did you try?"

He hesitated. She would have apologized but he hadn't seemed like he was reluctant to talk about it. She distinctly felt like he was desperate to talk. That he had left the *I don't want to talk about it* far, far behind.

"I want to say yes but I honestly don't know. We had been having problems for almost a year before she said we couldn't keep going like this. It feels so weird. She was the first person I loved beyond my family and she was family and now...she may no longer be. I don't know how to wrap my head around it."

Avantika felt herself falling a little bit in love with him then. As someone who was used to being at the receiving end of people's vulnerabilities, she had developed a love for humans who were brave enough to show their scars and wounds.

"Did you fall asleep on me?"

"No," she said loudly, then more softly, "no. I was just thinking about what I could say in this situation that won't sound stupid. I got nothing but I do understand what you mean. It's always hard when you realize something unshakeable, can shake."

He nodded. "I think I should sleep. I need to report to work tomorrow and you have to go help some more twelve-year-olds declare their love."

She laughed. "I once helped a seventy-year-old declare his love to his wife. He...it's a long story. But a story that's worth it. Ask me tomorrow and maybe I'll tell you."

She got up because she remembered she had a perfectly nice bed she could sleep in and had no reason to sleep on the sofa. "Good night Raj."

He smiled in response, already half-asleep.

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It was a Monday morning and Avantika was feeling all kinds of conflicted. The meeting with the school's principal had gone well but she couldn't be sure if her after-school program of Book Dragons Association: a reading group of, by and for teens would find traction. She fervently hoped it did.

Dadi was behind the desk, going over the timetable she had prepared for exam month. She gave Avantika a grin and a thumbs-up. She smiled back, relieved. The library was quiet, empty...well almost empty. She followed dadi's gaze and could see Raj, his head on the table, fast asleep. The light of his desk was on and from where she stood, she saw a sleek silver laptop too.

Avantika said, "When did he get in?"

"Ten minutes back. Poor thing. I don't feel like waking him." Dadi gave her a pointed look and Avantika sighed, rolling her eyes like it was a big hardship to go and wake someone up.

She climbed the stairs and once she had reached his table, she switched off the lamp and knocked on the desk, loudly. He jolted awake, wiping his mouth and eyes in one swoop.

She gave him a lopsided smile before settling in front of him. "Why are you asleep at 10 AM on a Monday?"

He sighed, looked at his watch and sighed again. He looked tired. Which made no sense because Avantika knew for a fact that he hadn't gone anywhere last night. He didn't have any friends in Dehradun and he hadn't spent the night with dadi and her.

"Rough night?"

"Something like that."

He stretched and Avantika couldn't help it. She stared. He looked so adorably confused and half asleep that she wanted to reach across the table and snuggle up to him.

“Please tell me all about it? Maybe it’ll help me forget my dismal morning.”

“What happened?”

She made a big show of looking here and there before leaning on the table that was separating them. “I had a meeting with a school’s principal. I want to start a Book Dragons...”

She had to pause to allow him to laugh.

“Association...”

She had to pause again for Raj to finish laughing.

“And the principal looked at me like I was a student who had done something profoundly nasty in one of the school’s bathrooms!”

This time, Raj almost fell off the chair as he laughed, holding his stomach. Avantika looked down and dadi was watching them. But instead of a frown, she had a smile on her face. She relaxed. She knew her crush was increasing by leaps and bounds but she didn’t want dadi to worry.

“It’s my age mostly...also my gender...”

He sobered quickly. “I...well it’s not that I didn’t...I’m not a bad...you know what I’ll just say it. I hadn’t realized it was a thing. Mink that’s the wife,” at her raised eyebrow he added, “pet name, long story. Anyway, Mink used to always tell me about her experiences and I’m ashamed to say I used to think she was exaggerating.”

“But then it happened at work once when we were hiring someone. The girl was the better candidate but the bosses refused. Their only excuse was she was a girl. I was mind blown. I fought so hard, she was exactly the type of personality we needed, but in the end, she was rejected. Just because she was a she. It was ridiculous. I went home that day and apologized to Mink.”

That was the fastest he had ever spoken. Her face she knew was doing its *awe you're adorable* look so she changed the subject.

“Yeah well. I didn't wake you up for that. Tell me why you were sleeping.”

Raj put his elbows on the table and banged his head on it. Rolling her eyes, she decided to tease, “Why so dramatic?”

He grimaced. “I deserve that,” he said, voice muffled. He raised his head and put it on his hands. “Yesterday marked the end of a week. I still don't know what I want out of my marriage and...”

“And you thought coming to the library and falling asleep would be a good idea?”

“Ugh,” he said and hid his face again.

Avantika chuckled and saw dadi climbing up the stairs, a tray in her hand. She had to stop herself from rushing to her aid. The lecture she'd get wouldn't be worth the effort.

Dadi placed the tray on the table, ran her hand through Raj's hair and pulled a chair for herself. She picked up a cup of tea and told Avantika, “Why don't you tell him about our business philosopher.”

“What?” Raj’s face came up again and he lifted his nose like a dog sniffing something interesting. He looked gratefully at dadi and picked up his cup.

Avantika took a long whiff of her tea and closed her eyes. Dadi made a type of tea that only she could make. She gave dadi a peck on the cheek and said, “So a year ago we got this student who couldn’t decide what subject he wanted to study in college. He came here to skim through the books on philosophy so you know Plato, Camus, and the like. And then he studied the five principles of marketing.”

“He...came to a library to figure out what he wanted to study in college?”

He looked from dadi to Avantika but didn’t let his gaze linger too long on the younger woman. He hadn’t come to Dehradun to flirt but he couldn’t help how effervescent Avantika was. She was like sunshine to his dark cloud and he couldn’t get enough of it.

“Yes.”

He shook his head, marvelling at how thorough kids these days were while choosing what they wanted to study in college. He and his peers had barely given it more than a passing thought. “And what did he choose?”

The two looked at each other. Dadi laughed. “He liked both but decided to go for business because it had fewer things to study and fewer essays to write.”

This time all three of them burst out laughing. They were moving so much that the cups were in danger of toppling over.

Once they had recovered, Raj asked, "That's a good story but I'm not sure what the message is."

"The message, dear boy, is that you already know what you want. You're just wasting your time dilly-dallying, hoping the answer will change."

Avantika looked at dadi, confused. That hadn't been what she was getting at. She had been trying to tell him he needed to collect more data so he could take an informed decision. But to her shock, Raj looked contrite.

"I..."

Dadi patted his hand, which was on his knee. "It's okay darling. Maybe you cannot see it because you're so close to the situation but I can. You have been with us for a week and you're already laughing more. It's okay to let things go that aren't causing you joy, you know?"

"You did not just quote Marie Kondo!"

"Marie who?"

"Marie, she's a Japanese consultant and she teaches organizing."

Dadi's eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of falling right off her face. "What you children see on TV these days I have no idea."

Then she turned to Raj. She took his hand and squeezed as if in apology for ripping off the veil of confusion and indecision he was hiding behind.

“Would it be running away if I left now?”

“You can leave, we won’t judge you,” she assured him.

As he started to pack up his things, Avantika and dadi left him to it. Avantika after all had to design flyers for Book Dragons Association so she could excite parents into signing up for it.

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Raj hadn’t seen Avantika in two days. Not that it was a long time but he missed her. He had imprinted on her like a baby duck and anytime he went to the library, he couldn’t help but look for her. And she hadn’t been there for two whole days. He was getting desperate so he went to dadi who told him she was hiding under a blanket in her room. She rolled her eyes but he could see the concern there too. He made the executive decision to find Avantika and get her out of bed.

He went to the house and found her in her PJs with headphones around her neck. Her hair was messy and he didn’t think a pencil was supposed to be in it. She looked...not okay.

“What’s up?” he asked, unsure if he’d get an answer. If he had any right to demand an answer.

She shrugged. “It’s stupid.”

She went to the living room and took what he had dubbed as *her* sofa. He went and sat next to her on the sofa. There were plates and tissues everywhere. He had never seen her be such a slob. His heart lurched in his chest and he was suddenly glad he had made the trip instead of simply calling her.

“Tell me anyway.”

“I saw this Instagram story of a friend. She’s travelling to Sweden for a work conference. It just...I guess it was a sudden reminder of what I left behind and I’m not coping with it. I thought I had...made peace with my choice. I’m angry at myself for falling apart like this. It’s stupid and makes little sense.” Tears were gathering in the corner of her eyes.

Raj smiled sadly. He loved how she could just talk about things that bothered her without him having to poke and prod her through it. He on the other hand wouldn’t say anything unless you ran over his toe with a truck. And even then, he would probably just shrug and say he was fine.

“But you *did* choose this life.”

Avantika grimaced. “That doesn’t mean I can’t hate it from time to time.”

Raj opened his mouth and then closed it. He looked sheepish. “I don’t know how that works, honestly. I think it’s a generation thing.”

“Oh please not you too. And you’re not that old.”

Raj rubbed his thighs with his palms, then patted them and stood up. “Okay what can we do to get you out of this slump. And no, flying to Sweden is not an option. The visa alone would take forever.” At her pout, he laughed. “There has to be something else we can do.”

Avantika looked at him and said with a sly smile, “You know what would *really* help me?”

"I'm not going to like this, am I," he muttered but he was ignored.

"Tell me about Mink and you. Why have you still not decided to go back to her? You clearly love her. I mean you go all heart eyes any time you talk about her. Then why are you pretending you don't feel anything for her."

Raj glared at Avantika. He *hated* this about her. How she would always turn his questions back on him. He had been here for more than a week and he still knew so little about her. He huffed and sat down. "Okay let's make a deal. I answer one question and you answer one question."

"Why?"

"Because I'm curious about you too and dadi loves you, obviously, and I want to know."

Avantika cocked her head, trying to get a read on him. But it was a straight enough request so she acquiesced. She did need to talk to someone and she didn't think she could talk to her friends about this. Especially since they couldn't understand the choices she had made. Raj was different. He could help her, even just by listening. She straightened on the sofa as if bracing for hurt.

"Why did you run from Delhi?"

"Why did you run from Mink?"

They went for the jugular which surprised neither of them. Avantika raised an eyebrow and Raj smirked. He said, "I didn't *run*. Well okay alright. I did run but not..." To his horror, he couldn't go on and there was a lump in his throat.

She waited to see if he would pick up the thread. When he didn't, she took pity on him by answering his question. She said, "I realized that my dream and reality are two very different things. They didn't gel. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy my time in Delhi. I did and it was fun while it lasted, even the bad. But I read somewhere how you millennials have made hustle into a lifestyle and I just didn't want that for myself, you know?"

Raj snorted. Now he did feel old. "I think that's the mistake we both made. We ran after our dreams instead of running after our goals."

Her eyes widened at the thought. "I...don't understand."

Raj straightened. He had the urge to use his hands to explain his point but Mink used to always tell him to be more *contained* and *less loud* and now those two sides of him were warring against each other and he didn't know who to listen to anymore.

"Mink was a dream," he said, not looking at anything in particular. His hands were tightly held in his lap. He looked at them and wondered when he had stopped using them altogether to make his point. "Dreams by their very nature are pristine. Unreachable because in our heads they represent a core of us that is undefinable. We have to turn them into goals." His one hand lost the battle as it came out to illustrate the point. "Because goals are practical. They are achievable. They make sense in the real world."

Avantika digested it for some time before she asked, "How was Mink a dream?"

Raj's hands were out of control now. "She was everything a person could want in a partner. But I didn't know what I wanted so I used someone else's definition."

Avantika nodded. She was vibrating with excitement. Everything he had said clicked into place. "I did the same thing. By defining success using someone else's yardstick. But it's hard you know, to make your path. What if it sucks? When you follow others, they are there in the suckiness."

Raj moved forward and put a hand on Avantika's knee. He said, "But that's where we're wrong. Life sucks, for everyone. You and I are both miserable but for things that are different only on the surface level. Underneath, they're the same."

Her face scrunched, her euphoria now tempered with confusion. "And that same is that we went for our dream and not our goal? I still don't get it."

"What do you want?"

"Oh god please stop asking me that!" Avantika got up from the sofa, her hands on her hips. "People keep asking me that and I have no answer. It's a stupid question."

"It's the *only* question that matters!"

"Okay if you're so clever, what do you want then?" She didn't know how this conversation had turned into a sort-of fight but it had. Her arms were now tightly crossed around her chest. She knew it was a defensive posture but damn it she wanted to protect herself. Raj was saying things she didn't want to listen to.

Raj wanted to give a flippant reply like *I want my life to suck less* but that wouldn't have been a proper answer and he was trying to help Avantika so he needed to take this seriously.

"I want...to be myself. No wait, hear me out. I'm not blaming Mink for this but...she has exacting standards. She wants things perfect and I'm not like that. Instead of finding a common ground where she and I could co-exist, I gave her too much ground. I allowed myself to be silenced. In the beginning, it was brilliant. But slowly, it started to change me. I became...not me. I became not the person she had married. You see where I'm going with this?"

The tears lost the battle of staying in the eyes and to their surprise, they were both crying. Avantika wiped her eyes and went back to the sofa. She pulled her legs up and hugged her knees and looked toward the sliding windows that led out to the balcony.

She said, "I want...I like...I really want my Book Dragon Association to be accepted. I want to help children. I want to teach them things no adult, and certainly not their parents will teach them. I want them to come to me when they have too big feelings or too adult questions so I can help them. I want..."

Seeing the grin on Raj's face, her voice faltered. "What?"

"What was your dream?"

It took her a moment to respond. "To live a meaningful life."

The grin stretched into a guffaw and Avantika picked up a cushion to smother him.

The conversation that Raj and she had settled something in her. She had wondered, often, if she had quit too soon if she had run away if she had made a mistake. Dadi had even tried to tell her to go back for a week to see if she would want to get back to her old life but the panic attack that news had incited served as a warning to her.

Now...she thought back to what Raj had told her about following goals instead of dreams. As she was putting her hair in a pony, she had a brainwave and immediately called Raj. Without preamble, she said, "I have a better explanation for why you shouldn't follow dreams than all the poppycock you said yesterday. And yes, it's a new word...Raj?"

She heard deep breaths and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"I have decided to divorce Mink. She...she and I are, we are...it's done. We're getting divorced."

He sounded so heartbroken that she wanted to crawl through the phone and hug him. Instead, she said, "What do you need?"

"Balls."

"Huh?"

"Sorry, that was inappropriate. I mean I need guts to now go back and...go through the process. Just saying and talking about it to Mink isn't going to resolve anything. We'll have to do the paperwork and I *hate* paperwork."

"Are you seriously whining over paperwork? And not how a chapter of your life is coming to an end?"

"I'm focussing on the small so I don't get overwhelmed by the big. You were saying something about poppycock and I turned into a thirteen-year-old and just heard cock."

She laughed. "It doesn't matter. When are you leaving?"

"I haven't decided all that yet. I may need some kicking in the ass and I'm sure you'd love to oblige."

"I shall wear my four-inch heels."

"Ouch."

They spoke some more before Avantika hung up. She looked at herself in the mirror and realized she had a ridiculous smile on her face. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't hide it. It took her getting to the library, seeing Raj's strange *I have reached a decision but I'm not happy about it* smile to understand why she couldn't stop. She was in love with a man who may not be on the same page as her.

But that didn't stop her from telling him about it...two days, three days, five days later.

He was booked and packed and ready to leave. Avantika had decided to see him off. They danced around each other for the better part of an hour, being so painfully polite that it embarrassed them. And yet, they couldn't stop.

As he was exiting the building, Avantika finally plucked up the courage. She pulled at his shirt and he immediately turned, bumping into her. She grimaced and took a step back. She found she couldn't look at him, not yet.

"I have to say this but there's no pressure..."

He took her hand in his. "Please don't." He was whispering like he was about to break.

But she squeezed his hand. "I have to. I know I'm being selfish but I have to tell you. I love you, Raj. You're cool and quiet and crazy. You made me feel normal. That could be because you're old..." she paused to let his laughter wash over her.

She kissed his hand. "I'm saying this because I need you to know that there's a place here for you, should you need it."

He put a finger under her chin and made her look up. "You made me feel normal too. And myself. I wouldn't have ever realized what the problem was if I hadn't come here so I cannot tell you how grateful I am that I met you. Thank you for everything. And...if I wasn't in a shitty place right now, I would probably have fallen in love with you too."

She smiled. There were tears in her eyes but he had said exactly what she had expected to hear.

"I'm not going to make any promises," she said, "and neither are you. You go do your thing and then we'll take it from there."

"One step at a time."

"One goal at a time," she said cheekily. "By the way, I'm going to laminate that thing you said about dreams and goals and put it in the library. It's mysterious enough to drive some people up the wall and you know how I live for such things."

Raj kissed her on the cheek. He wanted to tell her to wait for him. He wanted to tell her that he'd be back and he was almost ninety-three percent sure he was already in love with her. But he didn't say any of that because she didn't deserve ninety-three. And he couldn't rely on her to make him feel like himself. Yes, she was safe to be himself with but the real test was to be himself in front of *other* people. People who had known him forever.

"You're thinking too loudly."

"I'm just thinking that I'll miss you and thank you."

They hugged, for a long time. After, Avantika let him go. What they had said was enough for now and she didn't want either of them to linger and say things that might end up hurting the other. She had learnt, finally, that sometimes you had to let things go, let people, including yourself, do their thing. She had found herself, between the shelves of the library, between the questions and answers and she was at peace. She also knew that this finding business wasn't over.

But like she had told Raj, she wanted to live a meaningful life and by god, she would live it.

Urmilla

Urmilla sat through the meeting in a daze, not grasping the meaning of the words that were being said. If some passer-by thought that she was asleep, no one would blame them.

It had been a normal morning, or as normal as could be expected for someone whose sister had just died. She vaguely remembered the morning, and the memory of her getting dressed for this meeting was even fainter. She did, however, remember a single instruction, given out in a precise but cold tone, *dress appropriately*. And she had. She looked every bit the part of a mourning sister – a white sari with a conservative gold border and a pair of dark shades that hid her curiously dry eyes. She wondered idly if people could see through the sham.

She had tried to listen in the beginning but the language and the humidity had gotten the better of her intentions. Besides, she knew Avi would listen, dissect and argue every bit of everything that came out of the lawyer's mouth. She didn't technically even need to be here. She was here because she was playing her part. Could anyone then fault her for not listening?

Her attention perked up when she saw the thickness of the papers reducing. Even in the lawyer's tone, there was a definite drop as if he was preparing for the last bit of news like a discernible drop in the music when a song was reaching its end.

The bit to which she paid particular attention was her sister's last wish. She wanted her ashes to be immersed in the river Ganga.

"I'll do it," she said immediately, unthinkingly.

Avinash, who was sitting closer to the lawyer than the sister of the deceased, looked at his wife disapprovingly. He had told her to not say anything!

The lawyer paused and Avinash took that opportunity to beg for a break. They had been listening to his droning for the better part of an hour. *Everyone* could use a break. The lawyer readily agreed and called his secretary to order some tea and biscuits.

Avinash took his wife aside and spoke in a stern but placating voice, "You don't need to do this."

"Do what?" Urmilla looked surprised, like she had forgotten what she had said only moments before.

"You don't need to go to Ganga to put her to rest. She is already gone. She wouldn't care."

"It was her last wish Avi. I need to do this for her."

"Urmilla that is what I am trying to explain to you. You *don't* need to do this. Let her children do it. Why are you getting involved?"

"Getting involved?" repeated Urmilla in a choked voice. "She was my sister! I am involved whether we like it or not."

Avinash huffed with irritation. Why was she being so irrational? "Urmi, meri jaan, she wouldn't know the difference. We live in Bombay for god's sake. We are surrounded by water. We can always put her to rest here where she lived all her life. Why go all the way to Ganga?"

She knew he was right. Of course, he was right. And practical. Avi was always practical. Practicality was his go-to excuse when he wanted to avoid doing something. “Avi she was my sister. I have to do this.”

“Sister?” he snorted loudly, almost losing his cool as he grabbed her arm. He saw her wince and let go immediately. “You hadn’t even spoken to each other in the last nine months. You came to know about her death through the newspapers and she hasn’t even left you any...” he paused. “You don't owe her anything meri jaan. This is foolhardy. Why are you being so stubborn?”

Urmilla couldn’t answer that question. She always listened to Avi, no questions asked, no answers demanded; no exceptions. Then why did she want to do this so badly?

Because she was your sister, whispered her heart in response.

I am not being stubborn? she asked.

No matter what, she was your sister and your blood. That is something neither you nor Avi can change, continued the whisper.

Urmilla almost cried at the cadence of that whisper. It bore a shocking resemblance to her father’s voice but he had died ages ago. She wanted to speak to it some more, share some of her thoughts but the connection she had felt severed and she mourned it with fiercer grief than she mourned the death of her sister.

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“I’m going alone.”

“Urmi if you think I am going to allow this then you are mistaken.”

“Avi why can’t you understand I have to do this alone. She was my sister.”

“What is happening with you? You haven’t once tried to acknowledge the bond that exists between you two before. What changed?”

“Avi she died! Please try to understand. I have to go.”

The fight kept replaying in her head. And it didn’t look like she was going to get any respite from it anytime soon.

After the meetings with the lawyers and her sister’s children, Avinash had made impassioned speeches about togetherness and sharing in the wealth of the family since her sister hadn’t left much of her wealth to Urmilla. This had angered him but no matter what he said, the will was clear and he couldn’t do anything about it but crib, which he had done, loudly.

Everything her sister possessed from property to money to gold had gone to her children. Urmilla had received a pair of bangles, a chain and a pendant that had belonged to their mother and the script of a play. Though the script meant nothing to Avinash, it meant something to her. It brought back memories of simpler times, of times where the dream of *making it big* was still ripe and not tarnished by the harsh realities of showbiz and marriage.

After all this, they had gotten down to performing Renu’s final rites. It hadn’t taken long to convince her nieces that she wanted to fulfil her sister’s last wish. The elder one had even offered to accompany her but she had flatly refused.

Avi though had been another matter all together. It had taken her nearly a week to convince Avi and plan the trip but she had persevered and now she was on her way to Haridwar, travelling on a train after twenty-five years.

Yesteryear Bollywood queen Renuka dies at 60

Mumbai: Renuka Gupta, who mesmerized viewers of all ages with her enthralling beauty, and oodles of acting and singing talent, passed to her heavenly abode late last evening. Her children were with her when she reportedly died of a heart attack in her Bandra home. She was not suffering from any known illnesses and age seems to be the cause of the heart attack.

No spokesperson was available for further comment. Messages and calls to the family and Renuka ji's assistant went unanswered.

Renuka ji is mourned by two daughters, her husband dying of a similarly mysterious heart attack one and a half years ago.

The article had gone on to describe the many talents and achievements of Renuka Gupta but there had been no mention of Urmilla the sister who would have been the *yesteryear Bollywood queen* if circumstances had been different. But that was a can of worms that was best left to its own devices.

It was Avinash who had read the article first. It was Avinash who had shown it to her. It was Avinash who had called the press to express his outrage at the lack of empathy shown by them towards the family. Urmilla had been too shocked to react to anything he had said

or done. She had stared at the headline unblinkingly and had only moved into action when Avi had jolted her out of her shock.

Now that she thought back, she couldn't remember Avi once asking her if she was okay. He had understood the shock; who wouldn't be shocked reading about someone's death in the papers? But he hadn't asked her if she was doing okay.

How had it come to this? She knew she hadn't spoken to her sister in nine months but hadn't she at least deserved a phone call? Had she been such a poor sister that she had to wait for it to be printed in a *newspaper* to know her sister had passed away?

As the train sped towards its destination, the wheels and the tracks made a soothing racket which was dulled by the closed windows on account of it being an AC three-tier bogie. There had been a funny smell in her compartment but she had become used to it quickly. Now, she didn't even notice it. The dull racket contrasting with the silence inside made her drowsy.

"Here, take this," said Avinash, handing his wife a paper cup of very sweet tea.

If it had been twenty-five years since she had travelled on a train, it had been more for Avinash. He had been stunned when he was told the only way to reach Haridwar was by train. He had hoped the thought of travelling by train would snap his wife out of her foolish fancy but it had only hardened her resolve.

Urmilla had thought this would be her adventure but if she was being honest with herself, she was glad he was here. She didn't think she could do this alone.

She took the tea from his hand and looked out the window. The landscape here was so different from what she was used to seeing in Bombay. The hills were taller, but less green. It also looked dusty maybe because it didn't rain as much as it rained in Bombay.

While sipping her tea, the question returned. She wasn't sure which was worse – that she didn't deserve a phone call or that she had been a bad sister.

“Avi, why did I stop talking to her?” she asked. When in answer all he gave her was a blank look she explained, “I have been trying to remember what had happened nine months ago that we stopped talking. I don't remember. Do you?”

He sighed. His wife had been acting really strange these past couple of days. He knew it had to be the trauma but he didn't know how long it would take for her to become normal again. It was getting exhausting, dealing with her flittering mind and uncharacteristic stubbornness.

“You two fought over something.” He paused, trying to recall the exact nature of the fight. “I can't remember why you fought *this time* – there have been so many,” he said derisively.

Ignoring the jab, Urmilla tried to think back to that day. What had been the fight? They had had lots of fights but they had never stopped talking to each other. They had never been close, even as kids, but they had always shared cordial relations. Then why was Renuka's death hitting her so hard? Why was the fact that she hadn't spoken to her sister in so long and now couldn't, eat at her heart? Why was she

taking so much trouble to fulfil the last wish of a sister whose death she wasn't even informed of? Why did any of this matter?

*

When they got off the train, Avinash struggling with the bags, the first thing she saw was a bunch of reporters, waiting, peering, almost fighting with each other to be the first in line. As soon as they saw Avinash and Urmilla, they started screaming out questions, thrusting their microphones in front of them.

A surge of adrenaline shot through her system and a beautiful smile lit up her face. They were here for her? Did they want to interview *her*? How long had she waited for this moment? Longer than she cared to remember. She couldn't believe her dream was coming true. A little belatedly but coming true it was!

Before she could step towards them, Avi hissed in her ear, "Get rid of your smile you imbecile. You're still in mourning, remember?"

But nothing he would say could dampen the excitement, the *longing* that was sprouting wings inside her being. She walked towards them, the smile in place, ready to *finally* take her place in the spotlight.

"Urmilla ji where were you when Renuka ji passed away?"

"Is it true you are here to immerse Renuka ji's ashes in Ganga?"

"How do you feel that Renuka ji did not leave you anything in her will?"

And the barrage of questions continued. It was a rude shock to realize the reporters were here for her sister and not for her. They had never cared for her and wouldn't start caring now. Who was she kidding?

Renu had always been the darling of the cameras, not her. Even dead, they were more interested in her than the sister who was a nobody.

A sudden hatred for Renu surged through her and transformed her excitement into poison. She wanted to throw something heavy at the reporters, turn around and head back home.

A moment later, Avinash was standing in front of his stunned wife, hiding her from the glares of the camera, answering questions with humility and sadness. *He should have been a performer*, she thought. Turn the cameras on and he could give a performance that could win him a national award.

Another five minutes and the two of them were able to cut through the reporters to make their way to the waiting Ambassador car.

“Ye kya hai? Humne toh Innova mangi thi,” Avinash said to Narang.

Narang was their man Friday. Yes, he too was accompanying them. He was the one who had made all the arrangements to ensure his beloved Avinash sir did not face any inconveniences. What did Narang know that the biggest one was Urmilla herself?

“Sir, this was the only available car. I am sorry,” Narang said, hanging his head as if in shame. Like it was a personal affront to him that his master had to travel in an Ambassador and not an SUV.

“Avi, let us just get to the hotel.”

Urmilla didn't care what type the car was. Her skin felt like it was on fire, it was *that* hot and she could feel people staring at her. She didn't want to be asked any more questions; especially about her dead sister.

Her thoughts were in turmoil and she just wanted to lay her head down and go to sleep.

Some of her desperation must have communicated itself to Avinash because he nodded and ordered Narang to put their bags into the trunk of the car as he opened the door for her.

Once they reached their room, clean and with no funny smells, Urmilla started to unlock her suitcase so she could change out of the itchy sari and wear something comfortable.

“What are you doing?” asked Avinash, unbuttoning his shirt.

“Umm I am going to change, why?”

“Not yet.”

Urmilla knew that tone and what it meant. “Avi please, not now. I am really tired.”

“Urmi I have been respectful. Despite everything, she was your sister and she died. But it’s been a week since her funeral and I need some.”

Urmilla sighed. There was no way to get out of this and he *was* right. He had abstained for a week. “Okay,” she said in her best soothing voice. “Let’s take a shower together.”

*

She knew she was avoiding the inevitable. It had been two days and she hadn’t gotten around to doing what she had come to Haridwar to do. Surprisingly enough, Avinash hadn’t seemed to mind the delay.

Knowing he must have some ulterior motive, she broached the subject on the morning of the third day right after breakfast.

“It’s alright Urmi. It is good in fact. Let the media see what a caring and loving sister you have been and still are as compared to that horrendous witch who couldn’t even be bothered to leave a piece of real estate to her little sister.”

So that was it. She wasn’t surprised. If there had been any other reason she would have been surprised. She wanted to remind him that the media did not care about them. But she did not think that would break his illusion.

He then asked her gently, “Do you know what you’re going to do? This isn’t something you have done before.”

“There is an ashram here. She used to speak about it a lot. There was a guruji who she used to meet with quite often, especially after she stopped acting altogether. He was her spiritual teacher she used to say. His name was Master Mei Ling. I would like to visit the ashram once.”

“Why do you need to go to an ashram? I thought the plan was just to immerse the ashes in Ganga and leave. Urmi...” He sighed and rubbed his neck and then massaged his temples.

“Avi I have come all this way. I want to do this right.”

She could see him struggling with his anger.

“Fine. I am done with this idiocy. We are leaving in four days. That’s it. I am not going to put my life on hold because of some childish fantasy that you or she had,” he spat and walked away.

Urmilla stared at the retreating back of her husband. Avinash was a good man...till everything went his way. She couldn't tell him the real reason she wanted to visit the ashram because he wouldn't understand. She was afraid she wouldn't even have the luxury of four days if he knew her reasons.

Ten years after Renu had become a star and achieved everything she (they) had hoped and dreamed of, she had become uninterested in stardom or films. Urmilla had never understood what had happened to make her so disenchanting. Renu was leading a life that both the sisters had coveted since they had arrived in Bombay when they had been all but twelve years old. What had gone wrong? Even now, imagining herself in Renu's shoes, she felt *she* would not have had such a meltdown. To the extent that Renu had started to despise the very things that had made her who she was? Never!

Renu had just up and left her stardom behind one day. It was the time when the two sisters were not speaking to each other. Despite that, Renu had called Urmilla and shared that she was going away. When Urmilla had asked where, she had said she was going to follow Master Mei Ling of Haridwar. Renu had seen his photo in a newspaper and felt an instant connection. She wanted to explore that connection and hence had decided to take a sabbatical.

Urmilla hadn't said anything, only listened. At the time she had thought that maybe her sister was doing this for publicity or a role or simply because it was the fashionable thing to do. What she hadn't admitted then but was ready to admit now; she had hoped that in her sister's absence, she might get a taste of the mesmerizing limelight. Of course, that had never happened.

Two months after speculations went rampant about Renu's sudden disappearance, the media forgot about her altogether. It had been a bittersweet victory. It had lasted four months. Until Renuka ji, the darling of the 90s returned, looking fresher and younger than ever. Oh, how the media had *raved* about it.

In the six months that her sister had been away, Urmilla had been in sporadic touch with Renu via emails, messages and phone calls. It had surprised her greatly.

After coming back, her sister called her and requested a meeting. That had been another surprise. Seeing her had been a shock, to say the least. Even with her critical eye, Urmilla could not dismiss what the media had raved about. Renu indeed looked more radiant than ever and there had been a healthy glow to her; as if meeting this Master had ignited her inner flame.

They had had a long chat that day. It was on that day, after being related for nearly four decades they had connected as sisters. For a while after that, they had come very close to being friends. But then her film life and Urmilla's ever-present jealousy came in between and their relationship went back to sporadic calls, emails and messages.

Ever since that day, however, Urmilla had sought an opportunity to meet Master Mei Ling. Why she sought such an audience was a question she couldn't answer. She couldn't explain all this to Avi because she was sure it would anger him further. If she had learnt anything in the past thirty years of marriage, it was to not anger her husband.

“Namaste,” said Urmilla with her hands folded. She didn’t know what language to talk in, so she decided to go with Hindi. “Is Master Mei Ling still with you?”

The girl’s expression changed from polite indifference to shock. “I am sorry who?”

“Master Mei Ling. My sister told me about him and how he was connected with this ashram. I wish to speak with him on an urgent matter.”

“Who is your sister?” the girl asked, narrowing her eyes.

Before Urmilla could respond or run away, the girl screeched, “Are you Renuka Gupta’s sister?! I saw on the news you were in Haridwar to put her to rest. I didn’t think it was true! Oh my god! Where is she? Where is Renuka ji?”

“She is dead,” said Urmilla mechanically, too shocked to say anything else.

“Oh I know *that*, but *where is she?*” she asked, looking around like she expected Renuka Gupta to materialize out of thin air. When she did not get a response, she screamed, “Rekha, Janani, Radha, Firoz, come here quickly. Look who has come into the office,” running inside through a side door.

Before the platoon could show up though, Urmilla beat a hasty retreat. She wasn’t sure what had shocked her more. The fact that Master Mei Ling did not exist and perhaps had never existed? The fact that she had nursed a dream which was based on one of Renu’s many lies? Or had the sheer crassness of the girl at the reception

shocked her so? She wanted to run back to the hotel and tell Avinash to leave the godforsaken town once and for all. But she couldn't run away without facing her grief or disappointment.

Renuka and Urmilla had been nobodies to each other for as long as she could remember. Even before she had married a control freak Avinash or got sucked into being second fiddle to her sister or being reminded of her inadequacy every day by Avinash.

It was strange how that had come about. The only reason Renu had taken the acting opportunity and not she had been because of Avi. The director's first preference had always been Urmilla but Avinash's contention that his to-be-wife would not *parade in front of letches and audiences for their entertainment* had prevented her from doing something she had dreamed of all her life. Yet since the day she had declined the opportunity, he had put the blame squarely on her.

Despite all the painful history, she grieved for her older sister. She missed Renu with a tenacity that made her head spin and stomach rumble.

Exhausted, her mad rush to get out of the ashram came to an abrupt halt when she saw Har ki Paudi and its peaceful environs. Though several people were thronging the place, they could not take away the inherent peace that emanated from Ganga. Urmilla sat down on the steps, gazing wistfully at the water.

A faint voice, maybe her father's, whispered as if on the breeze, *Ganga is not only meant to wash away your sins. It also has the power to wash away all your sorrows and tiredness.*

Seeing the flowers and what not floating in the river, she decided against taking a dip. She did move down the steps so that she could dip her feet in the cool waters. A sense of serenity even in the madness engulfed Urmilla like a soothing blanket. It was as if the mere presence of the flowing river had the power to quieten minds and tongues.

“What do you see?”

The voice came from behind her. She turned to see a man in a suit sitting a little away from her. The suit looked incongruous in the heat, but he didn't have a bead of perspiration on his forehead. The man had a smile on his face and kindness in his eyes that spoke of millennia of hurt and pain and suffering. The enormity of it attracted and repulsed Urmilla. Was he another reporter, seeking his five minutes in the sun by procuring a sound bite from her?

She looked at his face again. The calmness and patience instead of soothing her irritated her. He didn't look like he belonged, and yet it was she who was feeling out of place.

“Who are you?” she finally asked, her voice sounding harsh.

He didn't seem to care. He seemed comfortable where he was sitting and considering the mood she was in she could use someone other than Avinash or Narang to talk to.

“I am Master Mei Ling. I was told you were looking for me. Well, here I am,” he said with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

“Oh so you do exist,” said Urmilla. “I thought my sister had made you up.”

“Did she make stuff up a lot?” he asked.

The past tense didn't register. Urmilla made a disdainful face. “How do I know you are the real Master Mei Ling and not some hack wanting me to say untrue things about my famous but now dead sister?”

“A sister you mostly hate and yet still defend,” he said. “I have nothing to show that will prove my identity except my word. It is up to you to take that leap of faith.”

He got up, and Urmilla thought he meant to walk away. Instead, he came and stood in front of her. He spread his arms and said, “What is real Urmilla? How does one define it?” His gentle smile turned into a mischievous laugh. “Do you define real by what you can see?” he asked pointing to himself.

“But...what if...you can't see what is real anymore?” He snapped his fingers and just as suddenly as he had appeared, he disappeared into thin air, right in front of Urmilla's eyes.

She gasped and stood up to run after him. But...where could she run? Was he real or a figment of her imagination?

Deciding the water of Ganga had magical properties that could induce hallucinations, Urmilla quickly turned around to head back to the safety of Avinash's arms.

*

She didn't want to. She had promised herself she wouldn't return. But her curiosity got the better of her. The next morning, making an excuse that sounded untrue even to her ears, Urmilla went to the

same place, sat at the same spot, in the same position with her feet dipped in the water. She fervently hoped Master Mei Ling, whether a figment of her imagination or not, would show up.

“Good morning,” she heard the same voice, coming from behind her.

“You came! I didn’t...I...uh...” Her heart was thundering and her palms were suddenly sweaty. She didn’t dare turn around. What if he looked grotesque? Without the haze of her grief, she felt more in control today.

“Of course I did. You called me, didn’t you?”

It almost sounded like an admonishment; which is what made her turn and look. He looked the same as yesterday. Even the suit was the same.

“I don't know why I am here.” It was a ridiculous thought. But she had been thinking about it since the whole drama began and the need for an answer was as urgent as the next breath.

“You miss her?” he asked gently.

“Yes,” she said angrily. “Why I miss her is what I don't understand. Please don't say it is because she was my sister. We were barely even acquaintances since our fight.”

“What happened?”

Rather than coming up with a nasty retort like *you should know since you are supposed to be omnipresent* she said, “We may not have cared too much for each other, but there was one thing we cared about more than anything else in the world. It was our mother.”

She paused. Only a few days ago, she hadn't been able to remember the fight properly. But now it came to her in waves. "It was such a silly fight," she whispered shaking her head in disbelief.

"We were arguing over the best course of treatment for mom. She had been in the hospital for two months. She was old. The doctors had given up on her. They had given us two choices, take her home or leave her there. We couldn't decide what to do."

"Can you believe that? Such a stupid *stupid* fight it had been; like a competition of who loved her more. And while we were fighting, she had a heart attack and she died. Just like that. Her last few moments and instead of being with her, we were fighting."

"I think I broke her heart that day. I mean I had broken it many times before but that day, I broke it beyond repair. We just stopped after that. Or maybe we stopped trying because the one thing that had glued us together was gone."

"Did you try to patch up?"

She turned to look at him. "No but then neither did she. And it's not like I *killed* our mother! I loved her equally. But Renu was *so* dramatic," she said with a roll of her eyes. "It was always about her, her grief, her emotions, and her broken heart. I, I didn't even exist for her."

Neither of them said anything for some time. Urmilla kept turning around from time to time to make sure he was still sitting behind her. Unlike the day before, his presence, like the Ganga, was soothing her frayed nerves.

“Did she even love me?” she asked.

No one could have guessed the kind of courage it took for Urmilla to voice that question. She dreaded both answers equally. What if he said *no*? And if he said *yes*; what would that make her?

“You know the first time I met your sister, she talked with me for hours. Like I was a long-lost friend, and she hadn’t spoken to someone in years. There was this need in her to be heard. She told me many things but did you know that was also the time her marriage was on the verge of breaking up?”

He didn’t say it like he was accusing her. It was just a question, delivered with equanimity.

Urmilla shook her head in alarm. Renu and Vijay had been on the verge of a breakup? Never! It was simply impossible. She hadn’t seen two people more in love.

“It’s true,” he said shrugging his shoulders. “And do you know the thing she complained about the most during that conversation?”

“She must have complained about me,” she said dispassionately. She could have asked him why Renu and Vijay’s relationship had been on the verge of collapsing. But she had a feeling she won’t get an answer.

Master Mei Ling smiled. “No. Avinash.”

“What? Why?”

“She said that since Avinash had come into your life, you had ceased to exist for anyone apart from him. You stopped being a sister, a daughter, a friend. You became only Avinash’s wife.”

Before she could say anything in her defence or deny what he was saying, Master Mein Ling said, “And to answer your question – she loved you very much. You were family; you were always family. I think she resented Avinash more than she resented you.”

Urmilla’s head was spinning. He had said so many things, she needed time to process them. She turned around to say that to him when she realized to her chagrin he had disappeared again.

That night, tossing and turning in bed, Urmilla thought of everything she had heard. Master Mei Ling had said that Renu loved her. Was she really surprised by that? No, she wasn’t. But it had been nice to get it confirmed from somebody else.

But *why* did any of this matter?

The answer came to her when she woke up in the morning.

It matters because she was your sister. It matters because, no matter what, you were always there for each other. It matters because even though you broke each other’s hearts numerous times, you still came through. It matters because she was a part of you, as much as you were a part of her, and now she is gone.

She is gone and now I’m all alone in the world, thought she, as tears started to roll down her cheeks. Urmilla was utterly alone in her grief.

*

Urmilla at long last did what she had come to Haridwar to do. She took out the beautiful red urn from her suitcase that contained her sister's ashes and went to Har ki Paudi. When Avinash insisted he accompany her, she didn't say no. She knew she wouldn't see Master Mei Ling again. There was no reason why he couldn't accompany her.

She bought flowers from one of the many vendors sitting there and instead of asking a pandit what to do; she proceeded with the final wish of her sister, relying purely on instinct. Urmilla went thigh-deep into the Ganga, opened the urn and closed her eyes.

"I loved you, Renu. Even when I was jealous or hurt, I loved you. Go in peace beloved sister. Maybe in the next lifetime, we will be more of sisters than we were here. For now, rest."

Urmilla emptied the contents of the urn into the water and sprinkled the rose petals she had bought. She joined her hands one last time and turned to look at Avi.

She could have sworn she saw Renu sitting on the steps of Har ki Paudi, where she had sat talking to Master Mei Ling, wearing a smile and tears.

Urmilla didn't want to blink because she knew Renu would disappear as soon as she would. After a few moments though, she had to blink.

Renu did disappear but not before Urmilla heard a whispered *thank you*.

Pranjal

“...and save the princess,” said the old man with the white beard and a pointy nose.

Pranjal puffed his chest out and nodded his head once. He looked at his right hand which held the sword. He wasn't tall or had a physique like The Rock. He was of an average height and build but that was the reason he would win where the others had failed. That was why he would slay the dragon and save the princess from the evil curse.

The old man picked up a twig from beside the big rock behind which they were hiding and began to draw the map that would help the boy save Fiona. He looked at this unlikely saviour and thought, *if there is a higher power, help him. He will need it.* He only hoped luck would be on their side tonight.

Pranjal didn't need to be a mind reader to know what the old man was thinking. His thoughts were as clear as day on his face. He smiled confidently. His name would go down in history as the *unlikely hero*.

He took one last look at the rough map that was drawn in the dirt and memorized it. He tightened his hold on the sword and prepared to run when...

“Pranjal are you with us?” said Miss. Kalra, standing next to his desk, hands on her hips.

He immediately straightened in his chair and looked at his desk. Where had his English book disappeared? Wasn't it on his table when he had been trying to save Princess Fiona? Poor princess, she would have to wait till the end of school to be saved.

As his eyes travelled up, he realized Miss. Kalra hadn't moved an inch from his table. Seeing his mystified expression, she held up Pranjal's textbook which had fallen from his desk. When he hadn't immediately bent to pick it up, she had realized he was daydreaming *again*.

The bell rang and Miss. Kalra told Pranjal to step out of the class so she could talk to him. Both of them knew where the conversation was headed but still, it needed to be said.

She waited for the coast to clear. "Pranjal, this is the third time in two days I have caught you dreaming in my class. Don't you get enough sleep at home? One more time," said she, "and I will be forced to call your parents and report this behaviour."

He offered no apology or explanation. He knew Miss. Kalra would report him and he would deal with it when it happened.

*

"Fiona, honey, if I don't return in an hour, get yourself out," said Pranjal, holding Fiona's face between his hands.

"Oh Pranjal," said she, tears pouring down her face, "why can't I come with you? Take me with you *please*."

He saw the fragile beauty of Fiona and nearly cried himself. But he couldn't afford such luxuries. He did not care about his life but he couldn't bear the thought of something happening to Fiona. He looked at her tear and grime-stained face and his resolve hardened. "Fi my darling please promise me you will do as I say..."

"Pranjal..."

“Fiona...”

“...Pranjal...”

“Fiona *promise* me,” he said. He needed to hear that she would do as he said so he could go into the fight with the knowledge that his heart...that Fiona...was safe.

“PRANJAL! What the hell dude, I have been calling and calling...”

Dude? Pranjal didn't use that word and neither did Fiona. He saw a big dirty hand waving in front of him. He turned towards his friend Nikhil, who was sitting next to him. He glared. “Dude, couldn't you have waited five more minutes? I was just about to start shooting!”

Nikhil rolled his eyes. It had taken him a while to adjust to his friend's oddity. He sometimes envied Pranjal who could, at will, be in another place, another time, saving girls and being a hero. It didn't matter where he was or how many people were talking around him.

He asked him, just like he had asked him numerous other times, “How do you do it dude?”

“I dunno,” shrugged Pranjal. “It's a gift...or a curse, whichever way you want to see it.”

“Dude it's one awesome gift if you ask me. Who wouldn't take saving the world over History or Math? I wish you could teach me. I have tried you know. I close my eyes and try to concentrate on a scene from a James Bond movie. It doesn't work! Sure, I can see myself doing those stunts but...”

“But what?” asked Pranjal, paying attention to Nikhil’s ramblings for the first time. He saw the embarrassed look on Nikhil’s face and pressed, “But what Nikhil?”

“But...it seems a little childish and foolish after some time. You know it’s cool to imagine yourself as 007 but come on, it’s not real and it’s not even impressive.”

“That Nikhil is the fun part.”

“What?”

“The *it’s not real* part is what’s fun. I can be whoever I want to be. I can be a dragon-slaying peasant boy one minute and a spy with a gun the next.”

Nikhil rolled his eyes again. “How about spending time with real people? How about saving real girls? How about playing a game of cricket with your friends? Isn’t that cool and fun too? Anyone can save the world. How hard can it be? Being real, now that’s what’s difficult.”

Pranjal tuned out his friend. He had heard this argument a million times. Be real. You are not a child anymore to be dreaming like this...grow up...blah blah. What he wanted to know was why should he grow up? Why should he stop dreaming?

*

“Mr. and Mrs. Negi, thank you for coming in,” said Miss. Kalra.

She showed them into the classroom. They sat down and seeing the look of concern and anxiety on their faces, she hated herself for

complaining about their boy but the time had come when some action needed to be taken.

She offered them water which they quietly refused. She took a breath and said, "Pranjal's daydreaming habit is getting out of hand Mr. and Mrs. Negi. It has started to affect his school work now. He doesn't listen and pays no attention in class. He always has a blank expression on his face like he isn't here at all but somewhere far away. Pranjal is growing up, he's almost fifteen now, and this needs to stop."

"What do we do? We have tried everything madam but there seems to be no improvement. We are at our wit's end," cried Mrs. Negi.

Miss. Kalra said, "I think Pranjal needs professional help. Someone who can figure out if something is troubling him or is it a result of some other condition whose underlying cause could be dangerous."

Seeing the horrified expression on Pranjal's parents' faces, Miss. Kalra added, "You could see Dr. Mahesh, he is a psychologist and good with teenagers. He has helped a lot of our students."

"Are you sure professional help is the right way to deal with this madam?" asked Mr. Negi. "What can a doctor do that we, as his parents can't do?"

"Mr. Negi I am only trying to help. Please understand seeing a psychologist is not that different from taking Pranjal to a paediatric when he is unwell. Sometimes teenagers find it difficult to talk to their parents. Maybe, he'll be more comfortable talking to a professional. Please. Just talk to Dr. Mahesh once."

*

Pranjal was sitting in a steel room with a single overhead lamp. His hands were handcuffed behind his back. This was a waste of time! *Precious* time that he could have utilized to find Fiona. The longer he stayed here, the farther she would go.

In front of him stood a six-foot-three man who had the air of being the one in charge. He was wearing a brown hat, brown coat, brown trousers and a white shirt with a brown tie. He removed his hat and put it on the steel table. He crossed his hands across his massive chest and looked disapprovingly at Pranjal.

He wanted to scream *I am innocent! I didn't kidnap Fiona. How could I? I am the one trying to get her back.* He however kept quiet.

He stared at the man and the man stared right back. It was going to be a battle of the wills...

Dr. Mahesh had been observing Pranjal for ten minutes now. He knew precisely when Pranjal had stopped listening to him and retreated into his make-believe world. He didn't disturb Pranjal but waited. When he didn't surface for another five minutes, Dr. Mahesh shook his shoulder gently.

"Care to share with the class?" said he with an easy smile.

Ugh! Pranjal *hated* it when people interrupted him just when the scene was getting interesting. He sighed and studied the adult in front of him. His parents had tried to explain who Dr. Mahesh was but as soon as they had uttered the words *stop* and *your daydreaming*, his attention had wavered. The doctor was wearing the usual adult garb of trousers and shirt. He had white in his hair but instead of the

exasperated look that most adults wore around him, this one was looking at him politely, like he didn't care one way or another.

That indifference made him want to engage with this adult so Pranjal asked, a bit rudely, "Who are you exactly?"

Mahesh thought about the question very seriously before settling on, "I am a guide."

His answer surprised Pranjal because he had expected Dr. Mahesh to say that he was a friend, who was only trying to help him through a difficult time. Curiosity piqued, he asked, "And what do you do?"

Another serious pause. "Listen to you if you will share your thoughts and talk to you if you will listen to mine."

A slow smile spread across Pranjal's face. There were very few people he liked and he was happy to acknowledge he liked Mahesh. "What are you thinking now?"

Mahesh sat down behind his desk. The boy was sharp. This would be interesting. He said, "Well I'm tired. It's 4 so I am thinking about tea, biscuits and looking forward to a warm bath. What about you?"

Pranjal nodded his head several times before answering, "I am thinking that this is all a waste of time. And I am thinking about what my friend, Nikhil, had said two days back."

"Why do you think this is a waste of time?"

"I am not ill. I just have a concentration problem," he said cheerfully.

*

Third Session

“What do you like to do in your free time, besides dreaming,” said Mahesh. They were comfortable enough with each other now that he could tease.

“I watch television but other than that, nothing.”

“Nothing? Don’t you get bored?”

Pranjal shrugged. “I have my private world,” said he with a wink.

Mahesh decided to drop the subject. “Tell me about your parents.”

“I...” It took him a minute to gather his thoughts. “They are really nice people. I know they are concerned about me and frustrated because they cannot help me. They have always been reasonable with their rules and expectations. They are the perfect parents I could have asked for.”

Mahesh, as a rule, did not make written notes during a session. Since he worked mostly with teenagers, they did not like it. It was as if they were back in school where they were being given marks depending on how they answered questions. But he noticed how Pranjal had straightened at the mention of his parents. He spoke of them politely, like they were strangers. Mahesh had never had a teenager who hadn’t said, at least once, that they hated their parents.

The session went on, they spoke about school, Nikhil, and Pranjal even talked about how he was usually a hero in all his daydreams.

At the end of their session, Mahesh went towards the wall on his left which was full of books from the roof to the floor. He selected *Harry*

Potter and the Philosopher's Stone from his collection. Pranjal would surely appreciate a book about wizards, witches, Hogwarts and yes, heroes.

"Here," he said, handing the book to Pranjal. "I want you to read at least five chapters of this book and when you come next week, we'll discuss it. Okay?"

*

Five sessions later

"Dr. Mahesh, we cannot thank you enough," said Mrs. Negi, dabbing her eyes with a pristine handkerchief. "We have seen tremendous improvement in him. For the first time, he is showing interest in something. You have given him a passion, reading."

"We won't need your assistance anymore," said Mr. Negi confidently.

Mahesh had been nodding his head absentmindedly but at Mr. Negi's comment, his head snapped. He said hurriedly, "Mr. Negi, I have only diverted the problem, I still don't know the underlying cause for his listless behaviour towards life."

Mrs. Negi though wasn't just a relieved mother. Pranjal had improved. There was an animation on his face that hadn't been there a month before. He took interest in the things around him and it was easier to hold a conversation with him. Yet Mahesh was sure he hadn't uprooted the problem which had triggered Pranjal's behaviour. How could he explain all this to his parents convincingly?

“Can I ask you a question before we end today’s session?” He could guess why Pranjal treated his parents in that detached way of his but he needed to be sure.

When they nodded their assent, Mahesh asked, “Is Pranjal adopted?” There was no delicate way of asking this so he didn’t try to skirt around it.

He didn’t need a verbal confirmation. The expression on their faces was all the confirmation he needed. But, it did not explain why he spoke about them the way he did. “How old was he when he was adopted?”

“He was seven. He knows that he is adopted. We didn’t tell you because we didn’t think it was relevant,” said Mr. Negi apologetically.

“Did something happen while you were adopting him? Was he close to anyone in the orphanage?”

“Why are you asking us these questions?” Mrs. Negi had tears in her eyes again. She couldn’t understand why this was happening to her son. Pranjal was a wonderful boy and except for this little issue he had never given them any cause for concern.

“Please understand, I’m only trying to help your son. Pranjal has a recurring theme in his daydreams. I have a theory that they may be related to someone from his orphanage.”

“We aren’t aware of any such incident that stands out,” said Mr. Negi getting up, thus putting an end to the session and the discussion. He

shook Mahesh's hand, thanked him again for all his help and escorted his wife out.

*

"Hi Mahesh," said Pranjal. He sat down on a chair opposite Mahesh's table and looked around him. His parents had told him it was his last session. While he was relieved, he was also sad at the thought of never meeting his friend again.

"Hi Pranjal," said Mahesh. "Today is our last session so I thought we would do something different." He pointed at a red comfortable chair kept in one corner of the room and told Pranjal to sit on that.

He took a stool and sat down near him. "Okay Pranjal are you comfortable?" He waited for Pranjal to say *yes*. "I want you to take a deep breath, relax and close your eyes. I am right here so you don't have to be scared."

Pranjal opened his eyes and said, "I'm not scared Mahesh."

"Yes," smiled Mahesh. "Okay let's do this again. Close your eyes, relax and take three deep breaths."

This time, with his eyes closed, Pranjal said, "Are you trying to put me off to sleep?"

"Pranjal don't ask questions just yet. I'll answer them when we are done." Mahesh waited to see if he would say anything but he didn't. Mahesh continued, "I want you to concentrate on your breathing."

After a minute, Mahesh asked Pranjal in a quiet voice, "What do you see?"

Pranjal started to say he didn't see anything but then he stopped.

*

They had been searching for her everywhere. He didn't want her to get into trouble so he waited until everyone was in the kitchen, taking a break.

He raced up the stairs and opened the door that led to the terrace. He stepped forward and was shocked to see that he was a lot closer to the ground than he was used to. This had never happened before. Come to think of it, this dream had a different quality than his usual ones. But he wouldn't worry about his small size or the *quality* of his dream right now. He had to find her.

He started from one corner of the terrace, making his way to the other end. He found her near the water tank, sobbing. He went and sat down next to her.

She said, rather dramatically, "I am dying."

"Don't be silly."

"No I swear Pranjal, I am dying. I heard them talking about it when they thought I was sleeping."

"Fi, nothing is going to happen to you. Somebody will adopt you and you will have a wonderful life."

"How do you know that?" asked she, still sounding heartbroken.

“You are smart, you are pretty and you have the softest hair I have ever touched. Any couple will be lucky to adopt you. Don’t worry; nothing will happen. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

*

Pranjal sat up straight; his solemn promise to Fiona still reverberating in his ears.

There were tears on his cheeks but Mahesh made no move. The air was too fragile and even though he knew his instincts had been right about this, he didn’t want to force Pranjal into the here and the now until he was ready.

Pranjal looked at Mahesh. He wanted a hug but didn’t know how to ask for one. Instead, he laid back down on the chair. When he reached out, Mahesh’s hand was right there and he gripped it tight. Mahesh didn’t move, didn’t speak. Pranjal was grateful for the silence.

Hesitantly at first, then with growing steam, he told Mahesh about Fi, his best friend, the one who he hadn’t been able to save because she had overheard correctly. She *was* dying and two days before he was to leave with Mr. and Mrs. Negi, she died.

“Pranjal...”

Pranjal squeezed Dr. Mahesh’s hand but he didn’t let go. “It’s okay. I’m okay. I think I understand now. I couldn’t save her so I was saving her in my daydreams.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not about fault. I didn’t keep my promise to her.”

“You were seven!”

Pranjal closed his eyes as a laugh escaped his throat and tears dripped down his chin. “Are you going to tell my parents?”

Mahesh wanted to say, *yes, I should*. Instead, he asked, “What do you think?”

Pranjal turned to Mahesh. He looked exasperated like only a teenager could look with an adult who had replied to his question with another question. “I think I should become a writer. I could be one of those serial writers and all my books can be around the adventures of Fiona and her sidekick Pranjal. What do *you* think Mahesh?”

Mahesh rolled his eyes at Pranjal’s smirk. “I think that is a great idea. As for telling your parents, I’ll leave that up to you. I would recommend you tell them.”

Pranjal nodded, smiled, then closed his eyes. “Do you mind if I sleep here for some time?”

Mahesh looked at his watch. “You have seventeen minutes before the next person will come in so...as you will my young padawan.”

“Ugh, you and your old references.”

But Pranjal was smiling and Mahesh couldn’t help but feel proud and smug.

About the author

Suchita Agarwal, when not putting her Masters in International Business to good use working on content creation, strategy and campaign management, is a writer who believes words are where the magic is. She blogs at [tales of Suchita](#).

THE GUNSLINGER



SUCHITA AGARWAL

[Hunter](#) has always been a lone wolf...until the kid entered his life. Trying to keep her safe has become his life's purpose until she is kidnapped from right under his nose. Taking on an unexpectedly violent turn, Hunter races against Lincoln who is bent on extracting revenge. Will he be able to save Lola? Or will Lincoln's vendetta destroy him and the kid?



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that can move mountains, raise floods
Inspire you to greatness
Drive you to madness
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