

The Girl I Last Loved

The girl who never loved me back...



Smita Kaushik

Bestselling author of *LET'S GET COMMITTED*

About the Author

Smita Kaushik became author by chance and is now pursuing it by choice. Her first novel *Let's Get Committed*, not only created waves among the young generation, but also pitched some notes with others as well. Though her forte lies in romance with a hint of comedy, she sometimes tries to lay hands on philosophy.

An ex-DPSite, she did her graduation from KIIT University and is currently based in Hyderabad. Always a creatively inclined person, she has excelled in different art forms like contemporary, *madhubani* and Warlipainting and has won many national-level art competitions. For fun, she likes to watch rom-com and read novels.

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Acknowledgement

This novel is very close to my heart and bears glimpses of my life, of what I experienced, of what I observed, a few random stories I heard and the several lessons I learned.

There were various people who contributed towards this, some known and some unknown.

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Lost in her Shadow

As truly said by someone "The love that lasts the longest is the love which is never returned."

*Walking by these empty lanes, I see myself fading away...
Yet I know...
Somewhere deep inside of you, you loved me back and it was true...
I tried to say, I tried too hard...
Each moment I missed, a moment of love...
Now just left with memories back when,
A lonely man trailing the solitary lanes...*

*Love was there and love will be...
The flames will burn in the air it breathes.
Even though you never loved me back, I'll love you for eternity.
You'll never know, how much you mean to me...*

*I didn't know how to confess what my feelings are;
If only I could know, if the doors to your heart were ajar...
I would've poured out what I felt back then.
And those times have passed...
Just left with memories back when,
Now a lonely man trailing the solitary lanes...*

*It was too late then, you were gone...
But this day I have so much to say,
No time to dream, nowhere to sway.
Just one chance to tell you that is all I need...
How much I loved, for you I lived.*

*And here I am, forever yours to stay...
Yes I mean forever, for that I will try,
Hope you will come one day to pass me by.
Sometimes I feel, I am a bit too late...*

*Too late to feel this way...
But I will try it again some day...*

*And then I fall back...
And think of the times back when...
We were young and we were friends.
And as time has passed, things have changed,
I am still in your love, but you have moved away.*

—Dibyajyoti Chowdhury

I have been writing since my childhood days and have a great interest in poetry as well as writing stories and personal accounts with an emotional touch... mostly based on experiences and random thoughts. (Winner – *The Girl I Last Loved* poem contest)

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Preface

*We always question destiny that it never gave us the chance on
love...
But isn't the real question whether we gave ourselves that chance?*

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Chapter 1

Present Day... Mumbai

Darkness all around. Vision getting blurred. It takes some time for the eyes to get adjusted to sudden darkness or brightness. Just like in life, we are always taken aback by sudden pleasure or pain, the same feeling of breathlessness, why does it always surround me. I am gasping for air and not getting much success. Someone pushing me from behind; in turn I am pushing the one in front of me. You've to impel others to get what you want; you can't blame others as everyone including yourself is doing the same. I can feel the adrenalin rush. Everyone has to run as they have a place to reach, a place they call home – a home where someone is waiting for them, who will be worried if they are late. But me, I am just getting dragged along the crowd as I have no place to reach, no place to call a home, no family to wait for me. Look at the irony of the situation – life is making me smirk at my very own misery!

It's really funny, even if you aren't making any effort to move on, you will, as time never stops. You feel nothing much is going to change but it does, slowly and gradually without you ever noticing.

People who are important will cease to matter six years from now if they walk out of your life at this point. You won't forget them but you won't even recall them every 'now and then', even if it was the person you were once 'madly in love' with. You may still be in love with that person, but other things will get in your head and your lover's memories will be locked behind a door you would rarely visit.

The time progressed a minute or few and I was out of that overfilled passage. Huh! It's Friday, so I am travelling by locals. It feels great to be around so many people whom you don't know at all but you can somewhere relate to their lives. A great place to identify yourself with several emotions, which either you can't feel or no longer have the ability to.

I used to come here as a kid. Dad used to bring me here for a walk and get me my favourite cutlet which Bansi *bhaiya* used to make around the corner. That was till he got transferred to Lucknow... and then he never returned.

Everything has changed since then but nothing seems different. Except a few more lights, a few extra waiting seats, increased shops, more betel stains at nooks and corners. Increased security in an attempt to prevent another

26/11. Finally, jostling young crowd running between different tuitions and home, under the pressure of cracking various competitions – bearing very few seats.

Making my way further, having just missed the train, I was lucky enough to get a place to make myself comfortable. It's a way of regarding the situation. Here it's my weekly luxury to travel by locals which I am still enjoying even after missing my last train. However, for those whose travelling by locals is a compulsion, missing the train can be akin to annoying, something adding to their misery.

I stretched my arms and glanced around. There were three young guys in their late teens, standing closely in a circle. All of them dressed in funky vibrant T-shirts and on-purpose tattered jeans, vibrant slippers; big dial watches, spiked hair. I reflected back at myself. I'm suited up, black and grey, Rado watch, well-set black shinning hair. Is there such a thing like young at heart? But I was more than relieved that I no longer carry a student bag. One of the three boys lighted a cigarette and took a very comfortable puff. After two to three puffs, he passed it on to his friend. During its lifetime, the stick kept on rotating among the three of them. I couldn't help but smile, remembering those good old days. Now I smoke sixteen a day and it's not even near to the fun we used to have puffing from a single stick. I have absolutely no idea why smoking or drinking bring guys closer. Although hard to grasp, but it's a truth. Most of the colleagues with whom I am acquainted, I met them at the smoking zone itself. Besides, it's something that serves my loneliness well. Since the past few months I am quite content with my career growth. So I was able to take this immense leap in slicing down my intake from more than thirty-eight to sixteen as a New Year resolution.

What started as an infantile attempt to feel like an adult, is my most eminent companion now. I smoke to reward myself. I snap a deal, I smoke. I complete a report, I smoke.

I survive yet another day of this purposeless life, I smoke; but most important of all, it feels like being with a friend. When it glows in the dark, it assures that I'm not alone. Being in a station gives the very same feeling to me.

All these years I have witnessed various flavours of life here. A kid taking blessings from his parents before leaving home for the very first time. An innocent newlywed bride with all her expectations and fears upon entering her new-found world. Children running after vendors; parents running behind them. Lovers hugging each other while parting ways. Lovers passing smile on spotting each other amidst the entire crowd. Some promising new-bees leaving for work, hanging their laptop bags in one hand and newspaper in other, which probably they will read before reaching work. Some tired fellows unwilling to begin yet another day. Few satisfied faces reflecting they

have embraced life in its every form. People coming. People going. Several unexpected convergence. Several unwanted divergence.

So many people, so many eyes – holding so many dreams, hope, anger, pain, desire. Those wondering, awaiting eyes!

Those eyes... those eyes that confirm you are not the only one with unfulfilled desires, you are not the only one who has assimilated this unusual mixture of emotions.

I have always been attracted to trains, especially the ones departing. I can't reason out why it gives a sense of wellbeing. Watching them leave reminds me one day I can refuse to be what I am. One day I can run away to a very distant place where I'm unknown.

There is always a start somewhere else, if not here.

"Oh! I am sorry," a stranger who just spilled half the contents of her bag over me uttered.

My thoughts or rather my repeated thoughts were interrupted.

I lifted my head, giving her an odd look and directed my sight elsewhere.

She bent down and some groceries out of her carry bag spilled again.

The feminine virtue!

Now I was crossing the line, uncivil on to rude.

I bent down, gave her a weary smile and started looking for and gathering her stuff. As they were expected to, nobody halted to join us. Even the person sitting just next to me didn't even budge a little, absorbed in texting.

I picked a few tomatoes, some oranges, actually lots of them; she probably attended some 'buy 1 kg, get 1 kg free' offer and placed it her grocery bag. I often wonder if these market analysts know women better than anyone else. 'Sale' gathers women together, makes them run, snatch and fight; they erroneously feel like a winner if they emerge out with a bunch of shopping bags.

This lady standing in front of me, only she would be knowing what she would be cooking with three bags of tomatoes and oranges.

'Thank you!' she hurriedly responded to my gesture. Just then an orange slipped from her bag and rolled along the platform.

I took a brief look at her. She was struggling with two plastic bags in one hand and one in another, while adjusting her handbag to her shoulder... gripping her *dupatta*... managing her hair.

As she progressed towards that orange, I signalled to her that I will get it.

I took long firm steps in its direction. I crouched to lift it up. At that very moment some train arrived and the platform was overflowing with people. I hastened to get up, but was ceased. I stopped. My eyes moved aimlessly without any direction, but I definitely was in search of something – something which I haven't seen but not unknown. All I could see were shoes, speeding feet following random tracks. It gets hard to scan especially when you don't

know what you are looking for. Subsequently familiar steps of someone walking struck me. There it is among all those unknown jumbled pegs. A flash of lightning and I retreated. I tried to focus. It was the mirrors. Small pieces of coloured glass studded in her slip-ons tangled in beautiful threads. That smooth skin texture. That shining pink enamel. Though what captured me was the silver-stoned toe-ring. A funky pink plastic toe-ring shaped as a Cinderella shoe, a flicker of memory from my past flashed back in front of my eyes. It may not be true... but every 'no' exists along with a corresponding 'yes'. I tried to concentrate on it, as with so many people bubbling in, I lost it; maybe I lost her. I got restless. I drifted my eyes sideways and again she was there. I couldn't see her in full but I was getting more and more attracted to her. In few more attempts I saw light blue jeans faded white at few parts. I froze. My heart started thumping. Is it? I was afraid to find out.

Still I followed her. In a few more glimpses, I saw her lemon-coloured *kurti* and purple-embroided *jhola*. I was nearing her. My speed continued to increase. I saw her hand, her sparkling multicoloured bangles, a red coloured thumb-ring, a sea-green ring on her little finger, when she tried to stop a man who was about to crash into her.

I quit. My feet were struck at the ground while my eyes were following her. Again there were several others between us. She tossed her stole up in the air and on to her shoulders. Everything was new but it wasn't different. All the action, the grace was unlike her, yet there was a striking similarity. She wore a silver metallic watch with complimenting bracelets hanging just below it on her other hand. Her long sleek nails stunned me. Her stole now rested on her shoulder. It was green with yellow patches here and there, several plain mirrors shinning...blinding people. Enchanting sound of *ghun-ghuru* hanging from her stole tried to drag me to her. I was tempted to put an end to it. To know. To confront. To feel. Still the push and the pull were equal. Her hair was flowing away from her face, long silky streaked in red, coursing up to her waist. The chase was over. She turned towards me. Few strands of hair obstructed her face. She tucked them behind her ear with her long slender fingers.

A chill ran through my body. I was unable to move. I choked. My hands curled. I was ecstatic for a moment, nervous for the next and scared in the third. I struggled with myself. Half of her hair tucked behind her ear from which hung a rotating *jhumka*. Same beautiful hairline, few strands flowing on to the face but ending before her eyes began. Her enchanting eyes – ever expressive, ever transparent, always innocent.

'Eyes are windows to the soul' was so true for her. Her pure white face gives one an illusion that it will turn red if anyone touches her. No straight guy can ever take his eyes off her golden nose-ring. Her lips, pure pink, never

needed any extra colour. But her smile was something to hold out for. So lively, so perfect, captivating, bewitching, delighting, enthralling... I never found enough words to describe it.

I reversed, scared to face her. I was even more scared to let her confront me. I sided. I saw her coming. She was then parallel to me. She halted. I hid behind a pillar. Then glanced back again at her. She searched her bag for something, then feeling assured on finding it, she smiled, typically her. Finally she passed.

The girl passed.

The girl I last loved...

The girl who used to look at me and I used to forget everything going around me and could not stop but smile back at her.

The girl... whose teeth used to sparkle on listening to admiration of her beauty.

The girl... whose eyes used to twinkle on seeing chocolate pastry.

The girl... who kept on adding words to my girls' encyclopaedia.

The girl... who used to love the sound of rain.

The girl... who used to explain everything along with gestures.

The girl... who could spend millions on clothing if she had, but never on gadgets.

'You say what's more...' was all what was needed to trigger her off on a never-ending series of stories.

The girl who ruled my dreams but I was never there in her thoughts.

The girl who was there in my life but never really came into my life and yet changed every bit of it.

The girl I last loved... the girl... who never loved me back.

Chapter 2

Eight Years Back... Lucknow

“Hey Priya, what’s up?”

That was my friend Vishal trying to be cool.

“Move on! Loser,” Priya rolled her eyes.

“Why can’t you be a little nice? We were friends.”

“Histor...r...ry. That was fourth grade, now it’s twelfth,” Priya pushed him away.

Vishal wasn’t among the lucky ones when good looks were distributed and definitely he was far behind me in the queue. Though he tried hard with his spikes, low waist jeans and half tucked shirt, he wasn’t the talk of girl town; still socially acceptable.

Priya was his childhood friend but a lot has changed since then. The separation between socks and skirts have increased, ties have loosened, hair have been let down.

Even after Priya’s indifference, Vishal didn’t budge.

“If a girl with a figure like mine be seen with a guy having a face like yours, it will look like a big time charity. So buzz off.”

This rejection was too harsh to ignore.

Behind all those happening cool dude attitude, I got a real glimpse of him. His feet involuntarily stepped back.

He faked a smile, “Who the hell gives you a damn! I gotta talk to Kasam.”

She lifted her eyes. They look even bigger when she looks upwards. Sunlight dribbled through her eyelashes into her eyes, turning it light brown.

“Actually Akash wants to talk to her,” Vishal added.

She directed her sight towards me and raised her eyebrows. She had this habit of speaking with her expressions and gestures which made her even more beautiful and mysterious. As she looked directly into my eyes, I forgot everything I practiced saying for the past five days.

I was lost.

Kasam exchanged glances with Priya.

Vishal nudged me.

“Hey, hi... Hasam... Kasam...,” my voice broke.

She gave half a smile.

“Why don’t you attend school regularly,” I managed to continue.

“Who are you to ask that?” she was irritated.

“No it’s just that I have noticed you come just once a week.”

I knew... I hadn’t got a good start. I recollected myself.

“So, how’s everything. Eh... eh... you know this great place opened just near Plaza,...awesome gaming...eh...eh...do you like ice-cream? Can I get you one? ...you like watching Friends... I heard you saying to someone... Err...Err...You like Smiley badges... you always sport them.”

“Are you interested in me?”

My babbling was interrupted by Kasam.

Being speechless. When trying to speak, my throat choked. I was perplexed. I looked towards the sky, brushing my hair with my fingers. Then hurriedly uttered while tilting my head downwards, ‘yes’.

Kasam and Priya burst out into laughter.

Priya exclaimed, “I told you so. I noticed him staring at you all the time.”

Kasam lifted one of her hands and placed it over Priya’s shoulder. Then with the other hand she gave her a hi-fi. They both chorused ‘sixty-four’.

I wondered whether my first ever proposal deserved a ‘I told you so’.

“That was Kasam’s sixty-fourth proposal,” Priya gave me ‘Come on! Let’s face it dude’ look.

I was taken aback. I always knew I won’t be the first one to ask her out, but sixty-four was huge. Kasam gave me a sympathetic look.

“Listen...,” Kasam uttered.

“Listen!! Is not good...,” Vishal mumbled. Then he spoke in a louder voice, “Hey... hey... Kasam cool down. He likes you a lot. He has liked you since you first came in our class.”

Meanwhile she pulled out her hair band and clutched it on the strap of her bag, then started swaying her fingers through her long hair. They were shining in the sunlight. Obstructed sunrays reaching her face made her glow.

“Oh yeah?!!” Kasam smiled and then looked at me.

“So was it like, I entered the class and everything else got blurred besides me?... And music started pouring into your ears... Trees started swaying... err... something like that...?”

Kasam and Priya giggled.

I shook my head in ‘no’.

“Then how can you say that you love me?”

She spoke as if talking to a five-year old.

“There’s lot more to me! More than my looks... my life... my thoughts... you don’t know any of them...”

I heard what she said but experienced what she meant much later.

Owing to our school ritual, many students forgot that they were supposed to just go home after school. All of a sudden I had a bunch of friends. One of

whom patted my back and advocated me to Kasam, “Even if you rub Aladdin’s lamp, you won’t get a better guy than him.”

Kasam and Priya laughed their heart out at this.

“That lamp is then worth throwing away,” Priya added.

The conversation took a more casual route then.

It was all friendly talk. Suddenly Kasam said, “I like someone else.”

“Yeah! We know...,” Vishal and I chorused.

“Interesting; how do you know?” Kasam’s voice got stern.

“Actually, we saw you writing some guy’s name at the back of your notebook,” I answered sheepishly.

Kasam’s mouth was wide open. She and Priya immediately went to their girl talk and when they were done, the following was the outcome.

“You were spying on her,” Priya shrieked.

“You keep on staring at me all the time, and whenever I look up to read from the board or see the teacher, you make weird eye contacts,” Kasam screamed.

Few more complaints and now I wasn’t able to distinguish who was speaking – it was just the cries.

“Do you even follow us?”

“You can’t see the notebook from that far. You must have picked it out from the bag.”

“You peeped into my bag?”

“Hold on, none of that happened. I didn’t check your bag,” it was me finally shouting it aloud.

With a few more kicks here and there, as the conversation was going nowhere, Vishal popped the important question, “What’s the status now?”

Kasam gave a puzzled look; the answer was evident.

“At least you can try to be his friend,” Vishal sighed. “He’s very diligent; he’ll definitely have a bright future. Get to know him. If you like him, take it forward, otherwise you can always remain friends.”

Kasam and I were both confused at what Vishal just said.

‘Yeah, okay...’ she replied while pulling back her hair and tying them up.

Kasam sounded unsure and I was blank.

My eyes were fixed on her.

I was convinced that she wasn’t ecstatic about this whole idea.

Maybe she was just looking for a cue to get out of this ‘situation’.



Next few days, I was more than busy hearing some wanted and some unwanted advice and opinions.

“Dude, this shit happened to me once...,” some guy patted over my shoulder.

“Being friends...it would be merely like committing suicide.”

“It’s very simple; she wants to be with you, but she is totally confused.”

“If it’d been me then the ‘love me, leave me formula’ would’ve applied.”

“Love is not always about getting.”

“No way of keeping any contact with that girl... can’t see her with somebody else.”

“Well, love cannot be forced. So it’s the truth the girl told you. Friendship is good and if the love is true, she will love you too in the near future.!”

“She needs time to think; just be one of her best friends and wait for her break-up.”

“Just a middle finger salute to this kind of friendship.”

I was in a turmoil. Does friendship really offer a door to love or it’s like being ‘just’ friends? She knows I am interested in her but she’ll see me just as a friend. I will hang around. She will notice me. She will find me a great guy, yet won’t think about me in that way. Moreover, I won’t be able to approach her, lacking the courage to risk our friendship.

This is roughly equivalent to the scenario where a guy goes to a job interview and the company says, “You have a great resume, you have all the qualifications we were looking for, but we are not going to hire you. We will, however, use your resume as the basis of comparison for all other applicants. We are still going to hire somebody else who is far less qualified and is probably an alcoholic. However, if it doesn’t work out, we will still hire somebody but not you. In fact, we will never hire you. But we will call you from time to time to complain about the person we hired.”

I cursed myself for going over to her, otherwise there could have been a kindle of possibility. Now it’s gone. I am stuck with being her friend.

Though the thought of being with her, being able to talk to her without shuddering, seeing her while being close to her – a temptation hard to resist.

So, I googled about it. Read the do’s and don’ts of ‘being just friends’.

Preparation was needed and it was done. When done, I was prepared.

Chapter 3

Present Day, Mumbai (Later that Night)

I have been trying hard but it isn't working.

My fingers shaking, I thrust them forward.

Still it resisted the pressure. My feet rambled a bit.

Finally it dawned upon me and I rotated the knob and pushed it forcefully.

The door was already open; no doubt the keys weren't working. I entered in my half-conscious state.

It was all dark except for the faint light peeping in through the windows.

I was baffled. The door was open, lights were off. If she is back, why is it so silent and deserted?

"Hey...", her voice echoed from a distant corner.

I scanned the area. She was there on the couch. Her bags were still packed, piled just beside her. She had gone to stay with her pregnant sister.

Taking the conditions into account, it wasn't hard to guess that she had just arrived.

I progressed towards her and rambled while hugging her, "Hey honey... you are back."

She cried softly in my ears, "You're drunk?"

"Yeah! It was my bar night."

"Yeah, like your local train nights, like your poker nights, like your club nights...", she gave a scorn.

I was still little dizzy to get into that.

"Did you just arrive? Come, let me help you unpack," I said, cutting her out.

"I am not unpacking," her voice broke.

"You're going again?" I gave her a puzzled look.

"Yes, I am going... never to return."

I let her out of my embrace.

There was a long enough moment of silence to be awkward.

"You know Akash... this... us isn't going anywhere."

I let out a sigh.

"Relationships do need a tag," she continued. "We think tag will restrict us... it binds us to certain responsibilities. But it is about responsibilities. A

relationship is about sharing, having time for your common choices; and love is when you don't have any regrets in doing all those. You accept it's a change from your bachelor life. Sometimes you even miss the things you used to do when you were single. Still you never wish to return to that time. Snuggling up at night with the person you love or knowing that someone will be waiting for you matters more than having twelve shots of vodka and walking to work with a hangover. *It's not about violation of personal space. It's about letting that person in your life, letting them change it and change themselves for you.* You are still a closed book for me."

"Why mention all these now?" I somehow managed to speak.

Maybe she wiped her tears but it was still dark to see.

"When I was at Kriya's place...when I saw Kriya and Shrey together, the way they both had given in for the relationship; the way Shrey has been by her side all the time, be it her job, her health... that was love. He returns home early to be with her. He calls her all the time to know if she is okay.

"Bringing flowers to cheer her up... nobody forces him to do so, still he does. These are not his responsibilities; this is what life is made up of."

"When placing us in that situation I had quite a hard time thinking that you can do the same for me."

She gave a stern look.

"At that time I knew it's all over. We want different things in life. Everyone gets one realisation trip; this was mine huh!" she tried making a joke yet it sounded like a cry. "When I met you, even I was looking for a casual relationship with least interference. However, as I came to know you, I wanted more of you and I wanted to give more of mine," she managed to continue.

Our eyes met for the first time the entire evening. I lowered mine as she carried on with an impatient tone. She wanted to get done with it. Get done with us.

"Things have changed over the years.

"Things which felt cheap are now desirable.

"Something which meant freedom now feels like having no one to count upon.

"Four years back, a girl wearing red bangles with formals used to be a head turner, a gossip initiator. Now as they are in the eighty per cent majority, girls like me get those odd looks – looks that ask, 'Career-oriented, huh!'

Looks that say 'girl you are going in the wrong direction'."

She looked away to avoid eye contact.

Two hours at a bar made me incapable to react or to say anything.

She composed herself.

"Akash, do you know what's the major problem with girls of all ages? They meet a guy and find him all perfect. They want only that much of love

and time, the guy is giving them. They think their chemistry is different. They are not bound by mushy talks, gifts, rituals... they are 'mature'. She reminds herself of this again and again but never accepts it from the bottom of her heart. I was in that situation, Akash," she was sobbing now.

"Actually the problem gets even graver when she assumes that she is the girl who can change that guy. She is the one who can bring out the loving, caring person out of him. She is so special that this relationship will defy all his previous history.

"Past years I kept struggling, changing myself in order to change you," she hung her head down.

A few moments passed.

"Akash, in due course of time I started developing feelings for you. I fell in love with you. You became my priority but I wasn't yours. That's definitely not what I want. Now I am tired of all those futile attempts.

"I am ready to accept what you are and what you can be.

"I want to be a normal girl who has marriage and kids on the cards. I want to be pampered. I want to be showered with gifts. I want to call you ten times a day. I want to hold your hand and walk in the rain and I want you to enjoy these."

She choked as her voice broke.

"Listen, we are going good. We are comfortable together. I like you..." I took her back in my arms.

"This is the best you can say?" she pushed me back.

As she dragged her luggage to the door, I stood there perplexed, confused...

What to say?

What to do?

What did I want?

When I turned around, it was just me and my solitude, and the darkness within and around me.

She had told me once, 'The best way to appreciate someone is through your eyes, not by words.'

I am aware I broke her heart... every time she got dressed for me, I gave her a monotonous, 'You look good'.

Every time she asked, "Where are you going?", I replied, "Yeah, just hanging out at the bar."

I know she wanted me to add, "Would you like to join?" at the end.

Every time she cooked for me, I arrived at midnight.

Every time she called me at work, I ended up apologising.

Still I never gave her as much pain as I did today... by letting her go.

By not holding her in my arms and saying, "Please don't go. I want you to be with me..."

“I need you...
“I love you...”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 4

Whenever I peep out through my office window, I see houses...

Where clothes hang at the balcony...

Where flowers grow in the garden...

Where stray chairs lie on the terrace.

These houses do have curtains, yet you can see inside them. In here, people wake up with a smile to begin a new day – someone prepares tea and everyone sit together, chatting, discussing...

Where in a lonely corner you can read your newspaper and still feel surrounded.

Where every decoration has a story to tell; where people separated by rooms still stay close.

Where someone always cares, whether you have taken your meal or not.

Even if they are housing or in flats, residents try their level best to reflect about their selves in these houses.

Whenever he returned from a conference, Dad used to say that no place feels as comfortable as your home. It doesn't matter if you have stayed at a friend's place or in a luxury suit. Whether it is good food, fashionable decor or king-sized bed. Still the sleep you get in your own bed, at your own home won't be the same anywhere else. Home is the place where you would like to return at the end of the day. A place to hide when you are sad, a place to rush when you are joyous. I always agreed with him, yet was never able to incorporate that philosophy into my own life.

I never called this apartment 'home' – as it never was. All the furnishing was done by an interior decorator. It was amazing enough to flaunt to others but lacked every single bit of emotion.

Few scattered flakes of personification were results of disorganised, desperate attempts of her. Some photographs of us, few vases in which she kept white roses – my favourite. Several chandeliers and lamp as those were her favourites. Though she tried to make it a home, all she lacked was my support. I don't know when she did all these but she definitely left her mark.

For me it was just a place to crash on during the night.

Then two years later, here I am, alone and this place is still a stranger. I grabbed a magazine from the bedside. It was Divya's. It read, "Do you see a

beautiful woman when you look in the mirror?” Bringing a smirk on my face it read to me as, “Can you see yourself in the mirror?” Even if Divya didn’t ask me that, her stuff did.

I collapsed on the bed, though unable to sleep. How amazing is it! When I walked, I was crazy for sleep; a particular happening can change all that – what you want, what you do, everything. So, I was awake, swimming in an ocean of memories.

Memories throwing random questions at me...

Shyama, Kirti, Riya and several other short flings... several other one-night stands were just a matter of satisfying my ego. Making me feel influential. I once committed the crime of falling in love with a ‘out of league’ girl. Those girls whose heads would spin at the very idea of ‘going out with me’. They will brag about my position, my income... my achievements. Even if I leave without any reason, they’ll think they weren’t enough.

But the most important question here is why I date in the first place?

It is the age-old criterion of doing well in life. Study hard for twenty years, get a high-pitched job, get regular appraisal with onsite project, buy an apartment in a metro and date hot-figured girls followed by a trophy wife some years later who inherits a fortune.

Being the Country HRD Head of Adcom-Multimedia, I had everything else in life. Why to leave anything? So, that was me trying to make my life complete.

When I first met Divya, I knew she was different. I was attracted to her from the very first moment I saw her. We met when Ved introduced us at a wine-tasting do. Divya Vashistha, one of the rare owners of enormous legacy, struggling to make something out on her own. Though she got a little advantage from her name, she started off as an entrepreneur three years back and now she defines the benchmark for professional grooming industry in India. Her clients include several top-notch media agencies, IT companies and the list continues.

The way she looked – her hair, her dress, the way she walked, her smile, everything about her was flawless and classy.

She was every bit of the profession she represented.

Her elegance, the way she maintained on and off eye contact. Finally after observing her for an hour, I approached her when she was sitting in a distant corner. Maroon gladiator shoes paired with maroon silk shirt complementing with grey jacket and skirt gave her a professional yet ravishing look. I tried to flatter by praising her tremendous success rate. She didn’t seem interested, probably having heard it a lot more times before. Thank God, the food saved me. I started munching without a word.

“Try some starter with sherry; it’s meant to be like that,” her firm tone reflected that she was being bugged by my deficient knowledge in this field.

“Red wine goes with fish.” This time it was a suggestion that too with a smile.

“I think you might like having beer with meat.”

In our seven-course meal, I was showered with suggestions of several other things ‘I would like to do’.

Desserts are to be with champagne.

I knew one holds the tip of the glass in between their index and middle fingers to prevent them from stains but my knowledge was enlightened by the fact that with one’s touch, the temperature changes, which in turn changes the taste of wine.

In due course, her tone softened and we were no longer strangers.

We talked about corporate know-how, statistics, gossips and what not.

She was the only girl who didn’t run out of conversation; contrarily, she seemed very interested.

“You seem to have lots of friends,” finally I was successful in changing the topic to a bit personal.

“Popular – yes! Friends – no!” she explained with a flat smile.

I raised my eyebrows.

“No one is my friend. They just want to be associated with me. They are my...,” she paused looking for the exact word.

“Connections...,” I smiled.

“Yea...a...ah!! I like you,” she cheerfully pointed out at me.

She started out in an excited tone.

“Having friends is a tricky matter. I am not into that business. When I started out as a management trainee, I tried to be social but following the norms was not my cup of tea.”

“Norms?” I gave a quizzical look.

“Yeah, if you have to be in a group, you have to be a part of most of their movie outings. Have to clash your lunch and dinner timings with them. If you go out for shopping, you’ll have to visit all the shops which your ‘friends’ wish to. These didn’t go along with my ambitions.”

“Still, don’t you have an advantage of never being alone?”

“Actually no. When I reflected what I actually want, I discovered it was definitely not having company. I didn’t have an appetite for roaming around and gossip. I like being alone, thinking, making plans, working. I wanted a no-interference life, be it with family, friends or love.”

I lifted my eyes. She looked away and then continued after a brief silence.

“Whether sitting in a movie or sipping coffee along with friends, I remained worried about the project reports or kept on thinking how I’m wasting my time.

“Then I realised this is not what I want. I want to work... work real hard... that’s what I want... that’s what I enjoy.”

She was exactly like me. I have never given anything else more priority than my work.

Success is all that which matters to me.

“Call me a loner but that’s what I am and I am perfectly comfortable being that,” she chuckled.

I was impressed. Very few people love what they do and there was a glint in her eyes when she talked about her work.

I invited her for coffee. She agreed.

We went out on a few more dates. Life was amazing. She wasn’t nagging or persuading.

She was into her work and accepted when I was into mine.

It hadn’t been more than three months since we were dating when I asked her to move in with me.

It was perfect. No questions. No answers. No responsibilities. Still having everything you want.

I once noticed that she always wore semi-formal dresses when we were out.

When I asked, she replied, “I always stay prepared any time of the day lest any business lunch or meeting pops up.” Everything about her made me like her even more.

Round the year things changed... rather Divya changed.

She started getting up and preparing coffee before I got up.

Giving me surprises with decorating the house, planning Friday night outs.

Moreover she began returning from work earlier than me.

Whenever I had a free day, she cancelled all her meetings to be with me. Half of the items in her shopping comprised of male shirts, ties and colognes.

She sporadically dressed up in traditional attires to direct my attention to her.

I liked it all, but there was a fine line between liking and loving which I wasn’t able to cross. We were so comfortable together that I always thought if I should ever... ever decide to get married, Divya could be the girl.

Still I never told her, ‘I love you’ while meaning it. It was more like a ritual – you meet, you kiss, you say ‘I love you’. I once read it somewhere or probably she did, “If you love someone, you not only tell it in words, you say it with your eyes as well.”

I was never successful in getting that balance in my life.

I told Divya several times in words, lacking the truth in my eyes. I told Kasam several times through my eyes, though lacking the words to express them.

I know what I hadn’t given Divya if I think about what I would have given Kasam if she had been in her place instead.

There always comes a girl in one’s life for whom you won’t remain the same person you are.

You will see everything differently.

You will do things which you never thought you will ever do.

You will try to get better and better so as to be the best for her.

The girl who will make you want things you never wanted.

For whom you will get up early just to see her sleep; in memories of whom you will hum romantic tunes... because of whom you will feel nostalgic whenever it rains.

Plenty of other girls will still be beautiful but you will be blinded by her looks to notice anyone else.

It will be more interesting to watch her sip coffee than anything else.

Whom you would want to protect, to take away from everyone, to have her all to yourself.

For whom you would want to make things happen.

Nothing else will matter in your life if you have her...

...And everything else you have will cease to matter if she is not there.

If you have friends and you love them, then you go on to make new friends. You grow your love and start loving them as well. Same doesn't apply to the girl you love. You can't grow more love, neither can you transfer it from one person to another.

Why does it have to be so complicated?

Why did Divya love me?

Why can't I love Divya back?

Why I loved Kasam?

Why can't she love me back?

Why do I still cling on to Kasam? Divya – we were alike, we lived the same life, we liked the same things.

Divya noticed my indifference, but she never noticed how hard I tried to love her and yet I wasn't able to.

Maybe every yin needs a yang, not another yin.

Chapter 5

“After studying for four years, spending such amount of money, I am stuck with this job which pays nothing and the saddest part is no growth rate at all,” my sister shouted at the top of her voice. She was an engineering graduate who didn’t land up a job she deserved, and we continuously had this conversation almost every day since she returned from college.

As usual, my two other sisters were supporting and consoling her while Dad was with his tea.

“What can we do now!?! You will have to work,” my father uttered putting away his cup.

“So what Daddy, you can get her into some better job,” my other sister interrupted.

“How can they pay so less? I mean nobody will even believe that!” my sister added.

“Yes, parents would also think that the company is paying substantially well and their own child is lying. Then the father will go to the son and they will engage in a fight, resulting in an accident where the father slips from the stairs. Finally adding to the misery of son who will now have to pay for additional medical bills.” As my father finished, everyone started laughing.

“Daddy, it’s not something you can go on making a joke about,” my sister was annoyed.

“*Beta*, why do you get so tense about everything? Situations will get better.”

“Yeah, then my project lead will go and ask me to make coffee for him!” My sister wasn’t listening at all to anyone else.

“Then don’t make it,” my Dad answered casually.

“I’ll get fired!” my sister fired back at him.

“Stuff sugar, coffee beans and milk in his mouth and then ask him politely to shake his body,” my father retorted with a hint of laughter in his voice.

My sister smiled at last and said, “I can’t do that.”

Everyone took a little time out of their giggles to ask her, “Why?”

“They will give me a certificate of misconduct.”

“Don’t go for taking,” my father uttered.

We all started laughing our heart out.

“Okay! We will discuss it later as I have to go and stop Akash’s bus.”

Dad left the room.

“I can’t help it. They will give me that certificate anyway,” my sister shouted from behind.

Dad walked back and continued his joke.

“Go there, take the certificate and ask, ‘Sir, is your name written over there?’” my father finally left.

At my home everybody gets up very early in the morning. As my Dad got up at 4:30, he made tea for himself and read chemistry books. Don’t assume he was chemistry professor. He read so as to teach my second sister who was doing chemistry honours. My mother didn’t qualify as much of a healthy person. So my father took care of most of the household chores. At around six, he used to switch off all the fans to prevent us from catching cold. Next, he opened all the windows to let the fresh breeze in. Then at six we all got up at the sound of his voice. I was the laziest one. It was impossible for me to go to sleep or even wake up early. So, every day I was late for my school bus which arrived at 6:20. That’s why Dad used to go early to the bus stop to stall it for me. There was a tea-stall nearby. Every morning he tempted the bus conductor to have tea on his treat while I used to catch up.

Today again the same routine followed.

As for my father, I can never find enough words to describe him. He isn’t only the provider of our family, he is the provider of our souls.



“Tell me,” Kasam was continuously flashing her fingers in front of my eyes.

“Have you changed your ring?” I acted confused.

“No, it’s the same. Something else...”

“Got it! Different nail colour?”

“Nope... how can you not see it?”

“What...?” I laughed in desperation.

“I have shaped my nails in a square manner.”

“What were they before?” My confusion increased.

“Earlier my nails were rounded.”

“Oh...yaa!” I made a learned expression.

She was looking at me with eyes full of expectations.

“They are fabulous! Your fingers never looked so good.”

“Yes I knew it!” she closed her fists and shook them.

However hard it was for me to understand her excitement, it was always a pleasure to watch her.

If it wouldn’t have been for her, I would’ve never known ‘the various ways in which girls shape their nails’.

“Do you wanna go out to take the print-outs for your assignment?” I

questioned.

“Cool with me. I’ll wait for you after school,” she chuckled.



I scanned the playground. She was standing near the main-gate with Priya. I progressed towards her with frankie in one hand and my schoolbag that now slipped down the other arm.

As she was coming toward me, Kasam exchanged sides with Priya so as to be adjacent to me. I virtually dived in the air, punching my fist back and forth several times. She let her hair loose and clutched her hair clip to the strap of her bag.

“For you,” I handed her the frankie.

“I don’t eat from the canteen.”

“I noticed you didn’t bring lunch. So, I got this for you.”

“You don’t understand, I’m allergic to...”

“I asked him ‘not to add capsicum’,” I added, softly cutting her out.

Her lips stretched into a smile as she quickly grabbed the frankie.

“Let’s get going, I need to be home early,” Kasam uttered with her mouth full.

“Priya, you coming?” I asked wishing for her to not come.

“You two carry on. I have a movie to attend,” she left us alone.

We walked in slow steps to reach the main road.

“Why are you rubbing your forehead now and then?” I was concerned.

“I went for threading yesterday and that bitch of a beautician attacked me!”

I wasn’t able to control my laughter – not because of what happened but because of Kasam’s animation.

“You are a bad... bad... boy,” she faked anger.

“Didn’t they apply powder or something?” I questioned.

Her face lighted up.

“How do you know they apply powder?” Excitement in her tone was apparent.

“Ehh... ehh...,” I acted sheepish.

“Akash Kashyap, I am not letting you go away with this!”

“It’s nothing, when I was a kid my Mom used to take me to the parlour along with her. That’s why.”

“Ohooo! That’s why,” she said, rounding her lips.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, lowered my head and started walking with a smile.

I hope I was looking cool.

We reached the auto stand. We both settled at the back.

“*Bhaiya*, come in front and leave the back seat for ladies,” the autodrivers shrieked. My smile disappeared.

“*Bhaiya*, come in front.”

I looked at Kasam. She teased me by indicating with her hands to go in front.

Forced to sit in front, I kept on turning back every now and then.

“*Bhaiya*, sit properly. I am having problem driving,” he opened his mouth again.

I felt like killing him.

I turned in front, hugged my bag and sulked. I felt Kasam’s hand over my shoulder.

I turned a little as she directed me with her finger and I looked straight, following her lead.

Oh Ghosh! I could see her in my side mirror.

She bent her head to a side and smiled. I was taken to heaven. My lips parted in awe.

Oh ghosh again! I can see her – that means even she can see me. I immediately closed my mouth. She giggled.

I kept staring at her.

‘What will she think?’

I looked ahead at the road.

‘Is she looking at me?’

I looked back.

‘Oh ghosh! She isn’t looking at me.’ All of a sudden a sudden she looked at me, then raised her eyebrow. I shook my head and rested backwards.

On top of that, the *autowala* was playing the song ‘*milan abhi adha adhura he...*’.

We were already at Forum Mart. The journey seemed timeless.

“Hey, this pen-drive is mine. Take the print while I use the internet.”

It was 2002: a time when normal people didn’t have either the know-how or the access to the internet.

It was a pink coloured pen-drive, just as cute as her.

I gave the PD for printing.

“What are you doing? What’s this?” I asked Kasam as I joined her.

“This is called a chat room. Multiple people can chat at a time. And to whosoever you like, you can send them a request to chat individually.”

“Angeloflove@rediffmail.com,” I read aloud her email-id.

“Isn’t it cool?”

I smiled. She went on chatting with several people. Even in a virtual world, everyone wanted a piece of her. She seemed like a completely different person. Her face lighted in excitement. Her slender fingers were busy typing and I was very busy staring at her.

“Yogi is one of my chat friends. He is about to get married. It’s arranged. He was having trouble to accept the whole scenario. I gave him the suggestion to meet the girl and know how she feels. Maybe her belief will make him believe. And now everything is sorted out,” she was jumping in excitement.

I just smiled. Somewhere I didn’t like her talking with so many guys.

“There is another friend of mine – Rashmi.”

Thank God. She was talking about a girl.

“He is...”

“He is’? I felt exhausted. As she continued, “He’s a model and so is his girlfriend Kimmi .”

She tucked in her half tucked shirt while walking on the road.

“He is a great guy. Handsome... six packs... awesome.”

I looked at myself.

“Kimmi is even more hot. They make an awesome pair.” She buttoned up her shirt to the brim and tightened her tie.

“Rashmi, in spite of being in the same modelling world, has never smoked, let alone drinking.”

She halted at the footpath, kneeled down and pulled her socks up till her knees. I never knew they were this long.

“Kimmi is an addict. Rashmi’s family won’t ever accept her.”

She spoke as she removed her bangles and rings and kept them in her bag and undid her clutch from her bag’s strap and then tied her hair. I was more than confused.

“He wants to marry her but Kimmi is not ready to quit smoking. He is unable to find a way out.

“Even I am not able to help.”

I seriously got anxious when she removed *kajal* by rubbing her fingers vigorously along her lower eyelids.

“What exactly are you doing?” I yelled out.

She smiled and then patted over my shoulder.

“You know if somebody goes to my home and reveals today I was with a guy at Forum Mart and I contradict and answer that I was all afternoon at home studying, nobody’s going to question me back. However, the other person will be thrown out of the house.”

“Context?” I inquired.

“Do you think with my kind of lifestyle – dressing, attitude – I can afford to maintain such an image?” she explained with a mischievous smile.

“Why have a dual life?”

“There is something known as ‘generation gap’ dear.”

“Still, I don’t think you need to hide things from your parents,” I contradicted.

“When I have a daughter, same age as mine and she gets dressed in a

miniskirt with a strapless blouse, seeks permission to leave for disco say at 11 p.m. at night with her boyfriend, who is blowing the horn continuously downstairs, even I won't allow her although I might like to do such a thing. If I won't allow my daughter for the same twenty-five years later, how can my parents do so for me now? I just want to spare them the trouble."

She stretched her hands and marched ahead of me. I followed her in awe – why do I keep falling for her again and again?



Three missed calls and I was good to go. As it was the era of landlines, Kasam gave me the 'unique identification mechanism'.

"Hello," she picked the call but there was lot of background noise.

"Hold on a second. Let me switch off the radio."

Suddenly it was all peaceful.

"Hey, again."

"Hi, who the hell listens to radio nowadays?"

"I do."

"Strange."

"No, it's fun! In a CD you listen to only those songs about which you know, which already are your favourites, but over radio you listen to songs you have never known before.

"Songs you have heard before but never liked much, but somehow at that moment it suits your mood of life. Listening to radio surprises you, thus it's much more fun. You experience things from others' point of view. When you have run out of your own options, you find happiness in someone else's choices," she blurted out, sounding grateful. Probably I was the first one to ask about this.

Rest of the conversation was just as usual. I wondered, wasn't Kasam like a radio for me? Every day I discovered a new song; even a new style of music. Now, I am not the one I used to be any more. I experience everything from her point of view. I experience everything with her.

My choices, my options, my decisions are all about her. Most importantly, 'Am I not finding happiness in it?'



Next day I saw Kasam while leaving for school as I walked one-and-a-half kilometres from my home to board the bus with her.

She was sitting over a bench beneath a tree, folding her socks down to her ankle.

I couldn't help but laugh, shaking my head while pushing both hands in my pocket as I rushed towards her.



Dear Romeo,

Today I asked Priya to come along.

She refused, saying, "I don't want to upset your boyfriend."

"He isn't my boyfriend," I stated in plain words.

"Does he know that?" Priya went ahead, chuckling.

Despite that I remained still there.

I have done a lot of things today; been to a lot of places, but my life, my thoughts, everything are stuck at that point.

"Does he know that?"

"Do I want him to know that?"

"Do I want him to ask me?"

"Do I want to put a label over what we have?"

"Do I..."

If you find the answer, do let me know.

*Love
Juliet*

Chapter 6

Google image results...

Abu Dhabi

As I glanced over the screen, my anger erupted like hot lava.

“Planning your holiday, Mr Rakesh Bedi?”

He turned back in anxiety.

On noticing that it’s me, he quickly minimised the screen.

“I won’t question you today. Instead you question yourself – were you doing what you are being paid for?”

“Sorry.”

I stared at him in anger.

“Akash, you come with me. Mr Bedi, get back to your work,” Ved dragged me along.

“He needs to leave,” I said in a flat but stern voice, when we reached my cabin.

“Who?” Ved asked casually.

“Rakesh.”

“You’re really thinking about firing him?”

“Yes.”

“Give him a chance.”

“I have issued five prior notices to him to improve his behaviour.”

“Still, it’s a big step. He is a nice fellow and is more than qualified for this job.”

“He maybe, but we don’t get benefits from qualified employees, rather from those who are qualified and work hard as well.”

“Maybe there is some reason. Probably he isn’t placed in the right domain. He has some conflicts with the team or...”

“It’s my duty to get the work done on time, not personal counselling. If after five warnings, he doesn’t improve, he’ll never do.”

“Aren’t you getting too harsh? He is married, has a family. You should give him another chance.”

“Don’t you think he should be the one to be considerate about these factors?” I slammed the laptop lid hard.

I placed both the hands over my desk and hung my head low, breathing out

to cool off.

Ved was standing at the opposite end of the room.

“You are taking something else’s anger out on somebody else.”

He had stepped on a wrong nerve.

“What do you mean?”

“Is it about Divya?” he asked with a suppressed voice along with a long pause in between .

I immediately looked at him, our eyes met for a brief moment and I left the room.

As I breathed out, everything was lost in fumes. What happened just now, what happened last night, what has been happening all throughout?

“*Ye dhuane... dhuane sa rehne do...*,” sound surrounded the closed smoking area.

I smiled without turning back. I often wondered what had I ever done to make him think we were such good friends. Whatever it was, I owed that deed a lot.

“For a change, start talking about your feelings,” I felt Ved’s palm over my shoulder.

I felt my muscles tightening.

I don’t know what got into me as I turned back and hugged Ved.

“You should call it a day,” Ved whispered. I nodded.

“I would like to carry along...”

Ved deliberately tagged himself along with me.

“I am going by local, so...,” I paused before answering in ‘no’ as it came to me that this guy had done much for me to receive a ‘no’ in any situation.



“I am so excited ‘the Akash’ has allowed me to accompany His Majesty to a local station,” Ved said, overanimated over his excitement.

In our fifteen minutes’ wait, he asked me more than fifty times ‘when will the train arrive’, though I wasn’t keeping a count of it.

“Don’t put questions like a five-year old who hasn’t travelled by a local.” I finally gave up.

“Dude, since the day I got into this city, I have owned a car. Everyone doesn’t share your luxuries.”

I wanted to ask then why today, but kept mum as I already knew the answer.

The train arrived and Ved tried to jump into the first compartment which halted in front.

Blocking him, I pointed, “We are moving to that one.”

Ved gave me a quizzical look but sensing he had no other option, simply followed.

He was lucky enough to land up a seat. In his excitement, he even managed to grab one for me.

I shook my hands in refusal and turned my back towards him.

Just in a few minutes, my world again came to a standstill.

She was there. From the moment I saw those glittering bangles, I knew there was no other who could contrast multi-coloured bangles with white shirt and blue jeans. As soon as she was in, she swiftly swung the red printed stole on to her shoulder. The ladies' compartment was empty, so she grabbed the window side seat. Then she hung her bag by the edge of her seat, stuffed earphones in her ears as rested on the seat. She then surveyed the area. I tried to hide, in spite of knowing that she wasn't looking for me.

A few minutes passed... she looked a little drowsy. She pulled out her *dupatta*, folded it as to form a pillow, placed it over the seat's metal frame, folded her legs and closed her eyes.

She was sporting golden eye-shadow which made her face look even more radiant. She glittered among the others, like always. She looked beautiful – her face was at such ease that it even made my thoughts peaceful.

It was hardly fifteen minutes that a fat woman in her mid-forties appeared out of nowhere and was tapping on her shoulders. I wanted to yell out, 'Don't wake her up. It's hard for her to regain sleep once somebody disturbs her.'

However, there has always been a difference between what I want and what I do.

She woke up with a jerk and adjusted to accommodate that fatsy.

"Now I know why we didn't go in that other compartment."

As I shifted my gaze, Ved was smiling while looking straight at Kasam. I smiled to myself and focused on Kasam again.

Chapter 7

Date: 17th July 1999

Dear Diary,

So, it's been a really long time, huh! Actually, today morning Daddy went to fetch Mommy's medicine and I went to take my bath while Ananya was at school. That was the time when Mommy fled away, what she usually does these days. Daddy was really angry this time. She returned at 1 p.m. when Daddy wasn't at home. When he came back home, he sent her out of the house and said that if that's what she wants, then she should leave once and for all. But, everything settled down and she entered back. However, later that evening at 6:30, when Ananya came upstairs, she told me that Daddy had driven her out of the home again and she had no money. We went downstairs but none of us dared to speak about that. We were feeling really bad and we thought that Daddy overreacted. All of a sudden she seemed like a nice, poor person and we all were wishing for her to come back. When she didn't return by 8 p.m., we got tense again and told Daddy to look for her but he said that we shouldn't be bothered about her.

Mommy came back at around 8:30. She had taken Ananya's saved pocket money and also spent it. Then she just went back to her old habit, which was a lot of abuse. When she starts saying all that cheap and abusive stuff, I feel like hitting right on her face with a baseball bat, really hard. She only abuses Daddy, which makes me feel really bad 'coz he has to bear it all just for the sake of avoiding us getting spoiled. Right now, we all wish for her to just go somewhere, just not around here and we won't care. We will be just fine.

In everyone's life there are some chapters which are never read. They are kept hidden from others so as to hide it from oneself. Probably I landed over one such chapter in Kasam's life.

Still perplexed to comprehend, when I saw her tear-filled eyes.

"Kasam," my voice broke.

"How dare you read my diary?" she uttered a sudden loud cry.

"I... didn't... you asked me to grab your notebook."

“Don’t you understand the difference between a diary and a notebook?”

By the time I stepped towards her, she escaped, with her eyes brimming with tears.

I wandered restlessly through the corridors, looking for her.

Asked for her in the canteen... gave the library a thought... nah... it wasn’t a place for her.

I even asked Priya to check the ladies’ room.

Then as a bolt of lightning struck me... maybe I knew where she was.

A few minutes later, ‘may’ was wiped out. She was there, sitting alone in the barren backyard of our school, playing with a small, perhaps wild flower. Her face had shades of pink. Normally if a fair girl such as her cries, they develop this texture. Her eyes were moist, but she wasn’t crying any more. There was a used coffee cup lying by her side with edges chewed. She had this peculiar habit of biting the paper coffee cup while drinking.

I went to her with unhurried steps and knelt down on the ground beside her. I looked into her eyes; she immediately closed them.

“You know, whenever in life I see a cup in this condition again, I will know it’s you. There can be no other.”

I managed to bring a smile on her face.

“Get up, it’s not your fault...,” she extended her hand to me. Though it was most of my effort but she pulled on to me.

“I am sorry.”

“You are forgiven,” I smiled.

“In fact, you did me a favour.”

My face made my bewilderment evident.

“You know all the girls, they want to be like me. My looks... my kind of style... my pocket money... the way guys fall for me... they want it all. To put it simply, they want my life. They think it’s perfect. I want to preserve that ‘thinking’. I don’t want people to talk about me behind my back. I don’t want them to know that there is even a single thing wrong in my life. *I am a star – they shine, never cry,*” she said with a smirk.

She spoke with such conviction that my eyes were forced to remain perplexed – fixed on her eyes.

“Four years back, when Mommy left us and went to her parent’s house, I was left crying, being alone in my house. Out of the blue, one of my friends turned up. I was so miserable and lonely that I blurted out everything. She said my life was her fantasy as she thought I had nothing to be worried about at all.”

“That very moment I realised ‘why share your pain when you know they are incapable of reducing it’. It will only put a red mark on the image they form of me.”

There was a strange softness in her eyes when she said, “But your

accidentally reading my diary and gave me a reason to share my secret with someone.”

All of a sudden, I felt wanted.

“My parent’s marriage was a mistake. My Mom never wanted to get married in the first place. She wanted to study but her parents forced her into marrying when very young. Daddy was establishing his business at that time, so he didn’t bring Mom home after marrying and she stayed with her parents for three years after marriage. I was born meanwhile. They never got the time to know each other and connect. While Mom was there at her home, constant questions like ‘Why you are still living here’ by her parents, neighbours and relatives, and Daddy’s indifference to her pain made her impervious to any commitment towards the marriage. Finally, Daddy brought her home when my uncle asked him directly to do so. Even after that, he was very much engaged in his work. He didn’t take Mommy for an outing and whenever he asked, Mommy refused. Daddy never liked fancy clothes, jewellery or makeup. He scolded Mom if she ever got overdressed.

“Slowly Mommy started blaming us – her own family for her state of life... loss of her career... rather she never accepted us as her family.

“Slowly she left doing all household chores and transferred all decision making to Daddy. But what remained nontransferable was our requirement of a mother’s love, care and advice. She kept on abandoning us and running to her past. In due course of time, Daddy understood that it’s no longer about his marriage, it’s more about his kids and lived with that very well. Alas! My mother wasn’t able to do the same.”

In my weirdest imagination even I never expected Kasam’s life to be like this. She was always so cheerful, happy, fun-filled. Perhaps she was so fun due to a miserable childhood. Maybe that’s why she lived every moment doing what she liked, being what she was and loving her life.

“Akash... when a marriage fails, people keep coming bubbling out with various reasons for its failure. But if they already knew these things before the marriage, why didn’t they stop it beforehand? My relatives said Mommy was *manglik* and Daddy wasn’t, probably that qualified as the major accomplice in the crime; or because Daddy married within one year of a death in the family. However, everyone knew these before, but they kept mum ‘coz they also knew despite these things, the marriage can still work. It just needed a try at the right time from both the sides.”

‘Wow...’ I thought to myself, ‘she was quite grownup for her age’.

“Still all those years – seeing Daddy and Mommy fighting; Ananya and me staying awake at night, planning what we can do to unite them; seeing in people’s eyes that our family isn’t normal, avoiding bringing friends at home, unknowing what could be the scenario.

“Neighbours always asking if everything was alright at home – ‘is your

Mom still living with you?'; relatives hesitating to come and visit us – on the whole, parents mess their marriage and their children who are incapable of cleaning it, live with that. The last thing I would let happen is to let my marriage go wrong, if not for me, then for my children as they don't deserve a childhood like mine.”

She finished talking, lowering her head while still playing with that small flower.

“I am sorry I brought that up.”

“Don't be. Though if you want to make it up, then there's one thing you can do...”

I got scared of the mischievous smile she gave with that line.

I ended up taking a whole round of the school with that flower plucked beside my ear.

So, that was Kasam, changing within a flash of lightning

While leaving the school, I handed her diary back to her. A few ten rupee notes fell from it. I reached out and on flipping the pages of the diary, a few more notes came out.

“What's it...”

“I hide money in books and finding makes me ecstatic.”

“Are you insane or something?”

“No, I am not,” her simple answers were always direct and mesmerising.

“You will lose all the money.”

“It doesn't matter; having them won't make me happy anyways. What if I find happiness by losing them? What matters more – the money or my happiness? Even you should try it, only then you would know the feeling.”

“No thanks. I am not as rich as you.”

“It's not about being rich. I keep only ten or twenty-rupee notes. Nobody gets poor even by losing them.”

“Point taken,” I said with a salute.

However illogical I found that idea but I realised that the beauty of life never lay in logic.

Later that afternoon, I took her to a *mela* going on in town hall to cheer her up.

On the way I learned she always carried spare clothes in her bag just in case she decided to sneak out for a movie, shopping, etc. We stopped at a mall for her to change.

It's not like I have never been to a *mela* or to a cyber café, but being at those places with her seemed like a raw experience. Everything seemed new, everything seemed beautiful.

So, there I was with a beautiful girl whose aura made everything around her as beautiful .

“Hey... Kasam.”

“Hii... Reena.”

“You know her?” I whispered to Kasam.

“Yeah!! She is in the evening shift in our school itself,” Kasam whispered back to me.

“You look beautiful, Reena. I have never seen you look any better; did you go shopping?” as Kasam said this, I did a full scan of Reena.

She was wearing a red T-shirt with shimmering black jacket paired up with light blue jeans. It was early October, so it was kind of cold in Lucknow.

Reena had braces and had let down her hair but they had streaks of white in them.

I shifted my gaze back on Kasam.

Black T-shirt with red print, a netted long black sweater open from front, blue denim skirt ending a few inches above her knees, low-lying velvet boots, black bangles, silky hair flowing till her waist; to top it all her gorgeous looks.

How the hell did Kasam tell her she was looking beautiful?

“Ohh... really... you think so...!?” Reena was surprised and asked with hesitation in her voice.

“Yeah... you look awesome!” Kasam spoke with such assurance in her eyes that anyone would believe.

We passed an enchanted Reena held spellbound by Kasam word-spells.

“Why did you lie to her?”

“I didn’t.”

“If you call her beautiful, what would that make you? Beautiful to the power thousand?”

“If I am damn beautiful doesn’t mean others won’t be beautiful.”

“Do you know how beautiful you are?”

“Of course I do, and I never hesitate to find beauty in others.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“If you had seen Reena in school, then you would have known why I said so.

“She looked unkempt... disshevelled. But today she was so well dressed; maybe it was one of her best outfit. She was wearing eye-liner that’s like going on the extreme to look beautiful. When she would have left home, she must have expected a few comments.

“I gave her one.”

“Still it was a lie,” I contradicted her.

“You won’t give up. It wasn’t a lie. She was looking beautiful compared to her usual self and that’s important. Aishwarya Rai is damn beautiful; that doesn’t mean other girls won’t be. As rightly said by John Keats, ‘Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder’.”

I smiled to myself. Kasam had once told me ‘there’s more to me... more than my looks’. Now I realised what she meant.

She wasn't just beautiful from the outside but even more beautiful from the inside. In fact there was so much beauty to her that my eyes were unable to behold.

As I immersed in her immense beauty, she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

I searched for her and saw her in a stall, trying out bracelets. A few minutes earlier I was furious at how she could leave without looking whether I was following or not. What if she got lost? Okay that was bit silly, still, if in case... but seeing her so lost in those shiny little stuff, I decided that holding my tongue was best. So I followed her.

She asked, "Do you like it?"

"Don't they have something better?"

Her face flushed. I understood she liked it enough to buy.

"It's good."

"Really, but you said..."

"I was just messing with you," I cut her out.

"I should get it then," her face lighted.

She kept on running from one shop to another and I followed her.

What if I didn't like it? As long as she was happy, nothing else mattered.

"Forward me that scrunchy..."

"What??" I was bemused.

"Those bracelets where lots of stuffs hang from a single chain like that one..." she pointed.

Here she was adding words to my girl encyclopaedia.

I saw a chain with the letter 'K' over it.

"Hey try this..."

Kasam's smile broadened on seeing that chain.

She immediately tried it and uttered, "I am taking it."

The shopkeeper extended his hand to pack it up.

"Oh... no thanks!! I will be wearing it."

Now it was time for my smile to broaden.

I always thought these Disneyland sort of things were about rides and food. Today I came to know that for girls, it was all about shopping.

"Candy floss!" she jumped.

I rushed to bring one for her.

A little flake of candy floss stuck to her nose.

I indicated her to remove it. She wandered her finger along her lips till her nose, but still wasn't able to get rid of it.

I advanced my hand to remove it. When I touched her skin, it felt like snow... her nose was extremely delicate. I wondered whether anyone had such a soft nose. I removed that speck of candy floss. I don't know what got into me for as I turned back I grabbed her nose and shook it lightly.

Kasam smiled at me, then shook my nose and walked ahead.

I touched my nose – it almost hurt after the ‘bar of softness’ had been raised.

‘*Pani puri!*’ she screamed.

I watched her having that.

“Will you have one?”

“No, I am good.”

“Yeah... anyway, guys shouldn’t have *pani puri*,” she winked at me.

There was a little girl standing over there, asking for money. Kasam looked at her and asked the *pani-puriwala* to feed that girl as well.

“*Bhaiya... pure dus rupiye ke khilana,*” saying this, we walked from there.

“How terrible is it that these small girls are forced into being beggars. Just near her another girl was buying ice-cream dressed nicely, holding the hands of her parents.”

“Yeah, my Daddy also does the same. He never gives money to them; instead gives them something to eat.”

Next, before I knew, we were in a haunted house. It was kind of fun as Kasam went to make jokes about everything we were supposed to be scared of. There was a couple watching ahead of us... cuddling... holding hands...

“Watch this,” Kasam winked at me.

She moved closer to them and patted on their shoulders. As they turned, she yelled at the top of her voice.

“Aaaahhh...”

The couple got scared and busted out, yelling back, “Aaaahhhh...”

Kasam came running to me, grabbed my hand and we got out as soon as possible. We laughed our hearts out on recalling that couple’s faces.

After three hours of doing what she wanted, she wanted to leave.

“Won’t we go over rides?”

“I am not very good with them.”

“This time it will be different.”

She hesitantly nodded her head in ‘yes’.

We got into the flying wheel and sat at the farthest end. It slowly reached the highest so that the others could hop in the remaining seats.

Then it progressed downwards slowly.

I heard a soft murmur: it was coming from Kasam. I wasn’t able to make out what it was. I concentrated. “*Anjani putra pawan sut nama.*”

She was reciting the *Hanuman-chalisa*.

In my weirdest of dreams even I never thought she might know the *Hanuman-chalisa*. I knew some of it because Dad recited it every other day.

The ride was now moving faster. Kasam got restless. She closed her eyes and clutched her hands to the edge of the seat and started reciting *Hanuman-chalisa* all aloud.

People in the nearby seats started laughing on looking at her.

As I couldn't say anything to her, I mocked the others to stop them. They didn't shut up.

Kasam opened her eyes. I took her hand in mine.

"You won't fall..." as I uttered this, she looked into my eyes.

"As I will never let you fall..." I finished.

During the whole ride, I held her hand with her eyes gripped to mine.

"Ahh!! Finally it's over!" she uttered.

'Shit! It's over,' I thought.

"Hey..." she went ahead and grabbed a big balloon.

"Don't tell me you are going to buy that?" I asked.

"I am not going to buy it... I am definitely buying it!"

There we were sitting on a corner bench with a big yellow balloon.

She sneaked in her bag and grabbed a marker and started scribbling something on that balloon.

"Hey... what are you doing?"

She rotated the written part towards me and smiled.

'Amul chocolate... *jeene ke ishare mil gaye...* a Smiley face... lilies... blue... some random words and few pictures were drawn...'

"What's it?" I asked, still unclear.

"I always buy a balloon like this one, then write all those things on to it which comes in my mind at that time and the things I like. Then I hang it on the ceiling of my room and whenever I see it, I feel nice..."

She took around fifteen more minutes to complete before we headed home – carrying her balloon which was once struck by a car and flew to the opposite end of the road. She made me run all the way round to get it back.

Though monsoon was gone, its remnants were still there – it started drizzling.

I was about to drag the umbrella out of my bag when I saw Kasam walking in front of me with her pink umbrella. I pushed mine back in and rushed to catch up with her.

She spotted me walking next to her without an umbrella.

She looked forward, then threw a glance at me.

"Don't you have an umbrella?"

"No."

"Are you fine?"

"Yes."

A few minutes passed.

"Come on in, otherwise you'll catch a cold."

Those words felt like rose petals raining over my ears.

I promptly slid in beside her, took the umbrella from her and held it high to accommodate me as well, though I offered Kasam most side of it. For me it wasn't about protection from rain.

We walked with rain trickling over the umbrella and the cold wind gushing in... chilling our bones... in silence... till I broke it.

“So when did you learn the *Hanuman-chalisa*?”

“Last to last year, when I was preparing for tenth Board. I used to stay awake at night. I used to get scared, so I learned just this much ‘*bhoot pisach nikat nai awae...*’ Later I learned whole of it.”

As a new chapter unfolded, I felt like I was reading a whole new book.



“You came very late today,” Dad said.

“Went out with friends,” I answered.

“Who are these friends of yours whom I don’t know about?”

“They are my new friends,” I said with a little irritation in my voice.

“Come, have a seat,” Dad said with unexpected calmness in his voice.

“Nowadays parents need to remain more concerned about their boy than their girls. Everyone is concerned when their daughter is leaving home and when she is returning, what she’s wearing; not only the parents, even the neighbours keep a watch over her activities. However, people forget about their lads. In due course of time, nobody notices when he is going or when he is returning. Yet with the rage of smoking, drinking, drugs, etc., it becomes more important to keep a track on your boy’s life – whether he is having the right friends or what his company is, adding to his habits. That’s why I asked.”

It was unbelievable how he put these complicated conversations into such simple words.

Probably the experience of raising four kids with me being the youngest.

I looked in his eyes.

“Dad, there isn’t anything going around about which you should be worried. I will try not to be late from now on.”

“Go to your room. I will go ask your Mom to give you *haldi dudh*.”

A few minutes later Mom came into my room.

“Mom, come here,” I shook her nose.

“Nah, it’s not that soft,” the response automatically came out of my mouth.

“What?” Mom asked.

Nothing. I hid my face in the pillow to avoid any questions.



Dear Romeo,

Today he was walking in the rain without an umbrella, though he was carrying one – I saw the top of an umbrella peeping through his bag.

I asked him ‘Don’t you have an umbrella?’.

He answered, ‘No’.

*I also know why he lied.
Maybe there are some unanswered questions between us.
I will wait for him to ask them.*

*Love
Juliet*

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Chapter 8

Prayas – A Beginning

Try and you will succeed... 'coz everyone else isn't.

—Kasam

I read the board and smiled.

How am I here? Long story short – Ved googled about Kasam residing in Mumbai. Thanks to her unique name, the list wasn't long. I wasn't very involved but wasn't very reluctant too. Some part of me wanted Ved to go ahead with the search. After a few filters we were able to scan her down. When I saw the website Prayas, for some implicit reason it felt like Kasam.

The name, the tagline, it was all Kasam.

So here I am. I marched inside the twenty-two storey building, Prayas being on seventh. The guard saw me but didn't budge. It's the clothes that make all the difference. With no delay I was at the reception.

"I am here to see Ms Kasam."

The receptionist gave me a monotonous smile, "Go straight, then turn right and look for hall No. 3."

I walked inside after thanking her.

"Who's up for some stretching?" Kasam's voice echoed in the silence. The crowd exchanged confused glances and murmuring started. I saw a smile lingering around Kasam's lips.

She yelled out, "Come on! Everyone I want you all to stand and raise your hands."

Some promptly followed her instructions. Others somehow dragged themselves up and slowly raised their arms.

Kasam raised her voice, "Is this the highest you can reach?"

Now her words alerted them.

Everyone became serious. They straightened their arms and tried to stand on their toes.

Kasam smiled and lowered her tone, "Is it?"

Now there were a few jumping jacks in the crowd. She pointed to one of the boys who was jumping.

"If you think that's the highest, think about it again."

Then some random guy got up from his chair and struggled to touch the roof. He was graced with a few giggles and a few claps.

Kasam smiled, "Get down now." She continued, "Now the most important question is why you didn't think of standing on the chair when I first asked you to stand and raise your hand?"

She drifted her sight to all, "For that matter, why didn't you all try getting up on your toes?" she cleared her throat.

I smiled, standing in a distant corner.

"I need an answer, buds," Kasam asked enthusiastically.

"We didn't know your expectations," someone shouted from the back.

"Interesting. Can't I turn the question the other way around and say you didn't realise your potential?" she paused to see their reaction.

They looked enlightened. She continued, "My expectations don't have a limitation. It will modify according to your abilities. Instead, your abilities are something which will define a bar for my expectations."

She went back to the dais and picked up a marker. She uttered while opening the marker, "You know the disease we all suffer from?"

She started writing something on the board. When she moved, it read, 'That-will-do-it-attitude'.

"Yes 'that will do it' attitude...", she faced the crowd.

"We always perform according to this theory, whether it be achieving in our studies, our work or extending help to our family and friends." A few people nodded.

"We always need some stick to push us forward. In exams, the stick is fear of failing or moment of glory. In work competition, promotions and perks are the stick. For family or friends, their love, their respect for you or 'they will do the same for you' in case can serve as the stick."

She stepped in between the crowd and joined her hands.

"Suppose you are asked to run a 50-metre race. You go for it and return successful. Then you know you can run a 50-metre race," Kasam shrugged her shoulders.

"What about the 100-metre, 500-metre and so on. You still have no idea about them. You may or may not, but you will never know until and unless you pull up your socks and actually try," she stressed the word try.

"That's why trying is important. It helps you to know your abilities and if possible, to extend them," Kasam raised her head and smiled at them.

"I will stop now and you all will have to share your own life experiences where you went beyond your capacity. Remember, capacity is not a hair clutch, it's rather a hair band." Saying this, she took a seat.

Some girl in a sizzling red top got up, "Hi, I'm Sweta and I would like to share something with you all."

Everyone's focus, including Kasam's shifted to her. Some girl now

identified as Sweta continued in a comfortable tone, “It is something from the time when I was in the tenth grade, preparing for the Boards. Every day I used to make a fourteen-hour study plan for the following day, including gruesome concepts and derivations which were hard to grasp. I always knew I can never study for fourteen hours a day. However, in an attempt to achieve my target I outdid myself. Whatever outcome was there, it was much higher than what I expected from myself. Thus setting a goal beyond my capacity worked for me. I hope it does for you all as well.”

Others supported her with claps.

“Thank you Sweta, for adding such a wonderful real-life instance to our session. If others haven’t tried it before, it’s your time now.

“Who goes next?”

A few more people talked about their experiences as Kasam listened to them attentively.

Somewhere in between I lost the focus, as I was immersed in countless memories.

“Okay! I will call it a day. If you get a chance, try...,” everyone laughed over the word ‘try’.

Kasam joined them for a few seconds and continued, “and read ‘*You can Win*’.”

I came to my senses as Kasam stood up. She was doing what she was best at – ‘changing people’s life’. My heart beat accelerated.

I inched a bit towards her but retracted my half completed step. My heart raced. Same as it does when I spend a night in a bar and out of nowhere I am supposed to give a presentation the next day in the morning about the progress I have been making. The distance I traverse from my place to the projector screen seems the longest. My legs get stiff and when I walk, they start to tremble. I feel minor tremors in my body, fearing when I’ll view the slides, I’ll go blank. Maybe I’ll try to speak and the words won’t come out.

Reaching out to Kasam however, was much worse than that. It was accompanied by anxiety, hope and fear.

What if she looks at me and asks – ‘May I help you?’

I turned back with firm steps and confused emotions. A wedge connected us which neither allowed me come near her nor allowed me to let her off my sight. I returned back with slow, unsteady steps, without being seen by her. I slid back into my car and my heart stabilised.

I fastened the seat belt, thrust the engine and placed my hands on the steering wheel. Suddenly, I dropped my head down and breathed out as if I wasn’t breathing this whole time. Finally, I managed to collect myself.

As I opened my eyes, I saw Kasam. She was standing on the other side of the road; looking left, then right and right, then left. The road was quite busy – nothing unusual. She adjusted her bag and clutched it to her chest, holding

the strap by both her hands. She was scared as always. That was the reason she never rode anything, not even a bicycle. There she goes – she tried to run through the gaps and almost crashed into someone’s car. Poor guy!

I unbuckled my seat belt, shook my head, smiled to myself and banged my car door open. With a little struggle, I was on the other side of the road. I was by her side. In no time I was in front of her. As I indicated to her to stay back through my hands, her face went blank.

I took her bag as I knew if she could only handle herself, that would be a big enough favour for both of us. I stood in front of her, stopping cars with one hand and escorting her by the other.

I glanced and raised my eyebrows at her. She slowly flipped her eyes.

I didn’t hold her but something told me she was following. A few minutes later, we were in the middle of the road. I hastened to break the crowd apart. Suddenly I turned back and Kasam wasn’t there. I searched for her and found her stuck to a spot. I progressed towards her and took her hand in mine.

In no time we were at the divider. I pulled her hand and shifted her to the other side. She was too amazed, excited or confused to react.

It all happened so fast, I wasn’t thinking at all. We finally were on the other side. She followed me to my car. Our eyes were locked just when I realised her hand was still in my grasp. I quickly let go. After a brief silence I opened the door for her.

She looked at the car and then at me. Her gaze remained fixed for a few moments and then without saying anything she got in the car. I gave the bag back to her and slammed the door shut.

Walking with long steps, I entered the car and started driving without another word. I didn’t bother to give her a single glance but I knew she was watching me. As the highway was just behind us, I asked, “Where should I drop you?” my eyes still fixed on the way.

Chapter 9

I headed towards Kasam's stop. I missed catching the bus with Dad; rather, his stopping the bus for me, though he was happy to see me reach the bus-stand on my own.

I reached there after a twenty minutes' walk.

She was nowhere in sight. I felt so irritated, 'If she wasn't coming to school today, she could have informed me. I wouldn't have wasted my energy coming here.'

Just then I saw a beautiful girl from behind.

At least I got some time pass till the bus arrived.

She was wearing a yellow suit; but it wasn't the normal kind. I didn't know what to call it. It was a more fluffy version of the suit. Underneath was a purple *churidar*. With the yellow and purple mixed *duppatta* – long beads hanging from the corners, crackled as they brushed the ground – her burgundy long hair reminded me of Kasam. She brushed her hair with her long slender fingers and I caught a glimpse of the long purple loops bumping against her slender neck. Multicoloured bangles covered half of her arm.

As she turned, she seemed familiar. I was captivated by her beauty and the aura it created, to make my mind work.

"Happy birthday," she wished me.

"Kasam, is it you?"

She smiled knowingly. How unbelievably ravishing she looked!

"You look awesome... even awesome is a lesser word to describe you today."

"Thank you... thank you."

"Wait a minute, is there a fancy dress event going on in the school at which only the coolest people are invited? Thus clearly I didn't land up at one."

"Can't you at all think of anything else besides school? We aren't going to school."

I knew I couldn't do it. I promised Dad that I would be at my best behaviour; but she looked like a girl with a plan and the way she was dressed, no one could ever say no to that.

Still I tried to make excuses.

"I am not dressed for going out," I moved my hands, pointing at my school

dress.

“We will take care of that,” she chuckled.

Next I knew we were at the mega mall. After a few trials, I was dressed in a pair of baggy jeans (in fashion at that time) and a loose white T-shirt combined with a purple checked shirt.

She aligned the collar and said, “We are good to go.”

“*Bhaiya* take us to Kashishwar Mahadev temple.”

“I won’t go in a shared auto since we will have change to it.”

“Okay.”

As Kasam said this, we both settled in the back of the auto.

Thank God we were going in a reserved auto, now the *autowala* won’t ask me to sit in the front seat and settle there.

Whenever we were stuck in traffic, people walking by were staring at Kasam as she was looking exceptionally beautiful.

Her hands were shining with the reflections from those bangles.

She was looking outside and then peeped into my watch. Then looking at me, she giving a tired smile. We reached the *mandir* in an hour. She went to one of those stalls where they sell *puja ka saman*.

“You can leave your shoes here; they will take care of it.”

She bought all the things, *akshat*, *chandan*, *nariyal*, *agarbatti*, *belpatta*, flowers...

She arranged her *duppatta* again and placed it over her head. We then started to climb the stairs. She gave money to some beggars sitting at the doorway to the *mandir*.

As her purse fell down, she bent down to pick it up. Just then it struck me that she was wearing quite a deep necked dress. I grabbed her arms and straightened her. She was startled. I calmed her and said, “I will get it.”

I bent down and picked it up for her. We marched ahead. She looked one hell of a girl in that attire. She walked slowly barefoot.

When we reached there, she placed her *duppatta* over her head again. I could never be successful at assessing how much more beautiful she could look. She asked me to grab *jal*. We started with pouring *jal* over the *shivalinga*. She told me to place the *belpatta* and flowers. I followed her words. She handed me *akshat* and *tika*.

“Why are you not doing anything?” I asked her.

“Cause it’s for you,” she smiled with conformity.

Her smile initiated mine.

Then we lit those *agarbatti* and did a *parikrama* of the area. By the end, she placed her index finger on the *sindur* scattered about the deity and made a dot on my forehead and placed one on her neck. As a final step, she went ahead to pop the *nariyal*. She tried and failed and swayed her hands in a ‘whatever’ gesture.

For the first time in that whole day, she looked like herself. Some things dress can't change.

"Give it to me," I asked her.

I smashed it hard and it popped open.

"Let's just sit for some time," she announced.

We sat there for around fifteen minutes in silence, soaking in the aura around us, not talking. Her face glowed in the sun and her eyes looked beautiful. Rays falling and reflecting back from her *bindi* constantly distracted me. Her eyes looked beautiful.

In order to stay longer, I struck a conversation.

"You know what my father says?" I was excited.

"Yeah, I totally know," she chuckled.

Ignoring her I went on, "...that all these customs, rituals and festivals, they are not bound by the process of doing it. They are just an entertainment like movies. Back in the times people didn't have technology, so they invented rituals. So enjoy when you pray. Make your rituals, and things which sound illogical avoid those."

"Wow... I like his way of thinking. I would like to meet him some day."

"You will surely like him."

Then we rushed suddenly as she shouted, "We are on a schedule!"

I just followed her. We grabbed an auto and headed to the nearest church.

She brought a pack of candles and two chains with a cross. She hung one around my neck.

"Now you look cool," she clicked.

The lady selling it was all cranky about giving money in change, but definitely that wasn't the highlight of the moment. We marched into the gigantic church, having no idea where to go or how to initiate a prayer. My idea of a church was only limited to what I had seen in the movies. So we decided to follow a guy who just entered. We maintained a certain distance and followed him. There were very few people owing to the obvious reason – it wasn't a Sunday. The guy moved forward, opened the gigantic gate and we lost him inside. We went there and tried opening the door. Going against our expectation, that door was closed. It started drizzling a bit. I looked for any other entrance while she followed my instructions to stay just where she was. She was wearing heels and almost slipped about five times. I knocked at the three doors but they were all closed. We decided to ask someone.

"What's the way in?" I asked a passerby.

"The church is closed for lunch."

"What?" Kasam panicked.

"But you can visit the prayer room at the backside."

Kasam kept on blabbering how the day got ruined because of this. I tried to convince her that it was not bad. At least we had some place to go. I never

understood why girls needed to plan every single moment and if anything at all deviated from the plan, they were bound to freak out. In the process I almost forgot it was my birthday and not hers. She was kind of worried about leaving her brand new, thousand-rupee sandals, which was a whole lot of money to be spent over sandals those days. Finally, in the end she left them by the staircase as there were no other options. Again clueless, we followed what others did. There was a big painting of Jesus at the centre and big giant candle in front of it. People were lighting their own candles from that one and placing them around it. We did the same. Others, who were early there, sat in silence, praying or reading the Bible. A few people were adding money in the donation box. We sat there for some time, prayed, analysed others, and also donated ten bucks. Finally we noticed that there was a register where people were writing what they wished for. Kasam grabbed a pen and scribbled something. I wanted to read what she wrote but she placed her palm over it. It was my turn. I wrote ‘thank you’.

We walked past the serene premises.

“So, what’s next? A *gurudwara*?” I chuckled.

Her expression said it was her next surprise. In no less than twenty minutes, after an awe-inspiring *rickshaw* ride, we were keeping our first steps in the *gurudwara*. I have been through so much in this whole day that I was no longer afraid of being at a completely new place. We will manage. At the very entrance, there were shoe shelves and we placed our bags and shoes there. Then the inviting look of taps at the corner, when we started walking ahead, indicated that we needed to wash our feet. Then we marched ahead. As some people were already settled there – girls on one side and guys on other side – so we assumed it was the way and followed the same norms. It was already past ten minutes when I noticed a couple walking in and they sat together. Ignorance isn’t always bliss, as people were walking in, they went and bowed their head. We even did the same. A kind-looking man grabbed the jar which contained some nuts probably, the *Prasad* and distributed it among everyone. By the time we were out of the *gurudwara*, it was three in the afternoon, I was tired and hungry as hell.

“Kasam, don’t you think we should head home now?” The aroma of home-cooked meal already filled my nostrils.

“No, we should head to any nearby restaurant,” she contradicted.

I wasn’t much into that idea, so I declined. But beautiful faces never go away with a ‘no’. Neither it happened this time.

So, we were at a restaurant and soon there were people pouring in. There was Priya, Vikas and a bunch of people I had never met before.

“Hey, I just knew Vikas among your friends and you know Priya and these are my other friends.” They, one by one, introduced themselves. They were all dressed in a cool kind of way. Where guys were in hanging jeans and

accessories, the girls sported black nail paint.

“Hey I just broke up with the girl I proposed two days earlier,” the guy, whose name I forgot, spoke.

“Oh! What happened?” Kasam asked.

“We went on a date yesterday and she ordered *chole bhature*. What kind of chick does that?”

“Yeah, that was cold. How did you fall for her in the first place?” Priya chuckled.

“Yeah... she was kind of cute.” that guy spoke again.

Everyone went into the state of oh... and aahhh.

Vikas tried to blend in. I just sat mum in order to avoid blurting out anything stupid.

Then there it was, the grand surprise. Priya gave me a big box saying it's my birthday gift from Kasam and her. Though whatever she had done all morning, I didn't think she even owed me a gift. It was kind of a big box wrapped in red paper. I took it and immediately looked at Kasam who was sitting kind of far away with her friends. She smiled at me. I smiled back.

As I started unpacking the box, she advanced towards me. There were little packets inside the box. It kind of felt strange – small packets of abrupt shapes. I picked one up and started tearing the wrapper while everyone's eyes were fixed upon me. I flicked it open and found it was a toy snake which sells in fairs. I took it out and sprayed like a small kid while everyone else cheered. Next it was a *phirki* whose wings unfurl when you blow at them. Priya took it from me and started blowing it. Then there was a fake toy sunglass which I had to wear for the next one hour. I was trapped but soon excused as I wasn't able to see. Then there was a fake flute. I blew through it. I don't know what I was doing but for sure, I was enjoying it. There was a little toy car and several other stuff. Then Kasam grabbed a pack and unpacked it. It was that thing from which soap bubbles erupt. She blew over it softly. Her lips were mesmerising. When the bubble surrounded us, I totally lost track of others. It felt like just Kasam and I were there. Vikas's hand on my shoulder burst my bubble. Kasam went away again. There was food everywhere – drinks, ice-cream. Yeah! So I was giving a treat to the love of my life, my best friend, her best friend and bunch of other people, I didn't know. The money I had been saving for my walkman all went away. I did regret it a bit but not at those times when I saw her. She came with a big pile of who-knows-what. I started unpacking it. By this time I was kind of bored with this packing stuff, but the fact that Kasam packed it up for me, made me carry on. There were big weird leaves hanging from it. I looked up. They were all laughing. I unwrapped it quickly. It was a cauliflower.

“What the hell?” I shouted.

“Everyone gets a flower but definitely its not my style,” Kasam chuckled as

others cheered her.

But somewhere from my facial expression she learned I wasn't much into it. Just then we spotted a guy giving a bouquet of roses to his girlfriend. The whole group moved on to their table and started persuading him to trade this cauliflower with roses.

"Everyone gives roses – there is nothing unique in it. You should definitely go for expressing your love with this one," Kasam and Priya chorused.

By the time we left that restaurant, I was penniless, with loads of toys and a bunch of roses. The more I knew her the more I fell in love with her.

"How can I go home like this?" I whispered in Kasam's ear.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of that," Kasam assured.

As the others left us, we rushed to a mall where I changed and she went into the cyber cafe. Her ultimate getaway. By the time I came back, she was still surfing.

"Hey," she said on seeing me.

"Hey," I replied.

"You see this guy? He's my Dad's friend's son... I think he's kind of into me."

She showed me a small picture of the guy.

"I sort of like him," she added.

I was mute.

"How do you find him?" Yes! She was really asking me this.

I looked at him. He was fair just like her. He had nice stylish hair, though not like her but complimenting hers. He had a nice face and a nice built. He looked like one of those Close-up ads model.

However, I said, "He isn't that good."

I don't know why I said that. It sounded so stupid.

"I mean he doesn't look like someone who would be good by nature," I tried correcting myself.

"How can you say that by just looking at the picture?" Kasam smirked.

I knew I sounded ridiculous but I was.

I walked her home. Then took a rickshaw for home – no matter how late I was getting, I walked her home – I was so desperate to be with her that I forgot everything else. Even Dad's warning. I reached home in fifteen minutes. My elder sister was sitting outside. I mouthed her asking if Dad was at home. She mouthed he wasn't. I breathed in and casually entered the house and then my room.

I sat there for hours, thinking about Kasam. Then about me... then about us... then about my family... then about studies... and then rolling back to her... I didn't know what the hell I was doing. My mind was racing on everything I could think upon. She was never mine, yet she changed every bit of me. All her friends were now my friends. I even wear the clothes she likes.

I walk the way she finds cool. All these things – the gifts, everything – it's like her. Now I find pleasure in her methods – in her likes with her. How did all these happen... I don't know?

Do I like it? ...I don't know.

Are we just friends? ...I don't know.

Are we anything else? ...I don't know.



Dear Romeo,

He didn't ask any questions;

Perhaps he just lost the feelings he had for me?

The more he came to know, maybe the less he liked me?

Some stories never end, but leave them dangling;

Those stories don't move, but life moves on.

It was beautiful, but maybe not my love story...

*Love
Juliet*

Chapter 10

First time was due to Ved's constant compulsion.

Second and few more other times were by 'the evenings I ran out of stuff to do'.

Further there were the impatient wait till the evenings.

A few more were about screwing up work so as to see her.

"Ambition, success... they sort of go hand in hand," Kasam spoke as she wrote ambition on the board.

"By technical definition 'ambition is the desire for personal achievement'. It provides the motivation and determination necessary to achieve a particular end or condition."

She faced everyone and spoke in a very soft tone.

"But it's up to you to decide that certain end or condition and more importantly, that certain end or condition is not same for everyone."

She looked at the crowd who was now exchanging confused glances.

"Confusing? Okay... let's switch on to examples, then it will be fun as well as easier."

She took a seat. I had never seen her sit during a session. Well there is a first time for everything. She breathed in and closed her eyes.

"When I was in college, for me life was all about achievements, grades, extracurricular, opportunities, volunteering, some of which I enjoyed and some I didn't," she moved her hands in a haphazard manner.

"What it wasn't about were Friday night-outs, sleeping on Sunday afternoons, group lunch, lazy-evening lying down with friends, being invited to birthday parties, etc." She folded her hands and continued.

"I was doing something I really wanted and they were doing something they really wanted to, but maybe some random evenings while struggling with my bag overstuffed with books, I took a corner glance at those who were sitting around the 'coffee bug', ,chatting, humming... those smiles which I was never a part of..."

"Or maybe some random afternoon when results were out over the notice-board. I was the one jumping out and they were sitting in a distant corner worrying about their life," as she finished, she regained her smile.

"Maybe sometimes I wanted to be at their place and sometimes they

wanted to be at mine.

“Still we chose to be the way we were ‘because that was what we wanted and there was nothing wrong about it,” she folded her hands, which she normally did when concluding.

“I traded up fun and friends for grade. They traded up grades for friends. Maybe we were right or maybe we were wrong, but trading was never wrong. It’s never wrong to trade. You can’t have everything so decide what you want more and let go of the rest. ”

“Let me tell you something specific.” There she went again.

“There was a girl in my college, who was pretty, intelligent, one of the toppers actually. She had a boyfriend and was a bit nasty, yet she seemed to be someone with a bright future. Suddenly round the third year, she got married to a rich business man. Went to New Zealand for honeymoon; she came back only for the exams, gave a shit to grades and most of all she was talking money. We didn’t even know those brands existed until we spotted them on her. Initially I pitied her life. Married at the age of twenty, mother at twenty-three – that was something I would have never liked for myself. But still I won’t call her wrong,” she straightened her back.

“One day I was telling this story to a faculty member and she was constantly impressing on the fact that later one day my ‘now rich classmate’ may regret what she traded for and she might miss a self-made life like mine.

“Then there I said it, ‘Maybe one day I might like to step in her shoes. Simple life devoid of struggle, everything down to her knees whenever she wanted.’

“However, I clearly didn’t intend to get ‘hitched to a rich businessman’. Moral of the story: you may get attracted to another’s life, still you live your own because that’s how you have paved it.”

There were few scattered claps. She signalled to everyone to keep it down.

“You can only decide who the winner is if they are running the same race. For some, success is about doing well in life, while others find joy in making good friends. Someone excels as a daughter; some hit it as an entrepreneur; some find their love.”

She was interrupted with suppressed giggles. She mocked a smile.

“You can never compare a good engineer with a good cook and they shouldn’t even be compared. In a country like ours everything comes down to ‘how much you are earning’. That’s why we forget to respect what others are good at and sometimes what we are good at too.”

She got up and moved around the crowd. I noticed she normally did so when she was just about to close the session.

“Figure out what you really want. Prioritise them and never fear to trade, though stay careful whether you are trading up or down.”

Everyone cheered and clapped as she closed the session. I noticed she was

sporting a bright purple nail colour. I never knew these many colours existed if it wasn't for her nails.

"Now Kritesh might want to share something with us regarding his ambition..." she rested her speech at this.

A handsome-looking guy in a black formal shirt and blue jeans stood up. He fumbled as he tried to speak. In addition he was taking very long pauses.

Finally he broke, "I won't be able to do it. I am not very good at speaking in front of so many people."

"It's fine Kritesh. Try and prepare. I'll give you five minutes," Kasam tried to calm him.

She faced the others, "What do you think of me as a speaker?"

She was very well applauded. She bent by her waist and took a bow in quite a dramatic manner, "Thank you, thank you. You know many a times even I fear when I am about to speak that words won't come out. People may not even like what I say. Even my legs shake, my heart beat rises and then my throat starts constricting. But you know, where I win? I don't let it show to others. If you don't have it, then fake it.

"I bet everyone fears speaking – that's inevitable, but the extent can vary. It can depend on a lot of things; a few tips might help. Sometimes it depends on the side from which you are speaking."

She gulped some water; everyone became more attentive as she spoke again.

"It's my very own 'being on the other side' theory. Here I am so 'confident' while speaking, as I am the one who is conducting this seminar and you are paying for listening. Obviously you won't contradict if I am wrong and go on listening attentively. Your interest is what gives me the confidence to go on. Maybe if I go to a medical research seminar, I might fear speaking. This one is an example of content constraint."

A few people noted it down like school kids.

"There can be several other constraints and strengths. Try finding out both so that you can overcome your constraints and harness your strengths."

By this time she completed a whole round of the auditorium and returned back to Kritesh. I loved her energy.

"One tends to feel nervous if they think they are being judged. So, Kritesh think that you are conducting this seminar and you are speaking in front of ducks and donkeys... no offence guys," she said, turning a bit towards others.

"It's perfectly fine, Kasam," someone shouted, though everyone laughed.

She continued pouring into Kritesh eyes in a gentle voice.

"...yes ducks and donkeys who have completely no idea about the subject matter.

"Believe me it won't be the same."

Her voice was calm enough and her eyes were driving enough.

Kritesh didn't make it to the BBC Broadcaster of the Year, but still managed to keep people engrossed in his words.

I rushed out to avoid Kasam, knowing that I secretly came to her sessions.

'Ahh! finally' I gushed out as I lighted the stick. Though I had been smoking less, but still it was my best buddy. However I couldn't introduce it to Kasam. As I saw her coming, my best friend was out of my Audi Q7. Sprayed car freshener, sprayed mouth freshener etc, brushed my hair. Wait, am I concerned about the way I look in front of her? I didn't know why but I messed my hair again.

"Hey," Kasam appeared on my window.

"Huh! Aren't you going to come inside," I acted sheepish.

"Of course, oho...o it smells nice."

I didn't know why but my heart sank.

"You know Akash, you should come to my sessions."

"I am normal. Your sessions are for those who need help."

"No it's not like that; besides who said you are normal?" she punched me.

"Not the suit," I said repulsively.

"It's just that you wait for me here. Instead you can come and be with me."

There was an awkward silence. So, I drove.

We were at Barista because of Kasam's profound love for coffee.

She was about to step out of the car when I rushed to open the door for her. She gave me a weird look. We went in the elevator. She was talking all the way through. Like always, I was a very good listener until I realised the lift wasn't moving.

"You might want to press the button."

Kasam looked at me and then pressed seven and there was silence except for my suppressed giggles.

"I will catch you up. Go ahead."

"Okay," I answered.

I hadn't settled already that I heard banging on the door. As I turned back, it was Kasam. She was trying to pull the door – the door over which 'push' was written in bold.

I indicated to her to stop and then push it. She gave me a broad smile and pushed the door with both her palms.

We walked to a corner table. I signalled to Kasam to settle down. I unbuttoned my coat, removed my cell phones from my pocket and took a seat, placing one Blackberry Bold and one iPhone 4 on the table.

Just then a waitress arrived. I asked her to take the order from Kasam; however, she kept on questioning me while Kasam kept on mocking from behind.

When we were done, the same waitress again arrived to place the bill.

I uttered, "Bill is for me while the feedback form is for the lady."

I quickly snatched the bill. The waitress showered me with constant turning back and smiling while passing away.

“How do you do that?” Kasam uttered, while jumping two stairs at a time.

“What?” I was surprised.

“Acting so cheesy... in a flirty kind of manner!?”

“No, I don’t,” I acted defensive.

“Yeah? Opening the car gate... kneeling by the wall... flashing your mobiles on the table – are all a little cocky,” she flinched her eyes.

“They are normal.”

“Okay, then smiling at the waitress... brushing your hair while placing the order to display your Rolex? Didn’t all that get the poor girl into you,” she snapped.

‘Probably, I did behave a little cheesy, I reflected though nobody except Kasam was able to mention that transition. Still whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, that was something I would reflect upon later.

“Anyways, who uses the term ‘lady’ these days?” she looked into my eyes and winked.

It started drizzling when I drove back to her home. She was humming softly. It was pure melody even though I wasn’t able to distinguish the words.

I waved her goodbye, yet stayed there – looking at her – watching her leave. Just then she turned, “Akash, don’t you want to catch up on our lives after we last met in Lucknow eight years ago?” My smile had no boundaries.

“I know we just had coffee, but would you like another one,” she added.

I jumped out of my car.

“Yeah, I went on to do company secretaryship in Mumbai and then I went to California for MBA. Now I work in Adcom Multimedia... wow!” my tongue slipped as I entered her home.

“I didn’t know Prayas is paying this well.”

“Yeah, Prayas pays real well but still, this is sponsored by my father. At least money is a thing which my parents never felt short of to shower on me.”

I bowed my head down.

“Anyways I will make some coffee, meanwhile ‘feel at home’.”

It was beautiful. A small cottage with broad windows... money plants hanging from the edges... small crotons resting in the corner... low-lying tasteful furniture... rare collection of bells and wind-chimes scattered all over the place. Bright sunny yellow walls with purple linings... so many photographs hanging from the wall telling a story...

And there was Kasam’s room. Stick notes all over her cupboard... a radio resting at the bedside... bangles and *jhumkas* scattered at her study table... dressing table... corner table... She was never very organised, be it her dressing, her décor, her choices, her life. She never abided by the rules.

A collage captured my attention from the other side of the room. I was

wrong, it wasn't a collage; it was her life. Some of the Smiley badges she no longer sported.

Few earrings pasted with the help of cello-tapes – she might have lost one in the pair.

Stickers from the events she might have organised in college; a few volunteer I-cards.

Some stick-notes over which few random notes were written. A picture of Priya kissing her cheek.

Her family picture with her fake smile; an ATM slip – probably of her first salary... few roses she used to make with ribbons, but I got glued to a picture of her in a *lehenga*.

“Coffee,” Kasam said cheerfully.

“You look very different in this picture.” Why I didn't say beautiful... does different makes any sense at all? What was wrong with me?

When I was done with self-analysing, I noticed Kasam's pale face.

“That's my engage...,” she looked away.

“You were engaged?”

She turned, tried to fake a smile.

“You remember Utsav?”

I nodded.

“We dated in college. Our families were close, so our parents decided to get us engaged.”

“So, congrats! What's he doing... where he is now?” I managed to stay normal though my heart ached. He again did it – took her away from me.

“Living a life that could have been mine,” she went outside.

I followed her.

“I was the first topper with him being the second. Our university was offering full scholarship for doing mass-comm in Columbia University. If I stepped down, Utsav would have been the sole contender. Everyone was convinced that it would be a better idea if Utsav went. I believed in their conviction. Utsav left, but never to return. He found someone there.”

She said it in plain simple tone but I knew she wouldn't let people to know her pain.

It tore me that she didn't even confide in me.

We ended up having more than ‘one cup of coffee’.

“I left Lucknow, joined a job, but wasn't much happy in that. So my cousin helped me to establish ‘Prayas’. Being with all my participants never allowed me to peek into the past...”

“I stayed so engrossed in disentangling their lives, never thought there are some knots in mine as well.”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes,” she smiled.

“Yeah... I am happy. I have everything... it’s wonderful,” she said smiling. Those were more ‘yes’ than required. You don’t assert when you really are happy.



“I should go,” I whispered.

“Yeah.”

“No need to step outside, just close the door,” I asked Kasam, while stepping out.

“Mr Akash Kashyap, don’t forget I have been living on my own since you came along,” Kasam teased me.

I let out a smile. But she accepted what I asked for her to do and stayed there. I walked far from her, continually looking at her and staggered as I encountered the stairs.

Kasam’s laugh crackled over my ear. It was the first genuine smile she gave that entire evening.

I was glad for stumbling.

Chapter 11

I was searching different ways to write a resume.

As I typed in Google ‘different ways to’, it gave me the predictions in the same ranking.

Different ways to say I love you.

Different ways to kiss.

Different ways to create departments in an organisation.

Different ways to create objects in Java.

I had very little idea about the last two things in the list but they sure looked kind of tough and the stuff for which you Google. Still, saying ‘I love you’ tops the list. Is it just that now people Google everything before doing or it is kind of hard to express your feelings. I don’t know – the first time when I told Kasam it was kind of easy. I went ahead and told her how I felt. I didn’t even know her, and now when I know all about her, I can’t tell her. Lately she has been kind of busy and when available, she is all about Utsav.

So, I did what guys like us do best in that kind of a situation. I focused on things that were more important than Kasam. Actually there wasn’t any, so I focused on making the less important things more important. Things like studying. Things like resuming jogging. Things like hanging out with my friends and watching daily soaps with my three elder sisters. Things like indulging in aimless discussions with Dad about what aired on the Discovery Channel.

I kept on stuffing my mind with useless things so that I didn’t think about her. But somehow she sneaked in and in those moments I used to wonder...

What might she be doing?

Where did that Utsav guy might be taking her?

Does she even think about me?

Does she notice that I was kind of avoiding her?

Doesn’t she miss me, not being around?

It was one of those moments when I still cherished the fact of her being mine.

It was one of those days when I immersed myself in studies in order to wipe her thoughts. Books were my saviour, my escape... my best friends.

I even avoided her at school. Though it wasn’t that hard as she was most of

the time bunking classes to be with Utsav since he was from another school. As my friends had been replaced by Kasam's earlier, now hers were replaced by Utsav's.

Obviously she would pick him. He came from an army family, who owned high enough legacy. He had a nice built, was bright at studies. Confident. Athletic. Unbelievably well mannered. He was the male incarnation of Kasam.

They both together looked like winners of the genetic lottery.

When I look at myself, I qualify as good in height. Built has a question mark over it. But it definitely isn't in an impossible situation – wheatish complexion, slightly on the darker side. I am sort of smart but not much confident to show it to everyone. Athletics never ran in my mind. Mannerism, well I used to think I am still a kid before I had feelings for Kasam.

So, if it was a race we had a clear winner.

And he kept on winning again and again.

It happened the other day.

“Hoo...hooo Akash.”

“Yo Akash...”

“Hey buddy, come and sit with us.”

“For whom are you waiting?”

“Why are you sitting in the front?”

“Hey for whom are you keeping a seat for?”

“Is it a girl?”

“It's a girl... it's a girl.”

As my friends who were sitting at the back in the bus kept on shouting back at me, I focused my sight on every other girl in expectation that the next one will turn out to be Kasam. Then she jumped in the bus, following a wait of ten minutes. I slid my bag to make space for her. When she was just about to slide in, she shouted ‘Utsav!’.

I looked outside and there he was honking his bike. It was split seconds when she wasn't by my side but beside him. Surprisingly my friends (the real ones; not the ones borrowed from her) were mum on this whole event.

I stood up. They were all looking at me.

I announced, “What goes?”

With that I returned to what my place was. At the back with those guys...

After having a whirlwind trip of the ‘girl world’, I returned to my own self. What did I want?

What did I have to do? What do people who love me expect of me?

I realised the problem with me and Kasam was...

Before meeting her, my life was about ‘I’...

After meeting her, it was ‘she’...

After she left it was ‘I’ again...

It was never about 'us'...

That's why we never made it.

I realised when a guy likes a girl, they don't remain friends. Nothing between them is like friends. Thus, when somebody else comes along, their so-called friendship has to end. The saddest part is you don't realise it before that somebody else comes along.

I am wrong; the saddest part isn't that. The saddest part is when the girl tries to pretend everything is normal.

It was one of those days.

I was studying in the library after school, 'because that's what I used to do and now returned back to doing that again.

Suddenly she walked in. I knew she wasn't there to study, so she definitely came to see me. I tried to pretend I hadn't noticed her and restricted my gaze to my book only.

Then a paper slid into my restricted area.

'Do you wish to go shopping with me... now?'

'Why don't you go with Utsav?' I tried to skip that question.

'Why can't you go?'

'Why can't you go with him?'

'Because I don't want to show him my crazy shopping *avatar*.'

'Why can't you take Priya?'

'If you want an accomplice for a bar, who can stop you from over-drinking? You aren't going to take another drunkard. You take someone who is sober. Me and Priya together in Flat 50 per cent off Sale – it will be like two drunkards in an open bar.'

'Okay,' I wrote as if now I hadn't learn how to say 'no' to her.

Next, we knew we were at Forum Mall where flat 50 per cent sales were going on. The girls' section 'not surprisingly at all' was full. Even 'full' is an understatement. It was jam-packed. Girls were leaving with lot of bags. Girls were fighting over grabbing the exact size. Girls were buying the stuff they didn't even need. Girls were buying oversized dresses only 'because they were cheap. The trial room line looked longer than the voting line. I thought of taking a sneak peek at the men's section. Blame it on the afternoon, but I spotted only a few men here and there. Most of them were employees arranging the stuff. A few people were passing time like me by surfing through the shirts. Finally I spotted a guy moving towards the billing counter. Clearly he was obsessed with socks as he carried two packs (a pack of three) with which one pack of three was free. After a little more browsing, I returned back and waited for Kasam.

She came running to me with two pairs of jeans.

"Can you believe it?"

She shook the jeans at my face.

“What?” I asked.

“These are just for Rs 150.”

“But these are damn big; they will never fit you,” I warned.

“I will put on some weight.” Seeing her conviction, I didn’t argue any further.

“Hey, want to catch a movie?” Why the hell did I ask that. It was just that it had been so long we’d been anywhere together and I was just longing for being with her. It just came out. My desperation was evident from the number of ‘justs’ I used in my thoughts.

“Okay cool,” she said.

After a few minutes, she got a call from Utsav inviting her to the very same movie.

All I had by my side was a ‘sorry’.

Next day she came to meet me, wearing those jeans. Exactly fulfilling my expectation – they looked huge.

“I told you so.”

She twisted her lips.

“I will make them look hot. I will eat... eat and eat. Then they will fit and I will look super-hot.”

“You won’t,” I paused before completing my ‘you won’t look hot if you gain that much weight to make it fit right’.

“What?”

“Never mind,” I smiled.

It was one of those days when she noticed Utsav’s arrival had created a rift between us.

Then she tried extracting time and being with me without mentioning Utsav.

Just one usual day at school, I was in my class when she bumped at the door.

Upon spotting a faculty, she ushered, “I want Akash.”

Everyone was mum. I lowered my head down.

“I mean Mrs Bakshi is calling him for the cultural society meeting,” she corrected herself.

Our math’s faculty Sinha ji indicated me to go. Then he looked at Kasam and smirked, ‘I think you wanted him’.

The whole class burst into laughter. Kasam gave her elongated lips smile which she does when she is embarrassed.

Then we went to see that movie, but I knew I was the second person with whom she watched it.

That was probably the last interaction of that kind we had. Otherwise it was limited to accidental bumping during classes, when some of the common friends invited us both. It was mostly awkward. Gradually we lost on topics to

be discussed. Earlier we used to talk on anything and everything. Now most of the things seemed out of context. A few seemed way too personal. Later on, we struck to the usual, 'Hey, how you doing?'

So many times I felt like running to her and telling her not to go with that guy.

He doesn't look at you the way I do.

He doesn't know that you don't have any favourite colour as you love all of them.

You bite your nails when you are nervous.

He doesn't know you are the rarest of the rare owners of a radio.

You love wearing heels. He finds you hot in them. Still he doesn't know you twist your ankle every now and then. Thus, standing by you means one should be immediately able to hold you.

He doesn't know you switch off the lights to light up candles.

You hate it when someone gives you a rose. It doesn't make you feel special. Orchid does.

What you want to become in life changes with the recent movie you have watched.

Your eyes flicker whenever you have something sour.

He doesn't tell the waiter, 'No capsicum' as you are allergic to it.

He doesn't know you are prone to losing things. He doesn't hold himself behind for a moment after you go away to check if you have left something or not.

But I do... Kasam, I always did.

He doesn't know you cry over a broken nail.

Drawing flowers, stars, hearts or Smiley in the blank spaces between your notes comes naturally to you.

He doesn't know it all.

He doesn't know how to love you.

He doesn't know you.

I do!

However, I never told her these things. I suppressed every little thought of that kind which ever came into my mind. I didn't know why expressing my feelings was hard. Suppressing my feelings was harder. I stayed irritated most of the time, trying to focus on every other thing. I was afraid that one day I would be pushing my thoughts so hard that I would forget the difference between what I wanted and what I had tricked my mind to be wanting.

Chapter 12

“Let’s meet up for lunch.” How did I end up being so authoritative?

“Aye, aye captain,” she faked a military accent though the scorn was evident in her voice.

Even a prince never behaves like one, when with a princess.

“I mean I am free if you are free...,” I corrected myself.

“That’s better, though I am a little busy.”

She paused. All quiet. My heart sank.

“Who cares? I don’t have a session today – some pending documentation... ah... ah... I am good to go,” she ate a few words but definitely conveyed the message.

She hung up. I smiled, still holding the receiver. Suddenly it came to me, in the past few days whenever I smiled, ‘I smiled for real’. Not the monotonous smile with which I nod to everyone in the morning. Nor the diplomatic one reserved for a social gathering. Definitely excluding the plastic smile plastered on my face when a toothless old hag criticises my work when they themselves have gone so rigid during the span of their career that they forgot the meaning of innovation. To complete the list, not even the cheesy smile I put on to pick up girls.

“Normal people keep the receiver down, when the call ends,” Ved’s voice echoed in my thoughts.

I involuntarily placed the receiver down. I looked at Ved with a flat face.

“What are you looking at? We have a meeting at Jenkins,” Ved prompted me.

“Oh! Shit,” those were my words.

Ved shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows along with it.

I got up hurriedly, buttoned up my coat, checked my keys, hung my bag and marched ahead with long, firm steps.

“You are forgetting your laptop,” Ved blocked my way.

I hugged him enthusiastically. He was surprised.

“You’ll be great. I know, I have trained you well,” I patted on his shoulder hard.

By the time Ved realised what I meant, I had raced past behind him though I heard a few screeches bearing my name.



Isn't it true that you make best friends when you are not trying to find one? The gift you will cherish for life is never what you had asked for. Someone whom you pass across several times is the last piece which completes your jigsaw puzzle.

Hasn't it happened before that you get up in the morning still feeling sleepy? When you get up on your feet, you feel dizzy. Take a bath thinking that this will be it.

You rush to work with the same headache. On the way you pick up an aspirin. Start on with your work. Just then a colleague enters with two cups of coffee and then you know this is it – my favourite thing which happens to me all the time. Flat, humdrum, routine, monotonous are the only words which you can relate your life with.

You think your partner is the problem. Quitting your job is an option. Then out of nowhere, you spot a brochure of some hotel in Thailand. Everything gets sorted out and you know it's just about a break, a holiday and everything else is great as they are. You will start loving them back once again.

How many times has it happened to you that you find something when you are not looking for it? Even better, when you don't know what it is you want until and unless it is in front of your eyes.

There she was standing in front of me, standing tall in the crowd with her head held high. Sending a message she was strong, confident and didn't need anyone.

She didn't need love... she wanted love.

It was still sunny. She placed her hand over her forehead to obstruct sunrays so that she could search for me.

That feeling again made me smile for real.

White made her look even brighter. As she looked for me, her long loops dangled across her slender neck. I could hear the sound of her bangles. When she gazed into my eyes with deep interest, her pupils dilated and her lips stretched into a smile and then I knew why it never worked out with anyone else.

As others had better things to do on a glaring Wednesday afternoon, it wasn't our luck that we landed up on a bench on Marine Drive.

There was a bunch of envelopes in her hand. I raised my eyebrows.

"Oh! These are letters...", she explained.

"Love letters?" I made questioning expressions.

"In a way they are. They are tokens of unrestricted love," her smile made me look stupid.

"These are the documentation I was talking about," she added.

She hanged her bag at the edge while she explained to me, "I thought I will

read them in the bus,” she continued.

“I can be of some help if you will care to begin from the beginning,” I interrupted.

“In Prayas, we carry on different activities to help out people. This is one of the ways. People write to us and then we reply them back. The recent topic was ‘something you did a long time back, that changed your relationship with someone’.”

“Okay, that’s complicated.”

“No, it isn’t.”

She crossed her leg, pointing towards me.

She kept the letters in the centre.

“People still write letters. Why doesn’t one switch to e-mail? It will be speedy and less cumbersome.”

“E-mails can never replace letters for me. It’s not about the words. Letters are a reflection of the person who writes it. The kind of paper used, handwriting, scent, colour of the ink tells you a lot about the person. If not that, then about the immediate mental condition of the person when the letter was written.”

“It’s amazing how you get to know all that from a single letter,” I beamed.

“Yes, it helps us to reply to them in an efficient manner.”

I gave her an appreciative nod.

“They are a mixture of several emotions. I feel overwhelmed that they are ready to make me a bearer of their deep hidden secrets.”

Not only her words, even her expression and eyes were indicative of how proud as well as connected she felt.

“You get these many letters every month?”

I felt exhausted just by looking at those.

She shook her index figure in a ‘no’.

“Every week,” her voice made it more clear.

It was unbelievable but so were many other things about her.

One busy road, huddled lovers, children and babies in perambulators, a windswept promenade, flanked by the sea and a row of art deco buildings, looped between the concrete jungle of Nariman point. I was there with a beautiful girl, immersed in her beautiful thoughts, surrounded by a fresh breath and the sunlight reflected by the mirrors of her *dupatta*.

That’s it! I am here and there is no other place I want to be.

Within the embrace of pure love in the form of these letters with a girl who laughs in unison with me.

Who speeds up or lowers down her pace to match mine.

We were in a crowd, yet we were alone as she spoke only to me, focusing all of her undivided attention on me.

So it began.

“This letter is a beauty. In this one a father confesses how much he regrets saying something to his child which he never intended to – though once said, it can’t be taken back.” I was captured by the conviction in her voice as she continued.

“He told his five-year old son who wanted to play with him as he returned from work that, one day his child would wish he died while fighting for life in intensive care. He will be burdened by his sick father, that’s why he can refuse to play with him now.”

“That was a really stupid thing to say.”

“Really...? Maybe not! He was a little drunk, felt pressurised by the obligations of the family, work and those words came out in agitation. It can happen to anyone but everyone won’t rethink over it and stay conscious.”

She was right and I was blessed to be with her at that moment to listen to her.

“This one is sort of funny – one girl pinned holes in her boyfriend’s condoms so as to get pregnant,” she handed me the letter.

It began:

Dear Angel of Love,

I glanced at Kasam and uttered...

“Angel of love...”

“You still remember...,”

She looked moved.

Few initial lines described what Kasam had already told, so I switched to the latter part. It read:

‘I was twenty-three at that time, young, naïve, immature and insecure. We had been living-in for a-year-and-half. I had this feeling he won’t marry me. He mattered to me the most. I knew getting pregnant will get him to marry me.

Now we have been married for four years. We have a beautiful daughter. He loves me and our daughter.

Still I die every day under my own guilt. I think about telling him everything. Neither do I have the courage to break it out to him nor I can live, watching him every day being a perfect husband. Maybe it wasn’t what he wanted. I snatched his life and he accepted the life I carved for him.

What if he finds out that our daughter was an armament to force him into a life which is a lie? I know he will never find out if I don’t tell him. This makes it even more difficult.

Although sharing it with someone gave me much relief, still I would look forward to a way out if possible with your response.

With love

Such a dilemma; I placed myself in her place and wasn't able to make out anything. I looked up at Kasam.

"Akash, every mistake is not meant to be amended. Every secret is not meant to be disclosed. What they have now is much larger than what she did four years back.

"It may or may not have turned this way but as it has, she needs to live with it. Otherwise, her own guilt will distance them apart.

"Moreover, she can make-up on the guilt part by being a wife anyone, including her husband, would die for. A wife her husband will be honoured to have."

She was brilliant.

I watched her in amazement as she fluttered through other letters. She picked one. My phone buzzed. I took it out; it was Ved.

"Hey, shoot," I spoke.

Ved went on about for some time.

"Buddy, do me proud," I hung up.

I reached out my hand to take the letter.

She seemed irritated and placed the letter back. I shrugged my shoulder.

"It's nothing; it's about a guy who after breaking up with his girlfriend dated her worst enemy, although the breakup was on mutual consent. He told all her secrets to his current girlfriend, including some of their intimate moments. Those secrets were later posted over the internet by someone anonymous."

My phone rang again.

Kasam's face turned exasperated.

I switched it off.

Her cheerful expression returned.

"This one's my favourite," Kasam handed me a beautiful pink coloured envelope.

Dear Angel of Love,

This is something which happened a long time ago. I don't want any response or a solution. I just want you to share this with others so that they don't lose someone they love over a ridiculous reason.

My brother and I, we never had an ideal sibling relationship from our early childhood. He was a notorious fellow back then and mostly I was his victim, be it pulling my hair or reading my diary in front of everyone. He seldom missed out on any single opportunity to embarrass me.

When I was in eighth grade, my father gifted me a rose plant. I got very attached to it. Before going to school, I used to water it. After

coming back, I used to rush back to my room to check out on it. I was waiting for the day it would blossom. A few days later, it did. It was one of the most beautiful things I ever saw. It was the happiest day of my life.

I went to school, told all my friends about it. It was really hard for me to wait until I saw that rose again.

After returning back, I rushed to my room. My eyes welled on seeing that the rose had been plucked. I rushed to the kitchen. My Mom told me that she saw my brother with a rose.

I raced to his room. For the first time I confronted him, told him that he no longer existed for me and I would never talk to him again.

So, I never did. He complained to Papa but I didn't budge.

Time passed. He went out to study and then joined Army. By that time we got so accustomed to being oblivious to each other's existence that we were never comfortable with each other.

We seldom talked; having a conversation felt unnatural.

I got married a year back and moved to the US with my husband. My brother is married with two kids. Now we are so busy in our own lives that we never get a chance to catch up.

When I think about it now, I feel it was all so stupid. I missed on the time when we were together and now I can't have it back. I do hope my story can correct a few mistakes before it's too late.

Thanks for your time.

*With love
Rashi*

I was overwhelmed. I learned so many lessons today without even committing those mistakes. It was all because of Kasam. Today she connected me with so many people, so many stories and so many emotions.

I was honoured to be a part of their life. I was glad I was a part of Kasam's life.

Click!

Kasam clicked a picture of the sun that was now setting.

Click! I clicked a picture of her.

"Why?" she questioned me.

"To remember this beautiful day I had with you."

Click! Kasam clicked my picture.

"I too have a right to cherish this day," Kasam chuckled.

"Allow me to take a picture of you both," a man in his early seventies offered.

We looked up in astonishment.

"Uh! Sorry...", Kasam looked at him and then at me.

"Ah! We are not together," I explained.

“Is it?” the man smiled at me.

“No, no, we are not a couple,” Kasam reconfirmed.

“Sorry, normally I am not wrong. Sorry once again.” The man walked away with the same pleasant smile with which he came.

Our smiles were gone as he left us with a question.

People perceived us as a couple.

I looked at Kasam. She turned a bit uncomfortable as she started playing with her *dupatta* and jewellery.

She is nice, imaginative, funny, not sad at all times but not too optimistic as it is unrealistic to be. She is smart enough to talk about complicated issues. She has dreams and hopes; even the unrealistic ones. How can anyone not fall in love with her?

How can someone be this cruel to her?

As she unfolds before me, she turns more complicated, yet she remains as simple as always.

Someone has rightly said never try to understand a girl; either you will go mad or fall in love with her.

Chapter 13

I didn't have any idea where my book shelve ended and my bed started. Most of the time I had been sleeping on top of my books. Again, I didn't have any idea when I was sleeping and when I was awake. Most of the time when Dad was getting up, I was going to sleep. Sometimes I felt that studying at night wasn't a requirement but more of an attempt to avoid those moments when before going to sleep, your mind is completely empty. Then you begin thinking about things. So I started keeping awake and studying till I fell asleep.

Every day by pushing the books to one side of the bed I slept on the empty half. I was making a lot of progress. A few days I managed without thinking about her at all. Soon enough I managed conversation with my friends without mentioning her.

Boards got over.

After that it got terrible. I was planning to go to Mumbai for my further studies. Most of the time I was hanging around with friends along with my newfound habit of smoking or had lots of free time at home to think about her. I fought those thoughts... those feelings.

I started staying irritated most of the time. I used to have more mood swings than my elder sister. Lately I had been a lot more quiet. Spoke only when asked. Gave round-about answers to anything. I thought I was moving on, but as time passed, clouds of latent anger surrounded me.

I stayed frustrated without any reason.

I wanted to be left alone.

I sneaked into the alley during the nights to have a puff.

I just wandered with my friends, without paying attention to what they were talking about.

However hard I tried not to accept, but I was wretched.

It was just three days before I left for Mumbai.

I wasn't able to stay still at all. Sometimes I went and chatted with Mom in the kitchen, sat at Dad's table, annoyed my sisters, tried packing; finally, I did what I wanted to – picked the receiver up and dialled her number. I gave three missed calls and then called again, hoping she still remembered our code.

Thankfully she picked the call up.

“Hey... long time,” she said.

“Yeah, actually I was busy with my plans to go for further studies.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Yeah I am leaving day after tomorrow.”

There was silence for a few seconds.

“Do you wanna meet?” she asked.

“Yes, if you are free.”

“Okay, let’s meet tomorrow. Four o’clock sounds good.”

“Yup, it definitely does.”

Next Day 4 o’clock...

“Hey!”

“Hi!”

“So, what’re you going to study?”

“I am doing a course in company secretary-ship. It’s a four-year thing.”

“That sounds good.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I got into DU. Will be doing journalism.”

As we talked about all that crap, it started getting a little hazy.

I don’t know what got into me. I was feeling anxious as this was going to end – us being here together. I felt an urge to smoke, but I suppressed it. Being there with her after so long brought back all the feelings I had pushed away all this time; that very same adrenalin rush. Sometimes I felt like holding her close to me and telling her how I felt. At others, I felt like holding myself back in and running away from that moment, running away from her. The result of my mixed feeling came out like this...

“I love you,” blank and abrupt.

“What?” she asked in a normal expression.

“Yeah... I have always been in love with you... never stopped loving you altogether. Ever...” she gave a confused smile.

“Like what? You are behaving as if you had no clue?” Now I knew where that subdued anger went. It was just around the corner, a little deep beneath and which was oozing out now.

“What are you trying to say?” she sounded a little annoyed.

“Yeah, as if you had no idea why this guy hangs around you all the time?”

“You are blaming me of using you?” she squealed.

“I mean look at me. I started walking the way you like – hands in pocket; head hanging. I brushed my hair the way you preferred – hair falling on to my face. I dressed as you liked. All those cool double shirt things. I even started humming the songs you hummed. I lost touch with my friends, hung around with yours. My lips never knew the word ‘no’ if it was for you. I lost my existence. I started thinking like you. I started liking those things which you

liked. Listening to you all day long without keeping a track on my watch; did it ever occur to you that this guy might have something of his own to do? I passed my days doing what you liked. I lost myself in you.”

“I didn’t ask you to do any of those,” she replied back.

I probed into her eyes. “Can you look straight into my eyes and tell me that you had absolutely no idea at all about my feelings for you?”

She looked in my eyes, her lips parted. I breathed out but she didn’t speak.

I got my answer. I stepped back. Then turned my back to her and started walking. Swiftly my legs stretched a little longer with every step I took. I walked on, never to look back. I walked alone. I walked away from the girl...

I last loved.

The Girl I Last Loved

*T’was one of my better, bloomy days,
When I met her in a gluey gloomy place;
That’s fine, I thought, in any case,
No place ever could match her grace.*

*For her deep eyes: imagine a few Niles,
Below the Nile ‘n who made those smiles?
The gods didn’t know. Stalled my office files,
And I stalked her for days. For miles.*

*One day I can never forget,
She was happy and looked so nice,
For the first time,
She looked up at me with a smiling face.*

*I went to her and we talked
She was so kind while we walked.
We spoke often, and when we did,
None of us knew how time passed.*

*We became good friends,
But this something inside me-
All I could think about was how
To tell her the things I felt?*

*I’d close my eyes and see,
This someone I adore – she.*

*A beautiful person, whole and sole,
A pretty heart, a prettier soul.*

*Her kind and gentle temperament,
Her sweet angelic smiles.
Her softly spoken sentiments,
That reach across the miles.*

*Her smile and laugh that sparkled with
The softness of her sighs.
The way her face lit up a room
Those twinkle in her eyes.*

*My soul-search was done and over,
And now she must simply know,
Just how I feel about her,
For with words I cannot show.*

*So I searched the card displays,
To find something that says,
Just what was on my mind.
I prayed, "Please God! Be kind."*

*That day, I jerked off the cover,
I told her how much I loved her.
She stood there silently and thought.
She threw away the flowers I brought.*

That day...

*Whirlwinds blew, cyclones raged,
No birds flew, they all were caged.
Into dark blank nothingness, I gazed.
In a matter of moments, I aged.*

*Really, all of this really happened?
No, it didn't.
But did it matter what really happened?
No, it didn't.*

*Love was all that mattered,
Yes, I was sad and shattered.*

*But in her, my love found its voice,
So no blames, she made her choice.*

*My love for her I'll take to my grave,
And no, I'm not trying to be brave.
Did I mention ever, when you think back,
That I'll love her only if she loves me back?*

*It's been nine soft years since,
That love-light upon me was cast.
She was, will remain, and she is:
My first love, and my last.*

—Prakash Kumar

I never started out to be a poet, I don't know if anyone really does start out to be anything, but I now find myself one. I guess it's largely due to my habit of penning down my inspirations, and I do seem to be getting a lot of them (Winner – *The Girl I Last Loved* Poem Contest).

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Chapter 14

When you knowingly or unknowingly break somebody's heart, you don't even think for a single moment.

When you are doing something wrong, why doesn't your heart stop you?

But when you go to mend the very same heart that you broke, you lack ample of courage. Your heart will beat faster.

Your tongue will be all sloppy and words won't come out.

How amazing is it that several miles seem easier to traverse but few steps look difficult?

Why doing something wrong is always easy?

Why making it right so tough?

Here I am standing at her doorstep, all impatient and still unable to bang on the door.

On my way, I kept on thinking what I would tell her.

Though now again I am feeling unprepared. For the past fifteen minutes I am standing here, trying to be able to confront her.

I guess I will never be ready.

I got close to pressing the bell several times and every time withdrew my hand.

It's now or never as there is no other time.

I recollected myself and stretched my hand to knock on her door.

"Akash!" she banged the door open before I knocked.

"Hi... hi Divya!" I said as our eyes met.

We stood there like lifeless unmoving stones.

"Ahh... you were going somewhere...?" I asked.

"Yeah, but that can wait. Come on in," Divya said with a little awkwardness in her voice and eyes.

There are two types of strangers.

First, where you know nothing about each other.

Second, where you know everything about each other, but whatever you went through made you strangers.

Clearly we were in the second category.

It felt really awkward to behave like strangers, going through all those formalities, when you have spent enough days together to appear for a CAT

exam based on the other person.

It felt awkward to remain silent when you had so many things to discuss.

“I will get a cup of coffee for you,” Divya said.

“Wait, I will make for us both.”

I went to the kitchen and returned with two coffee mugs.

Divya reached out to take one.

“Oh no! That’s for me; this one’s for you, strong with extra sugar just the way you like it.”

I forwarded the other one to her. She gave me a surprised look.

“So, how’s work?” I mumbled.

“It’s great... how’s yours?”

“It’s great.”

Again there was a lull.

“Hey! I almost forgot...”

I gave her a long-stemmed red rose.

“Akash... I... can’t...,” Divya spoke with broken words.

“Oh, it’s for last Valentine’s Day when I forgot to bring one for you.”

“Last week I was in Dubai for a meet, so I got this chandelier. It may go with your yellow mirrored collection.”

I jumped to fix that.

“Akash! You don’t really need to do it.”

I stopped for a moment but then went ahead to fix it.

“The other day I was wandering in the mall with some associates and my eyes fell over this perfume. I had some faint memories of you using this one, so I bought it. Check if it is the same.”

“Yeah! It is...,” for once she seemed excited though it lasted a split second.

“You were counting on buying this Chopard secret limited edition watch and I knew you will forget, so I ordered one.”

“Stop it! Akash... don’t come back... you can’t just come back like this...”

She hid her face and I heard her suppressed sobs.

I knelt down on the ground in front of her, moved a lock of hair from her face and tucked them behind her ears.

“Divya, I am not trying to make it difficult.

“I am doing all these to let you know I was there...

“I listened to you...

“I cared for you...

“I knew you...

“I wasn’t able to show all that but I was almost that much into you...

“...as you were into me.

“I want you to know that the two years you spent with me and the immense love you gave me wasn’t a waste.”

She rubbed her face with her palms.

I pushed away her fingers from her face and looked directly into her eyes.

“I knew you loved me and I appreciate it. Divya, I really tried hard to feel the same way as you, but for some reason I wasn’t able to...”

“Yet you have touched me and made my life beautiful in every possible manner.

“I will remember you throughout my life.”

I took her hand in mine.

“And I want you to remember me. Remember all those beautiful moments, little fights... all of them ‘because they are an integral part of our lives. They play a role in making us what we are. More importantly, I don’t want you to spend the rest of your life struggling to fight back memories of me... trying to forget... pushing back my thoughts.

“What’s the need to forget them? Why can’t we just live with them?”

“We are not together now, but that doesn’t make ‘we were together’ a lie.

“So why try changing it?”

I gripped her hand firmly.

“I won’t ask you to be friends, as I know how much it hurts when the person you love asks you to be friends. But I don’t want to be the reason for you to not fall in love again.”

A tear trickled down her cheek and fell on my palm.

I wiped her cheek and took her face in both my hands.

“Someone once told me, getting married, having kids, watching them grow, sharing those memories with your partner is much larger than ‘someone you loved and weren’t able to make them yours’. I want you to realise it and live your life ‘because it’s greater than *me* or *you*.”

She gave me a slow confused nod.

“This is a picture of us from our first date. Remember me, remember us as we were. Those are your own memories, but don’t let them come between, making fresh new memories.”

I got up and sat adjacent to her.

Rest of the afternoon we flunked our commitments, laughed over some memories, cried over some. That all happened because of someone. That someone was Kasam.

“Yeah! I guess I should leave,” I told Divya.

“You guess or you know?”

We both laughed.

As she was shutting the door behind me, she called out for me.

“Akash...”

“Yeah?” I turned back.

“Whoever she is... she is the one.”

I smiled and nodded at her.

For a slight moment you enjoy a position to be superior to the female

league and then again, she surprises you with her emotional intuition.



“Hey Kasam,” I spoke as I picked her call.

“Hey... what’s up Mr Akash Kashyap?”

“Mr Akash Kashyap – that’s odd; what is Ms Kasam up to?”

“Oh! She is about to ask Mr Akash if he would like to accompany me to a local train ride.”

“What time?”

“Wow! That was easy. I thought getting the ones who travel by Audi to travel by train would offer me some hassles.

“So, be at Mumbai Central by 3:30.”

I puffed two sticks at a time ‘because I wouldn’t be able to, for a long time now.

3:30 p.m.... Mumbai Central

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“So, who is this utterly handsome guy with you?” Kasam nudged me.

“Let me have this honour myself. Hi, I’m Ved.”

“Hi, Ved...,” Kasam extended her hand.

I felt that was unnecessary.

Just then I noticed her.

She was wearing a pink formal shirt with dark grey trousers, complimented with small diamond earrings.

“Hey... hey, so where were you headed?” I inquired.

“Oh! Had a meeting with the sponsors for opening an extension of Prayas on Mira Road.”

“Great, so how did it go?” Ved interrupted.

I gave him a look.

“It was good,” Kasam responded.

“Let us know if we can be of any help,” Ved spoke again and this was it.

“Ved, don’t you need some coffee?”

“No, so Kasam what was I saying?”

“Ved, you needed some coffee... you had a headache...”

This time I said it very slowly and clearly with my hands pressed over his shoulder.

“Yeah, I do need some coffee...,” he said with a slight irritation in his voice.

So it went back to normal, just me and Kasam.

“If you need any help at all, do let me know.”

“Mr Akash Kashyap, I am doing well and I am satisfied with my progress.

Whenever I will need your help, I will let you know.

“As of now I’m just tired of all these meetings and formalities, so I decided to come here.”

Just then the train arrived. We got into the compartment. Then we were reminded of Ved. I looked around for him. He gave me a ‘thumbs up’ from the adjacent compartment. Then I turned back to look at Kasam. It was very crowded but I caught a glimpse of her at the other end. There were almost six people between us.

I asked the man standing just beside me, “Hey, I need to go that side.”

“So?” he replied rudely.

“Don’t misbehave... even I know...,” before I completed my sentence, I heard Kasam’s voice.

“Excuse me! I am with him,” her words brought a smile on to my face.

People slowly made way for her. How things change when a beauty enters the scene!

Soon she was standing by my side. In literal terms, close and together are almost synonymous. In general terms, they were vastly different. We were so close, still not together.

Dumbly I was displaying a static smile. Kasam ducked to avoid other bastards crashing into her. I surrounded her with one arm.

We had never been this close. Nobody except us noticed it, that’s why it was even more of an awkward closeness.

Kasam’s uneasiness made me even more uncomfortable. For making us at ease, I looked around to strike some topic. Without even thinking, I uttered, “That little boy, he looks kind a weird.” Kasam gave a very disappointed sigh and shook her head.

Even I felt stupid for bitching about a little kid. “You know Akash, people get on to make fun. If only they had given some time, they might have been able to look beyond.”

“I am sorry...,” I acted confused as I was.

“It’s fine ‘because you don’t know. Last month a few kids were making fun of him. I ignored,” she looked at him with affectionate eyes.

“Some other day, again few kids teased him.

“Then I went to his mother and asked her whether because of some tragedy they had tonsured his head. Then she told me he was going through chemotherapy.

“Then I noticed it’s not just his hair he doesn’t even have eyebrows. His mother went ahead to describe their financial problems while my eyes remained stuck at that poor boy.

“He silently listens to all those taunts and teasing.”

Kasam’s response left my lips sealed and mind shocked.

We both kept on looking at that boy till he and his mother got down.

“I ruined your mood,” Kasam said.

“I am already ashamed,” I hung my head.

“That’s just a part of life. *Kabhi khushi kabhi gham...*,” she chuckled. We stood in silence for some time, but since it was Kasam, how could silence stand with regard to her.

“Look at that guy, the one in double shirt and tattered jeans. He always hums while listening to his iPod. Most of the time that humming is loud enough to be heard by several others.”

I choked, by laughing out all of a sudden. She thumped my back.

“And that girl, every day she opens a novel and then looks outside the window. Maybe she has a lot on her mind than to read.”

I concentrated on that girl.

I was seeing the world from her eyes. However beautiful it was, my heart was sinking with that obnoxious feeling of losing myself in her. I wanted to pull back, keep the strings attached but losing was much more tempting.

“And that couple, most of the time they argue with loud voices. It’s really funny when they act all romantic.”

Just then a man tried to bump into Kasam and I pushed him hard with my fist.

Kasam acted oblivious but her smile wasn’t.

“And that aunty, it’s not a local train for her; rather, her living room. She cuts vegetable, knits sweaters...”

“Yeah! She looks like those women who can’t get household chores off her mind. Just like my mother.”

“Unlike mine,” her comment just followed mine. It brought back all those memories. I felt real sorry for her.

She still wasn’t able to let it all go.

To change the topic again, I tried to find something sensible and I found it.

“You met Ved, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, what do you think about him?”

“Of course! He is your friend, so floating money tags along, though he seems like a fun, frolic, flirt kind of a guy.”

“You want to listen to his story?”

“His story?” she questioned.

“Yeah! He had a girlfriend in college. He loved her more than anything. While they were in their final year of graduation, the girl’s parents fixed her marriage.

“He went to them asking for her hand, but they refused owing to his financial status and also because he was raised by a servant as his parents had died in a car accident. His girlfriend got married and he went for higher studies. Since then he has never dated. He still has his girlfriend’s photograph

as his desktop wallpaper. Every year he goes to her house on the day he proposed to her just to look at her from a distance. And he lives for that single day.”

We both remained engrossed in imagining what that kind of love it could be.

“I wish someone would have loved me like that,” Kasam uttered in a heavy tone.

“What’s the use if that love goes unnoticed?”

I automatically followed her words.

We reached Andheri.

“So, where were you this whole day... you weren’t picking up your cell?”

“I was with Diiiiii...,” Thumped by Ved on my foot, I wasn’t able to complete my sentence.

“I was at work,” I corrected myself.

“Since when did you start working?” Kasam smirked.

“Yeah! Now Prayas should give salary to him,” Ved added.

“Shut up! Even now I work more than you,” I attacked.

“Oh! You think so?” he defended

“You fight like kids,” Kasam made faces.

“*Taqrar wahin hoti he jahan pyaar ho...*,” Ved got on with his dialogue-*baazi*.

“That’s not true... he never fights with me!”

“That’s a different case,” Ved said out of flow.

“Why... what...?” Kasam struck it outright.

I tapped on Ved’s back.

“I will look for a cab,” Ved dodged the question.

She turned towards me.

“You want to have an ice-cream?” I raced away.

“Chocolate,” I heard her scream from behind.

I turned. She stood there smiling.

We got out of the station, licking our respective ice-creams.

“It has been so many days since I had ice-cream,” Kasam smiled.

“Dieting?” Ved teased her. I understood why people say three make a crowd.

“Nah... it’s just that when you are adult, you forget what you like,” Kasam looked at me.

There was something at that moment. Was it a question?

Kasam’s smile was deceiving.

Na main kuch batata hun, na wo kuch kehti he... phir bhi kuch kehna sunna baaki nahi rehta...

“You know Ved, when I was in school I used to imagine about the days when I would be living alone... independent... earning. I was totally

determined that the day I would get my salary, I'd go for shopping and buy a carton of ice-cream, bunch of chocolates, couple of dresses and lots of bracelets. How life was amazingly limited! When you grow up, these things occupy the least of your thoughts." I knew Ved wasn't the recipient of this talk.

"Then the big things come into the picture – like competition, money, assets..." she continued with slight disgust.

"Fifteen was the best age; life was simple. You could have been anything you wanted... no decisions were made. Contrarily, we were not happy then, huh? We wanted to grow up..." she was cheerful again.

"Yeah and you had no limits on your wild imagination for your career. As far I remember, you wanted to be a radio jockey, a chef, a salsa dancer, doctor, writer and a few other things."

"Shut up, I was a kid back then!"

"Who asked you to grow up?" I smiled.

"Yeah," she said with a little overwhelmed tone.

"Come on, let's get going."

"Where?"

"To live the life you wanted to ten years back."

She raised her eyebrows.

"It'll be fun."

"What about me?" Ved spoke up. I almost forget.

"See you at work tomorrow!" I winked at him.

First we bought a carton of ice-cream and attacked it like fiveyear olds.

Then we filled our pockets with overflowing candies and chocolates. Without even reading their names we picked up anything which looked nice. Then Kasam went on picking all the clothes she liked. We swooned through bracelets and picked them for weird reasons; kept on running as we were robbing the store... at least, people gave us such looks.

"Kasam, I will pay."

"Dear, my imagination was about spending my salary."

"This will be the best money I will ever spend."

A smile on her face said it all.



I rushed to take refuge in the already crowded exterior of Bajrangi bookstore. Fresh beads of rain droplets fell on the ground and got lost. I checked my bag to see if my books were fine; they were. It rained temperately. Just then I saw a girl in my school's uniform... walking casually... enjoying the almost empty road... probably humming something... wet from head to toe... people called out to her... 'Come inside the shed'... 'You will catch a cold'... She shook her head in a 'no' and kept on walking. Someone shouted 'You are crazy'... she

shouted back, 'No you are'.

At that moment I lost my heart and probably never got it back.

Today that girl knows my name, stays with me.

But even today she is that far; she doesn't know I am watching her from a distance, losing my heart all over again.

I stared at Kasam, musing from almost half-a-metre distance as I played with sand and she danced in the waves. In between, she continuously kept on calling me. I kept on shaking my hand in a 'no'.

Had a hell of a day today – going to Divya, getting 'a glimpse of life', living like a kid... and the sole reason behind all these was playing with the waves, unaware of the impact she had on someone's life.

Am I again...

Am I again vesting Kasam with the power to change my life?

Am I again risking something?

Is again my life, whatever I do... all about her?

She came to me, pulled me by my hand and took me with her. I didn't want to get wet, but I wanted to be with her. Then, why am I doing the things I don't want? Am I again losing it...?

Will I get lost?

Kasam smiled at me and held my hand and started walking with me.

I will definitely get lost.

"How the impression of our feet gets swiped away by the waves... why isn't life like that... why doesn't everything get erased... whatever mistakes we made... whatever good we did...? Why our today can't be independent of our yesterday and our tomorrow...?" There was an emotional anguish in her voice.

I turned her, facing me and slid my hand in my pocket and took out a chained locket before placing it around her neck.

"There are three keys in this pendant. Lock your past, you can't change anything about it. You are allowed to use just the present key – live for the moment," I told her.

"What about the future key?" Kasam asked in an overwhelmed tone.

"It's for emergency purpose; avoid it's usage as the very next day you can unlock it with your present key."

"This is the most special gift someone got for me."

You are the most special person in my life.

Why... why can't I just say it? Why am I scared... what am I scared of...? She has already broken my heart once! Maybe because I am aware of the pain it caused?

Dear Romeo,

Today he stated that love is useless if it goes unnoticed.

I wanted to tell him love never goes unnoticed.

Why didn't I tell him?

What was I scared of finding...?

Maybe that he doesn't feel the same way about me now?

*With love
Juliet*

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Chapter 15

As she was lying there dead asleep, the screeching sound of the heavy gate opening fell over her ears.

Slumber let lose its embrace and only her eyes flashed in the darkness. As the cold winds swayed them, the trees whispered at her window. Faint yet consistent steps tapped on the grass. She flinched inside her bed, squeezed her eyes in the hope that it's just a bad dream. She heard a knock on her door.

She pressed her ears to ignore it. Next she heard some indistinguishable voices from the back of her window. Her heart skipped a few beats.

She slowly removed her covers and looked around. Faint glow coming from the mobile screen was the only source of light. Chill ran through her spine as her numb feet came in contact with the cold ground. She slowly grabbed her mobile to guide her through the way. She kept on turning back, unaware of the unseen.

Gradually the noises died as she approached the door. As she placed her fingers on the knob, she flinched. The knocking grew louder and louder.

Something got into her and she couldn't resist but burst the door open. To her surprise the night was still dark and lonely. She looked around as she stepped out, but there was nobody to find. She kept on looking, though in the wrong direction. The dark figure approached her from behind. Submerged in her subconscious, she didn't feel his presence until he grabbed her mouth and tied both her hands with his other hand. Sweat trickled down her entire body in spite of the icy surrounding. Her heart beats quadrupled. The mobile slipped from her hand and split in two. She felt blood rush through her veins.

He held her body close to his, brought his lips adjacent to her shoulders and then whispered...

“Happy birthday!”

Her body relaxed. She let out her breath as I released my grip on her. She turned slowly and punched me in the stomach. I felt weak in my knees.

“Make a wish today... that you lose some weight this year,” I bolted out of pain.

“Are you mad or what... you know how scared I got?”

She grabbed my shirt with both her hands. Anger was evident in her eyes. She stomped off and I heard the door banging.

“I just wanted to surprise you...”

“There are two types of surprises!” she said in a voice bearing annoyance. She sat there assembling her mobile. I stood in silence.

“It isn’t working...,” she gushed out.

She spotted me with my iPad: “What are you up to now?”

“Nothing. I am just ordering a new cell phone for you.”

Her anger was gone in a split second, her face flushed and lips parted.

“You are welcome,” I said.

“Huh?”

“I know you well to tell when you are faking anger, so if a smile is lingering somewhere, bring it on.”

She smiled finally.

“As now we are at peace, can I get a coffee? It was freezing out there.”

“Only on one condition.”

“What?”

“Tell me, what was the sound coming from my bedroom window?”

“I just played a recording over there.”

“May I know how was that at all useful?”

“You will never forget this birthday!”

I came up with something though what made it worthwhile the look on her face. The peace which dawned upon her on seeing me was priceless.

I went to her room and started packing her stuff.

“What are you doing, Akash? I don’t like anyone touching my stuff.”

I looked around. Nothing was at its place. What need to be placed at study table was placed half across her double bed and half of it left for her to sleep. Accessories and bangles scattered all over the place.

“Believe me Kasam, I will do a better job if it’s about arranging.”

“Will you at least tell me why we are packing up?”

“Because the next one day you are spending with me.”

“What makes you think I have nothing better to do on my birthday?”

“Because the best time any of us ever spent was together.”

Maybe it was one of the first times I was able to accept what Kasam and I shared, in front of her. A smile on her face reflected acceptance from her side.

As she stayed at the outskirts, it was a two-hour drive to the city and it was already twelve thirty at night.

Kasam hopped on the front seat as I took the driver’s seat. She kept on tilting, half asleep.

I jerked off with the brakes. She immediately got back to her senses.

“What?” she was concerned.

“What?” I replied.

“Something is wrong with the car?”

“No something is wrong with you.”

She gave a confused look.

“Kasam, I think you should go to sleep.”

I placed a cushion in the back seat. She slid in. After placing a blanket over her, I returned back to driving. I drove to our destination without any tiredness in my body and eyes devoid of sleep.

“Kasam, let’s go,” I gently woke her up.

“Where are we?”

“You will know soon.”

We hopped in the lift.

“Hey, this looks like some corporate building.”

“It will look like, ‘because it is.’”

“So, on my birthday you are getting me a permanent job? Yay!”

The lift came to a halt at the twenty-second floor.

“Whose office is this? Are we going to break in?”

She kept on throwing random questions till I took my card out and swiped us in.

“Oh my gosh! This is your office!” she faked surprise.

I swiped the card again and opened the conference hall.

“This doesn’t seem exciting at all.”

Kasam mumbled in the background.

“It will be; hand me the bag.”

In the next five minutes I clicked on the projector, sprayed two blankets over the long table and placed some cushions at the farther end.

“Care for some coffee... it’s really nice in my office.”

“Sure... make it strong.”

After handing her the coffee, I climbed on our newly created lounge area and covered half my body with the blanket.

“Hop in.”

I extended my hand to Kasam. She grabbed my hand and jumped up on to the conference table.

Letters to Juliet screened on the projector.

“How did you know I wanted to watch this movie?”

“I knew you won’t let it go, so here is the answer...I read one of your stick notes over which it was written ‘Have to watch *Letters to Juliet* again this weekend’.”

She laid comfortably adjacent to me.

“Wow! It’s nice... so big and engrossing,” she exclaimed.

“Yeah I always thought of doing it but never got a partner in crime.”

At few moments later our hands brushed against each other. At others, our legs collided.

Sometimes she looked at me.

Sometimes I looked at her.

Sometimes we both looked at each other.

“You know Akash, I love its ending... the way he says, ‘I am madly, deeply, truly passionately in love with you’. Then the way the girl asks ‘You are?’ with so much of hope in her voice and tears in her eyes. And after a moment of silence, the girl asks him, ‘Are you going to kiss me?’ and the guy is like obviously ‘yes’. It’s beautiful... simple yet so beautiful.”

I nodded with a ‘yes’.

We watched them kiss afterwards.

She said while cuddling up in the blanket, “You know Akash, I watch so many romantic movies. Each has the same sequence. They meet. There is some problem, they part away. You can always predict the next happening. Still some scenes are enough to make you realise the beauty of love. And those moments definitely bring a smile on your lips... the smiles which stay with you.”

I immediately switched off the air conditioner, perhaps a smile lingered for a short span across her lips.

“Kasam, we should get going...,” I told her.

“Its 3:30 a.m. in the morning.”

“Yeah, that’s why,” there was conformity in my eyes.

We were on a roll again with her sleeping at the back and me driving.

Two hours later.

“Kasam,” I whispered softly in her ears.

“Kasam...”

“Kasam...?,” I kept on repeating without increasing my volume.

“Umm...,” finally she showed some recognition.

“Happy birthday...,” she smiled with her eyes still closed.

“Will you get up?”

“No,” she uttered in a honeyed sleepy tone.

“Okay, I will be waiting.”

I heard her chuckle.

She opened her eyes; it was still dark.

“Where are we?” she asked, while rubbing her eyes.

“You will know.”

She stepped outside the car with bare feet and let out a sigh on touching the cold sand.

“Are we on a beach?” she tried scanning the area.

I shrugged my shoulders. She smiled at me and grabbed my hand for support. I lifted her by the waist and placed her over the bonnet and climbed adjacent to her. She was sitting with her legs folded which she grabbed with both her hands. I was kneeling outwards with my legs hanging. She was a bit cold, so I offered her my coat. She refused. We sat there in silence. I offered my coat again and this time she wore it. To the virtue of her height, my coat

didn't at all look clumsy on her. She looked kinda cute. I checked my watch. It was almost 5:30. I inclined towards Kasam and whispered in her ears, "Look over there," I indicated with my finger.

A streak of yellow line brightened the sky followed by several streaks. Slowly emerging from that side where rays of light...rays of hope... rays of life... slowly embracing the whole sky... leaving their impression on the dark night as well as on the waves, turned the whole sphere lustrous.

"Wow!" Kasam exclaimed.

I kept on looking at her beautiful face which glowed with the sunrays. Her eyes turned light brown. Probably she looked her most beautiful at this time. Nothing artificial; just pure Kasam in pure sunlight.

"Hey, have you seen anything this beautiful?"

"Yeah... maybe... I don't know," I got confused on confronting that unexpected question.

"I will help you with that," Kasam replied.

"What?" I asked.

"C'mon," saying this, she got down and stood in front of me.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Close your eyes," she brushed her fingers over my face.

I closed my eyes. It was all dark.

"Now go deep in your mind. Flip through your memories and look for the most beautiful thing you ever saw."

I followed her instructions and concentrated.

Was it the rains... Was it the roses... Was it the water gushing out of Niagara Falls... the carvings I saw in Konark temple or the *maha-arti* in Varanasi... or was it the street lights in Kyoto? These snaps flashed before my eyes and faded away.

There was a sudden outburst of lightning at the back of my eyes. Probably Kasam moved from my front. When my eyes got adjusted to the brightness I again saw a faint glitter... purple in colour... shining and then going away. I focused. That glitter became clear. I tried to find what lay beneath... the flickering became constant and it was just a dot now... a purple coloured dot... I looked for a bigger picture. There it was. Two beautiful large eyes, lying at both side of that purple dot. Whenever those eyes blinked, they looked even more delightful with the purple shadow and that *bindi* flickered with sunrays falling on to them. Soft strands of hair fluttering in front of those eyes, obstructing them for a moment and then going away before again coming back...

"So... what's the most beautiful thing you ever saw?" I heard Kasam whisper.

"You," I answered in my subconscious.

I immediately opened my eyes.

“What?” Kasam laughed.

“Oh! There are many of such things... let’s just leave now. I have to go to work.”

“Yeah... okay.”

There was a new-found awkwardness between us.

While driving back, I kept on looking at her. She was looking outside the window. There was a strange happiness in her face. Sometimes she even smiled.

As we drove through the outskirts while returning from Manori Beach, we saw that outside some house a coal stove was kept to let the smoke go away. A few shopkeepers were sweeping the front of their shops. That dust combined with the smoke gave a misty look which is rare to find in Mumbai. It reminded me of Lucknow’s winter.

Vegetable vendors started laying their roadside shops.

I always heard and experienced even that Mumbai never sleeps, but for the first time I was witnessing that Mumbai wakes this early.

There were few tea stands. I parked besides one.

“Do you want some tea? It will drive away the tiredness.”

“Tea would be amazing but I am not tired.”

She sat there on the side when I went ahead to grab two cups of tea.

When I was back, I offered one to her. She grabbed it with both her hands to feel the warmth like she always did. I don’t know why but it always made her look very sexy and mysterious.

I drank mine in one go while she kept on blowing on hers.

“Why do you bother having hot tea? By the time you drink, it becomes ice tea.”

She waved her hands in ‘whatever’.

When we left, there were two cups lying on the table – one in normal condition, one chewed at the edges.

When we progressed more into the posh area, I could see people jogging along the roadside. People doing yoga in the parks; some ladies carrying daily grocery; some walking to work, still in sleep. So many school buses... reminding of the old days. We reached my flat. I got ready in ten minutes and poured two bowls of cornflakes. She took another half an hour to arrive.

When she arrived, I came to know where the time went. She was clad in a light pink saree. She was wearing small diamond earrings and very few pink coloured bangles in her comparison. I wasn’t able to move at all. My eyes were fixed at her.

“You can sit. I am not looking that pretty.”

She walked with such divine elegance. I always knew her for her spontaneity. Sometimes for being experimental and many a times for being clumsy... losing things, walking hurriedly... I never knew she could do this.

She carried the saree so well. Her skin looked even fairer in pink.

She came to the dining hall, walking perfectly in heels. Before settling, she arranged the end of her saree and moved all her hair to one side. I don't know what exactly it was that made her completely different. I kept on forgetting to munch before gulping. She kept on smiling to herself.



While I opened the car door for Kasam, my cell phone rang. It was Ved's. I knew it must be about coming early so I walked away before picking up.

When I finished my call, I found Kasam standing by my side.

"Work?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Go now, I will catch a bus."

I nodded again, went ahead in my car and drove forward. Then took a U-turn and came back to where Kasam was standing.

"You will catch a bus in these clothes and you think I will let you hop on?"

She gave a smile and got in without questioning on seeing me firm.

We drove up to Prayas. She left.

I stayed there. Should I leave or not – that question hovered in my mind. Leaving Kasam when she was dressed like that was a temptation hard enough to resist.

Having no other option, I followed her without her knowledge.

"Hey, you look ravishing dear," an old lady graced her with this comment.

"Thank you," Kasam whispered, kneeling on to her.

"Hey pretty lady, will you marry me?" A guy in his thirties shouted.

"Yeah... only if your wife agrees!"

There were a few giggles and guys were gulping at her beauty. Some girls were passing with envious glances. Then I looked at her again and confirmed that she looked like the ultimate epitome of beauty. Somehow I felt proud.

Kasam clicked the projector screen off to reveal the white board. She was surprised to see 'Happy birthday, Kasam' scribbled over it. Then from the greenroom a few participants brought a big chocolate cake. Everyone shouted 'happy birthday' and hovered around the cake. One lady escorted Kasam to it. She cut the cake and started distributing it to the participants. Three girls stepped up to cut more pieces and started handing it to Kasam.

She looked overwhelmed and ecstatic at this gesture. Some people even gave her a few gifts and cards. It felt real nice to see that she has made a place in people's heart. Although they had only formal interactions, she had touched their soul. They loved her. They respected her. Probably that gave her the strength to go on although life had been rather cruel to her. First those family issues, then Utsav. Being a lone girl in a city like this, living on her own, running Prayas with little help from her cousin on financial front... she had

done one hell of a job. I was happy for her and proud of her, as the only person responsible for her success was she herself.

Finally they packed up the party.

Today we would discuss about 'collaboration'.

She spoke up. Then paused. She went ahead to write that on to board. Then withdrew her hand and turned around. She looked kind of confused.

Suddenly she smiled.

"Let's do something different today," she beamed.

Few confirmations and few suggestions.

"Yeah."

"Yup... let's play something."

"Let's all go out and have lunch!"

"Or... let's talk about love," Kasam uttered sheepishly.

Followed by suppressed giggles from the crowd, there was a soft glitter in her eyes.

I smiled to myself. Was it for me?

Was she finally noticing my feelings for her?

Was she feeling the same way?

"So... from where we should begin?" Kasam added.

"I have an idea. Let's talk about whether love can happen at first sight," a young girl suggested.

"Love can only happen at first sight to a kiddo like you," an elderly man answered.

The girl gulped.

"Normally love doesn't happen at first sight; it's merely attraction," a woman took her question seriously.

The discussion went on...

Some were single lined answers with 'yes' or 'no'.

"I can't say exactly love, but sparks do fly if love is gonna happen. My Dad fell in love with my Mom when he saw her for the first time; not the other way around though..." a girl added in an overwhelmed tone.

"Love can happen anytime... anywhere... with anyone..." a boy gave out in a lazy tone.

"Oh! That's a cliché," Kasam chuckled.

A cool looking guy in a loose T-shirt folded at the sleeves and a jeans serving just to cover his ass sort of announced "Yeah, love can happen at first sight, it 'depends' on the second... third... fourth..."

"Very clever answer, Devesh. We will close this topic on this note itself."

I often wondered how she remembered everybody's name.

They went on to discuss love marriage, arranged marriage, living without marriage, whether opposites attracted or not.

Then silencing the whole crowd Kasam, asked, "Can one be in love with

two people at a time?” My face lifted up.

As Kasam asked this question, people considered before speaking out anything.

“The case can be considered as the intermediate stage... remember organic chemistry? A snapshot in which first girl is about to leave your life and simultaneously second girl is about to enter your life... else loving two girls at a time would be considered as an unstable state,” a guy in carbon frame spoke.

“Ohhoo! Geeky,” a girl gave him an odd look.

“Love cannot happen twice; it’s only the wild attraction given the name of love. Ultimately, one of the two has to cry,” a girl spoke who looked like someone speaking from experience.

“One can’t walk on two different paths at the same time, just like that one can’t love two different people at the same time,” an intellectual spoke.

“No one can be in love with two people at a time... and if it is so, then that means the person doesn’t truly love either,” a wise lady added.

“If there is a point in falling in love with two people at a time, then one must go for the second one whom he or she loves because’ if that person was seriously in love with the first one, then he or she should not feel at all for the second one. If you were so overwhelmed with love, you wouldn’t have looked out for it in any other person.”

I don’t know why that girl’s statement made me look at Kasam. She was deep in her thoughts. After some time she gave a smile of hers which she always gave after realising something. I read her lips, probably she uttered a ‘yes’.

I left for work upon receiving another message from Ved. Probably I would have to do a little overtime today. I didn’t feel much like smoking today; maybe I didn’t feel alone today.



Dear Romeo,

Today he told me I am the most beautiful thing he ever saw.

Does he still love me?

Do I love him? Or have I always loved him?

Somebody told me you don’t look out for love if you are already in.

So, what was that which I had with Utsav? I cried so much after he left. I wished so much for him to return. Probably I still kindled that faith in my heart until I collided with Akash again. If I loved Utsav, why did I forget about him on encountering Akash? Why I survived without Utsav but got addicted to Akash?

Maybe I cried for Utsav just because somebody left me.

Was Utsav only a ‘somebody’?

Is Akash 'the one'?
Life would have been so simple without such questions.

Love
Juliet

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 16

I drove as fast as I could. The thought of reaching to her early was the only dominant thought in my mind. Sharp turns... restlessness... for the first time I left my beloved Audi to be parked by the gatekeeper and rushed upstairs. I forgot to ring and clicked the door open with the keys. In the past few days, again I got accustomed to living alone. This never came in my mind that you can enter the house by just hitting the bell. I entered. Kasam was there in her room, as a soft humming sound was coming from the guest room. I don't know why, but I was kind of relieved to find she was still around. I placed my laptop and coat at the couch and progressed towards her. She was kneeling from behind. Her hair hanging downwards, she was wearing a light blue *kurta* over a purple *patiala*. She was arranging her clothes – white top and dark blue jeans from the morning, then that pink saree. Whenever I saw her I felt guys had so few options. My wardrobe included shades of black, grey suits and if I decide to go a little offbeat, then brown. Huh, that's why guys got drawn towards girls as their world was everything a guy's world wasn't.

Kasam turned with a smile on her face. She was constantly brushing her fingers over that saree.

She just bumped into me.

“Hey,” I said.

She looked kind of ‘taken by surprise’.

“Hi, you scared me.”

“Why? Am I not supposed to be here?”

“I thought you will be late.”

She went ahead to keep her clothes in her bag. It gave me a feeling that she intended to leave tomorrow. The sinking feeling seeped in but I couldn't let that come in way of making the most of the night we had together.

“You know Mommy sent it for me.”

There on her face was one of the most genuine smiles I ever saw.

I reflected that smile.

She somehow came to terms with her mother. I was happy for her.

She kept that saree in her bag with exceptional caution.

“Come with me for a second,” I indicated to her.

Took her to the study and unlocked it.

“You lock the rooms inside your own flat,” Kasam gave an odd look.

“Come,” I said patiently.

Making her stand in the room, I shifted to hit the light.

“Wow... you are making me say it again and again,” Kasam looked exhausted from the day and overwhelmed at what she saw.

“You always wanted to have a Christmas and wasn’t able to because nobody permitted it at your house.”

“Oh! My God! How could you possibly remember that? It had already slipped my mind,” she beamed.

Two people under the same roof, one whose wish was fulfilled and another whose happiness lay in fulfilling those wishes.

In a room with a partially decorated Christmas tree, few series of lights... few candles... few bells... some randomly hanged decorations... hot chocolate... blowing balloons... opening meaningless presents and half other boxes that turned out to be empty... hanging more bells on to the Christmas tree... laughing... sharing... two friends who already left friendship at the last station... with no other station in sight yet.

Finally we both felt exhausted and fell flat over the couch.

Both numb for some time. I drifted my sight to her. She was lying with her head hanging by the edge of the couch. She looked at peace, so I dared to ask, “So now, everything is fine with your mother?”

“Yeah, you can call it fine. We both grew older and wiser.” I smiled as she continued. “Akash... sometimes you need to let go what happened in past to see what that person has to offer you ahead,” she placed a hand on my shoulders and got up.

She stood by the window, looking at the street lights shining far away.

She looked at me and gave a little smile. She said while recalling, “After my grandparents died, my maternal uncles fought over the property. They even went on to arrange separate *bhoj* for my grandfather’s death to claim a better share for the inheritance. My elder uncle at that time was retired and by then had married off all of his daughters and his sons were making big time in marketing. It’s out of my ability to comprehend why he needed that inheritance at all. On the other hand my other uncle just got married a few years back, had a little daughter and except few random construction contracts once a year, could be well considered as jobless. Morally we had a clear winner here; still, they needed a court case to sort it all out. My grandfather, whatever he made, whatever he owned, he always bought in pieces of two. Perhaps he feared what was about to happen. Still it happened. They asked all the sisters for their letter of consent that they wouldn’t claim anything. My father convinced Mommy over it. And slowly she realised that her brothers never accommodated her and gradually she turned towards us... her real family.”

I listened patiently all through. It's only a few times that she agreed on letting out her feelings.

As the conversation came to an abrupt end, I added something, "When my grandfather retired with a hefty pension, everyone in our family was in need of money. My eldest uncle had to marry one daughter and finance a son studying in London. My father had four to raise. My other uncle was jobless. My aunt was a widow.

"My youngest uncle was just relocated to a sector where he wasn't getting any black money. Yet everyone agreed on dividing that money between my aunt and the jobless uncle's family... these things are dependent upon family education and nonetheless, on the individuals."

She got down, perhaps tired of looking at the lights and sat on the floor. I slipped in beside her.

"You never talk about your father now; earlier you always use to quote his opinions... his jokes... I liked hearing them... I liked him."

"Me too... Dad... huh!! He built a very beautiful house. After his forties, he spent most of his time in giving his dream a concrete shape. He himself measured the ratio of sand and cement – a house for his children, with their individual rooms... matching their choices.

My sisters got married and two of them moved to USA and another is settled in Delhi. And after school, I left for doing company secretaryship, then for my MBA and then this job. I never returned home for long. In Indian society, building a house is every man's dream. Why? When he has lived his entire life in a service quarter, of course, for his children, as he will be not leaving them with the life his parents left him to lead. A place to unite... a place to stay there forever without any fear; whenever I talked or visited them, this topic popped up and they asked me to stay there and in an attempt to avoid that awkward denial, I slowly stopped talking or going there. I felt really bad when I imagined them wandering alone in the house they made for their children who even don't visit them."

She rubbed my hands.

"If you feel so concerned why don't you just call them and tell them how you feel?" she helped with her suggestions.

I shook my head, "It's not that easy to tell how you feel."

"When I looked at my parent's marriage from the other side, I realised that my father didn't give much to Mommy. Daddy likes simplicity and a little deviation. He never appreciated whenever Mommy dressed a little differently and sometimes thrashed her. He never allowed her to buy accessories or wear makeup. Slowly she also left it. I often wonder if a man is authorised to do that to a woman. If he can't appreciate, he can't even take it away. But when a man matters so much in your life, you automatically give him so much power. Daddy never took her out as he was busy in business. Gradually they had no

interaction left and it was visible to everyone. That made their relationship even more complex and prone to interference from others. It was not all her fault. Then I realised the actual source of my mother's indifference. In Indian societies, where the father is earning, we rely on everything upon him. So somehow we give less respect to our Mom. And especially when you are a girl who aspires to have a career, you get more inclined towards your father.

"But as I grew, I realised that Mom needed us as much as we needed her. Though late, but she wanted to be a part of us growing up. I wanted to give Mommy her share before it was too late. So no 'talking and resolving' but little gestures changed everything. Be a part of your parents growing old, Akash, otherwise you will never forgive yourself."

I covered my face with my palms and rubbed my forehead and eyes hard, pressing thumbs on to the cheeks. I heard Kasam's footsteps. I opened my eyes. She was approaching the door. She turned slowly.

"You know, Akash... after seeing my parents' life, I always thought one thing that I won't let go wrong my marriage. See where I landed. A broken engagement in which my partner never even returned to call off the wedding."

She gave a smirk. I wanted to rush to her... grab her... tell her you are not alone... I will always care for you... take my hand and I won't let anything go wrong.

And again I let another moment pass. She went to her room. I sat there – thinking or maybe not thinking at all.

Two Hours Later

Brrrrrrrummm!!

"Akash... you alright?" she came inside the kitchen.

"Yeah," I answered, covered in flour.

I followed her sight – laptop in the middle shelf with a Youtube playing 'How to make a cake at home'. Flour lying on the ground, strawberries floating in chocolate syrup, egg shells near the stove and then she looked at me, trying to make the dough with a spoon.

She gave an exhausted look.

"What are you doing?"

"Isn't Christmas and for that matter, a birthday incomplete without a cake?" I answered innocently.

She again scanned the whole area and fixed her eyes on me and then laughed. She plucked a clutch from the edge of her *kurta* and tied her hair. She brushed the egg shells aside and put them in the dustbin. Handed me the *jhadoo* and indicated to me to brush the floor. She poured those egg whites into a coffee mug and gave me a small spoon to stir it. I looked at the video.

"Will you turn that thing off?" Saying this, she searched for 'When you say nothing at all...' and played it.

She took another cup and started stirring oil and sugar.

“Not that fast, Akash,” she said as some egg white spilled out.

“Not that slow either... watch me,” she said again.

I copied her.

She grabbed that drawer where I keep my sticks... I rushed to her and closed it.

“Baking soda,” she answered.

“It’s not here,” I survived.

As I breathed out, she threw open the fridge.

“Whoaaa...,” she exclaimed.

“Those beers are for guests,” I tried and explained.

“With these many beers, you will have one hell of drunken guests,” she shut the door with a pat on the refrigerator door.

‘Shit!’ I thought to myself.

She teased me for a few more minutes before returning to work again.

Then she mixed everything with white flour and chocolate powder in a big bowl.

“You are not letting me do anything,” I complained.

“Ohh!! Come take it and stir for an hour.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

I took it and started stirring. She sat on the table.

“Come here,” she dipped her finger in the dough and tasted it.

“We are doing just fine,” she added.

“Yeah,” I asked.

She blinked her eyes in agreement.

She sometimes hummed along with the music. It was awesome. It was the best time I ever had in this house.

Sometimes she took the bowl and stirred it for a few minutes. Then we placed the whole mixture in the microwave and sat in the kitchen... talking... listening to songs... laughing at the video of a baby elephant sneezing.

Twenty minutes passed in a nutshell.

The cake was finally out.

Kasam carefully started spraying the chocolate syrup all around.

I brushed my finger over it to taste it and she slapped my hand.

She went on to decorate the edges with strawberries. I picked one and forwarded her to eat. She looked at me for a moment. Then ate it...

“See, it’s so beautiful,” she said, looking at the cake.

“Yeah, it is,” I said looking at her.

A few hours later, we went to sleep. I got up in the middle of the night to have some water. Then I noticed Kasam was sleeping on the couch and TV was still running. I switched it off. I was in turmoil for a few minutes. Then I

grabbed her hand and placed it on my shoulder. Took her in my arms and walked towards her room. I felt her hair on my neck. Her breath brushed my chest. Her cheek pressed along my neck. I walked slowly, very slowly and placed her on her bed. Then I covered her with a blanket and switched off the lights.

When I was out, I realised this was the closest I had ever been to her. I always imagined about it, but never thought that even a minute would feel like eternity.



Dear Romeo,

Today at midnight on hearing his footsteps, I pretended to sleep. I don't know why I did that. It just felt right. Perhaps I wanted to know what he would do. He came and lifted me in his arms. It felt heavenly. I never wanted him to leave. Is that love?

*Your
Juliet*

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Chapter 17

The very next day I got up real early. Perhaps I wasn't able to sleep at all.

I didn't go out for a jog; instead spent few minutes over the treadmill. Something was itching in my mind, akin to something choking in the throat. Not much, but a little uneasiness. You keep on wandering from one place to another. You are doing things but in between, deep in your thoughts, forget what you are up to.

There was a ring on the door. I went to pick up the newspaper. Finally it was time for the sun to rise. I went to the kitchen to make some coffee for getting rid of this headache. I poured some coffee powder, thought 'that won't do it', hence poured some more. Stepped towards the small window at the end of the kitchen and flipped the curtains. It was raining. I took a sip from my coffee. It was raining heavily... bingo!! It's June, that means never-ending rains, clogged road, deadly traffic, no mobility. How could I let Kasam out in a weather like this? I jumped in the hall to check the weather predictions, hoping it to be worst as possible. Luck was on my side today.

"Akash... you are up already?" Kasam came in the hall, wrapped in her apple coloured nightgown, ending before her knees. Her uncombed hair was even more fluffy... she was looking smoking hot!

She looked at my track pants and sweaty vest.

"You went jogging?"

"No, was running at home only."

She gave a half nod and came and settled beside me.

It was flashing in the news that today it would rain all day. And owing to Mumbai history, many of schools and colleges had declared it a holiday.

Kasam grabbed my coffee and took a sip.

"Yuck... what's it?"

"It's for me; wait I will make you another one," I got up.

When I came, Kasam was watching the news. Half work done.

"Kasam I will drop you home... don't worry," I said casually.

"But it's raining..."

"Yeah... it is. Better you stay here till weather gets fine." Was I too early in dropping this question? Kasam didn't reply; just took the coffee. She again looked at me.

“Yeah, probably I should stay.”

I picked my cell to call Ved, asking him to take care of everything. And there was this sms: ‘Tender passed. Final meeting to crack the deal. If you don’t turn up today everything screwed.’

“Ehh... Kasam make yourself comfortable. I will be back by lunch.”

“Where are you headed to?”

“Something very urgent popped up.”

“I don’t get to work, you still do...?”

“I am sorry and anyways if I fall sick, you are there to take care. If anything happens to you, both of us won’t be in a condition to handle.” What the hell did I just say?

As promised I was back by noon with Chinese food in my hands. Kasam was sitting by the window. I bumped into her.

“Hey...”

“Shhhhh,” she said, adjusting her glasses.

“You wear glasses?”

She gave an exhausted expression and closed the lid of her laptop.

“No, I don’t have power. I wear anti-glare when using laptop,” she answered and opened her laptop again and started typing.

‘To say what you mean, know what you mean.’

— **Kasam**

‘Do you know what you say, not only has an impact on the person who listens, but it also has an impact on you? Impact on what they think of and what they will expect of you?’

‘So coming to the work in hand today, I am going to discuss with you all the difference between criticism and feedback.’

Before I could read more, she shut the lid again.

“Akash, I don’t like people sneaking in while I am working.”

“I am sorry; I was just trying to understand what you are doing.”

“I didn’t go to Prayas today, so was uploading the content in a blog and will tag the participants to it.”

“Oh, I never thought I will see a day when you will be this dedicated.”

“Yeah, that’s something you acquire if you like your job.”

“That you definitely do! So what’s your blog all about?”

“Since when did you get interested in all this?”

“On my suggestion, you missed your session and we both know how much you love to talk... so I thought of offering a participant,” I pointed towards myself.

“Okay,” with a childish excitement she agreed.

“Go on,” I smiled.

“So it’s about criticism and feedback owing to the difference between them.

It applies to all aspects of life, personal or professional. It's very important to know when you are suggesting something how you sound, the kind of impact it has on the other person, what aura it's creating about you around others and most importantly, if it is achieving the desired result."

I listened like a school kid, sometimes nodding in between as she went on.

"Now coming to criticism. Positive criticism is a feedback and everything else is negative criticism. So where is the difference? The difference lies in the motive. When it's positive criticism, you tend to bring out some change, when it's criticism, you just go on without noticing where you are headed to. The second difference lies in the target. In feedback you target the problem. In criticism you target the person. This happens all the time in our life. That we develop a habit of finding some faults in a person's way of doing things. Initially it must be because of that person's own fault, but later we get accustomed to doing that. Haven't you heard yourself saying, 'Oh! That guy, he always does like that...' ...Slowly without even noticing, we stop targeting the problem and our new target becomes that person. So, stop yourself when you learn you are doing that. You might think that you are such a truthful and frank person, telling people what they are good at and what they are not. But behind your back, you are just taken as a stubborn ass and they ignore your comments."

I relaxed a bit and took off my shoes. She got a bit distracted.

"Go on," I told.

"Yeah..."

She took a minute to recall and then continued.

"One more important aspect of feedback is the condition of the person who is getting that. It determines whether that person is able to relate with what you are saying or not; otherwise it can be disastrous for that person as well as your relationship with that person.

"Suppose your friend lost lakhs of money in a share and you warned him before he invested in that. Will you go on and throw your most awaited, 'I told you so' or will you try to calm that person, offer him alternatives to get out of that crisis? Later, some other time you can tell him that it was his fault."

She was saying nothing that I didn't know but it all sounded so much of a realisation trip. Perhaps that was her magic.

"Knowing all doesn't make sense at all if you don't know the right way to give feedback."

"This one I know – first say something good then bring out your guns," I suggested.

"Bingo!! Isn't it like when you have a bad news, start with the good one? There is a very good term for it – sandwich feedback. First appreciate the person, then bring out the change which you want in them and again end up

on a positive note.”

“Yeah, good one,” I appreciated.

“I had an experience. There was one faculty of ours who used to scold the students to death. Used to tell us we were worth nothing and we will never make anything of ourselves. His words never persuaded anyone to work harder. Slowly people opted out of that course. But his trick might have worked on kindergarten students who do their homework from the scare of punishment or getting scolded in front of the whole class. However, when you are older, these things no longer matter. Some people will always attend the class and some will always bunk. You can’t force them to progress. You know what can do the magic then? Appreciation. Appreciate the person. Make them realise what they have and with that, what they can be. I experienced it personally. Whenever I came to know if someone thinks that I am good at work, from that point onwards I worked even harder to maintain that image of mine. Contrary to which, if someone loathed my work, I gave up on him. Thus gave up on myself.”

“You are really thoughtful,” I was mesmerised.

“That’s pretty much it,” she finished.

“Okay I will be back in five minutes and then we will eat.”

“Why do you take so many five-minute breaks?” she raised her eyebrows.

“Just to freshen up.”

“Or for this?” She placed the cigarette packet on the table.

I was shocked.

“What Akash... what do you think of me? Your five-minute break... then the smell of mouth freshener... whenever I come to your car... those perfume sprays... a kid will be able to guess!”

“So that you know, I am trying to quit,” I tried explaining.

“Yeah with fifty packets in storage,” she smirked.

I looked away.

She came to me, “Akash, why do you want to keep the things as they were eight years ago? We have been separated for a long time... things change... people change... you started smoking, so what!? Almost all guys do. You just don’t need to hide it.”

“Seriously Kasam... I mean... I...,” I didn’t have any idea what to say.

“Okay freshen up. We will eat.”

When I returned, she was again engrossed in writing.

“Write the blog after eating. Come, I brought Chinese.”

We ate and I again left for work.

Seven hours later, I was back on the street, praying for the traffic to move at all. And above all, for the rain.

Luck was definitely not on my side.

I reached my flat at around 11:30.

I crashed on the couch. Lights were off; she was probably asleep. I thought about last night. How close we were and how I missed this whole day. I went to kitchen and grabbed a beer. ‘Shit!’ I hung my head over the couch. Hung it down... drank some beer. My throat burned on having it neat. I noticed I was thirsty but too tired to get some water. So I drank beer like water. I looked towards Kasam’s room. The door was slightly open. I concentrated – swift music was playing. Faint line of light was coming out of it. Was she awake? Was it the alcohol? Was I seeing and hearing things?

I lay there with drowsy eyes, looking at that door. In normal setting that meant ‘an invitation’. I closed my eyes hard and then flipped it. I can’t be that drunk that the door was open. Was she waiting for me? Did she want me to cross that door? I got up. Stumbled towards her... random steps froze on touching the cold ground... I almost reached there.

I brushed my fingers on the door.

‘What was I thinking?’ I retraced my steps and came to the couch. I had another beer, yet the streak of line was calling out to me. I stayed there, unable to decide. I don’t know when I closed my eyes.

An oak leaf flew on to my face. I waved it away. It flew back to the side of the road. Millions of such beautiful leaves covered the edges of the boulevard. They played music while brushing through the streets. Beautiful leaves, red at the out and orange by the middle. Lying still... flowing away... I looked down that narrow street. Nobody was there.

Long trees decorated its sides. Swaying... kissing the sky. A spur of sunlight blocked my sight and when it ended, there I saw it – a beautiful old wooden bench by the side of which Kasam was sitting in an orange gown, flowing till her feet. Her hair swaying like the trees... looking more beautiful than ever... sometimes brown... sometimes red. I stood where I was. She came to me... brushed her fingers on my face and gave a shy smile. She kept her head on my chest. I embraced my hands around her. We stood there, unmoving. She looked up. I let her lose. She stepped back a few steps. I stood there. She kept on walking backwards. My eyes were fixed at her but I didn’t move at all. She turned back and ran. Through that beautiful street where oak leaves flowed, where sun merged with the trees... she ran, leaving her shoes mid-way... she ran like a free bird. I turned and I ran away. My eyes were swollen. I ran as fast as I could, but opposite to her. She kept on running... I kept on running. She hugged a man, swayed her long arms around his neck and smiled at him – I couldn’t see who he was. He placed his hands on her waist. She pressed her lips on to his. I kept on running... I kept on running away. I was tired... I was breathless... there were tears in my eyes. I collapsed on the street... fighting with those leaves... all alone... alone... alone.

“Huuuhhhh... huuuhhh,” I breathed out as my eyes opened to reality.

Raindrops were still tapping on the window. I closed my eyes again and regained myself. I went in the kitchen to have some coffee; it was just 4:30. I felt asleep last night on the couch only. My head ached from all the alcohol, but my heart ached from something else.

I know alcohol makes you do silly things... but it makes you dream silly things I didn't know.

I went to my room and tried to get some sleep. I kept on turning on the bed. Probably slept for a few minutes in between. I kept on thinking about that dream. Kasam is so close to me... everything is so perfect... why would such a dream come to me? I stayed on the bed trying to get my body at ease though my mind wasn't. It was around eight-thirty when I finally got up. I hit the shower and stood there, hoping that water would clear my mind. I was combing my hair when I looked outside the window of my room. I could see Kasam's room-window. Nobody ever stayed in that guest room before, so it was sort of a discovery to see someone from my window to that room. It was still drizzling. Rain droplets were falling on the windowpane and making its way downwards. It was a bit hazy but I could see her in her cream coloured *kurta* and her white *duppata*, her hair was half tied. I don't know when my feet headed towards her. When I entered her room, she was looking away. She looked at me on hearing my footsteps. I noticed a comforting feeling in her eyes on seeing it's me. I sat by her on the broad window extension. She looked at me and smiled. I looked at her and never stopped looking.

"Let's do it your way," I broke the silence.

"What?"

I drew a Smiley on the window glass by my finger.

"You remember, you used to draw whatever came to your mind on a balloon. So let's do it on this window."

She blew at the window and drew a moon. I drew a star. She did a sun. I did 'you'. She added 'and me'. We both exchanged glances at that time. I wrote 'love'. She wrote 'music'.

She drew a 'virgin' sign. I rolled my eyes. She laughed.

"It wasn't a question, dude!" we both laughed.

We laughed our heart out. We laughed as we came close. We laughed as the rain droplet kept on tapping at the window. We laughed as our eyes closed. I brushed my warm fingers on her cold ones. Our fingers entangled for a moment and left each other. Then I took my hand again and took hers in mine. I had held her hand a lot of times before but this was different. My fingers played with her hand. I grabbed her arms with both my hands. She brushed her fingers on my neck. I tilted my head back to feel her more. I opened her hair and brushed my fingers through her long strands. Meanwhile her *duppatta* slid down to her arms. Her breath touched my skin. I grabbed her neck softly, rubbed my thumbs across her chin and then her ears. We were

close... very close – in the apartment which I never called home, which felt like one for the past three days. She slid her hands under my shirt and grabbed my back. My body was now pressed against her. She closed her eyes. I knelt forward, just a centimetre difference between us and I looked at her. She looked so beautiful. Then out of nowhere that morning dream flashed in front of my eyes. I retaliated. Does she really want me? Or is the need arising from the fear of her being alone... betrayed by some guy? Just then I felt her lips pressed against mine. She took the leap. I was tired of being the other guy. I sat stoned. She moved her lips a bit and then pressed them again against mine. I was frozen. She moved back. There was pain in her eyes and shock on my face. She slid away. She looked embarrassed. I wasn't able to think at all. In the first place, should I be thinking at all? She stood up with uncomfortable steps and walked away, murmuring, 'You didn't kiss me back'. She kept on murmuring it again and again.

'Yeah! Why didn't I kiss her back?' I asked myself, bewildered at what had happened.

She walked with heavy steps. Her *duppatta* brushed the ground. She went out. I grabbed my face in my hand, 'What have I done?' I looked up she wasn't there.

"Kasam," I shouted but no response came.

I rushed out of the room. She was in the hall, heading towards the main door.

"Kasam," I shouted at her. She didn't turn.

I ran to her and grabbed her arm.

"Kasam."

She turned with red eyes and looked at me for a moment.

She grabbed my hand with her other hand and pushed it away. She shouted, "You didn't kiss me back!"

She cried, "You didn't kiss me back!"

She moaned, "You don't love me. I was wrong."

She walked with long steps towards the door and I had nothing to say to stop her.

Chapter 18

Three Weeks Later

I spent the following week, analysing what I wanted. What Kasam wanted. Did she really want me in her life or was she clinging to me as Utsav had left her? Love is complicated. All that I wanted in my life was Kasam to love me. Now when she did, I was more interested in why she loved me. It took me a week to overcome my fear, be prepared and be confident to face her again. But this always happened to me. When I was ready, my stars no longer remained in my favour. I was asked to go to Dubai for a client presentation.

When I returned after two weeks, Kasam wasn't in the city. I learned from 'Prayas' receptionist that she went to Delhi to visit her parents. I noted down the address and packed my bags.

Next I knew I was hailing a cab from Delhi airport to her house. On the way we crossed a series of card shops. Somehow I pictured our names in those. A few minutes after, I was there. Her home looked awfully crowded, probably some function was going on. That was all I inferred from all those decoration. I asked a little girl to call Kasam. She smiled and asked, "Kasam *didi*?"

I nodded and she went running. A few minutes later Kasam came. She was wearing a yellow plain saree. The whole thing wasn't giving a positive vibe. On finding me, her expression got bitter. She said something in that little girl's ear and marched towards me.

"Let's go outside," she said in a whispering voice.

Still confused, I followed her.

When we were standing in her garden, I finally managed to ask "What's going on?"

"You can't just come in here and ask what's going on?" she said in a fury.

I stood in silence but my eyes were still asking the same.

"I am getting married," she announced.

I wasn't able to believe what I just heard.

"You are what...?" I repeated.

She didn't say any further.

"Are you nuts?" I yelled.

She didn't reply.

“Listen Kasam, all this is a big mistake. I accept I screwed big time the other day at my place, but that doesn’t mean you will get back at me like this.”

“Wow Akash! Everything is about you, isn’t it? I am not getting married to get back at you. I am tired of this lonely life and people asking me when will I be getting married. So now I am!”

“Then marry me. I love you. Forgive me,” I don’t know where I was headed but my words were not in my control.

“Do you? Do you really love me?” she questioned.

I looked into her eyes.

“Akash, try loving yourself first, then love someone else. You were never confident enough to accept my love for you. Even if I love you indefinitely, you will reject it. I will respect you but you won’t feel it because of your self-created shell. You keep me on such a high pedestal – I don’t want that. The other day I was just a girl who loved you and was asking for your love in return. You weren’t able to give me that,” she almost yelled and then controlled herself.

“But I am here now and I am repetitively telling you that I love you.”

“*Aaj meri haldi hai,*” she said in a low tone.

I breathed in, gripped her hands in mine and said, “Listen. I was wrong. I let go of a million moments to tell how I feel about you. But today, if you go forward with this decision, I am sorry to say you will ruin what we have. You will be wrong. So don’t do this.”

“I can live with someone knowing that he doesn’t love me but I can’t live with someone who makes me feel he loves me but still lacks the courage to directly say it in words. I will be waiting for you to say so... I will love you but you will distance yourself from me, thinking you don’t deserve my love. With Utsav, I knew what I was going to have. With you I will have expectations and that will kill me,” she screamed.

I left her hand.

“You are marrying Utsav, the one guy who ruined your life?”

She didn’t add anything. I pressed my forehead and then I just lost it.

“You know what Kasam? Your problem is you think you can invent happiness. All these years you have been doing so. Singing in trains... writing stuff on balloons... wearing weird combination dresses... decorating your home with little things.

“Those are just your excuses, not happiness. If I can’t accept love, then you can’t accept happiness. You are a motivator, I get it. You analyse others’ problems. But you know what? Doing that has paralysed your mind. You bring out fictitious problems in everything. You complicate things.”

“Just get out,” Kasam yelled at the top of her voice.

“Huh! I am standing here, telling you to come with me and you are

marrying Utsav?”

I faked a laugh.

Kasam’s eyes were red and her body was stiff.

I had nothing else to say to the girl standing in front of me... to the girl I last loved, except, “I would have wished you a happy married life but I won’t, because even if you won’t be, you will find out a way to fake it.”

Soon someone called out her name and she started walking away from me.

The one girl I loved walked away from me...

The girl who changed my life...

The girl who never bid goodbye...

...but who always left me alone...

The girl I last loved...

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Chapter 19

3 Months Later

Lights off.

Head on the floor.

Legs on the sofa. Drunk.

Bottles, the only friend and always by my side.

Too numb to decide whether in pain or lonely, angry, sad or terrified. Any other options were definitely not applicable.

3 More Months Later

Lights off.

Legs on the floor.

Head on the sofa. Partially drunk.

Bottles, the only friend and always by my side.

Too numb to decide whether in pain, or lonely, angry, sad, or terrified. Any other options were definitely not applicable.

3 More Months Later

Legs on a run.

Mind in one piece.

Returned to my workaholic phase. I often wonder if I didn't have my work, how would I have survived? From time to time it has taken me in its shelter and rescued me from outside world.

Weekends were the odds.

Drunk, as I saw my life beyond work.

Drunk, as I was alone.

Drunk, as I wanted no one but her.

So many times I have seen in movies that when you miss something or you want something, that is all you can see around you. When a couple wishes to get pregnant, they see babies all around. When you need a date, you start seeing even your office receptionist differently. When you are in love, you see people kissing, holding hands all around.

I was having the practical experience of this overutilised theory. I saw

couples all around. Not of just our age but of all ages. When I saw couples who were younger than me, I thought of the moments which could have been ours if we had taken the chance eight years back. When I see couples of my age, I know what I am missing at this very moment. When I see a couple older than me, I repent not having such a future to look forward to.

It was just the other day. I saw a schoolgoing couple and the guy was holding the girl's bag. I never got that chance. The girl smiled, while throwing glances at him. I never got those glances.

Sometimes while driving during lunch hour, I saw a few college-going students hanging out. Most of these couples wore matching dresses. One day I spotted a couple, both sporting checked red shirts. They looked awesome together. I often imagined what life could have been for them. It must be about coffee from the college canteen. Sitting together in the library, holding hands below the table. Gang fight for that girl. Lying at home about group study to catch a late night movie. Futile attempts to change each other. Listening to songs from one iPod, sharing a sandwich, frequent visits to *Archies* gallery, sneaking out from your group. That guy might have tried to rescue his girl from colliding bastards while they travelled in bus. Staring into eyes without any reason. SMSing, covered under the sheet all night long. I never got a chance to live that life. I lost all that time, all those moments. I never knew this at that time – with each passing day, I missed days which could have been my history. Our love story.

However hard I tried not to see couples, the more they came into my view.

While jogging I saw a couple jogging together; An old lady who always wiped her husband's head while doing power walk. I saw our faces in them, Smiled for a moment and then came back to my senses as it was never going to be true.

I saw a married couple sending their kid to school and waving at him together. Will I never have those moments? I kept on questioning myself. One day I spotted a wife insisting to her husband to climb the stairs in spite of the elevator. I smiled at her concern. Once I saw a husband fighting with his wife for holding all the carrybags by herself as she was pregnant. I thought what that might feel like. Having a wife... having a kid... finally having a family, which was yours.

The other day I saw a boy wiping off chocolate syrup from his girls lips in CCD.

At others, I saw various couples feeding each other.

Those couples, who just stepped into the corporate world, struggling to make time for each other, still when they met at the end of the day's struggle, all seemed worthwhile.

When I saw an old couple sitting in the balcony of their flat, she had her head on his shoulder and he supported her by holding her waist. They were

enjoying the warm sunlight and both of them fell asleep after some time. I stood there, watching them for hours. Perhaps a tear trickled down my eyes at my loss.

I saw couples everywhere – at the beaches, in the train, at work, in my apartment building, on the way, in the restaurants. There was no escape.

It happened to me a few days back. On a Friday night, I was dining at a restaurant and the waiter kept asking me whether anyone would be joining me. I thought he was mad or what. Then after serving the food, the waiters started moving from table to table with trays filled with roses, asking the man, “Would you like to present a rose to the lady?” I realised I was the only one sitting alone there. Candles were lit everywhere. There was a special menu for two. Lights were dim. And then a violinist played some notes. Now I understood why he was asking me whether anyone would join me. I just finished my food and headed out. While going back, I read Friday nights were couple’s night special.

I was hitting the higher side of twenty-eight.

Whenever I opened my Facebook page, notifications flooded with changed relationship status. Guys were getting engaged.

Most of my female friends were already married.

Every day pictures of marriage ceremony and engagement made me feel like I was running out of time for these. I was hell tired of buying gifts for guy’s engagements and girl’s baby showers. Sometimes I got confused. Did I miss not being part of such stuff or having something coming up or I really missed Kasam.

One random day I was not at all randomly thinking about the time we spent together. I got reminded of Dad. I remembered her exact words. She recalled those days when I used to quote Dad’s words all the time. How did I move so far away from home? I picked my cell and called him, “Hello.”

“Akash,” he answered.

“*Aap kaise hain?*”

“I am good.”

For a few more minutes we discussed about my life and career. Then he told me about the new research paper he was working on. I suggested to him not to take so much stress. Then he gave the phone to Maa. It didn’t matter how many days had passed but all she asked was whether I was getting food or not. Dad was back.

“You alright?” he asked me.

I paused.

“Akash?” he uttered.

“Yes, I am fine.”

One of the best things about growing old is you learn to hide your feelings even from those who used to see through you.

I missed her all the time. When I opened my eyes in the morning I missed her not lying by my side. When I got up, I missed not seeing her brushing her wet hair with a towel. I missed her not passing me the juice during breakfast. I missed her yelling out about not taking my wallet or mobile and getting them for me. I missed not saving her image in my eyes before leaving for work. I missed kissing her goodbye at the door. Whenever I looked at my kitchen's window from the parking, I missed her not standing there, watching me till I leave... waving to me. I missed not getting abrupt calls during meetings. I missed the anxiety to reach home early. I missed the way she would have opened the door for me. If sometimes I would have arrived early, I would have to make coffee for her. I missed her massaging my head if I had some work-related issue. I missed trying to knit her hair. I missed sitting on this sofa together, fighting for the remote. I missed letting her win and then watching romantic comedies. I missed lying in the corner of this hall. Her sitting in my lap... I smelling her hair, knowing it's forever. I missed her, kneeling her head on my chest and then going to sleep. I even missed the fight we never had. I missed the kisses. The hugs. The warmth.

I missed not making all that happen.

I missed the very possibility of her being with me.

Chapter 20

It had been almost a year since I last saw her. However ridiculous it may sound that time is the best healer, I experienced it. I felt it and I know everything becomes just fine with time. Life was back to normal. Going to work. Eating out. Hanging out with guys at the bar. Smoking only six cigarettes a week. Occasionally getting drunk and losing my senses. Life is much, much larger than love. When one person goes, it creates a void. Other people, work and daily life step in and fills that void.

And obviously I had to return for this one.

I took my cell out and it flickered.

Divya calling.

“Akash, you forgot?”

“Oh, is it already time?”

“Huh, why can’t you be as involved as I am in the wedding preparations?” she yelled at me.

“Because it’s a girl thing,” I yelled back.

“So that means you are going to leave me alone, hanging with all the shopping to be done by myself.”

“Marriages are anyways for the bride.”

“You are not getting away with these lines. So get your lazy ass up here.”

She hung up. This marriage thing had got into her head.

So I picked my ‘lazy’ ass up and got there.

“The black one or the red one.”

“I want to ask again why we are doing lingerie shopping?”

“Because otherwise the spark won’t come.”

I shook my head in a ‘no’ as I already didn’t find that a very great idea.

“Because if the groom buys his bride lingerie, she becomes obliged to wear it at least once,” she explained further.

“Okay... now I get it.”

She gave me a mischievous smile.

“Now let’s go to the designer and check how the *sherwani* is coming along.”

“Why do we have to do all this now? The wedding is after three months!”

“Duh... you yourself answered your question, ‘because it’s just three

months.”

With the speed she drove we were there at her designer’s in no less than an hour.

“Hi,” she waved at the people standing there.

“Hi Divs,” a guy with not much of a guyish manner came and hugged her. It was kind of amusing to watch.

“So, taken the measurements?” she inquired.

“Yes darling, it’s coming just fine,” he said, waving his hand in a weird manner.

“So how is our groom to be?” she said, while raising her eyebrows.

“He is confused and tired,” Ved replied, who had been waiting for us there for the past two hours.

“Dude, you are getting married... your whole life is going to be confused and tired!” I chuckled.

“I am the one getting married! The way you two are running around, it very much seems like you are getting married,” Divya became silent all sudden.

“Why aren’t you two married?” Ved went on to add this.

“Because we are not meant to be,” Divya smiled.

“Yeah, as our work here is done. Let’s leave for a drink,” I suggested changing the subject.

Divya with her apple martini joined two guys with beer.

“So what are you two discussing?”

“About his honeymoon,” I spoke with a pretended husky tone.

“Don’t even think about it. That’s my wedding gift to you. Two weeks in Santorini,” she told Ved.

I had been long enough with him to know when he is smiling to hide his fear. Few minutes later Divya announced, “I need a refill” and gave me some solitary moments with Ved.

“What’s it?” I asked.

“I don’t love her,” he said it in plain simple words.

“I know.”

“So?” he asked.

“You are a very nice guy, Ved. You are well established. You are not even an addict like me. You will make her happy in every possible way.”

“But isn’t that cheating her by not telling what I feel?”

I recalled what Kasam has told me as a solution to that girl’s problem who pinned holes in her boyfriend’s condom so that he married her.

“Akash, every mistake is not meant to amend. Every secret is not meant to disclose. What they have now is much larger than what she did four years back.

“It may or may not have turned this way but as it has, she needs to live with it.

“Otherwise her own guilt would drive them apart.

“And she can make up on the guilt part by being a wife anyone including her husband would die for. A wife her husband would be honoured to have.”

“You know Ved, every secret is not meant to be disclosed. And you have so much love in you that even if you get successful in sharing a percentage of it with her, which I am sure you will, that will be enough for you both to live happily.”

Ved nodded, his face seeming a little at ease.

“Anyways, you are going to Delhi for fifteen days to spend time with her. Give all of yours to that time – to her. I think that will do.”

“Come along with me,” he asked like a kid asking for an ice-cream.

“Don’t be such a sissy. Anyways I am going to visit my parents in Lucknow.”

“Okay, that means I will have to go alone.”

“Now Divya is coming back and if she knows that you are having second thoughts about this marriage which she is planning, she will rip your chest off. So, act cheerful.”

The following day Ved took a step towards his new life and I stepped back in my past to even off a few slips. I was in Lucknow at my parents’ house. Oops! My house. I called up all my three sisters to join us. Somehow we all managed to be under the same roof at the same time after nine long years since my eldest sister started working. Slowly we all left that place for a better future. But now when we all were here together, fighting to tell our stories or fighting for one remote. Again Maa tired of cooking food according to all our preferences and we all abiding to the rules made by our father after being all grown up. I doubt the future was for any good. But as of now, as of this moment, we all were ecstatic to relive our childhood. And my sisters were reliving it with their own children. I knew we were not going to settle there for all our life. But when I saw my parents satisfied with proud faces, I knew it’s real and it’s worthwhile.

All these were possible because of the conversation I had with Kasam on her birthday below that Christmas tree.

“Dad, Maa always wanted to see snow for real and that’s not even that far; just go to Shimla this year,” I tried to persuade my father.

“But who will look after the house?” he counteracted me.

“I will. Anyway, the kids’ summer holidays are going on and Akshat is in the US for an assignment,” my eldest sister spoke.

“There you go,” my second sister spoke with conviction.

Now they had no excuse. We didn’t leave home before getting them packed up and dispatched to Shimla.

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Chapter 21

As I stared over the signboard, pulled open the two doors of the conference hall situated across the way from my cabin, her face flashed in my mind. How she used to pull the door on which 'push' was written. Thankfully some people rushing into that hall diverted my mind. I noticed the third person entering there, pushed the door open on which 'pull' was written. Then the ones following him were in such haste that they never waited for the door to close and kept on pushing it again and again. The very same happens in life. Somebody does something in a wrong way and others follow him by repeating his mistake and then it goes on to become the right way. In all that, what happens to the door is it becomes the victim.

Eight years back I did something wrong. Then we got a second chance. Then again I did something wrong by not accepting her love for me. By the time I overcame my mistake, Kasam made the mistake of not taking me back into her life. Her mistake was not to forego me. These small little ridiculous mistakes ruined something beautiful we had and something big which we could have had.

Our whole future.

Our love which remained unexpressed.

Those moments which remained un-lived and never got a chance to become memories...

The people we could have been.

The things we might have cherished...

They never came to life.

What would have happened if I had begged for her love eight years back?

What if I had kissed her back last year?

What if she wouldn't have gone ahead to marry Utsav?

Eight years ago, I thought we never made it because there was no 'us'.

Now I knew there was an 'us', but it was just not big enough than our individual ego.

Just then I saw Rakesh Bedi walking in with his bag. I twisted my watch. It showed 1 a.m. He was three hours late again. It was almost lunch time. After lunch, even normal people don't concentrate on work. Let alone Rakesh. Why does he even come to work? I was taken into flames. I picked the receiver and

called Shireen.

“Let Mr Bedi know I want to see him in my office now.”

People like him are a disgrace to the organisation. They think they can fool us. I know their category; they never change. But if I let him continue, it will mean dishonouring the effort others put in.

And even further, it can promote such behaviour from others. I just hate his guts. I just hate his guts. I repeated that line in my mind again. Was I targeting him and not his mistake?

I recalled what Kasam had told.

Initially we have issues with some person’s habit, his problem. When time passes by, we realise it’s no longer about the problem; it becomes about the person.

This realisation immediately vaporised my anger.

I started analysing.

Did I not like Rakesh Bedi or his ability or I didn’t like the way in which he had been behaving lately?

What was my motive?

To curse him or to change him?

Definitely it would be the best way out if he could change or improve his behaviour a bit and contribute to the team as he did earlier.

Would my constant yelling at him help me to make him return to his previous self? I guess ‘no’. So that means for changing him first, I needed to change.

I thought more of Kasam. It came to me she said something about sandwich criticism. How much I liked the idea at that time, but it was all in theory. I never applied that practically.

Well now I had my chance.

I calmed myself before Rakesh entered.

He knocked.

“Yes.”

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, come in and have a seat,” I said.

“So, what’s the progress?” I asked.

“I am kind of stuck because I don’t have the SRS documents yet. The customers haven’t specified their requirements.”

“Customers never do that anyways. We are the ones who need to extract every possible detail from them. Even better give them a projection of the things they don’t know yet, but they want.”

He looked up at me in surprise. I continued, “Two years down the lane I heard these lines from a very dynamic Team Lead in this very same office. You know who that person was?”

He hung his head.

“You,” I pointed at him.

His face lit for a while and then faded.

He looked away.

“I can’t believe that not getting the SRS comes in your way of progress. So tell me what the real thing is?”

“Yeah, I was that person. I loved my work. I was crazy for my work. I motivated others as well. But where did it get me? Slogging all day long, what has it given me? I missed out on all the fun. I don’t have any idea how I got a few grey hair and when...”

“You got so many promotions; every one respects you. You set the bar of performance to a much higher level,” I spoke, cutting him out.

“You don’t understand. My wife cheated on me,” he shouted out aloud.

I was taken aback.

This was not at all what I expected to deal with.

“She cheated on me and the worst part is I don’t want her to leave. I don’t want a divorce.”

I got up, went to his side and patted his back.

“I can’t concentrate on anything. I come to work, I stare on the computer screen and get lost. I keep on working and I forget my aim. I can’t tell anyone about it. I can’t discuss it with my wife as well, as it makes me sick. She makes me sick.”

“I understand,” I said what sounded appropriate at that time. I didn’t expect to be dealing with something like this.

“You don’t understand. I am not weak. It’s just that I love her too much to let her go.”

“Wow,” I whispered. Perhaps if I and Kasam would have thought like this, things wouldn’t have turned this way.

“I keep fighting with myself. I stay awake at night. I don’t find peace at home. I don’t find peace at work. Most of all, I feel responsible,” he kept on talking.

I thought what Kasam might have suggested at this point. Then it was all easy.

“Why don’t you tell your wife how much you still love her? Try it once. I bet things will change for good.”

His face showed some expression of conviction.

“I want you take a week of leave. Go some place faraway. It has been a long time since you took a holiday and I know that when you will be back, things at work will also take a U-turn.”

He nodded, recollected himself and left.

Huh! I got through with that. Sometimes you have no idea how you acquire qualities of the person you stay with, be it good or bad. I believed in religion but never really followed the norms of it. When I first started working I had to

stay in a two-room shared flat. My flat-mate, he was a very religious guy. He never allowed me in his room wearing slippers. Prayed two times a day. Chanted for around one hour in the evening. Gave me odd looks when I entered, wearing slippers in kitchen. In the evening after doing *aarti*, he used to come to my room for giving me *prasad*. After dropping two pieces of cashewnuts in my hand, he used to repeat 'Wash your hands'. I found him so ridiculous, mainly because he used to tell most of the superstitious rubbish. In everything he used astrological references. Most of all he was always telling me 'what to do, what not to do'. Besides he wasted a lot of time in these stuff. One day we were shopping together. He bought a lot of stuff. And I was dangling with my cornflakes and frozen food packs. We stopped at one section where he bought *agarbatti*. I even bought one with the thought of using it as a room freshener. A few initial days I enjoyed the fragrance on coming back from work. Then slowly I started roaming around in the whole room with them and chanting *Hanuman-chalisa* and *Gayatri mantra*.

It had this weird soothing effect to it. Whatever happened at work, however tiring the traffic was – my mind was empty and ready to relax. Praying in the morning gave me the promise that things wouldn't go wrong today. At least I started my day on a positive note. I gained it from my flat-mate minus the nuisance. I didn't pray if I didn't have time. It was according to my convenience and I knew when to cut short.

Every person who comes into our life teaches us something, knowingly or unknowingly. They leave their impression not only on our memories but sometimes also on our way of thinking and doing. Kasam is not with me. But is she really not with me? Although she was not there, was she really not there? After school when she wasn't with me, she stayed with me, but as a passion to achieve everything which felt like a target to me. She stayed with me as the urge to achieve power. To be in a position where I can never be rejected, be it promotion, groups or girls.

She stayed with me as something unfinished. She stayed with me as the block which never allowed me to fall in love again.

And now... isn't she with me? When I speak, I speak her words. When I am in trouble, I look to her and she helps me in decisions. When I am lonely, I smile with her memories. When someone needs my support, Kasam helps me. She is here. With me. In the choices I make. In the decisions I take. In what I am. In what I do for others. I never recalled when this happened but as of now, it's the truth of my life.

Chapter 22

It was more than a year since I met Kasam for the last time. Time played its charm and everything was back to normal. If I consider my condition from two years back before Kasam's re-entry in my life, I can very well say that it is better than before. I worked. Spent time with friends, didn't hit on chicks all the time. Cultivated a few hobbies. Started a little garden in my balcony. Frequently called at home. Life was smooth as for now. I was not going by a plan. But it was fine. A welcome change.

I got up in the morning, did a little bit jogging, grabbed a cup of coffee and drove to work. Wished everyone good morning and started on with my work. It was a normal day, till it wasn't.

"Hey buddy," Ved's voice echoed in my chamber.

"You have no idea how much I missed those untimely knocks at my door."

I stood up and hugged him.

"Coffee?" I asked.

He nodded.

"So how were the things? Did you two gel well?" I inquired.

"Yeah...", his lips immediately stretched into a smile.

"I think I can survive the next fifty years with her," he added.

"I am happy for you. I could have told you 'tell me all about it', but if I will do... what will be left for Divya?"

"I need to tell you something," he murmured in between, as I went on.

"...and then I will have to hear the whole story again."

"I saw Kasam in Delhi," these words left his mouth but didn't reach my ears as I was consumed in my own excitement.

He stood up and came to me. Placing his hand on my shoulder, probing into my eyes he uttered, "I saw Kasam."

It took a few moments of silence to absorb his words.

"So?" I said with an impatient voice.

"She looked kind of different."

"That's not a big deal. She might have come with her husband for a holiday," I said without looking at him.

"I didn't talk to her. She was in a rickshaw with a girl."

"They might be visiting their parents or may have decided to settle in

India,” I kept on blabbering to show I was oblivious to that stuff.

“She was not looking like herself. She looked devastated. She looked sad. Her face was pale.”

“Why do you think I want to know that?” I finally shouted at him.

“Because I know you,” he declared.

We stood there facing each other in silence when I turned my back on him and knelt on the window.

“I don’t know but I sensed she was in some trouble.”

“Ved, I beg you don’t make me go down that lane again,” I appealed.

He placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “You should find out about her.”

“No, I don’t want to.”

“I know you way better to believe in that.” Saying this, he left the room.



The next week Ved and I were at Gautam’s place. Gautam was Kasam’s cousin residing in Mumbai and the one who helped her out in establishing Prayas.

I kept his number in case of emergency. I realised I never deleted any number associated with Kasam. Gautam was a family guy. He lived there with his wife, but they had no children yet. Gautam was eight years older to Kasam and looked after her from time to time. He ran a small computer consultancy firm. His house was huge with much old interior but well maintained. Probably he inherited it. While he went to bring us some *chai* as his wife was not around, I helped myself to look around a bit. There was a picture of him, his wife and Kasam hanging on the wall opposite to where we were sitting. I went near. It was of Prayas’ inauguration.

“Such a bright girl,” he said while entering the room and spotting me near that picture.

“When she said *bhaiya*, I wanted to run away. I gave her the idea of starting Prayas. I knew she would do it, but I never knew she would do it this well.”

I smiled as I settled down again and grabbed my cup.

“When she came here, twenty-one year old, fresh out of college. She had no knowledge of how things go around here, though she had that fire in her. She was one of the most determined people I ever saw.”

I nodded as I totally agreed with him.

He breathed out and continued, “Such a tragic life. For some people, the struggle never gets over and some of them lose themselves in the fight with their own destiny.”

I acted normal and asked, “What happened?”

“After two months of being married, she found out that what she suspected was right. Utsav was still involved with that girl. He used to sneak out from

New York to Boston to see her. When she confronted him, he asked her to live with it. Even she was scared to let it all out to her parents. But when she decided to leave him and return back to India, he took possession of her passport. She went through a lot of torment till her parents brought her back to India.

“Now she is alone and devastated. I never thought I will ever see such a brave girl in that condition.”

I turned my head sideward as I sensed my eyes welling up.

After few more minutes, we left.

“I have booked your ticket for Delhi,” Ved told.

“What? When?”

“When we were talking to Gautam, I booked one flight for tomorrow over my cell.”

“I don’t know...” I was not prepared.

“We both know after overanalysing for weeks, you will go. So, save yourself, Kasam and us from that misery and go tomorrow morning.”

“Come along,” I was nervous.

“This, my friend, you need to do alone,” he said while we drove to office to get down with my leave application.



So, Delhi it was. From the airplane itself I caught a glimpse of the beautiful city. It looked so unorganised, so random, yet so vibrant and colourful. Never seen a city like this before which offers all the highs and lows. On one hand, it’s the kaleidoscope of various architectural legends, on the other, it offers modern erections, be it Chandni Chowk’s narrow lanes or broad roads of Connaught Place. One can meet people of all kinds, be it those who have migrated from other parts of the country in search of jobs, better education, better and larger life or those ladies selling Rajasthani goods on the streets. Those who shifted here in an attempt to flourish a small business or those who have always been here; all world-renowned brands or the high-pitched but sold low items of Palika Bazaar. Be it the cultural assimilation or the exquisite night life – all the extremes coincided here. Most of the above would hold true for several other cities as well, but I wasn’t in any other city. I was in Delhi and analysing its attributes, keeping the bitter memories of my last visit caged.

It had taken me a lot of self-compelling to come this far. I didn’t want anything to drop in which could make me to step back. I didn’t want anything to unleash my fear. Control is what time needs, ‘because it’s not about me, it’s about Kasam. And I have to stick that in my mind.

Followed by a series of card printing shops which struck not so fond memories of my last visit, I was finally there. After the initial half an hour of

the so called *aaobhagat-cum-inquiry*, I was allowed to see her. Her father was not much pleased with the idea of letting me in. I knew he was a little orthodox from my previous conversations with Kasam. He was all like ‘Why do you want to meet her?’, ‘How do you know her?’ When her mother said, “Let him meet her. Nobody comes for her. She might get a little cheered up on meeting her friends.” Her father, though not fully satisfied, finally relented. Her mother guided me through the way to her room. I was afraid to see her, to see what Ved had described. But I had to overcome every inch of hesitation. I had wasted a lot of time already. So, I jumped ahead without a thought. I stepped into her dimly lit room. It was not dark but curtains were drawn. I scanned the room. It was not bright, not at all colourful, even not cluttered with small little beautiful things. It was tidy; simple... it was not her.

She was sitting there in the lonely corner of an isolated room, in track pants and a loose sweatshirt barely clinging to her bones; hair tied up in a pony, definitely not combed recently. I was facing her back. Still she looked lean, weak and her palms were pale.

Her eyes were fixed in just one direction. Her body was firm as stone.

For most time of the past nine years, she was not in my life. I was wrecked, hurt, holding an ocean of pain and the unspoken feeling within myself. I don’t remember exactly but I’ve never cried.

Today when I saw the unimaginable, there was a glint in the corner of my eye which blurred everything. Kasam was the liveliest person I had ever seen. Seeing her like this numbed my senses. I wiped my tears, cleared my throat but she didn’t budge. I called out to her, ‘Kasam’.

She didn’t move. I was taken aback. I recollected myself and spoke again but with a louder voice ‘Kasam’, but she showed no sign of recognition. I stilled my back against the wall, folded my arms and supported myself by placing one foot on the wall. I remember once I asked her that ‘Why do you always dress flamboyantly and with so many bangles, earrings, accessories’ and she had replied in a very simple manner, ‘One day might come when I no longer may remain interested in doing these things so till then I’ll flaunt it.’ I never thought that this would happen.

If it did... then not like this.

I called out again, ‘Kasam’.

First time in her presence I didn’t feel uncomfortable. I didn’t weigh my words. I was simply myself. Perhaps because she was in a vulnerable stage or maybe because for the first time in her presence I didn’t feel vulnerable.

I stood there for around two hours – either Kasam didn’t notice me or she pretended not to. I left after that, fearing her parents might have some problem with my stay. I wasn’t able to sleep much that night. Next day again I went to her place, stood there for two hours, called her name, she didn’t reply and I came back.

It more of all became like a routine.

“You know, Akash, one thing I find extremely fun is travelling in an overcrowded noisy bus or train filled with indistinct voices.”

Her face beamed as she spoke.

I looked around – we were barely standing, with others kneeling over us and thumping at our feet.

“I hope you are heading somewhere with the statement you just made,” I spoke while popping my eyes out.

“Come, I will show you,” she somehow sneaked towards the door, dragging me along with her.

Now we were standing by the gate. She was hardly audible with the noise inside and the sound of train wheels tapping on the railway lines.

“Now try this, sing at your highest pitch but nobody will be able to hear you. It’s fun. You will be surrounded by so many people but you needn’t care how you sound.”

“Let me guess you have done this before,” I smiled at her.

She nodded and started shouting, ‘*teri meri prem kahani*’ from the movie ‘Bodyguard’.

I watched her in amusement.

She nudged me, ‘C’mon...this is fun!’.

Yes, I followed her lead and it sure was fun.

And here I was standing beside that same girl who now allowed hours pass by without a word.

When I looked at her I felt responsible.

If only I had been prepared and placed my proposal in a better manner, eight years back, the first time I told her, ‘I love you’.

If only I had waited for her answer 11 months later to it.

She wouldn’t have been mum today.

If only last year I had kissed her, she wouldn’t have gone through any of this.

If only I had held her tight that day in the garden.

She would have been mine.

Mine to protect.

Mine to love.

Chapter 23

I even didn't count how many days and nights passed with me sometimes standing and sometimes sitting, waiting for her to speak. It was just another usual stay of mine at her place. When I was just about to leave, I heard her voice, "Don't go, I don't want to be alone."

Her words made me as much happy as the pain in her voice made me miserable.

I stayed there till she went to sleep. It was nice to get recognised. It was much easier to stay, knowing I was wanted.

The following day when I visited her, she acted like she was waiting for me. She gave me three roses and went outside to sit in her garden.

One was a bud, one was in bloom and one drying.

Just like her life's journey. I looked at her from a distance and then walked away. I knew she was not ready yet.

Next day I was in Mumbai, exasperatedly waiting for the weekend, so that I could fly back to her.

I went to see her on the subsequent Saturday morning. As I entered her room, it felt like night was never over. I uncovered the curtains. Kasam threw a glance at me and then stood up. As our eyes collided, she came running towards me and held me tight. I was unable to move. I was unable to think. I felt something moist on my neck. She was crying.

At that moment, I didn't think anything. I held her close. Didn't say a word. She kept on crying. It was unbearable to listen, but it would have been insane to stop her. She had been holding them since all those years when her parents fought and her Mom left; the time her engagement was over and God knows what she went through in the past one year. She needed to cry for those times she put up a brave face. She needed to let it go. I caressed her hair as she sobbed, when she was loud, when she cried, forgetting it's been hours since she was crying. In that time we knelt to the ground and sat on the floor with my back against the wall and Kasam clinging on to me. Most of the time, I was blank. My mind wasn't working. At others, I associated myself with the pain she had in herself.

At those I felt ridiculed. I felt anger. My muscles clenched. I felt like punching Utsav real hard, right in the face till his blood started oozing out.

Seeing him suffer. Seeing fear in his eyes.

As a tear journeying from Kasam's cheek traced my chest, I knew I was needed more here. I swallowed my anger and clenched my arms around her and sat there still, unmoving.

I never asked her what exactly happened. For me it wasn't a party gossip I was curious to know. It didn't matter. What mattered was bringing her back. Back to life. Back as she was. Like she did for me.

In the following days, she seemed at peace. She didn't speak much but her face wasn't grim any more. I wasn't able to make out whether she was really moving on or she was again deceiving with a flat face, holding something back. But I was never good at reading someone, so I stuck to what my limited capacity offered. She sometimes shared little fragments of what happened and even lesser of what she felt.

Their split after the engagement led to the split of the business owned by both the families. Utsav's family faced rejection from the community. Later on, their business sank. They urged Utsav to get back with Kasam.

When they both moved to Boston after marriage, Utsav was never home. His strange behaviour forced Kasam to look out. Rest was now history.

A few more days passed and she started sharing what she might not have shared with herself even.

"When I found out, he wanted me to live with it. I mean he thought I was so weak that he could pull something like this all our life without me finding out. All these years I worked so hard, to be strong... emotionally, financially, so that no one could dare to hurt me ever again. When he did something like that to me again I felt I hadn't gained anything in the past six years. I was the same naïve girl who he dumped after the engagement. I lost it. For a few days I even tried to live with it. I had no other way. I was tired; tired of fighting my destiny. Perhaps my life was meant to be lonely, sad, and depressed. I just kept on pushing it back but finally it engulfed me."

In a gloomy summer afternoon she answered the question which I dreaded the most 'Why?'

"I was 27. I had to get married. I was tired of living alone. I was tired of staying with my parents, who never were able to make a home. When Utsav came back and apologised, everyone had expectations. I was confused. I didn't want to take him back. But there was so much anger. I wanted you to pay... I wanted to hurt you... I didn't think what will happen to me... I just wanted to seal every chance in which I may want you..."

She kept on talking in haste until she realised what she was saying. She bit her lips. My heart took it all. I didn't know who was at fault.

She suffered, so it's definitely not her fault. But if it's my fault then why I was the one in pain.

One fine evening when I arrived, she opened the door for me.

It felt like she waited for the weekends as well.

She was looking continuously at her parents. I nudged her.

She smiled at me, “See those two people. They have been married for thirty-five years. They live in the same house, oblivious of each other’s existence but never forget to pretend in front of guests. I was so cautious, to never end up like them. Guess, an apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

I had nothing to say to comfort her. She was the one who was good with philosophy or feel good saying, “You were right Akash, hiding money in copy, dressing vibrantly, doing things differently, acting my life was super cool. When I grew older, pretending I was more mature than others, even running Prayas, where it was all an attempt to make me not feel sorry for myself. To feel it’s all fairy tale like... doing those things made me feel that I had everything under my control, but it wasn’t. And it’d proven now.”

It was confiding in someone that all she needed. I let her go through that phase because for the first time, I had all the time.

Gradually when she had said everything there was to, I knew this was time – time to bring little changes. Life is at its best when it’s normal.

So, I went for a scavenger hunt in her old closet.

Next morning I arrived early and arranged breakfast for her.

I brought some fresh coffee, some fruits, bread, omelette, juice and her mother prepared *aloo parantha*.

She panicked on seeing all those over her table, besides her bed.

“Are you crazy? I can’t eat this much. Besides, I don’t feel like eating anything.”

“Maybe this will change your mind,” I pulled out that jeans which she earlier bought in 50 per cent sale and declared she would fit in them by gaining weight, as to finally look hot.

On seeing it, she glanced at the food and then at me. There it was. For the first time in a very long time I heard her laugh. Then we had breakfast, recalling all those stupid things we use to say or think during our adolescence.

Sometimes past can provide us a rescue – and this was one of those times.

Probably she recalled what she was – unknowingly, but she did.

The following week when I visited her, she was waiting for me at the door. When I entered her room, drapes were already removed. Earlier it had become my duty to do so.

I wasn’t there to witness, but I would like to think she did that herself.

Was it just in my imagination or she was really changing? Her hair was no longer unkempt. Her skin was a little less pale from the first time I visited. She was no longer in a fight with colours. I entertained the feeling that she might be dressing up for me.

I never did anything particular to bring the changes.

Wo kehte hai na... ki koi saath ho toh zindagi utni bhi buri nahi lagti...

I wasn't able to go to Delhi for two months, as work was crazy like hell. Though she sometimes wrote to me, e-mails, texts, I read them again and again. Not to memorise the words but to see what would have been her condition when she wrote.

Nah! I wasn't much good at that. But she mentioned problems or her past less and talked about her less important goals – goals not related to marriage, family or career; simple goals like, watering plants, reading a novel, buying a gift for her sister, sleeping on the terrace. She was never this simple earlier.

I was still confused whether to grade it as an improvement. She seemed at peace but I somehow liked her better before. Whenever I closed my eyes to picture her, I pictured that girl running in the sea.

That girl who reflected confidence.

That girl who lived life.

That girl who didn't wait for anything or anyone to make her happy.

That girl I last loved.

And the girl writing those e-mails wasn't the one; she just looked like her. Hell, she hardly even looked like her.

On my next visit I planned to stay with her for a week, trying to find whether that girl I loved was still alive in her.

Just at her doorsteps I got the answer. She had accumulated a few of the neighbouring kids and they were playing carrom. She asked me to join them, but I wanted no distraction while I watched her.

She is there.

She is just in hiding.

One afternoon when her father decided to research for writing a biography on my life and I somehow survived well on that, I saw Kasam, my Kasam.

She was looking in the mirror, trying to motion something. She was practicing hand gestures.

I went near without disturbing her.

"It's just the way you look at it.

Whether the glass looks half empty...", she paused recalling what she wanted to say and there she went, 'shit'.

She tried again.

"It's just the way you look at it.

Whether the glass looks half empty to you or half filled.

Human nature tends to focus on the 'half empty' part."

She tried again but she seemed lost meanwhile.

She tried again and again, but sometimes, she forgot to move her hands, sometimes she gobbled up some words... sometimes she was nervous.

Finally she turned saying, "Why did I even try?"

She seemed a little disturbed to see me there.

"Akash, when did you come?"

“Just now...,” my expression deceived my words and she knew I was there when she was practicing.

“You saw,” she genuinely looked disappointed.

I gave her something I brought for her – a rose bud.

“Kasam, you can start anytime you want. Here’s this one for a fresh start.”

She smiled a little.

“I thought about Prayas a lot this whole time. It was my life. How would I not think about it?” she poured her questioning eyes into me.

“Then why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was not able to decide.”

“What is there to decide?”

“I used to believe in things. I used to believe that everything happened for good. I had faith in God, in myself, in life. That way I was able to stand there in front of all those people. I don’t believe anymore. I feel if I stand there, people will see it. They will see my broken life. They will see I wasn’t able to hold it all. They will see my tears. They will see me weak.

“They will question what I have to tell them about life, about relationship... about achieving.”

“Nobody will see you like that...”

“How can you say that?” she said dismissively.

“Because they are burdened by their own issues, they won’t have concern for anyone else.”

“You are just saying that,” she turned her face away.

“Listen, my father use to say... whoever fails in cracking the competition opens up a coaching class for it, as they are expert in knowing what the obvious mistakes to look out for are.”

She turned and started hitting me lightly.

“Arey...okay...okay...but on a serious note... those who fail as an actor become drama critics, those who studied literature and didn’t have time to write a book become reviewers... so, I am implying those who lived a more troublesome life know more how to mend it. You did so again and again in life. Thus, you can preach it. Besides you won’t just give them crap like ‘pain is nothing but a state of mind’ as you know it exists. It will help you to understand them better. They also will feel less vulnerable or intimidated. You will connect better as you know what they have gone through. This will help you both work things out in a better manner.”

She looked convinced.

“And, this time, you will be even better than before,” I said, taking her hands in mine.

“You think so?” she asked little unsure.

“I know it, so.”



As I had just made such good friends with her father, I cracked the news, “Kasam needs to go back to Mumbai.”

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Chapter 24

As her numb fingers came in contact with the metal engraving spelt 'Prayas', not only did I see a response in her fingers but also a faint glint in her eyes.

As she progressed with heavy steps towards the lobby, tears welled up in my eyes.

God knew how much I missed Kasam being 'Kasam'.

She was standing in front of the lift, afraid of pushing the button.

I recalled those days when she used to forget pressing any button while engrossed in her talk.

Now, even in complete silence, except the constant sound made by arrival of the lift and faint mumbling of the receptionist, she wasn't aware of pressing the button.

I marched ahead and pressed the up-going button. She looked at me.

"See, I am finally coming to your session."

I caught a smile on her face.

We weren't alone in the lift, still my eyes were fixed on her. My eyes traced her slowly. Flat white slippers, plain white *patiala*, light blue coloured *kurti* with sleeves covering her entire arm.

Hair tied up in a ponytail. She once said that she felt more confident with her locks swaying.

Her only jewellery was a pair of pearl earrings. My thoughts were shaken by the lift opening on the seventh floor.

I whispered to Kasam, "Come."

She followed but stopped just beside the gate.

"Maybe, it's a bad idea. I won't be able to do it," she acted repulsed.

I flicked her hair clutch, sprayed her hair and uttered, "Believe me, you will be."

I saw my belief reflecting in her eyes.

She pushed the door open and surprisingly 'push' was written over it.

I followed her. Just before entering the auditorium, she turned back to get a final confirmation.

I blinked my eyes slowly as to assure her.

"Oh! Shit," she mumbled softly, over entering the auditorium filled with almost five hundred people.

She looked at me in absolute surprise and mouthed, “What the hell?”

I shrugged my shoulders and said, “It’s your fan following, I just did a little work in getting them here.”

A little work.

Google ads.

Facebook ads.

Creation of event, newspaper ads, posters. I harnessed all the power vested by social and print media – for the backup, releasing her previous videos on Youtube which granted her few followers not only in India but also abroad.

However, location constraints enabled only five hundred of them to turn up.

She looked at the crowd and for the first time I saw hesitation in her while being in this auditorium.

Somehow I saw that coming.

“I think you will need a mike,” I whispered. She looked at me with empty eyes devoid of confidence and trying to find a glint of it in mine.

I progressed with energetic steps to fetch the mike.

She extended her right hand to take it. Her fingers were slightly shaking.

I retrieved my right hand, placing the other on her shoulder, “I got it.”

She gave a faint, unbelieving smile.

“Allow me to have the honour of introducing Miss Kasam who has been a motivator for past five years. Not only has she done justice to her work but also touched lives of several.

“If you need to overcome your personal or professional problem, this is the place for you.

“Or just to forget what you are, this is the place for you.

“If you need a mentor, or someone to be a companion through your rough times...

“Sometimes just a friend who listens to you silently, Kasam is the person.”

“Ah! Akash here, as he is my friend, is being more than generous,” she spoke cutting me out. She was never very good with receiving appreciation.

Many times people have genuinely told her ‘she is pretty and she ended up either showing uneasiness or either explaining her beauty, saying, ‘it’s just the dress.’

‘Oh! Maybe my new hairstyle.’

Same as she was doing today.

“It’s not me who is worth all that praise. It’s you all. Whatever I say, they are experiences of fellow ‘Prayas’ participants. It’s you all... even me included as a group from which something I learned and something you all do.

“We get inspired by a member’s success story and we learned from someone’s mistake. Then try and refrain ourselves from making the same.”

Everyone clapped and cheered. In her attempts at being modest, she almost forgot to be nervous.

Sometimes when you are not all about self-belief, still you try with shivers running in your body.

Contrarily, you find that others had full belief in your capabilities. Then you realise there was nothing to worry about in the first place.

I didn't advertise 'Prayas' so as to gain more participants, money or popularity. I did all that just for getting the same confidence back in Kasam.

While in my thoughts, I walked to the end of the auditorium.

"Let's begin..."

My feet clung to the ground.

Without looking at her, I felt the joy in her voice. Kasam was back.

"Today we will be talking about positive thinking."

She fumbled a little and maybe that's why she stopped.

She looked at me.

I gave her a thumb's up.

Then she continued with a smile, "Positive thinking? It's not something you do on a one-time basis – suppose by being positive you took a risk in your business, or, by being positive you jumped in a relationship.

"It's not even a ritual. It's something which you can instil in yourself.

"Books may help, still you can't learn it from there.

"Spiritualism is another window but not a door.

"Then how... from where can you bring it in?"

She raised her pitch to make it sound more like a question, though nobody answered.

"You are the answer. It's a recursive correction process. You don't need to try hard nor punish yourself for not being positive."

She wasn't that confident like the last time I saw her in Prayas but she was definitely way better than what she was at her house.

"Long way back, when I was in my first job, we were just chilling and discussing about whether God exists or not. You may be thinking that what's the relation? Believe me there is."

There were a few soft laughs.

"The discussion was all heated up. Though one of our friends was constantly stuck at the point that she has seen several real life experiences that if you pray with full devotion anything is possible. She kept on throwing examples from her family where some of her relatives suffered from a lethal disease... doctors gave up, but family's belief and prayers saved them.

"Then I went on to counter that view by saying that if I pray for topping in university exams with true devotion... will I get that? She didn't have any answer for that. But I do have an answer for it now."

Everyone listened to her patiently. Her voice now regained confidence, still

she was confined to the stage. Unlike earlier, her body was stiff.

“Haven’t you heard ‘*Ache logon ke saath hamesha acha hi hota hai*’. Is it?”

“We have heard it several times before. But do we believe in it? In reality do such things exist?”

“Maybe or maybe not. There are real life examples of both such conditions.

“‘Good things happen to good people’.”

She spoke with more stress in her voice.

“Won’t it be better to put it like ‘whatever happens with good people... they consider it good.’”

“They know what satisfaction is...”

“I wanted a Volkswagen, I got an Indica... That’s good enough. Both do the same work; perhaps I deserve this much only.

‘I am fortunate to lose just my leg in the accident; at least I survived.’

‘I came second. Perhaps the one who came first deserved more than me. Till then I am happy as I worked hard. If I didn’t work this hard, perhaps I wouldn’t have landed this position as well.’

“Won’t you call these good?”

“And from some other angle, aren’t these things the worst ever happenings.

“It’s just the way you look at it.

“Whether the glass looks half empty to you or half filled.

“Human nature tends to focus on the ‘half empty’ part.

“Bringing the half-filled part into the scene is going to be a lot more tough.

“For some it will take months, for some years. As I already said, it will take time as it’s a continuous recursive process.

“Even I myself am not much in terms with thinking positive.

“Believe me, by thinking positive, nothing will change in your life. For instance, even if you think you will land up a promotion this year, it won’t guarantee a promotion.

“If you came second, thinking positively won’t fulfil your dream of coming first.

“In short, I repeat again it won’t change anything, but the way you look at the happenings will change.

“At the end, your gain and loss quotient will remain as you were. Still you will feel like a winner because you will be happy anyways.”

She was cheered with claps. It felt so proud to see Kasam like this... her body was no longer stiff. Hands were swaying with her words.

“So, we talked about being positive. I gave examples even. Now let’s break it down into simple routines which you can apply in your daily life.”

She gulped some water as others relaxed with little murmurings.

“Hey the guy in black T-shirt over there, can I know your name and what do you do?”

“Rajesh, I am a software engineer.”

“Hi Rajesh! So if you are asked by your employers to shift to a new domain, what will be your response?”

“Ahh! Perhaps I’ll say... sorry sir, that’s not what I am an expert in. I won’t be able to do it.”

“That’s it. This is where positive doing comes into action. Your employer is also well aware of your shortcomings. He also knows you won’t be able to do it. But he believes you have the ability to surprise him. That’s why he asked you.”

She turned towards the lot.

“Why do we always reply in a negative tone? That’s because we see the half-empty glass.

“He could have said, ‘I am new to that domain but I will definitely give it a try’.”

She pointed at a man perhaps in his mid-forties.

“Here sir, I would assume you are married?”

The person nodded in ‘yes’.

“Suppose you are a very busy person and your wife asks you to come home early. Naturally you will say, ‘No, I can’t.’

“Why not say ‘I will try’?”

“And don’t just put it in words, do try; rest is not under your control.”

She went back to the stage.

“Yes and no, most of the questions in our lives do not end up in such answers. So try avoid saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ immediately, particularly ‘no’.

She progressed in between the crowd as she always did when about to close a topic.

“Have you ever noticed that a person who tends to say ‘no’ often ends up making the least of opportunities, least of life and least of himself?

“Nonetheless they are less liked by others.

“So, at the prime of most things, avoid saying ‘no’. If that’s not applicable, avoid negative sentences.

“Try saying, ‘I will give it a try’ instead of saying ‘I won’t be able to do it’.

“You will be conveying the same message in both the cases but the way it will be received is different.

“Not only the way you will be perceived by others will change but also the way you act will take an immense leap.

“Try changing your ‘no’ to safe words like ‘perhaps’, ‘maybe’, they will themselves change into ‘yes’ some day.”

She smiled and her charm was back as others were captivated by it.

“Generally we tend to focus on what we don’t have, be it ‘what we want’ or be it ‘what we can do’. For instance, if you are given some work, you will first try to stress on the parts which you are unaware of. Why not stress on the parts you know?”

“We always crib upon the things which we didn’t get... why not stress on the things which we have received?”

“Try bringing these changes in your life and not only you will change, but also the way you will be received by others will change.”

She spoke in a softer tone, “It won’t be easy, but whenever you feel low and start thinking negatively, look for that ray of positivity.

“Most of us will be fortunate enough to find that light in ourselves.

“If not, then you will find that light in God.

“Even then, if you are unable to find it, look around. There will always be someone in whom you will find that light. I will call it your ‘angel’.”

Kasam looked at me and smiled.

I nodded at her.

I felt ecstatic. Seeing Kasam like this. Being the cause of that change... not only because it was Kasam... because I had that strength of bringing someone back to life.

“That’s one aspect of positivity – ‘how you can be positive’.”

She continued as she wrote it on the board. “Now let’s see how you can receive other people positively.”

My cell beeped. It was Ved calling me for a meeting. I indicated to Kasam that I was leaving.

She gave an understanding nod.

She joined her hands and spoke. “Whenever we meet a very charming, joyous kind of person who is very energetic, ‘a jack of all trade’.”

Her voice was little shaky. Ved could do without me but Kasam wouldn’t. I decided to stay there.

With the help of my hands, I assured Kasam that I was going to be here. Her face lit up as she continued in a more comfortable tone.

“We immediately feel threatened and start pinpointing what that person isn’t good at.

“We do that to assure ourselves that we are not the only one with flaws. But was there anything to feel threatened about? Were you two in a competition?”

“You are great in your own way. You don’t need to make others feel small so as to feel you are big.”

She picked up the bottle to have some water but it was empty. I rushed to her with another bottle.

“How many times has it happened that there are some people in your surroundings with whom you have never talked or done anything bad to them, but still they give you cold vibes? Similarly there must be some friends who just like that stopped talking with you and you too never bothered.

“Why do these things happen? There might be several reasons for them. I am not here to discuss them. But I can tell you how you can avoid such situations.”

I never expected she would last this long... but she did.

“Go and wish them regularly... indulge in small talks, wish them luck on their important days...

“Appreciate them occasionally...

“Believe me however cold-blooded that person might, be his behaviour towards you ought to change.

“Remember these vibes are not individual. They are always mutual.

“I will leave you at this note. Kindly, someone summarise.”



She wasn't chirpy like old days, telling me all about her session.

But there was a strange serenity on her face and I was not able to detach my eyes from her face.

I knew it wasn't because of the soothing effect of the sun setting, or the gentle touch of cool breeze.

Nor the beautiful sound of the waves.

'Mission accomplished' was written all over her face. She was beaming with hope.

I didn't want to disturb her thoughts, so I slowly took her hands in mine and started sliding the bangles I got for her. She threw a glance at them and then at me.

“Kasam, this is you. You like being like this and I like you this way,” I uttered without looking at her... cautiously sliding those bangles one by one.

“How was I?” Kasam's voice sounded more like an appeal.

“You were good.”

Her face lit up and she asked like a little kid, “You think so?”

“I know so.”

To the soothing effect of the sunset, to the gentle touch of the breeze, to the beautiful sound of waves, sound of her bangles jingling were added.

And then I realised they were the music of my life.

Chapter 25

6 Months Later

If I wrap up the advances of past few months in a nutshell, it would be like...

Rakesh Bedi is doing well at job. Probably things between him and his wife have settled down.

My parents after coming back from Shimla got over their stigma of never leaving home and are planning a trip to visit all their children.

I don't see much of Ved as he is a happily married guy now.

Divya reunited with Simon, who is now working with UNICEF and came to India for a campaign. They dated back in college when she was in London. She finally found her yang. At least for the time being.

Kasam, after staying at Gautam's for a few months, returned to her home.

She is more mature, less open, less vulnerable though more beautiful than ever.

As she is helping the participants at Prayas, they are helping her to seal her past and expect good from future.

As for me... my life is fantastic. It's calm and convenient. It's finally normal.

I sometimes drop her to Prayas. I always pick her up in the evening and we discuss our day over coffee.

On a few afternoons I surprise her at lunch.

I have again started learning about new colours from her nail polish.

The tinkling of her bangles is still the music of my life. This is not exactly the type of relationship I pictured but it's still nice.

Sometimes I think of asking her to be mine, but then I am scared to lose what we have now. This time is good.

She is here. She is with me. She is safe.

I am happy.

I never thought I would feel this way. But such is life. This is perfect.

There is nothing to reach for.

I am living in the moment and I am having the time of my life.

Why fix it, if it ain't broken?

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Chapter 26

An oak leaf flew on to my face. I waved it away. It flew back to the side of the road. Millions of such beautiful leaves covered the edges of the boulevard. They played music while brushing through the streets. Beautiful leaves, red at the edges and orange by the middle. Lying still... flowing away...I looked down that narrow street. Nobody was there.

Long trees decorated its sides. Swaying... kissing the sky. A spur of sunlight blocked my sight... and when it ended there, I saw it. A beautiful old wooden bench by the side of which Kasam was sitting in an orange gown, flowing down to her feet, her hair swaying like the trees... looking more beautiful than ever... sometimes brown... sometimes red... I stood where I was... She came to me... brushed her fingers on my face and gave a shy smile. She kept her head on my chest. I placed my hands around her. We stood there, unmoving. She looked up. I let her loose. She stepped back a few steps. I stood there. She kept on walking backwards. My eyes were fixed on her but I didn't move at all... She turned back and ran. Through that beautiful street where oak leaves flew... where sun merged with the trees...she ran, leaving her shoes midway... she ran like a free bird. I turned and I ran away. My eyes were swollen... I ran as fast as I could, but opposite to her... she kept on running... I kept on running... she hugged a man... wrapped her long arms around his neck and smiled at him... I couldn't see who it was. He placed his hands on her waist. She pressed her lips on to his...

I was not able to see him. I poured a bit deeper, still got no glimpse. All I could see was Kasam waving her hair, making the arena crimson as the colour of her hair. The picture started to turn a little. I could see her hands swaying around his shoulders. He ruffled Kasam's hair with his fingers. I had this impelling urge to see who he was but his face was covered by Kasam's. He seemed awfully known. Their lips parted. Kasam hugged him with her head resting on his shoulder. His face was right there. I saw him. The face which ruined my life before... there he was... happy, smiling, content. He was mocking at me without even doing anything. A chill ran down my spine. It was a moment which never lasted. My fist clenched.

I ran out of breath.

And there I caught it when I smashed my alarm clock on the floor.

I gulped some air. Breathed out and shook my head to believe what I saw. That face was mine... my own. I realised that the last time I saw this dream and to this point when I saw it again... my life... my life never really moved on. It kept on juggling back and forth. It was not Kasam. It was never Kasam who had the decision to make. Now I got it. The culprit was me. It was me who was responsible for all those moments we spent apart. I never loved myself enough to make her love me, not even that much to accept her love. It was I who needed to see things differently. One year back when I saw this very same dream, my subconscious also created the image I feared but kept it enclosed even from me. Thus in the dream, I ended up alone and she with someone else, following which the same happened in our lives and I wasn't able to forge our destiny as within myself I never accepted our love. But today my subconscious showed me the reality. It showed me what Kasam and I were. We were together and we were never apart, be it eight years back or last year. She was mine as she is now. It was just that I couldn't see it. Now I see it, I feel it and I know it.

I immediately jumped out of my bed. In the clouds of uncertainty, I had already lost a million moments of love, million moments of togetherness and now I was sure, a single moment of delay was what I was not making. I rushed in the shower, suited up in the best of my collection, black suit, white shirt, black tie, though a bit cliché... still nothing could charm a girl more, gelled my hair and combed it perfectly where every strand had its place. In an attempt of not spilling the whole bottle of perfume on to myself, I left the room. Five minutes later I was again there, giving my hair a messy look and five minutes later, making spikes. Finally after half an hour, the messy look was the final one. I didn't want to wait for a single moment now. But the sarcasm here is that you will have to when you don't want to.

Bell Rang

It was a parcel from my eldest sister. I would have let it rest but my sister never wrote to me, so it was worth a peek. It was a small packet but little did I know what it was holding inside. I opened the outer covering. There was a box inside and a letter. I took the letter out and started reading.

Dear Akash,

When Dad and Maa left for their trip, I decided to rearrange the house for passing time. I found this box Kasam left for you. She gave it to Siya the day you left for Mumbai. She forgot about it on your subsequent returns. Though it's quite late, still I thought it's yours and should be with you.

*With love
Shruti*

I dropped the letter and all I was left with was that box. I was unsure whether to open it or not. I stared at the box for a few minutes. I kept on guessing what could be inside even though it was just this simple to open and have a look at it. I looked away, with the box still in my hands. I was afraid that it might have something that was withholding the power of changing my decision.

But then I realised it's something from nine years back. Does it have the power to change what Kasam and I have now?

For the first time in my entire life I was sure of something. Anything this box has couldn't affect my actions. I owed this to Kasam, I owed this to myself, I owed this to the love I had and still have for her.

I flicked the box open. It had a few folded papers. I took them out. They seemed like some sort of letters. There were many...

I took the first one.

Dear Romeo,

Today I asked Priya to come along. She refused saying, "I don't want to upset your boyfriend."

"He isn't my boyfriend," I stated in plain words.

"Does he know that?" Priya went ahead, chuckling.

But I remained still there only. I have done a lot of things today.

Been to a lot of places. But my life, my thoughts, everything is struck at that point.

"Does he know that?"

"Do I want him to know that?"

"Do I want him to ask me?"

"Do I want to put a label on what we have?"

"Do I..."

If you find the answer do let me know.

*Love
Juliet*

I was a little confused. It seemed like a letter but it wasn't addressed to me. I read it in such haste with extreme uneasiness that I was able to grasp just a part of it. Obviously, I wasn't a man of time and peace at the moment. I hastily picked up the next one.

Dear Romeo,

Today he was walking in the rain without an umbrella.

Though he was carrying one as I saw the top of the umbrella peeping through his bag.

*I asked him, "Don't you have an umbrella?"
He answered 'no'.
And I know why he lied.
Maybe there are some unanswered questions between us.
I will wait for him to ask them.*

*Love
Juliet*

Yeah I recognised this one. It's about the *mela* we went to visit after she got upset on her mother thing. Shit! She knew I had an umbrella. How stupid I made myself look in front of her. The more I read the more I was able to relate to it. As I read the successive letters, I realised it was meant for me, written by Kasam. It was not really the saga of love or friendship but those words made me see my incapacibilities to relate to her feelings at that time... to the girl I last loved.

He didn't ask any questions...
The words kept on bouncing from the letters.

*Some stories never end... that leaves them dangling...
Those stories don't move... but life moves on...*

I was overwhelmed with so many new questions which were not even meant to be answered at this point of time. Then I grabbed the final one in the lot.

*Dear Romeo,
Today he told me straight and short that he loves me and he has been in love with me...
He slammed it on my face like 'there you go'.
'I love you' isn't a statement with a full stop. His came with a full stop.
'I love you' is a clause which gets completed with another clause.
He didn't wait for my answer.
I wanted to tell him it was not a race which two were running.
It was never a race.
It was not about running.
It was just about admitting your feelings.
That's not the way you propose. This is...
I love you Akash and if it is the same way you feel, that would make me the happiest person in the world.
And as I already know his answer to it...
I'll just wait till he reads this letter and then comes and find me.
I'm sure he'll find me...*

By the time I read this one, I realised something which happened in the past didn't hold the power of changing my future. But if only I knew at that time, it would have definitely changed my present.

Though it strengthened my decision. As the first knot between Kasam and me disentangled... others were resolved automatically.

Now I left my flat, not only with determination but with hope as well, the letters still lying on the corner table but the words lingering around me.

I jumped in my Audi. Driving as fast as possible with the Mumbai traffic serving as a hurdle, I kept on honking in spite of knowing that it's of no use. I even yelled at my fellow 'stuck in traffic jam' mates though I ended up smiling. Today I was a man filled with so much love that I let everything take its turn. I kept on thinking what I would say to her. I searched those words which could make my love for her superior than those of the couples I knew... superior to that they show in movies. Then I thought about her, thought about those letters... it was so dramatic... I laughed. Still thanks to those letters, I had the right thing to say.

After three hours of a gruesome drive, I was dead tired. I set my hair by looking in the rear-view mirror. It was hot outside. I felt kind of sweaty, so I undid my coat and folded it in my right hand. I hit the bell at her doorsteps.

She came. Before I could say anything to her, she turned her back to me and rushed in the hall. She looked perfect in her light pink *patiala* and a short white *kurta*. Her bangles clinked as she ironed her formals for the session probably. Her *jhumka* playing hide and seek with her hair distracted me. A few minutes passed.

"Kasam," I called out.

"Yes... Akash," she turned with little irritation.

But when she at looked me, there was this strange connection between us, as if she knew what I was about to say. Her face relaxed automatically, making it more difficult for me. Her body language, her face... the way she was fiddling with her hair told me she expected me to say something.

"Kasam," I said.

She raised her head a little.

"I am madly..." as I said these words her face lighted.

"...deeply, truly... passionately..." as I added further, tears rolled down her cheeks. I took a deep breath.

"...in love with you," I finished what I started.

I saw her lips stretch into a smile which she subdued. There were mixed emotions on her face – content, happiness, fear, anger, pain. I didn't plan to imitate the whole scene of letters to Juliet. Perhaps those words were meant to

bring those expressions only.

If I had outdone myself... then this was Kasam.

“You are?” she spoke with so much expectation in her voice.

“I am,” I nodded.

Then she finally smiled and it was clear that the final expression in spite of the tears was of happiness.

We both knew what happens next in the movie. So there was a pause of a single minute.

She controlled her emotions and uttered, “Are you...,” before she said any further. I dropped my coat, loosened my tie and marched to her. Taking her in my arms, bending her a little, I sealed her lips with mine. I kissed her deeply, I kissed her madly, I kissed her passionately... I kissed her truly. Just like the way I loved her. I played with her hair. I hugged her as to never let go.

I kissed her again. I kissed her again and again, till I lost count.

I kissed the girl I last loved.

The girl who used to look at me and I used to forget everything around me and could not stop but smile back at her.

The girl... whose teeth used to sparkle on listening to admiration of her beauty.

The girl... whose eyes used to twinkle on seeing chocolate pastry.

The girl... who kept on adding words to my girl’s encyclopaedia.

The girl... who used to love the sound of rain.

The girl... who used to explain everything along with hand movement.

The girl... who could spend millions on clothing all she had, but never on gadgets.

‘You say what’s more...’ was all what was needed to trigger her off on a never-ending series of stories.

The girl who ruled my dreams but now was a part of my reality.

The girl who was there in my life but now was in my arms and I am never letting her go.

The girl I last loved...

...the girl... who always loved me back.

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