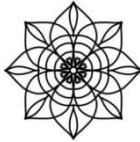


**30 years  
in the searing sun**

# **30 years in the searing sun**

**A Romance Memoir**

From a loveless childhood to finding my  
Dream Husband



**KALAVATHI RAJ**



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Book Cover design by Sanjida Smrity

ISBN : 9798839816619 (E-book)

First Edition: July 2022



To my Hubby,

“I want to start by thanking my adorable husband. From listening to early drafts to giving me moral support through every progressing chapter and every tear spent, he was so important to getting this book done as I was.”

“No amount of words could justify how much you mean to me hon!”



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## PREFACE

It is widely believed that a woman looks for her father's heart in her life partner. It is so true.

I think it would be fair to say that children from dysfunctional families are slaughtered into a million pieces. The reason I say this is because far too many children in this world are least fortunate to experience a normal childhood. They may look as regular as other infants. But from the inside, they are frozen and fail to find a self. I might sound dramatic here but reality is a lot harder for some of us. It almost feels like a nest of spiders crawling in and crawling out from what the eyes can see. We cannot tell you where it hurts. Trees begin to look like monsters and suffering twists itself in the gut like a hot knife. Restless and dissatisfied, they grow into phantoms saying something like – “*What*

*regurgitated Mask shall I don today?"*

Pain doesn't stop with us. Happiness becomes a glossy varnish that hardened over our flesh. The body starts to feel like an urn of marble. We open our mouths and we become wounds, confused and bruised lying in the bedroom with the curtains drawn. The real world outside home looks like a terrible dream. When we realize that we are not going to get any better, we still fight to know why. Tested by the floods of heavy dark blues, we just wish for lesser pain and nothing else to touch our God-like suffering.

Some day, a bright, white light walks to us. Now all of a sudden, we are unsure and shuttered by the stellar luminosity. Quite obviously because we were all fist and blades in darkness. On a blurry horizon, we now begin to hear ourselves from far away, begging for permission to come back. We start to visualize OUR own desires, OUR own voices and OUR own needs and nothing less. The Light reminds us that transitions are



hateful. Most often, we are already aware about this. But, in our own time we choose to come back and face the mirror. First slowly, and then all at once.

Letting go of that grief feels as if we're giving up. Something like surrendering to the enemy. As if we're admitting we were wrong, and that it didn't matter or hurt. Yet no matter what force or happenings one may contribute to saving a life, it is no will other than our own that kept us and many other women of fire and heart alive.

Eventually, someday, the road back to redemption becomes seeable exactly like a sandglass often twisted upside down for every puny speck of cosmic dust to resettle and rest in everlasting harmony.

I'd like to think of myself as one of the lucky few who made it out of the matrix of mental madness. How does this convey what I want to articulate? I would want for my readers to know that my life changed after meeting somebody who correctly coached me through

trying circumstances, seasons, dare I say, even the wind. For this reason I feel inspired to share my story.

As I recall my younger me, I let myself go back into my yesteryears of dark curly hair days and cold, frozen stares, morbid and exuding guilt and how often my heart hardened into a lump of dead wood. What I am essentially talking about is vivid flashes from the past, of my father's all-consuming loneliness and a rage that went out axe-wielding at my family's throats.

My Father is no more to hear what I want to narrate. So I dedicate this poem to him and all those souls who are longing to erase a past, right from the moment they were born to letting go of their trauma and march voyeuristically to become women of fire and heart.



My heart which was slaughtered,  
Now sits awake,  
Fleeing through horror,  
To Heaven's golden gates,

I forgive you Dad,  
For there is no other way,  
For my heart to break free,  
And stand in the light of day,

I know you forsook me,  
But my pain still remains,  
Of not being able to heal you,  
From your own deadly chains,

I could very well say I am wrong,  
Because the Father Above brings on,  
The crimson love of his dripping Heart,  
Only upon those who choose to restart,

Thank you for your infinite hate,  
I will no longer cry or wait,  
Because I am going to that Golden Gate,  
Where my heart and maker finally celebrate!





**PART - I**

**SINKING INTO THE ABYSS**



30 years in the searing sun



## CHAPTER ONE



### When I Opened My Eyes



**I** remember the first time I saw my father. He was dark, with darker hair on his body, a face looking tomato-red with eyes balling out at me. He had no clothes on. I was scarily watching him from my mother's arms. She was sauntering away gently from dad as I held onto her chest staring with my eyes wide open at him.

As I looked hard enough at his clenched teeth and bulging neck arteries, he kept repeating these sharp high pitched words, " Get out of

this house! Now!”

This man was my father. The best thing about him was his inflamed crimson nose. I was amused each time his eyes squinted. Something in my throat felt really heavy like I swallowed down a stone or something. I remember my little chest palpitating like a ticking timebomb.

My chest thomped faster every single second father kept nearing my face. I actually freaked out because I thought I was going to be killed. My eyes were staring down at him and my face frowned into several wrinkles. Surely this was not the memory anybody would look forward to have in their baby pink, imaginary album from their tender firstyears.

My mother who held me firmly in her arms tried her best co-existing between dad’s beastly temperament and defenseless me. But I have to admit, she did a great job of saving me from Papa, the pirate. It almost felt like a



desperate mother and child running for cover from the unexpected bombings of a middle eastern terrorist. Mother was unsure about her future with Dad who was very unstable and always insidious in his ways. It felt like we were living in a slaughter house. Neither of us knew what was to be expected from father raging all day long.

I still tremble when I think of the ludicrous situation back then. I vividly remember panicking in my room. I thought to myself I have two options to anticipate. Option one, either I was going to be kicked out of the house. Option two, most likely I was going to get stabbed in the stomach. Eventually I told myself perhaps I happened to be an unwanted child. The more I watched my Dad fade into the obscure, the less fond I grew of his shadow.

Given the unusually well-founded comedy of tragedies, my lovely young mother was constantly aggravated and embarrassed with

me. Sometimes I tend to wonder when did I actually become the perfect role model for her vocally nutritious chastisements.

Most likely she flared her nostrils at me because I never washed up my three year old self within five seconds. Or for not being able to gulp down a glass of sour, yellow creamed milk that made me throw up. Perhaps I deserved her punishing eyes for gobbling down every single piece of chocolate cake my mother wanted to keep for herself from my birthday cake. Better still, for not being able to enunciate words like ‘ma-ma’ or ‘pa-pa’ each time they verbalised to show me. The voice enactment was so precise that they looked like the famous comedian *Charlie Chaplin’s* long lost cousins.

And of course, lastly, I was the subject of her human experimentation because I may have been purposely slow at the forgetful age of three. Even today, she never fails to remind me how frustratingly long it took for me to

pick up two letter words as a child. But what she may have never pondered about is that her abrupt and non-filter tongue was way too harsh and uncouth to submit to.

In the Himalayan lap of clouds and misty mountains a legend was narrated to me again and again. The legend was about my conception into this planet. With usual monotones, my father would boast that on a lovely day, my father and mother had sex on a boat on a placid lake between the snowy ranges. However, they would tend to see me like I was a total chowderhead who was destined to be the firstborn of their patently excellent bloodline.

It is widely accepted that newborns upto the age of seven thrive like the well-known comedy cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Much like the animated character, children breathe in precisely what parents breathe out literally word to word. My limbs and arms chose to stay unarmed during the day. My

unblinking eyes would wander around like a worthless vagabond in a parched desert, except that it was a desert with dank rooms and a kitchen. All fingers and thumbs considered, my head and heart were flung into a muddy ditch of enraged voices without any warning.

Talking about the kitchen, I did run in and pull up the drawer to find a dozen knives in it. My small palms picked out a random steel knife and held them above my left wrist. It was right then, a clear loud voice sounding like a spiritual documentary commentator emanated from inside my tiny chest.

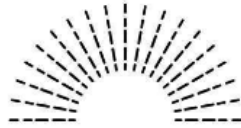
A God-like voice uttered, “No. Don’t do that. Are you really sure you want to take your life because your Mum and Dad are busy fighting?”

Like a ready believer, I obeyed the stern voice and put the steel knife away into the kitchen drawer.

Back in that body, I wanted my father to pick me up in his arms and play with me. But whenever I saw my father's squinted eyes, I took it as if he was saying to me, "Oh! You think I look cute when I'm angry. Wait till I look gorgeous !"

So I told myself that I have to get used to the parenting practices of 'MISTER AND MISSUS AMUSINGLY NORMAL'.





## CHAPTER TWO



### Father Why



**I** would spend most of my time ogling at a big red bible in the other room and the antique, old-fashioned wooden furniture scattered across in every single empty room in the house. I would run, hide or stay away from ‘MISTER AND MISSUS AMUSINGLY NORMAL’. I’d never look at my Dad for fear of being banished from the house.

Amusing as it could be, my ribs complained

about having to carry endless jibes from my father and mother, things said like “STUPID”, “IDIOT” or when they were having a brighter day, “YOU ARE A GREAT GRAND FOOL”.

The next seven years of my co-existence became subject to a sort of conditional fondness from my scrupulous mother. Mum wanted her daughter to walk the tight rope of english mannerisms and meticulous math. In fact, once my mother sent me to the tuck shop with my father.

By now I was certain that he would throw me out of the flying scooter or stab me and dump me in some unknown squalor of the city. As he kickstarted the candy red light-weight scooter, my heart jumpskipped to nasty thoughts of getting butchered into wet, chopped meat.

Much to my luck nothing like that ever took place. After taking the ride through the city, I get off the back seat. Right then, his brownish

hands gently picked up the bottom skirt of my dress between his brown phalanges. The other hand moved swiftly with a long, white and saffron cigarette. With utmost sincerity and gentle maneuvering he took his last smoke and blotted out the rest of the cigar into my skirt filled with pink and yellow flowers.

As he bounced from one hole to the other into the flowery skirt, my eyes stopped moving. My lips were frozen and my heart stood still like a stopped clock. I stood passively feeling humiliated. Why in the world would any father do that to his daughter?

On walking in through the door of the house, my fast feet took me to Mom to report the grotesque incident. Hoping that her judiciousness would serve a purpose in my case, I put in an urgent appeal.

At once she frowned and her large, black eyes became larger. Right then she noticed Dad walking in through the door.



In her husky and harsh voice she cross-questioned him, “Did you really burn her skirt with your cigarette?”

He paused briefly at the dining table and stated nonchalantly, “No”.

Mother looked down at my face to look into my searching eyes. I immediately whispered to her that he was lying. But the matter was adjourned until future notice of any such similar occurrence. In that moment I felt like my justice had been denied.

I murmured to myself silently, “Wretched Mother of mine, she bought into his deception”.

From then on, I decided not to tell her anything ever. But father’s blind and threatening stares at me would never end.

In that moment I prayed to ‘Lady Justice’ present in every courtroom of the world who

had her eyes blindfolded with a black sash. The high priestess of truth and common sense, the one who sought to demonstrate her 'unbiasness' to the world through the perfect balance between her balancing scales. I so wished for her to give me answers to the whole family mess I was squelched under.

Unfortunately for me, Mum was lost in her own ignorant darkness. Mother would threaten and cuss me for saying anything at all.

One time, I was summoned by Mum for not finishing my meal and loitering around the house in 'dirty' clothes. I stood with my looming eyes and helpless hands in anticipation of my fitting punishment. I felt strongly that prosecuting me for something I wasn't even aware of was unarguably unfair.

Dashing away to the closet when father would hurl things at us was somehow okay. But letting me stand in front of mad dad's attacks

while he still flung ashtrays and table dishes towards me was somehow acceptable.

“That was a felony!”, I thought. Yet I had nobody to deliver me from this vicious cycle of cruel punishments. My own father tied my little arms at the back with his hands when I was being court marshalled by mother.

Sometimes I lamented to myself, “You are such an idiot yourself Mother”.

Ultimately a day came when she got to hear it out loud. Like a maleficent queen she strolled towards me with narrowed eyes.

She bit her teeth and questioned me in a huff tone, “What did you just say to me?”

I took a deep breath and lied from my timid mouth, “You’re right Mummy. It is my fault”.

Mum's big, bulging eyes stared through my ribs and she pointed her index finger at me and reproached, "Yes, you better be sorry about what you just said".

I would have nightmares about a vague, dark ghost chasing me inside a thick, black never ending tunnel. My pulses ran faster as soon as I would wake up with shivering breaths. In every dream I wanted to get as far away as I could from the beast.

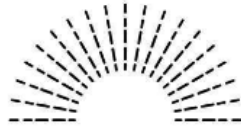
After dinner I would often get scared of going to bed. Either way, I was terrified of opening my eyes only to recall myself being thrown against the dining table by my father or I could choose to go back to bed every night for another ghost waiting to chase me down the never-ending tunnel.

Like a horror film going on repeat, their sadistic tortures never saw a sunset. On the contrary, she continued to train me into a 'GOOD AND LESS EMBARRASSING' version of

myself.

By the time I was in the fifth grade, I felt like a lonely little parrot caged inside a beautiful, golden cage called my home.





## CHAPTER THREE



### Fly Away



**I**t blew my mind away to contemplate the possibility of running away from home. Every single evening my family and I would sit down to watch an old ‘Ninety’s’ film. Every one out of four films was based on a homeless child, or should I say A ‘HOME’ LESS CHILD who would be forever perturbed by his brutish parents.

Eventually in the climax, what the lad did was undoubtedly a fantasy to my ebullient mind. On one hand, the juvenile actor would take

the heroic decision of fleeing away and his troublesome parents. On the other, I would replay this sequence over and over in my head about eight to ten times a day. His Atlantic escape excited me to a level that was almost mesmerizing and unparalleled in every sense of the word.

The child playing the character of a runaway kid was always a little boy in a navy-blue cap paired with an Indigo blue T-shirt and Pinafore denims. He would gladly step out of a charred, black coal train with feet running at the speed of light. He finally bid a ‘Good-bye’ to the clichéd kind-hearted engine man who helped him endure long, cold nights of the arduous journey.

His coal masked nose and cheeks seemed to me, the brutal marks of a miraculous survival in the vast wilderness. I ended up imagining weeks upon weeks about that one scene of the brave little boy seizing the day.

True enough, this became the escape my soul began to look forward to. Without haste I mentally drifted along with our brave hero to where he finally wanted to be – a wide green forest with crystal clear streams and grey smooth-cut rocks. I so badly dreamt of being at someplace that looked exactly like that.

Like a desperate vagabond, I wanted to fly away to a far-off eastern mountain. My eyes pictured myself sitting next to the runaway child actor in the same evergreen forests. The sky would look cloudless blue with a few westbound white storks dashing their wings up and down. The streams would be pristine and placid. The brave boy and I sat all day on the natural bare rocks laughing at something we said. We also cooked up a bonfire in those thoughts.

White fumes went up from the iron pot that boiled restlessly sitting upon a fiery wood pile. We danced and ate together under a full-grown orange tree. Right then, an eight-foot



yellow python falls onto the shoulders of the newly turned jungle boy.

Right then I heard somebody snapping fingers before my face. Maybe it was mother. Suddenly my imagery was all gone. My eyes begin to see the same drab old room with its pale white walls and odd coloured tiles. Once again, the eight year old self was standing within the iron bars of her own room.

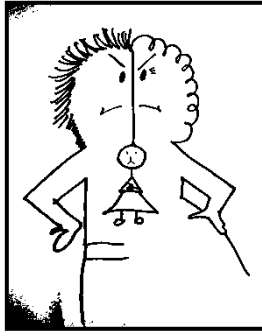
I'd draw into my shell like a small amazonian tortoise each time I witnessed hysterical episodes between my father and mother yelling at each other with every last inch of breath they took in. The rooms , its walls and I were all in shock to know how much these two hated each other.

As a consequence, their steaming energy ruffled a feather or two, of my ruby red plumes I held in my tiny hands for my parents. I wanted for them to resolve their differences and come together.

Unquestionably, my parents meant the sun, moon and stars to me. Every footstep, every look, every opinion and head nod told me so much about how much I mattered to them.

I can't speak on behalf of other children if they ever felt the same way about their parents under the same circumstances. But I will go ahead and say I was a lot more receptive of the ambience my Mum and Dad created. I can never let go of the terror that pulverized my little heart with the pounding weight of a sinking self-esteem. I really felt like the *Titanic* that had to finally sink into the cold and consuming waters of the North Atlantic Sea because of the iceberg's big blow.





I see the darkness and terror within,  
No joy, No love, No Hope within,

How far I've come never knowing that,  
This is where I would fall flat,

But every step just scarred my legs,  
And my feet gave up in spite of my begs,

How miserable and alone I felt inside,  
It drowns me into an ocean of high-tide,

So I sit down quiet with my hair neatly made,  
My face all clean and my hair in braids,

So what if my father just blew off his steam,  
And my mother cried, screamed and screamed!





## CHAPTER FOUR



### Acing School



**D**ad got transferred to a city situated in the north of the country. We travelled six hundred miles away from our old town. I was thirteen when I remember entering my new classroom. Walking past a few benches with some heavy-bottomed girls sitting upon them, I put down my school bag and took a chair.

When it was time for school break after four long hours, I gladly pulled out my plastic yellow tiffin box. When I opened it, I was ecstatic to find a deliciously juicy chicken leg

piece with some bread inside the box. In a second's glance, the prominent heavy-bottomed girl turned around with her boy-cut hair and declared, "No, you can't eat that. Chicken is not allowed in our classroom".

After twelve painful years of forcing down cold club sandwiches, I was finally here to see my favourite food made for me. Before I could get to touch it, I get corrected by this girl and the others who nodded their head unanimously in agreement. Like a clasp of thunder, I pushed my lunch box away from my face. The yummy looking chicken leg was sitting inside for everybody else to look at and analyse. I sat throughout those angry thirty minutes with a clenched jaw while the rest of the girls cheered me on to eat up. But I didn't touch anything.

I remember going back home with an empty stomach and explaining to mum that I was stopped from eating chicken in school. When I added that I had the chance to eat it right

then, mother disagreed with me by saying that the chicken must have gone stale in the last eight hours. My eyes widened and my face hung like a pillar when I saw the chicken leg getting chucked into the garbage bin.

This particular school was weirdly different from the previous schools I had been to. Most of the time I'd notice the girls of the class huddling up in groups with their bottoms on the table. What would they usually do? They would get busy gathering their followers by talking about a certain senior from a certain class who kissed so and so. The rest of the girls who were probably new to the concept of kissing would rush in to find out more.

On to my right side sat the boys of grade seven. They were tall, good-looking, husky and sweaty young teens who added to the overall fragrance of the class. I decided to talk to a certain boy who always laughed at his own jokes. Within a few minutes of jovial conversation with him, the class would fall

silent. Everybody watched both of us laughing together as they whispered into each other's ears.

In my eighth grade, there was a particular boy who suddenly stole my attention. One fine day, he walked right into the class with spiked hair and eyes that smiled like little puppies. Right from the first hour to the last hour of school, I couldn't stop staring at his semi-tanned *Peter Andre* like dimples.

The way in which he walked, and swayed his hair from moment to moment was all recorded in my head in slo-mo. No matter how stylish he looked, I would always feel a lot lower than him. In my plaited long, curly tresses I would wait to see him every single morning to walk in from the classroom door.

But the guys used to line up to the queen bee of the class. Gliding into the room in her shortest skirt, freshly washed wet hair and a bit of lip

gloss, she was the eyecandy of the class.

Her doe-like eyes teased our young men and their droopy tongues. One by one, it seemed as if she petted them and gave out a vivacious smile as a parting gift. Jumping up and down with a huge head and flawless skin was another bee. This pretty dynamite had a lot of energy to give to the ugly masses, including fun facts on how women can enjoy long-lasting sex.

Did the other girls try their best to look better than the reigning queens? Absolutely. Some of them turned out to be loyal followers of the queens and most of them gave up after a terrible haircut. In the midst of these northern beauties, I along with most of the girls faded into the background.

Until the day came when my classmate asked one of the boys about who he thought was the prettiest girl in class? In an instant he mentioned my name. As soon as I heard him



say my name, fresh blood pumped into my veins and my pen started to scribble faster on paper while my classmate examined my face for evidence.

Unlike most girls, my periods started a little late. Unfortunately for me, I was a very heavy bleeder. On Saturdays, we were supposed to dress to school in white. On that very incredible day, my ovaries exploded all over my white skirt. While a friend of mine helped me cover up by wrapping my sweater around the stained skirt, the others remarked that they thought I dropped a lot of red paint. It was a total bloody mess.

As I rushed towards the school gate, my friend asked me with raised eyebrows and crinkled nose, “Why on earth do you not have pads?”

I frowned in return and replied meekly, “Trust me, I’ve tried talking to my mum about getting me pads with wings, and she just

won't listen!"

To which she continued walking and wondered what sort of mother would allow a period disaster to happen to her own daughter.

Sometimes, my south indian orgin came in the way of how people perceived me. My chemistry teacher was a bit strange with my grading. I never saw this as a coincidence. I have never recalled getting anything above a B from her. It didn't matter how well I prepared for the exams. I felt like I was deprived of the credit I deserved for a science subject that I really liked.

There were moments when I felt like getting up and talking to her about my performance. But her eyes stared down at me as though I got into the wrong school. It certainly wasn't a coincidence. I may have mourned about this behavior quitely but I know my soul was crying inside to be noticed.

At the time, I wasn't even ready for something called reality. Tossing myself from one group of girls to the other, I was constantly trying to find the right fit for social acceptance. Most of the time I would be sitting all alone at the back of the class with nobody to talk to. Of course, the 'MATURE GIRL' that I was called, added to my troubles.

In the next two years, I got to choose my special subjects. I got the opportunity to opt out of math and science and went for computers and art instead. The decision of going against the majority of my class and most people in general was something I did not foresee.

Math never ever helped me in any way possible. All I remember is getting spanked by mum for not knowing that five minus three equals two. I was pulled by the ear to the ground for not finishing my math homework while my parents cursed me for being 'SLOW' at the subject. It was never easy to sit in a

class of forty other children and think that I might never be able to figure out math.

“For once”, I thought, “I may be able to live. After all I loved drawing. I loved art. I liked computers. I think I’ll be fine. At least I wouldn’t be burdened by something that’s not natural to me. That unnatural attachment was Math”.

It turned out that I and maybe two other children in the class were the only ones who would have a less notable, maybe even no career to look forward to. The reason was clear. No math and no science equals no future.

On my way out of the Math class, I would look anxiously at the teacher. He was a tall, fair and lean man who sported a thick moustache. I definitely felt intimidated by his sharp, glaring looks. A couple times he caught me staring at him. He responded by rolling his eyes at me with the most redness I had ever

seen.

In the passing months I turned into a blooming fifteen year old girl whose silent face began to matter to some of the boys in the school. I have had a senior chasing me up the stairs shouting out, “Excuse me, excuse me!”

For fear of getting trapped with the wrong guy, I dashed into my class from the stairs within five minutes as compared to the usual fifteen minutes. I shared my harrowing experience with Mum and she scorned me for not accepting the guy’s invitation.

In the following week, I got to see the handsome, fair looking senior. I longed for him to give me a look while he pretended that I never existed for him.

The final examinations were here. Everyone including myself were busy prepping to pass grade nine. Somehow, I got through with not

so unreasonable grades. My father's transfer had come to another city back into the south. It was probably the last day that I was going to be sitting with my classmates.

I sat with my head lowered to the floor, thinking of the one person I liked from the start. He was somebody I never got the chance to know within the last three years.

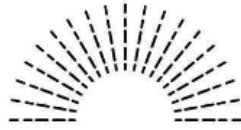
The fact that he never understood me while I cried inside for somebody's attention, the fact that he began to laugh at me like the rest of the class when I stammered with a frozen face, or that I wanted so badly for him to look me in the eyes and whisper to me, "Its okay, I am right here for you! Your best friend!" ; these imaginations were all fiction now.

I had to move on. I went along to the next city with lots of bags and tiny pieces of my broken self.



There she saw a wound or two,  
And sensed the hidden sorrow,  
She came back up and glanced again,  
If she was ready for tomorrow.





## CHAPTER FIVE



### The Day My Grandmother Died



**I**t was a typical Saturday morning. Grandmother, from my father's side woke up early to wash her grey tresses and clean her small, wrinkled body. One could usually see her in a chequered sari creased from every angle. She would wrap a piece of lilac coloured fabric on her wet hair. I haven't forgotten the way in which she sipped her morning coffee with a straight face and unblinking eyes.

In the Southern peninsular, Coffee is sometimes called "DECOCTION". Up until age



twenty three I wasn't sure if it was "DECOTION" or "DECOCTION". Of course I understood that it was a concentrated brown liquor derived from roasted coffee beans.

As she sat on the couch of our living room, father walked in and sat beside her to give grandmother some company. Much to my astonishment, she whispered something into her son's ears in her own language. At once I did the math. My guts told me she was 'bad mouthing' me.

No sooner than two minutes, father stood up and reprimanded me for 'MISTREATING' and 'DISRESPECTING' his aged mother. I stared with my eyes wide open and raised eyebrows as he walked towards me. He pulled my ears in chastening with a word or two of warning.

My eyes welled up and my shoulders slouched back as my head hung in the air. What caught my breath was she had her chin up and chest out

without a grain of conscience. She folded her hands and made a grumpy face looking over my head at the green verdure of our manicured lawn.

I then concluded sardonically to myself, “I’m damn sure that pulling of ears must be a tradition in their family”.

Betrayal never comes from a stranger. But the fact was she was my father’s mother. She was sowing seeds of distorted lies in my mind about my ‘not-so-good mother’. It placed me in bitterness against her for a few months.

Sooner or later, her devious tricks blew up against my moralistic worldview of ‘should’s’ and ‘should not’s’. To this day I could never bring myself to understand why on earth I was being accused for committing ‘treason’ against mother? Right then I made up my mind to walk away from my her for good.

I’d stay miles away from grandma. I wonder if

she ever thought through her modus operandi. This was power play at its basic best. Anybody could read between the lines. Years came and went and I kept reproaching her for many more of such incidents that played out in the family.

Towards the end of four years, we migrated to the South in a surprise move to share the same roof with her. Within our family, everybody was well acquainted with spick-and-span tastes. She would neatly fold her old, cotton sarees and arranged them well enough for anyone to point out otherwise. Her cupboards were mini storehouses of food grain in reusable plastic cans. The opening of one of the doors gave out a stale, muddy smell of some kind of pungent salt.

Our nights in the house were pretty uncomfortable. For the reason that the nightfall poured an erotic spell on her that unleashed her malodorous farts. One such night I still recall with absolute drollery.

My sister and I happened to share the same bedroom with our grandmother. As we tried to sleep in the already ‘foul smelling room’, we heard a bubbling sound. The sound was produced alongside with a rising stench like that of a ‘Mexican stew-like kitchen’. In a matter of five minutes, my sister turns her head to me and bellowed with her fingers pinching her nostrils tightly. The tepid mild smell seemed to paralyse her face. She was beginning to look like a frozen corpse with no life at all.

“Let’s go outside and sleep!” she quickly protested.

I politely declined her request with the hypothesis that we must not breach our sleep protocol. But she refused to comply and nodded her head in defiance.

Poing! Like a spring wire she jumped out of the bed with her hands covering her nose as she fled the room. It almost appeared like she

was chased out of the bed by a ghost!

She lamented to father that she would not sleep in the room because of the wobbling frequency of the sulphurous waves. That was the last time all of us caught our stomachs rolling on the floor.

Grandmother didn't make it through her fatal brain stroke. In her last stages, I took care of Grandma with all my strength. I was left holding her dangling, oversized body in my lanky arms. I became her guardian angel while father was profoundly busy in office.

My mother couldn't care less if she was going to die or remain lucky enough to be a breathing soul. My sister was too childlike to understand the nature of geriatric care.

Amid this helter-skelter my mind was perplexed with thoughts about my occasional faints and unruly hair. It became extra hard for me to watch our neighbours run away

when grandma could barely stand.

These were the same people she would spend her evenings with. Like miserable cowards they feared they might get arrested for her unexpected death or something like that. In the end she did thank me once as I looked into her tear filled eyes and smiling face.

Grandma's death unmasked the hidden avatars of our extended family. Father was dumbstruck with the accusations of a 'conspiracy' smeared across his loyal person just because he had failed to look after his own mother in her very last days.

Mother's face was very plain and seemingly calm over her mother-in-law's death. Mother strictly instructed my sister and me to stay away from her corpse which lay inside a grey ice-box arranged during the last hours of her cremation. Our relatives contemplated that her sudden departure was a supposed conspiracy to get our hands on her apartment

and gold. With endless scrutiny upon us, it felt like Pandora's Box had been opened to allow others to come throw stones at us.

My face froze when father blamed me for 'neglecting' his ailing mother. I haven't forgotten what my father said to me that day.

He cringed his mouth and looked at me with sharp eyes and spoke out with crossed arms, "You will be spending jail time if somebody from my family falsely complained about this so called 'murder' to the police. You would have to sulk through your youth behind four dark walls for the rest of your life to come".

As I kept quiet, a voice inside yelled at father without opening my lips.

"No. This was not acceptable by any standard. What about those desperate morning trips to old

age homes? What about the daily obligatory visits to the hospital after finishing my eight hour shift at the call centre? What about me cooking grandma's lunches and dinners every single day for her to get well right after preparing a fully fledged meal for my sister? Where was he when I was holding her body against mine when she was about to collapse when everybody else ran away from her?"

The moment had arrived when my father literally abandoned me. I could so much as cry in front of him and beg him not to think so hysterically. I thought maybe he turned delusional because he did not get the deserved time to grieve over his mother's death. Besides he was coping with hate messages from our reproachful relatives about things like victoriously digging into grandmother's grave and laying our hands on her prized possessions.

It was God's upper hand that made me come in contact with a trustworthy caretaker for



the elderly, who promised me to send a new attendant every day. But my troubles had just begun. We were running in choppy waters with nobody turning up to nurse Grandmother. Unfortunately, none of them wished to stay for the whole day to wash her up or feed her, to say the least. My lips tightened as I suspected her to kick the bucket any moment with the prevailing nuisance.

It was then that I learnt about the naked facts of being sick and old. Nobody cares when you're dying. No help or sympathy except for my little acts ever reached out to her. How quickly our own kith and kin turned their backs against us and abandoned grandma when she needed them the most was all out in the open.

It's been over ten years since Grandma went to the big place in the blue sky.

Today I have no soreness or fury against

Grandma. Sometimes she visits me in my dreams. She becomes a sweet, old fairy godmother who loves feeding her eldest granddaughter.

Sometimes, her presence touches me when I visit our old house.



**PART - II**

**SWIMMING MY WAY UP**







## CHAPTER SIX



### The Man I First Met



**I**t was a balmy Tuesday afternoon. It was my first job and I was promptly noting down ‘the top ten lessons from life’ into my head like a seventeenth century Greek philosopher. I was seated on a stiff, black plastic chair at a luxury real estate kiosk.

I do confess, I had quite a moment of infatuation with my pretty face and my ‘august presence’ in the nouveau-riche four-star property. Not to mention, my petty chin lifted toward the ceiling

when people walked up to my temple and chose to share their life's rewarding experiences with me.

Never once did I doubt my voracious assumptions that I was an untouchable goddess, and everyone else after all must be a crippling soul, decaying with age and never ending responsibilities.

“Eventually”, I pondered, “Having good looks is a starting point”.

It was then, amid those thoughts, that I saw a princely gentleman striding in my direction. At first glance he looked clean-shaven, dapper and the way he strutted about was hard to miss. He seemed like the most well dressed suit-and-tie man in the world I had ever seen. He called out to me and signalled with his hand to meet him.

Getting up with staggering feet and rapid short breaths I walked up to him and

introduced myself. Having accepted his invitation to a tour around the property, I was intrigued to know more about somebody as charming as him.

In the following days I noticed that he was a bit nervous and quick at articulation while asking me about “where I lived?”, “Where I came from?” and “To what level I studied?”

I clearly remember his peculiar breathlessness as he questioned, “Do you have a Boyfriend?”

The query escorted with it two twinkling eyes and a wide and staring smile like an innocent fourteen year old. The swift contraction of his pupils through his uptight, steady eye contact revealed to me that he was restraining any kind of hysteria that could burst out from the corner of his eyes onto his tremulous, broad mouth.

This conspicuous gesture was enough to tell

me of a quite indelible effect I had hoped to imprint on him.

Immediately my delighted Elizabethan chest lined up with his squared body and corresponding height as I whispered to myself, “How long was he going to stay around pretending that he was absolutely unaffected by my flawlessly beautiful face?”

Pretending to preserve my virtue, I smiled with my eyes and my lips mumbled, “No”.

There was something weirdly charming about this man because he certainly seemed to hypnotise my heavily scattered mind. I was enchanted each time he looked at me. He smiled like the sun for a simple ‘Good Morning’ or ‘Good Afternoon’.

My maiden eyes began to assess his lean physique, his alluring manliness and the depth of his sanguine voice which was often brandished by his natural, elegant gait.



Soon, very soon, we began to go out on lunches to the cafeteria together, talking to each other incessantly as we beamed at each other.

Every little conversation seemed like a century passing by. Each day carried with it a contagious frenzy as I yearned to spend more time with him. Until one day his sure, steady hands grabbed my breasts.

My back froze. I never saw that coming.

In a toneless, wobbly voice I retorted, “Don’t do this please”.

I quickly took off his hands from my chest in prompt reflex, but he couldn’t stop rubbing his hands up and down my shirt.

Again I frantically lifted off his hands away from me and assured myself, “I’m sure this is just an accident. I’m sure he won’t do this again”.

But in the following days, I walked into a persona of him whose hungry hands wanted more. The more he pushed to see me or talk to me or come closer, the more I panicked.

There were times when I wondered why would he do something like this? Where was the gentleman I had lovely conversations with? Somehow I shushed myself to continuing to see him. I thought I could change him. But the more I let his hands on me, the more muted I became.

With every passing day I silently walked into his cabin like a frozen corpse. Sometimes I sobbed enough till my throat went dry. But there were also days when he kept his hands to himself. My thin and bloodless lips trembled. They felt it was too late to ward off the physical malevolence. At a very late point between us, I came to acknowledge that probably married men should never behave this way.

I woke up every morning with the astute

intent of withholding my body from him. I thought to myself, “If I could just make him listen to me when I said, ‘Why don’t you behave like a good man by staying my friend?’”

Back then I was breathing under the belief that I could somehow change him. Unlike him, he never seemed to stop. Every advance he made was met by the same pushing away by my thin hands. Each time I told him, “Let’s keep it to friendship only” made him somehow lose control and fondle me unnecessarily. I remember rushing out of spare suites, sometimes his office cabin considering being subject to his excessive touching all over my shirt to my pants below.

Slowly it became a game of hide and seeks. I was obligated to show up whenever he called me into his cave. Like a ravenous wolf he gravitated towards the vortex of a black torrent that completely numbed my hands and thighs.

Sometimes he studied that I ignored his savage manoeuvres. Then he would back out like a bruised lion as if bitterly defeated in a ring match. It never really occurred to me that I could choose to stop seeing him. That way I would have stood a chance to save myself from a lot of humiliation.

I didn't hate him. To be honest, I never really hated him. I just blamed myself for allowing it get this bad.

One fine day I decided to end the molestation by renegotiating our tumultuous relationship. I was colossally overtaken by the childish idea that if we just sat together and sorted out our mess that we might be able to clear the air and go back to a place of platonic understanding. The kind of understanding we had when we first met. Those long intelligent and intense conversations that I daydreamed of.

When he looked at me walking towards him,

an irresistible nudge gave wings to his desires of letting loose his skirt chaser. His dark, black eyed evil repulsed me. My fearful feet submitted without hesitation at once to the hungry beast. I wasn't even willing to fight back. So fatigued I was that my hands became dead to his whims and fancies with my lean, soft figure. Inside compromising, fancy suites and lawless, winding stairways, he continued to molest me. My heart fidgeted with pain and my body began to feel like toilet paper.

I ran my hands through my hair as I huddled in my bedroom one night. I sat thinking about my ruined attempts at keeping him away and how terribly I failed. I felt trapped and tortured and I wanted to break free from this pernicious mayhem.

Initially I was clear about my motivation to befriend the allegedly fine sober gentleman. But now I was just running out of ways to run away from him.

“Maybe I gave him all the wrong signals”, I thought.

“Perhaps”, I thought, “this was the most foolish decision I have ever made. To meet him in the first place. To want to see him and know more about him. Like meeting a new person brings in a new face to talk to, and when they intrigue you, the willingness to open up to them to know how they perceived the entire human race, what was their purpose in the world and whether they were willing to make sacrifices for the greater good. It would be much like synchronizing with soul friends. To illuminate each other like forever allies”.

Somewhere through the banality of my squalid existence, I faced up to him with the right to beg for my dignity. I was ready to apologize to him. Maybe even drop to his feet. Whatever it was going to take, I did not want him to look bad for fear of being indicted myself. I decided to take all the blame to save his face.

Come to the worst that could possibly happen with me, I was prepared to being labelled a 'slut'.

I blurted with a dry tone, "I want us to stay within our boundaries. We both know now that this was all your doing and not mine. Please don't make it harder than it has to be. Let's just stay friends. Okay".

I thought after hearing me out, he'd call out on me as a cold-hearted, arrogant seductress who tempted men with her aromatic eyes.

During those grieving minutes, the clever-toothed cat broke his silence and staunchly confessed to me, "I am never not thinking about you mate. You have to trust me when I say this. Ever since you fell from heaven I can't sit still! I try hard to run but your bright black eyes keep calling me."

His passionate, intense words wriggled down my throat into my tight, breathless belly. With

wide eyes and raised eyebrows I stressed, “But you’re a married man, aren’t you?”

To which he nodded his head up and down with a remorseful face. But he didn’t say anything. I was hoping that somewhere he was equally inspired to seek out a genuine camaraderie between us. Little did I know all this time that he cared more for my curves and less for my company.

To that end, every impression of his dynamic and formidable being fell like a giant rock on the floor. My little long suffering heart crashed a wall. It was indeed a great fall.

My inner voice at once echoed to me, “No wonder he’s like all the other men – easily infected by a woman’s looks”.

Following his atomic confession we transitioned into a ‘moral terms and conditions’ bond. We chose to stay friends and at the most embrace each other by a hug.



One time we met in private and he hugged me as usual.

Suddenly I pressed into his collar and felt the inside of his thighs. He was moaning passionately in pain and regret.

Turning towards me with a frowned face he pleaded, “No! Stop! Stop!”

I thought, “I don’t have to do this. I can stop right now”.

But my fingers did not take kindly to the warning. My inner voice refused to condemn my hand strokes. I was soaked into the fever of the moment. He was breathing heavily as his nose grimaced. He gently told me to remove my hand and I stopped.

Standing as I was like a mummified body, I recall not feeling a thing. I just knew that he was responsible for getting me involved and now I wanted him out of my life. It became

clear to me that I was now a part of a dark, fallen world of hungry bodies and hungrier mouths. I madly craved for a solution.

What really put an end to this saga was the day we were allegedly caught together in a booked hotel suite. Like always he invited me into his suite. My two fearful feet took me to the lobby with a last chance that I could still talk him into becoming a pious angel.

The prowling tiger once again forsook his promise and desired to devour my body. I remained adamant on my virgin ways of bringing a change of heart in him. He used this opportunity to break all barriers and held me in his arms. I stopped him with my delicate but nervous hands which trembled under his weight.

He finally stepped back slowly and said to me, “Okay, Okay. You’re so... just stay away from me because you’re too.....okay, just stand right there for me and I won’t come close...”

Eventually nothing happened. I was profoundly smiling from the inside.

To any other person, this situation would have looked like two random office colleagues making out together. My worst fears came true. The entire hotel staff got to know about both of us ‘cosying up’ in a room during owkring hours. It did not take longer to find out who booked the room and who the female co-apprentice was. Rumours spread around that the attractive young kiosk girl slept with the horny front office manager.

A thousand eyes decided that I was the **‘OFFICE HOOKER’**, the **‘SLEEPING SIREN’**. I felt like the infamous, under aged harlot of the town who had to leave because her torn tatters of shame fell off her naked, round haunches.

At the same time around I actually ended up crushing a young man’s heart who wanted me to be his girlfriend. But it was too late. While

a thousand eyes cast me out, a pair of eyes wailed and weeped over a stabbed heart.

Through some weird coincidence, that day also happened to be my last day working at the hotel. I was required at the Head Office starting from the very next day. That meant no more sitting at my kisok for eight long hours.

A sense of relief enriched my mind as I looked down with slumped shoulders and walked away from the hotel. Tears rolled down my face because of two things: I was free for real and I had lost a great deal of who I was.

On the whole my experience robbed me of my spark to fly. In the beginning when I joined the hotel, I felt inspired to be brilliant and become one with the sparkling stars. Working at a five-star hotel everyday felt like reaching out to the big beautiful night sky. But it also had a phenomenal dark side that started at the edge of all the shiny stuff.

Presently, as I was leaving, it suddenly looked like a dungeon of sexual predators and gossip driven beavers.

The man who ruined my face was out for everyone to see. He earned a bad name above all. Eventually I got to hear that he put down his papers and resigned from his distinguished position.

Later after two years, I got to learn from a common friend that he died in a bike accident. With his unexpected demise, I walked away from him and his reminiscence.

I must admit I did feel sorry for his wife and son.

Being young and wanting to look attractive to others were not exactly my best achievements.

As I recall this entire incident, I happened to dig up a grave I buried years ago. I was glad

to find a few white roses on the gravestone of my younger self who believed she was dead.

The first rose whispered to me to not to be flattered by my own face. Every time I swelled in smugness, I stumbled further to my lowest darkness.

The second rose whispered said to me that relationships ought to be based in reality. If they are not, it turns into a mirror that gives the illusion of everything one ever wanted to be perfect.

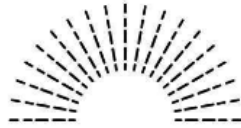
The third one murmured to me that remembering the divine really helped me through my not-so-proud moments.

All things said and done, I forgave myself and left the perpetrator to a greater judgement.



Being battled and bruised,  
She thought, "Let's come out and face it today",  
She looked at her face in the mirror,  
And decided to take a new way.





## CHAPTER SEVEN



### My First Boyfriend



**I**n the wee hours of a mundane monday morning, the sun stretched out itself onto the corridors of the majestically marbled lobby. This anecdote is from the same timeline I worked as a guest relations executive at the hotel. I, as usual, was dressed in my classic formals.

I was anticipating a tall, possibly a rich, deep-pocketed client to walk up to the kiosk to have a quick look at our slick, glossy brochures



promoting world-class residential apartments built around an international championship hole golf course.

Between the lustrous black, curved walls of the high ceilinged lobby entered a giant of about six feet, trudging like a scurrying train. He definitely looked like he was in a hurry to finish his day shift. I could not help but notice his full impressive height in contrast with his noisy but brutal walk. He had a bright face with obvious protruding teeth. His compelling dark eyes popped out at mine.

It was almost as though, he told me in not so many words, that women who work for real estate are as immature as toddlers toying with their fallen stuff toys. But there was a certain smugness in his looks.

At times I sensed a weird feeling from him. Something quite synonymous with dislike. He always seemed wrapped up in himself. On busy days his fast walking figure would cross

my pretty kiosk in full briskness. His unblinking bulging eyes gazed towards the in-house boulangerie. His uptight nose would keep up with his sour pout and frontal jutting teeth. He never bothered to give the tiniest glance to my little sanctum where I sat all day.

Meanwhile my eyes were fixed on him thinking whether I offended him in some way that he continues to pretend I don't exist.

He gave me permission to speak when he posed the question, "Why do you stand here?"

Right away I felt like a little nine-year old answering perplexed questions coming from a white-haired old man about the agony of my silent existence. I mentioned to him that looking out for rich investors was pretty much my job. He nodded his head royally and marched away.

There came many brief moments between his

purposeful heavy footsteps and my quiet shrine. A particular cheer echoed as we greeted each other. He would laugh at everything I had to say. After a while I was used to the noisy off-balance sound of his clumsy shoes from approximately four feet.

We smiled more frequently and sneaked more glances at each other. Many such full tilt encounters occurred between us. I waited wistfully every morning to see his fresh, clean-shaven face and talk to him. I would notice his spotless face heedfully and smelled his subtle, woody scent whenever he paced close to my eyes. He would text me from morning to night about every miniscule moment of his wonderful day.

Every so often he would say with a simple directness, "I think it's time we should catch up. I definitely mean catching up beyond our work lives. Can you please take the trouble and take out time to meet me outside?"

My ears listened enthusiastically to his deep, masculine voice. I kept my promise and we finally met at a nearby restaurant. The restaurant looked garish and unpopular. He sat on the couch adjacent to mine. My navy blue jute bag lay like a dead rock between us. Without another moment's hesitation, he picked up the bag with his huge palm. His eyes were slightly wrinkled as he placed my bag behind him. He talked about what he liked doing and asked me what kind of movies I liked watching. I noticed he wanted to draw up closer to my seat with every second question.

I put across a fake smile to cover my frowned face.

I tilted my head as I wondered how his front teeth stuck out beyond his rubbery upper lip.

His presence was electric enough to light up a barren windowless room into a bright lofty chamber of golden lights. His unblinking dark

eyes would talk to mine and I would look up through my downcast lashes. He straightened his spine and struck a ‘cowboy’ pose at me while I crossed and uncrossed my demure legs in front of him. I never liked him talking to ‘other’ women. Likewise he’d fight for every inch of space around me that was occupied by other men than himself.

I flash back to the day when he shook with laughter from morning to evening. I swear he was grinning the whole day like nobody else I’d seen. He was swinging his arms around. He was also spinning loosely. As I heard his footsteps across the polished wooden floor, he turned around with a giggle and saw me with a fixed gaze and curled lips.

I asked offhandedly, “You look happy today. Did the sun show up on your side or something?”

He looked up through his lashes and tilted his head to the right and said with a controlled

smile, “It’s nothing”.

He took careful slow steps with his leg crossing over to the left leg as he went away. It definitely looked like a lot more had happened against what he said about nothing significant happening. He would frequently ask me out. But I was reluctant to say ‘Yes’.

On a dainty Wednesday evening he asked me with burgeoning excitement over the phone, “I have been meaning to ask you something. May I?”

I knew this time it was serious. So I asked in return, “What is it? Tell me already”.

He said with stressed weight for the words to sound more meaningful, “Will you marry me?”

On hearing this from him I replied in a curious tone, “Honey, don’t you think it’s way too early to think about that?”

He spoke with a gloomy sigh, “What am I getting wrong here? I thought you wanted this too. Besides, I have already announced the news to my friends and family”.

I smacked my palm against my forehead and asserted in a chiding tone, “I do not remember discussing this with you. Why do your friends and family know about this? Didn’t you bother asking me first?”

I continued in the same tone, “I want you to listen carefully now. I think it’s way too early for marriage. I still want to land somewhere on my own feet. Someday I want to become a ‘somebody’ and prove to everyone around me that I can give back to the world. Why don’t we give each other time and see if things move in that direction?”

He stayed quiet for a few seconds. I could picture him holding his phone in one hand and his two-frontal teeth protruding out from his mouth.

I completed in a soft one, “Sure I want to see myself married honey, but just not now.”

It sounded like my blunt revelation shattered his glaring mantle into tiny shredded pieces.

Later each time he spoke about marriage, I’d tell him straight that I never felt the same way about him.

I somehow knew very strongly that we were never meant to be together for life. But now, as I reveal this, I do confess that I lacked the gumption to admit to his sweet gentle face that I was never certain about him.

Although he loved to revisit the point of marriage by imploring, “For how long are we going to keep meeting this way? When can I hear a ‘Yes’ from you for marriage??”

Never have I ever liked that my voice gets brutally gagged among other loud voices. Similarly I found that my right to reason



struggled to stand straight in front of his ardent statements on how less likely I valued him.

I would postulate in return by uttering, “Maybe this is something that’s meant to be. Sometimes I think maybe not”.

I deprived my heart from attending to her senior. I wanted to meet him but I would shut myself up. He could never have guessed that I was trying to avoid him to begin to break up from him.

When the wretched winters arrived, we burst forth into episodes of fierce and unspoken feuds with pronounced phases of cold callousness. At the end of his morning shift he’d call me. While I heard him saying something unpleasant and shriek at him, he would put away the receiver of the phone from his ears and wait till my I had finished ranting. We didn’t talk we would fight.

We didn't play we just lied to each other. It started to become unbearable to stay on the phone with him for more than five minutes.

My moist, mournful eyes begged him to stay with me, but without the mandatory premise of tying the knot. My unnatural silence seemed to eat away his crimson heart. I escaped from his life like a frightened fugitive because my heart submitted readily to his unfettered, eternal love. It was as if I only wanted the taste of the purple, juicy berry and not the nutrient.

I chose not to engage with him for the next year or so. So far away I was from him that he never heard me over the phone again. No matter how far we grew apart, he was bull-headed about his decision to settle down with me.

He wanted to kiss my dreamy eyes one last time. He wanted to feel me desperately. I plainly refused to meet him. I was not sure

myself if I had the strength to hold myself straight any longer after he'd leave.

In a way we drifted away like two boats in a seething storm. He no longer remained my significant other, neither was I a part of his dotting eyes. Deep down within, I was in intense shock. But I never allowed anybody to see it. The thought of parting with him made it heavy for my mind to accept my reality.

I wanted to stay on as his girlfriend. But he wanted to see me wedded to him by the following year or so. This changeless push and pull between us made it difficult for us to be with each other.

He begged me to reconsider my stand. However, I firmly stuck to my decision and said 'No'.

We'd meet each other across cities once every three months. He usually booked a suite in a nearby three- star hotel under his name. I

was often referred to the front desk as his 'visiting wife'.

He loved chocolates and I liked cherries. He fantasized me in splendidly sexy stilettos while I imagined waltzing around with him in a sequined blue gown. He was my handsome flaming pillar and I was his authentic Arabian princess. Like two pole stars we attracted each other's wildest energies. After every horned wave of passion he'd pull me up in his favourite shear accoutrement and make me say his name. He wanted to break in between my legs. But I would tell him very clearly that I wasn't ready yet.

Right then he would find the idea priceless and chuckle loudly and we would go to sleep in each other's arms. Morning would come and we'd know we were heading back to an existence without each other.

Without him, days felt like nights. The night felt like a dark time bidding me to walk with it.

At the very thought of sleepless anguish I might have caused him, I rolled onto my back and soothed myself with songs from the *Twilight* movie. He departed like a dark, vivid shadow from over my anxious eyes. Rightly so, a sudden wave of overwhelming, soft emotions flooded the inner gateways of my bosom.

Just like clean, sweet beach waves washing over my face I felt his radiant warmth and fierce protective love I received under the dwellings of our times we shared together. Very slowly, like the trickling of warm and persistent rain drops on a glass window, I was overcome by the moments we swooned each other. It almost felt like I was married to him in a grand movie inside my head.

But the fact that he was gone pressed into my heart and I never felt the same again. I withdrew myself into a cold and frozen space where sadness meets soul. Either I spent the day watching the vampire film on my phone at

least five times or I'd stay soaked in his memories. It felt like trying to remember the first scent of rain I had experienced for the first time ever. Little did I realise how much of a loss I was going to ensue from such a magnanimous and well behaved gentleman such as him.

One night I frantically dialled his number with newfound faith in my heart, but I couldn't get through. After some seven or eight odd trials he picked up my call and responded by saying a calm 'Hello'. This time though, he sounded like a faraway friend talking in the wee hours of the night. The fact that I felt his warmth was absent from my life made me more adamant that I must win him back.

I swiftly retracted all negative words out of my language like poison extracted from a venomous snake. I spoke to him in the sweetest, kindest possible manner, if I was ever like that. With all eloquence and

gentleness I wished for him to utter his few but emphatic words about how much he missed me. If only he had to say those words, I was ready to leap onto him with every molecule of my existence.

Finally I heard him speak as kind as ever, “I am doing great! How are you doing madam?”

Right then, I sensed a strange feeling that his love was gone.

I conveyed with firm persistence smilingly, “You know what! I missed you”.

For a moment nothing was reciprocated. After a short pause, he said in a dry tone, “And, what else have you been doing?”

I said with astonishment, “Do you not miss me hon? I think I was wrong all this while about us. Let’s get back together”.

He responded with a false cheerfulness, “You

know you don't have to say that. After listening to your bittersweet words for two years now, I have had to painfully accept your choice. I have moved on".

A tear or two dropped from my lids as I sat listening with my jaw left open.

Then he continued in a serious tone, "We were both hurting each other. Perhaps I was being too pushy about marriage. You know what! Just forget it. Maybe you were right. Maybe we were never meant to be together".

I boomed hastily, "I'm here now for us. I swear we can make it together now. What do you have to say about that?"

To which he responded unflinchingly, "You've always been very gracious about me. I appreciate that. But I don't see a future where you want something else that I may not be okay with".



I immediately filled in, “Listen to me. I know I’ve been very annoying by pushing you away. Please, just please give us another chance”.

He uttered without a moment’s hesitation, “I wish that were true. Anyways, I wish you the best of everything in the future”.

Hot tears were running down my eyes as I sat myself down the stairs. Unable to move, with wide eyes and my shaky voice I returned, “Okay...”

He mentioned in a casual fashion, “Okay then. I have work to do so I’ll let you rest for the night. Bye”.

He hung up.

I whispered with a heavy chest, “Bye”.

As my phone slipped down my cheeks, I stared with frozen eyes into the living room before me which seemed to disappear into a wet watery void. With slumped shoulders and a

contorted face I lay down with my wet face kissing the cold concrete wall. In that precise moment *Norah Jones's* song '*Happy pills*' played in my head as my helpless hands hung below my knees.

All I understood was that he had already moved on like a brave, black knight who was rejected by the girl he wanted to get married to. As I rehearsed this in my mind, I imagined a heartbroken knight galloping on his black, majestic steed to the other side of the river. He looked back one last time before treading onto his homeland. Somewhere in his heart, he was certain that his ladylove wouldn't return again.

By the time he started over towards the front, his ladylove stormed out of her castle and came down to the ground, crestfallen at the tragedy she had just given birth to. She was mainly mortified that she had to live through the consequences of her own devastating decision. As I pulled out of my imagination, I

felt like a fallen queen brought down to hard ground for her stupid insensibilities. By now I hated myself even more.

Six years and four cities later, we met again. He was a married man now. He called me up and we chatted for a brief while. Not face to face this time. It was only phone now.

He could boast proudly about the way in which his career had moved forward and I could turn to him for any advice. This was it. At last I felt glad that I gained some sort of closure on our amazing friendship. I thought we would be best friends.

No sooner than a month, our newfangled friendship caught the unavoidable attention of his beloved wife. I vividly remember the night he called me. As I noted the hour hand away from midnight, I picked his call with mild doubts. I could hear his wife wailing vehemently with a short pause in between every howl that echoed over the phone. Her

bawling cries haunted me.

“Something must have gone terrifically wrong”, I thought.

With a gasping voice he faltered heavily and uttered, “Sorry to disturb you at this hour of the night. But my wife thinks you and I have a fling. I have explained to her over a hundred times that it is a figment of her imagination.... But she won’t believe me.....”

He took a brief pause and breathed heavily as I heard him panting over the phone. After about five minutes when he was no longer breathless he continued desperately, “The woman you hear crying now is my wife. She is crying because I slapped her.... I couldn’t help it....She kept pestering me about you....I have called you to want you to speak to her and tell her that we are just friends and nothing more”.

Right then, I asked him to calm down. I

insisted that if she was ready to speak with me I would be ready to sort out the misunderstanding. I assured him that I would speak with his wife in private. After a brief ‘breathe-in’ he agreed with my suggestion and told me he would call back.

I never heard from him after that ominous night. I mourned about the dead skeleton from my grave I had been burying away. The skeleton of ‘THE BAD WOMAN WHO SEDUCED GOOD MEN’.

To say the least, was I expecting it to come back and haunt me? Of course not. Was I becoming the third person in his marriage? That was never ever my intention. So I prayed anxiously that he patch up with his wife. I promised my maker that I would forget him forever. True enough I never contacted him again.

Three years later, I was married.

I receive a random text message, “Hey! How

have you been old friend of mine?”

I was quizzed to know who was on the other end.

I texted back, “Who is this?”

Within a few seconds I receive a text back. It read, “Hey, it’s me. My wife is away for a few days. I think it’s best to keep our friendship a secret from others who would otherwise never understand”.

He went on to talk about how much he missed my presence in his life. When I mentioned I got recently married, he congratulated me. Having stepped into a new phase with my husband by my side, I proceeded to warn him to stay out of my life. But he spoke with such tremendous confidence as if there was no steep, gaping trench that had engulfed between us.

One of my old friends once told me that

staying friends with an old flame will mean inevitably that we want the same thing we had when we owned each other. Only this time the difference was either of us don't want to call it a relationship and run the risk of opening our eyes to the reality of life. I instantly recognised the truth for what it was.

With these passing thoughts I quickly recalcitrated my words by saying that he must see us for who we were and stop waiting for snowflakes to fall freely into what he thought was a forever friendship we could ever dream of having.

I am guessing by now he doesn't look back anymore.

So what if our love never lasted? He did transform my life in many meaningful ways. We shared a heartfelt relationship, or rather a brief affair to say the least. We may have never run around rose bushes to declare our love to the world. But we certainly valued

each other.

I believe if we were meant to be together, it would have happened anyway. In the end I feel grateful for all he taught me about my own juvenile ways.

To me we became wrecking balls crashing into each other's worlds and ripping out our heartstrings.

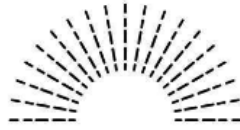
Our times together will always remain a long lasting memory. I am grateful to the universe that I met somebody like him. I always am. I always will.



Your walk, your talk, your face could be a memory,  
But time and age have shown how we're meant to be,  
All the times I shared with you were kind and gentle like  
forever,  
But if we are not together, it means we must now forget  
each other.







## CHAPTER EIGHT



### Summer Love



**I**t was a golden, opportune October night. The past few months of serious soul searching brought me to a point of thorough drunken sadness. The perfidiousness of the cold, blank winter was perpetually employed on expanding the phlegmatic cavity I contained within my sunken chest.

The pervasive sadness was so dark that the curious veil of optimism would lift up all seven walls before reaching the heart which lay in muscular rehabilitation.

30 years in the searing sun

After ten caustic months of extreme lonesomeness I was ready to acknowledge that the present moment is mine and it was too late to do anything about what was not mine.

It was during those enlightened days that mother called me up to talk about a notable, young man who had impressed her in the first rendezvous. She said with a controlled smile and wide eyes that the man was a Sales executive at a renowned real estate firm. It seemed to me that her ideal image of a prospective son-in-law was turning into a reality. He worked as an “executive” in her ever so gentle use of words. I was completely off but I knew that mother was definitely smitten by his personality.

After a few sceptical days, I viewed his online profile picture. It was visibly amateurish. The picture had him standing in a true white T-shirt and berry blue jeans. He looked like he stood

somewhere next to the beach. His chest was out like a peacock. His hands rested on his well proportioned hips. I'd be perhaps wrong if I dared to mention the debonair *Antonio Banderas*.

But the truth was his picture could not hide his lifted chin from a side-angled view of his square jaw line and unfocused eye contact. My first impression was he looked over smart and that his chest-thumping superciliousness could make a room full of people cringe.

I never liked my mother's choices. She possessed a niche and taste of her own that never matched my liking. Truth be told, her interpretation of the word 'executive' meant something very grandiose and first-rate to her against the regular interpretation of a sophisticated clerk. The brouhaha she babbled constantly about his sweet face and formidable height never really bothered me. I was certain about not giving into her tricky little black magic.

It was the third or fourth day that she was lauding oft-repeated compliments about him. She wanted me to establish contact with him. As she leaned forward to whisper into my ears she appealed that he was not such a bad groom-to-be after all. She insisted that I give him a chance. I turned my head away from her whenever she uttered words to honour his heroic image and his oozing charm. But it seemed like she was never going to stop singing about him. I stayed determined to resist her invitations.

But mothers are mothers. Her requests could not be forever declined. I was required to open conversation with the 'good-looking real-estate worker'.

Our first 'Hello' over the phone was frigid and spiritless. I 'helloed' to him in return. His voice sounded like that of a heavy metal rock head with a rough ferocious tone to it. After the first few days of chatting with each other he began to unfold a lot more beyond his

‘put-on’ rough voice.

From the beginning I understood that he was a deep thinker who was concerned about how I thought and what things I gave priority to. It was almost sensational speaking to him over the phone. He enjoyed philosophical conversations. He was a calm, thoughtful and sensitive beast. He figured out my deepest parts very quickly. He was like a gargantuan sea creature swimming toward his precious pearl in the dead of night. He loved affirming this analogy to me.

His chivalry and daring display in order to defend his beautifully bare mermaid from the boundless ocean swept me off my feet. He confessed his love for me in seven different ways. He would softly feel my lips and I would generously caress him on the phone. Within a stretch of ten days we were struck by cupid’s arrow. We had more calling, more texting and many more dirty pillow talks. That’s when we decided to stay together forever.

I confirmed to mother that we were in love. She happily invited him over to our place. My belly was swimming with butterflies. Finally I would see him face to face after four long months. All day I thought of his dreamy words and softest promises of never leaving me. So it happened.

He came to see me in a bus. Father offered to receive him at the bus station. I was decked up in a pink dress and salon treated straight hair. I was very grateful that my face was not breaking out those days. Another twenty odd minutes and I heard father's car driving into our building. In that moment my heart jumped up and down like a crazy ping pong ball. My earnest ears waited for him to ring the doorbell. I waited inside the kitchen to peep at him through the candy white kitchen door.

I knew I couldn't walk up to him alone. I needed my hoity-toity sixteen year old sister. One of the nicest things about my sister was

her strikingly sedate mind. Her fewest and plainest words of wisdom would help me restore my reserve of much needed peace. I begged her to stay on with me in the kitchen.

Right after a few minutes I heard the footsteps of father and him walking through the corridor. He then walked right into the living room. I watched through the crack of the kitchen door to see what his face looked like.

I was able to view his informal brown trousers as he sat down on the dusty maroon sofa chair. He spoke in a gruff, sonorous voice. His hands looked fair, nimble and veined. Both of them lay suspended on the armrest facing downwards.

At first I was horrified at the way his hands lay dead on the armrest. They looked like two paralysed limbs worn down from a long time prevailing nervous disorder. His hairy arms rose up with every breath he took. His wrists

reflected the evidence of some kind of birth defect. After having finished what he had to say they fell right down to the armrest. My lips quivered as I watched his square face and deep-set black eyes.

After a brief lunch and a few camera moments with the family, he thanked us for inviting him over. Father offered to ride him up to his motel. Both the men took the slow rickety elevator to the basement. I ran downstairs to wave him goodbye. He sat inside the small red hatchback. His shiny pupils looked at mine. His mouth opened up into a sunny smile as he waved goodbye to me. In a glimpse I could imagine the promises he made to me. His face glinted like a golden apple in the mid-afternoon sunlight.

I now could see his sweet reminiscence and simple heartedness. My pulses were running faint and strong at the same time. My head was busy engaged with my heart to come to a final decision about him. But I was not ready



to compromise with his sheer innocence. Somehow the voice of reason overpowered my feelings for him.

“Am I to be with him? Or am I not meant to be with him?”

It was a nagging premonition that was stronger than the ones I counted before. A sudden rush of guilt and sadness flooded my face and chest. My eyes cried tears of an irreparable loss. That moment was the one that gave me divine discernment about his hidden self that never existed in the course of the few months we were getting to know each other. I completely lost all passion to meet him. A subtle voice in my head told me I was talking to somebody over the phone I may have overestimated.

His soft, subtle voice drew out a dark feeling of uneasiness and deceit. In a slow wave the moment arrived when I could distinguish between his handsome face and his strangely

seductive words. My mouth was wide open at the hint of suspicion I intercepted against the sum and substance of his existence. Right there my head and heart indicated to me he was definitely not the one.

Just like a heavenly revelation, it felt like my sense of good judgement was blinded that day. I felt incredibly stupid to give way to some random bloke the opportunity to break into my fortress and ransom my heart for his second-rate theatrical words. It was the worst feeling of never wanting to go back to him again.

Father and he were gone from the premises. His departure brought copious and bitter tears to the corner of my eyes. My lifeless feet ran towards the back of the building. My body sank like a 'once majestic' iceberg on the grim white Arctic. My poor old, ill-fated heart that I carried around places like an empty grave, or like a wailing mother pouring out an unbroken tide of bittersweet, unstoppable

downfall of excruciating sorrow. Four months and a new found love I get to arrive at a horrible conclusion. That he was not the one.

More rapid and more massive flowed out the draft of merciless misery into my lap like a wide, silvery river emptying its sluggish streams of water into a lonely river basin. The fullness of it was drained out on the ground. The river dried up and the heart sat down like a patient in mental asylum. My silent feet dragged themselves upstairs.

I walked in through the door with my eyes downcast as my hands swung around to latch the door up. I went into my room where my sister sat reading a book.

I said with mocked astonishment, "I don't think he is the one for me. Maybe I was completely wrong about him all this while. He is not meant for me".

She had a fixed gaze for a while. She shrugged

her shoulders back and said I was being unfair to him.

In a voice soft with affection she concluded, “I understand how you feel right now. Maybe you’re taking a snap decision”.

She continued to hypothesize, “Maybe you and him just need more time together. It’s hardly been a few months since you’ve known him, right? I mean, how sure can you be about marrying him? So trust me when I say this. You guys just need to chill out more. Okay. Don’t worry and take your time”.

She believed he deserved a second chance. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps I was expecting too many things from him. Maybe a mental conspiracy that did not want me to move forward. Maybe I was being heavily impulsive in my judgements. It could be possible that my mind overreacted to his presence suddenly. Maybe I was being impatient. Especially after he looked tired

and weather-beaten because of the painstaking journey he undertook to come meet me.

The chances of not trusting him were many. But I knew my heart was not in the right place this time.

After sunset my parents and I picked him up from outside. There he was, standing under the cloudless eastern sky. He made his appearance in an open-collared, white shirt with a mangled blue pair of jeans and a broad brown waist belt. Like a magnificent creature from the high heavens he looked tall and singularly handsome. He crossed the road and greets my parents. He opens the back door and sat inside next to me.

No matter how handsome he was looking, I was not going to compromise my assumptions. We were driven all the way to the paradisiacal, sandy beach. My parents were determined that we talk through marriage.

We were sitting by the dazzling warm waters, on the fine, moist sand. He leaned forward and stared deep into my eyes. His slim, deft fingers ran over my scarlet lips. A wave of wild dreams ran through my pelvis. My legs froze as he continued feeling my fleshy lower lip. He held my neck and tilted his face. His thick, sensual lips embraced mine. Flesh to flesh. Soft, sensual and salubrious was the tune to which both caressed each other. Both now learnt the rhythm of deep-seated delectation.

Like two thirsty shores meeting each other after years of droughts and dry spells. After diving in from the deep pool of wet pleasures he pulled himself back with considerable effort. He looked back into my eyes and most elegantly confessed that he did not want to waste another second of his life without me.

Somehow I acted like I was very disappointed. I questioned his intentions behind the passionate kiss.

“Because I love you my darling”, he confessed.

“I don’t feel embarrassed about what I just did”.

A raging voice inside of me wanted to bark at him, “You’re Insane. You say you love me? Not now I don’t”.

Those words made me feel worse after hearing him out. It was almost like a random set of excuses he kept to have me blush around him.

At a brief distance away from us, I saw my parents sitting on the slate granite side walk. Mother smiled brightly as she sat on the marbled top with her legs dangling over the floor. She was holding father’s hands and waiting in deep anticipation from us. A vivid sense of deep founding trust renewed my feelings for them. I could only thank my parents enough for the kindness and discretion given to us to decide if we could take this further on our own.

Next we headed back home to drop him off. I really needed him to go away from me. He left and I felt relieved. He thanked my parents and wished us goodnight. He left the next day for his city. I was glad that I got the chance to see him. My parents were happy too. But I felt betrayed about the way he turned out to be.

I was fuming at mother as I marched in with stomping footsteps and a clenched jaw, “Mom, what is it that you saw in him?”

Mother paused and turned to look at me with wide speculating eyes.

I continued speaking with raised eyebrows, “Ever since he came here, I saw him hiding something inside his chest. There is an invisible pain in his voice more than a thousand tons of iron weights. You say you know this man clearly. But I have my doubts”.

Mother became dumb for a while and later explained with a creased brow, “No sweetie, I



told you he was a sincere and well cultured boy. He speaks very politely to all of us. You must be saying that because you met him for the first time”.

“No, I don’t think you understand. He once told me he was betrayed by lots of people. Believe me when I say that he already crossed hell. He doesn’t look quite happy himself. How would you expect a man like that to keep your daughter happy?”

Her face contorted slightly. She turned around and justified with her hands holding each other, “I think you’re being too hasty with your judgement”.

With a raised voice, I immediately defended my argument and uttered, “You’re one word away from starting a war Mother”.

Mother stood breathless for a few moments. Then she sat down on the bed and slowly covered her face with her hands. She turned

her shoulders down and looked to the floor. Large, syrupy tears started to run down her scarred, chubby cheeks.

She sobbed and blubbered with heavy sighs, “Just once, I wanted to find the perfect husband for you. Trust me! Your mother never would have wanted somebody else to walk through that door. I’m so very sorry”.

She began to breakout into volumes of regret. I answered quietly, “Don’t worry Mom. I’ve got this”.

I felt bad for mother. Besides, almost every mother always wants the best for her children. On the other side, father strongly believed that mother was to be found guilty for the stranger she invited into our household.

In more ways than one, I saw him as a man trying to deal with his parent’s separation, his alcoholic past and the epic chain of

heartbreaks he suffered. I didn't know what to make of his personality. The thought of losing him disturbed the sleepy shadows of our closeness.

He would take a bus from his city to visit me and stay in during the weekend. Somehow he began making up stories about where he went and what he did. I always wondered how he managed to travel six hundred miles in spite of the fact that he was barely able to save much from his pay.

He prowled around me to check what I was doing? Whether it was the kind of clothes I wore or friends I chatted with. He spied on my telephone calls. He strictly monitored my clothes and what I wore.

He would narrow his eyes and scan me from head to toe and query roughly, "Where do you think you're going dressed like that? Every inch of that body is for my eyes only. You hear me?"

Sometimes he directly blurted, “Aren’t you’re being too friendly with your new friends?”

For some strange reason he never fully trusted my words. He always mentioned to me the number of betrayals he saw in his past. He never wished to be put through a similar position of soulless surrender again. But he also seemed to barricade a part of himself away from me. He buried his inner child who I felt was wailing like a fragile infant, waiting for somebody to reach out to him to nurture his gloomy heart. It gave me the idea that he saw ‘blamelessness’ in it.

However he wanted me to not hide anything from him. He made it emphatically clear to me that I must never break his heart or cheat on him.

Curiously one day I pleaded abjectly, “When do you plan on marrying me?”

“Not now, No! I am not ready. I do want to tie the knot with you. I just want some time to

focus on my career. In the meantime I'd like you to not worry. Okay. I want you to stay by my side and support me", he specified in a casual tone.

Most times I found him to be a dear friend. Someone I could close my eyes and take counsel from. He was a charming boyfriend to have and be in love with. He wanted to possess me because he knew he could hold me in his arms forever. His spirit loved connecting with me like an ancient shamanic lover. He demanded to know every strand of sentiment passing from my face into my heart.

He always spoke largely about how noble and illustrious his family was. But whenever he got a phone call from his mother, I always found him shaking his legs furiously and parading up and down in fast, short- paced breaths. He lived like he was a war mercenary who was never on holiday.

At the manifestation of anything unexpected, he sprung up on his feet ready to open fire. Anybody who threatened his idea of peace identified as his enemy. Oftentimes I was his number one target. He continually complained to me for not having the heart to understand his needs. Every day he said things that were enough for me to go hide my face somewhere.

When I played with my hair or neck he looked fixedly at me with his mouth wide open. His eyelids closed when he heard my calm edgy voice. We enjoyed lying naked with each other. He loved it when he touched my hands. Every single touch ran through him like electricity going down to his limbs to release a spout of euphoric joy. On one hand we floated on clouds of unbridled passion. On the other hand I just knew we were meant to break up anytime soon. To keep him from being shattered again, I promised to stick with him.

He asked for money all the time. There were

days when I was forced to lend money when I was out of work. Under those grim circumstances I was forced to part with my sliver of savings. He gave me panic attacks if I didn't give him cash. Somehow I kept telling myself that this was part of being in true love. He started threatening me for every minute detail I missed telling him. He would become churlish about every single way I made conclusions or made the bed. I gave him more chances to turn around from his old lazy excuses. He came down on me if I ever did something that was against the way he asked me to. I no longer felt like the person I used to be. He made me feel like everything I did was replete with errors.

Our conversations ended with blaming and shaming each other. I often wondered if I was being a bit too unrestrained with him. I never felt like talking to anybody. Somewhere in the midst of our fights he stopped caring for me. But he never ever forgot to remind me that I was supposed to inform him about where I

went and when I must come back.

In the sixth month I saw us drowning into a placid lake of insidious poison. The lake of lapid love that once was redolent red which gave us a reason to be around each other, was now a black snare for him to trap me in and excoriate my soul. I had no choice but to leave him. I was forced to make a decision and I decided to break up with him. Right then I made a solemn swear that I would rather stay single all my life instead of slipping down to some silky persuasive voice.

One Sunday night, he was at a friend's house party. He was clearly drunk from his slurred speech. He laughed impulsively as he narrated how his friend tried telling a joke to the crowd, and how he failed miserably at that. I swallowed my throat frequently in impatience as I waited for him to finish his insightful report on the camaraderie.

After he finished speaking I announced



truthfully,” I want to break up with you. I trusted you and you continue to hurt me. It should have never come to this. I deserve more than this. It was never up to me alone”. He remained silent for a while. Then he said softly, “But you promised....”

“Yes”, I explained irritably, “I did make a promise to be with you forever. But I can’t stand another day of being reprimanded by you for not covering my body right when I step out of the house. The funny thing is that you expect me to be loyal to you. Despite all the drama, you insist that I stay by your side and wait for a long time before you’re ready to commit to marriage. I hate you for this. Now I just don’t see a way for us to live together”.

He stressed with a panicky voice, “What are you talking about? Don’t I at least deserve one last chance?”

“You want a second chance? Go away! My love

for you didn't die a natural death. It was killed by your own dilapidated hands. If I am cutting you off today, it's because you were responsible for handing me the scissors", I yelled back at him.

He felt the tremulousness of my voice. I finished my confession by speaking in sobs, "I'm sorry but I don't see a way to fix this now. I just want all this to stop".

Probably he understood that this time I wasn't ready to compromise. So he accepted my explanation without a single word and went his way. Did I wish for him to come back for me, or maybe to say 'sorry'? To be honest, I didn't know but I was definitely sure about one thing. I couldn't heal in the same environment I was falling sick.

He felt emaciated for being rejected for the first time ever. He refused to accept that I wanted to break up with him. He came back only to make me feel like the most malicious woman on this planet for turning him down.

He accused me for not being sensitive about his situation.

He chided me by remarking, “You were the one who rejected me. YOU, YOU HEARTLESS B\*\*\*\*! I loved you with all that I ever had and this is how you prove your love to me. I was in the middle of my friend’s party and then you call me telling me that you want to break up! Thanks for ruining my night and the rest of my nights right after. I know you care about the money. That’s why you don’t like sharing it with me. You think you can get away from me without even looking at me. How dare you?”

I softly reiterated, “Listen to me. You have been promising me that you’d look at changing jobs. Right now you’re broke. I am not working anymore myself. Yet you insist that I give you money out of my father’s pocket. I have never asked you to buy me anything ever. How long do you think we can go on this way?”

He argued that I was being money minded when I said he was not capable of paying my bills. He also expressed that he was statically unhappy by the way I suddenly broke up with him in the middle of his friend's celebration. He was especially upset with the fact he wasn't warned about this.

In the following days he'd call me and often retorted by saying frantically, "You are a cold-blooded woman. Don't you have any mercy on me for leaving me like this right after I quit my job?"

I replied with raised eyebrows, "You keep saying you will change someday but I am tired of you lying to me. I know that you will always be the same man blaming me for everything that ever happens with you. Whether you like it or not you're a jerk. You may pretend to have no money problems, but I know that you're running out of cash all the time. For whatever reason you choose to be silent when I ask you how you spend your money, you still

have the daunting audacity to keep fishing out big bucks from me. I think you're the one who is shameless".

He continued in the same aggravated tone, "Yes go on. I am listening. I am the one who is the culprit here, am I not? It was your mother who wanted me to meet you. She invited me over to your city and introduced us to each other. Now you're gonna turn around and blame me for that too?"

To which I truly was silenced. After all, the fact was my mother brought him into my life. For the next four months he continued to haunt me with twice the guilt I had before I ended the relationship. I tried weaning him off my caller's list but he bickered and argued endlessly with me over the phone. He begged me to stay with him as a friend. But it made things go really sour between us.

There came a time where he began to talk to my sister for a couple of days. On one such

occasion my sister signalled to me to come over when he was chatting with her. As I walked in her direction she kept motioning to me with her eyes to listen to his conversation. As soon as she handed over the phone to me in silence she walked away.

The first words that came out of his mouth were, “You know something, I like you. Your sister and I may have had a breakup but I find that we have an inner connection. You can always trust me. I will be there for you whenever you want me to. Don’t be afraid of me coming close to you. I will always make you feel comfortable with my touch”.

As soon as he finished uttering the word ‘touch’, I flew into a fit of boiling rage. I yelled as my face flushed red with disgust, “What do you think you’re saying to my sister, huh?”

He acted blissfully ignorant as he replied nonchalantly, “Oh, I never knew I was

speaking to you all this time. How have you been doing by the way?”

“How am I doing? You sick bastard! You couldn’t get me so now you’re gonna go behind my sister. How dare you? I never expected something like this from you”.

“No, you’re getting it all wrong. I never meant anything like that. I was just telling your sister that she can count on me as a brother. Jeez! You’re thoughts are disgusting”.

“No, you are the one who disgusts me right now. I hate you now even more. Get out of my life and never ever ever come back”.

He kept pushing the argument and I ranted at him as my sister stood at the back listening to everything. He refused to admit to what he just said. Seeing that there was no way he was going to step away from denial, I cut the call and deleted his number forever. I changed my own number.

We met a couple times later. Bed and breakfast as usual. Neither did he want to forget me nor did I want to stop seeing him. By now I learned that every relationship has a season. But he was never mine to have. Maybe because he was always broken.

After a whole lonely year and parched six months, I understood that loving someone was more than just holding hands. Love can also become a shared responsibility.

How much was I expected to forgive his mistakes, care for him and continue to carry on with his destructive state of mind?

For the first four months, he was like a never ending summer break. Something about him wanted me to sink into his sweet eyes. It was only when the rains of reality came pouring down was when he ran away while I stood getting soaked alone.

Our relationship took off like Exotic Havana



and died down like a chilling Bonfire in the  
cold Saharan desert night.



Your Talk is a snare,  
Your well kempt hair,  
When I first met you,  
You were nice to stare,

Your gentleman eyes,  
Your passion for love,  
Your cuddles and hugs,  
Your voice undreamed of,

Pulled me into yourself,  
Threw me at your feet,  
Sent me to your heart,  
Like a mail receipt,

But the day you came,  
The truth came out,  
Your white lies were caught,  
I suffered a blackout,

After all you were not the same,  
Man I spoke to everyday,  
Yes it's true there is a phone,  
That gives you the choice of hiding alone,

I cried alone,  
My heart was torn,  
To know that he was gone,  
Like a child from a crayon,

He tells me 'No',  
He will make things right,  
But he didn't expect me,  
To say Goodbye!

Eight chicks and a bottle,  
Is what he earned in a throttle?  
Like a gamble with life,  
He tested the chastity of his would-be wife,

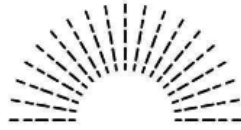
We separated,  
He got frustrated,  
He couldn't take it,  
His helplessness he hated,

We met however,  
To feel each other's skin,  
And the taste of his lips,  
Like a player with his mandolin,

He fell in my eyes,  
Head to toe full -size,  
No more was he a surprise,  
Much like he used to publicize,

He was a summer dream,  
That lasted too short,  
For all the lavish promises,  
Which were to end with a thwart?





## CHAPTER NINE



### In Love With The Devil



**I**t intrigues me to imagine that men also, like women, exist in different shades and facades. Most of us have ghosts from the past that can never be forgotten.

I met my haunting ghost one afternoon when he was strolling in the lobby of our standard business class hotel with his co-workers. As usual I was standing in a flamboyantly self-righteous posture at my designated kiosk. His eyes began to wander around like a ferocious

predator pathetically trying to pursue a tempting and easy kill.

After spending five minutes sniffing his nose in the air his alert black eyes landed on my smooth unwrinkled forehead. Within a second's gaze he was left slack-jawed as he withdrew his eyes from me. It almost gave me the impression that he was probably making a mental note to approach me later in the day.

As I looked closely at his honestly smitten face, I could tell he was going to take this encounter forward. In the following days he tried his level best to come forward and ask me out. It was a staggering coincidence that I met him in the same workplace as mine. He was seen with a thick gigantic smile every time he happened to see me. I could also sense an awful kindness around him. He was a bald broad chested man in his late twenties. His smooth clear-cut face and dimpled smile were his alluring attributes.

He would end up fumbling in the middle of a sentence. After much momentous glimpsing and shy smiling he asked me for my number. Efficaciously he mentioned to me that he was available on call 24×7.

To be honest, I kept his feelings hanging dry in the air since he was frantically lovesick and I was not. We decided to go out on a date to an uptown discotheque at the hotel. My parents were in for a rude shock to watch a young, daring man wanting to go out with their adorable eldest daughter. As we arrived at the curb to meet him, he stood with a bright electric grin on his face.

He also met my mother the night I was allowed to go out with him. My introspective mother stepped out of the car and stared at him with the widest eyes ever. He issued forth a very sentient and warm greeting to her, “Good evening ma’am!”

Mother immediately returned an equally

resounding response, "Good evening to you too dear!" as she glided away from him softly. Father parked the car and inspected the guy in question from head to toe. After a brief encounter he let us go on our date.

On arriving at the venue, we waltzed in through the access door. At the foot of the escalator, he extended his arm to me to be escorted. After giving my hand to him on the moving staircase, I accidentally saw a pair of large, mournful eyes looking back at me through the blinding darkness of the venue gates. Within a few seconds I recognised his face and instantly turned my face towards the man who was chaperoning me.

The man with the large wistful eyes paraded away with his iconic heavy footsteps that I was used to hearing every morning. He was standing more than just a walk away. He definitely looked droopy on seeing me with another guy that

night. In that precise moment, my date and I rode up the escalator towards the grand gates. We danced together till midnight.

I couldn't help but notice the glittering excitement that sparkled in his eyes. He laid his face against mine at the table. After gobbling down a half-baked meal, we happily agreed to never return to the shabby restaurant ever again. By midnight he dropped me home.

Father had a brief word with him. While leaving he departed with his right palm facing forward and fingers slightly touching the right side of his forehead as done in a proper military salute. Father who was an armed forces officer was very impressed.

Devil loved touching my hands. He fit them in his beefed-up palms. He praised my voice while I blushed around him. He talked about climbing the moon for me. The reason I called him the 'devil' was because of the hundred



ideas he talked about running away from home when my parents fell asleep in the night.

There was a time when he was the third person between me and the man I first knew. Devil had a strong hunch about the front office manager from the start. He clearly suspected that there was something going on between me and him.

The damning evening arrived with its unheeded warnings. As soon as devil found out that I was in a room with the manager, he warded me off like I was a contagious sickness. I strutted down the stairs with eyes looking to the ground and my neck lowered in shame and shallowness.

He looked like he could hardly breathe. His eyes looked watery as he lowered his head to the floor. There, in exactly that moment, I saw him fall out of love with me. He was holding my hand bag in his hands. As I walked

towards the front desk, I could see his red flushed face that tried hard to hide the excruciating agony of his aching heart.

My eyes and lips became numb. I had no clue if I was supposed to apologize to him in the moment or later. I clearly saw the pain I put him through. He handed out my bag to me with trembling hands while looking away and marched past like I was a total stranger to him. He was gone. He didn't want to see my face.

I knew I made a mistake by not telling him about the manager. I also knew in that moment that he would never come back. I distinctly remember the handwritten note he gave me. He wrote about never wanting to see me again. But I greatly felt the hateful hurt oozing out from every word he scribbled down on a piece of napkin.

For three years there was a hollow void between us. I was unattached myself.

Suddenly one day I get called by him. He sounded sardonic and composed at the same time when he voiced out his affliction, “Do you have any idea how hard things were for me? After I left you, I became another man. I couldn’t trust anyone anymore around me. Your face hovered in my mind all day. Yet I clawed my own hands to think that I once was madly in love with you. **YOU B\*\*\*\*!** **YOU CHEATER!** You are one of those crafty sly women who sleep with hotel managers to get their way up. God knows what I thought of you! You are indeed a cheap woman.”

I listened quietly as my head was buried in my hands. He continued in a vicious tone, “You are the only reason I stopped being me. Do you really want to know how these years went by for me? I really hated you. I would drink myself to sleep to delete you from my head. The only feeling I felt was of being used by you. I felt like a dumb jack for buying into all your lies. I never went back to looking at another woman let alone moving on. The

tiniest thought about you filled me with wrath and repugnance. It took me several months to get over a whore like you”.

I let devil say what he wanted to say. Never once did it cross my mind to ease his sorrow by telling him that nothing really happened in the room. The very next day I pondered deeply over his open-hearted confession.

I felt a sincere, remorseful cry from within. I groaned loudly as I could. I looked down and covered my face in my palms. My eyes squinted and nose crinkled as I let out a voluminous roar of exuding guilt.

I went down on my knees and shouted out, “Lord, I have in fact, hurt so many men. How did I do this? How could I do it? I don’t understand. Please talk to me God!”

Right there I chose to relive the crucifixion in my mind. In that precise moment what didn’t bother me was whether or not I was a

heartbreaker. The grace of my God enabled me to sit up. Instantly I received perspective about what I needed to make a priority. By the way, this was not the first time I was doing a 'Trial surrender'.

Like a hard hit on my back, I understood that my disappointments end where divine promises begin. What really mattered now was that I was placidly oblivious of what I left behind. It was clear not one of the charming men I met made me believe that we could take the next step. I was woke enough to realise that I can think for myself and step into a direction that served me only. I did not want anything exotic or anyone special. I was pretty much done falling in love. I was ready to wash my face, tie up my shoe laces and walk free.

Fast forward a couple years, I get called from an unknown number. It was midnight. The night was lunar and drop dead quiet. I woke up surprised. As I rubbed my eyelids to stare

at the mobile screen, I put on my slippers with crinkled brows. Trying to trace the person behind that anonymous call, I answer the phone. It was the devil himself telling me he was in the same city. He spoke with a suddenly meek tone. He said he wanted to come see me. I consented. So we planned to meet at the movies.

On the set date, I saw him standing across the road. He was wearing a cap, standing cross-armed and waiting for me impatiently. I was super excited to see him too. I quickly noticed him standing with a bulkier body, chest out and shoulders back.

The way in which he gazed at me this time was a bit too ferocious. Immediately I sensed there was something suspicious about the way he invited me. As I abruptly crossed the road, I waved at him and sat inside the cab he brought along. I recalled him looking at me with those wanderlust eyes again. He kept giving me frozen stares. Something didn't feel

right. I began to question his intentions this time.

We reached the movie theatre on time and were both starving. I don't remember what I ordered that day. He certainly ordered a fresh hotdog for himself. In the crowded food court, he looked evermore seriously at me. He wanted me to sit next to him and share his meal with him. I reasserted that I was comfortable being seated all by myself. After the meal was over we headed straight into the movie hall.

I let him clutch my hands throughout the first twenty minutes of the movie. Then his fingers reached out for my neck. As I kept wondering what he was trying to do, his hand slid down under my neck. I resisted and wrestled my hand off of him. Slowly his fingers began to poke my chest. He spread his hand over my shoulder and held me tight and pulled me towards him.

As I kept shoving his hand away, he never stopped. Initially I thought he was trying to hug me. Later I realised that his intention was to touch me, touch me more and touch me incessantly. He even tried pulling my mouth towards his lips to snatch a kiss. But a suppressed anger inside my stomach wanted to protest against his moves. His insatiable hunger for feeling me up never stopped even as I told myself, “I can’t believe that I am getting molested”.

But I chose to be quiet. My voice froze because I felt completely helpless. I was desperately waiting for the movie to finish. Right when the movie got over, the devil stared at the screen peculiarly for five straight minutes. He stood up with a disgruntled chin. After the nasty ninety minutes I rushed out to catch a bus home.

I didn’t utter a single a word to him. I may have tried to talk back or something, but I was interfered by his unequivocal demand for



my undivided attention. His dreamy eyes caught my attention in the exact same way he saw me for the first time. But I was sure that he was not the same sweet man I met years ago.

We spoke briefly before I boarded my ride. I don't exactly remember what he actually said to me. I think he may have said something like he was really looking forward to spending the day with me. I could see his visibly flushed face and throbbing veins jutting out from his neck. He spelled out his discontent with his bare teeth about what he wanted the day to be vs. what actually happened inside the movie hall. At once he demanded aggressively that he wanted me to let him more closely.

Right there I interjected him and asserted in a firm voice, "I'm sorry but your idea of touching me all over does not exactly translate into having a good time together".

I was escorted to the bus depot by him. I

desperately wanted to run away from him. He offered to drop me home but I brazenly denied. Right then he raised his voice and echoed a loud, abrupt shriek from his throat and resounded, "Those were my feelings for you. Don't you make fun of them!"

Knowing full well that he was communicating from his heart balls, I saw it pointless to extend the discussion with him. My hands were folded and rested on my purse as I waited quietly for my ride. Within ten minutes I saw my bus approaching from a short distance. He waved good-bye to me in the gentlest way possible while I boarded the bus. I waved out to him in return trying hard to hold back the flood of tears from being seen.

The bus started moving away from him and my chest sank into its cavity like a hot-air balloon deflating out into the sky.

About two stops away from the station where we bid adieu, I felt mighty relieved for

already going far away from the devil. Like a short film running in my head I rewinded the moments I had with him right from the beginning. As I relived those moments I could feel his hands grabbing me all over my body like a ravenous wolf. I was questioning my sanity for having to agree to meeting him in the first place. Flaming darts of self-imposed guilt spiked through my soft mantle and took me down into a punishing darkness. I was struck down by the deepest shame.

After a while or so, I realised that I allowed myself to walk into a trap again. I stood thinking how I wished it was a pleasantly platonic encounter.

After the movie date with devil I didn't want to run away from him. Somehow I was fixated upon showing him the right path. I really believed that I could bring out the gentleman from the beast inside of him.

I would fantasize myself as a goddess trying

to rescue a savage minion from the sin of lust. What I seriously missed was that he was mortally consumed in the fire of his dick dominance.

Certainly Devil's attempts to reach out to me were predetermined.

The next time we met, he forcibly pressed his mouth over my lips. His impromptu action snapped my vocal chords off from my crying, complaining heart. In some such way, I drew towards a conviction that silent endurance would be my safest bet. So I didn't say anything. I continued to allow him to enslave me for his satanic pleasures.

Another Sunday afternoon he came to see me. In fact he sounded very serious about taking me out.

Suddenly I began to dwell on the times I was holding hands with a certain someone and laughing with his swaying body. I sure wanted

to go, but I also did not want to go out with devil. To forget that I was lonely, I agreed to go on a non verbal date of sorts.

We met at his place after lunch. He was exhilarated enough to show me his luxurious watch collection. Then we watched a movie together in each other's arms. Everything was perfect. I was amazed to think that he was being non-physical. Till I pretended at one point to close my eyes. I was curious to know what he would do if I drifted off to sleep.

I thought maybe he would kiss me gently on my lips. Instead he immediately moved my head from his arms onto the pillow, got out of bed and came around to stand behind me. He began to unbutton his my jeans. He dropped his pants and fell on top of my back.

Something inside of me screamed in horror saying, "Open your mouth and tell him 'Are you mad?' Say it!"

He bounced on me trying very hard to squeeze his phallus inside. My rapid heart couldn't help but panic. His penis was pushing into my butt. But I stayed numb like a statue between his legs . For a while I stopped breathing.

“This time I need to get up or else, he might just rape me”, I instantly reflected.

My inner voice reprimanded me, “Come on, Shout out! Now! No!!! What is he doing? Beat him for god's sake!”

My lips remained sealed. Before it would get too late, I pushed him gently and held his face with total kindness telling him that he must stop. In spite of the warning he insisted that I spread my legs. His huge heavy hands were fondling and pinching my butt cheeks like he was an untamed bull out of control.

Ceaselessly like a maniac he kept mumbling, “It's okay. Let this happen. Come on!”

He was a hefty guy who was ten times heavier than me. But I did not give up. Somehow I kept pushing him back to his bed and explained to him how much I admired him to show me my mistakes in the past.

After much pushing and shuffling him away, he rose up on his feet and turned away with his face looking towards his bedroom wall. He sat himself down and leaned back with his feet up. His eyes were narrow and he was not looking at me at all.

He hastily retorted, “My girlfriend is away. While I don’t have her here I know I have you here with me”.

I immediately replied, “Your girlfriend loves you equally. I’m damn sure she waits on you. You must not compromise your loyalty towards her, even if she happens to live a thousand miles away from you. Don’t you concur?”

At that moment he seemed to take my advice seriously and he began to put on his shirt. He dropped me home and I walked as fast as I could, away from his hunting eyes.

There were two other times when I was still determined to knead my soft ways into him so as to yank his animal attitude. But he never seemed to shy away from his despicable habit.

Again I let him lay on me. This time I was in a position to let go because I was tired of fighting him. Very happily he took out my blouse and he took out his shirt. He threw me on the bed and I pretended like I was a carcass. He fell on me as he started moving up and down on my pelvis. I switched off all instincts to fight him.

I thought maybe this is it. I closed my eyes and fell asleep. Whenever I'd open my eyes, I'd see his staring face as he was jerking off into his underwear. By half an hour, he was done while I remained zipped up.



The last time I saw him was at the movies. The movie I selected was an adult film. Just the way I knew he'd like it. As much as he stared at me with predator eyes, I had no other option but to clutch his hand with all my heart and tell myself, "He is the one for now".

I even fed him some popcorn like a wanting mother feeds her loving child. He had no idea that I was never going to see him again. Indeed that was the last day he was ever going to see me.

In my mind I always knew that he possessed the heart to be a total gentleman.

But now I think I was wasting my time trying to save him from his hot-blooded lust. Many times I found I was stuck between the desire to feel loved and devil's daredevil ways. Yes this was consensual to a large degree. But I am also aware that my sealed heart was being silently bullied. I know that does not sound

good at all. I was trading my tender self with a wild werewolf wanting to ravage me.

I was witness to the transition of an earnest sincere-hearted man to a savage organ sucker.

Somewhere he understood perfectly the kind of expectations I had from him. He acted like he was genuinely interested to see me each time he proposed to meet. Sometimes I tend to think that he plotted a full-scale plan to avenge me for all the 'wrong' I did to him. Maybe he was never going to change. Maybe he was meant to stay this way. I was foolish enough to embark on changing him.

If I had the slightest sentience, I could have said 'No' the very first time he approached me. In fact now I feel that that's the worst thing I may have done to myself by not being crystal-clear with him.

I wouldn't have had to give wings to his wild

whims and fantasies.

I did everything I could to change him. I guess that's never worked with me. I know that I suffered everything that lies far and between a rape. I am still grateful that things never got worse.

Do I regret all that happened? I would say 'Yes' and 'No'.

'Yes' because I allowed him to wreck my whole anatomy.

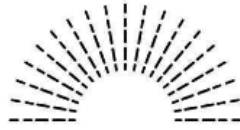
'No' because his assaults taught me how naive I was with my heart on my sleeve for a reprobate rascal.

Somehow I trust God when he says he will give me justice from the devil.



The war has begun and the warrior is ready,  
She is going to proclaim her rights from heaven,  
From mountain to deserts, from valley to valley,  
He has toughened her core and cut down the leaven.





## CHAPTER TEN



**Leo**



**R**unning through my twenties I had the good fortune of meeting somebody who told me that I was falling apart a lot. He was my classmate from High school. As advised by one of my colleagues who knew I tended to burn out easily, she predicted that I would be in search of a man on whom I could gladly relinquish my burdens.

Leo was one such man. I barely spoke with Leo. He was a bit taller than me, but also on the

30 years in the searing sun

heavier side. He was the kind of guy who remained perpetually girded by his circle of four comrades. It was much later that we befriended each other on social media.

He and I agreed it would be nice to meet up. His first conversation with me was plain and formal. He loved taking out his SUV car for long drives from one end of town to the other. His best bright smile would diffuse across his dark, candid eyes. He absolutely adored cracking jokes behind the wheel. I like telling myself that I was his most favoured car mate for a while.

I still reminisce the dark, dramatic night I had with Leo. Amid a town of electric city lights allying with odious traffic, the sky turned black and featureless. My eyelids turned downwards as they felt heavy. My head full of curly, brown hair lay clumsily against the car window as I looked into my phone.

Leo sighed softly after having discussed about

my first breakup. He strongly believed that the generational age gap stood responsible for it. His arms rested on the steering wheel and eyes narrowed down on the road in front.

He was driving with all meticulousness intact. At that minute I hear a ringtone from my cell. It was a text received from my first boyfriend. Days had gone by and I never heard from him or his heavy footsteps. I sat up straight and rubbed my eyes as my fingers unlocked the touch screen.

The message was pretty lengthy. As my eyeballs read word to word from left to right, I suddenly stopped. Leo politely encouraged me to read the text aloud. I had not finished reading it yet when I took to his command and started reading out from the salutation.

Within minutes of reading through, I drooped down my head. Leo at once noticed me going close to tears. I took short intakes of cramped car air between each time I cried.

Very quickly, he found a desolate spot and stopped the car promptly. I spoke in gut-wrenching sobs that tore through my chest about how I felt responsible for losing him. Leo looked at me generously and slipped his plump fingers into my hair at the back of my head. He wiped my cheeks every few seconds as I lay my head on his chest. Leo held me in his huge arms till such time I was able to stop weeping. I sank into his admirably rich and soft heart. He offered to console me by patting my back.

Then he held my little face and said with a fond look quietly, "It is going to be alright love!"

Leo was the only man in twenty years to see my inexplicable cries. My tears stopped running. His face glowed with resplendence like a christmas candle lit up after centuries of darkness. After a moment's consolation, he dropped me home.



As I stepped out of the car, his keen black eyes looked downwards as he bent his head.

He inquired enthusiastically, “So, I just wanted to ask you. Would you like to have me by your side forever starting from this minute?”

At this serious question, my mouth was left open and my hands rested on my waist. I dragged my feet as I walked towards my building. I wanted to be honest but I also didn’t want to say anything that would make him go away that night and leave me alone in my wretchedness.

I returned gently, “Yes, Okay”.

Leo’s cheeks flushed. His eyes were not making contact with anything except his fingers that twiddled with each other as his big head tilted downwards with a shy grin.

But I quickly said with a sense of guilt, “I will

need to think about this. But I do like you”.

He probably heard me. Probably not. I am not entirely sure. Leo was rather absorbed in thoughts about having me.

He said with a graceful simplicity, “Yeah Okay, Take your time. I will be there for you here you know”.

I smiled at his few but emphatic words. He smiled back at me. This time he beamed like he was solar powered by a hundred suns. He gently waved his hand at me and drove away.

As the golden rainless august passed by, Leo would often ask me the same question. About being with him. Every time I was honest enough to tell him that I saw him only as a friend, and that my heart did not see anything more in him. He went on as far as specifying that he would be willing to shed a few kilos of body weight in order for me to marry him willingly.

Knowing full well that I was unskilled at saying 'No', I somehow fearlessly demonstrated my objection. My nod of sharp disapproval did grieve him but I knew what I was saying.

His intrepidly frank confessions were endearing to the ear. The penetrating power of his unselfish, unconditional love defeated my shrewdest shield of answers I ever prepared.

Leo loved making a good impression and taking the lead. There was a hunch that whispered to me that he was not destined either to be my soul mate. However he wouldn't take 'No' for an answer.

Nonetheless he never gave up asking my hand in marriage. At every occasion, I assumed that he was attracted to my simplicity more than the way I usually appealed to the lot of men I had been with. Yet I was horribly mistaken about his honesty of marrying me. He was not

posturing a random question.

There was this one time when we drove out to the beach. He was dying to know if I truly wanted to take our relationship to the next level. On a Saturday evening he drove us down to the scalloped southern shore. It was sun-warmed but also very muddy. I remember he was sharing a little wisdom with me about loving a man without having to compromise.

Leo said flawlessly, “By now, I know you a lot more than when we first met. I can tell you this that you always take the burden of your partner without telling them that you have problems too”.

I replied in a distorted voice, “No. I find that quite hard for me to digest. I believe that loving someone comes with no boundaries. Either I give in my all or I give nothing”.

Leo quickly got back to me on that by saying, “Yes I think I know why you’re saying these

things. You think you are *Mother Teresa*. Stop being a saint. Trust me, life will treat you better than you have always known’.

I felt a lump in my throat as I opened my mouth to justify myself by asserting, “You know nothing about being in love. You don’t exactly know how much I’ve given, how long I’ve served everyone around me and you certainly don’t know what happens when you have to say good-bye to the man you love very much”.

In that snap moment, Leo drew near me before I could break out into tears again.

He empathised with me by saying, “Hey, come here!”

He put my long, fine-boned hands around his neck and held my waist clinging to my full frontal body. His soft, capable hands shoved my head into his shoulders. He hid me there and cajoled my hair. He swung me from side

to side like a little child. The drowsy effusive warmth of his assuredly ample and plump chest made it easier for me to cry on for a longer time.

In a few minutes I was feeling very relaxed. My tears had stopped streaming.

I felt his hands reaching right around my waist. His grip was stronger this time, much more firm and very unbreakable. Like he never felt like parting with me in that moment. His body completely received me into his majestic, inner compose. His chin was over my shoulder and his hands caroused my straight back swinging up and down in gentle strokes. Not even the slightest wind could creep in through our holes and pockets.

Right there, he whispered into my ears, “My beautiful queen, I’m crazy about you. I love you very very very much!”

I had a nudge about something like this

happening between Leo and me. The eventful moment came to pass as I looked out across his shoulders towards the sea. I got distracted on seeing a half-clad fisherman who was walking from afar and who watched us intently as we were engaged in each other's stolid embrace. His figure was lanky but his quick, light footed gait pointed towards the extraordinary strength of his limbs and his daily struggles.

He laid eyes on us fixedly as though we would, at any moment, rip off our clothes. Then I said to myself perhaps he was a random villager walking through the waterfront to get to another place.

Within the forthcoming minute, I intercepted an energetic motion so close between our congested bodies that Leo was anxious to fill in. He was passionately stuck to me like a powerful magnet. I was also subliminally countering his silent, groaning loving tenderness through his manly, mushy full

chest hugging up my rounded bust. I felt his sharp, canine teeth nipping into the still soft and translucent skin on the left side of my neck. His moist open tongue began to lick and bite my neck together.

My back froze instantly. His fiery, intense love bites transmuted into a low-lying, frenzied stamina of unrestrained, incompressible upsurge through my waist down to the thighs. His enormous, swollen frontal shaft fastened itself to my clitoral centre. The slightest touch was enough of a catalyst for something more deadly. In a few seconds a sharp, deep-seated yell was released from my vacuously open mouth as my eyes were tightly shut. Although my trembling thighs urged me to cave into his manly gusto, the inner me beckoned me to stop Leo. I pushed him back.

He found my sudden move a disruption to his flow of gravitational radiation towards me. He probed in full inquisitiveness about the crude



cut off I caused to our powerful intimacy.

I offered an explanation to go, “Leo, your body is doing things to me. Before mine starts asking for more, I want us to go away from here and never come back here again”.

Leo listened calmly. He looked at me with the most mellowest of eyes and blubbered, “But I know you want it so badly. Alright. As long as you’re comfortable, I’ll make sure you feel so”.

We began to drive back downtown. I knew I didn’t want this to happen. I remember I wasn’t even looking at him. My eyes were fastened to the road to see how quickly he would reach us back home.

The first question Leo asked me when he looked towards me in the car and continued with the same passion, “I know you want more, don’t you?”

To which I voiced gruffly, “Yes, you must be

dying I'm sure!"

Leo lay his liquid dark eyes at me intently and entreated yet again, "Are you sure you don't want me to...?"

It seemed to me like he wanted to hear a 'Yes'. I was certain to not give into the hour of temptation. But as fate would have it, time and time again, at that very moment, Leo pointed out to the hills on top. He politely beseeched me to consider going to the top at a spot where nobody would be there. More than knowing what my answer was, I saw Leo's eyes that wanted to devour the fiery moment we conjured through each other's minds and hands. Finally I agreed for his sake.

Leo put all his manly push into the fourth gear to speed to drive uphill. When we arrived at the top, I got off the car. I looked at the horizon beyond the blue radiant sea and the lofty infinite sky. The sound of the ocean

waves breaking against the shore along with the fresh east wind tickling my skin. My wavy, black hair was swaying and flying from every side on my face. Leo walked up to me and stood up close to my face.

His eyes volunteered. My eyelashes stayed low. We got back inside the car to the backseat. I watched the sea, the sky, the mountains, the dancing trees and the listless wind. They were ready for us to mate with each other and so was he.

I sat up on Leo's rather well-fleshed thighs. His hands reach out to my back as they began to unfasten my bra. I began to seesaw back and forth as his instantly sharp teeth chewed up my sweaty lower lip. He motioned to lie down from head to toe. My shivering waist submitted to his instructions. Leo comfortably rested over me like the golden lion of the jungle sacks out on his thick and soft bed. His broad bestial chest folded into my hardened nipples.

Every organ locked into mine, mouth to neck, hand to hair and toe to toe. Within seconds our vestments were breathing in liquid, hot sweat. With each inch of flesh closing in between his legs and mine, Leo released a hoarse purr in my left ear. His limbs and hands emitted a fiery red, feverish flood of fluid flame that signalled a low, deep-seated spout below my navel to give steam. An incautious, unstable ebb of dense, hot steam rose up from my slimy vulva lips and played with the centrum of his vital manhood. His sweaty lips licked my sensitive ears and my sharp, curved nails burrowed into his humongous back. My teeth bit into the ravenous appetite proceeding from my deeper caves.

Right then, before Leo's volcanic, vigorous vitality could shovel fully into the dark, cavernous tunnel of my melting metropolis, he elevated his chest from my top leaving me moist and mumbling for more.

In a moment's throw, he noticed a small crowd approaching. He quickly alerted me to get up. Soon we found out that the crowd was headed in our direction. While I got outside standing with my back against his car, he held my tiny palms in his padded hands and rested his forehead against mine. Leo's little twinkling eyes kind of purred at me again.

I looked back into his eyes which were lowered at my very gaze. He stood looking at my hands while playing with my fingers with utmost care.

I pleaded, "Hey, How are you doing now?"

He answered with his bent head and a pleasant, quiet voice, "That was perfect. Your lips are so soft. I could kiss them all day. I think I might be falling in love with you even more".

He spent a few more minutes toying with my fingers around his chubby, soft phalanges.

For a brief moment it felt like a beautiful dream playing out itself by the tranquil sea and the quiet hills. Right in front of me stood Leo, whose shy eyes had finally discovered the queen of his heart.

The high summer winds and the open, blue sky welcomed his silent, deep breaths of a fresh mindfulness for my presence in his huge heart. I was his to taste and his to caress. His thoughts sounded like I belonged to him. I was his to protect, his to take pleasure in, his to give moaning pain, his to bite off. I was his to forget, his to own, his to hold tightly, his to love, and never let go.

Leo's eyes swore an unspoken oath to marry me, right there. His lips spread out to a charming smile under his visibly smitten face. He wanted to speak no more. Instead he preferred to trail his fingernails around my empty, soft hands. The gusty winds swept through my hair. With every touch he felt my kindled spirit. I stood and read through his

mind of what he might have felt like for me. If Leo had a heart that spoke, his words would be something on these lines:

“You put your hands on either side of my face, and the room falls away. I have never gotten so lost in a kiss before. And then, the space between us explodes. My heart keeps missing beats and my hands cannot bring you close enough to me. I taste you and realize I have been starving. I have loved before, but it didn’t feel like this. I have kissed before, but it didn’t burn me alive. All I know is that kiss, and how soft your skin is when it brushes against mine, and that even if I did not know it until now, I think it was you I have been waiting for forever”.

It was time to say good bye to that afternoon as the warm coastal sun was setting beneath the horizon. We travelled back home. Leo dropped me to my place. The next morning I woke up and observed a few dark purple marks on my neck. And I must say, they

looked like a dark melanin phenomena that scarred the appearance of my otherwise, unblemished neck. I remember my sister asking me about the marks deposited right below my chin.

In a frantic effort to tuck away the signs of what really happened, I tried to explain in the most logical way, “Something must have bitten me I’m sure.”

The justification offered to her query didn’t seem to convince the young girl. She tilted her head to the right and narrowed her sceptical eyes at me. In that instant she creased her brow and meditated, “Really sister? I don’t quite agree with what you’re saying”.

Then she tilted her head to the left and posed, “Are you sure you didn’t scratch your neck like a raccoon while sleeping?”

Then she suggested with a sigh of irritation,



“No, no, most certainly no. It looks more like a sort of fungal growth on your neck. I don’t think you see this very seriously. But you must visit the doctor before the growth festers into something ghastly and gangrenous”.

Leo called me the very next morning when I happened to casually make a mention of the marks on my neck. Leo was brimming with pride and prejudice over the fact that they were known as ‘Love bites’ and I didn’t know about it until then. He went on to rejoice over the achievement of bestowing those dark love bites to me which always brought a good, gigantic smile on his face and broadened his puffy chest to a higher ascension of victory.

Our conversations typically revolved around his new projects and friends. He adored himself more than anyone else. He had endless desires to bury a mark in the big world of men. More often than not, there was something in his inflections and sensibilities

that strongly made me feel more subject to him than anyone else in the past.

His sense of apprehension was a lot more on the side of control and complete custody over anything he wished to possess. Quite honestly, I felt very prudent around him than anymore myself. I was also sure, somehow, that if we were to marry he would never be able to endorse my liberties I would naturally prefer in marriage.

But the lion never stopped loving me. He wore his heart on his sleeve and laid it gladly at my feet. His sweet smile and sweeter words were able to brew a pure aqueous vapour of tender, petal-like love that planted its coral lips on my healthful cheeks.

He was certainly not *Hercules*, but his broad smiles reflected the inner voice of his heroic and handsome heart. It was truly breathtaking to find out how much Leo was ready to recoil to return to seek me for as many more times as possible.

On a timid and gloomy night, Leo was ripe and ready with his proposal. I hated to wait on these moments since they brought with them, a large deal of discomfort and drudgery to the breath-catching moments of reality.

Making the effort to sound reassuring, Leo steps up and quotes over the phone, “Hear me Darling, and I’ll never come back unless you want me by your side. I want to be the man for you. I will always promise to love you and spoil us, day after week after year. With your ever sweet eyes and flawless fingers, I will be able to see through every stone, pebble and rock that life chooses to throw our way. Tell me love, do you feel your heartbeat moving with mine from this moment on?”

The fewest and plainest words from his proposal dismantled any explicit exoneration I had to offer in my defence.

I lowered my eyes and answered in a dim voice, “I know you Leo. I know you want to

marry me. But I can't".

He was quick to clarify, "Which means you do love me and would have no problems in becoming mine. But there is something else. I think I might know it".

I replied with my eyes more open, "No, really no, I couldn't tell you. It wouldn't feel right to me. You might get hurt".

Leo said with an increased pitch in his voice, "No! It won't hurt me".

I said with my tilted head and pressed lips, "Don't make me say it. I don't want to say it. I can't say it".

Leo insisted with a sense of determination to find out why I wouldn't say yes, "Tell me, is it because I am not good to look at?"

I held my breath as he spelled out the truth and replied, "No Leo. It's not that".

Leo suggested with firm persistence, “Is it because I am a little on the heavy side?”

I verified with quickened breathing, “Yes....”

Leo reassured with a note of relief, “I can drop a few kilos for you. That’s no problem. I promise you my love! I am ready to do anything to get you”.

My nostrils flared and brows frowned to his immediate judgment of the situation. He waited impatiently for me to say something.

As I swallowed my throat, a wave of conviction like a brutally white light filled into my lungs. My heart was rescued from that violent storm of emotions and managed to breathe again.

I asserted with a stern simplicity, “Leo! No. I just can’t”.

Leo began to appeal indulgently, “No! No! I

can't lose you. I just can't afford to let you go. Don't do this to me".

I concluded with simple directness, "I have to. It's the only way you'll make it away from me".

That was the last time I imagined seeing my arm extending out to his face and holding his chin up towards me.

The Lion knew I had given my heart to my summer love. Believe me when I say this, he did try stopping me from going back to a position of begging for babyish devotedness from a man who was going to bring in a dark dimension to my life. However I chose to ignore the need to oblige to his warnings.

Just like he forewarned me, I lost my heart, my everything including some grand.

About a year later, Leo and I saw each other again. He would barely take his eyes off the

road while he continued imagining baby pink hearts streaming from me to him.

When I was ready to get off his car, my thoughtful forehead gently stared at his mute cold lips with a last profound hope and anxiously confident expectation of an exuberant embrace. Anyhow, Leo lifted his chin and flared his nostrils at my downturned black eyes. Then his averted eyes distended into wide, black circles like the auspicious full moon against the pale skies.

It felt like a serious warning that was well intended to park my hormone-driven demand of hugging at my eternal dump yard of great expectations. They peered through the outer corner of my left eye into my low temples with a quiet, present threat.

His focused eye contact commanded my eyelashes to lower down in submission. My lowered head drifted away with my contracted chest towards the dim pavement outside. My

remorseful fingers pulled the car handle. My feet lifted with them the cardinal weight of guilt as they stepped onto the chided path of correction freshly received from Leo's proud, uncompromising countenance. The path seemed long and grievous back home.

Somehow Leo made me think differently about him. He taught me that there was a separate reality in what I chose to see in men vs. what I was blind to fall into. One might ask how Leo fared after all this. I sincerely don't know. Maybe I will never be able to have an answer to that question in this life.

Perhaps, he was the only man who believed that I was born only to win his ferocious, self-sacrificing heart. I learnt with time that Leo was absolutely not kidding about his proposal for me. He was darn serious. I cannot imagine how much he wished to have me and how much I ended up rejecting his love.

The Lion intrigued my mind, questioned me



less and cheered me all the way to the dwelling place of sugar sweet happiness and the finest most private love. His unembellished words gave extraordinary wings to me to fly and soar above my own past tendencies.

Were *Shakespeare* to be alive, I have a funny feeling that he would have actually melted at my storyline. Since he paired love with tragedy so many times, I think it would have become very necessary to stop him from lamenting at some point.

In retrospect, I will always tell myself that this was yet another fairy tale that never made it to ‘happily ever after’.



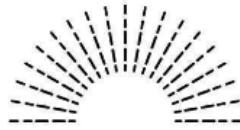
Your cute little words and warm arms,  
Shaped my heart into a Hawaiian hut,

Where the shores of my soul rested on yours,  
And sipped from its rich sweet coconut,

My inner lover says, "Thank you so much!"  
You made me feel beautiful with every little word and  
touch,

I just hope that next time,  
You go looking for love so overrated,  
You look and leap instead of jumping naked.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN



### Romeo



**W**hat is the picture we get when we hear the word ‘Romeo’? Ideally he was a cute, young boy who was obsessively in love with his juliet, or somebody who loves being a romance absolutist. I had the privilege of knowing one such lunatic.

Back then I was a young woman in my mid 20’s. The ‘pins and needles’ of struggling to make my own path made me long for someone to be there to help me, to put their hands on

my shoulders and tell me, “You know what? It’s Okay. I am here for you”.

Back in time when my granny was rushed to the hospital, I was busy running around to watch over her. Father and Mother were almost five hundred miles away from us. She was brought in right after suffering a mild concussion.

I remember I was strolling up and down the dull, tiled floor of the general ward. My sister and I were looking anxiously at her hollow, dead limbs and frail body being put into a bed by a team of nurses. She wailed painfully as her legs were put on the bedding under the pale, white blanket. That’s when Romeo came down to see how we were doing.

In a calm, confident voice he called me and asked, “Where are you right now?”

With a frowned forehead and feeble tone, I told him it was an emergency. Without any

restraint I uttered that I was at the hospital to stay with my grandmother.

He promptly answered, “Okay. Tell me exactly where you are and I will come by”.

When I heard him say that, I felt like a prayer got answered. Perhaps an angel was coming down to protect us.

I double-checked with him whether he was okay about visiting a random colleague whose grandma was in the emergency ward. But he did convince me that he was more than okay to stick around.

The doctor was quick while giving out instructions. Grandma was put on a ventilator and shifted to the ICU. Right before that, he walked in unfeigned towards me.

He stood by me and made sure if I was alright. Romeo’s presence brought down the thumping of my heart. Trust me when I say this, I felt

ten times better when I replied, “Thank you for being here! You’re too kind for a colleague”.

Throughout the hospitalisation, he stayed put with us. He did not worry about going back home. Sister also noticed the absolute calm he radiated around us. She did thank him resplendently. After about three hours, we saw grandmother through the small panoramic glass pane of the ICU door. We were not allowed inside. She was lying on her hospital bed, with her oxygen mask and drip.

It felt as though the death goddess had descended upon our family. As if the great old mother whale of our ancient family tree was withered down to the last stages of her humble life. We watched our tremendously old and wrinkled grandmother lying down as if defeated by her own dying body. It felt like the end of the world for me.

One could see her sound asleep wheezing through the mask under laboured breathing. She couldn't move or speak. Her heavily veined eyelids chose to rest in repose. After a long arduous waiting time of four hours at the hospital, Romeo dropped us home. He rode his bike all the way back and made sure we reached home. Safe and sound. We were told to visit her every evening for the next four days. With noble hearts and tear-filled eyes we gently interjected to him, "Thank you dear friend".

The next day after I got finished with my shift, I rushed home. He picked us up from our place and took us to the hospital. We were permitted to enter into the ICU this time as luck would have it. So we took off our shoes right outside the door. Scurrying in as soon as we could, sister and I gathered around her bed.

One could correctly point out she was having a hard time with the mask on. My sister broke

down in tears to see our grandmother lying on the bed, so mute and bloodless. Right then, the enormous feeling of an everlasting inseparableness between us and her pounded over my chest and throat. Like the hour of judgement arrives at church bells ringing, her white anxious face seemed to say that her final hour had come.

In a low, feeble voice I heard her mumble, “Thank you for all you’ve done for me, my child! I think my time is here. It has come...”

I swallowed my throat constantly to keep myself from breaking down. Sister sobbed uncontrollably at Grandmother. She looked at me in tears and I didn’t know what to say next.

She continued in a broken voice, “Both of you are my dearest grandchildren. You have gone through an awful lot because of me...”

Right then, we begged her not to give up so



fast. Turning her head from side to front, Grandma looked at me with wistful eyes. Then she utters, “Thank you daughter for watching over me like my own begotten son”.

Beads of large, syrupy tears ran down my eyes. My tongue was tied up to the ceiling. I thought we might lose her that night. Right next to me stood Romeo. Then I introduced Romeo to grandma. She saw him and smiled so brightly like never before.

She spoke with graceful simplicity, “Dearest Son, I know you’re a stranger. I can never repay you for what you’ve done for me and my granddaughters. Your name means ‘bright as the sun’! The Golden, glad sun that saves the troubled from the severities of suffering. May God bless you and your future! Thanks a million for what you’ve done dearest”.

On hearing these sentences, Romeo began to smile back at grandma. Granny continued talking, “God will definitely bless you for

being here today. May he prosper you”.

Truly he did play the part of the glorious angel who saved me that day.

Back then, Romeo was going through a rough patch in his love life. I, on the other hand was dealing with my own bucket of bachelorette loneliness. This lugubrious feeling of lonesomeness brought us together into a quiet but mutual cocoon of empathy. We were not doing anything important, nothing special or out of the ordinary. There was absolutely no need to say anything to each other. Minute moments with Romeo blossomed like lovely red tulips. Tulips are sweet to see and we would be very glad to accompany each other.

Romeo and I worked for an IT company. He was among many other trainees in my batch. The first time I saw his face, his brown skin disgusted me. His face repulsed me so much that I never even said ‘Hello’ to him. My proud mantle also took a beating. Like the

shards of glass fall from a broken window pane, that's precisely when the warm, yellow sun rays of his face beamed into the dark, unscrupulous heart of my puffed up inner self. That was the last time I said anything like that about him.

We would go to the beach every day. I would sit in the back of his bike. He would ride us on the road to unknown, far away vicinities. We scarcely talked. Each one of us knew we breathed silence. We chose to stay quiet while driving through the hills and oceans. We gave each other broad smiles when our eyes drooped. We shook each other up by the shoulder comfortingly saying, "Hey! It will be alright. Trust me".

He would pick me up every day from outside office and drop me home. With a million dollar smile on his sweet desperate face, he waited outside after six in the evening. As soon as he saw me and I saw him, we would grin at each other.

We would say something funny to swing our breakup blues away. Time was like spending a hobby with him. We laughed whenever we wanted, cried whenever we needed and comforted each other whenever we had to. He helped me come out of my drugged depression. I often gave ear to the stories of his harrowed heart. We knew we cared for one another's tragedies. We could not hold back because honestly, we were not sure what holding back stood for.

He was there for me any time of the day or night. Like a pair of colourful parrots fluttering above the canopy of tropical trees, we gave each other more and more reasons to fly and sing to our imprudent veins.

For the most part I am reminded of my big, broad smiles to Romeo. When he would look at me he would avoid all eye contact, bend his head and become red like a cherry tomato.

He once dropped me home and looked straight into my eyes and said softly, “Your eyes look so angelic. I’ve never seen such dark eyes with so much light in them”.

My eyes recognised the way he smiled at me and my mind concluded immediately that Romeo finally found his *Juliet*. I had grown tired of finding love. I knew I couldn’t, even if I wanted to love him back. Even if it meant to blink at him lovingly for a microsecond. It was going to be another tree planted in soil that would never bear fruit.

Without giving the thought another thought, the celestial being in me commanded the floodgates of love to remain sealed. He was unable to sit still on his bike. He was waiting for me to say something. A ‘Yes’ or a ‘Let me think about it’ or something significant to him.

I looked straight back at him and appealed, “Do me a favour to please not fall in love with

me. I like you... as a friend. Nothing more. Nothing less”.

He looked at me with upturned eyes and a broad mouthed smile in wistfulness. After hearing me out he pleaded, “Please...Please... don't say no! I can't afford dying again. I just can't. Please! Please just say yes. I promise I will give you all my love from within my heart. Trust me, I am ready to do anything for you”.

My affirmative heart stood still like a steady stallion who had already decided to tread along the road and not wander away into the wayside.

I stared into his eyes and smiled and stressed further, “I am really sorry. I don't want you to do this. In fact, I myself don't want to do this right now. You are a lovely friend. I don't want to lose you too. Would you please stop?”

His eyes slowly were losing the luminescence

of delight. His face drooped downwards. He seemed to nod, very slightly, his head from left to right. He folded his hands against his enormous chest. He seemed to refuse what I just said to him. It was a resounding rebuke.

Noticing his droopy body and arms wrapped around him with a bowed head, I thought it best to tell him to leave instead of staying on with me to save his heart from getting crushed again.

Then I said with a gentle remonstrance, “If you really want, this could be the last time we see each other. I sincerely do not want to let you down anymore than I already have. I want you to be as happy as you’ve always been”.

His eyes began to well up as they darted at my face. His wide chest held a breath and became taut. His muscular arms stretched towards me. In an increased pitch of voice while swallowing his throat he insisted, “No!”

After a moment's reflection, then I offered, "Perhaps we could remain good friends".

To which he quickly replied, "Okay, I think I can live with that".

I wanted to make sure he heard me correctly and I entreated, "Are you sure?"

He nodded his head and said wilfully, "Yes I am sure".

A random stranger could tell from his face that he was not okay with our little agreement. He wanted me sworn into his arms and wanted nothing less. Instead he stood still with his head bowed down. He seemingly agreed to my terms and conditions. With a contorted face looking downward, he kick-started his bike and sped away. He left without saying a single word. I had never seen Romeo so ruined before.

When he was gone and the stars were still being put out in the night sky, I looked into



his direction and whispered to myself, “Maybe one day we’ll meet again when you will be my only Romeo and I will be your only Juliet”.

Romeo was a faithful friend for keeps. He was there for any help I needed. He helped me get my cancelled driver’s license money back. Like in a matter of a single day, the notorious office clerk who was avoiding me for two whole years doled out the cash he owed us.

I spent swell days with Romeo when he sped up his bike during a cloudburst all the while getting soaked, shouting and whooping on the way and we just laughed and laughed. He even invited me out with a couple of his friends to a waterfall. Sincerely, everyone on the trip thought I was his cute, new girlfriend. Very gladly he let me pour cold drops of water on his head. But the sweet Romeo whom I knew, openly clarified to his friends that it was not so. We played together in the waterfall.

After an hour’s time, we sat down on a huge

rock. I found Romeo shivering and quivering from head to toe. All of a sudden he began to act out as if he was sitting inside an ice cold lake jittering and chattering like *Tom* from the cartoons. In the cartoon Tom would shudder in the snowy cold outside the house while *Jerry* giggled and watched Tom with squinted eyes. Jerry's right hand would be in the air and the other on his stomach as he opened his mouth and burst out laughing. It became clear to me that Romeo was doing a 'pretend shiver'. I would become Jerry and laugh away. He watched me chuckle and start shuddering all over again.

On our way back home, we swooped along the road from left to right singing lilting whimsical tunes. With every bend and curve on the road, we rode up way faster than the others. We were singing, howling and enjoying every second before the sun set.

We kept seeing each other until the final day came when I had to leave town forever. There

was a moment of still silence between us. We were talking about all the great times we had. We looked into each other's eyes one last time and waved our hands in hopes of meeting again sooner.

In my late twenties, mother had created a ruckus out of my ordinary life much like a never ending nightmare because I said 'No' to a groom she chose for me. That particular evening was deadly. It cast a spell on a looming debate on 'what daughters do not get about mothers and vice-versa' that would break out between us. This was the moment when all the stars aligned to witness our fierce debate.

Walking round the room with a flushed face, she finally stared at me and demanded, "Is this a game to you? Why don't you marry a decent man already?"

Standing with a stone face and my mouth wide open, I quickly defended, "No Mother. I know

perfectly well it's not a game”.

Slowly I looked up and uttered with curled lips, “It doesn't do any good to me either when you're up all night looking for grooms. I don't like any of them anyway”.

She marched up and down with a lifted chin and sneered at me saying, “Oh really! You should thank me for selecting the right guys for you. Why don't you open that arrogant mouth of yours and tell me what was wrong with this fine man I got you?”

She mentioned his name at which I crinkled my nose because the chap showed me a picture of his dead girlfriend a day or two before. Knowing very well that this was a secret kept from the world, I pushed my chest out and grinned, “He's a liar, all right. He carries his dead girlfriend's picture in his wallet. Did you ever know that?”

She listened and stated offhandedly, “Yes! Of

course. What else would you expect? Poor guy! I feel so sorry for him. He's just like me. We scorpions are deeply passionate for the ones we love and never forget them. We want relationships to last, but when that can't happen we never forget their darling faces".

Unable to move at her response, I said reflectively, "Mother! You just don't get it, do you? I hate people who keep secrets from me. It's only when I said 'No' to him that he told me about his dead girlfriend. He even showed a small photograph of both of them standing together grinning with their teeth wide open. Besides from the way he spoke of her, it seems to me that he never got over her".

She kept listening in but didn't utter a word.

I continued steadfastly, "How do you think that made me feel? Can you imagine how embarrassed I would be if I was to discover the photo after I'd marry him? This is exactly what I am talking

about, playing safe till he gets caught kills many marriages. Besides, we don't even know how much more he's hiding from me. I would hate for my partner to be anything but covert".

She simply nodded her head from left to right. Instantly I felt like I was the scapegoat of the family, for not being able to distinguish what I desired from my future husband. I was shocked to see my own mother not wanting to understand my reasons for rejecting him. She went on to spew out unnecessary things that kept pushing me away from her.

Bizarre statements like, "You have a very Neolithic way of understanding men. Better grow up or I'll have to forcefully marry you off to the man of my choice".

Sometimes she would come down at me with passive-aggressive threats such as, "Without your royal highness's permission, we're going to get you wedded to the man I want you to

settle down with”.

I felt marooned as I sat up and hugged myself to squeeze out the poison given by her in ridiculous unawareness. Something inside me answered that I was going to rise out of this precarious situation. I sat up with my palms to the forehead covering my eyes with one hand. I turned away from everyone and lay down on my purple striped mattress with my body all curled up.

As the night rang in, everybody except me fell asleep. My mind started to go over the unbelievable things that mother spit out. Each statement passed from east to west inside my skull. Her words were crippling my brain like unreleased ghosts from the bottomless pit. This very sensation eroded my peace and I stayed in a state of trigger throughout the next day.

Morning came and mother and I were not seeing eye to eye. Sister didn't say much

either. She may have snapped at me briefly. Probably she was going through a rough day herself.

To take a break from mother's accusations and nonsensical arguments we conjured, I needed to get away from home. The idea of a holiday instantly made the wrinkles from my forehead disappear. Initially I thought of going out by myself. But the thought of going all alone felt a bit daunting. I thought of calling Romeo to a nearby beach for the weekend. He agreed to come along immediately. He was super excited to see me. I couldn't wait myself.

My unused stipend from the previous month allowed me to make reservations. Romeo also confirmed to me the best time he would be available to visit. We set the date of journey. November was the best time to travel outdoors.

But the only stumbling block was - "Will my



parents allow me to go on a solo trip?”

After approaching Mother about the trip she clearly refused and demanded me to cancel my trip. I had to do something.

In my small, dingy office was a colleague I knew from recent times. She was short, wheatish and very talkative. Her front teeth would jut out like that of an adorable, little squirrel. Her black, lucid eyes rolled from the ceiling to the floor from the time she entered and left office. They almost scanned all of us to perhaps discover something forbidden or secret about the office. Since she was a master at using words, I knew she was the right person for the job. We clicked immediately and shortly became friends. I explained to her about the reasons for me to leave city for a while. Without any hesitation, she quickly assented to the plan.

The strategy was for her to come home and talk to my parents and ask for their

permission to take me along with her on a trip with her family. Since the first excuse never worked, I was hoping the second chance shouldn't fail. With a fake smile and hunched posture, both of us walked to my place one evening. My mind floated away towards dark thoughts of a possible downfall of my travel plans. But I held on to my friend's confidence as she kept consoling me through our way back home.

Within a span of ten minutes, we reached the front door. The door opened. Father saw my friend and welcomed her in. Mother also smiled at her and invited her to sit down. She spoke to my sister who was giggling because she knew my secret.

My colleague introduced herself and began the 'rehearsed talk'. With equal care I made sure to keep a straight face. She managed to surpass the first challenge of explaining why I should be escorted by her. With great fortitude she convinced my parents to

understand that I will be taken care of by her family. They were able to buy in her excuse because she clearly mentioned that she and her family of six will be travelling together.

It was on this very condition they were able to let me go. I couldn't wait for the conversation to finish. I jumped with thrill from the inside. I knew that I was allowed to go on my holiday with Romeo.

Of course, discretion was advised by my darling sister. In five minutes they were beaming at her and asked her to come home more often. She cordially thanked them for their generosity and said 'good-bye'.

We parted and I thanked her with a big hug for the favour. Exactly after a month, as planned, she came to my place to take me with. I sat ready with my backpack. We booked a cab and I proceeded to the train station. On the way I offered to drop her home. I hugged her in return and she waved

her hand at me. Then she opened her mouth and flashed a broad smile along with those large eyes. I thank her enormously for her unflinching support I got for my weekend getaway.

I boarded my train and reached my destination the next afternoon. I really wanted to be out by myself in a place that didn't know me. But I was greeted by a crowd of rickshaw drivers right outside the train station. Their tailored khaki uniforms and mighty ready tongues compelled me to stand speechlessly with my backpack for quite some time. I waited bravely till each driver had quoted a decent tariff to drop me to my resort. At the lowest bargain offered to me, I took my ride and travelled to my remote three-star resort.

It was already half an hour since I had checked into my room. With pensive footsteps towards the window I was enjoying the view outside the glass shield.

The hot, daytime sun was right above my head. The cloudless blue sky provided for a sanguine background for the green monochrome flora and fauna. Maybe a sun ray or two tried to pierce my pupils with brutally white sunlight. Right there as I watched further down from the fourth floor, I saw the narrow rough tar road that ran from my left to my right. A regular fair-skinned foreigner woman rode past the way on a rented motorbike. Her bohemian multicoloured clothes motivated me to get out that very minute and dive into the fascinating turquoise pool.

The room was single but lavish. Creamy tiled floors with impeccable freshness and a fragrance filled the impressive interiors. The bathroom walls were large format tiles. The vanities were of a dark wood and the counters were a brilliant white quartz. There was no bath but instead a huge walk in shower with a square shower head. Right then, the lights went out in the room.

As I sat waiting in hopeful anticipation, I heard my phone ringing. It was Romeo who helped me track his location. He knew where to find the suite. Right before he could enter in, he called me so that I would stay ready to receive him.

I jumped like a six year old and sprang to my feet to get the door. When it opened, Romeo was standing right before me slack jawed. His smile radiated throughout his rugged, body hugging shirt. With glittering eyes we enfolded each other in our arms and tilted our heads back and yelled with our lungs.

He went in to take a shower after travelling for fifteen long hours himself. Within an hour he walked out in his favourite mustard sweatshirt and a casual pair of cargos. His hair was dripping wet. His face appeared clean shaven and jovial.

The next four days were idyllic. We commuted on a hired bike from the resort to the beach.

When we reached the place, we enjoyed the breathtaking view of the ocean and sat by the elevated platform. He looked at me with all the love in the world as I held his hands and climbed down.

Whether it was a French style dinner, or going to the beach, or laughing together, or swimming in the pool, the anguish I carried from home vanished around him. I would have closed my eyes and fallen asleep the night before our return. But Romeo stayed awake for me. He called out to me once or twice. I narrowed my eyes after I was abruptly woken up. So I sat up and asked him what the matter was.

Maybe he wanted to say something significant. I never forgot to remind him that we were just holidaying as friends. It was hard for me to say that to him because I did not want to trigger any possibility for us to fall into a hormonal situation.

However, his eyes kept telling mine that no

one would ever love me the way he did. They sought permission to want to come close, real close up to my lips. So close that when his face would be an eyelash away from mine, his bare brawny arms would take to my waist and pull me closer to his lips and seal them with the longest, richest and warmest caressment.

Not long ago, I had heard that a woman who smiled and laughed a bit more than usual with a man gave him the idea that she was liked him. My position with him made me realise the same pattern. But I could never endeavour, even in my wildest dreams, to fish for pleasure or even pretend to play the radioactively charming seductress with Romeo. I chose to stay on the path of self-denial of any kind of love I felt for him.

The nature of second chances took over that night. Whenever I saw him, I began to transform from shades of running red passion to pale amber blankness. My soul shifted places within the room with a thousand ideas



of submitting to an exotic act between Romeo and me. Each time he looked at me, I sensed his wild, thumping heart pause for my breath.

Did I know he was also ready? Of course. But I was too afraid to let myself fall into him. I prepared my body to pick itself up and fight back in case the tempting night wouldn't see me coming out with my clothes on.

It was midnight. We shared a queen-size bed. Both of us slept in opposite directions. At about 12:30 pm, he woke me up.

Fearing the worst had come down, I roared at him with the following words, "You just keep acting like everything's fine. Oh, now I get it. You only signed up for the holiday to sleep with me."

Romeo suddenly sat up with his back straight, threw aside the fluffy white quilt and stared at me with eyes wide open.

Then he said with mock astonishment, “You really...you actually think I came down all this way to sleep with you?”

Romeo looked down and away. He huddled back into bed and specified gruffly, “So I realize I have been planting roses along your path which you say are not good enough. What you’ve just said has ruined everything I ever prevented from coming between us. I am going to engrave these words on my chest till eternity to keep reminding me of this sleepless night I endured for your sake on a holiday trip that you so desperately wanted to run away from your miseries. I am out here all alone taking the blame for something you don’t want me to be part of and yet you need me around you. Thanks for ruining everything!”

Clearly what he told me that night was that I was a total wreck and I was also wrecking away his life into pieces. I agreed completely. Very swiftly he slid his head onto the soft,

white pillow away from my face and pretended to fall asleep. My eyes stared at him widely as they saw his quivering lips hide from my sight.

Without wasting another second, I ran towards his bedside and sat next to him. His arms were wrapped around himself and his face was flushed. I spread my fingers over his head and ran through his temples in strokes. He seemed to enjoy the gentleness being sprinkled over his skin.

With a tilted head and pressed lips I conceded, “Hey, I just want you to know that I am very sorry for what I just said. I was mad about something else. I Promise.”

Then I leaned downward to reach out to his cheeks and kissed him like a flower. We slept for six short hours to wake up the next morning to catch the bus on time. We reached the bus station and stopped by for some breakfast. We gorged on steamed rice cakes

and tangy chutney.

As we waited for my ride, I was looking into his eyes like a small child. The sun's rays were reflecting off of his dark pupils and reached my eyes carrying his magical, moist warmth. I was hoping for him to forgive me.

After I boarded my coach, he looked restive and seemed to say something the last time before he would never see me. Before the bus left I saw him and smiled with my best.

His eyes seemed to be watery as they were quietly saying to me, "Love you and only you!"

My eyes widened and stared into his tear-filled eyes with a candid smile and returned likewise, "I will always love you too!"

I waved at him from my seat window and he waved his hands and smiled very gratefully. I knew this was the last time I was going to see Romeo. The bus retreated towards its

destination and every second felt like a planet away from him. I closed my eyes and dropped a tear or two.

Later that year we had a brief altercation that brought an end to our half love relationship. Romeo voiced out his frustration to me by blurting out that I was a heartbreaking machine. That was the last worst thing I heard from him. We never spoke to each other again.

I had moved on from Romeo. The conscious habit of reflecting on anybody I met was gone with him. He was hurting and so was I. Even if I wanted to assess the damages of being around him, loving him silently, and still pretend that not a hair strand of mine would't stand in his presence, even if I did all of that, I knew I wouldn't be alive to tell this story.

After a couple months of meeting my future husband, Romeo travelled six hundred miles

to my city to bury the hatchet between us. I saw the same magical eyes and ever so kind words trying to tell me to forget that he called me a heartbreaking machine.

To make it easier on both of us, I bid him Good-Bye and secretly wished to never to see him again. It was my only way of ending this long, short, sad and happy love story.

My floating gas balloon of high-headedness flattened by this son of a charmer. His awful, gigantic kindness showed me how depthless I was. After I knew him, I began to take a liking to people without being a cruel racist.

I will always admire Romeo's lively, legit heart. He was with me the whole time sending out neon love like smiles that are unforgettable.

All things said, he remained a very true and loyal friend to the end.



Romeo, Romeo,  
As they say,  
Slowly and Steadily,  
He came my way,

Romeo, Romeo,  
You will die,  
If your ignorant love,  
Makes you cry,

Romeo, Romeo,  
That heart you wear,  
Puts me to shame,  
Made me scared,

Romeo, Romeo,  
Go away!  
I have hurt you,  
And I hope you will be okay,

Some day...



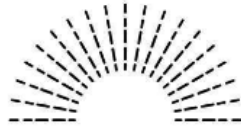
**PART - III**

**I CAN FLOAT**





30 years in the searing sun



## CHAPTER TWELVE



### The Die-Hard Fan



**H**ow much would one be willing to risk to protect themselves? The question is whether or not protection from a persistent person is okay.

Particularly when the near gut sensation one experiences while they are being secretly pursued, or the crippling fear that lurks and sneers the anticipation of a ghoulish phantom, such as that of a stalker or even the paralysing terror meant to scare a person so much so that

our natural body begins to feel like an inescapable trap.

My fan story begins from the time I began to comprehend that jobs were not just money making devices, but also a way of defining what I could be good at. With an aggregate of five hundred employees, I was on my heels all the time, running from one end of the lobby to the other. My hands were full and my manager was on the brink of collapsing from a burnout. A busy workplace undoubtedly creates a busy environment. Parading around the corridors with well polished low-heeled ballerinas and a crisp white and black suit, my pale muscular back rarely found the time to take a breather. I was in charge of the routine administrative assignments in one of the top-of-the-line luxury traveller hotels.

I strutted about to the fullness of my duty every single day. Known to be someone who was lovely to look at, I could catch sight of shrewd, dark eyes glaring at my face for

something as mundane as a simple greeting. But I chose to pass by their blank, wide-eyed stares at a fast pace before their piercing eyes could sting me any more. Besides my desk job, I was usually found drifting around for paperwork and signatures from other departments.

My work team was perpetually hand-tied to their desks whether anybody chose to affirm or not. Our six member unit was perceived to be the best looking work group across the other departments. We smiled, laughed and paused at the same time in front of the camera. We almost looked perfect together. But as soon as the camera went off and the photograph was finally captured, the wide, invisible gap between myself and the team was as palpable as the incessant, dull pain of broken teeth which could never be tended to.

Fellow co-workers who were capable of dragging themselves out of their grinding rosters never hesitated to express their

disappointments to me about my fleeting feet pretending to sound 'busy'. A sprawling bright canteen stood in the middle of the cold-tiled floors to bolster the appetites of beelines of workers.

At the stroke of 12 pm, everyone was allowed to take a break from the daily grind and come down together at the cafe. The regimental cafetaria nourished hungry stomachs with a piping full course of hot curries, steamed rice and various kinds of vegetable entrees. Employees queued up for getting served by stewards who welcomed us with their beaming smiles and selfless cordiality. The monotonous natter-chatter of people with their clinking spoons and forks distracted anyone who was scouting around for an unoccupied table.

One day, I happened to be passing from the kitchen when I noticed two keen, deep-set eyes screening my presence from top to bottom.

A skinny, ordinary commis chef was grinning with his wide, thin-lipped mouth on occasional glances. It appeared as if his unblinking black eyes finally picked up a soft, feminine energy around him. He raised his eyebrow and winked at me without the slightest courtesy to call out from his station.

So I walked over to him with a jutted out chin and lowered eyebrows to confront his awkward invitation. Watching me approach him seemed like the perfect anomaly from his daily cooking routine.

I stood right in front of him as he was busy punching his tiny, clenched fists into a huge pound of dough. The cook grinned and looked upward at me and questioned, “ So, are you new here?”

I narrowed my eyes and denoted, “Yes”.

He threw his head back in laughter and continued, “Oh really,that’s amazing!”

He proceeded with the pounding and introduced himself as an aspiring Head Chef. He went on to mention how pleased he was to watch me everyday. Then he took one last good look at my face and exclaimed, "You're very beautiful, you know that? Never stop giving me such wonderful moments to talk to you. Bye!".

I took the occasion to excuse myself from the distressing weirdness of his presence and marched away.

The first three months of my work were terribly easy to execute. Later on, I realized that my manager wasn't very impressed with my running around. She believed it could save me time and energy by focusing on work at the desk and in doing so, I would spare myself from getting overworked. I knew she had a point in mention. I totally bought into her logic.

But, I really wanted to say, that my impatient

rather hasty legs running around from pillar to post wanted me to escape the roaring silences between me and her team. I found those silences loud and uncomfortable to sit with. She was right though. I may have stressed myself out and added unnecessarily to my workload, but I preferred doing that everyday instead of spending time in a room full of potential strangers with whom I had nothing much to share.

Once during my usual routines, I was trudging along the corridor when I got to see a tall, white clad commis chef standing right in front of the laundry counter. I spotted him and walked straight toward him. With a flushed face and clenched jaw I stopped by and called out his name with the total strength of my soft voice.

The man, in his white clothes seemed to look lost and unassuming. His face was wheatish, still and expressionless.

Nobody would have suspected him to be the



man who sent me a friendship request persistently for three straight days from Valentine's day. In spite of rejecting his friendship request, he was never tired of resending a fresh request in the hopes that one day I would approve.

I raised my voice, rolled my eyes and bawled out, "Happy Valentine's day, huh?"

I stared at his pale face with squinted eyes and flared nostrils. He leaned forward and looked at me steadily with wide eyes and a brimming smile.

I squinted my eyes even more as he looked at me with parted lips slightly. I snorted with my teeth that clenched tightly, "Valentine's Day? I see all your tricks in there".

His face flushed like an Italian apple. He smiled in response and looked downwards with his dreamy eyes at his boots.

I contended openly, “Why me? How could you send me a Valentine’s Day wish card?”

He faltered a little and replied, “Because it was February the fourteenth”.

I queried gruffly with a curled lip, “You didn’t answer my question. WHY ME?”

He crinkled his eyes and nose and said with a protruding smile, “Because you’re my Valentine!”

With rolled back eyes, I smeared my mouth in shock with my palms and with a breath or two, proceeded roughly, “Did I correctly hear that I am your Valentine?”

This time he spoke with a cheery-eyed smile softly, “Yes..”

I sighed in exasperation and cursed him in my mind with pressed lips. Then I turned around and walked away in indignation. I reach my desk and sat myself down.

Back then I had fallen for a team mate. He was oddly tall and smart. I loved that he noticed how shy I was. He made a point of telling me that I should be able to open up and be less inhibited around people.

On a routine afternoon when nobody else was in office, I walked up to him to pass on a folder. As I paced slowly to hand it to him, he asked me to keep it on his desk.

As I was starting to walk away, his left hand extended towards my hand and held me from moving any further. I turned my head towards him but he wasn't looking at me. I started to walk back to him and hugged him with my hands. Then very quietly, I strolled away.

Sometimes we really hated each other. Other times I wanted to know what he thought about me.

A couple days later, right after logging out from

office, I took a left to cross the road and get to my bus stop. I was walking on the broad, concrete pavement that led to my bus station.

Right then, I happened to notice a figure leaning against a wall near a tree. It looked like a man's dark shadow whose face was looking back at me expectantly. I wasn't so sure of who it was. However I kept looking straight and continued walking.

I watched the dark shadow emerge from under the tree walking slowly towards me. He revealed his face to me under the bright gray street light as he came up to me at a foot's distance. I stopped and paused for a moment. It was the 'friendship request guy' I yelled at the other day. After having faced a few awkward moments in the corridor with him, I thought I would never see him again.

My unblinking eyes widened up at his pathetically placid face which was staring back at me for prompt answers. He looked

away to his right and was tapping his feet impatiently.

He pleaded in a soft voice, “Please! Just give me a chance”.

I would have loved to tear down his hideous face with my fingernails. As ready as ready can be, I was provoked to the right degree to yell again at his face, “No means No! Do you understand ? Do not make the mistake of thinking that I like you in any way. To me you are just another regular employee who slogs to get some money. Now move out of my way”.

I stared long enough into his keen, black eyes that were shocked at my rebuke of his unbecoming behaviour. He turned his head towards the right, rolled his eyes back and frowned with his neck lowered to the ground and pulled back his droopy body off the streets. As his huge shadow began to fade away in the distance, I took four deep breaths and walked off.

My head was high up on my shoulders as I went back home that night.

Meanwhile, there was a significant tension growing between me and my team in the coming months. I was becoming incapable to carry out any instruction from her. There were serious one-on-one meetings involving the Director lady herself.

The Director lady was the one whom I thought of as rare, superior and preeminent. She was charming, sympathetic, intelligent and cultivated. She knew how to communicate- an accomplishment, that I think, is rare in women. Her fair countenance would often frown upon my answers coming out from my lowered head and shy tongue.

It usually begun with an unassuming question like, "Is it true that you're in a relationship with

someone in the hotel?”

My manager’s face would frown and her head popped out in earnestness of my confession. I plainly denied the rumor.

Most of the time I sincerely wished to impress the Director. There were times when she really showed her compassion towards me in the most elegant genteel manner. For instance, she would hold my fingers in her delicate hands and look at me with her eyelids wide open and an upturned smile that covered her serene face.

That one simple gesture was extraordinary for me because I was caught scooping my nostrils with my fingers by her very discerning eyes. I do confess that I felt like hiding under my desk each time we had these weird human connections.

Moving onto my immediate manager, she was a fiercely ambitious and methodical woman.

She would keep it real without any filter with everybody around her. But she never resisted in demonstrating her strict standards towards the common code. I always saw her nose dug deep into files and paperwork. She did lose her temper, very quickly and usually without warning. Many workers I noticed including me were exposed to her fiery shock waves at anything that never lined up with her way of things.

At my fourth session with the manager and director, it was concluded that my output to the office was not very profound. An official audit of the department revealed the glitches I made. It was true I would tend to make errors and miss out on lots of work. Throughout the debriefing I was questioned whether or not I was willing to show the team I was capable of contributing better this time. I did promise them. But I was not entirely sure if my running around would help resolve the crisis.



However they thought those interrogations would help, the truth was I never really got the kind of support i expected from them. Most of the meetings wound up in about thirty minutes after a huge discussion about how I actually worked and how I ought to be working. They would often bring up travelling news of me wasting my billable hours with an anonymous worker.

With the already heavy workload, I was getting triggered by their words. I felt like I was strung up amidst echoing voices in my head after every time I silenced my inner rage. One might assume, maybe I should have just told them about my side of the story. Instead I refrained from doing that for fear of something far more worse playing out against me.

Fundamentally I still struggled to find common ground with them. In fact I found it a challenge to socialize with anyone. I swear I gave the best laughs and tried listening and

stuff. Somehow I continued feeling like a nobody.

After months of stressful investigations and teary-eyed bus rides, I was asked to take a week's break from work.

My break for me meant prepping through some bible passages before I went back to office. The day I returned was a Grand hotel celebration which was hosted every year. The annual night was marked with lit up tables and plenty of good food and beverage to gorge on. Every single worker was present. Somewhere in the middle of my dancing and jiving along, I felt somebody's arm pull me abruptly.

It was a violent, almost harsh force that demanded me to turn to the back. All of a sudden, the gala and its festivities paused for a brief moment. About two hundred odd eyes were fixated on me and the man who had pulled me. I now stood facing his drunken

face who looked upset over the fact that I warned him a few days back.

I stared at his shadowy, male figure leaning towards me with shoulders and arms thrust forward. I froze with my mouth wide open and anxious eyes anticipating his next move. His face was sweaty and stoned. His lip corners were downturned. His pupils were dilated enough to ask me about the alleged injustice I had perpetrated upon his honest heart. He moved his huge body towards the side with arms swaying and face looking away from me for a quick composure. After mildly opening his eyes and unclenched jaw, the man regained some form of presence.

My hands hung down helplessly by my side. He then looked back at my trembling face and frowned eyebrows and let out a voice that was filled with broken, hesitating notes,

“WwHhhYyy.....??”

It was me and two hundred other people who did not have the next clue of the situation. He was not going to take 'No' for an answer.

Time literally stopped ticking for two whole minutes. I quickly took three swift steps away from him, and stood behind my female friend. The drunk crook, my friend and myself were at the spot centre of this frozen spectacle. She stood as my shield for that moment with her pale face and hands shell-shocked as all of us.

As we waited for him to retreat from his rude advance, we watched him dragging his droopy body backwards with arms swaying formlessly. He turned away from us and walked away without making a sound. Soon he became invisible.

My friend and I turned away and ran towards the back of the huge hall. We ran as fast as we could to get away from his very eyes that could possibly hunt me down any minute. As

we sat down and leaned at the wall with sunken lungs, I stooped low with my back bent and face in my hands.

She finally spoke up after panting through her floral, viscose blouse, “ This is bonkers! Trust me it will help you if you give in your resignation to your team”.

I sat with my eyes closed and tears rushing out through my curly hair smearing my mascara all over my face. I was faced with the only choice of quitting a job that I so badly wanted to take me through my otherwise colourless life.

She looked at me this time, stretched her tender hands over my shoulder and analysed, “First came the rumours of you having a fling with someone, then came your struggle to get on with your team, then your manager yells at you for the littlest of things, and now this guy is creating a scene for you just because you said ‘No’. How much harder does it have to be

for anyone?”

I sobbed away as she continued, “Listen Sweetie, better leave as early as possible before that crazy moron tries to do something dangerous”.

At this point I didn't want to give this incident a label. I was convinced enough with the extensive 'NON-PERFORMER CUM NOT-SMART-ENOUGH-BUT-ACTUALLY-MORE-OF-A-DULL-MIND' kind of resonance from my team. I had to quit now.

After a long week, when I was doing my usual rounds in the patisserie department, I was met with glaring eyes and feisty hands swinging in double speed. I could pick up a knotted, stiff feeling of red hot boiling anguish around their five-foot bodies. The chefs appeared flush faced with jutting chins in their snow-white coats and aprons.

Since I entered in looking for the head chef,

each and everyone of them chose to answer with clenched teeth. For a moment I found it uncanny. Right after, the heavy footed hasty and passionate exit they made right in front of me seemed so obvious they were offended. Probably because I did not seem to undersand their fellow colleague in the party. I looked down and away as I walked out myself after the vanishing souls marched out toward the back door.

It was well over five days. I wanted to finish up my last working month as fast as I could. I had spoken with my manager and she gave me the get go to exit office. One day as I sulked and chewed on my lunch, I receive the crook's phone call.

In a low, tremulous voice he beckoned to me, "I want to say sorry to you".

I heard out his apology with a frown of outrage on my brow.

He monotonously continued, “I was being a total arse. I shouldn’t have attacked you like that in the middle of two hundred people and created a scene when I was high. Please I beg you! Would you please forgive me?”

I listened patiently and bit my teeth because of the absolute agony I recalled of that fatal night. But his words did reflect the ingenuity of his tone and modesty of his apology. I settled for it and decided to proffer amnesty to his pale face.

On a more dramatic note, I was exhausted. I needed to get away from everyone. My inner voice kept looking for more reasons to dig deeper into a place called the chambers of darkness. These chambers only served those who chose to lay low between negative voices and death. Metaphorically speaking, I was murdered in cold blood because I was labelled ‘UNFIT FOR WORK’ in the eyes of my team who happened to pronounce the verdict.



The elegant Director lady summoned me into her cabin one day to tell me that I was apparently harassing a team mate. Instantly she hinted to me about the man on the team I had a crush on.

She immediately stated with frowned eyebrows and a high pitched voice, “Before you say anything, I want you to know this conduct is not expected of you in the office”.

I sat with my head lowered down and listened as he continued, “Listen to me clearly. When you know that he is not interested in you, why are you still desperately seeking him out?”

To which my face turned pale and purple at the same time. I kept my truth bottled in.

Madam Director gave me one last warning and I exited her cabin to run to the powder room. As I called my female friend from the other end of the lobby, she rushed to see me. I opened my mouth in hiccups and uttered,

“This is what she told me. Can you believe it he complained about me! Like I’m some sort of stalker”.

I broke out into a flood as she tried to stop me from falling down on my knees. She said with a gentle voice, “My goodness! Are you seriously telling me he reported you inspite of the fact just because you texted him yesterday. I don’t understand how could anyone put up with with this mess. What is wrong with that guy? I feel sorry for you dear. I’m so glad you’re quitting. Yes, in fact this is the best thing you are doing right now”.

As I finished wiping my tears she said with the sweetest smile, “Hold on sweetie, you’re going to get out in a few days”.

Very slowly, my own shadow began to feel like a burden to me. My troubled tenure with the western-style high rise hotel ended with ease. I was desperate to make my exit and never come back.

There were times when I reminisced the lazy morning in the office that started with a special-order in- from the chef's kitchen. A Classic English breakfast consisting of Toasted brown bread, grilled sundried tomatoes, pan-fried mushrooms, poached egg, hash browns, fried sausages, beans and fresh cut kiwis and apples.

There was a particular crazy night I recall a lot. The crazy night when I was invited to my manager's place and I got high after drinking up a wee bit of breezer. My manager was giggling hysterically at the way I ran into her in her kitchen while I blabbered out about how well I dressed to the office.

My last day arrived like a sad movie climax.

The Manager called me into her cabin with the rest of the teammates to give me a farewell. A lovely black forest cake was cut and divided between us all. There were small words of shared experiences enunciated by

the ladies. The men chose to stick to the most down-to-earth greeting of all times - "All the best".

Lamentably, I made it out of the hotel. I had three things taught to me. Getting torched and not 'touched' by a soul is more popular. Second, being told by everyone that I was not good enough did not mean I was worthless. Third, I ran after somebody who would not even turn around to watch me leave.

In the end, I compared my work experience to listening to a mixed tape of heavy metal songs and blue-eyed soul. Horrific and harmonious in a single tune.

I came out maimed with a broken leg. I had a bleeding but brave wound to remind me of my team I loved very fondly inspite of everything that happened. My little pink fleshed heart stood quiet with deep cuts ribbed throughout its core.

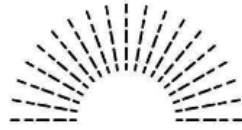
Ironcially the same heart had wished to carry  
me places where I wanted to light up a soul,  
make a forever friend or get a warm touch of  
the famed human experience.

But now it was injured and no longer willing  
to reach out.



Feeling worthless and beaten down,  
Her heart decided to give up,  
Her mind ran out of power,  
And her body grew numb.





## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



### Let's Zumba



**A** year had gone by since I quit my hospitality job. On a fresh note, my die-hard fan was tracking me through every single number I changed. On a regular Monday, I got a phone call from an anonymous number. I picked up the call and uttered the routine monotone ‘Hello’.

He answered from the other end. His singular voice sounded out from amongst the cacophony of dishes clanging in the background. It was

self-evident that he was in the middle of his day shift. He stressed in a taut but loud tone, “It’s me.... remember!!”

My heart pounded very loudly within a second of hearing his fanatic voice. Without any further ado, I ended the call abruptly and blocked his phone number. I sat morosely contemplating how he desperately tried to reach out to me. Right then, very slowly, like grey cloudbursts in the Himalayas, I began to notice menacing thoughts of his brutal attack of the party night that still haunted me. There he was, in many numbers, standing before me in every hill and every valley of my head.

His large, bulging eyeballs pointed to my low and wrinkled forehead. Vast thunderbolts of his bull-like stubbornness and the possibility of getting entangled with his mad, restless insanity freaked out every atom of life within me.

I was indeed frightened to imagine the

aspects of his ominous presence around me. I felt like I was being dismantled into spare parts of a dead machine. I was now looking at his six-foot brutish body correctly motivated to stall me, in the middle of my present unhappy and miserable, malfunctioning life.

“Surreptitiously he might just find out where I live”, I assumed.

The next thing I knew was to get dressed, go downstairs and put on my sneakers. With my right arm over the door handle, I pulled myself out of the house and away I was trudging along on the straight and narrow path to the dance studio. I sprinted to reach the studio on time. I was in charge of leading a zumba session for ten middle-aged women. Hard slaps of fear pasted onto my pounding chest as I set course.

What was I supposed to do if I happened to encounter the die-hard fan outside my house yet again? I was ‘readying’ myself to take in



any punch, word or assault from him. With constant mental numbness about the die-hard fan, I needed to be sure about a way to manoeuvre around him. Although, I must confess that I was equally confident that I would be able to handle myself in a situation with him.

In the aftermath of quitting the hotel, I threw myself into a dark disastrous dungeon of terrorizing self-immolation.

Right when I thought my world had come to an end and my career could never ever be forged again, I decided to walk down the city roads. Those very roads that give grit and determination to millions of aspirants. I was one of them, in a very broken faceless self.

It was like my grief turned into an old, wise woman who wanted to keep me from falling down. She was like an inner sublime voice who knew me and wanted to place her life's two cents on a crippled car wreck like me.

Perhaps she was the one who delivered me from falling into an apocalyptic fight with mum. She blamed me for being a total failure. I was provoked enough to hold a knife in one hand. I was ready to slash my wrists when my father intervened.

Since he was a bit doozy due to his low manic bipolar phase, he said with a low voice, “Don’t fight both of you!”

In her faint but prominent voice, the wise woman kept telling me the profound truths of this road called life, or the road lesser known to most people. The most renown pathway of depressed souls walking down with their necks staring at the road as their faithless feet took them on with the chance of meeting someday, somewhere, somebody called bright-eyed hope.

Hope carries all of our burdens and tells us to sit, and wait under its cool shade and take some rest. Hope tells us to trust him when

nobody trusts us, not even our personal shadows.

I took it upon my honest self to echo inside that I was worth more than just my basic graduation degree and a three year long worklife.

“If I really really wanted, I could land up at the place of work I deserved”, I said to myself.

Right there, I was given an olive branch of hope to start something after my own heart. And that’s so true when I walked down that fateful day on that empty road. Not a single person was in sight. To my left, I lifted my neck at this compact and ornate dance studio across the road from me.

Then, the wise voice affirmed to me, “If you still think you are worthy of doing something, walk into that Dance studio and tell them you are a dance instructor. This your only chance!

Go”.

I swear to god when I say this, I summoned all my breath and took a giant leap across the road. I cleared away any thought of self pity and I crossed over from the highway of tortuous nothingness into the path of daring dauntlessness.

I ran upstairs and arrived at a humble, flat-topped desk with a skinny, black-bearded man sitting behind it.

He raised his brows at my then trembling face and probed, “Yes. What do you want?”

I spoke almost like a parrot and spouted out these words, “I want to teach dance at your studio. D...ddo you have a vacancy?”

He lowered his eyebrows and smurked his lips with great curiosity and replied, “Teach! Ha, ha, ha! What can you teach?”

In that second I scanned my memory to realise that I was part of a zumba dance session a few years back.

Figuring out that it'd be easy I quickly said, "Zumba! I can teach Zumba."

"Zumba! Really?"

I nodded my head up and down in response.

He fiddled with his fingers and said, "Okay. Why don't you join in for a dance class with me tomorrow? If I decide you've got the moves, you shall have your job. How does that sound for a deal?"

The deal did sound good and his words gave me the hope I was looking for over sometime now.

I took a deep breath of comfort and reciprocated, "Sure! What time?"

He smiled back and told me, “6:00 p.m.”

I plummeted down the two-storey building and took the right road home. Home, where my heart lay in peace, in hope and truth that my God always helps me and never lets me suffer more than my shoulders were carrying.

When I entered in, I remember mentioning to my mother how I landed myself at a dance studio as a Zumba instructor. My voice was low but my eyes were watery. Mother was extremely proud of me for getting a dance instructor’s job. I could now support my Human resource training classes through the wages earned from my dance sessions.

March came along with its splendid evergreen summers. Trees would blush through wheezing winds and chartreuse green leaves rustled along as I took my walk to the studio every single day.

At least once in a day, I would get a panic

attack when my phone showed an unknown number ringing. I shuddered in the corner of my room and frowned my face with my hands covering my ears.

More than before, I sat with my feet close enough to my knees. I felt a bland mourning in my chest that wished to break out and cry. I would cry like a long, endless, never-ending river of tears that cascaded from my scared self. The river felt like a life that knew no death, and a road that had no end. I was spread across the floor like a woman without bones.

My hard work, my wings of worth were getting buried under the overwhelming waves of a huge, black shadow of his threatening male presence.

This pugnacious energy felt enormous, gruesome and totally indomitable. Like an old, cranky, wooden man who did not want to change his ways, his invisible existence made

me see stars in the day. He had a weapon that most men possess. He held the power to mutilate a woman with his loutish loins if she wished to express anything that sounded other than a 'Yes' to him.

My mind was going around in circles with self sabotaging thoughts. I kept watching out for him whenever I wished to go out. I would ready myself just in case he mysteriously arrived before me. I found peace in knowing I wasn't being followed by him all that time.

Jiving through four dripping months of hot sweating salsa, I summoned no more memory flashbacks. I began to look at the skies above and they seemed magenta pink, Iris purple to me. After toilsome days and sad sobby moments in my bedroom, I could see more beautiful, dark and starry nights. Long, narrow roads and small lanes began to look like long lost pals which lent me just enough strength to walk down home. My real reward was five kilos of weight I lost in two months



and the numbers of women who managed to lose most of their flabiosa too. I could recognise my success as I molded through my grey days. A grain of confidence kept telling me all the time to trust in HIM.

Most people I heard of would usually wait for destiny to shape them into somebody significant. But when I looked at myself and my potential, I knew I was turning into a more surer self. I could see a stronger person standing in the mirror. Somebody who swiftly crossed over from blistering hot bad times to zumba her way into the cool green valleys of rich, sweet-smelling peace.

It was absolutely hilarious to watch the choreographer's face when I marched up to him and demanded that he pay up my monthly which was due from the previous two months. I wanted to fight him but I felt like I had no voice. The habit of constantly pushing myself down left me like a sailor with no oar.

At first I thought I was acting cynical. Then the inner wise woman told me to go get my hard earned money back from him. As I climbed up the staircase of the studio, I felt like a thousand ghosts were pulling me back. At every step forward, my body was struggling to walk straight. My stomach turned into a freaking war zone with a thousand knives going through it.

On my way up, a random student brushed past me as I kept pushing up myself with a sweaty, pale face. Slowly my limbs and hands began to quiver around vigorously. By then, the gravity of the invisible pull had weakened and my stomach started to sound like beating drums. When I was finally standing away from his desk, I looked at him with wide eyes and chided myself to go back home.

When I walked up to him and asked for my pay, he was fuming at my request as he vented out that he was going through a financial crunch himself. In the end he mentioned he

had a family and he could not afford to pay anybody.

I was deeply frustrated at the tawny skinned dance master. He literally left me high and dry without any warning. With a sober end coming to my dance life, I found it risky continuing with him. On the dot, I decided to abdicate myself from teaching dance at his studio.

I then murmured to him very gently, “Don’t forget to read your bible”.

Back then I said that because I knew him to be a christian and he sounded very helpless to me.

I was back to the roads again. The best buildings along the roads of unemployment looked into my eyes to help me use my reality as a weapon. This time around, I was a lot more confident about what I wanted.

After traipsing around for thirty minutes, I eventually found myself sitting in the private lobby of a recruitment firm. I was instantly hired after a fifteen minute interview with the manager herself. Her regal presence, arched out head and dashing eyes inspired me to answer exactly the way she wanted to hear from me.

She examined me with all her fortitude and responded towards the end, “ Great! You can join us as a recruiter. You can be here tomorrow and we can start from there”.

After getting offered a job by her, I was glad I wasn't jobless anymore. I was content to know that I would be remunerated sufficiently instead of getting paid in pennies.

I could go back home with a broad, smiling heart who knew pretty much what it was to feel back on track.

One of my students wished for me to

choreograph a wedding dance for her. At her place as we sat down to discuss the particulars, I happened to quote a fee that seemed unaffordable to her. She thought a while and said she would get back to me with her final decision.

When I returned home and disclosed this to my mum, she shook her fist and pointed fingers at me and shrieked, “You lazy hag! Why didn’t you quote a bigger fee? YOU USELESS, PENNILESS, JOBLESS GOOD-FOR-NOTHING! You want us to sit and foot all your bills for the rest of your life. Have I not brought you up with dignity? What do you think of yourself? We don’t deserve this. Look at your servant-like face. Nobody is gonna marry you. I had some dignity in me when I was a teacher. But you disappoint me. Like always. You good-for-nothing...”

She continued ranting and I walked upto my room and sat myself on the bed. A harsh, sonorous cry emanated from deep within my

intestines. Heart-rending tears and a simultaneous shrill echoed in the room.

Sister trotted towards me and placed her hand on my shoulder, “Sister, You’re an adult now. Why are you sitting and sobbing like this? Why didn’t you say something back there?”

My tears didn’t stop. I didn’t say anything. How could I explain to her that on one hand there were mothers and on the other hand here was our mother, her thick-headed skull and a senseless tongue that lashed out at all of us. Despite her deriding words, nobody could win a debate against her. She consoled me and my tears ran dry.

A few months ahead in the future, my family and I were shifting out to another apartment. Sister, Father and I were peeved with the idea of having to shift for the hundredth time. The person behind the prominent idea was the sole decision maker of the house- Mother.

She came out at us with her hands on her waist and yelled out, “You idiots! For years now I have been hearing voices from people I don’t know. I know that they follow us wherever I go. Right now, they live somewhere at the back of our house! I just wanna leave this place”.

We tried telling her that those voices were not real. But she remained stubborn about her beliefs. Upon her nonstop insistence, we were forced to pack up our clothes and get moving to the next apartment. The villa we resided in was promptly returned to the owner and we watched our little bodies leave a splendid bungalow that once started it’s day with us.

In retrospect, I believe I managed to pull off a short lived career as a Zumba instructor. Well, I wasn’t really qualified or anything. Did I miss being in a five star hotel in swanky corridors? Of course, yes. Did I also miss my comfortable paycheck? Certainly.

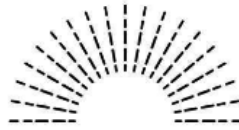
But I started to believe that I was ready to fly  
on my wings. It felt better to leave behind  
glossy payscale ranks to work at a smaller  
place where I wanted to be of real help.



Miles of calm I can see today,  
In my eyes and heart I can feel it today,  
My soul is relaxed and my mind is at ease,  
I can feel the soothing waves of peace.







## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



### The Die-Hard Follower



**T**his was the time when I was spending my last days with my parents. I was critically ‘unmarried’ and my mother was anxious to get me out of the house. I had to get up in the mornings and make my own breakfast and scurry off to my recruitment firm.

Like always, I wanted to get to the bottom of all things. I was always deep down under, looking for a part of my innocence I thought was lost in my early years.

I would return home and sit down to watch videos on faith and spirituality. I would spend a lot of my time on myself and silencing my mind. Needless to say, I'd often dive down to the parts of my being that needed answers. Some days I ended up in darker, conspiracy theories about the universe, 'the invisible planet', aliens and so much more.

In the days to come, I was to meet the die-hard fan face to face. It happened around the time when our maid had offered to terminate her services from us. She was an old, good-natured woman who would do the dishes and scrub the floors daily. After her departure, we knew we were in a domestic crisis. Naturally it was going to be me who had to fetch somebody. So I did.

I ran down the building, about two blocks away, outside a small hutment of a family of three. I saw the sign of resolution when the man of the house came out as I called out to him. He quickly dragged himself out and

straightened his shirt.

He stood before me in straight posture and made sure he was presentable enough for me to begin my inquiry, “Yes madame”.

So I wasted no time and asked him promptly, “I needed a maid to do our dishes. Could you please just send in your wife. She will be paid well, I promise”.

At first he looked reluctant. Later his wife emerged like a fairy godmother from the shack with her child in her arms. A quiet, dainty, wise woman stood before me now. I assumed she might have overheard what I said but I repeated my request.

She agreed to come and explained to her husband who was looking confused. He then allowed her to come along and so she followed me to our apartment. She entered the house. Mom and Dad were too happy to see a pious looking housemaid. She took a look at the pile

of dishes dumped in the sink and started to get to work.

My sister very honorifically mentioned to mother, “You just wait and watch Mom. Sister has brought her in which means this maid will never leave us!”

She echoed her prophecy twice. Right then, I walked back to my room. The maid left everything spick and span. Each one of us were very engaged in assessing her work. She got a full score of ten from each one of us. She was the perfect one. We were naturally happy. The lady told us she would need some time to think over working at our place. She mentioned in her feminine, petite voice that she would get back to us the next morning.

The next day was a sunny Wednesday morning. I got ready for office and quickly dropped by her hut to know her decision. She emerged from her tidy, windowless house like a saint, and looked at me with saintly eyes

and stated, “Sorry madam. I have found myself a new job of a typewriter. I won’t be coming”.

To which I smiled and replied, “Alright then. Best of Luck!”

I walked backwards before I could turn to the front. I almost bumped into someone. I stepped back to see who the blind man was. I raised my eyes to look at his face and there, there he was, the die-hard fan, standing before me with a patent of authority and stark hunger in his eyes.

He stared into my eyes and leaned toward me like a bent oak tree. The kind that was very willing to graft my slender body into his red, fibrous and hungry bark.

At that very moment, I grabbed my phone from my bag to evade any snap reaction. My moist, hasty fingers touched the smart screen as I opened a new text box. While I was

fiddling with my fingers, he stood by like a gawking mannequin. My perplexed cautious eyes were roaming around into the phone. I stood with my head glued to my phone screen. My impatient palms were moving disruptively throughout those tense five minutes.

The first thought that came to my mind was, “What the heck is he doing here?”

I typed that out as I allowed the words to come out. I remember I was wearing a head wrap. Trust me, I was too glad to be wearing that. So long as the case was where, the lesser he saw of my skin, the less trouble it would mean for me to tail him off.

In earnest, I started a self talk session right there. Fast pacing questions like, “What am I supposed to do now?” or “How am I expected to respond to a situation like this?” popped into my head. I got tangled into a host of harrowed questions like, “Should I run away from here?” or “Would I be justified in

something like shouting it all out?”.

But then a reassuring, rational voice guided me to stop finding a way out. She just told me to stand and stay calm and keep doing what I perceived to be a strategic move.

His face kept giving long, hard stares at mine. Then taking in a deep breath, he tittered and bent his head slightly towards his left foot and gave out something that looked like a half laugh. I stood still and felt my heart racing to the moon and back.

Very expectantly he viewed my tiny nose which was the only part of my face not hidden under the fabric which went from my head to cover the mouth and beyond.

Ceaselessly, he blurts out, “ Where were you all this time? I was looking for you everywhere I could and you were not there...”

After he finished speaking, his forehead

pointed at my eyes so directly that I stopped breathing. I stopped feeling or sensing anything in his frightful presence. Then he pointed out towards his left on the back towards the corner of the street and told me how he'd been waiting for me in that spot for the past four days. He took the liberty to tell me the exact time and hour of the day he was standing there to catch me.

Instantaneously he revealed to me he'd been following my mother on social media. He even followed her home to find out where I lived. In fact that's how he managed to fetch out my location. His pursuits never stopped there. He shifted into a neighbouring Boys' hostel that stood right next to my apartment. When he said that, I could finally make sense of the creep next door who would keep ogling at my breasts every evening when I stood in the balcony.

It was him. It was the die-hard fan.



In that horrific moment of realisation, I was running out of ideas. I scanned my head for anything that could help me against him. I knew I had to be doing something about him. Categorically I was aware that this was something that stayed hidden from my parents. At the time, going to the cops would mean a lot of trouble for them. It was only my sister who was informed about the stalker.

With a placid tone and calm face I uttered, “Listen, I am getting late for work. Can we talk some time later?”

I literally fled from him and reached office late by half an hour.

Back home, sister was sitting against the pale bedroom wall in her black, thick ponytail. As I narrated everything to her, she queried with taut eyebrows, “Blooming Hell! Is he gonna stall me up when I walk to college?”

Pulling down my hands from my head, I

replied, “No. Don’t worry he won’t do anything to you”.

Immediately she imposed, “ How do you expect me to believe that? Is it just conjecture? If he can follow Mom all the way here, it is pretty obvious that the next target is me!!”

She raised her eyebrows and began contemplating the chances of getting attacked on her way out every day.

She got up from her cross-legged posture and stammeringly said, “I don’t want to think about this!”

Saying this, she left the room which left me thinking of a way to back him off. Perhaps an idea, or a trick, or maybe a face-to-face talk with him would work. I wanted him to know that he can’t touch my family.

So next morning, I got ready impulsively with

the intent to meet him and warn him against harming my sister. Right after breakfast, I headed out and recognised him standing a block away from my building, which was his usual waiting spot.

I strutted in his direction with trembling hands. The likelihood of getting raped or kidnapped, or getting hacked into pieces was imminent. I didn't know how I was going to say it, but I mustered some audacity as I stood facing him. I had sworn to my heart if anything unexpected happened, I would be ready to meet my maker.

I was widely staring into the air before I could clear my throat and ease my forehead. Very quickly, I looked up at him and postulated haughtily, "Look, I don't want any trouble from you. I do not want to hear from my sister that you were following her".

He glared into my eyes and said with a sad grimace, "Alright".

Straight to the city road, I sprinted away from him from one puddle to the other. I was hoping for him to not chase me. The sudden realization of the die-hard fan running towards me with an axe added wind to my feet and I flew towards office.

Every single morning I knew he was standing out there on the road to see me. By the time I logged out of work, I was petrified by the chance of intercepting a possible attack from the die-hard follower. I was too disturbed to come up with ways of defending myself with my shivering hands or legs. Most of the time, I would take a smaller road home that never saw him.

I would tiptoe towards the inroad and stood by the edge to see if there was a bleak visibility of him waiting for me. A couple times I had to watch him coming out of the evening shadows from beneath the roof sheathing of the tuckshop. I wouldn't have guessed if it was him were it not for the dim, oddly bent

street lights looking down at the puddled lane.

Once he entreated me to meet him someplace. After making a request four times in his usual stubborn pleading tone, I warned him to go back or else I would have to scream in front of a crowd to get help. He would attend to my warning and disappear right after having stared at my tiny face and smiled coyly for double the time. He would never show up after I shouted at him.

As bothersome as can be, large numbers of young men and women would land up at the spot from where I chose to stand and berate him. It was intended to be a public spectacle, not so much for me, but for him. I thought that was definitely one way of discouraging him from approaching me.

With my hands wrapped around my handbag, I stood up to his scarred sweaty face and vociferated loudly, “Who do you think you

are? How many times have I made it clear to you that I hate you. Do you even know where this world is headed to?”

At that precise moment a random boy walked around us and sat down on the sidewalk with his phone in his palms. Two other young boys walked around him and became the faithful audience to our little street play.

But all that public attention only added power to my words in the aggressive tone I used, “You are wasting your time around me when you could actually go back to your work. Haven’t you thought about your future? Does this seem appropriate to you?”

His eyes drooped as his face hung long enough for his mouth to utter these words, “I don’t know...”

I warned him to stop following me. Anyhow, he pulled his body back and looked down and away

as he bowed his head and walked back to his hostel.

I was focused on getting to work without his existence bothering me. But the die-hard follower never gave up. I would find him after a good two weeks or so at the same street corner. I never gave up either. If the follower was unwilling to stop pursuing me, then I was equally firm at avoiding him each time I saw him. So the only option I was left with was to take the alternate route, which by the way, was rougher with nothing but mud and stones caking my heels.

Very ambitiously, he started intercepting me on the alternate route as well. His cold, big eyes would watch me walking down.

With quivering lips and a sweaty forehead, he froze his gaze at me as he trembled. He turned his face to the side and gave me a wide smile. Before I knew it, he looked ready to do something, perhaps a move that would

compromise my life forever.

Taking a bout turn, I ran back and took the next road. My feet carried me at the speed of - I don't know how many light years ahead. I could feel my stomach sucking in like an empty polythene bag perforated with holes. I swear to God my heart hula-hooped from the top of my neck down to my strapped feet.

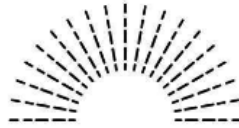
In the coming days it became crystal clear to him that I did not want to see his face and that I would rather run away from him instead of succumbing to his sick hands.



The storm of my life never ends,  
Where does it start how do I pretend,  
It takes a milestone to walk this road,  
One of them is never enough, another long day I  
suppose...







## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



### Matchmaking



**P**ewter grey cumulonimbus clouds moved into the October sky. Sharp, loud cracks of lightning illuminated the neighbourhood. One could look through the dull, low lying cracks of standalone buildings giving away a manifest black looking overgrowth on its cemented exterior.

Somehow, the flat cracks disappeared into the indubitable view of the continuing wall. Surprisingly, those walls looked radiantly lit up in banana shades of yellow in hot march.

30 years in the searing sun

All this pause and play between seasons happened from where I stood at my verandah. There was nothing to get to. Just a random layout of squalid and unpopular houses stood from the ground up. Just then mother called from within, "Come inside you guys!"

So my father and I got in with our lowered faces right in the middle of us enjoying the somehow brighter scene of things outside the house.

By now, I assume I was doing well at work. I lavished my independence. My attention hovered around saving enough in order to shift out of my parent's place and make my own little way in the world. I would tend to think I would be able to do it and do it with flying colors.

The same year, my importunate mother was resolute to marry me away. Since she tended to be hasty, she had about four online portfolios ready to inspect as prospective

grooms. On one hand I was breaking my bones during office hours and came home and recover to get started for the next day's drill. On the other hand, I endured mother's barbed warnings if I happened to disagree over the photograph of a potential 'suitor' she handpicked for me.

Oh my! Don't we all run away from the thought of marriage in the beginning? The notion, that every other suitor, seems like a mutual fund. The prospects looked potentially risky and long-term returns were very unpredictable. Trust me, I really wanted to do the same whenever I was shown pictures of twenty something men 'handpicked' by mother.

The first man I was supposed to meet was a man in his late twenties. His wide, angular face gave away a sense of inherited pride. The look was very telling. He seemed to possess princely cavalier also. Since mother wanted me to go meet him pronto, I had no other

choice but to go see him.

Dressed in white and green, I hurried down the flight of stairs to meet him at a local coffee shop before the appointed time. I knew I was not ready to meet him but I also knew I had to find a flaw in him before I was sure I could reject him.

My father at the time, watched me rushing toward the door with a keen eye on how his daughter was dressed to present herself to the man who was going to be his future son-in-law.

His intelligent, black eyes examined me as I made way through the door to put on my old brown leather strapped sandals. Before seeing me off, I spotted him lowering his lashes and nodding his head in up-down motion, to show he was okay with how I was dressed.

The man in waiting called me about five times. I knew I was running late. The first

impression I got from him was , “Wow! He must be impatient to have to call me five times in five minutes. Much Ado about nothing. Okay, let’s not assume too much here”.

The only thing familiar about him was his photograph listed on his marriage profile. I went in and stood looking around for him. Finally my eyes spotted a broad, stern face slouching against the already slouching body.

He stood up and signalled to me. I smiled and greeted him. His eyes went from crinkled and expressionless to almost dead. He nodded quickly and reclined into his seat at the table. The pitch in his voice was lower than the noisy airconditioning in the cafe. While I sat there and apologised for being late, he cordially smiled for a few seconds and then stared most of the time outside the window.

To cut it short, he was doing a terrible job at showing he was even mildly interested in me.

We spoke about our careers and families. It lasted for thirty slow-snail minutes. After sipping coffee and a two-second handshake, he immediately took off in his high-ticket royal enfield. We never met after the lousy date.

As far back as I remember, I kept returning his calls as and when he chose to call me. By the end of a month or so, it was perfectly clear that he wanted a girl who would much rather 'listen' to him, and his mother. He always mentioned his sweet sisters would help 'ease' the selection process a lot easier. That was never the deal I was looking for, and so, I backed out.

Up and coming was another preternaturally sharp, young man in his late twenties. He was definitely motivated to have me as his bride-to-be. However, the funny pretext was that our conversations didn't exactly pan out as one would expect them to. One thing lead to the other, and we struggled to find middle

ground.

As clear as a bell, I remember his rapt line he presented to me every night, “You know what’s interesting about me? My animal instincts! Trust me, you will never regret my bull dog roller bed move, and I shall rock your world!”

Every little word from that sentence made me want to jump off a cliff. That certainly seemed like pretty intense bedroom plans for a conversation starter.

My next suitor was an Uber rich guy who wanted everything from his future bride including a life-long live-in situation with his only mother. When I was told about this, I wasn’t sure that I would be willing to live with his mother under the same roof. When I chose to bring it up with him, he frowned upon my opinion by giving a minute long awkward pause on the phone. He did promise he would return my call. Trust me, I was

hoping for the opposite to happen. Just as I wanted, the call never happened.

Somewhere in this unpredictable world, I felt like I was getting away from every unwanted situation.

A bitter experience presses my heart as I write this down. The so-called bad experience came from a similar man looking for a bride to settle down with. His profile description mentioned dramatic words like 'Handsome', 'Smart', etcetra.

The profile picture displayed a man with a long, angular jawline and cheetah-like sharp eyes. When the occasion arised that I meet him, he was standing in person with a black blazer on. He looked like he dressed well. We had a casual meeting and one that involved my sister with us. Her presence that day did feel like a pillow mint in the midst of my stale conversation that dragged on and on between the man and me.



The next time we saw each other was at a coffee shop. His big, wide mouth brimmed from left to right every other five seconds. Strangely whenever I mentioned something about myself. He then popped the question to me, “Do you like me? If you would, I am willing to accept this as a half-proposal!”

“I am not sure what to say”, I said in return. “What would it take for me to do for you to say ‘Yes’?”

Like a swing the same words kept coming up from a range of different lips. The ‘Yes’ part.

Like a senorita in distress, I answered, “I think you may have popped this question up too early. It’s just the second or third time we’ve met. What would you expect me to say?”

Somewhere in my head, I remember reading a little more from his profile. ‘Scorpion’ was the word to identify with him. As much as I knew some of them, I was waiting for the part

where he would unleash a blind, inveterate vindictiveness upon me.

As fate would have it, the man actually attempted a revenge after I told him that marriage between us wouldn't work out. He saved his nasty tentacles for the day my family shopped at his supermarket. Usually he would politely offer to cover up the bill for us. Unlike his usual self, we left the place after having footed the bill ourselves.

Something I have somehow managed to never forget. By then I was done meeting men who eventually cut me through without warning.

There were a couple other chaps lined up for me to meet and figure if they could share my loveseat with. Soon it felt like I didn't want to try anymore. So I just manually pulled out a list of single men off the net and randomly chose some random faces. I just left a 'Hi! Wanna talk?' message and logged out in a rush.

Have we ever heard of anybody who voluntarily fell down to their face to confess that their powers, abilities and talents are many but they pretended to be real?

To tell the truth, I was not going to beg God for any sort of help. But I knew time was slipping

away like sand from the palms of my hands. I urged God to take up my imminent case which was since long pending in the Royal courts of Heaven. I went on to confess that my search for a marriageable man did not exactly pan out.

Maybe this time was supposed to be my last.

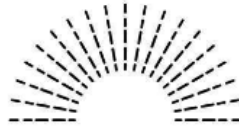
I prayed like a little eight year old. What did my prayer sound like? Nothing extraordinary. It was a verbal agreement between the judge and I, that said defendant, meaning I, was done spending all her resources on hunting for a potential life partner. The defendant pleaded guilty when she was asked if she was

exhausted. So, she reversed her statement down to a simple and sincere confession of the truth. The case was handed over to the judge who decided to assign a life partner to the defeated defendant.

Only on one condition though. The settlement was to be done in 'Good faith' and by withdrawing from liasing with other partners, especially if they were temporary arrangements.

Basically I had to go on a 'No man' fast. So I wiped my tears and followed his command.





## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



### The Man Of My Dreams



**A**bout two weeks later I happened to come across the picture of a man on my matrimonial search engine. A fair skinned, bearish face with a tall, somewhat bulky figure. Something about his wistful dreamy eyes left me mystified. The introduction read as follows:

‘Born in 1981, graduated from University in UK’.

Upon reading this, fiery first impressions beamed out from his profile.

Our first conversation over the phone was tragically boring. We shot plenty of cross examining questions at each other.

He interrogated me like a veteran television host wanting an immediate response on my views about 'Life's purpose' and the best proven theory behind marriage. I replied in equally melcanholic statements like a sweet, homebound would-be-wife who would very soon be chit-chatting with her newly wed hubby.

The most interesting thing he brought up in a base, smooth tone was, "I have to say this, you sound pretty wise for a young twenty something".

I immediately returned his compliment by echoing, "Thank you for saying that. I like to

believe that women at our age have a lot more wisdom than most people believe they have”.

I sensed him listening to me through every breath he was taking in.

I continued my philosophy in like manner saying, “I believe in living in reality. It definitely makes me feel more focused towards the next step for me”.

As we closed the conversation, he felt like we could talk more. Usually, I was the one to call him up and check up on him.

We set the date. We decided to meet up at a coffee shop. Our conversation sounded mostly like a running script for first time marriage dates. It was replete with awkward silences and brief pauses.

After a couple of days, he confessed to me that he never really found me physically attractive. He was equally astonished upon

hearing that I thought he smelled like an old man.

Both him and I wanted to know the other person more. I affirmed to myself that I must capitalize on his quiet, wide-eyed simplicity and monk-like stillness. But I wanted things to move faster between us. I began encouraging myself to call him more often.

A week went by and still no phone calls or messages from him. Forced to take the lead, I brought it to his kind attention that he was doing a terrible job at making our friendship work.

I texted him in an anxious tone, “You know, if you choose to keep staying laid back, I am afraid we won’t be able to see a lot from each other. Probably you and I will remain stuck as friends only”.

My parents dropped me off after a long day’s outing to see him. My daisy-like sister



decreed in a very chirpy and slightly edgy tone, “Here’s wishing you best of luck for your meeting with candidate no. 117!”

She opened her mouth and emitted a wild guffaw like I had never seen before.

As I stepped out and starting walking the stone pavement, I spotted him standing at the exact same bus stop I met him for the first time.

I was not expecting an extraordinary welcome in any way. The next moment he spread out his thick strong arms wide into a fan and stood with the best broad smile on his face like a fabulously open-feathered peacock.

But my heart whispered to my ears and said, “We think he is in love with you”.

We walked down to a place that was selling burgers. He ordered a chicken burger for himself. So did I. When he went to place our

order, I could see his bald patch in the centre of his head. Somehow, it did not really matter to me back then. I noticed every two seconds he would turn his head around to look at me. Right then, I got a phone call from my grandmother. When I told her I was out meeting a guy from a matrimonial reference, her ears opened up to know more.

She promptly asked me, “Check the man thoroughly and then say ‘yes’”.

I agreed to her advice and then I saw him returning to me with two burgers placed in a plastic tray. We took a bite from each other’s burgers and left.

As the evening came to a close, both of our minds stopped questioning and started taking a genuine interest in each other. Both of us wanted to feel a real desire for each other.

He sauntered silently, with his head bowed down toward the stone pavement. I walked

right next to him hoping for him to hold my hand. Since he was looking like the one who needed more help, I decided to take a step forward.

There was a cool night's breeze welcoming our smiling sentiments. Every tree rejoiced to breathe into the monsoon's light air. The leaves rustled and whispered about the celestial betrothal of our virtuous pair strolling together. The candescent moonlight over the road made it feel much more surreal.

I held his hand. His soft, plump palms clutched my warm, dainty fingers. Instantly I felt I saw a world of deep, long-lasting conjugal love. Right after, we stopped at a point where we had to cross a road. He quickly pulled back his hands from mine as he prepared to look left and right. My eyebrows wrinkled and my face frowned since I was confused as to why he 'd do something like that.

So he stepped forward to cross the road which was almost empty. Without any second thoughts, I ran along to keep pace with him and grabbed his hands again. He quickly encased my soft fingers into his huge hand and held onto me like he would never let go off my hand again.

Funnily, or ordinarily, whichever stands correct, he broke out into a song. It sounded like a quiet, unbroken lullaby from his inner musician sung only for me. By now he was firmly holding my little, enclosed palm as he strolled like a new born lover under the silent, nighttime sky.

My eyes and face smiled along as if the song would never ever end. One by one, traipsing hand in hand, one step at a time, I finally walked down that road with the man of my dreams who had nothing less than a life full of golden hearts to offer.

I was gently escorted home by him. His little, deep set black eyes twinkled along with a few stars smiling from on top of us. We embraced for the longest time and returned little pecks of joy to each other. He took a bout turn and he walked back his way as I turned around to walk back home.

For the first time ever, my mind was serene. I could walk without heavy clouds in my head. Eventually, I found my man. His balmy cheeks made me blush more than before.

I rang the doorbell. Mother answered the door and she peered straight into my watery eyes.

The first thing that she asked was, “Hmm! Don’t you look happy? Looks like you’ve found your husband”.

I looked back into her eyes as my mouth couldn’t stop grinning and I answered, “Yes!”

She wasn't late to point out that she was glad to hear that and that the guy was from the mountains. I think she was happy about the fact that she herself was, once upon a time in her life, miraculously cured by the himalayan mountains. This very fact, was echoed a couple times right before she ceremoniously declared, "Yaay! You are a mountain girl now!"

I laughed away as I headed into my room. My staid, demure little sister hastily inquired, "Hey! Tell us, is he the one?"

Raising my lashes, I replied with upturned eyes and lips saying, " Yes!"

She responded with a sigh of relief by estimating, "Yeah! Thank God, we are all blessed now. I'm so happy for you. You finally found the one. Well, this does take off a lot of pressure from your shoulders and Mom-Dad too!"

I concurred with her happily concluded reflections by saying, “Yeah, you’re right”.

That evening I lapsed into the arms of gratitude. My head rested on my regular purple coloured pillow. Tonight my mind was at a place where there was no inner voice criticising me for living like a single sailor. I saw myself drifting towards thoughtless comfort. The chances for something new to begin were dancing like kites in the sky.

My large dreamy eyes began to see sweet dreams of a blessed life coming my way. I could now tell myself with certainty that my companion had eventually arrived and that I could now allow myself to be taken care of.

I had won my prize. Something that every woman wants – The right life partner.

At last, the universe beamed, the night stars proclaimed and God from above, delivered me

to a man who wanted to spend the rest of his years with me.

Fast forward a month from now, I was engaged to him. Right after we exchanged our rings, my parents travelled out of town for making wedding arrangements. On a quiet Friday night, I had scorching fever. My fiancée arrived as soon as he heard I was sick.

The sweetest angel that I had never seen before was standing right before me as I opened the door. His eyes expressed a heavenly happiness on seeing me. He told me he wanted to make sure I was healing faster in order for the flu to come down. We had vowed to abstain from each other till we were married. After a few hours of feeding health drinks, putting wet strips on my forehead and massaging my legs, he planted a gentle kiss on my forehead and left for the night.

It was about midnight. My sister arrived home right when my fiancée was leaving. Right after



about ten minutes, the doorbell rang. When I asked my sister to open the door, she refused to get up. I was guessing it was my fiancée.

Somehow I stood up with my feeble limbs and a boiling body. Before I would unlatch the door, I called out from inside just to be sure, “Who is it?”

Sister was smiling at me since she thought my fiancée was too shy to answer. Then again, I called out, “Tell me who is it?”

We didn’t hear a response. After asking three times, a very heavy voice replied, “Its me”.

At once my sister and I knew it was the die-hard follower at our doorstep in the middle of the night. She gasped for breath and covered her mouth with her hands as I was left flabbergasted. With a raging heartbeat and wide-open mouth, I looked at my sister as she whispered to me immediately, “Call your fiancée now!”

We sat frozen near the door as he kept kicking the door multiple times. His blunt, heavy voice echoed inside the house, “Open the door! I said, open the door!”

As my shaky hands were dialing my fiancée’s number, I told him right away that there was a man who had been following and harassing me from the past two years. He was right now up at the door trying to get in. Out of nowhere he called his friend and both of them drove down to my place within thirty minutes. My fiancée strictly warned me not to open the door unless it was them.

After about forty minutes, the doorbell rang and it was them. I rushed to unlatch the door when they asked me where the guy was. As usual, I spotted him on his building’s rooftop, sitting down on the floor against the wall. I instantly located him and pointed out to his body leaning against the wall. The next moment my fiancée and his friend were

running two blocks away to get to the follower.

My sister and I watched them climb up the terrace and catch hold of his collar. They grabbed him and pulled him towards the side where they had a heated argument. They also hit him black and blue.

Within half an hour, they were back home. My fiancée's shirt was torn into tatters. His friend sat down on the couch huffing out of breath. I quickly brought them some water as they urged us to pack up and leave with them for the night.

The next day we were dropped back home. There was a real fear lurking around about whether or not the crazy stalker would do something outrageous.

In the next few days, our parents returned. My fiancée and I decided to disclose all this to

my father. Father's face froze as he heard about what had happened.

Later on, both my father and fiancée decided to explore the area where the stalker lived. By then the follower had disappeared. Soon it was revealed to them that he was unemployed, ogled at women and drank like a fish. It was decided that father would pick me up from office everyday to keep a watch.

As the wedding date kept drawing closer, we were all very relieved to know he was gone far away from us. A few days later I checked his online post to be sure where he was hiding.

A picture of him with blood smeared all over his face and shirt was posted on his timeline. My fiancée was quick to point out that the picture was from the night he was beaten up. After a few days of stalking his profile, we noticed the bloodied picture vanished from his timeline.

That was the last time I saw his awful face. I went ahead and blocked him.

Right then, on one of the days when father was bringing me home, he acidcentally divulged in his drunken stupor, “I REALLY WISH THAT STALKER GUY KIDNAPPED YOU AWAY AND DID WHATEVER HE WANTED TO DO WITH YOU”.

I stared at his face for five straight minutes. I couldn't retaliate to what he just said because he himself was in his manic phase. Knowing fully well that he was off medication for more than four years, arguing with him would provoke him to say a lot more rubbish to me. I stayed silent and gulped my throat a couple times to gather some perspective.

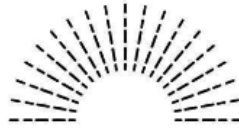
Whatever anyone said or did to me, I was already married to my man in word and deed. Whether it was our weekend rendezvous or wiping each other's tears, his huge bear-like chest was home to me now.

The wedding date was set. I was very happy  
that I couldn't wait.



A knight in shining armor,  
Has come, has found me,  
The Heart of the longing one,  
I fall at your feet,  
To promise to be devoted,  
And serve you as your wife,  
For it is written and noted,  
By God and his angels,  
I am love and you are light.





## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



### His Eyes Closed Forever



**L**ike most married couples, my husband and I swear by anything to abide by each other. Of course that doesn't mean there are no rocky moments. We do have our share of thunder and light times.

The day came when I narrated my entire thirty years to my love. My then fiancée looked me in the eye and serenely affirmed, “I am amazed at how far you’ve come. I see you now for who you

30 years in the searing sun

are, my love. But honey, let me tell you something. I am far beyond the person who would be interested to learn about your past”.

My eyes were wet with tears as he continued in a cool, confident tone, “Sweetheart, it’s inspiring to learn from you. I mean it. After you’ve revealed your past to me, I think it was supposed to be you who was meant to go through your young days all by yourself. These things were supposed to give you courage and character.

He continued speaking through his collected self, “I want you to know that you’re with me now. The past is behind you. Look at me and you will know that I am your present. I am the kind of guy who wants to know what the future looks like for us together, only you and me. What do you say my love?”

In a heartbeat and a tiny drop from my eyes, I clung to his chest as he rounded me into himself with a wise face and calm smile.



It may sound insane but I was willing to take a huge risk of losing him. I had promised myself I'd rather prefer he never knew me instead of marrying me anyway without ever seeing my I-shaped scars running all over my broad back.

In those precious years, I grew very distant from father. He was living in with another woman. She was his life's new twinkling star. By that definition, my mother and sister had to go looking for another apartment. The news was not surprising to us. I was forewarned about such a thing in a dream I had years ago.

One fortuitous night, I sat watching a movie about a father who would spank his wife every day. His daughter was stopped from pursuing her musical interests. In some way, that particular movie loosened all my tears that I had been saving for this moment. My memories as a kid feeling lost and scared, the number of times I was scorned by my mother,

dad's addiction to alcohol that devastated our lives, the numbers of women he slept with, to add to the list, his sudden diagnosis of bipolar disorder broke us into pieces and we were never whole again.

My chest felt heavy as I sank to the tiled floor. I knew that this relationship had to see an ending. A spasmodic motion stirred me from splitting up. I rose to my feet as I shivered from head to toe. Every pulse and every mote of my skin was willing to let go of him.

In ten terrible years, my family and I had to watch our dear diligent father evolve into a marauding monster. The sickening pain of having to go through his devilish anomalies have always been invisible to others. Not to mention, our extended families stood in the distance while our hands were tied by society's expectations.

The moment had arrived. I was supposed to pick up the phone and tell him the truth. I

called him to vent out whatever I had with unstoppable tears.

On the other end, Dad spoke with biting teeth and a flaming hatred, “Yes...why have you called me now?”

I opened my mouth for the first time in what felt like a hundred years and said, “From today, you are no longer my father and I am no longer your daughter. Whatever existed between us has come to an end. This is the last time you’re ever going to hear from me. Good-bye”.

As I disconnected the call, I collapsed to the floor and began crying ceaselessly for an hour or so. My husband immediately picked up my sunken body and lay me next to his warm, loving chest.

After two years, we were informed that father became homeless after the other woman threw him out of her life. He was literally on

the roads. Precisely at the time, a kind gentleman had found father and gave him shelter at his humble cottage.

A few years later, we were informed by the gentleman turned caretaker that father had stopped moving. We were told that he would stay seated in his chair all day. He would not talk to anybody.

Mother was extremely distressed with the news. Sister also got worried about father losing his chance to survive any longer. My husband seized the opportunity to go visit him. The caretaker showed him to father's room.

From the way my husband described him to me, father sat fixated on his chair. He had grey hair over the sides of his head. His face was wrinkled and expressionless. He sat with his head stooping down to the grey granite floor.

My husband knelt down and asked father, “I have been told sir that you’re not keeping well. I have also been informed that you don’t eat”.

Father did not utter a single word.

My husband continued, “Sir, I am here because we all care for you. Please don’t stop taking your meals. Tell me, do you want to come back home?”

Father remained unresponsive.

After about a week, the caretaker called to inform my husband that father had stopped eating for some days. Both my sister and husband travelled down to take father to the hospital.

At the time, I was recovering from an abdomen surgery. My doctors told me to be on complete bed rest. Father was being shifted from the cottage into an ambulance. Mother and I were praying for things to go well for

father. As soon as the ambulance reached the hospital, he was going to be taken inside.

Upon bringing him out from the wheeled stretcher, his eyes were closed. A female attendant emerged from the hospital to check on father. He was confirmed dead. Sister howled out as she buried her head onto my husband's chest.

After a few days of mourning, father's body was carried to the crematorium. Sister was sitting motionless with her head lowered to the ground. Initially, she was going to be the one to finish the last rites. But her mute body and dead face urged me to take on the responsibility. Right there, I stepped in, with one hand touching my surgical wound and the other held by my husband.

Both mother and I were in grief. When I uncovered the sheet of cloth from father's dead face, I shrieked out a guttural cry that was loud enough for everybody in the

crematorium to hear.

My husband immediately came to me and held me by the shoulders. He strengthened me to finish what I had started.

We finished the rites before we watched his body go into an electrical cremator. The shutter went down and that was the last time I saw my dad.

After releasing his bones and ashes into a nearby river, a part of me flowed along with him into the great Indian Sea. I forgave my father and moved on.

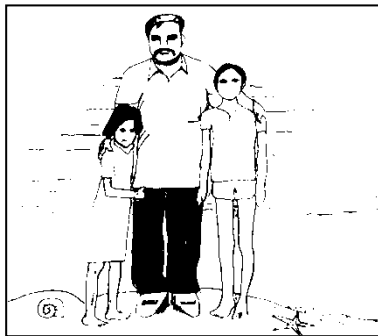
His wandering spirit happened to visit my home when I was singing to my God. In fact he also came to see me in my dreams. In the next few days, every single old man I saw began to look like my father.

Every daughter has a dream of looking after her old, ailing Dad. My dream of taking care of my father disappeared like a forgotten

wish. His departure reminds me of the autumn season.

The gamboge yellow leaves fall freely, give readily to me and those of us who receive the best of life's lessons after a special someone goes away. The loss of what was gone and what might have been a life with lesser regrets pained me for almost a year.

Now when I look back, I thank my Dad for being who he was and making me who I am today.



You came into my life like a heckling hurricane,  
Severe and swift to consume,

Kalavathi Raj



But you left like the perfectly breathless, yellow fall,  
Like a tranquil tree I will always miss you...





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt appreciation goes out to God for his unconditional love.

My deepest gratitude goes to my husband who stayed up day and night while I cried and wrote out my feelings.

I earnestly thank each and every person who came into my life and impacted me to write this book right from my parents, teachers and classmates to my friends.

To every single man I met, thank you for coming into my heart. The times we shared together will always remain imprinted as our story. Except for some, no regrets.

To all the others who chose to vilify my existence, I want to thank them the most. Their judgements gave me enormous strength to stick around and become the fighter I am today.

A special thanks to my Book Cover Designer Sanjida Smrity. Thank you Sanjida. In spite of our little disagreement, I openly apologise and thank you for putting life into the pencil portrait I first shared with you.

I also wish to add to the list, the movies, songs and artists mentioned in the book whose work helped ease my pain. I am forever indebted to each and everyone of them. No disrespect intended.

## MESSAGE TO THE READER

Thank you for taking the time to read my story. I am humbled.

For those who need to hear this, I want you to know that I was on the same doomed path just like you. Truly, it's been a long journey to true love as I learned to kiss the ground of thorns I walked on. I fell so many times, but I never stopped telling myself three things:

1. I do not hold the power to change a man  
(Nobody does)
2. I will never ever ever ever ever ever  
give up
3. I deserve better than this

If any of you is feeling stuck and wants to move on, here are five hopes I wish to give away to you.

1. I hope for you to not give up.

2. I hope for you to be harsh and then be very kind with yourself after every mistake you make.
3. I hope for you to celebrate your body.
4. I hope for you to never stop dreaming.
5. I hope to dedicate my journey to more warriors like you.

I emphasize that I am offering my opinion, not the 'gospel truth'. For those who feel differently, I am open to understanding meanings I haven't explored. Most importantly, I wish for you to know that people are random bystanders. At the end of the day, it is your word and your action that set the foundation for your life.

As for me, I intend to start a food business. I am really looking forward to becoming a mother. If I have a daughter, I would love for her to learn from my story as well.

Today this is where I stand. I have started to finally find parts of a newer me. I can say now, that I am standing on solid ground now.

Take care of yourself. Moisturize your feet  
and dream on.

This is all that my pen could write.

## **ILLUSTRATIONS**

### **Ch.3.**

Illustration 1: A self made pencil sketch of my parents arguing with each other and me dangling in between.

### **Ch.17.**

Illustration 1: A self made pencil sktech of my father, my sister and me standing at the beach. The sketch was made from an original photograph.



# NOTES

## Ch.12.

1. Commis Chef - A commis chef is a junior member of the kitchen staff who assists senior chefs with food preparation and organization.
2. Head Chef - The head chef will be in charge of a single kitchen, managing all the other chefs within the brigade.

## **ABOUT KALAVATHI RAJ**

KALAVATHI RAJ was born in erstwhile Kolkata in October 1989. Originally from the peninsular, she has a Bachelor's degree in education. She has travelled around most cities in the Indian subcontinent. Kalavathi is happily married for seven years now.

Her passions involve writing, painting, cooking and gardening. 30 YEARS IN THE SEARING SUN is her first written project. Through her memoir, she aims to light up the way for many women to create their own path and find their right life partner.

30 years in the searing sun