

AUTUMN *Of* RELATIONSHIPS

TWENTY FOUR STORIES AND TWENTY FOUR MIRRORS.

Reflecting the bonds we hold,
the vices we hide,
and the truths we ignore.

RAFAT FARZANA



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DEDICATED TO

My father, late Mohd. Mahboob Ali.

My mother, late Raziya Begum.

My teachers who built the calibre in me to write.

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My deep sense of gratitude to:

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My immense pleasure in expressing my gratitude to the Bluerose publishing team for their guidance and extensive support in exposing my stories and giving it the shape of an exquisite book, available globally for the benefit of the readers.

Finally, my deep appreciation to the readers for sparing their valuable time and casting a glance at my work and reflecting upon the characters picturised and the morals imparted.

A Note on The Writer

I was born on June 18th, 1956, in Warangal Telangana. I am a retired vice principal of Lal Bahadur Degree College, Warangal, Telangana, run and managed by Osmania Graduates' Association and Exhibition Society Hyderabad Telangana. My basic education from kindergarten to tenth standard was from a very prestigious convent school, Fatima Girls High School, Kazipet Warangal, Telangana. I did my intermediate and degree from Pingle Government women's college Warangal Telangana. I post graduated in English from Kakatiya University Warangal, 1979 and won a gold medal for the same.

I worked as Lecturer in English in Arts and Science College Subedari Warangal from 1979-1980. I joined Lal Bahadur Degree College, Warangal in the year 1980, rendered 34 years of service under various heads, and retired on June 30th, 2014, as Principal-in-charge.

As Lecturer in English

As Head Dept. of English

As academic coordinator

As Examination superintendent

As in charge girls' hostel

As vice Principal

As Principal-in-charge

I worked as a professor of English at Shadan Institute of Engineering and Technology Hyderabad Telangana from 2014-2018.

I worked as convenor and editor of 'Bahadur' magazine for both Urdu and English sections.

My interest in writing made me edit and contribute articles to the magazines. It was the skill of initiation that has finally given shape to the art of writing short stories after retirement from service.

I started the translation work from 2005 onwards. Some of the short stories which I translated were published in a well-known literary magazine, 'The Triveni' Hyderabad. This continued as a research project under the kind guidance of late Prof Laxminarayana, the former Head of Comparative Literature at Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad, Telangana, who later became the honorable vice chancellor of Kuppam University Andhra Pradesh.

My first book, 'The Wax Statue and Other Stories', was published in August 2022. It is a collection of Jeelani Bano's short stories translated into English. I have translated a few other Urdu writers also. My second book, "HIGHWAY" is a translation of Qamar Jamali's Urdu short stories into English. It was published in October 2023 and the second edition, by the name "THE VELVET MITE", has come out in 2026. The primary focus of my translation work is to convey the message of Urdu writers to the non-Urdu

readers on global basis. My translated stories are published in well reputed magazines. Recently my translated story, 'SHELTER', has been published in Rekhta magazine and 'THE STONE PRINCE' in TRIVENI, English literary magazine. My short story, "FINGER PRINTS" published in IJELLS, international journal of English literature, language, and skills. The present book, "AUTUMN OF RELATIONSHIPS" is a collection of short stories written in English. All my stories are a one-sitting stories. Present day scenario is the theme of my stories. I intend to write for a common man because society comprises of such people. The topics of my stories are diverse. The budding writer in me has penned these stories and it is left to the readers to decide whether they aptly deal with the prevailing social evils.

I am also trying my hand, along with my husband, Khaja Nizamuddin, at compiling some uncommon words, English slangs, idioms, and phrases which help the learners of English from Hindi and Urdu background. The art of writing has initiated in me right from my childhood days. In school there was a practice to borrow a book from the library, read during holidays and brief it after reopening. I won appreciations and prizes. During my service as a lecturer many a times, I worked as editor for the college magazine and contributed articles. My love for reading and writing instilled the talent of writing in me. All this accounts for the development of the skill of writing and the personality flourished as a writer. I

owe this credit to my teachers at large, and my parents for providing me an eminent school atmosphere. My hobby of extensive reading ultimately moulded me into a writer and translator of short stories.

RAFAT FARZANA

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From The Writer's Desk

I deem it a proud privilege to pen down my thoughts on the current topics in the form of short stories. Stories arrive in fragments. Sometimes they appear as a voice overheard in a passing, memory that refuses to fade, or a fleeting moment that seems ordinary until it reveals something deeper beneath the surface. The stories in this collection were born from such moments — from questions left unanswered, from silences between people, and from the strange beauty hidden inside everyday life.

Each story stands on its own, yet together they form a mosaic of human experience: love and loneliness, hope and regret, beginnings and endings. Some are grounded in reality; others wander into places less certain. All of them, however, are attempts to capture the emotions that connect us despite our differences.

Short stories possess a unique power. They ask us to step briefly into another life, to see the world through unfamiliar eyes, and then to return changed in ways we may not immediately understand. Unlike novels, they do not linger for hundreds of pages. Instead, they strike quickly — like a conversation remembered years later or a dream that leaves behind a feeling stronger than its details.

This collection was written over time, across changing seasons of thought and experience. Some stories emerged effortlessly, while others demanded patience and revision before they found their final form. Together, they reflect not only imagined worlds and characters, but also the evolution of the writer behind them. Despite their limited length, they often deliver a powerful message and leave a lasting impression on the reader's mind.

The writer of this story is known for her creative ability to present deep emotions and ideas in a simple yet engaging manner. The writer's collection of stories is engaging, thought provoking and rich in human emotions. The writer demonstrates a remarkable ability to transform ordinary moments into compelling narratives that resonate with the readers.

What makes these stories particularly appealing is the writer's skill in blending creativity with simplicity. Through vivid descriptions and meaningful plots, the writer captures the reader's attention while conveying deeper insights about human nature and society. Each story leaves a lasting impression, highlighting the writer's imagination, sensitivity, and dedication to the craft of storytelling.

If these pages offer you a moment of reflection, recognition, discomfort, wonder, or escape, then they have fulfilled their purpose.

Rafat Farzana

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Introduction

Literature has always been a mirror held before society. Sometimes that mirror reflects beauty, compassion, and hope; at other times, it reveals wounds we choose to ignore. The stories in this collection arise from such wounds — the silent suffering of elderly parents abandoned in loneliness, the pain and humiliation faced by women, the burden of meaningless rituals, and the many invisible injustices that continue to exist around us. These are not merely fictional tales created for entertainment. They are echoes of realities witnessed in homes, streets, and communities every day. Behind every story lies a human experience — a mother waiting for a son who never returns, a woman silenced by fear and tradition, an individual trapped beneath customs accepted without question. Though the characters are imagined, their struggles are painfully real. The purpose of these stories is not simply to criticize society, but to awaken thought and sensitivity. Social evils do not survive because they are powerful; they survive because they become ordinary in the eyes of people. Silence, indifference, and blind acceptance often strengthen the very practices that hurt humanity. Through these narratives, I have tried to give voice to emotions that are frequently suppressed and truths that are often left unspoken. At the same time, this collection is also about resilience. Even in darkness, the human spirit

searches for dignity, love, and hope. Many of these stories carry quiet moments of courage — small acts of resistance against cruelty, loneliness, and injustice. If these pages encourage readers to reflect more deeply on the lives around them, to question harmful traditions, or to respond with greater compassion toward others, then this work will have achieved its purpose. I offer these stories not as answers, but as conversations — conversations that society must continue to have. Twenty-four stories are twenty four mirrors to society.

A Blast from the Past

(A brief account of a few selected autobiographical details)

A thought recently struck me to sketch a few snapshots of my life. To start with my childhood memoirs, the most cherished involve my parents. I was born on 18 June 1956 in Warangal into a well-to-do family. My father was a tahsildar, and my mother was a soft-spoken, good-natured woman who raised me with care and shaped my life. I thank God for being born into such a family; I am grateful to my parents for ‘who and what I am in this challenging world.’ We were five siblings—three girls and two boys. I was the youngest girl in the family, and we lived a very comfortable, happy life.

The most cherished moment of my life dates to when I was five or six. My mother had given me a bath, gently rubbed my body dry, and dressed me in a nice frock. While this was a routine occurrence, what touched my heart was my father’s affection. He took me to the open yard and sat on a chair in the hot sun, turning my hair sideways to dry so that I wouldn’t catch a cold. He affectionately twisted his fingers through my hair to make it curly. He is no more and I am 70 now, whenever I dry my hair after bath with a hair drier I recollect my father. I feel the quiver of his fingers in my hair. Parent don’t die; they live in our memories till

we are alive. I can still feel the touch of his fingers. It gives me inexpressible joy.

While my eldest sister and brother studied in an Urdu-medium school, my middle sister, my younger brother, and I stayed home with our mother. My father's job required him to move frequently, often away from headquarters, but he was determined to admit us to an English-medium school. I remember a school bus taking a turn into the lane beside our home; we three would peep out of the window to watch the driver. We were partners in every activity, good or bad. The driver would often speak to us affectionately, encouraging us to join the school. We relayed these conversations to our parents, expressing our own desire to go.

The school was Fatima Girls High School, a missionary institution in Kazipet. Because it was far from home, my father initially hesitated. Though my mother was not highly educated, she insisted he visit the school. She convinced him that the three of us could travel together and that the driver was also reliable. In 1961, my father finally decided to enrol us. He owned a car in those days. It was a blue colour Ford bearing registration number, APJ 8. My father drove us there himself. The school was run by nuns and featured a massive building, a hostel, and a sprawling playground. Convinced by the atmosphere, my father completed the formalities.

I still remember the excitement of covering our books and arranging our bags. On my first day in kindergarten, the teacher let us play with toys and asked us to write the alphabet on slates using attractive, colourful striped pencils. Later, she gave us plasticine to make shapes and figures out of it, the soft, colourful clay fascinated me. However, during the final period, when the teacher asked the class to nap, I sat rigidly in my chair. I was terrified that if I fell asleep, I would miss the bus and be left behind. I missed my mother terribly in that moment. Though the teacher tried to comfort me, my tiny mind couldn't grasp her logic; I simply bowed my head on the table and kept my eyes squeezed shut. When the "home bell" finally rang, we joyfully boarded Bus Number Two. The driver welcomed us warmly, and I returned home and shared every detail of the pleasant experience of my first day at school, with my mother.

As I go down the memory lane I remember the remarkable three slap incidents of my childhood days. The first slap involved my fascination with plasticine when I was in first class, we had a craft period in which we were asked to play with plasticine making different shapes. I had taken some pieces home from school and became so obsessed that I would play with them even in my sleep. One night, I woke up crying loudly for the clay. My mother was unwell, and my father, his sleep disturbed, grew irritated. When I told him I wanted to play with plasticine, he gave me a slap and told me to go back to sleep. I lay there crying for a while before I

finally dozed off to sleep. The appeal for plasticines still persists in me and when I went to Uk in 2022, my granddaughter brought the plasticine and sat making toys I joined her. I made quite a few toys narrating her how I received a slap of my father due to the love for these plasticines.

My father was a strict person in parenting, but he cared a lot about us. Despite his busy schedule he would spare time for our recreation and enjoyment. I remember going to exhibition with him. We moved around the stalls holding our father's finger and bought quite a few toys. I remember buying an elephant toy operated with key, a hen laying eggs, a monkey on a string going up and down when we pressed the button, a plastic toy table and chairs, a small tiffin carrier made of colourful plastic. I was satisfied and next we went to the swing section. My father made me sit on a small merry go round pushed in a circular motion. As it caught speed, I felt giddy and shouted to stop. He stopped it immediately and made me get down. He made me drink some water and soon I regained the normalcy.

In the second class, I was the monitor and a top student. My teacher, Mrs. Barbara Clarke, appreciated my diligence and even asked me to collect and correct homework books. In a fit of childhood innocence, I even put her signature on the books because it looked easy. When she saw it, she simply smiled. I realized that it was a mistake. As I grew older, I understood the gravity of the action.

During lunch, the three of us would gather on the playground. If anyone bullied us, we sought out Liyaqat, an older boy from our bus route whom my father had asked to look after us. He guided us in every aspect, and we comfortably moved on in the school.

At 70, I still remember the second slap incident from my fourth-class teacher. I did not study the third standard, having been double promoted to the fourth class. I was a year younger than my classmates, which included my second sister's peers. My teacher, Miss Shakuntala, was good, but an unforgettable incident occurred when she was verifying birth dates in the classroom. When she called me up, I told her my birthday was 18 June 1956. She asked me to go, but I hesitated and suddenly said, "It is 18 January 1956." Confused, I corrected myself again. Without a word, she raised her hand and delivered a sharp slap on my left cheek. My head shook, my cheek flushed red, and tears rolled down my eyes in front of the whole class. As I grew up, I understood that we should not be confused and speak with confidence. Unless we are not sure we shouldn't utter a word. The memory remains as fresh today as it was then. It reminds me to live with confidence.

The third slap happened on the day of my eldest sister's wedding. My other sister and I were in the fifth standard and had stayed up late in the night for the celebrations. On the wedding morning, I fell into a deep sleep on the bride's bed. My mother tried to wake me, but I didn't budge. Amidst the chaos of the

wedding rituals and the disturbances created by the groom's party, she lost her temper and slapped me to get me out of bed. I realized later I was simply a victim of the surrounding stress. I was stunned to see a soft-spoken woman getting angry due to the disturbance created by the bride groom's people. After those three instances, I was never beaten again; I grew into a calm and obedient girl.

I remember how my father took me and my younger brother to the hospital when we fell sick. He didn't hesitate a moment to stay all night in the hospital with us. Such was his love and attention to us despite his busy schedule.

School life offered many joys, The annual "Fatima Fete." was celebrated on a grand level. Each class had to run a stall to raise funds. I fondly remember the games, like break a pot while blindfolded, and ringing the duck. The visitors were allowed to participate in the games by taking a ticket. There would be a great rush at these stalls. Some other girls maintained stalls of eatables. Everything was organised in a systematic way. Buses were arranged for our transport. We enjoyed a lot, and the memory of each incident still lingers in the mind. We also went on excursions; I remember a trip to Hyderabad with our teacher, Miss Marina. We saw industrial exhibition Salarjung Museum and went to public garden and enjoyed a lot.

My memory regarding my pocket money flares up my mind. I remember my father giving us a 25-paise coin

or a one-rupee note for pocket money before he left for work. We would save it for school treats: raw mangoes, phali, batani, and colourful barf ka laddu were our choice.

I remember Sister Alberga, our gentle headmistress, who praised my sister and me for our honesty. In the eighth class, a group of us decided to use the nuns' private toilets instead of the student facilities, 'the round palace' as it was named. Sister Amandine caught us, locked the door, and called the headmistress. "Toilet beauties, come out!" she called as we emerged out one by one. She didn't scold us, but the embarrassment was enough to ensure we never repeated it again. At the end of tenth class, it was a tradition to host a farewell party to the teachers. We were all very much excited. We planned to dress up in sarees and make the party a grand success. Sister Amandine addressed us and left us with a lasting lesson. At our farewell party, she instructed us to serve the peons and the lower staff first. "Give them due respect," she said. Her words ring in my ears today; whenever I host a party, I serve my maid before my guests. This was how we were given unforgettable lessons in our missionary school, which helped us all through our lives.

In those days, our progress reports were sent by post. My parents would wait eagerly for the results, and it was always a reason for celebration with sweets. Mostly during summer vacations, my father would take us to Hyderabad to escape the Warangal heat. A

peon named Fakhir Mohammed worked under my father and would bring us groceries and take us to the Zoo Park, Salar Jung Museum, and the Public Gardens. I remember him taking us to see the Bibi ka Alam procession during Moharram. He perched us on a bicycle so we could see over the crowd. I had a phobia for large crowds and nearly fainted due to the heat and congestion. Fakhir Mohammed grew scared, rushed me to a hotel, washed my face, and gave me hot milk until I recovered. He was a man of great responsibility who always brought us raw coconut and jaggery from Moazzam Jahi Market. We enjoyed our vacations visiting many places, eating ice-cream and playing with each other

A significant milestone was passing my SSC in the first division. My name was displayed on the noticeboard of the school. Till, today my name exists there on the notice board. —a matter of pride. My parents were happy at my achievement. My father got retired in 1971, the year when I passed SSC. I did my intermediate in Government Pingle College for Women, Waddepally. My aim was to become a doctor but unfortunately, I couldn't achieve my goal. I continued my studies and did degree in the same college. When I was in degree, I remember my father's saying, "Do not go after the glitters of the world. Always take the example of those who are lower in standard to you. Never feel restless seeing the rich, thank God for what you have." This is how he gave life lessons and guided us now and then in all aspects.

Later I sought admission in MA English in Kakatiya University. I vividly remember standing under a tea shop shelter with my father on a rainy day during the admission process. Those years of study were a golden period of my life. I spent many hours in the library and was eventually awarded a gold medal in 1979. My entire family attended the convocation—a moment of immense pride. I was awarded Gold Medal by the then governor of Andhra Pradesh K.C.Abrams in the presence of Mother Teresa, a noble personality. It added a feather in the crown of the event. Immediate after passing I joined Arts and science college Subedari, Warangal as part time lecturer and worked for one year.

Soon after, I began my career as a lecturer at Lal Bahadur Degree College Warangal. On my first day, my younger brother accompanied me because the campus was set back among rocks and felt quite lonely. Eventually, I gathered my courage and continued my job. My parents were happy at my achievement.

In the year 1982 my father fell sick and became bedridden. I still remember a night before his death. When I was passing by his bedside, he called me with the movement of his hands, he held my hand affectionately and looked into my eyes as though he wanted to convey some ultimate message. He couldn't speak but just looked at me, probably he meant that I should never deviate from the righteous path in my life. I understood his silence because sometimes silence speaks more than words. Early morning I heard a loud

sound of snoring; I woke up my mother and we all rushed to him. Those were his last moments. I suffered a heavy loss.

In 1984, i got married to a gentleman of my choice. My father was not there to witness my marriage, but I felt his blessings all around me for a happy future. I felt he was happy with my decision. Life remained pleasant with my life partner. I was very happy and very soon experienced the bliss of motherhood. In 1985 I was blessed with a daughter first then a son after two years. Their childhood still flashes in my memories as I go down the memory lane and brings forth indelible pictures shaping a bundle of countless sweet memories.

Life is a mixture of joys and sorrows. As life was happily moving with loving husband and beloved children, an unfortunate incident occurred. My mother suffered heart stroke and was hospitalised. It was a great jerk for me. I took leave and stayed with her all day in the hospital. She was happy to see me but equally sad at her condition. It was the fifth day of hospitalization I was in the ward making her eat idly. She happily introduced me to the nurses saying, “She is my daughter, working as lecturer in LAL Bahadur college, she took leave and staying with me.” She was happy and contented with my presence. As we were not allowed to stay for long in intensive care ward, I had to leave. Those were the last words, I could hear from her. Another massive attack snatched her from all of us. A great loss which shook me and my life activities. A motherly affection has no compensation elsewhere.

Life proceeded and I had to move on. I became busy with my children and family. As teachers we taught them all the virtues necessary to meet the challenges of life. We infused in them good manners and education—a key to success in life. We taught them that education should be the primary goal of life without caring about the hardships we encounter. I and my husband worked very hard to give them a good life and mould them into better citizens. We did not bother about the pains we took or the money we spent to impart the best education. Hence my daughter and son grew up to become ENT surgeons, both settling into successful lives. My daughter is a well-known ENT surgeon in the United Kingdom and my son a famous ENT surgeon in the kingdom of Kuwait. They blessed us with four grandchildren, two each. I and my husband enjoy the bliss of being grandparents. Being a grandparent is an inexpressible joy. Today I spend my time with my children and grandchildren happily.

My life partner is a man of good nature. This is God's and my parent's blessing to me. As far as horizon, I can visualise contentedness and joy in my life. My life partner remains my best friend in every activity. I retired from my service in 2014. I dedicated more time to my husband, children, grandchildren and to my sweet home. My passion for reading paved way for writing short stories and translating Urdu short stories of a few internationally eminent women writers. The main intention behind this was to spread their message to the non-Urdu readers on a large scale.

My books are published and a few more yet to be published. This has become my hobby. Whenever I get free time from my children and grandchildren, my husband and I pen down short stories. From teachers we have become the critics of the society. My other hobby is knitting, which was taught to me in my schooldays. I knit Woolen caps, scarves, hand warmers and tea coaster and so many other things. Though it sometimes pains my eyes, I continue to knit because it gives me pleasure. At 70, I am enjoying life to the brim. Every blissful moment is indelibly printed in the book of my memory, and no eraser can ever remove it. I am happy to have such a memorable life. I thank God for all that He has bestowed upon me.

END

The Silent Courtyard

He was very happy. His joy knew no bounds. The gentle rocking of his chair expressed his delight. His children were coming—this was the greatest news for him. He made several calls and conveyed the message of their arrival to his friends. The scattered pieces of his heart seemed to unite once again, allowing him to breathe freely—if only for a few days.

That afternoon, after lunch, he sat down on his chair to relax. He wished to take a short nap and closed his eyes. But to his surprise, he drifted into a *hulya*, a vivid reverie. He saw his children playing in the sand, laughing and enjoying themselves in a park along with their parents. The vision fascinated him deeply. It had been a long time since he had seen them. In his flights of fancy, he could not even imagine how they looked like. They must have changed a lot. His eyes yearned to see them again.

When they had left him, they were well-educated, grown-up, and married. Their aspirations were high; they desired a luxurious life, and for that they had to earn more. In this pursuit, they left their parents behind to live alone in old age. They travelled to different parts of the world in search of better opportunities. The only question that occupied their minds was how to settle in life. In doing so, they paid a heavy price of separation from their parents.

The youngest son, Adil, had gone to the United States to pursue his MS. His daughter, Rayeesa, was a doctor settled in Dubai. His eldest son, Athar, was a cardiologist in Saudi Arabia. All of them were well settled with their families. Yet he and his wife longed to see them, to hug them, and to hold them close, quenching their thirst for affection. They had bought gifts for their children and grandchildren and waited anxiously for the auspicious moment.

As time passed, he grew more nostalgic. Memories flooded his mind—how excited his children used to be while going to the park, how they laughed while swinging, how they relished the dishes prepared by their mother, licking their fingers and asking for more. Like every parent, he had cosseted them with love. The thought of playing with his grandchildren filled him with joy. During teatime, there was no other topic than their children. He silently hoped for the same love and attention in return.

Though only a day remained for their arrival, it became difficult to wait. That night, neither he nor his wife could sleep. He lay on the bed with wide-open eyes, unable to calm the excitement of his heart.

At last, the awaited morning arrived. The children came one by one. The parents were overjoyed. The sight of their grandchildren brought an indescribable happiness. Rayeesa had put on weight; her husband was a successful businessman. Her children, Ayaan and Sweetie, were seven and five years old. Athar, the eldest

son, was a reputed cardiologist, settled in an Arab country with his family. His daughter, Rabia, was studying in the tenth standard and aspired to become a doctor like her father.

Adil was different. He hugged his parents warmly and exclaimed that he had missed them very much. He had been in America for seven years and had married a green card holder of his choice. Out of love, the parents welcomed his wife, Lucy, without a word, though they felt deeply about it. He was a conscientious engineer in a U.S. firm, prosperous and well settled.

The children were happy to meet one another. Their prosperity delighted the parents, yet something pricked their hearts—their distance, and indifference to their loneliness.

The days passed in celebration. It was a *Retrouvaille*, ___ a time of reunion, filled with parties, shopping, and recreation. Everyone was in a festive mood. They gathered, spoke about various matters, and enjoyed themselves. Yet, no one spoke about their parents' loneliness. The children remained insouciant in their behaviour. Even the parents did not express their feelings. Seeing her husband's silent suffering, the mother's longing for her children grew even stronger. Though they noticed a sea change in their children, they tried to remain happy in their happiness.

But the festivity did not last long. The dreaded day approached—the day of departure. The next morning, the children were about to leave. A strange silence

filled the house. The children remained unaware of their father's emotional turmoil. No one noticed how frail their mother had become. She seemed almost lifeless.

That night, he could not sleep. His heart ached with silent sobs. The pieces of his heart that had come together now seemed ready to scatter again.

Morning arrived. His eyes were red and swollen. Yet none of his children noticed. They were busy preparing to leave. They believed they had fulfilled their duty by spending a few days with their parents and giving them gifts. For them, it was enough—until the next visit, uncertain though it was.

The father gathered courage and made an earnest plea to Athar to stay for a few more days, but it was in vain. Athar feared his professional commitments, lest his boss may pull the plug. Rayeesa read the runes and made excuses about her children's exams. Each had a reason, and none had time. In this retrouvaille he discovered the fragility of human connections.

They started leaving one by one, each departure leaving behind a deeper silence. The house that had once echoed with laughter and merriment slowly returned to stillness. The parents stood at the doorway until the last figure disappeared. Then, with heavy hearts, they went inside.

Everything was the same—yet nothing felt the same. The silent courtyard stood a symbol of their loneliness.

The rooms seemed larger, emptier. The voices that filled the house just yesterday had faded into memories. The house became desolate.

He walked slowly towards his rocking chair and sat down. The same chair that had swayed with excitement now moved gently in a quiet rhythm. He closed his eyes.

This time, there was no eager anticipation, no joyful imagination.

Only memories. They were a blast from the past.

He saw his children again laughing, playing, calling out to him. He tried to hold on to those moments, to relive them, to feel their presence once more. But slowly, the voices faded, and the laughter dissolved into silence.

A tear slipped down his cheek.

He neither slept nor rested. He simply remained there, between the past and the present—holding on to what once was and letting go of what could never stay.

The chair continued to rock gently.

The house was silent again.

He opened his eyes, as if expecting a voice...

but there was none.

He closed them once more—and held on to the only thing left to him...his memories.

END

Temptation And Truth

Some memories from childhood fade away with time, while a few remain etched in the heart forever. One such memory from my school days still returns to me whenever I think about honesty, kindness, and the quiet power of a good teacher.

I was studying in the second class then, a confident little girl with neatly combed hair and an oversized school bag. Our class teacher was Mrs. Barbara Clarke, an Anglo-Indian lady known for her grace, discipline, and gentle smile. To us, she seemed strict at first, but beneath her firm manner was a heart full of understanding and love.

I was considered one of the brilliant students in the class, and I always completed my homework carefully. Mrs. Clarke trusted me greatly. She appointed me the class leader, a responsibility I carried with great pride.

One morning, she asked me to collect the homework notebooks from all the students. After gathering them, I placed the stack on her desk. She was busy preparing lesson notes and, without lifting her head, said, "Please sit there and correct the homework till I finish my work."

I obediently carried the notebooks to a corner of the classroom and began checking them. The room buzzed

softly with whispers, the scraping of chairs, and the distant sounds of children playing outside.

As I corrected the notebooks, a playful thought entered my mind.

The teacher usually signed each notebook after checking it herself. Her signature looked simple enough—just a flowing “B” inside a curved “C.” Innocently, and without understanding the seriousness of what I was doing, I began putting her signature beneath my corrections.

At that age, it felt less like wrongdoing and more like helping the teacher finish her work quickly.

When the period ended, I handed the notebooks back to Mrs. Clarke. As she flipped through them, her eyes paused for a brief second on the signatures. My heart began to pound. I expected anger, perhaps even punishment before the entire class.

But she merely looked at me, smiled faintly, and said calmly, “Distribute the notebooks.”

That gentle silence pierced deeper than any scolding could have. Without uttering a single harsh word, she had made me aware of my mistake. I carried the notebooks back to the students with lowered eyes and a heavy conscience.

Just then, I noticed a classmate named Suman crying quietly at his desk.

Mrs. Clarke walked up to him and asked softly, “What happened, Suman?”

Between sobs, he explained that his spinning top was missing. It was brightly painted and very precious to him because his father had bought it on his birthday at a village fair only a few days ago.

The teacher questioned the class, but no one admitted taking it.

Then she turned to me. “Please check everyone’s school bag.”

I searched carefully, one bag after another, but the top could not be found. Whoever had taken it had hidden it cleverly.

Suman continued wiping his tears while Mrs. Clarke comforted him gently. Before the final bell rang, she quietly told me, “Keep an eye out for it.”

That afternoon, after school ended, several students, including me, waited for the second bus trip home. The playground glowed golden in the evening sunlight, and children shouted happily as they played.

While talking with my friends, I suddenly noticed Mohan standing near a tree, spinning a top skilfully on the ground.

The moment I saw it, I recognized it.

It was Suman’s top.

The red stripes, the chipped wooden edge, the long white string—there was no doubt about it.

I walked up to Mohan and asked, “Where did you get this top?”

He avoided my eyes and continued spinning it silently.

His silence itself was an answer.

After some persuasion, I managed to take the top from him and kept it safely in my school bag. The next morning, I went straight to Mrs. Clarke and told her everything.

She listened quietly, then smiled and patted my shoulder with affection.

Calling Suman forward, she placed the top in his hands.

The boy’s face lit up instantly with joy. He hugged the top tightly against his chest as though he had recovered a treasure.

Then Mrs. Clarke called Mohan near her desk.

The entire classroom fell silent.

We expected punishment.

But instead, she asked him gently, “Mohan, why did you take the top?”

For several moments he remained quiet. Then, with his head bent low, he whispered, “I liked it very much... temptation made me take it.”

Mrs. Clarke did not scold him.

She placed her hand softly on his shoulder and said, “It is natural to admire beautiful things, Mohan. But we

must learn the difference between admiration and possession.”

The classroom remained still as she continued:

“If something belongs to another person, we have no right to take it, however badly we may want it. Real character is shown when we control our desires instead of becoming slaves to them.”

Then she looked around at all of us and added, “Honesty is not proved when someone is watching us. It is proved when we are alone with our temptations.”

Those words settled deeply into our young minds.

Mohan’s eyes filled with tears. He apologized sincerely to Suman and promised never to repeat such a mistake again.

Mrs. Clarke forgave him immediately.

Years have passed since that small classroom incident, yet I still remember it vividly—the sunlight in the room, the frightened silence, Suman’s tears, Mohan’s guilt, and above all, the wisdom of a teacher who chose understanding over punishment.

Today, whenever our old classmates meet, Mohan speaks of Mrs. Barbara Clarke with the greatest respect. He often says that her kindness changed him more than any punishment ever could. From that day onward, he never touched what belonged to someone else.

As for me, I carried two lessons from that classroom.

The first was from my own childlike mistake—an innocent enthusiasm, which later made me realise the gravity of the action.

The second was from Mrs. Clarke herself—that true education is not merely about books and marks, but about shaping the human heart.

The lost top was eventually found, but far more importantly, a few young children found something even more valuable that day: a lifelong understanding of honesty, integrity, and self-control.

END

Childhood Under Siege

The morning sky was unusually quiet.

That silence no longer brought comfort. Ever since the war began, silence itself had become suspicious. People had learnt to distinguish between the distant hum of drones, the shrill warning of sirens, and the brief moments when the world seemed to hold its breath.

My daughter and I stepped out of the shopping mall carrying two small bags. The streets were less crowded than they had once been. Faces hurried past us, each person eager to reach home before another alarm shattered the day.

My daughter walked close beside me.

“Mama,” she whispered, “what if the siren sounds again?”

I smiled, though fear had already settled inside me.

“Then we’ll do what everyone else does. We’ll find shelter. Courage doesn’t mean being fearless. It means learning to live despite fear.”

She nodded quietly and held my hand a little tighter.

We had almost reached our neighbourhood when she suddenly stopped.

“Mama...”

Her voice trembled.

“Look.”

A group of children had gathered beneath a dusty neem tree.

At first, I smiled, believing they were inventing another childhood game.

One little girl gently laid a doll upon a toy stretcher made from two sticks and an old piece of cloth. Another child carefully covered the doll with a white handkerchief. Six children lifted the stretcher onto their shoulders.

The others walked behind with bowed heads.

One little boy raised his hands as though offering a funeral prayer.

Another wiped imaginary tears from his cheeks.

Slowly, solemnly, they carried the doll towards the end of the lane.

No one laughed.

No one ran.

For a few moments, childhood itself seemed to be walking behind a funeral.

My daughter looked at me.

“What are they playing?”

I searched for an answer but found none.

Instead, another memory rose quietly from somewhere deep within me.

I remembered my own childhood.

Whenever a wedding procession passed our street, I stood at the gate, fascinated by the lights, the music, and the beautifully dressed people.

Whenever a funeral procession followed days later, I watched that too with the same curiosity.

One evening I innocently asked my mother,
“Why doesn’t a wedding come to our house?”

A few days later I asked another question.

“And why doesn’t a funeral come to our house?”

She stared at me in silence before gathering me into her arms.

At that age I did not understand celebration.

Nor did I understand grief.

Both processions seemed merely different kinds of gatherings.

Years later, during my elder sister’s wedding, I finally understood why homes fill with laughter.

Years after that, when my father died, I learnt why the same walls could echo with unbearable silence.

Life itself had taught me the difference.

I looked again at the children.

Perhaps no one had explained death to them either.

But unlike my childhood, they were learning about it not through occasional glimpses of life, but through the endless repetition of war.

Every day they heard explosions.

Every evening they saw shattered buildings.

Every night they watched grieving families on television.

Death had entered their games before they had learnt the meaning of life.

The little procession reached the corner of the street.

One child whispered,

“Walk slowly. Don’t drop her.”

Another replied,

“After this we’ll bury her near the tree.”

They spoke with the seriousness only children can possess.

Not because they understood death—
but because they had seen it too often.

My daughter pressed my hand.

“Mama...”

“Yes?”

“When I grow up...”

She hesitated.

“I don’t want children to play games like this.”

I looked into her frightened eyes.

Neither did I.

The children disappeared beyond the lane, still carrying the little doll with the dignity they had borrowed from the adults around them.

The afternoon breeze stirred the leaves above us.

For a long time neither of us spoke.

I realised then that wars do not end when the guns fall silent.

They continue quietly inside the minds of children, changing their games, colouring their dreams, and stealing, little by little, the innocence they were born with.

As we walked home, I held my daughter's hand more tightly than before.

For the first time in my life, I understood that the greatest casualty of war is not always the soldier on the battlefield.

Sometimes, it is childhood itself.

END

Parents — A Boon or A Bane

The night was growing darker. It was a cold winter night. One by one, everyone prepared to roll up themselves in blankets and drift into sleep. But Sofia lay awake, restless, deeply absorbed in thought. Perhaps she was planning something____ that would change her life altogether and forever.

This was the house where she was born. She was the first girl child of her parents. Her mother often spoke of the celebrations that took place at her birth. Among all, her father had been the most excited. His heart rejoiced at the arrival of a daughter. He believed that the birth of a girl brings prosperity and blessings to the family. To him, it was a path to heaven. He loved her dearly and fondled her with affection.

Sofia was born in a middle-class family. Though not born with a silver spoon, her parents provided her with every comfort. She had a room full of toys and was considered fortunate among her friends. She loved her father deeply. He pampered her and fulfilled her wishes. She was admitted to a good school at the age of five, and from school to college, her life was filled with cherished memories.

As she lay awake that night, those memories passed before her eyes like a moving reel. It was a blast from the past. Her eyes filled with tears. Yet, she knew she

could not change her decision. To turn back now would be like biting a bullet—her future would be at stake.

Her mother supported her silently. She did not find fault with her daughter's decision, yet she was helpless. She was a chink in her husband's armour. Even the smallest task required his permission. She had spent her life compromising, turning a blind eye to many things. Being submissive by nature, she could neither oppose him nor openly help her daughter.

Sofia glanced at her younger sister, sleeping peacefully. How could she explain why she had to leave her home silently? It pained her deeply.

She was forced into this decision because of her father. She was well brought up, self-respecting, and valued her culture and principles. She had completed her graduation and wished to pursue higher studies.

But her father had other plans. His decision pulled the rug under her feet.

It shattered her dreams. He wanted to marry her to an aged businessman who could help expand his business. Her happiness did not matter to him. Once a loving and affectionate father, had changed over the time. He became authoritarian, treating his family like subordinates. He turned into a man driven by greed, considering even his daughter's marriage as a business deal.

His cupidity grew, and his ideology changed. This transformation cast a shadow over the entire household.

Sofia had her own ideals. She did not wish to marry a businessman; she preferred a professional, someone who would understand her aspirations. Yet she lacked the courage to oppose her father openly. At the same time, she could not sacrifice her life.

So, she decided to leave.

The clock struck twelve. She became alert. The destined hour had arrived. She looked once again at her sister, her heart heavy with love. The house was wrapped in deep silence. The night felt eerie and uncertain.

Slowly, she got up, gathered a few clothes, and took the money her mother had secretly kept aside for her. She turned back for a final glance at her home—the place where she had grown from a child into a young girl.

She stepped out.

She walked with a heavy heart into an unknown world—a world very different from the one she had known. Until now, her home was her entire universe. Outside, everything felt strange, unfamiliar, and unpredictable. Fear gripped her, she was chilled to the marrow, but she gathered courage.

If she stayed, her life would become unbearable. She could not accept that fate.

With heavy steps, she moved forward, unsure of her destination. Thoughts about her family flooded her mind. Doubts crept in—was she making a mistake? But she reassured herself. No, she was right. She squared the circle.

She hired a taxi and reached the railway station. Anxiety surrounded her. She looked at every stranger with suspicion.

A train was ready to depart. She boarded it without any hesitation.

As the train sped through mountains, tunnels, and forests, an eerie atmosphere surrounded her. She shrank within herself, waiting anxiously for the next stop. The train halted, and she got down.

Where to go? The question vexed her mind and the uncertainty overwhelmed her. She sat on the platform, closing her eyes. For a moment, she imagined her mother beside her—but it was only a thought. Her mother could not guide her now.

She had to decide for herself.

After much thought, she chose to join a working women's hostel. The next challenge was finding a job. The money she had would not last long. She needed to survive on her own.

Every day, she went out in search of work. She pounded the pavement, visited offices, and approached organisations. It was not easy to find a job in a city like

Chennai. People were busy with their own lives, indifferent to her struggles.

At last, she found a job as a secretary. It was a low hanging fruit, not ideal, but she accepted it gratefully. She considered it a blessing and began her new life. The salary was modest but sufficient for her needs.

When she received her first salary, tears filled her eyes—tears of achievement and longing. She missed her mother and sister deeply as she had no one to share her joy with. She sat brooding as many thoughts crowded her mind. At last, she decided it futile to live in the past. She had to move on in present and bother about the future.

Days passed. She met Ahmed, a software engineer in the same office. He was kind and supportive. Gradually, their acquaintance turned into friendship. They spent time together after work, talking, sharing ideas, and understanding each other.

Sofia had no one else to confide in. She could not speak to her parents about Ahmed, fearing her father's reaction. She dreaded being taken back and forced into marriage.

One day, Ahmed proposed to her.

He was a middle-class man with responsibilities, but he matched her ideals. She accepted his proposal, believing it to be the right choice—a new beginning.

They got married. She felt lonely at every step.

Initially, life seemed happy. But as it proceeded, differences began to emerge. She was happy if she agreed with Ahmed. He did not pay attention to her desires. Disagreements became frequent. How long could she adjust herself to the circumstances. Like her father, Ahmed expected obedience. Compromise was always demanded from her.

Sofia resisted.

She had seen her mother's life—full of submission and silence. She refused to repeat that pattern. She preferred independence, respect, and equality.

But her expectations clashed with reality.

Arguments increased and the bond of love weakened. Distance grew between them. Eventually, she had to return to a working women's hostel.

It was not new—but, was painful.

Amidst all this, she discovered she was pregnant. She was happy, but Ahmed remained indifferent. He did not support her in any cause. Once again, she was alone. She didn't want to be submissive like her mother. She chose to be independent rather than to submit herself totally to her husband and oblige him at every step. She did not regret for her decision. By then she understood the patriarchal society and its dominance.

She missed her parents more than ever. She became nostalgic and remembered the celebrations made at her birth, as said by her mother. She felt sorry for her baby.

After enduring countless hardships, she finally gave birth to a baby girl. Holding the child in her arms, she felt a warmth she had longed for—a sense of belonging, of purpose.

Tears filled her eyes, but this time they were not of helplessness. They were of strength.

Her daughter lay peacefully against her, unaware of the struggles that had brought her into this world. Sofia gently caressed her tiny hands and kissed her forehead.

In that moment, memories of her own childhood returned—her father’s affection, her mother’s silent sacrifices, and the painful choices that had driven her away from home. The past stood before her, not as a burden, but as a lesson.

She looked at her child again.

“I will not let your life be decided by others,” she whispered softly. “You will grow with love, not fear... with freedom, not control.”

For the first time in a long while, she did not feel alone.

Her daughter was now her companion—her strength in times of weakness, her hope in times of despair.

She closed her eyes, not to escape into the past, but to gather courage for the future.

The question that once troubled her mind still lingered somewhere within— “Are parents a boon or a bane.”

But now, she was determined to find her own answer through the life she would build for her child.

END

Fingerprints

Voices echoed through the courtyard, and the fragrance of sandalwood and turmeric drifted through the house as the marriage rituals began. In the family's tradition, an elderly woman would imprint her fingerprints on the wall before the ceremony. It was believed to be an auspicious sign, a blessing that marked the beginning of a joyful occasion. Soon after, the celebrations began. The manja ceremony followed, and the bride was adorned with happiness and care.

The marriage was performed with all rituals, in a jubilant atmosphere from both the sides.

The mother had chosen a well-educated girl for her son, an engineer.

The bride entered the household as a well-cultured and gentle young girl. She learned the customs of the family from her mother-in-law and treated everyone with reverence. The old couple, especially the mother-in-law, held a place of esteem in the house. Guests were warmly welcomed, and conversations flowed in their presence. Their role in the family was central and valued.

In the beginning, life flowed gently within the family.

Gradually, however, a change crept in. The son and daughter-in-law began to distance themselves from

family affairs. Their attention shifted toward their own lives and ambitions. They stopped involving the parents in matters of the household and no longer invited them to sit with the guests.

What once felt like presence now began to feel like inconvenience.

The daughter-in-law gradually grew impatient with the slow movements of the old couple. Even their footprints on the floor disturbed her sense of obsession with cleanliness. She began to complain to her husband, calling their presence a hindrance to the order of the house. She suggested that it would be better if they stayed confined to their room rather than moving about freely.

The grandson, however, remained deeply attached to his grandparents. He spent most of his time with them—playing, listening to stories, and sleeping beside them. He noticed the change in his parents' behaviour but remained silent, observing everything with quiet understanding.

As time passed, the old couple found themselves circumscribed to their room. The son, swayed by his wife's reasoning, accepted this change without a question. The affection he once held for his parents began to fade into indifference. Though deeply hurt, the parents said nothing. They chose silence over conflict, unwilling to trouble their son.

One day, the young couple entered their room with irritation. In a harsh tone, they instructed the old

parents not to touch the walls while walking. They complained about the fingerprints left behind. They were told to use a walking aid instead.

The same fingerprints that were once considered sacred had now become desecrated.

The parents nodded silently not to displease their son.

The grandson, unable to bear it, ran to them and embraced them with affection. From that day on, the old couple stopped touching the walls. The soft tapping of the walking stick echoed through the silent corridor each night.

One night, tragedy struck.

The mother woke up and reached for her walking stick, unaware that it had broken. As she tried to walk to the washroom, she lost her balance and fell. Her scream echoed through the house. The son and daughter-in-law rushed in and found her lying on the floor in pain.

Her leg was fractured.

As he lifted her from the floor, his hands trembled. For the first time, he noticed how light his mother had become.

But it was too late.

The mother became bedridden. Her health gradually declined, and she could not recover from the injury. Soon she passed away.

The grandson wept deeply, unable to reconcile the love he had received with the neglect he had witnessed.

After her death, the house was prepared for limewash, as per custom. Painters arrived and began cleaning the walls. As they moved toward the faded fingerprints, the grandson cried out, pleading with them not to erase them. Those marks, to him, were not stains—they were memories, blessings, and love.

No one could calm him.

Moved by his emotion, the painters made a promise. Instead of erasing the fingerprints, they transformed them into a delicate floral design upon the wall. The marks remained—reshaped but not erased.

They became a quiet remembrance of the grandparents, a lasting blessing for the child, and a silent testimony of regret for the parents.

The grandson smiled again.

Each morning, the child touched the flowers on the wall before leaving to school.

END

The wrong mirror

One winter morning, I awoke earlier than usual. A faint beam of sunlight slipped through the curtains, resting gently on the dressing table. I stood before the mirror to comb my hair and paused.

Silver had quietly conquered the black strands that once framed my face. Fine wrinkles rested around my eyes and across my forehead, as though time had signed its name upon me. For a long moment, I stared at the woman in the mirror, searching for the young bride I once knew.

Where had she gone?

Had youth really left so silently? I had never noticed its departure. A strange sadness settled in my heart.

I touched my cheek and smiled faintly.

“Time,” I whispered, “you are a clever thief.”

The aroma of coffee drifted from the kitchen. I prepared two cups, just as I had done for nearly forty years.

“My dear,” I called softly, “your coffee is getting cold.”

A familiar voice answered from the bedroom.

“I’m coming.”

My husband emerged a few moments later, his silver hair untidy, searching for his spectacles.

“They’re on your shirt,” I laughed.

He looked down and burst into laughter himself.

“So they are! I was about to search the whole house.”

We carried our coffee into the garden.

Winter had painted every leaf with dew. The roses bowed beneath tiny pearls of water while the morning breeze carried the fragrance of jasmine. We settled into the old wooden chairs that had stood beneath the neem tree for years.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

The silence between us was never empty. It was filled with decades of shared mornings.

I reached for my cup, but my hand trembled slightly. Before I could steady it, my husband gently held the saucer.

“Careful,” he said with a smile.

“I suppose my hands have begun telling my age.”

He looked at me for a moment.

“They’re the same hands that carried our children when they couldn’t walk.”

I looked at them again.

The wrinkles had appeared quietly, but so had countless memories.

Across the street, children hurried towards the school bus. One little boy chased his sister while their mother

adjusted their scarves and shouted instructions that neither seemed interested in hearing.

We both laughed.

“Do you remember?” he asked.

“Every single morning,” I replied.

“There was never enough time.”

“There was never enough money either,” he added.

We smiled.

How many mornings had we spent rushing through breakfast, packing school bags, paying fees, worrying over examinations, saving every spare coin, and praying that our children would grow into good human beings?

Life had seemed endless then.

Now it felt wonderfully complete.

Just then the garden gate swung open.

Our youngest grandson ran inside carrying his little school bag.

“Grandma!”

He threw his arms around my waist before I could even rise from my chair.

“I wanted to show you my drawing before school.”

He proudly unfolded a sheet of paper covered with bright colours.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, kissing his forehead.

His eyes wandered to a framed photograph resting on the garden table. It was taken nearly forty years earlier.

There we stood—younger, smiling, beginning a life together.

He picked it up.

“Grandma...”

“Yes?”

“Is this really you?”

I nodded.

“You were so young.”

“I was.”

He studied the photograph carefully before looking back at my face.

For several moments, he said nothing.

Then, with complete innocence, he smiled.

“I like you better now.”

I laughed.

“Better now? Why?”

“Because in this picture you’re smiling.”

“Am I not smiling now?”

“You are.”

“Then what’s different?”

He thought for a moment before answering.

“Now your smile reaches your eyes.”

His words settled gently into my heart.

Children have a way of seeing truths that adults often overlook.

He hurried away as quickly as he had arrived, waving goodbye before disappearing through the gate.

I turned towards my husband.

He was already looking at me, smiling quietly.

“I think,” I said after a long silence, “I’ve been looking at the wrong mirror.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“The one in the bedroom showed me only wrinkles. Today our grandson showed me everything those wrinkles have earned.”

He reached across the table and held my hand.

“Grey hair isn’t what tells our story,” he said softly. “It’s the life behind it.”

The winter sun climbed a little higher, spreading warmth across the garden.

For the first time that morning, I looked at my trembling hands without regret.

They had cradled babies, wiped away tears, cooked thousands of meals, folded countless prayers,

applauded achievements, comforted failures, and held the hand of the man sitting beside me through every season of life.

How could I wish them young again?

The woman in the mirror had not disappeared.

She had simply become richer in love, stronger through sacrifice, and gentler with time.

As we sat together beneath the old neem tree, saying nothing at all, I finally understood what the years had been trying to teach me.

Youth is a beautiful chapter.

Old age is the book that gives it meaning.

END

Between Yesterday and Tomorrow

“Time has changed,” uttered Saira.

Saira was a 15-year-old girl with a bold and independent nature. From childhood, she disliked restrictions and believed in equality between boys and girls. Her father supported her and encouraged her to grow like a free bird. .

Her mother, however, followed traditional values. She believed a girl should be disciplined, learn household work, and adjust to family life. This difference often led to disagreements at home.

Whenever her mother stopped her from playing outdoor games with boys, Saira would calmly reply, “Time has changed.”

She played Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and other outdoor games without hesitation. She moved freely in her neighbourhood, ignoring gossip and judgments. She believed empowerment mattered more than tradition.

Her mother was often worried about her behaviour. She wanted Saira to learn cooking and other household skills like her sisters, but Saira showed little interest. She believed a girl should not be limited to domestic roles alone, she should also be exposed to the outer world.

Meanwhile, Saira's elder sister was married in a traditional way to Javed, an engineer. She accepted the marriage quietly.

Saira disapproved. She felt her sister should have more say in the decision. But the family considered it unnecessary and did not involve her.

After marriage, her sister slowly began to face restrictions in her new home. She was discouraged from continuing her studies and expected to adjust silently. She obeyed without protest.

Saira could not agree to this.

"Why is she silent?" she asked her mother.

Her mother replied softly, "Sometimes life is about adjustment."

Saira shook her head. "No, Mamma... time has changed. She should speak for herself."

Years passed. Saira completed her education and got a job. When marriage proposals came, she rejected several traditional ones. Eventually, she chose a well-educated man who respected her opinions, and she got married on her own terms.

Her sister, meanwhile, continued to live a life of quiet compromise.

One evening, Saira visited her sister. She found her sitting alone, staring at a faded photograph from her wedding album.

"Are you happy?" Saira asked.

Her sister paused for a long time and said nothing.

Then she simply smiled faintly and turned away.

Saira stood there silently.

For the first time, her confident words did not come easily.

Outside, the wind moved fiercely through the trees.

“Time has changed,” she whispered again... but this time, her voice was unsure.

END

Experiences with Grandma

The seven-lettered word “Grandma” filled Simran’s heart with warmth.

It was a cold winter evening. Wrapped in her quilt, Simran lay thinking about the essay her teacher had assigned—“Grandma.” The thought of her grandmother instantly lit up her face. Sleep vanished; there was a rush of memories. She remembered her childhood—the garden, the games, the laughter. Her grandmother running after a ball, pretending to be tired just to make her laugh. Those evenings filled with stories, where she would fall asleep in her grandmother’s lap, holding onto the sound of her voice.

Every vacation meant one thing—going to her grandmother’s house. Sweets, stories, affection—everything felt fuller there.

But now things had changed.

Her grandmother was seventy—frail, slow, and dependent. The same hands that once cared for her now trembled while holding a cup of tea.

Simran felt a quiet ache. For the first time, she understood—love also means giving back.

When she visited her grandmother this time, she didn’t run into the garden. Instead, she walked beside her slowly, holding her hand. She fed her, gave her

medicines, and sat for hours listening—not to fairy tales, but to life’s truths.

One night, as her grandmother spoke softly about patience, kindness, and time, Simran realized these were the real stories she needed now.

She returned home and wrote her essay—not just with words, but with feelings.

Days later, her name was announced as the winner.

On the day of the ceremony, she insisted her grandmother come.

When her name echoed through the hall, Simran walked to the stage— not alone. She held her grandmother’s hand and walked slowly, matching her steps.

When she received the trophy, she didn’t look at the audience.

She looked at her grandmother.

Their eyes met—no words, just understanding.

For a moment, time stood still.

The applause faded in the background, but Simran felt something deeper than pride.

She realized that the greatest reward was not the trophy in her hand—

—but the hand she held.

END

Nancy Cottage

Nancy lived in a cottage that stood apart from all others in the locality—not merely in structure, but in spirit. Built by her husband, it was named “Nancy Cottage.” The name, carved delicately on a slab of marble, was more than an inscription; it was a serene declaration of love. Every letter seemed to echo Robert’s devotion to his wife.

Robert had designed the house with utmost care and prescience. It was spacious yet intimate, alive with purpose. A garden flourished at the back, and a small playground once rang with the laughter of children. They had two sons and a daughter, and in those days, the house was full—of voices, of movement, of life.

Nancy dedicated herself to the upbringing of her children, with love and care. Robert, too, played his part, working diligently to provide bread and butter for the family. Years passed the children grew, were educated, and eventually settled in their own lives.

With time came Robert’s retirement, and he received a generous settlement. The couple led a peaceful retired life, free from financial worries. In the quiet comfort of Nancy Cottage, they began a new chapter—slower, gentler, yet content.

But something had changed.

The children, now absorbed in their own worlds, visited only occasionally. Their presence, once constant, had become brief and formal----- short stays, polite conversations, and hurried departures, promises to return all lingered in the air, and seldom fulfilled. Yet Nancy and Robert did not complain. They were together and the silence did not feel heavy.

Human lives are not always the same. As said, "life is not a bed of roses----it is a pendulum between smiles and cries." Then illness entered their lives.

Robert fell sick—suddenly, quietly. What began as a fever soon confined him to bed. The children came, stayed for a while, and then left, each drawn back into the urgency of their own lives. Nancy remained, unwavering. She cared for him with devotion, sparing neither effort nor expense. But love, however deep, could not bargain with fate.

Robert passed away.

The house that once echoed with companionship now held only memory. The children returned to perform the rituals, stayed for a few days, and left again—leaving Nancy behind, alone within the walls that had once held a family.

No one asked how she would live. No one offered to take her along. In their lives, there seemed no room for her.

And so, Nancy remained in Nancy Cottage—a body without a soul

However, Nancy was a strong woman. She gathered strength from routine. Mornings began with a quiet walk in the garden, followed by a cup of coffee and moments of stillness. She attended to her chores, cleaned the house, bought groceries, and prepared her meals. The newspaper became her companion, prayer, her solace. She asked for nothing—only the strength to remain self-reliant, never a burden.

Time moved, as it always does—unconcerned, uninterrupted.

The children's visits grew rare, reduced to occasional phone calls. Nancy felt the distance, but she did not speak of it. Instead, she held on to the cottage. It was no longer just a house—it was Robert's presence, her past, her identity.

Then, one morning, the fragile balance broke.

She slipped in the bathroom and fell. Pain shot through her leg, leaving her unable to stand. She called out, but the house answered with silence. With great effort, she dragged herself to the living room and reached for the phone. One by one, she called her children. No one answered.

For a moment, despair settled over her.

Then, through the haze of helplessness, a memory surfaced—a number she had once seen in the newspaper. A voluntary organization that offered help to the elderly.

With trembling hands and a flicker of hope, she dialled the number.

A gentle voice responded.

Within minutes, a young volunteer arrived. She entered not just a house in disorder, but a life on the edge of neglect. Without hesitation, she lifted Nancy, tended to her injury, and called a doctor. She moved through the house with quiet efficiency—cleaning, arranging, restoring order where neglect had crept in.

She brought groceries, prepared food, and stayed until Nancy was comfortable.

In that moment, something shifted.

Relief replaced fear. Presence replaced absence.

The visits became regular. What began as service slowly turned into something deeper, care, then affection, and finally, an unspoken bond. The volunteer did not come out of duty alone; she came with warmth, with patience, with sincerity.

Nancy, in turn, found herself no longer waiting for her children's calls.

She understood, perhaps too late, yet with clarity:

‘Where there is no love, there is no true relationship.’

Years passed. Nancy grew weaker, more dependent. The young volunteer remained—steady, compassionate, unwavering. She fed her, cared for her, and stayed by her side through the quiet decline of age.

And one day, Nancy's journey came to an end,
peacefully, silently—within the walls she had never
left.

The volunteer stood perplexed for a moment, then did
what seemed right—she informed the children.

They came.

They performed the rituals, spoke the required words,
and soon turned their attention to what remained.
Their grief, if present, was overshadowed by
calculation. Their eyes settled on the cottage—the
same cottage they had long ignored.

Each laid claim to it.

Voices rose, arguments formed, and entitlement
surfaced—until someone remembered the will.

After searching the house, they found it—an envelope
beneath Nancy's pillow.

They opened it.

And read.

“I, Mrs. Nancy Robert, declare, in full awareness, that
after my death, all my belongings, including Nancy
Cottage, shall belong to the young volunteer who
served me with sincerity and selflessness in my old age.
My children shall have no claim over my property.”

Silence followed.

Not the silence of peace—but of realization.

Without a word, they gathered their belongings and left—carrying with them not inheritance, but consequence.

Nancy Cottage remained.

But now, it belonged not to blood, but to kindness.

The young volunteer stood within it—not as an outsider, but as one who had earned her place through compassion.

And in that quiet house, where love had once prevailed then forgotten, and found again—

Goodness endured.

END

After All, Men Are Men

Sakina was born in a prosperous family. Her father owned a large bungalow and acres of fertile land. She was my mother's cousin, raised with care, discipline, and traditional values. In those days, girls were educated only to read and write. Beyond that, they were expected to master household chores.

By the age of ten, Sakina's world had shrunk to the walls of her home. She learned cooking, cleaning, sewing, and every responsibility expected of a respectable girl. Like most daughters of her generation, she never questioned the decisions of her parents. Obedience was considered a virtue.

As she just left playing with the dolls and entered her teenage, her parents began to worry about her marriage. Sakina was not strikingly beautiful. She had ordinary features and a dusky complexion, but she possessed a gentle nature and quiet dignity. In those days marriages were done in relations and at an early age.

Her father had already chosen a groom — Saber, his sister's son, a schoolteacher of average appearance. The families approved the match immediately. Though Saber seemed hesitant, the pressure of his parents made him agree. Somewhere in his mind lingered the

desire to marry again, someday, to a woman of his own choice.

No one asked Sakina what she wanted. She accepted her elder's decision. She was a righteous, innocent and disciplined girl.

The marriage took place with celebration and blessings. In the beginning, life moved peacefully. Sakina proved to be a devoted wife and dutiful daughter-in-law. Soon she gave birth to a son, and the family rejoiced. Even Saber appeared content with life. Gradually, his earlier thoughts of a second marriage faded. Sakina's kindness and sincerity won his heart.

Then came his transfer to another town.

At first, he visited every week. Later, the visits became monthly. Eventually, he came only for a day or two before leaving again. Sakina accepted his neglect silently, believing patience was part of marriage.

In the school where Saber worked, a new lady teacher joined — a fair, confident, young divorcee. Friendship grew into intimacy, and Saber became infatuated with her. The old desire returned, stronger than before.

Without informing his parents or his wife, he married her.

When the news reached the family, there was outrage, but it changed nothing. The second wife soon took complete control over Saber. Clever and possessive, she persuaded him to distance himself from Sakina.

Meanwhile, Sakina, innocent and trusting, continued to welcome him warmly whenever he visited. During one such visit, she conceived again.

The second wife saw the pregnancy as a threat. Afraid that Saber's bond with his first family might become strong, she pressured him relentlessly until he stopped visiting Sakina altogether. Her influence was more effective and he listened to whatever she said.

Sakina never fought, never complained, never demanded her rights. She adjusted herself to humiliation, the way some women adjust themselves to pain — quietly and permanently.

She moved back to her parents' house with her children. Relations between the families grew strained, but life moved on. Saber built a comfortable life with his second wife, and she became a mother of two sons. He educated them well, gave them security, affection, and opportunity.

For Sakina and her children, there was only abandonment.

There was a sea change in her life, yet she continued to love him.

She waited for his visits long after they had ceased. She defended him even when others condemned him. She continued to wear the black beads around her neck which symbolized marriage. In her heart, she never accepted herself as deserted. Despite the presence of co-wife, she desired to maintain relation with him. He

was indifferent to her, and she was left to bite the dust. Her life became a bitter pill. He stopped giving them financial aid and abandoned Sakina completely. She left everything to fate.

Her younger brother helped raise her sons and supported their education. Without him, they might never have survived those difficult years. Still, Sakina never spoke bitterly of Saber. Sorrow had made her silent.

I remember how my mother would invite Sakina and her children to our house during family gatherings. She fed them warmly, packed gifts for them, that life had denied them elsewhere, and treated them with tenderness. My mother was a generous lady, and her brother was unkind and unjust.

He made his children from the second marriage successful professionals — a doctor, an engineer, and a bank manager. He never spent a penny on the sons of his first wife. Being a teacher, he set a poor example for society by discriminating between his own children.

The second wife, though a woman herself, never hesitated to destroy another woman's peace to secure her own happiness.

Till her last breath, Sakina lived with the thought of her husband. Though he had abandoned her long ago, she never removed black beads from her neck. She endured humiliation, neglect, and loneliness silently, carrying the burden of a broken marriage with patience and dignity.

Saber built a better life elsewhere, untouched by guilt or responsibility.

He deserted Sakina because he was an unkind man.

She raised her children through hardship and spent her life waiting for a man who had long erased her from his life. She remained faithful to a bond he had already broken.

Some women are taught to endure everything in the name of marriage and preserve relationships at any cost. And some men are taught that they can walk away without bothering about consequence.

After all, men are men.

END

Where Punishment Failed

In a small village named Malgudi, bordered by mango trees and dusty lanes, lived a boy named Asad. He was bright, playful, restless, and forever drawn toward mischief. He often stayed outdoors, playing with the children in his locality. He climbed forbidden walls, skipped lessons to chase dragonflies, and laughed whenever the elders scolded him. Correction and punishment were easy for him to endure. He did not care for either and recklessly repeated the same mistakes. Mischief was his greatest delight, and everyday seemed another adventure. He was happy in his own way.

His mother, Mahira, believed in the saying, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” For her, discipline was the only way to shape a child. Every mistake Asad made was met with punishment—harsh words, extra chores, beatings with a cane, and sometimes being locked indoors while the other children played outside. She feared that kindness would spoil him further and that she would lose control over him.

But with every punishment, his heart withdrew a little farther from hers. Instead of learning a lesson, he stubbornly continued making the same mistakes.

On a monsoon evening, Mahira warned him not to go near the swollen river. Yet Asad, stubborn as ever, ran

out with his friends without informing his mother. Slipping on the muddy bank, he was swept into the rushing water. He cried relentlessly for help, and his mother's words rang in his ears. Just as he was losing hope, the villagers reached him in time and managed to save his life. They carried him home, shivering and unconscious.

All night Mahira sat beside him, terrified of losing her only son.

When Asad finally opened his eyes at dawn, the first thing he saw was his mother—her face pale, her eyes swollen from a night of tears, her hand still clutching his as if letting go might take him away again.

For a moment, neither spoke. The silence between them felt heavier than any punishment he had ever known.

“Mother...” he whispered, his voice trembling. “Did I... scare you that much?”

Mahira's composure broke. Tears streamed down her face as she pulled him close, holding him with a desperation he had never felt before.

“Scare me?” she choked. “Asad, I thought I had lost you. I kept calling your name, begging you to come back... and all I could think was that I had spent more time punishing you than loving you.”

Her words struck him deeper than any cane ever had.

“I was so afraid of you going astray,” she continued, her voice shaking, “that I forgot you needed my love more than my anger. What good is discipline if it pushes you away from me?”

Asad’s eyes filled with tears. For the first time, he saw not a strict mother, but a frightened one—someone who loved him more than anything in the world.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” he whispered, gripping her hand tightly. “I didn’t understand... I didn’t know how much I was hurting you.”

Mahira gently cupped his face, her voice soft but firm. “And I didn’t understand how much I was hurting you either. We both forgot what truly matters.”

In that quiet morning light, something changed between them—not through fear, but through understanding.

From that day on, Asad began to change—not because he feared punishment, but because he could no longer bear to see the pain in his mother’s eyes. And Mahira, too, changed—choosing patience and love over harshness, knowing now that a child’s heart is guided not by fear, but by the warmth of being truly understood.

END

A Family Reunion

A knock on the door startled Sayeeda. She pressed her ear against it and heard a voice say, “Open the door.”

The voice felt familiar—the one she had longed to hear for years.

She rushed to open the door and stood frozen. A tall man in soiled clothes stood before her. His eyes were wide with shock. He stared at her—dressed in white, like a widow.

Before she could call his name, Sayeeda collapsed.

Two young girls rushed in, lifting their mother and placing her on the bed. They sprinkled water on her face, calling out, “Mama, get up!”

The man stepped back. What a pity, He could not even stretch his hand to hold his unconscious wife. The unfavourable situations made him an estranged husband for her, a stranger.

The girls had never seen him before. They were too small when he left them. Realizing this, he quietly walked away and sat under a tree, overwhelmed. Twenty years was a long period to erase his identity.

His thoughts drifted back.

Years ago, that evening, he had left work early, eager to take his pregnant wife to the hospital. Despite warnings of his friends about heavy rain and a curfew,

he hurried home. He had to take his wife to the hospital for delivery.

It was raining cats and dogs, and darkness fell. He struggled hard to find his way. Chaos erupted, and a loud sound was heard, probably riots broke out. A violent mob rushed towards him and attacked. A blow to his head left him unconscious on the road. All night he lay groaning.

A kind old man rescued him and took him to the hospital. It took weeks for him to recover. But when he returned home, the door was locked. His family was not there. He became hopeless and a momentary thought of ending his life appeared in his mind. But he did not give up hope, gathered courage and started going to job. Years passed in loneliness, and he continued his search for his wife and children.

One day, a stranger told him about a woman living nearby with two grown up daughters. Something stirred within him. He decided to follow the address. The next day he went to the place and knocked the door. Fortune favoured, his wife opened the door, but she fainted before recognizing him.

After some time, Sayeeda got up and looked at the door. There was none. She continued saying that she has seen their father. The daughters did not believe her, instead they were astonished at her behaviour.

Again, there was a knock at the door, she jumped out of the bed to open the door. Now it was the milkman. She sat on the corner of the bed and wept a lot. She

started talking about her husband and showed his photograph to her daughters.

He did not give up. In the darkness of the night, he went again and knocked at the door. This time, the door opened but a teenaged girl stood before him. Before he revealed his identity, Sayeeda rushed to the door. Tears filled her eyes as she recognized her long-lost husband. She couldn't resist the separation anymore and took him in.

By the time she could say something her daughters were frozen. Sayeeda looked back and turning to her daughters, she said, "You are not alone anymore. Your father is here, to take care of you."

The daughters believed their mother and welcomed him. The fatherly affection stirred his emotions. The family reunited happily after a long separation.

The estranged husband, now, returned home—not as a stranger, but as a loving husband and caring father.

END

Memories Remain

It was winter. The biting cold of December evenings was harsh, especially for the elderly. Savitri lay in bed, wrapped tightly in a blanket. She was a frail woman of seventy. Her eyes were closed, but she was awake, lost in the sweet memories of her past.

Her present held little excitement. She lived with her son, and the future seemed uncertain.

Suddenly, the light in her room flickered on. She opened her eyes to see her son, Manoj, standing beside her.

“Mother, get up,” he said sharply.

She looked at him, confused.

“Didn’t you hear me?” he shouted again.

With effort, her weak body responded. She slowly sat up.

“Get ready. You must leave this place and go to a home for the aged.”

She was stunned.

“Where, my son? What is this place?”

“It’s a place where old people are kept,” he replied bluntly.

“Why? Is it because I am old and weak?”

“Yes. Your duties are over. You need rest now.”

His words made everything clear.

Without protest, she got up. She gathered her belongings and cast a final glance at the house where she had spent years with her family. Then she stepped out silently.

She felt unwanted—a burden.

The journey was quiet. Neither spoke a word. After two hours, they reached the destination. Formalities were completed quickly.

It was time to part.

Her son left without hesitation.

She watched him go, her heart heavy. He drove away without looking back, relieved, as though he had discarded something unnecessary.

She sat on her bed, overwhelmed. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Memories flooded her mind.

She saw Manoj—not as a grown-up man, but as a little boy. She remembered feeding him, caring for him, and watching him grow. He used to share his food with her, laugh with her, and fill her life with joy.

But time had changed everything.

He grew up, got married, and became absorbed in his own life. Slowly, she faded into the background. And now, she had been removed completely.

Other inmates tried to console her. Gradually, she adjusted to her new surroundings. She formed bonds with fellow residents. Together, they created a new sense of family.

Yet, during festivals and quiet nights, she missed her son deeply.

Meanwhile, Manoj remained busy in his life. He never thought of his mother.

One night, he had a disturbing dream. In it, he was attacked by burglars. Helpless and in pain, he called out for his mother. She appeared and saved him, risking her own life.

He woke up, shaken,
his conscience stirred.

He realised his mistake—his cruelty, his neglect. Tears filled his eyes. Determined to make amends, he decided to bring his mother back home.

The next morning, he rushed to the old age home.

With a heart full of hope and repentance, Manoj rushed towards his mother's room. Every step he took was filled with urgency, his mind replaying memories of her love and care.

As he reached the doorway, he noticed a small crowd gathered around her bed. A sudden fear gripped him.

Pushing through the people, he reached her side.

There she lay—still, silent, and motionless.

“Mother...” he called out, his voice trembling.

There was no response.

He called again, louder this time, as if his voice could bring her back. But the silence remained unchanged—the same silence he had once chosen over her presence.

His legs gave way, and he fell beside her. He held her hand, cold and lifeless, waiting—hoping—for even the slightest movement.

But it was too late.

Tears streamed down his face as realization struck him with full force. The mother who had once responded to every call, who had stood by him in every moment of need, was no longer there.

He had come to take her home...

but now, he could only take her back as a memory.

His cries filled the room, but they carried no meaning anymore.

For the first time in his life, he called out “Mother” not in need, but in regret—

and this time... she did not answer.

He sat there, broken, surrounded not by her presence, but by the weight of his own actions.

Now, nothing remained with him except her love...

and the memories he could never relive.

_____Memories Remain.

END

The Night Between Us

Reshma and Rashid were a loving couple who deeply respected each other's feelings. True love grows out of respect, and fifteen years of intimacy and trust had only strengthened their bond. With every passing year, their love, happiness, and peace increased.

Reshma rarely visited her parents because she disliked leaving her husband alone. She shared every moment of her life with him—both joyful and painful. Whenever she felt sad, Rashid would hold her in his arms and comfort her. Likewise, he never liked being away from her. Wherever they went, they went together. Such was their love.

One winter night, Reshma received a phone call from her mother. She was crying.

“Ah! It hurts terribly,” her mother said. “I slipped and fell. I think my leg is fractured. Please come quickly.”

Reshma felt extremely worried and informed Rashid. He advised her to go immediately. Though she hated leaving him alone, the situation demanded it. It was a chilly winter night, and the wind blew harshly outside as she left in a taxi.

Rashid sat beside the fireplace, reading one of his favourite detective novels. The warmth of the fire and a hot cup of coffee made him comfortable, and he forgot Reshma's absence.

Suddenly, he heard a knock at the door.

Without lifting his eyes from the book, he casually said, "Come in."

The door swung open because it was unlocked. Rashid looked up in surprise, a woman entered the house. For a moment, he thought it was Reshma, but she was a stranger. Her clothes were completely drenched, and she was shivering from cold.

Being compassionate, Rashid asked her to sit near the fire. He offered her warmth and shelter instead of questioning her immediately.

Meanwhile, Reshma had returned home unexpectedly after arranging medical help for her mother. She knocked on the door several times, but no one answered. She had also been calling Rashid repeatedly, but he was too distracted to notice the call.

Growing anxious, she pushed the door open and rushed inside.

She was frozen at what she saw.

Rashid was asleep beside him was a stranger woman, who rested in his arms. Reshma felt the ground slip beneath her feet. For a moment, she thought she would faint, but she gathered herself and cried out loudly,

"Rashid! Rashid!"

Startled, Rashid woke up and jumped out of the bed. Seeing Reshma standing before him, he immediately realized how terrible the situation looked. Speechless,

he hurried into the other room. Hearing the commotion, the stranger got up and quietly left the house.

Reshma burst into tears and shouted in anger and pain. Rashid tried to explain, but his words sounded meaningless to her. She refused to listen or forgive him. Overcome with fury, she pushed him out of the room and slammed the door shut.

All night Rashid remained outside, knocking and pleading her to listen. But Reshma ignored him. Exhausted, he eventually fell asleep outside the door.

The next morning, he woke up expecting the usual cup of coffee. Instead, he found a note.

It read:

“Go away.

Leave my house.

Don’t show me your face again.”

The words pierced his heart. Though he knew the previous night had been a terrific misunderstanding born of weakness and circumstance. Reshma’s harsh rejection wounded his pride. Hurt and humiliated, he packed his belongings and left the house.

The weather was bitterly cold, yet he continued walking aimlessly. Questions troubled him—Where should he go? What should he do now?

As he wandered through the streets, the thought of the stranger woman came to his mind. The memory of the

previous night still lingered amidst the chaos. He found her sitting alone in a small café, sipping coffee.

He approached her and sat nearby. She apologized sincerely and asked whether things had been resolved between him and his wife. Rashid sighed deeply and narrated everything that had happened.

The woman advised him gently, “Go back to your wife. Apologize sincerely. Fifteen years of love should not end because of one mistake.”

But Rashid had already sunk into hopelessness. He felt rejected and broken. In his despair, he believed he could never return home again.

Later that evening, the weather grew even colder. Seeking shelter, he stopped at a nearby bus stop. Several people waited there silently until a bus arrived and everyone boarded except one woman.

She was a widow.

To escape the silence, Rashid started a conversation with her. Gradually, they shared their stories, loneliness, and disappointments. In the darkness of that cold night, two wounded strangers found comfort in each other's company.

For a moment, Rashid thought of a new beginning. It seemed easier than returning. Instead of taking a hasty decision, he realized how easily loneliness drives people toward companionship.

And suddenly, he remembered Reshma.

He remembered her care, her sacrifices, and the countless years they had spent together. He realized that he had been searching for comfort outside, but what about Reshma. She had only reacted from pain, betrayal, and heartbreak. From her perspective, the scene she witnessed had destroyed fifteen years of trust in a single moment.

At that instant, Rashid understood:

Love does not survive on explanations alone—it survives on trust, patience, and forgiveness.

Without another word, he stood up from the bus stop and walked back toward home.

END

Togetherness

As usual, Sarah glanced at the screen of her mobile. She saw what she expected—a message from her husband. She opened it. The message read: “Talaq.” It was in reply to the heated argument they had the previous night.

A strange mixture of emotions crossed her face—joy and anxiety. Joy, because it was a long-awaited response and anxiety, because she now had to face life alone. She had two children: a son of eight years and a daughter of six. The thought of their future made her anxious.

She sat on the sofa, closed her eyes, and drifted into memories. Her marriage, a ten years ago event unfolded like an album before her. She had been welcomed warmly by her in-laws. Her parents were delighted—she was married to a wealthy man, Nabeel. Her life was full of comfort: a big house, servants, cars, and luxuries. The early days were filled with happiness, added to it was a honeymoon in Singapore. What more did she desire from life?

The passing time, faded the excitement into routine. After two years, she gave birth to a son and was praised by the family. Soon, however, responsibilities began to weigh on her. With no reason, she developed a dislike

for her mother-in-law, despite her kind attitude. Small issues turned into arguments.

Instead of guiding her wisely, Sarah's mother encouraged her defiance. Sarah grew more stubborn. She disliked household chores and demanded a separate home. Nabeel refused—he was devoted to his parents. Their arguments intensified resulting in distance.

The birth of her daughter, briefly softened things, but Sarah's attitude hardened. She felt strong and independent. She was firm in her decision and wanted control over things, and not compromise. Nabeel tried to reason with her but eventually lost patience. In a moment of anger, he pronounced "Talaq."

"Mamma, I'm hungry," her daughter's voice interrupted her thoughts.

Sarah got up and gave breakfast to her daughter. Just then, another message popped up on the mobile, it was from Nabeel, apologizing and expressing his regret. He said he did not mean it, only an outburst of anger. But Sarah had already made up her mind for an independent life.

Her parents supported her, urging her not to submit. She started working to bring up her children. Life became difficult, but she remained firm in her decision. Nabeel tried to be in touch but there was no response from Sara. She was silent even when he tried to enquire about his daughter.

One afternoon, her daughter lay sick in her lap. Suddenly, the child woke up crying.

“I had a bad dream,” she sobbed.

“What happened?” Sarah asked gently.

“In the dream, I was a grown-up girl. You were searching proposals for my marriage... I got scared and refused for marriage.”

“Why, my child?”

“What if my life becomes like yours? Will I also leave my husband and come back? I don’t want to marry, Mamma...

I want to be with you and live an independent life like you.

You are my ideal, mamma.”

Her daughter clung to her and cried.

Sarah froze.

For the first time, she saw the image of her own life reflected in her child’s fear.

Slowly, she reached for her phone... and began to type.

END

Rocking Chair

I visited her as usual. She was sitting on a rocking chair, her eyes closed, gently swaying back and forth. As she heard my footsteps, she opened her eyes and asked the maid to see who it was. I greeted her from the entrance. She smiled faintly and called me inside.

Her name was Rahmat Bi. She was around eighty years old with a frail body, wrinkled face and slow in her movements. Time had weakened her body, but it was loneliness that had truly worn her down. She lived alone, except for a maid who helped her with daily chores. Most of her work was managed over phone calls.

She had lost her husband ten years ago to a heart ailment. In his lifetime, he had travelled to USA several times to visit his daughter, though he never really liked staying away from home. After his death, Rahmat Bi was left to face life on her own.

Her daughter lived in America with her family. Rahmat Bi visited her occasionally in early years, but age had made travel difficult. Now she remained in her house in Hyderabad, while her daughter, busy with her own life, visited her rarely.

Despite her loneliness, Rahmat Bi never complained. She spoke with pride about her ability to manage things independently on phone. Whenever I visited,

she would share stories from her past—her college days, her participation in the play “She Stoops to Conquer,” and her happy life with her husband. She often lost herself in those memories, her face resplendent as she spoke.

She admired my family and often praised the way we raised our children. I still remember her introducing us to others with pride. Those moments seemed to give her a sense of belonging.

In her youth, like many others, she had dreamt of a prosperous future for her daughter. She had happily married her to a man settled in America, never imagining the loneliness that awaited her old age.

Every morning, she would sit on her rocking chair, neatly dressed, her hair styled with care. She maintained her dignity and routine despite everything. With her mobile phone in hand, she stayed connected to the world—talking to friends, settling matters, and occasionally speaking to her daughter.

Loneliness had become her silent companion.

Slowly her health began to decline. She longed more than ever to see her daughter, but the visits never came. Whether it was helplessness or negligence, no one could say.

One day, she fell seriously ill and was admitted to the hospital. I visited her there. She lay on the bed, eyes often closed—not asleep but lost in memories. Sometimes she would suddenly open her eyes, as if expecting someone.

probably her daughter.

But it was always friends, the maid, and silence.

The doctors eventually said she had only a few days left. There was no shortage of wealth—she had a bungalow, a car, and all comforts. Yet, she lacked the one thing she needed most: the presence of her own child.

One night, she spoke to her daughter on the phone for a long time. She seemed calmer afterward and went to sleep early.

The next morning, she woke up restless. “She will come,” she murmured, her eyes fixed on the door.

But no one came.

She closed her eyes again... and this time, they never opened.

Her body was brought back home for the final rites.

I stood there silently; my eyes filled with tears.

The rocking chair in the corner was still moving gently...

but it was empty.

END

Death Or Murder

Shama breathed her last.

She was dead.

But did she die? ... or was she murdered?

The question lingered—unanswered, unsettling.

Yes... it was a gradual murder. Not in a moment, but
—day by day.

Was it intentional, or an unconscious cruelty?

Again, a question that refuses to rest.

People die every day. Then why did her death disturb me so deeply? Why did it awaken such unrest, such relentless interrogation? Was it because she was close to me?

No.

It was because she had been wounded beyond repair—wounded in a way that no eye could fully see, yet no heart could ignore. At last, she found refuge in death, the only place where pain could no longer reach her.

A relative called to inform me.

“She slipped in the bathroom early in the morning,” he said. “She passed away within a day.”

Was it a fall?

Or the final blow to a life already shattered?

Her lifeless face lay calm, almost peaceful. But beneath that stillness, I could see a story—unspoken, unfinished.

Memories flooded my mind.

She was my childhood friend. We grew up together, studied together, shared dreams in innocent companionship. Then marriage came—and separated our paths.

Mohsin—her husband—was a clerk in a small office. A man of narrow mind and shallow thought. It was her misfortune that he was chosen by her father and elder brother. They fulfilled all his demands, eager to see their daughter married. That was enough for them.

Fate was not done yet.

Mohsin went to Saudi Arabia and began earning. With money came arrogance, not wisdom. He considered himself successful, but his thinking remained small, unchanged.

Shama, on the other hand, was educated, gentle, and brought up in dignity. She entered marriage with trust, faith, quiet devotion. She respected her husband, adjusted to his nature, and tried to build a life of harmony. She bore his flaws in silence, protecting the honour of her father. She became a victim to all his nuisance and immoral acts.

But what did her innocence earn her?

A slow, silent death.

Perhaps she did not die that day.

She died long before,

the day when Mohsin chose to marry again.

I remember that day.

It was a moment of pleasure for him—but the end of existence for Shama.

Of course, Mohsin did not inform her. She came to know by a stranger. At first, she did not believe it. She thought he had gone on official tour. But the truth that he had gone to begin a new life with a new lady shattered her.

She collapsed.

When she regained consciousness, the world before her was dark, void of meaning, void of belonging. Life slipped off suddenly. She cried bitterly. But all in vain. No one consoled her. Not even her son.

Did he not hear her cries... or did he choose to be silent like his father?

She had lived for them—sacrificed every breath, for their happiness. And in return they both betrayed her.

Very soon she realised that she is alone now. There was no one to hear her. She deliberately pushed herself into a silent cocoon. Biologically she was alive----yet without soul. The agony is not that her husband deceived her, but her son who was wise enough did not intervene the matter. He remained unconcerned.

Had he stood by her, had he questioned and revolted against his father, for the injustice done to his mother, perhaps his intervention could restore some dignity to her life. He could have won a husband for his mother, the woman who brought him into this world. But he chose to be silent----- a clear reflection of his father.

Things already done could not be undone_____

“No”___she answered herself. The only option left was to remain silent and dignified.

Day by day, Shama's existence faded. She was a skeleton wrapped in the skin, her spirit broke, her health declined. Illness followed grief, and grief consumed life.

Who was responsible?

Her husband?

Her son?

Or the society that gives unseen wounds in the name of culture?

Mohsin never returned to her—not truly. He became a bygone story for her. Yet she failed to scratch him out of her soul. She was taught ‘survival’ is nothing, but compromises.

But endurance has a limit. How long_____?

Every moment has an end. Hence, she too_____

One day she fell in the bathroom and died. People named so many reasons for her demise. She died by

keeping her reason wrapped in her soul. May people call it the years of negligence, humiliation, or emotional abandonment?

Her body lay still—but her story screamed mouth to mouth.

A story not of a single woman, but of a mass of womanhood.

How many Shamas suffer in silence? How many pretend to live and silently pass by the bypass road of life. How many are slowly erased—not by physical violence, but by indifference? Is it the flaw of male dominated patriarchal society? For him second marriage was fun, not a matter of concern. It sapped life out of her. More than herself, she was bothered about her son's future.

Men justify their actions. Society ignores. Destiny is blamed.

Should the man's brutality be condemned or a woman's fate be cursed?

But can injustice ever be justified?

She is dead leaving a question behind her.

Her cry remains—the cry of a woman unheard, unseen, unlived.

Was it a death? _____

Or a murder?

END

The Price of Happiness

Shazia pleaded with her mother for a divorce. Her request shocked her mother; she tried to console her and asked the reason behind such a drastic decision. Shazia broke down in tears and finally revealed everything.

Her mother recalled all the complaints Shazia used to make over the years, about her husband's behaviour. For seven long years, she had endured emotional neglect and humiliation. Now, she had finally decided to end the marriage. Shazia also had a six-year-old daughter whose future weighed heavily on her mind.

After marriage, Shazia faced many difficulties with her husband and in-laws. In the beginning, adjustment between two people with different personalities was naturally difficult. Mutual respect and understanding were necessary, but her husband never cared about her feelings. He denied her the freedom to take decisions, stopped her from working, restricted her shopping and spending, and controlled every aspect of her life.

For a few years Shazia tolerated his demands silently. She often shared her suffering with her parents. She gave birth to a baby girl and hoped that motherhood would change her husband's attitude. But nothing changed. His harsh behaviour continued in every matter, whether emotional, financial, or personal.

Shazia was a strong-willed, educated, and confident woman. She tried her best to adjust and maintain the relationship. However, her husband's selfishness deeply hurt her. When she started earning, he refused to bear her expenses and even ignored his own daughter.

Repeatedly, Shazia informed her parents about the problems she faced. She waited Patiently for the right time. She eventually came to her parents' house, completed training, and took up a job. However, he disliked her growing independence and demanded that she resign. He did not like phone calls from her boss.

By then, Shazia had changed. She had become determined and refused to quit her job. Learning to face life's hardships, she chose to stay independent. Surprisingly, her absence did not seem to matter to him. He continued enjoying his life and even attended his brother's wedding without his wife and daughter.

Fed up with his behaviour, Shazia decided to take the decision of divorce. Her parents did not interfere with her decision, although they tried several times to convince their son-in-law to change and take responsibility for his family. Friends and relatives also attempted reconciliation, but nothing worked. Finally, after many failed efforts, both families agreed to a divorce.

A meeting was arranged, and the divorce papers were signed. Her husband even refused to take

responsibility of his daughter, and this was accepted by everyone present there.

After the divorce, Shazia felt free from the emotional torture she had endured for years. She focused on her career and single-handedly raised her daughter. During this time, she developed a cordial relationship with her boss, which gradually turned into intimacy.

Her boss was a wealthy, middle-aged married man with wife and children. He was unhappy and dissatisfied with his first marriage, though he continued supporting his first wife and children. Frequent meetings with Shazia led to mutual understanding and affection. Eventually, they fell in love and decided to marry.

He willingly accepted responsibility of Shazia's daughter. Soon, Shazia found herself surrounded by love, comfort, freedom, and wealth. She finally found the respect and emotional support she had long been denied or perhaps the attraction of his riches

She prepared her daughter for the new life and convinced her parents about her second marriage. Her parents readily agreed, hoping their daughter would finally find happiness and stability in life,

Everything went smoothly, and they got married. Her parents hosted a grand reception on the occasion. Shazia moved into her second husband's luxurious villa with her daughter and began moving in a BMW car. She now had servants at her disposal, financial security, freedom, and a life of comfort.

Her daughter adapted quickly to the new environment and enjoyed the changed lifestyle. Shazia's parents were delighted to see their daughter living in prosperity.

The existence of the first wife did not matter to anyone. Surprisingly, Shazia accepted sharing her husband's love with another woman. In most situations, such an adjustment would be difficult for any woman to tolerate. Yet, in Shazia's case, she accepted it willingly.

Shazia believed she had finally found happiness. But time alone can reveal whether it came from love, or from comfort wrapped in luxury.

Happiness remains a question only life can answer.

END

What Stayed Behind

There lived a couple in the neighbourhood. They lived a simple and happy life. Sadiya was a demure lady of sixty. She believed in being the artist of her own life. She did not like to give the paintbrush to anyone else. Because of this, people in the neighbourhood often envied her. She had everything she desired in life.

Days passed quietly. She raised three children — a daughter and two sons. All were well-educated and settled in life. They had their own families and lived independently. They rarely considered their parents as their responsibility and visited only occasionally.

Sadiya remained active in her domestic duties, always supported and appreciated by her husband. She never relied on a maid and took pride in managing her home herself. She believed that blood is thicker than water, but her children proved otherwise. Her needs were often ignored, though she never openly complained., though her life was not a closed book for them.

Once, when the house was affected by termites, the couple arranged for treatment. Around that time, Sadiya developed a severe lung infection. Her condition worsened, and she began depending on a portable oxygen device. It became a part of her daily life. Her husband took care of her with patience and dedication.

The children did not visit. They called occasionally, and their lives remained focused on their own families. For them, distance became a habit.

Time moved on without pause. Sadiya continued to move around the house, though slowly, affected by illness and emotional strain. The oxygen device became her constant companion, along with occasional help at home. She had to adjust with the maid for her daily chores.

One morning, her husband suffered a sudden heart stroke and passed away.

His death brought a sea change in her life. She was left alone. Life became a bitter pill to swallow. Her children arrived for the funeral and performed the necessary rites. Once the formalities were over, they gradually returned to their lives. Their reasons and explanations meant little to her.

Sadiya accepted their absence without protest. She gathered herself and continued living, though every part of her life had changed.

Her husband had left behind a house and pension, which supported her survival. The respiratory aid and financial stability became her means of living. She depended on them more than on people, having long understood that her children would not return in the way she once hoped. She learned to live without them.

Her sons never considered taking her with them. Gradually, even phone calls reduced. She too stopped waiting for them.

She knew that one day, when silence finally took over her life, they would return — not to care for her, but to complete the rituals of farewell and later divide what remained.

The respiratory aid would remain with her until her last breath, constant and reliable. Her children, however, would appear only when everything was already over.

This is life — not always just, but often accepted as it is. Relations and emotions lose meaning when self-interest takes over. People eventually live for themselves. Even family bonds weaken when convenience becomes priority.

Sadiya sat by the window, the steady sound of the machine filling the silence of the house.

Loyalty remained not with people, but with a machine — the portable respiratory aid.

END

The House Between Them

The village of Hastinapur often celebrated stories of harmony, but none was spoken of more warmly than that of the two sisters, Sameena and Muneera, who married two brothers from the same family.

The brothers, Jameel and Sohail, were hardworking, gentle men who lived with their widowed mother, Rayeesa. Their father had died many years earlier, leaving Rayeesa to raise her sons with sacrifice and determination.

When the marriages were arranged, everyone remarked that fate itself had woven the families together. The sisters had always been inseparable, and now they would continue their lives under the same roof. They were known for their love for each other.

For several years, happiness filled the house. Everything was in order and cordiality prevailed in the house. The two brothers found themselves lucky to have such sensible and loving wives.

Sameena, the elder sister, gave birth to two daughters, sweetly and lovely as they were called. Muneera was blessed with a daughter named Pinky. The children played together like siblings, their laughter echoing through the courtyard.

Rayeesa adored all the three girls. Every evening she sat beneath the neem tree, telling them stories while their mothers looked after the daily chores.

To all the villagers , the family seemed perfect.

But perfection is often a fragile illusion.

It began with small complaints.

One afternoon, while folding clothes on the terrace, Muneera sighed:

“Ma always finds fault with my cooking.”

Sameena nodded her head.

“She says the same things to me. Yesterday she told me I waste too much oil.”

The sisters laughed at first. Then the conversations became frequent.

Every gesture of Rayeesa was examined.

If she advised, it was interference.

If she remained silent, it was indifference.

Either way she was blamed.

Slowly, ordinary disagreements grew into grievances.

Neither sister realized that they were feeding each other's frustrations.

What might have ended as passing irritation became resentment.

The brothers noticed the change.

Dinner conversations grew shorter.

Smiles became rare.

Arguments surfaced over trivial matters.

One evening Sameena confronted Jameel

“We need a separate house.”

Jameel looked up in surprise.

“Separate? Why?”

“I cannot live with your mother anymore.”

Jameel remained calm.

“She is old. She is alone. This is her home.”

“And what about my peace?” Sameena demanded.

Jameel tried reasoning with her, but every discussion ended in bitterness.

A similar conflict unfolded between Muneera and Sohail .

Both sisters reached the same conclusion: they wanted independent homes where their mother-in-law would not live with them.

For the brothers, the choice was unexpected and unbearable.

Their mother had devoted her life with every sacrifice in raising them after their father’s death.

The thought of leaving her alone was unbearable and impossible for them.

They didn't want to forego their duty towards their mother, though they loved their wives and children.

Caught between duty and affection, they hesitated to decide.

Their indecision only deepened the cause.

The atmosphere in the house became tense.

Then came the day that changed everything.

A heated argument erupted between Sameena and Jameel.

Harsh words were exchanged.

Years of accumulated resentment exploded.

In anger and wounded pride, Sameena packed her belongings and left for her parents' home with her daughters.

Everyone assumed she would return after a few days.

Instead, the separation gap widened between them.

Relatives attempted reconciliation.

Meetings were arranged.

Messages were sent.

Each conversation ended with the same demand.

"Separate living."

Jameel felt torn between mother and wife.

He wanted his wife back, but he could not abandon his mother.

Then, during one particularly bitter confrontation, anger overcame judgment.

Words were spoken that should never have been uttered in haste.

Jameel pronounced talaq.

The moment passed, but its consequences remained.

Silence followed.

A marriage that had once been filled with promise ended in a few irreversible seconds.

The tragedy did not stop there.

Watching her sister's struggle, slid Muneera's position.

Soon she too left with her daughter and returned to her parents.

Sohail pleaded.

"Come back. We can solve this."

But Muneera remained unchanged.

"No mother-in-law. No joint family."

Sohail bluntly refused to abandon his mother for the sake of his wife.

And so another family drifted apart.

Not through hatred.

Not through cruelty.

But through stubbornness, pride, and the inability to come to a right conclusion.

Years rolled by.

The daughters grew up.

Sweetie became a teacher.

Lovely studied medicine.

Pinky became an engineer.

Each carried memories of a family that had once been united.

Meanwhile, Rayeesa grew old and weak.

The courtyard that had once echoed with children's laughter became quiet.

Jameel and Sohail continued caring for their mother, but a sadness lingered in their hearts.

The sisters had won the separation they demanded, yet not the happiness they had imagined. They had to pay a price.

Loneliness replaced victory.

Festivals became painful reminders of what had been lost.

One winter evening, the three grown up daughters gathered at a family wedding.

For the first time in years, they spoke openly about the past.

“Did anyone really win?” The elder one asked.

No one answered.

Because everyone knew the truth.

Their family had not been destroyed by a villain or by fate.

There had been no great betrayal.

Only a series of choices made without patience, humility, or compromise.

A conversation that should have led to understanding had paved a way to dispute .

A disagreement that required wisdom had been met with pride.

An indecisive search for solutions had allowed anger to make decisions instead.

When Rayeesa passed away, the entire family stood together at her funeral.

The sisters, older now and softened by time, wept not only for the woman they had once opposed, but also for the years they had lost.

Years that could never be regained

After the funeral Jameel spoke softly,

“We spent our lives protecting what we thought was right.”

Sohail nodded.

“And lost what mattered most.”

Years later, Sameena passed by the old ancestral house.

The neem tree still stood in the courtyard.

Children from another family were playing beneath it, and for a fleeting moment she heard echoes of her own daughters' laughter.

She realized that no one had truly wanted separation. Each had only longed for respect, understanding, and a sense of belonging. The tragedy was that none of them had known how to ask for those things without hurting anyone else.

As the evening shadows lengthened, she quietly walked away.

Behind her, the old house stood in silence—a witness to a family undone not by hatred or fate, but by pride, wounded hearts, and the choices made when compassion gave way to anger.

The house no longer belonged to them.

Its lesson did.

The great losses in life are often preventable but not irrevocable.

END

The Betrayal of Blood

The rhythmic beats of the dhol and the songs echoed through the house. The fragrance of jasmine spread everywhere. It was a traditional wedding celebration filled with jubilation. The first ritual was the ‘manja’ ceremony in which all the guests were dressed in yellow-coloured garments.

Shaista, the bride’s younger sister, was full of life—playful, mischievous, and radiant. She danced to the tunes of the songs, along with her friends, and planned to tease the groom during the ‘mehendi’ ceremony.

Her sister Nazia, the bride, gently warned her not to overdo it—but Shaista only laughed.

The elderly women were preparing to receive ‘sanchaq’ from the bridegroom’s people. The ‘sanchaq’ is a ritual in which bride’s wedding costumes, bangles, chappals, fruits, betel and nuts are brought as offerings to the bride.

Next comes the ‘mehendi’ ceremony, in which the bride’s sister along with her friends goes to the bridegroom’s house to apply mehendi on his finger. They sat waiting for his arrival. There was a loud acclamation at the arrival of the bridegroom.

Shaista’s glamorous dressing attracted his attention.

During the ceremony, she playfully held the groom Tanveer's hand, demanding money as part of the ritual. Amid laughter and teasing, a strange connection began—one that continued unnoticed. Her sweet talks and elegant dressing mesmerised his feelings.

Tanveer's intentions were not innocent. He was a lusty young man. The urge to meet Shaista grew stronger in him.

Over time, their interactions grew frequent. Family outings and gatherings gave them chances to meet. Slowly, boundaries blurred, and intimacy progressed.

Shaista eventually got married to another man, but she remained emotionally attached to Tanveer. She was disinterested in her married life and found excuses to visit her sister, spending more time with him than with Nazia.

What seemed harmless turned dangerous.

Nazia began to sense something was wrong. She tried to stop her sister. But it was too late, a sort of irresistible relation developed between them. He started ignoring his wife. Nazia lay in bed planning to distance Shaista from her husband. Her husband was away till late, she became restless and walked out of the room. She heard a few murmuring sounds and the ecstatic laughter of her sister. she discovered the truth—her husband and her sister together.

The betrayal of blood shattered her.

She couldn't tolerate the deception of her husband.

Unable to bear the pain, she ended her life. Her children couldn't tolerate the loss of their mother. This did not move their father, he continued his advances towards Shaista.

Life moved on. Disturbances intensified in Shaista's married life, she took divorce from her husband and stayed with her parents. Her visits to Tanveer continued nobody could stop their relation and ultimately, she married Tanveer. She has built her house upon the grave of her own sister, and it would certainly make her unhappy very soon.

Years passed the family progressed; she gave birth to a son. All were happy, Tanveer forgot his life with Nazia. He got busy in educating Shaista's children with her first husband. He performed their marriages and looked after their wellbeing. He never failed in his duties as a father.

Conflicts arose on the issue of property, Shaista grew restless, affectation faded leading to another divorce. Tanveer moved on and married someone else.

In the end, Shaista was cornered and left alone—just as she had cornered her sister.

Her life became a reflection of her actions.

Karma played its role.

She finally reaped, what she had sown.

END

Two Sides of The Same Coin

Mahween was known in her college not only for her beauty but also for her elegance and confidence. Her fair complexion, graceful personality, and refined sense of dressing made her stand out wherever she went. Whether it was an ordinary lecture or a college function, she carried herself with style and dignity. Her friends admired her modern outlook and fearless demeanour.

She was a final-year Commerce student, very intelligent and outspoken. One afternoon, she presented a paper at a seminar on the topic “Tradition and Modernity.” She spoke passionately about how society must preserve values but reject customs that suppress individuality and dignity. Her words were thoughtful, bold, and convincing. When she finished, the hall echoed with applause.

“Excellent presentation, Mahween!” her professor said proudly.

Her performance was superb, and she was on cloud nine.

Her friends gathered around her with smiles and congratulations. Mahween walked home joyfully. She felt as if the world had finally understood her.

At home, she dropped her bag on the sofa, relaxed on an easy chair, and switched on a soft melodious tune.

Closing her eyes, she replayed the applause in her mind.

Suddenly, the music stopped.

Mahween opened her eyes in irritation. Her mother stood near the player, worry visible on her face. Behind her sat Mahween's elder sister, Sana, silently holding two dresses against herself.

"Which one looks better?" her mother asked anxiously. "The blue one or the pink?"

Mahween sighed deeply. She did not need an explanation. Another family was coming to "see" Sana for marriage.

Sana worked in a reputed software company and earned a handsome salary. She was kind, educated, and independent. Yet none of these qualities seemed important to society. Every proposal focused only on her appearance, weight, cooking skills, and manners.

"Wear the blue one," Mahween said quietly.

"But doesn't the pink make me look slimmer?" Sana asked nervously.

The question pierced Mahween's heart.

This was not the first time Sana had been rejected. Once, a family had complained she was "too career-oriented." Another time, they said she had gained weight. Slowly, Sana stopped eating her favourite food and began following strict diets. Every rejection stole a little more of her confidence.

That evening, the house turned tense. Their mother moved restlessly from room to room arranging cushions, checking snacks, and correcting Sana's appearance.

"Sit properly," she instructed. "Speak softly. Don't laugh too much."

Mahween did not like a girl sitting before the bridegroom's people waiting for their judgement.

She could no longer remain silent.

"Why should she behave like she's giving an interview?" she asked sharply.

Her mother frowned. "This is our tradition."

"Tradition?" Mahween replied. "Why should only girls be judged traditionally? Why doesn't anyone ask the boy to walk properly or prove his skills."

Her father looked up from the newspaper. "Mahween, enough. Some customs must be respected."

"But should respect come at the cost of dignity?" she asked.

The room fell silent.

Later that night, Mahween found Sana sitting alone by the window.

"Does it bother you?" Mahween asked softly.

Sana smiled faintly. "Sometimes. But what choice do we have?"

“We do have a choice,” Mahween said firmly. “Marriage should be about understanding and respect, not inspection.”

Sana looked at her thoughtfully but said nothing.

Days passed, and another proposal was rejected. This time, the family had said Sana was “not traditional enough.” Their mother wept quietly in the kitchen while Sana locked herself in her room.

Watching her sister suffer, Mahween made a silent promise to herself. She would never allow anyone to measure her worth by appearance or rituals. She would marry only someone who accepted her as an equal human being or remain unmarried

Time passed.

Mahween completed her Chartered Accountancy and established herself as a successful professional. During a business conference, she met Aamir, a calm and thoughtful man who admired her intelligence before her beauty.

One evening, while they walked beside a quiet lake, Aamir said, “I don’t want a perfect wife, Mahween. I want a true companion.”

For the first time, Mahween felt completely understood.

Their marriage was simple, free from unnecessary rituals and judgments. It was built on friendship, trust,

and mutual respect. Aamir encouraged her ambitions, and Mahween valued his kindness and support.

Years later, during another college seminar, Mahween was invited as a guest speaker. Looking at the young students before her, she smiled and said:

“Tradition and modernity are not enemies. They are two sides of the same coin. Traditions that preserve love, respect, and family should remain. But customs that steal dignity must change. A society grows stronger when it learns to balance both.”

The audience applauded loudly.

Among them sat Sana, clapping the loudest, her eyes shining —not with relief that society had changed, but with hope that someday it finally would.

Mahween had not broken tradition. She had simply removed the humiliation hidden inside it.

END

What Will People Say?

I grew up hearing one question repeatedly in our house: “What will people say?”

This single question changed the course of my sister’s life forever. In those days, many decisions were not taken according to one’s happiness or wisdom, but according to society’s opinion. Especially for women, dreams were often silenced under the burden of social fear. It is a misconception which spoiled the life of many people. It shattered the dreams of those people who did not have the courage to make decisions. This misconception changed many right decisions.

We were five siblings—two brothers and three sisters. My elder sister completed her PUC and wished to pursue higher studies, but she never expressed her desire openly to her parents. In those days, girls were taught not to voice their opinions freely.

My father did not support higher education for girls because graduation colleges were co-educational. He feared, “What will people say if a girl studies in a co-educational institution?” Instead of sending her for graduation, he admitted her to a vocational training institute meant only for girls. There, girls were taught cooking and sewing, skills considered essential for marriage. During those days, the bridegroom’s family often insisted upon them.

Soon, my father began searching for a suitable marriage alliance for her. He agreed to a proposal from a middle-class family. In those days, the girl's opinion hardly mattered. My sister silently buried her dreams and agreed to the marriage out of respect for her parents.

After marriage, she tried to live according to the wishes of her husband and mother-in-law. She endured their ill-treatment quietly. The atmosphere in her marital home was hostile, but she preferred silence rather than bringing disgrace to her parents. Many times, her in-laws even objected to her visiting her parental home.

With great difficulty, she convinced her husband and in-laws to allow her to come to her parents' house for her first delivery. She gave birth to a baby girl and was overjoyed. However, her happiness did not last long. Neither her husband nor her in-laws came to see the newborn child. Perhaps they had been expecting a male child.

For three months, her husband did not even see the face of his daughter. He never worried about "what people would say," and society too remained silent. As a child, I often wondered about this injustice, but I found no answer.

My father was deeply hurt by the treatment given to my sister. At one point, he even thought of divorce for her. But once again, the same question arose in his mind: "What will people say?" His friends advised him

not to take any hasty step. Society did not care about my sister's suffering, even though her life stood on the verge of ruin.

This single phrase— “What will people say?”—changed the course of her life. Why is a woman always the target of social judgment? Had she been allowed to study further in a co-educational institution, perhaps her life would have taken a different direction.

My father became deeply distressed seeing his daughter's condition. He regretted his earlier decision. Realizing his mistake, he wanted to improve her situation and restore happiness in her life. He discussed the matter with his friends, who advised him to arrange a meeting with his son-in-law and his family.

A meeting was finally held, and by God's grace, the matter was settled peacefully. My brother-in-law agreed to take my sister back home. Life slowly moved forward. In course of time, my sister gave birth to a son. The family celebrated the occasion, and both children were brought up with love and care.

Determined that her children should have a better future, my sister educated both her daughter and son in English-medium schools and eventually made them doctors.

When it came to my education, my father no longer worried about “what people would say.” He admitted me to an English-medium school and encouraged me to pursue higher education. I completed my M.A. in English, became a lecturer, and led a successful life.

Through the hardships faced by my sister, my father learnt an important lesson. He realized that decisions should be guided by wisdom and compassion, not by the fear of society's judgment.

Even today, the phrase "What will people say?" continues to influence many lives. But true happiness and progress become possible only when one gathers the courage to rise above such misconceptions...

END
