

Dreams

By The Hillside

PARINITA DAS



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
Stories Matter

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Season's greetings! Kindly choose the season that you have picked my book up in. It doesn't have to be the 'right' season. It's not a 'mix and match' test, guys (smiles cheekily). You could be shivering in a December winter, and be all 'rainy' and 'aaj chai pakore ho jate, toh maza aa jaata' in your heads. Yes, I despise this that I occasionally do. I'll stop

Hi! Parinita Das, 27, former movement artist and an ardent writer. Three years back, I staged my writing name to be 'Veatrix', and my dear friend, Sailesh Mohanty, almost puked at this idea. I've always been a keen observer of stories, be it cinema or novels. I like to play a part in tales, mostly in the backdrop, due to the constant delirium of panic that wheezes through my spine each time it's 'camera' or a 'confrontational' moment. Y'all know what it is, but we refrain from using the 'a' word today.

I've been writing since the last five years. This is my first time publishing. It didn't take me much time to write this book. The plot had created itself in my head, I just had to bring it about on paper. I believe once you have a story, you owe it to yourself as an author to pen it down. That's always better than wanting to write, and then creating a story around it. It surely didn't cost me time.. but it might have cost me my life for this one. It cost me my whole heart.

Ever since I can remember, I have loved stories. Mystery adventures, romance novels, mythological narratives, descriptive tales and old world fables. I like to read, anything and everything. Today, even blogs, newspapers and old letters. I had begun with classics of 'Enid Blyton' as an 8 year old, and soon moved on to savour crime mysteries by 'The Famous Five'. Contrary to public opinion, I have had my days relishing 'The Vampire Diaries' and my absolute favourite during my teen years was 'Twilight'.

I remember my Mother and I visiting our local book store each time I finished a book. She wasn't a fan of feeding me junk, but so as to nurture a 'reading habit' in me early on, she would often reward me after a book with

- a) another book of my liking (that was to satisfy her literary urge)
- b) a multi coloured, multi layered ice cream cone (yes, that was all me)

She would spoil me with countless collections of comic books for children. 'Tinkle', 'Chacha Choudhury' and 'Amar Chitra Katha'. I read them all with a keen liking towards story telling in general.

As I grew up, I was devoted to the language and story telling process of 'Ruskin Bond'. I owe him all my write ups. I've read over 20 books of him, and it still doesn't feel enough.

'Roald Dahl' and 'Archies' would make me delve deep into the world of the west. I understood anecdotes and varied colloquial references.

For a while, I read celebrity books. Michelle Obama's 'Becoming', Twinkle Khanna's 'Pyjamas Are Forgiving' and 'Mrs.Funnybones', Priyanka Chopra's 'Unfinished', Emraan Hashmi's 'The Kiss Of Life', Soha Ali Khan's 'The Perils Of Being Moderately Famous', Tahira Kashyap's 'The 7 Sins Of Being A Mother and others, and Karan Johar's 'An Unsuitable Boy'. They were all so varied, interesting, informative and candid accounts of their lives.

- Mother, thank you. I owe this to you.

If I wouldn't have read so much, I probably wouldn't ever have taken on writing. Thank you for giving me the space to be myself and to blow in me life, not once, but every single time life beat me down. I know I don't say or show this often or enough but Mama.. I love you!

- Daddy, I don't owe you this. I owe you much bigger things in life. But knowing you, I know all you've ever wanted for me was for me to be happy, and have merrily cherished all of my accolades, no matter how big or small they were.

Thank you, for speaking sense, news, information and freedom into my head, every single time I lost the will to live. I don't mind a sick body, a painful life or a mind that destroys my own peace, for as long as I have you by my side.

- Dearest Uncle, I extend my sincere gratitude to you for being one of the biggest support systems of my life. Thank you for being around with your loving, nurturing presence and for always pushing me to reach for the stars, and nothing less.
- Dear Nikky, thank you for existing.

My guardian outside home, my friend, my confidant. I won't thank you today for being creatively involved in all of my endeavours or pushing me to think and do big, or for blessing me with your insights.

I want to thank you for doing for me everything else that kept me going in my worst. For hearing me out every time I had things to say, for consoling and scolding me, for being an elder sister and cooperating friend. I can't imagine my life without your angelic presence. Thank you.

- My Brother, Tanmoy. Thank you for pushing me through and through, in all of my down days. Your dedication and sincerity reflects in your efforts. Thank you for being such a responsible soul, for doing with me the 'illustrations' of this book and for making sure I am standing tall, lone, no matter how bad life beats me down. My heart is full. You are precious.
- Thank you Silu, for being the best friend any human could possibly ask for. I don't just mean it theoretically but quite practically. Thank you for giving me the space to be myself, for being kind, empathetic, informative and an ideal human in such simplistic, absolute ways. Your write ups, work, demeanor and outlook inspires me greatly.
- Dear Subha, thank you for humorously engaging in all of my work and being a reliable support throughout. When people filter, a lot of our close ones get phased out. But with your sheer efforts and

sincerity as a friend, you have helped me shape myself to be a morally righteous, principled individual. I extend utmost love and gratitude.

- Dear Sahil, I extend my gratitude to you for keeping my spirits up, happy and alive. Brother Dear, every single day with you is indeed a very happy day.
- Dear Prateekshya, thank you for being around me whenever I wrote a piece, for reading it, for being so generous in terms of time and kindness. For inspiring me to get my work published. My dear friend, author of a timeless beauty, 'But You Are Real'.
- Suna Apa, thank you for being whole heartedly appreciative of all my work and for always inspiring me to do more in life, be it movement arts, academics or creative writing.
- Thank you Dinesh, for reading a lot of my pieces as I wrote them and for being a good friend to me in times of need. I extend my sincere gratitude to you for your time and efforts.
- Thank you, Suryan Sir, for enlightening me with countless scripts of yours and helping me understand life a lot better.
- Thank you Soumya Sir, for pushing me to pursue arts nonetheless having been an academics tutor of mine. You have instilled belief and confidence in me with your presence, which I had lost in the lapse of time. My sincere gratitude towards your kindness, sensitivity and sincerity.
- Dear Maa, before you left for your heavenly abode, I am more than thankful to you, for you to have thrust in my guts a Ruskin Bond classic on a random Thursday afternoon in 2020. That's when I consciously realised I was always made to work in a world of words. I miss you, greatly and I'll surely see you soon.

Dear Ben,

I hope and pray that,

whenever the world beats you down,

Or when bleak days seem longer to pass,

You hold on to dear life for just a little bit longer,

And never fail to find, the Strength In Your Scars!

Dear Nora,

You held me alive, each time I broke myself.

My beacon of strength, my voice of reason.

My sister, my guide, my friend, my Parent.

I owe you, my whole heart.

I love you.

FOREWORD

I had never believed in the pull of destiny before. The journey of life was as tedious, as it was mechanical. You work, and you (mostly) reap what you sow. Sometimes, discipline leads way for you. And at times, life feels like a dead end. Like dead fish in the sea, floating wherever the whims of the river takes them. No passion to kill, no question ever asked.

I had lived my life in a carefully curated path for years down the line. I plan, I work, I execute. It doesn't work out, but I never lose hope, I never give up. An almost tasteless sense of being in a body, mind, heart and soul.. that almost have no correlation to each other, in form and figure, soul or sanctity.

I do, I wait and I let go.

The process. The life. The loss.

Till the day I met you.

Or the day I lost you.

This isn't a giveaway of the plot, it's life that happens.

I've written a clichè romance novel, or have I?

It's much more knotty than that.

This book could have easily been called 'Crossroads'.. because what are roads honestly? Just confusing alleys of distant dream lands. But that's also what the journey of love, the journey of life is. Ek aag ka darya hai, aur...

The protagonist is a young Indian girl from the hills. She's a lot like you, and a lot more like me. She's naive, passionate, righteous, determined, hopeful and mostly driven by emotion. On the downside in this world, she doesn't really understand the complexities of human nature, or the conceited tangles of intention that come with people.

Some people, when we meet them, they ignite such zeal in us, as though blowing in us, LIFE. Life that had with time, faded away into a meaningless abyss. Days that felt seemingly monotonous. As though all that we ever needed, was the reason, that their presence fulfills us with. And with their departure, our reasons decline too.

It is happenstance, or is it tragedy? Perhaps, it is comedy. Humour that life and luck bestow upon us. Breaking us to a point where living feels like a lesson, leaving it be on us, all for our gut and soul to realise and infer.

As much as I relish indulging in perfecting the language and being an expert at framing the perfect story, I have let myself go, let myself be in this one. I've rambled on, at times. Held myself back, at others. I've shown fears of a woman in some chapters, and been incredibly daunting in others. But what terrified my soul whilst my time in this book, is that, I've bared my heart in here.

A lot of you are going to agree to this. And lot of you won't. That's alright. Lenses and perspectives shift from person to person, time, space and experiences. You could like the pace of the tale, and might not relate with the characters, or fall in love with a character, and find the plot immobile. Either way, I am thankful to you for having given my book a chance. To a young writer, it means the world.

I hope and pray that whenever you love, you win.

You invariably do, because love requires courage, selflessness and patience. When you truly love, you already win. Win over your fears of failure.

And each time that you love,

I hope you fall in love with yourself a little more.

You dream a little more.

You breathe a little more.

I did too.

Cause I'm also just a girl with
DREAMS,
BY THE HILLSIDE.

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CHAPTER I: I SEE YOU!

As I blow dried my hair this mildly cold Sunday afternoon, the gush of hot air seemed to play pleasant tunes on my face, and aired my freshly dyed locks with a rather gentle sense of grace. My summer dress with short sleeves did not seem to work wonders this winter. Hence I eagerly longed to get into something warmer.

It wasn't easy doing chores, finishing tasks these days. Not since I've partially lost mobility in both my legs for over a year. It all began with a tear in my meniscus, culminating into disastrous and quite painful consequences. The aftermath of art isn't always love. At times, it is heart break. After a deep breath, I ran the handles of my wheel chair, collected a woollen midi dress with sleeves as long as the drink my sister had the night before called 'long island' and went about my way. I am not great at humour, but can I interest you in a melancholic poem?

I was meeting Nora after almost a month's wait. Her new work world demands all her patience and attention. She's one of the hardest working souls that I've met. She and I go way back to high school when we met each other for the first time. I was her senior in age and grade, but there was my girl.. sporty, nerdy, popular. We weren't the best of friends then, or at least even after years of knowing each other. Our personalities were poles apart. So were our interests in academics, food and men. Our bond developed eventually. We would meet during the weekends and speak endlessly. We discussed our views on life, future, academics, relationships, politics, geography, music, arts. Basically covering the whole world.. and sometimes beyond. With time we

realised, we had both let our guards down. Now it's a territorial space that we share for each other. We're quite like siblings now. Battling over the tiniest of things, and yet fiercely protective of each other.

We've been whiling away cafe hopping on Sunday evenings these days. Both of us scurrying to save the last bit of penny and patience we could have had for this well coveted outing ventures of ours. This time she suggested an overpriced coffee outlet mentioned by her friend who's a regular at this (Thanks Lexie, aren't you a doll!), and I almost pushed her over a raving truck over it. Dissatisfied and disoriented, we sorted to a rather familiar cafe, round the corner at Isle 8.

As tedious and tiresome it is for her to drive an old, vintage honda, it is all the more distressing to help me with my wheels time and again. My Doctor said it won't be so for long, that the physical pain of the steroid injections would fade soon and I would be able to walk with my crutches in a week's time. But she a country side strong lassy who need no man or plan! I use my walker for stairs with support. Finally booking a table of two, we plonked down on our seats. The interiors were absolute wonders.

White toned chairs and cute mellow architecture against a royal vintage blue back drop. They had a round fancy mirror at the back with adorable initials that said 'Be You' and wooden show pieces against the walls in colours that complemented the pastel hues of this cafe corner. The frontier had a huge television set for video games with headsets and duels to battle. And I spotted a wall piece with 'Live Music' scribbled on it, glowing earnestly in warm welcoming sub tones.

After having settled down and placed our orders of cold and hot coffee (Yes, I must drink cold coffee, even if it's snowing outdoors)... (And she wouldn't touch anything cold after sunset), we began chatting. Only to be interrupted by music. Live music. Guess they weren't lying with the tapestry. They had members singing and instruments to accompany their mild melody. We saw a presumably older member singing while two of their younger inmates played the guitar and the clap box. It was

an absolute delight. Such an alternation from my usual ordeal and nerdy evenings.

We all took it in for a while, and then joined in, singing from our seats. And then I saw him. At the cajon. A faint black tee with faded blue denim jeans and deep blue slip ons. He sat.. wide legged playing his part with absolute immensity and enjoyment. Not that this was even remotely a general event for me, but I saw him looking at me. For a little longer than usual. His eyes were stuck, perhaps without his knowledge or consciousness. I looked up, our eyes met for what felt like a billionth of a second and I moved in my chair while he shifted on to the guitar.

I had an unsettling feeling in my stomach, a strange fidgeting. So I spoke of the little things that came into my mind at the moment. As Nora munched into her crisp tofu wrap, I saw him switch seats with the current guitarist. As he began, I couldn't help but analyse him. His arms were a wheatish shade, a bulging bicep and countless arteries popping all along, like spears of green leaves up a mighty tree. A silver bracelet dangled on his right arm that kept playing seek with the strings. He wore a bunch of rings. So unlike me. He pulled the show masterfully while his good friend, Dev sang old Bollywood classics.

Experiencing art in such pleasant vividity, Nora and I reminisced of our times as lead performers at 'Norman's Theatre Arts', an internationally acclaimed performing arts studio in Manali. We travelled and performed our souls out as movement artists and trainers back then. For performing arts was the only language that our hearts, habits and hours spoke. This was way back in high school that we had whiled our wild teenage days. The stage, the sweet sweat and countless practice hours sent us into an incredibly memorable high. As I spoke, I stole glances of the man in black. My faint heart unable to interpret the fidgety feeling in my gut. I had never experienced anything as such. It was bittersweet. I was straddling still to decide, which was it that I felt more. I could not interpret if it was warning me in affirmation or

negation. It was too soon to know. Memories of an unfulfilled love came about in flashes, and I nonchalantly brushed it aside.

To remember the night, I began recording a short video of Nora and myself on my old, broken phone. It isn't fair to complain, it has been a faithful companion in times good and bad, saved me from a few uninvited glances and uncomfortable conversations over the years. As Dev wrapped up his set, he handed over the mike to the mystery man. Dev had a handful of tattoos, we noticed. Nora had never been fascinated by tattoos. She didn't quite like the theory of having permanent sketches on her body. She believed that humans were everdynamic in nature, and that life was just an amalgamation of various fleeting moments. But I was. A firm believer. I even have one. A little star behind my left ear. I had gotten it carved in the memory of a baby spitz I had raised and loved for a whole ten years. He crossed the rainbow bridge, just about a year ago. He was my child, my saviour, my little love and my first born.

A star, indeed.

Adjusting the mike on the stand, he prepared for his set. And we waited apprehensively as to what he would sound like. Before he began, he looked me up once, closed his eyes and began singing.

So life DOES get awkward!

Khamoshiyan'.. was the first song I heard him sing. I realised, there was a surreal resonance when I heard him hum for the first time. There was a certain honesty in his voice, or so I thought. Song after song, we couldn't help but admire in sheer awe. All the singers joined in, they sang, played the cajon and revelled in this heartfelt symphony. All of us present in the cafe joyfully shared the vibe. Suddenly, I couldn't feel the December cold in my feet anymore, my legs seemed to have worn themselves off of pain and the intertwined thoughts in my head managed to have resolved themselves all on their own. Was this what healing felt like, or was I walking towards the edge of a cliff already?



CHAPTER 2:

PS : YOU'RE TALL

‘D^octor Singh's appointment has been rescheduled for next weekend. He's out of town for a supposed family function.' said Dad dismayed, a hint of worry in his eyes. He was visiting. I noticed they didn't gleam the way they did every time he saw me, regardless of the defenseless state and situation that we were abruptly thrown in by destiny. There was no layer of an underlying joke this morning as we sat for breakfast together. He's always tried to be cheerful amidst all circumstances.. good, bad, happy or terrible. But it had been over a year and my condition did not seem to improve at all. A life altering surgery was on the table.. but so was blueberry marmalade, one of my favourite breakfast go alongs. I changed the subject to discuss my cousin's wedding and we chatted away.

During late in the afternoon in the weekends, I tutor primary school kids at home. Those kids are a freaky bunch. Always mumbling and munching on snacks. Rarely ever interested in their calculus theorems or remembering important historical dates. I always begin their sessions with reading the daily newspapers out loud to them, with the intention of making those munchkins keen and intrigued for knowledge and information. Perhaps a day will come when the socio economic status of the country would excite them as much as finger chips did today. For now I let them be, as they rolled on the floor laughing at a silly story one of them had about their annual function costumes. On some rare days, I join them in.

After a short prayer session, I helped myself up the stairs and into the terrace with my walking sticks. I swear if someone ever said to my face that the most difficult sticks to use in daily life dwellings were chopsticks, I would give them a little tumble on their heads with my crutches. It was a windy evening, and today I let the breeze caress my tresses. Wrapping myself up tighter in my shawl and breathing in the calm of the serene sunset, I broke into an old Kishore Kumar classic. All my life, I've had Maa sing old world classics to me.. till she could. As I collected dried out clothes, from the corner of my eye I could see a star glinting brightly. It had a hint of a blue halo to it. Now, I had seen stars, but something about it made me stare for a while. It was as if the cosmic cadences were attempting to speak to me, of things and theories I was perhaps perpetually unaware of. I looked on a little more and let the wind sing to me of romance in distant foreign lands.

Two days passed by in a hasty hurry. My online tests had me hooked on them. I was pursuing an on the line course to upgrade my skills after the incident ended my career as an educator in movement arts, two years back. I am a working professional today in the field of advertising. I was to meet Nora that afternoon to help her with her upcoming debate on a topic that I was more familiar with. She lived in a lovely studio apartment and I sat down with a steaming cup of coffee as she got freshly baked bread hot from the oven. This maiden always had me in awe of her talents and habits, but majorly of her dearly affectionate heart. As we made notes separately and then summarised our points together that went on for about two hours, if I recall correctly, she chipped in that her partner would be moving to our city soon. It almost made me dance with joy. Of course I couldn't. I gave her a bear hug instead. Before I left, I wanted to speak to her about the ... but I let it go. Mohit Bhैया is a gem. She has waited for this for long now.

I sat in the hall boiling my brains over something little Jay had said. As much as I rejoiced in their company, I swore to God that one day these kids would be the end of me, or at least of my brain's functioning in absolute normalcy. I tried talking them into learning Wordsworth's 'Daffodils', explaining in vividity the subtle beauty and profound

paradox it exudes, when suddenly one of them broke into a song. I was taken aback. He wasn't singing on his own. He was singing along to the faint sound of the TV that played in the background of the next room as my father watched the news. Apparently today he didn't. I'm guessing today was a romantic bollywood parody. I felt a tinge of rose in my cheeks that evening. Those kids sang at the top of their voices, moving in delight, gesticulating nuanced actions, to a song called 'Khaamoshiyan'!

Luck.. is it?

For our next Sunday adventure, we had mutually decided to shift the focus of our expenditure and time towards a cause, a purpose, at least for a day that we are able and fortunate enough to. Visiting an animal shelter close by, run by one of our family friends, Kevin. Our hearts were full to perhaps be solely around the precious presence of God's own children. We bathed two young puppies whose mother they lost in a road rage, fed a few calves fodder and they licked away our hands happily. We smiled and squealed in delight. A few stray cats joined in once in a while, perhaps to just give company to these dear inmates. These are the moments you realise you are humane. To be around nature in the most simplistic yet heartwarming form. We went home and got changed. Just when I was about to leave, Nora exclaimed with sheer nonchalance,

'Viraj had texted, he wants to meet today'.

I was a teeny bit skeptical on our way to the cafe and I stumbled more than usual in the car. If I remember correctly, I was borderline fumbling too. Nora was in splits over my ordeal. She thought it was the mushroom that we had had for lunch which was possibly sprouting inside my insides. I state this cause it was exactly what she said. I know. Her wry humour makes me cry sometimes. Today it was just enough to make me smile and squeeze her hand tight. We've toiled blind in our younger days, powered through with courage and grit and laughed our way for over a sweet 15 years. What would I have done if not for her... she was the sister I've never had. She is the sister that I now have. I

couldn't have asked God for more. No. We chatted on our way and I kept fighting the fidgeting in my chest. Yes, it indeed had sprouted veins all along the traces of my interior. It felt strange. I was as afraid as one is, moments before taking a leap of faith from a towering height, all in the name of sports. God save me!

We reached in good time. The inmates were performing. I eyed the place, all lovely and decked up. He wasn't there. I tried to keep my breathing under control. I felt the butterflies enveloping from their cocoons already. I maintained composure. I wasn't 12. Also, did I ever mention that my emotions were more competitive than calculative? Never mind. Nora wanted a mojito for herself for a change and I ordered a cool blue. Blue... the blue halo, blue flip flops. It was all getting messy in my head with flashes of imagery and the voice that made me toss in bed for weeks. I was busy in my head fighting the fidgeting when I entered him. Formal trousers, black stout shoes, a french cut beard, the silver bracelet on his right arm and a sky tinted blue shirt. My soul must have cracked open with the sheer irony because Nora looked at me aghast. She told me later I had turned paler than her 90 year old grandmother and was breathing quite abnormally. So.. It was all visible! How low-key of me. :)

She must have seen my face alter colours because when he walked in with a smile and wave, I couldn't look elsewhere. Nora had told me on our way over that Viraj and her had been texting and exchanging friendly notes over these weeks. I had asked him what he seemed like in person. I must have been strangely inquisitive for she asked me if I am quite alright before going on with the details. 'Lovely person, really considerate. "Remember how I was down with a throat infection last week, he kept enquiring if I felt better or needed anything."

"Considerate", I thought to myself.

We'll see.

Nora snapped me back from my subconscious and gestured to me if we were to order snacks. I nodded a simple no and was fighting the urge

to look at this, a person so strange that had befallen my guts. Yet I did. The moment I looked up, I saw him already looking at me, singing a song I had obsessed over all my school life. 'Haale-dil'. He sang with soft nuances only my soul remembers permanently with sheer attention, one that the pen won't be enough to define or dictate. His tonal range was immense and the delicate chords he touched with all his heart. Deep in my heart, I felt afraid. The kind even clarifications would not have sufficed. The band enjoyed itself over timeless classics and 'Emraan Hashmi' specials. It was something all us millennials collectively enjoyed. A good jamming session. All our spirits came alive.

As we prepared to leave, I saw Nora not ready herself. She quietly asked me to put my walkers down and catch my breath. I hesitantly looked aside. I fumbled in my purse for my phone to text Dad and when I looked up, I saw them speaking. They seemed to have known each other since ages. I was envious. I won't lie. Nora has this. This habit of becoming best friends with complete strangers, all within hours. It's her superpower, I call it. I collected my walkers again and adjusted my midi dress. The boots had eaten half of my feet's flesh and were sucking raw on my blood by then. As I was busy untangling my thoughts, I saw him look at me. He walked over to me, quite a calm confident stride. Looked below at me for a second as I looked up and matched my eyes to his. The moments seemed to pass really slow for some reason, for some definite filmy reason. "Hi, Viraj", he said, extending his arm for a shake. "Hi... I'm Violet" I managed... shaking his hand. I realised for the first time then. He was tall.



CHAPTER 3:

HEAVEN BY THE HILLSIDE

I wrote pieces of poetry with leisure. Every time I am in the soothing presence of nature, words seem to write themselves. All that the universe wishes to be expressed, it does on its own.. We are mere mediums that connect divinity with realism. Having stated so, we always leave a chunk of ourselves in those tales. Stories to tell, characters to express the world and plot climax that leave us astonished, aghast, altered and amazed. Literature is art, it is divinity manifested in thoughts and papers. Today I sat alone by the stream close to the valley. It was on a hill top and a little distance from the town's market place, and it was rare that I attempt to advent solo these days. Deep down my heart knew, there wasn't anything that the music of the falls couldn't heal.

I reached with much toil. Climbing a hill top in this challenging phase of my life was quite a task. Recently life has been treating me with harshness. But for whom was it ever easy? I thought as I repeated these lines from one of my favourite movies in recent times. It was one made on rap artists of the country. It was absolutely incredible and wildly inspiring. I joined both my walkers to hold them together and slipped my feet from the flats to the ground. The grass blades held my feet softly and had little dew drops formed by the twilight mist uncoiled onto them. I walked a little ahead and helped myself sit by the waters. It was a clear sparkling blue today. I could spot little fish and below them lay layers of smooth pastel hued pebbles. The current wasn't exactly strong and I went along to dip my feet longing to feel the cool of the course.

A sweet twilight breeze had engulfed the forest today and I let out a hum, staring into nothingness, or perhaps amazed at the healer that nature was. In the distance, a toddler in a red hooded cardigan rode a play horse whilst his mother cheered him on with high spirits. A wild cat purred softly as it rested in the shadows of the mighty oak bunch. I ran my fingers through the grass and saw veins on my rather pale hands popping slightly out. I shrugged as I felt little fish exploring the skin of my feet still in the water. I leaned forward to strike a conversation with the tiny aquatic wonders, who in their cute little brains were feasting on my flesh... I saw my reflection. My eye bags had sunken and the cheek bones were a highlight now. It is indeed scary when even your physicality depicts pain. I saw my eyes and for a moment my heart forgot all about the impending miseries and smiled while the last rays of the sun shone bright. I had my mother's eyes.

As my soul quietly drank from the beauty that inundated my vision, my phone began to buzz and broke into my reverie. I answered it in my usual semi interested tone and the simple 'Hi' from the other end sent my heart into a whirling tizzy. It was a smooth manish baritone, textured with a soft lacy undertone of a psalmic tonality, it felt like a song to my ears.

“Vir..aj?”, I pretended to enquire.

“Hey..where you at?”

“At Hudson Hill”, I answered, wonderingly.

“Alone?”, he asked.

“Haan haan”, I responded assuringly, yet confused.

“May I join?”

“Ya..”

I realised he was quite direct. It was no more a quality I could relate to, yet I kind of began to like this about him. Fingers rummaged through in my purse and out came a small flat foldable mirror. I held it delicately, it had memories. I had gone to buy it with Mother years back

on a late winter afternoon when the sun shone bright on our faces and I was barely fourteen. It was old and scratched about in places but I never parted with it. It was a treasured possession. Looking myself in, I tucked the fringes behind my ear on the right. I always do that when I'm apprehensive. Well, that and my throat getting super dry, but that could also possibly merely be a side result of my eternally dehydrated nervous system. My face appeared ghost white, a contrast to my red lips, cheeks and auburn hair. The hair was a sound resemblance of my late mother, and the cheeks were a blood rushed moment as I heard his name. I waited.

Picking myself up from a rather therapeutic aquatic retreat and after having collected my walkers, I made myself comfortable on one of the long wooden benches placed at intervals by the walking track of the hill side arena. It was not a popular joint in the hilly region of Crystal Falls in Manali and only a few people visited to calm their overburdened senses and perhaps relish the cool twilight breeze. I nonchalantly delved into the book I was reading then. 'The Old Man By The Sea' by Ernest Hemingway. It was gifted to me by one of my school mates who believed that I would not only heal, but benefit immensely from this much revered novel. Honestly, I did feel it in my guts when the old man, lost at sea, stuck amidst the harrows of thunderstorms, weak.. battered and bruised still kept his heart and hope alive. A mighty warrior against the paradigm of time.

It was at the onset of the darkening sky that deep, heavy clouds had piled up, as I was engrossed in the book. Rains in the north were a rarity. I looked up to assess my surroundings, nature always signals us beforehand if its landscape is to be altered. The earth exuded a sweet smell of fallen twigs and I waited for the heavens to drizzle upon us. The rains did not come, but the storm did! From a distance I could see him walking up to me. As he ascended the hill, his form became more visible. A cream coloured shirt with little blue outlined circles drawn on to them. Ember hued trousers.. his black watch. He had come clean shaven. As I looked up to his face, I breathed rather heavily. Yet, it felt

short. Such a short life, even shorter meetings. He appeared familiar. Perhaps someone I had met earlier in a galaxy far away.

Oh the things that fiction does to us!

Scary? Or securing sanctity?

Only Time could tell.

He helped himself next to me. He glanced right at me. For some reason, I could not look directly at him for longer than a few seconds. He could have possibly made out my discomfort, that in the softest way a man could have spoken, he nudged my soul with a 'Heeyy'.

I looked up. Our eyes met.

Deep black eyes, a green halo encircling them. The sides were elegantly lined with a dense charcoal outline, as though damped with a heap load of kohl onto them. It was misty .. and at the same time, strangely mysterious.

He would look up at me.

But something in me would tell me otherwise.

He would stare as if he were studying something.

Me.. was it?

I must have squinted my brows whilst my own eyes wandered on to his face, that he corrected it with his finger. We broke contact and I let out a gentle smile.

“Hemingway?”, he asked, pointing at my book.

“Ya, I do enjoy classics.”

“Do you read?”, I asked.

“Sometimes.. The last I had read was 'Fluid Mechanics', years back when I was a student.”

I looked at him and we both giggled.

“No seriously.. anything?”, I asked.

“I had read Pride And Prejudice once. Didn't think much of it.”

“I see.. My friends tell me the same.” I said.

“What's your favourite story?”, he asked, looking at me intently.

“Umm, not many know about it”, I shrugged.

“Come on, I'm sure I'd have heard of it”, he said insisting.

“Pride And Prejudice”, I said, matching his with a sorry smile.

I saw him nod his head in sorrowful unison, all with a cheeky smile.. and we chatted away.

An hour or so later, I got a ring on my phone. It was my Father. I'm not out for long these days, so he must have wondered what had kept me away. I told him that I was with a friend and shan't be long. He was surprised and satisfied that I was out, finally making friends again.

“Mom?”

“No, Dad”, I said. Keeping the secret for another day. For some reason, I liked keeping my guards up. For some reason, I feared if they ever broke, they would break me too.

It was getting chilly as I casually crossed my arms around my body. My scrawny fingers visibly lacked blood and lustre. I wore no rings, jewellery had never appeased me. The wind was blowing at a more passionate pace and I could smell rain play seek with it. I moved my head around to witness nightfall set in, that made the little golden park lights look regal, yet shine on delicately. My thoughts were straying elsewhere but I turned in surprise as I heard a soft humming. He was singing! It was love, longing and lucid. My pupils dilate as I look. I blink numerous times to reset, perhaps to make my nervous system behave appropriately. In my defence I would say that I was just not a regular at dating or relationships. As he finished, I couldn't help but take a deep breath. He saw that. I looked away.

“I haven't heard that before”, I enquired.

“I wrote it.. a few days back”, He added.

“It is beautiful. I didn't know you wrote”, I said.

“ do.. when I have inspiration”, he said. And I could see a shift in his gaze.

As I was about to alter the course of our conversation, nature took matters in its own hands. Big pellets of rain drops fell upon us. He grabbed my walkers and held me by my hand. It was one of the first times that we felt each other's skin's souls. We hurried to the coffee stall nearby for some shade and an active boost of caffeine.

My dress was almost soaked and stuck to my skin. It was a thin lavender linen, with dainty violet lilies carved onto it with woollen threads. Upon noticing it, he stated he needed something from his car, and took off immediately, before I could sense or stop him. Standing under the shade of a big oak tree, I looked around in the meanwhile... the trees, the lake, the shack and I, all drenched in love colours of the sky. I rubbed my hands together for warmth and moved the hair away from my face. From the corner of my eye, I could see him come running. He was holding onto a piece of clothing. Had he gone to bring his overcoat for me? I was not expecting such a gesture. He barely knew me. There was something else I couldn't help but notice. Him.

Soaked to the skin. Drops gently descending from his shiny black hair. His cheeks glowing a pastel pink. His lips, lustrous and shivering a little due to the cold. The moon behind him and the twinkling stars. It was a sight I might have encountered before, but never truly soaked it in, or perhaps wanted to remember. I snapped myself out of my chain of thoughts and he passed on to me a dixie paper cup of steaming coffee. I took it, slightly embarrassed. I looked around. It was a small shack carved out of hillside wood, to my knowledge. Tiny golden lights along the seams of its interior and warm yellow bulbs inside. The roof was two slanting chunks of oak wood, giving it a much vintage western appearance. We took sips as we chatted away.

Sips Of Coffee, what a pretty name for a coffee shop!



CHAPTER 4:

SOUVENIR FOR THE SOUL

A late summer afternoon, a warm twilight fading into the horizon of the beach. Countless colours strewn about across the sky. I sit by the sea shore and a sultry breeze blows right in my face.. I struggle to gather my hair, my hands are sand filled as usual. Happy voices chattering, being gently faded by the wind. Suddenly, a mammoth of a wave gathers speed, we all look up in sheer horror. I gasp in terror and the next few minutes of my life are a blur.

A woman screaming, a child's cry, muffled voices ring in my ear from second to second. Striving for a breath, all of us hold on to dear life! I bat my arms, attempting with my all to fight the current.. I stick up my head from the sea for a fleeting moment and gasp loudly. Another wave drowns us all. The voices are all quiet now. They've ceased to ring, even in my head. 10 feet under water, all that there is, is a strange silence. I let go. Lucid imagery flashes before my eyes. Vibrant coral hills gleam in the mild reflection of the sun.. and a ray of fish swim by me. At this point, I don't know if I'm dead.

Visions blur into memories, my mother and I on the beach side on bright summer mornings, collecting colourful seashells, dipping in the cool of the water. I start to lose my breath when from a distance I see something swimming towards me. Flaps, snout.... my breath doubled (I think at a point it even tripled). I was losing it, it was a shark. As I made out, I began panicking. Death was inevitable now. I felt breathless, strangled, nauseous.. all at once. Fidgeting, I tried swimming away, too stunned to even scream. The sea water hurt my eyes, I kept swimming

away. I didn't want to die yet, it wasn't time. Or so I thought. A moment later, everything blacked out.

I woke up. Upright in my bed, startled with my soul. Beads of water forming at the temples, began trickling down my cheek. My breath was still high. Heart racing fast. These are the sole moments when my humour ceases to be the defense that my guts forever rely on. These are the moments I feel weak.. and alone. When I really want someone to hold me, and tell me it's gonna be alright. Alas. I held the wall next to the bed, leaned into it and tried breathing normally. I just had an episode.

As a child, I was epileptic. Too many problems.. aren't they? 'Not enough, I could be a drug addict', I thought to myself. My humour, kicking right in, putting me back in the game. Somewhere in my overly conscious mind, I felt safe with my humour. Like an anti bomb squad to diffuse the constant ticking in my head. On some rare days, I even laugh at my own jokes. To not digress further and come back to the point, because of this abnormal anomaly, I had developed anxiety earlier.

I drank some water and checked the time, it was 3:30 am. Spooky! But good. It was mysteriously pleasant. Looked out the window. The street below dimly lit by the streaming moon light. I've always liked nights. They are quiet and peaceful, it was similar to the underwater episodes I often come across in my dreams, because at both times, the voices in my head lay low and stay calm. I noticed something else too. I had missed a call, at 2:30 am, from Viraj! That was new!

The next morning, I woke up a little late. Got dressed, put myself in a clean pair of jeans, paired it up with a white sweater and my usual sneakers. Got my crutches and went in to work, it was quieter than usual today. Or perhaps it was me. On my way in the auto, I kept reminiscing of my convo earlier with Viraj. He sounded worried. About me. I hadn't told him much about myself. And something else too, he sounded off. To me.

Boy was I wrong, it was a bustling day at work, innumerable calls and deadlines sent my mind into a tizzy. At lunch hour, I grabbed my phone and walked slowly to the lift when through the glass window, I could see a familiar face standing by the walkway below. I pressed up against the glass and rushed down a moment later. What was he doing here, and why wasn't he calling me? Was he waiting for someone else? But wait.. how did he know I worked here?

I was able to walk a little now, without the crutches. It still hurts. I approached him, he wore a dark blue shirt, his eyes swayed restlessly. As soon as he saw me, he embraced me in a hug. I was clueless at first. Nervous, curious.. but it was the first time we did that. I... hugged him back. My fingers pressed against his back and another held from his shoulder. He smelt of a strong musk. He let go of my waist and held my face. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? Is everything alright?"

"That Mum's not around anymore!", he exclaimed.

"Who told you this?", I asked.

"Nora", he said.

That bitch.

We sat at a coffee shop nearby for lunch. I narrated to him the entire incident. It didn't hurt as much now. It's been over 14 years since it. Also how anxiety was part and parcel of the whole fiasco, that I received as a souvenir post the loss. I sighed and smiled later. He listened, carefully, staring right into my eyes. There was something about him. He stared at my eyes, sometimes a bit too hard, as though he could look right through my soul from it. I broke contact, it was getting late for work. He held my hand strongly. "I'm here", he said.

"Here?.. As in.. in this shop?"

"No, Violet. In life", he stated.

I smiled. And left. It was sweet.. wasn't it?



CHAPTER 5:

LIFE IN THE ORDINARY

Days passed into months. I went from home to work to the physiotherapist's clinic, and my crutches oscillated with me throughout. November approached, and so did the chill in the wind. I didn't get a chance to meet Nora much the last few months. She was juggling a newly pursued distance online course along with her work. It took a lot from her. She was a calculus genius. Love child of two very well known athletes of the state. Back when she used to dance, I would absolutely be in awe of the grace she exuded with her movements. 'Story telling' was her expertise. The way she structured and performed her pieces was a sight to truly behold. Sometimes we wish we still danced. Perhaps, someday we will.

Viraj and I had been meeting frequently. Sometimes, he would pick me up from work, else we hung out after his gigs. It felt good. He listened, he cared. He made me feel special. Most of the time, he asked me to just speak my heart out. Yet, something sting. Something that lay dormant, deep inside my gut.. saying things that perhaps I was too busy to listen to, or maybe, my soul not ready to truly infer what my mind read in him. Something called me out from within. But he was there. And that's all that we want, right?

I often thought to myself 'Is this real?' 'Can we just bump into someone so good and that'd be it?' 'Does he really like me?' Time knew better than me. It surely did.

It was late in November when Viraj and I were driving past Model Town Road, when I asked him to slow down. Pointing up to the first

floor, I gesticulated and showed him my favourite book shop. 'Mind Maze'.. and as I was telling him about my Dad and I being a regular at it, when he suddenly cut me off.

"Who reads books these days?", he said and drove us off in a whiff. I was stunned, but didn't react. Perhaps he has had a bad day, I consoled myself in my mind.

We approached my flat after a while. He asked me out to meet some of his friends the next day's evening.

"I.. haven't met Nora in a while. I really miss her. I'll meet your friends sometime later, Vir.. is that alright?"

And slowly, I could.. see his face change. His eyes got seemingly redder, his grip on the steering wheel got tighter and with gritted teeth, he said "Fine", and drove off. I squinched my eyebrows and took a few steps back as the dust rose in plumes from his car.

I am barely ever surprised anymore in life, but I did get a little scared.

Nora and I haven't been to our favourite spot since months. Her rooftop. My desi girlies, where you at? Her roof had a cemented bar from wall to wall, wide enough to fit us both, where we sat cross legged, face to face, often with chai or chocolates. Little pots of home grown plants sat along the thin line of her parapet. She watered them in the morning everyday. I had picked a favourite, a baby pink rose plant. I spoke news to her, on all of my visits. Young school boys played ball in the field across her apartment. Her balcony had a terrific view. So did the terrace. Plus, the sunsets from over her place were a rare sight. Clouds scattered along the margin of the day sky, and pale strewn hues all merged into one another.

Today, Nora was off work, she had done her laundry, dusted her place clean, taken a rather long shower, applied her numerous coveted face masks and was in a mood quite similar to that of drunkards after they have finally had pegs of their favourite tonic post a recovery phase. She looked relaxed, I was happy. Not only that, this lazy ass had baked chocolate waffles for me in her new mini microwave oven, in

anticipation of my arrival, and I had, in my usual manner, got for her, her favourite cold coffee on my way over. Tell me if this wasn't a date!

"Ahhhhh, us... feels like ages since we've done this.", she said, shrugging her shoulders, sipping on her coffee.

"Ya, and we surely don't sound like a couple in the midst of love making, Bro!", I exclaimed with wide eyes.

She laughed. She has a soft undertone in her voice, that grows stern when required. It's always felt like home to me.

"What on earth is Shelly doing these days?", she said, showing me a rather obnoxious dance video on her phone.

"I have been a performer for a decade, and even I felt uncomfortable.. imagine the horror non dancers have had to face with these impressions", I concluded.

"If I danced that way" ... and I'm sure she got lost in memories.

"Why don't you, Nora?", I asked. Actually enquiring.

"Cause you don't Violet, when we start, we start together."

"All I want, Nora, is my body to heal soon. That's all I want", I said.

We chatted a little more, well.. gossipped. What do you kids say these days? 'Idhar udhar ki baatein, wagera wagera!' Girl talk, we call it. Since when? Since always!

She had spoken to her father that morning. They have always shared an on and off relationship. He would often say things that hurt her as an adult, and at times when she spoke, he would refuse to listen. But he had called on his own that morning, told her that they got a new wall painted at their ancestral home, they got it painted her favourite colour, that Aunt's health was getting better and complained that his dear wife for the fourth time in the week had cooked bottle gourd curry, much to his annoyance. She almost broke down as she narrated it all to me. I knew she missed being her 'Father's little girl' too much. Earlier in our childhood, Uncle would take her everywhere on his motorbike.

She would latch on to his shirt, and sometimes even sleep with her head on his shoulders mid way. Uncle never let her fall. He wouldn't.

"How's Virrrraaj working for ya?", she asked animatedly, reckoning a mike to her face.

"Wow Babe, the resemblance... Uncanny!", I rebuked with a forced smile.

"No seriously.. What's up? All good?", she asked.

"I think...", I answered doubtfully.

"He seems like a nice guy, doesn't he?", her eyebrows now squinched.

"I guess. I mean, I could be over assuming things. He's nice, talks well, lets me speak, cares. But, something about him seems off. Like..."

"Like what?", she enquired.

"Like a skin shedding."

"Hmm", she said and my voice trailed off.

Before I forget, I need to confess. Nora is intuitive. She's a deep thinker, in absolute control of and in connection with her gut instincts. She's borderline psychic.

And when it comes to me, she is protective like a tigress is for her cub. She'll cry at Korean movies, and yet shred anyone to pieces, whoever tries to harm me. She's taken on the role invariably, since I lost Maa.

For the next week, we met twice again. It's not only a delight, but such security to be around her. We visited the shelter once, feeding a litter of newly born puppies and later singing them all to sleep, cradling those babies in our arms. The founder of the rescue shelter was a family friend and he always talked to us about his new expeditions. We loved listening to his rescue stories. Such people truly are real life heroes. Being the voice of the voiceless is not every man's feat or drive. Only a few dedicate their all to save another. Love is never gender to gender, species or interests. It's soul to soul. Another time, we visited the church. Lit candles, said our prayers and just whiled about around in

the ambience for a while, gathering all love and energy radiating from within the walls.

"Di, keep a little distance if possible." At times, she doesn't refer to me by my name, whenever it was something concerning, she remembers her role as the sister that she was to me.

"Analyse first, then proceed. Please.", she said after much thinking.

It came out of the blue, but I knew exactly who she was referring to.



CHAPTER 6:

LOVE IN THE HOOD, IS IT?

After the whole 'driving off' instance, I had decided to not let my guard down with Viraj anymore. It's only been a few months since I have known this person. How much could I really know? How much could he really show.. or hide? What does he have, that he has to hide? Was it the skin that was peeling off? Or was he just a spoilt moody guy? Either way, I was ready to be guarded by my own conscience.

Earlier this morning, Dad and I had a tough call to make. I had an MCL tear in my right knee, and required surgery. Regenerative steroid shots did not seem to work anymore. We went in to the hospital the following afternoon at our appointment time, both anxious and apprehensive. Luckily, Dr.Singh was available, he wasn't in the OT today.

"It's been over a year, Doctor. It doesn't seem to get any better than this.", said my Father, in his calm, low voice.

"Yes, the new MRI reports seem to say the same", he said in a voice that had a hint of dejection. Perhaps even he was wishing for the physiotherapy and steroids procedure to have worked for me. Everybody dreads surgery. Sometimes, even the doctors.

He examined the reports for a little while longer and concluded-

"I think.. hmm.. we will have to have an arthroscopic surgery to examine it further. It'll not be as serious as open surgeries usually are and can heal sooner, if she follows the recovery procedure properly. We will have to give this a shot now, Sir."

My Father took a moment and said "Alright then Doctor, you fix up the date. Let's move forward with it."

12th April, 2024.

I noted the date, everywhere. My phone, my appliances, the calendar hung by the wall, even on my hand. Yes. I was scared. And it wasn't like there was a guaranteed assurance that this would work. Lately, nothing had been seeming to work. I hadn't ever but this time, I was losing my patience, and time I felt, was long gone for me. My peers were way ahead. International trips, assets accumulation, stable livelihood. And that was not all that I was envious of them. A healthy fully functioning body, a career that didn't snitch on them, and luck that worked. Since when did life get so hard?

Honestly, it doesn't happen in a day. If it did, you just call it a bad day, eat your favourite dinner, go to sleep and wake up with a fresh, I'm-going-to-conquer-it-all head space. Mine was not that simple. It developed gradually. Everything. Osteoarthritis, gut issues, a body addicted to medication and a mind that was ready to kill the only remaining conscious part of the life that I led. Was it hard, or was I making it hard?

'I shall return like a phoenix,

From deep under the ashes.

Flying fearlessly through life,

Combating endless battles.

With fire burning in my eyes,

Frenzied, a relentless yearn.

Undying grit, newfound faith,

Like a phoenix.. I shall return.

(I always write, when I feel too much)

I went in to work the next morning, a little dizzy. I hadn't slept well the previous night. I had another episode of an anxiety ridden dream, resulting in sleep paralysis for the two times that I managed to fall asleep. The moments I beg God hard to keep me sane, in all of my conscious being. I edited a video, uploaded it with appropriate amenities and posted it online. Oh! I never told y'all. I work as a marketer in a state run news channel. I did my masters in journalism and mass communication a few years ago. I liked what I did. It gave me the space to be creative and be vocal, all at once. I'm allowed to channelise my instincts, and be proud of it? Well, most of the time at least.

My phone buzzed, I was in a team meeting.

'Vir' it said.

My heart raced a little bit, and I realised it wasn't butterflies. It was an anxious state of racing. Oh God!

I silenced it and continued listening to our team leader instructing the design of the new creative format.

It rang again.

I silenced it. This time, I could feel myself getting physically anxious. I despised it. What was happening?

After the meeting, I called him, a lump forming in my throat. I gulped a few times and cleared my voice.

"Kahaan ho?", he asked.

"I was in a meeting. Bolo."

"Babe, I really wanted to meet. I'm really sorry for.. "

I waited.

"For?", I asked, actually waiting for him to give me a valid reason, so it doesn't feel like he meant what he did.

"For acting like a jerk. For hurting you.

I can never hurt you, Violet.. I love you!", he said.

I inhaled deeply. It was the first time he had said that. It would be special for any girl. And it was. But why was my soul telling me otherwise? I knew I was getting attached to him. Was it right? What would happen if..

"I love you too, Vir.", I said, in an instance.

"I'll pick you up after office, bye."

He cut the call.

The video that I had posted earlier had reached a million views in less than an hour. It meant a good day and consequently good money for the team, and me.. obviously. After movement arts and writing, this gave me the space to be myself. I wasn't ever someone who would be obsessed with technology, cars or calculus. I was a quiet, introverted child. Reading countless books, spending my days climbing trees, staring at the stars, brooding as like a pigeon for hours. God knows what all I thought. I still wonder sometimes. I didn't have that many friends as a child. I didn't go to school much. I didn't feel safe there. I wondered if they thought I was problematic. Perhaps I was.

I went downstairs. Viraj was standing by his grey-silver sedan. He had bought it a few years back. He was a year younger than me. But all the more mature. He advanced to hold me, but I stopped him with my hand.

"Did you really mean what you said?", I asked.

"Yes, babe. I love you. Be my girlfriend, be mine."

I hugged him slowly, as though waiting for him to react in any certain way. I really didn't understand much that was going on. I went with my heart.

He had arranged dinner at a cafe by the end of the city. 'Brewing Today', the name said. I wondered what would brew today. I was in a bright red, knee length dress, full sleeves and ribbed at the seams, had

paired it up with black boots and silver ear cuffs. A silver locket dangled from my neck. I kept losing and gaining weight frequently those days. I had thinned down then, but my cheeks looked full.

After dinner, we took a walk in their garden. It was a long walkway to the parking lot up the stairs. It was a new moon's night and the path was dimly lit by yellow bulbs. As we walked, his hand brushed against mine. He held it. I was talking to him about the new asteroid that was in probable terms of hitting the planet soon and he turned to look at me. I stopped looking and looked up at him. He held my chin and looked into my eyes. Something about the gaze was always intrusive. I felt my heart racing. He leaned in for a kiss.

Our lips touched, I could sense the tension in his jaw. It just wouldn't leave me be. His hands moved on to my waist. He pulled me closer to him. I kept a hand on his chest, my eyes closed. It was happening. I could hear him breathing fast and he bit my lip.

I stopped, moved away. But he didn't loosen the grip on my waist. He leaned in again. I dodged, kissed him on his cheek, hinting for us to stop. He loosened abruptly, as if unwillingly. We walked towards the car and he dropped me home, in a strange quietude. I smiled as he left. IT WAS SPECIAL, I thought to myself.

Then WHAT WAS THIS FIDGETY FEELING THAT I FELT EVERY TIME I WAS WITH HIM? There were multiple voices that screamed at each other in my mind. I sighed, went upstairs and went to sleep.

Enough brooding for the day.



CHAPTER 7:

COUNTLESS DREAMS, AND A BLOODY NIGHTMARE

‘The desire to be a model mind, a feigned fallacy, the thought of becoming the ultimatum has long ceased. The joy of simply being raw, real and human has surpassed all probable emotions. Merry to be basking in all of my sunshine like glory.’

I wrote and shut the mini notepad that I kept in my purse.

Decembers in the hills are quite a chill. Heaters being brought out, blankets that sprawled on rooftops to be sun dried and winter wear back in fashion! As a child, I had wished to be a fashion model. A high class woman, with bob cut hair and an ultra tanned, toned body, walking down the ramp with the fiercest horse walk that ever existed, donning a strapless bodycon dress with boots as high as her nose would be in the air, all with sheer confidence and pride.

Snapping back to reality, I didn’t have the height, attitude or demeanor that required to withstand such a challenging career. A shy, nerdy me could never. That didn’t stop me from nailing the ‘walk’ at home though. My Mother appreciated it with all her heart. She’d clap for me, cheer as like audience from the stands. She was all the audience that I ever needed.

It was a chilly evening, I covered myself up with a shawl as I taught the kids their grammar. I had for sometime been wanting to build at my flat a digital screen to help them with their concepts and school tasks better. Videos could also be screen recorded and saved for future

batches, that followed sometime later in time after this daunting, adorable lot. As we were finishing up with the session, Dad walked in with warm cups of hot chocolate for everybody, including us. So we chatted as the kids played amidst themselves, occasionally sipping from their cups, feasting alongside on some of my home made pickles. An obnoxious combination, some would say. My children loved it, though.

Cleaning after them, I kept thinking about.. you know! As I kept mumbling to myself my daily affirmations, the bell rang and broke into my reverie of thoughts. Shona Di had come to see me. I embraced her in a tight hug, and she yelled at me to leave her be, after having hugged me back with the same intention and intensity.

We sat on my bed. I got her chai. She loved her chai.

“Kaise ho? Kya chal raha hai aaj kal? Itne din kyun lagaye aane me? Yaad nahi aati na meri ab aur?”, I bombarded my cousin sister with countless questions.

“Ruk, saans lene de pehle!”, she demanded with a cheeky grin. She composed herself.

“Raat ko rukoge kya? Khana khaake jayoge na?”, I was clearly restless.

She held my hands, joined them together and held them close to her face.

“Violet, I’m getting married”, she said.

I smiled. All the restlessness settled into places.

I knew she was speaking to Mayank Bhaiya, who she met via Shaadi.com, at the constant badgering of Tai ji, for around six months now. I hadn’t realised it had culminated into anything.

I put my head in her bosom, and she held me tightly, like she did when we were kids and I got hurt. Tears formed at the corner of my eyes and started falling, drop by drop. My sister was getting married, you guys! :’)

“You know Babu, I had vowed to never marry”, she said.

“I knew that. I never knew the reason though.. bolo ab!”, I demanded, earnestly.

“Shaadi ka concept hi samajh nahi aata tha mujhe. Padhai karli, job kar rahi hun, apne Mummy Papa ke sath, apne marzi se zindagi jeeti hun. Toh why should I risk it all, spend my life at somebody else’s place, drop my maiden name, quit my freedom and lead a life at their mercy. All for what... companionship?, she said.

“Magar ghar toh ghar hoga na, chahe aapke ho ya unke. Parents toh parents, chahe kisike bhi ho. Aur shaadi ke baad toh dono ke dono ho gaye. Ab isme tera kya aur mera kya? Considering there’s a perpetual sense of mutual respect and sensitivity towards each other, it’s just finding and keeping a lost piece of your soul. Marriage!”, I said.

“Baat toh sahi hai, magar duniya nahi na sochti aisa”, she said, lying beside me on the bed. It was a girls’ sleepover night.

“Bata, what’s up with you?”, she asked.

“Hai na koi, sharma kyun rahi hai?”, she added, instantly.

“Haan, I mean I like someone. We know each other since around eight months now. He says he likes me too”, I said.

“Toh itna lowly kyun bol rahi hai? Sab sahi hai na?, she asked, worried.

“Haan Didi”, I assured her.

“If he ever tries to hurt you, please know I’m going to...”

I didn’t let her finish the sentence. Instead, we got out our old photo album and began reminiscing about the good old days.

Viraj had called the next morning. It was a holiday. He didn’t have a lot of gigs the last few months, stayed mostly annoyed and kept getting angry every now and then. By this time, I was understanding his behavioural pattern. I just didn’t know if he would ever get physically abusive with me. I sighed silently. These were details I didn’t share with a soul. Yet.

Violet Miller, a feminist. Voicing sound opinions against patriarchal oppression and gender discrimination all her life.. being in an abusive relationship herself. And worse, not even fighting back. At times, I express not via emotion, but solely with words.

*'The angst in my heart augmenting,
Growing earnestly in its leisurely pace.
Crawling up on my nerve and sinew,
Wearing me gently with its deadly grace.'*

We had planned to meet that evening. I took a cab and it dropped me by his flat. I got down and tugged tightly at my overcoat. The December wind had frozen my nose. I walked myself up the stairs slowly. He opened the door for me. He lived alone in his rented 1BHK. His family lived in Delhi. He had an older sister that often called him while we were out. I didn't know if he had told them about me, or was intending to.

We sat on his couch, watching a new Hindi release. It was a classic horror and I despised every second of it. I shifted to my knees on the couch and turned towards him. "Can I ask you something?", I asked.

"Hmm, pucho", he responded, not breaking contact with the television set.

"Do you think about us in the future?", I asked, moving his face towards mine with my hands.

"Ruko, ye khatam hone do", he snapped.

I was shifting to my side of the sofa when he held me from my waist, came close and said the following "I think about us all the time. I'll soon tell Maa about you. Bahat pehle se soch rakha tha ye"

I nodded in agreement.

My breathing had gotten fast, and not in a way I liked.

He came closer, sliding me flat and came about on me. I breathed, not knowing if to feel happy about it or excuse myself home. He began kissing, staring at the lips.. he held my chin. He kissed the nape of my neck and held me tightly. He smelt heavily of a wild musk and I had began to like how he smelt. I looked at him softly and kissed him back. His fingers were on my back and slid to my waist.

Do you.. want to?, he asked me.

“Wha.. what?”

“Do you want to do it now?”

“No.. I’m not ready”, I said.. half afraid.

He responded quietly with a ‘Acha’ and went back to kissing me. This time, his grip was tighter around my body, he bit my lip multiple times. He held my hand roughly and kept going at it.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I asked him to calm down. I asked him to let go off me.

“I want to do it now, Violet”, he demanded.

I took a moment. “But Vir.. I am not ready now”

“Why?”, he asked and I could feel the anger streak crawl onto his face.

I gathered courage. I had enough by then. I retorted.

‘Nahi hoon mai ready abhi, samajh nahi aa raha hai kya tumko?’, I said and moved away from him. I took my coat from the rack and stomped off.

As I was walking myself to the auto stand with a heavy heart and heavier eyes, I heard him calling behind me. Temperature had dropped down to being 8 degree C and I was afraid if they would provide cab service at this hour, in this weather.

He caught up to me, I glanced back at him and he said “Sorry, suno, I didn't mean to. I’ll drop you home, come” and pulled me by the arm. Tears streamed down my face. “Would you have forced me next, Viraj?”

I trust you and tum ye kar rahe ho mere saath?”, I asked him, but didn’t dare question him further.

Deep down, I was still afraid of this man and his abusive behaviour. I’m a girl and I was alone.

“Bhool jao wo sab please, I’ll drop you home”, he insisted.

“I’ll please meet you later, Viraj. Let me go now”, I said, shrugged his arm off from mine and walked away.



CHAPTER 8:

DEATH

All my life, I've never feared death. I have been rather a loner as a child, writing and tearing up melancholic pieces of poetry, revelling in pain. This was when my parents split and decided to taint me with the very information. It was a blood red tint. I was 8 then. Why.. I sometimes ask myself. My father was native of an eastern state in India, he has a PhD in Philosophy. He's been a professor in the same field for about a decade, before moving on to seek a life with an NGO's Research and Development vertical. As a young adult, he was an ardent reader, and I take after him. My Mother belonged to the hills. She was feisty for a woman of her time. She studied, worked, paid her own bills, and had always dreamt big. She had a Master's degree in Sociology and was a senior in the same NGO that Dad joined later.

They met via mutual friends in an office gathering, back in the late 90s. My Father was a tall, thin introvert, who barely spoke. My Mother, a vivacious woman. She was shorter than most hill women, dusky and had hair up till her knees. She had big, beautiful eyes. I believe I was told that my Father fell for her the minute he saw her walk in. And booked her soon for marriage with his Mother's family ring. I wonder why they parted ways. How did love vanish, perhaps.. life got in their way. Sometimes I wished they hadn't. Sometimes, I wished I had siblings. Sometimes, I wished life wasn't this. My Mother and I weren't that close. But when she got sick and left us, all I wanted to do was to run back in time and tell her a million times, how much I loved her. And that indeed for me, she was the prettiest woman ever alive.

Days flew by fast, and it was Christmas eve. Nora and I had planned an outing, for a change. It was about time, we took a trip, all by ourselves. We were big girls now. For New Years', she would have Mohit Bhaiya stay over at hers, they do this every year. Quarrel year long, and make it all up to each other during New Years. When I look at both of their graph together, all I see is commitment. There have been fights and misunderstandings, agreements and disagreements. But they've stood by each other in the worst of times, rock solid. Bhaiya has been a part of our lives for over six years now, he feels like family. Whenever he's in town, he takes us out, that's a mandate that he owes me, by all means. He's all hearts.

"Got your ticket?", she asked, waiting for me with a cab below my apartment.

She wore a blue frilly shirt, tucked it in into her black office trousers. She had crocs on. Crocs!

(Believe you me, I cried a little)

Why would anyone voluntarily do that to themselves?

"Yes, Mommy! Got everything packed, got my phone, charger, toothbrush, medicines and tickets", I said, cheekily, pushing the ticket up close to her face.

"Hmm, we'll see that later if you got everything", she said, mothering me as she helped me with my luggage.

We rode off to the airport. I had my crutches with me. We had decided not to hike, and take cabs more, once there. But we just had to keep ourselves moving. She's barely gone around since my mishap. We were finally making it happen, in whatever means we could for now.

The flight was safe, there was a light turbulence, and Mother Meri (Mary) started reading her prayers instantly. I had to hold her hand tightly to calm her down. That obviously didn't work, but one stern look from me did the job well. She immediately regained composure and breathed normally. We take our turns mothering each other.

We reached the hotel, and I opened the long, royal drapes to the magnificent view from the hills. There was a lake that ran right ahead, trees sprawling on levels of hills and a beautiful evening sky. The mountain air filled our lungs with a newly found zeal and purpose. It does, every time. We got changed, ordered in a light dinner and spoke our hearts out for the next few days.

The trip was a success. We visited their holy temples, ate maggi at a hill top, clicked numerous photographs, wrote poetry, and even hiked a bit. She was afraid my knees would give up sooner than expected. They didn't. My body stood strong by me. It always has. And now when it needs an added dose of care and attention, I should be kind enough to give it that. One fine evening, it rained enough to drench us at the hills of the Bhowali Range. We revelled in it. I cannot calculate as to how divine intervention truly works, but it certainly washed us off pain.

Back in the city, I buried my nose in my laptop at office. I had taken a 4 day leave, and Sir Jonathan didn't seem too happy with it. He kept eyeing me from his desk and reminded me of the deadline that followed for the creatives. Sometimes I wondered how people are expected to be creative with deadlines, like a knife waiting to fall on your neck! It's not an on and off switch, you know. But modern day work expects you to be so. Surprisingly, a lot of my juniors have excelled in it. I envy Gen Zee as much as I despise them. They learn too fast, they stay unattached. I hadn't spoken to Viraj in a week post the incident. He had called a few times, but I spoke little. I didn't want myself to be at the mercy of my heart, it was a burdening feeling. That's not what love was.

I met Viraj at his apartment the next day's evening. He said he had something to say. While I was in Nainital, he had borrowed a few thousand bucks from me, he claimed he needed it for work. I didn't ask any further question. I was his girlfriend, I was supposed to help him, wasn't I?

We sat on his sofa. I expected him to speak first.

He did.

"Violet.. I know how I must be looking to you now, like a bad person in your story. You have been so supportive towards me and my ambitions. I have spoken about you to my Mother. I had sent her your photo. She said that you're really pretty."

I was not able to believe him, or in anything that he said, I inhaled deeply, looking at him still.

"Babe, I had something to share. When we were younger, I lived in Delhi with my parents. I was in love with my batch mate, Saina. She was the reason I began singing. She was older than me, and loved me truly. But suddenly her organs began to fail. And when she was 22, she.." and his voice trailed off.

"And that's why I get aggressive at times. I don't do it on purpose. I can never do anything to hurt you', he added.

I looked at him earnestly, gathered myself, kissed him on his forehead and held him tightly in an embrace. He held me back.

"I love you, Violet. Do not leave me, please.", he said.

I bought it.

For the next few weeks, he was a gentleman. He would pick me up from work, take me out on drives, sing to me on his terrace in the evenings, cook for me and make me feel like a princess. I was happy. The fidgeting in my gut had not stopped, it never did. But I had learnt to ignore it. Viraj smoked, a lot. But he did not, in my presence. But I insisted him time and again to quit this habitual evil.

One evening, it was colder than usual. And he had promised to drop me off post dinner. I wore a full sleeve tee, denim jeans and my favourite sneakers. He worked on one of his songs, whilst I wrote a prose piece, sitting by the window.

'Change is imperative, an absolutely dire need to lead way towards a wholesomely experienced life. As only when you muster the strength to withstand even the most withering storms, do you regard the magnimus of courage and

valour gathered in your brave little heart. Forever ready with a smile and a shine, come what may, to face the brunt of life.'

I shifted my gaze at him. He was there, and yet for some reason, I missed him. Was he not fulfilling my emotional requirements? Did I not trust him yet? Why did all of it still seem strange? I brushed aside my thoughts that intervened in the present. I walked over to him, sat by him and kissed his hand. He moved his hand away, saying "Ruko, dekh nahi rahi kaam kar raha hoon?". I sat.. took a moment, before getting up to go back to the window.

But before I could make a move to leave, he held me tightly and began kissing. "Why do you hurt me?", I asked.

"Because I like it!", he said.

I looked at him with questions in my eyes.

And he immediately covered it up with words.

"I'm kidding, Baba. Obviously, kidding."

I hugged him. "Don't", I said. I was attached, badly.

He slid his hand up to my hair and kissed me passionately. I kissed him back. He put his hand up my tee. It was not something I particularly appreciated.

I fidgeted in my heart. Was this happening? Was I ready? Was he the right person? Words kept jumbling up.

He kept at it strongly and for a moment, I didn't feel safe anymore.

"Viraj.. not today, please.", I said softly.

He stopped. Immediately. Walked back to his desk, continued working his writing.

"Kya hua..?", I asked, walking over to him.

"Kuch nahi, akela chod do mujhe", he complained.

"Please batao na", I demanded.

"KYA HOGA?", he shouted.

I was stunned and took back a few steps.

"Tumhe trust nahi hai mujhpe? I'm your boyfriend, for fuck's sake. This is what couples do."

I felt inadequate. I did. He wasn't demanding anything extra ordinary. And it wasn't as though I didn't want to. But did I really want to now?

Those were two separate questions,
that beget answers on two ends on the spectrum.

"Suno..", I said and pulled him by his hand.

"You'll not leave me right?", I asked.

"Never", he said in an instance. And for some reason, I knew, he had lied.

I kissed him. And we went to his bed.

He kissed me with the same passion, sliding his hands up and about my body. I knew he wanted to. And as his girlfriend... it was what was to do, right? He came on to me, holding my waist tightly. It was all mind numbingly overwhelming. He held my waist tighter, that hurt. He bit my lip. And after a while I begged him to stop, I remember begging him. Nails went in my waist, and I started bleeding.

"Vir, stop, please."

"Viraj, please please, just stop."

My lips hurt. My body hurt.

I pushed him away.

I sat on the bed, crying, bleeding, in a mess.

"WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR PROBLEM, YOU BITCH?", he screamed at the top of his voice and slammed the door as he left.

I don't know how I got myself home that night, but I did.



CHAPTER 9:

WHERE WAS I?

I curled up in my bed till the next morning, shivering with the visuals as my mind replayed it, petrified of life. I covered my head, I didn't want to be seen. I felt disgusted.. with myself, or with him? The daylight scared me. I wanted to disappear. There were too many emotions, all bottling up, second by second. I called Nora, I asked her to come over.

"Where.. are you?", I asked, my voice quivering.

"Office yaaaar, where else?", she said in her usual laid back manner, shuffling files at her work place. She must not have heard my voice properly with all the noise at her end.

"Can you come now, please?", I said.

"Kya hua hai? Dari hui kyun ho?", she asked, noticing.

"Aaja bas please", I said and hung up.

She must have rushed, because she was panting when she reached. She didn't know what had happened. So she got directly in bed with me. Hugged me. "Kya hua hai?"

I sat up, pulled my tee shirt up, and showed him the wound on my waist. Her eyes widened in horror.

"What the hell.. how did this..."

She paused for a moment.

"Viraj?"

"Violet, don't tell me it's Viraj."

"Are you serious?"

She held my chin, and pulled my face towards her.

It made my heart race fast. Viraj used to do the same.

"Your lips look sore!", she said, aghast.

"Tell me what happened, did he hurt you anywhere else?"

I breathed heavily and narrated to her the entire incident.

I could see blood slowly collect in her eyes. I could notice her body language change. Her grip got tighter around the bed and her lips pursed. "I'll show that leech how to touch a girl now, wait", she said and rose up to go. I stopped her.

"No, please.. Nora. I don't want to engage with him in any sort of way anymore. Just.. please, let it go.", I requested.

"Violet, don't be such a spineless person, yaar", "He has abused you!"

"Do you realise how severe this shit is?", she asked, actually worried about my being and dignity.

"I know.. but. I don't want to be part of all this anymore. Please just be with me. Let it go, please."

She agreed after a while.

She calmed herself down, walked around the room a bit and spoke to me in her normal voice.

She cooked a light lunch and we ate together.

In the evening, she got board games, flavoured frozen yoghurt and we spent the day together.

I stayed in from work for the next two days and gathered my emotions, all scattered and strewn across the various corridors in my mind. I began the habit of meditating. I ate clean and initiated walking post meals. I realised what had happened to me. I was in an abusive relationship with a man I trusted. I wasn't ever in love with Viraj Ahuja.

We met, became friends, and he showed me what a good life with him would be. I visualised it, I went along with his plan. He approached, pursued and created an entire plot with the two of us, in my mind. I wasn't attached to him, he got me attached to him. It was 'manipulation'. After spending days of being emotionally intimate with me, he withdrew, all his efforts and presence. So I would panic and chase after him. He liked it when he could reject me, hurt me. He liked it. Was this psychotic behaviour, was he sick? Or was this all a part of his plan? This wasn't normal human behaviour, if not anything else. I was done with him.

Nora drove me to work those days. I spoke a little. It was difficult to be alright. I was strong, and yet, emotionally wounded. At office every day, it was difficult to be around in the presence of men. I pushed myself nonetheless and involved all my senses into work. Viraj hadn't called. I wished he didn't anymore. The young girl in me was terrified, and the woman in me, outraged at the audacity. A week post that, I was in our local supermarket, buying groceries for home. I had been using my crutches more than usual those days. Sometimes, emotional instabilities manifest physically. I bent down to collect gram flour and rice powder. As I reached up, I bumped into Shuv, an old colleague. He was older in years to me and I was the one to have choreographed for them at his wedding, two years back. We smiled at each other and exchanged pleasantries.

"It's so nice to see you, Sir.", I exclaimed.

"Ma'am, the feeling is mutual", he reciprocated.

"How is work? I heard about the injury from Shovna. Did you go in for surgery yet?", he asked.

"No Sir, it's in process. It'll all be finalised in April", I said with a smile.

"How is Meera?", I asked.

"Oh, good, she got promoted last month. We are all fine, Ma'am. It's really good to see you", he said.

I nodded in agreement with a vibrant smile.

"Violet, I had something else to say. I had wanted to reach out to you anyway, I'm glad we met here", he said.

I was surprised. What could he have to tell me?

And why did he sound serious?

"Tell me, Shuv, please", I said, squinting my brows.

"Umm.. I knew you and Viraj Ahuja are dating since last year, he is one of my mutual friends from college, he was a junior", he explained.

"Acha.."

"My classmate, Rahul, called to speak with him last week for a new business project that he wished Viraj to be a part of and casually asked how life's been with him lately. Rahul knows you, you met him at my wedding", he said.

"Yes, I do remember him", I added.

"Yes, so... When asked about how things were going on with you, he responded, Violet.. outrageously.", he said and his voice got low.

"Wha.. what did he say?", I asked with a lump in my throat.

"Violet, he kept at it for long. Rahul has voice recording service turned on for work purpose. I really don't know how serious you are about him, but you must hear this. I am your friend and well wisher. This is absolute nonsense. I'll send it to you, please listen to it. And take your decisions accordingly thereafter, no matter how hard it is for you", he said.

I agreed and we parted ways.

I rushed home, put the load on the table and plonked myself on the sofa. It overlooked a steep hill, and various small houses. I opened Whatsapp, took a deep breath and played the voice recording. My heart pounding, inside.

"So.. aur kya chal raha hai bata." It was Rahul's voice.

"Aur kya chalega. Bas chal raha hai", said Viraj.

I skipped to the part where they spoke about me.

"Violet ke saath hai na abhi? Sab thik wahan?", enquired Rahul.

"Arrey ghanta thik. Puch mat uske bareme. Dimaag kharab ho gaya hai mera ek saal se", said Viraj with a few abusives in conversation.

"Kya hua hai.. bata toh", Rahul insisted.

"Man, she's a psycho. Har cheez me darti hai. Har cheez mein uska anxiety bahar ata hai. Maine yahan koi dharamshala khol rakha hai bey?", Viraj said.

"Sahi se bata, kuch hua hai kya?", asked Rahul.

"Mujhe nahi rehna iske saath. Ghatiya ladki hai", he said.

My heart stopped.

"She's even borrowed money from me. Mujhe chahiye hi nahi aisi ladki", Viraj's voice and I couldn't hear anymore.

"Do you know why he's doing this around?", Nora asked me the next day's evening as we sat at her apartment.

I looked up at her.. "No", I managed.

"He's doing it in anticipation. He knows you might go around telling people what a psychotic, manipulative crass he is. That you might tell people that he forced you.

So he is doing this before you, to look like a hero, and to make you look like a bad person."

"But.. he said he had spoken to his Mother about me", I said blankly, not really realising what I was saying.

"Violet, are you stupid? Are you fucking blind?

Can't you see what this jerk has done to you?

He was taking money from you, he was manipulating, he has hurt you, abused you. Are you bloody blind?", she said with a stern voice, sitting very close to me, eye to eye, knocking sense into my head.

"So.. this was all a show!", I said.. realising slowly.

"Please manage yourself, Violet."

At the same moment, Viraj called.

I picked it up. I wanted to hear what more he had to say.

We put it on speaker.

"Hi.. kaisi ho?", he asked, in a normal voice, as though nothing had happened.

"Good", I said, quietly.

"Mai puch raha tha, aaj movie chalte hai?

Aur ek baat..", he said.

"Kya?", I pretended to ask.

"You know na naye business ke liye bahat problem ho raha hai mujhe, do you have 15K? Can you send me please?", he said.

Nora snatched the phone, went into the other room, shut the door behind herself tightly and came back after a while.

Through the door I could hear her say things like

"Tujhe chahiye ke mai abhi police bulaun?",

"Sun, sun, ye sab police station me bolna jaake",

"Isko ek baar aur contact kar, fir dekh tu".

I thanked her for doing this for me. I was glad she was around. I didn't trust myself. My soul didn't trust my heart anymore. So this was all a racket. He must do this to other women as well. I stayed numb for the next few days, going in to work, finishing chores, all mechanically. It hurt to think that I ever trusted this person. It hurt to be human, sometimes. Around in office, I stayed a lot distant from men now,

wrapped my scarf around the neck tighter and made sure I never let my guard down. Never!

'Flying and fluttering, a fallen feather.. lost in the wisps of wind. Soaring through and through, dazed amidst the wilderness of the late spring breeze. Unraveling mysteries, it journeyed placidly through worldly sights and sounds. Resting timely on wild flowers and towering heights, on mounds of wet grassy grounds. Dueling with currents and torrents, dipped in dappled mud puddles. Steady trodding, a knight forlorn, flying as a free flowing thought bubble. So far it flew, a heart bleeding blue, bearing the brunt of misery in time. A merry loner, a pious wanderer, just flying and fluttering in life's truthful paradigm.'



CHAPTER 10:

VIEW FROM THE WINDOW

Spring had set in, it was early on in February. The harsh cold winds had turned into mild, cool breezes that soothe the soul and fell dried leaves off trees. A light mist had been coiling down the valleys post twilight and hot chocolate tasted like heaven during the nights. Dad was visiting. I like him around more now. We would sit by the balcony post my work and he would talk news to me. He always did it. Giving me tips to be a better writer, discussing with me various psychological phenomena and always, always talking news. I liked my Father for who he is as a person. He is relaxed, laid back.. but hard working and fun loving. He has a quiet demeanor and a broken sense of humour. I take after him at that too. He has never imposed any of his ideologies or opinions upon me and has always let me make my own mistakes, giving me the space to be able to learn and grow from them.

The sky was clearer those days and I spent my lunch hours at the office, barely eating but staring out the window mostly. The clouds were soft white and floated at their whims, birds soared high and swerved with their wings open as they gently glided down. The rhododendron and fireweed were in flower. I wondered if the wildflowers must have sprouted colours at the hill tops at this time of the year. I longed to hike up the mountains. I longed to see them in person. It had been long.

I was lost in thoughts when someone spoke.

"The hill people like lupins, but I like lilies better", he said.

I looked to my side, a tall man stood. Coffee in his hand.

I smiled and looked at the window again.

I didn't know if to speak yet. He was new.

"I've always liked lilies. They are royal. And rare", I said.

We exchanged a look, and he smiled. So did I.

He was called from a cabin behind us. He walked off.

I sighed and went back to my desk. There was a lot of work that was to be done. Indeed. I had commenced my writing since the last few days. I had begun to like how I wrote. The tenderness of emotion validated through the valour of words. The simplicity of life described in short, simple stories. Literature is a wonder. I had created a piece a few days back and it went something as this.

'I feel a hollow in my chest, framed tastefully

with the morose of a young fallen lover.

Freshly found anguish pulsating deep in my veins, crafted albeit with the greatness of art.

My soul today defiantly resilient

to release the heart of ache,

to perpetually let go of the fleeting tenderness

wrapped tight in the dense pools of longing,

an endless yearning.

Beauty in desire, gripping misery best.

With love and desire, this thrives the hollow in my chest.'

Sakshi was visiting me for a couple of days. We went to school together. She was my best friend then. She has always been this thin, milk coloured brunette who wore a big, thick pair of glasses. Her family belonged to Rajasthan, and over these many years that we spent together with each other, she felt a safe space for me and we shared beautiful childhood memories. What was better about her was her

Mother. I know! Auntie nurtured me like her daughter and fed me fat all of their native, royal meals. I had missed Sakshi's presence. She works in fashion, is placed in a foreign land and is able to visit India only twice a year now. But every time she comes, she meets me. She gets me chocolates, scarves and floral fragrances. Boy, does she spoil me!

"Kya kar rahi hai? Tu bhi le naa!", she said, serving me big table spoons of burnt flavoured rice as we dined out at an Italian themed restaurant that evening.

"Life kaisi hai wahan? You never feel alone?", I asked.

"V, I always feel alone", and rolled her eyes!

"But kya karein bata.. karna padta hai na", she added.

She was feisty, when we were younger, she would ride on her bicycle and go around the whole city, all alone.

I always admired her confidence and her incredible ability to be merry, alone. Something that my gut and soul could never relate to.

"Tu strong thi, bachpan se. I'm proud of you.", I said, with a slight tear in my eye. I was. I have been with her on her down days years back, when she longed to get into an international Uni, and nobody would accept her for over 2 years in a row.

"Tu bhi toh lad rahi hai zindagi se. Dekh pa rahe hai sab hum. Mai strong hu V, magar tere jitni nahi.", she said.

"Umm.. I've been better. It's just that I feel lately, everything has been working against me. Is it me, is it my luck. I sometimes do not know, what to infer of happenings. Thik hai, zindagi hai.. ho jayegi thik jab hona rahega", I said, dropping my shoulders down.

She held me by the shoulder and said "I'm proud of how much you are doing. I know it's not easy, I know life's not the same for everyone. Some get it easy, and some, really really tough."

I smiled, now the tears, quite prominent.

"Bas yaad rakh, I am proud of you", she said at last.

I nodded, laughed at her maturity and we changed our topic of discussion to a spicy gossip session. Us girls, we tell you.

It was mid February. A project deadline was due. I wasn't getting my creatives right. I was harried. I had done the designs four times now. What more was I supposed to do.. crack open my brain and serve it to Jonathan on a fancy china? I meant to speak to him now, I stood outside his cabin, knocked on his glass door. He was standing at the table that had a big flowchart of our ongoing project. Beside him, stood the man I had met by the window the other day.

John eyed me to speak. I shifted my gaze back at him.

"John, I don't think I'm getting the input right. These are the contents and this the design. (I showed him on my laptop.) Please tell me how I can do them right."

He inhaled, thought for a moment and spoke.

"This is my friend", he said, pointing at him.

"Former senior executive at VeraTech before, he's been transferred from Guwahati, a few days back. He's working with us on this project, and I've given him the inputs. He'll help you today with it", he said.

"Yes Sir", I said, meekly.

"Please remember, Miller, I need the designs by Thursday this week, please", he said.

I nodded and left his office.

At my desk, I fumbled.

Wait.. what was his name? How will I ask for him?

I slapped myself on the forehead and buried my nose in a piece of poetry that I was writing. I had initiated writing again. I felt at peace with creative thoughts.

That evening at around 5, I went by the new guy's cabin. He was sitting and writing something with a pencil, I could make, through the glass door. I knocked.

"Yes, please", he said. A calm, stillness in his voice.

I walked in.

"Please, could you close the door behind you", he said.

I did and took a seat.

He got up to make a few designs on the small board.

"I'm making a few structures. Could you turn my laptop towards you", he said, his face still towards the board.

I obliged.

"Please log in to my account. Umm.. doesn't have a password.", he said, still distracted.

I looked for his account.

Ben, it said. Benett Preston Marshall.

What a big name, I thought to myself, the very moment.

"Find 'Deerwood Designs' on the desktop.

Look at it. I'll be with you soon", he said and continued with his drawing.

For the next two days, he instructed me on the case and cause of the project and helped me with my creatives. He did most of the speaking. I barely spoke. For some reason, his gaze felt safe. So did his voice, and persona.

I pitched my designs, John appreciated my efforts.

I made sure I kept my focus sharp, hereon.

It was Nora's birthday the week after. Mohit Bhaiya was coming into town. We, along with her other friends, had planned a big birthday weekend getaway for our girl. Nora deserved so much, so much that life

had not bestowed upon her. So much that she truly deserved. We attempted with our all, all for just a smile flowering on that mostly-tense, mostly-wise pretty face.

Early on in March, a day before my Babe's day, we drove to the Lahaul Pass, a high altitude district in Himachal, it was at a 2 hour drive from Manali. Lahaul was heavenly, it was known particularly for its scenic mountain views, traditional hill villages and placid but fascinating Buddhist art and culture. We longed to visit it. Upon reaching, we checked in, we all got our separate rooms, at a hotel that had cottage style individual houses instead of rooms. The infra was exquisite. The walls carved out of thick bamboo cut outs, and the floor lined with furry carpets. The furniture was all wood and marble. What an indo-ethnic interior wonder. I got settled in my room, washed myself up and got changed into tracks and a tee.

The bed was a springy, comfortable white spread. I longed to get a good night's sleep. After having serious life threatening episodes of anxiety and recurring sleep paralysis night after night, I deserved peace. After having journaled for a bit, pausing every now and then to delve into self introspection, I continued writing. I am much more in control of my emotions these days. I hadn't been getting anxious much lately and life seemed to fall into place again. I shall recover from the worst. The battles that we fight!

As I prepared to sleep, I took my medicines and massaged the soles of my feet. Going straight into Ayurveda, guys. Our reconnection with nature is one dire need of modern times. I lay down, staring at the wall for a while.

Then opened Instagram, and searched the following,

'Ben Marshall'



CHAPTER 11: LUKA CHHUPI?

The next day, I woke up sharp at 6, before anyone else, I believe. I took a deep breath, opened the huge window and let the hill breeze hit me with its all. The sun was soft and warm and the rays fell into my room in thin shafts. There was a mild birdsong in the background, and I ran to get my notepad that I carried everywhere. I wrote some poetry. There's truly nothing better than nature in its quietude and magnanimity that inspires the soul of a writer.. as though stirring soundly, the chords of our gentle, frenzied hearts.

'Holding my gaze by the windowsill,

I sit brooding, absolutely still.

Peering avidly from the brow of the hill,

While my eyes drank nectar with an endless fill.

Showering the mystic heavens soundly,

I could just heave agape,

The early monsoon rains, the verdure it lay,

The blinding brilliance of the dusty cloudscape.'

I showered and did my morning prayers. Lately, Nora and I had taken a keen liking towards finally building our skincare regime. She loved her SPF and I absolutely detested it. (Agree with me, y'all?) After getting dressed and accessorizing myself in denim shorts, a black tank top layered with a denim shirt and ankle length sneakers, I ran to her room with a little gold pendant that I had bought for her as a gift. She was

sharing her room with Bhaiya. She opened the door, still in night clothes. Indeed she was tired (ahem ahem).

'Happy Birthday Baby', I said, giving her the tightest hug and a peck on her forehead. She was taller than me but when it came to babying her, I did it with utmost pride.

She smiled, still sleepy.

This is for you', I said and gave her her present.

Her eyes lit up. She loved it. I could say.

'Di, you didn't have to...!', she said with surprise and gratitude.

'Of course I had to. You're my baby', I said and hugged her once again.

'Now get dressed, meet you at the breakfast table', I said and let her have the precious moments of her day.

I took a moment by Chandra Taal by myself, close to which we had booked our lodging. I went and sat by the river. It exuded such pious serenity. The sky was a clear blue and the clouds all flew by merrily. The fidgeting in my heart had stopped, since I heard the voice conversation between Rahul and Viraj. Honestly, deep down I was waiting for the shoe to drop. Life doesn't just happen that way. Anyway, the worst was over. I had a life to lead, and lead it well. I took my phone out, clicked a few pictures for my travel vlog and breathed the fresh mountain air. It just instantly seems to purify you. The serenity albeit, reminded me now of the profile I had stalked last night.

'Traveller'.. 'Water child'.. 'Sunset Lover'..

There were pictures of him at the beach, enjoying water sports and he seemed like an ardent lover of marine life.

There wasn't much on his profile, but that was enough.

Wait, I questioned myself. Why... am I doing this?

I shut my thoughts, quite aggressively this time and travelled back to my troupe. Reality living is the only sorta living, folks!

We had the time of our lives at the highland. They had arranged a bonfire with lights and music. Trees were all decorated with lamps and the cake was her favourite flavour. We laughed our hearts out and danced the night away. I sat by the fire, sipping on my mocktail, whilst I saw her from a distance, slow dancing with Mohit Bhaiya. Hand in hand, her head against his chest, as he delicately held her waist with both his hands. 'Tera.. hone laga hoon', played on in the background, a placid romance unfolded as the night faded into morning. I bet that's what love looks like for some... security.

Back in town after the weekend, we all settled into our regular lives. Working, writing, brooding. The hurt in my heart had been numbing, day by day. I still stayed quiet and guarded at public scenarios, but something inside me was willing to keep loving life on with strength, and a tiny bit of hope. At 3.30pm though, we had a team meeting. It went well. Two new interns had joined our team and they had a knack for AI, with terrible lifestyle choices. I'm absolutely no one to judge (or maybe I'm someone with a voice that could point right from wrong), but why have we as a society normalised smoking, so much?

With questions in my head, parent like behaviour in my heart and a frustrated co-worker's spirit, I kept typing aggressively. In the background, I could hear faint voices of Ben speaking with Aarav. I was unaware of the conversation and was featuring a script of my own on my laptop. Aarav had initiated leading the marketing vertical for his friend's merchandise brand and was taking Ben's insights. Ben gave helpful tips and asked Aarav to use the right set of words during his page's optimisation and kept repeating the words with a slight confusion to pronunciation.

"Use the right keywords. Timing is important. Words like 'merchandise', 'trending', 'clothes' help a lot", said Ben in his usual manner.

Then kept repeating the last words, confused.

"Clothh-es.. Kloth-es", he said, unwary.

"Clothes", I said, nonchalantly from behind them, stating the right enunciation.

And then I stopped typing for a second in horror. Why did I have to do that? He's my senior, I thought to myself.

"Thanks, Miller", he said after a moment's wait and went about his way. Such a face-palm moment! :)

My surgery was nearing. I had been trying to delay worrying about it, in my mind, for as long as I am able to recollect. I was bound to maintain composure because Shona Di was getting engaged the week after. All arrangements had been taken care of, the catering decided, flowers and confetti in place. 'Wait, I hadn't seen the rings yet. 'Never mind, I'll see them tomorrow at the ceremony,' I thought and went to iron the burgundy lehenga I had decided to wear. It had a sequined blouse with quarter length sleeves and the skirt was flaired with pretty pleats. I wondered if she was nervous!

It took place at a temple on a hilltop. It was built a few hundred years ago with white stones. The pillars were so intricately crafted and the floor, white marble. It was still chilly in the hills, and we all carried our shawls and dupattas. I had mine wrapped around me. I met Reva Di after almost a year. She recently birthed a baby girl and I finally met our princess. God, was she tiny! I held her in my arms and she instantly grabbed my finger. These moments, these exact same moments make us so unimaginably happy, and feel empty at the same time. I held on to her for the entire afternoon. It was as though Reva Didi could infer my insides, she looked at both of us, placed a hand on my head and said in her quiet voice "You guys look so good together" I smiled. "I know", I responded. Sisters are different, it's as though all our hearts are eternally connected with a string.

And then the bride entered. She donned a deep orange zardori saree, with a thick brown border at the seams. She has paired it with golden jewellery and had a nath on her nose today. She looked ethereal. Mayank Bhaiya had colour coordinated with her and wore a saffron

kurta and churidar. As we all cheered for them, from the corner of my eye, I could see a face quite familiar. My breathing stopped for a moment. It was Ben. But.. I just let it go.

We went on to the hall behind the temple for lunch and I could see him walking over to me.

"Miller.. didn't expect to see you here", he said in his usual slow voice.

"I'm actually.. related to the bride. She is my cousin", I said, half embarrassed and half shy.

"Oh, that's... very nice", he said, smiling.

"You are...?", I asked, rather hesitantly.

"Oh, my brother works with Mohit Bhaiya. They work together at the Central Bank. They're kinda tight. He visits over often", he said, looking over at them.

"I'm glad you could make it", I said, playing host.

"You look good, Miller", he said, eyeing me.

"Thank you Sir, this is.. it's new", I said, looking down at my attire nervously.

"No, I mean, you look healthier now. You used to look sick and sad when we first met. Hope you're fine. Do take care of yourself", he said, in a voice a little more intense than usual.

I smiled.

"I will, thank you Ben", I said and we went in for lunch.

There was something familiar in his voice.

Something safe, in his eyes.

Something about him,

that could perhaps build something broken.



CHAPTER 12:

HONEY BROWN EYES

15th March, 2024. I tried choreographing and shooting a dance video. Not those 15 seconds obnoxious reels that have spread like an epidemic these days. I tried to shoot a 3 minute, freestyle dance performance on one of my childhood's favourite soundtrack. I failed twice, the knees begin to hurt. I was determined to do it today. I must. I'm not gonna let this kill me. I'll get through this, Today! And I let my all out.

रांझा रांझा करदी वे में, आपे रांझा होई,

रांझा रांझा सद्दे नि मैनु हीर ना आखो कोई...

I did it. I had to take the next day off, it hurt so much.

Why couldn't I just dance for a living again? That was a question for life, luck, destiny, the Universe and God. Perhaps, I would be answered someday.

Next day morning, I visited 'Mind Maze'.

I had been whiling a lot of my time there those days.

There was a cute little walk-in cafe before the book shop, and sometimes I go in to sit there with a cup of espresso with my new purchase. 'Oh, the little joys of life'. It is a rather cosy space, with old world Victorian style interiors. Pastel coloured walls, marble flooring, ceiling with warm lights fit in them and wooden chairs with floral cushioning. There were trays of freshly baked muffins and brownies in the glass shelves that showcased the 'specials' of the day! I have begun

to like my lone time. It's such a mandate to be able to spend time with oneself, all alone. I used to feel unsafe and uneasy with my own thoughts for the longest time. But time alone gives you the space for self reflection and a deep sense of introspection. Was I maturing already?

Sometimes I got novels that were heavy on my intellect.

On some days, I collected children's stories.

The range is incredible. By the by, I am a Cancerian.

At work the next day, it was rather relaxing and I spent the day editing a certain news video. It was scheduled to be posted the next day. I set a reminder on my smart watch. Are we consuming tech, or has it swallowed us whole already? At lunch, I had a paneer bhurji wrap that I had packed from home. And got myself a mojito from the office canteen. It was around 4pm and I could hear voices in the background.

I was developing social anxiety, did I tell you guys that, yet?

"No, we'll all come surely", I heard Aarav speak.

"So let's all leave at 7?", asked John.

"Ya ya, I'll tell Violet, Priyanka and the rest", confirmed Dhriti. She was socially more at ease than the rest of us.

Dhriti moved over to me, turned my chair towards her and reckoned me to remove my headphones. I did.

"Hi. You good?", she asked.

She was a cutie.

I nodded in affirmation.

"So, John said that the project was a success. They liked our work and might refer us to other companies, in good time.", she squealed.

I joined in.

"He's taking us all out for drinks and dinner tonight", she said.

"Wow.. guess he's human after all", I exclaimed.

"Haha.. So you in?", she asked.

"Ahh, sure", I said. Quite, quite hesitant in my mind.

But I must. I had promised myself, I would be good.

The plan was to go to a pub first, then go in for dinner to a dine-in restaurant close by, if any of us by that time possibly could. I wore a black mid length A-line dress, accessorised it with black earrings, boots and a funky bracelet. The men were dressed in formals still. Dhriti wore a bodycon dress. Boy, was she fiesty! Nora would've been proud to meet Dhriti, someone so comfortable in their own skin and self! Priyanka and Avani wore mid length dresses like me. The nine of us hit 'Night Eye Club', at around 8pm. The ceiling was crazy disco, so was the ambience. I sat by the counter with the girls. Dhriti and Priyanka went dancing after a few shots. I was sipping on my mocktail. John insisted on getting me a cocktail, but I refused politely. The deejay played a lot of Justin Beiber and Ed Shereen, mixing it up at moments. After a while, the mood had switched to Bollywood masala. Dhriti pulled me and Avani to the floor and we all merrily performed on the hook steps of 'Tumhi ho bandhu', you know.. with the arm gestures and all! It was a fine evening. I looked over at the counter. Rahul and Ben were facing the floor, with whisky in their hands.

At around 10pm, we reached 'Il Forno', which was on a hill top again. The way John drove us up, only God and we know how he did it partially drunk. I prepared to sit and saw Ben taking a seat right before me. Hmm, coincidence!?!

I breathed once deeply, then got back to the menu. We ordered paratha, butter chicken and for the pious vegetarians, paneer, by default. The way they all feasted. So alcohol does make you hungry! We all sat and chatted till 12am and the store owner looked at us with teary eyes, gesturing us to leave. The staff member, a young man, came with the bill, and stood quite close to me. An uncomfortable close. I shifted a little in my seat and kept looking down. The man didn't flinch, he

kept standing. My breathing got high, I held my scarf tightly and as I looked up straight, I saw Ben looking at me. He had a strange assurance in his eyes. He didn't break contact, till the man left. Then with a slight movement of his brows, he signalled that all was well.

I looked down again. Hmm. I didn't think much of it.

He is just a nice man. A nice man who cares about his colleagues. That's all. The men drove us all to our house and partied a little more. We could say, cause they all came hungover the next day. Oh, what a laugh we all had.

Avani has had a crush on Rahul, for over two years now. But due to company regulations, we never let the news reach John's ears. Sometimes, Rahul would come in early and keep a red rose on Avani's desk, and hide it behind her photo frame that showcased her parents, in a way where only the petals would be visible. So when Avani came by and sat at her desk, she would see a fresh rose peeking at her early in the morning. The smile that she directed at Rahul then, was worth a watch.

I was sleeping over at Noras' that night. We watched a comedy thriller, ate Korean noodles, drank three full cups of coffee and spoke our hearts out. I was to help her out with one of her scripts for her YouTube page. And she, with my finances. We went to sleep at around 4am. It was a holiday the next day. I turned to my side of the bed. I massaged my head, shoulders, feet and applied a thick layer of night gel on my face. I was ready to sleep. And yet... for a long time, I couldn't. I kept getting visuals, imagery. I tried to brush them all off my consciousness but they kept flashing. So I chose to deal with them. I inhaled deeply, and let my visions flow.

Eyes... light brown eyes.

Thin, bluish green veins spurting from the iris.

Thick, long lashes. A familiar smile.

The eyes were deep, as though hiding a world full of secrets in them. The eyes, they seemed like they had the universe's treasures. The eyes, they exuded such beauty, and serenity. Like sunshine on a snow clad mountain.

The smile, that stretched from ear to ear.

A soft, pretty smile. A laugh, vibrantly ringing in my ears.

I knew who the eyes belonged to.

I knew whose smile that was.

I held my heart.

I kept my heart from thinking any further.

I knew it wasn't my mind thinking.

That thing wouldn't be so cruelly treacherous.

I was afraid, for myself. This wasn't right.

So I took my earphones out, put my favourite song on and went to sleep.

रांझा रांझा ना कर हीरे, जग बदनामी होए,

पती पती झर जावे, पर खुशबू चुप ना होए...



CHAPTER 13:

AJEEB DASTAAN HAI YE

For a while, I had stopped tutoring the kids. I just could not make time anymore. And the thought of my probable impending doom was too much to bear already. I had things to take care of. These are some of the reasons that I kept giving myself, from time to time. I missed those babies so much. I have once had to let go of some of my children when I stopped working as a choreographer at a certain performing arts studio. Some of them would still facetime me from time to time. The kids, when you are teachers, they expect a certain parental behaviour from you. And you perform them duly with dignity and responsibility, all by your own. It's truly an unspoken relationship, that builds on its own and continues to bloom. I texted their parents that I would soon resume their sessions, post my surgery. They were all thrilled.

I was at my apartment, doing laundry when suddenly, I got Nora's call. I picked it up and began speaking in my usual manner, about absolute random things. Well, I guess that's the charm of sisterhood. It just keeps giving. Giving love and headache. Also brain rot comedy.

"Hi.. I was saying.. is Sunday church chale kya?"

"Or do you wanna go someplace else?", I asked.

I could hear sniffles.

I stopped, stood still by the kitchen counter.

"What happened!", I demanded.

She kept quiet.

"Batayegi.. please?", I said. My heart raced.

"He's cheating on me", was all she could say.

"Mai aa rahi hun, ruk", I said, cut the call, turned the gas off and immediately booked a cab.

At her apartment, we sat on her couch.

I calmed her down and sat close by her.

"I.. I don't know. We have had each others' instagram passwords for over 5 years now. I open it every now and then", she said.

"Okay..?", I asked.

"So.. he is out for a business outing to Mysore for a week. I haven't spoken to him properly. He is in the interiors and there's poor connection there", she said, in between sniffles.

"And..?", I asked, growing impatient, but not showing it.

"His phone is unreachable. And when I logged in to his IG account this morning, I saw his chats with some girls. Sleazy chats. He had initiated them", she said and broke down badly.

Nora is a lioness. She never cries, she never begs, she's almost always in control of herself. She is one of the strongest persons that I personally know of. But she sobbed today, like a child.

I couldn't believe that Bhaiya would do something of this degree to her. Why would he? Something seemed fishy. But I knew what the whole thing looked like to Nora, and what it was doing to her. She could barely breathe. And kept crying.

I tried to sort for reasons. Perhaps, he was drunk. But either way, how could he?

"Di.. I don't know what to do", she kept sobbing.

There isn't much that I could do then. But the thought of her losing Bhaiya was too much to bear. I couldn't believe this was happening.

She held me and kept crying. I was numb.

I tried to make some calls to know of his whereabouts. When somebody rushed through her front door.

It was Bhaiya.

He went straight for her and held her in his arms.

She stayed for a while, then pushed him away.

"I know Baba, what it looks like. But I lost my phone 3 days back. Somebody at the Hunsur village stole it. And Deepak told me there were some ongoing objectionable activities on my social media accounts. I logged in from his phone and saw what all it was. You can kill me for not having remembered your phone number, I would have called you else. As soon as we finished work, I took the first flight to Manali. I know you would be worried", he said, all of it, in one breath.

She stood, numb.

She stood for over two long minutes.

Just breathing, staring at him.

I stood with bated breath. As relieved as I was to hear his side, I waited for Nora to decide on something.

She moved slowly... held his arms... and then lost herself in his arms, crying at the top of her voice.

I could feel tears filling my eyes.

I hid my face and in my palms, turned away from them and cried like a child.

The fact that this could possibly have been a situation where they would have to lose upon each other for the rest of their lives, scared the three of us so much.

It was a sister's thing. Whenever she cried, I cried. I had never felt this way for anybody else.

Bhaiya sat her down and I left them both be.

"Just stay with him for a while, I'll come later", I said.

They needed their time together. I sent a prayer up and left.

I reached home, turned the gas on again and fell on my bed for a while. My phone beeped. I checked it out. Not many people text me at night.

'don't have a life, but I can die.. what am I?', it came.. .. from Ben! I had saved his number from our office team's whatsapp group.

'Me, at this point, I swear it's me', I wrote, with a slight smile on my face.

'Umm, batteries, but sure, we can go with yours too', he wrote with crying emojis.

'How do you do?', I wrote back.

'Pretty well! Dinner's burnt, lost the book that I was reading. I should be ready to kill myself any moment now', he wrote.

Boy, did he have a sense of humour!

'F.R.I.E.N.D.S fan?', I texted.

'Yah, why?', he wrote.

'Nothing... Me too!', I wrote, laughing now.

'See you tomorrow, Miller. Gotta set fire to the laundry and put the dishes in the pool', he wrote.

'You are Good!', I wrote. Quite, quite impressed with his timing. COMIC TIMING, you predators!

(Cry emojis for real)



CHAPTER 14:

THE HURT IN MY HEART

Shona Di's wedding preparations were going about in full swing. It was a destination wedding! The destination was Manali. Manali is a hill station, you guys! So before you roll your eyes at my twisted humour, I feel obligated to tell you that Manali is in fact, a very popular place for successful destination weddings. Relatives were flying in and there were innumerable trips being constantly made to malls and other market places.

Alreaaaady, we were exhausted.

"Laal pehen, ye white shite mat pehenna", screamed Tai ji, hurling her strong opinions at Di.

"Haan Maa, laal hi pehnungi", she said, coaxing her mother.

Tai ji, came and sat by me. We have been close.

She loves me like I was hers.

After my mother's demise, she had taken me in and loved me so much, I owe her my whole life.

"Iski shaadi hai ek mahine mein, magar aadhi raat coke order kar karke peeti hai", she complained.

"She'll fix it Mummy. You don't worry", I said, assuringly.

"Aur fix nahi kar pai toh?"

"Toh Mayank Bhaiya ko fir karte rehna padega iske liye coke order. Aur kya option hai?", I said and we all had a good laugh.

Back in my office, I was smiling a little more than usual. I would look forward to team meetings, steal glances at the Seniors' cabins every now and then and had started wearing pastel-colored lip shades again.

"Looking good, Babe", complimented Dhriti.

"Not as good as your boots! My God, are they rare!", I said, looking down at the exquisite wear she donned.

"I knooow, na? Got them off at sale from Westside last week", she said, flashing me them with her skirt's pleats.

"Listen, let's leave soon and catch a movie today", she said, making plans for us girlies.

"Haan, chal na!", I said.

I had started liking these girls a lot.

We all met at lunch time, sometimes sat together.

Discussed our lives and struggles.

Dhriti and Priyanka would go out for smoke breaks. Avani and I would sit by the window and chat often.

We decided on the movie and theatre. And at lunch time, John came by and ruined our plans.

"Hi!", he said in a serious tone.

We all stopped whatever it was that we were doing, and looked up at him. He sounded worried.

"So.. you know the deadline for the 'Apex Adventures' project was due on the 25th of March. Now, it's been preponed", he said.

We all gasped.

"When is it due then?", stammered Rahul.

"21st", said John. Waiting for all of us to react.

"We'll do it, Sir", Priyanka said. We all agreed.

In times of need, we all showed unconditional courage.

We set to work, rescheduling all our personal deadlines and remaking the flowcharts. Roles were shifted and some of us filled in for Aarav, who was not present those few days. Ben and John told us our new strategy and we were all equipped for war.

We all stayed back till 7pm.

Then, one by one, people began to leave.

Priyanka, Rahul and I stayed. John left at around 7:30pm. He offered to drop Priyanka and I home. Priyanka obliged. I was still working on a certain report.

"You carry on, Sir. I'll leave with Rahul", I said.

"Alright, but don't be later than 9pm, Miller", he said and left the office.

Rahul and I got coffee at around 8pm.

It tasted like heaven, to be honest.

I was having trouble with words those few days. How could I call myself a writer and then stumble upon words! Words? Wasn't that supposed to be my forte? Wasn't I supposed to be a proud nerd?

Well.. I thought to myself. At least I have the opportunity to showcase my abilities. Most people don't even have that. So with gratitude in my heart, I set to work!

Rahul left at around 8:40pm.

He almost convinced me to drop me home, even took me by my hand. But I was hell bent on finishing this write up.

How could I possibly lose a battle with words?

He left but after making sure that I would leave exactly at around 9pm, and not a second later than that. Rahul was sweet. He was like a brother to me, ever since I joined Watson and Co.

I took a long, deep breath, rolled back my shoulders and went in straight with my keyboard. I remember typing aggressively for over half an hour. Typing, deleting, altering.. making all sorts of faces. And then lo, I was done. I pressed the last full stop like a warrior at the war ground slaying the last enemy with the sword and re-checked it twice.

To chill for about a moment, I opened Facebook.

I hadn't logged in to Facebook for over six months now.

I scrolled for a bit.

Memes, news articles, celebrity drama...

.. and wait.

I dropped my water bottle down.

There was a post.

It was about me.

The fidgeting in my heart hit the roof.

It was a post. About me. From Viraj Ahuja's account.

I had not unfriended him yet. I didn't open Facebook.

It has a photo of both of us. A selfie at a restaurant.

With a caption that said;

'Chick that seduces and digs for money'

My anxiety peaked. I couldn't breathe. I just couldn't.

I called Nora. She didn't pick up. She must be making dinner.

I called Dad. And then in an instance, I cut the call before it could ring.

Wait!

I was panicking, yes. But we need to fix this first.

Would Maa be this afraid, to do what was right?

No.

She would fight.

She would fix this with courage and teach this immoral scamster a lesson. She would make things right for herself. She would stand up for herself.

And so I did too.

I made a quick call to a friend, Bhushan, working for the state's cyber security and told him my case. I explained some things to him, and gave a few details. I was lodging a virtual case against him.

I did and waited.

They fixed it in a minute's time.

Bhushan also advised me to lodge a complaint against him at our nearest police station. He was infuriated.

I fixed the issue.

But how was I to fix the fear in my heart?

How could I forget all that had happened to me?

I was fearful. I was afraid to face such scums.

Why would people who you trust make you look like clowns, hurt you for their purpose?

I hated myself for ever trusting a garbage of a person as such. It was too soon for me to realise the evil that coexisted with us on this very planet. I was still very naive. Still hopeful of life.

As I was contemplating the past, I realised I had triggered my cause. It was happening. My limbs started to shiver. My breathing got high. Pain radiated through my body and I just couldn't stop myself. I couldn't.

I moved the chair to the side and covered my face.

I had to cover my mouth to stop from screaming.

It was a full blown attack.

Just then, the lights went off.

Only screen light from the systems stayed on.

I almost fell to the ground and as I saved myself, I could sense somebody rush to me and sit by me on the floor.

My vision was blurred at first, but I soon recognised him.

It was Ben.

He probably hadn't left.

He saw me, held my knees and tried bringing me back.

"I'm here, it'll pass", he said.

I kept screaming and closed my mouth shut.

My nose felt numb, my hands felt numb.

It was such a helpless state.

I hated myself.

I wasn't weak. I just, couldn't stop it.

Breathing stayed high.

He held my knees tighter and kept calmly repeating

"Violet, I'm here. Sab thik hai"

"Just breathe, just breathe"

"Sab theek hai.. sab theek hai"

"Mai hoon na yahan pe"

"Keep breathing"

"Just keep breathing"

I don't know how it passed, but it did.

My breathing got slower. The numbness of the nose slowly began to fade. The pain, uncoiling from my body. I stared blankly at him.

He looked at me with a placid cool in his eyes.

I just needed security at that time.

And for a moment, it was just us breathing, staring right into each others' souls.

"You okay?", he asked.

I barely nodded. I tried hard to move.

My body felt tired. Like it had run a marathon.

I needed water. I needed air. I needed to lie down.

He nodded back at me..

And in an instance I held him.

I fell to the ground to match his stance.

I grabbed on to him, tightly with both my arms crossed at his neck. I latched on to him.

He held me back, slowly.

His hand at the back of my head.

I pressed my face sideways on his shoulder.

I felt security and presence.

How I felt with Dad as a child whenever I used to wake up after nightmares and would hug him to shoo the scary thoughts away.

He didn't let go.

Neither did I.

After a few seconds, I breathed heavily.

My chest was pressed against his.

Our hearts beating in a certain synchrony.

I felt him breathing lightly.

He smelt a sweet summer flower.

My head was against his chest now.

He loosened the grip from my head and held me by the waist now, not letting go.

I could sense his grip getting tighter around my body. His face buried in my hair.

I stayed.. for a while. And yet, it felt as though I had gathered all of eternity's beauty in moments.

I slowly... very slowly let go, putting my hand on his chest.

I looked up at him.

"Thank you", I managed.

"Let's go, I'll drop you home", he said with a smile.



CHAPTER 15:

PUSHPA, I STILL HATE TEARS!

After my doom's day incidence, I had been rather cautious of managing my emotions at public places. It wasn't like I wasn't getting better. It was just one very unfortunate incident. I slept like a baby that night. I said a few prayers up to Maa, and curled up in bed. Ben had been texting me every now and then. He told me he had never seen anybody during a panic attack before. And yet, he took me in his care with such maturity. I wish I could tell Maa about Ben. I wished she would have met him someday. I had quite a few things to say these days. But I didn't have time to recover, because my SISTER WAS GETTING MARRIED!

The arrangements were all taken care of.

Flowers, ornaments and catering

Garments, guest invitations and malas.

There was just so much to do.

The sangeet was a blast. The groom's side performed on SRK'S hits like 'Marjaani Marjaani', 'Aaja Maahi Ve' and 'Tujhme Rab Dikhta Hai'. Mayank Bhaiya had a special entry on 'Ghode Jaisi Chaal', Shona Di's favorite childhood song. The things that men do in love. It is but, precious to witness.

The bride's side danced to 'Nachde Ne Saare', 'Kaala Chashma' and 'Titli'. My sister had her solo on 'Teri Ore'.

For 'Haldi', everyone wore different shades of yellow. Everybody experimented with colours on the evening of the 'Mehndi' ceremony.

And then, everybody held their hearts for D Day.

We all woke up at 4am sharp. Shona Di was bathed in pure milk, she was wearing just a white, cotton saree. They bathed her then with clean water being poured on to her by the elderly women of our family. She blushed all pink by the milk bath. I could see the radiance of a bride already on her face. Then after a few more rituals, she went in to get her hair and make up done. Nora was with me. Dad had arrived and we all left for the venue. She was getting married atop a hill in Manali, at a Shiv Temple in Siyal. It couldn't have gotten any better than this.

It was a day wedding. Most of the relatives were in by mid morning. Nora and I had our chai and looked after the arrangements, double checking everything. Tai ji was draped in a blue banarasi saree and Tau ji wore a peach coloured sherwani. Reva Di had a pink lehenga on and little Pari wore a white top and skirt, matching her outfit with that of her Mother. My Dad wore a yellow shervani and I imagined what Mom would have worn if she were here today! Definitely a heavy bordered saree with lots and lots of ornaments! Nora wore a green banarasi saree, and paired it with black sandals, oxidised jewellery and a big black bindi. I felt surreal watching her dress like an adult. Wasn't she still supposed to be my baby? Ugh! I hate to see her grow. I was at the same time, so incredibly proud.

I wore one of my Maa's saree. It was a bi-colour draping. Its colour was a fire orange, with amber hued flowers carved onto them. I paired the heavenly thing up with gold jewellery and a maang tikka. I wore a chandrakor bindi and a nose pin to finish the look. Dad looked at me... and smiled. I knew. Appreciation between the both of us, was just silence. That was our love language.

I went and met all the other relatives. All my Bua's daughters had arrived with their kids. I introduced myself to the ones I hadn't met, and gave the tightest hugs to those munchkins that already knew me.

And the non married ones were all stacked at the 'golgappa' stall. Some of us, I swear to God, just refuse to grow up. All of them, including me.

The temple had a huge white stone wall at its entrance, with pillars of oak wood built at its seams. The floor were all old stones. One had to walk through to reach to the platform where the ceremony was to be held. It was still cool. We all had draped shawls, which we all dropped at around midday when the sun hit high. The wedding was to be held at a stand on a small hill. We helped some older relatives climb it up. It had thin orange coloured pillars crawl up to meet the roof, which was thatched and made of white wires, all intersecting each other, leaving room for sunlight to fall in dappled shafts.

It was 12:30 pm now. Pandit ji had informed us of the 'Shubh Muhurat' to be exactly at 1 pm. The groom entered the temple, and sat by the wedding fire. Mayank Bhaiya is a tall, sturdy man. He was lean and built strong. He wore an off white shervani with peach coloured jutti. He wore a very adorable sehra and while he walked in, he looked as coy as a bride.

We all stood at the 'pandal'. And then finally.. She came!

A lehenga, bright red in colour, embellished with tiny white stones all over in circular patterns. The border, lined with intricate golden designs, that slowly ran up. The blouse, a wonderful red corset, that had broad shoulders and met with a U at the neckline. It was embellished in golden stone details too. The dupatta had zari work and was a pure net material with heavy borders. She had bangles, anklets, a circular nose ring that ended at her ears and wore a big red bindi. We beheld our hearts. She looked like an angel donning red. Red has always been the 'bride's colour here in India. She walked in slowly, holding her lehenga, nervousness obvious in her stride. My eyes were watery, I kept a hand on my heart and remembered this moment for life.

It was one of the most heartfelt weddings that I had ever attended. There was family, music, love, laughter, rituals and absolutely delicious

food. My sister cried when Jiju (yes, officially now), filled her 'maang' with 'sindoor', it was just such an emotional moment for a woman. She must have dreamt of it ever since she was 5. Jiju must have recalled to her of an embarrassing memory in her ear, that she looked angrily at him, and burst into laughter the next minute. We all ate to our heart's fill that afternoon after the ceremony. Deep in my heart, I was waiting for someone to show up. And he did, quite late though. It was Ben, along with his Bhैया and Bhabhi. He introduced me to them and I walked him to the 'coffee stand' that was at a little distance.

"Hey, you look....", he said, looking me up and down, as we walked slowly.

Ever since the intimate hug after my attack, he had stopped referring to me by my last name. He didn't call me Violet either. Just 'hey', or 'Ma'am' sometimes. It was sweet, I felt.

'Thank you, so much!', I said and took a mini bow.

"You look really good today. I had never seen you in... anything besides formals", I said and realised it wasn't really a compliment.

He was wearing a magenta coloured kurta and white pyjamas. He was milky fair and the contrast of the kurta suited him. It brought out his eyes.

OKAY STOP WITH THE EYES, I told myself time and again!

After the Vidaai, we all sat down tired. The sun had set and our hearts were heavy. It was one of the hardest things that I had to do. Di is a married woman now. She had a new life, new roles to play and a whole new set of responsibilities. I prayed and hoped with all my heart's will that she had a marriage that lasted a lifetime. I introduced Nora to Ben and as they were exchanging greetings, Ben's brother got a call. It was their Mother and as he talked, we could see colour fade away from his face. He almost couldn't speak, even when Ben forced him to speak up. It was about their Uncle at home. He had a heart attack a few hours earlier, and had passed on now. We were all too stunned to speak. They

all rushed back home. Nora and I went along with them. I sat beside Ben and held his hand strongly. He kept from crying, I could notice.

As the car reached the main gate, the boys ran inside. We all walked in to find a doctor sitting in their living room, writing a death certificate. Our hearts paced up and down. How did it transpire to this already? Did their Uncle have any chronic sickness? Where was Ben? Was he okay? Why was this all happening..

We entered the bedroom and saw Ben and his relatives sitting by their Uncle. I saw him touching his hand, unable to do anything more than that, heart broken at not being able to have his hand being held back. We left the family on its own to have their last moments with him and went home ourselves. I could barely sleep that night, kept praying for God to make the family strong at this hour.

The next morning, I went directly to see Ben.

He was sitting on their porch alone, dressed in white kurta pyjamas. He saw me and slowly stood up. I went closer to him, and he looked me in my eye. I could sense such hopelessness in them, I wish I could take it all from him. I didn't know why I felt that way, but I did.

We stood for a little while, and this time, he held me.

He was taller than me and yet, he latched on to me at my shoulders with both his arms around me. I gently held him at his waist. His finger ring, getting entangled in my dupatta. It was just for a moment and then he let go of me. We sat on his porch.

"How did.. I mean.. did he..", I stumbled to ask.

"Yes, he had diabetes for over 15 years now. He was nearing 70. We thought we had it under control but..", he said and choked on his words.

"Please, stay strong, Sir. The family needs you now", I said, assuringly.

"Ya", he managed.

"It's just that, after Dad passed away years back, he was all that we had. And now..", he said and I saw tears falling from his face. I tried consoling him but instead I noticed something surreal with myself.

Tear ducts had begun to tug at my eyes. My nose felt a strange sensation. My eyes were welling up. I do not, till this point know why, but I just could not bear to see him cry. It was so hard, nothing had been this hard. Was I even allowed to feel this way? What was this that was happening? Before I could sense or stop, I had begun crying too. It was not intentional and I couldn't comprehend my actions at the moment and yet, it just kept happening.

"I'm sure he's watching you proudly, Ben", I tried to say, in between sniffles.

He looked up at me. I think he was taken a little aback.

So was I.

I controlled my reactions. The last thing that I wanted to do was to scare him.

Deep down I knew that this was something that had only happened to me with Nora. But that was solely because I was deeply attached to her, for over a decade now. She was my sister. And for nobody else, when they cried, had I cried.

But...

I was terrified for myself.

We talked for a little while. And I left.

Tears, such ambiguous story tellers!



CHAPTER 16:

THE HEART THAT SMILES...

It took Ben a couple of weeks to overcome the loss he had just borne. Death is never an easy feat. At one moment, they are there. Walking, laughing.. doing what they have been doing their entire lives. And the next moment, they are gone. Left. Vanished into thin air. It is strange for the heart, to not have them around anymore. The conversations that you've had with them, your brain repeats them to you, on and on, till your heart is consciously sore, and the soul can't take no more. Such is the feat of death. You reach as far as possible, and yet, nothing brings them back. Such is the feat of death. You just continue living, with a tiny hope in your heart, that perhaps someday in another world, you'll meet them, and then continue exactly from where you both had left off. Such is the feat of life. Such is the feat of hope.

'Hey, what's for dinner?', he texted me one night.

'Making spaghetti and soup', I responded.

'That's nice. I'm doing noodles tonight', he wrote.

'Wow! Did you make it?', I enquired, surprised.

He barely knew how to cook.

':)', was his response.

'Delivery?', I questioned.

'Yupp, that's me! Boy, am I sad?', he wrote.

'Now that is a different conversation we can have', I texted.

‘Heyyy, look who's cranking up a notch’, he wrote to me, cheekily, already expecting a fiery comeback.

‘Guess we HAVE to meet somewhere’, I wrote.

And then realised it was a probable hint for a date!

Wait.

Did my mind do it on purpose?

I kept negating these thoughts. Shooing away any stray emotion of wanting to meet Ben outside work, ever!

EVER!, I repeated to myself.

‘So when are you actually going to?’, he enquired.

Now I took a moment to analyse.

What was this?

Was he asking me out?

Was he interested?

Was he...

Hmm, this could take a while.

‘Anytime next that you're to burn your dinner!’, I wrote.

And waited to see his response. I was so nervous.

‘Saturday evening sounds like a good time for fire experiments’, he texted after a gap of 6 minutes.

Every minute seemed incredibly long.

"I'll get the extinguishers", I wrote and wondered if it sounded flirty. There was so much about this person that I was not aware of. And yet, for some reason, I did not feel afraid.

Ben offered to pick me up, but I insisted on coming alone by myself. We were to meet at the 'Urban Terrace' in Old Manali. It was a rooftop cafe, with pretty black furniture and a green carpet for the flooring. I

walked in. I wore a full sleeve black top, deep blue jeans, canvas shoes and had a black pendant chain around my neck. It was something my Mother had gifted me years back. I had my hair in a ponytail and a cornflower blue scarf wrapped around my neck. There were little yellow flowers carved onto them. I saw him there, sitting at a table by the edge. I took a deep breath. My heart felt funny, it... smiled. He was wearing a deep blue shirt, rolled up sleeves and wore a brown watch on his left arm, with brown trousers and a leather brown pair of formal shoes. I'm not exaggerating, but I stopped and looked for a moment. It wasn't an emotion that I could share with anybody. Perhaps, not even with him.

He saw me, stood up, pulled me a chair and adjusted himself back in his seat. I smiled a little, mostly looking down and having to remind myself a hundred times in my head, that it was JUST A CASUAL DINNER WITH A CERTAIN COLLEAGUE!

"Wow.. you look!", he said and stopped and smiled.

"I've heard that before from you", I said, smiling back.

"But, you do.", was all he could say.

We ordered mocktails and spaghetti.

I let my hair loose.

From the corner of my eye, I caught him staring.

He looked at me with longing eyes.

My hair fell in tresses on my shoulders and chest. My top had a deep neckline, and I felt nervous about it.

But not even once was he not looking at my eyes. I knew he was a gentleman.

They served the spaghetti and I smiled.

"Hope this one's not burnt", he said and covered his face with his palms, animatedly to show pain and tears.

"Well, it mustn't be. You didn't make it!", I said, taking a slight risk. Was I getting better at this?

"Heyy, that's rude for a girl this sweet!", he said and realised what he said.

"Thank you, Sir, the compliment is well received", I said.

He paused for a moment.

Then spoke.

"Well, then I have quite many things to say to you for a while now", he said, staring straight into my eyes.

I looked at him intensely for a while, then broke contact and looked down. He looked away too. I blushed, just a little. I'm sure he saw that.

We talked through the night and he told me a lot of his childhood stories. I didn't have much to share. Not everybody's childhood is eventful. Some are just instances and collections of tales you never wish to recollect. I could not tell him about my parents' split, or the fights that I encountered, all as a child. I just did not wish to inflict this upon anyone else, ever. As he was speaking to me about his fascination with tigers and how he had always wished to visit 'The Jim Corbett National Park', I got a call. I received it. It was Dad. I spoke to him and cut the call.

"Who, Mom?", he asked.

And for some reason, I wanted to tell him.

"No Ben, it was Dad. I've lost my Mother, ever since I was 12. She had developed a chronic illness, when I was just 10 and she passed away a year and a half later from great suffering. I had grown up post that with my Father. He had always cared for me, played all roles sincerely. They were already separated before she passed away. It's just...", I said and raised my shoulders and dropped them down with a deep sigh and smile.

"That's.. that", I said.

He didn't ask anything thereafter. Looked at me for a while.

His right hand went and held my hand firmly on the table, not breaking eye contact. He just nodded at me with a soft smile.

I breathed and smiled back.

For the first time in my life, I felt as safe with an outsider, as I had felt all along with Dad.

I wasn't afraid anymore.



CHAPTER 17:

THE MONSTER IN MY MENISCUS

It was time. I had to get my leg operated.
Was I dreading it?

Yes.

Was I terrified?

Yes.

Did I want it to happen?

Yes.

I just wanted to get it over with. Perhaps, this could finally solve things that I had been suffering with for the longest of time. Perhaps, my life could restart again. Perhaps, this was a portal to strength, a ray of hope.

All those possibilities could be true, and I had to take a chance to find it out.

The surgery would last for some hours, and I would have to spend a couple of days at the hospital under their observation, before I could go home.

But there were other restrictions. I wouldn't be able to walk for over 20 days. I had to strengthen it once the cast was off. I had to take strong painkillers for weeks. I had to...

Just doesn't end, does it?

I sat there, waiting to change into sterilized clothes, provided by the hospital. Nora was there, so was Dad. Nora held my hand strongly. She didn't say much, just looked at me before I was called in and smiled.

"Stay strong! Sab thik ho jayega, okay?", she said.

It reminded me quite of how Maa used to do this.

I got changed and they wiped my leg with a sterilizer ointment. They wore all kinds of masks and the doctors made their preparations. I got a local anaesthesia shot above my right knee and slowly stopped feeling sensations altogether. I decided not to look. I decided to play in my head, happy memories with Maa.

They got started with the procedure.

My heart raced fast, and I told it a story to calm it down.

I wanna tell you guys a story. Did you know how my parents met? Well, to start with. My mother had always wanted to work, unlike other women of her age or time. She wanted to build her own identity. She did her masters, waited for sometime and joined a Research and Development NGO working in the Healthcare sector. She was doing fine, she was outgoing and enterprising. And the company loaded her with many important responsibilities. Around a year later, Daddy joined the same firm. He had experience in teaching and had just had his first ground survey at a small village near Manali. My father was taken by her.

Maa was not anything stereotypical. She didn't look quite like a hill woman. She laughed out loud and was vivacious. And that was exactly what took Dad.

"Why her?", I would ask Dad often in solitude.

"Because..", he would pause, and then resume.

"I didn't need someone who would take care of me or work for me at home whilst I went out and earned a living. I sought a partner, who I

could speak to and who could talk to me of ideas, worldly things and everything beyond", he would respond.

They met, spoke a few times.

Even exchanged letters.

Maa's family was adamant on getting her married elsewhere. Mother, Adaline Stacy Miller was Catholic, and my Father, Bhavesh Acharya, was a born Hindu. But Dad didn't flinch. He tried, and tried on. Till they were convinced. She fought too.

After I was born, we were all baptised. He became Benjamin Miller and they middle named me 'Hazel' after Mom's beloved, late sister.

And that's how it happened.

I snapped back to reality.

It was getting over. It took around 2 and a half hours.

I could see my internals in the projector on the wall.

It was done with. It was finally done with.

They shifted me to a room and I dozed off.

I woke up in the middle of the night. To 33 missed calls.

33? I wondered?

I'm in the hospital, then who died?

I kept aside that tasteless joke and scrolled.

Shona Di (3)

Saakshi (2)

John Sir (1)

Ben (28)

Wow! That's quite a number.

I decided to call the rest in the morning.

I called Ben, he picked up.

"Hey", I said, in a sleepy voice. The painkillers were acting out. I had also slowly begun to feel the pain.

"Violet, I searched for you in the office. They told me you had taken a month's leave for your surgery. Why didn't you tell me this before?", he asked, visibly worried.

"I must have forgotten. I'm sorry. I also didn't know if you wanted to know", I said.

"What is that supposed to mean?", he said, in a clear voice.

"Umm.. you know.. I mean. I was going to be operated on. I won't be able to walk for a few days. It's not.. pretty!", I said.

He paused for long.

I didn't know if to say anything, or wait for him to respond.

"Are you shifted to the room?", he asked.

"Yes, they did a few hours ago", I said.

"I'll see you tomorrow at 9", he said and cut the call.

I slept. A sound sleep, occasionally waking up by the pain around my knee. The effect of the drug was wearing out. As like my BLOODY DAMNED CARTILAGE!

'Relax', I reminded myself time and again.

And dozed off again.

The next morning, I felt like I had one leg.

Believe you, me.

The nurse helped me get to the washroom. I was helped back and I sat straight up in my bed.

I reached for my purse and took out a small mirror from one of the pockets. Looked myself up.

No make up, messy hair.. dressed in hospital clothes.

How nice to be looking like this for my second date.

Was it?

He came by. Sharp at 9.

Wow! He had too many similarities with my Father.

He wore a green shirt, with rolled up sleeves. The watch in place. He looked a little worried. I wondered what it was.

"Hey.. ", he said.

"Don't say.. you look!", I intervened.

He smiled at me.

"How are you?" "Is it hurting?", he asked.

"A little.. it'll be alright", I responded.

We talked for a little while, and it was time for him to leave for work.

"Thank you so much for coming, Ben... Just thanks", I said, part shy, part grateful.

He looked at me for a while.

"You rest, I'll come by tomorrow", and with that he left.

Nora entered soon after. I got busy.

It was good I kept myself from brooding.

People, saviours.. such saviours! :D



CHAPTER 18:

I LOVE YOU

For as long as I spent my mornings at the hospital, Ben would visit me on his way to the office. I wondered why he did. I had questions. But.. I didn't want to ask them yet. On my last morning in the hospital, he got me breakfast.

"Upma and chutney", he said, beaming with pride.

"Oh My God, I can't believe this", I said, utterly taken aback.

"You didn't?", I asked

"I did", he said and smiled while he nodded subtly.

We ate. It tasted to me somewhat like what dew drops taste to dried leaves. (You do the math, I'm getting poorer at this)

As he stood up to leave, I could see him wanting to say something, but was refraining.

I didn't ask.

I waited.

"Umm.. I also, got this for you", he said, after much hesitation. And produced a lily from his bag.

I took a deep breath.

I forced myself to act normal.

I smiled, looking at it for a long time, adorning its each petal and leaf. This was special. This was...

"I'll see you soon, Miller." With that he left.

For the next few days, I rested at home. Occasionally texting my friends at work. And for regulars, I had been texting Ben, and meeting Nora. Dad had made so many arrangements. I am often too stunned at his sensitivity. Well, I must say I have taken after him at this, ALSO!

I had my physiotherapy sessions initiated soon after.

It hurt. It hurt like hell. I kept myself from shouting, every now and then. But I was determined to bounce back, I mean, quite literally as well.

I used my crutches again. I was learning to walk.

It was fine, and one got to do what they got to do.

Life is not the same for everyone. And healing isn't always necessarily linear.

As I was lazing about on my couch one afternoon with a Virginia Woolf classic, I heard someone knock on the door. I got my crutches and went to attend to it. Three weeks had passed, and I was able to use my right leg again to walk. It was Silas. I was meeting him almost after a year. I held him tight and spoke to him about a hundred things, all at once. Boy, do I piss my friends off no end. No, he would also throw that fact in my face soon!

"Watchha reading?", he asked, sitting down.

"Novels, literature. Currently hooked on to Ms.Woolf", I said, in one of my failed attempts of sounding intellectual and international.

"And what is it that is reading you?", he asked, plainly.

This man was psychic, I always, always knew.

"I don't quite understand, what your question signifies", I asked. Knowing very well what he meant to ask.

"Come On! I have known you for over a decade now. I know you've been white for a while now, but what is that new red on your face?", he asked.

Confusing and blinding me and my comprehension abilities with... a wordplay with colours? Had he gotten better at this, or am I losing my skills?

"Don't you tell me, that it's just summer acting out on your skin. I'll stand you up now, and kick you on your leg that you've been limping with", he said, actually standing up.

"Fine, fine, batati hoon, baith!", I instructed and gave in.

I would not hold up long if I were ever interrogated.

I told him about a few things, just here and there. Random pieces of information. I made it sound very obvious and formal.

"Does it mean that you're seeing him?", he asked.. straight faced.

"I.. I don't know that yet. I haven't spoken to him officially about this. Our relationship is just random gestures towards each other. I still don't know if I'm supposed to make anything out of it, or not", I said, rubbing my palms together. I did that often when I was nervous. And ISTG, this was nerve wracking, even talking about it.

He paused for a moment.

"You need to tell him how you feel", he said, looking straight into my eyes.

"Woah! Then what? What if he says he doesn't feel the same way? Or worse, what if he says he looked me up as a sister?", I squealed, visibly worried.

"Hmm.. sister zoned. I oughtta try THAT out sometime in the future", he said, zoning out.

"HELLOWWW! Can you help me solve mine here?", I asked, agitated, animatedly.

"Sit first!", he instructed.

I obliged.

"Breathe", he said.

I did.

"Breathe with your eyes closed, you dumb fuck!", he said and I made a crying face and obliged again.

I regained composure, closed my eyes and inhaled deeply a few times.

I slowly opened my eyes. There was a calm look on Silas's face. He held both my hands and told me things.

"Look, Violet. I've known you for long now. I've seen you struggle through the course of your life. I know what all life has made you endure. And how you have fought back, putting a brave front always. Any man, who has to be with you, has to respect and earn you. You're an incredible friend, and a selfless person. I hope a good man finds you, and keeps you forever, listening to you yap crap all day long, for years till eternity", he said.

I laughed. My eyes welled up a little.

"I know you wouldn't be in love, if you didn't think this man was worthy. I know you have a hundred doubts, and I trust your heart's decision. But, you need to tell him this first. You just need to tell him how you feel. You must let him in now", he said.

I knew what he was trying to do.

Silas and I met in college. There was an instant connection between the both of us. We were kids then, but our friendship has evolved, with time and age. He visits me every now and then, on birthdays and other festive occasions. He brings me nothing. But he always, always shows up. And that's the best thing about him. He always, always shows up.

He knew how terrified I am of loss.

He has seen me bear it, he has seen me lose myself, and suffer to my very core. So each time he comes, he puts happy, positive, life affirming thoughts into my head. This time, he was trying to break the walls I had built. So I finally let someone in. Without a hundred, thousand doubts.

I have had angels in the form of friends.

I had to agree to that.

I took three days to think it through.

I had to break those walls myself. I had to make myself strong enough for rejection, wise enough to be able to be together, if it ever worked out. I had to, in my mind, prepare myself for any possibility that would befall after my confession.

I still had my doubts.

One evening, I was taking a stroll through Hudson Hill and as I took a seat after a few rounds, I saw an elderly couple beside me.

The old man was wearing a pastel coloured shirt, formal trousers. He wore a round hat on his head. He was reading a book with one hand. And the lady, she was in a baby pink salwar suit, her dupatta immaculately pinned. Her hair had greyed and she had it in a braid and wore a small, black bindi. She was holding on to his hand, and had leaned her head on his shoulder. While he read, she held onto him, and stared into the veritable wilderness.

I saw them. It irked something in me.

They were there.

There where a lot of us wish to be.

To have someone around us, someone who we have a deep sense of connection with. Someone who wishes to be around us, as much as we want to be around them. Someone with whom our hearts feel safe, and each day feels like a celebration. Someone who we can finally aspire to share our lives with.

I saw them.

They were there.

Which a lot of us imagine to be, perhaps someday.

It was beautiful. And today, even that was an understatement.

I sighed deeply. And decided to confess.

He might not share my emotion, but what if he did!

Here I was. Ready to risk my being, ready to play the biggest gamble of my life.

Was I really ready?



CHAPTER 19:

KE DIL ABHI, BHARA NAHI!

Women in love are peculiar in characteristics.
Women in love are mothers.

They are concerned, sacrificial and all they want for their love is for them to have all of the world's success and security.

Women in love are children.

They just let themselves go and yap about the weirdest, wildest things, around the men they love.

Women in love, become women.

A lot of the times, we do not know what we want. But when the right man comes along. From young little girls, we transpire into the various attributes of womanhood. Women who know what we are doing, and what we finally want. Our priorities change. Our lives change. We inadvertently take on roles and responsibilities. And we do it with sheer love and utmost happiness.

I was taking life a little seriously those days.

Working hard at the workplace, scheduling the right things to be done at the right time. I was pushing myself to rebuild strength in my knees. I had stopped wanting to waste any money on unnecessary extravagant shopping. I was taking care of my skin and health better. It was as though I had found new reasons to live a better life. It was as though all my senses were preparing myself for new roles in life. It was as though I was simply happy to continue with the journey of life.

I had not met Ben in over two weeks, ever since I was discharged home from the hospital. He had been caught up closing on the last project, and we had not been able to message each other frequently for over a week now. I texted him first. 5th May.

‘Have you ever spent summer in the hills?’, I asked.

He didn't respond till after noon.

‘Not really. I've heard the snow melts away. I haven't seen the snow here yet’, he wrote back.

‘The snow here is far up.’

‘I do have the next best thing though”, I wrote.

‘Enlighten, please, Ma'am!’, he texted back.

‘Are you afraid of heights?’, I enquired.

‘No! Bungee jumping is on my to-do list this year’, he said.

‘Meet me at Hudson Hill at 5pm today?’, I wrote.

I had run the risk.

‘Sure.. umm’, he wrote.

‘I want to show you something’, I wrote.

‘I'll be there’ he texted.

I was wearing a violet dress, it had short sleeves and I paired it up with silver earrings and a nose ring. I loved my nose ring. It made my face switch between faiths. I wore black knee length formal boots, put on my overcoat and wrapped around my neck, a black scarf. I let my hair loose. My red hair, straight at the roots and curled towards the ends. It fell till my waist. Maa had always liked my long hair. I wore her favourite pendant around my neck and looked at her photo for a while longer today, before I left.

I reached first, walked up, and chose a seat by the walkway.

Ben arrived. Donning a formal look. He looked a little tired. I took him by his hand. And it sent the butterflies in my stomach flying into a whirling tizzy.

"Walk with me, no time to waste", I said, walking him up the hill.

"Wh.. what's up?", he asked, perplexed, but keeping in step with me.

"You'll see", I said and huffed as I tugged at my scarf and led him uphill.

After a 5 minute walk, we reached.

A railing had encircled the entire park. We stood by it, catching our breath. I held the bar. And Ben stood silently, in awe.

It was a sunset point, from the highest hill in Manali.

The whole city was visible in layers.

Clouds floated a little above us.

The sky was painted a lemon yellow, with streaks of crimson and purple splattered all across it. As if the painter had let his internal thoughts win, splashed vague colours on his canvas and was brainstorming for just a moment, before he went on to craft a masterpiece out of it.

And then in a little while, the Sun was in position to set. It was a warm, fire red. Everything underneath seemed to glow with its light. I saw him standing, soaking every bit of the cosmic beauty. This was perhaps the moment.

"Ben.. for sometime I had been wanting to say to you some things", I said. I felt a certain peace as I spoke, and not nerve wracking nervousness. I was prepared for any consequence. I just had to tell.

"Ya.. ", he said and looked me in the eye.

"So.. "

As I was about to speak, his phone rang.

He picked it up, walked a few steps back, spoke on the phone and retracted his steps.

"All good?", I asked.

"Violet.. I've been wanting to say something to you for a while as well", he said.

"Yes, please do", I said.

He took his phone out, scrolled for a bit and showed me a woman's picture.

She was pretty. Donned a pastel coloured saree with silver ornaments. She smiled a peaceful, mellow one.

He was hesitant, almost not wanting to get to the end of the conversation. I saw him change body language. I saw him take a deep breath.

I looked.

"She's really pretty. Who?", I asked.

"It's Anamika... my wife", he said.

"She had been away for over a year now. We were having troubles in our marriage. She had been to her parents' place. I barely spoke to her.....

But a week ago, she called", he kept speaking.

My ears had stopped listening.

It was all a whizz in the air.

Numbness.

What?

I had to confirm.

"Your wife?", I asked again.

"Yes.. my wife", he said, looking down.

My world stopped.

It stopped.

It has never moved since.

He said a few things I could hear on and off..

"We have been married for the last 2 years. We fell in love while in college. We have had problems for over a year, she left for her parents' place".

"All I wanted to do was to continue with my own life.

I kept trying. And somewhere since the last few months, I had begun to feel happy again. I was beginning to feel fulfilled."

I looked up at him, fighting with all my might, my tears.

I couldn't let them flow today. I couldn't show the world today.

He continued to speak.

"Last week, she called. She apologised. She said she had realised how harsh she was on me and our relationship. That she judged sooner. That she wanted to give our marriage another chance.

You see, Violet.. She has had a turbulent childhood and has to lead a very difficult life. She lost both her parents when she was only 9. I am family to her. I am all that she has. I have seen her suffer throughout. She meant everything to me.

She said she loved me. Also that she could not let me go."

"And you?", I asked. My hopes, barely alive anymore.

He took a moment.

"I do too", he said.

That was all that I had to hear.

"Oh", I said and turned to see the sunset.

I stared at it for long, begging Maa to give me just enough strength to bear with this and finish this conversation with dignity. I pulled myself together. It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. I turned to him and spoke.

"I'm sorry Ben, I did not know", I said.

He simply nodded, somewhere I could see guilt and pain gathering up in his eyes, as though he knew that he had let me down.

"If you really love her, you must be with her.

She is willing to be with you, if it is that she has realised your importance in her life. Sometimes, distance gives us the space and vision we have always been lacking. Either way, she has realised.

She wants to be with you.

What could be more beautiful than someone you love, telling you that they love you back?", I said. And smiled at him.

"I guess so", he said, with tears in his eyes.

"I guess so", I said, with tears in my eyes.



CHAPTER 20:

FOR THE LOVE OF LOSS

For the next four days, I pushed myself through. Quietly doing what I was hired to do at office, buying groceries on my way back home, making my meals, sleeping. I did what I had to do, I did what I was supposed to do. I worked my part of the project and made sure all my deadlines were met. I talked to Nora normally and took a walk in the park below my apartment in the evenings. I did not text Ben anymore. I did not know what to say anymore. Last I heard from Dhriti, he was transferred to another state, and was preparing to leave soon. The last thing that I wanted to do was to process. I won't. I just didn't.

On the fifth day, I just stopped.

I didn't go to the office. I didn't make meals.

I didn't eat, didn't speak, didn't sleep.

I just sat, on the floor, at the foot of my bed.

I just sat.

I don't know what happened.

I just don't know what happened.

All I could hear from time to time, was the ticking of my clock on the wall and a numbing buzz in my head.

Time felt like it had stopped forever. Life, just a lesson.

I sat there. Alive.. dreading to be alive. I sat there.

Nora dashed into my house two days later.

I was laying down on the floor when she said she found me, my eyes open, my hair in a mess.

I wasn't crying.

I was just, there.

She picked me up, sat me down straight.

I don't know what I was thinking. I don't know what I was doing. It was difficult to recall where I was in my head.

Her heart raced as fast as a bullet train, she later told me.

"YOUR OFFICE CALLED ME, YOU'VE NOT RESPONDED TO ANYBODY IN 2 DAYS, VIOLET, WHAT THE FUCK IS UP WITH YOU?", she screamed.

Not realising the extent of damage that life had got onto me. I despised being alive.... breathing.

"CAN YOU FUCKING SPEAK, DI?", her voice high.

She calmed herself down in some way and spoke to me again in a softer tone.

"What has happened?", she asked.

"Why weren't you taking my calls?"

I kept silent.

"Tell me", she began to lose her cool again.

I couldn't look at her.

I stared out the window.

"Is it Ben?"

"Did you get attached to him?", she asked, taking a guess.

"No", I managed.

"Did he hurt you?"

I nodded in negation.

"Tell me, Di, please", she grew impatient.

I kept quiet.

"Did you begin to like him?", she asked.

I looked at her for a few minutes and mumbled out somehow.. "I love him".

"What... When?", she couldn't get words out of her mouth.

"I don't know."

"I.. I don't know."

My breathing got high.

"I.. He's gone, Nora."

"I know. One of his colleagues is my friend. I know he has a wife. He got transferred to Pune recently. I know that. But I didn't know you.....", she said.

She couldn't speak, just looked at me helplessly.

Tears rolled down my cheek.

"Nora, he's gone. He left"

"Didi, I am here", she said, seeing me panic.

"Nora, he's gone. He's gone."

My voice raised and I began screaming.

"He left, he just left. I can't take it. I can't take it anymore." "Please, bring him back. Please."

I begged her with joined hands. I kept pleading.

I threw whatever was in sight. I was throwing a tantrum.

I threw my phone, the remote, entire desk's content.

"Please, tell him I love him. Please. I can't do this. I need him, Nora. I need to see him. Please, please. Please... "

My voice was beginning to get sore.

"Just tell him. Please.", tears rolled down my face, I could barely breathe.

I broke down to the ground.

She sat down with me, holding me.

"Please.. I can't live without him. I need him."

"I've lost Maa, I lost him. I..."

I sobbed like a child in her arms.

I screamed and kept begging her.

"Bring him back, Nora.

Please, please. I can't.. I can't do this anymore.

I can't be the one losing. I can't lose anymore.

I miss him, Nora. My chest hurts, my chest physically hurts these days. I need to see him."

"I am here, I am here, Di", she kept telling me. She supported my head with her hand and held me with another. I couldn't hold myself.

"I can't believe those eyes are not the eyes I would be looking at my whole life.

I can't believe the moments that we spent amidst ourselves meant nothing to him.

I can't spend even one more second not being around him. I need to see him, please bring him back.", I kept on begging...

I could barely speak anymore.

"I can't believe it. I don't want to believe. I can't", I said at last and kept breathing heavily.

"I'm here, Di. I'm here. I'm here with you. I'm not going anywhere. Sab thik ho jayega. Sab."

She cradled me for an hour more, I lay there, my head in her bosom. I lay silent, there was not a sound in the room, and yet, every single cell of my body was helplessly screaming. Screaming for this to not be true, screaming to not be here, screaming to just not be the one to have lost something my heart felt, was so unimaginably dear to me. She held me near, before I passed out in her arms on the floor. I needed that sleep. She placed a pillow under my head, and covered me with a blanket. She made a few calls outside my room and stayed the night with me, watching me over. She slept on the floor right beside me, holding me tightly, as though trying to suck from me all of my agony.

The next morning was deaf quiet. My head felt heavier than a sand sack. I got myself up and leaned against the bed. I could barely inhale. My lungs hurt. Living hurt. I sat on my haunches and stared into nothingness. I felt the same empty numbness in my chest as I had felt.. the day after Maa's demise. Nora walked into the room, she had made me breakfast. I couldn't look up at her, but I knew that she had not slept the whole night. She fed me the bread forcefully, and forced through my throat a disprin along with it. I was in too much pain. All I felt was nausea and pain. I fell asleep again. I was getting addicted to sedatives.

I lay down for the next two days, only waking up.. to being fed and forcing a painkiller down my throat, sitting and staring at the window the whole day, then going to sleep again. On the fourth day, I took a shower. I stood in the shower for over an hour, recollecting the past six months, like it was just a dream, lucid imagery flashed before my eyes. And I wondered if I'd ever be able to recover from this. Sometimes... heartbreaks hurt so bad, people die. They prefer to. It's not like they want to, it's just that living becomes so unbearably agonising, that a search for escape becomes the only way out.

I stepped out, went to Nora and spoke to her of a few things.

"Go home", I said, straight faced.

"What?", she asked, not knowing what emotion to show.

"I'll be fine.

I need to do this alone.

I don't know how, I don't know what to do.

But I'll do it. I'll make it through", I said, in one go.

She was extremely hesitant. She was afraid.

Reasonably so.

I could sense the fear in her eyes. She didn't want to be the one losing now. Well, she couldn't, even if she ever wished to.

"Ek ladke ke jaane se life nahi rukti, Di", she said.

"Yes.. But the heart does! ", I managed.

I went and sat next to her on my couch. I was gathering all of my courage and sanity and put on a brave front.

"I promise you, I'll not kill myself", I said. Somehow.

She didn't ask me any more questions. She picked up her bags, kissed me on my head and left the apartment.

"Bounce back soon. I've never known you to lose", she said, before she shut the door behind her.

I sat there on the sofa, all alone.

The tension in the room was soul terrifying.

I had lived alone for over 4 years now, and never in my whole life had I felt so alone.

I lay down on the sofa till evening. Staring at the ceiling. Night fall had set in. The birds all flew back home.

At around 7pm, I got up and went to meet someone.

I put on a clean pair of tee shirt, jeans, sneakers and headed out. It was an important call, that I had to attend.

I booked a cab for some distance, and walked the rest of the way. It was cold. I wrapped my coat around me tight. From far, I could see the old architecture of the Church in Siyal. I had an appointment with God. I needed him, around and within me. I wanted to talk to him about things, tell him that I needed him to be with me, that even though this was something that I had to do all alone, I needed him by my side.

I went in, sat at the front bench, after lighting a candle.

I went on my knees. They hurt.

But not more than my soul did at the moment.

I joined my hands, and begged him to be with me.

I prayed for Ben, to keep him safe and sound, no matter what. Love was not always achieving. Or their presence. LOVE WAS LOSS. And we are to cherish all forms of it, with equal sensitivity and dignity. When I fell in love, I didn't ask for reciprocation, or a promise in return. I just felt things, that my heart knew it felt.

I begged God to let this hurt go.

I prayed to make me stronger, so as to keep loving, and never have emotions of hate, anger or vengeance in and around me.

I prayed to be able to have such ability in me, that separations do not lessen my emotions ever.

Suddenly my brain recalled a moment from SRK's monologues in my favourite film, that made sense in ways beyond general human perception.

"मोहब्बत में शर्ते नहीं होती, तो अफसोस भी नहीं होना चाहिए"



CHAPTER 21:

I SEE YOU

I had slowly begin to live my life, again. Normally.
I had promised God, that I'd try.

I would not let Maa down.

I cooked my meals again, did laundry, groceries.

Took walks in the park below, smiled at kids playing. I babysat a young one named Julia. We spent happy times watching her favourite cartoon and I loved listening to her after school, while she spoke her heart out. If I could in the slightest chance be somebody a soul can rely on, I'd be it.

I rejoined office after a long wait.

Everybody knew something was up, but nobody asked me anything. They all just tried their best to make me feel alright there. I was lucky to have a workplace as such.

I visited the Church weekly. I spoke to God regularly.

I believe, he heard me each time.

It was not easy. It never is.

It has been, for me, one of the hardest things I have ever had to do.

I've never had an easy life.

I've seen my parents separate, spent countless days in the hospital, been handicapped for over a year and half. I've tasted unemployment. I've had to bear manipulators and have been abused by life. I've lost... Maa.

It's not been an easy life.

And yet, letting Ben go, was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. It took from me my heart, soul, body, mind, my core, my being. It took from me everything to be alright.

He didn't ask. And I didn't tell him.

And how was I ever supposed to be vocal about something so simple and basic? It was never his eyes, even though the honey brown in them made me fall for him every single time I stared into them. It wasn't his skin. It wasn't his stature or his recognition. It wasn't what he owned, or where he came from.

All that I am recurringly reminded of in my dreams is his smile, the way it just tugged at the corner of his lips first, and then spread silently to each bit of his face. It's how the room suddenly brightened up, each time he entered it out the blue. It was how his eyes shone a placid summer morning hue, whenever he laughed at a fairly strange dad joke? How he twisted his feet at extreme right angles to push himself inside his work table, questionable behaviour though. It's how his reassuring words made my rather insane soul calm, tugging at my inanities being haywire, pulling them to the 'present' and perhaps coolly whispering in my ears... 'Hey, look. Reality's good too. Don't escape, just stay, like I am.. Look!'

And how would I ever say it to him? That he could be the fairest or the darkest man on Earth, shrink till he was 5 feet or balloon up as much as he wanted. That he could have no literary, financial or academic achievements and be so broke, we'd have to beg together, I'd stay. I'd wake up happily every single day, if it meant having even the slightest chance of seeing his heavenly smile shine bright onto me each morning, for all of my existence. How could I ever say it to him?

It was JUST how his soul made mine feel.

Safe. Sound. Secure.

I was standing at the office window post lunch.

I didn't brood much those days, just soaked in the happenings in the present.

I saw kids playing football below our building, how their hair bounced as they jumped, and how they were soaked to the skin in the rain, the mud having reached their faces, and yet, they played on.

As I was busy in my world, I heard a voice behind me.

"The hill people like summers, but I like the rain better", Ben said, standing beside me.

There was a week left before he would leave for Pune with his wife. Today was his last working day here.

"I've always liked the rains. They are gentle and rare", I said with a smile, still staring out the window.

"I'm going to miss you, Miller", he said.

"Me too, Sir", I said, matching his eye, I smiled and left for my desk. The longer I would stay, the more guilty he would have felt. Somewhere, I knew he knew how I felt.

His laughter would still ringed in my ears, years later.

It was an emotion I could never rid myself of, no matter how much I tried.

A clear, ringing laughter. He would try to purse his lips tight, amidst a joke, so as to not laugh anymore, for he would suddenly remember that he was in a professional set up.

His eyes danced, whenever he was about to be mischievous. He would go along with it anyway, but the look of a wild nervousness on his face, it'll be hard to forget.

He would ask strange questions sometimes, with a face that you could never say no to. He would ask the silliest, most basic questions.

And be so surprised at the responses, it would make me smile and purse my lips shut.

Yet, he'd solve the most difficult equations, be zen in the worst of situations, at work and beyond. He's always given sound, realistic advice.

He was a strange emotion.

Someone I could barely intercept.

Someone I'll remember for a lifetime, and beyond.

=====

Weeks passed by. Life went on.

I didn't get nightmares anymore. I had dealt with my fears in my subconscious. Every single fear that I had in life, they had presented themselves before me, had broken me into a million pieces and left me shattered, all alone for me to pull myself out of them. I had fought with them all. I had defeated them all. I was free now.

My knees had been healed. I pursued dancing, at my highest capacity, all in a few months' time. I was joining my crew again, I had performed at a national stage in the first week of July.

I went in to work, with a smile every day.

I wore kurtis every now and then. Ben had told me once he liked me in kurtis. I never forgot that.

Mohit Bhaiya had moved in with Nora in June. The three of us would cook together and have dinner on weekends. He would feed us 'biryani' and 'rasmalai' every now and then. It was as though they had adopted me. Saakshi visited India, and lived with me for a week. We went out a few times and talked our souls out. She gave me perspective, or at least, a shift of what I had in mine. She was proud of me for having taken up dancing again. She was the one who took me to my first dance school, when we were both 10.

My writing career took off. I had published my first book, an amalgamation of a lot of my poetic pieces.

'Dhun', said the cover.

Dad was proud. It was his smile I saw, during my 'book reading session', while I interacted with a bunch of happy kids. I would have died for that smile.

Words won't suffice, what it meant to a daughter.

I see you.

I see you when I wake up tired and the Sun shines so bright in my face, that I am bound to leave all of life's worries behind.

I see you.

I see you when the twilight breeze airs my locks with pure grace. I am reminded of your gentle nudge on my soul.

I see you.

I see you when the rippling rains fall on my face each monsoon, unwavering as you unwary of me.

I see you.

I see you whenever I see love around.

Whenever my heart feels happy, I feel you.

I see you.

July 14th, I walked to Hudson Hill.

Earphones plugged in. I reached the sunset point.

It was cloudy, all piled up along the margin of the sky.

There was slight thunder, and monsoon winds hit my face with stealth and tenderness.

I was listening to a recently released song.

I felt the likes of it.

'हमें पूछो, क्या होता है, बिना दिल के.. जिए जाना,

बहत आई, गई यादें, मगर इस बार, तुम ही आना।'

As I took a deep sigh and held myself, it began to rain.

Drop by drop, the sky fell on me with a subtle softness.

I silently revelled in it.

I was wearing a white chikankari kurta.

Although it was cold, it felt like home.

I was a rain child.

A pleasant petrichor, the misty winds unravelling magic.

It brought along with it, flavours of the damp earth, drenched and fulfilled, overflowing with joy.

The mild, balmy fragrance of the dwindling lilies.

The lazing of the trees swayed by the sudden stir of wind.

They pelting down, flakes of sky.

"DIDI!", I heard a voice scream from behind me.

I looked back.

It was Nora. She must have gone to my apartment, and come here, looking for me.

I looked at her.

Nora A. Paige. My sister.

Simple, subtle, wise.

A crackhead when it came to love. And an intellect when it's numbers.

My friend, my confidant, my family, my sister.

Someone who never left me alone.

No matter how much I pushed her away.

No matter how many times I had let her down.

Perhaps all love stories are not about romantic engagements. Some of them are leaving the world be, and realising who stands by you, still. Perhaps, it is about accepting that life has a path for you, and about finding oneself. Perhaps, it is about dancing a little in the rain, forgetting all of life's worries, just for a moment, while the leaves and wind join in with you, and the butterflies encircle around, as the Sun shines on brightly from behind.

I smiled.

And ran back to her.

We spent a long time dancing in the rain.

Sauntering, moving, singing, like the wind.

With hope in our eyes and dreams, by the hillside.

With hope in our eyes, and countless dreams by the hillside.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Parinita Das is a writer and movement artist from Bhubaneswar. She has dedicated her life as an artist and educator in the field of performing arts, being a part of various state and (some) nationally acclaimed reality shows. She has forever fancied fiction, and the universe full of enigma that tags along with it.

'Dreams; By The Hillside' is her first published novel.