

Memoirs *of* Oysters

by Eli



BlueRose ONE^{IN}
Stories Matter

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Thanks to all the human oysters who have inspired
me to tell their stories.

Thanks to my family and friends who have
encouraged me to write this book.

And, thanks to that friend who found the writer in
me.

Preface to *The Memoirs of Oysters*

People are the stories behind the stories. Just as sounds have no meaning without musical instruments and their notes, stories are nothing without people and their emotions. The way we each feel, react, and respond to life's play on our emotions not only makes us unique but also interesting. This book is about those people: the person next door, someone you meet on the street, a stranger in a coffee shop, or the person who commutes with you on the subway.

Why oysters? What do they have to do with human beings?

Of nature's many wondrous creations, oysters have always awed us. They are not only rare but also mysterious. Hidden in the depths of the sea, they possess a basic instinct to preserve something precious. Through a mysterious chemical reaction—or magic, if I may be so bold—they create a pearl. Is it that simple? A closer look at these creatures reveals the great perseverance, patience, and pain required to give birth to something so beautiful. The oyster waits, preserves, nurtures, and protects it within itself.

When you think about it, aren't we all oysters in our own way? We carry memories that we preserve and safeguard in the innermost, secret chambers of our minds and hearts. Every memory is a pearl, precious to

us and only us. No one else can claim it; no one can snatch it away. Just as an oyster alone experiences the joy and burden of nurturing its pearl, it is the individual who alone carries the weight of dark memories and rejoices in the happy ones.

Memories are like clothes in a wardrobe. Some we like to show off; others we wouldn't want anyone else to see. Some we put on only for special occasions, and some will always occupy a space, even though we may never use them or throw them away. One day, they die with us. No matter where we go or how hard we try, we cannot escape our memories. They are a part of us. There is no delete command that can erase the past.

What makes these memories so dear? Is it the feeling we associate with an experience? Is it time? Or is it both?

To understand this, let us return to the oysters. Not every oyster can bear a pearl. It is only those that wait. Only those with the patience to bear the burden and nurture it alone is gifted with pearls.

Zen masters say that waiting is an art. Not waiting *for* something or *on* someone, but simply *waiting* as a virtue is a great quality. A study showed that the average person spends about five years of their life waiting—in queues, for transport, at traffic lights, for food, for sleep, for results, for movies to start. Nobody escapes this waiting. Even our own physiology cannot avoid it. If you pay close attention, you will notice a

stillness — a moment of waiting — between every breath you exhale and inhale. There is a pause — a waiting — between your heartbeats.

Waiting! What used to be something so delightful or so annoying experience in the past has lost its charm.

Not so long ago, people still enjoyed this sweet experience. But technological advancement and our addiction to mobile phones have robbed us of this simple pleasure. It is sad that today we are losing this virtue. Instead of simply being, we pick up our phones and scroll through social media or play mindless games.

It is in the quiet moments of waiting, when the mind is devoid of distractions, that memories flood in, emotions multiply, and the laws of time seem to fail. Anxiety, anticipation, uncertainty, fear, imagination, contemplation, and frustration can all happen at once. For some, these feelings flow like a gentle river; for others, they crash like a chaotic, roaring wave. I have always thought that if Einstein was a poet or a philosopher, he might have proposed the theory of relativity not with numbers and equations, but from the profound experience of waiting.

Whatever the emotion, waiting is a unique journey we take within ourselves, and only with ourselves.

Come, let us take a trip down the memory lane of some human Oysters in waiting. Let us look at the little

emotions at play in the moments that change their lives forever.

This series of short stories is an attempt to peek inside some human oysters and see the pearls they have nurtured. This collection explores their stories: a father waiting to give his daughter away in marriage; a mother awaiting her son's arrival in her final hours; a young woman waiting to meet her ex; a long-awaited reunion; an unexpected meet-cute; sacrifices made, promises broken, and regrets that linger in the secret chambers of the heart.

I welcome you on this expedition into the world of human oysters.

About the Author



Crafting stories comes more naturally to me than writing about myself – a task that often feels like the most challenging chapter of all. The blank page for an author bio is often more daunting than a fresh manuscript. My path to

becoming an author wasn't paved by formal training, a lifelong ambition, or a professional writing background. I stumbled into this world more than a decade ago, nudged by a friend who saw a spark I hadn't quite recognized. What began as a hesitant exploration has blossomed into a profound passion.

I still approach each new project with a blend of wonder and determination, and my greatest hope is that you find joy and connection in the worlds I've had the privilege to create.

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It Never Gets Old

In some cities they call it the subway. Somewhere else, it goes by other names: metro, loop, etc. Yes, I'm talking about the boon and bane of daily commuters in every metropolitan city across the world. Five days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, for what feels like donkey's years, I've taken the 8 AM train to the office and the 5:30 PM train back home. It was never a pleasant ride, I must say. These were always the worst times to take the subway. Tucked into tight corners, shoulder to shoulder, body to body, like chickens squeezed and stuffed into a farm carriage, we ride inside those closed coaches every day. Eventually, when you get off, the first thing you do is check if all your belongings are still with you: your bag, cell phone, and most importantly, your wallet, tickets, etc. Your clothes are no longer neat, you've long forgotten your own body odor, and you're always mindful of your surroundings. It was indeed not a pleasant ride.

But what can I say? Not everyone is fortunate enough to buy a car. Huh! Some of us can't even afford a first-class ticket on the subway. We depend on the subsidized general class, the crowded coach. A coach designed to fit fifty people now carries almost two hundred and fifty. Sometimes I wonder, why did they even bother with seats? At least that would give more space for the stuffed farm chickens to breathe and relax

their shoulders. But then I'm also afraid it would bring fifty more chickens inside. I looked around and gently nodded. Yes! It would rob me of the only simple pleasure I occasionally get to enjoy: sitting and watching the subway lights flash by as the train zips through these tunnels.

It was one of the thousand such days that had faded from my memory over the past mundane, donkey years of my commute. There was nothing special about the day. It started the same, it was exactly the same, and it almost ended the same. As usual, I shut down my laptop, as usual, I took my 5:30 PM train, as usual, I was heading back home. As usual, the train was jam-packed. As usual, I squeezed in. And as usual, I put on my headphones and switched on the music — my sweet escape into my own metaverse.

As usual, it was the same old playlist. Yes! My old playlist. I guess we all hit a point in life where our playlist gets stuck somewhere in the past. I saw it happening with my dad; I never understood why he didn't bother to update himself. Now I'm seeing the same thing happening with me. I still don't get it. My son looks at me with the same wonder I once felt about my dad. Is it because we lose the taste for music, or is it because the music in us has left? Answers to some questions are never easy. Better not to ask them in the first place.

Then, the guy next to me jostled around and pushed me a bit; my headphones came off, pulling me out of

my virtual world and back into the subway noise. It was loud, annoying, and equally irritating. I looked at him. He ignored me and moved away without even apologizing.

Well, how often do you get one in a subway? I kept staring in the direction he went. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, exhaled, and slowly opened my eyes.

As my eyes followed him exiting the coach, a dangling earring on a woman caught my attention. A big, round earring with a doll on a swing inside the ring. As she entered the coach, head down, shoulders tucked tight, arms hugging her handbag to her chest, and meandering through the crowd, the earring swayed back and forth. I knew that the earring wasn't made by a goldsmith. I knew that it was made of iron with fake gold foil paint. I knew a half-foot nylon thread was knitted like a doll, and a piece of leather upholstery from a car seat was draped as a dress on the doll. I knew it had its glory days of shine and care, but now all that remained was a rusted piece of iron with the paint eroded, barely hanging. I knew the other ear had a similar design with a boy sitting on the swing. I knew the history of that earring because I made it. I made it for her. When we were young. When we were naive. When we were daring. When we were in love.

Back then, that pair of earrings meant me and her.

But, now it is just

me..... and her.

Huh! We were young, naive, and daring. Probably that's why we were in love. The kind of love which was hot like the Sun and warm like the moon. The kind of love that was strong like a cyclone and a gentle like a breeze. The kind of love that made me experience life and death in every breath.

Well! What can I say? Life has its way of happening to all of us. The two-foot distance between us seemed the longest my eyes had ever seen in the distant cosmos.

I was waiting to get a glimpse of her, but I wasn't lucky enough. She stood facing away from me, her hands still clutching her bag. My feet felt rooted, my eyes yearned to see her, my heart stopped and then beat randomly. My throat dried again and again. I wanted to call out her name, but I went mute. She stood like someone who had grown used to the uncomfortable feeling when her shoulder and hip rubbed against others. Never in a million years did I ever think my eyes would witness such a terrible thing happening to her. She would have been the queen of my kingdom, and I would have protected her the way she deserved to be protected.

Huh! What can I say? Life had its way of happening to all of us, as it happened to us.

She wiped the sweat on her forehead with her arm, very cautiously. I had a glimpse of one side of her face. Her big, intense, beautiful eyes—a tidal wave of emotion that swept me away, helpless. Memories

rushed to remind me how she felt, how she smelled, how she smiled, how she sounded, how she touched, how she hissed, how she kissed. Years and eons had passed, but she still remained fresh in my memory. Within the secret chamber of my mind, lay her portrait, her belongings, the places we had been, the laughter we had shared, the tears we had shed, the intimate feeling of oneness I had once felt for this woman. Everything unfolded like an avalanche in seconds. It was truly a drop-dead moment, and I wasn't sure how my body or mind was able to handle it.

The train stopped at the station. The abrupt halt caused a jerk that pulled me out from the secret chamber and threw me back to reality. The coach doors opened. Hardly a few got out, but many stepped inside. She got pushed inside the coach towards me. She crowded slowly backward. The distance between us narrowed with every step she took towards me. My heart started to beat faster and faster. My mind started to become slower and slower. My limbs grew colder and colder, and as I felt my heart was going to explode, she closed in on me and bumped into me. The sudden touch of familiarity, triggered by muscle memory, caused her to jerk a bit, startle a bit. She swiftly turned around and looked at me. She froze like a statue sculpted in flesh and bone, blood and body, love and emotion. She was in a greater shock. She didn't move her eyes away from mine. I couldn't help but helplessly surrender to their overwhelming depth. I could hear her heartbeat racing

mine. She held her breath, and after the first moment of shock, she finally exhaled.

Her breath on my chest. Yes! Her breath on my chest.

The feeling of oneness that had lasted for a million years flashed in that moment. It was exactly the same. Some things never get old. It was like a breath of life, a CPR that brought me back. And at that moment, I exhaled slowly.

Yes! My breath on her forehead.

She looked away in shy embarrassment, trying to hide her smile. The same old feeling. Her eyes could hardly contain the tears.

Those initial seconds were filled with unexpected surprises, unfelt happiness, unsaid apologies, unexpressed disappointments, unfulfilled feelings. Our hearts went through a rollercoaster of emotions. Lips quivered to express words, but tears rushed in to defend them.

"How are you?" asked her eyes.

"I'm okay!" replied my nod.

"And you?" asked my raised eyebrows.

"Same here!" replied her blink.

"You are so..." said her brightened, smiling eyes.

I scoffed and replied, "You look quite..." with my furrowed eyes and quarter smile.

"Oh my God!" said her smile.

"Oh my you!" replied my smile.

"Some things never change," she scoffed with a hint of smile and a dash of shyness.

"Some things never will," replied my nod and naughty smile.

A hand patted her shoulder and prompted her to move in further. My first reaction was a frown, followed by anger. My protective instinct kicked in. But then I looked at her eyes. There was no shock or disgust. Rather, a sense of familiarity. I understood. It must be the hand that held a claim on her shoulder.

"I guess. This is it. Isn't it?" asked my raised eyebrows.

"Indeed! It is," replied her eyes.

I tried to squeeze and step aside. As she walked past me, her tucked shoulders relaxed. Yes, they relaxed on my chest. The shoulder that didn't relax to the touch of her man relaxed now. It touched, rubbed, and moved past me.

Hmm! I guess certain things don't change, no matter how much life tries to steal them away.

She looked down and walked away. I didn't look at her. I knew she wouldn't turn back either. Because it was enough for us. Enough for a million lifetimes to come.

The train stopped, and the door opened. A chill wind blew on my face. The damp coach suddenly turned pleasant and dry. The noise didn't bother me anymore. I plugged the headphones back into my ears and searched for the latest number my son was listening to the other day. A cute romantic song. After all, nobody is too old to feel love once again.

Huhh! What can I say? Something's never gets old.

My Last Love

I was sweaty and tired. My legs wouldn't stop trembling. My whole body was shaking, as if a jolt of current was passing through me. It felt as if my body had been released from a compressed atom for the first time. Tired was an understatement to describe my state.

Excruciating pain. Huhh! The word "pain" did not even come close to explaining what my body went through. Words and language failed completely.

It wasn't that I was taken by shock. I had been expecting this day would come; I had been preparing for this moment. But never in a million years did I expect something like this. He didn't look at me. I was choking, suffocating. I wanted to cry out loud, but my voice wouldn't come out. He did not move a limb. I felt betrayed. His indifference was worse than my suffering.

My pulse was slowing, and my body was giving up. I was slowly losing consciousness. Unable to comprehend what was happening, I started to slip into a dark limbo. At that moment, he kicked me in the chest, barefoot. The kick felt like a defibrillator. It pulled me back from the dark abyss I was about to enter. I had difficulty breathing. I couldn't contain it anymore, and finally, I burst into tears.

They were not tears of pain. They were tears of joy and ecstasy. Teardrops rolled down my cheek and landed on his feet, and in that moment, he cried loudly and took his first breath as I held him in my arms.

Finally, after twelve hours of intense labor, he laid eyes on me. My pal, with whom I had developed a special connection over the last nine months. A three-kilo wonder with whom I had fallen head over heels in love the instant I found out I was pregnant.

Love at first sight? No, it was even before that. Love at first sense.

I have not seen anyone more beautiful than him, and I don't think I will ever feel the same way for another man in this lifetime.

The doctor clipped the umbilical cord, locked the forceps, and cut the cord that had held our lives together for the past nine months.

A part of my body left me forever. It was not just a body part. It lived in me, and now it was independent.

He became independent.

A part of my soul left me forever, in a good way.

Finally, welcome to the world, my child.

Serendipity

Some say it's serendipity. Others say it's just a chance encounter. I don't know what to say. Call it crazy or magical. Because, that's how it felt.

It all started on a lame weekend evening. The season for games was over, and the multiplex screens offered nothing but predictable blockbusters. Still, that didn't condemn us to idleness. It was my buddy. He'd sustained a head injury, and the doctor advised admitting him for one night for observation. So here I was, dutifully babysitting this adult in the sterile confines of the hospital. The faint smell of antiseptic clung to the air, a constant reminder of our unglamorous Saturday night.

I picked a can of soda from the vending machine, the clunk of it dropping echoing in the quiet corridor, and settled in a corner with a book. It was nothing good, just a thick paperback whose pages promised to help me kill time. My friend, on the other hand, was neither used to resting nor reading. Against doctor's advice, he did what he usually does.

Left, right, right, right, right, right, left, left, right, right, right, and so on...

Gen X might wonder, "Is it a military parade with random pauses?" Millennials might describe it as a direction. But Gen Z knows what it is.

My friend, eyes glued to his phone screen, thumb blurring, was swiping through girls on an online dating app. He clicked his tongue with every left swipe, a faint "tsk" of disapproval. I'm a bit old-fashioned for this; I've never used one and wasn't interested in signing up anytime soon.

"Hey! Check this out," he grunted, flipping the phone towards me, his wrist still taped from the injury.

"What?" I asked, not bothering to lift my gaze from my dull pages.

"Your perfect match," he announced with a triumphant grin.

"Doctor was right. Something's seriously wrong in your head," I shot back, finally looking up at him, a half-smile playing on my lips.

"Not funny, though!" he protested, his grin faltering slightly.

"Not interested," I clicked my tongue, a familiar habit, and continued to read the not-so-interesting book.

"A passionate girl, trying my luck in this app," he mused aloud, reading from the profile.

"All the very best to her," I replied, my eyes still fixed on the paragraph that refused to hold my attention.

"Hey, check this out," he burst out, a new urgency in his voice, "You can't plan to fall in love. Let's meet and

have a cup of coffee and see where it takes us." I looked at him, my eyebrow arched.

He chuckled and said, "Looks like she stole your lines."

"I don't own a patent or copyright for those lines," I retorted dryly.

"Look!" he persisted, shoving the phone closer. "My interests are art, writing, and gym. You guys have similar interests."

He chuckled and replied, "You guys are going to hit it off."

"You are crazy," I stated flatly.

"He's Just Not That Into You is not a movie. It is a relationship Bible," he read from her profile.

"Is that the one where Scarlett, Jennifer, and Drew were all cast?" I asked. He nodded.

"Huhh!" I sighed, a long, drawn-out sound, and said, "Good luck with her search. She's in the wrong place."

"She is pretty," he said. "This one will definitely click for you, man. You must be the one to swipe right on her," he insisted, his voice tinged with desperation.

"I will pass," I replied.

"Why not?" he asked, his brows furrowed in genuine confusion.

"All it takes is two minutes to create your profile," he said. "And boom! You're in the dating pool. Hooked and ready to catch fish."

"Don't call it fishing," I said. "Fish don't bite the hook to get caught."

"Okay. Whatever," he replied. "Don't change the topic."

"No!" I replied.

"No, what?" he asked.

"I'm not getting into the online dating pool," I replied.

"Okay!" he sighed, a weary sound. "At least, take a look at the profile," he said and flipped the phone towards me.

I clicked my tongue, hesitantly closed the book, popped off the chair, picked up the phone from him, and there it was: the profile picture.

My gaze snagged, instantly captivated. The world around me seemed to fade as time itself paused. Time, a relentless river, simply ceased to flow. She appeared exquisitely sensational, a sudden, vibrant splash of sweetness against the dull canvas of my day.

Wow!!!

"Could she have always been this stunning?" a voice whispered inside. "Or was it only now that I truly saw it?"

A profound depth in her eyes utterly arrested my gaze, holding me prisoner to the image. I was adrift,

untethered from the minutes and hours. Was it a mere blink, or had an eternity slipped by?

"And?" my friend's voice sliced through my reverie.

My internal gears clicked back into motion, the world rushing in as I was pulled back to the present. There was no denying her striking beauty; it was a revelation that brought with it a surprising sense of lightness, a rush of happiness and pure freshness.

A smile flashed on my face, my eyebrows raising in surprise, and I scoffed, "Huhh!"

"What?" he asked, leaning in, expectant.

"I can do one up better," I replied. I looked at him and said, "I can even get you her address, if you're so much into her."

Popping his eyes wide open, he replied, "Holy shit! Don't tell me you know her."

"Oh no!" I said. "I don't." I returned to the chair, slouched, and replied, "She lives in the same building I used to live in six months ago."

"Really?" he asked, his voice practically a squeak. I nodded gently.

"So, you know her," he asked. I nodded in denial.

"We had met a few times in the elevator, but I haven't spoken with her," I replied.

"You are an idiot," he groaned, slapping his forehead softly.

"Thanks!" I sassed, a wry grin tugging at my lips.

"Never mind!" he said. "It's not too late."

"No! It is late to change someone who has been an idiot for a very long time," I sassed again.

"No, you idiot!" he replied, his patience wearing thin.

"You just moved a street away," he replied. "You still live in the same community."

"So?" I asked, my voice flat.

"You still got a chance to meet her," he said.

"For?" I asked.

"To talk and ask her out, you idiot!" he replied, exasperated, running a hand through his hair.

"You're talking like a woman," I replied.

"Shut up!" he replied.

"Okay!" I remarked. "When I meet her next time, I will talk to her," I replied.

I looked at him, smiled and said, "I'll tell her that calling that movie a relationship bible is a bit too much."

"Whatever!" he said. "But you let her know that you're more like the character played by Ben Affleck."

"Seriously? Me? Ben Affleck?" I scoffed, a burst of disbelief escaping me. "Definitely! You need an MRI scan of your brain."

"I didn't mean your physical appearance," he remarked. "The character he played doesn't believe in marriage. Just like you. One-woman guy who doesn't want marriage," he remarked.

I clicked my tongue, "Nah!"

"Who knows, she may like you," he said.

"You've gone crazy," I remarked.

A Few Months Later

The cool, crisp air of an early winter Sunday morning still carried the lingering scent of damp earth and freshly cut grass as I finished my jog around the nearby lake and headed home. My path, however, was soon diverted by the community café, which had recently undergone a renovation and just reopened. The sweet, potent aroma of brewing coffee, strong enough to pull me off my path, combined with my eagerness to see the new interiors, irresistibly drew me to its doors.

Upon entering, my gaze swept across the space. The café exuded a sense of freshness and renewal. Walls now sported a harmonious blend of light pistachio green and off-white. The wooden columns and roof beams were beautifully laminated in rich oak colors, while the smooth, dark surfaces of the new chairs and tables, seemingly sourced from tribal artisans, glinted softly in the light. A distinct partition now separated a cozy nook at the far-left end, where a wall adorned with cobbled stone boasted an artificial fireside setup. Despite the bright morning light outside, the drawn

window blinds, the intimate glow from the fireside, and the gentle hum of the air conditioner within the café conspired to create an enveloping mood of cozy repose. A wide, genuine smile stretched across my face. This lazy Sunday morning, I thought, was off to an unexpected and wonderful start. "Lucky me!" I murmured, "I get to unwind and enjoy my coffee right by the fireside."

I approached the counter, ordered my coffee, and as I picked up the cup, its warmth seeped into my hand. Turning towards the fireside, I was stunned: she was there. She sat on one of the chairs by the hearth, holding her own coffee cup, gently blowing on the rising steam. A moment ago, the place was empty and now there she is. Wow!.

As a beam of sunlight pierced the window louvers and illuminated her face, she radiated a soft glow. She was undeniably gorgeous; the dating app photos hadn't even come close to capturing her true beauty. Her presence, here of all places, was completely unexpected. I quickly pivoted, finding an empty seat near the entrance, still facing the inviting fireside.

A voice from my past flashed into my mind—my friend's. Once again, it replayed snippets from her dating profile. My thoughts brimmed with joy over our shared interest in writing. My imagination gently brushed acrylic colors over our mutual passion for art. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, cherishing the

vivid, sweet sight of her in my mind's eye, then slowly opened them once more.

Wow! She truly looked like a morning rose. Clad in workout pants, a simple T-shirt, and sports shoes, her hair was tied back with a band, leaving a couple of delicate strands to frame her forehead like a soft, gliding wave. I observed her: she blew on the hot steam, took a sip of coffee, inhaled deeply, and then closed her eyes, clearly lost in the moment. When she opened them again, a faint smile graced her features. In every detail, she looked ethereal, a vision so perfect it almost seemed to ripple the air around her.

Suddenly, a compelling new attraction surged through me—an undeniable desire to approach her. Somewhere within those mesmerizing moments, as her beauty held me captive, I hadn't realized the dramatic shift in my resolve: from the confident "I will pass" I'd told my friend the other day, to the urgent question now dominating my thoughts, "How do I even begin to talk to her?"

My hair was a wild mess, strands plastered to my sweaty forehead, my outfit was soaked, stinking faintly of exertion, and I was still panting for breath. A beautiful girl, a fireside setup, and an opportunity to talk with her. Should I be thanking nature for handing over an opportunity on a platter, or grimace at the mockery it made for giving me the opportunity when I was clumsy, sweaty, and stinky? Thinking leads to nowhere.

Time was running out, and her coffee seemed to be draining even faster. She wasn't going to be here all day. I wiped the sweat off my face, forehead, neck, and forearms, the damp cloth feeling cool against my skin. Thanks to the blowing air conditioner, my sticky attire partly dried out. I picked up my coffee, walked towards the fireside setup, and asked, "May I join you by the fireside?"

She gently turned, looked at me with a smile and said, "Of course. Please!"

I sat across from her, looked around and remarked, "The renovation is done very well. Especially the fireside."

She said, "Yes!" and remarked with a smile, "They've redone the place quite well. I really like it now."

"Do you live in the building?" I asked her, pointing at the building she lived in. She looked at me, a flicker of recognition in her eyes. "I think I've seen you."

"Yes! I too remember seeing you there," she replied. "Do you still live there?" she asked.

"Not anymore," I replied. "Moved out to another building on the next street," I replied.

By then, the music in the café got a bit louder. I stood up and sat on the chair next to her and introduced myself. We shook hands, and she introduced her name. Her voice sounded mellifluous. Her hands felt soft. From there on, the conversation flowed like a gentle,

chill breeze. I felt a sense of familiarity. It was like talking to someone I already knew. We shared our likes and dislikes, our professions, our passions, interests, a little bit about the present, and a bit about the past. I didn't plan any of it. The point of our common interest came along naturally. We spoke about almost everything under the sun. Those unmeasured minutes with her felt truly magical.

Our conversation got interrupted by a phone call she received. She cut the call and said, "Sorry! My friend is waiting outside. I have to leave now."

We both stood up and walked out of the café together. There was a brief moment of awkward silence. The car that was parked on the other side of the road honked once. She waved her hand at her friend who was waiting in the car. It was time to go. I couldn't linger around. Although I wanted to ask her out, something stopped me. Something within me said to pause. A mild voice echoed in me, "Next time when you meet her. If you meet her". I did not rebel my inner voice. I bid her adieu and started to walk away.

As I walked away, my mind started contemplating. Something like that had never happened to me before. It felt crazy, but in a good way. Our conversation still lingered in my mind. The smile on my face didn't fade away.

I don't know if there's going to be another chance. I don't know if she will still be single. I don't know if she

will be ok to go out with me after I tell her that I had already seen her dating profile and approached to speak to her as I liked her. I don't know many things. But I know one thing for certain: the moment spent with her felt like watching my favorite movie for the first time. Though the meeting was short, it was ephemeral. Every word felt fresh. Every breath was exciting. Just like the morning coffee.

To be continued.....

Yes

It was the longest ten seconds of my life.

My heartbeat raced like a hyperloop express, 'O' Negative blood pounding through my veins—an experience of life and death simultaneous. Every cell imploded and exploded at once. I'd rehearsed this moment a million times in my mind, spent sleepless hours contemplating it, certain I had it under control. No. I was wrong. I was helplessly drawn to her dark, bottomless eyes, like an object caught in the inescapable pull of a black hole. I resisted entering that dark abyss, terrified of what awaited me on the other side. But it was too late to undo what I did.

Fighting my own inner turmoil, holding my life in my palm, I tried to look at her. She stood frozen like a beautifully sculpted ice statue. Her lips quivered, her throat dried out. Her breath was so feeble it was as if her heart had simply stopped. Her eyes tried to contain the tears, waiting to burst open and flow like the Nile. She didn't expect this. It was indeed a rude shock for her. I wanted it exactly this way.

It was the longest ten seconds of my life.

The ice melted; the statue came to life. Like a nuclear reactor going critical, her heart kickstarted once again without a CPR. She gasped, letting the tears finally roll from her eyes, releasing her body from the shock. She

held my arm, lifted me, nodded, and kissed me. It wasn't our first kiss. I'd tasted those lips a million times. But there was something profoundly different about this one. It was the exchange of our hearts into each other's keeping. She hugged me tight. I'd felt those hands a thousand times around me, but never like this before. They spoke: I was hers, and she was mine, forever and ever till eternity.

She looked at the ring, then into my eyes, and finally whispered, "Yes."

It was the longest ten seconds of my life.

Closure

It was about 3:30 p.m. in the afternoon, and the restaurant was hardly occupied, mostly with folks who seemed to have ended up there to escape the afternoon heat. It was the lull time on a weekday. The restaurant had already closed orders for lunch, and the evening snacks were under preparation.

I was sitting at a table right in the center of the restaurant, tapping my leg, fidgeting my hands. The anxiety, tension, and uncomfortable feeling needed no explanation for anyone who saw me. My effort to act normal didn't go well either. Luckily, I was there alone. Folks at the other tables were lost in their own world. One was busy on a phone call, and another was peering through the screen of his laptop. I turned towards the other side, and there was the third one, mindlessly scrolling through social media.

Usually, I would be one among them. But not today.

Oh! Don't get me wrong. I did not have any epiphany or something. In fact, I tried it all. I opened my laptop and tried to focus on work, opened my phone and scrolled through social media. Nothing worked. Don't even ask me about music; it was so annoying. Eventually, I ended up watching what others were doing.

I emptied a bottle of water, got up, and walked into the restroom. I spent five minutes in there and came back with the same sweaty face, just like the way I went in. My lips were dry. I didn't put on my lip gloss. I didn't even apply touch-up for the sweat. My hair was as messy as I had always felt it was. I didn't bother to do anything about it. I walked back to my table, and as I stood in the center of the restaurant, the place appeared huge, and suddenly, I felt like I was standing naked.

No! My clothes were still on. Fear followed by an unusual sense of insecurity. I took a deep breath, looked around, picked up my handbag, and took a seat at the corner of the restaurant. I felt secure with my back against the wall. The waitress looked at me and hesitantly set the table and brought me a fresh set of cutlery and plates. For someone who hadn't ordered anything yet except for a bottle of water, she felt entitled to show me a little attitude. It didn't bother me, although I didn't ignore it.

Drops of sweat started to pop up on my forehead and the back of my neck. I removed my jacket and sat back at the table. The visceral fat on my small tummy fold popped out.

"Shit!" I regretted my lunch choices. I had literally gorged on the food. For another two minutes, I tried my pranayama exercise.

(Breathe In. Breathe Out).

Nope. It did not help. On the contrary, I started to sweat even more.

Another bad choice.

The restaurant manager had already come around twice to inquire if everything was alright. No, she wasn't worried about a customer occupying a table without ordering. She sensed something might be wrong with me. I knew I was kind of feeling out of place. More so, stupid. But it didn't bother me.

I gently replied that everything was fine, although it was not. She was not the person I wanted to talk to about my situation.

I was waiting to meet him. I didn't show up early. As usual, he was late.

"Certain things don't change." I sighed mildly and nodded with a short smile.

It was three years, four months, and twenty-one days since.....

Since we broke up.

"Huhh!" I sighed.

Wait! Before you judge me, I wasn't counting every day and minute in the last three years. I did the math in the last three minutes. I have moved on. So did he. At least that's what I heard from our mutual friends.

"Wait! Who am I justifying? Why did my ego jump in right away, like I'm answering someone else?"

"Is it because I ended it?" I clicked my tongue in denial.

"All of it seems silly," I nodded again in agreement and scoffed, "Yes! Silly."

I pulled a dry tissue out from the stack, wiped my forehead and neck, crushed the tissue, and kept it aside on the table. But the sweat drops reappeared. I repeated it one more time.

"We didn't stay in touch after the breakup." "Who does?" "Silly!"

"Breakup," "Huhh!!!" "It was not a bad one. But it was not a decent one either. We both were hurt, angry, and confused."

Did I say, "we?"

"Yes!" I scoffed once again mildly. "Probably, now I am able to see things clearly." "He too was hurt, angry, and equally confused as I was."

"Back then when it all happened, I was only focusing on my feelings and emotions."

"Just like he focused on his feelings." I picked up a glass of water and sipped it. I was still sweating.

"Oh Gosh!"

"Huhh!" I sighed.

My heart beat phased as I recollected the day it all happened. I made a big scene. A bad one.

I guess, only in scripted movies, breakups happen in a most decent manner. The boy and the girl meet at a park for one last time. With love in their eyes and heart, they let go of the relationship gracefully, understanding each other's needs. Just like a scene from a Hugh Grant or Clark Gable movie. Holding their heart in their hands, one of them walks away while the other remains seated. The camera zooms out, and the screen fades away.

Too dramatic.

I scoffed and shook my head in denial, "Yes! This happens only in movies."

"Even Hugh Grant can't play Hugh Grant when it came to his real-life divorces."

"Yes! Not one. Not two. I heard he had three divorces. Three costly, nasty, broken marriages."

"Huhh!" I sighed as if it was my own money.

I took a sip and repeated it another couple of times and thought, "I am glad we broke up."

"I'm sure he must be relieved that it was just a breakup and not a divorce," I raised the glass once again and took a couple of sips.

After a moment of pause.

Did I say "Glad?"

Yes. I did, and I am glad.

"Was I truly glad that it got over? The answers to such questions are never a straight yes or no."

"Frankly, when it comes to matters of the heart, I suck at making hard choices. Sometimes it is better not to confront such questions."

But my mind wouldn't stop bugging me. "Again! Was I glad that it was over?"

"No. How can I even think about it that way?" There was a sharp anger and a mild disgust.

"Yes! The relationship didn't work out well. But that doesn't describe the way I felt for him once. That doesn't devalue the love I had for him." "Not anymore. But it all felt true and real for me once."

"Not anymore."

"I was not sobbing, whining, and stayed single after my breakup. I had my share of dating history," I smiled sharply.

"After our breakup, I moved on and dated a few guys. In fact, a couple of them ended after it got serious. But none of them had any deep impact on me. Until now. Until I met my.....".

Does this make him special? Or does this make the love I had for him special?

Maybe or maybe not.

Sometimes it is better not to confront such questions.

I smirked mildly and said to myself, "However much my mind tries to trick me out, I am not caving in. Because the answers to such questions are never a simple, straight Yes or No."

"Is that so?" asked my mind.

"Then, why does my heart skip a beat every time someone from our common friend circle speaks about him? After all these years, why am I getting a spontaneous smile when something reminds me of him? Am I still hung up on him? The body memory is stronger than mind. My nose still catches the strong scent of the perfume on his skin. My chest still feels his face. My lips still remember the kiss. My ears still echo his sweet hissing, my skin still feels the warmth of his body. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I felt light and levitating as if I was high."

Yes! He was definitely a drug. Am I still hungover him? Will I get over this hangover ever?

I don't know. I don't know.

But one thing is very clear. I don't want to be confronted with such questions. I don't want to be reminded of things from my past. Especially, this way.

Guilt. That's the only word that my mind judged me with.

"Is he still with the girl, with the thing?" I thought about the girl with the thing. Last I heard that they are going

through some rough patch. Did he break up with her?
Is he still thinking about me?

"Shit."

"Why am I feeling guilty for him?"

"If he breaks up with her, then you are not the reason,"
echoed my mind. "But if you break up with yours,
definitely it is on you."

Shit. The wait sucks. Why did he want to meet with
me?

And once again my heart skipped a couple of beats.
And it started to race faster and faster. I went to the
washroom and splashed water on my face, looked at
the mirror. My face was becoming pale, and my eyes
were becoming red.

"Wake up, girl!" A voice came from within.

My heartbeat continued faster. But this time, it was not
because of him. It was guilt.

I picked up my phone, but shied away from looking at
it. The screensaver had a picture of me and my
boyfriend. No. My Partner.

"You are not my girlfriend" "Not anymore."

"We had gone past that stage long ago in my heart."

"You are my partner," my mind echoed the voice of my
boyfriend/partner.

When I got the text message from my ex asking me to
meet with him, I showed it to my partner. He did not

panic. He did not get angry. On the contrary, he encouraged me to go and meet with him. He trusts me. He is sensible, but a bit sensitive too. Less emotional but more understanding. He is all any woman can ask for. Yes! We fight, we argue, like any other couple. But he can never stay mad at me for a long time. He hates silence as much as I do. He always comes back to me," I smiled with pride.

How can I forget the way he makes me happy these days? Most of the nights I spend at his place. Otherwise, we spend at mine. We hang out all the time, and I like that. We are going strong for almost nine months now. My friend said that he is showing all indications to take this relationship to the next level. Very true. He even proposed me to move in with him. I did not give him an answer yet. I don't know why! I don't know!

Is it because...?

Some questions are better left unanswered. Body memories are strong.

My mind stopped suddenly. I had gone blank. As if I couldn't remember how it feels to be with my Partner. My heart skipped a few more beats again, and I started to sweat. And suddenly it all came back to me.

I remembered he didn't speak to me this morning. He left early for a meeting which, now I realized, there wasn't any.

Was he just trying to be supportive? How did I not notice that he was not okay? Did I make the mistake by telling him about the text message from my ex?

Oh, fuck. What did I do? A couple of days ago, he asked me to move in with him, and instead of saying yes to him, I fucked it up with him all over.

I felt claustrophobic inside the restroom. I felt like drowning in my own breath. No. This is a mistake. Why now? After all these years? Why now?

No! This is bad. I shouldn't have come here. I walked out of the restroom, paid the bill, picked up my bag, and started to walk out of the restaurant.

My mobile phone dinged with a message, "Sorry. I'm running a bit late. Please don't leave. I need to see you today. Sorry. Once again." I kept staring at the message popup for a moment. I read the message, and the mark turned blue. But I didn't reply. I exited the message and kept looking at the screensaver picture. The one with my partner.

He was smiling happily. I kept looking at his calm eyes for a moment. A calmness descended in me. I sighed. Contrary to what I thought, my body felt relaxed the moment I saw his picture. I cannot run away now. I need to do this for myself. I need to know for myself. I cannot do this to my partner.

I went back to the restaurant and sat on the same seat. The waitress had not replaced the water glass yet. I

took a sip of water from the glass and felt relaxed. My heartbeat slowed down, and the anxiety came down.

"Go and meet him. Don't think too much about it," his voice echoed in me. I could feel his hand in mine when he said this last night.

The tension in my cheek and neck relaxed. The feeling of nausea faded. Slowly, I could smell the fresh aqua mint fragrance. The way my partner smelled. Like a flower that blossomed on a morning, the taste of his lips bloomed on mine. Like a spring breeze that touched the flower, my senses woke up to a new moment.

After a moment of silence, a voice whispered in me: my ex is of my past. He is not in my present. I am not hung over him. I don't envy. I don't stalk. I don't think about him. I have moved on. My body will carry this memory for a very long time. But my heart doesn't belong to him anymore. He is not in my heart anymore. I realized that I don't need to remember my partner. He is in my heart. He is in my breath and in every ounce of my being. My present is with my partner, and I am looking forward to a future with him. I sensed the blow of chill wind touching my skin.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I pictured a sailor boarding a small boat and setting sail. Initially, there were waves and tides. The boat struggled against the roaring waves and toppled more than once. But still, the sailor managed to get back on the boat and

continued the journey, because she needed to do it for herself. And finally, she got past those waves and tides and reached far away from the waves into the calm, serene ocean. My mind became relaxed, and finally, I felt like I was in a place where everything seemed clear. I figured out what I needed to do.

I opened my eyes, and before my mind could coherently conclude my thoughts and coin a word, I saw my ex walking into the restaurant towards me.

I was seeing him after three years, four months, and twenty-one days. He had put on a little weight around his chest and mid-section, or was he working out? He had short hair, which he never had. He was clean-shaven and had no beard, which I never thought he would. He did not remove his gaze away from me as he walked towards me. He kept the smile on and walked confidently towards me as he always did. I smiled back, coping to compete with the same level of confidence, and held my head up high.

Oh, shit! I totally forgot one important thing. Should I hug him?

Wait! What if he doesn't...? Ah, crap! That would be awkward.

Okay! I will keep it simple and formal. Yes. I will do a formal handshake.

Seriously? That would be way worse.

Come on, think something. He is hardly ten steps away from the table.

Okay! Don't do anything. Simply sit tight.

I held my pelvic muscle glued onto the chair. I didn't want him to sense my inner chaos. I took a deep breath and spoke, "Some things never change," I smirked.

"What can I say? I always try to make a late entry. But a grand one," he replied with a laugh, and he continued, "And you are right. Some things never change. I am sorry," he said and bowed a little bit and sat down on the chair right opposite to me. He didn't flinch or have a bit of hesitation in his demeanor. How can he be so casual? Is he acting cool or sticking it up to me?

I didn't want to give in to his arrogant confidence.

"Your apologies will be considered," I smirked once again.

"I am flustering," he said and picked up another glass on the table, poured the water, and gulped it.

He looked at me, smiled, and asked, "How are you? How have you been? Are you still with the same company? I hope you got the promotion you deserved..."

"It's been a really long time..."

"Are you dying?" I interrupted him and asked. "Unless you're not dying, stop blowing smoke off my ass and

tell me why I am here?" I couldn't believe those words fired through my mouth like a ray of bullets.

He looked at me. Indeed he was in shock. His all-confident, smiling, casual cool-guy look changed. For the first time, I saw his confidence fell off like a domino.

"About that..." he exclaimed slowly.

"I am not sure how to say it. So let me just say it," he said. "I will be lying if I say I don't know anything about you. I get to know almost everything about you from our mutual friends. I am truly happy that you moved on and found someone."

I looked at him quizzically.

He straightened his voice and said, "I don't know how it was for you, but our breakup was not easy for me. It really did a number on me. To move on was not easy. I am not nagging. It took me a while to get into the dating club and meet someone," he said in a low voice.

He sighed and said, "Eventually, I found someone, and I am seeing a future with her."

I looked at him, shocked, surprised, and silent. My anger started to fade off. He was reflecting exactly what was running in my mind. But, of course, with less vocabulary and emotional drama.

He continued, "But, there was something that kept me from taking the next step with her in life."

I looked at him with a slight guilt.

He nodded and said, "It is you." He looked serious and said, "Somewhere I felt that a part of me got stuck with you and couldn't move on. After a long struggle, I have come to terms that you will always be in my memory. But if I have to move on and totally be with my current partner, I need to do this."

I looked at him even more shocked.

He continued, "Our breakup was bad."

I looked down, chuckled, and said, "Yes, it was terrible." I couldn't believe I was sharing a smiling moment with the very same person who broke my heart.

"For all the good times we had, we ended things badly," he said. I looked at him and nodded in agreement.

"I guess this has left a long hangover in me," he said. "I won't be able to take the next big step with my girlfriend without clearing all my baggages. I wanted to do right by me."

I couldn't agree with him anymore. In that moment, I felt like everything changed. Now my mind felt calm and serene.

He waited for me to respond. But I didn't reply to him right away. My mind was replaying his words, mapping them exactly to what I was rambling in my mind a few minutes ago.

He called out my name.

"I couldn't believe I am saying this. But you are right," I told him. And then the word popped into my mind.

"Closure," I said. "We both need it for us to move on totally," I said. He smiled and nodded in agreement.

After that, it took a few more minutes for us to start talking. I will agree that breaking the ice was the most uncomfortable thing to do. But somehow, we both felt that we needed to do this for ourselves. So we went through with it. Initially, it was like talking with a stranger. But, what can I say, body memory is stronger. It came up easily like riding a bicycle. Then, almost for two hours, we talked. We talked just like two adults. We smiled a bit, became a bit emotional. I shed some tears. He showed some guilt. Somewhere during the conversation, we both apologized.

In the end, I felt that I got a proper closure. He wished me his best, and I returned him the same. We shook hands and gave a hug. He smiled brighter than before and walked out of the restaurant.

I sat back at the table. My mind was absolutely calm. It felt like I had offloaded a dead weight that I was carrying for more than three years. Somewhere I realized that I was not hung over him. All I needed was a closure. I felt like the heaviness in my chest reduced. There was no guilt, because there was nobody else in my mind. It felt like there was just me dusting some old memories and rearranging my memory closet.

I remained seated for some more time. I felt complete and whole within me.

I picked up my mobile and dialed my Partner.

"Hey!" I said.

"Hi," he replied in his usual calm voice.

"Yes!" I said.

"Yes, what?" he asked smilingly.

I said, "I could use your help moving in with you." I said, "I am ready, Partner. Totally! Wholeheartedly."

"I will be waiting for you, Babe," he replied.

I clicked the phone out, picked up my handbag, walked out of the restaurant wearing confidence on my shoulder, a smile on my face, contentment in my heart, and with relief after dealing with a long-overdue closure.

The Old Man and the Bride

"She is getting married in a few hours, and you are a mess." The words, my own old, husky voice, echoed in my head. And yes, they were undeniably true.

I should be totally supportive of her decision, be there for her. It's not like I couldn't; I simply *didn't want to*. Call me selfish, an idiot, immature. But this is how it felt. Of course, I was happy, but not entirely. Contented, and yet I felt I needed more. Understanding, and yet I was jealous. I'd been holding this glass of whiskey in my hand for the last hour—probably the second longest of my life—and still hadn't taken a single sip.

"Did you give me all those twenty-six years of joy and happiness only to lead me to this point, where I have to give away everything?" I mumbled to myself. "Or was it always like this, and I didn't notice it?" The questions never stopped.

"True," came an unwelcome reply from within. I scoffed, a dry, bitter sound. I hadn't noticed it because I hadn't *wanted* to. Is this how it feels to be a father of the bride? Or is it just me? I was a mess. Children, I thought, grow too fast, leaving the child within their parents to long forever. I was in no mood to talk to anyone, but today, that wasn't an option. I located a secluded corner in the marriage hall and sat, trying to

avoid attention. Yet, inevitably, people spotted me and approached. Can't avoid it. After all, I am the father of the bride.

A grim intuition settled in my gut: I was going to create a big drama today.

"Hey! You're here?" A friend's voice boomed beside me. "Congratulations! Finally, the responsibility is over. Now you and your wife can be free birds."

I managed a strained smile, shook his hand, and motioned him to a seat.

Responsibility? Why do people call it that? I wasn't giving my child away in adoption. She would always be my daughter, and I would always be her Dad. *Fuck!* This was precisely why I'd wanted to remain unnoticed.

An uncle's second son's wife, a woman I barely knew, bustled over and greeted me. Her gaze lingered on the whiskey glass in my hand. "Already started to celebrate?" she chirped. "Looks like you and your wife will be off to your honeymoon before the bride and the groom take off!" She punctuated her joke with a robust chuckle.

The last thing I wanted was to crack jokes and laugh. Yet, I had to maintain my composure. I offered a sharp, brittle smile—more of a grimace, really—which thankfully she didn't seem to notice. I vaguely gestured towards where my other cousins were sitting. She smiled, oblivious, and walked over to join them.

My mind replayed the number: 2,500. The total number of people invited. A big fat Indian wedding.

Huhh! *Just get through with this day. Focus on what's more important. It's a big day for your daughter. Don't be a schmuck*, echoed an internal voice, uncannily precise in my wife's tone.

I scanned the vast marriage hall. Slowly, people began to trickle in, their murmurs growing into a low hum. My eyes drifted back to the whiskey glass, still untouched. The amber liquid seemed to mock my resolve.

It felt like only yesterday I was holding my little princess in my arms. After three grueling hours of labor, my wife delivered her. The wait almost killed me. I didn't endure the labor or the C-section, but I went through hell. Something much worse than labor. When the life of loved ones hinges on probability and chance, the one witnessing helplessly undergoes the real hell. Those were the longest hours of my life, until now. The memory still sent a cold shiver down my spine.

I still vividly remember the feeling when I first held her. Her tender, soft skin, her tiny body wrapped in a delicate towel. She opened her eyes, and for a fleeting moment, her gaze locked with mine. At that instant, I felt as if my whole life had simply existed to lead me to that very point. For the first time, my life made complete, undeniable sense.

It felt as if nothing else mattered to me anymore in the whole world.

"Hmm," I chuckled, a softer, fonder sound this time. It was true. Thereafter, nothing else truly did. A small smile finally touched my lips.

They say, for a man, his daughter is the last girl he will ever fall in love with. Very true.

Poof! Twenty-six years vanished in a flash before me. From the hospital cradle to this elaborate marriage hall. I never thought life would fly so fast. No father, I wager, would ever say, "I've had enough with my daughter." Certainly not this one.

I found my wife across the hall, a blur of motion, bustling around as usual. She moved with the practiced efficiency of a general on a casual Tuesday in the office. She seemed to be handling it all with such grace, such maturity. She was clearly worked up—tired, anxious about the whole event—yet she maintained a radiant glow, a warm smile, and an unyielding warmth in her face. She welcomed every single guest, making sure everything was in order. She had meticulously orchestrated the entire wedding planning, a tireless presence beside our princess every step of the way. She wasn't just my other half; she had always been my better half. Far better than me. I was confident if she couldn't pull this through, nobody else could. So, I took that as a convenient, cheap excuse to recuse myself from all the planning responsibilities.

What an arse I am? Yes. I am. Again. Call me immature, and I really don't care.

My wife had been buzzing with excitement from the day our daughter burst in and showed us her engagement ring. Honestly, I couldn't share the same feeling. Yes. I'm going to be brutally, nakedly honest. For the first time, the reality hit me hard, a direct blow to the face. I couldn't avoid the fact that my daughter, now a grown-up woman, was *going away*. It struck me with the force of an Armageddon. I froze, like a lifeless corpse, the blood draining from my face. That certainly wasn't the reaction she expected. Frankly, I went utterly blank, as if I'd lost consciousness.

In our parenting duo, my wife used to be the strict and controlling one, and I used to be the cool and calm one. I always got to play the good cop, and I loved it. I'd always encouraged our daughter to be brave, to go after her dreams, challenge the norms of society, and always, always to be a true, authentic rebel in her own way. On the other hand, my wife constantly warned her to be watchful of every step she took and every decision she made. But when it came to *this*, the tables had completely turned. I felt like I was containing a roaring tsunami inside me, whereas my wife was as serene as a gently flowing river.

"How did this happen? How did I end up here?" My mind, lost and adrift, stared into an abyss of cluelessness.

Truth be told, I had been diligently avoiding the very thought until it had slammed into me at this precise moment. I simply wasn't ready to face the fact. I'm genuinely surprised how my wife managed to handle this so gracefully. Is it just her, or is it so with every mother? How is this innate acceptance naturally etched into their DNA?

Needless to say, she is the mother. She gave her whole life for the kids. She had prioritized them over her career. She loved them so much, and yet, when it was time, she was so casual about letting go of our daughter.

Without her, this wedding wouldn't be happening the way it is—just like the way our daughter dreamt of.

For a brief moment, my mind stilled, like a running horse finally halting to quench its thirst.

Huhh! I sighed, a long, weary sound.

Of course! Growing up, every girl must have dreamt about this sometime or other. It's not easy to handle one marriage. But this isn't just one; it's two. One as per the bride's tradition, and another as per the groom's. Nevertheless, it's always the bride's side that shoulders the bulk of the work when it comes to a wedding. When our daughter mentioned they were planning two ceremonies, I hadn't given a moment's thought to the logistics. Hmm. I scoffed at my own blissful ignorance.

In truth, I hadn't thought about anything at all. Thanks to my wife.

An enormous, uncomfortable feeling settled over me. I couldn't quite call it pain or suffering, but it was undeniably there. Everybody talks about the pain of pregnancy and what it feels to be a mother. But nobody talks about what it is to be a father. Is it because men are not good at talking?

Today, I am going to talk. Talk on behalf of every father who is standing in the eleventh hour of a wedding, when the clock is ticking, when he is about to give his daughter away in marriage. For a mother, it was only nine months. But for a father, it will be for a lifetime.

"Ah! Cut the crappy dialogue and drama. This doesn't suit you. Don't ruin the moment. Nobody is ready to listen to your speech," came a sharp, dismissive voice. My own voice.

My wife's gaze met mine from across the hall. A knowing warmth in her eyes told me she understood my inner turmoil. It was clearly etched on my face; she could always spot it. She navigated the crowd with practiced ease, walked over to me, and sat down.

Her eyes fell on the whiskey glass. Without a word, she reached out, took it from my hand, and drained it.

She looked at me, a playful challenge in her gaze. "What?" she asked. "I know you weren't going to drink that. You never drink when you don't feel good. So don't start today."

"What are you talking about?" I feigned ignorance, my voice rough.

"Ah! You are a pathetic liar and a terrible actor," she chuckled, a soft, familiar sound.

"You are not giving away your daughter in adoption. It is just a marriage," she smiled, repeating those exact same words I'd heard from her countless times.

"Huhh!" she sighed heavily, a rare moment of weariness. "I am tired, Hon!" she groaned softly.

She leaned over my shoulder, her voice a low murmur against my ear. "The flowers are yet to be arranged, and the caterers are still preparing the dishes, and the table arrangements are not yet done, the usherers aren't coordinating the seating properly, and there are a million other things which need to be supervised and brought in order." She pulled back, winked, smiled, and said, "It's fine. I can handle it." She stood up, turned towards me, and said, "You better wash your schmuck face and welcome everyone with a smile. And don't forget to refill a drink for me." She kissed me lightly on the cheek and went away, a whirlwind of calm competence.

I remained seated. I knew I was a lucky bastard. She never complained about my lack of involvement. She understood. I truly am a lucky one.

I remained seated, juggling the myriad memories that vividly surged through my mind: my daughter's first day at school, the chaotic joy of school annual day

events and celebrations, her prom, high school events, her graduation, and the first time she moved out of the house for her job, her impressive career progression.

A tinge of disappointment pricked at the corner of my mind. "Will I get to make more memories with my daughter?" Although she will always be a part of my family, somewhere, deep in the corner of my heart, I find it difficult to accept that I am not going to be a part of *hers*. But then, I am happy that she is going to create a family of her own.

A few more relatives drifted by, and I managed to offer a welcoming smile, guiding them towards the usherers. Others passed, their gazes sliding past me; they didn't expect the father of the bride to be lurking in a corner.

I looked around. My son was a pillar of activity, striding up and down, barking instructions to the usherers and coordinators. He moved effortlessly, greeting friends, families, and relatives, stopping to laugh, giggle, and crack jokes with his own circle of friends. I could even see the boys were already eyeing the girls who had come to attend the marriage.

I looked at my son. He has done good for himself, so far. I loved both of them equally, but somehow the love for my daughter always appeared in a slightly bigger and bolder font. Daughters are always special to fathers. Call me a hypocrite, and I really don't care. A

son is just a son. But a daughter is a darling, a princess, etc... etc.

"Your children are not your children. They are life's own longing. They are not from you. They came through you," echoed Khalil Gibran's lines from inside.

Very true! And I have absolutely no problem accepting it when it comes to my son. During his teens, we became easygoing. Slowly we became sort of friends by the time he turned 20. We started to have occasional guys' chats, played real games, and I should say, I poured him his first drink. We became equal.

But when it comes to a daughter, I wish I could say the same thing.

I was not controlling my daughter. Never did.

It is the other way around. I didn't give her just equal; I gave more than equal. Like they say, if you have a son, you teach him everything. But if you have a daughter, she teaches you many things. With my daughter, she is always more than equal. Probably that is why in our relationship, she became the adult and I remained a child.

My son's gaze found mine, and he approached.

He sat next to me, his smile light. "Hey Dad! Do you want me to pour you another drink?" he offered.

"I know you could use one," he chuckled, nudging me lightly, playfully. "After all, it is your precious

daughter's wedding." It was his time to take a dig at me. I managed a small smile.

He waved his hand at a waitress, who nodded and moved to get a refill.

"Do you need any help...?" I began, my voice trailing off.

He abruptly interrupted me, a confident wave of his hand. "Dad! Everything has been taken care of."

"Thanks," I replied. I handed him the glass, stood up, patted his shoulder, offered a light smile, and started walking towards the bride's room.

I went over to my daughter's room and waited outside for a moment. What was I going to talk to her about? Definitely, I have never advised her, and I was in no mood to give one today.

Should I talk about all those memories and my feelings? That would be a dumb idea. It was her big day, and I didn't want to be the one to ruin it. Without thinking further, I knocked on the door.

A soft footstep approached from inside. The latch clicked, and the door opened. One of the bridesmaids peered out, then opened it wider. I stepped inside and looked towards the far end of the room. In front of the mirror, radiant in her bridal dress, stood my daughter.

She turned around, smiled, and breathed out heavily. "Dad!" she exhaled, rattling her hands, raising her

brows, and with a raw anxiety, asked me, "How do I look?"

She looked prettier than ever. Her face wasn't just glowing from makeup and costume; she was happy. Happier than I had ever seen her. Her eyes were truly exuberating joy, sparkling with an inner light. At that moment, my worries, my anxieties, my internal sobbing—everything vanished.

"Oh, my darling!" I exhaled, the words barely a whisper. Twenty-six years of joy, happiness, and all of it had led up to this point, where I realized it multiplied manifold and glittered like a million stars in the night sky.

And for the first time, a profound sense of calmness descended in me, and I smiled at her wholeheartedly, a genuine, unburdened smile.

She waited for me to comment on her appearance. But words always fail when the heart opens up to speak. I walked over to her, gazing at her. She was truly an angel from heaven. I wrapped her in a hug and kissed her forehead. Traces of tears started to wet her eyeballs, bright and shimmering. I quickly grabbed tissues and handed them to her. She dabbed her eyes, offered a shaky smile, giggled mildly, and said, "Dad! I'm scared."

"Honey! You are in love. And love is scary. And marriage is an even bigger step," I said, my voice soft but firm. She nodded, her gaze fixed on mine.

"But, you are happier than ever before. You are taking your first step in creating your own family, and you will do great." She nodded once again, a hint of resolve in her eyes.

"I am not sure if I can do this," she confessed, her voice barely audible.

"Honey!" I smiled lightly, gently rubbed her arm, and said, "You look ready. More than ready."

After a brief moment of comfortable silence, I said, "Honey! I will be outside." I turned and walked towards the door.

"Dad!" she called, and I turned back. "Are you happy?" she asked me, her eyes searching mine.

I smiled, a wide, genuine smile, and replied, "More than ever." I couldn't believe the words that came out of my mouth. An avalanche of emotions that had run rampant within me suddenly settled, and I felt calm and light as I walked out of the door, as if shedding a heavy cloak.

I came back to the main ceremony hall. It was fairly filled with people, a sea of expectant faces. The stage was set, adorned with flowers and decorations. Musicians took their places, their instruments humming softly. The pastor approached the stage, a Bible held reverently in his hand. I stood at the other end of the hall and scanned the room.

My gaze fell on my father-in-law. He was sitting in a corner, happily looking around, a stark contrast to his demeanor on my own wedding day. I remembered the look on his face then—as if I was a villain stealing his prized possession. I felt a sudden urge to swallow my pride, walk over to him, and ask him how he truly handled it. But the fact is, he didn't handle it well. Even till today. And till today, I know what my wife goes through to mediate between us.

I didn't want to be that guy. I didn't want to put our daughter in that position. I didn't want to become the Robert De Niro from *Meet the Parents*. I wanted our daughter to be truly happy, unburdened by any lingering paternal angst.

I looked at my son-in-law. He is, truly, a nice guy. Hmmm! I chuckled to myself. He *must* be. He was my daughter's choice, after all.

I walked up to him and extended my hand. He turned, his eyes widening slightly, and greeted me by name, then quickly corrected himself. "Sorry!!! Or should I call you Dad?" he asked hesitantly, a blush creeping up his neck.

"Whatever you are comfortable with, my dear son-in-law, or Son, or should I just call you by your name?" I replied, letting a chuckle soften my words.

His friends, sensing the shift in atmosphere, discreetly walked away a bit, giving us some privacy.

There was an awkward moment of silence, the air thick with unspoken questions.

"Do you have something in mind to ask?" I sensed his hesitation, his desire to speak struggling against a wall of nerves.

I put my hand on his shoulder, a reassuring weight. "Son!" I said. "I know you and I haven't talked much. But I want you to know that you have my full blessing."

"Whether you like it or not," I added, a wry grin spreading across my face, "we are family." I chuckled, hoping to ease his tension.

He smiled hesitantly, then spoke in a soft, almost vulnerable voice, "I am not sure if I will ever take care of your daughter the way you did. There is not a day that went by without her talking about how great you are. She always say, 'If there is an award for the best father, the award will be named after you, because nobody will be able to compete with you.'"

A proud smile tugged at my lips, and I felt a surge of vanity. But I quickly tried to hide it in front of him.

"You live so tall in her heart. Honestly, I am scared if I will ever be able to compete with that?" he confessed, his gaze earnest.

I looked at him quizzically and read his angst. *What if I failed her?* I thought. *I know you are a major part of her life, and I can't compete with that.*

He looked at me, waiting for me to say something. But I didn't. You can say I was basking in my own ego, hearing him declare he could never compete with me.

After a brief moment of triumphant silence, "Son!" I said. He looked at me, a question in his eyes.

"I don't know if this is the right thing to say," I replied, a soft smile spreading across my face.

"But you know what?" I continued, my voice gentle, "I was in your shoes once, and I had the exact same doubt."

"Honestly, I can say this: It is not your duty to take care of her. It is mine, and it will always be mine. She is independent enough to take care of herself. You are with her to share your life. She loves you for who you are, and last but not least, you have already won her heart, and there is nothing more for you to compete." I couldn't believe those words had come out of my mouth, directed at the very same person I'd felt an irrational "beef" with just fifteen minutes ago.

I patted his shoulder, a genuine smile now firmly in place. "Son! You both are lucky to have found love for each other. Now go and be happy," I said with newfound pride and authority.

He didn't reply for another minute, seemingly processing my words.

"Huhh!" I sighed playfully, breaking the silence. "If you are still not convinced, then take a left and walk all the

way down the corridor, to the fire escape exit. That will be your last exit," I chuckled, a glint in my eye. He looked at me, surprised.

I laughed, a hearty, booming laugh now. "Don't think it would be that easy, though " I said, laughing even harder.

That was a dangerous sass, I knew, but I felt in my heart it would work.

He burst out in laughter, a genuine, relieved sound, and said, "Thank you, Dad," and hugged me tightly.

Oh boy! You are a hugger, I thought to myself, a warmth spreading through me.

I wished him luck and walked back to my seat in the last row once again.

My wife hurried towards me, her eyes radiating happiness, already knowing something significant had transpired. She couldn't wait to hear the story. She sat next to me and nudged me, "What was that?" she asked, her voice brimming with curiosity. I simply smiled, choosing not to reply immediately.

"When did you become a hugger?" she prodded, a chuckle escaping her.

"That was him. Not me," I replied, still smiling.

"What were you guys talking about?" she pressed, her excitement almost palpable.

I simply smiled and replied, "Something which your dad should have done in our marriage."

"What are you saying?" she asked, genuinely perplexed.

"I just told him, after all, I am not an arse like my father-in-law," I said, a mischievous giggle escaping me.

"My dad is not an arse. You are," she retorted, nudging me playfully.

"Sorry honey! Truth always hurts," I giggled, enjoying the moment.

"Whatever! Huhh," she sighed in relief, waving a dismissive hand. "I was worried that you would talk him out of the marriage and ask him to run away through the rear exit."

I leaned closer to her ear and whispered, "Guess what? I did."

She looked at me, genuinely shocked. I nodded, confirming, "I swear."

"Seriously! You are an arse," she replied, a final playful nudge.

I saw my son-in-law walking towards the front, near the altar, and stand in front of the pastor with his best man.

"I am glad he didn't listen to you," my wife remarked, a relieved smile on her face.

My son came next to me and said, "Mom! It's our queue."

I looked behind me; the carol girls, their voices a sweet harmony, walked down the aisle, showering the path with flowers.

My wife and son walked forward, a united pair.

It was my turn now. I closed my eyes for a moment. The anxiety, the stress, the tension, the anger—it was all long gone, completely dissipated. I felt peaceful, contented, and genuinely happy. A gentle breeze, unseen yet felt, filled my heart, and a soft, unburdened smile popped onto my face. I opened my eyes and turned around. My daughter walked into the hall, a vision of pure joy.

She was dazzlingly beautiful, radiating happiness. I looked at her, my heart swelling, gave her a brief smile after a very brief, loving look, and said, "Shall we?" extending my elbow. She held my elbow, her grip soft but firm, and together, we walked down the aisle.

The Price

I'd been waiting to reach here for a very long time, and finally, I've arrived.

I wasn't just waiting. I worked hard, tirelessly, day and night. Despite several failures, I didn't give up. Although everyone around me doubted it, I didn't stop. Not to mention the countless sacrifices I'd made, the myriad things I'd lost, just to reach this place. My commitment, dedication, and sincerity finally paid off.

I must say, it wasn't easy. Tsk! I didn't regret the sacrifices and losses I suffered. Working my way to get here, I knew I could have it all once I reached this place. After all, that's what we were taught from a young age, right? Many before me had reached this place the same way. Getting here without sacrifice and loss isn't an option. I wasn't an exception or special to have it easy. I emulated, followed their ways, and that had eventually paid me. Now I know that I can have all that I had sacrificed. Even more than what I gave up.

All my life I'd dreamt of this place, and now, finally, I've arrived.

But what is this place? It looked utterly alien, certainly not what I'd expected. I don't know how to explain it. A pervasive chill bit at my skin, a suffocating darkness pressed in, and an unnatural silence swallowed even my own breath. It seemed a realm beyond time, a

frozen eternity. Is this all there is? It was as if time itself had elapsed. A strange, bitter sadness, like a cold tendril, began to crawl inside my mind, even as I acknowledged my achievement. I looked around, noticing the faint footprints, faded flagpoles, and obscure marks left by those who had arrived before me. But there was no one. Not a single soul.

"Hello! Is there someone around?" I shouted, the sound thin and desperate. My own voice echoed back through the vast silence, swallowed completely. I thought this was the place where I would find everyone who took this journey ahead of me. This place looked like a thousand skies of night with no stars, a cosmic void.

Time passed, minutes stretching into hours, and still no soul around. The cold grew colder, a bone-deep ache, and the dark grew only darker, heavier.

As I sat in that lonely, dark place, memories from the past flashed like dying embers.

"You've gone too far away from us," my mom's voice echoed in my ears with a nostalgic tone, a whisper from across continents, while my days were spent on flights, endlessly traveling.

"You missed all the fun, man!" remarked my best friend, smiling at me from by the bonfire with other friends, while my nights were spent in business dinners with strangers, small talk, and fake smiles.

We shared a kiss. She gently leaned over me. I wrapped my arm around her and we continued our walk on the seashore towards the sunset. The winds of time blew, and as I turned to look at her, she faded with the wind. A life that could have been lived with her disappeared like a bubble, while my precious time was spent chasing my dream.

Like a pack of cards that fell like dominoes, all the bets came down.

Now, I have money, but I don't have best friends. I have time, but my mom isn't alive anymore. I have the rest of my life ahead of me, but there's nobody to share it with.

I reached here first. I reached fast. But there's nobody left to celebrate with.

All these years, nobody told me it would be lonely out here. Nobody told me there are no second chances in life.

Nobody told me that success without life is cold, dark, and loneliness. It was too late when I realized that life cannot be the price to pay for success.

From a Marriage to Date

I am not a sociable, friendly person. I am the guy who wants to be left alone.

Generally! Not always.

Generally, I don't wish good morning to strangers passing on the pavement, nor do I engage in small talk with neighbors or offer a welcoming smile to anyone I meet. In any public place, I prefer to sit in a quiet corner, put on my music, and do my own thing. I keep to myself. I am absolutely comfortable this way. This is just me.

On a random day, I was sitting at the airport lounge, in a quiet corner with my music on, peering through my laptop screen, working on a presentation due for submission. I had two hours until my flight to Dubai, so I decided to make the best use of my waiting time by choosing one of the most boring tasks: a presentation!

It was a routine job of copy-pasting what I had already done from one screen to another, adding some beautiful backgrounds and design screens.

I hate it.

No! I love my job.

But I hate presentations. It's like sales.

I hate sales. I suck at it. That's one of the reasons to hate. Probably, it should be because of my nature. The other reasons are irrelevant at this point.

The newly inaugurated Airport Terminal at the International Airport wasn't fully functional. The lounge on the third level was still under renovation. The airport authorities managed to squeeze a corner near Gate 8, putting up a 10-foot-high gypsum wall wrapped with a flashy sign on the outside that read, "We are working to serve you better. We will be back soon." It was a temporary arrangement to keep the business running.

The so-called airport lounge, which basically served fresh filter coffee and food with comfortable chairs and a few tables to work, was unusually full.

The brewing smell of fresh South Indian filter coffee and hot, steaming, authentic breakfast native to my hometown took me back to nostalgic days from the past.

How often do I get a chance to taste this native-style, freshly brewed filter coffee?

Almost never.

So, I decided to soak in the nostalgic feeling and treat my insatiable palate to my native-style filter coffee. The aroma of the decoction, the milk poured to the brim and topped with froth. Hmm! It made me feel at home. The coffee served in a 'Davara' (bronze cup-saucer) and tumbler made the experience more authentic.

The cup-saucer was colloquially called 'Davara.'

The literal English translation is 'a gated channel.' I don't know if this was a coincidence.

I am not sure either if 'Davara' was an original Indian word or one of those things that was taken from English and we made it our own, the Desi way.

Enough of etymology. Back to the coffee in front of me.

I picked up the coffee, a sachet of sugar, a stirrer, and settled back in my seat.

I consider myself a minimalist. Not in this monologue.

But in certain ways. I wouldn't waste things. I emptied half of the sachet into my coffee and safely secured the balance sugar sachet on the table. It was intended to be replaced at the same sugar counter or left on the table for someone else to use. I stirred the coffee gently, careful not to disturb the froth. I inhaled the hot aroma of coffee and took the first sip. Nativity in every bit of taste. I closed my eyes to savor the moment and enjoy the experience. It never gets old.

I am not a big fan of wines. I never understood the whole drama of swirling, inhaling, sipping, sprawling. I had always thought there should be something like this for coffee.

Why should only wine have all those dramas? Coffee deserves it too. Perhaps a grand one.

In my view, there should be an exclusive club or organization for coffee tasting. Not sure if there is one already.

To get every bit of the native styled filter coffee, I let it linger in my mouth for a second or two before gently swallowing it.

Who even said only wine has to be savored in the mouth?

I closed my eyes and stayed with the experience, savoring the taste and the feeling.

That's when I heard her voice.

"Are you going to use it?" she asked, pointing at the half-used sugar sachet. I knew the sweet voice. I recognized it. It was indeed a familiar one. I opened my eyes and gave a courtesy smile. A warmth bloomed in my chest, an involuntary smile tugging at my lips the moment my ears picked up her voice.

I nodded and replied, "It's all yours!"

She replied, "Thanks," and picked up the sachet and sat on the empty chair next to me.

I glanced at her briefly. She stood out among the crowd, making all heads turn. Like a blossomed flower in the barren desert. My morning suddenly changed. Weather, location, terrain, and mood.

Everything changed at the same time.

Usually, I am the guy who would call such expressions like Shakespeare and William Wordsworth a cliché. Not today.

I looked at her again.

A sigh escaped my lips.

I couldn't get enough of her beauty with just one look. Not with the second one either.

My eyes helplessly kept going back to the beautiful sight of her face again and again and again.

However much I tried, mere glances couldn't do any justice.

Every gesture, every bit of her smile, every blink of her eyelids, every waving movement of her hair, every dangling rhythm of her earrings, every furrow of her brows. I didn't want to miss even a bit of it.

Frozen to the sight of her was the only way I could capture it all. I wanted to etch this sight in my memory and store it for eternity.

Wow! Those alluring eyes that flashed like lightning every time she blinked. The sleek eyeliners that framed those magnetic eyes. The eyebrows that went up and down like gentle waves every time her eyes showed an expression.

Fingers that stroked like an artist as she slid a strand of hair behind her earlobe.

Cheeks that turned strawberry pink every time she gave away a quarter smile.

Lips!!!! (a deep sigh). The sheer thought of them made my breath catch.

Lips that turned shiny as she ran her tongue over them. The jawlines that stretched distinctly from her long neck, which was embraced by a thin silver chain that subtly complemented her beauty.

What a shame!

Why do words always fall short to explain what eyes saw?

What a shame!

My mind was craving perfect words in all languages to describe her beauty. My heart didn't care about the words. It melted and swam in that ecstatic experience.

Ineffable. That's all I can say. No words in any language could describe her beauty.

Yes! Her beauty was ineffable.

Even the greatest poets of the world would concede when it came to describing her beauty.

My heart beat lost its rhythm.

"Enchanting," I said in a mild tone. She looked at me quizzically, with her brows slightly raised. A faint blush crept onto her cheeks, a subtle shift in her expression that spoke volumes.

"You look enchanting!" I clarified.

She smiled and replied, "Thanks," slightly blushing.

The mehendi on her hands were still fresh. An array of bangles covered her hand from wrist to elbow. They moved back and forth in sync, as if rhyming with her smile.

She smelled fresh. She looked refreshing. Her hair was wet. It was pouring outside cats and dogs. She was feeling cold. It was quite evident from the goosebumps on her hand. She emptied the sugar in her coffee and poured the coffee back and forth between the tumbler and the cup-saucer (Davara).

She looked at me, smiled, and said, "I wanted to get the froth. But I can't let it get cold."

"It is a crime to have this coffee without the froth," I replied with a smile.

She took the first sip and closed her eyes, soothing her palate, running her tongue over her lips to lick the froth. "Nothing beats the taste of our native coffee," she said.

If you are wondering how this comfortably boring lonely guy who preferred to be left alone is enamored by her presence.

This was not our first meeting. I met her a couple of days ago at my friend's wedding and had already spent considerable time with her. The bride was my friend, and she was the groom's sister.

Weddings, you see, have a way of fostering unexpected chemistry, with unplanned flirtatious puns exchanged among the singles present.

I enjoyed every moment of the sass and banter we shared during the Mehendi, the dances we paired during the sangeeth. The repartee we exchanged and the repertoire of tricks I pulled out during the wedding. Of course! All of it was to make a good impression on her.

The old Tom Sawyer way.

No! I did not walk on the rope.

She looked at the boarding pass stacked between the pages in my passport and asked, "Dubai?"

I said, "Si."

I shut down my laptop and asked her, "E tu?"

"Español?" she furrowed her brow, and "Muy Bien," she remarked with a smile.

"Londres," she replied. I looked at her quizzically. I had no idea what she said. Two days of Spanish training on the Duolingo App didn't teach me enough Spanish to get all the city names. She looked at me for a second, chuckled mildly, and said, "Let's stick to English." I nodded with a short smile.

She looked at me and replied, "London." I replied back with a nod.

I am the last person to learn a new language. Two days of Spanish course couldn't salvage much.

Over the past couple of days, we shared a lot of conversations. Most of which were non-verbal. We shared quite a lot of conversation without exchanging words. A conversation only our eyes could decipher the meaning of. With every smile, every look, I was learning a different language of encryption beyond the codes that I ran in my computer.

I am not a man of great words. I don't know what this feeling was.

But this was nice! It was pleasant! It was refreshing.

Over the past two days, my eyes searched for her every time they blinked. Definitely, I was smitten. Drawn hopelessly to her beautiful magnetic eyes. I didn't spare any chance to lay my eyes on her. Not in a creepy way. But in a nice way, of course.

She liked me. I was certain.

Men, since ages, have been drawn to look at women they like. And let's admit, don't women appreciate such attention, especially from a guy they like? Quite frankly, women also observe men they are drawn to, often more subtly, a skill honed by generations of societal norms.

Despite all her effort to keep it subtle, I noticed her noticing me. I lost count of the times she slid her hair behind her earlobe to glance at me. The accidental glances, the spontaneous smiles, her secret gazes

followed by shyness when I noticed her watching me, and many more moments of accidentally walking into each other. It was new. It brought a smile to my face many times for no reason. I liked it.

Right now. It's just us.

Finally, it was our moment to talk. But there was an awkward silence. I had to start with small talk. No doubt.

But the starter couldn't be like meeting a total stranger. Our eyes had gone past that stage long ago. I felt like I had known her for a long time. My other senses almost wanted to kiss her.

But! I had no clue how she felt about me. At the same time, the other side of me was almost certain that she liked me.

This sucks. The silence stretched.

I had to start with small talk. I am not an expert in reading women. But I knew we had a vibe. I knew she liked me. So, I decided to flirt with her. Obviously! Shamelessly!

She slurped the coffee and clicked her tongue with a slight nod.

"Did you miss me?" I asked with a smirk. She stopped slurping the coffee, her eyebrows arched one more time, eyes popped brightly, and looked at me quizzically. A flicker of surprise, then a knowing twinkle in her eyes.

I knew that one came out too cheeky.

Remember! I hate presentations and I suck at sales

I winked and asked, "Is that what the coffee is asking you?" and smiled mildly.

She smiled, shied a bit, nodded gently, and replied, "Can't get enough of you." I looked at her quizzically. Surprised, in fact. She smiled and continued, "That was my reply to the coffee," and slurped once again.

Not bad! I thought to myself. At least she didn't find me to be cheeky.

She clicked her tongue again and said, "Every ingredient was the same out there in London. But nothing compares to the one we have here."

"Probably the flavor of this City," I replied.

She smiled with a gentle nod, "Probably!"

"Our Indian marriages are really something," I said with a smile. She looked at me quizzically.

"I meant in a good way," I clarified. "These past few days."

She nodded and took another sip and ran her tongue over her lips to taste the flavor.

"You must be pretty close to my sister-in-law," she remarked.

I nodded and replied, "Practically, like a brother."

"Well! I must admit. It's a shame I missed my chance to meet you when I had visited London during my business trip," I said.

She smiled gently and replied in a low voice, "You are not too late after all."

Her smile was... something! Is this how William Wordsworth felt when he described daffodils "ten thousands at a glance."

"Point well noted!" I replied with a smile.

My friend had already spoken about setting us both on a date during my London visit. I'm sure she must have told her everything about me. I knew it, because she gave a glorious recommendation about her to me. A shame I hadn't pushed to meet her sooner, to connect with this captivating woman before today.

She scoffed and said, "I'm surprised!" I looked at her quizzically.

"There was no special someone yet?" she asked.

I nodded in denial and smirked and replied, "Maybe, not as surprised as I was when I realized that you too are single."

"Definitely, the Universe is saving you for someone way too special," I said.

This, of course, was only to get a hint about her expectations in a man.

She smiled and replied, "I don't know about that. I would be happy to find someone who is just special for me and me alone," she smiled. "He need not be special for everyone else," she remarked, adding, "He could be any normal guy."

A smile bloomed on my face. My facial nerves relaxed. I am not an Alpha. More a Sigma. I am certainly not the type who makes grand gestures and creates fleeting moments to sweep her off her feet. Her reply was comforting. I knew I had a chance.

There was a brief silence. Did she ask me if I am taken? Yes, she did.

Did she give away that she is interested in me? Yes! she did.

What are you waiting for?

I noticed the boarding pass stacked on the table along with her phone and passport. It was for Dubai.

"Aren't you traveling to London?" I asked, looking at her boarding pass.

"I have a stopover at Dubai," she replied.

"It's quite a punishment to travel alone," she added.

"My London flight from Dubai is at night," she said. "I am going to be bored to death at the airport."

"Well! At least, you don't have to worry about that till you reach Dubai," I replied.

"Let's see about that," she replied with a smile.

Hmm! Looked like the game is on.

I have four hours to convince her to break her journey in Dubai.

"Have you been to Dubai?" I asked.

She nodded in denial. "I have been meaning to visit Dubai for a very long time," she clicked her tongue and said, "I couldn't make time for it."

"Never postpone life," I replied. Quite frankly! I should be the last guy on the face of the earth to say that. I always plan things ahead.

I hate surprises.

Spontaneous is not me.

But with her, I was different.

Everything around me was different.

I never knew that I had a spontaneous side in me. I guess that's how it is. When you meet that someone special. Is it?

"How about a spontaneous trip?" I asked.

"Surprise yourself," I said in an enthusiastic tone.

She raised her eyebrows, meaning, "Are you serious?"

I nodded, meaning Yes, and said, "I will be your travel buddy."

"A spontaneous trip to surprise myself," "with you?" she asked.

I clicked my tongue, "Why not?"

She did not reply immediately. It was a long pause.

"Don't overthink it. Overthinking leads to no action," I replied with a chuckle.

"Hmm!" she remarked. "Sounds cool! Like a movie."

"But! This is not a movie. I don't handle surprises well. Spontaneous is not me," she replied.

For a moment, I heard an echo of my own voice through her lips. But today was not the time to be the regular me. And I didn't want her to be her usual.

I leaned forward in my seat and remarked, "Break the routine. Reinvent yourself."

"Huhhh!" she scoffed.

"I hardly knew you. And you already expect me to roam around with you in an unknown city?" she asked.

"Give me a valid reason why I should trust you?" she asked, retaining the smile all through.

I read somewhere, women always like to play tough and men would always play tease.

"You are right! We are practically strangers, and that is precisely what I wanted to change," I replied.

"I want to invite you into my world and get to know the real you."

"I am asking you out on a trip. This is not merely just a suggestion," I remarked firmly.

She looked at me quizzically.

"I was just informed that I was not late after all, I don't want to be late any further," I replied with raillery.

She blushed mildly and turned away, trying to contain her reaction. It was pretty. She looked pretty when she smiled. I knew she liked it.

She turned back towards me but did not reply.

"A man has got to try, no matter what," I said. She smiled. She didn't say Yes. But she didn't say No either.

She occasionally glanced at me between the coffee cups, lips, and conversations. We exchanged smiles for no reason. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

I was not sure if there was any other woman more beautiful than her at that moment. Frankly, I didn't want to know, even if there was one. I was oblivious to everyone else in the lounge.

This was not me. Never have I ever been like this. This was new to me. I was a new me.

Time flew.

The PA system broadcasted the final boarding call for our flight. We picked up our bags and rushed to the gates.

We checked in at the gates and boarded the flight. As we walked down the aisle, I noticed that she was three rows ahead of mine. But it seemed a world apart. I

didn't want this distance. I didn't want our conversation to end abruptly.

My reptilian brain prompted me that *She didn't say Yes. But she didn't say No either.*

As she reached her seat, without waiting further, I requested the guy next to her to swap seats with me. He wasn't happy at first. But then when he looked at the way she was watching me, he understood the unspoken bro code. He stood and walked away. She smiled and thanked him.

I stowed our hand baggage in the overhead cabin, and we settled in our seats. She sighed in relief. This was the first time I sat close to her. Arms tucked together, sharing the same armrest. She smelled fresh, like a lavender spring breeze. Her hand felt softer than it looked. Honestly! For the first time, I liked the economy class seats on the flight.

She nudged me slightly and said, "Thanks."

"Where else would I be on this plane?" I remarked.

She looked at me, surprised, with a tinge of shyness.

"Don't you think it's a bit too much?" she asked.

"Cliché? Cringe?" I remarked. She smiled in reply that conveyed a bit of both. But above all, a strong affirmation of liking.

I smiled and replied, "I am simply trying my chances to convince you to break your trip in Dubai." She looked at me with a long smile.

"You have got four hours for yourself now," she said. "But it is not going to be easy," she smiled and said, "You have to bring your A-game."

"It will happen," I replied in a casual, mild tone.

"We will see about that," she replied in the same tone. "You sound very confident."

"I feel it in my gut," I replied.

"What does it say?" she asked.

I said, "This stranger from Dubai is going to take you out on a date."

She is right. I have got to bring my A-game. Words can get the attention. Maybe a good first impression. But it's not enough to convince her. It's not like I'm meeting her for the first time. But it was not like I knew her all that well.

As the cabin crew demonstrated the safety instructions, I pulled out my phone to turn it off. I saw a message from my friend asking for some pictures that I had taken during her wedding. I browsed through the gallery and sent a few.

"My friend couldn't wait to see the pictures that I took during the wedding," I said. I forgot to switch off the phone. Neither did I turn on the airplane mode.

In less than a minute, her phone dinged. She pulled out her phone and checked the message, smiled, and flipped the screen, showing me the same picture that I sent to my friend.

"My sister-in-law is quite active in our family group," she remarked with a smile.

"You have no idea," I replied with a smile.

The flight took off and stabilized in mid-air.

"The pictures have come out really well," she remarked.

"Thanks," I replied.

I asked her, "Do you want to see some of the pictures from the wedding?" This wasn't meant to flaunt my skill, but genuinely to share.

She nodded *Yes*.

I gave her my phone. She scrolled through the pictures.

"Did you take these?" she asked pointing at some of the pictures that I had managed to click with light exposures.

I nodded *Yes*.

"These pictures look pro-level," she complimented.

"Thanks," I replied and said, "It's one of my favorite hobbies."

She scrolled through all of them, and we both shared some stories for most of the pictures that I clicked. She once again complimented my skill in photography.

"Have you ever considered taking it up as a profession?" she asked.

"I would have been a travel photographer," I said, "if I was not this computer guy."

"Travel photography!" she remarked.

"What stopped you from becoming one?" she asked.

"You've got skills," she remarked.

"I hate sales," I replied. "I suck at it." She looked at me quizzically.

"A lot of self-profiling, branding, marketing, and advertising has to be done if one has to make some money in this field," I said.

"I didn't even have a social media account," I replied.

"So I decided to keep it as my hobby."

She nodded and replied, "Makes sense. In the end, what makes sense to your heart should make sense to your mind and wallet as well."

"Absolutely!" I replied.

"Do you have anything else I can see?" she asked.

I showed her an entire album of pictures that I had clicked during my travels around the world. She was a good traveler herself. She acknowledged having visited some of the places I had shot with my camera.

She also shared some stories from her travel to those places. We laughed at the funny things we did in those places.

Her laughter rippled through my ears, a melody I instantly wanted to memorize. It wasn't just a sound; it was a feeling, infectious, making me want to join in, to bottle that pure, unadulterated joy. My eyes didn't want to leave the sight. My mind wanted to capture her laughter like a Picasso painting.

"I love traveling," she said. "It is therapeutic," she added.

"Rejuvenating," I added.

"Words flow through me during my travels. My mind gets lighter."

"True," I said. "Innovative ideas flow fresh."

"I feel life is not complete without it," she said.

"It opens up our minds to new things. New places bring new possibilities," I added.

"During travel, you can be whoever you want to be," she said. "You don't have to stick to the norms of your social and official circle."

"You can be authentically you," I remarked. "More so, unapologetically you."

"No need for makeup. No need to do the hair."

"You are not on a clock. You are in your own zone."

"You can sing on the road, dance in the street, stroll a whole day in the market."

"You can lie down on the beach for hours during the day or camp in the woods."

"Untied hair, tanned skin, sweaty thin linen wear, grains of sand from head to toe, the ringing bells of seagulls, the fresh morning sunrise, warm sunny days," she said.

"Days away from office emails, laptops, and mobiles. No Italian suits and office furniture."

"Sitting in a shack along the beach and sipping Pina Coladas and Margaritas, life can be different," I said.

"Enter a roadhouse and wait tables," she said.

"Or get behind the counter and manage the bar," I replied.

"Become the person you authentically want to be," I said with a hint of a smile.

She looked at me quizzically.

"You have written it so well in your blog," I said. "Not many of us are gifted to express our hearts through words. But you have got that gift."

She blushed a little and said, "Thanks!"

"Truly!" "Your words brought out the authentic experiences of travel," I said.

"No offense to travel and tour operators and commercial establishments," I said, "but an authentic experience comes only when you travel like a local and live amongst them."

"True!" she said. "I try to do home stays with the locals. If you want to understand the local culture and history, you need to live among them and experience life through their eyes."

"You travel not to escape life," I said.

"You travel to explore life," she completed and continued, "I love that quote."

"Cook food with the locals," she said.

"Propose a toast with the host family," I replied.

"Talk all night long about the stories of our lives," she added.

"And doze off for a couple of hours before the first ray of the sun," I continued.

"A spontaneous adventurous trip," she said.

"To the mountains of Caucasus," I said.

"Aimlessly stroll on the narrow streets paved with cobblestones in a mid-town in Europe," she said.

"Explore the expansive islands and the beauty of the Caribbean and Mediterranean," I said.

"Explore the histories preserved in the Museums of Egypt," she said.

"Experience the exquisite taste of local street food in the Far East," I said.

"Haggle in the local Friday markets," she said.

"Sing and play with the local bands," I said.

"Crash a random wedding," she said, giggling.

I looked at her quizzically.

"Santorini," she replied.

"Or help an eloping bride," I replied.

"Seriously?" she asked. I nodded and replied, "In a small town in the south of France."

"Trek the valleys and mountains in the day," I said.

"Do all the adrenaline-pumping, high-octane adventures during the day," she said.

"And hit a local bar, drink and dance in the evening," we both said simultaneously.

As we rhythmically stacked our travel experiences one by one, without another thought, I spontaneously said, "Your next trip is with me."

"I would love that," she replied without thinking a bit.

Our eyes met in close proximity. I was able to feel her breath on my chin. Her forehead was right at the reach of my lips. My heart paced faster and faster. My eyes looked at her left eye, then her right eye, and finally her lips. I gently clasped her hand.

Ahhhh! The touch. What can I say?

Kiss! Don't think about it. It will happen when it is necessary, remarked my mind.

My mind took a back seat, and my lips were getting ready to kiss her as if they knew. As I leaned forward to kiss her, the flight jerked into a mild turbulence. The world tilted, the spell shattered. Our hands unclasped suddenly, pulled apart by the abrupt shift, and we recoiled, eyes wide, a silent apology passing between us as the moment evaporated.

She gently slid her hair behind her earlobe and leaned back on her seat. Her hair. I could lose myself in between those curls and waves. My heart began to slow down.

There was a brief moment of silence. This flight turned out to be one of the most memorable trips. I couldn't wait for another vacation and plan a trip with her. I wanted to ask her to go on a trip with me today itself. Time flew faster. The countdown to the destination seemed to be approaching faster than it was supposed to be. I hated that. I wanted this flight to continue for some more time.

"So, you are the guy who likes simple pleasures of life," she asked. I nodded.

"And you are the girl who wants to keep trips authentic?" I asked.

"Always," she replied.

She returned to scrolling through the pictures I took during the wedding. They were all 'say cheese' moments. Everyone posed perfectly for the camera.

"I had some candid moments too," I said. "They are saved in a separate folder." I took the phone from her, navigated to the folder, and opened it.

"Here you go," I gave the phone back to her and said, "Some candid moments. Some funny moments."

"Authentic moments," I looked at her and added.

"I love authentic expressions caught on camera forever," she replied.

As she scrolled through some pictures, we shared the stories behind the candid moments and laughed over some of the funny ones. The laughter brought us closer once again. In those moments, she burst out laughing and casually rested her forehead on my arm.

Touch! What can I say!

My camera lens had captured a couple of her pictures too. She looked at them and zoomed in to look at her picture.

I looked at her and said, "I didn't add any filters or AI effects. You, truly are beautiful!"

"Only, you will say," she replied.

"Of course! I can say," I replied.

"Probably, nobody else has seen you through my eyes," I replied.

There were a couple of pictures where she was making faces.

She pointed out one of the pictures and asked, "Are these authentic or funny moments?"

"They were special ones," I replied. She blushed lightly.

"I am sorry. When my eyes and camera lens spot a beautiful face, they can't resist."

"Does this line always work on girls?" she asked, smiling.

"I don't know," I replied with a smile and said, "You tell me?" She giggled and blushed lightly.

"I will assume that it is working," I replied with a smile.

"They are good," she said. I looked at her, surprised. "I meant the pictures," she clarified and smiled. I nodded gently and smiled.

"Can you forward me these pictures? I will collage and use them as my DP."

She continued scrolling the rest of the folder. Among the pictures, there was one particular picture in which I had caught the bride and groom looking into each other's eyes.

"How did you get this?" she asked, jumping off her seat. "They were so perfect."

"I guess I was lucky," I replied.

"They were so full of love," she said.

Our conversation was interrupted by the Air Hostess who served us the mid-morning juices.

"To the sweetest couple," she said, raising a toast. Our glasses clanged, and we sipped the drink slowly.

After a brief pause, she said, "They are cute together." She looked at me and said, "My brother and your friend."

She continued, "I never thought my brother would become marriage material. He always used to say, 'I am not wired for this,'" she rolled her eyes and remarked, "Typical cliché dialogue."

"The same goes for her too," I replied with a smile. "She used to be a bro among boys." I clicked my tongue and said, "But she looked more a woman than I had ever known her."

"In fact! A beautiful one," I remarked.

She nodded in agreement and replied, "She was gorgeous."

"I guess the real beauty comes out when you find the right one. Just like a flower blossoms during a Spring morning, like a rainbow in the sky right after a rain," she added. I couldn't express it so exquisitely like she did. But I couldn't agree with her more.

"Seriously!" she reiterated. "Who would have guessed these two would end up together," "of all people on the face of the earth," she said.

"I am glad they found each other," I replied.

"In the end, they became a perfect amalgamation of flavors," she said.

"Amalgamation of flavors!" I repeated and mildly scoffed.

She looked at me quizzically and asked, "Why? Anything wrong in that?"

"No!" I said and smiled lightly, "You put it so right. It was apt. This was the first time I heard someone expressing it this way."

"Not overrated like soulmates or stereotypical like 'made for each other.'"

"I think it was perfect, just like they both are," I said.

She laughed and said, "You are right. I wouldn't go with 'made for each other.' Like we are some cogs in the machinery, made to fit into something?"

She looked at me and said, "I am made for myself," and winked at me with a sharp smile. There was pride in her voice, and it sounded so nice.

"We all are. Aren't we?" I replied in a low voice.

"Absolutely," she replied.

"I don't buy into the concept of soulmate either," I said.

"I guess it's one of the overused and overrated terms," she replied.

"Became a cinema cliché," I said.

"Way too much," she replied.

"We all are made for ourselves. Maybe along the way, we find someone with whom we can share a part of this life," I said.

"There is some sort of beauty in sharing," she replied.

"And it always brings back more," I added. She nodded in agreement.

"Just like Khalil Gibran said," she remarked.

I looked at her and smiled as if I effortlessly guessed the lines.

And I quoted, "Love one another but make it not a bond of love."

She nodded with a long smile. There was a slight dash of surprise and a tinge of excitement.

"Sing and dance together and be joyous but let each one of you be alone," she said.

I nodded with a smile and replied, "Absolutely."

"Stand together and yet not near together," I said.

"For the pillars of the temple stand apart," she completed the poetry.

And there was a brief silence. Far beyond the conversation where our words rhymed together like a musical note, in the moments of silence our thoughts synched, and our hearts mingled, just like the lovers from Khalil Gibran's poetry.

Kiss! It will happen when it should.

Once again, our conversation was interrupted by the air hostess. What can I say? A perfect moment to interrupt. The food trolley rolled down the aisle, and the air hostess pushed the brake lever and stopped it.

Great! It's the food. The only good thing that happens after a sumptuous meal is sleep. The very thought put me off.

She looked at the air hostess and said, "I will take only an orange juice."

Thank God. A glimpse of smile and happiness in me. "I will go with the same. No breakfast for me too," I said.

Air hostess served us with the orange juices and left us to continue our conversation.

But I guess the moment was lost even before it could build up. And for some strange reason, the song 'Suzana' replayed in my mind. She started sipping the juice and looked outside and all over. She drained the juice quickly and said, "Excuse me! I will use the lavatory," she said and stood up and went to the toilet.

"Damn!" I groaned mildly. She returned in a few minutes. My eyesight was fixated on her all the way through the aisle till she reached our seat. She noticed me. While she walked down the aisle, we exchanged glances, followed by a smile. I felt the difference. Not in the way I felt, but also the way she looked at me. I

don't know how to express it in words. But I was feeling something like,

Man! Why are you so far away from me?

She gently slithered into her seat and settled back.

She gulped the bottle of water and drained it quickly. She looked outside, and we were already across the Arabian Sea into the desert land. The high desert dunes, black limestone mountain ranges that bordered the coastal seashore. It was one spectacular view.

While I sat right next to her and thought to myself, I guess the moment is over. She flipped the magazine and shoved it back in the pouch. The air hostess came back to collect the empty tray. We handed the empty cups to her and exchanged glances and smiles.

After a brief moment of silence, I calmly said, "Against all odds."

"Sorry!" she exclaimed and looked at me quizzically.

"Looks like I am up against all odds," I replied. "For some strange reason my mind is repeatedly singing Suzanna," I smiled. "The turbulence, the crew interrupting the conversation, and even Khalil Gibran is not helping me here."

She burst out in laughter. After a few moments, we remained silent. Something told me she was ready to start the conversation from where we left.

She straightened her voice and said, "Soulmates are overrated."

I nodded and replied, "Made for each other is definitely a no-go." She nodded firmly.

"Then how do you define it?" she asked.

"I like the amalgamation of flavors," I replied. She smiled. "It sounds fresh, tasty, smells good, brings all colors to visual perception."

"Where does this lead to?" she asked.

"Eventually finding the right one," I replied.

She remarked, "The one?"

"Yes!" "The one whose arrival in our lives makes us feel complete," I replied.

"How do you feel about it?" I asked.

"The moments that were spent with the one, and the other moments that we miss them, both of which eventually make us realize the one," she replied.

She paused for a moment there, as if she was transporting herself to a world of poetry. She closed her eyes, smiled a bit, and continued.

"Aren't we all looking for the one?"

"The one whose image lingers in our thoughts and feelings,

the one who we miss in our sleep and miss even more when awake,

the one who we expect to walk in when the doorbell rings,

the one who our hands search when we roll over in the bed,

the one whose chest we want to sleep in and,

the one whom we wish to see when we wake up

the one with whom we would like to share our morning coffee,

the one who will be the answer to the missing block of our puzzled life,

the one who can make a bad day good and a good day better."

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes, turned towards me, and said,

"Aren't we all looking for that one?"

I listened to her and nodded mildly. After a brief glance, I exhaled, looked down, and closed my eyes and smiled.

She gently nudged and asked, "What?"

I turned towards her, opened my eyes, and said, "Even a cold heart will melt and fall in love. How could anyone resist when you put it this way?"

"Love is the invisible child impregnated in the hearts of two," she said.

After a brief pause, she sighed and said, "As much as love brings happiness, it is equally scary."

"Pure love is the demolition of ego, the end of individuality; love makes us vulnerable," she said.

She scoffed and replied, "Look at the irony of love. Vulnerability is seen as weakness," she said.

"Love is not weakness," I replied.

"Exactly!" she remarked. "Only the strong can love. You have to be strong enough to let yourself become vulnerable to the other person."

"Very true," I remarked.

"You cannot half-heartedly love someone. You have to go all in and give everything you've got," I said.

"At the same time, maintaining individuality in an egoless way is equally important," I said.

"Finding the one and maintaining the space is a fine line to tread. Isn't it?" she asked.

"That's the spice of a relationship," I replied.

"That's the scariest part too," she said.

"Attachment is like a magnet," I remarked. "It repels as much as it attracts."

"Relationships are not easy," I said. "When emotions are involved, we get closely attached to the person," I said. She nodded.

"Their presence, their absence, their talk, their silence, everything affects us," she said.

"True!" I said.

"Their sadness, their happiness, their pain, their gains," "everything becomes a thing of both," she said.

"Hmm!" I sighed. "Like I already said, relationships are not easy," I said.

"But, isn't that what a relationship is all about?" I asked.

"We love, we fight, we care, we cross lines, we shout, we cry," I said, looking into her eyes. "But eventually, we find our way back to them."

"We realize that our fight is not with them, but for them."

"Our anger is not about them, but it was for them."

"We cry not because of them, but for them."

"Eventually, we return to them. Not for them, not even for us, but for the love," I said.

She silently listened and nodded gently. After a moment, she looked away. We didn't share a word. It was as if we were pondering over the conversation. I couldn't believe that it all came from me. Did I say all these things? When have I ever thought about these things? Where have I heard of these things before?

But it was me. I spoke.

"We are all looking for the one with whom we can be ourselves both in best and worst form. And accept the other person as they are. And grow old together."

"Aren't we all looking for that one?" she asked, expecting a reply from me.

Our conversation was once again interrupted by the pilot, when he delivered the descending message through the PA system and asked everyone to fasten their seatbelts.

I did not reply right away. A silent battle waged within me. Part of me yearned to keep the profound connection of the past moments alive, to follow her poetic lead. The other part, the old, cautious me, was tethered to the reality. She waited for my reply and turned away, a subtle shift in her posture.

After a moment, I inhaled slowly, then forced a mild chuckle. I sighed heavily, "We have arrived in Dubai."

The flight landed on the tarmac with a heavy jerk, and our bodies jolted a bit as the flight phased on the runway before coming to a halt.

There was a shock followed by disappointment in her eyes. She turned straight and remained silent.

As the flight touched down, suddenly my mind rushed in with the realities of life from memory. I was physically and metaphorically transported back to reality. The flight taxied to the arrival gates, and all other passengers clambered around and got ready to

deboard. For some reason, we both remained seated as if we wanted to escape reality and remain in the flying wonderland. My heart was beating faster than ever. I silently unclipped my seatbelt, stood, and pulled our hand baggage from the overhead cabin and stood aside, allowing her to lead the way through the aisle.

In about one hundred feet outside the flight, we would part ways, and I wasn't sure if I would ever see her again. We didn't speak. There was a courtesy smile and a load of disappointment. We deboarded the flight and walked towards the baggage claim. These hundred feet distance seemed to be the longest walk of my life. We reached a junction where she had to turn right towards transit, and I needed to proceed left towards the arrival terminal.

She turned towards me and said, "I guess here we are," and forced a smile.

"I guess," I replied in a low voice followed by a smile. There was a moment of awkwardness when our hands danced between a handshake and a hug. She rolled her eyes, a hint of playful exasperation. I opened my arms, and she gladly came forward and hugged me. I could sense her heart beating faster than mine.

She kissed my cheek and tried to say, "Bye." But the voice wouldn't come out, catching in her throat. A tiny layer of teardrops wetted her retina, glistening. She looked into my eyes with a deep sense of longing and quickly turned away and started to walk.

Suddenly, I felt like waking up from a deep slumber. Every sight of her over the past few days and our conversation from this morning flashed through my mind in a fraction of second. I called, "Hey!" She turned back and looked at me, her eyes fighting to contain the tears, a silent question in their depths.

"I don't know if there is this 'one' born for me somewhere," I said.

I slowly proceeded to walk towards her.

"But I don't want to wake up for the rest of my life asking myself, were you the one for me."

"I don't know what future holds for me," I said. "I don't know what future holds for you. There are many things I don't know. But, one thing I know for sure, and I have never been so certain about anything else in my life," I said. "The way I feel about you. The way I feel about us. I don't know how to say it poetically like you did, but I will just say this."

"If life is anything like this past four hours of flight with you, I just don't want to carry this as a memory. I want it to be a living reality".

I came closer to her, held her chin and lifted it gently. Our eyes met. My heart skipped a beat. My mind disappeared. I was levitating within me. At that moment, her teary eyes turned happy. Her smile brought a mid-morning rainbow, and her face blossomed like a lavender spring breeze; she exuded the beauty of a thousand splendid things. The smile on

her face stretched her eyebrows, and her big black eyes shot an arrow that pierced right through my heart. I held her chin, went closer, and kissed her. The touch of her lips against mine sent shivers of chill down my throat. She leaned in, touched my cheek, and slowly ran her fingers through my hair and kissed me. I closed my eyes and fell into a blissful abyss.

After we shared a brief moment of kiss, I opened my eyes. The happiness in her eyes popped back. A sense of relief. A serene look in her sight. Her eyes glittered. She was glowing in happiness. My heart beat slowed down, and I felt light.

I smiled and said, "Would you go out on a date with me?"

She nodded with a smile. I took her bag in one hand and held her hand in the other, and as we both proceeded towards the arrival exit, a voice came from within, "Finally! You won the bet! Finally! You found the one."

Until Death Do Us Apart

"She is too young for this," a woman whispered.

"What can I say? Sometimes life can be cruel," another replied, her voice hushed.

"Or maybe, this *is* life," the first murmured, "it could happen to any of us."

The second nodded, a weary resignation in her tone.
"We see this all the time."

I opened my eyes to the stark white of a hospital room. Empty. But the voices, so real, seemed to vibrate just beside my ear. I was lying in the bed, an IV drip feeding saline into my right arm, each slow drop sending a shiver through my body. This wasn't right. This wasn't the expected aftermath of delivery, the sweaty warmth, the bone-deep exhaustion. This was completely opposite. I felt cold, a profound weakness that spoke of something irrevocably wrong. My abdomen, which should have been a landscape of throbbing recovery, felt unnervingly numb. My breasts, instead of heavy with the promise of milk, were slack, devoid of the familiar ache of lactation. Down below, where the raw aftermath of birth should have screamed, there was only silence. As a doctor, I knew. Something was critically, terrifyingly amiss.

"Hello!" I croaked, my voice a dry rasp. "Is anyone here?" No response.

Across the room, a man sat calmly. He hadn't been there a moment ago. He simply *was*. In his mid-fifties, with familiar warmth etched into his face, he folded the newspaper on his knee and placed it neatly on the table. He stood, a soft smile curving his lips. "Look who's awake finally?"

He looked familiar, yet I couldn't place him. He was a little over six feet tall, with long hair, strands of gray and black running through it like the waves of the Black Sea. He was dressed casually in a collared red T-shirt tucked into beige chinos, a slim brown belt cinching his waist. He had abs, not a stomach, and the definition in his arms and elbows spoke of an athletic build, remarkably young and fit for his age.

Wait! Why am I staring at a middle-aged guy when I just had a baby?

"Where is my son?" I demanded, the question cutting through the fog.

"Your son!" he exclaimed, a soft chuckle escaping him. "He is not here," he said, then added, almost an afterthought, "yet."

"Yet? What do you mean yet? Who are you?" I pressed, a flicker of panic.

He came closer, stopping beside my bed, his smile unwavering. The badge on his chest pocket simply read, "Taker."

"Are you... a new kind of caretaker appointed by the ward?" I asked, my voice thin, a thread of confusion weaving through my mind.

He shrugged, a subtle, almost imperceptible movement. "You may call me that," he chuckled again.

He felt familiar, yes, but the *why* of it eluded me.

The nurse bustled in, her uniform rustling softly. "Yes, ma'am! Do you feel any pain?"

"Where's the other nurse?" I asked, looking past her.

"Who?" she asked, her brow furrowing slightly. "I'm the only one assigned here, ma'am. You need to rest well. Your son will arrive soon. He's being flown in. We'll be right outside if you need anything. Please sleep and rest well," she murmured, gently tucking me in before leaving the room.

"Flown in?!" The words echoed, chilling me further. Did I hear that correctly? Why was my newborn baby being flown away? Where was he taken? How long had I been out? My mind began to race, stacking questions one after the other. My vision, still blurry, swam before me. This could only happen if I was under anesthesia. But why? What went wrong? I tried to rub my eyes with my left hand. I looked at my hand. It was pale, almost translucent beneath the IV drip, and felt...

disconnected, alien. I touched my face; the skin felt slack, unfamiliar, as if a stranger's features had been draped over my own. There was a waxy pallor, an absence of the vibrant blood circulation I'd seen in countless living patients. My hands were not firm anymore. They felt like they didn't belong to me. I felt literally uncomfortable in my own skin, like wearing a meticulously tailored suit that belonged to someone else, too big, too lifeless.

"Don't worry. It's still you," the guy's voice boomed, filled with amusement. "Your head is messing with you," he added, a ripple of silent laughter shaking his shoulders.

I looked at him, quizzically, but surprisingly, not shocked. "Stop messing around," I groaned, a weary sigh escaping me.

A knowing smirk played on his lips. "Okay, lady! You are on your deathbed. You are having a memory relapse from twenty-five years ago."

My eyes widened in genuine shock.

"Probably the time you delivered your son," he supplied, his gaze soft.

His words landed like an avalanche, burying me in confusion and anxiety. I struggled to grasp what he'd said, my mind a tangled mess. Then, slowly, as if roused from a deep sleep, my memory began to surface, pulling me back to the stark reality of the present.

Yes! He was right, a quiet voice affirmed from deep within. The pieces slotted together: my aged skin, the unsettling feeling of being a stranger in my own body. A profound silence fell, a moment of reluctant acceptance.

I met his gaze, a frown etched on my face. "And you must be one hell of a caretaker they appointed," I retorted, a dry laugh catching in my throat. "Sounds like me."

Still, no surprise truly registered. What was this hallucination?

"You are confused," the man stated, as if he had perfectly read the very thought forming in my mind.

I thought for a long, hard moment, then turned to him. "You are not my caretaker, are you?"

He shook his head gently in denial.

"So, you're telling me the truth!" I remarked, a strange clarity breaking through. He nodded.

"If I am on my deathbed," I mumbled, a mild groan of pain escaping me, "are you my angel of death?" I asked, a faint, morbid chuckle bubbling up.

"That's not an option," I immediately countered, clicking my tongue. "You must be a projection of my subconscious, messing with my head."

"There you go," he giggled slightly. "But I would have gone with 'angel of death'."

The pain was real, sharp. I was certainly not in any mood for jokes. My own mind was truly screwing with me.

"Don't try to analyze further," he replied, his voice unexpectedly gentle.

I glanced around again. No one else. Just him.

He chuckled, a low, resonant sound. "Whether you like it or not, you are stuck with me for now. You have no choice but to talk to me."

"Then why don't you just get it over with and end this stupid thing?" I asked, irritation lacing my voice.

"Well! Whether you like it or accept it, deep down, you are not ready to die," he replied, his voice firm. "Not yet!"

I looked at him, a flicker of understanding.

"Not before you see your son," he confirmed, his eyes holding mine.

I looked at him, confused once more. He nodded. "Don't be confused. I'm just a projection of your subconscious."

My rational mind fought desperately to get a grip on the situation, while my body continued to slip into a subconscious relapse, the edges of reality fraying.

"You are overthinking it. It won't help you," he said, moving closer. "Move over a bit. I will lie down next to you."

"Shut up! You may be a projection of my own subconscious, but I wouldn't allow a stranger to lie down next to me!" I retorted, a flash of my old self.

But he ignored me. As if absolutely sure that deep down, a part of me truly wanted him beside me, he casually removed his shoes and hopped onto the bed, squeezing his athletic body right next to mine. He gently lifted my head, slid his arm underneath, and rested my head on his right arm. Everything seemed impossibly real, although my rational mind kept repeating that I had gone insane. The touch of his hand, the warmth of his body, the scent of his skin—all of it felt profoundly, undeniably familiar. Contrary to what I thought, my mind relaxed, settling into a comfort I hadn't known in decades. A deep sense of safety descended. I knew this feeling. I had rested in these arms a million times. I had hugged and slept on this chest. This body was mine. He was mine.

Out of the pain and agony, a soft moan escaped me, and in my low, husky voice, I called out the name of the one true love of my life. My late husband.

He chuckled, a sound of gentle triumph. "Finally, you recognized me."

"Were you expecting someone else?" he teased, chuckling again.

"You look hot as always," I managed, a weak smile forming on my lips.

"I guess, according to your subconscious," he chuckled, tracing patterns on my arm.

"Hmm!" My body was feeling impossibly heavy, drifting. I still couldn't truly believe all that was happening to me.

"When I walked out of the room with the ultrasound image in my hand, I was on cloud nine. I couldn't wait to share this good news with you."

"But, what I got was the news of your demise on the field. I literally broke down inside out."

"Liar! You didn't shed a drop of tear," he countered, a gentle accusation in his voice.

"Wife of an Army Major. Was I not supposed to stay strong?" I asked, the old, ingrained military pride surfacing.

"Did you?" he challenged softly.

I shook my head, tears finally, gloriously, streaming down my face. "No. It was suffocating, like drowning eternally without an end. Every cell in my system, every part of my body, shredded into pieces. The pain was so unbearable. I wanted the pain to end. I wanted the suffering to end. I wanted everything to end," I confessed, sobbing openly now. I looked at him, rubbing my abdomen instinctively. "But! I couldn't."

After a brief pause, a raw accusation escaped me. "You left me." He didn't reply, just held me tighter. "You left us. You left your one half and took my other half with

you," I cried my heart out. I knew it was pent-up anger, years and years of it, finally bursting forth. A stupid part of me, the hopeful part, had waited all these years to see him again, just to pour this out.

"You promised me 'until death do us apart'," I choked out, tears blurring his beloved face for the first time.

"Honey! I'm sorry," he replied in a calm, soothing voice, kissing my forehead.

I looked at him, surprised by his apology.

"Please don't be," I replied, shaking my head. "Not your fault."

"I was an army doctor, and you were an Army Major. Death was always on the cards for us," I reminded him, and myself.

He held me a bit closer, his embrace a sanctuary.

"No amount of preparations can make you ready to face the eventuality," I whispered.

"Honey! I am truly sorry," he repeated, his voice thick with emotion.

"If there was any consolation," I exclaimed, managing a faint smile, "you didn't leave me high and dry. You gave me a multi-cellular protein in my uterus." I kissed him on his cheek, a gentle, grateful touch. "That small creature became my world."

"Thank you," I replied, a profound relief washing over me.

He hugged me tightly, his embrace soothing and comforting, helping me ease the pervasive pain that had clung to me for so long.

After a short pause, he chuckled softly. "I missed a major portion of your life."

"The life that we had dreamt of."

"Tell me about it," he prompted, his voice full of curiosity.

I looked at him quizzically, then sighed. "Well! Where can I even start?"

He smiled. "How about you start by telling me the first word you spoke to our son."

The question took me back to that day. As the doctor clipped the umbilical cord that had held our lives together for nine months and handed him into my arms for the first time, I looked at his tender face. He cooed softly to the warmth of my body, then gently opened his eyes and saw me. I kissed him softly and whispered, "It's just us now."

"The same first words you uttered when we met the first time in that army bunker," I recounted, a nostalgic smile.

"Amidst firing tanks, spraying bullets, and smoking grenades, when hopes died and I was counting my last moments, you came like a knight in a shining Army Uniform," I said, a soft giggle escaping me.

"Oh! You have to pull that one. Even after all these years?" he laughed, reaching out to tickle me playfully.

I knew he wasn't a big fan of the damsel-in-distress trope. I didn't remember the last time I'd laughed wholeheartedly like this. Slowly, the laughter faded, and the room settled into a comfortable silence.

He gently rubbed my arm. "Probably, you would have been the only mother who said to the fetus in her uterus, 'Congratulations! We are pregnant.'"

"Very true! It's only the mom and the fetus who go through the entire journey of pregnancy together."

I nodded in agreement, but only half-heartedly.

"Honey!" he remarked, a knowing glint in his eye. "I see a 'but' in your eyes. But I have to ask you. Ask you about an unresolved, deepest regret of your life."

I nodded, my gaze dropping. "I must confess. It was not easy to come to terms and accept that you were not there anymore. There were many nights I wet my pillow with tears. Your pillow was the only thing I confided all my feelings with," I said, my voice thick with fresh emotion, a soft sob escaping.

"You were not there. You left me," I remarked, the resentment still raw, continuing to sob.

He rubbed my shoulder, his touch a gentle anchor. "I'm sorry, Honey!"

"I was so angry and broken from inside during my first trimester. Not even a day went by without the thought of terminating my pregnancy. Every night and lonely moment was a struggle, a battle. I was desperately looking for any signs to keep going on."

"You don't have to lay it all out, Honey!" he said, his voice mild, understanding.

"I must confess to you," I insisted, looking up at him, my eyes pleading. "You must know. I am not a good person. Things that I had thought... I couldn't get rid of this guilt. I cannot share it with anyone else. My deepest regrets and my darkest secrets." My heart rate rose, and I was gasping for breath, the words tumbling out.

He looked at me gracefully, his eyes full of compassion. "But despite whatever you thought, you had done the right thing. Nobody can deny that. You had always been the best mother a son can get, despite all these things."

"The Army prepares every Jawan for self-sacrifice," I said, my voice strained. "I was ready to lay my life in the service of our country."

I looked at him, tears streaming down my face. "But can it ever prepare the ones who are left behind to grieve the dead? When the reality hits, the woman I am was angry at life. I realized that I could not be anyone other than a simple, selfish woman who wanted to have a simple family. A husband and a son. All for

myself. And I had it in my hand. When it was snatched away from me, I was angry at life like any widowed woman."

"Honey!" he murmured. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You fought a battle within you, all by yourself. You were the only one standing and holding the fort. It was not simple. You did not give up. You kept on going. And here you are at the victory gates," he said, his voice a balm. "Look at how our son has turned out."

"What about love?" I asked him, the words tasting like ash. I looked at him, my voice filled with a deep, persistent guilt. "Did I love him enough like any other mother? I didn't bring him up with love. I didn't hug him enough. I didn't kiss him enough. As a toddler, when he fell down, I couldn't rush to scoop him up. When he was sad, I didn't find the words to promise everything would be fine." I said, fresh tears rolling over my cheek.

He wiped the tears away gently. "No. You didn't do any of those things. But you did something great." "You were preparing him to be strong. You were preparing to be independent."

"My separation made you realize that you don't want our son to go through the pain of separation ever in his life."

"Don't try to talk me out of it," I stopped him, my voice firm. "Nothing you say will change the way I feel about

myself, the way I brought up our son. Let me have this confession about my deepest regrets in this life."

"Losing you was, of course, my deepest regret. But that was not in my control. But our son's upbringing was entirely in my control. And I can't shake this feeling that I didn't do my role."

"He took the role of a dad, a brother, a bodyguard, a friend at a very young age. He was not possessive about me, rather protective about me. As if it was coded in his DNA, those instincts grew stronger as the days passed by. I vividly remember. It all began when he asked me about your death. He was about five years old. I wasn't sure if I did the right thing by telling him about death, and especially yours. I robbed him of his innocence by revealing the most cruel thing about life. And that took away his privilege to be a boy or a teenager. Perhaps that's why he was never rebellious during his teens."

I sobbed, the words heavy with self-condemnation. "What sort of a mother would do that? I could have told him about Heaven, God, and stories about you. Or at least, I could have said you became a star in the sky. Instead, at the age of five, I gave him the first taste of the harsh reality of life. I told him it is inevitable and it can happen to anyone. I couldn't comprehend how his little heart would have felt hearing these things from his own mother. I robbed him of his childhood. I failed him. I failed us. I failed as a mother."

For a long, quiet moment, he didn't reply. He simply held my hands and rubbed my arms, comforting me. He allowed me to calm down, letting the storm pass.

After a brief pause, "You did not rob him of his childhood or teenage," he replied, his voice firm, unwavering.

He looked at me, his gaze direct. "You are right. Protective instinct towards you was etched in his DNA. Just like his dad. You did not rob him of his teenage rebellious nature."

"Honey! There are no right and wrong answers when it comes to death. After what happened with me, you prepared yourself and our son for what will eventually happen in the future. Despite everything, you brought up another Jawan and gave him up for the country. That is not an act of selfishness. Definitely that is not something any common woman can do. That takes a lot of courage and willpower."

"Don't try to blow smoke up my ass. Are you afraid to walk down the guilt lane with me? Are you not ready to see the darker side of me?" I challenged him, a last flicker of defiance.

He smiled, a gentle, knowing smile. "Sweetheart! I am a simple projection of your subconscious. I already know everything. You are carrying the cross of guilt, but these are indeed the fruits of sacrifices. And when you drop it off, you will see the real reward of your sacrifices. Your love for our son is exceedingly stronger

than your regrets. So, blame me if I always come to your rescue."

He hugged me softly and held me closer to him. Slowly, enveloped in his warmth, I began to doze off. The IV was steadily passing through my veins, but now, any thoughts outside of him seemed to drain my strength.

"Sweetie! Just hang in there. It won't be long," he murmured.

I woke up, my vision blurry, refusing to clear. But I could still feel the warmth of his hand on my body and the familiar, comforting solidity of his muscular shoulders around me.

"How long was I out?" I asked, my voice weak.

"Unfortunately, I don't know, Honey. I went to sleep along with you," he replied with a soft chuckle.

He gently released his hands, slipped away, and jumped out of the bed, moving with the effortless grace of a memory. He looked at me, a question in his eyes. "Do you remember that time?"

"Our first meet." A smile, bittersweet, touched my lips. "How can I forget? It was all a fairy tale from the moment I saw you. I ended up on your chest. The first hug, first touch, the scary night we spent in that bunker." He nodded gently, a shared memory.

"I must say," I remarked, a teasing glint in my eye. "I felt safe in your watch."

"You took a bullet for me. You protected me," I whispered, the memory vivid.

He gently kissed my forehead. "I wouldn't have it any other way," he replied with profound care and love in his voice. "Gosh! I missed this. I missed you. I missed us."

"And the following three days in the forest terrain of the Himalayas." I chuckled. "I went over the mountain single and came down three days later with my soulmate. It was life-changing."

He didn't move his gaze away from me. He came closer, kissed me again, and said, "It never gets old, and I will never get tired of listening to this story from you."

My memory played our favorite song, a silent melody in the room.

After a brief moment of silence, he asked, a sharp smirk on his face, "Which is truly life-changing?"

I looked at him quizzically. "I didn't get your question."

"The moment you met me or the moment you met our son?" he asked, his naughty smile giving away his attempt to trick me into a choice.

"Are you jealous?" I teased back.

"Kind of!!!."

"Even if it's our own son," he replied, his voice laced with mock possessiveness. He knew I always liked it

when he showed his possessiveness in casual conversation. Don't all women secretly love it?

"Hey! You were the love of my life. You were everything to me. You still are," I said, my voice thick with emotion. "You are my end and my home. I knew I would never fall for another man like I did with you. But, that changed after our son was born," I confessed.

"You are my soulmate. But he will always be my knight in shining armor," I replied, a profound truth.

Those tiny little legs taught me the persistence to walk towards destiny. I didn't hold his hand and teach him how to write; those small hands held my hand and taught me to write our future. I didn't bring him up; he brought me up. He gave me direction, meaning, and purpose to carry on. He brought back the smile that was lost with you. He was the foundation pillar over which I rebuilt myself. He was the track that protected me, on which I ran this long marathon. He was the beacon of light in my darkest hours. He pulled me out from my own darkness.

I thought my life was over when you left. This little one came into my life only to teach me to start all over again. At thirty, I was reborn once again with him.

He listened, and after a brief moment of silence, he sighed softly. "Hmm! I could live with it," he chuckled, a knowing warmth in his eyes.

"Wait! You were never jealous. How come you became one, all of a sudden?" I asked, a hint of confusion.

He smiled. "Honey! Don't you remember? It is what you always wanted of me."

"Yeah! You are after all a projection of my subconscious," I replied, a tired smile.

"Hey! Just go with the flow and stop being a buzzkill," he remarked, his smile widening.

A brief silence settled. The nurse walked in, her footsteps soft. She looked at me, then at the IV, and replaced the empty bottle with a fresh one.

She came closer and asked, "Are you feeling sleepy?" A wave of intense pain, which I hadn't been aware of until that moment, gushed into my body. I nodded mildly. *No.*

"Ma'am. Your son's jet touched down. He's on his way here," she said, her voice gentle, before leaving the room.

I mildly groaned, the pain intensifying, and looked around for my late husband. He reappeared on the seat from the other end of the room, as if materializing from a fading dream.

He stood up from his seat, walked towards me, his gaze tender. "Can't wait to see him, can you?"

I nodded with a light smile, my eyes fixed on his familiar face.

"Well! Meanwhile, back to our discussion," he remarked, a playful tone in his voice. "What was your proudest moment?"

Without a second thought, I replied, "The first time I saw our son in uniform." Tears welled in my eyes, a mix of pride and longing. "We both missed you that evening," I said, a catch in my voice.

He looked at me, his eyes mirroring my emotion. "Me too." He came closer, sat by my side, and sighed. "I've always wondered how you convinced yourself to let him join the Army? After all you've been through?"

I mildly chuckled, a sad, knowing sound. "You are the reason he went to the Army."

"Growing up, the kid had a lot of questions about you."

He looked at me with keen interest, a fond smile spreading across his face.

I began to outline our time together, painting a picture of your accomplishments in the Army. Your heroic deeds. Your unwavering love for me. Our life together from the moment we met until the very end. "It was like," I explained, "he didn't look any further for a role model or hero. Even though you weren't here with him, you truly were an inspiration for him to join the Army. Without any second thought, he followed your footsteps, like he already knew his destiny."

He looked at me, his gaze softening. "Do you have any regrets?"

"Not a bit," I sighed, a deep sense of peace washing over me. "I wouldn't have it any other way," I replied with a genuine smile.

He nodded gently, reciprocating with his charming smile, a silent acknowledgment.

I groaned mildly, the pain now a dull ache, and sighed heavily, slipping deeper into his arms, finding solace. We lay on the bed silently, a familiar comfort, like our Sunday afternoon matinee moments.

"Did you hear the footsteps? Did you hear his voice?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. I nodded, a spontaneous smile popping onto my face.

I could sense my body slowly giving up, a gentle surrender. He kissed me on my forehead, a tender, final touch, sighed, and then, effortlessly, jumped out of the bed. "I guess this is my cue, honey," he said, his voice laced with love.

"Don't worry, Honey!" he said with a smile, that same confident, comforting smile.

He came closer to me and whispered, "This won't be long. This won't be long."

"I will be waiting for you on the other side."

"We have all the time beyond this world for us, Honey! All the time for us," he promised, his voice fading slightly as he slowly walked towards the other end of the room, disappearing into the darkness.

Suddenly, a jolt shook me awake, and I felt the life force inside me plummet to a final point of bare sustenance.

I realized it was about that time. I could sense the distance between my body and my consciousness growing farther and farther, a gentle separation. I took one deep breath, the toughest breath of my life. But I did, as if willing to give every last ounce of what I had. As the breath left my body, I felt lighter and lighter, a profound sense of release.

I knew I had lived this life in its entirety. A life filled with regrets and contentment, with happiness and sadness, with fulfillment and disappointment, with longings and achievements. But in the end, as everything squared off, all of the pluses and minuses, ups and downs, evened out. I could see peace descending in me, a calm, enveloping blanket. I had walked all the miles in this life. Standing at the cusp of time, I could say with certainty: I had lived the story of my life to the fullest extent, and I was ready to finally rest after bidding goodbye to my son.

As my son walked into the room, his voice, thick with emotion, calling out, "Mom!" my vision brightened for one last, glorious moment. There he was, my boy, my son, a man now, in the sharp lines of his own Army uniform – my other knight in shining armor. I raised a trembling hand towards him, barely able to call out his name. And as my eye lens caught that final, perfect frame, the last drop of life force left my body. My eyes shut down, and everything became dark. Sans pain, sans mind, sans body, sans thoughts, sans emotions, sans breath.

An Arranged Date

I was scrutinizing the menu card, pretending a deep fascination with artisanal coffee blends, when a clear female voice cut through the cafe's gentle hum, calling out my name in an uncertain tone.

I nearly jumped, tossing the menu card onto the table with a clatter. She stood across from me, a silhouette against the restaurant's panoramic window, where the evening sun bled a vibrant orange. Her hand extended, slender and elegant. "Hi," she introduced herself, her voice soft but confident. I managed a clumsy nod in return. Her hand, when I took it, was soft, yet surprisingly firm. A smile, impossibly bright, curved her lips – familiar somehow, or perhaps just a trick of my anxious mind. But it was a smile that made the very sun outside seem to pause and grab a glass for itself.

She was beautiful. Mesmerizing.

"Drop-dead gorgeous beauty" wasn't just a hyperbolic phrase anymore; it was an undeniable, experiential truth.

I couldn't believe this poised woman was the same wild-haired eight-year-old from twenty years ago. Of course not! We'd grown apart. Until yesterday, I hadn't even remembered her name, let alone her face.

And now, here I was, sitting across from her like a complete loser. Yes, a loser. Who in the 21st century needed their parents' help finding a date? That's exactly what she must be thinking.

She had to have a boyfriend. I mean, look at her! If a girl like this wasn't already taken, it was a collective shame on all mankind. My kind.

She settled smoothly into the chair across from me, a picture of effortless grace. Her simple white, short-sleeved evening gown grazed her knee. Her hair, shiny and smooth, was still faintly moist, gliding like a dark wave as she moved. Her skin glowed, flawless and natural, utterly devoid of heavy makeup save for a precise line of eyeliner. It stretched, a delicate wing, ending in a sharp, almost predatory arrow beneath her eyebrows. One piercing look from those eyes, and any man's heart would feel impaled.

Wow. I could stay lost in those eyes forever.

I'd thought Medusa was a myth. Now, I had my doubts. Her earrings, subtle silver hoops, dangled, catching the light like miniature wind chimes. They were noticeable enough to draw the eye, yet understated, as if deliberately designed not to steal attention from her captivating gaze.

A pleasant, unseen breeze drifted past my face. I inhaled, just a subtle breath, enough to catch her fragrance. She smelled of fresh lavender, clean and inviting.

There was no awkward pause or hesitation in her. She picked up the menu card, a graceful sweep of her hand tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Hey! Are you looking for a snack or something to bite?" she asked and continued, "I am perfectly fine with just a coffee or juice".

I nodded my acceptance, unable to form words. The faint scar on her forehead, a delicate white line against her smooth skin, stood out distinctly.

I remembered the scar. And the incident. More vividly, I remembered the night it happened. We were playing snatch-and-run at some family gathering. She'd tripped on the patterned carpet, her head striking the unforgiving edge of the center table. I remembered the sickening thump, the sudden blossoming of blood across the polished wood floor. The helpless dread that knotted my stomach that night. I remembered it vividly. It's one of the childhood memories still etched in my mind.

The waiter materialized beside our table, a practiced, standard cabin-crew smile plastered on his face. "Are you ready to place your order?"

She tossed the menu back onto the table. "I will have whatever he is ordering," she said, her tone casual, then quickly grabbed her phone and began typing, her thumbs flying across the screen.

She seemed preoccupied. Anxious, perhaps. Or, more likely, completely disinterested. Whatever it was, I got

the message. The reality of this "arranged date" crashed down on me. This meeting wasn't going to last.

I remembered one of those infuriating psychological non-sense reels: "If she's on her phone while on a date, she's not interested." I hated to admit that it was making perfect, painful sense right now. I got it. Either she was already taken, or she just didn't find *me* attractive.

Or, worst-case scenario, she'd friend-zoned me before we'd even said hello.

Well, lucky is the guy whoever got her.

I was not desperate to find a date nor was I disappointed about my chances with her. I was here purely out of my family obligation. I came here without any expectations; besides she was not a total stranger, which I thought would make this meeting slightly less awkward.

I thought, a bitter tang in my mouth. *Whatever. I've got my answers.*

I'll order a simple Americano, drain it quickly, make my excuses, and conclude this farce. Then I'll never talk about it again.

"I'll have an Americano," I said, my voice flat.

She glanced at the waiter. "I'll get the same," she echoed, her smile formal, distant.

As the waiter started to turn, she called out, "Excuse me! Please get me the drink in a takeaway cup." She gave a light, apologetic smile.

Wow! This is getting even better. It looked like she didn't even want to wait until we finished the drink. I was feeling worse than a loser, a sensation I didn't remember ever experiencing. I felt my ego took a hard blow. I'd always had a fair share of luck with girls; I wasn't one of those weird guys who didn't know how to approach a woman. But now, I felt precisely that.

What happened to you, man? Where have you landed? How did you end up here?

You know what?, screw this.

"Be nice to her," echoed my mom's voice, a ghost from earlier today.

The memory sparked a sudden, hot spike of anger. I had limits. My self-esteem was taking a colossal hit. "You are not a loser. You are not doing this", came a voice from within.

"Be nice to her," my mom's voice echoed again, persistent.

I snatched my phone and sent a text to my friend, asking him to meet me at our regular hangout in 15 minutes. In my head, I quickly calculated: five minutes for the coffee, two to say hi-and-bye, two to pay the bill. Five minutes to drive back. He replied with a thumbs-up emoji. I noticed she was still engrossed in her

phone. I started scrolling through my Instagram, pretending interest.

"Excuse me!" she said, her voice interrupting my scrolling.

"Something came up," she explained, rising from her seat. "I need to make a call. I'll be with you in a minute," she added, already walking away.

That was it. "Be nice to her." That limit was breached. I was done being nice. My blood was boiling. More than that, I was furious with myself for ever agreeing to this.

She returned after two minutes, her expression apologetic. "I'm so sorry. Something I needed to sort out urgently. I truly couldn't avoid the call." She pulled her chair out and sat down again, her movements still graceful.

I watched the waiter approaching our table, carrying our coffees.

"I see you're busy. If you need to go," I stated, my voice clipped. This was the absolute maximum limit of my niceness.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I promise! Now I'm with you," she offered a small, reassuring smile, and dropped her phone into her handbag. There was something in that smile, a flicker of genuine warmth, that instantly diffused the boiling rage in me. The anger was still simmering, a low heat beneath the surface, but the immediate surge had receded. The waiter placed

the coffee cup on the saucer towards me and the takeaway cup towards her.

"Thanks!" she murmured to him, that same polite, smile on her face. She picked up the takeaway cup, her fingers tracing its rim. "I'm a bit clumsy with ceramic cups," she explained, a shy smile. "I prefer disposable cups." She took her first sip. "I hope you didn't take it any other way."

I nodded, a genuine smile replacing my forced one. "I was about to ask for the check," I admitted, and took my first sip of the Americano.

A blush crept up her neck as she replied, "I'm so sorry!"

Her alluring eyes, now free of their earlier preoccupation, released the first arrow as she apologized. It effortlessly extinguished the last embers of my simmering rage. Our lips continued slurping the coffee from our respective cups, a strangely synchronized sound.

A smile popped onto my cheek without my permission, a traitorous upward twitch. I hated it. But the anger, the simmering anger, was gone.

She was indeed beautiful. In my eyes. Through my eyes. For my eyes.

"You look totally different," she said, her voice soft, contemplative. She placed the cup on the table, leaned forward slightly, and asked, "It must be what, twenty years?"

I smiled back lightly. "Could be around twenty, and you look different too," I replied. She looked at me quizzically.

"I meant, you look beautiful!" I corrected, "and you know that, obviously," I remarked lightly. "But I must say, enchanting!" The compliment came out spontaneously, surprisingly heartfelt.

Without hesitation, she replied, "Thanks," a simple, unadorned acknowledgment. She smiled. "You are generous in your compliment." Then, a few more rounds of quiet slurping.

Suddenly, the coffee in my cup felt like it was draining faster than I wanted it to. Asking for one more would be weird, without knowing where this was going to lead. But at the same time, a cold dread began to settle: this meet-cute would be over with an empty coffee cup.

"I'm sorry! I will be straight with you," she said, her tone serious. She paused briefly, taking a deep breath, almost bracing herself.

I braced myself, too. This was it. She was going to say she has a boyfriend.

"I have absolutely no memory about you. I didn't even remember how you looked back then." Her confession caught me off guard. I looked at her, quizzically.

"I meant, I didn't stalk you on your social media," she clarified, a sheepish smile.

"That makes two of us," I replied, a small, genuine laugh escaping me, and nodded.

I smiled lightly, adding, "My compliment earlier was for the woman I am meeting today."

She interrupted, leaning forward, a playful glint in her eye. "Hey! But I remember *this* one. Don't think you can escape on this," she pointed at the scar on her forehead.

"I remember how much I cried and the drama I made. I remembered how much you were scared," she laughed, a bright, clear sound.

A genuine flush of shyness popped onto my face, heating my cheeks. Yet! I couldn't take my eyes away from her, from the sheer joy radiating from her.

I could watch this smile all day long. Long live the guy whoever gets her.

"You could be the lucky guy," came a voice from within, a hopeful whisper.

Not yet. You don't know that.

Like a wave that rises and settles down and slowly retreats, her smile softened on her face, a gentle, lingering warmth.

"Honestly! That was the only thing I remembered," she confessed, sliding her hair above her forehead once again and looking down, as if to hide the lingering shyness in her big, beautiful eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said, a faint apology for something so long ago. She looked quizzically. "I know. It's too late for an apology."

"Oh, please!" she waved a dismissive hand. "I was just kidding. I was a drama queen back then. I can't believe the big act I put up," she replied, still tinged with shyness.

"But, I got all the attention," she winked, a playful sparkle in her eyes.

"I was a falling master. I almost trip on everything, and I still am super clumsy."

Then she looked straight into my eyes, and with a slight smile said, "Your apologies accepted though." She looked away, a soft, intimate tone entering her voice.

A brief moment of comfortable silence stretched between us. Neither of us spoke.

She looked at me and gave a courtesy smile. Ten seconds later, she smiled one more time, a quiet, knowing look.

It was obvious we'd run out of any shared topics from the past.

Our moment of awkward pause came now, a shared recognition of the void between us.

It was obvious we both needed to start fresh. Like two strangers.

This was the pivot point: either she ended the meeting, or I took the lead.

My mind raced, conjuring scenarios. Meeting a girl in a bar. Walking up to her and making the first impression.

"Hi! Hello!" and make her laugh with my off-hand pickup lines and then offer to buy her a drink, "Can I buy you a drink?" I'd done this, and I'd had a fair share of success in that area.

But, this was different. She wasn't a total stranger. She knew me. I knew her. We had a history, however distant and animated it might seem now. It was true.

Worst of all, it was an arranged date. Our parents arranged it. The whole dynamic changes everything.

She was beautiful. Drop-dead gorgeous. But was this all? Probably enough to strike a conversation with a stranger in a bar. But not if you wanted something real. Not if you felt something special stirring inside. I didn't know anything about her, and she didn't know anything about me. Had I met her outside, it would have been entirely different.

I looked at her. Her eyes, deep and expressive, spoke a lot more than her lips. I noticed a flicker of hesitation. She didn't seem to share the same level of enthusiasm as I did. Or was I reading it incorrectly?

Fuck it! I can't keep guessing.

"Don't hesitate!" I blurted out. "You can say it," I smiled slightly, trying to ease the tension. "After all, I'm not a total stranger."

The hesitation in her grew visibly more obvious, a quiet distress.

"I mean!" I stumbled, "I understand. This is a bit awkward for both of us."

"But these empty stares were far more awkward", I said.

It was better to end the conversation. I knew I'd already implied it, but I wanted to reiterate this time, without the undercurrent of anger.

"If you want to go..."

She interrupted, her voice firm. "I don't know how to say this. So I'm just going to say it."

"Honestly! I did not sign up to meet with you. I only came because of my parents. Please! I don't want you to have any hopes."

I heard her. The words landed, sharp and clear. I did not react, my face a mask.

"I'm sorry, but with all due respect to the elders, how can they decide on the future of two individuals over a dinner who were not even present at the table in the first place?" She looked at me, expecting an answer. But I didn't move a limb.

"Quite frankly, I agreed to this because you weren't a total stranger. After all!"

"Although we know nothing about each other," she said with a small, wry smile. I did not respond.

"I am not trying to find a suitor for me. Definitely not like this," she stated.

She looked at me, still expecting a reply. I didn't offer one.

She straightened her voice and, in a stern tone that surprised me, said, "I want to make it clear as I don't want you to have any misconception about me or this meeting."

"Had I met you in different circumstances, like total strangers, it would have been different," she repeated. Still, I didn't reply.

"I didn't mean to imply that you are not good looking," she quickly added, as if realizing my silence.

"You look indeed handsome," she didn't shy away from complimenting. "But is that all?"

She picked up her coffee and sipped a couple of times, her gaze steady on mine. I didn't respond yet, just continued looking at her, waiting. After a moment of silence, she asked, a mild chuckle in her voice, "Do you have anything to say, or is it going to be a monologue?"

I straightened my voice, a slow smile spreading across my face. "Thanks for the compliment," I replied.

She shyly acknowledged it, but that wasn't what she was expecting.

"Quite frankly, you summed up everything I wanted to say. I was trying to get to it, and you made it easy for me," I said, my smile widening.

The anxiety visibly drained from her face. Her cheeks relaxed, and it exuded a different aura of beauty that was quite ineffable, a softer, more genuine glow.

"And I can't agree with you more," I said. "If I had met you outside, things would have been different."

"I'm sure we wouldn't have recognized each other," she winked, a mischievous glint in her eye, and continued, "It would have been something real."

"I feel that our parents ruined what could have been a perfect....."

"Meet-cute experience?", she remarked, a playful, quarter smile on my cheek.

I didn't expect her to jump into complete my sentence. A delighted giggle escaped me, as her eyes sparkled. Her smile conveyed it all.

"Thank God! That's a relief," she said and sighed, a genuine exhalation of tension. Her face became even brighter and prettier, almost radiant.

"My mom gave a verbal CV about you," she smiled, "That's good for a job or business. Not for deciding my future with someone, right?"

"I totally agree with you," I said, a conspiratorial grin.

"My mom literally warned me to be nice to you," she confessed, and then burst out laughing. I looked at her, charmed by her unrestrained mirth.

"Not that I am a rude person," she interjected, catching her breath. "But I hate this matchmaking thing," she said, a playful grimace.

"I guess they made copies of the same dialogue for both of us," I said. She looked at me quizzically. I nodded and said, "I got exactly the same instructions from my mom."

"I'm glad that we are on the same page," I said. Although in my mind, I knew I wanted more. But I didn't know anything about her. I didn't know if she was seeing someone. I didn't know her likes and dislikes. I knew nothing about her. But I decided right then and there to change that. One thing was certain. I could feel that our thoughts synched. Well! that's a good start.

I looked at her and, with a quarter smile, said, "You are right!" I crossed my arms, leaned a little back, "we don't know anything about each other." And then, leaning slightly forward, opened my arms in an inviting gesture. "Having met with you," I said with a slightly bigger smile, a warmth in my voice, "certainly I would like to change that, even though our parents set it up." Her eyes widened slightly, and she couldn't hide the charming shyness that popped onto her face.

I like this. The fun-loving, confident me is back. I wanted to give it a real try with her. I needed to know if I had a chance with her or not. I couldn't wait to break this charade of family background and past memories and meet her as a stranger, to simply ask the girl out on a proper date. Although in a way, we both *were* strangers. The winner takes it all, and the losers stand small.

She did not reply. But I had conveyed my intentions.

Remember! She didn't reply. The thought gnawed at me.

"I'm surprised you don't have a girlfriend," she said, breaking the silence.

I nodded and replied, "Had one. But not anymore."

"Do you?" I asked, my heart thumping. She looked at me quizzically.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" I asked again, clearly.

Her phone rang. She picked the phone from her handbag. "Sorry! I need to take this call," she said and walked away, leaving me suspended.

My time calculations went for a toss. I was way past the time I had scheduled to meet my friend. But I didn't regret it. *I'm sorry, buddy.* I picked up my phone and checked the chat window. No text from him. Good!

A part of me was quite happy about the way this meeting had turned out. But the other part of me, my lizard brain, doubted this meeting might end soon.

Above all, I was left with the unanswered question, hanging in the air like smoke.

"Having met with you, certainly I would like to change that." My own voice echoed.

Remember! She didn't reply.

She came back and stood. She did not sit.

I got my answer. "Is everything alright?" I asked, my voice calm despite the sinking feeling.

"I'm so sorry! I really need to go," she said, her eyes apologetic, and stood waiting for my reply.

"I get it," I replied, forcing a smile, and waved at the waiter for the check. I settled the bill, and we walked towards the parking together. We did not speak. We reached her car. She stood hesitantly, flapping her phone, avoiding eye contact.

"So, I guess this is it," I said, a sigh escaping me.

She clicked the key fob, and I, automatically, opened the car door for her. She turned towards me, her gaze lingering. "Are you in some rush, or do you have some more time?" she asked, a tentative softness in her voice.

I furrowed my brows, a silent "Why?" hanging between us.

"Although it was a bit awkward in the beginning, now, I feel bad we couldn't spend more time," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

She slowly looked at me, a genuine smile blooming on her face. "I really liked our short meet." She smiled again. "I wanted to get to know you."

Yes! Definitely my bad, I thought to myself, a surge of adrenaline. I liked this. I was not ready to give up on her. Especially when I was left with one unanswered question.

"So! Does that mean we have another date, another time?" I asked, pushing my luck, my voice suddenly eager.

She hesitated a bit, her gaze flicking away.

"I would like to..." I began, ready to press further.

She interrupted me, a playful spark in her eyes. "How about now?" she asked. I could sense a comfortable feeling in her voice, and a sort of familiarity now in her gaze.

"What do you have in mind?" I asked, my heart doing a little jig.

"Would you go with me?" she asked, a challenging glint. I looked at her quizzically, a grin spreading.

"Trust me! You wouldn't be disappointed", she exclaimed in an assured voice.

"Are you asking me out on a date?" I asked her, a mild laughter escaping.

"Maybe!" she said, her own lips curving into a wider smile.

"In fact, I was about to ask you," I admitted.

"Well! I asked you first," she giggled, a bright, joyful sound. "So, you are coming with me."

I nodded with a broad smile. "But allow me to do the honor," I said, opening her car door and then gesturing towards the passenger seat of my car that was parked right next to hers.

She gladly agreed with a wider smile, hopping out of her car. I opened the passenger car door for her; she gently glided inside. I scooted around and settled behind the wheel.

I pulled the car out of the parking and drove straight onto E11, the familiar highway.

I had driven these roads all my life, enjoyed their smooth, wide expanse. But this ride was different. Today, it looked even more beautiful with her by my side, the golden hour light painting her silhouette against the desert landscape.

I couldn't wait to get the answer to my question. Did I have a chance with this "fall master" and make her fall for *me*? "You didn't answer my question," I prompted gently.

Without any further context, she came out straight with it. "No! I had one, but not now."

She is not taken. Shame on my kind. Lucky me. A wave of relief washed over me.

"Honestly! I'm not sure if I'm ready for another relationship," she said, her voice turning a bit husky, a flicker of vulnerability.

"I understand you," I replied, genuinely. *I am ready to wait.*

She looked at me quizzically. "It's not one of those standard 'I understand' from a guy," I said in a mild voice, a gentle chuckle in my tone.

After a brief pause, "Having said that, I would like to take you out on a proper date next time."

"Oh! You better make it up properly," she said, a playful warning in her voice. "You got lucky this time. I am the one taking you out."

"Trust me! You will be in for a surprise," I said, a mischievous grin. She looked at me and smirked, "Hmm! Let me see it."

"McDonald's," I said and giggled.

"What?" she said, incredulous.

"Okay! Burger King," I said, giggling again.

She burst out in laughter, a full, uninhibited sound, and elbowed me lightly.

Our laughter continued for about another 30 seconds, and she elbowed me one more time, a clear sign of comfort and amusement.

I looked at her, my heart full. "I wouldn't have met some random girl if it wasn't for you." I paused, then added, "Even though my parents would have insisted."

"Almost same here with me," she replied, her eyes twinkling.

"Almost?" I asked, a slight eyebrow raised.

"I would have met with any total stranger for my parents' sake," she said. I couldn't hide the slight tinge of disappointment that popped onto my face.

"But, I wouldn't have asked any total stranger to join me on a ride in my car," she said, her voice dropping to a softer, more intimate tone. She looked at me, her eyebrows slightly raised, a clear dash of happiness in her black, beautiful eyes. "I am glad it was you," she continued, and smiled that conveyed a thousand subtle things, a quiet promise of possibility.

The Final or the First Talk

I don't remember the last time I cried. It has almost never happened. We are, after all, supposed to be the strong ones, and strong ones aren't supposed to cry.

But right now, tears won't stop rolling down my eyes — non-stop, uncontrollable. A hot, unfamiliar ache tightened my throat, stealing my breath. My vision blurred, not just from the relentless stream of tears, but from a crushing weight pressing behind my eyes. Each sob was a jagged tearing within my chest.

I am sitting in a public common area, surrounded by countless judging eyes, as if I were oblivious to the world around me. I want to scream until my vocal cords tear open. I want to shout until my eardrums burst, with blood oozing from these pores. I am clenching my palms tightly. Yes! I want to punch the wall in front of me until the bones in my hand crack into pieces and won't move anymore. My lungs burned with each ragged gasp, a harsh, tearing sound in the oppressive silence. My hands, clenched so tightly my nails bit into my palms, trembled uncontrollably, a physical manifestation of the seismic rage within. Anger, frustration, betrayal, and a feeling of utter helplessness consumed me. It felt as if the entire universe—God, Devil, Heaven, Hell, fate, and

destiny — had conspired against me, leaving me in this dire situation.

I don't know what to do. I don't know. The more I thought about it, the more tears started to flow.

Three hours ago, I was sitting in a meeting, closing a deal that, at that moment, I thought was the most important moment of my life. But now, it meant nothing to me. When I walked out of the deal as the winner, I saw 13 missed calls displayed on my phone screen. All of those were from my wife. This was unlike her. My heart slammed against my ribs. Thirteen missed calls. From *her*. My mind, usually a fortress of logic, instantly conjured a thousand impossible scenarios, each more terrifying than the last. 'No, it's just...this....., or.....' The lie died on my tongue. My heart raced, and I instantly started sweating. I dialed back immediately. A lady, her voice anxious, replied and asked me to come to the hospital. She didn't give me any details. But I knew something had happened that wasn't supposed to. There was anger in her voice, as if I had betrayed the one person who trusted me and would have walked to the end of the world for me. When I reached the hospital, the nurse handed me the handbag — the very same bag my wife had taken to her office this morning — her cell phone displaying our picture together from our last Switzerland trip, and a disposable bag. I peered inside it, and I recognized the dress. I peeled open the disposable bag, and a metallic, coppery scent immediately assaulted my senses. There,

crumpled and chillingly limp, was the dress – the vibrant color muted, almost swallowed by the stark, dark crimson that had seeped into every fiber. The very same one I had bought her for her last birthday. The very same one she had worn this morning when she left home.

But now, it wasn't in the same condition. It was covered in blood – the blood of the two most important lives in my life.

A team of doctors met me in a room and bombarded me with a million technical terms. A torrent of complex medical jargon washed over me – 'pre-eclampsia,' 'placenta previa,' 'fetal bradycardia.' The words were just sounds, empty vessels in a sea of terror. All that resonated, all that mattered, was the crushing, ringing pronouncement: 'life or death situation.' Of these, the only thing I understood was that it was a life-or-death situation for my wife and our child she had been carrying in her womb for the past eight months. Our child. Our first.

It was indeed a death blow to me. Never in a million permutations had I expected something like this. I was dying within. I wanted to scream.

This morning, I had kissed them both before leaving for the office. Now, I was holding her clothes, drenched with her blood. Their blood. This was not a scenario I had envisioned even in my worst nightmares.

I wanted to hug her tight. I wanted to hold her so close our hearts would beat as one. I wanted to infuse my strength into her. I wanted to undo this moment, this entire day. I wanted to whisper promises her that I am going to protect them. I wanted to assure her that I would become a shield, a force against this cruel world.

I wanted to... I wanted to... I wanted to...

But life challenged me in ways I didn't expect. It had put me in a spot where I couldn't do anything. I couldn't work it out. I couldn't sit and solve it. I couldn't help but feel helpless. When success went to my head, I soared high, thinking I could do anything.

No. I was wrong. Never have I ever...

My heart was racing fast, and my chest was pounding heavily. I covered my face with those clothes and groaned heavily. Tears ran down, wetting her clothes, as if a lifetime of pent-up emotions burst forth like an avalanche washing down a mountain.

The arrogance of agnosticism dropped to its knees. The "I can do" attitude flew out the window. All beliefs and disbeliefs vanished. The first question that came out of helplessness was: Why me? What did I do to deserve this punishment? A rush of guilt. The question tore through me, raw and irrational. My carefully constructed agnosticism crumbled, leaving only the primal, desperate plea to an unseen, unheard force. A useless request to the gods of all religions, a nonsensical plea to the indifferent universe, a stupid,

hopeless prayer to anything—divine or devil—that might be listening. 'Take me instead,' I begged the silent air. 'Give it to me. I can bear it. I can handle it.' I was in the same state as Emperor Babur, of whom legend says he pleaded with God to take his life instead of his son's.

If only people could proxy for death's hunger?

Unfortunately, there are no substitutions in life. This isn't a stage drama where one can replace a role and the show still goes on. The show must go on. It will go on. With or without them in this life.

As I stood clueless amidst my mental tornado, the nurse approached me, hesitating.

I was called back inside the room. This time, the team of doctors looked even more worried.

The chief among them said, "We are doing all that we can." I sensed hesitation, not confidence, in his voice, followed by a sigh of guilt. Truly, I could see that he was indeed trying his level best.

"We have encountered a unique situation. The mother has pre-eclampsia. Due to imbalanced blood pressure, she lost consciousness. The fetal heartbeat is slowing down due to a damaged placenta. The lives of both rest in the hands of the baby. If the baby fights and survives, then the mother's blood pressure will stabilize, and we can then take the chance of surgery to save both lives."

I am someone who doesn't concede to defeat easily. I push, negotiate, question, clarify, and obtain clarity. But right now, there were no questions, no debates. There were no negotiations nor clarifications. My intelligence had been brought to its knees.

Why not do the surgery now? But I didn't ask the question. If it were possible, they would have done it already.

I trust the doctors. They are my only hope.

The Chief looked at me and said once again, "We are doing everything within our powers. But we request you to prepare for the worst. Pray for a miracle, while we wait longer." He patted my shoulder and walked out of the room.

The assistants checked the chart, noted the dosage, and left the room, closing the door behind them.

The air conditioner in the room was mild. I died a million deaths seeing my wife lie still on the bed, hooked to equipment all over her body. The room went into silence. The only other sound in the room, apart from the chaos in my mind, was the constant beep of the equipment that showed my wife's vitals.

In many ways, doctors mentioned that it was beyond their control. In many ways, their attempt to camouflage their failure went in vain, because I was able to see it through in their eyes. I went near the bed and kept looking at her. A roller coaster of emotions —

anger, suffering, pain, desperation, dismay, betrayal—all surged inside me with every breath I took.

But I couldn't do anything. Nobody could. Even the doctors couldn't!

I felt betrayed and left in a helpless situation. The feeling of desperation to do anything to save them was the only thing running through my mind. But I was walled in, with no way out. My mind wanted to scour the bottom of the ocean to find a solution. My soul wanted to fly to the ether to pull off a miracle. But what help could those futile acts possibly do? At this moment, neither rational nor emotional thought mattered.

I lay still, looking at them, hopelessly desperate to save them.

Seconds crawled into minutes, each tick of the clock a fresh stab of agony. Minutes bled into hours, and still, no sign, no flutter, no shift in the relentless, flat line of their condition. The silence in the room was a deafening weight, pressing down on my chest. I ran out of any more tears to shed, and my choked throat and the heaviness in my heart lessened. The tension and fear in me faded. I got up, wiped my eyes, straightened my voice, and said,

"Hey darling!" I called out a name looking at my wife's tummy. Suddenly, my voice seemed to be coming out—loud and clear. I continued.

"Yes! that is the name we've chosen for you. Do you know where this name comes from? Well then, wait until you wake up, and I will narrate the full story. For now, follow my voice, sweetheart."

You are a fighter, child! You don't give up. You don't concede defeat. Any amount of nature's force may come your way, you will fight, beta! Don't be scared, beta! I am there with you in every sense, in every breath, in every vein. Don't give up! Fight. I know you can. I know you are. I know you will. Today, you are going to fight not just for your life, but for your mom's life too. Don't allow the fear of death to swallow you. Hold my hand, and I will walk with you into the fire of death, and together we will emerge into life. There's a beautiful and amazing life we've built for you. Together, all three of us are going to have an amazing life. If only I could show you what awaits you here. Beta! Trust my words.

We will have a life full of happiness, joy, and togetherness. Every morning, I will wake you up to another beautiful day. Every night, I will tuck you in with a bedtime story. We are going to be there every step of your life. I will teach you how to swim, I will teach you how to play cricket. I will teach you to ride a bicycle. We can go camping. We can do trekking and hiking. We will pull out all the pranks from the playbook. I will teach you how to stand up, and I will protect you from any harm. Just hear me out, beta! Wake up, darling! Follow my voice. Come on, darling!

You cannot give up. Not today. Not now. Not in this lifetime. Yes, you may think you aren't born yet, but to me, you are already living with me.

One step at a time. One breath at a time. One step at a time. One breath at a time. One step at a time. One breath at a time. One step at a time. One breath at a time.

I noticed a mild movement in my wife's stomach. I immediately jumped and rang the emergency bell. Nurses rushed into the room within seconds, and I exclaimed, "There was movement! I saw! I saw!" I was smiling and crying at the same time.

The junior doctor looked at the monitor and said, "Sorry, sir! It could be bowel movement. The readings don't show any variation." But before he could look back at the monitor, there was another movement. Seconds later, the monitor, silent for so long, blipped. Once. A hesitant, fragile beacon. My breath hitched. Another blip, then another, finding a rhythm, a pulse. Tears, hot and uncontrollable, flooded my eyes. I clamped a hand over my mouth, a choked sob of pure, unadulterated joy escaping me.

Miracle, legends, science, agnosticism, faith, beliefs, disbeliefs—every parallel and opposite in the world—all made sense.

Promise (Miles to Go Before I Sleep)

The garden table, barely a foot off the ground, was set, and we all settled on the grass around it. An oil lantern glowed at its center, casting soft light on the circular arrangement of dishes. By now, I was accustomed to flies dancing around my food, having learned to embrace the insects that tried to alight on me. I hadn't just become a member of this family; I had become a native of these green grasses, a friend to the local crickets and insects.

It was an age-old Georgian tradition. The man of the house uncorked the home-brewed wine, filling our cups. He then poured the last precious drops into a bull horn cup, raised it high, and declared, "**Ojakhis uakhles ts'evrs!**" — "To the newest family member."

He met my gaze, calling out my name. "He came to our home as a guest, then we grew closer, becoming friends. Now, as I hold this cup to bid him adieu, to see him leave us, my heart feels heavy, for he has become one of us. A member of my family, a familiar face to the villagers, a son of this soil."

His voice trembled, and shades of sadness deepened on his face. He straightened, then continued, "I bid him goodbye with the sole hope that someday, this son will return home." It was quite unusual for a Cold War

veteran from the former Soviet Union to deliver such an emotional toast and farewell speech.

He lowered his toast and sat down, a visible struggle playing across his features as his gaze fought to hold back the tears that shimmered in his eyes. Crying is contagious; even a former Soviet war veteran couldn't resist its pull.

The lady of the house, who had become a mother to me, gently held my shoulder. "Son," she asked, her voice soft, "you must visit us next year?"

I knew. I wouldn't. I couldn't. My eyes shied away from hers, my lips quivering, unable to form a lie. This woman had fed me for the past month, showering me with a love and affection I hadn't known since my own mother's death. The man of the house touched my other shoulder, his voice a quiet comfort. "Son, take it easy." He looked at me and nodded, a silent understanding passing between us.

I saw the disappointment in his eyes, but it was followed by a profound calmness, a quiet acceptance. It was as if he already knew the answer, as if he understood the turmoil in my heart, saving me from my own self-reproach.

The children were openly upset. My usual tricks failed to lift their spirits; they were in no mood for my jokes. They sat quieter than usual, their small faces downturned, refusing to meet my gaze. Children can't conceal their true feelings, and their disappointment,

anger, and sadness were undeniably authentic. They were nothing but expressions of love in different forms. Their innocent faces, brimming with anger, only reflected the depth of their affection for me. I was disappointing them.

We ate dinner in silence, words retreating as our hearts spoke through our eyes. The city boy in me, accustomed to a world of careful expressions and guarded emotions, hesitated to voice my true feelings in a place so honest and pure. I couldn't speak my mind, and it would be wrong not to speak from my heart. I offered occasional smiles and gestures. But these people were authentic, simple, and pure. They used their minds to make a living, but they lived life with all their hearts. They allowed the wings of their hearts to soar when it came to expressing love. They cried when tears brimmed, and they laughed when their cheeks spontaneously creased with joy.

After a while, the man of the house broke the quiet. He spoke of how much he had enjoyed our time together: the stories he'd shared from the Cold War, the hours we'd spent hunting wild animals in the forest. He had taught me so much, sharing histories and tales from his past, just as he had with his late son, who was almost my age. He was glad I'd spent the summer in his winery. I had enjoyed the adventures with him, just as I used to with my own dad. I expressed my deepest gratitude for the privilege of learning their secret

winemaking recipe, passed down exclusively through generations of family members.

The lady of the house beamed, expressing her delight at having me in their home for the past month.

"Your arrival filled the huge vacuum our son left in us," she said, leaning over my shoulder. "It was as if the Gods of Heaven sent you to us, for a second chance to be with our son." She recounted our little morning chats in the garden as she tended her plants, and when I helped her in the kitchen, just as her son used to do.

The children, too, voiced their disappointment, saying they would miss having me around – my little magic tricks that entertained them, the games we played, and the stories I shared.

We finished the rest of our dinner in silence. For one last time, I shared a quite walk with the lady of the house. For one last time, I shared *chacha* with the man of the house, and then we retired to our quarters. I packed my backpack, bid the family farewell, and stepped out of the house, descending the hill toward the village center.

This family had treated me as one of their own. I had become a son to the man and the lady, an elder brother to their children. This was the family I had always longed for, the one I hadn't had a chance to experience.

How could I ever repay their benevolence for all the love and affection they had showered upon me? What could I possibly give these people in return that could

ever come close to what they had offered? The money I had in plenty? The luxury I could command at my behest?

What they offered me was a chance to have a family. The only thing I could offer them was to be the son they no longer had. As much as my heart yearned to stay and make them my family, my mind knew I couldn't. I had promises to keep.

I had exactly what I longed for. So why couldn't I stay? Was there a family waiting for me in the city? No. A girlfriend or loved ones waiting for my arrival? No. I had nobody waiting for me. Yet, I had to go.

I had to go back. Not because my vacation days were over, nor because I'd run out of money. Not because I needed to secure my future. I had to go back because of a promise I had made over the dead body of an old man.

"Will we see you next year?" The woman's words echoed in my ears, a gentle but insistent rhythm that pulled me back through time, back three years, to the day it all began. The memory, sharp and vivid, rose like the very sun I'd witnessed on that mountain, a beginning born from an ending.

As the day began its graceful surrender to the encroaching embrace of night, I found myself standing triumphant upon the mountain peak – a summit that had tested every fiber of my being, marking one of the most arduous ascents I had ever undertaken. I was no

seasoned mountaineer, merely a wanderer with an insatiable hunger for the world's hidden wonders, drawn to this formidable height by whispers of an otherworldly panorama awaiting those who dared. And indeed, the vista that unfolded before me was nothing short of spectacular.

Each bead of sweat that had trickled down my brow, every ragged, gasped breath I had drawn during the relentless climb, was unequivocally vindicated by this moment. This was one of Earth's rarest sanctuaries, a hallowed ground where the celestial ballet of sunrise and sunset converged in the same sacred space. From my elevated perch, the vast expanse of the sea seemed to rise, meeting my gaze at eye level, creating an illusion of boundless horizon. As the sun, a fiery orb of molten gold and crimson, began its slow, deliberate descent, it appeared not to merely dip below the horizon, but to slip from the very canvas of the sky itself, plunging with a magnificent splash into the waiting, shimmering waves of the ocean below.

The vista was beyond breathtaking; it was a symphony of vibrant hues – oranges bleeding into fiery reds, purples deepening into indigo, all painting the sky in a fleeting masterpiece. My hand instinctively reached for my camera, its lens clicking furiously as I attempted to capture the ephemeral beauty from every conceivable angle, documenting the sun's deliberate, majestic merger with that distant, ethereal line where the ocean and sky met in an eternal, tender kiss. Yet, even as the

shutter snapped, a profound realization settled within me: what my eyes bore witness to, the sheer, unadulterated grandeur of that moment, transcended the capabilities of any lens, any sensor. It was as if nature, in its infinite artistry, had meticulously orchestrated this breathtaking, fleeting spectacle solely for my solitary gaze.

I pulled out my cellphone and tried to reach my Dad. He didn't pick up. I thought, as usual, he was busy with work. I left him a voice note.

"Dad! I wish you were here with me to see this. We're definitely coming back here next year. I love you, Dad."

I put my phone away, and as darkness settled, I prepared my tent, awaiting the first light of morning.

As I lay in the tent, ready to rest, my heart thanked my Dad for all he had been and done for me. I had to say this from the bottom of my heart: my dad single-handedly raised me. I lost my mom when I was young, and he stepped up to fill her shoes, becoming both a Dad and a mom to me. He was the best, undoubtedly!

It was well past midnight. I brewed a hot tea and kept myself engaged, watching the magic unfolding in the vast expanse of the night sky. The light show of stars, meteors, and constellations was a true visual treat. I lay outside the tent, watching the open sky. I wasn't sure when I fell asleep, as if Mother Nature had taken me into her lap and lulled me to slumber.

The alarm went off at 4 AM, and I got ready to catch the first light. As I waited, I recalled the readings: the day began as it had ended last night, in the exact same spot on the distant horizon. It was precisely as if the evening's visual was replayed in reverse. As if nature started the day with another show of galactic colors, filled with magic. As I enjoyed the sunrise with a cup of tea, my phone rang. It was my father's friend on the other end.

"Son!" he called, his voice barely a whisper.

"Uncle!" I exclaimed.

"Son, I'm sorry," he said softly. He continued, "Your Dad left us."

My heart stopped. My ears clogged. My eyes went blind. My mind blanked out for a moment. In a flash, the serene, color-filled morning transformed into a stormy sky slashed by thunder and lightning.

"Dad!" I whispered faintly. The very thought that I would never again have this person to call out to hit me like a heavy blow to my heart.

"Dad!" The thought that I would never use that word again for the rest of my life smacked me with a force that ripped my heart from my body.

It was the worst moment of my life. The very thought of it still hits me to the core. I never wished to relive it or even think about it. Until that point, I had never worried about anything in life. I had never thought

about my future. Because I had my Dad. I was born with a silver spoon; my Dad had never let me face any hardships life had thrown at me. He had always been there for me. He was my armor, my shield, and I don't know if that was good or bad. For the first time, I was worried, scared, sad, and for the first time in my life, I was forced to think about my future.

A future without my Dad. The silo of memory opened, revealing the moments we shared together. The laughs, the love exchanged, the happiness, the joy. All of them sweet, all pleasant. That's who he was, and that's how he always made me feel.

After the stormy emotions, as the morning sun rose, a sense of peace began to dawn within me. Peace filled with gratitude, humbleness, and a whole lot of love. A love that would last beyond life. I guess that was the only thing that helped me move on.

I vividly remember the ceremony. Sitting there, I could hear the key personnel in management talking, mostly concerned about the company's future.

"He is not ready," an elderly Board member declared, his voice dismissive.

"He never will be," another scoffed, a sneer evident in his tone.

"Born with a silver spoon, how will he ever know the reality of workers and their lives?" remarked the Worker's Union Leader, his words laced with skepticism.

"We need to issue a strong, assuring statement to the public. Primarily, we need to announce the new Chairman. A promising and stronger face for the Company. Otherwise, share prices will plummet," said the PR head, a note of urgency in his voice.

Hell yeah! They were all right. What did I know? Could education alone provide the knowledge? What did I know about leadership? Who was a leader? Just because I was born to *him*, would it qualify me to become the next Chair? Do I have it in me?

I vividly remember sitting in my Dad's office, while the entire management and Board contemplated the company's future. My Dad's friend, also a Board member, dismissed them and walked into the room, sitting opposite me. He didn't say anything, didn't talk about anything.

Minutes passed, and we both remained silent. After a moment, I said, "I may be naive, but not stupid. So, please go ahead and take your shot at me."

"There are no shots to be fired at you, Son!" he replied.

I looked at him and asked, "Uncle, why don't you say something? I hear the talks from the Board."

"About that!" he remarked. "Whenever you are ready, Son!"

He chuckled. "Your dad never rushed you into doing something you didn't want to." He looked at me, a

smile touching his lips. "That is not going to change, just because he is no longer with us."

"Take your time, and whenever you are ready to talk," he said softly.

I retreated into my silent zone once more.

He went to the window, opened it, and said, "Let's get some fresh air."

Moments later, my silence was broken by commotion and external noise. I couldn't resist checking what was happening outside. Thousands of people had turned up for his cremation.

"Uncle, what are they doing here?" I asked. "Is there any problem in the Company?"

He shook his head. "They are all here for your Dad."

I never knew he had influenced thousands of lives. Most had tears in their eyes; some even cried out loud.

"Everyone came not because he was the Chairman of the Company," Uncle came next to me and patted my shoulder. "They all turned up for the love they had for your Dad. The love he gave them. The way he treated and respected every one of them. Right from the CEO to the janitor."

"These people have no expectations from your Dad or from you," he said. "They all miss your Dad."

I looked at the crowd. The whole area was filled with people, even children and family members of employees.

"Your Dad was not just an Employer," Uncle said. "He was more than that. He was one among them."

"They all turned up not because the Chairman of the Company died," Uncle explained. "But because they had lost one of their own family members. They all mourn the loss of his life just like we do," he said in a low voice.

I stood there, looking down at the crowd for many moments.

Finally, I turned to him. He read my mind. "Son!, I know you are sad, scared, confused, anxious, and above all, I understand you are hurting."

"Like I said," he reiterated, "whenever you are ready to talk. Whenever you are ready to hear what your Dad's dream and wish for you were."

"Dad's dream for me?" A shiver went down my throat. He had never asked for anything from me. What if this was his dying wish? What if he wanted me to take over? Even if I were ready, how would I ever fill his large shoes? How would I fill the huge vacuum he had left in the hearts of thousands of people? How could I win their trust and be the family member they needed? The very thought scared me, concerned me. I was perplexed. I dropped to the floor on my knees and remained quietly.

But if there was a dream my Dad had for me, at least let me hear what he had to say. Let me hear about his last wishes.

"Uncle," I said, "I don't know if I am ready, or if I ever will be. But at least, I will hear what his last wishes were for me."

"All in good time, Son!" He smiled faintly and handed me two letters from my Dad. One was addressed to me, and the other was a message Uncle would deliver to the Board. I opened the first letter.

Son!

I have to say goodbye to you. Unfortunately! What can I say, this is life. Although I would love to spend a lot more time with you, travel the world with you, share a hot cup of coffee in the Himalayas, spend nights in the Amazon jungles, hike the Caucasus Mountains, or vacation on the Mediterranean Islands. But, I guess life had different plans for both of us.

As a father, I have always been proud of you. Not just for all your achievements, but for the person you were and who you have become. Son, you were always an inspiration for me. Do you remember the time you did a Solar power project in high school for sustainable living and environmental protection?

I paused, remembering how passionately we both worked on that project. I remembered how my father canceled all his meetings and spent day and night

buying and building the miniature solar power plant to bring it to life. I remembered it very clearly.

That was the inspiration for me to create our nation's first fully integrated sustainable community for common people. Son, you are truly a remarkable being, a visionary, and a leader. I have always loved that passion in you and the conviction to strive for what you want to achieve, yet remain humble and calm.

Son, I have never advised you on anything. So, I am not going to break the norm now. As I won't be able to be with you, I want to leave you with these words. When life throws its curveballs at you, when you feel you are being thrown off, just remember: you are a fighter. You never give up on your dream and passion. Travel around the world, meet new people, live life every day anew, and don't forget, no matter what, I will always love you.

Goodbye Son!

I folded the letter back, looking at his picture. Truly a remarkable person. All I could think of was what I had done to earn such a father who loved me all the way from my birth until death. How could I ever repay that benevolence? Tears of gratitude welled in my eyes.

I picked up the second letter. "Should I read it?"

"Please go ahead. Open and read it," Uncle said.

Dear Family members,

I am sorry to have left you all in shock. I didn't get enough time to say goodbye, or apologize for any hurt I might have caused. However, I have always kept the best interest of my family, this company. As an outgoing Chairman and in my right to elect my successor, I am proposing that the next Chairman will be entirely elected based on merit of knowledge, experience, and above all, the one who wins the confidence and trust of the shareholders and employees. The Board will select the Consultant who will shortlist candidates through a fair and transparent process based on the criteria I have provided above. I hope that the one who succeeds this selection process will be the best fit for our Company. I am leaving you all in good hands.

I folded the second letter and handed it back to Uncle. He left me in my Dad's office. The city outside, teeming with thousands mourning him, seemed to blur. Inside, bathed in the soft glow of the desk lamp, I held my father's words, his dreams, and his trust. It was then, in that quiet, heavy space, that I made my two promises to him: one, to chase my passion and live the dream he had inspired; the other, to safeguard the family—this vast company and its people—he had so faithfully stewarded. Six months later, the Consultant shortlisted three candidates, and I was one among them. Following a period of probation, the Board unanimously elected me as the Chairman.

So, one month a year, I give to myself. I live a normal life, traveling anonymously, fulfilling my Dad's last

wishes, chasing and living my dream. For the remaining eleven months, I dedicate it to my family – the family my Dad promised to leave in good hands.

As I walked down the hilly road toward the town center, my personal bodyguard awaited me.

"Good to see you back, Boss!" he said, taking my bag. "Hope you had a wonderful vacation, Boss!"

"It was amazing," I replied with a smile. "Do you know how to brew Georgian wine?" He smiled, shaking his head. "No."

"Okay! We're going to try it sometime," I said.

He handed me my phone. "Welcome back, Boss!" my secretary replied.

"Thanks," I replied.

"How was the trip?" she asked.

"Refreshing!" I answered. "I must reach the city before the first light. Let's catch up tomorrow morning and fill me in on my schedule."

I ended the call and boarded the ride. The image of my Dad, like the enduring mountain peak, flashed in the distant dark night on the hill. A breeze of happiness, and a heart filled with gratitude.

I have promises to keep.

And miles to go before I sleep.

And miles to go before I sleep.