

A Heart That Remembered Everything

— My Autobiography —

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CHAPTER 1



"FROM MY MOTHER'S ARMS TO BOARDING SCHOOL"



Loreto Convent Entally, kolkata (ICSE Board) My boarding school.

I was born in 1968 into a Roman Catholic family in the city of Kolkata at a modest municipal hospital. My mother often teased me, saying I was a tiny, dark baby who looked more like a little rat rather than a human-something we later laughed about together. Every morning after sunrise, my mother's younger brother, Uncle William, would lovingly carry me up to the terrace and massage me with mustard oil, believing it would strengthen my bones and perhaps even

brighten my complexion a little. My darling uncle tried every trick in the book to transform me from what he called an "ugly duckling" into a cute baby, because in his eyes, I was his little princess. Life at home was simple and sometimes difficult. My parents couldn't afford much, so my mother, at times, fed me glucose water instead of milk. Thank God I was an infant and couldn't protest-hahaha.

My earliest memories of childhood begin around the age of four, my mother was a primary teacher earning a small salary, yet doing her best to manage our little household. We were three girls: my sister Maureen, three years older than me; I was the middle child; and then came my baby sister Veera, two years younger. Sadly, but tragically, she lived for only six months. She died of a severe stomach infection. I was too young to grasp the weight of the loss. While everyone around me mourned, I remember playing in the corner, unaware of the depth of the loss. My baby sister lay there on the floor, still and lifeless, as if in deep sleep, while sorrow wrapped around my mother and the rest of the family.

My father, caught up in politics, was young, restless, and often busy making poor decisions and getting into trouble. Married early and suddenly the father of three daughters, he found it hard to embrace responsibility. To him, life felt like a movie set, and he imagined himself as a hero of a grand Hindi cinema. It was my mother who stepped up; most of the burden of raising us fell on my mother, who became both mother and father to us. It wasn't easy for her, but she did her best despite the challenges. We didn't get to see much of our father. He spent much of his time in prison, and I have a few faint but fond memories of him.

I recall him saving apples and Marie biscuits given to him in jail, keeping them aside for our visits. He'd share them among us; it made us incredibly excited; perhaps those little treats felt like luxuries to us. He genuinely tried to be a good father to us. But yes, we were all afraid of his temper; he was extremely strict, so my elder sister kept her distance. But I was the bold one, a bit of a brat too. I would be all over him. When he was in a good mood, he would play with me, lifting me on his tummy, singing Hindi and English songs in his tuneful voice. I inherited my love for music from those moments. To this day, I still remember some of his favourite songs. My father was handsome, though not very tall; he had a wheatish complexion, with long frizzy hair tied in a top knot, a silver kada on his wrist, and a presence that left an impression. My mother always said I got the looks from my father, and I held on to that with a little pride. Because I was daddy's little girl till he was around. That's why I feel a little pretty sometimes- hahaha.

Maureen and I, however, were the complete opposite in every way. Honestly, but I always thought she was more beautiful. She was tall, fair, quiet, and reserved, while I was darker, shorter, bold, and mischievous. Trouble followed me everywhere. Neighbours' complaints about me were routine, and punishments and spanking barely bothered me. I was loud, outgoing, and cheeky, while Maureen remained shy and withdrawn. She was uncomfortable around strangers. Life at home was tough for my mother; she struggled to balance work and raising us, and eventually she made the heartbreaking decision to send us to boarding school. I was only four years old when I first walked through the gate of Loreto Convent Entally, a girls' school affiliated with the ICSE board up to high school, which was run by

Irish nuns and priests. My sister joined later, as she was undergoing asthma treatment and wasn't medically fit to join the boarding school yet.

The school was a sanctuary of its own-spotlessly clean, surrounded by lush greenery, one of the most beautiful parts of the school was its small, vibrant garden blooming with colourful flowers, whose fragrance lingered in the air, filled with butterflies, ladybirds, dancing among the petals, and we would often try to catch them, gently placing them on our hands to admire their delicate beauty. But they would flutter away, startled by our touch. The chirping of birds echoed through the garden, creating a soothing melody that made us feel their presence. Just listening to them brought us a sense of peace and joy. In those simple moments, we came to realise the blissful beauty of god's creation. Our school had a small farm where fresh organic fruits and vegetables were grown. Once ripe and ready, they were served to us, adding a touch of nature's goodness to our meals. A lovely heritage church with lifelike statues of Mother Mary and Jesus, whose faces seemed to radiate blessings. It felt as though they were grazing directly into our eyes. Comforting us and making us feel deeply safe. Loved and protected, as if whispering, "we are here for you, children, always" Atop the church, there was a large black bell that rang peacefully at dawn and dusk; its sound carried from far and wide, calling us for mass and prayer. Whenever we spotted the priest, we would run towards him eagerly. He always carried candies in his pocket and handed one to each of us, greeting us with warmth and kindness. There was a small pond filled with tadpoles and a few little fish swimming around. We often tried to catch them, but they were too quick for us.

What we enjoyed even more was dipping our hands into the cold, freezing water; it was such a thrill, we loved teasing them and watching them dart away. Our school courtyard was a lively space where we played basketball, hockey, and throwball. During the rainy season, we had a variety of indoor games to keep us entertained. But the highlight of the week came every Thursday night, when the senior girls had an hour of recreation to showcase their dancing skills in the dance hall. They danced to beautiful old English songs, like jives, ballroom, and even salsa. We, interns and junior girls, would gather by the windows, mesmerised, just watching them. To our surprise, every girl danced so well, so gracefully with beautiful quick moves, even though they were never given formal dance training. A nun, a music teacher who played the piano beautifully, taught us how to sing in perfect rhythm with her musical scales. She trained us for the church choir during mass, and together we created harmonious music. Most of the girls had melodious voices, including me. We held grand concerts, celebrated events and sports day, where families were invited if their children were participating. Every child was special and talented in their own unique way. Our school had more than eight hundred boarders. From kindergarten to high school. And the rest were day scholars. Most boarding girls came from broken homes, single parents, or were orphans; thankfully, sponsors from abroad, kind-hearted foreigners who helped give us the chance to grow and shine. The weather was awesome in Calcutta, but the season we cherished the most was winter. Seeing the white, milky thick fog, it felt like magic. We'd walk on the wet, chilled grass beneath our feet, glistening with dew. And pretend we were movie stars, holding an invisible cigarette. We'd inhale the fog and exhale it like smoke puffs,

mimicking the heroine we saw on screen. Once in a while, a Hindi movie would be screened for us on a big white canvas using a projector. It was a rare treat, and we'd get wildly excited. The moment the lights dimmed and the film began, we were completely engrossed, lost in the dreamy world of cinema.

But amid these charms. Now comes the turning point, the saddest chapter of my journey began with the start of my boarding school life, when I had to part ways with the dearest person in my world: my beautiful mother. The hardest moment of my young life was the day my mother dropped me off for the very first time. I held her hands happily at the gate, unaware of what was coming. It never crossed my innocent mind that I would soon have to say goodbye. As we reached the school gate. The moment of separation crept in. I stood there confused, watching her prepare to leave. She knelt down, hugged me tightly, and kissed my cheeks. I looked up at her with a blank, innocent gaze, a silent question in my eyes, and then I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. That sight hurt me. Seeing her cry broke something inside me. Whenever my mother cried, even for her own reasons. I'd cry along with her. I could never bear to see her in pain. It was my nature to share her sorrows, to carry even a part of them with her. In that small, fragile moment, something in me understood things were not ok. I was overwhelmed, choking with emotions. Clinging to her saree. I cried out repeatedly, "Mummy, I'll never trouble you again! I'll be the good Child you always wanted to see in me!" It was a promise made by a trembling heart, trying to hold on to the only world she ever knew. In my little mind. I believed she was getting rid of me because I was a naughty child.

The nuns pulled me away from my mother, and I watched as she disappeared completely out of sight. I cried until every tear had dried on my pillow. I was so exhausted that I didn't realise when I drifted off to sleep. Deep down, I felt abandoned. I knew I wouldn't see my mother again. With very little choice. I was forced to compromise and begin learning how to live without her presence in my life. The pain of separation still lives in my heart even today. When I arrived at the school, the other girls looked at me with a kind of pity. I was just a new admission to them, but perhaps they too had stood once where I stood-lost, heart broken, and forced to adapt. Maybe that's why they could relate to me. I was very possessive of my mother and deeply attached to her. According to my sister, I was Mom's favourite girl, and that upset her, a feeling she later shared with her close friends. Speaking of what she felt was partiality. I guess in some ways, I grew up faster than my age.

Boarding school quickly stripped away the tender comforts of my childhood. At the age of four, when most children are pampered and guided by their parents, yet learning to walk through life hand in hand, I was already becoming aware of things beyond my years. That's the age we are taught right from wrong, nurtured gently into the world. I missed out on bedtime stories, no one to tuck me into bed with a good night kiss, no soft taps to put me to sleep. No warm meals fed with love, because eating on my own would just get messier. No one to give me a clean shower, those tiny hands couldn't do a better job than a mother could. No one to comb my hair nearly, tie my shoelaces, or sharpen my pencils. No shopping trips or garden walks, no movies or restaurant treats, no cuddles, no

tight hugs that wrapped me in my mother's warmth. From the smallest to the biggest things, a child depends on their parents during those early years. That's what life demanded of me. I wasn't given a choice or option. Eventually, I realised that facing life alone wasn't hard. It became a routine. And in school, I saw other kids doing the same things, managing on their own, and that's when it struck me I wasn't special. I was just like them. I stopped thinking I was less privileged, and I started feeling less like a rejected Child. Because maybe? Just maybe, this was my normal? I owned no toys; I never really knew what a toy looked like. I didn't even own a plastic doll. I remember playing with my colourful pencils, imagining them as my dolls, making them dance across my classroom desk, while I hummed little tunes. I pictured each pencil dressed in a saree of its own colour, sounds crazy now when I think about it-silly, but honestly kind of cute, full of innocence. That was real happiness for me: having nothing, yet dreaming big. That was always me, finding reasons and excuses to smile or laugh out loud. Maybe it was pain? But I never acknowledged it as that. Even the smallest thing brought me joy. Anything made me giggle, because crying wasn't an option. No one really cared. So, when I cried, it was hidden under my bedsheet or locked away in the bathroom. I used to feel it was a shame to cry in front of others. But laughing? I shared freely with the world, which was easier for me.

In school, we girls had to appear spotless. Every inch of our bodies, from head to toe, was subjected to sudden inspection by the matrons. Hair, nails, uniform, shoes. Everything had to be perfect. One small mistake and we were punished without mercy. We were pulled by our hair or spanked hard.

If lice were found, hair was chopped off without a second thought, and long-haired people cried bitterly as their locks fell to the floor. Unfortunately, my sister was one of them. It was heartbreaking to witness, and though it wasn't happening to us, it still hurt.

CHAPTER 2



MY SISTER, MY ANGEL



My eldest sister Maureen. My lifeline forever.

Over time, we became thick-skinned. The discipline was so harsh that even the smallest slip was met with punishment, and perfection felt impossible. Slowly, we became numb. Tears no longer came easily; we had cried too much, too often. We learned to bow our heads and endure.

Sometimes our cheeks were pinched so hard they turned red or pink, oddly enough, we found strange comfort when other girls teased that it looked like blush, it made us laugh a little. A few bold girls even dared to laugh or mimic the matrons and nuns after being punished. They feared no one and, in their own way, taught us the value of resilience. Back then, physical violence against children was allowed, even normalised. There were no rules, no protection, not from the government, not even from parents. We simply survived it.

Into this world stepped my elder sister, Maureen. As mentioned earlier, she joined school a bit later; she had a sponsor because our mother could not afford the fees. The nuns, aware of our financial struggles, kindly arranged help for at least one child. By coincidence, Maureen shared the same name as her sponsor from America.

And because of this, her sponsor grew very fond of her, and they kept in touch through letters. She often sent her thoughtful gifts that Maureen, in turn, would always generously share with me.

Describing my sister as an earth angel truly reflects what I saw in her. From the moment she arrived, she instinctively took on the role of a mother to me. The insecurity I had carried disappeared. Suddenly replaced by a sense of safety and warmth. I felt happy, loved, reassured, as if to say, Now I have someone of my own to fall back on. The bond we shared back home and the one we had in boarding school were worlds apart. I could feel the shift deeply. Every step I took, she held my tiny hands and walked with me; it was her way of reminding me, "Audrey, you're not alone anymore. I'm here; you can count on me," And that was the most beautiful feeling in the world. From

that moment on, my troubles no longer belonged to me alone-they became hers too.

I, however, was the naughty one, forever embarrassing her in front of her friends. I followed her everywhere like a little lamb, which she clearly wasn't comfortable with, while she longed for her space. From wetting my bed as a child due to a weak bladder, or perhaps some deep-rooted childhood fear that showed up in this way, to struggling with low marks in school. I always felt like a disappointment. Especially when compared to my sister, who was admired as the perfect girl. Standing beside me, I felt like I was a disgrace to her image.

The nuns and matron would regularly punish or spank me for messing up. Poor Maureen was often called to the office to be given yet another complaint about me, and to somehow drill some sense into my head.

But all those efforts were in vain. When her name was called, she knew instantly it was because of me, her face betraying panic and a flutter of butterflies in her tummy, as she thought. "Oh! No, not again" Written all over her face. And the nuns would lecture me: why can't you be more like your sister? So obedient, so well-behaved. And in my head, secretly, I'd laugh, thinking, I don't even want to try being like her-how boring! I was happy being myself, and I knew she loved me just the way I was. I'm sure she would never want me to change. I would always be that kid sister to hers.

Although she was my elder sister, that did not spare her from me. During holidays at home, our sisterly battles erupted fiercely. We fought with words, sometimes even with fits, and though she was bigger, I never saw myself as weaker. In my mind, we were equals. And once we started,

no one could easily separate us. Mom was always busy with work; she hardly had time for our childhood nonsense. But once we were back in school, my sister became my best companion.

I was a foodie, and during meals, Maureen, being a senior, was often in charge of serving our table. She always remembered where I sat. Because it was our regular fixed place. She always filled my plate with food. I had a habit of eating quickly as I was always hungry. She would look at me with disbelief and say, "How can you eat so much? You're so tiny- how big can your stomach even be? She mentioned this to our mother during visiting days, half amused and half concerned. The meals were simple, organic, and fresh. The rice often had tiny stones, and porridge had a few worms in it. It wasn't properly cleaned. How could it be, with so many children to feed? But we ignored all that; we ate them regardless, because we had no choice. Looking back, it wasn't the food; it was about the care.

It was about her serving me with sisterly love, about her watching me grow, not in size, but in spirit. She always kept extra toiletries and stationery with her, knowing I'd come running to her, saying, "I lost my pencil" or "my toothpaste is over." Memories of her still touch my heart deeply. On my birthday every year, she would quietly place a small gift beside my breakfast plate, a surprise waiting for me. And from a distance. She would simply watch, smiling, as I tore the gift wrapping in delight. Eager to see what was inside.

The gift was never grand- perhaps a bar of Lifebuoy soap, a story book because I loved to read, or a packet of pencils- but it was always the thought that mattered. Even now, the habit has stayed with me. I open every gift with haste, heart racing with anticipation, never caring if it's

costly or simple. What I cherish is the gesture, the thought, the love. To make me happy, no one needs to try too hard. Small, thoughtful acts are enough to bring a smile to my face that reaches my eyes. Material things have always mattered little. It is the love that wins me over every time.

CHAPTER 3



BETWEEN LOVE AND LOSS



**My mother's youngest sister, my grandmother
and my beautiful mom with the black skirt.**

With Maureen's unconditional pure love, I don't even remember when I stopped feeling the absence of my mother. Maureen slowly and completely took over my life. I turned to her for the little things. Somewhere along the way, my mother faded into the background. Maureen gradually

became my world, my comfort, my safe place. Just seeing Maureen from afar was enough to bring me peace. I didn't need her to talk to me; one glance, one moment of crossing paths and locking eyes. That was all I needed to be seen. But sometimes, she would suddenly disappear. I'd search for her everywhere, filled with worry; the nuns never told me anything, and I was left confused and anxious. Only later did I learn she suffered from severe asthma attacks and had to be quietly taken home for proper treatment. My mother would come silently, pick her up, and leave, because if I saw them, I would cry and request to go along. So, they did this in secret to spare me the pain.

Life changed suddenly when I turned six. We were called home from school without warning, and there he was—my father, lying lifeless, covered with a white sheet. His face looked grey and bruised. Just like that, he was gone.

My dad was no more, and we would never see him again. The elders told us to kiss him and touch his feet, like our final goodbye. My mother was crying bitterly, but this time, I didn't cry along with her like I usually did; my sister and I didn't know what hit us. We just stood there, staring at him in silence. There were no tears, no sobs. We hardly knew him; the grief felt hollow; there was no deep sense of loss; there hadn't been much interaction or connection between us; he was a distant figure in our lives. Like losing a familiar stranger.

After my father's funeral, we went back to school, carrying heavy hearts but little understanding of what was unfolding in my mother's world. Though she had a large family, her parents and siblings, she had married young and, by thirty, was already a widow. Our classmates and the nuns looked at us with quiet sympathy, their eyes filled with

kindness. But we were ok- we had each other. The reality of the loss hadn't sunk in deeply yet, almost unreal.

During vacations, we stayed with our grandparents, and those days were filled with joy, and it was always super fun. Our uncle, who worked in flurries, brought us delicious cakes, chocolates, and fruit buns. My sister and I would eagerly wait at the entrance, patiently waiting on a Sunday for him to return from work. The moment he arrived, we'd rush to grab the goodies box and start dividing the treats between us. Carefully picking out our favourite flavour. Our unmarried aunt was another highlight of those days; she often took us to Hindi movies and brought home film magazines. That's where my love for cinema began, and I became a full-blown movie buff. She also had a music tape recorder and a collection of the latest Hindi movie song records. I'd spend hours singing along and dancing my heart out.

My grandmother often got annoyed with me because I had the habit of sneaking coins from her purse to buy candies. Eventually, she started hiding her purse and came up with a clever plan: I had to earn my pocket money. She'd assign me a little task like pulling out her grey hairs, massaging her legs. Or fetching groceries from the nearby store. And then I got cheeky; I started asking, "How much will you pay me for this?" "Hahaha!

Though my grandmother loved us, she often said I resembled my father in colour and features, and that didn't sit well with them, since they never truly accepted him from day one. My mother had run away to marry my father at the young age of sixteen. And who didn't belong to their caste. "My father's parents were an inter-caste couple, his mother a Bengali and his father was an Anglo- Indian.

CHAPTER 4



WHEN MY MOTHER STOPPED BEING MINE

My grandmother always seems to prefer my sister. She said she was more like them-fair in complexion and reserved in nature. I was different. Having two daughters and being a young widow made it difficult for my mother to live in a society filled with pity and often uncomfortable questions she never wanted to answer. The world around her was not kind; work became her escape, something to keep her mind busy. And keep her financially stable too. After my father passed away, she moved back in with her parents, where she found some comfort and support.

Then came the third phase of my life. One ordinary day, my mother suddenly informed my sister and me that she had decided to remarry. I was eight years old then. I didn't really understand what marriage meant, except for the vague memory of attending my uncle's wedding at the age of five, with me being the flower girl on his wedding day. But even then, I knew one thing clearly: the thought of sharing my mother with anyone else filled me with confusion and dread.

It was the beginning of a new chapter. One we weren't prepared for. It was a huge shock. Because I was deeply attached to my mother and couldn't imagine sharing her with anyone-not even my own sister. So how could I possibly share her with a man, a total stranger to us, someone I had never ever seen before? How could I call him "Daddy" when, in my heart, I had already lost my father? I had always believed that everyone was meant to have just one Dad.

After my father's death, my mother completely cut off contact with her in-laws. They had harassed her even when my father was alive, and now they wanted to take me away because I resembled my father. Seeing me reminded them of him, and eventually, my mother discovered they were planning to kidnap me from school. Terrified, she sought help from the nuns, who arranged police protection and promised to take special care of me. They treated me like one of their own, and I became part of their lives and responsibilities. I have no real memories of my father's family, only faint fragments. He had a huge family, and we visited occasionally, but they remained distant.

Now, coming back to my mother's marriage. When she shared her plans to remarry, she tried hard to convince both my sister and me. She said this new dad would give us everything we dreamt of: a better life, delicious food, lots of candies, beautiful new dresses, heaps of toys, and even a big new house of our own. It felt like she was trying to bribe us into agreeing, sugarcoating everything in hopes we'd go along with it. My sister, as usual, was easily convinced. But me? I was the tough one to crack. I looked straight into my mother's eyes, expressionless, and said firmly, "I don't want any of that you just mentioned. I only want you."

But my feelings were truly not considered. The date of the marriage was fixed, and everything fell into place. They had a court marriage followed by a small reception with close friends and family. I was shattered, broken by what felt like betrayal. I cried endlessly, begging my mother, "Please don't get married."

I don't want a new Daddy. I only want you." My cries became so unbearable that, during the ring ceremony, they literally locked me in a room, just to get through it, so that the vows and exchange of rings could continue without disruption.

I sat behind a closed door. Swallowed by pain. When they finally let me out, I wasn't the same. I didn't smile, I didn't speak, I just sat in the corner, sulking, invisible in the middle of the celebration around me. No one really noticed me, oh maybe, no one wanted to. After the wedding, my surname was changed from Rodrick to Gonsalves. On paper, legally. To the outside world, it may have seemed like a simple adjustment- just a change on paper, but to me, it felt like suddenly, I was expected to accept a new father and a new identity. I had always been Rodrick, my father's daughter. The name was more than just letters-it was my last connection to my father, to who I was.

But I couldn't bring myself to call him "daddy" before marriage; we used to call him "Chocolate Uncle" because he worked on the ship and used to get us foreign chocolates whenever he visited us. Over time, his visits became more frequent, and before I could understand what was happening, suddenly he was no longer "Uncle," he was my mother's husband, and legally, our father. My mother always tried to make the transition easier. She would tell us, "This is your new daddy."

But the single word New stayed in my little head. That name never left me- perhaps because in my little heart, he never truly became "Daddy." The word New was etched in my memory for life. It carried both innocence and pain.

At school, when the teachers and children began addressing me as "Gonsalves, " I stumbled, hesitated, sometimes even ignored it altogether. The girls were curious. They whispered when they found out I suddenly had a new dad and a different surname. I struggled too, unsure of who I was supposed to be now. Through all this, my sister became my anchor. With her beside me, I slowly found strength again.

My mother had met my new dad through her youngest sister. My grandfather's journey ended suddenly- he died on board, on duty, from a heart attack, later after my father's death. My grandfather had worked as a chief officer on a Cargo ship. Because of his rank and position, he was allowed to take his family along with him at sea. And one day, by chance, my new dad's vessel was docked beside my grandfather's ship in Cochin. As they stepped off the Pier, they met and got introduced. They started talking and got a bit friendly, and soon enough, my aunt began sharing family photos with him. That's when his eyes caught sight of my mother. Back then, she was young and beautiful. He immediately asked on seeing her picture, "Who is this woman? Aunt replied that she was her elder sister, a young widow left with two little girls, now staying with them. He listened carefully and, without hesitation, asked for my aunt's house address in Calcutta. He said he would visit someday soon when his ship sailed to Calcutta. But he didn't waste time; he soon turned up at my grandparents' house and was introduced to my mother.

That first visit turned into frequent ones, and over time, they both began talking often and grew closer.

My grandparents approved of him; the best part for them was that he worked on the ship, and back then, that meant he was doing well in his career. In those days, marrying a man working on the ship was considered a big thing. Plus, he was a Goan too, so everything aligned perfectly. This time, my mother's family happily gave her their blessings, unlike with my daddy, who had been a runaway marriage with no match at all, which they disapproved of. Whether it was fate or my aunt's doing that brought them together, only God has this answer. At the time of my mother's second marriage, my new dad was significantly younger than her. About seven years precisely.

CHAPTER 5



A NEW CITY, A NEW FAMILY



A new beginning held in one frame. My sister Maureen, my mother with my little brother Sunil on her lap, my new Dad, and me with short hair.

My mother went to visit Bombay, now known as Mumbai, for the first time, accompanied by my new dad. It was a complete surprise to his entire family when he introduced her as his wife, as they hadn't been informed about the marriage. Naturally, it came as a huge shock to them, not only because they weren't present at the wedding, but also because she was a widow, much older than him, and a mother of two daughters.

At that time, he had only his mother; his father had passed away when he was a child. He had three more siblings, and he was the youngest amongst them all.

Gradually, her in-laws accepted her. My mother won their hearts because of her simplicity; as a result, she often started visiting Mumbai whenever he signed off on vacation. However, my sister and I were unaware of this, as we were away at boarding school. But I noticed this when my mother didn't come to visit us on the second Sunday, our visiting day. Instead, our grandmother and aunt came with food and treats. My mother had given them detailed instructions on what to bring, what we liked to eat, and what we needed. Whenever I didn't see my mother walking in with them, my heart would sink. I would run up and ask, "Where is Mummy? Why hasn't she come?" It was unlike her to miss a visit, and the emptiness of her absence felt unbearable. My aunt would reply, Mummy's unwell, she couldn't come today, " but that explanation never eased the ache inside me. I would cry bitterly, my heart searching for her in every corner, hoping somehow she might still appear. The truth, I later learned, was that she was in Mumbai; it felt as though the world had forgotten to bring me, my mother.

Visiting days were full of excitement. The full atmosphere lit up when the family arrived. The younger girls, like me, waited eagerly for our family. But the senior girls often had their own drama going on. They weren't excited to meet their families as they were about spotting which girls had brothers or cousins coming. And let's be practical, the boys came not only to visit their sisters, but also to check out the girls. It was a two-way street. The preparation would begin a day in advance, girls fixing their hair, doing their nails, all to catch someone's eye. And

watching the flirtatious exchange and playful expression was like live entertainment. But no matter how bright the evening was, the goodbyes were always the hardest, parting with our families left many of us teary-eyed. There was always a quiet, heavy sadness that followed.

For me, the disappointment ran deeper. I couldn't even enjoy the tuck my mother brought, which we were allowed to keep in the refectory in a steel cupboard, and were given permission to have them at tea time, because I was often punished for some reason, my share was taken away. My sister seeing my sadness, would quietly tell my mother to take my share of treats back home, saying, it would only go to waste, she already had her share, which was more than enough for her, she did feel sorry for me, and tried to ease my hurt, even when the strict school rules kept me from enjoying the little joy I longed for."

Eventually, my mother had to introduce her daughters to her in-laws someday, sooner or later.

So, one fine day during one vacation, she finally planned a trip to Mumbai. She told us to pack our bags because we were going to visit our new family in Mumbai. Before we left, she reminded us to be on our best behaviour, to be polite, well-mannered, and show how disciplined we were. That wasn't difficult for us, we were from a convent school, after all, my mother painted such a rosy, magical picture of Mumbai. She told us it was a beautiful city, full of glamour and excitement. She said we might get to see a few film stars as they live around. Being a movie enthusiast, I was thrilled. The vacation felt like a dream. We couldn't hold on to our excitement and mentioned it to friends at school. Their reaction? A mix of "wow" and envy. We felt special. When we arrived, we were awestruck.

Mumbai felt cleaner and more modern compared to Kolkata. Tall buildings, auto rickshaws, crowded local trains, and busy roads made the city pulse with energy. A new family welcomed us warmly. My grandmother, whom all her grandchildren affectionately called "Bombay Nana, " the name Bombay Nana was actually given by her eldest grandson Glenn, when he was just a child. At home, whenever he called out "Nana, " both his grandmothers would turn back at once, leaving him confused about whom he meant. To make things simpler, he began calling his mother's mother "Goa Nana" too. Bombay Nana instantly won my heart. And my new dad's only sister was exceptionally gentle and loving towards us. We did a lot of sightseeing and had the thrill of visiting a film set with cousins at Film City, where Hindi movies were being shot. Glenn's immediate next-door neighbour was a famous actress named Rita Bhaduri, which was quite exciting! Like stepping into a dream. The vacation was short but filled with fun. And we'd return to Kolkata with countless memories and stories to share with our school friends.

Back at school, we were all equals. Each girl was assigned a task every week, polishing brass knobs and handles until they shone. Some would clean the doors and windows, some would clean the dormitory, or scrub the refectory. That's how our school campus stayed immaculately clean, a lesson that taught us both discipline and pride in sharing responsibility.

My mother finally bought a 1BHK

flat in a Muslim locality. It wasn't big, but it was ours, and that meant everything. Right across our window stood a mosque, where men gathered every Friday for prayer. By then, I had turned ten years old.

My mother had just given birth to a baby boy. And while it was a time of joy, a part of me felt a twinge of jealousy. My grandmother's neighbour once teased me, "Now everyone will love you less, especially your mother. And those words lingered in my mind, even if they were meant in jest.

During our school vacation, my mother entrusted me with a small responsibility, of making milk for my brother, but the milk powder tasted so good. I couldn't resist sneaking spoonfuls of it myself. The milk powder would finish much quicker than expected, often not lasting for long. My mother used to look puzzled. I knew it was me, but didn't dare to admit it. Afraid of being scolded.

Still, I adored my little brother; he was chubby, fair, with curly hair, like a living doll I could call my own. I was overjoyed to be his elder sister. My sister, being the eldest amongst us three, naturally took on a motherly role. She cared for us with a quiet maturity. My new dad named him Sunil, chosen after the cricketer Sunil Gavaskar, whom he admired and was a huge fan of. At school, whenever my mother visited us along with my brother, it caused a stir; all the girls crowded around just to catch a glimpse of him, some wanting to hold him. He was our little star, a friendly child, always with a broad smile on his face, winning hearts everywhere. And the attention he got made both me and my sister feel proud and special. Even today, some of my old school friends still remember him fondly.

Sunil was pampered and deeply loved by everyone, especially my mother's youngest sister, who practically raised him, surrounded by so much affection. He grew up into a cheerful child whose charm made him unforgettable. For me, despite my jealousy, he was the brother I had always longed for, and his presence filled our home with happiness and laughter.

CHAPTER 6



FEAST DAYS AND THE HOUSE THAT HELD MY HEART



**From Boarding school friendship till date.
Ann, me in the middle and Sabrina.**

Back in school, we were all part of different colored Houses. Each is named after a saint. Red house was St. Joseph's, Green St. Patrick's, Blue St. Michael's, and Yellow St. Don Bosco's. I belonged to the Green House St. Patrick's. And I still feel a flutter in my heart whenever I think of those days at convent school.

There was something incredibly special about feast days, especially when it was the feast of the saints your House was named after. It felt like your birthday. The school made sure we were treated like little royals.

On St. Patrick's Day. We were served a special lunch—bright yellow special pulao, and a big juicy sausage, with a banana on the side. It may sound simple, but to us it was a feast fit for the kings and queens.

The celebration didn't stop there. After lunch, our teachers and the nuns would take us to an English movie at a theatre near our school. It was such a treat.

I still remember the first English movie we saw: Saturday Night Fever. I was a little girl then, but the movie stirred something deep inside me. John Travolta, with the deep cleft on his Chin and those mesmerising dance moves, became my forever favourite. The whole film was about dancing, a passion so close to my heart, and I was completely enthralled. It felt like the movie had been made just for me.

My sister was in the Red House, St. Joseph, and she had her own special day too. Our parents would give us pocket money for the month, two rupees to each one of us. Which made us feel rich enough to enjoy those little luxuries of school life.

Our pocket money was kept safe with the nuns, with our names carefully written on the book with the amount. On Thursdays, we were given fifty-paise coins each, and those small coins felt like treasure in our tiny palms.

We would rush to buy chaat from the senior girls who were allotted the duty of selling delicious treats in school. And the profits went towards the school, but for us, it was

all about the joy of those tangy, spicy bites shared with friends.

In school, friendships were more than just connections. They were like little empires of their own. Some groups had five or six girls; others were smaller but tightly bound. The bolder ones- usually the outspoken or the bullies- commanded larger circles, with a clear leader at the centre.

I belonged to one such group of four girls. My friend Ann D'Souza was the strong one, confident, bold, and naturally the commanding one. I, on the other hand, was softer in nature, eager to please, and perhaps a little unsure of myself. I followed Ann everywhere.

She had a way of bossing us around, not cruelly, but in a sweet, commanding tone that was sometimes both annoying and oddly comforting. I overlooked things and tolerated it most of the time, not because I had no voice, but because I valued the friendship too much to risk it.

Still, there were days when her behaviour wore me down. I'd retreat into silence, distancing myself from the group. In retaliation, Ann would warn the other girls not to talk to me, her subtle way of punishing me. They followed her lead, but somehow, it didn't bother me much. I found comfort in my solitude, knowing deep down it wouldn't last.

Ann would come back. Her way of saying sorry was with her smile, and just like that, everything fell into place again. My sister, however, never approved of our friendship. She felt Ann always dragged me into trouble, and that I ended up paying the price. She wasn't entirely wrong- hahaha. I can't deny that, I always got caught in the crossfire.

And yet something about that friendship meant more than the mischief or the punishment. It was real; that bond was unshaken. Today, though we live in different cities-she in Kolkata, and I in Mumbai-we remain close; when we meet, it's like stepping into a time machine.

We laugh at our childhood dramas. Silly fights, pranks, and the deep loyalty that never really faded. Some friendships are Messy, some a little lopsided. But the ones that last are the ones that were real from the start.

Now Ann has become just the opposite of her childhood self, having two beautiful daughters.

She is a wonderful mother; she is very spiritual, deeply religious. In many ways, she has become a better version of me.

CHAPTER 7



FEAR, DARKNESS, AND PUNISHMENT

Even now, past the age of fifty, a quiet fear still lives in me, a fear of the dark. I cannot sleep alone without the lights on, and the TV hums softly through the nights, keeping me company with voices that break the silence. This fear didn't begin in adulthood. It was born long ago, in the dormitories of my boarding school, where creaking beds and midnight whispers shaped my nights.

The girls often gathered to tell stories about ghosts and spirits. The most haunting talk was always about a girl named Mary Fox, a student who, they say, had jumped to her death from the terrace. Some believed she was deeply troubled; others claimed she was heartbroken. Whether true or not, we never knew, but what I do know is that the story scared me and changed something in me. The stories didn't stop there. Some girls swore they saw her ghost roaming in the corridor or standing by the windows. I believed them. I was young, sensitive, and unsure of myself. I was never the confident one, too timid to separate truth from imagination. That fear of shadows and silence never left me. I was a child trying to make sense of the world that often felt too loud, too

mysterious. Maybe it was the loneliness of being away from home at a tender young age, or the confusion of my childhood that felt a little too overwhelming. And so even now, with the wisdom and years behind me. I still sleep with the lights on. A small part of that frightened girl still lives in me, vulnerable, and just needs a bit of brightness in the dark.

Alongside that fear was a struggle I carried in secret: from a baby until I turned eleven. I wet the bed. It was not by choice, and certainly wasn't because I didn't care. But the nuns showed no understanding. Their punishment was cruel. The nuns had a system for children like me. If we wet the beds, we were denied water after six in the evening. Our throats are aching with thirst through the nights. To make matters worse, the dormitory toilets were locked at 8. p.m. It was because the girls used the toilets as an excuse to stay up late and play pranks. leaving us desperate. For children like us who wet their beds, it was a silent torture, as we couldn't use the toilet. I was desperate, so I found my own way, ashamed but determined. I would often quietly sneak into the toilet after 12 a.m., when the matron unlocked it, just to wet my tongue and drink water from the tap to soothe my dry mouth.

Because of bed wetting, we were not given a mattress. We slept on a bare iron rod bed with a thin bedsheet beneath us. In winters or rains, when our blankets wouldn't dry as we had to wash them ourselves as a punishment, we had nothing to pull over us to keep us warm. Our back bruised against the rod bed. All we could do was lie there shivering and curl up like a leaf to keep warm.

The punishment grew harsher. Sometimes we were forced to swallow a loaf of dry brown bread with no water, swallowing it was a challenge, it stuck in our throat, nearly

choking us. Each day, the punishment was different, disguised as a solution. Some nights we had to kneel on the hard floor of the dormitory from 8.30 bed time till 10.30. Till the nun was ready to go off to bed. If we shifted or dared to rest our aching knees by sitting. We were told to kneel a little bit more than our time. Other nights, we were pulled over the nun's lap and whipped with a feather duster real hard, which stung terribly, with a whip sound, on our bottoms and back of our legs and thighs. Leaving our skin raw, red, and bruised. That pain became a routine- a daily sentence for a weak bladder.

But the worst part, despite all the punishment, all the suffering, we few girls still wet our beds, because it wasn't defiance, it wasn't laziness, it was just something we couldn't control. And no one tried to understand that.

Now, when I look back and reflect, I finally allow myself to ask the question: why did I wet my bed until I was eleven years old? I began to research, and what I discovered brought me a great sense of peace. There were reasons- real validated ones. Bed wetting isn't always just a bad habit or carelessness. It can have medical and psychological roots. Sometimes it is due to a small bladder, deep sleep patterns where the brain doesn't get the signal to wake up, or a delay in the nervous system. In other cases, it's linked to emotional stress, anxiety, or trauma- things a child cannot always understand or express.

In my case, I know now that it was emotional stress and trauma. And with that knowledge, the shame no longer belongs to me. That little girl, once punished and misunderstood, can finally be seen with compassion. She wasn't broken. She wasn't bad. She was simply a child, carrying too much weight for her small shoulders. Today I

hold her close to my heart, and with each night that glows
beside my bed, I remind her that she is safe, loved, and no
longer alone in the dark.

CHAPTER 8



SHADOWS OF INNOCENCE, SEEDS OF CHANGE.



**Our Mother Superior, formerly known as
Sister Philomena, is now retired and lives in Ireland.**

There's something still fresh in my mind about school days, something I didn't fully understand then but makes complete sense to me now. Living in a girls' school, surrounded only by fellow students, nuns, teachers, and matrons, it was natural that close emotional bonds formed between some of the girls.

As a playful and innocent child, I never read too deeply into what I saw then. But as the years passed, and later conversations with old friends surfaced in adulthood, I began to understand the truth behind what I had once witnessed with such naivety.

Back then, we saw it as friendship, intense and emotional. But in hindsight, many of those relationships were early expressions of same sex love. No one dared name it that way. I remember two girls crying after a quarrel, others sitting in quiet corners, cuddling, or gazing into each other's eyes with such raw emotions. Some even went so far as to engrave each other's names into their wrists with blades, as their scars were proof of devotion. That always frightened me. When such an act was discovered, the punishment was harsh, scolding, beatings, public shame, isolation, or separation, parents summoned in anger. The word "love" was never spoken of gently; it was simply labelled "wrong."

As a child, I laughed it off or found it dramatic, because society never gave us the language or the compassion to understand anything outside the norm.

But today, with adult eyes and an open heart, I see differently. Those girls were simply discovering themselves in a world that gave them no space to exist as they were. Their feelings were real, though forbidden. What was hidden then in shadow and silence is thankfully beginning to be respected and understood today. I look back not with judgement, but with empathy-for the confusion, and the quiet heartbreak of those young hearts.

The fourth phase of my life began the day my mother and new dad made a firm decision to take us out of boarding school and enrol us as day scholars.

It was a turning point, a complete shift from the only world we had known since we were toddlers. From the age of three until eleven, the convent had been our home: the dormitories, the chapel bell, the scent of polished corridors, the rhythm and routine. Leaving it felt like tearing away a piece of ourselves.

When the nuns and girls of our school heard our mother's plan, the news hit them hard. We weren't just students—we were family. Growing up within those walls, year after year, had tied invisible threads of love and friendship. To imagine that we would no longer be there, to laugh in the dormitories, running through the courtyards, or kneeling together in prayer, was heartbreaking. But my mother had her way with us, of turning endings into beginnings. She could paint dreams with her words, and she knew how to guide our little hearts.

She made it all sound like an adventure, of travelling to school by tram and bus, the joy of hearing her voice each evening, the comfort of home-cooked meals, and the warmth of family nights. Away from the strict matrons and the occasional hardness of a few nuns. No more cold, tasteless food, no more fear of rules and punishment. Slowly, excitement bloomed.

Still, parting was not easy. Friends clung to us with tears in their eyes; their hugs were long, the tears honest. Eyes glistened with silent pleas, "Don't go, please stay with us." It was a moment etched in time. The kind of parting that hurts deeply because it comes from real love. Even the nuns walked us to the gate to bid us goodbye, their faces softer than usual. When we walked away from the gates of the only world we had ever known.

Something of us remained behind, nestled in the hearts of those we left, and something of them we carried away in memory. Life as day scholars brought us new freedom, but also quiet losses.

We did meet our friends, yes, but things weren't the same anymore. As day scholars, we had to bring our own tiffin and eat separately, not along with the boarders. That simple divide made a big difference. Our friends were also placed in different class divisions, so we hardly crossed paths during school hours. After school, we headed straight home. There wasn't time to linger, to chat, to laugh in the corridors like before. The brief moments we did get to see them, just enough to say a quick goodbye, weren't enough to hold on to the closeness we once shared. Slowly, the friendship began to fade. Bonds loosened, as they often do when time and circumstance pull us in new directions. Without regular contact or communication, the connection grew weaker. And that's how life goes, doesn't it? Nothing remains the same; people change, places change, and time quickly moves us forward, sometimes away from the ones we thought we'd never grow apart from. But the memories remain. And they remind us of what once was, and the beauty of having experienced it all.

CHAPTER 9



THE FIRST RED SECRET

I had grown older by then, though not yet completed twelve years. No longer the little girl I once was. Life had started to feel more normal. We were day scholars now, and when my new dad was home on vacation from the ship, he took it upon himself to drop us off at school and pick us up. My mom was still working then. That spared us the fear of travelling alone, Kolkata wasn't always safe for young girls, where eve-teasing was an everyday shadow we learned to live with.

School hours stretched from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., a long day, as always. Before leaving class, we bowed our heads in prayer. But that particular day, something unusual happened. I suddenly felt something trickling down my legs. I froze for a moment. At first, I thought I had wet myself. My face burned with embarrassment. Confused and panicked, I ran to the washroom. That's when I saw the blood. My heart raced. Had I cut myself? Was something wrong with me?

When I came out of the class, my sister was waiting for me, ready to head home. I pulled her aside, with my voice trembling, and whispered that I think I had a cut and was

bleeding from "down there." She looked at me for a moment and then burst into laughter- not out of mockery, but recognition. I stood there confused and hurt. Why the hell was she laughing when I was so scared? She understood immediately what I couldn't: I had gotten my first period.

They got a taxi, and we went straight home. Once there, she gently took me to the bathroom, sat with me, and explained everything she could. "This is called periods," she said softly. "It will happen every month now. Don't worry. Just stay clean, change regularly, and it will pass in a few days." I listened, but the truth was, I didn't really understand then. I still couldn't grasp it. What I understood was that she really loved me. Now, when I look back at it, what really touched me deeply and mattered most was how she never left my side. Month after month, she remembered the dates, reminded me, she became my guide, my comfort, and my quiet protector, and helped me manage what I could not yet handle alone.

What most daughters learn from their mothers, I learned from my sister. With patience, kindness, and love, she didn't make me feel alone; she just stood beside me-not just explaining, with understanding in her eyes and caring in her actions. And to this day, I feel blessed and lucky. Not everyone has a sister like mine.

CHAPTER 10



WHEN HOME WASN'T SAFE

Life after boarding school wasn't as bright as my mother had once painted it to be. My new dad turned out to be Stricker than even the nuns and matrons we'd grown up under. Though we were always given the best, especially when it came to food, his presence brought a heavy air into our home. Whenever he was down on vacation, I dreaded it. Even the smallest mistake would trigger his temper, and his punishments were harsh. He was a big man, and his blows left more than just physical pain. Maureen was often spared- she hardly ever made mistakes- but I seemed to catch his anger almost daily. We would sometimes ask my mother, "When is he joining the ship again?" His nine months away at work felt like a breath of peace in our lives.

Despite everything, I remained my mother's favourite, even with Sunil around. Maureen, with two younger siblings, naturally stepped into a caregiver role. She became a second mother, especially to Sunil, her favourite little brother. There was a thirteen-year gap between them, but that only made her love and protectiveness stronger. And so, the days passed.

Hard as they sometimes were, we found light in Sunil- he kept us busy, distracted, and gave us something to smile about.

I can't get too deep into life after boarding school- it wouldn't be fair. But I'll say this: it was the darkest time in many, many ways. The worst nightmare that yet frightens me. Something is best not to be revealed.

One of the few bright spots was our Sunday ritual. Maureen loved to go to Sunday Mass, not because she was spiritual or religious. But because her friend Christian would come home and join us. The three of us went for Mass together and then went to see a Hindi movie- that was our little tradition, most Sundays.

Maureen, however, was forced to tag me along, something she wasn't too thrilled about; she wanted to spend time with her age group, not babysit me everywhere. But my mother never allowed her to go alone with friends- she felt safer knowing I was there too. After all, I always updated my mother about everything happening around. I was her little spy! I didn't mind it- maybe I even enjoyed that power a bit too much. I had to be bribed for almost everything. If Maureen wanted something from the shop and asked me to get it, I'd shoot back, "What will you give me in return for doing your outdoor work? She'd get irritated, but that was our dynamic- our little give-and- take policy. She even had to iron my dress for Sunday Mass and polish my shoes too!

Even though we were now teenagers-me thirteen and she was sixteen- we fought like cats and dogs, fists and blows included.

Maureen was the neat one, while I was a messy whirlwind. But somehow, she always managed to bully me into doing her share of the housework.

How she pulled it off, only she knew. She was smart and clever in her ways. The funny part is, besides being messy myself, my Virgo side kicked in when it came to cleanliness at home. Keeping the house neat made me feel good and positive, and my mother was always happy about that.

We had a full-time maid, quite old, who took care of the cooking and other chores. She became the witness to all our dramas- even our physical fights and loud yelling. The maid was a messenger. Every complaint would be

Faithfully reported to mom when she came back from work in the evening. Our house always echoed with life, chaos, and a whole lot of love amongst us siblings beneath it all.

The landlord of the building had a big family, and his eldest daughter, Jharna, became my closest friend. We were thick as thieves. I'd spend my entire day at her place, playing and laughing without a care in the world. Her home felt like a second home to me. At night, Maureen would go to the next-door neighbour's house to sleep. The lady's husband worked the night shift, and she was pregnant with her first baby. Maureen kept her company through those lonely nights. It became a routine- each of us in our own little world, yet somehow always connected and shared moments.

My new dad had a good friend who was much younger than him. He visited us almost daily; his name was Vijay, fondly called Biju by his family.

He was a Bengali Muslim, and there was something about his presence that brought warmth into our home. I never called him uncle; to me, he was just Vijay. He had a kind energy, and I genuinely liked having him around. He always teased me in a playful, loving way, and I found myself looking forward to his visits. Sometimes I'd even go over to his house, since he lived nearby. He had a big family, and his mother's cooking still lingers in my memory- the delicious taste of Bengali food that felt like comfort. Vijay had two absolutely beautiful sisters, and I admired them each time I saw them. The sisters were incredibly close, always seen together.

Over time, Vijay became more than a family friend. He practically stayed with us, only going home to sleep. He was part of our daily life. The only thing I disliked was how much both Vijay and my new dad smoked. The smell filled the house and affected me and Maureen's breathing- it always bothered us. But Vijay had a soft side, especially with my brother Sunil, who followed him everywhere like a shadow. Vijay adored him, carrying him along to the mosque every Friday, right across from our building. And so, Vijay became part of my story too.

CHAPTER 11



FLAMES THAT STOLE MY SISTER

Life was already a complex puzzle I was trying to solve when yet another dreadful twist unfolded- one that, to this day, remains impossible for me to fully process. My mother was eight months pregnant with her second baby. As planned, she needed to send a telegram to my new dad, who was away sailing, to update him about her due date. He had expressed his wish to be back in time for the delivery, longing to be present for the arrival of his newborn, but fate had other plans.

One morning, while my sister was making tea- because our maid was unwell and resting- the stove burst as she was pumping it, and she caught fire. My mother had gone upstairs to the landlord's house for some work, and I had stepped out to buy something from the shop. Engulfed in flames and in a moment of unimaginable pain, Maureen was trying to brush off the flames with her own hands, seeking help for herself. But by sheer coincidence, I was just entering the building gate. I was the first to witness her burn.

The fire was so intense, I couldn't even recognise her. In a split second of horror, unsure whether it was my mother or my sister, I screamed out loud, "Mummy! Mummy!"

My voice echoed in panic. My mother, hearing me, rushed down without a second thought, forgetting she was pregnant. She saw her daughter in flames and immediately tried to extinguish the fire with her bare hands, burning herself in the bargain. Frozen in shock, she didn't know what first aid to give or even how to process what was happening.

Meanwhile, Maureen, still ablaze, ran outside. A group of local men bathing under a tap nearby saw her and immediately grabbed buckets, splashing water to douse the flames. Her clothes had burned away, leaving her exposed and vulnerable, until a neighbour quickly wrapped a towel around her trembling body. She stood there, terrified, looking at my mother with silent fear in her eyes. She didn't scream. She didn't cry. Perhaps the pain was too deep for words, or maybe shock had numbed her.

Someone immediately called for a traditional hand-pulled rickshaw to take her to the nearest big hospital up the main road. Only two people could fit in the rickshaw. A neighbour volunteered to go along with her, and my mother, despite her burns and pregnancy, followed closely behind. She asked me to stay home and take care of my little brother.

I was waiting anxiously for some news from the hospital; my mom hadn't returned yet. At home, it was just me, my little brother, and the maid, along with my good friend Jharna, to keep us company. Inside, I was completely shocked and shattered, devastated beyond words. I had witnessed something no one should ever see. I saw my sister burning right in front of my eyes. The flames surrounding her, the thick black smoke, the terrifying roar of the fire, they haunted me then, and they haunt me still. I begged God to let it all be a nightmare, to wake me from this horror dream. I prayed over and over for my sister to come back home,

promising myself to never fight with her again, vowing to be the best little sister she could ever have. She was my world, my pillar, my strength.

It was October 19th, 1982, around noon. It was vacation time during Durga Puja. As soon as it happened, the school nuns were informed, and they rushed to the hospital to be with Maureen. My mother, heavily pregnant in her fragile state, was sent back home for her health and safety. The mother superior of our school visited Maureen every single day. She would sit beside her for hours, praying, begging God to ease the pain Maureen was enduring, both physically and mentally. Maureen was 89% burnt. The doctors had quietly confided to the elders that survival would be nearly impossible. But they choose not to tell my mother the truth. Vijay, the nuns, and a few neighbours took turns being with Maureen at the hospital. They assured my mother that Maureen's health was improving.

Maureen often asked, "Where is my Mummy? Why isn't she coming to see me? The nuns gently lied to her, saying. "Mummy came while you were asleep." She would moan softly, her flesh and body burning from within, and in constant pain, her skin what little was left stuck to the bedspread, her body blackened and swollen, she was fully naked with a huge net over her body, and a cover over the net, only her face was visible and her eyes still recognizable, A terrible smell from her burnt body filled the room as water leaked from her skin, which was unbearable even for those sitting by her bedside. Then how could she? But it was her body, her pain, her living nightmare and her spirit fighting for life.

Her voice had turned hoarse, pleading again and again: "Mummy darling, save me. I don't want to die, when she heard

Mother Philomena sitting by her side praying the rosary aloud and pleading with God to release Maureen from her pain and sufferings, she would whisper, "No, no...I don't want to die. Pray to God that I live, " Even in her agony, Maureen still recited the rosary with Mother Philomena. Maureen clung to faith as tightly as she clung to life itself.

Once, my mother managed to visit her briefly. Maureen's face lit up. She clutched my mother's burnt hand tightly. With happiness. It hurt my mother, then just imagine Maureen's pain, she was 89% burnt, yet, all she wanted was to hold her mother's hand to feel the comfort of security. She asked my mother, "How is Audrey? Take care of her," she didn't ask about anyone, not even her favourite little brother Sunil, whom she absolutely adored. Maybe in her heart, Maureen already knew Sunil would be safe, cared for by both his parents. But she also knew I had only her. I was alone, clinging to her as my world, my anchor. Perhaps in those final hours, as she stood on the edge between life and god's kingdom, her greatest worry was not for herself, but for me, her words, her eyes, her last act of love were all for me- trying to leave behind a strength that would hold me when she no longer could. In that moment, she left me a final gift: her love, her care, and her protective spirit. Those words became her last message to me.

The nuns realised the end was near, and they called for a priest. Maureen received her last confession, the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, and holy communion placed gently upon her burnt lips. Surrounded by prayer and divine grace, now she was prepared to meet her maker...her God.

When my mother went to meet Maureen, she returned home carrying her towel, which she was wrapped in on the way to the hospital the day she got burnt.

Still with her flesh stuck to it. We had that towel as her last memory to date. My mother told me with hope, "Maureen is getting better. The doctor said if she makes it through these five days, we can bring her home soon." I was only fourteen. We believed it. Excitedly, I told my mother I would go to the market and buy fish for Maureen, her favourite, and keep a bar of foreign Lux soap ready- the fragrance she loved.

But early morning on October 23rd, my mother woke up with a start from a dream. She said she saw Maureen standing by her bedside, softly calling, "Mummy darling..." that same morning, the news came. Maureen was gone. Her soul, when alive, came to visit us for the last time before she passed away.

When we got the sad news, my mother and I cried bitterly. Others quickly held her, afraid the grief would harm her and the unborn baby. But for me, something inside broke forever. That day carved a wound in me that time has never healed. Something irreplaceable had been stolen from me. Maureen was just not my sister- she was my shield, my teacher, my other half. Watching her suffer so cruelly left scars far deeper than the flames ever could. She passed her strength into me. They became both a burden and a blessing- her way of making sure I survived when she could not. Maureen wanted to live. She wasn't ready to

Leave. But heaven wanted her more. And from that day, I knew my life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER 12



MAUREEN'S LEGACY



Maureen's resting place. Kolkata

I felt I had lost my identity, like I was nothing without her. Life felt empty. Meaningless. How could I go on without her when I was so used to having her around me every single day, every hour, every moment? She had walked with me through life step by step, like taking baby steps together.

Quietly, she had carried all the pain on her shoulders. Shielding me from it all. I never knew what struggle was, because she took it upon herself. She was the eldest, and I, unknowingly, took her presence for granted. But overnight, everything changed. Suddenly, I was the eldest. And a new baby was arriving soon. The world truly is around- what goes, comes back. I understood that now. It's used to me, Maureen, Sunil and me. Now, it was me, Sunil and the newborn.

I had countless sleepless nights. The silence of the dark felt louder without her. Walking towards death is also called life; we die daily but start a new day with hope. My friend Jharna was my only supporter, my anchor. But back in those days, something was different. Something strangely beautiful in its own way. No one shared their pain. No one opened up about their problems- not with friends, not with elders, not even with family. Unlike now, where even the smallest sadness is spoken loudly, back then we just carried on. We lived every day as it came. There was no place for sorrows, no concept of sadness, or even of poverty. We simply lived.

There was no talk of good days, bad days; every day was just a day. We had no fear. We were told by our elders that when we grew old, we would die- that death came with age. It was something we accepted as natural. But today, the order of life feels reversed now. Elders are living well into their eighties and beyond, while young people, just starting their lives, are leaving us suddenly. Heart attacks at thirty, brain strokes at twenty- five. Deaths we never imagined at such a young age then. What once made sense no longer does. Life has changed, and so has death.

Now people say, "don't laugh too much, you'll cry tomorrow," or "don't show you're happy, evil eyes will catch it. Back then, we didn't know such fears. We didn't measure joy- We just felt it. We didn't fear tomorrow; we barely thought about it. We simply lived in the moment, with whatever we had, and whomever we had, we really couldn't tell the difference between rich and poor, because whatever little we had, we cherished it. Whatever was put on our plate, we ate with gratitude and finished every bite. We had one pair of shoes and maybe three dresses each, but we wore them with pride. If they tore, we stitched them without complaining. There was no shame in wearing the same dress again and again- it was ours, and that was enough. Our happiness didn't depend on how much we had, but on how deeply we appreciated it.

When tragedy struck, my mother's family was in Goa. News quickly spread, and every relative and friend from both my mother's and my new father's side was informed. My school was notified too, and it was the nuns who had the heartbreaking task of sharing the news with the girls. The entire school was shaken to the core. Maureen's name was on every child's lips. Everyone knew us. The grief swept through the school like a storm. Students cried uncontrollably. That day, no one could even bring themselves to eat.

On the day of the funeral, the school shut down completely for the day. Every student from Maureen's and my section, every nun, every teacher, and priest attended. The church overflowed with people, hundreds and hundreds gathered to pay their last respects. Maureen was laid to rest in a white coffin, as she was unmarried. Just seventeen years old- gone far too soon.

The school bore all the funeral expenses: the Mass, the choir singing by the nuns and girls. The graveyard arrangement, flowers, candles, holy water, and the marble Cross with her name, date of birth and death. Was engraved on the cross, everything was taken care of. There wasn't a single dry eye in the church. The sound of sobbing filled every corner. People wept bitterly. Because Maureen was truly loved. Her soft, gentle nature had touched everyone she met. She had won the heart without even trying. The nuns mourned her as though they had lost their own child. Her passing left a void that could never be filled, but the love and memory she left behind were proof of the beautiful soul she was.

The incident didn't just leave a scar- it created history. Even today, decades later, whenever we reconnect with old school friends on Facebook or Instagram, or speak to the nuns who are still alive. One name always comes up: Maureen. She is remembered by all, her memory etched deeply in their heart.

I am still known as Maureen's sister. They say, "How could we forget her? That smile...that radiant face...her soft, gentle nature- it's all so vivid in our minds."

Time has passed, but Maureen's presence remains timeless. She lives on in the love and memory of every soul she touched.

CHAPTER 13



THE END WITH ONE LIFE, THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER

After the rituals of Maureen's burial were over, a new journey began for me, one filled with immense responsibility. I was still not old enough to handle life with the same grace and strength that Maureen had shown throughout her time with us. But now, it was my turn. Everyone returned to their own life and routine, but I was left behind. State of confusion, unsure of what came next. I didn't return to the school after the incident, as people kept coming over to offer their condolences. I saw the last of my father's full family at the funeral, and with that, a chapter quietly closed. It was the end of one part of my life, and the beginning of another, with new people, new roles, and a future I had yet to understand.

Around that time, my new dad's mom and sister came to Kolkata to stay with us for a few days. Their arrival brought a shift in my mind and heart- I smiled again, as I had always been fond of them. It was their first visit to Kolkata. And when they arrived, we shared our sympathy and condolences. Together we visited Maureen's grave, laying flowers and lighting candles in her memory.

After that, it became my responsibility to show them around the city. Sitting at home was too painful, so stepping out helped. I genuinely enjoyed those moments with them. I was still at an age where sadness didn't linger long. Being around people made me feel more at ease, less afraid. It was the loneliness that really scared me. After a week, my grandmother and aunt left for Mumbai, and I found myself feeling sad once again.

Not long after, my new dad returned home from his voyage at sea. He hadn't been told that Maureen had passed away, only that she was serious. My mother sent him a telegram on that excuse, and he believed he was coming home in time for my mother's delivery. But when he arrived, the truth hit him like a storm. It was the shock of his life. He had brought back many things for us- chocolates, clothes, soaps, shampoo, and cheese, because Maureen and I loved opening his suitcase when he returned from the ship. It was like a treasure chest to us. He had even brought a large Hitachi tape recorder just for Maureen, because she adored listening to Hindi music. He went straight to visit her grave. In his grief, he burned the dresses he had brought for her, right there at her resting place, as a painful wordless farewell.

But the biggest and final shock awaited me, and this time, I had to face it alone. Maureen was no more, and with that unbearable truth, Mom and my new dad made a life-changing decision: we were leaving Kolkata for good to start anew in Mumbai. My new dad had no family in Kolkata; everyone on his side lived in Mumbai. Only my mother's family lived here. Mom told me the shift was necessary, advised by the doctor, because she was unable to cope with the constant reminders of Maureen.

Every corner of our home, every sound, every silence echoed with her absence, making it harder for my mother to carry the baby growing inside her. The grief was too heavy, and it was starting to affect her pregnancy. So, this move wasn't just about starting over- it was about survival, about protecting what was left.

CHAPTER 14



THE FINAL GOODBYE



Vijay more than a family

"Every goodbye brings us a step closer to the next beautiful hello God has planned for us."

As November drew to an end, we began packing our belongings, and soon after, the house was handed back to the landlord. My mother accompanied me to the convent to inform the nuns of our permanent shift to Mumbai. I also had to collect my school leaving certificate. The nuns were saddened by the news, but they understood the reason behind the decision. They hugged me tightly and reminded me to take care of myself and to be more responsible, as I

was the eldest and now had to look after my mother, just the way Maureen once did. I thank them for everything they have done for me throughout my journey, though words could never be enough. They had given me values, discipline, and strength- gifts that would carry me forward in life with confidence and ease. I was leaving with more knowledge; I carried love, warmth, and life lessons that had shaped who I was. Whatever I had become, and wherever I stood, I owed it to them. I raised my head in pride and sent blessings their way. Wherever they may be now. Most of them, I know, must already be in heaven, and I pray daily for the peace of their souls. Mother Philomena, the superior nun, is now retired and lives in Ireland, but is still in touch with me on WhatsApp and Facebook. That bond has stood the test of time, and it is something I will carry to my grave.

The nuns gently urged me to meet all the girls and inform them that I was leaving. The boarders were heartbroken. My life had already gone through so many ups and downs, and this final goodbye only added to it. Tears welled up in their eyes at the thought of never seeing me again. I hid my own tears behind their tight embraces. My dear friends Ann and Sabrina came running when they heard the news, crying bitterly and pleading with me not to go. As I looked around the school, every place, every corner, every wall, every step had witnessed my growing up. I knew I would miss it deeply. This was my boarding school- my roots, my world, my home. The girls, the nuns, the teachers, the matrons, the priest, the cooks, the helpers, the cleaners, the gardeners, the nurse in the infirmary and even the watchman had all become my family over the years. I remembered the little girl I once was, barely four years old, crying bitterly on my first day of school.

Not wanting to leave my mother. And now, at more than fourteen, I stood in the same spot, crying not to leave my school. God's plans are truly mysterious.

As the taxi pulled away from the large school gate. I kept turning back, waving at the girls who ran behind it, blowing kisses, crying until the school disappeared. That moment etched itself into my soul. Even now, when Ann and I speak, she tells me, "After you left school, I just couldn't make friends with any other girl. No one could take your place in my life." Her words touch me deeply, a pure and honest emotion that still echoes in my heart. The kind of pain, a quiet, empty ache, stays with you forever.

It was also time to tell good bye to Jharna, a year younger than me, quiet and timid by nature. She had lost her mother at the age of ten and grew up with three younger brothers, two of whom were twins. Later, her father, who was a sailor, remarried a beautiful lady who worked as an air hostess with Indian Airlines. She gave birth to a cute baby girl, named Shweta, whom Jharna and I loved playing with. Auntie Shamim, Jharna's mother's kindness, left a lasting impression on me. Knowing how much I enjoyed food, she often brought home meals from her flight. Even if it was late at night, she would wake us up gently, insisting we eat it immediately before the food got spoiled. There was genuine warmth in her care. Jharna was heartbroken that I was leaving. I was her only real friend; we had shared so many good times, and saying goodbye to her felt like leaving a piece of myself behind.

But even harder than all this was letting go of the house where I had last been with Maureen. Her voice still echoed in my ears- the way she used to call out "Audrey" so loudly. The way she teases me with sisterly love, our fights, and the

way she held me tight at night as we lay side by side in bed to sleep. It all played vividly in my mind. After Maureen passed away, my mother gave away most of her clothes. Keeping only most of her school things, the precious personal treasures in her desk. She had beautiful handwriting, and her slam book revealed her quiet, expressive nature in words. Even in her shyness, her memory was captured deeply. We had many photographs of hers too. She loved being clicked, even if she remained reserved. Before leaving, we visited her grave one last time.

I spoke to her, as I always did, like a little sister chatting away. I promised I would come back soon someday. In my innocent, childlike way. I believed she heard me.

Vijay came to drop us off at the station. He looked at me and smiled sadly. Saying, "Take care." I smiled back, a quiet, painful smile. Knowing deep inside, this might be the last time I would ever see him. There was so much I wanted to say- that I would miss them all, that I didn't want to go, that this goodbye was too heavy for my little heart to bear. But the words stayed trapped inside me. All I could do was stare back at him with unspoken sadness, eyes heavy. I was leaving everything behind- my home, my friends, my sister, my memories- and carrying with me only the ache of it all. I had no choice. I was too young to fight and make my own decisions, too broken to hope. All I felt was silence inside me- just sadness, nothing more.

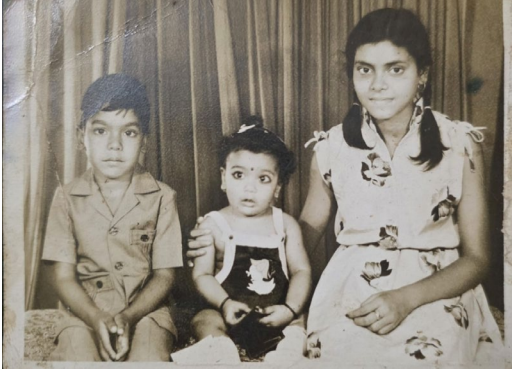
The train slowly began to move, and as always, I turned to the window, hiding the tears that silently rolled down my cheeks. I didn't want anyone to see how much it hurt. Mom, my new dad, and Sunil seemed perfectly fine; they chatted easily, accepting the change without struggle. But me? I was empty.

My journey in Kolkata had come to a complete end. A full stop. Yet somewhere deep within, I held on to the belief that God had other, more beautiful plans for me. By then, Sunil was nearly five years older.

CHAPTER 15



A NEW LIFE IN MUMBAI



My brother Sunil, and the newest little addition to our extended family- little baby sister Smitha and me.

A new journey was beginning... this time in the bustling city of Mumbai. At the station, Glenn was there to receive us. He was my new dad's nephew and Godchild too, his eldest brother's son. Technically, not really my cousin since we weren't related by blood, but here he was, part of this new world I was stepping into. To date, he still laughs when he remembers the day I arrived after that exhausted thirty-six-hour journey on a non- AC train. Sunburnt, dusty, and completely worn out, I looked like a messy little traveller

who had just survived a battle. To this day, he teases me about how "black and messy" I looked, and we always end up laughing at that memory.

Everything felt unfamiliar- the sound, the crowd, even the air. It was all so different from Kolkata. While the city buzzed with life around me, inside I felt quiet, unsure, and not quite ready initially. We stayed at my grandmother's place, since we didn't have a home of our own. It was a joint family set-up, with my new dad's elder brother, his wife, three children and our grandmother all living in a small one-bedroom flat. And now, the four of us had to squeeze in too.

Life in that cramped space was challenging, but we managed.

By then, my mother was nearing the end of her pregnancy. Amidst all the chaos, on the 1st of December 1982, she gave birth to a baby girl. The elders in the family believed Maureen's spirit had returned to us. Her in-laws especially held onto that belief, and so did I. It made me happy. My mother wanted to name the baby Maureen, but her in-laws advised her against it, fearing it would make it harder for her to move on from the pain of losing her eldest daughter. But deep down we all knew... Maureen had found her way back to us, still. My mother gave the baby girl the second name Maureen. And she was named Smitha Maureen Gonsalves.

After a month, following the naming ceremony, we moved in with my favourite aunt, my new dad's elder sister. I truly enjoyed staying with her. She had a son, Nikhil, who was a year younger than Sunil. My aunt's husband, Uncle Kotian, was a Hindu from Mangalore. Though my aunt's house was smaller than my grandmother's, it never mattered

to me. I liked her too much to care. There was. Warmth in her home, a sense of comfort I had been missing. She always called me "my girl" instead of my name, and somehow that simple phrase made me feel loved and special. Even now, past fifty, she still calls me that.

I used to love watching her get ready for work, especially the way she did her makeup. I was mesmerised, particularly by how beautifully she did her eyes. Every evening, I would wait by the door for her return. The moment she saw me, she'd flash that big, loving smile, and I would run straight into her arms. She always brought little treats from the market on her way back home from work, and I would dig into her bag to check what she had brought for us. Without even resting, she went straight into the kitchen to cook dinner- tasty meals full of love that we all enjoyed together. She never once showed tiredness; she was always full of warmth.

Eventually, we rented a small place of our own in Goregaon, close to my aunt's house. I couldn't continue my studies- I simply couldn't concentrate- and instead, I took the responsibility of taking care of my siblings and house chores, my mother began taking tuitions since she was never used to sitting at home, and for financial help too. Slowly, I began to adjust to life in Mumbai.

The unity among the Gonsalves was incredible. The bond was strong, and every birthday, wedding, and anniversary was celebrated with love. Christmas was at Glenn's place, New Year's at my second uncle's house, Easter at ours. Almost every month, there was a family gathering. Life was filled with togetherness, warmth, and joy.

And yet in that moment, I often thought about Kolkata- the streets I once knew, the life I had left behind, and Maureen's grave where a piece of my heart still rested. Mumbai was louder, faster, and so unfamiliar, but little by little, it began to shape me. Between the chaos of joint family life, the Comfort of my aunt's home, and the bond of the Gonsalves family, I was slowly finding a place for myself. It wasn't easy, but it was the beginning of a new chapter- a chapter that carried both the ache of what I had lost, and the fragile hope of what was yet to come.

CHAPTER 16



STOLEN MOMENTS OF HOPE



The full Gonsalves Happy family.

We truly enjoyed those times. Delicious food was always cooked, there was cake and some kind of sweet dish, and we would play and sing songs together. Everyone in the family knew I had a nice voice, so they often made me sing at parties and gatherings. I was their go-to performer. Though I felt shy, deep inside, I loved it. Singing made me feel appreciated, like I had something special to offer. The smiles on their faces were enough to keep me going.

I also loved drawing, and that hobby found its way into every celebration. For birthdays and anniversaries, I would make homemade cards using chart paper.

I poured my heart into each one- drawing, colouring, decorating, and writing a personal message in my own words with my best handwriting, those simple, heartfelt cards became treasures. Looking back now, I realise how much those moments of creativity, love, and togetherness shaped the bond we shared as a family.

But beneath those warm memories lay a very difficult reality. My new dad lost his job at a reputed Indian shipping company and was home permanently due to a big personal reason. He had a very bad temper.

Life during that period became very uncomfortable for me, especially as I grew older. Yet, despite my age, the beating continued. For the least reasons. My little brother was often at the receiving end, too, punished for the smallest mistake. My mother and I constantly shielded him, covering up his silly mistakes just to protect him from beatings. This became a part of our daily routine- living on edge, watching out for each other, hoping to maintain some fragile peace. Life was far from smooth; it felt like it never seemed to end. Each day that passed felt like a small victory, a sign of relief that we made it through. Yet, through it all, I clung to the belief that God was with me, even when everything around me felt dark.

Weeks turned into months, and months into years. Life moved forward, sometimes slowly, sometimes in a rush. But always with a purpose. Through all the ups and downs, changes, and challenges. Somewhere along the way, Glenn began to develop feelings for me- something I wasn't even aware of at first. We were at that age where attraction was natural. By then, he was in his first year at Mithibai College when he tried to express his feelings through his sister, "Cookie", her nickname, who by then had become my closest

friend. One day, out of the blue, she simply told me, "Glenn likes you." Her words caught me completely by surprise. Still, without hesitation, I jumped at the proposal. I wasn't happy with how my life was shaping up, and I thought maybe, just maybe, his presence would bring comfort, a fresh start, a bit of hope. Little did I realise, I was stepping into a battle of hearts-a relationship within the family that was destined never to be easily accepted."

That's how our love story began. I had just turned sixteen. Quietly and without the knowledge of our elders, we started going out without raising any suspicion. The advantage was that, because we belonged to the same family, no one suspected a thing. Cookie became our secret- keeper, the only one who knew about what was blossoming between us, our stolen moments. The excitement of a young love story kept under wraps added a thrill to everything. For the first time at sixteen, something in my life felt like it was truly mine- something that made me feel seen, cared for, and hopeful.

Often, I stayed over at Glenn's place, and I couldn't help but notice the difference in our lives. To me, they lived quite luxuriously. Their home felt comfortable, filled with things I could only dream of. That lifestyle fascinated me, especially since my own life was very different. We weren't well off. We lived in a single rented room in a chawl, with just a small curtain partition that separated the kitchen, and a small place in that to have a bath. Privacy didn't exist. We even shared a common toilet with the house owner's family, which meant waiting in line or putting up with endless inconvenience. But that was our life, simple, modest, and filled with silent compromise. But yet in that small space we found strength to carry on. My new dad remained jobless, and my mom earned very little through her tuition, roaming

from house to house. With five mouths to feed, survival was a daily struggle. Yet somehow, we managed. When I visited Glenn, I saw another world- a world where comfort seemed effortless. They lived in a one-BHK flat. Experiencing even a glimpse of that ease made me long for a better life, one where I didn't have to worry about the basics.

Looking back, I realise that my love for Glenn was more than just a teenage romance. It was a lifeline. Those moments of laughter, conversations and gentle promises reminded me that even in the darkest of times, there could be light.

He represented not just affection, but a hope for the future different from the one I was trapped in. At sixteen, I didn't know what life had in store for me. But I knew one thing with certainty: something had awakened inside me. A longing for more- for freedom, for love, and for a life where I could finally breathe without fear.

CHAPTER 17



A DOOR OPENS

Life had a way of changing in the most unexpected moments. For us, it began with a small opportunity- a temporary job that my mother took up at an office called Adlabs in Dadar East as a receptionist and a typist. She was filling in for her younger brother's sister-in-law, who was on leave for a month. It was meant to be short-term, but that one month altered the course of my life forever.

While working there, my mother found the courage to speak to the head and boss of the editing department. About me, and asked if he might consider giving me a job. I was seventeen at that time- young, eager, and ready to work. My days had mostly been spent caring for my siblings and managing the household, so when my mother told me she had spoken on my behalf for a job, my heart was filled with hope.

To our surprise, the boss agreed. He had been deeply impressed by my mother's sincerity and dedication. Her quick work, discipline, and willingness to go the extra mile had not gone unnoticed. The respect she earned opened a door for me, too.

He told her to bring me to the office for an interview. That simple request marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life- the first step towards independence.

My mother gave me the news, and I was overjoyed. For the first time in years, I felt a spark of excitement- as though the world was finally opening up for me. I began to dream again. The thought of stepping out on my own, breathing freely, meeting new people, and learning something new filled me with a sense of purpose. This wasn't just about earning money; it was also about finding freedom.

The next morning, I accompanied my mother to Adlabs, not knowing what to expect. To my surprise, it wasn't a typical office at all- it was a processing lab, part of the film industry. I was stepping into an entirely new world. Everything felt unfamiliar yet thrilling. My role was to learn negative editing, a term I had never heard before. I was completely raw, but I was determined to learn and make the most of the opportunity.

The boss interviewed me; it must have been the first time he was interviewing a girl as young as I was. He looked at me with curiosity. Perhaps wondering if I could handle the work. I could sense his hesitation- after all, I was tiny and looked younger than my age. But something in him must have seen the same spark my mother always spoke of. He finally turned to her and said, "I'll keep her. I'll see that she learns the work."

I was so nervous, shaking like a leaf with happiness, that moment changed everything. I felt as though my late sister Maureen was blessing me from above, guiding me towards the new beginning.

I still remember the date, it was June 16, 1985- a date I'll never forget. It felt like I was born again.

Though I began working, my duties at home didn't stop. After reaching home each evening. I still cleaned and cared for my siblings. Saturdays were my weekly off, and I made sure to spend that day with them, catching up on everything we missed during the week. Those moments were precious and kept our bond alive.

Each morning, I woke up with pride and purpose. I would bathe, have breakfast, pack my tiffin, and leave home with five rupees in my bag. My daily routine began with catching the 9.15 a.m. slow train from Goregaon to Dadar- a journey that soon became one of my favourite parts of the day.

In the train, I made a few wonderful friends, some of whom remain in touch even today. We became experts at local travel- running to grab seats, laughing, sharing stories, and finding joy in the simplest things. Those thirty and forty minutes of chatting and joking made the mornings refreshing and come alive.

After reaching Dadar, I would cross over to the east side at Kabutar Khana and walk about twenty minutes to the office. The industrial area wasn't pleasant or particularly safe for a young girl walking alone, but I had no choice. Over time, I became braver. Sometimes, we, a few girls from Adlabs, would decide and meet at a junction and walk together to work and back- our little group became a source of comfort and strength.

Work ended at 5.30 evening, and by the time I caught the 6.15 local and reached home, it would be around 7.30, the days were long, but I was happy.

I had finally stepped into a world beyond the four walls of my home. It was my new identity and a promise to myself that this was only the start of greater things to come.

CHAPTER 18



THE STRENGTH OF TWO HEARTS



Glenn's great-grandmother. Me, and Glenn's favourite grandmother, his Dad's mother.

Once I began working, Glenn and I grew deeply serious about our relationship. We both knew that someday, we would get married. It just wasn't a fleeting phase- it was something real, something we both believed in with all our hearts. Our grandmother, aunt, and my mother already knew about us; thankfully, they were supportive and genuinely happy. They wanted nothing more than to see our content.

Yet beneath our smile, we both knew the road ahead would be very difficult for us. The real challenge still was waiting ahead of us- that moment we seriously feared most- how the rest of the family, especially Glenn's parents, would react. It felt like living with a ticking time bomb, ready to explode at any moment. Still, despite the fear, we cherished every second we had together.

Glenn would often drop me off at the station, on my way to work, and those few minutes we spent together- just being close, sharing quiet words before I boarded the train- were enough to carry us through the day. We didn't have a mobile phone then, so communication wasn't easy. Every plan- where to meet, what time, which spot- had to be decided in advance. There were no last-minute calls, no urgent cancellations, no "change of plans" messages. Because we very well knew the front person would be definitely waiting at the given meeting point, if one of us said we'd be there, we were there- come rain, storm, or sweltering sun... because we had no choice or option. And more importantly, we had no desire to let each other down. That kind of love, rooted in commitment and trust, is rare now.

Today, we're spoiled with choices, everything seems easy, with mobile phones, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and emails, everything at our fingertips, we have endless ways to stay connected, and have many sudden last-minute excuses to back out. But back then, it was different. We respected and valued our plans. It was about commitment, about keeping your word. Our trust in each other was unshakable, and that dedication strengthened our bond in ways that technology never could.

Glenn, meanwhile, was learning early on what it meant to be self-reliant. His mother only gave him fifty rupees a

month as pocket money- barely enough to cover his daily commute to college, travelling, and to have something to eat at break, let alone other expenses. But he dared not complain. Instead, he looked for ways to stretch every rupee, determined to make things work. He found small ways to earn at the age of sixteen, and no job was ever beneath him. Glenn was doing multiple tasks and was always on the move; he dabbled in many small businesses, anything that earned an honest living.



Old cherished memories. Me, Glenn and his sister Cookie.

One of his first ventures was helping a friend who bought and sold second-hand and brand-new kinetic Honda bikes. He assisted with deals and earned a small commission- just a few rupees- but to him, it meant progress. Every small step counted. He believed in starting somewhere. And carving his own path. He was endlessly resourceful, taking up whatever opportunity came his way. During Diwali and other festivals, he sold fireworks, and he used to take orders and do home delivery.

He ventured into the garment business and even travelled all the way to Bangkok to bring back stylish clothes and accessories to sell in Mumbai. One of his clever Ideas was buying a VCR, which he rented out along with movie cassettes. And charged rent on an hourly basis- a huge hit in those days. Glenn was always thinking ahead, always finding ways to grow. He made sure he saved every bit he earned.

By the age of nineteen, he had already opened his own bank account- built entirely from his own savings. He was disciplined, hardworking, and incredibly focused for his age.

At the heart of Glenn's journey stood his greatest pillar of strength, his guiding light, our grandmother. Everything he became- the values, the success, the determination- he owed to her, unwavering love and support. She stood by him not just financially, but emotionally and physically, from the time he was born till she passed away. She was there with him through every trial and triumph. To this day, he acknowledges this fact and gives her full credit for the person he has become today.

Glenn was her eldest grandson among eight others. And he held a special place in her heart. She raised him with love and devotion, personally dropping him off at school, ensuring he never felt alone. A strong independent woman, at sixty-plus, she yet worked at Mazagon docks, a government employee who built her life through sheer perseverance. Even after retirement, she lived with dignity, relying only on her pension. She was self-made. Proud and unshakably resilient. Women like her are rare to find- a true inspiration, deserving of the highest respect.

She had four children, but none came forward to help her in any way. A heartfelt salute to her legacy. I, too, played my part in supporting the boy I loved. I wasn't just a silent partner in his journey- I stood beside him, heart and soul. Whether it was brainstorming ideas, selling products, or helping him with all my contacts, I was involved in every step. I used my network of office colleagues and friends, or I found customers. I helped him find buyers for his imported items, Diwali goods and VCR rental business. The profit we earned felt like a victory we shared.

It wasn't just about love- I had faith in his vision. I believed in Glenn, in his dreams, in the man he was becoming. I knew he was destined for something greater.

He could always count on me and our grandmother. Between the two of us, he had everything he needed: encouragement, support, love, and faith. Together, we formed a foundation beneath his wings, steady, strong, and unwavering, his quiet sanctuary. In many ways, a place of comfort. And even now, when I look back, I know - the strength of two hearts in love can move mountains.

CHAPTER 19



LOVE IN BETWEEN THE LINES

Life had grown busier for Glenn and me; we were working full-time now, caught up in the rush of responsibilities. And the endless routine of adulthood. Yet, somehow, we always found time for each other. No matter how hectic things got, we made sure our worlds still met somewhere in between.

When Glenn got a job at the Oberoi hotel, it felt like a dream come true for him. He worked in the banquet hall, a demanding department with long hours of late shifts. Many nights, he wouldn't go home at all, choosing instead to sleep in the staff bankers to save his energy for his early morning shifts.

Days would pass without seeing each other. But whenever he managed to get even a day or two off, Glenn would turn it into something special. He knew my office schedule by heart- what time I felt home, which bus I took, and exactly when I reached Dadar. On those rare days off, he'd come all the way to the bus stop near my office and wait patiently.

And just when I least expected it, he'd appear from behind, tap my shoulder gently, and flash that familiar smile. That little gesture was enough to light up my entire day. He would walk me to the office, we'd talk, laugh, and steal a few precious minutes together before parting ways. As if time itself could pause for us.

Sometimes, I'd even bunk work just to be with him a little longer. Of course, I made sure to reach home at my usual time so no one suspected anything. Our little secret remained safe, at least most of the time.

But unfortunately, my little adventures didn't always go unnoticed, a few times when I bunked work to spend time with Glenn, someone from the

office would spot me at the station or bus stop and report back to my colleagues. The next morning, my boss would ask, "Why were you absent yesterday?" Before I could open my mouth, a colleague would chime in, "Sir, we saw her near the station... and then she vanished!"

I had to get creative after that. I'd show up looking pale, with dull hair and no makeup- the perfect "I'm not well" look. When the boss questioned me, I'd sigh softly and say. "I wasn't feeling well, sir."

He'd raise an eyebrow and reply, "But someone said they saw you walking towards the office."

With my most innocent expression, I'd respond, "They must have been mistaken, sir. Maybe someone else who looked like me."

And just like that, the case would be closed. Oh, those were the days- balancing love and work with a dash of drama, a pinch of boldness, and a whole lot of fun!

Of course, it wasn't smooth sailing between us. We fought like any normal couple. And if I'm being honest, most of those fights were my doing. I was extremely possessive back then. Sometimes, I'd even end up at Glenn's college unannounced, just to keep an eye on him. He had plenty of pretty girls around, as he was very active in sports and won many medals and certificates, so he was a bit popular. That was enough to set my jealousy ablaze.

If he spoke to any of them, I'd keep my cool at the moment, but later, he'd get an earful from me. Poor Glenn- patient, kind, and endlessly tolerant- never lost his temper quickly, unless he was pushed too far. haha.

Sundays were working days for me. Glenn would often drop me off at the station, but those were also the days of Ramayan and Mahabharat aired on television- a time when the streets would literally go silent, and people would vanish indoors. Glenn would be restless to get home and catch the show, but I, of course, had other plans.

I'd purposely delay him- miss a train on purpose, start a pointless conversation, or even pick up a fight, just to keep him around a little longer. Once, I went as far as throwing the artificial silver ring he had given me- our little symbol of commitment- onto the railway tracks, just so he'd stay back to look back for it. I knew it meant he'd miss half the episode, but back then, I didn't care. I just wanted more of us.

Looking back now, I can't help but laugh at how dramatic I was. But Glenn, my patient sweetheart, never complained; he saw through my tantrums- understood that behind every outburst was simple love, and fear of losing him.

Because in the world I lived in then, I didn't have much control. I was always cautious, always holding back, afraid of stepping out of line. But with Glenn, I was free. He gave me the space to be myself- wild, emotional, mischievous, and alive. He was my comfort zone, my calm chaos. And I, in all my innocence and mischief, took full advantage of that love- the kind that only comes in a lifetime.

CHAPTER 20



SATURDAYS, THALIS, THEATRES AND WATERMELONS

Saturday was our day- a plan we never had to discuss, it was simple. Since it was my weekly off from work, Glenn would often swap shifts with his colleagues just to keep that day free too. I'd wake up early, rush through all my chores, pack my siblings off to school and by one in the afternoon, I'd be ready to meet Glenn. Our ritual always began with lunch- a simple veg thali at Radha Krishna in Andheri, our favourite spot. By three, we'd cross over to the old Ambar Oscar theatre, just opposite the restaurant, to catch the latest Hindi or English release. The place was filled with memories- today the theatre no longer exists. In its place stands the grand shopper stop store, but without the charm or simplicity that once filled that corner of the city.

By seven, Glenn would drop me home. I wasn't allowed out past 7.30, so our time was short, but those hours were always joyful- filled with laughter, little arguments, and the unspoken warmth of love in its purest form. Sometimes, when we couldn't wait until Saturday, on Thursdays, Glenn would come to my office around 5.30 in the evening, right after his early morning shift, and together we'd board the 201

bus to Elphinston. From there, we'd walk to St Jude church for the 7. p.m. mass and novena. Afterwards, our humble treat awaited- a small bottle of mangola and a small packet of hot potato chips. Then we caught a bus back home. Even the bus driver and conductor knew our familiar faces as we were regular. The one- hour shared journey, with the cool evening breeze through the open windows, was our happiness- a moving little world where it was just us, talking endlessly.

Whenever he had early morning shifts, he would come by cycling around eight in the evening to meet me at my place for an hour. He never came empty-handed; he always got my favourite fruit for me-sweet, juicy watermelon, cut into small cubes and sprinkled with chaat masala- just two rupees a plate. The fruit vendor near his house knew Glenn so well by then; he'd start cutting the watermelon the moment he saw him approaching. It felt like the most thoughtful treat in the world. And truthfully, there were evenings when I was almost happier for the watermelon than for Glenn himself. haha.

Glenn received his stipend every three days, an amount of three hundred and fifty rupees neatly placed in an orange envelope, sometimes a bit more. He'd always proudly show it to me first, counting the notes as though they were treasure. Every single rupee had its place. Together, we'd plan how to stretch it through the week, balancing travel, our Saturday treats and small indulgences. Back then, shopping wasn't even on our minds. I remained with those same five dresses the whole year, mending the single pair of shoes and five dresses when torn, and cherished them like gold. From my salary, I'd give my mother a part of it each month, and get my siblings some small toys, and manage all

my expenses, and whatever little remained, I saved for my future.

It was Glenn who encouraged me to open my first bank account. I still remember the feeling of holding that passbook- my name printed on it, my very own savings. We would check our bank balances monthly. Even the modest amount gave us immense pride and comfort, a sense that we were building something slowly- carefully, and together. Every rupee we saved was more than just money; it was a piece of our shared dream, our future taking shape, one step at a time.

CHAPTER 21



HOLDING THE HEART OF A FILM



Work mode. Negative editor for feature films at Adlabs.

When I first joined Adlabs, I had no idea what I was stepping into. Negative editing was no easy task- it was meticulous, demanding, and left no room for error. Every little detail mattered. One small mistake could destroy an entire reel, and with it, weeks of effort. The entire post-shoot process of a film depended on the precision of our work. Scene by scene, shot by shot, everything had to be edited with utmost care and focus. It wasn't just technical work; it was an art that required patience, sharp concentration, and a steady hand.

Often, it felt as though I was holding the very heart of the film in my palms, and that sense of responsibility pushed me to give my best every single day.

Of course, I made mistakes in the beginning. No matter how careful I was, errors did happen. Whenever they did, my boss would scold me- sometimes so harshly that it felt as if I had been fired on the spot. Those moments were tough, but the senior editors would step in, fix what went wrong, and guide me patiently so I could learn. They were my silent teachers, showing me how to transform errors into lessons.

Working at Adlabs meant working under constant pressure. Directors and producers like Sudhir Mishra, Govind Nihalani, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Prakash Jha and many more often visited to check on their films. They had deadlines to meet, and the distributor was always breathing down our necks, anxious to release the movie on time. Every Friday mattered; that was the day films had to reach the theatre, no excuses, no delays. Amidst all the chaos, some directors and industrial people would joke with my boss, saying, "You'll land behind bars for hiring such a young girl-shit, this is child labour. It was all in good humour, of course, I had just turned eighteen, though I looked much younger. What amused them even more was that I was learning and doing a job that was traditionally seen as a man's domain. Editing demanded precision, long hours, and immense focus, yet there I was- proving.

In the early days, I wasn't paid at all. The accountant would hand me two hundred rupees a month, mostly meant for travel expenses. But I didn't mind. I wasn't there for money. I was there to learn something that few girls even dared to dream of at that time. With my tiffin from home, a monthly train pass, and five rupees in my bag for bus fare, I

had what I needed. Slowly, as I grew in skill and confidence, I started getting a proper salary, which kept increasing. By the time I was twenty-one, I was fully settled in the film industry. Adlabs had earned a prestigious name, and saying I worked there brought instant respect. Over time, Adlabs grew tremendously. What had started as a modest film processing lab soon expanded into a major name years later in the entertainment industry. The company went on to open a chain of movie theatres across the country known as Fame Adlabs, and even established a grand entertainment park called Imagica, owned by our very own boss. Manmohan Shetty. Watching the company rise to such heights filled me with pride- I had been a part of its journey from the ground up, witnessing its transformation.

The feeling of being able to support my family was deeply fulfilled. The work that once seemed impossible was easy now. I had mastered the art of negative editing and was considered an expert in the field.

The most exciting part of the job was getting to see all the movies before it released in the theatres. As we had a mini preview theatre inside the lab, the original copy prints of the movie could be screened by the directors, producers, distributors and actors before going into the cinema hall every Friday. Film stars like Madhuri Dixit, Akshay Kumar, Hrithik Roshan, Deepti Naval, Rakesh Roshan, Anil Kapoor, Ajay Devgan, and many others would visit. But no matter how thrilled we felt, we had to remain composed. No autograph, no excitement- professionalism always came first, we had our office strict rules. We just had to act normal, like they were common humans like any one of us. We had to respect their privacy.

Most of the films we worked on became super hits. Every time I entered the editing room, it felt like stepping into another world- the smell of the film reels and primer, the rhythmic clicking of the splicer, the delicate feel of the negatives between my fingers. Carefully matching shots, trimming scenes, and watching raw footage turn into cinematic magic, and separating the good takes from the not-so-good ones. Gave me a sense of pride and joy that words could barely capture.

We also processed Marathi and other regional films, among all the hustle, a few girls who worked in different departments like accounts and reception shared a special bond. We had our own little corner, our inside jokes, and our quiet birthday celebration. We'd bring homemade tiffin and share them at lunchtime, all of us digging into one another's lunch boxes, tasting a mix of flavours from different homes. During our tea breaks, we'd laugh, share stories, and support each other like sisters in a sea of men. Those small moments of warmth and togetherness made the long hours lighter and the hard work worthwhile.

Those years at Adlabs were not just about learning a craft- they were about discovering my strength, my patience, and the power of perseverance. I may have started with two hundred rupees only in my pocket, but I gained something far greater- the confidence that I had shaped my own destiny, frame by frame, reel by reel.

CHAPTER 22



WHEN LOVE WAS TESTED

Before I go on, I want to make something clear: what I share here is not written to judge or diminish anyone. These moments are part of my love story- pieces of my journey that shaped who we became. It is not personal to those in these pages, but necessary to tell the truth of how love endured, even in its most difficult seasons.

The day we had long feared eventually arrived. Some truths can never stay hidden forever- especially within families. Slowly, Glenn's parents began to grow suspicious, and before long, they learned about us. It was a day neither of us would ever forget. After two years of secretly nurturing our love, of building a world that belonged only to us. Our quiet dream was suddenly thrust into chaos.

In my home, things were calmer. My mother, with her understanding heart, accepted our relationship wholeheartedly. She even managed to convince my new dad to see it through her eyes. Though reluctant at first, he finally agreed- and for that I was grateful. On my side, there was a little peace amidst the storm.

But Glenn's journey was far harder. His parents, deeply rooted in tradition and guided by strong principles, struggled to accept the Idea of their only son being in love at such a young age. Their reaction came out from fear- fear of family judgment, of broken customs, of society, fear of what they did not understand. Glenn faced those challenges quietly. Whatever pain he bore, whether physically or mentally, he never showed it to me. I only came to know later, through our grandmother and his sister, how difficult those days truly were for him; our grandmother and his sister were both silent witnesses. Quietly supportive, though unable to intervene as they had no voice or choice.

His mother was a woman of great strength- disciplined, determined, and devoted to her family. She carried an air of authority that filled the home and commanded respect. Her voice was firm, her words precise. She expected order and obedience, and in her own way, she believed she was protecting her family from what she thought was a mistake. His father, a man who spent most of his time at sea, was seldom home. When he returned, he trusted all her decisions and shared her concerns. Standing by her sense of what was right for their son.

In their home, emotions were seldom spoken aloud. Love was shown through discipline and duty, not words. Glenn's bond with his father had always been distant, simply due to silence. Their relationship was very formal and quiet, with no communication. His mother remained the link between them, while his grandmother became his safe place- the one soul who truly understood his heart.

A misunderstanding made things harder. There was a false and clear excuse. Believing that Glenn and I were related, a notion that cast a shadow over our relationship.

But the deep truth everyone knew. We were not bound by blood or surname; we were not cousins. Glenn was my new dad's nephew, his elder brother's son. Yet that belief lingered, feeding doubt and resistance. That we were family.

Over time, Glenn found solace in visiting my home. My family welcomed him with kindness, and our small moments together became an escape from the uncertainty that surrounded us. Without the convenience of phones and messages, every meeting felt like a gift, fragile and precious. Still, peace was short-lived; sometimes, his mother, driven by suspicion, would appear unannounced at my home, hoping to find Glenn there and catch him red-handed. Those moments were nerve- wracking, but even then, our love did not falter.

The elder in Glenn's family held meetings to "discuss" us- gatherings meant to reason, to persuade, to restore what they thought was order to us. We were made to stand together in the middle of the room, as if love could be debated or reasoned away. They all tried every approach to change our minds and separate us, but none could understand what we felt for each other. What we shared was not temporary. It was rooted and real.

Eventually, they gave up as time softened even the hardest hearts. But acceptance did not arrive with celebration, but with quiet resignation- a gentle surrender to the truth that love, when pure, cannot be broken.

When the moment of freedom finally came, it felt like the first breath after years of holding it in. We could walk side by side without fear, without secrecy, no more stolen moments, no more hiding.

It was a quiet victory- not triumphant, but deeply peaceful. Love had survived, not through defiance, but through patience and grace.

CHAPTER 23



A QUIET DAWN

The distance at home always weighed heavily on Glenn. Though surrounded by family. He often felt like a stranger in his own house. Home, for him, was not a place of rest but one of restraint- where every word had to be measured, every emotion carefully hidden. He moved through those walls quietly. Carrying the unseen burden of being misunderstood. His parents, despite their intentions, never truly saw the depth of his heart or the sincerity of his efforts. His father's harsh words and constant dismissal left a quiet wound that time could never fully erase. And perhaps what hurt the most was the absence of a single safe place- a parent to confide in, to feel believed or to be gently understood.

Through all of it, Glenn and I stayed steadfast. We never raised our voices, never retaliated, and never disrespected anyone. Every accusation, every insult, and even the moments of pain were accepted with calmness. Our silence became our shield. Because sometimes, silence can speak with more power than words ever could.

In the midst of all this, my mother faced her share of pain. Because of my relationship with Glenn, she was

unfairly judged and accused of encouraging something forbidden. Yet she bore it with quiet strength. Not once did she ask me to let go of Glenn because of the pressure. And to add, Glenn's parents were first my mother's in-laws too.

By the time we turned twenty-one, life had already taught us lessons far beyond our age. Both of us were working, saving and planning for the future we dreamed of together. Deep within, however, we knew his parents might find some way to separate us. We needed something more than love- something that could not be taken away. And so, with courage in our hearts, we decided to take a bold step.

We chose to get legally married quietly, secretly, Glenn went to the Bandra court, and we set our date: 21st August 1989. The law required a month's notice, which gave us time to plan every detail with care and secrecy. We needed witnesses, people we could trust completely. I turned to my office colleagues, who had watched our love grow over time, and they readily agreed. From Glenn's side of the witness, I requested my mother. Though hesitant at first, fearing the consequences within the family, she finally said yes. Because love, when it is true, makes even the timid brave.

That day, we were both trembling with fear and excitement. At the Bandra court, surrounded by a handful of trusted souls, we signed the marriage papers, exchanged garlands, and Glenn placed an artificial mangalsutra around my neck. In the moment, we weren't defying anyone; we were simply claiming what was already ours: our right to love and to belong to one another.

Afterwards, we shared a simple lunch with my mother and my colleagues. There was no grandeur, no grand celebration, as if nothing had happened, but Glenn and I

were so happy with our quiet sense of victory and peace. Then, as if nothing had happened, we returned to our separate homes, carrying the sweetest secret in our hearts: now we were husband and wife. But secrets, as life would have it, rarely stayed hidden forever.

Glenn had a foreign friend, Peter David, a kind-hearted guest he met at his hotel where he worked. We invited Peter to my house for lunch and shared a warm meal with my family. He enjoyed the spicy Indian food. Before leaving for the U.S, he promised to send me a small gift. A week later, a parcel arrived from overseas. Addressed to Mrs Audrey Gonsalves. Inside were little tokens of affection: makeup, nail polish, and accessories. But I never saw them. The parcel had mistakenly reached Glenn's home instead. His mother opened it, and upon reading the address and the congratulations note- "Congratulations on ur marriage"- her world, and ours, shifted once again.

In that instant, the secret was no longer a secret. Glenn faced another storm- questioned, accused. He tried to explain and deny, but the damage was already done. The parcel, which was meant for me, had changed everything. Ironically, I never got to see its contents. Only the chaos it left behind.

Yet, life has its strange way of balancing pain and purpose. Around that time, Glenn came across an opportunity that could change his life. A job opening with a reputed cruise line. It felt like hope. But there was an impossible condition: he needed 29, 000 for the application fee to give the agent, a large sum in those days. Desperate but hopeful, he turned to his mother for help. She listened, then replied, "We will give you the money... but on one condition, if you leave Audrey."

It was a very hard choice between love and livelihood. Glenn said nothing, but his silence carried his answer. Maybe his dreams were not for sale.

Refusing to give up, Glenn went to the one person who had never failed him, his grandmother. When he told her everything, she didn't hesitate at all, and with a loving heart, she immediately agreed to help him. No condition, no judgement, only faith in his sincerity. Glenn promised to repay her with his first salary. That was who he was. Honest and humble.

With my mother accompanying him as a witness, he paid the agency. A month later, his life changed. The call came through: Glenn was selected. And in the first week of February 1992, he boarded his first ship with Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines. One of the most prestigious companies in the world at that time.

It was more than just a job; it was a reward for his resilience, his patience, and the purity of his intentions. After years of storms, Glenn was finally sailing toward a brighter horizon. And though the world had tested us in every possible way. Our love had endured.

CHAPTER 24



LETTERS ACROSS THE SEA

The day Glenn shared the news that he had landed a job on a cruise line, my heart swelled with pride. It was a moment of triumph for him- and for us. We had prayed for this break for a long time, and now it is finally here. I could see the excitement in his eyes. The pride in his voice. Yet, even as I smiled and celebrated with him, a strange heaviness settled quietly in my chest. It felt as though happiness and sadness had decided to share the same space in my heart. I didn't speak of it then; there was no time to dwell on emotions. A whirlwind of activity began the very next day. Glenn was going to travel abroad for the first time, and there was so much to prepare- his clothes, toiletries, passport, documents, and other essentials. I helped him pack, ticking each item off the list we had made together. Every small object felt precious, like a piece of him that he would carry across the world. His contract was for eight long months, and though I tried not to think too much about the time apart, a quiet ache kept whispering at the back of my mind. We decided to focus instead on the little things, the moments we still had before he left.

One evening, while we started talking for hours, we made a promise to each other: we would write a little every week, there were no mobile phones, no internet, and I didn't even have an MTNL landline at home. Letters would be our only lifeline. I gave Glenn my neighbour's landline number and went to speak to her personally, explaining how important it was that she informed me immediately if an international call came through. She understood my situation and agreed, charging me two rupees for each incoming call- something I gladly paid for.

Then came the day I had secretly been dreading- the day I had to let go of his hand at the airport and watch him walk away. I hugged him tightly, tears streaming down my face as my heart shattered into pieces. He was leaving me for the first time- so far away, out of India, and for eight long months. That thought tore my heart, for he was the only one I could truly call my own. Yet, I tried to smile through the pain, trying to be strong for him, "At least I had people whom I knew around me, familiar faces. And my work to keep me going, " I told myself, "But Glenn...he's entering a completely unfamiliar world all alone." I could only imagine the nervousness he hid behind his brave smile as he boarded the plane to the U.S., his first flight ever.

After he left, the world felt emptier. Life lost some of its colour. I went about my daily routine- office, household chores, helping my siblings- but my thoughts were always with him. I would lie awake at night, wondering what he was doing, what the sea looked like from the ship, the kind of people he was meeting, the food he was eating. We kept our promise faithfully. Every week, we wrote long letters filled with details of our days, our emotions, our longing. Because of the distance and postal delays.

We barely received two letters a month; each took about 14 days to arrive. Still, we poured our souls into them- four pages at the very least.

I lived for the moment the postman would appear. I knew his timing almost to the minute- between three and four in the afternoon. On working days, my mother would collect the letters for me, but on Saturdays, my weekly off, I would sit by the door, waiting to hear the familiar ring of his bicycle bell. Over time, the postman and I shared a quiet bond. He could sense my excitement when he handed me an envelope, and I always rewarded him with two rupees- a small token of joy carrying my heart's message across the sea.

The day dragged on. I began marking each date on the calendar, counting down the months until Glenn's return. Letters and dreams were what kept me going. Then, one day, I received a letter that made my heart leap. Glenn wrote, "Let's get married in church."

We were both twenty-four years old by then, and we had waited for this moment for so long. He said he would return in November, so we fixed our wedding date for 5th December, 1992. It felt surreal. Glenn informed his mother about our plans, but just as things seemed to fall into place, she objected. She said we couldn't marry yet because his younger sister, who was twenty-one at that time, was still unmarried. Glenn listened respectfully but stood firm. He told her he couldn't delay the wedding as he had to rejoin the ship in January- and, most importantly, he wasn't depending on his parents financially. He would fund the wedding with his own savings.

I wasted no time. I rushed to the church and spoke with our parish priest. As per tradition, we had to give one

month's notice so our wedding date could be announced at Sunday Mass for four consecutive weeks, allowing anyone to object. It was both thrilling and nerve-racking. There was so much to do: finalize my trousseau, which I had been preparing for two years from my own salary, we had to get the wedding gown stitched, book the hall, hire the live music band, and caterers, design and print invitation cards, and coordinate with our bridesmaid, flowers girls, and best man, to stitch their dresses, and suit, get them their size of matching shoes. Had to set up the church decoration, get our wedding rings. It was the first wedding in our generation in both families, and everyone's eyes were on us. I wanted everything to be perfect.

After years of struggle and hardship, my new dad finally secured a job with a small shipping company as a chief, a complete shift in his career, considering he had previously been in the mechanical field. He had suddenly discovered a natural talent for cooking. He was well known for his mouth-watering dishes. We were still paying off loans and maintaining a large family of five. Glenn knew this. According to customs, both the bride and groom's families were expected to share the wedding expenses equally. It was very well known that we didn't have the funds readily available, so when his family insisted that we arrange our share immediately to book the hall- perhaps hoping it might delay our plans- Glenn, fully aware of our situation, quietly sent me money so that everything moved forward smoothly.

By the time Glenn returned to Mumbai in mid-November, almost everything was ready; all that remained was for him to get his suit stitched- and to stand before the altar, waiting for me, as we began the next chapter of our lives.

CHAPTER 25



A PROMISE AT THE ALTAR



Finally United in Marriage.

The happiest moment of my life was the day I received Glenn at the airport. I still remember how I took an appointment at the parlour the day before, wanting to look my very best for him. After eight long months apart, our hearts were finally going to meet again- and soon, we would

be married in church. That reunion was filled with joy, warmth, and an overwhelming sense of love after a long journey of hardship. When our eyes met, it felt as though time had stood still; my heart swelled with gratitude and happiness. My new dad had gifted Glenn a thick golden wedding band that he had brought for Glenn from overseas. And miraculously, it was a perfect fit- as if it was heaven's quiet way of saying that everything was meant to be.

As the wedding day grew closer, my emotions were a mixture of excitement and quiet sadness. I was eager to begin a new life with Glenn, yet it pained me deeply to think of leaving my siblings behind. My little sister and I shared a bond unlike any other- she was my baby, my shadow, the one I pampered endlessly. Her love for me was innocent and wholeheartedly, just like the love I had once shared with my elder sister, Maureen. My brother, being a lively and mischievous boy, wasn't one to show affection openly, yet I always felt his love in silent ways. Through all of life's rough trials, my siblings had been my pillars of strength, my little source of joy and courage when everything around felt uncertain.

In our tradition, the groom must not see the bride for three days before the wedding. But Glenn, unable to stay away, came pedalling his bicycle and softly called out to me near my window. My mother spotted him and quickly scolded him, warning that it was a bad omen. He cycled away in a hurry, and though it was funny, it was also endearing- he just couldn't resist seeing me. That moment was innocent and brought a smile to my face.

We held a rose ceremony with close family. Since Glenn and I belonged to the same extended family, many of our guests overlapped, which made the gathering all the more

intimate and warm. As part of the rituals, everyone had to pour a mug of coconut milk mixed with turmeric over me. Traditionally, the parents pour the first mug, but since my new dad was away at sea, my then fifteen-year-old brother stepped in to do the honours alongside my mother. My uncle placed twelve glass bangles on each hand- red, green, and yellow- symbolising love, prosperity, happiness, and blessings. It was a beautiful, touching moment wrapped in tradition and family affection.

On the morning of my wedding, my best friend Diana- still my dearest friend to this date- came over to do my makeup. She was actually my beautician, and it meant the world to have her by my side. According to the custom, the groom's aunt must come to help dress the bride. The gown, shoes, tiara, gloves, and delicate handbag were all gifted by Glenn. I was so slender then, weighing only forty kg, that they had to pad me up a little to make me look fuller! We still laugh about that memory even now. Glenn looked handsome in his complete grey suit, with a new pair of shoes. Clean-shaven.

Then came the moment I had always dreamed of. As the white, flower- decorated car stopped at the church entrance, the best man, Glenn's sister's boyfriend, Rufus, stood waiting for me. He gently lifted my veil and gave me a peck on my cheek. In a catholic tradition, it is customary for the best man to give the bride the first kiss on her cheek before she enters the church. He stands beside the groom as a witness to the sacred vows. Then my brother held my hands firmly as we walked down the aisle together towards the altar where Glenn stood waiting, filled with love and emotion. In that moment, the world disappeared- it was just

us, my little brother guiding me forward and Glenn waiting to begin our life together.

Our nuptial mass was held at my Parish, Rosary church in Goregaon West. Followed by a joyful reception at St. Anne's Hall, Orlem, Malad West. Around three hundred guests joined us- nothing grand compared to today's lavish wedding, yet it was perfect in every way. My little sister was dressed as a flower girl alongside two cousins. Looking so cute scattering petals of love down the aisle. My bridesmaid was Zenilda, Glenn's cousin, one of my favourites and someone I remain close to even today. The hall was filled with laughter, blessings, and the warmth of family.

Years later, my little sister, who was ten years old then, shared something with me that touched my heart deeply. Shortly after the wedding, she had written me a letter - her way of telling me how much she missed me and loved me. She secretly slipped it into the spokes of Glenn's bicycle wheel, believing I would find it soon. But the innocence of her young heart didn't realise that once the wheel turned, the letter would be lost. I never received it. I never got to read the words she had poured into those tiny pages. That small, silent act of love still lingers in my heart- a bittersweet ache wrapped in innocence. Had I found the letter, I knew I would have cherished it forever.

That day, I stepped into a new life filled with hope, love, and dreams. It was both an ending and a beginning- the sweetest goodbye and the brightest beginning of them all.

CHAPTER 26



LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHAOS

The night of our wedding, just after midnight on December 6th, 1992, remains etched in our memory- not only the beginning of my new life but also as a night that changed the course of our nation. What began as a day of celebration ended in tragedy and fear. News spread that the Babri Masjid had been demolished, igniting horrific riots between Hindu and Muslims across the country. The air grew thick with dread as violence engulfed the streets- people were attacked, homes burned, and lives were senselessly lost.

One memory from that night I yet remember- our tailor, a Muslim man who lived nearby, was brutally stabbed to death. He was newly married, and his wife, six months pregnant, was left shattered alone. The city was placed under strict orders- police were instructed to shoot on sight if they witnessed any act of violence. Fear gripped every home; no one dared to step outside. The very night that should have been our most peaceful became one of deep sorrow and disbelief.

Amid the turmoil, Glenn and I left for Goa along with our grandmother, following a family custom. We stayed with our grandmothers-in-law in old Goa, and as a part of

our tradition, the bangles my uncle had placed on my wrist before the wedding were to be offered at an old church there. Goa was my first visit, and it had become an escape from the darkness we had just witnessed. It's calm beaches, old Portuguese homes, churches, and delicious Goan food. For a brief while, we were surrounded by peace, laughter, and a sense of safety. The world away from the chaos we had left behind.

After a few days, when the riots finally subsided, Glenn planned our honeymoon through Kesari Travels- a trip to Bangalore, Ooty, Mysore, and Kodaikanal. It was a group tour with mostly Gujarati families, all meals included, as there was a Maharaj cook taken along. And we were one of the three newlywed couples. Naturally, we were teased endlessly, but it was all in good spirit and still brought a smile to my face. We built sweet memories with that group-sharing stories, fun, and even staying in touch with a few of them for years afterwards.

When we returned, we settled into a joint family home-something quite rare among Catholics. It was a 1BHK flat, shared by six of us, and a pet dog named Suzy- a brown and white Pomeranian mixed with the softest fur. Glenn had brought Suzy home as a gift for his sister when she was just a puppy. Both siblings were inseparable, and during our counting days, his sister often tagged along wherever we went. She was my friend before she became my sister-in-law, and I always wanted her to feel included in our little adventures. Later, when she met her boyfriend, our outings turned into cheerful double dates, filled with fun and youth's innocent happiness.

I must admit, I was never fond of pets- even to this day, that hasn't changed. I am terrified to touch them, and the

sight of fur scattered around the house made me uncomfortable. I would notice it everywhere- on the dining table, on the floor, even on furniture- and it would make me cringe. I was very particular about cleanliness, and it took me time to adjust. But Suzy was family, and like it or not, she had found her place in everyone's heart. Even Glenn's mother, who initially objected to having a pet, eventually grew fond of her. It's true what they say- pets somehow weave their way into a family's life until you can't imagine the home without them.

During summer, Suzy would be groomed by our grandmother, her fur trimmed to keep her cool. Everyone would fuss over her, calling her cute and cuddling her endlessly. I'd quietly watch from a distance, amused by the affection she received. After grooming, she looked snow white- I couldn't help but admire her beauty then.

The funniest thing about Suzy, though, was her fear of Glenn. It dated back to his school days when his sister had been seriously ill and hospitalised for over a month in Bombay hospital in town, for her kidney problem. While his mother and our grandmother took turns to stay at the hospital, Glenn, then in class 10, invited a few friends home under the pretext of studying. In their mischief, they tried to "train" little Suzy, though they had no idea how. He must have shouted or scared her somehow, and that memory stayed with her forever. Even years later, if Suzy saw Glenn from afar, she'd bolt straight into the house and hide under the chair! To prank her, we only had to whisper Glenn's name, and she dashed away in fear. Glenn, of course, would smile and say proudly, "At least I trained her well!"

Life in that small house was lively but far from easy. Space was scarce, and privacy was even scarcer.

Glenn and his father both worked on the ship. So when they were home on vacation, the bedroom would be theirs. As young and newlywed, we had to adjust, even when it felt uncomfortable. That period of my life was a blend of love and struggle.

CHAPTER 27



BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

The beautiful holidays had come to an end, and soon it was time for Glenn to leave for his job again. The joy of our togetherness faded into another painful goodbye. I had taken a short break from Adlabs, hoping to settle into married life, but once again, I was overwhelmed with sadness. Helping him pack was heartbreaking- we were freshly married, yet already preparing for separation.

Through my tears, I asked him softly, "Do you really have to keep doing this job? Can't you find something here instead?" He looked at me, his voice firm but tender. "Do you think I enjoy being away from you? If I hadn't taken this cruise line job, we wouldn't have been able to marry so soon. It's this contract that gave me the means and the approval from my parents. I'm doing this for us- for a better life. There's no future for us in Bombay otherwise." I whispered, "I don't want a luxurious life, I just want you...I want us." But he had no answer. Deep down, I knew he was right- we were young, ambitious, and full of dreams. The job promised security and dollars, but it also stole precious time, creating an emptiness that love alone couldn't fill.

After he left, the house felt unbearably quiet. The vacuum grew louder with each passing day. I wasn't used to his parents yet- they were still "Uncle" and "Aunty, " never "Mama" and "Papa." The words felt foreign to my lips. I address her directly, without titles, while "Papa" for my father-in-law comes naturally, without effort. But emotional bonds can't be forced. I didn't grow up with them, so suddenly, how could I pretend we shared that closeness?

Thankfully, Glenn's sister was around, and our dear grandmother too- her presence was my biggest comfort. My mother-in-law conducted tutitions at home from early morning till evening, with just a short break in the afternoon. During her class hours, my grandmother and I were confined to the small bedroom. Waiting quietly until the last student left. Only then could we step out into the living room, and it felt like freedom.

Household chores were divided; my mother-in-law handled most of the work- laundry, sweeping, mopping, watering the plants, and making the morning tea. I was responsible for cooking. I had learned it only after marriage, under our grandmother's gentle guidance. At my mother's home, I had never stepped into the kitchen. Now, rice, one vegetable dish, chapati, and a non- vegetarian dish became my daily duty- meals that were meant to last till dinner.

Our grandmother helped in cutting, chopping, and cleaning the vegetables, as well as the raw meat, fish, and chicken. Every Sunday, my mother-in-law would visit the market early in the morning and return with all the fresh ingredients for the full week. She would prepare special dishes over the weekends, and the leftovers often carried through Monday as well. Because of this routine, I only had to cook about three times a week.

My mother-in-law was remarkably active, efficient, and precise in everything she did around the house. Balancing household duties with her work, a self-employed woman as a tuition teacher. She managed it all with admirable speed and perfection. It was truly amazing to watch her.

Our grandmother, despite her age, worked tirelessly. She woke up at 4:30 every morning to fill water before the supply stopped, washed the lunch and dinner dishes, and even prepared food for the pet. She did everything perfectly, silently and faithfully- never once complaining. Glenn's sister, on the other hand, was seldom home; she had her job and a boyfriend who visited often, so her days were spent away from the household chaos.

The routine continued for months- until one day, I couldn't stay silent anymore. I voiced my concern, honestly, about the difference made between my sister-in-law and me. And that's when things began to change. My honesty was mistaken for disrespect. Small misunderstandings grew into bigger clashes. The atmosphere in the house shifted- tension filled the air.

When Glenn called from the ship, I longed to pour my heart out, but my mother-in-law took over the conversation. She would keep talking endlessly, unaware that I was waiting desperately to hear my husband's voice. So, I turned to letters- long, emotional letters, filled with pain, my longing and my truth. But Glenn's replies were cautious, guarded. He never took sides. He still respected his parents, and his silence became his shield.

That silence hurt the most. I needed support. I needed to know he was standing by me. Instead, I felt myself sinking deeper into loneliness.

Our grandmother was my only solace through this, as she witnessed everything. Sadly, she had no say in the household matters and preferred peace. We understood each other's helplessness. Two women, under one roof, both voiceless in their own ways.

Gradually, I began longing for a home of my own- a small space where I could breathe freely, live without judgement. Then came a breaking point. By then, a full year had passed in that joint family. The bond between husband and wife began to wither under the weight of unspoken pain.

CHAPTER 28



OUR LITTLE WORLD

After much time, struggle and contemplation, Glenn gathered the courage to speak to his parents. For someone who had lived with fear of them since childhood- even after marriage- this step was monumental. With calmness and a respectful tone, he explained that we had decided to move out because we needed privacy. The house was simply too small for so many people to live under one roof.

But his parents did not take it lightly. Their reaction was instant and explosive. They were furious, questioning how he could make such a big decision without consulting them first. The air was thick with emotion, and the atmosphere became painfully tense.

To make matters more difficult, our grandmother- the person Glenn was most deeply attached to- was left shocked and devastated. She was very hurt that Glenn hadn't shared the news with her first. The truth was, he didn't have the emotional strength to break it to her directly. Our grandmother's bond was so strong with Glenn that he knew very well she would melt his resolve and perhaps even convince him to stay. He also knew he couldn't ask her to come along with us; she was too afraid of her son and

daughter-in-law to take such a step. She cried bitterly and begged Glenn not to shift. It broke his heart, but our decision was final. What followed was chaos. Another Gonsalves family meeting was called, but this time no one took sides. We were married adults and had the right to make our own decisions.

Even before informing his parents, we already began house hunting. Time was short- Glenn was only home for two months. Eventually, we found a small but cosy one-room kitchen in a chawl building in Goregaon, Shastri Nagar. The previous owner had partitioned it to make it a tiny bedroom. It was simple, but it was ours.

We brought it just for three lakhs- Glenn's entire savings. Living in a joint family, most of our income went towards the household expenses, and we also renovated his parents' home. And got new home appliances. We had no intention of ever leaving.

When we finally purchased our own home, we were left with no savings. Financially, we were empty- but emotionally, we felt free. What hurt the most was that no one from the Gonsalves family came to see our new home or share in our joy. Not even our grandmother. She stopped speaking to us completely. That silence broke Glenn; she had been his world.

In those old days, it was considered taboo for children to move out after marriage, seen as a rejection of the family. We understood that this was more about societal shame than about family ties. Things are different now. Today, many parents encourage their children to live separately for the sake of peace and a healthier relationship.

We were allowed to take our sofa- cum- bed, and the steel cupboard, and all my trousseau, the home appliances, I had lovingly brought on my wedding day. We also got along with the thin mattress that Glenn used to sleep on the floor, as in our new house, we didn't have a bed. He brought along his pillow and bedcover too. And his favourite steel glass and plate. It's funny how attached we become to our own things- sometimes, you simply can't do without them.

We painted and cleared our little home and carefully arranged everything we had. When we finally looked around at the neat setup and humble space, our hearts were full of pride. Yes, we had lost the warmth of our grandmother's love, but in return, we had gained something deeply special- our own little world. Built entirely with our hard-earned money. Not a single rupee or helping hand came from anyone in the Gonsalves family.

We called our parish priest, and in the quiet presence of just the two of us, he blessed our home with prayer. Father gently sprinkled holy water in every corner of the house. The simple, sacred ritual completed our new beginning. Suddenly, the space felt calm, positive and truly blessed.

The happiness that filled our hearts that day was pure bliss. No rules, no restrictions, no fear. We could laugh loudly, speak freely, and live as we wished- without the constant worry of being overheard or judged. For the first time, we truly felt at home.

CHAPTER 29



A BEAUTIFUL SENSE OF COMMUNITY



My first home after Marriage, Shastri Nagar, Goregaon. With my siblings and mother, sharing fun time together.

We had such wonderful neighbours - warm, friendly, and almost like family. We never really felt the absence of our own relatives around us. There were eight flats on our floor, four on each side. Most of the family were Maharashtrian, and among them, there were just three catholic families. Shortly after, we settled into our new flat. Glenn left for the ship, but he wasn't worried at all. The environment was so safe and comforting that there was no space for fear of loneliness.

Everyone kept their doors wide open, and neighbours freely walked in and out of each other's homes. It was a beautiful sense of community - genuinely kind and full of trust.

I soon resumed work at Adlabs. By then, our office had shifted to Andheri East. Which was a bit closer than Dadar East, though still situated in an industrial estate, the surroundings were much better. In this new lab, there were more women, and that made the atmosphere lively and fun. Lunch breaks become moments of laughter, shared tiffin, birthday treats, and endless chatter. I was especially glad to be working alongside my best friend from my Dadar Adlabs days, Sandhya.

Sandhya and I started our careers together, and both of us were around the same age. She had just finished her 12th standard back then. Coming from a large family of five sisters and one brother, she carried a cheerful spirit despite their modest circumstances. I often used to visit her home in Bhayandar East. A small 1BHK flat that somehow managed to fit eight family members and their pet Pomeranian, pampered dog, Prince. He was wild and moody, barking and growling at everyone. I was terrified of him, so they would keep him away whenever I came over, till date Sandhya and I are the best buddies.

Life overall was going smoothly by god's grace. I felt truly blessed to have good people around me. I used to visit the Gonsalves family during birthdays, festivals, or special occasions. My daily routine was packed- I would leave early for work and return home by seven in the evening, once home, I would prepare something simple for dinner. My caring neighbours, knowing I lived alone while Glenn was

away, often shared their meals with me. Whatever they cooked, they made sure I had a portion too.

Most of the girls on my floor were unmarried- either in school or college- and though I was the only young woman, they treated me as one of their own. Every evening, after I returned from work, they would wait eagerly for me, and in the corridor, we'd all gang up and play cards, antakshari, or other little games that filled the night with laughter, Saturday's my weekly off, were our favourite. All the girls would gather at my place, we'd put on loud Hindi movie songs, and dance our hearts out! The whole house would come alive with joy and music. Those were truly some of the most carefree, heartwarming days of our lives.

My mother lived just across the bridge, so it was easy for us to visit each other. Around that time, our grandmother slowly began speaking to us again, though she rarely visited- only when Glenn was on vacation- it still meant something to us. Glenn, on his part, was always dutiful and loving. Every time he returned from a trip, he brought bags full for his parents and grandmother- chocolate, cheese, perfume, and other thoughtful things. He also financially took care of them.

About a year after our marriage, preparation began for Glenn's sister's wedding. His mother told him firmly, "She's your only sister- you must contribute half of the wedding expenses." Without hesitation, Glenn agreed, but strangely, his parents forgot to mention Glenn's contribution to his sister. Years later, when I happened to tell her, she was taken by surprise- she had absolutely no idea. Her wedding had been grand, full of gold sets, bangles, appliances, a steel cupboard, and everything one could wish for.

Her parents were financially comfortable, and with the help of Glenn, gave her the best. In contrast, our own wedding- the first big celebration in the family- had been very simple. Glenn had managed all the expenses alone, without a penny of help from his parents. Still, I wished his sister and her husband, Rufus, nothing but happiness and God's blessings. Rufus belonged to a simple background and lived in a chawl house beside Mount Mary Church, Bandra. He had lost both his parents at a very early age, in his teens, but he carried himself with quiet dignity.

We loved visiting his home; it had a cosy, lived-in feel, made even more special with a loft in the living room, which they cleverly turned into a small bedroom.

And oh, Rufus could cook so well- especially Mangalorean dishes! Rich, flavorful, and always made with love.

Yet, what truly hurt me was the partiality that was so clearly visible; Glenn's parents seemed unknowingly far more generous and affectionate towards their son-in-law than towards their own son. Glenn, being soft-hearted, chose not to notice, but I felt it deeply- not just as a wife, but as someone who loved him dearly. We both held on to grace and gratitude, trusting that God saw everything, even what went unspoken.

CHAPTER 30



DREAMS OF A LITTLE ONE

I fondly remember a tender little phase from the early days of our marriage -a time that now feels wrapped in the softness of simplicity. When Glenn had just joined the ship, we were starting from scratch. Our small house was almost bare; we didn't have a television. After returning from work, I would long for some kind of company or entertainment to unwind. At my mother's house, there was a tape recorder that was bought for Maureen, and a small coloured TV that Glenn had gifted me when I was unmarried. So, once I shifted to our place in Shastri Nagar, I came up with my own little arrangement. On Saturday, my day off, I would visit my mother's house, bring home the tape recorder for a month, and then the next month return it and borrow the TV instead. I kept swapping them back and forth for almost six months, until Glenn returned from his voyage.

When he came back home, we began to build our little nest together. We bought a medium -sized TV and fridge, gradually, we added more essentials- a bed for the inside room, a top-loading washing machine, and a landline phone. Within a year, our little home was fully set up and felt just perfect.

As we settled into married life, people around began asking, "No good news yet?" The comments and curiosity grew, and the initial excitement of being newlyweds started to slowly fade. I was twenty-six, and that quiet pressure began to build within me. I started feeling restless.

Glenn's sister got married a year after us, and she conceived almost immediately. Of course, she had one advantage- her husband worked in Mumbai, so they had more time together.

Despite everything I was going through, I was genuinely happy for her. Whenever we met, I made sure to take care of her and be there for her. But deep down, it wasn't easy. People around us didn't understand Glenn's sailing job- that he was away for long stretches, and our time together was limited, it was difficult to explain without sounding defensive. Their judgement came easily, but they had no idea of the quiet ache I carried within me.

The comparison between my sister-in-law and me became tough to ignore. Though I knew every woman's journey was different, it still hurt. I tried to stay positive, but inside, I couldn't help but feel disturbed. Looking back now, I realised how much society's expectations burdened women in those days- as if our worth depended on how quickly we became mothers.

Now, time has changed, couples today are more relaxed- they don't rush into starting a family. Many choose to wait, or even not have kids at all. They're not afraid of responsibility; they just want to live life on their own terms. And thankfully, society doesn't bother them the way it used to earlier. Or perhaps, now people have simply stopped caring about the noise.

Everything has become so expensive now, from the cost of living to the food we eat. Nothing feels organic or pure anymore; everything is processed or full of chemicals. The younger generation lives a far more stressful life- long working hours, night shifts in call centres, constant pressure of promotion and increase in salary, no vacancy or suitable job of their qualification, their late-night entertainments and hardly any rest, there's no balance anymore.

That's one big reason why so many women today find it difficult to conceive easily- the body and mind are both under strain. Unlike the simpler, more natural way of life we had back then. Today, though, women who struggle to conceive- and have the means- have options, medical advancements like IVF, test-tube babies, and surrogacy have made motherhood possible for many, science has given hope, and that's a true blessing.

After a year of our marriage, I consulted two different gynaecologists to compare opinions and went through several tests, both of whom assured me that everything was perfectly fine, that I should have no problem conceiving. During my ovulation days, the doctor would even give me hormone injections to improve my chances. They were confident I'd conceive soon. But I carried a lot of stress during that phase. Looking back, the pressure of wanting a baby so badly- at any cost- affected me deeply. The anxiousness might itself have been the reason I couldn't conceive. Each time my periods were delayed by a few days, I'd rush to the laboratory for a pregnancy test, hoping for a miracle. Every time, it was negative and a false alarm. I'd come out crying, feeling miserable.

Yet in the midst of all this, I was truly blessed. Neither my in-laws nor my mother ever pressured me.

In fact, they supported me- and for that, I was always thankful. After all the painful treatments, which may not even have been necessary, I still held on to Hope. Every time Glenn was home on vacation, I prayed harder. I visited every church, made every novena, and prayed with full faith. But as three years of marriage passed. The sadness began to sink in.

The thought broke me. If I saw a mother carrying a baby, tears would well up in my eyes. I felt incomplete. I had always loved children- taking care of my younger siblings had made me dream of having one of my own someday.

CHAPTER 31



SHOWER OF BLESSINGS

I still remember the day so vividly- Glenn and I were in Bhayandar, trying to close a deal to purchase a flat for investment. It was pouring heavily, the kind of rain that makes the whole city pause. We stood at the station, waiting for our train back home, when we learned that all services were delayed because of the downpour. Those were simple times. We had just bought our very first Motorola mobile phone- big, heavy and nothing like today's sleek models. But oh, how proud we were to own one! It felt like a true luxury back then, being able to connect with family and friends whenever we needed to.

It was the 12th of July 1995, just then, we received a call which filled our hearts with joy- Glenn's sister had delivered a healthy baby boy at Holy Family Hospital in Bandra. I was over the moon! I couldn't wait to rush there and hold the little angel in my arms.

As soon as we arrived, I ran inside and scooped the baby up. My heart overflowed with love and happiness. Cookie came to stay at her mother's home for three months while she was on maternity leave, and every morning, without fail, the message lady would arrive by 8.30 for the

baby's bath. I would wake up early, get ready, and head straight to my mother-in-law's house just to see the baby. I'd carry him, play with him, shower him with hugs and kisses, and then, after half an hour of pure bliss, I'd leave for work, with a smile in my heart. This became my cherished routine for months after my nephew was born.

The sweetest part of all was when they made me his godmother- a gesture that touched me deeply. One morning, the massage lady, noticing my affection, said to my in-laws with a knowing smile, "Your daughter-in-law loves your grandson like her own. See if he pees on her? That's a lucky sign. Mark my words- she will soon become a mother herself. Her words felt like a blessing from a stranger. And believe it or not, they came true. Just six months after my nephew was born, I found out I was pregnant. It was nothing short of a miracle. You could say my little Godchild brought me luck - he was the beautiful beginning of my own journey into motherhood.

Now, I'm so excited to share that part of my story with you all. God has always been kind to me. Yes, indeed - God has always been my Daddy. I clearly remember my boarding school days. When the nuns would lovingly tell us, "Talk to God in your mind, pray to Him, he is your Father, He loves his little children and listens to them instantly." Being innocent and naive, I believed every word- with all my heart.

As a child, I never really knew what the word "Daddy" meant- I never had my father around me to teach me that feeling. There was always a quiet emptiness there. But in those tender school years, when the nuns spoke of God as a father who loves his children, something awakened in me; I felt what it might mean to have a Daddy-someone who cares, listens, and loves unconditionally.

From then on, I began calling God my Daddy. And even today, that little girl inside me still holds on to that same faith. In every joy and every struggle, I've spoken to Him, as a daughter would to her father, and he has never let me down.

I don't really pray in a traditional sense. I simply talk to God, my Father - like a daughter speaking to her daddy. I share everything with him- my worries, my joy, my silly thoughts, even the smallest details of my day. It's not just about rituals or reciting prayers for me. It's a personal bond, one that has carried me through every season of my life. Just knowing He's always listening- quietly guiding me- and I can literally feel his presence. That fills my heart with peace. Over the years, I've come to realise something precious about myself- I never stay worried for too long. No matter what happens in my life- whether it's something personal, emotional, physical, or even financial- my worries never last more than a few hours. Deep down, I just know that everything will eventually fall into place. I've learned to leave it all in God's and my daddy's hands. Because when you truly trust your heavenly daddy, you stop living in fear. You start living in faith.

CHAPTER 32



A BIRTHDAY AND A BLESSING

It was the 1st of March 1996, after three years of marriage. It was Glenn's birthday. I had missed my periods by a week, and quietly, I shared it with Glenn's sister, Cookie. Without wasting a moment, she suggested we go for a urine test at the nearby laboratory. We slipped out secretly, not wanting anyone to know- not even Glenn. I had faced disappointment before, and this time, we didn't want to raise hopes too soon.

I remember telling Cookie, "You check the report. Don't show me...I'm too nervous." The test would take some time, so we waited in silence; my heart was pounding, my hands cold and trembling. I could feel the anxiety rising within me, and every passing minute felt like eternity.

When the reports finally arrived, Cookie opened them while I stood beside her, holding my breath. She looked at me with a blank expression, giving nothing away. My heart sank. Then she asked teasingly, "So what do you think- "negative or positive?" I signed softly, "Negative, of course..." not expecting anything different. And then she screamed with happiness, it's positive! Congratulations- you're going to be a mom!"

For a moment, I froze in disbelief. Tears welled up in my eyes, rolling down my cheeks uncontrollably. I was overjoyed, yet in shock. I was nearly fainting, the girl at the reception quickly made me sit down and handed me a glass of water, perhaps seeing how pale I'd turned. After three long years of waiting, the day I had prayed for had finally come. It felt like a dream. Throughout those years, I had Glenn's full support; he never once pressured me or made me feel that something was wrong. He was calm, patient, and full of faith. I was the one who carried the emotional weight- the quiet ache of waiting, the fear of disappointment, and now, finally, the overwhelming joy of new life.

The joke of the day was that after hearing the news, I immediately started walking like a delicate flower, taking tiny baby steps, refusing to ride in an auto unless necessary. I remember every word of advice from our elders- that the first three months were crucial- and I took it to heart, that day, though, we had no choice but to take an auto back home. We even told the driver to drive slowly, saying it was a "medical issue" as we were very well aware of their rough driving.

Meanwhile, at home, Glenn was growing worried. It was his birthday, and the house was full of family and relatives. Suddenly, Cookie and I disappeared! When we returned, we shared the good news- turning the day into a double celebration: the birthday of a dad-to- be and the first announcement of our baby. The joy in the house was infectious. Everyone hugged us, showering us with blessings and wishes. It was a moment of pure happiness we would cherish forever.

By then, I was already two months pregnant. Cookie took me to her gynaecologist, Dr Coelho, at Lilavati Hospital, a well-known and trusted doctor who had helped Cookie during her own pregnancy. During my first internal examination, Dr Coelho smiled reassuringly and said it was a healthy pregnancy. She estimated my due date to be 2nd November 1996.

But I had deep-rooted fear of internal check-ups; they scared me terribly. The anticipation of pain made me tense up, and I was unknowingly tightening my pelvic muscles, making it difficult for the doctor. She would have to apply more pressure, which hurt even more. I would lift my lower back in pain while she gently repeated, "Audrey, relax, keep loose, and don't lift." Yet no matter how much I tried, the fear never left me. Before every appointment, I would break into a nervous sweat.

Around that time, Glenn had to leave for the ship. He was worried about going, especially now that I was expecting. I was living alone, and he hated the thought of being away. But I told him calmly, "Go, relax...I'll be absolutely fine. We have good neighbours and family close by." Work was important, and he had no choice. I had already resigned from my job because I didn't want to take any risks. I wanted to give my baby the best chance - to be safe and nurtured within me. I knew by the time Glenn returned, it would be mid-October, and soon after, our baby would arrive.

Once again, everything seemed to fall perfectly into place- as if guided by god's gentle hands. Every month, I would travel to Bandra for my routine checkups, usually accompanied by whichever family member was available- my mother-in-law, my mother, or my sister-in-law.

Each visit brought me a step closer to the miracle growing within me- a long waited blessing finally coming true.

CHAPTER 33



THE RHYTHM OF LIFE.



My best friends from Adlab days till date. Sandhya, Me in my sixth month of pregnancy, and Tasneem who is sadly no more, she died of cancer in her 40's.

Months flew by quietly, and most of the day was spent at home, cocooned in a quiet world that revolved around the tiny life growing within me. Friends would drop by now and then to keep me company, bring warmth and laughter into my days. My neighbour too became my extended family- and looked after me with such kindness- making sure I ate well, rested enough, and never felt alone. A maid would come in to handle the heavier chores. One afternoon, however, I got caught red- handed. I climbed a high stool to wipe the ceiling fan when my neighbour happened to walk

in. The look on her face was a mix of shock and anger. "What if you fall? Are you gone crazy?" She shouted. I couldn't say a word. She was right- I was being reckless. By then, I was already seven months along.

Travelling all the way from Goregaon to Bandra for my monthly check -ups had become exhausting, so we decided to shift to a nearby gynecologist. That's when I met Dr. Grace Paul, a gentle and compassionate lady Doctor at a hospital on Link Road, Malad. My mother's younger sister had delivered both her children there, but unfortunately, her firstborn- a baby boy- had passed away on the second day after his birth. I can't quite recall the exact reason for the infant's death, but it was a heartbreaking loss for my aunt and uncle. Thankfully, a year after her second delivery, again, a baby boy was born. He was born healthy and strong, bringing back hope and joy after sorrows, so we felt reassured it would be the right place for me too. Glenn had become more involved by then. He stayed in regular touch, knowing how much attention and care I needed, as I was living alone.

They say pregnancy is a miracle- and it truly is. When a child is born, a mother is born too. No matter how prepared a woman thinks she is, nothing can train her for that moment when she first holds her newborn. There are no manuals, no rehearsal- just instinct. A woman may not know how to raise an infant, but when that tiny life is placed in her arms, something sacred awakens. Love takes over. It's a language without words- the child becomes the teacher, and the mother learns, slowly and beautifully like a devoted student, how to comfort with a touch and unspoken understanding. This, I realised, is God's divine design- turning fear into

strength, confusion into wisdom, and a woman into a mother.

When my baby kicked from within, it always took me by surprise. Sometimes it hurt- a sharp nudge that made me gasp or let go a little "Ooch!" But even through the pain, my heart leapt with joy. Each kick was a sign of life, I could almost feel the heartbeat- a secret rhythm only I could feel. During those months, I would sit in my easy chair- my little sanctuary, it brought me comfort in ways my bed no longer could. Lying

Flat on my back made me ache, and sleeping on my sides wasn't easy either. But in that chair, I could breathe, dream, and find peace. I often talked softly to my baby, like to a dear friend I hadn't met. Somehow, I knew it was listening. We even played little games- I'd gently tickle my tummy, and the baby would respond with a tiny movement, as if playing back. It was magical- just the two of us, connecting without words.

The neighbourhood children were fascinated. They'd rush over when they saw me seated in my chair, eager to see the baby move. Their tiny hand would press gently against my belly, eyes wide with wonder. When the baby kicked, they'd squeal with excitement, laughing and shouting in delight. Those moments were pure joy- innocent, and a celebration of a new life shared by everyone around me.

Those were those days, though, when the baby grew quiet. Hours would pass without a single flutter, and fear would creep into my heart. I'd rest my hand on my stomach and feel nothing but stillness, my heart pounding with worry. During one of my visits, I shared my anxiety with my Doctor, she smiled, the kind of smile that comes from deep

understanding. "Don't worry, " she said softly. Sometimes babies rest. But it's good that you're paying attention. Just keep connecting- rub your belly gently, keep talking to your baby, play some music. You should feel at least one movement a day. That's your sign that all is well."

From then on, it became my little ritual. Whenever I felt the quietness stretch too long, I would do all that the doctor advised. And soon enough, I would feel the familiar kick or roll- like the baby was saying, "Don't worry, Mama. I'm here", in those quiet exchanges, I learned the rhythm of patience, of faith, and of unconditional love. But not all moments are gentle. One late evening, while taking a night walk with a friend after dinner, a passing rickshaw slowed near us.

The driver, a heartless man, reached out and hurt me deliberately on my chest. The pain was sharp, physical, and deeply emotional. I was shaken to the core. I realised then how cruel the world could sometimes be, even to a woman carrying life within her.

Another time, in my eighth month, I joined Sandhya, my friend, for a visit to the Mount Mary Fair. It was early September, just before the feast. The long walk uphill left me breathless, but I managed. We prayed at the church and wandered through the fair before I quenched my thirst with some sugarcane juice. The small indulgence turned into regret - I fell ill that night with food poisoning and had to visit the hospital. I had to be admitted for a day.

While recovering, I witnessed something that changed me forever- a woman in labour, screaming and crying in unbearable pain. The rawness of it, the sheer force of what the body endures, left me trembling.

Listening to her, I thought to myself, if this is childbirth, I don't think I can bear it. From that moment, I knew- I would choose a cesarean delivery. Those moments were a journey of awakening- of discovering not just the life inside me, but the strength, fear, and faith that motherhood stirs within every woman.

CHAPTER 34



THE DAY A MOTHER AND FATHER WERE BORN.

It was finally time for Glenn to return home, and I was thrilled without words. I remember so clearly- when he had left for the ship, I was just two months pregnant. Now, as I waited for him, I was stepping into my ninth month. He had last seen me with a flat tummy, and now, he would be coming home to a wife who was round and glowing with life.

Before he left, I had teased him in my usual nautanki way. "You want to see how I'll look when you come back?" I tucked a small pillow under my dress, puffed out my belly, and waddled around like a heavily pregnant woman. We laughed our hearts out that day- such a silly, sweet memory.

He arrived home one early morning at 3 a.m. Our floor had a security grill door that stayed locked. Glenn called me on our landline to open it. As I walked towards him in the dark, the moonlight from the corridor fell softly on my belly. The moment he saw me, his face broke into the broadest, happiest smile. My tummy was huge by then; my baby was big. I had gone from 40 kg to 55, and my short frame made

me look adorable and round. When we finally hugged, it felt like a lifetime of love and waiting had been wrapped into that one embrace.

One night, not long after his return, the electricity went out across the entire area. Glenn had stepped out for some work, and I was home alone. I lit a candle to move around safely. When I went to the washroom, I noticed blood- even in that dim candlelight, it was clear. Panic set in instantly. I called our neighbour, who immediately reached out. I called my sister-in-law too- the one person with whom I was truly comfortable. Unfortunately, my regular doctor was away on vacation in Mangalore, and her daughter-in-law, who had just begun practising as a gynaecologist, had to examine me. I was not used to her, and the internal check-up was so painful that I cried through it. After examining me, she said, "You should deliver by tomorrow night, the 29th of October."

I had already made up my mind- I wanted a C-section, not a normal delivery. It was foolish of me, I know now, because the pain of a normal delivery lasts only for a moment, but the pain from a C-section stays for months. But even since I had seen a woman screaming in pain during her delivery- when I was eight months pregnant and hospitalised for food poisoning- fear had taken root in me. So I told the doctor firmly that I wanted the surgery the next morning. She finally agreed. That night, my sister-in-law stayed with me in the hospital. Early the next morning, my mother, my mother-in-law, and Glenn arrived. By 8.15 a.m., they took me to the operating theatre. I was given an epidural injection in my spine, and soon I felt drowsy and numb, though still half unconscious. I couldn't feel what they were doing- not pain, just a strange sensation.

The room was crowded- my main doctor, the anaesthesia doctor, a paediatrician, two nurses, and an assistant. I felt the first cut of the scapel, then the tagging as they began to pull the baby out. A faint pain crept in- like they were tagging at my very navel- after all, the umbilical cord was still attached there. I heard one of them, maybe the doctor, say, "Didn't you give her enough anaesthesia?" And the rest of them continued chatting casually, gossiping about everyday things, as if delivering a baby was just another routine task. I tried to cry out, but I was too drugged, too weak to be heard. Then suddenly, the air changed. I faintly saw them lifting the baby out of my womb, turned him upside down, and gently pat his tiny bottom. A moment of stillness hung in the air, and then came that sound that shattered the silence. The first cry. That sharp, piercing howl that made my heart tremble and overflow all at once. It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. My baby had arrived- alive, breathing, claiming his space in the world. They weighed him and noted down the details. The nurse's voice rang out: "Born on 29th October 1996, at 8.48 a.m., weighing 2.59 kilograms."

The paediatrician examined him carefully- his skin, tone, reflexes, breathing- and finally smiled. "The baby is absolutely healthy," he said. Those words were like a prayer answered. My eyes filled with tears of gratitude. My baby was perfect. He was mine. And he was safe. Then came a gentle voice asking, "What do you want...a boy or a girl?" I smiled faintly- I already knew. Back in my sixth month, during sonography, the doctor had excitedly pointed at the screen. "Look, your lazy baby is yawning!" He said, I could barely make out the shape, but I saw a tiny upturned nose- just like Glenn's.

My sister-in-law, curious as ever, asked about the baby's sex. The doctor turned to her, saying, "Why should I tell you? If the mother wants to know, that's different." With her nudging me silently. I asked. And the doctor told me- it was a boy. We kept it a secret between us, not even telling Glenn. And as I had guessed, our baby looked exactly like him- a carbon copy.

Outside the operating theatre, the family were waiting, hearts pounding, eyes fixed on that single door. Every minute must have felt like an hour. Finally, the door opened. A nurse stepped out, cradling a tiny bundle wrapped in a white cloth. Her face has a smile. "Can you guess?" She asked jokingly. "Boy or Girl?" Everyone held their breath. "It's a boy!" She announced at last, her voice bright and full of life. A wave of joy crept through the corridor. Glenn's face lit up; his eyes shone with gratitude and pride. Without a moment's hesitation. He began distributing money to the nurses and Aayahs- not just as a tradition, but as a spontaneous overflow of happiness. Then he ran to a nearby shop and bought sweets to celebrate his son's arrival.

In that corridor filled with laughter, congratulations, and the sweet smell of. Mithai, a father, was born too. Everyone who saw the baby agreed- he looked exactly like Glenn. That made him blush with joy. But amidst all that celebration. His and my mother's eyes kept drifting towards the operating theatre, worried for me. While his mother and sister couldn't take their eyes off the little angel. Glenn and my mother waited, hearts full of love and silent prayer, for me- the new mother who had just given birth not only to a baby but to a new life within herself.

CHAPTER 35



THE WEIGHT OF A NEW LIFE

I spent 5 long days in the hospital, learning the first and hardest days of motherhood- how to nourish my baby. The nurse stood close to me each time, guiding my hands, positioning the baby, trying to show me how to hold him just right. I knew she meant well...but my body was still tender, my stitches raw, and every touch felt like it pressed into the deepest parts of my pain. They were a little rough- adjusting, pressing, pulling my body - and every attempt sent a wave of fear through me. It wasn't only physical. It was the fear of failing my infant, the fear that my body wouldn't understand how to feed my own child.

But someone deep inside, a quiet belief whispered to me: give it time. Your body will learn. Your baby will learn. You will find your rhythm together. And I held on to that thought, breath by breath, pain by pain. Because I was his mother. And I would get there.

The very next day after my C- section, they asked me to walk. I could barely stand. The stitches pulled sharply with every moment, forcing me to hunch over like an old woman. Each step felt like climbing a mountain barefoot. And to make things worse, my baby was in pain too.

His entire umbilical cord had been removed during birth- something that should have been left to fall off naturally within a week. He was restless, crying often, and I could feel the ache of his tiny discomfort in my own chest.

When I learned that the doctor who handled my delivery was inexperienced- stepped in only because my actual doctor, her mother in-law, wasn't available till mid-November. I felt a wave of uneasiness. This wasn't just another baby. He was my miracle, the child I had prayed for over three long years. I had always wished for a boy- not because I didn't love the idea of a daughter, but because I couldn't bear the thought of watching a little girl go through the pain I had known well. Periods, pregnancy, heartbreaks, emotional storms- women carry so much. I didn't want to witness that in my child.

After discharge, my mother-in-law took me to her home for a week, and I was treated like a queen. Meals came on time, I rested, and many loving hands held and rocked the baby. For a moment, I felt safe. But when I returned to my own home... reality came crashing down. It was just Glenn and me. And I was not coping. My baby barely slept- maybe an hour at a time. He was a light sleeper, waking at the slightest movement. He cried often, perhaps out of hunger, and my breastfeeding wasn't enough. The doctor advised formula, but he was too tiny for a bottle, so I spoon- fed him from a small bowl- even at 2 a.m.

Half asleep, I would measure the powder...boil the water...cool it...and drip it into his mouth, spoon by spoon, terrified he might choke. Then he'd cried again, and I would start all over. Love became a rhythm of surrender. One week old, I took him for his first checkup. My sister-in-law recommended her son's paediatrician, Doctor Deepak

Tirthani, all the way to Bandra Hill Road. Despite the distance, we went- Glenn, Cookie and I- carrying our fragile newborn. I was exhausted, still healing, but desperate for reassurance.

CHAPTER 36



A NAME BLESSED IN GRACE



**Glenn and I held our newborn on his Baptism Ceremony in church.
Along with our little boy's God parents, and both his grandmothers.**

After forty days, we celebrated the baptism of our little boy- a beautiful and deeply meaningful ceremony that felt like more than just a religious ritual. It was a symbolic welcome of our child into a life of faith, blessings and community. The name was chosen for him, Dalston, which had been discovered by my sister-in-law. It was unique and uncommon, yet the moment we heard it, we knew it belonged to him. With everyone's blessings, we decided to go ahead with it wholeheartedly.

Preparation began soon after: invitation cards, caterers, the hall, DJ music, arrangements for the church ceremony, and the candle the priest would bless and light that day at the altar. But the most meaningful part for me was his baptism outfit. I knew I didn't want to buy something ready-made; I wanted his attire to carry a piece of my heart. That was when the idea came to stitch his baptism dress from my own wedding gown- a gown I had cherished till this very day. The moment I cut into its fabric, I felt overwhelmed with emotion. The gown had marked the beginning of my journey with his father, and now it was being reborn for our son. I crafted a delicate cap, mittens, and socks, all in soft white, and when he wore them, he looked like an angel.

Choosing the godparents was the next important step. We wanted people who meant something truly to us. Regardless of their age or experience, Zenilda, Glenn's first cousin and our bridesmaid, was young but full of warmth and genuineness. My brother Sunil had always been my constant, steady, loving and ever-present. Though some questioned our decision to choose such young godparents, teenagers and still studying, we stood firmly by our choice, trusting our hearts.

We chose to celebrate the Rosary Church grounds, a place that held memories of my youth and our wedding nuptials. Returning there with our own child felt deeply special, as though we were adding another chapter to a place already rich with meaning. With a guest list of almost 150 people- family, friends, relatives and neighbours- every detail needed care. Yet, amidst the busyness of organising everything, an unspoken happiness flowed between Glenn and me; often, I found myself pausing just to whisper a little prayer over our baby, hoping he would grow strong, feel

endlessly loved, and walk a path filled with grace and goodness.

The night before the baptism, I hardly slept- not out of anxiety, but emotion. My heart was overflowing. Our baby, who had brought so much love into our lives, was about to receive his first sacrament, a blessing that would stay with him forever. He was about to be given a name- the name the world would know him by, call him by, and love him by. I imagined this name following him across milestones and achievements, shaping his identity with strength, kindness and truth. In my heart, I believed that through his baptism, angels were being assigned to him, ready to walk beside him, guide him, and protect him in unseen ways.

As the holy water would soon be poured over his head, I felt as though he was being embraced not only by us but by something far greater- faith itself. I imagined God, my beloved daddy in heaven, smiling down at him and welcoming him into his loving arms. Our baby, who had only known the warmth of our embrace, was now stepping into a divine circle of love and protection.

The celebration that followed was vibrant and full of joy. The tables were beautifully spread with salads, vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, desserts, and ice cream. And delicious starters were served around. The DJ filled the air with music, and guests danced, laughed, joked, and reconnected with one another after years. We even arranged games to keep the atmosphere lively. Everywhere I looked, I saw smiles, warm hugs, and a sense of unity. Little Dalston slept peacefully in his pram, occasionally opening his eyes, drawing smiles from everyone who came near. Guests showered him with gifts and blessings as they left, their hearts full. By the end of the evening, my own heart felt

full beyond words. The day had been everything we hoped for- perfect, blessed, and unforgettable.

CHAPTER 37



THE QUIET CORNERS OF CHILDHOOD LOVE



**Rita Bhaduri the actress and Glenn's neighbour with
Glenn's grandmother. At our wedding reception.**

Dalston was growing beautifully, filling our hearts with laughter and sweetness as each new day unfolded. Yet, even as our little world blossomed, there were realities we could no longer overlook. One of the tender aches of his childhood was that he never truly experienced the simple, affectionate warmth many children receive from their grandparents- the cuddles, the bedtime stories, the surprise treats, the easy closeness that becomes a child's safest place.

The small joys that make childhood magical. The kind of love we ourselves had known from our grandparents was missing from his life.

I often remember the saying, "parents love their grandchildren even more than they love their own children." Over time, I understood the truth behind those words. What parents, in their younger years, could not always give- time, patience, or individual attention- life often allowed them to give freely to their grandchildren. With their own children, they had been responsible and strict; they set rules and expectations, shaping and disciplining them. Love was there, but it was structured, controlled. Perhaps stolen by life's burden. But with grandchildren, the role softened; they became storytellers, protectors, companions. Partner in crime. They often try to give tenfold to their grandchildren. It's as if life grants them a second chance: and simply be present in a way they couldn't before.

But for reasons I quietly accepted, this softness did not reach Dalston in the way I had once hoped. Glenn's parents were gentle people in their own way, but somewhat reserved and wrapped up in the rhythm of their own lives. There were no special moments to remember. Because they rarely visited us and saw him only on occasion, the bond that naturally grows between grandparents and grandchildren remained faint. Whenever I brought him to their home, especially during gatherings, Dalston- still very small- felt uneasy by unfamiliar faces and surroundings. He would cling to me, hide his face in my chest, squirm in discomfort, uncertain and shy. I couldn't really explain, but I deeply understood his little heart was simply responding to a place and people he did not yet know well. I often had to leave immediately because his cry was too loud, and I couldn't

bear to force him into a place where his heart clearly didn't feel at home.

In contrast, the moment he saw my brother and sister, who adored him wholeheartedly, he blossomed. Their playful nature, laughter, silly games, warm hugs, and endless affection made him feel safe, loved and wanted. Among Glenn's family, there was one person who held a very special place in his heart- Glenn's sister. From the very beginning, she embraced him with genuine care. She spoke to him softly and sweetly as he mattered, treated him with importance, and carried him as if he were a part of her own soul. He trusted her easily, resting his tiny face on her shoulder, smiling with the comfort only a child can express. Even though a part of me wished things had been different.

Glenn's parents naturally shared a closer bond with Julian, our nephew, perhaps because they lived together under one roof, as Julian's father worked in Dubai, Julian was more than a year and a half older than Dalston. Proximity often waves its own kind of affection. My in-laws had watched Julian grow from the time he crawled to his first word, and their involvement came effortlessly. I understood this, and never held it against them, and though at times a quiet sting found its way into my heart, it hurt to see Dalston- not receiving the same level of affection. It's never easy to watch your child be the second choice, especially when he has done nothing but exist with innocence.

At social gatherings, attention often drifted naturally towards Julian, and sometimes Dalston remained in the background. These moments were hard for me as a mother, but I reminded myself that people rarely intend harm- they simply respond to the relationships they know best. I chose

to hold on to grace, believing that understanding grows with time.

It wasn't that my mother-in-law didn't love Dalston, she absolutely did. But that love was clouded by me. My marriage to Glenn was something she just couldn't accept. In her eyes, I was the reason her only son had stepped outside the fold of her expectations; this battle wasn't about grandchildren. It was a battle about me. And no matter how much I wished things were different, it never truly ended. Dalston never knew the weight of that silent tension. But I saw it in every act of indifference.

But yet, in a world where adults let pride build walls, children find ways to break them down with the simplest emotion- love.

Throughout everything, the pure, innocent bond between Dalston and Julian shone brightly. They were more like brothers than cousins- their laughter filled every corner of the home, their little feet running eagerly to greet each other. Even if separated for only a few days. They longed to meet again. Their tiny disagreement never lasted long; their little fights were adorable. A shared biscuit or a quick hug would mend everything. And forgiveness without being taught. To support their harmony, we often got them the same toys, the same treats, and the same clothes. Watching them twining and smiling at each other remains one of the sweetest memories. It was our way of teaching them unity. And tie them together for life- trips to the park, McDonald's happy meals, toy store advantages, children's movies. Just watching them grow in happiness was pure bliss. Dalston, though younger, had a clever streak. Whenever things didn't go his way, he ran to Cookie dramatically, "Cookie! Juju is hitting me...go shout at him!" And she was playing along,

pretending to be furious, making Dalston beam with triumphant satisfaction. He never called her "Aunty." For him, she was always "Cookie," just like everyone else.

Among the people who wove themselves quietly into our story was Rita Bhaduri- Glenn's neighbour, a well-known actress in Hindi and Gujarati cinema. To the world, she was a star; to us, she was simply Aunty Rita, fair, graceful, warm, unmarried and deeply respected, accomplished and beautiful. Her home was always filled with creative energy like artists, script readers and directors. Glenn had known her family since a child. Because of this, he shared many fond memories with her, and was called their favourite "Glenn boy" I, too, along with the Gonsalves family had a unforgettable beautiful experience visiting her bungalow twice in Lonavala, and Glenn his family often visited her bungalow in Baroda for vacations, enjoying her hospitality, her kindness, and the small joys of being around someone so full of life. Her home in Baroda was iconic- the former a landmark for fans who gathered outside daily. As children, we adored her. She took us to shoots, often cooked for us delicious Bengali dishes prepared in mustard oil. But

Everything changed when I entered Glenn's life not as a neighbourhood child, but as the girl he loved.

Glenn's mother made sure Aunty Rita heard her version of who I was, and she believed it. Slowly, her warmth towards me turned cold. Still, I don't blame Aunty Rita; she simply trusted the wrong narrative, she was like a part of the Gonsalves extended family. I chose to believe that she acted based on what she understood then, not out of any intentional unkindness. People always trust the words of those closest to them- it is human nature. And I hold no bitterness for that.

When Dalston and Julian were little, Aunty Rita, too, seemed naturally more familiar with Julian, perhaps out of habit or because she saw him more often. One small incident from those days stayed with me, not as a wound but as a quiet memory of motherhood. She once visited with a bowl of paneer- Julian's favourite dish. Both boys went excitedly to greet her. Little Dalston, innocent and unaware, reached out his little hands eagerly; in response, she immediately told him it was only meant for Julian. He stepped back with wide, confused eyes, too little to understand rejection.

But I did. My heart tightened for a moment, but I reminded myself that adults sometimes follow patterns they have long known. Without realising how it appears to a child. Children teach us softness, and moments like these taught me patience and compassion.

Over time, I understood my in-laws' power of influence. My mother-in-law commanded respect- she was a woman of great strength. She was very disciplined, hardworking, and talented. Her tuition classes were known throughout the neighbourhood. Parents admired her dedication; her students did wonderfully under her guidance. She stitched clothes with skills, kept her home well organised, cooked delicious dishes, and took great pride in supporting her family. Her personality was strong, and at times could be intimidating to others, but beneath that strength was a woman who took her responsibility seriously and gave her best to everything she touched. She had many admirable qualities. And she had many sharp edges.

There were moments where differences arose between our families, and I watched my mother swallow her hurt silently. And somehow, I was always made to feel like the root cause of every discomfort- for Glenn, for Dalston, for

my siblings, even for my mother. And I lived in the middle of both versions of my mother -in-law. I chose to believe that life simply places everyone in a difficult position now and then. Each person has their own challenges, and sometimes kindness cannot be expressed in the way we hope. And yet, there were moments of genuine affection. My mother-in-law was fond of my little sister, her goddaughter. Every birthday, she stitched beautiful dresses for herself with her own hands- carefully measured, perfectly fitted, made with love,

Looking back, that every person in my story- acted from their own experiences, their own truths, their own limitations, life is rarely simple, and hearts unfolded at their own pace. Through it all Dalston grew into a boy full of love, softness and joy. And perhaps

What mattered most was that he always had a home where his heart felt safe, a circle of people who cherished him, and a brother -like cousin with whom he shared the happiest days of childhood.

CHAPTER 38



A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

After a long and beautiful holiday- one that welcomed the birth of our son and his baptism- Glenn finally had to return to the ship. His departure was heavy with unspoken worry. He had watched me juggle a newborn in one arm and household responsibilities in the other, barely able to sit down for a proper meal. His eyes conveyed what words could not: he was anxious for me, and he felt helpless leaving me behind.

Yes, I had the part- time maid, and our kind neighbours, but caring for an infant is a 24- hours devotion. No help can truly replace the quiet comfort of a husband who sits beside you, holding the baby so you can breathe for a moment. And now, suddenly, it was just me and my little one in a home that felt too big without Glenn.

Six months without him stretched before me like an unending path- I questioned myself constantly- how will I manage everything alone? But they say that when you are pushed to the edge, God sends strength you didn't know you possessed. And slowly, in the middle of exhaustion and sleepless nights, I began to feel that strength rise within me.

Just when I wondered how I would survive those early months, help arrived in the most unexpected and humble form. Her name was Kalavati- a graceful South Indian woman, middle -aged yet full of quiet energy, maturity, and a deep understanding of care. From the day she stepped into our home, life began to shift. Until then, even taking a shower felt like a mission; I'd keep the bathroom door half - open just to keep my eyes on little Dalston.

With Kalavati around, I could step out peacefully to run errands, pick up groceries, or pay bills, knowing Dalston was in capable and loving hands. She was not just a maid- she was a blessing sent by God at a time when I needed one the most. And with neighbours visiting often, the house never felt empty. In Glenn's absence, I had been given a larger family to support us.

Among those who visited us was our grandmother, who cherished spending time with her great-grandson. Holding the fourth generation in her arms was a sacred joy for us. She was seventy -two, then, a great soul, with a fragile heart that had once given her a minor heart attack. The doctor had advised her not to lift anything heavy, and we would remind her of this often.

One day, when I was in the washroom, Dalston began to cry. When I came, I found our grandmother gently rocking him in her arms, and singing a soft poem to comfort him. He was seven months old, chubby, heavy, full of baby warmth. My heart skipped a beat. I rushed to take him from her, reminding her of the doctor's warning. She simply smiled and said, "Nothing will happen to me. Why are you worried?" Her confidence came from a place of pure love, but life had its own plans. What we always feared took a sudden and heartbreaking turn on the night of 7th May 1997.

She collapsed shortly on the sofa after taking a shower. She seemed slightly breathless and uneasy. Glenn's father immediately called his younger brother, and together they rushed her to the hospital in a rickshaw. But fate had already been decided, she passed away peacefully in the arms of her son's. Our grandmother had always feared hospitals. She hated injections, hated checkups, and always prayed for a quick, peaceful death- not bedridden, not suffering. Looks like she manifested her own departure. God granted her exactly what she wished for.

The Gonsalves family was heartbroken. Her only daughter, who was away in Mangalore, received the news like a blow to the heart. Glenn, her favourite eldest grandson, was away too- somewhere at sea- unable to come home on emergency when he longed to. He just could not accept the news when he was informed by his mother. He broke down completely, repeating, "This can't be true...how can this happen so suddenly?" His grandmother had raised him from the moment he opened his eyes to the world. She was more than a grandmother to him- she was his mother in every way. She knew his joys, sorrows, dreams, and secrets. He lived transparently with her. Today, where Glenn stands in life, he gives all the credit to her alone. She was his foundation. And each time he returned from the ship, waking her early with a surprise visit brought her immense joy.

Before every voyage, she would bless him with teary eyes and say, "Son, I hope to see you soon again...if God wills that I live." Glenn would get upset, asking her not to say such things. Little did he know that one day those words would come true. Her passing left an emptiness in him that nothing could fill. As a sailor, he had no choice but to continue his

duties with a heavy heart, smiling before passengers while his soul mourned inside. That is the cruel side of a sailor's life. Whether it's good news or bad, you can't be where your heart longs to be. He told his mother, "Cut a lock of her hair and keep it for me... until today, Glenn carries that lock of hair in a small plastic pouch in his wallet.

Years have passed, yet each time Glenn returns to Mumbai, he never fails to visit her grave in Mahalaxmi. He still travels with her photograph, placing it in his cabin on every ship he joins. Her blessings continue to guide him as silently as ever.

After the funeral, a family meeting was held to discuss her belongings- her savings, her gold, including me, there were ten grandchildren in total, the elders decided to contribute small pieces of jewellery among the Children and granddaughters. Every granddaughter received something- a Bangle, a chain or a ring, but I was not included. My new dad stood up and said politely, "Audrey will not receive anything as she is not the granddaughter." Surprisingly, I felt no hurt. Somewhere deep inside, I always knew I had never been fully accepted into the family, so nothing that happened surprised me.

Her remaining little savings were to be placed in a Gonsalves fund under their grandmother's name, multiplied through interest and eventually divided among the grandchildren someday. But even after twenty-nine years, no account has ever been shown of that money. As for Glenn and me, we received nothing being the eldest, but we never felt empty. What we had was far more meaningful than gold or inheritance. We had a lock of her hair, and her photograph- pieces of her soul, her love, her presence.

Others took what was tangible; we received what was eternal.

On her first death anniversary, the family discussed who would take responsibility for maintaining her grave. Glenn immediately stepped forward and said, "I will do it." And he did- not for praises, but for the love and deep bond he once shared with her.

If our story sounds familiar, we've seen it in movies...the forgotten ones. The silent sacrifice, the unrecognised love, though movies are made out of real life. Our story was no different. From above, grandmother must have watched it all- the affection, the pretends, the division, the sincerity. Because in the end, while we may deceive people with words or half-truths, and you can mask love with convenience. But we can never deceive God; He sees every step we take.

CHAPTER 39



A NEW BEGINNING. A FAMILIAR GOODBYE



Dalston turns 1. First birthday celebration.

Now, little Dalston's first birthday filled our home with excitement. It felt unbelievable how quickly the months had passed. He was soon going to turn one year old. We decided to celebrate his first birthday at the same place where we had his baptism. All the arrangements were made, and our neighbours were just as thrilled. They were busy discussing what they would wear for the party, and like always, it turned out to be a wonderful celebration.

But that day, Dalston wasn't in the mood for a big crowd, he was restless and cranky, overwhelmed by all the people and noise.

I ended up holding him the entire time...he just wanted to stay close. Not passed around, not put down, just held. By the time we got home, we were all exhausted, we slipped into bed, completely drained.

The next morning brought a fresh, gentle start. We sat Dalston down and began opening his birthday gifts one by one, carefully noting the names written on each wrapper. He was full of curiosity, exploring each present with his tiny hands. In his playful enthusiasm, he even managed to break a few toys. Through his baby years, Dalston was mostly calm and quiet, rarely giving us any trouble. All he needed was to see me nearby, clinging to me like a leech; his sweet broad smile melted hearts wherever we went, but when it came to physical affection, he had boundaries. No cuddles from others; he cherished his space.

Around that time, with Glenn processing well at his workplace, we decided it was time to move into a bigger place, a cosy one-bedroom flat. So, we began our search, going around with brokers, exploring different options. After some time, we found a home that felt perfect. A flat in Sejal Park, on Goregaon link road, on the second floor, garden-facing... Before moving in, we were clear; we wanted to make this place truly our dream home, so we renovated the entire flat exactly as we had imagined, from furniture and painting to plumbing and electricals; we designed every corner with love and intention. When it was ready, our home radiated nothing but warmth, Beauty and a sense of fresh beginnings.

But the excitement of our new home came with a bittersweet ache. I had lived in Shastri Nagar for five years, and the bond I shared with my neighbours ran deep. When they heard we were leaving, their reaction was emotional. Many

cried, pleading with us to stay. Their voices were full of affection and pain. It felt as though the entire floor was grieving. Glenn and I felt equally heartbroken and guilty. This community had become our safe haven. Glenn could go sailing in peace of mind, knowing Dalston and I were surrounded by people who truly cared. Moving into a flat, we realised, would be very different. In the Chawl-style building, people came and went freely from our home, filling our days with warmth and connection. This new lifestyle felt quieter, almost isolated.

Still, our neighbours eventually accepted our decision and lovingly helped us pack. Since the new house was already furnished, we only took our clothes and utensils. We sold everything else except my precious steel cupboard, the one I had received in my wedding trousseau. Glenn and I carried our luggage back and forth on his bike. Without any help from either side of the family. But we were content. We had each other, and that was enough.

At Glenn's request, our neighbour's daughter stayed with me at night during the initial days, and her presence offered much-needed comfort. I also began searching for a full-time maid, as living alone with Dalston in a flat felt scary. My previous maid, Kalavati, had left us for a better opportunity in Dubai, and I missed her terribly. Eventually, the day of our shift arrived. We invited the church priest to bless our home. Like before, it was only the three of us, no family, no relatives, yet beautiful. This time, we had our little Dalston with us, making the blessing feel complete. As we settled into Sejal Park, a quiet truth surfaced: aside from friends and our earlier neighbours, we truly had no one else around us. But in that simplicity, there was strength. We had one another, our memories, and the love that filled our homes. I grew to love our cosy new home.

It carried positive energy, much like our previous ones. Visitors often mentioned feeling peaceful the moment they stepped in, and that meant a lot. Eventually, I found a maid, Jyoti, a fourteen-year-old girl, undernourished yet bright and eager to learn. She was the daughter of the society's housekeeping worker. Help was hard to find, and her presence felt like a blessing. She quickly learnt the work, cared for Dalston lovingly, and even picked up basic English simply by being around him. Over time, she grew healthier, happier, and more confident.

But after Dalston's third birthday, her family arranged her marriage, and she left. Later, my sister once saw her on a bus with a baby. Jyoti didn't recognise her, but I still hope she is safe and happy whenever she is.

In Sejal Park, I made only one close friend. Janet from the fifth floor, her husband worked in Muscat, and her warm company brought comfort during my early days there. We often visited each other or went out for a casual stroll. Around that time, I enrolled Dalston in a small kindergarten called Odelia's in Orlem, Malad. I remember sending Glenn to fill out the admission form. After waiting almost an hour in line, he headed back home because he couldn't remember Dalston's date of birth! He rushed home on his bike so I could fill in the details. I scolded him thoroughly- you don't know your own son's birth date?" It was one of those funny moments that stayed etched in memory.

Dalston school hours were just two hours a day, yet that first day was emotional. He had never been away from me, not even for a moment. I brought all the tiny essentials - raincoat, tiffin, water bottle, bag- feeling proud and nervous at the same time. When we reached the school, the sound of crying children filled the air.

As I said goodbye and watched the aya take him inside, he began to cry-and so did I. Glenn tried to laugh it off, saying it was only two hours, but what he didn't understand was the flood of emotions I felt.

Perhaps it awakened that old wound- the memory of being three years old, dropped at boarding school, and never seeing my mother again. Watching Dalston cry felt like reliving that moment through him. I stayed outside the school every day, waiting for those two hours to pass, afraid they might call for me.

When school ended, I would rush to the gate, eyes searching for my little boy. And the moment he spotted me, he would run towards me with the brightest smile. I'd lift him in my arms, even though he was getting heavy. That embrace meant everything. This became a ritual- day after day, week after week, until the entire year slipped by.

CHAPTER 40



HANDS THAT LIFTED ME, HEARTS THAT STAYED



**My maid Sushila, who took care of
our house and us, for 23 long years.**

By the time Dalston turned three, finding a reliable day and night maid had become increasingly difficult. Still, I had grown confident in caring for him on my own. One afternoon, the laundry lady who came regularly to collect our clothes casually asked if I needed a top servant." Without a second thought, I said yes. That simple moment marked the beginning of Shushila's entry into our lives.

Shushila carried a story shaped by hardship and courage; she had walked out of her marriage after repeated physical abuse. When she became pregnant for the third time, she made a bold decision to protect her unborn child. At six months pregnant, she left her husband, taking one daughter with her while leaving the elder girl in her father's care. She moved into her mother's home in Mumbai, determined to rebuild her life.

She was then a mother of three daughters, two of whom were married, and she was a proud grandmother too. Her youngest daughter was only ten years, life, however, had not been kind. The sudden passing of her beloved mother shattered her emotionally, plunging her into depression. She needed a change, a distraction, something to keep her moving forward. And so, she chose to work once again after a break of six months since her mom passed away. That choice brought her to my doorstep.

She began with the basics - washing dishes, sweeping, mopping, and making rotis. But very soon, she became much more than household help. Her warm presence blended seamlessly into our daily routine. She became a family, among my friends, family, relatives and neighbours. Everyone knew her. Gradually, she took charge of the entire house and became someone I could depend on through every season of my life. She stayed with us from the time Dalston was more than two years old until he was twenty-six years old and even witnessed his marriage. Nearly a lifetime shared. Built on trust, care, and quiet strength.

When the time came to choose a proper school for Dalston, we wanted only the best for him, our only child. After much thought, we selected Janki Devi Public School, an ICSC board in Lokhandwala Mhada.

The school was impressive. Large, well-equipped, and thoughtfully designed. There was a swimming pool, optional horse riding, Karate, and various sports activities, each with dedicated periods. An elevator ensured the children moved safely between floors. The campus had a well-maintained science laboratory and library, and an air-conditioned computer room where students received early exposure to technology. Everything reflected quality and modern planning. The students usually came from affluent backgrounds. Children's parents were from the film industry, professionals, and businessmen.

The founder of the school was a politician, Narendra Verma. The school was considered one of the best in the area during those years.

Although it was far from our home, we overlooked the distance. Believing the education and environment were worth it, around that time, Glenn gifted me a brand new Maruti car, a beautiful Metallic gold. Compact, manageable, and perfect for me. I had already learnt to drive before my pregnancy, but I never enjoyed driving through Mumbai's chaotic traffic. Glenn, however, encouraged me, reminding me of the importance of independence. So, every afternoon, I would drive from Dalston to school myself.

Soon, the terrible traffic made reaching school on time difficult. I eventually hired an autorickshaw driver, Rajesh, a responsible young man who transported three kids from our complex and a few from the nearby area. He somehow often managed to fit seven children at once; sometimes that made us nervous, but somehow, he handled it well. The children adored him, affectionately calling him Rajesh uncle, and he genuinely cared for them all.

Around this period, one of our relatives moved into the next wing of our complex, my father-in-law's first cousin's sister, Dawn. She was much younger than him by many years, making her just a year younger than Glenn and me. Married to actor Adi Irani, younger brother of actress Aruna Irani, Dawn naturally became someone we interacted with often, especially since our children attended the same school. She had two daughters, one older than Dalston and the other younger.

Once Dalston began attending afternoon school, I finally had time for myself.

His school hours were from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., giving me the space to rediscover my own interests. During this phase, one person became very dear to me, Diana, my beautician and close friend; our bond went back years; she had done my makeup and hair on my wedding day. Over time, our client- beautician relationship blossomed into a deep and comforting friendship. After dropping Dalston off at school. I often spent my afternoons at her parlour. Our friendship was about warmth and connection. Those were golden days. It's been forty long years since I met her, and we are still friends till date; our bond has truly stood the test of time, a friendship woven with love, loyalty and sisterhood.

CHAPTER 41



A MOTHER'S QUIET BATTLE

Though those early years had their own share of joy. They also brought moments that tested me in ways I had never imagined. When Dalston was just four months old, I began noticing something unusual. His tiny chest would rise and fall with difficulty, his breathing heavy and strained. Strangely, he hardly ever had a runny nose. It was always the breathing. Concerned and anxious, I took him to his paediatrician, Dr Deepak Tirthani, in Bandra. After examining him thoroughly, the doctor gently broke the news: Dalston had asthma, Glenn was away at sea, and I had gone with his sister. In that moment, my world seemed to crumble. I held my little baby close, feeling blank, broken, and helpless. How could a child so tiny, so delicate, already be fighting something so heavy?

Dr Deepak explained kindly that asthma could be genetic. And suddenly memories of my own struggle came rushing back. Nights when I couldn't sleep because of breathlessness, and the homemade remedy my mother lovingly prepared, warm milk whisked with a raw Indian egg yolk, a teaspoon of doctor brandy, a bit of sugar, given to me first thing in the morning on an empty stomach.

I remembered even experiencing an attack during pregnancy. Realising that I may have passed this to my child filled me with a different kind of ache...not physical but deeply emotional.

We returned home with heavy hearts. The doctor prescribed medication and a nebuliser suitable for his age. It shattered me, my four-month-old baby on high doses of medicine, I gave him every dose on time, day after day. As he grew older, the asthma did not get easier. I became extremely careful about his diet. No jam, butter, chocolates, cold drinks, ice cream, cream biscuits, or chips. Everything he ate was homemade. Whenever we stepped out, I covered his face gently with a thin transparent scarf, and as he grew older, tied his nose with a handkerchief. To my surprise, he never resisted. Calm, obedient, and always trusting.

Over time, getting emergency appointments with Dr Deepak became difficult, and Bandra was far. On someone's recommendation, I visited Dr Vinod Garg on Marve Road in Malad. It was a blessing. He had both a clinic and a children's hospital, which proved valuable during emergencies. Soon, Dalston became a regular patient. The hospital felt like a second home. Every few months, he needed hospitalisation for wheezing, congestion, and breathlessness. I never took chances. For me, breathing was life itself.

The treatment was intense. IV saline, injections, and strong medication like deriphyllin syrup. Those steroids changed him temporarily. My otherwise quiet, composed child would suddenly become hyperactive, running non-stop, jumping endlessly, unable to sleep... like a little tornado. It frightened me, and the side effects were painful too. Severe constipation made him cry with agony.

I applied ointments, used glycerin suppositories, anything to ease his sufferings. Still, the condition remained stubborn.

I followed every instruction religiously. Daily steam twice a day, monitoring his breath per minute, praying the count wouldn't cross sixty. Many times, his breathing was so laboured that I could see his little ribs sinking in, forming a hollow, and hear the whistling sound from his chest. I even started homoeopathy. Always maintaining a two-hour gap from his allopathic medicine. I kept him away from smokers. I stayed constantly alert, no one to share the fear with, no rest, no backup. But he was my only son. My entire world. And in Glenn's absence, his care was completely my responsibility.

One day, the doctor said something that became my lifeline: "He will outgrow it by the time he turns ten." Those words filled me with hope. I prayed, waited, and surrendered my child into God's hands. Stress consumed me- I grew thin, exhausted, with no time to rest or even eat. But none of it mattered; Dalston did. I gave up everything, any personal indulgence. His safety, health and happiness became mine.

To shield him from the pollution during Diwali and Ganpati, we made it a point to travel during school holidays- sometimes aboard, sometimes across India- usually with tour groups like Thomas Cook, SOTC, or Kerari tours. Everything was arranged with care: a vegetarian diet, a Maharaja to cook healthy meals, and children were around to play with. Those trips became our precious escape-moments of joy, laughter and togetherness, a contrast to the constant health battles at home. Watching him smile made every sacrifice worthwhile.

And God heard my prayers. Today, Dalston is free from Asthma. He is truly God's child, my gratitude goes to Jesus and Mother Mary, who carried us through those exhausting years. Every day back then felt like a mountain, but somehow, we climbed it together. It became a chapter of quiet courage, one that shaped both my son and me.

By the time Dalston entered the first standard, his intelligence became evident. He grasped lessons quickly, though he wasn't always attentive. He excelled in class activities but needed gentle reminders while studying at home. What stood out most was his reserved nature. Unlike other children, who came home bubbling with stories, he shared nothing- no joy, no sadness, no complaints. I always learned about incidents from other parents or children. He never wanted to upset anyone or lose a friend, so he quietly absorbed everything, keeping the world within himself.

Besides his silence, he was remarkably active, excellent in sports, games and physical competition. He came first in races, carrom tournaments, and writing contests, and was even selected to play football at the district level. Though the team came third, his achievements made me proud. Yet he remained humble. Never once did he come home waving certificates or boasting. Once I got a call from a parent, now a dear friend, Payal Rohira. Her son Vishal was from the same class. She congratulated me because Dalston had won the handwriting competition from the entire four divisions in the 1st. I checked his bag, and there it was- a certificate neatly tucked away inside his bag.

There was only one thing he disliked in school - swimming. It was held on Thursdays during the last two periods. He would hide his swimming costume and tell the coach, "My mother forgot to pack it."

At first, I didn't understand the extent of his fear. But after repeated incidents, the coach called for me. Slowly, I realised the real reason. In another division of his class, a boy had tragically drowned during the swimming period. The whole school was shaken. Sensitive, observant, and silent as he was, Dalston must have internalised the fear deeply, though he never said a word. Some children don't express their fears. They simply find ways to protect themselves. And that is exactly what my little boy was doing. With patience, reassurance, and gentle encouragement, we helped him continue. And today, he is a very good swimmer-another quiet victory he achieved in his own time and his own way.

CHAPTER 42



SEASONS OF SISTERHOOD.



Glenn, Me and Dalston along with our friend Payal, her husband and son Vishal, Dalston's classmate in Janki Devi School. A picture of us on a vacation in Switzerland.

I always felt a quiet pride whenever parents told me they preferred their children to be around Dalston. His gentle, calm nature made him a comforting presence, and many felt he was a good influence on their children. It was through our sons Vishal and Dalston that Payal and I first connected. As they were in the same class and division since standard one.

Payal lived very near the school, and soon we settled into a comfortable routine of meeting at her home sometimes. In the course of time, we bonded deeply, almost like sisters. We often took the boys for snacks, early children's movies, and a visit to Nana- Nani- park, or a little shopping at the mall, which became their special day every Saturday.

Sundays, however, remained disciplined. With school the next morning, I ensured Dalston followed his routine- dinner at 8.30 p.m., brushing his teeth, and bedtime at 10.30, only on Fridays and Saturdays was he allowed to sleep late. I personally supervised most of his studies, with only Hindi, Marathi and Maths handled by his tuition teacher.

Payal and I often spent hours completing the boys' school project, doing our best to make everything neat, presentable and creative. The boys enjoyed their free time, while we mothers put in all our efforts. And, of course, they received all the credit and marks. We used to laugh, wondering if the real homework was meant for us parents instead of them, yet watching the boys proudly submit their project made every moment worthwhile. Weekends always ended with our husbands joining us for dinner. Those evenings were filled with cheerful conversations, a sense of togetherness that made our family grow close. The men bonded just as easily. Completing the circle of warmth that surrounded us.

We even took a memorable trip to Switzerland together. But unfortunately, towards the end of the trip, I sensed something was different- a slight partiality between the boys. I mentioned it gently, then chose to remain silent so as not to spoil the last days of our holidays. Payal sensed the

change, and by the time we returned to Mumbai, an unspoken distance had begun to form.



**Dalston and his cousin brother Julian.
Glenn's sister's son and my blessed Godchild.**

We tried to talk it through, but like many heartfelt misunderstandings, both of us wanted to be heard and understood. No one paused, and nothing truly resolved. In time, we drifted apart. Our children and husbands, too, silently became part of that distance created by us. Yet despite everything, there was never bitterness; our bond had been strong, we knew each other's families, celebrated many moments together, and shared a connection that was sincere.

Today, with Payal living in the United States, we connect occasionally, exchanging warm messages and updates about our lives. The memories remain, preserved in dozens of photographs and the tender moments we once shared. She was a truly loving person, and I still treasure our friendship deeply.

When Dalston was three years old, my sister-in-law left for Dubai with her son. Her departure left a quiet ache in my heart, for over the years we had grown close through our shared journey of motherhood.

A year before she moved, she had been living in Naigaon, in a nearly empty building with only a few neighbours. I remember visiting her with Glenn, Dalston and their mother, and feeling a deep sadness seeing her there with little Julian in such loneliness. But not long after, she locked up the house and moved permanently to Dubai, later selling the flat. I missed them terribly, though we kept in touch through calls, it wasn't the same. The children were too young to understand what separation meant, but we adults carried the quiet heaviness in our hearts.

A year later, Glenn, Dalston, and I visited them in Dubai. Dalston was four at that time. Watching the boys reunite after so long was beautiful- pure joy, full of innocence. The trip restored a part of my heart, reminding me how deeply woven our families were.

CHAPTER 43



BHOOMI CLASSIC: A SENSE OF ARRIVAL



**Desiree and I have been friends for more than
two decades, and yet together.**

We had spent five full years at Sejal Park. By the time Dalston had stepped into first standard, we knew it was time to move on to something bigger, something that would grow with us. A two- BHK flat is the next natural step.

Our fifth- floor neighbour, Janet, who had become a close friend, mentioned a new complex coming up, Bhoomi Classic. It was still under construction. She had booked a flat in A wing on the fifth floor and was preparing to shift. When she heard we were house hunting too, we suggested we take a look. There were still many flats available. That's how we found ourselves standing in Bhoomi Classic, G wing, second floor.

The moment we visited, something felt right; the complex had wings from A to G, with a small garden planned at the centre. Over the years, we had unknowingly formed a tradition- we always chose a second -floor flat. And this time, we were clear about one more thing: it had to be garden-facing. Like the one we had in Sejal Park, too. I wanted to be able to watch Dalston while he played, even from a distance.

We again renovated this entry house too. Planning every corner with intention. This wasn't just another house- it was meant to be our forever home. From a humble chawl studio, to a one -BHK, and now finally a spacious two -BHK, it felt like we had arrived. This was our sense of completion. Life felt settled, sorted and calm.

We did the renovation slowly and thoughtfully. Every detail mattered. Every corner had a purpose. Once the house was ready and we finally moved in, we made a conscious decision to sell our Sejal flat along with all the furniture. We carried nothing with us. Everything in this new home was new- just like the beginning we wanted it to represent. One moment that stood out was the visit from Glenn's and my favourite aunt, and her husband, Uncle Kotian. They both came to help us set up our new home, even if just for a day, their presence meant the world to us.

The house buzzed with laughter, joy and comfort. We arranged things, ordered food, joked and talked endlessly. Little Dalston waddled around; his curious eyes added magic to the day. It was a precious moment- one of the genuine family warmth. Life, however, has its bittersweet turns. A few months later, Uncle Kotian passed away after being diagnosed with throat cancer. It was heartbreaking for everyone who knew and liked him. It has been fourteen years since then, yet his kindness and warmth remain deeply cherished in our hearts. A few neighbours dropped in out of curiosity, and their reaction warmed my heart. They admired the interiors, the simplicity, the elegance. It was not fancy, but it was full of love.

The A wing was almost fully occupied. G wing, however, felt deserted. We were among the second owners to move in on our floor; the other flats stood empty.

The garden didn't exist yet. Construction in the other wings was still incomplete. The complex felt lonely.

Back then, Inorbit didn't exist. The land where it now stands proudly was once a dumping ground. The stench travelled far. The roads were dark, barely lit, and the entire area felt barren. People who knew us thought we had made a foolish decision- buying a home in such a remote part of Malad Link Road. But we believed in what the place would become.

One of our biggest regrets remains- not buying a parking space when it was available for just 25 thousand. Glenn believed the society would later charge minimal parking fees; today, that same spot is worth nearly 25 lakhs. Over the years, we owned different cars, each with its own seasons, but parking was always a struggle.

Inside parking costs 4000 Rs a month, and outside parking leads to fines. Eventually, we gave up owning a car altogether. Glenn, being away at sea most of the time, preferred a bike - simpler, easier, practical, and Dalston was abroad in the USA too.

Our neighbours, the Hariharan family, lived next door, parents with two children. Their son, Sagar, was six months older than Dalston in age. What began as neighbourly warmth slowly turned into family. We shared meals, coffee, and conversations. Birthdays meant midnight cake - cutting. Festivals like Diwali and Christmas were celebrated together. With lights, sweets, and laughter. It felt like we weren't living in separate homes, but under one shared roof. Strangely, I didn't miss Sejal Park at all. We have lived there for five years, but never truly connected with anyone. It was a place we stayed in, not a place we grew up in.

It was in this house that I met someone who became one of the most cherished friends in my life, Desiree.

Glenn was at sea when he sent a small parcel for me through his colleague Neil, who lived nearby. One evening, Neil came over with his wife to deliver it. Neil's warmth easily put me at ease. But his wife felt distant. Polite, reserved. Refined, tall and graceful, with a bob hairstyle and an effortless elegance. I remember thinking she was not my type. We were nothing alike. On the other hand, I was loud, expressive, and unfiltered. I never imagined we'd become friends. But life has its own plans.

We kept meeting slowly, with polite smiles, and our conversation deepened. Without realising when and how, the distance melted.

I found myself admiring her- her discipline, her grace, her command over English, she was the perfect girl next door, and I was just me. And yet we clicked.

She hadn't had children then, and often spoke to me about her longing to be a mother. There was a quiet sadness in her eyes. I tried to lift her spirit, telling her gently, "You'll be a proud mother soon". She held on to those words.

Eventually, her prayers were answered. She convinced her first child, a boy. I was there through her pregnancy, bringing lightness where she needed it most. She struggled. Loneliness and exhaustion took over, and she slipped into moments of depression while searching for a reliable 24-hour maid. I reminded her, again and again, of her strength. She soon became a mother of three children. She grew into motherhood beautifully. Today, those children are all grown and independent, and Desiree has taken up teaching in a school. Something she always dreamed of. It's been 25 long years, and we are still best friends.

Time hasn't touched us. We talk, laugh, and reflect. I give her fashion tips, forcing her to pose for photos. She likes the crazy me; I admire her calmness. We balance each other. Our friendship is rare, rooted and real, beyond logic.

With time, however, Bhoomi Classic revealed its flaws. The builder, in a hurry to sell, had compromised on quality. The walls were weak in the G wing- one nail could crack the plaster. Electric wiring was poorly planned, leading to frequent short circuits. Electrician complained everytime they opened up the electrical board. And yet, despite its flaws, this house gave us something priceless- community, friendship, belongings, and memories that still breathe within its walls.

CHAPTER 44



THE STRENGTH WE CARRY, THE LOVE WE CHOOSE.

More than two decades ago, my mother made a brave decision- one that was meant to restore her sight and bring relief. Cataract surgery, back then, was nothing like the advanced, precise laser procedures of today. It was invasive, risky, and required immense courage. Sadly, what was supposed to heal her became the beginning of a lifelong struggle. The surgery, performed in Goregaon, was marred by negligence. A grave mistake was made- one that cost her the vision in her eyes. The physical pain was unbearable, the trauma deep, and yet, there was no accountability. Like many patients, she had signed a bond that legally protected the doctor. There was no one to question, no one to blame. My mother was left to bear the loss alone- emotionally, physically, and financially.

A year later, still holding on to hope, she was told about a reputed doctor, Dr Shroff, known for handling complex cases. With faith and determination, she visited his hospital in Town, believing that perhaps something could still be salvaged. After a thorough examination, the truth was confirmed: her retina was completely damaged.

Yet, one last attempt was made. A second surgery- delicate and demanding - was undertaken. She was clearly instructed to take absolute rest and avoid all strain, most importantly, to stay away from heat and fire.

But life rarely pauses for responsibility. At that time, my mom was running a home- based tiffin service, their means of survival. Against medical advice, driven perhaps by duty, fear, or the pressure to keep life going, my mother returned to the kitchen. That single act- whether of neglect or sacrifice- worsened everything. Again, the second surgery failed. Lakhs were spent, but the eye was completely lost. Setting her on a painful journey. What remained was a hollow space. Covered by a white film- no eye ball, only loss.

Yet, my mother did not collapse under grief. She chose dignity. She chose life. With one eye, chronic pain, and a silent ache that never truly left her, she carried on. I know it wasn't easy at all. She never allowed the world to witness her suffering. She smiled, she lived, and she stood tall. What she endured was deeply unfair, but she bore it with remarkable grace. She was a woman of quiet resilience - a silent warrior. And she remains one of the strongest people I have ever known.

Twenty- one years ago also marks the beginning of another profound chapter in my life- the day I met my dearest friend, Sandra. Some friendships are casual, some meaningful, but few are soul-tied. Ours was one such. We first met at Bhoomi Classic, where she lived just opposite my building, in E wing on the third floor. At that time, I was actively involved in church activities. One afternoon, while accompanying our parish priest for a home visit, carrying the cross, we entered Sandra's house.

She was seated quietly on the sofa, looking pale, her hair neatly tied back. What caught my attention immediately were her knees, both wrapped in a bandage. When the priest asked with concern what had happened, she calmly explained that she had just returned from a pilgrimage to Velankanni. As a tradition, she had walked on her knees in the sand while saying the Stations of the Cross prayer. I was speechless. This kind of devotion requires extraordinary faith and strength. Velankanni church visit had been a part of her family's life since her childhood, and even today, it continues- now Glenn has joined their annual holy pilgrimage religiously whenever he is on vacation in August.

We clicked instantly, as if written somewhere long before we met. Both Virgos, born in August- Sandra on the 26th, and me on the 28th- just two days apart. Soon, casual visits blossomed into deep friendship. We became part of each other's families. Her home felt like my second home. Sandra had a generous heart- always warm and welcoming. She worked at a boutique in Juhu called Christiana. And I'd often visit her there. Between customers, we'd chat and share lunch. I introduced her to a few ladies in our complex. I even started a Kitty group. I was and am always a social one, bringing people together. Those days were simple, yet full.

Sandra often joked, "Bhai, you have a hundred friends, but I have only you." It became our inside joke- lighthearted, yet deeply true. Over time, I noticed her effortlessly spontaneous sense of humour- quick, cheeky, and never hurtful. It comes out naturally. That leaves everyone smiling and laughing with her funny one liners, it keeps the mood easy.

Around the same time, my world also revolved largely around Dalston. Through his school, Janki Devi, I met Shashi- another friendship that quietly grew into something meaningful! Her son Yash and Dalston were classmates, and visits for homework soon turned us into friends. Our cherished memories were our trips to Delhi and Jaipur, the vibrant beauty of the Pink City. Shashi always believed that I was her lucky charm. She was just being honest; she felt my presence brought her home good energy and fortune. I was grateful to see the trust she had in me. Sadly, her husband was diagnosed with mouth cancer. Though he underwent surgery, it didn't help much; he struggled for three years and finally passed away at the age of 50. It was Shashi who once told me I needed to step out more, to give myself space. That nudge led me to another beautiful chapter- my Lokhandwala girl gang introduced to me by Shashi. Our kitty group of about fifteen girls hung out often for themed lunches, birthday parties, movies, festivals, picnics, and endless laughter became our escape from daily routine. With friends around, we forgot our roles and simply became ourselves - playful and alive. Even our husbands, with their busy working lives, couldn't always offer us. And somewhere along the way, we stopped missing family outings, because our girl gang became family, A space where we could be our wild, silly, carefree selves. There was no judgement, no pressure.

Those moments mattered. They still do. They taught me that life isn't about perfection. It's about presence. Every person who walked into my life brought something- joys, lessons, warmth, sometimes disappointment too. And that's ok. I've learned to hold on to the good, to forgive the rest, and to let go without bitterness.

I am sensitive- yes, but sensitivity is not weakness. We all feel deeply; what matters is how we respond. I thank God every day for sending the right people at the right time. Some stayed, some drifted away, but all left behind memories worth cherishing. And that, I believe, is life-imperfect, transient, yet deeply beautiful. Nothing is permanent and forever, but what can be in our control is how we choose to remember it. Even if the ending was hurtful and messy, we mustn't forget there were good times too. But what I've come to understand is that while we can't control our emotions, we do have the power in us to control how we respond to them. Especially when it comes to negativity, because thoughts become our reality. No one can force us to feel anything unless we allow it. That's initially in our hands, every emotion. It's all the reflection of the thoughts we choose to feed our minds with. Everything begins and ends with us. I'm trying to implement this awareness in my life, choosing peace over chaos. And slowly, with every step, I feel freer. Eventually, I introduced Diana, Sandra and Payal to the Lokhandwala gang, and it created beautiful memories.

CHAPTER 45



THE FAMILY I WAS GIVEN



**Sandra and I are inseparable friends.
Family not by blood though.**

For a long time in my life, I never truly knew what it felt like to have a family beyond my immediate one- the kind others seemed to be born into so effortlessly, Grandparents, cousins, relatives, my world felt quieter, family who formed a safety net, a place to fall back on. I didn't have that.

There were moments when I felt like an orphan- not in a literal sense, but in the emotional one. Alone when moments when others have shoulders to lean on, homes to return to, blood ties that offered comfort and certainty. But even in those years of emptiness, I gradually came to realise something powerful: God has always been kind; he is never unjust. He doesn't abandon; he redirects. He gives each of us what we deserve, in his perfect way and time. Some are blessed with large families. Surrounded by parents, grandparents, cousins and relatives who form their core. And then, there are others like me, not surrounded by traditional families. But instead blessed with good friends who feel like more than friends. Those beautiful souls who walked into my life weren't tied to me by blood, but they gave me love, care, support and belonging that was greater than any label. Friends step in without obligation and choose to stay.

And that itself is a divine gift. Today, I no longer feel orphaned. I feel chosen.

Coming back to one of the most cherished blessings of my life- Sandra. Our first meeting is still a favourite story in her household. One that she and her husband Bryan retell with laughter and affection. What makes it especially amusing is that while they remember it so vividly, I was completely unaware of it at that time. Before I even knew them, they already knew me. Our living room windows faced each other directly.

I had placed my dining table close to the window, and every day-like clockwise- I would sit there and help Dalston with his studies. That was our daily routine. Of course, studying came with its own share of chaos. If Dalston grew distracted, I would scold him, sometimes even chase after

him with a ruler. He'd dodged me in fear and run around the centre table, zigzagging through the hall. At home, I usually wore shorts, my hair wasn't too long, and being petite, I apparently looked more like his elder sister than his mother.

From across the building, Bryan had a perfect view. After returning from work, he would sit by his window with a cup of tea and quietly watch what he believed was a young girl tutoring a little boy. The scenes amused him endlessly. At times, he even felt sorry for Dalston, thinking he had a very strict little teacher. "Poor kid," he'd think. He found the entire scene absolutely hilarious. Sandra eventually noticed Bryan sitting by the window so often and asked, "Who are you always looking at across the building?" With a grin, Bryan replied, "This good-looking girl is teaching a little boy. I can't figure out if she's his sister or teacher, but it's entertaining."

The mystery only deepened when one day they suddenly noticed a man drying clothes out the window. "Now, who is that?" Bryan laughed. "Their father?!" That only made the truth even more amusing when it finally surfaced- on the day I walked straight into their house with the parish priest. The moment they saw me, recognition was drawn instantly. She's the one they had been watching all along.

Sandra is what I call my 2 a.m. friend. The kind of friend you know you can turn to at any hour, without hesitation. And it was never one-sided. She knew she could count on me just as deeply. Ours was a relationship built on balance, care, and quiet understanding. We shared everything openly. Often, a single look was enough. No words were needed.

Though Sandra is much younger than me, it rarely feels that way. She is always there for me, which sometimes reminds me of my sister Maureen. Sandra gave me the name Auds, " a name that felt warm and affectionate and quickly became a part of me. So strong is our connection that everyone around us knows- where you find Audrey, Sandra will be there too. We are inseparable. Of. Of course, like all deep friendships, we have our rare disagreements and silence. And during those times, the absence of our togetherness is felt by everyone around us. Friends grow uneasy, unsure of how to act, unwilling to take sides because they love and respect us both equally. They go out of their way to bring us back together- calling, messaging, gently nudging us towards reconciliation. And they mostly succeed. Because our bond no longer belongs only to us. It is cherished, protected, and nurtured by the circle we now call our chosen family.

Whenever I had to travel abroad, I never once worried about leaving Dalston behind. He was in safe hands- with Sandra and Bryan. They cared for him as their own. Bryan would iron his college uniform in the morning. Sandra made sure he ate on time. Little Sabrina prepared his favourite Maggi and Tang when he returned from college. They had dinner together, watched television, laughed, and lived like a true family. At night, Dalston is among the children, surrounded by comfort and belonging. He never once missed me during those days- not because he didn't care, but because he felt completely at home.

Of course, Dalston had a mischievous side that no one suspected. Quiet, polite, and soft -spoken, he carried the perfect "good boy" image. While studying at Rizvi College, he often declined Bryan's offer to drop him off, as they had

the same route to Bandra, Dalston politely saying he would go later. What no one knew was that he wasn't always going to college at all. Fully dressed and prepared, he would quietly return to our house, as our house keys were hanging by Sandra's door. And only to come back later pretending he had attended college.

The truth leaked out when the college contacted me regarding his poor attendance. Sandra was shocked, but soon found the whole episode amusing. She laughed as she narrated how this silent, obedient boy managed to fool everyone. That was Dalston- gentle on the outside, playful beneath.

His bond with Sandra's family only grew stronger over the years. Today, at 29 years, his respect and affection for Sandra and Bryan and her kids, especially Sabrina, whom he lovingly calls Saby, and in turn she calls him Dalu Baba. It remains deep and sincere. He remembers them on each and every occasion, not out of obligation, but from the heart. Sandra supported him through many phases of life, even helped him secure an internship at the Westin hotel through her own contact- an act that spoke of care beyond friendship. This was the family I was given.

CHAPTER 46



WHEN BREATH BECAME PRAYER.

It was the Christmas season, nearly three years into our new life. As I did every year, I brought out my carefully packed Christmas decorations- the ones I had collected over time, and stored safely in the loft, waiting patiently for December. The Christmas tree stood proudly in the living room, and soon the entire space shimmered with Festive warmth and quiet joy.

At that time, Glenn was in Malaysia to explore a business opportunity, hoping to acquire a franchise he planned to set up at Inorbit Mall. Just across from our complex. So, for those fifteen days, it was just Dalston and me at home.

That night, at around three in the morning, Dalston suddenly woke me up. He was struggling to breathe- an asthma attack. He was only nine years old then. I rose instantly, my heart alert before my body fully awakened, and went to get him a glass of water. As we were using the air conditioner. I had closed the bedroom door. As I opened it, I was met by something terrifying- a thick, dark cloud filling the passage. I froze. It was not mist. It was heavy, black smoke. Instinctively, I shut the door at once.

Dalston looked at my face, already frightened! "Mama, what happened?" He asked. I tried not to alarm him further. I just told him there was a smoke outside and that I didn't yet know what had caused it. My first instinct was to stay locked inside the bedroom. But something deep within me- an inner voice I have always trusted- warned me that staying inside the bedroom could be more dangerous than leaving. With both of us having breathing issues, and Dalston's asthma worsening. I knew we could not afford to remain inside for long. This was a moment of decision- do or die.

I tied a handkerchief firmly around Dalston's face, covering his nose and mouth. I spoke slowly and clearly, "Close your eyes tightly. No matter what happens, do not open them until I tell you. Mama is right beside you. You don't need to be afraid." Holding his hand, I opened the bedroom door again. My heart pounded violently as we stepped into complete darkness. The smoke was so dense that I could not see anything- not even my own hand.

I relied purely on memory and instinct. Each step felt heavy, as though I was carrying the full weight of our lives on my shoulders. I did not know what lay ahead or whether we would make it through. I trusted only one thing- God. And the fierce love I carried for my child.

Coughing and choking, I stumbled towards the main door. At night, I always locked the main door carefully- every latch, every bolt. In the panic and suffocation, my fingers fumbled, but somehow, one by one, I managed to unlock all. The moment the door opened, the thick black smoke followed us like a living shadow. I did not pause for even a second. We ran down the Stairs, heart racing, breath unsteady, but driven by a single purpose: survival.

I took Dalston straight to Sandra's house. The moment she saw us, she gasped. We were blackened from head to toe, as though we had emerged from a coal mine; only our eyes were visible through the soot.

She immediately sent Dalston for a hot shower. Thankfully, her younger brother Allen and her cousin Rocky were home. She, along with them, came over to check our home, since in that chaos, the main door had been left wide open. In moments like that, having someone beside you makes all the difference, and I felt deeply grateful for their support.

Meanwhile, our downstairs neighbour. The Shettys, who owned a hotel and usually returned home around that hour, noticed thick smoke pouring out of our windows. Without hesitation, he rushed upstairs, risking his own life. With only a handkerchief tied around his nose, he entered the house blindly, feeling his way through the darkness. He called out, asking where the main power switch was. I directed him, and within moments, he switched off the main electricity line. And opened all the windows so that the smoke could get out easily. That single act of courage and presence of mind saved us.

It was then discovered that the refrigerator's compressor had caught fire. We were only minutes, perhaps seconds, away from tragedy. Had Dalston not woken me up asking for a glass of warm water. The smoke would have suffocated us in our sleep.

Someone had already called for the fire brigade, and the police arrived soon after. Since there were no flames, only smoke, no firefighter was required.

Statements were taken, windows were flung open, and slowly the house began to clear. By morning, the incident had spread through the entire complex. Neighbours came one after the other, falling silent at the sight of the devastation. Thick black soot covered every surface. Walls, furniture, kitchen tiles, cupboards, clothes. Nothing had been spared. My Christmas decorations, the ones I had arranged with so much love, were completely ruined. The joy and anticipation of the season vanished in an instant. It felt as though a dark shadow had passed through our home, stealing not just our belongings but our peace.

I stood there numb, unsure where to begin or how to process it all. Housekeeping services tried to help, but the damage ran too deep. The house needed repairing. Floor tiles had to be replaced. Furniture had to be refinished. It felt as though we had to rebuild everything from the beginning.

Glenn was due to return from Malaysia soon, but I didn't have the heart to tell him over the phone. I wanted him to come home and see us alive before hearing anything else. When he finally walked in, he stopped at the doorway, stunned. His eyes move slowly across the blackened walls and ruined furniture. "Why didn't you tell me? He asked, shocked. I had no words then. Only relief.

He hugged Dalston and me tight in that moment; nothing else mattered, not the house, not the losses. Only the fact that we were alive. "Thank God, " he whispered. "You both are safe.

Neighbours gathered around him, offering comfort. They said with concern, "You may have lost everything in the house, but God saved your family; that is his blessing."

They were absolutely right. We had been given a second chance at life.

In the days that followed, neighbours brought us meals without being asked. Their quiet care and kindness made us feel seen and supported. A priest was called to bless the house, sprinkling holy water in every corner. We needed peace to return- not just the walls of our home. But to our hearts.

After giving a written complaint, the Godrej company inspected the refrigerator and replaced it with a new one. Slowly, room by room, the house was restored. Fresh paint covered the soot, tiles were replaced, furniture renewed. Soon, the house stood beautiful once again- physically restored and spiritually strengthened.

Sometimes, it takes standing a breath away from death to truly understand the value of life. That night changed me forever. It reminded me that faith is not just something we walk through, step by step, even in complete darkness, trusting that God is holding us all the way. It was a miracle.

CHAPTER 47



SAINT TERESA



**The blessing I received from Mother Teresa,
as a little child. Now a Saint.**

I have always believed that I am God's chosen child. One of the strongest roots of that belief goes back to childhood, to a moment that shaped my faith forever. My mother's younger brother once went missing. He struggled with alcohol, and my grandmother was deeply protective of him and was frantic when he failed to return home.

After two days, a missing person report was filed. Fear filled the household.

Amid the worry, my mother decided to visit Mother Teresa's home in Calcutta. I still remember that day vividly- the first time I saw her. My mother explained everything. Mother Teresa listened quietly and then said gently, "Go home peacefully. Your brother will return in four days. He is safe. Keep praying the Rosary." Her face glows with a calm, angelic light.

My mother asked her to bless me. I knelt, hands folded; she placed her soft hand over my head, whispered a prayer, and smiled. Patting my cheek with affection. Her touch felt like cotton, so much warmth on her radiant face, pure and gentle. Years later, she would be known to the world as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, canonised in 2016. Her life of compassion and service continued to inspire millions.

Just as she said, on the fourth day, my uncle returned home safely. How he ended up in Madras remains unclear, but what mattered was that he was back. I will never forget my grandmother's tears- tears of relief, gratitude, and answered prayers. My mother later returned to thank Mother Teresa personally.

To this date, I believe her blessings have stayed with me- a quiet shield of grace. Through fire, fear, and uncertainty, faith has carried me. And every time I look back, I know this to be true: we were never alone. When I sit back now, it feels like a very sweet moment. I was just a small child then, and I did not know who Mother Teresa was or how special she truly was. I was too little to understand her greatness.

I only knew she was kind, gentle, and made everyone feel safe. Without realising it, I was blessed to be in her presence, carrying the quiet grace with me as I grew up. Even today, when I remember her touch and her smile, my heart feels calm and protected. As though a gentle prayer is still resting over me

CHAPTER 48



MY BOY GOD WATCHED OVER

Dalston's childhood is filled with stories that still make us laugh loudly whenever we remember them. Looking back now, they seem humorous, but at the time, each incident left me shaken and breathless with fear. He was an accident-prone child, forever falling, tripping, or hurting himself in the most unexpected ways. Raising him as a single parent often felt like living in a frying pan- always hot, always alert, constantly wondering what might happen next.

One incident that remains etched in my memory happened during Holy. There was this huge tree standing in the middle of a narrow pathway. Dalston was running to escape a group of friends chasing him with a water balloon. In his hurry, he kept looking back while running forward, and in a split second- bam-he ran straight into the tree. He hit his nose hard and suffered a small cut. By God's grace, his eyes were unharmed. I remember my heart pounding as I rushed to him, thanking God repeatedly that the injury wasn't worse.

Wife: Another frightening episode occurred when he went to visit his friend's house in the opposite building. While inside the lift.

Dalston began playfully tapping the wall through the metal grill as the lift passed each floor. Suddenly, his hand got stuck. In panic, he yanked it out forcefully, tearing the skin so badly that the raw white bone was visible. He came running home holding his hand, and my first reaction was disbelief- I thought he had stuck one of those Boomer bubble gum stickers on his hand to fool me. Because not a tear of pain from his eyes. But when I looked closely, and realized it was a real wound. I began trembling. I felt like I might faint.

There were no elderly neighbours at home or on our floor that particular day. Thankfully, the neighbours' children, Sagar and his elder sister, were home alone. Seeing my terrified face, they immediately volunteered to take Dalston to our family doctor in Goregaon. The injury required many stitches, and to this day, the scars remain on his hand. What amazed me most was that not a single tear rolled down his cheeks. He stood quietly, strong and composed, even though he was clearly in pain. This was especially surprising because, just a few years earlier, he would create complete chaos over something as simple as an injection. The entire clinic would be in an uproar. But that day, he showed a quiet courage that stayed with me.

As he grew older, Dalston became tougher in many ways, though certain signs of fright never left him then. Even now, when he is nervous or uneasy, I can tell instantly- he starts shaking his legs continuously while sitting. Hospitals still make him uncomfortable. Though he is at ease with our family doctor. One Friday, Sandra and I were on our way to visit the holy miraculous cross in Charkop. We were halfway there in a rickshaw when I received a call from Dalston. His voice was calm, but fear lingered beneath it.

"Mama, I fell and got hurt." I immediately sensed it was serious. We turned back at once. What I saw shocked me- while running after his friend's pet dog, his leg had gotten caught in the leash, causing him to fall flat on his face. His two front teeth were broken. He was around fourteen years old. Dalston kept asking anxiously, "Mama, now what? How will I look without my teeth?" His embarrassment worried me as much as the injury itself.

With very little time before I was scheduled to travel to the USA, I immediately contacted my dentist, whose clinic was in our complex. She fixed his tooth within three days, and the relief I felt was incredible. By God's grace, Dalston was always saved from serious consequences. It truly felt as though he was protected, especially, and for that, I remain endlessly grateful.

When Dalston was eight, he developed a severe urinary infection and was in terrible discomfort. His paediatrician suspected that his urinary passage was too narrow, preventing him from emptying his bladder. A test was advised to confirm this. I was too frightened to go inside with him, knowing how he reacted to medical procedures, so I waited outside. Nothing, however, prepared me for the heart- wrenching sound of his screams. The test was extremely painful, plus a thin pipe with a tiny camera was inserted into his urethra, and it took two people to hold him down. I cried helplessly outside. The test confirmed the doctor's suspicion, and surgery was advised.

The circumcision was scheduled during the summer vacation so he would have time to heal. I dreaded the day, convinced that Dalston would bring the hospital down with his cries. When he was taken to the operating theatre, he gave one scream- and then there was silence. The

anaesthesia had taken effect. After half an hour, the surgery was over, and everything went smoothly. But the real pain came later. When he had to urinate, he screamed in agony. My heart broke into pieces listening to him.

We brought him to my mother's house, where he was dressed only in a soft white cotton cloth tied around his waist. He required immense care. Daily dressing was advised, but the moment he saw the doctor, Dalston would cry so loudly that the entire hospital echoed. Eventually, the doctor politely requested that we do the dressing at home, saying Dalston was frightening all the other children. Imagine a doctor intimidated by his young patient. That was Dalston.

His fear of injections was legendary. Once, when he was unwell, a local doctor suggested an injection for quicker recovery. The moment Dalston saw the needle. He began screaming uncomfortably. Even with Glenn holding him, the doctor couldn't manage. Glenn was asked to bring someone to help. Because it was a Sunday unable to get anyone from nearby, so he called in a labourer working on the road outside. The poor man walked in, completely clueless, and helped hold Dalston down. When Glenn narrated the incident at home later, we laughed endlessly. Dalston had a way of making even brave doctors nervous.

Dalston shared a very special bond with my younger brother, Sunil. As Dalston grew older, he insisted that we visit my mother's house in Malvani every weekend or during holidays just to be with Suni. He was his hero. He admired him deeply and followed him everywhere. Sunil gave him freedom- freedom to eat what he liked, do as he pleased. Things I usually restrict.

Dalston also adored Sunil's girlfriend, then his wife, Albena. She fed him, played with him, helped him in studies, and he wouldn't sleep unless she tickled his back or stomach. But Sunil and Albena were his favourites.

Wife: Dalston was very possessive about Sunil. If Albena sat close to him, Dalston would deliberately squeeze himself between them, silently claiming his place. When Sunil was getting married. During the family blessing ritual at the house, when it was our turn for blessings, Dalston suddenly had tears falling from his eyes. He tried hard to hide his tears, but they betrayed him. He didn't understand marriage, but in his little heart, something felt like it was changing. Perhaps he feared losing Sunil to Albena. It was a moment of pure innocent love- one that stays with me forever.

Today, Dalston is a grown man- tall, confident and handsome. Yet, his bond with Sunil remains unchanged. He still calls him Sunil, not uncle. Their relationship has matured into one of equals, strengthened by years of love, freedom, and shared memories.

Though quiet by nature, Dalston was never alone. He had many friends and was always included. Some friendships date back to the 1st standard and remain strong even today. Tanasha was his closest friend, and they were inseparable. Another important friendship was with our neighbour's son, Sagar, but over time, adults' interference and misunderstanding created distance.

My relationship with Sagar's mother gradually deteriorated due to subtle comparisons and constant interference. She often highlighted her son Sagar's achievements while putting Dalston down for being quiet,

reserved and smiling too often. Over time, I understood her nature, and I chose to distance myself. I am a simple person who believes in treating everyone equally, and our values were very different. Though time has moved on and interactions are now limited to polite greetings, I still hold affection for her children, having watched them grow up. Now they are adults and doing well at work. Abundant blessings to them all.

At one point, Dalston emotionally persuaded me to change his school from the 7th standard, Janki Devi School, ICSC board, to Mount Mary SSC board, believing it would be academically easier. As the next-door neighbour boy Sagar, his good friend, indulged him by saying that Mount Mary under the SSC board was easier. Dalston believed this immediately, for he was trusting by nature and easily convinced when it came to friendship. Admission was granted mid-term, but it turned out to be one of the worst decisions. The school was extremely strict, almost military-like, and the constant punishment for the smallest things created anxiety for both students and parents. Despite multiple incidents where parents were called for, to be lectured at the principal's office. Anyhow, it was a great relief when he finally completed his tenth standard there.

Looking back, Dalston's childhood was a journey filled with fear, laughter, pain, resilience, and divine protection. Through every fall, every tear, and every scar, I truly believe God's hand was always over him. And for that blessing, my gratitude knows no bounds.

CHAPTER 49



WHERE MEMORY WAITING FOR ME

After twenty long years, I finally decided to return to Calcutta. Life had quietly slipped by- first in the responsibility of caring for my siblings, then in long working days in Adlabs, followed by marriage, and finally motherhood. Time moved forward without a pause, leaving little room to move back. It wasn't until Dalston grew a little older, more aware and understanding, that I felt ready. With the encouragement and support of my mother, we finally planned the journey.

We travelled by train; the journey was long and exhausting, yet there was something deeply comforting about it. Dalston, playful and full of energy, kept the atmosphere lively- sometimes a little chaotic. I found myself constantly alert, almost anxious, especially about his diet, water and hygiene. I double- checked everything: boiled drinking water, homemade snacks, medicine like homoeopathy and allopathic. Yet beneath the tiredness and constant vigilance, a quiet anticipation pulsed within me. I was returning to a city that had once been home.

As the train pulled into Howrah station, a strange mix of nervousness and nostalgia washed over me.

So much had changed, and yet something felt achingly familiar. The noise, the chaos, the smell of the city- it all stirred memories I didn't know were still alive inside me. We went straight to our aunt's house - my mother's eldest sister, Veera. She had seven children. Even now, that number amazes me. But what surprised me more was their discipline and gentleness. All seven were soft-spoken, polite, and remarkably well-behaved. It was almost surprising how quiet the house felt.

Their father was a very strict man. His presence alone commanded silence. After returning from work, he would sit alone in the living room, the television murmuring while the radio buzzed in the background. He spoke only to his wife and rarely addressed the children. The unspoken rules in the house hung heavily in the air. The children mostly remained in one room, some doing homework, Others helping their mother in the kitchen. Each child had a role, a responsibility accepted without question. With five daughters and two sons, my aunt managed everything with a quiet grace.

Dinner followed a strict order. The father's place was served first, generously filled with food and the best portions. The children were then served a mound of rice, a spoonful of gravy, and just one piece of non-veg. No one complained. They ate silently, accepting what was given. My aunt and my mother looked strikingly alike, as if they were twins.

Our first visit to Calcutta was to Maureen's grave. She had been resting there silently for twenty long years. Without a single-family visit. The thought shattered me. I wondered if her soul had felt forgotten, perhaps lonely, waiting patiently for someone to see her.

And now, finally, that moment had arrived. It felt like a reunion- quiet, heavy, and sacred. I had tried to prepare myself, but nothing could truly prepare me for standing before my sister's grave, after two decades.

At first, we couldn't find her grave; there was no caretaker to guide us, little Dalston, and we were literally hunting for her grave. The grave was covered with overgrown grass; nature had taken over, slowly swallowing what remained. Thick weeds hid her grave completely, as though time itself had tried to erase her. Then my mother remembered the directions her brother from Goa had given her. He, too, had lost his wife a few years after Maureen and was buried in the same grave. "Go straight, " he said. "Then turn right. There's a tree- her grave is there." We walked slowly, carefully, almost holding our breath. When we finally found it, my heart sank. Guilt, sorrow, and relief crashed over me all at once. We had found her. I placed my hand on the cold broken mud and stone and whispered through tears, "We're here. I'm sorry it took so long." Seeing her name etched into the marble- a simple cross gifted by the nuns on the day of her funeral- made my throat tighten. I ran my fingers gently over the faded letters. So much time had passed. We whispered a quiet prayer. I introduced Maureen to Dalston. "This is your nephew, " I said softly. "If you were still here, you would have been more like his mother. He would have called you Ma." My body trembled as I spoke in my mind, "You would have helped me raise him. You would have loved him endlessly."

I paused, gathering myself. "Maureen, I miss you so much. I know you've seen it all- my pain, my struggle, the lonely nights. But I survived. And I believe I did because you were always with me, like an angel.

Watching over us. Protecting my little family and me. After Maureen's death, we left for Mumbai immediately. There was no time to grieve, no space to mourn. But standing there now, after twenty years, I realised I had finally come home- not just to Calcutta, but to her.

I had carried these emotions for far too long. My heart felt unbearably heavy. In that moment. All I wanted was her back. I stared at the grave, half expecting a miracle- that the stone would disappear and she would stand there, smiling happily, arms open, ready to hold me. I'm sure she wanted that too. I couldn't see her, but I felt her- like a presence just in front of me, close yet unreachable. She was there. I knew it. It's just I couldn't touch her. "I'll come back again before leaving," I whispered. "I promise." We were in Calcutta for only a week, and saying goodbye was the hardest part.

Before leaving, we asked the Mali, the cemetery gardener, to clean the area. We gave him some money and requested that he trim the wild plants and clear the leaves around the grave. I knew Maureen must have felt happy too- seen remembered. Before leaving Calcutta, I made a quiet promise to her that I would return after, every three to four years. I would never let another twenty years pass. As I stood there one last time, looking at her resting place- peaceful at last- I felt something shift within me. The ache didn't disappear. But it softened, wrapped in the quiet comfort of having finally found her again.

The next day, our journey took us to my boarding school. We set off in a taxi, and as we drove through streets I once knew by heart, my chest tightened with memory. When the road began to rise, and the bridge came into view- the one that overlooked the school- I caught sight of the familiar green gate,

As children, that bridge carried two very different meanings. Going up the bridge meant we were heading home for the holidays- hearts racing, faces lit with joy. From the top, we could lean out of the taxi windows and wave goodbye to the school below, already imagining the warmth of home and the arms waiting to hold us. But coming down the bridge meant the holidays were over. It meant returning to school, leaving behind family, especially my mother, comfort, and the soft safety of my grandmother's home. Our faces would go quiet and solemn, and the short drive to the gate felt heavier. It's strange how the same bridge could hold such opposite emotions- yet both were part of growing up.

When we reached the tall green gate, a wave of emotions washed through me. The guard wasn't the same one from my time, but he was Nepali, which the school always hired just like before, and something about his calm presence felt familiar. He greeted us with a gentle smile and asked the reason for our visit. "I'm an ex-student," I replied. "I've come to visit the nuns." His face brightened immediately. Without hesitation, he opened the gate and welcomed us in. In that moment, it felt as though a part of that school still lived inside me- and perhaps the school remembered me too.

As we walked in, a feeling settled over me- part awe, part nostalgia, and part quiet ache. The long pathway looked unchanged in my mind. I could see us as little girls in uniforms running along it, laughing without a care. And then I remembered the visible line, we were never allowed to cross, just before the main gate- a boundary etched into our minds. Crossing it meant severe punishment. Even standing there years later, I could feel the tension in the line, how close we used to get without daring to step over it.

Now, I walked past it freely - no fear, no scolding- only echoes of the past beneath my feet.

As we moved further inside, sister Benedictor spotted me from a distance. Her eyes widened in recognition, and she called out, "Audrey", with a joy that startled me. She hurried over, arms open, pulling me into a tight embrace, and kissed my cheeks. "How are you? She asked, holding my hands, her eyes shining, laughing with joy. I was still stunned. Asking, "Sister, how did you recognise me after all these years?" She smiled playfully, "How could we ever forget your naughty but cute face?"

Words of our visit spread quickly, one by one, the other nuns appeared, faces glowing with delight. Even Mother Superior came, walking with quiet grace and unstoppable excitement. The air filled with warmth and belonging- a feeling I hadn't known I missed so deeply. They were overjoyed to see my mother. "Oh, Mrs Gonsalves!" They exclaimed. "It's been such a long time. What a pleasant surprise." My mother shared a very special bond with the nuns; they had witnessed every season of our lives- through struggle and hope. Seeing my mother again felt like the past finding its way gently into the present.

I introduced Dalston, and they were overexcited. "Look at this!" They laughed. "This little girl has become the mother of such a lovely boy. "He's our grandson!" Dalston stood there, wide-eyed and puzzled, trying to make sense of the laughter and affection swirling around him. With mock seriousness, I signed, "Mother, Dalston troubles me a lot!" The nuns turned to him with smiles. One gently pulled his cheeks and said, "Very good, son- your mother troubled us twice as much, now it's your turn to give it back!" Laughter filled the room, and Dalston, still confused, smiled anyway.

We were invited into the school parlour for tea and snacks- a place that had always felt mysterious to us as students. In those days, it was strictly off-limits for school children; only the nuns and visiting parents were allowed inside. We used to peep curiously through the windows, imagining quiet conversation and delicate fancy teacups. Now, I sat comfortably in that very room, sipping tea and talking with the nuns who once watched over us. We had so much to share. It felt surreal, like standing on the other side of a memory. It was the warmth- the welcome, the love, the familiarity- that made everything sweeter. The nuns were especially surprised to see Sunil, my brother, now tall and a teenager. They last saw and remembered him as a tiny toddler, the school's little soft curly-locked darling. Time had moved on, but in that room, held together by memory and affection, it felt as though nothing precious had been lost at all.

They were seeing Smitha, my younger sister, for the first time. When we left school, my mother had been pregnant with her. They smiled warmly, calling her very cute, and blessed her with so much affection and emotions. It felt as though they were welcoming not just a new face, but a part of our family story that had been missing all those years. They had tears as they looked at us- not only from surprise, but from the deep connection we shared. We had been part of each other's lives during such formative years, and even after all this time, that bond remained unbroken.

"Our daughter Audrey is back after all these years, " one of the nuns said softly, her hands folded with gratitude to God. They all whispered in turn. "God bless you all and your family too, and may he always keep you all safe and happy. The words felt like blessings wrapped in love.

We had brought small gifts and some eats for the nuns as a kind gesture. They accepted them with such joy, their faces lighting up with appreciation and grace.

"We'll be there for a while," I told them. "I want to show Dalston and my siblings my school- the classrooms, the dormitory, the chapel, everything that once was my little world." "Yes, yes, sure," they smiled. "Take them everywhere around. Let them see where you were raised. And we began our walk down memory lane together. Dalston ran ahead, full of excitement, but for once, I didn't call out to him; I wasn't worried. I was home- my school, my safe place, the world that had shaped who I became. Emotion flooded me. With every step, the past came alive. I could see the children, my friends, the nuns, the priests, the cooks, ayahs, the nurse, the gardener, the teachers; they were no longer just memories; they surrounded me as gentle spirits, laughter echoed, prayers murmured, distant scoldings rang softly in my ears.

The classrooms, dormitory, infirmary, ballroom, hockey and basketball courts, garden, pond, farm, refectory- each space breathed again. The school was no longer empty. They spoke, and I listened. And then I saw her. Maureen. Calm. Gently. Smiling. She walked past me, just as she used to in school. In that moment, I was no longer a grown woman. I was a child again- safe, reassured, whole- because my sister was there. I didn't want to be disturbed. I didn't want to leave. I wanted time to reverse. To hold that moment just a little longer.

My mother's voice gently pulled me back. "Audrey, let's go now." It's late.

"Yes," I replied softly, it was time to leave.

No one could truly understand what I felt; I had just walked through the sacred corners of my childhood. I had to say goodbye to my school once again, knowing I would return. Our next visit was to the place where we last saw Maureen- the home we once lived in, the place where she died. As we sat in the taxi, my mother guided the driver using fragments of memory- landmarks, instincts somehow-

It was enough. When I saw the hospital, I shouted out, "This is it" My heart pounded. From there, everything came rushing back. Straight to the end of the road, our old building, opposite the mosque. It stood quietly, holding the last living memories of Maureen.

Before going there, we remembered Vijay, a family friend. He had once come to live with us in Mumbai for six months seeking a job, but didn't succeed. Finally, he returned to Calcutta. Life happened, and we lost touch. We visited his house and met his sister Lilly, who was a school principal. She welcomed us warmly and shared heartbreaking news- her younger sister Baby had passed away at an early age. We were very close to both sisters, as they used to visit us often when we lived in Calcutta. So hearing about her passing left us completely devastated. The loss felt personal, heavy, and deeply painful- another reminder of how fragile life can be. Life is unbearably unpredictable. She told us Vijay had settled in New York and had two daughters. That brought comfort. She gave us his number, and we hoped for a reunion.

When we finally reached our building, everything felt unfamiliar. Time had changed it. The building was old but complete. When we once lived there, the building was newly constructed and not yet fully complete. As I stepped inside, my whole body started trembling with goosebumps.

I stood in the very spot where Maureen had burned, where I had screamed, seeing her burn, calling out to my mother. I could literally feel Maureen here. I spoke to her, telling her how much I missed her. I knew she could see us, only Mom and I went to visit our home. We didn't take Dalston, Sunil, or Smitha along; we left them with my aunt. Mom felt it wouldn't be right to take them there, especially because they were young. She had her reasons, and I followed her decision quietly. I believed Maureen heard every word I felt and spoke silently in my mind and heart. Even if we couldn't hear hers. "I love you, Maureen, " I whispered. The truth was, I had frozen. My mind turned blank, numb with emotion. All I could process was feeling her around. That house was a bad memory. The building felt empty. Most neighbours were gone who we knew. Perhaps it held too much of her spirit. The house we once lived in was now occupied by one of my former schoolmates, who was married and living there with her husband. We did mention the reason for our visit, we greeted her, and she just smiled, no exchange of words. There was no warmth or invitation to step inside. It felt awkward, and we didn't insist. We quietly respected the boundary and chose to leave without seeing the home that had once been ours.

The next day, we visited Mother Teresa's house, where we took along Dalston, Sunil and Smitha. We offered prayers and thanks. I briefly met my best friend Ann before flying back, as Dalston wasn't well. Despite the sorrows. The trip was one of the most meaningful journeys of my life. It was healing and blissful. And I knew- next time I return to Calcutta, Glenn would accompany me. He also had to see where I was born, where my roots lie. Only then might he understand the part of me that words can never fully

explain- that part forever anchored in Calcutta, and Glenn had always dreamed of visiting Calcutta someday, and I knew that when he did, he wouldn't just be visiting a city- he would be stepping deeply into my past life and see the place where my story began.

CHAPTER 50



THREADS OF LOVE AND LOYALTY



**JD our family pet Dog, for 14 Long years,
and Dalston was JD's favourite.**

Dalston was the only grandchild my mother had known for many years. When Sunil got married, our family waited with quiet hope for new beginnings. Sadly, Albena endured two heartbreaking miscarriages- one of them a baby

boy- leaving us all deeply shaken. Grief lingered, but so did faith. When Albena conceived for the third time, her gynaecologist offered hope alongside caution. Due to the fragility of her womb, a cervical stitch and complete bed rest were essential. Albena followed every instruction with remarkable discipline and courage. For nine long months, their days were filled with patience and prayer.

On the 13th of November, just a day before Children's Day, Albena gave birth to a beautiful, healthy baby girl. The proud parents named her Ivy. Despite the large age gap between Ivy and Dalston, joy overflowed. We gathered eagerly at the hospital, waiting to hold the little angel who instantly became our lifeline.

I was especially drawn to Ivy. I had always had a soft corner for children, particularly girls. There is a quiet delight in dressing them up- pretty frocks, colourful hair clips, hairband and hairstyle, tiny sandals, and cheerful little bags. Shopping becomes an adventure of colours and patterns, and every choice feels like a celebration.

Dalston embraced his role as an elder brother with pride and tenderness. He was attentive, protective, and endlessly excited. Ivy, meanwhile, looked exactly like her father. Even today, after she is all grown up and seventeen years old, she is still daddy's little girl, drawn to him like an invisible magnet whenever he is around.

Sunil, like Glenn, eventually found his calling at sea, he started his career in the hotel industry at JW Marriott hotel, before joining the cruise line with Glenn's guidance, sharing the same surname- Gonsalves- and mentioning that they were blood brothers in the relationship section of the form, and by providing Glenn's ID number, followed by Glenn,

several calls and mails to the concerned person in the head office who he knew personally, the process moved much faster. That support played a significant role in helping Sunil secure the job without unnecessary delays. Both were sailing side by side, cousins, cum brother-in-law and now shipmates, curving lives across oceans.

After some years, our family welcomed another soul, JD, our beloved Dog. The name, Sunil's idea, was short for Jack Daniel's! A whisky brand. One day, Sunil arrived home carrying a tiny golden-furred puppy, barely two months old, with soft cottony silk fur and the most innocent black eyes. He was a gift for Dalston, who was a dog lover, and fell in love with JD instantly.

I must admit, I was never an animal lover and was, in fact, afraid of pets. I insisted JD stay at my mom's house, with Dalston visiting on weekends and holidays. Dalston was heartbroken, but I remained firm. JD, mischievous as all puppies are, chewed slippers and scratched furniture. I was fully aware that all this would eventually happen, and that awareness was one of the reasons I initially disagreed. Added to that, my discomfort with fur everywhere around the house- a feeling shaped by my earlier experiences with Glenn's pet, Suzi, which I had found difficult to live with at his mother's house. JD often earned my mother's exasperated scolding, though she could never truly stay angry with him.

For Dalston, JD was everything; they were inseparable. JD could sense Dalston's presence before the door even opened when it rang. Greeting him with uncontrollable excitement, jumping, wagging his tail, and showering him with affection. He followed Dalston around the whole house. Guarding him fiercely during study time, and stood

between us whenever I grew strict, braving bravely until the ruler was dropped from my hand, and laughter filled the room with whoever witnessed this.

They slept cuddling together, sharing a bond, which JD allowed no one else. JD grew into a strong Labrador. By then, Ivy was born, and with her came a phase of jealousy, which was very obviously noticed. Yet, over time, JD accepted her, too, watching over her like a loyal older sibling, protective and devoted.

I was Ivy's godmother. Every time we met, it was pure madness- endless dancing, makeup experiment, dressing her up like a little doll, and laughing till our stomachs hurt while playing games. She loved having me around because I was just as crazy with her. I never played the "grown- up" I became a child with her, and that's exactly why she loved it. She called me Ma. Just as my other niece and nephew do. Today, Ivy is seventeen, grown into a beautiful young girl, studying in the 12th standard at Andrew's College, Bandra. Though life has grown busier and meetings fewer, love remains unchanged. She and Dalston are still inseparable- laughing, teasing, and standing together always.

JD lived a full fourteen years. When illness overtook him and suffering became unbearable, we made the painful decision to let him rest. We laid him to sleep near my mother's building, in a place he loved. Though I have never overcome my fear of animals entirely. JD did find a place in my heart. He was more than a pet- he was family. Even now, his photograph hangs in Dalston's room, a quiet reminder that love, once given so freely, never truly leaves us.

CHAPTER 51



ZEE'S SALON: WHERE LOVE TOOK A SHAPE



Zee and me ordinary moments into beautiful memories

When Bhoomi Classic first came into being, there were only two salons within the complex. For years, those were the only two options. There was little variety and no real sense of anticipation- haircuts were a routine necessity, never something to look forward to.

One day, Sandra and I were walking past the back gate of our complex, and something new quickly caught our attention. A salon had opened there, almost unnoticed by many. The name, however, stood out instantly-Dilshad's. It wasn't just a name; it carried a certain weight and recognition. Dilshad, after all, was known as Sharukh Khan's personal hairstylist.

My excitement deepened when I realised there was a personal connection. I knew Dilshad's mother, who owned the well-known salon Nalini Yasmin in Andheri, my trusted place for haircuts and hair colour for many years. To me, this felt like a small but meaningful thing; a familiar, reputed salon right inside our own building. Sandra and I became the first clients from Bhoomi Classic to step into a new salon.

We introduced ourselves and decided to give it a try. Little did we know that what truly drew us in and kept us returning was not the salon itself. It was Zahira.

Lovingly known as Zee, she was unlike anyone I had met before. In a world full of hurried interaction, Zee moved with gentleness. She was soft-spoken, deeply caring, and carried an abundance of love within her. What made her rare was that her warmth was never selective- it flowed naturally and equally towards everyone.

Very soon, the salon stopped feeling like a commercial space. It transformed into something warmer, more personal. We did not visit only for haircuts or beauty treatments; we went for tea, conversations, laughter, and the quiet reassurance of Zee's presence. The space felt safe. Comforting - almost like an extension of the home.

A few years later, we heard news that shook us. The salon was being sold along with everything in it. Dilshad

was migrating to Canada for good, Sandra and I were sad, and the thought of Zee leaving felt unbearable. Our hair, our comfort- all of it seemed to rest in her hands. So deeply had she become a part of our lives that, at one point, Sandra and I even considered taking over the salon together in partnership; it was just a fleeting thought, never spoken aloud.

Then came a moment of unexpected grace, Zee told us she would take over the business and run it under her own name, with the same staff. It felt as though our silent prayer had been answered. She bought the salon and made sure that Achal stayed on, even as other staff members gradually moved out. Only minor renovations were made. And the salon was renamed Zee's Salon.

Everything else- the soul, the warmth, the love- remained unchanged. For us, Zee's Salon was never merely a place of business. It became a sanctuary.

Birthdays were celebrated there with a tenderness that words couldn't capture. Zee would block off an entire hour, decorate the space with balloons, and arrange a simple yet loving spread- cake, chips, tea, or coffee, we sang birthday songs, clicked photographs, recorded little videos, and created memories that settled into our hearts.

She brought gifts, yet what touched me most- every single time- were the fresh, vibrant flowers she brought without fail. My joy was not about the gift itself, but the flowers. Since childhood, flowers have had a magical hold on me. I had also always loved unwrapping gifts- not for what lies inside, but for the thrill of the wrapping, the curiosity, and the child-like excitement of opening something new.

During lunch hours, the staff often gathered in a small loft above the salon, originally meant for storage. But transformed into a cosy corner of togetherness. Tiffins were opened, food was shared, and every dish carried a flavour of warmth and belonging.

Festivals were celebrated with equal love, the salon would be beautifully decorated with themes, and we were always invited to dress up and click photos. Zee had an extraordinary ability to sense emotions. One glance at me and she would say, "Why is the cute smile missing? Bring it back- you don't look good when you're quiet." She always saw the playful child within me. She pampered me. Comforted me whenever Sandra and I drifted apart due to misunderstandings.

Zee became the bridge between us. She would even print a photograph of Sandra and me together, frame it, and gift it to both of us- quietly reminding us of love, history, and reconciliation. That was Zee- always nurturing, always mending.

While doing our hair colour, we sometimes played Antakshari. Other times, we sang old English songs. If there were no clients, we danced too. She visited our homes when invited. Our bond grew beyond the salon- into dinners, outings, even clubbing. She knew my love for flowers and often brought me fresh blooms for no reason at all. She knew I liked kadak ghee rotis and would sometimes bring them specially for me. If I casually mentioned I hadn't cooked, the next day she'd bring something lovingly prepared in her own kitchen. Whenever Dalston needed emergency money, he'd walk in confidently and say, "Mummy said to take two hundred rupees." Zee was his piggy bank- and ATM. Zee loved animals deeply, especially cats.

Every morning she arrived at the salon carrying dogs' and cats' food separately, only two of her favourite cats were allowed inside the salon, moving freely. Initially, I was afraid of them, but over time, even that fear dissolved. Once I accidentally half sat on one of the cats who was sleeping on a client's chair. The cat meowed loudly, and I froze, certain Zee would be upset. Instead, she laughed softly, patted the cat lovingly, and said, "Janu, are you ok? Seeing my expression, she mistook it for jealousy- and from that day on, I became her Janu too. That is how she still addresses me.

When my mother was diagnosed with cancer, Zee became my quiet pillar of strength. She comforted both my mother and me, guiding us through what to do and what to avoid.

Having lost her own younger sister to Cancer, a loss that left a lasting scar, Zee understood that mental pain intimately. Her support came not from words alone, but from shared experience.

For ten straight days, my mother underwent stomach surgery for cancer. While I stayed on in Hinduja hospital with her for the nights, after I returned from the hospital in the mornings, Zee would open her salon in the morning at 9. Then, a hot breakfast and steaming tea were served to me, and only after that would I go home to rest. She never spoke of her kindness. No boasting or announcement. She simply did.

One fine day, Zee called with news that left me shattered. She had decided to sell the salon; it was a big decision. After years of running it with love and devotion, she felt it was time to take a back seat- to rest a little. She was Sixty then, though she never looked her age.

Even at Sixty, she carried a glow, an energy, a youth that no number could touch. On hearing the news, it broke me completely. I burst out into a loud cry, unable to hold myself together. My daughter-in-law Vaishnavi came running into the bedroom, frightened by my sudden sobbing, trying to understand what had gone wrong. Something did happen- a part of my world was changing forever. Zee herself came running up to my house to console me. Unable to stay away when someone she loved was hurting.

She never addressed her clients by their first name, not even after our friendship deepened. That was a form of respect deeply rooted within her. To this day, even though we are no longer her clients but her close friends, she still addresses us as "Ma'am. It speaks volumes about the grace she carried so effortlessly. She always encouraged me.

"Ma'am, do something to keep yourself busy, " Divert your mind. Take up a hobby, join dance classes. Meet new people, she knew I was always only used to my old friends for years. Yet she wanted me to open myself to new connections and explore parts of life. Her concern was genuine, thoughtful, and deeply personal. Eventually, Zee did sell the salon; it was taken over by yet another well-known hairstylist from the film world, Mr Raj, Shah Rukh Khan's personal hairstylist. Everything on the surface looked impressive, but something essential was missing. The heart was gone.

For nearly a month, we avoided walking past the salon; the memories were too overwhelming. Even today, though we remain in touch and are still a part of the same circle, something has shifted. Yet some people never truly leave. Back then, Zee's Salon was slightly more expensive than the

other two salons in our complex, even after adding GST, yet without discounts or flashy offers, or any compromise in quality, her salon was always crowded. Her clients never looked elsewhere. Their loyalty was permanent- not merely because of good service, but because of Zee's warmth. She made every client feel seen, valued, and special- and that made a difference.

Zee and her family had purchased a beautiful 3BHK flat in Pune, complete with a large terrace- like balcony- a space that reflected her spirit. On the 25th of July 2024, her birthday, she surprised us all by inviting eight close friends for an overnight celebration. It was one of the most thoughtful and love-filled gestures we had ever experienced. The journey itself was filled with joy. One of our friends booked a mini- van, and the road to Pune echoed with jokes, singing, and laughter.

When we arrived, Zee and her family welcomed us not as guests, but as family. They took care of every detail, serving us a delicious hot lunch with an array of dishes and dessert. After the long journey, every bit felt comforting. Zee ensured that everyone had a cosy place to rest, thoughtfully dividing us into small groups across the bedrooms. The terrace like balcony offered a breathtaking view and a fresh Breeze that felt like peace itself. Sitting comfortably on an easy chair, sipping warm green tea while the breeze gently kissed our face. We experienced a moment of pure, quiet bliss.

That evening we dressed up for a small celebration- cutting cake, dancing, laughing endlessly, and being clicked to cherish memories. There was a sense of magic in the air, a feeling of being exactly where we were meant to be. The next morning, we were treated like royalty.

Breakfast was served with such elegance and love to perfection- every dish lovingly spread according to what taste was preferred by each one, by the cook, who had been specially called all the way from Mumbai just for that one day. The thoughtfulness behind every detail was remarkable and deeply touching. Zee is not just a good friend. She is a beautiful soul- a rare Leo. A nurturer, a guide, and a giver. I often joke with her, saying, "Zee, I have a few friends but many haters. But you? You have only well- wishers and friends. She earned it all, though. And perhaps that is her greatest legacy- leaving behind hearts fuller than before, simply by being who she is.

CHAPTER 52



A BRIDGE ACROSS TIME



**Firoza and I, miles apart,
but yet somewhere close to the heart.**

After we returned to Mumbai from our unforgettable journey to Kolkata, one name kept resurfacing in our conversation- Vijay. He was a dearly loved family friend from those earlier Kolkata days. Now settled in New York. Reaching out to him felt like tracing a delicate thread back through time, ensuring whether it would still hold friendship, yet hopeful that it might.

When Vijay finally heard from us, his reaction was pure disbelief mixed with emotion and joy. "How on earth did you find me?" He asked, his voice alive with excitement. We shared the entire story- our emotional return to Kolkata after twenty long years, our visit to his mother's house, and the quiet grief of learning that his mother was no more. We met his sister, Lilly, who gave us your contact number. That single act reopened a world we thought was lost.

Our first phone call stretched far beyond what we had expected. Twenty-eight years of silence melted away as though they had never existed. Laughter, memories, and life flowed effortlessly, and the bond we once shared found its way back. From that moment on, we stayed in regular touch, slowly rebuilding a connection shaped by time yet untouched in spirit. One day, Vijay surprised me with a generous invitation to visit him and his family in New York. My heart leapt with joy, and I accepted without hesitation. He arranged a visit sponsorship letter, along with a supporting letter from Glenn's company, RCCL - Royal Cruise Line, alongside all the required documents. With careful hope, I applied for my U.S. visa. When the interview date from the U.S. Embassy arrived, my excitement was matched by intense nervousness. Everything depended on that one interview. Glenn was my calm anchor, sat me down and prepared me for the process. He spoke about the questions they might ask and reminded me to answer with honesty, clarity, and confidence. Just be yourself, "you have nothing to hide, and every reason to go."

His reassurance meant everything to me. Holding on to his words, I walked into the interview room with as much composure as I could gather. And when my ten years were up, I could hardly believe it.

Oh my God, I thought, this is really happening. My very first international visit to New York in 2012 was officially planned a whole month in advance.

The only shadow during that time was when Dalston had a tooth accident, which worried me deeply, but apart from that, everything else seemed to fall perfectly into place. For my trip, I chose to fly with Air India, mainly because it offered a convenient route, a short stop in Delhi and then directly to JFK airport. The best part then was not having to change flights or terminals, which alone was such a relief, especially since this was my first time travelling solo and so far. I didn't want long layovers, unfamiliar airports, or the stress of dragging heavy cabin bags while feeling lost. The thought of being stranded or confused terrified me. I was going from my world to a brand new one.

The journey was twenty-three hours long. And I was beyond nervous. All my precious trips abroad had been with Glenn. He handled everything- tickets, check- ins, luggage, immigration. I just simply followed. Glenn was deeply concerned. He knew how anxious I could get, especially about flying. I'm terrified of heights; every take-off sends my heart straight into my throat, and during turbulence, my imagination runs wild. I pray non-stop throughout the flight, whispering my fear away, trusting that I will land safely.

Managing the heavy suitcases on my own was another challenge. The flight was completely full, every seat taken. With so many passengers and only a limited number of toilets, things became uncomfortable as the hours dragged on. The toilets were in a terrible condition- dirty, smelly, and clearly not cleaned throughout the flight, it was so unhygienic that I hesitated every time I even thought of

going. But on such a long journey, eventually, I had no choice. How I managed in that filthy space, only I know. I had to summon every ounce of strength just to get through those few minutes. It was one of those little nightmares no one prepares you for during a dream trip. But I kept reminding myself- this is just part of the journey. Focus on the bigger picture. And then finally I landed at JFK airport. After sitting in one position for endless hours, my body felt completely worn out. My legs were stiff, my neck locked, and no amount of stretching seemed to help. The flight had felt never-ending. But the moment I stepped off the plane and passed through immigration, a massive wave of relief washed over me; I had made it. I called my family and friends to let them know I'd arrived safely. Glenn was so relieved- he had been on pins and needles.

And then came the most exciting part- meeting Vijay again. My heart was full.

We met and hugged with pure joy. Vijay, my old friend from Kolkata, stood before me once more. Time had left its mark, of course. I remember the Vijay I once knew: tall, six feet, fair, charming, slim and handsome. Now he had put on quite a lot of weight, his hair mostly grey- a salt and pepper look. But he still carried the same gentle charisma. To my surprise, he now spoke with a polished English accent, shaped by over three decades in New York. Standing beside him was his beautiful, statuesque wife- tall, almost Vijay's height. She waited patiently, smiling as she watched our emotional reunion. When we finally turned to her, she greeted me with a polite hello and then wrapped me in a warm, tight hug. I felt completely hidden in her embrace- she was taller and broader- and I disappeared into her arms like a little child.

She laughed softly and said, "Oh my God, you're so little- so beautiful and young! I imagined someone different!" I chuckled. Barely five feet tall, slim, and delicate, I could see how I might have surprised her. Her comment was genuine and lighthearted, and it instantly put me at ease. Her name, I learned, was Kalyani before marriage, a Hindu Bengali Brahmin by birth. After marrying Vijay, a Bengali Muslim, she had adopted the name Firoza, interestingly, while I had always called him Vijay, but his family used to call him Bjoy. But in America, Firoza was known as Rosa by the Americans. Though I loved the name Kalyani- it had a lyrical grace- but I addressed her as Firoza, just like everyone else. She was a year younger than me, yet with her towering height and fuller frame, she appeared slightly older. Still, she carried herself with confidence.

They introduced me to their two lovely daughters. The younger one, Rabiya, was a spitting image of Vijay- same eyes and smile, she is thirty and works as a nurse in a reputed hospital. The elder, Fatima, resembles Firoza and has grown into a poised, accomplished woman. At thirty-plus, she, too, works in the medical field. Their pride in their daughters is seen. All my luggage was packed into their car, and soon we were driving through the heart of New York City. I sat by the window, wide-eyed, absorbing every detail. Wow, I thought, what a place. The streets shimmered in the golden hue of late autumn. The air was crisp and icy - it was November, after all. To me, the cold felt extreme. I was bundled head to toe. Shivering despite all the layers. For them, it was just another normal winter day. Despite the chill, I felt a deep warmth in their presence. Vijay and Firoza went out of their way to make me feel at home. And Firoza- oh, we clicked instantly.

Our bond felt effortless, as if we'd known each other for years. When we arrived at their home, I gasped. It felt like stepping straight into a Yash Chopra film abroad. Not an apartment, but a beautiful white cottage-style house, with soft glowing lamps flanking the entrance, a little gate, and a stone path leading up to a small stairway. Normally, Firoza grew colourful flowers and plants that danced in the breeze, but winter had already set in, the garden rested in hibernation, waiting patiently for spring.

Inside, the house was warm and inviting, thanks to central heating. A specious hall led into a cosy dining room with a fireplace, and beyond that, a well-organised kitchen. With a toilet. Upstairs were three charming bedrooms, again with a toilet. Downstairs, a basement with a laundry area, an open kitchen, and a bedroom with a private bathroom. Every Inch of the house carried Firoza's personal touch.

She had decorated it herself- from wall colours, to the tiniest kitchen shelf details. In New York, where labour is very expensive, homeowners often paint, garden, and do their own plumbing and carpentry work. The backyard was magical; she grew her own vegetables- cherry tomatoes, small red chillies, brinjals, white pumpkin, some leafy vegetables, and many more, alongside vibrant flowers. There was a swing, a small tea and coffee table corner with comfortable chairs, and a barbecue grill waiting for gatherings. With a car parking space.

And then came an unexpected welcome- I met Fanfan, a majestic, massive Persian cat with luxurious grey and black fur, with her regal walk, and piercing green eyes. She frightened me at first. "She's the queen of this house," Firoza said, smiling proudly, "My lifeline, I froze. Animals had never been my comfort zone, moreover cats- especially one

this large. But slowly, I adjusted. Fanfan observed me, blinked slowly, and over time began to accept me. Brushing past my legs gently as if granting her approval. She wasn't just a pet. She was family.

From the moment I arrived, both of Firoza's daughters took an instant liking to me. Everything felt natural and effortless- there was no formality, no awkwardness. They welcomed me as one of their own, as though I were an old friend rather than their father's long-lost connection. They were more comfortable calling me "Audrey", but in their soft American accent, my name sounded beautiful and different-more refined. Almost more English. It felt like the way it was originally meant to be pronounced. Back in India, when people called me Audrey, the sound often shifted, shaped by who was saying it and how. Firoza, however, quickly stepped in. "Give her respect," she said firmly. "She's your dad's family friend. Call her Mashi- that means aunty in Bengali. The girls changed the kind of exaggeration, wide-eyed look only daughters can give their mother- a clear have you lost your mind? expression. "Mashi? They echoed, half laughing. "She's so little, and we look huge next to her! You really want us to call her aunty in public and look foolish? It was all said in good humour, and honestly, I didn't mind at all. Whatever they chose to call me felt perfectly fine. My one- month stay in New York turned out to be absolutely unforgettable. Every day was filled with laughter, stories, new experiences, and an abundance of love. Firoza gave me her full time and attention, managing most of her work from home on her laptop. This gave us freedom to explore the city together without any rush. We travelled everywhere-sometimes by car, sometimes by metro. She showed me the very heartbeat of New York City: Manhattan, with its

towering buildings and relentless energy; the iconic Statue of Liberty, standing proud and serene; and the most emotional of all, the 9/11 Memorial. Standing on the very ground where the Twin Towers once rose felt overwhelming. I had watched the tragedy unfold on television, but being there in person, just a year later, the space felt both haunting and sacred. Though everything was clean and orderly, the weight of the loss hung heavily in the air. The silence spoke louder than words ever could.

One evening, we all went to a fair filled with enormous, dangerous- looking rides, summoning every ounce of courage. I got on a couple of them- absolutely terrified. The moment they started, I screamed like never before, gripping tightly while Firoza laughed beside me. I felt like my stomach touched my heart. It was pure madness, and yet, tremendous fun, although later I was feeling a bit dizzy. When it was finally time to leave, my heart felt unbearably heavy. I had come to the United States because of my connection with Vijay, but I was leaving as Firoza's friend- more than that of her soul sister. Our bond had grown deep and effortless. We shared everything, from lighthearted laughter to the most intimate stories of our lives. We could talk for hours, day or night, and still feel we had more to say. During those long conversations, Firoza shared the love story of her life- one that felt like a real- life Laila- Majnu saga. She had run away to marry Vijay against the wishes of her powerful Hindu family. Her mother was fiercely opposed to the match and used every means possible to separate them. Her father, a four- star police officer and a thorough gentleman, tried to keep matters under control, but her mother used his position and influence to have Vijay arrested.

False charges were filed against him, including kidnapping, as Firoza was underage at that time; Vijay was twelve years older than Firoza. Vijay was beaten, tortured, and held in police lock-up for months; through it all, Firoza remained unshaken. Her love for Vijay was unwavering, and she was willing to endure any hardship to be with him. Eventually, her family was forced to give in, and the two were married. Yet the struggle did not end there. What began as a personal love story soon turned into a large Hindu-Muslim conflict, drawing in outsiders, authorities, and endless complications. To protect Vijay from further danger, his sister decided he must leave the country. His younger brother, who was already studying in New York, sponsored him. The entire plan was kept a secret from Firoza, as any information reaching her family could have had devastating consequences. Firoza was told about Vijay's departure only on the day of his flight. The wound stuck her life a storm- she was devastated- hurt and betrayed that such a life-changing decision had been made without her knowledge. How could her husband leave the country without a word? Vijay tried to soothe her broken heart, promising to stay in constant touch and assuring her that he would make every possible arrangement to bring her and their one-year-old daughter, Fatima, to him as soon as he could.

Six months later, he kept his promise. From New York, Vijay called for Firoza and their baby. She was overjoyed to reunite with him in a new world, far from the chaos they had left behind. In the United States, she began working and slowly built a life with him. Their second daughter, Rabiya, was born a U.S. citizen, and together they devoted their lives to raising their girls and creating a loving home.

When it was time for me to return to India, the family came to the airport to see me off. Firoza and I clung to each other, tears falling from our eyes as we hugged goodbye. That day, we made a promise-to see each other often, at least once every two years, either in New York or in India. We kept our word. The first trip became the beginning of many more. I have now visited New York four times, and Firoza has travelled to India several times as well. Even when she flies straight to Kolkata to visit her mother, I take a separate flight just to spend a week with her. And also, obviously, to be near Maureen too. That is how close we have become-inseparable, sisters from another mother. Her home feels like my own. We have travelled together to places like Florida and Washington D.C., and many others. She drives me everywhere, and those long journeys are filled with pure joy-old retro love songs playing, Starbucks coffee in one hand, doughnuts in the other, endless laughter, singing and conversation. Her elder daughter is especially fond of me. We shared quiet evenings with wine, popcorn, and strawberry in cream, Hindi films at home. She loves Punjabi music, and we often dance to its lively beats. She often jokes that she would love to marry a Punjabi guy, saying she finds them quite handsome. Firoza pampers me endlessly and calls me affectionately baby at times. She feels I bring fun, positivity, and good energy into her life. That she feels happier and more alive around me. We truly get along like a house on fire. Every time I think about how we met and how deeply we connected, I thank God from the bottom of my heart for giving me not just a friend but a sister in this lifetime.

CHAPTER 53



A BIRTHDAY WRAPPED IN SILENCE.



My brother's daughter Ivy and my Godchild too, Dalston and my sister's Son Neathan. Cousin's time together at their grandparents house.

My younger sister, Smitha, was unmarried for many years, and as a family, we were always on the lookout for a suitable match for her. Finally, when she was nearing thirty, a proposal came through the church marriage bureau. The boy's name was Dancy, an East Indian Roman Catholic from Kalina Santacruz, five years older than her, working in a

reputed liquor company. His family was small: a father who sadly passed away not long before, his mother, and one married sister who lived nearby with a little son. Their home reflected a quiet, traditional joint - family setup. Dancy came across as a nice human, respectful and grounded. He seemed like the right choice, and soon enough, after six months, the wedding date was fixed, 17th November 2012.

But fate had other plans. On that very day, Bal Thackeray passed away, and Mumbai came to a complete standstill. A citywide bandh was announced, and overnight, everything changed. What was meant to be a joyful celebration turned into a somber one. Almost an unreal experience. The streets were deserted, guests could not make it, and the wedding venue stood eerily quiet. Most of the food prepared with so much care remained mostly untouched. So with heavy hearts, we decided to donate it all. The wedding did take place, but it bore little resemblance to what we had imagined. The space, which should have echoed with fun and laughter, music, and blessings, felt subdued and sparse. It was a tough blow- an important moment of joy forever tinged with sadness and disappointment. The wedding was planned on the church school grounds, with invitations sent to over three hundred guests. With no public transportation available, neither roads nor trains functioning, people travelling from far-off places were unable to attend. Only those living nearby who had access to private cars could make it to the wedding. A moment of joy turned bittersweet. Without wasting time after marriage, my sister started planning for a child almost immediately, as she was already thirty years old and fully aware of the complications that could arise with age and did not want to take any chances.

Motherhood was something she deeply longed for, and she was ready to embrace it without delay. Within a year, she conceived, and on 17th October 2013, she was blessed with a beautiful baby boy. They named him Neathan- a biblical name chosen with faith and hope.

From the very beginning, Neathan was a special child- quiet, gentle, and extremely shy. He kept mostly to himself and was deeply attached to his mother. Life, however, was not easy. When Neathan was just three months old, Smitha had to return to work, financial responsibilities were heavy, and she needed to support her husband. With a heart full of guilt and worry, she left her baby in the care of her mother-in-law and a full-day maid. But the only emotional warmth and attunement that only a mother can provide was missing. Neathan felt that absence deeply. Every evening, he would wait by the door, his face lighting up the moment his mother walked in. His tiny feet would rush towards her, and he would cling to her, following her everywhere, unwilling to let her out of his sight. It was as though he was trying to make up for all the hours she had been away. Smitha did her best with the limited time she had, but the quiet guilt of not being fully present during his early years stayed with her.

When Neathan turned one, his first birthday was celebrated with much planning and excitement. The party was held in a hall, with many guests invited. But the noise and unfamiliar faces overwhelmed him. He clung tightly to his mother, seeking comfort and safety. Still, the celebration went well -There were starters, drinks, and a hearty meal. And the eagerly awaited cake- cutting ceremony. Though he kept his distance. Neathan would glance at us and offer a shy smile, as if acknowledging our love from afar.

On the days off, Smitha often brought Neathan to our mother's house in Malvani, and I would visit too, along with Dalston and my brother's daughter, Ivy. These cousin gatherings at their grandmother's home it was such a Joy to watch them interact; it became a quiet family ritual. Neathan, the youngest among them, seemed happiest there. The large two-bedroom flat gave him space to move freely, to play, to breathe. Surrounded by love and laughter, he slowly began to open up.

He started speaking very early, forming words and phrases even before he turned two. He had a natural ear for music and played the drums instinctively, as if rhythm lived within him. He loved musical toys, especially a small battery-operated guitar that lit up when switched on. Music brought him pure joy. And he loved being tickled- just like Dalston had as a child. Whenever we tickled Neathan, he would freeze completely, standing still like a statue, absorbing the sensation with the most adorable expression. Those moments are etched in our hearts forever. Then slowly, something began to go wrong.

Neathan started experiencing frequent breathlessness. At first, it was assumed to be childhood bronchitis. A nebuliser was prescribed to be used in puffs three times a day. He often had cold and cough, and believing it to be an option, Smitha choose homeopathy. She genuinely thought she was doing what was best for her child. What she didn't understand was that in a medical emergency, only allopathic medicine can act swiftly and effectively. Neathan's condition gradually worsened. He was too young to explain what he was actually feeling and suffered quietly. Smitha was balancing work, home, and motherhood. She relied on instinct, trying different treatments, hoping something

would help. What she didn't know was that something far more serious was unfolding inside his tiny body.

It was Dancy who felt the first deep unease. Haunted by a family history of heart disease- his own father having passed away from heart failure- he sensed something wasn't right. He shared his concern with Neathan's paediatrician, Dr Vinod Garg, who had also treated Dalston as a child. The doctor dismissed it lightly but said, "If you want to clear your doubt, go ahead." That was enough for them to proceed with the heart test.

When the reports were shown to Dr Garg, he remarked casually that it was an enlarged heart, "likely due to chest congestion from a bad cold. Nothing alarming, he said. But again, Dancy remained unconvinced. On discussing it with his family and our parents too, a cousin suggested a reputed heart specialist in Dadar. Getting an appointment took time, and so they had to wait.

Meanwhile, Neathan's second birthday was approaching. That morning, they took him to church to seek God's blessings, beginning the day with quiet prayer and surrender. On the way back home, while sitting in an air-conditioned car. Neathan suddenly began sweating profusely. He turned white and pale and fainted in his mother's arms. Panic gripped them. Smitha shook him gently, calling out to him again and again. He did not respond. In her fear, she assumed it might be weakness or hunger, as he had not eaten anything since morning. They rushed home, splashed water on his face, and miraculously, he regained consciousness.

Relief flooded the room. Smitha immediately gave him some warm milk, and he soon fell asleep. When he woke up, he was active again, playing, smiling, as if nothing had happened. They did not know then that Neathan had just suffered a mild heart attack. Who could ever imagine such a thing in a two-year-old child? That evening, we gathered at their home to celebrate his birthday. Only close family and a few dear friends were invited. We hid our fear behind smiles and silent prayer. Neathan ran around happily, but his eyes constantly searched for his mother. His world revolved around her. Every few minutes, he would call out "Mama," making sure she was near.

During the cake-cutting ceremony, we sang and clapped, trying to keep the moment light. Unlike his first birthday, this time he was truly happy. He cut his customised cake and then, with great joy, fed each one of us a piece with his tiny hands. That image- his smile, his innocence, the light in his eyes- will live in our hearts forever. He squealed with delight while opening his gifts, and after a warm dinner, we all left, grateful for one more birthday. One more precious memory with our special boy. None of us knew then how sacred that night would become.

CHAPTER 54



WHEN HOPE WAS ALL THEY HAD



Neathan, when unwell along with his little brother Brayden.

After celebrating Neathan's birthday on the 20th October, they finally took him to a heart specialist in Dadar for a proper and detailed check- up. The appointment had finally come through after a long Wait. They went with a fragile mix of fear and hope, silently praying that the wait would reveal nothing serious.

The doctor examined him and conducted all the required tests. During that time, my sister sat outside in the waiting area, too anxious to step inside, too afraid to face

whatever truth might be waiting behind that door. Battling a thousand thoughts and fear in her heart. Her husband stayed with Neathan during the consultation, while she sat quietly, praying. Then the doctor called for my sister; he needed to speak to both parents together as it was important. What he told them shattered their entire world. He said Neathan's heart was functioning at only 20%, and that he would not live for long. The weight of those words was crushing. My sister froze- completely blank. She was physically present, but mentally she disappeared. It was as if lightning had struck her soul. No thoughts. No reaction. Just stunned stillness. Her husband stood beside her, equally numb, struggling to comprehend what they had just been told.

The doctor advised them to admit Neathan immediately and begin treatment without wasting any more time. When they stepped out of the cabin and shared the news with our parents, who had accompanied them that day. Everyone broke in their own silent way. Tears did not come so easily. The pain was extremely heavy even for that release. Meanwhile, little Neathan, blissfully unaware of the conversation that had just unfolded, played happily in the car on the way back home. His innocence only deepened the ache in their hearts. There was complete silence- except for my sister.

She kept talking, nonstop; it was as though a dam had burst inside her, pouring out disbelief in the form of words. "No, this is not possible. I take such good care of my son, there must be some mistake. Look at him- he's playing, he's laughing. This can't be true. We'll go for a second opinion. My son is perfectly fine." She repeated herself again and again, not fully grasping her own words; it was the sound of

a mother trying desperately to outturn a reality too cruel to accept. At one point, our mother could not take it anymore. With trembling hands, she gently but firmly covered my sister's mouth and said, "Now just stop, no more talking, it was not anger, it was helplessness, desperation and grief. In that moment, no one cried, not because they did not want to, but because the pain was too raw to allow even tears.

My sister wasn't ready to give up; she was clinging to hope with everything she had, silently begging for a miracle, refusing to believe that her only son, her entire world, was just slipping away. In her heart, she wanted just one thing: that God would prove the doctors wrong.

They returned home that evening mentally drained and physically exhausted. No one had the appetite to eat. Still, my sister quietly went about her routine, preparing Neathan's feed. She sensed that he was not feeling well that night and stayed alert, watching every breath he took. Her husband broke down completely the moment they reached home. In the presence of his mother and sister, he could no longer hold it together; he cried bitterly and uncontrollably, the pain pouring out in waves. All this while he had been holding himself together, bottling up fear and helplessness-but now it came crashing down. The thought of losing his only son was unbearable.

My sister, though shattered inside, tried to remain strong. She stood beside him, wiped his tears, held him close, and kept saying softly, "Don't lose hope, stay strong, be positive, nothing will happen to our son. Her voice trembled, but her words did not waver. She was fighting her own storm within, yet she chose to be his strength. God never gives a storm without shelter.

In that moment, we saw that shelter in her. Even as her world was falling apart, she stood tall, for her son and for her family.

By morning, without wasting another moment, they packed a few of Neathan's clothes and some essentials. They knew admission was inevitable. They took him to Suriya Hospital, a well-known children's hospital. Through recommendations from Dancy's sister, they found a small sense of reassurance. While waiting for their turn, Neathan played cheerfully in the children's toy section. Smiling and running about, carefree like any other child. Watching him in that moment, so full of life, it was hard to believe something serious was happening inside his little body. Then his name was called.

My sister and her husband took him inside. Unexpectedly, the nurse asked my sister to step out, explaining that they needed to begin the procedure. The moment they tried to separate him from her, Neathan broke down. He cried uncontrollably, his tiny hands reaching out for his mother. "Mama...Mama..." he cried repeatedly, saying, "over...over" in Marathi, words he picked up from his grandmother, who spoke that language. He did not understand why his mother was leaving him with strangers. His fear was heartbreaking.

My sister collapsed in tears as they pushed her outside; she was so helpless. All she wanted was to hold him and tell him it would be ok. But she was not allowed in. That brief separation felt like an eternity. She stood outside the door, barely able to breathe with anxiousness, longing to hear his voice again. And then came the silence. A silence that terrified her. When the family had been informed that something had gone seriously wrong, we all rushed to

Suriya Hospital. Neathan was still inside, alone, while we stood outside. Praying, waiting. Finally. The doctor came out and delivered the most unimaginable and heartbreaking news of our lives. He told my sister's husband that Neathan was no more.

Amid the chaos, my sister stood unaware of what had truly happened. When our mother hugged her tightly and whispered, "It's over", she stood frozen, unable to understand what those words meant. She searched their faces for reassurance, for clarity, anything but the truth. Her husband cried bitterly in one corner. It felt as though the ground beneath us had vanished. How could this be real? How could a child so full of life just hours ago be gone today? Where was God? Why were our prayers unheard? Why take Neathan before he has even begun to live? And then, just as we were drowning in grief, something happened that no one could explain. The doctors came out again. "He's alive."

Neathan had been resuscitated. By a miracle beyond understanding. Our little angel came back to life. We were all stunned, confused, crying all over again, this time with disbelief and gratitude. It felt as though heaven itself had opened its doors. We thanked God for returning Neathan to his parents and to all of us.

The doctor explained that Neathan would need to be kept on a high dose of sedatives, strong enough to keep him asleep around the clock. Being just a baby, conscious awareness of needles, machines, wires, oxygen masks and unfamiliar faces would only cause fear and distress. After a few hours, my sister was finally allowed to see her son. Nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. Overcome with emotion, she broke down bitterly.

Seeing her hysterical state, the doctor firmly asked her to leave the ICU. From that moment onwards, she was not allowed inside again. Her presence, they said, would disturb the treatment.

For a mother, being kept away from her own child during the most critical time was a pain beyond words, suffocating and cruel. The doctor gave strict instructions to the nurses and even the security guard not to allow her near the ICU. Threatening their jobs if they disobeyed. The harsh control and secrecy raised many unanswered questions. But my sister, unaware of hospital protocols and too emotionally shattered to question anything. And on top of everything. Their critically ill son was under the hospital's care. They were not so financially stable, and that reality left them feeling powerless, unable to question or to raise their voice, afraid that speaking up might affect the child's treatment. They remained silent. They listened, and she waited.

Only her husband was allowed brief visits to receive updates. The rest of the time, they waited outside the ICU day and night. Often standing for hours, sleepless, as there was no place to rest. Barely eating a proper meal, exhausted and anxious. At night, they took turns dozing off on the hospital's uncomfortable chairs. In the morning, one of them rushed home to get fresh, only to return in haste. There was no improvement, not a single sign of recovery. Then, after about fifteen days, the neurologist called for them.

He sat them down and once again delivered the kind of news no parent should ever have to hear. Neathan had suffered severe brain damage. His organs would no longer function as they should. There was no treatment left, no procedure, no surgery. Now the doctor said it was only in God's hands.

The world seemed to spin. One blow after another. After watching their son slip away and return. They were now being asked to let go again. After God, it is the doctor's word that people cling to, and when even that offers no hope, where does one turn? What remained hardest to accept was why it took fifteen long days in the ICU to reveal this truth. Why was this not shared earlier while the treatment was on? Why allow hope to stretch and bleed this way? The doctor's word had to be accepted; they had no choice. Yet deep within, my sister and her husband felt otherwise. As if the truth carried another layer. As if the real story was something else entirely. Each time they inquired about his condition in the ICU, they were reassured that he was slowly recovering and that the doctors were doing their very best for him.

Those words became the thread of hope they held onto each day. And then, suddenly, everything changed. The final verdict came without warning.

CHAPTER 55



NEATHAN, A MIRACLE CHILD

After 15 long, painful, and agonising days, Neathan was finally shifted from the ICU to the general ward. When her husband shared the news, my sister was overcome with emotion, a trembling mixture of nervousness and joy. At last, she would see her baby again. For fifteen endless days, she lived without holding him, without kissing his face, whispering how deeply she missed him every single moment.

Her heart pounded as she hurried towards the ward. Her eyes searched desperately, longing for that first glimpse. She imagined lifting him into her arms, feeling the warmth of her child against her chest once more. But nothing, nothing, could have prepared her for what she saw.

The child lying on that hospital bed was not the vibrant, plump, glowing baby boy she had brought into the hospital. Before her lay a frail, skeletal figure. His skin had darkened and dried, his cheeks had sunk inward. And his tiny teeth appeared more prominent against a face that had thinned drastically. His once lively body now looked hollow and fragile. He resembled a child abandoned by the world.

For a moment, she froze. Then a loud cry escaped her, a cry so raw and heart- wrenching that it echoed through the entire ward. "What have you done to my baby?" She sobbed. "He was healthy when I brought him here. He was full of life. Why does he look like this? Why does he feel like nothing in my arms?" She kissed his forehead repeatedly and whispered into his unconscious ears, "Wake up, my baby. Mama is here now. No one will take you away from me again. I promise. Please open your eyes, my son, please." The nurse stood nearby, silent and motionless, her eyes lowered. There were no explanations that could ease a mother's grief. There were no words strong enough to justify what had happened.

As my sister cradled his fragile head, she discovered something even more horrifying- a Deep wound at the back of his head. It was so severe that a little finger could nearly pass through it. Nearby was a dark bluish mark, resembling a clot. Shock turned into fury. "What is this? she cried out. "He is just a baby! Do you not have children of your own? Do you not understand what a mother feels?" The response was cold and dismissive. "It is because of the brain damage, " they said as though that explanation could erase the sign of neglect. But from that moment onwards, something changed within her.

My sister became his nurse, his guardian, his unwavering protector. She took complete charge of his care. She consulted his dietician, obtained his diet chart, and ensured that every feed through his nasal tube was given on time. She sponged him twice daily, applied cream to his fragile skin, powdered him gently, oiled his hair, and combed it neatly.

She changed his diapers, whispered prayers into his ears, and anointed his forehead with holy oil every single day.

Slowly, within a week, the transformation began. Under her relentless and tender care, Neathan started to look better. His skin regained a faint glow. His face softened. Though he remained still, he looked loved again. No system, no doctor, no circumstances could overpower a mother's determination. She stood like a warrior, a true embodiment of Mother India, fierce in love and faith.

When she saw no visible improvement in his responsiveness, she insisted that the sedative injections be stopped. "What is the purpose now?" She questioned. The doctor agreed. The sedative was discontinued. Yet Neathan remained unresponsive, as though he had travelled far beyond the reach of reactions. Questions haunted them. Who was to blame? Fate? The Doctor? The nurses? There were no clear answers. In the darkest hours, my sister cried out to God. "Why us? Why my son?" She would ask. But eventually, exhaustion silenced her questions. She surrendered, not in defeat, but in acceptance. She chose to live one day at a time, pouring every ounce of her strength into her son's comfort and care. She resigned from her job at BookMyShow, where she had worked faithfully for a year. Her world narrowed to one purpose, Neathan.

Not even the deepest, darkest light found its way in. Her Boss, moved profoundly by her story, personally contributed one lakh rupees towards Neathan's treatment. It was an act of pure humanity, a reminder that compassion still existed. Then, one day, as she gently spoke to Neathan as she always did, she whispered, "My baby, open your eyes

for Mama, just once." And then, as if heaven had responded, he opened his eyes.

He gave a little smile. Overwhelmed with joy, she called out to her husband, "Come quickly! He opened his eyes!" With trembling hope, she whispered again, "Baby, open your eyes, show Dada you can hear us, " And he did. Though he could not speak or move, he had no eye contact, no spoken words, yet he responded. He recognised his mother's voice. He recognised love.

Even today, if you whisper into his ear, he smiles; if you stroke his hair gently, he smiles. The spirit within him is yet alive. Subsequently, doctors performed another procedure to shift his feeding tube from the nose directly into his stomach. A tracheostomy was also done to assist his breathing and manage secretions. For such a small child, he had endured more than most could imagine. After a month in hospital, Neathan finally returned home. As their own home was very small, my mother welcomed them into hers, providing space and comfort. For four years, they stayed there, building their lives around his needs.

Their home became equipped with oxygen support. A physiotherapist visited three times a week to keep his muscles active. Once, when Neathan suffered a seizure, he was rushed urgently to the hospital, another trial in an already heavy journey. News of his story spread rapidly. Family, friends, distant relatives, neighbours, and even strangers came forward; people visited, prayed, and offered support. Donations poured in from known and unknown hands alike. It felt as though the world had gathered around one little boy. My sister and her husband remained deeply grateful. They thanked each one who helped Neathan, personally through messages.

Whether through prayers, presence, or financial assistance. In the midst of pain, humanity revealed it's most beautiful face.

But the greatest miracle of all was Neathan himself. Our little warrior. Our tiger. He fought with a strength beyond comprehension.

Later, my sister and her husband made a brave yet beautiful decision- they chose to try for a second child. They wanted Neathan to feel the presence of a sibling. Someone who would grow beside him. Hoping to bring companionship into Neathan's life and light back into their homes. In God's perfect timing, they were blessed with another precious baby boy, Brayden, born on 8th September 2021- on the birthday of Mother Mary- a divine sign that felt like heaven's gentle embrace. From the moment he arrived. Brayden brought renewed joy into their lives. He is growing into a lively, curious, and affectionate little boy whose laughter fills every corner of the house and whose playful energy brings constant smiles. His presence has truly restored warmth and life to their family. Now Neathan is the elder brother- silent and still, yet full of a quiet, angelic love that surrounds his younger sibling. Though he cannot express himself in words or movement, his spirit radiates tenderness. My sister lovingly teaches Brayden to respect, care and love his elder brother, nurturing in him a deep understanding that Neathan is special, chosen, and deeply cherished. Their bond is beautiful in its own gentle way- one vibrant and playful, the other serene and watchful.

As Neathan approaches thirteen this October, his body continues to grow even as his condition remains unchanged. His devoted parents care for both the children with unwavering dedication day and night, never once

complaining or giving up. Every detail of care is handled with tenderness and precision, because to them they are not burdens- they are their blessings.

And Neathan's breath, his warmth, his very existence is enough. Together, these two brothers stand as a living testament that love comes in many forms, and that even through life's trials, joy still finds its way home.

CHAPTER 56



WHERE MY HEART STILL BELONGS



Glenn worked for the RCCL shipping line from 1992 till date.

It felt like the right time to take Glenn to Kolkata. It had always been his dream to visit the city, but somehow the plan never seemed to fall into place. There was always something- either he was away at sea, or Dalston had school. Then one day, we finally decided not to wait any longer. Even if it was just for five days, we would go.

We didn't take Dalston along; he stayed back with my mom. We flew to Kolkata, and my dear childhood friend Ann had made all the arrangements for us. She booked a hotel that was conveniently located, making it easy for us to visit my school, Maureen's grave, and Mother Teresa's House. As soon as we landed, we headed straight to the hotel. Ann came by soon after, accompanied by her younger sister Mary. They stayed closely connected with us throughout our stay in Kolkata.

It was Glenn's first visit to Kolkata, and in many ways, it felt like an introduction- not just to the city, but to an entire chapter of my life. Everyone who met him for the first time. My friends, Maureen's friends, and even the nuns at my school welcomed him with warmth and curiosity.

There was something quietly special about watching those worlds come together- my past and my present meeting through him. Glenn, with his gentle and soft-spoken nature, made an impression on everyone he met. He listened more than he spoke, observing, understanding, and absorbing each moment with sincerity.

To them, he was not just a husband; he was someone they instantly felt connected to. And to Glenn, they were not just people from my past- they were pieces of my story, finally coming alive before him.

The very first place I took Glenn to was Maureen's grave. I felt deep within me that she must have been very happy to see both of us together. She had known Glenn well. During her lifetime, we visited Mumbai during school vacations, and he had taken an instant liking to her. We brought flowers, lit candles, and said prayers. In that stillness, we both spoke to her silently, from within our

hearts. Glenn noticed that her grave was not maintained at all. There was only a simple old marble cross placed there by the boarding school nuns the day she died. He expressed what I, too, had always felt - that it was not enough. This was my sister's resting place; it deserved dignity, care and love.

We spoke to the cemetery caretaker and arranged for the grave to be restored. Since we were to stay in Kolkata for a few more days, we planned to return before leaving. When we did, we were deeply touched to see how beautifully it had been done. It brought us both a sense of comfort and satisfaction.

After that, we visited my school. Glenn was visibly impressed. He remarked that it still looked grand and beautiful, even after all these years, and could only imagine how majestic it must have been during my time there. I introduced him to the nuns, who welcomed him warmly. They seemed to take an instant liking to him, perhaps drawn to his gentle nature.

As we sat with them, the conversation slowly turned to the past. The nuns began sharing the story of our childhood-the struggles Maureen and I had faced. Glenn was taken aback. Though we had known each other since we were fifteen and had built our life together, he had never fully understood the depth of those years. Hearing it from the nuns made it all the more real.

Their voices grew emotional as they spoke, and tears filled their eyes. Glenn sat quietly, absorbing every word, visibly moved and deeply affected. It was a moment of truth-one that revealed the part of my life I had long kept buried within myself.

When it was time to leave, we said our goodbyes with warm hugs and kisses. They had once been my family. Though life had taken me elsewhere and I now had a new home and family in Mumbai, Kolkata would always remain my beginning. It shaped who I am. Even today, a part of my heart still belongs to Kolkata.

We then went to see the building where we once lived. This time it stood still and locked, with no one residing there anymore. We could not go inside, but I showed it to Glenn from the outside. It felt like standing before a memory- still, distant, yet deeply familiar.

Later, we visited Mother Teresa's House. We made a donation and offered prayers for the souls of the departed in our family. There was a quiet sense of peace in that place, and that stayed with us long after we left.

One evening, Ann invited a few of Maureen's old friends to her home, and we had a small reunion. It was a deeply heartwarming gathering. We spent hours talking about our school days- the laughter, the mischief, the pain and the strength we had found along the way. Despite everything we had gone through, we found ourselves smiling; those memories, though touched with sorrow, were still precious.

Glenn sat among us, mostly quiet, listening as the stories unfolded. Some were light and humorous; others deeply emotional. He did not say much, but his presence was steady, thoughtful.

That night, we returned to the hotel feeling both tired and content. But the next morning, Glenn said something that stayed with me. He looked at me with a mix of emotions and concern and asked why I had never spoken about my

childhood in Kolkata. He told me he had not slept well the previous night. He had been thinking about everything- the journey, Maureen, the struggles, the life I had lived before him. It had stirred something deep within him. He said he felt restless, almost haunted by the thoughts. I could see it in his eyes- he was deeply moved.

In that moment, I realised how much of my past I had carried silently. Not because I did not want to share it, but perhaps because I had buried it so deeply within myself that even I had learned to live around it.

The five days passed more quickly than we expected. Before leaving, we visited Maureen's grave one last time. As I stood there, I felt a lump in my throat. It was never easy to say goodbye. But I also knew, with quiet certainty, that she was always with me.

We managed to do a little shopping before we left. There is something special about shopping in Kolkata- it carries a charm of its own. We bought some Bengali sweets, especially mishti doi, which Glenn quite liked, and a few beautiful sarees. Walking through the local markets brought back memories of my younger days.

Finally, it was time to say goodbye. I hugged Ann and Mary, not knowing when I would see them again, as we made our way to the airport a heaviness settled in my heart. I had shown Glenn my world- the part of me that had remained unspoken for so long. And in doing so, something within me had shifted. It made all the difference.

CHAPTER 57



A LOVE THAT FOUND ITS WAY HOME.



Dalston and Vaishnavi blessed in Marriage.

Dalston had now grown into a self- made young man. He had secured a position in the hotel industry, working at none other than the prestigious Westin Hotel. One that reflected not only his ambition but also his ability to stand on his own feet with confidence and grace.

It was here that he met Vaishnavi. They both began their journey in the same department, yet instead of forming

an easy friendship, something rather unexpected unfolded between them. They become rivals. It was unusual, almost puzzling, especially for someone like Dalston, who was known to get along effortlessly with people from all walks of life. His warmth and easy charm made him naturally likeable. But with Vaishnavi, things were different. They disagreed on everything- work, protocols, responsibilities, even the smallest details of daily tasks.

Dalston, being undeniably handsome, had his share of passing flings. But nothing serious. He moved through them with a certain detachment as if searching for something deeper but not quite finding it.

Despite his easy way with girls, none of them ever made it home to meet the family. He kept his friendships- especially the romantic ones- outside the house. Then one day, out of nowhere- and to our utter surprise- Dalston finally brought a girl home.

She was beautiful. Long, silky hair and a pair of delicate specs sat neatly over her nose. There was a quiet grace about her. Dalston introduced her simply as a "friend, " not a girlfriend. Though something in his eyes said she was more than that.

She offered us a nervous "Hello, " her voice barely above a whisper. Shy, polite, she sat through a brief visit with not much conversation exchanged. She did mention her name, but none of us could catch it properly. It was unfamiliar to our ears. For nearly a whole month, we fumbled through guesses, calling her every name but Vaishnavi. Poor girl- she never corrected us, just smiled each time, probably too kind or too shy to interrupt. Soon, her

visits became more frequent. Vaishnavi was no longer just a stranger with a hard- to -remember name.

We learned she was a Maharashtrian. But what stood out more than her roots was her personality. Confident and warm. Somewhere along the way, she had changed jobs, moving from the Westin Hotel to Soho House in Juhu, in the front desk department. She carried herself with poise. The kind that came from experience and self - awareness.

Despite the cultural background, Vaishnavi's vibe was distantly Catholic- likely because she had grown up in Amboli, a locality known for its strong Catholic presence. Being raised there from birth had naturally influenced her tone, her expression, and even her body language. She blended easily into our world.

She lived in a joint family- a proper one. Her home was a modest 1BHK flat shared with her parents, her younger brother Raj, her grandfather, and her father's younger brother and eldest sister. A big family under a small roof- and yet, she spoke of it with warmth, never a hint of complaint. Gradually, Glenn and Vaishnavi's bond deepened. What began as an undefined friendship quietly grew into a committed relationship. They never made any grand announcement- it unfolded naturally.

And as things got more serious between them, we too began to feel a sense of ease and familiarity. Vaishnavi was around more often, becoming a steady presence in our home. Her warmth, respect, and quiet charm made it easy for us to welcome her- not just into our house, but into our hearts. Over time, we happily accepted her into our Gonsalves family, introducing her to our relatives near and

far with quiet pride. As the years rolled on, it became clear- this wasn't just a phase, it was forever.

She blended effortlessly into our extended family. Attending gatherings, birthdays, and festivals. Everyone took to her. She was well-spoken, grounded, and sincere. She didn't try too hard to impress anyone. And maybe that's exactly why she was liked by all.

Finally, after three years of their relationship, we asked Vaishnavi to invite her parents over. Despite how close she has become to us, we had never met her family. It felt like the right time- not for anything official, but simply to connect.

We organised a proper family dinner at home. From our side, my family came- my mom, sister-in-law, and my in-laws. Vaishnavi arrived with her parents, her uncle, her aunt, and a few elders from her family. The gathering turned out to be warm and pleasant. Both families met with open hearts. There was no awkwardness- just simply conversations and shared laughter over home-cooked food. There were no formalities, no pressure, just genuine connection. Everyone got along beautifully.

However, at that stage, no discussion about marriage was made. Dalston and Vaishnavi were only twenty years old then. They had dreams to chase, a career to build, and a future to create. There was time ahead of them.

Quietly tucked within my heart, I carried a dream. More than welcoming a daughter-in-law, I had always longed for a daughter of my own, someone to share life with- to laugh, to talk, to simply be. I used to imagine outings together, movies, shopping, Sunday church, sharing laughter, stories, little traditions, and an unspoken

understanding that only deep bonds create. And somewhere along the way, Vaishnavi became that for me. She was never just my daughter-in-law. She was my daughter and a friend. Our bond grew in the most natural ways; we shared everything, even clothes. We were the same size, and that small coincidence became our little joy. Whenever I shopped, I found myself picking things for her too. She accepted everything with love, never once complaining.

She was also a wonderful cook, creative, enthusiastic, and full of ideas. The kitchen, which had never been my favourite space, slowly became hers. Together, we formed an effortless rhythm.

I ensured everything was in place at home. And she brought it to life. Every meal felt special, filled with care and warmth.

For the longest time, it had always been just the two boys in my world. But now, with her presence, it felt balanced, a complete family.

When Dalston received an opportunity to work in the United States, it marked a turning point. He was twenty-five years old then, ready to step into a bigger world, and the offer came with growth and promise. But love stood at the centre of everything. Yet, the thought of being away from Vaishnavi for years was not easy for either of them. Together, they made a decision- they decided to have a court marriage before he left. It was not about celebration, but about commitment. About belonging to each other, no matter the distance.

There were concerns, naturally. Glenn was hesitant at first. He worried about their age, their stability, and the responsibilities that marriage brings.

But I saw something else. Clarity in their decision. I explained to Glenn that this would give Dalston peace of mind, and it would also make practical sense for their future, especially for visa sponsorship as his wife. Slowly, Glenn understood. He agreed, with one condition: only a simple court marriage, no celebration. As reality set in, we realised this might be our only chance to celebrate their reunion before Dalston left. Being our only son, I knew we couldn't let the moment pass quietly. What started as a small plan soon grew into something much larger. From a quiet gathering, the guest list expanded to nearly three hundred people. A heartfelt wedding. Filled with love, effort and emotion.

The court marriage took place on the 5th of September 2022. Followed by the church wedding on the 11th. In just six days, everything came together- the permission, the preparations, the ceremonies. It was a whirlwind of emotions.

But somehow, I made it all happen, all of it; every detail was managed by me. With a heart full of energy, determined to give the kids a beautiful small celebration. Since Vaishnavi was a Hindu, we had to follow the formal procedure and obtain special permission for the interfaith union. A letter of consent was required from the bishop and submitted to the church authority for approval. Both Dalston and Vaishnavi were required to attend a two- days marriage course, which was mandatory, aimed at helping couples understand the sacrament of marriage. Their roles, responsibilities and the spiritual foundation needed to begin the new chapter. From Vaishnavi's wedding gown to Dalston's suit, the flower girls' and the bridesmaids' dresses had to be coordinated with shades that complement the

colour theme of the flower arrangement in the church and hall decoration. The best man's suit was tailored to perfection, matching Dalston's attire. I had to choose the right photographer. The hall, DJ catering, and the wedding cake. The wedding invite had to be designed and sent, checking off the guest list, and the church flower arrangement was taken care of by my good friend Sandra, who was a blessing. It was all a mad rush, a race against the clock. It was not easy, it was intense, demanding and exhausting. But it was all worth it and meaningful. Every moment, every decision, every effort came from a place of love. And in the end, it became one of the most cherished chapters of my life.

CHAPTER 58



LETTING GO, HOLDING LOVE

Thank God everything fell into place. The wedding took place beautifully. Just as we had hoped. And before I could take it all in, it was over- my boy was married. The day rushed past in a whirlwind of emotions, laughter, joy, and silent tears hidden behind smiling faces. Somewhere in that blur, a quiet realisation settled in our hearts. He wasn't just mine anymore.

I had to let him go- into the arms of his wife, into the new life he was meant to build. And I did it selflessly and happily, without hesitation. From the moment he was born until the day he got married, it was always me by his side. Every step, every milestone, every tear, every smile... it was always "mama." I was his world, and he was mine.

With Glenn often away due to work, our bond grew deeper with each passing year. He was my only child, so Dalston became my constant, my companion, my entire heart. We were less like mother and son and more like siblings- bickering over silly things, teasing each other endlessly, laughing over the smallest things. Our bond was light, effortless, and full of warmth. I stayed small and youthful, and Dalston kept growing taller over the years, so

we started to look more like brother and sister duo than, in fact, people rarely guessed our real relationship. We were often mistaken for everything else but mother and son. People still can't guess my actual age, though. And this secretly makes me feel proud. Even if it embarrassed him a little.

When Dalston was younger. My sister and cousins would tease me endlessly. "You're so possessive, " They'd say. "When Dalston gets married, you'll never let go of him!" They'd joke that I'd interfere, that I'd never share him. But love, I realised, does not hold tightly- it expands. And when the moment came...I didn't cling. I let go- with grace, with joy, because I wasn't losing a son, I was gaining a daughter. That thought alone made it easier and lighter.

I remember looking at Vaishnavi and smiling quietly to myself, thinking, Now, it's your turn, my girl...You take over. Of course, I thought it was a joke, but deep within, there was truth. Marriage doesn't just unite two people- it reshapes the lives of everyone around them. And I was content, knowing that I had fulfilled my role and was at peace. Now it was her time to walk beside him, lead him, care for him, and vice versa. And knowing it was her made it easier to let go, because she loved him just as deeply as I did.

But life moved quickly; just ten days after the wedding, Dalston had to leave for the United States. Miami. Everything felt rushed- the celebration, the packing, the goodbyes. There was no time for them to truly begin their journey together. No honeymoon, no time to simply be together- just a sudden separation. It was a bittersweet beginning. Love sealed with vows, yet tested by distance almost immediately.

The day he left, the 21st of September, remains etched in my heart. The airport was filled with family and friends from both sides- a sea of teary eyes, long embraces, and heavy silence. It slowed how deeply loved he was. Not a single eye was dry. And me? I was shattered. For twenty-five years. I had never spent a single day away from him. Coming back to an empty house felt unbearable. His laughter, his voice, his presence... everything echoed in his absence.

But I wasn't alone. Vaishnavi was there, and in that shared emptiness, we found a quiet strength. We both missed the same person, and that connected us in a way words couldn't express. And then there was Dalston. alone in a new country, starting from scratch. It must have been harder for him than for us. We still had familiarity- he had none. I will never forget his message from the flight, just before takeoff. "Mama, I'm missing you all..." That one sentence broke my heart completely. All I could do was pray... that he would be safe, protected, guided by Angels, never alone. Believing that love like ours would always surround him, no matter how far he went.

Vaishnavi continued with her work and stayed busy. Dalston, on the other hand, slowly adjusted to his new life. It wasn't easy- long working hours, a different culture, loneliness- but he ensured it all quietly. That's who he is. He carries his struggles quietly, never wanting to worry us. Even on calls, he was always more concerned about us than himself. And when we asked about him, he'd simply say, "Good." But behind that one word was so much we didn't see. Once he experienced a blackout due to exhaustion and lack of a proper meal. He visited the doctor, yet chose not to tell us.

It was Vaishnavi who eventually shared it, and I remember how deeply it worried me. But that's Dalston - he shields us from his pain, especially me. Hard work mostly never scares him. God has truly blessed him with resilience.

Time passed, as it always does. A year later, Vaishnavi still struggled to get a visa. Despite the opportunities in the U.S, Dalston made a decision that spoke volumes about his heart- he chose to come back. Because being with Vaishnavi mattered more than anything else. I supported him- not just as a mother, but as someone who understood the pain of distance. I had lived that life- I knew what it meant to be separated from your partner in the early years of marriage- the loneliness, the silence, the waiting. I didn't want that life for them.

Money is important, yes. But so is living. So is love. So is togetherness. In the race to build a better future, we often forget to live in the present; we forget that time once gone, never returns. And moments with loved ones cannot be bought. People will always have something to say. They will question, they will judge, sympathise. Few taunts with disguised curiosity... How can you live alone? Hats off to you. But they never truly understand the quiet strength it takes to endure such phases with dignity.

And I knew one thing clearly- I didn't want history to repeat itself, so we welcome our son back home, not just for us, but for them, their journey, and the life they deserved to build together. If they couldn't be together in their youth, what was the point of waiting for old age? These were their years to build memories together, to grow together, to truly live as husband and wife.

CHAPTER 59



THE FEAR WITHIN



Bravely facing my fear, surgery day.

Before Dalston was born, a fear began to grow in me quietly, unexpectedly. It wasn't there at first. Even when I went through two miscarriages and had to undergo a D&C, I never felt frightened, not in the way I would later come to understand. I carried those moments with a strange, numb strength. But somewhere along the way, something shifted.

I cannot explain when it began or why. Fear does not always arrive with warning; sometimes it simply settles into you, unnoticed, until one day you realise it has made a home inside your body.

For me, it revealed itself during my pregnancy, particularly during internal check-ups. I dreaded them. The thought alone made my palms sweat and my body tense. It was a mere discomfort. What would take a few minutes for other women would stretch into longer, more difficult moments for me. The doctor would gently repeat the same instructions each time, asking me to relax, to loosen my body, to trust the process. But the more I tried, the more my body resisted. I would stiffen unconsciously, as though bracing for something far worse than what was actually happening. It felt as though my body was no longer listening to me.

I carried a quiet guilt during those moments. I knew I was making the doctor's work harder, yet I felt powerless to change my response. That fear had a life of its own, one that did not seek any permission. It simply existed, growing stronger with each encounter.

When Dalston was finally born, I felt an indescribable relief. It was as though a heavy chapter had come to an end. I told myself I would never have to face that kind of fear again- the anxiety, the helplessness, the vulnerability that had occupied those months. Life, as it often does. Moved forward quickly. I immersed myself in raising my child, managing the home, and slowly reconnecting with dreams I had once set aside. In the busyness of life, that fear faded into the background, becoming a distant memory I rarely revisited.

Years passed, and I entered my fifties. With pre menopause changes- some expected, others not. At first, the anxiety and occasional panic felt explainable. People around me reassured me that it was hormonal issues, something many women experience. I accepted that explanation, at least on the surface. But deep within, something more unsettled was unfolding.

The fear returned, but this time it had changed its form. It was no longer tied to check-ups or physical discomfort; it had grown deeper, darker. It became a persistent thought that I might develop cancer. I do not know where the thought originated, but once it took hold, it refused to leave; it lingered in my mind, quietly shaping my thoughts, influencing my emotions, and slowly convincing me of a reality that did not yet exist. I became convinced that I was going to die. And worse...that I would die in the very place I feared the most in my body.

It was not simply worry- it felt like something had taken control of my mind. The thoughts did not feel entirely my own. They felt forced, uninvited, repetitive, and overpowering. I began to understand how powerful the mind truly is. Convincing us of truths that may not even exist. And when the mind turns against you, it becomes incredibly difficult to quiet it.

We often feel that others are responsible for how we feel- that someone else has the power to make us happy or hurt. But over time, I came to realise that our emotions are born within us. It is our perception, but instead of owing them, we protect them outwards. We blame others. We say, "They made me feel this way." But the truth is, we allow it. We choose how to see things. It's all perspective and choice. The outside world is just a mirror.

The real story unfolds within us. In my case, that reflection was fear- deep, persistent, and entirely my own. There is a quiet truth in a saying: whatever you think about more often has a way of becoming your reality. The mind can manifest your deepest worry if you let it take over. The mind is powerful beyond what we often acknowledge, what we repeat, and dwell on, whether fear or hope. When a thought is fed with constant attention, it grows. It settles deep within us, influencing our emotions. Over time, it starts to feel real- so real that it begins to reflect in our lives. I have lived this truth. The fear I held onto. The thoughts I allowed to repeat themselves in my mind- they did not remain just thoughts or fear. They become feelings, then beliefs, and eventually they shape my reality. Because my mind did it.

That is a quiet power we all carry within us. And that is why we must be mindful- what we choose to think again and again, does not stay inside us forever, it finds its way into our life.

And then... what I feared for so long seemed to come alive. One day, I started bleeding too much, and I knew I couldn't ignore it. It had been decades since I had visited a gynaecologist, and the thought of returning brought back every buried emotion. The anxiety resurfaced. My sister insisted that I see her gynaecologist, and I agreed, knowing it was necessary despite my reluctance.

After the examination, the doctor recommended a biopsy. At that time, I did not fully understand what that meant. The word itself carried a certain weight. Later, when I learned that it involved taking a tissue sample to test for cancer, the gravity of the situation struck me deeply. That single word... cancer - echoed loudly in my mind. It felt like stepping into the unknown.

And also, with my mother's history of ovarian cancer, I understood I had a high chance of developing it.

The procedure was explained as simple and routine, to be done under anaesthesia. I went through with it; the sample was sent for testing. Placing my trust in the process. Yet internally, I was in a state of constant anxiety. My thoughts raced, my body remained tense, and my emotions fluctuated between hope and fear. My family, too, carried their own quiet worry, though they tried to remain strong for my sake. The wait for the reports was agonising. Ten days felt like a lifetime.

During those days of waiting, we turned to prayer- not out of habit, but out of a place of genuine surrender.

Each passing day carried the weight of uncertainty. When the call finally came one afternoon from the hospital, asking me to visit the doctor, I felt my breath catch. My body reacted before my mind could process anything. With tremble body and a racing heart, I asked the nurse if everything was alright. The response was simple- there was no cancer detected.

In that moment, an immense sense of relief washed over me. It felt as though my burden, I carried silently for so long, had suddenly been lifted, until it disappeared. Gratitude filled my heart, and all I could do was thank God again and again. It was only then that I realised how deeply that fear had rooted itself within me. However, the journey did not end there. The following day, the doctor reviewed my reports and advised that I undergo a hysterectomy. He explained patiently that while there was no cancer, the condition was close enough to warrant preventive action. The biopsy had shown I was one step away from cancer.

The doctor explained everything carefully, even drawing it out for us. It didn't erase the anxiety- but it gave me clarity. The presence of fibroids further supported this decision. It was not easy to accept. The idea of undergoing surgery was necessary to protect my future, and letting go of a part of my body that had once nurtured life required both emotional and mental strength. It was hard to process.

After seeking a second opinion with another known gynaecologist of my good friend Shashi, to bring more clarity, which confirmed the same recommendation, I made my decision. That was not about fear anymore; it was about choosing life, consciously and responsibly. We fixed the surgery date- right after the lockdown. The Sage hospital near my house was convenient and accessible, and the hospital surprised us. It felt like a place of comfort; it was elegantly designed, equipped with state-of-the-art technology and high-quality medical equipment sourced internationally, creating an environment that felt both advanced and reassuring. It felt so positive and brought a sense of calm. It did not feel intimidating or clinical. The doctor personally showed us around, including the operating theatre, and this gesture made a big difference. And the professionalism of the staff helped ease my anxiety. I began to feel I was in safe hands. I didn't feel fear walking into the operating theatre. I felt taken care of in those three days' stay at the hospital. And by god's grace, everything went off perfectly fine.

Amidst all of this, God truly had his own plans, in his mysterious way, was working behind the scenes, and something deeply unexpected happened. The news of my biopsy reached Sandra through Glenn. She had sent him an invitation for our Lady Velankanni's prayer gathering,

which she has every year in the month of August at her home. But this time Glenn gently excused himself, explaining that he couldn't make it because it was the day of my biopsy. That was enough. Sandra immediately called Glenn, shocked and emotional, She said she would pray for me, and something magical happened, the next day when I was stepping out of the complex gate, we suddenly walked towards each other, we both stopped and hugged tightly, "don't worry she whispered, with tears in her eyes, "All will go well, Mama Mary will not let anything happen to you. And from that moment on Sandra came back into my life. Misunderstanding had built walls, Circumstances brought us together again. When we met, there was no explanations needed. One embrace was enough to dissolve years of separation.

In that moment, I felt a different kind of healing- one that went beyond the physical. Sometimes it takes a storm for broken things to come together again.

The surgery lasted for more than an hour. While I remained unconscious, those who truly mattered were there for me- Sandra, Glenn, my kids and a few close friends. Their presence, their prayers, and their quiet strength meant more to me than words can express. No one from my extended Gonsalves family came. Not even my mom. But strangely, I felt no bitterness in my heart. Everyone has their reasons, I told myself. Maybe I was never their favourite; I never truly belonged there. I was never accepted, not wholeheartedly. That sense of belonging that a family is supposed to give? I rarely felt it. Though we cousins were very close, it was actually the elders who differentiated. Over time, I had already made peace with that long ago. Because the genuine souls who stood by me were enough.

Glenn's mother was admitted to the hospital for her leg surgery at the same time as mine. He found himself constantly moving between two hospitals, trying his very best to be there for both of us. At the same time, his parents had sold their old flat, and their new home in our Bhoomi Classic complex was under renovation, which he also had to supervise. Amidst all of this, he would make it a point to visit me once every morning, just to check on me. The rest of the day, I was completely on my own, as his father stayed with his mother in the hospital. Nights, however, felt a little easier- each late evening, a friend would stay with me, and their presence became my greatest comfort.

Recovery was not easy. There were moments of physical pain, moments I had to get up on my own, walk slowly to the toilet, moments of solitude, and moments where I had to rely on my own strength to take even the smallest steps. I didn't want to depend too much on the nurses as they had to attend to other patients. But with each passing day, the pain was real, but so was my strength. I chose not to dwell on weakness. Instead, I focused on healing, one step at a time and pushed through. And here I am. Still standing. Because no matter what life puts me through, I refuse to stay down. I may bend, but I will never break. There's too much fire in me. Too much life left to live. So much joy yet to be experienced. And if there's one thing I've learned through this journey, it is this: pain may visit us, but it never stays forever. Life changed unexpectedly around eight or more years ago, when Glenn's mother suffered a serious fall from a relatively low bed while taking an afternoon nap during her break from her tuition classes. But again, three years later, she required a second surgery on the same hip when the steel implant from the earlier procedure

surprisingly and unexpectedly broke. Her surgeries were difficult, yet she faced them with remarkable courage. We watched her transform gently through those experiences—her demeanour becoming softer, more grounded, and more reflective. Despite everything, I looked up to her strength. She remains an incredibly strong woman, even at the age of eighty, and I truly believe God's grace has carried her through each trial. She continues to inspire with her resilience and quiet determination.

CHAPTER 60



A NIGHTMARE WE NEVER SAW COMING

Glenn had always carried a dream close to his heart- to send Dalston abroad for a better future. He believed that in India, growth was limited. And no matter how long one worked, true progress was hard to achieve. Just before the lockdown, this dream began to take shape when he struck up a conversation with a man from our building complex, Jose Abraham.

Jose had been running an optical shop for over fifteen years. He appeared respectable, soft-spoken, and deeply religious. Though we didn't know him personally, his familiar presence over the years had quietly built a sense of trust. With his convincing words and calm demeanour, he painted a vivid picture of opportunity. He claimed to have direct contacts in Canada, a connection within the embassy itself. According to him, he had helped many secure jobs and resident visas through a relative working there.

All Glenn had to do, he said, was pay thirteen lakhs and submit all Dalston's documents. Within four months, the visa would be ready. It sounded like hope. It felt like destiny.

Without hesitation, we began the process- gathering documents, arranging finances, and making payments in cheque instalments. Glenn handed him the first cheque before leaving for the ship, and I continued the rest of the payment every month. Jose visited our place regularly to collect the cheque, each time reassuring us with hope, always promising us the visa work was in progress, always speaking of the bright future for Dalston. Claiming it was taking time since it was a resident visa.

Within four months, we had paid the full amount. But months passed, and nothing materialised. When Glenn returned home after six months on vacation, something didn't sit right with him. A quiet uneasiness began to grow. Determined to uncover the truth, he searched through old emails and found contact details of the so-called relative in Canada. When he called them, the response shattered everything.

They knew Jose, but had not been in touch with him for months. They did not know Dalston, no visa process, nothing at all. Worse still, they warned Glenn that Jose had been misusing their names to cheat people. Even the story about his son working in Canada through this same relative's help turned out to be a lie. In that moment, reality hit hard- we had been deceived.

When Glenn shared this with us, it was impossible to digest. Thirteen lakhs- our hard-earned money- gone. Months of trust, hope, and belief reduced to nothing. We tried contacting Jose, but he avoided us with endless excuses. He claimed to be in his village, caring for his critically ill mother. When confronted, he continued spinning new lies, insisting the process was still ongoing through another agent.

Eventually, we demanded our money back. He asked for time, still clinging to his false promises. He stuck stubbornly to his lie, even though he knew very well that we had uncovered the whole truth and no longer trusted him. Meanwhile, we discovered he had sold his optical shop in our complex during lockdown. The new optical owner was complaining that bank people were coming by to his shop looking for Jose, who was deeply in debt. His reputation, once hidden behind a gentle face, was now exposed.

Determined not to give up, we began searching for him ourselves. With Sandra by our side- our constant support- we went to his place at Mira Road, suspecting he was still in Mumbai, but we just couldn't locate his home. A young stranger, who was sitting at his shop nearby, seemed to appear out of nowhere. Noticing the worry on our faces, he approached us and asked what the problem was. When we explained our situation, he asked for Jose's number. Using his own cleverness and with the help of his friend who worked for the Vodafone gallery, he managed to track the number through Google Maps to locate the exact address of his optical shop in Mira Road, which he had recently opened, apparently by taking yet another loan- from whom, we could only wonder. To us, this stranger guy was God-sent, a true blessing in disguise. We were deeply grateful for his kindness and thanked him wholeheartedly.

We finally found Jose. Sitting in a small poky shop, far from the lies he had told us. He was visibly shocked to see us. Glenn, furious, began yelling and confronted him, demanding answers and asking him to return our money immediately. Jose was shaken and afraid, offered three signed cheques and asked for time. Though trust was long gone, we took them as a small step forward.

The situation was tense, even frightening. When we went to collect the cheque from his house, fear lingered in our hearts. We took precautions, unsure of what we might face. Because this man couldn't be trusted one bit.

To protect ourselves legally, Sandra suggested drafting an affidavit, having the document properly notarised, and clearly mentioning all the cheque details along with their respective dates. It also stated that he had taken a specific amount of money from us and had committed to repaying it by a particular date. Furthermore, it was clearly written that if he failed to do so, strict legal action would be taken against him. Finally, we ensured that he signed the document, making it a formal and binding agreement. Sandra's quick thinking gave us some security in an otherwise uncertain situation.

Glenn took Jose's car keys, making it clear that the vehicle would only be returned after a partial payment was made; otherwise, we would be forced to sell it. The car was a Duster model. However, once again, luck was not on our side. The vehicle was still under loan and was registered in his son's name, as the loan had been taken in his son's name and had not been repaid. At that time, his son had been working in Qatar for a year. Despite all this, we kept the car for six months.

Despite constant follow- ups, emotional stress, and countless confrontations, there was no resolution. We even approached the police, but were advised to settle the matter outside court, as legal battles would drain us further. The stress took a severe toll. Glenn suffered a brain stroke. It happened suddenly, during a prayer gathering at Sandra's place. His speech was faltering, his body weakened, and he nearly collapsed from dizziness, and panic set in.

Medical tests revealed it was his second stroke, and the neurologist warned that a third could be fatal...he was advised to avoid stress completely and take his B.P medicine daily.

Even then, he didn't give up. Jose didn't allow us to deposit the cheques, claiming there were insufficient funds in his account. Left with no other option, Glenn decided to take the next step. By sheer persistence, Glenn tracked down Jose's brothers-in-law, his wife's brothers. Who also ran a successful optical business. Unlike Jose, they were hardworking and honest men. After Glenn narrated the entire story to them. They were not in good terms with Jose, as they were well aware of his past- his laziness and his habit of borrowing money from various people. Because of this, they had always kept their distance from him. However, though initially hesitant, for the sake of their sister and to protect their family's reputation, they felt compelled to step in. Reluctantly, they agreed to help and paid 10 lakhs, making it clear that the remaining amount would have to be recovered directly from Jose.

When Jose learned that Glenn had contacted his brother-in-law, he was upset and questioned him, as he did not want the truth revealed to them. But this was the only way Glenn could try to recover this huge amount. The remaining three lakhs, Jose promised to return in instalments. This time, fear worked in our favour. Glenn made it clear- if he failed again, we would expose him in his village in Kerala. Slowly, over time, Jose repaid the remaining amount. And finally, after two years, from 2020 to 2022 the nightmare ended. We were free. What remained was just relief, but a deep lesson about trust and the cost of blind faith. Through it all.

Sandra stood with us like a pillar - strong, unwavering, and selfless. We thank her from the depths of our hearts. And above all, we thank God for giving us the strength to endure, to fight, and to finally overcome.

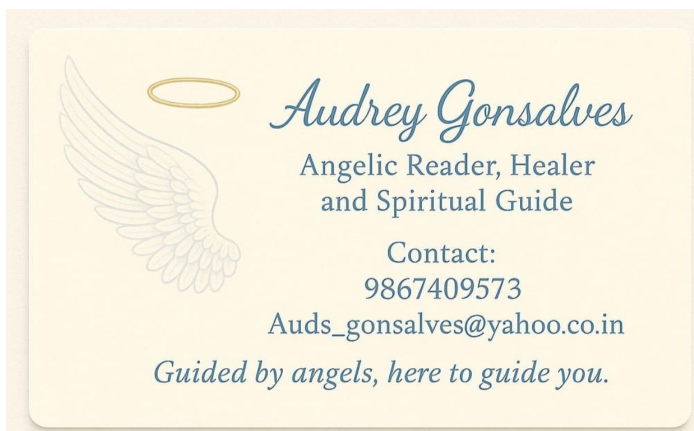
CHAPTER 61



CROWNED BY FAITH, GUIDED BY ANGELS.



Beside my spiritual mentor, and angelic journey.



My angelic visiting card.

Sometimes during the quiet years after Dalston was born. And began growing into a little boy, I didn't really notice it then, but now, when I look back, I realised a quiet transformation had already begun within me. Unfolding, unknowingly. It was important to me. Maybe not to the world, but within me there was a sense of quiet superiority, not over others but over the timid version of who I was. It was as if I placed a crown on my own head, unseen by the world. Yet heavy with the weight and wisdom of my journey.

One day, I found myself happily gifting people angels- there was no deep purpose behind it, I simply felt like spreading angels. Because it felt right. It was as if I was being guided to share light in small, silent ways. The happiness it brought to others, in turn, filled my own heart with quiet contentment.

Then came a sudden and exciting urge one day to get a tattoo. Without hesitation or confusion. I knew exactly what I wanted: a baby angel inked into my arms.

Years later, I chose a queen's crown beneath my collarbone. Anything shaped like an angel or a crown-whether in the form of an ornament or a statue - instantly draws me in, and I find myself compelled to buy it without a second thought. At that time, I had no explanation for these choices. And yet, looking back now, I realise how consistently my instincts circled the same spiritual symbols-angels, crowns, divinity. It was as though my heart understood something long before my mind could gasp it.

In June 2023. A sudden thought entered my mind as softly as a whisper- I wanted to do an angel therapy course, I shared this idea with those close to me, and my good friend Diana mentioned a lady in Thane who conducted such sessions. I called her, and her voice was warm and gentle. She explained that it was a two-day course, six hours each day. But when she mentioned the fee- twenty-four thousand- I hesitated. It felt beyond my reach.

One afternoon, while sitting casually at Zee's salon, I mentioned to her that I wanted to pursue an angelic course, but found it quite expensive, and the distance made it even more difficult. Zee immediately responded, "I have a client named Madhvi, call her right away." Without wasting a moment. I did. Fortunately, I was already familiar with her through the same Zee salon. She was also a television actress, a known personality, and had once hosted an exhibition at her home showcasing angels and various spiritual items, which Sandra and I had visited together. When she told me she conducted the same course- two days, six hours each-with a certified certificate, and the fee was only seven thousand, I knew this was meant for me, and it was nearby. Without a second thought, I booked the course.

On the 15th of June, I began what would become a deeply meaningful spiritual journey. When the two-day session ended, something within me had shifted. It was not dramatic or overwhelming, but soft and profound. My restlessness began to ease, my overthinking slowly quietened, and the sharp edges of my emotions softened. I became more grounded. I began to love myself more deeply, to stop seeking validation, and to gently place myself first. This transformation did not happen overnight- it unfolded gradually, like dawn breaking across the sky.

Perhaps it was easier for me to embrace this path because of my upbringing. As Roman Catholics, we were taught from a young age to pray daily to our Archangels. Each one of us is believed to be blessed with two angels to protect and remain beside us, as God cannot be everywhere at the same time. So, he sent angels to watch over us, but only when we call upon them and truly invite our angels into our lives do they come and stay with us.

One night, with closed eyes and an open heart, I whispered, "My angels come into my life and never leave my side. That night, I felt as though I had truly invited them into my life. And from that moment on, I began to notice their presence. I started asking for signs- and they came.

Once, during a particular low emotional moment, I quietly called out, "If you are truly beside me, please make me feel better...If it is your will." Not long after, my phone buzzed. It was a message from my friend Anita- a photograph of a beautiful building in Spain, with bold words written across it: "Go Audrey, Be You." When I thanked her, she replied instantly, "It's not a picture forward. I saw your name and thought of you." I smiled with joy. My angels had answered. This message lifted my spirit.

These signs have continued to appear in my life in countless ways. I see Angel wings on cafe walls, a sudden rainbow in the sky, during my trip to Egypt, while on a boat. The faint fragrance of perfume in an empty room, a few times when I open YouTube, a video pops up with a soft, beautiful song playing at just the right moment to lift up my spirit. All of these are signs from angels. They are subtle reminders that we are never alone.

Another moment unfolded during a family holiday in Phuket. As I stood in the beach water, holding my new Samsung phone, a sudden wave knocked it into the water. My heart sank as the phone wasn't waterproof. But when I picked it up, it worked perfectly- as though nothing had happened. Later, when Vaishnavi showed me a photograph she had clicked of me falling with the waves hitting me, we noticed something unusual- what looked like two extra hands gently lifting me from behind in the picture. Dalston and Glenn, seeing the picture, said it was Vaishnavi's hands. But how could she? She had been standing in front, clicking the picture. A quiet shiver ran through me. I knew I had been held.

There were other moments too- small, mysterious, and deeply personal. One evening in New York at a gas station, not a Bird in sight in the sky, yet a single soft, beautiful white feather drifted down in front of me. I excitedly wrapped it in a tissue to keep it forever. But when I unwrapped it at home. It was gone. That made me very upset as I was wondering how it disappeared.

This same incident happened once again, just opposite our complex. I was returning from Inorbit Mall, crossing the road, when I spotted a one- rupee coin. At first, I felt hesitant to pick it up, thinking, "What will people think? Greedy for

a coin?" So, I walked past it. But almost instantly, I felt a pull to pick it up. I turned back within seconds, and to my surprise, the coin had vanished from the exact spot. How could that be... gone in just a blink of an eye? The angels don't want you to hold on to these signs; rather, they want you to simply know that you are being watched over and to feel their presence with joy. That is why, at times, you may notice these signs, only for them to disappear almost immediately.

One night, after an exhibition in Bandra, I noticed a young man standing ahead of me, wearing a white T-shirt with the number 11:11 printed on it. I smiled to myself, feeling comforted. Later, my friend Geeta noticed the time on her wristwatch- 11:11 again. And moments after that, Geeta's daughter saw the car ahead of us bore the same number 11:11 on its number plate. That was not a coincidence- it simply couldn't have been. What made it even more remarkable was that all three of us strongly believed in angels. In fact, Geeta, like me, had completed an angel course years before I did. So, each of us was deeply aware of these angelic signs. We felt truly blessed, as though the angels and universe were gently whispering, "You are protected." It was a moment that felt nothing short of magical- purely angelic.

I developed this habit of calling upon my angels even for the smallest thing. For example, if I am in a completely remote place, I'll still find myself talking to my divine in my head, not formally praying. Today, I speak to God and my angels as I would to a friend- not through rigid rituals, but through simple, heartfelt conversations.

Some may laugh and say, "Go on, call your angels, " but for me, it is not amusement- it is faith.

I have come to cherish my own company, to find peace in solitude. Tears visit me less often now, and when they do, they pass like clouds. If I ever feel distance from someone, I step back- not in hurt, but in respect. For the front person's space, if I make a mistake unknowingly, I apologise immediately without hesitation and own up. And if I am hurt, I choose forgiveness over resentment. Life, after all, is too short to carry the burden of grudges. Instead, I choose to send that person my blessings. I'm not perfect, and who is? Yes, I make mistakes because at the end of the day, we are just human. Forgiveness is simple; we just have to leave our ego behind.

I have learned that life is never a straight path. It has bends and curves in ways we cannot predict. If we accept all the good life offers with open arms, we must also learn to face difficult moments with courage. Nothing we have is truly ours, and everything is temporary, so why flaunt? So why hold on? Why not live with humility, gratitude and grace? And count our blessings. If you are genuinely kind, it returns in tenfold. I have lived my life to the fullest, and now, I can say fearlessly, "God, I am ready."

Since June 2023, I have been practising Angel Therapy and healing, connecting with clients not only in Mumbai but across the world. Some visit my home, while others connect with me online. Each session brings its own wave of emotions- tears, smiles, release, and peace. Many tell me they feel lighter, blessed. And for all this, I remain deeply grateful- to God, and to my angels.

I have a small number of clients, and my work has grown purely through word of mouth. I have not advertised on any social media.

This is my spiritual journey... and I am glad to share a part of it. I could go on and on, but I choose to share just a glimpse of what I hold within my heart. Angels do exist... if you choose to believe. They are gentle, kind, and never harmful. The answers you seek often lie within you, waiting to be heard. Trust that voice. Trust your faith

You will always get positive answers to your doubts, and miracles have touched my life time and again. They have shaped me into who I am today.

Let me end with this. God sent Angel Gabriel with a message to Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus, a story most know. Even Jesus himself was comforted by an Angel sent by his father from heaven, where the angel appeared in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was praying before giving his life for our sins. Angels were important even then in the most sacred moments of history; they were sent as messengers of God.

I end each greeting with a silent blessing- may angels surround you, and God always be with you. It is a simple prayer, wrapped in love, sent from my heart to yours.

And so, I leave you with this thought: angels have always been a part of our story. And I carry this with pride.

CHAPTER 62



A BOND, A DISTANCE, A TRUTH REVEALED.

My Mother was the only family I had. Losing my father and sisters so early in my life felt like having entire chapters torn out before I even had the chance to read them. I was too young to understand what family truly meant, too small to grasp the feeling of belonging to someone and having them belong to you. All I knew was it was just her and me- a bond not only of blood, but of a quiet, unspoken promise to keep going.

As I grew older, moving from the innocence of childhood into the confusion of my teenage years, my understanding slowly began to change. I started noticing differences, sensing things I had never felt before. Life, in all its reality, was coming into focus. There was a time I loved my mother with a devotion that felt like it was stitched into my soul. She was everything to me- my sanctuary, my angel on earth, words can never fully capture the depth of that love.

But somehow along the way, life began to pull me away from her.

It happened so slowly that I didn't even realise it at first. Gradually, I felt emotions slipping. Sometimes, I still wonder how it is possible to give so much love, so completely. That one day, it feels like there is nothing left to give.

Deep inside, I began to feel like a neglected child-almost an orphan. It seemed to me that my mother had found a new family and started a new life in Mumbai. I felt as though she had forgotten about me, as if I were just a lingering part of her past in Kolkata. In Mumbai, it was my mother, my new dad, and their own two children- and then there was me, standing somewhere in between, not quite fitting in.

There were many moments, more than I can count, when I was made to feel that I didn't truly belong. But I never once spoke about it to anyone. Life was moving too fast, and its demands built a wall between me and my emotions. Somewhere along the way, my pain learned to stay quiet. My feelings remained hidden, even from myself.

Time passed, and my mother grew older, and so did I. I started working, got married, and then Dalston was born. Through all these changes, I knew my mother was still there in my life, but was never really present. She wasn't a part of the moment that shaped me.

Then in September 2020, everything changed. We received shocking news that broke us instantly. My mother, who had long suffered from asthma, began experiencing sudden and severe stomach pain. At first, she thought it might be something minor, like a gastric issue, and admitted her to the Zenith Hospital in Malad Link Road.

While running routine tests, the doctor delivered devastating news- she had ovarian cancer, already at stage 2. We couldn't bring ourselves to tell her immediately.

The truth felt too heavy, too painful to place on her all at once. But she already knew. She sensed that something was wrong and chose to wait quietly, giving us time to gather the courage to tell her.

The next day, we all gathered as a full family at her home in Malvani. The room was filled with silence and fear. None of us knew how to begin. Being the eldest child. Yet, I didn't have the guts to say it- I knew my voice would break. Finally, my sister-in-law spoke softly. Choosing her words with care. She told my mom about the cancer, quickly adding that there was nothing to worry about and that with proper treatment, she would recover. My mother's reaction surprised us all. Her face remained calm, there was no fear, no tears- just quiet strength. She looked at us and said, "I knew this."

In that moment, the heaviness in the room lifted slightly. We all felt a sense of relief. What had seemed impossible to say had been received with courage and grace. Even in her own moment of pain, she made it easier for all of us.

Our journey began when we consulted an oncologist at Hinduja Hospital, recommended by our family doctor. That visit marked the beginning of a long and painful chapter in our lives. The doctor had informed us that the cancer had spread more than expected. Surgery was no longer optional- it was necessary. They would have to do a hysterectomy and even remove a small portion of her intestine, as the disease had begun to invade those areas.

The surgery lasted more than six hours. We sat in the designated waiting area reserved for visitors, where families quietly waited anxiously for updates on their loved ones.

Staying connected and alert for any call from the nurses, each passing minute feels unbearably heavy. When we were finally called, the surgeon had exhaustion written all over his face. He told us it has been a very difficult procedure- far more complicated than anticipated. Cancer had spread into the deep corners of her abdominal cavity, making its removal extremely delicate. Although they managed to remove most of it, some tiny, stubborn traces had to be left behind. We were told this could be treated with chemotherapy.

Chemotherapy began soon after, but in smaller doses due to her age. At seventy-five, her body could not endure aggressive treatment. The doctor carefully balanced every dose, trying to fight the disease without breaking her strength. The financial burden was immense. She had no medical insurance, and we, her children, contributed whatever we could. After the surgery, I stayed by her side in the hospital for ten days, supporting her through her initial recovery.

Three months later, it was time for her routine CA -125 blood test. We waited anxiously, hoping for even the slightest improvement, but the results brought no relief. The cancer was still spreading despite the chemotherapy. Another surgery was advised- this time to recover growth in her abdominal area. The doctor warned us that a colostomy might be necessary, a procedure that would create an external opening in her belly area, called a stoma, where part of the colon would be brought through and attached to a pouch outside the body for the stool to pass into. If the cancer had spread near the colon, this would be the only way to avoid repeated abdominal infection.

The thought of this was deeply disturbing to hear. We discussed it amongst ourselves and expressed our discomfort to the doctor. We feared it would make it difficult for her to step out of the house, and it would bring unnecessary embarrassment. We heard of other patients who went through this and found it useless, offering no benefit, only discomfort. Thankfully, when the surgery was completed, the doctor told us it was not needed. That small mercy felt like a blessing from God.

But even after that, there was no real improvement-chemotherapy continued relentlessly- week after week. Each hospital visit drained more of her strength. While trying to save one part of her body, other parts began to suffer. Constipation became constant. Fatigue followed her everywhere; nights were sleepless, loss of appetite, and days were painful. She experienced breathlessness and severe body pain. Her hair fell, her weight dropped, she used to get blisters in her mouth, and the glow on her face faded into a pale stillness. Each day brought a new struggle. She gradually barely spoke, barely smiled. I can't remember the last time I heard her laugh out loud the way she once did-freely. From the depth of her heart.

Years passed, but her suffering remained. She was alive, yes, but at what cost? We often questioned the purpose of treatment when there is no peace- physically, mentally, or financially. We were helping her to live, but what kind of life was this? The chemotherapy seemed endless, and at times, it felt meaningless. It was as if the treatment was harming the healthy parts of her body in an attempt to destroy the diseased ones.

Doctors offered little guidance beyond continuing treatment and advising her to "eat anything, " which never

felt right. We strongly believed that diet should have been the foundation of healing- home-cooked meals, carefully planned Nutrition, and avoiding harmful foods, yet, the focus always remained on chemotherapy- the most expensive part of the treatment. It often felt like if you could not afford it, you were simply left behind. Mercy is rare in this profession. The hospital bill climbs by the day. There is often little transparency when it comes to medication. Detailed records are not clearly shared with the patient's family; instead, the charges simply appear on the final bill, leaving them with questions but no clear explanation. And if you happen to have insurance, the hospital stay often seems to stretch longer, and the bill ends up being significantly higher.

Not all doctors are the same. Some are genuinely kind and compassionate, and their presence makes a significant difference. A caring doctor can ease a patient's burden in ways medicine cannot. The same applies to nurses. While some are gentle and understanding, many lack empathy, handling patients roughly and reacting impatiently to their pain. The level of care often depended on the type of ward and class you were in.

After the first surgery, there was a brief period of hope. At home, my mother followed a strict diet plan with great discipline. Every meal was prepared with care. My friend Zee guided us with a plan she had once used for her own sister during her cancer battle. For a while, it worked. Her reports showed small but steady improvement. And even the doctor seemed pleased.

But slowly, that discipline faded. Feeling better, she began to eat things she shouldn't have, perhaps she believed

she was cured. Gradually, her health declined again, bringing her back to where she had started.

My sister-in-law was her greatest support during that time. My mother appreciated her deeply and held a special place for her in her heart. I'll share a small example of the partiality I sometimes felt. On my sister-in-law's or my sister's birthday, even their kids, my mother would lovingly give them all gifts. But then she would quietly whisper, "Don't tell Audrey... she will feel bad. I don't give her, Glenn, or Dalston any gifts on their birthdays. As I can't afford it." Honestly, I never truly felt hurt by this or held any grudges. I understood that my sister-in-law had done far more for my mother during her illness initially. From the very beginning, she took full responsibility- taking my mother for her regular check-ups, following up with the doctor's, while also keeping track of every medication she needed to take. Yes, there were moments of partiality that could have stung, especially since I too did my bit, by sometimes helping her financially, and stayed by her side through both her surgeries, spending those long weeks and nights in the hospital by her side. But that's alright- Somethings are better ignored. In the end, what truly mattered was that my mother was cared for. Materialistic things take a back seat for me. It was always about the thought that hurt me, as I was her only living eldest from her past.

In the end, my mother had to make one of the hardest decisions of all. They sold their spacious 2BHK flat- the home they had cherished for years- and moved into a smaller 1BHK flat in the same Malvani area. It was a painful sacrifice, made purely for survival. From September 2020 to January 2025, so much was spent on her treatment that nothing was left. Despite everything, my mother never gave

up. Even as she approached seventy-nine, she continued to fight. Her strength was extraordinary.

Her spirit refuses to surrender, no matter how much her body suffers. She truly deserves a round of applause - for the courage, and her unwavering will to live.

Dalston came back to Mumbai after nearly a year from Miami...in 2023 July...he never really looked for a suitable job...it was the first time that we four as a family went for an international holiday to Phuket...and we had really enjoyed every moment there ..as it was a beautiful holiday spot ... then we decided to send Dalston to New Zealand for his masters in hotel management and tourism...we got in-touch with this agent with reference from my cousin...took a educational loan from the bank and mortgaged our house papers as security...and the process took at least three months by the time we submitted all his documents which were asked for and had to go through medicals ...his visa came in after all the formalities...for a year and a half...a collage in Plymouth in New Zealand...by the time he was ready to go to fetch a bright future it was September 21st 2024... after celebrating his second wedding anniversary...this time he was ready and more matured to migrate to a new country...not like earlier when he had to leave for the U.S. for the first time...he was not prepared and was nervous and emotional.. leaving his wife and us ...this time he was more confident... he knew Vashnavi would follow soon as she had also applied for a sponsorship work visa because of Dalston and being his wife, it was easier for her to get the visa...the procedure was the same as Dalston with submitting her documents too. But after doing her medical when Dalston was here in Mumbai, they found she had fibroids in her uterus so had to do a sonography and

visit a gynecologist, I took her to my doctor who operated on me, and she underwent the surgery as the fibroids were a bit big and had to be done, but all went well and she was home in three days, and was taken good care and had a speedy recovery...she had by then resigned from her Long lasting job in soho house where she worked for 5 years...and joined some big builders called Oberoi builders in Goregaon east, in six months she left this job too as she had to do the surgery and in few months would join her husband in New Zealand, all of us went to drop Dalston to the airport... friends our family and Vaishnavi's family...it was a huge group once again at the airport to bid him goodbye...but this time it was not for months but years ...we didn't know when we will see him once again... because going in the intention of studying and then getting a full time job and settling down would take more than three years of struggle to build a good better future everything takes time...as a new place and environment. Once again the house felt empty...but this time it was me alone who felt the pain ..as Vaishnavi knew that soon she would join him so she was not sad ...this time I knew my son was gone for good...and my heart did ache this time a bit more...but this pain only a mother can feel...no one can understand this love...he got busy with his college then part time job three times a week ...he was staying with a Keralite family with two tiny kids, Dalston was given one bedroom...and the apartment was near his college...so he soon brought a second hand car to travel as transport was hard to get...the place was very beautiful and he used to click pictures and send us...he got along with everyone in college and made a few friends and was a favourite to his Sir...but I was happy to have Vaishnavi by my side for those few months... then it was December month when she was ready to fly on 15th December... before Christmas...i made her

decorate our house for the last time for Christmas... usually every Christmas she and Dalston used to decorate the house for Christmas...now it was only me and Glenn at home that Christmas the house seemed empty with only the two of us, usually it was us four with a lot of noise around...when it was time for us to drop her at the airport, all friends family...she was all excited but I was feeling it more for her then I felt for Dalston... I became completely quiet, sad and low when I had to say goodbye... I just started crying and couldn't stop my tears...I hugged her tight...now both had left us and soon Glenn we would leave too...it was the first time in my entire life I was all alone ...it had always been Dalston around me then Vaishnavi when Glenn used to sail ..but I had to show I was strong and hide my feelings...this was not our choice to part as a family...it was money future and destiny... nothing was in our hands... The house used to come to eat me. It was absolutely silent...only my breath could be heard ...and the TV... a few friends stood by me...and understood my loneliness...but how long could I depend on others to keep me happy and going? They also had a family, so I used to not disturb anyone with my emotions...I was strong, had seen so much in life that this was nothing... my closest had gone far away from me, which broke me. Everyone gets settled in life ...life goes on...they say the show must go on... and that was exactly what I did...just lived for the moment...cried in my own house...and laughed among people...to show them I was strong... Vaishnavi also got a full time job after a while...near to their house...then after a few months they shifted to another apartment close by as they couldn't stay there for long, they used to do night shifts and with the loud noises of the kids and parents it used to disturb them a lot and get sleepless days ..so they were forced to shift...they took a three bhk

apartment and Dalston college friends shared the apartment each in one bedroom...so the rent and everything was equally divided...and things get less expensive as renting an furnished apartment is very expensive in New Zealand as it's an very expensive Country. Now there are five of them ...2 in each bedroom and one in one bedroom...they cook in turns and share the grocery too...they go for outings when they have all an off very rarely in one day...all have different shifts and time of work...both do video calls to us often in a month so we feel less apart...only glen can't talk with them when he is sailing as time issues and working hours timing too...now with the video WhatsApp calling it feels less distance...as u can see one another... It's one full year and seven months that I have not seen them ...and at times I get nostalgic...and cry too...but when I am on call with them, it's all smiles and laughter... they always say they are ok and doing fine, but I know their struggles...God knows when I will get to hug them and see them face to face, just waiting for that day anxiously...for a reunion... Dalston, by the grace of God, completed his master's in the month of March this year 2026... With an A grade. Praise and thank the almighty...and he has got his visa for three years too...now waiting for Vaishnavi's visa, which I am sure will be received soon. Everything will work wonders according to god's will and their hard work and parents' and elders' blessings on them...life has its own plan, we just have to manifest and pray and stay positive and healthy...they might think that we parents sent them away so far ...

Leaving their country and friends, but this could only give them a good future, as in Mumbai, both were not doing so well for themselves... this was the only way out ... parents always want the best for their children...

CHAPTER 63



A JOURNEY OF LOVE, DISTANCE, AND HOPE.



Dalston completed his Master's in hotel Management in New Zealand, with A+ grade with Merit. Convocation day. Blessed.

In July 2023, Dalston returned to Mumbai after nearly a year working in Miami. Despite being back home, he didn't actively pursue a suitable job. Around that time, as a family of four, we planned and experienced a beautiful milestone-our first international holiday together in Phuket. It was a

truly memorable trip, filled with joy, laughter, and togetherness. The beauty of that place and the happiness we shared made it unforgettable.

Soon after, we made a life-changing decision- to send Dalston to New Zealand to pursue his Master's in hotel management and tourism. With a reference from my cousin, we connected with an educational agency and began the long process. We took an educational loan, mortgaging our house papers as security. It took nearly three months to gather and submit all the required documents, along with completing medical formalities. Finally, his visa was granted for a year and a half for a college in Plymouth, New Zealand. Before leaving for New Zealand, Dalston and Vaishnavi took the blessings of their grandparents and the full Gonsalves family and Vaishnavi's family and relatives too, bidding them all goodbye. Those moments were filled with love, emotions and silent prayers for their journey ahead.

By September 21st, 2024, shortly after celebrating his second wedding anniversary. Dalston was ready to leave. This time was different. He was more mature, composed, responsible and mentally prepared- unlike his earlier departure to the U.S., when he was nervous and emotional about leaving his wife and family behind. Now, he carried confidence and hope, knowing that Vaishnavi would soon join him; she had already applied for a sponsorship work visa, and being his wife, the process was smoother.

However, life has its own challenges. During her medical test, doctors discovered fibroids in Vaishnavi's uterus. Further tests confirmed that surgery was necessary. I took her to my trusted gynaecologist, the same doctor who had once treated me.

The surgery went well, and within three days, she was home. With proper care, she recovered quickly.

By then, Vaishnavi had resigned from her long - standing job in Soho House, where she had worked for five years, because of no growth and increment in salary. She briefly joined Oberoi Builders in Goregaon East. But left within a year due to her surgery and plans to join Dalston in New Zealand.

When the day came to see Dalston off, the airport was filled with friends and family from both his and Vaishnavi's. It was a large and emotional gathering. But this farewell felt different- it wasn't for months, but for years. We didn't know when we would see him again. He was leaving not just to study, but to build a future, which would take time, patience and a little struggle.

Once again, the house felt empty. But this time, I felt the void more deeply. Vaishnavi was still with me and knew she would soon reunite with him, so her heart was lighter. But as a mother, I knew my son was gone for a long time. That pain is something only a mother can truly understand.

Dalston soon settled into his new life-college, part-time work, and living with a Keralite family who gave him a room in their apartment on rent, close to his college. He even bought a second-hand car due to transportation difficulties. He often sent us pictures of the beautiful surroundings. He adjusted well, made college friends and even became a favourite of his professors.

Meanwhile, I cherished the few months with Vaishnavi. But December arrived, and with it, her departure too. Before she left on the 15th of December, just before Christmas, I asked her to decorate the house one last time- something she

and Dalston always did together. That Christmas felt painfully quiet, with only Glenn and me at home.

The day we dropped her at the airport was overwhelming. Surrounded by loved ones, she was excited, but I was breaking inside. As I hugged her goodbye. I couldn't stop my tears. For the first time in my life, I truly felt alone. There was always someone with me- Dalston or Vaishnavi when Glenn was away at sea- but now, the silence in the house was deafening. Because then Glenn left at the end of February.

I tried to be strong. I smiled in front of others and cried when I was alone. A few close friends supported me, understanding my loneliness. But I knew I couldn't depend on them forever. Everyone had their own lives. I had to learn to live with this emptiness. Life, as they say, must go on- and so I did. Quietly, bravely, carrying my emotions with me, people always see me as the happiest and the luckiest, someone who is always smiling and full of life. But what they don't realise is that this side I have chosen to show the world. The lighter, joyful version of me is what others see, while my deepest emotions are the ones hidden within myself.

I remember when Dalston and Vaishnavi left for New Zealand, for over a month, I couldn't bring myself to step into their room. It felt too heavy with their absence. Every corner of that space reminded me of them- their belongings, their presence lingering in silence. At times, it almost felt as though they would walk in at any moment, as if nothing had changed. I miss them so deeply that even entering their room became an emotional struggle.

In New Zealand, Dalston and Vaishnavi slowly built their lives. After some time, she secured a full- time job near their home. They later moved into a shared three- bedroom apartment. With Dalston's college friends. Since the apartment they were staying in with the Keralite family had two young children who often made too much noise during the day, Dalston and Vaishnavi found it difficult to get proper sleep after their night shifts. As a result, they had no choice but to look for another, quieter place where they could rest peacefully. Sharing expenses with their roommates made it more manageable in such an expensive country. They adjusted to different work shifts, shared responsibilities, and found moments of outings together whenever possible.

Technology became our bridge. Through video calls, we stayed connected. Seeing their faces, hearing their voices- it made the distance feel a lot less painful.

Only Glenn struggled to connect regularly due to the time change, his sailing and working schedule.

It has now been one year and seven months since I last saw them. There are moments when nostalgia overwhelms me, and I cry. But when I speak to them, I put on a smile. They say they are doing well, but as a mother, I can sense their struggle too. I wait for the day I can hug them face- to - face. That hope keeps me going.

By god's grace, Dalston completed his master's in March 2026 with an A grade. We are deeply grateful to God and proud of Dalston. He has also received his three-year visa, and we are now waiting for Vaishnavi's, which we are sure will come soon.

Life unfolds in ways we don't always choose. Perhaps they may feel that we sent them far away from home, from their comfort, and loved ones. But everything we did was for their future. Mumbai, opportunities were limited for them. This path, though difficult initially, was necessary. As parents, all we ever want is the best for our children. We continued to pray, to hope, and to believe that everything will fall into place- with time, faith, positivity and their hard work. Life has its own plans, and all we can do is trust the journey and manifest. And stay healthy and pray daily.

CHAPTER 64



A LOVE THAT LIVED BEHIND WALLS

When my mother finally stopped going to Hinduja Hospital for chemotherapy, it was not a decision made lightly. The doctor himself advised ending the treatment. There had been no improvement- only a slow, visible decline. He told her to take one day at a time. And she did. She accepted it with a quiet grace, almost as if she had already made peace with what lay ahead. Somewhere deep within, she knew time was nearing its end.

In May 2024, she was admitted once again to Tunga Hospital, complaining of the same relentless stomach discomfort. But this time, something new had been added to her suffering. A tumour began to grow inside her navel, swelling to the size of a sweet lime, with fluid constantly oozing from it. It brought her unbearable pain, day and night. After a week, she was discharged. The message was clear- her body was too tired to fight anymore.

From then on, every day became a repetition of agony. Pain was her only constant companion. The medication was minimal- something for gas, a vitamin, calcium, and an occasional painkiller. Nothing worked anymore.

Even then, initially, before being admitted to Tunga Hospital, her doctor did prescribe a chemotherapy tablet for a few months. But by that stage, her body was too exhausted to respond. The medicine no longer healed; they merely existed.

During her illness, I would often ask her to come stay with me for a few days. I wanted to take care of her, to make sure she ate right, followed a routine, and felt loved. But every time, she would pause and say softly, "I don't want to disturb you." I knew that wasn't the truth. It was never about me.

Some elderly people feel a deep sense of comfort and familiarity in their own homes, making it difficult for them to adjust elsewhere, even in their homes of their own children. Their space holds their memories, routines, and a sense of independence that they are not ready to let go of. As a result, they may prefer to stay in their own environment rather than move, even when it means being away from those who love and care for them.

My new dad always took charge of her meals, but one day, when she was particularly upset, she revealed something that she had kept buried for a long time. He would give her spicy food- food she physically could not tolerate. Her tongue burned with every bite. Even half a chilli felt unbearably spicy to her. The heavy medication and her weakened condition had caused painful blisters inside her mouth. He added processed "Magic Masala" to her meals, believing it would make them tastier. But for her fragile body, it was nothing short of poison. It worsened her condition, silently and steadily.

Looking back now, I cannot blame my mother. She was vulnerable- conditioned to obey, to follow, to shrink herself. She never had a voice of her own, and she simply became a follower. Her opinions were never asked for. She lived cautiously, almost fearfully, always aware of his bad temper, almost timid in his presence, always alert. I found her naive. In that house, his wishes were our command. We ate when he was hungry, we slept only after he was done with his drinks- no matter how late it was or how sleepy we were. Even though we had to wake up early for work the next day, we were still expected to follow his routine.

I remember it clearly- the blows would come suddenly, striking our faces, backs or heads without any warning. We were never prepared for it. Only afterwards does he begin to shout loudly with abuses, giving reasons for his anger. Sometimes it was over the smallest, most trivial things- a missing kitchen ingredient, or even if we refused to eat something we disliked- food that was never to our taste but was still prepared at home. Such minor issues would lead to severe beatings. The beatings were almost a daily occurrence, and because of his large build, they hurt intensely. No one in the house was spared- neither my mother, nor me, nor my younger brother. Even when I started working, nothing changed. Rules were rules.

There is a saying that when a person responds to your fear or mistake with violence, pokes fun at you, or humiliates you in public, it slowly begins to break your confidence. Instead of feeling supported, you start to believe that you are not good enough- that you cannot speak, express, or carry yourself with confidence. Fear takes over, and rather than improving, you find yourself repeating the same mistakes again and again- not because you are incapable, but because

you are too afraid to try freely under constant judgment. And that is why we kept making mistakes unknowingly and kept getting beaten.

A far better way to support someone who fears crowds, stammers while speaking, struggles to find the right words, or lacks confidence in public is to respond with understanding and kindness. Instead of laughing and mocking or creating an awkward situation, one should take them aside and gently point out where they went wrong, offering guidance respectfully and encouragingly. A little patience and empathy can make a world of difference to someone who is already battling self-doubt. Why put someone in an uncomfortable and embarrassing position?

God has made each one of us talented in one way or another. No two people are the same, and everyone carries their own strength, even if it is not immediately visible. True worth does not lie in perfection, but in the ability to be kind and human. If you are a good human being, even physical beauty fades in comparison. Your face reflects your nature- it becomes soft, warm, and approachable, drawing people towards you effortlessly. On the other hand, no matter how outwardly beautiful a person may be, a lack of kindness and humility eventually creates distance, as people begin to notice the pride beneath the surface and slowly drift away.

So, when my mother hesitated to come and stay with me, I understood- it was never her decision to make, it was his. She could never speak to me freely when he was around. But the moment he stepped out, she would sometimes call me. Those calls were rushed, urgent. And once we finished, she would delete the call history. If suddenly the door bell rang mid-, conversation, she would hang up abruptly.

The call was always incomplete- cut short by fear. He would check her phone. "Why do you have to call Audrey? Let her call you if she cares."

Even messaging was difficult. Her phone was often in his possession. When I did call, she would speak cautiously, sometimes on speakerphone, so he could hear everything. There was always a barrier between us- a suffocating invisible wall. Now I understand...that wall was never ours. It was built brick by brick by control, fear, and silence. She was absent from my life not by choice; she was trapped in a world where even love had to pass through permission. I used to think we were simply distant, but now I understand we were both prisoners...hers was visible, mine was silent. And yet, even in that silence, I guess she cared for me. She just couldn't show it the way she wanted to.

As her health worsened, something inside me refused to stay quiet any longer. I gathered all my courage and asked her for something simple, yet profound.

"Mummy, can you give me just one day of your life...just you and me? No one else around. A day when we can be together freely... without fear, without interruption." She thought...and then said yes. That, yes, felt like a gift I had waited my entire life for.

I prepared everything with excitement and care. I wanted her to feel safe, at home, cherished. My new dad dropped her off near the lift of my building. When she arrived, we welcomed her with the biggest smile. Dalston and Vaishnavi wrapped her in a warm embrace. For once, she was mine- just mine. But barely two hours later, her phone rang. It was him. An excuse. A reason. A command. I saw her expression change instantly.

I said nothing. I didn't need to. And just like that, she left, saying that he told her someone was waiting at home to meet her.

That evening, when Glenn's mother called to ask how things were going, all I could say was, "Mummy has left." There was no explanation. Only an ache- deep, quiet, and heavy. It was never just about her leaving early. It was about everything it symbolised. Years of interrupted conversations. Love that was never fully expressed. Moments that were taken away before they even had the chance to exist. My mother lived her entire life under someone else's shadow. I never truly had her for myself.

On 29th December 2024, she was admitted once again to Tunga Hospital. This time, her condition was worse. She couldn't eat or drink. Whatever little she swallowed came right back up. Her stomach was in constant unbearable pain, her motion had completely stopped, and her body had almost stopped functioning.

Because it was the New Year holiday season, her regular doctor was unavailable. The assistant doctor admitted her directly into the ICU, completely unnecessary in our eyes. It felt less like care and more like a calculation. ICU meant higher bills.

After three days, we insisted on shifting her out. We were ready to sign the risk papers. They reluctantly agreed. What more could they do for her anyway? Painkillers, anti-vomiting medication, something to stimulate moments, and saline with protein injections- that was all.

When her doctors finally returned, he reviewed everything carefully. Then he looked at us with rare honesty and said, "Take her home, let her spend time with family."

From the day she was admitted, I began visiting her more often. Before this, I rarely went. Something about her home always made me uncomfortable- heavy and negative. The emotional gap between us had grown too wide. Even her illness couldn't bridge it entirely.

I knew she was my mother, but the connection felt distant...almost mechanical. It came more from a place of humanity than love. And yet, I know now- it was never my fault, I never once felt guilty. I didn't choose this life; I was born into it.

The experiences I went through could have easily broken me. They could have led me down the wrong path-seeking validation, sympathy, or escape in unhealthy ways. But I choose differently. I refused to let my pain define me or turn into bitterness. I refused to lose myself. Instead, I stood tall. Because somewhere deep inside, I always wanted to make my mother proud. Even if I never truly had her...she always had me.

I remember a conversation I once had with my younger sister. I had asked her something that had been quietly troubling me for a long time- why Mummy never stayed at my house, not even for two nights. Her answer came in parts, but each word stayed with me.

She said first that Mummy was never comfortable leaving my new dad alone for that long. And then she added something that hurt far more deeply- Mummy was afraid to be alone with me. Afraid...of me.

Not because I would harm her, but because I would ask questions. Questions about our past. About the life we once had. About my father... about my sister, Maureen. In my youth and even after marriage, I had always been curious.

I would gently dig into memories. Trying to understand pieces of my story that were never fully told to me. But those were questions she never liked to answer. And so, over time, she began to avoid being alone with me, although. When I heard this, something inside me sank.

Yes, it's true- I wanted to know. I longed to understand where I came from, to learn about the people who were a part of me. My father - my sister...they were my family too. I wanted to see them through my mother's eyes. To bring them alive in a small way through her memories.

CHAPTER 65



LOVE, AT LAST - IN THE SHADOW GOODBYE.

Towards the very end, something miraculous unfolded- something I can only attribute to God, or perhaps to the quiet, unseen presence of angels watching over us. My mother began to express her love for me openly, something I had never witnessed in my entire life. I could feel that shift. It felt like a release, as if all her fear had finally left her. Perhaps, in the stillness of her approaching end,

She thought, "Who can stop me now from loving my daughter the way I always wanted to?"

She began to praise me, even in front of the man she had feared all her life. One day, he said something that stayed with me forever. "Your mom feels so happy when you visit her in the hospital and sit beside her, and pray for her health so faithfully, making her recite the prayer along with you. She said you pray so beautifully- something she had never witnessed before- and that while praying with you, she could truly feel the presence of Jesus near her, listening.

I never knew she carried such faith in my prayers. I never knew they brought her peace.

That revelation touched a place in me. All my life, I longed to hear just one good thing from her- that I was good enough. And finally, in the closing chapter of her life, I heard it.

On the 6th of January, she was brought home from the hospital. A recliner bed was arranged to keep her comfortable, and a nurse visited twice a day to administer saline. A full-time caretaker attended to her every need. She was reduced to bones; her abdomen appeared visibly swollen due to the cancer and tumour around her navel, making it the most prominent part of her frail body. Her feet were swollen, her voice barely a whisper, like she had lost her vocal cord.

Nothing solid could pass her lips anymore. At most, she could manage a few teaspoons of moong dal water or rice water, and even that her body rejected. She vomited countless times a day, for more than eight days, and not even liquid stayed in her stomach. It was as if she were watching death slowly make its way into her home, one quiet step at a time.

And yet, amidst that painful reality, something sacred bloomed between us- a closeness we had missed our entire lives. It arrived not in years, but in days. I believe deep within, she knew she had not given me enough as a mother. And so, in those final twenty days- from her hospital admission on 29th December to her last breath 16th January at 6 p.m. - she tried to pour a lifetime of love into the little we had left. Sometimes love does not always come when we expect it. Sometimes, it arrives at the very edge of loss.

The wounds of my childhood had shaped a silent promise within me: that if I were ever blessed to become a

mother, I would rewrite that story. I would give my child everything I had once longed for but never received. And I kept that promise.

Every ounce of love I had, every comfort I had searched for, I poured it into my son in abundance. Each time I looked at him, I remembered my own emptiness, and I made sure he would never carry that void. If it meant giving my last breath to fill his heart with love, I would do it without hesitation.

My mother would keep her eyes fixed on the door, waiting just to see me walk in. Every time the phone rang, she thought it was me. And when I finally arrived, her face would light up with the sweetest smile. It did not matter how long I stayed. What mattered was simply that I was there. As she lost her voice, her words were barely audible, but she still tried- with all her strength- to speak, and in those fragile words, there was love.

On the 10th of January, Glenn left to rejoin his ship. Before leaving, as always, he went to see my mother to seek her blessings. But this time, there was a quiet understanding within her; she knew this would be her final meeting and Goodbye. She gently kissed his forehead. With hope in his voice, he said, "Get well soon, I'll see you after five months." She looked at him with tired eyes, offered a faint smile, and whispered, "God bless you, son...take care of yourself." Six days later, she was gone.

Glenn did see her in his dreams- as if her soul had come to bid him farewell, entrusting her daughter into his care. Glenn felt an emptiness after she was gone. Their bond had always been special. She was not just his mother- in-law; she had been his Aunty first- someone he had known and

respected deeply. She adored him. Whenever we quarrelled, she would defend him, saying, "You are to be blamed...my son-in-law is never wrong." And Glenn, in turn, held a soft corner for her too. He was more comfortable with my mother than with his own. They shared a rare ease, a warmth that needed no effort. Their connection was genuine, simple, and deeply affectionate.

The same love extended to Dalston, her beloved eldest grandson. When he visited her before leaving for New Zealand on the 20th December 2024, he leaned down and kissed her cheeks- a gesture she always treasured deeply. To her, that kiss was not routine whenever they met; it was love itself. If he ever forgot, she would tilt her head and gently remind him, "Where is my kiss?" While pushing her cheeks forward with a smile. That day, she blessed him wholeheartedly. "Babush, " she said softly, using the nickname she always called him by. Take care of yourself and Vaishnavi. My blessings and prayers will always be with you." And she meant every word. She had also embraced Vaishnavi with genuine affection- not just as a granddaughter-in-law, but as someone she truly welcomed into the family. At least, she had the joy of witnessing his marriage and spending time knowing Vaishnavi.

On the 13th of January, something within me urged me to take Sandra along to see my mother. I told her, "Let's go today. If anything happens, you'll always feel bad you didn't meet her one last time." My mother was fond of Sandra- she knew her very well amongst my other friends, she used to visit Sandra's place every year faithfully for Velankanni prayers.

When we reached my mother's house, I saw her crying while taking the nebuliser. Alarmed, I asked the caretaker

why. She replied simply, "She is crying for you. Since yesterday", she's been saying. 'Audrey has not come to see me.' I walked up to her and said, "Mummy, why are you crying. I'm here. I may not come every day, but you know I will come to see you for sure. In her faint Voice, she replied, "I am your mother. You have to come, or at least call me daily." I reassured her gently, explaining that I never wanted to disturb her rest, but I always checked on her.

Then, turning to Sandra, she inquired about her children and Bryan. Sandra made a call to Bryan, and my mother spoke to him briefly. With loving effort, she raised her weak hands and placed them over Sandra's head, blessing her: "May you, Bryan and children prosper in life...and with good health." Then, unexpectedly, she asked for ice cream. I believe her stomach must have been burning intensely with pain, and the coolness of something soothing brought her a sense of relief.

The doctor had said she could have anything she wished. But she had no desire to eat or drink anything, as her stomach couldn't retain anything, and her digestion had completely failed. Sandra immediately offered to get it, and within minutes, vanilla ice cream was brought. For a moment, my mother's face lit up with childlike joy.

After Sandra left, I stayed behind. We helped my mother sit up. And I gently fed her spoon by spoon. She managed only five small wooden spoons, but she savoured each one as though it was her first taste of something truly delightful,

With every spoon, she closed her eyes, finding relief in its coolness. The cancer and acid in her stomach had caused constant burning and pain, but that ice cream soothed her, even if only for a moment. That day she was happy. Truly happy.

In those fleeting moments, surrounded by those she loved, she was no longer just a patient. She was simply my mother again- smiling, peaceful, and alive in the smallest, sweetest joy.

CHAPTER 66



THE NIGHT SHE CALLED MY NAME



This was my mother's last picture I clicked at noon, the same day she passed away at 6 in the evening on 16th January 2025.

Tuesday and Wednesday passed without me being able to visit my mother. Life pulled me in different directions, and on Wednesday evening, I went for a novena at St Michael's Church. I called her, of course - but a call is never the same as being there. I didn't realise then how much those two missed days would come to weigh on my heart.

That Wednesday night, something happened that shook me to my core. At around 4 in the morning, I woke up abruptly- terrified. I heard my name, sharp and unmistakable: "Audrey!" It was my mother's voice. Clear and loud. And there she was, I saw her shadow, deeply real, of her standing by my bedroom door in the dark, dim light. Not fully seen, yet undeniably present.

My entire body froze. My heart pounded wildly against my chest, unexplainable heaviness took over me, and I sat on the bed with panic and rushed to switch on the light. But even with the room fully lit, the fear did not leave me. Sleep never returned that night. All I wanted was for it to be late morning...so I could go and see my mother.

Shaken, I immediately called Dalston and told him everything. He tried to calm me, saying, "Don't be sorry, mama...go back to sleep. It was just a dream. Nana is ok, " but deep within I knew- it was not a dream. Still trembling, I messaged Sandra: "I heard Mom calling out to me." She replied, "Just pray for her." But I knew this was something more. That voice lingered, echoing in my ears; the way she called out my name carried a depth...a longing... almost like a cry from her soul. It no longer felt like fear. It felt like a connection.

A mysterious, divine connection that only a mother and child can share. Perhaps it was God's way of preparing me. Perhaps my angels were waking me up, whispering the time had come- that my mother would soon be called home.

From the time my mother was diagnosed with cancer, it never once really entered my mind that she would die someday. To me, cancer did not mean an ending. It did not mean death. It was simply an illness- something she had,

something she was being treated for. That was all I allowed myself to believe.

In my heart, she was always going to get better. Even in the final weeks of her life, I was not prepared. Not emotionally or mentally.

After the doctor stopped the chemotherapy and placed her on tablets, she would sometimes say that the doctor had told her she had only three months to live. My new dad would repeat it too. As if trying to make us understand the seriousness of it. But I never accepted it.

I would brush it away almost immediately, refusing to let those words settle in me. "Don't think negatively, " I would tell her, "Stay strong. Eat well.

Manifest that everything is fine, stay positive." I never allowed the conversation to go further.

Perhaps I believed that by denying it, I could protect her...or protect myself. Perhaps I thought that speaking about death would somehow make it real, bring it closer, give it power. I was simply running away from reality.

The next day, Thursday, the 16th of January, I went to see her around 12.30 in the afternoon. Her eyes were fixed on the main door as usual- as if she had been waiting- watching the moment she saw me, she immediately stretched out both her hands towards me, her face filled with sadness so deep, it pierced through me. Seeing a cry look on her face...it still haunts me. Even now, I can see it as clearly as if it happened just a moment ago. I walked up to her and asked, "Mummy, how are you? She didn't answer in words. Like she always does, instead she placed both her hands over her stomach in action, whispered, "It hurts.'

I don't know why, but that particular day, I just kept looking at her continuously, something I rarely did before, but that day, something inside me urged me to truly see her, to hold on to that moment.

I gently held her hands, but she did not look back at me. Her face was very pale, her eyes distant...as if she was already slipping beyond my reach. She seemed dazed, silent- so unlike the mother I knew. Her face carried the tiredness I had never seen before. I asked her if she wanted to sit up, but she shook her head weakly.

Soon after, she asked for two spoons of coffee. But even that, she couldn't keep down- she threw it up almost immediately. We raised her bed slightly, hoping it would bring her some relief.

Her neighbours came in, and we all gathered to pray the Divine Mercy Rosary together. But something was different that day. Mom didn't join in. Her lips, which once moved so faithfully with every prayer, remained still. Her eyes stayed open, but her gaze was into nothingness.

The neighbours tried to lighten the moment. "Aunty, what happened today? Are you not talking to us? You didn't even pray with us!" They teased gently. She only responded with a faint, distant smile.

By 2.45 p.m. I got up to leave. I said goodbye, promising I would return the next day. She simply nodded. Not really looking towards me...she was just looking straight. I stood up...I did something that felt so unusual, so unlike what the situation truly needed, instead of holding her... instead of leaning in and embracing her the way she had silently asked me to... through her look, I picked up my phone and clicked her picture, not knowing it would be the last click.

But that moment- when she had stretched out her hands towards me as I entered- still echoes within me. I should have hugged her. I should have kissed her. Instead, I walked away. And that thought pierces me every single day. Why didn't I? What held me back? She was my mother...of course, I cared. But the bond we once shared had been strained for so long that I could not even remember the last time I had embraced her warmly. As a child in Kolkata, I had clung to her constantly - hugging her, kissing her, telling her, "You're mine alone, Mummy." But after Maureen's death and coming to Mumbai, something changed. I built a wall between us- a wall I never managed to break. Not even on her last day. She wanted that hug. I realised it now. She wanted me to hold her, to kiss her goodbye...to give her that one simple gesture of love. But I didn't. And that regret has stayed with me ever since.

After leaving, I went straight to Sandra's house. Something didn't feel right within me. I told her, "Mom isn't looking good today. Even when I asked the caretaker, she dismissed it, saying she was just sleepy. But I knew better. I showed Sandra and her mom a picture I had taken of my mother earlier that day. The moment she saw it, Sandra agreed- something was wrong, because she had just visited my mother on Monday, so she could clearly see the difference.

At 6 p.m. the same day. My phone rang. It was my new dad. His voice was worried as he said, "Come immediately... your mother is sinking." My heart dropped. I rushed out and got into a rickshaw, urging the driver again and again, "Faster... please, faster!" My mind was in prayer. "God, just let me reach her. Let me hold her one last time.

Please let her wait for me." Inside me, the words I had buried for years came rushing out. Mummy, I love you. I'm sorry...for the silence, for holding back my love. From 1982, when Maureen left us, till now...there is so much I wanted to say but couldn't. Just wait...just ten more minutes. But somewhere deep down, I already knew. She had come to me last night, calling my name. Her soul had already reached out to me. They say that when a person is about to leave the world, their spirit visits the one they love the most- to say goodbye, and she came to me. Only me.

When my sister Maureen passed away in the hospital forty-three years back, something strikingly similar had happened the night before.

My mother was suddenly awakened in the middle of the night- startled, shaken- because she heard my sister, Maureen, call out to her. Clear and unmistakable. "Mummy, the way she described it to me the next morning...was exactly how I experienced it. In their final hours, the souls reached out- one last time.

And in that realisation, I forgave her completely, I released her. All the resentment I had carried in my heart for years melted away within moments...and in its place, there was nothing left but pure love for her. As the rickshaw neared her building, my phone rang again. This time, it was my sister -in-law. Her voice was sad as she said the words that shattered me: "Mom is no more." Everything stopped. When my new dad had called me earlier, she had already gone. He just didn't have the courage to tell me. I whispered to myself, "It's finished... Mummy, you wanted to see me one last time- and you did. By coming to me the previous night, you were actually reaching out to me... asking me to come and see you one last time before you left for God's kingdom.

Monday was the last time I saw you. And by Thursday evening, you were gone. And yet, you made sure I came that day. You waited for me...you saw me that afternoon, only then did you let go. And in that, I find a quiet, bittersweet comfort- that you didn't leave without seeing me.

That became my quiet consolation - that in her heart, I was her most precious child. A truth she may not have spoken in life, but revealed in her final moments.

When I reached her building, I ran up the stairs, my leg trembling. And there she was. My mother. Lying peacefully on the bed. Her face looked radiant... calm...as if she were simply asleep. I didn't cry. I couldn't. I just stood there, staring at her- unable to look away- just as I had done earlier, just three hours back when I saw her alive. It felt as though we were speaking to each other silently. Heart to heart. Her body was still warm. I touched her face, her hands, her head, her body- pouring into her all the love that I held back for years. And in that sacred stillness, I knew she could feel it. Our final goodbye was not spoken. It was felt.

In those 79 years of her life, she had journeyed through more than most could ever bear. From her early childhood, when she first began to understand the weight of life, through her youth, to her marriage at just sixteen...her path was never easy. She endured the loss of my father at twenty-plus, with two young girls to raise, the heartbreaking deaths of her daughters, and then stepping into a more difficult second marriage, where she carried the responsibility of raising their two children and working at the same time. Life was her constant struggle- never straight, never simple, always filled with unexpected turns and painful bends. True happiness seemed to elude her.

And then came the final five years of cancer- years marked by deep physical pain and silent suffering. By the time she reached the end of her journey at 79, her passing felt, in many ways, like a release...a gentle lifting of all the burden she had carried for so long- emotionally, mentally, physically, and even financially. She never once broke with her quiet strength.

I often feel that those who endured such profound suffering are, in some way, God's chosen ones- his strongest, most tested souls. Towards the end, she herself longed for peace...for an end to her pain... wishing to leave the world as quickly as possible. And perhaps, in the end, she was finally granted that rest.

I have always been someone who is deeply afraid of going near dead bodies and graves...yet, holding my mother close in that moment did not feel frightening at all- it felt like a blessing, my own.

Late that night, her body was taken to the morgue. The funeral was delayed for four days until my brother could return from sea. I had prepared something for her. I sang "Mother of Mine", a farewell song, I sang in church. I had learned this song in boarding school and often sang it as a child. It was her favourite. As I sang, every note carried my love for her. It felt as though she was listening. Smiling. Just like she used to.

As she lay peacefully in her coffin, beautifully dressed as a bride, right in front of me, my voice trembled with emotions as I began to sing. There was a moment when I choked. My voice caught in my throat. The church had no electricity- there was no keyboard music to guide me, no microphone to carry my voice.

And yet, in all this, I sang from somewhere deep within my heart, and the song felt more beautiful than ever.

As I sang that final tribute to my mother, I could see it in the faces around me- the quiet glistening of tears in so many eyes. Some wept openly, their emotions flowing freely, as if my song had touched something deeply personal within them. Perhaps a few were remembering their own mothers whom they had lost...while others, maybe, were holding their mothers a little closer in their hearts, feeling a renewed love for those still with them. In that moment, the entire church was wrapped in a shared emotion- brief, love, memory- all blended together, touching every soul present.

As people came up to me to offer their condolences, many of them also spoke about my singing- how well I sang and how deeply it had touched them. In the midst of my grief, hearing those kind words moved me in a quiet, comforting way. It felt as though my song had truly reached their hearts, just as it had come from mine.

As there was no electricity in the church, it was hot. Yet no one moved out of the church. Everyone stood there, patiently, honouring her with respect with their presence.

The church was filled beyond what we had ever expected. Nearly 200 people had gathered to say their goodbye- an overwhelming crowd for someone of her age. Usually, such numbers are seen when a young life is lost, despite it being a working day. It spoke volumes about the life she had lived, the heart she had touched. After 42 years, she was reunited with my sister Maureen and my father. She was free. No longer just my mother...But my angel.

CHAPTER 67



STRENGTH IN SILENCE.



This English song "Mother of Mine." was my mom's favourite song, which I sang in church on the day of her funeral as a tribute to her.

I felt so alone. My entire immediate family was far away at the time of my precious loss. Glenn was out at sea, Dalston and Vaishnavi were in New Zealand, and I was left with an empty house to return to. Not a soul within those four walls to comfort me. Yet, in that silence, I found the space to truly discover my feelings. I poured out my heart, crying from the very depths of my soul, releasing years of pain that had been locked inside me. And though I could not see her, I knew she was there... watching me. But she could not come near to embrace me or wipe my tears. We were both helpless- she could see me but could not touch or speak, and I could not see her, though her presence was everywhere around me.

I remember, in the hospital, as I was leaving for home, she said to me, "Love you." It was the first time she had ever said those words. But I could not bring myself to reply. I felt a strange uneasiness, an unfamiliar discomfort. We had never expressed our love in words like that before- not once in a lifetime. I wondered if it had simply slipped out of her mouth unintentionally. I was confused, and in that moment of hesitation, I let it pass...never realising it would be the last time I would hear her say it.

From the time my mother was alive and we came to Mumbai, she became the constant bearer of everyone's frustration. Whether it was my new dad, my siblings, or even me, whatever conflicts arose between us, she was the one who had to endure the consequences. She became the target, the one we turned to instead of resolving matters among ourselves. Rather than dealing with our issues directly, we would involve her, accusing her of taking sides or holding her responsible for a misunderstanding that was never truly hers to bear.

Now things are different. There is a certain silence, a distant peace. Perhaps because we rarely meet, and are all living our separate lives.

The day of the funeral, Sandra called me over to stay the night with her, knowing too well how afraid I was of the nights. And I did go- grateful for her care, but deep inside, I knew I could not lean on her forever. How long could I be running from the silence that waited for me at home? I had to learn to be brave, to stand strong in the darkness. This journey was mine, and it was a lonely one.

I could not be troubling her, no matter how kind her intentions were. I had to face the truth that everyone I loved

was far away, - not just for a little while, but for long stretches that felt endless. Glenn would not return from sea for another five months, and my children were away in New Zealand with no promise of coming back soon. I reminded myself again and again that I could not keep carving sympathy. My friends had families of their own, lives, and responsibilities that I had no right to intrude upon. It would not be fair to press my grief into these daily joys.

So, I taught myself to live with the idea of absence- the ache of people being away, not temporarily, but what felt like forever. I learned to sit with the silence, to walk through it, and somehow grew stronger within it. Far stronger than I ever thought I could be. Not just emotionally, but spiritually too. I have learned to let go of things easily now. I no longer hold grudges. I respect people's feelings in a deeper way. If I sense I do not belong somewhere, I do try my best to fit in. I truly do. But if I am constantly avoided, which rarely happens, I have learned to read those unspoken signals. And when I do, I step back gracefully, respecting the other person's space instead of forcing myself where I am not welcome.

I have also learned the power of humanity. I own up immediately when I feel that I am in the wrong and never go into denial. I know I may be able to fool a human and manipulate them, twisting a situation, and perhaps the other person may even believe it, but can we deny God? No, nothing can be hidden from him.

Human life is uncertain; we may live long, or we may not, for death does not come according to age. With that understanding, I have come to feel that human attachments, while meaningful, are not everything. It is God who remains constant, who stays with us beyond all time.

And so, I believe the true purpose is to please Him. Not merely through rituals, but through the goodness we carry within us.

Sitting in prayer all day while hurting the people around us holds no real meaning. It is better to pray less, if one must, but to live in a way that reflects kindness, compassion, and sincerity. That, to me, is what truly pleases God.

Today, at this stage of my life, I choose peace over people- whether it be family, friends, or my surroundings. There was a time when being avoided would trouble me deeply, leaving me with sleepless nights. But now, it no longer affects me the same way. I have learned to find comfort in my own company, and in that solitude, I have discovered a quiet, steady peace.

Saying "sorry" comes easily to me now. It no longer feels like a battle with my pride the way it once did. I forgive and forget quickly, and refuse to drag out conflicts. Instead, I simply send out my blessings and move forward with peace in my heart. I see no point in ego, no value in carrying an attitude. Life is too short. We live life every day...but death is only once. We are only here for a short while why waste it on bitterness?

First, I had a very bad temper, but now I am a different Audrey- changed, refined, softened, yet made strong at the same time. And this change has come gradually, so slowly and gently that I can witness it within myself, and that is enough...I have nothing to prove to the world but God.

When I sense a shift in someone's behaviour towards me. I do ask, because I believe it is better to bring things into the open than to keep them bottled within.

And then, instead of speaking openly, they put on a distant face- leaving others to guess, to wonder, and to question what the real issue behind such rude behaviour might be. But the response I receive is only the reflection of their own understanding- their own views, opinions, and knowledge. That part is not in my hands.

I believe this transformation in me has come from two things: my spiritual journey and the loss of my mother.

Both have shaped me in ways I never expected. Of course, I do have haters- and who doesn't? No one can be loved by everyone. But even so, I hold no bitterness in my heart. I carry them in my daily prayers, whether they know it or not.

CHAPTER 68



WHEN FEAR TURNED INTO FAITH



**My first stage performance as a singer,
for a Hindi film song.**

There was another miraculous shift after my mother passed away. It did not happen all at once. It came quietly—almost unnoticed at first. But when I finally became aware of it, I was stunned by the beauty of the change within me.

For years, I had lived in fear of the dark. Nights were my greatest challenge. Whether Glenn was home or away, I needed noise, light—something to hold onto. The television would stay on, lights glowing through the night. And only at dawn, around seven, when the world felt safe again,

would I finally switch everything off and sleep. I convinced myself I was simply a "late-night person," but deep down, I knew the truth- it was fear that kept me awake. And then one day everything changed.

After years of the same routine, I found myself turning off the television, switching off the lights, and lying down peacefully with only a small dim light on. No anxiety. No restlessness. Just calm. It felt unbelievable. I could not explain how it happened, but somewhere within me, I already knew the answer. It was my mother. Her blessings, her presence, her love, and her strength had carried me beyond my fear. She was still guiding me, even from above.

With that quiet transformation came another awakening. I began doing things I had always loved but had never made time for. I joined singing classes- a childhood dream I had silently carried for years. I started taking daily walks, determined to complete at least ten thousand steps each day. Slowly, the weight of self- pity began to lift. In its place, I felt something new- a sense of being chosen, protected, one of God's own. Even my prayers changed.

I no longer followed structured rituals or repeated words at fixed hours. Instead, my prayer became a conversation- deeply personal. I spoke more than I prayed. It was no longer confined to mornings or evenings; it flowed through my entire day. I carried God and my angels with me, not as distant figures, but as companions of my soul.

I realised that speaking to God felt far more meaningful than speaking to people. With him- and my angels- I found answers, guidance, and peace. With people, there were opinions. Some offered kindness, some offered advice, and some, unfortunately, took advantage of vulnerability.

That, I learned, could be unsafe. So I began listening to everything- but believing in myself.

I chose to trust the divine voice within me more than the noise around me. That, I discovered, was the safest place to stand.

Then came Twinkle. Sandra's cousin, she entered my life like a spark of faith. She saw something in me that I had long stopped seeing in myself. In a casual conversation, I had once mentioned that I liked singing- not seriously, just a fleeting thought spoken without intention. But she held onto it. One day, she asked me what song I would like to sing. I laughed it out and said, "Maybe, Jai Jai Shiv Shankar- it's peppy and fun." To my surprise, she replied, "Ok. Practice it." Then one day she asked me for a close- up photograph.

I sent it without much thought. A few days later, she sent me a banner for an upcoming musical night- with my name and photography on it. I was stunned. Was she serious?

I immediately told her about my fear- about how uncomfortable I felt performing in front of a large audience. But she remained firm. "Don't worry. You will do it. I'm sure. One hundred per cent." Her confidence shook me. It felt like madness. How could she place so much faith in someone who was not even a trained singer? It felt like she was risking everything- her show, her reputation, her name. What if I failed? What if I disappointed everyone? But Twinkle did not waver. "Nothing doing, " she said. "You will sing."

She even paired me with someone who would boost my confidence- Mr Nayan, an elderly gentleman with a living spirit and a striking resemblance to Prem Chopra, the actor, the villain.

He was energetic, humorous, and full of stage presence. Twinkle believed that with him beside me, I would rise.

Sandra stood by me too, constantly encouraging me. My circle of friends became my strongest support system. They came home, listened to my rehearsals, corrected me patiently, and lifted me every time doubt crept in; without them, I could never have gathered the courage to step onto that stage. And then the day arrived.

It was mid- May- a grand musical night with more than six hundred people in the audience. A large stage. Professional musician. Bright, colourful lights. A professional microphone in my hand. My heart was racing. The song I had chosen was not easy- it was high-pitched, demanding, and risky for someone like me. I was terrified.

But when my name was announced, something extraordinary happened; I felt a presence. My angels. In that moment, courage surged through me like a wave.

I walked onto the stage as though it belonged to me. As the music began and Mr Nayan led the way, I followed. Slowly, all my fear dissolved. I sang, I moved, I danced. My nervousness transformed into rhythm, and I flowed with the music. To my amazement, the audience did not just listen - they joined me.

They clapped, whistled, sang along, and even danced in the aisles. Their energy lifted me higher. I had been advised by the other singers not to make eye contact with the audience, as it could cause nervousness, as it was my first stage performance, so I kept my gaze forward. But soon, I forgot everything. The fear, the instructions of- don't dance and sing at the same time- you might lose your rhythm or forget...it all disappeared. I was no longer just singing; I was

celebrating. It felt surreal- like a dream I never wanted to wake up from.

When the song ended, the hall erupted in applause. The sound echoed through me, filling every space I had once carried. For the first time in a long while, I felt something I had deeply missed. Truly proud of myself.

The other singers came up to me with such warmth and admiration. They said it was hard to believe that this was my first performance- that I had stepped onto the stage and filled it. Along with the entire audience. With such energy and excitement. They shared how, during their own first performance, they had been extremely nervous. And yet, there I was, singing and dancing as if no one was watching, completely lost in the joy of the moment.

They told me that because I enjoyed myself freely, it allowed even the audience to enjoy every moment with me. Even Twinkle, Sandra, my friends and my family were incredibly proud of me. And their belief in me made that moment even more special.

On stage, I took a moment to thank Twinkle and Rupesh, the organisers, for giving someone like me- a non-singer- a chance to perform on such a grand platform. And for believing in me when I struggled to believe in myself. I also expressed how much I missed all my loved ones who couldn't be present.

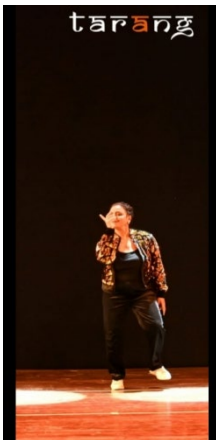
The next day, I visited my mother's resting place. I thanked her. I thanked Maureen, God and my angels for guiding me, protecting me, and making a forgotten dream come alive again. They say the show must go on. Now I understand what that truly means.

It is not age that defines us. It is willpower. It is courage. It is the refusal to give up on ourselves. That night taught me something I will carry forever- it is never too late to live your dreams. And even now, I sometimes wish I could pause that moment... rewind it...and stay there just a little longer.

CHAPTER 69



LOST IN THE MUSIC, FOUND IN THE DANCE



**My first bollywood
dance show on stage.**

After singing, I turned my heart towards my other passion- dancing. Everyone who knows me understands one simple truth: when music plays, my feet move on their own. There is no stopping me. Whether at parties, family functions, or a night out with friends for clubbing, I could dance endlessly, never once feeling tired. Dance was never something I learned- it was something that lived within me.

I used to follow a dancer named Kiran on Instagram, completely mesmerised by his moves. I never missed a single reel. One day, a thought crossed my mind- why not learn from him? Without hesitation, I reached out and enrolled in his classes. The studio Impetus was in Powai, quite far from home, and classes were held only once a week on Sundays for nearly two hours. Still, my excitement knew no bounds.

On the first day, I eagerly scanned the room, hoping to see Kiran. But to my disappointment, he wasn't there. Instead, a kind and patient instructor guided the class. I continued attending, enjoying the sessions, but after two classes, curiosity got the better of me. I approached the reception and asked, "Where is Kiran, sir? He hasn't come." The lady smiled and replied, "He only comes here for workshops."

For a moment, I felt disheartened. But something deep within urged me to stay. The instructor was wonderful, the energy of the class was warm, and the girls there radiated such positivity. Slowly, we became friends- a rare occurrence for me, as I don't easily open up to new people. Perhaps it was destiny, or perhaps angels were quietly guiding me. Either way, I knew there was something special here.

The girls encouraged me to continue, and because of them, I stayed. Eventually, I even attended one of Kiran's workshops, filled with determination and excitement. He was exceptional- so graceful in his movements, every step flowing with effortless elegance. What made him even more admirable was his gentle nature. Soft-spoken and humble, he guided each of us with immense patience, ensuring no one felt left behind. I truly enjoyed every moment of learning from him.

At the end of the session, we even clicked pictures with him. Being such a well-known dancer on Instagram Reels. It felt special to capture that moment. I remember feeling so proud - standing there in the same frame, knowing I had not only learned from him but also performed alongside him. It was a memory I cherished deeply, a little milestone that meant so much to me...he actually conducts his own classes in Andheri East.

Meanwhile, I grew closer to my instructor, Urmila, and the group. One day, during class, Urmila asked, "Who would like to join The Munch- a live stage dance performance?" Without a second thought, my hand shot up.

I had recently experienced the thrill of performing at a musical night, and the excitement still lingered within me.

I wanted more. We began rehearsals at the studio. And I even started taking private lessons at home once a week. As the countdown to the performance began, so did my nervousness. We were a small group of six students, one guy and the rest, females, performing a three - minute dance set to three different song numbers, yet it all flowed seamlessly as one continuous performance in a single take.

I was the eldest among them, while the others were in their thirties. And yet, no one could tell. I blended in so effortlessly that I looked just like one of them, moving in the same rhythm and sharing the same vibrant energy. It was a quiet, beautiful moment of pride- where age faded away, and only passion remained.

I had always been a free-spirited dancer- someone who moved with rhythm, not counts. Now, suddenly, I had to follow steps, stay synchronised, and move to "1-, 2-3-4." It felt restrictive, almost unnatural. There were moments when I wanted to quit. This is not for me; I would sign.

But my friends wouldn't let me give up. They laughed and teased me, saying, "You're doing the same thing you did with singing- claiming you can't do it, and then stealing the show!" They compared me to those students who insist they haven't studied, only to top the exams. Their belief in me carried me forward again this time.

Finally, the big day arrived. The dance show was at St. Andrew's College auditorium, Bandra. As I stepped inside.

I was in awe. Nearly four hundred dancers filled the space. An audience of around eight hundred waited eagerly. The air buzzed with talent, energy, and excitement. Every dance form imaginable was represented- ballet, contemporary, kathak, aerial dance, Bollywood, and more.

We six were part of the beginners' category, while many others performed at advanced levels. Their grace and elegance left me inspired. Our performance was the fourth of the evening, right at the beginning. Backstage, my heart raced. But the moment I stepped onto the stage, everything changed. The fear vanished. Under the bright lights, dressed in a shimmering black and gold costume. I danced, free, alive, and completely in the moment.

The audience clapped, cheered, and whistled. Among the voices, I could hear Sandra and Twinkle seated in the front row, cheering loudly for me. Their encouragement felt like wings beneath my feet. The performance was brief, but beautiful- and deeply appreciated. It was another dream fulfilled, another feather added to my cap.

When it ended, I found myself reflecting on my younger years- on the dreams I once held but never had the chance to pursue. And here I was now singing, dancing, performing. Living proof that it is never too late to follow your passion. But my third bucket list was not about singing and dancing. It was something deeper- it was about discovering myself.

For years, I carried a quiet emptiness within me. I smiled and laughed for the world, but often it felt like I was

wearing a mask. I was a people pleaser, always careful not to upset anyone, always striving to keep others happy.

I measured my words, guarded my actions, and tried endlessly to be someone I wasn't.

I loved bringing people together, creating circles of joy and connection. Yet, only a few rare souls ever saw the real me- the unfiltered, authentic Audrey. With them, the mask disappeared. They are the ones I hold close. The ones I cherish deeply. And if someone becomes a part of my life, they remain there- unless they choose to walk away. Even then, I try to hold on with sincerity. And if it doesn't work, I let go gracefully, without ego, without bitterness.

It was during that phase that I turned to journaling. Writing became my refuge. It allowed me to express what words often couldn't. Through writing, I discovered a part of myself that had long been hidden. I had always felt insufficient as a child. But through writing, I began to see my worth. I made a promise to myself- to value who I am. Because if I couldn't see my own value, how could anyone else?

My friends often praised my writing- my heartfelt messages, my birthday notes, my simple message of love. They say my words carry sincerity. Sometimes, when emotions rise and words feel heavy to be spoken, I turn to writing- even in moments of confrontation. I know I am often teased for writing too much. For letting my thoughts stretch into long, heartfelt notes. But this is where I feel most at ease. This is how I express what truly lives within me.

Writing is a way of showing my honesty. I pour my thoughts out with sincerity, without shortcuts, because

feelings, to me, are never meant to be rushed. I do my part- I say what I need to say, in the only way I know how.

If I matter to you, you will take a moment to read, to understand, to feel what I am trying to share. And if you don't read, it's ok- you can let the words pass by. I leave that choice with you, without expectations. But one thing I know for sure, - I will never stop writing. Because in those words, I find my truth, my peace, and my voice.

And so, one day, a thought emerged- why not write a book? Not for the world, but for myself. A biopic, My story, My journey. I began writing in 2021, after the lockdown. I stopped. My story lay untouched and incomplete for three years. But I remember sharing one page of my writing with Zee, Jyoti and Sandra back in 2021- something I had simply typed on my mobile, on WhatsApp. Just a piece of my heart written in a quiet moment. And yet, when they read it, their reaction stayed with me. They really loved it- felt it, connected with it- until one day, Jyoti published her own book in 2024, which was a pleasant surprise for all of us. Her courage reignited something within me. Inspired, I began once again, returning to my WhatsApp, gently continuing with the story of my biopic- one heartfelt page at a time. I know this might surprise you all... writing on WhatsApp? But yes, that is the truth. On my own WhatsApp number, I quietly kept typing each chapter. Turning simple messages into pieces of my story.

Once again, the first person I shared my writing with was Sandra. She read it and said, "Auds, this is amazing, you must publish it- it will be a best seller!" I dismissed it as a friendly encouragement. But she didn't stop there. I shared my work with others, and soon, friends and relatives began

asking for more. Doubt filled my mind. Who would want to read my story? I am not famous.

I am just an ordinary woman. But I was wrong. Because what touches hearts is not fame- it is truth.

The response overwhelmed me. People who never enjoyed reading couldn't put my pages down. They said they saw themselves in Audrey; some had tears, some smiled, some felt deeply moved. As they turned each chapter, they travelled through many shades of my journey- some filled with sorrow, some with happiness, and others touched with laughter. Each moment carries a different emotion, yet all of them come together to tell one heartfelt story. People kept asking for more, unable to stop.

That's when I realised- every life, no matter how ordinary, has the power to inspire. I had written about the darkest part of my life- things I never thought I would share. Initially, it was just for my own healing. But as it reached others. I understood something important: this was not about them. It was about me. My journey.

Every person who appeared in my story had a role, a purpose. They shaped me, taught me, and helped me grow. I held no bitterness, no anger. I have forgiven them all and wish them all the happiness and peace. Writing became my way of letting go with every page; I moved forward. Now, I tell God, I am ready.

CHAPTER 70



THE RHYTHM I CHOSE.



Learning Drumming, and sung my first music cover at the recording studio, "Nothing's Gonna Change My Love For You. on YouTube.

After a long gap. In January 2026, a sudden and surprising thought crossed my mind- I wanted to learn a musical instrument. And not just any instrument...I chose the drums. As expected, my family reacted exactly as most

would. They thought I had completely lost it. "Drums?" They said, "That's one of the hardest instruments...and how many women do you ever see playing it?" Their doubts were loud, but my determination was louder. Something inside me had already decided- this was happening.

I turned to Google, did a little homework, checked reviews and ratings, and finally found a drumming class in Goregaon East. By the name of "Soulful Musik Academy." With curiosity and quiet excitement, I went to meet the owner, Shreyash Sir. We spoke at length. He asked me about my background, my intentions, and whether I wanted to pursue drumming as a hobby or a career. I told him honestly- it was just for myself, for joy.

He seemed genuinely surprised and impressed by my enthusiasm. When I shared snippets of my journey- working at Adlabs as a feature film negative editor, performing on stage, and even writing a book- his reaction was a simple but heartfelt "wow." In that moment, I felt seen.

He asked his manager to show me around the academy, and as I walked through, I felt like I had entered a sacred space. Instruments were everywhere- bass guitars, drums, saxophone, keyboard, tabla, piano, sitar, harmonium, flute, and so many more. The room had a certain energy-peaceful, uplifting, almost divine. It truly felt like the presence of the Music Goddess Saraswati herself.

What touched me even more was the openness of the place. Sir told me I wasn't restricted to just drums- if I ever wished to explore other instruments, I was free to do so. The academy was open from 7 in the morning till 10 at night, all week. I could come in anytime, stay as long as I wanted, and learn at my own pace.

That kind of freedom felt rare and beautiful. With a happy heart, I enrolled for the year and began my journey.

But then came the one major hurdle- travel. Getting to Goregaon East was manageable, but coming back home became a real challenge. After 5.30 p.m., the area turned chaotic with office rush, and finding transport was exhausting. There were days I stood outside the building for over an hour just waiting for an auto. Sometimes, not even an Uber was available. Slowly, the thought of that long, uncertain wait started draining my motivation.

It wasn't the class, it wasn't the people. In fact, the staff was warm and welcoming, and my young instructor was one of the most humble souls I had met. He would gently remind me, "Ma'am, try to attend at least twice a week... consistency will help you learn faster and better."

But life, as always, brought its own rhythm. Around the same time, my husband came home from the ship on vacation. Naturally, I slipped into a different mode- going out, spending time, living in the moment. Still, somewhere deep inside, I know this is not the end of my drumming journey. It's just a pause. But I will return more disciplined and ready to commit. Not just twice, but at least three times a week.

In the academy, there is also a recording studio, and since I can sing fairly well, a new idea began to take shape in my mind- why not record an English music cover and upload it on YouTube? I often find myself thinking of ways to do something meaningful, something different, something big. So, I met my Sir and shared my desire to sing. To my delight, he immediately encouraged me and said I

could begin recording whenever I felt ready, after practising a song of my choice.

My Sir is not only an excellent mentor but also a remarkably talented singer. He has recorded many Hindi song albums, including film songs as well as soulful spiritual ones. Beyond his singing, he is incredibly versatile- he can play all the musical instruments available in his academy with great skill, which makes learning from him an even more inspiring experience.

Earlier, in February 2026, it was my friend Sandra's silver jubilee celebration. I wanted to surprise her with a special performance, so I chose to sing one of her and Bryan's favourite romantic classics, "Nothing's Gonna Change My Love For You". I practice the song using karaoke, singing along with just the background music. Since there was no live band at the celebration, only a DJ, I sent my track in advance to the DJ, so it could be played while I performed

The celebration was held at St. Arnold's Lawn, Andheri East, with a crowd of over 200 guests. I was the first to perform, before the dance performances by her family and friends. As I stepped onto the stage, people cheered my name, shouting, "Come on, Audrey, rock the stage!" Although I wasn't entirely comfortable with the karaoke sound quality, I sang with confidence. I even found myself dancing to the slow love song- something unusual, but completely me. The applause, whistles, and energy from the guests lifted my spirit, and by the end, everyone appreciated my performance. Most importantly, Sandra and Bryan were deeply touched by my gesture, which meant the world to me.

Later, when Glenn watched the video of my performance, he jokingly said that I had turned a love song into a hip-hop performance just by adding my own dance moves. His comment made me laugh- it was so typical of me to bring my own unique twist to something so classic.

Since I had already memorised the song and I knew it was loved by many across the globe, I felt it was the perfect choice for my recording. I fixed the date and began the process. Live recording was quite different- it required precision in every note, rhythm, and tone, especially while singing along with the keyboard playing. It took nearly twenty takes, but finally, I got it right. The final version sounded clear and sharp. After editing, the manager sent me the track via WhatsApp and email after a few days.

We then uploaded it to YouTube, creating my own channel. I shared the link with all my personal contacts on WhatsApp. I did not actively promote or showcase my video on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or even through status updates.

The entire reach and response came purely through sharing it on WhatsApp. And the response was overwhelming. Within less than a month, I received 101 comments, 865 views, 177 likes, and 139 shares. For someone who is not formally trained in singing, that kind of appreciation felt truly incredible. Everyone was proud of me, and I felt like God, my mom, Maureen, and my angels must have been smiling down, proud and happy. My hard work had paid off- I had finally made my place on YouTube, a platform I spend so much time on watching inspiring and positive content. And now, I was a part of it too. Now Glenn often asks me, "What's next on your bucket list? What's left to achieve?" I just smile and laugh, and say. "Wait...let me think."

CHAPTER 71



FRIENDS WHO FEEL LIKE HOME



**Pictures with my Girl gang, and Couple groups.
"Hum tum" and "Malad to Nebo."**

I have had many friends, but only a handful with whom I share a deep. Daily connection. These are the ones who truly want to be a part of my life- the ones who call just to check on me, message to ask "what's up? and causally say,

"Let's do something tomorrow." We don't wait for weekends; we meet whenever we miss each other. Just being together refreshes our minds and relaxes our hearts.

With them around, life feels light and joyful. We laugh for no reason, dance without needing an occasion, play games and pranks, and even shout in mock frustration when we lose. We indulge in harmless gossip, make grand plans for holidays that may never happen, click many funny photos and silly selfies, and later delete them because our gallery is full. These little, seemingly ordinary moments are what make our friendship so special.

We formed a close-knit group of five two years ago. Lovingly known as the Hum-, Tum gang. Together once in a while, we enjoy dinners, plan getaways to a friend's Banglow, and take turns hosting at each other's homes. Every gathering leaves us with beautiful memories to cherish. Our husbands are just as wonderful and supportive, caring and full of life. They encourage us to enjoy ourselves and have fun. And the guys, they get along with each other effortlessly, like a house on fire. Their presence adds even more warmth and strength to our bond.

Alongside this, we have our girl gang of nine. We make it a point to celebrate each other's birthdays without fail...the birthday girl, being the host, chooses the restaurant. And almost everyone tries to be present. Each friend brings something unique to the group.

I have known most of my friends for the longest time, and with all of them, my comfort level is absolutely 100%. More than just friendship, it is family. I truly feel blessed to have each one of them in my journey. May we celebrate life now and forever together.

It has been one year and nearly four months since my mother passed away. I still miss her deeply. But I know she, along with my father and sisters, is watching over me, blessing me from above. Now, I find myself the only one left from what was once a family of five. At times, that truth feels heavy. Leaving behind a quiet emptiness- a feeling I can only describe as being orphaned. And yet, life continues to move forward. In the midst of all this loss, God has blessed me in the most beautiful way- with a loving husband, a wonderful son, and a caring daughter-in-law Vaishnavi. Their presence fills my life with warmth. And through them, I am reminded that while some chapters close, new bonds are gifted to us, keeping our hearts full in ways we never imagined.

You never really know when the final goodbye is; there's no warning, no pause in time, no quiet voice whispering, "Pay attention...this is your last time, sometimes it is just a silly comment, a passing question, a small gesture. No one ever thinks, "This moment will be our last." How could you know? If you're lucky, you might hear a "Be safe," a "Stay warm," a "Take care," or even "I love you." And when they're gone, we repeat that moment again and again. We search the past, trying to feel their presence. Where their voice hasn't faded, because memory becomes the only place where they still exist in real time. There's nothing unusual about that. But over time, something shifts; that ordinary moment becomes sacred. And maybe that's the quiet truth we learn too late.

To all those whose names may not appear on these pages, but whose presence quietly shaped my journey - this is for you. Not every hand that held me, not every heart that understood me, could be written into words. But please know, you were felt. Deeply Truly. You were the moments

that mattered- in silent support, in unseen strength. This book may not hold your name, but my heart does. And that is where your place will always be. Thank you...for being a part of me. God bless each one of you abundantly.

To my readers. I say this with all my heart- if anything I have written has caused discomfort, forgive me. This story is not about anyone else. It is about me. It is not written to gain sympathy. My life has been blessed. And even if one part of my journey inspires someone to see life differently, then I have fulfilled my purpose. Life is beautiful- it all depends on how we choose to see it.

Take one day at a time. Share your smile- it may heal someone. Laugh freely. Love deeply. And always remember, angels walk beside you.

You may find your mind wandering while you pray, drifting away despite your efforts- remember no one is perfect in prayer, but gently bring yourself back, even if it takes twenty attempts. Do not be disheartened. God has not gone anywhere; he is always present, patiently waiting. It is we who must return to Him, again and again. And in that return lies something beautiful- because every time you come back, with sincerity and faith, He embraces you with even more love and blessings.

And so, now my bucket list lives on. My story is now written. My journey is now told. I'm ready to turn the page. A new chapter awaits. A new Audrey begins. This is not goodbye. It is only a pause. A beautiful life after all is a bliss and a beautiful gift....