

I Have Experienced Your Suffering



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**Inspired by the teachings of
Param Puja Dada Bhagwan**

I Have Experienced Your Suffering

Disclaimer

In today's world, the more one becomes involved in technology, the more he loses his inner peace.

The cumulative effects of adolescence, personal goals and ambitions, parental as well as peer pressure, a fast-paced life forces one to grow up faster than any other generation that came before and the abundance of social media; results in teenagers oscillating between happiness and sorrow, ultimately ending their journey in depression.

This novel describes this whole journey in detail. At the very same time, it shows the reader ways to overcome this depression along with providing many other words of wisdom.

Param Pujya Dadashri always used to say that sufferings are only due to a lack of right understanding. This novel describes this right understanding, which will help teenagers and youth alike, navigate the current predicaments they face in their life.

In this novel, effort has been made to elaborate upon the right vision, given by Param Pujya Dadashri, that is, to convey His intention at the level of teenagers. Otherwise, for Pujya Dadashri's exact understanding, readers should refer only to Dadashri's books.

(1)

It was sweltering outside. Not just human beings, but even the silent animals wished that it would rain soon, so that they could get relief from this unrelenting heat. The sky above was covered in clouds. Everyone was fed up of the humidity. Yes, I was too. Yet, there was so much peace in my mind and a coolness arising from the internal stability within me. I was alone in my room, just like I was in my life. But no more, I had cried enough on my own! I had now started to enjoy my own company.

My study table was arranged near the window in my room. Carefully placed on this table was my diary containing memories depicting my life's experiences. The pages in this diary had kept an account of all the good and bad moments of my life. One could easily say it contained only bad occasions since I didn't have any good ones. But now, a new chapter in this diary was about to begin; and that too, in your presence.

Suddenly a cool breeze came through the window. I felt it on my whole body including my head. I calmly touched my head. Today, I felt composed and at peace. There was no feeling of suffering or inferiority within me. Up until today, just by being a complainer, I had despised myself and God's justice many times with hatred, disappointment and anger.

You must be wondering who I am?

I am Samyukta...

Your very own friend...

Your very own shadow...

You will inconspicuously see me somewhere in yourself ...

Perhaps you don't recognize me and so you aren't able to recognize my hidden image within yourself.

You and I, lost in various facets of life by trivial misunderstandings, punish our lips and eyes by preventing them to laugh freely without any reason. Today, I realize that after obtaining a new vision, I laugh and live freely.

The gusts of wind coming into the room from the window started to increase in speed. The pages of my diary began to turn. My eyes fell upon a creased page and my fingers stopped the page from turning over. My thoughts drifted to those old memories scribbled on the open page lying in front of me.

Yes, I remember why the color of the red line on the page was smudged and why the page was creased. Today, this page, written hurriedly in bad handwriting, was narrating my history ...

'It was raining very heavily when I came back from school today. All my so-called friends were soaked to the bone. Since we were all already so wet, we decided to go up onto the terrace and enjoy ourselves in the pouring rain. I loved getting wet when it rained. I joined my friends up there.

"Come on Samyukta, isn't it so much fun over here?"

"Yeah," I said shyly, like every other time.

“Let’s all play Antakshari*.”

“Antakshari in the rain! Yippee! Wow, good idea,” Shweta enthusiastically shouted.

Shweta, Neha, Krishna and I, split up into two teams of two.

“Yahoo... It doesn’t matter whether someone calls me wild...”
Upon starting the song, Shweta jumped into a puddle of rainwater. Seeing her, we all followed suit and started splashing around in the rain.

“Oh uncle... oh uncle... oh...” the game continued with songs from different movies. As we sang the songs, we enacted them and were having so much fun. It was like we were on top of the world! It was like I had forgotten my shyness and restraint.

After ten to fifteen minutes Neha started, *“These silken tresses... these intoxicating eyes...”*

That was it...my true facts... my reality... my glumness had taken away all my happiness in a split second. My face had become pale. I felt embarrassed seeing my friends playing with their lovely hair. I started to become jealous of all of them. I thought of going home right away, but my legs wouldn’t move a muscle.

“Samyukta... come on, it’s your turn now, sing a song...,” Krishna shook me.

I didn’t even realize when the song was over and which letter we had stopped on. I remained quiet because if I had tried to speak then I might have cried. After gathering my courage, all I managed to feebly utter was, “I am feeling cold. I am going home.”

I quickly ran down the staircase and reached home. I went into

my room and sat on the chair. I was feeling very angry. My mind was filled with hatred and contempt for myself. My eyes were overflowing with water like the rainfall outside. I opened my diary and with tearful eyes, jotted down the pain I felt from this incident. The diary's page became wet from my falling tears, my wet and shaking hands and my perplexed mind. The handwriting was very messy.

Today, this creased and faded page made that whole incident come back to life again.

However, there was a world of difference between my past and my present. Due to my inferiority complex, I had sacrificed many of my life's happy moments to the burning fire of sorrow and suffering. My entire childhood and the beginning of my youth were spent in sadness. The hope to live life had also kept diminishing, as I grew older. I had become more and more a victim of disappointment.

But now I want to relive all those moments, which may not be possible. For the first time in years, I am waiting for the rain to fall. Without restraint, I want to soak and dance in it like a peacock.

Ever since I met with a rare superhuman, it is as if my life has completely changed. He has given me a new life, a new vision. Just tasting two drops of His love and compassion have made me content. And yet, the greed of how I can get more and more of it becomes stronger. Now my mind wanders away from myself and runs to Him. And why wouldn't it? He was the one who had given me a taste of the happiness that I had longed for and that had never let me sleep in peace before.

There are many people who fly high in this world on the strength of money, fame, intellect or their unique skills. And if we talk about women, the very first thing on everyone's mind is their looks. At the very first sight, people judge her by her appearance. Then it

is her intellect that is considered and perhaps only a few people value a woman's virtues.

However, not even one of these qualities was unique within me. I was ordinary then, and even now, I am still ordinary. If we talk about the intellect and the other virtues, then actually my intellect was wasted in irritation and negativity. And, I was not able to develop my virtues because my mind-intellect-chit*-ego complex was always lost in the internal turmoil of how to live a peaceful life and how to muster the courage to face people. Due to this, whatever good qualities I possessed, they didn't account for much. New bad virtues arose every day. So, what was left? My appearance; which I have always felt negative about. For the first time today, I found my outer looks insignificant.

Suddenly, Ronak burst into the room and broke my chain of thoughts...

"Hey sis, do you want to go watch a play today?"

"Yeah, let's go. What time are we going?"

"Wow, what's up today? You answered right away without a moment's hesitation?"

"Yes. I will not say no to you today. I definitely want to go."

"Excellent... the show is at six, be ready by quarter past five."

"Ok. Done," I said as I high fived him.

My younger brother Ronak... he always tried to come up with new ways to make me happy. And I always thwarted his every effort. I didn't wish to disappoint him, but I would have so much discontent within myself, that I had lost the ability of thinking about or even

understanding someone else's feelings and emotions. How can a person who is constantly just lost within, who is sad and depressed, make anyone else happy?

The time on the clock was four-thirty. I got up to get ready. I quietly wore a pair of blue jeans and put on a white t-shirt. I washed my face. I put my wallet and mobile phone in a small sling bag. Standing in front of the mirror, I gave myself a nice confident smile.

To see myself smiling in the mirror was very difficult for me, until now. I was afraid that the mirror would make fun of me. But today, I was prevailing in a silent peace within. Everything was quiet. There were no thoughts in my mind. I was just experiencing a different type of bliss and self-confidence. Now, I was almost ready to face the world within me, and the one outside.

Ronak called out, "Sis, we will leave in ten minutes, be ready."

"Yes, I am ready," I answered back.

Once again, I stood in front of the mirror. Even in the past, whenever I had to go out somewhere, I had the habit of going and standing in front of the mirror. This place has always been painful for me. A big crack in the mirror and the part without the glass dragged me into my past

It was mom's birthday. Dad had bought tickets to a play. After seeing the play, we were going to go for dinner at a nice restaurant. But even today, mom was dressed in that very simple sari.

Grandma said, "Rashmi, wear some nice clothes today for a change!"

"These are actually really nice," Mom's eyes were struggling to convince her.

Ronak had gone out to play with his friends. He came running home and quickly got ready. He was very excited because we rarely go out or go to restaurants. He always had a habit of fixing his hair four, five times before leaving the house. He took some hair gel from the counter near the sink, applied it on his disheveled hair and rushed into my room.

“Hey! What have you been doing in front of the mirror for so long? Let me get ready. Move from here,” He pushed me jokingly.

My depressive mind lost it, “What do you think of yourself? I will not budge from here.”

“Why do you need to get ready so much?” Now he lost his temper too.

“Who are you to tell me anything?” My weaknesses changed to anger and I started to explode on the outside.

“You’re bald for one, and you are being so arrogant!” Ronak’s ego also exploded.

Instead of him putting pressure on my painful nerves, I felt as if he had completely severed them. There was a paperweight on the table next to me. I was blinded by rage. I picked up the paperweight. I did think of slapping him for a brief moment, but the quarrel was over the mirror, so I threw the paperweight at the mirror instead. The glass broke with a loud sound; there were a few cracks in the mirror and some pieces of the mirror fell on the floor. Upon hearing the loud noise, everyone gathered in the room. No one said anything to me. Everyone got angry at Ronak. Although I could see both anger and compassion in my dad’s eyes for me, due to grandma and mom’s presence he cooled down a bit. Mom picked up the pieces of broken mirror with teary eyes. Tiny shattered pieces of glass were spread across the room.

I broke the mirror and Ronak had broken my heart.

Shards of the mirror had spread across the room and fragments of inferiority and triviality spread across my mind. It was like it had pierced my heart.

All the bitter incidences that had happened in my life; I was indeed a victim of them, but I didn't even let my parents live in peace. Along with me, they too would feel the same degree of pain I did.

The plan to go out was immediately cancelled and my grandma quietly went to her room. Ronak went to the room outside and sat down as he turned on the TV. Mom went back to the kitchen and pretended to work, as she couldn't say anything to me at that moment. If she had, then my anger would have been too much for her to bear. That's why she would calm me down after a little while, with her love and care. My hands and legs were still shaking with anger. Dad tore the tickets for the play and threw them in the garbage. He gently stroked my head with his hand and left without saying a word. Finally, mom's birthday was celebrated with khichdi*.

Poor mom... she always became distressed because of me. I would also forget everything and focus only on myself. And that is indeed why I couldn't comprehend anyone else's pain. How would one think about saving others, when he himself, was drowning?

“Sis... Come on now, we will be late,” Ronak came into the room and I returned back to the present.

(2)

We reached the performance theater in twenty minutes. People would stare at me like I was some sort of an alien. Ronak and I passed everyone and moved ahead.

“Ronak, will you have popcorn?”

“Yes, I will go and get it,” Ronak said as he tried to move ahead.

“I will go and get it today,” I grabbed his hand and stopped him.

He was surprised. He didn’t say anything, but his happiness was visible in his eyes. Two ladies stood in the queue behind me for popcorn. They commented about me under their breath.

“Hey, look at her, her hair is so ugly!”

“You can’t even tell if she has hair or not.”

“Maybe she has some illness.” Suddenly, the mind of one of the ladies filled with compassion. Now the other lady also stopped talking. It was not new for me to hear and endure such mean comments. But today I accepted their harsh words without feeling hurt.

“Ma’am, you dropped your handkerchief,” I told them as I left.

“Oh, thank you,” she expressed her gratitude.

The play was nice. It was actually very funny. I laughed a lot. Slowly, the entire crowd came out of the theatre. Through the muffled clatter, I heard a familiar voice.

“Samyukta....”

I turned around and saw my classmate, Ishita, standing there.

“Hi! How are you?” I extended my hand.

“Fine, how are you?” She held my hand with astonishment.

“I am doing great.”

“What’s up with you?”

“All is well. You tell me,” I spoke with her earnestly today.

When I was in high school, Ishita was the most beautiful girl in my class. Not just her face, but her hair was really beautiful as well. The teachers in my school would often ask her, what hair products she used. She would feel proud of her tresses. Other girls felt pride in being her friend, and it didn’t make a difference if they were jealous of her or not.

Due to her good looks, she used to be arrogant. I rarely spoke to her. Whenever I saw her, I would feel more ashamed of myself. I would feel inferior, so I always kept my distance from her.

Once, in the sixth standard, a play was to be performed on stage. Everyone was very excited to take part in it. I also had a lot of ambitions, but I was hesitant to admit them. When all the girls would get together in a group and discuss the play, I would listen

to all their discussions carefully while standing far away from them. The play was about the generation gap between the younger and older generation. There were five characters in total. One of the characters was that of an old woman. Everyone was in the mood to joke around.

“Hey Anjali, only I will play the character of that young girl,” Swati proclaimed confidently.

“Oh come on, you will actually look good just in her mother’s role,” Anjali responded.

“I think that only Ishita will get that role,” Ishita’s follower Nisha, quickly piped in. Nisha was always first to follow Ishita around and be the ‘yes’ girl in their group. Everyone secretly used to call her Ishita’s sidekick. It was as though she had no existence of her own.

“I think Nisha is right. The teacher will only select Ishita,” Rehana agreed too.

“Ok, then that role is out of my league,” Swati frowned as she looked at Anjali in dismay.

“We will end up playing the roles of the mom and dad indeed.” Everyone laughed out loudly at Anjali’s comment. Ishita kept quiet as she was floating on cloud nine. Her nostrils flared up with pride.

“Now there are only two more roles left to fill. One is of the young girl’s brother and the second is of her grandma,” Priya continued the conversation.

“It would be good if Sana takes the brother’s role because her hair is cut short like a boy,” Anjali showed her wisdom again.

“And who will be the grandma?” Swati inquired.

“No one is interested in that,” Rehana said.

“But someone has to do it, right?” remarked Priya.

“I have an idea,” Ishita directed everyone’s attention towards me and hinted at something. I didn’t follow her cue. Everyone started laughing loudly.

“Wow Ishita, your idea is super!” How can Nisha remain silent if Ishita says something?

“Oh come on, forget it!” Priya said on a serious note.

“Let’s ask her at least,” Nisha blurted out loudly.

“In any case a white hair wig needs to be worn. So, it will fit her perfectly,” Ishita’s response overflowed with a lot of ego.

“Samyukta, do you want to be in the drama?” Nisha shouted as she asked me.

“No.” She didn’t know that I had overheard their entire conversation. I was completely shattered. I broke down. I started to hate Ishita considerably. I never imagined that one day I would be made fun of like this. I became a laughing stock. My eyes welled up but I didn’t want to cry in front of everyone so I rushed towards the bathroom. But, I actually ended up crying on the way there. I turned on the tap and while washing my face, I tried to hide my tears from the other girls; but my eyes were swollen and red. It was not possible for me to face anyone for the remainder of that day. Keeping my head down, I went back to class; I took my diary and went towards the staff room.

“Akshita ma’am,” I quietly called out to the class teacher.

“Tell me, Samyukta.”

“I am not feeling well. Please can you give me permission to go home?”

“What’s wrong with you? Have you been crying?” Akshita ma’am questioned.

“Yes ma’am, my stomach really hurts. It’s unbearable.” I looked down as I made an excuse. “If you allow, then I can call my dad to come pick me up.”

“Yes, let me sign the permission slip in your diary.” Without asking any further questions, Akshita ma’am let me go home. I was indebted to her because if I had tried to say anything more, I would not have been able to stop my tears.

“Thank you ma’am,” I reluctantly tried to smile.

I called my dad from the school’s office. At the school gate I showed the permission slip that Akshita ma’am had signed and left with my dad on his scooter.

“Come dear, let me take you to the doctor first,” Dad said in a concerned tone.

“No, I want to go home.”

“But dear, if you get some medicine then you will feel much better.”

“I told you Dad, didn’t I? I want to go home. I don’t need to visit a doctor right now,” I replied haughtily.

“Ok, as you wish.” Perhaps, he had understood that I had lied and

left, so without saying anything further, he took me straight home.

“Samyukta...,” Ishita shook me, bringing me back to the present.

“Oh...,” I realized that I was standing in the theatre hall. Her action had broken my chain of thoughts.

“Are you in touch with anyone from school?” Ishita asked.

“No, but we should keep in touch from now on.”

“Give me your cell phone number.” A girl like Ishita, was asking for a phone number from a person like me?! I was extremely surprised, but without thinking about it too much, I gave her my number. Ishita in turn gave me hers.

“Ok, we’ll meet up sometime.” Without having anything else to say, I felt it wise to say goodbye to her.

“Yes, sure, we will meet up.”

“Ok. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Although Ishita had said bye, I felt she still had something to say. So, I lingered in front of her for a minute more.

“You have changed a lot,” Ishita remarked observing me more closely.

“Really? Do you think so?” I was interested to know her thoughts.

“Yeah, you look happy and confident.”

“You are right.”

“It feels good meeting you after so many years.” I was just as surprised to see the once arrogant Ishita speak to me in this way, just as Ishita was at seeing me happy.

“Sis, can we go now?” Ronak called out.

Almost everyone had left the theatre hall. Ishita and I were so engrossed in the feeling of astonishment from seeing each other, that we had lost track of time. In any case when two girls meet up, the conversations are bound to be lengthy. And now, I too have started to interact more freely with everyone. The Samyukta before, did not mix much with anyone. As for Ishita, she befriended certain girls only. But today, that seemed to have changed as well.

“Sis,” Ronak called out again.

“Yes, I am coming.”

“Ok, bye Ishita. We will talk later on the phone.”

“Yes, I will call you,” I gave her a smile and we both parted ways.

(3)

I came out onto the road and stood in one corner. Ronak came with his motorbike. As soon as I was about to sit on the bike ...

“Hooray!” ... I heard a loud noise.

I turned around and saw my school friend, Mit standing behind me.

“Hi!” I got off the bike. “Looks like today, is classmates’ day.”

“Why?”

“I just met Ishita and now you!”

“Now it’s going to be another fifteen to twenty minutes for sure,” Ronak muttered under his breath. But even he was looking at the change in me with a mixed feeling of happiness and bewilderment. Today, he enjoyed observing his older sister behave differently.

“How are you?” Mit looked at me in astonishment.

“Fine, how are you?” My face was beaming with happiness.

“I am cool, as always,” Mit said shrugging his shoulders and moving his head, in his unique style.

“Yes... yes... yes... you are still the same.”

“Of course, you have to stay the same. How are you doing?” Years ago back in school; Mit would ask me this very question in the same tone, especially when I would be feeling down.

“Yes, I am telling the truth. I am fine.” I gave him an honest answer today. Other boys in school looked at me with hatred and ridicule. But Mit was different from them all. I never felt such a thing with him. On the contrary, with his pointless stories, he would make me laugh and I would forget my sorrows.

“Where are you lost now?”

“No, no, I just remembered our old school days from years ago.”

“Upon seeing me, any great and mighty one would recall everything.”

“You are still so rocking.”

“This is actually my inherent gift.”

“I know, in debating with you, I can never win.”

“What else is going on with you?”

“I just graduated.”

“Ok. Nice. Where have you been hiding these past two years?” Mit jokingly asked.

“I took a break for two years. What are you doing?”

“I did my B dot Com and now I have started a course in Life Living with Burden.”

“What’s that?”

“That means I am doing L dot L dot B,” Mit replied reluctantly.

“What? You and LLB!? I can’t believe it,” I was so surprised.

“Oh, forget it. Dad towed my life’s car and put it in the LLB compound,” He said unwillingly, but with laughter.

“Ha ha ha... you are very funny.”

“Hey, I am happy because I am funny. Otherwise with this LLB, a person like me would forget how to laugh and how to live.”

“Hmmm...” I didn’t know what to say.

“Now what are your future plans?”

“Fine Arts.”

“Nice. Give me your contact number and stay in touch.”

“Yes, of course.” We exchanged our phone numbers and then parted ways.

On the way back, I started to remember my school days. Ronak’s motorbike moved seamlessly through the traffic.

“Sis was that Mit?”

“Yes, do you remember him?”

“Yes, I liked his personality from the beginning.”

“He is very straightforward.”

“He is still a very cool guy.”

“Yes, he would come to school many times without having done his homework, but it would not take him long to coax the teacher.”

Ronak and I attended the same school. So he knew some of my classmates very well.

Mom had kept dinner ready when we reached home. After finishing my meal, I went to my room. To pass some time, I opened Facebook on my phone. Someone had shared a Gujarati joke. It read, *‘A person who laughs will settle down in a conflict free family life ... but what about all the crying he will have to endure after starting the family life?!’* I laughed after reading the joke. My thoughts drifted to Mit. I remember he had once asked me...

“Samyukta, why are you always in such a serious mood?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t have an answer to his question.

“Life is not to be wasted like this.”

“Life is not to be lived like that either.” I didn’t want to tell him about my agony, yet my uneasiness came across rather clearly.

“Hey, you are talking like a big pessimist.”

“You won’t understand. Forget it.” I didn’t have any interest in continuing this conversation with Mit.

“Your face looks sullen. Is it because we are getting our results today?” Mit speculated.

“No, I don’t care about that right now.”

“Wow, amazing. It looks like I am rubbing off on you.”

“I am not in the mood, please...” Mit’s sympathy had no effect on me, at that time.

I knew that he was putting in a lot of effort to calm me down. Not just me, but he would certainly try to cheer up anyone in class that he felt was sad. He had never learnt to take on tension in his life.

“Good, but can I tell you one last thing?”

“Tell me,” I said without looking at him.

“Have you heard that saying?”

“What’s that saying?” I wanted to finish the conversation quickly.

“Oh, you know there’s that proverb in Gujarati?”

“???” I didn’t respond, but looked at him quizzically.

“The one who speaks will be heard, and the one who laughs will settle down in a conflict free family life.

“Yes, so?”

“Oh! I have also invented one.”

“Ok.”

“I will tell you if it will be helpful to you.”

“Yes, tell me.”

“The one who speaks will be heard, but the one who smiles will sell the world.”

“Nonsense!” Now I could not tolerate his jokes any longer.

Nevertheless, he was as calm and joyous as ever. I think he had a soft corner for me somewhere.

“What do you mean by nonsense?!”

“Then, is that a very sensible thing? Are you going to sell the world by smiling?”

“It means that you can sell all the suffering and difficulties of the world by smiling.”

“To who?”

“To the one, who made you suffer!”

“Good.” My mind was not working at that time. I had intense acid reflux from the medicine that I had taken in the morning.

“Please, Mit, don’t feel bad. I don’t want to hurt you, but right now I want to be alone for some time.”

“No problem.”

Mit left quietly. Recess finished and after three classes, the school day was over.

‘One has to speak up to get things done, but the one who smiles can sell the world.’ He had said this in his humorous style on that day; I recollected that today again after reading the joke on Facebook.

“Samyukta, grandma is calling you,” Mom said as she came into my room and broke my chain of thoughts.

“Ok.”

I went to see my grandma.

“Look dear, I have brought an ointment from that doctor for you. Come; let me apply it on your head.”

“It’s ok grandma, I don’t need all this now.”

“Why dear?” Grandma asked surprised.

“Grandma, after doing all this for all these years it is has not been so beneficial. It is too much now,” I replied with composure.

“This is in fact made from special herbs.” Grandma’s feelings and affection were evident in her words.

“Grandma, can I tell you something?” I said as I sat down beside her and gently held her hand.

“Tell me Sanyu.” Grandma affectionately called me ‘Sanyu.’

“Now I want to stay exactly the way I am,” I said firmly.

“But dear...,” Grandma still could not believe that a girl, who once made a fuss about applying ointments like these, is speaking in this manner.

“I am telling you the truth, grandma,” I said as I squeezed her hand and reassured her.

From the day I grew up, the consciousness about my looks kept increasing. I was prepared to make any sacrifice for it, in whatever way possible. Until now I had consulted ten to fifteen allopathic and homeopathic doctors and eight or nine ayurvedic doctors. I had undoubtedly tried countless different medicines, herbal medicines, oils, shampoos. I had tried everything. I drank countless types of decoctions that would make one vomit. My body was still suffering from the side effects of these medicines, even today. There were dark circles under my eyes from all the years of experimenting. Many hormonal changes have taken place. My nature had also become irritable.

In all this, there was one such person that came into my life, who helped me see the true identity of my existence; who changed the entire purpose of my life. This could indeed be the result of the tremendous merit karma of some other lifetime. I still face the consequences of the past effects sometimes, but my mind becomes peaceful very quickly.

Just like that a few days went by. One day, all of a sudden, the phone rang.

“Hello...”

“Hi... Samyukta. How are you, madam?”

“Hi Mit.”

“What happened? Why is your voice weak?”

“No, no. It’s just like that.”

“Hey, come on... just chill like me.”

“Yes, yes, even I chill sometimes.”

“Really? What a change.”

“Yes.”

“Great.”

“Tell me, how come you remembered me?”

“It’s because you don’t remember me anymore.”

“Ha... ha... ha...” I started laughing.

“I need a favor from you.”

“A favor? What is it?”

“Can you come to my house to meet me?”

“To your home?” I asked hesitantly. Actually, Mit is a good person. But after so many years, I didn’t think it appropriate to go meet him at his house.

“I can understand that you might feel odd.”

“If it’s possible, then you can come to my house,” I said.

“Actually... It’s something personal, but I feel like I should share it with you.”

“Yes, go ahead.” I had never seen Mit acting like this before.

“Since I met you a few days ago and the change that I have seen in you, from that moment on, I cannot get you out of my mind.”

“Mit, why do you have to sound so mysterious? Please, whatever it is that you have to say, say it clearly,” I blurted out.

“Do you remember Miraj?”

“Yes, how can anyone forget him? How is he?” Miraj was Mit’s younger brother. Whenever I went to Mit’s house, I really liked playing with little Miraj.

“Yes, I have called particularly for him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Right now Miraj is, well I wouldn’t say completely in depression but, on the verge of depression.”

“Oh!”

“We have tried everything to help him come out of it. However, after meeting you, I felt that a girl like you, who has faced difficulties in life similar to this and gone through many struggles; and after all these experiences of yours, you managed to save your existence from becoming lost; only a person like you can understand his situation well. If you can talk to him, then maybe he can understand the value of this life.”

“What happened to him?”

“On one hand there is family pressure and on the other there is peer pressure. That’s it; because of this he is depressed.”

“Oh, then I will come for sure.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, no thanks needed, tomorrow is Sunday. Let’s meet tomorrow if it’s ok,” I agreed right away, considering myself fortunate, if I could help Miraj.

“Yes, let’s meet tomorrow.”

“Please don’t let Miraj know that I have called you for him. We met suddenly after many years, so we are just meeting up; keep it that way.”

“Ok, don’t worry.”

“Ok, then I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye.”

“Bye.” Mit hung up. Snuggling a pillow from the bed, I relaxed.

I still remembered Miraj’s face. Just like my brother and I attended the same school, Mit and Miraj went to the school. Sometimes, during recess, we would all eat our snacks together.

Miraj was normal, how did he come into depression? His family is actually nice, what may have brought on his depression? Mit has never mentioned that they had any problems at home. So far, I had always seen him laughing and making others laugh too. For the first time today, instead of there being openness in his voice like before, there was feelings of sorrow and sympathy for his younger brother. In the same manner that Ronak felt sad for me, he must also be feeling sad for his brother. I would certainly help. He has tried to make me laugh during all my gloomy times. After all, he is a good friend. I didn’t understand the value of his friendship at that time, but I understand it today.

The next day I got up, took a shower and prayed to God. I lit a candle. I prayed to God that I could be of help to Miraj. After finishing my breakfast, I got ready to go to Mit’s home. I was telling my mom

about it when Mit called me.

“Hello, I am texting you my address.”

“Ok, I will be there.”

(4)

I arrived there sharply at ten. Mit opened the door. His mom was sitting across the room on a sofa. In the large living room, the first thing that caught my gaze was a big sofa set and an elegant carpet spread out on the floor. There were golden and red colored curtains hanging from the window. The house was well decorated.

“How are you, aunty?”

“I am fine dear. How are you? I’m seeing you after so many years.”

“Yes aunty. I bumped into Mit after so many years.”

“Where is Miraj? I don’t see him?” I asked, not knowing what to say further.

“Miraj dear, Samyukta has come,” She called out to him.

“I am coming.” Someone answered from the room inside.

“What will you have?” Aunty asked me as she gave me a glass of water.

“Nothing, aunty, thank you.”

“Sit, relax and catch up all of you. Mit, I am going to the kitchen, do let me know if you need any tea or coffee.”

“Yes mom. Other than you, who will make me tea?” Mit replied flatteringly.

“Ok then, just tell me honestly that you want some tea. Samyukta will have some too, right?”

“Yes, just make some for all of us,” Mit answered.

Just as aunty was walking towards the kitchen, Miraj came out of a room opposite to it. Aunty’s gaze was on him. Without looking at anyone else, Miraj glanced at me and slowly sat down on the sofa. Seeing Miraj’s mom, I remembered my own mother. She too would always be engrossed in looking at me and my gestures. She could easily determine whether I was ok or not.

“Hi Miraj, how are you?” My eyes widened upon seeing him. He looked completely different from before.

“Good,” His disinterested voice and slow gait were signs of his depression.

Indeed, after seeing him, I could see a reflection of my previous condition in him. I got slight goose bumps. I immediately composed myself. I took out a package from my purse and smiled.

“Miraj, I bought this especially for you,” I was trying to make every effort to be as normal as possible. He shouldn’t get even the slightest hint, that I was shocked at seeing him in such a state.

Miraj glanced at the package with a questioning look.

“Take a guess, can you tell me, what might be in here?”

Miraj was looking at the package. Before he could say something,

Mit took it in his hands and said, “Gift... wow... let me guess... looks like a T-shirt!!!!?”

“Uh... wrong!”

“Uh... a book?”

“No.”

“Then...” Mit said while feeling the package back and forth. “A show piece?”

“Don’t even try, Mit... in any case, have you ever answered a question correctly in your life? Remember in school when the teacher asked you any question, you would always fumble for the answer. You are doing the same thing right now.”

“But, in the end, I always used to give the correct answer. Remember?”

“Yes, yes... I know. But no matter how much you try today, you will not be able to give the correct answer.”

Hearing Mit and my banter, Alka aunty came out of the kitchen. “What have you brought, dear?”

“It’s a gift for Miraj, aunty

“Oh...,” She exclaimed as she took the package from Mit’s hand. She started looking at it and tried to figure out what it could be in her mind.

“Aunty, please don’t answer,” I blurted.

“Ok... ok...,” Alka aunty smelling the tea boiling returned to the

kitchen.

I raised my eyebrows playfully.

“Tell me, otherwise I will open it and see for myself,” Mit said in a commanding voice.

“Is that it? You have lost and so you are being a bully Mit? Oh, Miraj, you and Mit, are both out.”

“Come on, tell me quickly. Don’t create any more suspense. I can’t wait anymore. I’ll just remove the wrapping,” Mit said.

While all this was happening, I was waiting to see if there was even a slight change in Miraj’s facial expression. Perhaps, I might not have been successful, but that was also normal. Considering his condition, this type of behavior was normal indeed.

Mit was about to rip open the package, when...

“Statue, Mit...” I raised two fingers against Mit and Mit froze like a statue.

Laughing, I took the package from Mit’s hand.

“Over,” I said and unfroze him.

Both of us burst out laughing. In that short time, it felt like the atmosphere that had been filled with silence for so many months, had come back to life. After so many years, hearing this sweet squabble between Samyukta and Mit, Miraj who had been sitting silently looking down, looked up... a flickering smile slowly appeared on his face.

That’s it... I was actually waiting for this very moment.

“Miraj...,” I said, while removing the wrapping from the package, “There is a game of *Snakes and Ladders* for you in here.” Then, I held the unwrapped game out to him.

“*Snakes and Ladders?*” The words rolled off of Mit’s tongue.

Miraj stared at me dumbfounded. “Samyukta, you still remember?”

When Miraj was young, he used to play *Snakes and Ladders* a lot. Whenever I would go to Mit’s house, he would always ask me to play it with him. Only after playing *Snakes and Ladders* at least five times with him, would he let me go and study with Mit.

“Yes Miraj that is why I brought it. Won’t you at least play *Snakes and Ladders* with me five times today, before I go and hangout with Mit?”

My eyes were filled with love and compassion. Relationships are quite strange. The relationship between parents and their children, between teachers and their students, and the relationship between friends... why is there resistance in relationships which have been given a name. And those that do not have a name, there is so much peace and lightheartedness there!!

The smile on the Miraj’s face widened a little. This was my first victory. He put the game of *Snakes and Ladders* on the table. He took out the counters and the dice from the box. I sat down opposite him.

“Mit, do not disturb us now,” I said waving Mit away.

We both started playing. Just then, Alka aunty brought three cups of tea and some cookies. She then left us to play.

Hooray... Oh no! zing... weee, zoom... yup!... with many such remarks we both continued playing, while sipping tea and dunking our cookies. Out of the five games, Miraj won three and I won two. We both started laughing.

Seeing Miraj smiling, Alka aunty's eyes and Mit's heart welled up with emotions.

"Enough Miraj, I am tired now," I said taking a deep breath.

"I was already tired," suddenly the freshness on Miraj's face disappeared.

Seeing him, both Alka aunty and Mit became silent. But this was not new for me... In fact, for me, today's victory was the very first step to my success.

"Then that's very good! I get rid of your fatigue and you get rid of mine. Good company."

"Samyukta, your sense of humor has become strong."

"Thank you Mit. Just wait and watch, in a short time, Miraj will surpass even you with his sense of humor, right Miraj?"

Miraj laughed dryly. For a little while, Mit, Miraj and I recollected fond memories of our time in school and laughed.

"We shall all meet up again sometime soon, with another surprise, OK?" I looked at Miraj.

Miraj nodded slightly.

Although today's first meeting with Miraj was short, the fact that it had touched him was important for me.

“But next time we shall meet outside somewhere. Not at home,” I said looking at aunty, seeking her silent permission.

She blinked her eyelids, as if giving her permission.

Miraj didn't say anything, so I told him, “Remember, you have to get rid of my fatigue and I have to get rid of yours.”

“Do come visit us again, dear,” Alka aunty's eyes were now moist with emotion. They now also expressed a silent expectation from me.

Wishing everyone goodbye, I left to go back home. I reached my house in twenty minutes. I kept seeing Miraj's face in front of my eyes. I saw another Samyukta in Miraj and aunty in place of my mom.

When another person is experiencing the pain that you have gone through, a feeling of oneness naturally arises with them. I could connect with his inner state. I too wanted to bring him out of this condition. And I made the decision to truly make all the efforts in my power for that to happen.

Ever since I have come out of my pain and inferiority complex, my desire to help people like me come out of it as well, continued to increase.

For the first time, after a long time I had gone out by myself.

When we disregard our internal strongholds that is when we experience the true joy of living life. Until now, because of my hair, I had lived my life in constant shame and with an inferiority complex. I couldn't even talk freely with anyone.

Today, I experience that **the world that puts you down, nobody in that world has the time to look at you. Everyone is engrossed in their own problems.** Yes, sometimes you might find a few people who are free and they indulge themselves in needless gossip about others. Nevertheless, the whole world does not become like that because of them. If I live everyday feeling inferior and thinking about what others would think, then who is at fault?

My ignorance

Many years get wasted just because of one wrong understanding. And once that understanding changes, everything feels so light. Only the one who has experienced this would know! The world has always been like this and will continue to be this way. What is important is what path we are walking on.

“Samyukta just like Miraj,” Alka aunty was about to ask Mit, but Miraj walked into the room silently and she did not finish her sentence.

“Yes mom, but you can see how much she has changed now, right?”

“Yes... she looks very normal.”

“Mom, I really wish that you would also meet her. By talking to her you will get an understanding of what Miraj’s mental state is right now.”

“Yes, definitely,” Alka aunty agreed.

“Mom, after seeing her, for the first time I have felt that it is not worth becoming miserable or depressed in any circumstance.”

“Yes, you are talking about her hair, right? Every girl has the most illusory attachment for her appearance. This world is such that

if a girl has too many imperfections or shortcomings with her appearance, it makes her life difficult to live.”

“Yes, people have become narrow minded, especially in our society. Mom, after seeing Samyukta, I feel that even Miraj could laugh again. In school what was Samyukta like? She would sit quietly and at a distance from everyone; and all the teachers and students would neglect her.”

“Before, she used to come to our house quite often. Then she stopped coming altogether.”

“Yes, as her inferiority complex increased, she gradually detached herself from everyone.”

“Oh, she must have suffered a lot of difficulties then,” empathy for Samyukta developed in Alka aunty’s heart.

“Sometimes the question arises of how she would have endured all of this!”

“After listening to you, I am more worried about Miraj now.”

“That was Samyukta’s past. Look at her now.”

“Hmm... If the body falls sick, then it can be cured by medicine but if the ego is shattered, then it takes a while for it to get back on track.”

“Mom, I wish for you to also share your feelings with Samyukta. How long will you keep suffocating within?”

“Ok.” She went back into the kitchen before her sad voice ended up with tears rolling down her face.

(5)

I went home and relaxed a little. Seeing Miraj, I recalled my days of agony, but I didn't want to dwell on the past at all.

There is no joy in remembering the past. If your past was good and you are having difficulties right now, then you would feel miserable by recalling the past. On the other hand, if your past was bad and everything is fine at the moment, then by getting engrossed in the past, you are missing out on your present.

Sitting on the chair, I lazily stretched my feet and placed them up on the bed. I gazed out of the window. It wasn't a very sunny day. The weather forecast didn't indicate any rain but the sky was covered with clouds. It could rain out of the blue, even if it wasn't the monsoon season yet.

I could hear the sound of crockery and cutlery clattering in the kitchen. 'Come on *Samyukta*, shall we go and help out in the kitchen today?' my inner voice beckoned. I had never helped mom in the kitchen before. But I guess it's never too late to get started. So, I followed the resonating sounds as they led me towards my mom. How strange is the life of moms? They spend fifty to sixty percent of their day in the kitchen alone.

"Mom, should we have coffee?"

"Coffee!? At this time?"

“Yes mom, I feel like having some today.”

“Ok, why don’t you go and sit down. I will make it and bring it to you.”

“No mom, I am making it today. You go ahead and finish your other work,” I said as I opened the fridge and took out a jug of milk.

“Do you know how to make it?” Mom asked surprised.

“Yes, I learned how to make coffee from dad.”

“Really???”

“Yes. When you would get upset with dad and grandma wasn’t home, dad would go to the kitchen and make us some tea and coffee. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes, of course I remember,” Mom blushed.

We had very few moments of happiness like this in our lives, which I can think of. It feels like years since we were all happy together. It’s time to relive those golden moments.

“And to pacify the both of you he would also make noodles, do you remember?”

“Yes. I remember that. I haven’t forgotten. Ronak and I would especially wait for Sunday to come around, so that we could enjoy the noodles that he would make for us.” The emotion in my voice was silently paying tribute to my dad.

“It would have been more fun, if your dad was home right now.”

“We will still have fun. It’s almost Sunday. But today, I just want to drink coffee with you. Only you and me,” I said as I gently held my mom’s sari.

Mom’s eyes welled up with tears. She became emotional and affectionately patted me on my cheek.

“Do you remember when I was three or four years old, when it came to doing anything, I would always say, *‘Only me and my momma?’*”

With a gentle smile, mom nodded and blinked in agreement.

Suddenly, I could smell the strong aroma of coffee linger in the air. I turned the stove off. The coffee had brewed, while we were chatting. We sat on the dining table and had the coffee together. Although we didn’t say much, we certainly enjoyed each other’s company.

Each relationship has its own significance. You don’t always need to go out, to be able to feel the affection and warmth of a relationship. Sometimes, the happiness that arises by simply spending time together with our loved ones is much more fulfilling than the transient happiness we experience from watching TV or using our cell phones.

“The coffee tastes good,” Mom complimented me. I found it very sweet.

I casually told mom about Mit and Miraj.

“Why don’t you invite them to come home when Ronak is at home? Miraj will feel good.”

“Hmm. That’s a good idea, but I don’t think Miraj will agree to come to our home right now.”

I started thinking about what to say to Miraj in our next meeting.

“Ok, you can ask them when you think the time is right. Looks like having coffee was a good idea, not only did it revive old memories, it also created a fond new one,” Mom said as she picked the mugs off the table. Then she went back to doing her work in the kitchen.

I got an idea from my conversation with mom. So I went to my room and called Mit right away.

“Hello.”

“Hi, I was just about to call you.”

“Why?”

“To say thank you.”

“Ok, then say it,” I replied jokingly.

“You really have changed Samyukta. But I am happy to see you like this.”

“Thank you.”

“Miraj has put the *Snakes & Ladders* game you brought in his room. After you came to our house, there has been a slight change in the atmosphere.”

“Yes, I think Miraj really needs change.”

“Hmm.”

“I called you because I wanted to ask, whether we can meet up

alone before I meet Miraj again?”

“Yeah sure, shall we meet tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Ok, that’s fine.”

This was the first time that I was going to see a boy alone. I was feeling a little guilty. I had already agreed to meet Mit, but I felt it was necessary to ask mom. I hung up the phone and went straight to her. She was in the kitchen.

“Mom, is it ok if I go and meet Mit alone tomorrow?”

Mom stared into my eyes.

“Why are you asking such a question?”

“You already know that I need to meet him in order to discuss a few things about Miraj. I’ve never gone out to meet anyone like this before.”

“What’s important is your intention.”

“The purpose is to figure out how we can help Miraj. Nothing else”

“The fact that you asked me is a good thing. Always ensure your speech and actions are such that they do not cross the line of our moral character. I have full faith in you. We haven’t enforced any strict rules upon you. You very well know what is necessary and what is not necessary.”

That unwavering look from mom had silently drawn a fine line of trust and moral character in my mind.

Although I know that no boy would become infatuated with a girl

like me, I still should certainly be careful about my mind not spoiling for any boy.

The next day, Mit and I met at a coffee shop. Everyone around us was young. There were a few couples and some groups of friends, about four or five. A few people glanced at me. I became conscious for a few minutes and my walk became slower. However, as I sat on the chair, I remembered something that someone had said. I regained my composure.

Once we know ourselves, really know, then it doesn't make a difference what others think of us.

I was just talking to Mit, but I knew that the people around me were looking at us. They were staring at me, just as much as they were staring at Mit.

"I hope you don't feel awkward," I told Mit.

"No, why?"

"People around us are..."

"Oh really? That means we are special," Mit popped up his collar and glanced around. Like always, he made light of something serious. I've always liked this quality of his. It was worth learning.

"Actually, these people find something weird about me, and that is why..."

"No, you are wrong. If there was an attractive girl in your place, then what would they be doing?"

"They would be staring just the same..."

“Exactly! These people have no other business. They have come here to enjoy and relax themselves, but they indulge in gossiping. It’s the nature of all human beings.”

“Yes, it’s like they say... wherever I look...”

“I find faults in people...” Mit finished the sentence.

Mit and I burst out laughing.

“Tell me, what did you want?”

“I wanted to know more about Miraj from you.”

Mit took a deep breath.

“Well, we don’t know when and how the situation Miraj is in now actually started, if that’s what you are asking.”

I had an interrogative look on my face.

“We noticed changes in him during the past year and a half; changes that every teenager normally goes through. However, as far as I can tell, his friends have had a huge effect on him.”

“I believe in this day and age, everyone goes through this problem, some more than others,” I said as I looked at the crowd around us. I could see that some of the boys were trying to flirt and impress the girls.

“Other than that, I think that there was a time in between when Miraj started to distance himself from me as well,” Mit said.

He took a sip of his coffee and put the cup down.

“One time” he continued, “Miraj and I were going home after finishing some work and on the way home Miraj asked me a question. I still remember our conversation,

““Mit, have you ever made any friends on social media?” There was a curiosity in Miraj’s eyes.”

“Friends on social media? No way bro, there’s no need to make such friends. I already have friends who I can meet up and chat with.”

“But a lot of my friends are on social media every day. Param says his best friend is someone he chats with online.”

“He may have them but I don’t think I need such friends.”...

We arrived home but our discussion remained incomplete. Perhaps I should have discussed this topic with him further when there was more time. I should have listened to him and understood his point of view patiently, so that his mind was content. But instead, I cut him short as if it was an insignificant matter. After that day he never brought up that topic again.

“Does he like to make new friends?”

“Hmm... friends...” Mit started thinking.

I was observing his facial expressions.

“Everyone at home would always say that I fit in easily with everyone. I am more outgoing. I can easily adjust with anybody.”

“And Miraj?”

“You could say that Miraj, by nature, is reserved. In terms of friends,

he was always choosy. He does not make friends easily.”

“Introverted?”

“Hmm... yes... introvert would describe him correctly.”

“Does he have a best friend?”

“He had a friend named Vishrut, but his family moved to another city for a couple of years, some time ago. Ever since then, his group of friends has taken a turn for the worse.”

“So, who are his friends now?”

“As far as I know and what I have heard from mom, he does not want to be in touch with anyone right now but...”

“But what?”

“After Vishrut left, he made two friends, Param and Nikhil. Param is his classmate. He lives close to our house. He is a spoiled rich kid. If you see him, you would say that his nature is exactly the opposite of Miraj.”

“And who is Nikhil?”

“Nikhil is the son of Param’s dad’s business partner. And he is around nineteen or twenty years of age.”

“So, Nikhil is much older than Miraj, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but Miraj would always hang out with those two.”

“Ok, after listening to you, I am curious about two things.”

“What?”

“The first thing is if Miraj is an introvert and Param is an extrovert, how did their friendship last? Normally, if you think about it, people prefer to hang out with those whose nature and thoughts are similar to their own.

“I haven’t thought about that. What is the second thing you wanted to ask?”

“The second thing is, did he actually have any friends on social media or does he currently have any friends on social media?”

Mit was quiet for a couple of minutes.

“To tell you the truth Samyukta...,” Mit paused.

“Yes, go on...”

“I can’t answer that. I was so caught up with my own life, that I didn’t pay any attention to what was going on with him. But since you brought it up today, I actually have a feeling that no one in my family has any idea whatsoever about this either. Otherwise my mom would’ve certainly mentioned it. There were many times I noticed Miraj was preoccupied on his phone. At that time, I could see feelings of anger, restlessness, impatience, eagerness and happiness on his face. But I always thought that he was talking to Param and Nikhil.” Suddenly, Mit started feeling concerned.

“It’s ok.”

“No, it’s not ok. Why didn’t I question Miraj’s behavior?”

I was observing Mit.

“There were many times when my mom would nag him about how much time he spent on his phone. I would always defend him, telling her that this was common at this age; so she wouldn’t nag him so much. I too would get so preoccupied with my phone at times, that I would lose track of time.”

“I think it’s the same case with everyone. Everyone is so involved in their cell phones that they don’t know what is going on in their own lives or for that matter, with their family members. Ironically, they know everything about what is going on in the world, in the country, in politics, in society or even in the world of celebrities. One knows everything from which restaurant a friend dined at, to who they went out with. In fact they may even be able to describe the clothes that the person was wearing.”

“I realize today, after talking to you, that after seeing the change in Miraj’s behavior and by thinking it was normal, we made a terrible mistake somewhere. We didn’t dig deep enough and try to figure out his actual state of mind. He gradually cut people off and started spending more and more time of his time on his phone. Now I can understand the reason behind that.”

“What?”

“He felt alone. There was no one for him to talk to or laugh with.”

“Don’t worry Mit. Everything is going to go back to normal.”

“Thanks, Samyukta...”

“Mit don’t keep thanking me all the time. Just say it once when Miraj becomes his old self again.”

I glanced at the time on my phone, “Time to go home,” I remarked.

We walked to the parking lot of the coffee shop and suddenly Mit started talking, “Before Miraj would get upset or annoyed with some things and sometimes he would get angry as well. Now he doesn’t get annoyed, he doesn’t get angry either. He has become very quiet and serious instead. I don’t know how many things he has suppressed within him.”

It seemed that Mit had started to understand things about Miraj’s behavior and interactions, which he hadn’t paid heed to before.

Just from our meeting, if Mit has begun to think in this direction, it could prove to be helpful to us to better understand Miraj’s current mindset and his problems. With this hope, I bid Mit goodbye.

How strange is the world we live in? If someone gets angry or annoyed too often, then people tell them they should not get angry. And then, a time comes, when that same person simply stops expressing their emotions. They get tired and lost. And their entire being gets disturbed. Their calm behavior starts to appear abnormal. At a time like that, it’s extremely difficult to understand the darkness that lies in the depths of their mind, while they appear to be so calm externally.

While I was going home on my scooter, my mind was busy trying to understand the different characteristics and forms of human psychology. The form of the ego is also very complicated, isn’t it? If the ego is boosted, then it does not listen to anyone and if it is deflated then let alone others, it will not be able to face itself either.

As I reached home, I pressed the brakes on my scooter and came to a halt. My thoughts stopping for now as well...

(6)

As usual Mom was busy in the kitchen when I arrived home.

“Where is Ronak?” I asked.

“He has gone out, but he should be back soon.”

Mom was making some puris* to snack on. I ate a few and drank some water. I was expecting her to ask me where Mit and I had met and what we had discussed, but she didn’t ask anything. Her trust in me was touching. That being said, if she had questioned me, I wouldn’t have had any problem telling her either. After all being a mother, she has the right to ask.

Sometimes in relationships, there may or may not be questions or there may or may not be answers to these questions, but the important thing is that the power of trust exists. And if someone has this kind of trust, then how can it be broken?

We didn’t realize when Ronak came home. But the loud noise from the TV confirmed his presence. I left the kitchen.

“Where did you go?” I asked him.

Nowhere in particular, I felt bored at home so I went out for a stroll.”

puris* -A deep fried indian food

“And where did you go?” Ronak asked me.

“I went to see Mit.”

“That’s right, mom mentioned something about his brother having some problems.”

“Yes, I didn’t get a chance to talk to you about it. You’re always busy with your work.”

“I am not that busy, I am always here for you.”

Just then his phone rang. His face became pale as he looked at me. But I gave him a smile, so he was instantly relieved.

“Sorry, I need to answer this,” He said as he went outside.

I was alone again. Lost in thought I went out for a walk. Although there was a small patch outside my house where I could take a walk, I felt like going up onto the terrace instead. The entire terrace was empty; I was alone with my thoughts. I looked down at the view below, from above. Everyone was busy doing their own thing. But, there were a few people who managed to capture some happy moments out of their busy life, with the help of technology. There were also two girls from a neighboring apartment playing badminton.

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

A week later, I decided to meet Miraj again. I arrived at his building with the hope that today’s meeting would be more fruitful than the last one.

“I am standing at the entrance of your building, can you guys come downstairs?” I asked Mit on the phone.

“Ok, we are coming.”

Five minutes later, Miraj and Mit came down.

“You should have come home,” Mit said right away.

“No, it feels good to be out in the open. Sometimes being indoors makes me feel confined.”

*“O foolish person, what is there within closed doors and windows?
O foolish person, what is there within closed doors and windows?
Ask those who have experienced life in the open breeze!”*

“Wow... what poetry you’ve recited... thank you... thank you...”
Reciting the poem and praising himself, Mit attempted, in a completely new way, to make the atmosphere delightful.

“Is that called poetry?” I asked smiling.

“I don’t know. It seemed like the right time and it’s also tradition. Wouldn’t you say I hit it out of the park? If not, then I will endeavor to improve myself.”

“You will never change. But this time, I have to admit, it was much better, than your previously failed attempts,” I remarked with a smile.

“Thank you, but my existence is only worth it, when my bad poetry and I come together,” Mit bragged.

“Miraj, your brother must torture you with his bad jokes. I pity you just thinking about it,” I said to him jokingly.

“Nowadays, everybody pities me.” My words had made Miraj

serious and his response had erased away Mit's enthusiasm. Perhaps the wrong words had been spoken, at the wrong time.

"Do you like to go for walks?" I asked, as I tried to change the topic.

"Not really," Miraj replied faintly.

"There is a park nearby, can we go for a walk there? I really want to check it out. It will be a good change for me. Will you guys come with me?"

"Ok," they replied in unison.

"And because I was also in the mood to play badminton, I came prepared. I hope you guys don't let me down."

"Sorry, I will just come to the park. I don't want to play anything," Miraj said unenthusiastically

"No problem. Just your company, is more than enough."

I guess it will take some time for Miraj to open up to me. Mit had become silent in the meantime. Who knows what was going through his mind. Whatever it is, it must involve Miraj.

We got to the park. The air was cooler because it was still evening. It was a weekday today, so it wasn't very crowded either. I avoided coming here during the weekend when the park was filled with people.

As soon as we entered the park, a butterfly flew and landed on Miraj's shoulder.

Miraj stopped.

“I think it likes you,” I said.

“Nobody likes me,” he replied solemnly.

Mit who was closely observing Miraj, didn’t display his true feelings in front of him.

As Miraj took a step forward, and the butterfly flew away. We came across a big open space covered with lush green grass.

“Do we want to sit here?” I asked.

“Ok,” Mit agreed.

Miraj didn’t have an opinion in the matter. I started to look around. Some people were busy walking and some were busy exercising. Further away, there was a group of three to four ladies sitting on a bench.

“When I was younger, sometimes my dad would bring me here.”

“Yes, I know,” Mit said.

“How do you know?”

“I have seen you here sometimes breaking the slides and swings.”

“What?”

“I mean playing on the slides and swings.”

Miraj smiled a little. I felt good.

“I am going to ask a question. Let’s see of the two of you who can answer it correctly,” I said.

Mit shrugged.

“How can you put an elephant in a fridge?”

“An elephant?” Mit started thinking.

“Mister intelligent... speak up.”

Miraj was quiet.

“You need a fridge the size of the elephant. Then you can put the elephant in it,” Mit answered.

“Wrong.”

“Then why don’t you just give us the answer.”

“Simple... by opening the fridge door, you can put the elephant inside.”

“That was nonsense.”

“We just need to talk about nonsensical things. Give me a nonsensical answer at least and show us how it’s done. That my friend is also a talent.”

“Now the next one... how can you put a camel in the fridge?”

“Oh, simple, by opening the fridge door,” Mit answered proudly.

“Wrong again.”

“Now why is that wrong?”

“You have to take out the elephant from the fridge first, only then can you put the camel in the fridge!”

“That was utter nonsense.”

Now, Miraj burst out laughing too.

“Come on Miraj, now it’s your turn, you have to answer this last question.”

“I will try,” Miraj replied.

“A lion and a lioness were going to get married. Everyone went to their wedding except for one animal. Which animal was that?”

“The one who the lion must have eaten,” Mit answered with full confidence.

“Wrong.”

“Miraj, you tell me, who could it be?”

“I really don’t know,” Miraj answered

“Ok, should I tell you?”

“Yes, yes, just say it already,” Mit said as he folded his hands together.

“The camel of course! Why you ask? Well duh! It’s because the camel was in the fridge the entire time!”

“Ha... ha... ha...” Miraj laughed out loudly.

“That was so funny Samyukta. Where do you get these rubbish

jokes from?” Mit laughed as he asked.

“That’s a secret, I cannot tell you.”

And the whole atmosphere had become cheerful.

“Come on, who will play badminton with me first?”

Mit looked at Miraj. He didn’t express any enthusiasm, so Mit stood up.

“Look, I am playing after a long time,” I said as I passed a racket to Mit.

We started playing. Initially, Mit kept dropping the racket. I didn’t understand whether he was doing it deliberately or it really was accidental. In about ten minutes, we got a good handle on the game. Miraj sat quietly watching us play. As it didn’t seem like he was getting bored, we continued our game.

“Hey Mit, I didn’t expect this from you. Aren’t you like an expert in all things?” I said as I jumped to hit the shuttlecock.

“Well, sometimes even experts have their bad days, don’t they?”

“Really?”

“Oh no...” The game was going well.

“Oops...”

“Come on... you can do it,” Mit patted his own shoulder before hitting the shuttlecock.

“Yes... keep trying.”

“Well done Samyukta.”

“Thank you... thank you.” I started having fun playing with Mit. I glanced over at Miraj. It appeared as though he had become engrossed in observing our surroundings. After all, we were doing all this just for him.

“Well, do you know why I am playing like this today?” Mit asked.

“Why?”

“I am giving you a chance to win,” Mit teased.

“That is very kind of you”

“Oh no... Mit...,” the words suddenly rolled out of Miraj’s mouth when Mit dropped the racket again.

“Of course, one brother would always side with the other!” I exclaimed as I now saw Miraj excited.

“After all, whose brother is he?” Mit said as he pulled his collars up.

“He is my brother too,” I said with pride.

“Time out,” I had an idea and paused the game.

“What happened?”

“I am hungry after jumping so much.”

“Actually, I am too. What do you guys want to eat?” Mit asked

“There is an ice cream shop nearby.”

“Ok, then Mit go and get us some ice cream. I am resting in the meantime.”

I was deliberately sending Mit away.

“Ok, I will have to go home to get some money. I will be back in a short while.”

“No problem. Take your time. I am in no hurry.”

Perhaps Mit had understood that I wanted to talk to Miraj alone and that is why I was sending him off to go get us some ice cream.

(7)

Once Mit left, Miraj and I settled down on a bench in front of us.

“You play badminton well,” he started the conversation.

“To tell you the truth, it’s the only outdoor sport that I know how to play well.”

He chuckled.

“If you ask me to play cricket, I can’t even hold the bat properly.”

“Cricket used to be my favorite sport,” he remarked.

“What do you mean used to be? Isn’t it anymore?” I asked inquisitively.

“I don’t play cricket anymore.”

“I think playing at least one sport, even as a hobby, is important. You can learn a lot from sports, including life lessons.”

“Not everyone gets that. My parents only expect me to do well in school,” Miraj said begrudgingly.

“Actually, I think all parents think like that,” I commented.

“No, I don’t think that’s the case for everyone. There are many parents who are quite liberal with their children. They don’t enforce any rules or restrictions.”

“If a person is given too much freedom, they become spoilt,” I said.

“In any case, in today’s world no one has a need for naive and simple people. People prefer the company of spoilt kids. No one supports a straightforward person.”

“Are you referring to your friends?” I asked him outright.

“Yes, they were my friends once, but not anymore.”

“It’s not easy to make good friends.”

“The thing is I ruined my life for them. It’s very hard to change yourself, but I tried to become like them, and I still failed miserably. I failed at everything.”

“The one who fails does not actually lose anything,” I remarked

“What do you mean?” Miraj asked perplexed.

“The one who fails does incur a small loss, but at the same time, he gains experience from his failure. He learns one thing for sure; that is, which mistakes will lead to failure.”

“But one still fails, right?”

“Yes, you failed once but if you do not repeat the same mistakes again, then your chances of winning increase.”

Miraj started thinking.

Realizing that Miraj may open up about his suppressed feelings, I started to tell him about my own experiences. “I couldn’t make any real friends at school. Even when I did make a friend, the other girls would not rest until they destroyed my friendship with that person. At first, I tried to talk to everyone in a courteous manner and help them the best I could. I put my self-respect aside. I also tried to behave in a way that would only please others. But once they got what they wanted from me, they would push me aside. I became tired of trying to fit in. In the end, I was left with nobody.”

“Yes, I feel exactly the same way. Everyone is selfish. They only befriend you for their selfish purpose,” saying only this Miraj stopped.

“And then I started to become a victim of people’s ridicule, contempt and anger. And I gradually started to detach myself from everyone. In my whole class there were only a handful of people, barely two or three, like Mit, who would make an effort to talk to me. During this time my personality bore the brunt, making me so reserved that I was not able to talk to anyone freely. It became extremely difficult to make eye contact while talking to people. Mit was the only one, who never stopped trying to support me. But at that time, I didn’t care about Mit either because I was drowning in my own frustration and depression. Before I even tried to make friends, I had this deep seated sinking feeling of fear that they would abandon me. I didn’t have the courage to tolerate the insult and suffering of someone leaving me. That’s why I pushed away even those people who were truly caring. I didn’t trust anybody anymore. Truth be told, I had no confidence in myself, so how could I trust anyone else? I didn’t trust my own family either. They had always overprotected me. And in addition to all of this, the suffering inside me was so overwhelming, that I pushed everyone away.”

Miraj was observing me closely. From his facial expressions, it

seemed as if he was reliving the past in his mind.

“From a young age, I had a habit of sharing everything with Mit. I always felt the comfort of having him close to me, as an older brother. I could tell him anything, at any time. He was like my soul mate. But...”

“But what?” I interjected.

“But now, I don’t like to talk to him.”

“Everything was so good, so what happened?” It made me a little sad to realize that the closeness between Mit and Miraj had faded.

“Now it seems like the string of a kite that had once soared high in the sky had been cut and that kite is flying directionless,” Miraj’s eyes were fixated on an old broken kite that was hanging on the tree opposite us.

“Things collect dust because of the atmosphere, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are ruined because of a little dust, does it? You can just wipe the dust off and return the items back to their previous glory.” I was confident that Mit, who had never failed anywhere, would not fail in matters pertaining to his home for sure. When a person is very close to you, you merely need be a little more attentive. Perhaps by trying to help Miraj, I was trying to a certain degree repay Mit for his constant support and friendship to me.

Just then, I saw Mit returning with our ice cream.

Miraj became quiet when he saw Mit approaching.

“Miraj, I know that it’s not easy to open up about your feelings in the presence of the person whom you are displeased with. But

just remember, that no matter how far they are, our loved ones will always remain our loved ones.”

“But I haven’t shared anything with him in a long time. And now, I don’t feel like sharing anything with him at all.”

“If you decide that you want to talk to him, you will surely be able to. You need to remove the opinions you have of Mit from your mind. Try and remember how you two were before all this happened.”

“I bought chocolate chip,” Mit said, as he handed the ice creams to us.

“Wow, chocolate chip!” I changed the subject in order to give Miraj time to calm down. “I love chocolate chip.”

None of us thought that we would one day eat our favorite ice cream, just for the sake of keeping up ruses. A wave of silence spread amongst us.

“It’s also Miraj’s favorite,” Mit said sitting next to Miraj. Mit, who was always able to speak his mind freely in front of anyone in the world, was hesitant today to express his feelings in front of his own brother.

“Can’t we at least attempt to break the silence of many months, today? It doesn’t matter whether we are successful or not in the end,” I urged.

Miraj realized that I was referring to the silence between Mit and him. But he remained quiet. He was not able to utter a word.

“Miraj, speak freely without any hesitation. And from the perspective of appropriate social interaction, it’s actually a good thing to have a third person present amongst the two of us.”

“I understand that, but I am having a hard time,” Miraj replied.

“If you focus your energy on your efforts and not on the result of the task, then the task will become easier for you.”

“I feel Mit could understand me before. But now, I’m not able to explain my condition to anyone including him. It’s as if everything inside me has become still. And now it’s too late. When I really needed him, I was all alone.”

Although Miraj was talking, he could not look at Mit. Mit’s eyes were also lowered, as if being pulled down by a huge weight.

“That, what you feel is stagnated. It is itself eating away at you. Moss easily gathers over stagnant water. Instead, it is better to move forward like the flowing river. Life doesn’t stop when you get stuck at just one point. It’s in everyone’s best interest to clear all your desires, sufferings and confusions and move forward by coming to some resolution.”

Miraj was quiet. His face was serious. However, within him, there was a turbulent ocean of thoughts touching the shore, receding and then rising once again to meet the shoreline.

I remained silent, waiting for Miraj to continue speaking. I was confident that he would open up today.

The three of us sat silently for a couple of minutes. Miraj was looking around. His wide open eyes although glancing around the park were in fact seeing numerous events within himself. Eventually, as if his lips and eyes were finally ready to say something, he took a deep breath...

“Do you know something?” I asked Miraj impatiently.

“What?” There was a slight sparkle in his eyes.

“According to one study done on the human brain, we know about one hundred and fifty to two hundred people closely in our lives. Out of these, there are about fifty or so people, whom we can invite home for lunch. Out of these people, there are about fifteen people with whom we share our good and bad times. And out of those fifteen or so, there are only about five or so who are close to us and whom we can call our world. In your life who would you say those five people are?”

Miraj started thinking. After about five minutes, he looked at me.

“I don’t have an answer for you right now. I will have to think about this. But after hearing your question, there a few people that come to my mind right away. Let me start with them.”

“Yes.”

Finally, Miraj looked at Mit. For a second or two, Miraj stared at him blankly and then started, “From the very beginning, Mit has been my shield. Wherever I went, if Mit was with me, I would always have peace of mind. I used to share everything with him. Slowly, the pressure of studying started to increase for the both of us. And after spending the whole day at school and then at our tuition classes, we would be exhausted. So we’d spend some time at home watching TV.

On dad’s insistence, Mit applied for admission to the L.L.B. program against his will. So, during that time he was extremely stressed out. I had so much to share with him, but seeing his condition, I tried to solve my problems on my own. I didn’t want to burden him with even more issues. But Mit is a champ. He quickly accepted his new reality and busied himself in his studies. That is a very positive

quality in him. He can face reality very easily and far better than me. I always fell behind everywhere, but Mit didn't."

"Do you know being shy or introverted is not at all a bad thing? In fact, introverted people are very sincere. If they learn to enjoy their own company, then they would never be alone in their life. It's ok to be shy or introverted, just be yourself," I said.

"No one has ever said this to me before, that introverted people are very sincere."

"Yes, they are special, which means you are special Miraj."

"The next name on my list is my friend Vishrut. He was also introverted like me."

"Vishrut?"

"Yes, he was my best friend."

"I was very comfortable with him. Even though we only met for ten minutes, in those ten minutes, we were able to understand each other and listen to each other very well. In the game of cricket too, our frequencies matched."

"Was he with you in school too?"

"No, we became friends through cricket. He lived in our neighborhood. I am talking about the time when all the boys in our neighborhood used to play cricket. We both started cricket coaching classes together. Gradually, as my passion for cricket grew, I started to lose interest in studying. Vishrut, on the other hand was an all-round performer. Whether it was studying or playing cricket, he would always be ahead. But my focus started to weaken in studying, which in turn resulted in my grades going

down. My mom and dad would often nag and compare me to him. They used to tell me, that Vishrut is smart at everything. He plays cricket without compromising his studies. And I was only progressing in playing cricket. And in that game too I was lagging behind him,”

Miraj said this much and stopped. His voice became a little hoarse. In a couple of moments, he composed himself.

Mit's still position was changing, but I hinted to him to remain seated.

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“To tell you the truth, I personally had no problem with Vishrut. But due to the frequent comparisons being made between us, I began comparing myself to him. I started to find shortcomings in him. Be it studying or playing cricket, I wanted to be ahead of him in any one of these two areas. I found that my capacity to study was less than Vishrut's, so I put all my efforts on playing cricket. Around that same time, there was going to be a cricket tournament. I dedicated myself to proving that I was better than him in all ways.”

“Then what happened?”

“Before I could participate in the cricket tournament, my exam results came out. My grades had gone down significantly. I got a warning at home that now there would be no more cricket classes. I begged my parents to let me play in this upcoming tournament. But my dad didn't budge. My mom didn't take my side in the matter either. This came as a huge shock to me. I had thought that I would be able to prove that I was better than Vishrut in at least one thing, but my mom and dad thwarted all my efforts and dreams. Since then I have started disliking my parents immensely.”

“As such, my dad never reprimanded us for anything other than

our discipline and our studies. He never accepted any compromise when it came to these two things. In fact, dad was the one who had told Miraj to join the cricket classes. But, from the day he saw the effect it was having on Miraj's academic performance, he was not ready to listen to any arguments from Miraj. He was also very strict with me when it came to the L.L.B program," Mit said.

Mit started to fidget with a half-dried leaf lying on the bench.

"And happened to Vishrut?"

"His father was transferred to Pune for his job and their whole family relocated there. But Vishrut had left a lasting impression on my parents. Even after he moved away, my parents would give his example and scold me when it came to studies. I was so angry at them but I could not say anything to them. I would fret within thinking about one question only, that can a student with average grades ever be successful?"

"It's so strange, isn't it? When we are young, our elders teach us not to become angry. Gradually, we learn to control our feelings. Then comes a time when we are not able to express our feelings at all. And we cannot even cry out openly. But the thing to think about is if we cannot cry openly, then how will we be able to laugh openly?"

"You are a genius. You always say something different. You have answers to every question!" Miraj said

"A genius is not a person who has answers to every question. Rather a genius is one who has the patience to get an answer to any question. You will also have to find answers to your questions, won't you?"

Mit was speechless after hearing what I had said and Miraj had

become quiet again. It was evident that he had also suppressed all his feelings in his mind. And that was ordinary too. It is not easy to open up to someone. It is only when you trust someone so much, that you can share your inner feelings with them exactly as they are. I didn't have any expectation of personally gaining something from Miraj. My only wish was for him to open up about the heavy burden of his feelings that he had buried deep within and find some inner peace.

It had become dark and it was also time for me to go home.

“Miraj, isn't it so refreshing outside today? After the scorching heat of the summer, Mother Nature has sent a cool breeze to remind us that the monsoon is soon approaching. Therefore, it always cools down after the heat. We just need to wait patiently for it.”

This philosophy was not something new for Mit. But it certainly was for Miraj. Yet, I was confident that he must have understood the meaning behind what I had said.

After opening up to some extent, Miraj seemed to be a little more relaxed. I felt peaceful. I left them with the hope that Miraj would definitely open up more in our next meeting.

“I will see you guys very soon,” I said as I left. Both brothers also walked out of the park.

Although, I had made Miraj feel relaxed, my mind was filled with countless thoughts.

“Oh Dada!” I said to myself and the chaos in my mind was overcome by peace.

I could envision his divine face. His eyes filled with love, his face filled with love, his laughter filled with love, his entire personality

filled with love, love and just love!

A living idol of complete love... such is Dada.

Just a casual contact with him feels as if he is an old acquaintance of ours; our very own Dada...

While remembering Dada, I reached home.

(8)

The front door to the house was open. The atmosphere was filled with tension. It felt like a sensitive topic was being discussed.

“What has happened to kids these days?” Grandma said as she came out of her room. Her voice was filled with melancholy.

“They react in such a way over minor things. What can their poor parents do?” It felt like mom was also just as affected by whatever had happened.

“Don’t say anything to Ronak. He is still a child,” Grandma told mom in a stern voice.

“But mom, the whole neighborhood will eventually find out about it.”

“Nevertheless, we shouldn’t talk too much about it at home.”

‘What could they be talking about?’ I thought. With a heavy heart, I slowly walked into the house.

“What happened?” I asked with a worried look on my face.

“When did you come dear?” Grandma asked lovingly.

“You are very late today,” said Mom, as if she was trying to change

the subject.

“What’s the matter? Why do you look so tensed?”

“It’s nothing,” Mom tried to conceal the matter again.

“I know you were discussing a serious matter. Why are you not telling me?” I urged.

“Oh Samyukta, if there is anything worth informing you about, then your mom would tell you, wouldn’t she? We were just talking about the recent news that is published in the newspaper.”

“Ok grandma, if you don’t want to tell me, then it’s ok. As it is, I am very tired,” I didn’t have any intention of forcing them to tell me about the serious matter they are discussing anyway.

My head started to ache. I became irritated by the fact that my mom and grandma thought of me as a young naive girl and were trying to hide certain things from me. But then again, I can’t blame them. The Samyukta before was actually very hardheaded. There must be something. Whatever it is, I will find out later on.

“Mom, I have a nasty headache, can you please make me some tea? I’ll have some medicine and then take a nap.”

“Dear, it would be better if you also ate something with your tea.”

“Ok fine.”

After eating a little and taking the medicine, I went to my room. As I lay on the bed, I gently massaged my forehead and tried to sleep. I didn’t realize when I dozed off.

The next day, my mind started to ponder again. They didn’t want

to tell Ronak or me about it, so what could the matter be?

After freshening up, we all came together for breakfast. I went to the kitchen to get some plates and tea cups.

“What is your plan for today?” Ronak asked me.

“Nothing much,” I replied.

“Then I’d like to see you in my room after breakfast,” Ronak sounded upset.

“Ok.”

At the breakfast table, like every other day, we talked about what was happening on the news, as well as around us. Then as agreed, I went to speak with Ronak in his room.

“Tell me, what’s the matter? You seem a little worried,” I urged.

“Actually... do you know what happened yesterday?” Ronak mentioned yesterday’s matter.

“No, what happened? Nobody told me anything,” I was beginning to lose my patience now.

“You know that boy Chintan who lives in the neighborhood behind us?”

“Yes, that mischievous boy... I remember him. What happened to him?”

“He ran away from home.”

“What! Ran away from home? But why?”

“I heard that he wanted to be a painter, but his dad reprimanded him for taking an interest in such an ordinary profession and forced him to study engineering.”

“That’s it, for such a small issue he ran away from home?” I repeated my grandma’s words from yesterday.

“You might think it’s a small matter, but he must have been terribly hurt by it. Only then would he have taken such a step.”

“I don’t know why, but nowadays people’s minds have become very weak.”

“I couldn’t believe it at all. I just met him four days ago at the gym in our neighborhood.”

“How did you come to know about it?”

“My friends told me.”

“Mom probably knows too, doesn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“They didn’t tell me anything.”

“Well, that is because grandma and mom are worried that an issue like this may affect us negatively.”

“We are not going to do something like that though, are we?”

“Of course not, but they are concerned about it.”

“Perhaps they feel like that because of my behavior in the past.”

“Forget about the past,” gently squeezing my hand Ronak comforted me.

“What can be done though? Everyone’s circumstances seem to be depressive lately.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Ever since the exam results have been released, I am tired of reading bad news in the newspapers. Someone commits suicide or someone...” Ronak suddenly stopped as he uttered the word ‘suicide’.

“It’s okay. Don’t let the past bother you,” I said, as I pulled Ronak’s thoughts out of my past.

“Yes.”

“His parents must be very worried?”

“Yes.”

Just then, Ronak’s phone rang and he left the room.

I became anxious after hearing about Chintan. He was a very mischievous boy, but he was sentimental too. Why did he take such a step? Where could he have gone? As these thoughts continued, I drifted into my past...

There were many times, when I also felt like I wanted to run away from home, from this world, from everything and just go somewhere. But where would I go? There was no such place that I could go to. The psychological effect on my mind of the insults I used to get was unbearable. At some points I couldn’t live with it, yet I couldn’t end my life either. I felt so trapped in my life and I just couldn’t find a way to escape it.

I thought of Miraj. Mental pressure in any circumstance can bring about disastrous consequences. Chintan had run away. I do not know what will happen to him, but I am certainly going to keep an eye on Miraj. With that, my desire to help Miraj became even stronger.

I met Mit and Miraj again during the week. This time we met on the beach. Mit was evidently happy seeing how Miraj had opened up a little the last time we had all been together. In his eyes you could see his desire to help Miraj overcome his depressive state.

“Hi Miraj, how are you?” I asked calmly.

Although Miraj smiled a little, it was clear that he had a lot going on in his mind.

“Miraj, I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care for you and I want to help you.” I was ready to listen to Miraj’s condition in his own words. There was still a lot that was yet to be said...

“I could not tolerate the pressure from my parents about my studies. After all, I have my own desires...my own aspirations... don’t we have any say in our own life? Do we have to study and aspire to become professionals in fields that our parents want us to excel in? Do I have to do just that? I felt so suffocated. But I had no one I could talk to in order to come out of this suffocation. Not even Mit. Although we all lived under the same roof, I started to feel like I was all alone. I felt burdened. During this time, I came in contact with Param.”

“Param?! Isn’t he your school friend?” I asked.

“Param, is my classmate. He lives near us. At first, we only

exchanged pleasantries, nothing more. But ever since we worked together on a science project, we've become closer. One day, the phone rang...

"Hello."

"Hello Miraj, what are you doing?" Param asked on the phone.

"Nothing much."

"Why don't you come over to my house? I am also bored. There is no one at home. We can hang out and work on the science project together."

"Ok. I am coming."

I got to Param's house in about ten minutes. That was the first time I had gone to his house. It reflected his wealthy lifestyle. If you saw Param in school, you wouldn't be able to guess that he came from such a well-to-do family.

"I can smell noodles," I said to him, as soon as I arrived.

"Yup, my mom is not at home, so what else could I make," Param said, as he smiled.

"Come let's go sit in my room." Saying this he walked towards his room, and I followed him.

His room was disheveled. It was clearly displaying Param's laziness. He quickly moved his school uniform, headphones and ear plugs among other things off the bed and asked me to sit.

On the table beside his bed, there was an open laptop.

“Have you started the research?” I asked.

“Yes, I have, but I was getting bored, so I called you over.”

Just then he received a message on his phone. He pulled his phone out.

“Right now...” There was a big grin on Param’s face and his fingers were quickly typing a message.

“What happened? Who is that?” I asked him curiously.

“Oh it’s nothing. It’s just a new friend I have made on social media. We talk for a while whenever the both of us are free.”

“A friend on social media? Who is it?” I inquired curiously.

“Well, I really don’t know her personally, but I still know her very well,” Param explained.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked a little perplexed.

“Oh, come on, she is a friend of mine on social media, but I haven’t actually met her. She is in Delhi. But we are very good friends. We talk at least once a day,” he elaborated.

Listening to Param, I had a lot of questions in my mind.

“What’s so shocking about that? You really are naive, my friend.”

“These kinds of things are not allowed at my house.” Param’s comment made me feel inferior, so I retorted in self-defense.

“There is nothing wrong with it. It’s just like when we talk to our friends here. She is also a friend. Besides, with this you get a chance

to meet new people and get to know them. And to be honest, if that person is a stranger, then it's all the more fun to talk to them! They're all from different places and different cultures. We have never met one another. We meet our other friends every day and they still talk about us behind our back. Whereas with my social media friends there is nothing of that sort," Param said without a pause.

"You mean... everyone is all nice and pretentious here?" I swiftly asked.

"Not exactly, but yes you can say that."

"So, your friend on social media, she's from Delhi?"

"Well, she is Indian, but, she is born and brought up in America."

"Oh. So, whatever she says is always true?"

"I think that she is telling the truth. We both trust each other."

"Isn't that blind trust?" There were many questions cropping up in my mind.

"I don't think so."

I was trying to understand Param's point of view.

"And just now, I made a new friend. She is from Bangalore."

"She became your friend in just one day?" I asked puzzled.

"Yes, she is nice. I like non-Gujarati people, more than, the traditional Gujarati people like us. Compared to us, their thinking and lifestyle is very different, so it's fun to talk to them. They are very smart and

open-minded.”

Param was chatting with his friends online while talking to me in his room. He was also getting quick replies on his phone from the other end too. At first, I didn't like seeing this attitude of his but my curiosity intensified.

“Well Miraj, I've said bye to this girl for now. I'll pacify her later.”

“Why do you need to pacify her? If she is a friend, then she will at least understand, won't she?”

“Oh, we chat online everyday around this time because she is only available at this time. That's why she is a little angry with me. And I am sure you know that it doesn't take much for a girl to sulk.”

“Your friend on social media sulks and gets angry too? That's weird...”

“Well, she is an old friend of mine. So, her getting angry and then me pacifying her, is normal. You won't understand,” Param said, while he ran his fingers through his hair.

“What is this trouble? You also have to pacify your invisible friends?”

“Why are you being so negative? Forget it. It's not your cup of tea. Come on; let's start working on our project. Then I will also have to devote some time to her.”

'It's not your cup of tea.' Param's remark had pierced through my heart. I thought about proving to him that I was not outdated, but I didn't know what to say in that moment so I changed the subject by looking at my phone instead.

“Yes, let's hurry up. I have to be home in an hour. It's already seven

o'clock.”

We lost track of time because we were discussing Param’s online friends. I was a little bored too because I had just sat there since I had arrived. In reality though, I was more upset about the insult than the boredom. In this particular matter, I started to feel like I was inferior to Param, who when it came to studying was not as smart as me.

“When we know ourselves very well, then it should not make a difference to us about what others think of us,” I said to Miraj as I interrupted him halfway through.

“You are right. Since Vishrut left, I started to compare myself to Param, without realizing I was doing it.

We spent some time researching the matter for our project together. We made notes of the data we needed. Just then, more messages started coming through on Param’s phone. Before Param had a chance to become engrossed in them, I told him to email me all the material we had found...

“I will then make my points from it.”

“Yes, let me send you the email right now.” He emailed the document to me.

Param’s phone was being bombarded with messages and the phone rang.

“She has no patience at all.” He put the laptop away and picked up his phone.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“It’s Nikki, the girl I have been chatting with.”

“Does she have your phone number too?”

“Yes,” Param said casually.

“Doesn’t anybody at home have a problem with all of this?” I couldn’t resist asking him.

“No, why would there be a problem? My mom knows that I talk to Nikki. Everyone in my family is open-minded. There are no such restrictions on me,” Param said proudly, as he shrugged his shoulders.

I said goodbye to Param and left.

Mit was observing Miraj, and I was looking at Mit. Mit had pointed this out to me when we had met at the coffee shop. Could there be a connection between Miraj’s life and Param’s social media friends? Mit and I were thinking the same thing.

Miraj’s story had just started to unravel. What new chapters and characters would emerge in his story was yet to be discovered.

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“I reached home on time, but the entire way, I was preoccupied with thoughts like; what should one’s moral limits be? Is it unfitting to be so straightforward in this day and age? Why are every parent’s thoughts different? Are my parents extremely conservative? Param’s freedom is due to his parent’s liberal mindset. What about my freedom? When I’m just playing games on my phone or using WhatsApp, my mom gets mad at me. But Param uses his phone to do so much more than that. Is there anyone at his home who nags him about these things? My mom always badgers me, that I shouldn’t touch my phone in front of my dad as he doesn’t like it all. My mind was overwhelmed with questions, complaints and misunderstandings like this.”

Miraj’s voice had become a little soft while talking. I saw confusion in his eyes.

“Did you know Miraj, adolescence is very complicated. During this phase, absolutely everyone goes through things like this. However, your actions during this time and the experiences you acquire can certainly change the direction of your life. Now if you happen to take the wrong path, then it takes a lot of time to turn around. Yet, it’s not something to be scared of. You just need to be in the company of someone who can stop you from walking down the wrong path. That is why we shouldn’t always have only those people in our life who praise us.”

Miraj's eyes were curious.

“Positive criticism is a good friend and insincere flattery is a fake friend,” Mit uttered these words instantly.

This was Mit's unique quality. He had a hobby of reading books written by good authors. I learnt a lot of new things from him when he talked about it in school.

“There is a saying in Gujarati, poison cannot be tested. One does not need to experience everything himself. One can learn from other people's life experiences.” It is normal for a brother, who has been intently listening to his brother's difficulties without uttering a word share his feelings on the matter.

“Do you know Miraj, sometimes those who criticize us are actually showing us our own reflection in the mirror? When we look at a mirror, we can see ourselves exactly as we are, right?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“In the same way, people who have our best interest at heart will try to stop us from going down the wrong path. But it's also not necessary that all those who criticize us, are our well-wishers. Some could also be criticizing us because they are jealous.”

“Then how do we recognize them?”

“The easiest solution to that, as I understand it, is our family. For the most part, we don't listen to our family members' advice at all. Nevertheless, other than some good friends, who else would think about what's best for us, more than our parents?”

Miraj was silent. He was not able to comprehend this point.

“Anyway... then what happened...?” I asked.

“I gradually became closer to Param because I was always curious about the things he used to do. It was not possible for me to do all those things at home. In my home, I was constantly being told off about my studies. I was already very furious about having to leave cricket classes. I couldn’t forgive my parents for that.

Other than school, whenever I was free, I would go to Param’s house. I used to see everything he did. Perhaps inadvertently I was picking up his habits. In this way, Param and I became closer to each other.”

Miraj picked up the bottle of water next to him and took a sip from it. He then managed to regain his composure.

“My days were not going well. All I got was pain from here and there.”

One day...

“What are your results?” Mom asked, as soon as I stepped into the house.

I carried my school bag and sat on the sofa. I gently opened my bag and gave her the transcript from it.

“Fifty-two percent?” Mom was shocked.

“Check it properly. It can’t be that low.” Suddenly dad came out of the other room.

Why was dad at home at this time? Seeing his face, my heart started pounding.

“Fifty-two percent is low. Last time you got sixty-seven percent. You cannot get such low marks Miraj,” Mom reprimanded me sternly.

“You have never gotten such a low mark before. But lately, your performance has deteriorated. I see you are constantly preoccupied with your phone and busy with your friends the whole day.”

“I work hard to the best of my ability. I already told you to send me to good tuition classes,” my voice started to rise in anger.

“Miraj, calm down,” Mom’s voice became louder as well.

“Mom, all of you think that I am not working hard at all. First of all, my tuition class is far away. It takes very long to commute there every day. I get really tired. My computer is also not in the best condition. It keeps freezing and stalling now and again. As a result, I cannot finish my projects on time either. And you don’t let me go to the cyber cafe. You already know that the marks I get on my projects count towards my final grades as well,” I tried to save myself by coming up with all types of excuses.

“So, what you’re saying is that you are not doing well in school because of your tuition classes and the laptop?” Dad asked, coming straight to the point.

“Yes,” I snapped at him angrily and stomped to my room.

When we are not ready to accept our own mistakes, we become angrier with the people around us. We argue with them as if it’s entirely their fault. Miraj did the very same thing. Listening to him, I could see my past before my eyes. I saw all the same types of things that I had also done; like flashbacks one after another.

The house had become silent.

“If he finds the tuition classes very far, then let’s change them,” Dad said promptly.

“The problem is not that they are far. He wants to go the same tuition classes that his friends are going to,” Mom interjected.

“Then let him go. If that is the problem, then we can find a solution for it too. At least then he will study, won’t he?” Dad voice was loud enough so I could hear.

“But those classes are very costly. We cannot afford them. It’s for those who can afford them!”

“Don’t worry about the money. We will see to it. If the money is used for his education, then I have no problem in spending it.”

As a result of our argument that day, I managed to join the tuition classes being held nearby. Param went to these classes so I wanted to go there as well. Gradually everything started to become normal. I did have a little stress on my mind about having to get good grades this time, because my dad unquestionably gave in to my stubbornness on this one thing.

One day at home, my mom saw a flyer that had a price list for laptops. She became curious seeing it.

“Who got this flyer?”

“I did,” I quickly replied.

“Why?”

“My class friend bought a new laptop and I had asked him to share the price list with me. I have brought it home to show you guys.”

“Look Miraj, first you have to study well. Then we will fulfill all your demands. We have already enrolled you in those expensive tuition classes, as you asked. Now you will only get a laptop when you get good grades.”

“Tanay has it so good. Prashant uncle fulfils all his demands. I just have rotten luck.” I tried to get my way by using my cousin as an example.

“Dad is doing the best he can for you. When you want branded clothes, he buys them for you as well. Your school and tuition classes are also expensive. But he never says no to send you there. He does it so you can get a better education. What more can he do for you!” As always mom started to praise dad and tried to convince me. Yet I felt discontent with both of them.

“Prashant uncle does the same thing for Tanay, doesn’t he?” I argued back.

“If you want to bring Tanay into this, at least see what grades he is getting.”

“Of course, he gets good grades. Prashant uncle has enrolled him in one-to-one classes from the very beginning.”

“When will you understand? On every matter, you have nothing better to say. So you just argue about it,” Mom rebuked.

“Both of you nag me on every matter too, don’t you?”

“We have given you all the liberties. Only in those matters where we are not able to give you liberty, we haven’t,” Mom explained.

“Miraj dear, you should not argue with your mom like this,”

Grandma cajoled me softly.

Grandma had come to stay with us for a few days. I didn't like her interfering in this matter even a little bit.

"Grandma, you should not speak and interfere in this. You don't know the half of it. They're always just praising Tanay in this house. Everyone likes Tanay only. I have no value at all," I lost my temper.

"No dear, it's not like that. You are also very smart," Grandma replied.

"No, I am not smart in studies. I am more interested in playing cricket than I am in studying. But dad didn't allow me to pursue that. They just stopped me from going to the cricket coaching sessions half way through," Finally, I had put words to the pain I had suppressed within me.

"That was because your education was getting ruined. You are in the eighth grade now. You will be in the ninth grade next year. You have a lot to do at the moment. If you get stretched on all fronts, then you will become ill," Mom tried to clarify everything, but I was not prepared to listen to her.

"As a matter of fact, you all feel that only those who study well excel in life. But that is not entirely true. Why can't one have a career in cricket? Look at these cricket sportsmen; they are all multi-millionaires, aren't they?"

"But dear, only those who perform well are valued in cricket too. Otherwise, many people have been forgotten," Mom said as she tried to calm me down.

"Mit has never raised his voice at your mom in this manner. You should learn something from your older brother. You shouldn't

get so angry,” Grandma’s ill-timed advice made me even more frustrated.

“Yes, all of you idolize Mit all the time, don’t you? Clever, smart, wise, cheerful... he has everything in him. Have you ever seen anything good in me at all? Everyone keeps giving me the same advise all the time that I should be more like Mit. I should learn from Mit,” shouting back I was venting my resentment. But more upsetting than that was the fact that for the first time the dislike I had for Mit had been verbalized. I didn’t know why I had said this aloud either.

That day seeing my behavior mom’s eyes welled up with tears. As the days went by, my anger and contempt intensified. Mit was a witness to this altercation. He didn’t say a single word in favor of anyone.

“This is a sign of adolescence. Once you hit adolescence these things tend to happen. There is a lot of conflict within our own selves and with the outside world. Seeing others at school, a rivalry of sorts develops within us. We feel as though we are in competition with others. But the truth is that there is a strange battle going on internally where we have to lose ourselves to win. That is exactly what teenage is all about. It’s where on the one hand, we have so many dreams, aspirations and wild imagination and on the other hand the reality of our life continues to exhaust us. Suffocation arises within when one doesn’t know how to find the balance between these two extremes. We feel as though our family members don’t understand us. A strong belief sets in our mind that ‘I am always right and others are wrong’. That is when you have to face your struggles. This happens, more or less, to everybody,” Mit said something so serious so nonchalantly. As he said this, he was looking at me rather than Miraj. But he was conveying his point directly to Miraj. There was a sort of mature look on his face, like that of an older brother.

“Mit, you understand a lot, so why didn’t you explain it to Miraj?” I felt proud once again of his maturity.

“He still doesn’t understand; he never took my side. That’s why I was so mad at him,” Miraj spoke with a little uneasiness.

“I can’t believe this Mit. How can you keep quiet at a time like this?” I was surprised.

“Perhaps it was not the right time for me to convey my point to Miraj. For one person to explain a point and for the other person to understand it, if both people involved are not mentally stable or ready to listen, then no matter how correct your point may be, it will not be able to get through to the other person. But, in waiting for the right time to say it, I may have left it too late,” Mit’s face dropped displaying his remorse.

“After about thirty to forty-five minutes later that day, Mit came into my room. He sat next to me on the bed, with a pillow, on his lap. I thought that he would explain some things to me but he didn’t do anything of that sort. He gently took my book and started flipping through the pages,” Miraj continued.

“Your handwriting has improved compared to before. Good.”

I looked at him. Upon meeting his gaze, I looked away.

“Come on Miraj, you are the brave son of a lion. Did you know that when a lion is going to take a big leap, he takes two steps back,” He paused after saying this much.

“So?”

“So, don’t you feel that you are also going to take a big leap?”

My anger was subsiding, but I was still trembling with rage.

“So, I think Miraj from now you will get outstanding results.”

I didn't say a word.

“Chill bro. It's because of people like us, that scholars are considered scholars. So, we are more valuable.”

Mit was trying to pacify me, but I had no interest in what he was saying. That day, for the first time, I had found his opinions worthless.

“Miraj, we have to live our life based on whatever circumstances we are in. But, we must keep our mind strong, so that those circumstances that are not in our favor do not make us unstable,” Mit had also become serious now.

I was listening quietly.

“So, keep going without having any negative thoughts. Work towards a goal in mind. You will most certainly achieve the results.”

“Please Mit, I am not interested in listening to you right now. It's time for me to go to my tuition class,” As I said this, I took my bag and left our home. Mit couldn't take his eyes off me.

I started to see Param at school and in my tuition classes now. Because of my stubbornness, I had achieved my goal of attending the same tuition where everybody wore branded clothes. But I did not realize that people could also be considered non-branded based on their thoughts and impressions. There were many things about them that attracted me to them like a moth is to an open flame. I was impressed by Param and I tried to be like him, but I

couldn't always pull it off. Although, staying in constant touch with him, my nature and thoughts had changed.

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That's when my phone rang. Miraj stopped talking.

"Excuse me," I said as I answered my phone.

"No problem," Miraj said. I didn't want to break his conversation midway, but it was important to answer the phone call. After all, the call was for Miraj's benefit.

I had to get some guidance from the caller, regarding Miraj. Without this person's help it would be impossible for me to help him. I stepped away from Miraj so that I could talk privately. As soon as I ended the conversation, I looked at Miraj. His condition was a mirror image of my own a while ago. For both of us, the reasons were different, but the results were more or less similar.

Miraj was staring unblinkingly at the ocean but it felt as if he had delved into the depths of his life. I sat down with my back to him.

"Sorry, Miraj it's not too late yet. If you have time, we can sit here for a while," I said breaking his train of thoughts.

"Yes, I want to sit here too. I feel relaxed today. It feels good to have reduced the burden that I have been bearing inside of me for so many days. But I am not half way through yet. I hope you are not tired of listening to me?" saying this, he gave Mit a glance as well.

A faint smile appeared on Mit's face and there was tenderness in his eye. Along with Miraj, he was also feeling lighter.

“Not at all, I love listening to you,” I was happy that Mit had responded positively to Miraj.

I looked at Miraj. He was looking at a boat in the distance.

He then looked at me and started talking.

“The urge to get a new cell phone or a new laptop had not subsided in my mind. I also wanted to maintain my status in front of Param. To ensure my willful demands were met, I worked very hard for the last fortnight to do well and get good grades in the exam. I also had a secret wish to maintain my status in the new tuition class by getting better grades”.

Should one study well for one's own interest or for maintaining one's impressions and status? There is a vast difference, like that of night and day, behind the intentions that bring about the same result in these two situations. The purpose of life changes depending on one's underlying intentions.

“Working extra hard coupled with a strong desire to get a new cell phone, I managed to score 74% in the exam. Everyone was happy for me at home. My parents felt that their decision to put me in the expensive tuition class turned out to be correct.

After seeing my results, my family was not able to comprehend my past behavior and the seriousness behind my thoughts that resulted in me acting out the way I had. All their past impressions of me were erased. After all, a parent's vast ocean-like heart is not one to hold onto a child's mistakes but rather to easily forgive and forget him!

Dad took out the flyer he had kept safely in a drawer. It had the price list of the laptop that I really wanted and he started to contemplate purchasing one for me.

Since my exam grades had improved substantially, there was no more bickering at home. By now my summer vacation had started I was allowed to do whatever I wanted; hang out with my friends, have fun, get up to mischief, party, and play cricket... everything.

To top it all, I got what I wanted. On my birthday, my parents gave me a surprise gift. My joy was unsurpassed. The love for my parents, which seemed to have dried up in me somehow, increased many folds over. I started spending most of my time on my new laptop. For the time being, I put aside my demand to get a new cell phone”.

“Look, son, your dad has given you a new laptop, so now make good use of it.”

“Yes mom, don’t worry. But right now, I am on vacation. Can I at least enjoy myself for now?”

“Yes, but set a limit on its usage, not more than two hours a day,” Mom said with a serious note in her voice.

“OK mom, thanks,” saying that I gave her a big smile. My smile oozed with more flattery than heart. How long would it take a mother to realize this? She gave me a faint smile and left.

Mit was given a new cell phone, so they would have had to give me a laptop. After all, they are parents and they should certainly do this much for their children. Such an argument arose to my mind and then subsided.

I kept staring at my new laptop. The incident where I had seen

Param talking to his social media friends at his house resurfaced in my memory. Eventually I also created accounts for myself on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and downloaded the chat messenger. The day had finally come to fulfill my desire to make at least one online chat friend.

On the very first day, six new names were added to my friends list. Initially, I was a bit hesitant to talk to each one of them for about ten to fifteen minutes, saying more than the usual hello, hi and bye. But slowly I started to enjoy it. The attempt to get more friends online continued. I lost my senses like an intoxicated person and spent three hours of my time figuring out the various social media platforms, chat messengers and just chatting generally with various people.

The fact is, I was drowning...

I started enjoying it. My inferiority complex didn't affect my chatting world as nobody was there in person. Someone invited me to play online games. Just as I was about to open the link they had sent, I recalled my father's grave words.

"Miraj, there is an increasing number of viruses on the internet. Please don't open any unknown websites. There are so many websites nowadays that would make you go astray. Don't fall prey to anything that will spoil your instilled moral values," my dad's stern words echoed as a warning to me.

Just then the cell phone rang. It was Param.

"Hello."

"Hello. What's up boss! So, are you also hooked on social media now?"

I could not think of an answer.

“Ok, listen, I have sent you a few website links, check them out!”

“Sure, I will.”

“Ok bye, my friend is waiting, otherwise she will get upset,” saying this, Param laughed slyly and hung up.

When I put the phone down and looked at the laptop, all the people I was chatting with, were either invisible or were busy somewhere else. I logged off. Just then, Ravi called me.

“Hi Miraj, what’s up?”

“Not much Ravi. I was just chilling.”

“I was so surprised to get your friend request.”

“What’s so surprising about that?”

“Oh just that you are on Facebook now as well!”

“Yes, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, I am everywhere bro,” just saying that my voice echoed with pride.

“Awesome.”

“Now it seems you have become modern.”

I was agitated at these taunting phrases, but I remained quiet.

“Listen, I have a very good movie collection. Do you want it?”

“Movies?”

“Yes, what else would we be doing during our vacation? My parents don’t let me go to watch movies, so I watch them at home on my computer.”

“Good idea.”

“Come to my home with your pen drive.”

“Okay.”

And so my new daily routine started with me spending time on my laptop for hours on end. I finished watching all the fifteen movies that I had got from Ravi, within a week. It became my habit to watch one or two movies a day. Gradually, I started living in my room. I was not interested in talking to my parents. My interaction with Mit had also become very limited. He was busy in his life and I was busy in mine. Whether it came to games or movies or chatting, I could not escape from whatever I had started to follow.”

Saying this, Miraj looked at Mit. He was looking down. Even though he was quiet, he had a serious look spread on his face. This was the first time I had seen Mit like this. It felt like a tsunami was going on in his mind. My ears were listening to Miraj narrate his autobiography, but my eyes were fixated on Mit. Once again, I focused on Miraj. He is telling his story with all his courage, so my focus should be on him. With that, I became engrossed in his past journey again. Miraj was not only speaking with his mouth, but his face and eyes as well.

“There was no one to stop me. Mom was busy looking after grandma’s frail health, dad was busy expanding his business and Mit was trying to like a career, which he never wanted to get into. I was so engrossed in the social media’s glamour that I used to stay up late. Before, I had enjoyed playing cricket during my vacation,

but now instead of hanging out and interacting with my friends or other people in person in the real world, I found it more comfortable to stay in my room in the exciting virtual world of social media and online games. I could not bear to have any quarrels with anyone while playing cricket, during any matches. Instead of arguing with someone, I felt more comfortable sitting alone and passing my time in my room online. At least here I didn't have to deal with anyone!"

Listening to this, Mit looked up. He finally broke his silence.

"My dear bro, I didn't realize that you were so lonely. You were lonely and I was trying to be alone."

Mit's words were mysterious, but I had to focus on Miraj and not Mit. I stopped Miraj and myself from diverting the conversation, so as not to lose track.

"You are absolutely right, Miraj. It is such a fake world, that it pulls us away from the real world we live in. That is why in the real world, if something happens like we didn't expect, or we are not able to face our bitter reality, we do not have the strength to sustain ourselves. Due to our obsession with TV, movies, games, social media and the internet, all our inner strengths are destroyed and in turn this makes our mind weak and lame."

"I was under the impression that after Vishrut left, you were very attached to Param, but I had no idea that he had such a profound effect on you." There was a slight resentment in Mit's voice.

"Param was not the only one in my life...", Miraj paused. His face showed a little agitation. I could not make out whether this was due to his mistakes or his feelings for Mit.

"Miraj, I have no words to appreciate the calmness with which you have dared to look into your past, today. But today I am sure that

whatever characters you reveal from this chapter of your life, you will definitely feel lighter,” I urged him encouragingly.

Looking indirectly at Mit, my eyes urged him to keep quiet.

Miraj nodded in agreement and continued talking.

“One day Param called me and asked me to meet him at the park near our neighborhood. When I reached there, I saw a boy, who was about 20 years old, sitting with him.

“This is Nikhil. My new friend,” Param introduced us.

“Hi,” Nikhil extended his hand towards me.

“Hi,” I said shaking his hand back.

“The reason that you have not seen me for such a long time is because of Nikhil,” Param explained.

“What do you mean?” I asked with surprise.

“Nikhil is my dad’s friend’s son. A few days ago our families went to Manali on vacation together, you know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“They used to live in Baroda. But now his dad and my dad have become business partners and they have shifted here,” Param said, happily extending his hand. The joy on his face was something else.

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“He is new here, so I am going out with him every day. He has a driving license and I know the city. So, both of us hang out every

day.” It looked like Param was very impressed with Nikhil.

I felt Nikhil was over smart and did not enjoy meeting him.

My vacation was passing by with fun. I was spending more time with Param and Nikhil. One day, they decided to go and watch a movie.

“Have you ever met Nikhil?” I asked Mit.

“No.”

“Mit just didn’t have the time. He stayed less at home and was spending more and more time staying outside. And all those who were at home, despite being around me were not close to me.”” Miraj’s eyes were seething with complaint for Mit and reflecting a deep seated dissatisfaction for his parents.

“Miraj, you do not need to be sad by remembering the past, because the people, who made you sad, are now feeling sad for you. Seeing you happy will bring them peace of mind.”

Miraj’s silence was a sign that what I had said was reaching him. His eyes fixed on me were ready to rewind to a new page of an old chapter.

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““Miraj, there are seats available for the evening show. I have looked online. I can book a ticket for you if you like,” Nikhil said.

“A movie??? But I will have to ask for permission first from my parents.”

“So, just call them now and ask them,” Param suggested a shortcut.

“No, I won’t get permission for such things over the phone.”

Both Param and Nikhil looked at each other and laughed. It was like a joke for them, whereas for me, it was like adding fuel to the fire.

Teenagers emotions and excitement is such that it leads to temptation to have what their peers have, to a point where their needs become a demand. Param and Nikhil had something, which I too wished for...freedom.

“Mom, my friends are going to watch a movie. Can I go as well?” I asked as soon as I stepped into the house.

“Watch a movie?” Mom asked surprised at this sudden question.

“Yes, dad hardly ever takes us to watch movies.”

“But, he does take you to watch movies that are worth watching,

doesn't he?"

"Yes, but according to him there are hardly one or two such movies in the whole year which are worth watching."

"Miraj, your dad and I unlike other people, don't like to watch vulgar movies. You already know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. But all the movies are not like that. I just sit there looking dumb when my friends are talking about movies."

"Miraj, we should not compare ourselves with others in such matters. My dear, it is your own responsibility to maintain whatever good virtues you have within you."

"Mom, dad will never understand me. At least you should try." I changed the subject and tried to emotionally blackmail my mother, to get what I wanted.

Mit was also present in the room. Mom looked at him.

"Mom, Miraj is capable of taking care himself. And he is off on vacation, so just let him go. Later on, he is not going to get any time to look up from his studies," Mit replied. I had never imagined that Mit would convince mom on my behalf.

Mit, who was looking at Miraj with compassion but Miraj was too engrossed with his past to notice.

"Okay, you can go this time, but it will not be acceptable every time," Mom said firmly.

"I don't wish to go every time, and anyway school opens in ten days, so there is no question of me going after that," I said out loud while thinking to myself, 'we will see about that later on'.

“Ok. What time is the show?”

“Quarter past five.”

“You are to come straight back home after the movie, understand?”

“As you wish, ma’am,” I said bowing down to her in Urdu style.

“That’s enough; you don’t have to go overboard with all this fake acting.”

This was my first opportunity to go and watch a movie with my friends. I was in the company of rich friends like Param and Nikhil, so I wore my favorite, branded clothes, Nike shoes, sunglasses and strong cologne. Looking up to date I went to the city’s biggest mall. There was only ten minutes left for the show to start. We went to the ticket counter quickly, but the tickets for the movie we were going to watch were sold out.

“Oh no,” said Param, looking disappointed.

“It’s okay. We can watch another movie,” Nikhil said cheering him up.

“Yes, we can do that,” I agreed at once. I had no desire to go back home without watching a movie, especially after all that effort I had put in to get permission from mom.

“But I wanted to watch this movie. I should have booked it online!” lamented Param.

“We can always come back tomorrow. For now, we can get into any other show,” Nikhil tried to console him.

Who knows what will happen tomorrow. Let's just buy tickets for another show. I was ready to watch any movie, without the faintest idea of its reviews.

Nikhil returned to the counter and came back with three tickets. I was reveling in the freedom I was experiencing, rather than enjoying what was going on around me. We were standing outside screen three. Most of the crowd around us was made up of youngsters.

'My parents have imposed too many restrictions on me. Look at all these people enjoying themselves'. I thought to myself.

I was relishing my newly found freedom, more than the movie. It wasn't a good movie at all. But I easily managed to hide my emotions in the darkness of the theatre hall. Nikhil and Param were making random comments at intervals. I pretended to be like them by giving them fake smiles. Some people whistled in excitement at some scenes and Nikhil also did the same at times. Param, would look at him and let out a sly laugh. All this was very awkward for me. I always considered such people to be 'vulgar'. I never liked looking at those types of people. Today, my own friends, sitting next to me were behaving in the very same, cheap way that I had despised all this time. Yet, I was not able to react in any way to their behavior. My mind was becoming unstable. There was a strong conflict raging within me. One part of me was strongly opposing what was happening outside and the other was trying to convince me that all this was normal behavior. This is what people call enjoyment. I am overly constrained by my modest upbringing... I was making all kinds of excuses to justify their behavior. I was forcing myself to be just like my peers."

"Why is that?" I asked Miraj provoking his thoughts.

"So that I wouldn't be considered 'odd' by others," Miraj replied.

“And then?”

Miraj continued, “My mind had become stiff and my body was tense after watching certain rude scenes. At the end of the movie, everyone started to exit very casually while I could not even stand up. I was not able to look at anyone in the eye, so I walked ahead with my eyes fixated on the ground. I felt extremely guilt ridden.

Param and Nikhil looked completely normal. So why is this happening to me? This question bothered me tremendously. Is something truly wrong with me? This question constantly bothered me. Maybe, I was torturing myself internally. I was filled with so much contradiction within myself, for which, I neither had the right understanding nor the know-how to come out of it. I had inadvertently, allowed myself to be pulled into the flow of time and circumstances.

“Come on, let’s go to Pizza Hut,” said Param abruptly.

“Yes, let’s go. I am very hungry,” agreed Nikhil.

“What do you say, Miraj?” asked Param.

“That’s not a problem, but I will be late getting home.” My face turned pale.

“We won’t be late. Only half an hour more,” said Param, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Come on, Miraj, don’t be a mommy’s boy.”

“Okay,” I gave in, to avoid looking odd in front of everyone. And anyway, Param always succeeded in convincing me.

“It’s my treat today,” Param pulled out his wallet and went ahead

to order the pizza.

Meanwhile Nikhil and I went to get an empty table. Someone called out to Nikhil.

“Hi...” A teenage girl, probably around 18, came over and gave Nikhil a pat on the shoulder.

She was wearing a short yellow dress, high heels, a sling bag, and sunglasses on her forehead; she had golden highlighted hair, and wore a dark lipstick... what relationship could Nikhil be having with this girl? My mind started reeling as I looked at her.

“Hey... Shivangi,” Nikhil shook her hand.

“Good to see you after such a long time,” she said, hugging him.

“How come you are here?”

“Just the way you left Baroda to come to this place, I did the same...” The emotions on her face changed slightly.

“Left?”

“Forget it... it’s a long story.”

“You mean you have left home...?”

“Not exactly, but something like that...I am staying with my friend,” Shivangi nodded at a girl sitting at a table behind us.

“Oh... that’s sad.”

“No, that’s absolutely cool.”

Param returned after placing the order.

“Meet Param, my best friend in this new city.”

“Hi!” Shivangi shook his hand.

“This is Miraj,” Nikhil said turning towards me.

I stared fixedly at Shivangi as countless questions arose in my mind. But I dropped my gaze the moment she looked at me. Who knows why my eyes could not bear this shameless flirting, with the blue colored lenses and teasing eyes.

“Hi, Miraj. Nice name,” Shivangi extended her hand towards me.

“Hi,” I looked at her and held out my hand.”

Suddenly Miraj hesitated and could not say anything further. He turned to look at Mit.

“Miraj, I am proud of you. I might consider myself an extrovert, but I do not have the guts to open up like you. I respect your transparency. I am not concerned about whether you did something wrong or right, but the fact that you are able to narrate whatever has happened to you. It makes me feel like you are my older brother,” Mit’s eyes became moist.

“Miraj, you see, Mit’s heart and thoughts are not at all reserved, and who knows this better than you? So whatever has happened, talk about it without hesitation,” saying this much, both Mit and I remained silent, so that Miraj could continue.

“I had never talked to such a modern girl before. I felt a strange sensation as I held her hand. I completely forgot that Nikhil was about six years older than me. I began to feel that whatever ‘fun’

Nikhil was having and whatever 'freedom' Param has, is normal in the modern times and even I should change.

Behind the mask with a fake smile, there was a battle raging on. I must change myself, no matter what happens. I want to be like everyone else. My world was confined to Nikhil and Param's personality. I wanted to change my personality.

"I must say your friends are very cute...school boys," laughed Shivangi. Before Param or myself could make out whether this was a complement or a joke, Shivangi's friend came over.

"Come on. The show is about to start."

"Oh, yes..." Shivangi looked at the shiny gogo watch on her wrist.

"Have you come to watch a movie," asked Param.

"Yes. Sorry...we are getting late," Shivangi smiled at Param giving a little nudge on his cheek.

I was surprised, 'this sort of behavior in the first meeting!'

"It's ok. Nice meeting you. We will meet again. Right Nikhil?" said Param looking at Nikhil.

I knew that Param was not the type to miss an opportunity to talk to a girl. However, at that time, I did not like his behavior.

"Yes of course. Now that she knows I am here, she is not going to leave me alone," said Nikhil with a laugh.

Shivangi laughed as well. Her friend tugged at her hand, as it was getting late.

“Nikhil, give me your cell phone number. I will catch you later.”

“Sure.” Both of them exchanged their phone numbers.

“Bye everyone,” Shivangi and her friend waved goodbye.

“Nice meeting you,” said Param once again.

Shivangi looked back and smiled at him.

Param’s driver had come to pick us up from the parking lot of the mall. On the way home, Param asked, “How do you know Shivangi?”

“She was in my college.”

“Oh...”

“She was behind me. But I was not very interested in her,” said Nikhil brushing his hand through his hair.

“Why? She is so nice.”

“She is not my type. She is just for time pass.”

“Time pass? Then what is your type?”

Nikhil just smiled. There was no answer.

“She had a boyfriend, who shifted here a long time ago. It looks like she has followed him here.”

“Oh...really?” said Param with a sigh of disappointment.

“But you must have a girlfriend?” asked Param.

“Of course, is that a question to ask?” laughed Nikhil.

I was keenly listening to their conversation.

The driver hit the brakes and stopped by the roadside near my house. On that day I saw a different side to Nikhil. I was lost in trying to figure out Nikhil and Param’s frame of mind and did not even realize that I was home.

“Miraj...you’re home,” Param shook Miraj.

“Oh...yes.”

“Where are you lost?” laughed Param.

“Nowhere. Ok bye. And thanks Param.”

“Oh don’t mention it.””

(12)

“Param and Nikhil had departed but their discussions had left an imprint on my mind. Who could Nikhil’s girlfriend be? What type of girl would she be? Shivangi is very modern, so why is Nikhil not interested in her? Param also has two girlfriends, whom he met on social media. Why do I need to think about all of this? They will do whatever they want! After all, it has nothing to do with me ... I tried to calm my thoughts and find answers to all the questions arising within me, but my thoughts continued recklessly. I had nothing to do with any of this, yet there was something that would not let me stop thinking about them.

I don’t know why but that day I went to Mit.

“Mit, don’t you have a girlfriend?” I tried to pass my question off as a joke but, I wanted to find a solution to the confusion within me.

Mit was slightly startled by my sudden unexpected question. But the very next moment he put his hand on my shoulder and laughed.

“Tell me, what do you mean by girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend means girlfriend... Don’t try to be so innocent.”

“No, I am serious. I want to know from you who you really think a girlfriend is? Is she a girl with whom you have fun or you have a girlfriend just to prove yourself to others? Or do you have a

girlfriend just to imitate useless T.V. series and movies? Or is she just a friend who is a girl that's a girlfriend?"

"I'm asking you a simple question. Instead you are asking me so many questions? If you don't want to answer, then so be it," I was startled.

"Look Miraj, if one finds a friend in a girl and does not cross one's limit, then that is acceptable but if one tries to find another relationship in a friend then the entire outcome changes."

"Don't give me a complicated answer Mit. I didn't understand a thing you just said."

"If you think it over carefully, then you will understand."

I couldn't argue any further with Mit on this matter, so I started to walk away."

"Miraj, I remembered a nice story, should I tell you?" I interrupted Miraj.

"Please do tell me Samyukta."

"After Raavan had abducted Sitaji, Lord Ram and Lakshman went to find her in the jungle. On their way, they saw some jewelry lying on the ground. Lord Ram picked up the jewelry one by one and asked Lakshman, "Lakshman, are these your sister-in-law's bangles?"

"I do not know." Lakshman replied.

"Look at this, is this your sister-in-law's necklace?"

"I have no idea brother."

“We have been living together in this forest for many years, yet you cannot recognize your sister-in-law’s jewelry?” Shri Ram asked in astonishment.

Lakshman didn’t say anything.

“Look at this, are these anklets your sister-in-law’s?”

“Yes, these are her anklets.” Lakshman said yes for the first time.

Lord Ram was surprised upon hearing this. He asked Lakshman, “Lakshman, you cannot recognize any of Sita’s jewelry, then how did you recognize these anklets?”

“Brother, I have never looked at my sister-in-law. But I did touch her feet every day like I would my mother’s. That’s why I have seen her anklets. I have no idea about all the other jewelry she may have worn.”

How wonderful was Lakshman’s modesty and respect towards his sister-in-law. We are descendants of the very same civilized persons. Self-control, modesty, purity, nobility...all these traits are inherent to us. But look at our pitiable state now. Nowadays cultural values are sold for peanuts. And those who have upheld these amazing values are regretting this.” I said.

Miraj looked down.

“Miraj, you made the same mistake. You were ready to ruin your own moral values.” Upon hearing me say this, Miraj’s face became serious.

“I now realize that I have made a grave mistake.”

Before Miraj could say anything Mit spoke, “Did you know

Samyukta, that Miraj has a quality which is much better than mine.”

“Which one?”

“Miraj has the strength to accept his mistakes. Although he falls behind in facing situations and people, but **a person who accepts his mistakes and tries to correct them, that person is certainly able to get rid of all of his mistakes one day.**” Mit was trying to steer Miraj away from self-negativity by showing him his positive attributes.

“The steering wheel of our car should be in our hands. Not in the hands of others,” I told Miraj in a firm but compassionate voice.

“You are right. The steering wheel of my car was in the hands of my friends. I didn’t realize how powerful that day’s experience would prove to be,” Miraj said as he continued.

“When I reached home, mom had kept dinner ready.

“Come for dinner,” Mom called out.

Dad and I sat down for dinner. I was a little anxious that mom may ask about the movie in front of dad! I quickly ate a little bit of my dinner and got up.

“Miraj, why didn’t you eat properly?”

“Oh mom, it’s just that I’m not too hungry today.”

“Did you eat out?” Mom questioned me on the topic which I was trying to avoid.

“No I didn’t eat much. But Param and Nikhil were hungry so they had ordered pizza,” I had decided not to tell the truth but I don’t

know why I couldn't lie.

I cannot lie easily. That's a weakness I have. And I have always been ready to listen to my mom reprimanding me after telling the truth. Mit and I have always been taught to tell the truth, right from when we were kids. Those very same moral values were a hindrance that day.'"

Mit was calmly looking at Miraj but his eyes and tensed eyebrows seemed to be in disagreement with him.

"Hey, that is not a weakness but a sign of strength. Perhaps people do not appreciate its value right now but a real diamond always shines out from charcoal," I showed Miraj the positive attributes he possessed.

"I don't see any goodness in me." He was still being negative.

"There are many good things about you and your family. The good cultural and moral values that you and Mit have been brought up with are not an obstruction. Those very cultural and moral values will help you both to run on the runway of your life."

'Not running but taking off. One is a highway and the other is a runway. On the highway you keep progressing on just one level. Whereas on the runway, initially the plane is slow but when it picks up speed, it takes off from the ground. It may not be easy to progress in life with the help of good cultural and moral values. But if you have cultural and moral values, then you will be able to take off and soar high. Otherwise just like on the highway, you will remain where you are in life."

Miraj was listening to Mit's conversation with the same attention that he was listening to mine.

“What happened after you told the truth at home?”

“...afterwards?” Miraj paused for a couple of seconds, then continued.

““Who is Nikhil?” Dad quickly asked.

“He is Param’s friend.” I replied.

“He is the son of Param’s dad’s new business partner. His family moved here from Baroda,” Mom responded with more detail.

“How do you know that?” My eyes were widened upon hearing mom.

“Our neighbor Ketki aunty knows Param’s mom very well. She was telling me.”

“Oh.”

After a couple of minutes, I stood up.

“Miraj...” As I was about to go to my room, dad called out to me.

“Hmm...”

“You have less than a week left before school opens. You are aware of that, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I replied. My face was reflecting my dismay.

“When do you have to go to buy notebooks and textbooks?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know. I will ask Param.”

“Why have you not been so attentive lately? Where are you lost? You just met Param today. Could you not have asked him?” Mom’s conversation felt like she was nagging me.

“I didn’t remember,” I replied with a sense of carelessness.

With my changed attitude, dad’s gestures also became stern.

“Now don’t forget to ask him tomorrow.”

“Yes.” I quietly went to my room.

Once inside my room, I just sat there quietly for a little while. All the day’s events, flashed quickly before my eyes. I had developed a distinct dislike for Nikhil. Buying such third-grade movie tickets, whistling during crude scenes in the movie, behaving politely at the Pizza Hut for a girl like Shivangi and then calling the same girl a ‘time pass girl’ behind her back. What is Nikhil’s actual personality? I found it difficult to comprehend him. For the first time today, after seeing the other side of Nikhil’s handsome looks, branded clothes and fine English, I felt that I should stay away from him. I was tired from all the confusion in my mind. I went to bed early. But how could I sleep? Even after trying so much, my mind was not at peace. I couldn’t put a stop to the never ending thoughts. There was a continuous debate between two lawyers, the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’. I had no idea at that point, how long this case was going to go on. Because, it would be a while until the verdict came in.

The next day I decided to hold off meeting Param, as he is with Nikhil all the time. I was disturbed by the incidents of the day before. I sat down to play cricket games on the laptop.

After getting bored, I went on WhatsApp. I then went on Instagram after getting bored of that.

Lately, everyone has been obsessed with following celebrities on Instagram. I was too. I followed my favorite cricketers, footballers, boxers and actors. I somewhat enjoyed looking at profiles of Bollywood and Hollywood actors too amidst the feelings of astonishment and restlessness. Whilst looking at photos of their dazzling lifestyle, I came across some unpleasant photos. Initially, I looked away from the screen and turned the screen off. But just like with quicksand, once you fall in it, the more you try to come out of it, the more you get pulled in it. In the same way, I became lost in looking at such trash.

My mind had become full of scenes from the movie we had watched. I also followed the actress that was in that movie on Instagram. The reason driving me to do all this was the anxiousness I was feeling to know what their personal and professional lives were like! But I didn't know what I would gain from knowing all this irrelevant stuff."

"You have a lot of understanding yet you got dragged into this path?" I asked Miraj.

"I have that understanding now. At that time, I had no sense at all. I was blinded by all the celebrities' lifestyles. Which cricketer or actor has what kind of a sports car or bike, how many bungalows they have; I wanted to know all of that. And that was just so that when everyone would talk about it, I would not look stupid. The lack of such knowledge, to a certain extent in my heart, would make me feel inferior to other people. So as a solution, the knowledge obtained from sources like Google, Instagram and YouTube would keep me part of the gossip going on in the groups I was part of," Miraj told us without pause.

"Now like other people, I too am up to date with things. With that satisfaction, I lied down in bed and stretched. I started thinking. All

these celebrities have so much wealth and luxury. Many of them haven't even seen the inside of a college. Some have not even passed their tenth or twelfth grade and some have left school altogether. Yet they are the happiest people right now. What about me? At school, at home, at tuition classes, I am living with the stress and torture of studying. Education hasn't helped anyone and I am no exception.

With a deep sigh, I put the duvet over my head. I got lost in the world of my thoughts and didn't realize when I fell off to sleep. As it is, I hadn't slept well for the past couple of days!

Half an hour later the phone rang. I reluctantly opened my eyes. I thought to myself, it's certainly Param who is calling since I haven't gone to see him today. But no! With my eyes half open, I peeked at the name on my phone. It was Vishrut, who was calling this time. Vishrut?? After a long time!

"Hello," I said rubbing my eyes.

"Hello you! Where have you been lost? During the period of exams, it was okay but now vacation is almost over too and no phone calls? What world are you in?" Vishrut laid it out on me.

I felt like talking to Vishrut and opening up about what I was going through to him but something was stopping me. I wanted to talk but the words would not come out.

"I am here. How are you doing?" My words were being spoken as if they were preset.

"I am alright. I just thought of you today so I called."

"Hmm." Not knowing what to say next, I became silent. There was no warmth in the tone of my voice. It didn't take long for a friend

to notice I was not myself.

“I hope everything is alright with you,” Vishrut said with a worried tone.

“Yes...yes...I was sleeping, so...” I paused again.

“Oh, sorry, I disturbed you. Go to sleep. I will call you again another time. Bye. Good night.”

“Good night.”

I closed my eyes.

“I hope everything is alright with you.” Vishrut’s words started to play in my mind. I know nothing at all was alright with me yet I couldn’t understand what was wrong. I felt distressed and uneasy about not being able to talk to Vishrut. Gradually, everything seemed uninteresting. I didn’t like to be with anyone. I still had hidden anger towards Param and Nikhil.”

Miraj ventured into his past. He spoke without a single pause. My heart melted many times whilst listening to his story. On the one side, his stream of experience was overflowing and on other, while listening to him, my stream of thoughts flowed uninterruptedly as well. I could understand many of the phases of his life. From seeing him, I could relate to the kind of impact and the intensity those phases can have on a person.

Mit was quiet. He was looking at Miraj and me with a lot of emotion. He had seen both of us very closely. Mit’s heart must have melted after learning about the unknown pages from Miraj’s life diary. He had seen many of the chapters from the diary of my life. Yet, he felt happy seeing the Samyukta of today. He was also in shock and surprise too. Today, the circumstances of the two people

before him had switched. Though, I was confident that Mit had the patience and understanding to appreciate this role reversal.

Nonetheless, he was trying to act normal, almost as if his emotions were not given permission to present themselves on his face. But eyes are an open book. They can reveal a lot without actually speaking. As an older brother he was doing fine. At the moment, it was more important to support Miraj not discourage him.

“Can I ask you a question Miraj?” I asked

“Yes.”

“Who do you feel special, happy and safe with in your life?”

“I didn’t understand.”

“Ok, well, let me give you three options. From Param, Nikhil and Vishrut, who do you feel special, happy and safe with?”

“Why are you asking this all of a sudden?”

“You should ask the Miraj within you, not the Miraj on the outside.”

“Yes, the Miraj within is different and the Miraj who goes around with a fake mask on is different. The inner one is the original Miraj. He understands what the heart has to say. The outer one listens to the intellect. If you close your eyes, then you will certainly find the answer.”

Hearing my question, Miraj closed his eyes. He was trying to find an answer.

“Miraj, sorry to interrupt you,” I interjected just a couple of moments later.

“Hmm...” He opened his eyes and came back to the present.

I looked at the watch on my wrist.

It was dark outside. It was more important for me to respect the time and stay within my limits. My relationship with Miraj couldn't be termed as a friendship. He was more like my younger brother and I like his older sister. My friendship with Mit was untarnished too. Yet every relationship has its limits. Just two minutes of forgetting those limits can bring unwarranted consequences.

“Oh, it's late. We should leave now.” Before my lips could even open to say anything further, Mit spoke up.

“Yes.” Now I didn't have to say anything.

“Let's go.”

The three of us walked and left the beach. Miraj was walking with his head down. Mit was staring at Miraj. It seemed as though Mit was happy with the change in his brother's walk and behavior. His eyes silently expressed gratitude for all I was doing.

“It's late today but we will meet again soon. I really enjoyed talking to Miraj,” I looked at Mit and said.

The look on Miraj's face signified a sense of trust for me, which I had to uphold. It is only when you have a lot of trust in someone that you can open up to them. Otherwise, there are many people who take advantage of your trust and ruin your life.

“Shall we come with you until your house?” Mit asked.

“Oh no, I will be fine. Don't worry. My home is very close.”

“I will answer your question in the next meeting.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I know you already have your answer.”

Miraj didn't say a word. He just smiled.

We went our separate ways. I was happy for Miraj. His condition is definitely improving because he has become very open with me. His burdens have started to become lighter.

When we talk about our miseries to our confidant, it is from that moment on that we start to experience freedom.

(13)

The next meeting should be held at such a place where Miraj can completely clear his mind. After that, the past will remain with him, not as a painful experience but as one where he learned some important life lessons. Lessons that prevent him from making such similar mistakes in the future again. It is my wish that he makes a fresh start in his life. Where would I find such a place?

I reached home lost in thought. Grandma was doing aarti*. I instantly felt at peace and joined in the prayers.

“Samyukta, you know navratri* has been going on for the past two days?” Grandma said, placing the aarti plate in front of me.

“Yes, grandma,” I took the aarti plate from her. I waived my palms over the burning lamp and took blessings. I felt as if God had blessed me, as an idea of a new place to meet Miraj materialized in my thoughts.

After finishing dinner, I went to my room, changed into my pajamas and laid down on the bed. My mobile was next to me but I didn’t look at it. I wanted to enjoy this free time. I could see my own reflection in Miraj’s current condition. When the phone rang, I reluctantly answered it.

Glancing at the screen I saw the call was from Mit. *What could the matter be? I thought to myself.*

“Hello,” I said answering it.

“Dear Samyukta.”

“What happened?”

“How can I tell you what happened?”

“Tell me, why have you called me?”

“Today Miraj asked me if we could sit and watch *Tom & Jerry* on the television together?”

“Really?”

“Yes, I can’t believe it! We used to watch cartoons together when we were younger. After so many years we actually sat and watched cartoons together. Furthermore we were both very relaxed.”

“Wow! I am so happy to hear this,” I exclaimed with happiness.

“The distance that had inadvertently developed between us for the past several months has reduced after hanging out together like this.”

“I noticed that at the beach,” I said.

“He also told mom that it has been so many days since she made pav-bhaji*.”

“Oh, that must have made aunty very happy.”

“Yes, mom’s emotions were soaring in the sky. She told me that she wants to meet up with you.”

“I will definitely meet her. There is a lot of improvement in Miraj’s condition. But I still feel that there is something that he is still keeping inside of him. There is a barrier that is preventing him from expressing himself openly. I did special prayers to God that he becomes as open as he was before. He should get rid of the remaining burden he is harboring as well. You too can pray sincerely for him.”

“I will do that for sure. This is the first time I have heard this from you.”

“There is a superpower and with his guidance, this type of result is coming forth. At the same time our positive intents and sincere prayers will also bring positive results. I have full faith in that.”

“We have done a lot of prayers for Miraj. But today, I will pray with true faith and intents of positivity,” Mit said

“I will come and see him next week.”

“Sure. Bye. I will not thank you now. I will thank you when you complete your entire project.”

“Yes, not only thank you. You will also have to give me a party!” I said laughing.

“Of course,” Mit answered.

“Ok, bye.”

“Bye.”

The following day, Mit’s mom called.

‘Samyukta, I want to meet you, dear,’ she said casually.

I knew the reason she wanted to meet up. After all, she is a “mom” and who else would she share her agonies with? Where else could she discuss her concerns? She reminded me of my own mom.

I immediately said yes to her. We met at the beach. Aunty was looking at me and she started talking.

“Miraj was praising you a lot. We talk about you almost daily. Yesterday, Mit came to see me after Miraj had gone to sleep.”

I was listening quietly.

“He said to me that you have changed completely. He said you used to be a girl who was once sad and disheartened. That you would always look down at your feet unable to face people, but now you are able to look and speak confidently. Instead of being ashamed at your appearance you have accepted your shortcomings and in fact even laugh at them. We had all tried to convince Miraj to help him overcome his condition, but your way with him is unique. When we had all but given up on Miraj to try and get him out of his depression that is when you started afresh with him. The closed buds of Miraj’s withered mind are beginning to blossom one after another, like a blooming flower. We can all feel this fragrance and sparkle in our home!”

Interrupting her I said, “Aunty, I haven’t done anything like that. I saw my past condition in Miraj, and I have experienced the pain he is going through firsthand. I have got a new lease in life through the blessings of a divine personality. I have no capacity to repay him. So, if I can help alleviate someone else’s pain then, I think I can repay my debt to him to some extent.” My heart silently bowed down to ‘Dada’s’ compassion. My eyes welled up as my heart overflowed with gratitude for him.

“Mit was not able to believe that a person who is completely broken can become an emotional support for another person.”

“Even I am not able to believe this.” Mentally I thanked Dada for giving me a new lease on life.

Aunty looked away from me for a few moments. Playing with the hem of her sari with her fingers she started talking with some confusion in her mind.

“From the time Miraj’s behavior started to change, I have become like a sandwich between him and the rest of my family. Initially, he was very aggressive. At that time, it was like I had to be alert before the flood came so that his dad would not be so upset with him. I had a deep seated fear that Miraj shouldn’t be insolent with his dad. This was compounded by the fact that his dad is very strict, especially when it comes to things like discipline. Mit often used to tell me that the change in Miraj’s nature was as a sign of him being a teenager. Mit would say that we needed to deal with Miraj with love and not with anger or irritation. However, there were times when Miraj would be so angry that I too would lose my control. Sometimes I have said some harsh things to him as well. Not only was his education suffering but he also was too.

Suddenly after some time, there was a huge change in his behavior. He became very quiet at home. I then started to feel very sorry for him. My heart would ache seeing his condition. I felt as if my child had been cursed by someone’s evil eye. His dad also felt very sad. We tried to find out what his problem was but all our efforts were in vain. Mit tried to convince him but Miraj started to stay away from Mit as well. All our efforts to be closer to him made him retract into his shell even more. A woman can bear all kinds of suffering but cannot bear the suffering of her child.”

“You are right Aunty. There is a rule that when one’s endurance reaches its peak, then a person turns towards religion. Otherwise this world would forget God also.”

“You sound like a grown up,” Aunty said.

“I wanted to remain young but people around me, made me grow up quickly.”

“Our society is also very strange.”

I was aware of the fact that Alka aunty was my mom’s age and would not talk to me openly. After all it’s not natural for an elderly person to take advice from a young person.

“I have hurt my parents a lot too; especially my mom. After all, the only person I could take out all my agony was my mom.” Alka aunty would only open up to me if she trusted me. So, I started sharing my misdemeanors with her.

“One day....

“Samyukta, get ready, dear. We are getting late.” It was the wedding of my mom’s close relative.

“I don’t want to come.”

“Why? Your dad has got you such an expensive dress for this occasion,” Grandma said, looking at a wrinkled dress laid out on the bed in my room.

“I don’t want to wear this dress.”

“What happened dear, you had chosen it yourself, right?”

“That was a mistake. I thought if I wore good clothes, I would look good. But now I have realized that whatever I wear, I will still be the ugliest person in the world.”

“Don’t say that, dear,” Grandma put her hand on my shoulder.

I shrugged grandma’s hand off.

I took the dress and went to another room thumping my feet. Everyone thought that I was going to get ready. After fifteen minutes, I came out of the room.

“Dear, such a dark shade of lipstick? And this one...” mom was dumb founded seeing me.

I deliberately had put on very dark and bright colored makeup, just like fashion models wear on the runway.

“Why, what is wrong in this? If other people do it, you praise it and when I put it on, it doesn’t look good?” I started yelling.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” Mom desperately tried to cajole me.

“When your nieces or other girls get ready you always appreciate them,” my inner jealousy was exploding. My mother had inadvertently become the scapegoat for all the anger I was feeling as I poured it all out.

“Samyukta, what happened to you suddenly?” Grandma inquired.

“Grandma, please don’t say anything,” I interjected before she could continue.

“Please go and sit outside for a little while,” Mom quietly requested grandma so that I would not insult her further.

“No, you stay right here. You are not going anywhere,” I grabbed grandma’s hand.

“You always tell me that girls have to dress well. You are already beautiful. There is only one problem, and that too will get better with the medications,” I yelled.

“Yes dear, but you have to be patient,” Grandma consoled.

“Even after two years, I don’t see any results. How can I be more patient?” My voice was rising as I become ruder.

“Samyukta....” Mom tried to stop me.

“Stop it mom, let me speak. You guys say I am good looking. Even though I have applied this red lipstick and golden eye shadow why am I not glowing?”

I rubbed my fingers vigorously on my lips and spread lipstick on my face. I rubbed my eyeshadow and eyeliner and wiped my hands on my new dress.

Mom and grandma were both silently watching my outburst. Mom tried to come closer to me but I held out my hand to stop her.

“You guys go and just leave me alone.”

Without a word, they quietly left my room. I slammed the door, closing it shut behind them.

I went and stood in front of the mirror. I screamed when I saw my face and burst into tears.

Mom and grandma were begging me to open the door. I was inside

and they were on the outside.

Alka aunty was staring at me. She was surprised that I was able to share my outburst so freely with her?

“You know Aunty, my medications were so strong that the side effects made me very irritable. There was a drastic change in my hormones. The heat from my body eventually came out in my speech and it would only calm down once it had hurt someone. I would lose my temper without notice. I would cry for no reason. It was very common for me to scream and cry for no apparent reason and because of that no one in the house bothered me. I did not want to make a big deal out of small things, but this was happening to me. Sometimes, I would behave like a mad person. Even today when I remember my face smeared with red, black and golden colors, it raises my heartbeat,” I took a deep breath and stopped...

I looked at Alka aunty she was wiping her tears with her scarf. I gave her my water bottle and she took two sips and composed herself. For a while, there was silence between us, the only sound was that of the ocean waves. We were both watching the waves; some were small and others were big. They would come crashing with the shoreline and then silently retreat back into the ocean.

Life is also like the waves of the sea. Just as waves come and go but the shore remains steadfast, similarly in our life sufferings, difficulties, and waves of confusion come and go. We need to be resolute like the shore.

“Samyukta, at least you used to cry but Miraj didn’t even do that. He was suffering within and because of that he was getting more and more depressed,” Alka aunty looked down as she spoke.

“That is the problem Aunty. In our society, we have been taught that if you are a boy, you are not supposed to cry. Due to that, a man’s

ego hesitates to express his feelings. Boys don't cry... boys cannot be soft... the words that are told to them since their childhood do not allow them to express their feelings openly. The suffocating and bewildered boy crushes his emotions with the weapon of his ego and this ultimately leads to disastrous consequences. An outcome of which is seen expressing itself as depression.”

“We don't understand where we went wrong. Everything we said was for his good. Mit was sensible from an early age and he has always lived his life according to his own principles and set of rules. Miraj on the other hand did not have such a set of life values. His circumstances drove him to act and behave the way he did. The result was we see is that he has become a shadow of his former self.

Family values had bound him to a certain extent. Perhaps these very instilled values proved to be a hindrance for him to become modern and change with the ways of the world. His circle consisted of having fun, friends, movies, music, and social media. He wanted to get respect from others by creating an impression on them... he was surrounded by all of this and Miraj was attracted to it all. One more thing in this list was limitations. Due to that he could not go about his ways openly beyond a certain limit, but gradually he was trying to cross that line by hiding from everyone. We think Param and Nikhil's company may have played a big part in this.”

“You must have understood why it was so?” I asked cautiously

“Yes, due to my interference and bickering, he started hiding everything from me.”

“That was pressuring him. Aunty, we need to understand that due to the western influence children now mature earlier than their age. You cannot control or turn them by punishment, education or any pressure. It is only with love that we can bind them.”

“Do parents not love their children?” Alka aunty inquired.

“They do but they have expectations and they compare their children to others. Ultimately, parents care about their status in society, and due to that when they unknowing exert pressure on their children, the children find it unbearable, even torturous.”

“Meaning...” Alka aunty looked quizzically

“Meaning, Mit is already studying L.L.B. against his wishes. Since uncle was successful in studying L.L.B. his son should also pursue the same profession. Is such insistence by a parent justified?”

Hearing this, aunty became very quiet.

“Mit is mentally capable so it was not a problem. But Miraj wanted to pursue a career in cricket. Unfortunately, he was not allowed to do so. After that he started breaking down. And then as you are saying, undue comparison, a weak mindset, stress, peer pressure, self - negativity, competition... all of these devoured his mind like a virus. And now this is his condition.”

Aunty let out a gasp.

“Alka aunty, frustration is a temporary condition. It’s not craziness. With the support of the family, one can overcome it. Family support implies nothing but trusting him. What can’t be achieved with love and trust?” I put my hand gently on her hand.

“Parents realize that my child needs extra coaching but they don’t realize that he also needs extra counseling” I added.

“Mit had once told me that we need to take Miraj to a psychiatrist, but my mind was not prepared to accept that and I become

dismayed.”

“There is no shame nor should there be any hesitancy to consult a psychiatrist, if need be. It is sometimes too late to save our loved one when we start thinking of what people will think. There are many stages of depression. In the initial stage the patient gets cured just by counseling. He does not need any medication. Miraj is at that stage right now. Just as the body gets fever, doesn’t the brain also get fever?”

Alka aunty put her other hand on my hand and nodded as if she understood her mistake.

“At a certain age, if one does not get love at home then the person would go out to find it. We also had a lot of problems in our house. Mainly, because of me, all the relations were complicated. But one day all the complications were cleared. My family has learned to live and cope with my condition, with the help of this extraordinary person. Today, I am able to stand in front of you with no hesitation. Although there has been no change in my physical appearance, there has been an incredible improvement in my speech, behavior and attitude due to the change in my understanding.”

“Samyukta, I also want to meet this person who has had such great impact on you and your family. I need to know more about him.”

“Sure aunty. Right now, I am interacting with Miraj as per his guidance. I have faith that Miraj will be completely normal, just like before.”

Hearing this, Alka aunty was very happy.

“It’s getting dark shall we call it a day, aunty?”

“Yes. Samyukta, I feel so much better after meeting you. You have

not only helped Miraj but have helped me as well.”

We parted company and I went home.

(14)

It didn't take long for the week to pass. I asked Miraj and Mit to come to my house at seven the next morning. We had planned to go cycling. After some time, I received a call from Miraj.

“Hi Miraj”

“Hello Samyukta”

“How are you? Is everything alright?”

“Yes. I just wanted to talk to you privately.”

“What's the hurry? We are meeting tomorrow, aren't we?”

“Up until now, I hadn't shared what I have told you with anyone, not even Mit.”

“Yes, I am aware of that.”

“I have shared everything with you in Mit's presence because you insisted, but now I will not be able to say anything further with him around.”

“Do you trust me, Miraj?” I avoided asking him ‘why he wouldn't talk in front of Mit.’

“Why are you asking me such a silly question? Do you have any doubt after listening to my story so far?”

“Look, you have trust in me and I have trust in Mit,” I answered without any hesitation.

“But Samyukta...”

“Just a few months of misunderstanding cannot possibly weaken the strong bond you have with Mit. He became aloof from everyone for a short time as he needed to deal with his own problems. That does not mean that he is always going to be like that. He really does care for you Miraj,” I tried to explain.

“Yes, but he will not understand me. He will not be able to relate to everything I have to say. He has never been in such a situation. He won’t understand me,” Miraj uttered despairingly.

“Miraj, I have no idea at the moment what must have happened to you, but I know for sure, that whatever we go through in life are just phases.

And this simply is the process of life. Each mistake increases our life’s experience and each experience in turn reduces our mistakes.”

“But, it is not necessary for everyone to go through all the experiences!” Miraj lamented.

“What happened to you must have happened to many people, but not everyone has the guts to open up like you. Mit and I are with you even if we haven’t gone through the same experience. I am here with you today, and might not be later on. But Mit is always going to be with his younger brother. I have absolute trust in his maturity. Have faith in me. I will not let your trust be broken. Now,

please go to sleep without any further thoughts. We will meet tomorrow morning. I am not going to force you, just do what your heart says.”

“Alright, if that’s what you think. I will try my best,” Miraj said hesitantly.

Next morning, Miraj called, “I am outside your house.”

“Okay, I’m ready. I’m coming.”

“How are you, son? Come on in,” my mom had come out with me to meet Miraj and Mit.

“No Aunt. Maybe some other time...,” said Miraj hesitantly.

Not seeing Mit I asked, “Where is Mit?”

“His bike seems to have a puncture. He will join us as soon as it’s repaired,” Miraj replied.

“Did it occur to him to check his bike now!? I asked a little perplexed.

“Why don’t you come on in and have some tea and snacks while you guys wait for him?” Mom encouraged.

“No thanks aunt. Today my mom made my favorite snacks. I had those before I left home so I am quite full.”

“Ok then. But the next time you will have to come in. Ronak is out today but I am sure he will be happy to see you,” My mom had become only too familiar by now on how to deal with cases like mine without any insistence and pressure.

“Sure.”

Just then the phone rang.

“Hello. Samyukta, I need to tell you something.” I wondered what Mit wanted to say all of a sudden.

“What?” I asked impatiently.

“Don’t let Miraj know about this phone call, Ok?”

“Umm Ok,” I walked away, so Miraj couldn’t hear me.

“Miraj, is opening up to you rather well. I don’t want this discussion to stop. I am convinced that he will feel much lighter once he has had a chance to completely express his feelings, and empty his heavy burden. I am sure just like before, he will be back to normal soon,” Mit said.

“Yes so what are you saying?” I curiously asked Mit.

“It’s just that I will refrain from coming with you today if he is apprehensive about my presence. It is better the two of you meet up without me,” Mit reluctantly explained.

Both brothers were thinking about each other.

“No, you are needed. You have to come! But I want to share something with you before you do that.” My job was to bring them together with each other and meet at the center.

“What is that?”

“We don’t know what exactly happened to Miraj. I want you to promise that you will not get emotional or show any aggression at whatever he has to say today. During this time of adolescence, it is

natural for one to make mistakes. You must not react to anything he says, even if it is against your principles. You have just told me that he will feel much lighter once he has poured out his feelings. That will only happen if he has our full support. It does not matter what sort of mistakes he has made, but he must be reassured of your unconditional love before he has revealed them.”

“Yes Samyukta, I promise. I understand. But I am glad that you have warned me. Had I known all this earlier, there wouldn’t have been this drift between us. If only I had understood his curiosity in the world of chatting...”

“That’s it then. I just needed this assurance from you. Come quickly, we are waiting for you.”

Miraj was waiting, lost in thoughts. I walked over to him and cleared my throat. He started “Where are we going?”

“There is a path at the back. We are going to a place about four and half kilometers from here. But I will not disclose the place to you right now. You have to see it for yourself.”

“Ok,” Miraj responded and then continued “I really enjoyed cycling today after a long time.”

“Sometimes it’s so much fun to re-live one’s childhood memories. I cycle regularly. And sometime if I feel like it, I just take simple joy from coloring pictures from children’s books. At times I get joy out of playing with little pups along the way.”

“We have become dependent on mobiles, TV, and the internet to get pleasure, whilst we seem to have forgotten the simple things. Innocent pleasure... what a beautiful word,” Miraj exclaimed.

“Yes, I have also heard it from someone. Innocent pleasure... the

pleasure that does not cause suffering to anyone.”

Mit turned up from around the bend ringing the bell of his bicycle as if to warn us of his presence.

All three of us were quiet. It was as if we had given pause to our speech and ease to our mind... we were free to take in as much of the morning freshness as we possibly could. We rode for about 20 minutes enjoying the beautiful greenery along the way and listening to the chirping birds, before we reached the place I had in mind.

“This is a temple!” exclaimed Miraj.

“I have never been to this place before,” said Mit looking around curiously.

“This temple was dedicated to Lord Ram along with Lakshmanji, Sitaji and Hanumanji. This place is a great power house, a temple with an amalgamation of strength, devotion and faith. Let’s go inside and pray,” I encouraged.

After prayers, we found a spacious spot where we sat and shared the prasad* from the temple priest.

“Samyukta, the answer to the question you asked me last time...” Miraj started the conversation.

I shook my head to stop him from saying anything further. “I know what your answer is Miraj.”

Miraj looked at me questioningly.

“Life is like a jigsaw puzzle. People like me can help you look for the right pieces and put them together. However, it is up to you to

prasad* - Auspicious offering of vegetarian food to God

complete your puzzle,” I elaborated.

“Umm once again your words...” Miraj started to speak...

“...are very deep, you mean?” I laughed.

“Yes.”

“But I am very happy that you are able to get the essence of these deep words. See....you’re a genius!”

A light smile spread over Miraj’s face.

“Do you know why I had asked you that question?”

“No, not really”

“So that, you can determine and fit the right people in your inner circle. At that time I had given you only three options... Nikhil, Param or Vishrut. But you might have more people in these options for you to choose from.”

Miraj’s lowered his gaze. He started to look around. There was still something bothering him. “This temple is very beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I have come here after a long time.”

“My mind feels peaceful here,” Miraj said.

“Yes. It’s because we have faith in God. We always feel peaceful where there is faith.

“Hmm...”

“Where there is faith, new energy begins to flow there. With that

energy we can climb and cross over mountains. So there is no place in this life where one needs to become depressed over any situation. Not all days are the same. Just because the sun is not visible through the dark clouds, it does not mean that the sun is not there. It will shine as soon as the clouds have dispersed. In the same way when the veils over our understanding disperse, the light of knowledge will shine through. We only need someone to push aside the clouds.”

“You are right. It’s because of you I have now got a lot of understanding,” Miraj said.

“Whereas for me, it was because of someone else,” Once again, Dada came in my vision. I continued, “It was only last night I came across a beautiful quote by Gandhiji.

“Which one?”

“I will not let anyone walk through my mind, with their dirty feet.”
-Mahatma Gandhi

“Yes, it’s a very nice quote,” replied Miraj after giving it some thought.

“It is powerful and full of self-confidence, isn’t it?” I asked.

Mit was sitting with his eyes lowered and his hands folded in prayer. It looked as if he was silently praying. The prayer must be for strength either for him to be patient or for Miraj to open up.

“Sorry, but I do hope that whatever I am about to tell you now will remain between the three of us,” Miraj said stealing a quick glance at Mit.

“It’s ok Miraj, you don’t have to be sorry. It goes without saying.

Besides whatever you are disclosing is not easy to share with anyone. I have also shared the darkest side of my life with a special personality, in confidence,” I reassured him.

“Samyukta, on the other hand I also wonder, what do you want from me? Nothing really... You have given me so much of your valuable time. You have listened to my story very calmly. There isn't any selfish motive in that,” Miraj said appreciatively.

“Of course there is!” I rolled my eyes jokingly.

“I don't believe it...” Miraj laughed.

“There was a time when I was also in the same situation as you. And someone freed me from that anguish. From that day onwards I developed a burning desire that everyone should experience the same freedom. I feel very sad when I see someone else's suffering. I am doing all this to heal my own suffering. And that, is actually my own selfishness in doing what I am doing. I will be very happy and satisfied to see you come out of this low phase of your life.

Someone changed the whole perception of my life. I have no words to describe how much that person has done for me. So what can I do for him in return? I am not capable of giving him anything. Yes, this much I can definitely do... I will consider myself very fortunate if I can help other people in the same situation as us to find peace, happiness and the right understanding... and that will be my return gift to Him!” I said.

“Your understanding and your words are full of virtue. It will take me a long time to understand them. I want to know who that person is. But for today I want to get rid of the entire remaining load lingering in my mind, in this pious temple,” I looked at Miraj's eyes, as he said this. His eyes spoke volumes of his honesty and sincerity.

“Rest assured that whatever you tell us will not be repeated anywhere else and I will not hold any negative opinions of you. In this generation, who does not have similar problems? The only difference is that only those who uphold high values will be searching for the right understanding, for a way out. But they can’t find the right path. Everyone is looking for a way to come out of this pitfall. But the big question we all find ourselves stuck with is who should one trust?”

“It’s true. At the moment I don’t know what to say to you, but I do want to understand each and every word that you have to say. After listening to you, I pray that I don’t fall short in fulfilling my responsibility as your brother. Please do forgive me, Miraj, for whatever has happened already. I will not let the same mistakes happen again,” Mit’s words added the feeling of truth and repentance to the pious atmosphere in the temple. The words suppressed in the heart, when poured out at the right time, can break down the wall of misunderstanding between relationships.

Miraj looked at Mit. Corners of Mit’s eyes were damp. There was no doubt Miraj felt humbled. His eyes said it all. My one task was accomplished. With a sigh of great relief, I looked at the opened the temple doors and thanked the Lord within.

There was silence for a few minutes and feelings of empathy arose between the two brothers. I witnessed that moment where Mit’s relationship had revived for the better with Miraj.

“I often refer to a revered personality. He has said that, *‘Today’s youth is very pure. But they are suffocated due to the lack of right understanding. They need someone to guide them. They are overwhelmed with illusory attachment.’*” Now all Miraj had to do was to come out this web of feelings and empty his unfulfilled desires and restlessness. Thinking this, I hoped to change the

direction of Miraj's thought process.

"Illusory attachment...yes....I got entangled in illusory attachment," Miraj's voice trailed off...

He became quiet. It was clear that he was going to spill out a new and final chapter of his past. Firmness as well as remorse was clearly evident on his face. Perhaps new names would be added to the previous three for which he had to first brace himself. Composing himself he started...

(15)

“Movies, games, chatting online.... the same routine continued for me during my vacation. At the same time, something happened in my life for which I had already developed a strong desire long before. I made an online chat friend.

When I got disappointment from every aspect of my life, I found a new friend in the form of a ray of hope. Her name was Priyanka. From the very first day, I liked her more than any other chat friend I had made. Our likes and thoughts matched to a certain extent.”

““Of all my chat friends, you are the best so far!” Priyanka once said. Her statement became a reason for my happiness. It was a pleasure to win something.

“Really?”

“Yes, you are simple and honest. I like that you are not flirting like the other boys.”

“You are also very nice,” I had never spoken to any girl so freely and I wanted to share that with Priyanka but I was not able to verbalize it.

I started liking Priyanka’s openness. In school, I only spoke to the girls when necessary. But when I saw Param and Nikhil openly talking to girls, I was haunted by a deep seated feeling of

inferiority. The words that Param had uttered, 'It's not your cup of tea.' had really pierced my ego. Although I had my moral values, in this matter, I started comparing myself with him. Unable to find a worthy person in my current circle of friends and to prove myself, I started to search for a friend on the internet. Priyanka turned out to be a perfect fit in this regard.

I got into a habit of sharing details of how my day was and what new things I did with her. Priyanka, on her part also shared stories of her family and friends with me. In a few days our friendship became so strong that we would talk at least once a day. You could say it had become almost like an addiction". A soon as he said this, Miraj felt shy.

"It's ok Miraj. No need to be shy. Everyone makes girlfriends and boyfriends out of rivalry. The pressure sets in that everyone has someone and I have no one. Whether it's for education, money, status or so-called relationships... peer pressure always plays a major role in our lives," I said to bring Miraj out of his guilt ridden feelings.

He started speaking again, "Priyanka responded to all of my discussions and cared for me. I really just thought 'how can there be such a nice girl?'"

I was often lost in Priyanka's thoughts. The satisfaction that I used to get from Vishrut and Mit, I started to get from Priyanka. I began to feel that I didn't need anyone else anymore. On one hand I was becoming closer to Priyanka and on the other hand, I had started to develop differences with all my family members.

Mit's eyelids lowered. A grave expression spread across his face.

""Miraj, your tuition teacher had called. You need to attend tuition classes from tomorrow." Mom told me and ruined the happiness I

felt during my vacation.

“Oh no! From tomorrow?! Both school and tuition?!?” I thumped my legs in dismay.

“Yes, you did get a long vacation. Now get ready for studies from tomorrow,” Mom said with a stern voice.

“Ok...Ok... I know that... don’t give me the same lecture again mom,” I replied back rudely.

My mom was aghast by my rude behavior. But she left me thinking that if she would say anything else, I would continue to argue. Mom and dad could not understand the reason for my changed behavior. They began to spend some time with me.

“Dear Miraj, what’s up nowadays? You have become very busy after your school has opened,” Dad said one night and came and sat next to me in the living room.

“Yes.” I answered curtly.

“Dad, you and I, all three of us could go for a walk every night,” Mom said encouragingly as she came into my room. It felt like the two of them had discussed what to say before coming to speak with me.

“We shall see. I have no interest in taking a walk every day,” I replied sharply.

“Why? When Param calls you late at night, don’t you insist on wanting to go out with him?” Mom interjected quickly.

“Yes, but when I want to go out with him you always say ‘no’, to me.”

“He always calls late at night, so I have no choice but to say no, my dear.”

“We don’t get any time other than at night to hang out together, mom.”

“Miraj dear, you are at such an age right now that you may not believe us. But with experience you will surely understand, why we behave the way we do with you.”

“The main point was that from today onwards, we would like to spend some time together,” Dad tried to divert the conversation.

“Yes Miraj. Mit has also become very busy these days. For a long time now, we haven’t spent time together as a family.”

“Mom, now I have also grown up and I enjoy spending time with my friends more, than with you guys.” My attitude was still very rude. At first, I had no courage to speak against dad but now I did not care.

“We are not saying not to go and spend time with your friends, but there is a limit to that. We need to see the time and circumstances as well?” Mom said.

“Miraj, there must be a reason why your mom is saying no?” Dad’s voice became serious.

“There is no reason dad. Mom feels that if I am allowed to go out at night, even once, then I will get into the habit of going out and that will spoil me.”

“No dear, we trust you but it is not safe.”

“Param’s parents give him full freedom, but I have all the restrictions in this house.”” At last, I had blurted out what was suppressed in my mind. I was not convinced by what they were saying. A different kind of aggression was emerging within me and I had no clue what it was?

““Why do you feel that way? Dad fulfils all your demands and you are still not satisfied?” Mom’s voice had started to choke up.

“Miraj, Param’s family lives with the thinking and values of a high society. We cannot live like that. Our moral values will not let us live in that manner.” For the first time, my dad’s words were not harsh against my rude behavior. Somewhere in my heart I was affected by his feelings but my heart could not withstand the negative force rising within me.

“You only see what is on the outside. They are modern in their thinking. But you and mom are still very orthodox. Your thinking has not changed nor has your way of living. You both tend to impart advice for everything...” I had said with my eyes looking down as I did not have the courage to look into their eyes. However, the turmoil that was going on inside me for so long had finally burst open. My voice felt as if it was being stretched when I spoke.

Mom was shocked to hear this. She could not say anything else and went to the kitchen. I felt separated from everyone, even though we were all living in the same house. I could not even fathom what I had said in anger. My mind started reeling, my throat choked up. I thought of getting up and going to my room but my dad was still sitting across me. I could not bear his feelings towards me.

I looked at him for a quick second and dropped my eyes. On the one hand, I was furious from within and on the other I was remorseful for hurting my mom’s feelings. There was a lot of uneasiness within me. I was not clear as to what I wanted to do or even say. I was

overwhelmed amidst so many questions and confusions hounding me. I was fighting with my own self.

Just then Mit came home. The atmosphere in the house was extremely tense. All the conversations stopped as soon as he walked in. He later found out what had happened. He came to my room that night.

“Hello brother, you are so quiet nowadays?” Mit started moving the things that were next to me on my bed.

I was messaging Priyanka.

“Hello Priyanka.... how are you?”

“Where are you today???”

“My school starts tomorrow. Why are there no messages from you all day?”

I quickly closed my phone and looked at Mit.

“Nope, it’s not like that. You don’t have any time to think about what I am doing nowadays either?” I said rebelliously.

“Yes, I am sorry about that Miraj. But I have decided that I will spend more quality time at home even though I am not here that much these days.”

“Wow!” I raised my eyebrows sarcastically.

“Can I tell you something?” He asked politely.

I nodded.

“When you were young, you used to ask me for everything. But now that you have grown up you have an understanding of what is good and bad. All I can tell you from my experience is that there is a need to be alert before doing anything that your heart does not accept. No matter what kind of friendship you have, do not be drawn into it if your heart is not there.””

I looked at Mit. It felt like his sharp gaze was trying to pierce through Miraj’s mind. “Miraj, even though you were annoyed with Mit, you are now giving yourself proof that you listened to him carefully,” I told him.

“Hmm... yes, as soon as I heard that, I remembered the day I had gone to see the movie with Param. I remembered the guilt I had felt at that time.”

““His school starts tomorrow. Now, both of you go to sleep,” Mom’s said from outside.

“Okay bro, time for bed.” Mit got up after putting his hand on my shoulder. I checked the time on my mobile. It was quarter to eleven. Priyanka had messaged back.

“There was no internet since morning, so I could not message you. I just read your messages. I will talk to you tomorrow. Miss you.”

For the first time, Priyanka had written ‘miss you’. These words that were written in general had a profound effect on me.

We don’t realize how these words ‘miss you, ‘with love’ make your mind crazy. Because of such words, you unconsciously lean towards the writer.

‘Nobody understands me. Only Priyanka understands me. I could not talk to her today. From tomorrow, all my time will be spent in school,

tuition and homework.’ Thinking this, I sighed deeply.

‘What would happen to me if I am not able to talk to Priyanka’, that suffering started to take form in my mind.

My head felt heavy because of the rude way I had behaved with my parents. I was in discomfort. I wanted to share my feelings with Priyanka but I could not talk to her. The day passed with boredom, suffering and uncomfortable feelings. I tried to play some games on my mobile but my heart was not in it. There was a different kind of restlessness in my mind. At last, I turned off the lights and dozed off to sleep.

After what happened at home the previous day, I decided to apologize to my parents in the morning, but I couldn’t bring myself to actually do it. In the past, when I would go to school in the morning, mom would always stand by the window and wave a ‘good bye’ to me. Then, I would tease her by saying that I am no longer a small child, and that she should not stand by the window like this. But today, when mom was not standing by the window my eyes were searching for her.

The first day of school started with sadness. Priyanka’s face would appear in the midst of my thoughts. After many days off, all the school friends were together again. We all spent some light moments laughing and catching up. Param was lost in his old friend circle. We looked at each other from a distance and raised our hands in silent acknowledgement as we mouthed the words ‘Hi’ from a distance. I had no interest in talking to anyone. I just listened quietly to everyone talking and sharing their thoughts.

No teacher taught anything on that day. Everyone emphasized taking our studies seriously. Ninth grade is the base for the tenth grade. So, we talked about the importance of goal setting. I also wanted to study more seriously and go further in life. I wanted to

maintain the image that I had received after getting good grades in the last exam. There was a kind of satisfaction in getting good grades.

But the idea of studying did not last very long. Every now and then I would remember Param, Nikhil and Priyanka. As such, I could not focus on what the teachers were teaching us in class. During my lunch break, as soon as I took out my packed lunch, I remembered my mom.

‘But is it my fault entirely? No, they are also at fault. They don’t understand me. I never get what I want. I never get to do what I want easily. I always have to wait for it. Why do I have to always understand and compromise?’ Once again, arguments started in my mind. The little remorse I had in my heart dissipated. Again, the issue stopped at the same point where it was stuck all along.

My mental condition was such that it was swinging between the two directions; north and south and in this way the school day ended.

“Hey Miraj, wasn’t today so heavy?” Param called out, stopping me before I could exit the school gates.

“Yes bro, I also found it to be stressful.” The reason the first day of school was heavy for both of us was different however.

“Ok then, see you in the evening after tuition.” It looked like he was in a mood to plan something.

“Oh yes, we have to go for tuition today?” I was feeling bored.

“Yes bro, we have to go. But I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s go hang out somewhere after the tuition class.”

“Out? But where?” I looked puzzled

“We will think about that later on. The thing is there will be more pressure on our studies going forward, so whatever we want to do, let us do it now. Otherwise later on, nobody will let us do anything.”

“We shall see. For now, I do not wish to go out anywhere,” I said to him.

“It will be fine. We will decide when we meet at tuition class later today. Ok. Got to go. Bye.” Param’s driver had come to pick him. Nikhil was also in the car waiting for him. He waved at me from a distance.

I also waved back at him, acknowledging his presence. I then went and sat in the school bus and looked outside the window. Again, I was lost in my chain of thoughts.”

Leaving the hesitation to speak against Mit, Miraj was engrossed in narrating his story. Mit and I were trying to decipher the pages of Miraj’s life from where frustration and desperation had begun to overwhelm his mind.

“I felt relieved as soon as I reached home. Yet, yesterday’s events were still echoing in my mind and the aftermath could still be sensed in the house. I quietly entered my home thinking that mom would talk to me. I was not able to look directly at her. A cold silence played out between the two of us. The meal was served on a plate as usual but there was no taste in it. Mom’s eyes were also looking at me with the expectation of listening to something but I remained quiet. After eating, I went to my room and laid down on the bed

with my mobile. There was no message from Priyanka. I checked my mobile many times but there were no messages. Finally, it was time to leave for the tuition class, so I quickly messaged Priyanka and waited for her reply.

The same discussion about the importance of this year's studies was repeated in the tuition class. It was no fun. I was not at ease because of the quarrel at home and because I had not been in contact with Priyanka all day.

“Miraj, where are you lost?” Suddenly, Sir asked me.

“Here... I am here Sir.” Sir's voice hit me like a ton of bricks. I hesitated. My facial expressions and my words did not match, so Sir asked me again.

“I have been noticing you for some time now. Your attention is somewhere else. If this is the situation on your first day, what will you do for the whole year?” Sir mocked me in front of everyone.

“No Sir, there is nothing like that.”

“This is the problem with students your age. If they have conflict with their girlfriend or boyfriend, they lose interest in their studies. Sir's words were thrown in the air randomly but they hit me like a ton of bricks. I did not want to understand the reason behind it. Somewhere, I was cheating my own self. I wanted to live life on my terms and did not want anyone to interfere with it.

Sir's comment made the whole class laugh at me, which was very insulting to me.”

“Oh that happened to me exactly the same way. I had the same situation in my L.L.B. class,” Mit said in a jovial tone.

I raised my eyes at Mit in an effort to let him know that he needed to be serious. I wished that today not only Miraj but also Mit would open up and release everything. If he opens up, then Miraj will be able to understand him better as well.

“Miraj, there was no difference between our condition but the reasons were different. We were both stuck in the letter ‘P’. Due to that, the distance between us grew from where we had stopped.”

“Which ‘P’ are you talking about? Miraj interrupted Mit and asked as he had seemed to have lost his patience.

“You were entangled by ‘peer pressure’ and ‘Priyanka’, the words that begin with the letter ‘P’ and I was entangled by ‘Pappa’, a word that also begins with the letter ‘P’.”

Miraj, stared at Mit blankly.

“The condition you are in; I was in a similar condition in my L.L.B. class. I had adopted it but I had to constantly push myself repeatedly to accept it. I was pretending to be normal from the outside but from inside, I was struggling against my situation. I did not have enough strength to fight it. So, at that time, I had no strength to share your sufferings with you,” Mit said calmly. Within a quiet Mit arguments against ‘p’ were going on in his mind.

“The strength that you are in search for, that strength was already within both of you. Often, it is only by opening your mind, that you find the strength to endure such situations. You don’t need a solution but you need a good listener,” I said looking at Mit and Miraj.

“What Samyukta is saying is actually true. If we had talked to each other at that time, then maybe...”

‘Although you have a grievance against me, that I had no time for you, but in reality, you remained quiet as you did not want to add to your brother’s grief by sharing your own problems,’ Mit explained Miraj’s inner situation. There was always a different maturity present when he talked.

“And why did you remain quiet?” Miraj asked.

Listening to this, Mit stood still and then let out a laugh.

“Because I always had to be your older brother, that’s why. I already had the habit of being your support. I did not realize that sometimes I also needed to be supported.” With moist eyes and a smiling face, he said what he felt like. With his head down, he nodded and once again laughed at himself.

Should this be considered Mit’s strength or his weakness...

Miraj was serious, thinking about what happened between him and Mit.

“With so many entanglements coming together, you started feeling that no one cares about you. To some extent, it could be true. But can we not be upfront and share what is in our minds? In today’s fast paced world where everyone is chasing after a goalless life, is it fair to expect others to read our mind without us actually telling them anything? My question was in fact an answer to Miraj.

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““Come on. You’re coming out, aren’t you?” Param asked after tuitions finished.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Nothing. I am not in the mood today,” I had decided to go out less with Param.

“That’s the reason I am asking you to come. After all, what is a friend for?”

“No, not today please.””

“Many times, we become so blinded by the other person that we tend to forget what is good or bad for us and follow them without any thought.” Yet again, I interrupted Miraj to find a piece of his puzzle.

“Why does that happen?”

“It is because of the fear of being left alone.” I knew that my answer would lead him right to his weakness. However, without knowing the reality the effort to overcome it will be useless. I hoped that, not only would he recognize his weakness but also learn to accept

it. Then he would certainly be able overcome it one day.

Miraj was quiet but his eyes indicated that he was accepting my point.

“That’s the reason you went?”

“How did you know? I haven’t told you yet.”

“It is from seeing your situation right now. If you had not gone at that time, then you would not be in this position.”

Miraj’s eyes widened a little after hearing me.

“But it’s ok. That was your past which is gone. You can make your inner circle with new people, who really care for you.”

“Yes. I want to give a new start to my life. When I talk to you, I feel like my life is taking a new path.”

“Then what happened after you went with Param?”

“Param continued to insist that I go with him. I was paying attention to my phone but there were no messages from Priyanka. She had not seen any of my messages, so how would she reply to them?

“So what do you say? Are you coming?” Param asked again.

I didn’t answer. I didn’t know what to do.

“Nikhil is coming too. He was saying that we will go to some nice place. We will be back in just an hour, so you won’t be late going home either. Now don’t say no.”

I remained silent, thinking about what I would say at home about

going out. After a couple of minutes, I thought to myself, even if I went home early what would I do? As it is I was not in a good mood today so I would feel better if I went out with the guys. With that thought, I decided to spend some time with Param and Nikhil. By hanging out with them, I was actually running away from myself and my problems.

I gathered the courage and called mom. To my surprise, she agreed without any questions or advice.

“Thank you.” Although I didn’t say sorry to her, I couldn’t stop myself from thanking her.

Mom’s love softened my heart.

“Where are we going?” I asked Param.

“To the café.”

“Oh, you were forcing me to go there?”

“No, no. It’s a café that has just opened. Nikhil has been there. He says it’s a really great place.”

Just then suddenly a car honked from the back. We both turned. Nikhil had come in the car.

“So, your dad gave you the car?” Param laughed.

“Yeah of course, he does that sometimes.”

Param and I sat in Nikhil’s car. About twenty minutes later the car stopped in a parking lot.

“Oh! Are we going here?” Param asked quickly.

“Wow, how did you know?”

“You can see from the outside. It’s just been opened.”

“Yeah.”

“This is...” My sentence was left incomplete.

“Please dude, don’t say anything negative. We are just going to have coffee,” Param didn’t give me a chance to say anything further.

The three of us entered the same place yet our moods were all different. You could see the happiness of coming to one’s favorite place on Nikhil’s face as well as his composure. Param was glancing around as he walked in, he displayed enthusiasm to get know or see something new. And I walked at a much slower pace, once again lost in the thoughts of what is appropriate or inappropriate. Now that we were already here, there was no option but to go inside. Having said that, my mind was tired from all the thinking it had been doing, so without further thought I entered the café. I had mixed feelings of hopelessness, sadness and unwillingness.

The brightness of the blue and red lights inside hit my face as I entered. There was soft yet captivating music playing in the background and cigarette smoke shrouded all over the place. It had all found its place in the minds of the young people sitting there, as if to make them lose their senses.

Nikhil went to a table and looked at Param. Param nodded in approval. They both settled down at the table. I stood behind them and glanced around. The young people, mesmerized by the music, had beaming smiles, elegance and stature. I too went and sat down with them. Nikhil extended one hand over the edge of the couch and started to take selfies with the other. In the meantime, I saw

Shivangi approaching us. I was shocked. Param was also surprised.

“Hello everyone,” Shivangi waved and greeted us enthusiastically with a big smile.

“Hi dear,” Nikhil stood up and hugged her.

Param looked at me and chuckled.

In the meantime, a waiter came over. I ordered an iced tea. Param ordered a cold coffee and a sandwich. Shivangi ordered a cold coffee too. Nikhil ordered an iced tea and double apple flavored shisha.”

I looked at Mit. He controlled his expressions and emotions so he could hear Miraj’s story. Miraj looked at me as he continued to narrate the rest. I glanced over at Mit again and swiftly focused my eyes and ears, as well as my mind, on Miraj.

““What a surprise! We didn’t know that you were coming too,” Param looked at Nikhil as he spoke to Shivangi.

“Hey You? I am not an aunty.”

“Oh sorry Shivangi,” Param said as he smiled.

When it comes to boys like Param, there is no need for Shivangi to tell them that they can just call her by her name.

“Why are you so silent? Sorry but I forgot your name,” Shivangi said as she looked at me.

“Miraj.”

“Miraj. Nice name.”

“Poor guy, he is upset with the comment the teacher made in our tuition class about girlfriends earlier today,” Param quickly said.

“Oh, really? What is there to be upset about, bro? I hope you are normal,” Nikhil started laughing.

“Yes, but our Miraj is very straightforward,” Param added.

“Straightforward like a jalebi*?” Shivangi laughed.

Despite not liking what was going on I had to forcibly laugh and respond in an attempt to fit in.

“Look Miraj. Look at me. If you were to say to me in front of everyone here that Shivangi and I are having an affair then she would be much happier than I would be,” Nikhil said as he pointed to Shivangi.

“Oh shut it. In fact, it was Nikhil who was chasing me. Him and all his friends were wagging their tails around me,” Shivangi said smacking Nikhil.

My uneasiness was increasing. Once again, their behavior was unbecoming, yet who knows why I was trying to fit in with this group. I was experiencing an internal friction of balancing my body language and the discomfort I was feeling in my mind.

Just then the waiter came with the hookah and put it on the ground. With the help of some tongs, he adjusted the pieces of coal on it and gave the pipe with the mouthpiece to Nikhil and left. Nikhil offered it to Shivangi.

“We have come to this place especially for you.”

Shivangi looked at Nikhil with her sharp eyes and gave him a sweet smile. She took a deep puff and blew the smoke in the air.

It took Param a minute to catch his breath after seeing all this. My heartbeat was already racing from the moment we had stepped in this place. However, looking at Shivangi's personality, it was no surprise that she would be capable of smoking the hookah.

Then, Shivangi passed the Hookah pipe to Nikhil. "You probably haven't seen this side of Nikhil, have you? People blow smoke out of their mouth but he can blow smoke out of his nose too." Shivangi encouraged Nikhil to display his feat.

Nikhil raised his collar and showed the trick right away.

"Great, man," Param swiftly praised Nikhil while taking a sip of his coffee.

"Sorry school boys, you still have a while until you can do this." Shivangi made fun of Param and me. For Param, her comment had the effect of lighting a match stick.

"No, it's safe. This one doesn't have nicotine. It only has apple flavor. There is no tobacco," Nikhil said.

"Yes, I have heard that too. But my dad says I don't need to indulge in all this right now," Param answered."

"That's just something they say, there is always tobacco," Mit said.

"Hmm," Miraj nodded.

"Then?" I said trying to bring them back on track.

Miraj continued...

“Nikhil proudly exclaimed. “In fact, you would not be allowed in this place but the owner knows me very well so it’s ok.”

“Although he is new in the city, it seems like he has made lots of contacts everywhere.” Param said happily.

“Of course he would, he keeps hanging out everywhere.” My dislike for Nikhil spoke out from within.

Shivangi offered me a sandwich but I couldn’t eat anything right now. I did feel like getting up and leaving. But I found it difficult to do that too.

Param, Nikhil and Shivangi were having fun and I was in a state of utter shock.

“Priyanka?” Just then someone called from the table at the back.

And a girl walking turned and looked back.

“Wow,” Param uttered.

Amidst the sorrow, shock and confusion, my self-respect and moral values were being blowing away too just like the smoke from the hookah. My thought drifted towards Priyanka again. My mind started to worry about Priyanka. My hand moved towards my phone but the battery was low. As soon as I turned on the phone, it shut down. I looked at the time on the clock hanging on the wall across me.

“It’s late now,” Saying this, I looked at Param and my eyes widened.

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Param had the hookah pipe in his hand. The Param that was in front of me a few moments ago, suddenly transformed into a new person. I was not surprised at all.

“Param...” I spoke out loudly.

“Chill bro... it does not have nicotine!” said Param calmly showing me his hand.

I looked at Nikhil. He was sitting next to Shivangi and they were both laughing at something on the mobile. Then they became preoccupied in taking selfies. They were busy in their own world and Param was also drifting away from me. I felt aggrieved.

“Bye.” The group sitting at the next table said bye to Priyanka.

In the midst of so much confusion, I remembered Priyanka again.

I lost my patience in waiting for Priyanka’s reply. I was drawn to Priyanka thinking that maybe she would be able to fulfill the expectations of a friend that Param was not able to fill? Was I stretching myself towards Priyanka because of this void in my life? Or is having a girlfriend a common and important part of one’s life. Did this kind of thinking increase the importance I had placed on Priyanka in my life? Whatever it is... I did not care about the reasons. My eyes were fixed on the mobile that had gone dead. I

had no interest in sitting there. I wanted to go home.”

Mit sighed and took a deep breath. Miraj continued...

““Your mobile is dead? Look, there is a charging point next to you,”
Saying this, Param took a puff and started coughing.

“Crazy, you need to exhale the smoke!” Nikhil looked up from his mobile and advised him.

“I need to go now. I am getting late.” If everyone is happy in their own way, then why should I be here?

“Guys, I also have to leave,” Shivangi added.

“Ok, then let’s go,” Nikhil told Param.

Param looked at the hookah.

“Come on, next time,” said Nikhil patting Param’s head.

Everyone started walking ahead. Nikhil went to the cash counter and paid the bill. I quickly came out and looked at the cafe’s board.

It read “Salvation Cafe and Shisha Bar.” I thought to myself salvation means liberation. But which liberation does it refer to? Liberation from life or Liberation in life?”

I was shocked listening to Miraj but there was no point in getting angry with him after he had opened up so much about himself... I kept looking at Miraj. He was speaking without any pause.

“I barely had taken four-five steps on the pavement outside the bar, when someone yelled from behind me.

“Mi...raj.”

It was a familiar voice. I turned back and looked, it was Vishrut.

“Hi,” Vishrut said enthusiastically.

“Hi.” I was embarrassed. What would Vishrut think if he knew about the place I had just come out from? I became a little tense thinking this.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing... just like that...” I did not know what to answer.

“I had been to a gift shop here. My parents’ anniversary is coming and I thought of getting them a small gift.” Vishrut’s face was glowing.

Just then Param came out laughing. Behind him came Nikhil and Shivangi. Nikhil had his hand on Shivangi’s shoulder.

“Hi.” Param came and he gave a pat on Vishrut’s shoulder.

“Do you know him?” I asked.

“Yes, very well. Who would not know the captain of our society’s cricket team?”

“How do you know Miraj?” Param asked Vishrut.

“Know him? I know Miraj very well. He is my childhood buddy.”

“Oh really, I have never the two of you together!” Param exclaimed a little surprised.

“That is because I have only just returned back here two days ago. We had shifted to Pune due to my dad’s transfer.”

I was not happy to know that Param and Vishrut knew each other as Vishrut was a very good friend of mine. He was very straight forward. He never got into bad company. His friend circle consisted of a few selected people, of which I was one.

“Ok, bye everyone, I have to leave now,” Shivangi interrupted us.

Vishrut’s attention was on Shivangi and mine was on Vishrut. He gave a quick glance at Shivangi’s clothes and looked away. Looking at Vishrut, I had a sinking feeling that I had done something wrong. Vishrut’s presence multiplied my guilty conscience manifold more.

Shivangi shook Param’s hand and then she extended her hand towards me. I hesitated for a minute, but then I shook her hand lightly thinking how I would look in front of Shivangi and everyone else. Shivangi gave a casual glance at Vishrut and then looked at Nikhil. Nikhil smiled and said goodbye.

Everyone looked at Shivangi.

“Should we leave now?” Nikhil asked.

“Yes, let’s go. Are you coming with us?” Param asked me.

I looked at Vishrut.

“I will also leave,” Vishrut told me.

Actually, I would have gone home with Vishrut but I was not ready to answer his questions.

Everyone left. Param and I sat in Nikhil’s car and Vishrut went to his

bicycle.

All the way home I was upset and disturbed. Echoes of respect, humiliation and impression were constantly churning in my mind.

I haven't done anything wrong. This is all normal. If Vishrut finds this wrong, then it's his mistake.... such arguments of the intellect kept bombarding me the way."

Hearing all this, Mit looked down and shook his head as if he had lost something. As such, he had heard all of Miraj's stories with his face down or sometimes with his eyes closed.

"If you are the accused, you are the lawyer and you are the judge, then how would you find your mistakes?" I gave Miraj an opportunity to think over that.

"Yes, was there anyone to tell me that? And even if someone in the house had said something, I had become good at turning a blind eye," Miraj said.

"Reaching home, I first put my mobile to charge. I then put the tuition bag on the bed," Miraj continued his conversation.

"“Miraj, dinner is ready, do you want to eat?” Mom asked. Her voice had the same sound as before. Everything was back to normal, so I felt at ease.

"Hmm, yes, not now, after some time," I answered politely.

My attention was on the mobile so until I saw Priyanka's message, I would not be able to eat dinner.

"Are you not hungry? Eat while the food is hot," Mom asked me again.

After so many days, there was insistence in mom's voice which I did not like before but appreciated this time. I did not feel like eating even though I was famished.

'It's better to eat before Dad comes so that I can chat with Priyanka afterwards. If I sit down to eat with him, then he will only talk about school and tuition and I am in no mood to listen to all that right now.'
I thought to myself

"Ok mom, I am please serve me dinner," I sat at the dining table.

Mom put the plate filled with pav-bhaji and pulao on the dining table. This is my favorite food. I felt mom had made the food today keeping me in mind especially.

How strange is it that no matter how we behave with our parents, they show us the same love. But I did not have any interest in eating that day.

I hastily swallowed the food and drank water to flush it down my throat and then I got up abruptly to go and check my mobile. It had not charged. I realized that I had forgotten to turn on the power switch. I thumped my legs and that inadvertently hit the chair which in turn banged against the dining table.

"What happened? Why did you stop eating?" Mom asked me

"My mom does not leave me alone," I mumbled under my breath.

My love for my mom immediately subsided.

I turned on the power switch and sat back down to eat. Mom came and sat across me.

“Are you alright? Why are you looking so worried?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. I am just very tired.”

“Why, you didn’t have fun outside?”

“No, not really mom,” perturbed by the thought of what answer I would give her if she asked me where I had gone, I couldn’t swallow the food and started coughing uncontrollably. Mom quickly brought me another glass of water and started rubbing my back.

I don’t know why but feeling my mother’s touch on my back brought tears to my eyes. My heart was filled with emotions. My mind was tired. I could barely control my tears in the presence of my mom. But nothing would be hidden from her!

“Are you feeling alright dear?” She put her hands on my throat and forehead to check my condition.

Then she lovingly placed her hand on my head.

“Let us know if you have any problem”, Saying this, she went to the kitchen. Her heart was filled with emotions. She was able to see the change that was taking place in me but could not understand the reason behind it and started to suffer mentally as well.”

Mit who was sitting like a statue listening to Miraj was also struggling to control his tears. He used his fingertips to stop them from flowing out and controlled his feelings within himself. He felt the pain of the recent past once again. Mit wanted to say a few words but it was not appropriate to interrupt Miraj and disturb him. I also embraced my emotions within me.

“I could not finish my dinner. My mind was choked up. I wanted to talk to my mom but I was not sure of what to say and how to say

it. I got up and went to my room. After ten minutes, regaining my composure I came out.

“Mom, I have a severe headache. Please give me some medicine. I want to go to sleep early today,” I said this so that no one would disturb me. But how was I going to sleep so early?

Going back to the room I sent several messages to Priyanka again. There was no point in sending new messages without seeing the previous messages. But I poured out both my anger and agitation in the messages.

Who knows how the day started? Nothing is going right. The problems that seemed to exist in school and tuition, exponentially multiplied at the Salvation Cafe and Shisha Bar. Nikhil is already a spoiled brat and he is pulling Param onto that path. I do not understand the relation he has with Shivangi. Previously he used to say, ‘She is not my type’ and now he is showing different colors. He took selfies in such a way as if she is his girlfriend!

Do you really need a girl to display status and reputation? Today Sir also talked to me about a girlfriend. To understand what type of girl Shivangi is, is also very difficult. She hangs out with people like Nikhil, does it mean that she is also like him? Is Shivangi entrapping Nikhil or is Nikhil entrapping Shivangi? And today Param crossed the limit when he tried to smoke the hookah!

Am I trapped in bad company? No... no... perhaps they fit in today’s world. Why am I not able to mingle with them? I am trying to be like them, but where am I going wrong? Why am I not able to remain normal? Why am I looking abnormal?

From the beginning, my house environment has been reserved and orthodox, so I feel shocked and uneasy about all these things. I have never seen all this since I was a child and that’s why I feel so

uneasy and apprehensive. Everyone else is enjoying themselves. Whose fault is it? From the beginning, my parents have always protected me. They have never allowed me to do anything, to venture anywhere... such thoughts constantly were constantly haunting my perplexed mind.

That is when ten to twelve consecutive messages started to beep on my mobile.”

Mit and I both kept looking at Miraj. We were feeling his helplessness.

“It could be Priyanka...” thinking this, I switched on the mobile with curiosity.

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“They were messages from Param. He had sent everyone’s photos. I had no interest in looking at them. I shoved my phone aside feeling fatigued, bored, frustrated and troubled by my headache. There were no messages from the only person I was eagerly waiting to hear from.

Just then, mom came into my room.

“I just came to see whether you are sleeping or not. You have a headache, so go to sleep,” saying this, she put the duvet over me and left.

I started to receive messages again on my phone but this time I didn’t look at them.

Forty-five minutes later, I woke up and picked up my phone. I read the messages.

“Hi, sorry.”

“I am not able to reply to so many messages at this time. I am out of station and there is a network problem where I am.”

Finally, Priyanka had replied, but she said this!

“That’s it?”

I was tired of waiting for so long and she doesn't even value me at all. She doesn't have time to reply to my messages. Whenever I get a message from her, I leave everything and reply to her first. It shouldn't be like this, should it? For the first time, I was mad at Priyanka.

My feelings were terribly hurt by Nikhil and especially Param. To add to that, I was desperate to talk to Priyanka but I couldn't do that either. I wanted to talk to someone about my pain. But who could I talk to? Telling mum and dad all these things was not an option at all. I started to suffocate from within. The night went restlessly and I just tossed and turned in bed.

The next day turned out to be the same typical day. From home to school, school to tuition classes and back home from there. I was not interested in anything. I did not feel like talking to anyone. I felt empty inside. One way or another, I dragged myself to school and tuition classes.

During this time, Mit used to sit with me for some time too. He used to talk about things happening around us. He would try to lift up my mood. But I was not interested in anything he had to say. I felt burdened. At school and tuition classes, the pressure to study kept increasing. From ninth grade, we had tests every week at school and tuition classes. All of my friends became more serious about studying. The race to get full marks had started. After getting good grades in the eighth standard, a different sort of enthusiasm had awakened within me too. I wished to be at the top of the class as well. But that energy and excitement was lost somewhere along the way. My strength was lost. I could not focus on one thing for very long. I would lose focus in class too. Sometimes my mind would become tired from the countless thoughts that wouldn't pause for even a second. Sometimes my mind would be blank. In that circumstance, I found studying extremely difficult. I started to

feel the pressure and stress from not being able to keep up with everything. I would sit in my room for hours on end in complete silence.

A few days passed by. I hadn't received any messages from Priyanka.

"She didn't even look at any of my messages, so what is the point in writing to her?" I decided not to send any messages to her until I had received a message from her. When I would get bored during the day, I would sit down with my laptop. I started to spend a lot of my time on Facebook and Twitter. My focus started turning more to useless things. The only reason I did that was because there was no one who would hurt me over there. With Priyanka not being around, I started chatting with other people once again. If I was comfortable with someone then the chat conversation would last longer, otherwise it would end quickly. I only talked to one person properly. Her name was Riya.

"Hi." Priyanka messaged one day out of the blue. She just said hi, nothing else. So, I thought just like before Priyanka is free to chat at the usual time. I got my phone right after I got back from tuition classes in the evening.

"Miraj, what is this? As soon as you step in the house, you go on your mobile or laptop," Mom expressed her frustration again.

"It's just to freshen up. Mom, I talk to my friends or play some games to take the edge off." I, who had always told the truth, gradually started to lie in self-defense.

"You see them at school and tuition class, don't you? Then why do you have to talk to them after coming back home as well?"

"Mom, you won't understand. Sometimes we have to talk about

our homework or projects too.””

Miraj looked at Mit remorsefully. Mit did not think it was appropriate to comment on what Miraj already felt remorse for.

“Mom thought I talked to my friends from school or tuition class. I’d never hidden anything from her but this time I had hidden the fact that the chatting I did was with people I had never met in person. As it is, my mom would never have accepted this world of online chatting,” Miraj said, as looked at Mit.

“Then I looked at my phone. Priyanka was online but she did not message me. Mom was standing in front of me so it was not possible to talk to Priyanka in front of her. I was impatient for her to leave the room.”

“But you are busy with all this, every day. You don’t even have dinner with us anymore. You eat an early dinner and then shut yourself up in your room,” Mom was in a mood to scold me today. I couldn’t see her leaving me alone any time soon.

“Oh, that’s because lately I’ve been getting hungry in the afternoon. That’s why I eat early.” It is a natural law that one undoubtedly has to speak a lie to protect another lie.

“Your dad was also asking about why you have become so antisocial at home lately? You don’t talk to anyone of us anymore.”

“Dad himself is not at home the entire day, so what would he know?” I quickly answered dismissing her argument with contempt.

“When he is home, then he can see that you shut yourself in your room, can’t he? In the past you sat with us at for a little while at least. But nowadays...”

“Please mom, that’s enough. You only see my fault in everything. Instead of explaining things to me, you get pleasure from finding my mistakes. If I sit with you, then all you talk to me about is studies or what kind of friends I should or shouldn’t have. Other than that, do you have anything else to talk to me about? That is why I am bored with you all.” I said everything without a pause. I was more focused on Priyanka. If only mom would leave me alone then I would be able to talk to her. With that thought, I was becoming more agitated.

I did not have time at all to think that I had hurt my mom’s feelings. My world had become restricted only to my selfish interests. My fingers and my eyes started to go towards my phone.

“Hi.” I sent a message to Priyanka after all without receiving anything from her.

“Hello.”

“What’s up?”

“No much. I was waiting for your message.”

“Oh, why, can’t you message me first?”

“Of course I can but I wanted to see why you are not responding.” Just like the wrong doer blames the whistleblower, Priyanka blamed me.

“What?” I was shocked. But right now, I couldn’t afford to displease Priyanka. “Ok, forget that. Tell me, where did you go?”

“We went for a trip.”

“We?”

“Yes, my cousins, their friends and me. We all went to a hill station. The network was really bad there. In fact, the power would go out frequently, so I couldn’t charge my phone either and the rest of the time we were out and about.”

“Oh, I thought that you would have gone with your parents.”

“Oh no, hanging out with parents is no fun at all.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just responded by sending an emoji.

“We really enjoyed ourselves.”

“Can you go out with your friends for two days like that? I mean would you get permission from your parents?” I asked inquisitively

“Well, it wasn’t easy. But my cousins, who are about five to six years older than me, were also there with me, so it was safe. My friend Riya also came along. Usually, my dad would not agree but this time he gave me permission to go.”

“What a coincidence! I recently made a new friend. Her name is Riya too.”

“Oh, so in my absence, you have already made a new friend?” Priyanka sent the message with a punch emoji.

“Come on.”

“So, what’s new?” asked Priyanka.

“Nothing much, I have been tired for the past two days.”

“Why?”

“I will tell you that later at a better time.”

“Ok.”

“So, were your cousins’ friends all boys or were there girls too?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“Yes, they were a group of three boys and two girls. And my friend and myself.”

“I hope the boys were decent like me,” I tried to interrogate her by laughing it off as a joke.

“Boys are never decent,” Priyanka replied humorously and sent a winking smiley.

I couldn’t understand her intention, but I did not like her joke. I started feeling angry as to why she would just hang out with any type of boy?

Priyanka sent a couple of photos while we are chatting. I started to download them.

“Then you should not have gone with those people,” I took it seriously.

Priyanka didn’t get whether what I had said was serious or a joke.

When the photos had downloaded on my phone I sent her another message.

“Sorry to say Priyanka, please don’t feel bad, but I do not like it at all that you hang out with everyone wearing these kinds of clothes.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes? My parents have never said this to me.”

“Please try to understand. Boys are not as straightforward as you think.” While typing this message, I pictured Nikhil and Shivangi.

“I know what is right and what is wrong. Who are you to tell me? You have no right.”

I didn’t say anything. Until now, Priyanka had always respected me, appreciated me and was someone I believed to be my best friend. She had now suddenly insulted me.

“You spoiled my entire mood. Even though I was tired, I stayed up just to talk to you.”

Priyanka was typing whatever came to her mind in anger. I had no reply to anything she was saying. What I couldn’t understand is why she was getting so upset about something so small? Do I not have the right to say anything to her? Am I not saying it for her good?

“I was very excited to share all this with you. Other than you, all my friends told me that I looked very pretty and that my dresses are very stylish. You are very narrow-minded.”

“You are getting me wrong. I am just thinking about your safety.”

“I don’t need your advice. I am mature enough to take care of myself!”

“If you felt bad, then I am sorry.” The two of us fought for the first time but I did not want to lose Priyanka. To avoid things going any further, I apologized from my side. In actuality, I was hurt by Priyanka’s attitude but I didn’t tell her that.

For the next few days, we had the usual conversations between us. One day Priyanka and Riya were both online at the same time. Riya messaged me while I was chatting with Priyanka.

“Hi Miraj, how are you?” Riya sent a message with a sad emoji.

“Hi, I am fine.”

“It has been a while since you talked to me.”

“Hmm. I have been a little busy.”

“Now I will not be able to talk for about three or four days,” Riya wrote with a crying emoji.

“Oh, why?”

“My brother’s phone is broken so he will be using my phone.”

I sent her a sad face emoji.

Priyanka kept sending messages one after another and Riya too was sending messages! By the time I replied to Riya, Priyanka had sent ten to twelve messages.

“Hello...where are you?”

“I am here.”

“Why are you not answering?”

“Oh, I am talking to Riya too.”

“Riya? Who is Riya?”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Yes, I remember now.”

Two minutes later, she messaged again. “You talk to Riya then. Bye.”

“No, it’s not like that. I was just trying to explain to her that I will talk to her later, but...”

“So what? If she is more important, then why don’t you just talk to her?”

“Come on, man, why do you get angry with everything?”

“I am not getting angry. I am freeing you from myself.”

On one end, Riya continued sending me messages.

“Hello...”

“Do you know I had an accident today and I had to get a cast on my leg?”

She sent her photos of her cast too.

“Ok.” I replied without reading the messages.

“Ok..?! My leg is fractured and it does not make a difference to you?!”

“Sorry, I just saw the message,” I replied to Riya.

“See? Now you are busy with Riya... Ok then, bye,” Priyanka got mad because it took me a while to reply to her.

“Come on man, you girls make a mountain out of a molehill.”

“She’s had a fracture so I was just asking how she is doing.”

“You were telling me that other than you, I do not have any other close friends. Then why are you showing so much sympathy towards Riya?”

“No dear, you are my only best friend. I haven’t talked to her much at all. It was because you had gone for your trip; I just talked to her to pass some time.”

“Who knows, you might also be passing time with me!”

“Please, Priyanka, if you want to talk to me like this, then I don’t want to talk to you. I have never taken you as a friend who I would just pass time with. You are taking the wrong meaning of whatever I am saying.”

“Ok bye, I am in no mood to talk to you right now,” Saying this, Priyanka went offline.

“Oh man...” I banged my fist on the table in frustration.

There was now jealousy and negativity in Priyanka’s mind. She too felt that she is the only one who has the right over me and I have to do whatever she says.

Riya’s continued to message me.

“Sorry Riya, I cannot talk to you right now,” I told her.

“No problem.”

“Is something wrong with you?”

“No. All is well.”

“I feel like you are hiding something from me.”

“Nope, nothing.”

“How’s Priyanka?” Riya suddenly asked and I had no clue what to tell her.

“You didn’t have an argument with her did you?” Riya sent an emoji.

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t, I just asked.”

I was already in a bad mood but so as to not hurt Riya, I continued the conversation for a little while then said bye to her. I sat and waited for a while in the hope that Priyanka would come online again, but she didn’t.”

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“Frequent arguments like this with Priyanka made me feel even more disturbed. But what could I do? I could neither leave Priyanka nor could I find a way to come out of this situation. I did not realize that I had become so obsessed with her.

For many days, Priyanka did not talk to me properly. But I consoled myself with the understanding that at least she was talking to me. On the other side, my wavelength with Riya had started to match. But I was not able to mention her name in Priyanka’s presence. When I talked to Riya, I felt a sense of comfort which I didn’t feel anymore when talking to Priyanka. In spite of that, Priyanka was there for me before anyone else. At any time, I would leave any work and sit down to chat with her.

Priyanka loved my honesty. But she had become upset with me after I told her honestly about Riya, and that was something I could not tolerate. I justified lying to her to maintain my relationship with her.

Although we were together in school and in tuition class, I would barely meet up with Param and Nikhil due to the fact that I spent countless hours chatting online. Param’s talks and behavior still had a lot of influence on me. I continued to lie, and show off. I forced my parents to meet all my needs and necessities by being stubborn with them. The atmosphere in the house had also begun to deteriorate.

Mom's health had started worsening and she had developed high blood pressure. So, she did not bother with me that much anymore. Dad sometimes urged me to study. Mit was always busy in his routine. He used to come home like a guest and after dinner he would finish his work and go to bed. Everyone in the house had probably washed their hands off of me because of my ever-deteriorating behavior."

After saying this much, Miraj looked at Mit and said quietly, "I do not want to complain to you, I am simply trying to explain my condition. Now I understand your situation."

While Miraj was talking, there was a sound of a child crying nearby that caught our attention. We all turned to look at him,

"Oh! ... did you fall down, dear?" His mom was telling him.

"It is like this Miraj, it takes so long to climb up but what if you fall down? You would fall rapidly, be it a child or in our case adults."

"Yes, it does not take long to fall down in life. If you are in bad company, you are bound to slip. Then, you fall down in your own eyes."

"This experience and understanding will stop you from making the same mistakes again. Now Miraj will never fail again," I said with a ring of happiness in my tone.

"Fail? I already am a failure, in life and in my exams as well."

I knew that Miraj had failed in his exams but I had to figure out the circumstances that had led to this result...

"Days and months passed by and soon it was time for exams. I

was getting disappointment from everywhere. In those days, I had no interest in studies. I was determined but I could not study. My condition was like that of a losing player,” Miraj’s face and words were displaying his distress.

“Eventually it was the day of the exam... I could not finish the course so I used to stay up late at night. In the first two papers, there was no problem, but in the third paper, my health faltered. As such, the papers were not going well, so days were passing in a lot of stress and tension. Due to the mental fatigue, disturbed sleep patterns and unhealthy food habits my health deteriorated. Suddenly I had developed a high fever.

I took medicines and went to give the exam. It was a math paper. I attempted it with great difficulty. After the exam, all the friends had gathered around and were trying to solve the paper, at that time I looked down and quietly left the school. I was devastated. My body was not in my control and I reached home in a bewildered state.

Next was the science paper. What if I fail in math? On one hand there was tension and on other there was exhaustion. I needed someone’s support. I picked up my mobile. Riya was online but my eyes were searching for Priyanka.

I texted Priyanka.

“Hi.”

“How are you.”

“Not good.”

“What happened?”

“Do you remember my exams are going on?” I asked her.

“Oh yes, I had forgotten. How did the papers go?”

“Nowadays you don’t care about me anymore,” I finally got the opportunity to blame Priyanka for something. Up until now, she was blaming me and now it was my turn. Did I really want to blame her or share my grief with her? What was I up to? I had no idea what I wanted.

“Miraj are you there..???”

Suddenly I told her, words from the wounds inflicted earlier that were lashing out.

“Do you even remember anything about me these days? You are always in your own world Priyanka.”

“I feel the same way about you. Ever since you have met Riya, you have less time for me.”

“Please don’t say that. You know very well that due to my exam preparations, I was not able to talk to you. How does Riya come in to this? What wrong has she done to you?”

“Yes, you are right, she has done nothing wrong to me, and in fact I am the one who has ruined everything. I wasted my time for a person like you.”

“If you tell me something, it’s alright but when I tell you something just once, you feel so bad?”

“Yes, I felt bad.”

“Priyanka, what’s wrong with you? You were never like this before. Why have you changed so much all of a sudden?”

“I want to ask you the very same question.”

“Can we be the same friends as we were before?” I asked her

“I think that’s not possible anymore Miraj. It will be better if we stop talking to each other.”

“Priyanka, what is wrong with you? I wanted to share my stuff with you and you are...” Again, I started becoming helpless in front of her.

“Look Miraj, you keep on having problems in your life that does not mean that I am always available for you. I have my own problems to deal with.”

“Hi Miraj.” On the other side, it was Riya’s message.

“Please don’t disturb me,” I messaged Riya brashly.

‘Oh Ok. Sorry.’ That was the last message from Riya.

“Bye forever. Don’t try to contact me again. I am fed up with you.” This was Priyanka’s last message.

After that she did not send me any more messages.”

‘Fake friends are like a shadow. They will follow you in the sun but leave you when it gets dark,’ Mit said with a serious note in his voice.

“Whether the friendship is online or offline, many would have had such experiences,” I said.

Miraj added, “Riya also went offline as she did like my reply. She

supported me but I did not respond to her well. It was my fault. In Priyanka's presence, Riya had become a second priority to me. I left my mobile on the side. I was totally heartbroken. I got up from bed and took the science book in my hand but...

"Bye forever. Don't try to contact me again. I am fed up with you," Priyanka's words pierced me like a knife.

My throat dried up. My body started to cringe. I took two sips of water from a bottle that was next to me. I felt like resting. So I lay down on the bed and placed the book aside. Water started coming out from my bloodshot eyes due to not having slept in days. It was hard for me to understand whether the water was from the heat of the fever or of a losing person who felt frustrated and suffocated. I wiped my eyes and tried to become normal. But immediately my eyes became wet again and tears started to flow. I felt that I was reduced to dust.

I felt that there was emotion stuck in my throat. What if mom comes into the room? The more I tried to control my anxiety the weaker I became. Now I was unable to hold back my tears. I was lying in the bed with my eyes closed.

After about an hour when my eyes opened, I felt a strange nervousness. I was feeling heat from the fever. I did not have the courage to stay alone in my room. I came out of the room. Mom's voice could be heard coming from outside the room.

"I am very worried about Miraj. Will you sit down and talk to him tonight?" Mom was talking to dad. She had a habit of talking over the speakerphone.

"How is he feeling now?" Dad's asked.

"He has little fever. He has not eaten anything."

“Okay, I will come home early today. You should not worry.”

‘I think he is stressed. Previously he was agitated with us but now he has become very quiet. He is up till late at night. I have noticed this for some time now.’

“Hey, that is because of exams...” Dad was trying to console mom.

“No, even when there is no exam, his room’s lights are often on. When I go to see him, he is not doing anything in particular. He just sits on his bed silently staring at the ceiling.”

“I feel that we have failed in fulfilling our duty as parents and because of that he is upset with us,” Dad was feeling weak. Mom was sobbing.

Hearing this, my heart became heavy. Everyone is mine; then why doesn’t it feel like they are mine?

So much distance had developed between my parents and me that I could not pour my heart out to them. I was constantly trying to find warmth outside and felt completely alone. I felt as if everything was empty. I went back to my room and sat on the bed. I reached out to drink some water but the water bottle dropped from my hand.

Hearing the sound of the bottle falling, mom dropped the phone and ran into my room.

“What happened dear?” Mom picked up bottle and asked me.

I was left with nothing but to cry. Holding her hand, I burst into tears. She embraced me in a warm, comforting hug.

“My life is ruined. I am of no use. No one likes me. No one needs me; there is nothing for me to live for. I will not be able to live like this. Mom, I want to die.... mom, I want to die.” Embracing her tightly, I cried out loudly.

My wails were piercing her heart. Tears were flowing from her eyes too. Her soft hands were silently touching my head and my back.

At night, dad was shocked to see my condition. I was in such a state that I was going to die. They immediately called the doctor at home. Medications started and the exam was postponed.

I was falling from my own eyes. As if I had lost my own existence. I was not going out anywhere. I was sitting all day in a corner of the room. Slowly, even my tears dried up. My face was expressionless, no feeling or no sensations, as if I was a statue. Our neighbors would also ask mom if I had any mental ailment. My parents also questioned my state of mind? I also started feeling that am I really...

When all this was going on with me, you met Mit that day...”

Miraj’s anguish and Mit’s tears were flowing out together. Who do I console first?

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Miraj broke down after saying this much. He choked up. I stood up and went to him. I put my hand on his shoulder. He started crying. As the tears poured down his face, the pain he felt came out as well. These must be really old wounds that were now gradually healing. It was necessary for this to happen. He cried a lot but he had finally let out all the suffocation he was feeling within. He may have been thinking that he has lost everything but in fact this was the beginning of his triumph.

Mit too wiped the tears off his face and composed himself. His eyes had become red.

I didn't stop Miraj from crying. He hadn't let everything that was weighing him down within out until now completely. He was under a lot of strain from a burden he had never anticipated. Today he let it all out. He now had a place in his heart, to live with new happiness, hopes and aspirations.

“Just as you would laugh out open-heartedly, by crying out when your heart overflows with emotions, you make space for new kinds of happiness to come into your heart,” Mit said as he stood up from his place.

Mit went to Miraj and affectionately embraced him. Mit patted his back a couple of times. Before returning to his spot, he stroked Miraj's head with affection, and then sat back down in his place.

After Miraj stopped crying, I opened my water bottle and gave it to him. He couldn't make eye contact with me.

“Hey, it's ok. Did you forget the first thing I told you? If we cannot cry openly, then how will we be able to laugh openly? And boys unnecessarily carry the burden on their mind that they are boys so how can they just cry like that? Come on; cry it out bro, whatever you have within is bound to come out. You're not making yourself cry, are you?” I said as I looked at Mit and Miraj.

Mit laughed.

Miraj pulled out his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes.

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel free and light.”

“Yes, I can see that on your face. The worry that was etched on your face before has now gone someplace else. Do you know where?”

“Where?”

“In your eyes.”

“In my eyes?”

“I mean because you cried, your eyes are swollen. But no worries, they will be back to normal in a little while.”

“Sometimes you crack very bad jokes like Mit.” There was a smile on Miraj's face.

“Really? Then my sense of humor must have improved,” I laughed too.

“Yes, sometimes you need a crazy sense of humor like that,” Mit said.

“And you need such crazy people who can talk to you in a crazy manner and make you laugh,” I said as I hinted towards Mit.

Miraj burst out laughing. His bloodshot eyes reflected against his cheery face. In his triumph, I could see my triumph. He was happy that he was going to make a new start.

For a while, the three of us sat quietly. He didn’t need anyone’s support now. We were all enjoying the silence of the temple with a peace of mind, especially Miraj.

In the meantime, a lot of thoughts crossed my mind. I learnt and understood a lot from Miraj’s life too.

How long can one live with a mask covering his face? To what extent can a person try to change their self? How long can a person carry on doing something that feels like a burden to them? Whatever happiness is left in life disappears too. What is the use of continuing down that path? What can be the biggest self-torture than forcing yourself to become like those around you in order to fit in?

It’s not difficult to be simple and stay simple but it’s very difficult to compare yourself with someone else and continue to struggle to keep up a fake personality or impression. Change to a certain extent is acceptable and necessary too. But a person should understand its limits first. It is easy to live life but we ourselves make it complicated. In the end, after Miraj tried everything to change himself, he couldn’t achieve anything.

“Where are you both lost?” Miraj spoke up.

I looked at him. He seemed to be at ease now.

Mit said, “I was thinking that **it’s good to be simple than to be nice because being nice can be seen on the outside but being simple can be emotionally touching.**”

“Telepathy.... I was thinking about the very same thing. But you said it in a short and sweet way,” I told him enthusiastically.

“Whose friend are you after all? Of course, our thoughts will be the same, my influence is such,” Mit commented as he raised his collars with pride.

“You will never change.”

Those very same old tactics of Mit lightened the atmosphere. Miraj seemed to be very relaxed but I still had something left to tell him.

“There is still one thought that bothers me,” I told Miraj on a more serious note.

“What thought?”

“I was thinking that it seems like you are completely alright now but there is no guarantee that this will not happen to you again.” Upon hearing this, the smile on Mit and Miraj’s face disappeared.

Miraj was shocked. Suddenly, a little nervousness could be seen on his face.

Mit also looked at me with surprise.

“Why are you saying that?” I do not have the strength to tolerate all this again. And I have no intention of going towards that very path that has resulted in my current state.

“I know, you are saying this with reference to Param, Nikhil and Priyanka?”

“I will never forget them. They made my simple and safe life unsafe. What have I become?”

“No, it is not their fault. They are just instrumental in the process. It’s our own fault. You have always lived with fear. And the weight of that fear has an impact on all your relationships.”

“Fear? What kind of fear?”

“The fear of being alone, the fear of being left behind, the fear of looking old-fashioned in other people’s eyes and the fear of being a joke to other people”

Miraj kept looking at me.

“So, should we bid farewell to these fears today once and for all and embrace life anew?”

Miraj took a deep breath and smiled. He accepted my point without a single argument.

“How do you know all these things?”

“It’s because I have already experienced what you are experiencing now. We all are our own teachers in the school of life.”

He laughed.

“Let’s go.”

I felt thankful to the God within for making this the most memorable day of our lives.

“Some relationships do not have names. We can call them well-wishers,” Miraj said as he got on his bicycle.

“You are absolutely right.” Mit rang the bell on the bicycle in support of this too.

His eyes were clearly filled with emotions of gratitude for me. He did not have to utter the words.

“Yes, but there is also something in addition to that which draws the line between the good and the bad for us,” I tried to steer our conversation in a different direction.

“What is that?”

“Religion and spirituality.”

“No person is able to give us permanent happiness. That is where spirituality comes in.” We didn’t realize when we reached home whilst cycling.

A few days went by with a lightheartedness that was never experienced before. I’d learnt from Mit that Miraj had started to get back to his routine life. He was a lot better than before although he hadn’t completely become the old Miraj just yet. He still had a few weaknesses, but he will overcome those quickly with time. I was hopeful about that. But I was waiting for the right time.

One day Miraj called, “How are you?”

“Fine, how are you?”

“Doing well.”

“I’m calling to invite you to dinner at my house. My parents would really like to meet you.”

“And you Miraj, you don’t want to meet me?”

“It is because of you that I got a new life. You are always with me by way of true understanding. So, I see you every day Samyukta!”

We both laughed out loudly.

“I will certainly come.”

“Ok, then I’ll see you at seven o’clock in the evening. Would you like Mit to come and pick you up?”

“No thanks, I will manage.”

“Ok, bye for now.”

I reached Miraj’s house at seven o’clock on the dot.

“Come, come dear,” Alka aunty gave me a warm welcome.

Mit’s dad stood up seeing me enter their house, “Come in dear.”

They couldn’t say anything more but their eyes said it all. The way they were standing showed a lot of gratitude in itself.

“Welcome.” Just then Miraj came out of the other room. He looked happy. Seeing me, his eyes were shining.

“Hi Miraj, looking cool,” I said then sat on the sofa.

“Where is Mit?” I asked as I looked around the house.

“He should be coming any moment,” said Miraj. Just then the doorbell rang. Miraj ran to open the door. “Speak of the devil”.

I actually wanted to say that to him but his dad’s presence kept my modesty in check.

“Hello Samyukta,” Mit said as unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. He went and sat on a chair under the fan, whilst rolling his sleeves up.

“Let’s eat now,” Alka aunty asked.

“Yes, today’s family dinner with a family friend,” And everyone burst out laughing.

Everyone at home looked fresh and that added to my happiness. We chatted and laughed over various things and finished dinner.

We sat down on the sofa while chewing on some mouth freshener served after the meal. Alka aunty was busy in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner.

“Samyukta, I have heard a lot about you from Mit. I am very happy to have finally met you today,” Mit’s dad wanted to say a lot more but he didn’t. I know what he wanted to say.

“I think the four of us are happy after meeting Samyukta, right? And the credit for that goes to me,” Mit raised his eyebrows and looked at everyone for approval.

“Yes, yes, you can take all the credit, ok?” Alka aunty came after finishing up with the kitchen chores. She wiped her hands with the

loose end of her sari and sat on the sofa with relief.

“Oh mom, think before you put eighty kilos of weight on something. What will happen to this poor sofa?” Mit teased his mom

“Shut up, you brat!” Alka aunty laughed.

“Can I ask you something?” Miraj asked me

I was surprised. What could he want to ask me that required getting my permission first?

“Because it is personal,” He quickly interjected realizing I was taken aback by his sudden question.

I was hesitant. “Ok, sure.”

Now Miraj was hesitant. I couldn’t understand what was going on. I looked at his parents. They were quiet too but eagerly waiting. Finally, I looked at Mit.

“Oh man, let me ask her. Samyukta, everyone wants to hear about your journey. We all want to know what kind of phases you have gone through. All of that.”

“You talk about a rare personality every time but you have never told me anything about him. I especially want to hear about Him,” Miraj interrupted Mit half way through.

A feeble smile spread across my face. I sat properly on the sofa, making myself comfortable. Everyone took their place. I started flipping the pages of my past...

(21)

Due to my appearance, with no hair, I constantly endured insults and suffered a low self-esteem and I finished school feeling rather dejected. It is everyone's dream to go to college. I also had similar feelings like other girls. We tried all sorts of remedies for my hair to grow, each time with a new hope, and eventually I got fed up of it all.

After all the efforts and experiments had failed, someone suggested hair transplant. However, in my case, even that failed.

Now there was this last resort...a wig. But that would make me a laughing stock in school because everyone was familiar with my normal look. With that fear in mind I did not attempt to wear a wig in school. Getting through the school years was a great struggle. However, my dream of studying further was realized when I started going to college with a new found sense of self-confidence, brought on by wearing a wig. Wearing a wig turned out to be the best solution.

"Samyukta, I will set the wig for you in such a way that no one will ever suspect that you are wearing one." Our family doctor, with whom I had been acquainted since many years, had a heartfelt concern for me.

"Really?" The doctor felt like god sent to me.

After a few minutes of setting, I got a new look with beautiful hair and my life was filled with a new self-confidence, new hopes and immense happiness. Really, everything changed once I got the wig. It was like finding a new life.

Tears of joy filled my eyes. We returned home, looking cheerful. Mom, dad, Ronak and grandma, everyone was full of praise. Mom couldn't take her gaze off me.

From that day onwards, the whole atmosphere in our home changed. Everyone experienced peace and calm when they saw this change in my life. I was eager to go to college. With new aspirations and confidence, I started my college life.

College means a new life. For some people it is a place where one can strengthen the foundation for their career and status. Whereas, for some people it is a platform for fashion, style, speech, etiquette, attitude, competition, jealousy, love and show biz.

Like everyone, with the hope of progressing, I settled down in college routine, leaving aside any suffering of shyness, hesitation or inferiority I had suffered in the past. I made some good friends. A few boys also joined our group. Thanks to the wig and the new confidence, it didn't take long for me to blend in with them.

The wig cannot give you a 100 percent natural look. But it almost looked like real hair, so I didn't think anyone had any doubts about it.

I used to tie my hair in a simple pony tail. I was getting a normal acceptance from everyone at my college. I became more and more confident. There came a time when I really believed the wig to be a part of myself except between the times when I removed it and put it back on. I forgot the reality and believed that whatever I am is due this wig. This was not real hair. I enjoyed handling the wig

and making new hairstyles. I imagined the wig to my real hair.

Now my confidence soared high. I didn't see any difference between myself and the other girls. From the beginning my brain was sharp at studies and so I started becoming popular in college. Until now, because of no hair, I had been the victim of ridicule, insults, dislike and rejection. Everyone was interested in my looks rather than in my talent. As a result, I had suffered from extreme low self-esteem.

But now, that was all in the past. My grasping power increased once again. With my education I wanted to show the world that Samyukta is also something. I had been neglected for long enough.

Gradually, everyone started following me. My notes, my writing, my reading, everything was perfect and now it felt as if I was not afraid of anything. Sometimes I got a few compliments when I had dressed up well.

"Samyukta, you rock babes," flattered Zankhana.

"Why what happened?" I asked surprised at the sudden compliment.

"Today Mr. Mehta was praising you in our class."

"Really? What was he saying?" I asked full of curiosity.

"He was saying that you are a brilliant student. He was complimenting your handwriting, your notes..."

"Really?" I was charmed. The joy that I felt was akin to that of a person who gets some delicious food after a year of starvation. While in school I had tried my best to impress the teachers. I had tried to keep my friends and teachers happy for fear of being undermined due to my unnatural look. Unfortunately, my efforts

had not lasted long.

People used to avoid me. Those who were less bright and less skilled got more recognition. Not able to withstand the entire burden, I lost my self-confidence and developed an inferiority complex instead. Now I was getting back all that I had lost. My happiness knew no bounds.

“Many girls are jealous of you.”

“I don’t believe that,” I could not digest that story.

“People are bound to get a little jealous if you have beauty as well as brains.”

“Oh come on, it seems you haven’t found anyone to mock today.”

Zankhana’s words threw me off balance. It was beyond my dreams.

Now I started becoming proud of myself. I had no idea how I had reached the state of ‘I am something’ from ‘I am nothing.’ Instead of being satisfied, I started yearning for more.

My mind became intoxicated. Gradually I became conscious of fashion and started dressing up like the other girls. The words ‘beauty with brains’ became ingrained in my psyche. As a result, a transformation took place in me and I started doing different hairstyles and sometimes let my hair hang loose. Initially I was a bit shy, but slowly I got used to it. Yes, but one thing was for sure, I did not overstep the boundaries of moral values instilled within me.

Over the years I had endured insults and now I started getting a lot of respect because no one knew my real story. To prove myself to be ‘beautiful and brilliant’ I was heading from below normal to above normal.

And then suddenly one day.....

‘Samyukta... Samyukta...’ Mitva was calling out my name.

‘What happened?’

‘It’s Zankhana’s birthday today, don’t you remember?’

“Oh, it had skipped my mind.”

“Come on join us for a group photo.”

“Happy birthday Zankhana,” I wished Zankhana giving her a big hug.

“Thank you dear.”

“Sorry, I had completely forgotten.”

“It’s ok.”

“Come on everyone, arrange yourselves in a line,” shouted Nirali, who was now tired of holding the camera. Nirali was Zankhana’s cousin. She was also studying in the same college.

“Come on girls and boys,” Mitva directed everyone to take their positions.

Our screams and mischief were drawing attention from other people around us.

“Boys, please sit on that wall and you girls can stand behind,” Mitva roared once again.

“Ready....steady... cheese...” Nirali clicked three to four snaps.

“Now, only girls... boys, don’t mind please,” announced Mitva.

“All of you are so dramatic!” laughed Pranav.

“Whatever you think! Girls like such things,” Mitva answered back.

“Hey girls, the three of you sit yourselves down on the canteen chairs, and you three guys can stand at the back.”

“Yes, there should be proof that I have given a party to everyone. Nirali, make sure the photos cover the food on the table.”

“Yes, but first of all position yourselves properly.”

“Let’s do it this way, place your hands on the shoulders leaning a bit, like this,” Zankhana demonstrated, posing behind Mitva.

“Okay, I will pose with Zankhana,” I said pushing Mitva aside.

Everyone arranged themselves with their partners. Nirali handed over the camera to Pranav and stood behind Mitva.

“Okay. Ready?” Pranav asked everyone to look at the camera.

“Yes....” Everyone smiled.

Pranav took a few snaps. The photo shoot was over. While leaning, the brooch on Zankhana’s dress had become entangled in my hair. None of us had noticed this. Mitva, impatient as usual, started pulling Zankhana’s hand.

“Srrrrr...” I felt a strong pull on my wig.”

“Ouch,” I screamed loudly.”

Everyone looked at me. The wig had pulled off from the front part of my head. Zankhana glanced at my head. Mitva, unaware of what had happened once again pulled Zankhana’s hand. Now the wig, with an extra pull almost came off. Everyone stared at me. It was only after Zankhana yelled at Mitva that she realized what had actually happened.

“Eeeek....” Mitva screamed when she saw me and that drew everyone’s attention on me. Everyone was stunned. And I....

I became as helpless as ever. Blood wouldn’t have flowed out if I had been cut. I was not able to look up and tears rolled out of my eyes. I felt suffocation as if my breath had been stopped.

“Oh no...Shit...What’s this?” Such words as well as laughter pierced my ears. My head was reeling.

Where should I go? What should I do?

I tried to reset the wig, but my hands were trembling. Zankhana slowly removed her brooch and tried to help me restore the hairstyle. I could not get up from there. I forced myself to stand up, but out of shame and fear sunk back into the chair. Although my eyes were lowered, I could sense people staring at me. I had become a complete farce.

Mitva and Zankhana were standing beside me. They sympathized with me. But they must have felt betrayed. Nirali laughed for a while and was trying to get serious. She stopped after Zankhana gave her a sharp look.

My whole body became cold.

‘It’s okay Samyukta, don’t worry,” said Mitva quietly.

Zankhana, somehow managed to reset the wig for me and hinted to everyone to leave us alone. The boys left, but some girls still had their eyes fixed on me.

Those who were jealous of me might have found relief from all of this. I started walking with my gaze lowered. Zankhana held on to my hand tightly, as if trying to console me.

Mitva pulled out her car from the parking lot. We both got into the car and left the college grounds.

I had no words to say. I sat in silence, wiping my tears.

“Here’s your house?” asked Zankhana, putting her hand on my shoulder.

Mitva got out to open the door for me and pressed the doorbell. Mom came out.

“What happened?” Mom panicked when she saw our pale faces.

“Nothing, aunty, please don’t worry,” Zankhana said at once to try to pacify my mom.

“Samyukta’s wig...’ Zankhana looked at Mitva to stop her from saying anything further.

They dropped me till the sofa and left quietly. Mom had figured out what must have happened. After the girls had left, I cried my heart out. Mom pulled me to her and embraced me tightly. She brushed her hand over my back and my head and let me cry.

This went on for about twenty minutes. I was tired. I closed my

eyes and lay down on the sofa holding her hand. Mom neither asked me anything nor did I tell her anything that day.

(22)

On that day the shock I had received was more than all the shocks put together throughout my life.

First of all, everyone was unaware of my real situation and secondly the happiness I had been relishing was actually deceitful pleasure. So I was hit with a double whammy. Not only was I exposed in front of everyone, but I had also become unworthy of facing anyone.

With the help of the wig I had seen and experienced a great change in me and I had believed it to be my world. It had become my refuge. I had firmly started to believe that the happiness, respect and fame that I got due to the wig, would never leave me. I had taken for granted the compliments such as 'beautiful', 'brilliant'. That was indeed my biggest foolishness!

My mind was shattered. I had become so used to getting humiliated when I did not get any respect. But now that I had climbed up the mountain of pride, I fell so badly that I could not get up again.

This college incident enveloped my mind like a horror movie. For days I could not come to terms with what had happened to me. It had been after many years that I had barely started to study with vigor when I suddenly received this blow. Once again, I became all alone.

I stopped talking to everyone at home except my mom. I started

hating the wig. After this incident I never touched it again. Now there was nothing left in the house! Whom would I show my fake face to!

Sometimes, grandma would come and sit with me. She would try to converse, but after getting no response from me she would give up and leave. Dad would come and see me at least once every morning and after coming back from the office. Sometimes he would muster up the courage to say “How are you, dear?” And poor Ronak would sit near me and do his homework. Everyone had hoped that I would speak up, only to be disappointed in the end. Ronak would sometimes bring chocolates for me and put them next to me. I would stay in my room for days on end.

And my poor mom... she would come into my room now and again. Sometimes she would wipe off tears from my eyes with the edge of her sari and hold me for a while with great affection. Sometimes she would try and hold back her tears and at times just end up crying in front of me. One week passed like this.

“Samyukta dear, when do you want to go back to college?” Mom asked gathering up some courage one day.

I just shook my head indicating a vigorous ‘no’.

Zankhana and Mitva had phoned a couple of times but I had not answered them. They had messaged me as well but I had not replied to their messages either. I just couldn’t forget that day. I wished I would lose my memory.

Whenever I felt intense suffocation, I would go to the bathroom, turn on the faucet and cry loudly. Seeing my face and red eyes in the mirror, I felt pity for myself. I thought I was going crazy.

About eight to ten days later....

“Where is Samyukta?” Someone asked from outside.

“She is inside, in her room,” said mom.

“Can we meet her?”

I heard someone walking towards my room. With a slight hesitation someone pushed open the door. It was mom. She must have made someone sit outside.

“Who is it?” I felt afraid, who would that be? What if they saw me like this?

Dad had strictly instructed everyone not to allow anyone to see me other than my family members. He was afraid that my condition would deteriorate if someone said something that would upset me.

“Your friends are here.”

“Which friends?”

“It is the same two girls who had come to drop you the other day from your college.”

“No.” I put my hands on my head. I don’t want to meet anyone and with that intention I put my hand on my forehead. At that instant I realized I had not worn the wig. They had not seen me in this state before. I was too ashamed of myself. Once again I felt a deep dislike for myself. The next instant I thought of putting on the wig. Mom took out the wig from the wardrobe and gave it to me.

“I don’t want it.” I pushed her hand aside roughly.

“My dear, they have wanted to meet you for many days now. When they came last time I had asked them to come back after a few days.”

“How can I meet them?” My eyes started watering again.

“Okay, I will tell them you can’t meet them. Please don’t cry.”

“I put my head in the pillow and started crying.” Just then I heard someone push open the door which was already ajar. I quickly covered my head with my mom’s scarf.

“Hi Samyukta.”

I looked up. It was Zankhana and behind her was Mitva. Thinking that they might not get a chance to see me even today, they had allowed themselves into the room. I had no guts to face them. Zankhana came and sat next to me on my bed. Mitva was a bit hesitant. She stood against the wall across the room. Mom was looking extremely uneasy.

“How are you?” asked Zankhana.

I didn’t answer. I looked at her and my eyes lowered. Mom, Zankhana and Mitva, all three of them looked at each other.

“Aunty, when will Samyukta come back to college?” Mitva was finding it difficult to utter the words.

“I have no idea about that at the moment,” answered mom calmly.

“Samyukta, it does not suit an intelligent person like you to sit at home. Forget whatever has happened.”

“It’s not that easy,” I said.

“I understand, but it’s not your fault.”

“Please, do not torture yourself,” Mitva found some words.

I looked at her and then at Zankhana. Zankhana put her hand over mine.

“Won’t you listen to me at least once, Samyukta?”

“My dear, they have specially come to meet you because they have feelings for you,” remarked mom.

Once again my eyes filled with tears. I will never forget the support Zankhana had given me on that day. Even today I could see sympathy and compassion for me in her eyes. But this same sympathy was making me feel inadequate.

“Tell me, Samyukta, will you listen to something I have to say?”

I looked at her questioningly.

“Please start coming back to college. We are all with you.”

“Yes, Zankhana is right. Nobody will dare look at you in a bad way,” said Mitva stepping forward.

“You can remove the entire burden from you mind.” Zankhana put her hand on my shoulder and waited for eye contact from me.

“Sorry, I can’t,” I said looking down.

“It’s okay. We will not force you, but promise us one thing.”

“Please call us whenever you feel like it. I will definitely come and

see you again.”

“Okay,” I said curtly. I did not want to upset them, but I was in no condition to think about anyone else at that moment.

“We will take our leave now,” said Zankhana looking at Mitva.

“Yes dear, thank you. Please do come and meet us sometimes,” Mom said with affection.

“Bye, take care,” said Mitva

“Bye”

“Take care, Samyukta.” Saying this much, Zankhana glanced at Mom and left the room.

“Please do not hesitate to let us know if you need anything, aunty.

After everyone had left, I cried until the heaviness in my heart cleared. Then I became silent. I was tired of crying. Once again I looked around the room. My gaze stopped at the study table. For the past ten days not a single book had been taken out. With so much enthusiasm I had brought back to life my broken ego at this same place.

Once again I was overcome with overwhelming negativity. Sometimes I would become blank and at times I would get extremely tired of the whirlwind of thoughts. I wouldn’t call it mad, but I started living like an absent minded person. I wasn’t interested in anything.

It was nine in the night. Dad came into my room. He wanted to say something.

“Samyukta, how are you, my dear?”

“Come on, sit outside with us,” encouraged Mom

“No, I am more comfortable here.”

“You can’t sit here in your room all day. Come out for a little while. Meet someone who you like,” encouraged Dad.

“Nobody likes me,” I said with irritation.

“It’s not like that. We like you as much as we like Ronak,” said Mom, quickly.

“I am not talking about you. I am talking about people from outside.”

“Dear, you will only see the world the way you want to see it. Think about what there is in life rather than what there isn’t.”

“I am not interested in listening to any of this talk. I don’t like anything.”

“Okay. Let’s not discuss this further,” Dad stopped before my mood became worse.

“It’s okay if you don’t feel like going to college at the moment, but do something that will freshen up your mind. Something to pass your time,” Mom said coming over to me.

“I am not finding anything appealing, what do I do?” I was becoming quite stubborn.

“Alright, it doesn’t matter. Don’t force her,” Dad said looking at mom.

“Will you come for a walk with me tomorrow morning?”

“I’ll see.” I didn’t want to commit to anything.

Everyone was quiet for a little while. I didn’t have anything to say, and even they were tired of coaxing me.

“I am tired. I want to sleep,” I said hinting for them to leave the room.

“Well, go to sleep. Mom will sleep here.” Dad left after placing his hand on my head.

My mom stayed with me that whole night. I wasn’t able to sleep though. I lay there on my side and mom already tired from the day’s physical and mental stress fell asleep lightly stroking my back. Weighed down with hate, despair, listlessness, my eyes closed without me realizing it.

The next morning, mom was back to her usual chores. Grandma was sitting on the chair in my room. Everyone was doing their best to look after me.

“Are you up, dear?”

I sat there in silence.

“Are you alright, Samyukta?”

“Grandma, I won’t become insane, will I?”

Hearing this sudden question, grandma came over and sat next to me. Lovingly she placed her hand on my head and nodded at the picture of God on the wall.

“Look dear, he is the one who runs the world. Surrender all your worries to him.”

Listening to Grandma’s words and looking at the picture of God, I did feel peaceful, but I did not understand how I should surrender my suffering to him.

“God will take care of everything,” added Grandma soothingly.

“He is sitting there playing his flute. How is he going to take my suffering?” I couldn’t help asking.

“My dear, we should not disrespect God in this way.”

“I don’t understand what you are saying. He is in the photograph and I am here.”

“God gives suffering and he also gives strength to endure that suffering.”

“You are taking both sides. On the one hand you are saying I should surrender my suffering to him and on the other hand you are saying he gives strength to endure that suffering.”

Grandma stared at me as if she was looking at some ignorant person with pity!

In a way my family had withered because of me but this time what had happened was rather different from before. The short lived joyful days became eclipsed all at once.

Days passed like this. Everyone’s efforts to uplift my spirits ended in complete failure. Slowly, my food intake became less and my health started to deteriorate. I had no interest left in life.

“I am a girl, I am young, and nobody would accept me in this state.”
I had learnt to debase myself in every way.

All the self confidence that I had acquired from wearing the wig had gotten shattered all of a sudden. Whose fault was this? Mine, of course, because I had taken this situation to be permanent. Everyone wanted to see me happy. And in order to remain happy I had tried everything possible in this world, felt dejected and by taking refuge in the wig to keep my identity, I had forgotten the truth. I was paying such a huge penalty?? I couldn't bear it anymore.

Zankhana and Mitva tried to call me after a few days. They also messaged, but after getting no response from me, they phased out of my life as well. I was grateful to both of them, but I carried the burden that I had deceived them, and that was not allowing me to face them. Now I was not willing to meet anyone who would remind me of my past. In this way I lost all my good friends.

(23)

Four months passed by. I started getting sick. As my mental condition worsened, I suffered from physical disability, fatigue and weakness.

“I am tired of thinking about how to make Samyukta normal,” Mom expressed her anxiety to dad one day.

“I am worried that if she lives like this, then something will go wrong.” Dad too was really worried about me.

“Dad, my friend’s relative is a famous psychiatrist. Should we talk to him about Samyukta?” With age, Ronak had also matured.

“Yes, I think you are right,” Dad told Ronak.

“Do whatever is possible, but make my Samyukta normal again,” Mom exclaimed, looking at both Dad and Ronak in a tone that showed her pain and concern.

“Yes Mom, I’ll call him tomorrow and make an appointment.”

“Yes, do it quickly. Now even my patience is running thin.” Dad’s eyes had tears.

Next day, the doctor’s appointment was fixed.

“Sis, tomorrow we will go and see a doctor,” Ronak came and informed me.

“Why?”

“Look at yourself. You are not keeping well and you are not eating well. You are so weak.”

“But I don’t need any doctor.” I was really tired of doctors.

“Sis, we are not going to the doctor for your hair. We are going so that your health improves. Please Samyukta don’t argue about this.”

“I told you Ronak, I do not want to go to any doctors.”

“Doctor Shah is a very good person. You will like him when you meet him.”

“No, I don’t want to go to see anyone.”

Ronak was tired of convincing me. Mom and dad also tried but I did not budge from my decision.

“Don’t worry mom, we will talk to Dr. Shah. He will prescribe some medications and Samyukta will feel better,” Ronak comforted mom who was extremely frustrated.

“Samyukta, Dr. Shah has prescribed vitamins for you. He has said with that your weakness will improve. Will you take these medicines?” Mom asked.

“Yes,” I was also tired of my weakness and I readily agreed.

Hearing my answer, everyone at home was relieved.

I started taking the medications and started feeling a little better.

Because of me, my mom started to stay home more to take care of me. Dad and Ronak took care of all the outside work.

In her free time, mom would sit with Parul aunty who was also living in our building. Parul aunty's temperament was very similar to moms. Mom got along well with her. Slowly mom started becoming alienated from everyone else. Whoever met her, would only talk about me, which she could not tolerate.

With Dr. Shah's medicine, initially I remained calm. I was also to get a good night's sleep and the relentless force of thoughts decreased. I felt better for three or four months. Everyone at home became at ease. Sometimes I also went for morning walks with my Dad.

Few people from my building would also come out for a walk. We would walk away from everyone. I noticed that people would stare at me but I did not pay attention to them.

One day Ronak's friends came home. They all knew me, but I never talked to any of his friends. Everyone was sitting in Ronak's room and chatting when the doorbell rang. Ronak went to open the door.

"Did you see Samyukta?" Pranav asked Mihir in whispered tones.

"No, why?"

"Last time I came here she was wearing a wig and now she is just like before without a wig."

"Really?"

“Yes, she did look good. I don’t know what has happened to her?”

“Hmm. Baldhead...” Said Pranav and smiled.

Mihir also laughed.

At that time, I was watering the flower pot outside Ronak’s room and his friends were not aware of my presence. Listening to them, I started feeling weak again.

Does no one have any other topic to discuss besides me? This one thing has become so important in my life and in my personality and existence; no one finds anything other than this to discuss. Does the world have only one way of looking at me? That thought broke me from within.

If it is going to continue like this, then what is the point of getting cured with medicines? I thought to myself.

And I stopped taking medicines regularly. I was not interested in getting better.

I totally stopped going out of the house. My courage was shattered. Now my situation was such that even a simple comment from someone became very difficult to digest. I could not forget it for days on end.

One day I was sitting with my wardrobe open. All of a sudden, my attention was drawn to my drawing book lying on my table. I opened the drawing book and started looking through it. It contained all the old sketches I had made. As I started turning the pages, my eyes fell upon one page in particular.

I had made my own sketch during the happy days in my life after getting my wig. I had made this sketch from the photo that was

taken with my friends with my flowing hair. The dream of seeing myself with long hair was fulfilled and the sketch was the symbol of my enthusiasm.

But alas....

The dream palace that was made in the illusory world crumbled down like a house of cards.

Once again, the whole incident at college flashed in front of my eyes. Zankhana, Mitva, Nirali who was taking photos, other boys in the group flashed in front of my eyes. In just four or five seconds, the whole event seemed like it had just happened. The laughter of some people started piercing my ears like a nail. Straightening my wig, I could see my trembling hands. Even now they were trembling as they had done that day. I let out a loud wail.

“Samyukta, what happened?” Mom came running to my room.

I threw the drawing book from my hand. I held mom’s legs and started crying.

Mom sat down with me.

At that time Parul aunty our neighbor, had come to visit my mom for some work and she was aware about my condition.

“Will you listen to me?” Parul aunty told mom.

“What?”

“You tried so many things so far but you have not been satisfied in anything.”

Mom was listening with her face down.

“I assure you that if you listen to me you will not lose anything. Give it one last try, just for your daughter’s sake.”

“What should I try?” Mom asked cautiously.

“Just once, come with me to Dada. Let’s take Samyukta to Dada for his blessings. It is my request.”

After a few minutes of silence, mom looked at me and said, “yes.”

“This time, you will not be disappointed.” Parul aunty softly stroked my head with her hand. She then looked at mom.

Mom answered, “Let’s see, God willing.”

I was quiet. I had no strength left to think about saying either ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

The next morning, Parul aunty came again. This time, instead of going to mom, she came directly to me.

“Samyukta,” she came and sat next to me.

“Yes.” I looked at her.

“I have a request for you today,” She told me with folded hands.

“What?” I found it burdensome.

“Do not refuse to come with me to visit Dada. All your problems will be solved permanently.”

“That’s not possible.”

“This is the first and last time Parul aunty is forcing you to do something. After this she will never force you again, ok?” Somehow, I could see love in her eyes for me.

I nodded. She hugged me with a lot of joy. Mom was watching us.

“When do we have to go?” Mom asked.

“That’s what I had come to tell you. Oh, I nearly forgot in all this excitement. I have already talked to them about you. We will go and see Dada in the afternoon at four o’clock today.”

“Are you sure that Samyukta will not have any problem?” Mom was still worried and apprehensive about the whole thing.

“Trust me. Once you meet Dada, you will be convinced.”

“Very well then, we will be ready,” Mom replied”

Miraj was carefully listening to Samyukta’s narrating all of this.

“Then what happened!?” Miraj’s curiosity was evident on his face.

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“Then what!? That was the best day of my life; it was the day when I met Dada. In the first meeting, it awakened a supreme love in my heart.”

“Supreme Love? How did that happen?” Miraj asked excited.

“I am telling you... We reached their home at four in the afternoon. I stopped in my tracks at the front door. Parul aunty urged me to come inside. On the one hand there were doubts and on the other hand I had a lot of trust in Parul aunty. We entered the house very quietly.

The house seemed normal. It looked like an old antique house. There was an aura of simplicity and virtuousness in the atmosphere. Purity was evident everywhere as if it was proclaiming its silent existence. The house had an amazing sense of tranquility, just like you when you are in a temple! I was feeling cool but my mind was not at peace.

Just then a lady dressed in a Punjabi suit approached us.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand Parulben,” she greeted with a welcoming smile.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand Kananben.”

“Jai Sat Chit Anand,” she said looking at mom and me with folded

hands like when you pray.

We also wished her with folded hands and a faint smile.

“Please come and have a seat.” She indicated for us to be seated on the bed.

“Is Dada inside?” inquired Parul aunty.

“Yes, he is. He is talking to the people who came before you. It will take about five minutes.”

“No problem.”

As soon as we sat on the bed, it felt like the wanderings of many lifetimes had found a place to rest and there was a sense of peace that could be felt taking hold within. My mind was tranquil. The room did not have much furniture. The walls of the house were coated with a soft paint color and there were antique doors at the entrances. It was a clean and open space. There was nothing extra in the room. There was nothing that would catch one’s eye but my mind was still getting pulled in different directions. It felt as if we had come to the abode of a saint.

Just then, a man and a woman came out of the room inside. Their faces were smiling joyfully and they greeted Kananben, “Jai Sat Chit Anand” as they were leaving.

“Come let’s go in,” Kananben said to Parul aunty urging us to stand up.

“Yes, let’s go,” Parul aunty quickly got up and indicated to mom to follow her inside.

Slowly, we cautiously entered the room behind her. There were

so many emotions going through me as I was engulfed in some curiosity and some doubts.

Dada's room was very simple however it felt very comforting. I guess it was due to the infinite bliss I felt when I was inside it. Dada was sitting across us. Kananben sat down at Dada feet.

Parul aunty went straight to him and bowed down at his feet.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand Dada,” Parul aunty greeted him while bowing down.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand,” Dada replied.

I was standing beside my mom. Dada looked at us. My eyes met his for the first time. His eyes seemed to be reflecting an infinite life time's acquaintance with me. I still have that vision stored in my mind.

He looked at me. My eyes were fixed on the smile on his face and the pure radiance of his eyes. Whatever doubts I had for Dada were getting cleared without the need to speak. My mind was impressed by his facial glory and politeness. My heart almost froze. My stormy mind seemed to have calmed down completely. I had experienced all this within a few moments if just being there.

“Please be seated,” Dada's voice was very soft.

Mom sat down where we were standing. I sat down next to her. I did not understand what was going on inside me. It just felt like time had stopped.

“Go and sit in the front, near Dada,” Kananben urged us.

“No, it's quite alright, we are fine here,” Mom replied hesitantly.

This was the reflection of my previous beatings.

“Dada, this is Samyukta and her mother Rashmiben,” Parul aunty introduced us.

“Have they come for the first time?” Dada asked.

“Yes Dada,” we replied in unison.

“What do you study?” Dada looked at me and inquired.

“Actually, she is in college but.... Dada we have only come to take your blessings. Samyukta remains a little disturbed right now,” Parul aunty answered for me.

“No problem. Everyone in the world is disturbed,” Dada said with a smile.

“Not like that, Dada, she has a problem,” Parul aunty tried to clarify.

“Really? Slowly it will be alright. It cannot remain cloudy forever. Once the sunlight comes, everything will become clear again.”

“Yes Dada,” perhaps Parul aunty became quiet as if she understood what Dada had said.

There was a silence in the room. After Dada’s response, Parul aunty sat quietly and kept looking at Dada. I looked at Parul aunty. Her eyes were fixed on Dada and you could feel her mind was in full devotion.

“You can ask whatever you want,” Dada encouraged mom.

“Yes,” Mom said, but remained silent.

My gaze wandered all over the room and then finally settled on Dada again. I am not sure why my heart was filled with emotions when I saw him. My eyes filled with tears. It was normal for me to cry but today my eyes were tearful due to Dada. I felt that he was mine and my mind seemed to have immediately accepted him.

Is this really true? Am I dreaming? What is happening to me? Again, I tried to control my tears.

“Unload your confusions here,” Parul aunty encouraged my mom.

Just then Kananben came inside. She went to Dada and told him in a whispered tone, “Dada, there is a call from Tanmay from Pune. He sounds very happy and he wants to speak with you now.”

“Is that so? Let me talk to him.”

Halfway through our conversation, Dada received Tanmay’s call. I didn’t like it but remained still. I looked at mom. She was also embarrassed. I looked at Parul aunty. She was sitting with the same devout feeling evident from her face.

Kananben stood beside Dada, holding the phone. She had put the speaker on.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand Tanmay.”

Hearing Dada’s voice, Tanmay’s voice became soft.

He was stammering, “J-jjai Ss-sat-Chi-chit-Annand Dada. S-s-sorr-r-r..y, I insisted on talking to yoo-ou right now. Bbb-but Dada, I am ve-very happy to-to-today and that is why I w-ww-wanted to share this www-with you right away. You have rrr-really been a gr-grr-greaeat help to me. I had n-n-never thought that I would be able to

li-li-live a norm-mm-al life. I am now h-h-happy like others and am als-s-so able to enjoy my life. I had imagined that I would s-s-spend my entire life in a d-d-da-ark room, but you have g-g-given me a light that I h-h-had never experienced before.”

“Who is this Tanmay? I can understand his problem is that his speech is not clear. What could Dada have done to him that he is feels so obliged to him?” My mind was besieged with so many such questions. I looked at mom. She was also looking at Dada with the same curiosity as me. My eyes moved from her to Parul aunty. Looking at her I could feel that this was not something new for her. She was looking at Dada with the same devout feeling. There was a light smile on her face. My ears were once again eager to hear the conversation Dada was having with Tanmay.

“D-d-dada, you held my h-h-hand and taught me to walk in the light again. When th-th-there was no reason for me to live, you came into m-m-my life as a big reason and pro-pro-pr-provided me with the s-s-support I needed to stand on m-m-my feet today. I can face pe-pe-people now and comfortably an-an-answer their questions. Whilst talking, when my tongue stu-stu-stutters, I am now also able to laugh w-w-with the people around m-m-me.”

Tanmay talked uninterrupted. There was no full stop in his speech and his voice had a bounce to it. Dada was listening to him very calmly and did not stop him in the middle nor did he say anything to him. Kananben also stood holding the phone without any agitation. It was clearly evident she was neither bored nor had any thoughts like ‘let him finish and hang up soon’ going through her mind.

“Dada, Tan-tan-tanmay of yester years, who had sto-sto-stopped going out and who was feeling shy of meeting people, now freely goes out and mi-mingles with people and participates in new college projects. Dada, it is all be-be-because of your grace. No medicine can do what your di-di-divine love has done. When I met

you for the first time, it was your divine vi-vi-vision that saw me as a normal person. You never saw any flaw in m-m-me. Your divine vision has given me a lot of st-st-strength. Dada, please continue to shower y-y-your grace upon me.”

Now Dada said, “Our grace is always with you. Keep doing what we have told you to do and everything will be fine. I am with you.”

“I am already feeling th-th-that Dada.”

“Ok, come and do the vidhi*.” Saying this much, Dada closed his eyes and started chanting something in his mind. I kept looking at him; his face had a supernatural radiance to it. I do not know what Tanmay was feeling but I was experiencing a wonderful peace within me.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand,” Dada said, finishing his vidhi.

“Jai S-s- Sat Chit Anand, Dada,” Tanmay said and hung up the call.

After that there was a silent exchange of smiles between Dada and Kananben. She then switched off the phone and sat down on one side of him.

“Did you see? Problems exist in everyone’s life. But with the right understanding, all the sufferings can be removed. Tanmay, who sounds so happy now, was depressed when he came to me.”

“Depression...!” said mom but after glancing at me, she quickly became silent.

Dada looked at me and said, “Tanmay is around the same age as you. He stammers from a young age. He has undergone a lot of different treatments but there has been no difference in his ailment. Wherever he goes, people make fun of him. Gradually, he

lost his self- confidence as a result.”

“People laugh at me too.” Not sure why but I unconsciously said this out loud.

“The world has no way to enjoy innocent happiness, that’s why they try to get happiness by hook or by crook. But they don’t realize how much risk they are taking on just by doing that. But we need to have such an understanding that we are able to absorb those jokes and forgive those poor people who unknowingly get involved in such pranks.” Dada’s words made me think for a moment.

“World... poor people?...and to forgive them?” Dada’s words were hard to digest but his speech was full of compassion and that touched me tremendously.

“Dada, Samyukta is also going through the same thing as Tanmay,” finally, Parul aunty told Dada indirectly.

“Really? Then talk to Gauravbhai. This is what he has studied and he will explain it very well to them. She will also feel better. I will pray for her.” Dada looked at Kananben. Kananben immediately stood up and waited for us to follow suit.

Parul aunty very humbly folded her hands together in front of Dada and stood up. She told mom and me to come out with her. Mom and I got up, bowed to Dada and left the room.

“Please have a seat,” Kananben asked us to sit on the bed and went to get Gauravbhai from another room.

The three of us settled down.

‘Jai Sat Chit Anand,’ he said entering the room with folded hands and a faint smile. Gauravbhai’s face had a different kind of glow. At

a young age, there was naturalness on his face and humility in his behavior.

“This is Gauravbhai. He is also dedicated to Dada like Kananben. You can talk to him without any hesitation,” Parul aunty told mom.

After some formal discussion, Parul aunty told mom, “You can tell Gauravbhai about our daughter Samyukta in detail.”

I looked at mom. Her words were stuck. She nodded and looked at me and then she looked at Parul aunty.

As if Parul aunty understood mom’s hesitation, she held my hand and said, “Come Samyukta, let me show you Dada’s home,” saying this she pulled me inside.

After we left the room, mom talked to Gauravbhai in detail about me. She asked with tearful eyes, “My daughter is in depression, I am afraid that she is becoming crazy!”

“Oh no, most of the people believe that depression is a mental illness and a mental illness is equated to madness. This type of belief is rooted deeply in people’s minds. Actually, this is one type of physical (mental) illness. Depression is not madness but due to some chemical changes in the brain, a person gets more negative thoughts and due to that the person is under the influence of negative emotions. Since we do not understand this, we think of it as ‘madness’. At the end, it’s our own vibrations that make a person crazy. So please do not make the mistake of thinking in this way and give her lots of love instead.” One could sense the affection in Gauravbhai’s voice.

“Is her mind weak?” Mom asked.

“No. It’s wrong to say that depression is a mental weakness. First,

get rid of such false illusions and become strong. Only then will you be able to help your daughter come out of it.”

“How can I do that Gauravbhai?”

“What is your religion?”

“Vaishnav.”

“So, you must know that Arjun was devastated to see his own uncle, grandfather, brothers and cousins on the opposite sides on the battlefield of Mahabharat. This was one type of depression as well. At that time, Krishna gave him advice and brought him back to normality. In today’s context, it was one type of psychotherapy. All this is explained in detail in the Bhagwat Gita’s Vishad Yoga and Karma Yoga.

Mom nodded.

“So was Arjun’s mind weak?”

Mom started thinking but didn’t say a word.

“No, certain situations affect the mind in such a way that it creates chemical changes internally and that in turn triggers negative thoughts. After that a person stops thinking further. He becomes hopeless and then goes into negativity. In medical terms it is called depression.”

“Oh!” Mum exclaimed softly as she tried to understand what Gauravbhai was telling her.

“If you look at history, you will realize how many great men had to face depression in their lives. So, it is wrong to think that depression is a shameful situation. First, you should come out of this feeling

of guilt and shame, only then will you be able to provide proper support to your daughter.”

Mom wiped away her tears.

“Right now, she needs constant support, both physical as well as mental, especially your love and warmth. You can express it to her through your eyes, words, behavior and laughter. Let her experience the feelings of love. Do you know both the giver and receiver of love are healed! This has been proven in recent findings.”

Mom was listening quietly.

“In addition to that, talk to her openly. Listen to her a lot more. By doing so, feelings that are suffocating her inside will find a way to come out and she will feel relieved. If her feelings do not come out, then she will feel more alone. So, let her feelings come out. Understand her and accept her.

And remember specially, during this time she does not need your advice but she needs your appreciation, so appreciate her positive attributes. She does have some positive attributes doesn't she?”

“She paints very well and also cooks well.”

“So, praise those qualities and slowly inspire her to get involved in them.”

“Will she be alright?” Mum asked despairingly

“Yes, Definitely,” Gauravbhai encouragingly answered.

That's when I entered the room. Parul aunty came in behind me.

“Mom, let's go home,” I whispered under my breath.

“Yes, let’s go dear.” This time there was no tension on mom’s face. She placed her hand on my head with a loving smile.

Gauravbhai once again said Jai Sat Chit Anand to us with the same respect and folded hands as he had done when we first met him.

He then added, “Please meet Dada one more time before you leave.”

“Did you talk with her?” Dada asked Gauravbhai as soon as we entered the room.

Gauravbhai answered, “Yes Dada, I did”.

“Did you like it? Are you satisfied?” Dada asked mom.

“Yes, I feel a lot lighter,” Mom answered.

“Do you like it here?” Dada asked me.

I nodded silently.

“Do you want to say something?”

I started thinking. There were many unsolved puzzles but I had no courage to say anything in that moment.

“No problem. Ask when you feel like it. Will you listen to one thing I tell you?” Dada was talking to me with such a warmth and closeness, it felt as if he knew me very closely.

“What?” I inquired curiously.

“I am here for a few days. Will you keep coming? You will feel

better.”

I agreed with my eyes.

Parul aunty bowed to Dada and we followed her suit. Dada then gave us prasad.

“We will come again tomorrow,” Parul aunty said and we left the room. Kananben escorted us to the door and with a smiling face bid us goodbye.

On the way home, Parul aunty asked mom, “How was it?”

Mom said without hesitation, “We felt good. Dada looked like a saint.”

Even though we did not talk a lot on the way home, there was calmness within each of us. Kananben and Gauravbhai also felt like our own. Have they been living with Dada for a long time?” Mom asked finally breaking the silence.

“Yes, they have been in Dada’s seva for many years”, Parul aunty explained. I was listening quietly.

“Gauravbhai also has very good knowledge. Talking to him, gave me a new direction. The burden of so many years has gone away. Talking to him made me think, if Gauravbhai is like this, then what will Dada be like?”

“What can I say about Dada! He is a unique wonder. Whatever I say about him would be too little. Why don’t you experience it yourself gradually? Shall we go tomorrow as well?”

I saw that mom did not hesitate to agree.

“What could Gauravbhai have said to mom?” I was also astonished. I saw mom relaxed after so many years.

‘Dada is a unique wonder? What does that mean? What would Dada have in him?’ On the one hand I had lots of questions in my mind and on the other I had inner satisfaction because I felt so relaxed after meeting him. It was as if my restlessness of many lives had become quiet now.

“Samyukta, dear did you feel good?” Aunty asked me with her gaze steady on me.

“Yes.” I could only say this much.

After a long time, I had been to such a place where I did not find any abnormal expressions from anyone, where they would mock me or frown at me and I found it to be very helpful.

“I am very happy to hear this. We will go again tomorrow. You will definitely be fine.”

On the way home, I kept remembering Dada’s face. As such we did not really know him but he had left a unique impression on my mind. I couldn’t help but constantly feel that, ‘Dada is different from others.’

And Mom...mom was also very relaxed. I saw her relaxed face after many years.

After this conversation, we reached home. Parul aunty turned and smiled at me and left.

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It was nightfall. I was feeling a little positive. Dad had come home but mom did not mention our visit with Dada. She had spoken to grandma and Ronak about it however.

I couldn't stop thinking about Dada. His divine face and the calmness in his eyes; I was touched by the uniqueness of it all.

I kept tossing and turning in bed that night, trying to get some sleep. I didn't realize when I had fallen asleep.

"Samyukta, what are you thinking?"

"Dada, why does this only happen to me? What have I done?"

"The entire world is paying off the accounts of demerit karma and merit karma."

"But I have not done anything to bind such demerit karma."

"If not in this life, then you may have in the past life. Fruits cannot grow without the seeds!"

"I do not need any other understanding. I just want to look normal. Will you be able to get rid of the unhappiness that I have because of my hair?"

“Yes.”

Everything went blank for a while. Then I saw myself standing in front of the mirror. There was no change with my outer appearance. I had changed from within. I was feeling blissful. I had no complaints against myself or my appearance. I was calm and strong.

“That’s it, Dada. Now I do not want anything else. I have recognized my true self. Please continue to grace me like this.”

“Our blessings are always with you.” Dada then put his hand on my head and disappeared.

I woke up abruptly. But there was no shouting or screaming this time. My heartbeat was steady. My mom, who slept next to me, didn’t even realize that I was awake. This had never happened before. It was four o’clock in the morning. I was feeling fresh.

“Dada had come in my dream? I could not believe it. He had blessed me in my dream after meeting him just once! I could still feel his hand touching my head. Is he a supernatural man or a divine person?!” I couldn’t think much further.

Before I prove myself wrong by assessing Dada’s value, I wanted to meet him again.

“Mom...mom... can we go and see Dada today?” I excitedly said shaking my mother sleeping contently next to me.

“Samyukta... go to sleep for now. It’s not even morning yet.” I used to wake my mom up like this in the past when I was depressed. That’s why she responded without really understanding what I was trying to say.

“Mom... I am talking about Dada.”

“Dada!”

“Yes, listen. I want to meet Dada again.”

“Ok, I will talk to Parul aunty. Go back to sleep for now.”

It was but normal that she would not realize how eager I was to meet Dada, whilst she was asleep. I laid back down on the pillow thinking about the dream I had just had. I was wide awake now. I lay in bed with happiness that the meeting with Dada is a sign of something good.

Dada was the only thing on my mind since the morning. Just then Parul aunty came to our house.

“Samyukta, are you ok?” Parul aunty asked as she smiled at me affectionately.

“Yes, I was just thinking about you.”

“Really? Why is that?”

“Dada...” I said with a little hesitation in my voice.

“Yes, tell me. What about Dada?” She asked me lovingly.

“I had a dream about Dada today.” I then narrated the entire dream I had in the night to her.

“What are you saying?” aunty was awestruck, “We haven’t become properly acquainted with Dada just yet, and he has already come in your dreams? This actually means Dada has graced you.”

“Did you hear that Rashmiben?” Parul aunty called out to my mom,

who came running out of the kitchen to see what the commotion was about.

“Our daughter got Dada’s blessings. Now she will surely get better. I am convinced about it,” saying this Parul aunty gave me a big hug.

I glanced towards mom. She was looking at me happily. She put her hand over my head tenderly.

“Parul aunty, I want to personally meet Dada,” I said.

“Yes, yes, why not? We are definitely going today.”

“Mom, you will come too, won’t you?”

“Yes.” I could see the joy in her eyes seeing how eager I was to meet Dada.

I was also happy after so many days.

That was it. Just like that my meeting with Dada was arranged. Parul aunty had played the biggest role in taking me to Dada.

The three of us went to see Dada that afternoon. Mom and Parul aunty were asked to sit outside with Kananben after meeting Dada and taking his blessings. I sat with Dada a little more.

“Is your name Samyukta?” Dada started the conversation.

“Yes.” I wanted to tell Dada about my dream but I was debating whether to tell him right away or to wait for the right moment.

“Where you feel there is trust, you can open up,” Dada said.

“Dada, I feel much more at peace after meeting you. I didn’t realize

that I would feel so eager to see you again.”

“That is what happens when our heart accepts it.”

“I am doing what you had told me. I feel good.”

“Is that so? Good, good.”

“Dada, I had a dream about you today.”

“Is that so? Then you have got Dada’s blessings. What was the dream about?” Dada asked me.

I told him about my dream in detail. Dada was just as composed after listening to me as he had been before I had started to tell him anything. His expressions hadn’t changed. He didn’t get carried away with any excitement. These kinds of characteristics in Dada were always touching to behold.

“So, you are unhappy about your appearance?” Dada asked me directly.

“Yes Dada. I have been tormented all my life because of how I look. Everyone has rejected me. Many people have made fun of me too and I have very often found myself to be the laughing stock for a situation I can’t control. But what is my fault in that? It’s out of my hands, isn’t it?”

“You are right. It’s not in your hands. Instead of being unhappy about something that is not in your hands, you should focus on that which is in your hands.”

“What is in my hands, Dada?” I asked curiously.

“Inner beauty!” Dada’s voice was gentle but strong.

“Inner beauty?” I was trying to understand what that meant.

“Yes, the physical looks of this body and its’ beauty are considered outer beauty. A good body shape, a beautiful face, a good physique, hair, nails and all that, is outer beauty.”

“And what is inner beauty?” I uttered without realizing.

“Your character is considered inner beauty.”

I remained silent.

“No matter how beautiful a person is in their outer appearance, if their character is bad, would people like such a person?” Dada asked encouragingly.

I shook my head indicating that I didn’t think anyone would like such a person.

“But if that person is whole-hearted, is helpful, does not make other people unhappy and if such a person does not have good looks, then would people like that person?”

I started to ponder upon this question posed by Dada.

“If a person is physically disabled but joyful, always remains happy and always makes others around them happy, then wouldn’t people like such a person? What do you think?” Dada continued to prod me.

“Yes,” I said in a soft voice. “But Dada, people will still look at the outer appearance too.”

“People do look at it initially. Then they start to look at the character

of the person. This is because they may look very beautiful but if they are arrogant, put people down, insult people time and time again; then how long would a friendship last with them?"

I was speechless.

"You would feel like, *'you can keep your good looks, I am going.'* Such a feeling would happen, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would," I finally said.

"So, you should not worry about not having thick hair."

"But Dada, but I cannot tolerate the jokes people make about me. It really hurts me a lot."

"As long as you feel hurt from the jokes people make about you, they will continue to enjoy messing with you. And you will always be unhappy. You should become unaffected by it. Then they will not enjoy making fun of you and they will gradually stop doing it."

"But, how do I become unaffected by it?" I inquired inquisitively.

"With the right understanding, you should not worry about that which you cannot cure; you should not be unhappy about it. In fact, it is not actually considered suffering. So, you should accept it happily."

"How do I accept it? People do not accept me. I do not fit in with anyone," my voice started to break a little as I tried to compose myself again.

"If people do not accept us, then why should we take that upon ourselves?"

“Then where should I go? How would I face all this?”

“With patience and understanding,” Dada said compassionately.

“I am tired of trying to understand over and over,” I said with a hint of impatience in my voice.

“It is not considered understanding if you become tired of it.”

“Then Dada, why don’t you explain to me, what it is that I should understand? I too want to look good just like the other girls.”

Whilst we were having this conversation, Kananben came inside the room and quietly said something to Dada.

“Samyukta, try to digest whatever we have talked about today. Think about it. But along with that, will you do what I ask you to do?”

“And what is that?”

“Do you know yoga and pranayama?”

“Yes Dada I do.”

“You should do that daily.”

“What else do you like?”

“I like drawing.”

“Do you like cycling?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should do that too.”

“Then every evening, you should do Krishna Bhagwan’s aarti and make a flower garland for the Lord. Will you do all that?” Dada patiently asked.

“Yes I will.”

“Then do that from tomorrow.”

“Ok Dada I will.”

I bowed down at Dada’s feet. He blessed me, “We will pray for you. Everything will be fine!”

On that day too, I had become very light hearted. Upon reaching home, I told mom, Ronak and grandma about my conversation with Dada. Everyone was very happy. That night I went to bed thinking about what Dada had said to me.

From the next day, I started to experience a change in myself as well as in the atmosphere at home. I was the same person and my bedroom was the same as well, but the walls weren’t closing in on me that day. I wasn’t cursing myself either. I was very calm.

Actually, seeing my miserable state, everyone at home tried to find many solutions for me. But my mind was not prepared to accept them. But Dada’s words had such an impact on my mind that my heart immediately accepted whatever he had told me to do.

Gradually, I started pranayama and mom started doing aarti at home. I used to sit quietly. Sometimes I would listen to her while lying on my bed. With the help of grandma, I started making flower garlands. The atmosphere at home started to become light-hearted rather than like it used to be in past full of unhappiness

and restlessness.

There was a change in myself and in mom, grandma and Ronak as well.

They would all sit with me and do their work. I did not dismiss anyone. I started talking to my family members. They too would listen to me affectionately. I had stopped cursing myself and crying about my luck.

Gradually mom talked to dad about this too. He was very happy to see this impossible change in me. He gradually started doing aarti with us as well. The atmosphere at home had become divine and blissful.

Everyone at home started to feel thankful towards Dada and towards Parul aunty too.

Parul aunty couldn't contain her happiness either when she saw us so happy.

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It was decided to meet Dada after a week. When we reached there, Kananben welcomed us with a smiling face. She made us wait outside and went to inform Dada of our presence.

I went inside. Mom and Parul aunty sat outside with Kananben. When my eyes met with Dada's, I had the same experience again; the same feelings of coolness, the same sense of contentment. I was not sure whether to call it magic or something else! I could not understand it. It seemed like such a wonderful feeling.

I went inside and bowed down at Dada's feet.

"How are you, Samyukta? Feeling better?" Dada asked me.

"Yes Dada. The understanding you have given me gives me some strength. But I still do not have complete satisfaction. There is a lot of turmoil going on inside which bothers me a lot. It suffocates me."

Before I could say anything, a girl came inside, crying. The way Kananben followed her made it seem as if the girl had pushed Kananben aside and ran inside to meet Dada. She was young and beautiful in appearance; she looked about twenty-three or twenty-four years of age. She bowed down to Dada and started crying.

"Dada, I cannot live in this selfish and fraudulent world. No one

wants me, I want to die.”

Dada remained silent and patiently waited for her to speak.

“I have everything; a degree, good looks, money...everything. Just as I was diagnosed with cancer, Ankit refused to marry me. Even though this cancer is curable! Really, people of this world are terrible,” she kept talking uninterrupted.

“Parthi, no one is bad in this world but it’s our own karmas that are bad. When merit karmas are unfolding, many people would come and compliment you and when demerit karmas unfold, the very same people will have contempt for you. If you look at this, it’s our own merit and demerit karmas. People are just evidentiary instruments.”

Dada’s reply caused a storm inside me. My life’s sorrows, between momentary happiness and again series of agonies overwhelmed my mind.

‘Is no person really bad? No one is to blame when we get hurt?’ There was a flash of light in me.

“What should I do Dada? I do not understand anything,” Parthi kept talking helplessly.

“If we do not finish our karmas then the debt will be on us. It will have to be repaid later. Nature will not spare anyone, Parthi.”

“Dada, this is getting too much for me. I want to die.”

“You cannot end your life like that; by doing that, your karmas do not get completed. If you die without finishing your karmas, you have to take birth again and repay that with interest. You have to commit suicide for seven life times. If not solved correctly the pain

will increase instead of decreasing.”

“I can’t forgive Ankit. I thought that he loved me a lot but everything was just a show.” Her despair was added with anger.

“Love? What kind of love can these two-handed people give you, Parthi? On the contrary we will give love to the world. But when? When we become vitaraag. Vitaraag means there is no attachment or abhorrence for anyone. There is equal love for everyone! Just like what Dada has for all. Do you see Dada’s love?” Dada’s voice was full of love and compassion.

Parthi then became quiet. I sat there frozen.

“What kind of love can these two-handed people give you?” Each and every word of Dada’s was etched in my heart.

“Equal love for all beings. Just like what Dada has. Do you see Dada’s love?” I felt that Dada was talking to me, not to Parthi. I was not only seeing but also experiencing Dada’s love.

Dada lovingly persuaded Parthi and turned her away from the thought of committing suicide. At the same time, my mind also made the decision of never committing suicide.

Parthi bowed down to Dada and left the room. Once she left, Dada looked at me.

“The looks that Parthi was proud of could not cure her from cancer or sustain her engagement.”

What could I say to Dada.

“Things are not so bad for you, are they?”

“No.” I nodded in silent agreement.

“So always keep your vision on the ones below you. Then you will be happy. If you keep on seeing the people above you, then the pain will not go away.”

“You are right Dada, yet I am stressed that I do not have hair.”

“It is just that you have no hair, everything else is there, safe and intact. Tell me, you have a heart, kidney, eyes would you sell them to someone for thousands of rupees? If you get your hair in exchange would you give them away?”

“How can I do that?”

“Many people in this world do not have that. At least we have all these assets in the body that are safe, don’t we? Hasn’t nature blessed us with all that?”

Dada’s advice was directly going into my heart.

“Always be grateful for what you have. Do not worry about what you don’t have. Do you understand?”

“Yes Dada.”

“But Dada, you understand this, but people do not understand it. People do not look at me with the same vision as you.”

“People are always looking for beautiful things. When they go shopping for mangoes, they always buy mangoes that look good from the outside. But when they try them after getting home and the mangoes turn out to be sour, they regret buying them. It’s like that. People worship Lord Krishna as shamlaji or dark colored but if they see a dark-skinned girl, they criticize her. People are like that!”

I laughed when I saw Dada's actions as he spoke to me.

"If you change the perception to look at the situation, then that situation will not give you any suffering. Do you understand?"

"Yes a little bit."

"Remember one thing; there is no beauty in this era. Beauty was there only in the time when God was present. Those women used to be called padmini. Women during those days used to have a fragrance that could be smelt from miles away. And today's women! You do not even like to sit next to them as you can smell their sweat! You need to apply perfume to be fragrant!"

I was getting convinced with every word Dada was saying.

"Beauty does not come by wearing a nice dress, applying makeup or styling your hair. Real beauty comes with satsang, with true understanding, with keeping good company. And beyond that as the ego dissolves the person becomes divine. Ego eats away at one's beauty, eats away at people's love and affection and gives misery to all."

Now I started developing interest in what Dada was saying.

"God is completely egoless and due to that His beauty is much more than the other deities. This skin will deteriorate one day but if the ego dissolves, then the beauty is divine and remains eternal."

"How can you dissolve the ego?" I curiously asked Dada.

"When we stop hurting others, when we stop finding faults with others, seeing them with faults, our negative intellect begins to reduce. In this way, if the ego and the negative intellect are reduced,

our internal beauty and nature become so good that people love our presence, they love our nature and they love to be around us.”

Now I smiled freely. I found his conversation very unique. Why doesn’t anyone think like this?

“Now tell me, which beauty will you prefer?”

For the first time, someone had explained to me the reality about ‘inner beauty’ with a totally new perspective of life. “I feel good listening to this but when I have to face the world, it can be a daunting task,” I finally said to Dada.

“No, when you face reality, you keep this understanding with you and it will help you. Let me tell you something, when a person dies, does anyone keep his corpse? People immediately prepare for his funeral. Why would people do that?”

“Because the dead body rots,” I answered.

“Yes, the body starts decaying, it stinks. So, people would say, before we get sick, let us cremate this body quickly.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“This body of ours which was once considered beautiful, when it ages how strange does it look? How do you feel if you have beautiful eyes with cataracts? There is value only as long as there is the presence of the soul. After that, the value becomes zero.”

“Yes, I had seen my grandma. Her body had reduced. After death, her face had also changed.”

“Yes, then the real value is of the soul. Soul itself is God. Otherwise, this body would give problems any time. You cannot trust this

body.”

“Dada, what should I do when the other girls show off in front of me?”

“That is because they think they are something. I know cases of several such girls. At one time they were very successful and then lost everything to depression. So, where does happiness based on appearance, status and money go? Everyone has to bear the fruits of their karma.”

“Dada, I can understand all this but what if I don’t have the strength to face anyone?”

“Why? What are you scared of? Are you afraid that people will make fun of you?”

“Yes, other girls get respect and I get contempt. Seeing them I become jealous.”

“Have you ever wondered why people respect a girl who is more beautiful?”

“It’s because she looks good and everyone likes her. She is also able to show off in front of everyone.”

“No, in this world, people are hungry. Some are hungry for money, some are hungry for respect and most of all they are hungry for lust.”

“Lust!” Hearing this I was shaken.

“In this time cycle people’s vision is very sexual. If the opposite person is good looking, then they would enjoy that person’s beauty. At least they would enjoy it mentally. They trap a person

by giving them respect and then take undue advantage of them. And these girls become fools. When they are given respect, they lose their mind and become unconscious.”

Hearing this, I became speechless.

“People respect others for their own greed. In return, there is always some temptation to enjoy something or to take some benefit.”

“Then, is it the same for all these heroines in the world of entertainment?” I asked

“What else? Girls think that they make others dance around them, but at the end of the day, they are only fooling themselves and getting cheated.”

Hearing Dada’s last sentence, I was stunned. I got up and straightway bowed down at his feet.

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Dada put his hand on my head with lots of love. Tears were flowing from my eyes. Dada let my emotions flow out of me until I raised my head myself. I became quiet. I wiped my tears and recovered and looked at him. I saw only love flowing from Dada's eyes.

"Samyukta, reflect on what we have talked about every day. Do this especially when you have to go out somewhere. It will give you strength. Slowly your hesitation will decrease."

"Yes Dada. But whenever I lack courage, please be with me."

"I am always with you. Will you accept one more thing that I tell you?"

"What Dada?"

"Start your doctor's medications as your parents are suggesting."

I did not say anything.

"Doctor's medicines and our blessings, both will work together."

Not sure why but my mind immediately accepted what Dada said.

"Okay Dada," I said humbly.

Once again, I bowed down to Dada. Dada gave me his blessings. This time I was very relaxed, it felt as if my burden had suddenly evaporated!

Would you call it magic or a miracle!

I came out of the room. Mom and Parul aunty were talking to Kananben. Seeing me come out, their eyes seemed to transfix on my face. They were trying to figure out how I was feeling!

But as the saying goes, ‘moms are moms after all.’ Looking at me, her face was glowing with happiness. She quickly got up and hugged me.

“Sanyu...my baby...!” My mom cajoled.

“Mom, I felt so good!”

Hearing this, Parul aunty heaved a sigh of relief.

“Come, take Dada’s blessings,” Kananben told mom.

“Mom, aunty and I all went inside to take Dada’s blessings.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand, Rashmiben.”

“Jai Sat Chit Anand, Dada.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes Dada. I also feel good, seeing Samyukta.”

“Everything will be alright, hmm. Also start the doctor’s medication as well.”

“But, will she...” my mom didn’t complete her question

“She will take the medicines,” Dada said that and looked at me.

I nodded affirmatively.

Mom was shocked to see this unbelievable change in me.

Her eyes were welled up with tears. Her gratitude towards Dada was clearly visible in her eyes but she could not express it in words.

“Dada...” That was the only thing she managed to say.

“Rashmiben, your daughter is going to achieve real beauty and for that she will need your support.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

Dada talked to Parul aunty for some time and then the three of us left.

Mom talked to Ronak about starting the doctor’s treatment and Ronak in turn talked to dad and grandma. Everyone was happy. My treatments began.

‘Doctor’s medicine with Dada’s blessings!’

I started getting better, both mentally and physically! Every day I used to recollect my conversation with Dada and it worked like a vitamin.

Slowly I got the courage to go out. There was restlessness with courage. Initially I went down to the ground floor of the building and came up. I did not have the courage to stay out longer than that. My heart beats increased when I panicked. When I got home,

I would close my eyes and sit for a while and remember what Dada had said to me. That gave me courage. In this way a few days passed...

One day I decided to go out alone to meet Dada. And I did. Mom, grandma and Ronak could not believe this!

By the time I reached Dada I was sweating profusely. I hastily went towards the room. Seeing Dada from the door, my heart rate automatically returned to normal. I felt at peace seeing him. Slowly I entered the room he was in. He has such a tremendous influence that you would automatically become modest and humble.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand, Dada.” I greeted him.

“Jai Sat Chit Anand. Is everything Sat Chit Anand?”

“Yes Dada.”

“Has your suffering reduced now?”

“As such I remember that this understanding that I have received from you has made a lot of difference. But often the effects do arise inside me...”

“Does it? What happens?”

“Dada, whenever I go out, people’s astonished eyes are staring at me. The effect is not as great as before. However, when someone stares at me for a long time, I do feel awkward and uncomfortable.”

“What do you do at that time?” Dada asked.

“When I remember what you told me, then I regain my composure and I remain normal. But sometimes, when I do not like the behavior of the opposite person, I forget everything and become uneasy.”

“But you do feel better than before?”

“Yes Dada, before my situation was very bad. You are aware of it.”

“What else are you feeling?” Dada could see through into my inner state that my suffocation was not yet over.

If I tell Dada the truth about how I feel, then how would he react. Thinking that I did not tell him everything at once, but Dada caught me.

“Dada, I still cannot make eye contact with people. I try not to be afraid of these people or feel small in front of them but even then ...”

“Never mind, we have to get out of this not with the ego but with the right understanding. As you start understanding in depth, then everything will become fine,” said Dada lovingly.

Seeing his love, I felt a sense of relief. Dada had become more familiar to me. Because of Dada’s compassion, the hesitation I had in talking to him started to decrease.

“Yes Dada. But I am not as confident as others.”

“You don’t have to bring that confidence. Once, your understanding changes your confidence will automatically come from within. You never know when the confidence gained from ego will slip into depression.”

Dada’s words refreshed my memory about the elevation I had felt because of the wig I had once worn and the subsequent depression I fell into. Dada’s words were now getting digested and as soon as I heard them, I could clearly see my faults and immediately find a

solution...

“Your vision which is always looking at Samyukta’s appearance is limited to the temporary form, set the same vision on your original indestructible form,” Dada said.

“Sorry? I did not understand you.”

“This body is constantly changing. What it is in childhood will not be the same in youth and what it is in youth; will not be the same in its old age. The body also changes at the time of death. After death, once the body is cremated then whose presence was there during the life in the body? All the relationships that were based with the body end with death. So, *who are we in this?? Have you ever thought about this?*”

“No Dada.”

“The pure Soul that is within all of us is the eternal element and that itself is the Supreme Being. That is your true form. People can’t see it. What they see is the outer packing. That packing can be beautiful for some and for some it could be ugly. But the pure Soul that is within this packing is the real element. Once it leaves the body, nobody keeps the body; they always take the dead body to the crematorium. That is why there is no value for this packing against the pure Soul. But in this time cycle of Kaliyug, people’s attachment has increased so much so that this body is considered as everything. This is what I am and all this belongs to me. In terms of spirituality, the reality is totally different. Do you understand this?”

“Yes, little bit. All my life I have lived believing this body is me and because of that I have suffered so much. I now understand that the true value is of the pure Soul in the body. Dada, from today I will start going out on my own.”

“Very good, our blessing is that you will live a beautiful life.”

I was about to say something but before I could, Dada continued, “u...h..., not with the hair but with the real understanding that I have given you.” Dada pointed his index finger and warned me jovially.

I burst out laughing.

“Dada, sometimes I can’t believe what my life was like before I met you and what it is today!!”

“When you have accumulated so much merit karma from many lifetimes, then in this life, you meet a Gnani.”

For the first time on that day, I was proud of my cursed destiny. I bowed down to the lotus feet of Dada. Dada blessed me and I left from there.

And from that day on, I started going towards normality. The day I met Mit, with a carefree attitude I had gone to watch a play with Ronak and you know what happened after that.

Everyone was quiet and composed. Yet they were all engrossed in deep thoughts.

I looked at Miraj and continued, “Miraj, remember one thing. We feel that we have suffered a lot but in this journey our parents have suffered more than us.”

Miraj lowered his eyes, and I saw that his parents’ eyes were also lowered.

“Miraj, do you remember I had told you that Param, Nikhil,

Priyanka... they were all instrumental?”

“Yes Samyukta, these people are like that, but I could not distinguish between good and bad, and due to that I tried to change myself and got stuck in that. They are not at fault.”

“Your understanding has developed a lot, Miraj. I am happy to hear this from you.”

Miraj’s face was glowing with a satisfactory smile.

“Miraj, if you can forgive those people then why can’t you forgive your parents?” Hearing this, Miraj was shocked.

“Even though their thought process has changed over this time and you can now pursue a career in cricket, always remember no matter how much the times change, the principle ‘*never hurt your parents*’ should never change. Explain to them. But if that does not work, you should keep them happy. In doing that, if you have to forgo your own happiness, you should do that and opt to keep your parents happy instead. The effort that you had put into finding your own happiness if you had put the same effort in keeping your parents happy, you would have been happy as well. Your situation would have been different today. After all, they are your parents and no parent would ever wish to harm their child.” My voice was a little strong but I was confident that Ronak would not break down.

“How do you feel living together in a home without unity?” I looked at everyone. No one had an answer.

“What happened? Do you find it difficult?” again, my gaze was fixed on Miraj.

Miraj stared at me.

“One day you will have to climb Mount Everest, won’t you?” My voice became softer, “Tell me, when you were sick, which Facebook or Instagram or WhatsApp friend came to help you?”

“No one”

“At that time, only your parents were with you, right?”

Miraj nodded. One by one, all the events started flashing before his eyes.

“So, no matter what happens, family members are all always tied together. Why don’t you experience that unity?”

Miraj relaxed. His heart acknowledged my words. Feelings of remorse reflected in his eyes. He got up immediately and bowed down to his mom. With this sudden move, Alka aunty was awe-struck. She held Miraj and embraced him as tears silently flowed from her eyes. Then Miraj bowed down to his father. He stood up and embraced Miraj in a warm comforting hug. Alka aunty wiped away her tears with the end of her sari and Miraj’s dad wiped his glasses. Mit became emotional as well. He stood up and hugged Miraj as well. My eyes welled up seeing the reunion of two brothers who were previously at odds with each other.

Finally, Miraj came to me and tried to bow down at my feet. I quickly stopped him and with a smile extended my hand instead, “Good luck Miraj. I am so proud of you!” Miraj shook my hand while wiping his tears.

Miraj commented, “Samyukta, can you do me one last favor? I want to meet Dada and get his blessings as well. I want to meet the one who has not seen me yet but has constantly guided you for me and blessed me so much.”

“Yes, yes of course. I also want to see him. With his divine bliss, there is light in our dark house,” Mit said.

“We will certainly go,” I said happily. “Right now, he is out of town. We will go once he is back after a month.”

Everyone was extremely happy.

“Miraj your birthday is within a week right? Here, this is a small gift from me.”

“Is it something like a frame?” He tried to open the gift wrap.

“Yup, Correct.”

He opened the wrapper and read the words written in the frame.

“When you want to give up, tell yourself you will hold on for just one more day, one more hour, one more minute - whatever you can manage.”

“From today onwards, you have to remain strong in whatever situation comes in your life that tests you. You will never give up. Promise me this much,” I encouraged.

Miraj happily promised.

And this was my last meeting with him as his well-wisher. We haven’t met after that. I get an update of how he is doing from Mit from time to time. Everything is alright at his home. Sometimes emotions arise, but soon, there is a solution for them. Emotions do flare up, but you should know how to extinguish them.

I am very content. The new life that Dada has given me I cannot repay that, but to turn one person around like me on to this path

has made my life worthwhile.

Yes.

I am Samyukta....

Your own friend....

Your own shadow....

You may be able to see me or Miraj somewhere within yourself....

Now you know me very well so you may easily recognize my image hidden within yourself.

Stuck in various aspects of life, you and I, for the slightest misunderstanding, are blindfolded and sentenced to a life of imprisonment for not smiling.

Come, with the right understanding, let us laugh with an open mind and live life to its fullest extent.

Jai Sat Chit Anand

“How long can one live with a mask covering his face? To what extent can a person try to change their self? How long can a person carry on doing something that feels like a burden to them? Whatever happiness is left in life disappears too. What is the use of continuing down that path? What can be the biggest self-torture than forcing yourself to become like those around you in order to fit in?

It's not difficult to be simple and stay simple but it's very difficult to compare yourself with someone else and continue to struggle to keep up a fake personality or impression. Change to a certain extent is acceptable and necessary too. But a person should understand its limits first. It is easy to live life but we ourselves make it complicated.

”

