



By the bestselling author of *You are the Best Wife*

AJAY K PANDEY

An
Unexpected
Gift

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Ajay K Pandey grew up with big dreams in the modest NTPC township of Rihand Nagar. He studied Engineering in Electronics at IERT (Allahabad) and then did his MBA at IIMM (Pune) before taking up a job in a corporate. He is currently working with Cognizant, Pune.

Apart from writing, he wants to follow his role model, Mother Teresa, and make a contribution to society. He aspires to start a charitable trust that would support aged people and educate children with special needs.

Ajay's first book, *You Are the Best Wife*, was published by Srishti Publishers in 2015, and went on to become a bestseller. Based on his life, it went straight to the hearts of his readers. The sequel, *You are the Best Friend*, was also received with much appreciation.

His next two books, *Her Last Wish* and *A Girl to Remember*, have only expanded his fan base and cemented his place on the bestseller lists.

Ajay makes it a point to individually connect with and respond to all his readers, making him a personal favourite for many. He has also introduced many people to the world of reading.

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An Unexpected Gift

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Dedicated to the real Sheetal

Never accept the taunts that the world throws at you. Every woman is a daughter, friend, sister, wife or mother to someone, and you are no less than anyone.

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A true hero is one who smiles through silent pain and fights battles nobody knows about.

–Kanika

Acknowledgements

Hi Friends,

The idea of writing this book sprouted after I met Sheetal in Pune. Her story and struggles were something I wanted to write about for a long time. This was the most emotional book for me to write. I wish I could highlight, in a more sensitive way, the problems faced by people who are third gender.

My respect to my entire family, who stood by me and decided to take each step with me.

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Never surrender!

Ajay

1

It was a special day. The last birthday of my love. My bald and beautiful wife lay in bed. Our little baby snuggled against her. I had looked in on her thrice that morning. She seemed peaceful, and free of pain.

I managed the chaos in the refrigerator while Mohan mopped the house. As usual, I had to guide him to the corners that needed extra attention. My supervision pushed him to work in an orderly manner. His work was always slipshod; sweet talk was his real talent. He took forty-five minutes to finish cleaning the house that day. If I had not been standing there, keeping an eye on him, he would have wrapped things up in ten minutes.

By nine o'clock, things began to look settled. There was no hurry in any case; it was a holiday.

I made a cup of tea and sipped it silently, gazing at the person I treasured most in my life. Counting the months we still had together.

I wanted to wake her up, but she looked so content in her sleep that I decided against it. Instead, I checked my phone which had been vibrating silently with endless notifications.

Facebook and Instagram were flooded with emotional outpourings from friends and family. Everyone wanted to make sure they did not miss out on wishing her on her last birthday. Several people had written long, sentimental pieces, reminiscing about the times they had met.

Many had shared their pictures with Kanika; some even asked for a birthday treat.

In this age of urbanisation and virtual connections, it is possible to have hundreds of friends on social media but not a single heartfelt relationship in reality. I am not complaining about the warm wishes Kanika was receiving. After all, we have accepted this new culture, and are part of it. Besides, of late, Kanika had anyway been refusing to take calls and declining all social invitations.

By the time I finished my morning tea and read the newspaper, it was already eleven o'clock. I went over to Kanika and kissed her on the forehead. She opened her eyes but continued to lie motionless on the bed. She looked tired, lethargic and weak—everything a cancerous brain tumour could make her look.

She read the question in my eyes and said, 'I am fine.'

I smiled, 'Happy birthday, dear.'

'Thank you.'

'Your Facebook and Instagram are flooded with birthday wishes.'

Kanika was not the most humble, kind-hearted or down-to-earth person, but now she seemed not to have any enemies. We always talk good about someone when they are born or die; during the journey, we only hate.

Kanika and I had met at a college function. I was the lead actor in a play and she was the anchor for the event. I remember the day vividly. When I had mimicked Shah Rukh Khan on stage, she was cheering me on joyfully from the wings.

I let go of my theatre aspirations not long before I got married, realising it was an impractical dream for a family man. Sacrificing the dream had cost me many a sleepless night, but in the end, the need to earn a decent living prevailed, and I joined a software company.

Kanika and I were married after five years of courtship, when I had spent three years in my current job. We were happy together, but soon she began to complain of a constant pain in her forehead. At first, we thought it was migraines, but it worsened, and the ache spread to other parts of her head.

She was already in the fourth month of her pregnancy when we found out that the cancer in her brain had reached the third stage. We tried brain surgery twice, without success. After the second operation, the doctors gave her only a few months to live. I had watched the sudden change in our lives with dismay. By the time Kanika's condition was diagnosed, it was already too late. It had all happened so fast!

‘Has Mohan left already?’ She brought me back to the reality of the day.

‘Yes, just a few minutes back. How is your headache?’

She extended her arm towards me, invitingly. I reached for her and hugged her close. My cheek rubbed against her bald head. I pressed my lips to the surgical scars on her scalp. She looked beautiful, despite the absence of the straight, glossy hair that had once framed her round face.

Her facial expression changed to that of a concerned mother.

‘What’s wrong, dear?’

‘Who will take care of my baby next year?’

The thought upset me. My helplessness must have been evident from the expression on my face. Not wanting to increase her anxiety, I faked a smile. ‘I promise he will be in the best hands.’

‘Will you get married again?’

That was my weird Kanika. She said whatever came to her mind.

‘What would you want me to do?’

‘I don’t want to discuss that.’

‘You started the discussion.’

She was silent. Nervous, I distracted myself by switching on the television and watching the news. Every channel featured discussions either about rape or about politics. There was nothing new ... and no positive news. Someone was howling over cows being slaughtered; others were praising Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar. The politicians were as usual ranting about changing the names of places rather than changing the conditions there for the better.

I switched to the music channels. It was the safest course of action; her lips now curved in a genuine smile of pleasure.

‘Now get up. It’s time to have a look at your gift.’ I took out a bulky gift-wrapped box.

‘Wow ...!’ Her face glowed with eagerness. A surprise gift is the best kind of gift, after all.

Despite my helping her, it took us several minutes to extricate the gift from its glittery, flower-printed packaging. Finally, I opened the box and pulled out a statue of Lord Krishna.

She cried out in delight: ‘It’s the one I had been looking at in the mall ...’

It was. She had looked longingly at this two-foot-tall idol of Lord Krishna that was on sale at a shop in the mall the last few times we had gone out.

‘You noticed!’

‘Yes, and I know you would never ask me to get it because you thought it would be too expensive.’

Before she could get into the topic of my overspending, I handed over the description of the idol on the box: Height 27 inches, Weight 35 kg, Copper, Brass and German Silver, Solid Casting, Polish Finish.

‘Now tell me, do you like it?’

‘I love it,’ she said, hugging the heavy statue.

Her gaze turned towards Ayush again. Suddenly, the emotions in her eyes changed. I could sense she was going to cry. She looked at our six-month-old son. Her bony fingers slowly travelled the length of the baby. She put the statue aside and pulled the baby on to her lap. She spoke to him, but I was sure she was talking to both of us.

‘You know, Krishna had two mothers. One was Devaki and the second was Yashoda.’

2

Kanika's last days were painful but finally she found her relief. The house turned strangely quiet after she was gone. It was not the first death I had seen. I lost my mom when I was only twenty-two. Yet, life has not always been cruel to me. Just the last few years.

One morning, I woke up to the sounds of my fifteen-month-old son. He had kicked aside his covers and was trying to discover a world beyond the bed. I looked around. Mohan seemed to have cleaned the house already. I could hear him tinkering in the kitchen, probably preparing breakfast.

After Kanika's death, he had taken charge of cooking breakfast and lunch. He knew exactly what needed to be done. What Ayush was supposed to eat, the quantity of milk that had to be mixed with his baby food. After all, Mohan had been working for us for two years and Kanika had instructed him well.

'Breakfast is ready, Abhay sir.'

I asked him to attend to the baby and not bother about serving me. I had more or less stopped caring about my meals. I remembered with a pang how Kanika used to be after me to have fruit before leaving for the day.

My son was comfortable with Mohan. He went to him with his blue Mickey Mouse toothbrush with every intention of trying to get a head start on the day, unlike his father.

'Ayush wants to sharpen his teeth?' Mohan asked in the tone one uses when speaking to kids.

'Na ... na ...' Ayush answered. That was the only word he could say. He hadn't learned anything else. Not 'mamma' or 'papa'.

Ayush's presence was the only reason I felt I had some life left in me. His inquisitive light brown eyes were a constant reminder of his mother. They were exactly the same as hers. He kept me engaged constantly, leaving me no time to think about mistakes and brood over the past. Being busy is the biggest healer.

I walked over to the cupboard. Even the act of finding and putting on a clean blue shirt and a pair of grey chinos seemed too much of an effort. I already felt tired. Did I have time for a quick nap, I wondered. I was heading for the sofa when Ayush planted himself on it, rolling around in his pyjamas.

'Wear your T-shirt, Ayush,' Mohan said. He had followed him there.

Ayush started crying. He was independent-minded and had his own ideas of what to wear. And he had made it very clear every day for the past few months, ever since he began walking, that he did not like clothes.

'Please bring him here.' I gave up on my nap and joined the daily ritual.

Mohan scooped Ayush up from the sofa and handed him over along with the T-shirt. He looked relieved at being temporarily discharged from his duties of tending to us.

I had become somewhat of an expert in handling Ayush's antics. The best way to deal with a kid's tantrum is to ignore his cries and do what you think is best for him.

After an hour of complete chaos, involving two attendants and several bouts of rebellion, Ayush was dressed and ready for the day. Seeing him fully clothed and finally quiet gave me a sense of accomplishment and some peace. I had come to the conclusion that I deserved a gold medal for dealing with this drama every morning. I was a proud father.

My son was on the sofa now, playing with his favourite stuffed panda bear. Glancing at myself in the drawing room mirror, I realised I had to finish getting dressed myself. I walked over to the shoe rack. While tying my shoelaces, I took a good look at Ayush. Then my eyes were pulled to the image of the woman on the wall behind him. Kanika's smiling face in the photograph seemed to be looking down at her son. The resemblance was striking. I looked at my son again and realised that he had not taken after me in looks.

My eyes fell on another wall with a big collage of photos. They were different images of me, including one in which I was dressed as a

cowboy, dating back to the days when I was doing my BCA at Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, Delhi University. The collage featured pictures of the roles I had played on stage, of advocate, doctor, biker, delivery boy; there were so many.

Those were happy times, but now I had this overpowering urge to throw all of them away. Only one thought held me back. The collage had been put together by Kanika and she had put it up on the wall. I knew that she never wanted the theatre artist in me to die. She had always felt she was responsible for my giving it all up. I had left my theatre group to join an IT company, so that I could be financially stable and support Kanika and myself after our marriage.

‘Please, Ayush, you have to drink the milk,’ Mohan’s plea brought me back from these recollections.

Making Ayush drink his milk was another impossible task. On some days he took over an hour to finish a glass of milk. It was like watching a snail run a marathon. His speed was reducing with increase in age; even the levels of drama around milk-drinking were reaching new heights every day. When he finally finished the glass that morning, I looked at my wall clock. Eleven o’clock. I was already two hours late for work.

I dropped Ayush at the day care centre and headed towards the office, facing the usual hot and humid weather, along with a heavy traffic jam.

In spite of being more than two hours late for work, I was not worried. I had other things to worry about. At office, I encountered the same depressed faces I saw every day, of frustrated warriors who have given their life in the name of client support. Hardly any of them were sympathetic about what had happened to me.

‘How is Ayush?’ Alka enquired.

Sometimes, it doesn’t really matter what your condition actually is; you simply have to reply with the same standard answer. ‘He is good, his naughtiness is increasing day by day.’

‘Hmmm ...’ she said, trying to smile.

I sensed a little more empathy from her today than on other days.

‘All well?’ I asked, logging into the system.

‘Mr Rao has asked you to see him.’

It must have been clear to everyone why I had been summoned by the boss. I looked at all those faces again. This bunch kept cursing the

management for not playing fair when it came to increments, salaries, promotions, visas and projects, yet ended up spending year after year in the same company.

‘May I come in, sir,’ I said, opening the door to the boss’s office.

‘Hi, Abhay, how are you?’

‘I am doing well.’ My standard one-liner.

Typing something on his laptop, Mr Rao waved me towards the sofa. His thick fingers moved over the keys at a pace which hinted at his level of efficiency. Mr Rao was only five years older than me. Within ten years of joining the company, he already had an impeccable track record and his own cabin. I ran my eyes over his office. In one corner, I noticed a statue of Gautam Buddha, eyes closed and smiling as if nothing existed. A statue of Lord Shiva occupied another corner.

As I looked closely, I realised that it was not your run-of-the-mill Shiva statue. It was what they called the Ardhnarishwar form, in which the lord manifests himself as half-male and half-female. The concept symbolises the creation of the universe. A woman, after all, is the creator, without whom no man can be born.

I wondered why I had not noticed it before. It had been acquired recently, I guessed.

‘So, Abhay, how goes it?’

‘Great, sir.’ I could sense that he wanted to say something but was looking for a way to initiate the conversation.

‘Have you recovered now ...? I mean’

‘Yes ... yes, sir, I am fine,’ I tried to reassure him.

‘Why are you late?’ He finally chose the direct approach.

‘Sir, you know my situation after Kanika. I have to take care of my son. There is no support from her family, and my father is still working.’

My boss looked at me sternly. Either my excuse was too personal to be acceptable in a professional space, or he had lost all hope in me.

‘You have to take care of your job as well.’

‘I know.’ He had said this to me before. ‘Sir, I need a favour.’

‘Let me guess, you have to leave early.’ He looked me in the eye.

I nodded.

Mr Rao took a long breath and rubbed his palms together. His grave eyes told me he was working hard to control his anger.

‘You came in at twelve o’clock, and wish to leave at around six o’clock.’

‘I am really sorry, sir.’

‘Is there any way I can help?’ he enquired, as a last-ditch effort. ‘Have you managed to find a full-time caretaker for your kid?’

‘No, that is the biggest concern. Ayush’s day care centre closes at six o’clock. They extend their service till seven, maximum. I have been unable to find a carer who is willing to stay on in the evenings.’

‘What is your requirement from a caretaker?’

‘A caring and honest woman who can be flexible about working until nine or ten o’clock.’

He seemed to reflect for a few minutes, reaching for the glass of water on his desk and looking thoughtfully at the Shiva idol. For a moment, it almost looked like he was praying for me. Or maybe he was just cursing God for having made him hire me, or me for impressing him with my work in the past.

‘Do you believe in Shiva?’ he asked, still looking at the image of the Ardhnarishwar.

‘I don’t believe in God.’

Mr Rao smiled at me mysteriously. ‘I’ll put you in touch with a babysitter. If she agrees to take the job, I am sure she can work late hours.’

‘Is she honest and reliable?’

‘Yes.’

I thanked him. It did not even cross my mind to ask how much I would have to pay for her services. Mr Rao had lived not far from my place for years now and was aware of my predicament. I only wondered why he hadn’t mentioned this lady to me before.

‘But once she starts coming to work, be on time. And if you come in late, I’ll expect you to work late hours from home.’

‘Yes, sir, thank you.’

I was about to leave the room but Mr Rao signalled to me to wait for a few minutes. He went over to the Shiva statue, picked it up and began wiping it with a cloth, though it was already spotless and gleaming. I had never seen this version of my boss.

‘Listen, Abhay, a person who doesn’t believe in God needs to believe in people.’

I frowned.

‘Always believe what you see and not what you hear about someone.’

3

It was a quiet Saturday morning. Ayush was still sleeping. Mohan had just placed a steaming cup of tea in front of me. The best part of working in the IT industry is having two days off every week.

From my sofa, I studied the most beautiful wall of my house, the one which never failed to give me a sense of fulfilment. A large, framed photograph covered one-fourth of the wall. The smiling faces of Kanika and Ayush when he was still a baby.

The doorbell rang punctually; our milkman was more accurate than any digital clock. I answered the door, and picked up the newspaper that had been lying unattended for hours. Across the corridor, Mrs Verma's door opened as she came out to get milk.

'How is Baba?' the milkman asked me. He had been delivering milk for my son every day for the past year, and must have grown to care about the motherless baby.

Finishing my tea, I went to the bedroom to check on my only prized possession. He was still sleeping peacefully. The sight calmed me, soothing my frayed nerves.

I was on my way back to the sofa to enjoy this peace while it lasted but was interrupted by the doorbell again. I opened the door. A tall woman in her late twenties stood there. Her face was smooth but lacked softness. Her high cheekbones accentuated her narrow chin, giving her face a sharp, definite V-like shape. She had broad, sturdy shoulders and long hands with bony but strong fingers. She was dressed in a soft green salwar kameez that complemented her fair complexion. The steady dark eyes under her shapely

brows, and everything else about her appearance, seemed to suggest she was reliable. Her best feature was her long wavy hair, loosely tied, that framed her face and made her look all the more graceful.

My study of her was interrupted when she said, in a surprisingly harsh voice, ‘Are you Mr Abhay, sir?’

I nodded. Her voice did not complement her looks. She must have a really bad throat infection, I thought.

‘Namaste sir ji, I am Sheetal.’

‘Oh ... did Mr Rao send you?’

She nodded.

Was she really here for babysitting? I couldn’t help feeling a bit incredulous, not to mention protective about my son. I looked over her shoulder to check if she had brought someone else with her.

‘You do have a requirement for a babysitter?’

‘Yes. So, you are the one?’

‘Yes,’ she answered shortly.

I invited her inside, directing her towards the sofa. Mohan was cleaning the floor but I knew his attention was secretly focused on the visitor. He was nosy by nature. However, this time, I did not blame him. His interest in Sheetal was justified. She was, after all, professional competition. Till now, he had been taking care of things for Ayush.

I was still struggling with the idea of this woman working for me. ‘Have you ever had this kind of job before?’

‘Yes, sir, I worked for over one year in Rao sir’s home. That’s how he knows me.’

‘Where are you working currently?’

‘I haven’t had a job for the past four months, sir.’

‘Kids can be a handful. You will have to take care of everything ... cleaning him up, taking care of his things, food’

She smiled, and her face softened. ‘I like kids. I am accustomed to taking care of babies ... bathing them, dressing them, changing diapers and toilet training, monitoring their meals and so on,’ she said calmly.

This boosted my confidence in her. ‘Mr Rao must have informed you that you may have to work late in the evenings. Will that be a problem?’

‘No, sir. I can easily stay till ten in the night, and if needed even stretch my timings till eleven o’clock. But if that is the case, you will have

to drop me home, as public transport is not reliable at that hour.’

I liked this about her. She was absolutely clear about everything. And reasonable.

I noticed that Mohan, who had been cleaning the door, had stopped suddenly. I wasn’t sure what had made him freeze. Was it something about Sheetal, or her being okay with staying so late? I kept my eyes on him, and slowly, he moved towards the kitchen. But he looked distressed, his eyes fixed on Sheetal.

‘How much will you charge?’

‘Eight thousand rupees, and Sundays off.’

I nodded. I couldn’t wait for her to start work. I had been struggling to find a full-time carer for Ayush for so long.

Mohan was in the kitchen, and seemed to be making more noise than usual. ‘Mohan, can you please bring a glass of water?’

I asked Sheetal a few more casual questions regarding her work experience. To be honest, I had many questions, but feared that too much nosing around on the first day could lead to my having to look for childcare all over again.

Mohan took a long time coming out of the kitchen. Finally, he came up and put an open glass of water on the table in front of Sheetal. I knew something was bothering him. He always covered the glass with a lid.

‘Mohan, meet Sheetal. She will be taking care of Ayush in the evenings.’

I seemed to have rubbed salt in a raw wound. Mohan gave Sheetal an unpleasant look.

‘Namaste,’ Sheetal said. Mohan nodded and went back into the kitchen.

I realised that Mohan could make the work environment tough for Sheetal if he chose. To defuse the tension, I came up with another question. ‘Sheetal, how many kids do you have?’

Suddenly, the pleasantly confident Sheetal turned solemn. Her lips pressed against each other in a grim, straight line.

‘I am not married.’

Suddenly, it sounded like a volcano had erupted in the house. I heard utensils falling in the kitchen, and I sensed the lava of Mohan’s anger could overflow anytime.

4

A twenty-nine-year-old woman, who was arrested for allegedly running a baby-selling racket on Friday, confessed to kidnapping at least six newborns in different parts of the country over the past six months, said the Delhi Crime Branch.

Police sources said this number could be just the tip of the iceberg as they are still interrogating Sonali Fernandes, the accused, who is not cooperating with the investigation. Police teams have been sent to various states to track the six children. The gang is believed to have operated primarily in Delhi and its neighbouring states.

The anchor on the Aaj Tak news channel, howling his lungs out, gave the impression that someone had kidnapped his own baby and he was calling Prime Minister Narendra Modi to account, demanding why he wasn't tweeting about it.

My eyes were glued to the TV when Mohan mumbled, 'Sir, she must be bad.'

I intentionally ignored him.

Ours was a housing society that was protected by various mandatory safety protocols. Visitors were admitted into the premises only after their appointment was confirmed with the relevant resident. A local intercom system was also in place. Mushrooming criminal activities had rendered these precautions necessary, and growing technology had made them possible. It had become compulsory for cleaning staff, domestic help and other service providers to produce a set of basic documents to vouch for their credentials. All support staff had to go through a process of police

verification, and if there were exceptions, they were subject to approval by the secretary of the society.

Mr Ashok Kumar, the secretary, was a cheerful elderly man with whom I had a cordial relationship. I had collected the Maid/Domestic Helper registration form from him and was checking which documents Sheetal would have to submit, when Mohan interrupted again. ‘Sir, she is not good,’ he said.

‘Who?’ I asked, though I knew perfectly well whom he meant.

He abandoned the breakfast he had been preparing, came up to me and repeated, ‘Sir, she is not good.’

‘Are there grounds for your allegation?’ I said in the profound tone of an advocate.

Mohan was foolish enough to think himself a most intelligent person, and his stupidity had its own logic. The only real difference between stupidity and intelligence is that stupidity has no limits.

‘How can a young, unmarried woman stay out till eleven at night?’ Mohan said.

‘So, I should not be hiring her *because* she can work late hours?’

‘If Kanika didi had been here, she would definitely not have entertained her.’

That was his favourite line! He chanted it all the time. The previous month, when I had threatened to deduct five hundred rupees from his salary for taking extra leave, he had used this refrain, ‘... if Didi had been here, she wouldn’t have shouted at me ... in fact, she would’ve given me two thousand rupees on Diwali.’

I didn’t like his smart mouth much. The only reason I hadn’t sacked him so far was that he had been hired by Kanika. I decided instead on giving him a task to distract him. ‘Mohan, why don’t you follow Sheetal and collect evidence against her? If you can find a good reason for me to sack her, I will do so immediately.’

A smile appeared on Mohan’s face. He was evidently proud to be entrusted with this assignment. Even his body language instantly changed. He straightened his back and squared his shoulders. Sometimes, trust brings out the worst in people. I wondered if he was about to offer a salute to his commanding officer. My expression of my faith in him on this occasion had unveiled the hidden, malicious spy in him.

Before this newly appointed spy could open his mouth, the doorbell rang. Sheetal walked in. She wore a white salwar kameez, a well-worn brown bag hung on her shoulder, and her lips were curved in a polite smile. There was an air of mystery about her that was hard to pin down. Could I trust her? Should I doubt her? Her clothes were not expensive, but they were clean and respectable-looking. Did she actually need this job? Somehow, her worn but refined appearance and polite manner did not seem to match the job profile that she had applied for.

Spreading the two pages of the Maid/Domestic Helper registration form before her on the glass-topped table in the living room, I pointed out the boxes where she was supposed to sign and the papers that she needed to submit. She stood by the sofa with the table between us.

‘Could you fill this form out by yourself? I mean ... do you read and write?’

‘Yes, sir, I completed two years of my bachelor’s degree course with a first class.’

Mohan’s discomfort, from the corner where he stood, was palpable. He had not even passed his Class 10.

‘So, you can fill this form today and start work from tomorrow.’

‘Sure.’

Sheetal had mentioned her educational qualifications with a smile but it made me feel bad for her. She was a first-class student in college, and here I was offering her a babysitter’s job.

‘Have you brought your ID card and address proof?’

She nodded, fishing in her bag for a small yellow booklet. She placed it on the table along with a few other papers. I noted that the booklet was her ration card. Before I could reach for it, the great spy, Sri Mohan Bhargav, picked it up and started flipping through its pages.

Both Sheetal and I stared at him, stunned. After scanning the booklet for a few minutes, he said, ‘Sir, it’s blank.’

I looked at Sheetal. Her discomfort was apparent. To ease the tension, I said, ‘Mohan, are you in need of rations on grocery items?’

‘No.’

‘Then please hand that to me. It’s her ration card, which she is producing as proof of address.’

He sensed my displeasure and placed the booklet on the table. I opened it. It contained information about her family members, three in all,

and mentioned an address in Kanpur. I searched among the rest of the papers for an ID card, but there was none.

‘Do you have a ... stronger document?’

‘Why, sir? These are not sufficient?’

‘No. These contain your permanent address. There is no document attesting to your local address ...’ I looked through the papers, ‘... and there is no valid ID proof issued by the government.’

‘But I had submitted the same documents at my previous place of employment.’

‘Try to understand, Sheetal, these residential societies operate by strict rules. These documents, local address proof and ID, are mandatory if you wish to work here. Of course, even if you don’t have separate documents for these, an Aadhaar card will do for both.’

She clenched her hand, hesitating. It was as if I had unwittingly asked her a personal question.

‘What’s wrong? Is there a problem?’

‘Sir, I cannot submit my Aadhaar.’

‘May I know why?’

‘No. No ... I mean ... I don’t have an Aadhaar card.’

Mohan shook his head knowingly. All he wanted was for me to throw her out of the house that very instant.

I pondered the matter, looking straight into her eyes. She was worried about something, and no matter how hard she tried, she was unable to hide it. Yet my heart was telling me that I should have faith in her. Unexpectedly, Mr Rao’s words came back to my mind in that moment. ‘Don’t believe what you hear, believe what you see.’ I thought for a few seconds and came to a decision. ‘Let’s do this. Why don’t you apply for an Aadhaar card? An Aadhaar enrolment campaign is going on in the society. Meanwhile, I’ll arrange for special permission from the secretary for the time it’ll take for you to get one.’

Strangely, there was no reaction on her face. I had expected a smile of relief, at the very least.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, sir. You are right. I will apply.’

‘To establish your credentials, I will need to come over and have a look at your place. So that, if needed, I can say that I have personally verified your address.’

‘You are most welcome, sir, any time,’ she said with a bright smile.

‘Sir, can I ask a question ... if you don’t mind?’ Her eyes were on the photograph on the wall.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘What happened to madam?’

I was blank for few seconds but I summoned myself and said the hard-hitting truth.

‘I lost Kanika to brain cancer.’

Sheetal's question about Kanika took me back to a different world, to the past.

I was once a die-hard fan of Shah Rukh Khan. Not because he was the best actor of our times, but, well ... maybe because I have been told that I look like him. As a child, whenever his movies were aired on TV, I stood up and delivered all his lines along with him. I had mugged up his most famous dialogues even before I learned to sing the National Anthem.

'Abhay is a good actor,' my mother often said, and my father agreed, as did all my other relatives.

Later on, I became something of a toy to amuse our guests with. When people visited our house, my talent in mimicry served as the biggest entertainment. I felt neither reluctance nor any shyness in doing this. Too much appreciation too early in life can do more harm than good. I soon started believing that I was the most talented actor on earth.

My father worked in Northern Railways. My childhood years were divided between three cities: Lucknow, Noida and Gurgaon. In many ways, we were the perfect upper-middle-class family, small and close-knit, with a bread-earner who had a government job. What better start could anyone have wished for in life?

My passion for acting motivated me to participate in school plays and other events. I received several prizes for these performances and in story-writing competitions as well.

When I was in Class 11, my mother asked me what I aspired to be in life. When the entire world was geared towards achieving the greatest

heights in professional careers, and while my peers were busy taking oaths to clear the IIT, GMAT and medical entrance examinations (recalling these names still sends chills up my spine), I said that I wanted to join the theatre.

A declaration like this was like detonating an atom bomb in the middle-class world that I had grown up in. I had assumed that my talent had already made an impact and would end up silencing any objections they might have. After staring at me for ten minutes, my mom said, ‘You are the best. Let’s see what your father says.’

I hugged my mother, thinking that her sweet words of encouragement meant that my parents consented to my entering the crazy world of theatre.

‘Abhay, you are grown up now.’ Those words were my father’s first reaction. They made my dreams tumble like a house of cards.

‘Look at Khanna-ji ka ladka. He has cleared IIT in the first attempt. And did you hear about Vinita didi? Her son cleared All India Medical ... government seat.’

There was always a Sharma-ji, Verma-ji or Khanna-ji living in a house nearby, whose offspring achieved their dreams, only to crush yours. In my case, my Bua-ji was enough. She had a son who had no life beyond his textbooks. Every time Bua-ji called my father, I would quietly escape from the house.

I took Math and Physics in Plus Two, and with a heavy heart, pushed myself to pursue the monotonous task of achieving academic excellence. Still, I managed to do some theatre too. In Class 12, I got the first prize for a play that I had directed for a school competition. I hugged the trophy, re-reading the words engraved on it—*Abhay Chauhan: First Prize in Drama*—a hundred times over. When the final bell rang, I ran home with that trophy. I ran like I had never run before, filled with immense pride and joy. I presented the trophy to my mom with a sense of great accomplishment. She hugged me and proudly said, ‘You are my hero.’

That day, I made a promise to myself that I would become a real hero one day: an actor. That night, when Papa came home, before he could unwind, I handed my trophy to him.

Millions of butterflies fluttered in my stomach. I was expecting the appreciation that was suitable for a Param Vir Chakra recipient. He studied the trophy, but his true emotions were hidden. He then looked at me and

read aloud, 'First prize in drama!' The smile on his face widened. What he said next killed my excitement: 'Your Board exams will be starting soon, right, Abhay?'

I nodded.

'Bua-ji's younger son got 112th rank in the IIT exam.'

At the end of this sentence, all the butterflies sank abruptly. I wished I could have killed my Bua-ji's entire family.

I appeared for all the engineering exams and failed deliberately. Deep down, I knew that if I cleared even one of them, it would be the end of my impractical dream. I thought I was smart to take a step like this, but I was wrong.

'Abhay ... Abhay ...!' My father had just entered the house, chanting my name. I wondered who was responsible for the harshness in his voice. Sharma-ji, Verma-ji or Bua-ji?

'Yes, Papa.'

'How was the IIT entrance?'

'I tried my best.'

'How many questions did you answer in Chemistry?'

'There was no negative marking. I answered all the questions.'

'Good. I love you, my son.'

'Thank you, Papa.' It was the first time he had shown appreciation for an academic achievement of mine, even an imagined one. But I had failed to read between the lines.

'I am thinking of sending a legal notice to the IIT exam controller.'

'Why, Papa?'

He thrust the printout of the results in my face. My score in Chemistry was zero, and the number of questions attempted was mentioned: zero.

'I cannot believe this, Papa, I had'

'Now I can proudly say, you *are* the best in drama.'

In a single sentence he shattered my lie and mocked my passion. I put myself on mute, thinking that silence would prove the best weapon to counter his disapproval. But that day was different. My father came up with a million and one examples of how acting had spoiled people's lives, and an equal number of success stories of the Sharma-jis and Verma-jis of the world. I somehow managed to cool him down by saying that I would enrol for a BCA course in Delhi University.

Officially, my dream had died, but unofficially I never surrendered. In college, I put together my own troupe and performed street plays which grew popular with time. Originally, we were a bunch of just four drama enthusiasts. Every day, we discussed the technicalities of the stage and techniques in acting. We came up with social issues that needed to be spoken about and created pieces that could be eye-openers for our audiences. We were a boys-only group, to begin with. But we needed and were looking for a few like-minded girls. The rainbow of hope embraced us when two girls joined the gang. Kanika was one of them.

Soon we became famous in college. On a couple of occasions, our performances were even covered by local newspapers. We spent most of our time acting, creating characters and devising plays.

Eventually, I fell in love with Kanika.

6

It was Sheetal's first day on the job. I directed her to my son's room, thinking of initiating a formal introduction with Ayush. But Sheetal declined.

‘I will get acquainted with him in my own way.’

Either she was an expert babysitter, or she really loved kids.

Ayush was engrossed in watching TV when we went into his room. A number of toys lay unattended on his bed. Sheetal's face changed instantly on seeing him, her expression softening. She seemed genuinely moved by him. Ayush's innocence did that to people. She waited a few minutes to see if he would turn to her, but couldn't hold herself back for too long. When he didn't take his eyes off the TV, she said, ‘Ayush, what is the little baby doing?’

Ayush didn't respond, not even with a blink or a tilt of his neck, to acknowledge the new voice. His eyes remained glued to *Chhota Bheem*. No one could claim his attention while he watched *Chhota Bheem*.

I had come to the conclusion that Ayush's refusal to wear clothes every morning had something to do with Chhota Bheem's friend Raju who exhibits a similar disdain for clothes and prefers to strut around in a langot. Even Chhota Bheem goes around in a lungi. This was where, I was sure, my son had found his inspiration.

‘Will you not play with me?’ Sheetal went closer to Ayush, trying to catch his attention.

This time Ayush turned and made eye contact. Sheetal moved closer to his bed and picked up a few of his toys.

‘This elephant is cute. Do you like elephants?’ Sheetal looked at him as if the species of elephants was dependent on Ayush’s verdict.

Ayush did not react, and turned back to the TV.

I smiled at her failed attempt.

‘I have Chhota Bheem toffee. Do you want them?’

This time, Ayush turned and looked at her properly.

‘So, you do like Chhota Bheem toffee?’

Ayush stretched out his little palm. Even he could not remain immune to the temptation of sweets. Sheetal pulled the toffee out of her bag and offered one to him. Ayush took it with an authority only a Chhota Bheem disciple would have. Sheetal asked, ‘You want one more?’

He nodded. She said, ‘I will give it to you, but only if you sit on my lap.’

After considering the deal for a few seconds, Ayush made his decision. He tumbled on the bed, allowing Sheetal to pick him up. Within minutes of their meeting each other, Ayush was sitting on Sheetal’s lap, watching his favourite cartoon show.

I went back into the living room and glanced at the family photo on the wall. My lips relaxed in a contented smile.

When I requested Mohan to make dinner for an extra person, he made some unsavoury faces, but did as I asked him. That night, Sheetal made sure Ayush ate his food before she had her own dinner.

I finally had a free evening after more than a year. Earlier, I could roam anywhere, at any time of night and day. But now, going out for even fifteen minutes was a huge matter. I never ceased to be amazed at the extent to which kids changed our lives with their presence in our world. But I could never regret this change that Ayush had caused. Because in him, I saw my Kanika.

I finished my dinner peacefully that night and lay on the sofa, at rest. For once, there were no thoughts cruising in my head of things that needed to be done. A person’s biggest asset is to have a life without worries.

Ayush fell asleep around ten o’clock, and Sheetal’s first day in our house came to an end.

‘I am done for today.’ Sheetal’s words broke the sleep I had drifted into.

I remembered I was supposed to visit her home to verify her address. I went over to Mrs Agarwal, who lived on the floor above mine, and requested her to stay at my place for a few minutes as Ayush was sleeping. She and I had worked in the same office once, and she sometimes helped me out with Ayush.

We were headed towards the car when Sheetal said, ‘Sir, do you have a two-wheeler?’

‘I have an Activa.’

‘Sir, it would be difficult for the car to enter the narrow lanes near my house. The Activa would be easier.’

I nodded my agreement and we took the Activa. Sheetal guided me through the twists and turns of the route. In ten minutes, we reached Norani Masjid. I recalled that Mohan lived nearby. I had never been to Mohan’s house, but in the absence of documents, the security rules of the housing society could not be compromised in Sheetal’s case.

There was a narrow lane behind the masjid. I noticed open, garbage-clogged sewage drains beside every house. Most homes had a meat or kabab shop in the front while people lived in the rooms behind them. There were a few thelawalas on the road, which was only a few feet wide. I understood why Sheetal had advised me to take the two-wheeler.

We stopped in front of a four-storey building.

‘That is my flat, sir.’ She pointed towards the first floor.

I was surprised to learn that such places existed in the city. My life had been spent in tall, multi-storeyed apartments that were completely removed from miseries like these. I belonged to a class of people who screamed when we saw the level of water in the swimming pool go down even by an inch. Here, hopes were floating in the gutter.

‘Sir, please come and have a look.’

I noticed a few suspicious and distressed-looking faces staring at me. Either they did not like the look of me, or they were not very fond of Sheetal. I looked up at the first floor again, hesitating. But this was a necessary precaution to ensure my child’s safety, I reminded myself, and walked in.

Sheetal opened the door. I had a feeling someone was following me. I turned to take a look, but there was no one.

‘Sir, please come in,’ Sheetal said, welcoming me into her home.

The interior of the house was entirely different from the exterior. It was spacious, and had two big windows. I guessed there was also a balcony. Everything was clean and neatly arranged.

There was a large double bed in one corner, with four paired cushions. On the headboard of the bed was a picture of a boy who looked a lot like Sheetal. The white tiled floor was clean. Vibrantly coloured curtains brightened the room. Small paintings decorated the walls. Sheetal seemed to have a good sense of home decor.

‘This is my small home,’ Sheetal said.

‘Nice house, Sheetal. Very well-maintained.’

‘Thank you, sir. Would you like to have tea or coffee?’

‘No, just water.’

She nodded and went inside. I looked closely at the photo on the bed. The boy had a strong resemblance to Sheetal. Must be a relative; her brother, perhaps, I thought. Then I noticed a small idol in a corner of the room. It was the same image of Shiva that I had seen in Mr Rao’s cabin.

I am not sure why, but I instantly thought they could be related. Why was I suddenly seeing this idol everywhere? Did it have anything to do with Mr Rao? My position in office? It seemed to be some sort of intimation.

Next to the bed, I noticed two pairs of slippers. Sheetal came in then with a glass of water.

I realised I was not really thirsty, and declined the offered glass of water. ‘Sheetal, I am getting late,’ I said.

‘Okay, sir.’

‘Please apply for Aadhaar. I will speak to the society secretary about allowing you access to the building in the meantime.’

7

Why was such a well-educated, refined-looking woman working as a babysitter? The picture of the boy on the headboard of Sheetal's bed kept popping into my head. Who was he? Why were there four cushions on the double bed? She was young, and had all the qualities of a desirable companion. Yet, why was she still unmarried? Why did she stay alone in such a locality? Why were those people staring at me ... or were they staring at Sheetal?

As the questions crept into my head, I realised that there was a web of mysteries around her. Logically, it would be fair to conclude she was withholding information about herself. But Mr Rao had vouched for her, and I didn't really have too many choices at the moment. Sometimes, to be short of choices is the best choice.

The next day, I discussed the matter with Ashok Uncle, the secretary of our housing society, over the phone. My father happened to be a good friend of his; they belonged to the same age group and, besides, he and my father were the most religious people I knew. On festival days and other religious occasions, they could be found arguing about mythology. Every argument had Ram and Krishna in it.

My mom once told me that my father would have surely named me Kishan, had it not been for the fact that Bua-ji's husband had the same name. It was the first time I felt something close to affection for Bua-ji. She had saved me from carrying an unwanted religious name.

Ashok Uncle had visited my home once while Kanika had been fighting the tumour. Sympathy in times of loss forges its own associations.

After I explained the situation to Uncle, he said he would make an exception and allow two months' work access in the society for Sheetal.

Mohan was hard at work in the kitchen that morning. He had already cleaned the house, and washed and arranged the utensils. Generally, his performance fluctuated wildly from day to day. However, he was anxious to make a good impression these days. No doubt, Sheetal's appointment had meant professional and moral competition.

'Mohan, don't you live close to Norani Masjid?'

'Yes, sir. Sheetal stays in the building adjacent to the mosque.'

'How do you know where she lives?'

'I read the address when she filled out the form.'

The new spy in the house was at work! I silently waited for more information. Common sense from him, however, was not very common.

'Sir, I am telling you, she is a con woman.' I frowned. 'Sir, she was carrying Chhota Bheem sweets in her bag ...' Mohan said excitedly.

'So?'

'She seems like a cunning woman ... she keeps candy in her bag.'

'Just because she has candy in her bag, it makes her a cunning con woman?'

'No, sir, she does not have Aadhaar card ... she is not married ... she is tall and ...' he hesitated, '... she is beautiful.'

Beauty brings unwanted attention and unwarranted doubts. We were no different, I thought to myself, Mohan and I.

'So, these observations of yours justify doubting her character?'

'Sir, why would a beautiful, unmarried woman work as a babysitter?'

For a moment, I considered the possibility that he was not as silly as I had thought him to be. I marvelled at this seemingly sensible version of Mohan Bhargava standing in front of me. 'So, tell me, what options do we have?'

'You pay me five thousand more, and I will do the babysitting.'

I stared at him blankly. He retreated to the kitchen. I began shuttling between my bedroom and the living room restlessly, trying hard to ignore the points he had made. But they were not entirely absurd, I felt.

Ayush started crying, and I realised that he had pooped. He had not been wearing a diaper. Instead of cleaning him up right away, as I usually did, I called Mohan. 'Mohan, would you clean Ayush up?'

Mohan nodded. I stood in the corner and kept my eyes on him. Mohan reached for Ayush and tugged at his pants, then suddenly pulled them back up, his nostrils flaring.

‘What happened? You just assured me you can be a babysitter.’

‘Sir, actually, I am a Brahmin by birth.’

‘So what? You can do it ... right?’

There was pin-drop silence in spite of the baby in the room. Every sound from the rest of the building and the street outside could be heard. Ayush let out a second bout of waste from his body, announcing it with a loud splat. Detective Mohan inhaled the poisonous gas and hurried out of the room, mumbling, ‘I think ... I think ... I am not suitable for the job.’

I often dropped Sheetal off after work.

She was getting on well with Ayush. I had not found a single reason to complain about her. She came to work by six-thirty in the evening, and was always on time. On coming home from office, I always found Ayush happily engaged, playing games or watching television with Sheetal. My evenings were now peaceful and relaxed.

She had been there for barely a month now, but it already felt like Ayush and Sheetal had always known each other. Though my little son could not express his feelings in words, when he returned from day care, I could see that his eyes were looking for her. The smile that brightened his face when he saw Sheetal come in could not be missed. She was his go-to person. Whether he felt hungry or sleepy, or even when it was *Chhota Bheem* time, it all had to be done with Sheetal. He had taken to throwing tantrums when she was not around. A bond like this would be hard to find.

I often took work home, to make sure Ayush did not come back to an empty house from his day care centre. Mr Rao was no longer upset with me. I was able to keep my work up-to-date as I could peacefully work at home between seven and ten o'clock, if needed. Life was sorted, at least for the time being. However, I also realised I was spending less time with my son. I missed that. He spent most of his time in day care, and his evenings with Sheetal. I only took care of him in the short interval between the two.

Ayush was growing up. At sixteen months, he had mastered the standing position and soon began waddling on unsteady feet. Each day, we found him progressing from one piece of furniture to the next. He usually

depended on these for support, but there were moments when we glimpsed him standing all on his own, looking around him confidently, as if on the lookout for new territory to conquer. Holding on to my fingers with his hand, he could have probably covered the Char Dhaam; but for steady, solitary steps, we would have to wait at least a few more weeks.

Late one night, I lit a cigarette and was sitting silently, struggling with memories and chasing them at the same time. Sheetal was with Ayush.

A rough but polite voice interrupted my thoughts. ‘Sir, would you wish to have a cup of coffee?’ It was Sheetal’s indirect way of seeking permission to make some coffee. I appreciated her consideration and etiquette.

I smiled and said, ‘Sure, thank you. You will find everything you need in the kitchen. Feel free to use whatever you like.’

The house was silent. Ayush was asleep. She never indulged herself or wasted time when she was on duty.

I went to the balcony, looking at the darkness outside bleakly. I had no long-term plans, and nothing seemed to interest me anymore. At times, I wondered what my life would have been if I didn’t have Ayush to take care of. He was the only reason I kept going. It was his presence that urged me to carry on with my life. Otherwise, the drive to work and earn a living would have died with Kanika.

I had no one to talk to. The prospect of facing the long journey of life without my better half daunted me. My friends were absorbed in their own daily struggles, and now, after Sheetal had efficiently taken over half of my responsibilities, I suddenly had a lot of unoccupied hours to wallow in my loss.

‘Sir, your coffee,’ Sheetal said, handing over the steaming cup.

While reaching for the coffee, I saw that Sheetal was wearing a loose-fitting kurta over a pair of jeans. I rarely noticed her clothes. We never really talked when she was with Ayush. She was very professional, and I preferred not to encroach on her personal space. However, I was still intrigued by the mysteries that surrounded her. I decided to open a conversation.

‘Let me finish the coffee, then I will drop you.’

‘No problem, sir.’ She turned to go back into the living room.

‘You could sit here in the balcony,’ I said, taking a sip of the coffee. I gestured to the other chair there. She sat down and sipped quietly from

her own cup.

I missed the evenings Kanika and I used to spend together. Suddenly, a thought crossed my mind. There had to be something in the saying: A lot can happen over coffee. The coffee was well brewed, although it tasted a little bitter.

‘The coffee tastes amazing,’ I said, breaking the silence.

‘The grounds were too fine. It over-extracted the coffee,’ she said.

I had no idea about the intricacies of coffee-brewing, but I went along with her explanation.

‘Are you comfortable with Ayush? Are you happy with this work?’

‘Yes, sir, I am perfectly fine.’ The soft smile on her face was more than just polite.

I nodded and took another sip of the coffee. I was thankful to her for giving a sort of structure to my haphazard family. It made me think of the question that had been bothering me for some time now. ‘Tell me about your family.’

‘There’s no one, sir. My parents passed away some years ago.’

‘I remember you telling me that on the first day. What about other relatives, cousins or ...?’

‘I don’t have any close relatives. I keep changing cities ...’

‘Changing cities ...? Any special reason?’

She gave my words some thought. ‘Actually ... nothing, sir,’ she finally said.

I could sense she was hiding something from me.

‘My Mama-ji is in Kanpur, but I rarely go there.’

‘Can I ask you a personal question, Sheetal?’

‘Yes ...’ She looked at me guardedly.

‘You are educated ... you say you were a good student ... you seem to come from a decent background ... I mean, family. Why have you chosen babysitting as a career?’

‘My degree isn’t complete,’ she answered simply.

I could see her ease fading with each question, and didn’t have the courage to delve deeper into her personal life. We had finished our coffee. I decided to risk a final question, one that had been bothering me for days.

‘Why haven’t you married yet? You are alone. Wouldn’t it be good to have support from someone?’

‘Sir, I am getting late.’ She stood up, and waited for me to hand her my coffee cup. The conversation was over. I nodded and continued to look at her, despite the reticence that was evident on her face as well as from the way she pointedly evaded my question. I think my doubts were apparent in my eyes. And she was mature enough to understand why these thoughts troubled me, I believed.

Eventually, she took a long breath, looked at me steadily and said, ‘Not all are fortunate enough to have good relationships, sir.’

9

When are you getting married again?’ my father asked me on the phone, not for the first time.

‘Papa, I don’t think I am ready yet.’

Why had I said that? Earlier, whenever this question was thrown at me, my response had been, *I don’t want to get married again*. This was the first time I had admitted that I was not ready. Sometimes, your heart needs time to accept what your mind already knows.

Having received a satisfactory response, my father changed the topic and asked several questions about Ayush. Whether he had started speaking. How was the new carer. The conversation then moved to the office and my performance at work. I could sense an emptiness in my father. He wanted to spend more time with me, to be able to play with Ayush. We had both lost our partners.

It was the first time I was seeing my father in this light. It occurred to me that two losers are perhaps the best working partners.

‘When will you visit us?’ I asked.

‘I am thinking around Diwali.’

‘Papa, is it okay if I ask you a question?’

‘You don’t need to ask my permission, son.’

‘Life is so difficult when you live alone. How have you been managing everything all these years?’

‘That is the reason I keep telling you to get married soon.’

His words conveyed a lot. When I disconnected the call, something seemed to have changed in me.

My mother left us nearly five years ago. I lost a part of my world with her death, but till that moment, I had not really understood my father's pain. Having prioritised his job over his social life, he did not have too many friends. Now, both of us were sailing in the same boat. Now, I had the maturity to understand this.

Our family had been a complete one. My mother, my father, and I. Yes, my father even used to smile sometimes. After Mom died, it was a rare sight. But I had found my smiling father again when Ayush was born.

Lost in memory lane, I was unaware that my landline had been ringing shrilly for some time. The landline always gave me unpleasant feelings because it was connected to the intercom, and I would get calls from the society guards or the society office on it.

'Hi, sir, Sheetal here.'

'Hi, Sheetal, what's the matter?' I asked, surprised to hear her voice.

'Sir, these society guards are not letting me come to the house,' she said, and then the guard on duty spoke to me.

'Sir-ji, her permission to work expired yesterday,' the guard explained before I could question him.

'Okay, make a guest entry and allow her to enter. I will get her permission renewed soon.'

The guards were just showing off their petty authority. They enjoyed poking their noses in the business of the residents. I had never heard these rules cited in Mohan's case. As always, I thought, the peril of being a good-looking woman is unwanted attention.

I replaced the receiver and, suddenly, all the disturbing thoughts I had had about Sheetal surged back. I began pacing the room restlessly. My anxiety peaked with the knock on the door. I opened it and almost shouted at Sheetal, 'Had I not asked you to apply for an Aadhaar card!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then where is it?'

Her eyes widened with alarm, and I noticed she was trembling. Yet, she avoided my eyes. Surely, she was hiding something.

'Is there a problem, Sheetal?' I said, trying to soften my voice and taking a deep breath. I asked her to sit on the sofa and rushed into the kitchen to get her a glass of water.

'Don't worry about your Aadhaar card. We can go together, and I will help you apply,' I said when I came back into the living room.

‘Sir, I have an Aadhaar card.’

I frowned in confusion. ‘Show it to me then.’

‘Sir, whenever I show it to people, I lose my job.’

‘I would like to see the document which has that effect,’ I joked. It all sounded so fishy, if not silly. ‘Don’t you worry, I will not react like other people.’

She unzipped her bag and rummaged inside it. When her hand emerged, it was trembling. I saw tears in her eyes as she extended the piece of paper to me. It was hard for me to understand how an Aadhaar card could worry its owner like this.

As I took the card, she almost pleaded, ‘Sir, please do not throw me out of this job. I will have no choice but to dance on the streets ...’

Bewildered by her words, I turned my eyes to the culprit piece of paper.

I read it. And re-read it. I read it ten times in twenty seconds and looked at her in disbelief. I was utterly shocked. Words tumbled around in my mind, but I failed to put them together.

I finally gathered my wits and asked, ‘Are you a transgender woman?’

Sheetal Speaks

The day I was born was a happy one for my small middle-class family. They raised me like a boy but there was something unusual about my body. My father worked as a sales head in a car showroom and my mother was a housewife. We lived in Kanpur. My father had a decent income. Though my memories of my childhood are a little hazy, they were the best years of my life.

I remember that things started changing when I turned five. I saw that the boys were always playing games involving cars, balls or superheroes, while girls were more creative. They could turn a game with dolls into the most engaging sport. I loved dolls deeply. I would always ask my parents to get me the most beautiful and colourfully decorated dolls.

‘Those are for girls ...’ Ma tried to reason, but that was just a theory for me.

One of my earliest memories of school is being yelled at by my class teacher for going to the toilet with the girls. I did not realise that I was different from them. When I was thirteen, I refused to have my hair cut short like the other boys. I loved my long hair. I liked my mother’s sarees, her jewellery boxes and make-up kit, her bangles, and everything else that made her the feminine image of beauty and comfort. Ma did not feel the same way. She often snatched those enchanting objects from me and kept

them in places out of my reach. She would yell rudely, ‘These are not for boys!’

My father supported my mother’s views. But my interest in dolls, sandals, lipsticks and ladies’ clothing only grew.

One night I asked myself, ‘Why am I a boy?’

When I was in Class 6, I dressed up in my mother’s clothes, applied red lipstick and combed my hair to frame my face. When I looked in the mirror, I felt I resembled a doll. My parents were out, attending a wedding. When they returned, I was still in my doll’s outfit, engrossed in a game with my cousins.

I remember the incident vividly. My mother’s face had glowed like a red-hot iron. Before I could say anything, she slapped me. It was the first time she had reacted so violently, making me realise she thought there was something terribly wrong with me. However, I was not convinced.

At night, when I was sulking, my face wet with tears as I tried hard to fall asleep, my mother came and hugged me.

I kept asking her, ‘Why am I a boy, Ma?’

My mother did not say a word. She didn’t have the answer, maybe, or she was trying very hard not to cry.

I could not believe there was something wrong with me. I soon started feeling uncomfortable in my boy’s outfits. My increasing height and changing voice said I was like the other boys around me. But my fair, soft skin contradicted that idea. My body and mind began to undergo changes which my peers were not experiencing.

I have never said this, but I started liking boys. Girls were simply my playmates. I was not at all attracted to them. The boys I hung out with were always talking about girls, their clothes and bodies. I was fascinated by them, and the things they said.

I had always been popular in school because I was a good student. Then, suddenly, my friends started teasing me. They whispered amongst themselves that I was gay. Some of them teased me and called me ‘babes’. The way they sniggered made me wonder whether I was so different that they could not like me. Or were they the ones who were weird? All of a sudden, I was getting all sorts of unnecessary attention. I was bullied in the classroom, in the playground, everywhere. I was picked on for being too thin, for being too soft, for being feminine.

My parents seemed ashamed and shaken when my nipples started bulging. My soft breasts had not gone unnoticed among the other children and became a topic of discussion in school.

Eventually, my mother realised I needed her. She stepped up and supported me, in her way. But my father seemed to have disowned me. He was not harsh, but he stopped playing with me or talking to me. Earlier, he was the one who always pampered me and saved me from Ma's scolding. Now, he just didn't seem to care. I guess he had only loved his son, not me.

Things changed drastically. I only went to school to take exams, as my father did not want me to attend school regularly and my mother agreed with him. I was confined to my house. I watched TV or read books to pass the time. When we had visitors, Ma instructed me to stay in my room and not come out to meet them.

I failed to understand what was wrong with me. Or what had gone wrong with my parents. My unexplored identity and its impact on people around me was becoming a crisis.

Once, in our neighbour's house, a baby boy was born. A group of women came to celebrate the occasion. They sang, played the dhol and danced for several hours.

My mother warned me not to come outside. But the lively music and loud cheers had my entire attention. I couldn't stop myself. Restrictions fuel curiosity, rather than curbing it.

I came out of the house and watched those ladies. The eyes of one of the dancers fell on me. Twice, I noticed her staring at me. Weird looks didn't really bother me much any longer, but my mother glared and signalled to me to go inside. I obeyed, but kept looking at them from behind the curtains. I heard the neighbourhood boys snigger, saying words like 'eunuch' and 'hijra'.

'Am I also a eunuch, Ma?' I asked my mother the same night.

My mother broke into tears. She hugged me and said, 'No ... who said that? You are my daughter.'

I had been near tears, but I smiled at Ma's words. These were the words I had wanted to hear for so many years.

Strangely, something else happened that night. My mother made me promise that I would never allow myself to dance on the roads.

Next morning, I woke to a commotion outside my house. The woman who had spotted me while dancing the previous day had come with

a few of her people. They were in conversation with my mother, requesting, arguing and finishing with threats. They were shrieking, insisting that I was one of them. I looked around the house for my father. He was nowhere to be seen. I guessed that he had deliberately chosen not to be there. My mother refused to send me off with them and managed to drive them away, single-handed. I was frightened, but I remember her words. She said, ‘Sheel is my daughter and will always remain with me.’

Now, the entire neighbourhood’s assumptions were confirmed. I was what they had always suspected me to be—a transgender person.

My father was no longer comfortable with having me around the house. He started scolding me for mistakes I hadn’t made. My mother considered the situation and decided to send me to Lucknow, to my Mama-ji’s family.

Before I moved, my mother literally gave me a new avatar. She called it my second birth. She took me to a parlour and, with a little bit of grooming, I was transformed into a girl. I stared at the mirror, unable to take my eyes off the image that stared back at me. I finally seemed to have found my body. I was looking at the correct version of me.

My name at birth was Sheel, but when I reached Mama-ji’s home, I had a new name—Sheetal. My school records still carried the name Sheel, but everyone called me Sheetal. Ma had instructed me on how to carry myself in school. She warned me not to go to open restrooms and to always shut the door while using the toilet. I learned to apply make-up, and soon I had access to all the cosmetics I had ever fancied.

However, my unusual height, my harsh voice, and the hair on my body eventually gave away my secret. Everyone started noticing me.

A time came when, even at my Mama-ji’s place, my real identity was discovered, despite my mother telling them that I was a girl. I had to stop going to school, but was allowed to appear for my Class 12 board exams.

One day, when I came home from school, I found out I had lost my mother. She had died of a cardiac arrest. They said it was my deviance that had made her ill, and I was held responsible for her sudden death. Everyone, directly or indirectly, started speaking ill of me. Mama-ji, however, was on my side, and defended me from these jibes.

By now, my father had distanced himself from me completely. After my mother’s death, the fragile thread that bound us had broken. I was now

totally dependent on Mama-ji for my expenses. But whenever he spent a single rupee on me, my mami-ji would make an unpleasant remark. 'We are not millionaires,' she would say. My cousins were growing up, and an unwanted teenager confused about her gender was a financial liability for their family.

Somehow, I managed to complete my schooling and enrolled for a BSc in Lucknow University. I met Subhajit there. He was a nice boy, studious and helpful. I opened up to him, and he accepted my truth without prejudice.

My Mami-ji's taunts grew worse every day, making it impossible for me to continue staying at their place. I was unable to concentrate on my studies in that atmosphere. On the day the results were announced, I packed my belongings and left their house. I never went back to my family ever again.

I had some of my mother's jewellery. Selling it helped me survive for nearly a year. My best friend, Subhajit, helped and protected me to the best of his ability. However, as he was a student himself, he couldn't offer me financial assistance to continue my studies.

It was around this time that I discovered I loved kids. They were the only ones to whom it didn't matter if I was a male or a female. I could be kind and affectionate to them, and they were equally adoring in return.

Meanwhile, Subhajit finished his BSc and took admission in Galgotia University to do his MCA. He was shifting to Noida, and insisted that I move with him. The possibility of better opportunities for work in a bigger city compelled me to accept his offer.

We lived in Indirapuram. Subhajit was a true friend. When people questioned my identity, he stood by me like a pillar.

It was he who helped me find a job with Mr Rao. Initially, Mr Rao was reluctant to hire me. But he realised I was the cheapest babysitter available and decided to give me a chance. He was soon impressed by the quality of my work, so he hid my identity from his wife and kept me on. When Mrs Rao eventually found out I was a transgender woman, however, she refused to allow me in her house or near her children. I reconciled myself to fate and started looking for a new job.

But everyone everywhere, from banks to prospective employers and the government agency issuing PAN cards, asked me for proof of identity.

On 15 April 2014, I found a ray of hope in the landmark Supreme Court judgment which declared ‘... *transgender people to be a “third gender”*, affirmed that the fundamental rights granted under the Constitution of India will be equally applicable to transgender people, and gave them the right to self-identification of their gender as male, female or third gender’.

Subhajit insisted that I apply for an Aadhaar card. After securing the necessary documents, I was successful in getting one. The proof of my identity as an Indian.

Looking down at my Aadhaar card, I smiled, although I knew not many would like what they saw on it. From that day onwards, I was officially a transgender woman.

I never forgot my mother’s inspiring words: to never dance in home ceremonies for money. I had made a promise to Ma, who had fought for me her entire life. It was also a promise I had made to myself. I would not surrender.

Even reading the Aadhaar card twenty times did not help reduce my shock. I could not come to terms with Sheetal's truth.

‘Transgender?’

This certainly cleared up some of the mysteries around Sheetal. Most women would have had trouble staying late hours at work, but Sheetal didn't. It explained her build and the harsh voice. Yet, if she could keep a fact like this about herself a secret, it was a matter of concern.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I felt cheated.

Amidst these thoughts, I had not registered Sheetal's repeated pleas. But her voice finally reached me. She was pleading, ‘Sir ... please, sir ... do not kick me out like the others. I don't have the option to dance on the streets.’

I resolved to sack her. No ... it was not only because of her identity. She had violated my trust, crumpling it like a piece of paper.

I went into the bedroom and took some cash out of the almirah. I placed the money on the table in front of her. ‘You may leave now,’ I said shortly.

Sheetal just sat there, shaking her head. She continued to beg me not to turn her away. After a few more attempts, she understood that it was like pleading with a stone. She took a long breath and said, in a tone of acceptance, ‘Sir, is it okay if I collect my belongings?’

I nodded.

She used to keep an extra set of clothes, a pair of slippers, and a few other things in the house in case of an emergency. I made myself scarce and

went into the washroom. In a few minutes, she stood at the door with her bag on her shoulder and a plastic bag in hand, ready to leave.

‘Thank you for everything,’ she said.

‘Can I check your luggage?’

She hesitated for a moment.

‘Can I see it?’ I repeated.

She emptied the plastic bag in front of me. It only contained her things. Yet, she continued to look guilty. I was sure she was hiding something. I pointed at her handbag this time, with authority.

She did not move.

‘Don’t force me to call the security guards.’ My voice was tough.

She looked at me, her eyes begging for mercy. Finally, she let go of the handbag, placing it on the table. I frisked the bag and pulled out something that looked familiar.

Ayush’s favourite panda toy! That was what she had stolen from my house. What use could it possibly have? Why did she steal a soft toy? It had barely cost two hundred rupees. I looked at her again. Her body seemed numb; only the tears flowed freely. Her eyes held the plea: ‘Can I keep it?’

She was silent, but her eyes were screaming like those of a grieving mother. Was I making a mistake? No, I told myself.

I didn’t say anything, just placed the toy back in her bag.

I don’t have the option to dance on the streets.

Somehow, the words kept buzzing in my ears. Every time I tried to ignore them, they echoed louder than ever.

Sheetal had gone, but she left me feeling responsible for all the disasters in her life.

So my life was back to normal, struggling to balance work and single parenthood. Only one person would be happy at how things had turned out. ‘Mohan, where are you!’ I called out loudly.

‘I am finishing up in the kitchen, sir ...’

‘Can you stay for some extra hours in the evenings ... like you used to?’

‘I will stay one extra hour, but ...’

‘But what? You will get extra pay,’ I clarified.

‘No, it’s not about money. What happened to ... your Sheetal?’

He did not bother to hide the taunt.

‘She will not be coming here anymore.’

Getting angry at fools is a waste of energy. My peace is more important than his punishment, I decided. I left the house with Ayush and dropped him at the day care centre before heading for office.

I waited outside Mr Rao’s cabin for fifteen minutes before I was called in.

Even before I could take a seat, he spoke. ‘So, you got to know about Sheetal?’

His query added fuel to my fire. ‘Sheetal has already informed you that I dismissed her from my service?’

‘No. The anger on your face did that. You have thrown her out on the street. She does not belong in a place where she will be made to wash dishes and clean the house. Why did you do that to her?’

‘Am I responsible for this?’

‘People like you are responsible for this.’

I wanted to shout at him, but he was my boss.

‘Abhay, just think. If educated people like you will not give her a job ... then who will?’

‘What about me? I feel like ... I have been betrayed not once but multiple times. And if you are so concerned for her, why did you kick her out of your house?’

‘Not me. I wish I had a choice. My wife dismissed her.’

I could see the helpless regret on his face. Mr Rao had always come across as a tough and confident man. His guilt about his family’s treatment of Sheetal reinforced my conviction that he was a good human being. There was no reason for me to reproach him. I got up to leave.

Before I could exit his cabin, he said, ‘Wait, Abhay.’ He went over to the Shiva statue in the corner and picked it up. ‘Do you know the story of Ardhnarishwar?’

I shook my head. ‘No, I don’t,’ I said.

Mr Rao returned to his table, statue in hand, and slowly drank a glass of water. Then he cleared his throat and spoke,

‘Shiva is referred to as the ultimate man. He is the symbol of ultimate masculinity. The Ardhnari form illustrates how the female principle of God, Shakti, is inseparable from the male principle of God, Shiva. Masculine and feminine does not mean male and female. The “feminine” and “masculine” are certain qualities. Only when these two

qualities happen in balance within, can a human being live a life of fulfilment. God is beyond the concept of any sex. So God can be male, female, and even neuter, too. So God existing in this intrinsic condition is referred to as Ardhanarishwar.'

I was silent. We seemed to be on totally different pages, Mr Rao and I. Before I left his cabin, I looked at the Ardhanarishwar statue again. I now understood why Sheetal kept one in her house.

It was apparent that Mr Rao expected me to say something.

I said, 'Always believe what you see and not what you hear about someone.'

The traffic on NH 24 was getting on my nerves. Especially with a small kid beside you, it's difficult to feel kindly towards the sloth-like procession of vehicles in all shapes and sizes that you are trapped in. I was irritated by the time I reached home. I had been driving for an hour-and-a-half that evening! As my car approached our housing society's gates, I saw a commotion on the road outside. The business of others rarely interested me but this hoopla caught my attention. My eyes travelled to the source of the noise. A group of hijras were shouting and arguing with the security guards.

I recognised the group. They usually came on the invitation of residents, to sing and dance on occasions like weddings or births.

'It's completely legal. You cannot stop us from going inside the society,' one of them said.

'Go from here. Don't waste our time. No visitors are allowed without permission,' a guard said haughtily.

'We will curse you! You know our words can ruin you.'

'I will call the police,' the guard shouted.

A crowd had gathered to watch the drama. The uproar scared Ayush. He began to cry, and I hugged him close to me. His eyes were tightly shut and his small fists clenched; he was clearly agitated by the ruckus. I knew I should take him home, but a strange curiosity compelled me to stand and watch.

I moved closer to the hijras. Ayush gripped me tighter, and I rubbed his back soothingly. 'Excuse me,' I spoke to one of them politely, '... why don't you find regular work somewhere?'

‘Where will we get work? Who will give us a job? Even the government doesn’t. We do not have any support, no provision for education ...’ one of them retorted.

‘You can find small jobs somewhere, housework ...’

The hijra turned to face me, hands on manly hips and nostrils flared, and asked, ‘Will you give us work in your house ... sir?’

Will you give us work?

The question resonated in my ears. It held many answers for me. I sat silently in my room. Thoughts, images ran through my mind. I could not be calm. I walked out of my room and sat on the sofa. My eyes fixed themselves on the collage from my college days. But it didn’t make me feel good about myself anymore. In the photos, I seemed to be smiling meaninglessly. I posed as a police inspector in one picture, in another an advocate, a bartender, even a cowboy! They all looked fake.

Mohan had extended his working hours by an hour. He had prepared our dinner and laid the table, cleaned all the utensils and tidied the kitchen by seven-thirty. ‘Sir, I am done with work,’ he said, picking his bag up and getting ready to leave.

‘Mohan ...’

He stopped near the door.

‘If I sack you tomorrow and you don’t find another job ... what will you do?’

He stared at me, shocked. He put his bag on the ground, his face crumpled.

‘No, sir, don’t sack me ...’ he pleaded.

‘Oh ... you are getting me wrong ...’

‘Sir ... if Didi was here, she would never ever have asked me this question.’

I smiled at his melodrama. He knew the best trick to manipulate my decisions.

‘I am not sacking you, Mohan ...’ I said in a soft tone. ‘I just want to understand. Suppose, tomorrow, you don’t have a job ... what will you do?’

‘What can I do, sir? I will do what I have to do. Rob ... or beg ... or something that will fill my stomach.’

‘You know that’s illegal.’

‘Hunger and necessity don’t heed morality.’

I smiled. Even a person as illogical as Mohan could understand the basic compulsions of life.

Ayush and I had our dinner together in the bedroom. I put a bowl of mashed rice and dal in front of him. Usually I fed him, but today he picked the spoon up and made an attempt to put the food in his mouth. More than half of it spilled on his clothes. Eyes fixed on the TV, he took another spoonful. This time he spilled food on the bed. But he continued to try, and I let him. There is victory in doing your best and failing, as well.

With some assistance from me, he managed to finish his food and sat quietly for a while, watching TV. I came back to the living room. Again, my focus was on the collage on the wall. In one of the pictures, I was wearing my favourite black shirt. That image had some good memories attached to it. It was a symbol of my first big success. It reminded me that I had always dreamed big. My ambitions were huge, inspired by an urge to do something extraordinary ... different from the aspirations of regular people. When I decided that I wanted to work in films, I spent years chasing that impossible dream.

At this moment, I did not like the person whose pictures were on the wall. I closed my eyes. There was no one in the house to hug me, comfort me, or even offer me a glass of water. Only my son, who sat quietly in the next room, and I.

I went back into the bedroom to check on Ayush. As I looked at my child, I was filled with remorse. No one cuddled him or put him to bed with a warm hug, laughed with him, or told him silly stories at bedtime. He had gone to sleep all by himself, watching TV.

I checked the time; it was ten-thirty. Not very late by city standards. I went to the bathroom and freshened up. I pulled out my old black shirt, the only souvenir of success in my life. As I put it on, there was a sparkle of victory on my face. I looked into the mirror. My mind said, you are doing the right thing.

I again requested Mrs Agarwal to remain at my home for a few minutes. I left my apartment, got on my scooty, and rode towards Norani Masjid. In no time, I was at Sheetal’s house. I gathered all my courage and knocked on the door.

‘Sir, you ... here?’ Sheetal asked as soon as she opened the door. As I had expected, she was astonished to see me.

‘Where is your Aadhaar card? I have to arrange for your pass ... to enter the society.’

‘You are allowing me to work for you again?’ Her face was impassive. I think she dared not hope.

‘Ayush’s eyes look for you whenever he enters a room. I think ... he needs you,’ I said, showing no emotion.

A smile spread on her face. It was the most genuine smile I had ever seen. She welcomed me into her house, so happy that she even forgot to thank me. Again, my eyes fell on the Shiva statue. There was so much to learn from the story behind it.

Sheetal gave me her Aadhaar card. ‘Will the society permit me to work on their premises?’

‘That I will manage. You just come.’

She folded her hands to thank me.

It was a gesture I did not feel I was worthy of. ‘No need to thank me. I have a request to make ...’

‘Anything you say, sir.’

I sighed, took a deep breath and said, ‘Even if I sack you ... never ... ever allow yourself to dance on the streets.’ I left before she could respond.

As I rode home, I glanced in the scooty’s mirror. I saw a man in a black shirt, smiling while tears flowed from his eyes. As I felt the cool night air on my tear-soaked face, I was filled with a sense of contentment. Suddenly, a burden was lifted from my chest. Finally, I had spoken like a hero.

My Black Shirt

Kanika and I were the most famous couple in college. We loved each other immensely, and were together all the time. Anyone could find us in the canteen or in the auditorium at any time of the day, talking, studying, laughing and fighting. While I was in college, my father got transferred to Lucknow. This gave me the much-needed freedom to spend time with her.

Kanika and I had discussed my dream of becoming an actor at length. When we successfully completed our BCA, she suggested that I join the drama course that was being offered at Sapna Theatre. She knew well that my father would never support me in pursuing this crazy dream. However, through thick and thin, Kanika stood by me. She even funded the theatre course. There is no shame in mentioning that, back then, I enjoyed having a rich girlfriend who loved me so much.

The best thing about Sapna Theatre was that they had evening classes. I could attend them while pursuing my MCA course. Once I finished the drama course, I believed, I would have a concrete foothold in the world of my dreams.

That's what the word 'sapna' means—dreams. In the case of Sapna Theatre, the name had a darker meaning. It was a place which had also broken many dreams. I met people there who had been pursuing acting and

performing plays for decades, but they were still struggling to find their feet in the world of theatre.

Sapna was my first encounter with reality. But Kanika always believed it would do me good. I never knew why. I guess, she was too blind in her love for me.

After two years of acting and directing plays, I made a friend, Pavan Raghav. He was my senior at Sapna. He had joined the theatre to become a hero, but he looked more like a villain. He had even played the role of the villain in films like *Purana Mandir* and *Bandh Darwaza*, directed by the Ramsay Brothers.

He shared the dirty details of the film and television industry in India, warning me that people often played nasty tricks to survive in that world. They grabbed opportunities by denying them to others and often took credit for their work. His scary accounts bewildered me.

‘What? You are not getting any roles! But Ramsay Brothers ... aren’t they famous?’

‘I played a ghost,’ Pavan said. ‘There was a lot of heavy make-up ... actually, no one even recognises me as the villain in that film.’

My eagerness to appear on the big screen didn’t go unnoticed by him. With a lot of disclaimers, he finally introduced me to a casting agency. It was an agency that hired actors largely for minor roles. After appearing for a dozen auditions and nursing a bruised ego several times, I finally got a break! Yes, it was a break that could be cherished for a lifetime.

‘Abhay, we have a role for you.’ I was in the casting manager Mahesh’s office, and he seemed enthusiastic.

‘What’s the role, sir?’

‘It’s a very big budget movie! I think you are suitable.’

‘Do I need to audition or am I already finalised for the role?’

‘No need for an audition.’

‘Could you please explain what is required for the role?’

‘You have one of the lead roles in this film.’

‘Lead! Really?’

‘Yes. You will be the second boyfriend of the heroine ...’ Mahesh said, his eyes sparkling.

‘Who is the heroine?’

‘Karina Khan.’ He said this as if he was giving me a boon.

‘Fuck! Are you serious? I’ll play the boyfriend of Karina Khan!’

‘I am absolutely serious. And if I am not mistaken, you will even get a kiss on your cheek!’

‘Wow!’ Blood rushed through my body. I could have exploded with excitement.

‘Let me explain the situation. You are the second boyfriend. To tease the leading man, she will place her hands on your shoulder and ... and ...’ he smiled slyly, ‘... she will kiss you.’

‘Oh my God! Karina Khan is going to kiss me!’ My eyes were about to pop out. My happiness knew no bounds. I literally pinched myself hard to make sure I was not dreaming.

‘Do I have any dialogues?’

He leafed through some papers, and read out, ‘She is mine. *Ye meri hai. Iski taraf dekha toh ... I will kill you.*’

‘Only one line?’ I was slightly disappointed.

He gave me another cunning smile and said, ‘You cannot speak more. How can someone expect to speak more while kissing.’

I didn’t care. I didn’t even ask how much I would get paid.

Before I left the place, he instructed, ‘Wear a black shirt for the shoot.’

‘Are you really serious? Karina Khan is going to ...?’ That was the first reaction from Kanika.

I didn’t get a chance to give her any more details. She was so excited, she did not even ask about the scene.

‘Yes, she is going to kiss me. I will be her second boyfriend.’

‘I cannot believe this!’

‘Why?’

She did not reply. I could sense she was a little jealous, but she was also genuinely happy. We celebrated that day in Lodhi Gardens. We had a million dreams about what my life would be after becoming an actor on the big screen. I knew I was trying to fly before even spreading my wings, but we were sincerely happy.

She said, ‘Let’s practise your lines.’

She sat at one end of a wooden bench, I on the other. We were in the middle of Lodhi Gardens on a summer day; I could see Lodhi ka Makbara towering over us. A few couples roamed around the gardens while others hid themselves in the bushes.

I pulled out my smartphone and read, ‘She is mine. *Ye meri hai. Iski taraf dekha toh ... I will kill you.*’

The garden suddenly went quiet. Kanika did not react.

‘Why did you stop?’ Kanika said, shrugging. She was waiting for the rest of it.

‘That’s my dialogue.’

‘That’s it?! You are the boyfriend and that’s all you’ve been given ... one cheesy line?’

‘When you put it like that, it does sound weird.’ I thought for a few seconds, beginning to wonder if the casting manager had been bluffing. But I didn’t have the courage to reconsider the offer or refuse. What if I lost my chance! Looking at Kanika, I felt terrible thoughts were running through her mind.

‘Let’s practise,’ she said, emotionlessly.

‘She is mine. *Ye meri hai. Iski taraf dekha toh ... I will kill you.*’

I repeated the lines a hundred times. Sometimes like Shah Rukh Khan, sometimes in Salman Khan’s style, with my shades on or standing on the bench ... and even while running around the garden.

After an hour of marathon practice, Kanika said, ‘I hope that is enough.’

I nodded. For weeks, I practised the dialogue every day. I called my father, but did not tell him about the acting break. I shared the news with mom, though, and requested her to not tell anyone else. I wanted it to be a surprise for Papa. My mother was overwhelmed with love for her son. She blessed me a hundred times.

When the day of the shoot arrived, I thanked all the known gods. I shaved three times and washed my face twice with charcoal facewash to appear clean, fair and handsome. I combed my hair carefully, first fluffing it up from every angle to give it volume and then smoothing it with gel. I tried on two pairs of jeans, two formal trousers and three chinos before settling on light blue washed jeans which went well with an old but well-fitted black shirt. My footwear changed from formal to sports shoes to ankle boots, but I finally opted for a casual look with a pair of peppy grey and blue sneakers. Strapping on a black belt and my black Fastrack watch, I felt I finally looked the part of Karina’s second boyfriend. I checked myself out in the mirror countless times, until I found myself confident enough to go for it.

My love, Kanika, came over with a gift, and a chocolate to celebrate our small step towards success. Her happiness was evident on her face for all to see, but there was also a hint of concern, which only I could see.

‘Is everything okay? You look worried.’ I touched her cheek.

‘Everything is fine. I am so happy for you. Would you mind trying this on?’ She handed the wrapped gift to me.

I unwrapped the silver paper. The gift was a black Allen Solly shirt. Kanika had a good eye for clothes. This shirt would add a stylish edge to the casual appeal I was going for.

‘This must be expensive.’ I lifted the shirt high to have a better look.

She ignored the statement and instructed me to change quickly. I put the shirt on. The comfortable cotton felt cool against my skin. I felt I looked a hundred times better than before.

Kanika looked me over twice from front to back and from top to bottom. After her appraisal from all angles was complete, she said, ‘You look like the perfect hero.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, grinning, dazzled by my own good looks.

‘If life ever gives you an opportunity to be a real hero, you should wear this shirt,’ she said, her face solemn.

I nodded.

* * *

‘She is mine. *Ye meri hai. Iski taraf dekha toh ...* I will kill you.’ I kept repeating the line under my breath.

I reached the site where I had been asked to report for the shoot. Preparations were under way and already a crowd had gathered to catch a glimpse of the stars. Within a circle marked by some flimsy ropes, spot boys, bouncers and some security personnel walked around. Huge cameras were everywhere. I felt I was finally at the right spot at the right time. I was carrying a printout of my job appointment letter in my folder and I needed to let them know I was here. I considered whom I should report to. Close observation directed me towards a man sitting with bundles of paper in front of a board which said, ‘May I Help You?’

I walked over to him.

‘Sir, I was called in here for a role.’

‘Do you have the confirmation of your job appointment?’

I nodded and showed him the printout.

He read the name and tapped a few keys on his laptop. He looked at me twice, appraisingly. ‘What is your height?’

‘Five feet and seven inches.’

‘We asked for someone who is five-four.’ He slowly shook his head.

‘I wasn’t told of any requirements. Mahesh sir picked me.’

He looked at my stylish shoes and then at my face. ‘Why don’t you remove your shoes? Anyway, the cameraman is going to shoot from a top angle.’

I shook my head in acquiescence. ‘Sir, I do have a dialogue ... right?’

He looked at the screen of his laptop. ‘Yes, you do. And then Karina is going to kiss you ...’ He gave me a sly smile and said, ‘Lucky dog!’

He indicated a tent nearby. ‘Go in there and wait. They will call you when it’s your turn.’

I walked into the tent. There were ten men there, all dressed in black.

I felt a strange excitement. I had been waiting for this moment my entire life. I looked at the faces around me. All of them seemed taller than me. Then a weird thought ran through my mind. Why was everyone dressed in black shirts?

I sat in one of the vacant seats.

The man on my left said, ‘So ... you are the one whom Karina Khan is going to kiss?’

I nodded excitedly.

‘Have you worked as a bouncer before?’

‘Excuse me, I am an actor. Not a bouncer.’

‘Oh ...’

He looked at me again. I suddenly realised all the men in the tent were bouncers. I sat quietly, waiting for my call. Soon, a make-up man entered. After a glance at the group, he walked up to me. He examined my spotless face and applied some make-up from his much-used kit. I was thrilled with the special attention.

‘Any idea when the shooting will start?’ I asked, hoping the make-up would not be ruined if the wait was too long.

‘I don’t know anything. They asked me to make you look good, as Karina Khan is going to kiss you ...’ the man said in a bored tone.

With every passing moment, my heartbeats were increasing gradually, and I could feel the blood surging through my body. I wanted to discuss my acting part with someone in the tent, anyone, but I realised that all they were concerned about was the job and the food it would put on their table.

In my desperation to talk, I called Kanika. I recounted everything that had happened so far and then practised my line with her a few more times.

After about two hours, a girl wearing a crew T-shirt came inside the tent and called out, ‘Abhay ...’

I raised my hand instantly.

‘Do you remember your line?’ she asked, her eyes shifting from the sheet of paper in her hand to my face and back.

I cleared my throat, which had gone completely dry, and mouthed, ‘She is mine. *Ye meri hai. Iski taraf dekha toh ...* I will kill you.’

‘Good!’ She tapped approvingly on the paper with a pen. ‘You have to deliver this line to the hero.’

‘Could you please explain the scene in detail?’ I requested politely.

She took a long, exasperated breath, ‘Oh ... they didn’t tell you?’

I shook my head.

She fumed with irritation, ‘Why don’t they do their work, man! Okay ... so the scene is like this. Actress Karina Khan is inside this pub. You will stand outside the pub with the other bouncers.’ She pointed at the other men in the tent. ‘And then ... she will walk out of the pub after quarrelling with her boyfriend—’

‘Who is the boyfriend?’ I interrupted her description.

‘Akshay K. ... he is the hero,’ she said, shaking her head disapprovingly. I was not sure if she disapproved of me or of Akshay K. ...

‘... so Karina will come out of the pub and pick you.’ She was drawing a few lines on a piece of paper now, trying to make me visualise the entire scene.

I looked at her, wide eyed.

‘Any doubts ...?’

‘Yes. What will we be doing outside the pub?’

‘Fuck! What the hell is this?’ She thumped her head, just like a frustrated teacher. ‘You, with all the bouncers,’ she now spoke slowly, as if talking to an especially slow kid, ‘... will be standing outside the pub ...’

I was still confused but did not have the guts to interrupt her.

‘All the bouncers will be standing outside the pub. And ...’ Her attention trailed away from her instructions. ‘Where are your black shades?’

I stared at her blankly.

‘You don’t have them? I had told the agency to make sure you wear black shades.’

I looked at her guiltily. Lost.

‘Let me see what I can arrange.’

She called an assistant. ‘Give him black shades.’ She turned to me. ‘Return it to him before you leave the place.’

I nodded.

‘So, the scene is ... Karina picks you ... the weakest bouncer. She says ... I love him ... and kisses you on your cheek. *Just* to make the hero jealous. And when Akshay comes towards you ... then you have to deliver the dialogue.’

‘*She is mine ...*’

‘Same.’

She shut me up with the air of having more important things to attend to, and left. I didn’t have the courage to ask her another question, even though I was the boyfriend of Karina Khan. That was the irony of the day.

My phone had been buzzing constantly with Kanika’s encouraging messages. I put my phone away.

My desperation to find an acting opportunity had died. After three years of learning and practising theatre, I had gotten this thirty-second role of a weak bouncer. But at least Karina Khan was going to kiss me! That thought still made me a little happy. Men hang on to their fantasies, which no tragedy can take away.

That moment, when the lips of the hottest celebrity of all time would touch my cheek, would make my day. Finally, I came back to earth and focused my attention on my appearance. I looked in the mirror, opened a button at my collar and loosened my belt. I wore the black shades as if they were precious jewels.

Do I look like a bouncer? I asked myself.

I practised my solitary dialogue, considering the best way I could say that line. After all, I was to share the screen with Akshay K.

‘Get ready, guys! Your scene is about to start!’ a crew member put his head inside the tent and screamed at the top of his voice.

The make-up man hurried into the tent and applied an additional layer on my cheeks, which were warm with excitement. All eyes in the tent were on me. Being able to inspire envy is a success in itself.

In a few minutes, we were waiting on a set that was supposed to be the outside of a pub. Everything was made of thermocol and thin wood, but at a glance, no one could make that out. The ambience, the lights, everything seemed perfect to my eyes.

And then suddenly we sensed a sizzling energy on the set. The hottest celebrity in the industry came out of the door of the ‘pub’. A mere glimpse of her, and the hormones began circulating rapidly in my body, arousing every cell in anticipation. She looked so much more beautiful in person than she did on the screen.

I noticed that everyone was staring at her. Some with envy, many with desire. Not many looked at Akshay, except for a few young actresses who were playing supporting roles. In just a fraction of a second, my desire to become an actor grew manifold within me.

‘Scene 133. Action!’ the assistant said loudly, and Akshay entered the pub. Nearly a dozen cameras were following him, so did more than a hundred pairs of eyes. That was my dream. That was how I wanted to see myself. I said to myself: Today, I am the weakest bouncer. But one day, I too will be a hero. I put on my black shades and lost myself in the world of fantasy.

When Scene 134 was announced, Karina came out of the pub, glancing at us with her piercing grey eyes. The director screamed, ‘Cut!’

Karina Khan was standing two metres away from me. She wore shorts that were probably no longer than six inches. Her long legs were bare. She was stunning.

A voice inside me said: *Is she really going to kiss me? I will not be washing my face for the next few months.*

Scene 135 was announced. Karina Khan walked up to me and put one hand on my shoulder.

‘Why are you doing this, darling?’ Akshay K. came running after her.

The moment Karina touched me, I could feel the jitters in my stomach. I could no longer remember what I had to say. I was lost.

‘If you don’t get me the diamond necklace, I will make him my boyfriend.’

Putting her hands on my shoulder, she moved closer to me, her lips heading for my cheeks. I forgot the lines I had repeated over a thousand times. The lights, cameras, her perfume, the attention of all the people on the set ... it all transported me to a different world. I was losing my senses. I closed my eyes. I wanted to feel it. Karina was moving closer with every passing second. I could feel her breath on my overheated skin, but before her lips could land on me, Karina said, ‘Cut!’

I opened my eyes to find Karina speaking to the director and the cameraman.

‘Can the backup artist finish it?’ Karina asked the director.

‘You have a problem kissing this guy?’ The director looked at me as if I was a piece of wood.

‘Actually, yeah ...’ Karina didn’t even look at me.

Shooting was put on halt for a few minutes. In no time, a girl dressed exactly like Karina stood in front of me.

‘Body double is already here,’ a crew member announced.

I guessed the duplicate Karina was going to kiss me in the retake. The hormone surge inside my body died a very quick death. We got ready to reshoot the scene.

Soon, Karina Khan came near me again. Then Duplicate Karina took her place and kissed me.

Scene 140 was announced. When Akshay came near us, I roared like an injured tiger, ‘She is mine. *Ye meri hai. Iski taraf dekha toh ...* I will kill you!’

The day ended there for me. I didn’t return the black shades.

I had mixed feelings, I guess. I had gotten a chance to see the real inside of the acting world. But I also realised I had been chasing an impossible dream. I explained everything to Kanika. She listened to me quietly and broke into laughter when I told her about Karina refusing to kiss me. But she did feel a little jealous of the body double who had done that scene with me.

Above all, she was genuinely happy that I had gotten to live a little of my dream.

I still remember Kanika asking, 'What did you gather from the day?'

I smiled and said, 'Memories and a lucky black shirt.'

I returned from Sheetal's house with a challenge. Convincing the society secretary would be a Herculean task. I couldn't sleep the entire night. But I didn't for a moment regret asking Sheetal to come back to work.

The next morning, I called Ashok Uncle and requested an appointment.

I had been living in that society for nearly five years. My apartment in Cloud 9, Indirapuram, had been purchased by my father. He had lived in the apartment briefly, before Kanika and I moved in, and during that time, he and Ashok Uncle would go for morning walks together. Papa was transferred to another city nearly four years ago, but Uncle was still very fond of him, and by extension, of me.

Ashok Uncle had visited my house once, to collect a donation for some religious function. In his pristine white kurta pyjama and much-worn kesari bandh gala, with a mild smile on his lips and three streaks of chandan tilak on his forehead, he stood out amongst the other tired-looking elderly residents. He actively organised religious gatherings at the society club and tried to involve as many youngsters in these events as he could manage to convince. He was obsessed with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Hindu scriptures. Ask him any question, and he would pick out an instance from the Ramayana or the Gita to explain or justify his reply.

Behind his back, a few people called him the 'Ramanand Sagar of Indirapuram society'. He was one of those who wanted to see changes in the society, but found it hard to adjust to the changing realities of urban

life. He wanted these changes to be in accordance with the teachings of the Upanishads, which no one these days knew about!

In his outlook, he was both religious and modern at the same time. Once, he had invited me and Kanika to his house for a puja. He had a gigantic picture that depicted Lord Krishna reciting the Gita to Arjuna at Kurukshetra. I found the whole set-up bizarre, as the huge frame dominated the entire drawing room, which was otherwise furnished with all possible modern amenities. Kanika and I had been amused because, apart from the prasada, he had served pasta and ginger beer to the guests. His kids were settled in the US and he was happily settled in India, enjoying his retired life while cursing the younger generation.

Now, I stood at his door. With a deep bracing breath, I knocked.

‘Hi, Abhay. How are you, young man? It has been a long time since I saw you.’ He extended his arms in a warm welcome. His forehead was adorned with the trademark three lines of sandal paste. They covered most of his wrinkled forehead. Everyone knew he set great store by that tilak.

‘Please sit,’ he said, after applying a dot of chandan on my forehead. People went into his house clean-browed and came out with marked foreheads all the time.

We lived just a few hundred steps away from each other in the same building, but our paths rarely crossed. The seat he had offered me was just below Arjuna’s image, while he sat on the other end of the sofa, like an elderly Krishna. Next to him was a bookshelf filled with hundreds of religious books.

‘Nice chandan,’ I touched my forehead and absently inhaled the mild sandal fragrance on my fingers.

‘Do you know why we apply chandan on the forehead?’

I did not want to seem rude by remaining silent. But I was apprehensive that, whatever I said in reply, he would counter with scientific and religious evidence, and the conversation would proceed in a way that could change the whole atmosphere. This did not bode well for the request I was about to make.

Thankfully, he wasn’t really expecting a response from me and began explaining without waiting for encouragement from me, ‘The “magic” ingredient, sandalwood, has cooling properties. It not only benefits the skin, but also cools the nerves below it. Applying sandalwood on your forehead helps cool your entire system.’

‘I totally agree. I often apply it too.’

He smiled and hopefully understood that I was not there to talk about sandalwood. ‘How is life? Your father ...? Are you able to manage everything at home?’

He shot a volley of questions at me. When someone asks several questions at once, it implies that the person is not interested in your answer.

‘All good.’ I offered a fake smile.

‘Tea ... or water ... anything?’

‘No, Uncle.’

‘So, tell me ... what brings you here?’

‘Uncle, I need some advice.’

His chest swelled, and his dull eyes opened wide. He felt entitled to share his profound knowledge, waiting eagerly for opportunities when some lost soul came to him in search of guidance and wisdom.

‘I will be happy to help you. These days, who cares to learn from the experiences of oldies.’

I sensed pain in his voice. It appeared that he had been looking in vain for a disciple to whom he could pass on his unsolicited sermons, the lectures which not even his own kids were willing to hear.

‘Ashok Uncle, I have a transgender friend who works with a private manufacturing company. But this person has kept their identity hidden.’

He didn’t even blink. ‘Male dominant or female dominant?’ he asked.

I was surprised at his precise knowledge of these classifications. For the first time, I started to feel I had come to the right person.

‘Female.’

‘Okay. So, what is the problem?’

‘Her employer fired her when he found out about her identity. But she feels she may get her job back if she is able to convince him. That is where I need your help. Could you help me with reasons that would speak in her favour? I want to be of some help to her, but I don’t know as much about the world as you do.’

‘Is this person religious?’

‘Who? My transgender friend?’

‘No. Her employer.’

I shrugged. Could I answer that? I was not sure myself, what my feelings were about God.

Rising from his seat, he gazed at Krishna's image and then at me. It appeared as if he was seeking some advice from Krishna. 'Have you read the Mahabharata?'

I frowned a little, wondering why he had to bring in the Ramayana and Mahabharata everywhere.

'Yes, everyone has,' I replied.

He smiled. I had never thought my knowledge of the Mahabharata would bring such pleasure to anyone.

'You are familiar with the character of Shikhandi in the epic?'

'Yes ... He was a transgender man.' I wondered why he had brought up Shikhandi.

'How important was he in the holy war of the Mahabharata?'

'He was the one who was responsible for killing Bhishma.'

'Without Shikhandi, the Pandavas would have never been able to defeat Bhishma.' He said it with pride, as if he was the great Shikhandi in a previous birth.

'Why are we talking about Shikhandi, Uncle?'

'Shikhandi was born as a girl named Shikhandini to Drupada, king of Panchala, who offered penance to Lord Shiva and was promised that his child would change her sex at a later stage in order to inherit his crown. Shikhandi fought in the Kurukshetra war on the side of the Pandavas. When Bhishma faced Shikhandi, he refused to fight because he had vowed never to use his weapons on a woman. That was the moment when Arjuna attacked Bhishma.'

I couldn't make head or tail of this long-winded explanation. It would be an effort to bring him back to the topic that I wanted to discuss.

'So, there was a transgender character in the Mahabharata ...' I tried to summarise hastily.

He smiled benevolently and shook his head. 'No. Not merely a transgender character, but one who became the king of Panchala. And people accepted this person as their ruler.'

'So, what is the point?'

'If we could accept a transgender man as a king thousands of years ago, then why should we have a problem employing a transgender woman now?'

I could see the Krishna in Ashok Uncle. If the same speech had been made somewhere else at the right moment, it could have resolved some

major disagreements, even stopped wars. I realised that this was my chance to apply the lesson I had just learnt.

‘Uncle, do you remember I brought you some documents last month, and spoke about the lady who would be working in my house as a babysitter?’

‘Yes. I had granted her permission for two months’ special access to the society as the documents were not complete.’

‘Uncle, she is a transgender woman.’

Ashok Uncle's staunch belief in the scriptures led him to make an exception in Sheetal's case. She was the only caregiver who would be allowed to work in the society without police verification.

I was relieved, as I had been sceptical as to how the police would react on seeing Sheetal's papers. I submitted them, along with her original ID card, to Ashok Uncle, and he promised me that her documents would be safe in the society files. As long as he was secretary, he assured me, Sheetal's real identity would remain a secret.

Sheetal came back to work with a new zeal. She was full of gratitude. It was evident that she loved this job and needed it. After a very long time, I felt I had done something worthwhile.

Mohan went back to providing only cooking and cleaning services. With Sheetal staying till late at night, he was now forced to make dinner for her too. They barely spoke to one another. But Mohan knew all there was to know about Sheetal.

One morning, while he was mopping the floor, I gathered from his body language that he was unhappy about something. His disappointment only grew when he realised that I had decided to ignore his dramatics. Unable to work silently any longer, he summoned his courage and approached me. He began to state his case like an advocate, 'Sir, police verification is important.'

'Yes. But what has it got to do with you?'

'Sir, Sheetal's police verification is pending.'

'Who told you that?'

‘I have been working in this society for the past five years.’

He said this as if it explained everything. But I knew that the problem was not with Mohan alone. A good-looking girl spending more than four hours in the evenings in a man’s house and leaving after ten o’clock at night had raised many eyebrows. The power of rumours cannot be underestimated. From the times of the Ramayana till date, they have, if anything, only become more powerful.

I did not reply to Mohan’s remark, and tried to silence him with a stern look. He was usually dense, but this time he understood.

‘She is a bad woman.’

‘What is the basis for this allegation?’

‘Sir, I know Sheetal stays with someone.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘We stay in the same neighbourhood. I saw her with a man.’

‘So? What is the harm in being with a man?’

‘Nothing wrong, sir, I guess ...’

‘Don’t hesitate ... go on ... get it off your chest,’ I prodded him.

He came closer and whispered as if revealing the deepest secret of all time, ‘Sir, she belongs to some gang.’

After coming pretty close to exhibiting some good sense, he had proved once again that he had no brains.

‘Mohan, it’s not lost on me why you are trying to create this mess. You are jealous of her being here!’

‘No, sir. I am concerned for Ayush baba’s safety.’

‘Do you have any sensible solution?’ It was a mistake. How could I ask something logical from him?

‘Yes. When Sheetal is here ... someone else should be at home.’

‘I am there.’ I tried to maintain a straight face.

‘But, sir ... you are ... you are busy worrying about something or the other. And you spend most of your time here on the balcony or go out for a walk. At those times, no one is keeping a watch on her.’

‘So ...?’

‘So, you need a third eye on Sheetal.’

I gave his words some thought and realised he was doing the right thing, but for the wrong reasons. When Sheetal came to work, all I could think about was a third eye. Especially when I looked at Ayush, my precious son, who spent the maximum time with mysterious Sheetal.

I called Justdial. ‘Could you share the details of a CCTV security service provider?’

* * *

I was sitting in the office of Zicom Total Security Solutions. This company had the highest rating on Justdial. The rest had bad reviews that mentioned poor picture quality, face recognition and backup.

The sales manager had glued himself to my side. Salesmen generally possess the unique trait of talking a lot, and tend to be poor listeners. Mr Sachin, the area sales manager at Zicom, was no different.

‘Welcome to the safest place on earth.’

I didn’t know what he was boasting about. Then I looked at a crowded cabin in a corner of the office. Ten cameras were installed there. They were probably used to give demos to prospective clients.

‘Sachin, I want surveillance devices to be installed in my bedroom and living room.’

‘Of course.’ He gave me a sly smile. ‘I’ll show you what we can do ...’

He spread out a brochure which showed off their client list: Airtel, Bharti, LIC, HDFC ATMs, Aditya Mega City, and many more, as well as their complete list of products. Bullet camera, CCTV camera, IP camera, hidden camera, pencil and paper camera—the array was endless. I had been shown the entire buffet, and suddenly I felt like I was not hungry at all.

‘Look, I don’t need all these things. I just want my bedroom and living room to be covered.’

He gave me another cunning smile. ‘Ohh ... I understand what you want exactly.’ From a drawer in his desk, he took out a paperweight and put it on the table.

I looked at the beautiful glass object, puzzled.

‘How is this?’ He smiled at what he imagined to be his own insightfulness.

‘Sachin, I am not here for some fancy paperweight.’

‘Sir,’ he smiled with an air of superiority, ‘this is not a paperweight. It’s a camera.’

I looked at the appealing device and asked, ‘How much does it cost?’

‘Forty-one thousand including GST only ... and you can connect it with any storage device to view and save the footage, in case it needs to be produced later as evidence.’

‘It’s way too expensive.’

‘We can offer you a discount.’

When he saw that I was still hesitating, he shook his head and said, ‘Sir, this camera has helped many people to get divorced. I assure you, with this, you will definitely catch the traitor red-handed.’

‘Traitor?’

‘Sir, we know ... bedroom surveillance is the best way to catch a cheating partner.’

‘What nonsense is this? Would you please focus on my requirement?’

Now he looked at me seriously. ‘Why don’t you explain why you need the camera?’

‘I want the surveillance to keep an eye on my son’s caregiver. And I need to access the feed directly on my smartphone.’

After looking at a few options, I chose a tiny four-inch-long model. I was finally satisfied.

‘So ... you will be needing only two cameras, sir?’

‘Yes. One for the bedroom and another for the living room.’

‘What about the washroom?’

‘The washroom?’ I looked at the salesman blankly.

‘All maids commit their sins in the washroom.’

He had just made things a lot more complicated. He took my silence as agreement and said, ‘Lots of stuff happens in the washroom, sir.’

I informed Sheetal about the installation of CCTV cameras in the house. Her discomfort was evident on her face. But I hoped she was mature enough to understand why this was necessary.

There were two washrooms in my house. Ayush used the one which was under surveillance. Sheetal had been asked to use the other one, if she needed to.

Now I had a caring babysitter, Mohan coming in to cook and clean, and a safe environment for my son. It was a moment when my life appeared organised and hassle-free. I could finally devote more time to my work, staying a few extra hours in the office when needed. I could even work in peace after coming home. Mr Rao was happy with my improved performance, and said as much in a series of appreciative emails.

It was an ordinary afternoon. I was in the office. My phone vibrated. It was a call from Ayush's day care centre. They never called me in the morning unless it was a matter of some concern.

'Hi, Abhay here.'

'Sir, are you Ayush's father?'

'Yes.'

'We are calling from The Little Legends. The principal wants to meet you.'

'Shall I come now?'

'No need for that, sir. You can meet her tomorrow when you drop him off.'

'Certainly.'

The first thought that occurred to me was that something had happened to Ayush, or that maybe he had a health-related problem that they wanted to tell me about. When I picked him up that evening, I scanned him from top to bottom. He looked the same to me. I opened the app on my phone and checked all the recordings of the past few days. Then I also watched older recordings at random. The CCTV footage was not very clear, but I could easily see my son's movements. There was nothing to draw suspicion. Everything seemed normal.

But that day, for the first time, I also saw Ayush eating his food on his own, with Sheetal having to help him only occasionally. It felt amazing to see my son clear this milestone, to watch him grow as he went about his daily activities.

At around ten-thirty that night, I dropped Sheetal home. I wanted to ask her how Ayush was doing, but decided to wait till after the meeting with the principal the next day.

When I returned home, all was silent. I went into the bedroom, my favourite spot in the house, where my son slept peacefully after a day of exhausting activity. Then I sat on the chair in the balcony, the cool August breeze soothing my nerves. I lit a cigarette and took a puff. In spite of the tranquillity of the evening, I felt I had failed as a father.

It could be because, looking at the CCTV videos of the past week, I had realised I rarely had any interaction with my son. Ayush spent his day at the day care centre and his evenings with Sheetal. Six months had passed since she had come back to work for us, and she had begun coming in on Sundays too. She was the one who got to spend maximum time with him.

Even when I was home, I was always on my laptop, or spending hours here on the balcony, smoking. I began to realise that, one day, I would regret not having seen my child grow.

My mind went back to the time when Kanika had been diagnosed with final-stage cancer. Even then, I hadn't spent much time with Ayush, except when he slept between us at night.

'How cute he is! It's good to see my baby sleeping so peacefully, assured that he is cared for by his parents,' Kanika said contentedly.

'Yes. But if he continues to sleep in the middle, it won't be possible to have a second child.'

I looked at my wife teasingly. She smiled and then burst into laughter. It was a moment I would never tire of reliving.

I have never truly taken care of Ayush, I now told myself. When Kanika was there, I was focused only on her. But my son was my wife's most precious gift to me. We often keep gifts we have received in good condition, but never really use them or cherish them.

'Wouldn't it be exciting to see our kids grow ... hear them speak for the first time?' Kanika had said.

'Yes.'

'What do you think he will say first—mom or dad?'

'Mom, of course.' I wanted to make her happy.

'No ... that is too common. He is our child. He should start with something different.'

She was upset that she would not be there to witness the moment and be a part of those beautiful memories.

'When he tries to say mom or dad for the first time, just give him a hug for me.'

I looked at her. Her love for Ayush was unmatched. I often felt jealous of the fact that she loved him more than me.

* * *

The next morning, I drove my son to The Little Legends. It was a modern, professionally managed, high-quality day care centre in Indirapuram. A huge open space was available for the kids to play in, at the centre of the premises. There was a separate dining room with chairs demarcated for each child to create a home-like ambience. There was round-the-clock security and CCTV surveillance. I was absolutely assured of their safety and vigilance standards. Nutritious food, prepared in-house, was served to the children at regular intervals. Their hygiene was impeccable, and their staff, disciplined.

I handed Ayush over to a teacher. Watching him move around and interact for a while, I realised that Ayush was a little less active than the other kids in his group.

The walls of the classroom were painted with cartoon characters. One wall was covered with birds, another with fish, and the third with superheroes. There was a soft, colourful carpet on the floor. I scanned these designs in detail, and appreciated their efforts to get the kids' attention.

Afterwards, I met the principal in her office.

‘Hello, Mr Abhay. How are you?’ she asked as I entered.

‘I am doing well, thank you.’

‘Actually ...’ She hesitated for a moment, then continued with an air of regret, ‘Actually ... we wished to let you know ... Ayush is not doing as well as you would expect from a child of his age. All the other kids in his group have begun speaking and communicating. We have been patient with him, but he has not shown any progress. We thought this would be a good time to let you know, so that you can arrange for some additional help ... if you wish.’

I allowed her words to sink in. ‘Do you think the problem is developmental?’

‘I couldn’t really comment on that.’ She mulled over my question. ‘Let me call his care teacher. She will be able to give you a better picture. Actually, she was the one who wished to discuss the matter with you.’

She made a call on the intercom and asked them to send Aparna madam to her office. When the lady came in, I recognised her. She was Ayush’s group teacher. She and I had often discussed his activities and dress requirements on special occasions.

‘Sir, Ayush’s progress is slow,’ Aparna said. ‘He is extremely shy. When the other kids are talking and playing, he always sits by himself in a corner. The expression on his face is often gloomy and he seems to hate socialising. This behaviour hasn’t helped him to make friends. His disinclination to socialise and inability to communicate are also hampering his learning process. As he does not engage with the others, we are not able to include him in rhyme recitation and other learning activities. On some days, he refuses to eat no matter what options we have here.’

‘Do you think it is a developmental issue?’

This was something I knew nothing about. I was not at all sure how it needed to be dealt with.

‘I don’t think so. He understands our instructions, and follows them when he wishes to. He is very creative, and loves to colour. I feel ... he is lonely and too adapted to the quiet atmosphere at home. He does not know how to deal with the noise and activity here.’

Her first response relieved me of my greatest fear, but another concern took its place. ‘What do you think would be a possible solution? How can I help him ... I mean, do I need to consult a doctor or something?’

‘I don’t think so,’ the principal intervened. ‘Since there is no mother at home, it’s all up to you, I guess. We understand how difficult it can be for a single parent, but you are all that he has. You need to interact with him more.’

‘I understand ... I will do it.’

‘Have all the other kids his age started speaking?’ the principal turned to the teacher and asked.

‘No ... but the other kids at least say a word or two, like mom, or dad.’ Aparna replied.

‘And nothing from Ayush?’ the principal prodded.

‘Well, yesterday, he did say something for the first time. That was the first time ever that I heard him speak.’

I frowned. The news made me emotional, even. My kid had said a word! I looked at Aparna with anticipation. She was still trying to recall the word.

‘What did he say?’ I asked.

Aparna looked straight at me. ‘I guess he said “Auntie”.’

The big photo on the living room wall, of Kanika and Ayush, seemed to be staring at me. Sometimes, I didn't even have the courage to face that picture. I looked at my son, who was watching cartoons on TV. Something in me had been taken away along with Kanika. I never used to be so silent.

That evening, Sheetal came, as always, with an invisible bundle of happiness for Ayush. Answering the doorbell, I stood staring at her for a moment, wondering what it was like to be a transgender person. How did she deal with society's cruelty towards people like her?

Sheetal inquired, 'Ayush is in the room watching TV?'

I nodded.

'Ayyush ...!' Sheetal called his name in a sing-song tone and Ayush came out of the bedroom, almost running on his tiny unstable feet. He wrapped himself around Sheetal's legs. I turned my face away. My eyes fell on the photo again. Kanika was still smiling at me. I smiled back but failed to control my tears.

Mohan had left for the day after cooking dinner. Sheetal occupied herself with Ayush.

I stepped out for some fresh air. I had been restless after speaking to Ayush's teachers at day care that morning. But I had made a decision. I wanted to speak to Sheetal. A lot of confused thoughts were running through my head about what I planned to say to her. Would it be right to expect something like this from an unknown person? I couldn't think of any other option. But was I doing the right thing?

I smoked nearly seven cigarettes in two hours, as I walked around the building society. Thoughts of dinner or office work were far removed from my mind. Nothing was as important as my Ayush. My thoughts were disturbed by a phone call. When I looked at the mobile screen, it was flashing Sheetal's name.

'Yes, Sheetal?'

'Sir, Ayush is asleep.'

'Oh ... wait. I will be there in a few minutes.'

I unlocked the door with my keys. Sheetal was sitting on the sofa, waiting for me to arrive. She stood up as soon as she saw me.

'Sit down. I will drop you.'

'Sir, it's already ten-fifteen. You have not had your dinner.'

I waved off her concern. 'I will have my dinner a little later. Please sit for few minutes. I have to discuss something with you. About Ayush.'

I sat on the sofa opposite Sheetal. I looked into her eyes. Summoning all my courage, I said, 'Sheetal, I need your help.'

'Yes, sir?'

'Today I met Ayush's teachers at the school. They are concerned that he does not speak and communicate as a child of his age should.'

'But, I guess ...' She wanted to say something, which might have been an explanation for Ayush's slow progress.

I cut her short. 'You are educated ... why don't you try to train him with the alphabet and rhymes? Talk to him, be a little more vocal.'

I had meant to ask another favour but had ended up suggesting something else. On reconsideration, my initial plan had felt too weird. How could I even have thought of it?

'Sure, sir. I can definitely try.'

'I will increase your pay from eight thousand to ten.'

'Not needed, sir.' She smiled fondly. 'Spending time with Ayush is like living with my inner self.'

Her words were reassuring. I was still struggling to articulate my thoughts, but could not find the words. Finally, I said, 'Let me drop you home.'

I changed into a T-shirt, and Sheetal and I went down to the parking area. As I started my scooty, I noticed the security guard staring at us. I was in no mood to read his mind, but his unpleasant looks were proof enough of the dirty thoughts that kept his mind engaged.

I dropped Sheetal outside her house. I was still not at ease. Before Sheetal could leave, I made another attempt to get rid of the burden I had been carrying, for so long. ‘Sheetal, I have an unusual request to make.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We all know how important a mother is in a child’s life ...’

She nodded, confused by the sombre expression on my face. Her blank eyes gave away the fact that she had no clue what I was going to come up with.

‘A mother is someone who showers her love and care on us unconditionally. It hardly matters whether the love comes from a female or a ...’ I couldn’t meet her eyes, but I persisted. ‘I have an unusual request. I want Ayush to feel like he is a normal kid. When all his friends and classmates talk about their moms, he might wonder ... whom he could call his mom. I don’t want him to feel different from others for not having a mother. I want Ayush to address you as Mamma ... and not Auntie.’

Sheetal nodded vigorously, tears accompanying her smile.

I failed to understand what made me feel so weak in my knees. Maybe it was relief, but it became hard for me to continue speaking. There was a lump in my throat. I did not want to look like a weak father in front of her.

She said, tears flowing down her face, ‘Ayush will always have his mother with him.’

Sheetal Speaks

I had thought he was a man devoid of emotions. When he found out that I was a transgender woman, he banished me from his house ... from work. I was utterly dejected, but he called me back. My respect for him had increased manifold when he told me that he had felt cheated by my hiding the truth from him. He had not rejected me because I was not born a female.

Initially, when he told me that he was going to put cameras in the house, I wanted to stop him because it seemed like an unnecessary expenditure. But then I understood that his greatest concern was Ayush.

Things resumed as before. I was with my Ayush again. In a short while, I had grown very attached to that little bundle of joy. All was well at work. Except for Mohan.

I had known Mohan long before I went to work at that house. He lived somewhere close to my house. He had always wished me ill.

It gave me an unpleasant feeling, the way he used to stare at me. He had seen me a couple of times with Subhajit. I knew he wanted to strike up a conversation, but I wasn't willing to invite more trouble into my life. I always avoided him. In the last few months, I could see fury in his eyes, and gauge his unwillingness to work with me under the same roof. He got really upset when Ayush made a mess while playing with me. He couldn't

ask me to clean up as Abhay sir was around, but kept mumbling under his breath the entire time. He hated making extra food for me, and whenever he could, he would keep aside the previous day's curries or dal for me.

I had been caring for Ayush for over seven months, when I realised that Abhay sir, too, needed someone. He always came home from office tired and dull-faced, to a million sad memories. It seemed that he was physically present, but dead inside.

In the house, there were many pictures of him in various attires. They reflected how alive he used to be as a person and how happily he had lived every moment. I would try my best to make small gestures to care for him, like offering to make him some coffee, but he would maintain a certain distance between us. His days and nights were spent working on the laptop or sitting on the balcony. I wanted to ask him to stop smoking cigarettes, but felt I did not have the authority to do so.

I wished I could be a friend to him, shout at him, or suggest that he pull himself together, but he was my employer and I was his employee.

One day, Abhay came home from work, sadder and more stressed than usual. He went for an evening walk, which was quite unusual. He returned late, with red eyes and clothes reeking of cigarette fumes. I understood that he was terribly upset and there was something on his mind.

I was in tears when he asked me, that same night, to allow Ayush to call me mother. It was such a moving moment, such a precious feeling. Yes, a transgender woman could also be a mother. I had never thought I would be lucky enough to have such an experience in my life. My ears had yearned to hear this for so long. Yes, I had always wanted to be called 'mother'.

When I was in Class 4, one day, a teacher had asked a question, 'What do you want to be in life?' The other kids said, I wish to become a doctor ... pilot ... engineer ... politician ... businessman ... the list was unending. I clearly remember my answer. I said I wished to become a mother.

Everyone had laughed. My teacher had tried to make me understand, 'A boy cannot become a mother.'

I had only said that it was what I wished to be. I had let it out, completely ignoring what my brain and body were saying to me.

When I took Ayush into my arms, I felt the whole world was in my embrace. He could see beyond my body, into my soul. Whenever he hugged

me, I felt the warmth and acceptance. I loved him, and was loved in return.

I was happy. Even if it was just for the sake of lessening Ayush's loneliness, I could call him my son.

One evening, back home from the office, I sat down with a newspaper and was skimming through it. The paper was flooded with all kinds of news items.

Tarun Tej, top investigative journalist, writer and founder of a respected news magazine, has been accused of rape.

On the last page, the newspaper had printed an apology: *An error was made in last week's edition.*

It turned out that they had killed the wrong man with their headline: *Obama found dead with youngest wife.* Actually, it was Osama who had been found dead in these circumstances.

Mohan was busy cooking in the kitchen and Sheetal was with Ayush, trying to teach him to say a few words. I noticed that she was trying her best to converse with him these days. I had started spending more time with Ayush too. A little more ... I didn't know whether that was enough. Everything seemed to be moving fast. My life now shuttled between home, day care, office and Sheetal.

Walking is a major developmental milestone for babies. Ayush could now cover considerable distances without the help of a baby walker. We could no longer leave him alone even for a few seconds. He would walk to places and corners that were potentially hazardous.

While I was in the living room, reading my paper, Sheetal came out of the bedroom thrice and peered at the kitchen door. I realised she was checking if Mohan was still around. Maybe she wanted to talk to him. I pretended that I had not noticed.

Mohan finished his work for the day and left after recounting the feats that he had performed in the kitchen.

‘Sir,’ Sheetal said, immediately after he had left the house.

‘Yes, Sheetal?’

‘I have to discuss a few things with you. ... Sir, I have a complaint about Mohan.’

‘Complaint? What did he do?’

‘He stares at me all the time ... he even sends messages ...’ She hesitated a bit. ‘And of late, he has started saying things as well.’

‘Does this mean ... is he following you?’

She nodded.

‘Where did he get your number?’

‘He’s been working in the society for a long time, and he’s friends with the guards and others here. His network is strong.’

I had never suspected that Mohan had such a side to his character. He was not very bright, I had thought, and full of silly talk, but I had never expected this from him.

‘He is saying things to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What does he say?’

‘He said ...’ She was hesitant.

‘What is it ... something that you cannot share?’

‘He said ... he loves me.’

I tried my best to not smile, but a smile broke out, and Sheetal, too, smiled. Both of us burst into laughter. This was the first time we had laughed together. After a very long time, I felt that I had met a friend.

‘You could have told me before.’

‘I know ... sir, I have a request to make.’

‘How can I help?’

‘Can you ask him to come to work a little earlier? I want to avoid any encounters with him.’

I had thought to punish him, but a better idea came to me. I asked Sheetal, ‘Can you cook dinner for us? If you can, he need come only in the mornings.’

‘Yes, I can cook for two.’

Ayush came into the living room. ‘Hey, baby, what are you up to?’ I said.

He moved towards Sheetal unsteadily, clutching his building blocks, wishing her to continue the game they had been involved in. He was very comfortable with Sheetal and loved to be around her. When she was around, I actually saw him smile and do things, instead of sitting blankly in front of the TV.

I called him, ‘Ayush ...’

He came to me and climbed up on my lap. I kissed his cheeks.

‘D-d-d-d-d ...’

Sheetal looked at him encouragingly.

‘Hey ... do you have something to say?’ I held him by the shoulders and looked at him.

‘D-d-d-d-d ...’ he babbled again.

Sheetal was still looking at him encouragingly. I looked at her with a question in my eyes. She knew something that I didn’t.

‘Sir, he is trying to say “daddy”.’

I looked at the child in my arms.

‘Dadaaay ...’ he finally gurgled.

I hugged him close, speechless. A tear dropped from my eyes. I mumbled, ‘Miss you, Kanika.’

Mohan had been working for me for more than two-and-a-half years, and with his network of contacts, he had helped me several times. From the cheapest vendor to the most reliable mechanic, he proved to be exceptionally resourceful in finding the best services available in the neighbourhood.

Initially, when Sheetal had come to me with her complaint, I thought I would sack Mohan immediately. But he had been loyal to us in his own way, and secondly, he had been hired by Kanika. I knew it was silly, but I refused to make any changes in the system that Kanika had so carefully put together at home. That way, I could still feel her presence in every corner of the house. I decided to handle the case in a different way.

The morning after Sheetal's complaint, Mohan was working in the kitchen while I was engaged with Ayush. He always gave me a hand in getting things ready for Ayush's day care, but today I didn't ask him for any help. He finished his work and called out in a tone of satisfaction, 'Sir, I am done here in the kitchen. Do you need any help for Ayush?'

'Thank you, Mohan, but I think I can manage. I did want to talk to you about something, though. Come, have a seat.'

Mohan sat on the sofa. Ayush was on my lap, engrossed in a Chhota Bheem jigsaw puzzle. 'Mohan, I am thinking that I will cook my own food from now on.'

I knew exactly what he was going to say. Hadn't I watched this drama countless times? 'No!' he cried. 'If Didi had been ...'

‘Stop saying that!’ I had to raise my voice at him to come back to the topic at hand. ‘I have a budget issue, Mohan. I cannot afford to pay for two helping hands.’

‘Oh ... is it about Sheetal?’

‘No, Mohan, it’s about money.’

Mohan went silent. I could see he would not let it go easily, and waited for the next outburst. When he stayed quiet a little while longer, I decided to make my real point.

‘Do you know what stalking is?’

He shook his head.

‘Stalking is harassment. Stalkers try to make repeated, inappropriate and unwanted contact with another person. Stalkers often follow their victims or spy on them, approach them at home or at the workplace. They want an intimate relationship with the victim, whom they believe to be their “true love”.’

I had researched the topic on the internet. But I was coming from a perspective that he could not understand at all. He was listening to me with a gaping mouth. I couldn’t really tell whether he had grasped the severity of the situation.

‘Mohan, do you understand what I am trying to tell you?’

‘Yes, sir. I think ... you are saying that I am the ... sta ... sta ... stalker.’

I suddenly felt proud of myself. This was like having the power to turn a useless stone into a gem.

‘So, do I have your word that from now onwards you will stop stalking?’

He nodded absently. He considered his next words. After much deliberation, he said, ‘But why, sir? What is the problem in stalking?’

I realised I was banging my head on a rock. Before my ears bled from listening to his outrageous replies, I made my last attempt.

‘Mohan, I am not sure how much you understood, but know this clearly. Stalking is a criminal offense!’

His mouth finally closed. I watched him as he tried to swallow this information, or maybe his saliva, to wet his dry throat. His eyes widened. I noticed that he had begun to tremble. ‘But, sir ... I was only following her because you asked me to.’

‘Don’t you dare drag me into this! I told you to keep an eye on her eight months ago.’

‘But you didn’t tell me when I had to stop.’

With an effort, I resolved not to be harsh with him. He would go out and tell tales to anyone who would listen in the society. The worst part about rumours is, the more you try to keep them from circulating, the faster they spread, with the speed of fire.

‘Anyway ... I am not accusing you. I am just trying to protect you. You never know ... Sheetal could complain to the police. I don’t want it to go that far.’

‘Sir, I told you ... she has a boyfriend ...’

I gave him a look which told him he had made another blunder. He shut his mouth and seemed to be racking his brain for a fresh idea.

‘How do you know about this boyfriend?’ I asked.

‘I have seen them in our area. She goes out with him all the time. I am very sure he stays with her only.’

‘If she already has a boyfriend, and you know that ... you have seen it with your own eyes ... then why are you following her?’

‘Sir, I know why Sheetal is cooking up this story about me.’ Mohan’s eyes danced as a new brainwave presented itself.

‘Why?’

‘Because I am poor.’

I hate people who pose as victims by blaming their bad behaviour on their financial situation, family background or education.

‘I doubt that. Don’t get me wrong—I am on your side. But I think she is not interested in you.’

‘But I love her!’

‘Why do you love her?’ I looked him in the eye.

‘Because I like her,’ he said, with a silly smile.

‘Why do you like her?’

‘Because I love her.’

It was my turn to look at him, open-mouthed. I was seething inside. I wanted to bang my head on the wall, rather than talk to this desperate lover boy.

Mohan's one-sided love for Sheetal led to some major changes in my household. His working hours were now restricted to the mornings, and Sheetal took charge of our dinner.

Ayush had become more confident on his feet. He began expanding his territory to every nook and cranny of the house. He tried to reach and touch everything his eyes fell on.

I enjoyed watching my son's struggles to reach different places and objects on his tiny, wobbly feet. Sometimes, when he got tired, he would simply lean on the wall and slowly slide down to the ground. After a brief rest, he would again embark on his journey of exploration. The cartoon channels on TV kept Ayush engaged for a while in the evenings, giving Sheetal some time to complete her other tasks. Otherwise it would have been tough for her to keep an eye on him. The TV was the only thing that could hold him in one place for a few minutes. I guess he inherited the habit from me. I used to spend hours watching movies on the TV when I was young.

Detective Mohan was now no longer in his snooping mode. However, I knew that Sheetal and he often encountered each other outside my house. It was inevitable, as they lived in the same neighbourhood.

Sheetal had made a few small changes around the house. It had been a long time since I had seen that feminine touch in my surroundings. Now, when I looked around my home, I could visualise the effect of her personality. Even when she wasn't there, I could picture her working in the kitchen or playing with Ayush. Sheetal was now a part of the family. She

even accompanied me when I went to get Ayush vaccinated. The doctor assumed she was Ayush's real mother.

She was a real blessing. The time when I used to keep tabs on her activities by checking my CCTV app was long past. I now had complete trust in her.

Once, not long after his vaccination, Ayush got really sick. One of the first signs of illness in babies is a change in behaviour. He became cranky and cried endlessly. His nose was so blocked that he began having trouble breathing. In a few hours, the trouble aggravated, and he vomited a couple of times. When I tried feeding him to keep up his strength, the diarrhoea started. His eyes roved around the house, searching for someone, but it was not me. He was constantly looking for Sheetal, as if her mere presence could heal him.

He kept repeating, 'Mamma ... mamma ...'

I had taken leave from work. But I called Sheetal, requesting her to come early to work. It was tough for me to take care of him in this state. I wondered how I would manage till the evening without Sheetal.

The doorbell rang. On answering it, I was surprised to see Sheetal. I had called her only ten minutes back. Ayush was lying on the sofa, weak and lethargic. Sheetal called out, 'Ayush ... my baby ...'

He began squirming on the sofa, willing his exhausted little body to run to her. When he found himself incapable of doing this, he held his hands out to her, calling out, 'Mamma ...'

Sheetal went to him and took him in her arms. He hugged her back. A twinge of jealousy ran through my body, but subsided when I told myself that this was no stranger, just a loving mother who had come to the aid of her sick son.

'Sir, looks like Ayush is running a very high fever. We need to bring his temperature down.'

'What do we d—' Before I could finish my query, Sheetal had laid Ayush on the sofa and rushed into the kitchen. He began to sob again. Sheetal came back into the room with a big bowl of cold water and some towels. She put the wet towels on Ayush's forehead, changing them frequently. In seconds, Ayush seemed calmer. Sheetal wiped his body and changed him into clean cotton clothes. She looked prepared to sit there for hours, if needed.

That night was a tough one for Ayush. I spent a few hours with him, and then went out to the balcony. Lighting a Marlboro, I inhaled it deeply. With every puff of nicotine, thoughts rushed through my mind. I began thinking of Sheetal's selfless, unrestrained love for Ayush. She never had second thoughts where he was concerned. That day, she had come over in a matter-of-fact way as soon as I had called, not once mentioning the inconvenience it must have caused her, as most other employees might have done. This made me happy and sad at the same time. I had never come across a person who could love someone else's baby with such intense devotion.

But I could not take advantage of her love for Ayush. It was a paid job, after all. I went into the living room to ask her, 'Sheetal, would you like to go? It's already very late.'

She didn't say anything. I looked at the wall clock. It was a quarter to twelve.

Then I looked at Sheetal and Ayush together on the sofa. Ayush was drowsy but he had stopped crying. He was holding Sheetal's hand. Before she could answer, Ayush grabbed her fingers tighter. He was now old enough to understand what I had asked her.

Sheetal smiled at Ayush and then looked at me.

'If you are comfortable, you can stay here all night. I will drop you in the morning ...' I was relieved but didn't show it.

'Thank you, sir, I will stay here tonight.'

I smiled and went back to the balcony. Ayush went to sleep at around one o'clock. There was a silence and relief in the air. Sheetal took him to his room and then came to me.

'Sir, would you like to have coffee?'

I knew she needed it more than me. She hadn't even had dinner. I nodded. Her filter coffee was ready in ten minutes and she served it in my favourite cup.

'Sheetal, please sit,' I said. We sat quietly on the balcony, drinking coffee. Sheetal looked exhausted. I also noticed that she refrained from making any eye contact with me. I could see that we were yet to bridge the gap that existed between an employer and an employee. The cool, continuous breeze on the spacious balcony was refreshing. This was the best spot in the entire house.

'Sheetal, I have a question to ask.'

She looked at me in anticipation.

‘How do you manage so many things? I mean ... you are alone, right? Do you have any relatives or friends in the city?’

‘I have a friend.’

‘Do you? And does she help you to take care of stuff? There are so many things to manage every day ...’

‘Actually, his name is Subhajit ...’

‘Oh ... a man,’ I paused. ‘Or ...?’

There is no gender in friendship but Sheetal was not a regular person that you met every day. So, the question became important. I had to ask.

‘He is not a transgender person. He is the only support I have in this entire world.’ She turned and looked me in the eye, something she rarely did.

I learned many things from her brief answer. Above all, her obvious pain about not having a supportive family. It was apparent that Subhajit was more than just a friend to her. I guessed he was the person Mohan had been talking about.

‘You can count me as your friend too.’

She smiled and then laughed.

‘We cannot be friends?’ I made a sad face.

‘No, sir, you are far too respectable to be my friend.’

‘Oh! Come on, Sheetal. By the way, what does your best friend do?’

‘He works as a tester in an IT company.’

‘Invite him here sometime. I would like to meet him.’

‘Sure, sir.’

Meanwhile, we had finished our coffee. I checked my watch. It was very late, almost two in the morning. I got up to leave the balcony, but Sheetal continued to sit there, gazing into the dark night. I knew she had something on her mind. Her silence was too loud.

‘Sir, could I ask you something personal?’

I turned to look at her intently.

‘Sir ...’ She paused, unsure.

I nodded encouragingly.

‘Life is long ... and ...’ I understood what she was going to say.

‘... why don’t you get married again? I mean ... your entire life is ahead of you. No one else can take the place of a wife.’

I was silent. My tortured face must have troubled her because she sounded uncomfortable when she said, ‘Hope it was all right to ask you this, as a friend?’

I smiled to put her at ease.

‘The thing is, Sheetal, I suffer from the fear of losing loved ones now. I don’t want to get too close to a person again.’

‘Never be afraid to love, sir. It makes us better people.’

I had never thought she would be the one to give me a lesson on love.

Sheetal slept with Ayush in his room and I went to the other bedroom. I was tired, but memories of the past lay heavily in the air in that room. I had trouble falling asleep.

I dozed off finally, in the wee hours. As I did not wake up at the usual time, my sleep was interrupted by the doorbell. It rang once, and after a pause, twice more. Lying in my bed, I realised that I would have to get up and open the door soon or the bell would continue to ring. I forced myself to get up. I was walking towards the door, when I saw that Sheetal was already up and had opened it. Standing outside, Mohan looked at her and then saw me standing not far away. Sheetal and I were both barely awake. He gawked at us with his mouth open. He was so shocked that he did not say ‘good morning’ as usual.

As he walked in, he mumbled, ‘I wish Didi had been alive!’

It was supposed to be just another morning. I woke up at around seven, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and checked on Ayush. He was bundled up cosily on his bed, sleeping with one fist tucked below his chin. I lightly ran my fingers through his hair. He did not stir. I kissed his forehead and went to the door to pick up my newspaper. As I straightened up, paper in hand, my eyes met my next-door neighbour's.

‘Hello Abhay-ji, good morning.’

‘Good morning ...’ I gave her a half-smile.

‘How are you doing ... and Ayush?’

‘Everything is fine.’

I folded my hands in a greeting and closed the door immediately. I couldn't pinpoint what had scared me about that exchange. I don't care much for people and their opinions, but her extra-sugary smile and sudden show of polite interest in my life had not hidden the curiosity in her eyes. They were talking about me. I knew it.

I sat down with the newspaper. It carried everything apart from news.

A lady had run away with her father-in-law. A UP minister had lost eight of his buffaloes and ordered the state security agency to find them. In other news, Shah Rukh and Salman had hugged each other at an iftaar party.

Someone knocked on the door. I went to the kitchen to get the milk vessel, assuming that it would be the milkman knocking at that hour.

I opened the door to a pleasant surprise. ‘Hi, Papa, which train brought you here at this early hour?’ I touched his feet and he hugged me

close. My father was not one for surprise visits. He was a meticulous planner who worked out each of his movements in detail and made sure everyone knew about them.

My father had always been a family man. When I was a child, he used to make time to play with me, and we often went on trips together as a family. He was not very demonstrative, though. For him, parenting was largely about making sure rules were followed and maintaining discipline. But one thing made him special: he was always there when I needed him the most. Yes, he was a silent, loving father.

‘Is everything okay, Papa? You didn’t inform me you were coming.’

‘Why? Is it necessary that I announce my wish to meet my son?’ He was relaxed, smiling.

I smiled back at him. He had clearly missed us. It seemed as if he had this thirst which was satiated as soon as he saw me. Lately, he had been delighted to hear about Ayush’s progress and often expressed his desire to hear him talk. He wanted to watch him grow, before it got too late.

When Ayush came out of his room, I said, ‘Do pranam, Ayush.’ I guided him through the custom of touching his grandfather’s feet. My father beamed with pride. It is a gesture that always makes an old person happy, especially when it comes from a young child.

‘Say dada ... da ... da ...’ My father encouraged my son to show off his new talent.

Papa had gathered Ayush into his lap. Ayush had hesitated initially, as Papa was still new to him. But after a few cajoling smiles on his grandfather’s wrinkly face, and encouragement from me, he climbed on. Papa was trying his best to introduce himself to his grandson and to get him to say ‘dada’.

Sheetal came in the evening at the usual time. Ayush was in his room, playing with his grandfather. I requested Sheetal to make her special filter coffee for Papa. I sat in a corner, enjoying my son’s antics and the way my father tried to deal with them. Seeing him on Papa’s lap, I was transported back in memory to my own childhood. I had heard that I was a lot like Ayush, as a kid. I used to keep my parents completely occupied with my naughtiness, adventures and tantrums. Now I could understand how much parents do to make their child’s life comfortable.

My train of thought was broken by a commotion in the kitchen. Sheetal must have gone overboard trying to make the best coffee in the

world, I guessed, along with special musical effects in honour of my father.

‘Who is there in the kitchen?’ Papa asked. He had been so caught up with Ayush that he had not heard her come in.

‘Sheetal, our caregiver ...’ I said.

Sheetal came in with two cups of coffee. The presence of a young and attractive woman in the house was immediately registered. My father gave me a veiled look. Sheetal bowed her head in a namaste. He nodded and glared. I understood what was going on in his head.

Sheetal served the coffee and went back to the kitchen to finish cooking dinner. I sat quietly in my corner. My father would definitely need an explanation, but I would do that later.

‘Who is she? You said caretaker,’ Papa said, and took a sip of the hot coffee.

Before he could swallow it, Ayush shouted, ‘She is Mamma!’

A hundred volcanoes, a thousand atomic bombs and a million missiles exploded with Ayush’s words.

Papa lost interest in his finely filtered coffee and glared at me with eyes like red-hot iron. He seemed to be frozen, coffee mug in hand. I tried to stroll past the danger and asked politely, ‘How is the coffee?’

‘So, Mohan was right?’

That explained it all. The reason for his surprise visit. The great spy, Mohan Bhargava, had vomited his version of the story to my father.

I requested Papa to hold his horses until Sheetal had left. We could discuss the matter in detail then. I asked Sheetal to leave early as my father was there to help with Ayush. It would give my son more time with his grandfather, I explained. However, Ayush was not ready to let her go so early. Sheetal made some excuses to the baby, who agreed reluctantly in the end. I didn’t drop her home that evening.

‘I will call Subhjit, he would be happy to pick me up,’ Sheetal said, as I saw her to the door.

After Sheetal left, there was silence in the house. The silence before the storm, which had been building up inside my father for the last two hours. It was going to break loose at any moment. I sat on the sofa in the living room and looked at the pictures on the wall, even at the small Krishna statue which I had placed on the glass shelf in the corner, though I don’t believe in God. I was not praying but my heart was pleading to be saved.

As soon as Ayush fell asleep at around ten-thirty, my father came out of the bedroom.

‘We need to talk,’ he thundered.

‘What did Mohan say?’ I asked him, though I knew he would only be interested in getting answers out of me.

‘I cannot believe that my son is chasing a maid!’

‘I’m not chasing anyone, Papa. She is a very good caregiver ... especially good with Ayush.’

‘Don’t tell me how good she is.’

‘You don’t know her. Why are you forming an opinion about her?’

‘Look at you! I have never seen you fighting for anything like this before.’

‘I am not fighting, Papa. I am simply stating a fact.’

‘You were always good in drama.’

I smiled and, after a pause, Papa couldn’t help smiling either. Back when my father had forbidden me to do theatre, he had used the same line.

There was silence for a few minutes while we looked at the darkness beyond the balcony. Then, he resumed his tirade. ‘I cannot compromise on this. Tomorrow, I will fire Sheetal.’

‘Papa, you are reading too much into nothing. That too, because of that stupid Mohan’s words.’

‘Too much! Why was Ayush calling her Mamma?’

‘If you love him the same way Sheetal does, he might start calling you Mamma too. He is just a kid who doesn’t understand the things that bother you.’

‘But I understand everything. Tomorrow I will throw that girl out of this house.’

‘If you fire her, that poor girl will be compelled to dance on the streets.’

He frowned. ‘She can find another job. This is not the only house that employs caregivers!’

‘Would you give a job to a hijra? A transgender person?’

‘What do you mean?’ My father’s angry eyes narrowed.

‘Sheetal is a transgender woman, Papa.’

My statement fired another set of missiles. My father was completely silent for a moment. In a few seconds, his avatar changed, and

he looked like an angry bird. ‘How can you allow her to even touch my grandson?’

‘She is totally reliable, Papa.’

‘How do you know that?’

I opened the CCTV app on my smartphone through which I could track Sheetal’s activities with Ayush. I installed the app on his phone as well, explaining the technology in detail. As we watched some footage together, he seemed to calm down. I was relieved. I had never thought technology would come to my aid in a matter like this. However, my father was still not fully convinced. He seemed to see something which, as a son, I couldn’t see.

The next day, Papa visited Ashok Uncle. I am sure the wise old man must have discussed the curious case of Shikhandi with my father. He looked a shade happier after meeting him. Afterwards, he took Ayush out shopping with him. A bunch of Avengers, Doraemon and Angry Bird toys were purchased. My father bought everything that Ayush smiled at or pointed to in the store.

I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I said Papa spent most of his three-day visit with Ayush. I gave Sheetal a few days off. It was for the best, as her presence would only have added fuel to the small flames that were still burning my father.

Papa’s presence had given me some much-needed oxygen. I realised after his arrival that I had been struggling quite a bit with the mental burden of single parenting. Sometimes, the presence of a member of the family who feels equally responsible for your child brings relief.

The day Papa was set to leave, I wondered why he had not initiated the topic of my getting remarried.

I was scrolling down my mobile screen to book an OLA for him, when he said, ‘I wish to talk to you.’

‘Only if it’s not related to marriage,’ I said, without taking my eyes off the screen.

He went silent. I had killed the discussion before it had begun, I thought. But he said, ‘Stop smoking.’

My slightly blackened lips and the cigarette butts in the corners of the balcony had revealed my secret. I knew I was probably in for a long argument.

‘Papa, after Mom, how are you managing everything alone?’ I changed the topic.

‘Some things ... you cannot help. You just need to face them.’

‘You are a strong man,’ I said, looking at him with pride.

‘When you stop crying in front of others, people will give you such adjectives too.’ He looked back at me. I felt bad for him but I failed to understand him. Sometimes I felt we were both victims—victims of our own souls and slaves of our own emotions. I did not prod any further. I did not want him to break down. Actually, I wanted to hug him and weep. I wondered, why do we have to grow up? It is good to remain a child.

‘Papa, you are getting late for the train.’

‘Why don’t you join the theatre again?’ my father asked.

I smiled. I could have responded with sarcasm, but I could see his love. I said softly, ‘You were never fine with the theatre ... why are you suddenly asking me to go back to it?’

‘Because when you did that ... you were happy.’

Father Speaks

The biggest worry for a father is to see his son living a life without dreams for the future or desires for himself. Abhay had never been like that before. You would always see him smiling, laughing out loud, and dreaming bigger every day. Who killed his dreams? What had destroyed him internally?

For a long time, the thought that I could be responsible for his current state never crossed my mind. I had always thought the loss of his wife, his life partner, had turned him into a lifeless piece of stone. Eventually, it dawned on me that, when he stopped doing theatre, something had died inside him. I, too, was responsible for that.

He had never been a hormonal, screaming teen, shutting himself up in a room and pumping up the music. His idea of partying had never included alcohol with friends. Nor had I needed to worry about him going on secret dates with girls in his class. For him, the best entertainment in the world was watching movies.

He was twelve years old when he started mimicking Shah Rukh Khan. He would tune into the movie *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, put the TV on mute, and deliver all the dialogues himself. My wife and I loved our son, pampered him, and proudly asked him to exhibit his talent whenever we had guests at home. He would comply without any hesitation. He soon

became the leading attraction at our parties with family and friends, and with every enactment, his confidence grew. Over time, he got obsessed with watching TV, remaining glued to the screen at all hours. He even cried during emotional scenes.

When he was in Class 9, he participated in a school play and won the first prize for his performance. His mother was filled with pride, as if he had won an Olympic gold medal.

I began to fear that he was side-lining his studies and was getting more and more invested in an impossible, impractical dream.

I clearly remember that day when he was in Class 12. I know I was too harsh when he had come to me with a proud smile and said, 'Papa, I got the first prize in acting.'

I had taken his trophy, looked it over and said, 'Your Board exams will be starting soon, right, Abhay?'

Yes, I did that! After all, I was a middle-class father whose duty was to prepare his child for the realities of life. He stopped sharing his aspirations with me. I had, blindly and unreasonably, created a barrier between us.

He moved to Delhi to pursue his higher studies. When he started attending classes at Sapna Theatre, he never revealed it to me. He even got a chance to appear in a movie with Karina Khan. I only let him know that I had found it shameful to watch that stupid scene on screen. Karina Khan kissed him on his cheek and that was it; his role had lasted one minute.

But let me confess now. I have shown that scene to my entire friend circle and tried to make them jealous. I never told my son I appreciated his little success. I didn't think he ever needed it because he always appeared to be a confident, strong man. He took his own decisions. This made me feel proud and sad at the same time.

When he told us about Kanika, and that they were in love, the first question I asked was, how much do you earn? I did not wish to insult him. I just wanted to make him realise that theatre was not a practical profession. He would not be able to support himself, let alone a family.

He was confident about his feelings for Kanika. And I deeply respected that. Losing my wife was a major blow in my life. And Abhay lost his mother, along with her unconditional support. He stopped doing theatre and joined an IT company.

Deep inside, this sudden decision troubled me, but I thought it was for the best. His marrying Kanika soon after assured me that they would now settle into a happy life. I was busy trying to pick up the pieces of my own life. After two years of marriage, Kanika was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumour. And we got to know that she was pregnant too. A year after the baby was born, we lost Kanika. The deaths of the people who mattered the most to us almost destroyed our family. My son Abhay was no longer the same person.

I worry about my son. My greatest wish is that he regains his confidence and becomes strong so he can cope with the rapid changes that life throws at us as we grow older. I want to see my grandchild and my son building up each other's lives. I want to see my family grow in wisdom and maturity, and to be resilient in all circumstances.

Mohan was my secret spy to whom I spoke often, to get news of Ayush and Abhay. He told me that Abhay was smoking too many cigarettes. I had thought I would discuss the matter when I visited them around Diwali. But then, suddenly, Mohan raised an alarm about the secret relationship brewing between Abhay and Sheetal.

When I saw her, I was amazed to see such a well-dressed and good-looking woman working as a babysitter. Sheetal's appearance confirmed my doubts about their rumoured relationship. I was impolite and aggressive while confronting my son about her. That was when he told me that she identified as transgender and that Ayush was always under CCTV surveillance. This information gave me some relief.

Once reassured that things were fine, I was ready to return home. But as a father, I wanted my Abhay back badly. The old confident and cheerful Abhay. I hugged him, and when he clung to me longer than usual, it disclosed many more things. How badly he needed his father's support. I had to push back my tears when I said to him, 'You are my hero.'

My son replied in a dull voice, 'There is no hero without a heroine.'

Ayush's third birthday had come and gone. There had been no celebration and no gathering. For me, his birthday always brought with it memories of Kanika. He was too young to understand or ask for anything related to his birthday. Sheetal brought some candles and a cake. Initially, I had toyed with the idea of a small party. Then I wondered whom I would invite. I had hardly any friends. Loneliness is the feeling of being unwanted.

Sheetal and Ayush were together all the time. He slept only when she put him to bed. On occasion, when Sheetal took a day off for personal reasons, it would be extremely difficult to manage him. I wondered what would happen if she were to leave us. Sometimes, I felt bitter when all my son's conversations were about Sheetal. He had no memories of Kanika.

One day, I was working from home. Sheetal was in the kitchen and Ayush was hanging on to her, wrapping himself around her legs and crying unnecessarily.

I asked him to come to me, took him in my arms and made him sit on my lap. He stopped crying immediately. He was a naughty, attention-seeking boy.

'Why were you crying?'

'Mamma was not playing with me ...' He turned to me with watery eyes.

'We can play, you and me ...' I went to the sofa and picked up his favourite toy. As I asked him questions about its daily routine, his eyes fell on Kanika's picture on the wall. He pointed with his tiny finger at the image of Kanika holding him as a baby.

‘Who?’ Ayush’s eyes were filled with curiosity.

‘He is our little Ayush.’

He broke into a tiny, gleaming smile. He continued pointing at the picture. He was pointing at Kanika. ‘Who?’

A million feelings, a thousand thoughts and hundreds of memories, came rushing forward. They were all attached to my one and only Kanika. I was about to answer, but had to gulp down the lump in my throat first. When I could speak, I said proudly, ‘She is Mamma.’

He looked confused. After giving my words some thought, he raised his tiny fingers, ‘Two Mamma?’

For the first time I thought—how lucky he was!

‘Wait, Sheetal, I will drop you.’ I picked up my keys. Sheetal had just finished her work and Ayush was finally asleep.

‘No, sir, I will manage. My friend is here to pick me up.’

‘Okay ...’ I nodded.

‘Sir, remember Subhajit ... my friend? He wants to meet you. When would be a good time?’

‘He wants to meet me for ...?’

‘He is looking for a job in an IT company.’

‘Oh ... can he come now?’

She smiled and made a call, giving him the flat number and the floor. I noticed that her voice modulation had changed as soon as she had begun speaking to him. She spoke with a kind of authority.

‘Hello, sir, I am Subhajit,’ he said when I met him at the door. ‘I am Sheetal’s friend.’

Inviting him inside, I offered him a seat. He was soft-spoken and his demeanour was courteous. He had left his footwear at the door before entering the house. Simply dressed in a cream shirt and brown trousers, he looked like a pleasant and well-educated young man. I could sense an awkwardness in him, though, as he seemed reluctant to meet my eyes.

‘It’s quite late, but we could have tea or coffee ...’ I offered.

Before he could respond, Sheetal was standing there with a glass of water. They must be really good friends, I thought.

‘Subhajit, you can be very open with Sir about everything,’ Sheetal advised before going back inside the kitchen. I wondered if there was a hidden meaning behind the word ‘everything’.

‘How long have you known Sheetal?’ I initiated the conversation.

‘Since a very long time, and ...’

I got the feeling that he was not comfortable talking about Sheetal.

‘Sheetal told me that you are looking for a job.’

‘Yes, sir,’ he answered, his head still bowed. I sensed that he felt ashamed of being in a position where he had to approach someone else for a job.

‘Do you have any experience in IT?’

‘Yes, sir. I was working with ATNA software as a test consultant.’

‘Why did you quit that?’

‘I was there on contract, and my contract got over.’

‘How well acquainted are you with Excel sheets and other tools?’

‘I am confident in using reporting and the Microsoft tools.’

He had difficulty making eye contact. I could sense his lack of confidence and discomfiture with communicating in English. But at the same time, I liked his simplicity. He was not making grand claims or talking nonsense.

‘I will try to find a job for you. I have a couple of friends in Satyam Mahindra, and they may take you.’

To make him more comfortable, I thought I would ask Sheetal to bring tea or coffee. However, before I could say anything, Sheetal appeared with coffee.

‘Sheetal, you could have asked what Subhajit would have liked.’

‘I know he likes coffee,’ she said matter-of-factly.

Her openness made me ponder the nature of their relationship.

‘How open are you to relocating to some other city?’ I asked Subhajit, once he had taken a sip.

‘I am not comfortable with settling long-term in other cities, but short-term assignments would be okay,’ he said, looking at Sheetal.

‘Is there any specific reason why you do not wish to leave the city?’ I asked lightly, to convey that it was not so much of a pressing matter.

‘Yes, sir ... but it’s kind of personal.’

I looked at him and found that I had lost eye contact with him again. He concentrated on his coffee mug and I picked mine up. I looked at Sheetal. A hidden connection is stronger than an obvious one.

Hello ... is this Mr Abhay Chauhan?' The unknown voice asked as soon as I picked up the call.

'Yes. Who is this?'

'I am calling from Sapna Theatre, in Vasant Kunj ...'

A tremor of excitement ran through me. With it came a surge of joyful memories. Then the realisation dawned that I had left that place many years back.

She continued in an unsure tone when I did not respond, 'Sir, you had joined Sapna Theatre around ... seven years ago?'

'Yes ... but I have not been an active member for years now.'

'Yes, that's why I was calling. Was locker number 32 assigned to you?'

'Yes ...' I only remembered this vaguely.

'Sir, you are not associated with us anymore and the records show that your membership expired five years ago. But, sir, you have not returned the key to your locker. We could get a new one made, but if your belongings are still there, we will not be answerable ...'

'Oh, I hadn't realised. I am really sorry about this.'

'Sir, I would request you to bring the key back to us on priority, or we will have to take action at our end.' She sounded apologetic as well as threatening.

'I will try to do that at the earliest. Thank you for bearing ...'

The line had gone blank. I put the phone down.

I had struggled for many years to get a firm foothold in the world of theatre and acting. When I lost my mother, I suddenly left all that behind. I had Kanika and I had thought that, if we were together, we could face life.

Now, I had to go back to that world, if only for a small moment. I felt an awkward reluctance at the thought of it. But to be honest, a part of me did want to go to Sapna, even if it was just for a visit. The call from the theatre had triggered some good feelings and also exposed some wounds. Old memories and young hopes. I applied for a half-day leave at the office and requested Sheetal to pick Ayush up from day care.

At home, I looked at all the pictures I had of the theatre. While rummaging through the almirah, my fingers paused when they touched my favourite black shirt. I remembered the moment of success that was attached to that shirt.

I put on the shirt, shaved my beard, and applied gel to my hair. I dressed like an old champion.

As I was about to leave the house, my eyes sought the images in the living room. The various characters I had played, immortalised in the collage on the wall, performed in front of my eyes. When and how those pictures had been taken, and the series of failures associated with them, suddenly rushed into my mind. I looked at myself in the mirror. I felt awkward. It didn't feel right. I changed my shirt.

I drove to the place that I had hoped would give form to my dreams. With every passing mile, memories came to me in hordes.

Sapna was a centre for all kinds of theatre activity, and had been running for over seven decades when I joined. The talents the place had produced performed on various platforms, from stage plays and street plays to television and cinema.

Among many acting schools across the country, I had opted for Sapna, as it offered evening and weekend classes. I could pursue it along with my MCA degree.

They put up plays on weekends and there was always a good audience. I wrote six plays and performed countless times on stage. My looks and confidence always got my presence noticed on stage.

I had always dreamed of the day when I would perform there, and my entire family would clap for me. But that had never happened. The greatest dreams are always the most unrealistic.

When I reached Sapna, I found that most of the faces there were new. I saw young, happy and cheerful people. The energy on their faces told me they had not tasted the harsh realities of theatre yet, or maybe my experiences had made me bitter.

Most of the old staff were still there. A group was practising in a room for an upcoming show. I was in no mood to meet anyone. I was looking for the person in charge of the lockers so I could leave the key with them.

I came across a man engrossed in reading a play. Maybe he was reviewing a play. He looked like he was totally dedicated to the task. He would be a good person to ask, I thought.

‘Hi, can you please help me find the person who manages the locker keys ...?’

‘Which locker?’

‘Where the students keep their belongings.’

‘On the first floor,’ he said shortly.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and then I suddenly realised I knew him. The man looked up at me at the same moment.

‘Abhay ...?’

‘Hello, Pavan.’ His name came to me easily.

‘What a pleasant surprise! Are you joining the theatre again?’

‘No ... I just realised my locker keys were still with me. I am here to return them.’

Pavan and I had not been close friends. But we had shared the stage in a few plays. One of them, *Shaukeen*, had been a popular play, in which three lusty old men try to seduce a young woman. In the end, however, the lady calls them out and embarrasses them.

‘You seem to have given up on acting.’ Pavan voiced the harsh reality of my life.

‘Long back, Pavan.’ I looked around at the theatre, and the empty seats there seemed to hold a lot of answers.

‘Very soon, I will also leave. You can’t earn a living here,’ Pavan confessed.

‘Did you get a break in movies?’

‘No, yaar, I acted in a web series, but did not have much of a part even in that. You know web series, right?’

‘Yeah. They are quite popular nowadays. The internet has revolutionised a lot of this art.’

He looked over at the stage and said, ‘Okay, my play rehearsal is about to begin ... I need to guide the beginners.’

‘Which play? A new one?’ I was suddenly filled with a strange enthusiasm.

‘Yes, there are some good new plays, but today we are doing *Shaukeen*.’

‘*Shaukeen* ... wow! It’s some lesson that the lady teaches those old buffoons.’

‘Yes, but now more fun elements have been added to our new version.’

‘How?’

‘This time we have replaced the lady’s character with ... a special one.’

‘A special one?’

‘Just to add more fun, we have replaced the lady with a transgender person. That is revealed in the end ... and what a surprise it is to all the tharki men.’

I didn’t react. He was expecting a conspiratorial smile from me.

‘What? You did not like the surprise addition at the end?’ Pavan got up to leave.

My curiosity compelled me to ask him, ‘Why? What is the fun there? A man cannot love a trans woman ... is that it?’

He looked at me, startled, and shrugged. ‘Those three old characters are not in love. It’s just lust.’ He left.

I found my way to the first floor hall and handed the key to the person at the desk.

‘Have you checked the locker? Nothing there is our responsibility anymore.’

‘Nothing is there ... but let me check.’

I headed to my old locker, and after a small struggle with the gathered rust, I managed to open it. It was almost empty, but one plastic bag remained. I took it out and opened it. There was a pair of black shades inside. I clearly remembered then: it was same pair that I had worn for the shoot with Karina Khan. I had not returned it. My lips curved in a smile. As I moved the bag, I realised something else was in it. It was a greeting card.

I was in shock when I realised what it was. And who had given it to me. It read:

A true hero is one who smiles through silent pain and fights battles nobody knows about.

All the best, my hero.

*Love,
Kanika*

Mr Rao called me to his cabin to inform me that the company was happy with my performance and that very soon I would be promoted to the post of project manager. He even offered me a bigger team and new projects in Pune and Bangalore. I wondered whether I should leave the city, but I had a good support system now, and I refused it politely.

A few months ago, the company had been on the verge of sacking me.

I never had any interest in a career in IT. I often wondered what I was doing there and why! But even though I didn't want it, I was happy about the promotion. I wanted to share that happiness immediately. Then I wondered, whom could I call? I didn't have a mother who would say with pride, my son is an achiever. Even though I hadn't done well in any sphere of my life, she had always said that. And there was no wife to whom I could say, let's celebrate! Or, let's plan a long, lavish holiday.

I had had to go through long-term failure to find this brief, unwanted success. I knew my father would be happy to know about the promotion. I could call him. I looked at my phone for a long time, placed the call, then disconnected. He had always appreciated my professional and academic successes, yet, I didn't want to call him. I didn't want him to feel that he had been right to guide me towards this career.

My thoughts were disturbed by an unwelcome vibration on my phone. It was a call from Ayush's day care teacher.

'Hi ... is this Mr Abhay?'

'Yes, speaking.'

‘Sir, I am calling from Ayush’s day care centre. Principal ma’am wants to meet you.’

My happiness was demolished. I felt uneasy, wondering what new mischief Ayush had been up to. I cursed myself for not spending time with him.

I drove to the day care centre, leaving work early. I checked the CCTV screen before stepping in, and saw Ayush playing with the other kids. He looked more confident of his surroundings now. He was getting better every day. That was all I wanted for him. Yet, somehow, my mind could only come up with negative possibilities for my being summoned there.

Soon, I was called into the principal’s office. The walls were lined with inspiring quotes and several brightly painted images. I observed all of them minutely. The painting that I liked the most was of a lady carrying a handbag and entering a doorway.

‘It’s good to meet you again, Mr Abhay, and I am happy to offer my congratulations,’ the principal began.

‘Congratulations for ...?’ I was not prepared for such a warm welcome.

‘We are all very happy to note Ayush’s progress ... you deserve all the credit.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Ayush has made remarkable progress lately. He even won the painting competition.’

I had not even been aware of any competition. My blank face must have told her I was not responsible for this success.

The principal handed me a bundle of paintings. I looked at all of them. They were really quite remarkable for three-year-olds. I was amazed to see the creative minds of the children at work in these pictures, reflecting their interpretations of the world around them. After looking at each and every one of them, I asked, ‘Which one is by Ayush?’

‘Ayush’s work is not there. As he is the winner, we have displayed his painting on the wall.’

The principal pointed to the image on the wall that I had been studying earlier. The image of a lady carrying a handbag. I had seen that bag somewhere! And then I realised it was similar to Sheetal’s. I looked at it twice. My joy was so great that I could barely hide my pride.

The principal smiled encouragingly and said, ‘We are also happy for you. Your hard work is paying off.’

‘No ... it’s not me. I am not doing anything.’

She smiled and said, ‘I’m sure you are, Mr Ayush, and it is also the people you have chosen to take care of him when he is not around.’

I picked Ayush up from his class and took him to Shipra Mall. The shopping mall was flooded with attractive things and appealing offers. It had been a long time since I had shopped for anything. I had been dressing Ayush in the clothes my father sent for him. That day, I bought him a few T-shirts and trousers, and a toy car his eyes had glued themselves to. I also bought two formal shirts for myself. Happy with my purchases, I was window-shopping to pass the time when my mind whispered, I need to get something for her as well.

I was reminded of the handbag Ayush had drawn. The threadbare old bag would not last much longer. *Thanks, Ayush, for bringing my attention to that!*

I bought a leatherette purse for her. Then, as I was coming out of the shop, my eyes fell on a saree. The bright yellow was enticing to the eye. As I looked at it, I realised that Kanika had owned a similar saree. After considering for a few minutes, I bought it. I knew Sheetal only wore salwar suits but, somehow, I couldn’t walk past that saree.

I hadn’t smoked even a single cigarette that day. When Sheetal came in the evening, I told her about Ayush’s painting competition.

‘Don’t make dinner today—we will go out.’

She nodded with a smile.

‘This is a small gift,’ I said as I handed the purse to her.

She looked pleasantly surprised. Taking it out of the packaging, she gently stroked the rich-looking material. ‘Thank you so much, sir.’ Her genuine smile said she liked the gift.

The yellow saree was still lying in my bag, on the sofa. I wanted to give it to her, but a strange hesitation held me back.

Sheetal finished her chores, putting Ayush’s things away and cleaning his room. We were ready for dinner. I had booked a table at Bamboo Shoots in Noida.

I was going out for dinner after a long time. Eating out is not just about food. It is the experience and the company that counts.

Once there, I looked around the restaurant, which was clean and filled with young couples. It had a yellow-themed decor. The staff were wearing yellow T-shirts, and the room was even scented with a fresh lemon fragrance which was instantly refreshing.

There were tiny lights on each table, creating a cosy candle-lit atmosphere. The downside was, in the dim light, you couldn't really see what was in front of you on the table.

Sheetal looked around herself unsurely. Maybe she was not used to such places. We took a corner seat. Sheetal checked the menu for a long time, looking very out of place. I was sure she was looking more at the prices than at the items. Ayush was sitting on her lap, playing with the napkin in front of him. It was a liberating feeling, seeing Ayush so comfortable with Sheetal.

I ordered a vegetarian Manchow soup for both of us, followed by stir-fried tofu and vegetarian Thai green curry.

'Ayush, see, we are here to party ... because we are so proud of you! You made such a nice painting,' Sheetal said, smiling brilliantly at my son in the dimly lit room. 'You are a very good boy ... what do you want today?'

'Chocolate shake!' He jiggled his body to show how he wanted his chocolate to be shaken.

We were close to finishing our main course when I asked, 'Shall we order some dessert?'

'No, sir ... not needed. We already had so much.'

'Vanilla ice cream!' Ayush put in his order. He did not bother with formalities. I ordered an ice cream for him.

Sheetal said, 'Sir, you seem happy after so many days.'

'Yes. Today is a good day.'

It was obvious that she wanted to ask me something. She had turned serious, but seemed hesitant to speak.

'Sheetal, I wanted to thank you. Actually ... for taking such good care of Ayush and of the house. It's because of you that my work is being appreciated at office. I am relaxed about Ayush and everything is going perfectly. This celebration is for you. I wanted to do something for you.'

'But, sir, it's not needed.' She softly caressed Ayush's hair. 'You have given me the best gift ...'

‘Sheetal, if there is something on your mind, do ask. If you are not comfortable here, you can ask me later.’

Ayush looked at both of us.

Sheetal smiled. ‘Okay, sir, I do need a small favour.’

‘Sure, anything. What do you want?’

‘As you know, I don’t have parents. Could you please ... talk to Subhajit’s parents?’

‘About what?’

‘Actually ... we ... we ...’ She hesitated, not sure how to put it in words. ‘Subhajit and I ... We ... love each other,’ she finally blurted out. I could see her blushing in the dim light.

‘Really?’

I was suddenly at a loss for words. Things swam in and out of focus. The vanilla ice cream on the table in front of me was slowly melting. Ayush was chattering and smiling and playing with the salt and pepper containers. I was completely blank. It didn’t register at that moment that she had shared happy news and that I should congratulate her.

‘How long have you guys been together?’

‘For a very long time.’

Before I could ask her anything else, the waiter came to us with the bill and the swipe machine. As I paid the bill, a strange feeling came over me. Suddenly, I started feeling bad about the day.

Ayush fell asleep in the car on our way back. I dropped Sheetal at her home. Before she got out of the car, I asked her, ‘Is he aware about you ... you being a ...’ I couldn’t finish the sentence.

‘He knows everything,’ Sheetal said and got out of the car.

She had just turned away when I recalled something. ‘Hey, you wanted some favour ...? Sorry, I totally missed it.’

‘Actually, we have been thinking of getting married secretly. His parents don’t approve. But I think we should try one last time. It would be a great help if you could talk to them and try to convince them about me.’

I nodded. ‘I will try my best.’ Sometimes, the most shocking surprises are also the most beautiful ones.

I waited until Sheetal entered her lane. Ayush was sound asleep by now in his car seat in the back. Reaching home, I carried him to his bed. Making sure Ayush was cosily tucked in, I went to the balcony and smoked a few cigarettes. Somehow, it was hard to believe that people like Subhajit

existed. I knew it was good news, but for some reason I couldn't understand, I felt uncomfortable about everything.

What could I say to his parents? And how was I going to talk about her?

I went inside, thinking of going through my work email, as I had left office early. I pulled out the laptop bag, and realised that the gift I had bought for Sheetal, the yellow saree, was still in it. I stared at the package for some time, and then pulled out the saree.

I closed my eyes and took a long breath. Memories flashed in front of my eyes. I walked over to the wardrobe and placed the saree carefully among Kanika's clothes.

Sheetal Speaks

A friend, a motivator and my soulmate. I could use these words to define my relationship with Subhajit. We had met in college. He has been the only ray of hope in my life since then.

In the beginning, I didn't know him too well as a person, but he was always with me. When the entire world was jeering at me, and even my loved ones were abusing me, he was the silver lining in the dark cloud that surrounded me.

When my Mami-ji was frustrated with me and cut me off, due to the discord my presence had created in her household, Subhajit not only gave me emotional support but also helped me financially, even though he was not very well off himself.

After completing his graduation in Lucknow, he shifted to Noida to pursue his master's in computer science. I could move to Noida, and get far away from those probing, ridiculing eyes, only because he had come forward to help me.

One of his friends helped me find a job, but then my identity was discovered, and the same old story began to repeat itself. It was like a curse.

Whenever I was thrown out of a job, Subhajit helped me make ends meet. He took care of me. I had never met such a sensitive and caring

person. Initially, I tried to convince him that we were not suited to each other. We were poles apart in social status. I am not even a complete woman, physically. I felt he would only waste his life with me.

But every time I said these things, he shut me up with just one line: 'I don't care about others.'

I can confidently say that my relationship with Subhajit is love in its purest form. What would be the future of this relationship? I am not so dreamy as to believe in fairy-tale happy endings. I know well that I won't be able to satisfy him sexually, but he is not that kind of a man.

After he declared his love for me, he often stayed with me. I had told my landlord that I would be staying alone, but he was living with me most of the time. Needless to say, the neighbours had their eyes and ears glued to my house.

We were both delighted with the work atmosphere at Abhay sir's house. He was not an authoritarian employer. He always treated me with respect and courtesy, even allowing me to cook dishes of my choice, though I was a mere employee in his house.

My dedication and love for Ayush pushes me to spend extra hours at Abhay-ji's place. Initially, Subhajit was upset about my working late in the evenings. He began to resent my job. I tried to make him understand that it was much more than just a job for me. With time, I think he has realised what it means to me.

I feel I have found a new friend in Abhay-ji. He is a kind-hearted man and has always helped me. I was hesitant about suggesting that he remarry, but he did not take my advice the wrong way. He has treated me with respect and earned eternal respect from me.

After eight years of love and friendship, Subhajit and I have decided to get married.

He wants to get married as quickly as possible, but marriage between a trans woman and a man is difficult in our great country.

When he discussed me with his family, they were, as expected, totally against the idea. We know that his parents will never agree to our marriage but we want to give it a final try anyway. After all, parents are parents.

We feel it would be a good thing if a mature and convincing person could talk to them about us, let them know our perspective. But I have no

relatives to speak on my behalf. So Abhay-ji was the only person I could think of.

I am so comfortable with Abhay-ji now that I have begun thinking of him more as family than even a friend. But I know my boundaries. There always exists between an employer and an employee, a certain distance.

Yet, that house is not just a house where I go to work. There is also a part of me in that house, my Ayush. Since I have started working there, something in me is changing. Now I have started feeling more. I was not like this before. I have gone through a lot in my life, and this had hardened me. But the new me is more sensitive and easily touched.

The first time Ayush called me mother, I hugged him and cried. That was the best moment in my life. When the entire world was against even giving me a job, he, my Ayush, accepted me as I was. Loved me the way I was.

I never knew I would receive this kind of love. I have started caring for him so much, and I have promised myself that I will never ever leave Ayush, my beloved Ayush.

Subhajt always warns me, ‘You love him too much. Don’t invest all your emotions in him. Someday, Abhay sir will get married again, and then you will be of no use to him. They will throw you out of the house.’

Giving up is not an option when someone calls you mother.

I smile and tell him, ‘Till then I want to live like a mother.’

I was watching the news after many days, Ayush by my side. I seldom got to watch TV. There was always some *Chhota Bheem* or *Doraemon* prancing across it.

An anchor was reporting breaking news on NDTV. Apparently two transgender women had been arrested for allegedly trying to kidnap a toddler in a popular mall. A woman, along with her children—her five-year-old daughter and four-month-old son—and other relatives were in the mall to celebrate her mother’s birthday. The two transgender women attempted to take away her son, who was in a pram just behind where she was sitting. It was her domestic help who saw this, and raised the alarm. The anchor reported that the duo were held by security officials of the mall and then handed over to the police. A case had been registered. I changed the channel but found that the same news was being aired on every other news channel. Ayush was looking intently at the screen, so I turned the TV off.

I was disturbed by the way the news channels were covering the incident. I did not understand. *Two transgender women were arrested for allegedly trying to kidnap a toddler ...* Do criminals have a gender? They could have said, *Two criminals were arrested for allegedly trying to kidnap a toddler.* Somehow, I could sense prejudice at work behind the news.

It was the day on which I planned to speak to Subhajit’s parents. I steeled myself for the monumental task. Opening the almirah, I considered my choice of clothes. My eyes immediately darted to my black shirt. I looked at it for a few minutes, and involuntarily, my hands reached for it.

But after a lot of back and forth, I decided on a plain white shirt and black trousers. I applied some perfume, gelled my hair after parting it on the side, and combed it to flat stiffness. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I thought I looked like a professional salesman. I only dressed up that way when I had to meet my clients.

Sheetal was at home to take care of Ayush. I had never imagined that, one day, I would be visiting her prospective in-laws to talk about her marriage.

I looked into the mirror again. This time, I was not looking at my clothes.

My lips were dry and darker than I remembered. I was smoking too much, I told myself, I should be doing something about it. As I took a closer look, I noted lines on my forehead, and crinkly crow's feet near the eyes. They had never been so prominent. My skin did not glow with health. There was a dry greyness. My eyes drooped and the muscles of my neck were losing their tautness. I pulled at the loose skin and it seemed to move away from my body easily. I let it go when I noticed a grey hair at my temple. I pulled it out forcefully.

‘Am I looking so old?’

I considered my own question. My lifestyle had added a few extra kilos and some loose skin here and there, but honestly, there were no signs of balding, and but for the solitary hair I had pulled out, there weren't any prominent streaks of grey. My teeth were intact, and I was still able to read and write without glasses. I probably couldn't be classified as old, yet. The significant signs of ageing were absent. Sometimes, the sense of being young or old is not based categorically on your own perception of yourself, but more on how others see you.

When I met Sheetal in the living room on my way out, she folded her hands and said, ‘Thank you, sir. You are a good man.’

I felt I was being given an unnecessary burden, that of being a good man. My eyes smouldered a warning: I could kill you for making me go and meet these people. But as she stood in front of me, with Ayush self-assuredly going about his antics in the background, I faked a surprised smile.

With a heavy heart, and shoulders bowed by the responsibility and stamp of being a good man, I carried myself towards Subhajit's parents' home.

The house was only a few kilometres from mine, in Mohan Nagar, Ghaziabad. I found it difficult to locate the house. The locality was not well-planned. Subhajit had told me there was a famous printing factory nearby. This landmark eventually helped me find the place, but not before I had spent an hour wandering fruitlessly through various alleys.

A black plate, engraved with the name 'Mr M.L. Verma', hung outside a two-storeyed building that had been painted blue. Sandwiched between two smaller ones, it was quite a prominent house in the lane. A gleaming cream Mahindra Scorpio car announced the prosperity of the inmates. As I entered the gates, I noted the veranda on the ground floor. However, I did not form any opinion about the people inside.

I knocked on the door. A young woman opened the door and looked at me with an unsure, polite smile. From the details Subhajit had given me of his family, I guessed that she was his sister. I introduced myself, 'Abhay Chauhan ... Subhajit's friend.'

The smile instantly evaporated. She looked at me uncertainly, as if she was considering whether to let me in or slam the door in my face. I became even more unsure about what I had come there to do.

She said finally, 'I am Lavanya, Subhajit's sister.' She moved away from the door, allowing me to enter. I stepped into the drawing room. She gestured towards a sofa. 'Let me call Papa.'

I nodded, grateful that they had not brought the guns out yet. I leaned back on the sofa and looked around the room.

The room was spacious and clean. The well-polished marble floors shone, and their whiteness matched the colour of the walls. I took in the comfortable sofas and the high grey ceiling. An ornate golden fan distributed the air uniformly around the well-ventilated room. One wall was dominated by a huge TV. Someone had been watching it when I had knocked. It was on mute, but life-size characters were moving around on the screen. Next to it was a surround sound music system. Everything was rich and lavish.

I had not imagined that Subhajit belonged to such a prosperous family.

'Papa will be here in a few minutes,' Lavanya said, when she returned to the room. 'Would you like to have tea or coffee ...' she asked me as an afterthought, maybe to relieve the awkwardness between us.

‘Coffee sounds good.’ She nodded and left again. I sat in the silent room with the mute characters on the TV screen. I tried to focus my attention on them. As I watched, I realised it was a daily soap called *Shakti*.

I had read about this series, and occasionally noticed Sheetal watching it at my home. It was the story of two sisters, Soumya and Surbhi. Soumya is a transgender woman, and is disliked by her father and grandmother, but adored by her mother, Nimmi. Soumya is calm and quiet, while Surbhi is a fun-loving girl. Harman falls in love with Surbhi, but after a lot of drama, finds himself married to Soumya.

While I had been absorbed in the action unfolding on the screen, a balding man with patches of grey hair and thick glasses walked into the room. There was a confidence about him which comes from the security of having money. He didn’t look like a man who would mince his words. I rose from my seat and folded my hands in greeting.

‘Hello, Mr Abhay, please sit,’ the old man said. ‘How are you?’ he asked, but didn’t really seem to be concerned about my well-being.

I smiled politely. ‘I am good ... how about you?’

His eyes fell on the TV screen, and he suddenly screamed, ‘Laaavanyaaa!’

Lavanya appeared in a few nano-seconds.

The old man fumed, ‘How many times have I told you not to watch this!’

Lavanya looked embarrassed. Her eyes were averted from mine as she picked up the remote, which was lying well within her father’s reach, and turned off the TV.

He glared at her as she scuttled out of the room. ‘So ... Mr Rich Man ...?’ His sarcasm was not playful. He looked me straight in the eye.

I continued to smile politely. I took a deep, silent breath, and said, ‘Sir, I am here for Sheetal ...’

‘I know that. But you wasted your time and breath.’ Nothing escaped this old man’s spectacled eyes. ‘There is no way this marriage can happen! We are never going to approve.’

‘May I know what you think is the problem ...’

‘Problem? You need to ask me that! If you do not have the maturity to understand that, you should have stayed at home!’

‘Sir, Sheetal has been working in my home for almost two years now. She has taken care of my child ... helped him grow. She is a very good

woman.’

‘Woman!’

‘I mean ... a very good soul. I have seen her goodness.’ I had committed the blunder of classifying her gender.

‘I don’t care what you can or cannot see!’ The old man seemed to be in the habit of shouting all the time, at everyone.

I understood that the conversation was not going to last very long. Thankfully, Lavanya chose that moment to bring the coffee. I took the cup from her and placed it on the table in front of me. Once she left the room, the only sound in the house was of me sipping the hot beverage. It was the most difficult drink I had ever had to swallow in my life. It tasted as if Lavanya had doused all her anger in it.

‘May I ask you one question?’ The old man had not touched his coffee.

‘Yes ... please.’

‘Let me be frank with you, as we are not too concerned with breaching each other’s privacy. You are a widower ... I am sure that you plan to get married again someday. If you see so much of her great soul, why don’t you marry Sheetal?’

I had been expecting that question. I smiled and said, ‘I would have loved to do that.’ I believed I had answered the old man’s question, and I rested my case. As I finished the coffee, my eyes fell on the golden Laughing Buddha on the stand beside the TV. It appeared as if Subhajt’s father was laughing at me. I met his glaring eyes, and decided to make a final attempt.

‘I know, sir, that your mind is already made up regarding this relationship. The thing is, I have not come here to convince you. I have come ... to try and understand you.’

There was no response. It was a signal for me to leave the house.

I continued, ‘Anybody who knows her will define her as the perfect soul. A woman is someone who has a heart that only knows to love and care for others. Don’t think of her just as a body. Even though she does look like a woman ...’

‘Is she a complete woman?’ He peered at me from above his glasses, as if he wanted to pierce through my words. His face was expressionless.

‘Her physical and sexual characteristics may not match with your definition. Her special orientation is what your son wants. But to all appearances, to any other eye, she is a complete woman.’

His eyes turned red and his nostrils flared as his voice boomed, ‘Can she ever become a mother?’

Can she ever become a mother?’

The old man’s voice echoed in my ears. The question of whether Sheetal could become a mother was haunting me.

A woman is more than a mother. She could be a sister, a daughter, a friend, a lover. I could not digest the old man’s conviction that a woman’s only purpose was to have babies.

That was all a woman meant to him? No one could change the ideas of gender roles that were deeply inscribed in minds like his. I felt pity for Subhajit. To grow up in a family so opposed to his own beliefs! I also felt a lot of respect for him. He had understood his father’s approval was a lost cause and had cut himself off from him, for the dignity of his love in which he completely believed.

That evening, when I reached home, Sheetal looked at me. I knew she was trying her best to suppress any feeling of hope. She brought me a glass of water as I sank into the living room sofa. She was going back into the kitchen when I stopped her and recounted what had happened. She did not show any signs of surprise. Her face calm, she quietly turned and went back to the kitchen. She had seen enough in life. She had accepted the truth before I had even finished my story.

She seemed to be done with her work and was silently putting away Ayush’s toys. I was uncomfortable, not sure what I could or could not do.

I took refuge in the balcony, avoiding facing Sheetal and meeting those resigned eyes. The last thing I had wanted to happen, had happened. Then the landline in the living room began ringing. I cursed silently. This

was rare. It only ever rang if there was a visitor for me at the society's gates.

'Abhay sir?' asked someone in a Bihari-Hindi accent.

'Yes.'

'You are summoned to the society office, sir.'

'Society office—at this time? Who has called me?'

'Society secretary, sir.'

'Okay, okay. I will call Mr Ashok Kumar.'

'Sir, Ashok sir is no longer the society secretary. New secretary sir has taken charge.'

'Oh!' I smelled unnecessary, unpalatable things coming my way. I snapped at the guard, 'I don't have time to waste on society activities. Just tell me what the problem is.'

'Sir, new forms have come for vendor and maid registration.'

'Oh. You can hand the forms over to me.'

'Shall I come now?'

'Yes.'

Society management never called residents individually. The call meant that they wished to discuss something important. I opened my door to face my unwelcome visitor.

The overseer handed me some papers. 'Sir, this is the form you need to fill for your maid. And here is the new circular.'

I read the circular. It made me very angry. 'Whose idea is this circular?'

'Society members,' the man said nonchalantly. 'If you have any concerns, you can bring them up during Sunday meetings.'

His nonchalance did not fool me. And his underlying sly smile had not escaped me either. The entire situation was now clear to me. I slammed the door in his face and looked again at the circular.

Notice

You must be aware of the rising crime in metro cities. Our esteemed society members have put forth their concerns over the same issue and we have unanimously agreed to draft the below changes in the maid/ helper/vendor working rules within the premises.

There were twenty instructions, some related to parking, a few regarding the guards, and many pertaining to the children's play area. It was the last one that I couldn't take my eyes off. It seemed that those lines had been written only for me.

No transgender people, eunuchs or unmarried maids are allowed to work after 8 p.m. Police verification and two valid references are a must for new registrations.

I was reading the newspaper and my eyes had fallen on a headline: *Trans man and trans woman couple who're all set to marry.* The story was about a couple, a trans man and trans woman, who had both recently undergone sex reassignment surgeries, and found love in each other. 'Their story is not the typical experience of people from the transgender community,' the article stated.

TV news, these days, only featured politicians shouting, 'Look at us, our party is better than yours'. I appreciated the fact that print journalism had not stooped that low. Less sensationalism and more constructive news. I applauded myself for not watching the news channels anymore.

My focus on the newspaper was disturbed by a knock on the door. The world's most punctual milkman was on time, again. I picked up the milk vessel and went to the door. The vendor was delivering milk at the opposite door, Mrs Sharma's. Although she had been my neighbour for five years and we had had a cordial relationship when Kanika was alive, I rarely interacted with anyone these days.

The milkman came to me and began pouring the milk in my proffered vessel. Mrs Sharma was still at her door.

She smiled and said, 'Good morning, Abhay-ji. How are you?'

'I am good, thank you.'

'Ayush ...?'

'Yeah, he is doing great! Thank you.'

I could tell these were just the preliminary queries of a deeper probe. I knew she was itching to investigate something, from the inexplicable enthusiasm in her voice.

'Abhay-ji, I just wanted to ask a personal question ... if you don't mind.'

Who has ever escaped the queries of a well-meaning neighbour? These Sharma-ji, Verma-ji, and Mukherjee neighbours have a very strong network.

I was more or less sure she was going to ask something which would create havoc in my life.

‘Sure,’ I invited the proverbial bull.

‘When did you get married again?’

Beyond the realms of my knowledge, new rumours were cooking in the society. I guessed this query was related to Sheetal.

‘Marriage ... me? What made you think that?’ I forced a smile unsuccessfully.

‘Actually, sorry to ask ... it’s your private matter ... but I overheard Ayush calling someone Mamma. So, I thought ...’

I didn’t reply to her. Before she could finish her explanation, I closed the door.

Something nasty was brewing in the society. I felt like I was being scrutinised by the neighbours, the guards, the society administration ... I could feel the glare of their staring eyes.

That evening, my head was a mess of confused thoughts. Thoughts of lives that were in my life, whether I wanted them to be or not. I thought of Sheetal, I thought of Subhajit, of Subhajit's family, my father and several others whom the present circumstances could affect. It was time to take some tough calls. Suddenly, I was a responsible man—*too responsible* for the lives and well-being of others around me. Too much trust brings its own burden. After a lot of consideration, I came to some difficult conclusions.

When Sheetal arrived, my mind had already been made up. I needed to discuss the matter with her but I continued to avoid her. While she took care of Ayush and cooked in the kitchen, I stuck to my laptop. Finally, when Ayush fell asleep at around ten, she informed me she was leaving for the day.

I turned to her. 'Is Subhajit here to pick you up?'

'He will come once I give him a call.'

'Call him now ... I need to speak to him.'

My purposeful tone startled her. 'Is everything okay, sir?'

'Even when the sea appears calm, a storm could be brewing underneath,' I said philosophically. 'It's important that we speak. Call him.'

Soon, I faced Subhajit and Sheetal who were sitting side by side on the sofa in my living room. The introverted Subhajit that I had seen so far seemed to have gone in for an upgrade. This was a visibly relaxed and

confident version. I looked at Sheetal. Her face held a lot of questions. But there was something else as well. It came to me when she met my eyes.

Seated opposite me, they were looking at me with hope. The overwhelming feeling that I was the person who could change their lives!

‘Subhajit, what are your thoughts about marrying Sheetal? Even if your parents will not agree to this.’

‘We have known that for a long time now, sir, but that does not change the fact that I wish to marry her.’

I looked at Sheetal and she nodded, trying to smile, but ended up wiping the thin film of perspiration above her lips.

‘Your parents are aware of Sheetal not being a woman physically. Your survival depends on how successfully you keep the fact hidden, to escape probing and jeering eyes ...’

‘I know, sir.’ Subhajit’s lips were now pursed in a straight line.

‘As a sign of respect for your relationship, I would suggest that you go for a low-key but proper Hindu wedding. Then you can start living together like a married couple. Wherever required, give your names as husband and wife.’

‘That has always been our plan. But ... why do you suddenly ... I mean ...’ Subhajit interrupted me, confused.

His confusion was understandable. But I didn’t want them to find out about the ideas floating around in the society. ‘Marriage shuts down a lot of rumours and brings with it some social respect. In our society, there is a huge difference between a married lady and an unmarried one.’

Subhajit nodded. ‘What do we need to do?’

‘I will arrange everything. Only the three of us need be involved in the wedding.’

Subhajit smiled. I could see the happiness in his eyes. Sheetal went silent, her eyes pinned to the floor.

I wanted to ask her, though I sort of knew, what was going in her head.

‘Give me two weeks to make preparations. You can go now,’ I said, bringing the conversation to an end.

Sheetal lifted her face and looked at me. She had never before looked at me like that. There were tears in her eyes.

A lump formed in my throat. She folded her hands and her lips moved to speak but I cut her off, ‘You guys are getting late. It’s eleven-

thirty already.'

I closed the door after them and slumped back on the sofa. After a long time, I was feeling good about myself. I washed my face with cold water, prepared some coffee, and lit a cigarette. Nicotine slowly took over, soothing my nerves.

I looked at the most beautiful wall in my house. Tears came rushing to my eyes as I saw the most beautiful woman in the world smiling at me.

It was a Saturday, I recalled, as soon as the landline rang. Immediately I was overcome by an eerie feeling. The intercom rang again. I didn't move. After three successive missed calls, finally, there was silence.

But peace was just an illusion. Moments later, my mobile rang. I knew who the caller was.

'Hello, Sheetal.'

'Sir, you are at home, right?'

'Yes.'

'I was calling you on the landline.'

'What is it? Have the guards stopped you from entering?'

'Yes,' she said resignedly.

I didn't ask her what the reason was.

'Could you give the phone to the security guards?'

There was a pause and then the guard said in a mix of Hindi and Bihari, 'Yes, saar, she is not allowed ...'

'She is a guest in my house. Please make an entry in the guest section and let her come.'

'But, sir, she is not a guest ...'

'Who will decide whether she is a guest or not?'

'Sorry, saar!'

'If you don't want to lose your job, just listen to me.' Some people do not understand soft voices and the guard was no different.

'Today I will make an exception, saar, but not tomorrow.'

* * *

Sunday clears away the rust of the whole week, but I was not fully relaxed.

I knew this Sunday would be different. I planned my day and noted the important pending tasks of the day. I gave Sheetal the day off and went to the club house with Ayush. The society's main office was a big hall. Several comfortable plastic chairs were arranged neatly in the hall. There were two big metal almirahs which held all the important society documents. Apart from its neatness, there was nothing to recommend that room to the eye. In the corner, I noticed the moderate-sized Ganapati statue which they used during the festival every year.

I never got involved in the society's activities. The regulars were ten grey-haired enthusiasts—two Sharmas, three Vermas, and some Khannas and Tiwaris.

I looked at them assembled there now. These ten busybodies were making rules for the two thousand people who lived in the society! These people had basically lost interest in their homes and families, and had started taking an interest in other people's affairs. There was an apparent lack of volunteers from the younger crowd.

It was the first time I had come to a society meeting. I couldn't even connect all the faces to their names. I only knew I had seen them in and around the society. For me, the most familiar face in the society administration was still Ashok Uncle's. Though he was not the secretary, he was still an active member.

'Are you looking for someone?' Mr Sharma, my next-door neighbour, asked.

'I am looking for the secretary ...'

'I am the secretary, Mr Abhay.' He said it like he was the new army chief of Pakistan.

So here was the source of all the unwanted rumours. He was the youngest member of the troop of busybodies. Neighbours have the exclusive privilege of poking their nose into your private business.

'Sir, may I know who modified the rules regarding outsiders working on our premises?'

Everyone else immediately dropped the conversations they were having. They had managed to get the much-needed spice they coveted for

the rumour mill, enough for the rest of the century. They looked at me as if I had challenged the Indian Penal Code.

‘We have come to the decision collectively,’ Sharma-ji gestured towards all his partners-in-crime. He had included all those who were present, in that ‘we’. I was the only one in the opposition camp.

‘I had submitted the documents for my child’s caregiver long ago. Why have you stopped her from entering the society?’

‘Society rules say a transgender person cannot work on these premises.’ He raised his voice, as if to make himself very clear.

Ayush tightened his grip on me. He was scared of loud voices. I asked him to go to the corner and play with the Ganesh-ji statue. But he wouldn’t let go of me. I picked him up, went to the corner of the hall and put him down near the idol.

‘Why can’t a transgender person work here? There are no legal restrictions in this matter.’

‘As per society rules, if a majority of the members feel the same way about something, we can come to a collective decision. This peculiar concern was unanimously understood, and the decision taken.’

‘This is not right! This society is not above Indian laws,’ I said in the tone of an expert lawyer fighting the case of a Bhagat Singh-like revolutionary.

‘Haven’t you been watching the news? Transgender people are stealing babies and converting them to their own kind,’ said a grey-haired man. He looked like he had nothing meaningful left in his life and spent his days glued to the TV with his thick glasses on.

‘She has been taking care of my child for almost two years. She has done it in the best possible way. There is no reason to doubt her character or her integrity.’

‘We don’t know what and whom she has been taking care of,’ Khanna-ji said maliciously. His useless companions sniggered.

‘A good-looking, young, unmarried woman works late hours in your house. Which child needs care at eleven o’clock at night? On top of that, your kid calls her mother! You think we are fools ...?’ Finally, I understood the problem would not be solved here. ‘Abhay, we cannot compromise our kids’ safety.’

‘I will file a police case against this stupid society.’

‘Don’t force us to manage this in other ways,’ the society secretary threatened in a chilly tone.

My eyes sought Ashok Uncle. I looked at him hopefully. He had remained silent all this while. He returned my gaze compassionately. His eyes said he was with me, but also that he could not speak against them.

It reminded me of the famous Bhishma. He had remained silent along with all the gurus and sages while Dushasan was trying to disrobe Draupadi. It was their silence that had spurred Duryodhan and Karna on in their misdeeds.

‘Do you know the story of Shikhandi?’

‘He was the eunuch,’ old Verma-ji’s voice jeered. He took great pride in his knowledge of the Mahabharata.

‘He was the king of Panchal, and the people accepted him.’

They frowned.

‘Even thousands of years ago we acknowledged a trans man as a king. And today, we have trouble accepting a trans woman as a maid.’

There was silence.

I could see a thin smile on Ashok Uncle’s face. On every other face, there was a common expression of rage and arrogance.

‘She is my guest and she will be coming every day to this society as a guest. It is no idiot’s business whether she is staying for five hours or the entire night! If you try to stop her, I will file a police case.’ My voice was loud. Ayush came running to me, frightened. I picked him up and hugged him close.

‘Do you think of yourself as some kind of hero?’ my neighbour said, with gritted teeth.

That made me smile. In my head, I thanked him for saying that. There was something magical about that line. I walked back home, with my son in my arms.

I happened to know a pandit who was an expert in conducting secret weddings. I contacted him.

He gave me a list of items that would be needed for the ceremony. Then he consulted some books to finalise the time and location. Not a shubh muhurat in an auspicious spot, but an hour and a place that would attract minimum attention.

Subhajit was asked to purchase only a mangalsutra.

In the bustle of making all the arrangements, I forgot to purchase a gift for the wedding couple. Then I remembered the golden-yellow saree that I had bought for Sheetal. I took the package out of the cupboard and placed it in front of her.

She opened it, and her eyes sparkled with a smile. She was dressing for her wedding in my house. We were to go to the venue together.

Ayush and I were waiting when she came out. Her fair complexion glowed against the yellow and gold of the saree. She had tied her hair up in a bun, her eyes were faintly lined with kajal, and a pale pink lipstick gave her face a softness. She wore a plain maroon bindi, and, at her neck, a golden necklace glittered. She had no other accessories, but she looked beautiful and glowed with happiness.

We drove to the venue in my car. Everything so far had gone very smoothly.

At the venue, Ayush was thrilled. It was the first time he was seeing something like this. I took part in the rituals myself. There was no wedding song, no decorations, no relatives. I remembered my own wedding day. The

cheerful atmosphere, the grand celebrations. I could still see my glowing bride, looking resplendent. This day seemed so stark in comparison. I felt bad for Sheetal. What had she done to deserve this?

But her face was content. She looked happy in the truest sense. However, Subhajit's face remained emotionless. I realised that he was probably missing the presence of his family on this important day.

I clicked some pictures, in case they were needed some day as proof to establish that they were married. There was no one else present with whom Sheetal could share her memories. Ayush was in almost all the pictures. It was hard to keep him away from her. Even during the ceremony, he had been glued to Sheetal.

Two hours later, everything was done to the priest's satisfaction, according to the Hindu reeti-riwaaz.

'What is that, Papa?' Ayush asked, as the priest poured the last of the hawan samagri into the fire.

'It's a wedding ceremony. ... Mamma is getting married.' I could not think of another way to put the idea to a three-year-old.

He put his finger in his mouth, deep in thought. 'So ... Mamma is getting married to Uncle!'

I was there to welcome Sheetal and Subhajit as a new couple into their old home. I offered her leave for a few days, but she refused.

When she came to my home for the first time after the wedding, she made an entry as a guest in the society's register. She wore a cream saree, and the mangalsutra that Subhajit had given her nestled proudly at her throat. With a little red bindi on her forehead, she looked like a new Sheetal, happy to exhibit her changed status.

Life went on. She now came to the society as a guest. The guards tried to bother her a few times, threatening to call the police. But then, they somehow relented. No one really wants to mess with the country's lethargic legal system.

But I understood that now, since everyone knew about her, this arrangement could not realistically last for long.

The milkman had not come for the last two days, so I went to purchase some milk from a nearby dairy. While waiting at the counter, I realised that even the newspaper had not been delivered that morning.

Something woke me up at seven the next morning. I checked on Ayush, and found that he was still asleep. The silence of the morning was

broken by a noise outside my door. I guessed the milkman must have returned. I went to the kitchen, but no one rang the bell. I went to the door with the vessel and opened it. I was right. The milkman was waiting for the lift.

I called out, 'Hey man! Where have you been for the past few days? You should have let me know if you were not coming.'

He looked me, dazed, as if he had not been expecting me. 'Sorry, sir ... the cow delivered a bachiya ... so, less milk ...'

'You could have given me half a litre at least—there is a small kid at home.'

He did not reply. The lift arrived and he walked into it. 'Sorry, sir, but there is no milk.'

I found this extremely strange. He had been delivering our milk for the past three years. Never before had he behaved like that.

Slowly, I realised that many unusual things were happening to me in the society. The daily newspaper was not being delivered to my door, and the dhobi stopped coming, too. In fact, no one even knocked at my door anymore, except for Sheetal. Then Mohan, too, didn't turn up for three days. Suddenly it felt like I was living alone in a jungle.

The next morning, I was busy with Ayush when someone knocked at the door. Curious, I opened the door. Mohan stood there, expressionless. The delight you feel when your house help returns after a long absence makes you realise how much you missed and needed them.

As I looked at him with sparkling eyes, I realised that I had never seen *this* Mohan before. The usual carefree smile was missing from his face. I enquired after his health.

'I am fine, sir,' he responded dully. He went to the kitchen, made breakfast, and cleaned up afterwards.

There was no change in his spirits. He finished his work and sat brooding on a chair. I couldn't help wondering why he had not come for the last three days. And, finally, when he was here, he looked lost.

'What happened, Mohan? All is well? Where have you been the past few days?'

He sighed dramatically. 'Sir, I have to leave this job.'

I understood this was all related to what was happening in the society. 'Why?' I feigned ignorance.

‘Sir, I have got stern orders from the society. If I work in this house, I will be sacked from all the other houses I am working in.’

‘How many houses do you work in?’

‘Five.’

I understood his concern. There was really nothing either of us could do. I saw regret on his face. ‘Why are you feeling sorry? I can manage.’

‘Sorry, sir. I was thinking ... wrong things about you. When I got to know that she is ... a transgender woman ... and now that she has gotten married also ... I feel really sorry for thinking ... what I did.’

‘How did you know about her marriage?’

He shrugged. ‘I stay near her house. I saw you dropping them off at her place. Her dress, the jaimala and the mangalsutra. I was also there when the landlord asked her to vacate the house.’

‘What! They asked her to vacate her house?’ For the first time, I thought, he had been spying for a good purpose. ‘And who told you that she is a trans woman?’

He spread his hands and said, ‘Everyone knows in the society. I have heard the guards passing comments on her almost every day. What I can’t understand is—how and why she is facing so much trouble?’

I had been completely unaware of the new troubles in Sheetal’s life. ‘No problem, Mohan. If you need to leave, you must. We cannot do anything about it. I can understand.’

He nodded. He looked genuinely sorry about everything. He could hardly meet my eyes. This was not the Mohan I had known for ages. For the first time, I felt respect for him instead of disdain. To make him feel better, I said again, ‘It’s okay, Mohan.’

He replied with empathy, ‘I wish ... Didi was alive today.’

How had Sheetal been facing all these taunts and comments? How long had she been facing them? Why hadn't she informed me about them?

It was six-thirty in the evening, and I was waiting for Sheetal. There were so many things I wanted to ask her. She was on time as usual, and had a smile on her face when she enquired how I was. When I said I was fine, she called out, 'Aayussh!'

Ayush came running and they hugged each other. It was their ritual. Ayush waited for her, and when she came, they greeted each other like that, every day. They both disappeared into the bedroom. Ayush was always a happy child around her. He threw a lot of tantrums when asked to sleep or eat in her absence. But then, Sheetal rarely went on leave.

I began walking restlessly about in the living room. I felt caged in, so I went outside for a walk. The fresh air soothed my struggling mind. After six cigarettes and five kilometres, I returned to my flat. Sheetal had finished her work. It was late, and she was about to call Subhajit when I interrupted her, 'Wait, Sheetal, I wish to talk to you.'

'Yes, sir?' She immediately sat on the sofa opposite me. She looked at me with interest, smiling.

'How is married life, Sheetal? All okay?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Why did you not tell me?'

'About what, sir?'

'That these guards are mocking you ... throwing comments at you?'

'I have faced that everywhere, sir. It's nothing new.'

How easily she dismissed the facts that had been troubling me for so long!

‘Sheetal, why don’t you end it all?’

She frowned. ‘I am not sure I understand you ...’

‘I mean ... why don’t you settle in a new city?’

She shook her head, looking scared. ‘No, sir, don’t ask me to do this! I can live with pain, but I cannot live without Ayush.’

I was expecting her to say this. Sometimes, I felt jealous of her unconditional love for my son.

I realised there was no point in discussing this with her. She was totally irrational when it came to Ayush. I changed the subject. ‘Your wedding pictures ... which I had clicked.’ I placed a pen drive on the table. She picked it up with excitement.

I went downstairs to see Sheetal off. I wanted to see those guards. I wanted to blast them, get them thrown out of their jobs, but I knew I would not get any support from the other residents. I looked every guard in the eye. I could see the arrogance in them.

When I returned to my flat, I had already made a tough decision. I called a friend who worked in Pune. ‘Hello, Mr Author Ajay K. Pandey ...’

‘Hi ... how are you, bro? And don’t call me author.’

There are a few things that Ajay and I have in common. We have both seen tragedy in life. He, too, lost his partner after a long medical battle. We rarely talked, but when we did, we spoke from the heart.

‘Ajay, you know many people and you have a following in the city because of your books. I need a favour, bro. Regarding a job.’

‘You are looking for a job? Why ...?’

‘No ... not me. A close friend of mine wants to relocate to Pune, and he needs a job there.’

‘Which field?’ Ajay asked.

‘IT.’

‘Oh ... I have a few friends here. I am sure I can help your friend. Just send me his CV.’

‘Thank you, Ajay, you are a true friend.’

We talked about Ayush and about Ajay’s books. He is crazy about his writing and he shared some of his plans with me. He was on the verge of leaving his IT job and becoming a full-time author. I realised that, in the

end, we find solace with the people we have known from the beginning. I felt happy talking to him after such a long time.

Before disconnecting the call, Ajay asked in jest, ‘Abhay, I will surely try to do something for your friend ... but what will I get in return?’

I said with confidence, ‘You will get a magnificent story to write.’

I called Subhajit and asked him to meet me at my office. I requested him to keep the meeting a secret from Sheetal.

I met him near the reception and took him out for a walk in the campus. The sun was bright. There was a soft, cool breeze that rustled the leaves of the trees that lined the roads. We walked in their shade.

‘Are you willing to relocate to Pune?’ I asked Subhajit, who had walked quietly beside me so far.

He turned to me, a little confused, ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Are you willing to work in Pune? An interview has been scheduled for you in a Pune-based IT firm.’

‘I have no problem ...’ Subhajit shrugged. ‘But I guess Sheetal will mind shifting there.’

‘The best decisions in life are always the hardest ones.’

He nodded.

‘So, I am assuming you are ready to leave the city?’

‘Truly speaking, I desperately want to leave this city.’ He sounded subdued.

I guessed he was grieving about some new trouble in their lives. ‘What happened, Subhajit?’

‘Sir, Sheetal’s landlord wants us to vacate the flat.’

‘But, why?’

‘Sir, he got to know about Sheetal. Many maids and vendors who work in your society live in our neighbourhood. They know the truth about Sheetal. Someone might have informed him.’

‘What exactly did he say?’

‘I don’t want a person who is a threat to society to live in my flat.’

I was not shocked by the audacity of the man. By now, I was used to the way people reacted to Sheetal’s true identity.

‘Subhajit, you prepare for the interview. There is a requirement at this Pune firm for a software tester. I’m sure you will crack the interview and be a good fit for the job.’

I explained the requirement in detail and gave him tips to clear the interview. We spent around two hours together. Before he left, I requested, ‘Please avoid sharing any of this with Sheetal, before you get the offer letter.’

Among all the struggles and challenges that life brings, good news always lightens the heart. Subhajit got the job at the IT company in Pune. The package was decent and he was asked to join within a week. But good news is always accompanied by a great sacrifice. Subhajit was excited when he shared the news with me. I pretended that I didn’t already know about it. His happiness was evident in his voice, but then he made a painful request, side-lining his success.

‘Sir, is it possible that they will postpone the joining date by two days?’

‘Not advisable to ask for it. Any specific reason?’

‘I want ... I wish ... Sheetal could celebrate her last birthday with Ayush.’

It was so strange to hear that phrase, ‘her last birthday’.

‘Once the offer letter has been printed, nothing can be done,’ I said plainly.

‘Okay, sir.’

‘Have you informed Sheetal about the job?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is Sheetal happy about it?’

‘She has been crying since morning ...’

I dreaded meeting Sheetal. I wished they would go immediately. I hate departures. I hate sad faces. People go away from your life, taking all the colours with them, and then life becomes dull and plain.

That evening, when Sheetal came to work, her eyes were red-rimmed. She looked at me when I opened the door. I could not meet her eyes. Millions of angry questions were evident on her face.

‘Aayyyush ...!’ I interrupted her silent assault.

Ayush ran to Sheetal and hugged her. Today, the hug was longer than usual and the kisses were many. I was thankful that Ayush’s presence had diverted her attention from me.

After Ayush fell asleep, the house went quiet. I knew she would confront me. Waiting for her in the balcony, I expected her to be harsh with me.

She finished her work, came to the balcony, and stood there silently.

‘Hi, Sheetal, shall I drop you?’

‘No, sir, Subhajit will come. I have already called him.’

‘Subhajit told me about your birthday. I want to do something for you. Let’s take you out for a birthday treat.’

She did not react. It looked like she was not in a mood to talk about it.

‘You didn’t answer me.’

‘Why have you done this? You want me to get out of your life ...’

She had never spoken to me with such anger and authority. I could see the rage in her eyes, but it was obvious that she was miserable at the same time.

‘Sheetal, how does a city matter? Your husband has a good job in an IT company now. You don’t need a job anymore.’

‘Job? That’s all you think ... this is to me.’

I tried to meet her eyes to add emphasis to my words, but failed. I diverted my attention to the view from the balcony. ‘In the present situation, this is the best decision.’

‘That’s not what I asked you. Do you think all I am doing here is ... just a job?’

‘Sheetal, no, it is not. I did not intend to hurt you. Ayush is older now. I think I can manage him alone. You are married, you have a husband to take care of. Choose a good life.’

She sat down. For endless moments she stared at me silently, and then hid her face in her palms. She was trying very hard to control her emotions.

I was getting restless. ‘Sheetal, I know this is painful ... but it is the right decision.’

She raised her face. She looked straight at me and said with tears in her eyes, ‘I know very well that I can never become a ... Thank you for

Ayush ...'

I wanted to stop her. But she continued to mumble, 'Thank you, sir, for letting me know what being a mother means.'

Sheetal had been spending more time with Ayush for the past four days. There was a constant sound of some game being played, or of talk that sometimes made no sense to me. Every day, she walked in with a new gift for Ayush. A new toy, some more chocolates, storybooks, other packages that had not yet been opened. Even the hugs got deeper with each passing day.

I was still doing my best to avoid any eye contact with her. But when our eyes met, there were still a hundred questions. And anger.

Subhajit let me know that their train tickets to Pune had been booked on the Swarna Jayanthi Express, from Nizamuddin.

The day before they were to depart was the last day that Sheetal had with Ayush. When she came, the pain was evident on her face and there were several packets in her hands.

‘Oh ... so many things for Ayush!’ I said to lighten the air when I saw her tortured face.

‘Not everything is for Ayush. This is for me.’ She raised a bag.

Before I could respond, Ayush landed on her with cries of jubilation and a broad smile, and soon turned to the pile of gifts. He loved the silly things she got him.

That night, Ayush went to sleep early. But Sheetal was still pottering around in his room. I couldn’t risk going in there. Instead, I turned on the CCTV app on my mobile and watched her. She stood by Ayush’s bed and looked at his sleeping face. She knelt beside the bed and planted a soft kiss on his head. She picked up her bag and stepped out of the

room. Moments later, she was back in his room. She bent down and hugged him close. She tried but couldn't let him go. As I watched with moist eyes, I only saw the silent tears of a mother. There was not an ounce of strength in my body that could face her. I sat there silently, incapacitated. Sheetal finally came out of the room.

'S-sir, I need to ... show you ... something ...' Her tough voice was breaking as she spoke.

She had finished packing everything in her house. She had spent more time at my home on her last day in the city than her own. Now, she showed me where I could find his books, his clothes, the clothes that he no longer wore, his medicines, his toys ... everything related to his life. I followed her around the house. I hadn't realised that she had been taking care of so many things.

She was telling me so much about my son in such detail. I had not even thought of these things, even though I had spent time with Ayush every day since he was born. It felt like Sheetal was leaving her child in someone else's care for a few days. I thought she would stay there forever, instructing me about his favourite toys, his favourite food and his favourite shoes, when she finally said, 'Sir, I am leaving.'

I nodded. A sigh escaped me. 'Okay, the time has come.'

I picked up Ayush's favourite teddy bear and held it out to her. 'You can keep it.'

Her hands shook as she took it. She raised it to her lips, kept it in her bag, and mumbled, 'Thanks.'

Sheetal was still holding a large package in her hands. Her feet dragged, as if refusing to leave. She turned to me again. 'Sir, tomorrow is my birthday. Will you give me one small gift?'

'Oh, I should have bought something for you. Please tell me ... what do you want. It completely escaped my mind.'

I could see the hesitation in her. She was debating whether she should ask or not.

'Feel free to ask for anything. It would be my pleasure to give you something of your choice.'

She unpacked the gift-wrapped object she was holding. I had thought it was for Ayush but, as she unwrapped it, it seemed as if she was giving it to me. She handed the box to me. 'You are giving me something ...? I thought you were asking for a gift.'

In reply, she only looked at the box I was holding. With immense curiosity, I opened it. It was a framed picture of Sheetal holding a child in her arms. The child was my Ayush. The photo had been clicked by me after her wedding ceremony. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

'This is a beautiful picture,' I said.

'Sir, I want a favour ...'

I frowned.

'Could you please put this photo on the wall ... there?' She indicated the wall that held my collage.

I immediately removed the collage and put up her picture with Ayush. I looked at the collage in my hands, reminiscent of my dreams. 'Don't you worry ... I will put this in the other room.'

'Sorry for doing this ...'

'No, no ... there is no need to feel sorry. This was such a small thing to ask ...'

She nodded. 'Sir, one more request.'

I looked at her, keen to know what was on her mind.

'I know I have no authority ... that I am no one to say this ...' She couldn't shake off her hesitation, '... but you should get married again. Rather than struggling with your memories on the balcony and destroying yourself with cigarette fumes ...'

I didn't say anything, just looked at her emotionlessly.

'Every kid deserves a family.' She turned her face towards the room Ayush was sleeping in. Suddenly her cell phone rang. 'Yes ... I will be there ... just five more minutes.'

I assumed it was Subhajit, waiting outside the society. 'Sheetal, you should go now. Your train leaves early in the morning.'

She looked at me with unblinking eyes. Her eyes, puffy and red-rimmed, teared up again. She was sad, and angry at me.

'This is the best thing I can do,' I said. 'I am trying to find a job in Pune. You go and get settled ...' I hoped this hope would make her happy.

'That would be the best thing ... if it could happen.' She was trying her best to keep her emotions in check, but a sob escaped her. 'Please ... don't let me get erased from his life. I want to live in his memories. When he grows older, never ever tell him that he was loved by a transgender woman. Tell him he was loved by a mother.'

Her train was scheduled to depart early in the morning. Her tears stayed with me long after she was gone.

I looked at the clock. It was one o'clock already. There was nothing in the house except dead silence. I had already smoked six cigarettes and was feeling suffocated.

I kept pacing up and down in the living room, and checked on Ayush several times. He was sleeping peacefully. Back in the living room, I looked at the images on the wall. On one wall, my wife was smiling, holding a six-month-old Ayush. I turned to the other wall, where Sheetal stood with three-year-old Ayush in her arms.

My eyes kept flitting between the two pictures. My suffocation intensified. It felt like my son's two mothers were looking at me.

I went to the kitchen, took out a forgotten bottle of whisky that lay in a cupboard there, and made myself a small peg. As I washed it down with cold water, there was a sharp burning sensation in my throat. My hands moved to make a second drink and a third. They burnt a course of fire down my throat, but there was no relief. I was sure that something had happened to me. But I did not even feel like I was drunk.

It was three in the morning. My eyes rested on the Lord Krishna statue in a corner of the living room. Picking it up and placing it on my lap, I stared at the image. Krishna had two mothers. One was his biological mother, Devaki. The second was Yashoda, the foster-mother. Yashoda played an important role in Krishna's upbringing. She nurtured him and cared for him his entire childhood, but she missed his wedding.

We all know that Krishna was the biological son of Devaki. Then why is Yashoda's image in every temple?

My mind answered, 'Devaki never accepted Krishna as a son; she regarded him as a God. But for Yashoda, he was always a son.'

I looked at my Kanika. She was, as usual, smiling. I kept looking at her, looking for the answers that I knew she would have. She smiled at me with an apparent answer in her eyes. But I could not read that answer.

'Am I doing the right thing?' I asked her.

Her words echoed back to me, '*A true hero is one who smiles through silent pain and fights battles nobody knows about.*'

I washed my tear-soaked face. I found a piece of paper and started writing a letter. Then I went to the almirah and packed a few things in a travel bag.

Sheetal's train would leave at six o'clock, and it was already four. I shut my eyes, but tears escaped the barriers of my closed lids.

Getting up, I pulled on my jeans. I opened the almirah to reach for a comfortable yellow T-shirt, but my eyes landed on the black shirt instead. I pulled it out. Once dressed, I looked at myself in the mirror. The person there, wearing the black shirt and blue jeans, had no regret on his face. He just smiled.

I went to the room Ayush was sleeping in. I picked him up and hugged him close. Then, picking up the bag I had packed, I left the house.

I put Ayush in the back seat, in his car seat; he was still asleep. I started the car, and began driving towards Nizamuddin railway station. On NH 24, the traffic was heavy even at this hour. When I reached the station, it was nearly five-thirty. Only half an hour before the train was scheduled to leave.

As I parked my vehicle, Ayush opened his eyes. He looked around the car and then out of the window.

'Where are we?' he asked. 'Are we going somewhere?'

'Yes ... we are going to meet Mamma.'

'Mamma? Is Mamma going somewhere?'

'Yes ... she is going to a new place.'

'We will also go,' Ayush declared.

'Maybe someday ...' I put the letter in his pocket.

'What is this?'

‘Give this to Mamma. It is her birthday gift. Today is Mamma’s birthday. Did you know that?’

‘I want cake ...’ Ayush said excitedly.

I nodded at my innocent son.

Although I was filled with a rush of energy, it took us over ten minutes to reach the platform from which the train was scheduled to depart. I looked at the station clock; only ten minutes till departure. I knew which coach they were in. I called Sheetal on her phone.

‘Hello, sir ... good morning.’

‘Hi, Sheetal, happy birthday!’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Where are you now?’

‘In our coach ... the train is about to start.’

‘Come outside for a few minutes. I need to give you your birthday gift.’

I disconnected the call quickly. I didn’t want to answer any more queries. I saw them appear at the door of their coach. They stepped down.

‘Mamma ...’ Ayush called.

‘Aayyusssh!’ She nearly screamed in her excitement.

Ayush ran up to her and hugged her. Sheetal hugged him back, planting kisses all over his face which was soon smeared with her tears.

Sheetal walked up to me, Ayush in her arms. ‘Why did you bring him here, sir? It will be so difficult if he starts to cry when the train leaves.’

‘Happy birthday, Sheetal.’ I didn’t answer her question. There were many thoughts flowing through my mind and I needed to keep them in line.

‘Ayush, you need to go with Papa. I will be back in the evening,’ Sheetal said to Ayush.

‘No ... I will also come in the train ... I want to have your birthday cake.’ Ayush wound his arms around her neck.

‘Let me drop you inside,’ I moved towards the train, bag in hand.

Sheetal and Subhajit enquired about the bag, but it was too difficult for me to speak. The station clock showed there were only two minutes left for departure. I took the letter from Ayush and gave it to Sheetal. Then I left the coach.

Dear Sheetal,

I am writing this letter because I have brought you the most precious gift in life.

My biggest concern when Kanika left us was, who will love Ayush like her? I never thought anyone could love Ayush more than Kanika. She was his mother. Yet, in all these years, I have never felt he was missing out on motherly love.

Whenever I saw you hugging my Ayush and caring for him, I never saw your gender. It was always a mother who loved her son.

I have always wanted to do something heroic in life, but circumstances were always against me. My only success in life was finding my Kanika.

I was always a hero for her, but my destiny took even her away. I realised life is the biggest theatre, where the real hero has to sacrifice and smile at any cost. However, many things died along with her.

I cursed my fate, and screamed at God. My version of God had died that day. Then I met you, and saw the struggle you have been through in your life.

There is always a smile on your face. No one can ever imagine what you have been facing. For the first time I felt that mine was not the worst hand that life could deal.

I do not believe in God but I believe that the old stories have lessons for us. Lord Krishna had two mothers, Devaki and Yashoda, but in the images everywhere we only see Yashoda with him. I am not comparing Kanika and Sheetal, but your love is no less than hers.

Ayush will be known as your son. I wish you and Subhajit a happy life, and am leaving my most precious gift, my Ayush, in your care. He will leave the city with you. The bag has all his immediate requirements. I will courier the rest of his things soon.

My association with this city is also nearing its end. I will also relocate to Pune—my company had offered me a job there. I will join you there soon.

I have a request to make. Never accept the taunts that the world throws at you. Every woman is a daughter, friend, sister, wife or mother to someone, and you are no less than anyone.

But you need not classify yourself in any gender. There is no shame in being a transgender person. There is nothing as powerful as a mother's love, and nothing as healing as a child's love.

Before I met you, I had never noticed eunuchs who dance on the streets for money, and I never understood the pain of a childless mother. Thank you for making me a better person.

Hope you liked the gift. Happy birthday!

Never surrender.

Abhay

I was on the platform, standing a few steps away from the train. Sheetal came to the door, holding Ayush in her arms. She wanted to say something, but the train had started moving. She had tears in her eyes.

I shouted, 'Bye, Ayush!'

Ayush waved, 'B ... bye ... bye ... Daddy.'

The most precious gift of my life was moving away from me with every passing second. I waved at them, and they waved back. I stared at the train which was slowly gaining speed.

I stood there in my black shirt, eyes full of tears and a smile on my salty, wet lips. When the train was out of my sight, I closed my eyes, trying to hold in them the image of Ayush's happy face with his mother. I allowed the tears to flow, unheeded.

My phone vibrated. There was a WhatsApp message from Sheetal: 'You are a true hero, sir.'

Postface

The term 'transgender' is used to denote people of diverse kinds of sexual orientations, including homosexual, pan-sexual, poly-sexual, asexual and bisexual.

Therefore, this is a more common term with a comprehensive range of category.

A eunuch is an AMAB (assigned male at birth) person who has had some or all of their external genitals surgically removed for a social or political purpose. Historically, consent was not a factor; nor was identity.

Often the world looks at the people of third sex, eunuch, transgender persons or hijras with derision. While most often hijras are thought of as nothing different from those who are transgendered, scientifically these two terms denote different sets of people.

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