

**FEW MOMENTS OF
LETTING GO**

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About the author

Kavita is the author of *Few Moments of letting Go*. Besides giving her time to this book she had to put her best spin to parenting her daughter, handling her boss at a demanding marketing job, dropping down dead with her close friends while random adventures, fixing household stuff and of course her addiction to reading. She has been writing Poems and Articles since last ten years and have submitted more than one articles in various formats. She believes in spreading love and light around her by touching all the lives that she encounters in a positive way. She loves to interact with children and is also practice psychotherapy in the same direction.

She believes in what she writes. She has firm faith in the fact that all human beings are interconnected at a larger level and our feelings affect each other immensely. The book is an attempt to connect with people and speak with them through a story.

DEDICATED TO

My Father and Mother

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Few Moment of letting go is about a journey. Any journey leads to meeting lot of people. Some leave good memories and others maybe a little not so good. My book would have never seen the light of the day without being motivated by my friends. I always told them I would never put any word of thanks to them and they all know why. However I must mention PPS, Ekta Sagar (my Reiki partner and consultant), Rohit Bhole, Shweta Thakur, Urvashi Rai, HA, Pooja Raha, Charu Tripathi, BD, Charu Bhutani, Abhinav Sethi, Sachit Bhatiaand Anisha Sethi and many more who have been reminding me to finish the book.

And ofcourse two most important people Late Nimesh Tanna and Kapil Digani. Thanks for your support always. However any name or resemblance in my book to anyone is fictitious and has nothing to do with any real event. It just means that I was too much in love with the name.

PREFACE

A few hours before I finished my book I was tired myself. I kept everything aside and without knowing a reason I shed couple of tears. As I sat feeling drained I asked my maid to fix me a cup of hot coffee. I noticed the picture frame that hung on my walls. My daughter smiled at me through the brown canvass frame. Giving in to an urge I took out an old album from the closet. Looking at old pictures was like watching a rainbow disappear. In one of the pictures my father was playing with me in snow clad mountains. My mother held me and my sister in her younger times. I realised they were old and tired now. Yet when they met me I found them full of life.

Suddenly I knew why I felt tired. We all are travelling through this life. Our souls constantly carrying the weights of our physical bodies. A constant journey and various encounters. Imagine the stories that the entire universe would have had a compilation of, given that each soul has its own individual tale to offer. Our pleasure, our pain, the heart breaks, the adventures, the disappointments so much and so more. Our hearts made of glass with unique glass paintings carved on them.

Any journey gets us tired and so was my book. A journey I made with a woman who realised that life best lived is that of spontaneity. 'Few

moments of letting go' is a collection of random life experiences of Maya Dewan who figures out that people end up carrying too much baggage with them in life.

It is easy to accept death because we close the chapter. It is more difficult to accept a simple betrayal because we carry it with ourselves. We don't give closures to the chapters in our life. Like dead bodies we drag them. We forgive but don't forget. Spontaneous life will also bring pain and heartbreaks but it also brings courage to accept mistakes. The maturity to stand up for our own decisions. The strength to start all over again. The integrity to be able to enjoy to the fullest. Above all the child like simplicity to live in the moment.

A journey is all about varied experiences. It is bound to get us tired. All we need to do is relax, sit back but not give up. I went back to my desk and just about as I thought of Maya Dewan, I knew exactly what we both learnt through this together. Getting sad and worn out is normal. We need few moments of letting go in our lives to shed off the layers of dirt. We need to give closures to old chapters and move on in now. There is no one else to lean on but ourselves. Maya Dewan's journey is any girl's journey through life. There's no end to it for there's no end to life. Its only message is to move on.

ONE

At half past midnight, the telephone rang. Why would that goddamn thing ring at this hour? Maya picked up her phone. She could barely open her permanently tired eyes.

It was Esha, her friend. Her name blinks on her phone after a long time. Why today? Why now? She answered the call with a whispering hello.

There was a pause for a second.

“Maya,” answered another whisper, “Were you sleeping?” her voice was stressed, deeply stressed.

“What happened?” Maya felt her heart sinking with a weird anticipation.

“Nemo's dead, Maya. He killed himself a couple of hours ago.”

Struggling to comprehend what she heard, Maya put the lights on and sat down on a chair. She was bewildered, not sure if she was awake or asleep.

“What the hell are you saying? He can never kill himself! It can't be true.”

Of all the people she knew in the world, he was the one she would never have expected to take his own life.

“He jumped into the sea from a bridge.”

“I don't know what to say... Why?”

“No one knows yet! I wondered if you would know about it

and I thought I must tell you.”

“Yeah, yes ofcourse,” Maya's voice failed her.

Strangely, but instinctively she opened Facebook. Once in a while she would check his page to read his work.

Yes, there it was.

R.I.P. Nimesh Tanna.

Someone had gone ahead and liked it.

Oddly there is nothing you could dislike on Facebook. How similar it is to an already destined life, where we can't dislike what God gives. Whatever happens we have to accept it wholeheartedly.

Dead! He could not do so. Maya felt a sense of guilt. She remembered their last meeting a few months ago, the day before he left for Australia. How she had told him that she was too old for him. That there was someone else, besides...

She had hoped that he would soon get over it and realised it was no more than an infatuation. Obviously, he hadn't.

Maya Dewan, senior editor, Republic Publishing House, did not know what to think. The news hit her hard because Nimesh was synonymous for his cheerful smile. Her hazel brown eyes looked past the belt of universe at that moment. She herself was a lost cause trying to figure her life out. Why did this happen to her? What role did she play in Nimesh's death? Did she even have any?

Dead, he can't be. For God's sake, he should not have killed himself. What could have gone wrong in his lively and lovely life? This jigsaw puzzle of life, confused Maya. She had no idea of what to expect from it.

Too many things gone unexplained, anyway. And now this, unless Nimesh comes alive again, the reason for his death will be a mystery.

She still remembered the misty evenings she spent with him. Though she wasn't in love with Nemo she sure loved the moments together. Besides, then she didn't believe in love. Not anymore.. She did believe in those moments as they distracted her from the turmoil that twirled inside her.

Nemo's face was sketching up on the wall. It changed colour every second. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't. Maybe the flood marks of her soul had reached a different high level.

Floodmarks

Life has a unique method of passing lessons to generations. She learnt that it gives the most painful stab by cutting deep inside and makes us more human. A broken heart is always a kinder heart. She recalled how close friends turned bitter in a second. More than once she had been hurt by the people she met in her journey of life. She was struck by the kind of lives they were going through. Her own life too was no better. Life was a series of mistakes, she thought, her's at least was. She was loved and abandoned. She had been honest, but she had lied too. She had always been fearless, but at the same time she felt fear too. She loved passionately to the extent of being desperate. She believed in herself so much so that she felt was the master of her own life. Yet she was insecure and weak. She wanted to be held while she dealt with her own complexes and flaws. She was everything black and white. Not even for a moment she was a fake or a coward. Never, she was genuine, always. She had her own set of pale, honey drenched episodes that seemed like some misplaced dreams.

TWO

“Why are we so desperate to be loved?” Nemo had asked her while looking at the sea one day. Why is it that the whole world is in search of that one blissful moment where everything ends? Yet we are so scared of new beginnings. Then and there Maya had thought he nailed it. We are so desperate. Allofus. Aren't we? That's what makes us so needy and vulnerable to pain.

Maybe she should not have pleaded Kartik to marry her. That was her first mistake. She should have waited, should have been emotionally self-dependent.

It was while she was married to Kartik and trying to figure her life without him, did she meet Nimesh. He was infectiously cheerful and that made her fond of him.

Maya never imagined that the intensity would grow by leaps and bounds? In a daze, she kept looking at the Facebook page. *Come back and surprise me, you kid. What did you prove by killing yourself?*

As if from a projector, images of Nimesh flashed matching up to her big, rainbow coloured eyes. The assortment of images flashed on for a while, and then a feeling of blankness conquered her mind.

She collapsed on the bed. Nimesh was gone and so was her sleep. The hours limped slowly, very slowly into the morning.

THREE

She remembered when she fell in love for the first time. How eager she had been, how dazzled she was. There were butterflies all around, even inside her stomach. Everything made her smile, even her Stepmom. She woke up with his thoughts and the last thought before sleep was him. Life felt colourful and beautiful. She met Abhay at Chemistry tuitions, a subject she just couldn't comprehend.

It was a batch of five and the students tried their best to outdo one another. The equations confounded Maya, but Abhay seemed to have no trouble at all. More than the chemistry classes, his thoughts troubled her. She felt happy about the fact that he noticed her as well. She felt elated that she was not losing out to Pallavi. Deep inside she used to think Pallavi was far better looking than her. She found her own eyes too big for her face. She hated her curls that were so difficult to comb through. Pallavi had long smooth hair all the way down to her waist. And Maya could never get over the gap in her front teeth, though her mom used to say that it would get her big money someday. "Maya, did you understand the equations?" the chemistry teacher asked.

"Yes, I did," she lied, in fear of appearing dumb.

"Can you solve the second equation for us then?"

"Ah, well ... I can try." She knew she would never be able to solve it.

She wondered whether studying chemistry was meant for

her. May be she should have chosen humanities. She wondered whether she had committed a mistake by choosing to study sciences. Yet mistakes made her what she was today. She would not have been Maya Dewan had she not made the mistakes in her life. She was good with literature, but like so many others, she thought science was the most intelligent thing to pursue. That's when she learnt that it's not always great to be part of the herd.

"Where are you lost, Maya?" the teacher asked in an irritated tone.

"I'm thinking about the solution."

"Pallavi, may be you can help her find one? I don't think she has understood the concept."

She thought the tutor, Mr. Shankar, should be a bit more understanding. What if a student took time to understand? Surely he could wait with some patience. She felt humiliated in front of Abhay. It irritated her more for Pallavi was one of his best students.

"Sure, Sir," Pallavi answered, as usual.

Once the class was over, they packed their books and got ready to move on. As she walked home along the narrow lane lined by bushes, she wondered how Pallavi managed to understand stuff so well.

"Hey Maya, wait!" she heard Abhay calling. Her blood froze. She looked around to see if it was really Abhay. She bit her lower lip and stopped to wait for him, her heart started racing.

The hot guy is running behind you, she thought. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Maya, would you care for an ice cream?" he asked.

Say yes, say yes, say yes. The teenager inside her was yelling.

"No, I don't think I can. My mother will be waiting for me."

"Well... Okay. Let me know if you have any problem with today's lessons. I'll be happy to help you."

"Of course, I will."

My problem is you. Her heart whispered.

She cursed herself for being such a fool. This was what she yearned for and would have given an arm and a leg for. Yet, when he asked her out, she had politely declined. How smart was that?

"Let me walk with you till your house. That is, if you don't

mind?" Abhay pursued.

Yippee, her heart did a somersault.

Why did you say no to the ice cream? Her heart ached.

They walked home chatting about weather in general.. It was hardly five minutes' walk. Once home she placed her bag on the study shelf, still excited from the walk. She sat there thinking about it for some time.

Home was no home for her. She never felt at ease there, especially after her mother's death. She wanted to be nice to her stepmother but deep inside she knew they weren't meant to get on well together.

As a child, Maya had been very sensitive. Maya was above average when it came to her grades. She was popular among her teachers as well as with the other children. She was short, but her lean structure and defined jawline made it up for her. The constant brooding look in her brown mysterious eyes spoke coded volumes.

Her father was a simple, hardworking man who had a small factory that manufactured mixers and grinders. Money was adequate enough to make both ends meet, and for him, his life was divided between work and family. He really did not have anything else. It was as if nothing else mattered.

When his wife committed suicide, he was shaken to the core. It was his love for his daughter that helped him pull through the ordeal.

After her mother's suicide her father remarried, more for Maya's sake than anything else. Her stepmother, Neetu, was a pleasant natured, good looking woman, but she had preconceived ideas of how children should be brought up. Children were meant to obey, she thought. She took good care of her husband, cooked decently. She did have a liking for Maya, but their ideas about discipline clashed. Maya could never relate to her. She was a bird who wanted to fly across the sky. Stepmom was a tree. It was like they both sat on the banks of same river yet on opposite sides. Perhaps they both wished they could understand each other better. If only Neetu wasn't keen on Maya being an example for others, both in her studies and otherwise, everything would have been fine.

The doorbell rang. Dad was back. She loved him. The moment he returned home was the brightest moment of the day for her.

But it was different with her stepmother.

“Why only boys would call you?” she would ask Maya.

“Why? Girls too call me,” she would reply.

But her stepmother wouldn't stop. She would go on and on from one thing to the

Not again. Please don't start that again.

“Maya, you need to be more ladylike. Look at your friend, Pallavi. How well she carries herself. Look at yourself. How do I make you understand? Men don't marry girls like you, they need good and obedient wives.”

“Relax, ma,” she said brushing a lock of hair from her forehead.

FOUR

A bell rang, breaking her thoughts. It was the coffee guy.

“Madam, your coffee,” he said.

She took the cup of coffee from him, cursing him for shaking her out of her reverie. She turned towards her laptop to peep at her Facebook account. Was he really dead? She remembered the first time she saw Nimesh. He was half drunk, almost yelling as he danced. They were at Club 10, a hangout for the well-to-do, who mostly seemed to have nothing else to do. She was sitting at one of the tables, toying with her cocktail and thinking about the marriage she wished she had not gotten into.

“Come, dance.” Her friend Reva Sharma called her.

She shook her head. She was too shy to dance, without the drink flooding her brain. She sipped her drink letting her mind wander away.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi!” she said in reply, involuntarily, turning around to see a slim guy standing next to her. His naughty grey eyes sparkled. Grey eyes! Whoa. He was cute as hell, though.

“I think I’ve seen you earlier,” he said.

“Really!” she sounded disinterested.

“I saw you ordering at the bar a few minutes back,” he smiled.

.He was such a cliché and immature. But he was cute, she thought.

“Yeah, or maybe I have been photographing someone who looks like you.”

What does he want to say? She wondered if he was trying to impress her.

“You're a photographer?”

“Yes, but I hardly get to do nude photography,” he said *sotto voce*.

The kid had nerves. But his cute looks were disarming. She would not have tolerated such a statement from anyone else. Yet that was the beginning of a mad friendship. Nimesh started visiting her often. They used to chat for hours about photography and how he wanted to write a book. There was something different about him, but he was her excellent companion, full of life.

“You want to write a book?” She had looked at him dumbstruck. The guy looked like he'd just been weaned off his mother's milk. What could he possibly write about?

And now he was dead. There will be no book. Only a closed chapter.

The pun was not in good taste, she thought.

She cursed herself for not regularly staying in touch with him. The last she heard from him was when he was fully immersed in his course on photography at an Australian institute.

Once, when they met, he had shown her some of his photographs. Those sure had depth in them which she did not expect from someone who was so young.

He was a decade younger than her. He was brought up single-handedly by his mother who he looked up to. The best part was he was taught to respect women. He was born and brought up in Mumbai and did not have the indifference Delhi seem to sow in its people.

“You know Maya dear, I've written a poem about you. I'll show it to you someday,” he said dramatically. They had come for a candy to the beach and Nimesh was talking about his dream to open an advertising agency. It was a starry night and they could see a ship anchored in the sea. The sand below their feet was cold. He walked, though Maya, however did not take her slippers off as she was too lazy to walk holding them in her hands. She would rather let them get wet with her. The sand felt soothing.

“Oh dear Nimesh! Would you just sing to me?” She mimicked

him naughtily.

'You should take off your slippers first. Feel the sand.'

Maya did as told. The sand tickled her wet feet. The foam massaged and hugged her sore sole. Every now and then a little wave would come and wash her feet.

Whenever he was around she became a teenager. That was a magical change she gifted her. The teenager in her was very fond of Nimesh.

But he was in love with her and told her so.

She did love him or rather she loved herself when he was around. Yet she was scared of him falling in love with her. She was living separate from her husband, but they hadn't got to the divorce zone yet. She was trying to get away from the disappointment and the pain and being with Nimesh was a wonderful remedy.

"Aa a a a a...I love you, Maya. I can wait for you," he used to stutter when excited. T t ttell me you love me too. He held her from the shoulders, making her face him.

She did love that moment. Even the stuttering was cute. In that moment she loved him. She loved the innocence in his eyes. She loved the uber charm, he had. How many types of love one can experience, she wondered. Yet it was not the love that he wanted her to feel.

"You know that I like you, Nimesh. Let's not spoil it. You know I'm older than you, right?"

He would never accept no for an answer. How the hell did the difference in age matter, he asked. What could she tell him, apart from that which mattered?

She had seen so much in life already. He on the other hand was innocent in his ways and deserved a less complicated life.

The innocence in his eyes made her feel miserable. Before she could say anything he looked up and smiled.

"It's fine. I understand."

She sighed and looked at the moon, casting its spell on the sea, with folded arms. The sea knows that it would never touch the moon. The waves rise and keep trying to reach the beautiful moon, to engulf it. The moon just smiles. It grips the sea tight enough only to

see it go again. She felt she was the sea. The dreams rise and then fall, just to rise again. In reality they might never reach the height. Only the flood marks will increase.

FIVE

“You can't die you fool, you moron.” She felt drained. She managed to grab a cup from her wooden shelf. A dark black cup of coffee, its colour reflecting her mood. She poured her ready mix coffee delivered to her and let the microwave do the rest.

“Shall I make a coffee for you?” Maya had asked him when they were brainstorming about a new situation for the book he was writing.

“Do you make good coffee?” he asked, smiling. “If so, go ahead by all means!” She made a face in response to his smile.

They were at his apartment in Mumbai. The sea facing apartment located on the Arabian Sea coastline, was a gift to him from his mother, for his 24th birthday.

He often wondered why he was attracted to her. He liked her as a strong independent woman. She was breathtakingly beautiful, attractive and her eyes were limpid pools. He always thought that there are two Mayas. And only one Maya loved him. She did something to him that he could feel, but could not understand. The Maya, who took him into emptiness with her, own longing for love.

“Maya, you fascinate me. Who are you?” he kept the coffee mugs on the square table.

Such a direct question! But that was how he was!

Who was she after all? A question that she herself had no

answer for. She had often asked the question to herself, "What am I to do in this life?" Nimesh had this ability to make her think. With him around, you would always be guessing what he would say next. With him she felt emotionally high, but only for few moments. She was scared of such moments; moments that made her lose control. Moments that touched hidden flood marks.

"Gosh! Don't think so hard. That little brain of yours will go on strike," he said tickling her.

"Nemo!" Maya was getting restless.

"Every time I look at you, I want to take you. I want to feel you." She felt his fingers on her cheek. She was suddenly conscious of the slight wrinkles under her eyes. His hand travelled down the nape of her neck.

She gasped. He seemed to be in some hurry.

Some moments are more powerful. The visionary moment, in a few seconds, clears the whole meaning of existence. In those moments we are truly alive. In those few moments of letting go we gain everything.

"You're beautiful," he said.

"Nimesh," she tried to protest.

He just didn't listen that moment.

SIX

Nimesh can't be dead.

This was not the first time Maya had experienced such a close brush to death. However, this was not going to be the same. Since the time she heard the news a piece inside her was crumbling slowly, bit by bit. He was too innocent, too young to die.

She walked to the mirror. It was like, a vacuum staring at her eyes from the mirror, smiling dismissively.

She got ready and went to her workplace. Some things are unavoidable, no matter who lives or dies, she thought to herself. It's strange how helpless life makes us feel at times. Everyone needs to fight their own battle. No one can borrow your hurt and no one can feel your pain. That's the way things are! One thing that even death can't stop is the flow of life. Whatever happens, there's always a new morning.

Somehow she went through the day's work. It looked as if it was just another day at the office, yet inside her were a bundle of emotions trying to hit her walls and break open.

"Hey Maya, how's work going?" asked Rahul. He was her teammate.

He jolted her out of her thoughts as she stood lost near the vending machine, overlooking an empty space. "Hey!" she smiled. "You look little dull today."

-“Nothing, was just watching those birds feeding her babies.” She pointed at the tree outside the window.

“Are you coming for the party tomorrow?”

“No, I won't be able to. I have some chores to deal with.”

“Anyways, there will be nothing in the party except some drunken monkeys jumping around, dancing!”

Few people desperately trying to network with seniors and some seniors casually trying to exploit their position would attend the party. Beginning of some casual flings maybe and some artificial conversations by pseudo intellectuals over alcohol! She thought to herself.

The window near the coffee vending machine overlooked a huge tree. She hadn't previously noticed the nest hanging on one of the branches. The mother bird was vigorously feeding the little ones. The baby birds looked ugly. Perhaps they hatched recently. They had no feathers. They fought with each other to grab what the mother bird was giving.

She thought how similar life is, though it was a corny comparison. We keep struggling for opportunities thinking that it will make us happier. Does that really help? The day ended with her going through her mundane job sheet mechanically. She picked up her black string bag, oblivious of her surroundings, she mechanically drove back home. The house was still and silent. She switched on the lights and opened the windows. Her apartment overlooked a large playground where children would play. The road that led to the apartment was rather narrow with potholes. Yet the playground was a relief.

In a city where homes stick to each other the playground brought a little open space for her. She saw toddlers jumping up and down in the sand pit. Some guys were playing football. There was a small group of women who were chitchatting in a corner. A few health conscious men and women were walking as usual. Maya recognised many of the faces, though she knew none of them. She wondered how similar each day seemed to be.

It would be different in Nimesh's house. His mother would not be chit chatting. She trembled as she thought about the woman who had already lost her husband. And now her son. What could be

more unfair than this? The silence cannot be broken by any laughter.
It will rest heavy on the heart and on the walls.

SEVEN

She heard her mobile ringing.

“Hi, Maya. I've got some good news for you. Daniel Publishing House has agreed to publish your book! This calls for a party, Maya,” Reva said.

“Reallyyyy...?” Maya shouted.

“Yup, they have a wing which is encouraging new Indian authors. They liked our draft and are ready to take this forward for commercial negotiations.”

Maya felt as if she finally could breathe. Finally, her work would be recognised. However, she felt guilty and selfish about being happy now when she was supposed to mourn.

“It deserves a grand party,” Reva screamed, “And please don't come in your blue faded torn jeans, okay?”

“Okay. By the way it is not torn... (huh). That's style.” She hung up.

Who'd have a thought that there would come a day when people would pay big money for torn jeans!

“Yippeeeeeee!” Maya could not control her excitement. This was a dream come true. Life had taken a 180 degree turn. She was going to make a mark for herself. She will create her own identity and paste it on the wall of the world. She could not contain her excitement. She jumped up and down on her bed like a small child. She was happy. As she looked out of the window, suddenly, thought about Nimesh again.

“Is it you who is doing this for me, Nemo?” She felt his presence. Yet it made her terribly sad as she could not share her joy with him. The intensity of any moment increases or decreases depending upon who we share it with, she thought.

“You shouldn't have been dead. You should have been here sharing this joy with me,” she said, looking up at the sky. She never missed him so much when he was alive.

The sky was a light shade of blue. Everything looked so lovely. Yet to her everything was also laced with sadness. A smile painted in a tear. A lie trapped in a truth.

She wanted to talk to Nimesh. She had read that there were ways and means to talk to the dead, but then she was scared of treading on an unknown path. She had learnt magic and heard about occult ways. There was another dark side of hers that she kept away from the world. She had a guide who introduced her to this world of mysticism. He wanted her to learn to let go and be indifferent to the world around. He wanted to help her discover herself. He had crossed this dimension. He lived in a different dimension, he was a magician.

EIGHT

Her mobile rang. Reva was on the line.

“What’s wrong with you? This is my third call. Why were you not picking up the phone, damn it?” she screamed.

Third call? How is it possible that she did not hear the phone? Strange!!

“Sorry,” she said.

“Well, my dear author. We’ve decided to celebrate your success tomorrow evening. A pre-launch of the book! I have planned a surprise for you. Just be there at Nitin’s house at 6 p.m.” Reva’s voice was ringing with excitement.

“Who else will be there?”

“Come and you will get to know.”

“Why at Nitin’s house?”

“That was the best place I could think of. He’s the only one I know with a house that overlooks the sea. He was also nice enough to let us have it,” she said.

I knew another guy too, who had an apartment overlooking the sea.

She thought of Nimesh’s apartment that also overlooked the sea.

“But you broke off with him, didn’t you? How could you ask for a party at his house, then?”

“Maya, come on. Life is too short to live in the past.”

“It was all over long back. We decided to be friends now. Are you coming or not.”

She heard the silence behind the receiver. "Come on, I am doing this for you. I have invited a few hot top models and cool dudes too. We can take our photographs with them and try and get them published. Any publicity helps."

"Why would they publish our pictures?"

"Firstly, there is a lot of talk about the book. Secondly, we would pay them. Thirdly, you shouldn't be asking such dumb questions, it does not suit you."

"Paid publicity!" "Is it?" She giggled. "Money can bloody well buy everything," Her tone was sarcastic.

Except peace, her heart murmured.

"I'll be there."

Reva Sharma and she went back to her college days in Delhi. Since then they glued together in ups and downs. Reva had a round face with straight hair, unlike the unruly curls Maya possessed. She was beautiful, especially when she smiled. She was extremely well networked and spent half her life on Facebook, Google Chat or Skype. WhatsApp however was the new entrant in her list of apps. She was hooked to them. It was no less than an addiction, for she was on a hunt for a suitable match for herself, but couldn't narrow down on anyone. She developed some interest in Nitin, a software engineer. But that too had broken down.

It escaped Maya how she was different from Reva. Yet they got along with each other like a house on fire. With Reva, she was sure that she would not be judged. She would not have to pretend. They would get bored, irritated, fight or even have a difference of opinion, but this would never force her to do what pleased her friend. They would be there for each other. It suddenly struck her that Nimesh and Reva were so similar. They never judged her over anything. That really helped maintain relationships, she thought. It's so difficult to find people who weren't judgemental. She had learnt to appreciate this trait from Vikram, her mentor and friend.

Her fondness for Vikram was weird. She herself could not comprehend it. She let it be for another day. He taught her to go beyond human judgements. If nature is so flexible about everything how can we be so stringent?

She picked up the phone to dial Vikram's number. He understood her like no one else ever did.

"Yes, Ms. Dewan," she heard his voice, warm as ever. His voice soothed her.

"You know what, Nimesh is no more."

"What!! Are you serious?" he took a pause. "That's bad news. The death of a friend has always bad news."

Vikram knew she was on the way to discover herself. He always saw a light in her soul. The light would never let her give up. He was a magician with a strong intuition. He had seen all there was to be noticed.

"My book is being published by Daniel Publishing House," she broke the silence.

"That's a good news."

"But I'm missing Nimesh a lot. I don't understand why. I don't feel excited."

"It's obvious Maya. He was your friend and a death of a young person is always difficult."

"He killed himself!"

"Uh! Oh! My God, Why did he? That's strange-and - sad."

"It's making me restless Vikram. It's reminding me of my past. It's bringing to mind, even the things that didn't happen! It is making me feel guilty. I don't know why. I want to talk to him. I feel so broken right now and I don't even know how to explain this."

"Hmmm. That's your subconscious. Often there are thoughts that we dump in our subconscious, afraid to even think about them. A shocking situation can bring them back to the front. It's called the Trigger," he said.

"It makes me sad. I feel we all are running in vain. Ultimately, no one is going to gain. Finally, we are all going to be dead. What's all this mess for? Why don't I feel satisfied? Why can't I just stay?"

"This is life's maze, Maya. Everyone has to pass through to reach another level. It is like a 3-D video game. We have to grow level by level."

"What levels, Vikram? Ultimately, all of us will die. Death is the ultimate truth. Isn't it?"

“The truth will ultimately free us from the bondage. The life force will find its way and take you to another dimension which you or anyone can't sense right now. Life throws many disappointments to us Maya; the hard way is to face them with patience.” He knew she was going through pain.

Vikram wanted to hold her at that instant. He wanted her to feel the bliss that he felt when she was around. This connection made him stay together with her even when she was not there. She was burning inside him like a flame and he was burning because of his love for her, every moment.

“I know how it feels to lose a loved one, Maya.”

“Oh, I wasn't in love with him!”

“At one point you did Maya, maybe you didn't realise. He was close to your heart and you denied him your love.”

“No Vikram, I don't think so. I liked him, but it was not love. In fact you know how unlucky I've been in love.”

“The problem is that we as a generation are not clear about what love is. Maya, love is energy. The focus has to be right. Remember the orange circle ritual. That is the power of moment. It should give you a sense of togetherness. Your heart breaks because you lose focus. You want to cling to it and not let go. You need to search within yourself and figure out what you want. You should stop taking things for granted and learn to appreciate the reality. You wanted to write a book and be famous. You should be full of gratitude for it. Instead, now it doesn't excite you anymore. There was a time when Nimesh was there, trying to talk to you. It did not excite you enough and now you are restless. You need to live in your present, Maya. Ironically, human beings want to own love, but love wants to set us free. We are travellers in this journey of life. Don't forget the art of rejoicing special moments. Be grateful.”

She didn't agree that she took things for granted. Why would Vikram talk to her like that? There was a silence for a few seconds. Both kept quiet.

“Maya, life is another form of death. It's about reaching the ninth and last dimension. Death is like a black hole. We need to pass through it to enter another dimension.”

“You think I take things for granted.” Maya digressed from the conversation.

“Yes, I think so!” he sighed.

“Have I ever taken you for granted?”

“Me, you always can. That’s an exception,” he chuckled.

“Well, I think I’ll call you later.” She sounded irritated.

Had he been too curt with her? But it was important, for she was losing focus. He knew her for so many years now. He had seen all her ups and downs. Her joys and sorrows, her sadness and exhilarations. He knew she was the one.

Everyone has a pre-defined way to go through life. Some are meant to suffer and find out their way. Suffering makes them better. It is the pleasure known only to the sufferer’s heart. Maya was also chosen to suffer, endure and set her heart free finally.

The problem arises when we let the suffering stay. Our hearts are designed to let all our sufferings write a lesson and pass. That’s the way to freedom. It is we who get caught in their bitterness and let them embed into us slowly. He knew she had strong faith, but it was dwindling now. It was time for her to absorb the knowledge. Faith and knowledge have to go hand in hand. It is essential to master both if one wants to enter a higher dimension and connect with the higher elements of nature.

Maya felt restless. She felt angry at herself and everybody she ever knew. She felt betrayed for she had lost her mother at a tender age and it made her feel jealous of other kids.

She felt empty. She felt as if she was being choked to death. She tried to scream, but no sound would come out. She did scream again and this time it was loud. She broke down sobbing. She lay on the bed and felt the emptiness grow in her.

NINE

Images of a lifetime ran through her mind. It was as if she was watching a film. She had read about parallel universes. Metaphysics says nothing gets over in the sense of time. This means everything is eternal. Every moment, every emotion is eternal. It keeps on repeating itself. It's the theory of eternalism. All points of time are equally real, be it present, past or future. Nothing ever truly dies. The moment is forever embedded in the chronicles of time and space. Hence life and death possess same intensity and same control. It's no wonder that we go through moments that leave scars that pain forever. She thought of her father. How much he loved her!

She remembered her mother as a woman of passion. Short in build with brown eyes and a twinkling smile. They used to sing and dance together. She too had loved Maya a lot.

Maya turned to look at the picture of her mother on the table. Looking at it made her feel better. Her mother had been a painter, and lived in a world of her own. It was she who ignited sensitivity towards colours in her. She missed the times when they both would soak their hands in paint and leave marks on walls.

She was a lively person, but there was another side to her. Maya remembered her shedding tears in silence. Perhaps there was some kind of vacuum in her that she was unable to share, or express. Once she had walked into the bedroom to see her mother sitting with black paint spread on her canvas. She looked at Maya differently. She

looked scared. As soon as she saw Maya she grabbed her and forced her to crawl under the bed. Maya was almost smothered. It was the first time she felt scared of her mother. Such incidents started happening more often.

Good days had her mother playing with her, cooking for her and acting normal. She would cry if Maya got hurt. She would sleep with Maya, surrounded by her warmth, she slept peacefully. Then there were those days when she acted distant. She would behave as if the house was haunted. At times she would tell Maya to empty her bag and check it thoroughly. Finally, the doctor confirmed that she was gradually becoming schizophrenic. Once, Maya overheard their conversation.

Doctor: "Her mental state is getting worse day by day."

Dad: "What's to be done?"

Doctor: "I think you should send her to the medical institution now. It's dangerous for Maya."

Dad: "How will Maya handle it?"

Doctor: "See, she has reached the state where she cannot differentiate from what's real and what is hallucination. She has already started seeing and imagining things that don't exist. She thinks everyone is out to kill her. It's just a matter of time, in this state she would even stop recognising Maya, and that can be very dangerous for the child.

But what would a little girl understand? How could her mother stop recognising her? What were they talking about? She turned around to see her mother standing right behind her with tears in her eyes. She silently kissed Maya and went inside her room.

Since then Maya's mom was kept under watch. Her father hired a nurse to look after her. But things only got worse from there. She started doubting her father and would refuse to take medicines. She would throw them away. The only person she was not scared of was Maya. She loved and hugged Maya with the same warmth as ever. But she rarely painted now.

Maya would never forget her ninth birthday, the last one she celebrated with her mother. She had painted a beautiful sunrise for her. That surprised everyone, as they thought she had given up

painting. Most people hoped she was recovering. It was not to be. It was to be her last painting. Maya's last birthday with her mother. Her mother's last painting. Too many things ended that day, Maya thought, pensively.

When she returned from school the next day she could not find her. Instead, she saw her aunt waiting for her. She was told that her mother was in hospital, unconscious.

In the evening Maya's father took her to see her mother as Maya would not stop crying. She went in and saw her mother, with various tubes going in and out of her. Maya went and held her hand. It didn't seem to be her mother's hand anymore though it was still warm. Her mother opened her lifeless eyes, gave her one last look and closed them.

The doctor came in and asked her father to leave Maya outside and come in. Maya sat on the bench for a while till her father returned. He didn't look too good. It was the look of the man who had been tired and drained from day to day stress. Strangely, our everyday struggle wears us down much more than any one time crisis. He walked slowly towards Maya and kissed her on her forehead. Maya looked at his watery eyes and wished she could make him smile.

Later, in the night, her mother died. She didn't recover from her bid at killing herself. She had slit her wrist, unable to bear the agony any more.

The child that she was, she kept looking at the sky, searching for the star her mother had said she would turn into once she was no more.

Maya slowly got up from her bed and went to her cupboard. She retrieved the letter her mother had left for her before she attempted to take her own life. Maya must have read it a thousand times in these last few years.

My dear baby,

This is to tell you that I love you.

There may be times when I may not recognise you, but don't worry. Some stupid nerve disorder prevents me from being normal. When you grow up, you will understand what was it that was not letting me be normal.

Please forgive me for the days I was not normal. It was out of my control. Remember that you were all I wanted to live for. You were all I ever painted and you always will be my little darling.

Never let anything worry you. Remember that the sun will always shine again. Like my paintings, some shades would be grey, but without them the picture would be incomplete. Be brave. Don't give up fighting for what you want.

I pray to God to look over you. I wish I could tell how much I love you.

Remember love is simply love. Nothing can make or break or even create it. Similarly life simply is life. Nothing can create or end it. I will stay forever with you and you will be in my thoughts forever.

With immeasurable love for my little angel.

Maya whimpered like a baby. She held the letter to her heart and let the tears flow.

She often wondered how could someone like her mother who had so much passion and zest for life could be mad enough to end it all.

Possibly too much of passion is also dangerous.

Two years after her mother's death, her father married a cousin of Maya's mother thinking that it would be good for both of them.

Neetu, her stepmother, couldn't easily trust anyone anymore. She herself had been through difficult times. Her husband had eloped with another woman, within six months of their marriage.

She became a strict disciplinarian and Maya, who had never been beaten by her mother or her father, now received occasional thrashing from her stepmother. And sometimes, a tongue lashing as well!

TEN

There were times when her father had bitter fights with her stepmother. She was a pretty woman and like many a pretty woman, she too craved attention. On the contrary, her father was a very humble man with few wants.

Once, after her stepmother yelled at her, Maya went into the bedroom and tore a new dress into pieces, to vent her anger. The Dewans had been summoned by Maya's class teacher who complained that their daughter was restless and hyperactive. She told them that Maya has been categorised as an Indigo child in one of the routine counselling sessions. When they returned home, Mrs. Dewan, who too had no clue of what an Indigo child was, drained out her anger on Maya. Her reasoning was that Maya was making up things.

"What is this pseudo thing? Indigo child, being sensitive and all that crap. It's all nonsense! Your father and mother have completely spoilt you," her stepmother told Maya and her father, accusingly.

She knew Maya was intelligent, but for some reason wouldn't listen to her. She refused to acknowledge that Maya was an Indigo child, and that such children are to be spoken to in a language they understand. All children need love, but Indigo children need lot more of it.

"I wish you could understand me," her stepmother once told her.

"I wish the same too," Maya said.

It was different with her father. There are times when children become pseudo companions in parents' lives. They take the place of the imaginary lover that is hidden somewhere behind the realms of consciousness. Ironically, they bond in such a way that it connects deeply and absorbs the intensity of the relationship that should have been with someone else. Maya and her father understood each other's fears and shared the sorrows. Maya was his pseudo partner in life.

There was one thing that Maya did like about her stepmother. Though she took good care of her father, but she was more than a good caretaker, she thought. She tried to have a child with Mr Dewan, but somehow it didn't work out. She gave up the idea and adopted Maya completely as her daughter. However, Neetu Dewan was largely gripped by one consideration that Maya should be married off as soon as possible. Like many mothers she also thought that marriage was the only goal to be achieved in life.

By the time Maya finished college, Neetu had spread the word around in the neighbourhood that she was looking for a suitable boy for her Maya.

"Hun vaddi ho gayi hai apni choti," she said to one of her friends at a wedding.

"My name is Maya," she immediately corrected her.

"Haan, haan vahi," she laughed at Maya's reply. "Do tell us if you know of a good boy for her!"

"Mom?" she used to plead with her to drop the topic.

On one such occasion, Maya took umbrage at her stepmother's requests to nearest strangers to find a match for her.

"I am not going with you anywhere anymore!" she told her stepmother angrily when they reached home.

"Why would you? We look like fools to you?" her step mother asked.

"Mom, you have nothing else to do other than think about my marriage!"

"You should get married now."

"I don't want to marry!" she replied. "How many times do you want me to repeat the same thing?"

"You just want to go out with boyfriends," her stepmother said accusingly.

"I'll do what I want," Maya said, anger turning into rage.

"Bring disgrace to the family!" Neetu roared.

"I will do much more. I will rot." Tears rolled down Maya's cheeks in anger.

"Such a nasty girl you are. Sometimes I wish you were never born."

"No wonder why you are childless." Maya did cross her limits. She knew this would hit her and hurt the most, but she couldn't hold herself back.

Neetu turned around and slapped her hard. Maya missed her mother. Her own mother would never have had thoughts of this kind, let alone say it.

Overhearing the argument, Maya's father came in from the living room.

"Neetu, please stop. You're also behaving like a child. Maya isn't a baby anymore," he told his wife.

"She's grown up? Why doesn't she learn to behave, then? Didn't you hear how she spoke? Is this how children talk to their parents?" she asked her husband.

"You know you aren't my mother, don't you?" Maya let her stepmother have it.

"Yes, I know that. I'm not mad either, like your mother was!" Neetu said, her spite spilling over.

"My mother was not mad. She was ill," Maya screamed with hot tears rolling down her cheek and left the room.

"And you are equally ill." Neetu's voice followed her.

Her father looked at his wife with contempt and went over to Maya. . He took his daughter's hands into his and hugged her.

"I understand, Maya. I know it hurts. Your mother was not mad," he said.

"Why is she always so fucking rude.," Maya was gasping.

"Mind your language honey," her father reacted.

He hugged her and slowly the crying ceased.

"I don't want to get married, Daddy."

"You will have to one day, my little girl. You will have to leave us and go."

"Don't send me away daddy. Whom will you talk to?"

“Neetu is not a bad person, Maya. She is good at heart,” her father said, attempting to be a broker of peace between his daughter and his wife.

“I know, Dad, but sometimes she doesn't know when to stop.”

He himself felt helpless with Neetu. She was always complaining about something or someone. She was accustomed not to look at the bright side of things.

ELEVEN

Maya had a strong need to be understood and loved, and this was not being fulfilled. She had already had an encounter with love; her first love was Abhay, the guy whom she met at chemistry tuitions. That happened when she was in school.

She liked him very much and he seemed interested in her too. One day, while he was walking along with her to home, he suddenly pulled her close and kissed her. Shocked, she pushed him and ran away. That night, lying in bed, she thought about it. An arrow of pleasure shot through her when she thought of his kiss, his body touching her's.

It was a disaster. She had allowed him to kiss her and it did feel wonderful only for a particular moment. As she was stepping into tuition class the next day, she overheard Abhay boasting about last evening's kiss to others. Her liking for him turned into contempt, forever, at that moment. Her heart felt the pain caused by pleasure for the first time. Little did she know it was just the beginning of the game called 'life'.

She felt rotten, but her teacher walked in just then. Shankar had started teaching them about how molecules mix to form various elements and sub-elements in the universe. He told them how two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen have to combine to form water. The water that we drink without any thought, day after

day.

It is one of the wonders of nature that all the elements, be it air, fire or water combine in the most perfect order to form all molecules in this universe, she thought. Perhaps her love for Abhay was not the right mix. The formula was not in place, that's why what happened, happened, she told herself.

That evening when classes were over, Abhay called out to her.

Maya stopped and turned to look at him. "I heard it all, Abhay. I heard you boasting to others about last evening!"

His face fell. She looked at him as he fumbled for an explanation, but without success. She felt humiliated and angry. "So you have nothing to say to it. I hope I never see you again," she said as she sighed and walked away.

This was her first lesson in life. A moment, she realised, could bring joy and make you feel special, but the same moment can transform into pain a wee bit later, and make you feel worthless. Life is a matter of perspective, she thought.

TWELVE

Time passed. Little Maya joined English literature. She was a free soul, keen on finding the meaning of life. She topped in her class and college education was opening up the world of prose and poetry to her. Still, she couldn't figure life out. Everything seemed to become shallow after some time, even though she had no trouble making friends and spending time with them at coffee shops, movie halls and parties was fun. She had even tried drugs, but everything seemed to bore her. She dated men, but did not go beyond kisses, if at all.

Then Vikram Oberoi happened. She met him in a training session just after she finished her graduation and was scouting around for a job. He was known for his numbing magic shows. He used colour therapy and magic to train and heal people. Her college had organised a training session by him on how to retain one's focus and that was how she came to know him.

When she first saw him, she could barely take her eyes off him. He was powerfully built with a strong jawline and mature brown eyes. He seemed serene. After the session was wrapped up, Maya had gone up to him to ask for a personal healing session.

"Can I come for a personal session to you?" she asked, blushing.

"Why do you need to?" he grinned.

"I guess I'm a little disturbed!"

She felt he was suppressing a grin this time.

“Everyone here is disturbed, you see,” he said, dismissively.

“I want to find the real meaning of life.”

“I can't help you much with that. All of us have to find our own meaning. No one else can do it for us, no matter how much they would want to.”

“I want to learn magic!”

“You have to be eligible for that,” he smiled.

“Eligibility needs to be created. Help me with that!”

He smiled at her.

“You mean you won't let me come to you,” she said, disappointed.

“Well, normally I don't take individual sessions, but I'll make an exception for you. If you're serious, you can join me as a part-time assistant after you graduate next month. But only if you are serious. Don't waste my time otherwise!” Vikram wondered why he came up with the lie about needing an assistant.

“Of course, I will. When can I join?”

“Tomorrow, if you can!” he smiled.

They agreed, she could join as soon as her graduation examinations were over.

The day after it got over, she went to his office.

“Hi, my name is Maya,” she told the girl in his office.

“I'm Manmeet,” the girl replied, sounding aloof.

She looked good enough to participate in the Miss India contest, Maya thought. She held a jazzy pink Samsung handset with a shining key chain hanging along with it.

“Are you the new girl he has hired as his assistant?” It was her turn to ask questions.

Yes, Maya replied.

“I wonder why he needs anyone else,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Maya felt a little embarrassed, but she managed a reply. “I will only be coming for two hours a day on alternate days.”

“Is he in?” Maya asked, trying to change the topic.

“No, he isn't.”

Maya waited for an hour. During that time she saw Vikram Oberoi's sketches. There were horses in black and white running

across flat lands. A lady bound in chains. Most of them were in black and white.

She lost her self in his art. Painting had always brought solace to her, though she herself painted only occasionally. She must do it more often. How it would be to make love to a painter. Her heart chuckled.

She noticed some photographs hanging on the wall adjacent to his cabin. There were some certificates of specialisation in magic. There were some symbols painted on the wall behind his desk. A pack of cards lay on a glass slab specially designed to keep them. Books on magic and spiritual healing stared at her from his glass cabinet.

One of the photographs had him standing with a charming lady, his arm around her. Was she his girlfriend?

“Why don't you call him?” Manmeet suggested.

“Are you the only one in his office?”

“I'm his personal assistant,” she said sighing.

“This is his private office. We have one in the basement where the rest of the staff, about a hundred people work. There are branches all across India. Didn't you bother to check our website?” She made Maya feel stupid.

“I guess I should have!”

“I take care of his appointments and schedules. He doesn't like to deal with multiple people. In fact, I wonder why he hired you.”

Maya cleared her throat. “I called him, but he did not take my call.”

“He has a magic show today for some clients from England.”

“Who's this lady in the photograph?” the words were out of Maya's mouth unexpectedly.

Manmeet gave her an angry look, but did not answer.

Maya wondered if he was in love with the woman in the photograph.

Manmeet went out. When she returned Maya was still around.

“I thought you'd left!” Manmeet looked at her with raised eyebrows.

If she could be half as sweet as she looked, she would have passed the test of being human, Maya felt.

Maya picked up her big black leather bag and walked out.

She did not meet Vikram for another three days, and somehow she couldn't convince herself to not to go to his office.

“Are you sure he has called you to work with us?” Manmeet asked her when she went to his office the fourth day. “I told him about you, but he couldn't recall offering you a job,” Manmeet said gleefully. This was humiliating. The lady was definitely loaded with sarcasm. Maya found her rather dumb. She had a huge Kareena Kapoor poster pasted on the side wall of her desk. Maya wondered if copying her was her only mission of life.

“Hi, Manmeet!” she heard Vikram's voice, the very voice that made Maya's heart beat faster.

Vikram came in. “Hey, what are you doing here?” he asked Maya. Maya looked at Manmeet for a second before she answered.

“Remember you said I could work with you for an hour, thrice a week,” she cleared her throat.

“Oh! I'm sorry. It completely skipped my mind,” Vikram said.

“Anyway, come in,” he said entering his office.

Maya went in after him. He looked criminally handsome in his deep grey suit. He lit a cigarette and took a puff. Everything he did seem to have a sense of rhythm. She had never felt so strangely conscious in front of anyone. His eyes seemed to be staring inside her soul.

“Why do you want to work with me?” he asked, smiling.

“Well... to learn from you!” She didn't know what else to say.

He smiled again. His otherwise serious eyes twinkled. His expression changed completely when he smiled.

“You said your mother was a painter. Do you paint too?”

He remembers. Her heart was ecstatic.

“I write. I want to paint too.”

“You can't say, want to paint. You just go ahead and paint.”

His eyes were twinkling. Maya felt as if he was teasing her.

“I believe you can heal. I have this unrest in me. I don't know what to do. It's as if someone else is living in my body. I just want to feel at ease,” she said, eyes drooping in shyness at having said something that was so personal to her to a near complete stranger.

He took a deep sigh and his smile vanished. He stared at his cigarette and then looked back at Maya.

“Unrest happens when there is a conflict in the soul. When

we decide to overlook what our hearts are trying to convey to us, this happens. The law of the universe states that you get what you really desire, Maya. You have to focus and listen to your heart. No one else can do that for you.”

Tell him I desire him, said her heart.

“What if I am unable to listen to what my heart says?”

He smiled.

“It's not so difficult. Close your eyes, concentrate between your eyes,” she felt his hand in the centre of her forehead, “Just breathe and wait in silence.”

A glimpse of bright light charged her and she blinked.

He smiled again and winked at her.

“Do you see the cigarette here? Do you see the fire? It burns with more intensity with every puff of mine. This is how love is, for a person, for a thing, for an art. The fire once lit burns you completely and its intensity only increases with time.” What the hell was he saying?

She stared at the cigarette.

“Where does the fire go when the cigarette ends?”

He smiled at her. He knew there was something extraordinary about this girl. It was as if she belonged to magic.

“Why don't you join me for dinner tonight?”

She wanted to say yes, but she thought of her stepmother.

“I have to inform my people in advance,” she said.

“No problem, some other time, then!”

“Tomorrow?”

He smiled again, the smile that kills.

“OK. So be it.”

She paused.

“Who's the lady in that photograph?” she asked, wondering if she wasn't stepping into someone else's personal life.

“She is my partner,” he said, getting up, indicating that the conversation had ended.

THIRTEEN

Maya reached the restaurant on time, dressed in her favourite blue dress with black stockings, giving her an 'at work' look. It was a lovely restaurant with huge aquaria all around. Colourful fish swam in them. Vikram was already seated. He smiled at her as she took her seat, opposite his.

"May I order wine?" he asked.

He was conscious of sitting with a girl much younger to him, but for him age did not matter. His instinct told him that this girl was special.

"I've never had wine before," she replied.

"Well, all the more reason for you to have some now!" he answered. He found her beautiful. She had an innocence that melted his heart and her eyes were full of fiery life. When the wine came, they drank it silently, each apparently lost in thought.

Maya had never felt so peaceful before. In spite of the silence, she enjoyed herself. The wine seemed to help and so did the music playing in the background.

"You didn't tell me what happens to the fire when cigarette ends?" she reminded him, when he kept the glass of wine aside and lit a cigarette.

"It is there. It just changes form. It turns into ash. So it is with love. It only changes form. People often make this mistake of

imagining love as some control game. If someone loves you, you want to be the centre of his or her universe. Don't you think it's crazy? As a human being we ourselves are not sorted out, but we want someone else to revolve around us. We develop this need to control under the pretension of taking care. We suffocate ourselves and then blame it all on love. What has love got to do with it? Love flies away the moment control enters. It is there no more. Love is in letting go." The words poured themselves, "Are you in love with someone?" she asked, directly.

Surprisingly, he was not angry at the question. He seemed to invite it, in fact.

"I was!"

"You were?" she frowned.

"She's no more!"

"I'm sorry," she said, ashamed of her curiosity. But inside she was suddenly very relieved.

"You don't have to be. Besides, her presence goes with me. You know, Maya, when we see matter, it is solid in form, but in reality it is just some atoms and molecules dancing together in rhythm to create a magnetic field. Remember the diagrams in your physics textbook. You and I are all in this constant blissful dance in rhythm with the universe. Only we are too busy to find that bliss. When we leave our bodies the molecules and atoms remain. Only they change form. The rhythm is forever. The dimension changes." He paused to take in a long puff of smoke. "Besides, all said and done, I've moved on." His memories lunged at him. He tried to push them away.

Maya wondered if this meant that there was someone else he was seeing. Who was that woman in the photograph she had seen in his office? Why was the photograph there?

"Moved on means?" she managed to ask.

He smiled.

"Evolved."

"No woman?"

"Many, maybe!" he winked.

The rest of the conversation was far more mundane.

When they had their dinner and walked to his car, a cool

breeze was playing. There seemed to be music in the air too.

As they reached his black Audi, he opened the door on the passenger side and said, "I'll drop you home."

"I'll manage," she said.

"It's a bit late," he said, sliding into the driver's seat. She got in and closed the door.

He drove out of the parking lot. He drove neatly.

Maya wanted to hold his hand.

Suddenly he stopped the car and got out. Maya was caught off guard. What is he up to? Is she going to kiss me?

"What do you think when you see such a sky?" Vikram asked, looking up.

"I feel nice."

I want to hug you right this moment, she thought.

It's a good thing that the darkness concealed her blushing face. She had to swallow hard to hide her stiff jaw.

"Do you ever think why certain things make you feel nice and certain things don't?"

"Yes, I do. But then I can't figure out an answer." She was surprised at her spontaneity.

She should have known the answer, he thought to himself. The man could see a light in her eyes which was the sign of a great energy she possessed. She herself did not know it. The energy in her will keep her wandering in search of love. He himself had been looking for the same. The moment he saw her, he had known she was his twin flame. Though he couldn't share that awareness with her right now, but that is how the mystic world works.

One can't tell, for the other soul mate must find the way too, through suffering, sorrow, passion, pain and joy. He could not do anything other than reassure her. He wanted to hold her, tell her that she was the one. He was starving to hold a woman against him for some time now. Aching to feel the love and bliss he knew she could give him. Yet this was not the time. She was his canvas. He has to paint the picture and this has been just the beginning.

"Do you ever think that there are times when you want to do something desperately and you've to hold yourself back?" he sensed

an urgency in himself.

“Oh, so many times. Like a hundred times in a day.”

Like right now too. I desperately want to fall in love. She thought to herself and smiled.

He smiled.

“Being desperate isn't too bad either. You must love every moment of life desperately. It's a temporary life and you just can't miss telling people you love them, that they are important. You never know when it all ends. You never know which your last kiss is. Every kiss should be desperate and passionate.

That night under the sky their souls connected. They both sensed it, but didn't know how to express it to each other. Maya was much younger than him, but both, unknown to each other, felt a passionate pull towards each other.

He might not feel anything for you, her mind said.

“You should never hold yourself back.” He came dangerously close to her.

Oh, kiss me, will you?

She could sense her muscles straining. She could feel a pressure in her head.

He held her. Both his palms rested on her shoulders. Her lips parted. Her eyes moistened. She felt a strange peace that instant.

He is a magician, her mind reminded her.

He stared into her eyes. Then with a deep sigh, he looked up at the sky. The stars seemed to smile back.

“You can lean on me forever,” he said.

“Forever is a long time,” she heard herself whispering. Her lips were dry. Her body was so still she could hear herself breathing rhythmically and calmly.

“Time is forever. This moment is eternal, Maya. He planted a kiss on her forehead.

He wanted to take her there under the blue sky. He could feel himself stiff. Her eyes closed.

They kissed. It felt like eternity. Maya felt complete in that moment. This was not ordinary. His arms tightened around her. His touch was warm and gentle. She closed her eyes. She was floating in

the blue sky. She could touch the stars.

She didn't know how long it was before she felt the cool air on her face. She realised he had stopped kissing her.

Suddenly she was embarrassed. She wasn't sure if she had imagined the kiss or if had really happened.

I told you not to be so easy, Maya. What's he going to think about you? Her mind was worried. But her heart was in silent bliss.

"I, I ... I ..." she stammered.

"Relax, Maya. We kissed at this moment because we felt for each other. We are the dancing atoms in the cosmic journey. This is a precious moment that we share full of love, warmth and togetherness. Cherish it since it's a part of the magical eternity. You don't have to feel guilty or obliged. I understand. You are beautiful and you can really ask me anything. I will try to be there always."

A pause and then he continued. "Just let your heart be. Don't analyse everything. Don't hold yourself back. Remember, we have one life and we need to live it to the fullest. Go explore the world, it might make you smile, it might also bring pain. However, you will grow and gather experience. Don't be worried of what other people think of you. They would want you to be one of them. Be yourself. Society creates all kinds of rules for us to mingle with others. Don't struggle to become ordinary. Take risks. Fall and get up every time. Do not fear. The universe has its own way of teaching us the secrets of life, the passion of living and loving. Seek and you shall find. Then come back to me."

He said those words as if he was reciting some spiritual verse. His eyes were warm and kind. There was a strange longing in them.

His phone rang and as he answered the call his face returned to its familiar stiff expression.

"Yeah, I'll be there tonight. Don't worry, I remember very well."

Maya could hear a faint sound of a woman on the other end.

"I know. I know. I am also looking forward to be with you. I hope it's only the two of us."

Maya did not understand. Who was he going to spend the night with? She chose not to think too much about it.

"Come on. I'll drop you home," he said.²⁰

FOURTEEN

“Drink your milk,” Mrs Dewan kept the glass of milk on the centre table.

“I'm not a baby.”

“Oh yes? You still need to finish the milk,” she shrugged.

They lived in a house in Saket, adequate enough for a small family.

Maya took the glass of milk and gulped it down. She noticed some of her mother's paintings on the wall.

“Drink slowly, Maya. Don't gulp it down,” her father said.

“Look at the dress you're wearing. You've no shame left in you, Maya?” Her stepmother was at it again.

“What's wrong with it?” Maya retorted, turning back.

It was just another day in the Dewan household!

It was a striped red and black figure hugging T-shirt and a black skirt. No matter what she wore, her stepmother found some fault with it. Either it was too tight or too loose or too drab or too revealing or some damned thing or the other.

Maya sat down and thought about Kartik, who she was to meet in a while. They behaved like a couple. One thing puzzled her, though. *Every time she asked him if he loved her he changed the topic.*

She had been out for drives with him on his bike. She remembered the day it was raining. Water was pouring while she was sitting behind him, holding him tight. Their bodies rubbed against each other. Maya felt so excited that she could feel herself getting wet

inside. She was embarrassed with the thought. Suddenly she felt Kartik's hand holding hers and rubbing against her palm. She reciprocated. The rubbing of palms was leading her to a state of intoxication. She felt she would go mad with desire. She didn't know what was happening to her. Kartik stopped his bike in a narrow lane.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked bluntly.

"Tell me if I can?" he repeated. "I won't kiss you till you say yes."

The idiot wants me to write down my assent and give it to him.

She thought about it. Not saying no meant a yes.

"I guess, yes," she finally uttered.

Her body shivered with the mix of cold water and warm tongue in her mouth. She felt his hand slide towards her side moving on to her breast. She quivered with excitement.

They grew closer and closer till one day she lost her virginity to him. It was a lazy afternoon and there was no one at Kartik's home. They were listening to music sitting together, kissing each other. Kartik suddenly took her by the hand and made her sit on his bed. He put on the television and that was the first time she saw a couple having sex.

"I don't want to watch all that," she said embarrassed and red with shame.

"Relax. I wanted to show you how they do it."

She was a little curious and was both excited and perplexed about watching a sex tape.

She felt his hand touch her thighs. A spark ran through her body. Maya never had a huge regard for her virginity and for her sex did not exist. It was just making love, giving in to the pleasures of love and letting the moment rule. His hand stroked her thigh. With every stroke it went more daring. She ached for him to touch her. Kartik's hand was brushing against her wetness. A groan left her mouth and her eyes closed. Kartik came closer and she sensed his breaths getting heavier. Her lips parted and she felt his tongue piercing inside with force. She felt her t shirt off her with the cool breeze touching her naked self. His mouth found her hard nipples ready to be kissed.

"Why don't you take off my shirt?" he whispered.

Maya blushed and fumbled with his buttons. His impatience

made him unbutton it himself and throw it on the couch.

“I don't want to wait anymore?”

Are you going to have sex with him? Her mind panicked? Love is all I want.

She took a deep sigh in surrender and let him unbutton her jeans. He laid her on the bed and pulled them off. With her body bare and quivering it was getting too intense for her to stop. It was a strange, but wonderful moment.

“Have you done it before,” she suddenly asked him

He paused for a moment. “Yes, I have.”

“Ah”

“Does it matter?”

“I don't know,” she replied.

She was too involved with the pleasure it was bestowing upon her. He took his pants off and grabbed her closer. He moved away from her for a second to be sure about the protection. She was glad to see he was responsible towards her. He thrust inside her bringing a delicious pain. Pain accompanies pleasure everywhere. She felt her own body clench as waves of desire shot out of her.

His movements went fierce and he started riding her with more force. Finally he stopped drowned in his own sweat, smelling of his own sex and spent for the day. She loved it. She loved the feeling. She liked the way her body seemed relaxed. A true Wiccan at heart she realised that making love was one of the biggest pleasures one can obtain from the body. Yet she missed floating across the stars. Nothing could match it.

The first sexual experience has its own beauty. It is like exploring the unknown pleasures of universe. It introduces you to a new set of emotions. The emotions that can either enslave you or set you free.

FIFTEEN

She dreamt of becoming a writer someday. As of now she maintained a diary in secret.

Deep inside her heart she wished her mother had been alive. She missed her presence. She would have been able to talk to her. She was sure she would have understood her emotions and her doubts and been there for her. She remembered how she used to say she would never let her go. Yet she did.

Maya looked at her watch. She was running late. Kartik must be boiling as much as the coffee itself. However hard did she try to be on time, she was always late. She could see Kartik sitting in the corner as she entered the coffee shop.

“Hey,” she greeted him.

“You are thirty minutes late. I've been waiting here like a fool.” He was angry.

“I am sorry, really. There was so much traffic. You could have picked me up, couldn't you?” She smiled. “So how was the day?”

“It was fine.” Kartik ordered two coffees and cookies. They discussed his campus placements slated for the coming week.

“I am sure you'll get a good job, Kartik,” Maya said.

“I hope so. Let's see.” He was quite a confident guy.

“Kartik, I need to speak with you”

He looked at her, somewhat surprised.

“Kartik, do you think we can get married?” The question popped out of Maya's mouth, unexpectedly.

This girl has lost it, he thought. Marriage was the last thing that was on his mind.

“Will you marry me, Kartik?” She repeated.

“Maya are you out of your mind. I have not even thought of marriage.”

“Don't you love me?” Maya challenged him.

“What's love got to do with it? Listen, Maya, I like you, but then I don't think I can marry anyone right now. Maybe after a few years.” Maya was unable to understand why Kartik was making such a big deal out of it. She thought he had liked her.

“Maya, it is not so simple after all. It means a lot of compromises and adjustments.”

“I am ready for them. What's the big deal? I'll do anything for you, baby. I love you so much.” Her eyes turned into two big lamps. Maya was herself unsure about this line the moment she spoke it. Was this love? She was sure he didn't love her. He did not want to marry her that was clear. Yet something inside her was not letting her stop. She was forced by the other Maya, perhaps, who would go to any extent to experiment, and find out the unknown she was in search of. She wanted to see how far she could push him.

Maya didn't realise that she was already a loser in the bargain. She thought of marriage as an escape route. She lost her focus on the career that she could have started upon. She could not picture the life she really wanted. She fell in the trap laid for women since beginning. The trap, which forces women to concentrate on marriage as the biggest goal in life, the next one being, having children.

“No Maya, whatever it is, I can't marry you. At least not now.”

“But why? Can you explain? Do you think I won't be able to make a good wife?” Maya asked.

“I do, but you need to understand. We are too young. I have not finalised my future,” his tone was one of irritation.

“Oh, come on! By next week you would have a fat job and the future is all settled. We would love each other and always be happy.” She was in her own wonderland.

“Do you want me to leave?” he was furious now.

Maya was almost teary eyed with a sense of rejection. She was confused and silent. She looked down and didn't know what to do next.

“By the way how is your painter?” he asked trying to change the topic.

“You mean Vikram Oberoi. He is great!” Her dim eyes lit up a little.

“Is working with him adding value?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure it does, but I am no more working with him. By the way he is not just a painter and magician. He's seriously rich and has some high profile clientele.”

“That's nice. You really like him, don't you?”

A pang of jealousy seized Kartik.

She looked at him and smiled. “Do you love me, Kartik?” she held his hand.

“Maya, I need to go.”

“Please stay for some more time,” she pleaded.

“Maya, let's go. For God's sake!” He picked up the keys of his bike and paid the bill.

With no choice, Maya also stood up. She thought Kartik loved her, but she could not make out why he would not want to marry her. He used to drive her to various places, date her, took her to lovely lunches, but when it came to discussing the future, he would just avoid the topic.

Maybe he isn't ready. Maya felt that love would come to them naturally. What she failed to realise unfortunately, was the difference between forcing love to happen and letting love happen on its own. Most of the times people end up trying too hard. She was doing exactly the same.

Love happens slowly. Make haste and it flies off.

SIXTEEN

"I have finished one of your assignments," she told Vikram when he called her on the phone from Israel where he had gone for some work. While she was not working regularly for him, she did help him out now and then.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I am fine, enjoying the Dead Sea minerals."

"That's good. See you when you're back," she said, putting the phone down.

Her heart went weak at the thought of sitting in front of him.

"You are hungry for information!" he had said one day when she was asking too many questions. His gaze burnt her from the inside. She wanted to know everything about him.

"I think I'll stop coming here to work," she said once, while having lunch with him.

He looked at her, expressionless.

"You won't even ask me why?" she was surprised.

"It's your choice."

Obviously he didn't want her to go.

Sometimes she found him extremely distant. She wondered if it made any difference to him if she did not work for him.

He wanted to hold her hand and tell her how much she tempted him. He wanted to reignite the fire that was burning since he

first kissed her. He wished it would be great if she could feel the love he had developed for her. Yet he didn't want to force her. He wanted her to understand love so that together they could follow their hearts. He wanted love to pierce her soul. She should be ready to receive love.

"I think I have discovered love, true love," she told him.

His heart twitched. It was difficult. There is nothing like true love because there is nothing like false love either. You are in love and that's that. The biggest mistake people make is to find the so-called true love in someone else. Love is a light and light is within.

It has shades maybe like Betelgeuse, the star that is red and orange in colour, Vega or Sirius which is blue white in colour, though they all look the same to us. It is as much as our eyes are trained to see. There is a need to cross the dimension and open the inner eye to discover the colours of love. It only reflects what we already have within us. It is dependent on our inner self and not the outer stimulants.

"What is true love Maya," his eyes danced sarcastically.

"Well the one that happens once in a lifetime when you find someone special." Her eyes blinked.

"Maya, love is a state of bliss. It comes from within. When two people come close, there are electromagnetic fields that get connected. There are reactions in the heart that also has its own hormone and sensors which are even more active than brain. The newness generates excitement and that's when people make a huge mistake. They start relating that bliss with the other person. The other person is just a catalyst. His magnetic field helps yours to generate the mental bliss that is addictive. It's like being high on cocaine. It takes you to some other world, some higher realms and then you don't want to come back. Two hearts connect and together it becomes easier for them to decode the universal language of bliss."

"Wow! Isn't that nice?" She smiled with a confused look.

"It sure is till the time the catalyst's effects starts to weaken like any other narcotic. Everything in this world is temporary. Even when you are high on drugs there will come a time when thresholds will rise higher. The brain would refuse to accept the fact that it is dependent on an external stimulus and would ask for more. That's

when people cling on to love and start controlling the other person. This ruins it. Love cannot be controlled. It's a flowing river. You cannot change the course. You can just swim along."

"You mean in a relationship there is no importance of the other person" she frowned.

"Of course there is", he smiled, "Without the catalyst the chemical reaction would not take place. The idea is however to concentrate on the chemical reaction itself. How do you think a musician manages to keep his interest alive in music? In his case music is his catalyst to achieve the state of bliss and there's always newness in it. Painting is the catalyst for someone who can paint. All these movies, people around you make you think differently about love" he winked at that.

"What is love then after all according to you?" Maya was getting a little impatient now.

"Love is within. You need to reinvent it within yourself every time. It's like meditation. Love simply is. There is nothing true or false about it. It can happen and re-happen for nothing can stop a life force from flowing. The catalyst can change, but the freshness and simplicity of your being should not. How can a person who himself is searching for love bring it to another? That too, forever, love is not to be given to each other. It is to be discovered together and for individual self at the same time."

Maya was absorbing.

They looked at each other for a while till Maya realised she wanted to talk about herself.

"I don't know what it is, but I met this guy the other day at my college and I thought he is the one."

"Does he also like you?"

"I don't know. I guess he does. I love him and I feel some times he also loves me."

"Well, the last time you thought you were in love, you ended up breaking your heart." He was a little concerned about the sadness in her tone.

"That was puppy love, Vikram. I was a fool to think like that. You know how it is when you are in school and all. I wasn't mature

enough then.”

“You think you are now?” He smiled indulgently at her, thinking about the vibrant energy she seemed to radiate

“Of course yes, don't you think I am?”

“No, I don't!”

“Come on, I think I'm big enough now. Last time, that was just a crush. I liked the boy and he was honest enough to admit that I am too good for him.” She raised her eyebrows. “He told me that he was not ready to be in any relationship. I felt bad and heartbroken, but I want to give love another chance.”

“Sure, you must,” Vikram replied.

“Now this guy I met is very warm and intelligent. He looks nice and I feel I should go ahead and marry him.”

Vikram felt an arrow was being shot against his chest. Was it going to be long till she realises he was her soul mate. He knew that she would have to go through her journey so that her soul is ready for change. He thought he would have to wait. There was no choice either. The law of the spirits did not allow him to make a claim on any other soul. He would have to give her the chance to discover him. Even if it means he would have to go through some more longing. “Are you sure?” he asked her totally aware of her presence.

“I think I am. Anyways, mother wants me to get married now and I have no better person to fall in love with.”

So it was just the beginning of the journey for her. Vikram was aware of the void within her. He knew the kind of pain that could shake one's existence. When one burns with a love that cannot be consummated, it can be hard on oneself.

He wanted to tell her to stop. He knew that she had that light. The light that would lead her to pleasure, but at the same time torment her through the journey. It would force her to go through the pain that not many people around will be able to understand or empathise with. The search for more will absorb her. She was already in a different dimension, but did not realise it as yet. He knew she will naturally endure trials and the fire of longing that he was already burning in. He had to wait. He knew this was the universe's way of teaching her to let go.

“Be sure about whatever you do. Don't repent later.”

“You think I will repent, do you?” her eyes narrowed down.

He took her to one of the canvas and pinned a plain sheet.

“Paint!”

“What?” she asked him surprised.

“Paint anything that this love reminds you of!”

She closed her eyes to visualise. She could not see anything. She dipped the brush in orange paint and painted a line across the sheet.

He wanted to kiss her closed eyes. He wanted to hold her hand and paint the canvas together.

She looked at him.

“All I can think of is this orange colour.”

“Orange is the colour of energy, Maya. Your energy is vibrant and ready to take off. Remember one thing. The canvas is always blank. It's ready for any colour, all colours. You need all of them to make a masterpiece.”

Her big eyes flickered.

“Close your eyes and think of what this love remind you of,” he said.

She did as told. “A horse, I can see a horse running away from me. It disappears into the white clouds,” she said.

“The horse again represents energy. This energy will touch you. Don't try to tame it. Even if you become sad, do not repent, for this is your decision. Seek and you shall find. Don't give up, little one.”

“Do you think I will repent?” she sensed the concern in his tone.

“I'm just alerting you.”

SEVENTEEN

"I've decided to get married," she told Reva.

"Why this hurry?" She looked at Maya, surprised.

"Stepmom!"

"Come on! As if you do everything what she tells you to!"

"Not that, but it struck me that I can get out of this place if I get married to someone," she giggled.

"Are you serious?"

"Kartik is the chosen one."

"He chose you or you chose him?" Reva raised her eyebrow.

"Well, he too loves me!"

"Good for you. But I have my doubts. I know you very well, Maya. This is not what you would be looking for. He is not your type."

"What's my type?" Maya winked.

"Maya, I too would love to marry someone. I wish to find my prince. But I guess it needs patience. I don't think you love him enough. You fall in love at a drop of a hat!"

"The only problem is he does not want to marry me," Maya continued.

Reva looked at her from top to toe, incredulously. But then Reva was like that, honest and straightforward. "What do you mean by that? Is it the only problem? I thought you said he loves you. You are marrying someone who does not want to marry you. You can't get

more ridiculous than this, you know that,” Reva said, irritated.

“Don't be silly. He's a nice guy. He loves me. I am sure he will realise it soon. He will soon get a great job and have a well-settled future. What else does a girl want?”

“Love, Maya. A girl needs love,” Reva sighed deeply.

“He loves me! Besides, you don't even know what love is,” she winked at the thought of her conversation with Vikram.

“Oh yeah? How are you so sure that he loves you?”

Reva was sure Maya was fooling herself. She knew her friend too well. She was repeating something only to reassure herself. When we reassure ourselves the brain senses it as the truth. It feeds into our unconscious from the conscious to make it seem real. That's what Maya Dewan was doing. She was creating her own unreal reality around her.

“Tell me,” Reva insisted.

Maya had no answer to this question. She wondered how was it possible to figure out if another person was truly in love with you. After all, it's only an abstract belief. She felt happy and had fun with Kartik. What else could love be?

Later that day, her stepmother told Maya that they had invited a family for dinner next week with regard to a marriage proposal for Maya.

“No need, I've found a guy for myself.”

“Who is he?” her stepmother asked. She was furious.

“He's a great guy. An engineer and he is well paid, well-educated. Exactly like those guys you have been searching for me. This one is better than them.”

“Why don't you call him home?” her stepmother's tone changed from challenging to the assenting at the drop of a hat. Some chameleon, she is!

“All right, I'll let you know after I talk to him,” she turned away and went back to her room.

As she was getting ready for college the next day, she was a bit nervous. She was supposed to invite Kartik home, but she was not sure if he would come. She called him on the phone.

“Hey, Kartik?”

“Hi Maya!”

“Kartik, I need to see you.”

“Maya, I'm planning to watch the match today with some friends. Don't you know India is playing today?”

How these guys could watch that stupid game of cricket all the time, she thought.

“Kartik, you have to come. This is a question of life and death for me. You need to make it and we need to discuss something that's important for both of us. Fuck your cricket match.”

“Maya please, not again. If this is the same topic that we've been discussing over and over again, I'm not interested.”

“Then you have to decide, Kartik. Either we marry or we are no more friends in any form or shape.” Maya's heart wept as she said this. Whatever happened to the love? There was a pause. Kartik took a deep sigh and then relented. What's with these girls, he thought. Just show some interest in them and the next thing they want is to get married!

“Okay Maya! If that's what you want, then let it be.”

“You mean we are breaking up?”

“You want to?” he sounded impatient.

“You mean it makes no difference to you if we don't meet again?”

“I didn't say so.”

“That's what you mean, though!” she said, ending the call.

Maya could not believe her ears. Was it so easy for him to go away like this? What about those passionate kisses? About all the times they made love?

She decided to find some solace in Reva. She lived a kilometre away and Maya rushed to her house every time she needed to chit chat. The love that she was so desperate for was just not happening. The love she thought touched one deep inside. Love which she was convinced, always finds a way.

She was not in a mood to do anything. She felt her heart breaking. She could not bear it. The air around her seemed to overwhelm her and she could not see anything. She realised she was crying. It felt as if she bled deep inside. She knew he was not ready to marry, but she could not understand why he was so against it. After all

it was just about staying together. Wasn't it? They had seen highs and lows together and she could not understand what would change so much if two people marry and live together. Was it such a big price to pay? She could not believe that he didn't want to be with her after all those moments spent together. She wanted to cry hard, but had to wait till she reached Reva's house. She called her and told her to be there. Crying in public would be inviting more attention and she would not want that, at least not now. Once she reached Reva's house she cried her heart out.

'Oh, he does not love me at all.'

"What made you think he did in the first place?"

"Oh, all those moments I spent with him. What did that mean?" she whimpered.

"Come out of your fool's paradise. You guys were dating. That's about it. He does not want to marry you. What's the big deal about it? Anyways, he is too young to marry. And so are you!"

Maya could not see any logic in what Reva said. The other Maya inside her was terribly upset. Her mother left her. Now this guy also does not want to be with her. She felt even more rejected and cheated. She felt so unwanted. The feeling of being unwanted, even when it is not true, can play havoc with the mind.

EIGHTEEN

Kartik Agarwal's sharp features promised he would be a good looking man in some years. He belonged to a middle-class family with its own set of rules. His father worked in a hotel and had migrated to Western Delhi, during the partition. He worked day and night and managed to give the best education possible to his sons. His wife was a teacher in a small private school and taught pre-schoolers. They had been living in their two storey house in Rajouri Garden for almost 30 long years.

Both his sons appreciated the trouble he took to educate them. Kartik's elder brother worked as a finance head in one of the top American companies. He passed out from the IIT, the topmost technical college of India. Though they had seen hard times during childhood they resolved to get the best out of their education.

Kartik was somewhat confused as he could not do away with tradition.

"Hey dude!" Harpreet Singh, Kartik's best friend, walked in. He was dressed in a pair of blue jeans and looking absolutely funny with his spindly legs, thin build and protruding large ears. They had been together at the IIT.

"What's wrong with you? You aren't watching the match?" Harpreet asked.

"I broke up with Maya!" Kartik said sulkily.

"Oh, what happened?"

“I don't understand. I like her, but she is insisting upon marriage. Now I don't want to get married, it's so early.”

“Obviously dude, how can you marry now? We are just beginning our careers. I'm sure we will meet hot babes. Imagine that we would get a fat pay cheque and a wonderful car. Explain it to her, na”, he said. “We have to plan investments, vacations and much more. Life has just begun,” his voice naughty. “Hot sex, rave parties,” he winked. His expression turning wicked with lust dancing in his eyes.

Kartik's eyes partnered him in his excitement. They were not exposed to luxuries in life and the near future offered them big promises. They dreamt of compensating for every missed moment.

“Still, when it comes to marriage, though it gives me shivers, she isn't a bad girl, either!” Kartik said, “She is witty and smart and I like her.” He didn't mention that he loved her in bed too. “I feel guilty for being the reason for her heartbreak.”

“Relax, yaar. Now you can't make everyone happy, right? Especially women.” Harpreet spoke as if he was an expert on women. “Still, do you think she loves me?”

“See dude. I don't believe in love and all that crap. It's up to you to decide! I would never screw my chances for this bull shit.

“Sometimes I think she will eventually turn out to be the right girl for our family. You know how mom is.”

“See dude all I know is you can't marry for your family. Besides, why do you always want to make everything perfect? It does not work like that.”

“I know, Harry, but I don't dislike her.”

“Does that even count as a reason?” Harry shrugged

For Kartik she was an opportunity. What he did not understand was that a relationship had to be nurtured. Kartik could not see that Maya was not the only Maya he interacted with. There were two of them. One who was in love with him and another one who was more vulnerable? Maya's alter ego. She was dangerous. She lived deep inside her and at a mere chance dominated her emotions.

Maya was unaware of this. The other Maya could force her to take decisions on impulse. The other Maya who would not let her be ordinary, she was in constant search of the meaning and purpose of

life. He failed to see the Maya who was a wanderer at heart, yearning for her soul mate; for passionate love that enters the soul of one person and pierces another, thus forming a bond that brings both extreme pleasure and pain.

Kartik had no idea what he was getting into. After a few hours of contemplation he decided that he would call her next morning and talk. He could only see the Maya who was ready to go to any extent for him, not the selfish Maya who was after all only bothered about herself.

Next morning it was he who got a call from Maya.

“Kartik, are you sure we aren't going to talk to each other?” she asked with sadness in her tone.

“Maya,” Kartik paused. He did not know what to say.

“Kartik, I love you very much. I would do anything to be with you. Please don't say no to this. I would never bother you with anything.”

She felt bad about begging, but the other Maya would just not let her stop. She was not ready to face rejection. She would go to any extent to win over this man. Maya was convinced that marrying him was the only right thing she could do. She was bored of her stepmom telling her what to do all the time. She wanted to live her life. The other Maya was pushing her for a free life, not realising that she was further getting into a bigger mess. Her heart was unsure. Her mind was unsure.. Yet the other Maya would not let them dominate. She would get what she wanted.

“I'm sure our love will find a way.”

“Hmmm...Okay,” he said.

“Okay means?” Though she felt humiliated to beg him for love it made her extremely happy that she seemed to have achieved her goal.

“Well, I thought that since I've to marry anyway, why not you?” he replied casually.

“Oh, I'm so happy.” Maya had not realised that his agreeing was a kind of consolation prize for her. She felt sure love would find a way.

“What made you change your decision though?” she asked

him out of sheer curiosity.

“Well, I thought it really does not make any difference who I marry! After all, a woman is a woman.”

“You mean you could have married anyone?”

“Yes, anyone who would have loved me so much.” He giggled.

“Can you come and meet my parents this weekend then?”

NINETEEN

Kartik sometimes wondered why he was doing it. Was it really worth it? Now he had gone one step ahead and committed himself to a relationship. This was making him feel even worse. Yet he was sure since she loved him so much she would manage with all his idiosyncrasies. Kartik was too weak to handle any woman's tears, let alone Maya.

He was attracted to Maya and there was no way out now. Not that there were no other women who excited him equally, but any other woman in place of Maya would have aroused the same sentiments in him. He was not sure of marriage. He ironically was convinced this was not the right time and he was about to make a big mistake.

He made a mental note to pick up his purple shirt from the drycleaner after office.

"Please get him some tea, Maya," her father said leading Kartik into the living room and directing him to a chair.

"So you are in love with Maya, young man." Mr Dewan looked straight into Kartik's eyes, making him feel uncomfortable again. Why the old man doesn't understand that it was his daughter who was in love with me, Kartik thought to himself.

"Well, she loves me."

"You don't?" Mr Dewan asked.

“Well of course, we would like to marry each other!” he managed to say with a smile.

“What do you do?” Her father asked

“I work with Wipro Technologies. I joined it for a salary of six lakhs per annum.”

Mr Dewan was a little hesitant. How can anyone earn so much when he was just out of college? The guy seemed to be impressive, unless he is lying about his salary, he thought.

“I think we must meet your parents.”

“Why my parents?” Kartik asked with a tone of discomfort clear in his voice. Maya walked in with tea. She sat next to her father seemingly proud to have Kartik around, knowing that her stepmother would not have expected this. She would have never thought that Maya would manage to find a guy who was well educated and earning better than all the boys she had approached as a suitable match for her daughter.

“Who else?” Mr Dewan sounded a little confused.

“Meeting me should be enough. I have to marry her and I guess there is no need to involve my parents as of now. In any case, we do not plan to marry immediately. Perhaps after another three years.”

Both her parents were confused. They looked at each other and then at Maya. She was quiet.

That night Mr Dewan came into her room and sat next to her.

“Do you really love this boy, beta?” he asked Maya, with warmth in his eyes.

Did she really love him? Every time she asked herself this question the other Maya jerked her head up before she could even decide. The feeling of wanting to be loved was so strong in her that she would go to any extent for it. She wanted to live for the moment.

She was a true romantic at heart. She believed that her love won't fail her. She had the ability of giving herself in completely. Clearly, she could see that Kartik was not head over heels in love with her, but she could not get over him.

She wanted to cry and hug her father. She wanted to tell him that she was unsure. She was scared and fearful of plunging into unknown. She was weak inside wanting to be loved deeply and madly.

She was yearning for meaning in life. She was putting up a brave face, though she was as lost as a lamb in a jungle. She wanted her father to hold her and guide her, but she could not express this to him.

“Of course I love him,” she tried to sound as confident as possible.

“What about him?”

“He also does.”

Sometimes maybe, her heart whispered.

She ignored the voice as usual and said nothing. Tears filled her big doubtful eyes. The last thing her father could bear would be to see her cry. He hugged her quietly, thinking of the days when they both cried together over his first wife's death. Those days when he comforted her, every day, and encourage her with for studies.

“All right, then. Your mother and I have decided that if this is what you have really wished for yourself, you can go ahead with it. Though we have our doubts, it is your choice,” he said stroking her hair.

What she didn't say was that she also had her own doubts. She was scared of the other Maya that lived inside her. She would not compromise and rest till she finds the love she was looking for.

“By the way beta does he really earn so much,” her father smiled. “Who pays him so much?” he chuckled.

They laughed together.

TWENTY

Maya had looked forward to this day. Kartik was also excited. She looked beautiful on her wedding day.

“Please exchange garlands with each other,” the priest said. They were made of red and white roses and were to bond them forever. It must be weighing not less than ten kilos and they were to carry them around their necks now for the entire night.

“Now your independence will get over, Kartik!” His friends warned him as if he was a country that was being besieged by an enemy!

It was time for her to leave for Kartik's home.

Her father's eyes showed utter misery. Even her stepmother's eyes were filled with tears.

“Take care, beta,” he said as he hugged her. He burst into tears. She had never seen him crying like this. “You are a piece of my heart. Never forget it. I will always be there for you.”

She went ahead to hug her stepmother.

“Maya, take care, baby. I am sorry if I ever hurt you, but I hope you know I never meant any ill.”

“It's Okay, ma. Relax,” she smiled.

She went into her room to have a last look and came out. She hugged her friends. She held back her tears and walked towards the car. Everything around her seemed to tell her that she was making a

big mistake, but now it was too late.

Kartik was waiting for her, almost expressionless.

“Take care of her. I am giving you a part of me. Please don't ever make her cry. Let me know if she ever does anything she should not. Just be kind to my daughter. She lost her mother quite early in life...” her father broke down.

“Sure, don't worry!” Kartik said embracing him and patting him.

TWENTY ONE

Marriage was not as smooth as she thought it would be. First, she found another dictator in the shape of her mother-in-law. Though, Kartik had often told her about his mother and that she could be curt, Maya never thought mother in laws could get so difficult.

She missed the warmth of her own mother and tried to impress her mother-in-law as much as she possibly could. Gradually, she realised that she would never be able to match up to the woman's expectations. Her mother-in-law wanted a girl who would be at her beck and call. She wanted a simpleton who could sit with her and gossip endlessly, cook, get up before sunrise and do whatever possible to become the ideal bahu of some television serial.

Maya on the contrary, was a free bird. Immediately the other Maya started protesting in her own way.

“Kartik, I don't think your mom likes me too much,” she told him over a coffee. Kartik was just back from office and was tired of listening to her complaints that were increasing by the day. He was irritated with Maya's inability to win over his mother. She said she loved him and she was not even able to manage his little home. And they had been married for just over a year.

“I am sure you don't like her very much either?” he snapped

“Kartik, I try and do things that make her happy,” she said.

“Oh yeah? Like what? You can't wear what she expects you

to. You can't get up early in the morning. Maya, doesn't this feel like your own house? Or are you incapable of being a good wife and a good daughter-in-law," he retorted.

Maya got angry. "As if all you men are such ideal characters?" "Plus no one has accepted me as a part of the family here."

"You wanted to marry me, Maya. You were the one who begged and pleaded me to marry you. I was always like this I've not changed, it's you who is changing." Kartik walked out of the room.

She felt very lonely. This was not the love she had dreamt of. The spirit of earlier months was fading off. In a way Kartik was right. He was always like this. Though he was responsible and ambitious, he was also insensitive and indifferent. He never knew passion the way Maya did. In her desperation to escape from her existing world, she had just entered another one, unthinkingly.

Later that night she was lying in her bed when Kartik came and lay down next to her. He was in one of his good moods.

"Come on Maya, let's make it a night to remember."

Maya turned around to look at him. He rubbed the nape of her neck with his thumb. Maya looked in his eyes like a little puppy waiting for its mother to lick it.

"Kartik, I feel very low."

"Let me make you feel good." He leaned forward to kiss her in a genuine attempt to make her feel better.

"Listen to me," she wriggled free. "I want to be happy. I honestly believe that if we stay here we just won't be happy. Let's move to some other city, have a family of our own."

Kartik's fingers stopped moving. "Why do you always have to spoil all these moments, Maya?"

"What moments, Kartik? How can you think of sex all the time? I need to talk."

He pulled himself up with a jerk. "I keep thinking of sex all the time? How can you even say that? As if you don't like it." His eyes narrowed in disgust.

"I didn't mean that Kartik, don't overreact."

"Am I overreacting? Oh Yeah?. You make me feel as if I am some kind of criminal torturing you. Huh."

She came closer to him. She held his hand. "I was just trying to talk it out, baby."

He looked the other way. Their hearts spoke different languages.

"Come on Kartik, stop acting like a baby now." She was in no mood to fight.

He kept quiet, but his lust got the better of him. He pulled her on to his lap and kissed her lips. He then unhooked her buttons and let her night gown slide low so that he could kiss her breasts. She felt as if there was no way he could understand if she wanted to make love to him or not. He would do it anyway as if she owes it to him. Though he never used physical force, but she felt it's a violation of her basic trust in love. There was a lack of sensitivity towards her and all he was interested in was quickly finishing off the stuff and going off to sleep. He pulled her back to the bed from the chair he was sitting on. He removed her panties and his own trousers. He was wearing nothing beneath it. He touched her trying to excite her. She felt as if she was divided into two. The body without the involvement of the *mind* meant nothing to her. She was there participating, while the other Maya flew out of her body watching this whole episode; the Maya that craved for love. Love was her food, her air. It flickered above them as if struggling to breathe. Kartik entered her and moved inside her till his desire burst out of him.

"You liked it?" he asked Maya as he rolled off her to ease himself.

"Yeah," she said. They hardly spoke afterwards. Sometime later she fell asleep.

TWENTY TWO

She was reading a book when her phone rang.

“Hey! Maya! What's up?” asked Aditya.

“Hi, what's up?” Maya's voice shrieked

“I'm fine, girl. How have you been?”

“Well, it's the same old me. Nothing's changed.”

“Except that you got married. How is the dude treating you?”

Kuch taqleef dega to mujhe bolna!

She laughed “Pata nahi, vaise tho there is no problem, but it is not as exciting as it should have been.”

“Why? Does he not have sex with you?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Aditya Balraj was a college friend. Maya was very fond of him and they had some nice times together. He was a flamboyant guy who drove a fancy car and didn't care much about anything. Maya loved his attitude.

His father had a huge bungalow right in the middle of Greater Kailash. He owned a couple of companies. His mother was a socialite. The two lived under the same roof, but on different floors. His elder sister was studying abroad and planned to settle there.

“What have you been doing?” she asked Aditya.

“Well, like always; making merry, spreading love.”

“You found someone for yourself.” She asked him.

“Well, many. I am editing the list.” He chuckled

“Adi, you will never change.”

“Want to catch up for a rum shake?”

Maya paused. She knew Kartik would not like her meeting Aditya. She had introduced him to Aditya and they did not seem to hit it off. Rather, Kartik disliked him. He found Aditya too frivolous.

“Okay, let's meet.” Meeting him would be relaxing, for he was that kind of a character. She did not tell Kartik that she would be meeting Aditya.

She had loads of fun when she met him in the evening. As usual, he was nattily dressed. A proper clotheshorse if ever there was one, he didn't have much to do, other than pass time with friends. He did not need to work either.

She found him childlike. He found her weirdly cool and tomboyish. The fact that she was not into cars astonished him as he was mad about them.

They had three tequila shots each, chatted a lot and by the time she reached home, she was almost tipsy. It was 9 p.m. and Kartik was fuming.

“Where did you go?” he asked her, pulling her into the bedroom so that his mother could not see them.

“Is she back?” she heard his mother ask from the other room before she could answer.

“You're drunk?” Kartik looked shocked.

“No, I'm not,” she replied.

“Maya, you don't have to lie.”

“I'm not lying.”

“You promised me you won't drink once we got married.”

“I did not drink!”

“Who did you go out with?”

“Reva,” she lied.

“You're lying,” he accused her.

“I'm not!”

“Call her then!”

“No, you can call her if you want to!” Maya just wanted to go to bed and was in no mood to argue or listen to any *gyan* from anyone.

She had a wonderful time and she did not want to spoil it. The other Maya was thrilled and she did not care.

“Maya, you have no sense of responsibility. You come home drunk! Didn't you think about how mom or dad would feel like if they know you had drinks? Or how I would feel?”

“Ah! Sense of responsibility, huh,” she was sarcastic. “I didn't do anything wrong.” She went into the bathroom and was washing her face when the phone rang.

“Is all Okay babe?” She heard Aditya on the line.

“Yeah, I handled it. No worries. See you soon.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“You too Adi.” She turned around to see Kartik standing behind her.

“So you went with him?” His face was red with anger.

“With whom?”

“Aditya. You know I despise him.”

“I didn't go out with him.”

“Maya, I heard you talking to him.”

“I said I didn't go out with him. You can ask Reva tomorrow morning.”

“I can't understand why you're lying,” he said in disgust.

Kartik couldn't sleep. He was very disturbed by the idea that his wife could go out with someone else. Deep inside he knew the other man, Aditya, was smarter, richer and more confident. It dented his ego. His marriage already seemed to be going haywire. And now this!

He was getting tired of both; his mother's constant complaining about his wife and of Maya's growing indifference to his mother. He knew he had made a big mistake. He blamed Maya for everything. He hated himself and he hated her too.

Since then, lying became a habit with Maya. She hated to lie, but she loved to do things which she was not supposed to. Of the two she chose to lie as she could not give up on getting attracted to things forbidden. She started going out more often and come back tipsy. That led to arguments between her and Kartik.

The more Kartik was disillusioned, the less she seemed to care.

“You don't love me anymore,” she complained to Kartik one

night, just when he was about to doze off.

“Please don't start that again,” he squeezed his eyes.

“Admit it to me, na. Why don't you? Tell me you don't love me.”

“How many times will we discuss the same thing again and again? You were the one who wanted to marry me, so you should be happy about it now.” He turned away from her and tried to sleep.

“Why don't you admit the truth?” Maya fumed.

“Talk about love, eh? You said you loved me. Is this what you call love? Lying, being irresponsible half the time. You broke your promise to try and get along. You've spoilt my life. You are a cheat, Maya, a selfish little bitch, a slut,” he blabbered in one go.

Maya burnt with anger. She was disgusted at herself for begging him to marry her. This could not be a marriage. She sat quietly for a while thinking what she could do to make it better. The truth of the matter was she was lying to him about lot of things.

“Is that what you think about me?” her voice was tired.

“That is what you force me to think of!” Kartik mellowed down.

As her tears formed, he moved towards her. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so harsh,” he said holding her hand.

“I think we should have a baby now. I want to make things better.”

“Maya,” he pushed her away, “where do you leave your brain when you think all that?”

“What's wrong about it? I want to be a mother.”

“Maya, get this right once and for all. I don't think I am ready for it. I think we are not even handling our relationship right. Bringing a child into the picture is going to ruin this further.”

“Why don't you at least listen to me?”

“I don't want to start it all over again.”

“Start what?”

“I am tired, Maya. Besides, for a child you need to become responsible yourself!”

“You are always tired. I'm also tired. I'm tired of this life. I'm tired of asking for permission for everything. I'm tired of pleasing people. And I'm tired of deadlines for everything.”

“If it is so bad for you Maya, you can very well leave.”

TWENTY THREE

She suddenly woke up from her sleep one day, feeling quite uneasy. Kartik was not there. Maybe he had gone out to get some cigarettes. Lazily she sat to check her Facebook account on his laptop. Before she could even log in her password a tinkle distracted her. It was Kartik's mail box reflecting a new message. She knew it was not right to read someone else's mail, but curiosity overtook her.

She was shocked to see a mail from another woman asking him to come over for the night. She was surprised to read the trail mail where Kartik had also written romantic lines for her. She always thought Kartik was born to be unemotional. Yet the mail said quite the contrary. He could express. He could emote. He could communicate. That meant he could not emote and communicate with her and only her. She felt completely deceived.

This was her payback for lying to him. She left the laptop and came back to lie down on her bed. She knew it was all falling apart. They had never been able to reach a level of companionship. She had never been special to him. She felt everything was a lie.

Perhaps she should not have forced him to marry her. She felt the urge to vomit.

When she woke up she was in a hospital. What was happening? She blinked her eyes and tried to get up from the bed, but all she could do was unwittingly press the switch against the side of the

bed.

Kartik came in.

"Hey, how are you feeling now?" He sounded concerned.

The nurse walked in after Kartik.

"Madam, your reports are in. You are pregnant."

"What?" said Kartik, taken aback.

"What report?" asked Maya.

"Your medical test reports, madam. The doctor will come and talk to you. Also, we need to put you on a drip. Some glucose is what the doctor has recommended."

She came near her and injected needle in her hand. She connected the injection with a glucose bottle hanging on the iron stand. The glucose entered her body drop by drop. She didn't know whether to be happy or sad on hearing the news.

'Are you married?' the nurse asked her.

"Yes!" she replied slowly.

"Aren't you happy? I won't take less than a five hundred rupee tip for the news," she said, as she left the room.

Kartik looked bothered. They both kept quiet for some time.

"Maya, I told you!"

"What does that look mean? You think I injected your semen into myself?"

"We can't have this child, Maya," he finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

"I thought you'd be happy!" she said.

"I would have been, but this is not the time. I can't afford a child right now, Maya. You know that. We talked about it already."

"It is here now," she said. "We should have been more careful."

"Please don't overreact. We are too young. I don't think I can take the responsibility of a child."

"I will!"

"I don't trust you."

She looked at him with eyes full of hurt.

"You don't trust me?"

"Maya, you've got to choose. Either you get to live with me or with the child. I can't deal with this." He turned around and left the

room.

Maya closed her eyes.

Don't give up little one. She heard the voice in her mind.

She was discharged by the evening. She came home and slept. She was feeling a little weak and had no energy to fight or argue. She thought about the future she was having to offer to the unborn child. A marriage where love was dying, and trust and respect were dead. The next day she told Kartik to book for an abortion. He seemed relieved and did so without any delay.

"Are you sure you don't want the child?" asked the doctor.

She nodded.

"I wonder why educated young people like you don't use precautions when you are not sure. This is bad for your body also. Your generation takes all this too lightly."

The words pricked the other Maya even more than they did harm her. The other Maya wanted to be a mother. She wanted a child, a replica of herself who she thought will bring immense love in her life. Maya loathed Kartik at that moment for putting her through this. She felt terrible with the choices she made in her life.

"Thank God! you are safe and it's over," Kartik said when he saw her after the operation.

Everything had changed. Everything seemed to be over.

TWENTY FOUR

The picture that Maya had of a cozy home and family was shattered. Kartik on the other hand, was getting increasingly frustrated with her complaints and emotional demands. His calculations were going wrong and Maya was turning out to be a bad debt for him. He could not sense that Maya was turning away from him gradually. She was drifting further and further towards loneliness.

Loneliness is often, our biggest shadow. It seems to be at a touching distance all along. Everyone faces loneliness at least once in life. How long it lasts is another question. The inner demons keep haunting us. We would go out to parties, walk over the grinning faces, drink, smile, and lean on physical pleasures and in the end come home scared. Maya was also trying hard not to get sucked into the black hole.

She knew the pain that fills you when life destroys your closely knit dreams and in that pain she felt a connection. A bond she shared with every other woman and also with her step mother. She wondered why she could not see life from this angle earlier. She realised suffering makes one less judgemental automatically. She closed her eyes as if she was in lot of physical pain and she lay on her back. She felt difficulty breathing. Tears trickled down the corners of her eyes. She wanted to scream and cry, but she could not. However hard she tried she could just gasp, nothing came out of it. It's strange that as we turn into

adults, we lose our ability to cry like kids. She felt as if she would choke. She removed all her clothes and lay naked on the bed. She felt trapped, as if her hands were tied.

As she put her hand on her waist, she felt a sudden sensation, of pleasure, a frisson of excitement. She started touching herself more and more. She wanted to touch the woman inside her; the shocked woman who is terrified of this world. The naked Maya, with blisters in her heart.

Her hand was making a subtle move towards the woman in her, fingers guiding her thoughts, and her body responded to every touch. She seemed to be moving into a tunnel of pure pleasure. The entangled and bleeding mess in her soul felt at ease. A strange calm was also descending as her mind was wandering. An intense mix of pain and pleasure was making her feel anxious.

Her whole body was responding to her own touch down there, sending shivers transforming her mind and soul. She felt an unnatural bliss. Strangely her body echoed an orgasm and her eyes responded with screaming loud tears a sobbing orgasm. How about that? She felt tears gushing out of her. She felt as if something that was trapped was let loose on her. She gasped for a second and burst into loud cry. She kept crying for a long time screaming her heart out.

An hour later, bewildered by her discovery, she reached for the phone and called Vikram. Only he could possibly understand.

"What's it?" his voice was soothing.

"You can't imagine what I went through," she said.

"I'm all ears."

"I ... I ..." she hesitated.

"Relax!"

"I masturbated," she said finally, not without a hint of shame in her voice.

"So?"

"Well... then I cried. I cried my guts out. I should have felt pleasure!" she sounded confused.

There was a pause. She is evolving, he thought.

"Hello?" she reminded him of her presence.

"What's making you so sad?"

“Nothing, leave that. Tell me why I would cry after an orgasm.”
He took a deep sigh.

“Most people think that when people have sex or crave for better sex it's only physical. More often than not, it's the craving for a deeper state of peace and bliss. The deeper connect. You cried because when orgasm leads you into a state where the mind ceases to exist. The emotions are raw, so you express what surfaced inside you. In your case, it turned into crying. Your pain found a way of release through your pleasure. It's exactly how life finds a release through death. The unrest is gone forever and peace restored to soul.” He paused.

“Alright, look at it this way,” he continued, “When you are in an orgasmic state you are free from all other thoughts. It's what you call spiritual sex which is as good as meditation. It leaves you thoughtless for a few moments. In those moments you have no *Ego*, no mind, there is no *I*, you just become part of this huge universe. If there was nothing that would distract you back you would have been able to stay in that bliss forever. This is what meditation also does to you. The sad part is there are enough distractions that pull us back in this life. In your case you cleansed yourself with your tears.” She was listening to him silently awestruck as ever. She realised that listening to him always seem to charge her energy levels.

“What is spiritual sex,” she was curious.

“Maya, it's the transcendent sex. Strangely, it's even better when people are not living together. It's about experiencing emotions that help us discover altered states and higher realms. Ecstasy in the Greek origin means 'to stand outside'. It's loosing oneself into divinity, the larger cosmic space.”

“I don't get that.”

“Will you ever be patient?” He smiled. “Spiritual sex is complete surrender to your own desire, your own centre. If we learn to live charged up and with a similar integrity in every moment all of them would become raw. Nothing would need to surface, simply because nothing would be hidden. The sexual energy is not contained till sex. It is the energy of the being. The energy at our centre, the life force. Some people also call it *kundalini*. Imagine if it is always charged and you are always on a high. The mind becomes incapable of

influencing you and controlling you. Your mind doesn't let you discover that kind of intensity because it does not want to lose control over yourself."

"You mean I cried because the pain surfaced in the form of pleasure," she said.

"Yes. Pain and pleasure are connected. There is no balance. It's like a rope. One end is pleasure and the other is pain. It's the same rope."

"No wonder there are times when at my deepest connect with someone I can feel an equally intense release of pleasure as well as pain."

"Yeah, because all intense emotions produce a similar kind of feelings, in our hearts. We should always listen to them. Their voice is the voice of our soul and the larger cosmic space. Through them the Almighty guides us."

"What would I feel if I am at the centre?" she asked.

"Salvation!" He must be smiling, she thought.

"How?" she was curious.

He liked this aspect of her, her thirst to know more.

"A living person emotes. He would feel happy and he would feel sad. If we are afraid of feeling sad we would have to do away with our want to be happy either. If we want to achieve a balance, then we would have to leave both the ends of the rope. That can only happen if we stop living. We need to understand that life cannot exist without death. Days cannot be without nights. Pleasure would not exist unless it is polarised with pain. So we need to enjoy both the ends. Sadness and pain have their own beauty. They also teach us, they feed our soul. Pleasure and pain can be of the same intensity, the same bliss to a point of having no difference. What you experienced was that point. What matters is just the result. Not the journey. You can achieve the same state both through pleasure and pain."

"Hmmm..." she drifted into her own mode of introspection.

"Sleep!" he said.

And she did doze off thinking over it. She opened her eyes to realise that she had slept for a while.

She felt surprised at herself. The other Maya in her became

more firm on her decision to search for meaning. Some part of her was dead. Another Maya, the more vulnerable one, took over completely. A more impulsive Maya, the wanderer, and the one in search of something she knew not.

TWENTY FIVE

"I'm leaving," she told Kartik after one of their usual and pointless fights. This was not the first time she had told him this, but she meant it this time.

"Is anyone stopping you?" Kartik retorted.

"Why would anyone stop me? There are other women who would do anything to please you. Besides you need only pleasing since you can't please anyone. It takes a real man to do so."

Kartik's ego received a strong blow, if that's the correct expression, she thought.

He sprung at her, pulling her towards him and slapped her. It was the first time he did so, she realized with a shock. How dare he?

Immediately, he realised he had crossed a line he shouldn't have. "I'm sorry," "I didn't mean to hit you."

"But that's what you just did," she retorted. She stared at him, hurt and angry. She felt betrayed beyond measure, he felt guilty that he behaved so nastily.

"Look," he said, "I didn't want to..."

"But you did. You just hit me. That's what you are good at. You can't love anyone. You are a mean, selfish bastard."

"Stop it, Maya. That's enough."

"Else what will you do? Will you hit me again? Hit me. Come on, hit me," she screamed, pushing him against the wall.

“Maya!” he shouted, his hate reflected in his eyes.

“Don't scream. You have no right to scream at me. You sleazy dog,” she screamed pushing him hard, so hard that his head hit the wall. Astounded by her gall, he pulled her by her hair and pushed her away, hard. She fell on the bed.

“You bring out the worst in me,” he shouted and turned to leave the room.

“That's because that's all there is,” she retorted. He looked at her with pure hatred and disgust before leaving the room. He didn't want to do this. She did hurt him in all possible ways.

Dear Diary

It's been long since I wrote anything. I was too busy sorting out my life, but it's even more messed up now. I don't think anything called love exists. It is just a matter of chance that we feel certain emotions for someone in our lives. Love is just a trap that brings with it a dark pain and sometimes pleasure. Neither seems consequential!

Had I never met Kartik, I would have never known my love for him. Had I met someone else, it could have been different. Maybe I should have waited to meet someone who loved me the way I wanted. There was no hurry to marry. I wish my mom was alive. I miss her. I would not have felt so lonely and there would not have been any need to marry so soon. My father would have never let me cry so much. I'm all alone here sitting here on this bed wondering what I ran away from and what I've achieved. I still feel unloved and I can't run away from here. Or, can I? Had I eloped with that boy Raghu in Goa, things might have been different. Who knows? Maybe in a way I did cheat on him and this is the payback. It is pointless to blame anyone. Perhaps it is unfortunate that Kartik is also trapped with me. Will I ever find love?

She stopped, for the severity of her questions left her limp.

She called Vikram.

“I'm feeling very low,” she said.

“What happened?” Vikram sounded emotionless.

“I don't know. I had a huge fight with Kartik.”

“Hmmm...” he sighed.

“Do you love me?” she asked suddenly, like a child desperate to be cajoled by someone, anyone.

Though he was taken aback at the question, his voice did not show it. "I had answered that question earlier," he said with equanimity.

"What?"

"I do."

"I'm coming over to see you."

Vikram knew she had to complete this part of her life before finding solace. She had to cross this worldly dimension and learn to get detached. It makes us more real and more truthful. Maya had to learn to let go.

The greatest of pains make us realise that nothing in this world is permanent and all things will come to an end.

He knew she was confused. He remembered the first time he was introduced to her in a training session. She asked him if he could give her ten minutes, alone. The moment he set eyes on her, he knew she was no ordinary girl. She had the latent energy in her to achieve a lasting peace. That would take time, though.

The mystic in him was touched by the sensitivity she seemed to possess. It was hard to find sensitive souls. It was even harder to find souls around for most of them were trapped in bodies that were on a different plane. They had to go through multi-dimensional changes to reach the spiritually awakened state he was now in. This girl could be a partner. She was the one with whom he could go ahead with for his final journey, but it was not the time, yet. Once spiritually awakened, one needs to wait for the enlightenment. The final stage was oneness with the universe. He was aching to achieve that with her. He knew he would have to be patient.

"Tell me," he said, reassuring her with a smile as she sat beside him.

"I've decided to leave him," she said.

"Well, you have to be sure. It is you who loved him, who chose him!"

"I did, but I don't think there is any love between us."

"Hmmm, I don't think you will be able to leave him so soon."

"Why do you say so?"

"Maya, in love the one who is more passionate is the weaker one. The one who loves less is always better off. It is easier for him to break the ties because he is not clinging to love the way you are. You're weak, as much as your dependence on love is strong."

It seemed to make sense.

TWENTY SIX

Maya had learnt by now that the most painful feeling for a human being is to deal with indifference. For, this threatens their existence. The fact that your existence makes no difference to anyone's life, good or bad, is hard to accept. Though Kartik did apologise for hitting her, she packed her bags and walked out. He was out when she left, so she left a note behind for him.

Dear Kartik,

I loved you very much all this time. Not that I hate you now. This is not the love I dreamt of. You have always been insensitive towards me. I know you think that I forced you to commit to me, but I sincerely feel that you are equally responsible for the state of ruin our lives are now in. The need to find love blinded me, but I wish you had not married me, since you too were not sure.

I realise I also went back on my promises and sometimes lied to you. All I can say is that I'm sorry. I don't know whether it is right or wrong, but my need to be loved supersedes everything I do. I am leaving to find myself again, before I get lost completely. I am not blaming you, for you have been nice to me most of the time. It's just that we are not meant to be together. All I wish is that you could have loved me, even if it was only for once.

Good bye and take care.

She imagined him reading it and repenting. She wanted him

to feel sad about her. She wanted him to feel as if he had lost something precious, something irreplaceable.

“You must be happy,” she said, when she called Vikram.

“Why?” he asked, his voice as calm as ever.

“You predicted that my marriage wouldn't last. Today, I finally walked out.”

“I didn't say your marriage wouldn't last. I remember telling you to be careful.”

He felt sorry for her. There was much for her to learn, much to cope with. He loved her spontaneity, and the courage to dare and take chances. The courage to make mistakes again and again, the ability to use her sadness as a weapon to find meaning. Her way was a hard one, but she wasn't the one to give up. That fascinated him. It exerted a mysterious magnetic pull towards him.

“I've got a job in Mumbai. I'm going to stay at Aditya's apartment in Mumbai as no one uses it now.”

“How will you manage alone? Why don't you join me?” He wanted her to say yes.

“I would love to, but I want to explore life on my own. I'll manage. Besides I have an old friend there. I don't want to be a burden on you.”

“Who is it?”

“His name is Raghu. In fact, he liked me quite a lot at one point of time.”

“I think we have discussed him. The guy you met in Goa, right?”

“You remember everything!” His memory was razor sharp, unlike hers.

“You should go home to your parents.” He felt jealous at the thought of her moving in with another man.

“No, they won't let me in.”

“They are your parents.”

“Stepmom won't be able to take it!”

“They would get to know anyway.”

“The later the better, actually!”

“Maya, you need to learn to face a situation. Not run away from it. The last time you ran away, you landed in an even worse mess.”

“What makes you sure it won't happen again?”

He desperately wanted to tell her to come to him so that they could find their meaning together. But he chose not to. There was a time and a place for everything.

“What worse can happen?”

Of all the people he knew, only Maya could speak like that.

TWENTY SEVEN

Why was it so important for human beings to be loved? What was the connection between souls that made it so difficult to live on their own? Matter can neither be created nor destroyed. Human body which is again energy only changes form and spreads over the vast universe. Some of the atoms mingle with other atomic formations. That meant there is an amalgamation of particles in all of us. We all are connected with one another. This whole human race is connected!

That must be why we suffer and rejoice with each other. We can sense each other's pain at a larger level, though we get too busy to think about it more often. We think and feel only at a micro-level because these circumstances become obvious, it hits us in the face. Yet we are all connected.

Vikram knew he could give her the love she was looking for. He could teach her the art of loving and letting go, the art of being one with the universe. Yet this was not the time. She had to come to him. That called for patience. It needs the removal of all clutter and making space for the best things to happen. If you are ready to compromise, the universe will make sure you do.

At one time when he was younger, he lusted for power. He did work hard and build a big industrial empire for himself in electronics. His had been a known name in the country's business community; there wasn't a month when something or the other

wasn't written about his empire in the business newspapers, the business periodicals.

He loved travelling and so the amount of travel his business needed was not a nuisance for him at all. More than that, he also enjoyed his work. He had fallen in love with a lovely woman and married her. They dreamt of having a couple of kids. He was no stranger to women earlier, and his wife was perhaps the least demanding woman he ever met. He had the kind of money most people could only dream of, a mansion that was big and beautiful with a swimming pool to cool off in.

He remembered that day well. How could he ever forget?

He had left earlier than usual that morning, after a brief goodbye to his wife. It was going to be a long and busy day, with meetings that could end up transforming the size of his industrial empire even further.

She had tried calling him three times in the afternoon, but he could not attend her calls. It was evening when he called back, and he had just one more meeting for the day. No one picked the phone. Finally, the maidservant picked it up.

"Why did you pick up the phone? Where's madam?" he asked her.

"She is in the hospital, sir," she replied.

His blood froze.

"What? Why didn't you tell me earlier? What happened to her?" His tension increased by every second.

"Sir, Madam said there was no need to disturb you, that she'll be fine."

He calmed down a little bit.

"What happened to her, Mira?"

She was crossing the road when a car brushed against her. She heard herself falling and the car stopped. No, thank God, it was just a shove, though being pregnant, she fell heavily.

The couple in the car walked up to her as she was picking herself up. She insisted she's fine, but they suggested a check-up at the nearby hospital. That was when she had called him, from the hospital. He ran down and got into his car. As he drove to the hospital all kinds of crazy fears were taking hold of him.

They turned out to be true when he reached there.

Both she and the baby, who would have been born in another five months, were dead.

The couple in the car were there. From their looks, they wished they were dead too.

That was five years ago, though it seemed like yesterday.

He took out another cigarette and forced back the tears. A cool breeze was blowing. He hadn't realised when he finished his previous cigarette.

He saw some children prattle as they played.

Death took away from him his dreams, his unborn child, his power and vigour. He was lost and for months did not know how he passed his days. He lost interest in his empire. His life seemed to be in vain.

It was then that he started his search for meaning. It took hold of him gradually.

He wanted to find answers to questions that were troubling him. He found his master in Brazil. One of his clients he'd met in Brazil told him about Osho, the mysticmaster. He had stayed in Rio de Janeiro to witness the grand carnival they celebrated to say farewell to all their sins and prepare for Christ's death and resurrection.

Vikram was well-educated, well connected and well-travelled, but that was all in the past now. Osho, the mysticmaster, had accepted him as a person eligible enough to start his journey for the final destination. That is when he learned Capoeira, an art form that includes martial arts, dance and music.

He started painting and that seemed to calm him within. It was as if he learned to heal himself through colours. He learned the rituals which bring awareness and helps one achieve the power of mind. He was told about various dance forms that invoked consciousness and took the soul to a higher realm. He realised that his wife was also a part of the universe somewhere.

After that he learnt magic. He learned to see beyond the three dimensional world we live in. The dark secrets of the mystical world and how they can make everything a human mind perceives to become true. He met women, conducted magical rituals with some of

them, but when he saw Maya he was sure that she was his female counterpart.

Together they could achieve their quest for knowledge beyond time. By then he had sold his companies, stashed the money away in the bank. It had taken some years to do so, but not as long as it took to build them!

TWENTY EIGHT

Maya went to Vikram's house the next day. She found his house dimly lit, serene as usual.

She was restless, he saw as they sat down.

"I can't live with him anymore."

"With whom? Kartik?"

"Yes!"

"I thought you had been sure about him."

"I thought as much, but I was a fool. He did not love me ever.

It was only I who assumed it to be so."

"Hmmm."

"I feel so lonely some times. I don't feel loved. I don't know what to do. Life seems to have no meaning."

"Do you need to be loved so much?" He knew she did and that she was a Wiccan. Wiccans are spiritual souls. They are the pagan angels filled with love for this earth and all human beings. Her soul belonged to the group of Wiccans who need to be loved. She was a lost soul waiting to be united with her own. She had reached the dimension where she realised that she needed to be loved, but could not find the way. Wiccans are in search of the ultimate truth.

"Then find it." He took her hand and made her sit on the floor. He drew a circle around her with an orange piece of chalk. He placed a lit candle inside the circle. The candle was sending out aromas

that seemed to be inducing something akin to a trance.

While they sat there in silence, he wondered about love. It is ironical how important it is for a human being to be loved, but how hard it is to come by. Love enriches the entire existence of a being, yet it is incomplete without the pain. Act of love in itself requires a readiness for both, acceptance as well as letting go without any fear. "What are you doing?" she asked mesmerised.

"I am teaching you to focus on the present."

"It's not happening, Vikram. It's just not happening. He does not love me."

"Then find someone who does!"

He held her hand. Tears fell from her eyes, but she felt a strange peace when he touched her. She leaned on his shoulder. They were sitting in the circle. This circle in the world of magic kept all the energy inside. It also did not let any unnecessary energy enter the world of the circle.

"Maya, do you love him?"

"I don't know."

"Focus on yourself."

"I can't love him if he does not love me back."

"Maya, love gives whole heartedly. You sound like a selfish lover."

"Who said so? I am not selfish!"

He smiled. Vikram liked her bluntness. She was honest and knew her shortcomings. Realising that we all are born as humans and have our shortcomings is also a state of enlightenment. He smiled and pulled her close to him. Her head leaned on his broad chest. She felt as if she had known him forever.

It was a moment of bliss. Time stood still.

Vikram kissed her passionately. She lost track of everything around her. She could not resist kissing him back. Their tongues met and intoxication prevailed. The bodies grew weaker and more vulnerable. There was no ego. There was no identity. The atoms merged into each other and diffused warmth from all over. She could not remember how long they kissed. It felt as if he had pumped her soul full with fresh energy. He embraced her with his love and passion.

"Maya, I love you!" He whispered in her ears. At that

moment she felt utterly peaceful. She closed her eyes. This was what she wanted.

“You are a wonderful soul, Maya. I wish I could erase all sadness from your heart. I wish you realise how much we are meant to be with each other.”

Maya wanted to hear this. She felt loved in that moment like she had never felt before. Not when she was with Kartik. Not with Raghu. Not when she made love in past. With just one kiss she felt the bliss of togetherness. She felt as if her soul had connected with Vikram. He was talking to her on a different frequency. She did not want this to end. This was how it should be forever.

“Why don't you tell me that you love me, more often,” she whispered.

“That is where the problem lies... We always want more. We forget to focus on the moment. We are more worried about sustaining the moment than enjoying it. We need to be realistic. Love is energy. How can we tame it? We need to give in to the power of love. That is when it will reveal all its glory to us.”

“You mean you don't want me to be there forever.”

“Who said we are for forever. When this life itself is temporary, how can we be forever?” he smiled. “Who said that we can only love one person in this world? Love is like waterfall. It quenches the thirst of whoever seeks water from its banks.”

“The atoms in the universe are all connected and so are our bodies. When the soul leaves a body, it carries with itself psychic memories. It forms a group of souls who are interconnected since they share the same destiny, the same life force, the same universal language and the same set of atoms. It is a misconception that there is only one soul mate who makes life ideal and complete. One can have more than one soul mate and they need not be inclined romantically only. Your mother could be a soul mate. It could be your teacher or your best friend.”

“For me, is it you?” she whispered drunk with his voice.

“May be!” His tone softened. His kiss resumed its intensity.

He kissed her again with even more vigour. He held her close to himself. His palm spread on her back.

After what seemed eternity, they stopped kissing, but they were still gazing at each other. Maya was lost in his dark eyes.

“Is that what a soul mate does to you?” her voice quivered.

He smiled.

“It is likely that you can find more than one soul mate, Maya. Sometimes they just come into your life to teach a lesson or two. Their influence is more than a friend or acquaintance will normally have. They would make a significant difference in life. There are soul groups, soul families that keep meeting one another over the journey across all dimensions till we attain the ultimate understanding. The power to live in the moment, learn and absorb them and then let them go.”

Her eyes were closed and she was lost in a trance. Vikram stood up and blew off the candle that was burning. She sensed him come back in the circle and sit in front of her. She wanted him to touch her, assure her of his presence. The room became dark. There was no trace of light or any movement. Maya became restless again. She did not know what was happening. She wanted to feel that bliss again, but Vikram was sitting away from her. He was in her circle, but suddenly he was too still. He held her hand and kept his palm on hers.

“Vikram...”

“Keep quiet,” he responded calmly. Maya felt weird. She knew he was a mystic and did some weird things. Yet she did not understand this one. Bringing her to a state where she would have done anything to reach ecstasy, and then suddenly stop everything, leaving her wondering.

She had come here to discuss her troubled relationship with Kartik. She wanted to believe love again. A love, that seemed to have vanished.

What did Vikram want her to feel? She felt him touch her hand again. She felt relaxed. The thought of the kiss came back to her. She clutched his hand tighter. This was one of the most secure moments she had experienced. Vikram wanted her to realise the lesson on her own. After all, she was his soul mate.

They sat with Vikram holding her hand. Maya felt wonderful. She thought about this man holding her hand. She was

surprised she felt so strongly for him. May be he wanted her to realise that it was not the hand, it was the moment. He had led her into the moment, but she was spoiling it herself.

She had to learn to focus, focus on the moment and also on herself. She would have to control her thoughts and be in the moment, completely. Once she was in the moment she would not analyse it because she had given it her best. She had felt like this in life, but lost grip because of her thoughts. She remembered how she parasailed in Goa where she learnt a lesson of life; Facing her fears. She had experienced, though for a few moments, that once you face your fears they cease to exist. She got up and switched on the lights.

Vikram glanced at her and smiled. He was aching to make love to her, but he knew she was not ready in the true sense. Yet he was glad he taught her the first ritual of the circle. When you make a world for yourself, you have to let go of your fears to enjoy the pleasures and energy the world brings in for you.

“Would you love to have a cup of coffee?” Vikram asked with his eyes full of warmth. “By the way this was a beginner's ritual that I learnt in Brazil.”

He wondered how much time she would take to get over the people of this world and cross the bridge of knowledge to realise his love for her. Maya sat there waiting for the coffee and thinking about what just took place between them. She felt as if someone had injected confidence in her. Did Vikram mean what he just said in the circle or was it only a ritual? She felt loved and blessed.

She felt she was complete with this man. He was there whenever she wanted. She was one of the soul mates, maybe.

This is what she was craving for in life. It was right there in front of her, but she was not sure whether it was for her. Doubts started to raise their heads again. Was it for any participant or was it that he said it for her ears only. She wanted to ask him, but was unsure.

There were times when she hated herself for being unsure. It frustrated her. The inability to take a decision, reaching a conclusion, eluded and irritated her. Perhaps she was not daring enough.

The inability to decide stems from a fear of future, a fear of going wrong and a fear of getting hurt. What we fail to realise is that

we still will get hurt, no matter what. Taking a chance might just change the course of action. Would she always be a wanderer like this all her life, unable to find an anchor? How much more time did she have to dare and follow her heart?

“By the way, how is that charming woman?” she asked him, sipping the coffee.

“Good!”

“Do you love her?”

“She is my partner, Maya. She and I perform some rituals together.”

“What kind of rituals?”

“Rituals of the heart!”

Maya didn't know what was to be deciphered from those words.

TWENTY NINE

She carried her luggage and dragged herself to the station. There was a book stall and she thought of picking up a book. She looked around and saw people waiting for the train. So many people were travelling. Someone must be going to get a new job, or going to get married. Someone must be in the midst of some emergency. There must be people going for vacation; different people, different situations.

She again thought about her decision to go to Mumbai. She should at least discuss it with her parents. She went to a nearby booth. She called her father and told him that she had been posted to Mumbai. It had been a sudden decision, she said, but the posting was not for long.

She thought about her own mother. She was sure her mother must also have been lonely at some point of time. But, unlike her mother, she would not give up, she decided. Still, she did not see her mother's suicide as a decision a weak person made. It takes a huge amount of courage to turn off life's working machinery. It takes effort to leave behind unfulfilled desires, broken hopes and dreams.

As the train arrived at the platform people were getting impatient to get in. That's what life too is like, she thought. How impatient we are to get what we want, not realising that the journey could be slow and long.

She looked out of the window as the train started moving. The memories started coming back.

She recalled how she met Raghu D'Souza on one of her office trips. He was a handsome man in his early thirties; a charmer, who would sweep many a women off their feet.

It had gone so horribly wrong though. It was an outbound training in Goa. Maya was fascinated by water always. The office had booked a free adventure sport session for all the employees.

She had left Kartik and came for this trip just a week before her wedding. She was standing and looking at the waves coming and going. It had never occurred to her that one day she would be back in this city, to live here.

The vastness of the sea made her feel small, insignificant. Vikram used to talk a lot about sea. He had told her about the mysteries the sea bore. The secrets the waves took from this shore and drowned them elsewhere. He had told her that someday he would teach her a ritual on the beach under the moonlight. She wondered what it would be like. Moments with Vikram made her face the truth and the truth did hurt, sometimes. Yet it also seemed to cleanse and purify.

"You aren't trying para sailing?" She turned around to see a tall, handsome man with tanned skin standing next to her. Her heart missed a beat and she felt her cheeks blushing. She hoped he had not noticed her nervous expression. She was caught off guard.

"It's nice. Your colleagues seem to like it." he continued.

"I'm scared of water," she said.

"How can anyone stand on the beach and say that?" he laughed. "How can you be scared of water? Do you know the seventy per cent of you is water."

"Yes, I do!"

"Have you ever tried parasailing?" he asked.

"No."

"Come with me." Maya's heart leapt out of her body. As it was she was scared of the water. Then, this man was acting fresh with her.

"I don't want to do it."

Oh come on. Go for it. Her aching heart took notice.

"Are you scared of dying?" She chose not to answer to that question.

Isn't everyone afraid of dying? Yet ultimately we all will. She wondered why we create so much of fuss about living after all. May be she could have some fun with this man here in this unknown place. After all, who knows her here?

Feed passion to your soul, her heart said.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked.

She shook her head in reply.

"What's your name?"

"Call me Raghu!" he winked. Maya looked at him, wondering why he was showing so much interest in her. She found his name rather cute.

"Go parasailing! You'll love it." He guided her to the man who was giving people their chance at parasailing one by one. She wore the lifejacket and got into the boat with Raghu behind her.

She was both excited and scared enough to turn back, but wouldn't that be embarrassing? She was buckled with a parasail which would blow open once she was released in the air, above the sea.

"Get ready," she heard Raghu saying.

Oh hell, I'm going to die today!

"Don't worry. This will attach you to the parasail which will be connected to the boat." He pointed at a harness by which she was hooked to a tow rope. He could see that she was very afraid.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"No, I'm Okay," she replied, though dizzy with fear.

She stood at the end of the speeding boat in the middle of the sea ready to leap.

"Let go. Leave the rope," Raghu shouted so that he could be heard over the strong wind. She froze. She just could not let go her hands off the rope.

"No, no, I can't," she said, almost in tears.

She felt as if her whole body would break into pieces over the water.

"Maya, let go," she heard Raghu shouting as the attendant who raised her rope pushed her. She felt a jerk. Her heart stopped beating. She thought she was dying. She screamed as hard as she could. In a moment there was only the sound of the wind. Everything else

went quiet. She opened her eyes and looked around. She spied the boat below her and her bare feet felt cool. She felt she was like a bird soaring over the sea. She would have been about 500 feet high. She spread her arms and looked up at the sky. The cool breeze felt nice on her face. Then, it was nothing short of exhilaration.

She felt utterly foolish for being afraid. What a loss it would have been if she had not taken the leap, literally. So many times in life we skip an opportunity to follow our hearts only because we are scared of the unknown.

Her feet touched the cold water of the sea. It was at that moment that she learnt to face her fears.

Later that evening she dressed herself in a pair of blue jeans and a frilly red top. Red was a favourite colour with her. Raghu was waiting for her at the beach side table, just where he had met her in afternoon. He saw her slowly walking barefoot towards him. She looked beautiful in the moonlit night.

Something about this girl was mysterious. She fascinated Raghu. As a pilot, he was mostly surrounded by young and beautiful airhostesses, he had seen many a beautiful girl, but this one was different.

Maya could see him waiting for her. She wondered whether such a handsome guy would be without a girlfriend. What was she doing here with him in this unknown place? He pulled a chair for her and sat down opposite her. Maya felt a little uncomfortable the way he looked at her.

“The parasailing was really fun,” she said.

“You liked it?”

“Yes I did. It was really good. I never felt like this in my life. It was amazing.”

He liked the depth in her eyes and imagined her without the red blouse.

He gulped.

“What do you do?” he asked her trying to divert his crazy mind.

“I work with a publishing house.”

“Creativity, and all that, huh?”

“Not really!” she said. “For me being creative is to create

something. To make something that did not exist already; something that adds value to your existence. Not just sit there and write some two liners to sell cheap underclothing.”

“You sell underclothing,” he chuckled.

“Not really, that was an example,” she laughed.

Think about Kartik. Her mind sent a reminder.

“What would you like to have, young lady?” he asked, unable to take his eyes off her.

“Anything!”

“Uh, anything,” he mimicked naughtily.

For someone who was otherwise confident, Maya felt herself getting nervous. This wasn't the first time she was out for a dinner date. Yet this man was casting a spell on her with his amazingly good looks. She was growing weak in her knees.

“Drink?” he asked her.

Don't have it, Maya, this man looks dangerous.

Go ahead Maya. No one knows you here. Break the rules. Let's see how it feels at the edge.

“A Vodka, may be,” she said.

“Great, I like women who drink Vodka,” he said as he made a sign for the waiter to approach them. They spent next twenty minutes or so talking about regular stuff and sipping their drinks.

When they were through with their drinks, he suggested going for a walk on the beach. As they walked along, she realised the sea really looked quite scary in the dark. For a landlubber from New Delhi like her, it was even scarier.

Its vastness amazed and fascinated her. The point where the light split into seven colours, a magical world. Someday, she told herself, I'll get myself a house facing the sea. Raghu was watching her from the corner of his eye. Inside, he itched to touch her.

“Take my jacket if you're feeling cold,” he said, taking it off.

By the time she said no, he had already draped it around her shoulders. She could smell him in the jacket. There was a palpable tension between them.

“Let's go back. The waves are getting wilder,” he suggested.

“Like you?” Maya asked without thinking. He looked at her

with desire. He was doing something to her.

They silently walked back to the table, the tension between them only increased. Maya's palm brushed against his arm and she felt a current passing through her. "You like to read?" she asked, breaking the discomfiting silence.

"Yes I do!" Raghu was an avid reader, reading anything from trash to bestsellers, both being the same sometimes! As they sat down and had dinner, the rest of the conversation was about books and authors.

Maya was very impressed with his knowledge, especially since he did not look to be the type.

"Which is your favourite book?" she asked him.

"I have no favourite as such."

"Hmmm..." she nodded.

"What do you like to do?" he asked her in a flirtatious tone.

"I also like to read," she said her eyes glittering in the dark.

"What do you like to read?"

"I like to read about philosophy, relationships, life and moments that make me feel alive."

"Interesting!" There was a pause in the conversation for some time as if both were lost in their own thoughts.

"You don't look like someone whose mission in life is to get married," he said awkwardly.

It was too sudden a question and Maya didn't know what to say.

"I don't want to. But my parents want me to."

"You don't look to be the type that will do things at the bidding of others," he said.

"Well, you're right. But then, I don't think there is any harm either. I have nothing better to do with my life, anyways."

"Oh, there are loads of things," he said.

"Well, such as?"

"Like coming parasailing with me or making love," he said, giving vent to his growing desire.

"Well, I think I'm already in love," she said, refusing to be lured.

"I doubt it very much. If that was the case you wouldn't have spent so much time with an unknown man," he said, laying it down

bare. "Is your guy eager to marry you?" he continued.

"Not really, actually he did not want to marry," she laughed.

This conversation was heading in crazy directions, she felt.

"You mean you convinced him?" he raised his eyebrows.

"You mean you are marrying because you have nothing else to do in life and as there is no harm in it," he giggled even louder this time.

"Are you trying to make fun of me?"

"No, I'm laughing at myself for thinking that I am sitting with someone smart and intelligent!" he said, laughing.

"What a joke! Besides, I think that marriage is an important aspect in everyone's life, especially a woman's."

"Really?" he said, dismissively.

"What do you do?" Maya tried to divert the conversation.

"I fly," he winked. "I'm a pilot."

"You don't have a girlfriend?" she smirked.

"I was seeing this girl, but she would not let me have my way with her. She was so silly. She would just not listen to me. I really tried hard to make her understand. I should have been a little more patient, but she was adamant that we get married soonest. I admit, I was rude with her, even hit her once. I should not have done that. But what the hell! Why don't you women learn to listen?"

Maya was shocked.

"How can you speak about it so coolly?" she asked.

"Well, she asked for it, man" he shrugged. "Anyway, let's not talk about it. It's done and over. I came to Goa to get over her."

There was a pause. How can anyone hit a woman? She would never be with a man more than a second if he would ever hit her, she thought.

"Where do you live?" she asked, wondering what kind of feelings his handsome appearance hid.

"I live in Mumbai. I come here once in a while and stay here with my grandfather. My mother is a Christian and my father a Hindu, that's why I have a name like Raghu D'Souza, you see. My father believes the Hindu way of life is the most correct way of living, but I don't agree. I think it is best to get married to people of one's own

religion. My dad got my sister married to a Hindu guy. Poor chick is divorced now," he giggled.

"What's there to laugh at?"

"I had told her not to marry a Hindu, but to marry someone from our own religion, but she and my dad wouldn't listen. I believe in my own religion. I believe Jesus is the only one who can help us. Even my mom thinks the same, but then we can't argue with my dad. He lost it."

This guy is turning out to be a fanatic. He was talking like the evangelists do on television.

"I'm feeling sleepy," she said not wanting to carry the conversation forward any longer. "Let's call it a day."

As she lay on the bed later that night, she was both attracted to and put off by Raghu's thoughts.

It was after lunch that she received a phone call at the lobby of the hotel, where the training session was being held in.

"I just called you to say good afternoon. Have a full meal and take care of yourself," she heard Raghu's voice at the other end.

"Gosh, why did you call here?"

"To surprise you, you didn't like it."

"You are unbelievable. Bye!"

She disconnected the phone with a big grin. She thought about this man she barely knew. He was making her feel so special and she for no reason was letting him enter her world so easily. When she went back to her room, she was shocked to find at least a hundred red roses.

"Madam, a gentleman left this for you," the housekeeping boy said, after she opened the room door. She took the card and another red rose from the tray he brought in.

From Raghu with love, the card said.

She was at first irritated by his boldness, but this soon gave way to disbelief. She was at a loss for words. Why was he doing it for her? And why was she letting him do it for her?

Indigo children like her sometimes have a tendency of falling into multiple relationships till they find the one they're looking for; the one that makes them complete. They crave for attention. The

other Maya was pulled towards this attention. This is what she wants. The other Maya also had a want for more. She was not content with an average relationship that she shared with Kartik. The need to be loved was much more and it was dangerous. She wanted to feel special and Raghu seemed to make her feel special.

The next evening they went for a walk on the beach again.

“Maya, I've fallen in love with you,” he said, without warning.

Maya did not know what to say. The other Maya was craving for Raghu while she herself was ashamed that she could even think of another man when she was getting married to Kartik in a week!

Let me give in to him. After all, who would know, Maya thought. She badly wanted him and she decided that after tonight, she would anyway be back in New Delhi. As long as she did not get in touch with Raghu after today, what was the harm?

She was a bit confused too, though. Raghu could see that she was vulnerable, that her mind was wavering. He took her face in his palms and turned her towards him. She followed as if she was hypnotised.

He kissed her. Again, he brushed his lips against hers. He smelled masculine. She had felt a whiff of the same in his jacket. He pulled her closer and her breasts pressed against his hard chest.

He was used to attention from opposite sex. There was no dearth of women. Yet he felt like a puppet with her as her body trembled against his, her mind and body seemed to think opposite. He laid her against the sand and they clung to each other. He pulled off her clothes and there was no one on that part of the beach. He rubbed her breasts with his palms. Her eyes were closed and her ears were listening to the sound of the waves.

She felt his hand touch her sex. She felt a sensation deep inside; the whole of her, wanting him to be one with her. The woman inside her was waiting to unite with him. He wanted to melt inside her. She felt the heat of passion and Raghu did not let it dwindle for a moment. He had to enter her. He wanted her to realise the power of passion. In that moment they were one. He moved inside her with vigour.

When their passion was spent they got dressed.

Temptation sometimes takes the better off you.

“Why did you kiss me?” she asked him as he later walked her back to the hotel, their energies nearly spent.

“Why did you kiss me back?” he asked smiling.

“This is crazy.”

“I love you, Maya!”

“You need to understand Raghu, that I'm getting married soon. Good night,” she said, suddenly turning away from him and walking briskly towards her hotel, and it surprised her that she did not feel guilty.

In a daze, he kept watching her as she walked away. He couldn't let her go so easily. The passion that she had stirred in him was not going to die just like that. It was after a long time that he had felt strongly for a woman. The thought that she was leaving in the morning robbed him of much of his sleep that night.

As for Maya this would be the dark secret buried in her heart forever, in a woman's heart.

THIRTY

“Madam, your food!” Maya was pulled out of her thoughts by the train attendant. She took the tray from him. It was a chicken sandwich with brown bread and some caramel custard with it. She liked caramel custard. She looked at her watch. It would take another ten hours to reach Mumbai.

She wondered if going back to buried skeletons was the right decision.

“We all have a pervert side to us, Maya, a side that we never show to anyone else,” she remembered Vikram telling her. He was the only person she had confided to till date. Even her best friend Reva didn't know about this part of her life.

“Sometimes when we get lonely we turn towards sex as a quick fix. That is when we mix love and lust. Sadly, the pleasure derived is short lived, similar to the high obtained from alcohol. Once the effect is over we are back to being the same person we were. Sex leads to spiritual fulfilment and ecstasy only when it consummates love. In itself, it leads nowhere. Having said that we should be able to forgive ourselves for the mistakes we make. Only then, it is possible to forgive others. So forget about it and stop feeling guilty.” He smiled. After that it was only now she decided to open the long closed door.

Raghu had been very excited when he heard that she was coming. Though she had decided not to be in touch with him anymore

after leaving Goa, she had broken her own rule. The urge to meet him again was very strong. As she bit into the sandwich she wondered if something that feels so strong could be wrong. Intensity is not a parameter of what is right or wrong, she told herself.

She saw Raghu as the train pulled into the station the next morning. He rushed towards her.

“Oh Maya, my love,” he whispered, as he took the luggage from her.

If there were any mixed feelings, they went away in an instant. How happy he is, she thought. And how happy I am too, she said to herself.

“Why don't you stay with me in my apartment,” he said.

“No, Raghu, I want to be on my own, but I may need your help.”

He drove her to her new destination. The flat was a studio apartment in Thane. They took the lift to reach the seventh floor where the flat was and opened the door. Aditya Sharma's flat had a small hall, a bedroom and a little kitchen and bathroom.

“Uh, huh! This place needs a clean-up,” she said, more to herself.

“When I'm at your service, madam, you need not worry,” Raghu smiled at her.

She opened the windows. She could see the clutter of buildings around. One stuck to the other. She had wondered how her new neighbourhood would be.

Raghu took her around to shop for some basics. She bought a broom, a new electric stove, some dishes, soap and some more stuff to begin with. She insisted on hiring domestic help to clean the place up, but Raghu disapproved, doing it all by himself. For two hours he swept and cleaned the place and made it liveable.

They ordered some food from outside and chatted about this and that. Later that evening, as she had promised, she went to Raghu's apartment for dinner. It was a smallish apartment, but more than adequate for one person. The moment she went in and shut the door behind her, Raghu hugged her tightly before going into the kitchen.

He made some chicken sandwich and an egg sandwich, one for each of them. This time, the chicken came first.

“It's quite good,” she said taking a bite.

“I can cook for you every day of my life,” he said.

"That's good. In any case, I don't like cooking!"

"You won't have to. All you'll have to do is take care of our kids."

He was assuming too much and this taking for granted wasn't going down too well with her.

"Oh! Maya! How long I've waited for you."

"Do you love me?" she asked foolishly, driving herself into quicksand faster than anyone else could have. One can destroy his own existence much faster than anyone else could, she thought.

"Of course, I do. I love you very much. I can kiss your feet," he said, but she would have preferred to have heard these words from Kartik.

She realised it was Raghu who was hugging her. He was looking into her eyes intently.

"What happened, Maya? You don't seem too good. Your eyes look sad. I don't like that."

"I'm hungry," she said

"Oh baby, finish your sandwich," he said, letting go of her.

"Do you know how much I wished Kartik would do this for me," she said, honestly, but tactlessly.

"He should, but he is an ass!"

"He doesn't love me."

"Why did he marry you then?"

"Well, peer pressure. Besides, I thought I loved him. Maybe he did love me sometimes after all."

"And did you really love him?"

"I did. Then I could not, because there was no love!"

"Can I ask you a question?" Raghu said.

"Of course!"

"What made you come to me?"

"Honestly, I don't know."

"You were not scared?"

"Well, yes and no. I have never been to any one's place like this to stay."

"Didn't you ever feel guilty about what happened in Goa?"

His lips twitched a little.

"I don't feel guilty. It was a moment when I just followed my heart."

She saw disappointment in his eyes. He didn't expect this answer maybe.

"I think you are also to be blamed. You were not loyal to him."

She sighed, looking somewhere far trying to disappear in some vacuum.

"By the way, how's your job doing?" she asked, changing the topic.

"It's no big deal."

She smiled. "I'm sure it must be tough flying that big thing in the air all the time."

"Oh no, not really. A Pilot needs to do only the take-offs and landings. Otherwise on-board computers do most of the work these days."

"Well, take offs and landings are important too," she smiled.

"Sure. It's the only time when I get a chance to kill people if I want to!"

"Nonsense," she said knowing he was talking flippantly.

"By the way my air hostesses, tells me that I look smart in my uniform," he said, revealing his ego.

Maya laughed.

"What's there to laugh? You don't know how many of them are after me!"

"Who's stopping you?" she smiled.

"Well, I don't like them. They are mostly whores. They would sleep with anyone."

"Gosh, that's bad language." She said

"What else can I call them? I hate women who behave like sluts to get their job done."

"What's wrong in it if people are ready to do the work?"

"You mean you will go and sleep with anyone who will get your job done?" he looked at her with ridicule in his eyes.

"Personally I won't. I can't do anything of that kind, but I don't think people who do it are wrong!"

"You think dirty."

"What's dirty about it?"

"I'm amazed you don't realise what's dirty about it."

"I believe everyone has a different perception, each individual

makes his or her choices.” The Wiccan traits in her manifested in her words sometimes. “If someone can use his mental abilities to get something done, why can't the other person use his physical abilities? After all, it is his or her body and he or she should have the right to do whatever they wish .,” she continued, “In fact, I feel that it is better and far better than people raping someone or being nasty to each other. I think it will help in fighting crime against women if prostitution is legalised in this country.”

“You have a twisted mind,” he said, sounding genuinely taken aback.

“Nonsense, it's a matter of personal choice,” she insisted.

She saw Raghu reading a book when she came back from the bathroom. He looked inviting with his rugged good looks. He was wearing shorts and she could see his bare skin.

“You like to read?”

“Obviously!”

“What's so obvious about it,” she laughed.

“Any intelligent man would like to read. The power of the word,” he sounded dramatic. She glanced at his collection of books; most of them were about aviation and anthropology; an unusual combination, for sure.

“You don't like fiction?”

“I rarely read it. I like to read about history and evolution. Besides these, I like psychology. These are my favourite topics.”

“I see. I also like to read,” she said.

“No one would think so, looking at you,” he said, his words not completely said in jest.

“Very funny!” she said, reading the titles of the books.

“Do you know the basic difference between men and women, lie in their minds.” He took out a book from his collection titled 'The Essence of Evolution'.

“If you notice men have always been hunters. In olden times they lived in caves and women were the ones who made the food and looked after children. These days they are hell bent on changing the rules and you can see where the society is going,” he continued not without rancour.

“You mean women should not work?” she sounded a little agitated.

“They can, but that is not what they are made for. Look at the bodies of women. The shape, the purpose, it all is different. A woman is complete when she becomes a mother. She needs to be loved and taken care of. A man goes out hunts and comes back to the cave, or these days, to work and back. That's how it should be.”

Women are to be taken care of and loved, indeed. How she wished Kartik would have thought the same way.

“Anyway, I think you should be dropping me back now,” she said.

He lived in Mulund and had to drop her in Thane. This was a tedious task, but he was willing to do it for her. He wished she would have stayed back. He could not understand why she wouldn't. Something about her was already making him insecure.

THIRTY ONE

“You look lovely,” he said. He himself looked stunningly handsome in a pale yellow T-shirt and blue jeans.

They were sitting in a pub.

“I don't like crowded places. It should be in a corner with rock music and some beer.” He was extremely attractive tonight.

The beer and snacks came.

“All right, to our budding love,” he winked at her, “and for tonight!” Her heart missed a beat. What was she doing here in a different city with an unknown man? What does she know about him? Where is Kartik? What would he be doing? She felt bad since he did not even bother to call and find out where she was. He did not care. Why it is that life becomes so complicated just because that one person does not love you? So many friends and people hanging out with you become insignificant. There is this emptiness, a vacuum that stares right through you; a constant turmoil. It's like you are distracting yourself from the crowd's stare, but all this time you know it is there.

“I don't mind the crowd.”

“Well then enjoy it because you are not going to be here for long. I am going to take you with me tonight,” he said, as if it was his decision to take without consulting her.

Maya smiled and sipped her beer in silence. His attractiveness

was far more intoxicating than anything that had any percentage of liquor in it.

“Will you come to my house tonight?”

“No. I want to go back home.”

“That is not your home. There is no one. You should have someone to go back to in a home,” he said. He hated when she didn't make eye contact with him. He hated the way her eyes wandered. Who would she be looking at? Was she trying to find a better companion? Was he not good enough?

“I'm too tired. I had an interview today. It went off well and they have called me for a second round tomorrow. I want to sleep early so that I may look presentable,” she smiled.

“Presentable means?” he asked.

“It means I have to look good.”

“Looking good, will it get you the job?”

“It helps.”

“You mean you will try to impress the guy on the other side of the table with your looks for the job. What else will you do for him? Even give him a blow job?” He was taking her for granted. “And of course you have that cheap mind set of a person using his or her body the way they feel like,” he went on.

“I think you are going off track,” she said.

“Well, it's your life and you're responsible for it. If you aren't bothered why should I be?”

She smiled at what she thought was a childlike anger. Maya was unable to see the potential danger. The man was getting possessive and you better watch out, her instinct said, but she ignored it.

That night, after he dropped her home, he did not go back immediately. He loitered around, keeping an eye on the front window of her flat. Why had she been eager to go back to an empty house? Was there any man involved, his jealous mind asked? In fact, that night his jealousy chased his sleep away.

She was coming out after her interview when she received a call from her father.

“How have you been? I've been worried about you,” he said.

“I'm fine, dad. I had applied for a new number.”

“How are things?”

“Fine, daddy, the office here is bigger and better. They find me quite good at work so I may have to stay back a while longer.”

“Till when, Maya?”

“May be another two months,” she lied. She was speaking whatever was coming to her mind spontaneously.

“You take care. Your mother and I love you. We miss you, baby. Come back soon,” his voice was warm and there was a longing in it.

That's why she felt bad when she lied to him.

Later that evening she sat with Raghu beside the sea. The waves always touched her deep inside. Her mind wandered far away. She thought about her father. She remembered how he used to walk with her to school bus; how he used to pack her lunchbox with a sandwich, some biscuits and a toffee. It used to thrill her to watch him waiting for her after school, on days when he did not have work. He was the man she loved most. He was the man who loved her the most and unconditionally. The man who would forgive her for whatever she did in life. She wondered why in spite of the fact she and her father shared this love and concern; they had to lie to each other. As a parent he could not share his problems with her thinking she would get hurt. Not realising she got hurt anyways. As a child she could not fall back upon him even when she was sure he will not let her fall. She was scared of hurting him. He was getting old now. She ran into a marriage just because she tried to find a new family in her raw and youthful excitement.

It's so strange that in the desperation of getting loved we forget the art of loving unconditionally. It is so strange that we always keep expecting to be loved in return. In the process we waste the precious joy that the art of loving someone would cherish upon us.

“I want you to be with me all the time Maya. I can't imagine my life without you. Please don't ever leave me and go.” Raghu said in such childlike way as he held her hand against his. Maya was elated as she came out of her thought maze. The romanticist in her loved the romanticism in his tone. She was crazy about such moments and loved the way he took care of every little detail of hers. She always wanted

someone to propose in so many words to her. Words that would make her feel wanted and loved.

She loved him, but there was something in him that set off warning bells. She could not put her finger on what it was, but it sure was sounding as loud as a factory siren.

A woman passed by, holding the hands of her two children. She was busy showing them the sea. The little one could not understand what was so exciting about the water; if it was so good why wasn't he allowed to go nearer? The older one was more interested in the toy seller.

How much Maya wished that she was that unknown woman with her two children. The one who gets up in the morning, cooks for her husband and children, has sex diligently in the night and spends all her life doing the same. She never aspires, never questions; the one, who is content or at least looks to be. The one who either pretends to be happy or has started believing she is happy.

She remembered her neighbour in Delhi who sounded happy, but given a chance would want to change her life. She was a housewife who looked content, but often used to tell Maya: "*Humne to aise hi saari zindagi nikaal di. Ab kya sochna, baaki bhi nikal hi jayegi*" (*Our life has passed us by, the rest would too*). Then she would smile a loser's smile. Had it been a smile of a confident woman, Maya would have believed her. It was so sad that after contributing her life towards her house she was still made to feel that way. Yet she wished she was like them. If not happier, life seemed less complicated for them. It was seemingly happier.

She had just been proposed to by a handsome man, but when it happened, it did not seem as great as she had imagined it to be. Sure, she was swept off her feet, but that was for just a few minutes.

"I feel you aren't happy with me," he said.

"I am," she said. She did not know why she could not admit that she was not sure when she was not. Perhaps it had to do with her inability to say no. She was more concerned about how others would feel rather than how she would.

"Why do you say so?" she blinked her eyes.

"Maybe that I'm not satisfying you enough."

“Means?” she looked at him

“May be you need someone else. A more educated and a richer man. May be Kartik is the right guy for you. I have nothing, but love and it does not seem to excite you at all.”

“I don't understand what you are saying.”

“Half the time you seem to be lost. Sometimes I notice you looking at other couples; even other men.”

“Have you lost it?” she asked, not believing what she heard.

“I'm a loser! What can I get for you?”

“I don't understand why you talk this way. You are so intelligent. I am sure you can make things better. In fact, like I always say, I really feel you underrate yourself.”

“So that's what it is! I'm so dumb that it's not just others, but I underrate myself. I'm not even interested in earning more money. All I dream of is a life where I stay happily with the woman I love and our three children.”

She smiled. He looked innocent. At such times when he was so helpless, his desperation to be with her oozing from every word convinced her that he loved her more than anyone else in the world.

“Look, Maya. The aviation industry is not doing too well, but I'm making enough money for us to live comfortably. I don't need loads of money. My children can be simple ones, not those English speaking MBAs who know nothing about life.”

Maya looked away. It was useless to explain things to him when he was in this mood.

“I have found a job here in Mumbai,” she told him.

“Huh!”

“What do you mean, huh? Aren't you happy?” she asked with a smile.

“What is the need for you to work? Aren't you satisfied with my job?”

“It's not like that, Raghu. I also need to have an identity.”

“Identity?” “What fucking identity do you want? You bloody women can never be happy with what their man can get for them.”

“You don't have to be rude, Raghu. It's just that I also want to make a mark in life.”

“So you have my children, na. Why do you want to become a whore? Go to work and meet other men to get laid?” He was talking

nonsense. His filthy language was shocking.

“Raghu, we need money to bring up children!” she implored.

“You mean I don't earn enough. Is that what you're getting at? Bitches like you can never be tamed. I thought you were different, but you are all the same. All bitches, one and all!”

She felt angry and hurt and did not know how to react. He left his food half-eaten and walked out of her flat. The next evening, he was extra nice to her, as if to make up. He said he had goofed up and would never repeat it. Maya decided to take him at his word. Again, she refused to listen to the warning bells going off in her brain.

Maya had started disliking herself already for giving in to whims and fancies of Raghu. He used to be nice to her sometimes. At other times suddenly like a chameleon he would change colours and attack her with the dirtiest accusations possible. What it is with us women? Maya often thought.

The Indian woman was a paradox in herself. She did not have the ability to stand by herself. On one side the country had some powerful women ruling it from positions of power, but on the other side, women were sad, dominated, abused, killed, raped and forced to live a monotonous life.

All they would do is crib about living in a man's world, not getting tired of producing more of them. They hated men, but still wanted a male child. They would look at an independent woman and would want to be like her. Yet in a public debate they would call her an irresponsible mother who leaves her children to go out and work. They would hate their husbands, but they would think it is criminal for anyone to walk out of a marriage. They worshipped female deities, but they themselves felt guilty of exhibiting any authority.

Women, she thought, had the ability to either make or break the coming generations. Wasting away their talents and carving a forced routine for themselves which in turn often give birth to pent up frustrations. Ironically a glance at history shows them as much stronger. They were polyandrous. There were things such as *gandharv vivah and niyog*. In *gandharv vivah* one could choose to make love with a man without marrying him. In *niyog* one could choose another man if he is more capable of procreating better progeny.

What has then happened to women now? The larger world seems to have affected us; religious influences seem to have dented the status of women in the country too. Why is it that the three other big religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam have no strong female goddesses, unlike Hinduism?

Thinking along these lines made Maya feel miserable.

THIRTY TWO

The next evening, Raghu came to Maya's apartment.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"A few minutes more, Raghu."

These days Raghu was growing more and more restless, she thought. Perhaps his job was stressing him out. The airline he was working for wasn't doing well, financially. Then he had to fly at night more often these days, more night shifts were common now. "It's not a shift. It's a shit," was his view he had of night shift.

Maya felt that he worried about her too much. When he was not with her or not flying, he literally called every hour to find out what was she doing, whom she was with.

"How much more time will you take?" he said impatiently, even as she was finishing her make-up.

"Oh, Maya, you look lovely," he said, when she stepped out. She smelled his strong perfume.

"I love you!" he whispered. "Do you really want to go out? Let's spend the night at home," he said, tempting her.

But they went out anyway, to a club a couple of kilometres away, in Raghu's car. They had a couple of drinks and Maya thought it would be fun to dance a bit.

"Come, let's dance," she said.

"I can't dance," he chuckled, waving his hands in a no signal.

"You can't dance, how ridiculous!"

“You go and dance, na,” he said. She walked to the dance floor and joined some folks there who were already dancing. She must have danced for some twenty minutes or so when she suddenly felt Raghu's hand on her wrist.

“Come, let's go home.” His tone was sharp and firm.

“Why? What happened?” she said, surprised at his change of mood.

“Come, I said!” He pulled her away from the dance floor. A couple of people noticed it, but turned away.

“What happened? Will you tell me?” she asked.

“You are asking me what happened, you shameless woman?” he said, bitterly.

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you see the way you were dancing looking at that boy?”

“Which boy?”

“Oh, like you don't know? You were staring at Danny. Do you even know how embarrassing it was for me?”

“Danny, who's he? And why would I stare at him? Are you crazy?” she screamed at him. Danny was one of the guys who Raghu had introduced as an acquaintance of his, when they entered the club. Maya had not even noticed him after that.

“You've lost it, Raghu,” she said angrily.

“If you are so interested in sleeping with other men, why do you come to me?”

“Raghu, will you stop being cheap now?”

“You can go ahead and sleep with him. I can arrange it for you. He will be happy to screw you.”

“Stop it, I said.”

“Bitch, don't scream at me.” He slapped her hard. People at the parking lot looked on, as stunned as Maya was.

“How dare you hit me?” she screamed.

“You deserve it, you whore,” Raghu replied. “I am leaving you right here on the road. I don't want you in my home.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Maya started crying. He went and sat in the car, smoking.

It was late. She got into the car submissively as he looked on. Once they reached his home neither of them spoke. She was

humiliated and did not know what to do.

She took a shower. When she came out, Raghu's expression had changed.

"Come here. Come to daddy," he said.

His voice had changed. It was again the same person she knew earlier. There was the same affection in his tone. He came near her and hugged her. She let the tears come. He touched her back and caressed it. She felt his touch distressing. The other Maya grabbed the comforting moment.

He is manipulating your emotions, mind said.

He was exploiting her need to be loved, but she could not control it. She felt as if she was no longer in control. She had given up to him.

"Why do you make me so angry, baby?" he asked, as if she was at fault.

Maya sobbed. "Will you do it again?"

"No!" he replied.

"Let me give you a good massage," he said. As she lay down on her back, he brought some warm oil and started rubbing it on her arms.

Raghu is very possessive about me, that's why he gets so angry, she told herself. As his hands rubbed the oil on her thighs, Maya had forgotten about the slap. She was now anticipating sheer physical pleasure. She smiled at him.

"You like it, baby?" he smiled back.

His hands moved on to the sides of her breasts, caressing them for some time. He started exploring her body with his mouth. He licked her brown glory till she begged him to stop. He licked her across her stomach and reached for a small button right on the top of her vaginal lips. He felt her hand holding him and pressing him towards her own clitoris. He finally removed his pants and entered her, moving swiftly inside her for long. After they climaxed, almost simultaneously, they slept, dazed and spent.

Her heart, though silently disapproved of her being so illogical and needy.

THIRTY THREE

Next morning she was cleaning the house when her phone rang. It was Kartik.

“Yes,” she said, disinterestedly.

“Where are you, Maya? I'm worried.”

“You are? Is that why you are calling now after so many days?”

“I thought you would call me back. Besides, I tried to reach you, but your phone was switched off.” That's possible, for she used to switch off her phone when Raghu was around. He did not like her friends calling her.

“Are you listening to me?” she heard Kartik saying.

“Yes!”

“Maya, we need to talk.”

“What is there to talk about?”

“You don't have to be so rude!”

“As if you have always been polite to me.”

“What is the problem with you? What is it you want?” he continued.

“What do you want?” she countered.

“Why do you answer by questioning my questions? Can't you answer a simple question?”

Well, this wasn't a simple question, it was a million dollar one, she thought.

“As for answering your question, there's nothing I want.”

There's certainly nothing I want from you," she said.

Kartik sighed. "Why don't we get the divorce papers ready?"

Maya didn't know what to say.

"Who's preventing you?" she retaliated.

"Come on, Maya, we need to discuss and sort things out."

"Sort things out? What's that supposed to mean? You didn't care for me when I was with you, so what the hell there to sort out now?"

"As if you cared for me?" he said. The conversation was going nowhere.

"You will never be out of complaints Maya," he said irritably.

"You will never understand Kartik. I have dreams, needs. I need to be loved. I need to discover myself."

"It's all about you and no one else. Anyways," she heard Kartik saying. "There is no use fighting. Tell me what you want."

"I want nothing."

"Where are you?"

"In Mumbai."

She heard him sigh over the phone.

"You did not even bother to let me know."

"As if it matters."

"Where in Mumbai?"

"With a friend."

"You have no friend that I know of in Mumbai."

"You don't know all my friends, right."

"I know you are lying to me as usual."

"I'm not." She couldn't tell him that she was living in Aditya's flat. She knew he hated Aditya.

"Maya, all I can say is that you have to decide and let me know. It's alright if you don't want to stay with me, but I need to know."

"I know that, Kartik. I know that it does not matter to you. You don't care. Anyway, I'll let you know once I decide," she disconnected the phone. What's the point of such conversations, she wondered.

She would have run back to him if he had asked. But he

wouldn't ask, his ego would not let him, and she could not go without being called.

Not that this thing with Raghu was working out well, either.

She glanced outside the kitchen window, at the cemetery further on that had scared her a bit when she first moved into the apartment. Now, it did not seem to matter. Could the dead feel, she wondered, uselessly.

She picked her phone and dialled Vikram. It had been some time since they talked. She seemed to need his calming influence again.

"Where have you been?" Vikram sounded a little worried.

"Mumbai."

"I know that. But you didn't call me. I was thinking of you."

"Were you?" She didn't expect him to admit that.

"Shouldn't I?"

She smiled to herself. She always felt natural with him.

"Anyway, how have you been? How's Raghu?" he continued.

"He's good," she lied, but without wanting to.

"Why did you call me?"

"Can't I call you without a reason?"

"Sure you can," he said, a little taken aback by her reasoning.

"I'm feeling very low."

"What happened?"

"Nothing, really. But I feel empty."

It was the Wiccan intuition, he knew. He knew that they both belonged to the mystic tradition and some day they were meant to be together. Yet they had to be part of this worldly ritual. She was supposed to go through the entire cycle so that she can be mature enough to change dimension.

Besides, restlessness is often felt at some point by all mystics. The desire to know more, the desire to go beyond known things, a dissatisfaction with the present, an empathy with the world, suicidal feelings sometimes – the whole gamut of restlessness. Just about when it is about to crush all hopes we need to surrender to love. Surrender needs no ego and that's where we lose the game.

He wished he could hold her and soothe her.

“How's Kartik?”

‘He called me to discuss things, but I don't think he was really interested.’

“I thought Raghu loved you!”

“He does, but he is kinda weird. I find him very cynical.”

“Maya, you will never find anyone perfect.”

“I know, but I want someone who's close to that,” she chuckled. “Is it so important to be loved, Vikram?” she continued. He knew this was going to come.

It is. Love gives life meaning. Love is the silence that speaks when two people are looking in the same direction. Love is the language of the universe. It makes everything beautiful. When you love, it becomes easier to carry out day to day mundane jobs. It creates a sense of joy around you.

Sadly most of the people in this world never know what love is. They just believe in controlling the force and ruin each other in the name of love. They want to own the other person, own his love. Can love ever be owned? Love is what Mira felt for Krishna. Love is when you learn to let go of 'I'. Love has no place for EGO. Love is complete surrender to your heart. Either you follow your heart or let it move on. You are lucky even if you have been through that magnanimous whirlwind even once in life. It comes from within. It is the song of the heart. Here I will tell you a small story,

The sun asked the cloud. 'Why are you so sad?'

Cloud responded, 'It's me who collects all the raindrops. They are mine. I own them and you make me let all of them go.'

'Don't you like to share your treasure?'

'What do I get in return?'

'All right, I will not force you to do away with your rain drops from now on.'

The cloud was very happy. Yet after a few days she felt heavy from carrying all the weight with her all the time. Besides, she noticed that the flowers those were waiting for her, for her drops, started withering. Her joy faded.

She returned to the sun. 'Could you please help me share my raindrops? I think I liked it better that way.'

The sun smiled and poured a little warmth on the cloud. It made her shower her love on the withering flowers. They looked up and smiled as they blossomed.

'The true joy lies in giving. If you would keep expecting the flowers to return your love you would never experience the spring.'

The other Maya was all ears.

“Why does this love bring so much pain then?”

“Remember Maya no beautiful thing is devoid of an ugly side. If you want to experience the miracles, magic and peace of love you have to be ready to rejoice in the pain it brings with it. A cool evening can only be appreciated after going through a heated afternoon. Love is incomplete without pain. Just as fire can't exist without smoke, suffering makes you a better person. When you experience pain, your heart warms up. It is like sharing the dream. Every part of the dream is not beautiful, yet the feeling of sharing makes it lovely. When you endure pain you shed some tears. Every tear makes your heart more fertile, more receptive to the universal pain. Pain is again the language of the universe, just as much as love is. The heart that does not learn to bear pain in silence can never learn to rejoice in love. There is a language with which you connect to the universe. Love reveals itself the best in the pain it leaves behind. There is nothing that you want and can ask for, but you won't get. Tears are just a cleansing mechanism so that you can make space for love again.

THIRTY FOUR

“I will pick you up in about twenty minutes. Better be ready,” she heard Aditya say.

“How come you're in Mumbai?” Maya sounded surprised and happy at the same time. She loved Aditya for making her laugh and forget all her worries.

“Girl, you're in my flat! I needed to check if all is fine.”

“Adi, you'll never change.”

“And you'll not stop saying that over and over again!”

They met a few hours later, at a beer lounge.

“So girl, what's up? Are you keeping my flat warm with sex or not.”

“Shut up, Adi.”

“What shut up? Did you find a guy or not.”

“Well, I did.”

“That's like my girl,” he pinched her cheek.

The waiter got a bottle of beer and two glasses.

She loved his openness, his flamboyance, his straightforwardness. He was a sweet and simple soul and all that mattered to him was having a good time.

“Let's drink to our unending friendship and your marriage.”

“My marriage?” she queried.

“If you fail to find anyone, I'll be there to marry you! Who else will?” he said, as always, ready to banter.

“Shutup Adi,” she smiled. Tell me what happened to Simran, your last girlfriend.”

“Simran Kaur or Simran Bhatia.”

“You had two Simrans, is it?”

“I had three. There was a Simran Pathak too! But yes, the one you know was Simran Kaur. Ah she was good,” he winked.

Maya looked at him, wondering how he could take things so lightly.

“Adi, don't these girls get sad when you dump them?”

“I don't dump them. Either it dies a natural death or they dump me,” he said, with no remorse at all.

“Adiiii!”

“Yes, the moment they find out that there are others involved, they dump me. As if I had pledged to be loyal to them!”

She laughed out loudly. The way she hadn't for some time now.

“By the way, you told me you are writing a book!” he reminded her.

“Yes, I'm almost done with it.”

“Let me know when you're done with it. I'll market it for you.”

“Really. How?” she was excited.

“Maya, my dad is filthy rich as you know. One of the divisions in his company is into digital marketing.”

Her phone rang. It was Raghu. Aditya glanced at her, then at the other girls sitting elsewhere.

“Hi!” she said screaming as she walked past the speaker.

“Hi, where are you?” Raghu asked authoritatively.

“I've come out to meet a friend of mine.”

“Which friend?”

“A college friend. You don't know him.”

“Like a *chutiya* I've been trying your phone for an hour while you are dating some bastard.”

“What's wrong with you?”

“Look at your phone, you bitch. Or were you so busy with him that you could not see the missed calls.”

“Raghu, why do you keep thinking on these lines all the time?”

“I am a bloody *choot* to love you so much. You, you whore.”

“Raghu!” she said, “I am putting down the phone.”

“Where are you? Tell me now. I'll come now.”

"I'm going home, we can meet there." She nearly came to tears.

"Tell me na, tell me where you are. Or are you scared that I'll come there and bash up your hero?" he said.

She disconnected the phone. She came back to where Aditya was sitting.

"What happened, heroine?"

"Nothing," she sat and took her glass to finish off the wine.

"Have you been crying?" he asked.

The phone rang again. She picked it up.

"I told you I'll be home in twenty minutes," she said.

"Talk to me now," Raghu said.

"For God's sake, understand."

She disconnected.

They paid the bill and came out.

"Is anyone bothering you, Maya? Tell me if anyone is. I'm still the old Adi who loves brawls. Grrrr," he said in jest, but his tone was serious.

"No, nothing like that. It's just that I need to go. Something important has come up."

"All right. I am in the city till tomorrow afternoon. Let me know if there's anything. I can come and sleep over anytime."

"Oh shut up, Adi."

"I'll drop you home?" he offered.

"No need. I'll go. Someone is coming to pick me up." She said. She didn't want Raghu to see him dropping her off for he was sure to create a scene.

"All right then. Take care, sweetheart."

The way he said it, she wanted to fling herself into his arms and cry.

"I will." She smiled and walked out.

Aditya saw her off. She had changed. This wasn't the old Maya whose eyes were full of life, he thought. Something's amiss, he thought. It sure was.

Her phone rang constantly till she reached home.

She entered her apartment and took the call.

"Why are you not taking my call?" Raghu roared.

"I was in an autorickshaw, Raghu."

“Autorickshaw or his bed?”

“Raghu, I don't understand what gets into you. Come home if you would want to see me.”

“Why? Aren't you satisfied still? You want me to come and fuck you.”

“Raghu, I was with a friend,” she said, ignoring his filthy language for the umpteenth time.

“You didn't have time to talk to me.”

“Raghu. I thought I'll finish with him and speak to you at length. I was at a beer lounge. There was loud music.”

“You could have called me at least once.”

“I don't understand why can't you just be normal.”

“I know you're lying.”

‘ I'm not. Besides if you don't trust me, there's no point in trying to make anything work.”

“How can I trust you? You have been lying to your husband and sleeping around with me. How can anyone trust a whore like you?”

She closed her eyes, sickened by the thoughts his words revealed. She had had enough.

“That's enough Raghu. I think this needs a break.” She was fed up.

She disconnected the phone and felt anger flow through her eyes.

Raghu's abuse was getting out of hand. She, who once took his angry words as a mark of his possessiveness was not so sure about it now. He had no right to monopolise her time, impute that she was sleeping around with every other man in sight. It showed a complete lack of respect, of grace.

The phone kept ringing. It was Raghu again. She chose not to take it.

THIRTY FIVE

The doorbell rang.

“Hey dude, I was waiting for you,” Simran smiled at him as she opened the door.

Simran Kaur, was a young girl working in the product team at the same office. They had met at an in-house event and clicked well. She had liked Kartik's enthusiasm and started meeting him over coffee almost every day. The coffee turned into wine in no time.

Kartik stepped inside with a bottle of vodka and a packet of chips. He kept it aside and pulled her towards him. Their lips met eagerly and his hand slipped inside her shirt. The lights in her house had been dimmed, as if she was waiting for Kartik, for a romantic evening.

She kissed him and felt his hand caress her breast. He pulled her T-shirt up and put his mouth to her chest. He loved her breasts; the big splendid ones that made him want to rub his manhood against them. She let a groan pass her and closed her eyes looking up towards the ceiling. He loosened her skirt and let it drop to the floor.

As he marvelled at her bare legs, she put her hand to his mouth and pushed a little.

“Let's have some wine first,” she said.

“How can I wait for anything when you are around, babe!” He stopped to look at her before he kissed her again. He pushed her on the sofa and stopped only to take his jeans off. When he took his T-

shirt off, she started nibbling at his chest.

They were naked and rubbing against each other on the sofa. She pushed him to grab his manhood and filled her mouth with it. This was the moment he would trade anything for. He grabbed her hair and pulled her over. He pushed her on the sofa and entered her. He moved inside her and the pleasure took over.

After that, they lied down next to each other.

“I often feel you are still not over Aditya,” Kartik commented casually.

Simran narrowed her eyes and let a sigh escape.

“Why do you say so?”

“Well you still have his pictures up on the wall in your study.”

He was referring to those frames Simran had hidden on the walls of her house trying not to see them every day

“That's only because I don't have the time to redo the house,” she looked away. She thought about how badly she wants Aditya back in her life. She desired for a man whom she knew might never come back to her.

“Relationships are complicated and you know that Kartik. Don't you?” she finally muttered.

THIRTY SIX

Maya was again restless. It was dark outside, but sleep was faraway. As a child she was scared of the dark and would hold her father's hand tightly until he switched on the light. Her fear of the dark extended to become a fear of the night itself. She couldn't bear to tell this to anyone, for fear that she would be laughed at. But the fear was there. Only her mother knew about it and would always hold her hand in the dark. Till she could.

Maya always tried to win it over. Nyctophobia, the fear of the night itself. She dreaded those empty nights that stared right in the face. There were times when she used to ask Kartik to accompany her from one room to another as she was scared of crossing a dark room. He laughed and obliged her. She wished he was there today. She was getting nervous. She felt panic gripping her. Loneliness mixed with anxiety was turning out to be dangerous.

She wanted someone to be there. Anyone. In the dark everything was taking a peculiar shape. She felt eyes staring at her. Her breath and heart beat was getting faster. She wanted to get up to put on the light, but her body would not listen. She felt as if someone was standing behind her. But she could find the courage to turn around and look.

In desperation she started chanting the *Gayatri mantra* her father had taught her. He had told her that if ever she got scared, she

should chant it and the fear would go away. But it was not happening today. Though it was lying a few feet away from her, it was with great difficulty that she managed to pick up her phone. She dialled Kartik.

No answer.

She dialled Raghu.

“What's it?” He was curt.

“I'm very scared, Raghu.”

“Call your friend, your college friend. Don't bother me.” He disconnected.

Tears rolled down her cheek. She was mortally scared and the silence heightened her fears.

She dialled Aditya.

“Hi, what's it, babe?” He sounded half asleep.

She wondered what to say to him. She did not want to say that she was scared to death.

“Maya, you there?” he asked.

“Oh Adi, it got connected by mistake.”

“Ah huh, good night, sweetie.”

That someone in the room would kill her now. She was sure of that. She could feel the hair on her neck, stand upright. She felt the goose-bumps and heard herself breathing. He was coming. She wondered if she should call Vikram at this hour.

Helplessly, she dialled Raghu again.

“Please. Please talk to me. I'm very scared.”

“What happened?”

“There is someone in my house.”

“What? Who? Are you Okay?” He sounded genuinely concerned.

“I don't know. All I know is that I am scared.”

“Relax, Maya. Go to sleep now. We will talk later when you are not busy with friends.”

“Raghu please, can't you come over?”

“I am sleepy. Please sleep now. You should have called me earlier.”

“I'm coming over!”

“I don't want sluts in my house. I won't open the door,” he said.

She had to move. There was no way out. With Raghu on the phone as a moral support she jumped like the lightning from her bed

and put on the light.

Everything changed. There was no one. She realised the phone was already disconnected.

We are scared of the unknown, she thought. The fear of unknown is the worst fear of humankind. We fear death because we do not know what happens after it. Some of us fear the dead because we can't see them. We are not sure whether they can see us.

The cemetery for example, is home to the spirits, but we are scared to go there. Some of us are afraid of heights, others of flying, still others of insects. We don't know what scares us. Yet this unknown controls our lives.

Men and women are busy planning their lives, saving their money for the fear of unknown. Most of them are scared to follow their dreams because they don't know where the path would lead. The unknown destroys so much in us that we could have invested in what we know about ourselves.

Nothing was distracting her mind from feeling miserable. She grabbed her purse and went down. She found a taxi, one of the best things about being in Mumbai on a late night.

"Why did you come to me?" Raghu demanded as soon as he opened the door.

"I was so scared, Raghu!" she replied meekly.

"Don't act like a poor little baby in front of me. You are smart enough to go out with other boys."

"Come on, Raghu. Stop it now."

"Stop what. You should have called that boy of yours to sleep with you or that bugger who left you halfway in your married life," he said to spite her.

Maya felt helpless and weak. She silently went and sat on his bed.

"Are you inviting me?" he smirked

"Raghu, stop it!" she screamed.

"Stop screaming, you *rand*. You were the one who was not taking my calls and now in the middle of the night you've come to ruin my sleep as well," he said angrily.

"Will you hit me, Raghu?" She was taken aback with her own idiocy. "Hit me! I want to see how strong a man you are?" What was

happening to her?

A sharp pain surged through her abdomen as she realised that Raghu had kicked her. She hadn't seen it coming. Instinctively, she stepped back and slapped him, out of sheer reflex. He slapped her back once and then again. She tasted blood from a corner of her mouth. She cried with pain and hurt. Her body begged her to leave Raghu's house, but her mind wanted her to stay, even if she was beaten and abused.

'You still want more of it,' he smirked.

She decided to leave before her self-respect gets mutilated further.

She walked out without looking at him again. By the time she reached the ground floor, the watchman of the building had got up from his cot under the staircase and looked at her, puzzled. She realised she looked shabby. She felt battered, but her mind still told her to stay. She was scared of those inner voices making her weak. She was scared of the loneliness that would bite her from inside. It will nibble her ribs making her writhe in pain. She was split into two as always. Raghu ran down and caught hold of her by the wrist.

"Don't make a scene here now," he said pulling her back.

The guard kept staring at Maya's embarrassment.

She followed him like a lifeless log of wood. Even dog would have done better, she thought to herself.

"Why don't you let me go when I decide to?" she asked him as she entered the house with him again.

"I love you, Maya."

The words meant nothing to her now.

Raghu held her close to him. He made her sit beside him and rested her head on his lap.

"I'm sorry, Maya."

She felt no emotion. She couldn't care less.

"I'm really sorry, Maya," he repeated. "You know how much I love you. When you did not pick up your phone I was worried. You always think only about yourself, Maya. That's very selfish. You don't think of what I go through when I can't reach you. All kinds of thoughts come to my mind. What if something happened to you?"

"Come on, Raghu. What would have happened to me?"

“Anything, my love. You know how times are.”

She sighed.

“It justifies your hitting me?”

“I didn't hit you hard.”

What a defence!

“I am bleeding,” she whimpered.

“It's just a small cut. Come, I'll kiss it and heal it, he said, a semblance of a smile returning to his face.

His lack of guilt sickened her.

“Why do you make me so angry?” he continued. “You should understand what I expect out of my woman. I feel you just don't love me. You bring the best out of me, but you also bring the worst in me.”

He pulled her closer and hugged her. She was exhausted. She felt foolish. He wasn't trying to be with her, but was trying to control her. In spite of the fact she felt humiliated she let him hug her. She was so drained that a hug from a stranger would have done equally good at that time.

She wondered what kind of a man he is. In a moment he showered love and in another moment he acted as if he was possessed. Somehow love becomes a control game for people. They can't find their own happiness and they intend to control someone else. Husbands want to control their wives by depriving them of financial freedom and putting unnecessary restrictions. Wives want to control husbands by keeping a track on their movement and whereabouts.

Raghu's violence was on the increase. This was not the first time Maya witnessed physical abuse. He had even tried to stab her with a cigarette bud in anger. Hitting another person was another way of showing dominance. Parents hit children, or grownups hit other grownups because the ones at the receiving end are noticeably more vulnerable.

Like her stepmother, Raghu too was trying to control her, the way a leash is used to control a dog, justifying it by saying that it was for her own sake! There was no reason she should encourage this mental and physical abuse.

It took all kinds to make the world, she thought. She was not the kind that could be controlled.

THIRTY SEVEN

Kartik took a glass of wine and settled with his laptop. He was tired from the day's work. He called off his plans to see Simran at her place. He lied to her about a conference that is going to eat up on his time. She had started to bore him. She was turning into a nag. At times he found it better to find a quick sexual release through cyber-sex. It was so much easier that way. No need to know the person, no commitment, right to the point and that's it.

Most of the times chatting also bored him, but these days it was different. He had come upon a girl through one of the social networking sites. She seemed to be just what he would want a girl to be. Settled in Mumbai, she seemed to be pretty bold and intelligent. He liked her straight forwardness. It seemed as if she exactly knew what she wanted in life. She had named herself 'the dancing wind'.

The dancing wind: 'So how are you feeling today?'

Oceanblue: 'Fine, as usual. Same old fucking life.'

(Oceanblue was his own email id.)

The dancing wind: 'You crib too much.'

Oceanblue: 'Why shouldn't I?'

The dancing wind: 'Well you have a good job, a not so bothered wife. Girlfriends. What else will make you happy?'

Oceanblue: 'Yeah, I do.'

The dancing wind: 'Why do you get stressed then?'

Oceanblue: 'I am fed up. *Saala paise kamate jao. Bas!*'

The dancing wind: 'You don't want to earn money?' she sent an emoticon depicting surprise.

Oceanblue: 'It's not that. What is the point of everything? It's all the same. You get up in the morning, do the same old stuff, get to work, fuck yourself, get back and go to sleep. Action replay the next day, and the next. I wonder where is the real us?'

The dancing wind: Hmmm

Oceanblue: I feel as if I am doing the same thing over and over again.

The dancing wind: 'We have to find the meaning ourselves, Kartik. We have to figure it out for ourselves.'

Oceanblue: 'How?'

The dancing wind: 'What about your wife. Is she coming back?'

Oceanblue: 'I don't know. I don't know what the fuck is happening. She just does not bother. She does not even call me.'

The dancing wind: 'Why don't you leave her? May be that will give both of you a new direction.'

Oceanblue: 'She won't leave me. She says she loved me. I wonder what love it was which taught her to lie and disrespect me. She could not bear with my few mistakes. I don't understand what love is. I wonder if there's such a thing.'

The Dancing wind: 'Do you want to leave her?'

Oceanblue: 'It does not matter to me. I can't tolerate her crying. It irritates me and I can't handle it. I don't care whether she comes back or not. I just want some peace.'

The dancing wind: 'Oh, poor baby! Come let me give you a hug,' a smiley with open arms popped up.

Oceanblue: 'I wish we could be more of ourselves all the time. More than half of our life goes by pleasing others. We end up doing things we would never have done just because we are too needy. We want to be loved. We have identity crisis. We are just not ready to stand up for ourselves.'

The dancing wind: 'Yeah I understand. That's what I promised myself when my heart broke. I would never do things to please anyone else, but me.'

Oceanblue: 'Ah ... you should please me a little though. I wish I could kiss you right now.'

The dancing wind: 'LOL. Who is stopping you?'

Oceanblue: 'If you were here in Delhi I would have.'

The dancing wind: 'Naughty boy'

Oceanblue: 'Would you let me?' he felt excited.

The dancing wind: 'Yes Of course, if you would plead me a little more.'

He imagined her chuckling to herself. She was teasing him and he liked it.

Oceanblue: 'I want to do much more with you.'

The dancing wind: 'Like'

Oceanblue: 'Oh Baby... I want to touch your boobs and go deep down there.'

The dancing wind: 'Are you trying to get me excited.'

He imagined her touching herself.

THIRTY EIGHT

Maya woke up in Raghu's bed the next morning. It had been a horrible night, every way. In the turmoil, she had even forgotten to have her dinner.

“Hey honey, you are up!” Raghu said, lovingly and as if nothing had happened last night. He handed her a cup of coffee he had just made.

She took it, trying to smile. He went into the kitchen to make some egg sandwiches.

He was crazy, she concluded. One minute he treated her like a queen, another minute he called her a bitch. How many times could she be called a bitch merely to be treated like a queen?

It didn't seem a new day to her at all. She felt sorry for herself. She brushed her teeth. The warm water on her body relieved the muscles temporarily. She stepped out and stood next to the window. It was a concrete jungle. Every flat would have its own story. The same sun would shine differently on every home. There was so much happening parallel in the universe. People would be either sleeping or carrying out their mundane tasks. Few would be pretending to be very busy. Few would be looking forward to meet their loved ones. Few would just be dreading a new day. She was one of them. A small molecule in the universe and yet trying to feel all that important.

She wondered how we create fuss over various things in life. Perhaps our biggest concern and issue has no significance in the larger

universe we belong to.

She remembered a girl who used to come and clean her house. A slim, average looking girl. She was eager to learn, dance, study and make a mark for herself. Yet she didn't have money. She didn't have the opportunity. She didn't want to marry because she felt that women in her class were beaten and bruised by husbands. She wanted to find love of her life. She was no better than that uneducated girl. Wasn't she taking abuse?

"What are you doing, sweetheart? The breakfast will get cold and tasteless," Raghu said, coming from behind and planting a kiss on the nape of her neck. The kiss sent little shivers through her spine. She loved the way he smelled. She sighed and turned around. He caught her lips the moment they were face to face. It was a few moments before he stopped and looked into her eyes with that intense stare.

"I'm sorry. I am really sorry for last night."

She didn't know what to say. She loved him, but it was not the same in her mind. She was sure this was not the love she was looking for. He was an intelligent man, but it was a mistake to give him so much, so soon, as he didn't deserve it. He was unconsciously involved in a typical power struggle where men and women want to control each other.

"My chotu, are you angry with me?" he asked, tickling her.

"Stop it, Raghu!"

"I won't till you forgive me."

Suddenly the love that had been rotten for a while, was returning, it seemed, but it was hidden behind a kernel of doubt. And doubt kills.

Doubt is the seed that germinates either wisdom or foolishness in your mind. Every thought originates from it. There had to be a doubt in the mind of Pythagoras towards the old theory of the earth being spherical, in order for him to believe that it was round. Doubt can never co-exist with faith.

At the moment Maya's faith was replaced by doubt.

"Maya, please say something. I'm really sorry, baby. My little baby." Raghu carried her to the bed.

He made her sit on the bed and served her breakfast. He fed

her out of his hand. She was eating as he started speaking about a book he was reading on Bermuda Triangle. The Bermuda Triangle is an area with its points being at Miami, Florida, the island of Bermuda, San Juan and Puerto Rico. *These points are covered with the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. In this area, over the course of time, many different aircraft and boats have mysteriously disappeared without a trace. People just wonder, like they wonder about the larger miracle, life.*

There are different theories about it. Some people believe it is a UFO infested region while others say it is caused by methane hydrate bubbles. There is lot of methane there and these can cause ships to sink. Or maybe it was an electromagnetic fog. Even Columbus was supposed to have had magnetic and compass problems when he crossed the sea here. There are some places on the globe where magnetic north and magnetic south come together to create all kinds of problems, she had read.

'Do you believe in the paranormal?' Raghu asked.

'Yes I do. There are angels and ghosts and demons. Although they only attack people who are weak and negative.'

'Hmmm...'

'They attack people who think they are very smart and try to interfere with the plans of God. See, God made us to enjoy and live life. He didn't want us to waste time on finding answers to stupid questions.'

'But who gave us the urge to find out,' she countered.

'He gave us urge to help ourselves, not to solve the mysteries of life and to go mad about them. There is no point creating unnecessary confusion.'

'Nature itself is confused sometimes. Why would there be places like the Bermuda Triangle or for that matter the North Pole and South Pole coming together, tell me?'

'This is what I don't like about you. You don't understand. My point is not that you should not make scientific discoveries, but you should be balanced. Discuss it by all means, but don't take it seriously.'

She sighed. There was no way she could win over him in argument. She'd read somewhere that a man who truly loves will let his girl win the argument rather than losing her. Raghu was not that man.

Once she finished her breakfast they decided to watch a movie together. Maya was feeling better.

His head was resting on her lap. He didn't get up when the movie ended, they lay together cuddling each other. His hands slowly caressed her body and she responded to his touch. They made intense love before falling asleep.

She woke up to his nose rubbing her back.

Later that evening she told him to drop her back home.

“Come on. Stay back my child, you'll get scared again. You should stay back,” he told her as they got into the car.

“Yesterday you were trying to keep me away. Today you don't want me to go. Do you realise how strange that is? I have to fight it out, Raghu. I can't keep getting scared all my life.”

He dropped her home with thoughts of her meeting someone else filling his mind again. Often, he tried not to think like that. He believed she would not cheat on him, but he lacked the ability to trust. He was unsure of everything after his first girlfriend dumped him for someone else. Since then, he had problems building relationships. A short temper did not help either. He had been into many frivolous relationships till Maya came along. He fell in love with her at once. He worried about her all time.

After he dropped her, Raghu did not go away immediately. He parked the car some distance away from where he could watch her door.

He also had a difficult childhood with his father walking out on his mother. At times he had discussed how he felt about his abusive father with Maya. She, in turn, wondered why marriages are made to look perfect in our country. It's a crumbling institution and the rising divorce rates were proof that people were dying to break the shackles of marriage.

She knew couples who would have been better off single, but continued to stay together, clawing at each other. They pretend that they are sacrificing it for the children.

Sometime later a taxi came into her apartment building and stopped. As the passenger got out he indicated to the driver that he'd be back in a few minutes. As he closed the car door he looked up towards Maya's flat. Raghu, his suspicions did not allow his eyes to move away.

The guy walked up to Maya's flat and rang the bell.

"Adi, how come you're here?"

"Well...I'm leaving for Delhi. I had to pass this way, so I thought you'd like to give me a farewell kiss," he said, mischievous as ever.

"Oh, shut up, Adi!" she said, as he took a seat and a cigarette.

"Is everything alright?" he enquired.

"Yes, Adi. So far so good."

Before he could reply, the doorbell rang. Who it could be now, she wondered. She looked through the keyhole to see Raghu standing outside. But he should have left about an hour ago, she thought, opening the door.

"Who's it? Aditya asked.

"*Tera baap saale matherchod.*"

Aditya threw down his cigarette on the floor, crushed it with his shoe and stood up. He wasn't the kind to look for brawls, but not the kind either to flinch from one.

"Stop, Raghu. Behave yourself!" she tried to pacify him.

"Is this the guy for whom you wanted to make me a *chutiya* and come back," he roared.

"Who's this ass, Maya?" Aditya asked, sensing something was sorely amiss.

"*Tera baap bola na. Dost hai tu iska?*" he shouted at Aditya.

The guys were practically into each other's faces.

"Raghu, he's the owner of this flat," she said.

"It doesn't matter," Raghu said. "Is this the time that house owners check on tenants?"

"Listen mister, whoever you are. We were college mates. Anyway, what's wrong with you?" Aditya asked, angrily.

"You don't speak saale, you keep quiet. *Owner hai to kabhi bhi aayega fuck karne ko.*"

"She is my friend and this is my house. Who are you?"

"Tell him who am I, bitch."

"Adi, this is my boyfriend, Raghu."

There was silence in the room for a few seconds. .

Aditya looked at Maya as if he felt sorry for her. "Maya, I'm

sorry if my coming here has caused you trouble. As I said, I was passing this way. We'll catch up when I'm in Mumbai next. See you, Maya," he said, ignoring Raghu, and got up to go.

"Oh no! You don't go, it's I who have to. You sleep with this bitch," Raghu told Aditya, pointing his finger at Maya.

"Maya, if it was not you, but someone else..." Aditya left the sentence incomplete, and shaking his head, he headed towards the door to leave.

Raghu was in no mood to listen. He was spoiling for a fight.

"What would you have done otherwise, you *chakka*?" he shouted at Aditya.

Aditya ignored him, though with difficulty.

"Show me na? What would you have done? Or you want to show it to her only. *Saale gaad doonga zameen mein*," Raghu snarled at Aditya's back. Aditya turned and gave him a hard stare. Then, he left, closing the door behind him.

Maya looked at Raghu with a numb painful disgust. She was breathing heavy.

"What is it that you want?"

"You don't know?"

"You have no right to speak like that to Aditya? she said , angrily. "I didn't know he was coming to see me. He was leaving for the airport and he stopped as this place was on the way. Do you know that this is his house and he's allowed me to live here and that too for free?"

"Free, really," Raghu was sarcastic.

Maya looked away.

"I've asked you to stay with me so many times. Why do you have to take this obligation?" Raghu asked.

"That's not the point, Raghu. You just don't get it!"

"I know you would say something like that, you greedy whore," he said.

"You have a problem with everything, Raghu. You want to know where I am all the time, where I work, who I talk to and then you spy upon me. I'm sick and tired of you," she said.

"I can't let you go so easily for using me," he said menacingly.

“Using you? Using you, Raghu?. What did I use you for?”

“For God sake I even went ahead and paid your bills when you were out of money. What have you done for me?” she was fuming with anger and disgust.

“I knew it. It's all about money you whore. I will pay it back with interest.”

“Yeah, I am a whore. I will do what I want and for now I don't want to see you ever again.”

He almost came upon her to hit her again. She lost her balance as she stepped behind and fell on the side of a chair hurting her.

“Just leave me alone. You can't scare me.” She almost spat the words.

“I am not scaring you. Watch out. Wait till I tell your husband about this. I'll tell your father too. I'll ruin you, you bitch,” he said, banging the door hard behind him as he left, muttering.

Maya's heart not only broke. It blew into pieces.

Blackmail.

She had never imagined she would have to face it. She locked the door and went towards her basin. She washed her cut and sat there for a while.

For a moment she wanted to end her life. It felt so lonely and useless. However she would not give up like her mother. She would not hurt her father just because she lost strength to handle a crisis in her life. She would not lose the game. She would not get scared. Nothing and nothing can scare her spirit.

THIRTY NINE

She woke up next morning with a heavy head and two messages in her phone's inbox.

I'm sorry. Please call me when you get up – Raghu

I hope you are fine. You are messed up totally. Call me when you can - Adi

Another message popped in her inbox.

I know I get difficult and insecure about you. I promise to change once we get married. Please forgive me - Raghu

Marriage! The very word put her off.

It was time to act. Time to find a more meaningful life.

She did not bother to reply to Raghu's messages. As for Aditya, she'll call him later in the day, when she was in a better frame of mind. Right now, she had to get ready to leave for work.

FORTY

Simran walked over to his work station. She was wearing a navy blue kurta with a soft yellow Patiala salwar.

“You look stunning,” Kartik said, admiringly.

“I need to speak to you.”

“Is it urgent?” He asked.

“Not really, but kind of,” she said.

What did women mean when they say such a thing? Why they make conversations so complex, he wondered.

He got up anyway and they headed to a coffee shop outside the office premises.

They ordered coffee.

Simran's expression changed. Kartik was waiting to hear the urgent stuff.

“You don't love me anymore,” she said accusingly.

Oh, it's that damned love again, he thought.

“What makes you say that?” he asked, surprised.

“You've changed,” she said with downcast eyes.

Kartik held her hand.

“You want me to show my love tonight?” he winked.

“It's only sex that's on your mind,” she hit back.

“As if you don't enjoy it?” he said, irritated.

“I feel lousy that we are compelled to hide our relationship from everyone,” she said.

"You know I'm married," he said.

"Then why are you with me?" She wasn't letting him off easily. Not today.

He sighed with frustration. "Why can't you take it easy?" he said.

"What do you mean? Easy? What's easy about it," she retorted. "Either work on improving your married life or decide about us. Either make your wife happy or take care of me. Or is that you aren't capable of love?" she said, pushing the empty coffee cup away and getting up to go.

"I think I can't carry on like this Kartik. I have thought over it. It's time we should move on."

Kartik looked at her walking away. Whoa that was not so bad after all.

Later, as he surfed on his laptop, Kartik pondered over what Simran said. She was partly right. He didn't really feel for anyone. That's the way he was brought up, the family had been always short of a rupee. His parents were too busy making ends meet, bringing up the children, carrying out their parental chores.

It's so strange that half the time we are busy doing things what everyone else is doing, simply because that's how it should be done. Because everyone else did it, he thought. We keep following the monotony. We have no courage to take decisions. We are scared to follow our heart, to dream, give ourselves second chances.

Anyway, taking a cue from Simran's words, he decided to call Maya.

"Hi, Maya," he said. "How have you been?"

She wanted to tell him she was feeling very bad and very lonely.

"I'm fine," she said, mechanically.

"What have you decided?"

"About what?"

"About us Maya, about our marriage," he said, irritated.

"I haven't decided anything," she said, irritating him even further.

"This can't go on like this Maya. Maybe you can at least come back. Let's give it one last shot."

She did not answer.

"Come on, Maya. I'm still fond of you. I'm sure you would not have been alone in Mumbai all this while, but I'm alright with it.

We can start afresh.”

“What do you mean by that? That I was not alone?” she asked, angrily.

What's with these men, she thought. First it was Raghu spying on her. Now, her husband bringing up insignificant things.

“A friend of mine happens to live in the building close to where you stay. He has often seen you with someone.”

“Can't that person have been a friend, Kartik?”

“It's possible. But you don't hug a friend and kiss him when you get inside the car or get out! Do you know how humiliating it is for me? And that too, to hear it from someone else?” he said.

“Why call me then?” she was sarcastic.

“I want to either make it work or end it, Maya. This isn't leading either of us anywhere?”

“Do whatever you want to, Kartik.”

“I can't do it alone, Maya. Whether it's building something or breaking something, I cannot do it alone, Maya.”

“Hmmm. Does it make any difference if I come back to you or not?”

“Maya, there's no point talking like this. I'm fine with it either way. It's your call.” He disconnected.

Maya felt a loss for words. She started scribbling on a piece of paper.

Listen to my heart
 In silence that pains
 Like a dumb woman
 Who cries in rain
 Voice unheard
 Pain unnoticed
 Eyes heavy
 Hands weak and tears unseen
 I walk in sin
 And I walk alone
 I sing a song
 To myself unknown
 My body sins
 Mind is saint
 Blood is all

It knows to paint
Love hurts all the way
I should have known
All of it feels like a lie
A lie trapped in a lie

FORTY ONE

Someone rang the bell. It was Raghu. She opened the door and let him in. Unusually for him, he looked nervous.

"I'm sorry, Maya. You know how much I love you." It seemed that all he was capable of was either pleading with her or abusing her.

"I know, Raghu. But I don't think we can make it."

"Come on, Maya. It was a small incident. Don't make a big issue out of it. In any case, I've said sorry. You know I lose control of myself sometimes."

"It's not a small thing, Raghu. I know you love me, but we think very differently. You don't want an ambitious girl, but I am one. That's why it won't work out for us," said.

"You mean you're dumping me?" He was dumbfounded.

"It's not that, Raghu. It's just that we aren't made for each other," she said.

"I'm not letting you go," his voice changed.

"You can't keep me with you as well," she said, standing her ground.

"I'm not letting you leave me like this, you bitch. You used me and had a good time. Now you don't want me anymore," he said angrily.

"This is precisely why it is not going to happen, Raghu," she said, tears beginning to form in her eyes. "I wish you were more sympathetic and normal."

"Go to hell. Do whatever you want, but I'm not letting you go,"

he said.

“I have to go now, Raghu. I've some work to do.”

“What work? I'll come along too,” he said, spoiling for a fight.

“I'm going to a friend's house, Raghu.” She picked up her bag and the house keys to go out.

Raghu snatched her bag and pushed her against the wall. “I said you are not going anywhere.”

“Please, Raghu. Don't start all over again,” she pleaded, crying. It only seemed to enrage him further.

“You desperate bitch. You think you'll get away by crying?” He threw the bag right at her face. It hit her in the eye. Before she could understand what happened he slapped her.

Then his expression changed again.

“You want to leave? Alright, leave. If I ever see you again, I'll kill you,” he said his left hand going for her throat. He slapped her harder this time.

“It's hurting me,” she almost choked.

He released his grip and turned away from her.

Crying she ran to the bedroom and threw herself on the bed crying hard.

She cried for some time. Then, she got up, washed her face and came into the living room. Stuff from her bag was scattered on the floor.

She thought he must have gone away, but he was there. He lit another cigarette and stepped out on the balcony.

Then minutes later he came back in.

“You know how much I love you, don't you. Why do you do this to me?” he asked, as if she was at fault.

“Please leave me, alone. Please! For God's sake,” she said, lapsing into tears again.

“You really want me to leave baby,” he was murmuring.

He looked at her for a while as if unsure of what to do next. Then he left. It was over with him, she decided. She was not going to get trapped further.

She was drinking a glass of water when the phone rang. Thank God it wasn't Raghu! It was Aditya.

“What's wrong with you, girl? Why didn't you call back?”

Maya was unable to say anything.

“Hey, Maya. Do you want me to come over?”

“Are you still in town,” she asked.

“Yes. The flight's got postponed. I'm leaving tomorrow.”

“Hmmm.”

“You've been crying?” he asked, making out from the tone of her voice and her unusual lack of enthusiasm.

Maya could not control the tears waiting to gush out. He listened to her crying on the phone for a while.

“What have you gotten into? I don't know what you are up to, Maya? It seems like you're in trouble. Is it that guy who dropped in earlier when I was there?”

She didn't say much. What was there to say, anyway?

“It's alright if you want to be alone now, Maya. I can understand. I won't come over and trouble you. But don't cling to bad things, just let them go. It's like clinging to a boat with a hole. Eventually it will take you further down,” he said.

“I will,” she said, lifelessly.

“Why don't you cling on to me? I've some strong equipment to hold on to, babe,” he said laughing.

“Shut up, Adi,” she chuckled.

“Only you can make me laugh anytime. You're impossible, Adi. Anyway, I appreciate your concern. Don't worry about me. And hey, thanks,” she said, putting the phone down.

Raghu was sending messages now. But he was not in her mind. She wanted to speak to Vikram. It was time.

“I'm returning by the late night train,” she told him.

“It will be good to see you,” he said.

He wanted to tell her to come to him. She was suffering; stranded on the road to love. He could not prevent it. Moreover to become a mystic and cross over to another dimension she had to go through all this. We are imperfect creations of God, because we cannot be perfect, we need to learn from our own mistakes, he thought. Wounds are the medals that a mystic wears up his sleeve. This is what God meant by giving us free will. If we fall, we had to feel the pain. We have to choose the medication for the pain too.

FORTY TWO

The dancing wind: 'Hey what's up?'

Ocean blue: 'I am fine. Where have you been?'

The dancing wind: 'Was busy with the new job. My boss is thinking of changing my profile. How have you been?'

Ocean blue: 'I am okay. Fed up of life.'

The dancing wind: 'LOL, what happened?'

Ocean blue: 'Nothing seems to be going right.'

The dancing wind: 'Is your divorce happening?'

Ocean blue: 'God only knows.'

The dancing wind: 'What do you mean by God only knows. You have to take a step towards what you want.'

Ocean blue: 'It takes two to take a divorce.'

The dancing wind: 'Oh you and your marriage woes. Phew!'

Ocean blue: 'You think it's very easy right.'

The dancing wind: 'When you got to do something you got to do it. Simple. Do you still love your wife?'

Oceanblue: 'I hate the goddamn word called love.'

The dancing wind: 'Oh I hate it too. Nice meeting you ocean blue. She sent a laughing smiley. Then what's your problem.'

Oceanblue: 'My problem is my wife can't decide what she wants. Moreover there is this girl in my life I started dating and now she is a pain in my neck.'

The dancing wind: 'LOL. Chuck her out man. Life is too short to waste on these emotions. I have learnt it after lot of heart breaks.'

Oceanblue: 'You must meet me.'

The dancing wind: 'Patience young man.'

Oceanblue: 'Why don't you send me your pic?'

The dancing wind: 'I like it this way. No baggage.'

Kartik looked at his watch. He was to meet Simran in half an hour from now. He decided to take a quick shower before that. He kept the laptop aside though he still wanted to chat more. He was supposed to take her out for a new movie that was running. A love story. Oh how he hated all this emotional drama. Women- you need them, women- you can't keep them, he thought.

FORTY THREE

“What did you decide?” Simran asked him as they lay naked next to each other.

“About what?”

“About us!”

“Simran...,” he turned towards her and kissed her. His hand circling round her pink nipples. “With you around where is the time to think.”

“Kartik, I want to talk.” She whispered.

“Would you like some coffee?” he asked reluctantly. That will be nice, she said. He put on his shorts and got up when the doorbell rang. He opened the door.

He reeled from the shock. It was Maya with her luggage, having returned from Mumbai.

“Maya? You. What are you doing here?”

“I thought I’ll come back home,” she said.

“That’s Okay. But why didn’t you call and tell me?”

“I decided to return all of a sudden. Besides, today being a Sunday, I knew you’d be at home,” she making her way inside and setting the suitcase on the living room floor.

She badly wanted to wash the grime off from her face and headed for the sink in the bathroom.

But what was this, Maya thought, as a bedsheet moved. There was a woman on the bed, she could make out. Simran had heard snatches of their conversation and had tried to hurriedly dress up.

"What's this?" asked Maya. "Who is she? What have you been up to? Where's your mother?" The questions flew fast at Kartik.

"Maya, she's a friend," Kartik stammered.

"Friend? What is she doing here without her clothes on, Kartik."

She walked out of the room so that Simran could at least get dressed.

'Is this why you called me back? Oh, I forgot. You did not call me back. You said I could come if I wanted to, right?' she shouted. Kartik was tongue tied.

"Maya, don't get me wrong. This means nothing," he said, motioning to the bedroom.

"Of that I'm sure, Kartik! I mean nothing to you, and that woman too means nothing to you, either," she said, dazed, but stepping out to pick up her suitcase. Kartik didn't know whether to stop her or let her go.

Maya took an autorickshaw to Vikram's house.

"What happened?" Vikram asked, as she stepped in.

"Nothing. I'm lost. I think I'll have to tell my parents that I'm getting out of my marriage. I feel so sorry for them."

She narrated the recent events of her life, of Raghu and of how she went back home and saw Kartik with some other woman.

"Does that other woman make a huge difference in your life?" Vikram asked her.

Maya took a few minutes before she answered.

"Not really. It does not matter at all. Maybe it was just a momentary reaction."

He shook his head. It was going to be noon, but what the hell, let's have some wine, he thought. She thought so too.

His house was a lavishly done apartment. He had a taste for Victorian furniture. A giant centre table that lay neatly in the hall with giant cushions on one side of it. Another side had a huge sofa covered with embroidered upholstery with shimmering blue satin feel. On the side a lamp hung beautifully spreading yellow light in the room. It gave a calming effect to eyes. Light music was being played in the

background and the smell of cigarette was evident in the house. A round rug lay on the floor around which two wooden chairs were kept. He poured some wine from an expensive looking bottle for both of them.

As they sipped the wine, Vikram asked no questions, allowing her to speak herself.

“You know my father loves me very much, don't you?” she asked Vikram rhetorically.

“All parents love their children,” he said, nodding.

“They do, but I'm sure my dad loves me a little more than other fathers love their daughters. My heart is broken, but he'll be even more heartbroken when he knows that my marriage has fallen apart,” she said. “I don't understand why I feel so lonely when my dad loves me so much. How much more do I need? I'm greedy for love and that's what's screwing things up.”

He sighed. “Maya there's nothing bad about being greedy for love. It's just another need. The way one needs food, water, and air one also needs love. Some need it more than others. Love is the same; it changes its shape and form. It's like water. Water that can slake your thirst or kill you if denied. Besides, it's got to be pure.”

“How do you find it?”

“It flows within you. No one tells you when you should drink water, Maya. You realise it when the time comes.”

“I also felt the same when I met Kartik,” she said.

“You did not, Maya. You forced yourself to believe that you have found love. Love happens to you, you can't go looking for it. It's not as if it can be retrieved off a shelf!”

He continued. “Sometimes it feels like love, but it is not love. We start experimenting out of boredom of routine life and give it the name of love. Love is always two ways. Love demands reciprocation. It feeds on newness. It is like an art which has to be nourished. Love is like a videogame. Once you cross a level, there is another one ready to be explored. If there are no new levels the game would get over. There are conditions applied. You must have read poets like Byron and Wordsworth. One wrote poetry about love for a woman and the other wrote about love for nature, but both are called romantic poets. The

intensity and passion with which they write does not change. It is not what you love, it is how you love. Love is when you close your eyes and can listen to the music the universe is singing for you.”

“Is it so important, this love?” she asked.

“Yes. It teaches you to become a complete human being. Love makes you a better person and the pain it brings with itself helps you understand and come to terms with life better. It comes in different forms, like a mother's love for her child, which is probably the most unselfish love in the world. It is unconditional. It is the most evolved form of love in the world. The highest form of love does not seek reciprocation. It's like the love of God, who wants you to choose the best for yourself, but gives you the free will to decide, anyway. Love is the light that helps you cross over different dimensions.”

“The second form of love is between a man and a woman. This can be the strongest form of love. Its suffering and passion makes you understand life as well as other people better. But it is also the most materialistic form of love and that is the reason why it is the most common, painful and the most easily understood.”

“Christianity says God made woman from a rib that he took out of Adam. In Indian mythology, Radha is the extended energy of Krishna. She has no other body. Even Gods are not untouched by its power.”

“After the Big Bang, both matter and anti-matter were created. This is why we crave for a soul mate. The anti-matter is actually a part of the matter our body is made of. When you meet that anti-matter which is instrumental in completing your process of existence here in this world, you hear the music that your soul sings. Then is the time when you mingle with each other and become one and move on to the next journey of life. We all belong to the same morphic field. All of us are connected through the atomic bonds in the energy ground of the universe. All of us are connected through love.”

She was amazed at his words. But thoughts of her father and Kartik distracted her. “Are you alright?” Vikram asked, soothingly. “You can cry if you want to,” he said.

“I'm missing my mom and dad,” she said, taken aback by her own words. Perhaps that's the only love that meant anything, she reasoned. “I don't know what to do?” she said. “I want to run away.”

“Stop escaping, Maya. You ran away from your step mom, and then you ran away from the marriage. You ran away from Raghu. Stop. How much are you going to run? Stand tall and face it. You need to face these situations. Cry when you want to, for it heals. Lean on yourself alone. Don't cling on others to make you feel better. The pain should make you strong. Everything in this universe is balanced. If there is intense pain, there will be intense pleasure too. If it is dark today, it will be bright tomorrow. Just keep your faith. The night never loses faith in the sun. Faith is the language of universe.”

Maya smiled, but she looked drained.

Vikram held her hand and kissed her on the forehead. “Maya differentiate between habits and love. Look within yourself. Love is the force that would keep you going even when loneliness will weigh you down. Habits on the other side will trap you.”

FORTY FOUR

Her phone beeped. A new message entered her phone's inbox.

Where are you? Kartik

Should I let him know, she wondered. It can wait, I've better things to do, she thought. It flashed across her mind, then that instead of feeling bad about breaking up with Kartik, she should be happy that she followed her heart. The same heart that once told her that Kartik was the man for her.

Suddenly her heart was trying to talk to her.

"Be strong. Take the chance to be happy. Follow me," she heard her heart. "Don't expect anything from others. Have faith in me."

"I am scared of you," she heard herself whispering back. "You confuse me."

"I don't. In your anxiety you overlook what I say. I chose to be quiet when I see you are not bothered. That's when you get confused. I know the road to love. Dump all your fear and just sing with me."

All our lives we keep living in expectation of achieving something out of it. She thought. As a child we live for our mother's affection. We imitate our parents till we grow up to start feeling that we are perhaps the smarter lot. We make love couple of times and then get tired of it. We learn to hide things even from closed ones so that we are not in weak positions in front of them. We are scared of others taking advantage of our weaknesses.

She remembered a colleague of hers she had met in Mumbai who had discussed her apprehensions with her in one of the impulsive moments. She told her that she came from an extremely influential family and was working just for herself. She wanted to get out of the house so that she could expand her horizons and not stay depressed all the time. Her husband was an exporter. She had married him out of love. She was an airhostess and had met him on one of his flights to Thailand. She was looking lovely that day and had exchanged her number with this man. Once in Thailand he had invited her to have drinks with him. He was really handsome and she was tempted to spend some time with him. She knew he would have to be either rich or influential to travel in business class. After drinks he invited her to his room. She knew it was a signal and she had a boyfriend back home, but she accepted. Once inside the room they instantly hit off and soon after the trip he started sending her expensive gifts and met her often. He finally proposed to her. It was going very good for the first six months after which he slowly started drifting away. She could not understand the reason of the drift. She tried to cajole him and make him stay, but it was getting over. She figured out that he had developed a new love interest and made a lot of fuss about it. However, she did not want to be an abandoned wife and so after being warned by him she gave in. She tried to find out ways and means to find happiness and one of them was to come and work for the company where Maya was also working. They often used to discuss about love. A thing which was once source of her happiness had now become painful for her. All she would now do is keep red beans under her pillow and sleep as per a ritual from Chinese tradition. Red beans as per Chinese tradition are love beans. They are supposed to attract love in life.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Vikram.

“Nothing,” she replied.

“You must be thinking about how complicated life can get with love?”

Vikram could always read her mind, she thought to herself.

“Isn't love meant to be simple?” she asked

“It is simple. It is the rules and pressures of society that complicate

it.”

Another message in her phone's inbox.

“What the hell is wrong with you? We need to talk. I'm worried –
Kartik

Vikram looked away. He smiled at her.

“You must be tired,” he said. “Why you don't lie down for some time, he said, turning to go out and leave her alone.”

For some time after she lay on the bed and went to sleep, he looked at her with longing. Someone caressed her forehead as she drifted deeper into sleep. It felt peaceful.

The next morning she got up feeling better. She realised she was in Vikram's house. She looked around. The house looked different in the morning. The shadows on the wall were no more to be seen. Sunlight seeped in from the window. The shades of the bed sheet had changed with the effect of light. She got up and walked to the kitchen. Vikram was making coffee.

He looked so handsome. No one could be so handsome and yet so aloof.

He smiled at her. “Good morning. Here, have some coffee.”

“I think I'll go meet my parents today,” she said.

“What will you tell them?”

“I don't know!”

“Hmmm.”

“What should I?”

“Well, tell them whatever comes to your mind!” he smiled.

“I don't know what to say?”

“Try the truth. For everyone, it's easier.”

She saw three new messages on her phone. Kartik was trying to get in touch. He'd even called when she was sleeping. She decided to speak with him. She stepped out of the kitchen and picked up her phone.

“Where have you been the whole fucking night? I was about to call your parents?” he said.

“What for?”

“I wanted to ask them if they knew about your whereabouts.”

“Why do you want to find me?”

“It's not something that can be said over the phone! I need to see you!”

“What's there to see me for, Kartik?”

“So you've decided that you are leaving?”

“I'm not sure!”

“You are never sure. You are not sure of your love for me. You are not sure if you want to leave me. Do you know how much trouble you being unsure causes?” He complained, bitterly.

He was so right, this time, she thought. How can we be sure of life? We are a miniscule part of such a big universe. We don't even know the simple answers to questions like who am I? Where does the sun come from? What happens to us when we die? Why are we herefor? How was she expected to take absolutely flawless decisions and be sure about them?

“What do you want me to do?” she asked him.

“I want you to decide. Once and for all! Do you want to come and live with me or not?”

“I don't know. Besides you have someone else staying with you.”

“Relax, Maya. You too had someone else comforting you when you were in Mumbai! Anyway, I don't even know if you have gone back to Mumbai or not. In any case, decide and let me know soon.” He disconnected.

She came back and sat on the rug. She started to sip her coffee silently.

“I dreamt a weird dream today,” she said in a soft voice. “I dreamt that I was dancing on a stage and in the first moment people were worshipping me and in the other moment they were throwing stones at me. I saw myself performing a dance of the goddess and next moment I was the witch.”

“Hmm!” his expression softened. “All of us have the good and bad within us Maya. That is why we are responsible for our actions. God and devil both reside within us in the form of goodness or evil that we exude in this world. Nothing in this world is only good or bad. Everything is grey. The difference lies in the perspective and situations.”

She felt numb. She wondered what was heavier, the burden of past or

the uncertainty of future.

She had a shower and got dressed.

“Are you leaving now?” Vikram asked. “Where are you off to?”

She was incredibly pretty.

“I’m going to my parents place. I’ll stay there for a day or two and then probably go back to Mumbai!”

“Why don’t you stay here?”

“I have to be sure,” she said. She kissed him and stepped out of the house.

FORTY FIVE

Simran took a taxi to her flat. She was a little shocked after her silent encounter with Maya. She did not feel guilty, but a bit disturbed. Perhaps this was the first time she realised what it was to be getting involved with a man who carried baggage. Kartik had profusely apologised to her, though.

She had met Kartik in her office while she was going through her break up with her boyfriend, Aditya Balraj. It was hardly the best of times when she met Kartik.

Woored by Aditya, she was in seventh heaven. He made her feel special and she threw caution to the wind. Everything was like a party with him. When she found she was pregnant, she was shocked. Aditya did not want to get married and she did not want to be an unwed mother. Her mother had been unwed, so she thought not be one too. Not that she had any qualms for being a single mother, but she had dreamt of a marriage and a settled family.

Aditya had backed out when she discussed it with him. A fighter to the core she sadly decided not to have the child, little realising that it would leave her incomplete forever. She really loved Aditya, but was hurt by his irresponsible behaviour. She wondered why having a child became so sinful, only because one wasn't married. How can a marital status change the perception towards motherhood?

It was on the rebound that she hooked up with Kartik. However,

she never could outgrow the love she had for Aditya. Only that she was down and out could have played a part in her getting involved in a seemingly promiscuous relationship. Kartik was going through a failing marriage, she had failed in love. Misery loves company, indeed. As she opened the door to her flat, it struck Simran that Kartik's wife's face seemed familiar enough. Oh God, she thought, I've met her with Aditya. Aditya had claimed her to be his best friend. She was sure Maya would have recognised her too. The world was such a small place after all. Will Aditya's ghosts never leave her?

FORTY FIVE

“Maya, did you see what I'm knitting,” Mrs Dewan asked, showing her a lovely little blue coloured pair of socks. Maya's absence seemed to have cheered her up enough to make her fond of her.

“They're nice.”

“This is a gift for your son,” she said looking up at Maya with a smile.

Maya felt a stab at her heart. This was going to make it harder.

“I've decided to end my marriage,” she said.

“What? What did you say, Maya?”

“I said I'm putting an end to my marriage,” she replied stubbornly. God knew where she got the strength to say so.

It needs a lot of strength to fail your parents. They need a lot more strength too, to see you fail. “Does your father know?” her stepmother asked. “Don't give up, Maya beta. All marriages go through ups and downs. *Hum bhi to reh rabe hain*,” she continued.

“Mom, please understand. I can't live a loveless life,” she said, and went into the bathroom, not wanting to prolong the conversation or get into an argument.

Her stepmother called out after her. “What's love? There's no such thing. You think someone will come in your life and fill it with love. Take life as it is. That's it. Leave all this nonsense about love! Do you think there is loads of love in our lives?”

As Maya shut the bathroom door, her stepmother's voice trailed away.

Maya thought for a moment how right her stepmother was. There was practically no love in her life. Post getting dumped by the first husband she was forced to live her life with a man, fighting with him and bringing up his child. She had to cook, look after the house. And then there were the endless chores. Maya noticed her pale skin. She had developed under eye dark circles that made her look even older than she was. She had no time for love.

She wondered whether women like her would have even experienced love even once in life. They might get tempted to follow their hearts once in a while, but they kill the voice in order to maintain their moral identity. They invest so much in the family and children that their own dreams are replaced by some underlying frustrations. Ironically, they end up smothering the ones they love.

When Maya came out, she locked herself up in the bedroom because she wanted to avoid talking to her stepmother. She lay down on the once familiar bed. It was as if the bed and the pillow recognized her, as if they were old friends. Maya fell asleep.

She did not know how long she slept. A knock on the bedroom door awakened her. It was her father. This was the moment Maya dreaded. But may God bless him a million times. His eyes radiated kindness as she ran to him and flung herself into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably. He patted her on her head, holding her tightly as her body was racked by her sobs. He was comforting her, though he probably was the one more in need of comforting.

"What is it, *beta*? Your mother was telling me about the conversation you had with her. Whatever it is, don't worry!"

She did not know how to start. Mentally she thanked her stepmother for breaking the news to her father. She herself would just not have known how to break it to him. She just wanted to hug him and cry. She remembered the times when he would come back home exhausted from the day's work. They would either play chess or carrom board together. He would silently let Maya win. In surrendering, he taught her the greatest lesson of love.

"Tell me, *beta*. What is it?"

This man must be the nearest thing to God, she felt.

“I don't love him anymore, papa,” she said, the tears rolled down her cheeks.

He sighed.

“You don't get everything in life, Maya.”

“What's everything, papa? What's a life without someone wanting you to be there?”

He and his daughter shared a bond that ran deep in both of them. Neither of them had anyone, but each other.

“Take it easy, Maya. I understand what you're going through. You don't have to spell it out to me, Maya. This life is a puzzle, darling. You have to fight your inner demons and solve your own for yourself.” His eyes were moist. At times it gets difficult to offer advice to someone we love dearly.

And what I could tell her that will comfort her, he thought, helplessly. Maya couldn't resist the thought that she had let her father down badly. Her presence now heightened his helplessness, his sadness, she thought.

Her stepmother came in.

“What are you going to do now, Maya? What will we tell our neighbours?” she asked, looking at her husband all the while.

“Don't worry, mom. I'm not going to stay here,” she replied.

“What do you mean? This is your house, you can stay here forever,” her father told Maya.

“The neighbours can go to hell,” he roared at his wife.

“It's ok Papa. It does not matter,” she tried to pacify him.

“Why would it matter? Your dad only has spoilt you. You never bother about me. My feelings never mattered. I have wasted my life taking care of a child like you,” she said with tears in her eyes. “Don't you two get it that I am also a part of this family.”

Suddenly the woman in Maya felt bad for this woman standing in front of her. They never connected as their dreams, aspirations were opposite to each other's. Yet Maya realised that holding on to the family was her biggest goal and sadly that too was broken. For the first time she connected with her as a woman. Two Women with broken hearts and broken dreams.

Her father turned to her.

“Maya, think carefully about whatever it is that you want to do. It isn't the easiest thing in our society for a woman to live alone after separating from her husband. I suggest you think it over again. But no matter what you decide, I will always be on your side. I have no one else to live for,” he said, the tears finally broke through the dam he was desperately building.

Father and daughter sobbed, clinging to each other, like two abandoned children.

Maya told him about the job she had in Mumbai and that she'd like to go there and work for now, to divert her mind off other things. Mr. Dewan, who had never opposed his daughter, only asked her to be careful.

They did not discuss the issue again that day.

The next morning after breakfast, she called Aditya. She had decided to go back to Mumbai, where she had been transferred, she told her dad.

“I need the flat back, Adi,” she said.

“Are you mad? Are you going back to that demon?” he asked, thinking that she intended to reunite with Raghu.

But she had forgotten about Raghu in the last couple of days.

It's a good thing that she didn't put in her papers, she thought. She had said that she urgently needed to go to Delhi for a couple of days. Thank God for small mercies, she thought.

She had forgotten about Raghu all this while. What would have happened to him? He would have gone mad trying her old number and checking on her flat hundred times by now. Was she ready to face him again? Was she ready to take that shit again?

“No, Adi. I'm not that mad to reunite with him. I need a place to live, that's all. And as you know, I can't really afford to have a place of my own now!”

Aditya agreed she could have the flat back on condition that she would not see Raghu ever again. She agreed to because she had already decided to do that.

She called Vikram then and told him she was coming to his house.

She packed her luggage and took leave of her parents. Her father could hardly bear to see her go, but departures seem to have a degree of inevitability about them. This is a piece of my heart, he told himself helplessly, as she took leave of her stepmother. He called Maya by name and hugged her, crying like a child. It was her turn to comfort him. Then as she left, he watched on, feeling orphaned.

As he looked on, Maya called an auto rickshaw and put her luggage in. She boarded it and smoothing out her dress unconsciously as women ought to do, turned to wave at her father. But he had turned away, unable to take it anymore, and was limping back to the house, as if he was a man who had lost his last bet. Maya's heart bled a tear. She remembered all those days when he had brought smiles to her sad days. She missed how he had comforted her when nights got scary. It was better when he was just around. She wanted to get off and run to him. All along the way to Vikram's house, she sobbed silently, feeling for the old man, her great and helpless father.

Vikram was standing outside his house as the auto stopped. He expressed his happiness seeing her.

"Hi!" she sounded chirpy. It took an effort, but was worth it, she thought.

"You look happy," he chuckled as they went in.

"I've decided to take charge of my life," she told him.

It was as if she was declaring war against the world, he thought to himself, smiling at the thought.

"And if I may ask, how did this realisation happen so suddenly?"

"I don't know for sure. I think it was when I saw the misery in my father's eyes, I decided I can't allow him to fail," she said.

Vikram could see the spunk returning to the girl. Yesterday, she had been whimpering through the day. But that was yesterday, he said to himself, shaking his head.

This is what he liked about her. She wouldn't take no for an answer. Knock her down and she'll get up each time. Maya was a fighter.

"I have decided to go to Mumbai."

He felt a pinch. He thought she would stay in Delhi.

"Why would you want to go back?"

“I have to sort things out. I am not sure how I can do it living here. There would be too many complications.”

“Do you want to go back to Raghu?”

“Are you out of your mind?” she hissed.

He felt a sense of relief. She told him that Kartik had called her in the morning to speak about their marriage that was falling apart. Kartik had also said he was willing to let bygones be bygones if she would behave in the future.

“Do you think I ought to give it a chance?” she asked Vikram.

“You have to take that call,” he said.

“I don't think it will work out,” she declared.

“Why do you think of making it work then?”

“I feel a sense of guilt for having cheated on him.”

“So? You want to live with him because of your feeling of guilt? How stupid can you be?” he asked incredulously. “Besides, Maya, what is cheating. It's as bad as you make it feel. Most of the times when people cheat they are actually looking for some relief. We all are so alone in our journey of life. We are made to believe the rosy side of love that lasts forever through movies, songs and fairy tales. It isn't so easy Maya. People around us are working hard to cling on to their marriages after a couple of years. The feeling of boredom, routine weighs them down, but society does not let them break the rules. Love is life. It needs fresh oxygen every moment. Human beings are so sad. They are so confused. They don't know which way to follow. They are trapped. Society has given them a rule book to follow and you can't imagine the kind of boredom that it has set in.”

“What if he actually loves me? I'm confused,” she said.

“Maya, love is never confused. Love makes its presence felt. I am not saying whether he loves you or not. All I'm saying is that where there is love, there are no ifs.”

She nodded.

“Do you think he loves you?” Vikram asked, afraid of her reply.

“I don't think so. I did love him, but I don't love him anymore, I guess,” she said, to his great relief.

“Maya, I believe that when two people want to be with each other it is natural. We are all human beings who are equals. Killing or using

force on someone for anything is breaking the basis of trust in each other. Besides, you ought not take what you cannot return. If you cannot return a person's self-respect or a person's life, you have no right to take it from him."

She was listening to his every word. She was astounded at his clarity of thought.

"You and Kartik need to introspect. Are you two in a relationship wherein you have respect for each other? Or is it a dead relationship whose corpse you two are carrying? Remember that with time, dead bodies only get heavier!"

She thought about it. Was the relationship really dead? If it was, there was no point carrying on with it?

"How do I know if it's all over between Kartik and me or if there is chance?" she asked him.

"No one else can tell you this, Maya. This is an insight which you have to find out by yourself. Follow your heart. All I can tell you is not to worry about making mistakes. Nothing in this world is perfect. But some choices come with accompaniments. Life offers you packages. Making choice is always difficult. I will frame a simple example for you. Imagine you have to choose between two packs. One that has bread and butter and the other has roti dal. You cannot have the bread with *dal* or rotis with butter. That's how it is, no more, no less."

"Hmmm," she said, listening intently.

"Make a choice and think about its repercussions logically. Then be prepared to face these repercussions happily as it was your choice after all. Even if it goes wrong you can still learn from it and evolve. Don't get scared of making mistakes. Mistakes are the lessons that the universe has carved for us."

"It sounds so simple, but then why does it get so difficult to make a choice then?"

"We all want the best for ourselves. Then we let our egos and our greed come in the way. We fear failures and mistakes. We are not bothered if our choices are bad for others or not. All we seek is that it should not hurt us. The fear of walking out of one's comfort zone is what stops us from listening to our hearts. All choices have advantages

and disadvantages built into them, but we do not acknowledge. We seek pleasure, not contentment. That makes us restless as our search for pleasure is endless. Restlessness gives birth to more frustrations which then leads to fear. This is the fear that makes it difficult for us to make choices clearly!”

“I don't think Kartik loves me,” she heard herself telling him. “I can't figure out about what he thinks about us?” At that instant she thought of how loveless her heart felt as she thought about Kartik.

“All of us believe in our own ways of thinking, but this is not bad. Nothing in this world is absolute truth or absolute false. Everything overlaps. The way night overlaps morning, summer overlaps spring. The problem arises when we discard the sensitivities of others. It is you who has to find a way for yourself. You have to figure out a road you believe in. It does not matter how many people walk on that road. What matters is what you feel while walking on it. It might not be an accepted path, but remember that it is your road, your way to yourself. Don't let the path choose you, find your own path.”

He was right, as usual. She thought, hers' had not been the road under the shade of a tree, but it was her own road. That made her less guilty and almost relieved. At least she was not one of those men and women who suffer in silence in the name of love. They think marriage is going to give it permanence and when it does not happen they go ahead and have children. They think children will make it rosy and then they realise that it still is as frustrating as it was. They cheat and try and figure out other ways of distressing themselves. They justify cheating as a way to revive their dying relationships. In that moment her heart warmed up towards the man sitting in front of her. It felt like music melting in her blood drop by drop. He was her guide her spiritual master and all other faces in her life were fading in his shadow. “Are you sure you want to go to Mumbai,” he asked, not without a little hope left.

“Yes,” she said, just as he had expected.

“I think I must leave now, Vikram. Thank you for everything from the bottom of my heart.” She hugged him, declining his offer of lunch. She had taken so much from him already, she felt.

She had lunch with Aditya, after which he dropped her at the

railway station. On the way they shared a smoke and remembered the nostalgic old days.

“I hope you're not going back to that wretch, Raghu,” he said, in earnest.

“I need to go back, not to be with him again, but to sort myself out. I want to find the meaning of my life,” she said.

“What?” Aditya said, his mouth open. He looked at her as if she had gone mad. Find meaning, indeed. That was the last thing on his mind, anyway. Some people just don't get it, he thought, feeling pity for Maya. “Meaning of life,” he repeated with sarcasm, “Why don't you join some ashram.”

“One day I will. I will make you my disciple,” she teased him.

“I will be your doctor. You would need treatment.” They laughed together. The sound of her laughter was also not the same. It felt empty. It was as if her loneliness had become the only thing that was alive in her body.

“You've changed a lot from our college days, Maya,” he said with a trace of nostalgia in his tone.

“Have I?” she said laughing. They shared an ability to laugh together at the silliest of things.

“You remember how full of life you were then. How we used to bunk classes, get piles of fake medical certificates.”

“Yeah, I do,” she smiled, “Also I remember that slap you got from that NRI chic in college.”

“Huh. Remember one day, your dad caught you smoking.”

“Whoa, that was bad. Remember your mom caught you watching porn.”

They laughed till her eyes were little damp.

“Those days passed by fast Adi.”

“Yes, but your spirit should not weaken Maya. Catch hold of yourself.”

She just smiled and a heavy sadness passed through her eyes.

“Remember, I will be there whenever you need me.”

“You are a sweetheart Adi,” she said with a pressed smile.

“By the way what happened to that friend of yours, that boring girl we met while you were in Delhi?”

“Who Adi, I will have to press my search button for you.”

“Arey! That pretty chic, wearing a backless top. The one, who had lost her iPhone.”

Maggie laughed as she realised who he was talking about.

“Reva.”

“Yeah!”

“Oh, she has got a job”

“Everybody wants to earn money,” he smiled.

“Not everyone is lucky to have inherited it like you.”

“Tell her to join me. I would make her rich.”

“Huh and then dump her to spend the money on someone else.”

“Who gave her a job?”

“Daniel Publishers. Now go trace her.”

“Ah ha, that's neat,” he grinned.

Reva and hers was a perfect friendship. They were never actually out of touch. It was just that sometimes, time intervals were unusually longer. Their ability to pick exactly from where they left was the salt of their friendship.

Once in the train she picked up the day's newspaper. The same horrible stories, filled the pages. The same news: politicians' involvement in scams, an actor's rehabilitation, match-fixing in cricket. Well, what's the point in reading the newspaper? She asked herself. If you wanted to get depressed, you could do it on your own, she chuckled to herself. Besides, it's cheaper!

When she reached Mumbai the next day, she wondered if she had made the right decision to come back to Aditya's flat. After all, Raghu knew this place. Maybe she should have opted for a working woman's hostel, she thought. Back in the apartment, she opened the windows and let the breeze come in. As she did so, she saw the cemetery. She had forgotten about it. Not to worry, all of us will be there sooner or later she thought. Not much point thinking like this, she thought. Mayadecided to order some food, have it and go to sleep.

FORTY SIX

As she was going through her work next morning, the receptionist called her on her extension.

“There's a call for you, someone had been desperately trying to reach you in the past few days,” she told Maya.

“Hi!” the familiar voice said. It was Raghu, she realized glumly.

“Where had you been? I knew you would come back. How are you?” he sounded excited.

“I'm alright,” she said.

“When can I see you?” he asked, not stopping to wonder if she wanted to meet him. But that was how he was. Sensitivity was hardly his strong point.

She did not want to see him, but that was not what she said. “I'll be home after seven,” she said.

“Alright, I'll see you then,” he said.

Maya went numb. She was getting into quicksand, again.

He was already waiting for her when she reached her flat.

He looked handsome as ever and had a bunch of red roses in his hand which he gave her.

She smiled, but feebly.

“Where were you?” he asked as she opened the door and they went in.

“I was in Delhi,” she said, putting her bag down on the table.

"I know that. Why were you avoiding me?"

"I was not avoiding you or anyone else," she said, wanting him to sense that she was not obliged to answer him.

He passed her and made himself comfortable on the chair lying next to her bed.

"You don't seem to be happy to see me?" he said.

Should I be? she asked herself.

He continued. "How many times should I tell you that I love you? Just because I got angry at your classmate, you disappeared. You didn't even bother to answer my calls."

"It was not that. I was busy. Besides, I don't like the way you sometimes behave, Raghu," she said.

"Why don't you come and stay with me. Why waste money on this flat," he said getting up from the chair. Subtlety would never be his strong point, she thought.

"No," she said spontaneously.

"Why do you want to get obliged to someone when I'm there for you?" he pressed on.

"There's no obligation. Besides, I want some space of my own. I'm not sure if I want to move in with you," she said.

"What do you mean you aren't sure? What's the damn problem? You fucking women talk whatever you feel like, these days," he sneered.

This was getting out of hand as usual, she thought.

"Baby, it's my job to take care of you. Why don't you understand?"

"Raghu, I want to do so myself!"

"God! It's so difficult to explain things to you. Don't you want a husband and children and live in peace?"

His was a one track mind, if ever there was one.

"That's not the only thing I want from life," she said, defensively.

"What else do you want, you fucking whore?" he shouted, losing his cool.

She wanted to slap him for his filthy language.

"Raghu, please stop it. You're getting abusive as usual. This is exactly what I don't like about you. You have absolutely no concern for anyone else's feelings. For you it's all I, me, myself!" she said.

When she spoke her view, it ended up upsetting him further.

"I just don't understand what you bitches want," he said, half in anger and half in defeat.

But his rage was back. He grabbed hold of her hand tightly.

"Let me go, Raghu. It hurts," she said, crying.

"Don't you think you will get away from me easily, you bitch? I'll spoil your life. I'll kill you and I mean it," he said, his eyes glinting with fury.

She started sobbing.

"Don't shed these crocodile tears on me, you whore. I should not have come over to see you," he said, and suddenly slapped her hard. He slapped her with such force that she fell down on the floor.

"No one invited you here," she said, picking herself up from the floor, her misery venting itself in words.

He looked at her for a minute or two, kicked the chair aside and walked out of the flat, banging the door hard behind him. She got up and quickly latched the door, afraid that he would come in again and beat her.

She had a colleague, Esha Natarajan, who used to be beaten up and abused, she remembered her.

It was on a trip to Kolkata that she and this colleague shared a hotel room. After the day's work was over, they had come back to the room. Maya had a bath and was flipping through a book, her colleague had more than two cups of beverages, she noticed.

It seemed like she was crying quietly as she drank, Maya thought. Though they weren't familiar enough, Maya went over to her. Yes, she was crying. Maya took the glass of vodka away and led her to the bed.

"Can you sit with me for some time?" she asked Maya hopefully.

"Yes, of course," she replied.

"Have you ever felt love?" she asked Maya.

Maya nodded circumspectly.

"Do you know why we need to be loved, Maya? Why we all are so lost? Maybe I'll explain it to you," she looked enquiringly at Maya.

Everyone has a theory, Maya thought, as she nodded for her to go on. She would have gone on anyway, perhaps.

"Once upon a time we humans were very powerful. We were self-

dependent. Each human being had two sexes within. We had two set of arms and legs. Two faces. We were complete, needing nothing. We could procreate on our own. Then one day our strength and defiance started bothering the Gods. They got Zeus to send down a thunderbolt that split all of us into half. Our belly buttons are a reminder of that split. From then on, we have been incomplete. That's why we go in search of love," she said.

What her colleague had said that day came back to her. It was a frightening truth. Maya always thought Esha was a strong and intelligent woman. Had she been right? Well, who could tell!

She knew however that men found a strong-willed woman to be threatening. That was why Raghu bombarded her home. For he knew that she could live without him. That hollowed out him from the inside.

The simple fact that love meant sharing, not possessing, could never occur to such a person no matter how long he lived, she thought. What a waste, what an absolute waste. She felt pity for Raghu, not anger.

Love cannot be possessed. When possession enters, love will fly out of the window.

She went to her kitchen and made a cup of noodles for herself. She would have preferred rice and dal, but what the hell, she thought. She felt quite a bit stronger today.

FORTY SEVEN

Work was taking its toll. The days were getting monotonous. Maya was feeling increasingly lonely in this big city. There was hardly anyone here she knew well enough to be comfortable with, to confide in.

Whatever she thought, she noted down in her diary. The diary took the role of a silent companion. She did not really know what she was writing the diary for, but writing it seemed to provide a little relief. Does what I write make sense, she often wondered. She consoled herself saying the world did not make much sense, either. It made as little sense as a Hindi movie, she thought, taken aback at her own comparison.

Apart from writing her diary, the only other relief was talking to Vikram. She wished this would have been enough to live a life with. Just a day or two after she remembered Esha Natarajan, she received a call from her. She had been transferred to Mumbai and would work with Maya in the same department. Thank God for that new companion, Maya said to herself, relieved.

She arrived the next day. Though they did not know each other very well, they had met enough to be at ease with each other.

“Can we step out for a while, Maya. I want to have a cigarette,” Esha said.

They went out. Esha didn't look too well.

“Is something wrong? Is something disturbing you?” Maya asked, concerned.

“What made you think I’m disturbed?” Esha asked.

Maya quickly changed the topic. She didn’t want to intrude.

“Has your family moved here too?” Maya asked, changing the topic.

“No. My parents are still in Delhi. I’m separated from my husband,” she said.

“Welcome to the party!” Maya said. This seemed to ease matters when both laughed, as if it were a joke.

“I didn’t know you were married!” Esha said.

Esha looked lost as she took a drag from her cigarette.

“Yes, I am disturbed. I broke off with the man I thought I was in love with. My sixth failed attempt at finding love.” She was misty eyed. *Maggie* raised her eyebrows. Six fucking heartbreaks. The girl must have an iron heart to deal with she thought. No wonder she is so lost. She felt sorry for her.

“By the way I am looking for a place to stay. Can you help?”

“Hey, you can move in with me. I was looking for a roommate.”

“Really.”

“Yes of course,” Maya said, glad for the company.

“I will have to go to the washroom to dab some kajal.”

Public Appearances.

They went home a bit early that day, for they decided to have a proper home cooked meal.

As they were chopping the vegetables, Esha reopened the issue.

“What’s your excuse for being separated?” she asked.

“What the hell! He doesn’t love me,” Maya complained. “And your’s?”

“He isn’t worth loving,” Esha replied, chuckling.

Maya shared her thoughts about men. “You know how men are! There are only two things on their mind. One out of that is money. You know what the other is?” she exclaimed, looking at Esha.

“Yes, of course. They want their girl to be beautiful and available to them whenever they desire. They’ve no time for others except when they want to use someone, even if it is their wife.”

And so they chatted on, as the meal was getting ready. They talked

through their meal and continued to as they lay down to sleep.

"Have you separated for good?" Esha enquired.

"For my good!" Maya replied. Both laughed at the pun.

"Mine's not even worth talking about," Esha said.

"Sometimes relationships take time to conclude. It is difficult to make them and it becomes more difficult to break them," Maya added.

"Weren't you smoking once?" Esha asked.

"Yeah. I gave it up! My smoking was becoming a topic of discussion. Besides, some guys got the idea that a girl who smokes could be an easy lay," Maya said.

"You don't look to be the type who gives an ear to what others say," Esha exclaimed.

"Not really. But it seems to affect everything. The language men describe you in. How your colleagues treat you. Some men avoid you imagining you to be a whore. Though they themselves smoke it doesn't seem to matter. I find it irritating."

"Would you ever see a woman smoking in television commercials? No, you won't. It spoils people's idea of a woman. Or a woman drinking? No, you won't! It's alright if men do so. No one happens to think there's anything wrong in a man doing so. The bastards. Our culture sickens me, sometimes," Maya said bitterly.

"You hate men?" Esha asked, taken back at the bitterness in Maya's words.

"No, I don't hate them. But yes, I hate the type that think all women are good enough for are to be good wives. Good mothers. Guys who think a woman is responsible if she's raped! The type who circulate obscene multimedia messages. The ones who go and rape a five year old baby and call them the stronger sex. For that matter, I even hate women who are insecure and pull down women who are more independent and in control."

Couldn't agree more, Esha said. "Besides, women aren't of equal status with men!"

"It's not that. A woman can be better than a man or it could be the other way around. But there's no point in comparing," Maya said.

"Easy, girl, easy!" Esha smiled, patting Maya as if to console her.

They drifted off to sleep in this fashion.

The next day Esha put up a poster of Lord Hanuman as if to protect her from any harm the cemetery could bring. If it possibly could, that is!

FORTY EIGHT

The Dancing Wind: 'What's up?'

Ocean blue: 'Hey where have you been? I missed you.'

The dancing blue: 'Really. LoL. I thought you were busy donating sperms.'

Ocean Blue: '???. 'You think I am some sexmaniac.'

The Dancing Wind: 'Aren't You. That's sad.'

Ocean Blue: 'Well. I don't connect with people easily. You know that.'

The Dancing wind: 'Yeah I Know. You only connect physically. Gee.'

Ocean Blue: 'Very funny. I think you are dying to connect with me.'

The Dancing Wind: 'Hub. Keep dreaming.'

Ocean blue: 'How's work going?'

The Dancing wind: 'Work is fine. I have shifted in with another girl now.'

Ocean blue: 'I wish you could shift in with me.'

The Dancing Wind: 'Come to Mumbai.'

Ocean blue: 'I have really started liking to talk to you. It feels so comfortable. You seem to understand me.'

The Dancing wind: 'Ditto.'

The Dancing wind: 'Do you know the girl I moved in with is also separated.'

Ocean blue: 'Marriages have become a farce these days.'

The Dancing wind: 'Of course it's a crumbling institution. Society has commercialised it too much. It's not two people marrying for companionship. It's a deal happening and deals do go sour.'

Ocean blue: 'True. I agree. Then there are people who believe in romance and all that jazz.'

The Dancing Wind: 'LOL. Fools.'

Oceanblue: 'Why don't you come and spend a weekend with me?'

The Dancing wind: 'Why don't you send me tickets?'

Ocean blue: 'You have to give me your details for that. I don't even have your picture or name FYI.'

The Dancing Wind: 'Don't you like it this way? We can share all our dark secrets and talk about anything without any hitch.'

Ocean blue: 'I thought we have done that enough to know each other pretty well. Why not share the formal facts as well. I really want to meet you.'

Ocean Blue: 'Don't you?'

The Dancing Wind: 'We will. Right now I am sleepy.'

She ended the chat with a yawning sticker.

Maya had come back from office a little more drained than every day. It was a busy day with no room left for anything else. As she headed towards her bed she saw Esha glued again to her laptop.

"It doesn't tire you. This machine?" she asked Esha.

"That's my distraction. It keeps me busy," she replied.

Maya sighed.

"You had your dinner." She asked Esha as she cuddled to find comfort.

"I wasn't very hungry. Had a bite before I left office," her eyes glued to her screen. "What took you so long today?"

"Loads of work. Every part of my body aches." Maya sighed again.

"What are you doing", she was curious.

"FB and some chatting," Esha smiled. "What's your Facebook account. I will add you."

"I don't have an account," Maya smiled.

"Whoa! You aren't active on Facebook?" Esha asked. For her, the first thing to do on the internet was to log into Facebook.

"Well, not much!"

“That means you're a cave dweller!” she said, laughing.

By now they both knew quite a bit of details about each other. Esha had given positive signals about Maya's chemistry with Vikram. She was unable to figure out why Maya was not taking it to the next level.

“Let me create your Facebook account tomorrow,” she smiled.

“You know what, I wish we were as rich so as to we wouldn't need to work. Someone should just give us money for sleeping.” Maya said peeping into the laptop.

“Yeah, after all it helps world to be at peace,” Esha chuckled.

As they chatted lazily they heard a knock on the door and Esha went to open it. There was a very handsome man at the door.

“Is Maya in?” he demanded rudely. His manners were in contrast to his looks, she noticed.

“Yes! Who are you?” she demanded.

He barged in, pushing Esha aside.

It was then that Maya saw him and she was instantly afraid.

“Why aren't you taking my calls?” Raghu demanded.

“What are you doing on the computer? Show me!” he snatched the laptop from the table.

“Raghu. That's not my laptop,” she said, disgusted by his behaviour.

He threw the laptop on the floor.

“Hello, what do you think you're doing?” Esha exclaimed, and stared at him. She bent to pick up the laptop from the floor.

“Stay out of this if you want to stay alive!” Raghu threatened her.

Esha was flabbergasted. She went to Maya, but Raghu was closer. He grabbed Maya by the wrist.

“Excuse me. What's wrong with you?” Esha asked.

“Shut up and stay where you are. Or I'll throw you down from the balcony,” Raghu said, though he didn't know Esha.

“Don't get into it, please,” Maya pleaded.

“This is between me and her. Leave us alone and get out,” he told Esha.

Esha, didn't know what to say, thought it was wiser to step out and close the door behind her. She was embarrassed at what was obviously a private matter.

“She got scared. All your friends leave you with me, allowing you to die,” he laughed as if it were a joke.

“What do you want?” Maya snapped at him, her dislike palpable.

“Don't you know?”

“No, I don't!”

“I love you!”

“I've already told you that I'm not the one for you, Raghu. You can't barge in and abuse me whenever you feel like,” she said angrily.

He glared at her. He'll use his hands on me next, Maya thought, scared.

“You bitch. You can't be a good lover. You couldn't be a good wife. You can't be a good daughter, either. That's why your mother must have killed herself,” he shouted, wishing to wound her.

“Raghu,” Maya screamed.

“You are the biggest whore I have ever met.”

“Why are you here then?”

“You think you will escape from me so easily, you cunning bitch,” his eyes were red with anger.

He shouted abuse like there was no tomorrow. Maya did not bother to listen or protest. Finally, his fury drained off, “Don't mess with me girl,” he banged the door so hard it seemed it would come off its hinges. But thank God, he left.

Seeing him leaving, Esha ran back in.

“Who was that swine, Maya? Are you alright?” she asked looking concerned.

Maya told her all she knew of Raghu D'Souza as Esha looked on, dumbfounded and mouth open.

She sighed in reply.

“Why don't you complain to the police?” she asked.

“For all he does, he's genuinely loves me, Esha,” she said. Esha was even more dumbfounded. What was wrong with this girl, she wondered.

“He's a sicko, Maya!”

“I'll have your laptop repaired,” Maya said.

“Screw that. You must be really desperate to put up with such behaviour,” she sounded sad. “He's stalking you, Maya. That's a

crime.”

“I know, but I also know that he can't help it. He thinks he loves me. He has nothing in his life, but me.”

“I haven't heard anything more nonsensical in all my life. He loves you? How can he hit you, then? That isn't love, definitely not,” Esha reasoned, trying to drive some sense into Maya's head. “I have been in relationships before Maya, but never been stalked or bashed up for that matter. Things go wrong. People drift apart, hearts do break, but this is not what it is.”

An uncomfortable silence enveloped the room.

“I need a drink,” Esha announced. She got up and made a small vodka with lime cordial for both of them.

“Here, I guess you need one too,” she offered Maya who willingly took the glass.

Why you and Kartik don't talk it over and sort out matters, Esha suggested.

“There are others involved,” Maya was tearful. “Plus some questions have no answers Esha.” Esha understood clearly now that it was not just Raghu who was in a mess. Maya was in a mess too, of her own making. Look what momentary passion can cause you, she thought.

“Why don't you leave Kartik,” Esha asked her.

“Mentally, I'm trying to leave Kartik, Esha. But leaving is like losing. It is like the death of the relationship and no one ever did train us to face death. It gets difficult. But there is one thing I've learnt. To be loved is more important than to love. Life is sometimes weird. I've felt that way sometimes. Yes, this is the person I needed, that I've found my destiny. Then it ends. It disappears into thin air as if it never was.”

“I'm tired of being alone. I'm tired of being with others. I am tired of just being tired!” she said helplessly, lapsing into tears. “There have been times when I stood under the shower, endlessly trying to wash off my indecisiveness, my pain, and my tears. I feel hopeless and when I want to give up I hear my heart talking. It feels as if my stronger heart tells my weaker part to rejoice in all those moments when love has touched me. It tells me that there are people who crave for love. It tells

me to be hopeful once again and move on. Still at times my weaker part takes over and asks me why I crave for unknown bliss when this journey brings me so much of pain?" she looked towards the window.

"Are you alright?" Esha inquired.

"No, I'm not," Maya said.

Esha didn't know, how and what to say to that.

FORTY NINE

“Hi, I'm coming to Mumbai!” she heard Reva say.

“That's nice.”

“I'm transferred to Mumbai for a year. We'll rock the city together,” she said.

“Where'll you stay?” Maya asked.

“They have offered me a guesthouse. But I'm going to stay with you,” she said.

“I already have a roommate.”

“Throw her out!” Reva demanded, putting the line down.

A friend is joining me in Mumbai, Maya told Esha. “She's coming tomorrow!”

Esha raised her eyebrow. “So”

“She is going to stay here for some time,” Maya said meekly.

“Oh god, Maya we already have a space constraint here.”

Esha was unhappy.

“Please Esha, it's just a matter of few days.”

Esha glued herself back to her machine with a sigh.

Reva called her after arriving in Mumbai the next day.

“Where are you?” she asked Maya.

“Where are you, stupid?” Maya asked. She took a taxi to Maya's flat. They hugged. They were happy to see each other after long time.

Maya introduced Reva to Esha.

“By the way, I've another surprise for you,” Reva said. She turned around and gestured someone else.

Maya almost fainted to see Aditya walk in. They couldn't be a couple, she thought.

She greeted him warmly. It was so nice to see him.

She nudged Aditya who responded with smile.

“By the way he is our landlord,” She introduced him to Esha.

“Whoa.” Esha smiled.

“I am hungry,” Reva squeaked.

“Well, since the road is being repaired we would have to walk down to the pizza outlet. They are not delivering it here as yet,” Maya informed.

“Fine by me. I can walk for a good pizza,” Reva smiled. “I want to have a look at Mumbai too.”

“Now?” Esha was unwilling. “Arent you tired?”

“Tired. Me! No way. Come on Maya,” Reva sounded excited.

“How come you made your mind to shift to Mumbai,” Maya asked Reva as they settled in with their pizza.

“Aditya helped me find a job here,” she replied as she grabbed a bite from her cheesy mushroom.

“How did you... as in ... met Aditya,” Maya asked hesitatingly.

“Maya I knew where she was working. That's more than enough,” Aditya smirked.

“She is very sweet, Aditya. She is my best friend,” Maya reminded him.

“Don't worry Maya, I am not going to eat her up,” Aditya chuckled as if he gave an answer anticipating her next question.

After lunch, Reva and Aditya went on ahead for some shopping.

Maya and Esha walked back home. As they opened the door, Maya's phone beeped.

So you met your pyaar today.

She read the message and went pale.

“What's it, Maya?” Esha asked.

Raghu's somewhere around, she told Esha.

“Shit!” Esha exclaimed.

“When will this end, Maya?” she asked.

“I don't know!” Maya was almost in tears.

“You must seek police help.”

“No yaar. Not for him,” She twitched her lips.

“Grow up, Maya.”

“Even if he is sick, he's doing this because he wants me,”

Maya said resignedly.

Esha's pity for her was mounting.

FIFTY

Maya came back home after a long day to see Esha and Reva watching a horror movie.

“Hey!” Maya greeted.

“Shhhhh... Maya it's the last scene. The conjuring. It's based on a true story yaar.”

“Esha see this and then you will get scared.” Maya smiled.

“Shhhhh.”

Maya went ahead to change to her shorts.

“Oh My god,” she heard Esha swearing in. She smiled to herself.

“Let's have a drink, girls?” Reva got up as the movie got over.

“It was horror man.”

The other two smiled in agreement and fetched glasses, a bottle of water and a cold drink to make the vodka more palatable.

“Maya, do you think Aditya is the right guy?” Reva asked suddenly as they sipped their drinks.

“Why do you ask?” she wondered loudly.

“I don't think he's committed to me,” Reva said.

Maya did not know what to say.

“Whenever we go out he's busy checking out other chicks. Yesterday, I caught him kissing a girl,” she said.

Maya raised her eyebrows. Esha made a face as if she wanted to puke.

"Reva, you knew he is a flirt. You always knew it, right?" Maya said.

"Yes, I did. But he promised to change! I feel cheated," Reva said.

"Oh, come on, Reva. I'm sure Aditya loves you," she told Reva.

"You mean he loves her and kisses someone else!" Esha demanded angrily.

Maya sighed.

Reva burst into tears.

"Come on, Esha. One can get carried away momentarily," Maya told Esha.

"There is something called commitment, Maya. For God sakes, you left your husband because he was sleeping around. I'm sorry," Esha said, immediately regretting it.

"She knows?" Reva asked Maya.

"Yes. By the way I didn't leave him only because he was sleeping around. I left him because there was no love between us."

"You think there is love between them? He is kissing someone else," Esha said.

"Relax, Esha. We need to judge people not by morals and standards, but by situations."

"How can any situation lead him to cheat on me, Maya?" Reva interjected.

"I am not defending him, Reva. All I'm saying is that you should accept a person as he is. You have to understand that Adi has a certain character that won't change easily. This is the mistake I made too. I wanted to change Kartik for myself. Raghu wanted to change me for him. We all try and change one another for ourselves. That is not what love is all about. When the earth nourishes a certain plant she does not change it. She helps and supports it to grow. I forced Kartik to love me. I could not see that he was incapable of expressing love. He was an emotionally dry person. Raghu wanted me to become a homemaker. Someone who would obey him and look up to him as a husband. As soon as we want to change the other person, love starts to die," she said.

"Don't accept a cheat, Reva," Esha said, coming to the point without subtlety.

"I am not defending Adi. All I am saying is that we create our

own notions of love and loyalty and start a control game. We become so needy. We forget that love is not bondage it rather frees us. It gives us wings to fly and a set of moments that can last a lifetime.”

“Don't confuse her,” said Esha.

“You can always kick him out. But if he kisses someone else, does it mean that he doesn't love you? You have to figure out where you stand in his life,” Maya said. “Reva, off late I have understood that each of us have their own definition of love. I don't blame Kartik for everything that went wrong between us. We both made same blunders in our marriage. We both were equally at fault. Yet it wasn't because of anything else, but maybe because the definition of love was different. Our paths were different. Either we should have chosen to accept each other's differences or to carry on without each other. We chose the latter.”

“I did speak with him about it. He said he couldn't hold himself back,” Reva said still focussed on her own issue.

“Why are you clinging on to him if he admits it to your face?” Esha asked, without logic.

“I feel lonely, Esha. Besides, I don't know what to do!”

Esha kept quiet. She knew what it meant. She was lonely too.

Maya knew what it would have been like. Reva would have confronted him. Aditya would have said sorry. Reva in her desperation to find a partner would have been ready to give another chance. Yet on a promise. Promise not to cheat again. That Aditya would never keep. Reva would also know it in her heart.

Maya wondered how strange it was. The control game. Everyone tries to control each other by giving promises and taking vows. Promises and vows, those are never to be kept. She wondered why it makes such a big difference in life if we are not the only person in someone else's life. Perhaps it is our perspective. We have created a make believe image around love. Who promised to us that love with one person will stay forever? How can a new thing stay new forever after the wheel of time has run upon it?

Either we find new ways for the old love or find a new love itself. That is whatever our heart desires for. As for right and wrong our heart defines it for itself.

FIFTY ONE

When Esha saw Maya getting ready, she knew something special was in the offing.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I have a dinner date,” Maya said, smiling at her.

“Have you patched up with Raghu?” Esha frowned.

“No, not him, Esha,” The name itself broke a spell, but it brought Maya back to earth. The last thing she wanted for Raghu washe should follow her and confront her when she was with Vikram. Vikram, is at Mumbai tonight at her insistence.

“Hell, Esha. Not him! I'm meeting Vikram,” she said. There couldn't be two more contrasting personalities than Vikram and Raghu, she thought.

“ I have two passes for a cruise dinner. I'm not interested in going. May be you and Vikram can use the passes. If nothing else, Raghu can't make it there. It's private and no one is allowed in without an invite,” Esha said, glad that she could be of some use. She picked the invitations from her handbag and handed them over to Maya. She'd almost forgotten about them.

“You are a saviour!” Maya kissed her cheek.

Vikram was already waiting for her at the beach. She looked pretty in her green dress that flowed down till her knees. A golden belt ran across her waist. She looked as a picture of contentment. They were happy to see each other.

They took the boat to have dinner on the ocean liner. She was glad to have him so near. His thigh rubbed against her sending goosebumps up her spine.

“How have you been?” Vikram asked. They were seated in a private chamber on the liner. It was designed exclusively for two people in blue theme. The shimmering curtains ran down the glass matching the shivers running up her body.

The setting was grand. There were small water bodies around them and one side was open to the huge dark sea. The table was set up with beautiful Victorian style silver crockery. Colourful and bright chandeliers hung above. Dark sea outside was the contrast to the shimmering lights inside. To the naked eye there was no boundary between sea and the sky. The sound of the waves intermingled with the silence of the sky.

“I'm fine,” she said, looking at him, her heart completely at peace.

“Did you get over Raghu?”

How did he know exactly what to ask?

“He still scares me,” she said, weakly.

“Don't worry. Just ignore him. Don't send him any mixed messages. Be firm,” he advised.

“I've been such a fool!” she admitted.

“Don't be harsh on yourself. Everyone makes mistakes. But the thing is that you should learn from them,” he said,

“What about you? How have you been, Vikram,” she enquired.

“I'm alright. How are your parents doing?”

“They are fine. They are worried about me. They want me to be happy.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to be happy too,” she smiled.

Was she asking for the moon?

“Who's stopping you?”

She kept quiet.

“You have to choose to be happy, Maya,” he continued.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I missed you too,” he admitted.

Her heart skipped a beat. Her mouth craving his.

He looked towards the vast sea.

“The sea is huge,” Maya said trying to distract her thoughts.

It earns its grandeur. There are billions of mysteries and stories buried inside. It chooses to carry the weight.

Impulsively she held his hand. He grasped it tightly. He got up and came closer. His hands enveloped her face. They kissed passionately. The sound of the sea merged into the silence of the sky.

“Do you love me?” she asked tentatively.

“I do,” he said, “I always did. I told you so.”

“You never said that earlier!”

“I don't believe in putting everything in words. They have to be understood.”

“But communication is equally important.”

“Love should be felt. It can't be expressed in words. It is a feeling that intoxicates your mind and changes your world.”

“It breaks your heart in the end,” she said.

Vikram sighed.

“Listen, Maya. Pain is bound to happen if you want pleasure. One can't jump into the water and be scared of getting wet. We have to learn that everything that happens teaches us something. It adds on to our experience. And experience helps us handle things better,” he said.

The food arrived and they started having their dinner.

“How will I get over Raghu?” she asked, desperately.

“Don't think too much about him. That way, you'll see for yourself that he will soon leave you. When you think too much about something or someone you tend to attract it to you. Your subconscious tends to make true whatever you happen to think about, either good or bad,” Vikram said.

“What does that mean?”

“Maya, you are trapped in your mind. We make things difficult for ourselves. You need to stop giving him so much importance. What would happen if he sees you here now? Why are you so scared?”

“He's abusive and takes pleasure in humiliating me.”

“So? Face it. Face the humiliation with a smile. He wouldn't do it if he weren't getting any fun out of it. And he gets fun out of it

because he knows you get scared. That gives him the kick to humiliate you further.”

She silently nibbled at her food.

“Don't let it dampen your spirit, Maya. Be brave,” he suggested. “Human relationships are full of colours. Sometimes you love a person who does not love you. Sometimes the same person who loves you kills you. Sometimes love itself changes into hatred. Jealousy, fear, anger, affection, love, impatience, possessiveness - these are the colours thrown on the canvas on which relationships are made. Accept whatever emerges. You knew you didn't love Kartik truly and accepted that he didn't either. Similarly, you need to give a closure to your relationship with Raghu. Let him scare you as much as he can. He cannot make you accept anything that you truly do not want. “Remember the soul is fearless. Nothing reaches it. It can only decipher the language of love and faith. Rest everything is as perceived by our physical bodies. Listen to your heart. It fears nothing,” he said. She smiled at him.

“If at all anything goes wrong, remember that I'm there for you, no matter what,” he said.

“I love you, Vikram,” she said.

“I love you too,” he said simply.

FIFTY TWO

The next morning found Maya in bright spirits.

“Everyone has expectations of others, none of their own,” she thought, out of the blue. She chuckled to herself. Watch out or you'll soon be a philosopher, she thought.

She went to work in a regular fashion. She heard men and women gossiping. Some were cribbing and some were working so that they can be back home in time. Not that they wanted to be home, but because they wanted to be out of work place. Once home they wanted to get out of there too. It was getting increasingly difficult for people to stay stress free. She often saw men and women counselling each other. It's so easy to counsel others. Maybe because the intensity of the situation does not affect us so it is easy to give an unbiased view. Yet the one who is set on fire can't even manage a simple act of fetching water.

“Did you know I got selected for the conference in Italy,” Esha said, cutting through her thoughts.

“That's cool. So you would be travelling abroad, finally. I don't know when my chance will come,” Maya said.

“You know how I got it, right? By ass licking the old bastard,” Esha explained.

“You mean Sunil?” Maya chuckled.

Sunil was their branch head. Esha reported to him. Many

people in the office believed he was extra attentive to Esha and that lead to malicious gossip, too.

"I was selected because the son of a bitch wanted to sleep with me," Esha said. She would be brutally honest, even at her own expense.

"So you're going to sleep with him?" Maya asked, troubled.

"Does it make any difference to our friendship?"

"No."

Esha was relieved. Sleeping with someone was no big deal, she told herself cynically. Some people use their talents or their education or their hard work or even their ability at bootlicking to get ahead. What's the big deal if you use your body? She asked herself. What's the difference?

"Hey, I forgot to ask you about last night's dinner. I hope you had a good time," Esha said.

"Yes, we had a good dinner. Can't you make out by looking at me, you silly girl," Maya asked in reply. They both laughed.

"I'm worried that Raghu will come to know about this," Maya said.

"Fuck him. What are you scared of?" Esha was suddenly angry.

"By the way, it's been some time since he came or called," Maya said, worrying when it would happen next.

"Good for you," Esha said perceptively.

Do you know Atul, she asked, lapsing into small talk.

"The tall guy who wears lovely suits?"

"Yes. He's getting divorced!"

"How do you know," Maya asked.

"Sunil told me. Atul's wife is seeing Sunil!"

"God! What's happening?"

"Yeah. She told Sunil that she would be filing a legal suit against her husband. In fact, Sunil offered to sack him, but she did not want it. She wanted to screw his happiness and if he would be out of job there would be hassles in alumni demands," Esha winked.

"She herself was also sleeping around, right?"

"So?" Esha asked with raised eyebrows. "Who said life is fair?" she continued. "There are women who keep living with men even when they cheat on them, because they want to be financially secure."

They are also scared to leave as they don't know where to go. There are men who continue with their marriages for the sake of their children or perhaps they want to be socially acceptable," she said.

"This thing you call love is all bullshit. It's all about power, money, sex and getting what you want. If love was everything, why would sex be the most popular word searched on the internet? If someone falls in love, they do so for their own sake. It is so common that we even have a genre of fiction called love stories. Yes, that's what love is! Fiction! How much more deluded can the world get?" Esha continued contemptuously.

Maya was flabbergasted by the outpouring.

"I won't be having dinner with you and Reva tonight," Esha said. 'I've a dinner meeting with Sunil?' she winked.

"Meeting?" Maya's eyes went a size bigger.

"It's about the trip to Italy," she winked, "And Maya, stop rolling your eyes whenever I speak to you about him! He isn't worse than the others," she declared.

FIFTY THREE

Vikram was coming for dinner to her flat tonight. Though the thought of Raghu stalking her was killing her, still she gathered courage to invite Vikram over. She had a shower after she reached home from work and slipped into a blood red, flowery evening dress. She applied kohl on her big eyes to make them even bigger. A little gloss on her lips and she was ready to greet him.

As there was no dining table she had spread a mat on the floor. She didn't want to face the hassle of cooking, so she ordered a meal from a nearby takeaway joint. But she was getting impatient, waiting for him.

At last, the bell rang.

She looked serene, he thought. She blushed as he gazed at her.

"You look tired," she exclaimed.

"I am."

"How do I look?" she couldn't help asking.

"Pretty as ever," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

She blushed and pulled away from him. "Would you like some wine?"

"I'd love it!" he replied. "Where are your friends tonight?"

"They'll be late. Both are out for dinner dates," she told him.

They talked about various topics over the wine, refilling it every time their glasses got over. The wine and Vikram both were

intoxicating. She was even comfortable with the silence in between them.

He got up and came and sat next to her. He put his arm around her shoulders, and asked her to close her eyes.

“Are you trying one of your rituals with me?” she asked.

“Close your eyes and just think only of the two of us,” he said.

“Imagine you are walking down some steps. I'm walking behind, but you keep going. It is dark out there and you're not sure where the steps lead you. But you keep going down them anyway. Don't get worried or scared. Keep going down and find what you want to,” he said.

Doing as he said, she slowly went into a daze. She imagined herself going down a steep spiral staircase. She arrived at a meadow, and there was an angelic woman there looking at her.

“Hi! I want to speak to you,” the woman seemed to say.

“Who are you?” Maya asked.

“I am love. I am the source where you all originate from. I am the miracle. I am the beginning. I am the blue in the sky and the green in the earth,” she smiled.

“You are the one for which this whole world is running around?”

“Very few can find me,” she said, her face radiating with the calm that full knowledge brought.

“Why do you hide from them?” Maya asked.

“They don't know what they want. Like you, they too are confused. Most of the people have mixed me with other emotions. All emotions arise from me, but I am not an emotion. I am the supreme. I am in the mother whose heart beats for her child. I live in the sister who prays for her brother. I am the friend who comes to you, when in need. I am everywhere, but you need to find me. I am eternal yet I am not forever. It takes longing to find me. I never deprive anyone who opens their heart to me. I never oblige anyone who does not seek me. I am all and everything yet I am found in nothingness.”

“Then why do you give so much pain and keep quiet about it?” Maya asked.

“I heal. Pain is part of me, but I am not pain. Pain comes by partially knowing me. There is no pain where I am not there. There is

no pain where I am completely there.”

Behind the woman, Maya glimpsed branches of trees blowing in the wind. She spotted a woman walking between the trees. “Why is it so difficult to find you?”

To find me one needs to move beyond jealousy, beyond judging others. Emotions trap you. Once you find me you need no one else. You must want to forgive. Wanting to forgive the past and move on is the biggest step you take towards me. You have tried to forgive people and not judge them. Only I can heal the grudges you carry in your heart. Grudges take you far away from me.”

“Who is she?” she pointed at the other woman.

“She is the body. She generates the impulses of pleasure. She lives for a moment. Everyone wants her, but the problem is that she can't stay at one place for long. She is frivolous by nature. She works best when she follows me. She has often been mistaken for me as she resembles me.”

“Why don't you be with her all the time then?”

“I can't. She does not want me to be there. Like I said, people mistake her for me often. They think I am her. They stop looking for me once they find her. I cannot oblige anyone who does not seek me,” she smiled.

“Aren't you very complicated,” Maya exclaimed.

“I am the simplest. I am inside everyone, whether they realise it or not. To decipher me all you have to do is forgive easily and stop judging. For me there are no rules as such. Come, let me touch you,” she said, putting her hand on Maya's heart.

Maya slowly opened her eyes.

“How are you feeling now?” asked Vikram. Maya shook her head, not sure whether Vikram was part of the vision she just now had. Vikram smiled. He knew that *going down the steps* ritual makes us reach our subconscious. All the answers to every possible question lie in our subconscious. She had the sudden feeling that she had found a box which would have answers to anything she wanted to know. Anything!

“What did she tell you?” Vikram said, coming to her and playing with her hair.

“She told me weird things. She said no one can reach her until they do away with their grudges,” she wondered how he knew what she saw.

“Do you have any?”

“No, not now. I used to have grudges against my stepmother. Against Kartik. Against my mother for killing herself.”

“Forgive them, Maya. We walk through this life to learn from our experiences and grow wiser. Sadly, we get trapped in insignificant things and start keeping grudges. They pull us back. As spirits we are far away from these human emotions. We form relationships only when we are mortals. As spirits we are disconnected and connected with the entire universe at the same time.

We learn, experience, gather our lessons and move on to next dimension. Sometimes we learn them quickly. Other times we might have to go back to the lower dimensions to learn some leftover lessons of pain, joy and suffering.”

Maya found his explanation too complicated to understand.

“My relationship with Kartik broke my heart in a way that no one will ever understand,” she complained.

“It takes two to make or break, Maya!”

“I know it takes two. I’m not blaming Kartik alone. I too helped screw it up,” she said.

He patted her head and holding her by the shoulders, gently laid her down on the mat. He looked at her, his eyes full of love.

“Let’s make love!” he declared.

He kissed her gently. An electric charge ran through her body. Slowly, he undressed her.

“Do you have candles here?” he asked.

“On the kitchen slab,” she replied.

He got up and fetched five candles. These he placed around the mat and lighted. He took a small bottle from his trouser pocket and sprayed a perfume that sent tingles up her spine.

Swiftly, Vikram took off his own clothes. Her legs were spread wide. He came upon her slowly just keeping as much distance so that the bodies didn’t touch. She was shivering. Her hands went around him to pull him down, but he didn’t let her. He kissed her

passionately, though. She craved for his touch, but at the same time felt immense love for her own body and for her own existence. In that instance she saw her mom smiling at her. She could see a joy in her smile. She smiled back as if in a state of dream and forgave her. She felt as if she took off some burden. She remembered her vision with the lady, love. She had said that she is everyone and everyone is her. She realized the importance of forgiveness. Since the same love connected all of us it should be easy to forgive and do away with unnecessary burdens we carry all our lives.

“I'll teach you a ritual today. It will proclaim my love for you, Maya,” he whispered.

“You love me?” she managed to whisper.

“More than anything else in this life right now.”

He went quiet and started chanting. After a few minutes he stopped chanting and opened his eyes.

“Connect with me,” he told her. “I am the God and you are the Goddess of love. We will become one today. We will be one with the universe. He kissed her again. Her eyes were closed, but she saw various shades of light.

She felt as if she was floating. His lips were warm on hers. He kissed her pain away. She was lost in his mouth. The bed seemed to have disappeared from beneath. He kissed her neck. The kiss melted through the neck creating shivers in her back and thighs. She was breathing hard. His hands moved on her body as if they were cleansing her. He entered her. She let out a deep breath. The matter and anti-matter united. She felt as if she transformed into an extension of his body. Their souls merged within each other and became one. They don't remember for how long they kissed each other till he finally flowed inside her. Maya screamed out of passion. The room echoed to love. He kissed her again. This time it was gentler and softer. He kissed her forehead.

“I want to thank you. You the woman who helped me to receive this abundant pleasure and feel the immense love, the universe has in store for us. I want to thank you the omnipresent and all-powerful woman. You are the one I love.”

She woke up wondering about how she slipped into a deep

state of sleep. She felt tears in her eyes. A deep sense of warmth and love enveloped her. Vikram was lying next to her. His eyes fixed on her face. And they caressed and clasped each other.

FIFTY FOUR

“Was Reva home with you yesterday?” Esha asked her at lunch the next day.

“No! Why?”

“Then who did you had pizza and wine with?”

Maya stammered and blushed as she told her about Vikram.

“Oh! So you had a good time yesterday, huh?” Esha winked.

Remembering the peace of the previous evening, Maya smiled.

“How was your's?” she asked Esha..

“Fine. That bastard is useless!”

“Meaning?”

Esha rolled her eyes.

“He was no fun. He just wanted to sleep with me. And that's all we did,” she said, as if she had merely had a lousy cup of coffee.

“You didn't have good time with him.”

“Oh Maya. He was lousy. There was no emotion,” Esha was irked.

“Why did you have to do it then?”

“Does it change me as a person?”

“I wouldn't think so!” Maya smiled.

“I did it because I wanted to make money. I wanted a good bloody career, if not a great love life!”

“And you made money?”

“Of course, I will. My trip to Italy, well, that son of a bitch will

bear the expenses of it.”

Maya giggled. “Then why are you so angry at him?”

“When did I say am angry.” She was irritated.

She attached her laptop to the charger.

“You are right. I am angry. I am not guilty, but I still feel not so great about it. Am I being too selfish.”

Maya smiled.

“Don't worry. Sleeping to achieve personal benefits does not make you a bad person Maya. We all are selfish. Human relationships cannot survive without expectations. We get hurt because at times we make wrong choices that pain us. Be sure of what you choose. Don't lose your focus or else you will spoil the essence. The problem is most of us are not sure about what do we want from life. We keep repeating monotonous patterns with our focus deviated from our dreams.”

“Hmmm,” Esha was introspective for a moment. “You are right. Unnecessarily I keep thinking about that stupid Sunil. I know he is not inclined towards me emotionally. I should also be just focussing on my Italy trip and a promotion,” she smiled.

“What the hell. By the way did you know Atul's son has cancer?”

Esha continued.

“How do you know?”

“Huh! I told you his wife was seeing Sunil!”

“Then why is she with Atul?”

“Money, baby. Money.”

Maya wondered how money represents power. Each of us wants to compete and the easiest way is monetary measurement. More money, more power. More power, more money. That's how the trap goes.

That night as Esha went to bed early and Reva was on the phone, Maya received a text message from Kartik.

Hi! What's up?

She was surprised. Why was he messaging her?

Nothing new. She replied.

How have you been? I miss you sometimes.

Maya couldn't believe her eyes. Should she answer?

“Maya, I know you are confused. There is lot of distance between

us. There are other people in your life. I really like you. Yet I know we are not meant to be. Tell me for God sake what should I do.”

What she should text back? How can she suggest anything?

“Do what you want to do,” she texted back.

“Ah Maya.... I think we just need to get over this.” He seemed to be getting tired of it.

FIFTY FIVE

Vikram called her next day. He wanted to see her before he left for Delhi. They planned to meet in Mainland China, a popular Chinese eating joint. Vikram loved to eat and he knew Maya liked Chinese. The place was beautiful with Chinese dragons embossed on the walls. The people serving were all dressed in Chinese dresses and chopsticks were displayed on every table.

He had chosen a corner table and both of them sat down, opposite each other.

“I will miss you!” she said.

“I’m always there for you,” he said.

“I meant physically!” she said, blushing.

“I will come back.”

“Hmmm.”

The waiter served them hakka noodles and fish.

“Kartik texted me yesterday. He said he is missing me,” she said

Vikram's expression didn't change,

“Do you miss him?” he asked her.

“I don't miss him. I think I am habituated to this. There is a comfort zone even if we are away from each other. I do think I am being unfair on both of us,” her pink lips pressed against each other.

“Do you want to go back to him?” Vikram asked her.

She took a bite from her plate and tried to think hard before

answering.

“Listen to your heart.”

She took a deep breath. “No, I don't want to go back. I still love him and will always do. He has been a part of my life and nothing can take that fact away. I feel guilty of not being able to be a good wife. At the same time my heart refuses to forget that he didn't love me the way I did. I feel cheated and humiliated.”

“Humiliation comes when you let yourself humiliated, Maya. No one can humiliate you unless you allow them to do so. Don't let anyone else judge you.”

“I want to forget all that, but there is a strange anger,” she complained.

“Residual emotions are even more dangerous than the actual ones. Just as actual hatred is less harmful than residual and latent hatred. Latent emotions have a strong ability to destroy from the inside.”

“I think he knows I talk to you and that I had stupid affair with Raghu! He had hinted me about reading a few e mails.”

“The first step in self-realisation, Maya, is to face oneself. You must stand up to yourself and be honest and fearless. Our problem is we fear too much and in the process lose the joy of fighting for and following our dreams. Who is Kartik to pass judgement? You made your mistakes, he made his. It ends there. Will blaming change anything?”

“You are right. It won't.”

“Find what you want to do and go do it. The problem is we don't take risks because we fear too much about failing. What if we just succeed?”

He paid the bill and they walked out of the restaurant.

“Don't worry Maya. Let time guide you. Just follow your heart. Be a warrior in life. Know that not fighting brings a certain kind of stagnation. It is a false stability, the stability of inaction. That's not the kind of stability that will make us happy,” he said.

He smiled as he took leave, staring into those big, black eyes of hers. I could drown in them, he thought.

FIFTY SIX

Let's go party tonight, Reva said.

Maya, Reva and Esha looked wonderful. Three beautiful young women they were.

Aditya picked them up and they headed to Nirvana. The club was famous for its high profile parties. Aditya had passes for a special music launch that was organised there. They danced their troubles away.

"Do you see Kabir Khan there? He has always topped the charts." Aditya pointed towards one of the top stars in the industry when they came and sat at a table. "He is such a terrible loner," he said.

"How do you know?" asked Maya.

"His secretary likes me. I took her out for smoke a couple of times."

Reva raised her eyebrows and looked at Maya who smiled at her.

"He is so handsome. He has a mansion overlooking the sea. Women drool over him. He has a beautiful wife. Two beautiful children. What more could anyone hope for?" Maya asked.

"Most of these celebrities become loners you know," Aditya continued. "Success is so lonely Maya, you can't believe it. To become successful you have to give most of your time to yourself. That means you avoid people and company to the extent you do not know how to get on with them again."

She looked at Kabir Khan who looked so perfectly complete.

Aditya noticed and smiled. "He is the most insecure. He needs guidance. Winners often forget the art to lose gracefully. That's where the universe decides to step in. Imagine if you would only keep breathing in and not breathe out how you would live. You need to win some you need to lose some. Universal justice."

Maya looked at him. "My god Adi! Words of wisdom! That too from you?"

Maya broke away and went to fetch herself a drink from the bar counter. She sipped her drink as she noticed a cute looking guy walking towards her.

"Hi!" he said

"Hi!" she said.

"I think I have seen you earlier," he said.

"Really," she was not interested.

"Yeah, or maybe I have been clicking someone who looks like you."

Now what does that mean she thought to herself? May be this guy is too much of a flirt.

"You click pictures," she asked dryly.

"Yeah, for the moon and the stars and the skies, I click," he almost sang the line.

"I also do nude photography." He didn't say those words aloud.

Maya smiled. That was the beginning of a mad friendship.

"What's your name," she asked him.

"They call me Nimesh. Nimesh Tanna."

"Ah!" she said. He said as if he was George Clooney and his raw innocence attracted Maya.

"Why don't you go and enjoy with your friends."

"I don't want to miss on you. You have beautiful eyes. Also you are alone here," he said

"Thanks," she smiled. "I am with friends. I guess I need to go now," she said as she saw Reva's missed call on her phone. She might be looking for her.

"Having people around does not always make you less lonely."

She was taken aback.

"Don't act smart with me." She was offended. She felt as if the

boy peeped inside her soul.

“Eyes of a photographer madam,” he shared a warm smile.

“Crazy.”

“When are we meeting again?” He stopped her as she got up from the high stool.

“What for?” she arched her eyebrows.

“We need to talk.”

“About what?” she gave him a surprised look

“About your eyes. I need to click them.”

“Crap,” she turned to go away.

“Don't forget you told me where you work and I can always figure you out” he winked.

“Do that,” she winked back and walked away.

“Difficult,” he murmured to himself.

“Difficult,” she took a deep breath.

FIFTY SEVEN

“I almost forgot. Who was it you were talking to at the bar yesterday?”

Reva asked on Monday morning as they were getting ready for work.

“This is the first time I met him. His name's Nimesh,” Maya said.

“He was cute,” said Esha.

“Yeah!” she smiled back.

Can we talk?

A message from Kartik. What's his problem, she thought, irritated.

He called her before she could reply.

“How are you doing?” He asked.

“I'm fine. How about you?” she asked back.

Both of them couldn't have cared less about each other.

“Do you plan to come back to Delhi?”

She did not know what to say.

“For what?” she heard herself saying.

“Maya, this can't go on. Either we are living together or we are not. You can't just go on sleeping with other people and be my wife too!”

“As if you've been a loyal husband?” she said.

“Then let's file for a divorce,” he said

“Hmmm.”

“Maya, I know I have not been up to the mark. We are so different. Our expectations from each other are too demanding. There

is no way we can fall in love with each other ever. I guess you should then tell your folks and I'll tell mine," his tone was sobered.

She realised he was right.

"The problem is we don't hate each other enough, but we don't love each other enough too," he felt bad as he prompted his inner feelings.

She sighed. How true it was she thought to herself.

"Why did you send me that message saying you missed me?"

She sounded desperate.

"Don't you get weak moments, Maya. There are times when I wish we should have made it. Yet I don't think it's possible. It will only keep on adding to the baggage."

Maya could not agree any lesser.

"I'll send you the papers soon. Have a great life ahead," he said hurriedly and disconnected.

"Hmmm."

Maya almost choked.

FIFTY EIGHT

She stood in the open area of the office during the coffee break.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” Esha walked up to her.

“We're separating,” Maya said.

“Who's we?”

“Kartik and I.

“Err..I thought you were already!” Esha sounded confused.

“ Legally. There's no looking back, now. It scares me a bit. It seems like jumping without a parachute. There is no hope.”

“Hmmm.”

There was a pause.

“Ending a relationship is painful. It's like death. Nothing would be there for you the way it was before. It is death of the relationship and with it some part of your life dies. Death is scary. Isn't it?” Maya sounded sad.

“You will have to bury it, Maya and move on,” Esha tried to calm her.

“You are right, I don't think we can ever be happy together. He didn't love me in the first place and now it is beyond repair. Infidelity, violence, insensitivity, what else can go wrong in this relationship. It's already dead. Now let me bury it.”

Esha nodded in agreement. “Let's go and have a coffee,” she suggested.

As Esha smoked a cigarette, Maya received a text.

"Hi Gorgeous, lets catch up, Nimesh." She noticed a new invite on her Facebook and was surprised to see Nimesh's picture smiling at her.

"That guy is certainly fast," she said to herself, smiling. As soon as she added him she received another message.

Let's have a coffee at Café Coffee Day, the one next to your office, he messaged.

She wondered how he knew where she worked. Oh, that's on my Facebook profile, she remembered.

"Who was it?" Esha nudged her.

"Nothing important," Maya shrugged.

"Ah! Doesn't look like. Someone is making you blush," Esha winked.

Yet Esha left it. The day went like any other day. Maya was quickly trying to pack her stuff and leave the office just when Esha distracted her.

"God it sucks. This job. Sunil is so irritating. I can't work like this anymore," she cribbed.

"What happened?" Maya asked as she kept her writing pad in her bag.

"All he wants me to do is shitty clerical work. He has not briefed the new project that they are going to begin."

"Hmmm." Maya finally picked her bag. "I will be seeing someone on the way back home. You have your dinner in case you are hungry."

Esha looked surprised. "Where are you going?"

"I gotta see a friend," Maya replied.

"Who?"

"You don't know him," Maya hurriedly walked out leaving Esha guessing.

"What's wrong with her?" Esha wondered.

Maya reached the coffee shop. Before she could place him she heard his jovial voice.

"Hey girl," he beamed, greeting her. "So we have met again," he continued.

She smiled. Her grey kajal enhanced her big eyes as she looked lovely in her long red skirt with a white t- shirt. Nimesh was dressed in a pair of denims with a loose t- shirt hanging carelessly on him. Yet he looked cute as he smiled sheepishly while pulling a chair for her.

“I told you. I was sure you would be equally interested in meeting me.”

“Excuse me! I came here because I didn't want to be rude,” she said.

“You look gorgeous,” he said as if he had not heard her.

Maya blushed like a teenager.

“So?” she said as he stared into her eyes.

“You tell me,” he said

“I have nothing great to discuss,” she smiled.

“I'm going to Australia next month-end.”

“That's cool.”

“One of my cousins stays there. She keeps calling me. You know she likes me,” he said. She believed him, though she wouldn't have believed anyone else saying the same thing.

“That's even cooler!”

“Besides, my dad wanted me to do an advanced course in photography there.”

“Hmmm...rich dad. Lucky you!” she said.

She noticed he went silent on that one.

“What are you carrying in your bag?” She saw a heavy bag pack with him.

“My camera. I carry it everywhere,” he smiled. “Few Sketches. I like to sketch. I like to sit next to sea and paint. I love to click pictures.”

“Can I see it? Maya asked.

“You can see everything baby,” he winked.

Maya gave him a playful stare as he passed her the file. She glanced through his sketches. She marvelled at them. Black and white sketches of horses. She was amazed at his work. There were photographs of nature taken by a mature eye. There were few colourful pictures of Ganpati festival. The grandeur of the sea was captured in some. There was one sketch that portrayed a dead body and his remains looked like flowers scattered all around. There were

little balls around the body and oodles of red colour depicting blood. It was a painful sketch she thought.

"I am speechless," she said. "Your work is ... is... emotional."

"Oops! This is the most unique compliment I've ever got. What do you mean by saying that they're emotional?" he asked, smiling. He had such an adorable smile.

"It relates with everyone. It talks," she said

They chatted on. He was good company. You'd never know what he'd say next, though. She felt younger in his presence. His youthfulness was infectious.

She glanced at her watch, and noticed it was getting late. Time passed quickly with him.

"When are we meeting next?" he asked.

Maya looked at him, surprised.

"We'll see," she smiled.

"Tomorrow! Same time, same place?"

"Noooo. Not tomorrow." She was surprised to see how pushy he was.

"When, then?" he persisted.

"Uff.. Nimesh, I'll let you know."

"My close friends call me Nemo. Come, I'll drop you home."

It's not very far, she remonstrated. I'll go by myself.

"I'm dropping you!" He wouldn't take no for an answer, but he did so in such a way that it felt nice.

She smiled. He was cute. There was something about his young blood that was giving her a high. He seemed to be living a full life.

Later, as she lay on her bed trying to fall asleep, she remembered Nimesh. She had been so full of energy like him. Why did she throw it all away?

Suddenly, a thought flashed through her mind.

Yes, she thought, that's it. She felt like a child who has unlocked the last level of the puzzle after much hard work.

She wanted to live, not just exist. Suddenly, all her doubts vanished. She had never been so sure of anything in her life earlier.

It made her want to start living, now. This was it! She has to let go. Free her from the bondage. She needs to follow her own dreams,

irrespective of anything else.

She called Vikram and told him about it.

Why do you think I can't leave him?" she suddenly blurted out.

"Whom?"

"Uff... Kartik. Who else?"

"Oh," he paused, "You don't want to!"

"I want to!"

"That's what you think."

"What should I do?" she sounded irritated.

"Make a choice and stick to it. Your confusion is understandable. In any relationship we commit to, we make some investment in it in the form of feelings and energy. When the relationship stops working, it is not easy to change the equation immediately."

Maya listened silently.

"It is natural to cling since we are taught from childhood to relate to everything we come across as ours. It is either 'I' or 'mine' - hence everything boils down to us. No one in this world is self-less enough to let that 'I' take a backseat barring some yogis who have crossed the sixth dimension. Society has conditioned us so much so that we believe that we are incapable of living as an individual. We believe that we won't be able to make it alone. We are scared of staying alone, so we hanker after love. The Bhagwad Gita tells us that the moment we bind our identity with any other thing or being we are bound to suffer."

"Society has to suppress the individual since individuals are stronger than the clusters. Ironically, we are made to believe the other way round. We need to teach our children to follow our hearts. Take them to the road that calls out to them even if it is less travelled. Prepare them to lose. Encourage them to let go. Teach them to find love within."

"Most people don't know the joy of living. The lightness of being. We need to live. To leave things behind us and get ahead," he explained.

"Are you there?" he inquired noticing the long silence.

"Yes!"

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing, I was all ears,” she smiled.

Kartik belonged to the past, so did Raghu. Good luck to them!

FIFTY NINE

Maya smiled as her phone rang. Esha noticed that she even blushed as she took the phone and walked out of the cubicle. She never used to answer calls in private.

Maya heard the energetic hello. It was Nimesh, who else?

“Hey girl, what's up?”

“Nothing much. How are you?”

“I'm fine. Can we meet for coffee now?”

“Now?” Maya sounded surprised. “I am at work!”

“So what! Tell your boss that you have a date!”

“Don't be silly. I can't.”

“You can't do this much for someone who loves you so much, baby.”

“Don't talk nonsense. I'm not your baby,” she said.

“I love you!”

“Yeah! I know. Besides horses can fly!” she said dramatically.

“Stop acting funny. Tell me what it is?”

“I want to see you. I want to show you something.”

“Can't it wait?”

“Nooooo. Pleeeeease!” he sounded cute as ever.

“Okay. Not now though. I will meet you by evening. Will try to leave a little early today.”

“I hate you!”

She laughed. It was funny to see how he used such powerful

emotions so casually.

She came back to her desk where Esha was waiting for her with a curious expression.

“What's it?” she turned towards Maya. “Who was it?”

“A friend,” she answered.

“Hmmm,” Esha didn't say anything in words.

“By the way I'll be leaving a little early today,” she said.

“Is Vikram in town?” she asked, her eyebrows going up.

“No. I'm going out with another friend of mine for some coffee.”

“Is it that cute boy you met at the club?” Esha asked, not without a little jealousy.

Maya blushed at the mention of his name.

“He is too young for you Maya,” she declared.

“So what? Can't we be friends?”

“Well, that you can, I suppose.”

She looked pretty with her curls flowing down to her shoulder as she entered the coffee shop.

Catching her eye, Nimesh smiled.

Maya sat next to him reciprocating his energy.

“Tell me what was so urgent.” She straightened the crease on her sleeve.

“I was unable to breathe.”

“Which means?”

“I had to see you so that my lungs could function.”

“Is that a joke,” Maya tilted her head.

“Maya I am s...s...s...s...s... serious.”

“Where's your camera today?” she asked him without reacting to his stammer.

“It's here.” He took out a Nikon SLR Camera. He focussed it on Maya.

“Oh my God, this light makes you look beautiful,” he said as he clicked her.

Maya's cheeks went crimson again.

“Did you sketch anything new?” she asked him trying to distract the topic.

“I did a portrait of you.”

He showed her a sketch of a woman with her eyes as bright as fire. She was surrounded with flowers and multiple hands come out of her.

"Is that me?" Maya asked him.

"Yeah, I find you multiple faced. Bright energetic soul trapped in multiple bodies."

What a description, Maya thought to herself.

"I... I... I... really want to know you better." He held her hand.

Maya was slightly embarrassed.

"Whendid you start sketching?" She again tried to change the course of conversation.

"Well when I was young my parents used to fight with each other. I had a little troubled childhood. Mom and dad couldn't see eye to eye, without fighting. This stressed me so much that I started stammering."

Maya had noticed that he used to stammer sometimes when excited. Yet she didn't think too much about it since it happened only once or twice. It is so ironical how much we underrate childhood memories since they are the ones who are responsible in building an adult. They are the ones who are responsible for the fears, anxieties and all our perspectives that we carry for life.

"Finally to de-stress myself, I started drawing and painting," he went on. "At times I felt as if they fought over me. Then finally a time came when I started sketching only violent scenes. They even took me to a child psychiatrist," he said.

She felt sorry for him

"That's life. Shit happens," Maya said.

"The story is not over yet. My dad died when I was twelve," he said.

"How did he die?" she whispered.

"The car he was driving was hit by a train. The impact was so hard that the car was crushed and his body was cut into two."

"Oh." Maya didn't know what to say.

"After my dad died, my mom was full of guilt. She had to be treated for depression. She recovered after a couple of years. During that time I was left in the custody of my paternal uncle, a really bad man. He used to beat me up and he left me hungry sometimes. Thank

God my mother pulled herself together. She is a very strong woman
Maya. I love her," he said.

Maya shook her head with understanding.

Maya thought about him and his mother. Tough life. Every
person has a story of his own. His own demons to fight with.

"Hey! It's fine." Nimesh pressed her hand.

"What were those balls around the dead body, in that sketch
of yours?" she suddenly remembered that sketch from his file.

"Those were dreams," he said.

Maya knew that dead body would have been his memory of
his father.

He pulled himself together and tried to smile, but the memories were
evidently tugging at him.

Oh, what it is with our minds, she thought. They know how
to remember, but not how to forget!

SIXTY

“It seems you are meeting this guy often,” Esha told Maya as she recounted her meetings with Nimesh.

“He's a nice guy,” she said.

“I'm sure he is. Are you in love with him?”

“Why do you ask so?” she queried. “Well... I'm not in love with him. But I like to spend time with him,” she said.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Esha stepped back after some shopping

“What have you thought about yourself and Vikram?” she asked. “You have to decide, Maya. You have just managed to get rid of a stalker and now you're meeting this younger guy almost every other day. It's going to complicate things, Maya!”

“Let's see. Care to have some Maggie?” Maya asked her avoiding the seriousness in her tone.

“Yeah, sure.”

Maya went to the kitchen and boiled two cups of water. As she looked at the small bubbles popping due to heat her thoughts followed the pattern. She wondered how everything has a boiling point and a melting point. Every atom and molecule has a threshold. The threshold of pain and the threshold of pleasure. Perhaps this is the boiling point that we need to cross over to get to the next dimension.

As they snuggled in with their bowls of soupy Maggie, Esha again took her case.

“Maya, what have you thought about your future?”

“I don't know Esha. I just like to do crazy things with Nimesh. I can't understand why you are overreacting.” She was sounding irritated.

“I wasn't talking about Nimesh,” Esha said.

After a small pause Esha took a deep sigh and continued.

“Maya you are a nice girl. Don't do anything that would mislead him or hurt you.”

Oh Esha! Relax, you tell me what's with your love life?” she asked Esha, changing the topic.

“Hardly anything. I'm preparing to go to Italy. In fact, I went shopping today to get some good corporate wear.

“Are you keen on going to Italy, Esha?”

“I am not desperate, but I deserve it. I've earned it,” she said defensively.

She got up to put the bowls in the sink. Before she could come back the phone rang. Nemo blinked on it as it lay right next to Esha. Both the girls exchanged glances. Maya took the phone and went to the balcony.

“Can I come over to your home?” he asked.

“Are you crazy?” she said.

“Why? Do only crazy people come to your place?”

“Don't be silly. What's it about?”

“Okay, can you come to the basement? I want to give you something.”

By the time she changed dress and went down to the basement, he was already there. He must have called from someplace nearby. She looked childishly cute in her high tied pony tail and blue shorts.

He took out a big brown envelope from his bag and handed it over to her.

“What's this?” It was a photograph of her that he had converted into a poster. She looked stunning.

But when he took her photograph, she asked.

“I took it the other day with my camera,” he smirked.

“This is beautiful,” she said, not without vanity.

“You are, too!” he said, simply. “Maya...I..I.. I ... am falling in love with you.”

Don't do anything that would mislead him. She heard Esha's voice.

“Nimesh. We are only friends. Please get that straight into your head. I like you around me and that's about it. I have someone else in my life.” She spoke in one breath.

He just smiled back in answer.

“No Problem. What's the harm in trying my luck?” He chuckled.

They laughed and joked for a few minutes before he left.

He parked his bike and started walking towards his apartment. The sun was setting and a faint red colour was covering the sky. He thought about the loneliness he felt at times. He threw himself on his couch and lied there for some time before he drifted into sleep.

“How long are you going to sleep today?” he felt his mother moving her fingers through his hair.

“I have slept for long, is it ma?”

“Are you okay, dear. Is there anything bothering you?” she asked him.

“Nothing,” he felt a little awkward.

“I am your mother. Won't you tell me?”

He leaned forward to rest his head in her lap. She moved her fingers through his hair.

“Why don't life happen as we plan it mom?”

She kept moving her fingers.

“It wouldn't be so exciting then,” she smiled.

“Why does it hurt?”

“It hurts because the reality often does not match up to our expectations. Hence we start blaming ourselves and everything around and get gripped by a feeling of loss.”

She paused for a second and then continued, “You know what else,” she further continued, “the problem is we take life too seriously. We forget that we are just here for some time. I used to fight with your father over petty things. Only when it was too late, I realised that all hurt and pain are associated with situations that involve other people or experiences. All these situations are only there till they are alive. When anyone dies no matter how harsh we might feel towards them it

all ends. When someone is dead, we feel no anger towards them. All hurt that comes through them is gone. Our ego is burst and we have no one to vent out the frustration. It is the experiences we are angry about not the people.”

“What if someone is not dead? What if I love someone alive who does not love me at all.”

There was a pause again.

“My dear. Love cannot depend on any particular person. Like I said, it is about the experience and not the human being itself. If one person is unable to reciprocate it should not matter so much. How many times the sun tells the earth that she owes him. If you love someone and she does not love you back, it's okay. I know it is easily said than done. I know it will break your heart. I know it will pain, but I also know through my experiences of life that it will be okay. Believe me nothing in this universe is permanent. No pain. No joy. Nothing is everlasting enough to cause you to feel the same always. Flow with the wind. Follow your heart. See where life takes you. What all it shows you. Pain is just a part of it. Remember there can be no day without night. There can be no learning without moving on. There can be no pleasure without pain. Don't worry. It will be okay.”

“Why does it cause frustration mom?”

“Ego, it is our ego baby. It forces us to feel extremely important. It does not let us loose and let go easily. We need to work on our alter ego. I learnt this the hard way. Believe me. We need to learn to let go.”

He got up and settled on his computer table.

“What if I tell you I am in love with a woman your age?”

Nemo knew he was exaggerating, but he wanted to test her mother's patience.

Knowingly or unknowingly, children make worship idols out of their parents. Parents become people who can never commit mistakes. Then as we grow, this image becomes more of a human to us. Hence begins the phase where both parent and the child start challenging each other.

“I would not appreciate it,” she answered in a little concerned tone.

“Why?” he asked.

“There are certain norms which need to be followed. At every age there is a given understanding. You are young right now. A woman of my age can easily exploit or manipulate you.” She was protective of him.

“Do you manipulate me?”

“I am your mother Nemo.”

“You are a woman too,” he still did not meet her gaze

“What do you mean by that?” she snapped.

“Nothing. You said it is easy for a woman your age to exploit me. Didn't you?” he knew he was being slightly unreasonable.

“I can, but I don't. I am your mother. I love you.”

“Is it only because you love me that you don't exploit me” he asked her.

She did not know what to say. She could not gather where the discussion was moving towards.

“Of course I love you” she said.

“Then why anyone else who loves me would exploit me” he started scribbling on his note pad waiting for her answer.

“How would you know that she loves you?” she was getting irritated by the pointless discussion and the fact that she seemed to be losing ground to her son.

“How would you know if anyone loves you?” his scribbling was getting symmetric in some fashion.

She was quiet. She didn't know how to answer that question. Love never seemed to touch her. She had been in a troubled marriage and then in troubled relationships till they all seized to be, one fine day. Off late the only thing that was there in her life was loads of money and her son. Her husband had left her money she could roll day in and day out. She had spent some of it on her boy-friends when young. She didn't know how to figure out what love is. She was not even sure whether there was anything called love.

“Tell me,” he repeated.

“You can sense it,” she gave the most obvious answer.

“There's no thumb rule then,” he smiled.

They were quiet.

“All I know is that you have to be practical Nemo. There are

women who would like you for your money. You are too naïve.”

“I have touched love,” he interrupted her before she could speak further. “Love is loneliness. Love is a mystery we all are trying to run after. The fact is that it is not possible to solve love. No one can love us more than ourselves. We have to drench in the wonders of loneliness to find out love. To become lonely is the only way to find ourselves. Since it makes us feel sad and suffer and that is when love touches us and takes us into the deep seas of pleasure. Love is within. Pain becomes pleasure in love. Love is vast. It engulfs and then everything seizes. All pain ends. All pleasure vanishes. It's just the bliss.”

His mother was dumbstruck. She did not know what he was talking. She was worried for her son. She wondered who he was meeting and what he was up to.

“It's all one big illusion, Nemo, and that too momentary” she said very slowly.

SIXTY ONE

Sleep was eluding Maya while Esha was sound asleep. She tried to listen to some Sufi music on her phone. She was not at ease since the time Nimesh went back. She didn't want to mislead him, but she didn't want to hurt him either. Her eyes were moist as she was drifting up and down in her thoughts. Suddenly the doorbell rang.

Who could it be? Reva had said she'd stay at Adithya's place tonight. A sudden fear gripped her. Could it be Raghu?

"Maya? Esha?" It was Reva. Maya opened the door with relief. Reva reeked of alcohol.

"I thought you said you'll stay back in Aditya's place tonight?"

"I broke off with him," Reva said and broke down. "He does not love me!" she said.

What a time to talk about love!

"What happened?" she asked her.

"I was at a party with him. But Adi was so busy with other women that he completely ignored me!" she complained breaking into loud sobs.

"You know well that he's always like that."

"Maya, you always take his side! Why would you not, anyway? After all, he's given you his flat to stay in!"

"I think you need to sleep," she said, getting up and leading her to the bed.

“You introduced him to me,” she almost accused her. She whimpered for a while, but the alcohol soon took effect and she drifted into sleep.

Esha woke Maya up with a cup of tea the next morning.

“Was Reva late last night?” she asked.

“Late and drunk,” Maya said.

“What happened?”

“She broke off with Aditya,” she said.

They readied themselves to leave for work.

Let's have coffee together today evening. It was Nimesh.

It wasn't so much a request but a command, she noticed, but his effrontery did not irritate her. She went through a hard pressed day.

“I am going to be late,” she informed Esha on her extension.

“What's new Maya? I guess, it is Nimesh again” she sighed.

On her way, Maya thought about why Esha was so apprehensive about her and Nimesh. Reva also crossed her mind for what she had told Maya last night. Guilt seemed to be pricking her unreasonably.

“Hi hotty!” Nimesh greeted her, with his usual smile.

“It's only you who find me hot,” she chuckled. “You should get your eyes treated?”

“Maybe you should get your mind treated!”

“How was your day?” he enquired.

“As usual,” she replied

“Don't worry. The end of the day will be great with me,” he smiled.

They ordered cappuccinos as usual. Nemo was looking cute as always, drawing appreciative glances from the girls in the coffee shop.

“My roommate dislikes you a little,” she said.

“She must be in love with me. She wants my attention,” he said.

“Very funny! She believes I'm falling in love with you.”

“Aren't you?” he looked deep into her eyes. She weakened, but only momentarily.

“I am. I love you Nimesh Tanna, but not as boy-girl love,” she said.

Her phone rang. It was her boss. What did he want at this hour?

“Maya, are you in the office by any chance?” he asked.

She glanced at her watch. It was almost eight pm. Why would he expect her to be there working this late?

"No, I've left. I'm almost home," she said.

"Meet me first thing in the morning when you come to work," he said, ending the call.

"By the way it's late and we should go home now," she told Nimesh. He dropped her home on his bike.

"Did you speak to Adi by any chance?" Reva asked her as she entered the flat.

"No, I did not?"

"Will you speak to him," she asked Maya.

"How does it make a difference baby? Can I make him love you if he doesn't?"

"Please."

"Okay I will speak to him."

"I am sorry for yesterday."

"It's okay," Maya smiled.

Their friendship needed no explanation.

SIXTY TWO

Maya woke up early next morning. It was one of the few days she had seen the sun rise, for she was a lazy and late riser.

Esha just entered the room.

“Where were you last night?” Maya asked.

“Didn't I tell you that I'd be going clubbing with Sunil?” Yes, she had, Maya remembered.

They had breakfast and Maya left for work. Esha wanted to take a nap before she started her day.

“I have to reach on time. I need to meet the boss,” she told Esha.

“What for?”

“He didn't say!”

Sit down, he said, as she went into his room.

“I heard you bought a car?” he said.

No, I've applied for a loan to buy one she said correcting him.

“HR is working on your appraisal,” he told her. “Mr. Chatterjee has been talking quite highly about you. In fact I have come across some feature writing that you did last month.”

Mr Chatterjee was her immediate boss. She always thought she disliked her. She was surprised that he conveyed positive things about her.

“Would you be okay if I ask you to go to Italy to attend this seminar for a couple of days?” he said, passing on a brochure to her.

“Of course. Yes! Thank you so much!”

“Oh, you deserved it,” he smiled.

“So Esha and I are going on this trip?” she asked.

“Why should Esha go?” He stared at her.

She stood looking at him.

“I...I thought she was going to Italy. I heard so.”

He shook his head and hoped she would have a pleasant trip.

She walked back with a heavy heart. She now knew why Mr Chatterjee would have done it. He was jealous of her proximity with the boss.

Esha was waiting for her when she returned to her workstation.

“What was it about?” Esha asked.

Maya didn't know how to break the news to her. She stared at her screen.

“He wants me to go to Italy.”

“That's supposed to be nice. We both will have fun together.”

Maya's heart sank. First Reva and now Esha.

SIXTY THREE

Maya was cooking when Esha entered. She had left the office earlier. "You ditched me, Maya. You snatched the trip away from me," Esha said, furious.

Maya did not know how to convince her that it was not her idea.

"The son of a bitch was screwing me, but he gave you the trip.

Did you sleep with him, Maya?"

"Watch your mouth! Why don't you go and ask him, Esha?"

"You should have rejected it."

"I need promotion Esha, as much as you do," Maya was irritated.

Esha turned her head with a jerk and went inside the hall.

"I should have known this from the start. You are such a looser both in your personal life as well as professional. You are not even loyal to your own husband. Screwing up with that little kid and spoiling his life. Oh, how I disapprove of you and Nimesh, Maya. I disapprove of everything you do." Esha screamed from inside. She brought out a suitcase from the cupboard.

"I'm not going to stay with someone as mean as you," she said.

"What's wrong with you, Esha. I let you stay with me and this is your way of repaying me? By accusing me unfairly? Anybody else could have been sent on the trip. It just happened to be me!"

"But it's you, Maya. I cannot trust you anymore."

She refused to see reason. She called for a taxi and left.

Reva was sitting quietly watching the entire episode. Maya sat on the bed with tears running across her cheek.

“Why did you do this to her?” Reva spoke.

Maya had nothing to say except for meeting her gaze.

Reva got up and walked towards her.

“I know it's not your fault. Why are you letting it make you feel sad? At times we vent out our frustration on someone else blaming the other person for our loss.” She took a deep breath. “We are responsible for our own choices, Maya. You only taught me this.”

Maya hugged her and cried aloud for some time before her phone rang.

It was Nimesh.

“Where have you been? I've called so many times.”

“I am not feeling well.”

“I'm coming over,” he said.

“Not now, Nimesh. Let me call you tomorrow,” she said.

Maya was worried that he'd get the idea that she too was interested in him, for they were meeting often.

“You will feel better, once I come over!” he chuckled.

She smiled at his bluster. She convinced him that they couldn't meet then.

Darkness was falling. She made a cup of coffee for herself and Reva and drank it, looking outside the window at the cemetery. It wasn't an encouraging sight, she said to herself, turning away.

“Maya, don't worry. She'll be fine.”

“What did I do to hear such rude comments?” Tears rolled down again her pale cheeks.

“I have learnt that you can't make everyone happy all the time, Maya. So live with it.” Reva held her hand and pressed it.

The next evening, it was a Sunday, she spotted Nimesh's bike coming into the compound.

“You look cute,” he said.

“Thanks.”

He drove her to his favorite place. A coffee joint just next to Bandra beach.

He ordered two coffees and looked at her. Her big eyes were

as infinite as the sea, the artist in him thought.

“What's with you today?”

She turned to look at him. The cool breeze was making it difficult for her hair to stay in one place. She took out a clip from her bag and tied her hair.

“Don't tie them,” he said. “I love you with open hair.”

She smiled.

“Where's your book?” she asked him. He had promised to get along a synopsis of a book he had just completed.

Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy, she remembered. Photographer, painter, artist, writer!

“I will become a famous writer. You can marry me then.”

“Nonsense!” She looked away from him.

“You know my mom is going to meet a publisher tomorrow evening. She knows a friend who can help me with getting the job done,” he said.

“That's nice.” She tucked her hair behind her ears.

“Are you going to tell me what's wrong with you?” he asked her. “You look so pale.”

“I got a promotion.” She pressed her lips in her usual style.

“Is that a bad news?” he raised his eyebrows.

“Not really, but with the promotion I am supposed to go to Italy for a project.”

“What's the problem?” he looked confused.

“Esha was to go there. She thinks I have grabbed a foreign trip meant for her. She vacated in a huff.”

“Good. More space for you! Anyway she didn't like me. More space for me too,” he winked.

She looked at him.

“What happens, happens Maya. She came, she left. Stop worrying, Maya.”

Photographer, painter, artist, writer, philosopher. Maya smiled.

“Let's take a walk on the beach,” he held her hand.

They walked in silence for some time.

He came closer to her and held her hand.

“YYYY ... you look beautiful.”

His eyes stared into hers.
She smiled. He leaned to kiss her cheek.

“A a a a .. I love you,” he stammered as he touched her ear with his thumb.

“Nemo...”

“All right. I know,” he held her hand with a smile and started walking.

The sun was setting. He stopped and faced the sea. He took out his camera and took a few pictures.

SIXTY FOUR

“Hey did you see this contestant dancing. She rocks, yeah.” Reva was watching a dance reality show on TV.

“I don't follow it regularly,” Maya replied. “Coffee?”

Reva nodded.

She went to the kitchen to make some instant coffee.

“Maya, my parents called me today. They want to find a guy for me to get married to,” Reva announced. “I want to go back to Delhi,” she continued. “I miss my parents and sister.”

“Me too. I miss my dad. Even my stepmother, would you believe it?” she got two red cups for themselves.

That injected some levity into the conversation.

“I wish we were children again. But if our parents had also wished the same we wouldn't be here, I guess,” said Reva, laughing. She lowered the volume of the TV and turned towards Maya.

“Yes. I too miss our school days. Friends, pranks, *masti*. No boss, no boyfriend, no in-laws to screw you, no competition, no misery, no loneliness and no graveyard balcony” her eyes became moist.

“Yup, it's funny. We used to talk so much and now though we live together there seem to be no time for a smile,” Reva said as she churned her coffee.

“I know I was rude.” Their gaze met.

"It's fine," Maya gave a superficial smile.

"At times I take you for granted, I know that. It's not your fault. Not even with Esha. We are responsible for our choices. Like you say always," she smiled.

"Thanks Baby. You know I love you ." Maya smiled back.

"Why don't you marry again," asked Reva.

Maya chuckled. "Marry whom?"

"Vikram!"

"Vikram? Nonsense." Maya dismissed.

"What do you mean? He loves you."

"He is just a very good friend."

"Has anyone told you that you are an idiot?" Reva asked her, smiling.

"I am going to miss you." Maya acknowledged.

"Me too."

"Hope you are not angry with me anymore."

"I never was. It was anger on myself," she hugged Maya.

Maya wondered how all situations and circumstances in life are temporary. Everything passes, everything wears out, and everything breaks.

SIXTY FIVE

The phone rang. It was Vikram, probably to ask if she had a comfortable flight.

“Hi! Hi!” she said, picking it up.

“You sound excited,” he said.

“I have just checked into Four Seasons in Milan. Did you know this hotel was a convent earlier? A convent turned into a desirable, glamorous hotel. Isn't that amazing?”

“Nimesh will be missing you,” he said plainly.

“He was a little upset. I'm sure it's no big deal. You know how he is. Besides I am here only for four days.”

“Take care and do well in your conference,” Vikram said.

“I will.”

The room was grand. The bathroom was huge. She filled the bath tub with warm water and poured bubble soap. She soaked herself in that good smelling self-made sauna. Weirdly enough, she felt an urge to make love with Vikram.

She finished the bath and slipped into a bathrobe. She applied some moisturizer on her body. The room was big with a master bed. It was a huge bed with four fluffy pillows lying on the side. It was inviting. She imagined how it would be to make love with Vikram on this bed. His arms would be wrapped around her. It was evening and sun was peeping inside the room. The curtains were a mix of white and

mustard. There was a sleek desk at the side with a white lampshade on it. White flowers spread their fragrance across the room.

There was a cream colored sofa in one corner of the room. Besides the bed a portrait of mountains was hanging. She was impressed with the grandeur of the room and of her first stay abroad. Being the first day there was to be an informal get together in the hotel ballroom. She chose to wear her red gown and let her hair loose.

She must get ready to meet Alda Nicoleman, the company's director in Italy. She was the one who was facilitating the tie-up with an Italian magazine. Maya's company was going to invest in the Italian firm and replicate the magazine in India. The magazine intended to change the way women and men think about women. This was what her boss had briefed her.

She made her way to the ballroom, looking confident and beautiful. She was introduced to Alda.

"Hi!" Alda got up and greeted her warmly. "How are you? How was the journey?"

"Nice."

"Do you like the hotel?"

"Very much."

"Meet Dona Maria. She is the editor of the edition here. Dona, this is Maya Dewan. She'll be your counterpart back in India."

"Hi!" Dona smiled at her.

She was a lovely woman. She had big lips and was wearing red lipstick. The lipstick shined making her lips looking even sexier. She was wearing a black, figure hugging skirt with a dull blue shirt. She was slim, fair with smooth skin.

"Hi!" Maya replied.

"It's nice to see a young woman working on our project. I am very passionate about this magazine. We want to help women across the globe become more independent and confident."

"That's great," Maya replied.

Alda looked on, smiling. She had black hair like Indians. Though her skin was a shade fairer than Dona, the red tint on her cheeks were missing. She had slight worn out looks. Maybe she had been working hard, bringing together everybody for the conference.

“This is the annual conference we hold every year to celebrate the success of our magazine. We discuss about the cases where we have tried to help women in distress. We even invite a few of them to describe their experiences. We analyze our sales and revenue as well, so that we can figure out next year's plan,” said Dona. “The idea of calling you here was to give you an idea of the quality of work we maintain. We expect the same from you.”

“Sure!” Maya was already in awe of Dona. She looked to be the dominating type, unlike Alda.

“I have read a couple of online editions of the magazine,” said Maya.

“That's good. How did you like those?” asked Dona.

“Good and touching.”

“Give me one example,” Dona raised her eyebrows as if she wanted to test Maya.

“I remember one about domestic violence against women in Italy. It mentioned that quite a few women in Italy die of attacks and violence from within the family. In fact, it talked about an unidentified corpse of a young woman found on the road.”

“Hmmm.” Dona remembered which one it was.

“We have organized this conference so that men and women can discuss this topic and the media's role in making things better,” she continued. Her tone was more accepting. “World needs to be more generous towards women. Countries like Italy, India, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nepal and maybe many more need to really work on the status of women.”

Maya nodded.

Once in her room she threw her red gown on the sofa and crawled inside her blanket. It was cold in the room and she liked to sleep naked with the soft blanket touching her body. The fluffy bed and pillows gave a cozy feeling and she let her body feel the softness around her.

She picked up her phone and texted Vikram.

“Sometimes I miss you so much that I start feeling I have fallen in love with you.”

“But I miss you all the time.” The reply was quick.

“I thought you were asleep!”

“In your dreams!”

Wordplay, phew!

She decided to sleep early since tomorrow would be a packed day.

The next morning Maya went in and took her seat.

“We have organized this talk to reinforce the commitment that we, as a media group, are against crime faced by women across the globe,” said the lead speaker.

“The plan is,” the woman continued, “to provide new ideas about current information and technology, to those professionals responsible for bringing awareness in public to combat heinous crimes against women. I am glad to state that we have many of our business associates and representatives from various countries present here to give their inputs. The mission of our magazine is to highlight problems women face and provide solutions through public platforms.”

She introduced important people that included a social worker, a police official, hacker for online crimes and few victims as well.

“It is sad to see that almost 76% of women have to face humiliation, physical or sexual violence in some shape or form across countries. Even sadder is that most of them face it from friends or people known to them.” She went on to read some gore statistics and case studies.

She gave hair raising accounts of the kind of torture women had to face across the globe. Female foeticide, trafficking for sexual abuse, rapes, murders, domestic violence, illiteracy and what not. Maya felt luckier after listening to all those. A woman survivor told her story of how she got lured into making money by sleeping with few men in Kenya and then she landed as a prostitute in Italy. She was also kidnapped and smuggled and finally thrown on the street. There were days where she could not sleep anywhere. She tried to remain awake, covered herself with newspaper trash. At times when she did sleep she had a knife in her hand. She even narrated the story of two of her best friends. One of them was cruelly killed. She was suffocated and gagged and had 349 stabs on her body. Maybe she was even raped. She went on to say that rape of a prostitute does not garner enough

sympathy, but it is as painful as it is for any woman. They were the brutal victims of one of the world's largest crime – human trafficking. There was another woman. She had a beautiful frail, body donning a pair of denims. Her hair touched her shoulders. She looked nervous. “I am Suzzane. I married an Italian man fourteen years ago. Since then I was treated violently. He used to mistreat me both physically and emotionally. I also had three children with him thinking that it would get better. We were all locked in the house and nobody could help us. He would not let my children to go to school. He would even beat them up. We all were so scared to talk to anyone. He even banged my head against the wall once and I fainted for almost a minute. I would have killed myself, but for my children I had to be strong. Then I met this young woman who gave me a number of a social center. They really helped me.”

It was disturbing. Are we all part of such cruel human race, she thought to herself.

Maya was sitting on her table next to a black woman.

The black woman smiled at her.

“Italian?” she asked.

“No. Indian!”

“English?” she asked.

“Yes.” Maya smiled.

“How come here?” she asked Maya as she lifted her glass of wine. She had sharp features and was dressed very well.

“Associate.”

“First time?” she smiled sarcastically.

“Yes,” Maya replied.

“You?” Maya asked her back.

“Regular, ex Prostitute,” she replied, without emotion.

Maya didn't know how to react. She quietly wondered what that woman was doing here.

The woman laughed. “Victim, was trafficked from Nigeria.”

Maya could make sense of it now. Nigeria was also one of the most prominent countries fighting with trafficking issues.

“What you do now?” asked Maya. She was tentative, wondering if she was invading her privacy.

The Nigerian woman laughed.

“A different kind of prostitution!”

“Means?” Maya frowned

“Media,” she winked. The woman got up and excused herself.

Maya was left perplexed.

The conference went on for two more days with unwinding sessions in the evening. Maya found some good contacts during these days. The third day Maya spent some time doing local window shopping, and she picked up small mementoes for Nimesh, Reva, Vikram and her parents. She was to leave tomorrow. She wanted to fill herself with adventure.

SIXTY SIX

The Dancing Wind: 'Hey I am in Delhi.'

Oceanblue: 'Do you think it's fair not to catch up then.'

The Dancing Wind: 'LOL'

Oceanblue: 'So where do I get to see you finally.'

The Dancing Wind: 'I am around CP.'

Oceanblue: 'Why don't you come home?'

The Dancing Wind: 'Don't be naughty.'

Oceanblue: 'Oh Come on Esha. We have been talking for some time now. We both really like each other. I am so comfortable with you. I don't think there should be any problem. I want to know you inside out. Let's have some good time baby.'

The Dancing Wind: 'LOL'

Oceanblue: 'What LOL?'

The Dancing Wind: 'Am here for an interview. Planning to shift.'

The Dancing Wind: 'Last job started to suck. The boss was a bastard. Even the girl I lived with, my colleague grabbed the promotion and the foreign trip I was eyeing at.'

Oceanblue: 'Oh. I had no clue you were so upset.'

The Dancing Wind: 'With you I like to distress. LOL'

Oceanblue: 'Don't worry am sure it will be fine.'

The Dancing Wind: 'I am sure too. Only thing I get cheesed up with how people behave, yeah. She is separated from her husband. Looser.'

Oceanblue: 'Ha Ha, relax!'

The Dancing Wind: 'You Delhites, are all so mean. She also belongs to your city.'

Oceanblue: 'Really. Come I will show you how warm Delhites are.'

The Dancing wind: 'Huh. I haven't met a worst set of people than north Indians.'

Oceanblue: 'Ha Ha. You are really angry on the poor girl.'

The Dancing Wind: 'Oh, Please.'

Oceanblue: 'What's her name?'

The Dancing Wind: 'Oh, Why? You are interested in her. HUH!'

Oceanblue: 'LOL. I am hearing so much about her. Might as well know the troublemaker's name too. Curiosity.'

The Dancing Wind: 'Maya Dewan.'

Oceanblue: 'Okkkkk. There was a pause.'

The Dancing wind: 'That was a long OKK.'

Oceanblue: 'Well... Strange coincidence.'

The Dancing Wind: 'What. Tell me.'

Oceanblue: 'Leave it.'

The Dancing wind: 'Tell me na. Don't crave for unnecessary attention all the time.'

Oceanblue: 'Send me her picture.'

The Dancing Wind: 'What's wrong with you?'

Oceanblue: 'Esha, Maya Dewan happens to be my wife's name and she has shifted base from Delhi.'

The Dancing Wind: 'What... I don't believe this.'

The Dancing wind: 'What's your address? I will see you in the evening. Let's still have some good time.'

This would be her way to get back at Maya. She smiled.

SIXTY SIX

“Hi, I missed you,” Nimesh hugged her as Maya came out of the airport.

She hugged him back.

“There was no need to pick me up. I would have come on my own,” she said.

“How unromantic is that? He took her bag from her. “Let me carry it.”

They walked towards his car. “You know I have almost finished the book.”

“In three days?” she smiled

“Yeah. Since you were not there I thought I might as well utilize the time,” he said.

“I've got a small gift for you,” she smiled.

“I'm glad you remembered me.”

“Why don't you take me seriously? While you were away I just could not think of anything else but you,” he said.

“You know I am serious about someone else, right?”

There was silence. She looked out of the window. She knew there are still twenty minutes to reach home and she wanted them to pass quickly.

“I don't think you are,” he replied. “If someone has a boyfriend it shows!”

“His name is Vikram. I've told you.” She felt a strange pride in announcing it like that.

The remaining ten minutes again passed in silence. He dropped her home with a heavy heart.

“Won't you invite me over for a coffee?” he asked with hope glinting in his eyes.

“Nemo, I am too tired. Tomorrow please.” she smiled.

“What if I disappear from your life, will it make a difference” he asked her as she made way towards her home.

“Don't ask stupid questions Nimesh” she frowned.

“I want to know. It's important.”

“Yes, it will.”

“We will find out” he smiled.

She shrugged his silly questions and went inside.

The flat was empty. Reva had left for Delhi, unable to stand Mumbai any more. She felt a little scared. Nervously she unpacked her things and arranged them on the empty cupboard. She was too tired to make anything for herself. She regretted not having a coffee with Nimesh. For an instance, she thought of calling him back. She wanted to fight her own battle with loneliness.

She took off her clothes and had a shower. She lied down in her bed and draped herself with a soft blanket. She closed her eyes drifting into a semi-conscious state. She felt some one was lying next to her. A naked ugly looking man with withering skin and dark under eye circles. He was lying on his back next to her.

“Who are you?” she jerked.

Tears slipped out of the corners and he kept looking up at the ceiling.

“I am loneliness. Why do you dread me so much?” As he turned towards her, his voice was husky and frightening.

“You are painful,” she replied with fear encompassing her.

“You make me painful by dreading me. A part of me surrounds everyone. I walk with you all the time. You can't run away from me. You work so hard to avoid me and drain us both. Be with me. Understand me. Find solace in me. I can give you that. Love cannot exist without me. When you will learn to accept me, I will change my form into contentment. That is when I will bring you the light of love

that is within.”

“Girl,” he continued, “problem comes when people don't want to face themselves. They are scared of being alone. In the process, they cling on to anyone and everyone. For once they have to realise that just because they are scared of me they don't have to claw on anyone else. Others are just as mortal as you are. You need to lean on me and only me to fight with me.”

They stretched their hands to grip each other.

She woke up next morning feeling lighter than usual. She was excited about going to work after her stint with Italy.

As soon as she reached office, her boss called her to ask how the trip had been.

He was glad to hear that it went off well.

“I expect you to start on this new magazine immediately. We want interesting stories. I want this to become an essential and informative reading for every woman,” he said.

People and their ideas!

She wondered how Esha could ever sleep with him. He was shrewd with a fat nose that extended both sides of his face.

She called Vikram and told him all about her promotion and about the plans for the new magazine.

He did not wish her good luck or congratulate her. Sometimes she wondered if the man was normal.

She and her team exposed stories about how women are exploited in various fields, glamour being one of them. The more she came across different stories across the globe, the more she realized how strongly hypocrisy has merged with power. She came to of people who would be associated with NGOs in the day and criminals at night.

A 16 year old girl she met was called for a photo shoot and forced to have sex with six drunken men at the same time. She was even clicked so that she does not talk about the incident to anyone. One of them was a top fashion photographer and the other one was a top film producer. Maya asked the girl to name them and she did. Maya was shocked since she had read both their interviews often in her own paper. One of them was attached to an NGO that worked for

women. He claimed that a percentage of his film revenue went towards the education of these poor women. What he didn't mention was that he then took it back from them with interest.

Her boss told her that no names should be published since they didn't want the first issue to go under any controversy.

"Who knows if that girl is actually speaking the truth or not?" he had said.

"What does that mean?" Maya was upset.

"See women are themselves involved in all this. You think those men really need to rape anyone given that they have no dearth of women around them. She might need some cheap publicity."

"She is just 16."

"That's a good age enough to exploit men," he said.

"Exploit men. What are we talking about? She was gang raped. She has lost the charm a 16 year old should have towards life. She does not know what goal she should keep in her life anymore and you say she was exploiting them."

"You tell me why they would have to rape a girl like her?"

"Power. Power works on your head and makes a person sick. They want to force their power on weaker people. The fun then lies in snatching, suppressing and showing one's darker side without being afraid of anyone," she paused for a moment.

"Control," she continued, "As humans, when these power addicts lose control on their lives and feel frustrated, they seek some kind of control in rape. Being able to snatch away the power of a weak woman and dehumanize her."

"For God sake, Maya. This magazine needs to bring revenue for the company and that's your prime work. Please remember that and stop being carried away."

She came out without another word.

The first issue was a success. It was launched at a theme party organized by her company. Crème de la crème of the society was present to grace the occasion. She even met Aditya at the same party.

"I heard you are heading this magazine," he said.

"How have you been, Adi?"

"Getting along. A bit stressed out, though."

“How come Aditya Balraj is stressed out?” she was sarcastic.

He avoided an answer. Instead he started talking about how Maya was doing.

“You disappoint me. You should not have cheated on Reva,” Maya told him.

“I knew you would be angry. That's the reason I didn't have the heart to talk to you. I am sorry.”

“Whats it Adi? You look troubled,” Maya held his hand. Apology coming from Aditya was unusual.

“I feel lonely Maya,” His eyes were moist. “I am tired of screwing around women.”

“Adi. What's wrong?” Maya knew he was serious.

“I miss a companion. Every time I sit alone I miss a girl.”

“Who?” Maya was surprised. Love can torture anyone.

“I wonder if you remember that girl with whom I spent the longest time with. Simran, Simran Kaur.”

Maya shook her head in disbelief.

“Why don't you get back to her?”

“I have tried so hard to trace her. I have lost touch and she had blocked me on Facebook.”

Maya thought for a while and whispered.

“I know where she works. Will that do?” she smiled.

Adi's jaw dropped. “How do you know?”

“Don't ask me that. If you want to know I can tell you, but you need to return the favor.”

“I will do anything,” he pleaded.

“Apologize and be nice to Reva. Both of you are my friends. It wasn't fair.”

“I will. I am anyways guilty of all that. I have gone through enough.”

Her phone beeped and she excused herself.

“Sun Software systems,” she whispered in Adi's ears before she left.

Coffee?

It was Nimesh.

Tied up.

She sent the reply.

You have no time for me these days. What about my book? You

were to edit it.

Don't be silly. I will. Will catch up on the weekend.

The magazine started taking most of her time. The next issue was on exploitation in holy places and she got to know of dreaded treatment women had to face. She met a woman who was sent away to a religious ashram in Vrindavan, near Ganges as a child widow. She was raped by her own brother in law after her husband's death. She was further raped by the priest in the name of shuddhikaran. She was then sold by the same priest to influential people and all in the name of God. A life dedicated to religious prostitution. She went through miscarriages, witnessed gory murder of her confidante and best friend in the same ashram. Maya shuddered at the plight of widows.

What's wrong with our religion? There is something terrible that we cannot see in our own set of rules. At an age of thirteen when she should have been reading in school and playing with friends under some banyan tree in the city of Lord Krishna, where people visit to cast away their sins, this girl was facing all this. She was forced to cut her hair, wear a white saree and live a life that was stamped every second. She was forced to sing bhajans, but the same caretakers were ruining her dignity. Such brutal tortures, those that were unheard of. Women guarded even in bathrooms. Women humiliated to an extent where life becomes gore.

She knew there was no point discussing it with the boss. This girl was a live witness with names that could set the magazine on fire. She knew no one will want to get deeper into mudslinging. All she could do was feel sorry and give a bird's eye view. The world was burning and we were just warming our hands on the fire.

Three issues of magazine were out and Maya's work was appreciated critically. In fact she got an award from the director's desk. She was gaining some recognition for herself. She had applied for a home loan and shortlisted a small one BHK in Mumbai that she could afford.

One afternoon she was busy working on a media plan sent by her client. They were looking at buying out first four pages of the magazine for the entire year. This meant big money for Maya.

Hey, wanna catch up. It was Nimesh.

I'm too tired.

I am leaving for Sydney tomorrow.

She had not known that he was to leave so soon. She had been caught up in her job for weeks and been too busy to see him. They agreed to meet that evening. She wanted to wish him goodbye.

"I had decided against going to Australia. But my mother insists," he said glumly. "He's been so nice to me that I don't have the heart to refuse."

"I'll miss you, Maya," he continued.

"Come on, Nimesh. Don't behave childishly," she chided him.

"I'll miss you, Maya," he repeated, his face wan.

"Listen, whether you agree or not, I'm in love with you. I thought it would be an infatuation and I'll get out of it. But no, Maya, I can't get rid of your thoughts."

"Go and focus on your course, Nimesh. Make a life for yourself. Soon you'll get over me," she said firmly.

"I have a bad feeling about going," he said.

He was sad. She was firm.

He was great to be around. But this was different. The boy was playing with his life, she could see.

"Nimesh, looking glum doesn't suit you. Grow up," she said.

"Okay. I'll go, Maya. Since you don't love me what's the point to stay?" he said wiping a tear from his eye, he got up suddenly and went away, head bowed.

SIXTY SEVEN

As the days progressed, work took up all of Maya's time. She was too busy to think about anything else.

She got a call from an unknown number.

"Have you decided anything?" It was Kartik.

"How are you?" she managed to ask.

"I'm fine. What about you?" His voice was bland.

He couldn't care less, she thought.

"I'm fine too!"

"Didn't you get the papers? I sent those weeks ago!"

She had received them, but had not done anything about it.

"Alright. I'll look at them and call you," she said, putting the phone down.

When she went home that day, she stood in front of the mirror. She looked at herself. She felt she looked older than she was. There were small wrinkles appearing on the sides of her eyes. Her eyes had lost their sparkle.

She wondered if leaving Delhi and coming to Mumbai was a mistake. If staying with Kartik and being little more patient would have helped.

The phone rang.

"I just landed in Mumbai," said Vikram.

"Why don't you tell me beforehand? You always surprise me!"

"You don't like being surprised?"

"I do. If it's by you."

"What about dinner?" he asked.

"Come home. You haven't seen my new house," she said.

She had a shower and decided to order dinner.

An hour later Vikram arrived, neat and attractive as ever.

She hugged him impulsively.

"So people have started recognising you through your magazine now?" It was more of a comment than a question.

"True. In fact I am even done with the book I was writing. It should be ready to get published soon."

"How are things going with Kartik?" he asked.

"He's sent me the divorce papers," she responded. "We are done with it."

He could see the sun setting from her window.

"Sun set looks beautiful," he said.

"Vikram, Why is it that I feel sad whenever I think about my divorce. I don't have any intention of going back."

Vikram Smiled.

"It's very simple. I will tell you about one of my clients. She is a beautiful and independent lady who decided to dump her husband. She filed in for a divorce. She felt wonderful and confident. Her husband though came back and pleaded to her for forgiveness. He didn't want her to go away. She gave in and decided to go back to him. It was fine till the time where he went back to his old ways. This time he decided to leave her. She came back to me devastated. The same woman who was herself convinced that there was nothing left in the relationship was now feeling shattered. Psychologists call this a fantasy bond. At times both the parties are tired doing ugly things to each other. Yet the one who decides to leave first makes the other person feel terrible. She wasn't worried about her husband. The fantasy bond broke. The feeling of stability. The social image, the false pretension of everything being all right superficially. The fear of being left alone. That fear is the language of the world. The heart has no fear. If the heart would have been fearful people would have never gone out of their way to do illogical things. True winners have always been people who have listened to the heart and abandoned fear of unknown."

“Don't try to control your life Maya,” he went on. “The problem is we all want to control our lives. We have to surrender to the life force. Let it take its course. You know we human beings feel we know it all. We need to understand that there are things out of our control. Don't take life too seriously. The wisest thing is to just let it be.”

“Is it as easy as that?” she wondered, aloud.

“It's not difficult. The point is that we are not just brother, sister, father, spouse, son, daughter, employee, neighbour, colleague, acquaintance. These are roles we carry out. But playing a role is only one aspect of our life. We exist as individuals, remember that. We want to be happy. We owe it to ourselves to be happy!”

“What's the end?” she asked.

“There's no end. Every passing moment is the gateway to the next one that is emerging. Learn to flow with the moment. If we keep holding past moments the new ones will have nothing to teach us,” he said. His hand slid down to the nape of her neck. She kept her head on his lap. He was caressing her shoulder and her neck. It was comforting for her. “Live in this moment and let go off your burden.”
Dinner was delivered.

SIXTY EIGHT

Maya was trying to climb a steep mountain. She suddenly saw Nimesh Tanna with milky white hair sitting and looking at her. His eyes were divine. She came next to him. As she came closer she felt a cold wave hitting her. It was cold and she felt painfully numb.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him

“Wondering what you are doing here,” he replied with a divine smile.

“I am trying to look for the meaning of life,” she said.

“Your heart already knows the meaning of life. It is connected with the universe, Maya. You can find it nowhere else,” he kept smiling.

“How can you say that? Everyone is already up there and I am left alone,” she replied with disappointment.

“The truth is everyone is lost,” Nimesh laughed. His melodious laughter echoed in the mountains.

“How are you so sure about the top,” she challenged him.

“Take care Maya. Live your life. It's just one life you have. Live by your heart. Nothing else matters. Don't get trapped in unnecessary. Give closures to everything that is dragging you behind. Release the weight and move on Maya. Till the time you won't release the weight you will never be able to free yourself. Forget about others. Learn to help yourself first. He walked away.

Maya kept calling him.

She woke up to her ringtone. It was 3 AM.

It was Esha, her friend. “Nemo's dead, Maya. He killed himself a couple of hours ago.”

So this was it. He came to say good bye to her. He wanted her to follow her heart. In his death he taught her to live.

Karde mujhe khud se hi riha . . .

A song was playing from the flat next door. Who would be listening to music early morning?

With tears and a numbing pain she didn't know what to do. She felt suffocated. He was full of energy. Why did he throw it all up? As she imagined his images all around she remembered the dream. His last visit to her.

She checked her personal mail account. She hadn't been checking it since long now. There was a mail from Nimesh as expected.

Maya

I read your magazine. Good job. Looks like you are very busy. I really wish we could see each other. Those stars and the beach where we walked together haunt me almost every day. I wish you had more time for me. I wish I could convince you enough.

Yet I am happy. I have chosen to be happy. It is when we don't share our emotions we feel suffocated. It is so normal for a child to cry when he needs our attention, or when he needs food or anything. As an adult it is not classy to cry when you need love and attention. I have figured out that crying is okay.

Crying it out and getting over with it helps. I miss you, but I am doing just fine. When we don't express our emotions we encourage open ended situations. Loose ends are like pricking pins from inside .It is far better to give closure and cry it out.

I am doing fine academically. I have made good friends here. I have also applied for a scholarship in photography which I think should go through.

Do write back.

Don't make me wait too long. Don't allow your loose ends to prick you. Close all of them and smile.

Nemo

Suddenly everything was so clear to her. Nimesh had come to

deliver a message in her life. Tears rolled down and she wanted to hug him.

I want to live, not just exist. Suddenly, all her doubts vanished. In moments her mind was made up. She had never been so sure of anything in her life earlier. Closure was what she needed to give to all her loose ends that burdened her. She need to let go in the real sense. The key to happiness is to forgive. Forgive everyone not for others, but for yourself.

It made her want to start living, now. Now. This was it! Everything was in the moment. She suddenly knew what she wanted in life. Life was too short to end it in confusion. She felt an overwhelming love for Vikram. A love that filled her vacuum and seeped into her empty spaces.

She called Vikram and shared her restlessness. She had found her key to unlock and let go.

Vikram was waiting for her, having returned from a meeting, as she came down her apartment building the next day.

She was again struggling to put aside the thought that Nimesh was no more.

“Maya, celebrate death. I don't mean create a song and dance about it, but celebrate it quietly. It is the one thing that connects all human beings. It is the bridge we all have to cross. We all are together. Death shows us the fact that for the universe, no human being is different.” He always could read her mind.

“There was nothing in this world which would live forever, except love and death. Love will nourish the coming generations, forever and death will take them to the next level. Love is within.”

She held his hand as they ambled to his car. It was comforting. She put all other thoughts out of her mind and smiled at him. The excitement of the book launch also took back seat. The moment just after she thought of Nimesh, was when she made up her mind. Or, her mind made itself up. Did it matter how she suddenly got rid of all the baggage in one moment of serendipity? No, it didn't, she told herself. Stop analyzing, start living. Let few moments leave your space forever. Live those few moments of letting go.

Nothing else matters now, she told herself. Everything will

fall into place. Her mind was suddenly at peace.

It was like walking through a sunny path that suddenly opened into a meadow, with flowers swaying in the breeze.

