

Mumbai ↔ HongKong

ENDLESS JOURNEY OF PERPETUAL MEMORIES

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Six months ago...

Section I

It's a perfect rainy afternoon in the most popular getaway from the cosmopolitan city. Ray's forehead resting against my chest, familiar fragrance of her favorite perfume, our arms tightly wrapped around each other just like toddlers hugging with their tiny arms, is the kind of moment where my entire world freezes and ceases to exist. I'm living a thousand lives and dying a thousand deaths in this mesmerizing moment holding her knowing she is mine, only mine. Till eternity. Just like in the good old days. I know she feels the same way as we both refuse to let go of each other; we want to make up for the three long years it has taken us to put all the unpleasant events behind to get back together. All the crazy and random thoughts which buzzed around in my head and drove me crazy since we parted ways, came to rest the moment I felt the warmth of her body against mine. The sanctity of this moment is probably what people describe as resting in peace post a tiring life, and to feel such absolute inner peace during one's life is probably what's described as true love and being with the person meant just for you. It was the Nirvana moment of my life, until I woke up with a jerk.

Where did she go? Why is it so dark in here? And, why are my eyes moist? Many more questions flooded my mind as I found myself lying on the bed, thousands of miles away from her. The nirvana moment was replaced by reality. Was it yet another cruel joke of my subconscious, or is my mind playing tricks to bring some much needed peace in my life, albeit momentarily? Whatever it was, it reminisced me of standing near the feet of my dad's bed in the hospital during his final moments almost a decade earlier. Just like then, I'm helpless in changing the current situation too.

Section II

This isn't how it was supposed to turn out though. Three years ago, we were just a week away from taking oaths to be with each other for good, before everything came crashing down, thanks in no small part to my egoistic outburst. From being a couple of baby steps away from living happily ever after, here I am, dreaming about what could've been, light-years away from the love of my life.

The loneliness I'm experiencing now is what she complained about even when we were going strong. And the worst thing about loneliness is to experience it even when you're with someone. Sure, we both were different individuals; she being a very happy-go-lucky and a chirpy breath of fresh air and me being the stereo-typical demure guy struggling to express his feelings. She understood my limitation initially; but I guess, as we progressed she expected more and I should surely have obliged. So, I deserve my current predicament.

We were a perfect match as Ray brought in her playful charm to my otherwise mundane life, partly due to the untimely demise of my father and partly due to my selectively-introvert personality, and I gave her the self-confidence to take on the world. We loved treating and addressing each other like very young playful kids, observing and describing everything with a childlike curiosity and innocence. We both wanted to spend our lives that way, but in a different location, as lack of fondness for the island city for its various shortcomings, was mutual. Therefore, when she received an opportunity to work in Hong-Kong, I was excited in convincing her to take it promising I'll join her soon, without realizing long distance would be cataclysmic for us.

My overseas job hunt was progressing decently and I would've joined her in HK in a few months if not weeks, but the ensuing complexities of the long distance relationship alongwith the tricky part of involving the families for our marriage, derailed our train-of-love.

By the time I realized the severity of this tectonic change in my life, she had become completely apathetic towards me. Maybe she is right, why didn't I do anything to get back together? How could I let her walk away over such issues which could've been resolved? These questions keep haunting me, day and night.

To put these questions to rest, I planned to have a candid one-to-one conversation. As video chats and whatsapp conversations failed to get any decent response from her, but gave me a feeling she is still single, I decided to surprise her by showing up outside her office in HK. The idea was clichéd, but the happiness of my entire life will come down to her reaction on seeing me in person after ages.

Section III

After travelling for ten and a half hours through connecting red eye flights and half edible vegetarian food, I landed in her city of dreams. I still remember my choked throat the moment my flight touched down at the airport, but I fought back my tears with the hope of taking off from here 48 hours later, with much needed answers and solutions, one way or the other. Either we will get back together, or if she has moved on and is seeing anyone then even I will look for a fresh start with my life. But there was no way in which I will return without convincing her in giving me and us a second chance, if just like me, she has not moved on with her life either. Thanks to the visa on arrival, the immigration process was smooth and within a couple of hours from touch down I had checked into my hotel. As I asked for a room on the higher floor, the hotel staff surprised me with a complimentary upgrade to a suite overlooking the city's harbor with its marquee sky scrapers. The one where I was headed as her office was located there, stood out from the rest – The Financial Centre, second tallest building in Hong Kong currently. Perfect start to the trip I thought.

Since I had a few hours before she will leave from her office, based on the tentative local office timings that I was aware of, I arranged for my tool of communication – a local sim card, took a quick shower and a bite of some food I carried from home alongwith a steaming cup of coffee. Even basic home cooked food seems like heaven in a foreign country where one struggles to find authentic vegetarian meals. While getting ready to move out and hunt for the quickest route to my destination, for the first time in all these years I was actually confused with what I should be wearing. After all, she will be seeing me after three years, so its important for me to look good. I was as excited and nervous as I was during our first date almost seven years ago. I went with the classic combination of light blue denims and a white tee, but since I was extra concerned about my looks that day, I topped it up with a black leather jacket, which later helped me face the local cold weather as well. After getting some directions from the hotel staff and the GPS on my cell, I started walking towards my destination through the famous escalators of the city. It connects the whole city, which is divided into upper, mid and lower levels because of its mountainous topography, ensuring the pedestrians never set foot on the main roads meant for vehicular traffic. The entire stretch of these escalators is marked by a number of local food joints, restaurants, pubs and provisional stores; all of which were thriving with patrons on this chilly Friday evening. About fifteen minutes later, I made it to my destination. The International Finance center is an integrated commercial hub. The level at which I entered was a shopping mall marked with Apple, Gucci and other branded stores. In the basement was the Hong Kong station and on the higher floors were the corporate offices belonging to multinational investment banks, consultancies and insurance firms.

Since there were five exit paths from the corporate offices section into the mall, I randomly chose one of them near to what seemed like the main entrance and exit doors and began expectantly screening everyone walking out from the elevators. After a few false alarms and three quarters of an hour, I checked the other exit points as well, just to ensure I do not miss her walking out to

the street. All this while I was looking at the people walking in and out of the office buildings, some excited, few of them tensed but most of them content that their weekend had begun. There were a few hugs here and there every few minutes, possibly of partners who saw each other only on weekends, thanks to their busy work schedules I guessed. Seeing them I was hoping for a similar re-union with my ex-girlfriend and to remove that dreaded prefix once and for all. After waiting for a couple of hours, for the first time since the idea of travelling here had struck me, I feared it might not work out if I fail to get hold of her. After another 45 minutes of internal struggle of calling off the hunt, which would take away the surprise factor, and trying to get hold of her local number so that I can atleast reach her on phone, I spotted a familiar face walking out of elevators at a brisk pace.

Is it a false alarm again? Am I hallucinating as I have been dying to see her, and have been looking for her since almost three hours now? I took a couple of glances before ascertaining it was actually her. When I did, I tried walking in her direction but I just could not move. Was I dreaming or actually seeing her in person after almost three years. She was looking leaner than before, slightly exhausted post a long day but she looked happy in general. She was wearing a grey dotted shirt and a black skirt with matching leg warmers. I was still unable to move as I just wanted to cherish this moment and not want it to get over. I could actually see myself , absolutely dumb struck and mesmerized in the same moment, standing frozen near the building pillar opposite the main doors from where she just walked out. My thought process was broken abruptly when she saw in my direction but then continued to walk without breaking a stride, until her mind registered the surprise. She stopped, saw in my direction again and a couple of seconds later, just like it had taken me to ascertain her presence, she smiled.

‘Hey! How are you? What brings you to HK?’ she asked smiling and walking towards me.

Her quality of making everyone feel welcome, irrespective of the time gap elapsed seemed to be missing here. My objective of surprising her was achieved, it was time to gauge whether it was a pleasant one.

‘Hello’, I said with a slightly bigger smile than usual but not as big as I wanted it to be. She always used to complain that I should smile more, atleast on seeing her. And I wanted to do just that, but my age-old problem of being inexpressive resurfaced. Partly because of her subdued reaction on seeing me; and partly because I was overwhelmed seeing her after all this while, and forgot whatever opening I had planned for this moment.

‘Just here for the weekend’, I said after an eternity.

‘It’s a beautiful city, no wonder you love it so much’, I added.

‘Yes, it sure is. Where you staying?’ she asked as we started walking out of the building.

‘Bishop-Lei-International.’

'Can we grab a coffee somewhere, and talk maybe?' I mustered to ask.

'Actually I'm running late to meet up my friends for dinner' she quickly replied.

I've travelled 4000 miles just to see her and she isn't even putting off her dinner plans, I thought to myself. But I realized she doesn't know that, so I told her.

'You're here only to speak to me!! Why?' she asked.

'We haven't moved on with our lives even three years after parting ways, surely it means something. I'm here to ask for a second chance. Maybe we can discuss whenever you're free.'

'Yes, we can meet tomorrow but I don't think it'll change anything.' she said, to my disappointment.

We exchanged our local numbers before she headed for her dinner plan. As I didn't have much to do except for looking forward to our meeting next morning, I picked up a chilled beer and some munchies on my way back to the hotel and called it a night.

Section IV

Coming from a tropical place like Mumbai, waking up to a 180° cloudy drizzly view of the harbor through the suite bedroom's three-sided French windows, was the perfect start to a defining day in my life. I woke up with huge expectations that day, and checked my cell to see if Ray had texted about meeting up. She hadn't. After a shower and a light breakfast with a strong cup of tea, I dialed her to check about the plan. She didn't answer, so I went around exploring the nearby areas of the city. An hour later I called again, she didn't answer but texted me.

'Hey. Look, you're asking alot. Meeting up and talking won't yield anything', before I could reply, she texted again.

'I would've told this on meeting you, but its better I say it now – I've found someone and there is no looking back for me now. I hope even you find someone and move on with your life' and with that, painstakingly, I realized I've lost her, forever. I still remember being absolutely speechless on reading her second text. My attempts not to cry in a public place were only partially successful. I replied stating even though I'm sad to hear this, I'm actually happy for her that she has moved on. I suggested we still meet-up as originally planned, so that we can atleast see off each other one last time. But she disagreed, vehemently, for the next few hours. When I had given up any hope of seeing her again and had returned to my hotel, she called in the evening.

The call was more out of courtesy I guess, because of the relationship we shared earlier for almost four years. She repeated what she had texted me, and suggested that I should get on with my life. And with that, she hung up, making me realize it was the last time I heard her voice. I was dazed with whatever she had said since morning. My expectation since last three years of getting back together at some stage was bull-dozed precipitously.

Even after hanging up, I continued sitting at the edge of my bed and staring at the towering Financial Center. It was growing taller and taller and I felt miniscule with every passing moment. It derided me for taking away my soon to be life partner at one stage and I was unable to respond. I finally lost control on my bottled-up emotions, which had been piling up for three years including the duration of planning and executing this trip, right until this moment upto which I refused to acknowledge having lost her, atleast until our next life.

Remainder of the trip is hazy in my memory except for when my flight was taking off, at which point I reminisced my thoughts at touch down 48 hours earlier. Far from being successful, atleast the trip will give me closure is what I thought before ascending towards Mumbai.

Present Day.

Section V

Expecting the HK trip to give me closure, was a huge mistake. Her memories refuse to evade me, and frankly, I'm not trying very hard either. Somehow, it has become a sweet spot where I linger irrespective of any pressing engagements in real life – personal or professional. I realize I'm becoming emotionally unstable which is affecting other personal relations in my life; just the sight of a cute baby, or a happy couple gets me emotional these days. I've been terribly deprived of quality sleep, and my ability to concentrate or multi-task is lesser than that of an infant, which is hampering my professional growth.

It's time to put an end to my misery. It'll be quick and worth the momentary pain. In the interest of everyone around me and for my own sake I ought to endure this extreme measure. I deserve this, despite the fact that I've been faithful to her even three and a half years after we parted ways, and for all my mistakes during and after our relationship.

Section VI

Electroconvulsive shock treatment is the only solution; an attempt to erase all her memories from my brain so that I can salvage a fresh start. The treatment has its own risks like a 50% success ratio, of which many people relapse within a year. And ofcourse, I'll end up losing many other memories as well in the process. My psychological counselor also agreed this therapy can be tried.

I realized it was important to get this done before midnight as it's my birthday tomorrow, and I wasn't sure if Ray would text to wish me this time as we had been doing all these years even after calling off the relationship. Once I'm through with this treatment, even if she texts me, I'll treat it like someone wishing me socially; and if she doesn't then I won't even realize it.

As I needed a three week break from work for this treatment, I was racing against time to complete the handover. I was able to wind up only by 10pm, because of which I missed my appointment for the shock treatment. But on my counselor's request, the hospital agreed to carry it out whenever I make it to the hospital, which was 11pm. The mandatory initial tests were completed and I was lying on the bed, slightly bewildered looking at all the equipment of the treatment in readiness. But suddenly, they looked like my source of freedom.

I saw the medical examiner going through mandatory test reports. It was 11.58pm. He would've to walk over to the adjoining room to initiate the shock treatment. I observed him carefully as he walked to the door. I knew that time was running out but suppressed the urge to check my watch. I took a deep breath and started counting in reverse under my breath. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..."