

# **I Am An Angel's Daughter**

**Preeti G**

**To my dearest parents, especially Mom (Aai), my husband, Himanshu, son - Aadit and my entire family.**

## FOREWORD

*For the first time, in all our lives, we have slept without her. We miss her badly as we imagine her sleeping in her grave, lonely, petrified of the change in dimensions. She must be equally, if not more, missing her children. It must be suffocating her to think of continuing her journey without her children. The house is filled with people, but looks so strange and empty. We are scared how will we spend another day in this house - a real home which she built with love and care, filled it with her beautiful laughter and painted it with optimism and happiness - without her, without our ever-smiling guardian angel, our protective universe called mother.*

**I got to grow up with a mother who taught me to believe in me - Antonio Villaraigosa**

## **To Mother, With Love**

*Each thought of yours gives me joy  
Every moment spent with you feels like heaven  
I remember your smile, your innocent laughter  
Which soothed every sorrow, and eased all pain.*

*Your inspiring words, they ring in my ears  
and seldom let me feel down and low  
Like magic, they wring all fear and disharmony within  
Hope's best companion and sorrow's dreaded foe*

*The peaceful slumber in the warmth of your lap  
to beautiful lullabies and tales so enchanting  
Untold happiness and countless smiles  
They still manage to bring.*

*I miss you often, almost everyday  
Your love so selfless and pure  
I dont know why, but my heart still believes  
Someday, sometime, we shall meet again for sure.*

## *A Worthy Fight*

*Her large room in the hospital seemed coloured eerily red. Everything seemed strange. Where was she? Where was her family?, her children? Her head reeled with dizziness from the drugs and she felt as if in some other world.*

*'Am I dead?' She wondered.*

*Suddenly, she saw a bright light and felt her bed lifting. An old man, who looks familiar, is sitting on a chair at the foot of her bed, reading from a bible. He looks like the pastor in her church, but surprisingly very old. She sees him speaking, but is unable to hear a word of it. He smiles as he speaks while she desperately tries to decipher his speech.*

*She squeezes her eyes to see if she is dreaming. Suddenly, she wakes up to find herself all alone. She looks out for her children, for someone to be by her. Where are my children? She cries. But, finds her voice choked. She shudders in fear feeling completely lost and alone.*

'Ma, what happened?' Nandini, her elder daughter in law was by her side, gently stroking her trying to make her relax. She could see the frail being in particular discomfort. 'Do you want something? Should I get some water?'

Ganga weakly smiled. She felt relieved she wasn't alone.

'No. I am fine. You were here all this time?'

'Hmm.' Nandini nodded.

'So you have been up all night?' Ganga asked concerned.

‘Don’t worry about me. I am fine. Please take rest. I will be here. Call me if you need anything.’

Nandini went to the adjoining room and sat on the sofa resuming her reading. She was tired and terribly in need of sleep. The last few nights, she had hardly caught a wink. Her mother-in-law was unwell and needed constant attention. Her 1 year old bundle of mischief, Shaurya, already took away most of her energies. She felt exhausted and upset.

Upset over her dream she had the previous night.

*Elements used in witchcraft - turmeric, lemon, bones - assorted near a corner of the hallway. The house looked strange - it was their house, but something about it did not seem alright.*

Their pet parrot, Mittu had died in an unfortunate accident a couple of days back and the mood at the house was already sombre owing to the loss of their dear one. Something was not just right in the house. Ma’s illness, mounting financial hassles, the house looked restless and tense. Two years ago, when Nandini had stepped into the house as a new bride, things were different. Ma’s health was much better. In fact, they used to go for long drives together, do a lot of shopping and eating out. They had a strong connection by stars as well as numerology, Nandini felt. She had learnt both the sciences much before and was much in demand for these skills by her new family and acquaintances. Her mother-in-law had been more like a mother to her, pampering her with her fabulous cooking and worthless love and care.

In the past few months, Ma’s illness had aggravated and there was little peace at home. Squabbles and fights between the siblings had robbed the house of its erstwhile unity and happiness. The family tried to resolve their differences for Ganga’s sake but somehow things were running out of hand. The doctors had clearly mentioned a few months was all that was there to Ganga’s life.

‘I hope it’s not a bad omen to something worse happening in the house’, she told her husband over the phone.

‘How could a person like Ma, so optimistic and happy suffer from such a fatal disease? She seems so content, so happy with what life has given her. Definitely, she didn’t deserve the agony and pain.’ She had felt many times.

The family had their own differences, but when it came to Ganga, they were all together, strong as a wall, refusing to let her go, fighting for her against the divine providence, against a certainty which everyone knew about but was unwilling to accept. When she seemed to be low and exhausted with the illness, they would encourage her to hold on, to fight in her best spirit.

They tried with everything.

'Aai, You are all we have.'

'If something happens to you, we will not survive too.'

'Just some more time. Our prayers and wishes will not go in vain. You will definitely recover and enjoy life with us.'

'You have your grandchildren to look after and play with.'

That strengthened her will to carry on, despite the pain, the second-by-second suffering, the agony of having to depend on everyone for the smallest of her tasks. Each time she wanted to go to the loo, or for a bath, she had to depend on her family, her daughter-in-laws in particular. At first she detested and felt embarrassed about it, but when her family called it their privilege to be able to serve her, she knew it was best to accept the situation and continue her fight with it.

'It's only for a little more time. Soon, you will be alright and do your things by yourself.' her children told her often to buck her up. She believed in them and their strong love for her, more than herself. On their part, they knew probably it was a false hope they were giving her, but it could be her placebo and make her determined to keep up her courage. All they wanted was to see her alive, even if she was bedridden, even if she depended on them for all her tasks. She was their anchor in life, their fountain of happiness. To see her alive daily was more than a blessing to them.

Ganga had resolved to fight against her disease for her children's sake- their happiness and their desire. Her children was all she had. They were her dreams which were realised, and they were her pride. Their responsibility had given her life a purpose, and which gave her strength in the worst of times.

She couldn't have faced life's struggles with such courage, had it not been for her children who loved her deeply, and cared for her. She felt important, loved and needed. She had to face this fight with all her might and win it for their sake. She wanted them to look up to her and say she was their strength.

Of course, with each passing day her suffering increased. She couldn't understand how a person like her who led an austere lifestyle and took a healthy diet, could fall prey to such a dreaded disease.

“I haven’t wronged anybody, have always worked hard for my family. I have loved life and enjoyed its struggles and joys. I’ve rarely cribbed. Then, why the suffering? Why the fatal disease? Why ME?” she languished in herself.

### ***Childhood and Innocence***

The year was 1946. She was born a delicate, beautiful child - Her dark hair contrasted her fair skin wonderfully, and her tiny pink lips were like fragile rose petals on a cherubic face. No one could escape her mesmerizing smile and her soft fragrant touch.

Her parents looked adoringly at the baby for a long time.

‘What should we name her?’

‘She looks so calm and pure, just like our sacred river, Ganga. Yes, let’s call her Ganga.’

They agreed in unison.

After a girl, her parents were keen to have a male child (as boys are considered natural heirs of their family name and property). So, the birth of a second girl into the poor, orthodox brahmin household brought mixed reactions. Even as the parents silently resigned themselves to destiny’s latest offering, little did they know a greater jolt awaited them.

Another girl and finally a boy followed. The family was overjoyed that the heavens had finally heard their prayers. A son was born, their heir was born. Relatives and friends were invited and celebrations took place announcing the birth of their successor.

Ganga grew up into a sharp and quick-witted girl. Though her parents rarely admitted it, Ganga was their pride, studying hard and proving her merit at school. While the richer students went for tuitions, Ganga studied on her own and topped every class.

'Wish the boy was half as clever as her' the parents often remarked looking at their son who was busy playing with children in the neighborhood.

They would observe in awe how Ganga would study late in the night with the help of a lamp. After helping her mother in her housework, she would take time off for her studies. Studies were like an obsession with her. She wanted to learn more and more, she had a million questions to ask her teachers and elders. She wanted to work hard, to become something in life and make their lives easier.

'Dada, I will become a teacher one day!' She would proudly exclaim to her father.

'Why, teacher?'

"Because I love teaching. And then, I will earn a lot of money. So, you won't have to struggle anymore'

Her mother would quip 'But, you will be married away before that'

"No, No. I won't leave you ever. Find me a husband who'll stay with us"

"Silly. All girls say that when they are your age. Even I did!" Her mother would say before calling them for their supper.

Dinner was a delicious spread of Jhundka and Bhakri - a traditional maharashtrian curry made of lentil flour and bread. She adored her mother's dishes. Even her simple dal-rice would seem so heavenly. Everything that went into the dal, the masalas, ghee - all would be made at home.

Ganga must have been seven when this happened. She suddenly fell while playing in the courtyard and was unable to get herself up. A couple of visits to the doctor revealed a greater, unexpected shock - She would never be able to walk again - she had Polio. Her parents tried different therapies and doctors, but all in vain.

She felt lonelier because she couldn't play hopping and other regular games with her friends. But, even if she did, she never showed it. She transformed her play hours into teaching sessions for the tiny tots in the neighbourhood. She loved to tell stories and teach children, especially her poor neighbours. She was their favorite 'akka', their elder sister, who sang beautiful marathi songs to them.

She had struggled really hard to study up to graduation and knew perfectly what it meant to be yearning for knowledge, success and a respectable social status.

She took great care of her thick dark tresses, which along with her blemishless rose-pink complexion and her large eyes made her a picture of remarkable beauty. But, the best thing about her was her belief in herself despite her shortcomings, the belief that whatever life gets is a blessing in disguise.

Everyday, she would walk to her school with her Nana (Father's brother). She would walk slowly with the help of a stick, listening to Nana's stories. Nana was a dominating, stocky man who had a signature baritone voice, the children in the family loved. He was especially fond of Ganga and would tell her about their childhood as a rich farmer's children, playing in large groundnut fields, eating jaggery and travelling by bullock carts, munching on sugarcane. Nana's siblings were extremely fond of each other and would set the house on fire, with their non-stop chatter, whenever they met. Nana would take 'shata-pauli' or 100 footsteps after every meal, munching on a roasted peanut at every step.

Ganga was Nana's favorite among all the children. He would often happily exclaim to dada, Ganga's father, how lucky he was to have such a cheerful and bright daughter. Looking at her devotion to studies, he encouraged her to study further and promised help whenever needed. Ganga's family lived off their small home-made masalas store. Her mother, a stout and dark woman, would grind all the masalas herself and help her husband at the store as well. Had it not been for the uncalculated philanthropy of dada, they would have done well financially.

But, that was not to be! Many took advantage of his altruistic nature, and he would naturally give in to their stories, donating money or store items for free. Soon, they fell into hard times and having two meals a day also became a rarity.

Ganga took tuitions for the neighbouring kids to support her family. Thanks to her tuitions and scholarships, she managed to complete graduation. She passed with distinction and was on cloud nine. She treated her sisters to a movie. Movies was something the girls loved going to. Dreams got wings at the movies and the girls would soar into some ethereal world wishing the dream would never end, and their heroes would come soon.

## ***The Ailment***

*I struggle for every breath. Every next moment suffocates me - what will I do when the machines will fail me? I have restricted my laughter - for every laughter is an extra effort on my lungs, that failing apparatus in my body which is slowly dying a painful death. Every laughter, every movement of my body breaks my breath into embarrassing fits of unending cough. Everytime I look at myself in the mirror, I see a scary ghost of my real self - one who's scared of more hospitalisations, of steroids that drain me of my energies, of blood tests that suck more and more of my blood, of reports that hardly show something to be happy about. I am not afraid of death, I am scared to tell my children I am failing in this fight against death, against their hope that I will win.*

Wikipedia defines Interstitial Lung Disease or Pulmonary Fibrosis as a progressive restrictive breathing capability as the interstitium of the lungs is affected. There are several types of Pulmonary Fibrosis. In her case, it was Idiopathic, meaning the cause is unknown. There is scarring of the lung tissues causing lesser oxygen flow to the rest of the body from the lungs. There is no cure, just precaution and prolonging of the symptoms. In short, ILD is FATAL.

Ganga was advised certain Steroids for her condition. Intermittently, every few months the drugs started waning in their strength. Lung transplant was ruled out due to her age factor. Higher dosages of steroids were prescribed which made her seem perfect for a little while. She would even walk short distances with the help of crutches.

And just when everyone would be heaving a sigh of relief, in a couple of months, the severe breathlessness and coughing fits would return and she would require hospitalisation. It would all happen unannounced, suddenly. A slight weather change would trigger severe infection in her lungs and make her ill again. In a few months, she looked like 10 years older. In fact, with dark circles under her eyes and hair fast greying, she was now looking older than her years!

In a couple of years since the diagnosis, she was advised to use humidifier for some part of the day, but to try breathing without machine support as much as possible. The next year saw her depending more and more on the machine. She could no longer do any activities on her own. A little time off the machine would leave her gasping for breath and drained out.

It was very embarrassing for a strong woman like her to depend on her children for basic activities like taking a bath or going to the loo. She broke down several times, 'Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Will I ever get well again? I have become a burden on you.'

Somewhere her will to survive was breaking down. If something was making her put on the fight, it was her children's love and concern for her.

More than love, she was their habit, their routine. Every day since they remembered, they had never felt a dearth of love or attention because of her. She would take care of their smallest needs and ensure they had the best in everything. Even if there were a thousand afflictions in her mind, she would be always smiling and strong for her children.

After some more time, huge oxygen cylinders took the place of the humidifiers. She would require hospitalisation more frequently. Her beautiful complexion had sobered. Her eyes looked tired with huge dark circles under them. She had lost most of her once thick hair and what remained was greying rapidly. She was almost looking like a ghost of her earlier self.

She wanted to talk, laugh and be busy as before but her body no longer permitted it. Her bouts of breathlessness left her incapable of doing little things which she enjoyed. She missed sitting in her porch looking at the birds and enjoying the breeze in her garden. Doctors warned against exposing her to any weather change as much as possible and to keep her indoors in 'ICU-like' conditions.

Come, aai. Let's go for a drive.' Vijay would ask her often.

She would sit calmly in their car with the cylinder beside her, with a mild sorrow subtly reflecting on her face. She was facing a storm inside, a war with herself. One part of her wanted to give up, she could no longer bear the constant ignominy of having to depend on others for the smallest tasks. The smallest acts of nature appeared strenuous and impossible now. The other part wanted to keep up the fight for the sake of her children, who loved her dearly.

'We can't think of a life without you. We need you. Besides, there's so much more left for you to see - your grandchildren, their education, play, marriages...' Her children would say to her.

That would make her smile. She loved children. 'They are the images of god.' she felt. She craved to play with her grandchildren, to see them through their school, to watch them grow up and spend and enjoy time with them. But, somewhere deep in her heart a suspicion arose if she would ever get well again. The doctors hadn't hidden much details about her deteriorating condition from her, so she knew that she would survive a couple of months more under the best possible conditions.

On some days, she would feel drained out and restless, probably due to the effect of steroids in her system. But, the optimist in her refused to take things lying down. She tried to keep herself busy as before - did the cleaning and cooking, took great care of her plants and tried to stay vibrant as ever. Looking at her spirit, friends and well-wishers would wonder if she was really suffering from a fatal disease!

Vijay always comforted his mother saying 'only the best and most loved are tested by god'

She would smile. 'But, I don't want you to suffer with me. All of you have changed so much in the past few years, because of my illness. Isn't that true?

The truth in his mother's words stung him. But, her observation was right. They had all become easily irritated, short-tempered and angry. When you helplessly watch your most precious thing slip away, when you know all the medicines in the world can't save them, how else would you be like? But, equally strong was their quest for a remedy for their mother's illness. Their one desire was to get her well soon and to prevent losing her for as long as they could. They refused to accept the doctor's word regarding the fatality of the disease and the time remaining in their mother's life. It was as if they were scared to imagine that very moment when their mother would not be there with them. It was scary and blank.

They had tried different therapies, visited countless specialists. Nothing worked. Everyone could see life slowly waning away from her. In a couple of years, she had started looking so old and weak. Her cheeks were no longer pink and healthy. Her hair had greyed and her

eyes looked tired and drained of all energy and enthusiasm. The steroids were no longer much helpful in enabling her to breathe normally. Even the oxygen cylinder which had supported her in the past few months, seemed to be losing its vitality.

Frequent hospitalisations, heavy steroids failed to destroy the optimist in her. She found reasons to celebrate life in more ways than one. On Sundays, when she couldn't manage to go to church and feeling a little low, she would make up for it by cooking up something special. With Vijay's help, she would set about making her famous biryani and mutton curry. She loved cooking for her family and sharing it with neighbors and friends. It gave her a high when she saw people eating off delicious food off her hands.

When the weather looked good, evenings would be spent chatting in the garden with the family, enjoying the cool breeze and listening to the birds songs.

Ganga would watch the two pigeons that would come daily at a particular time in their portico, feeding and drinking.

'Probably they are a couple.' she would say while throwing them their feed.

She loved to arrange for home-cooked meals to the children at the nearby orphanage school. The school principal was a distant relative and frequently came over, mostly with some concern or the other related to the school particularly.

'This year the number of children is a little higher than before. The funds haven't come yet. I feel so sorry to see the children adjusting with the few utensils we have.'

After a while, Ganga spoke 'how much would you need?'

What?

'I mean how much would it cost for you to arrange for the required utensils?'

After learning of the stipulated amount, Ganga confirmed that she would take care of that. It happened frequently with her - sending meals and taking care of a friend's children in their absence, pampering their beloved labrador, Rocky, providing moral and monetary support for an acquaintance in need. She had a sea of compassion for people around her. Probably, that was the reason, why she was deeply loved by everyone she knew. It would make her happy to bring a smile to someone's face. That, she often said, was god's purpose for her.

When she came to know of her ailment, she was frenzied for a moment. She had just begun to settle down to enjoy her retirement after 35 years of hard work. She had so many plans, so much to do. Her children were still not settled in life. She dreamt of seeing them happily married with children. One question that constantly bulldozed her mind was 'Why me?'

She knew she had to be strong for her children. Just like how she had been when Paul, her husband had unexpectedly died years ago, leaving her to bring up three young children on her own. It had scared her then. But, even if something in her was broken, insecure and afraid, she was determined not to reveal it to her children. She wanted them to be strong individuals, fearless and daring. She only wanted to inspire the best qualities in them.

15 years later, life had challenged her again - this time with a dreaded disease.

### *Dreams and Hope*

At 19, Ganga got selected for a government job. Her heart was beating loudly with joy. She was sure now their hardships would end. A government job meant a secure and reasonable income besides the gratifying feeling of being financially independent.

Her sister, saru, was an excellent cook. Ganga loved coming home to a hot meal cooked by her sister. Be it her simple Varan-Bhaat (Maharashtrian for Dal and rice) or Pitla-Bhakri (gram-flour based preparation and bread), the aroma and taste of simple home-cooked food would soothe Ganga's tiredness away. The sisters shared a loving and understanding bond between them.

At work, she enjoyed the attention of her colleagues, who found themselves attracted to her youth, beauty and intellect. A great feeling of self-worth and a plethora of new hopes and dreams springing up before her.

Life seemed more beautiful than ever with the newly gained financial independence. She was more self-assured and brimming with optimism. But, somewhere the seamless, clear sky of her life was beginning to crack...

She was 28. Most of her friends had got married and settled with kids. She began to feel the need of a life partner, the dream of being a householder, bearing kids and taking care of them. The joy in her heart was slowly transforming to pangs of guilt and pain. When others asked her father whether he was searching for a groom for Ganga, he would retort 'Is it that easy to find an eligible groom these days? And, with Ganga's problem...'

'Problem'.. Ganga wouldn't need to hear the rest. She knew, for some reason, dada wasn't trying too hard to find them their life partners. Her disability was an excuse he had conveniently sought to mention at the slightest hint on the subject. But, for that matter, even her elder sister, who was four years older to her was still unmarried. Certainly, she was good-looking, educated and had no disabilities. Ganga wondered if Dada, her father, was thinking of living off his daughters' incomes for life.

It was through sheer coincidence that Ganga's elder sister got married later. Sunanda, one of Ganga's closest friends had dropped in for tea one day. In the midst of their conversation, she saw Ganga's sister returning from work. She mentioned it to Dada then that she had a distant cousin whose family was looking for a good match for him. Would they be interested to talk to them?

More than Dada, it was Ganga who prodded Sunanda to set up a meeting between the two families. The boy and his family liked Ganga's elder sister and the match was settled.

After her elder sister's wedding, with no one really keen about her settlement, Ganga slowly started accepting a reality she had long avoided to think about. Her suspicion that she would never get married became stronger with time. Her family seemed to be more than happy with her income and her contribution towards her 'responsibilities.'

She longed for that special someone every girl at her age dreams of. Someone, who she could blindly trust in at all times, who would share her joys and sorrows and who would give her a new and more respectable identity in the society. She craved to have a family, to bear children who would address her with the sweetest word in any language 'aai', meaning mother.

In moments of deep desperation, she remembered several direct and indirect proposals she got at her office. But, more than religious differences, she dared not hurt her family, especially Dada. She respected him too much to hurt his feelings. After all, since their mother's death ages ago, in a kitchen fire accident, he had remained unmarried and raised the children on his own.

She would spend long hours at the nearby temple, pouring her heart to the deity. There was power in her prayers and she felt better. In her heart of hearts, she knew somehow her life was going to change for better. Even in the dark night of her life she continued to see the silver lining .

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### *A Love Affair*

His name was Paul. He worked in another department at her office. They had met formally on a couple of occasions. She knew of his reputation as a casanova, so she kept a wilful distance from him. But, on April Fools', she had played a prank on several colleagues, Paul being one of them, little knowing it will draw them closer. They had both laughed over it.

Thereafter, Paul was a regular at her desk, sometimes coming on the pretext of work. He was attracted to this fair and pretty girl. Everyone could see love blossoming between the two, who were oblivious to what the world was thinking about them. She loved his excellent communication and beautiful poetry. He could write wonderfully on any subject, reading out his poetry to her when they met. His poetry was pure magic for the ears listening to it.

She never realised when she had fallen in love with him. She enjoyed being the centre of his attention, the queen of his poetry. She loved it when he flirted with her. She waited for him to come by and make conversation. She longed for him to pop the inevitable question. Would he? or won't he? she wondered. But, whenever the thought crossed her mind, a picture appeared before her eyes and she would blank out - the picture of Dada and the rest of the family, eyeing her with indignation, as if she had just crushed their expectations from her.

She shuddered to think of them in this context. How would they react? Dada might even take his life rather than getting his daughter married to a Christian. Communal and religious differences - he was a telugu christian - were standing like tall barriers to her love.

She tried to dismiss Paul's attention as casual flirtation.

'What if he's not really serious about me? Why would he accept me with my disability?' She wondered.

Years of living with her disability, she was accustomed to sympathetic glances, made to feel a 'different' and 'disconcerting' part of the society. She had fought self-pity and sympathy, by working harder, and had several achievements to her list. Slowly, she had built her confidence, ounce by ounce, each moment, every day of her life, listening to her optimistic inner voice

One wrong step and her whole life would change. She was a strong and independent woman but she was bound by tradition too. She didn't want to hurt her family, especially dada's sentiments.

The sky was overcast and the winds heavy. Perplexed, she wept and prayed, for a solution, the whole day at the temple. She thought about her childhood, how happy and playful she was and the polio that struck her when she was seven. Her life changed after that. She was the brightest among all the children but was treated with contempt and pity and made to feel more like a liability. And then, there was no dearth of friends and neighbors, their feigning sympathies and a deluge of unsolicited suggestions flowing in from unexpected quarters. She tried to compensate for her physical infirmity with extra diligence to her studies and proved a worthy student. However, her disability always, if not mostly, overshadowed her achievements and brilliance and became the focus of discussion, more often-than not.

She didn't remember when she had converted her mediocrities to her strengths and strongly resolved to herself not to let people's opinions and versions of her, affect her. It took a lot of her inner strength to put on that exterior brimming with confidence and happiness.

She didn't realise when the day passed as she contemplated about her current predicament. As dusk broke, she felt more confident and resolved to take a major decision which could alter her life in so many ways. But, as always, she was glad she had come to a decision and vowed to herself that she would not regret it later if it ever backfired.

The clouds were slowly melting away to the first heavy showers of the season. She loved the rains as they produced a myriad of happy feelings in her every time they touched her. She felt love and joy and her heart felt lighter and much happier than ever.

Her conscience was hysterical. For once, after a really long time, she was doing something for herself.

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### *The Proposal*

For Ganga, it was increasingly becoming tougher, to see a hitherto unknown side of her family, which was egotistical, angry and indifferent to her happiness. In a weak moment, she wondered why she had never thought of herself ever before. For once, for her sake, couldn't her family look beyond these hollow barriers of tradition and culture, beyond their own self-centeredness? Did her happiness matter to them at all?

Ganga's close cousin, Vishwanath, intervened when things were going out of control. He was elder to Ganga and was very fond of her. He was the only one from her family, who understood her stance and stood by her. He knew that an independent and mature woman like her must have liked something strongly in her man enough to go against her own family. He, as her elder brother, raised valid concerns about Paul, but in the end, her love for Paul stood firm and he failed to see reason how Paul couldn't be worthy of Ganga.

It was a sunny day when Paul arrived at their house. He was tall, dark with sharp, eloquent features. He looked a little nervous as he introduced himself to her family. There was a telling awkwardness in everyone's mannerisms. She tried to ease the situation by putting in a few adjectives about him trying to keep her eulogy of him, as trim as possible. Clearing his throat, sipping his tea, he broke the ice first.

"Tea's good. You made? He said addressing Ganga, trying to hide his nervousness.

'No, Saru did. Try the Pakoras too. She makes them real good. She smiled back, ignoring the raised eyebrows around.

'So, what do your parents do? And your family...do you stay together?' Dada broke into their conversation.

'My parents are no more. My father was a pastor, a very respected man in our town. Mother passed away a few years ago. I have a large family back in my small town - we are all 11 siblings, most are married with their own families. I stay at a hostel away from my family for the job.'

The questions rained from both Dada and Nana.

'And are you planning to settle down here?'

'Do you smoke/drink?'

'Do you eat non-veg?'

'Will you make Ganga change her religion after marriage?'

Paul's responses were dignified and succinct. There was something charming about him, about the manner he went about trying to convince her family, of his love. Actually, he had coe prepared for something worse. Both Paul and Ganga felt ages pass before they regained their composure. An embarrassing silence ensued long even after he left.

She knew there would be a whole torrent of emotions ranging from anger to insecurities to deal with. And true to her fears, the torrent came first as a verbal volley of accusations and threats from Dada, then anxious concerns of the rest of the family, and finally the fear of societal boycott from one and all.

She had taken her decision and would stick to it, no matter what. She stood alone, stolidly resolute, unbroken by anything in the world. She had stopped reacting to their emotional extortions for she was conversing in the language of love. Love had filled every cell in her

and become her elixir of strength. Her conscience seemed to be shouting in ecstasy - she was doing the right thing, for she was doing it for love and love never fails.

Even though Vishwanath had a few good things to say about Paul like 'He seems to genuinely care for Ganga', 'Looks like a simple man', Dada was absolutely critical in his views.

'God knows how much truth is there in his statements. I haven't heard about a christian not drinking wine. Besides, he eats non-veg food. What will people say? That Dada couldn't find a better boy for his Ganga? Besides, what will happen to Saru's future? Who will marry that girl knowing that her elder sister has married a Christian'

The last part was mentioned with disgust as if being a christian was some carnal sin. Nana listened patiently as his brother spoke trying to convince everyone that the marriage was unacceptable in all terms.

'Have you thought about Ganga? About her marriage and future? I know the girl much better than you. If she has decided upon someone as her life partner, she must have given it a good thought.'

'Huh. Good thought. She's become so selfish, she doesn't even think of her younger sister's settlement.'

Nana retorted angrily, 'don't you dare call her selfish! The poor girl has been working hard since her childhood, so as never to burden you. Your needs, your requirements is what concerns her all the time.

Dada was a little apologetic this time 'I didn't mean it that way...'

I don't want to hear another word on this. If you care for my opinion, let the girl have her way. If you ask me, I found Paul quite a good match for her.

When words come from Nana's mouth, it is generally the final opinion of the entire family. So, the matter ended there, with the obvious conclusion that Ganga would get married to Paul.

But, things changed at home after that. It was a reluctant acceptance for her family. In their hearts, was burning anger at the obvious sacrilege to their views and expectations. They pretended she didn't exist for them. No one spoke to her. Everyone looked irritated and angry with her for her 'crime'. They thought the boycott would put sense into her head and she would realise her mistake. Her monthly salary was accepted as usual but the boycott and anger subsisted.

If she felt guilty or pained of offending her family, she did not show it. Her stubbornness was not against the family but their self-centeredness. It's good to stand and show courage than regret your whole life why you never stood for yourself.

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### *And, Finally - The Marriage!*

They had decided to continue following their respective religions. So, they got married both in the church as well as per the hindu tradition in the Arya Samaj. The marriage was a simple affair with just a handful of friends and relatives from both sides. All faces except, of course, the bride and the groom and a few others, looked dismal and ill-at-ease.

Dada, especially looked embarrassed and upset. His orthodox mind was finding it hard to believe that the daughter he least thought would rebel had chosen her life partner and was marrying him against his wishes. Somewhere, he was also worried about the loss of income now that she would no longer stay with them. She had, of course, assured him sometime ago, 'Things will not change after my marriage. Paul and I have decided that I will continue to hand over my income to you until my younger brother is financially settled to take care of you.'

Several bewildered eyes filled with disdain watched her. But did she even care? No, for her heart was brimming with a million dreams filled with love and joy. She missed the pomp of a regular hindu wedding, the gaiety of scores of guests, the traditional 'mandap' made of banana tree, and all the regular nitty-gritties of the wedding of her dreams. But, her sadness for expunged by the presence of Paul beside her. She felt she was now going to live her dreams - she would have her own house, children - all what she'd craved for secretly in her heart of hearts but feared dreaming about. Everything else looked insignificant.

She looked a million bucks in her peacock green silk sari with golden petal prints. Her fair color was resplendent with inner joy and excitement. She wore jasmine flowers in her hair, as is customary for an Indian bride, put kajal in her eyes which made them look more bigger and beautiful than ever. Her heart was bubbling with untold happiness as she enjoyed every moment of entering into wedded life.

She would be someone else's now. Her dream of becoming a married woman and having a respectable position in the society was becoming true now. She would have someone to share her joys and sorrows, her responsibilities and emotions. A new life was waiting for her.

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## *The Unexpected Blow*

Why does life always test your happiness? When you have just heaved a sigh of relief for things going your way, you get a bolt from the blue, which makes you question if you took the right decision. When fortunes dwindle, they don't shout out their plans beforehand. They creep in gently, and just when you start to think you have a new friend, they explode their dark little secret. It's time for rosy dreams to fade away, for life to slowly start getting miserable again. Time to introspect and ask a million questions why it happened to us? If you survive this test, probably you will get used to more and that's when true maturity dawns and we'll learn to laugh at the unexplained ways of providence.

With a million butterflies in her stomach, as she stepped into her new house, she silently thanked the gods for all the good fortune in her life. It was a small, cosy house, unkempt, for that matter, messy, but she didn't mind as she could only feel and see love around her.

It must have been late into the night when he came. His mood was unusually stern and he looked more lost than happy. She smiled at him and seeing his indifference, softly touched him out of concern to know the reason of his hurt.

He shrugged away as she was puzzled at his behaviour.

'What happened? Are you alright?' she asked.

'Ya. I am alright! Don't I look alright?' he retorted angrily, before shrugging her aside again and landing himself onto a rocking chair. She kept asking him for a long time what troubled or upset him for his sudden change in behaviour. But, he never bothered to look at her, talk to her. He looked strangely angry and distant. She had never seen him like this before. Hurt and nonplussed, she crept up to one side of the bed, sobbing softly. She felt alone, terribly alone and lost. She was unable to decipher the storm brewing in her, a storm of different emotions - confusion, guilt, anger and inexplicable pain.

Morning came later than usual, she felt. She hardly slept that night which seemed never ending.

'Maybe he'll be fine in the morning. Maybe he'll tell me what upset him.' She was hoping desperately for Paul to come over and talk to her. He didn't. She found him dozing on the chair. A few cigarettes were lying beneath the chair. She remembered how she liked the rings of smoke he left into the air with each puff of cigarette he inhaled. Queerly, she loved the smell of it wafting by. But that day, she just wanted him to smoke one ring into the air, just for her as he used to earlier, just to show that everything was normal again.

'Tea.' She gently stroked him.

He got up with a jerk and looked at her with a look - did she just see anger and hatred in those eyes?

A couple of days passed this way. There was little conversation, a monosyllable here and there. She tried her best to make things normal but as each day passed, her hopes were dying a painful death every moment.

One evening, when she could take it no more, she burst out, 'What happened to you suddenly? Tell me if I have hurt you in some way. Just, don't keep quiet. Let me know why you are behaving like this.'

He retorted angrily 'If you keep pestering me like this, I will leave you at your father's place!'

'Father's place! Is this why you married me? Is this why I went against my whole family so that you will dump me there after marriage. I will rather die than going back there to blot their reputation'

'Don't act as if you did a big favor by marrying me! I warn you again, if you trouble me like this I will throw you out of the house'

His words, abuses and allegations never ended. But, nothing seemed to make sense. Everything looked blank and strange. She could not think of sharing her woes with her sisters or friends. She thought of giving some time for things to settle down by themselves. Someday, he might rekindle his love for her and become the Paul she had loved, the one she had given up everything else for.

She never came to know her fault or what troubled him. One thing she vaguely guessed later was probably his expectations from her family's living standards was too high, probably he had a lot of expectations from the matrimony, which were never met, frustrating him.

He would come late every night, while she would wait for him at the doorstep. Post 9PM, the street wore a deserted look with the exception of a stray drunkard, sometimes. She would sit there until he came, alone and endlessly counting every second for his return. She cooked different delicacies for him, ensured she looked prim and proper and waited for him to come home and look at her effort in making their house a home. She had learnt to cook non-vegetarian food from Paul's cousin who had stayed with them for sometime. She had converted to his religion so that their children later wouldn't have a problem. But, do what she may, his heart never seemed to soften, he never seemed to have loved her.

She was always alone with her insecurities, and the more later he came, the greater her fears became. There was always a prayer in her heart for his and her family's well-being.

On those rare days when they had dinner together, she craved for one compliment, one loving glance of his. Needless to say, she was fervently disappointed. She introspected herself, tried to be perfect in everything, but it was as if, he was no longer bothered about

her existence. She, on the other hand, was determined to make their marriage work, come what may.

To the outer world, they managed to hide their unhappy marriage and seemed very much like any other normal couple. She missed cracking jokes with her sisters and the fun they had going to movies and shopping on their payday. She missed them but was strongly determined to fight it all on her own, for it was her choice - the life that she was leading now.

The barren pipal tree on the street, opposite their house, shorn off leaves, looked hollow and incomplete. Everyday she would look at it, and feel the same - empty and insignificant.

To her family, neighbors, colleagues she tried to appear the same - ever-smiling and optimistic person, but somewhere deep within, something was crumbling, something was slowly dying away.. was it her heart?

She hoped children would change his love for her. She loved children and craved to become a mother. It was 3 years after their marriage that her dream came true. She couldn't believe it when her doctor said she was expecting. She went crazy with joy. A million bubbles of joy burst in her as she conveyed the news to Paul. It made him happy too.

She spoke to the life growing in her, 'Trust me darling, I will ensure your life is filled with untold happiness. I will try to be the best mother in the world and protect you from all harm. Trust me. Trust me.'

The world around her was silent. Her pregnancy did not change Paul's behavior or his ways. But, she was more content now. She had someone to speak to, someone so very close to her that her fears were dying away slowly. She laughed more, took more care of herself and tried not getting hurt by Paul's behavior.

After all, she had to nurture the life in her, and bring him or her into her world, extend her love and ensure the child came into all that was happy and bright.

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*Despondent*

She was very fond of reading books. Sarat chandra and Premchand were among her favorite authors. At school she was often caught sneaking into the library and burying herself under a pile of books. She was labelled a bookworm by her friends. Once when she was caught reading a novel while a class was on, the teacher laughingly remarked, 'You never know probably someday you may no longer be so obsessed with books. Tastes change with life.'

She sighed to herself remembering her teacher's words as she continued with her cooking. She hadn't touched a book since her marriage. Actually, she didn't feel like doing anything she loved to do earlier. She was a sullen soul longing for one loving touch and a gentle hug. In her heart of hearts, she was scared of her future. She imagined a million times about the moment Paul would come over to her and become once again the Paul she loved. She would forget all the hurt for that one moment. She wondered how that would happen, but something in her told her to hold on, something good would happen soon.

As time passed, there was not much change in Paul's behavior. He was still sulking and brooding all the time. Where did the love in his heart vanish? she wondered.

What if Paul would separate from her as he had threatened to, several times? Where would she go? Her family feared the society and would never accept her back. Also, marriage was her decision. Why should her family suffer its consequences? Every time Paul threatened to send her back to her parent's place, she had strongly answered that if it were to happen then she would end her life rather than trouble her family.

Increasingly, she was feeling isolated as each day passed. She tried to immerse herself in her office work and her household. Nothing really helped. Feelings of guilt continued to haunt her as she tried to reason why she had sacrificed everything, her family, religion- everything- for a man who detested her for no apparent reason. But, in the end, something in her reassured her that all will be well someday soon. That hope became her strength as she fought on against the regressive beliefs of her family, her disgruntled husband, her own physical disability and against everything which tried to repress her.

3 years passed since their marriage and things had hardly changed for the better. He remained elusive, but she tried to be happy for all the things she had. She had realised that her marriage was a mistake. But, she was no better than how she was before getting married. Her only solace was that she was now a respected part of the society. She stopped asking Paul what troubled him to change his behavior thus.

With each day, she was more determined to be happy, no matter what. With each taunt, each blow to her ego and self-respect, she was becoming stronger and more resolved to keep going on. It was not in her nature to fail without trying.

She silently hoped that probably after having children, he might change. They did have 3 children. Paul changed a little. He became a bit more caring and sensitive towards her. He was very possessive about his children, but it was Ganga who took care of the children on her own, with little support from him.

She immersed her sorrow somewhere in the depths of her heart and looked after her children with dedication and love. She played with them, sang to them, told them stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. She told them interesting folk stories as well. When they started going to school, she took active interest in their studies and friends.

*Trying doesn't have an end limit..so she continued trying to make things better around her.*

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***More About Paul***

Is one good or bad by birth? Or do circumstances change people for what they turn out to be?

Paul had a sad, often unshared past. He was born to the second wife of his father and was the fourth youngest of the 12 children. Their family was poor and lived from hand to mouth. His father was a clergyman, respected in his small town, but could hardly make ends meet for the large family. Poverty and a large family made Paul largely neglected and bereft of attention. As a child, love and care were strange words to him.

Born with an insatiable appetite for books and reading, he found solace in the melancholy of Wordsworth poems and Shakespearean tragedies.

An old muslim lady who lived in their neighbourhood was very fond of him and called him 'bacchalu' or little child lovingly. She was more like a mother to him, feeding him when he was small and pampering him as if he were her own family. God knows what bound them, but whatever it was, it was strong and unforgettable, for he spoke fondly of her whenever his children asked him about his childhood.

Paul was tired of the struggle around him, struggle for livelihood, education, and even for the basic requirements of human life. He was carefree, fun-loving and ambitious. Naturally, he felt claustrophobic at home and longed to move out at the earliest. His desire might have been intense, for the opportunity soon came in the form of a government job in the city. His family was equally delighted to have extra income for the household. There was a younger brother, whose education was to be done and a younger sister who was to be married off. Paul had a lot of responsibility over his head, but he was thinking about something else now.

After years, his wish to enjoy freedom is true. He would have financial independence and could live his life the way he wanted - away from his family, from the pull of sadness that you have become so accustomed to.

*Beyond this land of dearth, there is a beautiful valley of lush vegetation, where fresh air and opportunity is abundant, where you can create a life of your own dreams ...*

The beautiful city of Hyderabad seduced him beyond his wildest imagination. He had never seen such well-dressed and well-mannered people, who greeted each other with an 'aadab'. Urdu was a beautiful language he was keen to adapt himself to. Women were beautiful and much more well-groomed than back home. Hindu women had large bindis on their foreheads, sensuous jasmine/firecracker flowers wound into 'malas' adorned their neatly oiled hair buns. They also loved to deck themselves in gold jewelry, be it beautiful bangles, bracelets, or earrings. The huge bungalows, wide roads, historical monuments - everything about the city was drawing Paul deeper into it.

His father's letters implored him for monetary help for some or the other difficulty at home. Sometimes, he was just too helpless to help, at other times, his pent-up anger and hurt at being overlooked, rose and he ignored them. The regret of not being able to be a good son remained with him till his last breath...

He wrote beautiful stories, penning all his hurt and guilt into his work. His writing was his breather from the harrowing past filled with loneliness and insecurity. And just it was in his love stories, he met Ganga and fell crazily in love with her. He experienced inexplicable attraction and happiness when he was with her. It was after a really long time he was actually happy in his life. He liked her innocence, responsible attitude and caring nature.

When he was proposing marriage to her, he knew what he was going in for. He knew she was from a conservative brahmin family, the second of the 4 children and the main breadwinner for the family. She had told him (in a lighter vein), of her dad being a well-off businessman and so, probably, he was expecting something more than her, in their marriage.

No one knows why, but after their simple wedding, where there were only grim faces (the only smiling face was her's), his behavior towards her completely changed. Her very presence seemed to irk him. He rarely spoke, spent most time outdoors and was completely indifferent to her. What storm brew in his heart, we are not sure, but somewhere a heart bled in silence, unable to decipher where the blame lay.

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## *The Hallucinations*

Ever since Ganga got pregnant with her first child, she started experiencing strange things. She would see a dark and tall shadow staring at her in the middle of the night. Then, sometimes the shadow would shrink to a small being and crawl over her. Sometimes, she would feel the shadow was throttling her and she would wake up, disturbed and terribly shaken.

Soon after the couple moved into their new house, there was an incident which Ganga rarely spoke about. It was a large and old house. But, it was beautiful. Ganga ensured the house looked spic and span. Even though both worked at the same office, Ganga would be home by evening and Paul would come home late usually very late. As she was waiting for him, every now and then looking at the window, she witnessed an accident.

That night, the road was pitch dark, the street lights weren't on. A speeding scooter had rammed into the pipal tree, with a loud sound. A crowd gathered and the severely injured driver was taken to the nearby hospital. Later, they came to know that he didn't survive. Having witnessed the whole incident from such close quarters, Ganga was deeply disturbed. Soon, after that, she started experiencing the strange happenings. The doctors attributed it to her witnessing the accident and her sensitive mind hallucinating reactively.

Their church pastor was called to pray and 'cleanse' the house. He said as she had converted to another religion, her staunch brahmin mind was hallucinating while adjusting to the change. It was satan tormenting her for having accepted christianity and that it was a temporary test.

We do not know how accurate either of the theories were, but Ganga continued to experience the hallucinations throughout her life since then. Over the years, the visions continued but were less frequent and her mind became strong enough to deal with it.

*When you fear the unknown, it becomes stronger and more intrusive of your life. When you start accepting your fears with courage, they become imbecile.*

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## *Aarti*

It was a Sunny Sunday afternoon. Aarti was cooking hyderabadi biryani and mirch ka salan for lunch and the aroma was simply irresistible. She lip-synced one of Lata's songs being played on tv 'lag ja gale..' as she cut the vegetables and checked to see if the rice was cooked. She loved cooking as she had mastered it on her own, within a short span of time and loved each and every compliment that came her way every time her dishes turned out wonderful . Her mantra was saying a little prayer before cooking each meal, especially if it was for her husband, Anil as he was a connoisseur of good food. She loved the way his face lit up after a hearty meal.

'Was it the biryani or me that you loved more when you came down to see me?' Aarti would pull her husband's leg often over his foodie nature.

Hubby retorted with a wink 'Both were good, but I liked the Biryani better.' He would get ready to shield himself from the punches that were coming his way.

Aarti and Anil had met over a matrimonial website and hit it off instantly.

'You sounded so boring when I called you the first time' Aarti jested at Anil.

'You disturb someone at 8 in the morning and expect them to be at their best! I was full-too sleepy when you called up. '

Aarti bit her lip as she said 'I never knew you were such a sleepy-head!'

Anil was proud of his wife's culinary skills. But, Aarti credited her achievements to him saying, 'if it was not for your criticism of my food, probably I would have never mastered it.' Needless to say, she loved challenges and cooking was one of her first challenges after their wedding. She never forgot to thank god each day for blessing her with a husband like Anil, who gave her the freedom and dignity she deserved. He was her closest friend and critic.

They both knew they were poles apart right from the word go. She was garrulous, always wanting things her way, and an outspoken live-wire causing either embarrassment or unintended misunderstanding most of the time. He was tacit, shrewd and more worldly-wise.

Between the two, he was more tactful, especially in dealing with her, for she was impatient most of the time. His one simple 'no' was enough to make her go hysterical. But, he would patiently sit her down and make her understand his point. He was understanding enough to know of her inner turmoil, though he rarely exhibited it.

Her mother's illness had a profound impact on Aarti, over the years. She had become broody, overtly insecure and extremely sensitive. She would break down at the smallest pretext. She was unable to come to terms that a woman as strong and fit as her mother, was suffering from a fatal disease.

Once when she was discharged from the hospital a couple of days before her birthday, Aarti had stopped the autorickshaw at a jewellers'. While her mother was in the auto, she came out with a set of gold bangles from the shop. They were her birthday gift, she said as she slipped them onto her hands.

Her mother was speechless with joy for a long time. At home, she proudly declared to her sons how her dream to wear gold bangles was now fulfilled. Everyone could see immeasurable joy and contentment in those eyes - joy of feeling loved and being important, something she had craved for since her childhood.

Her mother had single-handedly raised the three of them, two brothers and her. She gave them the love and care of both the parents. Her earliest memories of her childhood was her reciting rhymes taught at school daily to her mother. If she was tired from all her work at office, she wouldn't show it, patiently listening to Aarti as she did her cooking and other housework.

'Umm, My little girl seems to be learning so much at school' Her voice would be full of pride and joy. She would watch with admiration as the little tot would play teacher, using the door as the board to write on, and feigning scolding a student for not being attentive in class. She often said, her daughter was her reflection, her extension. She would fulfill all her daughter's desires and give her the freedom to make her own choices. Something, which she had always craved for herself.

"Come soon dear. I have prepared onion fritters" her mother would call out. The evenings would be get-together times for the family, with tea and delicious accompaniments. Her mother's routine awed her even now. She would wake up at 5AM, clean the house, get ready for work, make breakfast, pack their lunch boxes, get the children ready for school - her work seemed to never end. But, the best thing about her was her ability to do everything

without cribbing, she was always on a song, loving every bit of her life and spreading that joy around.

'Get up. Its 7 'O' clock. wake up dear, or you'll be late for school.'" Her mother's beautiful voice seemed to ring in her ears even today. It just seemed like yesterday. She remembered with fondness of her mother braiding her hair, feeding her, and singing her lullabies to sleep. She would tell her stories from the holy scriptures, or amuse her with fairy tales, where everything was well in the end. Aarti, especially loved the tale about an old woman in a pumpkin and would ask her to tell it every night. Now, she missed the carefree warmth of her mother's lap as she slept. It would make her forget all her insecurities and fears.

Growing up, she had shared her deepest feelings and desires with her. Her mother knew all about her friends, secret crushes, her likes and dislikes. Like best friends meeting after a long time, they would chat long hours till midnight about almost everything that happened under the sun. Aarti would tell her about how her day at the college went, who did what. Her mother would share her day at work and they would both laugh at the funny happenings of the day.

Ever since she remembered, her mother had been her source of encouragement, her beacon of strength. She felt like a mirror image of her mother, without which she felt incomplete.

'One day you will walk on your own legs. I promise you.' Aarti would emotionally tell her mother often. 'And you will travel the whole world with me.' Her mother would smile gently as if to say 'I know how much that means to me.' Aarti had seen her mother walk on crutches, doing all her work by herself and raising the three brats without batting an eyelid.

There was an unspoken understanding between them, where each knew the other's desires and wishes. It was as if she was speaking to herself when she shared her joys and concerns with her mother. Between all their arguments and fights, there was a bond which made them understand each other's stand very well.

Her mother was such a fun to be with. On days when she would be on an off from work, she would cook new and delicious recipes and they would catch a movie together in the afternoon. Both were very fond of movies, especially bollywood ones. Like 2 teenage girls, they would chirp and giggle at the theatre. They would go shopping together in the evenings, catching on their favorite gol gappas and chaat. All her life, her mother had been her best friend and emotional anchor.

To see her suffer, with hope for a recovery growing dimmer by the day, was traumatising for Aarti. In a weak moment, she had once told Anil, 'I can't see her like this, suffering and dying inch by inch, losing life moment by moment. Sometimes I wish, she left us rather than

fighting such a long painful fight. Sometimes, I feel guilty Anil. Are we selfish? Are we forcibly holding her back?’

Her mind was constantly thinking of some therapy, some reputed doctor she missed out, some miracle she hadn’t prayed for! She slept little, worried more. She would get up suddenly in the middle of the night and stay awake for long hours, without a wink of sleep touching her.

*She’s small, looking like an angel, bright and glowing. Her long thick hair, swaying and shining in the sunrays brightly. There’s a halo around her as she gently sways in the golden fields. The sun is shining brightly but she’s smiling sweetly, unabashedly, as she plays in the fields, carefree and at peace with herself.*

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## *Anchor in Agony*

*Three ladies, all well-dressed, clad in Indian sarees with bindi on their foreheads and laden with jewellery, beckoning her to join them. They looked familiar, smiling and calling her to come to them. She raises herself from her hospital bed, pointing her hand towards them....*

*Vijay looks up from the book he's reading and is horrified to see his mother smiling and trying to reach out to someone. He tries to appear casual and asks, 'Aai, you need something?'*

*She's calm as a smile lights up her face and she mentions the women she's seeing. At first taken aback, he composes himself soon and concealing his pain, he tells her to take some rest.*

*After ensuring she's sleeping, he goes to a corner of the room and cries his heart out, after a really long time...*

Vijay's phone call to his sister, Aarti that morning sent her into uncontrollable fits of frustration. Like a woman gone crazy, sometimes, she broke down, sometimes laughed helplessly, at other times, looked terribly confused and broken. Her mother had told her about her hallucinations since her childhood. But, her illness and the medication had made her mind more receptive to them.

Seeing a loved one, suffer such pain is nothing short of the worst living hell a daughter/son will have to undergo. A caring soul who wouldn't harm anyone and had led a helpful and inspiring life, was on her bed fighting death. Everyone watched helplessly as she put up a strong fight against the fatal disease even as the doctors awed at her will-power and optimism which sustained her.

At 13, Aarti had lost her father. His death was sudden, unexpected. He had just returned from office and complained of chest pain. The family implored him, virtually forced him to go to the hospital. But, he would not hear of anything and knelt down to pray until things started looking going out of hand. By the time he was rushed to the hospital, it was too late and he was dead by then. Aarti and her younger brother, Vijay had seen their father die before their own eyes.

It was a very difficult time for the family, especially a single mother to single-handedly raise 3 unruly children. Relatives conveniently distanced themselves. Many wondered how a single woman would run the house. Then there were the financial pinches. But, the worst loss was that they would never see their father again. To see an active, healthy loved one suddenly vanishing from your lives was the toughest thing for the family.

Everyday for the next year or so, they couldn't digest the reality and would wait for the door to spring open at 6 PM.

After work, he would normally walk in saying 'Bring my tea.'

They hoped against hope even as they found it hard to believe their loved one was no more. They desperately wished it was all a bad dream and would end soon.

Theirs was never a conventional, loving family, but one that stayed together through all the ups and downs. He was a prayerful man, praying 7 times a day and leading an austere life. It was only on rare occasions Aarti had seen her parents conversing. The conversations too revolved around serious topics such as work and children. It was as if they were living together just to keep their children at one place.

Mother always told her about their love story and how they got married. It all seemed like a fairy tale. Two strangers from far off places meet coincidentally, and then fall in love unexpectedly. The hero whisks away the heroine to marry her and lives with her happily. Only the ending differed here. The love had vanished, only traces of misunderstanding and disharmony remained, which surfaced infrequently in the form of bitter quarrels.

Aarti had managed to get hold of the love letters and poetry her dad had written for her mother. Reading them, she wondered if her father was the same man who had written it. She had never seen him speaking a loving word to her. Her mother too seemed to have got

accustomed to not having any great expectations from her husband, and surviving the rest of her life tending to her children.

Her mother got emotional each time she narrated her love story to Aarti. Towards the end of the story, her words appeared sullen and she would struggle to continue, for she had no answers to her questions.

Aarti's father was mostly brooding, strolling in the courtyard, drinking his many teas, and smoking his cigarettes in the bathroom. He looked an unhappy soul trapped in familial ties which he wanted to escape from, at the earliest.

Not that he was a bad, insensitive father. He cycled from office at noon, in the scorching hot sun, to pick up his kids from school, feed them lunch and put them to bed to the sounds of the radio. Only when grandpa came over to take care of the kids, did he head back to work. His love for his children was being possessive about them to the extent of marginalising them from his relatives, because he thought they wouldn't adjust to them. He kept them indoors mostly, fearing they would get hurt while playing with the 'unruly' kids in the neighbourhood.

Occasionally, he would allow them to accompany him to the church and for grocery-shopping. As the children grew, they yearned for more of his attention, and wanted family outings just like their friends had. But, over time, they learnt to be happy reading the superman, spiderman and other comics during summer holidays, when almost the whole building would look haunted - nearly everyone would be visiting their hometowns or vacationing in some nice place.

His insecurities and possessiveness restrained the children from social activities, be it at school functions or trips or with friends and acquaintances at weddings and social gatherings. Naturally, the children turned out to be reserved and introvert.

Aarti and her siblings had to thank their mother for believing in them and allowing them to make their own decisions - in education or life. The children had an almost normal childhood, thanks to their mother who worked hard to ensure they didn't miss out on anything in comparison to their peers.

Aarti's mother was one strong woman who ensured life continued the same way as when their father was alive. Often, she brought them loads of goodies when she came back from work. Then, she set about helping the children with their studies, and preparing the dinner.

She seemed so cool about it, that the children hardly understood how tough it might have been for their mother to juggle between so many jobs.

Like everyone in the family, Aarti was hoping desperately for a miracle, in her mother's case. Any positive news of her mom's health would exhilarate her to no extent.

She clung tightly to Anil, as she said, in between sobs, "Do you think Aai will ever get well again? It's so long since we've seen her normal. She doesn't deserve this..

Both their hearts were clouded - hers was filled with fear and confusion and his, with concern for his wife who had to come to terms with the inevitable soon.

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### ***Fatal Revelations***

2005.

Ganga's busy with the function preparations at home. She looked resplendent in her beautiful pink silk saree with golden border. Her fair color looked even more bright as the lighting sparkled at its best. The sprightly petite figure hardly looked the mother of the bride. How soon her little daughter had grown into a pretty young girl about to be married. She wondered as she applied the customary turmeric to the invitation cards. The marriage was a couple of days away and there was so much work to do.

'Are you feeling fine my dear? You look drained' It was her cousin Mangala who was helping her with the arrangements.

'Yeah, just a little bit of running about. Nothing to worry' she smiled back.

Mangala wasn't convinced. 'Why don't you go and lie down for sometime? We will manage here.' Even as she was speaking, she saw Ganga looking weak and reclining on the wall. As Mangala rushed to her aid, Ganga fell down unconscious.

They sprinkled water on her and she opened her eyes. A while later, she was rushed to the nearby doctors' clinic. The doctor examined her for a long time and then discussed about his patient's health.

'She seems to be under tremendous stress. Nothing to worry but please ensure she takes adequate rest' he advised.

There was a sigh of relief from all quarters even as Vijay said a silent prayer of thanks, standing in the corner of the room. He was deeply religious and would say prayers many times in a day.

Throughout the night she was restless but Mangala and her other relatives ensured Ganga got enough rest for the night.

The next morning found Ganga happily chatting with her relatives over tea and upma. Ganga loved having people around, and it was after almost 2 decades that her cousins were visiting her. So, she had so much to tell and listen to. After marriage, there was a virtual boycott by relatives from Ganga's side. She had missed talking to them all these years. They too were, as if waiting for an occasion to forget the past and give the relation a new beginning.

A few days after the function, she had a severe bout of coughing and breathlessness, which refused to go away after a few days. The doctor advised her a few tests. Reports revealed she had TB. She was hospitalised for a couple of days and underwent medication. Once back home, she felt weak but hardly revealed it, cooking and cleaning the house as if nothing had happened.

The children went to their workplaces and everything seemed to be normal again. But not before long, trouble came knocking their door again. In a few months, again she started coughing and feeling unwell.

One doctor to another, they consulted several specialists. But, nothing helped. Finally, after almost a year, they consulted a reputed pulmonologist through a reference. The tests revealed a fatality no one was prepared to hear or accept.

With a lot of studied preparedness, the doctor discussed about the fatal disease Ganga was suffering from. As he showed her lung X Rays, he said 'The disease is called Interstitial Pulmonary Fibrosis. Her lungs have been severely damaged and hence there is difficulty in

breathing. Her left lung is completely damaged. Only the right lung is slowly breaking down.'

Vijay and Aarti asked hopefully 'So, it is curable, right?'

The doctor sighed 'It can be controlled not cured completely. You see, the lungs have been damaged very badly. So, we can only control it for now.'

'Doctor, you are not telling us the whole thing. Is there something we can do to treat her?'

'As I said, there's little you can do at this stage. I will put her on steroids. Just ensure she takes her medication properly and is not exerted. Even a slight weather change might trigger an infection in her lungs which might make progress the disease. So, just be careful about that as well. That will help her for a little more time.'

'Little more time! how much is little more? Vijay tried hard to hide his broken self.

'Maybe a year, maybe two at the most.'

Vijay sunk into his chair while Aarti was too dazed to react. How would they break the news to their mother outside?

Each step they took towards her was as if in a long dream, a dream they both wished remained a dream.

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## *The Final Farewell*

It broke her heart to see her children fervently wishing and praying for the impossible. She herself wanted to live, for their hope and faith, for their happiness. 'Even if I have to live with these oxygen masks and cylinders for the rest of my life, I will do so happily. Just give me some more time.' She prayed silently.

The scores of blood tests, and other medical tests left her exhausted. But, every time she miraculously recovered much to the attending doctors' chagrin.

The house looked so empty without her - her childlike laughter, her amazing suggestions concerning everything related to her home and children. Without her, it felt unwelcome and sad to be there now. The garden had dried and birds rarely came. It was as if everyone was deserting the house in her absence. Everything seemed desperate to welcome her back, even if that meant she would be bedridden and machine-supported for the rest of her years. It was as if the house was no longer breathing, no longer interested in existence.

Someone suggested that Stem Cell Therapy was showing some good results in some of the cases of patients suffering from ILD. But, the doctors were worried if Ganga could take the treatment at 66.

'Out of 10 patients treated for ILD by the Stem Cell Therapy, 4 have shown good improvement. But, nothing can be said for sure as of now. We can try it as a last resort for her.' the doctor had said.

The family discussed the pros and cons for long.

'She's so weak. Will she be able to take it at her age?' Aarti asked.

'Is there any other alternative? She's already suffering so much. Doctors have suggested this as a last resort. Which means we have NO OTHER OPTION.' Vijay sounded helpless.

Aarti broke down. She knew that opting for the therapy was a gamble. They could lose their mother. The thought itself was worse than hell, but to see her suffer each moment was worse than that.

The treatment started with blood tests and transfusions. But, the worst fears came true when her health started deteriorating. She could no longer talk or sleep peacefully even for a little while. Her breathlessness aggravated like never before. Even with the oxygen cylinder support, her breathing was laboured. A few hours of undisturbed sleep seemed like a dream for her now. She spoke little, ate less and was bedridden. The doctors said it looked like it was her final stage and she had little time left now. The family was crestfallen - helpless and frustrated. Despite knowing about her illness, they had still hoped she would survive it. They had more confidence in her will power and optimism than the power of the disease.

They said prayers, did fasts, took great care that they remained united for her sake. She said she had one wish for her family - to see them living together with love and peace. They were desperate for some hope, some assurance that their mother would be well again. But, somehow it all looked dismal and impossible.

Vijay was hopeful to the last telling her again and again, 'Ma, if something happens to you, even I will not live.' Ganga would take her son's hand lovingly into hers saying, 'nothing will happen to me. I will not die so soon.'. She knew she wasn't being honest, but she wanted to assure her son that she will fight to her last, for her children's sake, for their faith in her and for her love towards them.

Rishi, Vijay's friend spoke to him for a long time that day. 'My dad died last year after a brief illness. I thought he would recover even though doctors gave little hope. He died after a long fight which he did for my sake. I refused to let him go. For me, it was my love for him. For him, it was a strong fetter he couldn't break to get relieved from the suffering'

He took a deep breath. 'Stop being selfish, Vijay. I think it's time for you to let her go. How long do you want her to suffer for your sake? Release her soul. Speak to her now.'

Ganga was uneasy, struggling to breathe, trying to rest, but unable to. She saw Vijay when she opened her eyes.

'When did you come? I didn't notice you.'

'Ma, I wanted to speak something with you...' He broke down and cried like a small child. She caressed him softly just like when he was a little child sleeping on her lap, listening to her lullaby. She could feel his agony and pain. The separation would be difficult for her too.

'I wanted to say that, I release you, from the trap of our selfish desire, that forces you to suffer, to hold on even while you wish to go, even while you want relief from your suffering. Aai, thank you for facing all the pain, all the agony for our sake, for our wish that was preventing you to seek release from your body. I don't want you to suffer anymore now...I can't see you like this anymore now...' He couldn't speak further. But, what he had spoken was coming from his soul, talking to his mother's soul.

He felt a connection, which he had never realised before, a bond which made him feel like an integral part of his mother, a pain which felt better after the release. He had never felt like that before. He wept for long, remembering their time spent together. He wanted that instant to freeze in time. His uneasy soul found comfort in her lap, as she gently stroked him. It brought to him the the warmth of her love and care, and memories he found soothing - the songs she sang for him, how he lifted himself up remembering her inspiring life every time he doubted his own credentials, and how she took care of each of his needs and wishes.

She passed away the next night in sleep.

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### *When She's No More...*

All of them feel alone, terribly alone and lost in their hearts.

'How are we going to manage without her?' Vijay asked.

No one had answers. Everyone felt like she was in hospital and would be back at home anytime now. Their hearts refused to accept the reality. All of them wanted it to be one big bad nightmare.

Aarti couldn't sleep a wink that night their mother was buried. Her heart was restless, sometimes beating loudly, sometimes missing a beat. She was missing her mother badly and wanted to see her just one more time and talk to her. She somehow felt that wherever her mother was, hearing her cry, she would come back again for their sake. She had after all prolonged death for so long, for them. Her mother's face, her memories - those happy and sad times together - flashed her mind throughout the night. She just wanted the night to get over and was hoping the morning would probably assuage her aching heart.

*Aarti is sitting on the bed with her 7 month old baby beside her. She's speaking to the relatives around her who have gathered to offer comfort to the family. She tries to smile and appear casual, just like others in her family, who have learnt to hide their pain from others.*

*Suddenly, she senses the hair on her body standing, a cold and inexplicable feeling, an intense and intuitive feeling that her mother's spirit is near her. The sensation lasts for a moment, long enough for her to feel her mother around. The feeling brings untold joy to her heart as if she knows her mother would never leave them. She continues to reside in the house with them. Maybe not visible, but being there with them, protecting and guiding them as always.*

*Love never dies. When the person you loved is no more, your love, respect and understanding for them increases manifold.*

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### ***About The Author:***

Preeti Govada is a short story writer and poet. She's recently published her book of poetry '22 Poems You Should Read about Love and Life!.'

Born and brought up in Hyderabad, she's done her MBA in Human relations and currently resides at Mumbai with her husband and son. She's currently working on her upcoming book which is a collection of short stories.

She loves observing people around her and integrating their experiences into her stories and poetry. Besides dabbling at cooking, she enjoys travelling, browsing the internet, reading and spending time with her family. If you'd like to connect with her, you can email her at [preetivandanamba@yahoo.co.in](mailto:preetivandanamba@yahoo.co.in).