



LUCID DREAM

By: Swati Singla

Contents

PREFACE

1. SARA' AFTERLIFE
2. PINEGROVE
3. FIRST TALK
4. INSANENESS
5. ABSENCE
6. TRUTH
7. THE REAL HIM
8. DIFFERNECE IN OPINIONS
9. DEMON
10. THE VACATION
11. PIHU
12. OPERATION

1. SARA'S AFTERLIFE

Date: 10.10.2014

Institution: CAMH (Centre for addiction and Mental Health), Toronto, Ontario

Psychiatrist: Dr Sarabjeet Walia

Patient's particulars:

Name: Tyler Stewart

Gender: Male

Age: 21

Treated for: Depressive Illness

CAMH recommended to patient by a general practitioner. Patient earlier treated for milder depression by the same GP. He has attended counseling services and drop in centers without any positive outcome.

But lately the depressive symptoms are more severe. The symptoms include depressive mood most of the day. Markedly has diminished interest in all activities. Significant weight loss, a change of more than 5 % of body weight in a month. Insomnia. Addiction to few drugs. Recurrent thoughts of death. _

Analysis: I consider the illness to be severe, though the events that may have triggered its onset are yet to be determined. Besides psychosocial interventions, I recommend a biological treatment for the patient. Psychotherapy will be secondary to the use of medication. A day's dose of serzone (nefazodone) is given and the patient is booked in for another session at 10.30 am on 11.10.2014.

I finished the last note of the day and shut my cyber pad resting the pen on its side.

The computer logged me off in a blink saying “Sayonara Dr Walia”.

It's been saying this for about a year now, since Chou altered it.

I stared at the clock impassively. It was five minutes past seven.

This was the time of the day I wish could be erased from my life.

Time to go home.

If a place where you use a bed to sleep and a restroom to shower is a home, then yes it is my home.

Three blocks away from the hospital.

Three fourth of my salary goes in the mortgage repayment of that one bedroom apartment, leaving me just adequate amount to buy groceries and pay bills. I do manage to put some in emergency savings account every alternate month.

It's just a habit. I'll never need it.

I have medical and accidental insurances, which will take care of my bills if I end up disabled or sick anytime in life.

And there is no person that will look up to me in case of an emergency.

Family, yeah I have heard that word somewhere.

A dad who left my mother before my birth and never came back for me, giving me a feeling that I was born to a virgin mother just like Christ, doesn't ought to count for a family. And a mother who paid for a sin which she didn't atone in the first place was left with me as a reminder of her failed arranged marriage, though she happily accepted it and gave 21 years to more than just feed me. Three years ago she did what she must have done a long ago. *Remarriage*.

Paul is a nice guy. He has a son from a previous marriage. His ex wife died of cancer and it surely took him a long time to overcome despair.

They look like a happy family to me.

But even if my mother wants me to be, I am not a part of it.

I stay away from her on purpose. I am just a reminder of a tragedy that costed her, *her youth*. She deserves better.

Friends, I don't have and don't need. The whole point of staying near to work is to escape any contact with the world that exists outside home and this hospital.

I am not social. I have tried to go out for drinks or dinner with work colleagues sometimes but it doesn't work.

Though I am a psychiatrist but I have failed to cure my mood disorders. The transitory blues lead to prolonged depression when I am out of home except for work. I know it is an illness.

I am taking medication for it.

But that doesn't make me similar to *Tyler Stewart* in any ways.

I am ill, I am not insane.

The first question he asked me echoed again in my mind "*Why must I live doctor?*"

I irritated picked up my bag, turned off the light and walked out into the helter skelter of the world.

The corridor was overflowing with people, even at this hour of the day. Each eye was on the Led displays flashing the numbers in the queue.

I offered to work extra hours to take off some burden from the evening doctors but my application was declined. Though the medical practitioners are exempted from the labor standard hours of work but the people above doubted my evenhandedness to patients after 7 in the evening or after a 12 hours shift.

But they are considering using me for evening shifts in near future.

It's the busiest time of the day.

An extensive darkness, an eccentric seclusion and everything except for peace is not just my idea of a night.

Peace. Isn't it a strange word?

If it's not in socializing, it's neither in solitude. The quieter I become the more I hear.

I advise my patients everyday that acceptance is the first step to inner calm. But I know acceptance is the hardest part to achieve.

The remorse for something that happened yesterday has become initiating factor of my life and also of many of my patients.

I was on the verge of losing myself few years back. When my psychiatrist told don't *agonize*, organize.

And now I have a job and a house. I am organized but I am no less *agonized*.

I don't have the ability to forgive people who have left me all alone. *Why was I not a priority to them? Why didn't they think what will I do, where will I go, How will I survive?*

They left me laid on the cold hard ground to live and die alone. *Where did I go wrong? You just can't turn your back on me and leave one day, you'll have to give me reasons. Why? Was I nothing?*

I have so many questions but apparently the answers have vanished with those acquaintances.

They made me feel that I don't know who they were, at all. The time and love I put to build up those relationships has gone in vain.

And the tragedy is that they have forgotten me, but I can't forget them. Even if it's costing me my life.

Every time someone asks me if I am okay, it's just a reminder that I'm not. I am crying inside when I am not feeling empty.

It's exhausting pretending living, to breathe in and out all day long.

But someone once told me *"Be kind when you are sad. If you'll become light to others God will show you light"*.

I am acting kind ever since. That's what I do 12 hours a day, but I see no light. *Maybe that was a lie too just like the other statements.*

I walked through the city. It was late but people seemed more awake then ever. Lights lit up in the night and signs flashed. I could hear horns blaring everywhere. The stars managed to twinkle and retain a charm in all the mock worldly lights. Skyscrapers reached up farther than eye could see.

And then there was another face of this city, very clear to me. Under the florescent lights it was a landscape painted by a palette of darkness. In the hustle and bustle of night my eyes also contemplated the street signs directing the empty lanes of traffic and the night lights standing watch over the empty corridors of residential buildings. This is a city where large darkened plazas are peppered with a face or two and there is also a solitary driver returning for the night.

I stopped at the Thai take away perfunctorily. This place has been feeding me supper for past one year. The place was bright as usual and the music which was playing was not truly authentic but maybe something from Bali. I didn't linger to gaze at the menu. I know my order. I have decided a meal option for each day in a week. It's not just convenient. It's a habit. A very old habit. I have had a time table for meals all my life.

"Hey dhocor" Ung, the little girl at the counter wished charmingly in her typical accent.

"Hi Ung, How are you?"

Everything that came out of my throat outside the hospital was tiresomely predictable.

"Good. Yourself?" Ung always wanted to talk more, something that was more than courtesy essentially demanded.

"Good Thanks. Can I have a mixture of garlic mushroom with steamed jasmine rice" I said with a smile.

She was grabbing a cardboard box before the words were out of my mouth.

"Nice top dhoc" she mumbled smiling filling the boxes.

"Thanks" I whispered.

My clothes come from home shop magazines or from online shops. Ladies would prefer dyeing rather than doing that. But I don't have tendency to go around shopping, spending hours in ladies try rooms.

The top is baggy and too formal; I don't think *Ung* actually means what she is saying.

I think if one day I just disappear nobody would notice except for her.

I used to think the same about someone who was so similar to *Ung*. Someone who is engraved like a scar in my memories. Maybe Ung is the reason I have been coming to this place for one year now.

"Thanks. Have a good night." I murmured taking the change and the boxes from her.

The boxes were still scorching against my freezing hands when I reached my building.

A huge brown envelope which seemed pretty heavy was badly chucked into my mail box. It took me a lot of effort to pull it out safely. There were another two envelopes. I emptied my mail box and unthinkingly rushed towards the lift twisting the brown packet in my hand.

It took me a microsecond to reach the 22nd floor. I threw my bag on the table and quickly splashed water on my face once in the apartment. I got changed to night dress and took the boxes and the envelopes to sit in my window bed. The view of the city from this wall size mirror was stunning at night, but something I wasn't interested in. One of the white envelopes had my superannuation statement. Few random charities were the beneficiary to my super as for some reason mom declined to become the nominee.

Another envelope was my bank statement, I knew without even notching it.

It was the quiet or else my heart was beating cautiously but the sound of the beat was way too loud, when I was opening the brown packet. It didn't mention the sender's name on the envelope but the stamps told me it was from overseas, from *India*.

There was a letter and a diary. A very feminine pink diary. Something which couldn't be found in market now days. It seemed old but well kept. And I remember seeing it somewhere.

Few pages were stapled together, it seemed like a letter. At every mail, every single day, deep down I wish it is from India, from that *someone*. Though I also know that would never happen. There would be no apology and there would be no forgiveness.

I started reading dizzily.

Dearest Sara

How are you? I hope that you are in the best of health and spirit.

I talked to your mother yesterday.

I don't know how to say it but you have completed education, you are at good job, now I think is time to take another step forward. Don't waste your adolescent years in sorrow and in anger.

Move on. Even if she is not there with you to say but I know she wants you to not give up.

Forgive her and try to forget her. It's hard but I know you can. I am sending you an old diary of hers, which maybe I should have sent you a long ago. It helped me understand her better; maybe it will help you too. It's all in the stars, its destiny. There is no one to blame.

I also want something else from you; to me you are a daughter so consider it as a demand not a request. I and uncle want you to spend three months in the year end with us like old times. We also want you to attend your school reunion which is in December this year.

Go back and face it Sara, exorcise the demons from the past. You have had enough.

I'll be waiting for you.

Please find enclosed an air ticket. Uncle has requested a vegetarian meal for you. If you change the dates, do let us know.

With lots of love and heaps of blessings

Sujata Aunty

As I read the letter the tears started rolling down my cheeks. It brought up the pain I try not to remember every second of my life.

How can I forgive her? She left me aimless and hopeless. How can I not ache with sorrow? And how can aunty forgive her? Even if she is her daughter, she cheated on us.

And still I miss her so much. How could she be in a better place than me? She vanished from sight and now even from my dreams. I don't want to read her diary. She loves him more than she loves me.

I aggressively threw it in the corner and lay on the floor. I had to press my heart with both my hands to stop it from aching. I failed terribly. And I choked before starting howling. It's impossible to cry out the pain. No matter how hard and for how long I cry, I don't feel relieved. It usually fades into sobs after few hours because my body retires not that the grief diminishes.

It was midnight by the time I was sobbing. I uncomprehendingly stared into the sinister. Beneath the faint beam of a bulb my medical degree captured my attention. I contemplated it for fairly sometime before gathering myself. It took a lot of effort to pull up my unresponsive corpse from floor and to walk to the bathroom.

I reluctantly looked at myself in the mirror.

I saw a shadow of her in the mirror, and whispered '*As a gift to myself, I'll never forgive you.*'"

But then a part of me believed that I was equally responsible for whatever happened. I am there for some random drug addict: *Taylor Stewart* but I wasn't there for my friend who was a sister, a mother, a family. No doubt she left without seeing me, she didn't count on me.

Maybe it's not just the sorrow but the guilt that's killing me. I tried resolving my thoughts.

I microwave my dinner and almost crawled to pick up the diary with trembling hands. I was so scared to look at it as if it will somehow look back at me. I went to the same place, my window bed, tugged myself in quilt and vaguely opened the diary. This time with more hope than grieve

2. PINEGROVE

SAMIPA

It was dark when I heard a clack sound. It took me a minute to realize, I was in bed at home.

Today was the day when I will be heading to the place which is actually ‘*my home*’ in the literal sense of the word.

Pinegrove, a purely residential coeducational school, as young as I am.

Feels like it was yesterday when I first saw that place hidden amidst the green Shimla hills.

It was covered with thick and beautiful grove of pines, situated on the banks of a brook in the exotic valley of Kothar, in the state of Himachal Pradesh.

At the age of six and a half I asked mum, “Can we stay here longer? They say there are snakes in this river, I want to see them”. Mum told me to take my time. It’s been ten years now, seems like she really meant what she said.

I still try to find snakes in that brook which I once thought was a river. But later turned out to be very shallow, confined within a bed of rocks and seasonal; thus having the characteristic of being recurring and perennial which to some extent qualified it as a stream. Once, it stayed dry for months and I wondered maybe it has decided to change its course, which really upset me. I justified to myself that it was illogical scrutinizing my very lack knowledge of environmental geography. Another time, the stream flooded, overflowed its banks and covered the adjacent lands which were less of floodplain and more of football ground. There were rumors that the school was cursed and all would die from flood in the so called river which I later started doubting.

For three months of winter break at the end of each academic year I had to come and stay with my parents. This year I was home for two weeks. Class 10 board exams finished in March. It was up to students of school to decide if they wanted to stay back and study. Almost everyone did.

Pinegrove is more than bed and board to me, it's a place where I have spent all my childhood and adolescence. It proffered me with my morals, beliefs, sight to see what's best for me and also a very focused academic discipline taught me to give more than hundred percent in whatever I chose. It is where I belong. I could not exist in any other situation or place. Food, climate, people and there are so many other commodities which are concealed like emotional attachment. I am visceral to the place like a polar bear to Arctic Circle.

Still giving up the luxuries of parents' home like staying up late, getting up late, eating in bed and watching television at any odd hour of the day bring a streak of disappointment the very morning of this day every year. I have to leave for school at the earliest possible hour before sunrise to avoid the heavy traffic in the city. The city where I think the number of vehicles almost equals the number of people, not to mention whose count is more than the total population of Australia, New Delhi.

The packing started few days ago and we were fortuitous enough to accomplish it by quarter past ten last night. Mum is a kind of freak when it comes to organization. Everything in the list goes in trunk in the same given order and had to bear torture of verification quite a number of times. And everything is dualistic for her. She has to pack for two because my kid sister, my only sibling escorted me to school four years ago. Though to Niya this is a much more devastating experience than to me, she calls it the day of execution.

Suddenly other than the irregular snoring sound I heard the clack sound again. Mum must have woken up early to switch the geyser on, that means I can still afford sleeping for next fifteen minutes, or probably just lying down calculating the pros of going back to school which might lighten the pull in my nerves.

I got dressed in a pair of dark blue jeans and white hoodies which I bought this week and didn't get much of a chance to wear. Though there was no point buying it so close to the school date yet I thought this will be the set of civils for me this year. The circular clearly stated, "*Students are allowed to keep no more than one set of casual wear*". It must have been difficult to pick one thing from heaps of clothes for Sara, my closest friend but it was just a matter of choosing color for me. I had a very scarce wardrobe of different shades of blue in jeans, and different colors in hoodies.

Mum and Nanhe will be going to drop us to school today. Dad has an important meeting to attend otherwise He is not a kind of a person who will send mum with driver and kids on a 12 hour journey. I have to give him credit for being very possessive.

It was 5.30, everything was nicely fixed in the car boot and mum was checking again, "... trunks, sleeping bag, donnas, pillows, badminton rackets, pithu bag ... ". My mind got side tracked on hearing the last two words. This bag which once I thought could fit in a baby elephant was now carrying my books.

I was in class 11 now. Results for tenth boards were not out yet but students were given admission to streams based on choices and pre-board results. My parents decided medical stream for me, not after tenth exams but probably when I was ten days old. They had a misconception that my pretty average grades are the output of lack of effort I put in. It never occurred to them that maybe I am not smart enough, maybe a med school is not where I belong. Dad had to push headmaster a bit to give me admission in med on 80 percent marks. Not that they were not good enough, but for the fact that from class of 50 students, 20 scored above 85 and there were only 15 places for science streams. They had to adjust one more. The thought of being the worst in sixteen students was killing me, and now I had to prepare for medical entrance exam. The cons easily outnumbering the pros agitated me a bit.

We bid goodbyes to dad.

He had a very strange way of showing concern. I think it was embarrassing for him to show love by means of any physical contact like a hug or kiss to a girl who almost reached his shoulder, even if she was a daughter.

Though I liked it this way.

He told me to always carry inhaler in my pocket and keep a spare one in locker.

Asthma had been one of the many reasons for me going to boarding school. Pollution free environment prevented acute attacks so far but still I was bringing inhaler to use on numerous occasions. Mum is always fussing about not using inhaler in front of others, as if it is an illegal drug. I don't understand what's so embarrassing about a medical condition. Also it is way beyond my morals to hide things or to pretend something I am not, especially in front of people I have grown up with, who know me inside out, my friends. So I don't actually care of what mum says.

After four hours drive, at the time of dawn we were opening our journey into Himalayas, whose beauty once fascinated me.

It was a green alien planet then, but gradually it lost its charm for me.

It's surrounded by green pastures and sometimes on lucky mornings one gets to see snow covered mountain peaks. Travelling into the valley of Kothar, I always get a strange feeling as if I am going for a pilgrimage, one's final destination. I don't know what to make out of it, to feel blessed to inhabit a place full of dense pine trees and deodar forests or to hate the idea of living in the same. To some the place may be serene, but to me its just home.

We left Dharampur road behind us entering into a lane which I can barely call road. To drive here one needs a lot of faith, self belief and sheer old fashioned courage. Guess Nanhe was used to it.

We finally reached.

The board painted white on black background saying, “Pinegrove” was clearly visible. Beyond that point, each and every thing was the property of Pinegrove. Once on the other side you are isolated from the outer world or for me you *no longer need an outer world*. Its like *city of Ember*, self sustained just that this one is above the ground.

There was a car in front of us and within minutes a queue started forming behind.

The wait was due to the single steep road leading to the school which was at the floor of a very deep valley. The road only accommodated one car at a time to pass across the reception and main building to the car park which was located opposite to the dormitories and on the bank of the Brooke. A watchman came running and asked for student particulars. Nanhe shouted at the peak of his voice, “*Samiya Mittal, Niya Mittal*” as if his shouting will accelerate the process.

After few seconds we were going down. I had my first glimpse of that city for this semester.

It is difficult to conceive how the imagination of our headmaster may have first perceived that this isolated valley miles away from civilization was to be the place for his new school. On a rural land at 5600 ft, forested with pine and evergreens, Pinegrove has developed over some 150 Acres. With its characteristics stone walls and blue roofs, the estate is a veritable wonderland of rambling paths, trees, flowers and exotic birdlife. To the north, on a clear sparkling morning, the snow clad peaks of Himalayas can be seen. Away from the distraction of city life, here interests are concentrated within the idyllic environment.

Amongst the oldest buildings is the Chapel, the church where I have lit more than a hundred candles over the years and the Central Dining Hall which is also the largest room, where Staff provides over 1700 meals a day. There is an indoor and outdoor sporting complex with solar heated swimming pool and squash courts. There is a separate building for learning resources centre other than the Academic and boarding buildings and this is the place where I have spent a quality time of my life surrounded by books. The Pinewood Hall, where plays, shows, films and lectures are regularly held is also called Rumpus room. The superb basketball court is the newest addition to the numerous playing fields and is used by me to assemble and admire the Brooke that scurried parallel to it.

All the students have their own electronic keycards with individual digital signature as all the areas have electronic key access entrance. This key also serves as an ID Card.

There are many other buildings supporting academic and non- academic activities.

Sitting in a valley as it does, physical activity is the daily bread of life for all pinegrovians. Though there are few magical spaces for repose and quiet, where students are free to sit and reflect, and those are my favorite spots in the whole valley.

Mum decided to leave me at the reception to take care of fees payment and she went to unpack the stuff in respective dorms.

The school reception had an appeal of the modern mountain house as it is unruffled and rustic, to make you relax and rejuvenated at the very first look. It doesn't work for me though. Also the untreated timber beams and raw, rough rocky walls standing in contrast to the sleek, contemporary fixtures and modern and urban interiors look marvelous. Certainly there is plenty of character in each and every part of *Pinegrove*.

Headmaster was the first familiar face I ran into, his words, “*All set? Tie your seat belt we have an entrance to crack Dr Mittal*” metaphorically meant *welcome back to hell*.

I could see all my prejudices turning real now.

I had no idea of mess I was entering.

He was in a chatty mode when Mr. Mathur, our physical instructor joined the conversation. I made a narrow escape when I saw Sara's mum at the fee counter.

It was a bit crowded, and the recognizable faces were in uniforms already. Many students usually came a day before the start date and stayed in Kasauli. So most of them were bidding farewells to their parents by now. My eyes were desperately looking for Sara when someone jumped on me, with the force of a fired bullet. I shouted in panic.

There she was, a bit taller and skinnier than I last saw her. With a new weird hairdo, all smiling, holding my hands so tightly that probably they were crushed by now. *Sara*, my wild funny mischievous friend, the only child of her single mother, citizen of Canada and owner of a very beautiful heart. We were together since grade 1, shared socks, slept in same bed, gave each other head baths for past 10 years. But now was the time to part to different streams. She was in arts now. It was hard to imagine seven hours everyday without her for next 2 years.

“*What's wrong with your hair?*”, I asked.

“*Mum trimmed them with her teeth, for a party*”, she said giggling.

“*Halloween party I wonder*”, I said winking and she chuckled. Her mum interrupted when she was giving details about the origin of this hairstyle, I conveyed greetings and moved

to the fee counter citing mum will be waiting. I handed the cheques signed by dad and collected payment receipts.

Was about to leave when Miss Renu asked if I will be taking extra coaching for medical entrance preparation? Oh, how could I forget that.

“Of course yes”, I said hunting for the envelope with cash in my bag saying *miscellaneous*.

It’s a good amount of money I thought to myself counting notes. One has to be opulent besides being exceptional in studies to be a doctor nowadays.

“How many students are taking coaching?” I asked wondering how many creatures will acknowledge diminutive working of my brain.

“Let me check”, she said and went up and down on the computer screen.

“Three have paid by now, including you”, she smiled at me handing the receipt. A very applauding smiles as if saying “congrats you are the lucky one”.

The figure washed another horror over me with this number of students I will be under constant surveillance of the teacher. *Why was god doing this to me? What wrong have I done to deserve this fate?* I was trying to overcome the despair when Sara banged into me again; it was hard for her to walk, because she had that amazing speed, requisite to be a bird I wonder. Probably her soul chose an inaccurate torso.

“Level three. Dorm three, first bunk on left, bottom ones yours”, she ran towards the revolving door at the entrance saying, “Mum’s in a hurry. She has a flight to catch”.

“Give my regards to her” she was already out of the door before I completed the sentence.

I started walking down the stairs towards the car park through the main building which is the academic building. We called it junior wing. Every floor had 3 classrooms. Teachers were in the respective classes meeting the parents. There was a queue outside music room, books were sold there. I had been in every classroom of this building through years. An unfamiliar grief transpired in me on that thought. Maybe the most glorious years of a human life, the adolescence would be soon bygone. I was lost in thoughts when I saw few boys from my tenth class. They hadn’t changed a bit in last few years. Probably fifteen sixteen was not the age for physical growth in boys. They saw me too and put their hands up for high fives. One of them pulled my hair and other patted my back. There was never enough of teasing for them. Though I didn’t mind. That was me – a people pleaser 24/7. You’ll have to do something extremely terrible to get me angry. I haven’t ever laughed thoroughly or cried thoroughly though. Sara always called me a *sufferer in silence types*. But my dad had a different theory. He calls me dumb, he says I don’t allow the sorrow or the pain or the happiness to reach my heart. I don’t know what that means but he is partially right, I am surely dumb.

I am the most ordinary human being imaginable. I doubt if all my teachers know my name. I am the one who sit on the middle seat of a corner row every day of the school for entire school life and hide under desk when they are electing monitor.

I was more or less like a shoulder for my girl friends to cry on. That was the only role I played in their lives. And with boys I shared a mutual understanding, neither of them was interested in me nor was I interested in them which really kept things simple.

If I was to tell the truth, I didn’t relate well to people of my age. Maybe the precision was that I didn’t relate well to people, at all. I wonder if the world sees the same things which I see through my eyes.

I was walking down the senior wing engrossed in thoughts. One could see the snow covered peaks from any of the classrooms on this floor, which were especially clear this morning. I was looking towards that intimidating view, relishing the serenity, the peace in that silence that I first saw *him* coming out from one of those rooms.

When everything went still. The leaves of trees, the bird ready to fly from their branches the noise of wind and the beat of my heart. As if he was the core point of the universe, holding us where we were. The gravitational pull changed its course. And I discovered that I had a heart of a young girl.

He was nothing like what I have seen before. A very pale skin with touch of pink around cheeks, a very natural shade of an inordinate blush for which anyone can spend thousands of rupees. A blasé red for lips, a color for the lips of the male models you see on magazine pages, which probably are digitally enhanced. The long dark black eyelids which were softly falling as if the hair of the paint brush made by squirrel hair. A very cute hairstyle, tousled, textured being carried with an extravagant grace. As he walked past me bemused by something in the book in his hands, totally heedless that how he was affecting sanity of people around him with his physical attractiveness left a sweet smell that made me believe that he was for real, not an illusion. I couldn’t move for a very long time, because I couldn’t make sense of it. I was lost, just like Earth would be if Sun decides to walk out of the solar system one day. After few seconds as an automatic set command alarmed, I spellbound started walking towards dormitories.

I found mum in Niya’s dorm she was arranging her stuff. Niya wasn’t helping. Instead she was crying ensconced behind the quilt so that her matron couldn’t see.

Mum was trying to tranquilize her with all the same things “*Samiya di is there for you, we will come to see on next visiting weekend, you will have fun learning swimming, see all your friends are here*”.

The words didn’t calm her and she was so little to put her feelings to words, to tell mum that nothing in this world makes up for her, that it was a hideous thing to leave a child on her own at a tender age. But I have deserted those feelings way behind and watching her cry, was making me sadder. I left giving particulars of my dorm.

I went down to car park greeting teachers and performing reuniting rituals of hugs and high fives with acquaintances on the way half unconscious. Almost 70 percent of the school area is sheltered with foliage, trees and dense vegetation. The path made its way through trees, which retain their old world charm. They have witnessed the British colonial rulers back to the date of 1842 and are crucial to my fantasies of Victorian era. And the trees which unlike my parents have seen me growing. So all these outdoor trails scuttle like ones in the maze leading to one premises or another. One can experience the natural serenity in its accurate form on a field trip around this place. Pinegrove which has remained untouched by civilizations if opened as a jungle safari can fetch heady more than the present dealing. Though right now lure of the place shrunk as my mind was still confound with a jumbled feeling of grief for Niya and dazzled by the allure of that divine boy.

Was he for real. Why haven't I seen him before? Is he a student?

It didn't take me long to track dad's car which was standing next to a black Mercedes as polished as if has come straight from the showroom.

People were rich here. However they all appeared alike in uniforms.

Well now with one exception. Assuming he is a student.

I moved back to work. Nanhe and two attendants followed me to the dorm which was two levels above Niya's and opposite to building of boys dormitories.

I was thrilled to see that my bunk was placed next to the window overseeing the playground and the brook. And swimming pool was clearly visible filled with green blue water concealed within walls with stairs on three sides and confined on one trivial corner of the huge play ground. All one can see is nearly naked stinky boys at the other end of the dormitory. Sara must have killed people for this awesome spot. She is a genius. I started unpacking stuff. Two shelves in a three shelf wardrobe were now dedicated to the books. I tried to hang most of the stuff on hangers; it looked a bit spacious and organized just in case mum came to check. All the extras went into trunk and the trunk was sent to the locker room.

I was making my bed when it occurred to me that it was taking Sara long. I was wondering what was she up to.

Sara was different from any one of us. Her dad left her mum before her birth. Seeing the things that happened to her mother made her immune to boys however she was naive that she was one herself.

She played football and never took pain to wax her legs before a match. While other girls took dance lessons she played drums. She was always up to some mischief and could get very abusive during fights. It was not a very good thing to witness her fights, I begged her to keep her cool during first few years. But eventually I got used to it and I think others did too.

So anyways immunity to boys was the principal trait that kept us together.

I was lost in thoughts when Amber came and reclined on my freshly made bed which had lavender scent of mum's fabric softener.

Most of the girls were back, perhaps because sun was up and girls that old are too petrified of bringing up the rear to their white complexions. They all congregated at my bed. Conversing about holidays and other random stuff, I secretly hoped that someone would come up with some news on that book boy.

And Chaaya alleged as if she was hearing my thoughts, *"Oye! Have you guys seen the new admission, he is gorgeous. I almost fainted. He was like Ahhhhh!!!"*

And then she sighed with both her hands on her chest.

I thanked God; *he has this effect on other girls too.* There's nothing wrong if I appreciated him like any other young woman.

No one else had seen him but were very keen to get the details.

I didn't feel necessary to tell them of my short acquaintance with him. Probably I would've lost track of words describing him and the last thing I wanted was to give an impression that I was intimidated by him. However, the confirmation that he would be studying in Pinegrove, among barely 350 students who convene with one another in thousands of ways each day, filled my heart with bliss. At assembly hall, mess, football court, rumpus room, on staircase, outside rest rooms, laboratories, dormitories,

I will get to see him every day.

"Mrs. Dikshit was talking to him about how he performed in board examinations. So I m kinda sure he has enrolled in class 11", Chaaya continued.

The affirmation of any assumptions was now leading to another set of questions in my brain.

Why one would start a new life, a new tussle in a new place altogether in the final years of high school

Maybe he didn't do well in exams to get the desired stream. There is a hypothesis which is based on the fact that beauties usually don't have brains. But people like him and Moon are so profoundly blessed in the looks department that it compensated for any other flaws.

Right at that moment Moon strutted, *"Hope he is in Arts then",* winking at Chaaya.

"I saw him first, so stay away from him", Chaaya replied.

They kept the war on with sarcastic comments and everyone around snickered.

I excused myself saying mum would be waiting for me.

I peeked through the window they were not in Niya's dorm as I expected; mum must be seeing her teachers. It's a nice experience for mum because they are full of praises for her.

Niya is a very intelligent girl. Every parent wanted their kids to be like her.

Her foremost strength is her keenness to learn, she is always eager to know how, where, why everything happens. Answer to her every question leads to another round of questions. But it worked pretty well between us. She always asks questions and I am all ready to give her answers. I don't remember when I last shouted at her or scolded her. One of the reasons is that she never gave me a chance to do so and another is that she loves me more than I deserve. I have never done anything special in academics, sports or any other recreational activities but still she thinks I am extraordinary. Last year in one of her essays she wrote that I am her idol. It's in human nature; people can easily start forgiving mistakes of others when they know how much the other person adores them.

I saw mum making her way out of Niya's class.

Niya was holding her hand, was done crying but her eyes were still red.

Mum started talking to me and it was hard to see how she was holding back herself from falling apart in tears in front of us, *it was time to go*. It's safe to reach home before sunset.

In that very moment I felt sorry for her it must have been hard for her to keep her children away all those years but God knows under what circumstances one has to think beyond their own selfish needs; maybe if their child's health and career are at stake.

We were making our way to car park when met Sara on way, she was sweating.

"I was helping Mr. Mathur move some benches", she said looking at my puzzled expression.

Oh I forgot to mention how big a social worker she is.

She was talking to mum all the way without giving mum much of a chance to speak. Thanks to Sara, the mood lightened a bit.

Niya was still holding on to mum's hand, I took her another hand and hugged her close to my chest,

"Let mum go Niya. She is getting late".

She dropped her hand at once. Mum kissed her head and waved goodbye to me and Sara.

Nanhe appeared poignant too when he took a u-turn and waved from the car window.

"Give her time. She will be fine", Sara said when we reached our bunk, which was not in as good shape as this morning.

Everyone was on their bed lying, chitchatting. An unceasing sound of TV played as a background score as always. Only two disgusting rarely watched channels played on Dorm TVs but still it was hardly turned off.

Sara sprawled on my bed while I went to change.

The rest rooms were on the right side of the corridor. I picked my bag of toiletries, blue tunics and white shirt, my evening uniform which too smelled of lavender fabric softener.

Changed, washed my face and applied some moisturizer, though it was not making my color any appealing. I was all pale without any blood in my skin. Probably I needed a healthy lunch, not that I was hungry. Days like this when you have so much on your mind kill your appetite. I put my hoodies and jeans into laundry which had my roll number tag.

Then Sat on foot of the bed cross legged and slowly brushed my hair. The tiny bump in my head due to the tangling of the stitches which I got few years back falling while rock climbing always irritated me disrupting the smooth running of hair brush through my hair. It wasn't visible but it reminded me everyday that how my carelessness almost killed me. Finally I tied them up in a ponytail.

"This sheet smells nice, though the smell is a bit strong", Sara said sniffing like a dog.

"Yeah I know. But its mum's favorite, she thinks this smell stays for long", I answered.

"Do you think it will make till Christmas", She asked very seriously.

Christmas, our next long break, when mum will get to wash my linen again, a year away.

She is capable of making fun of my mum. Silence is the best answer I could think of in such circumstances.

“I stayed at Nani’s place. Mum was there but trust me it’s a living hell. She has set of absurd rules. It’s like prison. I will fly to mum the very same day I finish class 12. I can’t take that old gal’s shit”.

I felt pity for the old lady but still can’t stop smiling at the way she was being described.

“Hey got you something. Actually mom got it for you. She wanted to give it herself but was getting late”, she said while browsing her cupboard, which appeared to be a room full of crap. Never looked it was made this morning. I didn’t want to spoil the moment for her so kept my mouth shut instead started guessing what it could be.

“No! It’s not chocolates”, she said sitting in front of me with a huge polybag and more excited than myself in game of guesses.

“Not chocolates, not sweets, not perfume, is it a book?” I took a final shot.

Reading novels is one of the things that really make me happy. There are times when I start reading at 9 in the evening when everyone is in bed and still reading at 5 in the morning when everyone is brushing their teeth. So there is no better gift for me than a book.

One of my favorite books which I read over and over again is “Twilight ” by *Stephanie Meyer*. It was gifted to me by Sara’s mum last year. I really love her for that. She promised to buy me the sequel but as far as I knew it was not out yet so that was a pretty wild guess.

“Nah...But something related to that”, Sara said.

I gave up and then she handed me the polybag. I could see how delighted she was.

Her love was worth a million dollars, I wonder how I will return a tiniest bit of her affection in this small time left together.

I opened the bag carefully. There was a cardboard box in it containing a black shirt saying *“I dream about being with you forever”* and a wrist band engraved with *“Do I dazzle you?”*

I had a flash back of the beautiful face I saw this morning on apprehending what the band said.

These were the quotes from Twilight book.

Never in my wildest of imaginations I thought that someone can affect your sanity in a way that Edward affected Bella’s. I adored them like any other book characters but not until this moment I realized how appealing Edward was to Bella.

“Thank you so much.” I grabbed and hugged her.

Moon stood up at once to look at the shirt from her bed which is placed opposite to mine sharing the window with a heavenly view.

She must have been eavesdropping.

Apparently she liked the shirt a lot, I could see disappointment on her face as she said, *“Nice”* and handed it back to me.

I didn’t like it. If that shirt didn’t mean that much to Sara I would have probably considered giving it to Moon as a present. And that would have looked prettier on her, I could bet on that. I folded and kept it in my cupboard.

Turned back to Sara and whispered, *“I will save this for a special occasion”*. Though I thought to myself that I will never wear it in school because that will make Moon feel stumpy.

“Hey I got you something too”, I said educing the I pod shuffle dad bought me from Dubai.

I was not that much into music and had a CD player which was in a healthy working condition so asked mum if I could give it to Sara. She didn’t have any objections to it. She is very fond of Sara I suppose. Who will not be?

“Are you kidding me? You got me an iPod”, she said. It was hard to figure out if that was a question or a statement.

“Yes I did.” “Actually Dad did”, I said after a pause.

She closed her eyes and said *“Thank you uncleji”*. The way she said made me laugh.

We were not done talking when Miss Gladys, our matron came to call us for lunch.

“Girls, I want you in mess at 2 everyday, which is the lunch time. Just reminding in case you have forgotten . No dieting or any other reasons to escape lunch. Higher education means more energy and to get more energy you need proper nutrition. So I will appreciate your cooperation in this regard”, she said in a voice full of concern for each one of us.

My heart crammed with respect for her.

We put our shoes on and started moving downstairs.

The mess doors were not opened yet and junior girls were waiting in a queue outside the door. I saw Niya standing talking to her friends, with her back facing us.

“Oh shit I forgot her present”, Sara said. *“I will be back in a sec”*, she announced running back towards the dorm.

I joined the bunch of girls from my class who were talking to senior girls. Took me a minute to figure out they were talking about cosmetic products. To me cosmetics were substances intended mainly for personal hygiene and sometimes to convey scent. Other than that I was blank on the topic. Though I wonder what would have lead to that kind of conversation at a reunion after a long break and at time when there are so many other issues on hand to think about.

Niya waved at me to join her, on noticing that I was lost. She was smart for her age.

“Hi Di, reading any new book?” one of her friend’s asked as I came to a stop. I get all excited whenever I read a book and like narrating it to others. It’s very mollifying to have these young girls who are all ears and enjoy hearing as much as I enjoy reciting.

“Not really. No more reading. Will have to stick to science books for two years. Else mum will kill me.” Neither of them liked that idea very much.

Sara came running with a basket in her hand and she huffed coming to a stop. *“See how quick I am. Got something for you girls”* and she handed a beautiful hand painted wooden basket filled with packets. I can only figure out Tim Tams and ferrero rochers amongst all other stuff.

“Try finishing ASAP. Inside news. Tuck rade coming Saturday.” She muttered softly with all those weird expressions as if it was matter of life and death.

So among all other troubles juniors had this tuck rade where the matron comes and take all the confectionary from your cupboards and pool up in the common room. This kind of activity is done to avoid discrimination amongst students who can not afford those items. Though, it was just a rule. Had anyone been destitute he/she would not have made to this place.

“See ya girls”, she said and pulled me towards the mess whose doors opened as soon as we reached there.

We took two corner seats on one of the dining tables saying ‘class 11’.

The huge hall filled with noises; of talks, movement of chairs and then echo of all those sounds.

My heart came to a stop when I realized what everyone was looking at

‘The new admission’.

He was sitting on the opposite side, few seats away.

I forgot to breathe when I had another glimpse of his face. It was not embarrassing to stare at him because everyone was doing the same. It was indulgence in the present situation.

He looked like Jesus sitting on the table with other less significant people for *the last supper*.

What was about him that made him so different from all others? I wondered.

I noticed he had blue eyes. The most beautiful shade of blue, aquamarine blue. He had that recessive trait which a very few number of people have.

What kind of genetic combination would have occurred to form that kind of trait? Oh hell they were beautiful.

He didn’t appear a bit nervous about all the attention he was receiving.

After analyzing the situation I realized he was not noticing what everyone was looking at. He was engrossed in talk with Mandy.

“Which country is he from? He doesn’t look Indian. He is prettier than Kashmiri Pundits. Prettier than Moon. Is he even boy?” Sara murmured in my ear followed by laughter at her own joke.

Is she normal? I thought to myself. *Why his allure is not affecting her in a way it’s affecting me?*

She is normal. It’s me who is acting nuts. I contradicted my own thought. *If you are beautiful outside that doesn’t mean you are beautiful inside. Outside beauty doesn’t even count.* I kept telling myself, developing any kind of feelings for a stranger who was so strange, who I have just met, though he hasn’t met me and especially at this time of my education was not such a good idea. I tried pulling up myself.

“Who knows? Maybe not.” I answered Sara.

Headmaster stood up for making small welcoming speech. He said we’ll have another half an hour after introductory speech for the lunch.

He congratulated students for being promoted to higher classes and said that he appreciated the hard work of both board classes’ students from previous year 10 and 12. Though year 12 students were no more present between us.

Then came the part where he had to introduce new students, the part I was desperately waiting for.

The introductions began in the order starting from junior admissions and then moving up. After every level the pace of my heart accelerated, by the time they reached year ten I could hear it beating in my head so loudly that I was unable to hear anything else. I tried to minimize the sound by taking deep breaths supplying good amount of oxygen to my heart. It worked a little.

“Year 11. Aadil Rathore who has joined us from Mayo College for boys, Ajmer will be studying medical. We are proud to have you here and hope you will make yourself an asset to the school. All the best.”

He stood up to raise my heart beat again.

He was wearing white shirt and blue pants, the same uniform like any other boys. But in a much more stylish way, a way it could have created a fashion statement. The fabric of the uniform was very different from others. It was the best form of cotton I guess and the pants had the finest creases as if done by some designer tailor. His wrist was tugged in a very masculine watch with the optimum elegance.

“Thank you” was all he said and that too I figured out from the movement of the lips, the volume was very low for human ears I suppose and then he sat.

Everyone indulged in eating food after heady was done.

Sara kept babbling about some team selection in my ear but right now I had so much on my mind to listen to her. I kept nodding absent mindedly playing what heady said of him again and again in my head.

‘Aadil Rathore’ so he was Rajput. No doubt he was extraordinary. Has completed previous education in Mayo College Ajmer, one of the finest institutions of India with a very tough screening process for national students. If he is a non resident than maybe he would have made to Mayo in the fixed quota. If he was intelligent why won’t he complete higher education in Ajmer itself? Why would he come all the way to this place? He could have received better coaching there. I tried getting all of that out of my head and eat in peace; I was trying not to look at him now and then. *What’s the point?* I thought to myself.

People started finishing and moving out, I tried very hard making sense of what Sara was talking.

“Just Half an hour for lunch, half of which is wasted in prayer and raising hand for a refill. Then they talk of giving us nutrition”.

It’s been 10 years but she still sounded very upset with the system.

“You take your time. They are not throwing us out or anything”, I tried cooling her down.

“No it’s not about me. I am full. But what others?”, she said getting up.

Some people want to invite troubles without any reason I thought following her making our way out of the mess and without looking at him. It was a very small but encouraging victory, I overcame urge to look at him probably I can get rid of any other alien feelings as well.

The same logic applied to this situation *why invite troubles without any reason.*

We went to tennis court and perched on one of the stairs.

It was the last day of my freedom. I would be trapped from 5 next morning.

We had a bizarre schedule. Gym at 5.30, bath at six, brekkie at 7.00 and school at 7.30. Then, a 15 minute tea break at 11. School finished at 2.00 and then was lunch. Normal people were rendered free after that to sit in common room or for other recreational activities. They had to change in evening uniform for completing homework in respective common rooms; supper was served at 7 and finally they go to bed. But for me, I will have to change in evening uniform at 3, then go for coaching which will finish at 6, followed by finishing home work in common room and then after dinner at 7 sit in library or dorm if others are not bothered by the light and study for competition.

Though there were several perks in this role of aspiring doctor which were not enjoyed by other students like using computer lab or library at any hour without permission. As if it was any good to me. My favorite studying spot were stairs around swimming pool and stairs which ran parallel to the Brooke.

You must be wondering, what is it about the stairs, I mean stairs stairs everywhere. Yes, Pinegrove was covered with a network of stairs, one couldn’t reach from one place to another without their use. That was because everything was built on a slope. I had trouble breathing sometimes going up and down again and again, it’s hard for me to figure out if that’s normal or an asthmatic attack. Though I always use inhaler in these situations, I don’t give time to the respiratory system to come back in normal shape. I think it’s easier and quicker that way.

We were talking about how we would catch up with each other after every period when I saw *him* walking with Mandy and Raag. Everything about him was very fascinating. There was a calmness on his face, like a mask to keep away strangers from looking inside him.

It gave an impression that either he was too smart or else he had been through things that brought a kind of maturity to his attitude. I preferred sticking to the first assumption. Liking him in any way was not very healthy for me.

They walked into library.

Probably I should start studying myself, I shouldn’t be wasting time. I was still thinking when Sara said pissed, *“What are they thinking? They have already started studying. What a show off”.*

So asking permission to leave right now won't be such a great idea.

"Saniya *do you mind if I go and play table tennis ?*", she asked hesitantly.

Good I can go study now without upsetting her.

"*Yeah sure. Take your time. I will catch up with you in the dorm*", I said trying not to sound very excited about the new accord.

I thought of checking time table on the way so I went to my class in the senior wing taking a longer route that by pass library.

Time table was different from previous years with several subjects gone. The names list for the class caught my attention. I positioned my finger on it matching names to the intended subjects.

Commerce and Arts sections had higher number of students. This was very traditional. More students came here from business families so they aspired to have a degree in business.

Lost I moved my finger from the subjects towards the names, my sight blurred and the very new feeling overpowered me again, my finger got stuck under '*Aadil Rathore*'. I used all my strength to move it and check the subjects again. He was the only one studying maths and biology at the same time. I wasn't sure if out of eagerness to learn or under some kind of pressure.

Its none of your business I reminded myself.

And checked for the number of girls, there were only four with three studying maths, so that left only me to study biology. That meant one hour everyday in a class with no girls and two hours on days of practicals. How would I stand being the only X chromosome in very small proximity with him when I can barely control my senses in presence of hundreds of other students.

I studied whole evening and prepared for next day; packed bag and polished shoes. The weight of the bag told me that I will need a whole bench to myself. By the time I was done I was too tired to go for dinner.

It would have been a bad idea to ask permission to ditch supper the very first day but fortunately Miss Gladys was watching me go through all those troubles while everyone was out.

"*Okay. Fine. Meet me in the mess in ten minutes. I will get you a glass of milk. And I don't want argument on that*", she said imposing the decision on me.

I mean if I had that kind of energy to walk down to mess, why would I say no to dinner at the first place.

But anyways I changed into night suit and tied my hair in pigtails. I noticed the pink from the night suit was showing in my cheeks.

When I walked into the dinner room, everyone stared at me for once and then moved back to eating. It was like a sudden reflex when someone walks in night suite in a room full of same color uniforms. I was searching for Miss Gladys when my eyes stopped at him. He was staring at me. There was a strange expression on his angel face. He looked like a polished statue, depicting some unknown feeling. After a second or two I lost track of if he was holding my attention or I was holding his. He was looking straight into my eyes I couldn't move and stood there like a pillar staring back.

"*Milk! didi*", I heard someone say.

Then I heard it again "*Didiji milk!*".

He suddenly dropped his eyes, rescuing me. The kitchen attendant stood with a glass of milk.

I took the glass and walked out, using all my energy and a partial focus on balancing it all the way back to the dorm.

What was all that reaction about? That wasn't a very pleased expression I can tell. May be I was absurd to him, maybe he thought I am an attention seeker.

That thought made me feel very dejected.

I finished milk and lied down in my bed turning off the bed side lamp. I decided not to give him any reason to form an opinion about me. I will stay out of his way. I knew I was not that attractive to be liked by someone, but being hated by that someone was a very disheartening concept.

I was still in turmoil of thoughts when everyone came back, I pretended to be asleep.

The first thing Sara did was to check on me, she whispered '*Good Night*' in my ear before going to bed. Even this act of love didn't mend my present situation.

I was unable to get rid of that face, the deep blue penetrating eyes, unsure if it was an unconscious state of mind or a dream.

It was a very restless night, I felt much tired when I woke up next day.

I rushed things a bit, the idea behind it was to be on time or before time for all the daily activities, So that no one notices my entrance.

I tried taking a seat which was almost a blind spot for boys on the other side of the table. The thought that may be he disliked me made it a bit easier to not look at him now and then.

I was the first one to the class. I took a corner seat in the last row and unpacked. Room started filling up. Then I saw him come in and I dropped my eyes to the paper at once without meeting his glare. He took second seat in the middle row.

The first lecture was chemistry, which was a compulsory subject and Mr. Pandey took the charge. He was also designated with the role of our class teacher. We moved to curriculum, reference books, assignment dates etc. straightaway after the roll call without having to worry about any introduction speeches.

I kept my concentration to books all the time though could see him whenever I looked at Mr. Pandey. He was pretty engaged in chemistry. *Pin drop silence* was something I thought of as a metaphor but I truly experienced it when Mr. Pandey paused in between the lesson. Probably because there were no uninterested elements in this class.

Then the next lecture was English. It was good to have Mrs. Anjali as English teacher. She is extremely kind and friendly. She is married to Mr. Mathur, our physical instructor and their successful marriage is an enormous example of the theory that opposites attract. She was taking a round while we were writing an essay when she noticed him.

“So *you are?*” she asked smiling.

“*Aadil.*” He said inaudibly. That was the first time I heard his voice which was as soft as melting honey.

“*Aadil. How are you finding it here?*” Mrs. Anjali asked in concern.

He was quiet and thoughtful for a minute.

“*I don’t know?*” He finally said mutely. *What’s that supposed to mean.*

He didn’t say anything else. And Mrs. Anjali hesitantly moved on, amazed.

We had two consecutive classes of Physics after that.

Physics, the word was enough to scare me to death. It is classified as a sub division of sciences but truly it is form of a very complex and cruel mathematics which possibly made no sense to people with a very average functioning of brain, like me. A physics tutor my mum took me to, who is also known as *physics guru*, gave me a mantra

‘Do it daily, one hour of numericals every day for next two years.’

“*Don’t let it beat you. Instead you beat the shit out of it.*” He told me.

That was a complete waste of time; I don’t think I’ll be doing that. I am happy to let physics beat me.

It was 11.00 already I could hear everyone leaving for tea break while I didn’t bother to look up engrossed in book. Someone stepped into the class I looked up as a reflex and noticed few things simultaneously, He was still in his seat and Sara was coming into the class followed by Moon and few other girls.

“*What are you doing? Come on we are starving.*” Sara babbled.

Sara came for me, she always does but others visit was not very justifying, except for the reason sitting in the next row.

I was winding up when Moon started making talk with him, I slowed down I was as eager to know more about him as any of the girls present in that room.

“*Hi Aadil*” “*How’s your day been so far?*” she was extremely polite, it was easy to figure out that it was a fake tone.

He just nodded. Or that’s what I thought he did and said before walking out of the room, not looking at Moon for more than a second.

What kind of a person does that?

Moon looked more embarrassed than shocked at this absurd behavior.

“*How rude. What a freak.*” She babbled to the other witnesses in the room.

“*He is like that. He behaved in a same way with Mrs. Anjali. Let it go.*” I said without emphasizing more on the subject, I didn’t want Moon to feel more embarrassed than she already was. And putting aside the unworldly beauty of his, he was sort of creepy.

After break I started packing up for Biology.

Biology1 and 2 both were being conducted in biology lab. Rest of the students were supposed to study computers during those hours. I was the first one to walk into the lab.

Few chairs were aligned side by side and then the hardwood laboratory tables and benches covered the room with metal cupboards placed at the end. I assumed we will have to sit on the chairs as it was a theory class. I was settling down when Raag, Mandy and *he* entered the class.

“*Hey Samiya. You know it’s just four of us for biology.*” Raag said surprised steering his pencil at four of us. He just found out.

To me the knowledge was ancient with all the planning I was doing to go through these hours every minute since yesterday.

“*Yeah I saw the list yesterday*” I said nodding looking at him from corner of the eye.

Aadil rested his books two seats away from mine.

Even saying his name in my mind was doing strange things to my heart. Though lately all the major functioning of my organs was being conducted by my heart. If that kind of thing continued probably I won't need a brain at all.

So clearly he was intended to stay away from me as I was from him.

I had a reason; *I liked him more than necessary and he probably had totally adverse feeling for me.*”

“*People want to go for engineering I suppose*” Raag said sitting next to me.

“*Good for them and good for us*” Mandy answered.

So it will be just four of us for competition preparation as well. There was not a word from him during the conversation. He didn't look at me at all.

But still his essence affected my heartbeat and I felt sort of hypnotized.

Mr. Ahluwalia was taking both biology 1 and 2. Biology has always been my favorite subject; this was the only favorable point of me studying medicine.

We were doing *Diversity in the living world* today. I earnestly dedicated two days and two nights of my two week vacation on that unit. And prepared notes with multifarious synopsis consisting of drawings, flow charts and paragraphs. So I had a clear picture of what we were doing. After almost an hour of that class Mr. Ahluwalia decided to issue few books from library to give us some more examples of taxonomic categories of some common organisms. As soon as he left, Mandy came out with an unending list of doubts and I truly understood his situation as I had been there few days ago, but my quest through books resolved them later. I shared my newly discovered knowledge not giving chance to other two *homo sapiens* to say a single word.

“*I don't understand the hierarchical arrangement of the taxonomic categories. Do you get it?*” Mandy was prying into the other two moving his head sideways.

I could easily pick from Raag's expression that he was lost himself.

Despite the huge black board fright; I got up to draw it on the board to help Mandy.

And now with *him* there I was stammering, losing sight and having a cardiac failure.

I was using all my strength to be intact and to stop my hand from trembling. When I turned around I was astounded to see him looking at me in that same weird expression as if I had done something wrong to him, or as if I was causing him pain. I was unable to stop myself from looking back at him surprised.

This face has become so familiar in a matter of few hours that I had a perception of knowing him since ages. I pleaded in my heart to know what he was thinking but his face was as impassive as before. What does he think of himself? I got agitated and went back to my seat leaving him doing all the gawking.

3. FIRST TALK

Days started flying by.

The pressure started building up.

By every chapter we finished there was more to learn and sometimes the information seemed unending.

I found myself doing homework for physics and chemistry under the table in classes which I thought were not imperative from competition point of view; English and computers.

Other people studied to converge with the fastest brains in the world; I studied to catch up with *other people*.

There was always something pending from school and coaching. I would usually sleep late; very late after finishing homework, revisions and preparing notes perching under a 5 Watt bulb in the dormitory stairs as amazingly the same amount of light at my bedside was actually bothering my dorm mates. Thus I started missing my gym classes because sleeping late means getting up late. I really cherished an hour of sleep in the change room while everyone did gym. Mr. Mathur seemed to be totally unaware of my absence, which proved what an inconsequential role I played in my school activities. If it was Sara it would have been impossible to cover up.

And with *him* things remained monotonous.

He stopped staring at me in that awkward way; in fact he stopped looking at me at all, ignoring me as I ignored him. In fact he ignored majority of people around.

He was one damn of an arrogant person, I could bet he was as ugly inside as beautiful he was outside.

He was one person with whom I spent majority of my day and surprising fact was we have never spoken to each other. I knew my problem, but I was totally oblivious of what wrong have I done to him.

But still my annoyance didn't do any good in getting over him. Instead I got used to living with those vicissitudes my body went through in his presence.

He turned out to be the only son of Dr Tanmay Rathore, a leading cardiovascular surgeon. Who received numerous awards like Padma Shree and Padma bhushan for his outstanding contribution to Indian medical sciences at a very young age. And now he was working as a senior doctor in Cleveland clinic in the state of Ohio in United States of America. He was constantly being covered for his tremendous work in some of the leading magazines. And I spent an hour reading about him in one of those despite the voice in my mind which kept asking *why I was bothered to do that*.

Dr Rathore with his wife Dr Ethalia Aleko ran an establishment for research and innovations.

Dr Ethalia was a gynecologist and *Aadil's mother*. That was the reason for all his distinguishing features; a Greek lady contributed to half of his genetic structure.

Rathores donated millions of dollars in charities every year. So he belonged to two people who were opulent, intelligent and kind. God knows what went wrong with him. His parents terribly failed in bringing him up to be a kind person, on the contrary he was not even normal, he had this insane feeling that he was superior to everyone around.

He was always indulged in books but not once did he answer any questions in any of the classes. Probably in one thing he was like me hard working but not with an exceptional IQ level. Watching him work so hard brought a strange kind of peace to my mind; I was not the only one forfeiting my life here. Other than that there were no good reasons for him to be around.

But no matter how hard I tried repelling the thought; *the truth was that his absence made me fidgety and restless*. Despite his rudeness and arrogance *I prayed to see him every day*.

It was Thursday morning I was sleeping in the change room as usual. I was so sleep deprived that could have possibly killed anyone to get some.

Everyone left for a jog. To me it was not more than few seconds when Rasna woke me up.

“Get up Samiya. You are in big trouble. Mr Mathur is calling you. He was inquiring about how long you have been bunking classes. We lied. But he already knew. Everyone is getting punished. I don’t know what he will do to you.”

How could that happen? It was like a worst nightmare. It has never ever occurred to me that I can get caught. I got so scared that wanted to cower in some dark corner and to never come out.

“What should I say?” I was stammering following her to the ground.

We were on the last stair when I realized I was still in night suit.

“He is in no mood to listen to any excuses. So best thing will be to keep your mouth shut.” Rasna was in a very bad mood right now.

Entire girl dorm was running around the rim of the play ground with their hands up, *thanks to me.*

Mr. Mathur was standing midst the circle of boys. *11 class boys.* Everyone was in shorts and sweating. Though I was as cold as ice.

“Sir. Samiya” Rasna announced and fled to join the other girls.

Mr. Mathur was not bothered to interrogate me in private. Embarrassing me in front of everyone appeared to be a part of the prospective punishment.

“Where were you?” He demanded visually examining me with a dreaded look.

I should have changed.

I acted in accordance with Rasna’s advice and kept my trap shut while looking towards my feet.

“Knuckles” he said after a long wait.

Until that word I didn’t realize there was a stick in his hand.

In ten years of history I have never been a victim of corporal punishment. The thought of the pain was petrifying me.

I was in dilemma when Mr. Mathur changed his mind *“or play basketball with class 2 for next two weeks”*. He knew how important my every minute was, *why he was acting so cruel.*

“I will play sir.” I decided as was too coward to bear the pain.

“An hour each day” he added, seemed like he was wondering how to make it even more dreadful for me.

Now I had more obligations, and it was much worse than the prior arrangement.

My life was a *FUBAR* (Fucked up beyond any recognition) in Sid’s language.

After coaching I had to run towards the ground where the second grade kids were all over.

It took me almost half an hour before the start to make them listen what I was saying. They didn’t give a damn about me. They wouldn’t have followed my instructions if I would have been the last person on the Planet Earth to save them from terminal destruction.

I genuinely lacked leadership skills.

And had no idea how to give a false impression of being angry when I truly had all the patience in the world with kids.

The other morning I got up I was having cramps in my stomach. The pain was getting disgusting.

I realized it was that time of the month. And the first day is always terrible. I thought of taking a day off.

Ms Gladys submitted my medical certificate at the reception.

I took two pain killers and thus suffered the potential danger of being drowsy and nauseous. I slept almost the whole afternoon and then went for the shower before studying. When I came back from shower a bowl of cereals sat on my bed. Aya must have left it.

I gulped it down in not more than a minute, I was seriously hungry. *God bless aunty.*

That evening Sara told me that someone complained about me to Mr. *Mathur*. The first name that occurred to me was Aadil's, in Pinegrove he was the only person who was not family. But why would he do that? I am none of his business? So I didn't give it a second thought.

Next day was the second Saturday of the month; another no school day.

The Biology tutor for competition preparation swapped the Monday class for Saturday due to some personal reasons. We were allowed to sleep late on Sundays. Everyone was following the same routine today. I started my day early. Took head bath and wore track suit, gathered my study material and headed towards the classroom.

I thought of grabbing something to eat on my way.

They were serving packed food in the mess.

Cutlets again. I picked two apples halfheartedly and walked out.

It was one of those times when you want to eat something amazing but you have no idea what your taste buds are craving for.

I took a longer way to the class room trying to finish the apple on the way, which almost seemed impossible. The wind was boisterous making my hair cover my face. They smelled very berryish due to my strawberry conditioner. And thanks to it now my mouth was actually watering for strawberries. I was unable to get them out of my head when I walked into the class room.

He was there.

In a moment the whole craving agenda shifted from the dull redness of the strawberries to the sumptuous redness of his lips.

I had no idea why I was haggard for something that was not edible.

He looked like a model from an English commercial. His wet hair was making him even more *delicious*.

And for the very first time the books rested closed in front of him. His arms folded on his chest and eyes were already on the entrance when I walked in. They didn't shy away when I looked into them neither did he pulled on an expressionless face as he always does, instead an alarmed smile occurred on his lips, he looked pleased though stuck in some kind of dilemma. Maybe acting normal was weird for him.

He appeared confused but ecstatic trying this for a change.

"*Hi*" he said moving nervously in his chair.

I tried hard but I couldn't regain my lost voice *or senses*.

I gasped "*Hi*" or *that's* what it would have sounded if not a blow of air.

I hesitantly moved to sit in the next row. I was unsure on what's valid distance between you and a class mate who didn't look at you for like a month and a half and has recently discovered that you existed.

I opened one of my books and notebooks without any idea of which subject they belonged to.

After few seconds of just peeking I realized it was physics. I started with one of the numerical, finding something to do. The question belonged to *units and measurements*. I read question indefinite times trying making sense out of it. But every time I reached the last word I realized I lost concentration after the first one.

"*Do you want help with that?*" He was talking to me in his mesmerizing deep voice. I was more than surprised; he has never talked to anyone in that tone before. That was not him.

So he was watching me going through a question over and over again. I felt like an idiot.

I nodded and he came to sit on the bench in front of me.

He had never been that close before.

He pulled the book upside down and moved away to leave a decent amount of space between us.

He looked at it for not more than a second "*which part are you not getting*".

I had no idea what the question was.

I swallowed hard to saturate my dried throat and answered "*I can't figure out what they are asking for?*"

Perplexed he looked at the question again suppressing a smile this time.

"*Ok*" he started explaining "*we are given length, breadth and thickness of a rectangular sheet. We have to find the area and the volume of the sheet to correct significant*

figures”.

“*Ohhh*” I said thoughtfully, though again I lost it after *we are given* and started turning the book towards me.

He was laughing.

“*What?*” I asked confused, trying hard to figure out what he said. Did he say something funny.

His eyes ceased on my face, I could see *the humor was fading*.

“*I just read out the question aloud*” he said scrutinizing.

I smiled in embarrassment.

“*You have beautiful eyes*” he expatiated softly.

What?

As someone entered the room he jerked and got up to get back to his place. He moved to a place closest to mine in his row. That counted in permissible distance.

There was something very suspicious of his behavior today.

He was not completely unobservant of the surroundings while studying as always.

“*What are your plans... for today?*” He caught me by surprise when the tutor left.

“*Nothing*” I answered relaxing my brows “*I am going down to the brooke. To study physics.*” I said mutely.

“*If you don’t mind can I come with you, I am also doing physics.*” he asked uncertainly.

“*Hun*” I heard myself saying.

It was not a good thing to imagine *that how hideous I looked walking next to him*.

I started browsing through famous couples in the history when the right phrase occurred to me *Angel and demon*.

He was trying to walk at a distance from me, and clearly avoiding any kind of physical contact. Though his face was inclined towards mine without any concentration towards the steps.

My feet were very used to this trail; I could easily ramble in any part of the school without taking the trouble of focusing on the way. *But he was new he should be careful*.

I realized how the passer bys stared at *him* with a glint of amazement. But there was another shade of envy today as they watched *him* with *me*. It was very discomforting for me while he looked heedless.

We walked in silence. I was thinking of something to talk to break the ice.

“*Board results will be out soon. Are you scared?*” I asked.

He smiled; something was amusing to him.

“*Are you scared?*” he asked without answering my question.

“*Yes I am. I will be declared loser officially if I score least in the class.*” I gave an honest answer. That was the only reason I needed a decent score.

“*It’s not about score. I know you know more than anyone of us.*” “*Never use the word loser for yourself again*”.

I could feel blood swelling in my cheeks.

I was deprived of breath and words right now. I wanted to drop that topic but a part of me coveted to tell him the truth.

We were going past the football ground meandering on the slope which was running parallel to the brooke, when I started explaining him the intricacy of my life

“*I am doing all this to just cope up with the situation I am in. My parents have decided this for me.*”

“*I don’t like studying*” I felt relieved, taking off the burden of those words from my heart. I longed to say them out loud.

“*You don’t?*” he asked.

“*Un Hun*” I answered nodding sideways.

“*Then don’t*” he said impulsively and subtly.

“If I won’t study what will I do then?” I asked that question more to myself.

He smiled wondering.

He was like an open book right now anyone could read him. There was more to him than his good looks.

He was as human as I was.

We were quiet in an awkward way when we ran into Niya.

“Hi di.” She said giving me a hug.

“Hey. Remember me?” Aadil waived at her, smiling.

“Of course. Aadil” she waved back in a hitch second.

“Call me Adi.” He said mutely.

“You guys know each other?” I asked shocked.

“Yeah we practiced together in the music room” she answered surprised that I was surprised.

Niya played piano very well. Her hands started playing the keys at a very tender age. She could play any song in first attempt. Sara was same with the drums. And now apparently he played some device as well. Everyone around me had talents, *why is it just me who is drained of these abilities, why I am not gifted?*

“Did you find her yesterday?” she was talking to *Adi*.

“Yes. I did.” He replied hesitantly.

“Why were you looking for me?” I asked as soon as Niya left.

He would have seen that coming.

He was quite for a while, apparently picking up the right words to explain what was going on.

“I was worried. You have never missed school before. I knew Niya is your sister. So I pretended running into her accidentally and asked about you. She gave me directions to your dorm. I left you a bowl of cereals.”

He came inside my dorm, he left me cereals, he was worried for me. This has to be a dream.

We started moving down the slope; there was no sound other than the pleasant noise of running water and chirping of birds.

He was worried for me. He was worried for me. I kept repeating those words in my heart; they were bringing enormous joy to my soul.

“Samiya...there is something else I want to tell you”. My heart missed a beat; this was the first time ever he called my name, holding to it carefully as if it was delicate.

I suddenly felt that my name was very lovely.

I looked at him, waiting.

“I told Mr., Mathur that you were not coming for the gym classes”.

“You what?”

He didn’t repeat.

“Do you have any idea how much trouble I am into? I am sleep deprived. It’s not easy for me to keep up with all this.” I paused to make sense of it *“Is it about competition? You don’t want me to study?”* I asked agitated.

He looked at me surprised

“Please don’t say that. You are one person for who I want all the success in the world.”

Amazingly the words calmed me down ...but he continued

“Its just that I didn’t like it ...not seeing you. I told you your absence makes me anxious. I tried hard to get over with it but next moment I see myself talking to Mr. Mathur. I had no idea he will do that kind of thing to you. I would have never let him hit you.”

My absence has never mattered to anyone before, not even my parents. I don’t know why it mattered to him.

“*So do you forgive me*” he asked eagerly.

“*Dare you ever do that again*” I warned. He smiled.

We walked in silence.

He decided to talk again “*so you don’t like studying*” “*what do you like then?*”

I liked reading stories, that’s it. I liked nothing that was creative or taking me anywhere in my life.

“*I don’t know*” I answered.

I knew he wouldn’t let it go easily so I tried side tracking him “*What do you like?*”

It worked.

He smiled. Why everything I say is amusing to him?

“*I liked studying*”

“*But things have changed lately*”. He paused “*Lately I like playing guitar. I listen to Ronan Keating whole night long. I would rather be at this Brooke than any other place in the world and I want to act nicely with everyone around. I want to get even with you.*”

I didn’t understand what evenness he was talking about and why did it matter but anyways one thing I knew was that to me *we can never be even.*

“*We can never be even. We are different*” “*I am like a virus and you are an antivirus*” I explained giving an analogy, smiling half heartedly.

“*You are stealing my line...*” he said insistently.” *It’s the other way around.*” He sighed

There was a strange deadness as he said that. Every sound in my body started pressing against my ears, the blood flowing in veins, the noise of pumping lungs, the heart beating loudly and finally I think I collapsed.

As I turned something hit my head. I got up too quickly, to find myself in bed. It was dark outside. I couldn’t make sense of what time was it, what day was it, how I reached my bed. I was desperately hunting for my watch when Sara leaned over from her bed “*Morning madam.*” She said ironically.

“*What time is it?*” I asked, my heart thudding for some reason.

“*9 o clock.*” She replied laughing “*You slept for 24 hours in a row. You have missed your coaching class this morning. Mr. Pandey wanted to see you. You should thank Miss Gladys she lied that you are still sick.*”

I looked back in amazement. What was she talking about? “*No I didn’t miss the class*” I replied too quickly. “*I went for coaching this morning. Tutor marked my attendance. Raag, Mandy and Aadil were there and then I went to Brooke to study.*” I said hurriedly and there was so much more I wanted to add.

“*You must have been dreaming.*” She said suppressing laugh. “*You were in bed when I woke up this afternoon and you have missed all three meals of the day. Miss Gladys is really worried for you. And seriously speaking now I am worried too. Are you taking overdose of your asthma medicines?*”

“*Shut up.*” I said getting out of bed, anxiously fleeing down the stairs without bothering to wear my slippers. I found Niya in the rest room, brushing her teeth “*Niya, remember you saw me with Adi this morning, going down the brooke.*” I asked hurriedly.

Her face was serious, she spit into the sink before turning to me “*Who Adi?*” she asked blankly.

My conscious faded, I had to hold onto the sink to keep myself from collapsing again.

I was in track suite, my hair still smelled berryish, I can still smell Adi, it wasn’t a dream. It can’t be. I swallowed too hard, that it ached.

I was not going back without a confirmation. I went straight to boys’ dorm from there, running. My pace slowed involuntarily realizing Adi, Raag and Mandy were sitting on the stairs in the dark. Their laugh echoed, making me weak. I wanted to turn around and leave but instead I kept walking.

Finally I came to a stop few centimeters away from them. “*Hi Samiya.*” Raag said puzzled, but I couldn’t speak, my eyes contemplating Adi. He wasn’t wearing what he was wearing this morning. His lovely blue eyes didn’t smolder at my sight as they did this morning. He started fiddling with the watch on his wrist, as if he couldn’t stand to look at my ugly face. He didn’t want to know what I was doing there at this hour, bare foot. He didn’t care. I bet he didn’t even know my name. I got my answer. It was a dream.

“*Samiya?*” Raag asked again, his tone lucid, trying to wake me up.

“*I was wondering if you could give me notes from today’s class.*” I said hurting.

“*Yeah sure. I will bring them to class tomorrow. How are you feeling now?*” Raag asked, worried

“*Better.*” I whispered turning around. I managed to walk to the point where I became invisible to them before started crying. *God, it isn’t fair. Why did I dream such dream, which gave me hope, which made me happy. It’s not right.*

But then I started realizing things. If that was a dream, how did I get changed, how could I have dreamed Adi saying that he brought me cereals, he confessing he made complaint to

Mr. Mathur? I tripped walking down to Brooke this morning, my ankle was still hurting, how can I imagine pain. I was out of my bed today. I was sure.

I couldn't sleep that night. The lines in the book which I marked this morning were still marked. But then everything was like a dream, I couldn't remember few parts of it when I tried putting them in sequence. Something was not right.

Next day was Sunday. Aadil was no different. He was unobservant and self occupied as always, which was now hurting to an extent that it was killing me. I after lunch went to the medical room, to get some pain killers. I was stupid enough to believe that a pain killer will cure that kind of ache. Mr. Niven Soman, the medicine teacher who is sort of a shrink too made me sit down for a quick check up; it's not easy getting your ways around him.

"Do you want to tell me something?" he asked in an old fashion parent manner when I told him the truth that the pain was a little below my chest, somewhere near the heart.

I sighed.

"I had this dream Sir, which felt too real." I groaned *"I just couldn't get it out of my head?"*

"What dream?" he asked politely.

I voluntarily changed few details here and there before explaining him what I saw.

"That person you saw, he asked your likes, he praised you. Did he?" he asked, worry lines too clear on his face.

I nodded stiffly.

He leaned back on his chair and turned thoughtful.

"Listen Samiya." He finally said *"I don't think it was a dream. If you got out of bed but you didn't reach your class. That means you went to the Brooke straightaway."* He paused *"You have lived away from your parents all your life; apparently you don't talk about yourself with your friends. In these cases. In your case people sometimes start imagining things."*

"You mean to say I am Schizophrenic?" I almost laughed at his diagnosis for a minute.

"No I don't mean that. But there is a possibility that sometimes your mind starts imagining conversations that you want to have. Talk. Talk to your friends, talk to your teachers. Talking is the best prevention for this disease." He explained putting a disprin on my palm *"if that ever happens again, I want you to come to me straightaway."*

I thanked before leaving.

I was unable to deny that possibility, my mind was weak enough to become prey to such mental disorders. But I wasn't prepared for that kind of complication in life. Dear lord wasn't Asthma enough. I prayed that evening to lord to keep me away from that kind of hallucinations. And on the other hand I was praying for it to happen again. I mean I was confused and I was confusing God as well.

That day at dinner I heard Raag, Mandy and *Adi talking about* spending night in library doing Biology.

Everyone else was going to rumpus room for a movie.

I was planning to go to library too but quickly dropped the idea as right now I had zero tolerance to Aadil's arrogant moods.

I went to computer room instead. There was no one in there. I made myself comfortable and started studying.

I clearly remember the clock striking 12 and me flitching, waking up from sleep when I saw him leaning on the table right in front of me.

He was wearing a black sweat and was looking extremely gorgeous in that.

"Remember me?" he said looking into my eyes. That was it. This here was the most beautiful hallucination, one can ever have and this was the proof that I was mad.

"Did I disturb you?" he asked calmly. His beauty was mesmerizing. I couldn't breathe, speaking was impossible.

He smiled crookedly.

"Do you want to come and study with me, Raag and Mandy?" he asked breaking down at each word, hesitantly. He was giving me a choice. Maybe he will just disappear if I would say no. But that's exactly what I never wanted. I walked out following him, partially to see the limit of my potential to imagine things. I kept noticing the smallest of things which I rarely ever did like he using his key card to enter the library. Raag and Mandy were there on the round conference table, whose every inch was covered with books.

"Hi Samiya." They said enthusiastically, moving their chairs making place for me to fit in.

They decided on going through one of the chapters in biology and then test each other on that. As everyone was studying a silence followed. Now I was at that point where I couldn't differentiate what was real and what was imagination. I wanted to test it.

“Which page is classification of kingdom animalia based on common features? I can’t find it?” I asked looking at all three of them in turns. I didn’t know where it was, so if I didn’t know how these characters of my *imagination* will know.

“Pass me your book I will mark it for you” Adi said calmly.

When he returned there was something written in beautiful calligraphy *“In lose hair you look like Virgin Mary”*.

I flushed on reading those lines; he was equating me with a faith, with a holy mother, to whom countless souls devote their life.

I read those words repeatedly; this was not a kind of radical complement I was used to.

I wondered can a boy my age use that kind of words of respect and sanctity for any girl. This was definitely my imagination. But insanely enough, I liked it.

I cautiously looked at him but he was engrossed in book. So I tried concentrating on mine.

I was still studying when Raag and Mandy started talking *“Why didn’t you do your studies in States?”* Raag was asking him

“Dad was an ex Mayo student so he wanted me to go to the same school.” He explained.

“Headmaster was my dad’s classmate” he announced wryly, looking at me.

And I was actually very surprised in a way he couldn’t know. Because he was my imagination and he was giving me a piece of information that I didn’t know.

“Oh so that’s the reason you came here?” I asked eagerly.

“Yes. No” “Many reasons actually.”

I waited but he didn’t say anything beyond that.

We talked a lot after that, about things, random and silly. And I laughed to the point where my stomach started aching. They finally decided to pack up for night despite my little reluctance. Once out of library I didn’t know if I would be with them like that again.

“Thanks for today.” I said with involuntary moisture in my eyes.

There was a sudden reticence in the room

“What’s wrong?” Raag asked stroking my cheek.

“Nothing. I was sick, so was having some silly thoughts.” I lied.

“Nothing will ever happen to you. Ever. Do you get me?” Mandy said and hugged me.

I was in turmoil of emotions when I saw him distressed. I had no idea what put him down my crying or Mandy hugging me.

It was ridiculous but I hoped that it was later.

I would love to see how the most beautiful person on Earth looked like in an emotion which brought feelings of insecurity, fear and anxiety, *Jealousy*.

In reality there was no reason for Aadil Rathore to be jealous but this was my imagination. May be he will be.

“I think I should walk her down to her dormitory” Adi suggested firmly.

“No please I will be fine.” I repelled; my dorm was just round the corner that was really unnecessary.

“No he is right. It’s very late.” Raag was with him in it *“good night guys, see you tomorrow.”* He waved moving away.

So it was *us* again.

I was as nauseous as it was for the first time, *just me and him*.

“You have become very close to Raag and Mandy?” I decided to talk first breaking the silence.

“Yeah. They are nice” his voice deep and tense.

“You are close to them yourself”. He added. I am not sure if that was a question or a statement. But I decided to put it straight anyways. *Making him jealous, if that was it* was not that good after all.

“They are good friends and Mandy is more like a brother” I emphasized on the word *brother*; just in case he was worried about the hugging deal.

I couldn’t believe I was explaining this to someone that wasn’t real.

I was about to say something when he just disappeared and I fell down unconsciously.

Next morning I woke up with a splitting head ache. I was the last to arrive at the gym class. As we did aerobics my mind was still wondering over the things that happened last night. I didn't know how I reach my dorm. Maybe black outs were also the part of this illness. But no matter how serious this condition was, I wasn't going to Mr. Niven. Why would I need treatment for it, I am not harming anyone. If my imagination pleases me, what's wrong with it?

As I would have guessed Aadil didn't even notice me in the class as usual. But now for some reason it was not very disheartening. I didn't like him either, it was Adi I liked. Anyways it was all study except for times when Sid threw paper balls at me like a kindergarten kid.

"Very mature Sid" I remember repeating throughout the day at his silly pranks. I have lately started feeling uncomfortable with Sid's attitude towards me. To some extent I have always known that he likes me and maybe because I can never return his feeling, I feel sorry for him. Its like Sid is Samiya and I am Aadil in our case, which really puts me in a spot where I want to kill myself for doing this to someone.

After school everyone went to the music room, some event was coming up and Class 11 was preparing a musical. I despite the zero interest went to the music room for the purpose of attendance.

When I walked in Sara was sitting at drums and appeared very restless, Moon was going through a book, sandeep was playing random keys at piano, *Aadil* was sitting in the corner with a guitar, everyone else was crashed everywhere in the room.

"Song selection" Chaaya whispered.

Suddenly the music started playing.

It was Aadil.

"Listen to this" he said seeking attention.

He was playing guitar... Ronan Keating. One of my favorite numbers.

There was gratification in his voice as he sang

"It's amazing how you can speak right to my heart, without saying a word you can light up the dark. Try as I may, I could never explain, what I hear, when you don't say a thing...The smile on your face lets me know that you need me, there's a truth in your eyes, saying you'll never leave me, the touch of your hand says you'll catch me whenever I fall...You say it best when you say nothing at all".

His voice was very original as if he could feel what he was playing.

"There's a joy on your face whenever you see me, there's a pain in your eyes whenever I am leaving, the voice of your thoughts reaches my heart, and I hear you best when you say nothing at all".

I realized the last lines were not in the song. He just made them up, He was a poet. Amazing a person as insensitive as himself could talk of emotions.

He blinked at me before playing the last string, or that's what I thought he did. I looked back puzzled, was this Adi?

I a little tense sneaked out to do my homework.

What was happening to me these days didn't make sense. It was just like *God's existence doesn't make sense*. They say that maybe God doesn't exist but I talk to him with a very strong sensitivity as if he is always listening.

I remember Niya asked me the same question on God's existence once, she asked why people say God is enemy of reason.

I told her it is not necessary to see everything, to have evidences. There are things beyond reasoning. Science can only see what's observable, *it will never have evidences to few things like believe, faith, love and God*. And whatever my imagination was; a belief or a faith I wanted to stick to it.

Lost in intellectual thoughts something that I rarely do I ran into Kirti, one of my seniors who is also studying science with biology.

We became very close over time as we shared a number of common interests except for *studying*.

I asked Kirti of how she was going with her entrance preparation when she took me by surprise

“I am not taking entrance?”

“Why?” I asked surprised. It was upsetting fact that people who deserved to be there are not keen and the ones who are useless *like me will* get in there by hook or by crook.

“No I don’t want to be a doctor. I will be doing bachelors in sciences.” “I will be working as a scientist some day...hopefully” she said crossing her fingers.

Is becoming a scientist a career goal.

“Why a scientist in particular?” I asked amazed.

A remnant sorrow appeared between her brows. Her eyes flickered away to the book.

“I had an elder brother who died of muscular dystrophy at age of 12. He was paralyzed for as long as I remember and in terrible pain, pain of being helpless and pain to know that there was no cure to his situation. He knew everyday he came closer to death. My mother lost it....when he was gone...everything went away with him...” she sighed and her eyes flickered back to mine filled with water.

“It’s like I am all by myself now.” She said in pain *“It doesn’t feel good at this place. I want to change it for others if I can.”*

An untimely death is something I consider highly unfair. And more unfair was that the ones who are left behind have to live despite they are dead in a way. Why does this happen to people? I caressed her hand hesitantly, I didn’t know how to soothe her pain.

I was trying to get Kirti out of my mind, when Rasna and Moon caught up with me

“What’s going on between you and Aadil??” Rasna asked arrogantly. It took me a moment to interpret. I wasn’t imagining that, he blinked at me. But right now I was not in a mood for that discussion.

“Nothing” I answered walking away trying to sound normal

“Then why was he staring at you like you were some bikini model from a playboy magazine” Moon said making a face.

Her words sliced through my chest, I felt like crying. And I was sure she was imagining things herself.

“You better go and ask him Moon” I said calmly scared of hurting her with my words, though she had forgotten all her manners lately.

I felt completely opposite of what I was feeling this evening.

Somehow pain was also an energy *which could neither be created nor be destroyed but could be transformed”*. I wanted Adi to show out of thin air. I wanted to pass on my sorrow to him; I tried hard but failed to imagine him.

Sara came hopping like a horse and crashed in my bed.

She said a whole essay about something though I just picked the last line. *“Did you see how Aadil was staring at Chaaya. I mean with all that attitude and superiority of his. Chaaya?”* Sara asked in amazed irritation.

Oh so he was looking at Chaaya, who was standing next to me. And I had to suffer all the sarcasm without any reason.

I dodged Moon’s gaze, tuned down the volume of gossip around me, resting my concentration on Sara’s confabulation all evening.

And later after supper immersed in a very fascinating biology chapter.

Everyone was sleeping when I looked out of the window.

It was full moon night.

Moon was as exorbitantly beautiful as it was faked in scene of a romantic movie. The breeze smelled of carnations in the morning dew. I knew the taste of that fragrance. This is the aroma of my home, this valley every night just before dawn, when the midnight sun shimmers.

The incense of heaven on Earth.

I poised in front of the window with open arms admiring the orb of night and enchanted by the knowledge that I was 5000 meters closer to that heavenly body than billions of other people.

I was somewhere on top of the world.

I let breeze run through me, so that it can touch my soul and its innocence is captured inside me, mitigating me of any evil. This was a form of reincarnation.

There was a pastoral sound of running water in the background with the millions of other natural night sounds that included singing of insects and trees on other side covered with twinkling fireflies and *him* leaning against a pillar next to football ground.

I was dreaming of him.

Now the view was cherubic and complete.

He was waving at me, asking me to come down. He had books with him. I picked mine and ran downstairs, taking two at a time and came to an abrupt stop. He was mounted at bottom of the stairs, appearing more like a Greek god than anyone had a right to.

“Hi” he said with glittering eyes. *“Remember me?”*

As Will Smith once said life is not the amount of breaths you take, it’s the moments that take your breath away.

That right there was the moment for me.

“Hi” I said cheerfully not hiding a tiniest bit of happiness his presence brought to me.

“Library?” he asked, his voice was guarded, he was asking my consent.

The location doesn’t matter when it’s *him* I am spending time with.

I nodded.

We perched in the silent area upstairs which had few chairs and an ancient computer confined on one corner. There were few seniors on the lower level, and the females amongst those bore their sight into him as he leaded me upstairs, obviously not giving a damn that I was watching. I had a silly mind.

So this was the most trivial and secluded corner of the library, he was looking for a place with more privacy. We were here to talk, not for mere studying.

“*Adi, do you know that you are my imagination?*” I couldn’t stop myself from telling him the truth of our relationship.

He looked back amazed and petrified at the same time. “*What?*” he asked in a tense expression.

“*You are not real.*” I sighed.

“*Who told you that?*”

“*You don’t remember me or meeting me every morning. Nor does anyone else remember seeing us together. Mr. Niven told me that people like me sometimes start imagining things. You are not here in real.*” I paused “*I am schizophrenic.*”

He looked back surprised. He couldn’t talk for few seconds.

“*I don’t know. Maybe.*” He said fighting for words “*you remember me after I leave?*”.” He interrupted.

“*Of course I do.*” I said contemplating his expression.

“*I don’t know. Maybe I am your imagination. But can we just pretend that I am not.*” He whispered. I felt a bit dizzy looking into his eyes.

He turned to write something in the book in front of him. His face was impassive.

“*How are you coping up with so much?*” I asked out of curiosity staring in his maths book.

“*I am doing alright because of all the added benefits I have*” He smiled. “*Like my excellent memory.*”

“*You seem to be very confident about yourself.*” I stated startled by the resilience in his tone of voice.

“*I am.*” He answered playfully, not offended.

He tilted his head and winked at me; getting the vibe that he was confusing me.

“*Can you learn this whole page by heart?*” he asked flickering one of the pages of his maths book. *Of course not. No one could, It had silly formulas and thus and therefore* so I nodded sideways innocently. He smiled a little.

“*I know this whole book word to word.*” He explained wryly.

I was too shocked to say a word. That was impossible.

He was still smiling distractedly, scribbling on the notebook, when I said undecidedly “*Aadil was.*” I paused to correct myself “*You were singing a song in music room today.*”

“*Hun*”

“*That’s my favorite song.*”

“*I know.*” He said indifferently “*That song is always on replay mode on your CD Player.*”

He was right.

“*How do you know?*” I asked in a low voice.

“*I can hear each and every sound of your world.*”

“*Oh*” was all I could say.

“*Why were you staring at Chaaya today?*” I asked interrogatively with a slight humor.

“*Why would I stare at Chaaya?*” he asked intensely turning back the question at me. The question itself was the answer, his beautiful scorching eyes from under the dark eyelids were contemplating me or that was what my heart wanted to believe.

“*Talking about that, why is Sid always staring at you?*”

I cringed “*I wish I could stop him from doing that, without hurting his feelings.*”

“*I know, it’s not easy, either way. To love or being loved.*” He said as if he was using those words in his context.

We decided to accomplish the task we were technically here for. ...studying. I memorized biology lesson while he solved mathematical problems. He had a beautiful handwriting, very creative as if he was a professional calligrapher. This trait distinguished him from characteristics of two species which he belonged to *boys and doctor*.

There was no morning sun shining in the mountains when my alarm rang, it was time to start the day.

There are days when every part of you resist just the idea of getting out of bed, and there are days when you are nonchalant with pessimism and you think *oh god why another day*, and then there are days when you wake up cheerfully full with enthusiasm and excitement looking forward to something.

Yes it was one of those days and I hoped the days ahead remain the same.

Today was Yoga for the gym class.

After brushing teeth *the lengthiest morning task for me* we went to the basement.

Boys and Mr. Niven were already there. There were two cardboard boxes saying *eco friendly yoga mats* at the entrance of the room. I and Sara waited for the crowd to desert so that we can cull mats for ourselves.

There was sound of a familiar cough at my back.

It was Aadil announcing his presence.

I turned instantly, unbalanced for a moment staring into his eyes which were oceanic blue this morning. The *blue* of his eyes changed shades, I am unsure if its florescence, or moisture or just the moods that affected the earlier.

“*Morning*” he said in a quite voice to Sara, which got better every time, without bothering to look at me. That was impossible and insane that I was having time of my life with this person, who barely knows me. “*We’ll be practicing an hour later this evening. Will that be fine with you?*”

“*Yeah. I’ll be there*” she said pursing her lips.

“*See you then*” he said casually walking away.

Unlike him I always fail drastically in making standard talks with other people in his presence that was really unfair.

The serious business of meditational class turned hysterical with Vaibhav and Iqbal *snoring vociferously* while we were trying to listen to the divine sound linking directly with the soul practicing lying down meditation. This happens when you make sleep deprived children do all these weird moves to your body.

When I entered the class there was a lot of chaos.

One of the chemistry whizzes saw a question answer page for chemistry on Mr. Pandey’s desk. Yeah a paper with questions and answers to those questions.

The not so bright students objected that a surprise test is possible because we were in middle of another chapter but the clever ones pointed out that the test won't be a surprise if it's given at the end of the same lesson.

So anyways everyone was jotting down the answers on palms, erasers, on tables to some of the multiple choice questions that Mr. Chemistry Whizze remembered. He was star of the hour. And seriously speaking I was no Angel so I pen down few answers here and there myself. When I finished scribbling I subconsciously slipped the paper on the next table, without seeing who was sitting on it.

"No Thanks." Aadil replied pushing the paper back at my table *"Duffer"* he added mutely.

That was it. I was done with my quota of patience.

"What did you just say?" that were my first words to the real Aadil.

"Nothing" he said casually. I had never been that furious in a long time.

"You called me a duffer. What do you think of yourself? Moron. What are you haan? Pig. You arse hole.hippy. Why did you come here? Why can't you just go back to that fucking 18th century school of yours?" I was shouting at the peak of my voice, I had never done anything like that before. Truth was I felt relieved. I should have done that a long time ago.

I was preparing a solid grip on my physics reference book to pick it with one hand and throw it on his face, because his blasé indifferent expression was making me angrier. I wanted to see him in pain, petrified, crying.

And apparently that wouldn't be enough either. But unfortunately Mr. Pandey intervened *"Leave it, what do you want do with the book."* He asked worried by the angle of the heavy book in my hand.

"Shove it up his arse." I threw back on my teacher's face. And as soon as the words were out, I turned red, too embarrassed. My anger faded. Mr. Pandey moved my place and all the time people were snickering around me for some reason.

Next two periods were for chemistry practical.

I couldn't understand that why a pig like Aadil had to look so enormously beautiful in a white lab coat.

"Dr Derek Shepherd of Grey's Anatomy is zero on ten compared to suave Dr Aadil" Deep said of him in the first practical class.

I even wondered how excruciating it will be to nurses to give cent percent to the demanding profession with him around.

But that was when I didn't know him. My perspective has changed a lot since then.

Our practical instructor has divided the class in groups of four with one girl in each group.

We formed groups ourselves the very first day but Sid and his mates almost set Lab on fire so instructor had to intervene and change the pattern to save school from destruction.

We were doing purification of a sample by crystallization today. Everyone was done while my fellow members were still struggling. We got it wrong for the second time. They assigned me a nugatory duty of collecting material and apparently my job was done. There were only three precautions in the given experiment which unfortunately were neither read nor taken by these three stupids.

Every time I opened my mouth to say something, they said *"shhhh"*. So I decided to stay quiet and let them fiddle while they were doing it wrong for the third time.

Aadil was leaning on the opposite table with his arms across his chest witnessing the episode of *how easily I can be dominated*. Strangely now that I shouted at him this morning and even attempted to kill him, he was more interested in me, like never before.

When we failed in the third attempt the instructor came to help us. He was about to start when Aadil intruded *"Why don't you let Samiya try"* in a disapproving tone. *"She didn't get much of a chance to participate"* he chided when the instructor didn't answer immediately.

I realized everyone was staring at him perplexed but allegedly that didn't concern him.

"Go ahead. Give it a shot" the instructor said cynically without looking at me. I had seen others doing the experiment and read the manual thrice so I easily pulled it off, though I wasn't fully concentrating on the experiment.

"You give her chance next time" the instructor rudely told my fellow members examining color of the purified crystals.

"Why didn't you say you knew it" Tushar whispered casually in my ear walking back to our table.

How skeptical. My eyes wide opened in disbelief and rage. As if you were giving me a chance to say even a single word. But he moved on without waiting for an answer.

"Relax or else your eyes will pop out" Raag said frolically laughing at me. I saw Aadil smiling too, he looked so much like Adi when he smiled. I got distracted for a minute.

"Ha ha" I said sedately rolling my eyes before moving on to my table.

.

It was a fun day if I eliminate the prattle that was going around about me.

We did another test in coaching class and then I scuffed to the ground blithely after changing into evening uniform.

I was looking forward to spend time with the little sprites.

I divided them into teams of two and watch them play.

Behind me Aadil and other boys from my class were practicing basket ball. Aadil was dribbling a ball near to the net. His hair were moving in exact formulation with his walk, the sleeves of the jumper were folded till elbows and he looked more of a pro than anyone could imagine.

Boys from junior Basket ball team were practicing on the other net. They were juniors in regard to their age; physically they looked pretty grown up. And they formed the best basket ball team Pinegrove ever had.

I couldn't help overhearing the conversation.

"I wonder how boys tolerate basketball" *"We called it a girl's game back home."* *"I mean Mayo"* Aadil was telling Ian.

"So what's your game?" Ian asked.

I was wondering if he could even swing a bat or kick a ball, I mean he never gave any sport vibes.

"I play football. I am a soccer boy" he said enthusiastically doing some cool ball pranks.

All Aadil does is talk big of himself. I bet other than his beauty, he doesn't have a single quality *"Bludy Show off."* I whispered to myself. I swear his face turned a little as if he heard what I said. And I died right there of embarrassment.

He suddenly stopped bouncing the ball and held it in his armpit contemplating the junior boy's team.

Karan, captain of the team, was practicing, while everyone watched. I have seen Karan playing he is undefeatable.

Aadil with his friends walked to other side of the ground.

He had a very gracious way of communicating, not that the boys were aware of but he easily got his way out with them, I have noticed.

I was unable to hear the conversation but apprehended the situation was leading to a match with Karan and Aadil shaking hands and other boys clearing the court.

Aadil took off his jumper and threw it over the ramp. A sleeveless grey shirt tugged his masculine chest. He had descent biceps but he still looked pretty fragile as compared to all the boys in sight. I had a petty twinge of regret; all the girls' spectators were now ravishing him in the present form where he looked like a runway model. Anyways it was hard not to have hots for him, with or without the jumper on. I reckoned even if he lost the match there would be no adverse effect to his fame as he was an object of temptation in other ways.

Karan started the game with dribbling the ball.

The object of the game is to merely set the velocity and height of the ball so that it goes through the hoop *according to books*.

Things are complicated on field.

Aadil was on the defense and I guess unaware of how good Karan is at free throws.

"He has a good arc in his throws and can shoot from far distance." I have no bludy idea what that means but I have heard people saying that a lot about him.

Karan kept messing with the ball when suddenly he jumped high to take a shot; simultaneously Aadil took the same lap and blocked him. The hand coordination, the movement of ball was blurred but somehow now Aadil had the ball. I was disarrayed with the confusion in the court. It was more like a mind game. I was unable to presume any one's move. Out of nowhere Aadil took a sharp turn and a vertical jump a few inches away from the hoop and slammed the ball through the rim single handed. Nothing compared to a fast break that finished with an emphatic thrust of the ball through hoop. Boys around him were going nuts wildly cheering shouting

"He dunks the ball" *"he dunks the ball"* running all over him in the court.

The game was over because now the highly impressed competitor was asking for lessons on ball dunking. They were making him do that over and over again and every time he *dunked* they shouted in state of high excitement.

I too conscious suspended the class and was making my way out of the ground when Aadil blocked my way, I came to an abrupt stop.

"Show off" he said harshly, repeating what I have said. His face was appealing red and he was sweating, but still he smelled very exotic. He was already more seductive than anyone had right to, I wonder why he used intriguing perfumes on top of that. We were there like that till his anger faded, and he cleared my way hesitantly, walking out of the ground.

Lost I could still smell him when I saw that he forgot taking his jumper. I tentatively picked it up and despite returning it; I waddled to my dorm undecided, ducked the jumper under my pillow and covered it with quilt.

I was on bed when something came flying from the window and dropped on the ground.

"Waiting outside. Adi." The paper tugged on the stone said.

I excitedly rushed downstairs; that was a pleasant surprise I wasn't expecting him so early.

“*Couldn’t wait to see you.*” The angel said when I reached the last step.

The way Adi tells me his feelings, so manifestly, amused me. I hoped I had that kind of courage and honesty.

I started walking along with him, too distracted to ask where we were going.

“*You are good at basketball...the dunking thing*” I said sarcastically making it sound like the boys.

“*You pulling my leg?*” he asked self consciously eyeing me.

I smiled ironically.

“*That was for you.*” He announced.

I felt special with all the courtesy he treated me with, like everything he said or did was about me. No one ever gave me that importance. I have always been insignificant, just another one in the crowd.

When he said stuff like that I desperately wanted to confess my intricacy to him, to clinch everything and dissolve in my wants.

“*You know we had a fight today. I was on the verge of killing you.*” I smiled feeling guilty.

“*But trust me I was trying to teach you some manners.*” I added too quickly.

“*And trust me I was trying to teach you to speak out for yourself.*” He answered patiently “*I wish you had done the same when Moon said things to you.*”

I was overwhelmed. I must like Aadil very much, that’s why I was finding reasons for his attitude towards me in these fantasies.

I noticed he was carrying a guitar case.

“*Is this your guitar?*” I asked, making talk to shut down the thought of reality. I liked this fantasy world.

“*Yup*” he said peeking at the guitar case and moving his free hand along the length of it, like it was something that had life, something that had hidden meaning to his life. Usually people do that stuff to show emotions towards their dogs.

“*It’s a custom pick, designed by an Australian company. This is guaranteed to last pretty much... forever. It is made of a meteor*” he continued.

A meteor. I gave him that *I don’t understand* looks.

“*It is fashioned from pieces of Gibeon meteorite which was discovered in 1836 somewhere in Africa. That makes it durable and unique. There are not many of its kind.*” He said explaining.

“*You know every thing that is played on this guitar, will stay forever.*”

“*What does that mean?*” I asked confused.

“*Sound is not a purely mechanical phenomenon of wave propagation, according to Para physics. There are means by which the sounds can be left in this medium, to be heard later.*”

“*Do we need a device to find it later?*”

“*No. Every human has an ability to hear it, one just had to work to improve on it.*”

“*I don’t understand.*” I confessed.

“*Have you ever heard noises when you are alone? Like opening of door, of wind, of someone talking when actually not a single thing is moving.*”

“*Yes.*” I said surprised “*it actually happens a lot to me.*”

“*So those are just the sounds left by the people who lived here previously.*” He said wryly.

I groaned “*You know you are scaring me.*”

He smiled “*They are sounds not ghosts. You don’t have to be scared.*”

“*So can I listen to whatever you have played, later.*”

“*Yup. Concentrate. The sounds are there, you just have to turn up the volume a little*” he explained.

“*Nice.*” I said considering what he has said.

I was quiet for a while.

“*Raag and Mandy are coming too*” he announced breaking the awkward silence.

“*Are they?*” I sounded very pleased, even to my own ears.

We were going towards the music room.

The cacophony of the music room filled the whole corridor. It has always been used as a place for socializing diminishing the actual purpose of the so called *music room*.

I shyly walked behind Adi not knowing what everyone sees when I am seeing him.

Adi walked straight towards the other end of the room, the ramp on that edge gives a stage like feeling. So usually people practice there. *Just standing on that ramp gives me stage fright*.

I walked in looking at that ramp, that’s what everyone was looking at and suddenly and swiftly someone jumped at me from behind the door and I heard huge roar something that sounded like “*bhau*”.

I shrieked at top of my voice, fall down and trembled there for few seconds almost panicking to death.

It was Mandy.

Everyone was whooping turning around on floor, holding their stomachs. So the whole drama was just to scare me.

I gave some good ones to that *Mandy* after regaining conscious.

Adi was scrupled and was smiling shyly unlading his guitar as if he was being teased.

In all that mess I was wondering why someone has to be so sweet!!

And the good part was Moon’s attitude was buttoned-down today, she was accompanying everyone in the fun.

I noticed Sara was twittering, acting benignantly towards Adi giving exaggerated opinions on his musical skills.

What’s up with her? I wondered. *She was not very sociable with him until this morning.*

So you can dunk the ball? She asked charmingly talking to *him*.

Oh for Christ sake. What’s the big deal about it? Out of all the luring factors she founds the ball thing amazing. Also that’s startling, how quickly the word spread around. And they say ‘boys don’t gossip’.

Niya also joined the group of good *for nothing* audiences shortly after the practice began.

There were few others like Mandy and Sid who started whistling whenever the girls danced and threw away fake *paper notes* on them.

So finally all those sorts were kicked out.

Sara, Sandeep and *Adi* were successful in creating magic.

The music was soothing and very liberated. It was sweeping me off my feet.

It was tune of ardor for a baby bird when he spreads his wings for the very first time, it was a ray of light for a prisoner in dungeon, and it was the hymn of faith of Meera in Lord Krishna.

The music deserved dance of freedom, hope and passion, something that was unguarded.

I wondered why *Moon and crew* were working so hard on the steps.

“*Samiya would you like to assist with dressing and make up on the day*” Rasna asked tentatively.

I promptly agreed as I knew it was just an imagination.

The girls left as they had to meet Ms Anjali for deciding dresses.

Sara, Sandeep, Niya and Adi were doing their own form of entertainment explaining how their instruments work.

While I sat there engrossed, thinking how small my world was. It was so modest that it fitted in a small music room. These three people here possessed my every reason to be alive.

I read somewhere that ‘*Some people are your family, no matter when you find them, and some people are not, even if you sleep with them in same bed for years*’.

This, right here was my family. I had no idea where fate will take all four of us but I knew they will be cherished in the safest part of my heart until the day I am cremated.

When they were done I told them few funny stories of how Niya played Casio for money, on all the family occasions.

Uncles used to push few notes in her hand after every song she played, and she happily accepted cash for her services. I think, making money out of it was what kept her going for hours.

And surprisingly till now she doesn't understand what's wrong about that.

I also told them some *not so funny stories*, like how my grandfather passed away in sleep while Niya sat on the edge of his bed playing Casio.

I have accused her many times of killing grandpa with her terrible music, during fights.

And that she believed.

Her brain screws apparently needed some fixing, she was my sister after all.

We spent whole evening laughing and as reality stuck in an invisibly quick second I found myself sitting all alone in the music room. I walked back to the dorm heedlessly. I was getting used to the sudden disappearance of the characters of my imagination. Also a part of me knew that they'll show up again sooner or later.

Sara was on my bed as usual.

I wonder why she always chooses the upper bed in the bunk when she actually uses the lower one, that's mine, approximately three hundred days a year.

"Tell your mum the fabric softener she uses is magical. It changes fragrance. Your bed smell's of men's cologne" she said firmly, as if she was serious.

How's that possible?

Holy crap!!! Adi's jumper under her head.

I rushed to sit on the edge of the bed on pillow.

Talked non sense to distract her from the topic.

I sighed in relief when she decided to walk down for dinner.

At dinner Rasna told me that Mrs. Anjali was renting white frocks from a local retailer for the dance.

"Sandeep, Sara and Adi can wear whatever they want" she said unbothered. *"Hey do you want to help in dressing and makeup."* She asked.

I looked back surprised. How could I have guessed that. *"Yeah sure"* I answered distracted swallowing the hard potato from the curry with water. Food in school was not the yummiest, but they say it's the healthiest. Though I doubt it.

There was a fixed time table for the meals here. Technically that meant eating yellow daal on Mondays, potato curry on Tuesday, capsicum on Wednesdays, kidney beans on Thursday and chick peas on Friday, for one very long year. We can tell which day of the week it is from looking at the food. That could be funny to some people, not to us.

I had to go to computer lab today with Raag, Mandy and Aadil as some online reference papers had to be done as part of coaching. *As if the books weren't enough.*

I was not very happy with this accord because this usually is the time when Adi comes to see me.

Mandy, Raag and Aadil were fiddling with lab key when I reached on second level of the senior wing. Aadil's physical resemblance to Adi always intrigued inside me the feelings which were not meant for him. Wish I could help.

"Raag I need some more time to revise. I will be in library, you carry on." I lied trying not to look at Aadil.

Instead of going to library I ambled in the tiny shaded lanes between the trees looking for Adi. Lost I reached heady's cottage like house down the alley on the left side of the car park. This has always fascinated me since childhood. Whenever I read of the witch's cottage in *Hansel and Gretel*, I related it to heady's chalet. Not that Heady was a witch but the hut was a geographical and structural mirage. There was one felicity of thing which was peculiar to *this hut*; I have always lived in it in delusions and dreams, as a grown up.

Though I have never crossed the *no man's land* to get any closer to it.

I wonder why my parent's three storey house which is subjected to renovation every six months; and is an enormous example of style and lifestyle is not the house of my fantasies.

Maybe because that modern structure is not feasible with the fairy tales I have heard or maybe because that house is not at all a house to me in the first place.

I was ambling on the *line of control*, lost in thoughts when he appeared.

“What are you doing here?” he asked calmly, in the gentle tone which worked like magic on me.

“I thought I’ll give you company” I said pleased.

He smiled hesitantly.

“Come I’ll show you something” he took my hand walking me down the lane. We were going *in the wrong, very wrong* direction, towards the *witch’s cottage*.

“What are you doing Adi? I am not supposed to go there” I alleged, repelling to go any further. *There can be serious consequences, for me as unfortunately my dad was not in Mayo in Class of 75. And also unlike him I was real.*

“Shhhh” he whispered with his finger on lips.

‘Whatever’ I thought. Naturally hypnotized, following him.

My heart fluttered as we walked across the hut. It was a real beauty; a very traditional mountain gem.

We were at the back of the house. A refined kitchen garden was spread all over the backyard. Veggies and herbs were carefully aligned and organized in a way that they intensified the attractiveness of the vicinity.

But anyways what’s so special about it? He risked my life to show me what heady does with his free time.

“Beautiful. Can we go now?” I murmured tracing my way back

“Look at that” he said pointing towards the top of the mountain.

A string of lights; dazzling and flashy were moving hastily in a row. They were like celestial bodies dancing in an open universe. I stood there speechless, putting it together in my head.

“What’s that?” I asked finally

He smiled looking into my eyes.

“Those are cars. I think that is Shimla road” he explained his eyes shining in the weak moonlight.

“Waow” was all I managed to gasp in that astounding moment.

No part of the mountain which was sectioned to make roads was visible from Pinegrove. I had no idea this angle existed. To me school was confined within four walls.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” he asked stepping into the *no man’s land*.

“Out of the world” I gasped.

“Out of the world” I gasped.

“Samiya why did you come here?” he asked on the way back.

“I told you to give you company.” I failed to sound amazed. I knew that wasn’t the only reason or that wasn’t the complete truth.

He laughed.

“No. I mean to Pinegrove.” His voice mused.

That was a sensitive subject for me.

“There are thousands of reasons” I murmured.

“Give me few” he interrupted.

“Foremost Dad had to keep moving around due to business and mum had to stay at home because of me. My mum’s a house wife.” I explained. *“But she wanted to be with dad. And I was sick. Every four months they had to rush me to the hospital in the middle of the night. Asthma was killing my parents more than it was killing me. Delhi was not the right place for someone as sick as I was”*

“You know I feel my parents put up a serious fight with God to keep me. I would have been dead a long ago.” I added. I remember how my mum used to cry and my dad spent days and nights without blinking sitting next to me on the hospital bed, keeping an eye on my each and every breath.

He remained quite and tense.

“What?” I asked, I don’t remember saying anything that could worry him

“I can’t imagine you that sick. I guess I have always seen you like full of life.” He answered in velvet voice.

"I have seen death so closely, that now I understand the meaning of life. And I am not always happy, most of the time I am just pretending." I confessed.

"You are very cheerful, when I am around. And you are not pretending then" he said, with an edge to his voice.

"You wish" I answered sarcastically.

"So why you think, you didn't go then. Was it your parents prayers that kept you alive?" he reframed a simple question, *why aren't you dead.* It was probably hard for him to say the D word.

"Mostly it is." I answered after a plausible second. *"Do you believe in mysticism?"* I asked before continuing.

"I haven't given it much of a thought" he answered.

"Well I don't know how to explain you this." *"Do you know anything about Bheeshma Pitahma of Mahabharata?"* I asked.

He looked at me puzzled, failing to see any connection.

"Yes. A little. He was the strongest character of Mahabharata and Grandfather of Kauravas and Pandavas. He lived for 350 years" he mumbled remembering anything he knew about the character.

"Do you know anything of his vows and his powers?" I asked interrogatively.

"Nope" he whispered.

"His vows are interesting but not of our concern right now. But his power or you could say a blessing was a very extraordinary gift that any person in the whole mankind can receive. His father and Gods gave him boon of swachhanda mrityu or Ischcha Mrityu." I paused dramatically.

"Ischcha Mrityu means control over your own death. He could choose the time of his death but he was not immortal." I explained.

His face became curious as I talked.

"He died at approximately 350 years of age at the battlefield when he wanted to give up his body."

"You may think that's funny but every time I was being taken to the hospital or the time when I fall down while rock climbing. I knew the game was over. The transition point when everything became still or numb from a shocking peak of pain or the hard breaths was the time when I knew someone was there to pick me up." I stopped for a second reliving that moment.

"But then I heard my mother crying, my dad shouting my name and I prayed to God to not take me for their sake." *"If that would have happened for once I wouldn't have thought about it but that instance repeated few times and then I knew"*

"You knew what?" he interrupted his voice tempted with heavy curiosity.

"I knew that I had the same blessing. I have a boon of Ischcha Mrityu in a very strange way. God can't take me until I allow him to"

He looked at me surprised.

"So were your parents there when you fell while rock climbing?" he asked.

I remember every bit of each of those experiences very clearly.

"No. Actually that part is quite unexplainable. I knew I was leaving and I wasn't reluctant. I felt light and numb and in another second I was in terrible pain. I was back in my body. I don't know why they didn't take me back then" I answered.

"Maybe it was for someone else's sake" he suggested.

That didn't go with my theory.

"Do you remember when that happened? I mean you falling down while rock climbing" he asked.

I couldn't believe that he was going with my theory.

"That was mid of 2001" I answered. I remember the 9/11 attack happening later that year.

His eyes wide opened.

"Was it May 10, 2001" he asked.

"I don't remember. But what's about that?" I looked at him in amazement.

"Nothing it just occurred to me that it must be the day. Something bad I remember took place on that date" he answered relaxing his brows.

There was a brief silence before he changed the vibe.

“You know you have lost so much weight in last few days” he said worried climbing stairs. “You don’t eat properly. Is something wrong?”

Well that explains why my tunics and skirts keep gliding down.

“Nah. Everything is fine health wise. Trust me I am hungry all the time. I haven’t lost appetite, if that’s what you mean.” “But” I sighed “the potato curry is excruciating” “and all the curries, as a matter of fact” I announced smiling.

He chuckled.

“Well eat more of yoghurt and salads then” he recommended. “I like the colors on you. Keep them intact”

I dropped my gaze, ducking out.

Well I liked the colors on him too. Red lips, blue eyes, dense black eyelids, pink in cheeks.

I have no words for how much I wished in that moment that he wasn’t that beautiful, he wasn’t that incredible so that he could have belonged to me and with me.

“You know Sid is going to propose you soon.” He said in a warning tone. I don’t know how that came up out of nowhere.

“How do you know?” I asked smiling.

“I know” he answered wickedly as usual.

We were quiet for a while.

“You see future. Don’t you?” I asked undecidedly.

“Sometimes.” He agreed.

For a moment I wanted to ask what my future was but I changed my mind instantly. May be I will end up in a mental asylum few years down the lane, somehow since birth the final years of the school is the last place I see myself in future. Maybe my present is my future.

I saw us going back to dorm.

I reluctantly said “good night” and turned to leave. I knew he will just disappear behind me.

“Samiya” he called after me.

When I impulsively turned around to look at him, my world paused at his expression.

“I never see us together in future.” He murmured, his voice, serious and husky replenished with an emotion. *Desperation and helplessness.*

“I really want to.” he confessed. The flawless shape of his motionless body, the perfect white of his skin and the sphere of vulnerability in his voice urged me to get closer to him, to touch him, to hold him.

But instead I stood there motionless scared of pushing my fate any further.

“I wanted you to have something of me. To remind you of me” His prismatic eyes glittered under the moon.

“I wanted you to keep my jumper” He murmured in a gentle but tense voice.

My cheeks flushed at the realization that *he knew*.

His velvety voice was compelling.

I hesitantly took a step in his direction, getting closer to him was one thing that I couldn’t resist under that pallid light of the stars with this enticing person whose charm pulled me like a magnet since the day he stepped into my world.

Maybe his nearness would be an antidote to my anxiety.

He took a step back. His lips tightened. I knew that he knew what I was up to. Slowly it sank, that it wasn’t the virtuous thing for him to do.

A horrible feeling of being rejected ran over me.

“You should sleep now. It’s late.” His breath blew in my face, overpowering me. The sweet, deep scent of his breath was exquisite, a blend of fragrance of jasmine and of one of those wines that sits in dad’s cellar, but in a more concentrated form.

I blinked, thoroughly dazed and a bit humiliated “Samiya.” His voice was deep and compelling, his eyes changing a shade of blue “You won’t remember me.” And suddenly all the lights went off in a dime.

5. ABSENCE

It was hard in the morning to believe last night was dream. The scent of his warm body was unwitting me, and a part of me believed it was a real.

I know it was irrational but I couldn't make myself feel less happy about the fact that Adi wanted me as I wanted him.

Today it was unusually cloudy. I like rain. I have few good memories riveted with it. So I had a good feeling about the day.

The gym was cancelled that morning.

While everyone straggled in the dorm in pajamas and few struggled with face scrubs, I decided to write to mum. I used to write her every week until last few years. I know it was more out of love than compulsion.

But I sort of lost a connection there, a letter a week turned to a letter a month and then *none*.

Mama kept writing me punctually and unconditionally. Every letter was virtually a copy of the last one except for few details that changed so languidly that I didn't see the change coming.

First few said things like '*don't cry, mama misses you too, eat properly*'. Then for a long time the letters said '*does Niya cry? We miss both of you, does she eat properly*'.

And recently they said '*I cry to sleep everyday, I miss you all the time, and I don't want to eat thinking you must be hungry*.'

So I took a pen and paper and started writing. I told her not to cry everyday and indulge in some social activities. I told her I missed her too. I thanked her for doing the right thing for me, for keeping me away from her for my benefit.

While ending the letter I don't know what came over me and I wrote

'I don't know why mama. I am happy all the time. You said my guardian angel is watching over me, she will reward me for good deeds. You were right.'

Always yours

Samiya

If my mum is smart enough she will notice a gradual change in my letter as well. The *Always and only yours* was now *always yours*.

"*What are you writing?*" Sara asked brushing her teeth looking dubious in her pajamas which hardly reached her ankle. She fought with the matron over laundry issues, it took a long argument to explain her that she was growing taller not that the pajamas were shrinking.

"*Writing to mum*" I answered folding the paper. I was trying to keep it from her; actually lately I was trying to keep a lot from her. I wish I could explain her things which are more complex than a teenage mind can understand.

"*Can you write to my mum as well*" "*I'll owe you a big one*" she pleaded, the froth of the paste running down her chin.

Disgusting I thought.

“Well you have to promise that you will never brush your teeth publically again” I asked making a face which was an unintentional reaction to her hygiene issues.

“I swear on Nani” she promised wiping her chin with her sleeve.

There’s no way her nani will make until next year, I thought to myself.

So She was making me write a letter to her mum which will be addressed by her. It isn’t new though, I have done that before.

I started

Dear Mum

Hope you are fine. Not that I am concerned, you know how I am☺

Well the news is that I am doing great despite of some of the issues with Mess food, laundry, bed bugs, bathroom ques and some of the students.

It may not come to you as a surprise that I am on football team and basket ball team. And you will feel proud to know that I have sent in a written complaint to Himachal Pradesh Public Service Commission about discrimination against girls as they are not allowed to form an independent cricket team in this school. Samiya wrote the complaint letter for me, not that she wanted to. Well regardless of the fact that none of the girls want to be on the cricket team we will have an independent team by the end of this semester, Insha’Allah.

I spend all my pocket money on buying skittles due to which I have pimples as big as planets all over my face, but you should be proud that I am not spending that money on buying drugs. Though I learned to grow opium and recipes of some home made drugs from a guy I cannot name. You should not be upset about it and look at the positive side that I now have a knowledge which very few people have and it can be used as a potent business idea if I end up doing nothing in life.

You will be happy to know how I fight for my rights, in the literal sense of the word. I beated the shit out of Kunal when I found out that he has stolen my iPod. Though it later turned out that I had forgotten my iPod in TT Court and he had the same one.

I am so busy all the time that I don’t remember when I last made my bed. I am eating properly and have saved banana and mango peels in my cupboard to show you, they stink and can eventually become a cause of a global epidemic but I don’t care much.

I think it was 2001 when laden attacked WTC that I last waxed my legs; it’s not on my list of priorities right now.

But except that everything is being planned. Diwali is in November but I have already started preparing the fire crackers Last but not the least I do study occasionally. They failed me in an exam on psychology with incorrect and strict marking. I did whatever I can to sit a retest. I succeeded. But they have failed me on the retest again. They haven’t changed their marking pattern you see.

I really hope that you don’t do a surprise visit on visiting weekend because I have other plans.

But one thing I never say out loud or frequently is that I love you mama and Samiya told me I talk to you in sleep almost every night.

Always and only yours

Sara

I handed over the page to Sara without worrying that she might read it. I know her level of patience in reading or writing letters. Well she returned it to me as soon as she took it asking me to post it for her.

Well that’s what friends are for. I thought sarcastically keeping the letter at the back of my book.

I pinned up my hair nicely and paid extra attention to my looks that morning.

I have always preferred using *Fa deodorants* rather than perfumes. But that morning I opened a black cardboard box saying *Britney Spears Curious* and dabbed the scent on my inner wrists and neck from a blue bottle with multi-faceted glass silhouette and two pink hearts sprawling against the rim. The fragrance was a white floral scent which was very feminine compared to the scents I was living in lately. *I preferred the later though.*

There’s no harm adding more perfumes to my very limited collection. They smell nice. Maybe I can go perfume shopping with mum next visiting weekend. She would love that. I smiled on the idea.

I smelled his jumper again before pushing it into my cupboard.

There was still half an hour for breakfast. I couldn't believe that time was going by so slowly.

I made my bed already so didn't want to sit on it. *Unknowingly and unintentionally* I inherited some freak obsessive compulsive disorder genomes from my mother. In my case the disorder was limited to certain things like *making up bed all the time, brushing teeth for hours and always removing shoes at their respective place and each shoe on its respective side.*

Well so I thought I'll go and see Niya for a while. I used to be around her a lot more before. I hope she doesn't notice.

There was a huge chaos in their dorm. That was the part of morning routine. Kids are more disorganized and lack experience on living in herds like sheep.

I found her twiddling with the tie knot standing bare feet next to her bunk. She twinkled on my surprise visit. I helped her and others with miscellaneous tasks of combing hair, fixing skirts, tying laces etc. They definitely needed some extra help there, one aya was not enough.

I promised them a swim on Friday evening despite the fact that I had no idea where I'll be. *I was not very good with keeping promises you see.*

I was fixing her books back in her cupboard when a black shiny object lying on the bottom shelf caught my attention. On a close look I discovered it was a mouth organ, very unique apparently. I don't remember my parents buying her that.

"Where did you get this Niya" I asked assertively, showing her the mouth organ. My parental instinct awakened; scared she was stealing or indulging in something that was possibly worse.

Male teachers using young girls sexually inveigling them with materialistic things was something I have heard of quite often.

My heart sank on the thought. *Oh god please no please no.*

She panicked and her face terrorized. Her eyes dropped to the ground.

I pulled her into the corner aggressively. *"Where did you get this?"* I asked in threatening voice this time. I was on the verge of bursting into tears and getting violent with her.

"Aadil. The boy from your class gave it to me" she answered stammering with fear, tears rolling down her cheeks.

I became numb, my mind refrained.

"Why?" I asked politely but in a tense voice. A part of me didn't want to listen to the answer. I haven't imagined that in my worst fears. Why would Aadil give something to Niya, he didn't know us.

Common sense and logic, both were not on my side.

"He asked for your picture instead." she answered weeping.

I started breathing once I grasped the information. I felt so relieved as if a close relative have returned from death bed. But now I was surprised why Aadil will need my picture, was he doing some black magic on me?

"You traded my picture for a mouth organ?" I asked sarcastically pulling her close to my chest, clearing my mind.

"I told him he can keep the picture. I don't need the mouth organ." Oh so she was giving it for free. *"But he said he bought it for his sister who he won't see sooner. He said he wanted me to have it as a present."* She said stammering and crying, her face on my chest and her hands around my waist.

"I am sorry sweetheart. I thought you were stealing. I am sorry. I was just worried about you" I explained kissing her red cheek, wiping her face. Few moments ago I wanted her to be safe, more than anything in this world and right now I wished I would have not used that tone with her no matter what.

"I'll return it didi. I don't want it" she said looking into my eyes.

"No. You don't have to. You can keep it. It's a present. That's nice of him. He thought of you as a sister." I said putting the mouth organ back from where I picked it. The picture that was clicked by Niya with her disposable camera on my 15th bday, last year was stucked inside her locker. It was no more there. I closed her cupboard and returned her the keys.

"You know di whatever I'll play on this mouth organ it will stay forever. This is special. Its made from a meteor"

My mouth fell open in disbelief. That's what Adi told me of his guitar. How could I imagine something that I didn't know of? Something somewhere was not right.

"Hey there" I said pushing my way between Raag and Mandy, who supposingly were dissipated in discussing world issues on the breakfast table, *with their handsome mate missing.*

"Think of Devil" Raag said moving his chair aside, making space for me to fit in and Mandy agreeing flicked on my head.

"Ouch. Mandy. You are such a pig" I said agitatedly rubbing my head.

"I'll take it as a compliment" he said smiling.

Of course you will. Pigs are much more sensible. I thought

So when the greetings were over I maneuver timidly while my two suspicious audiences waited for me to prevail upon my sudden friendly behavior at 7.30 in the morning when I am usually busy even noticing them in our ten years of history together.

“*So what’s up?*” Raag asked tilting his head over his palm, taking a good look of my face, definitely eyeing Mandy because there has to be some reason for the crooked smile.

“*Nothing much*” I answered politely pouring myself a glass of water and started sipping, my hand trembling like anything, as they two still continued eying me, I don’t know where to start.

There was a brief silence.

“*He is gone out of school. If that’s what you are after*” Mandy rendered indifferently.

“*What?*” I asked confused.

“*Aadil is out of school*” Mandy said.

Girls must have been asking about him, that’s why they are behaving so funny.

“*That’s none of my business.*” I answered with utter honesty “*Actually I wanted to know.*” I hesitated “*is something weird happening to you? Like forgetting things and seeing things that don’t make sense.*” I asked confused unable to bet my experiences in words.

They looked at me blankly.

“*Are you still sick?*” Raag asked worried.

“*Forget about it.*” I said and left a bit irritated.

I culled for the note Adi wrote in my book and matched it to Aadil’s hand writing from his notebook, which I stole from staff room. It matched. I put in all my effort to write with the same strokes, in the same calligraphy but I couldn’t get even close. I was sure I couldn’t have written that during one of those imagination attacks. It has to be someone else.

Possibly Aadil has the answers to my questions. But he was out of school. We weren’t allowed to leave school during semesters unless something very important came up like a death or a wedding of someone close. I don’t know why I was worried for Aadil’s family, I was praying for their well being constantly in my heart all the time.

My eyes kept flickering to his empty seat and to the door where I wished he would appear out of thin air. And every two minutes I opened his notebook as it made me feel that he was close. Missing Aadil should feel like ditching Adi but somehow it didn’t. With Aadil gone, Adi was gone too.

I used my lunch hour and all the free time to prepare notes for *Aadil* so that he doesn’t miss out on anything. I wasn’t sure when he was coming back or even if he was coming back at all.

I went to library after finishing coaching and the basket ball game. It was a very long day and though I was working on something or another the whole time, a strange kind of emptiness siege me. I realized I was alone before he came but I wasn’t lonely.

Thanks to him he was a continuous fuel for thought and I was lonelier than I have ever been.

Distracted I scribbled his name on last page of one of the notebooks outlining it with small hearts sitting in the silent corner of the library. I wrote my name beneath his and started crossing the common character; I realized I was playing *flames*. That was a silly little thing we used to do when we were kids, it was a bit of calculation and crossing to get one letter as a result. *F* stood for friends, *L* for love, *A* for Adore, *M* for marriage, *E* for Enemies and *S* for sisters.

The result came out to be A. So we adored each other. I don’t know what his feelings were for me but mine were definitely more than adoration so I crossed the whole thing in irritation.

I ate a lot of salad for lunch and dinner as was requested of me and waited in library until midnight hoping he’ll show up. *But he didn’t*. I went to bed half heartedly and spent a restless night waiting for the morning all along.

He wasn’t there the next day. I waited until afternoon but his absence was making me worried now. I didn’t know whom to ask except for *headmaster*.

I remember headmaster giving us sweets whenever being sent to his cozy little office for a punishment, when I was little. He used to spoil us like a lenient father. But that wasn’t the case anymore. I was a grown up now and so was he.

I needed a good story if I was going anywhere near his office.

And I knew I wasn't good at that.

I knocked at a brown timber door with a golden name plate saying "S.P. Singh, headmaster".

I went there after school and before coaching, giving him no reason to think I was missing any class.

"Come in" a strong voice answered. *Now I wished I wouldn't have come.*

I opened the door gently and took a quick look, making sure what I have heard and entered the room moderately monitoring each step as the timber floor made noise as I walked.

Heady was writing on something that appeared to be a register. He didn't look up to see who it was.

His calm but strict and businesslike attire was making me fidgety.

"Good evening sir" I forced the words out of my mouth.

"Good evening miss Mittal" he replied after a long pause figuring out it was me, of course he wasn't expecting me. He wasn't writing anymore.

"How can I help you?" he asked in a serious voice.

"Sir I am doing an article on Muscular Dystrophy for Grapevine, the school magazine. It is one of those diseases which still doesn't have a cure" I said abasely, I was getting good with lying day by day.

Well that was not a complete lie, I'll have to do an article now, unfortunately our principal has a sharp memory.

"That sounds interesting. You should talk to Kirti Suri of Class 12. Her brother suffered the same disease. She might be able to help you with understanding how family deals with this kind of sickness" Heady added.

"Yes definitely Sir. Thanks for letting me know" I answered nonchantly.

"So what can I do for you?" he asked the same question again when I didn't say anything except for that.

"Sir I was working on it with Aadil Rathore of my class. He didn't hand me his part of writing before leaving. The submission deadline is tomorrow morning. I was wondering if I could know when he'll be back so that I complete it sooner" My voice disappeared on the last words. I felt drops of moisture arising on my neck despite the fact that the room was air conditioned.

His casual expression changed to a rigorous one. His eyes a bit angry.

"You better complete it by yourself" he managed to say ruefully before moving back to his writing.

"Thank you Sir" I murmured before turning towards the door.

"Miss Mittal" I heard behind my back and turned to look at heady. He was getting up from his chair opening a drawer on his huge timber working desk. "Come here" he commanded.

I slowly reached his table.

He took out a bunch of sheets, which were thick enough like certificates.

"Look at these" he said throwing those certificates in front of me.

"NTSE Exam top, Maths Olympiad Top, Procom quiz, every debate, each and every class since Montessori I he has been standing firm at his position of number one Miss Mittal" He was mad at me, almost shouting.

I trembled looking on those certificates which said *Aadil's name* repeatedly.

"His father is one of the best surgeon's in the world. Even if he doesn't make into any Indian medical school his dad will make sure that he studies medicine in one of the top universities of united states of America" his voice high with anger.

"Have you thought about yourself? If you don't do it, all these years of struggle will go in vain. You will end up nowhere. Do you ever think about your parents?" he stated calming down.

My eyes rolled down ashamed. But I don't know why. I was seeing Adi not Aadil and I guess its only me who can see Adi.

"I very well see what's happening" he sighed. "You are not very brilliant. But you are sincere. Don't get distracted. This time will never come back"

And I felt guilty for putting him in this position.

Sorry was not enough a word. And I should be sorry to myself than to him.

“You *can leave now*” he commanded in a low voice sitting down on his chair.

I walked out without looking up.

Heady’s word echoed in my mind all the time. He was right this time will never come back.

He was right if Adi wont benefit from *us*, he wont be at loss either, I never gave a thought to how quick he was in understanding lessons. How he excelled in studies.

But wait. That’s Aadil he is talking about. I was going crazy. I don’t know what was happening. And I definitely didn’t know what was the difference between Adi and Aadil. Nothing seemed to be in my control. And the truth was I didn’t ask for any of this.

He again didn’t turn up the next day. I submitted the thing I was supposed to do on *Muscular dystrophy* which I finished late last night and kept myself busy with books. Heady’s confabulation made it easy for me to not look at *Adi’s note* every now and then.

Now I doubted that *Adi* will need any kind of help from me regarding studies. But still I couldn’t help and made an extra copy of whatever was being taught. I redeemed my mind from wondering where he was and when he’ll be back.

I joined Niya and her friends for a swim that evening, giving myself a chance to keep a promise for a change.

As the cool splash of water touched my face under the evening sun a chill ran through my spine.

Floating on the cold and still water of my school’s shallow pool with eyes closed, made me forget everything for a while.

Maybe *afterlife* will be identical to this moment. *An inexplicable pleasure. A peace.* Nothing to think of or to worry about.

I heard Niya and her friends begging for some more time in pool while their teacher disagreed.

I let them argue and climbed out of the pool, took a quick shower in desperation to cover my naked legs and wrapped the towel around my waist after foundering the attempt of soaking myself.

I walked up the stairs to pick my bag before getting dressed distracted by the extensive ruckus on the pool. When I reached the final step I muddled as *it was him sitting next to my bag*. His eyes tinselled in the blurred moment. *They always do on sighting me.* The straight line between his lips turned into an exulting smile.

The breathtaking immaculate face looked more admirable than I remembered. The giddiness was similar to the day I first saw him. My condition was monotonous to an addict who was trying to quit and out of nowhere was inveigled with a packet of cocaine.

In that moment I had a blurred sight but a clear vision, *I can’t quit him, I just can’t stop liking him.*

“Remember me?” he asked in his soft tenderly voice. The pressure of avoiding disgrace always saved me from fainting and sprinting headlong.

“Adi” I confirmed.

“Who else” he asked quietly.

While he waited I rushed to the change room and got changed into a white shirt and blue tunics and put a hair band on my wet hair, threw my costume into the laundry bucket and flew down the stairs taking two at a time.

“So” he asked smiling tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear making sure his skin doesn’t touch mine. I doubt I would have felt it anyways; *I was so numb right now.*

Still I shrugged.

“We need to talk” I proclaimed him to come with me, without giving him a chance to ask questions or refuse.

We walked to the meadow near the brooke. The blue flox and the rhythmic sound of the water tempted me to think nothing except of his presence.

He leaned against the tree I was sitting next to. His lips pressed in a straight line. The gravely features on his pale face sent a physical jault through my body. *He was tense.*

I tried to ignore and focus.

He raised his eye brow.

“Where were you?” I asked “these three days”

He sighed relaxing his brow. A brief silence followed.

“Samiya I have decided not to lie to you anymore. But there are things I can’t share.” “Don’t ask me where I was. Don’t make me lie” he flinched feeling guilty.

I tried absorbing his words.

“Just tell me is everything alright with you and your family. You left so unanticipated.” I said biting my lip. I was truly worried for him and surprisingly for Dr Rathore and Dr Ethalia and Olivia and Oliver, his adopted siblings all the time. I don’t know when I developed emotions for people I have never met. Maybe the reason was the connection we shared, *Adi*.

“Everything is uniform. Nothing has worsened” he answered lightly.

The answer wasn’t right. It didn’t cloy my urge. I wanted to hear that everything was perfectly fine. But I let it go.

“You are freaking intelligent. You won bludy thousands of competitions. You scored exceptionally well in each grade. Why didn’t you tell me?” I nearly growled at him.

He looked at me more furious than stunned.

“I don’t know. You never asked. But I told you I have good memory.” he answered, making an effort to control his anger.

Yes Adi told me that. But who is Adi and who is Aadil.

“Who are you? Adi or Aadil?”

He flinched. His expression softened.

“I am what, you believe I am” he said silently.

I was thoughtful for a second.

“Are you and Aadil the same person?” I asked mutely.

His expression tensed.

“I wish we were.” he paused *“but there is no degree of permanence between you and either one of us. Don’t head the wrong way.”* He maintained his composure.

Now I resented touching that topic. Cant I just stop questioning and live in the moment.

“I missed you. Don’t ever leave again without warning me” I couldn’t believe that I was saying this to him.

He smiled hesitantly though his pain wasn’t soothed.

“What happened with you and heady?” he asked confused.

“You didn’t show up for two days I became worried. I didn’t know whom to ask except for heady.” I explained.

“So you went to him and asked where I was?” he asked surprised, his eyes wide open.

“Not straightaway of course. I said you and I were working on an article for grapevine and you didn’t submit your part, so will you be back by the submission deadline.” I explained.

“Not too bad. Sounds genuine” he concluded smiling. *I don’t know if that was disdain*

“Not to him. He took out your certificates and started shouting” I flinched on the memory.

“What did he say?” he asked his voice curious.

“Stuff” I sighed. *“Like you are intelligent besides your dad will make sure you go to best university in states and that I am complete opposite and I shouldn’t distract myself. He said I’ll end up nowhere in life”* I said reservedly.

“His reasons and the way he spoke to you wasn’t right. But the intention behind it was just for your benefit. Not even mine. I hope you understand it.” He said in a deep voice.

I wondered if his wisdom was an inborn talent or something that he acquired through time.

I perceived more respect for him listening to his thoughts on the matter.

“I wish I could explain heady that I can’t do any better than I am already doing. That you don’t distract me.” I said meeting his gaze.

“I don’t?” he asked in a low and quiet voice.

Yes you do. But it doesn't depend on whether I am with you or not, it remains unruffled.

I remained unspoken while he analyzed my face to sample my thoughts. His eyes calm but an expression of unsurity clenched his face. He was no more upset.

His moods changed quickly.

"Are you a cancarian?" I asked barely aware of what his question was.

"Yes 3rd July. I share my bday with Tom Cruise. Though I wish I was born six days later to share it with Tom Hanks. I prefer the later" he told me smugly. *"How do you know?"* he demanded.

"I guessed." I said blinking at him blithe by my accurate prediction.

He raised his eye brow.

"I read too much about zodiac signs, astrology and stuff. You are feasible with all cancarian characteristics"

I clarified proudly.

"Tell me about it. About my characteristics" he snapped.

"Well let's see. You have mood swings, you can become the coldest person drowning the other to a bottomless depression and another time you can be very charming pampering someone to the top of the world, giving that someone all the attention. You adjusted here in no time, which means you are adaptable just like a cancarian. There is tremendous love in your voice when you speak of your family that means you are very attached to them. You avoid limelight, I know because you never answer any questions in the class though you very well know the answer. During conversation your facial features change a number of times like a crab. You are exceptionally well than others in regards to numerous things but still you don't seem pleased; you are not cheerful about the future that means you are prone to pessimism a weakness of a cancarian. Your own thoughts and secrets are strictly off limit for everyone. You really have to like someone immensely to discuss your personal life. Sometimes I feel that you evaluate me if I am worthy of it. Wastage of things tick you off, especially food, there are no leftovers in your plate, ever. You are a typical cancarian Adi." I laughed wretchedly pleased with my own knowledge.

"And yes there are things that I don't know about you. But they are few major traits of cancarian, like they are loyal; in fact cancer males are the most loyal men on the face of Earth. They never give up on objects they cherish be it a gift from a lover or a worn jeans they love wearing. Too much is not enough for them. They need more, more love and care of their lover." I pointed out gracefully.

He stared perplexed at me.

After a long moment he sighed.

"Waow" he gasped and then sucked in a deep breath. *"You are good at it"* he finally said.

"Thanks" I said flushing *"I like reading astrology books"* I said exaggerating overwhelmed by the praise. *Truth was I didn't have any love for astrology in particular, I read anything and everything. So have read one or two books on zodiacs.*

"What's your sign?" he asked with an edge of curiosity to his tone.

"I am Pisces. The last sign of the Zodiac born on 28 February 1990" I said giving information that was not demanded.

"Belated happy bday and I am an year older" He retorted *"Now tell me about you?"* he snapped impatiently.

"Pisces is emotional and sensitive just like you. Pisces is inflexible and finds hard adjusting in new circumstances. They are not interested in material things, they are aware of money's impermanence. Pisces feel truly happy and satisfied when they go against the flow, they like bringing change. They are easygoing and not bothered by restrictions. Very few things in the world compel them to lose their temper. They live in their own world. They think everyone is good and everything is beautiful."

"That's all I know" I said in a soft voice rubbing my hands to warm them smiling at him.

"That's you. You are a typical Pisces yourself" he said quickly, no doubt in his clear eyes.

"There is one basic Pisces trait I lack. So I doubt my entity as a Pisces." I said ruefully.

"Pisces have sharp memory" I sounded anxious and resentful at the same time.

"You have one too. Trust me." he said dismissively *"You just are using it on all the wrong things."*

"Okay tell me what you want to do with your life" he asked enthusiastically.

I sighed *"Right now. I want to be normal. Enough of twists and turns. I just want a normal life."*

He looked at me besieged.

"That's exactly what I keep asking God for. A normal life." He said bemused.

I smiled.

"You do Mr. Cancarian. Here's a tip. Stop scoring highest as first step to indulgence" I said laughing, shifting my weight on another leg. Beneath the transient humor I felt a

strange impulse. I did not understand clearly why the word *normal life* sounded more convulsive when he used it in his context.

“How I wish there was a good competition” he mumbled with his eyes closed and hand on his marble like chest followed by an enigmatic smile. I didn’t realize when he slipped on a blazer during the conversation.

It was dark already and one rigorous look at his body took my breath away. I think I’ll never get over the shock how perfect he looks.

If looks were the only criteria then we were a perfect mismatch.

I flinched on the direction of my thoughts. *He misunderstood.*

“We should get going. Its getting dark and cold.” he suggested calmly.

I didn’t want to go. I hope the disappointment was not too apparent on my face.

I don’t think that I fooled him. A smile was playing around the edges of his lips as he gave me his hand to get up.

I took his help barely touching his palm

A jault of pleasure ran through me as his too soft skin touched mine.

As I got up he carefully pulled me closer. His pale glorious face was just inches from mine.

I froze.

His breath touched my face, so warm and exotic. I wished I could stay there like that forever.

Before I get a chance to clear my thoughts he took off his blazer and wrapped it over me, I pulled my arms into the long sleeves with ease.

He made sure that it was buttoned before stepping back.

“Better now. Don’t want you to fell sick. Cant take your absence more than I already did” he blinked admiring his blazer on me.

Breathe; I had to remind myself while he leaded me through the bushes towards the Brooke.

“Samiya” he asked in a different tone, calm but pleading.

“Yes?” I turned to him too eagerly.

“Don’t come to this place alone especially at this time” he said staring past me into the woods.

“Why?” I stared at him

“There is some wild life left out there besides you are a young girl” he frowned.

I shuddered slightly at the bleakness in his voice and reality of his words.

The sound of the trickle of the stream is rejuvenating under the shining Sun but as the sun sets the murmuring and rustling of water becomes roaring. If it wasn’t for the dim lights on the muddy path that ran down the slope along the Brooke and the moon that shined weakly under the cloudy sky we would have been lost in the moody and dark wood with scare of falling into the running water.

But still I loved the low lights and nights. That’s why I dedicated a significant time of sixteen years of my life staring out of the dorm window waiting to be out there under the stary sky one day.

It was last year when the whole school left for winter break leaving the board classes behind, that I first tasted freedom and discovered this little get away.

“Will I see you at dinner?” I demanded.

“No I am not back in school yet.” he smiled.

Those words sent flutters through my stomach. It scared me.

I pulled his blazer off hesitantly, he took it back unwillingly.

I somewhat awkwardly, unscrambling my brain walked towards the dormitory.

“Samiya” he called behind me.

“Yes?” I turned impetuously.

“You won’t remember me tomorrow” he said.

I smiled at him in blank confusion before turning around.

I almost stumbled few stairs distracted. I realized it was cold as my teeth clenched together and I shivered. Why did he say that *you want remember me tomorrow. He has said that before. Last time he said that I fainted unable to remember anything after that.*

6. TRUTH

I reached for my keycard mechanically unlocking the dormitory door and stepping inside, confused.

The mixed fragrances of ladies perfumes and the foul smells of some homemade skincare remedies like henna and eggs were repugnant to the aura of *my night garden*.

Sara was watching cricket match on TV lying at Amber's bed while Amber was giving herself a manicure

"What's the score?" I asked Sara, who was exceptionally unobservant of my arrival.

That's what people keep asking each other during the cricket season. It's kind of a ritual I suppose.

"Cut the crap. You don't know a thing about cricket." She said without any humor, glaring at me.

She was right. So I ignored it.

"Where were you?" She added.

Her voice unusually arrogant, making me uncomfortable.

"At coaching in physics lab" I replied tentatively, shuddering.

"I was around the corner. I didn't see you there" she asked mystified.

"I went for a swim after that with Niya" I nervously murmured staring at TV, avoiding her glare.

"But your hair aren't wet?" she demanded. *Why in God's name this has to be the night for all noticing and interrogating.*

I touched my hair impulsively, prolonging the moment to think of a lie.

"I ended up studying on the pool stairs after the swim. It was warm out there." I said nonchantly flicking my hair.

"I think they usually close the pool at five, that's an hour ago" she said looking at the clock, a bit surprised, I think the idea of opening the pool till late was bugging her.

I know that she trusts me. But couldn't she have asked that question along with the last one. I would have figured out something better.

"Yeah. Yeah they do. I went to the library after that to return the books. You know I kind of get stuck in there." I doubt if I'll remember the order of the events the next day I hardly remember it now.

"Oh tell me about it!" she murmured under her breath, partially convinced. It isn't a hard job fooling her after all.

"I posted the letters today, to mums" I said ticklishly enunciating every syllable, making up a tiny bit for the immense guilt I felt.

"Well done" she said smiling briefly before switching her eyes back to TV.

I rolled my eyes at Amber while she snickered. The feeling of guilt was overpowered by anger when I realized that was all I was going to get.

"You are welcome sweetie" my voice filled with heavy sarcasm as I strolled down to my bunk.

I removed my shoes and stretched my arms before lying down on my back.

“Do you mind if I?” Amber asked hopping on my bed after few seconds, shaping her nails with a cute little nails filer.

“Yes sure” I delightedly welcomed her straightening up. She was struggling hard to give her ring finger nail a good shape.

“Here I’ll do it for you” I offered. *I didn’t excel on that but surely was better than her.*

“Bless you” She murmured handing it to me.

“So where were you?” she asked with a wicked glint in her eyes.

I gulped. *I just explained. What was that suppose to mean.*

I quickly scanned the order of events I just told Sara.

“I was in the library” I said, but, ridiculously my voice broke.

“You are not a good liar” she laughed.

“What?” I asked in confusion.

Amber was a sweet tiny creature just like her filer and very adorable strictly minding her own business at all times. *This has to be the day when my dead grandfather can come alive to grill me.*

“I am seeing Raag these days” she whispered in my ear “if that explain things.”

I was still confused.

“You two. Waow” I said my eyes wide open, pretending to be upbeat and curious at the same time “when, how where tell me all about it.”

She hopped cheerfully on my bouncing mattress, blushing, holding my hands “yes, yes, can you believe it? I mean Raag. You know what? I was dying to tell you. I can’t trust anyone except you with this you know. I can get expelled” she murmured leaning closer to my ear.

“You can always count on me” I said smoldering my eyes at her.

I carefully slipped down the filer and tugged my legs close to chest warning up for Amber’s love story or Amber’s fling; we might end up calling it that after few years.

“It started last year during board exams” she said hypnotized just by the thought of it. “He helped me with maths and science, I mean it wasn’t his job” “he was so kind and soft spoken. He is that good guy one can only dream of” “You won’t believe I made the first move” she sounded proud of herself.

“You did?” I asked in amusement.

She nodded faintly but a huge smile played on her small bow like lips.

“I asked him to write me on the day of last exam, before leaving for break. When I got home which is like five hours from here I went straight to my computer, there was this small offline message saying, I miss you already” she blushed remembering it.

“You know I cursed yahoo messenger. That stupid thing couldn’t hold onto it. But anyways I replied “miss you too” straightaway and we two ended up chatting for two whole weeks. I don’t remember doing anything else in that vacation. Trust me I have never ever been so desperate to come back to school” she gasped.

“Waow. I am so happy for you.” I murmured caressing her hand. Her story was brief but heartening. These two here were the people I have grown up with, whom I loved and cared for. I was overwhelmed with joy.

“Thanks” she said cheerfully.

“So do you two see yourself going further with this after school?” I asked more out of curiosity than courtesy.

I was already imagining two of them as bride and groom.

“Yeah of course. It depends where Raag gets medical seat and I’ll move to that city. I’ll be doing BCom and don’t have any preferences for any specific colleges .And yes hopefully will get married some day.” She expatiated delightly crossing her fingers.

“Amen” I whispered.

“So how are you two hitting” she asked me suddenly.

I glanced over to see her studying me with curious eyes.

“Who two?” I asked confused.

“You and Aadil” she responded a little confused.

“What? Are you nuts? Me and Aadil are not even friends.” I murmured under my breath. The thing she was getting to was really hard for me to explain.

“Oh please. Raag told me everything. And I told you everything about me. Don’t you trust me enough” she countered.

My chin raised a fraction and I stared at her in obvious curiosity.

“What did Raag tell you?” I asked repulsively.

“Aadil loves you since the first day at school” she paused dramatically.

“Raag found it pretty amazing, you know how these guys see us, as if we are still kids but gradually Aadil talked him and Mandy into it. He adores your simplicity and thinks you have the sweetest nature that puts others first. I believe that too, just for the record.” she said laughing, *“He played guitar in the band just for your sake, trying to impress you and stuff. He spends time with Niya teaching her music, I think to love something that you love. To get connected, if you know what I mean? And yes Moon acted rude to you about something relating to him, he talked it through with her. I was there and I haven’t seen anyone in that bad mood in my whole life.”* She took a deep breath.

“So concisely if he says he doesn’t want to be more than friends he is bull shiting. Truth is he is dying for your attention and love. And my dear friend everyone around knows except for that boneheaded blonde and you I guess” she said glancing at Sara and then me.

“See I have to go. Will catch you at dinner. Ask me anything you want to know. A lot have been kept from you apparently” she left saying that earnestly.

I stared out into the dark night, not sure what my face was exposing. My shuttering heart beats made it impossible to relax and think. It felt like a dream though I was aware in some corner of my consciousness that it wasn’t. I was too uncomfortable in that position as I was having goose bumps and my finger tips were hurting because of cold. But I lied on the quilt lifeless unable to get underneath it. I subconsciously dredged up all the information *Amber* gave me, going through it word by word. The images started forming in my mind as I related them to practicality.

I was surmising it. *He saw me at dinner that night, the night when he stared at me awkwardly. It started then but he ignored me thereafter for a vey long time. Why? And Raag and Mandy knew it since then. He was nice to Niya for me. He fought with Moon. But he was not Adi or was he Adi.*

Aadil loved me, something that I severely wanted. But now despite of bringing joy that was precariously worrying me.

Finally I decided. I had to find out the truth, I couldn’t put it off any longer.

He won’t tell me. And I doubt if his friends knew anything about it. Maybe I can go on internet to find information about him. Maybe I could find something in his past.

I realized it was time for dinner. I sat up and my head spun for a minute as blood flowed downward. I got up cumbrously unlocking the cupboard and pulled out a comfy sweat. I touched his warm jumper sluggishly and took a quick whiff before closing the door.

“Sara its time for dinner” I screeched to make my voice reach the other corner of the huge dorm, wearing my shoes. She remained inert, and answered *“Hun”* distracted, so damn busy with some stupid match.

“Here wear your shoes. And be quick else we’ll be late” I ordered throwing her shoes in front of her.

She was about to argue but then decided to chicken out.

I turned off the TV while she was striving with her shoes.

“I need your keycard tonight” she said, not meeting my gaze. Her voice a unification of a demand and pleading.

My key remained activated 24/7. I was allowed access to everything all the time as I was a senior science student and Sara’s key was denied access to any of the school buildings after 8 in the evening.

I couldn’t deny giving her my key even if she was up to some mischief but I still thought of it as my duty to ask where the key was about to be used, just in case.

“What’s the noble deed?” I asked subtly.

“Match Rumpus room” she murmured.

“Why are you having a match in rumpus room” I asked. Surely that was a stupid thing to do.

“No, we are not” she said irritated. *“We are watching match live on projector.”* She said in a voice that implied it should be obvious.

“We means?” I couldn’t help asking, and it came out in a peculiar maternal tone.

“Mr. Mathur and Sid planned the whole thing. It’s exclusively for few people. None of the staff knows. You have nothing to worry about mummyji” she said pushing me out of the dorm.

“*Okay. You can take the key. But I’ll need you to drop me and pick me up from library*” I didn’t want to put my thing off by another day.

“*I’ll be real late. It may finish after midnight*” she announced lingering by me.

“*That’s fine*” I murmured. I pretty much need several hours if I have to go through every single entry that comes up on Google, my favorite search engine on finding Aadil Rathore’s name.

At dinner, Aadil was not present. He was right; he was not in school yet.

During my thought process, Sid slipped into the chair next to mine.

He was craving for my attention all that while by coughing or asking to pass something but all I could manage was a heartless smile for him before looking back at Sara to reassemble my thoughts which were very tangled right now.

“*Samiya.*” Sid said, in a tone too different from his normal, mischievous one. I turned around to look at him impulsively. His expression made me shrug. *Not now* I thought as repelled to *no never*. I already had enough for one day. “*I want to ask you something.*” He said hesitantly. “*Not now Sid.*” I said stung at his choice of place to propose a girl. A school mess, with each and every person of school present there. “*Later.*” I added making my way out of the hall, I could hear a prattle going around with mine and Sid’s name. This was one explicit thing about the life in live-in- schools, *no one was allowed to have a secret. I felt sorry for Sid.* But what he didn’t know was that he was lucky, that I was not the one for him.

I realized I was tired as I was taking double the time in all the chores than I usually take. The backlog of lack of sleep and the food in my stomach pushed me into a subconscious state of mind where I was half sleeping.

Sara impatiently fiddled with the key while I made myself a cup of coffee before going to the library. Without the key I will be stuck in there for hours dying for some caffeine to keep me going.

“*I’ll be on the upper level*” I shouted behind her sticking my arm in middle of the library door.

“*Alright*” she answered in a voice strong and clear before disappearing into the dark.

I wasn’t the only one in there. But still the place was seriously drained of men. I cautiously made my way up the old wooden spiral staircase balancing a cup of coffee in one and books in the other hand.

I rested my books next to the old computer. This was the same corner which *Adi* chose for the last night out. I remember noticing this ancient computer then.

I switched on the computer after hitting the right button on CPU a while after tempering zillions of the wrong ones. Usually the library computers hit you in the face when you turn them on and then you hit it back and you end up in a long fight before getting to anything productive. So I left the computer on its own and moved to set the room temperature on a better level, to make the place warm. It took me a while to get it right. For some reason technology has always repelled me.

I logged in using my student ID and began closing all the little windows that pop up every time you turn on school’s computers. I hit Google as soon as the internet explorer showed up. And then I hit in the few easily traceable words on internet *Dr Tanmay Rathore’s son.*

The first page showed up Dr Rathore’s personal WebPages and then the Wikipedia. Wikipedia is always promising when you have to start up with the basic information about a thing or a person. I didn’t have to wait long for it to load. Internet worked smoothly at this hour of the day.

I clicked on *family and the personal life* in the contents without bothering to look through things like his career, researches, education, early life etc.

I quickly read through until it mentioned *On July 3, 1989, Dr Aleko gave birth to a baby boy named Aadil at Bethesda North Hospital in Ohio. Dr Rathore stated that the name derives from the Arabic word for “just, someone who wants to see that justice is done”. He is the only biological child of Dr Rathore and Dr Aleko.*

The rest of the paragraph said about the adoption of Olivia and Oliver, a native African twins. The Controversy column beneath this paragraph caught my attention. I read it carefully to find anything related to *Aadil*. It seemed most of the controversies centered on the research funded by Dr Rathore. It seemed the researches that were carried out in Dr Rathore’s establishment were deemed irrelevant and impossible by some of the critics. Thus it was countered as wastage of money.

I wondered what the controversy was about. It was his money; he could burn it if he wants. Some people are born with the sole purpose of criticizing others.

Anyways I didn’t find much about Adi on the site.

I went back to the search engine.

First few pages showed up the links to the hospitals and other organization’s that have used Dr Rathore’s services. There were few YouTube pages saying *interview with famous NRI’s.*

I was disoriented and impatient so I rushed back to Google again. This time I typed in *Aadil Rathore*. I felt motivated to see 63,500 results. But the joy didn’t last long when I realized that I had every Aadil except for the one I was looking for. An amazing amount of people lived out there with Aadil’s name and all had access to internet in a way or another except for mine. But I kept looking and finally came through an entry saying *14 Students injured in School bus accident in Rajasthan. Dr Tanmay Rathore and Son* highlighted in black, transcending the other information.

Aadil had an accident, I could hardly make myself think the words. My heart thudded badly and a chill that had nothing to do with the weather made me shiver as I clicked on the link. It was a newspaper article

ANS, May 11, 2001, 10.14 am IST

Jaipur: At least 14 students, 2 teachers and a bus driver were injured, six of them critically, when their bus skidded off a road and fell into a deep gorge 50 Kms from Jaipur, police said on Thursday.

The accident took place Thursday morning when the bus carrying students of Mayo College, Ajmer fell into a deep gorge on its way back to Ajmer. The students were returning after winning a Junior Football Championship from Jaipur. Some of the students injured came from well known families. The injured students included Rajat Kapoor s/o of LM Kapoor of Kapoor Cotton and Daal mills, Aadil Rathore s/o Dr Tanmay Rathore, Karan Singh s/o Lt Gen Amrinder Pal Singh, Harman Mittal s/o Dheer Mittal of Mobile-Oil-India and Prateek Deewan s/o journalist Priya Deewan.

"All injured have been admitted to two different government hospitals in the nearby District. And would be later moved to the private hospitals. Of those injured, the condition of six is stated to be critical" Deputy Superintendant of Police R.K. Varna told reporters.

"Those injured are in age-group of 10-12 years." He added.

My mind went blank. It wouldn't have taken a minute to read it but those few seconds felt like a very long time. I had a sinking feeling as I pictured what would have happened. Would he have been the one amongst the critically injured? I saw myself imagining him in blood lying unconscious in some inhumanly and unimaginable circumstances as a small tender kid. The only physical pain that was impossibly hard to bear was the one I had when I fall down from 20 feet height while rock climbing. But right now there was no precedent to the pain my body was suffering just on thought of that misery as if I was being thrown from that height over and over again.

I minimized that window and opened a new page in my rush to find what happened after that. My mind dismissed the thought that he was fine and alright now. I was living a terrible fear in the past date of 11 May 2001. I went through hundreds of entries but found nothing.

I kicked the CPU in disgust. Aggravated on newspapers for not covering what happened to those kids after that. Through my irritation I felt overwhelming pain. I was hurting. It was a strange déjà vuish kind of feeling as if I have seen the accident happening, as if I was one of them. My body ached terribly.

I went to the library catalog and found only one propitious book related to accidents *Aftermath of the road accidents*. I memorized the aisle and it didn't took me long to hunt one.

The book was a detailed version of the psychological injuries and physical injuries caused in an accident. Though tiered I couldn't impediment reading, looking for any information that could be helpful.

I kept reading, half sleeping on the book, my body defeating my curiosity, the last thing I remember consuming before sleep was the post-traumatic stress disorder.

I was in a place with mitigating silence. I felt my body was liberating pain, when I heard a sudden thud. It repeated after a plausible second. It was rhythm of a beating heart. It was getting closer when I wrenched upright of the desk. My sudden movement caused the books to fall off the table and they clattered to the wooden floor. It took me a minute to realize where I was. As I cleared my blurred eyes I almost fainted in panic, to see *Adi* on the final step of the staircase.

"*Did I wake you up? I am sorry*" he said drooping over to pick my books.

I was in pretty awful state. One glimpse of his face was enough to downgrade my sanity and the smell of his breath was making me drunk.

What was he asking?

"*Nah. You are alright. I was about to get up*" I spoke in a heavy voice and cleared my throat thrice in that brief confabulation. My speech impediment was embarrassing and on top of that I caught him chuckling.

"*What are you doing here?*" I asked, regaining my voice. "*You said you were not back in school.*"

"*I came to check on you. You were acting weird at dinner.*" His voice was quite as usual- velvet and muted.

"*I was just a bit tiered.*" I murmured in a low cold voice and then suddenly turned at him shocked "*You were not at dinner?*" I stated.

"*You know I know things.*" he said gravely, as if regretting of saying too much.

I looked at him in amazed irritation.

“*You are Aadil. Aren’t you?*”

He ogled at me for a fraction of second before turning to the computer. “*That’s me name.*” he whispered in amazement maximizing the window on the computer screen.

I reached forward, without thinking to stop his hand from clicking the mouse, but *it was too late.*

A strange despair flashed in his beryl eyes. His lips pressed into a hard line, all signs of vivacity gone as he read through the page whose dark headline *14 Students injured...* terrorized me.

He gradually went through the other windows, leaning there dispossessed, pretending I wasn’t there.

He promptly closed all the windows, before straightening up. Maintaining the usual distance between us.

The sorrow between his brows altered. I sat there figuring *my defense* ignoring the sound of my hastened breathing.

He appeared to be angry, he was scaring me.

“*Why are you digging my history. Which way are you heading?*” he asked mused.

“*You know which way I am going*” I swallowed “*And I guess that you have known it for a while now.*” I murmured, fighting tears.

I saw him reach toward me hesitantly but then he stopped and turned away his face towards the table. His right hand fiddled through the pages of the book.

He closed it in mere few seconds. But continued peering the closed book, distracted.

Then after a deadly silence his eyes shifted back to my pale face. A clear resentment capturing his intimidating face.

My intuition flickered; something bad was about to happen.

“*Its over*” he amended with a pliable tone.

It didn’t sink at first. But as soon as I realized, my face became pleading. My heart accelerated at the sharp aching.

“*Adi don’t*” I begged in a broken voice.

“*Its over.*” He repeated. “*You are right I have known it for a while now. And I am sorry that I didn’t stop you back then. But now I have to.*” He swallowed “*I don’t exist for you anymore. Forget anything that happened or that I said. Play it like before, before I came into your world. You were right I am just your imagination.*” he said.

I had so much to argument for but I don’t know where I lost it. How well I knew that I had a very brief period left with him but what I didn’t knew was that it was almost over.

The ache turned into a sudden numbness like the times when I was almost dead.

“*All the best*” he whispered in the same quiet, peaceful voice.

And then he turned his back on me and walked down the stairs.

He was gone.

I sat there crying. I tried to breathe normally. I needed to concentrate, to find a way out of this nightmare. I dropped my face in my palms as his words echoed ‘*it’s over*’. This for Christ sake, has to be my imagination. But I guess it wasn’t.

I didn’t sleep the whole night and waited desperately for the dawn. My heart was telling me that Aadil is Adi, and now he was gone.

Sara thought I was upset because of some tragic novel I read in the library so she didn’t give much of a thought to my puffy eyes and heavy throat.

I was one of the first ones to gym; my eyes didn’t move away from the clock last night as I watched every second pass by but standing there waiting for him to come was the longest wait I could remember I had gone through in my whole life.

He didn’t show up.

I didn’t wait for Sara, and left for the mess. I sat at my usual place and looked up whenever a chair moved. It was no different than the morning. I witnessed each and every person entering the mess, my heart beated hard every time anyone entered. The room filled with noises. Finally when I was about to give up, he came in. The former pain suddenly aroused as he passed by totally oblivious of my presence. His face was serious and his eyes a dark shade of blue, crabbier, like he was tiered. *I knew he couldn’t sleep either.* He was Adi. I stared at him for a while to catch his attention, but failed, he was good at ignoring me, I knew that out of experience. I took the courage to walk around the table to where he sat.

“*Aadil*” I called his name in perfect indifference.

He turned around slightly and looked at me half heartedly, his voice particularly reciprocal of mine “*Yes?*”

“*I want to talk to you*” his unnatural tone intimidated me into a sore aggravation.

“*About what?*” he asked confused.

I could hardly speak. I felt sick.

But still managed to say “*I’ll be waiting outside*” before coming back to my seat, ignoring our audiences, self respect was the last thing I was worried about today.

I did what was proper and ate breakfast despite no appetite.

I left before anyone did.

I saw him trespassing walking into the corridor with other class mates, without looking at me.

“*Aadil*” I shouted behind him. He came to an abrupt stop.

“*Oh yes. I am sorry I forgot you were waiting*” He said in a firm indifferent voice, now I doubted if he knew what I was all about.

“*So you were saying*” he asked.

I almost shivered and words didn’t reach my lips as everyone around looked at us, all his friends and all my friends.

I told myself *you have to do it now*.

“*Aadil I am sorry for yesterday.*” I started in a self delusion.

But he interrupted.

He took a step towards me and ordered in a low, hard cynical voice, “*Don’t embarrass yourself. Go back to class. Now.*”

“*No I won’t. I don’t care. I love you. That’s all I know. I didn’t do that on purpose. But it has happened and I can’t change it. And I know you love me too.*” I declared quite differently and firmly than I have imagined it happening.

When I looked again Aadil hasn’t moved a bit from his place, he was still two steps away from me he looked at me amazed, frustrated.

“*No I don’t*” Aadil murmured “*What are you talking about?*”

“*You are lying Aadil*” I replied, denying what he was saying. “*Amber told me everything.*”

His face was puzzled “*Who Amber?*” he asked.

“*What did I tell you?*” Amber stepped in from somewhere, clearly worried and unaware of what I was talking about.

“*No*” I whispered. Dr Niven’s words started swirling around in my brain. *You imagine things. You are Schizophrenic.* No I am not mad, I am not sick. I was losing sight of things when Aadil’s voice reached me, wiped clean of any emotions.

“*Have you ever seen yourself in mirror? Leave aside looks you are the dumbest person I have known. How could you even think that someone like me will fall for you? Get out of here*” He said disgusted.

He wasn’t Adi... I took steps backward sobbing, grieving *why I saved my heart for this person who hated me, who was embarrassing me in front of the whole school.*

Someone stepped between us.

“*Stop it Aadil. She is sick. Please stop it.*” I heard that familiar voice but my mind failed to interpret the meaning of the words.

I lost myself in despair and humiliation.

“*If she is sick, why is she here? she can cause harm to others.*” Aadil replied in his usual soft voice when he wasn’t showing his cruel side.

I ran away, faster than ever. To escape that unbearably cruel episode of life.

I ran and ran until my breaths broke.

I locked myself into one of the toilet’s in girl’s bathroom and lifelessly sat on the floor, crying. My head in my lap as I realized nothing ever happened, everything was mere imagination.

I was sufficiently happy to be someone of appreciable character. In that peculiar morning I lost my bloom, I knew what happened this morning could not be erased, also the few my insaneness could not be erased. And that it would be regret rather than attachment that would have a lasting effect on my soul.

I was still crying when Sara slowly knocked at the door; she didn't say anything except my name. There was the same affection and care that I once was highly fond of in *Adi's* voice. I was too ashamed to step out in their world again. But Sara was waiting on the other side and I knew she won't move until I am with her. I had to honor her feelings; it wasn't her fault that mine were brutally raped this morning.

She hugged me when I opened the door. She didn't ask anything and neither did she advice. She picked my bag while I washed my face. The awkwardness was anticipated but what I wasn't ready was for the pain I saw on her face.

"Don't be selfish" I told myself *"Resolve yourself and do what's proper"*. I took my bag from her shoulder and faked a smile.

"Let's go" I murmured.

"Will you be alright?" she asked delicately.

"Yeah" I snapped. But didn't say a word more, I knew I will start sobbing again.

I didn't have the smallest knowledge of how to react after mass humiliation.

How I wished that Sara was in my class when I had to enter alone in the room full of people who surely eyed me in disgust and very few in pity. The part of me that urged to see him residing somewhere there was dead. For the first time I wasn't looking for him at all. Mr. Pandey was in middle of the class and raised a brow as I entered. I took an empty seat in the corner row. I didn't look up at all, almost the whole day. I kept scribbling lectures in the notebook or practiced questions when not being taught. Everyone was kind enough to not disturb. They knew I felt humiliated and they were giving me time on my own to settle down.

Sara was deliberately making sure to not leave me alone in break or at lunch. Despite the continuous pain there was a glint of happiness as the day was coming to an end. I missed my coaching class because it was too soon to feel comfortable in his, Raag's and Mandy's presence.

At dinner Raag was passing me a register.

"What?" I asked in surprise, my heart ached unwillingly as I saw *Aadil* from the corner of my eye sitting two seats away from Raag. His brows rose to glance at Raag before shifting back to the dinner table.

"Coaching" he murmured.

I took the register, thanking him.

The day that crawled slowly and like a dream, left me with sore feeling of the reality into the dark night. I covered my face with pillow and mourned. I was angry though I didn't have anyone to blame except for myself.

I got up in the middle of the night and aggressively pushed his jumper under the pile of clothes on the bottom shelf. I took out anything that belonged to him; his notes, his books and pushed into my bag. I cried and cried but the grieving didn't end, the pain didn't weaken.

But everything considered it was wise and also my duty to live like nothing has happened. He wanted me to act like he doesn't exist; well he'll get what he wished.

It was a week past that morning. Life was somewhat back on track. I regularly went to gym, attended the school and coaching classes punctually and with all my dedication. The imagination ceased. Everyone started acting normally towards me. No matter how big the news is still it fades away down the time lane. But what doesn't fade away is the pain. I was depending on time to heal me, but apparently it wasn't an effective aid. It was normal for me to wake up to a wet pillow and a heart full of sorrow. His face haunted my once pleasant dreams. His voice still chased away all the sanity in me.

Though I successfully pretended living a normal life, somewhat similar to the one before his arrival. I put up a hard mask every morning and ignored him completely amidst the regular and frequent confrontations. For first few days I hoped that maybe he will at least realize that how rudely he behaved and will come and apologize. I feel sorry for myself for still watching the world through rose colored glasses.

My gym punishment was over. I utilized that time to go to chapel and sit there for an hour every day. It wasn't a sudden devotion in God but an escape. I begged him to help me move on. He used to hear me even for the tiniest of wishes but I don't know why he wasn't listening when I needed him the most. If I was still left with any time after that I spent it with grade 1 kids, the tiniest creatures in Pinegrove, it was easy to let lose and cry around them as they were not very happy either.

It was mid of May. Days started warming up. Mr. Pandey came in with a bunch of grapevines, our quarterly school magazines and requested to save them for after school. I quickly flickered the pages looking for my submission, which centered on Kirti's brother. I couldn't find it. It wasn't selected maybe. I was counting on that.

As Chemistry passed and Mrs. Anjali came she quickly settled us down and opened her copy of grapevine.

"I have a very interesting poem for you" she announced enthusiastically.

Everyone sighed but she continued *"I want you all to listen it carefully and understand the feelings behind the words."*

There was pin drop silence when she began.

"A mother to her sick son"

“Your silent howl, stalks me all the time

Whenever I think of future, I go blind.

I pray everyday, but there is no light

‘One day less’ is the thought every morning, that makes me whine.

I am with you laughing, but the fear never leaves

I keep trying to save you, but the thing worsens.

Sometimes I am so tired of being there

Watching you go despite the love and care.

To take care of you is all I know to do by myself

I keep watching you, your face is one heaven amidst this hell.

And there are times when I have to see the same face gravely unwell

The distress that torments me is hard to tell.

And the times when you strangely look at me

‘Goodbye’ is the word that I see

Well if you have to leave, then you must leave

But just so you know, your mother wouldn’t cry and grieve

But once again like a childish game, ‘she’ll follow your lead’.”

Mrs. Anjali paused and let the words sink in as if she was reading them for the first time.

I trust my father was drastically wrong when he said that I don’t allow sorrow and happiness to reach my heart. Or else what is the explanation for the overwhelming sorrow and the water in my eyes on hearing my own words.

The silence seemed incessant until Mrs. Anjali spoke in approbation “*this mother has opened her heart to her dying son. Look at the beauty of words that describe her helplessness. This poem is a mere pain penned down on a piece of paper. I wouldn’t have expected all of you to understand this mother’s heart, at your age if this wasn’t from someone not only of your age but of your class.*” She paused and looked towards me, her eyes filled with an admiration that I have seen only when she reads Jane Austen, her favorite author. “*A good clap for Ms Samiya Mittal.*”

And the room echoed with sound of claps. I murmured “*Thanks*” under my breath and bowed down my head looking at the book on the table, a bit shy. That was totally unnecessary.

I know my class mates were proud of my article selected for the magazine not because the poem meant anything to them. And I didn’t expect them to, they weren’t unemotional, they were kids and probably I was too mature for that age.

But there was someone else who I think was mature enough to not be in a high school, *Aadil*.

It was impossible not to look at him as he glared at me for the hundredth time before break. I was well satisfied that a person insensitive as himself was impressed by a sensitive poem that lead to awakening of a sudden interest in an unsightly thing like me or maybe it was the pity he was feeling for a sick girl. I have to pull back myself and battle to turn away to board as he continued staring me. It was gross that how beautiful a face can be of a person who is so devil.

And it was pity that *I was still in love with that devil*. I battled that thought, it wasn’t his fault if I was sick, I don’t know why I was not ready to forgive him.

That night after dinner we went through each cupboard in the dorm to find something descent for Sara to wear for the event, the after results party. Board results were coming out day after tomorrow and the passed out batch of class 12 was coming back to pick up the results later that week. It was a second farewell kind of thing.

Sara didn't want to play with *Adi* after what happened. I had to put up a good fight before she agreed to continue practicing.

"It's quite a sight." Rasna told me about the practice. *"Sara always has those killer elite like she is wondering how to kill Adi. May be by beating him with her drum sticks or pushing them down his throat"* she snapped and paused *"But still he is putting in his best to keep up with her."*

As if that somehow made him a better human.

So I was almost as worried for Sara to look presentable as I was worried for the board results. *I know that's strange.*

We finally settled for one of Moon's nicely fit top and Sara's faded jeans. I shined her converse sneakers with a wet cloth and put them against the rim of the cupboard to dry. It was quite late when Moon threw hesitantly smiling *"ladies can I try my dress again?"*

"Oh please no" everyone shouted in unity. They seemed tiered of Moon's dress rehearsals for almost three nights in a row now. She turned blue.

"Try it for me. Let's go to the change room." I said politely.

"Serious?" she babbled regaining her pink.

"Hum" I nodded in perfect happiness.

I zipped her white ballet frock which tugged her slender body in a complete grace.

"You look like a doll. Here let me do your hair" I murmured standing besides her in front of a body length mirror on the cold bathroom floor. She stepped in front of me willingly. Her black silky hair looked nice in braids but something contemporary like an up do would go with the dress. As I was concentrating on getting it right, Moon spoke in utter mercy *"Samiya I am sorry about that day."* My heart thudded for once before gaining the normal pace. I kept my eyes on my fingers running through her hair as she continued *"I saw something in his eyes for you that day. Something stronger than love. I don't believe you are sick"* she murmured.

Only mentioning him brought back the ache in my heart. It was hard escaping it for long anyways. It usually starts when I rest my head on the pillow, it was almost time.

"I think we can accessories your prom hairstyle with Deep's vintage hair combs. What do you think of it?" I said ignoring her little statement, tugging her last strand of hair in place. She got distracted.

"Wow. We sure can. Oh my god this looks awesome. You are doing my hair on that day. In fact I make you in charge of everyone's hair right now" she snapped honoring me with a promotion.

"Thanks mademoiselle" I bowed laughing.

As the clock stuck 2 in the night or in the morning I still lay awake on my bed. Moon's words repeated themselves.

"You are wrong Moon. I am sick." I whispered to myself under my breath.

His dreams haunted my few hours sleep as I wasn't miserable enough. It's strange that how you know *it's over* but still that episode repeats itself every night in a dream and you go through the misery like it's for the first time.

The next day was full of drama and tension. Other than prestige issues results did matter to some extent, it could lead to reshuffling of classes if few scored exceptionally low. That would be the worst case scenario.

It wasn't bothering me much as it used to in the past. I knew I would score enough to stay in science section. Humiliation was all I was worried about but thanks to someone, I have had worst.

A section of main notice board was already cleared for the future lists. Though headmaster addressed each section of class 11 with an extremely hilarious speech of how not to turn suicidal in case of scoring less than expectation, he himself appeared much more terrible than anyone else. A school's board performance surely reflected its academic culture and affected the school ranking.

"Lists will be up tomorrow morning at 6" Mr. Pandey announced as soon as heady left.

That afternoon I was surprised to receive two letters in mail. One belonged to mum but the other one was more colorful and gordy and apparently looked pretty worn out as if effected by a long journey. I curiously opened to find a lovely greeting saying *'Thank You'*. I skipped to the *from* part straightaway. It said *'Luv Aunty, Sara's mommy'*. It brought a smile to my lips. She knew the letter was from me. *'Keep Writing'* was highlighted with nice pink glitters. Mama's letter was same as always, except for *Good luck for results baby, we are not coming for the visiting weekend and what are your plans for summer vacations.*

Summer vacation, was yet another issue. Probably I wasn't going home, and neither any other student of science class 11 and 12. Coaching and all. It would be depressing without Sara and Niya and Amber, actually everyone in short. Anyways that tension can be kept off for a while.

I slept like any other nights, not better not worse. But woke up to an undulation of tension with almost everyone awake in the dorm. It was 5.30 in the morning. Girls were going down to be there, in front of the notice board when the results are put up. I tried to wake up Sara, failing of course and rumbled downstairs without redoing my braid or freshening up.

Boys were already there, cluttering around the coffee machine. *He* was there too in a red jumper and black track pants leaning against the door, a shiver ran down my spine as he caught me glaring. I turned around instantly. He won't be on our school list. Maybe they will have to check his results separately on internet.

It was ten past six when Ms Dhawan finally came out of the staff room with few papers in her hand, followed by heady.

"Where's my boy? Where's Raag?" heady mumbled in total joy. He hugged him as soon as soon as Raag appeared out of nowhere. *"94% marks. Raag is the topper"* he announced *"we have a 100 percent result boys and girls."*

"Three cheers for school" He shouted in excitement *"Hip Hip". "Hurray"* everyone jumped in excitement crowding around Ms Dhawan as she put up the list.

"Come in everyone after seeing the results" Heady ordered walking back to his office.

I let everyone see their results and waited for the crowd to disperse. Everyone seemed more than content. I was the last one to walk down to the notice board. It took me a minute to interpret the format and then I easily found my name followed by my marks in each subject and then the calculated percentage 87%. That was better than I expected. My eyes rushed through the list again, I knew *Adi's* name won't be there but I still was looking for it. After a failing attempt I went to Sara's, her marks were not bad either. Her calculated score was 76%.

I was going through everyone's marks when the warm fragrance which I lived in for a while confronted me. It was more exotic than I remembered it to be. It was the sweetest poison, I knew of. *He* was standing besides me, just a few inches away. His calm breath played a strange melancholy to the beats of my heart. *"Congrats"* he whispered aguishly, too close to bear and as if that wasn't meant to be heard. *"Breathe"* I had to tell myself. *"You are imagining Samiya"* I added.

I stood there like a statue for a brief second before my mind started working again and I slowly sneaked out to headmaster's office without looking at who was standing besides me, too scared.

"So how about Renuka jheel?" Heady asked as everyone stood around his table. A trip or a picnic was his *gift* to us.

"Make it overnight Sir" someone bargained from the clutter.

"Yes Sir Camping sounds good" someone else suggested.

"Okay. Deal Seal" Heady announced smiling. Everyone cheered for heady and thanked before moving out. *Adi* was nowhere to be seen. *He didn't see his results*, which made me anxious for some reason I don't know.

I was wearing socks sitting on bed after a quick shower followed by a gym class, when someone shouted *"Turn on the TV."*

"Why?" another voice asked.

"I don't know. Boys are shouting from their dorm." the previous person answered.

Someone turned on the TV. The morning news was playing. They were giving detailed version of results; board wise, state wise and gender wise. I moved back on putting my shoes after losing the thrill.

"I repeat again that 90.18 per cent girls have become eligible for qualifying certificates while 88.30 percent boys have cleared the test. As per region wise performance, Chennai is followed by Ajmer with 93.51per cent students becoming eligible for qualifying certificates. Also an Ajmer lad Aadil Rathore has topped the CBSE Class 10 examination with 98% marks breaking all previous records. Reports have just come in that Aadil Rathore is son of the famous Cardiovascular Surgeon Dr Tanmay Rathore." The news reader kept talking but I was lost, a sudden thrill ran through me again, a smile came to my lips before quickly evaporating as I noticed everyone was looking at me. I don't know why they have to do that whenever *his* name comes up in anything.

I was happy for him despite everything.

He was at his usual place when I walked into the mess. He looked at me impulsively as I entered, though I wanted to look back and give a smile, I rather not do that, if I have any pride left. He seemed busy with frequent wishers sitting there pretending to be obliged though he was exceptionally uncomfortable in that lime light, *I could feel that*. My eyes wide opened in amazement and I wanted to throw myself from top of the building when I saw Niya excitedly threw her arms around *Aadil*, congratulating him. He hugged her back in contentment, this time not pretending.

How could she? That wasn't fair after what he did to me. I'll talk to her; she'll have to pick a side, either his or mine. I thought for a minute before changing my mind. *Well I better not do that, she is a kid. I shouldn't involve her in my misery. Let it be.*

Heady also came and hugged Aadil before moving to his table. *Aadil* wasn't happy. He looked at me with an uncomfortable pleading glare quite often. I wanted to hug him badly and to smooth the worry lines off his forehead. But I had no right over him, I reminded myself.

The days that followed after the results gave me a new perspective to look at myself. *I can do sufficiently well, if I work hard. Maybe I can make it to MBBS without dad's help.* That thought truly inspired me. I almost planned everything that how I'll stay with mum and dad at home, happily, contently and merrily if I get admission in Delhi. I saw myself sitting at diner table with mama and papa, helping mum in kitchen, going cycling with dad, playing cards with them and making mid night snacks, to live all those little moments that I have missed and the things that meant so much to me. I can go to Sara's in Canada to spend vacations.

All those fantasies were an attempt to fill in colors to dreams which were black and white without *Adi* being in picture. *I loved him* but he loving me back was never part of the deal. So why cry over something that was not even mine in the first place. *Move on* I told myself for the last time.

When I came out of Chapel on one of those pleasantly warm evenings Raag was waiting for me to talk.

“Samiya I want to talk about something” he said in a deep and worried voice.

“What’s it Raag?” his pale face flickered tension in my head.

“It’s about Aadil?” he murmured.

I straightened my brows.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked almost in a whisper.

“He is not well. He has been acting strangely. I have a strong feeling that it’s something about you.” He said.

“I truly appreciate your concern for him Raag. But I guess you have got it wrong. I have nothing to do with him.” I said calmly walking away.

He was in dismay.

I don’t know if I have spoken to real Raag or was it just my imagination. But one thing I knew I didn’t have anything to do with Aadil Rathore.

6. THE REAL HIM

Next day was Sunday. The Ex Class twelfth was coming to pick up their certificates today. It was finally the day everyone was waiting for. While the participants practiced, some of us helped the teachers set up for the party. My shoulders started aching putting up those radium stars on the walls of the auditorium but my patience didn’t wash off.

I set everything I needed and could possibly need for hair and make ups for the band in the dressing room. I was least interested in doing it and was regretting accepting that offer. But it wasn’t right to back off on the last minute.

Finally the evening set in. I had a quick peek of the auditorium and my stars do lit up gloriously in the dim light. On one side the tables were set for the buffet and the stage looked marvelous. On the plasma screen the pictures of the ex class 12 played. Sid and his mates were already in their set of civils, well polished. I knew I wouldn’t have time to get changed into civils so I just washed my face and tidied up my school skirt and blouse. I did my braids again to look as presentable as possible. On small table near the stage were the certificates and small boxes with brooches. The gold, silver and bronze brooches were awarded to students according to their percentages. This was seniors only event so the auditorium seemed big enough to accumulate that big a gathering. The teachers were dressed nicely and most of them traditionally with their name tags on. Kunal struggled with his tiny assistant to get his camera and video camera right.

“Get ready. Its time guys” Ms Renu shouted from behind the curtains. Rasna, Moon and Jia were already there. While they went to change, I helped Kavya fix her sari; she was hosting along with Iqbal. She did her own makeup. All I had to do was put a clip on her half tied hair. She looked pretty.

That wasn’t on my job description but I helped Iqbal with his hair, which were previously spiky, corny and too funny to be on the head of an anchor. There was enough space to breathe in the time lapse between Kavya and Iqbal left and Moon and crew entered. I got to work and saw fruitful benefits after what seemed like few hours. Everyone did their own make ups, I just had to do the hair and other random stuff. Sara was ready too. She suddenly looked all grown up. I took a minute to admire her.

Suddenly there was a deadly silence when *Aadil* entered following Sandeep. Half of the girls almost fainted. I love to pieces what he was wearing. The white shirt tugging his chest and biceps, sleeves folded, black waist coat and the gorgeous jeans were somehow bringing out the blue in his eyes. Hair looked undone but seriously he turned out great just like that. A dark Burberry skinny tie was hanging from his coat pocket. *“Being this hot would be a tiring job”* I thought to myself. After the brief moment of unconsciousness and appreciation everyone went to what they were doing. When everyone went backstage I started tidying up the dressing room, taking my time packing up the stuff, the way it was supposed to be. No one needed me on the other side of this door. I kneeled down by the chair to collect the clattered safety pins, which continued for few minutes when I heard some other person closing the door behind. I hoped, on turning my head to see one of the girls but it proved to be one much less calculated for making matters easy- *Aadil* was standing in front of the mirror. I quickly straightened up and moved to the side, leaving him plenty of space. I hooked one safety pin into another thus keeping myself busy. He

glanced at me before moving his blue eyes, which could make sky look pale, towards the mirror. He smelled delicious. That was a new fragrance.

It took me quite sometime to make a chain out of all those safety pins. I don't know why it was taking him so long, as he was still at the same spot. *What is he doing* I thought to myself. I glanced up in the mirror slightly. His eyes were on his silk tie that was slipping through his palms, he was trying very hard to hold onto it, but it dropped on the floor anyways. He bent to pick it up, but though his hands were on the tie, he wasn't picking it up. He looked tense. His hands trembled but he wasn't getting a grip of it. It didn't sink.

I took a step and turned around to kneel down in front of him. His pretty eyes meet mine for a moment. I didn't know what I was doing or what was happening to him. I wasn't breathing, that I know. I gently touched the palm of his hands to see not the slightest of moment. Then I pressed it harder, still the same.

He was unable to feel my touch.

His hands were numb.

That feeling or sensation of numbness is called *Parathesia*. I have read about it. It could be transient or chronic. Usually it's a temporary effect and occurs as a symptom to a disease. It's not a disease in itself.

I glared back at him. He was worried but he wasn't surprised, so this wasn't new for him.

I picked up his tie and straightened it. He was just inches away from me and taller than I thought he was. He bowed and I tied the knot and fixed his collar. I was speechless for thousands of reasons, the two most important; he was not well and he was looking extremely gorgeous. The circumstances were not doing good to my disordered feelings. My little fever of admiration ended me up here, dying of tension for him. I calmly pulled him into the chair and brushed my hands through his hair. Applied some of Iqbal's hair gel to get them in shape. I was touching him and I wasn't panicking but that wasn't the moment of joy either. He wasn't well and he had a show to put up.

"Can you feel it now" I asked tracing one of the lines in his palm with my finger tip. He bit his lip in pure disgust and sighed. I didn't know the treatment for Parathesia but subconsciously I took his hand between mine and rubbed it. I wanted to try anything that could possibly work than sitting there doing nothing. I rubbed it for quite some time and then suddenly his hand tightened on mine.

"I am fine now" he claimed hesitantly.

I sighed in relief before leaving his hand slowly still doubting its proper functioning. *"Its okay"* he whispered again in his velvet voice to calm me down before walking out in the auditorium.

Aadil was sick. For the very first time it occurred to me that maybe it was Aadil who was mad, not me.

Before sneaking out of the auditorium I stole the dorm's key from Sid's pocket rushed to the boy's dorm.

Ten years and I have never been inside this place. The primary set up of their dorm was same as ours, just that theirs was pulled together to provide consistency and functionality while ours focused on décor and colors. Not a single bed was made. The condition of shoes told that it would be a challenge to find one's pair every morning. The memory board served the purpose of a cloth line as it was covered with socks and handkerchiefs. I was like a person from a developed nation discovering the slums of third world nation for the first time in life.

I didn't know which one was Aadil's bed. I was roaming contemplating each bed when my eyes stopped at the soft feather quilt draped in a dark blue cover, just like his eyes half tugging the pale bed sheet and a fluffy pillow. The red jumper and the black tracks that he wore the other day lay folded on the foot of the quilt next to the brushed steel edge of the bunk. Next to pillow rested a book. An alarm clock and an iPod sat purposely on top of it. Adi told me he hears Ronan Keating in night. I despite checking the iPod grabbed the book, a picture dropped from it and fell on the ground. It was my picture, the snap from Niya's cupboard. I stood there wondering for a while.

Then I found myself a compass and pushed into the key hole of a cupboard with David Beckham's poster on it next to his bed, his cupboard apparently. I didn't like doing it but unfortunately there seemed no other way around it.

After few minutes of fiddling, I heard a cracking noise. The lock broke and so did the compass but the door opened.

It was a mirror image of my wardrobe, more books, less clothes well organized. I started looking on the bottom shelves. One of the book shelves was divided with a shelf organizer to form a separate corner.

A paper with mine and his names and hearts drawn all over it, with flames and love percentages laid on top of the lecture notes which I wrote for *Adi*. I did that, it was my hand writing, on the last page of the notebook. He saved it. It had a small collection of miniatures a used pen, a hair pin, a tissue with pink lip gloss on it, a bookmark, my poem from grapevine and a blazer folded and wrapped in a transparent plastic paper, the one I wore once. He was holding onto my used tissue for Christ sake and then he called me sick.

I put back the things as they were, in urgency and got a plastic chair to check top shelves. The first thing I found was a plastic bag full of medication, my eyes wide opened in horror.

The bag of my grandfather's medicines that was an asthmatic, diabetic and had heart attack twice was smaller to the thing in front of me.

I hesitantly rushed through the packet; they were not the common fever or flu medicines. I can't recognize even a single thing.

I was numb in a state of Parathesia myself. I can't say if I was worried or praying, because I have no idea. *"Samiya"* a sudden voice scared me.

I didn't have to look to know who it was; this was a voice I would know anywhere- know and respond to, whether I was awake or asleep...or even dead, I'd bet. The voice I'd walk fire for- or, less slosh every day through the cold and endless rain for. The voice which had an exceptionally mysterious talent of keeping life altering truths from me.

I scared turned around to look at him standing few inches away from me, I was edging back finding a way out.

"Don't leave Samiya. Please" he begged.

He stood in front of me, casting no reflection, excruciatingly lovely and *just seventeen*. I couldn't leave.

“What are these medicines for? Are you mad?”

His face was pale.

“No I am not and neither are you” he said in a whisper.

“Then who was Adi. It was you, wasn’t it? Why were you trying to prove me mad?” I asked failing to form a coherent question from all that I needed to know.

“Yes I am Adi” he sighed. *“I have never wanted to prove you mad, that was never my intention.”*

“Then what was your intention? What are these medicines for?” I groaned.

“These are antiretroviral drugs. You are not sick. I am. I am HIV Positive”

The words numbed my soul. I wasn’t expecting that answer *“I fall in love with you much before you even noticed me. But I was sick; I knew we couldn’t be together. I tried to stay away from you but I couldn’t help. You pulled me towards you like gravity. I wanted to spend time with you.”* *“I know how to hypnotize people, whenever we got together I left a spell on you or hypnotized you, so that you wont remember seeing me. It worked with everyone. But you remembered things. Your memory was sharp than anyone I have ever met. Things got messed up. I didn’t want to get into your life, trust me it just happened.”* as he spoke a sheaf of dizzying images fluttered through my mind. The bits of the puzzle started falling in places. That’s the reason he kept me away. That’s why he called himself a virus which I though was just an analogy. He was too young to be a victim of a deadly virus, *HIV Virus*.

I couldn’t bring myself to say those words even in my heart. I tugged my arms around my chest as my numb body suddenly felt a shiver. The pain reached the heart and the tears started escaping.

He collapsed, kneeling down in front of me *“Forgive me. Please”* he begged.

A tear dropped from his beautiful eyes. They gleamed dimly with the moisture and reflecting moon’s light. I’d never seen anything more beautiful- even as I cried and mourned, I could appreciate that. And once again it did not matter if he wanted me or not. I would never ever want anything but him, no matter how long I lived.

I hesitantly touched his face, brushing softly against his flawless skin. My lungs filled deep with the sweet scent that came off his skin. I could feel my heart racing in my chest, the blood pulsing hot and fast through my veins. I wrapped my arms around him and embraced him close to my chest.

I just suffered the biggest shock of my life but still in that instant, I felt well. I could hear his heart pounding calmly against mine. It felt like I have longed for that moment whole my life.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked sobbing.

He sighed and let me lose. I didn’t let go off him completely.

“What would I have said? We can’t be together because I have human immunodeficiency virus. The thought bothered me, what if you don’t want me once you know that I am not perfect. Now despite you were not talking to me, I knew you loved me; I wanted that to be enough for me. And I didn’t know any way by which we can exist together. That situation still remains unchanged just that I want to be with you, I can’t help it.” *“Please forgive me for not doing what’s right for you because this feeling has taken control of me and I don’t know how to be fine without you anymore.”* He said in a deep pleading voice.

“You can’t leave me Adi not for yourself but for me. Not now, not ever. I lost myself when you left me” My voice broke as I confessed hesitantly.

“I know. I am sorry. And I am sorry for shouting at you that were the longest two minutes of my life. I can’t tell you how hard it was for me to say that to you. And I couldn’t come to terms that you believed what I said. Your lament face left a scar on my heart, that memory discolored any other memory of you.” He said in disgust. *“And you never looked at me again, as if I wasn’t there. You don’t know what’s it like getting up every morning feeling hopeless. Hoping that you find happiness even if that’s not with me.”*

“I don’t know if you’ll believe me but the fact is that I was resolved to tell you the whole truth any time now. I tried but I can’t live without you. You have no idea how it hurts when you don’t look back or return my feelings. I wanted to protect you from my misery but I guess you were already a part of it, regardless of if we were together or not”

As he spoke I felt recovered, the love and desperation in each word assured me that this someone was further than the level of aptness. *He left me, to protect me. But there was no need to protect me from himself. I was a part of him. I was him.*

In that debate of love and feelings, *the word* silently ached like a pulse of blood behind a bruise. *How did that happen was the next question that troubled my unsettled mind?* Sexual transmission was the most general root of the swell of the virus or that was the norm. But it seemed irrelevant in his case.

“How did that happen Adi?” I asked desolated.

“What. HIV?” He asked wondering. I felt uncomfortable of the ease with which he said that word.

I nodded sadly.

“I had that accident you were reading about. They took us to the nearby government hospital in the rural area before shifting to the private facility. Dad thinks I got infected there due to unscreened blood transfusion or an infected syringe. The condition of the hospital was beyond disgusting. It wasn’t until the year that followed that I went to Ohio for vacations that we found out” he spoke with despair in his distant thoughts. *“I was with dad in the research centre. One of the lab technicians was teaching me blood testing trying to keep me busy while dad was doing something important. We finger pricked me and mixed that with a solution, formed a slide to test under microscope. She glanced into it casually but ended up carefully examining it and after a while she decided to take some more blood from my vein. Saliva test, standard blood test, western blot followed, all leading to one result, presence of HIV antibodies in my system. The day that started in fun ended up changing several lives irrevocably”* *“Mum didn’t go to work for over a month”* *“Dad’s aggravation leaded him into an unresolving legal battle with the hospital. They were planning on*

not sending me back again, to Mayo. But I wanted to get away. I couldn't bear seeing them like that. They were blaming themselves. I knew it wasn't anyone's fault. It was destiny" He dwelled on the last word.

I lingered silently, paying attention. I had no outlook on the matter. But I felt the whole thing; his mum's grieve his dad's frustration and his stipulation on information that his life was altered everlastingly.

"I was in clinically asymptomatic stage so they began my antiretroviral drugs therapy."

I gazed at him befuddled. The most important question afflicted me.

"How much time do we have" I heard myself asking.

There wasn't anything on his face that showed he was surprised to hear that question.

I pretended to be composed but the fact scared me that he was agreeing that *we have a limited time.*

"There are four stages. I am on the second. Due to the improved treatment people can lead a healthy life for many years in this stage. But it depends from person to person. HIV Virus keeps damaging the system over these years and then in the third stage normal HIV symptoms develop, leading to aids that is the final stage. When HIV symptoms start showing people don't usually live for long after that." He explained making the concept as easy as possible for me to understand. I knew things are more detailed and complicated in real.

"Isn't there any cure for this" I asked. I very well knew the answer, but can't help asking hoping to hear something better. A hope in vain of course.

"There is no cure, just a treatment" he sounded as composed.

"They moved me here with the thought that this place is better than Ajmer in regards to pollution and also dad trusted heady with me." He said quietly.

I absorbed the information before moving on.

"What happened to you in the dressing room?" I shrugged just with the thought of it.

"It happens sometimes. It's one of the side effects of the antiretroviral drugs" he admitted.

"Oh" I replied *"Where did you go for three days?"* I asked.

"Delhi. I have to get tests done every six months to monitor my status." he said sounding bored.

"Did you tell heady what was going on between us?" I kept interrogating anyways.

"Nope. But he figured out. He asked me not to tell you about HIV because he thinks if the word goes around some parents can have trouble with that. You know..."

"Yeah I know. Deep's parents asked her to stay away from me because I have asthma" I interrupted jovial at the thought.

He laughed too.

"You can hypnotize." I circled back to where it started, looking at him amazed.

"Yeah" he nodded diffidently.

"By the way. I saw you before you saw me" I babbled bailing out of his previous statement, that he started loving me before I did.

"No that's not true" he flashed his gleaming smile, dazing me momentarily.

"Don't hypnotize me." I said covering his eyes with my hand too quickly, smiling.

"and yes it is true" I added *"On the first day of the school, you passed by me with a book in your hands, totally oblivious of my presence and same thing happened at the lunch table. But I noticed you."* I criticized.

"You did"

"Yes I did and I was almost hyperventilating." *"You were nice to look at"* I answered dubiously taking off my hand.

He watched me with unnecessary fixation.

"I didn't look at you then maybe but I saw you before that" his eyes stayed rigid on my face.

"When?" I asked surprised by his intensity.

"Now this is another complicated story. I don't know if you'll understand" he explained after a plausible second.

"Try me" I murmured curiously.

He sighed.

"Well there will never be an easy way to say this so just listen, you can choose not to believe it, it won't matter" he said.

I waited impatiently for him to start.

"It was a warm summer morning of 10 may 2001. We were going back to Ajmer from Jaipur after winning a football championship. Me and my friend Karan were playing wrestling cards. It was too quite for 14 young boys in the bus. Everyone was tired. We practiced for that match day and night for almost a month. The success tasted sweet but we were drained of energy. Everyone including two PT Teachers and the bus driver wanted to get back as soon as possible. I remember noticing that we were going too fast for that single sheer road. We were about to pass over a bridge when a long trailer appeared upright on the road from nowhere. The driver fully stirred the steering wheel in panic. The bus was going down with an enormous speed, everyone was shouting. The last thing I remember was seeing Karan lose his grip of the handle and there was blood everywhere." He said in a wistful expression.

I shivered.

"Mom pushes me for details sometime but no matter how hard I try I remember nothing of the accident or how I reached the hospital. All I remember after that instance is that it was very quiet. I was somewhere where there was no light and it wasn't dark. I could see nothing because there was nothing. I slowly kept walking finding a way or a direction to where I don't know. I couldn't see myself either. I started wondering if I was dead."

Life after death was something that never held my interest. In that moment I regretted not gaining enough knowledge on the subject to know what I was supposed to do now. I heard that one sees light or goes into a permanent sleep after death, depending on their Karma. I didn't know if I have to wait for light or for the sleep. I was 11 I had no idea what kind of karma history I had. I kept walking. As each step I took I had flashbacks of few memories that I never knew existed within me."

I saw myself taking my first step toward mum as an infant, there was a happiness beyond recognition on her young face. I heard my mum's heartbeat like I have heard it for the first time, clear and loud, when dad put his stethoscope in my ears and its chest piece on her heart. I saw the joy on dad's face when I kicked my first ball. I saw us entering into our new home. I saw the wall where all my medals, certificates or any smallest of my achievements is framed and decorated and which my dad sees every morning with pride. Suddenly I saw a picture of me on the same wall with a flower garland around it, my mother howling, my father breaking down."

As soon I decided to turn back I found myself in a garden at a foot of a bridge, crossing over a beautiful stream. The other side of the bridge was what I think is heaven. The view on that side was spectacular; the place was floating in clouds. And I knew if I were to cross the bridge, I could not go back in my body. Not for the slightest of moment I wanted to go on the other side, I wanted my mum, I didn't want heaven. I stood there thinking what I should do when I saw my late grand father on the other corner of the bridge. He waved me to come to him but I didn't move. He disappeared in few seconds and then Karan appeared at the same place. He did the same. It hurted to know that he was gone but I still didn't move. I saw ranger my deceased dog with him. I felt depressed seeing them waiting but I wanted to live. They vanished too."

And then after a conceivable second I saw someone, I had never seen before. She was pretty and there was light, she looked so white. Her long black hair contrasted her delicate features. Her face was calm and her eyes were penetrating. She looked at me with intensity as if she had known me for ages. She was very young but older than I was. She didn't ask me to come to her like my previous acquaintances. Her pink lips curved into a smile. I knew she was an angel. I couldn't resist her; I could feel that there was an unspoken desperation in her eyes as if she has been waiting for me for a long time. I hastily took a step on the bridge when I heard the noise of the ventilator and a pump alarm. My body was stiff and my hand felt heavy with the weight of the syringes. My dad was standing next to my bed."

"You are fine son." he murmured brushing his hand on my hair. I closed my eyes instantly to go back. I waited and waited she never showed herself again. I was not fine, not after that.

As the time passed I started believing that she was truly an angel. I secretly wished that whenever I die, may that angel come for me. I longed to see her again. The knowledge of my sickness was not that big a shock after all, the strong desire to see her dimmed the fear of death from my mind." He paused taking a deep breath.

I looked at him curiously waiting to listen more.

"It was last year in June, in the summer vacations. I went to Dargah Sharif in Ajmer as a usual tradition to offer prayers with my parents. I was following mom and dad doing the rituals in there. We were going around the mausoleum containing the tomb of Khwajaji when the face of the same angel caught my attention on the other side. Again there was light but she wasn't looking at me. In a briefest moment she disappeared. I ran out of the exit looking everywhere for her. I felt frustrated and defeated to not find her. When a thought came like a spiritual awakening, how could I find her she is just a spirit? If Khwajaji who died hundreds of years ago is still alive as a holy spirit in his tomb can't an angel live here too? Ajmer unquestionably is a great spiritual and holy land. The place itself was a never failing faith." "I started going to Dargah regularly to offer prayers. Every time the same one, asking him to send that angel to take me whenever I die." He paused with a heavy sigh and smiled.

"That was you." he said mutely "I know there can be psychological explanations to this, I have read tones of those but I know what I saw and I saw you before you saw yourself" a peculiar tone entered his voice.

I looked at his face blankly unable to think of an appropriate reaction. It was touching. He meant that angel was me. Even if I try to discard I know things like this are a psychological imbalance, you think it's an anomalous dream, supposedly a manifestation of extrasensory perception, that information is given that we could not have obtained otherwise but its our sub consciousness that piece together bits of information. Maybe he saw someone else, he liked her and then he saw me and liked me and he conceived the notion that it's the same person. It could be unreal but there was no harm in believing. I don't know if Angels or God or life after death existed. But faith definitely did. As I believed he was my Angel, he believed in me.

"You know I didn't want to leave Ajmer because of my belief that the angel lived there. Dad threatened me to Pinegrove. And I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you here. I felt very angry with God because whom I thought was an angel, was an ordinary girl. She was no holy spirit. Remember I didn't talk to you at first; I didn't like you very much. But then I saw you as someone who was sweet, caring, loving. Someone who was pure at heart, someone who can cry in other's pain. I had never seen anyone like you. You were an angel, my angel" He said in a murmur, a twitch of sadness crossed his eyes.

I felt warm and protected and happy. *The feeling of being loved* is truly the most beautiful feeling a soul can be blessed with. With him there it was so easy to fantasize that everything was okay.

"Tell me something?" he asked calmly.

"Hum" I asked in a very low voice.

"Did you go to Ajmer last year?" he asked gently but intensely.

“Yes. I went there with my parents. My dad goes there every year. Last year he took me too, to pray for the board examinations. And it wasn’t light; it was the white salwar kameez I was wearing.” I smiled “I wish I had seen you too. I would have never disappeared.”

He looked back intensely to see a human so passionately in love. Though I think he has known it all along, my obsession with him.

“How do you hear me when I am not near.” I asked looking at him in mystification.

He sighed meeting my eyes and they were surprisingly tender now.

“I can. I can hear minutest of sounds from a distance. Especially the sounds which are near to you, to the beat of your heart. I can hear the pages turning of your book in midnight, the pen scribbling on the paper, you talking in dreams and your prayers in chapel.” He said gloriously.

I stared at him besieged yet befuddled.

“Are you sure it won’t be more than enough for one day” he asked playfully *“I don’t want to scare you.”*

“Don’t worry. I will survive.”

He uncertainly came to sit besides me on his warm bed.

“I have more developed senses for humans. I see better, I hear better, I smell better”

“Even your memory is better” I smiled perturbed, remembering he told me he can learn the whole book.

“Yup. With memory comes the extra sensory perception because of which I sometimes see future.” He added critically.

I crossed my arms around my folded legs.

He fell silent for a minute and watched me intently as if he was thinking it through.

“They say that in 2000 the first human gene therapy success resulted. But that’s not true.” He sighed. His eyes were tight as he stared past me out of the window. *“The first alteration of an individual’s genotype with the aim of choosing the phenotype of a newborn was used to change the physical appearance, metabolism, hearing aid, eyesight and mental faculties like memory and intelligence was carried out in 1988. With the method of germ line engineering the genes was changed in a very early embryo. That was classified under enhancement or positive genetic engineering. It was a work of some greatest minds in the field of human genetic engineering. But look at their fate due to the controversial ethical issues those doctors never got a chance to come and tell the world about one of the greatest achievements of a human brain.” “Me”* He added almost in a whisper.

Adi was a genetically engineered human.

I shuddered slightly at the bleakness in his voice and the truth of his words. It took me a while to digest his story. I was a slow learner but I guess in this case anyone will be.

What he was saying does make sense. He was different, than anyone of us.

But it felt so surreal. I was a science student I knew this kind of thing is possible but so are aliens, I mean there is a difference between a possibility and reality.

We sat in silence. I glanced at the clock on the front wall.

“Adi” I murmured.

“Hum?” He looked up abruptly.

“Is the color of your eyes genetically engineered?” I asked dubiously.

“No. Mum says I have my grandmother’s eyes in Me.” he answered nonchalantly.

I smiled hesitantly.

He seemed confused. He tilted his head to one side and his eyes were curious.

“I love the blue of your eyes. I wanted them to be yours.” I whispered blushing.

He seemed unnecessarily confused though smiling, one of those beautiful smiles.

“Aren’t you upset? Or heartbroken knowing that I am not very genuine. That I am an artificial Mr. Perfect” He asked his eyes fixed at my face.

“No, why should I be. You are a biological wonder and besides you are so human. It’s the special you inside that body that I love and trust me that’s the most perfect thing in my world.” I replied, surprised he even thought that.

We both smiled mesmerized.

It was late when he dropped me outside the dorm.

“You sure you don’t want to eat anything?” he asked opening the door for me, unwillingly.

"I am not hungry" I assured him for the hundredth time. I was in no mood to go back to the party.

"You eat something" I requested hesitantly. Saying caring things was something that came to me with exceptional ease. But I was not much of a grown up in his presence, my mind was somewhat scrambled when he was near.

He smiled.

"Sleep well" he alleged clinging to his jacket.

I blinked thoroughly dazed. My heart sank as I watched him leaving.

There was no one in the dorm. I took shower and got dressed for bed, hunting the book that I issued from library, and elatedly rolled under the quilt. The book was just another love story. Though an innate reader but I was not a huge fan of choices these protagonists of my books made. Few questions forever bugged me, driving me insane and I used to read the chapters over and over again, looking for some possible explanation of unexplainable behaviors of women in love. For instance why Anne Elliot ditched Frederick in persuasion and then why she waited for a miracle like Frederick to happen again. And much less complicated why Sita suffered all the atrocities of Ram, she always had a choice to go back to her father; she was a princess after all. All these people be it Meera or Heer or Elizabeth Bennett of western world were never perfect to me. There were so many questions left hung at every book I finished.

But today somehow all that was coming back to me, making sense. Though in different eras, different worlds these people were all about love. They never thought of choices, as if they didn't exist.

Very true. Be it destiny or be it love, you don't drive it, it drives you and necessarily for early adolescence.

Just like them my heart pondered and got eager when Adi's name reaches my ears. I am sure my reflexes were more rapid to his name than mine. I was being driven too. By love.

I clogged my eyes, thinking of the evening. It ached to think how it started and the same pain numbed on the thought of its closure. Adi was infected with a virus, he wasn't sick; it was just like me suffering from asthma, I told myself. The risks were considerable in his case but they say the treatment has enhanced the existence rate. And they'll find a cure, every now and then it's in the news, researchers working on one.

"But what if they are unable to find a cure in time. As he said the virus is little by little terminating his immune system. He has had 5 years in the second stage already. How long would it possibly last" The thought was apprehensive.

I don't know when I fall asleep praying to God. That night I had a dream vivid but peaceful. Khwajaji came and shared a word of wisdom. He said, I quote *"Death is a necessary end; it will come when it will come. You cannot banish danger, but you can banish fear."* He said before vanishing.

I woke up in core of the dark and kept conjecturing how come Khwajaji ended up impressing things which were in fact quotes from a book I had. The dream was eccentric but the strangest tad was that his preaching's did make sagacity. How evenly Adi rattled about his disease, he didn't fear it. Likewise I have on no account felt a trepidation about my death, I won't fear his, I resolved. Or at least I can try not to fear it. He perceive me as a light, I'll be one.

And then there was another fear, can there ever be *us*. My parents are modern enough, they will respect my choices, and actually there never has been an instance where I have shown any preference to something that's not their preference. This would be first. I think we'll figure out something, they don't really have a choice on this matter. *I am his*, if anyone accepts it or not. To be with him was the decision that was ridiculously easy to live with. *So I vowed to be on his side in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death and beyond.*

At sometime we all wake up, that was the point for me.

My heart began to race almost uncontrollably. Adrenalin kicked in. That allowed me to use all my strength at one time, but for a very insignificant amount of time, to fight off the threats. I took advantage and babbled instantly *"With Aadil."* I regretted as soon as the words were out.

"Are you awake?" I heard Sara's voice from above as she shifted uncomfortably, stirring the whole bunk.

"Kind of. How was the party?" I asked moving to see her face.

"Where were you Samiya?" she asked, interrupting my question.

My heart began to race almost uncontrollably. Adrenalin kicked in. That allowed me to use all my strength at one time, but for a very insignificant amount of time, to fight off the threats. I took advantage and babbled instantly *"With Aadil."* I regretted as soon as the words were out.

She sighed impatiently and banged her hand on the metal frame of the bed.

"That's it Samiya. You are not talking to him again" her voice cutting, she glared me with an angry expression.

"He embarrassed you in front of whole school. Jesus, have some self respect girl. He hurt you. You have been moping around for two weeks; he didn't even come to apologize. Crying in bathroom in the middle of the night is something that sane and happy people don't do. We both know what's going on here and it's not good for you." She said furiously.

It was astounding how instantaneously a sentiment of security washed over me. Sara was always a *backup plan*. Sometimes when I felt that I'll end up unaided and by myself in life, when mum and dad will walk away and Niya'll be wedded and I won't stumble on with anyone, I constantly counted on Sara. It was so unproblematic to be with her, safe and not being lonesome. But since last few years she turned out to be dissimilar to me. She has a life where closest of people can go unnoticed for days. There is no precedent to how strongly she makes you believe that she doesn't care. But right now it didn't feel like her love had weakened over time rather that it had matured. It now sees beyond the happiness of a friend, to see the righteousness for her.

For the first time in long time, I clambered up to her bunk, just like walking towards the ground zero at the time of bombardment and kissed her red cheek, which was smoldering with anger but turned pink with amazement at once.

She glanced at me perplexed.

“*Move I am sleeping with you*” I said, totally unconcerned about what she was thinking.

We laid in silence for a while.

“*You are so odd Samiya Mittal*” she croaked softly.

I was pretty sure that I won’t be able to elucidate Sara the whole story honestly. I was bounded in good faith to keep some parts to myself. And there was no good enough reason for Adi’s attitude in absence of the whole truth. So I opted to come across like a psychopath for a change.

“*But I am telling you. If you don’t stop now you’ll never be able to leave him. And I am hundred and one percent sure that boy is going to leave you sooner or later.*” She said in desperation, to send her advice right through my head for once, “*I am warning you. End it*”

I didn’t reply. *It was too late for that. It was too late to end.*

I suppose she understood the gist of my stillness.

She didn’t say anything further than that.

We woke up to a bright day. I opened the window to suck up the relatively dry air. The dew shimmered on everything that was green. It was warm and hardly windy at all. The water in the stream was amazingly and rarely seen greenish blue this morning. There was a purple touch to the river which surprised me. I think they were the flowers. My frame of mind didn’t depend on geographical or environmental amendments but it surely brought an edge to my previously content status.

Boys were preparing for a jog when I came down for gym. It was the brightest lights I have seen in months. I saw Adi casually strolling, his eyes on the staircase. I grinned; he picked up on my mood immediately.

“*Nice day*” he commented as I approached.

“*Yes*” I agreed with another grin.

Despite the rush and the morning fuzz everyone managed to stare at us. It was just like the first day, when we walked down to the Brooke.

I disregarded them and reserved my thoughts customary on him.

He smiled back, his blue eyes glistened with the delight, I was hoping to see on the day of the results. When he smiled it was easier to see, why I am depressed when he is not on talking terms with me.

“*Where are you going?*” I asked, halfheartedly on a morning like this.

He anticipated and smiled crookedly.

“*Not far. Just around the BSNL quarters.*” He replied, his tone too lucid.

“*Oh*” I murmured.

He seemed to apprehend that I have no idea of the place he was talking about; being dreadful with names of places and directions is the most common girlie trait.

“*It’s located on the upper mall road within the Army premises.*” He tried explaining.

“*Oh yeah got ya*” I said excitedly “*I have been there thousand times*”.

He laughed,

“*And I haven’t been there once*” he said obliquely, in good spirits.

I knew what he meant. He knew the place and directions without being there and I didn’t know *whatever*.

“*Did you take your passport?*” I asked with assent. *Kasauli being a cantonment town has a restricted entry. Foreign citizens have to carry their passports.*

“*What’s the deal with that? First Mr. Mathur, then Raag, then Mandy and now you*” He asked politely, but amused.

“*Those are Indian Army premises*” I said hardly residing on each word.

“*That I know. But why not others, I mean Ian, Iqbal and Sandeep. Why me? They are foreign citizens too*” he asked wondering.

I sniggered at his confusion.

“*They don’t look like one. And you unquestionably don’t look Indian*” I explained.

He looked at me in uncertainty.

“Yeah I don’t look Indian. I look hippy. That’s what you called me when you were shouting at me” he failed miserably in an attempt to sound nonchalant.

“I don’t remember.” I answered chickening out.

Suddenly Sara walked amidst us from nowhere.

She looked at me furiously for a brief second and I bowed down my eyes with guilty and fear.

She must have set her prominent killer looks on Adi before gripping my wrist preparing to drag me away that Adi mumbled in irritation *“I am sorry Sara, for what I have done. I cant take my words back or the pain I have caused her but please give me a chance to make up for it..”* he said in low velvety voice, almost pleading for forgiveness. I can’t bear how his expression changed just on the thought of that memory. He could have just put a spell on her and she would have forgotten everything. I don’t know why he didn’t do that.

This is not fair Sara. You don’t know the truth. I wanted to yell at her.

“What did you have to go through? Don’t even get me started on how miserable she was. You embarrassed her with your bull shit in front of everyone. And you apologize in person in front of two of us. Go and tell everyone that its you who is behind her not the other way” She was shouting without any mercy, when I had to intrude. *“That doesn’t matter Sara. Please”* I said in a low but hard voice, raising my brows.

“You shut up and come with me” she didn’t even listen to what I was trying to say, dragging me with her.

I managed to look back and give a smile but Adi was still. *Why he has to take Sara seriously, for crying out loud. Everyone here knows that Sara is a black haired blonde.*

She let me lose in gym but indubitably was keeping an eye from wherever she was.

In the face of my incessant effort to explain her that he wanted to stay away from me, for my own good she pretended that she wasn’t listening.

And as a final point sitting on the breakfast table she alleged *“Then why does he have to change his mind now. Can’t he just stick to that previous choice? Of protecting you from himself or whatever”*

“I won’t let him Sara.” I whispered hesitantly.

She gave me *that are you nuts* looks.

I winked.

“That’s just a crush. You’ll get over it.” She pronounced heaving her glare from me.

I was more than irritated. But I carefully picked on words and tone, *“Maybe you are right. But right now I am pretty crazy about him. So please try and understand.”*

I wasn’t done saying that when he materialized from the rear walking towards his standard dining place.

I couldn’t help giving him a fleeting look before turning back to Sara, who was already ogling me.

“You know what? You are going crazy. I don’t know why you like him. He is weird. Have you ever seen the way he looks at you? Looks like a maniac. You are just into his looks. You are not seeing anything other than that” she accused in a hard voice. I don’t think it was inaudible to the public around us.

“You know me better than that?” I said sincerely, curbing a smile.

She didn’t reply. We all got up perfunctorily as heady walked in.

He was carrying a brown packet and few sheets of paper. *“Oh no. please not now”* Sara sighed anticipating it was lecture time.

She was right.

“Dear students. I need a minute of your precious time to read to you a letter which has arrived from Mayo College, Ajmer with certificate of excellence, a CBSE Mark sheet which is worth a sight and a CBSE Merit certificate. Please bear with me”

Heady continued keyed up as Adi gave me a timid smile and I returned the same with a look of proud in my glare.

“Dear Aadil Rathore

I am delighted to inform you that you have passed the Central Board of Secondary Examination with the highest position in the nation. I would like to mention that you have made the school proud and the teachers who nourished you, honored with the output that they thrive to bring in each student every day of their life.

In my life in Mayo I have seen people with mediocre ability achieve outstanding success because they don’t know when to quit. But rarely did I come across someone who succeeded because he was determined to.

In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins not through strength but by perseverance. Mayo sees you as a stream.

I remember telling you that it is by what you have done, not by what your father has done that you will be remembered in after ages. This will be remembered as the first milestone in the altitude of fame I am sure you will achieve one day and when you will indelibly etch your place in history.

Last but not the least Mayo College, Ajmer will always remember you as a notable alumni and someone who has set an exceptional example for the next generation of mayoites. I wish you all the very best for the bright life that lies ahead of you and will look forward to see you every year for old mayoites reunion.

Kind Regards

Major General Amarjeet Singh

Principal, Mayo College, Ajmer” Heady finished the letter with proud laying emphasis on the last words. “*A round of applause for Aadil*” The words were in his mouth when the hall echoed with the resonance of claps.

Everyone gazed at him with approbation.

He blinked at me as he got up.

“*Congrats*” I whispered under my breath clapping, my cheeks and palms warm with a sudden rush.

His lips moved to murmur “*Thanks*” prior to walking towards Heady. Heady patted his back and handed him the certificates, my mouth fell open as he bowed down to touch Heady’s feet. He must have one hell of parents to teach him stuff that I didn’t know. As soon as heady seated, they started serving the breakfast. But still Adi was the centre of attention for one and for all. Every table he walked past urged to see his certificates and mark sheet and he illustrated them around and showed gratitude with proper and gracious commitment. It was amazing how patiently he explained his grades to year 1 students, while the toddlers were just curios to see what the big mess is about. All the despair if any, momentarily vanished as I watched him, I couldn’t believe that I deserved this degree of good fortune.

As he stopped by at the fourth table in the row, I can’t help noticing that he spent more than necessary time exchanging discussion. Niya and her friends listened to him attentively. The identical pulse which tingled as hope in context to Adi and Sara quivered as happiness every time I saw Adi and Niya collectively.

“*I think you can have breakfast now. They are done*” Sara said in a low and severe voice.

I hesitantly turned around to get myself cereals. I contemplated Adi wont have time for one, so I set another plate and decided to make him a take away sandwich. I used brown bread, 4 ounce of cheese and anything and everything that was there for salads. I was worrying too much about the nutritional value of each ingredient something that I have never done before.

“*Is this for someone?*” Sara babbled. She knew I preferred cereals for breakfast.

“*Adi*” I murmured without hesitation and without any effort to keep my voice low. I don’t think me and Adi were object of gossip anymore, we have been going on and off for quite sometime now.

She contemplated the sandwich.

“*I want the same*” she entreated with a grave expression. Sometimes I feel that its jealousy or more or less competitiveness which kept Sara from slackening the tension with Adi. Perhaps she was petrified on sharing me with him.

“*Here. You can have this. I’ll make another one for him*” I said passing her the plate. I was doing another one, when he finally appeared. He stood at the edge of the table like a marble tribute to some forgotten pagan God of beauty while everyone on the table hooted and clapped for him. He gave fives to his friends and posed his fingers for ‘*V*’ as an ‘*Victory*’. Everyone looked at us in amazement but the hootings and tootlings went for quite sometime. Kunal was waving him, asking for certificates when he said “*Wait a minute*” in his mused voice walking around the table, towards me. His congenial attitude was something that could not be achieved through imitation.

I heard very unmistakably when he came to a stop besides me. My mind was spinning while to breathe was something I had to continuously remind myself when he was in close immediacy and they say its one of the automatically regulated functions of human body.

“*Samiya*” he said in a quiet, musical voice.

I knew looking at him won’t do any good to my present stipulation but I had to permit myself one glance. I looked up, at his stunning face and then was unable to take my eyes off. I had to speak he was waiting. But I couldn’t think of anything conventional to say. There is a complexity of feelings involved when he looks at me ignorant of everyone around.

“*Yes*” I managed stammering pronouncing that minuscule word.

He laughed a soft enchanting laugh.

“*Am I allowed to give you presents?*” he asked flatly smiling a crooked smile so beautiful that I can only stare at him like an idiot.

“*That depends*” I persisted stupidly.

He seemed confused.

“*I wont accept anything materialistic*” I said awkwardly.

“*How about this? Does this count?*” he held out the documents to me. The glow on his face argued all the three components of Triangular theory of love; intimacy, commitment and passion.

I smiled shyly holding his certificates. I knew it was something like that.

I didn’t know what love is and what task it serves but if love does what it was doing to me and Adi then I am positively recommending it to everyone.

I carefully assessed each document before looking up again “*You get these only once. You might want to keep the originals.*” I smirked.

“*I’ll survive*” he muttered, pulling himself back immediately.

I smiled back as didn’t have a word to thank him enough for the most exclusive present.

He has my heart, if that makes up for it.

“*I can no other answer make, but, thanks and thanks*” I mumbled out unthinkingly.

“*Shakespeare*” He said impulsively.

I nodded as he moved back to his seat.

Now I noticed that everyone on table was hooting for us and it faded as I passed on the certificates to Kunal.

Teachers must have noted too.

There were hardly five minutes left for the break. He was looking on the table searching for a quick snack, when I hesitantly held out the plate to him.

For a moment he looked at me wondering.

“*I thought there won’t be enough time for proper breakfast. You can carry it with you*” I tried to sound informal.

“*Thank you*” he said warmly taking the plate.

We were sharing smiles when Sara intruded “*I guess you should eat something too*” she said mordantly.

We quickly ceased the exchange and spent last five minutes eating in a rush.

Sara walked me down to the class, utilizing each second criticizing *Adi*, mostly talking to herself.

“*I can’t believe he is doing that kind of goofy stuff in front of teachers. Are they blind? They should throw him out of the school.*” She said in irritation, clenching her teeth.

That knowledge turned me blue. This was something that was exceedingly possible just there would be more to that idea, “*I think they’ll have to kick me out too*” I murmured unthinkingly “*if that happens*” I added.

She was hushed by that thought.

I walked into the class goaded at Sara and impatient to see *Adi*. I was startled to see that everyone was already there. I was scrutinizing the room for an unoccupied seat, when I saw him staring at me. He was smiling crookedly from across the room; he moved his books to one side leaving half the desk vacant and winked at me, motioning to join him. I automatically reached his table, standing there unsure. Sara’s comment was still worrying me.

“*Aren’t you going to sit down?*” he asked, smiling.

I sat down cautiously, hyperaware that *Adi* was sitting less than inches away from me. I was stunned by the unexpected electricity that flowed through me, amazed that it was possible to be more aware of him than I already was. I was in his arms yesterday and now his modest closeness was sending butterflies in my stomach. I wonder if I’ll ever get used to his imminence. He seemed as striking and incredible as always. A crazy impulse to reach over and touch him, to stroke his perfect face just once, nearly overwhelmed me. After a fanatical moment, when I almost lost it I realized things haven’t untied at his end either. He sat as far as the desk would allow, though his face was angled towards mine.

Mr. Pandey backed into the room then - saving us from making any talk in that awkward moment.

He started dictating notes. I clenched my free hand on the notepad while scribbling notes and despite enormous efforts our arms were brushing against each other most of the time. My eyes of their own accord flickered to him, when Mr. Pandey paused. I smiled sheepishly when I realized his posture was a mirror image of mine, a free hand clenched on the notebook and other snugly holding the pen. He smiled peering sideways at me. I couldn’t concentrate on the lecture for some reason- I didn’t even know what chapter we were on. I tried unsuccessfully to relax several times. Occasionally I permit myself a quick glance in his direction, but he never seemed to relax, either. The overpowering craving to touch him also refused to fade, and I crushed my fingers against the pen until they were aching with the effort.

I realized our arms were touching because he was righting with his left hand and me with right. *Oh, so he was left handed.*

Mr. Pandey decided to give us time to do some reading in silence. I didn’t bring my book so *Adi* offered to share. After few moments of gazing, I realized he wasn’t concentrating either. I was about to open my mouth to say something when Mr. Pandey shammed a cough to another talking duo. *Adi* handed me his pen motioning to write it down on book.

I wrote down carefully making sure that my handwriting is legible.

You are left handed?

Yes. Why? you don’t date lefties? He wrote in his own personal calligraphy, suppressing smile.

Are we dating??. I fiddled, doubtfully. He winked, I blushed. As usual and then I recessed and let my astroanalysis flow in.

Left handed people are considered lucky I smiled

Trust me, I am he wrote pecking at me and then continued I got a frye sandwich this morning he wrote ironically.

He smiled, as I smiled.

As Mr. Pandey passed us taking a round, he turned the page underneath my hand, and turned it back when Mr. Pandey disappeared.

I took the pen and started scribbling what was worrying me the most

Adi, do you think teachers won't have problem with us. I mean heady gave me a verbal warning already

Adi was shaking his head before I finished. I started writing again

How do you know?

He was quiet for a while before writing again as if thinking how to explicate this to me.

No they won't. I am like an asset to them. It's good for school's name. They can't expel me. And neither you. Me and you come in package.

I smiled timidly at the last line; he stole a look before continuing

Also I can always hypnotize him.

He smiled a boyish, mischievous laugh.

What got you worried anyways???

He knew it wasn't my idea. I took the pen hesitantly, thinking he should have guessed

Sara☺

His face changed right away, as if he has remembered something out of the blue. He took the pen and the words rushed out after that

Why is she so worried? I am just a crush. You are crazy for me right now but I am sure you'll get over it soon.

He put back the pen insolently, his lips pressed in a hard line waiting for me to right. I can't believe he heard that. I flushed with shame; he was not supposed to listen that.

I squiggled in a scurry

I don't have to tell Sara or anyone for that matter, how I feel about you. People don't understand. You should know, that's what matters.

I paused and wrote again irritated *I can't believe you sucked that*

We didn't talk after that.

"Do you want to change places? That would be more comfortable. For you" He asked rising fluidly. He would be on left then, and me on right and our arms won't collide. I explained myself. As if that would help my muddled thoughts.

"Hun" was all I was able to respond.

As I shifted to his warm place where he usually sat I noticed my name engraved on the brown wooden desk with a compass maybe. Several times. I looked at him overwhelmed.

"What" he asked surprised when he caught me glaring.

"Nothing" I whispered.

He smiled in uncertainty before whirling back to Mandy.

Mrs Anjali started the class with a poem; the laburnum top. Later in the class she asked for names for the scholastic poem writing competition.

"You should give your name" I suggested fervently.

"Hun" he murmured, his mind somewhere else.

Before I could ask him, he raised his pen only to say *"Samiya Mittal."*

I was horror stuck. All traces of my sudden excitement vanished. It was an inter school competition. I can't believe *he just did what he did.*

"Do you want me to put in your name as well?" Ms Anjali asked keenly.

"No Thank you mam. I am not good at combining rhyming words." He answered innocently.

I started as soon as he settled *"You gave my name. You didn't bother to ask me?"* I asked bitterly.

"You wouldn't have allowed me to" That was true.

"Because I don't know shit about writing poems." I growled. I bit my lip so hard, I think it was bleeding.

"You turn abusive when you are upset." He said suppressing a grin.

My teeth clamped together.

"You know sometimes I feel you try to rhyme everything you speak. There are poems and quotes everywhere in your books. If you can't write, nobody can. Trust me on this one." He mumbled almost incoherently.

His attempt to trap me in his words was not going to work, but I was already trapped to some extent. I don't think I have guts to get my name eliminated, I can't argue my side with him, it's nearly impossible to get your ways out with Ms Anjali.

I looked away in the general direction of the black board. The famous silence revisited. This time reciprocally, I wasn't on talking terms, I was still furious. I knew he scrutinized my face for a long moment before turning back to studies.

We were doing an essay on, *a laburnum top*, when he decided to give up. Actually he wasn't heated up in the first place but his attempts to make up began at that point.

"Okay. I am sorry" he whispered, trying to hold my gaze as I looked away.

He went back to writing, which lasted not more than few minutes.

"Are you still angry?" he asked carefully studying my impressions.

“*Definitely*” I growled.

He sighed. “*Will you forgive me if I help you with one?*” he asked rolling the sleeves of his shirt.

I was about to counter my conditions to get my name eliminated when the blue contusion on his arm caught my attention. He swiftly smoothed down the sleeve as if he has forgotten about it altogether.

With deliberate slowness, my hands slid down to his arm. I shivered, and I heard him catch his breath. But my hands didn’t pause as I softly curled the shirt, and then stopped.

The blue capillaries were visible more than sufficiently, as if the skin on them was transparent or missing at some points. The bruises except for the capillaries contrasted with the pale white of his glowing skin. I was about to touch it when he held my hand.

My hand felt so feeble in his iron strength yet it was he who was in pain. This was some serious damage.

And then too soon he released me.

“*How did this happen?*” my voice almost inaudible.

“*They were having trouble finding my blood vein*” he said mutely reading my expression.

“*Does this induce pain*” I asked gravely.

“*No*” he whispered.

I know that was a lie.

I carefully caressed his arm; he didn’t stop me this time. I delicately stroked the bruise; traced the shape of the visible capillaries. I could feel the sting travelling from his body to mine. I dropped my hand and uncurled the sleeve, tugged the button and leaned away. He was immobile as a stone. No one could be still like him.

“*I wish*” he whispered, “*You wouldn’t have seen this.*”

He raised his hand to my hair, and then carefully brushed it across my face.

No. please.

“*Promise me you’ll tell me whenever you are in pain or not well.*” My words came out like a warning.

He sighed.

“*You are not sole proprietor of taking care. I want to take care of you too*” I said in a rush.

His lips twitched in a hard smile.

“*This is exactly what I didn’t want.*” He said.

“*What? Now is it some prestige thing. Some male ego. We can do better than this Adi*” I pleaded, caressing his hand.

He seemed to relax a bit.

“*Actually I haven’t come up to that part where I start getting sick. I am lagging behind*” he smiled a surprisingly impish grin.

I can’t believe he found humor in that. I dropped his hand heated in invisibly quick moment.

We got back to our essays as were running out of time. I was on the third line when I indiscreetly hold the bench while doodling. Something cold touched my hand slightly. He turned around my hand to fit his fingers in mine. I shivered.

“*I’ll never let go of you. I’ll do whatever you want me to*” he murmured firmly with glitzy eyes.

The muscles in the pit of my stomach tightened and send my pulse hammering through my veins again.

He didn’t let go of my hand for the next two periods.

In biology practical, summer vacations were the headlines until Mr. Ahluwalia came.

“*Please don’t go in summer vacations*” I said pleading. He was going to stay in Kasauli at his parents. He will come to school every day for coaching classes but that much time is not enough for me.

“*I wish I could hypnotize them on phone.*” He said cutely “*once they are here, they won’t leave me.*”

It was marvelous how he talked keeping his eyes on the dissection. A third person can never figure that he was saying something not related to the practical.

I smiled sluggishly.

“*Did Sid talk to you?*” he asked firmly.

“*No. Not after that dinner.*”

He smiled obliquely.

“*I made him forget that he likes you*” he answered shrewdly.

“*You did?*” I couldn’t help laughing “*Thank you.*”

“*Pleasure is mine.*” he replied smiling.

“*I have few questions, about that little thing you told me. The genes stuff*” I asked hesitantly.

“*I was counting on that*” he stated casually “*shoot?*”

“*You said you have better genes but you got HIV*” I said not in complete indifference.

He looked at me as if I was missing something obvious.

“*There is no immunity to HIV. Just that because of my immunity to other infections I’ll live a bit longer maybe.*” He continued “*But lately they have found that some people have natural immunity to HIV. Maybe there’ll be a vaccine to prevent HIV in near future.*”

“*Oh*” I groaned.

“*And what are the ethical issues. Why didn’t they let world know about you?*” I asked astonished. If I would have done something like that, I would be running around the town shouting about it.

“*First of all genetic modification of embryos can pose an ethical question about the right of the babies. They believe that every fetus should be free to not be genetically modified. As you know in our body different cells have different tasks, changing one cell to do a different job will not only affect that one task, it can affect many others too. If something goes wrong a child can be born with diseases or dystrophies. So what dad and his friends did was illegal. But dad trusted his friends. And secondly if the world knows this can happen, wealthy families will opt to design their child with genetic advantages as everyone would want to provide best opportunities to their babies in life. Now the problem is that, this therapy will obviously cost good money, and the less wealthy families will be left to procreate naturally, and have to introduce their children into the world disadvantaged from their first breath. The impact on society will be a new alignment of classes, the new division will be between ‘the naturals’ and ‘the genrich’ or genetically enhanced. So this of course is not ethical.*” He peeked at me “*Do you understand?*”

I thought about it for a minute. So he disadvantaged us. This was a new point of view.

“*No offence but why did your dad do it then?*” I asked curiously.

“*They wanted to test their discovery. And they wanted people with genetic diseases like cystic fibrosis, to benefit from it. They did that with a sole purpose of helping sick. But what happened, that along with me the same genes were altered in dad’s friends embryo. The baby was born with leukemia. I was lucky to be healthy at time of birth. So no matter what, things can go wrong. And dad and his friends decided to close everything. It’s history now.*” He said setting the microscope.

“*Your mum allowed that kind of thing?*” My tone was very accusing.

“*It’s a very difficult decision to make. But you know what my mum is just like you. She is very innocent. Dad can talk her into anything. She resists for a while but then she goes with the flow. But if something would have happened, she would have never forgiven dad*” he murmured lost in pity for his mum

“*Weren’t you upset with your dad, when he told you?*” I asked dubiously.

“*Nope. He is my dad. And someone has to make a sacrifice to bring change to billions of others.*” His voice filled with respect.

Yeah he was right.

“*Adi and what is about the extrasensory perception?*” I asked undecidedly.

“*Extrasensory perception is also called sixth sense. It was something that was not intended. That sense involves reception of information not gained through the recognized physical senses but sensed with the mind. It may have happened as a side result of the mutation for memory. Some great authors have explained from time to time that this kind of thing is possible.*” He explained.

“*What things do you see?*”

“*The future comes to me in dreams. All pleasant. I saw Olivia and Oliver before they were born. I told mum two black twins will become a part of our family someday. I knew the exact appearance of dad’s research centre before it was built. I was in class sixth when I dreamt that I’ll top CBSE exams for tenth.*”

“*You knew you were going to do it.*” I asked surprise. “*That’s why you were laughing when I asked you how you did on your board exams, the first day we talked.*”

He smiled.

“*Tell me what else did you see?*” I asked curiously.

“A lot of random stuff. I knew what mum will be wearing what she’ll say when she’ll come to pick me up. I knew what I was going to get for my birthday. I have seen Niya and your parents more than once in dreams when I was in Mayo. And yes I have got a good one for you. You’ll be surprised.” He paused to stare at me *“Mandy and Sara will get married one day.”*

My mouth fell open, *“What? Are you kidding me?”*

“No I am not. I saw Mandeep in turban and Sara in pink wedding dress circling around Guru Granth Sahib”

My heart thudded with excitement.

“How was she looking Adi? Tell me everything. Does she have long hair, was she grown up?”

He smiled, contemplating my joy.

“She was the prettiest thing in the whole picture. An unusual peace on her face, similar to yours. Your parents and Niya were there too. Niya looked very young. Raag was there. And trust me those two looked as if they were paired together in heaven.”

My breaths were coming in sluggishly.

“Was I happy Adi?” I asked in a whisper.

He stared at me for a long moment; his expression told me that something was wrong.

“You weren’t there.” he whispered.

It felt like someone has stabbed me in my chest. *Why was I not there? What kept me from her wedding? Will she never forgive me about Adi?*

“But I don’t see the whole picture most of the times. And that dream was a long time ago. Maybe I didn’t notice you” he said firmly.

I knew he was lying, trying to cheer me up. It didn’t work. I didn’t know what to say.

“You told me you never saw us together” I asked hesitantly *“is that right?”*

He nodded stiffly.

Gradually I ran out of logical questions when I began with the ones that were insignificant. It was like I was testing his patience. *Result: He was the most patient person I have ever come across.*

It was drizzling when we stepped out of the classroom that day. The day had set into a beautiful evening. The water droplets were beading up. Ground was moist and soft. The aroma, fresh and sweet filled the air. The trees were like the wondrous natural beauty glorifying this alien planet. Monkeys were chattering noisily, roaming free without care. And the birds chirped rushing back to their nests. The colors ever-so-brilliant complimented. The path was covered with dry leaves, retaining there beautiful dull yellow color and *an angel* walking besides me. *How could all this be not a dream?*

We walked in silence, before I came up with another question.

“Adi could it be that when you saw me after the accident in that dream; it was a pre sensory perception? You saw the future.” I asked doubtfully.

He was instantly serious, I can say because his lips set into a hard line.

“No that can’t be” his voice suddenly antagonistic.

“There has to be another explanation to that. I searched your medical records. You’ll be surprised that you had that rock climbing incident on 10 May 2001. The same day I had my accident. And your reports show that your injuries were not minor. You were mere lucky.” He explained repentantly.

That was a very strange coincidence, if it was one.

He said softly, as if he was listening to my thoughts *“That cant be a coincidence. There has to be some explanation for everything.”* He sighed. *“Sometimes I feel that I am not just a specimen for human experiment but that God is also trying his hand on me. Someone up there is definitely playing with my life and you have to share my misery”* he smiled without humor.

Why does he have to say that?

“There is no misery. And there is no experiment. Forget about everything. It doesn’t matter. I trust my God. He has something beautiful planned for us.” I turned around to face him *“Please trust me.”* The words ached in my throat.

His face was grave.

“I don’t know why I am fooling myself. We can’t be together, we can’t get married. You are healthy and young and you have a bright future. And I have to wait for the day when I’ll start getting sick. When you’ll be somewhere in your midlife crises I’ll be dead” His voice had the seal of pain that struck right on my heart.

He shouldn’t have said that. He has no right to say that to me.

“This will never happen. We will live a long happy life together.” I replied aggravated.

‘I have been HIV Positive since five years now. Be realistic Samiya.’ He was more than frustrated himself.

We glowered at each other.

‘Aadil history is full of people who were sick but suddenly got better. That’s called miracle. And it can happen, trust me have faith in him.’ I said pointing towards the chapel.

‘You are very innocent Samiya. You don’t understand’ he murmured in his velvety voice.

Even in anxiety his pale face was beautiful. The tiny rain droplets shimmered on his skin. Wind played in his dark hair. His eyes gloriously agonized. His cool breathe smelled sweet, delicious, the scent made my mouth water. It was unlike anything else. My blood was racing, and I wish I could slow it, sensing that this must make everything so much more difficult – the thudding of my pulse in my veins. Surely he could hear it. Instinctively, unthinkingly, I leaned closer, inhaling. His dark red lips were alluring. My lips parted as I contemplated them. He instantly took a step backward.

As I realized the identical feeling enveloped me. That was the second time. As it sank in I felt ashamed, I stood their still.

He hesitantly came closer to me. I was too mortified to look into his eyes again. He gently took my hand and pulled me closer. In a quick second I was in his arms, my head on his chest. He fondled my hair tenderly.

His lips were close to my ear and his warm breath was sending shiver through my spine.

‘Listen to my heart.’ He whispered *‘It beats your name.’* His lips touched my ear faintly *‘I have faith in God. He gave me you’*

In another moment I did feel better, no more humiliated but my breathing didn’t sooth, the desire to feel his cold lips was more than ever. I unscrambled my thoughts unwillingly and slickly looked up to see into his dazzling eyes, *‘Chapel’* I murmured.

‘Yes’ he answered politely scrutinizing my face.

The church was as quiet as always. My belief was such that I could see the God watching. I have asked him to forgive my sins, for better marks, for seeing dad but that day I asked him something that was my last wish. I bowed my head down and I joined my hands and prayed *to be only Adi’s, forever.* I told God he was my only hope. When I was a little girl mama used to say when *you cry, God cry with you.* Even if I tried not to I was making him cry every day since last couple of days.

We silently walked out after sometime.

‘Let’s go down’ he suggested glazing at his watch *‘we still have time for dinner.’*

‘Won’t rain bother you?’ I asked. I meant that he could catch cold or cough. Infection of any kind is not good for him.

‘It’s drizzling. Don’t call it rain’ he said firmly, trying hard not to make a face.

He started walking.

I followed him through the trees, enjoying the peace. One glance at the greenish blue water of the curvy brook was enough to do wonders on my poignant disposition.

For the most part we walked in silence. Occasionally he would ask the same question *if I wanted to go back.* The path was muddy and slippery at places and I was slightly more imbalanced than other humans. Every time I replied *‘No I’ll be fine.’* courteously but doubted that I’ll make it safely to the meadow. It was dense yet beautiful. There could be more life here than mine and Adi’s. Though the fear of wild animals has never bothered me and maybe it didn’t bother him either, because of his good hearing abilities. He must be able to figure out danger from a distance.

‘Adi don’t you feel irritated with all those tiniest of noises bothering you all the time. Isn’t it hard to find quiet and peace?’ I asked interrogatively.

He peeked over my head into the dense forest, and then unthinkingly kicked a stone.

‘Nah. The noises don’t bother me. I was born like that.’ He glared at my confused expression and then continued *‘For example if a kid is born blind, how can he differentiate between dark and light. Just like that I don’t know how it normally is. To me all of you are deaf’* he smiled.

I smiled too.

‘Don’t you have to hear things that you don’t want to sometimes. Like someone gossiping about you. Or anything else that’s unpleasant?’ I murmured.

‘Yes I do sometimes. But I get to hear equally good stuff. It balances that out and I am patient with bad comments. Everyone thinks differently. People have different opinions.’ He answered intently.

I was impressed by his generous thoughts.

‘You are a very kind person Adi’ I whispered under my breath.

He smiled hugely.

‘Look who is talking’ he said smiling.

We finally reached our little getaway. The flowers were blooming and were shivering under the water droplets. And everything in the meadow looked back as if they were waiting for us to come. He calmly walked to rest against the immense rock which despite the recent water flow looked dry. It was no more raining. I touched the flowers and listened to the tune of flowing water while he took out a book. His already still expression drastically softened as soon as he opened the book. He was a keen learner. He read chemistry as if it was an Agatha Christi Novel.

He looked shockingly beautiful. I couldn't get used to it, though I've been trying very hard.

He slowly raised his eyes and caught me glaring. Still I couldn't take my eyes off him. He smiled warmly.

"What are you thinking?" he asked playfully but I can hear the real curiosity in his voice.

I shook my head.

"Tell me. Your heart beat is uneven. You are thinking something" His eyes watched me intently.

"I have few questions?" I said gravely.

He smiled *"You always have"* *"Ask whatever you want to?"*

I wasn't able to breathe. I hesitated – not in a normal way.

He came closer in his extravagant grace. He lifted my chin examining my face and bent his face slowly to mine, laying his cool cheek against my skin, my collarbone. I held perfectly still but my heart thudded.

"Mmmmmmm..." he breathed.

It was very difficult while he was touching me, to frame a coherent question. It took me a minute of scattered concentration to begin.

"That's my deodorant" I said, trying to exhale.

"It's lovely" he breathed.

This afternoon he was shoddily affected by the delicate scent, look at him now. He does build up immunity rapidly.

"So I was wondering..." I began again, but his fingers were slowly tracing my collarbone, and I lost my train of thought.

"Yes?"

"No, forget it. I changed my mind." I said feeling the sudden warmth where he touched.

"Samiya, you can ask me anything."

I didn't answer, and he groaned.

"You know it's very frustrating, knowing that you are thinking something about me and then not knowing what it is"

I shook my head.

"Please?" his voice was so persuasive, so impossible to resist.

"Please?" he pleaded again overpowering my reluctance.

"Well" I began, turning away from his glare.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering why you said that we can't be together or we can't get married."

He laughed in earnest now, understanding. That surprised me. *"Is that what you're getting at?"* he whispered softly in my ear.

I fidgeted, unable to answer.

"That was partially true. We can be together but we can't get married." He said.

I couldn't say anything.

"Why are you asking?" he asked playfully

"Well I did wonder why you will not want to marry me. Just because you may get sick one day or is it something else?"

He was instantly serious, I could tell by the sudden stillness of his body. I froze, too, reacting automatically.

"Don't you know how HIV can be transmitted? You may have different desires right now but you'll want more once you'll be married. Anyone will. And I don't think that... that.... would be possible for us."

"But I have read online. People who are tested positive are in relationship with negative tested people. There are ways." I sighed.

“Those people are idiots. I am not. You don’t have any idea how unsafe and irresponsible behavior it is to have... I can never ever risk your life like that. You have no idea how I have to mind my actions every moment that we’re together so that I don’t do anything that could infect you.” His voice became just a soft murmur *“You don’t realize how incredible your life is. I can never, never afford to lose any kind of control with you.”*

I didn’t know what to say, what to argue for.

“So can’t you have babies either?” I asked dubiously.

He laughed as soon as my question was out.

“No I don’t think so. Marriage and having babies is correlated. I thought you knew” he said laughing.

I felt prickly and embarrassed.

“I know I was just conforming” I waited for a minute to answer, but still the words weren’t true.

He seemed deliberate for a moment. *“I’m curious now, though,”* he said his voice light again. *“Have you ever been kissed, had a crush or a boy friend?”*

“Of course not.” I flushed. *“Everyone in school knows, I’ve never been close to being proposed.”*

“I know. Mandy told me. It’s just that I know that you are good with keeping things to yourself. I thought you may have liked someone before me.”

“Nope. You are the lucky one” I answered playfully.

“I truly am madam” he answered smiling, rumpling my hair. *“So never being kissed. Haan”* I could see the curiosity behind his words.

“Never” I replied making a face. *“I wanted to but someone declined the offer twice.”* I couldn’t believe I just said what I said.

My eyes dropped with mortification.

I wasn’t expecting any reply to that weird remark, when he murmured *“You don’t know how hard it is to decline such tempting offers. Girl you make it so hard for me. I think I should start keeping distance from you for my own good.”* He said softly.

My heart was beating unevenly making my conscious fade.

“Do you find me attractive Adi, in that way, at all?” I don’t think that was me who was talking.

“You have no idea.” He said almost in a whisper.

I felt dizzy and my eyes closed involuntarily.

“You are tiered. Let’s get you back to the school” he insisted taking my bag from me.

8. DIFFERENCE IN OPINIONS

“Morning Adi” I murmured unsure if he could hear me from this far, climbing down the bed.

I was the third one to the gym. Raag, Amber and Adi were already there. Mr. Mathur was highly impressed by the transformation in my behavior since the punishment. I am sure he was more confident with his system and practices of ameliorating students. We did aerobic exercises that morning and later Adi saved me a seat at breakfast table, which I later switched, because of Sara. Despite my explanation, Adi believed that I was scared of her. I told him if I want to be invited at Sara’s wedding than I have to keep a low profile with him, to which he laughed frantically.

I pleasingly glared at Sara and Mandy after every second. Picturing them together I realized those two actually looked cute in one frame.

During my conversation with anyone I was always hyperaware, knowing that he maybe eves dropping. He told me in gym that he can’t help listening, it comes to him naturally but it still frustrated me that I was left with no bludy privacy and so were my friends. I swear his lips twitched to suppress a grin, when Amber whispered in my ear that *“Niya caught her and Raag kissing in the basement last night.”* She started giving me details about her kiss and what followed, despite my requests to talk about it later.

Mr. Pandey informed that we were leaving for camps in Renuka reserve forests day after tomorrow.

The name fetched some zillion reminiscences affixed to that place.

I would say that Himachal Pradesh is one of the best-kept secrets on India. It was beautiful, of course; I couldn’t deny that. Everything was green just like here: The trees, their

trunks covered with moss, their branches hanging with a canopy of it, the ground covered with ferns. Even the air filtered down greenly through the leave. And there was some blue of course; the open sky and the silent water of the lake; Renuka Lake. Tourism has developed around it. It is surrounded by small hills and lush green vegetation and is an ideal spot for spending a quite vacation, but that's exactly what we were not about to do. The camps are the reciprocal of a quiet retreat. Setting up tents, sleeping in sleeping bags, arousing before sun, climbing impossible rocks, rappelling, rafting, river crossing, fox flying *in sky-scraping mountains* are some of the things, which are zero fun and life threateningly dangerous that we do for our version of silent escape.

But fortunately there are things for me in store as well. We do get to see the temples dotting the landscape. And the walk around the lake is beautiful. There are ducks and fish that can be observed by sitting at the banks. The reflection in the water is stunning under the moon; it's so beautiful that at times I have desperately wanted to drown myself into it. There is so much more to that hidden beauty but I am no writer. It's difficult for me to share in a meaningful way, the splendid memories and image from my childhood trips.

I jerked unerringly with the equivalent shove as I do when I fall into a pit in one of those stupid dreams, when saw him peeking at me.

He chuckled.

“*You are thinking about the camps. Are you?*” he asked grinning.

I nodded stiffly.

“*Camping is fun, isn't it*” he asked mused.

That was the last thing he should have asked. I have thousand genuine reasons to argue that it is not.

“*Not really.*” I managed to bring all those reasons down to two words. It's honestly stupid to argue the camping cons with a guy. That knowledge is something I have earned over and over again in my life at a coeducational school. They have traded movie in a theatre and shopping in Chandigarh for scaling mountains, like a pure idiot on several occasions.

“*You don't like camping*” It wasn't a question.

“*Or the adventures*”

He looked fascinated by what I said, for the reasons I know. His face was such a distraction that I tried not to look at it any more than courtesy absolutely demanded.

A busy day followed after that. Tests and revisions. It surprised me that everyone knew it was second last day at school. *Where was I?*

After coaching we congregated in pinewood hall. Class 11 bargained the theatre for whole evening. Latest movies back to back, awesome idea. We bought in some tuck to have a movie like feel; lays, soda and pop corns and banked it in a corner for the coming hours.

It was already murky before turning off the lights. The dim lightning of the hall was similar to no lightning. I and Sara found ourselves a finicky spot, close to the tuck. *Lols*. The row behind was accumulated by boys, with Adi exactly behind me. We shared a smile before I got comfortable.

Medical preparation was surely a tough job, else there is no explanation to the fact that someone like me hasn't watched a single movie in the year of 2006 until June, I mean for six months, unbelievable. I saw my picture on a byproduct of my insane imagination *A Wall of Shame*.

If I tell them that I haven't watched *Rang De Basanti*, they'll probably drown me in the Brooke. The whole school has gone gaga about that movie; they are suddenly patriotic and are keen on Indian issues. And I am talking about people who don't know the name of the prime minister and the ruling party.

I call it *RDB Syndrome*. Every time some of the movie freaks pass me they tell me ‘*Lose Control*'.

If I'll lose control, who the hell is going to sit in the entrance exam.

I wonder what's about that movie which has lead to a mass awakening in youth, not only of my school but in the whole nation.

After fiddling between *Rand de Basanti* and *United 93*, we decided to go for the first one first. They are proficient of watching it over and over again.

The story of the group of friends, their bonding, the care free lifestyle they lead and good jokes were treated differently and slyly in the movie. I found myself laughing and enjoying. The fact pleased me that a life similar to their lied ahead of me, college and mauj masti. And Adi as an added benefit.

But as the movie entered its climax I started crying so hard and relatively vociferously because I think I was watching it for the first time. I knew boys behind were mocking me and I was trying equally hard not to cry, but one has to see that movie and be me to understand what was happening.

I was looking for something to wipe my tears off when Adi mutely passed me his handkerchief. It was warm and smelled nice. I whiffed it before wasting its subtle fragrance. The warmth of the hanky made me realize, that it was cold and my bare legs were almost freezing.

I couldn't stop crying even after the movie ended. They turned on the lights for a quick interval before heading to the next one; Sara disappeared for something giving me a minute or two to get sober. The hanky weighed few kgs with the added solvents and was wet enough to be kept anywhere. I was folding it when Adi came to sit in Sara's place. He must have noticed the goose bumps as he covered my legs with his blazer tugging it around the corners.

“*Are you okay?*” he asked without a sound, slightly smiling.

I was nodding as he said the words.

“*I would have appreciated a better finale.*” I sighed “*I don't like sad endings.*”

He tugged a lose strand of hair behind my ear, sending a jolt of electricity through my body.

"You have to see beyond the ending. Something that succeeds to prick your conscious and alter your lifestyle is a happy ending." He explained sincerely *"Isn't it?"*

I don't know, I thought. *"Maybe"* I said doubtfully.

We had a silent minute. Next movie started playing.

He shook his head sideways, smiling reluctantly *"I know you can't help it. But please try not to cry."*

I looked at him puzzled.

"This movie will drain you of water, I can bet on that" his lips twitched in a straight line, as *United 93* played *"I am unable to hear anything, when you cry"* he said in a whisper.

I didn't cease looking at him, amazed. I wasn't crying loudly, I was sobbing, strange it bothered him.

He got up, saying *"Sara is here."*

My heart sank even if he was going less than half a meter away from me.

I tried very hard to not cry, letting the sorrow ache inside my chest to the next flick.

I felt relieved as the movie came to its end.

We cleaned up the mess, leaving the hall in endurable form.

I paced slowly walking next to *Adi*. I had my head tilted to 60 degrees to talk to him. He was taller to me but I think the difference was quite suitable. That was one thing that I didn't have to worry about.

"Thanks for it. It was cold" I said handing him his blazer.

"That wasn't for your sake" he replied, I could hear he was struggling to use a lighter tone. He turned around to face me.

His erotic breath blew on my face, making me unconscious.

"No offence. But this skirt of yours is too small for your height." He said in a hard tone.

I can't believe he thinks that of my skirt, that's the lengthiest skirt in the whole senior dorm, it deserves some respect.

"Get your mum to fix it in coming break" he snapped before giving me a chance to say something.

"This isn't small Adi." I argued.

I saw a shade of anger crossing his beautiful face.

He bit his lip before answering *"One can see your thighs in this thing when you sit."*

His situation was humorous to me, for some reason.

"What if I want one to see my thighs?" I demanded playfully, though without a trace of fun in my voice.

The joke didn't help his situation.

He looked into my eyes. I can tell he was upset with me.

"Get this thing fixed" he warned me again *"or I'll have to kill Ian."* He turned around without waiting for a reply walking ahead of me.

It took me a minute to find the connection between Ian and my skirt.

"Why would Ian do that. He has seen me when I used to wear one piece swimming costume." I said slightly louder for my normal tone, catching up with him.

He looked at me in umbrage. I can tell by his expression that he can kill Ian just for doing that.

This time I was scared.

"Consider it done" I snapped before he could say anything, walking away from the intensity of his stare.

"My hanky." He asked raising his hand for one.

I smiled hesitantly.

“*Can I return it after washing? I blew my nose on it.*” I asked diffidently.

It wasn’t funny to him.

“*Nope*” he said impulsively “*You can keep me but not my hanky.*”

I looked at him confused, what’s so important about the hanky.

“*I am superstitious about some stuff.*” He paused before continuing “*They say if you keep someone’s handkerchief you end up fighting.*”

Oh-uh.

I rethought for a second.

“*Okay let me chuck it in your pocket and put it in laundry without touching it once you get back to dorm.*” I instructed.

He stood there reluctantly confused and irritated.

“*Please. It’s embarrassing for me.*” I almost pleaded.

He shifted his blazer in one arm and slightly raised another arm, gesturing me to put it in his pocket.

I was disgusted to touch my own used hanky, it was soaking

As I stood centimeters away from him, touching his beautiful body, the scent coming off beneath his face, from somewhere near his collar bone dazzled me. In a quick second I rose on my toes and placed my lips on his bare skin around his neck. There is no pretense to how electrified I felt. Something tightened in my stomach as I kissed it slightly but desperately, trying to make most of the time before he pushes me away.

I could hear his heart racing as fast as mine. His skin was smooth yet soft against my lips. It smelled like alcohol, alcohol must taste like it too. That’s the reason people get addicted to it. It was an unbearable pleasure.

Instead of pushing me away his arm tightened around my waist. As his hand traced my spine moving up towards my neck, my desperation grew. His hand brushed through my hair, finally reaching my head, he pulled my face up. My face was so close to his that I could feel our deep breaths blending. It was just a matter of a second and my lips could be on his. Something that I have always dreamt of. I could see the same starvation in his eyes, which I could feel in mine.

I made a move to cover that tiny difference left between him and me, when he pulled me away gently but with irresistible force, by my hair, making certain it doesn’t hurt.

He looked at me insistent; his face still too close to mine his hand in my tresses, my lower lip quivered for a succinct instant prior he started talking “*Behave Samiya. Why are you doing this? Isn’t it hard enough for me already?*”

I was still breathing anxiously.

His voice turned the commiseration switch inside me despite the physical annoyance he has put me into. I didn’t understand why I wasn’t allowed to feel his angel lips against mine and if it was erroneous why my body wanted it so badly. But I didn’t know how to ask him.

“*I am sorry*” I whispered tentatively, powerless to look away from his marvelous marble lips.

“*You should be.*” He said impulsively, loosening his grip from my hair, slightly moving away.

His beauty stunned my mind – it was too much, an excess I couldn’t grow accustomed to.

“*Aadil it causes me physical pain when you push me away from you.*” I managed to respond, smitten by his allure.

“*You are sixteen. It’s perfectly natural. Its puberty and raging hormones*” His voice was polite, controlled.

He sounded more like a 40 year old gynae doctor rather than my 17 year old boy friend.

“*No it’s not just that*” I tried disengaging myself from dizziness “*The feeling is intolerable. I can’t explain. It’s like I want to eat you. If not all then most of the time.*” I said as if it was still an understatement for my situation.

He smiled a surprising impish grin.

“*My very presence makes you intoxicated. I have to check on your heart every two seconds*” he said grinning that playful smirk “*I am definitely not healthy for you to eat*”.

I was breathing heavily, that wasn’t humorous to me.

“*What about you? Aren’t you going through puberty? Don’t you have raging hormones?*” I asked harshly.

He sighed.

“*Why do you think I keep saying that it’s hard for me? You don’t know what an emotional roller coaster it is. But still I have got my priorities in a right order. The part of me which wants to protect you is stronger than the part which is, what can I say, seventeen!*” he groaned again.

“*What exactly do you mean when you say you want to protect me?*” I asked confused. This concept was so foreign to me: I mean what harm it could possibly cause if a girl

wants to touch a boy. A boy of her dreams.

His relieved expression turned anxious, he was thinking something, which got me thinking.

“It’s not exactly protecting you. It’s more like protecting both of us. We are seventeen.” He shook his head smiling without humor *“Actually technically not seventeen yet. You are sixteen and I’ll be one too for about a month and a half. So anyways I think it’s too early for that. It isn’t virtuous.” “Don’t you want to be like a good kid for a bit longer?”*

I am not stupid, I know a part of whatever he is saying is a lie or he is altering the legitimacy.

“I want you more than I want to be a good kid.” I snapped arguing for the sake of it.

It seemed that I was annoying him. Though he stood there perfectly still, looking like his own wax figure which totally deserved a place in Madame Tussauds, for being Galaxies preeminent looking guy.

“You are a silly girl, who lets her heart rule her body. Can’t you just think with brain and not with estrogen, progesterone or that little amount of testosterone in your body? Actually they have failed to find a connection between libido and these hormones in women. But I am sure there is some. There has to be an explanation for your wicked behavior.” He was thinking about the issue, wholeheartedly.

“Oh so Amber and Raag are sinful and so is everyone out there in love.” I said aggressively in one breath.

“Of all the things you want to follow Amber and Raag on this one.” He said in a disbelieving tone, agonized.

“Yes I do.” I snapped unthinkingly.

I suddenly realized I didn’t have any idea why I was arguing. I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

“I can’t believe you are making me beg to touch you.” I almost said in a whisper, more to myself.

He looked back in amazed irritation.

“Forget about the whole thing okay. And now even if you hang yourself upside down you’ll not get to have any kind of physical contact with me not a kiss, not a touch, nothing” I said dwelling on the last word.

A bitter sorrow flickered through his eyes before he turned humorous. He hasn’t realized that I can see more than he wants me to.

“Samiya I want to give you anything you want. I really do. But just be a bit more realistic.” He continued the argument anyways. Come what may he always has an upper hand on me, he gets his ways effortlessly, all he has to do is to trap me in words.

Not this time Adi.

“I don’t want anything else. But let’s just forget about it. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” I crossed him walking towards the dining hall. It was hard sounding rational.

He caught up with me. From corner of my eye I could see him contemplating my expression.

“You are scorching right now. You know that? Even your hanky in my pocket is dehydrated.” He was trying stiffly not to smile.

“Ha ha. Very funny.” I couldn’t speak normally yet.

The dinner passed in a blur. It was difficult to believe that I could be so upset with him. But that wasn’t for long. The way his eyes looked at me, was a very convincing part of the dream like reality I was living in. He loved me, in that instance only that mattered. That was enough for me; I didn’t want him to want me like I wanted him. And I was happy that at least I appealed to him on some level. I was his lady love.

Most of the times it was so easy to forget that Adi was sick. Not because he seemed normal than any one of us but because his angel temperament and manners made it impossible to believe the idea of losing someone so heavenly to something like death. But I knew the clock was ticking. The process was on. Something inside him was incessantly smoldering and that awareness to me was like inhaling flames.

That’s exactly what I was dreaming that night, him burning and me inhaling flames. I opened my eyes and sighed in relief to know that it was just a dream. I was curled up in my bed, intertwined as much as it was possible with his thick warm jumper. I hated the newly developed necessity of smelling him, feeling him even when I am in bed, as it was sort of ruining the different kind of romance Adi wanted. But as it was, I can’t help being human.

My eyes flew open. I lay gasping in warm bed for several minutes, trying to break free of the tang of his jumper. The sky outside my window turned gray and then pale pink while I waited for Ms Gladys to show.

When I was fully aware that I can no longer be in bed, I got up and got dressed, heading down to the breakfast. There was no gym. What a blessing before routing to a three day long gym class. That’s what you get for studying in a mountain coeducational boarding school.

That morning, I deliberately sat as far as possible from Adi's seat. I didn't want him to think that I have forgiven him so easily; he would be tempted to take my words for granted if that happens. I was prepared to give him a silent treatment. But when he didn't show up at the usual time, I fumbled with the spoon nervously, my eyes on the door. I was frozen for a second when I realized he was standing next to me, his lips sending a wave of pleasure through my ear.

"Looking for me?" he asked assertively.

"You wish." I said reassembling my now-tangled thoughts.

He slipped into the seat next to mine.

His eyes were wickedly amused.

"You aren't? I thought you forgave Me." he managed to ask severely.

"What made you think that?" I asked in amazed irritation.

He was suppressing a smirk.

"You saying my name in bed all night." He said like listening to someone's sleep talks, miles away is subsequently regular.

There goes my plan to act upset.

Though I was pissed, but I couldn't help blushing.

"Honestly Aadil." I felt a thrill go through me as I said his name, and I hated it. *"I can't believe you don't give me privacy even when I am sleeping."*

His lips pressed into a hard line.

"Yeah that's fun for me, listening to my name in the middle of the night which sounded as if was being called for help. And I get out of my bed and sit outside girl's dorm whole night just to make sure that you are sleeping safely inside. It was entertaining; evading your privacy." Heavy sarcasm. Anger flashed in his cobalt eyes.

"I am sorry that was rude." I said too embarrassed to look into his eyes.

"You know sometimes you are utterly absurd." He said in a low cold voice.

I shrugged as if it was a compliment.

"Why were you calling me anyways?" he glanced down at me, curiously.

I sighed. *"I had a nightmare."*

"So you were calling me for help?" his eyes still, he was enjoying the idea of me asking something from him more than he should.

"Not actually. You were there and I was worried for your safety." I muttered, trying to make it untailored.

His eyes danced to the spoon in my hand.

"Oh I see." He paused, to look at me *"Just for the record, you do that a lot. Call my name in sleep. So are they always; nightmares?"*

I hesitated. There has to be words to explain my pathetic situation.

"You come as a sweet dream or a nightmare. But either way I don't want to wake up. Because it's you that I am seeing." I whispered trying to maintain what sanity I could as he leaned closer to me. I wasn't very successful.

"I wish that you wake up in my arms each morning. That way you won't be in a dilemma." His tone was frantic, he really wished that.

I wish that too.

"Why were you late for breakfast today?" I asked interrogatively, hoping it has nothing to do with health or medication.

"I was on phone with dad." He said holding the door for me. I walked out into the cold, fine mist that had just begun to fall. It felt nice- the constant moisture falling out of the sky- as it washed my face clean. He held his book over my head as I gripped a fistful of his shirt staggering along sideways across the wet sidewalk walking towards the class.

"Is everything okay?" I stared at him, through the rain, he was already studying me.

Maybe he was wondering what it is about me and rain.

"Yup" he answered distracted *"They were about to board their flight."*

Something tightened in my stomach on that knowledge. His parents were on their way to Kasauli. *Adi's parents*. They were not the kind of parents you encounter on day to day basis. And their son were almost celebrities and I was pretty average even for an average person. Heady must have told them about me, I guess how they'll react when they'll finally get to see me. Amazed or furious, I can't think of anything better than that. Even a blind person can point out substantial differences between me and Adi. I wish that Adi somehow decides not to introduce me to them that would be the most convenient setting.

"Will they be staying for the whole month?" I failed sounding subtle.

"Pretty much. Dad has things to do at Central research institute in Kasauli" he responded, a little amused.

He smiled faintly *"He finds stuff to do anywhere he goes. You just have to say the word 'research' to get mum started. She is the biggest criticizer of dad's efforts."*

"Isn't that a good thing, I mean to be keen for knowledge?" My tone was reproachful.

"You don't know dad. He gets very occupied and mum feels neglected. She always has a tough time with me and dad around. She thinks I am like him too."

"I don't think so." I insisted *"You pay a lot of attention to me."*

His certain face said more than his words.

"You are the only exception" he said generously *"Anyways that's good that she has Olivia and Oliver now."*

Does that make a difference? Even with Adi around I crave for Sara's attention and time. No one person can make up for the other one. Your heart and time swells at every addition to your life, its strange how these things work.

The color of mud, the little sun shower from amongst the clouds and the damp trees and the gorgeous view of the mountains was lovely. I liked the way he looked up in the rain a little, he wasn't afraid of getting wet in it, he was enjoying it. His hair was burnishing with the wetness, he shook his head entering the class, the little moisture that came in contact with my face, tickled my skin. Mr. Pandey was already there so we got settled quietly in a seat by the window. I didn't miss a chance to glance out to watch the rain stream across the window in little rivulets; the way it trickled down was somehow amazing to me.

"Why do you like rain so much?" he finally asked surrendering, failing to find one himself.

It was impossible to think of a single reason, while staring back into his blue eyes, when usually there is hundreds of it. But naturally, he wouldn't rest until I'd give him one.

"I love the smell and the taste of it." I shrugged.

"It doesn't matter to you if you are inside or outside, you are into it." He stated confused.

"Rain is opposite to nothing, it's something that makes me feel life. And rainy days are perfect for listening music. It also reminds me a lot of moments. And whether it's sad or happy I like to relive the past." I sighed, staring down at my hands fiddling with a piece of my hair.

"Tell me of your rainy memories." He fired off.

"You sure? There are heaps of them." I felt embarrassed to share even few of them; he will probably die of boredom.

"I have all the time in the world" he said, his face somber as if he has suddenly nothing else to do then to listen to me.

"Okay. First of all my mum told me when I first left the hospital as a baby in her lap it was raining. Though the data has never been historically verified still it makes me feel closer to my mum. Secondly the first day my parents left me here at school it was raining and it washed away my tears. And I was crying and pretending that it's raindrops. That rainy day changed my life forever." I swallowed. *"And then there were days when me and Sara used to hold each other tightly, scared as it rained heavily and the storm would be near."* *"I have read hundreds of story books to Niya sitting in the dorm's huge window in rainy evenings."* I smiled, these were my happy memories.

He was listening to me, keeping his eyes intact on my face in a very non familiar way. I couldn't remember the last time I'd talked about stuff like this with anyone. It was a pleasure to see how he coveted to know every insignificant detail of my existence.

"You know this day today is also added to my book of rainy memories."

"Why?" he raised a brow.

"Because you are sitting next to me." I said flushing.

My face revealed too clearly how fixated I was.

He started after a short pause *"You will like Tutenendo in Columbia. It is the wettest place on Earth."*

"Have you been there?" I asked leaning forward on table, my eyes curious. I was always keen to hear more about places and travels; they fascinated me. Maybe because I didn't get my fair share on them

He nodded slightly, smiling, glaring down at me *"You'll love the constant rhythmic tapping on the roof"* he said with a promise.

My eyes danced as I wondered in my own wonderland, it sounded nice.

"Where else have you been?" I asked distracted and suddenly remembered that primarily he is a resident of America, Ohio *"Is America beautiful?"* I furthered.

“I have seen most of Europe, Asia and Australia.” He smiled *“And for parts of America I don’t have words. You’ll have to see it for yourself.”* He murmured looking at me obscured. His voice was thoughtful as if his mind were somewhere far away.

“Oh!” I answered trying to hide the melancholy, I wasn’t sure if I’ll ever get to see that part of the world.

He glanced at me for a brief second *“Is there any particular place you want to visit on this planet?”* he asked his mind already wondering.

I smirked crookedly *“Yeah I have few on mind.”*

“Tell me?” he commanded in curiosity.

I smirked, what I was about to tell him was totally barny, but my insaneness is not new to him.

“Adi for me its my novels which connect me to the world outside these walls. I have always wanted to follow the footsteps of my favorite characters to discover the places that I have always known but obviously never visited. I want to see Forks, a small town in America which is Bella’s town in Twilight, I want to see Hampshire, town of Jane Austen and persuasion, I want to see the part of America which Nicholas Spark talks about, I want to see Jhang and Takht Hazara, the towns of Heer and Ranjha.” I sighed *“You know I have felt the strangest of feelings, I have walked through the woods under those clouds, the secrets of those towns. It’s like a dream when I am aware that I am dreaming. Like a lucid dream.”* *“I want to see them for real.”*

He sat in silence, waiting for me to say more, finally giving up.

“You know you have always lived in the place of my childhood fantasies.” He said disparagingly.

I looked at him confused.

“The dense forests, the wild life, hidden rivers” he smiled contentedly *“Home of Rusty and blue umbrella.”*

Ahh. I laughed. *“Kasauli, home of Ruskin Bond, home of Samiya Mittal.”* I leered, my eyes gleaming.

He smiled tracing the rim of the green gemstone placed in the gold band on my pinky finger with his finger.

Ms Anjali gave us the list of things to pack for the camps. We were supposed to leave at six next morning so the task had to accomplish before dinner today.

Though I was never given a choice but I still regret for not speaking up a word against the whole camping shit.

I hate the camp buzz and it was going to be one of those days. If I was allowed I’ll prefer staying back and sleeping in, I don’t mind everyone leaving me back here. But I have to admit I’ll really appreciate if they can leave Adi behind.

After lunch we went straight to dorms after that. Mrs. Gladys opened the store room and we hunted for our sleeping bags, we pulled out our casuals from trunks for the campfire night when we are allowed to bring them to use. I laid all my toiletries, bath towels, under garments, watch, blanket, track suites, shoes, raincoat, medicines, and sanitary napkins on the bed checking and crossing each one on the list. I made a note to ask Mrs. Anjali to carry my corticosteroid injection incase I get a severe attack, which is most unlikely. I looked at my hoodies and jeans half heartedly packing my nebulizer and salbutamol injections. They are very tomboyish; I wish I had something girly to wear. I know that’s a new one but it’s for Adi’s sake not mine. I threw in few novels in the bag as precautionary measures in case I get a sprained ankle or a muscle pull. These kinds of things happen to me a lot at camping trips, especially before rock climbing and fox flying. I don’t want to be a drama queen, but hell it saves me a lot of snag.

It took me no more than an hour to sort out everything. We moved all the packed bags into the corner of the room and hurdled on two consecutive beds. It was sort of the last day together before vacations. As every one talked of the last three months some grievances, some happy moments, some confessions and some apologies came our way. Honestly, I don’t remember anything except for Adi for this whole period. But not for a single second I wished to have noticed something else except for him. *He was the best thing that has ever happened to me. His memories are the ones I wish to cherish , his memories are the ones that can’t be tempered.*

We slept in, the whole evening after our long tiring talk session.

My eyes opened to the pasty light of the moon flowing in through the open window. That was the only light in the dorm. The cotton curtains bordering parallel sides of the pane danced to the cool breeze blowing outside. It wasn’t raining but it smelled of drizzle. Precipitation always has that after effect. And I can hear the river, hidden in the obscurity of the forest. I curled and watched the clouds travel in the sky and the moon playing hide and seek. This same moon with that tiny guiding light was shining over Adi’s window too.

I sank deep into the warmth of the quilt and murmured *“Adi if you are listening, listen carefully. Open your heart, for my whispers in the night always. I’ll come to you through a cold breeze; feel me on your face. See the moon glow, up in the night sky and get the message I have sent through my soul. Listen to the water of the Brooke, it’s my voice. Feel the rain, pouring down it’s the memories I’ll leave you behind. I’ll come to you, in many different ways, even if I disappear one day.”*

I lay there thinking. Wishing that all this happens, wishing to stay near to him even after leaving some day.

Finally everyone was awake, the night lights glowed and thus it was time for another meal. The time lapse between the meetings with Adi was nearly appropriate; I don’t think it would be easy for me to take more than that.

It was relaxing to sit with Sara today at dinner. She was on about the camping with boys, leaving me free to think undisturbed.

My prince charming slipped into the chair next to mine apathetically. His hair was muddled, his eyes sleepy but still he looked cuter than I have remembered him to be.

He glared at me for a long moment and then something occurred to him belatedly.

“Thanks for the quotes but what made you think that you are leaving me?”

I was so confused, unprepared for this. I thought he wouldn’t be able to listen that far.

“I didn’t mean it. I just said them in sub consciousness.” I said when I can control my voice. Though I wanted to tell him that he must not have noticed but I am mortal.

“Well then congratulations. Cause you got yourself a poem there for the recital competition. That was lovely.” He said. His face softened and I swear I saw the blue changing in his eyes. It was absolutely ridiculous but I was feeling dizzy just like the first day I saw him

I couldn’t concentrate and he was waiting for my response.

“I don’t remember it.” I sighed.

He raised his hand, hesitant, conflict raging in his eyes, and then swiftly brushed the length of my cheekbone with his fingertips. His skin was icy, but the trail his fingers left on my skin was alarmingly warm- like I’d been burned, but didn’t feel the pain of it yet.

“I do.” He murmured.

It was quiet for a while but something stronger than butterflies battered recklessly against the walls of my stomach.

I couldn’t eat properly for some reason.

“Finish your dinner.” He grasped without looking at me when I was leaving.

His grip was too tight, so my chances of escaping were next to zero. I sat back reluctantly. He pulled my plate closer and sprinkled some salt on the curry, filled me a bowl of yoghurt.

“Now dip the chapatti in curry and yoghurt and eat it with onion salad.” He suggested in his usual low calm voice.

I sat there frozen for two seconds. *“Eat.”* He repeated dwelling on the word. I like a robot did exactly what was demanded of me. I have no idea what it was like, all I can taste was his concern.

As the density of population in the mess was diminishing Adi sat there making sure I finish dinner and Sara sat on the other side making sure I don’t stop to talk to Adi after dinner. There can’t be a more gauche situation than that. Though being a sluggish eater I tried to gulp down really quick.

“See you tomorrow.” Adi said politely as we stood outside the mess.

“See ya.” I murmured my voice too low for Sara to hear.

“Good Night Sara.” He wished Sara crookedly.

She scowled. That was her usual reply to everything that Adi said.

And yet we woke up to another cold day in the valley it was still dark.

I took a super hot shower, to get me awake, the whole room got steamy and when I walked out the steam rose off my body. I lost track of time in the shower, but it was definitely time well spent.

Dressed in warm clothing with our back packs on our backs we marched down.

Boys were already in the bus. Heady and Ms Dhawan were there for a formal see off. Kitchen attendants were handing in the packed hot food. We were allowed to carry them as it was too soon for breakfast. I followed Sara into the bus which said Ashok Leyland on the side pallet. Three sides of the bus were covered with large transparent glasses and the Saturn curtains bordered it graciously. The seats looked comfortable with soft leather coverings and ample leg space. There was a colorful LCD display at the front door, which usually plays the movies depicting the scenic beauty of Himalayas on mute for us at trips like this one. In the chaos of settling down my eyes scanned the male huddle for Adi. My head automatically turned as someone set guitar’s strings in motion. I heard a fundamental vibration and then the overtones. Adi was playing with the strings to get my attention. He was leaning casually against the side of the seat; his breathtaking face looked very fresh. I waved at him in a peculiar sense of relief. Since the day he disappeared without informing I always have a moment of doubt every morning, unsure if I’ll get to see him or not.

The bus was exceptionally large. Though people were clustered together but I am sure each one of us can still have a window seats to ourselves if we dispersed. Sara being taller fixed all the girl’s backpacks in the luggage rack and I grabbed out a novel and a blanket before handing her mine. I took one of the available seats and pushed my novel into the magazine holder. I fiddled with the pamphlets in the holder for a moment before resting back. I glazed out of the large glass pane and saw heady waving. I waved back shyly.

Ms Anjali and Mr. Mathur climbed on the bus and the tour coordinator closed the bus door. The bus started moving leisurely.

Once everyone was in their seats they turned off the lights. I am not sure if Sara was sitting with me or not because as her usual tendency she disappeared after every few seconds. I covered myself with a blanket and stared out of the window. We were chasing the orange luminosity of the head lights, the only illumination outside. It was dark but there was immense peace in that serenity. I loved the way the vehicles rolled, leaving behind something striking and giving an optimism to witness something more incredible on the way.

If you ask me, travelling is the only part I enjoy in camping trips.

Renuka Lake is 132 Kms from Kasauli, so unfortunately it won't be a very long travel.

Everyone was awake and talking, I could hear Adi fiddling with his guitar strings. Someone suggested *"Play it loud Adi. Let's play."* And suddenly a wave of enthusiasm travelled along the length of the bus and I noticed several heads turning around. *"You play the guitar and we'll figure out the song."*

"Can I start?" Sara asked her voice impious. Rasna threw an invisible mike to her. She caught hold of it and started *"I'll do something original."* She publicized.

I leaned down from the corner of the seat to look at the back. Adi smiled at me before starting playing. The tone was too loud and wild, it didn't strike but I knew that tune from somewhere. Sara caught it and she started *"We have an American Idiot. Thrown out of his nation for being a faggot."* She was referring to Adi I surmised mending Green Day's song American Idiot. He didn't stop playing and laughing his enchanting laughs. Sara continued her nonsensical bull shit. But I have to admit that sounded extremely hilarious and I couldn't stop laughing either as everyone joined her in shouting American Idiot. Adi bowed down in the end to his audiences as if he felt much honored. I clapped inaudibly to his patience. He then started with another song, that was an easy pick too, one of my favorites. Just the right song for the trip like these ones; *Bryan Adams, summer of 69*. Everyone sang along as he played. They didn't allow him to change the song, and for a long long time we were singing Oh and when I look back now, that seems to last forever, and if I had the choice, Ya- I'd always wanna be there, those were the best days of my life, summer of 69.

That singing seemed unending so I rested back smiling, taking out the novel, I removed my shoes and crossed my legs rearranging my blanket. I swiftly turned to the chapter 8 of Twilight book. The pale morning light of a new day was appropriate enough for reading. It didn't took me long to travel from the real world to the book world and I was suddenly oblivious of the surroundings. If it wasn't for the smell of his breath that wakes up my sick obsession and works like a drug I would have never noticed him sitting next to me.

He smiled in amazement as I looked up at him.

His eyes flickered between my book and my face *"Not again."* He sighed.

"Just two more pages?" I pleaded, Bella was in middle of the crisis, I desperately wanted to know how it ends, doesn't matter if I have read it already.

"Which page are you on?" he asked dubiously.

"Page 73. There are hardly four pages left for the end of the chapter." I insisted.

Before I could beg more he interrupted and started reciting *"A group of four men turn around..."*

I looked at him in bewilderment as he narrated the whole chapter. He finally came to a stop.

"Do you want to hear more?" he questioned, trying hard not to make a face *"please don't say yes."* He added *"It's embarrassing, narrator is a girl."*

"So what do you want me to do?" I smiled.

"Talk to me." he suggested winking, taking the book from me.

"What do you want to talk about?" I said resting my chin on the hand and my elbow on the hand rest.

"Your parents. They travel a lot." That was a question.

"Yes they have to." I realized I have never told him what my dad does for living. An information that sets your primary identity amongst your friends and that something is considered important on my side of world. *"My dad owns a business of electric water geysers and washing machines by name of Kulwant enterprises. He travels six months a year doing marketing and stuff."* I explained. I wished he doesn't press for any other information because I didn't have any.

"So who else do you have in your family?" he asked.

"It's just my parents and Niya. I don't have any uncles and aunts on dad's side; I just have one uncle, mama's brother." I watched him listen carefully *"But we are not close to him and my maternal grandparents."* I smiled cautiously *"or you can say I am not very close to them."*

"How about your dad's parents?" he asked warily.

"They died few years ago." I said in a calm but unpleasant tone *"They lived two houses away from ours and I remember spending more time at their place than mine. My grandfather had been sick, he had two heart attacks and we were actually prepared for him to leave. But the painful thing was that my grandmother died the same day my grandpa died. I always noticed that she looked at grandpa with a strange feeling of love but I never realized, not until I was kid that her life was actually twisted into a single strand with grandpas. If he was gone so was she. That was the core rule of the game."* I said in a feeling of guilty, because I had to admit that it pleased me in a petulant way that people were connected that way.

"How did she die?"

"I don't know what Post mortem revealed but everyone in my family believes that she willingly left her human form. She departed sitting in the prayer room of her house." I told him the same story that I overheard at their funeral, me and my parents never talked about it. *"She had psychic abilities"* I explained *"she was very close to God. She had this religious keertan everyday at her place for as long as I remember. And people who weren't even related to her came to touch her feet. They believed her blessings can do miracles."*

He listened to me contently. That was funny that two people from this century, people of science, people of reason were even indulging in such talk.

"What do you think?" he asked quietly, reading my face.

For the first time I was thinking about what I felt of her mysterious abilities.

“I think the power lies in the blessings itself not in the one who gives them.” As I spoke I felt more peaceful *“people misunderstood.”*

“I agree.” He smiled.

We both stared out of the window at the same time as driver pulled into an open space at a small dhaba. He parked there and turned off the bus. Ms Anjali announced that we can use the rest rooms here if we want to. I turned around to meet his gaze *“Tell me about your family.”* I insisted. *“Something except that your father is a famous surgeon and your mum is a greek. And that they met in Singapore for a conference and got married soon.”* I smiled winking *“Tell me something that I don’t know of.”*

He smiled vaguely twitching his eyes; he knew that I had intentionally gained that knowledge from different sources.

“Get ready for some history then.” He teased. *“I hope you don’t feel asleep listening.”*

I glared at him in confusion.

“Dad is a royal descendant. His great great grandfather Amar Pal Singh Rathore was the first Rathore Rajput to migrate to Rani, a small town in Rajasthan almost 150 years ago from Nadol village. He was descendant of Rathore Dynasty. The Gorwar region comprising of 102 villages was a part of their administration. My great grandfathers used to export in those days to Japan and other countries, and were the only civilians to supply parachute ribs to the navy. After some time India became a free nation and all the administration system was replaced by the government of India. Dad says my grandfather was a magnetic personality and people of Gorwar region worshiped him as God. He donated all his palaces and forts to the community and kept only the palace, the home he lived in. Today the majority of the land called Rajput Mohalla proves history of Rathore Royal Family which is spread across nearly 8 Lakh square feet.” He rolled his eyes coming to a pause *“Still awake haan?”*

I looked at him astounded; this personality next to me was component of royal bloodline of Rajasthan. He is not a hypothetical version of my prince charming, *he actually is prince charming*. I have been so engaged, I hadn’t ever thought of that as a possibility. With Adi every day you found out something new, everything about him was so amazing.

There was so much to think through, so much I still wanted to ask.

“Do you still have that palace, your grandfather’s home?” I asked fantasizing the dazzling halls, the reflective marble floors; gems carved into the walls, the lovely gardens, in brief a set of Sanjay leela Bansali’s Devdas.

“Yeah in Rani. When I was in Mayo we spent vacations there, I don’t think it would be possible anymore.”

“Who lives there?” I asked dubiously.

“Caretakers.”

Caretakers. I wonder how many of them are there, how huge is that thing.

“Don’t you have any uncles?”

His eyes darted to my face from underneath his long black eyelids.

“My dad had an elder brother. He died young.” He answered under his breath.

“I am sorry.” I said apologizing to touch that topic.

“No don’t. I never saw him. I know nothing about him. They say that my family was cursed by some lady whose son died in prison for a crime which she think he didn’t commit during Amar Pal Singh’s rule. Some say that she cursed that the successor of the throne will die young and some say the curse was on the elder son of the family. But since our family has witnessed quite a number of untimely deaths.”

“What do you think?” I asked, my attention divided as I repeated his words in my brain.

“Dad says that the legends came in after few deaths took place, so they are all worked up stories. But I believe that there could have been this woman who lost her only son, she was no witch she was a broken mother who had every reason to curse a ruler who didn’t do her justice. I believe a curse of a helpless person is a very powerful weapon of destruction.”

So he believed the myth was true.

“I agree.” I said mused.

That’s what my grandmother used to say.

“Does your family still have the titles the royal people have?” I asked momentarily unconscious of what I was asking

“No my dad gave up the title. It won’t travel in the family any more.”

“Oh” I said unable to say anything else.

“So is that palace of yours is a real palace?” I asked fascinated.

“Sort of.” He answered wondering himself.

I looked at him in bewilderment hoping to hear more.

“It’s been renovated to provide modern facilities but it still has that royal charm.” His eyes glittered and his lips curved into the shape of a sliced water melon.

“Will you take me there someday?”

He didn’t reply. That made me feel embarrass.

“What would you like to do, if you were to spend a day in that place?” he asked distracting me.

I didn’t think for a second before answering *“I’ll take pictures all day of every corner of the palace.”*

He smiled *“That’s exactly what my mum did when she visited it for the first time.”* He laughed again *“Dad says it was very funny because to him that was his home, where he grew up and she was acting weird as if it was a tourist spot.”*

We both laughed, it did sound funny.

“You know I have a room there packed with my stuff from Mayo. But mostly it has the canvases on which I tried to paint you each day of my vacation. Few had your eyes and few your lips, never got it right completely” he smiled *“I am no painter.”* he shrugged.

Everything fell silent for a moment. I have realized all the memories of his past are mostly the memories of that *angel*, he thinks was me. I felt petite and terrible in that position. All that waiting, that longing and all he gets is *me*. That’s really unfair.

Adi oblivious of the pity I felt for him shared more information on his royal family while I listened mutely.

Time passed more quickly than I have realized. We were going parallel to the actual Renuka Lake after few false alarms. I followed Adi’s glare to look out of the window, as it appeared the setting was spectacular. Even at this time of the year the whole place was deserted. The bus was going down on a steep road and after few curves and turns we came to a stop. All I can see were the plains with a blue edge, the line where sky and the silent water of the lake meets bordered by lush green vegetation. While Adi and Sara helped everyone with their backpacks, I wore my shoes and got down. There was a significant difference between the inside and outside temperatures. Even if it was a bit cold the ambience and the smell of dew, of water and of Jungles that bordered the plains and of a lovely morning was ecstatic. The nation was in middle of the summer season but in this part of the world like every morning, this morning was covered with misty winter haze. I saw a golden Eagle float gracefully over the lake. Watching the motion of an Eagle in the mountains is perhaps one of the most peaceful and inspiring moments of my life. There were two cemented huts built where the plains ended and the Jungles began. Few tents were already placed on the opposite side of the plains. I realized we were not the sole visitors here. A middle aged man, someone who looked like a local came rushing towards our bus, coming to an abrupt stop besides me, I directed him towards Mr. Mathur. He worked for the team who organized camps and was there to help us. The way he walked, his back a little tilted and his head bowed was a permanent mannerism of typical himachali hospitality. As everyone started coming out, I climbed back to get my rucksack.

My happy moment didn’t last long as in the bus I found Adi and Sara in a terrible argument. I was stuck in between for a moment before I had to shout at both of them or you can call it a request in a slightly louder than my normal tone. I knew Sara must have begun the argument but I have realized that Adi is not very good to her either. I have caught him talking to her obliquely and in irony on many occasions.

This was not one of the readymade camping sites. And we had to spend next two hours setting tents. Boys helped Mr. Mathur to unload the bags of amenities and food and to stock them in one of the tents, our temporary lunch room. We unpacked our sleeping bags inside the tents and transferred hay from a huge pile near the bus to the tents to add comfort and warmth to the sleeping bags for the night to come. The cemented huts were the rest rooms, as girls unpacked their toiletries I went for a loo break. As I entered, a sturdy odor of phenyl wedged me in snout. The floor of the bathroom was damp, I carefully walked in. Despite the cracks in places and lack of renovation the restrooms were neat and well kept. I totally unaware of anyone’s presence inside the room in a sudden fright got a little imbalanced and slipped to hit my head in the wall when I notice a tiny creature sitting on the corner of the lengthy shelf bordering the mirror. The pain, the presence of that creature and the embarrassment, everything sort of overlapped and I felt dizzy. The creature was a little girl she came rushing to me in a quick second and rubbed her tiny little hand on my forehead to soothe the pain.

“Thanks. I am okay.” I murmured blushing, her little hand was warm against my skin but to my dismay that was not enough to soothe the pain. She didn’t cease the movement of her hand.

I repeated, embarrassed to use so much energy of one tiny little person *“I am okay.”*

She slowed down and reluctantly pulled her hand back to shift the book she was holding in other hand. When the dizziness faded my eyes met with a cute little face, small eyes, a snub nose and lips placed on a fair smooth skin like a ribbon bow. Her features depicted that she was no foreigner; she belonged to these mountains originally. Her short black hair resembled Sara’s. I wondered if she was related to that middle aged man, the helper.

Her little body was leaning over mine and her eyes curious. *“I am okay”* I repeated for the third time, hoping she will give me room to get up.

I realized when I spoke she stopped blinking and concentrated on my lips.

She was deaf maybe.

I was still wondering how to ask when she got up.

I straightened myself, my head still aching, and half of my body felt soggy, my back was wet now. As I turned around to check my back in the mirror I caught her smiling. She looked even prettier when she smiled. Flushing I picked her in my hands and rested her on the shelf she was formerly sitting on. Still her face reached my shoulders. I bowed down a little and said *“thank you”*, enunciating making it easy for her to read my lips in case she was deaf. She shied and moved her hand into somewhat semicircular motion, I interpreted she was trying to say *you’re welcome*.

I felt sad and battled with the urge to Hug her. I wanted to make a talk but the fact that I had no knowledge of sign language made it troublesome. I used the restroom and left waving her goodbye, repeating *“Thank you”* over and over again. I walked back to the tents with my hand pressed against my head. It was still aching.

Ms Anjali saw me “*What happened?*” she asked. As soon as she said that I thought of playing that up and use it as an escape pass for at least a day.

“I slipped in the bathroom. My head hit the wall.” I said sighing bogusly *“I had a previous concussion. I feel like its bleeding.”*

She checked my head, to find nothing wrong. Of course.

“Does that hurt?” She asked making a terrible face.

I nodded stiffly. *“I feel dizzy.”*

“We are about to leave for trekking honey. What do you want me to do?” she looked confused.

I knew I’ll have to play it up a little before bringing up the real deal.

“A pain killer will do for the pain. But I don’t know why I feel woozy. Hope they have rest rooms on the way in case I want to throw up.” I very well kept up the remorseful mumbling.

Her eyes flew open and she staunch her nose a little. She was thoughtful for a second *“I guess it will be better if you stay back and rest. I think you will be fine in few hours. We are supposed to take off for biking after trekking but we can come back for you, if that sounds okay.”* She said talking to herself at the same time.

Biking, I do feel sick now.

“No please you don’t have to do that for me. I’ll be back in shape by tomorrow and I won’t miss on any fun.” I sighed.

“You sure honey?” Her head tilted a little as she held my hands in empathy; to her I was making an enormous sacrifice. *What kind of freaks these people are? Escaping Biking, Sacrifice? Are you kidding me?*

I nodded faintly; acting distressed, not less not more, just the accurate amount.

“I will ask Babu to give you your lunch. He is the care taker here. You rest, okay?”

I gave another nod, highly pleased with myself.

Everything that happen happens for good, I smiled when she walked away.

Adi was standing at foot of my tent, smirking. Of course he heard that. I glared at him. It wasn’t easy- I knew that he knew that I was lying.

I tried to walk past but he lifted a hand to stop me.

“Concussion?” he said, flashing his brilliant teeth. He had a quick peek on my head. He smirked again *“Nautanki.”* He said in his appealing voice.

“That thing really hurts.” I said, throwing a scowl at him. Even if I am lying I don’t like being called a liar and that does hurt, even if a little.

His smile faded *“Really?”* he said politely *“You take care of yourself then.”*

Now I felt guilty. I can’t make myself happy either way.

“Here have my I pod.” He said pulling out an apple I pod from his blazer’s pocket *“It has few good songs to kill time”* he smiled smugly.

I flinched and took it hesitantly.

“Don’t go very close to the lake. And I can hear roars from the west side of the Jungle. Babu will lit the fire as the sun sets but still stay in the tent once it starts getting dark.” He stared at me incredulously; his face was tense depicting a shade of maturity.

Wild animals don’t scare me, biking does, I thought to myself. I wanted to assure him that I feel very safe right now.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to hear you after a while.” His jaw hardened *“Try to be safe, please.”*

He knew that I have this strange attraction to jungles, but this wasn’t the safest zones, *I get it.*

Looking at his incredible face I almost cursed myself for being such a drama queen. Can’t I trek and ride a stupid bike to be with him. *I wanted to go too, I wanted to be with him.*

But instead of saying something I nodded grumpily. *Well, not everything happens for good.*

“Have fun.” I sighed.

“I’ll try to.” He promised, smiling. He touched my face, lightly brushing along my cheekbone, then turned and walked away. I stared after him until he was gone, until all of them were gone.

When the sore feeling of being left alone finally ended, I walked into the tent sulky. I dropped onto the pile of hay and stretched my legs, resting the I pod on my belly “*I miss you already*” I whispered, wishing he wasn’t listening.

I like an idiot waited for quite some time, for him to show out of thin air. When it became impossibility I gave up. I became a bit more comfortable, removing my shoes and putting the earphones on my ears, fiddling through the songs. The music didn’t help. I couldn’t stop missing him and I had a hell lot of sleep yesterday, so sleep wasn’t going to come to me naturally. A very silly thought occurred to me. I already had permission for a pain killer from Mrs. Anjali; two of them would be enough to knock me out for good eight hours. I hastily pulled out the headphone and walked out of the tent to grab medicines. In my rush I bumped into someone and almost staggered with a near heart attack for second time in one day.

The man caught me too quickly. “*I am sorry*” he said.

Despite saying something I looked at him confused, steadying myself.

“*I am the teacher from Joseph’s School.*” He said embarrassed “*I am here with my boys.*” He said pointing towards the other end of the plains, to the previous tents. There was more life at that side than this morning, Joseph school boys crawled all over the place and a bus similar to ours was parked on that side as well.

“*I came to say in hi. If we knew that you guys were coming we might have cancelled our rafting trip this morning to help you set up*” He yanked it all in one breath.

“*That’s really kind of you sir.*” I said obliged “*but we managed pretty well.*”

“*Good Good*” he said regaining his confidence, stirring his neck in all directions.

“*Everyone is out for trekking. They’ll be back at around six.*” I informed.

He narrowed his eyes at me.

“*I was a little sick so I stayed back.*” I hissed under my breath. He wasn’t my teacher, I didn’t have any reason to be scared of him, but for some unknown reason I was.

“*Oh*” his expression softened “*I and my boys will be around for a while, and then we will be leaving for sight seeing. Don’t hesitate if you need anything.*” He offered.

I thanked him before he left.

Every school has a peculiar trait which makes it stand out from others. Some are known for academic achievements, a few are excellent in sports, many are just known for a homely environment, Joseph’s school is known for its too true stereotypes of a campus full of spoiled rich kids. Drugs, alcohol, weapons, you name it, they have it. It has nothing except for oddities and drawbacks. I wonder what kind of parents send their kids into environment like theirs.

Anyways I deliberately swallowed two brufens and didn’t have to wait long for the drugs to kick in, I gladly sank into unconsciousness.

9. DEMON

I woke up to a faded light. And as I twisted and turned in my hay bed my stomach growled, I have skipped on two meals together. I was hungry. I peeked out of my tent to see the orange set on the dark blue water of the lake. A chilly breeze send shiver down my spine. There was not a single person in sight. I changed into my night suite and wrapped my mum’s pashmina shawl around me, grabbing a novel and a book light I stepped outside. Flicking on the bulb that hung in a hazardous condition outside the tent, I started hunting for food in all the boxes, finally settling for a pack of sandwiches.

I wanted to get out of the tents, but there was nowhere I was allowed to go. My body on its own angled towards the ever encroaching forests. It didn’t take long to find out where exactly the green and the orange met. I stopped few yards away from that line. The dark water of the lake was almost invisible but the sound of squish of ducks on water and the sudden sounds such as one fish running into another marked its presence. I spread my pashmina on a stone and sat down on it, enjoying the sandwich. The valley was secluded but enchanting shielding this lake which was once believed to be portraying a sleeping woman in Rig- Vedic period. It is extremely gentle and feminine in spirit and form. Perhaps that is why thousands of fish stay inside her without any fear of being killed by people. I opened my book, clipped the book light on it and started reading while subconsciously witnessing the sounds of waves gently lapping up its shore, listening to the chirping of birds returning to their homes and feeling the gentle breeze from the hills.

I didn’t realize how much time has passed when I heard a movement in the dense forest that stretched besides me. I froze there for a moment as the sound repeated. Someone was too close. I shivered at my place of concealment. This was the wrong place to have come, I should have known. Now that the sun had set the silence turned piercing. The fishes went quiet and the birds have safely reached their homes. I knew anyone who was watching me from three feet away wouldn’t have trouble catching me in case I opt to run. So unable to think I sat there hardly breathing, dwelling on negative, waiting for the death to come, I was calculating the pain it will cause when I heard the sinister pass by me. The noise was as if someone was being dragged on a bed of dry crunchy leaves. It was still close; the movement was on the other side of the trees. The piercing silence now smelled evil. I heard human voices from the trees. No one would believe the absurdity but instead of walking away from the danger I found myself walking towards it. I was gripped in a sudden curiosity to see who was there. I silently walked into the trees to see dark shadows of three men. As an innate impulse to a perilous situation I stepped in the rear of a fern to have a vigilant look. Three of them were no men, they were boys, two of them were bowed over something and the one whose shirt hanged unbuttoned on his shoulders was smoking a cigarette watching them. As I was trying to see what was happening I noticed the sky has darkened further, a sudden shiver made me cross my arms tightly across my chest. They had something on that pile of dried leaves, maybe drugs I assumed. The one who was smoking started filling stones in a plastic bag. I thought maybe the stones have something to do with the drug consumption process when my heart ceased. A chill that had nothing to do with the weather made me shiver.

I saw two small feet at the corner of the leave sack, through the dark. *That was a person there.* As one of the guys moved the ominous view became patent. That tiny little girl lay on the leaves. *She wasn’t moving. What has happened to her? Is she dead?* A small, frightened voice echoed in my head.

Please move. Move beta. I whispered tears rolled down my cheeks but I didn’t cease begging. I should have known that she is not Adi, she can’t hear my murmurs but I can tell

my mind wasn't entirely working. I wanted to take her in my arms, to wake her up but I don't know why my feet were jammed to the damp ground.

You are mean Samiya, a voice told me.

As I concentrated too hard on her face I didn't realize that they have tied the bag of stones to her tiny baby feet. *My feet ached terribly as if the same load of stones were tied on mine*

One of them picked her up callously and started walking towards the part of the lake that lies hidden in the forests. I didn't understand what they were doing until a loud noise of splash of water came and the devil stood there empty handed.

No.

As soon as I realized that they have thrown her into the lake. I was running to plunge after her. All I can see was her cute little face, her lips twitched in a smile, her hand with which she tried to soothe my pain. It was a short sprint to the lake; I jumped in exactly at the point where the surface of the water was still covered with small ripples. I knew the devil was watching, but all I wanted was to save what that evil was trying to ruin.

The water was freezing, but that was not as bad a shocker. It did freeze everything to the core of my body; the movement of blood in my veins was ceased. Traditionally I would have given myself time to come to the level of water's temperature but today I can't afford to even wait for hyperventilation to end. I used every ounce of my energy to inhale a deep breath before going down the water. The sound of astonished murmur is the last thing I remember on the edge of the water.

One thing that did come as a revelation was the darkness. I forgot the unalterable truth about diving at night; I was not able to see anything. I kept sliding down, in the total darkness as if my eyes were closed. Within seconds I realized this was going to be dangerous. It was the worst transition period to enter another world. I was roughly through with the prior quota of oxygen; and thus found myself cutting through the water hurriedly. There was no possibility that I was departing without her, something sneaked up on me and before I know it was pulling me inside. I wasn't alone here, maybe in another few seconds me and her will be just another drowning that happened in the moonlight, without anyone knowing the reality. Even with all that trying, I knew I'll still end up dyeing, but the manifestation of her fatality was enough to yield a disagreeable sensitivity. My lips were about to part, I was about to give up when my hand caught hers.

She was warm, even within the treacherous icy cold. A sudden gush of vigor arose somewhere in my chest. I just can't give up, I owe her that much. And I have to save myself, I owe Adi that much. What seemed like a decade may not be more than a few seconds. The struggle to swim up was equivalent to the struggle to swim against the current. Finally I made it. I held her close to me as my breathing came faster and deeper than necessary. The hyperventilation was causing me chest pain, if I haven't had that same pain before during one of the Asthma attacks, I would have misunderstood it for heart attack. Because right now that was a high possibility. The girl was lifeless in my hands, she wasn't breathing and as I pressed her she didn't respond.

"Please don't die." I pleaded swimming her towards the bank. In my panic I forgot about the fiends who stood waiting to murder this innocent girl. I hold her hand securely, as I used the dreadfully petite energy left in my body to force down the water out of her stomach. In my dizziness I realized her clothes were torn, with scars on her face. I didn't even want to think what they might have done to her, but for one thing I was sure, these people were not human.

They encircled me. The one who threw her into the water started pulling her hand from mine; I was inclined over her defying, not letting it go. He pulled out a rock, to perhaps smack my hand, I squeezed the grasp at once but then he tainted his wits. My accelerated inhalation was now almost aching. I felt nauseas as I struggled for each breath, my lips parted to get as much air as possible to my aching lungs. I could spot the skin on my neck moving profoundly into the collarbone and my chest moving in a scuttle for every breath. I was in middle of the most brutal attack of my life; any breath from now could be the last one. The one who was smoking pushed me on the ground. With all what was going that was pretty easy to accomplish. I dropped onto the ground, hitting my head exactly at the same place I had hit this morning. I didn't let go of her hand but I knew I won't be able to protect her for long. My tunnel vision forgot to deem what else these people can do. As he started taking off his pants, I wished that I would die. I was breathing heavily; I knew I couldn't fight him off. I left the girl's hand apologizing, tears rolling down my cheek as I started crawling towards the lake. He caught me with one hand and despite the little wasted effort he ripped off my damp shirt. I wrapped my arms around my chest. They were teasing and finding glory in it as I kept crawling to an escape. My torn shirt allowed my body to come in contact with the cold breeze and my soaking wet bra was doing additional benefit to the attack. *"Adi"* I whispered sobbing *"Adi please save her. They will kill her."* As one of them stood at my back I was unable to find a way but throwing myself in lake wasn't necessary, I knew I was about to die.

I was reluctantly pushing one of the guys who were trying to put his hands on me, when Adi like wind flew from within the trees, directing towards the one who was leaning on me, catching hold of his neck and dragging him past the other two, forcing him against the tree. I could barely see Adi's face but a glimpse of his eyes revealed that he was murderously angry. He was scorching with anger; his loose hand gripped into a fist and other pressing his neck against the tree. To the noises at a distance the other two rushed into the woods. And for Adi just killing him wasn't enough, he wanted to make him suffer, to slowly slaughter him to death. Slipping into unconsciousness, I was seeing Adi for the last time and as someone that I never knew existed. A fury, a rage was plain on his face as he punched and kicked him in his intestines. I wanted to stop him to request him to take that little girl to the hospital but words weren't reaching my throat. As I lay curled with my hands still covering my chest, I felt someone's hands on me. I forced my eyelids to move up a little to see Sara wrapping me with a shawl, her face red with panic; she was saying something I can't make sense of. I tried to point towards the little girl, but I couldn't get to move my hand. Mr. Mathur was trying to stop Adi while other few boys from my class were holding that demon, his whole body covered with blood. Adi wasn't impeding. *"Adi"* I whispered. I saw his face turn toward me impetuously; the transition of his blue scorching eyes to tense was the last thing I saw before losing sight.

"Keep breathing baby. You are my air. Do it for me" Adi's voice like melting honey still held that charm for me. His words still tingled in my numb belly as he carried me with tremendous ease. I was soaking wet but the shawl was a lifesaver. Except for warming me it saved me my virtue. And yes I was trying to survive. I knew they'll do everything they could but until that point all he is asking me is to keep breathing. And God knows that I did everything that was in my control to keep my weak lungs budging. Living seemed to be so difficult and I could feel Adi tormenting as I endured hell.

In my fading cognizant, I felt Adi shifting my weight on a bed. Someone was trying to take off my wet night suite trousers, when I instantly changed the position of my hand, residing it on top of my trousers.

"They are wet." Sara said strained. In the commotion I could hear Mrs. Anjali searching through my injections while Adi disappeared. *"We'll have to wait for a nurse to come."* Mrs. Anjali frowned. She doesn't know how to use injections.

But if there is no medical assistance who is taking care of the girl?

I almost lost control of my forced breathing at that notion.

Adi showed up in no more than few seconds. He was clutching a blanket and my clothes in one hand and a nebulizer in another. When despite my reluctance Mrs. Anjali and Sara started changing my clothes, Adi turned around hesitantly, his back facing towards me filling the drug in the nebulizer. He waited for Mrs. Anjali to inform him that they were done before he set the supple cord of the mask behind my ears and turned on the machine. His acutely beautiful face was throbbing; the blue of his eyes and the red of his lips were now very gloomy in disparity with the exceptionally pale white skin. It was like seeing an angel shattering.

"Keep breathing Jaan." He whispered in my ear brushing his warm hand on my head bowing down on me. *"Nebulizer will eventually calm down the attack but we need to*

inject some corticosteroid in you. This will hurt a little.” He sighed *“forgive me.”* he murmured in intense pain. I wanted to touch him with my numb hand to tell him that a pain of a syringe is nothing compared to the pain I am going through right now witnessing his nearly dead face, but it had been a long evening. I was done fighting. Through the very little that was visible from my vaguely opened eyes I saw Adi plug an injection and then there was a feeling of infinitesimal sting like a mosquito bite on my arm, followed by a blackout. I slipped into unconsciousness.

My eyes opened to a weak light entering through the chink between the tent walls. My hand was twisted in a drip, a bottle of glucose hung on top of my head. Even as sick as I was the only sense that never left me was my sense to smell. I can smell dew and morning carnations, it was early morning. And then the smell that intoxicating scent of my most pleasant dream, *Adi*. I turned my head slightly to find him sitting on a chair next to my bed, his head resting near my hand, he was sleeping. His exquisite face was so beautiful yet still pale. After the near death experience I was appreciating what I had more than ever. It brought back the unclear memories of last night and as I recalled it, I became really uncomfortable.

The girl.

As I tried to get out of bed, he suddenly lifted his head and his warm fingers caught my hand.

“No.” he murmured in his velvet voice getting up, making my head relax against the pillows *“I am here. Tell me what you want.”*

“Adi.” I whispered *“the little girl?”* I looked at him with thousand questions in my eyes.

His face changed a shade.

“Pihu” he whispered *“her name is Pihu.”* His lips brushed on my hand as he talked *“She is in hospital.”*

I sighed in temporary relief. That was better than being dead. And truly the way I remembered her last, cold lifeless in my hands that did come as a surprise.

“How is she doing? Is she conscious now?” I asked, my eyes worried.

He sighed. I could tell it wasn’t good news. I had to wait long before he decided to answer.

“She is not conscious yet. But she’ll be fine.” He answered quietly.

“What happened to her?” I asked impatiently.

He moved away from me sluggishly, resting his head against the chair, not meeting my eyes. He watched his hands as the grave expression on his face told me, it could be something worse than the worst. And he couldn’t find the words to tell me how terrible the world outside my bubble is.

“Did they rape her?” I asked making him a little more uncomfortable with the overwhelming pain in my voice.

He didn’t meet my gaze and kept himself away from me.

“They tried to. But they couldn’t. She fainted.” He explained briefly, embarrassed to touch the details.

“Who told this?” I asked unable to process it.

“They confessed after police arrested them.” He whispered looking up a little.

“Are all three arrested?” I asked, making sure. I remembered two of them running into the woods.

“Two are in prison.” He groaned *“and one is in the hospital.”*

The memory of Adi being so furious, did churn my stomach a little.

He realized that as he gazed at me apologizing *“I am sorry you had to see me like that. I couldn’t control my temper.”* He whispered caressing my hand.

He didn’t have to feel sorry. I am the one who should be sorry. I shouldn’t have called him; I shouldn’t have put him into trouble. I had to pull myself away from that memory.

“Adi why is Pihu unconscious?” I asked desperately.

“They were trying to force...” he sighed on thought of it, his hand covered his eyes as he rested back again *“it caused her internal bleeding.”*

“Ssssss” I cried in pain, turning my head on other side on the pillow, where I couldn’t see him.

There was an awkward silence when he finally broke *“why did you do that?”*

I impulsively turned to look at his angel face, in confusion.

“I told you not to go out in dark.” His voice a little more than tense *“And even if you did, couldn’t you wait for me to come?”*

The moisture in his blue eyes numbed my soul. I didn’t have any defense that was worth it.

“Do you have any idea what they would have done to you?” he asked in deep pain *“I nearly lost you last night. You were slipping through my hands...”* he said sobbing *“and that was not bearable. I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t.”*

“Adi” I whispered shedding tears for the near end we had yesterday “*I am sorry.*”

He didn’t consider my apologies.

“*You asked me to save the girl? Why didn’t you call for me when he ripped...*” he broke at the last words.

“*No Adi.*” I said feeling vulnerable “*I wouldn’t have let him do anything to me. I was about to jump in lake.*” I yanked it in my defense.

He looked back in amazed irritation getting closer to me “*You what?*”

And then I couldn’t get myself to cease the running water from my eyes.

“*If he would have done anything to me, how would I have faced you again?*” I said crying “*I preferred dyeing.*”

He reached for me in desperation; resting his head on my chest he laid on my numb body which strikingly awake at his very touches. His body was warm and I had this sudden urge to protect him as he cuddled his face on my chest. A tear from his eye sieved right through my shirt reaching my heart as he spoke softly “*you can never do that to me. Never.*” He sighed “*There could be no reason whatsoever to take you from me.*”

I caressed his head with my hand, trying to soothe the unintentional ache I have caused him.

It was the drugs in my system, I think because in no more than two seconds I drifted back to sleep.

When I woke up again I had this impulsive feeling of worthlessness as my hand couldn’t find Adi. But a warm hand did reach mine. As I managed to open my eyes sluggishly, a hesitated smile occurred on my lips to see Sara sitting next to me.

Time for some real spanking.

“*Hi*” I whispered, rising.

I realized there were quite a number of people surrounding my bed. Mandy, Raag, Amber and Adi. The atmosphere was tense and my audiences waited for me to tell the story.

“*Hi everyone.*” I said smirking, trying to raise my hand a little “*ouch*” it did hurt with that syringe for the drip dug into my skin.

Adi came to relieve me of that. As everyone smirked and grinned, I looked at Adi in surprise. I forgot to ask how come he knew how to use injections and now, how he knows how to remove syringe from someone’s blood vein.

“*This year the gallantry award goes to Samiya Mittal.*” Someone said distracting me, giving all the military background score. I could tell it was Mandy without looking at him.

My cheeks flushed.

“*Superwoman*” Raag added laughing.

“*Khatron ki khiladi.*” Amber suggested, getting carried away in the fun.

I hated being put on the spot especially with these people who are capable of making fun of me in any possible circumstances.

“*ha ha*” I said shyly, unable to find a derisive reply to that.

Adi finally removed the syringe from my hand taping cotton on it and of course sneering.

“*This is not fair yaar.*” Sara intervened. I was surprised she was standing up for me.

“*She had this big bleeding concussion in her head. She couldn’t ride a bike but she took the courage to run all over the jungles offering her life guard services to drowning people. She really is brave. Don’t make fun of her.*”

There you go. Heavy sarcasm.

“*I was not in jungle.*” I frowned “*and what would you have done if you were at my place?*”

“*I am not asthmatic*” she said in severe irritation “*and I would have called someone for help if I were you.*”

“*There was no time for that.*” I smashed.

She sighed looking straight into my eyes.

“*Then its better let one person die than go and die with her.*”

I knew she didn’t mean that, she was just upset. I tried not to argue beyond that.

“*Okay baba.*” I smiled apologizing “*I am sorry.*”

“*You better be!*” she smacked.

Finally I was on my foot with a healthy breakfast and some steroids in my system. Walking past our tents I saw boys from Joseph school leaving. I turned my head instantaneously towards the restroom as their eyes bore into me. *Those three were from Joseph School*, I realized remembering the uniforms they were wearing. As I entered the bathroom, that sudden remembrance of that little lovely face I encountered here ached in my heart. “*Adi*” I whispered, knowing that with my illness he will now be listening to my every heart beat “*I really want to see Pihu before leaving.*”

I gave myself a sponge bath gallingly, I longed to stand under shower and have a proper bath, but Sara stood there monitoring my each and every move. It was really frustrating to see Adi and Sara team up against me for all the wrong reasons.

Mrs. Anjali didn’t take the risk of leaving me behind again, but instead she allowed me to sit and watch while everyone indulged in river crossing and rafting.

Adi did look well trained as he crossed the river intelligently. The grace and power took my breath away as he came running to me for a quick break.

“*Hey there.*” He smiled pulling the end of my pigtail kneeling down in front of me.

I smiled back timidly.

“*Mr. Mathur will take us to the hospital before leaving.*” He said turning somber “*The girl’s father wants to meet you too.*”

“*Who? Babu?*” I asked confused.

“*Yes. He wants to thank you.*”

A thought flickered “*Adi aren’t they going to need my witness or testimony for the police case?*”

His eyes narrowed.

“*One of them is from a known political family. Babu doesn’t have enough money to pay the hospital bills.*” He paused “*Mr. Mathur went to police station this morning. Police is not registering an FIR*” his voice was sorrowful “*no one cares about our witness.*”

Yes, he is right. No one cares if a poor little girl gets molested in this part of the world. In that instance I wondered did I do the right thing by saving her, wouldn’t it have been better to let her go, to free her of this appalling life where her unfortunate father doesn’t even have the finances to buy her the very necessary justice.

I have to admit, that thought did hurt.

Later that day, me and Adi accompanied Mr. Mathur to the hospital. I could literally hear my heart beating against my chest as we walked into the general ward. The sorry state of the hospital, people sick and dying lying on the floor with families mourning, did scare the hell out of me.

I swallowed hard holding Adi’s arm.

“*These people can’t afford medical expenses.*” He explained gravely.

I realized even if me and Adi were sick we were not the weakest. People out there had troubles much bigger than ours. *God was not unfair to us.*

Herbert Spencer’s phrase “*Survival of the fittest*” has slightly changed its meaning through years. It is now “*survival of the richest.*”

If God was to come right now and grant me my one last choice I would ask him to never let me go out of the high school. The world outside was not worth living.

In all those faces, my eyes desperately searched for Pihu.

“*She has a bed for now.*” Adi whispered registering my prickly condition.

Mr. Mathur stopped on the edge of a bed. She lay with her eyes closed, her hand twisted up with several tubes looking fragile.

As I looked back to my childhood I remembered Barbies, doll houses, fairy tales. *What will she remember?*

I wished that memory will not distort her all other childhood memories.

Babu, who was sitting on the floor in the corner came rushing, his hands folded as he bowed down in front of me crying. Adi caught him too quickly. “*That’s okay.*” He said on my behalf. While Mr. Mathur, Babu and Adi were having a conversation I hesitated walked closer to Pihu. I stroked her cheek with my finger, she didn’t respond. She was still unconscious. It will take her time to recover, I figured out. “*She has a bed for now.*” Adi’s words recurred in my mind. I removed my ring and my earrings, with my back facing towards them promptly and kept it by the side of her pillow. I hoped Babu could get right price for them.

We didn’t stay there long. Everything kind of fast forwarded after that. We had our dinner by the fire at the campsite before going to sleep. I as usual suffered that eccentric feeling of sorrow which haunted me all night, the sorrow of leaving this place behind and also of the overwhelming attraction towards Pihu. I could never be a traveler. I had troubles moving on.

In the morning as I watched the lake for the last time from the window of the bus I had a recap of that night. Still I did not fear it, but for some reason I can’t explain I knew that

night someone called my name, God maybe, I knew something was pulling me inside and I yet refused to leave, again.

It was a short trip back to school. Time runs at an extraordinary pace when you want it to slow down.

My heart sank as we crossed the gates of Pinegrove. It was going to be a packing day and everyone will leave tomorrow. Everyone, including Niya, Sara and *Adi*.

I managed pretty well to put up a show and be a part of the excitement. I couldn't do a major contribution to all the work around but I was definitely on my toes for 8 hours in a row. At dinner as everyone discussed the plans for vacations I ended up being very quiet and so did Adi.

"Why were you not talking?" Adi asked softly after the supper.

"I was listening to everyone." I answered sluggishly. *"Why were you quiet?"* I added.

He gazed at me intensely.

"I was listening to you."

I stared back at him in confusion.

"That night it was your sobbing that reached me before your voice. When I say that I can not hear anything when you cry, I am not exaggerating." He paused *"I am almost deaf since last three hours."*

As he said that the unshed tears started rolling down my cheeks.

"What's it baby?" he pulled me close to his chest stroking my cheek, brushing his lips on my head.

"Nothing. I don't know." I sobbed.

"I am going nowhere. I am here. I won't leave tomorrow." He announced politely hoping that will cease the crying.

It did.

"No it's not that. Please I swear I'll be fine. I am just tired." I lied.

He didn't buy that.

"Samiya" he sighed.

"Hun"

"What did you ask God before I came into your life?"

"A lot of things." I answered shyly.

"I asked for death. My death was an endless dream I dreamt, to go to the other side to that smiling angel." He pulled my face up to look into my eyes *"I don't like this, angels shouldn't cry."*

"Shhhh." I frowned putting my finger on his lips *"That chapter's done. The story goes on."* *"I won't cry and you can't die."*

He smiled and whispered *"I'll try."* before taking off his arms from around my waist. *"We rhyme"* he joked.

Leaving him behind as I walked into the dorm it hurted. To part after getting so close it always does but today it was different. I knew I won't get to see him under the pallid light of stars for a while. And then there would be no beauty to the nights in his absence. The thought that he is somewhere near listening made me feel closer to him. I couldn't imagine how lonely I would be from tomorrow onwards.

13. THE VACATION

When I woke up next morning, bed sheets from all the mattresses were gone. A mattress *unwrapped* in sheet can be very depressing, I can tell you now. I because of medicines slept longer and as I got off my bed I realized that packed luggage has shrunk. Some people have left already. I brushed my teeth and did my braid flying down the plight of stairs to check on Niya. The place was chaotic with parents and students all over the place, and with noises of cars in the parking lot.

Niya's luggage sat on foot of her bed. Sara was there too sitting on the edge, not in school uniform.

"*Ready girls?*" I said leaning against a cupboard.

"*Yup! Mum is here. I am leaving.*"

"*Already?*"

"*Yeah. We are leaving for Canada tomorrow morning. She is in a hurry.*"

"*Your luggage?*" I asked obnoxious.

"*It's in car.*" She said getting up. "*You have nice holidays.*" She said patting Niya's cheek.

"*You too didi.*" Niya answered childishly, squeezing her face on shoulder.

"*Where's aunty?*" I asked trying to sound normal.

"*She is in parking lot.*" She said looking into my eyes; I could see a glint of sadness in them just like mine.

"*I will walk you down.*" I whispered leading her.

The parking lot was overflowing with cars. Most of the car boots were open as parents were fixing luggage in them. Aunty was already in the car, driver in his place, waiting for Sara. I bowed down at the car's window to greet aunty. She kissed my forehead and we talked a little, but I don't have a single clue about what. I finally turned to Sara and as we hugged each other I whispered in her ear "*I will miss you.*" She pressed me closer to her and whispered back "*Don't go out of school with Adi.*"

I mean this is her last farewell words. She is impossible.

I pulled myself back, suppressing smirk "*Happy holidays Sara and take care.*"

"*You too.*" She said winking.

And she was gone.

As I turned around I saw Adi standing there intently next to a car with open boot, with luggage inside. He was leaving too. He was looking more than gorgeous in a black tee and his faded denim. His handsomeness ached as I once again regretted my looks compared to his. I hesitantly walked closer.

"*Hi*" I said not looking straight into his blue eyes. They make me feel dizzy.

"*I don't like Sara.*" He said in polite irritation.

He heard that. I smiled unable to say anything.

"*So?*" I said after a brief pause.

"*So, you are looking very beautiful this morning.*" He said staring at me awkwardly.

If someone will hear that, they'll think he is making fun of me.

I couldn't help blushing but managed to change the topic instantly "*I mean are your parents here?*"

"*Yeah. They are at reception.*" He said turning around to close the boot of the car.

"*Oooo. Nice car.*" I said in amazement, it was a black Mercedes, the same car I saw that day when I came to school.

He smiled timidly "*its dad's.*"

He distracted placed a strand of my loose hair behind my ear and said contently "*Mum wants to meet you*"

Nope. Not such a good idea.

"*Not now Adi. I am not ready. I mean I just woke up, I am in night suite.*" I said reluctantly.

"*You look lovely. There is nothing as beautiful as you are.*"

"*To you.*" I smacked. His lips pressed into a straight line. "*Okay just give me fifteen minutes to get ready.*" I bargained.

He was not happy about it as he nodded just once, stiffly.

“I’ll be waiting.” He said behind me.

Please don’t. I knew I wasn’t going to come back. I don’t care if he gets angry at this one. There is no way I am going to meet his parents.

I was on the top stair when I saw my dad pulling into the parking lot. I rushed back downstairs and suddenly Niya appeared too out of nowhere. My mum jumped out of the car before it was parked and took Niya into her arms. Looking at mum and dad, no one would believe that they have a daughter my age. They still look like a newly married couple in their early twenties. The intensity of mum’s one hug and dad’s one look was enough to make me feel guilty of whatever I was keeping from them. I had to stop myself on several occasions from telling the whole truth of me staying back. *They won’t understand* that was the only thing I had in my defense.

Dad took the permission from headmaster to bail me out for a day. They booked a cottage near Kasauli, just to give me a break.

I was going to my dorm to get a shower leaving a note on Adi’s car when I bumped into him. *“You are going out?”* he asked.

“With my parents for a day.”

“Oh.”

“Adi I have to pack and take shower. It will take sometime. You don’t have to wait.” I suggested.

“That’s your reason.” He asked smiling ironically. I loved his wicked smile.

“Apologize to your parents on my behalf.”

He smiled *“Okay. So I guess I will see you on tomorrow then.”*

I forgot. That was it. If his parents leave, he has to leave too.

“Get permission slip signed from your dad. I have no troubles doing illegitimate stuff, so it’s for your own good.”

I scowled at him. But his anger was much more impressive than mine.

His lips suddenly twitched into an unexpected smile.

“What?” I asked.

“Mum and dad are having a laugh on the note you left on the car.”

“Oh No.” I said throwing my face into my palms.

“Don’t be embarrassed. They are family.” He said pulling my face up.

His eyes lingered on my face as he turned severe.

“Do you know that I am leaving me with you?” He said inaudibly.

“Do you know that you are taking me with you?” I said burning at the touch of his fingers on my cheek and couldn’t leave long after he was out of sight, still burning.

I was already counting on hours left to see him again breaking them further into minutes and then seconds in shower. I abstracted wrote his name on the steamy shower screen and kissed it before getting dressed. I wore jeans and the twilight shirt, which Sara bought me saying *“I dream of being with you, forever.”*

We left our luggage at the cottage before leaving for Shimla.

“Samiya make a list of things you need.” Mama instructed passing me a piece of paper. Car was bumping like a caterpillar, it was impossible to write besides there was not a long list.

“Mama I need school skirts. That’s it.”

“Don’t you have enough of them.” She said amazed, for the fact that she kept two new skirts in the trunk.

“They are very short.”

“How come they are short? You haven’t gained height after class five. You have been wearing the same length for all these years.” She asked confused.

My dad interrupted irritated *“If she is saying they are short. They are short.”* He gave mum a hard look.

Of course. Dad is very old fashioned just like Adi. So honestly mum is scared of me ending up in a skirt that reaches my ankles.

Mum surprised me by not arguing with dad.

“I bought some shorts for you. Maybe we can browse for some cotton t-shirts in Shimla. This place will turn scorching in few days.” Mum suggested.

“Mama I asked you not to buy anything. What about my old clothes?” I demanded.

“Shhhh” she said irritated not liking the thought of it “*What old clothes? You should see girls your age. I wish you were allowed more casuals.*” I and dad exchanged a wicked glance in rear view mirror while mum continued “*You remember Maheem, Rekha auntie’s daughter, the one who is very tall?*” she asked.

“No” I said nodding sideways.

“*The one who won North Delhi Beauty pageant.*”

I don’t know who mum is talking about.

“*Arre who*” mum was trying very hard when dad interrupted “*One who failed class tenth exams and now is doing Jewellery designing from a C Grade college.*”

“*Oh that Maheem.*” I suddenly remembered. Mum raised her brows as Niya grinned. “*What about her?*” I added.

“*She helped me shop around for you and Niya. She is very smart. She said she would love to give you personality development classes next summer.*” She announced pleased.

“*Waow.*” I said nonchalantly.

“*There is whole life to think about that irrelevant stuff. The focus is studies right now.*” Dad argued.

“*World is changing Akshay. Personality sets one’s primary identity, education has become secondary.*” Mum was sticking to her point of view.

“*And where do you put innocence. She is sixteen. She is a recluse person by choice. That’s her personality. She is right for her age.*” Dad debated politely.

Finally there was one thing that they both agreed to.

Innocence, what is its definition? I am in love with a boy and in according to human dictionary in a much underestimated way we are having a so called *affair*, so am I innocent?

“*Samiya*” mum asked surprised suddenly remembering something “*the boy who stood first in CBSE Examination this year, he is in your school.*”

My heart missed a beat; I couldn’t picture myself talking to my parents about Adi in any ways.

“*Yeah*” I said worried looking away from her stare.

“*Do you know him?*” she asked mystified.

At that question Niya pulled her head behind the seat to laugh inaudibly. She will definitely get me murdered.

“*Yeah. He is in my class.*” I answered kicking Niya on her ankle.

“*Do you know he is son of Dr Tanmay Rathore?*” Why does she have to interrogate me on all these questions?

“*Really? I didn’t know.*” I said in fake amazement, and in hope that the discussion will cease.

“*Do you know who Dr Tanmay Rathore is?*” Oh Jesus. Mama, what’s wrong with you?

To that question dad answered impatiently and with a sound of an almost religious devotion “*He did heart by pass surgery for Bade Papa. He saved his life.*”

Bade papa, my grandfather got that surgery done after his second heart attack. I didn’t know how much I owed to Adi in how many different ways.

“*He was asthmatic and the Angioplasty failed as well. They told us that Dr Tanmay Rathore was the last option. He gave bade papa 10 extra years to live.*” He said distracted “*Samiya that man is the reason that I want you to become a doctor. Despite the excellence there was greatness in him, which was inspiring*”

Oh, so that trait is something that Adi has acquired from his dad.

“*Which year was it?*” I asked unable to figure when that would have happened.

“*It was 1988 the year your mom and I got married. Bade papa’s operation was the last operation Dr Rathore did before leaving for States.*” He said again with devotion.

After mum fall asleep, as usual, on the rear seat leaving dad to drive and while Niya was bombarding dad with all kind of silly questions, I was thinking of the newly acquired information.

Adi’s father saved my Grandpa’s life, he is the reason that I am studying medical, I mean how tangled or intervened my life was with someone who I barely knew few months ago.

I faced the urge to ask more about Adi’s dad, but I couldn’t. My parents can read me like an open book. I can not afford to take chances.

Dad pulled the car into the closest parking lot to Mall road. For locals Mall road is a shopper’s paradise but I doubt it will please my mum. The road has a number of showrooms, departmental stores and cafes. *And there are three book shops including one that sells very very old books.* So this is definitely my paradise.

We just had the sandwiches mum brought from home and I and Niya were already arguing on where to eat.

“*Mc Donald’s papa. I want to eat burger.*.” Niya requested.

“*Liar. Papa she doesn’t like burger at all. She wants the stupid freebies.*.” I insisted.

“*They are not stupid di. They are very cute toys.*.”

“*Shame on you Niya. Your height is increasing but brain is still undersized.*.” I teased.

She was on the verge of crying, it felt good to have won.

“*Samiya.*.” Mama scolded “*She will eat Mc Donald’s.*.” she emphasized “*You don’t have to, if you don’t want.*.”

When Niya was not looking mum winked at me.

“*Akshay we will shop around a bit before eating. I am not hungry yet.*.” Mum announced.

“*Me neither.*.” I added.

We bought my school skirts first. “*Samiya what beta? This looks like a Ghaghara*.” mum said ridiculed apprehending me in the change room.

“*I like it this way.*.” I replied.

Mom scared of dad, didn’t argue.

Dad and Niya got bored too quickly while I and mum were browsing clothes for me, they went to playtime entertainment to kill time.

We settled for two t-shirts after evading every shop on the street.

“*Mama I want to buy books.*.” I said hesitantly, walking down the street.

“*What books? Novels?*.” her eyes wide opened in amazement.

“*Mama I don’t read novels now. I just need one or two for the holidays.*.” I insisted.

“*Samiya we are letting you stay here so that you can study.*.”

I remained quiet.

“*Okay just one.*.” She murmured.

I jumped to hug her “*Thank you.*.” I said smiling, pulling away in a quick moment. Since Adi I am in this strange habit of getting neurotic with anyone’s closeness, it’s just that I absent mindedly want to pull myself back before getting pushed away.

“*Lets eat first. Aren’t you hungry?*.” She asked.

“*Not for burger.*.” I sighed.

“*What do you want then?*.”

“*Gol gappe, papdi chaat.*.” I said, my mouth watering.

“*For lunch?*.” she asked amazed.

I nodded.

She laughed and leaned to kiss me on cheek “*My baby.*.” She murmured holding my hand.

Playtime entertainment was crowded with kids of all shapes and sizes. There was a full range of games for Video game enthusiasts. Niya was in queue waiting for her turn to DDR, Dance dance revolution, while dad was on phone.

DDR, it is an awesome game. Player has to stand on the dance platform and hit colored arrows laid out on the screen. I just love that game. I sneaked into the line with Niya while mum bought me the ticket. Finally the moment came; I and Niya took the positions on the platform and limbered up. Some euro trash music started playing. And we both danced insanely and as the frequency of the music and the arrows increased so does our speed. God, we were good at it. I could hardly breathe at the end of it. After finishing few rounds we were kicked out of the game due to the number of people waiting. Besides mum someone caught my attention. *Adi.*

As we moved closer, mum shouted “*You were great.*.”

I felt panicked and was sweating, my eyes were on him as he stood there smiling.

“*Adi.*.” Niya ran to him excitedly, catching his sight.

“*Hey.*.” He waved back cheerfully.

My dad was done talking, we both stopped few inches away from mum, Niya and Adi.

“*Mama this is Adi.*” Niya said introducing them “*And Adi this is mama.*”

“*Namaste aunty*” he bowed a little in front of mum, while mum perplexed looked back at him in amazement.

This is everyone’s initial reaction on seeing Adi.

I had to cough a little to bring mama back to senses “*Namaste.*” She replied mutely.

He greeted dad too.

Niya was giving mama a detailed account on the legend of Adi, when two kids came running, almost banging into Adi.

Tiny round faces. Broad features and not more than 18 inches in height. In their dangris and floaters they looked like some cool African American tourists.

Olivia and Oliver.

I fell in love with both of them instantly. I couldn’t stop myself from staring at them, trying to understand what they were talking to each other.

“*Mama this is Samiya, my class mate.*” I heard Adi speaking mutely, in a hesitant way.

I looked up quickly to see a very beautiful white lady, who could not be more than 25 years old glazing at me intently. Though the features were different but still there was some sort of resemblance between Adi and her. It was the calmness, I think. She didn’t say anything but looked at me miffed as if she has seen an angel. Exactly like my mum was staring at Adi a few minutes ago.

“*My mum.*” Adi whispered gesturing talking to me.

“*Namaste Aunty.*” I said inaudibly.

She bowed a little, at loss of words. But an appreciating smile occurred on her lips as she came back to reality.

Adi briefly introduced his family to mine.

“*Where is papa?*” the words were still in his mouth when a clone of George Clooney appeared. He was a very handsome man with a good physique and with a sense of maturity on his face.

“*I am here.*” He smiled, looking at all of us.

He didn’t behave in an unnatural way but took more than a second to apprehend me when I was being introduced.

I was shy to core.

“*Mr. Mittal I have seen you somewhere.*” He said to dad raising a brow, while my eyes on their own accord shifted to Olivia and Oliver.

“*You treated my dad in Apollo few years ago.*” Dad replied politely.

“*Mr. Amrit Mittal, that was your last operation before leaving for States.*” He added in an attempt to help him remember.

“*Oh yes.*” He said nodding “*Mr. Amrit Mittal, by pass surgery. How is he doing?*” he asked curiously.

“*He passed away few years ago.*” Dad replied mutely.

“*Oh*” he sighed “*I am sorry.*”

“*And your mother?*” Adi’s mum asked tensed, looking at dad.

She was asking about my grand mother. She knew her?

“*They both passed away the same day.*” Dad replied intensely “*Did you know her.*”

A sorrow appeared on her pale face.

“*I got to know her in the hospital. She was a great lady.*” She whispered talking more to herself.

After a plausible second of quietness, mum talked undecidedly to Dr Aleko “*were you shopping?*”

“*Actually we are staying in Kasauli. We came here for lunch, kids wanted to eat Mc Donald’s.*” she said in a very calm motherly tone.

Adi’s parents were elder to mine, but according to looks they all were similar, all in their early twenties.

“*We are going to Mc Donald’s too.*” Mum replied gladly.

“*Mr. Mittal where can we buy wine around here?*” Dr Rathore asked dad

Dad laughed as if he shouldn’t have asked that. Dad is a directory to all the wine cellars in the area.

“*I know some really good cellars around.*” He said delightfully.

And they both were gone.

I went to help Adi grab the meals, while mum and Dr Aleko took a table near to the play land.

“*I too.*” He said smiling an enchanted smile.

“*What?*” I asked confound.

“*Dream of being with you forever.*” He replied repeating the quote from my shirt.

I blushed,

“*Olivia and Oliver are very cute. Very very cute.*” I said shrugging.

“*Ha! Spend a day with them and then tell me.*”

I giggled, following him to the table.

“*Adi maybe we can get our babies engineered to give them African looks. I like black babies.*” I said wondering.

“*Great plan, but just for the record we can’t have babies.*” He said making a face.

“*Oho. Why are you so pessimist all the time? Technology is developing, who knows. Maybe we can.*” I said blinking.

He couldn’t help laughing at that.

It wasn’t a minute since we settled down, that mum started her interrogation.

“*How did you study for Exams Aadil?*” She asked, with a respect in which she hardly ever speaks.

“*I had few sleepless nights. I worked really hard. I didn’t do anything except for study the whole year.*” He said exaggerating, smiling crookedly.

My mum was ready to start comparing and lecturing. And he knew that.

“*Oh really. And I thought it was because of the freak memory genes in your body.*” I whispered irritatingly.

He couldn’t help smiling at that.

“*Of course you did.*” My mum replied “*hard work pays.*” She said giving me a hard look.

“*How did you do on exams?*” Dr Aleko asked me in an over polite tone, her eyes still filled with that sudden admiration for me.

I was trying to remember how I did, when my mum spoke for me “*Whole year me and her dad were behind her. With all the effort she still barely got 87%.*” “*We have failed to develop her interest in studies.*”

“*But she works really hard aunty.*” Adi stated, talking to mum, of course trying to get more out of her.

That was fun to him.

“*Work hard?*” She asked cynically “*Her hard work is to sit all day long with a book in hand. And every time you go to check she will be on the same page.*”

“*Mama.*” I said surprised trying to quiet her.

“*What mama. That’s the truth.*” She said firmly.

“*What does she like to do?*” Dr Aleko said smiling “*Maybe she can do that.*”

My mum has an answer to every question.

“*She likes to read novels. That’s it. I don’t know what possible career you can make out of it.*”

There you go.

My prayer paid and the talk finally deviated from me.

Niya, Oliver and Olivia went to play in that giant foamy structure with balls in it.

Dr Aleko hesitated for some reason before she started talking “*Mrs. Mittal I really wanted to meet your mother in law. I did not know that she passed away.*”

My mum looked at her confused and so did Adi and me.

“*I owe her my biggest happiness.*” She paused “*I owe her Adi.*”

What?

“*I used to work in Gangaram hospital at that time. Every day I delivered babies and sight of each baby pushed me further into an unending depression.*” “*Baby was the only thing I wanted and baby was one thing that I could never have. I had a T- shaped uterus, a rare disorder. My chances of conceiving a baby were one in million and even if conceived there was a high possibility of miscarriage.*”

“*That one evening I went to see Tanmay; he was with a patient in intensive care. While I was waiting outside your mother in law came over to me. Tanmay operated her husband. As she thanked me I could feel the energy her body was liberating. I could feel she was someone holy. She asked me if I needed anything. I couldn't resist crying and I asked her, can I have a baby.*” Dr Aleko's expressions were grave and her voice thoughtful.

“*She disappeared. I remember as she turned her back on me it was like God has turned his back on me. I cried my heart out that night. I didn't go to work. As soon as Tanmay left, there was a knock at the door.*” She sighed “*It was your mother in law. She asked me few questions. And while leaving she took out a tiny box and emptied half in a bowl, that was vibhuti, she asked me to eat it for 30 days and pray to God. She was more than sure that it will work.*”

Her eyes filled with water on the memory “*I did as I was told and waited for the miracle to happen. It happened. I got Adi soon after.*” She sighed.

“*Mama*” Adi was about to argue, when she said firmly “*Don't Adi. Don't argue with me on that. I am a gynecologist. Believe it or not it's a miracle.*”

“*I believe you.*” My mum swallowed, thoughtfully.

A brief silence followed “*She gave me the other half of the vibhuti.*” She whispered.

Everything befuddled. I couldn't make sense of what they were talking. Are these people here our mums? Why are they not acting like grown ups?

“*I have the same disorder. I couldn't conceive either. After 30 days of ritual, I got pregnant. I had Samiya.*”

Dr Aleko slightly patted my mum's hand.

“*Did she ask you questions before giving vibhuti?*” She asked mum.

“*Yes. She asked me if I was ready to take the pain that will follow after the happiness of the motherhood.*” Mum said clearly remembering each word of it “*She asked me if I understood the meaning of leaving the body at one's own wish. And the last thing was if my baby could do that, will I be okay with that.*” her eyes flickered to the lines on her palms. “*I said yes to all of them. To me it sounded like a blessing.*”

“*I did too.*” Adi's mum added, embarrassed for some reason.

“*I didn't try to understand the meaning of her question. I was very desperate for baby. But now I think of it all the time. Maybe they have something to do with Samiya's sickness.*” She said quietly “*Samiya has asthma.*” She explained to Dr Aleko.

“*Yeah I believe the same. Maybe that's the reason Adi has...*” Adi's mom got carried away and the word HIV was in her mouth when I started coughing, badly.

This was not the right time to tell mama about Adi.

As they made me drink water Dr Aleko turned to mum “*Mrs. Mittal you got Niya. Was it Vibhuti again?*”

A shade I have never seen, passed my mum's face.

“*Niya is not my biological child.*” She said.

That was it. I frustrated got up to leave the table, when she caught my hand. “*Listen Samiya*” she pleaded, the pain in her voice too transparent.

I couldn't walk away.

“*Niya is Soni's daughter.*” She explained.

“*Who Soni?*” I asked frustrated.

“*Soni was your aya, Nanhe's sister. Her husband died when Niya was in her stomach and she died giving birth to Niya. Nanhe doesn't have any family. I offered to take care of her and then we just couldn't give her back.*”

I was still angry, I couldn't look at her. Niya is mine. She is my sister.

“*If she is not born to me that don't mean that you are not her sister. Both of you are our daughters, both of you are equal.*” She explained not letting go of my hand.

“*Mum you should have never told me this.*” I said irritatingly, getting rid of her hand, walking out on the street.

I knew Adi was following me.

“*What?*” I asked irritatingly turning around to look at him.

“*We have same birth mother, Ms vibhuti.*” He said in a serious expression.

I can’t believe he was making fun of our mum’s story and my grand mother. I started walking and he caught up with me with an exceptional ease.

The girls and the ladies, who stared at Adi like hungry dogs walking past us, were like oil to the fire. Oil to my frustration.

“*What does that make us? Brother and sister?*” I asked without thinking.

“*Idiot.*” He said harshly.

I was. Shouldn’t have said that. And now he was angry too.

“*Well that explains the connection between us. You didn’t just got lucky overnight. It was the vibhuti.*” He said cynically.

How funny? But that was the truth. Maybe he is right. Maybe that’s the reason I got lucky.

“*Yes. You are right.*” I answered thoughtfully.

“*What?*” he was amazed “*No fight?*”

I shrugged.

“*Silly. It’s me who got lucky. We were wrong to think that your grand mum can’t do miracles.*” He whispered “*She brought this cartoon to earth.*” He said raising his hands towards me.

I can’t stay angry with him for long.

“*Forget the Niya episode and go and apologize to your mum.*” He suggested “*If you won’t you’ll regret it whole summer. Trust me.*” He added.

He was right.

I apologized and mum forgave me quicker than I realized.

Mum was talking to Olivia and Oliver, when I saw Adi whispering something to his mum.

“*Mrs Mittal.*” Adi’s mum said politely “*We are staying in Kasauli for a month. I would love to have Samiya at my place sometimes.*”

Oh, so he is using his mum now to hang around with his girl friend.

My mum blushed, a bit embarrassed “*That will be troublesome for you. That’s totally unnecessary.*”

“*No please. I insist*” Dr Aleko requested.

“*Okay.*” mum said obliged “*I will let heady know. That’s really kind of you.*”

And before the conversation was over our dads came back. Apparently they have had a successful trip.

“*So what is your plan, for the evening?*” Dad asked.

“*We are going to Chandigarh, I think.*” Dr Rathore said eyeing Adi.

“*He is supposed to buy me a present for Tenth results.*” He said as a courtesy to explain.

Mum laughed “*he deserves that.*”

“*What are your plans?*” Dr Aleko asked mum.

“*Samiya has to buy some books. Then we are going back to Kasauli. We will be leaving early tomorrow.*” She sighed “*its season so Akshay can’t stay away from work for long.*”

“*Oh!*” Dr Aleko sighed.

So that was it. No one was very keen on the idea to part especially me and Adi. But life isn’t fair.

“*Be ready in the afternoon tomorrow.*” Adi swayed before disappearing.

Mum let me buy three books. To her there were fairly limited means by which she can show her love to me, buying me things was one of them.

We went to monkey point for a stroll, in the evening. On the way back mum’s expression suddenly altered while talking to me. “*Samiya where are your ear rings?*” she asked

petrified. And in a quick glance she saw my empty finger “*Where is your ring?*”

I took a deep breath before telling her the story. Of course I altered few details like, time of the day, number of boys, and my savior and asthma attack. And yes I became Sara in story.

“Mama Sara and I were allowed to go to see the girl in the hospital. She was not in a good condition. She needed a good treatment. So we thought of helping her father financially.” I ended the story in a whisper.

Mum looked at me blankly, her face balanced by the hand on her chin, looking back at me from the rear seat “*I am very proud of Sara. She did the right thing.*” She finally said.

She was not upset with me. Thank God.

“Samiya that gemstone is for your well being.” She said and turned to dad “*Akshay pundit ji said it’s a must for her.*”

“I will call shri ram jewelers.” He looked at me in the rear view mirror “*I’ll courier it as soon as possible. Make sure you wear it on the right finger.*”

I nodded obediently.

In cottage that night after dinner, dad caught me by surprise “*Samiya you are asthmatic, you should take care of yourself.*”

I nodded without knowing what he was talking.

“And don’t lie to your mother again.” He added as I was leaving for the bedroom.

Now I know.

I embarrassed couldn’t look at him again.

I think I can but actually I can’t bluff with him. He is my dad, not the other way around. I wonder if he knew about Adi too.

I lay back against my pillow, stroking Niya’s face. It was completely silent, just for the faded sound of Niya’s breathing. I stared at her letting my mind wander idly, expecting sleep to take me.

“Awake?” a voice freaked me out, and I sat up too quickly that my head started spinning. It was mum “*You scared the hell out of me mama.*” I said tangled.

“I am sorry. I can’t sleep.” She murmured getting cozy under my quilt.

“Me neither.” I shrugged.

“Do you want some coffee?” she asked cringing. I am the heftiest critic of mum’s drinking habits, her obsession with tea and coffee is creepy.

“I don’t think it will help in sleeping.” I suggested in case she can’t see the obvious, but her dropped features made me change my mind “*we can talk. It usually helps.*”

She smiled in consent, clutching my hand, wanting to say something but as if the words weren’t reaching her throat.

“What is it mum?” Her behavior was worrying me.

“Nothing.” She said carelessly. Though not in usual carelessness tone, she was going overboard; mum was a big time over actor. That was second thing I acquired from her genetically.

“okay.” I exhaled “*Mama you can tell me anything, ask me anything, I am your daughter.*” I reminded her in case she has forgotten that there is nothing formal between us.

“Samiya about badi maa.” She broke off mid thought, her fingers moving on my hand nervously “*You are the only person I can talk to. Akshay gets irritated when I talk about this. We are not on the same page when it comes to beliefs.*”

I slightly nodded. I had never seen mum that abstemious.

“As I told this morning I got you because of badi maa.” She smiled “*You know you were her favorite child. She gave people blessings but she gave herself to you. Your faith, your calmness, that’s her reflection in you. She used to say that what happens is supposed to happen. Though she knew future but she never tried to change it. All she used to do was to give courage to people to live through it.*” She swallowed and paused “*She told Akshay not to send you to boarding school; she said if you’ll once cross that line, you’ll never come back again. Akshay does things his way, he didn’t listen to me. But once again two days before her death badi maa asked me to bring you back home. She told me to cherish every second of your presence as you were not mine to keep for long.*”

I had to resist my urge to tell her that my grandmother was roughly accurate. My physical presence has not yet diminished but my soul, yes. It was not my mum’s anymore.

Mum was still quiet fighting for words. I don’t know which way this conversation was heading.

“So?” I asked slowly.

It took her a minute. “*So are you planning to do your college in India or America?*” I was captivated by a sudden shock but mum continued “*I can convince Akshay. We will be happy to arrange everything if you clear your MCAT Exam.*”

I couldn’t bring myself to senses; a part of me knew what she was talking about.

“Oh Samiya.” She sighed “You think I don’t know about you and Adi.” “I knew that something was going on after that letter I received from you. Don’t fight with Niya but I forced the truth out of her.”

I couldn’t speak.

“I won’t lie; I was very upset with you and was finally planning to take you back. I was worried that some guy is just trying to use you. And I know you are stupid enough...But seeing Adi.” She hesitated *“He is something. He is the sort of person who deserves my girl.”* she said stroking my blood red cheek.

I finally spoke, words flowing out in a rush *“Its nothing serious mom. We like each other. Its not that we are getting married or something.”* I was about to say that its twenty first century mum but she interrupted too assertively *“I don’t know him but I know you Samiya. You are way beyond the word ‘serious’. I hope he turns out what he seems.”* She sighed and then her voice was serious *“Why did you grow up so quickly?”*

I didn’t know how to answer that question. “

She kissed my cheek and left.

I fall back on bed, twisting into comfortable position, letting the anxiety crawl out of me. It was a long day.

Before I could know it was morning. We checked out of the cottage resort and went back to school. Dad signed the permission slip and despite my reluctance left twenty thousand rupees with Ms Renu for my pocket money in the vacations.

“It’s good to have some money in your pocket when you are going out.” He emphasized. Some money and twenty thousand rupees is not the same concept to me.

Mum hugged me tightly for a minute, then she got on the car and they were gone.

I mopped around in an almost empty school before going to dorm. I was to stay here alone every night for next thirty nights. It was okay now with the sunlight flowing through the window, but I wondered how scary the nights would be?

I studied for an hour or so and then was going to the library. Adi was coming down the stairs *“Ready?”* he asked cautiously, sensing that I wasn’t.

“Hi.” I said leaning towards him, humorously.

“Hi.” He replied smiling carefully pushing me away, with his hands on my shoulders *“Are you ready?”* he repeated carefully again, steadying me.

“Where are you taking me?”

“We will have lunch at my place and then I am taking you to show dad’s lab.” He said fixing the loose strands of my hair.

Adi’s place. Not such a good idea.

“Can we jump on to the second part? I am not very hungry.”

“Oh trust me you’ll be. At the smell of the Indian food dad is cooking.” He announced derisively.

I found myself laughing.

“Are you sure?”

“Not really.” He said and took a step forward, with an exceptional ease he put me on his shoulder.

Despite the reluctance he carried me to the dorm and placed me on the floor circumspectly.

“Be quick.” He ordered.

His blue polo shirt was complementing the blue of his eyes. He looked striking as always.

“You can come in, there is no one inside.” I said in a low voice.

He has the talent to sense my moods. And right now I was acting a bit flirtatiously.

“No I am fine here.” He said with a slight mischievous smile.

I took my time getting dressed. I wore a Capri and one of the shirts I bought yesterday.

“Let’s go.” I said walking out of the dorm.

And we walked to the parking lot. I was not concentrating on the steps because apparently it was hard to take eyes off the person walking next to me.

My sub consciousness was unexpectedly disturbed by a double chirp sound, Adi pressed the button on the car key. My eyes on their own moved to track the direction of his stare.

In middle of a few acres of barren land, our so called parking lot a car stood that left me as breathless as Adi left me the first time I saw him.

When I found my breath, I looked back at him, this time speechless.

“*Dad’s present.*” He said mutely, smiling shyly.

I nodded slightly.

Swallowed. Still couldn’t speak.

“*It’s a BMW M6 Convertible.*” He answered as a courtesy to my unasked question.

It took few seconds to find my voice.

“*Blue?*” I asked blankly. Blue is the color which you see next to never, in such luxurious cars.

He looked at me confused.

“*You said it was your favorite color.*”

Oh. When he asked me I was unable to form a coherent answer looking into his blue eyes, and yes *blue was my favorite color* in that moment.

When the pleasant shock settled, I asked puzzled “*Who is driving?*”

Driver can’t fit in that car with me and him at the same time and as a matter of fact I couldn’t see any person other than Adi till my eyes reach.

He looked back at me expressionlessly, and raised his hands towards himself. He meant *he was driving*.

“*Oh please. You are not. What made you think I will sit in the car driven by you?*” I asked mordantly.

“*I drive all the time.*” He said in amazed irritation.

“*Doesn’t matter. I don’t sit with people who don’t have a driver’s license.*” I announced, pleased to get a reason not to go to his place.

“*Really?*” he said, hunting for his wallet in his back pocket “*Why don’t you provide me your instruction manual. That way I’ll know your operating system better.*”

I had to try hard not to laugh at that.

“*Here.*” He said putting something like an ID card on my hand.

It was his driver’s license.

“*You are 17?*” I asked like a pure idiot dazzled by his picture on the card.

“*I have links.*” He said. And the card disappeared from my palm.

“*Are you getting on the car on your own or you want some help?*” he asked conceited.

I walked around and got in the car obediently, scared.

I don’t know how he was driving, because to me the street was invisible, I was half sunken into the soft leather seat.

As we passed the school gates, I found a convenient angle to look at his beautiful face and the greenery around at the same time. I had never been in an open car. It felt so nice and airy, like I was on a bicycle.

I tried to suppress a grin. He will probably throw me out if he knows that I am comparing his Crore Rupees car to a cycle.

“*You are being spoiled.*” I murmured acerbicly when he caught me staring.

He smiled.

“*Being spoiled for a good cause doesn’t count.*” He replied indiscreetly. “*Give me the honor of spoiling you this summer.*”

“*Don’t you think I have spoiled myself enough already?*” I asked more to himself than to him. Since Adi I was a changed person.

“*You are opposite of spoiled.*” He said engrossed “*Actually hold on to that thought, and open the toolbox.*” He said.

“*This*” I asked leaning forward to open the box.

“*Yes*” he said mutely. As I opened, he said “*take out this bag.*” I grabbed the paper bag and closed the toolbox.

“*Look inside.*” He instructed.

I leaned back getting comfortable in my previous position removing my thongs, crossing the legs on the seat.

There were two small cardboard boxes inside, I didn’t touch them and moved my stare back to Adi.

He took a quick glance “*It’s not a gift. Trust me. Open it.*” He requested, reading my mind.

I hesitantly took out the box and opened it sluggishly to see a green gem engraved in a gold band sitting gloriously in it. It was my ring.

“*Adi.*” I looked at him confused. “*I bought it from Babu.*” He confessed.

“*When? Did you go to see him?*”

“*Yes.*” He said quietly “*I took mum with me. She did a quick check up on Pihu. She is better now and conscious.*”

I was overwhelmed, the ring didn’t matter but his going back to check on Pihu did. “*Thanks.*” I whispered.

“*You are welcome Jaan.*” He said and I blushed, momentarily under a spell.

“*Feel the ring.*” He requested.

Despite the confusion, I took out the ring feeling it with my finger tips.

There were tiny cavities on the other side of the band, which weren’t there initially.

“*It’s engraved.*” I said mystified turning around to see what it said.

“*To destiny*” it said.

My eyes got stuck on the two tiny words.

“*Napoleon presented a gold medallion to Josephine with these words inscribed on it.*” He said.

“*I know.*” I alleged still absorbing the meaning of the engraving.

I don’t know what those words meant to Josephine to me they were more meaningful than anything else. I was *destiny* of this beautiful angel sitting next to me. What good did I do in last life to be fate of a person like himself.

I wore it vigilantly on the fourth finger of my left hand, whose vein is believed to be directly connected to heart.

“*It’s a part of my heart now.*” I spoke with utter honesty.

“*I told you.*” He affirmed, misunderstanding my love as generosity “*You are opposite of spoiled.*” He was thoughtful “*You are the cleanest thing in creation.*”

His unusual remarks make me uncomfortable and worthy at the same time. In my world only Adi has the ability to do that to me.

In my own maze of thoughts, I didn’t realize that we have come to a stop. When I looked at him a gentle angel’s smile lit his expression “*Home*” he said pleased much more than expected.

In a quick second he was on the other side holding the door open for me. I got down, my attention caught by the house that was sitting on maybe the highest peaks in Kasauli. The exteriors of the house focused on the natural elements of its surroundings. I could see the jungles resting spectacularly in the valley down there. I could smell water, there was a river flowing somewhere in near proximity. It was a double storey house, with an elegant mountain house touch with branches of lush green trees holding it gracefully. I followed Adi nervously.

“*You met them yesterday. They won’t kill you.*” He whispered in my ear “*You can breathe.*”

I wish I could.

I was not good with people, I wasn’t taught how to behave in presence of adults, how to behave when you go to someone’s place. Living in Pinegrove all my life I was more of an uncivilized aboriginal. Just one clumsy mistake which I was truly trying to avoid with every step and that would be it. I would rather be happy with his family not knowing me at all than being disliked. I mean I looked at those six year olds yesterday, the twins. They are much more civilized than I am.

A glass bridge welcomed us over a water feature and into the home; we were in the living area. It was huge, it was spacious. I don’t know what style was it, because it was sort of unique and incomparable. Colombian stone floors and the decks on the other end of the house visible through a glass wall which was so transparent that I will categorize it as invisible. On the perpendicular side of that wall the living area offered an impressive view overlooking the patio and an edge pool to the expansive valley below. Two pillars stood between the living area forming a separate social area accented by stout wood beams, stone floors and a custom fireplace. The detailed stone walls gave it a very cozy look.

“*You like it?*” Adi asked dwelling on each word warily.

“*This is your holiday home.*” I stated, and then very quickly altered the information making it sound more unbelievable “*This is not even your real home?*”

He stared back confused “*Yeah. I guess so.*”

I looked at his face waiting for more to come.

“*What? Does your mother produce gold babies? Or is it your dad fixing gems in people’s hearts.*” I asked momentarily believing that it could be a possibility. People get gold teeth all the time.

The color of his face evaporated.

He fretfully leaned closer and said cautiously “*My parents have hearing abilities similar to mine.*”

Shock held me so sturdily that I was literally captivated by it. That kind of mistake, I wasn’t expecting. And that kind of mistake only I was capable of making.

I was ready to turn around and run out when his hand caught mine, losing that grave mask on his face, *laughing*. “*I am kidding*” he said. I agitated punched him twice in his chest with pure intentions of not hitting him hardly.

He was still laughing when a male voice came from the other end of the narrow cave like passage “*Adi*” the voice confirmed.

“*Yes dad*” Adi answered snickering.

“*Come.*” He walked me through the cave holding my hand.

On the other end of the cave was one hell of a kitchen. Why would doctors need a professional cooking place? *I was really scared to think anything, and was singing some silly Britney spear song in my brains to cover up any thinking processes, who knows, Rathores can possibly turn out to be mind readers.* The adjacent dining area also opened up onto the deck creating a unique indoor/outdoor atmosphere. On the TV screen of the fridge a familiar Indian cook was teaching how much liters of water is needed to make dough from half kg flour. *Gross.* I thought that was common sense.

“*Hi kids.*” Dr Rathore in a huge chef’s apron half covered in flour became visible from the pantry.

“*Hello Uncle.*” I said timidly.

“*I was making Indian for you*” He announced pleased. “*And me.*” he added when Adi gave a sardonic cough.

“*We live on pasta 300 days an year.*” He said leaning closer “*Ethalia can’t cook Indian.*” He explained with his hand on his lips, as if that was something that they weren’t allowed to talk about.

“*Talking about me?*” the familiar polite maternal voice, came closer to us.

Dr Aleko.

She hugged me before I had a chance to greet her and pulled back, but her eyes didn’t leave my face “*Its so nice to have you.*” She said. I could tell it wasn’t just a courtesy, she meant what she said.

“*Thanks for having me over.*” I said doubtfully, unaware if we say that sentence at beginning or end of the meeting.

“*Our pleasure.*” She replied slightly smiling. Thank God, I got that right.

“*Make yourself comfortable.*” She said offering me a kitchen stool, making her way towards the refrigerator.

As she fiddled with the bottle of lemonade Adi picked me up slightly and put me in the chair. I pushed him back hesitantly. “*That’s new.*” He smiled. Thank god his parents weren’t watching

“*Ethalia can you tell me if salt is okay.*” Dr Rathore said holding a spoon of curry to Adi’s mum

She looked amazed “*What made you think I’ll eat that?*” she said poring lemonade into glasses.

Dr Rathore put the spoon into his mouth, and there was this serene happiness a peace on his face on eating that “*You are turning your back on the best kadahi paneer, ever cooked.*” His eyes partially closed.

“*That’s what he said last time and I was sick for a week because of the spices he used.*” She said offering me the glass of lemonade.

I took it tentatively.

“*I will prefer slashing my wrist than eat that.*” she said looking at Dr Rathore, her hand on her waist and another one on the shelf. That’s my mum’s favorite posture, I suddenly realized.

“*Hope you enjoy your sandwiches.*” He said in a firm discontented tone.

Adi was smiling self consciously.

“*Mum I will show Samiya around.*” He announced helping me out of the chair.

“*Sure. Go ahead.*” She said over politely.

I was wondering what to do with the glass of lemonade in my hand when his mum added “*You can carry that with you if you want to.*”

“*Thanks.*” I said inaudibly following Adi.

Across the living area, there was a well stocked library. He gave me time to browse the collection. Mostly they were medical journals, with a small pile of contemporary authors stacked in a trivial corner.

He stood behind me, his arms across my waist, his lips brushing my hair when he whispered as if reading my thoughts “*We can redo the library according to your taste.*” That was much more than I can ask for. I was reticent in an unlike manner. My finger on its own was tracing the rim of a frame. It was some sort of certificate. With Aadil’s name on it.

“*What’s this?*” I asked distracted overwhelmed by his previous statement.

He let me lose, cleared his throat and expatiated softly “*What does it say?*” facing me.

“*United States Medical License.*” I read through it hunting for heavy words.

And then I let it sink in. “*Please don’t tell me that you have a degree in medicine.*” I said too baffled.

He exhaled. “*I didn’t go to medical school. But*” Oh please. No buts. I don’t like buts. They make Adi more impossible for me. “*But*” he repeated timidly “*I have cleared the United States Medical License Examination. I am equivalent to a surgeon.*”

I was getting quick in absorbing shocks.

“*That explains your knowledge of injections.*” I said mutely talking to myself.

“*Why are you here then?*” I asked confused.

“*Dad wants me to do it the traditional way.*” He said quietly.

Oh great.

I struggled to readjust my mind walking besides him. He was chuckling quietly.

“*So you just pretend studying, when you actually know everything?*” I asked trying to make sense of the confusing context.

“*I don’t pretend. I study.*” He said as if it was obvious.

“*Over and over again?*” I asked anxiously. That was creepy.

“*There is so much to study. I can read one book each day of my life, and I won’t be done when I die.*” He explained walking me out of the library.

A huge painting, *well not actually painting*, a huge white canvas with three strokes of blue and red paints occupied the entire wall of the subway leading to second half of the house.

No matter how hard I tried to run my imagination wild, making sense of the art in it, I found it total crap.

“*Is it from a famous artist?*” I asked clearing my throat and trying to keep the humor out of it.

“*Yeah*” He spoke in a lower voice “*It’s a masterpiece. One of its own. Do you know why it is unique?*”

I looked back blankly “*It’s the same blue and red paint which Leonardo Da Vinci used in one of his greatest paintings, The Madonna Litta. Leonardo’s pupil Boltraffio used the remaining paints to sketch this. This has been passed from Alexander 2 of Russia to Hermitage Museum from where dad bought it in auction and we got it transferred from wood to canvas.*”

I looked back surprised, suddenly my whole view shifted. The work looked marvelous and timeless and the strokes magnificent.

“*It’s beautiful.*” I sighed, contemplating, when he broke laughing.

“*What?*” I asked confused.

“*With all that history crap, now you like it. What’s there to like in it? I cleaned my brushes on it and threw it into storeroom. Mum thought plain white canvas looked good on this wall, so she hung it here.*” He was still laughing “*I can’t believe you bought that.*”

I kicked him, too embarrassed.

“*Olivia and Oliver’s room.*” He said walking me inside the door crafted like a tree with branches running all over the wall, still snickering.

I ignored him.

A pop of pink and a tint of blue were marvelously blended to give the kid’s room a boy-girl look.

The low beds the tiny indoor escapes lay muddled but I guess it was their exquisiteness that despite of making them look ugly made them cute.

“*Where are the kids?*” I asked pondering the room.

“*On roof, playing.*”

“*Oh*”

The pictures in animal frames on a doll table caught my attention.

I picked one of the frames for a closer analysis. The twins were infants in that picture, tugged in separate cots in hospital bed maybe.

“This was taken in the orphanage from where they were adopted.” He said not paying attention to the pic.

“Mum was brought up in the same orphanage.”

I looked back expressionlessly but he obviously can dissect my any mood.

“Mum lost her parents in an accident when she was 10” he answered, clearing my doubtful thoughts *“She had no relatives so was sent to orphanage.”*

“Oh” I sighed, lost.

When Olivia flew from the open end of the door, rubbing through my legs chased by Oliver and disappearing, I got imbalanced and despite the immense effort the glass of lemonade dropped onto the floor followed by the picture frame. Both of them touched the ground and scattered to pieces with a horrible sound.

It got me too worried and before I could get on my knees to clean it up Adi caught me.

“Leave it.” He said, his eyes towards the door, looking for someone to clean up maybe.

But I used all my effort to bow down as far as I could to start collecting the glass pieces. *“Leave it. The housekeeper will clean it up.”* He ordered taking the pieces that I managed to pick. In my little reluctance a glass piece cut through his finger and blood started simmering out of the cut. I almost fainted at sight of it, the glass pieces dropped to the floor as my hands moved towards him. He aggressively took a step backward *“Get out of here.”* he said in a firm tone. I couldn’t impede myself from moving nearer to him, he was bleeding, he was in pain, because of me.

“Stay away from me Samiya.” This time he said harshly dwelling angrily on each word. I looked back confused.

His mum came to an abrupt stop, near the mess that I have created. She was analyzing the situation, when Adi ordered *“Mama take Samiya out of here.”* holding his bleeding hand, protecting the blood from dropping on the floor.

“You are bleeding.” She stated worriedly.

“I’ll take care of it. Can you please take Samiya away?” He said for the hundredth time, really pissed.

As she turned to look at me, I hesitantly walked out of the room.

She called for the house maid to clean up and left Adi a first aid box, to walk me up to the end room of the corridor.

I too embarrassed couldn’t speak anything. All I wanted was to leave right now.

“I am sorry aunty.” I said mutely.

She smiled before I could complete my apology, caressing my hand *“Please don’t be. It’s not your fault. Olivia and Oliver are very naughty. With them around we always keep our first aid kit ready.”*

I smiled back hesitantly.

“This is Adi’s room.” She informed me opening the pale white door hidden in one corner of the semi spherical corridor.

The room was lit with the natural light flowing somewhere through all the green on the other side of the walls made of glass. A plane white bed was resting on the corner touching the glass overlooking the forest. Books were scattered on the soft cotton throw in the middle of the room. A small cubicle on the other end had a sleek table and a transparent ergonomic chair with IMac on the top. The cubicle had few shelves occupied by some more books. Other than that the room was clear in a sophisticated way. And this sophistication was very inviting, to me.

Dr Aleko pulled out a bed like couch from under the bed, offering me seat. I sat diffidently, contemplating a hand drawn picture of someone similar to me in a pale white frame on the wall. It was undersigned by Adi. *“That’s you.”* Dr Aleko interrupted my thoughts, picking up the remote pulling out another couch.

I looked away timidly but she kept looking at the frame. *“The very first time I came to know that Adi can see future, I was totally freaked out.”* She said turning to me.

“How did you find out?” I asked curiously.

“He just started walking and he was all over the place calling out ‘ranger’. I couldn’t understand what he was asking for. He was so obsessed with it that he kept crying all day and I didn’t know what to do. Next day Tanmay’s friend gave us his pet dog’s puppy as a present. They named him ‘ranger’” She sighed *“Obviously Aadil was very young to differentiate between a dream and reality but Tanmay figured out, that he was seeing future in his dreams. With Adi, there were many little instances that used to make me worried. For first few years after his birth almost every day I found out something about him.”* Her face was grave *“It’s a horrible feeling when you realize that your baby is not normal in any way.”*

“Weren’t you prepared for the changes beforehand?” I asked dubiously.

“No not at all. I was told that he will have better senses not that he will recite chapters from my gynecology books in spite of the nursery rhymes.” She smiled half heartedly *“Aadil was a self persistent child, he never needed me around. He deprived me of all the things a mother does for child.”*

A strange feeling of pity overwhelmed me.

She read the peculiar expression in my eyes and altered the subject instantly *“Since you he is a changed person. For the first time I feel his presence around, he is not locked in his room with books all the time now. He smiles and talks.”* She smiled wryly *“I wonder if you have hypnotized him?”*

I beamed shyly *“That’s his department.”*

“*Did he do that to you?*” she guessed, astonished.

“*I have lost count of how many people have become victims to his hypnotizing ability.*” I revealed “*He almost proved me mad.*”

“*Did he?*” she asked obviously amused.

“*His innate gifts are very harmful for people living around him.*”

“*That’s not in genes*” she interrupted too quickly “*His natural insaneness is not enough for him so he reads all these books to learn this weird stuff. And amazingly it works.*”

“*It didn’t work on me.*” I smiled back proudly.

“*Really?*”

“*I forget my words when I look into her eyes. It’s not that she has some special immunity.*” Adi appeared leaning against the door, his finger wrapped in a bandage, eating a brown nut bar, talking to his mum.

“*These are all reasons. She is special.*” Her mom smiled prudently, eyeing Adi.

He looked back obliquely “*If you say so.*”

Their little conversation was making me very uncomfortable with all the blood in my veins now pooling up in my cheeks.

“*This is yummy mom.*” Adi said waving the chocolate bar in his hand “*make more of these.*”

“*Did you pick it up from the refrigerator?*” her mum asked panicked for some reason.

“*Yeah.*” He said confused, his eyes scanning the bar.

“*Adi that is the last one. I saved it for Samiya.*” She said disgusted.

“*Okay. I am sorry.*” He said nervously.

“*No. Give it to Samiya. I will make you more, later.*” She ordered, genuinely.

“*She will have it next time.*” He said plainly. I couldn’t believe my ears, he was not ready to share his chocolate, and Adi acting like a kid was very new to me.

His mother was quiet for a second.

“*Give it to her Adi.*” She ordered in a much harsh tone, which oddly enough didn’t suit her very well.

He didn’t move.

I can’t deem that they were taking something so stupid to this level.

“*That’s fine aunty. I will have it next time.*” I alleged in a requesting mode. I couldn’t handle letting these two extremely calm people lose temper for me.

“*Adi are you giving her it to her or not?*” she didn’t even flinch a little at my words.

“*Mum please.*” Adi sighed.

She was on her feet too quickly; I mechanically stood up behind her. Her face was burning red “*This is not going to work Aadil.*” She paused to groan “*What were you saying to your dad yesterday?*” she asked harshly, louder for her usual tone “*You want to go to same college with her*” “*I strongly suggest that you change your attitude if you want to see yourself with her in future.*” She exhaled “*What do you think? Touching you, your blood or either your saliva will kill her. Educate yourself. If you will keep protecting her from yourself for all these wrong reasons, you will lose her. And seeing you lately I doubt if you’ll be able to take it*” Her voice turned into a painful whisper as she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

I sat on the bed blankly, staring at Adi. As his mother’s words sank everything started making sense. His not letting me touch him, the blood on his finger, not sharing something that is eaten by him.

His mother was right; we can’t stay together if all he has on his mind is to keep me away from him. Adi’s behavior was so resentful that it was hurting me. Where could I possibly start resolving things when he is such a huge illiterate?

He stood there still like a pillar ogling back.

My gaze dropped to the floor, as my mind went blank. He ambled towards me hesitantly and kneeled down in front of me. Pulled up my chin a little “*Are you angry with me?*” his soft voice imbalanced my irate mood.

“*What do you expect?*” I asked maintaining any sanity left.

"I am sorry." He whispered crawling closer. He was right there, his face so close to mine. Though I wanted to shout but his beauty as usual stunned my mind. The exotic fragrance that came from somewhere inside his throat as he breathed turned much stronger when he started speaking *"Please forgive me."*

I pulled a little closer as he spoke, in a wild second I tasted his bottom lip dizzily and flinched back on the sudden realization of my act, too embarrassed. And I let my hair fall and cover my face so that he can't see me. As my sluggish breathing took a new pace, he stopped breathing at all. After few seconds I looked up timidly to check on him, he was still too close. His lips deep red, his eyes eager. He raised his hand and confused tugged my hair behind my ear. There was a hesitation in his act but I could feel that eagerness has defeated him.

And then too slowly his cold crimson lips pressed very softly against mine.

His lips gently lingered on mine. They weren't prepared for my reaction and I guess neither was I.

Blood boiled under my skin, burned in my lips. My breath came in a wild gasp. My fingers knotted in his hair, clutching him to me. As I fall back on the bed, his body balanced on me. Comfort or no comfort my lips weren't ready to leave his. I was fighting for breaths when he finally pulled back, leaving me wanting more.

"Are you okay?" he said readjusting me on the soft mattress, having a closer look of my neck. Checking on my inhalation.

"No." I answered playfully.

He smiled cutely, reading my thoughts *"Didn't it satisfy your appetite?"* he asked in reference to the statement that I want to eat him.

"Nope. It made me even hungrier." I muttered honestly.

His marvelous body was partially over mine, his hand fiddling with the loose end of my hair. *"Not more than me."* He said softly not concentrating on my words.

"You can't tell how much I want you." I objected.

"But I can tell how much I want you." He sniffed my hair *"When I touch you, I want to touch your soul. I want 'us' to be one. I want you in ways more than a man can want any woman."* His arm created an inescapable snare around my waist *"and then I know that's impossible which make me want you even more."*

"You don't have to think about all these possibilities and impossibilities. I am here. I am yours. You can do whatever you want to." I said innocently *"You can't hurt me."*

"I wish I couldn't" he said his cold finger tracing my collar bone.

"If I get HIV will we be equal then?" I asked artlessly.

He obviously scowled and pulled back quickly moving away on the pillow, leaving my waist *"Don't ever say that word again"* he ordered firmly.

I hesitantly moved closer and pressed my head on his chest, scared of him. And he couldn't resist forgiving me for long, his arms wrapped on my body protectingly. As we lay there unspoken I was counting on the ways by which I can get HIV. I desperately wanted that virus in my body now that I knew that Adi wanted me but it was just that little difference between him and me which was pulling him back from becoming *'us'*.

"What was your mum saying about the college thing?" that occurred to me belatedly.

"Dad was asking which medical school I am planning to go." He said watching me, as I turned to rest my chin on his chest and contemplate his attractive features. *"I said it depends on where Samiya gets admission."*

I was quiet thinking it over *"What if I don't make it anywhere?"* I spoke out my doubts.

"Good question." That got him thinking. He finally spoke seriously considering all the aspects *"Dad knows people. He can get you a place in India and in America, wherever you want."* *"But"* he added *"that's the last card, I think you will make it on your own."* *"Good"* I sighed distracted, resting my head on his chest again.

He sensed my swiftly apprehensive frame of mind.

"Samiya, I always think of this other life we would have had, if things were not wrong."

"What do you think?" I asked inaudibly.

"Of me not doing the studies in a traditional way. Asking you from your parents, so I have every right on your life. And then letting you chose your own way. Living in these mountains, in this house maybe. Me working at clinic and you cooking at home." *"If you want to."* He added smirking.

"What else?" I asked, tempted to know more.

"Having babies. Genetically engineered babies to give them black skin." He said laughing, I pushed my face in his chest too embarrassed, he was throwing back my fantasies on me.

"What life we will have now?" I couldn't resist asking.

He sighed.

"I will go to college with you."

"And then." I had to ask when he paused.

“And then I will work where you work. I will be around until you want me to.”

“Do you think my parents will let me live on my own. You have seen how conservative they are. What if they want me to get married.” I pushed over for argument sake.

But he got serious about it.

“I will get out of way, if you will want to get married.” He said remorse too clear in his calm voice.

“How will you get out of way? Move place? This is what you call getting out of way?”

“I will figure something out.” He said mutely.

“So you will just disappear? You won’t be worried what happens to me after you leave?”

“I didn’t say that. I will always be watching you without you knowing.” He said too sincerely.

“Oh so you will see me getting married to someone else. To Ian or to Sid.” I paused, too upset, finding ways to hurt him *“Actually you know what I have decided; I will get married to Sid.”*

He growled.

“I know of another way” his lips pressed severely *“I will make your parents forget that they have a young unmarried daughter.”*

Hypnotize them. Great. That answer really ticked me off.

“Why don’t you hypnotize me and make me forget you. Things would be much simpler.” I said harshly.

I thought over my words and got scared on realizing what he would have heard in them.

“I tried, that didn’t work. When I look into your eyes, it’s me who loses mind.” He expatiated cautiously.

We were quiet for a while.

My stomach growled involuntarily, when he got up swiftly to get down on his feet *“Lunch time.”* He said offering me his hand to get up. I got up leisurely and grabbed the chocolate bar sitting on the couch. *“Say sorry to your mum”* I ordered fixing my hair looking in the mirror.

He besieged wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed my ear slightly *“Sorry mama.”* He said cutely.

Though dazzled I turned too quickly on one toe and brushed my lips on his lips slightly *“Its okay beta.”* I murmured before pulling myself away walking out of the door.

Now I knew how to astound him.

He caught up with me *“That was not fair.”* He said mutely in his honey soft voice.

“Everything is fair in love and war, honey.” I muttered crookedly mimicking Ms Anjali.

His parents were already setting up the dining table. Dr Aleko gave a hesitant smile when she saw me eating the chocolate. I smiled back.

I incessantly provided any possible help as a general courtesy, despite no need of my help.

“I have made Chaat for you in the starters.” Her mum announced energized *“Adi told me you like it.”*

“I love it.” I answered diffidently.

Though a little embarrassed I couldn’t resist getting myself a second refill, it was the second best thing I have ever tasted in life. First were Adi’s lips.

“When I die feed pundits chaat on my barsi and shradh. That will make my soul content.” I whispered in Adi’s ear, without giving much of a thought about what I was saying.

He couldn’t resist laughing, *“Cartoon.”* He said to himself.

And then added reflecting on my previous statement, spectating my involvement with the dish *“Make sure you eat chaat on my shradh. That will make my soul content.”*

I scowled. I didn’t like the talk of *him leaving me* in any way.

And then his face was abruptly serious.

The main meal was a funny combination. We had Indian food served with Pizzas.

I took a bit of everything for courtesy sake.

“So where are you kids going?” Dr Tanmay asked Adi offhandedly.

“To the research lab.” He chided with an artificial cough.

His mum groaned “*Aren’t there any other better places to hang around.*”

That statement confused him for a second, he ogled me endearingly “*Do you want to do something else?*”

“*No. Research lab sounds fun.*” I lied, not meeting his gaze for more than a second. I genuinely wanted to show enthusiasm about whatever he likes to do with his free time *and mine.*

“*Good.*” He turned around smiling “*So mum we will be downstairs.*”

I looked at him confused.

“*The lab is in the basement.*” He said consciously. Wow. He tricked me into that one.

After lunch he walked me wryly to the basement through the stairs, which no outsider can ever know exist, as their entrance lay hidden somewhere in the kitchen garden.

The motion sensor lights lit ahead of us as we walked, as if we were chasing them. The corridor ended to semi transparent glass doors. Adi put his palm on the LCD screen on the wall, a green illumination scanned his hand and the doors slide to let us in.

“*Secret doorsss*” I said crookedly singing my words.

He laughed aloud, rolling his eyes “*We have it secure because of Olivia and Oliver. Its not that we are making Hulk here.*” he said laughing.

“*They made ‘you’ in one of these labs.*” I joked.

“*Very true.*” He agreed smiling.

I was captivated by surprise when a whole city fell into lights in front of me. The lab was massive, it was separated into compartments and each of them had their names hanging at their doors.

We started the tour with Dr Rathore’s clinic. The devices were marvelous and much more advanced than I could have imagined. There was a huge range of very contemporary laboratory equipment. I heard Adi’s heart beat patent and loud by means other than stethoscope as he generally hears mine.

“*This is mum’s clinic.*” He informed opening door to the last cubicle.

“*What is this?*” I asked touching delicately against huge complicated equipment with screen and all *sorts* of wires hanging.

“*It’s an ultrasonography machine*” he announced without much attention towards me, pulling aside the curtains hanging in middle of the room.

“*What’s this?*” I asked contemplating the box like storage device put in one of the shelves. “*It’s a nitrogen cylinder.*” He answered distracted fixing a slide under the microscope.

“*What’s it used for?*”

“*It’s used in the process of Oocytes cryopreservation.*”

“*What’s that?*” I asked impulsively.

He finally looked up from the eye piece “*Question mark.*” He said smiling.

“*I thought we were here for my tour not for your entertainment.*” I insisted.

“*Yeah. Thanks for reminding me.*” he murmured suppressing a grin “*So where were we.*” “*Yes. Oocytes cryopreservation is the process of extracting and freezing women’s eggs.*”

I looked back amazed “*can that happen in real?*”

“*Anything you can think of.. can happen in real.*”

Our gazes locked for a moment; his deep blue eyes looked suddenly mischievous. Despite his brilliant mind or his incomparable face or his glorious body I guess we were working on the same frequency in that moment. He was having the same thoughts as mine.

“*What are you thinking?*” he gave me an opportunity to speak first.

I started undecidedly “*I was wondering can we freeze my eggs? Just for fun?*”

“*It’s a long process. Its not like freezing hen’s eggs*” he said sarcastically “*and it will be painful, we will have to give you few hormone injections.*”

“*Do you think taking injections is painful for me?*” I asked manifestly.

He nodded as if ‘yes’.

“*Oh please. I have gained perfection in that ‘one’ area.*” I revealed confidently.

Though not on the same page but he finally chose to went along with that.

“It’s a two week process. We will have to give you ten days worth of hormone injections to stimulate your egg production. And then after ten days we will have to take the measurement, do the blood tests and count the number of eggs.” He sighed *“And then a medication trigger ovulation is given and the eggs will be removed from the body using an ultrasound guided needle through the vagina, under sedation. And then we will have to freeze the eggs immediately which will be my job.”*

I looked back amazed yet pleased *“Do you know how to do all that?”*

“Yeah I do” he said raising his brows as if that is something obvious.

“So let’s do it doc.” I said reading his sundry expression *“I am not scared.”*

“Well I am” he replied too quickly, leaning away from me. He gave me all the crap on hurting me with syringe, sedating me and this and that. But All in all despite argument and stuff, I won.

I won’t lie, it didn’t hurt even a little when he pressed the syringe through my skin, maybe because of the measures he took with choosing syringe and strapping my arm or because of the distraction of sugar he shoved in my mouth.

“What does eggs look like? Are they white in color with babies inside them?” I asked as he washed his hands at the sink.

He glared back blankly and after a long pause spoke relenting *“No human chicks need male sperm to hatch and no they are not white and they are invisible to human eye.”* He explained.

“Oh” I sighed.

“I can’t believe they have been teaching you reproductive system for almost a decade.” he said wondering.

I looked back confused, unable to figure why he said that.

And too swiftly he added smiling *“Promise me you will ‘never’ ‘ever’ go near to a hospital for the purposes of health services.”*

He was confusing me *“Not that I’ll want to.”* I said shrugging.

He couldn’t stop smiling *doing his doctor stuff.*

The way he was acting in there, like a grown up or a doctor maybe really *turned me on*, if that’s what they say it.

“What?” he asked oblivious of the amount of time I have been staring at him.

“All of a sudden you are too hot to me. I think it’s the hormone injection you gave me.” I said pressing my lips, making a vaguely staid face.

He laughed aloud.

“First of all, these hormones have nothing to do with sex drive and secondly even if they do they won’t start working instantly.” He turned all mordant *“So girl you better keep your eyes off me.”* *“Okay?”* he asked smirking.

I couldn’t answer; as I was too busy laughing.

The phone on the side wall rang.

“Yes mum!” Adi said smirking.

And then he paused *“Won’t be long.”*

“Mum is calling us upstairs.” He smiled *“Babu is here. I forgot to tell you this morning mum has employed him as a caretaker to this house. He will move in with Pihu once she is discharged.”*

I am not sure how exactly to thank him enough for doing that, I was incredibly happy. *“Thank you so very much.”* I murmured.

“Save it” he twittered *“because I have something else. I am taking you for a drive tomorrow and was planning that we will stop by to see Pihu.”*

“I love you.” I said excitedly throwing my arms around his neck. He with sheer ease picked me up in his arms and said smiling *“Say it again.”* Walking towards the door.

“I love you” I whispered shyly.

“Again.”

“I love you.”

I’d all but forgotten that it was Dr Aleko’s home. It was Adi’s home and I was comfortable in it, my fears seemed unnecessary.

He finally put me down and straightened me as we reached the kitchen garden. I followed Adi to the sitting, where all the sounds of the house were concentrated.

Babu excited rose to his feet as he saw us. His back as of its natural curve bent a bit and he greeted us, excessively obliged. I too shy was trying to hide behind Adi, to let him do all the talking. After a while the meeting suspended and Adi went to show Babu out of the house, leaving me alone with his parents.

And thus my famous fear revisited.

“He speaks for Samiya.” Dr Tanmay said smiling *“Isn’t it strange I have never seen him speaking for himself before. I thought we have failed on teaching him socializing etiquettes.”*

Dr Aleko smiled back *“I told you he is a different person altogether.”*

“I like him this way.” Dr Tanmay wondered out aloud, he turned to look at me *“Thank you beta.”* He said hesitantly.

I should have said something like I didn’t change him or that I didn’t ask him to do that but I just couldn’t, like always.

“Can I ask you something?” his dad said uncertain.

“Of course uncle.” I used all my vigor but still the volume was pretty low.

“Aren’t you scared of getting infected from him?” he asked too barely.

“Tanmay” Dr Aleko interrupted in disgust.

“No uncle. Not at all.” This time I wasn’t fighting for words, they were coming to me naturally *“In fact I wish that I get infected. I want to be treated normally unrestrictedly around him.”*

His parents were quiet for a long minute, absorbing my thoughts, which maybe were insane to them.

“Samiya what are your plans after school?” Dr Aleko asked breaking the awkward silence, smiling *“I mean now that you know that your plans are his plans, so I am just interested.”*

I smiled back.

“I am not like him, I won’t have choices.” I shrugged *“I will go wherever I get seat. He must have told you.”* I added reticently.

“Actually.” Both of his parents started talking at the same time. I couldn’t help myself in controlling the laughter, in joining them.

“You go.” Dr Aleko said offering Dr Tanmay to say it.

“Actually Adi was pushing for doing his MD before he came here, before meeting you. Now he has changed his mind and apparently we have changed ours.” He sighed *“What we are thinking is you can do your medicine degree in Ohio and Adi can do his specialization in the same college. And”* he laid too much pressure on the last word frightening me *“And you can live at our place. We want to do it official, with your parent’s permission of course.”*

As I sat there waiting for someone to wake me up, which naturally didn’t happen, I realized Rathores were proposing me to be in their house, in their lives... *officially* as in like a daughter in law or a wife to their son. Is that a possibility in any ways? Can he be mine to keep for always?

I haven’t yet realized the whole pleasure of this new agenda when suddenly Adi’s fierce voice woke me, in a piercing way *“Samiya get up. I will drop you to school.”*

I couldn’t understand what wrong I did. His mum got up to taking a step towards him, he moved back in an invisibly quick second.

“Adi we were just suggesting. It’s yours and her choice in the end.” She said pleading.

“Mum” his voice was hard and fierce, though I would never admit to him but it was scaring me *“How many times have I told you, that there is no future between me and her.”*

“Why do you think that way?” his mum interrupted.

“Oh please mum.” He said loathing *“Why are you being so mean. You want to kill her to fit me into a comfort zone.”*

His dad got up, too aggravated himself.

“That’s totally disgusting. Your being with her won’t make her sick. There are rules which have to be followed.” He said impulsively.

“Dad we are talking of a lifetime here. You know one petite mistake will be enough to...” he left the words hanging, unable to say it again. And then other thing occurred to him belatedly *“And what are you going to tell her parents? Do you think they will marry their daughter to someone who is HIV positive.”* He exhaled *“I ask you mum if I would have been at Samiya’s place and she at mine, would you have married me to someone with HIV?”*

She was quiet but in pain I could see as she dropped onto the chair, lifelessly *“Probably not.”* She whispered *“You are right. I am acting mean.”*

He talked his parents into it; they were with him on that. In the whole scenario I was the one who felt defeated. I was the one against everyone Adi, his parents, my parents and probably the whole world.

“I don’t care of what everyone thinks. Of what you think. I will make sure now that we are even, just for the sake of it.” I said too harshly, as my breathing started to accelerate.

It made him angrier *“Say good bye to mum. You are not coming back here again.”*

I knew I wasn’t ready for that yet.

As usual my anger faded after showing just a glimpse of it and I got up a little too embarrassed.

His mum hugged me, clutching me close to her, though it was a newly formed bond yet it was strong, maybe that's the possible reason of the pain it was causing me to pull away and his dad waved bye in a grave face as if trying to say "*wish I could help.*"

He unlike this morning didn't open the door of the car for me. The engine roared and within few seconds the whole view diminished behind me. The pace with which the car was moving was frightening. His hand was too tight over the steering wheel and the free hand pulled up in fist. He was smoldering, his face burning red. He didn't look into my direction at all; it was like he didn't want to see me.

I was too big a coward to touch him, or to say even a word in my defense. It was more than intricate for me to get used to his mood swings. But now I knew the cause for their occurrence. It was just one. It was just that *I dreamt of being with him forever*. And to my despair, he wanted the same too but just with ripping away the *forever* part. Why was he doing this to me. He said he wants to give me whatever I want, can't I have that little almost insignificant thing.

I don't need marriage. It's just a piece of paper, believe me. But I need a confirmation to hold on to, a tough affirmation that no he will never change his mind, he will never leave me for any of the crap he throws on my face all the time.

We entered the gates of 'Pinegrove' too quickly than I have realized.

Now that the sun was setting, the school looked lethally drained of life; the view was beautiful and scary just at the same time.

Similar to Aadil.

He drove all the way to the stairs of my dorm and double clutched or raced or did something that the engine of his car kept roaring as he waited for me to leave. I hoped that he will at least look at me but he didn't even flinch. I aggressively released the door of the car, lay down a foot but then changed my mind as if had an adrenaline rush. I turned back too quickly without giving him or myself time to think, I leaned closer to him inhaling deep breath of his too exotic and warm scent and clutched my arms around his neck, I locked my mouth feverishly to his. Pressing against them as hard as I possibly could. It wasn't desire at all- it was need, acute to the point of pain. He struggled with me gently as he could in his surprise, trying to move me away. But he gave up perhaps because he was unable to do that without hurting me or either his need was unbearable in that moment as my own. But whatever the reason he surrendered letting me enjoy him. He wanted to say something but again my lips silenced his and then they started moving in perfect synchronization as mine. His hand twisted elegantly in my hair, while mine were holding onto his. Though my lips shaped around his but it was me who was forceful. My body as much as possible pressed against his on its own. I couldn't live without that, without him, for even a second. And then I wanted more, to press against his marble like chest, to caress every part of his, to love him to core. As he finally succeeded in unbalancing my too comfortable position, my lips lost their hold, but instead of pushing me away he adjusted my head on his chest. The taste of him unlike that day was much stronger. I liked its dry and sun- flavored scent, light yet strong overpowering me and yet that would be an understatement.

"*This was what I was talking about.*" He sighed his voice soft as silk, without any trace of anger "*we can't be together in a safe way. Just like fire and water.*"

"*I guess I am the fire. It's me who burns any which way.*" I said gently caressing the skin on his collar bones, pulling the collar of his shirt to a side.

"*Whatever but we cut each other. I cause you physical pain and you cause me psychological, which might seem petite to you but trust me, its freaking me out.*"

"*Don't you think that it's not a conflict, it's a balance between us? You need me and I need you.*"

"*So that's why you need me. I shouldn't have envied Sara. She has been right all along. It's just about my looks, your physical desires.*" his voice sounded like he was smiling.

"*Or maybe I love you and it's just a part of it.*" I suggested severely "*You are making me feel like a vamp, full of lust and all.*"

He chuckled "*I am just kidding. I want your love any which way. Be it my looks or be it my fate.*"

I sat motionless protected in his arms, on his chest, the safest place to be, in my world.

"*I won't mind us being here, but probably heady will have concerns.*" He said wryly.

"*Good. Hope that happens. He will throw me out of the school and my parents won't take me in too embarrassed of my deed. And I won't have money to go to school and to feed myself, so you'll have to do all that and provide a roof over my head. And maybe we will share the same roof.*" I said building my chain of thoughts.

He suppressed a grin "*or maybe you go upstairs now and I'll see you later.*"

I clutched him even closer for one second and then released him.

"*I don't want you to go.*" I said innocently tearing apart.

"*I don't want to go either.*" He sighed

"*Do you have Ms Renu's office number?*" I asked mischievously.

"*Yeah maybe.*"

"*Call me after 9.00. I will have the ringer on the phone turned down.*"

He smiled back desolately. I had a feeling that my obsession with him, worried him constantly, and it showed up on his face and in his acts occasionally.

Isn't the male chauvinist ego about it, making a girl fall madly in love till the point that she chooses love over everything. What was incorrect with Adi, why was he poles apart from men of *men are from mars and women are from Venus*. Maybe all men are not from Mars; maybe some are from Jupiter or even more theatrical, from moon.

Whatever.

He waited for me to leave and I waited for him, so all in all we both were there for much more than few minutes. He too worried for my safety and all finally gave up, and his eyes didn't leave me until he dropped out of the view entirely.

I didn't want to go up to a bare dorm with more than 50 beds lying all by themselves, watching my every move, me the centre of attention in this ghost city. Where Sara says souls roam in summers and Adi says people leave their voices to be heard later. Of course now that I should least think about it, all that horror stuff was coming back to me, as if I wanted to scare myself too. A jolt of fright stuck me and I found myself running to where I may find life.

Library of course.

I didn't have my key, I banged the door as hard as I possibly could, someone swore in the close vicinity *at the idiot at the door who came to library without a keycard.*

"It's me Sid." I answered uncomfortably.

He appeared, now smiling, holding open the door for me. *"Here have some water."* He said offering his gym bottle.

I too hesitantly straightened up, grabbing it crawling away from where he sat, in a way that he won't realize.

"What are you studying?" I asked flickering my eyes from book to book in the mess created on the table.

Now that he was hypnotized, I was just a class mate to him, I guess Adi gave me a chance to start all over again, without having to worry about giving him wrong indications.

"Physics." He smiled.

"God I hate that word. I mean for you its okay, with your engineering and all. But why would doctors need physics. I have a long list of questions for whoever created the whole education system."

"It's not them, it's you."

"What do you mean?"

"You just don't want to study...anything"

"Sid?" I said it as a question, amazed.

He spoke with a surety *"Hanging around with boy friend won't help. Trust me I have been there. "*

I gave a suspicious stare.

"Not with a boy." He altered the statement swiftly.

"You are right." I murmured suddenly too worried about my studies. *"What should I do?"*

"I am not going to tell you anything." He said ironically *"What's the point you are not going to follow."*

"I will Sid. I will. Just tell me."

"Okay" He swallowed as he said that *"Go and grab your physics books, I promise you, and I'll help you clear any entrance if you cooperate with me this summer."*

Wow. I was almost hopping, too excited.

"I'll be right back." I said getting up too hastily.

"I'll be waiting" he shouted behind me.

For a minute I was just a kid- a kid who had lived all of her life preparing for this one exam. Nothing but just one exam. In that moment all I knew was that I will have to make it, this will be what I have to earn next to Adi. I fearlessly ran all the way back to the dorm, in a damn hurry to get started, before I change my mind. I was on the last stair to dorm when I realized I didn't have my key on me. Oh Christ. What was I supposed to do now? The key was lying safely inside my tracks hanging in the restroom. I in my accelerated breathing reached the dorm door. *He was there. He was back, leaning against my dorm door.*

"Is it you or am I dreaming?"

He was all serious.

"I had to come back." He spoke politely showing a student ID *"there was this problem, that you forgot your key in my car and."* He paused hesitantly *"then there was a bigger problem. You spending night with Sid."*

"You are lying. About the first part. My key is in inside pocket of my track lowers, which are in the rest room." I said impulsively.

"Is that a duplicate copy of my key?" I asked deliberately.

His blank expression altered into a smile full of guilt, as he handed me my fake ID *"Well you broke my locker..so."* he had that in his defense.

I went a little closer to caress the crimson red in his facial cavity *"I love the way you lie."* I whispered.

And without giving him chance to reply I took his hand and pulled him inside. His hand slid to the switchboard but I stopped it “*Don’t. Ms Gladys will come to check if she notices someone is inside.*”

“*I was planning*” he hesitated “*On staying here overnight. Do you think she will come for round?*”

I was umm and aaaas for a while captivated by a pleasant shock as if I have hit a bumper lottery whose ticket I never bought in the first place.

“*No. No.*” I gasped “*Not if I go and see her, before she comes.*”

“*Well then.*”

“*Yeah.*” I hesitated “*That’s my bed.*” I said pointing. “*Of course you have access to my dorm, so you must know where my bed is but just in case.*” I babbled too confused by the pleasant near future.

I went over board on the issue of my psychological safety, when I went to see Ms Gladys.

“*I’ll be fine mam. I am just going to bed now. I have locked the windows and all, it’s safe. And trust me ghost crap doesn’t scare me.*”

She was sensing my nervousness I guess her lips on the tip of her specs swinging in her hand and her eyes contemplating the sweat on my neck. “*You can come to my room, if you feel scared. I have a spare bed.*”

“*Thank you mam.*” “*Good night.*” I said as I turned around biting my lower lip twitching my eyes.

I heard myself praying aloud enough in my heart.

I quickly locked the door, once inside of the dorm. As I stood there inhaling the fragrance of cologne already mixed with the odor of the room, the lamp on my bedside flicked on.

“*All done.*” I sighed walking towards him.

He was on my bed, my pillow tugged vertically behind his back, His feet bare, and his eyes glittering.

“*You should have told me about your visit.*” I smiled stupidly “*I would have put up fresh linen.*”

“*That’s good I came uninvited then.*” He was stern “*I more than like it, this way. It smells like lavender and berryish, of jasmines actually.*” He said confused “*It smells of you.*”

That was this strange divine love in his eyes again.

“*You make yourself at home.*” I rushed towards my cupboard, trying to be quick “*And I will have a quick shower.*”

I could feel his eyes on me contemplating my every move “*Talking to Ms Gladys was tough. I sweat my ass off.*”

He smiled back “*I know I was listening.*” “*Take your time.*” He added politely.

I fledged to shower bare foot, tried to get rid of the anxiousness I was feeling under the running water, it did help a little. I brushed my teeth and used everything in sight for a fragrant breath, pastes, mouth washes and an elaichi dying inside the pocket of my lowers.

I rushed on my toes in my shorts and tee all the way back to my bed and climbed in it too quickly, without doing any thinking further than I already did.

He tugged me close “*You look nice.*”

“*Ha.*” I baffled.

“*I swear upon everything that’s holy.*”

“*Okay. I trust you.*” I lied playfully.

“*You better do.*” He said winking.

“*What did you tell your parents?*” I asked while he was busy unfolding the blanket over my bare legs.

“*I called them saying I am staying at heady’s.*” he smiled crookedly “*I am in a way. This is heady’s*”

I was absorbed in the previous statement. “*Do you stay there a lot?*”

“*Not a lot. Remember when I was absent for a while and showed up in the evening, I told you I wasn’t back in the school yet.*”

“*Yeah.*” I whispered too softly.

“*I wasn’t lying. I was at heady’s*”

“That explains.” I sighed.

“So why do you have my fake ID?”

He cringed. *“For times like these.”*

I gave him an awful stare.

“Well I have used it sometimes.”

“Give me number.” I said trying to sound harsh.

“In the very beginning, when you did not know me, I didn’t get to see you as much as I wanted to, so I crashed here at nights.” He was wondering aloud *“and then when we fought, you used to cry sitting on the bathroom floor after midnight when everyone used to sleep”* he was hurting himself, recalling those memories *“I used to sit outside the bathroom and cry with you.”*

He couldn’t speak after that.

“That’s okay Adi.” I said overwhelmed *“You can keep the key.”*

He was quiet and I was quiet. It was almost time; I had to talk about the evening.

“Adi what was that anger all about...at your home?”

He exhaled.

“Samiya please understand. I can’t give you what you are asking for.” He said caressing my face; his hands were dead cold, they were so soothing in that warm weather *“Promise of a lifetime. When I don’t have any idea if I’ll be alive tomorrow.”*

I opened my lips to say something but he pressed his finger against them. *“I want to give you things that make you happy; I don’t want to give you hope, or a fear or a lifetime of mourning as a widow.” “I told you, I like colors on you. Do you think I’ll ever give you white for the rest of your life.”*

“Adi who knows what will happen.” I argued irritated but he was nodding his head before I could finish.

“No Samiya. No.”

I swallowed back the words which were simmering in my throat, making him angry was the last thing on my agenda right now.

But I couldn’t resist confessing him something.

“Adi you know when you take seven rounds around the fire, you give seven promises to each other, that’s what is labeled as marriage in our religion.” I exhaled slowly *“The whole point of the ritual is to make those promises in the name of God.” “To me the last part is marriage. And I married myself to you a while ago. So you accept it or not, misery or happiness, you are my future, I am not leaving you, ever.”*

His calm breath blew over my head, he was thoughtful.

“What promises did you make?” he asked intriguing me.

“I don’t think you’ll want to listen them.”

“Trust me I don’t like a word that comes out of your mouth. But I guess I bear that too so I’ll survive.”

He was upset with me, already.

It was hard for me to put them to words, but I guess he had the right to know. I started as if dreaming

“For every promise they say, there is a price to pay

They aren’t made easily; they are a debt unpaid

They are my very first decisions, I have thought them through

I know they are meant to be kept, that’s why I have made so few.

Our love is not at all normal, though delicate yet it is a bond

So I promise to bind it always and will try to make it strong.

I promise I’ll be there when you’ll need a hand to hold,

I’ll be waiting by the window even if you leave me in nights long and cold.

Between breathing and loving, I promise I’ll chose the later

And I promise I will let you go, if you think you were meant to do better

I promise I'll try to be a light, you said that illuminates your soul

And I promise to be only yours forever; you are the only person who makes me whole.

I have made these promises to you, only if in my mind

And I'll stand by them, till the end of time."

I sighed, my eyes closed, trying to hold on to those unshed tears, laying on his too smooth chest. He was so still, not moving to breathe even.

"*Adi.*" I whispered quietly.

"*Hum.*" He said in a voice heavy with pain.

"*Am I hurting you?*" I said readjusting my weight on his chest.

"*Not physically.*" He replied gently pulling me back in my previous position, I won't deny I was too comfortable in that.

"*What do you want from me Samiya?*"

"*You already know Adi.*"

"*Put it in words for me.*" he begged.

I was mystified by the poisonous fragrance coming off his skin dragging me away from reality.

"*Give me HIV. Then there will be nothing to worry about.*" I said half sleeping.

I was waiting for his anger which didn't show up. His arms were still wrapped around me so that was a good sign. I too tired of carrying the argument further drifted to sleep. It was a soothing comfort in his closeness, the little circulation of air because of the moving wings of ceiling fan, the moon winking at me from between the clouds, the silent noise of the curtains of the window playing with breeze and Adi's below normal body temperature. I will say that was the best night of my existence. I put all the bags of anxieties and tensions I was carrying since age of 6 on his shoulder and slept like I used to sleep ten years ago, like a daddy's little girl all protected and safe.

Weird, but even with him next to me my dreaming habitual didn't alter. I dreamt of him as usual.

I was with Adi, he was walking me through the woods, it was so real...so vivid...so sensory when he turned to kiss me, unprotected, with much more passion when I woke in the dark, with a sudden shock. It was Adi, he just winced under me. I got up too quickly and turned on the bedside light "*Adi?*" I said, my hands shaking him gently, but he was awake. His face panicked, utterly astonished at the same time. An anxious angel's face, dim in the darkness. His breathing not so calm. He was ogling me as if he has seen a ghost. I don't wear makeup during day so it had to be something else. "*Are you alright Jaan?*" I asked too worried caressing his head, gently kissing on his forehead. He didn't reply instantly.

"*I had a dream.*" He finally gasped.

"*Was it a bad dream?*" I asked, now sighing in relief. He had a nightmare, I thought it was something else.

"*Yeah.*" He said silently, too tense.

"*That's okay. It was just a dream.*" I said cuddling his face with my fingers, which was like an antidote to my burning skin.

He pulled me closer, touching my lips with his. His perfect face was almost severe with the depth of emotion. The kiss wasn't very tender but it was adoring. It made me forget everything. He began the kiss, and he had to end it; I clung to him like spider to his cobweb. On the surface he was pretending to be okay, but underneath something was bugging him. And then a sudden voice echoed in my brain, a fact that I was capable of forgetting.

"*Was it one of those dream's Adi?*" I asked, my words rang too clear, with suspicions.

His stillness was my answer.

"*What did you see?*" I asked forcing him to look into my eyes.

"*Nothing.*" He sighed and pulled me back in his embrace.

The faded grey light of the sky woke me up in the morning. Early morning. Everything was very beautiful in that dim light. I slightly opened my eyes, my heart pounding with doubts, I couldn't feel him against me, may be he left. But I was more than delighted to be proved wrong. He was there, watching me with a strange intensity in his eyes, as if seeing me for the first time.

"*You are here?*" I rejoiced, and thoughtlessly sat there unmoved too happy to show it off properly in an appropriate way. I watched him cautiously, breathing in the smell of his skin.

"*You think I could leave you sleeping, without hearing 'bye' from you.*" He said his voice tender with love.

I blushed.

“So will I see you for the coaching class today?” I was confirming.

“Nope.” He said too quickly. And I was like as if I have fallen into a pit.

“Get ready. I will pick you up in an hour. We are bunking the class.” He said authoritatively.

Bunking. It’s just two of us for the class. I didn’t even have the guts to ask him, *why?*

Again he embraced me too closely, with deep angst as he walked out of the door. I got dressed languidly, my mind still wondering over the last night. I don’t know what went wrong with Adi; the night was more than perfect to me.

Sid didn’t talk to me at the breakfast table. And I as usual failed in apologizing enough. People didn’t like me; I was hurting them all the time. Though unintentionally yet I had a feeling my time was up, something bad was about to happen. And it would be my Karma for sure. They say *Karma is a bitch; it slaps you right in the face*. I was going to get slapped pretty soon.

Adi took all the permissions and stuff, before he showed up in front of the library to pick me. He wasn’t talking, at all, as he walked me to the car.

“Adi are you alright?” I said pleading, his moods were killing me. “Did I do something wrong?”

“I am sorry.” He sighed, guilty “Its not you. I am just...” he cut that thought midway.

“Okay. Where do you want to go?” he asked calmer than before.

I smiled back.

“Actually I was wondering can we go shopping.” I said excited “I want to buy something for Pihu.”

“Of course. Yes.” I could feel he was going over the top now.

We drove all the way to Shimla. The situation was reversed for once in the car today. Adi was *playing the question mark*. He asked me all those silly questions. Silly because they were not intellectual, he was testing my physics, chemistry and biology. I mean it was like my worse fears turning real. How I wished there was a much stronger word to describe humiliation.

“Stop Adi. Please” I literally begged, joining my hands.

He smiled mischievously, “Well you were supposed to this with Sid. I was just helping.”

“It’s okay with Sid.” I smiled cringing “But you have already called me duffer once.”

“That was for other reasons.”

“What reasons?”

“There are so many.” “For a start you spent last night with me.” he smiled wickedly.

I scowled. Now that he was putting it into words, it was sort of embarrassing.

“Okay I have got another one for you.” He said lumbering up for another of his question, which sounded like pig latin to me.

“Adiiii” I shouted, cutting down his volume by covering my ears with my hands.

His laughter clear and loud rang in my ears. It was fun to him.

We hunted books for Pihu and few clothes. “Can we check out a toy shop? I am not going to buy anything, just like that.”

He got all serious “I am not your mum Samiya. Do anything you want to. If buying things for Pihu makes you happy, I am more than pleased to do that with you.” He said raising his hands, making an agreeable face.

“Cool.” I answered, leading him inside.

“What do you want to buy?” he asked courteously, ambling behind me.

“A doll.”

“They have heaps that side.” He said trying redirecting me, pointing towards another rack.

“With a house.” I added sturdily without looking into his eyes.

He smiled, looking down at his feet “Of course.” He added, nodding.

I didn’t have many options, to pick from.

"What's wrong with this one?" He asked trying to keep his cool, when I wasn't too ready to buy it despite his marvelous presentation on the features of the doll house.

"It is missing quite a number of rooms. Study room, prayer room, gym..."

He glared back in amazed irritation *"This is a house for people with mediocre income. You know how hard it is..."* He broke out midway, laughing, *"Let's buy this one. I promise I'll build her few extra rooms on top of it."*

I agreed, didn't have any choice.

It was tremendous hard work to fit that thing into car *"Don't you want to buy something for yourself?"* He asked fixing the car boot.

"The things I need are not sold in shops." I sighed.

He didn't say anything to that, until we were back on road.

"So where are they sold?" He never drops things promptly.

"If I had known, I'll probably have had them."

The velocity of the car was moderate, we were in no hurry. I opened the pack of bread and broke it down into crumbs languidly. I was in my happy place right now. And I bet the green trees and the clear blue skies and even Adi were not the only reasons.

"Adi I feel very strongly about Pihu." I whispered *"She doesn't feel like a passerby to me. It feels as if she has some sort of connection. As if I owe her something that I don't yet know of."*

He was quiet, listening.

"Is it because she is handicapped?" I asked mutely.

"Quite possible."

We were silent; the tonal adjustment of the surround system of the cars audio set up was bringing out the peculiar quality of the playing song, which was soothing.

"Which song is it?"

"How to save a life..." he looked a little into my direction *"by Fray. It's a new band."*

"I don't understand the words of the song. But I like it." I whispered talking to myself.

"Get ready" he interrupted excitedly *"here comes the monkeys."*

He slowed the car a little and I threw bread on the sides, they were like players of a football team fighting over crumbs, they ran along with the car. One carrying a tiny little baby around her neck, I couldn't help being partial to her. And then eventually I ran out, but I didn't look back, coward as I am, trust me I was getting some awful stares from hungry people out there.

We hit the road back in form once I cleared the after bread mess.

We were driving along with the fine line of the Renuka reserve forests, when Adi turned down the volume a little. He heard some roar of water dropping from height. His eyes glittered as he said that *"there's a waterfall nearby."* A mere km away a little lane hidden between the mountains, diverging from main road took us to the cascade. It was a backdrop for a local temple. *"Badholia temple"* it said. It laid hidden between the lush green drenched forests, with an old priest moping around, doing his rituals. As soon as we rung the temple bell, within few seconds an army of monkeys clamber out of the rocks, scaring hell out of me. I was hiding behind Adi, when priest gave us *"Prasad"* to feed them. Adi bought the whole lot from punditji but we failed to please them. Monkeys are so human, nothing is ever enough for them.

I sighed *"Have you ever tried hypnotizing monkeys?"* I was considering bringing Adi's ability to use now.

"I tried. It didn't work."

"Really?" I asked amazed. He gave a laugh ogling me. *"Adiiii"* I shouted as he ran for his life, with me hunting him down.

11. PIHU

I was feeling too soggy when we reached the hospital. But I couldn't resent it, because I myself was to be blamed. I started the water fight. *"I think I won't mind a bed here myself."* I said with a shiver. He stopped what he was doing becoming still like a statue, only his lips moving *"Are you cold?"*

“Ha..I was just saying for the sake of saying something. In this temperature, I won’t mind taking my shirt off.” I insisted regretting to have said that. He driving me back to change was the last thing I wanted right now.

“I will mind.... you taking your shirt off...” He debated wryly, before moving back to work.

The hospital was in the same position as we have left it last week. But I was different today, now that I knew Pihu was alright, everything was fine by me.

She was there, all pink, from clothes to cheeks, scribbling on a notebook. She didn’t look up as we entered, too lost in her own world. But Babu was on his feet, obliged as always. He was saying something, when she looked up. Her eyes little moist, lips curved into smile, cheeks tender with tiny pink dimples. She was shy. Babul offered the chairs but I hesitantly went around sitting next to her on her bed. I desperately wanted to pull her up in my arms and hug her close to myself, but I guess that’s not a normal protocol you follow with a stranger, so I had to hold myself back. I smiled looking into her pretty black eyes, *“What are you writing?”* I asked glancing over to look at her paper. It was a sketch of Babu, really awesome I would say for someone that age. *“You drew that?”* I asked surprised. She just smiled pulling her face into her pillow, I was making her shy. She was such a doll. I passed the paper over to Adi, feeling too proud boasting her abilities. I was telling Babu that I have got her few books, when she got up hesitantly moving closer, her eyes on my hands; she touched the gem of my ring slightly and looked back at me. Without her saying I actually knew what she meant. *“Yeah. Thanks. I got it back.”* I said politely, caressing her face. She took my hand in both her hands, and closed her eyes. I smiled confused, looking at Babu. He was cautious, *“She is reading your mind. She has a sixth sense. She will see what you are seeing in your mind right now.”*

“Really?” I asked amazed *“Did she tell you that?”*

“Yeah she draws pictures of things she sees in other’s minds. They say you need to have five senses. She is deaf and dumb so that’s her active sense.”

He was still talking, when she blinked at me, opening her tiny arms, offering me to hold her. I wanted to hug her. She saw that in my brain. I overwhelmed, went closer and took her into my arms too quickly as I was scared that the moment will pass. I don’t know what feeling was that, I have never had that before, maybe mother daughter, as it was peace, an immense peace. Adi went by the chemist to buy Pihu’s medicines. I didn’t know how to be of assistance to Babu without humiliating him, but Adi heaved it very well. I and Pihu gossiped, not in the literal sense of the word, but yet that was the best conversation I have had with a girl friend in a long time. Adi’s trip was short; he was arranging medicines at the table sitting next to her, when she blinked asking Adi to come closer to her. Her communication etiquettes brought a vivid smile to his lips, when he was close enough; his head bowed down a little to come to her level, she took his hand and closed her eyes. It took an imperceptibly sudden second to take away the beam from his lips. A plain expression of pain showed up on his face. And then too promptly she opened her eyes, this time shock sucked any trace of shyness or happiness from her baby face. She dropped his hand at once, pulling her face into pillow, her breathing hard, she was sobbing. Babu rushed towards her, she didn’t stop crying. We walked out of there.

“What was that Adi, What did she see.” I asked puzzled.

“I don’t know.” He replied gravely. Something was terribly erroneous, that was clear on his face.

I kept budging him to tell me. But I failed. His face somber, eyes on the road and the lips pressed together. His facial expression weren’t changing as if he wasn’t listening. I couldn’t believe his stubbornness. The light of his cell phone was going on again. The phone was on silent but he very well knew it was ringing for the hundredth time. Swallowing my disgust I reached out and took the call, before he could stop me. *“Hello. Samiya?”* the troubled voice on the other end said.

It was his mum.

“Namaste aunty.” I got hold of my temper.

“Are you both alright? Why is he not taking my call? He hasn’t done any packing his dad is getting mad at me. Tell him to come home right away.”

It felt like ice water has been injected into my veins.

“Samiya are you there?”

“Yes aunty. He is coming home.”

“Samiya aren’t you coming with him? We want you to have dinner with us. We’ll be leaving at 5.00 in the morning and I want to talk to...”

Adi took the phone from me *“Mum we are on our way home. See you in an hour.”*

He waited for her to say something and then he kept the cell down, his face angled towards me, his eyes away from road.

“Are you fine?”

“Where are you going?” I asked without answering his question.

He sighed *“Ohio”*

“Is something wrong?”

Adi’s blank expression told me how bad something was. He took a second to steady his words.

“Just wait for an hour. Dad will explain it to you in a much better way.”

“Are you kidding me?” my voice aggregated, my eyes stuck on his face without bothering to blink even *“you are leaving for states tomorrow. And you want me to wait hour and a half to know ‘why’?”*

“I can’t explain it to you Samiya. You’ll have to wait.” He said in solemn voice as if he was expecting me to understand what he was saying.

“Pull the car on side.” I requested firmly.

“*Samiya..*” He was about to negotiate.

“*Now.*” I commanded.

He reluctantly did what was requested of him.

“*What? Are you going to walk all the way to school?*” He said getting out of the car after me.

“*We are switching places.*” I announced taking the driver’s seat. “*There is no way we’ll make it home in an hour with your driving speed.*”

He was unmistakably on the edge of panic, standing beside the car, watching me ignite the car engine.

“*Now, what made you think that I’ll sit in the car driven by ‘you’ and just to make sure I wouldn’t have done that even if you had a airplane license or maybe Apollo 11’s license.*” He said too confused.

“*You are more than welcome to catch a bus home.*” I said pushing race, I am unsure how he managed to climb on the speeding car. Because it caught more speed than I would have expected.

“*All those mysteries and this is how we are going to die.*” He said, his hand sitting on his right leg ready to take charge of the steering wheel in case I lose it, which would be only possible under two circumstances one is if I die in driver’s seat of cardiac failure instantly or else if the car door break’s open and I fell off the car.

His eyes were firmly on the road. Now that I got a little idea of the speeds and breaks, I put the car into fourth gear and I was surely up on the road a little as if driving chopper, everything rushing behind me. Dad had to see this; he would probably go nuts, because I have failed each one of dad’s home made driving tests for under speeding. He finally gave up announcing, he can’t tolerate his car being treated as rickshaw.

“*Scared buddy?*” I asked ironically, I was using my insaneness in exaggeration, not that he knew of that I couldn’t feel anything down my waist. In that moment I was paraplegic and brain dead.

He couldn’t help laughing aloud. “*For me. No.*” he said fixing my hair band on my haystack “*For you. Yes*”

Now to that, I automatically slowed down a little. *He was with me in the car.*

“*When will you come back from Ohio?*” I asked though I doubted that I’ll let him go in the first place.

“*Hold on to that question. I don’t think it will be a good idea to answer it now.*” His eyes still on the road, without flinching even a little, as if seeing through the mountains at the wider picture “*Slow down a little. A bus is coming followed by another one at the next turn.*”

I did as he said. He was right.

He navigated me all the way back to the home as if walking a blind person.

I heard the tires turn off onto the quiet, damp earth of Rathore’s drive, when my heart started hammering. I still couldn’t feel my legs. Last time I had been here I was told that I was never going to come back here again, and this time I will be told that Adi, Dr Ethalia, Dr Tanmay, Oliver and Olivia will be leaving, and I wasn’t sure if they were coming back again.

I sat their concentrating on steadying my heart beat and thinking positive. While he was there reading all my vital signs, his eyes zeroed on me.

“*Are you ever coming back?*” I asked, realizing soon that he is not going to answer that question.

12. OPERATION

Now that I was in the house, with bags lined up in a corner, Dr Tanmay on phone with the travel agent and Dr Ethalia instructing the house maid and gardener, I realized that they were actually leaving. I was made to sit on the couch in the lounge while Adi excused walking out on the deck with his dad. His mum went to make coffee.

I sat there staring blankly at nothing.

Then Adi appeared following his dad. His face white and hard.

“*Samiya.*”

My head snapped towards Dr Tanmay, fighting my heart that couldn’t get enough of seeing Adi.

“*Yes?*” I said turning down the ring in my voice.

Dr Tanmay was sitting on the couch opposite to me, Adi leaning behind him.

“Adi wants me to explain you about the surgery and the bone marrow transplant we are going to conduct on him.” He said his medical doctorish tone kicking in.

My hand flew to my stomach- that’s where my heart was right now- holding tightly. Trying to stop it hammering against my skin. I looked at Adi with few million questions in my eyes.

“We are leaving because I have an operation in two days.” He interjected cowardly.

Dr Tanmay took from there.

“You know how they say HIV can’t be cured.” he paused dramatically *“Well that won’t be true anymore. We can cure it by bone marrow transplant. In this transplant HSC are removed from bone of the donor who is naturally resistant to HIV and is transplanted into the patient. Bone marrow produces the cells that HIV attacks. So by inserting the marrow that produces HIV resistant cells might endow the patient with a means to repel the infection. Along with which we will give him an advanced combination therapy, it’s a very new surgery which will try to eliminate the virus. If we get successful Adi will be back to normal.”* He assured me.

I don’t know about my mind but my eyes lingered on the sculpture in front of me. The beautiful heavenly face of all that was holy to me. Operating him was like a thought of running scissors and knives over the body of an angel. Something was not right about it.

“Have you found a donor?” I asked, predicting maybe that was the reason for urgency.

His dad sighed *“Yes. A while ago” “We have found the best near perfect HLA matched bone marrow.”*

“Near perfect?” I swallowed.

His dad hesitated *“We will never have a perfect match in Adi’s case because of his different human genes.”*

“Why do we have to do it then?” his mum asked settling the tray with coffee mugs on the table.

“Ethalia..”

“No Tanmay. You listen to me. Why Adi has to be the first one? You know how critical this operation is. He is doing fine. Why both of you want to go that way?” His mother responded reflexively agitated.

“I don’t know” his dad said after along pause, gravely *“This will eventually turn into Aids. We have an option to stop it, now, I don’t know if this would be effective at later stages.”*

His mum didn’t deny, sitting lifelessly on the couch.

“Why now? What happened suddenly?” I demanded staring at Adi.

He turned into a sculpture, his face impassive, and his glare glassy, as if he couldn’t see anymore.

“He didn’t want to do that earlier. He came this morning and suddenly he wants it ASAP. I thought it has something to do with you.” Dr Ethalia looked blankly at me and then turned to him *“What’s going on Adi?”*

He didn’t respond at once. Frozen, with no sign of ever moving again. But then his eyes turned tender as he looked at me in helplessness.

“I had a dream yesterday.” He said in strained voice. Then he was quite for what seemed like a long time *“I saw myself being operated. It’s time to do it now. I don’t want to wait for other consequences.”*

That was the dream he had last night. He should have told me, not that I would have understood but still. If he had seen it, if it’s his future, if it’s our future then probably I won’t be able to change it, no matter how hard I try.

Dr Tanmay’s phone started ringing. He took the call and excused himself. There was still a reticence in the room with weaken sound of Dr Tanmay’s conversation.

“Are you going to pack, Adi?” His mum finally spoke out, her voice numb, without any expression.

He took a long glance of me and then disappeared.

She and I were in a strange state of mind, we both unsure if it was happening for good or for bad.

“When is the operation?” I asked mutely.

“Within three days. He wants it done quickly.”

“You were saying its critical?” My breathing was accelerating, my hand still holding my heart; I couldn’t ask what I wanted to.

She chose not to answer that.

And then we both were quiet for a while. Don’t ask why. For some moments in life there are no words.

She was in an awful state as she walked me up to the kid’s room leaving me to find my way to Adi. How quickly things change especially when you least expect them to. Why does this happen? Is God testing our faith? But why does he test in ways which are bigger than our life?

I entered without knocking. It was dark inside his room. My eyes took more than a second to adjust to the discrepancy in luminosity. Few clothes were piled up next to an open bag and Adi was nowhere to be seen. *“I am in here.”* his voice came from the bathroom. I took two heavy steps and opened the bathroom door sluggishly. He was standing in front of the basin mirror, his shirt on the floor, his too perfect body was half naked and there was a captivating smell of aftershave blended with his usual fragrance. A quick glance in the mirror told me his face was wet. He just shaved. I have barely ever registered the fact that he had facial hair. The things that are discrepancies in others case usually end up adding to his too commendable looks. Before he could turn I hugged him in desperation. I wanted to gather my world in my hands. I buried my head in his back, he was as cold as ice, his hands moved to take control of mine and he turned around to fit me into his arms.

“Its difficult today to see beyond the sorrow, but looking back in this memory will comfort you in future.” He murmured to me *“I have thought it through; it’s the right thing for me to do.”*

I let it sink in, hoping he is right.

“Your clothes are still wet.” He said stirring his hand on my back. And then despite my reluctance he let me lose, disappearing. It didn’t feel good; I didn’t want to part with him even for a second at least until tomorrow. He came back with a shirt. *“Here change your shirt.”* He requested placing the shirt next to me, making his way out. I quickly took his hand *“Don’t go. Please don’t leave me for even a second.”* I used every bit of my energy to find words. He was too speechless at my vulnerability as if he wasn’t expecting me like that. *“I’ll be in the room.”* He tried to mold me, uncomfortably. *“Don’t go. Stay.”* I enunciated again, making him sit on the rim of the spa. I took off my shirt, my eyes not leaving his. There was no glitter in them today; they were revealing a suffering similar to mine. His eyes didn’t move to my body even for a wild second. But he dropped his glare to floor when I didn’t put anything on. I took a step in his direction, and touched his cold face with my fingertips carefully; I pulled his face up, to regain the lost contact. His eyes were little moistened, though he wanted to but he couldn’t get himself to shout at me, not when he was leaving me tomorrow morning. I ran my finger tip indolently along the smooth edges of his angel face, finally tracing the sumptuous lips; they were red and wet and were making my entire body desiccated. *“Promise me you’ll stay in touch each moment you’ll be away. Promise me you’ll come back to me As soon as it is over.”* I sighed, the words were like a mourn. My desperation made him susceptible, he pulled me closer *“I promise. You are my final destination. No matter where I go I’ll come back to you in the end.”*

13. GOODBYES

‘Gone- Flitted away,

Taken the stars from the night and Sun

From the day!

Gone, and a cloud in my heart.’

- Alfred Tennyson

As I stand there behind heady’s cottage watching the road, which he possibly would have crossed on his way to Delhi wasn’t ready to give a thought of how much time has passed. I couldn’t remember how long it has been since I saw *him* leaving. It was as if days have passed, but also only seconds.

Dip. Dip. Dip.

The sound of very first rain drops brought back a vivid image, the only image I remembered of rain, me and him sitting in class window. *What is it about rain*, he asked me. I don’t remember what I said but the minutest of expressions that passed his face are still clear in my mind.

One more car, and that would be it. I will leave after that, I promised myself yet again.

I knew there was no point watching the empty road, where once in two hours hardly a car passed. Not that it was too much of wait but he wasn’t coming. At all. Not today at least. He would inform me when that time will come. But it’s not today.

He is in operation right at this very minute. I don’t want to think about it. The weight of that thought is more than too much to handle.

He emailed me when he reached Ohio. I was least expecting that. I had Ms Renu’s phones ringer turned down and was almost spying on heady, ambling outside his office whenever his phone rang. But guess what he chose to communicate via email. All the conversation have been like that for past few days. I reply to every mail, but never once mentioned why is he not calling me? Why is he not listening to my voice and not giving me a chance to listen to his. I have too much pride to say that.

He did finally call. This morning. When heady’s peon came to call me I rushed through almost 200 stairs, in desperation and nervousness. As soon I took the receiver with trembling hands and said ‘hello’, the call disconnected. I waited too long . But he never called back. They must have taken him into the operation theatre. He wasn’t doing that on purpose.

Or else there was this other reason *“you make me weak”* he told me in one of our very last verbal conversations. Love and relationships make people stronger but I made him weak.

