

# **THE FICTIONAL VIRUS**

**Story of hope during a disaster**

**- Avani Jain**

**Chapter One**

## The Announcement

On the night of 24th March 2020, when eight o'clock was the time, darkening leaves on a tamarind tree rooted at the pavement outside a high-storey residential building were not aware of the revolution they were about to witness. It seemed as if they were still trying to unravel the mystery behind the sudden quiet on the roads and air. Their fluttering indicated an attempt to peep through the windows of all sixty flats in the *Block A* building of *Majestic Apartments* to find out, what was going on with the human world? Even in their imaginations, a more peaceful world was not possible. The moonlight too had disappeared that night, probably escaping the responsibility of guiding them to the tumult in the living room of flat number 301.

*"On 22nd March, the pledge of Janta Curfew that we took as a nation..."* The Prime Minister of Bharat was streaming live on television addressing the nation on the pandemic of Covid19. A deadly virus had spread across all the continents and people had been requested to stay at home to contain the infection, and he had dutifully announced his addressal on the vital aspects relating to the menace that was this disease. He was a beefy man in a cyan coat with squircle-shaped spectacles. He was also old, apparently in the late sixties, evidence of which was the greying hair on this partially bald head.

Immediately opposite the television sat Mr. Suresh Bhandari. A paunchy black-brown haired man who kept switching a glance from the mobile phone in his hands to the television screen every fifteen seconds. Now and again, he would also adjust his spectacles or jostle in his seat on the sofa or move his fingers above the mustache aiding to the slight itch on his upper lip. With such largely divided attention, he continued listening.

*"Friends, You are hearing and watching the worldwide situation arising from the corona pandemic. You are also seeing how the most empowered nations have become helpless in the face of this pandemic."*

"Nonsense!" The businessman thought to himself. He owned two retail garment shops in the popular market which had been shuttered for a week now. He had planned to set up another shop in the new market by the end of the year 2020. Instantly calculating the loss of Rupees One Lakh that the situation had incurred upon him, he sulked. It was not possible for him to believe that something more horrific than his helpless circumstances ought to be discussed at the point. He added an expression of disgust for a few seconds and then went normal again. It appeared as if he was justifying his sufferings to the prime minister who shall consider his ailments and make an announcement in his favour.

It was not the clatter of only his silent thoughts that lit up the energy in the room. To his right sat his twenty-year-old fair-complexioned son with short, wavy hair. By appearance, he was a handsome young man wearing a blue T-shirt with the famous Chinese symbol of Yin and Yang printed at the centre. His eyes were lost in the wonderment of 22nd March, the day the prime minister had just referred to.

The leader had requested people in the entire country to come out on their balconies at 5 p.m. and applaud the work of doctors, nurses, and other officials during the pandemic by clapping and bell ringing. The boy, like many, had humoured the idea. "This is ridiculous!" he had announced. At 04:50 p.m., as the sound of claps and bells dawned the face of the society. His father offered him a conch, which he obediently clasped in his hands. As pigeons and parrots flew haphazardly with shock and surprise, never having played a conch before, he practised inside the flat. He had to endeavour ten times before he could produce a sound that was bearable to a human ear. To a person who saw him practise, it would occur as if the conch itself was wailing from the trouble, and out of the want for the boy to stop blowing at its end so clumsily, gifted him the sound.

While he was stepping out of the door, he had pictured around two hundred people standing by the railings clapping enthusiastically. The scene had no appeal in his head before. But as he walked out and stood at the precipice, it took him no time to awe at the grandness of the juncture.

It is rare that a human is happy to realise that he predicted or estimated something wrongly. Not missing a single moment of this happiness, with magic running down his veins, he participated in the event by blowing the conch. Every time that he attempted to whistle wind into the narrow end of the instrument, he would hold it near his mouth and examine it with the bottom of his eye. The trick was to blow right at the centre. He would then close his eyes, let the air out slowly with precision, and experience an energetic peace within his body for about two seconds. While he oathed to get better at blowing the conch, people joyously continued to produce sounds through different mediums. Some kids used party poppers, some banged spoons at steel plates. Two hundred people, individual yet together, produced an energy of oneness which no one wished to let go of. The focus of the old lady who lived on the fourth floor was no more on carrying the walking stick in her hands properly. She had called for a chair and clapped like a five-year-old, sitting with an amusing smile on her face. Everyone knew that this won't last after a few minutes. It was like a hope of togetherness in a crisis one wants to but knows, won't last forever, and it didn't. After fifteen minutes, everyone went inside, and the will to be in conjunction with each other's souls was lost in history, yet it's pieces remained for the days to follow. Later that evening, he stood at the balcony observing the birds who were back at their favourite spots and smiled. His name, Armaan.

*"The irresponsible attitude of a few can risk the lives of your children, your parents, your family, your friends, and will jeopardise the entire nation. For the past two days, many parts of the country have been locked down. These initiatives of state governments have to be taken very seriously."* The streaming continued.

The voice of the prime minister snowballed stronger in their heads, slowly fading away the memories of the past. Even the fifteen-year-old Kavya had stopped thinking about her board exam schedules or Instagram followers and coerced her attention to the TV.

“Papa, water,” she said, handing over the glass to her father he had asked for. The moment the glass was out of her hands, she glued herself back to the television and sat to the left of Mr. Suresh.

In their memories, people remember only what they wish to remember and sometimes tend to miss out on important details. If not, then why would Mrs. Kavita Bhandari, the wife of Mr. Suresh, fall in the chair in the dining area with a worried expression on her face? Looking at her, one could easily gauge the fact that she must have been gorgeous as a young girl. One might flatter her even today for her beautiful eyes and skin, but the truth was that wrinkles had attacked her face, dark circles had buried her eyes, and a frown line had made its home between her brows. Moreover, her heart was now tainted with little crimes of selfishness and injustice she would never commit as a young girl. Despite being aware of these facts, the lady did not ponder over her appearance or character right now. And she also was no more cursing the date of 21st March, when her mother-in-law had declared that she felt alright and could go back to her village but the trains had been cancelled for more than a week. She was rather worried about the future, about an announcement that could make the old lady stay in her house for longer. Had she known that her mother-in-law did not wish her harm, she wouldn't worry, but that's not how she remembered her. And so, she envisioned instances of the silent war that raged between the two of them which was not going to be put to a halt anytime soon, which made her drop in spirits.

*“Learning from health sector experts and experiences of other countries, the nation is going to take a very important decision today. From 12 o'clock, midnight today...Please listen carefully...From midnight today, the entire country will go under total lockdown.”*

All ears were focussed on the voice spurting out of the television.

*“Every state, Every union territory, every district, every village, and every locality is being put under a lockdown. This is in effect a type of curfew. Therefore I request you to remain wherever you are in this country. In view of the current situation, the lockdown shall be enforced for 21 days...”*

Silence fell for a few seconds, which was broken by the laughter of Armaan. It was not appreciated nor criticised by anyone in the room. His father looked at him sternly which made him tone down his gaiety.

“What we feared has happened. It's like we are raging a war!” Mr. Suresh vocalised.

“What about our exams, papa?” asked Kavya.

“It's a Lockdown, Idiot! No exams. The world is about to face something unnatural! It's like it is the end of the world!” exclaimed Armaan.

The father turned to the mother and asked, “Do you need anything from the dairy? I should bring it instantly. Also, check about the medicines.”

While the family conversed their tales, the old lady sitting on a Divan at the extreme right of the hall laid herself down. She closed her eyes pretending to be asleep as she knew the discussion would not demand her presence.

“We already have extra groceries, vegetables, and Mummy Ji's\* medicines. I will put some general ones in a list. Bring milk tetra packs, curd, and cottage cheese.....”

The colloquy continued. Armaan stealthily rushed himself into his room.

## Chapter Two

### The Unwanted Guest

Armaan latched the door and turned to face the chair near his study table. His room carried the least pretence in the entire house. The walls were painted cream, with no wallpapers or stick-ons. The queen-sized bed touched the front wall, and two brown-coloured wooden cupboards stood on the leg-side. A small window crumbled in the corner, and a long clean study table with a laptop placed on its centre, accompanied a heightened book cupboard, and a rolling chair. His room also flourished with a dressing area and an attached bathroom, which were just as unembellished as the rest of the room.

“Lockdown for 21 days! I do not know whether to be happy or sad about it,” he uttered excitedly.

“Why would you be happy or sad?” A husky voice of a man was heard, but no human figure except for the boy was to be seen in the room. As the boy sat on his bed and sighed, it was evident that nothing in the room seemed abnormal to him and he continued.

“Had there been no Lockdown, millions of people would die and more millions would suffer. Nature would finally punish humans for their sins! I would have been happy. Now that there is a lockdown, all the humans will be on a standstill, nature can reclaim itself, and I don’t have to socialise with an unwanted species, which is again good. Although, once this crisis is over, I wonder what we humans will learn. We have a history to get lessons from which we readily ignore, the pandemic might be lost just the same. And more importantly, the thrill will die out, and the world will exist in the same monotony again. This possibility makes me sad,” he completed with a heavy voice.

Laughter echoed in the room followed by the strange voice again--

“I wonder what would it be like if I ever heard you speak like a normal person. You say the words of destruction and disappointment so easily, kid. Tell me, What if you also died of the disease?”

“I wouldn't mind if it brought back prosperity and wisdom to nature.”

“Well, aren’t humans also a part of nature?”

“They are. But they are the most evil, for they have the ability to be kind yet choose to dwell on selfishness and greed.”

“What makes you think they have a choice?”

“Don’t they?”

After a few seconds of silence, the voice replied-- “They do.”

“I need to tell you something. Before I begin, adorn your eyes. I want you to see me when I speak this.” The manly voice now approached not from the direction of the chair, but from near the cupboard, which swung open.

The boy walked towards the cupboard and instantly took out a blue backpack. From the second zip, he extricated a pair of spectacles. They were ordinary-looking

glasses with rectangular frames. Putting on the glasses quickly, he looked first to his left, then to the right. Staring at the top-right corner of the bed, he saw mass looming in thin air. Fading into existence, a man's face. Within five seconds, he could see an entire man sitting on the bed. Not astounded by the magical appearance of a strange man in his room, Armaan perched himself on the edge of the bed. The person who appeared to be in his early forties wore a plain black shirt and dark blue jeans. His hair was short and combed properly over his head. As he grinned, a dimple emerged on his left cheek, which made him look attractive.

"I can see you. Tell me." the boy reclined at the pillow.

"Do you remember the first time we met six months ago?" the man, whose name was Arnold, said softly.

"I do." And suddenly, every detail of the incident flashed before Armaan's eyes. It was a turning point in his life, and he had been brave.

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The last lecture was the dullest. Upon the beginning of break, Armaan, with his group of six friends, walked out of the college premises. Their institute was situated on the outer side of the city at the base of a small hill. A few businessmen had constructed restaurants at different altitudes, and the roads were clean and complete. Seven youngsters climbed up to hang at their favourite restaurant a little below the top of the hill, located opposite a three-way intersection. Armaan nowadays grew uncomfortable in these errands. The girl he liked a lot showed much affection and interest in his best friend. And so, when they placed their lunch orders, and the expression of discomfort was no more hidden on his face, he walked out to get some fresh air. Opposite the gate of the restaurant stood a growing Banyan tree with a round concrete structure built around it securing its roots. He watched the view interestingly. What he couldn't understand, though, was the unusual behaviour of the birds around the tree. A crow was sitting a little above the perch in the air and pecking its beak at something invisible. Another crow flew in and imitated the first one. Now they were just two crows walking around in the air. Thinking of it as the trick of the light, he stepped nearer and put a hand on his head, securing his vision from the blinding sunlight. The closer he walked, the certain he became of what he had seen. And when he reached close enough to get his doubts confirmed, both crows scared away. A pair of glasses dropped on the ground as the birds took a flight. However, he couldn't trace the starting point of the trajectory that the glasses followed. Picking and cleaning them up, he examined the frames and concluded of them being common and old. 'Someone must have thrown them out' he thought. When he put them on, within five seconds, an image faded in. First appeared the face of a man, and then materialised his body. The stranger wore a black corporate suit and lay unconscious at the perch. The boy quickly took off the glasses, and the man disappeared. Understanding the mechanism was not hard for a nineteen-year-old. The man was to be seen only wearing the glasses, and he instantly put them on again.

“Wicked!” he spoke aloud and stared at the man stupidly for a while. Daringly, he extended an arm to feel the mass of his body, if there was any, or was it just an image? While he moved his hands across his arms, which felt real, he heard a voice from the back.

“Bro, you alright?” a friend had called out. “What’s that strange thing you are wearing?” he burst out laughing.

“Just glasses,” replied Armaan.

He felt the urge to convey his eventful findings. He also wanted to request his friend to try on the specs and examine the situation with him, but then thought better of it. Armaan was not an ordinary boy, and what he saw in front of him was not just a strange phenomenon, but a hope for adventure. He was weird in his ways of looking at the world, which had arisen from uncanny movies, fantasy novels, and plenty of time spent on the dark web. The reality that most people happily live in was dry as dust for him. He disbursed days seeking adventure in his wonderment. Meanwhile, he was aware that his friend and most people he had known were a slave to this reality, and with the fear of his theories being ridiculed, or to not have his curiosities taken seriously, or to have his hopes put down for a possible impossibility, he hid his observations. He also wanted his experience to be exclusive.

“Listen buddy, I know it is hard to be around Riya and Aashu at this point. But you have to accept it and move on. Else the group falls apart.” The friend advised without realising that the uneasiness on the boy’s face was a result of an entirely different matter.

“Can you see anything over there?” asked Armaan.

“What? On the tree you mean?”

“Beneath the tree.”

“No. Nothing there. There is an idol of Lord Ganesha on the other side though.”

“You don’t see a man?”

“No. Dude! Are you seriously alright? You are being weird. Do you want to skip the lecture?”

“No, I am fine.”

The other five friends joined them. Ignoring the flushed look on Armaan’s face, they cracked a joke about some professor in pyjamas and began descending the hill. “I will be back in some time.” he had informed them, and they scuttled away.

After gawking at the lying man for a minute, he tapped at him. Noticing a deep scar on the man’s forehead and some bloody scratches all over his face, Armaan then shook him up in an attempt to bring him back to consciousness. He then took out a bottle from his bag and sprinkled some water on the man’s face. In an instant, the face of the man was no more expressionless. The burly body mass squirmed and shut open his eyes. He jumped and gaped at Armaan with scrutiny and confidence, although his body broadcasted how clueless he was.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am Armaan. Who are you?”

“I am Arnold. Oh boy! I am hurt.” He began examining his wounds and held his left arm close to his chest, groaning. “Where am I?”

“You are--”

“What year is this?”

“How hard did you get hit on your head?”

Arnold hesitated for a moment. A frown had appeared over his head. His hands now moved to the back of his skull and pressed at it.

“Badly. What’s the date?” Arnold questioned specifically.

“20th September 2019. It’s a Friday!” communicated Armaan.

“2019? You gotta be kidding me.”

“Are you from another year? From a different time?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“No.”

“No?”

“What do you do, kid?”

“I...I am a student in an engineering college downhill. What about you?”

Arnold halted for a minute and sat on the perch. He looked at Armaan and then at his feet. It seemed as if he was tired of explaining himself even though it had been only a few seconds in the conversation. He wanted to rest and wait. And so he did, for five seconds. It was surprising to him how even after months of tiredness, he could get back on his feet in seconds. It was an art he had learned over many years and was not going to give it up now, even though he wanted to fall back.

“Right. I am a traveller.” Arnold announced.

“Are you invisible?” Armaan enquired nervously. It was still not obvious to him, even his own eyes weren’t trustworthy. He wanted to know from the invisible man himself that the man was invisible.

“Can you not see me?” asked Arnold while he dusted the dirt off his jacket.

“Not without the specs!” Armaan cleared him.

“Right. How did you get them? They were in my hands.” Arnold began rummaging his pockets. “Did you steal them?” He narrowed his eyes with suspicion.

“No. They fell on the ground,” Armaan justified.

“Ok. I need to go. Where am I?” Scanning the surroundings, he began sauntering down and up the hill, Armaan trailing behind him.

“You are on the outskirts of the town *Mistwood*. Which year are you from?”

“3021”

“A century far! So you ARE from the future?”

“You would believe anything. Like a ten-year-old.” Arnold showed a spec of smile for the first time and turned around climbing towards the tree, where he was found first.

“I saw you become invisible. I can believe anything now. Why are you here?”

“I am running. Escaping.”

“From some people in the future?”

“Yes.”

“This can’t be true. It’s like in the movies, books, H.G. Wells. I must be dreaming.”

“Do you want me to pinch you?”

“No.”

There was silence between them for some time. Arnold grinned, looking at the boy in the eye. And then, in no later than a few seconds, began examining the place again, as if looking for a lost item.

“Why is that man staring at us?” Arnold verbalised his query looking in the direction of one of the guards standing outside the restaurant gate.

“Wondering how crazy I am, maybe, Talking to a tree!” Armaan let out a chuckle.

“Maybe you could pretend to talk over a mobile phone and walk me to someplace I could get a first aid kit,” Arnold suggested as he stood up straight and dusted his coat again. This time, carrying a black bag in his hands.

“So we survive another century?” a sad tone embraced Armaan’s voice.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Arnold sighed.

“How are you invisible?”

“I have a quantum intelligent system inside my body.”

“A system?”

“Yeah. Just a small device packaged inside.”

They trudged down the hill exchanging stories, more of Arnold’s than of Armaan’s. In the process of finding a place to stay and means of survival for Arnold, they became friends and scheduled their meetings twice a week. During Armaan’s exams, Arnold, being a genius scientist, would come and help him with the answers. Once a month, they would both plan their weekend at Armaan’s house. The boy would ask his mother to cook six chapatis instead of three, and his mother would be very pleased to do so, oblivious to the stranger in her house. Things changed this month though. The man had come to the house on 19th March and never left. Armaan’s mother was now more dubious than happy.

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“That day, I didn’t just go along with you without knowing you,” enunciated Arnold, sitting on the bed. Armaan traced his mind back towards the present. He could remember each detail freshly and his heart had begun throbbing fast, feeling more alive and energetic.

“You knew me already?” asked Armaan.

“No. I just knew you existed. Someone by the name Armaan existed,” explained Arnold. He was quick to clarify after noticing the vacant and puzzled expressions on Armaan’s face. “I received a letter in the year 3020. A properly stamped and enveloped letter by a man named Sabal. He said that he was the grandson of a person named Armaan Bhandari and told me that I might travel to the year 2019 and meet you and you are trustworthy.”

Armaan looked at him and laughed. The fact that Arnold was invisible and was from the future had made its place in Armaan’s brain for months now. It was a reality to him that he couldn’t escape. Although, he was still not prepared to set belief in other surprises that came his way. How could something be so dramatic and exist for real? Has he been dreaming for six months?

“You are serious?” he asked.

"I am. And this is important. You need to understand." Arnold's voice had grown anxious. "I am sick, kid."

"What are you saying?" Armaan's face grew stern and worrisome.

"The device in my body has been releasing radiations for a year now, and it has been growing rapidly. It keeps getting worse," narrated Arnold robotically, as if the statement had been practised many times in his head.

"Well then, get that device out. The doctors can help you," urged Armaan.

"No. The doctors might get their hands on the residue of this new particle and things might get messy. I cannot risk this. Besides, I am self-healing, you shouldn't worry." Arnold explained calmly.

"Stop talking like those scientists in the movies. This is not a movie! It's your life. You are only forty-five with two children and a great brain and..."

"I am already forty-five and have seen enough of life. My two children are living their lives far in 3021. I am lonely here. I am a nobody. And that's not the point."

Silence embraced the air in the room. There was so much Armaan wished to convey, but words seemed to disappear on their way to his throat. He was confused and anxious.

"What do you want me to do?" he finally asked.

"Make sure the letter reaches this address." Arnold passed a piece of paper to the boy.

"How do you even know about these radiations?" Armaan's voice grew impatient.

"I calculated today. I have medical gadgets. But don't worry, I am working on it. I promise I will be fine soon."

"So you are a doctor now?"

"I am a scientist."

"Not the same thing."

"Not completely different too, I bet! Just do this considering it my last wish or something."

"I really can't believe this. You should get a proper treatment, we don't know how serious--" before Armaan could finish the sentence, a banging on the door was heard. He opened the door quickly. It was his mother.

"Why do you shut the door? Again busy on the phone?" Kavita rebuked.

"I am not on the phone, mummy\*." Armaan said.

"Then who do you keep talking to locked up in your room? The food is ready. Come to the dining table."

"I don't feel like eating. I have an upset stomach. I will have it later in my room."

"Again? Better have some medicine, and then eat after an hour. Let me give you some. Come with me to the kitchen".

Armaan quietly followed his mother.

## Chapter Three

### Story of the Grandmother

Two days had passed since the announcement of the Lockdown, but the experience of receiving the news was still fresh for everyone. News from around the world would play all day long on the television and the instrument could ask for rest only during the night when everyone was asleep. Each member of the family embraced this situation or rather tried to do so, in their own unique way. Suresh would stick his eyes to the phone or TV, complaining he had nothing left to do, while his wife, Kavita, screamed for help because of the bombardment of work in the house, somehow only she was able to notice.

Kavya would spend hours browsing social media to gather ideas for content creation. She would also peruse catalogues and draw sketches secretly in her room. Armaan and Arnold solved puzzles, hosted science classes, read books, watched movies, and learned new languages together.

The only person untouched by any activity was Armaan's grandmother, Sushila Devi. She lay flat on the Divan\* in the living room and saw the sun go up and down through the glass window. Sometimes a pigeon, whom she called Krishna, would come and peck at the window and stare in silence into her eyes for hours. They would speak to each other in a language probably they themselves did not understand. She had no one to narrate these events. Once, when a storm had announced itself two days ago, she called everyone out. "Kavita! Suresh! Kavya! Armaan!". They arrived and celebrated the storm together, but within minutes, went back to their trapped lives, leaving her stranded and forgotten. It was a difficult practice, to talk to oneself when so many faces lurked about in the house. While she was alone in *Mountwood*, it had gotten easier. Now each day was arduous. Her eyes sometimes glittered with a longing for something more, but she would dismiss it for the habit of tiredness and boredom she had learned to live on with. Life was not always this way for her. Once upon a time, she was young even though old, her eyes would sparkle with hope, and her lips wouldn't tremble while talking to ANYONE, let alone her grandkids. And she often meditated on those moments of the past, and one moment of them all the most, which had transformed her life completely.

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It was a cold morning. The Peepal tree that had grown rooted on the outer surface of the terrace wall also didn't dare to command its leaves to quiver. The newspaper boy was late, like most days now. The paper he delivered at 07:00 a.m. reported the temperature drop up to six degrees Celsius on 20th December 2010. The light in the sky had been visible for only five minutes and Sushila Devi rushed upstairs to the kitchen on the terrace. Neither winter nor the wound in her ankle that she got by slipping in the bathroom the other day, prevented her from preparing an early morning tea for her husband and son. Her eldest son had only come in last night to

meet them from the big city. Unlocking the kitchen door, she took out the brass pot and poured some water in it. She smiled when she was able to light the fire to the stove with a matchstick after five perfect attempts. Later, when she put tea leaves and milk in the vessel, she remembered how her grandkid Ashwin had once told her that people in other countries rarely put milk in their tea. They prepare it with lemon, basil, and other herbs mixed in the water, but not always milk.

"That must taste awful!" she thought to herself humorously, probably the hundredth time since she first said it. While the tea boiled, the lady sneaked a walk out of the kitchen. Standing over the fence, her blinking eyes glanced at the market, closed except for milkmen and newspaper boys riding slowly on their bicycles. She then lifted her gaze upwards, staring right at the face of the mountains, or were they hills, her old brain did not understand the difference, not from that far.

Feeling blessed to be living in a town from where the hill could be spotted by opening a window, and the horizon looked wavy and not straight like for most people, closing her eyes, she muttered a prayer. A tiny temple situated at the top of the hill was the address. The next address was the kitchen. Content with the aroma, she poured the tea into the three china cups carefully letting it pass through the sieve. One could say, looking at her, that bitterness could not even touch her soul, and her smile was as precious and extraordinary as a child's imaginative monotony. It was a gift the woman had given herself. As she carefully walked down the stairs, she wondered why her husband, Prem Babu, hadn't called out her name yet.

"Must have overslept" her head invented the possibility. The thought that the man had not overslept more than once in years didn't touch the surface of her brain. Even if it did, she curbed it. Had she not, would be prepared for what was coming.

Laying the tea tray on the iron table bedside, she nudged her husband saying, "You have slept enough! Wake up now!" and sat next to him holding a teacup in her hand. Sipping through the essence of ginger and cardamom, she looked out of the window at the same hills following her through every course of her life in the house. They have been a witness of how joyful the life of the old lady has been, more in her perspective than theirs. Soon enough, when she extended her arms to fetch the newspaper, Prem Babu had still not moved and it was the unusual behaviour she could no longer ignore. That's when she jerked him, "Wake up now! Read me the news. You can't expect me to not hear the news with the tea!"

Her face was horror-stricken when no response advanced her way.

"Raju! Come here! Your father is not moving!" she called. Her eldest son came running to the room and examined the cold skin of his father. He first put his head at the chest of the old man to check for the heartbeat. Then he checked for the pulse by placing his two fingers at the neck.

"What happened to him?" Raju asked.

"He has been asleep since last night and did not wake up at all. I thought he was tired...Had a slight fever yesterday." Sushila Devi muttered.

A frown had appeared between Raju's brows. He felt the skin of his father again, ice cold.

"What is it?" panicked Sushila Devi.

“Let me call the Doctor,” responded Raju, blankly.

“Yes, you do that,” the lady nodded her head fervently as she spoke.

Raju immediately dialed the nearest doctor, who was also an old relative. Sushila Devi gathered some quilts and placed them around her husband to warm the air. Her mind was bursting with ideas and emotions she skillfully neglected. Within fifteen minutes, the doctor arrived. He immediately walked in, took out a stethoscope in his hand, and questioned as he rested the diaphragm on Prem Babu’s chest “What happened to him?”

“He has been asleep since last night and did not wake up this morning. He had a slight fever yesterday so we didn’t bother. But it is so late and he is not moving at all. Didn’t open his eyes.” Sushila Devi narrated. A shiver could be heard in her voice which was concealed well later.

The doctor then revealed a torch from his bag and opened the eyelids of the patient putting the light through. After checking the pulse by placing his two fingers on the neck, he declared, “He is gone. Dead. I am sorry.”

Carefully he covered the face of the body with a quilt and said softly, “It’s the cold. His body couldn’t bear the cold. It’s the third death in the state this week because of this reason.”

Sushila Devi didn’t look at him, she found her escape in the floral design on the part of the bedsheet that still remained uncovered by a quilt. The doctor left the room with Raju. The lady dropped down at her knees and uncovered her husband’s face. A tear trickled down the left eye. She had seen death, but not so closely. A surge of pain and breathlessness possessed her body. She did not understand the reason behind such torture, not that she cared. Now was not the time to understand things. It is not when the guilty is sentenced to death that he experiences the agony at its height. It is the days to come, that mark the journey of suffering and make him reflect. She put her hands on the skin of his cold face and tried to remember the night before when it burnt like molten ash. She was scared after reading the rising temperature, and she shall now face her fear during the cremation. Putting her head down on his right hand, she closed her eyes and pretended to sleep, not wanting to be disturbed, not wanting to be told to wake up.

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“Dadi\*! Dadi!” a voice called out from the back and Sushila Devi got up instantly. Kavya stood in the living room with a plate of chopped watermelons in it. She made an offering gesture without saying anything, and once the grandmother accepted the plate, departed as quickly as the whim of a wind. Sushila Devi wanted to call her back after tasting the first slice, the fruit would have tasted better with sprinkled salt, but thought better of it. Her life was supposedly plain. Bitterness had touched her and the world had witnessed it first sight.

Later that night, when the moon that shone was a waxing crescent, the old lady couldn’t fall asleep as she battled with thoughtful ghosts of the past. The phone screen confirmed the time to be 12:30 a.m. She shared a room with her

granddaughter who was unusually inactive that night. "Why is she not using her phone?" Sushila Devi thought to herself. She then switched on the light by pressing the two-way switch beside her bed to look at Kavya. Eyes closed. She placed her hand on her head, it was burning.

"Mini," she called out Kavya with her nickname. Eyes opened. "Did you take any medicine?"

"Yes," croaked Kavya.

"Where's the thermometer?"

"Bedside table."

Grandmother quickly put the thermometer inside Kavya's mouth, below the tongue. Three beeps on the thermometer, as she had learned from her grandson, alarmed her.

"How much is it?" she asked, showing the digital screen to Kavya.

"Hundred and two degrees," the girl muttered.

Sushila Devi abruptly scuffled to the kitchen. She opened cupboards after cupboards to find the right ingredients. Her old hands though, muddled in their movements, created noise, which could be heard as far as the master bedroom. In no time, Suresh and Kavita came running towards the kitchen. They were certainly surprised to see her dancing around drawer handles in the middle of the night.

"Mummy? What are you doing?" exclaimed Suresh.

"I am looking for cinnamon," replied Sushila Devi without looking up and continuing her search.

"At this hour? What for?" his face was growing impatient. Whether it was because of the broken sleep or the fact that his mother did not consider it important to look at him while answering the question at this hour, was hard to conclude.

"Kavya is sick. 102 degrees fever. She had medicines, but no difference. I am making a potion." explained Sushila Devi and turned her head. There she spotted her daughter-in-law who was dressed up in a Kurta, which she had never seen her wear, and for a second, she was taken aback by the demeanour.

"You should have woken us up then!" said Suresh, calmer than before and rushed towards his daughter's room. Kavita was only turning to trail in the same direction when Sushila Devi interrupted. "Where do you keep the cinnamon?" she asked.

Kavita, still displaying annoyance of the middle of the night racket, took out a little box from the second drawer from the top-middle column, and handed it over to the old lady. Time, one could see, is a very critical aspect of human life. Any process, no matter how highly intended and logical, if not defined in a proper time-frame must be considered chaos. The grandmother instantly got busy with lighting up the stove and pouring substances like basil, cloves, black pepper, turmeric, jaggery, saffron, cinnamon, in the pot. Kavita maneuvered to Kavya's room. The grandmother took another three minutes to join the army. She put the potion to boil, chopped a few onions onto a plate, which she carried with herself to the room. Armaan too had woken up and progressed towards the tumult.

"What happened, Beta\*?" asked Kavita, putting her hand on Kavya's head. It burnt like wildfire. "Should we take her to the doctor?"

"We will have to go to a government hospital. No private doctors will be willing to see her," the father declared blankly.

"She doesn't need a hospital," the grandmother arrived. "It is just the fever from the sudden change of temperature. She has been having trouble for a couple of days."

"What if she has the virus? We should take her," repeated the mother.

"Relax, Kavita. Kavya always has issues with temperature changes. She will be fine by the morning," grandmother spoke softly and began rubbing the onion chunks on Kavya's feet, which are known to lower the body temperature.

"They are only going to put her in quarantine even if we take her to the hospital. No testing kits in the city yet. Besides, she only has a fever. Mini, do you have a cough or breathlessness?" Armaan joined the conversation.

"No, just cold and fever," replied Kavya, feebly.

"Well, alright. You had the medicine, you can rest. We will see in the morning," said the father and walked away yawning, without looking at anyone in the room.

"Could you bring me the potion in a bowl, Kavita? Don't churn it!" Sushila Devi requested. Kavita obediently went to the kitchen and came back with a tray in her hands. The tray with the bowl of potion was placed on the top of the bedside drawer-case. The thermometer now measured a hundred degrees. "Magic of the onions" Sushila Devi called it, who left for her Divan in the living room whilst the mother slept in the bed near Kavya, waking up at regular intervals to check on her.

Sushila Devi had a rough night. Her eyes wouldn't shut and she struggled to not go down the past lane again. Memories came shooting into her head, as vivid as the colours of the rainbow in a pale blue sky.

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It had been a month since Sushila Devi lost her husband. Grief of death had trapped her in grave physical and emotional agony. Blood pressure had risen, migraine grew severe with each passing day, symptoms of diabetes began to show, and depression had fouled her tongue. The grief was personal, but her mind was too dormant to process moral or philosophy in its grasp. Everybody who lives, dies. And yet the cynicism of the unwillingness to let go seemed to grow over Sushila Devi. She knew for a fact that it was not completely the loss of her husband that her heart cried over, but the loneliness that had surrounded her mind and body after his departure. She didn't understand a life without the man she had married at the age of fifteen, and after decades of togetherness, he was taken away from her, which was unfair. The suddenness of the event had made it more tragic. If only fate had provided her with a time window. Maybe ten years or more. When things happen against your wishes, you ought to get angry. And how angry would you be if every minute of your life as you know, gets taken away from you without permission?

"What's done is done. What can we do now? Accepting it as fate, one must move on," spoke Kamla Devi, a woman in a purple saree\* with a crooked nose and braided hair, most of which lay hidden by the part of the Saree that covered her head.

Sushila Devi did not respond. Two more such women were present in the room, all surrounding Sushila Devi on the floor. Her two sons, Raju and Suresh sat in the other room with three old men with turbans on their heads. They were relatives from nearby villages who had arrived for consolation. It was a routine now. Every day, different people from the town or villages nearby would take time to visit the house. For Sushila Devi, it was enraging. While they thought they shared her sorrow, relieving her of the baggage, the lady had helplessness and aggression growing inside. If she was to be lonely, then she wanted to experience it and make peace with it.

Suddenly, a cracking voice was heard. Kavita, her daughter-in-law lost the grip of the brass vessel and all the milk fell on the floor. This little instance was enough to trigger the old lady's exasperation of thirty days to churn out.

"Can't you hold a single vessel properly! How useless are you!" she retorted in a rather loud voice. "Can't hold a small vessel, come to take care of me! Better go back to your big city where you have your maids. I can handle my house alone!" The scream was so loud that it could be heard on the streets. Suresh ran and held his mother.

"Calm down, she will clean it," he said and made her sit down. The old lady, shocked by her own words, with tears rolling down her eyes, sat quietly. He brought her a glass of water and went back to attending the male guests. Half an hour later, when the villagers had decided to leave, Suresh came to speak to his mother, his wife in the next room, listening.

"Kavita is upset," Suresh conveyed politely. "You insulted her in front of outsiders. She had been crying. What would they think and tell others of her? The talks will be everywhere."

"Why do you tell me that? She is your wife. It is a small issue. Handle her. Be her shoulder," rebuked Sushila Devi. Coldness rising in her voice.

Taken aback by the response, the man continued, "You never talk like this. She is your daughter in law."

"Yeah well, a lot of things happen for the first time, don't they?"

"Mummy..."

"Why have you all come here? To mock me of my helplessness? You think I can't take care of myself? Then where have you been all these years? Now that your father is no more, I should come and live with you? Leave my home! Is it fair?"

Her voice was shrill and hands trembled. The eyes glistened with pain and yet her throat could subdue all other voices in the room, including the sound of the turn of the fan.

"What are you saying? We only asked you to come with us because you are sick. Anyway, You have to relax. Get some sleep."

"You killed him!" every nerve of Sushila Devi quivered under the pressure of her voice. "He kept asking for you and you never came. That wife of yours never let you come back. She killed him. He had grown weak! You knew! You didn't let him go in bliss. He died with a yearning to meet you!"

“You think it doesn’t matter to us? He was my father!” a brink of angry blood had shot itself in the veins of the son as well.

“What does it change for you though? Just a void in your heart ready to be filled? Sad memories at night for a few minutes?” her voice was now heavy and countless tears rolled down her eyes. And some of them, the lucky ones, kept dissolving into her mouth leaving a salty taste, reminding her of the pain she felt. “What about me? My whole life is gone. Every second of my day. Every sentence to share, every dream to paint.”

No one looked at anyone else nor said anything, and befuddled thoughts circled in every direction.

“Take your wives and kids and leave!” she finally spoke. “Both of you! Raju and you. I can take care of myself. I don’t need murderers in my house.” Her eyes opened wide and she stared at the floor without moving a limb in her body.

Later that evening, both her sons travelled away with their families. The daughter, Pratibha, stayed for a few days. Weeks later, when the relatives visited the house, they found an old lady opening the door, welcoming them in an untidy sitting. Her hands would sometimes tremble when she brought a tray with glasses of water, being hospitable, but it went unnoticed easily. Her eyes sparkled at times during the night when she slept under the moonlight on the terrace looking at the stars. It was not just bitterness that pillaged her soul, but also the loss of hope. Remembering her life, she noticed imperfection and darkness she would never approve of and could never change. She stayed in communication with her sons, but they could all feel the solid wall that had been built between them. She endeavoured to apologise on many occasions. The timing or situation was never right, and eventually, she gave up. Ten years later, when she fell really sick, Suresh, her eldest son escorted her to his house in the big city known as Mistwood. Where she met her daughter-in-law and two grandkids who saw only a scathing old lady they needed to bear with, as they had learned. Keeping up with the coldness, not willing to be ashamed, she had grown into what she could never be. An old, dull, angry widow waiting for death to embrace her.

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Sushila Devi, lying on the Divan in the drawing room, lived her life again in the memory lanes from which she attempted to extract meanings and answers. “Words,” she thought. “A few words at the appropriate time can carve wounds so deep and build walls so thick, that could last forever, negating years of experiences in its wake.”

The next morning, Kavya informed the family that she was feeling better. Everyone was convinced she hadn’t been infected, or they just pretended. It was a new morning, and Kavya had begun spending more time in the living room, watching the television of course.

## Chapter Four

# Confession of the Ghost

“So, you coded this invisibility program on a computer?” asked Armaan as he rotated the upper face of a Rubik’s cube ninety degrees to the right. He wanted to believe that he knew what he was doing, but it seemed to be a rather random attempt at mixing up different colours ending in nothing.

“Yes, on a quantum computer,” replied Arnold. He peeled off an orange and continued, “It’s called a quantum intelligent system.”

“What is that?” Armaan asked and put away his cube.

“You know the principle of Superposition, right? At one point in time, a particle may exhibit a lot of states. There could be millions. Now, each state also is composed of many parameters. Take this orange, for example.” Arnold put his right hand at a higher altitude to showcase the fruit. “It’s existence and non-existence depends on a lot of factors. Shape, mass, flexibility, colour, etcetera. And one of those factors is-” “Whether the light gets reflected by the mass or not! Visibility and Invisibility!” prompted Armaan.

“Exactly! And if you tweak these parameters to get any desired state and you clamp onto it, fixing it against the natural behaviour, you can get whatever you want.”

“That is brilliant. And you were able to achieve this how?”

“It’s complicated. Even, in theory, there are too many overlaps and grids. And with humans, DNA stabilisation gets involved. I tweaked several string properties..”

“The string theory!”

“Yes.”

Arnold had gotten out of his chair and now stirred across the room explaining the science to the young boy in the most passionate way. His words danced through a million modulations and eyes gleamed.

“Our universe, like any other possible universes, is a result of a pattern of vibrating strings,” continued Arnold. “To get beyond the structure of a particle or sub-particles, I have been studying the mutation in these strings. It was dangerous though. One error and-- Well, I just got lucky.”

“What if it had all gotten wrong?” asked Armaan.

“Well, the world might have collapsed, reality rewritten, I don’t know.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“The creation of equipment was fine, but to secure it was difficult. It is not just about the power of invisibility. Had the technology reached the wrong hands, all evil could be possible. Tweaking of reality in any form. So I destroyed the equipment, but they were still after me.”

“Woah. So then you built a time machine and came running off into the past?”

“Oh no! That wasn’t me. It was a friend who sent me here.”

“Who was it?”

The question numbed Arnold for a little while. He rested his elbow on the wall next to the window. After a sigh, he spoke-

“Mihir. An old friend. I didn’t even get a chance to thank him. He was able to fix me to a point in the space-time curve, yes. Probably lost his life in the process--he was--” Arnold’s speech witnessed a breakdown.

“I don’t understand. Why would he lose his life? Why would you? Why do you have to run away!”

Arnold turned around and gazed at Armaan who still sat frozen on the bed, but now, he had a hunched back and he stared wildly at Arnold.

“Kid-” sighed Arnold. “The world a hundred years later is not safe, and the reason is the 21st century. You all, right now, use technology like it’s fun and easy. Social media, GPS, life stories, everything online, it looks so engaging and naturally fruitful. Ever thought to what extent can it be inculcated in your lives? You have made movies about it but ignore it tremendously. You can escape now, but won’t be able to escape in the future. Everything you say, every decision you make, in restaurants, libraries, sometimes your own home! Privacy exploitation to a level you cannot imagine! You are being trained to think a certain way, they are already in your minds, it shall be penetrated deeper. Aah-it’s a curse!”

“By they you mean?”

“The government. Businessmen. Normal people. All of them. You can’t differentiate who is the actual demon anymore.”

“What happened to Mihir?”

“Well, I was his first human experiment for time travel. They knew about him and got a hint of what he might be working on and were coming to collect him. He had to get rid of all his life’s work, but before that, did me a favour. He must have detonated the entire system and himself with it after the space-time program was initialised. I asked him to use the machine to save himself if possible, but he didn’t listen.” Arnold paused for a minute. “Humans are capable of so much and yet some choose greed for power over everything. He probably died saving the world from more trouble, and I have no way of knowing.” Arnold’s eyes now glistened with tears kept intact within the lower lid.

“But if it was an experiment, you did not know whether it would work?” spoke Armaan, a little welled up himself.

“Nope. I could be torn to shreds. Mihir’s brilliant mind saved me.”

“You risked your life.”

“Well, yeah.”

Armaan quickly got up and jumped at Arnold squeezing him into a hug out of the frenzy. Arnold smiled. In an instant, they heard the knob turn and the door to the room flung open. Sushila Devi walked in. Before the boy could get into a posture that wouldn’t invite any questions, her eyes fixated on him.

“What are you doing by the window in that position?” she asked with a frown on her wrinkled head.

Growing hesitant for a slight second, Armaan stood straight scaring a pigeon by the window pane, it flew away. “Nothing, I was just remembering a dance step,” he

answered. The grandmother stared at him for a few seconds and then began examining the room by moving her head sighting every corner. Armaan quickly went to his study table and turned the pages of the book that lay on the desk. "Introduction to quantum computing", read the title. Arnold had begun giving him lessons an hour a day, in exchange for which, the man got to eat all the extra dessert Armaan's mother saved. Grandmother then slowly walked towards the bathroom conveying the purpose of her visit. Arnold went near Armaan and spoke in a hushed tone, "I can't help but notice, don't you speak to your grandmother?"

"I do speak to her when necessary," replied Armaan.

"Yes, but she is your grandmother," said Arnold. "Shouldn't you be able to speak to her without a necessity?"

"Mom says she doesn't like us very much and she is also rude to her."

"Oh!" Arnold paused to think for a minute. "Maybe you could still talk to her once in a while. She seems like an interesting person."

"Interesting? She lies on the Divan all day complaining about mosquitoes," he snorted. "Besides, she is old!"

"I am old!"

"No, but you are future old, she is past old. Wait-hang on-You are-"

The sound of unlatching of the toilet door froze Armaan's words in the gut.

Grandmother approached the room with the sound of dull footsteps accompanied by one of the flushes getting refilled with water.

"Whom do you keep talking to?" she asked and progressed towards the door without expecting an answer. They both kept staring at the door until she disappeared behind it.

"She is definitely a very interesting woman," said Arnold.

"Alright! But-tell me this-what do you know about this pandemic? Like--you are from the future so you must know-for how long will the lockdown extend, what will change-what can we expect?"

"I don't know."

"Huh? Didn't you read about it in History books? Am I not your ancestor?" The excited look on Armaan's face was now replaced by that of worry.

"It's an important event in history, sure. I have read about it, but I didn't study in so much detail. Many such pandemics come in later anyway. I just know that the economy crashed, people stayed at home for months, and China struck war at different nations but failed."

"You mean, all of this that we are going through and talking about all day, has no significant place in history?"

"Oh of course it has. It's significant." Arnold looked at the boy with genteel in his eyes.

"But-not significant for you to remember any dates or statistics?" argued Armaan.

"Well-It's not like new states got added to a country or human lifestyle saw any drastic change or there was a world war," said Arnold.

"And here I thought this would be a transformation of humanity," scoffed Armaan.

“Not so much. It would take a great deal more than a virus to guide the people of this planet to sanity.”

“Hmm.”

And Arnold resumed explaining the science behind the invisibility device to Armaan.

For the next two days, Sushila Devi kept an eye out for anything unusual. Her weak yet scrutinised vision was able to register things she had readily ignored before. One night, when due to sudden rain, electricity in the house went dead, she noticed a torchlight walking towards her. She could promise she saw the torch moving in the air but as soon as she blinked, it lay on the dining table, left on. Also, in the afternoon when everyone was asleep, she heard the noise of the clanking of utensils. She quickly ran off to the kitchen and saw no one inside or moving out, not even a shadow. She then cross-checked to see if everyone was in their rooms, and they were. And the other evening, when the stormy wind rushed inside the drawing room, almost blinding her, the glass door to the balcony shut sideways on its own. After all considerations and observations, she called a meeting on April 1st. It included herself and her son, Suresh. Unaware of the fact that an invisible man had been living in the house for two weeks now, she said-

“We need to have a pooja in this house. The house occurs to be haunted by some spirit.”

And then she narrated all her encounters. She ensured that she includes every incident so that if one could be called a hoax or illusion, the other would do justice to her clause. Suresh listened intently and replied, “Very well. Let’s have the pooja tomorrow.” One could devise several reasons for Suresh’s agreement. Maybe he knew ghosts to be an irrational mind’s yield and the pooja, a stupid response, but because he was to be an obedient son, as was culturally ingrained in him, he agreed to his mother’s wishes. Maybe he connected with his mother’s experiences and believed in her conclusions of spiritual presence. For when he had switched off the light last night, his bedroom door had closed powerfully behind him. He tried to reason with himself that it must have been the gush of the wind but remembered well that no window had been left open. Maybe neither of the two possibilities held true and he was just curious, seeking adventure in the life that had turned monotonous. Whatever was the cause of his concurrence, could not be made out from the unreadable expression on his face. Nevertheless, the pooja was due for the next day.

All members of the family were ordered to get ready and gather in the hall at 09:00 a.m. except for Armaan. He was sent to the general store opposite the building to bring a dried coconut. The shopkeeper opened the shop for one hour daily which he said was the only hour in the morning when no police patrolled the area. The shop was usually surrounded by people least bothered with the rules of social distancing. They only wore face masks, which covered their pretence. Mr. Suresh had given the shopkeeper, Madan, a call to keep a coconut aside. The boy grabbed it and came running, without having to pay straight away. Face covered with a mask, hands with gloves, and head with fear.

The pooja went on for two hours with hundreds of enchantments, and loads of smog making everyone cough several times. Armaan looked from the mandir\* towards the living room where Arnold sat with a thoughtful look on his face. After the Pooja and sacrament distribution, which was a piece of the dry coconut, Armaan quickly went into his room.

“You should tell them about me,” said Arnold as soon as Armaan closed the door.

“Are you crazy? An invisible man in my bedroom? They are not going to be able to take this!” replied Armaan wiping the sweat from his head.

“Well, what are they gonna do?”

“Make you leave, call the police. I don’t know.”

“Very well then. I will leave.”

“In this quarantine? No way. You might get infected.”

“I am dying anyway.”

“Then you might infect others.”

“Then tell them. I am living in their house for more than two weeks without their knowledge and witnessing all their activity. It’s unethical. And now they got bothered so much that they organised an entire sweat party enchanting spells!”

“Mantras\*.”

“Yes, that. What do I look like to you?”

“A man from the future having no knowledge of the current human society or people and how unaccepting they can get.”

“But you were able to accept me without any issues,” continued Arnold as he fell into a chair.

“I am different,” replied Armaan.

“So much for self-love,” quipped Arnold as he rolled his eyes.

“No! You are from a century away! You don’t know how strange and scary such things can get for people! And invisibility? They may think you are a wizard!” asserted the boy, growing annoyed with his own arguments.

“Things are not so different a century away,” Arnold replied in a tone calmer than before. “People are always unaccepting. At least give them a chance. Don’t be so stubborn about your judgment.”

Armaan looked at him for a minute and lastly agreed.

“Well, fine,” he said. “But how do we do it.”

“That,” replied Arnold. “We should plan.”

The next day evening, Armaan and Arnold walked into the living room with a mission. On the sofa were sat Suresh, Kavita, and Sushila Devi. They intently watched the news coverage that the television projected at them.

“The number of coronavirus cases has crossed 4,000 in Bharat and 1.2 million worldwide with 64,753 deaths,” narrated a reporter dressed in a white shirt partially hidden under a black coat. “The police are getting stricter with the lockdown protocols. A few videos of police officers smacking citizens who were roaming on streets during the lockdown with canes went viral on social media.”

Armaan quietly seated himself in the empty space between Kavita and Sushila Devi. "I hope they don't extend the lockdown any further," said Suresh. "People are saying it might last until mid-June!"

"If people keep breaking rules like this," spoke Kavita. "It most certainly seems so. It might even go on for a year! You yourself don't follow the rules, going out time and again with your friends."

"Shut up!" he shouted suddenly. "Your tongue is spoilt. Can you ever say anything positive? And stop satirising me about going out. Had I not gone out, where would you get fresh vegetables!"

"But I..."

"Don't open your mouth only!"

Kavita lowered her eyelids and looked away towards the television which kept firing headlines bluntly onto her face no more reaching understanding in her brain. Sushila Devi, taken aback by her son's behaviour, questioned herself. Looking back at the past, she recollected the instances when she had seen a similar portrayal. How could she have ignored it? Lost within herself, she had lived in such vanity, that the most inappropriate behaviour of her son went neglected in her sight. Before she could utter a word, or rather try to, Armaan jumped into the conversation that was over.

"I need to tell you all something," he said and all heads turned towards him. "There's an invisible man living with us in this house."

"Invisible? What does that mean?" asked Sushila Devi.

"It means someone you can't see," explained Suresh glaring at Armaan. "Are you watching too many sci-fi movies lately?" he let out a chuckle and turned his face back towards the television. "C'mon. He is just messing with us."

"No, it's true," said Armaan. "All those things that grandma saw were the doings of the invisible man. His name is Arnold."

"Don't be silly!" snapped Suresh.

"I am telling the truth," repeated Armaan.

"Is someone threatening you? Some spirit?" asked Suresh, growing worrisome. "Do you feel heavy?"

"No!" Armaan had a tinge of anxiousness and vexation in his voice now. "He is my friend and he is a human. He just wanted permission from you to stay here until the lockdown is lifted."

Suresh widened his eyes conveying to Armaan to shut up. For twenty years, whenever his son would disagree with him on something he couldn't accept, he would stretch his brows up and win his side. However, this time, the situation was different. Meanwhile, Kavya too had joined the space.

"A man you can't see?" exclaimed the grandmother. "Then how can he be your friend?"

"He is a nice man," he said, not intending to reveal anything about the glasses. "And I have known him for six months."

"Six months?" snapped Suresh. "In such a short time you bring a strange person to our house and call him your friend?"

"Please," insisted Armaan. "He wants to talk to you all. Please don't freak out. He is standing opposite the coffee table."

"Hello!" a disembodied voice fumed around the room leaving most people strutted in their places. "I am Arnold, Armaan's friend. I am a scientist and am stuck in this country for some time because of the lockdown. If you could put me up for some time, as I have no other place to go to, it would be great. And I am sorry for all the trouble I cost you for two weeks."

"He has been living here for two weeks?" cried Kavita.

"Yes, mom, I-" Armaan hesitated.

"Is that why you have been asking me for extra chapatis every day?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied.

"And I thought you suddenly grew an appetite!" she said, surprised.

"That's it!" screamed Suresh. "Whoever you are, you filthy spirit, leave my house, and stop bothering my family! Or I will have to use other tools."

"Papa, he is not a spirit or a ghost," remarked Armaan. "He is just a human, like us."

"Can you do things like normal humans?" jumped Kavya. "Like--lift things, move them around etcetera?"

Arnold picked up a cushion and held it up in the air. And then he picked up another and displayed his substandard jumbling skills. Everyone except Armaan, who wore the glasses, saw two cushions dancing clumsily in open space.

"Wicked!" cried Kavya in appreciation and Arnold put the cushions down.

Suresh, who did not know how to respond with the confusion in his head, said firmly- "I do not know what is going on here but whoever you are, you cannot stay. These are difficult times and in any circumstance, this is not acceptable."

"But father," interrupted Armaan. Tried to interrupt.

"No! I have three women in this house. An invisible stranger cannot stay here! It's final!" he scowled.

"He has been at his best behaviour, allow him," requested Armaan. "He is sick anyway."

"Ask him to stay in a hospital then," yelled Suresh. "Wait, has he got the virus? Has he got the virus and infected us?"

"No!" shouted Armaan and searched for a clever lie. "He has some radiation thing going on inside him."

"Ok, that's irrelevant," responded Suresh in a calm voice. "Where is his family then?"

"They--err--are in the USA and he cannot travel right now!"

"Ahaan! Thought so! A foreigner?" Suresh had just found his moment. "Sorry, but we might have to ask you to leave. I hope you understand. And stop bothering my child and playing with his head," he concluded.

"He is not playing with my head!" yelled Armaan.

"I don't see why he can't stay." Sushila Devi rose from her seat.

"Maa--this--" hesitated Suresh who was taken aback by the interference of the old lady.

"We had no issues for two weeks since he was here," she continued. "We cannot cast out a homeless person during this tough period. It's a sin."

"It is too risky!" muttered Suresh, annoyed.

"He will stay," she said in magnificence. All the eyes in the room looked at her with amazement, including Arnold's. For the past ten years, Sushila Devi had hardly spoken in any family matters. Was it that she really wanted to help Arnold, or took a step against the domineering nature of his son that she had noticed first hand, one couldn't know.

"Thanks." Armaan grinned at his grandmother.

"Thank you," the husky voice was heard again.

Suresh quickly left the room, probably looking for a place to dispose of his anger.

Kavita followed him. Sushila Devi sighed looking at them both go. "Your father might be upset with this," she said. "Don't mess things up and keep him in your room only."

"Yes," nodded Armaan.

"And," she added. "We have to light the lamps at 9 p.m."

"Yeah, what's that about?" said Kavya.

"Well, if the prime minister asks you to light the lamp, you light the lamp," replied the grandmother and stood up to walk away with Kavya.

"That went well," gasped Armaan, looking drained of energy.

"It was probably not the best thing to do," said Arnold apologetically.

## Chapter Five

### The Fourteenth Day

At 03:30 a.m., the phone on the bedside table buzzed. 'Pawan Saklecha 502' flashed on the screen. Sliding his fingers three times on the display, with half-closed eyes, Suresh picked it up. Pawan's mother had passed away, he was told. Quickly waking up his wife Kavita, he put on a pyjama, checked himself in the mirror, wore a face mask and they both slipped out of the front door. Pawan and they had been neighbours for about five years and owed no obligation to each other. They spoke once a month if at all. However, that was no reason for Mr. Suresh and his wife to not be present at the funeral, even in such iffy times.

They entered the flat with dithered steps and saw the body of the old lady lying on the floor to the left of the television cabinet. She was fully covered with a white cloth except for the face and nostrils, which were stuffed with cotton balls. Kavita reached up to Mrs. Sakhlecha who had not a speckle of grief in her eyes as she tried to portray through the expressions on her face. Everyone in the residence was aware that she had not been very fond of her mother-in-law and so, to expect genuine lamenting from her was illogical. She let out a sob when Kavita went to comfort her. The two children of the house gawked from two metres away.

"We took her to five different hospitals at 01:30 in the night, she was breathless and her heart ached," narrated Mr. Saklecha. "Noone was ready to check her. They were scared they would catch the virus. I tried to tell them that she had a heart problem for years, but no one listened. Finally, at Foundwell hospital we requested at least to tell us if she still lives, for her body was cold, and they told us she was gone..."

Three more men and two women made an entrance into the flat. Looking worn out and ambivalent with every step they took, they struck multiple conversations. The story was narrated once more. Pawan also specified other unnecessary facts which everyone nodded to uninterestedly.

When the clock struck five, a stout woman asked, "Is she taken care of?"

The family had a clueless look on their faces. The woman, who was called Meghna, a resident of flat number 504, asked Mrs. Pallavi Saklecha to accompany her into the kitchen. There, she whispered, "Have you made her change clothes, wear bangles, etc.?" Mrs. Sakhlecha, unfamiliar with the custom, shook her head. She had been living away with her husband for twenty-eight years now and had hardly attended a single funeral within her family or friends. She was not the kind of a woman one could expect to understand customs or religious practices, as she remained "indefatigably away from such nonsense"- in her words.

"Well, I do not know how it is done in your culture --" continued Meghna.

"No, No!" interrupted Mrs. Saklecha. "You must be right. We hardly know about these traditions as we have always lived alone...What to do then?"

Meanwhile, Kavita had joined the colloquy.

“Well, I think she is fine. It is just an unnecessary procedure,” said Meghna glancing furtively at Kavita who failed to catch the signal.

“You should change her though,” uttered Kavita. “She is a widow, so you don’t have to get her ready.”

“What does getting her ready mean?” queried Mrs. Saklecha.

“You don’t have to put sindoor, henna, bindi, and stuff,” explained Kavita. “They are evidence of a married woman.”

Mrs. Saklecha stared blankly first at her and then the body on the floor. She also looked around the masked people and seemed as if she was on the verge of collapsing. Meghna quickly spoke “Excuse me” and signalled Kavita outside the house.

“Kavita!” she whispered. “We know she had a heart problem, but we really don’t know how she died. What if it was the coronavirus? Besides, do you really think you could undress and dress a dead woman?”

“Me?” exclaimed Kavita. “Why would I change her? Mrs. Saklecha will do it!”

“That woman?” scoffed Meghna. “She is going to make a helpless face and act all scatterbrained and vacuous making us take the responsibility.”

“But--”

“She won’t want to get into trouble if there is any. This is a troubling time and people only care about themselves. Let alone her, who always only cares about herself. She won’t even tell you if the old lady had a cough or other symptoms.”

Kavita pondered on the information for a while. She had always detested Meghna for her candour, but right now, it seemed to work its way. Still uncertain about her convictions, she gulped most of her doubts and responded-

“What do we do?”

“Make her believe that these customs are unnecessary. Ask her to take the gold earrings off which she will do pleasantly. You can also tell her to let go of the bedding and clothes belonging to the old lady, but don’t give her any information about any customs!” Meghna was calmer than before and her tone was friendly.

“Isn’t it a pity though?” said Kavita, worrisome. “People get to die just once and we are skipping rituals even then.”

“We also get to live only once,” snapped Meghna. “Besides, she is already dead and mustn’t bother about rituals. They will be taking her to the cremation ground in a couple of hours.”

Kavita stood gawking at her not begging to disagree with perfectly logical clauses set in front of her. Kavita had forever been a woman who abided by every rule taught to her and demanded the same from others throughout her life. And she certainly never concurred with the ideas set by the woman standing next to her. It was time for a change she didn’t seem to be ready for but accepted. Empathy shrewd its way in her eyes for the dead woman who lay flat on the surface. Immovable and serene. The old lady whom people knew of very little, who would chat sitting on the balcony sometimes and win hearts not with stories but a smile, was taken to the cremation ground by five men, split into two cars. One of them was Mr. Suresh Bhandari. And he laddered straight up as soon as he drove back home. He made careful use of the

elevator. When he entered his apartment, saw five empty faces waiting for him. It was 08:00 a.m., and people were expecting stories.

"It is a difficult time indeed," he said as he gasped for breath and went near the sink to wash the cloth mask. "There was no one to set up the wood sticks and prepare the fire. The only man managing the ground wasn't ready to do it even for a thousand bucks! Asked us to take the sticks and fix it on our own! I had to persuade him with some sweet talk. Poor lady, May her soul rest in peace."

"You didn't carry her to the ground, did you?" asked Armaan.

"No, I stayed back while others did it," replied Suresh. "I wonder if her son let her die and didn't even take her to any hospital. They never really liked her. Could be possible. Dunno!"

He quickly marched into his room for a shower and left others wondering over the death during breakfast. Upma was served.

The evening that day was cooler than most. Sushila Devi was sitting on a swing on the mini terrace. It was an eight by eleven square feet stretch adorned on opposite sides with plants. It started with Aloe Vera on the left corner and ended with the Money plant on the right. In between was a train of Basil, curry, coriander, rose, hibiscus, Aglaonema, and others. A few ropes were tied on which clothes had been hung during the day for drying. One end sticking the railing and the other end tucked by the door handle. Clips on the ropes dangled as wind gushed through the space. The swing swayed to and fro. It provided the people in the house with luxurious entertainment on days such as today. Three people could be seated at once and it was deemed very comfortable. While Sushila Devi stayed lost in her thoughts, she felt something drop on the other part of the swing. She flustered in her seat when a voice was heard--

"It's me, Arnold."

"Oh!" she gasped and resumed with her brooding.

"Stay at your homes!" spoke a policeman in a blow horn. It was a regular event now to hear police vans pass through with the same announcement every two hours, monitoring the road for rule-breakers.

The mini terrace was in a straight view of the balcony of flat no. 302. As the police van departed, Mrs. Saklecha appeared on her balcony to collect a piece of cloth that was hung by a rope. She grasped it, placed an irresolute smile on her glowing face, which she had tried very hard to make look pale, and vanished behind the door.

"She appears to be in awfully good spirits for a woman who lost a family member just today," pointed Sushila Devi. "I wonder if she only killed her mother-in-law!"

"And how would she do that?" asked Arnold.

"Poisoning, hiding medicines, giving her unnecessary stress resulting in a heart attack, could be anything," she suggested. "It is anyway easy to get away from such murders when people are dying in such large numbers every day. And the poor old lady was sick enough to be deemed dead anytime."

"Wow!" exclaimed Arnold. "Have you been contemplating the possible causes of your death?"

She peeped towards her left, where she reckoned the voice sourced from. Heaving a sigh, she admitted-

"I have been, Indeed, but more than that, I am forced to contemplate how little I have lived in the past ten years. Has it been all a waste? I had a great life, mind you. Fifty-two years, living each day profoundly even when some people might not agree when they analyse it through a looking glass. I just wonder if it was a good enough excuse to stop living before I died and spend the last ten years dormant and lifeless!"

"I understand," said Arnold, failing to find a better set of words as a response. "What happened ten years ago?"

Sushila Devi laid a wary glance at the space near her. She realised she had said too much, and trying to retain her grace, uttered an answer quickly- "My husband passed away and I didn't handle it very well."

"Ah!"

"What about you?" she asked. "You do not sound Armaan's age. Do you have a family?"

The question put a stern expression on Arnold's face which luckily, could not be seen. His expressions shifted in various dimensions fumbling through a million emotions. His eyes flashed back in his memories and forward in time, for it must have happened in the future, or did it?

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Two kids, a boy, and a girl, both almost nine years old, bolted everywhere inside the house. "Give my car back, Trisha!" screamed the boy as the girl dashed down the staircase, giggling. They both made a running entrance to the study where their father sat scouring the papers seemingly looking for something important.

"Come here, you!" said the father picking up the girl who couldn't stop laughing.

"What do we have here?" he sat her on his lap and observed the little car. The room was spacious with hundreds of books placed on five humongous shelves distributed across two opposite walls of the room. White curtains with random floral design patches stood half-open. The fireplace was encapsulated by an artistic wall cover and the desk was placed graciously between the two paper backed walls. The boy followed in the study gasping for air.

"Dad! Trisha won't give me my Scorpedo!" he said. "It is the only missing car in my Hot Wheels vintage collection."

The father eyed the little girl and asked, "Trisha, why are you running around with your brother's car?"

"It is fun teasing him!" she replied. "He gets so upset when his cars go missing, doesn't care about other toys. So no use taking them away."

"Teasing your brother is not supposed to be fun."

"Then how come it is?"

The father grinned at the witty response as he swallowed a chuckle before it made its way through his gut to avoid hurting his little boy's feelings. He had to remind himself again that fathers aren't supposed to be partial.

“Let’s come to a bargain,” he said. “How about you give Samarth his car back, promise not to disturb his vintage collection again, and you can have my most favourite stories of all time.” He took out a tattered book from one of the desk drawers that lightened up Trisha’s eyes. *Naughtiest Girl in School* by Enid Blyton, read the title. “A 1980 print edition and smells amazing.”

Trisha quickly clamped the book, rested a peck on her father’s cheek, and leaped down towards Samarth, giving him the toy back. “Sorry, I will not disturb your vintage hot wheels collection in the future,” she said in a melodious voice. Samarth snatched the car out of her hand, frowning, and muttered, “Thanks.”

“I make no promises about the other collections though!” she giggled away.

“Dad!” cried Samarth.

“Trisha!” scolded the father.

“I kept your part of the deal, Daddy!” she shrieked clambering up the stairs. Samarth, disgruntled, chased her, “Wait till I hide away all your books!”

“Don’t slip or break anything!” shouted the father. Before he could stand up from his chair to follow them, a woman wearing a dark blue, cropped, full-sleeved top which embraced her body perfectly and revealed little white skin above the black belt that covered her waist over a black skin-fitted pair of jeans, strode her way into the study. She was pretty and possessed the most beautiful curves. Her eyes reflected a shade of colour that could be associated close to sapphire and her nose, elegantly straight. She halted at the desk placing both her arms gently on the scattered papers.

“Hey!” said the man.

“Did you tell them?” she asked.

“No, Mishka! I told you I won’t.”

“Oh C’mon Arnold! Your kids have a right to know from their father first hand that they might never see him again!” snapped the woman, whose name was Mishka.

“They won’t understand,” jerked Arnold. “Or rather I don’t have time to properly explain, or rather I don’t want them to understand, they shouldn’t.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“To keep you all safe! Do we have to do this again? I think we went over this the last hundred times we talked!”

“Don’t get cross with me! You are the one leaving us!”

“For your own safety! And... they have you. Tell them I met with a car accident. When they grow older, this letter will explain everything.” He pulled out two crimson envelopes with Trisha and Samarth written on each with golden ink. “Looks magical, eh?” he smiled to himself. Mishka eyed furiously and as she crossed her hands, he gathered his grave expression again. “If not the father, they at least have a mother.” Mishka’s eyes melted on hearing this.

“Isn’t there a way out?” she asked politely. “How are you so sure that they will come in search of you?”

“I have worked in hiding for a long time now, Mishka. The government has begun tapping activity on all my computers. They even sent secret agents to the laboratory last week. They must find out sooner or later if I stay. I so wish they don’t, but the chances of that happening are unlikely”, he explained with a horrid expression

making its home in his eyes. "Corruption in the human mind is not declining, Mishka, the way they try to make us believe. It is becoming a part of us. So obvious, that we don't see it as a crime or something wrong anymore."

"I don't understand half the things you say sometimes," said Mishka. "Still...a scientist scared of the government zapping away his secret invention and the scientist protecting it over his life! Leaving his family before any trouble comes their way. This sounds like a movie plot. Stupid! It's not how the real world works."

"Oh really? Then tell me with a hundred percent surety that the compromise of our lives is not a possibility!"

Mishka stayed silent.

"Alright," she said. "I can't, but it's such a rare possibility, could you-"

"And what I have achieved is not rare? Has my life ever been anything but unconventional?"

"Sorry."

"Is that why you have been mouthing that bald brat?" Arnold's eyes shifted towards a book on the table, which he pretended to examine. "Because I was too unconventional for you?"

"What?"

"I have been watching you with him for over a month now, I am aware."

"I--I am--"

"Sorry? Don't say it. I know you are not."

"Look, you haven't been around for almost a year now. I met him six months ago and--"

"I have been working, Mishka," he scowled. "Not putting myself in other people's mouths!"

"Don't use that tone with me!" she commanded. "And polyamory helps marriages a lot. It's been researched and is practised everywhere. It's trending on social media as well."

"Sure," he said, turning away. "Call me old-fashioned then."

"Hey!" she put her hand on his shoulder which he jerked away.

"Fifteen years we have been married. I--" words ate themselves before throwing themselves out of his mouth and splashed in the form of a tear down his left eye. "It's one reason I don't want to look for a way out."

"Arnold--"

"Cause if I do, I will have to come back to you. It's better this way."

"Arnold, you can't abandon your children because your wife slept with another man."

"I am not," he said with conviction pouring itself out through his eyes. "I am giving them a better life. Safer, in every way."

"So I just tell them that you died in an accident?"

"Precisely."

He pranced out of the study without looking back.

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“Are you still here or you left?” asked Sushila Devi, making Arnold take a leap back to the present. The plants, ropes, and scaffoldings blurred their way into his eyes again.

“No, sorry, I am here,” he said. “I am forty-five, your son’s age. Have two beautiful kids. Trisha and Samarth. Don’t know when I will meet them again.”

“That’s nice,” said Sushila Devi. “Once this havoc ends, you can fly back to your country and meet them.” He nodded.

“I have been waiting for death for a long time,” she added dreamily. “Though now, when it seems closer than ever, I am unable to settle for the consequences.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“My life has been out of place for long and suddenly now, when time seems to be breaking bonds with me, I have a craving to do something about it,” her voice shuddered as she spoke. “You seem to be partly responsible for it.”

“Me? How?”

“Yes! I believed that I have seen everything there is for life to offer. And then you arrive with this impossible power, coercing me and others to fix on the idea that we hardly understand life. This makes one challenge oneself. And now that I shall be dead soon, it is only fair to use as much time as possible and reason about quickly through this.”

“Wow”

“Never mind me,” she chuckled. “I am old. I shouldn’t be saying all this. I am meant to enjoy simpler things, impart wisdom to the young, and rest.”

“Who said that?”

“Does it need saying? This is how it is done.”

“Well, quoting a dialogue from one of the most favourite movies of my daughter, I would say, ‘Just because it’s what’s done, doesn’t mean it’s what should be done.’”

“Heh-- which movie is that?”

“Cinderella, do you know her?”

“No.”

A pause succumbed in the air around them. An irresistible urge to converse crept over their hearts and a will to continue, that had been lost began gliding its way through the uncomfortable breeze of uncertainty.

“Have you had a good life?” asked Arnold.

“Oh yes,” replied Sushila Devi. On a normal day, sitting in front of a normal human, she would have been surprised at the question. It would even irk her to be asked such an unusual question. But today, the invisible air was grasping all her prejudices in itself and setting her free of judgment. “A good husband, three amazing kids, and they always loved the food I cooked and the way I prepared their beds,” a smile appeared on her face.

“Good,” he said. “What else?”

“I do not understand. My kids are happily married and so was I.”

“Yes, but how else has your life been good?” he asked, a little puzzled. In the world where he came from, when asked about their lives, people spoke often of the arts they pursued, or the inventions they most prized, or places they explored. In the

world he came from, people hardly spoke about anyone but themselves, to the friends and strangers at least.

“Oh, we were financially alright, if that’s what you mean,” she said with unshed confidence.

“No--err--what did you do for fun? Did you have any friends?”

“Friends? Well, I had a few lady friends at religious places which I would visit every weekend. They were mostly relatives.”

“Relatives as friends?” he whispered to himself. “Religious places for fun?”

“You deem my life as a lower kind!” she glowered at him.

“No--I--of course not! Just monotonous, ordinary, and with less content.”

“Monotony is magical,” she defended herself and scowled. “You seek adventure in little ordinary things rather than running after something grand to gratify your conjectural narcissism.” Her confidence was branching itself out with the turn of her neck which now faced the ruffling leaves of a mango tree. “It has stability and ease, but no vanity, leading to happiness most of the time.”

Arnold listened intently. For a man coming from a hundred years in the future, the conversation was an interesting glimpse into the history of another century past. Besides, the tempest that urged its way in the old lady’s voice had just been born, and it spread like wildfire through the atmosphere. In a colloquy that might seem unnecessary to the world, the plants humbly swayed, the wind blew its course, nature tried its best to make lives turn, and hearts swirl.

“Not that I had a choice anyway.” she now spoke in a soft voice, still raging her fiery mane within her feeble body.

“You always have a choice,” said Arnold, gently.

“Maybe now, when monotony has expired and I stand clueless,” she heaved a sigh.

“I haven’t participated in the adventure for years.”

Neither Sushila Devi nor Arnold had any clue of how extraordinary were their endeavours at peeking through a different asset of life. Had they known, it wouldn’t be effortless. Had they known, they would plan the righteous mysteries in their heads and the adventure wouldn’t be sought but called for.

“You can participate now,” suggested Arnold.

“How?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Embrace the adventure somehow?”

Arnold looked at her clueless wandering mind, empty as fresh glass, wanting to hold onto something.

“Is there something you have always wanted to do? Like fly a kite or go riding in a sports car?” he asked.

She looked indifferent against Arnold’s question.

“What I mean is, you are old and will pass away very soon,” he spoke with embarrassed hesitation, not wanting to sound offensive. “How about you live the days you have left doing things you truly want? We can call it a bucket list.”

Sushila Devi stared inquisitively at the air above the chair where she reckoned Arnold was seated. “A bucket list?” she finally answered. “We could do that?”

“Of course!” exclaimed Arnold, relieved for his attempt not backfiring. “Who is stopping you?”

Sushila Devi could picture a thousand reasons in her head as a response to that question. The fact that she was an old lady of sixty-five? That she was sick? That her family hated her guts when she did nothing anyway? That she had no goals, no ideas, no motivation? That they were all witnessing a nationwide lockdown? That her heart was confused? That she was a woman and such talks are not approved by the society she lived in, but frowned upon? That it is all so unbecoming? Nevertheless, she was tired of convincing herself with such propositions day in and day out. And so, even when she could picture a thousand reasons for being stopped, she could also see that one reason for which she would jump around and scream her heart out with joy- she wanted to be alive again. After ten years, she wanted to rise back from the grave.

“But, what would I do?” she then asked with a smile leaving Arnold in high spirits. “Anything!” he said. “Anything you want! Let’s make the list. Wait here for five minutes.”

The slight imbalance on the swing indicated that Arnold had left the scene. It was only a matter of a few minutes when the swing sprung again.

“Okay, let’s start,” Arnold’s voice reverberated. “Just say anything that comes to your mind, don’t worry about how and when, possible or not, just say it.”

“And you will write that?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Where are the pen and paper though?”

“In my hands.”

“But I can’t see them.”

“Yes. Because they are invisible.”

“Can you make anything disappear?”

“Oh yes, I just have to hold something for thirty seconds so that it is detected as a single mass body, and it disappears. Anyway, the first thing?”

“Umm--to see the mountains.”

“Anything specific?”

“No.”

“Next?”

“Learn to read and write.”

Slowly amidst the conversation, the vagueness in her mind began articulating itself in the form of words that were being put on a paper. It was the first time in a long time that Sushila Devi felt something stir within her which was not anger or grief. And the more preposterous the colloquy seemed, the deeper she could feel it within. After fifteen minutes, she halted, and peered at the empty space, longing to see the list.

“And here is your bucket list,” said Arnold, offering the paper to Sushila Devi. She rummaged around thin air until her hand got stuck to the solidified merger of Arnold’s hand and the sheet. She grabbed the paper and it faded into existence within seconds.

### Sushila Devi's Bucket List

1. See the mountains
2. Learn to read and write
3. Connect with family
4. Make friends
5. Cook six new dishes
6. Visit Varanasi
7. Surprise myself

The letters on the paper did not carry any meaning for Sushila Devi and yet all the meaning in the world. She caressed the ciphers she was not yet trained to decipher and blushed crimson with peaceful eyes as they glistened with tears. Hope had finally learned to make its way through the darkness.

"Stay at your home!" the policeman announced. "Get away from the road, sir. Enter your building or we will have to take you away!" And crack, shattered the hope within a second.

"There's a lockdown in place. We will have to wait," she premised the fact.

"It doesn't matter," reasoned Arnold. "I reckon we can achieve more than half the things on the list even during this lockdown."

Sushila Devi cast a disapproving glance at Arnold, to whom he appeared to be a brag again. How could it even be possible to step forward in time when everything and everyone was stagnant. She was supposed to be stagnant. It was almost as if she had given up being convinced about anything in an instant, as if time had moved backwards and they stood at the beginning of the conversation. What didn't change though, was the feeling she shared with him. She knew it to be ineffable, strange, and comforting, and neither shut it out or wrangled against it.

"So, about connecting with your family," continued Arnold. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" she asked with an irked expression on her face.

"I am your son's age, you can tell me," he requested.

But he was nothing like her son. He was a strange man from a strange land who had turned her stubborn head with his flattering words. Moreover, he convinced her that hope for a better life could be carried on without adding guilt to her soul and free her, and that she could after all deserve it. One can only imagine what it would do to a woman. Even to an old, very old woman.

"Please, I only want to help," he insisted. "This remains between us. It's my word."

"It happened ten years ago when my husband died," she began narrating with a sigh. The sun had turned red and spread the message across the sky that it was time for it to leave. For most people, it was time to close the curtains and embrace the stillness of life. For Sushila Devi, it was the beginning of an adventure that whisked within most parts of her body, and the leaves she most intently watched, wriggled, and swayed, agreeing with her in their own beautiful ways.

## Chapter Six

### The First Task

The next morning was the first knock of summers at the Bhandari household. It was not the hot breeze or the displacement of the water cooler in the living room that signalled the visit of the season most potently, but a huge carton of mangoes that Mr. Bhandari marched in with. It had been two weeks of the lockdown, and by now, the resourceful man that he was, Suresh Bhandari had made an arrangement with a fruit supplier. A man who went by the name Devilal had agreed to sell him and other residents of the building fresh fruits and vegetables at his own risk. The prices for the same were a little heavy on the pocket, but Suresh was content with the idea of his family eating good food and developing immunity. Vegetables came from farms in villages around the city where no positive case of coronavirus was reported till date. Nevertheless, the vegetables were not spared an excessive amount of washing, drying, and sunlight exposure.

As he placed the box on the floor for his wife to take out fresh mangoes from, he muttered, taking off his mask. "Selling such Alphonsos for Rs. Two hundred eighty per kilo!"

He continued as he washed the mask thoroughly in the sink, "Even Okra was so unreasonably priced! It's a scandal!" and then he immediately went on changing the subject, "I spoke with Ashok today. He is getting rid of his shop. Says there will be no more money for rent by June, and business won't pick up by year-end. He will be supplying from his house now."

"Tea?" asked Kavita, while everyone else stuck their ears attentively to his words. It was unusual to see an individual arrive inside the house these days, except for their incessant neighbour Mrs. Sharma, who visited them once a week. And so, all would gather to watch him enter, which usually occasioned once every two days, anticipating some news from the outside world, which now looked barren and cold, even in the summer heat.

"Yes! Don't add cardamom," he replied, and Kavita scuttled away into the kitchen.

"We might have to wait until July to open our shop. Armaan can come with me for a few hours when he doesn't study. We can't afford so much labour now."

This statement alarmed Armaan's brain of a whirlwind of sentiments in an instant. Anger, disappointment, and disapproval. He did not express it though, not through his words, not through his face. He waited for his father to freshen up and be seated in the living room, gossiping away the news on the television, sipping fresh tea. When Armaan had accumulated enough visuals to hate his father, he flitted into his sister's room.

He sat on the left bed with crossed palms, staring at the floor. Kavya soon entered the room with a bucket filled with water. Turning a blind eye to his presence, she pulled out a floor cloth from the bucket, squeezed the water out, and began sweeping the floor.

“Put your feet up!” she commanded. Armaan squatted his feet on the bed, and looking admiringly at her, said, “It was my turn today.”

“Yes, but mummy said you don’t scrub nicely, and the house looks comparatively dirty today,” replied Kavya. “She sweeps more than half the place anyway when you are tagged along.”

“Right,” he said, lost in a train of thought, forgetting to be irritated at her words, which immediately grabbed her attention.

“What is going on with you?” she asked.

“I don’t--why is papa always after the idea of me helping him with the shop?”

“You should speak to him,” mocked Kavya, relieved with the response she was expecting. It was the same old fuss which now bothered her the least.

“I don’t want to sit in some shop!” he exclaimed.

“Fine!” sighed Kavya rolling her eyes and seating herself next to her brother. Her red pyjamas soaked wet at various spots from the knee to the ankle.

“Look, he just asked for help because of the crisis,” she said consoling him. “Once the business is back in action, you could bail out!”

“But you know that’s not true!” he now stood on the ground. “He wants me to take charge of the shop as soon as I graduate.”

“For now, can you not believe that it is just because of the crisis?”

“And avoid the truth? I want to be a scientist or a writer!”

“And you will be! Stop fussing over this. We are right now struggling to make the ends meet. Grow up! A virus is killing people. Shops won’t open for at least two months. Focus on staying alive and well!”

“For what? What’s the point?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why should one want to stay alive in this stale, meaningless world?”

“I don’t know what you are implying here, but I would have swapped positions with you in a heartbeat. I love fashion and clothes, but papa says I am too young.”

“And a girl!”

“Excuse me?”

“You are a girl and you shouldn’t sit in a shop.” The tempest in Armaan’s voice was rising. His conviction was stronger and the so called ignorance was on display.

“I don’t think that’s what this is about!” spoke Kavya.

“That’s exactly what it is! You will soon grow up, go to college, work as a designer, work really well, but never sell clothes in a shop because he won’t approve of it.”

“No! I may not do it because I may not want to,”

“It isn’t about what you want. It is what you can’t do so you fool yourself into believing you don’t want it.”

“Don’t be so judgemental and pretend that you know everything.”

“I am older to you. I have seen things you haven’t.”

“Just 5 years older! And still in college!”

“Alright. You don’t have to agree. I may not make any sense, but it doesn’t necessarily take an age to realise how the world outside is! It is mean and stupid, and once this lockdown gets over, we have to go back living in the same dull, tiny

bubble of the universe, where there exists no scope of true adventure or retreat, only suffering.”

“You are crazy. And besides, I can’t wait for things to go back to normal again! I love the world I live in.”

“Well, good for you then. You are too normal a sister for me.”

She rolled her eyes and went back to rubbing the floor, pondering over what he had said, trying to deny a fact she had been living with forever. She did not wish to agree with his brother even though parts of his testaments held true. Not wanting to graze the uncomfortable thoughts, she just focussed on the sweeping.

“Kavya! How much is done?” screamed Kavita from a distance.

“Still in my room!” reported Kavya.

“Do it faster!” shrieked Kavita.

“Well, guess what? Dadi made a bucket list,” scoffed Armaan, trying to dodge to a lighter conversation.

“Bucket list?” exclaimed Kavya, without looking up.

“List of things you wish to do before you die.”

“Hasn’t she done everything already? She is so old.”

“Apparently not. I am supposed to help Arnold in teaching her how to read and write.”

“Seems like they two are getting on well together.”

“Yeah, and imagine Dadi holding a pen and paper. I should go get started,” he said and disappeared, transporting himself back to the drawing room. His mind was still sedated with irreverence towards his father, Armaan languid next to the grandmother. Suresh still sat opposite the television with an empty china cup. The grandmother looked up at the vacuum with jest.

“We will start with the alphabet today,” said Arnold. “Armaan, could you teach her how to hold and turn the pencil?”

Armaan nodded and formed a position to the left of the grandmother so that they could hold the grey blue striped pencil that he had sharpened, together, and work their way through the paper. He helped her grasp the pencil with the index finger, middle finger, and thumb. At first, he had difficulty instructing her, as he might have clutched pens and pencils perfectly between his fingers for years, he did not quite understand the technique behind it. It was natural for him. And so, to teach, he would first hold the pencil himself, write something, and then with all his observation on the placing and pressure applied, he would instruct his grandmother.

“There are twenty six letters in the alphabet,” he said. “They form the whole language. The first letter is ‘a’.”

He slowly drew a small and capital ‘a’ with required instructions. “It can be written in these two ways,” he continued. “Try it.”

The grandmother seemed to stare blankly before she grabbed the pencil. Although, if one noticed her eyes thoroughly, one could see that she was calculating. She grabbed the pencil, putting it in close proximity with the paper, and attempted at a capital A. Rather than drawing three straight lines, she sketched a poorly shaped nut.

“Keep your hands steady and straight, Dadi,” instructed Armaan. But as he surmounted his hand over hers, he realised how tricky it was. He noticed how the moment the nib of the pencil in her hands touched the paper, her hands trembled and struggled to stay stable enough to put something worthy down. Whichever way the pencil travelled, left a faint, rough zigzag trace. Would he have the same troubles in his old age? He wondered. He probably should never stop writing to prevent this from happening.

After fifteen strenuous attempts, when the grandmother got her ‘A’ partially correct, she let out a victorious chuckle which appeared serene to the eyes of the grandson after he had watched her anxiously jostle in her seat for several minutes. Continuing with her endeavour, she would sometimes put her head closer to the notebook, blink her eyes several times when forming a curve, and keep staring at the notebook to plan on the next move, not looking away. A childlike sparkle glinted through her eyes, but also an old lady’s helplessness. She tried and tried to sync her physiology to this new venture that she had stepped into, and failed again and again. It was surprising how she knew she was going to fail a hundred times before she could get a hang of it, and even more surprising how determined and confident she was to make it happen. Armaan, who had been stolen away by disgust and anger a few minutes ago, couldn’t help but notice the magic of being alive. Even Suresh, who gazed at them at regular intervals had been amused, which was not apparent through a smile he didn’t form, but by the glow and happiness that you see on a man’s face when he is generally happy. And also because he had looked at them several times and complained about nothing.

After half an hour of practice from the letters ‘a’ to ‘e’, when Suresh Bhandari had also gotten up and left, they decided to take a pause as her hand ached and eyes watered and hurt.

“You did great,” said Armaan. A unique surge of respect and adore had taken over his voice. Grinning, he travelled from the living room to the dining area for brunch.

“That’s the first step in fulfilling your bucket list, taken!” said the familiar disembodied voice which Sushila Devi could locate towards the window to her right.

“Yes, but I am unable to form proper curves,” complained Sushila Devi.

“That’s alright, It will take a little time to get a hang of the pencil,” he soothed her.

“You are an old lady for heaven’s sake! How old did you say you were again?”

Kavita entered the space eyeing dubiously at her mother-in-law talking to the window. She twitched at the giggles that followed Arnold’s jokes.

“The food is ready,” she announced.

Sushila Devi got up, Arnold following her at the table.

Amongst the clanking of dishes and chewing of food, what caught most of everyone’s attention was the floating plates and crumbs of bread disappearing after flying a certain height. Dining with an invisible man was still an undeveloped habit for the people in the household. Even if the habit was developed, it was a peculiar one. And they just convinced themselves every day with the inference that it is only a

matter of time after which it won't matter to them anymore, for a dent in a wall also seems like perfect architecture once the eye sees it for certainty every day.

"Nature is on a high tide reclaiming its space," said a news anchor projecting her voice out of the television. "The pandemic which has forced people to stay inside the four walls of their homes has set the power on to the healing prowess of nature. In Italy, Dolphins have resumed dancing on the coast, as the cruise ships now rest at the harbour. A small group of Egyptian geese was spotted crossing the runway of an airport in Israel. Weasels are meandering freely in Singapore and were even seen quarreling with each other near a statue. A Petrel couple took a day out at an aquarium in America," she continued as most people on the dining table chewed the last bite of Khaman and Kheech from their silver plates.

"Bharat too observes clearer skies and drinks cleaner water. The rivers have recuperated themselves while the waste from the factories is now absent. A Nilgai was spotted roaming on streets outside a shopping complex in Delhi. Some Sambar deer too were seen on the roads in Chandigarh. The residents of the nation are breathing clean air and people in Jalandhar, Punjab, after 30 long years have been able to sight the ice-capped Himalayas from their balconies."

On hearing the last segment, Arnold jumped off his seat crying "Mountains!" All eyes turned towards him, vacant as a piece of wood waiting to be written upon.

"The mountains must be visible from here too! Fifteen storeys! We could glance from the terrace!" his disembodied voice echoed everywhere with jest.

"What is he talking about?" asked Kavita with a disapproving stare.

"Dadi's bucket list," muttered Armaan.

"Bullet list?" she screamed, overhearing.

"No! Bucket List! Things she wants to do before she dies," explained Armaan, flinching one of his eyes.

"Die? Why?" a shocked Kavita looked around for more explanation.

"I am not dying," said Sushila Devi, attempting to calm her and prevent any further investigation in the matter.

"It is just a wish list, Ma!" said Armaan. "She wants to see the mountains."

Kavita, still appearing unnecessarily stunned by the unusual conversation she was witnessing, the kind she certainly did not approve of elders to be participating in or encouraging, gathered all the plates and left the table at once. Kavita followed her for helping with the dishes and Sushila Devi, Armaan, and Arnold, together went inside Armaan's room before they continued discussing about the mountains.

"So, we should try having a look from the terrace," proposed Arnold, not even a hair on his body had lost any excitement.

"We can't do that," informed Armaan. "No one is allowed to enter the terrace. It is locked."

"Why would they lock the terrace?" asked Arnold with furrowed brows.

"One of the residents organised a birthday party in the gym last Sunday. And before that, a few uncles were found drinking and celebrating. To have social distancing measures followed strictly, no one is allowed upstairs."

“Couldn’t we ask for the key?”

“No! The watchman has it. He will not provide in any case. We should wait until the Lockdown is over.”

“But when will it be over?”

“Fourteenth?”

Arnold could not contain himself from laughing at this. “Kid, I may not know the exact details about the outbreak, but Covid19 was surely a big event in history,” he enunciated. “Big enough to make it to the history books. This Lockdown will at least last for two months. The economy is supposed to crash badly. And then, there will be partial measures that one must follow for months! And nature won’t be so obliged to us then. Pollution, people, rains, and probably death. Travelling won’t be possible towards the Himalayas or the like, and we would die before ever reaching the next item on the bucket list.”

“What are you talking about?” interrupted Sushila Devi.

“Nothing,” said Armaan. “He can tell the future.”

“Is he a soothsayer?” she asked.

“No-no-,” said Armaan hesitantly. “He has predicted it scientifically.” It was the glance of the grandmother that made it occur to Armaan that even she, who had embraced the idea of Arnold being invisible without much effort, could be disapproving of him once she discovers that he is not just an invisible man, but an invisible man from a hundred years in the future!

“Well,” interrupted Arnold. “How do we get to the terrace?”

“We can’t!” repeated Armaan. “Papa will be upset if he finds out!”

“Why?” Arnold was genuinely curious, but the question implied objection to others. Even after having spent a fair amount of time with the family, he failed to understand what, why, and how they thought. His whys underlined a demand for logic, which he mostly did not receive. And so, he couldn’t learn from experience and only retained basic valuable information which kept him safe and away from troubles within the house.

“Because, if we get caught, he will be ashamed amongst the people of the building.” Armaan’s face appeared pale as if he had choked on something.

“What are you two getting at?” asked Sushila Devi, now tired of listening to an inconclusive and uninformative conversation.

“We are planning on stealing keys from the guards and witnessing the serene view of the mountains!” spoke Arnold, excitedly.

“Stealing?” blenched Sushila Devi.

“No!” Armaan got up from the chair he was sitting on as he shouted. “We can’t steal.”

“And why not? We won’t get caught,” repeated Arnold, a little irked this time.

“Because it is foul!” snapped Sushila Devi.

“Alright then, we are borrowing the keys for an hour, is that alright?”

After relentless persuasion and an ideal scheme setting, Armaan and Sushila Devi agreed to the adventure. They also ganged in Kavya and discussed their plan twice before the clock struck 4 pm. The sun had hidden itself and the breeze stirred the

enthusiasm in them all. It was fairly cold, and plants swayed in unison all across. The world appeared painted with a light shade of blue, rather than the burning yellow which was usual for this time of the day during summers. Kavita and Suresh slept peacefully in their room. Everyone was aware that their usual nap broke at 5 pm when they had their evening tea, and all four of them had to be back a few mins prior.

## Chapter Seven

### Adventurous Escape to the Roof

“Kavya and Dadi, you leave the house at fifteen minutes past four,” whispered Armaan, who put on his blue face mask which Kavya had stitched for him, and along with Arnold, ushered out of the apartment. They entered the lift where an old man from the second floor appeared to be smiling at them from behind his mask-covered face.

“Namaste, Uncle!” greeted Armaan in an artificially pleasant voice. The man though, exceptionally wary of his surroundings, stared at the ground floor button which was pressed automatically. Unaware that a third individual subsisted in the elevator, he ignored the incident by convincing himself that the boy must have pressed it while entering, and moving his glance towards Armaan, nodded with a contrived smile. The man walked out on the second floor and continued staring at the floor buttons on the right wall of the elevator while doing so. It took another twenty seconds for Armaan and Arnold to reach the ground floor. The elevator was the second amongst the three in the lobby, to the right of which opened the parking, where, randomly parked were about a hundred strange cars at their permanent residence. After the last line of parking were the two main gates for entry and exit to the society. Armaan surreptitiously guided Arnold to the front gate near which was the shed of the watchman. Armaan hid behind the car which was parked the closest.

“There must be a key bunch hanging somewhere inside the cabin,” whispered Armaan before letting off Arnold. “Meet me near the elevator in three minutes.” Arnold signalled with a thumbs up and gaited towards the shed. A watchman, dressed in a teal coloured uniform sat inside examining the visitor’s diary. Wondering what could one possibly find interesting in a visitor’s diary, Arnold stood right opposite to him, peeping inside to get a glimpse of the confined chamber. The watchman, who went by the name Prasad did not look up, noticing a slight blockage of light in front of him. Assuming it to be a change in the weather, which was quite frequent those days, he continued perusing the diary. Arnold noticed that the chamber was congested and small. Even after eliminating the desk, chair, and a little brown drawer that sat awkwardly on the right, it would be impossible to fit more than five men inside it. He also noticed a bunch of keys dangling by a stick handle on the left wall, above which was placed a clock, alarming Arnold, as the time read ten minutes past four. Establishing that he could not possibly take away the keys while the watchman still sat inside, he quickly stepped towards the front gate, held one of the solid bars, and began jerking it which produced a lot of disturbing noise. Prasad, lured by the distraction, quickly got up and proceeded towards the door. Not missing the slightest opportunity, Arnold scuttled to the shed, grabbed a bunch of key sets, and hid behind the wall. After waiting for thirty seconds, after which the keys were invisible to the naked eye, he hurried towards the car. The watchman, unaware of the event was back into the shed, and after looking around with suspicion for a few

seconds, simply muttered something, sat back in his chair, and resumed turning pages of the diary he was initially analysing. Meanwhile, Arnold walked behind the white EcoSport clasping the key sets tightly in his hand to prevent them from producing any sound.

“Did you get them?” enquired Armaan in a whisper when Arnold crouched near him.

“Yes, all of them,” replied Arnold in a hushed voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I got all the keys. Did not know which key bunch had the key to the terrace!”

“What? We can’t do that! We will get caught!”

“What choice do we have now anyway?”

“Show me the keys,” said Armaan. After picking out the correct key set as he remembered, he handed over the rest back to Arnold. “Keep this rest back into place.”

“The watchman is back!” retreated Arnold. “There is no use in wasting time, I will keep it back in an hour anyway.”

“Well, Alright,” sighed Armaan, and they both hurriedly stepped into the elevator, Arnold pressed the button fifteenth this time. The lift landed on the top floor in less than two minutes. Before they walked out, Armaan pressed eight from the floor buttons, so that no one suspects people on the terrace from the digital imprint of the floor location. Kavya and Sushila Devi had already arrived, waiting to be passed through the barred gate.

Armaan took out the chosen bunch from his pocket, and fiddled out two keys for experimenting, and slid the rest back into his pocket. The second key turned the lock and they set their foot in the open air. The terrace was huge and randomly structured with a gym on the right corner, and stretches, lawns, bulging squares on all sides. A few digital TV antennas found a home all around the railings. An iron ladder stood at the centre, leading its way up to the water tank. All four of them looked around as though in a trance. The lightning strikes were visible up close, clouds roared, birds played around in flocks, and little drops of water met their wondrous faces. The sudden drizzle didn’t stop them from peering through the railing at the city, it seemed now, they had never seen before. The central road bridge structured itself like a roller coaster ride. Railway tracks were steady with trains, roads were cleaner than ever, and the tallest buildings looked small. And right above the buildings of the city which looked like a miniature model of a new town, faintly peeped the peaks of mountains, partially covered with mist and clouds, like an eerie painting. Sushila Devi slowly lifted off her mask and took a deep breath in. She knew it was against the rules, but all she could do or think of was staring in silence and fixing her glasses closer to her eye as if it could provide her with a better or a magnified view. The faded image of the mountains looked like nothing like the ones back home, but they did not appear completely unfamiliar to her, but just beautiful. Some pinnacles were sharp as a pin, others shaped themselves as a crown, a curve, or a random pattern of strokes.

“You can get a better view from up there!” echoed the disembodied voice of Arnold.

“Up where?” turned Armaan.

“There!” he said.

“What?” shrieked Armaan. “Are you crazy?”

Others, who still couldn't see 'where', looked at Armaan with confused expressions.

Was he able to see Arnold? Did they miss some sight?

“Where is he talking about?” asked Sushila Devi.

“Top of the metal staircase, right below the water tank!” pointed towards a large, cylindrical, nine-foot tall water tank, which had 30,000 litre printed on its outer surface indicating the volume of water content. The metal staircase leading up to it was about 25 feet long. It was narrow, steep, and light weight.

“Then why are you so shocked? If a better view is possible from there, then why not?”

The old lady trudged towards the staircase and with one hand on the handrail and other holding the Saree pulled herself up on the first step.

“Dadi! You shouldn't!” exclaimed Kavya. “It is dangerous, and you are also wearing a Saree. You are not a kid or a labourer.”

“What book claims one cannot climb a ladder in a Saree?” retorted Sushila Devi.

“Besides, this is my adventure, not yours. If you were to help me with everything, what have I done to deserve a checkmark on the list? It's my dream.”

Kavya's mouth fell wide open. She had always seen her grandmother as an old, irritable lady, too busy brooding on the couch. She also had never witnessed an elder talk to her about a dream in the way the grandmother, whom she deemed as ignorant, whom she chose not to speak to, who she was sure would never understand her thoughts, just did. How ordinary did it seem at first, and yet how extraordinary was this adventure they had embarked upon!

Stumbling every now and then, Sushila Devi had managed to clamber up to fifteen treads, which was halfway to the water tank. That's when she turned, looked downwards, and panicked. Her breathing slowed down, heart pounded faster and the grip of the hand loosened. It was for the first time that Sushila Devi had come to know that she had Acrophobia, fear of heights.

“What's wrong?” shouted Arnold from the ground. Sushila Devi looked around, staggering. It took her a few seconds to realise in the consternation that the call was from a man she couldn't possibly see. She was reminded of the fact that it was him and his pleasant talks that had brought this upon her, and now, she was going to fall hard on the ground injuring herself, probably dying of the shock!

“Listen to me!” screamed the voice again. “It is the fear of heights! It's good that you at least got a chance to know what you are scared of! Don't let it get you. You won't die even if you fall down the staircase, but make sure you don't. Climb up! For the mountains!”

None of what he said made any difference to Sushila Devi, as she was trapped in her own head. She was stuck and it was her fault. She entrusted a man she couldn't see with a queer idea and turned into a crazy old woman seeking things only the weird and insolent creatures who have no place in society demand. If someone saw her here, stuck on a metal staircase on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor, what would they say! It was

indecorous in every way for a woman like her to be behaving so disagreeably, a woman who belonged to such a reputable family!

“The mountains! Please see the mountains!” said the voice again, not giving up, as if reading her mind.

She stayed still, struggling to maintain the balance.

“Maybe she should come down,” suggested Armaan.

“Look at the mountains, Sushila! Just put your head up and look! The mountains!” implored Arnold, again.

An alarming sensation spread across her body on hearing her name. It had been ages since someone addressed her with her first name, especially in a tone so unhesitant. She looked up immediately and turned her head to the right. The mountains glowed and whistled. Lightning strikes were closer than before. She stared at the mist and fog that covered the apex of the hills. She had to climb up for a better view and she did. Everyone stayed silent while she clambered up the stairs bustling with her uncanny uniform. When she made it to the 29<sup>th</sup> tread, she looked up again. The mountains appeared the same, but the angle and background had changed a bit, which also changed her perspective. She couldn't describe the change pictorially with precision but could feel the difference of emotions. She turned around slowly and sat down breathlessly. Not wanting to look down, she kept gazing at the limitless mountain range. ‘They must meet at my home’, she thought. ‘All the mountains are one,’ her heart called out. ‘They all are connected with each other by the earth and water and have a way of coming back to us wherever we are. The entire planet is one, everything connects with everything else.’ Lost in her thoughts, she let her eyes traverse the terrace above which she sat magnanimously. The sight was exhilarating but also filled with dreaded fear. She noticed Armaan and Kavya looking at her, with their necks craning indefatigably at a particular altitude. She wondered how Arnold would appear in a similar posture, how would the voice which called out her name look at all. Turning away her gaze, she then rested her eyes on a baby pigeon who lay beside a glass pillar which was covered with a shed of an iron mat. A nest lay graciously over the shed, while the avian beat in the air to be climbing back home. Sushila Devi instantly got up and clambered down. Trudging down the staircase was more difficult than climbing up as the horror of the heights had trapped her, but she managed it somehow, drunken with the delight of fulfilling a dream, a bombardment of new realisations, and the urge to help the little bird, that looked as ugly as human babies look beautiful. The moment she sat her foot on the terrace ground, a surge of contention electrocuted her entrails, a feeling she hadn't long experienced. The bucket list might have been a crazy idea before, but now, that's all that made sense to her.

“That was brilliant!” said Armaan in a cheerful voice.

“You have fear of heights!” ridiculed Arnold. Sushila Devi, ignoring the retort and the teasing that followed, grinning, all the same, walked briskly to the pillar and picked the pigeon up. At first it strangled and tried to attack her with its tiny beak, but once it was back in the nest, looked curiously at her with beady eyes, unable to grasp the source and unlikeliness of the kindness she had experienced for the first time.

Suddenly, the drizzle transformed itself into heavy rain, and they all took shelter around the bird, under the brick roof where she tossed in her nest, intimidated.

"Her mother is wise," pointed Kavya. "She chose the perfect place for laying eggs,"

"The baby is injured though, look." Armaan signalled at the splotch of dried blood on her developing left wing. Sushila Devi quickly ripped off a cloth piece from her silk Saree, folded it several times, and gently placed it around the wide-eyed pigeon. The bird didn't question her movements and stayed silent.

"Can't we do something?" asked Kavya.

"No!" replied Armaan. "We are not veterans and might end up harming her more. At this moment, it is highly improbable for any hospital to serve her too. Besides, look, she is fine. And the cloth will provide her with enough warmth."

"Maybe if we could get her some water then. She looks gross anyway."

"Oh of course. Look what we have falling from the sky, Ketchup! Maybe that would clean away her ugliness!"

"How come you never stop being snobbish?"

"I am not snobbish! You have a talent for saying stupid things!"

"Just like you have a talent for- "

"Oh, cut it out you two!" scolded the grandmother. Meanwhile, Arnold had brought in a plastic cup from the gym which he instantly handed over to Armaan, cognizant of the nervous stares that accompanied the flying bowl as he moved around.

"So, I am invisible!" he snorted. "How long until you make peace with it?"

Sushila Devi and Kavya still shared nervous stares but hid them behind a confident pretence of insouciance.

"Found this lying in the gym," he explained. "I washed it up with the rainwater and have scratched the dirt, but it still has some hard grained speckles on it. I reckon it could work for this little monster."

Armaan held the bowl under the downpour for it to fill in the cup enough in order for it to be fed to the pigeon, who was now bored of being scared of a bunch of humans who either did not care, or did not possess the ability to actually harm her, and had also stopped staring. Once the cup was half full, he kept it near her nest which she wilfully refused by looking away.

"Maybe she will drink it later," said Sushila Devi.

"Pigeons have amazing graphic memory, you know," said Armaan, turning towards Kavya. "They can never forget a path they have once travelled. They aren't gross, they are different."

"Well of course," snapped Kavya. "Like how you are not handsome and just different!" Before a reaction could come from Armaan, she added, "She looks at peace." She pointed at the bird, who now tossed and pried in her nest comfortably. The rain had stopped and tiny streaks of sunlight had made their way through the clouds.

"Most birds are at peace nowadays," said Armaan, dreamily. "Don't you listen to their singing in the morning? If you did, then you might notice how silent they have become and how soothingly melodious! They have stopped screaming."

"You sound like an old madman in a forest!" chuckled Kavya.

“Why have they gone silent?” asked Sushila Devi, earnestly.

“Because we have stopped creating noises, polluting the air, making them sick, and bothering them everywhere. It seems all species on this planet are pleased with the consequences of this lockdown except for most humans.” Armaan sighed.

“Even dogs, perhaps,” injected Kavya. “There are not many people feeding them anymore.”

Everyone nodded and read their watches, which now projected five minutes to five, headed downstairs. When they entered the flat, they unexpectedly saw Suresh getting ready to go out. The watchmen had lost all the keys and a clamour had broken out downstairs. The situation had come into notice when Mr. Pratyush, a resident of flat number 805, had asked the watchmen for a key to the iron gate guarding the electric meter boards. He had an electrician come down to assist him with certain electrical issues, and when no key was found, he had messaged it to the WhatsApp group of the building, bringing everyone together. After narrating this story, when Suresh asked them where they all were, all four of them said in unison, “Downstairs! To take a walk.” Suresh eyed them suspiciously when they apprised not knowing about the racket that broke out at the gate, but then chose to ignore it considering them thick enough to not pay attention to important things. Armaan rushed Arnold inside the room where they both sniggered.

“So much can happen in an hour!” exclaimed Armaan. He then guided Arnold to quickly rush downstairs and place the keys somewhere in the shed. “Try to take the stairs, not the lift.” And so he did.

Later that evening, when the couple of the house sat talking in the bedroom, a conversation about Sushila Devi rose up.

“The vendor said he had some good quality musk melons,” said Suresh. “I will get a few kilos tomorrow.”

“Yes, and ask him about lemons too,” reminded Kavita. “People are suggesting to squeeze a lemon in hot water and drink every day. It is good for health, especially during this time.”

“Okay. If there is anything else, then make a list of it and I will ask him.”

“Sure.”

Kavita took a pen and notepad that lay on the bedside and began scribbling names of vegetables and fruits. She looked up at her husband who was engrossed in the mobile phone in his hands.

“Mummyji seems to be enjoying herself these days,” she uttered.

“That’s good,” said Suresh, uninterested.

“It is strange to see her spend so much time giggling with that strange man,” she mentioned. “What would people say if they see this!”

“If people ever see this, then they are going to simply call her crazy,” he retorted.

“They would think she is talking to herself. Besides, I don’t trust this man, but I cannot deny her will and orders. I wish the lockdown ends soon and he flits away,” he sighed, not taking his eyes off the screen. It was a strange characteristic in him, which intrigued people who dealt with him in several affairs. On one hand, he was a

man who said what was in his heart without mincing a word, on the other hand, he would stick to his ideals even though it meant compromising his wishes, and he did so with perfect balance in his mind. It was interesting that he had maintained his sanity amongst this juggling of beliefs and manipulations.

"I hear it is going to be extended?" asked Kavita, not mentioning Arnold again as she assumed it might make her husband furious.

"Yeah, it is certainly not ending before May, probably June," he said.

"There is so much extra work in the house—"

"Besides, what do you have to worry about? I am the one concerned about how to bring the money home. All you have to do is spend it."

Kavita's face sank in shock and she looked away. She knew that if she argued any further, a fight was inevitable. It had grown on her like a habit, to be disregarded for the effort she put in every day, and yet it would influence her every time that her husband would remind her of it. 'Even this lockdown made no difference,' she wondered. 'Then what will?'

"Hey! Get me a cup of tea," ordered Suresh, still not looking away from his phone. Kavita quietly got up and sidled to the kitchen, her left leg stinging with muscle pain. She met with Kavya in the kitchen.

"Let me make the tea," said Kavya, her eyes imploring answers. "You go and rest." Kavita smiled and wondered to herself. She didn't mind working day in and day out, she loved working. She didn't mind getting sick due to the tiresome routine, it was inspiring. The clanking of the utensils, whistle of the pressure cooker, beep of the washing machine, celebrations of festivals, decorations, innumerable artefacts, activities, and feelings that accompanied the responsibility of managing the house only made her feel exhilarated. Nor did she lack love from her children. The one insecurity that fed on her was the disregard for her consistent care, about which, when she complained, was just deemed lazy and unfit for work. The one disregard she received from her husband constantly, which made her consistently unhappy, was one truth of life she was not ready to embrace and felt it with different intensities on different occasions. Even the world around her seemed to be judging her actions all the time.

"No, I will do it," she replied. "You go and study."

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"Look, Arnold," said Armaan, in an exceptionally polite tone. "Don't take it in bad spirits, but your association and coordination with my grandmother might be questionable to some people." When Arnold rose his eyebrows, he continued to explain- "I mean, to my parents- you both laugh and talk so much—"

"I spoke to her for the first time two days ago, I talk to you more than I speak to her," Arnold interrupted, not irritated at all, but curious, as if expecting a similar comment already.

"Exactly! And yet you are so well connected."

"Yeah, isn't that great?"

"No, you should stay a little away from her!"

"You mean, not sit near her?"

"No, I mean, spend less time."

"We hardly spend a couple of hours working on her writing, do you want her to stop working for that long, or—"

"Yes, but with more days coming, your time with each other shall increase, and—"

Armaan took a pause. He noticed Arnold's expression change with every sentence that he spoke. He was less pleased than when the conversation had begun.

"Well," Armaan shuddered. "She is a woman and you are a man. You hardly know each other and you talking like that and doing things together might be a little unbecoming."

"For heaven's sake!" squealed Arnold, no more amused. "She is sixty-two years old! Have some shame, boy!"

"Yes, that's why it is weirder!"

"The lady is dying. Let her live without your judgements and interference at least in her last days. Hasn't she stuck with your protocols long enough?"

"It is not my thoughts that I am putting forward, but of other people."

"And yet you are saying them, and expecting her to abide by it. On one hand, you crave freedom and understanding from the world around you, and on the other hand, you thrust it upon an old lady who possesses ten times more life experience than you. Shows how much you respect the old woman."

"It is not my fault that I did not get enough time to spend with her and have not much feeling of affection for her!"

"Does not mean you can't respect her!"

Armaan flushed with every word that consorted Arnold's defensive rage that he had never witnessed before. He almost felt guilty before Arnold said—

"Besides, she seems to be the only person in the house doing something new from the heart, wanting to go beyond her reservations to look and chase what she really wants."

"The only one?" scowled Armaan. "What about me?"

"What about you? Your maximum actions of the day are determined by your irresolute cries about how your father doesn't understand your ambitions and in that relentless pursuit of blaming, you couldn't even finish a stupid basic book on quantum computing in fifteen days!"

Taken aback by what he had just heard, Armaan glowered, until Arnold's tempest automatically disappeared. It was not the statement, but the fact that it came from the man he had deemed his best friend for the last six months hurt him.

"I was the one who believed you, brought you here!"

"I know, you are right."

"And that book is difficult! Maybe not for a genius brain like yours, but it is for me!"

Both of them stayed silent. While Arnold stayed shut to loosen the temperament of the space, Armaan did so in the cognizance that everything that was alluded to him was true. He had indeed been careless and had not proven his worth to anyone to

influence them. His recklessness did not disappear even after the efforts Arnold put in for him. He was making excuses against a dream he almost daily fought with his father for. It was also true that his grandmother indefatigably worked towards what seemed so dear to her without being complacent and wary of her age, and was old enough to decide for herself whom she could make close contacts with. And just like how he thought he deserved not to be judged or stopped by his parents to do what his heart willed, she deserved to pursue what she wanted without being questioned by her children or grandchildren. Existing in the knowledge of these facts was troublesome for him, especially when it came bluntly from the magical man whom he thought had been on his side and was always agreeable to him. It was also difficult to accept defeat when bitterness of the statements made him repel them hard.

“Look, I don’t think I said anything wrong,” Arnold decided to break the ice. “But I do believe I came a little too harsh on you, kid. I am sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said Armaan, plainly.

“If your parents have an issue with this association, I think you should speak to her and spend more time with her so that I don’t have to.”

Listening to this, Armaan quickly raised his head.

“She is old,” continued Arnold. “That doesn’t mean she doesn’t get bored or lonely.”

‘He is right’, thought Armaan. Before Arnold had announced himself to the family, Armaan hadn’t seen his grandmother be interested in any matter of the world whatsoever and had preconceived the behaviour to be the truth of her dull self. No one in the family would be interested to speak to her for more than two minutes. Participation in household chores was also not a likelihood due to her ill health. And so, she couldn’t command them to keep their legs in the air while she cleaned some part of the floor, or to get onto the dining table when the food was served, or even to keep their belongings in their right places while she dusted the furniture. The only entertainment in her life seemed to be a television show that broadcasted for half an hour every weekday. Upon this realisation, Armaan said nothing, but the change of his expression from disgruntled to enlightened convinced Arnold of the progress.

“Maybe play games with her, read out stories, and more importantly, speak to her about her bucket list,” suggested Arnold, grinning. As he did, darkness crept over the space. The downpour resumed with a storm-like breeze making a tree fall over the power lines, bombarding the transformer outside, cutting off the electricity supply in the house. The door to the room immediately flung open and Arnold jumped on his feet. A hand groped his arms asking, “Armaan?”

“No. Err- it’s me, Arnold.”

Sushila Devi quickly let go of his arm and Armaan switched on the flashlight on his phone.

“Will you bring me my quilt?” she spoke.

“Yes, I am coming,” said Armaan, obediently.

Sushila Devi turned and trudged to her room, words ringing in her head. ‘It’s me, Arnold.’ Covering herself with the quilt, keeping her specs aside, before closing her eyes, and the sound of the darkness covering her mind, the words wrung, distracting her again, ‘It’s me, Arnold.’ When she tried to sleep later, a high-pitched sound

echoed inside her gut, 'It's me, Arnold.' She couldn't stop but relive these words with different feelings when the room around her was still painted black. After an hour, the electricity supply was back, the noise of the rotating fan and little photons emitting from the tube light faded the words in her head, and she fell into a deep sleep. The dark has varied effects on different souls, some get their minds seized, and some, their thoughts.

## Chapter Eight

### Farce in the Kitchen

It had been five days since Sushila Devi first began to write. Her hands still trembled when she placed the pencil on paper, but she was now in better control of it. She could now recognise all 26 letters in the alphabet, small and capital, and had even learnt the difference between vowels and consonants. Today, she was to be receiving lessons on words, but her hand muscles ached from practising in the morning. She practised writing for at least two hours every day which had earned her such a successful feat so soon. Whenever her eyes teared up after a few minutes from focussing so much, she would take a five minute pause, and resume with the scribbling. Although, her patience was on the brink of shattering this morning. She had again started to believe to try to learn to read and write at such a pitiful age to be a stupid idea, and that she might die of the suffering in her hands before any disease grappling her, and that it would happen before she could even spell her own name on the paper without any mistakes. She sat in Armaan's room today, on the bed, perusing her scribbles in the notebook, analysing the pattern in her errors. Armaan played video games on his phone while a lecture continued on his laptop. By institutional and government orders, schools and colleges across the nation were officially closed, and thus, in order to prevent any loss of education, online lectures were being hosted for students by most institutes. Armaan and many other individuals who had no faith in their professors, and had suffered the cannon of compulsory attendance during normal days, had seen this as a jackpot. He had thought he could mute the video conference, and carry on with his personal endeavours, which should get unnoticed as his camera was disabled. The teachers though had developed a trick to deal with such situations. They would call out the names of random students who claimed to be present in the video calls in the middle of lectures. When they received no response, the attendance for that student would be marked zero. Armaan, known as the boy who slept through all classes even during a normal setup of a classroom, had been called out several times. He reluctantly sat through these lectures by plugging in the earphones but continued to play games. While Armaan and Sushila Devi sat in his room, Arnold sat outside watching the news. An extension of the lockdown until 3<sup>rd</sup> May had been declared. Even so, none of the family members had been shocked. They expected even further extension.

As soon as the clock struck ten and the last lecture of the day ended, Armaan spun towards his grandmother for the next reading-writing session.

"We will start with words today!" he announced.

"Let it be," said Sushila Devi with annoyance.

"Let it be? But Dadi—"

"These are not the jobs of the old. What will I gain by learning this?"

Armaan, surprised by her remark, looked at her plainly and listened, expecting more arguments which he might know to counter, but nothing came his way. Not knowing how to rise against her opinion, he heaved a sigh, and spoke assumptions of his mind, hoping it would make sense to her, if not him.

“What do we kids gain by learning this?” he asked.

“You learn to deal with the new world. It is a requirement for your new generation. It was not a necessity in our times.” she replied.

“But aren’t we all humans? Dadi, these things that we do every day as human beings have no credibility if we are all just going to die someday. We do what we do just to do. I know this new adventure that you have embarked upon makes you feel nicer and better, and so it is worth it. You may die tomorrow, or a year from now, or ten years from now or more. What is important is, you live before it happens, and you live every day. Just because you are old, should not mean you don’t get a chance to add memories to your thought basket for that one moment of death when you will close your eyes and say goodbye--”

Sushila Devi looked grimly at Armaan. She wanted to agree with something he said, but could not point at what exactly it was. She couldn’t understand the logic behind his talks but could relate to the emotions, majorly because of the enunciations that came along with his diction. One major barrier that had not yet shown itself in her association with her grandchild was the fact that she couldn’t be guided or motivated by her grandkid. It was not arrogance, but the guilt of not being in complete awareness of herself, in order to display certainty and conviction of her actions.

“All of that is fine, but it is a lockdown period,” she said. “Everyone everywhere is still. It occurs strange that I should suddenly become so aspirational. We can do all of this later.”

“Dadi!” responded Armaan. “Can I tell you a dream?”

“Oh no more dreams and wants and—”

“No, a literal dream. Listen—I may sound weird, but try to get my point, okay?”

Sushila Devi made no response but did not move away her glance from his face, which was an indication that she was listening.

“I had this dream a few days back when I was confused, it is all very detailed, but I shall skip to the main part,” he narrated. “A wise man, a fictional character from one of my favourite books, Professor Dumbledore had asked me— ‘How do you see the world, Armaan? Is it still, or is it moving?’ And I couldn’t answer. He asked me again, and I still couldn’t answer. Then he smiled at me and disappeared! I thought about this question for the next two days, and when he reappeared in my dream, I was able to give him the answer, after which, again, he smiled and disappeared! Guess what the answer was?”

Expecting a response, he halted for a couple of seconds, and when he noticed his grandmother gazing at him blankly, with no hope of a reply, he continued—

“The world is still when I am moving and moving when I am still!”

He paused again, now with a confidence that his statement would be received with awe and appreciation, but when the grandmother did not respond still, he burst into an explanation—

“Don’t you see? The world works relative to you! When you do nothing, you see things happen around you all the time. You see the world is moving faster than you. But when you do things, when you are immersed in activity, the world is much slower, as if it was still! You are moving so you see the world still, Dadi!”

Armaan had both his hands flying in the air anticipating a response, at least now. His mouth was half-open from the last word he had uttered and was enthusiastic even in his stillness. Arnold, who had arrived in the room a minute ago, broke the rigidity of his posture. “But the world indeed is still at the moment, whether you do something or not, so your argument doesn’t hold much ground,” he spoke.

“You are right,” assented Armaan, loosening his muscles and sitting low headed on the bed. Sushila Devi, who did not know the manner in which she was supposed to react, just looked at him. On one hand, she wanted to laugh at the triviality of the argument, on the other, she also felt that she had understood the idea and wanted to congratulate the discretion of his young grandchild, who could possess such grandiose thoughts. She also did not wish to ignore the incident like she had chosen to many times before in the arrogance of being an old adult, and yet did not wish to encourage a conversation on a strange topic that might make her occur even more indecorous or weird than what she already seemed, if not to the world than her own self.

“A good dream you had,” she said at last. “And tell me about these words,” she picked the pencil and notebook, and smiled. Perceiving it as a victory, Armaan excitedly set to his tutoring. Arnold grinned from the door.

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In the afternoon, Kavya, Armaan, and Sushila Devi were gathered in a room stitching face masks from spare clothes. On one bed were placed half-cut pyjamas and kurtas, square-cut stitch-ready stacks of printed and plain cloth pieces, and colourful strands spread all over. The other bed carried the machinery including rulers, elastic bands, sewing needles, threads, and scissors. Kavya worked the sewing machine, Armaan cut the pieces of clothes into proper dimensions, and Sushila Devi hand-stitched the elastics onto the prepared masks. Kavya had already stitched twelve beautiful masks all by herself, but considering the number of people in the house and future requirements, they reckoned more supplements were required. And so, they worked like elves, huge elves, in different rhythms.

“You could cook cuisines from different countries,” suggested Armaan, as he separated a blue square-shaped cloth-piece from the larger part, referring to the fifth wish on her bucket list, which was to cook six new dishes.

“You could try Italian! Pasta!” said Kavya, loudly over the sound of the sewing machine, which she did not look away from as she ran a piece of flowery red cloth through it.

“I don’t like pasta!” retorted Armaan. “You are suggesting it because you like it!”

“It is at least better than the spring rolls you drool over every weekend,” snapped Kavya.

“They are the most—”

Sushila Devi observed their arguments with a pacified and amused expression. Belonging to a small town of Bharat, her exposure to the food styles of different countries was minimal. As a woman who believed in a simple and rich diet, she had explored many recipes of her native land, but it was time for her to explore beyond. Familiar with this idea, she had already completed her research with the expert service by Arnold and had chosen her menu.

“But before this, you didn’t even like Mexican food!” argued Kavya, continuing with the riot. “You are just saying this to get back at me!”

“Why do you care?” retorted Armaan. “You like Mexican food and I am supporting it!”

“I don’t want you supporting me!”

“What is the problem you—”

“Stop now!” interrupted Sushila Devi with a pleasant shout. “Pizza, garlic bread, chocolate cake, and Manchow Soup, will be the first dinner.”

Looking at their stunned faces, she explained— “You both enjoy Pizza and Garlic bread at the wedding parties.”

They smiled and the first task was settled.

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Next day was spent collecting materials for Sushila Devi’s cooking venture. Suresh, oblivious to the idea of a bucket list, had asked the vendor to supply surplus amounts of capsicum and tomato, thinking that his mother might be wanting to please the kids. Armaan had gotten up early in the morning to go to the general store, where the shopkeeper, Madan, allowed only selected pupils to enter through the backdoor between eight and nine in the morning. The police had warned him last week catching hold of his illicit opening of the shop against government orders. Armaan, being a regular customer and son of an acquaintance could ask him for Oregano, Chilli flakes, flour, ketchup, and other items loosely one after the other as he stood inside the shop, which was technically undesirable, but he maintained a metre-long distance. Many others had to place their orders in advance, and receive their packets the next day. They stood outside the shop and made their payments digitally as it was a general idea that paper money was an instant medium for the spread of coronavirus in the city. It was rumoured that the famous milkman Channilal, with his shop only a kilometre away, had caught the virus by accepting paper money. It was also known through the media that some people wandered about licking the notary and spreading it around so that if they had the disease, they could spread to others, which people deemed abysmal and anti-national. The contagion was asymptomatic for most people who could act as carriers of the virus. Individuals had satirised and shown aggression for such activities on social media, but that did not stop the disease spreaders to infect even more people when the country strived to eradicate the infection by locking themselves in.

After Armaan brought all the required stuff home, he made Sushila Devi watch cooking videos over the Internet which she interestedly replayed many times to seep

in recipes in the memory. In the early evening, she had stepped into the kitchen and chopped vegetable toppings for the Pizza. When she sliced a yellow bell pepper with trembling hands, her mind set out fireworks of numerous thoughts which were mostly questions. At first, she wondered whether she should chop the bell peppers into small cubes or thin long slices. Then she thought whether it mattered, in fact, did it matter at all that she cooked some strange foreign dish for the first time! While she was young, she would get excited about new recipes she would learn from various relatives. Her children gorged with glee when something new was served on their plates. Her husband was a gourmet as well as an admirer of simple food. His earnestness for unique dishes pleased Sushila Devi's endeavours. He would never appreciate food if it wasn't satisfactory. Some people may have found it affronting, but for Sushila Devi, it acted as a class routine, which turned her from a miserable damsel in distress in the kitchen to a power chef in mere two years of her marriage. When Prem Babu did not give any comments while he ate, it was a signal to her that her food had been gratifying, what people would generally call- scrumptious. However, this acceptance of her food didn't change the fact that she always was awfully nervous and crippled when trying to cook new cuisines, as she always wished for her husband and kids to be pleased by her meals, and never complain. When it didn't happen, which was rare, she would get very upset, and Prem Babu would console her and encourage her to try making the same cuisine again. Now, Prem Babu was dead, and if she messed up the food, he did not exist to inspire her, nor could she expect anyone's review to be as honest and easy-to-accept as his. This emerged panic in her but she put it aside. She was the eldest in the family she served, and now remembered that her duty was to remain unshaken no matter what the circumstance. To get her mind away from the memories of her husband, she forcefully interested herself in the question of whether there existed such a variety of food that everyone in the world liked, or even disliked. Then she thought that the world was huge and even her worst dish had a probability to be liked by someone in a far off continent. She then got surprised by the way she was thinking. Her mind was touching the spaces of the universe differently, as if in a child's mind, and she liked it. After she finished chopping the bell peppers, Kavita entered the kitchen with a sunken face. Her eyes were droopy, and without casting a glance on the old lady, she simply took out a saucer from the cabinet, poured some water in, and turned on the gas flame to let it boil. Sushila Devi observed her silently while she dropped some tea leaves, ginger, and cardamom in the saucer, still determined not to look up. After she poured a cup of milk and began to leave the kitchen, Sushila Devi interrupted her by saying— "Kavita, where's the flour?". Kavita quickly moved close to the refrigerator, opened the door with force, fiddled fiercely through plastic packets, and taking out a pack named 'Flour', she lent it out for Sushila Devi to receive without turning her head. Sushila Devi handled the packet and asked again, "Are you alright?" Kavita nodded. The kitchen was now filled with the aroma of ginger tea which boiled on the stove.

"Did Suresh say something?" prodded Sushila Devi, determined.

The question made Kavita's face turn redder than it might have been before. "Why do you care?" she squealed in fury.

Sushila Devi, failing to understand the reason for such a response, coolly asked, "What happened?"

"Don't you see-- Don't you see—" she enraged. "THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!!"

Sushila Devi, clueless to the reference, stood frozen, listening, trying to make sense. The ferocity in Kavita's face evaporated as quickly as it first appeared. Her eyes were now wet with tears and she glanced at her mother-in-law grudgingly. Armaan, Kavya, Suresh, and Arnold quickly stepped into the scene.

"What in heaven's name is going on here?" roared Suresh. "Do you realise that your voices must be heard by the neighbours?" he bellowed without noticing the sin in the temper and loudness of his own voice. Sushila Devi raised a hand, signalling him to be quiet. "There is no need to shout," she said simply.

"We were just talking. Kavya, pour the tea in a cup and take it to your father out in the living room," she commanded, turning to Kavya, and the girl put herself to work. Kavita stood timidly at the same spot with her back turned to everyone. Armaan walked to his room, relieved, and Suresh mumbled towards the living area. Arnold fixed himself in the kitchen, whom no one took the notice of, not even Armaan, who quickly slipped back into a nap that he had awakened from. When Kavya took away the tea tray from the kitchen, Sushila Devi poured some water in a steel tumbler from the clay pot and offered it to Kavita, who took a sip and put the container away.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't answer.

"Tell me what you have to tell."

Kavita looked at her, tears contained within the arc of her eyes, streaming with a labyrinth of emotions, she wanted to scream. Anger inside her appeared to burst like firecrackers within the light-filled ocean of her eyes.

"It is you," she said numbly. "You got me married to your son and then ran away from the responsibility of managing his unacceptable attitude. Ten years and I had no one to confide in because you turned your back!" her voice rose and dampened in little intervals, with strange pauses.

Sushila Devi stared at her in a daze, still unable to place her head around reason. What was she talking about? Staying silent, Sushila Devi waited for more information.

"I didn't kill your husband," Kavita's voice went cold and she turned her head away as if expecting a blow, an onslaught, which didn't come.

"I know", said Sushila Devi, calm as water in the lakes during summer.

Surprised at the response, Kavita looked back at the old lady, gulping. After a few moments of analysis, she said, "You have been telling the world something else."

"I said those things ten years ago!" retorted Sushila Devi, a little irritated at the mention of an old incident, bringing back her husband's memories she was trying hard to forget a few minutes ago.

“Well, people don’t forget, do they! They still talk behind my back about the accusations of the horrible daughter-in-law that I am which you raved about for months!”

“I was going through a tough time.”

“Doesn’t excuse your behaviour!”

“My husband had died,” uttered Sushila Devi in a monotonous voice. “My life almost ended. Did you ever try to really know how I was?” and she didn’t realise when the expression of her speech transformed from calm to acrimonious. “Did my children? Did ANYONE?”

“We asked you to stay with us a million times!”

“Well, that was nearly not enough then!”

Sushila Devi’s eyes now flamed out. The atrocity with which she stood facing her daughter-in-law could be traced down from far away, as energy of retaliation lit up her dreary face, and her body attempted fiercely to control the fire raging within her for years, and only had a chance of revealing itself now. She had been misunderstood for years, her afflictions neglected. She had forgotten that it was not usual to expect emotional understanding from your younger relatives, especially from your daughter-in-law. She just sulked like an insolent little child looking into nothingness, anything but angrily.

“I am sorry,” muttered Kavita.

Sushila Devi nodded. “I too,” the redness of her face still evident. “And—I always believed that it was enough that a man doesn’t hit or abuse a woman and doesn’t deny her of any wishes. I was proud that my son was raised such a man. I was wrong. A husband ought to be a lot more than that, and there are other forms of abuse that we often ignore. I have failed to teach the same to him and I apologise for it.”

Kavita stared in amazement. Even though she admired the gesture of her mother-in-law, there lay no forgiveness in her heart, which was a fact she was too scared or good-mannered to confide. She smiled at her, but they both knew it meant nothing. Women smile when they suffer, as they are taught since their childhood, such suffering becomes their power they are told, not in words, but through their conduct. Today though, Kavita smiled from a fever of disappointment, pain, and unacceptance, which even willingly, she was unable to let go of. In fact, she doubted if she could ever let go. If even time has the power to heal her position, she did not know. “AND- you don’t have to worry about the kind of clothes you wear in the house during my presence, Kurtas suit you anyway,” continued Sushila Devi. On seeing Kavita’s eyes widen with questions, she explained, “I saw pictures in Armaan’s phone and the day when Kavita had a fever.”

Saying all that she deemed as necessary to be said, Sushila Devi marched out of the kitchen, extending her break from cooking. Her eyes glistened with pain. It was after ten years that the only important few words had ushered their way out, rather forcibly today. There was so much that remained unsaid. She could think of innumerable complaints and apologies she would want to confess, but in the wake of the truth of the relationship she shared with her daughter-in-law, she held herself frigid. Kavita

was not her husband or a friend whom she could confide in her insecurities, and even if she does, had to be mindful of the ways her words are put across, which negated the reason for sharing them in the first place. Embarrassed with her conduct, she wondered if a real reconciliation between them could ever happen. She was fine with a pretence too though, which seemed like the only possibility at this point. She suddenly felt a shadow behind her.

“You can speak to me if you like,” said Arnold’s disembodied voice. “I am a friend and there is no protocol. You can tell me.”

And she did, while they moved back and forth on the swing. She was acutely aware that she did not share her thoughts with him out of a necessity. A woman of her age had already learned to keep things to herself, no matter how troublesome. She spoke because she wanted to share her wisdom, her experiences, in the form of words that spoke discretion, told stories, that had learnings within them. And that changed the way she approached the situation as well.

The preparation of dinner that day was made possible by a little help from Kavita, and a lot by the kids. Sushila Devi wasn’t very proud of her attempt, but the fact that everything on the plate was edible for the tongues of all the people at the dinner table left her gratified and hopeful. She saw it on their faces, which always is a more reliable tool to know something than the words, which, unsurprisingly, said “delicious”, which she knew, was not true. She spent the next few days making new dishes every day, relieving Kavita from her Kitchen-duty during evenings. Kavya took over the task of clicking serene pictures of the food and posting them on social media with captions such as “Grandma’s special”, “Today we eat Mexican Style”, and “The restaurant is closed for family.” This encouraged Sushila Devi to sit through extensive reading and writing practices so that she could switch to her favourite activity of the day with confidence. Her hands no more shivered as she put the pen on paper. She did ask for breaks after every ten minutes to soak her fingers in warm water which ached due to the high pressure she put while holding the pen. She had learned distinct sounds of letters, finding ‘a’, ‘e’, ‘f’ easier than most. She often questioned Armaan about how she can remember the variations and tones for the same letters placed in a word at different places and pronounced differently. She would especially cringe at the letters ‘w’, ‘y’, and ‘d’.

The sound of ‘y’ in the word ‘gay’, was very different from the sound in ‘yacht’.

‘w’ would be pronounced like ‘o’ in ‘row’ and like ‘v’ in ‘word’.

Arnold spent most of his time sitting on the balcony, brooding over life experiences, and analysing the weather which was more unpredictable than he had ever seen. Sometimes, bright sunshine crept over the glass window panes, making everyone switch on the air conditioners and the water cooler. A few hours later, clouds appeared in the sky making the atmosphere so cool that one couldn’t remember it was sunny in the morning. Storms and rains had also become a regular sight.

Weather experts deemed it to be the sudden change in human practices that caused the atmospheric disturbance. Arnold enjoyed sitting around the trees as though he had never witnessed such unplanned, unstructured greenery in his entire life, which could be a possibility as he was born at least half a century later. He refrained from

physical activities as much as possible and had volunteered to teach quantum mechanics and Chemistry to Armaan, who now solved complicated equations in his notebook while pretending to listen to the lectures by college professors online. Arnold also displayed some physics tricks to other people in the house which added minimal effect of surprise in comparison to the fact that an invisible man stood and moved around in front of them. Once, when he had managed to put a long thin needle through a red balloon without popping it, Kavya had rattled him with questions about what caused it. He had then wagered a bet that if she tells him what caused it, he would teach her another interesting trick to woo her friends. She had already imagined how amazing it would be for her to be performing that interesting trick on social media, and this stirred a sudden interest in her towards science books which also aided her in her board-exam preparations. The house had now transformed into a learning hub, and squeals of excitement or achieving a new level in the specific science echoed most time of the day. To the eyes of Armaan though, who was the only person who could see Arnold, he appeared paler than before. His eyes were visibly red sometimes and the voice hoarse and tired on several occasions. He had also stopped sneaking himself onto the terrace to check on the pigeon who had, as per the information conveyed four days ago, grown even more feathers and would be forming wings soon. And so, on the morning of 29<sup>th</sup> April, when Arnold sat in his room watching an episode of Doctor Who intently on the laptop, Armaan dared and asked him.

“Hey, could you pause for a minute?”

Arnold paused the video and turned towards Armaan. The still picture showed a white man with brown hair holding a sword in his hand, who was apparently ‘The Doctor’, and a strange brownish shaded alien creature in a posture of defence. Armaan stared at Arnold nervously through the old rectangular spectacles, studying the yellowness of his face, redness in his eyes, and emaciated fingers on his hands. “What’s up?” asked Arnold.

“How are you?” asked Armaan sitting beside him, still shaken.

“Umm—Fine--?” replied Arnold, puzzled, trying to locate the purpose of the question.

“I mean, how are you physically, your health?”

“Oh—You don’t need to worry. I don’t think I have caught the virus if that’s what you meant to ask. I am anyway vaccinated, it is a future vaccine, but chances still are—”

“No! You said – You said before that the radiation of the Invisibility device was harmful, and you look pale and sick!”

Armaan kept looking at him as he moved his fingers through the eyebrows, scratching them to avoid eye contact.

“Well, yeah, I think I have begun showing symptoms of acute cancer, I might not last long.” He finally said.

“WHAT?” jumped Armaan. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I didn’t see a reason to repeat it to you,” said Arnold, with a horrifying calmness in his voice. “I told you there were radiation spikes, I reckoned you must know what that means.”

“Yes – BUT– You– I– But– No! I didn’t think of it as something THIS serious! You said you will deal with it!”

“You still knew there were chances that I would fail in doing so, right? The cells proliferated much faster than I predicted.”

“No! I knew it but didn’t know it. It was an information before, among the strangeness of everything I didn’t realise its severity– I– cancer? Really?”

“I understand,” said Arnold simply and turned away. “But you are overreacting.”

“Overreacting??” squeaked Armaan, still staggered by the truth he had finally come face to face with. “You tell me you could die, you have cancer, and you sit there calmly as if it is no big deal!”

“I have accepted it, you haven’t, so it’s natural.”

“There is nothing natural in it! You can take that device off, and we can go to the hospital for your treatment.”

“I am afraid I do not agree with your proposal.”

“WHAT? You don’t– What do you—”

“I will not be going to any hospital or take the device out of my body as of now. Because this is what I wish for.”

“Death? You wish for death?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s suicide.”

The certainty and composure in Arnold’s voice was causing an inexplicable exasperation in Armaan’s. The stubbornness with which Arnold put his point terrified him, and the thought of death ignited in him the strange kind of anger which arises when one loses control of a particular situation, and you anticipate repercussions you do not wish to deal with.

“You can call it whatever serves your ideas,” spoke Arnold. “Besides, the treatment you are looking for does not exist yet. The particle that caused the radiations was newly discovered by me in the year 3010. Its effects on cellular biology are not researched. Who knows I might also become a specimen of studying? It would put my years of research into the danger of landing into the wrong hands, for which I ran away from the future in the first place. Even a part of that particle in the hands of someone inappropriate would mean destruction.” Arnold’s voice was now rigid and had a domineering essence in it.

“It’s highly unlikely that a doctor would go that deep and insane during this time. And maybe the effects of those radiations are similar to other types of cancers, or even if different, the treatment could be similar, or the doctors will just figure something out to help maintain your strength!”

“That’s very unlikely, but maybe, it is possible.”

“Right, so we should either call a doctor or—”

“That doesn’t negate the fact though, that I might have to live like a normal human with the agony of physical reluctance for years, after which, I will anyway be dead.”

“But it could be fun too. You could repair the device and use it—”

“It is hardcoded to autodestruct in a month after it is taken out of my body, and I cannot create another one without advanced machines and equipment which may

take years to build. And therefore, this discussion is worthless, for in all possibility I may survive, but how does it matter when I am not willing to?"

"Why not? Isn't that what we are supposed to be doing? Surviving?"

"Well, as humans, we have a choice of not striving to survive all the time. We can choose to let go."

"You are being nonsensical! No one is supposed to die without trying to the best of their abilities to live."

"I have lived an exceptional life, Armaan. Unusual and admirable. The idea to live more appears very exhausting and worthless. I would rather embrace my fate today than struggle through eternity."

"There could be more adventures waiting for you—"

"I do not wish to pursue them."

"You can't choose to die! You don't have the right!"

"It is my life."

"It doesn't mean it only belongs to you! It belongs to the people who love and care for you too! I do not wish for you to die!"

"Very well. Then I apologise for taking away a part of my life from you."

"How would your mother feel?"

"My mother is long dead. Be that as it may, even if she lived, it would be in a different time, knowing myself to be dead anyway, and so would my children. I was supposed to be gone with that time machine. While it burnt to dust, I was delivered here. This is not my time, and neither am I killing myself. I am just letting fate happen to me and I am not fighting it."

"But—"

"End of discussion. It is time for your online class." He said curtly and marched out of the room leaving Armaan glued to the spot. As he trudged outside, his heart thumped loudly and feet felt heavy with every step. The living room was emptier than usual during this time of the day. Kavita and Kavya were busy in the kitchen. Suresh had gone on a car ride with his friends to look for fresh fruits in a nearby village breaking the lockdown protocol. He had managed to get a travelling pass and had the sign 'On duty' stuck on the windshield.

Sushila Devi sat on the sofa scribbling sincerely in her notebook. She shouted "People" as she turned a page. Arnold's heart skipped a beat looking at her. His entrails shuddered with the thought of parting with her. Eyes turned soft and for a moment he wondered whether he should listen to Armaan and try to live through the struggle. Just then, a sharp pain captured his abdomen making him feel weak in the knees. Feeling giddy, he perched on the sofa corner.

"No," he shook his head. "I don't belong here."

## Chapter Nine

### A Poetic Prose

For the next fifteen days, Armaan endeavoured defeated attempts at convincing Arnold to consider focusing on the 'magic of life' and healing himself. Arnold, tired by these consistent arguments eventually chose to deny Armaan's existence. Every time Armaan brought up the topic of his health, he would pretend that no one was present in the room and either begin reading a book or singing his favourite songs. When Armaan would stand in front of him, he would walk past. Even then, the boy's efforts did not die out. Although, after Arnold intimidated him by saying "You stop with this or I will leave the house", he gave up for some time. The helplessness of Armaan bore the fact that he could not ask a doctor to treat an invisible man. If Arnold was not convinced to take the invisibility device out of his body, or at least cooperate with the treatment, he could not force medical help on him.

Meanwhile, Sushila Devi had begun working towards the next task on her bucket list, which was to make friends. Everyone was convinced in the egress itself that she did not know how to make friends, when, in response to the question of whether she had any special friends, she had said—

"I know a lot of people in our religious community."

Upon further interrogation, it was found that she may have had a school friend while she was little, but lost contact with her at the age of fifteen upon getting married. Post that, the only friends she ever had were her relatives, religious group ladies, and a neighbour back in her city, who also, as she found out later, was her cousin from a different town. This knowledge made Armaan and Kavya look at her with empathetic and pitiful hearts while she gracefully sifted in her seat, proud of things she had shared about her life.

Now, after enough information gathering, a plan was made. It was clear that Sushila Devi couldn't go outside the house for any meetups or classes to engage with new people, and so, the only obvious idea for fulfilling her quest was online connectivity. A social media account was set up immediately. Arnold had rebelled against the idea, maintaining it was unsafe.

"Social media is the last place you want to be at!" he had said.

To which Armaan, who was still upset with him had made a meaningless and out-of-the-context argument to mock him— "Well, she obviously won't go lurking into chat rooms! They are too young for her taste!"

Their bickering went unheard by others and it was established that Sushila Devi would be using social media as long as she does not share any sensitive information about her, including a photograph. Once trained on the tools, only in a week's time, she had spoken to ten different people, eight of them from different countries. An old lady, Margaret, who was the same age and lived in France had asked Sushila Devi to visit her. She had five kittens in her house namely, Krouton, Gaston, Minerva, Scrooge, and Ella, of whom she shared pictures joyfully. Sushila Devi had asked Kavya to type "I will surely visit if time and fate permits. You should also come to

Bharat.” Even though she was still not in complete control of responding and accepting text messages, the training in reading and writing had helped her understand the texts all by herself most of the time. She could even form spellings of certain words by herself now. Moreover, confidence in her voice, as well as her learnings, bewitched those who had been around her a month before and had noticed her in the misery. To celebrate this feat, she had announced that she shall narrate a poem written by her on 15<sup>th</sup> May in the evening.

Arnold, Armaan, and Kavya had already gathered in the drawing room fifteen minutes earlier, waiting for the clock to strike five, when Kavita and Suresh were expected.

*“As we progress towards Lockdown 4.0, the cases in Bharat have risen up to 85000 with 4.5 million in the world—”* reported a stout bald man on the television. *“Another crisis coming the way of the citizens is the cyclone Amphan of the Bay of Bengal, traversing its path through Kolkata—”*

“Listen to this!” interrupted Armaan, speaking from above the phone in his hand and muting the sound on the TV. “I have some better news!” he read--

### **WOMAN CANCELS DIVORCE, THANKS LOCKDOWN**

*A lady in Pune recently retracted the divorce papers she had signed three weeks ago when she found out that her husband was having an affair. The husband, a software engineer, was texting romantic messages to a colleague and was caught red-handed when he forgot to lock his screen and messages flashed. Because of the lockdown, the lady couldn't move out of the house with no relatives in town, and so they continued to stay together. Within two weeks, conflicts resolved as the husband promised to never repeat it. Lockdown worked like a charm on saving the marriage of this couple!*

Kavya and Sushila Devi sniggered on hearing this. “So now there need not be any family courts! Husbands and wives should be locked in a house for two weeks, No divorce!” suggested Kavya.

Armaan read on.

*A girl born yesterday in the village ‘Brotra’ was named ‘corona’ by her mother Pankaj, who on being asked about the name, said, “She will represent this difficult time and will grow up as a memoir in history.”*

“She will be teased so much in school—”

“They might as well have added virus as a surname too”

“People are being ridiculous.”

*Virendra Kumar, a data scientist in a reputable software company quit his job after getting back to his village, Gorakhpur. He has decided to work on his ancestral agriculture land and says “Food is what people need first, it is a necessity of life.” He has promised to make use of technology to revolutionise the idea of organic farming*

*in his state. He is continuing to serve the notice period until June, while also considering futuristic farming options as he works from home.”*

“That’s stupid! Quit a high paying job at this time when people have no source of income?”

“But he could expand the agriculture business—”

“Only if he has a lot of land would it help—”

*The biggest hole in the ozone layer in the North Pole has closed. An unusually strong polar vortex kept the hole open for nearly a month in the Arctic.”*

“What is the ozone layer?” asked Sushila Devi.

“It is a protective covering around the earth which shields us from the harmful ultraviolet radiation from the sun and it has developed big holes because of the pollution and atmospheric disturbances humans cause,” explained Armaan.

“And it is now closed?” she inquired again.

“Well, one of those holes is closed because of the Lockdown,” he informed her.

“I highly doubt that it is because of the Lockdown,” interrupted Arnold. “There may have been many atmospheric changes, wind pressure changes, which might have influenced the polar vortex, but it is highly dubitable. Not everything in nature occurs because of human interference.”

“No human interference though solves half the problems of the world,” muttered Armaan.

In the meantime, Suresh and Kavita had entered the room and heckled their conversation. “Let’s hear your poem!” said Suresh, taking a sip of fresh ginger tea. Without any utterance, Armaan quickly placed a chair opposite the sofa and Sushila Devi straightened a parchment as she sat, and narrated—

*“There lived a man, tall and smart  
Dark blue eyes, and face covered by a moustache  
He would dance and read,  
Call to the office and plead  
For just one more holiday to spend with his children in peace.*

*Unable to stay forever, he would stay home during weekends,  
Jingles and stories, he shared with those little weasels,  
One fine day, when the sky was dark grey  
He packed his bags and left for an uncertain prey”*

Sushila Devi’s eyes lingered over the empty seat on the sofa she reckoned Arnold was seated in. Her eyes turned smaller while a wide smile appeared on her face as if trying to convey something. She read on—

*His heart never left the time or place  
 While wondered his soul with great dismay  
 Meeting men and women of different breeds  
 Struggling to offer his complete self to a place or scene  
 Baked up fresh in his lovely mind, his world looks so small  
 Hearts are bigger on the inside; he must have learnt it by now  
 As he travels, he may rest in a strange hut  
 Letting go of his stubborn cold, and stories chained with passwords*

It was when Sushila Devi put the paper back into her lap that others realised that the poem had come to an end. Everyone clapped and her eyes continued to linger over the blank space. Her ears involuntarily stretching to distinguish the sound of claps coming from a particular direction, she couldn't.

"Wow Dadi!" exclaimed Armaan. "First such a good cook and now a good poet too!"

"Yes," copied Suresh. "Did you write it all by yourself?"

"Yes, papa!" answered Kavya. "She wrote it yesterday."

"You kids did a good thing teaching her to read and write," he added.

"It was really nice," added Kavita, for the sake of saying it.

"Anyway," said Suresh placing the empty teacup on the table. "I should be going," he stood up amusingly. "There is a meeting in the building clubhouse about the availability and usage of sanitizers and masks for the workers in ten minutes. I am in the elected body. Should freshen up quickly." He walked out of the room with Kavita trailing behind him with the empty cup in her hand that she picked up a few seconds after he placed it.

Armaan noticed that Sushila Devi had stopped staring at the blank space and looked at the parchment ominously. He put on the rectangular spectacles to facilitate himself to see Arnold. As soon as he put the glasses on, he screamed, "Arnold!" and instantly rushed towards him. Arnold's head lolled sideways and his body appeared lifeless.

"What happened?" asked Sushila Devi.

"I think he has fainted!" reported Armaan while making him lie on the Divan by stretching his dangling hands and weightless legs. Sushila Devi immediately scuttled to the kitchen, coming back with a glass of water. She sprinkled it in the direction where Armaan was shaking Arnold. After five minutes of consistent shaking, shouting, sprinkling, and rubbing of feet, Arnold's eyelids fluttered open. He groaned and looked at Armaan who was casting an angry and disapproving glance at him. He wriggled on the Divan, taking support from Armaan to sit up.

"You fainted," said Armaan curtly when Arnold continued to stare at him for an explanation.

"Here," Kavya offered a glass filled with a glucose solution to Armaan who made Arnold drink it.

"I think we should shift to your room, Armaan," said Arnold feebly. "Don't tell your parents about this."

“Do you have the strength to walk?” asked Sushila Devi and Arnold finally saw her. He had lost his senses halfway through her recitation and longed to applaud and speak to her.

“Yes,” he said simply and hoisted his right arm on Armaan’s back for support and limped slowly to the bedroom. After he lay on his bed, Armaan scorned him in Sushila Devi’s presence.

“All you care about is yourself!” he bellowed. “Look what you have done! I am calling the doctor!”

“It’s no use,” objected Arnold with a bland undertone. “Half of my body parts are rotten and on the verge of destruction. Doctors can do nothing.”

“Let them at least try!”

“We can’t let a few secrets out, kid. As a responsibility—”

“You are just being mean and heartless!”

Armaan pursed his lips and stomped his feet out of the room. Sushila Devi stared. She felt defeated, victimised, although she didn’t quite understand why she felt those things.

“What was that about?” she asked. “What has happened to you?”

“Let me read your poem first, I only listened to half of it.” Arnold let out his hand.

Sushila Devi quietly passed on the paper she was still clutching in her left hand.

Arnold read, a smile wrinkling his face several times before he finished. A smile she couldn’t see but feel in the air. It was as if the curling of the lips was not a movement but a sound that brought with it a feeling, one which she could experience with utmost sincerity.

“Thanks,” he said, giving back the paper to Sushila Devi who continued to stare at where he laid blankly. He grasped her hand in his, which made her shudder. Her eyes widened and her heart gave a leap.

“I am dying, Sushila,” and there, he narrated his entire story, as truthfully and sincerely as it was possible for him. She convulsed, gasped, vexed, disapproved, but did not utter a single word as she listened. Every time she would open her mouth to ask a question, she would hear it being answered by Arnold already. When he was done telling the story, she asked— “Is it possible to save you? In any way?”

“Half of my body is gone. Until the time I am saved, at least one-fourth of the remaining will be gone too. What would the world do of a half-dead hopeless man? I will be going into paralysis soon, and—” halting for a minute, he rearranged himself on the bed, and continued with a stutter finding its way in his voice in several irregular intervals— “I wish I had done something about this months ago when I could. Had I known I would meet you—anyway—it’s for the best—you would soon be gone too—can’t escape death—I just wish we had more time—we could but I wouldn’t—No—”

His voice finally cracked and he jerked away, not being able to muster the courage emotionally or physically to say what he tried to say, and not knowing what it was. It was almost as if he could keep talking for hours and days with honesty, and yet couldn’t express what he wished to express, the nature of which he did not understand.

Sushila Devi got up, covered him with a blanket, and with a serene look on her face, disappeared from the room. She strolled dreamily about the house, striving to clear the clutter in her brain, which seemed to her impossible. She tried to cover the confused emotions with clear conversations that she understood. Reimagining the scene, while she still sat near Arnold, she imitated herself in the conversation, saying— “You are so attached to the idea of forever, it is sickening.” And with rage and pity, and a frown on her face, she spoke— “You are a clingy child, while I thought of you as an angel.”

“And what makes you establish that an angel cannot be a child?” he replied with a stupid smile she couldn’t see. She shook her head, feeling a million things at once, thinking emotions to cast them away. Once she walked into the living room and saw Suresh and Kavita seated on the sofa, everything turned normal, or rather, ignorant and superficial. She quietly sat down and began folding clothes that lay on the corner and her mind was shut for some time.

The doorbell rang and Kavita welcomed Sushma, a hearty woman who lived on the ground floor. She had arrived several times before too, but realising a little too late the severity of the lockdown and concept of social distancing, she didn’t show up for three weeks straight. She carried a vessel in which was mango pudding that she fondly offered. As she sat and spoke, Sushila Devi found a paramount distraction. “I think we don’t need maids at all!” spoke Sushma, in a shrill and loud voice that she always communicated in. “Working boosts physical stamina, and my children help me so much that there is so little left for me to do, Karthik and Samaira are always at the beck and call. In fact, I am so bored. If I had to manage two such houses, it would be better.”

Sushila Devi, who had now become a part of the conversation felt a pang of disgust. She was, in all her experiences, familiar with the fact that Sushma was the kind of a woman who loved to flaunt even the most undesirable perspective of things. But now as Sushila Devi remembered how Sushma would boast about her money, the number of servants, and having so much free time to learn new things two months back, and now she would speak of hard work and no servants in the house with such pride! The contradiction infuriated her. Vexed by the hypocrisy, which meant a lack of discretion in Sushila Devi’s understanding, her eyes fumed with disapproval, and she decided to leave.

“That’s good,” replied Suresh in a tone of appreciation. “Kavita here on the other hand was asking me if we could call a maid after the relaxation on the lockdown. She is unable to handle the house on her own, given her health—”

“But she is able to!” spoke Sushila Devi, who changed her mind and stayed with the conversation after her son’s comments. “It is truly admirable how she is managing the house with six people all alone! My medications, and children’s exams, and everyone’s separate demands! I am sure she can handle it for a month more, don’t you think?”

Suresh nodded and looked away in embarrassment, while Kavita grinned at Sushila Devi in surprise.

“Six? Aren’t you five?” asked Sushma.

“Well, of course, she must have counted it incorrectly,” covered up Kavita.

Suddenly, everyone was aware of the peculiar situation that they were living in.

Suresh and Kavita, who were particularly disapproving of an invisible man staying in their house, suddenly turned cold and silent to Sushila Devi’s presence. When she got up and turned back once before taking the last two steps out of the living room, Suresh and she had eye contact. He conveyed his disappointment and anger very clearly. Sushila Devi, on the other hand, seemed to agree with him, in a totally different context, which she didn’t quite understand, nor did she need to.

## Chapter Ten

### Life in Death

“Alright, I will get a checkup done.” Arnold assented to the constant reasoning and persuading that Armaan had taken over as his goal of the day. He agreed to a treatment not with a hope for recovery, but to put the quarrels to an end, or to probably prove as he was certain, his departure was inevitable, and no treatment or doctor in the world could stop it.

“Really?” responded Armaan with both astonishment and doubt. “Well, I will confirm the appointment with Dr. Gupta then. He is a family friend and has agreed to see you. Let me schedule for tomorrow afternoon!” he quickly grabbed his mobile and was about to dial, when--

“Hold on!” called out Arnold’s hoarse voice. “How are you going to take an invisible man to a doctor?”

“I am sure I can explain to him--”

“No, you can’t!”

“Is that an excuse you were planning after saying a yes? Look, we need to get you treated and you need to stop playing around with your life like this and--”

“Stop that blabber again! I will take the treatment, but before it commences, you will have to perform a surgery on me to get the device out.”

“A surgery? But, I am not a doctor!”

“Don’t you worry! I will guide you through it.”

“I think I will be able to make Dr. Gupta understand our situation. Or-- or-- I will make him wear these glasses somehow and he won’t realise you are invisible!”

“And what about the people around him? The tests, reports, surgery? And won’t he want to see what device lives inside my skin? I cannot trust anyone with this.”

“It is not the 31st century! You may trust a little the way you trusted me. Besides, everyone is so ignorant during this difficult time. I had to convince him with such difficulty to even offer you a consultation.”

“Humans in any century are not trustworthy. Stupid-maybe. Kind-maybe.

Trustworthy- Never! If you want me to receive this medical treatment, you will have to perform this surgery on me.”

Failing to form new arguments, Armaan collapsed into the chair placed at the right end of the room and pretended to be making a decision even though he knew he did not have a choice. The idea of performing a surgery excited him, and this excitement was the source of his fear. What if he failed to follow proper instructions from Arnold? It could cost him his life. Although, If he did not perform the operation, then the dying man would receive no treatment and shall lose his life anyway. At first, he detested the idea of being responsible for Arnold’s death or life. Later, with a clear choice in front of him, and the pretence of confusion he tried so hard to put up, he loathed not the responsibility that was put over him, but the fact that with all his power, he could not paint the situation differently. He also couldn’t be certain that any decision he

took would ensure his best friend's being alive. His mind wandered through various possibilities, which he proposed to Arnold.

"What if the doctor performs the surgery, sees the device, operates, but then forgets? Can you make a partial anorexic solution?"

"How about we tell the doctor to get you treated and we can tell him we will deal with the device later? But, oh no, you want the invisibility thing to be secret for him as well--"

"Do you know of a cancer tonic? Don't we have instant solutions to health issues a century from now? One of my friends' father works in a pharmaceutical company, he is in charge of production. He could help!"

"Can we dissolve the device within and let it leave naturally out of the body?"

"Can we rebuild the time machine?"

To his demise, none of these ideas were executable in this disposition.

Preparation of an anorexic solution ensuring the safety of the doctor was not possible without numerous research trials.

Treatment before the removal of the invisibility device, even when the doctor wore glasses, put them at the risk of exposure at body scans and other diagnostic reports. Arnold did not carry with himself magic medicines.

Even if he could draft chemical formulas and preparation notes, it might take months to produce and test, while he hardly had days.

The dissolution of the device seemed a task impossible. It was inorganic and made of materials that were not only waterproof and fireproof but may put out against highly concentrated acids.

The time machine's parts had been destroyed on Arnold's arrival 8 months ago and the scientist who invented it was dead in a different time period.

"Alright, I will perform the surgery," agreed Armaan. "But only if you promise to not excuse the treatment."

"I promise," said Arnold, smiling.

"Okay then, let me confirm an appointment for tomorrow."

"Take your time, eat well, be back in two hours and we can begin," guided Arnold.

Armaan said nothing. He just cast a compassionate stare at Arnold. He knew he was provided with these two hours to get himself mentally prepared for the surgery. But how could he ever be prepared for this? He predicted several events in his head, death was just one of them. He also pictured how he would appear cutting the skin off his friend's body. What would the device look like? He quietly opened the door and stepped outside.

"Hey!" called Arnold from behind. "Don't tell anyone." He nodded, smiled, and shut the door behind him.

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"Arnold!" called Armaan in a low voice, placing one hand on Arnold's shoulder who lay motionless on the bed. For one moment, Armaan thought now was it! He began preparing himself for the harsh truth he was going to learn. The next moment he felt

guilty for imagining such a fate for his dearest friend. And then he was suddenly certain that no such misery could befall on him, and his intuitions were imagined and were deemed unreal when Arnold slowly opened his eyes.

“Do you want dinner?” asked Armaan.

“No food before the surgery,” replied Arnold feebly.

“Okay, let’s start then,” spoke Armaan resolutely and latched the door.

“Get my backpack from the cupboard,” instructed Arnold, helping himself to change his position so that his back was propped up against the pillow.

“Everyone was asking about you at dinner,” spoke Armaan while pulling out a black backpack from the bottom shelf of the left cupboard. “They asked me whether you were ill, were scared that you might have caught the virus.”

“What did you tell them?” asked Arnold with amusement.

“That you were feeling a little under the weather, and it was not COVID.” Armaan furtively switched his stare between the backpack and Arnold now that he was perched on the chair near the bed.

“They asked you when would I be leaving, didn’t they?” asked Arnold, retaining the smile on his weary face.

“I am sorry.” Armaan hid away his face and stared at the ground.

“You shouldn’t be,” said Arnold in a soft tone. “You can open the bag now.”

Armaan quickly unzipped the bag and began drawing things out. In a minute, his face transformed from misery to awe. At first, he took out bundles of cash, boxes of gold and diamond jewellery, and gemstones (ruby, topaz, pearl, sapphire, emeralds). As he dug deeper, he took out several gadgets he did not understand the functions of. Arnold explained to him that the cylindrical spray bottle carried three different solutions, and by pressing a specific button, you could either make a person faint, or puke, or even send a smoking bomb in the room.

On the *multifunctional knife*, the sharpness of the blade could be changed according to one’s need, types of screwdrivers could be altered, and tools could be removed if not necessary and be added later.

*The thing detector*, which was an intelligent device with a camera and screen, and also had sensors attached to it, one of which rested in the shape of a disc to capture sound, could identify and provide information about anything.

“Could you not simply use your phone for that?” Armaan had asked Arnold.

“Oh no! This device makes no use of the Internet or other connecting technologies. It is cyber safe and majorly used in forests by travellers and archaeologists. Besides, it can also check your horoscope, blood pressure, and prescribe basic medications if you consult for petty health matters.” Arnold explained.

After playing around with the device for several minutes, Armaan also discovered a lockpicking gadget for digital and manual endeavours. An iron rod studied the lock-body on the door and rearranged the particles to form the shape of a key, which fascinated him. The other part of the machine, which was a digital lock-picker, ran a trillion calculations in five seconds and could break through any password or fingerprint.

“How do people secure their doors in 3019?” asked Armaan.

“Oh they have similar kinds of doors,” replied Arnold fiddling through a whistle.

“These are my personal gadgets. I built them.”

“It must be so much fun living with you in the 31st century!” exclaimed Armaan with a jovial, hope-filled expression.

“I guess so! My kids used to flaunt about the cool things I teach them in the school.

The artworks, interesting things they knew, the cool little impossible gadgets, and the uses they put them to!” The sudden reverie that had kidnapped Arnold’s face disappeared the moment he spoke the last word, and an inexplicable blow of agony hit him making it impossible to imagine he was the kind of a man who could smile.

After a pause, Armaan continued-- “Sure, why not. You must be a brilliant father.

Actually, it would be fun living with you in any time-frame. I wish I had more time to learn from you about particle physics. I possibly do, but can’t be sure. Can I use all of this?”

“Of course, you can. There is also an instruction manual in one of the pockets. It’s a small digital notebook. Never use the Internet on it! I bought it on short notice. No device was available without the option of the Internet!” His face and voice both were vexed now.

“Why do you dislike the internet so much? It is a cool invention!” scoffed Armaan.

“Yeah, sure. But it turned into a dangerous weapon from where I come from,”

responded Arnold, gravely. “The Internet should be avoided as much as possible.

The rest is all luck. Anyway, there is a silver box at the bottom of the backpack. Get that out.”

Armaan quickly began throwing out gums, little storage devices, scraps of paper, digital photo frame with Arnold’s kids’ moving pictures, pill bottles, and other little gadgets, before he finally took out a rectangular silver box, a foot in length, and putting everything else on his study table, he opened it.

“It’s a surgery kit,” informed Arnold. Armaan had seen surgeries in movies, read about them in books, even watched documentaries and transplants, but he had never seen tools like the ones he saw in front of him now. “These are all refilled and sanitised. Wear gloves before touching them.”

Arnold explained to Armaan the procedure and utility of all the devices. He had also drawn a rectangular box with a black marker on his abdomen, expounding on where he had to cut with the surgery blade. “Don’t worry, relax, you don’t have to perform a surgery, just make use of some advanced scientific tools to take an extremely cool device out of my body,” he said in the end. “And, if something happens to me, I wanted to remind you of the letter you are supposed to send me in the future, else I would never be friends with you and all these amazing things would never happen.”

“Why would something happen to you?”

“Oh no, It won’t. You should start now. I took the anaesthesia, it will kick in any second,” he said putting away a needle at the bedside.

Armaan gingerly clasped the surgery blade in his hands and pressed the red button at the bottom, which changed the blade settings and displayed ‘piercing’ on the digital black screen on one face of the rod-like machine. He marked his eye on the

bulged area on Arnold's abdomen and steadily put the blade on the rectangular lines drawn on the pale skin. He was surprised at his lean movements across the figure, but then remembered Arnold telling him that the blade was an intelligent machine and could scan and predict its movements. All Armaan had to do was to keep his hands steady on the handle while the machine traced through the boundaries. Once the blade had cut through the three sides, it beeped. Taking the blade off, he used a pair of squincers to partially peel a layer of skin. Disgusted with the way the muscles bent while he peeled, he shouted, "This is so gross!" expecting a response from Arnold, but then he noticed that Arnold lay motionless. It was now that he truly realised that he was alone at this job which frightened him even more. Peeling off half the rectangular part, he could see the invisibility device, kept untouched and unaffected by the muscles or other parts of the body. The invisibility device appeared not a magical tool that Armaan had expected it to be, but a rusty, blood-stained, cylindrical part of an old machine. He predicted its height to be about a centimeter, and not focussing on how the device appeared, he put back his intention on its retrieval. The cuboidal depression in which the device was protected appeared to be a distinct part of the body, isolated as if extra muscle mass had been crammed in for the very purpose of storing the device.

It was when Armaan used the poddler, a retrieval device which appeared like tongs, that he realised that the device was not distinct from the body. He held the squincers, which clutched the peeled off skin as thick as four cm with his left hand, and grabbed at the device, hauling it upwards with his right. As the device, which was a spherical gadget, the size of a cookie, finally came out of the covering and was put outside in a tray, Armaan noticed blood pouring out of the space where the device was placed. Arnold had not instructed him how to deal with a situation of internal bleeding, and so, relying on his intelligence, and giddy with the picture that flashed in front of his eyes, he let go of the peeled skin by taking away the squincers. It happened with such force, that a few drops of blood sprinkled out, aiming their way towards Armaan's eyebrows, wetting his forehead. He quickly cleaned up the space with an alcohol solution and stapled the skin with the organic surgery stapler. Once the threads began to dissipate and the skin began to heal, Arnold groaned a little and opened his eyes, getting out from anaesthesia.

"How do you feel?" asked Armaan.

"Fit as a fiddle," replied Arnold with his infectious smile.

"There was a little bleeding from where I took the device out, I left it as it is, should I do something about it?" asked Armaan, turning anxious and also feeling guilty about asking technical questions to a man who just woke up from surgery.

"Oh no, it's alright, the stapler sends out some healing chemicals as it dissipates, It will be alright, thank you!" Arnold chuckled and lifted himself up, studying his abdomen, and moved his hand above the fat. Armaan grinned and gleamed at the man. He wanted to first make a joke about the layers of muscle mass on his body and how weird it was for him to see it bend so cleanly. He also wanted to ask him how he managed to put on the elastic skin in a compartmented form over his body and felt an urge to convey to him how terrifying this operation was for him, and how

happy he was that it was all successful. But when he looked at him setting himself in place, he simply said-- "So everyone would be able to see you now, huh?"

"Yes! Unless I put the device on! Wash it and bring it here!"

Armaan made the blood-soaked device of invisibility run through water and saw his assumptions fading away. It no longer looked like a gross old part of a weared-out machine, but the gloss and finesse of the shining apparatus was attractive to his eye. With a blue circular coating on the edges, and a glass covering through which you could see the internal functions clearly, including the red and green lights, it was convincing enough to be called a high-tech gadget from the future. He offered it to Arnold once it stopped smelling of blood and medicines.

"It looks like an arc reactor of Iron Man!" spoke Armaan in calm awe.

"That was the inspiration." The pleasure of taking his most prized invention in his hands after months was evident in Arnold's voice and glowing face.

"Really?"

"Yeah! But so was a watch or an ancient coin."

Arnold began explaining enthusiastically all the properties of the device. The fact that it would auto-destruct in thirty days set gloom across his face for a minute, but choosing to avoid thinking about the dark future and celebrating the present, he resumed cheerfully telling Armaan about the On and Off controls on the device, which was a camouflaged button on the right edge. He then scoured for a belt in the bag, on which he stuck the device with a "magic glue".

"Do you want to try it?" he asked the boy who now drooled over the gadget most unnaturally. Armaan was staring wide-eyed, patiently waiting for it to be tied around his wrist. He took the invisibility band, as he now chose to call it, and hustled out of the room. Arnold heaved a deep sigh and lay down, wondering, falling asleep eventually.

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Arnold was woken up two hours later to the wagging by Armaan. He remembered sleeping off to a room with gadgets spread all across, and now he lay in a clean, organised one.

"It's time for dinner," spoke the disembodied voice of Armaan. Arnold took a minute to recollect all the events that eventually resulted in the current situation, and with the knowledge that Armaan was now invisible, he saw the floating Thali in the air without surprise. Never having been on the other side of the experience, he felt weird when Armaan's invisible hand helped him sit. He groped the invisible T-shirt and felt uneasiness after doing so. After two minutes, he witnessed Armaan standing in front of him, visible.

"Don't keep changing too many times," cautioned Arnold. "It can get very tricky. Try not to change once or twice a day."

"Alright, here's your food." Armaan passed on the plate with chapatis, vegetables, Halwa, and Namkeen. Arnold, who surprisingly felt energised now and had no complaints with his body, engulfed all the food and appreciated the taste for its

unique appeal that he had forgotten for a long time. It was around 09:00 pm when he met Sushila Devi after dinner. Not as an invisible man, but, just a man. She entered the room with a timid expression on her face. When Armaan had informed her an hour ago that Arnold was now as a man perceptible to her eyes, she had felt a harrowing sense of relief as well as uneasiness. She was terrified of the thought of being disappointed. By what exactly though, she did not know. Unaware of what to expect, she had prepared herself for the worst. It was when she saw Arnold perched at the edge of the bed that she realised the worst of her expectations weren't enough. A pang of pain became apparent in her eyes and she froze on the spot that she stood. His face was not attractive the way it used to be. He had been a handsome man once, which synced with his conduct and voice. Now though, after a month of sickness, his face appeared pale with all lost glory, a dense beard covering half of his face and the area around the eyes shadowed itself with darkness. Even his arms were emaciated and the body had shrunk down in half. Sushila Devi, unaware of his past demeanour, even in her vaguest imaginations could not know the man she saw now which was the only man she saw of him, and it gushed a feeling of terror within her. She questioned whether she knew him at all. The man who always said the right things, and always swooned in with his magic wand to save the day. Arnold on the other hand, not having seen himself in a mirror, felt differently. Not a trace of the energy he felt within was visible in his appearance, and when he spoke, even his voice, occurred foreign to her. Was the voice really changed, or was it her brain making adjustments to what it saw, it was hard to tell. "Hi! I am Arnold!" he offered to shake a hand humorously. In his head, he was speaking jestingly, but outside, he was dull and unbelievably unappealing. Sushila Devi, unhabitual of this greeting style, simply smiled and nodded lightly. She held a paper in her hand, which she clasped with both hands. "How are you?" she asked, unaware that a surgery had taken place in the room, although she knew the invisibility device was out of his body. "I am okay," he replied. "What do you have there in your hand?" She handed over the paper to him with gentle submission, and he read--

### Bucket List

1. Visit Varanasi
2. Teach reading and writing to old women
3. Play cricket
4. Walk 4 km
5. Start a school
6. Go back home
7. Climb a mountain
8. Plant 100 trees

“A new bucket list!” he exclaimed. “Wow- you think you could do all this? You are old and sick and could die so soon. What if this never gets fulfilled?”

All of these sentences looked alien to Sushila Devi. Even though she recognised the candidness in his approach, the negativity was foreign to her. She stared at a man who had helped her dream and now the contradiction appalled her.

“Fulfilling is not the point,” answered Sushila Devi sternly. “The dream is to live a life that works towards fulfilling them. It doesn’t matter if you die midway, even when you want to get through it all.”

Arnold smiled as her words just added up to the immense joy he felt inside. “I have something for you,” he said and signalled Armaan to give him back the belt. Armaan, who had been watching the conversation sincerely, unwilling to hand over the device with which he had fell in love with, tried to reason--

“The invisibility band? You are giving it to her?”

“Yeah, she is the one I want to give it to”

“But, you gave it to me.”

“I didn’t. I just let you experiment.”

“That’s alright, you can keep it,” interrupted Sushila Devi.

“No!” said Arnold. “You need it more than him and what use will he make of it for a month anyway?” He snatched the band away.

Armaan had been offended a second time over Arnold’s predisposal towards his grandmother, and to express his refusal, stormed out of the room.

“This is the invisibility band.” Arnold gestured to Sushila Devi. “You can wear it and go invisible like I did and use this pandemic time to fulfill your dreams. We don’t know how long you have to live and this will auto-destruct itself in a month. You might want to keep a check for that. Just press the button and you are invisible.” The elation in his voice was finally noticeable by her. She could resonate and see him as she saw in her imaginations, looking into the glint of his eyes and not the dark circles, the smile and not the unkempt beard, the modulation of the voice and not the hoarseness. Such a perspective to his appearance elicited feelings of joy and peace within her. It only takes a few minutes to see what you wish to really see. She wrapped the end of her Saree around the band and tied a knot and left it hanging.

“You didn’t write a bucket list,” she said.

“I did once and completed it,” he replied hesitantly.

“Not again though! You were scared now because you thought you could die before completing the list.”

“I like the change of characters here. Didn’t imagine I would ever be on this side.”

“I am aware of your situation, that you are very sick, seeking treatment, and speak of death.”

Although she spoke candidly, the utterance of the word ‘death’ sent a shudder down her spine. It was almost as if every time she uttered the word, it held more conviction and greater power.

“Had I known better, it wouldn’t be this way, but I don’t. I can keep pretending to have hope, but I don’t. Neither do I seek it, nor is it practically possible. You amaze me that way.”

"I wish you life before you die," smiled Sushila Devi, although it pained her to say it, and left as though conveying a solicited goodbye.

Later, Arnold reconciled with Armaan when he came into the room to sleep. Armaan had arranged a doctor for him for the next day afternoon.

"Why do I still think you don't trust me! You think I can't use the device properly" he said.

"No! She just needs it more than you," repeated Arnold for the fifth time. "And besides, you get to keep ALL of these amazing gadgets."

"I hope I don't. I hope you keep them. I don't want to lose you."

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The next morning marked a heavy rainfall. The clouds thundered away, pigeons took shelter on the balcony, and spaces outside the windows. Sun didn't rise and morning appeared as a darkened dusk. The supply of electricity kept fluctuating and Arnold slept peacefully in death. It was at seven o'clock when Armaan woke up to the sound of the thunder only to find out that his friend won't ever wake up again. The gloom on his face was in sync with the weather outside. After two hours, the weather changed into like during the spring, but his face only sunk into a darker state. The entire family was shaken and mourned in their distinct ways. Kavita did not cook breakfast and decided to follow the customs as they followed for thirteen days after a relative died. Mr. Suresh made calls to a couple of friends in the society to take Arnold's body to the cremation ground and spoke of nothing else. Kavya lightened out her heart with cries. Armaan stared in silence, finding the departure hard to accept and hoping to not have to grieve for the magic man, who always found his way in his life to be of help and move forward, and so, stubbornly waiting for his return. Sushila Devi, on the other hand, was busy packing. She put in her Sarees, an umbrella, a few documents, and some money in a bag. Having witnessed innumerable peculiar events lately, nobody questioned her on her actions. In a few hours, the body was taken away for cremation. After the rites, Armaan simply locked himself in his room and felt the digital notebook Arnold had left him, vibrating on the table. It blinked too. He rushed towards it with hope, maybe it was time to expect the unexpected, maybe Arnold was safe and it was some sort of a trick. As he picked up the notebook, a message flashed on the screen--

*Hey young scientist! I just need to remind you to send me a message about you, else I would never trust you and spend this amazing time with you, and that shouldn't happen. Remember that nothing is impossible and make sure that the message reaches me in 3019, and NOT THROUGH EMAIL. I am writing down some other extra addresses, just in case --*

He read the addresses twice, thrice, five times, without really reading. His hope shattered and he could now feel something breaking inside him. A tear dropped on the digital screen and the word “message” was blurred, just like his soul.

Sushila Devi left the house. She put on the invisibility band knowing she wouldn't be let off from the house otherwise, and placed a letter on the dining table, which was only found after her departure. She had written that she is going after her dreams and feels grateful for the wonderful care and time. She also mentioned that she loves everyone and shall remain invisible, and so, any efforts to look for her shall be futile. She breathed the fresh air and stepped gracefully on the cemented streets remembering Arnold, and feeling her heart, beat with excitement and fear. She walked but felt like she flew like a bird...unbridled...and stupid.

## Epilogue

The winds of April blew through the city. It had been one month into the lockdown and everyone in the Bhandari household was now frustrated with the new social regime. Armaan snatched away the newspaper from Kavya's hands and a riot broke out.

"I was reading the newspaper!" shouted Kavya.

"Well, I am doing that now! Just give me a minute, I just have to read an important article," replied Armaan. "It is this amazing science writer who talks about weird theories."

"Well, what is it about today? How some human minds are exceptionally stubborn and narcissistic and stupid?"

"It is about time travel."

"Urghh, the same old boring ideas of yours."

"No, it talks about how time travel is not possible."

"Yeah well, of course, it isn't."

"I agree. It isn't."

Sushila Devi arrived in the living room.

"Armaan beta, could you check if the alphabet is written correctly?" she asked, passing on a notebook. Infuriated, he took the notebook and pointed out mistakes in the formation of a few letters. About a week ago, her grandmother, whom he hardly spoke to, had suddenly come up to him and asked him to teach her reading and writing. 'Why?' he had asked her. 'Just to learn,' she had replied.

He liked the fact that she was learning but somehow, he was unable to stand her presence in the house. Her wrinkled face and droopy eyes showed him nothing but strangeness.

After practising for a few hours, Sushila Devi tiredly walked to the balcony and sat on the swing set. The emptiness of her heart which made her lose all hope for years now had begun seeking things, even if little at a time. She somehow felt full, like something rumbled and grew in her stomach. She connected with the leaves and the clouds, feeling blissful in her own accord. She put her hand on the other side of the swing as if wanting to feel something there but all it was, was heavy air.

Everything that happens leaves a trace, even if it never happened.

## Unsaid Last Words

*So many songs running in my head,  
 Time losing its grip, space scattered, I am losing my fence  
 The shape of reality so distorted and vain,  
 With these hormones and radiations, a body full of pain  
 No love or breath, no commodity or a place to sustain,  
 I don't speak ill of a position so lame!  
 I don't falter with atrocities or crashing trails!  
 I state the facts, the truth of the sought art.  
 Mangled in my arms lives my past, or future, or lost story, or fiction or craft?  
 My hopelessness a choice, being eyed by people so frail  
 In their imaginations, so stale and stale.  
 In my arrogance, life making sense this way  
 In my arrogance, death embraces fate  
 This pride of suffering captures my state.*

*Eyes nomore look, hearts no more shook  
 Brains no more faint in the grip of solitude or a cacophony that stood.  
 Pretence of restriction, turning me a sane man,  
 When a whirlwind of insanity rushing in my veins with broken strands  
 A mad scientist, a crazy fake artist  
 A lonely child, amidst the sky so wide  
 Sky with colours, not colours, wavelengths, equations, turning it all around  
 The falsity of your eyes, the wonderment of the ground  
 But what of the oddity of a family? Of children and human pride?  
 What of the economy and the traditions that break insights?  
 What of the old lady, who sits by my side?  
 Would she die with me? Shall I ask?  
 Who is she? Such a succinct piece of ash?  
 Her songs glorious and yet restricted in time  
 Oh, Just leave, forget the chimes  
 It isn't hopelessness, believe this and die  
 No matter what they say, you CAN choose to close one eye.  
 Oh what a lie! What a lie..WHAT A LIE!*

~ Arnold

**THE END**

*\*Mummy Ji: A respectful term for addressing one's mother-in-law in Bharat.*

*\*Papa: One's Father*