Little Things You Do

Dedicated to all the people in my life who have made me laugh and made me cry and made me feel living. Let me take this moment to appreciate you all.

Keerti Anand

Just Kidding!
Chapter One

As he stood at the bus stop, he took a glance at his watch, a quarter past 7. It was an ordinary, tiring day, made even more exhausting by the everlasting wait for the DTC bus. “These darned twats at DTC”, he wondered to himself, “for half an hour, there will be no bus and then, you will find four of them neatly stacked one after the other!” And so it was, after a vicious wait for 30 minutes, there came three 392As one after the other. He skipped the first one, which was air-conditioned and took the “greener” non-AC bus instead. It was not that he could not afford the AC bus, it was just that he grew up in a family where one is always taught to save money wherever possible. The journey from Andrews Ganj to Noida Sector 71 takes around a little less than an hour in the evening office hour traffic. It was a Friday, and everybody wanted to rush home as soon as possible. Luckily, after the brief period of standing for around fifteen minutes, he found himself a window seat. He thanked the gods for their kindness and sat on the seat which seemed nothing less than a throne amidst the million standing people. “When will they build the Metro here?”, he thought. The cool breeze running through the window, however, quickly made him rethink that. "Anyway, it will be more comfortable with the Metro”, he reasoned. He adjusted himself and his head faced directly to the window, looking at the distant skies. He always liked to sit like that in the bus, his face right outside the window, glancing at the world outside. He used to see himself as a philosopher in that position, in a deep trance, reflecting on the intricacies of life and beyond. It was during this deep thinking moment that he thought about Fatima, his wife. They had been married for eight years now, and in another two days, that would be nine. He was still undecided on what to buy her this time. Last, he had bought her Ghulam Ali’s album collection. She was a fan of ghazals and not a very bad singer herself. Fatima, on the other hand had gifted him the gold watch he was wearing. Whatever he thought, whatever he did, was however irrelevant, for today 34 year old Raghav Pasricha, a Software Engineer at Aztech India Software, was going to die.

He obviously was not aware of this fact, as he was hopelessly staring outside the window, lost in his musings. He thought about Fatima, and how their relationship was not so much an exciting affair as it was 8 years before. He met Fatima during his college days, when he was working at the Shiksha Kendra in Vasant Vihar as part of his compulsory course program. Fatima, used to teach underprivileged children there, and unlike Raghav, her work was voluntary. It was not love at first sight, neither of them could be deemed that
ravishing. Fatima had long silky hair, a round head with a snub nose, her skin was not very fair, but Raghav was not a very big fan of white beauties either. She always wore a pleasant sandalwood scent and her high pitched voice sounded sweet like sugar. Raghav was tall, not very fair either. He had those frizzy curls which would surely have impressed many college girls in his days. It is a shame that he is half bald today. But again, dead people look dead all the same.

He was jostled out of his thoughts by a sudden break and his knee hit the seat in front. He felt the not so overwhelming pain, as he looked outside the window where they had reached. Down, he saw that black spillway that people identify as the river Yamuna. The bus was over the bridge, as the vehicles moved at
snail's pace periodically coming to abrupt stops like this one. It would take him at least another half an hour, there was heavy traffic today. Undeterred by the noisy traffic or the stench from beneath, he went back to his stream of thoughts. It was after three visits to the Kendra, that he finally asked her out for coffee. It was after two coffees, that he finally asked her for a movie and it was only after four movies, four dinners and three trips to the Khan Market, that he finally gathered the courage to confess his love for her. Our Raghav was a shy guy, not very academically proficient but hard-working nonetheless. Fatima was the first “special” girl in his life, discounting his teenage escapades, of course. Raghav was spellbound by Fatima's simpleness and maturity, the utmost care with which she would teach the students and the infinite patience and calmness she possessed. The elegance with which she spoke Urdu, the respect she showed to one and all. How she would always dress in traditional Indian attire, a simple salwar kameez with a chiffon dupatta. Looking at her, no one could have guessed that she was from a very rich family of cloth merchants.

Raghav's family however was not that rich, his father was a senior division clerk in the Agricultural Department, her mother was a housewife, or as many people like to call it now: a 'homemaker'. They were seeing each other for around a year when Raghav became certain that she was the one. Raghav ultimately proposed to her during their one of their many trips to Chandni Chowk, although he was quite sure that she loved him too (he never understood why), still, as a prudential measure he made sure that Fatima had kulfi in both her hands lest she slapped him hard for over imagining things. Fatima's response was a jubilant affirmation, as she was astounded by his sudden proposal. It was the law of unintended consequences in action, as Fatima hugged him tightly, spilling all the kulfi on his new off-white shirt that he specially wore for the occasion. It was the happiest day in Raghav's life and he pledged to always keep that piece of clothing close to him as a souvenir. Neither Fatima, nor Raghav could tell where the shirt is now.

There was however, one tiny problem with their marriage and as you might have gauged by now, it was that they believed in different gods. For the two love-doves it was not a problem, they both had their thinking straight and were quite open-minded, but unfortunately, the same couldn't be said about their parents. Raghav tried his best to convince his mum-dad but they did not pay heed, same was the case for Fatima, “family or the boy!”, her father had pronounced the verdict. They had to go for a court marriage as a last resort, with only a few of their mutual friends present. Raghav still remembers how his mother would not talk to him for three long years after the marriage. Fatima's family were even more strict, they had severed all ties with their daughter who had brought shame to the family by marrying a worthless Hindu. Sometimes, Raghav wonders if he had done the right thing by not listening to his parents. Although, they were living a comfortable life, through these years, Raghav and Fatima grew more and more distant from one another. The exhausting shackles of work made trips to the Khan market less
frequent. Sundays were usually spent at home, working or whenever he could find time, Raghav would go out bowling with his friends followed by a few pints at the local liquor shop. On few rare occasions when Raghav actually thought of taking Fatima out, she would turn him down, citing work or some other reason. Fatima worked in an NGO, which did work related to children upliftment. Although, she adored children, still after 8 years of marriage, they still did not have one.
His stop was near and so was his death. He got off from his seat and moved towards the gate in front. Getting to the gate was a tough task, shuttling through the bodies in between and reaching to the final destination. “How has this city changed!” Raghav went through his thought train again. “There were fewer flyovers back when I was a child and Noida was non-existent, and there are so many darned people here, the migrants!” And as he stepped out of the bus and started moving to the other side of the road, still lost in his trance, he was hit by a speeding BMW and was flung in the air. His death was not instantaneous really, it was brief period of roughly 10 seconds between the car hitting him and his life draining out of him. Ten seconds is not a very short time, especially when you are being tormented with unbearable pain. It is said that when a person is dying, their whole life runs like a film over their eyes. However, for Raghav it was only Fatima’s face he could see, only Fatima’s voice he could hear and only Fatima’s touch he could feel. The sandalwood scent was the last thing he could sense, as the pain was withering him inside out. If only he could run his hand through her silky long hair. If only he could caress her skin, one last time. If only he could tell her that he loved her more than anything in the world. But alas, he could not. What would he have not given to spend another five minutes in the world with her and make up for all the time he had wasted in these eight years. Regret was the only thing filling him from the inside as the excruciating pain was slowly subsiding him. He tried calling her name but all that came out of his mouth was a spurt of thick, red blood. The pain slowly gave way to insentience as he met his end.

Except that he did not.
Chapter Two

Rimjhim was an affable, bubbly girl. You could always see her smiling and her smile would make you forget your deepest of worries. Oh! What a sweet little packet of joy she was!

Today, was a special day for Rimjhim, for she was not only finally going to participate in her first stage play at the Shankar Natya Academy, but it was also her birthday. She was only fourteen but her acting prowess betrayed her age. She was the youngest of the students to get a role in a play which was being showcased in a public theatre with some of the important people in the domain of theatre in attendance.

Everything had not always been very easy for her, she had to undergo rigorous hardships to convince her baba to enrol her in drama classes and even after getting admittance she had to practice day in and day out to secure a part in the play. Her father was hesitant at first, but when he saw her perform a memorable scene from the movie Anand, where she recited the lines of Rajesh Khanna's character,

“Babu Mushoy, zindagi aur maut upar waale ke haath hai ... usse na toh aap badal sakte hai na main ... hum sab to rangmanch ki kathputliyan hai jinki dor upar waale ki ungliyon mein bandhi hai”

Her father knew at that moment that she had it in her to become an acting triumph. Shiv Prasad Mondal was a simple DTC bus driver from Murshidabad, West Bengal who had come to Delhi more than ten years back in search for a better life along with his (then) three-year-old daughter and his wife. Rimjhim's mother soon got diagnosed with skin cancer and inspite of the numerous efforts put in by Mr. Mondal for her well-being, she died. The Mondals had already spent whatever little they had in their savings to save Rimjhim's mother and it would not be incorrect to say that the father-daughter pair were facing a hard time making ends meet with Mr.Mondal's meagre earnings. In spite of his scanty income, Mr.Mondal always tried keeping Rimjhim happy, that is why when he saw that Rimjhim's inclination was towards Dramatics, he did not hesitate to ask her to join Shankar Natya Academy, one of the finest of its kind. "You concentrate on what you love and let me take care of the rest", he assured her. Where could one find a father like that? A father who lets his daughter pursue their dreams like a free gazelle. While most of his colleagues were busy playing cards after getting drunk on some cheap desi booze, Mr.Mondal would drive overtime to make sure that the fee for her English-medium education and acting classes were taken care of.
The scanty ₹4/km wage was barely enough for him to deal with the household expenses. Frequent spats with the landlady at the end of the month had become common. They never seemed to have the rent ready in time. Summers were especially difficult because they would use the cooler for only a while because of the electricity charges. Mr. Mondal had to cut corners wherever possible to run the wheel of life. He was confident of Rimjhim’s hardwork and skill. He never wanted her to get in Bollywood
obviously, he had heard stories of how young girls are harassed for a part in the films and the rave culture of Bollywood. Instead, he wanted her to join NSD (National School of Drama) and become an accomplished artist. “One day she will be a big ticket theatre name with scores of people waiting for her. She would be earning enough and not have to face such difficult times ever”, he hoped.

The play had already begun, Rimjhim was in the green room waiting for her entry. The play was The Tragedy of Othello, and she was playing the role of Desdemona, Othello’s beloved wife. Her entry was not until the third scene. And as she waited for her part, a gush of nervousness ran through her. This feeling was however later superseded with excitement, as her entry came close. She went outside the green room and peeked outside through the exit wings to catch a glimpse of her father. Mr Mondal was seated right in the second row, he had bought those expensive tickets just so Rimjhim could see that her father was there for her when she wanted him to be. DTC drivers do not get paid leave and attending the play meant that he was going to lose the day’s pay. However, Rimjhim was not aware of this fact, he would never talk about any of his job issues with her.

Finally, it was the time for Desdemona’s entry, Rimjhim made sure that her make-up was perfect as she walked to the stage to deliver her dialogue, with a strong and unwavering voice she read out her lines,

“I think this tale would win my daughter too.
Good Brabantio,
Take up this mangled matter at the best:
Men do their broken weapons rather use
Than their bare hands.”

And so it went, Rimjhim’s was a class act. When the play got over, the roaring applause given by the audience gave her goosebumps as Rimjhim came to the stage with the other actors to take a bow. There was one crazy father beating his hands profusely standing up amongst the audience. His whistling and clapping did not even stop after the initial applause had dwindled. He was oblivious of the stares he was getting from the
other people around him, as tears of joy rolled down his face. Up at the stage, a daughter was triumphant to make her father proud.

Surely, it was the best day of her life as Mr. Mondal later took her out to her favourite Ice-Cream parlour in CityWalk, Haagen Dazs, as she devoured two full scoops of Cookies and Cream. It was a marvellous
evening spent by the father daughter duo and eventually they returned to their place. Mr.Mondal went to bed early as he had to work the morning shift tomorrow.Rimjhim was also tired and slept soon afterwards.

In her euphoric excitement the poor child had failed to notice that her baba did not eat dinner and went to sleep hungry anyway.
Chapter Three

The loud noise of the pressure cooker begged her attention from the Filmfare Magazine she was reading as Fatima went in the kitchen to see if the rice was done. She came home early today to cook dinner for the two of them. Chicken Stew with lemon rice, Raghav's favourite. She also brought in his favourite cupcakes from the local bakery. She was trying her very best to keep him happy these days. During these years, their love had diluted in some respect, he would not pay as much attention to her as he did during the times that they were dating each other.

The ghazal “Jhuki Jhuki si Nazar” was playing on the Radio. “A lovely song from a splendid movie, Arth,” she thought. “The 1982 film written by Mahesh Bhatt, made Shabana Azmi win her second Filmfare award for best actress”. How well she connected things! Fatima was an intelligent woman with a brilliant sense of memory. Still, if you would ask her about the first time Raghav asked her for coffee, she would only have a cloudy reminiscence. She remembered how shy he was, his hands were turning clammy with sweat and his voice was a bit shaky as he mustered the words out his mouth, “Will it be all right for umm...I mean, you and me, to go for coffee sometime, if that is okay, with you, I mean?” Fatima was hilariously surprised, she had been asked out to coffee many times by guys before, but Raghav sure grabbed her attention with his confidence, or lack thereof. That was all that she could recount of their first date together.

She was unhappy with how their marriage took place, in a courtroom with a few close friends. She never could really understand of why she loved Raghav. He had nothing special about him per se, but perhaps it was the way he made her feel. Fatima always wanted a partner that would take care of her, love her no matter what comes in the way and Raghav exuded that affection. How he would take note of all the little things she liked and he always knew how to cheer her up when she was feeling low.

The medical report was on top of the table which was to the left of the entrance of their 3BHK house in Roland Heights. The 80k EMI for the home loan that they took ate up a substantial part of their monthly incomes. But they lived a pleasant, blissful life nevertheless.

She waited eagerly for Raghav to come. Although she could have told him this on the phone, she wanted to see his face when she told her the “good news”. Fatima had waited patiently for this moment. For the first five years, they had been using protection to prevent any pregnancy, but after that, it was just, not happening.
Fatima believed, or at least hoped that this would bring back their happiness that had belittled over these years.

Raghav had grown increasingly indifferent towards Fatima and she was clearly very unhappy about it. There was little she could do about it though, Fatima never wanted to be the irascible, cranky wife. She gave Raghav the freedom that he wanted and rarely complained.

Fatima's teaching job at the NGO kept her occupied else she would really find it difficult to spend her
time. It also brought it in some extra cash for the household. And it would now surely come in handy with the baby on the way. Fatima’s family had cut-off all ties with her post marriage and she used to wonder how her life would be if she had ditched Raghav for her family. Her family were adamant on her marrying into Altaf Sheikh’s family. Sheikh’s son Abdo was well settled in Dubai and owned two auto-mobile workshops there. “He would treat you like a queen,” they had said. Instead of marrying the wealthy businessman from Dubai, she had chosen his poor IT bloke of Delhi. Instead of living the comforts of a queen, she had chosen to face the hurdles of an average household. Instead of spending her life with a person whom she little knew or cared about, she chose to live it with the one she had the utmost of affection for. She had, after all, listened to her heart.

But the love was fading, Raghav spent his time more with his friends and alcohol than with her. It was not that Raghav could be the only one blamed for his depreciating interest in Fatima. Out of all the many men and women who would age gracefully, Fatima was certainly not one of them. Fondly called as “Fatty” by her college mates, her nickname was more suited for her now than it was then. How easy it is to say that looks do not matter and inside beauty is much more relevant, that real beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. Unfortunately, the tides of time make the eyes of the beholder foggy as inner beauty takes a back-seat. If you would ask Raghav, he would swear that he still loves her, but his actions did not justify his feelings. The gallons of beer he guzzled every week had given him a sizeable belly and he had grown a lot more irritable these days. Fatima was getting increasingly intolerant of his ways but again, she was helpless, talking with Raghav never seemed to help, he always used to apologize, saying that this would be the last time he would touch alcohol and promised to spend more time with her.

Raghav was getting late, probably he was stuck in the evening traffic hour. Although, Raghav could have afforded a car, the thought of buying one never crossed his mind as he was acquainted with travelling in the DTC buses since his early childhood. He did own an old Hero Honda Splendour, but it was gathering dust and rarely found any use.

Fatima had just started to get a tad worried when the doorbell rang.
Chapter Four

The slight nudge on his shoulder brought him back to his senses, had he fallen asleep again? Ishan found himself in his cabin, surrounded by his coffee mug, the Macbook Pro and Shiva of course. Shiva Shetty, Managing Director at Ernst & Young and his boss asked him “All geared up for the presentation?”. Finding back his lost consciousness and with an assuring grin on his face, he answered “Of course, boss!”. He had not slept for 6 days straight now, preparing for the pitch to Malcolm and Co. If he succeeded, EY would find themselves a 12-million-dollar client and Ishan would be surely promoted to AVP, Sales. He checked his phone for any important messages, all he could see was that his father had called him thrice. “Probably another marriage proposal”, he conjectured.

As soon as Shiva left, he went to the washroom to make a double check on his appearance. He let a splash of cold water hit his sleep-deprived face. A nice, comfortable Van Huesen suit, a gucci belt and Giorgio Butini boots; perfectly combed hair, with a Rolex hanging on his left wrist, and a pleasant refreshing fragrance. Did the colour of his shoes match that of his belt? Of course, they did! Ishan had an unblemished dressing sense that exuded confidence and sharpness. He was also a very observant guy, one of the many skills that had made this 28 year old rise up the corporate ladder so fast. He took out the clean white handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wiped his face clean. He exited the washroom and took the walk to the board room. On the way, there were many of his workmates and he could see them smile and their thumbs up as he went pass them. Natasha, the cute girl with the specs looked at him expectedly, he gave her a James Bond kind of wink and a little wave of hand. That gesture sufficed to make her blush red and the wink almost made her day. He moved forward to the boardroom where the clients were waiting and nailed the presentation to his glory. “Failure” was a word not to be found in his dictionary. Ishaan Bhatia was a hard-working, ambitious fellow. And nothing seemed impossible for this self-made man whose work ethics were a prime example for all his office colleagues. “Work until your bank account looks like a phone number”, he used to tell himself. He rarely went to parties and all though he had made many contacts in the corporate industry, there were only a very few people whom he could term as friends; even these people were more like acquaintances really. He never had the time to interact with his family, let alone with others. He stayed away from relationships; women seemed nothing to him but a distraction. This was however not always the case for him though.
During his days in Hansraj College, he was a complete jester. Fooling around with friends, playing pranks on strangers, making life a miserable embarrassment for one and all. His friends called him IB. Not entirely because of his initials, but also due to the covert nature of his antics. Despite his taking all the care, he had been caught although never been proven guilty by the college authorities and had been given three 'last warnings' by them. Despite all this, he continued his buffoonery with all the zeal that he had in himself. Nothing was honorable about this Political Science (Honours) student. He barely cared for his future, his father had a small factory for automobile spares and for all he knew he was going to continue in his father's line of work. That all changed once he met Garima. Ishaan saw her
for the first time in the Delhi Metro, on the first day of college. It had just opened its first phase at that time from Rithala to Dilshad Garden. He was unaware that the astonishing girl he was gazing through his mortal eyes studied in the same college as his. His hopes got high when they both got off at Kashmiri Gate. Funny how the same destinations have such different paths as they both took separate auto-rickshaws to Hansraj College, Delhi University, North Campus.

Garima was a chemistry student. She was studious, academically adept and outlandishly beautiful. It would not be a false assumption to say that half of the college was crazy for her. Ishan was no exception, but he never actually found the courage to go up to her and strike a conversation. And she was always surrounded by her umpteen number of friends. Or maybe he did not bother much, unlike others, who were all drooling over her and fantasizing over how one day she would be theirs, Ishan spent his time over more productive things, like figuring out where Professor Madan keeps the exam papers and when will be the best time for him to steal them.

It was in the final year when Ishaan finally decided to at least be friends with her. He had the notion of not having any regrets in life. The pain of rejection did not scare him more than the agony of not trying. “What harm could that be”, he had reasoned. “When you start manifesting in something and believing in it too much, it tends to happen”, he had read this somewhere in a book whose name he did not seem to remember. Only the writer could have known what it meant, but IB took it as a go-ahead for a sincere try. He had deliberately taken one of her compulsory subjects as an elective so that he could ask for her notes and what not. It was on the first day of class that he introduced himself, or asked for her introduction rather,

“Hey, May I know your name please?”, he asked with his heart beating a bit faster than normal. “Hey! It is Garima Pandey, Chemistry Honours”, she answered with a tone hinting of interest. “I am Ishaan Bhatia, Pol Science, Honours, but my friends call me..”

“IB, right? I really loved it when you had placed that fake lizard in Proffesor Mukherjee’s overcoat”, she said, with a smile growing on her ever so lovely face.

Ishaan was so ecstatic about the fact that Garima was aware of his existence, and in addition to that she also “loved” her silly pranks that he forgot what his initial purpose of conversation was.

“Anyway, let’s exchange phone numbers and hang out sometime?” he blurted without thinking much.
“Yes...umm...sure” she reluctantly answered, taken aback by such straight-forward attitude.

They exchanged numbers and so it began.

They frequently exchanged notes, although 'exchange' won't be the right term as it was more of a one-way transaction of notes changing hands from Garima to IB. They texted each other late till night, there was no facebook or whatsapp then, SMS texting was the norm. Sometimes, it would take hours for her to reply but IB would wait. He was madly, deeply, hopelessly in love and there was no darned thing in
the universe that held more importance for him than Garima. He came to know that Garima had a boyfriend of six years, they were in school together and after that he had moved to some other city to do his engineering graduation in some big-ticket technical institute. She also showed him his photograph once in college. He had those thick glasses that you would identify with the studious kind, a lean built and his face looked like that physics dude, Stephen Hawking. IB was not a profoundly wicked being but he only knew how badly he hated that geeky cunt. He however never mentioned anything about him to her.

College was to end in a few months and the finals were nearing. IB reckoned that this was the time to accept his feelings for Garima. He didn't want a reply, he just did not want to live with the fact that he was not brave enough to say what he felt for Garima. As fate would have it, it was not all sunshine and rainbows in their long-distance relationship as Garima told IB that they were on the brink of a break-up. Probably, the big-ticket engineering guy had found another girl in his college. IB was elated hearing that news, he could only care less about that son of a bitch, he only saw a chance for himself and said to her,

"Why are you stuck with him? You know he does not care about you" "Yes, but I love him." she replied.

"But can't you see that he does not! Why are you smothering yourself thinking about him, move on, move on to someone who gives a shit about you. Someone, who would do anything to keep you happy."

"Oh right! Where would I find that someone. Someone like whom?" She retorted.

After a very long pause, he answered with the utmost seriousness that his clown voice could manage.

"ME."

That was followed by another long pause and and a one worded reply, or a question rather.

"Really?"

"Hey, listen! It is not my fault to fall for you. You are intelligent, humorous, nice to everyone and too damn ..."

"I like you too." she interrupted him again, much like the very first time.

IB didn't know any dance form but that night he sure did the craziest dance humanity could have witnessed. His broken bed could prove to be a testimony for that.
They were a couple after that night and did what every couple of their times did. Sneaking out for late night ice-creams, weekend trips to the cinemas. Sometimes, he also took her to Appu Ghar, although it was he who was more excited to be there than her. The extreme happiness that one gets when actually being with the person they love, whom they have dreamed for, whom they desire, whom they would leave everything behind, that exuberance is sure out of this world. All of this continued over a period of three months, the final exams got over and they were waiting for their results.

After the exams, Garima broke up with IB. Apparently, the engineering dude had got his shit together and had realised what a
stupendous retard he was by letting Garima go. Perhaps, the only time we realise the true importance of something is when we don't have it any more.

And Garima? Well, deep down inside, she still loved him unwittingly. Perhaps, she was never over him and maybe, IB was, in a sense, her rebound guy. For IB, it was the end of the world, the girl whom he had loved so much, for whom he would do just about everything, was leaving her. True, it gives immense happiness to be with the person you love, but when the bond breaks, it hurts even more. That is why today's IB never believed in any kind of relationships, why make attachments when at the end everything is going to run away.

He did once confront her, but what could he have done. Human beings developed linguistic abilities around ten thousand years ago, but still here was a splendid example of how eyes and facial demeanor can say things that vocal chords can't. He could see it in her eyes, she was sorry but helplessly in love with someone else, her “likeness” for him was just an illusion over the extent of friendship.

He wondered what was missing in him. Well, for starters he did not have any set goal for himself whilst that bloke had a nice seven-digit placement job waiting for him. IB was a certified slacker with zero regard for work or professionalism. The utter seriousness with which he pursued his pranks made everybody believe that he would find himself in his father's factory and it won't be long before he ruins that as well. Ishaan always knew that that was what the society thought of him and he frankly did not give a monkey's shit for their views. But today, he was forced to contemplate on his life and the choices he had made so far.

When you don't get the thing that you have desired for so long, the human brain tends to ask for reasons. And these were precisely the things that came to his mind as he searched for excuses of why she left him for ...him.
Chapter Five

And at that moment, he decided that he was going to change his life. And he sure did, it took him two attempts at CAT but he graduated from IIM-Bangalore with an MBA in Sales and Marketing. Six years and a stellar corporate performance later, he found himself exiting the boardroom of Ernst & Young after closing in on a 12-million game-changing deal. Loved by few, appreciated by most, and envied by all. He checked his phone again, another two missed calls from his dad. “Aargh! When will they stop bothering me with this marriage thing?”, he muttered angrily.

Outside he was greeted by his colleagues, someone had brought a Johnny Walker Blue Label and although Ishaan was not a habitual drinker as such, but he still joined in the celebration. He could see Natasha looking at her again, this time with an alluring gaze and it was almost certain that she wanted him to come talk to her. He did fulfil her wish, walking up to her, engaging in small talk and ending abruptly. “See you in the office tomorrow morning, 9:00 sharp.” And with that he went downstairs to the parking lot. He was interrupted again while descending on the stairs by a familiar voice coming from his behind.

“As long as the water remains under the boat, it helps the boat to sail; but if the water seeps into the boat, it sinks it.”

It was Firoz, his colleague who had joined around the same time as Ishaan, he had obviously not experienced the growth that Ishaan did but Ishaan still respected him. His uncle was after all a big cloth merchant and he could leave all the office BS any day to join his family business and make tons more than Ishaan ever did.

Ishaan understood what he meant by that, Firoz knew Ishaan was pushing the limit to his working capabilities and he was concerned.

“Are we quoting Rumi again, my friend?” asked Ishaan.

“Ah! Yes. You seem to know everything, don't you Ishaan?” Firoz remarked.

“By the way, your eyes seem that they have been deprived of the luxury of sleep. You know you do not have to push so hard brother. Congratulations on the deal though.” he continued.

“Thanks, Yes I will take care. See you tomorrow.” Ishaan said, rather bluntly.

Ishaan was known to not be nicest of fellows in office, he would limit himself to professional chats only and would rarely talk about anything not related to work.

As he reached to the parking lot, he received a text on his phone, it was from Shiva,
“Congratulations on the deal! Your pitch was phenomenal! I would like you to fill the new AVP position. Will discuss this tomorrow by EOD. Have fun tonight!”
The slight grin returned to his face as he put his phone back into his pocket. He sat in his BMW and sped away.

He lived in Noida, Sector 71. He owned a gracious penthouse in a posh apartment complex there. He wanted to get home early today, almost everybody in the city did, it was a Friday evening after all. As he was speeding away in his glory on Amaltash Marg, he was brought to an unexpected stop as the 392 DTC in front of him halted precipitiously. A half-bald, tall man stepped out of it angrily and was hurling abuses at the driver.

“Poor shits! Koi tameez hi nahi baat karne ki, shoddy middle class!” he judged.

He watched for a while, but patience was a virtue not present in this true delhite as he honked hard and gestured him to move. The bus finally started, leaving the bald man there and Ishaan continued his voyage to reach his house.

Not sooner that he had reached his house, he got the sixth call from his father.

“Hello”, he answered.

“Hello, beta… Why were you not picking up since morning?”

“Ki Hoya Papaji!”, he said with a shuddering rude tone. “I have told you so many times that I do not want to get involved in something as useless as marriage right now, I have a career to built and I have priorities…”

“Beta, your mother passed away this morning.” he was interrupted again. Ishaan got the shock of his life, it took him a while as he recollected his senses and asked, “But… how?”

“She complained of headache the day before yesterday, and it got worse and worse, she died in the hospital this morning, in her sleep. Doctor sa’ab said…”

His father was explaining the details (something about a stroke) but he was hardly paying any attention. His thoughts went back to the time in his early childhood when his mother would often make him favourite drink, Rasna when he would return from school. When his mother had caught him writing a love letter to his crush and instead of reporting it to his father (who would have beaten the life out of him) she proceeded on to read it and correct the grammatical errors. The time when her mother would give away her share of chocolates to him saying that she did not like the taste of cocoa. It was only many years later did he realize that she was a die-hard fan of dark chocolate, but she never let him know that.
His mother who had always protected him from his strict father. The time when he got suspended from school for cracking firecrackers, his mother had lied to his father that there it was a school holiday.
The time when he had failed in English, and he had forged his father’s signature. And the time when he had the audacity to sneak in the neighbourhood drunkard into the PTA meeting impersonating his father.

He tried to recall the last time he spoke with his mother, it was three weeks back, she was feeling a little ill then as well. But all she talked about was Ishan’s well being. He had told her about the “big project” he was handling and his mother promised him that she will pray for his success.
And she indeed prayed. And he indeed succeeded.

But all that success, all that exhilaration and all the appreciation from his workmates could not wipe out the agonizing tears that were rolling down his face. The blades of pain tearing through his veins. Amongst the hundreds of ‘connections’ he had on Linkedin, the thousands of FB friends or the numerous phone numbers in his contact list, there was not even one single person at this moment he could share his pain with. He drank heavily that night, maybe too heavily.

The employees at Ernst & Young had never witnessed something like this: For a man that was always at the office sharply ten minutes before 8 had not reached till late afternoon. For a man that was so impeccably dressed in fashion, his body was found in the barest of attire. For a man that always had that alpha male scent, the apartment neighbors could not even endure the stench of alcohol.
Chapter Six

As he shuttled through the sea of bodies, he finally found himself at the front-gate. But what the hell?! The bus driver had skipped through his bus-stop. There was some construction activity in the area and the bus shed was partially occluded. Probably, he was a new driver, taking the shift for someone else. Probably, the older one had some very important business today. Why would a DTC driver with a ₹4/km wage go a day without pay, until it was really something particularly overriding? Probably.

“Oye khotiya! Bus Stop nahi dikha terekol!”
A few words of love and romance were exchanged as the bus driver abruptly stopped and asked him to get going.

He stepped out of the bus and continued cursing the driver. He could have carried on with his out-burst, but he was stunned by the honking of some rich brat who was driving behind in his BMW, gesturing him to move.

“I bet he is some spoilt son swagging on his father's money!” even he judged...

He had to take a longer detour because of the overshooting. He was furious. But the anger made him think about his wife: He was done with Fatima. The way she would mix her language with all those urdu words. The manner in which she would dress! Who wears salwar kameez on every freaking day? And out of all the pleasant fragrances present in this darned world, why would one always wear sandalwood? .

Enraged in his thoughts, he rang the doorbell of his 5th Floor condo whose outer door had just begun to shed on some paint.

Fatima opened the door; she could have sworn to god that it only took her half a minute. But Raghav seemed quite pissed, “What took you so long?”

“Shouldn't it be me asking you this?” Fatima retorted.

“Oh, C'mon, Fatima, the man works his arse off in office everyday. Please do him a favour of not interrogating his soul” Raghav said sternly.
"You are not the only working person in this house." Fatima replied with a voice just as stern. It was unlikely of her to answer him back like this but Raghav had it coming.

"Oh God Damn it! You know what? You are right! It is always about you isn't it? Perhaps, I should have heeded to mom's advice about you and your kind" Raghav immediately realised the gravity of what he had said and felt guilty at the same time. But the arrow had left the bow and well on its way to hit the target.
Raghav expected Fatima to be grossly offended. Any person would. He thought she would begin to cry, and he would have to calm her down. Fatima’s reaction was exactly opposite.

“And maybe I should have listened to abba as well! I should have married Abdo and lived my life like a queen.”

Raghav had lost it.

“Stay with your filthy rich parents then!

I am not dependent on you anyway!

Leave!”

“Don't bring my abba-ummi in between, it is not their fault to be wealthier than your meagre clerk dad.” Fatima’s voice was spilling venom.

With that, she went in her room. She did return after a few minutes, with a bag in which she had hastily put in her essentials.

“A wonder how you ladies take so much time to dress to a party and so little to be ready to leave your husband's home.” Raghav always found humour at the wrong time.

Fatima gestured something that involved her middle finger and Raghav knew that she is very serious.

Fatima was always so well-mannered, so silent. The dormant of volcanoes spit the deadliest of lava. As he heard the loud bang of the door closing behind him, Raghav knew that he had lost Fatima forever.

He tried to say something, but his ego got the better of him.

To quote the great poet, Khalil Gibran:

“Between what is said and not meant, and what is meant and not said, most of love is lost.”

His misery had not even started when his eyes fell upon the report on the table. He picked it up to read it. Even amidst the complex medical terminologies, it was not hard to infer that he would soon become a father, although neither a meagre clerk one and nor a filthy rich cloth merchant one. But yes, a father!

He tried calling Fatima’s number only for her to disconnect the call. He sat there helpless, similar to a man who was sitting just as helpless in his penthouse around 2
blocks away. The mother of his unborn child had left him. No emotion could adequately
describe his extreme anguish.
He began to pour himself a drink, which was followed by a few too many. He might have
also taken a few sleeping pills to numb him down. Maybe.

The lovely Saturday mornings were always made even more heavenly by baba’s little
angel. She would make her baba a comfortable breakfast in bed. Anda bhurji with chai,
just as he liked it. This one was no different, as Rimjhim brought in the breakfast along
with the morning newspaper for her father. Her tranquilititating smile relieved Mr. Mondal of
all his stress as he proceeded to take a bite.
He then turned to the newspaper to read about how two poor blokes in Noida had ODed
on Alcohol – taken sleeping pills – some personal trauma – body found next day.
“Strange!”, he thought,
“I never earn enough money to buy that much of alcohol” he humoured himself as he
went on to play with his daughter, her magical laughter enchanting the atmosphere of the
one-bedroom enclosure they called home.

THE END