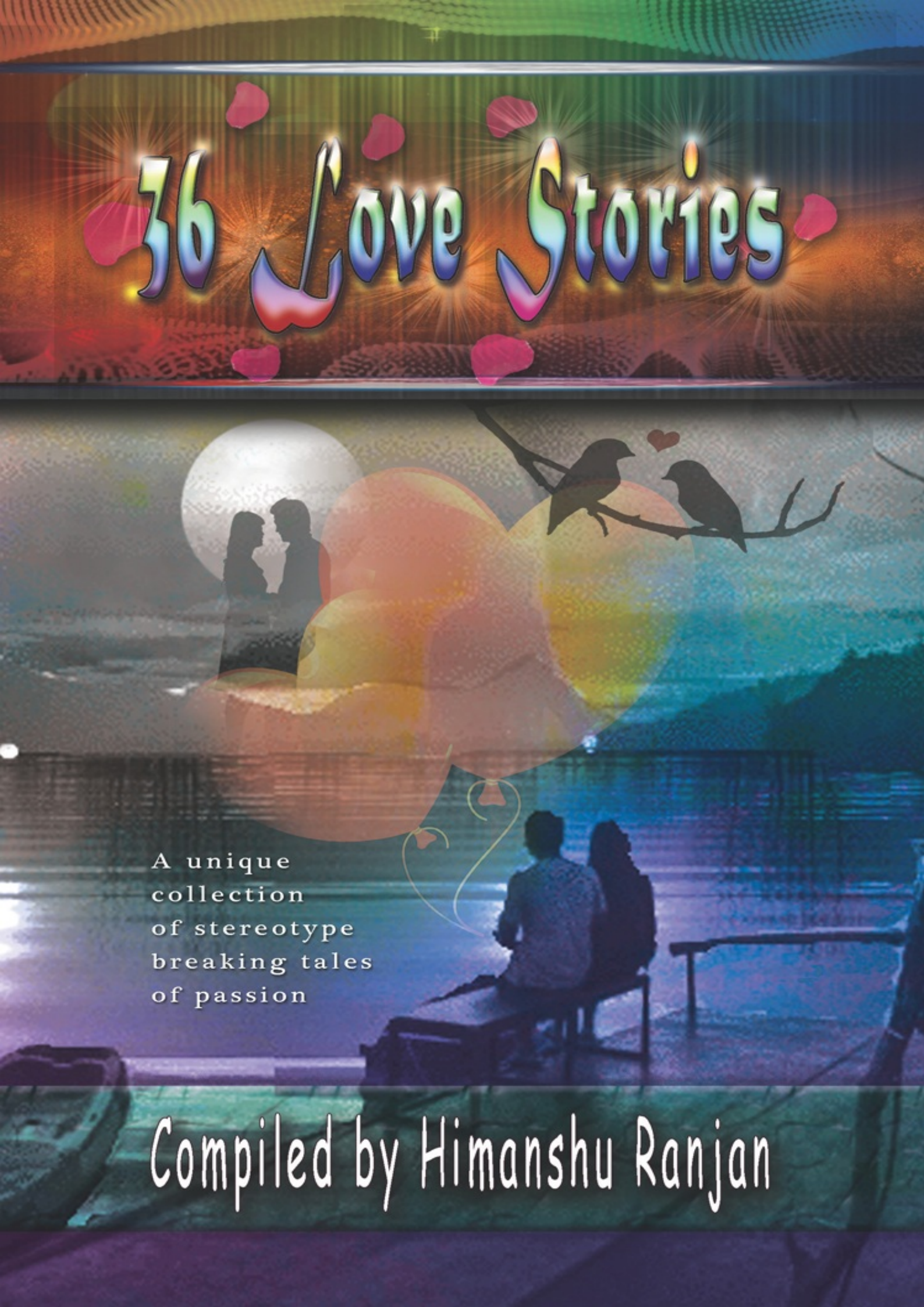
36 Love Stories



A unique collection of stereotype breaking tales of passion

Compiled by Himanshu Ranjan

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CHAPTER

1

Appo Deepo Bhava

Shubham Shekhar

"There is something wrong with this world. Even though we have so many great people, we have not solved this simple thing called life. We only look up to them and consider them to be great and live in their shelters. We have assumed ourselves to be weak. We don't have any answers to the simple questions that life throws at us. This thing we call death, why we cannot know anything about it, why we must stand before it like defeated cowards. Even all these marvellous inventions by us have not helped, they all have failed … we all have failed. No one has known the secret of this life; I will be the first one to discover it. I must find the answer, I must find the truth and I can't live my life as if everything is fine. I must try even though there is very less probability that I am going to succeed and whatever sacrifice I need to give, I will. Today, I promise this to myself".

Standing on the top of my house at night while staring at the constellations —the *Saptarshis* prime among them, my nine-year-evolved mind talked this to itself. The next moment I remember, I sat down to meditate in the cold night trying to visualize magical signs with my closed eyes. I imagined the long feet of Vishnu pervading the solar systems…

*****

It was 9 o'clock in the morning; I could hear the sound of train moving and my father talking to some person sitting below. I was lying on the upper berth idly trying to pretend that I was asleep. My father called me "Chhotu wake up, it's almost 9, come down, how much more will you sleep?" "He sleeps too much, if there is no one to wake him up he probably will not wake up for almost 16 hours" laughingly he said to the uncle sitting next to him. I was listening but didn't respond except a little murmuring giving an indication that I didn't want to wake up.

Suddenly, his phone rang and my heartbeat increased. My elder brother was just to disclose my JEE result. The next moment, I heard my father happily passing on the information. "Chhotu, your rank is 2197". I felt relieved.

I headed to my next destination to study "Aerospace Engineering" at IIT Kharagpur. I was excited that I would be studying about satellites and the realms of the magical universe but later I was proved wrong and left disappointed. Anyways, before I could put my feet on Asia's longest platform, the sight of poor beggars, some of who were crippled, again put me in disturbing thoughts. The bus from the IIT picked up me and during the show outside the window I was glancing at the village with hens and chickens running around, people adjusting their lungis, some smoking tobacco bidis, simple shops and greenery made me feel like to what a place have I arrived? As the bus approached the entrance gate, it started to rain and the raindrops settled on the window glass blurring the view of the institute.

Then, the bus stopped and a senior told us that whoever had been allotted Patel Hall, please get off here. So, I and my father got off the bus in the heavy rain and asked one rickshaw driver about the location of my hostel. He asked us to hop on and said he would charge 30 rupees for it. We thought it to be fair. He took us almost 6 m ahead and then took a right turn and there it was, right before me, Patel Hall.

I felt cheated when my father handed over the money and again felt gloomy about the world.

The orientation program began at the auditorium and I enjoyed specially that lecture about human morality and non-violence and on our attitude towards life. How there is beauty all around us and how every animal deserves love just like us. But then while returning back to my hostel, I saw white hens butchered for our daily meals. I was a vegetarian and would often ponder about why a living being survives by feeding on another. It's a parasitic relationship. I was disturbed even in the institute.

*****

I struggled to make friends, was intimidated by the Bengali language and initially would talk with my room-mate only. But then, I found one of my hall mates wearing my T-shirt at the convocation dinner. "Sorry, I took from your cupboard without asking as I was getting late and I didn't have anything to wear". He smiled and in his innocent gesture, I found a friend.

We would climb to the top of the roof of our hostel at night and scream to the first years just like us, pretending that we are seniors and would tell them to switch off their lights and go to bed. And they would follow. And we would go to the roof near the canteen, from where students who are entering the hostel gate can be seen, and tell our batch mates to stop and start shouting at them and would ask them to do parade and stuff like that.

But my participation in this trouble-making gang was rare and for my quiet nature, I was nicknamed BABA. Initially, I did try to make a place in the institute by giving auditions for the different societies such as dramatics, entrepreneurship cell or the space society but got sidelined due to my poor spoken English and their funny questions. I came back to my hostel, lying down on my bed thinking about how I am going to fit in.

My laptop and the Internet served as the only escape.

Meanwhile, a peculiar incident happened. A senior from third year knocked at my door and asked me very politely if I wanted to attend a lecture on Bhagavad Gita. It defied all the previous stories of treatment of juniors by seniors. I found the session blissful and also got to eat sweets. It resonated with my thoughts and purpose. But I never found the guy again and soon forgot about him.

*****

At Kharagpur, there is this culture of ragging in the second year unlike other colleges or maybe because the fresher students are given more attention towards and safety as per the laws. The experience was horrible. Seniors would scream at us in the mess, wake us up at 4 am and make us run in the fields. Adding to the torture, we were threatened that if we wanted to quit being ragged, then in return we would be barred from taking part in any hostel activities. But, when we were told to do awful things, I and my friends decided to quit. We were aware that we would not be allowed to participate in any events. We were given a separate wing called OPT OUTS. I shrank my life to the group of seven friends I had.

My childhood dream always haunted me as I would often fill up my world with philosophy trying to find answers to my questions. The Internet had a lot of videos of Osho, J. Krishnamurti, U. G. Krishnamurti, wisdom of Budhha, the penances practiced by Jainas, the complete works of Swami Vivekananda, the gospel of Ramakrishna, the words of Sri Sri Ravishankar and the Holy Quran, and I would devour literally everything similar with more interest than my courses. That started showing its effect on my grades too. But I was comfortable with passing.

Sometimes, I would think deeply and write poems or answers to the questions which befuddled me. Meditating unlike the beautiful childhood experiences I had would give me headache now. I would do some pranayama and even read about the Tantric wisdom of the psychic centres residing in the body. I could feel an upward surge of current flowing from the spine to the back of my head, and therefore, I thought they contained some truth. While doing the

"Bhramari" pranayama, I could see the green light near my forehead or the third eye. This made me feel that these practices are not be made joke of or taken as fun.

I got really interested in the subjects of outer body experiences as during my sleep on very rare occasions, I would feel like my body is floating up and blissful sensations would cover my entire being filling it with energy. This was different from a normal dream as I had numerous dreams before but this was something different. I thought maybe it could be the way the spirit recharges itself.

But these experiences were of no use as the truths still remain far away. The questions still remained unanswered. There were a variety of books, philosophers, religious principles and countless methods which made me even more confused. Whom to follow?

Then, I read a very profound book by J. Krishnamurti—"The First and Last Freedom". He would say truth is a pathless land and one should not blindly follow anything. It really excited me so much that I read the whole book again and again. His simple words moved me.

*****

Then one day when I was walking on the road to my hostel, I met the guy who came two years ago in my room to give a presentation on the Bhagavad Gita. He recognized me and asked me if I wanted to come to Krishna Janmashtami festival. I went there and got immersed in a totally different world. There were so many books on the philosophy propounded by Lord Chaitanya, and they would celebrate the morning prayers dancing around, serving the idols of Radha and Krishna. Then, I got to know that they believed whatever was being taught by their Guru. The idol was respected as the deity. The chanting of the transcendental mantra was practiced. They would worship the cows, enjoyed the pastimes of Krishna and give lectures of wisdom.

"Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare"

Whenever I would chant, it would give a cooling sensation to my mind. I understood that mantra has their effects. I even practiced chanting Gayatri mantra. But there they would only ask to follow what has been said as authentic and bona fide and ridiculed every other philosophy. They would be giving as such no freedom to have one's own thoughts or practice what one thought to be rational. Sometimes, I would think in which world they are living in. It was like a monastery which would cut off from the real life and so a balance was really crucial.

It was a process of churning within as I was finding it difficult to control the basic desires for which they would prescribe that chanting to spiritualize the thoughts. My mind felt bound. The discipline was hard to practice, even harder because I would find it really difficult to synchronize with the world outside. Movies such as "O my God" and "P K" were the general conscience of the public.

Meanwhile, the world around me and some of my friends were promoting liberal ideas as progressive. Gender division, segregating males and females, and practicing words without scientific proof were considered orthodox. I felt that following an idea alone while ignoring others was not the way forward. These words by Steve Jobs moved me to the core:

> *Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.*

I could now see everything has their place. Everybody is unique. One needs to follow one's passion and embrace life first before death stalks. I understood that spirituality had a profound place in my life. But there are things equally important and now I realized that great people are great because they refused to live in those shelters and rather made their mark by producing something innovative and radical. They accepted their defeats humbly but never ceased a moment to make life better for the people around. They were selfless but wanted to teach this primary lesson first. They acted on very simple truths. And suddenly, these words of Buddha uttered after he got the enlightenment, made me smile—"*Appo Deepo Bhava".*

Not to forget, the next in my reading list is Darwin's theory of evolution.

Something creepy about nature's cycle,
Defeated cowards accept unreal shelter.
Escaping is the coward's living style
Courageous accepts life's several colours

Madness sidelined college activities
Ancient simple wisdom revealed again,
Religious gospel awakens my spirit
Scientific temper inquires about the death

Various ways sprang confusion inside
Unique roadways needed to be trodden
Truth follows only when rejects faith blind
Selfless desires in heart shall enlighten

Forsake dogmas install your common sense
Acceptance comes with real experience

CHAPTER

2

1992

Anu Prasad

1992. Twenty-two years have passed since. The year still remains etched as a symbol of separation, rather of a deep loss, irrecoverable. It was the last day of that year. He passed away in the evening. December 31st, 8:30 pm, as the year was about to end, it took away from me, my world, my sense of security, my strength. Distant sounds of celebrations, some occasional fireworks were signalling some festivities in the air. They seemed to me but a testimonial of the heedless ephemeral existence. I was first in a state of shock, of total disbelief. The tears would come a bit later, tears that have never been very far away from my heart and my eyes since then. My sister and I clung to each other. Both of us were drowning. Intense grief had enveloped both of us.

Yet, reminiscing amidst our cry endowed us moments of pangs of laughter. He had always been a clown all his life and one could not help but remember him with a grin. This made our loss even more agonizing. It was unbearable.

Our house as usual was overflowed with people. They too wanted to be in his presence for one last time. He had always been a magnet for people, friends, family, nephews and neighbours. I think people sense goodness and kindness and decency and caring. Many refused to offer us condolences; they felt they needed condoling too! They too had lost a relationship they had valued and one of several decades! Even till today, it never ceases to surprise us at the number of people that were present at the time. All the building security guards, many of the office peons, both our drivers and the neighbourhood "paan wala" all the people he had had active relationships with! That night, I fell asleep exhausted beside him. They let me. They knew that the next few days and for months and years after, when the full realization of my loss would come, sleep would be the first to elude. That night was the sleep of the innocent who had not yet quite understood. Life is a teacher and so is death.

This was December 1992, Bombay. The city was also in the throes of growing violence. Rumours were rife. One minority community was being systematically targeted … the Bombay that we grew up in was also dying. It

seemed inhumane, extremely barbarous, how people would kill in the name of religion. The loss that I was subject to aroused intense empathy within. Who triggers these divisive feelings? That moment I cursed the gods in the heavens for their defective creations, for imparting little wisdom to the blood traders, for the inane fanatics who didn't know love and compassion. The sword was their road to hell. In a way, I also cursed those malefic vibrations in the air which I held secretly responsible for his passing away.

In a great contrast, he had led a very gentle life. He was the world for us and so we were his. He embodied for us all that was good in the world. His love for music and poetry, his magnanimity, compassion and humility made us feel to follow in his footsteps. But the one thing we missed the most was his unparalleled humour. "Funny" is the one word which would describe him the most nearly. He saw humour in most things, and he taught us to see the same. You knew that if you reached out to him in times of trouble, he would allay them by simple kind words. He always understood. How do you go through six decades of your life never really uttering a harsh word … what does it take?

My earliest memories of him were singing me to sleep. "*Aa ja ri aa, neendiyan tu aa, sansar ki rani hain tu, raja hain mera laadla*". The terror of the dark would quickly dissipate upon hearing his gentle voice. He was a morning person and loved nothing more than to exuberantly wake us up often with his off-key singing "*Uth jag musafir bhor bhayee, ab rain kahan jo sovat hain*?" and have us all sit around and chat with him while he had his cup of tea. Aah! It was undoubtedly the best part of his day. Surrounded as he were by his sleepy, slightly grumpy kids.

How do you live knowing that there is no getting back? That you have been denied of a million wonderful conversations? That you will not hear that voice anymore? Ever! Why is it that we always remember him with tears in our eyes and a smile on our lips? What is the word for that feeling? That sheer joy of having known someone so unique with the knowledge of having known them for too short a time. But then, even a hundred years would not have been enough.

For many years after that night, I would dream of his return. The doorbell would ring and he would be at the door; it was all but a jolly mistake. The sheer relief I would have felt on seeing his smiling face. I sigh. Sometimes, I would dream of dying; he must be waiting in the other world for us. He would be so happy to see me … that joy of being with him, again.

*****

Nazuk Jehan aunty had threatening visitors at her door. She came to our house

loudly protesting the sheer audacity of these men. Imagine, threatening a self-respecting middle-class person such as her! What was it with all you Hindus? The Babri Masjid demolition was unfortunate. Rumours were spread, facts were exaggerated, curfew was imposed and the mob became victim of police firing. Temples and Mosques were being attacked, houses were burnt and the news reflected the rising tension between the communities. Only one question pricked my conscience. Why Bombay, at this time of the year?

We were too wrapped up in our own grief; he had been on his deathbed for a number of days by then … suffering, in pain. His illness was a source of great humiliation for him. He, who had never asked anyone for anything, was now reduced to being helpless and bedridden. I would pray often in my silence afraid of losing him. God seemed angry for the nuisance in His name; otherwise, my prayers seldom went unanswered.

Things were ominously changing. Nazuk aunty quietly left for her hometown in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh. The particular flavour of her biryani also had gone with her. People, who have never lived in a multi-cultural community such as the ones that abounded in the Bombay of the early days, will never understand the love for diversity it fosters in you. The enthralling dandiya and the dance of garba, the seviyan and biryani mixed with prayers of the Eid, the Navjote ceremony invite, the khichdi bhog at the Pujos, midnight mass during Christmas … it was a congregation of celebrated solidarity. In a moment, where did it all vanish?

Our home was like an ashram for many. We joked that we were "Bharat guest house". We always had a few guests at dinner, and some guests that came to stay weekends would stay for six months. Friends, friends of the friends, their girlfriends and so on all would feel extremely comfortable in our house. His hospitality and easy going nature always made our home a beehive of activity and fun.

We had a guest walk in that night as well. He was celebrating the New Year with his family down the street and decided to drop in to wish us. His consternation and his confusion about walking into a situation and finding his jovial host in the last moments of passing had us secretly smiling. We knew he would have chuckled at the sight and plight of the unfortunate visitor.

His absence is deeply missed whenever there is any meaningful event or celebration happening in the house. He was the life and soul of all the events in our lives, in all the important stages of my life. I believe he was openly weeping during my "Vidaai" ceremony. Thank God I didn't see him else I wouldn't have left home! I wouldn't have been able to leave him. We never grew up for him.

He always remained the parent for us and I suspect all of us secretly speak to him when we are troubled. In all the happy moments in my life, celebrating birthdays is the hardest. He would start singing the happy birthday song, several weeks before my birthday actually arrived. July always became a special month for me because of him. Everything he said or did just always seemed so appropriate. I try and create the same special feeling of a birthday around the corner for my daughter but I don't think I can quite measure up. I just don't have the special quality he has that made everyone he loved feel that they were the kings and queens of the world!

Sometimes, I imagine he would have aged gracefully, probably have a walking stick and glasses. His slightly crooked teeth, my one visible genetic inheritance, would still be intact. He would have been in his 80's by now, smiling, always smiling.

My world, my life has always seemed like a before and after. Before it was secure, filled with laughter and light, carefree, a bit careless …. There was always this strong anchor, a comfort. He loved just looking at us. Smiling and staring at us much to our exasperation "What are you looking at Dad?"

I find myself doing the same thing myself, just staring at my daughters with a goofy smile on my face, can't take my eyes off their faces. I assume much to their annoyance. I can see now what he saw when he stared at the faces of his loved ones. What is it to love someone means? It means that this person sustains your soul, your heart and your sense of well-being. What does it mean to experience unconditional love? He never cared about my grades, my health was more important and he never asked us for anything. Ever. It was a very simple relationship, unconditional in the truest sense.

My life, our life after him feels astray, lost, the emotional strength dissipated. All of us struggle with the love and the loss in our own way. It has been years and life does go on and we too carry on with a vacuum in our heart as well. A hurt that never stops, it rushes back in when you hear a particular song or visit a special place. It's a loss only a daughter can understand.

The days after his passing were a blur. A nightmare, the city was visibly burning now; there was curfew in South Bombay. Imagine that—South Bombay! Political parties we had always scoffed at were taking centre stage.

Experiencing the tragedy in our lives, we could not understand the tragedy that was unfolding around us. Citizens of the city were being made to flee. This had been their city for generations, where would they go? What does it feel to be considered second class citizens in your own home? Years of peaceful living could

be rent asunder so easily? Neighbours could really turn against neighbours? Where did these hate mongers come from in Bombay? Bombay was never that kind of place. It was a live and let live kind of place, embracing all and judging none.

I can never love the city again. I feel betrayed by it. He was gone and the city suddenly seemed inhabited by strangers, people I didn't recognize. It is a death I don't mourn at all. I just feel a deep sense of sorrow at the end of innocence and the beginning of a lifelong heartbreak for me.

Epilogue

After so many years, she visits Mumbai again. She had to for some work. She experiences the rains, the sea waves and the change, and familiarizes with the places which remained the same. Her daughter accompanied her, longing to see again the house, the pathways which seemed shorter than before. She has grown up.

As she reached her house, an old lady came downstairs.

"Nazuk Jehan aunty", she recognized her, although old age has wrinkled her appearance.

She paused then said with excitement. "Anu". "Where were you gone?".

"I thought, you would never come to Mumbai again". "So did I", she replied.

Nazuk nudged her to come to her home instead.

"I often miss your father, his smile and kind words. I came back to Mumbai again, for I had faith in people like him. Besides, this is my home, the city that embraced me for years, why should I let a few bad people chase me away? If only we would educate people, problems will be lesser. Religion shouldn't divide but unite".

Anu felt her resentment toward the city fading away in her presence.

"Shall I cook the biryani for you?" she asked and rushed to the kitchen without waiting for her nod.

A few hours later, Anu was busy relishing the biryani, the flavour of which had lingered since 1992.

I felt betrayed by the city of Bombay,
The treasured feeling erupts in my dreams.
I miss you the most around my birthday,
No one wakes me up or lulls me to sleep.

You were my anchor and I was carefree,
It was a live and let live kind of place.
Symbol of loving and diverse beings,
In a moment how did it all so change?

Missing you with a vacuum in my heart,
Daddy! Stop being so funny! Come back.
Daughter's a loner since you made depart,
Yet I put up a smile to hide the wrack.

She taught me to love the city again,
I hope to meet you there, in the heaven.

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