

## **THE BENCH**

‘What will you do today, beti?’

‘Hmm?’ I turned around startled. Vidyawati ji had held out a cup of tea for me. I took it gratefully and sipped it in silence, maybe because so far I had not considered the question at all. What would I do now indeed?

She stood there, her question still unanswered.

‘So...where is Papaji?’ I asked.

‘He has left, beta. Some friend of his came over from the college to accompany him.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know...he didn’t say anything before leaving.’

‘No, you should also dress and leave for office, child. How long will you grieve like this?’ She patted my shoulder with unusual warmth.

Yes, I had to take stock of the situation now—get up and think about what I needed to do. Up to this moment I had not even tried. Which fuel could I use to light up a fire that would guide my way? My lamp had always been short of oil. How could I blame the storm?

It was true. I had to pull myself together... after such a

devastating quake... I shivered. The memory shook me up again. But no. This turbulence rose from emotion. I had to rise above all this and focus on consciousness. Slowly, I knew I had to come out of the fear of my dreams crashing down and employ myself in rebuilding my life. I had to find the way.

At that moment the newspaper boy dropped the newspaper at our doorstep and vanished. The recent events had shaken me to the core. Indeed, I needed to wake up. Because the newspaper was a reminder of the present...of events in the here-and-now, it would lead the way.

As I picked up the newspaper, I noticed the veranda floor sodden with dirt like Time past. The stubborn layers would need to be scrubbed away with water. The same layers of dust and grime seemed to have settled inside me too. I had ignored them for so long. Was this really in my nature? No! This couldn't be me.

In front of the veranda there was a little patch of vegetation that had grown into a garden. Papaji had been trying his best to add some more greenery to it. He had painstakingly removed the dry twigs and bushes and planted a row of plants that remained green regardless of the season. Some of them had flowered. In the middle of the bed was a Gulmohar tree laden with red flowers. Papaji had taken care to build a cement enclosure around it. One could sit comfortably on it. The most attractive feature was the path made of old blue tiles that connected the veranda to the enclosure. Some words

were written in a different script with pictures on the tiles. Papaji had mentioned they were china tiles he had bought from a kabadiwala. I didn't know what a 'pagoda' meant. But he explained the tiles were a part of Chinese handicraft. The pagoda was a place of worship for Chinese people. Exhibiting their culture, these tiles were an important experience that enhanced our garden. Perhaps they reflected the broken pieces within me, the feeling of being crushed.

A little squirrel ran helter-skelter around me, climbing up and down the tree again and again. Sometimes she would pause to nibble the food in her hands, wag her tail and break the stony silence around. She was a symbol of life that seemed to be slipping from my hands. Suddenly, I felt the need to sit down. I needed some stability beneath my feet. I found the old bench Papaji usually sat on very inviting. It was an emotional moment. It created the same feeling within me that the hospital bench inspired. I felt a deep bond with the inanimate structure.

If you come to think of it, one's life is filled with so many quakes that it is killing. If I turn around and try to figure them out, I realize that people's emotions are not deliberate constructs. Nor are they our own creation. They just happen as a natural phenomenon. They are what sets each person apart from the other as a unique individual. And it is a person's emotions that grant them the courage and ability to change the course of their lives. As I did. My research. My work. Marriage with Shailendra.

My research in the field of Psychology had revealed that human beings were the only species who not only had consciousness, but also emotional quotient. Then why did I find myself floundering? I needed to find my feet and deal with the altered circumstances. Why was I still struggling?

Several years ago when I joined the university to study Psychology, the sole aim of my life was to become a great psychologist. But today life had brought me to this point where I felt a greater need for faith and prayer. I needed something to ease the pain—some logical reasoning, cure or healing ingredient.



As I was leaving, Vidyawati ji said, ‘Beta, there is no fruit at home. Do bring some on your way back. What about your lunch?’

‘I will come back and eat. Maybe dal chawal. Make something...anything. What fruits should I get?’

‘Whatever you like...whatever Bhaisaab likes. Yes, he likes pomegranate.’

Once I was outside the gate, I paused and stared at the house, as if acquainting myself with it all over again. I had been so preoccupied with the hospital, rushing in and out, that I had never really noticed anything. I had been so obsessed with my own thoughts that nothing else was visible.

It was an old house in the middle of an open ground. Two of its bedrooms, a veranda and a bathroom belonged to us. I had not even bothered to find out who lived in the other rooms. The board over the gate read 'No 50, Hastings Road'. Underneath, a dilapidated nameplate had 'Ved Prakash Mehra' embossed on it.

Warren Hastings. Some foreign official, antagonistic to the freedom struggle, linking us to the East India Company?

Forget it. My sentiments were useless.

But that historical wide road was quite busy, jam-packed with fast cars, bicycles and pedestrians. A few makeshift shops stood next to the rickshaw stand. They stocked vegetables, fruits, soap, oil and other materials of everyday use. Good, I thought. I would buy the things I needed on my way back.

I was just about to sit in a rickshaw when a beggar on crutches stopped me. Frightened, I quickly opened my purse, took out a ten rupee note and handed it to him. 'Oh...' The pain within reached my lips. It would have been so difficult for me to see Shailendra in that situation.... Even Papaji, for that matter, was not doing a very good job of it. As long as he was alive, Shailendra had struggled with pain. That is why Papaji, initially, in his worry, sold off everything to build his son's future, and later this house—to save his life.

At that moment another beggar came and stood near me, held out his bowl and said, 'Give me something, daughter.

May your children and husband live long ... God bless you....’

I was piqued. He didn’t know what he was saying.

‘Go! Go away!’ I shouted. ‘I don’t have anything.’

Couldn’t he see the emptiness inside me? But he dragged himself beside the rickshaw as we began to move. Eventually, I had to give him ten rupees to get rid of him. I had no coins in my purse. The moment I reached the hospital, Harry would make me drop some change in his ‘donation box’. And I always obliged.

‘You have reached your destination, madam.’ The rickshaw puller broke my reverie.

‘Really? Have I reached? Where...?’ I was at the main entrance gate of the hospital that defined and would perhaps symbolically govern the rest of my life.

I was paying the rickshaw puller when my phone rang. It was Mandira.

‘How are you, Natasha?’ she enquired. ‘Haven’t seen you for a couple of days. Zafar is here these days. All of us friends would like to meet you. If you can, you must come along with us in the evening...for old times’ sake! Tell me what time you can make it. I’ll inform the others. And I’ll come and pick you up.’

‘Mandira, I’ve just returned to the clinic after a month’s absence. I don’t know how many patients I have or how much time they will take. I cannot say, but I’ll call you. Okay, Mandira.’

I disconnected abruptly and rushed to my cabin. I bumped into Harry on the way. ‘Oh, Natasha! Good to see you.’ He almost hugged me.

Sister Dorothy, Elena, Dheera surrounded me. Before they could speak up, Harry said, ‘Please don’t utter platitudes. No grieving, okay?’

Still, Sister Dorothy came up to me and kissed my forehead. ‘Be brave, my child,’ she said. I knew she had unshed tears in her eyes. Before any one of the others could utter a word or mention Shailendra’s name, Harry caught me by the hand and led me to my cabin.

‘Come on, start your work,’ he said. ‘Let me get you some coffee.’

It seemed he was in greater need of sympathy than I was. I could still feel myself tremble and settled down upon the chair. Yet my mind kept returning to Mandira’s words. Little do we realize where life takes us as unsuspecting observers. Sometimes, suddenly, we just find ourselves in life-changing situations or circumstances that later play a huge role in our lives.



I was just about to sit down at the table when my phone rang once again.

‘Hello, Natasha?’

‘Yes, Papaji.’

‘I called home. Vidya Behen told me you had left for the hospital. Good you did. Be brave my child. I’m there always whenever you need me.’

There was deep silence on either end of the telephone—as though words had drowned somewhere, in some unimaginable abyss. His words echoed in my ears: ‘I’m there....’ Whose duty was it really? His—or mine?

Papaji ambled through the tunnel of memories and parked himself at the other end. And I found myself thinking of the days at the university when my entire being was filled with ecstasy. In the Psychology lab, ‘Sir’—Mr Ved Mehra was explaining dreams to us and doing an interpretation of those dreams. Saumitro Sir also had a class on character and character analysis. He was explaining traits, descriptions, special features. I had to collect all the material and prepare a presentation. When the discussion began, Sir Mehra said, ‘Natasha, why don’t you come over to my home this evening? I have some great books on the subject; you can borrow them. They’ll be of immense help.’

He scribbled his address on a piece of paper. ‘Karam Bhoomi’.

In the evening I took a rickshaw to reach the address. When I arrived I saw a huge building with the name he had scribbled on the chit he gave me. There was a guard at the gate who stopped me. ‘Yes, madam, whom do you want to meet?’

‘Does Mr Ved Prakash Mehra live here?’

‘Yes, the Professor sahib? You may go inside. Ask anyone in the office; they will call him.’

‘Alright. Thank you.’

Inside there was a small lobby. A few chairs rested against its walls. Pictures of some saints hung above them. A few women snored on the chairs. As I walked in, they stirred to look at me. Their eyes were expressionless. The mere act of observing seemed a chore for them. A puzzling inability was frozen in those eyes.

A middle-aged man stepped out of the office.

‘Yes, madam?’

‘I’m looking for Professor Ved Prakash Mehra.’

‘Yes, he lives on the first floor...on the left. Wait.’ He turned to another door and called out, ‘Vidyawati.’

‘Coming.’

A woman in a white saree, with her head covered by the pallu, walked up to me gracefully.

‘Listen, Vidyawati, take this young woman to Professor Sahib’s room. She is his student.’

I took the elevator to reach the floor above. By this time I had realized that it was an old people’s home. Most of the residents, exhausted with age, considered it their permanent base. Maybe some of them had no children, or if they did, the children did not care about the existence of their parents any more. When the elevator stopped, a

sour-looking fellow rushed inside.

‘Rajinder? Did you meet Dadi? She remembers you day and night,’ said Vidyawati.

‘None of your business... I’ve deposited the cash for the month and I’ve bought her some clothes. How does it matter whether I meet her or not?’ He pushed her aside and left.

She turned to me, ‘See, beta, his grandmother has been living here for seven years. In her initial days she used to talk so much. She would pick up a quarrel with anyone she could find. But she was the one who taught me to read the *Ramayana*. Apparently, when she was young she used to be a well-known schoolteacher somewhere. Last year, her son dies of cancer. Ever since then she has turned into a stone. She has given up picking fights. She doesn’t accuse anyone of anything anymore. Her son left her here and now this grandson comes to pay for her every month. See there she is. He didn’t even greet her. But she calls his name, ‘Rajinder’, day and night. She yearns for her family, yearns for someone to share and care, but no, there is nobody in the whole world. If I don’t encourage her to get up from her bed, she would stay on it forever. I bathe her and make her eat.’

I noticed sitting right in front of me a shadow of a woman. She sat like a statue, staring at the ceiling, oblivious to the world around her, probably lost in some

memory from the past. I tried to recall the term we use for such a state in Psychology. I was sure I would find several interesting case histories at this Home.

Right then the door opened and ‘Sir’ stepped out.

‘Oh, Natasha. Come, come. Do come in. I was waiting for you.’ He turned to the woman behind me. ‘Vidyawati ji, please could you send two cups of tea?’

‘Of course, Bhaisaab,’ she replied and left, but I could still feel her voice and inhale her scent.

It was much more than an ordinary room and it certainly belonged to an extraordinary man. The four walls were packed with wooden shelves. Big, heavy books filled most of these racks. It was easy to associate the professor with them. Only the wall right opposite me had an open window. A study table was placed against it. An assortment of files and loose paper lay upon it. Outside the sun was setting. I don’t know why the sight of the fading light created a strange sense of melancholy in me. I could feel some indescribable churning within, but could not explain it. It could not be defined; simply experienced.

I spent some time with him discussing the topic and he explained the nuances. At the end when I rose to leave with the books he had offered, I could only revere the man in front of me. Psychology taught us that this reverence or faith was the essential ingredient for learning, for developing one’s character. It was crucial to imbibe

knowledge. As I left, this sentiment accompanied me, and I knew it had come to stay.



We were at the party room at *Simran* celebrating Alka's birthday. Popular music played in the background. We were lost in a world of our own. Music has a unique impact upon our psyche. Suddenly, at some distance from the window I noticed Professor Mehra sitting at a table. There was a young man with him, perhaps a student. I wondered if he was another student like me, seeking help from him for a research project. But I usually sought his help at the old people's home. Though I never mentioned it to him, I was strongly influenced by his personality and intelligence. I always tried to converse with him whenever I got an opportunity. My own parents and relatives at home were barely literate. Besides, I was researching emotions—the state of mind of a person, sense of self, consciousness and sentiments; my topic wasn't easy. Working with Professor Mehra I discovered the vast canvas of his mind and realized that analyzing one's life was not a simple task.

I stood up and walked up to his table. 'Hello, Sir,' I greeted him. 'You...here? I've never seen you here before.'

'Hello Natasha. Yes, this is the first time I've come,' he said. 'Come, meet my son. This is Shailendra. He has

just graduated from IIT... Shailendra, this is Natasha....'

'Hello.'

'Hi, good that you managed to persuade Sir to step out of that smoke infested room,' I said. 'I'm so happy to see him here. Honestly, even after having achieved so much he lives the life of a hermit...so detached. Thanks.' As I looked at the young man's face, I felt a strange shiver of excitement.

'But Sir,' I continued, 'You have such a grown up son? It's amazing. You look so young! Perhaps thanks to your yoga classes?'

Somewhat embarrassed, Professor Mehra was still mumbling introductions. 'Thanks. Natasha...Shailendra; Natasha is doing her research under me. She is an outstanding student. And Natasha, Shailendra is going to join a very prestigious bank soon.'

'Oh, all the best.'

'May I ask you a question, Natashaji...?' You have spent a lot of time with my father. I have come for a visit after almost a year. Is it just me or do you too feel that he has become too quiet, that he seems to be withdrawing into some kind of a shell?' His voice choked with emotion.

'May be this silence is a prerequisite for personal liberation,' I said. 'And frankly, I don't think Sir is shrivelling in any way; I think he's being enriched by his experiences— like some meditating sage. His students

are very impressed with him. In fact, the whole college considers him a genius. We all respect him.'

'Perhaps. But somehow I cannot bear his silence.'

'You know, I am researching human emotions—their variety and variations—and silence is the culmination of so many of them. Silence is the answer to many questions.'

'It's possible that you guys feel that way. But I'm quite worried. Ever since I've come I've been noticing that he doesn't even sleep properly. I got the mattresses changed, even the duvets and pillows, but it hasn't changed anything.' He slipped into past memories.

The professor took his hand and pressed it hard. 'You know how it is, Shailedra. There is frequent change of guard in my life. Of course I've dreamt of sweet slumber many times, but never been able to make it mine. But now that you're here, we'll have our own home and I'll be able to sleep in peace.'

Shailendra studied his father carefully, as though observing a stranger.

'Home....'

Perhaps he could see signs of life emerging in his father. Maybe he wasn't just a lifeless sculpture any longer. Right in front of us he was changing into a flesh and blood person he once was.

I don't know why but Shailendra suddenly put his hand over mine on the table. Perhaps he was so preoccupied that he did not think.

‘Natasha ji, my father believes in you, in your intelligence. And even I’m impressed with you...the way you analyze everything? Your voice too is hypnotic.’ He settled his gaze upon me. ‘Natasha, I would like you to become a part of our life. Please...we’ll have a home. My father will be able to sleep.’

The whole situation had suddenly transformed into a scene out of a film. I was shocked and leapt to my feet.

‘What—what do you mean? What are you asking?’ I was incredulous.

All of us stared at each other. His words hung in the air. What a ridiculous request it was. We stood rooted to the spot for a few minutes as though frozen by our thoughts.

My fingers were still laced with Shailendra’s. Before I could move, Professor Mehra put his hand over ours.

‘Please Natsha,’ he said, ‘I don’t think Shailendra can find a better life partner than you. I have full faith in your abilities. Your humanness and simplicity has always impressed me.’

‘Sir...’ I did not know what to say. It was surreal. ‘I don’t even know him. And what about my research—my future?’

Myriad thoughts raced through my mind. Both father and son continued to stare at me.

It was true Shailendra was Professor Mehra’s son, but to me he was still a complete stranger. There were so many images floating in my head, but they were still unfamiliar territory. I didn’t know how to paste them on the blank

notebook that my life was.

Trembling, I raised my eyes to the window. Outside the sunrays were receding, leaving a mist behind them. Dry yellow leaves scattered in the wind. They seemed out of sync with the turbulence I was experiencing.

I did not know what or whom to believe. Should I believe in these new relationships that had been unexpectedly thrust upon me? This young man's decision could change my life forever. It could create a whole new world for me.

'Happy Birthday to you. Hey Natasha, come, Alka is about the cut the cake,' Mandira's voice reached my ears, bringing me back to the real world.

But Shailendra's grip over my hand was still firm. He did not really need to convince me. I stole a glance at him. I had never seen such eyes—deep, black and trusting. His persona was as powerful as his father's. His impeccable clothes did not seem to fit in the surroundings. When he bent forward, I could smell the cologne on his body. So far I had not met a man who used perfume on his body. Trying to release my fingers, I wondered how I could define this bizarre feeling.

As I left the chair, I could feel Professor Mehra's sharp gaze on me. It gave me the same excitement as a lecture on a thought provoking or interesting subject in class.

'Please, Natasha. Think about it, beta,' he said.

'Beta'...once again, a plea to the vulnerable human side of me I could not easily ignore. He patted my head with his

tremulous hand. Touch has its own language.

‘Sir, how do I categorize this incident?’ I spoke up. ‘The possibility of emotion...or its impossibility.’

‘Natasha, please transfer this incident—our request—from the realm of abstract theory to real life.’ The professor’s hand still rested on my head. ‘Be practical, because I’m serious. I’ve thought this over very carefully.’

Shailendra’s deep black eyes had an expression I could not read.

Near the window on the wall opposite hung a picture of Guru Nanak. His palm was raised in a blessing. It gave me some solace, as though reassuring me. I don’t know, but there must have been some celestial vibrations at play. Staring at that poster Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, the book I had recently read, came to mind. The protagonist of the novel, Siddhartha, lived near a river. He spent many years of his life sailing on the boat from one end to the other. He not only observed the changing face of the river from time to time, but internalized the changes himself—sometimes calm, sometimes turbulent, sometimes restive like a youth, and sometimes, as in the summer months, thirsty and dying like an old man. It was like the journey of life. Eventually, it reached a point where all the worldly activities ended. The banks became blurred. Only tranquility remained. Siddhartha could imbibe this serenity from the river. He had been witness to the changes year after year. The experience

had brought him from curiosity to a comfortable kind of stillness, plucked him away from the false ideologies of previous lives lived. He knew the sweet reward of sacrifice.

Similarly, the image of Guru Nanak dangling on the wall of this restaurant was a witness to whatever was transpiring within its four walls. He was a divine witness to these crucial moments of my life. Could I call it a 'proposal'?

'Oh Madam Philosopher, come, Alka is about to cut the cake!'

Manjula was dragging me away now. How was she supposed to know what had happened in these few minutes I was absent? From those precious moments, the budding new relationships, I was suddenly transported to the here and now, the real world hustle-bustle of the restaurant. I was stunned. And preoccupied. I could still feel Shailendra's fingers interlocked with mine. I could still sense the Professor's palm upon my head in blessing. I could still feel the blinding light exuded by the portrait of the living legend on the wall across from me. My mind was in turmoil. And in the background the friends began to sing, unaware of the sweeping changes in my life. This was life.

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