

# *Stories-Yours and Mine*



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## ***The story behind the stories...***

In 2010-11, the Prayas Health Group conducted a study on the lived experiences of women in the course of their reproductive careers. We requested women who were HIV infected and had experienced marriage and therefore a sexual relationship to narrate their experiences to us. How must these women's lives have unfolded? Well, predictably, they were married, had a sexual relationship, became pregnant, gave birth to children, and so on. An additional, unpredictable factor in their lives was HIV and its possible impacts on each of these life events.

Indeed, we had anticipated such stories. However, when we heard these women out, we realized that the questions faced by each one of them in the course of their lives were entirely different. Crucially, each woman dealt with these questions in her own unique way. Responding openly and without the slightest reservation to our request, the participants in our study shared their diverse life experiences with us.

Since we began this study, we were determined that its findings and scholarly analysis would be shared with the women, their partners, and others in a similar plight. While the findings of such research studies are routinely published in scientific journals and made available to the scientific community, the people whose lived experiences and everyday struggles form the basis of such studies rarely benefit from the information that emerges. Some organizations do make deliberate efforts to communicate their research findings to the participants. At times, previously published health information

booklets are distributed to them. However, the information is presented in such a complex manner that common people are unable to parse it. The affection with which people unconditionally share their most intimate emotions with the researchers is not valued adequately by such efforts. What, then, is the way out?

At Prayas, we wrote this collection of stories as a token of gratitude to all those who helped us in our research. The characters in these stories are fictional, but the events that constitute their plots and the issues that emerge are certainly not.

Why are we presenting the findings of apparently dry research results in the more engaging format of stories? Imagine this. It wouldn't be wrong to say that we all 'know' ourselves as well as our friends and relatives through a story. The events in our past, experiences of the present, and desires and hopes for the future become 'our' story. This narrative identity makes our lives and our very existence meaningful.

During our research, we came to know the many facets of women's lives, their aspirations and desires, their notions of happiness, as well as their pain and suffering. The genesis of these stories is rooted in the emotions of these women. Therefore, in all these stories, it is women who are the central characters.

The protagonists of these stories are common women. Their personalities, the opportunities for education in their lives, their social condition

and economic status, as well as the issues they are faced with are entirely different for each woman. However, there is one common thread in all their lives: every woman is confronting the challenges she faces with extraordinary strength. In some instances, the woman's partner, her beloved husband, holds her hand and walks alongside her. In other stories, he evades responsibility and hides behind her. While in still other narratives, he betrays her, or even himself. Yet, while reflecting on the wordless spaces punctuating their relationships, we are touched by the immense power of love that can overcome barriers of caste, class, religion and a disease such as HIV. These seven stories present the beautiful palette of human emotions which we can relate to, experience vicariously, and derive strength from when our own lives run into difficulties.

Through these stories, we express our respect for women and their partners regardless of their HIV status, whose spirited and courageous approach towards dealing with their difficult life situations inspires immense hope.

Translating this idea into reality would not have been possible without the vital role of Dr. Sanjeevani Kulkarni, my colleague and adviser. The credit of writing these stories is entirely hers.

Knowledge that stems from experience has a special place in our minds and is never forgotten. The experience need not always be our own. In fact, while reading stories such as the ones in this collection, when we encounter a character in the story with experiences similar to our own, it might enable us to unravel knotty questions in our own lives.

In Indian culture, motherhood is considered to be central to the life of women. Being a mother

is often considered synonymous with being a woman. It is often forgotten that mothers are also women, with minds and emotions of their own. Even in the context of HIV, the most important issue in consideration is that of preventing mother to child transmission of HIV, and the motherhood of HIV infected women. In such a cultural context, the physical and emotional lives of women, and their 'womanhood' are completely neglected. However, in this booklet, we have tried to address different issues that women and men face regarding their reproductive lives — issues that are not limited to having babies and preventing mother to child transmission.

With availability of preventive medicines, women can choose to have children with more confidence than ever. If they wish to, they can also choose not to have children by preventing pregnancy. Information about available options for preventing HIV transmission to the baby, as well as information about family planning is included in this booklet as well. It is provided to help HIV infected women and men explore different options and make informed decisions to realize their reproductive rights.

Ms. Neha Vaidya and Dr. Trupti Darak worked with me on this research project. Both of them spoke to women who participated in this study. The successful completion of this project would not have been possible without their help and support.

The writer, Dr. Sanjeevani Kulkarni, is the coordinator of the Prayas Health Group. She has been working in the field of HIV for the past two decades. How she managed to create such engaging stories from mere factual information, is a question only she can answer.

Her writing was complemented by the illustrations of the talented and experienced artist, Dr. Mohan Deshpande. His engagement with the production of this booklet is also reflected in the stories themselves.

Dr. Benazir Baig translated the Marathi stories into English and Ms Neeta Deshpande helped with language editing. I am grateful to them for their timely help.

I cannot thank all of them enough for their support and concern.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Dr Vinay Kulkarni, our Sir. His guidance and support for all my work till date is extremely valuable for me.

Prof. Dr. Inge Hutter, Dean of the Faculty of Spatial Science at the University of Groningen,

Netherlands is my promoter and supervisor for this research. It was the strength of her constant motivation that helped me to complete this project successfully. I am blessed to have a sensitive and committed teacher in her.

Dr. Fanny Janssen, Assistant Professor at the Population Research Center, Groningen has guided me through the entire process of this research and honed my skills which also helped me in preparing this booklet.

I truly wish that you like this booklet and find it helpful. I leave it to you, the readers, to determine if you really do.

**Sincerely yours,**

**Dr. Shrinivas Darak**

## *Manda - Subhash*



She wept incessantly when she came to know that the two of them had HIV, but Subhash pacified Manda. "Nowadays, there are better drugs. We'll take proper medicines regularly. We'll live well...", he told her again and again.

"How in the world did we get this HIV?" Mandawoke up her sleeping husband one night to ask him. Subhash only pulled her close without a word. Still crying, she lay in his arms. He kept patting her. She wanted to be enraged,

and ask him if he had cheated on her. But the love and care she felt in his effort to pat her to sleep made it impossible to ask such a question.

If it wasn't for the HIV, Mandahad always considered herself very fortunate. Subhash was intelligent. Poverty and the responsibility of caring for his family had forced him to drop out of college, but he had done well in his job. He was not conceited about his achievements either. After he got home from work, he would help Manda with the household chores. He never raised his voice at her. With such a gentle and understanding husband by her side, and two wonderful children, she could not help but feel proud of her beautiful, happy home.

How did such a good man get infected with HIV? Maybe, through an injection? Or maybe she got it somehow and then he got it from her ... She would sink into despair with these thoughts. Fortunately, both their children were not infected. When she thought of her children, she remembered Subhash saying, "In today's times, we do not want a third child." He had been very keen that Manda get an intrauterine contraceptive device (IUCD) fitted by the doctor after the birth of their daughter Sakshi. Now it was three years since the Copper-T had been inserted. They had already decided that after the Copper-T was removed, Manda would undergo a sterilization operation. But when they found out about the HIV, all other plans receded. Now they could think of nothing else.

The doctor had instructed them to use a condom during each intercourse. "We will use it regularly," Subhash had promised. Since it was time to remove the Copper-T, and they were now going to use condoms, Manda got it removed. Subhash was of the opinion that there was no need for an operation since they would use condoms. Manda concurred.

Even a fleeting thought about HIV would make Manda feel depressed and hopeless. She would cry a lot. Subhash would take utmost care of her then, pamper her like a child. After a few days, she was a little better. Though the realization of having HIV was ever present, the pain of that realization was somewhat subdued. Life was back to its usual routine. Both of them disliked using the condom, they didn't want to. That they were using the condom because of HIV was always on their minds. To ignore thoughts of HIV, they would want to skip the use of the condom too. "What would happen if we don't use the condom once in a while? Did we use it when we did not know of HIV?" they thought.

After a while, Manda missed her periods. She did not give much thought to it at first. They used condoms most of the time, so she ruled out the possibility of a pregnancy. Two more months went by, but there was no sign of her periods. She was surprised when she visited the doctor, who told her that she was pregnant. Without a second thought, she decided to terminate the pregnancy. The pills caused copious bleeding, so she sent her children to her sister's place for a day so that she could rest. Subhash came home after

half a day's work to take care of her. As he held out a glass of fresh juice for her, he said, "Manda, you go through so much trouble because of me."

Manda was always quite overwhelmed by his loving and caring behavior. She had seen other men - her father, brothers, relatives, and neighbors. She had yet to meet a man who was so gentle with his wife. "I had to abort once, so what's the big deal?" she said to herself. She decided that she would not let Subhash feel guilty. Other women had to suffer so much in their marriages. It was her good fortune that she was married to such a good man.

No, she would not let him feel guilty. She gathered herself and resolved to make him forget not just this abortion but also HIV.

After a few months, however, Manda missed her period again. She was ashamed to go back to the same doctor to report her pregnancy. So Subhash managed to get the abortive pills through a friend of his. She took the pills, but the abortion was not complete this time around. She had to undergo dilatation and

curettage at a hospital to completely remove the products of conception from her uterus. The doctor asked them to meet him when she was to be discharged from the hospital. He told them to meet the counselor before leaving. Manda likened this to an experience in school when she was sent to meet the headmaster after committing a big mistake. She whispered to Subhash after they left the doctor's room, "We did make a mistake, but now the counselor is going to tell us the same thing, angrily or perhaps kindly. We know, so why go to the counselor now?"

"Oh come on, let's just go. So what if he's angry? His words won't blow holes through our bodies, will they?" said Subhash.



When they entered the counselor's room, they were greeted by his warm smile. "Please come in," he said. Manda was unable to smile back. The counselor was sympathetic and caring. Soon he was able to ward off fear from their hearts. He began chatting lightheartedly with them. He

inquired about their method of using the condom, and gave suggestions for proper use. He said, "You should use the condom from the very beginning of the sexual intercourse. With the use of just the condom, pregnancy can be avoided 85% of times, but there is still a 15% chance that you could conceive. Therefore, another family planning method needs to be followed to ensure complete contraception. Someone should have told you this before. If you were made aware of this other method, you would not have gone through this trouble."

He then suggested that they should consider using oral contraceptive pills or reinsert Copper-T. He informed them that in case the condom ruptures and there is a risk of pregnancy, then pills can be taken within 5 days of the intercourse. He said that perhaps they could have done this the second time around if they knew of it. The counselor did not get angry with them. He was of the view that the events which transpired in their lives were because of lack of information and awareness. He believed that had they known the options that were available, they would have taken utmost care. His words unburdened Manda. She opened up to this man about her doubts. "Sometimes, we don't feel like using the condom at all...", she said. "But as it is we do take care to have intercourse during the safe days, you see."

The counselor smiled. "You used the 'safe period method' which means that one abstains from intercourse during the fertile period, the time around

ovulation, when there are more chances of conception. Mind you, this is not a very reliable method. Wait, let us look it up in this book."

The counselor picked up a book from his desk and started reading aloud.

"Safe days cannot be counted with certainty, as they vary from woman to woman depending on the psychological and biological clocks in their bodies, because of which women may have irregular ovulation times. There are certain methods to calculate this safe period, but they may fail to be accurate. Moreover, the sperms that enter a woman's body through the man's semen can stay viable for a period of 2 to 5 days."

He closed the book and said, "Even after a few days of intercourse, the sperms may be viable to fertilize the mature ovum released at ovulation and this may cause pregnancy. Therefore, having sexual intercourse during the safe period is not a reliable method of contraception. You must use the condom at all times. Also, the supplementary method used for contraception should not be the safe-days method. It is too risky."

Now, fully informed, Manda rested her forehead against her hand.

Subhash said, "I think instead of all this, it would be better to get Manda's operation done as we had planned earlier."

"That should have been the first thing we did," Manda said, agreeing with her husband. She now looked to the



counselor for his approval. Did he have something else to say? She wanted to be sure, so she asked him, "We should have, right?"

The counselor said, "If you are completely certain that you do not wish to have any more children, operation is the best option. It could be a sterilization operation of either the woman or the man, but I would say a man's vasectomy operation is comparatively easier, saves time, and is also less troublesome."

Manda was about to say something, but Subhash was already smiling at her. He said, "Why then, I will undergo the operation, not Manda. I have no objections to having the operation done on myself. You see Manda, you have already borne the hardship of childbirths,. Now I should take on the responsibility of the operation." Now turning to the counselor with a broad smile, he said, "Should I not, what do you say?"

Manda realized once again how understanding her husband was.

"But I've heard that later the man feels a little weak. If this can happen, I would rather undergo the operation myself." She said abruptly, after a few moments.

The counselor laughed and shook his head. "No," he said. "Don't worry about it at all. This operation *does not* cause any weakness. Besides, it's a very minor operation, just takes about 15 minutes. You do not need to get admitted to the hospital for it either. It can be done as an outpatient procedure,

but you need to rest for 48 hours and that is all. Another important thing though, you still need to use the condom regularly after the operation. This is not to avoid pregnancy, but to avoid HIV from intermingling in your bodies and causing complications of the disease.

Also, you **MUST** take utmost care for the following three months, because the sperms that have reached the seminal vesicles before vasectomy, may again cause pregnancy, and..." And like a friend joking in good humor, he widened his eyes and laughed aloud. Subhash joined in the laughter.

Manda shrugged and said, "No, upon my word, not again!"



### **"USE THE CONDOM REGULARLY" - Why does your doctor/counselor say so?**

If both partners are HIV infected, sexual contact could transmit HIV or other organisms causing other sexually transmitted diseases to spread from one partner to another. These could be different strains of HIV, or could be drug-resistant strains. Thus the drug-resistant virus may grow, complicating the existing situation.

The condom is the only means of avoiding this possibility. Therefore, even if you are using any other family planning/contraception method, the condom should be used regularly.

Use of condom prevents HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases as well as provides contraception.

### **HOW TO USE A CONDOM?**

A condom should be used during each and every intercourse and from the very beginning of the sexual contact.

A new condom should be used for each intercourse.

The packet containing the condom should be kept in a cool and dry place. It should be kept away from sunlight and heat.

The date of expiry is printed on the packet beyond which it cannot be used. It should be carefully read. Old condoms past the date of expiry should not be used.

Studies have shown that when couples talk about condom usage, the regularity of using the condom increases. Therefore, talk to your partner about using the condom.

Do not completely unfold the condom before putting it on the penis. It should be unfolded/unrolled as you pull it up on the penis.

While buying condoms, buy ones which are lubricated. Do not apply external lubricants like oil, grease or Vaseline to the condom.

**IF YOU AND YOUR PARTNER DO NOT WISH TO HAVE A CHILD IN THE FUTURE...**

***It is Better To Think About Permanent Contraception***

### **Male Sterilization Operation: Vasectomy**

This consists of disrupting the passage of sperms through the vas deferens by cutting and ligating it through a small incision superior to the scrotum. The testes are not removed in this operation.

Because of the vas deferens being tied up, the semen does not contain sperms and thus cannot cause pregnancy. One incision is made for this operation and a skin stitch is not required.

This is the easiest and most reliable method of family planning.

This operation does not require hospital admission.

After the surgery, you need to rest for 2 days and can then resume light activities.

You may return to all normal daily activities after one week.

This operation does not affect the sexual function or erectile function of the penis.

It is an opportunity for the man to take some responsibility and participate actively in contraception.

It is imperative to use another method of contraception for the next 3 months following this operation, because it takes up to 3 months for the sperms which have already been released in the reproductive tract to disappear from the semen.

Reversal of this operation is difficult. To reverse it, the two cut ends of the vas are joined together to restore the passage of sperms. But there is no guarantee that pregnancy can be effected.

### **Female Sterilization Operation: Tubal Ligation**

In this operation, the fallopian tubes, through which the ovum passes into the uterus, are ligated (tied up) so as to prevent the ovum from reaching the uterine cavity.

This operation is done by making one or two small incisions on the abdomen (laparoscopic) with a possible stitch required to close the incision.

This is a safe procedure with no long-term complications.

Reversal of this operation is a little difficult. To reverse it, the ligated part of the fallopian tube is removed and recanalization is achieved by bringing together the open ends. Even after recanalization, pregnancy is not guaranteed.

Both these operations do not prevent HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Even after sterilization procedures, couples infected with HIV should continue the use of a condom for each intercourse.

### **THINGS TO CONSIDER WHILE OPTING FOR STERILIZATION PROCEDURES:**

Whether to undergo a sterilization operation or not should be the decision of the couple alone.

You could ask others for their opinion about the operation, but others including your partner, your family members or relatives, healthcare providers, doctors, or any other person cannot make the decision on your behalf.

It is the responsibility of the institutions providing the surgery to ensure that the decision to undergo sterilization is made by the individual with free will.

Some couples fear that the doctors would refuse to operate on them because they are HIV infected. Actually, any doctor cannot refuse any service to the patient because he/she is infected with HIV. But in reality, some people do experience such discrimination. You could decide along with your counselor where the operation could be done. It is done free of cost in Government hospitals/healthcare facilities.

## *Hawwa- Hameed*

Hameed's health was improving now. A year ago, he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and at the same time it was discovered that he was HIV positive. The doctor had prescribed medications for both these diseases. The doctor had also advised that Hameed's wife, Hawwa, be tested for HIV immediately after Hameed's diagnosis was established, but Hawwa had not gone for the test. Her in-laws also did not say anything about it. Hameed kept saying, "Please get Hawwa's blood test for HIV done," but he was very ill and no one listened to him.

"I will get my tests done after you are better," Hawwa told him. Hawwa took Hameed to all his doctor's appointments, gave him his medicines on time, and took good care of him. Six months passed by. During a visit to the doctor, he inquired again about Hawwa's HIV test. When he heard that she had not undergone the test yet, he was annoyed. At this point, Hawwa did get the test done. The results of the blood test were going to be available in half an hour, but Hawwa alone knew how apprehensive she was and how long that period seemed to stretch. Hameed was with her. The test result was positive. They both cried. Fortunately, Hameed's parents were not present.

On her way back, Hawwa said to herself, "O Allah, what did I do to deserve this punishment?"

When Hameed's mother saw the dejected faces of her son and daughter-in-law, she at once concluded that something was wrong. As was her habit, she blamed Hawwa. "What is the matter now?" she said. "Since you have come into our household, we are facing one crisis after another."

Hawwa bit her lip and looked at Hameed. He took her hand in his and pressed it. "Be quiet. Don't say anything to her," he told Hawwa.

That night Hameed said to Hawwa, "We will bear our pain and suffering, but we will not tell our family about your illness." Hawwa agreed. She knew very well that if the family came to know of her disease, they would immediately blame her. Since their marriage two years ago, Hameed had constantly suffered from one illness or another. Except for the first few months after their marriage, Hameed rarely had the strength to have a physical relationship with Hawwa, although he wanted to. But even with this infrequent sexual contact, Hawwa got infected with HIV, and on top of it all she had to routinely listen to the taunts of her in-laws.

She should not have taken their taunts to heart so much. Didn't most women have to suffer them? But Hawwa had some expectations from her marriage. She was not averse to hard work and adversity, but she wanted to be happy with her husband and have a cute little baby. Her husband and she would dote on their baby and educate him well. This was her idea of marriage. But her situation seemed to be quite the opposite. The counselor at the hospital had told them about using a condom during each

and every intercourse without fail after Hameed was diagnosed with HIV. Hawwa followed all instructions given by Hameed's healthcare providers to the T, but she thought the condom would prevent her from ever having a baby, and the whole thing became quite unbearable for her. Her in-laws and neighbors would taunt her for not being pregnant yet. When she came to know of her own HIV status, she had herself thought that she could not take on the responsibility of a child now. She was unhappy and would cry through the nights lying beside Hameed in bed. Hameed would say, "You want a baby, is that all? We'll just stop using the condom and you'll have one." Hawwa was not ready to do this though. "We can't do anything without asking the doctor," she would say. She convinced Hameed with great difficulty not to forego the condom. Knowing Hameed's nature, she was aware that the responsibility of asking the doctor would be hers.

She broached the topic during their next meeting with the doctor. He was annoyed at first. He raised his voice and said, "Do not even think of it right now." Hawwa's eyes welled up. The doctor softened a bit. "Let Hameed get a little better. Don't rush ahead with the pregnancy, ok?" he said.



That her tears had meant something to the doctor, that he had softened a bit, that he had not ruled out a pregnancy ever, but just meant not at this time, cheered up Hawwa a bit.

But Hameed was angry that the doctor had spoken angrily with Hawwa. "I was telling you there was no need to ask him. This is our personal matter and we decide it ourselves. When you are pregnant, we will go and tell him that you are." Hawwa did not say anything but she could not accept this.

Hameed's tuberculosis medicines needed to be refilled. Hawwa went for the refill and decided to speak with the doctor again about her wanting a baby. She expected that he would get angry this time too. But the doctor asked her, "Well, when was your CD4 count

done?"

"It's not been done yet," said Hawwa. "Hameed's tuberculosis treatment is still going on. I did not have time to think of myself."

Hawwa had a CD4 test. She kept the report on the doctor's desk and sat across to read his reaction.

Her CD4 count was 400 and the doctor actually smiled and Hawwa saw some hope. She asked the doctor, "So, is it okay to have a baby now? But the counselor had said the condom was compulsory with each intercourse, then how ... I mean ..."

"Hawwa, remember first, you must check your CD4 levels every six months. This is irrespective of the pregnancy. Pregnant or not, you must get the CD4 every six months and get the report to me, no mistake in that. The counselor will speak in detail to you about your pregnancy, I will speak to her. She will tell you specific days when you will not use the condom, but on all other days you need to use it regularly. Your CD4 count is good, so don't worry."

"If it is greater than 350, then it is good, isn't it?" She had read this in the information booklet in the hospital. The doctor smiled at her prompt recollection of it. "Yes," he said.

"If they are not more than 350?"

"Then I would start medicines first."

"And the baby?"

"After the medicines are started."

"So even after the medicines are started, a baby is possible. I was thinking that once the medicines are started ..."

"No, that's not true. Pregnancy is possible on medication. Even now, to prevent HIV infection from spreading to the baby, I will be giving you medicines from the fourth month."

"I was about to ask you that doctor, our baby must not get our disease." Her eyes filled with tears.

She came out of the doctor's cabin. She held Hameed's hand for a fleeting moment and smiled at him almost imperceptibly.

While the doctor talked about CD4 and medications, the counselor had other things to

say. When she came to know that Hawwa wanted a baby, she said, "You will have a baby, but also think about why you want one. Your in-laws, relatives, or neighbors expectations are not a good enough reason. You need to think about whether you will be able to take care of the baby and bear the expenses. You need to think about whether the father's health is okay. How will you pay your medical bills? Or will you go to the government hospital from now on? Think about all this carefully. I will tell you now what you need to do, but if you do not remember or have any doubts, come back next month."

The counselor took out a chart from a cupboard. She opened it up and explained it to Hawwa, emphasizing each and every word. "Like I told you already, first of all you need to decide that you really want a baby. Once you have decided to have a baby, then after the menses end, let a week go by, and then for 2-3 days have intercourse without the condom. There is a high probability of conceiving on those days. It is possible that you may not be pregnant immediately after the first month, but eventually you will get pregnant. Except for these 2-3 days, the chances of pregnancy are low on all other days, and you need to use the condom without fail during all intercourses then. There is a possibility of the virus being transmitted from one partner to another and complicating the situation, so unprotected intercourse is best avoided on all other days. I hope you understand what I have said."

"Yes, of course, I understood." Hawwa was smiling happily.

Hawwa and Hameed were overjoyed. When they were diagnosed with HIV, they had doubts of being able to live at all, but now, they were going to have a sweet little baby. With it, life would hold a whole new meaning and would become so livable. These thoughts lifted up their spirits. The doctor had shouted at Hawwa last time; that was forgotten. Hawwa reasoned that the doctor was angry because Hameed had just started recovering, and they were already thinking of taking on this huge responsibility upon themselves. Hawwa was satisfied. She was being so thoughtful, having carefully thought of the future, and spoken with the counselor. Hameed said to her, "It's good that we did not stop using the condom on any day we liked. We are being responsible, and careful ... One should be responsible at all times."



They talked continuously on their way home, and late into the night. They had many questions that they had never thought of before, but they were not troubled by these questions. They were happy that they would not be assailed by unanticipated problems at the eleventh hour. They were taking care, asking questions to resolve their doubts, gathering information, and becoming more aware of their situation. This satisfied them. There was going to be an additional expense. Hameed was already on medication which needed to be taken lifelong. After some time, Hawwa would require medication which she would need to take all her life too. They had not much fear of their inevitable death, but life with HIV was going to be difficult, and quite

unlike a normal life. However, it would not do to be afraid.

"Hawwa, I never told you before, I want to tell you now. I did not feel as helpless when I knew of my HIV as I felt when your report was positive. I wanted to die. But you are so good, so courageous ... and see what a long way we have come today, haven't we?"

Hameed's words brought tears to Hawwa's eyes. She brushed them off and hugged him tight.





## WANT TO HAVE A BABY?

**This ought to be a decision made by you and your partner.**

### ***Things To Remember:***

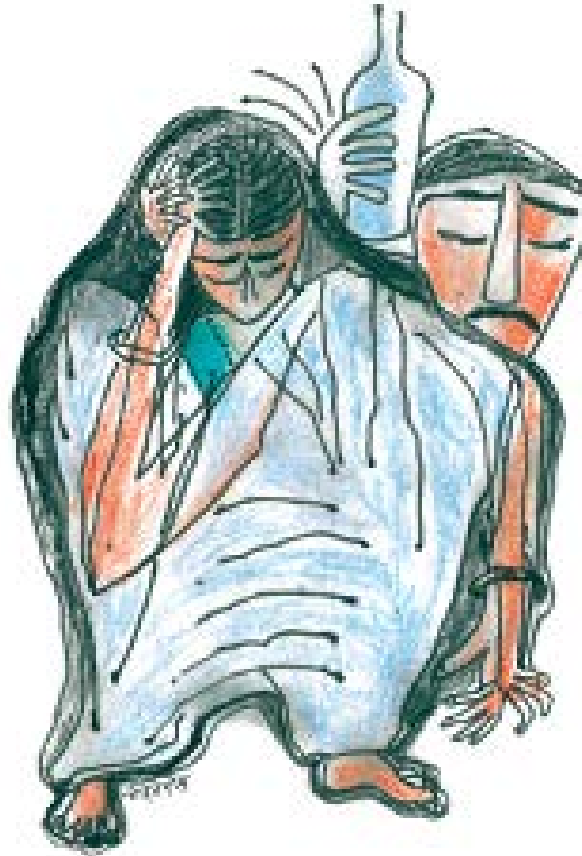
If the mother is very ill with an increased viral load, then the possibility of the infection spreading to the baby increases.

It is important for the mother's and baby's health that any opportunistic infections be treated before getting pregnant.

If there are any other pre-existing sexually transmitted diseases, then they would delay conception as well as increase the chances of spontaneous abortion. Therefore, it is important that these diseases should be properly treated.

Some medicines may cause adverse effects on the fetus. Therefore, if the mother is taking any medicines before getting pregnant, she must see the doctor for advice.

## *Sulabha- Suryakant*



Sulabha sat for a while on the steps outside the doctor's office. She had fever and backache. The doctor had reprimanded her. He was justified in being angry. She and her husband Suryakant were both HIV positive. They had been told by doctors time and again that they needed to use a condom without fail at the time of each and every intercourse to avoid transmission of HIV and any other STDs between the two of them and complicating things more. She and her husband were not just unable to follow this clear instruction which had been reiterated by the doctors, but she was

actually becoming pregnant before she herself knew about it. The doctor had every reason to be upset.

Her doctor had given her a prescription, but to fill it would require money. She felt she couldn't borrow money at work, having already taken many days off. She could actually withdraw money from the bank – she had about 5K in her account. If she kept the money at home, she couldn't have saved it. Suryakant would have demanded it and poured it down the drain with alcohol. So, she had opened a savings account in a bank nearby. But she had

had to withdraw a lot of money from that account due to the events of the last fortnight.

She bought the medications and went home. The children were at school. She had with difficulty managed to make some food for them in the morning. She wanted to be in a better condition by the time her children came home, so she took the medicines and tried to sleep. But when she closed her eyes, her troubles



assailed her. Her children were growing up and needed a nourishing diet. She did make enough money to feed her children well by working as a

part-time house-help for a few families, but then there were endless troubles and expenses now. This was the fourth time in the last two years. She changed her doctor each time because she was too ashamed to go to the same doctor again for the abortion. This time, she had gone to an abortion center in some dark alley. She was not even anesthetized; how excruciatingly painful it was! And since then, the flow of blood had not stopped and now she

had fever as well. But what could she do? Her drunk husband turned a deaf ear to her though she implored him, and she was not capable of stopping him. This time, she had not even bothered to tell him of her pregnancy. She had taken along a female neighbor to get the thing done with. But her primary doctor was extremely angry. He had said, "You have to tell your husband. You must get him here tomorrow."

She took him to the doctor, which was not an easy task. Though she succeeded in taking him along, she was very doubtful whether he would pay any attention to what the doctor would say. She was doing everything herself: earning their livelihood, bringing up their children, even getting abortions done all alone. In all earnest, she wanted to know how she could avoid another such situation in her already dreary life. She thought that if she took her husband along, it would allow her more time to

ask all her questions to the doctor. She thought the doctor would realize that she was much smarter than her husband in spite of being a

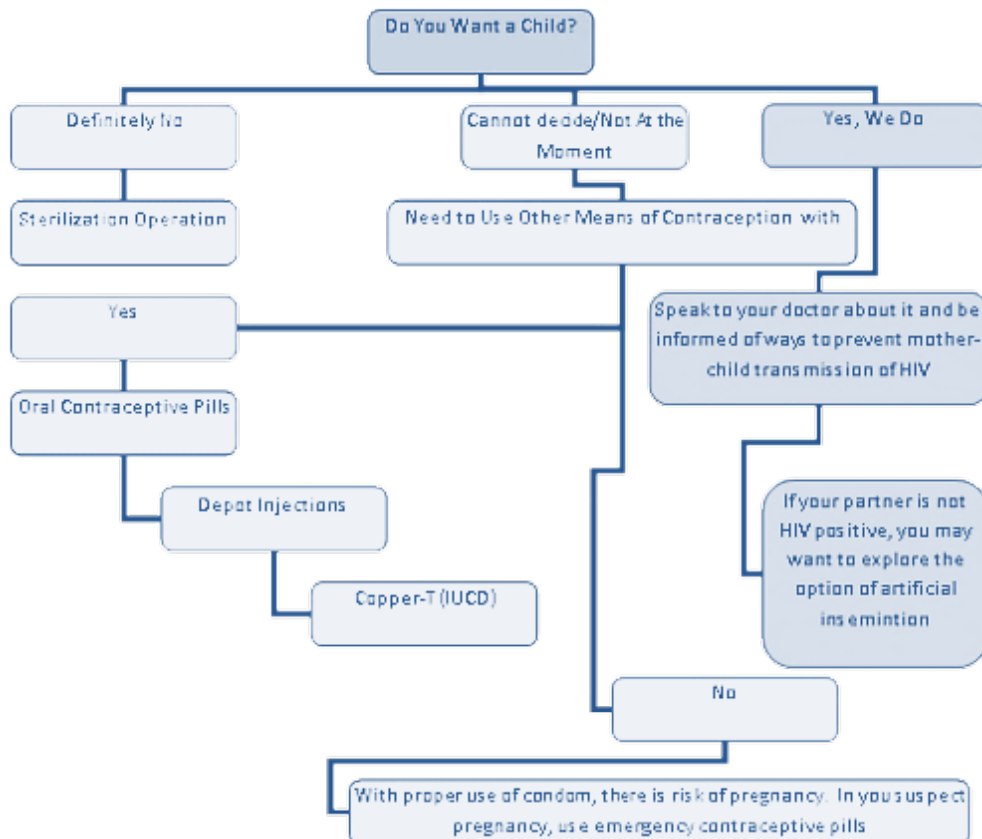
'mere' woman, and maybe that would work to her advantage during future visits in getting more information from the doctor. She had to be prepared for the visit if all of this had to work out. Her mind was brimming with a thousand thoughts, but she prepared herself, drank a glass of water, went to the restroom, and sat determined across the doctor's desk. Suryakant was beside her, but who knew whether he was even listening to the doctor.

"You need to remember that you have HIV. Regular CD4 counts should be drawn, medicines need to be taken regularly, and you need to use the condom each time." The doctor said in a serious voice as usual. Sulabha had to smile to herself. It sounded like a pre-recorded statement to her which she knew word by word, and if she were to sit on the other side of the table, she would be able to repeat it as well.

She had heard it at each visit.

"We use the condom sometimes though?" she asked, deliberately feigning stupidity. She was not stupid though and she knew the doctor would say, "It won't at all do to use it only *sometimes*." She thought it may help to awaken her husband, who was playing the meek, scared kitten in the doctor's office. If she could get the doctor angered by her stupidity, maybe her husband would pay at least some attention to what was being said.

She already knew the answers, but yet, she asked for the benefit of her husband, "We are both already infected, then why use the condom? What could happen if we didn't? My husband also wonders about this." The enraged doctor looked at her momentarily. He was perhaps thinking how these people could be so thick to not understand what he had repeated



quite lucidly a thousand times. But he sympathized with this lady who was suffering so much, and so he calmed down a little. "I will repeat this, please listen to me carefully." While speaking, he looked at their faces and was taken aback. Suryakant's face was devoid of any expression, and Sulabha was smiling faintly. His tone changed. "This virus keeps transforming itself. To avoid this changed form of the virus from spreading from one of you to the other and aggravating the situation, you MUST use the condom regularly even though you are already infected. And in your case, another issue is recurring. You must use some other means of contraception along with the compulsory condom. If you continue to undergo abortions as frequently as you have been, it will ruin your health even more. Do you understand this?"

Suryakant seemed even more inattentive, lost, perhaps helpless. Sulabha did not say a word in reply. The doctor resumed after a pause of observation, "You have two children. You must actually think of a permanent solution, a sterilization operation."

This too was often talked about. Sulabha knew that the doctor would now say that male sterilization was easier and more advantageous, and would insist on Suryakant getting it done. Her husband, now afraid of the doctor, would look to her for help. Back home though, this kitten of a husband would become a lion. Finally, after this drama played out, the operation, whether hers or his, would be postponed yet again. In the meanwhile, her abortions would go on! This was her stark reality.

She continued playing the stupid woman in her efforts to find a way out. She asked, "The operation is going to be done, sooner or later,

but if it is not done soon, what can I do to avoid this from happening again?" Perhaps by now the doctor realized why she was asking such questions, because he shut his eyes for a second and shook his head. Sulabha shook her head involuntarily. She looked at her husband's blank face, and smiled to herself, amused and amazed by this completely ignorant and disinterested man. Now she looked expectantly at the doctor.

"You are right," said the doctor, and pulled out a chart which showed various methods of contraception. He placed the chart before them, in fact, just in front of her. She keenly tried to understand each and every option available, though her situation was such that she did not know whether to laugh or cry.



### MEDICAL ABORTION - DRUGS TO INDUCE ABORTION

The medicines to induce abortion can be used only up to 9 weeks of gestation. There are two doses of the medication.

The first dosage does not cause much inconvenience.

The second dose causes bleeding. Often, there are clots in the blood. Normally, the bleeding occurs for about 2 hours and then it decreases and continues with a reduced flow for 1-3 weeks. Therefore, the second dose should be avoided if you are traveling or busy with work. It should be taken when you can rest at home.

The medication may cause occasional sharp pain or cramps in the abdomen. You may use analgesics for pain relief.

Incomplete abortion may occur in 1 or 2 of 100 cases with the medication. In that case, it is important to have a dilatation and curettage done to ensure that all products of conception have been washed out.

### III Effects of Unsafe Abortion on Women's Health

#### *III Effects of Unsafe Abortions*

Incomplete abortion  
Local/pelvic infection and sepsis after abortion  
Excessive hemorrhage  
Damage to the reproductive organs  
Death

#### *Factors Affecting Severity of III Effects*

The services available at the abortion center  
The skill and competence of the healthcare personnel  
The method used for abortion  
The woman's health  
The gestational age at the time of abortion

***Not only HIV-positive women but most women in general feel awkward about or ashamed of approaching a doctor for an abortion. This prevents them from seeking help in time, and in doing so, they increase the risk of an unsafe abortion***

### **Hormonal Pills**

Due to the synthetic hormones in the pills, ovulation is delayed and thus pregnancy is prevented.

The pills must be taken regularly.

If taken regularly, 92-99% women are able to avoid pregnancy.

If a woman is taking Ritonavir (ART), she cannot use these pills.

Lactating mothers cannot take OCPs. Heart and liver disease also precludes usage.

A few women may experience irregular bleeding, headaches, weight change, etc. Therefore, it is advisable to start the OCP in consultation with a doctor.

Even though you are using the pills, condom use is compulsory.

### ***Injections***

This injection prevents ovulation and thus prevents pregnancy.

The injection is given on the arm or on the buttocks (like any other injection).

If taken regularly, 97% women achieve contraception.

The injection causes change in menstrual and bleeding patterns. In the beginning, the woman may experience irregular menses, and later on menses may temporarily stop (amenorrhea). This may prove beneficial to women who are anemic with very low serum iron levels, as amenorrhea will prevent further blood iron loss.

An important point to remember is that if you need to get pregnant, return to normal ovulation may take longer after stopping the injection.

Even though you are on injections, condom use is compulsory.

## **Copper-T**

If you plan to have no children for a long duration of time, Copper-T is a good option.

Copper-T is a plastic device shaped like the letter 'T' which is medicated with copper, prevents fertilization of the ovum by the sperm, and thus prevents pregnancy.

99% women achieve contraception while using Copper-T.

The device can be inserted 4 weeks postpartum. Women who have full-blown HIV , i.e., AIDS, and have not been prescribed ART medications yet, should not get Copper-T inserted. They should first start ART, increase their immunity, and then consider Copper-T.

Even though you have Copper-T in place, condom use is compulsory.



## *Sandhya- Sambhaji*

When Sambhaji called and asked her to go out with him, his intent was obvious to Sandhya, but she could not refuse him. All she wanted these days was to get married and leave her brother and sister-in-law's house. After her mother's demise, there was no one left of her own in this world. She had her brother and sister-in-law, but she knew very well that they did not care for her one bit. They only allowed her to live in their house because she had a job, and gave half her salary to her sister-in-law.

There was but one ray of hope - Sambhaji. He had come to her workplace to do some electrical fittings. She remembered his warm smile. While leaving, he asked her if he could get her mobile number. She smiled and gave her number, and the next day, he called her for the first time. Since then, for the last few months, time spent at home in spite of all her troubles seemed quite tolerable. Sambhaji called four times a day and they met every other day.

Sambhaji took her to the parks, to the riverside, and when the evening arrived, he would come a bit closer to her. She liked when he did this. She wanted to be close to him, wanted to hold his hand, she would have liked him to buy her a new dress. She wanted to be in love and be loved.

But he was not stopping there. On a couple of occasions, he had taken her to his friend's house. There, he demanded more of her.

She murmured, "After we get married."

"We will get married soon, my dear, but I want you now," he insisted. Sandhya caved in. "He treats me so well, always cares about what I wish, besides I like him too," Sandhya tried to justify her actions to herself. She had fleeting doubts about whether Sambhaji might be cheating or duping her. But he didn't seem to be that kind of a person. Only sometimes, he would lose his temper without any obvious reason, and fly into fits of rage. He would calm down only when he had got what he wanted. She felt at such times that he was keeping something from her, but that was momentary. "Some people are short-tempered. I should understand him as he is my own now, my beloved. I should accept his nature," she would tell herself.

Each time Sambhaji wanted sex with her, she would tell him, "Only this one time. The next time is going to be after we get married."

Like a spoilt child who has got what he wanted, he would smile and say, "Of course."

This happened at least seven or eight times, but Sambhaji used a condom every time without fail. Therefore, she was not very worried about an unwanted pregnancy. But even then, she had an occasional fear that weighed down on her. What if the condom ruptured?

She knew what her brother and sister-in-law would do if she became pregnant. Though she was aware that there were emergency pills that could be taken after unprotected intercourse, she did not know which ones and how to get them. She thought she should get more

information about the pills. Perhaps asking her colleague to look up the information on the internet would help. Such thoughts came to her often.

Today, Sambhaji had gone a step further. He had booked a room in a lodge. She did not like the lodge at all. She felt like she was doing something extremely ugly there. She felt the eyes of bystanders on her back as she took the stairs to go to the room with Sambhaji. She was going to tell Sambhaji that they should never have come to such a place. But his face was different today. He seemed to be afraid of something. "We love each other, don't we? Whatever comes in the way, we will stand by

each other, won't we?", he asked her so many times that she began to worry about him.

He had not brought a condom today. When she asked him why, he said, "There was a lot of work the whole day. I am working twice as hard to save money so that we can get married."

She was happy to hear that he was saving money for marriage, but what of the condom, she asked again. He shouted at her all of a sudden. "I was busy. I didn't have time to get a condom."

When they left the lodge, Sandhya was feeling lost. "I want to go home," she said, and he agreed. He usually dropped her at the corner



around her house, but Sambhaji's bike was not on the way to her home that day. She asked him a couple of times. He did not reply, but brought her to a big hospital. She did not have a clue why she was there. When he did not seem to be forthcoming with any explanation, she asked him again. He replied, "My customer is here, I got a call from him. He must have some work. We'll just see what it is and leave immediately."

She wondered why he didn't tell her this on the way, but didn't venture to ask him because of his demeanor. Inside, they sat in the waiting room like patients. She told him, "Get your work done and let's leave, we are not patients to sit here like this." He growled, "Shut up, don't you see the doctor is busy, can't you see the rush?" He found a newspaper and began to fan himself.

After a while, he got up abruptly and went to another room. She stood up, picked up her bag, and was ready to leave as soon as he returned. But after Sambhaji came out, he pointed to another room and said, "We need to go in here."

"Another doctor?" she asked.

"He is a counselor," he said.

She did not understand any of this. She was getting late. She could already imagine the scene her brother and sister-in-law would create if she were late.

"Shall I leave now Sambhaji? I will hire a rickshaw. My brother and ..."

He cut her off with, "Oh no, that won't do. He's asked me to get my ... In fact, the counselor wants to meet you."

"Sambhaji, what is going on, will you please tell me clearly?"

Sambhaji did not reply, but put a hand on her shoulder. She did not know if it was with love, or to restrain her if she tried to leave. She wanted to shrug off his hand and run down the street. Then she said to herself, "I shouldn't be afraid. This is actually a hospital. I am being crazy."

Someone signaled to Sambhaji that it was their turn to go in. A counselor was seated in the room, a person who would explain the situation to them and suggest what could be done. He introduced himself to Sandhya and said, "If you understand the situation well, then the decision becomes clearer and easier." She agreed with this. But what was she being counseled for?

"Do you love Sambhaji?" asked the counselor. "Yes", replied Sandhya, when she actually wanted to ask him why he was asking her this question. Who was he to ask her?

As he started to explain things to her, the situation became clearer. She had never expected to be in such a situation. She could feel dark clouds gathering in her mind.

The counselor told her that Sambhaji was infected with HIV. He told her that even though there was no cure for it, medication was available for any associated problems. However, this infection spread through sexual intercourse, so the partner of the HIV positive person ran the risk of getting it too. She felt a heavy weight in the pit of her stomach. The counselor was explaining in a gentle voice, "There is not much difficulty in marrying an HIV

positive person, but the use of a condom is compulsory. Otherwise ..."

Her heart was not willing to open up yet in front of the stranger. But she was enraged at Sambhaji. She wanted to tell the counselor that Sambhaji never told her about his HIV infection, and also did not explain to her today that he was bringing her to this hospital to meet a counselor. So she decided to talk to the counselor.

"All this time, while professing and making love to me, Sambhaji never told me about HIV. He has deceived me." She tried to speak without breaking down.

Hearing this, Sambhaji menacingly came near her and said, "But I did use the condom, because I cared. How can you say I deceived you?"

"Don't you speak like that with me. You used it every time but what about today? Why not today?" She could not bring herself to say much more, but she managed to ask him, "Why didn't you tell me until now, Sambhaji?"

"What would you understand of this if I were to tell you? I brought you here so that the counselor can explain everything to you. Though you refused to come, I still brought you here, didn't I?"

He was not willing to accept his fault, and behaved as if she had wronged him! He was not ready to let her speak. He was speaking to her in a loud and offensive voice. When she

started to cry, he said, "Don't cry. I am going to take you away from the oppressive home of your brother and sister-in-law. I will give you a new life."

Unable to respond to such empty promises, she kept quiet. What could she have said in front of a stranger in an unfamiliar place? She had herself created this situation in her life. What was there to say now?

When the counselor saw her unhappy face, he changed the topic of discussion, and said, "We need to get your blood test done."

She asked, "When should it be done?"

"If unprotected intercourse has occurred, then one should get it done in 3 months after the intercourse. Has it happened ever?"

"Yes, today."

"Today? Has it happened often?" The counselor was apprehensive.

She said, "Yes, often, but without the condom just this once. Today." She replied without hesitation as simply as

she could, knowing full well what ramifications the day's events might have on her future.

The counselor spoke, but she hardly understood what he said. She was completely shocked, now that she understood what had happened.

After a few moments though, she gathered herself and asked, "Since we did not use the condom today, am I infected too?"



"Yes, there is a possibility, but only 1 – 2 %."

"How come the possibility is so little? You said a while ago that unprotected contact is the main route of transmission."

"Yes, but each and every contact would not transmit the infection. One unprotected sexual contact has only about a 1% risk of infection."

Sambhaji interjected, "That's what I am saying, don't be afraid. I won't let anything happen to you. I care for you, sweetheart."

"Sambhaji, you shut up, don't dare say a word," she spoke sharply. She had never spoken to him disrespectfully before.

The counselor ignored them as they fought with each other. He knew that if medicines were started within 2 hours of unprotected sexual intercourse, then the risk of infection could be further reduced. He was only concerned about getting those medicines started. So he took control of the situation and silenced Sambhaji. He spoke to Sandhya now and told her that she needed to immediately start medicines. They also needed to rule out any preexisting HIV infection, so she was tested. The blood report came back in ten minutes showing her to be HIV negative. The medications were immediately made available. The counselor did not speak to Sambhaji. Instead, he addressed Sandhya, made some entries in a register, gave her instructions for a follow-up visit after 3 months, and also warned against intercourse without condom protection. When they were ready to leave, he said, "If you have any further questions, please feel free to meet me."

She put the medicines in her purse and told the counselor that she would return after 3 months. Turning to Sambhaji, she said, "I am going home. I don't want to say anything now."

Sambhaji tried to stop her and speak to her, but she did not wait.

On the way home, her phone rang. Sambhaji was calling her, but she did not take the call. She did not get into a bus or rickshaw. Instead, she walked, though she knew she was already late, and what would happen when she got home. Yet, she walked. She needed time to herself so that she could face her folks at home.

"Why didn't he tell me all these days?" she thought agitatedly.

"If he had told me about it earlier, would I have accepted him? Who would accept a person with HIV?"

Her thoughts continued to run through her troubled mind.

"I would have understood. I would have accepted him only if he had been honest."

Her mind was roiled as she walked on.

"I'm a good person, understanding and compassionate. But what would most people have done? If I think about what would happen in most cases, I wouldn't think Sambhaji was wrong in trying to befriend me without telling me."

Her thoughts pulled in different directions, contradicting themselves.

"No, Sambhaji is absolutely wrong. Even though it is true that no one would accept a partner with HIV, it is still not correct to claim to love someone without telling them about such a thing as HIV. This is absolute fraudulent behavior."

Her mind lapsed into silence for a moment, unable to justify Sambhaji's behavior.

"Moreover, involving me in a physical relationship without telling me is most definitely wrong."

She reiterated to herself, "Yes, Sambhaji was wrong in doing this. He should have told me about HIV."

"And today he didn't even use a condom ... On purpose? To infect me?"

But after all, she loved Sambhaji with all her heart.

"Do I really think Sambhaji would want to infect me? Is he that cruel?"

"I never thought he was a bad person. But what else can I think now? And he was so angry with me in the counselor's office, in spite of everything he has done to me ... What do I have to say about that?"

"He had to do that to hide his wrongdoing," she justified his actions to herself again.

"But why hide one's mistake if one has committed it?" she asked herself.

"If he accepts that he has done wrong, will I accept him?"

She stood still when her heart posed this question. Tears were flowing down her face. She sobbed bitterly. Taking out a handkerchief from her bag, she wiped her tears. Images flooded her mind. Different facets of her personality jostled for space. She knew she was not selfish, but she had never thought of herself as entirely selfless either. One needs to be true to oneself, she knew. She lived by her convictions, and thought of herself as a woman of integrity. She had been deceived by this man. She had on her part, though, loved him. She was now faced with the choice of being

selfless and forgiving him, or thinking about her own peace of mind and being just to herself. She had to weigh the love claimed by Sambhaji against his behavior. At last, her mind gave its verdict, clear and loud.

"I strongly feel that I should forgive him because I love him. I would readily marry him irrespective of any HIV or even a life-threatening cancer. He didn't tell me because I would refuse to marry him if I knew, and for the same reason he may accept his folly but that would be equally wrong! If he wants to win my love, shouldn't he first love me? And to love is to accept the rights of each other. To love is to be true and not hurt the person you love. If you truly love someone, you simply cannot lie to them. If there is a situation where you must lie, you do not try to justify that lie. You accept that you hurt the person you love, and that you lied and deceived them. Here, I cannot see an inkling of sensitivity towards my feelings, a regard for our relationship, or respect for my right to know the truth. All he wanted to do was to defend himself, and say that he was right in behaving as he did. He did not repent his actions, in fact, saw no reason to do so. He did not seem to care for anyone but himself. I feel terrible. I truly loved him, but I cannot marry such a person."

"It is not easy for me to decide not to marry him. I do not have anyone who is as close to me as Sambhaji. I have no close relations. I have seen how my own brother can behave with me. I want to leave his home as soon as I can. Moreover, if I am infected with HIV in the future, I can't imagine what consequences I will have to bear. Even then, I will not marry him because if I marry him now, I would be compromising my heart and emotions. I will not compromise myself and marry the wrong

person. I would be forever ashamed of myself if I did that."

She could not stand the upheavals of her emotions anymore and broke down crying. Even though she stood broken, completely exhausted by her efforts to absorb the trauma she had suffered, she felt better for arriving at a decision to not marry this man. She chided herself for justifying his actions until now. No, not any more. If she had to keep herself free from selfishness, she would need to guard her heart. She couldn't think of being selfish enough to deceive someone she loved. She would rather sacrifice her love.



#### **IF THE CONDOM RUPTURES OR SLIPS DURING THE INTERCOURSE OR IS NOT USED AT ALL ...**

##### **What Can Be Done To Prevent Pregnancy?**

###### ***Take Emergency Contraceptive Pills***

If such unprotected sexual intercourse occurs, take the emergency contraceptive pills available over-the-counter as soon as possible.

These pills can be taken after unprotected intercourse for up to 5 days, but the sooner they are taken the better.

These pills primarily prevent or delay ovulation and thus prevent conception.

If the woman is already pregnant, then these pills do not affect the pregnancy in any way.

These pills are generally safe for almost all women, including women who are advised to not take regular oral contraceptive pills or injections.

These pills may cause side effects like nausea and stomach-ache.

It is advisable to use a suitable and reliable contraceptive method in the first place to prevent pregnancy, in order to avoid taking emergency contraceptive pills.

## *Jayashree- Dhananjay*



Jayashree was not yet twenty when she was faced with her ill fate. No one would wish such a calamity to befall even their most bitter enemy. She was married while still in grade XII. When she was engaged to be married, one of her teachers had come to meet her father. The teacher had expressed his concern that Jayashree was too young to be married – she was yet to complete her education. Her father had reassured the teacher. "It's a good match," he had said. "The boy has been abroad. He's an engineer. We rarely find such matches in

our community." The boy's grandmother wished to see him married before she passed away. "You don't worry, Sir," said Jayashree's father to her teacher. "Her marriage will not get in the way of her education. She will live with us even after she is married, until she completes her education."

After their marriage, her husband took Jayashree to his family deity's temple to seek blessings. They honeymooned, visited some relatives, and after a month and a half,



Jayashree came back to live with her parents to continue with her college. Some seven or eight months passed by when they met very rarely. And then came the shocking news of her husband's untimely death. Jayashree and her parents did not have any suspicions till then, but he had spent the last 3-4 months almost entirely in the hospital. Jayashree was not told about this. Her father-in-law had informed her on the phone on a few occasions that her husband was a little unwell, and that she should visit after she had taken her exams. She had not spoken much to her husband. He was a quiet person anyway. He was either busy working or reading something. For her, marriage had only meant visiting his home once in a while, where her mother-in-law would spend time with her through the day. It was only at night that Jayashree would be with her husband. And now, he was gone. Her father took her along to her husband's house upon hearing the news, and brought her back with him when he returned.

At the time of the funeral, her husband's body gave Jayashree a terrible fright. The body she had once held close to her heart with a feeling of love had now turned into this emaciated corpse. At the funeral, her father and she overheard a faint whisper: "Perhaps he had AIDS." She and her father were shocked at the mention of AIDS. But after that no one spoke about it again. People who were not part of the family were present at the funeral. Perhaps that was why the family members kept quiet. But when everyone had left, she and her father tried to find out the cause of his untimely death. However, her in-laws and their family did not reveal the cause. "Were we deceived?" they wondered. Why was the family keeping the cause of the death hushed up? "What was the use of lamenting now?" thought

Jayashree's father. "What's done is done and over with. What else could this be but our ill fate?" Jayashree's father pushed away these thoughts from his mind. It was futile to think about it in any case, now that the man was dead.

Father and daughter returned home, but Jayashree could not forget what she had overheard. She went to town for some work a few days later, and got her blood tested for HIV at a rural health center. Her suspicion proved to be true. Anguished, she felt the darkness encroaching upon her and engulfing her entirely.

She resolved that she would tell no one. Her behavior would be such that no one would be suspicious. She would live as long as she was destined to, and die like her husband did. With these thoughts, she returned home.

Her father's sister visited them one day. "Our Jayashree is very young, brother," she said. "We must get her married again. Luckily, she does not have a child. She will be able to live a new life," her aunt said.

Her uncle though did not agree with his wife. "She has just had an unhappy marriage. Give her some time. Let the girl finish her studies."

"What do you know of what a widow faces in this world? All men look for an opportunity to take advantage of her situation," said her aunt. The couple began to argue as they usually did.

Jayashree had not even remotely thought of marrying again. She was now apprehensive of what would happen if her father really suggested that she marry again, and looked for proposals. If he brought her a proposal for marriage and asked her what she wished, she would firmly refuse. She should have strongly

refused the first time itself, and all of this would never have happened. She did not agree with her aunt's suggestion of marrying again, but there was a grain of truth in what she had said. Some people would seem to say that it was her fault that she was widowed. Others tried to show that they cared so much for her that she could see through their friendly overtures. She would hear people say, "Now that she is a widow, she should not pursue her studies, but spend her time at home instead, busy herself with household chores, and experience contentment in the happiness of others." Until she got married, she was the beloved daughter of the household. She was praised for her intelligence. But now, people would say, "Of what use was her intelligence, if she couldn't save her husband's life." Her father doted on her, but these days he was different. Her family seemed to be happy in their lives. But for Jayashree, her existence itself had become a drudgery.

Dhananjay was the nephew of her aunt's husband. He was four years older than Jayashree. Her aunt's own children were much younger than Jayashree. Therefore, during her childhood, her aunt would casually hint at an alliance between Jayashree and Dhananjay. However, later her father married her off to another man. Dhananjay visited them often. He would bring good books for Jayashree to read. He was not very highly educated but he was intelligent. Though he came across as somewhat arrogant, he had a loving, sensitive heart. Jayashree and he had always gotten along well in the past, but now their friendship had matured even more.

On days when he would stay at Jayashree's house until dinnertime, he would suggest that they take a walk in the moonlight. When her family would object, he would suggest alternately that the two of them would chat on the open terrace. There was no question of anyone drawing inferences from his attention to her. She was a widow now. Her aunt had not the slightest intention of having her husband's nephew marry a widow.

Jayashree liked talking to Dhananjay. He was open-hearted and friendly. She liked the occasional casual touch of his hand during their meetings. She liked his compliments. He gifted her a mobile phone one day. He used to call her often on the mobile. He would laugh around and talk lightheartedly with her family as well. He made everyone smile. But Jayashree didn't



need anyone to tell her that all his efforts to make her family happy, were actually intended to make her happier. Her family did not object to his dropping by often because they liked to see Jayashree smile in his presence.

A few months passed by. Dhananjay's feelings, which might not have been apparent to others in her family, were quite clear to Jayashree. He used to hold her hand longer than usual during casual conversation. He said to her that she had a special place in his life, and that no one else could be what Jayashree was to him. He was displaying his affection for her more obviously. Jayashree did not want to encourage him. In the beginning when he hinted that he was interested in marrying her, she told him that she was not interested in such conversation, and that their aunt would not approve of it at all.

"I can handle that," he said in reply to her protestations. "I am my own master, I do not do as wished by others."

Young as Jayashree was, she was charmed by his confidence in himself. She was attracted to him so strongly that on occasion she did not protest when he talked of his affection for her. But later, she was rueful about keeping quiet while he expressed his love. "I am a widow, moreover I have HIV. And these thoughts in my mind! How deplorable! How can I have such feelings and thoughts?" She was angry at herself. "What if something worse were to happen if I continue to think along these lines? What if Dhananjay were to lead me on the path of love with all his

headstrongness? I must tell him that I have HIV, and he will go away. If he really goes away after learning of the HIV, how sad I'll be. It would mean that there is no such thing as true love which would survive no matter what. Should HIV get in the way of true love, and cause one to leave another? It would be far better for me to leave this house, this town or maybe even this world, so that there are no questions to bother me. There is no happiness left in life now, and no possibility of a loving caress ... What shall I do? Shall I tell Dhananjay? Will he accept me? And even if he accepts me, what of the future? Besides, I shall be living in debt for the rest of my life. How long will that life last anyway?"

She was sad and alone in her room. She remembered something all of a sudden and reached for her purse.

She remembered that she had noted down a phone number from a flyer she had seen that suggested that she call a number if she had any questions about HIV. She called the number from her mobile. Her heart beat rapidly.

A woman who seemed to be an elderly lady came on the line. The lady spoke in a gentle, compassionate voice, "Do you have any questions on your mind?" She listened very patiently to Jayashree's story. Then, she said, "First and foremost, you must take very good care of your health and if needed you must take medicines diligently. There are very good medicines nowadays, and they will help you maintain a good quality of life. You will live well, do not think of death, my dear. There is no problem if you remarry. If



you wish to have a child, there would be no great problem. But communication between partners is crucial. Be honest with your friend. You need to tell him. He may go away forever, but you still cannot keep him in the dark. Why should you expect that he will say no and go away? Love can conquer the fear of HIV. And regardless of this matter with your friend, always remember that although you have HIV, you are still a human being! You have the same emotions as any other human being, don't you? That's why I do not see anything wrong in you feeling affection for this friend of yours, and you too should not be angry with yourself for having feelings for him."

When she hung up, she saw Dhananjay's missed call. She wondered what she should do now.

She held the mobile tighter in her palm for a while. Then she smiled and said to herself, "To open up a channel of communication is the key to this problem! I need to honestly and frankly express myself to him instead of suppressing the truth. I must speak and see what comes of it, rather than feel stifled."

But what and how should she go about this? She was already looking forward to opening up to Dhananjay.

She thought she could ask Dhananjay to accompany her to the town to look for a good hospital that provided HIV counseling. She was now eager to tell him all, and if he was still ready to marry her, then she could tell her family. If he refused, then it would be her last meeting with her friend. What else could she have done?

How can we expect life to take the course we wish for ourselves, without doing anything to steer it in that direction? We must take a step in

the right direction, and do the right thing, shouldn't we?

Her decision was made. She dialed Dhananjay's number. A thrill passed through her body when she heard his familiar ringtone. She waited for him to answer with bated breath.



## *Chittarupa- Sharad*

Chittarupa had severe ache in her abdomen soon after they returned home from their honeymoon. Sharad carried her in his arms most of the way to the hospital. It was appendicitis and she had to undergo an emergency operation. After the appendectomy, the doctor called both of them to his office. The routine pre-operative blood and urine tests had been performed in Chittarupa's case, which included the HIV test, and this test had come back positive. The doctor had called them to disclose this. Chittarupa and Sharad were shocked. This was completely out of the blue. They were both educated and knew as much as is generally known about HIV. The doctor gave them more information about ways in which HIV is transmitted. He shared contact details of the well-known specialist doctors in HIV management, and educated them about the various tests which would have to be routinely performed to monitor HIV. He was also very proud that they *did* operate on *such* patients in their hospital. Trying to cover up their shock, they both spoke as normally as they could, and even asked a few questions. The doctor advised Sharad to get his blood tested. He got the test done and it showed that he was not infected.

The scenario was different now. It was apparent that Chittarupa had HIV before their marriage. Of course, she was not aware of this fact. The doctor was also somewhat surprised by this situation. Since the doctor came to know that they had just returned from their honeymoon, he apprehensively asked whether

they had used condoms. They replied that they hadn't.

The doctor told them that Sharad should get another blood test done after 3 months, and that they should use the condom from now on without fail. He told them that even though Sharad did not have HIV at this point in time, it is possible that he may have now been infected, and it would show up in the blood report only after 3 months which is called the window period. He told them that it was not the case that he was definitely infected, but that there was a possibility. He also told them to keep up the hope that he was not infected.

Chittarupa was terribly unhappy after this sudden turn of events in her life, but Sharad was firmly with her. "Difficulties do arise at every point in life, but being unhappy and worrying does not make things any better," he would say. He tried in every way to cheer up Chittarupa and make her feel optimistic. Chittarupa too was a reasonable girl. She thought that Sharad would not be wrong if he thought that he had been deceived, even if it was unknown to her that she was HIV positive. She asked him frankly, "Do you want a divorce?" Sharad replied, "Absolutely not." Chittarupa accepted his reply quite simply as the truth. After three months, Sharad was tested again, and the test was, as before, negative. Chittarupa was extremely happy.

Despite the HIV, their married life started happily. It was true that both of them felt less

inclined to be sexually active and had almost no desire in the initial 3 months before Sharad went for a re-test. But gradually, they started to desire each other's closeness, and used the condom regularly. They both did not like the compulsion of the condom, but they learnt to look at it positively. Their life together had not been affected much by Chittarupa's HIV. Periodic visits to the doctors and testing CD4s to monitor her immunological status was all that had changed. They were leading a life that they both had intended to - working at their jobs, going to the movies, enjoying their evenings out with each other, inviting friends over for dinners, cooking something special on such occasions, eating out at times. They were enjoying their life together. They both truly loved each other. They knew what they expected of life, and what they wanted to do. HIV had hardly made a difference. Four happy years passed by.

Chittarupa's CD4 count dropped then and she

had to get on medication. That day, for the first time, tears welled up in Chittarupa's eyes momentarily, and they did not escape Sharad's notice. He hugged her tightly, even though it is not a social norm to do so in the presence of the doctor. Their world came to a standstill for that moment. Not a word was spoken, and a minute later, Chittarupa's usual smile had returned. The medicines were started as advised by the doctor. Chittarupa took these diligently, and Sharad too reminded her although she did not need to be reminded. They had not informed their relatives about Chittarupa's health, although a few of their close friends knew, and they were always eager to be of help. It seemed that they had met each other to prove that HIV could not change lives.

Both of them had good jobs, so money was not a problem. Three years flew by since Chittarupa began to take medicines. They had debated early on whether they should have a child or not, but had decided that they would give each



other time first. They would think about starting a family only later. However, that topic did not come up again. Their parents did ask them about their plans for having children. At such times, Sharad would answer them himself so that Chittarupa wouldn't need to. "We don't want a child yet," he would say.

A friend of Sharad's from college who had lived in the United States for quite a few years had returned to India recently. He invited Sharad and Chittarupa for dinner. The couple was delighted to meet up with Sharad's friend Milind, his wife Swati, and their lovely daughter, Aseema. Milind and Swati were an enthusiastic and happy couple, but Sharad thought it was Aseema that made their home special. He instantly took a liking to her. Initially, Aseema was a little shy, sticking by her mom's side, but as the evening progressed, she was eager to involve Sharad in all her play. Sharad was so happily engrossed playing with her, that it surprised Chittarupa and Milind too. He was meeting Milind after such a long while, and yet he preferred playing with Aseema instead of catching up with his old friend. Sharad spent almost the entire evening happily playing with the little girl. This made the long forgotten question of a baby of their own to return to Chittarupa's mind. She was now constantly thinking about this question.



During her next visit to the doctor, Chittarupa brought up the topic, and Sharad was taken aback. She had not mentioned it to him beforehand.

Like a small child in an elocution competition who forgets her speech, Chittarupa stammered, but managed to speak her mind. "Sharad should not get HIV at any cost", she said. "If we keep using a condom, how will I get pregnant? Or should we just give up the desire to have our own baby?"

"You do not need to be so worried," said the doctor. "It is not very difficult. There's no need to have intercourse without a condom. We could use artificial insemination where the sperms will be directly introduced in your uterus. And that will be all that is required for you to conceive." The doctor was a little amused at her unnecessary vexation.

"If you had asked me, I would have told you the same thing,"

said Sharad.

Chittarupa still had one question though, "The baby will not get HIV, right?"

"We need to take precautions to prevent HIV transmission to the baby," the doctor told her. "You are already on medication, so there is not much more we need to do in your case."

The doctor had very promptly and easily resolved her doubts about the pregnancy, as easily as she would solve geometry problems in school! Chittarupa had always been an optimistic person, and soon realized that she was worrying unnecessarily. Life's problems



were as easy as those geometry problems. There were always answers to all questions!

Her mind immediately conjured up lovely images. She was pregnant, had a big belly, and her baby was gently kicking her inside her womb. She almost smiled at herself. On their way home from the doctor, she put her arm around Sharad. He laughed, "You are being extra nice to me so that I do not tease you about your foolishness, crazy girl!"



### **ARTIFICIAL OR ASSISTED REPRODUCTION**

In cases where only one of the partners has HIV, there is a risk of passing the infection to the non-infected partner through sexual contact. In such cases, pregnancy can be achieved by artificial methods.

#### **If a woman is HIV positive and the man is not infected:**

In this case, it is important to avoid transmission to the man as well as the baby.

Artificial insemination, that is, artificially introducing the sperms into the uterus, usually proves to be a good option in this case.

This is an easy method which the woman herself can administer.

If you need more information regarding this method, please feel free to speak with your counselor/physician.

#### **If a man is HIV positive and the woman is not infected:**

In this case, if pregnancy is attempted naturally, there is a high risk of passing the infection to the woman.

There are methods to separate the sperms from the semen where they are made virus-free, and such sperms may be artificially introduced into the uterus. This method is called sperm washing.

These 'washed' sperms could also be used for in-vitro fertilization, that is, fertilization which occurs outside the uterus, and then implanted in the uterus.

If one partner has HIV, then getting the infected partner started on medication aimed at reducing the viral load brings down the risk of transmission considerably if natural reproduction is to be attempted.

In this case, if pregnancy is attempted naturally, there is a high risk of passing the infection to the woman.



## *Friends*



Sunanda was at the door of the elevator when she happened to see her old friend Vaishali. "Oh my God! Is that Vaishu?" she said, smiling.

"Sunanda?" Vaishali recognized her immediately. "Long time! Really, such a long time!"

They were both classmates from college days. Quite a few years had passed by, maybe eight or ten. They had neither seen each other nor kept in touch. And now they were meeting here in a hospital. Had both their lives run into trouble? Memories of days gone by appeared as they looked at each other. They were in their early thirties, but they looked so different from their college days. There were frown lines between their brows, and strands of gray hair. They seemed to be smiling only to hide their unhappiness.

"What brings you here?" Vaishali asked Sunanda, observing the receipt and medicine carton from the pharmacy in her hand. "Is someone admitted here?"

"He," said Sunanda. She meant her husband. As she replied, a range of emotions passed over her face in that brief moment. "But how come you are here, who is admitted here?" asked Sunanda.

"I work in the lab here. Where did you say your husband is admitted?" asked Vaishali.

"I told you he is admitted in this hospital."

"I understood that, but which department? And what is the name of the physician?"

Vaishali asked her friend rather authoritatively, as she was used to asking patients in the hospital. Sunanda's hesitation, though, was obvious to her. When Sunanda told Vaishali that her husband was being treated by Dr. Deshpande, the situation was clear to her old friend.

Some things were better left unsaid. When classmates meet after long years, they tend to tell each other how happy their lives are, how smart their kids are, and so on. Sunanda and Vaishali discussed the happy events of their past as they stood in the corner by the staircase.

"Okay then, I should be going now. I will come back to meet you during lunchtime," Vaishali said finally, to end that pleasant but awkward meeting for Sunanda as well as herself. Before she left, she turned to ask, "What is your husband's name?"

She went to the pathology lab, kept her handbag in the cabinet alongside her workstation, switched on the computer, and started working. But she also checked if any of Sunanda's husband's reports were available in her lab. Her guess was correct, CD4 and viral load reports were recently done. Vaishali's eyes

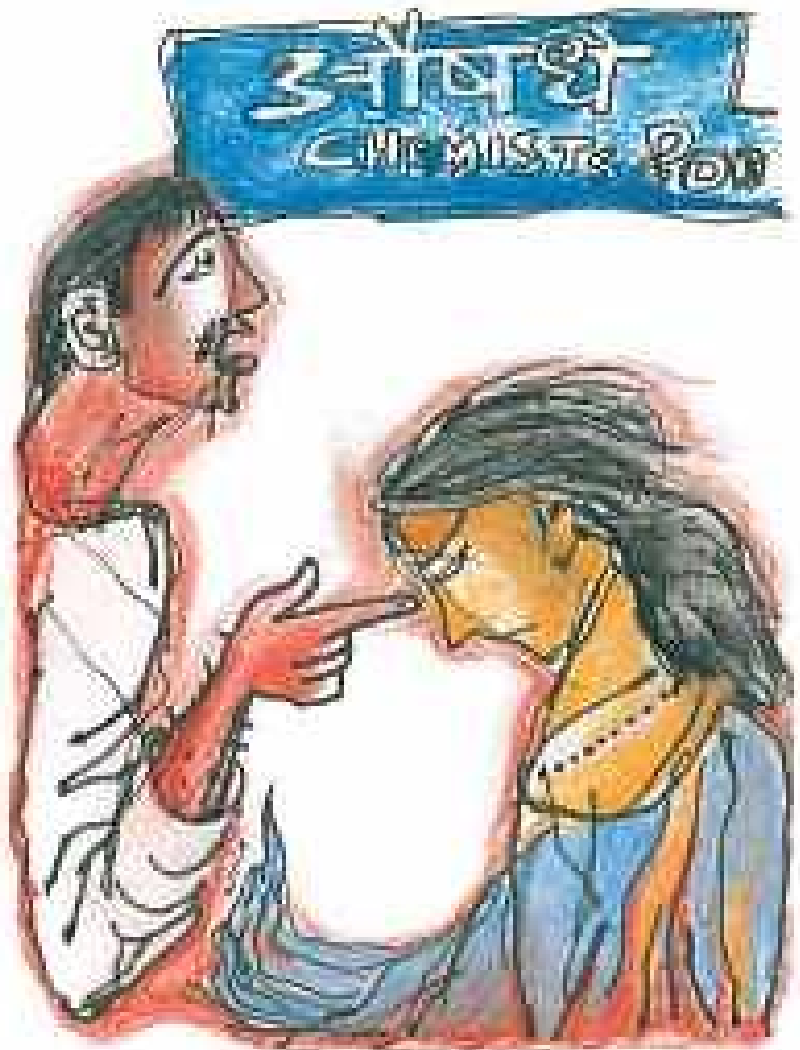
filled with tears. She realized that Sunanda was going through circumstances similar to what she herself has faced some time back.

Last year, Vaishali had noticed a few tiny clustered papules on her forehead, which looked somewhat like acne. She wouldn't have sought any medical attention if it wasn't for the painful sensation she had. That made her go to the doctor instead of applying some cream herself. The doctor told her, "This is shingles (herpes zoster)." He prescribed some drugs and those took care of the shingles. She went for a follow-up visit after a couple of days, when the doctor advised an HIV test. She just laughed it off, telling him that it was impossible that she had HIV. But she did end up getting her blood tested, just to put her physician's suspicion to rest. The result of that test shocked her. "How come?" she asked the doctor in utter disbelief. What could he say! "Sir, I think Vilas has it and that's how I got it," she said, shaking all over. She took leave from work that day and went home. Vilas was tested the next day. To her great surprise, Vilas was HIV negative.

It was some relief that only one of them had HIV, so to speak, but it was she who had it - the woman. Since her husband's nature would lead him to believe that she had cheated on him, she knew that lifelong suffering lay ahead. It was not that she didn't have problems in her life earlier. On the contrary, her work was very laborious, she was ill-treated by her husband

who would lie to her about trivial things, and was treated shabbily by her in-laws who were very high-handed with her. Her parents were not supportive either. Her only support system was her lovely five-year-old son, Saurabh, and the fact that she had a job. Besides, sometimes Vilas would be nice to her as well, and she convinced herself that this was enough. But now there was HIV, and except for Saurabh, everything else seemed extremely difficult.

Sunanda's husband HemantShedbalkar's report was available, but what of Sunanda? She also must be HIV positive, or no? She tried to find out by casually mentioning his case to the nurse



who was in charge of Dr. Deshpande's unit. The nurse said, "That patient's wife does not have HIV, only he does, but how he harasses her! She is always at his beck and call. Do this, do that, get coffee, massage my feet – such a vicious man!" The nurse should actually not have divulged such information about her patient. But Vaishali worked in the same hospital, and the nurse pitied the patient's wife so much that she spoke her mind.

Vaishali was very happy to learn that Sunanda did not have HIV, but she was also somewhat jealous. "No one should have HIV, but if it has to be then the man must have it. Since I am HIV positive and Vilas is not, it exonerates him and makes him righteous. All the blame is to be borne by me. Sunanda is better placed," she thought.

A few moments later, she realized that she was wrong. "Even though Sunanda is HIV negative and it is her husband who is positive, her situation is not very different from mine. The nurse told me how harassed she is by her husband. I must at least speak with her. Who will understand her situation better than I do? I must speak with her."

When they met again, Vaishali opened up to Sunanda. "Vilas has drawn the conclusion that I committed adultery and that's how I got the disease," she said. "It is as if he has a written proof in his hand to incriminate me. He feels entitled to deride me at every possible opportunity. At times, he even does it in public. The other day we were at the pharmacy to buy medicines and he needlessly told the pharmacist, 'I am not the patient, she is'. He hardly earns a regular salary, sometimes he earns money, sometimes nothing. The fixed income comes from my job. Earlier, if he needed money, he used to show me some

respect. But now, it is as if I am at his mercy. He is doing me a favor by letting me live in his house, and I must repay him by giving him money. And of course, I must consider myself fortunate that he accepts my money. I feel that between a husband and wife, there shouldn't be such talk that 'this is mine' and 'that is yours'. But now he doesn't even let go of the smallest opportunity to scorn me. He doesn't care one bit about me anymore. Nor does he feel anything for me. He prefers to walk at a distance from me to avoid touching me, says he is afraid."

Sunanda smiled sadly when she heard this. "Our sorrows are here to stay and won't go away," she finally said.

It had been two years since Sunanda's husband Hemant was diagnosed with HIV. Initially, for a long time, he did not tell Sunanda. All she knew was that he would go to a hospital regularly. Sunanda reminded him of his medicine schedule according to the prescription, but she had no clue what the medicines were, nor why he needed them. No one told her. His brother used to accompany him to the doctor. The doctor must have asked for her to be tested. This man did not tell her even then, just said that she looked pale and unwell, so she should get her blood tested. Sunanda's blood test was not done where her husband was being treated. Instead, her husband had taken her to a different lab. His behavior made Sunanda suspicious. He had suddenly started using a condom. She asked him why, and he did not give her any specific reason. "Just like that," is all he would say. Sunanda was not satisfied with that answer and asked him quite directly, "Are you trying to keep something from me?" He tried to ignore her, but she insisted on accompanying him to the doctor. When he

could no longer refuse, he took her to his doctor, who disclosed the sad news to her.

"I do not understand this about you women," Vaishali said after hearing Sunanda out. "You should have seen the test results yourself. How could you not understand what test it was? How could you behave like an illiterate person?"

"You are right, Vaishu, but for the last so many years, I have hardly even spoken to people beyond my household. I am completely cut off from the rest of the world. I simply did not think of looking at the report myself."

"So you are completely a housewife? No job, no social groups, no clubs ...?"

"They had got me to agree before my marriage that I would not work. I was not supposed to have a job, but there was lots of work at home. A huge family with sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, mother-in-law ... there were ten members in the family. My mother-in-law has a small home-based business selling food products, and also has a clientele to send lunch boxes to. It takes a lot of time to cook so much. If I was not to work, then what would I do? They had a pat answer. I was to help my mother-in-law in her business. We were not told about this at the outset. I was cheated in a way. I had initially asked my mother-in-law if I could get a job instead of helping her. But she had refused.



Forget about all that. But I tell you, these people are really strange. Even in casual conversation, they are hurtful and taunt me. That's just how they talk. They also believe that I do not have an iota of intelligence. It suits them very well that they can treat their daughter-in-law so shabbily. But that is all in the past. I am quite hardened now. What hurts me though is that Hemant did not support me at all. He also behaves just like them. He has lost the love and attention that his family showered on him because he was intelligent and did well in school and college. Now, his siblings shrink away from him because of his HIV. He says that he now understands why they respected him before. He used to teach in a private college then, and earned a handsome salary. He supported his large family, which is why they respected him. He was so used to it all that now he regrets that they don't look up to him the same way."

"What about children?" Vaishali asked.

"That is one blessing, that I do not have a child to complicate matters even more. I was pregnant soon after marriage. But my mother-in-law had gotten me to abort the baby. I took the birth control pills for some time after that. Later, when I stopped those pills, I did not conceive for long. I had started treatment to try to conceive, but then the HIV came to light."

Vaishali was sad to hear Sunanda's story. The fact that Sunanda did not have HIV, had not made her life any easier or better. "But did you

not ask him how he got HIV? Did you not tell him that you've been cheated?"

"Of course, I have been cheated, didn't I tell you that before. You do not need HIV to deceive a wife, it happens without HIV too. Our society does not think it is wrong if a man deceives a woman, because it is so common. He has mellowed down a bit with HIV, but that is all. His troubles have piled up. He lost his job, and on top of it, there are doctor's bills, medicines, tests, hospital admissions – he needs to pay for all this. Now I am expanding my mother-in-law's business. I take more and more orders and work harder, because there is no other way. If I question anything now, it will look like I am taking advantage of his situation. So I don't question him." While pouring out her heart, Sunanda suddenly turned to Vaishali and asked, "But tell me Vaishu, how did you get this disease?"

Vaishali smiled at this question. She thought, "It is funny that I did not ask her how her husband got it, because I assumed that he must have sinned somewhere. But she does ask me. Even if she is sure that I must not have done anything wrong, she still has a doubt. Society allows women the benefit of doubt in case of HIV. People might doubt women, but they assume that men are at fault without a second thought. Whether men or women, we are all slaves to our situations."

She answered Sunanda, "I do not know, but maybe I got infected while drawing blood from some patient. I cannot think of anything

else. Or maybe when I underwent a cesarean section at the time of Saurabh, and had required blood transfusion ..."

"I have heard that there are medicines now for HIV and all that, but you tell me, Vaishu, how long can death be forestalled?" Sunanda asked.

Vaishali was lost in her own thoughts.

"I am not afraid of this illness anymore. Dr. Deshpande has many patients everyday. There is good treatment available now. The medicines are cheap and dispensed free-of-cost in government hospitals too. I am not going to lose my job. There is no longer the same fear of death that haunted patients of HIV earlier. This is all true, but the difficulties posed by HIV in my life haven't ended. Now I have realized,



whether at home or at the office, I cannot assert my opinion like I did in the past. The work that I used to do with considerable skill, of withdrawing blood from patients, has been taken away from me. I am in the lab still, but sitting at the reception desk, typing reports, etc. I am not assigned the work which interests me. No one wants to discriminate or be offensive in an obvious way, but I can sense the difference in everyone's behavior towards me. I complained about it to our department head, but it was no use. 'If you do not like this work, you are free to leave,' he said. I can sense that they want me to resign. After that one complaint, I decided to keep quiet. I cannot do without this job. This is what happens at the hospital and what happens at home is another story. Vilas does not openly fight with me over the HIV, but his behavior is filled with animosity. In the past, I would sometimes feel that maybe he loved me a little, but now I do not have any doubts. I know he does not. When I told him that I may have contracted the infection while handling infected blood at the hospital, do you know what he said? He said, 'Of course, whatever you say is true.'

"Really?"

"Yes, and he has not come close to me since he came to know of my HIV. He refuses to use a condom and says he has nothing to do with me anymore. He says, 'I am quiet on account of Saurabh, but you must understand that I am not an old man now and I will fend for myself elsewhere. I cannot bear to think that I have no pleasure now in life' Now, what do you say to that?"

Sunanda could not say a word.

Vaishali kept talking. "He has in fact decided to desert me and my son. He will probably leave

town. The other day I overheard him on the phone. I was shocked to hear him speaking to someone about me having HIV and he being negative. He was telling someone on the phone that I had cheated him. He was speaking very softly and lovingly. I asked him who was on the line, but he said it was none of my business. Till that day, he had not dared to talk to me like that."

Sunanda said, "It is true that HIV has made you bear all this, but in my case, I cannot say a word to my husband. On the contrary, I have to hear him say that I should take on the disease if I love him!"

For a while no one said anything. Then, Sunanda rose and arranged the pleats of her saree. "Let's go back. My husband is perhaps already crying hoarse that I have run away."

"Okay. I will come with you to meet him."

"Oh no, don't."

"Come on, let's have some fun."

Both friends walked hand in hand.

As expected by Sunanda, Hemant was terribly angry. He shouted at her, "So you have come after all. I was beginning to think that you will come only after hearing the news of your husband's death."

Sunanda did not reply. Vaishali stepped forward and introduced herself. She said she worked in the same hospital and also offered to help if needed. This made Hemant calm down. He started complaining to Vaishali about the hospital. Since he was speaking calmly, Vaishali told him about her HIV status, and also that her husband does not have HIV. She did not say anything about knowing of Hemant's HIV but he

understood that she knew. He was angry with Sunanda. Sunanda must have told her friend. He just said, "Oh, Good!"

Vaishali was taken aback at this response, "What? Is that good?"

"No. I say good because the two of you are wonderful friends. 'This is how it is in my home and this is how it is in yours,' right? What lovely chat," he said, implying that he knew Vaishali knew about him.

"You are right, Mr. Hemant, but you see, no matter what we say, this or that, HIV does not change the situation. The main issue is that whether you are a man or a woman. I have learnt this lesson because of HIV, and I have shared it with Sunanda as well. The question you need to ask yourself is, what are you going to learn from this illness. Decide for yourself."

Vaishali knew Hemant did not have an answer. As she took her leave, she pressed Sunanda's hand in hers and said goodbye to Hemant. Smiling to herself, she walked away.

