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Pal-O-Mine

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Prayas is a Public Charitable Trust established to work in the field of health, energy, learning and parenthood and resources and livelihood. The health group of Prayas works in the field of HIV/AIDS.

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A few words…

The strength to cope with various challenges of life is more in young children than in elders. Youth usually prefer not to linger in an unhappy state and tend to take the challenges in their own stride. With even a slightest support, the child will thrive with enthusiasm and joy. The manner in which adolescents are internally geared up to fight against any odds has always amazed me. Sometimes they may accept a situation sensibly, while they may rebel at some other instances. If they find support from a friend, they can deal with dreadful situations with tremendous determination. The friend need not always be a peer. Such friendship, which could be present in any relationship such as between a mother and a son or between an uncle-aunt and a niece, increases the will to live on enormously.

Everyone has to deal with some or the other kind of issues in life. The question is how far one is going to allow these issues to affect life, and the will to live. If the colors of friendship brighten our lives and make us strong, then we need not fear the issues and obstacles in our lives.

This collection of stories is being published by Prayas health group (PHG). PHG works in the field of HIV/AIDS. Since the beginning of its work in 1994, I have seen a lot of children living with HIV. When a child living with HIV is very young s/he doesn’t know what her/his condition is or why s/he is being taken regularly to the doctor. They start becoming aware of these things as they grow up. Sometimes the caregivers or the doctor may disclose this to the child. Now that effective medicines are available, this virus is no longer considered deadly. Now for most people, 'HIV' is all about taking a pill every day and periodically examining your immunity levels and the effect of the medicines. However, people living with HIV do have to face some issues due to the misconceptions still prevalent in the society. Although the severity of issues faced by adolescents living with HIV is much more, the issues are not much different than those faced by teenage boys and girls in general.

The stories in this book are about such adolescent boys and girls.

Preparing a book is not a simple process. Many things have to be taken into consideration. The questions are many—from making a press-ready copy of the writing, to deciding what size the book should be, how many pages it should have, what should it cost and so on. If Manik Pardhe, Neha Vaidya, Neelima Sahasrabuddhe, Priya Barbhai and Dr. Vinay Kulkarni had not been there to support, this book wouldn’t have
seen the light of the day. I am grateful to Ms. Jai Nimbkar and Ms. Jyoti Kanetkar who have translated these stories from Marathi. Without their involvement, this book would not have been able to reach a wider audience.

I am very grateful to Dr. Mohan Deshpande for supporting this book with beautiful illustrations. The important thing is, in addition to the illustrations, Dr. Mohan Deshpande was very supportive at every stage while I was writing these stories.

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- Dr. Sanjeevani Kulkarni
“Remember one thing Sushant if people discriminate against you because you have HIV, then it’s their fault, not yours. Keep that firmly in mind.” Manik was telling Sushant. Manik who is Sushant’s neighbor works with an organization working in health care. Once as usual something had happened, and Sushant, in despair had gone and sat on the terrace steps. He hadn’t said anything to anyone, but somehow Manik came and sat next to him. For a while he just sat with his hand on Sushant’s back; then he said, “Sushant, listen. I’ll tell you something interesting. If somebody discriminates against us, it’s their fault, not ours. Keep this sentence in mind.” For a long time after that Manik and Sushant sat talking together.

It happened many times that someone for some reason, would say something to Sushant, treat him badly, pick on him, and then Sushant would feel like crying. When Sushant’s father died, the neighbors came forward to help. They were suspicious about his death; why and how had he died. The doctor asked Sushant and his mother to
get tested. When the test results came, all the people who had accompanied them learnt that both Sushant and his mother had HIV. It’s not as though everyone behaved badly, some people behaved very well with them, but some spoke indecently. But what could they do? For one thing having neighbors was a help and for another, it wasn’t possible to leave such a good place in the city and go elsewhere.

Sushant used to fondly address Manik as Manikdada; dada meaning elder brother. Manikdada had said, “If anybody discriminates against you, it’s their fault, not yours. Keep this sentence in mind. This is a magic sentence. If someone behaves badly with you, you should say this sentence in your mind and laugh your head off. Then you would not get bothered by other people’s bad behavior.” From that time Manikdada had become Sushant’s friend. He had learned Manikdada’s magic sentence by heart. Whenever something unpleasant happened, somebody said something offensive, Sushant would begin to reiterate the sentence in his mind. Sometimes if he thought of it while studying, he would write it in his notebook.

The occasion to say the magic sentence would come unannounced, at any odd time. Sometimes at school, or at Kishor’s home, or when his uncle came to their place or sometimes at some other place. Sushant used to go to Kishore’s house since he was small.

Kishor’s mother Lalita is Sushant’s mother’s younger sister. Lalita auntie’s Kishor is Sushant’s classmate, but not just that, they also are fast friends. Kishor never behaves badly, Sushant is not sure whether Kishor knows that Sushant has HIV; but Kishor at least never shows that he knows. Lalita auntie is also very nice. Sushant likes her mutton curry, so she calls him when she cooks mutton curry. But after he finishes eating, she makes him put his plate in the basin and pours boiling water on it. If he asks “Why do you do that?” She says, “Isn’t there oil in the curry? It doesn’t wash off without the hot water.” ‘How come only my plate is oily and no one else’s?’ This is a question that bothers him. But he doesn’t say it aloud. Actually the question doesn’t occur to him. He knows why Lalita auntie does this.

Sometimes Lalita auntie’s mother in law suddenly asks him, “Do you take the pills from the Government hospital?” He doesn’t answer. Then she asks the same question again and again. Earlier, Sushant used to get angry when someone asked such questions. Now he doesn’t get that angry. He doesn’t say anything. But, as though switched on, Manikdada’s sentence starts ringing in his head. ‘There is a virus called HIV in my blood. So it is there. What is there in it for anyone to pick on me?’

Actually, Sushant doesn’t worry much about what would happen if others learn that he has HIV. Those who live nearby are bound to know about each other’s joys and sorrows. For instance everyone knows that Ramesh’s grandfather has cancer, Harish has just got a younger sister, Pramod’s sister’s marriage has been arranged, Sagar’s brother has won a lottery of ten thousand rupees, Kishor’s grandmother’s knees hurt all the times. Sushant knows all this. Everyone knows these things. So, what’s the big deal about my HIV?

But sometimes people behave very cruelly, treat him with scorn, don’t let
him eat from their plate and don’t eat from his plate. Some children tease him, which makes Sushant feel angry. But then he tries not to pay too much attention to it. Sushant feels afraid of the idea that everybody at school may have learned about him. He wants to know if this is true, but how could he himself ask this to anybody? It doesn’t matter if some people come to know about it. And yet he feels, that some people should never know this. He keeps vacillating between the thoughts of it all right for a particular person to know or it is better if he doesn’t.

It is ok if Salunkhe teacher knows it, because he is very nice. But the boys like Pramod, Vikas shouldn’t get to know ever.

Once Salunke teacher was teaching in class. He used to teach very well. To teach a lesson about air, he had brought gas balloons to class. The balloons were floating all over the class. Everyone was playing with the balloons. Sushant said, “Please give me a balloon. Sir, please give me a balloon.” Janardan who was sitting next to Pramod said, “You can’t get a balloon. You have HIV, don’t you? There’s a law that says those with HIV shouldn’t be given a balloon.”

“What’s the sense in that? I must get balloon even if I have HIV, nobody can take away my rights. That’s what the law says. Manikdada has told me.” Sushant screamed loudly.

He could clearly see all the children tittering from behind the balloons. Their teasing laughter really got his goat. He himself had disclosed the fact unconsciously. He was so angry that he didn’t know what to do. He stood rooted to the spot. Afterwards Salunkhe teacher scolded the boys. “I don’t know if anyone here has HIV. But even if it is so, I know that there’s nothing in it for which you should pick on him or treat him badly. Those who have teased him must come in front of the class and say ‘I am sorry’. Until that is done, I am not going to teach you.”

After that a few of the boys came to the front of the class and apologized in a very low tone without looking at Sushant. Afterwards Salunkhe teacher said to the boys, “You have spoiled my mood for teaching.” The boys did not utter anything.

Sushant got very disturbed that day. To quieten his fast breathing, Sushant said the magic sentence over and over again. “If they discriminate against you, it’s their fault, not yours.”

The Magic Sentence
But while saying this he couldn’t even smile leave alone laughing.

On that very day, he had a talk with Manikdada. It was a wonderful talk. Manikdada had made him laugh a lot. Looking at him laughing, Manikdada had said, “You should keep laughing like this, Sushant.”

“See, Sushant,” he continued, “People don’t know much about HIV, that’s why they behave badly. If we give them proper information, then they would certainly behave better.” Manikdada and Sushant sat there talking for a long time. Sushant didn’t remember all that Manikdada said, but he only remembered that they had had a hearty laugh.

Sushant was unable to understand why he kept remembering these events that had occurred a while back in fits and starts right now. When he awoke, he was unable to recall where he was.

Then he understood that he was lying on a mattress on a bed. There was a white sheet on the mattress. Then he understood that his left hand was tied to a plank wrapped in white cloth. He had to go for a blood test to check his immunity level every six months since his HIV was diagnosed. The same way as they did it then, a needle was poked into his vein. But nobody was taking blood this time but a tube attached to the needle was fixed to a bigger bottle hanging upside down. Water was dripping drop by drop from the bottle.

“Oh my God!” He tried to sit up, but he couldn’t move. A sudden sharp pain shot in his stomach. “Mom…” He groaned loudly.

“What’s the matter, Sushant? Don’t move, my dear sleep, sleep.” His mother’s voice came near him.

“He’s awake,” She pointed at him and said to someone else.

Someone came near him. He tapped his cheek, said, “Take a deep breath, say aah, let me see your eyes. Okay, fine, fine!” Babbling something of this sort he went away. The man’s touch felt like rubber.

“Mom, why have we come to the hospital?” His mother came and held him close. Sushant was asking her something, she was answering him. Sushant was listening to her, but he couldn’t understand anything. Then slowly he remembered. Like a spool of thread unwinding, he started moving backwards moment by moment.

For the last four or five days Sushant’s tummy hurt really a lot. Last evening he also started vomiting. Mother had panicked and called their doctor. The doctor had asked her to bring Sushant to the hospital. This was Sushant’s favorite doctor. He used to fondly call him Doctor Uncle. Sushant used to go to the Government hospital on a regular basis, but visited this Doctor Uncle in case of any emergency.

Sushant’s mother was worried about her child’s health. She also rang up his paternal uncle who lived in the next building and requested him to accompany them to the hospital. Though this uncle lived very close to them, he rarely visited them. Because Sushant and his mother had HIV infection, this uncle and his wife kept their distance from the two. The wife, his aunt did not smile at Sushant like she did earlier.

Sushant also has an elder brother. But, that brother has nothing to do with Sushant as he does not have the infection and he had been kept with
their mother’s brother for the fear of acquiring the infection. Doctor Uncle had told Sushant’s mother time and again that HIV does not get transmitted by living together. She believed him, but uncle and grandmother didn’t listen. Even now, they don’t send Sushant’s brother to Sushant’s house. Sushant and his mother also don’t visit them much. Whenever Sushant remembers this, he feels hurt.

Sushant’s paternal uncle accompanied them to the hospital, but not in their rickshaw. He went on his scooter. At first, he wasn’t willing to go at all, but when Sushant’s mother had tears in her eyes, his wife said, “Don’t sit next to them in the rickshaw. Follow the rickshaw on your scooter.” So he went.

Before they left, Sushant’s mother requested him, “Can you please keep some money with you? I have taken what I had at home, but if we require more…”

Uncle curtly said to mother “Vaini (sister in law), take your ATM card with you. Now the hospitals accept it, and suppose they don’t, we can always withdraw from an ATM kiosk.”

What uncle was hinting at was clear not only to his mother but also to Sushant.

After sitting in the auto-rickshaw, Sushant threw up. Thankfully his mother had brought a plastic bag with her for this kind of eventuality. Otherwise they would have had to listen to abuse from the rickshaw driver as well for spoiling his rickshaw.

‘On top of it, if he had learned about the HIV, he would really have made a fuss,’ Sushant thought. He admired his
mother for remembering to bring the plastic bag with her.

‘Of course, there is no way to differentiate between vomiting induced by HIV and that induced by any other illness. But then, there was uncle to contend with, he would surely have spilled the beans. Thankfully he was not in the rickshaw.’ Sushant continued to think.

Later his mother too realized the folly of bringing uncle to the hospital. Wherever they went with him he kept telling people, ‘these folks have AIDS.’

In the hospital the doctor examined and got him admitted and prepared to give saline. Uncle was still telling everybody, ‘He’s got AIDS.’ This doctor called up Sushant’s doctor Uncle. He got instructions about what tests to do, what medicines to give. But Uncle wouldn’t let go. He told even the ward-boy who was carrying Sushant in the wheel-chair, ‘The boy has got AIDS.’

Even though Sushant was too spent to talk, he finally said to uncle, “Uncle, I haven’t got AIDS, I have HIV.”

Uncle merely looked at him as if to say, ‘What to do with these people, who know nothing yet try to appear smart.’ Then in a false tone of understanding he turned towards Sushant and said, “Yes, precisely, that is what AIDS is.”

Sushant was going to say something angrily, but just then he saw his mother folding her hands and indicating him to keep quiet and not complicate the matter further.

When was this uncle going to learn wisdom? Just then uncle saw some acquaintance passing by, so he called him closer and told him the same thing. Upon which the person asked him how he was related to Sushant. Uncle said, “He is my elder brother’s son. My brother also had AIDS. He died with it two years ago. This fellow also has it.”

The man asked with an innocent face, “It gets passed on from father to son, does it?” Uncle could see out of the corner of his eye that Sushant and his mother were uneasily listening to this exchange. Without answering the man, uncle went on and though they were livid, Sushant and his mother followed him.

The magic sentence was going on in Sushant’s mind all the time, but because he was very angry, he couldn’t laugh.

‘Manikdada, how can these people behave like this?’ Sushant said to himself.

Even though Sushant found it difficult to stand, he was made to stand in front of the X-ray machine and the attendant there pressed some buttons on the machine. Then he pressed some more buttons and said, “Done.”

Uncle said, “Is the photo all right? Can you see everything in the proper place? Does the X-ray show AIDS?” And he laughed “ha-ha-ha…”

Uncle’s misbegotten laughter didn’t have any effect on the man taking X-ray. He said impassively, “The doctor will tell.” Sushant felt good. Even though he was sick, he smiled at his mother. The poor woman was standing there quietly as though she hadn’t understood anything. She did not understand that Uncle had got his comeuppance.

X-ray was done, the roller of the sonography machine was run over Sushant’s belly. Uncle would have exhibited his sense of humor there too, but nobody let him in. When Sushant came out of the sonography room, his mother was dozing on a bench and
uncle was standing there, reading the names of doctors visiting the hospital on the board.

Upon waking up, Sushant looked around. His uncle was nowhere to be seen. He must have left with his scooter. His mother was sitting near him. Softly he asked her, “Mom, what’s wrong with me?”

“You had a very bad time last night, son. You vomited. Then you were brought here, and when you came out of the sonography room, you collapsed in the chair. I was in despair. I shouted loudly. Then one madam came out and admitted you into this ward. The doctors there gave you injections. Put something on your nose to give you air. I couldn’t see much. They had made me go out. They told me not to enter. Can you remember anything?”

Sushant shook his head, “No, I remember up to sonography, nothing after that.”

“You must have lost consciousness”, his mother said, running her hand lovingly on his face. He learned from his mother that the doctor Uncle had also come, but Sushant couldn’t remember anything.

It was afternoon now. Sushant was fast asleep with exhaustion. After feeding him some soft cooked rice, his mother had gone out to get the prescribed medicines. There were a lot of patients in the ward. Around each one there was a wall of curtains. But most patients had drawn the curtains aside. Some were talking to others while lying in bed. He also tried to push his curtain aside. A man from hospital staff came running and cried “let the curtain be. You can’t push aside the curtain.” He then put the curtain in place, and went straight to the washbasin to scrub his hands vigorously twice with soap and water. Sushant became speechless at the action of the man.

‘If somebody discriminates against you, it’s their fault, not ours.’ To chant the sentence was the only resort now.

Sushant was lying on the mattress. He felt sleepy again and closed his eyes. He didn’t know how much time had elapsed. He heard a nurse and some assistants talking. He suddenly realized they were talking about him.

“Who told you?”
“His own uncle.”
“He has AIDS!”
“Sh! Speak low.”
“Oh poor thing, he is so young. He’s so sweet. Isn’t he?”
“Now let that be. Have you made an entry in his file?”
“Let me see his file.”
“Hey there, wait a minute. Be sure to put on your gloves before you go get the file.”

Someone came and took away the file from his bedside. Sushant was very upset with these people. But he just pulled the cover over his head and remained still. He knew that they would not speak if they came to know that he was awake.

“Keep quiet everyone. He’s awake.”
“I don’t think he is awake. He has been asleep for a long time. Any way what are we going to do, whether he is awake or asleep, are we talking anything that is not true?”

“Anyway, how is he to know that we are talking about him and no one else?”
“Children these days are very smart, my dear.”
“That is why they get AIDS at such a small age.”
“He must have gotten it from his parents.”
“I don’t think so. His mother looked quite well”
There was the sound of their smothered laughter.
Sushant felt like taking each of them by the scruff of the neck and giving them a slap. But then he felt like crying. He was too upset to recall the magic sentence.
He wanted to phone Manikdada and ask him to come. He fell asleep while still crying.

When he woke up, he was feeling much better. Doctor Uncle was there. He was patting him on the head. He must have been talking to the people there. When Sushant opened his eyes, Doctor Uncle started talking to him.
“So Boss, what happened?”
Doctor uncle sat next to him. He examined him. Even after examining him, his hand kept running over his head lovingly.
The nurse and doctors in the hospital were standing in a row inside the curtain. They were all wearing plastic
gloves. Only doctor Uncle's hands were without any gloves.

He remembered the conversation he had heard. He took doctor uncle's hand in his hand and said, “I want to talk to you alone.” While saying this he looked at everybody standing near the curtain. Doctor uncle also looked at them. They all went out.

“Tell me Boss, what happened?”

“These people talk dirty things about how I might have contracted HIV. They wear gloves while coming near me.”

His eyes were brimming with tears. His mother came forward to wipe them. Doctor uncle stopped her with a gesture of his hands. Taking out a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped Sushant’s tears.

“Sushant, listen. There’s no need for you to cry;” Doctor uncle said in a firm and comforting voice. “There are people in this world who do not know how to behave especially with others.”

“Yes, I know it’s the problem of the people who discriminate against us. It’s theirs, not my fault,” Sushant said softly.

“Yes” Doctor uncle said. Since hearing the word ‘discrimination,’ he had almost joined Sushant in saying the magic sentence. Sushant was surprised to see this. ‘How come he knows it? Has Manikdada told him the sentence too?’

Doctor uncle said, “Sushant, suppose you don’t have HIV and someone else does. How would you have behaved with him?”

“I would have behaved well, for sure! wouldn’t I?”

“Listen, it’s not that easy. You know everything now. You understand, that’s why you would have behaved well. But suppose you didn’t know anything and thought that HIV is contagious, then perhaps you might not have behaves so well, isn’t it?”

“Yes, uncle. But when you understand that your behavior bothers others then you should correct your mistake, shouldn’t you?”

“But they don’t understand this, that’s why they make such a mistake. Tell me what we should do at such a time.”

“We should give them proper information, so that they behave properly. Am I right Doctor Uncle?”

Doctor Uncle laughed heartily. “That’s my boy! We should make you a counsellor. You will do great counselling. So will you be ready for that?” asked Doctor Uncle.

“Yes Uncle.”

“Good. So now go to sleep. I have prescribed the medicines. You should take them, so that by tomorrow you would recover and we can send you home.”

“Yes Uncle.”

“And stop worrying about these people. If they don’t understand, we can teach them. Right now you are sick and you should take rest, I will see to them.”

“Yes Uncle.”

Adjusting his bedclothes and once more patting him on the head, Doctor Uncle went out.

For a while after that Sushant could hear his voice talking to the hospital staff. At another time, Sushant may not have paid any attention to this, but now since he knew what was being said, he noted it.

Manikdada should be told about this, because he was the one who had initiated the magic sentence. Sushant still wondered how Doctor Uncle knew the magic mantra of Manikdada.
“It is the mistake of those who discriminate, never ours.” He said aloud to himself. Suddenly he felt someone else’s voice joining his own. Who was it? Manikdada!

Seeing Manikdada, Sushant was so overjoyed that he tried to get up.

“No. No. Don’t try getting up. I’ll come closer.” So saying Manikdada came and sat next to Sushant.

Looking at Sushant’s mother, Manikdada smiled and said, “On reaching home I came to know that our Prince was taken ill, so I said, I must visit.”

“Now that you are here, there is no worry.” Even Sushant’s mother was very happy to see Manikdada.

Sushant started telling his mother about the magic sentence, “You know mom, Manikdada has given me a Magic sentence... a magic mantra”, but she cut him short saying, “Yes, I know about it, but you have to smile while uttering the sentence, you cannot chant the Mantra while crying!”

“See, I am smiling right now.”

“You are smiling right now, but when it is time to chant the sentence, do you always remember to smile?”

“Wait a minute, tell me first, how did you come to know our magic sentence?”

“I can read my dearest child’s mind, that’s how! Silly fellow, does anyone write such things in an exercise book? I read it in there” she said smiling while adjusting his bed covers.

On hearing this, he shyly hid his face in Manikdada’s hands.

Both Manikdada and Sushant’s mother laughed out aloud.

Listening to the laughter he thought, ‘This is the way one should laugh freely while saying the magic sentence.’

After this much excitement Sushant felt a bit sleepy. He dropped back on the bed, and closed his eyes.

Inside the closed eyes he was flying like a bird and whirling round, he was laughing freely and saying, ‘If somebody discriminated against me it’s their fault, not mine.’

Translated by - Jai Nimbkar
Meenal didn’t feel like going to school. She couldn’t understand what was going on in the class. Her mind was always cluttered with various kinds of thoughts. If she had asked herself what exactly those thoughts were, she couldn’t have articulated any. ‘Sit on the bench all day, and think only about when each class period would get over’ that was all she used to do when in class. One hour has 3600 seconds, but when she learnt that a 35-minute class doesn’t hold more than 2000 seconds, she would start counting from 1-2-3... when the period started. She had got this idea from a girl in her class. One day Meenal had overheard this girl talking to her friend, “I start counting numbers from 1-2-3 when I don’t like a particular teacher’s class.” Meenal hadn’t understood how the girl had figured out the number of seconds in each minute, but she got an idea of how to pass the time. Meenal could never score well in any of the school
tests. Often she got a zero. These days nobody even laughed at her marks. If a new teacher joined she would keep trying to teach Meenal until she finally understood the situation. Nobody was concerned with whether she had done her homework or understood anything. Nobody would have lunch with her.

At least two or three times a year she would urinate in her panties in class. The girls and boys would wrinkle their noses and tell the teacher. They would ask her to clean up, and would send her home. Meenal wouldn’t go to school for a week or so, after that, and when she would start coming back again, nobody would feel anything about her coming back, either.

Actually, Meenal should have been a significant person in the school, because her ‘mama’ (mother’s brother) was the principal of the school. But nobody had seen him even talking to Meenal in the school. The Principal’s sister and her husband had passed away, and their daughter had been left behind. Actually Meenal stayed with her paternal uncle. But the principal had admitted her in the school, and taken the responsibility for her school expenses. Meenal had never failed in the annual examination till the eighth standard. She got the minimum passing marks every year. Everyone used to wonder how she got even that many, because her marks in the other examinations would have made it impossible for it to happen, but it happened. In addition, the Principal, had to go once a month to the district headquarters for a meeting, and he used to take Meenal along. Every month the ARV (Anti Retro Viral) medicines had to be brought for her from the district hospital, and he had taken that responsibility as well. But besides this, he never ever talked to her. Neither in school, nor in the bus enroute the district place. The only creditable thing was that whatever he was doing, he did it without any complaint, as an obligation to his dead sister.

Thus, Meenal was a girl not to be taken note of except by only one person; the art teacher. Meenal was somewhat noticed in only that subject. For example this year Ms. Dongre was the art teacher. She would stand leaning against the wall next to Meenal during the class, and, staring at her picture, would mutter to herself, “Well done”. She never showed Meenal’s picture to the class, or put it up in the class. She only stood next to the last bench where Meenal sat and, holding the chain around her neck between her teeth, she would gaze at Meenal’s picture. The boys and girls in the class had noticed this habit of the teacher and they used to make fun of her, especially as she looked at Meenal’s picture.

Another of Meenal’s qualities came to the forefront somewhat accidentally. District sport competitions were going on. A good sports girl in the school, Ramona, fell down while playing kho-kho. She twisted her leg. She
had been enrolled into the individual competitions as well. She had to run a hundred meters race after the game of kho-kho. With her twisted leg, Ramona couldn’t even stand, let alone run. She was crying with pain, but more so because she had lost a chance. Nobody knew how, but Meenal went there and asked whether she could run a hand over Ramona’s leg. Ramona kept saying, ‘No no, don’t bother’, but Meenal wouldn’t give up. She said, “Give me two minutes. If you don’t feel better, then I’ll go.”

Ramona came second in the running race. She went and embraced Meenal at the first opportunity.

Since then Ramona started praising Meenal a lot in the school. Then people began to take a little more notice of her. Of course nothing else changed much.

Just then another event took place.

The eighth standard class was very rowdy that day. Some special guest had come to the school and the eighth standard class didn’t have a class teacher to look after. Children became violently unruly. Two messages were sent to the class but that made no difference. The next day the Principal sent a message at the beginning of the day to cane each child five times. For a while there was a discussion about who was responsible
for the rowdy behavior. Meenal of course had no part in the ruckus. She was sitting quietly as usual. Only this time she wasn’t counting seconds. The caning started from the first row. Saying, ‘hand out’ the teacher worked his way to Meenal’s bench. Meenal held out her hand.

Ramona got up and cried, “Sir, wait.” The teacher turned to look.

“Sir, Meenal was not rowdy. You know that. She mustn’t be punished.”

“Even if she was not rowdy, she didn’t stop the other children,” the teacher said.

He started caning Meenal. Meenal couldn’t possibly say, ‘I wasn’t rowdy. I won’t accept the caning’ but Ramona came running. The first time the cane came down on Meenal’s hand, but the next time it was on Ramona’s hand. Ramona was not an ordinary girl. She was a girl with many qualities. She was good in her studies, she was a sports girl, and her family was highly respected in the town. The teacher stopped for a moment. Some more boys and girls ran there and joined Ramona. Half-a-dozen hands were put on top of Meenal’s hand to take the caning.

“Sir, please leave Meenal. She couldn’t have stopped us. Even you would agree.” Ramona suddenly stood there like a brave heroine. The teacher couldn’t go on with the caning. The class clapped. Some of them loved the turn the event had taken. Some still remained to be caned. They were very pleased. There was a lot of noise and shouting in the class. The poor teacher looked helpless.

The Principal came to the class and then there was a round of discussion. It was decided that only those children who had been rowdy should offer themselves for caning. Also, the teacher would not cane the children, but the boys and girls sitting near them would administer the punishment. Some felt, especially the teacher, who was using the cane that the principal gave in to the children. On the whole the children had won. Later the cane touched the hand so gently that they didn’t know whether the hand was being caned or if someone was blowing kisses over their hands. Some boys and girls thanked Ramona and Meenal too. It was the first time Meenal had heard the word from anyone except Ramona. From the next day Ramona and Meenal began to sit next to each other in the class. Meenal began to eat her tiffin with others. Ramona told the class that the dishes in Meenal’s lunch box were very tasty.

Meenal’s behavior in the class changed a little. Her school test marks saw a marginal rise. Occasionally she laughed at some joke, once in a while she gave answers to the questions asked in the class. She even realized that some of the answers were correct. Many days passed this way. During this time, she wasn’t bothered by involuntary urination.

The two girls often left school together to go home. One day when school was left far behind, Ramona
caught hold of Meenal’s hand. She pulled her to the steps of a closed shop on the side of the road and said, “Wait, I want to talk to you.” Meenal looked at her a little scared. She had not become completely used to the changes in the atmosphere at school as yet.

“Have you got HIV?” Ramona asked straight out.

Meenal looked down.

“Why are you embarrassed? I’ve also got it,” Ramona said. Meenal was completely shocked and speechless!

“How?”

“What do you mean, how? The same way as you got it. My mother got it, I picked it up from her. The same thing happened to you, didn’t it?”

“Yes.” Meenal didn’t know what to do or say.

‘Ramona is from a well-to-do family. I am poor, my mother is dead, I can live at my uncle’s place because I work. Because my mother’s brother is the principal, I am allowed to come to the school. I get the medicines from the district hospital, so I can survive. But Ramona – who belongs to a highly respected family, who is so bright, has also got HIV?’

“How did you learn about me?”

“I saw you at the district hospital. At the A.R.T. centre.”

“Do you also get medicines from there?”

“No, but I may get them from there. My mother had taken me to see a doctor there.”

Meenal still didn’t know whether what she had understood from Ramona was true or false. But Ramona went on speaking.

“Meenal dear, I saw you there. Until now I didn’t know that anybody I was acquainted with had HIV. As my mother is a doctor, we used to get the medicines directly from the Medical store. I always used to feel very badly about my illness. I never told anything to anyone about it. I used to feel that I was the only one like this in the whole world. I saw you there and realized that I am not alone.

Meenal took Ramona’s hand in hers.

“I also feel like that. I am all alone in the world.” She started crying.

“Don’t cry, dear. We feel bad because we think we are alone. But we are not alone. There are lots of boys and girls like this in the world. And this illness is simple, that way. It is not the one that kills us.”

“I have no parents, I stay with my uncle. Everyone says harsh things to me because I have HIV.”

“But it’s not our fault. People talk because they don’t have proper information about HIV.”

“I am not good at studies. My aunt says that the HIV has eaten up the brain in my head.”

“That’s not true. My mother says that if we take the medicines regularly, the HIV remains in control. It can’t do anything. And you may not do well in studies but you draw such beautiful pictures. And you cured my leg so easily.
And you know, our art teacher Ms. Dongre keeps gazing at your pictures every time. The other day I was asking her about your pictures."

"Really! About my pictures? Why?" Meenal asked with surprise.

"She always gazes at your pictures. So I asked her whether she liked your pictures."

"Then what did she say?" Meenal could hear her pounding heartbeats. She had heard Ms. Dongre mutter, "Well done", but had never openly said anything.

"She talked to me. She said, that girl draws pictures on the subjects given to everyone, but there's something different about her pictures." She said that her uncle who stays in Bombay is apparently a very well-known painter. Looking at your pictures, Ms. Dongre feels that you will also become a good painter."

"Ramona, what.... this.... me...." She was uttering meaningless words.

"Yes! Then I asked Ms. Dongre, 'will you show Meenal's pictures to your painter uncle?' She has said yes. For that purpose we have taken out all your pictures from the bundle. She said we will just need the principal's permission. He is your mother's brother. He'll certainly agree, won't he?"

"I don't know."

"Let's see. If he doesn't give permission, I'll have my mother call him."

Doing what she wants, making others do what she wants, how easily can Ramona manage it. Meenal couldn't even praise this.

"Ramona, you have great qualities. You will make it big one day"

"Me and big?? Well, I will grow up to become someone significant but ma'am, you are also going to be no less. Do you understand? Does this get through your head?"

"No, HIV has eaten up my brains," As she said this, she couldn't help giggling."

"If you say those words again....." Ramona expressed her fake anger.

"I won't say it again, okay? Now I must go home, Ramona. People at home don't like it if I am late. They immediately doubt that I might be talking to someone."

Ramona and Meenal parted their ways and started thinking on the way back to home.

'What is happening in my life today? What will come of it?' Meenal couldn't understand anything.

Ramona had seen a new problem for her to solve. She was wondering how to solve it.

'Can Meenal be brought to our house to live, or, under the guise of studies, can I take her to our house and at night? Mother can drop her home on her scooter? How to convince mother? That's not really difficult! But it mustn't seem strange to 'Meenal's relatives. What do I do in such a situation?'

She went on thinking. Solving problems was something she liked. And Meenal had now become her favorite friend.
The two girls brought close by HIV remained friends for many years. Ramona is in a hurry to find an answer when she comes across a problem. She has become a lawyer and has started working on matters relating to HIV. Her temperament helps her in this.

Meenal has become a physiotherapist. She helps people affected by injury, illness or disability through movement and exercise. Now she has become an expert at it. That’s not all. She paints very well. Apparently, one of her paintings got her a prize in an international competition.

She and Ramona don’t meet every day but meet occasionally. Ramona says, “Hadn’t I told you, you are going to become someone big in life?”

Meenal wishes to say, “Because of you Ramona,” but she doesn’t say it. She just puts her hand over Ramona’s with love, and smiles gently.

Translated by - Jai Nimbkar
Master Anwar Haroon Qureshi had ranked first in all the four divisions of the fourth standard in the Saraswati Mandir Primary School, in Solapur. This happened ten year ago. Since then, Anwar has always been extremely successful in academics with the exception of two years. Today, his name has appeared in the admission list of the city medical college. He is now going to pursue medical education. Anwar's journey has been so different that may be, a family photo of Anwar and his Aai-Baba (meaning mother-father - as addressed commonly by Hindu Marathi community) will appear in tomorrow's newspapers. Yes, Aai-Baba and not Ammi-Abbu (also meaning mother-father but as addressed commonly in Muslim community) Abbu and Ammi are no longer in this world but Aai and Baba are - Pramila and Kashinath Digde. The news report may talk about Anwar's success, his brightness but not about the hard times that the Digde family went through. His success has many other facets which will not be brought up in the news. All three of them are now reflecting upon those dreadful two years when they were struggling in the frenzied ocean of reality. But they won't utter a word about it to anyone, not even among themselves.

Now all that past is left far behind. The train of their lives has come back on tracks again.

Ten years from now, Anwar would have become a famous and kindhearted doctor. Maybe you would go to just see him, listen to his speech in which he would draw your attention to an important health issue of the society. Perhaps, after the speech you would see him surrounded by the delighted audience and he responding to their queries with a smiling face. Only if you don't take your eyes off him, perhaps you would notice him wipe a tear. The tear would be of the memories of the past.

Anwar's Ammi suddenly died. She had been sick since he was born, and then one day she just passed away. She didn't know and nobody knew what sickness
she had. Anwar’s father Haroon and Kashinath were both in the police force. They were very close friends. That night there was no one to look after the baby, who was crying with hunger. So Pramila, Kashinath’s wife, brought the baby home. Since then Anwar just stayed with them. They didn’t have a child of their own. Pramila was a teacher in Saraswati Mandir primary school. After couple of years, Kashinath was transferred to a faraway place near Nagpur, in the Bhamragad region. The area was known for its long drawn political unrest. Kashinath knew it was too dangerous to take Pramila there. Also, where would they keep little Anwar? So he went to Bhamragad and Pramila stayed back in Solapur, alone. Of course she had little Anwar with her. Pramila’s days just flew past in Anwar’s company. What fun it was to have a small child, watch how it moves its arms and legs, how it opens its toothless mouth and smiles gently. His clothes, his nappies, his food, his cuddles – Pramila got engrossed and enjoyed every moment with Anwar. Anwar had soft and curly hair. She loved running her hand through his curls. Her joy knew no bounds. All this while she continued with her job. Sometimes she would keep Anwar at her mother’s place or would take her neighbor, Rakhmi’s sister to school to look after him. Some people made fun of her but she never answered back. Nor did she take their comments seriously, because she knew how people are biased. Anwar was born in a Muslim family!

Haroon, Anwar’s father married again after he lost his wife. In due course of time the new wife Saira gave birth to first Tanwar and then twin girls, Reshma and Bias. Her day was used up looking after the three children. She had to deal with her husband’s recurrent illnesses too. Haroon once had herpes infection. He also used to have a consistent low fever. But he never complained about it and just suffered silently without taking leaves from work.

With all this, Haroon and Saira had no time to think of Anwar. Of course Anwar himself didn’t need it. He was happy with his Aai- Pramila. Occasionally, Kashinath would come down to Solapur. He would bring sweets and toys for little Anwar. Later, Pramila enrolled Anwar in Saraswati Mandir primary school. She cared for him, pampered him, spoilt him. When asked, Anwar would innocently tell his name as ‘Anwar Digde’. People used to make fun of him, but at the same time they liked the way he would say it.

Once Haroon was appointed on a duty in Mumbai. He got thoroughly wet in the pouring rains. He had to work throughout the night, and then the next day he fell sick. He was admitted to a hospital. His wife couldn’t leave the children and travel to Mumbai. She and Pramila both called up Kashinath and told him the problem. Kashinath immediately took leave and went to Mumbai. He tried to take care of his friend Haroon. The doctor also took efforts but in vain! Haroon couldn’t survive! He passed away.
The doctor from the hospital took Kashinath aside and told him something which shocked him. Haroon had a HIV infection. It would never be known whether he knew it or not. He was dead. “But his wife must undergo bloodtest for HIV and if she has it, then her children must also be tested.”

He became speechless. With great difficulty, he told the doctor, “Please don’t let Haroon’s relatives know about this. Haroon was my very dear friend. One of his sons is even today at my house. I’ll see what I can do. If people come to know about this then they will make life difficult for his wife.”

After returning from Mumbai, Kashinath wandered like one mute in the house. He didn’t talk to anyone. One day he took Saira, Haroon’s wife to the government hospital. He was relieved to learn that she had not caught the infection. The even better part of this was that her children didn’t have to be tested. Kashinath didn’t even tell Saira that Haroon had HIV. While taking her to the hospital he said vaguely ‘The test should be done just for our satisfaction’. Saira didn’t respond either. She already knew about it. Haroon had taken her to the hospital and had got her blood test done once. He used to take the ART medicines from the government hospital. But, later, he stopped taking them. She didn’t know that the medicines had to be taken regularly. She didn’t tell any of these things to Kashinath. She followed him to the hospital meekly. On the way back Kashinath bought sweets for the good news. She silently accepted them and went home.

‘Haroon is no more now,’ Kashinath thought. ‘Now, that his wife and children are not infected. I need not interfere in their lives. Rest is their relatives’ responsibility. The only concern is regarding Anwar. Shall we take him back to them?’ He was frightened to death with this thought. He remembered how closely Pramila was attached to Anwar. She had always treated Anwar as her own child. After Haroon’s death, Saira may not ask for Anwar. She would prefer one child less to care for. But what if some of the other relatives bring up the subject? ‘Let it be. If they do I will see what can be done at that time. As long as they don’t ask for him, I won’t bring up the subject,’ he decided.

Kashinath and Pramila couldn’t have a child of their own. In the beginning they had sought some medical treatment for infertility. But soon after Anwar came into their lives they never felt the real need to continue with the treatment seriously.

Anwar went in the fourth standard. After his Abbu’s demise, he sometimes went to meet his new mother, and met Tanwar, Reshma and Bias as well. Pramila would specially ask him to visit them. Sometimes she had all the children come and eat at her house. She took care that Anwar shouldn’t be detached from his siblings. The other side of the coin was that Anwar was now troubled by the question, ‘Isn’t it a little strange that I live in the Digdes’
house?’ But Pramila had given him some sort of explanation. Of course, he didn’t understand the complexity of the relationships. He was not old enough to understand everything. Sometimes he wished that the new mother should ask him to stay at her house, but sometimes he felt that he was being spoilt much more than his brother and sisters. He always got new books, biscuits, games unlike his siblings. Should he stealthily take some of these things and give it to them? All these thoughts crowded in his mind and confused him. He behaved quite strangely at times. But Pramila spoke patiently with him. She never scolded him. She paid close attention to his studies. Anwar was never tired of studying.

The fourth standard examination was over. Anwar started planning holiday activities with Pramila. In the meanwhile, Kashinath got transferred back to Solapur as desired. Pramila was also happy that she would no longer have to stay alone.

Kashinath didn’t share the same joy as his wife and son had. He was worried about something. He had carried tremendous tension for last two years. He remembered the conversation he had with the doctor after Haroon passed away.

“One of his sons is in my house even today”, he had said while talking to the doctor. He remembered his own sentence again and again. Saira doesn’t have HIV, but what about Anwar's mother? Did she have HIV? I know nothing about that, and now I’ll never know. The doctor had said that if a mother has HIV, then her child also may get it. He kept thinking about it all the time.

‘What if our Anwar has HIV by any chance?’ Ever since this question came into his mind, Kashinath was shattered. He had not told Pramila about his suspicion. Sometimes, he avoided coming to Solapur even on a holiday so that he wouldn't have to tell her. A simple thing would have been to get Anwar tested. But Kashinath didn't have the courage to do it. He would come home during every vacation, tell himself that next time he would definitely do it and go back. Anwar having HIV? Pramila would be so upset at the very idea. We took care of this child, loved him dearly, and were immersed in bringing him up. He also got attached to us, and now if he has HIV...?
Anwar wasn’t sick in the meantime, was he?’ every time Kashinath asked Pramila right at the door. When she said, ‘Nothing much,’ he would heave a sigh of relief. Pramila had got used to the question. She used to wonder, ‘Why does he ask such an inauspicious thing every time?’

Kashinath came back to Solapur for good. This time he brought all his things with him. He had taken leave for two weeks, then he would start working in Solapur. “Anwar wasn’t sick, was he?” he asked this time too, and heaved a sigh of relief when she said, “No.” Now every day he would have Anwar within his sight throughout the day. So he decided to put his fear aside and get him tested.

The next day was a Sunday. ‘The test can’t be done tomorrow,’ he said to himself. ‘But now I must stop passing time. Monday morning the test must be done, come what may.’ Only he knew how he passed that Sunday without doing anything or saying anything.

The idea that Anwar may have HIV had completely deranged him. He was in the police department, he had seen how strangely people behave, what they do. He even thought that if the result is positive they won’t keep him any longer. He even entertained a horrible thought of taking Anwar to Mumbai and leaving him at the door of some institution, and telling Pramila that he was lost. ‘I am not that bad, but what can I do, I have to find some way out of this situation.’ His mind was simply torn. He never used to get angry with Anwar, but on Sunday he was angry with him for jumping and playing, and hit him twice. This had an even worse effect. Pramila thought her husband was not in a stable mental state, he was raising his hand on the child. He doesn’t think of how badly his hand will hurt the small child. So Pramila got upset with him and said, “It was better when you were away. Why are you behaving as if you have lost your senses? I won’t stand for this police-like behavior in the house.”

The next day something even stranger happened. After Pramila and Anwar had gone to the school, Kashinath left the house. He went to school and, with the class teacher’s permission took Anwar for the HIV test. Anwar didn’t know anything. He set out quite happily because he was going out with his father. But he felt scared when he was pricked with a needle for taking his blood at the hospital. Also, the day before Kashinath had hit him. So Anwar had anger and fear in his mind about that too. He had not heard about any test to be done earlier. So when the blood was being taken he made such a racket that Kashinath didn’t think of telling him to keep this to himself and not mention it to Pramila.

Pramila learnt from someone in the school that Kashinath had taken Anwar out. She was a little scared. She tried to call up Kashinath, but his mobile was switched off. She left messages in all the places where Kashinath could possibly be. She suspected that Kashinath was off his head but had no idea why that would be. She thought he might have assumed that she was not keen about the fertility treatment she was taking and hence
annoyed with her. Both of them had not lived together for past many years. It was as though she couldn’t read his mind. At times, Kashinath would behave weirdly with Anwar. She would be puzzled with his statements like ‘He is not our child. If they ask for him we will have to give him up. Don’t get so involved with him’.

It suddenly occurred to her that this man had spirited Anwar away from the school to return him to his family. She became crazed with pain.

Kashinath went to drop Anwar to the school while the test reports were getting ready. He met Pramila at the school door. She became angrier when she saw Anwar with a chocolate in his hand and a red crying face. She, who had never raised her voice, lived alone year after year with fortitude, got mad at her husband in the street.

When Kashinath was away, she looked after Anwar with such love and care. No matter what problems arose, she dealt with them firmly. She had never complained about it. She must be carrying the burden of all these tensions, and it was now coming out in her anger. She always felt honoured at being called Anwar’s mother. Somebody may have asked her why she cared for a Muslim child. But she had always stayed firm. In fact she always took care that Anwar never heard such things. But today she held Anwar close to her and kept shouting at her husband, “Why am I caring for somebody else’s pest?” Finally she calmed down, and without talking to Kashinath, took the child and went home.

Kashinath made his way through the crowd that had gathered to watch the arguments. He was furious with Pramila, and also Haroon. The rage he felt could not be contained in his mind, so, swearing loudly against his dead friend he went to fetch the HIV report.

And he learnt that Anwar had HIV.

Although he had suspected, this horrible shock made Kashinath simply break down. Somehow he reached home. He felt completely hopeless. What is this nuisance we have taken on! We should really leave Anwar somewhere. My wife doesn’t understand anything, but she loves him. He got distressed and started crying. Worried, Pramila asked him, “What’s the matter?” So he told her everything and said, “Let’s not keep him in our house. We’ll leave him somewhere”. Pramila was devastated with his statements.

We make such a heavy burden out of our problems! Actually, Anwar having HIV was the cause of Kashinath’s distress. Though not a complete cure, the Antiretroviral Therapy is available. Taking the medication would have made - and did make - Anwar fit. ‘Whatever it was, to desert a child whom you have loved so much, just because he has HIV? My husband has gone off his head!’ Pramila was really annoyed at Kashinath’s strange reaction.

Kashinath and Pramila both were basically extremely good at heart but went on behaving abnormally with each other for the next few months. Kashinath was always irritated with Anwar. Once
in a while he used to hit him. At the same time, he would bring him some infusion or medicinal ash from spiritual healers. Angry and afraid of the strange behaviour of these two, Anwar started avoiding them.

The holiday was over. The results came out. Anwar had ranked first in all the divisions of the fourth standard.

Afraid that her husband would take Anwar and leave him somewhere, Pramila took Anwar to her sister’s place in Ahmednagar. Anwar didn’t like staying there much. People there discovered that he was a Muslim and picked on him. One day Anwar ran away from that house, climbed on some bus and got off at Jamkhed, a nearby village in the same district. He was starving for two days. Then he got some weeding work on a farm. With whatever he earned he could buy some food. Pramila searched him out in a couple of days. Tanwar’s mother, Saira learnt all this and, worried about Anwar, she told her relatives about it. They all came down and almost forcibly snatched Anwar from Pramila.

They all went through tough times like these for about eight to ten months. Then, slowly, the dust settled down. They all calmed down. Kashinath understood Pramila’s side. Pramila understood the reason behind Kashinath’s behaviour. They went and brought Anwar home so that they all could live together again. But due to the hard times he had during the past year, Anwar’s body rebelled. Then started relentless rounds of Anwar’s illnesses. Until now his health had been quite good, but now it went downhill. Kashinath and Pramilahad had no money in their hands, and the child was so sick. They sold everything saleable in the house, and took loans from wherever they could. They didn’t care about anything except Anwar’s treatment. That whole year passed in Anwar’s illnesses.

Children in Anwar’s class went from the fifth to the sixth standard and from the sixth to the seventh. Then Anwar went into the fifth. He, who had stood first in the fourth standard, came into the fifth standard after a gap of two years. Anwar felt awkward about studying with younger children in the beginning. But then he got used to it. It was like a story of Phoenix bird that rises from the ashes! Their family slowly rose up with the hard work of Kashinath and Pramila. Pramila started taking tuitions. To supplement that, she started taking catering orders. Anwar was taking Antiretroviral Treatment on a regular basis. He got back to studies with full determination. The routine was set.

Many years passed like this. Anwar passed tenth standard examination with flying colours.

One day after finishing the daily chores, Pramila was browsing through a book, when Anwar came and sat next to her. He took her hand and said, “I want to become a Doctor.”

“It is very difficult for us to pay donations and send you to a private medical college, Anwar. You should study and get admission under your own steam. We’ll support you.”
“Do you think I can manage it? Can I cope with it?”

“Why shouldn’t you? You are so bright. If you can’t cope with it, who else can?”

“That’s true, but I have HIV, don’t I?”

“Come on Anwar. Haven’t we read the book on HIV together? What did it say? Take the medicines properly and forget that HIV is even a problem.“

She gave him a small swipe fondly, and drawing him closer to her, she said, “Honey, I am not saying that you shouldn’t bring up the subject of HIV again. On the other hand, you should become a doctor of HIV patients, give them medicines, and relieve their pain. That’s what I am saying.”

“What’s brewing up there! Let me also be part of it”, Kashinath said, coming in. He came and sat besides Pramila. She thought about the agonizing two-year period and this sunny day of their life. This wouldn’t have been possible without the strong bond of love between them. She was holding Anwar with one hand, and laid the other on Kashinath’s hand lovingly. And for no obvious reasons, the memories brought tears to her eyes.

Now Anwar has got admission in the medical college. First milestone of their life has been reached! The turbulent part is over and the road of hard work and toil lies ahead. They are quite sure that they would achieve the victory!
“Who comes, who comes, who comes in Swapna’s dream? Who calls on her mobile? Who calls late at night?” Shabana used to tease Swapna and Swapna used to get annoyed. This was a common affair between these two friends and Swapna would miss it if Shabana didn’t pull her leg.

Recently, Swapna’s brother had bought her a mobile and she got a call from an unknown number late at night. Swapna picked up the phone but nobody said anything. The next day Swapna wrote down that number on the back page of her notebook and deleted it from the phone. She knew that her brother Sachin would check her phone. She whispered this incident to Shabana in the class the next day. Shabana said, “We’ll find out whose number it is. It must be that Sanjay’s. Who else’s can it be? Don’t worry. I’ll see.”

Swapna knew that her brother had gifted her the mobile only in order to keep an eye on her. Many times while she was eating or doing something he would pick up her phone and check it. Swapna didn’t like this at all, but she couldn’t complain. Swapna knew her parent’s every intention behind giving her the phone was to keep an eye on who talks to her or whom she talks to. Actually Swapna was not interested in any serious relationship with anybody. She was only in the ninth grade. School, friends, chatting, homework, playing in the back yard, helping her mother in the household chores occasionally and wearing fashionable clothes – could give enough spice to her life. But she definitely enjoyed the feeling that somebody was trying to reach her, somebody wanted to talk to her. However, she didn’t want any meaning read into it immediately. And she didn’t at all go along with the watchdogging by parents or her brother.

As soon as she reached the school, Shabana came running and said, “I’ve found ‘his’ telephone number.” Swapna’s attention wandered during the class periods until the recess. Shabana said, “That Sanjay keeps staring at you, and that’s his number.”

Sanjay Gaikwad was known to them, but still the two of them went and glanced at him from some distance. He was standing in the school porch surrounded by his friends. When the boys realized that the girls were looking at them, they hinted at each other and laughed intentionally. The girls then came to their senses and ran to their classroom.

Swapna conjured up a picture of how Sanjay Gaikwad and she would look together. She didn’t really like the picture much. She decided that, she would not get involved in this subject. Even if that Gaikwad tries to go any further, then she would simply tell the people at home, or the Principal at school. But till now he had not done anything much. He’d only made one phone call. If somebody
probes, he could have said that ‘it happened accidentally.’ So it was best to remain quiet for the time being.

Swapna was lost in thoughts while lying on her bed at night. ‘When she was in the fifth standard she had started menstruating. Her mother had allowed her to bunk the school on that day. While telling her about hygiene, care and so on, she was kissing her on the cheek for no reason. Swapna was delighted to find her favorite dish in the plate that night. She thought, ‘How wonderful is it to get pampered like this every month. But, when she took the first mouthful, mom-dad’s record began.

“Now you are grown up. You should talk to men from a distance. Do not let anyone touch your body.”

“You have to protect the honor of your parents when you are among people. You must not talk to a boy, you must walk along the road with your head down, you mustn’t make eye-contact with anybody.” She was quietly looking down and eating her meal.

In the beginning Swapna had followed their instructions literally. But these days she was getting annoyed by what they had said. It was not as though she was going to do something that she shouldn’t. But she felt she was going to be grown up someday. Already her body was blossoming; it was acquiring a tone and shape. When anyone would look at her she would sense that she has been noticed. She was aware of all these things. Every morning from the time she woke up, the fountain of a thousand thoughts had started surging in her mind.

‘School will be over next year and then there will be college. College will be a lot of fun. Then marriage! But, I am clear about one thing. In any case I am going to fix up my own marriage. I am not going to let anybody else do it. I am going to marry a boy with whom my wavelengths match – his mind, his temperament should be compatible with mine. Let him be from any caste, class! He can even be a Muslim. Isn’t Shabana a Muslim? She is my closest friend. If I meet someone like that, why should there be any objection?

‘Am I thinking of Shabana’s brother?’ She was so startled at this thought. ‘No,
no. Shabana’s brother is married. Even if I like him, even if he looks just like a film hero, I don’t want to commit this kind of folly. How silly of me to think like this!’ She shook her head as if, to get rid of the thoughts.

In the afternoon after returning from school, Swapna was cleaning wheat with her mother. They were just the two of them in the house. Both of them were working silently. Swapna’s mother, Jayashree was also lost in thought. She was mulling over this thought for quite a few days and wanted to talk frankly with Swapna. Actually it would have been better if Swapna’s father had been with her when she talked to Swapna. But in a way it was better that he wasn’t there. ‘He wouldn’t know how to talk to her as it should be, so that our dear girl wouldn’t get offended.’

The doctor had said, “Around twelve years of age, these children should learn about their HIV.” Swapna is fourteen now. Swapna also has HIV like the two of us. She is getting the ART medicines, but still nobody has ever told her anything about it. Once when she cribbed about taking the medicines every day, he was told, “You had T.B. when you were small. So you have to take the medicines until you would be grown up so that it shouldn’t recur.” The poor innocent girl kept faith on this and took the medicines obediently. But now she has come of age. What if she falls in love, what if she has to marry, what are we going to do if something untoward happens?

‘She is smart that way. Every six months we have to do her blood test for CD4. Last time while the lab technician was drawing Swapna’s blood, Swapna inquired ‘why her blood was tested periodically’. Did Swapna notice that I was standing behind her and was prompting the technician to not answer. Until now she was small, but now such incidents were going to occur frequently. Now I mustn’t wait too long to tell Swapna about her HIV. If at all at any point Swapna denies to take the medicines, the secret of her so far preserved good health will slip out of my hands.’

‘But what am I going to tell her? How am I going to tell her?’

She quietly looked at Swapna, sitting besides. Without saying anything, with her head down, Swapna was sieving the wheat. She too must be thinking about something. There was a slight smile on her face.

Swapna’s voice spoke up, “The wheat is done.”

“Is it done? Then bring the vegetables from inside, we’ll clean them.”

Swapna must not have liked this option much, because she sighed and obediently brought the vegetables from inside. She suspected that her mother was going to detain her in doing one job after another. She decided not to oppose her and do whatever jobs had to be done. She also thought that while quietly doing household jobs, she was getting time to think. She also brought some peanuts for removing the skins.

“It’s good, you have brought the peanuts. We’ll take off the skins and pound them.”

Swapna didn’t say anything. She was cleaning the leafy vegetables with her head down.
Jayashree was absorbed again in her own thoughts.

‘How did I feel when I learned that I had HIV?

That day was still fresh in Jayashree’s mind. When she was pregnant with Swapna, she had gone to a gynecologist to register her name. During the registration her blood test was also done. It was then discovered that she had HIV in her blood. To have to listen to this in front of her sister-in-law who had accompanied her was like a death sentence. She had taken such a fright of this that she didn’t again go to any hospital. Her delivery was done at home by her mother and her friend.

She had HIV, her husband also did. Her elder child, Sachin, didn’t have it. But her younger daughter Swapna had it. Swapna was already two years, when all this was discovered.

After the three of them were diagnosed with HIV, she used to feel very badly about it. She felt like leaving everything and committing suicide. But later things improved. The medicines became available in the government hospital free of cost. When the medicines were taken properly, their health also improved. Swapna’s medicines started from the time she was three years old. Now she had gotten into the habit of taking medicines everyday. Now the girl doesn’t crib much about the medicines.

‘It’s not as though there is any problem right now. Both the children are quite bright. Swapna gets good marks every year. The older Sachin has appeared for the pre professional exam this year. The two of us are keeping good health. But one cannot keep aside the haunting questions like what is the future for Swapna? How are we going to get her married? These questions are going to confront us sooner or later. The young girl looks so attractive these days that looking at her, nobody would imagine that she has HIV. She would certainly get an excellent match. But it wouldn’t be right to get her married without telling about her HIV. It wouldn’t be possible. It’s bound to come out sometime.’ Jayashree went on thinking.

‘We have to disclose about her HIV status to her husband-to-be. But then, Swapna has to be told first that she has HIV! When and how? It seems like her father is not worried about anything. He says, we’ll cross the bridge when it’s the right time.’

Sanjay Gaikwad appeared in Swapna’s thoughts again and again. She thought, ‘Instead of him why didn’t Ranjit Sabne call me?’ Ranjit was also in her class. And she used to like him. Once when the whole class was playing some games together on the ground, and Sabane came towards her by taking a big leap, Swapna had quietly let him catch her. Even her friends were amazed. Actually she was very good at such open air games. She wouldn’t get caught quickly. But when she saw Sabne in front of her, she felt she would do anything to grab hold of that momentary touch. She couldn’t run away. She felt bashful. This was a new feeling for her.

‘I am going to marry according to my wishes, with whoever I like.’ Swapna said to herself.
The work the duo had undertaken was almost finished. Mother and daughter both were apparently silent, engrossed in their own thoughts.

“Shall I register my name?” Swapna asked breaking the silence.

“For what?” Jayashree looked doubtfully at her.

“The Ladies Club is going to hold a camp for young women called ‘blossoming buds’. I want to go for it. They are going to talk about growing up and chums and all... and teach hair-styling also. It’s free. Can I go mom? I’ll have to register my name before it gets full. The club member had come to our school this afternoon to get the enrolments. Mrs. Abhyankar, that friend of yours had also come along with her.

“Tell me, Can I go, please?”

Jayashree didn’t know what to do. She held Swapna close and said, “Go. And please come back quickly, then we’ll both go to the park to eat your favorite popcorn and we will have ice-cream too.”

“What’s wrong with you mom?” said Swapna, looking unbelievingly at her mother.

“You were so small, and now you are all grown up. Go and learn hairstyling if you want. We’ll make your hairstyle like that for your wedding. Go to the camp also.”

“Wedding? Chill mom! There is lot of time for my wedding. I want to complete my studies first, then a job and then let us see about my wedding and all.” Swapna said, annoyed by her mother’s words.

When Swapna left, Jayashree too realized that she has failed to start the topic on a right note. She thought for a while, then changed and got ready to go out with her daughter. After Swapna returned, the duo left for the nearby park. On the way Swapna was chattering nonstop about the camp she had just registered her name for, but her mother was silent.

After they sat down in the park Swapna said, “Mom, you want to tell me something, don’t you? Then shoot!”

Jayashree came to her senses completely. It won’t be wise to lose this opportunity. She made up her mind and told Swapna about her HIV straight out.

Jayashree told her everything that had happened. She told that this illness is not that bad and it can be kept in control by taking medicines.

Swapna was startled at her mother’s speech. She had suspected that she had some illness. And the story about T.B. may not be true. But she had not given it much thought. Now when she heard her mother, she got a real shock of her life. It was like having a bomb inside her she thought.

“Mom, you’re kidding, right?” she asked, but when she saw the tears in Jayashree’s eyes, she had to believe her. Then she bombarded Jayashree with a lot of questions. “Can’t you take out the HIV if you take all the medicines just once? Why do you have to take the medicine lifelong? Can a girl like this marry? If she marries, does the husband also contract this illness? And suppose ..... I mean, if there is a child, does the child also get it?”

Jayashree answered as many questions as she could. Holding her life in her hands, she told the truth as far as she knew.

When Swapna came to know...
The two sat there for a long time. Jayashree was trying to control her tears but she just couldn’t. When Swapna saw that, she also started crying. Both cried for long time. They were so grief-stricken that they didn’t feel like eating. In order that the other may not feel bad, they bought some popcorn and ate it in a complete silence. After eating, Swapna felt a little better. She held her mother’s hand tightly. Although she wiped her eyes many times, they were getting filled again and again with tears.

To change their mood and the subject she told her mother that some Gaikwad had called her up. Now it wasn’t likely that her mother would get angry.

“Tell me if he calls again, then we’ll see”, Jayashree said. There was stillness between them, heaviness, but also closeness. Jayashree’s hand was in Swapna’s. Just then Swapna started talking.

“Mom, I have read a little about HIV in books. Tell me one thing, will anybody be willing to marry me when they learn that I have this illness?”

Jayashree didn’t answer for a moment.

“Forget marriage, it is not that important. I won’t marry. I will learn. I promise you, when I grow up I will become a scientist. I will discover a medicine that will completely cure HIV.”
The medicine will be well-known all over the world. Everybody will say Swapna Rawde has made a big invention. She has found a medicine for HIV. Once you take the medicine this illness will be cured for good.”

Jayashree, failing to understand all this, stared at Swapna. For a moment she was absorbed in her daughter’s dreamy idea. But will a medicine which is a complete cure ever be found? When will it be found? She had asked the doctor these questions many times, and been convinced that it’s not going to be an easy task. Even so, she kept quiet for some time, thinking that this was not the right time to wake her daughter from the dream.

But Jayashree was relieved to hear Swapna’s response.

‘Actually, she got HIV because of me and she alone got it, her brother, Sachin remained free of it. Still Swapna is not mad at me.’

Jayashree initially had a feeling that Swapna might get angry about all this but she wasn’t. She kissed Swapna and said, “You go ahead and invent the medicine dear, but even without that you can still find a groom. My brother, Nikhil has hearing problem. Didn’t he get a good wife? And remember a story that we saw on the television the other day? What was that girl’s name - Sharvari. She lost both her hands in an accident. She now does all her work with artificial hands. And there’s a man who loves her, who is willing to marry her. This can happen. HIV is so much easier than these handicaps. Now times have changed. With medical advancements, they have even invented medicines that prevent a baby from getting HIV infection from the mother. Why are you talking so pessimistically?’ Swapna didn’t answer immediately.

To get her to speak, Jayashree asked her on the way, “Do you want to buy bangles?” Swapna shook her hand.

“Why not? I’m giving them to you, why don’t you take them?”

“I don’t want any. I will cancel the name I have registered for the camp.”

“Why do you want to cancel it? Don’t be so disappointed, my darling. You are going to become a scientist who will discover the medicine aren’t you?”

Swapna didn’t say anything. She had become mute. After reaching home, she lay down for a while. Jayashree also didn’t keep after her. She let her be alone for a while. Then she made ginger tea that Swapna liked and took it to her. She found that Swapna was sobbing her heart out. Jayashree was terrified when she saw that.

“Don’t be like this, my dear, don’t cry. You want to go to this camp, don’t you? Tell me, when do you have to go?”

“I don’t want to go to that camp, Mom. I am not going to be able to get married. No marriage, no child, no hairstyle. Then why should I go to a camp to learn anything?” She said, sobbing, “Let it go. Why look at a road that you don’t want to walk on?”

Jayashree wondered whether she had messed things up. When the doctor told her to tell Swapna about her HIV, he had also extended his support for such a disclosure. But Jayashree didn’t listen to him. Her idea
was different. She felt that she should hold her daughter close and tell her gently. In the past few days she had prepared for it. She made up her mind again and determinedly dried her eyes. The doctor had given suggestions about how to tell the girl. He had said, ‘don’t cry at all.’ But she hadn’t been able to control her own crying. She told herself, ‘Whatever happens, this is my child. I’ll explain everything to her properly.’ She sat close to Swapna.

She called Swapna fondly by her childhood pet name and held her close. “Swapnya, listen to me. You see, there is a lot of time for marriage. You have just completed your thirteenth year. Because we have HIV, it doesn’t mean that we have done anything wrong. The HIV can’t tie us up. We have medicines, we can keep the illness under control, we can lead a good life. Then why despair? If you buy new bangles to wear to school, they don’t immediately become wedding bangles. If you get information about things, get to know your body, even learn to braid your hair in a new way, what’s wrong with it? If you want, tomorrow we’ll go to a lady counselor whom I know. If you have any more questions that I can’t answer, she will answer them. And if you want to marry, HIV need not stand in the way. We are certainly not going to deceive anyone. We’ll tell them the truth and then get you married. But the main thing is, there’s still a lot of time for that. First you have to be educated, you have to grow up. My child’s partner must be suitable for her, sensitive, smart, who will love my girl and whom she likes. Isn’t that so?”

Swapna wondered how her mother learned what was in her mind. Her mother went on talking, “For now, put all these thoughts about HIV aside. Live a great life. Don’t stint on studies, games and friends.”

“Mom, it’s easy enough to say. Leave the HIV aside, but in any case, girls in our country can’t live a free life. All the people have their eyes on her. The insiders and outsiders in different ways. Now because of this HIV, you are talking to me. But otherwise does anyone talk to a girl about how she should live her life, what she should do. We go to school, study, do whatever work you assign to us. Why do you ask me to help in the housework? So that I may not be embarrassed later when I can’t do it. What about Sachin? Shouldn’t he be able to do housework too? Finally, what is it you all want? That I should get a good match, that I should marry a boy you have found for me and go to live at his house. This is what’s in your mind. This is what I don’t like. Why can’t boys go to live at their wife’s place? Now I have got HIV, let me at least live my life the way I want to.” Swapna was surprised at herself. She hadn’t been aware that she was thinking this way.

Jayashree was just floored by her daughter’s speech. She had never imagined that Swapna could think so much about these things. She didn’t know whether she should admire her or be annoyed with her.

“Mom, suppose I tell somebody …?”

In a moment Jayashree became alert. If my daughter is thinking so much then as a mother, I must give her suitable answers.
“Tell somebody what?”
“That I have HIV?”
“Whom do you want to tell? Actually, there’s not objection to telling, but you should tell only such people who can understand it. Then we won’t have any trouble.” Jayashree’s stomach contracted with fear.
“I’ll tell Shabana. I always tell her everything.”
“It’s natural that you would feel like telling your friend. But if Shabana tells her family and if it spreads all over town through them, then?” But this was not an answer Swapna would accept. She thought, whatever the consequences, I’ll accept them.
Mother said, “It is your call Swapna. Your father and I have told some of our relatives, and have benefitted from it. If you are sure that Shabana is sensible and will understand things, then do tell her. But see, Shabana is also still young. We were afraid to tell you until now. But in your case it was different. We had to tell you. Why do you want to put the burden of responsibility to understand this issue on that little girl? And as it is you have no symptoms. The medicines are continuing properly. We are there to help you. If you need any kind of help and me, your father, your brother can’t give, then you can take Shabana’s help. If such a time comes, then you can tell her.”
Swapna understood both the meaning in what her mother actually said, and the underlying meaning in her tone. She wanted to laugh, but she didn’t show it. In order to benefit more from this situation she said, “Mom, I do need Shabana’s help, even now I do. Sachin gave me a mobile, but he checks it every day. I don’t like it. You don’t say anything to him about it. If I come to you with my problems, you solve them according to your lights. That’s what I don’t like. I am grown up now. I want to lead my own life. Even the fact that I had this big sickness, you hadn’t told me up till now.”
“Yes dear, I was wrong in that. We should have told you before this. But however much we thought, we couldn’t gather the courage to tell you. Finally I just decided to do it today. And I will warn Sachin. He won’t check your mobile anymore. I agree, you are really grown-up. You can differentiate in what is good or bad for you. Nobody should keep an eye on you.” Mother had backed off from all sides.
“That’s all right, then. But this is not the end of the subject. We’ll talk about it again and we’ll keep talking. If I have any questions I’ll ask the doctor also.”
“That’s decided. It’s absolutely acceptable to me. Come now, do you have any homework? Will you do it? I’ll look after the cooking. It’s time for your dad and Sachin to come.”
“Yes,” the daughter said, embracing her mother. Jayashree was waiting for this moment.
“But Mom, why didn’t dad come to say all these things to me? Wasn’t it his responsibility too?”
“Swapnya, parents love their children so much that they always see their children as small. Your Dad felt that you would be frightened when you hear this. So he always said we shouldn’t tell you. But I am now going to tell him, that our child is not small any longer, she’s grown up. I am very proud of my Swapnya today.”
“Mom, shall all four of us sleep together today?”

“Yes, we’ll sleep together; sleep in each other’s arms.”

Jayashree’s eyes filled again and again, but these were not melancholy tears. There was a little pain, but mostly it was joy. Even so, she wiped them away quickly.

Swapna got up. Jayashree admired the way Swapna enthusiastically opened her satchel and took out her notebooks. ‘She was a little upset, but on the whole she had accepted it with a lot of courage. Whatever happened was for the good.’ In her mind Jayashree felt like she was talking to Swapna’s dad. ‘Even if HIV hadn’t been there, the kind of conversation we had today should take place between every mother and daughter, father and daughter. But it doesn’t take place. It is never taken into consideration that the daughter is now grown up. We should let her think about her own life. Tell me, would we ever have thought of this? When she herself told me, I agreed with her, that too because the HIV was pricking my mind. If that hadn’t been the case, would you or I been able to bear so much openness? Parents in this country don’t think so openly about daughters. Had my mother ever thought about me in this way? Of course those times were different. A woman was considered an inferior being. In a way, I should thank HIV. Because I had that on my conscience, I was willing to consider what my daughter thought. Tell me, can a pearl be formed without stone hurting the living creature inside?’

Filled with pride and love, Jayashree kept watching her daughter studying for a long time.

Translated by - Jai Nimbkar
I had finished with my standard 12th exams and my vacations had started. I had gone to Mumbai to visit my paternal aunt. My aunt’s son Sandeep was a little older than I. One day, I had gone to the sea-shore with him. I stepped away a little to answer the mobile. Raju said ‘hello’ at the other end and instantly I knew that something terrible had happened.

“Shubham, my mother is no more. That she will die was a given. For a long time now she had given up taking the medicines…Her disease got intensified. The fact was that during my birth, she had been given a blood transfusion. She got HIV because of that. The first level medicines were no longer working on her. She needed advance medication. She would certainly have got those in the Government programme but she was not at all ready to go to a Government hospital…” haltingly Raju was talking and sobbing simultaneously.

“Listen Shubham, from her…from her I too have got HIV.”

“Raju, how…meaning so many days…you never…” Raju did not allow me to say anything. He told me this terrible truth in just four five sentences and shut the phone. I went into a spin. What to say, how to say it, I couldn't fathom it. Raju had shut the phone.

Did I understand correctly or was it just a bad dream? May be nothing like this has really happened, certainly there was great confusion in my mind. For a few moments I just stared at the phone like a person in a trance.

Sandeep asked me, “What happened Shubham? Whose call was it?”

“It was my friend Raju.”
“Raju? OK. The one whose mother put you into school with him. That Raju?”

“Yes, my friend Raju’s mother, she passed away. She has passed away brother.”

“Oh? How did she die so suddenly? Was she ill?”

“Ill? Yes. She was ill.”

“What was wrong with her?”

I heard Sandeep’s question, but I stopped short of answering it.

I burst out crying. Raju’s mother was not only my friend’s mother; she was like my second mother. Because she knew my mother, she had enrolled me in a good school in town along with Raju. I had three more siblings at home and both our parents worked. As a result no one had the time to look after us children. We were wastrels. We bunked school, roamed around, got into street games and played pranks.

Once Raju invited us home. Raju’s mother fed us. She explained to us gently why we should be studying. Raju’s mother was so loving towards us that I felt she was like a Goddess that day. Since that day there was quite a change in me. I started paying attention to my studies. If I had a problem, I asked his mother’s help. I began studying seriously. I started scoring good marks. In addition I got some prizes too. Raju, of course, was bright to begin with, but due to his influence I came into line, straight and narrow. Raju’s mother was always quick to praise me.

“She was my second mother, now she is gone, what shall I do now?” I put my head on Sandeep’s shoulder and wailed.

I must have howled like this for at least ten minutes. We were on the seashore and people were looking at us. Sandeep became aware of this before I did. At first he said, “OK, be quiet, don’t cry here.” After ten minutes he said, “Shubham, why are you moaning like it’s your own mother who has passed away? Why don’t you stop crying now? Come on everyone is watching us.”

I kept staring at him, thinking, ‘What kind of a person is he, who doesn’t feel anything about another’s grief?’ In reality I didn’t say anything. I took out my handkerchief, wiped my eyes and stood up. I was quiet. Sandeep’s questions were creating a storm within me.

At first I felt angry with him but then those same questions forced me to look inwards. I started questioning myself. No one was likely to be aware about this conversation between me and my own mind. I was finding answers to
my own questions. One of my school teachers, Rege sir used this method. If any student was facing any difficult questions, Rege sir would take him for a walk on the ground and while taking rounds make him search for answers to his own questions.

In my heart of hearts was I thinking of Raju’s mother as my mother?

‘Yes.’ I said to myself tearfully.

Would I have been this distraught had the mother of any other friend died? Did I have more affection for her because she had put me in school?

May be it was so, because in my entire family no one else had been to such a big school. No one else would have afforded me such an opportunity; it was only because Raju’s mother was staunchly backing me. She opened the doors of opportunity for me. She helped me get a freeship. She sent me to a scholarship class. Once things got going others too chipped in. But she was the first person I knew who would take such a genuine interest in someone else’s child!

‘So, you have nothing to do with Raju’s sorrow, you are crying because of your own sorrow!’ My mind said ‘yes’… and I was startled.

‘How can it be so? Raju is my friend, a very close friend and I am crying because of his mother’s death for sure.’

‘Has it struck you that though Raju’s mother had contracted HIV during childbirth, till today no one had told you about it?’

‘May be no one told me, so what? What difference does it make? It is their personal matter.’

Not when we were young, but later on, Raju’s mother would be frequently sick. Raju would come to school looking really morose. Still I never guessed at the truth.

‘Then why is it that he gave you this information at this juncture? Did he not feel the friendship to be close enough for such a disclosure before this?’ By the time my mental dialogue had reached this stage, Sandeep had taken me on to a bus.

He had recognised the fact that the responsibility of taking me safely home rested squarely on his shoulders. Since I did not want to trouble him more than necessary, I tried to pull myself together. I started paying attention to what he was saying.

Sandeep started telling me the story of some film to keep my mind occupied. Though I was listening to him, my mind kept questioning, ‘why hadn’t Raju told me the truth up till now?’

This line of thinking brought up another question. ‘When did Raju come to know of it to begin with? As long as Raju himself was in the dark there was no question of his telling me. Till matriculation Raju and I sat on the same bench at school. Today if I am facing so many questions, what must he have faced when he found out the truth? How could he have faced it all alone? Not only must he have come to know about his mother’s condition but also his own.’

‘Raju’s mother had stopped medication, but hopefully Raju was regular with his medicines. Sometimes I had seen medicines in his school bag.
I had read somewhere that they need to be taken very regularly. When I meet Raju this is the first thing to confirm and if he is not taking them properly, give him a couple of tight slaps and take him to the doctor. Raju must take his medicines regularly; this will now be my responsibility. In any case we are together every day.

On the way back I spoke to Sandeep about Raju’s mother but did not make any mention of HIV. Since Raju had not told me about it till today, it was in his private domain and now I was a part of that private community. The knowledge that now I have a responsibility made me feel more mature.

I don’t know what Sandeep told my aunt on reaching home but straightaway she made me sit down to a meal. Though I wasn’t hungry at all, since she insisted that I eat something, I made an effort to eat. After lunch, my aunt said, “You can get a night bus back to Pune. Would you like to go? Sandeep will accompany you to the bus stand.” I kept looking at my aunt. ‘How wise this simple woman is!’ I thought. She was on the right track. It was better that I go to Raju rather than immerse myself in my own sorrow. He needed me more. I had not realised this. I felt somewhat better after boarding the bus to Pune. I wanted to cry. Memories of Raju’s mother were crowding my mind, but I felt comforted by the fact that I was doing the right thing. Actually Raju was as old as I, but many times I felt him to be older than me, more understanding, wiser than me. I always felt that if there was a difficulty, it would be resolved by talking with Raju. Today Raju was in a vulnerable situation. He must need support and help. At such a time he has chosen me - his best friend- to be his support. While choosing me, there did not seem to be any reservations in his mind. He had shared the truth with me just as it was. I felt proud to be his friend.

I called Raju on his mobile. At first he did not take my call. His grandfather answered. He was calm. He had lost his daughter, but it was not an unexpected happening for him. On the other hand it was he, who comforted me. He asked me to look after Raju. When Raju came on the line and I told him ‘I am coming to you and will reach in two hours’, it seemed to make him feel better.

His voice was unsteady when he said, “When there was no phone call from you, I thought that you were going to break all ties with me after coming to know that my mother died of HIV and that I too have it.”

I was amazed. How sorrow distorts someone’s judgement.

“Oh Raju, how could you even think of such a thing? I am your friend. If you have HIV, then so be it. I am with you and will always be with you. For one, I am not in any danger because you have HIV and suppose that were so, even then I would not have bothered about it. I am coming. Look after yourself.”

On reaching Pune, I went straight to Raju’s place. He hugged me. Supporting him, I sat next to him. I was determined to pull him out of sorrow; I took it as my goal to make him look at life with enthusiasm and joy once more. I did not even bother to ask him when he came to know about
his mother’s condition. Nothing would have been achieved by that.

For many years this friend of mine had conducted himself with such courage, hugging such a difficult secret to his heart. In fact I felt very lucky to have such a courageous, strong person as my friend. Later in the midst of tears, Raju himself told me that his mother had told him the truth after he passed the tenth standard. At that time she had said to him, “Don’t tell anyone, because it is possible that they will despise us once they know the truth. People have a lot of misconceptions in their minds regarding this disease.”

“Since then I have wanted to talk to you but I couldn’t make up my mind.”

Raju said, “I don’t know about others, but I was sure about you, that you will not despise me.”

“Despise? Why should I despise you? You are my friend and I am yours. Today I am really proud of this fact. No one is going to despise you and I am not going to allow anyone to despise you.”

I kept patting him. “Listen to me Raju, now our friendship is so strong that it will never end.” I said to him.

“Yes.” He whispered.
Looking at me he embraced me tightly. Once again I realised how Raju’s mother, no, ‘OUR’ mother who had HIV, had made us wise and understanding. I resolved to help him to come out of his present sorrow.

I slapped him on the back and said, “Come let’s go out for ten minutes and share a cup of tea.”

Keeping my hand on his shoulders I kept walking with him.

Translated by - Jyoti Kanetkar
“Hey, you, come on, Mom must be waiting. She has not eaten anything since morning; she must be very hungry now.” said Vanamala’s brother Suryakant.

“Does she even understand hunger anymore? We are the ones who keep giving tea and other things through that tube.” Vanamala said in an irritated manner.

Ignoring his sister’s irritation, Suryakant said, “Should we give her soup two hours after tea? The doctor had said that she could have soup.”

“I don’t know how to make soup.” Vanamala was still pissed off.

“Let’s get some Maggi soup”, he suggested.

“Then you only go and get it”, said Vanamala.

“Yes, I’ll get it. Now quickly give me the tea in a bottle. I’ll take it and get the soup packet on the way back.”

“Then get me a packet of Maggi noodles too.”

For a moment Suryakant was really angry with Vanamala. He thought it was very selfish of Vanamala to think only of herself. But then he pulled himself together. He looked at her intently. Behind her disgruntled face, he detected a certain fear. He was feeling that a girl of Vanamala’s age should be more understanding when she knew how sick their mother was and when she could see that her brother was so worked off his feet while coping with everything. However looking at Vanamala’s behaviour it seemed as if she wasn’t aware of the issues at stake. What then was the fear he had seen in her eyes?

“Vanamala, I’ll get the noodles but I wonder how you can think of something so frivolous like noodles when our mother is so sick?”

“Are you saying that just because she is sick we shouldn’t eat or drink? Let me tell you, now whatever you do about her sickness, nothing can save her.”

For the last fifteen days, their mother had been admitted to the hospital. All the housework had fallen on to Vanamala and she was really fed up with it. On top of it all, they had to send tea, thin rice gruel, fruit juice to their mother in the hospital. These days another fear was haunting her viz. ‘would she be able to attend school ever again?’

When he heard her talking in such final terms about their mother, for a moment, Suryakant was tempted to hit her. He even went so far as to raise his hand. But before he could hit her, the fear in her eyes brought him up short. The fear was not about a possible beating. Maybe it had a little to do with the possibility that she might not be able to attend school anymore, but maybe the real fear was that today their mother was sick, and how would they possibly cope
after she had gone? It could also be that she was afraid of either the impending death or the fact that both of them were infected by the same disease as their mother. The moment this thought hit him, all the anger vanished. He took his sister into his arms and patted her. In his embrace, she burst into tears.

“What will happen to us now!” she said trying to control her sobs.

“Nothing bad will happen to us, don’t be afraid. Am I not there for you?” Really speaking he too had the same fear, but once she voiced it, he realised that he would have to be the wiser of the two and behave accordingly.

Both of them had tea and buns. He changed his clothes.

Just then the alarm on his mobile went off. Looking at the clock, Vanamala said, “Pills! Leave only after taking the medicines. Just wait, I’ll go and get it for both of us.” She got the pills for both of them. After taking them, he parted his hair looking in the mirror. While looking at his reflection in the mirror, he thought to himself, ‘Now I have to run this house, earn money, and look after Mom and Vanamala both.’ He poured tea for his mother into an old glass coffee bottle and left home in a hurry.

Fifteen days ago when he had gone to wake up his mother, he had found her lying crumpled up. She was unconscious. As it was she was house bound for the last two months without any strength to get up, or do anything, but when he found her unconscious, he called an ambulance and took her to the hospital. Since then his daily routine underwent a complete change. He would get up in the morning, take tea for his mother, come back from the hospital and then help Vanamala with the cooking, eat his lunch, again go to the hospital, talk to the doctor and get the medicines he asked for. He would stay for as long as he could near his mother and return home pretty late. By now their mother could no longer eat anything solid. She had to be fed through the nasal tube. Once in the hospital she had gained consciousness. Then she had been somewhat better for the next eight days but now for the last four five days she was once again unconscious.

Suryakant was older than Vanamala. When the mother and the two children were diagnosed with HIV, Vanamala was just a baby and Suryakant was four or five years old. His father however, did not have HIV. Suryakant remembered a lot of quarrels between his parents when he was small. But one thing was certain that ‘Anna’ his father, would take them to the ART centre quite regularly at that time. Their mother was irregular about going to the centre; sometimes she would go and at other times not go at all. Later their quarrels increased; still later his father left their house and went to live in another locality. At his mother’s insistence, he married a second time. Thereafter he would come home irregularly and give some money from time to time.

When Suryakant’s mother was short of money, she would send him to his father to ask for money. Whenever Suryakant arrived, his father would take him out in a surreptitious manner.
and hand over some money. He would buy a cake for him from the bakers on the corner. Even though Suryakant was very young then, he would understand all this. If his father wasn’t at home when he went, he would return without a word. Even after leaving for the other house, his father was regular about taking them to the ART centre. Now that Suryakant was grown up, their father didn’t always accompany them; however he did not forget to remind them about the upcoming appointment.

Earlier their mother used to wash clothes and vessels in three or four households in a nearby society. Since his childhood, Suryakant had been doing odd jobs too. Sometimes he worked in a shop, sometimes in a hotel and at other times as a paper boy. Now he had a fruit cart. In every job there was some difficulty. In the shop he used to get physically tired due to the work. While distributing newspapers, he needed a bicycle. For a while he did borrow the bicycle from Sarja auntie’s house. Then one day Sarja auntie and mother quarrelled and he could no longer use the bicycle. Subsequently he was forced to give up the paper delivery work. Ultimately it didn’t matter, as that made him think up the idea of the fruit cart.

In the last two years he had acquired a push-cart. He had to go early morning to the big market and buy the fruit and sell them through the day. He had learned over time how to bargain, how to arrive at a price, how to collect the supply. He would collect the fruits and
park his cart in front of the Council Hall. At peak times, he would finish all his supplies within two-three hours. Sometimes, however, he would not do good business till late in the evening and then he had to push the cart from street to street calling out his wares. People on the streets always asked for a discount, if he said forty rupees they would ask for fifteen or twenty rupees, and then the price would be settled at twenty-five. By now he had understood that he must quote a higher price to begin with and bring it down while negotiating with the customer. There were days when you could make a good sale. But this was not an everyday occurrence. Sometimes you had to be satisfied just recovering your cost price.

His mother and he, however, never sent Vanamala out to work. Sometimes she would go and help her mother, but that was all. ‘She is a girl after all. If something should happen, we are poor people and will get into trouble,’ said his mother. Suryakant didn’t like going to his father to ask for money. His father would come of his own accord sometimes and give some money.

Suryakant’s friend Puja lived in the next lane. When in school, Puja was his class-mate. They grew closer in the seventh standard. Once a dog bit her while returning from school. She fell down. When he saw this, he helped her get up and almost carried her all the way to her home. Thereafter, for many days, he took her every day to the government hospital for dressing and injections. Since then both of them had decided to support each other through life. Puja had passed the tenth standard; Suryakant however, had two subjects to clear. He had been determined to clear both the subjects, but now his mother was sick. Puja had said nothing to her family about Suryakant. Her surmise was that the family would not like her friendship with Suryakant. She would say she was going to Vanamala’s place, while leaving the house. Her mother would accost her asking, ‘what is so special about Vanamala that you visit her so often?’

Suryakant was unable to visit the market regularly to acquire fruit since the admission of his mother. He had to stay at home since Vanamala was alone at home. His mother’s work of course had stopped. It was Suryakant who now had to get up early in the morning and finish all the house chores. Sometimes Puja came and helped with a few of the chores and left. On returning home if he noticed that the house had been swept, he would make it a point to ask Vanamala, if Puja had been there.

Puja…Puja…She sang so well too. When Dev Anand the famous film actor passed away, the songs picturised on him were shown on TV, she had really liked one of the songs which she sang very well! Always thoughts of Puja occupied his mind.

Both of them used to meet in the Savitribai Phule Park. Once while sitting on the banks of the pond in the park, she had sung a famous song to him. The song specially sung for him in her soft voice had lightened his heart so much that he felt as if his heart was floating out of his body to embrace her.
On reaching the hospital, he climbed the main staircase to the ward. At first he thought of using the lift but seeing the crowd near the lift he thought, ‘this will take another five minutes, better to use the staircase instead.’ While climbing he was thinking, ‘today at least mother will be conscious and will smile at me.’ On reaching the ward he saw that her bed was empty. His heart missed a beat. He went close to the bed and looked at the nurse inquiringly.

“Shifted to the ICU. She was having trouble breathing,” the nurse replied.

“Go to the third floor ICU. There the doctors will tell you.” So saying the nurse turned away.

“Oh, Madam!” He said despairingly and kept quiet; by now the nurse had moved on to the next bed.

Suryakant had understood that he had to go to the third floor, but didn’t understand the rest of what the sister had said to him. He came out of the ward thinking, ‘what to do now?’ After reaching the third floor he asked someone ahead of him for the ‘AISHU’, replicating the pronunciation of the nurse. He followed where the man had pointed and seeing the closed door of the ward with a person in a uniform posted at the door who looked like a security personnel, he knew this was a ward for serious patients. A doctor was coming out. He felt relieved on seeing him. He had come to know this doctor since coming to the hospital.

“Good that you have come. Early in morning there was no one near your mother. See the thing is your mother is having trouble breathing. We have put her on oxygen, but it may become necessary to put her on the ventilator. What is your age, it’s more than eighteen, right?”

Putting a hand on his shoulder, he turned once more to go in with Suryakant.

“Nineteen.” Now he was really terrified. The doctor’s hand on his shoulder made him feel more afraid than ever. Was the doctor trying to assuage his fears?

“OK. Then that’s all right.”

Pointing to him, he told the nurse standing in front of him, “He is the son of Temghare patient, take his signature on the consent form. He is above eighteen.”

“What do I have to sign?” He queried, not comprehending.

“Look here,” the doctor said patiently, “Your mother is more serious now. Actually it’s a matter for worry. She will have to be put on a breathing machine. You have to give in writing that you are amenable to this. Right now your father is not here, where is he these days, does he come here sometimes or not?”

“No, the thing is, he comes, but right now the fact is that he doesn’t know that she is this serious.” He tried to hold up his father’s end. However, the doctor did not expect a reply, he carried on, “But you are above eighteen, so you sign the consent form.”

“Money?”

“No. No. It is not a question of money, you have the yellow ration card, so you will not have to pay, but a signature is required nevertheless. Sign
the form so that further treatment can begin.”

‘If I sign, mother will get treatment,’ this much Suryakant understood, he signed the paper put before him.

“Read what you have signed.” The doctor said, so he glanced at the paper before him, he did see the words, but didn’t understand their meaning.

“How is my mother?” He asked once more.

“That’s exactly what I am saying son. Your mother is pretty serious. There is a certain type of infection in her brain. Her chest is congested, making breathing difficult, now we will start the breathing machine; let’s see how it goes.” There was a certain tension in his voice.

“Tea?” he asked pointing to the bottle in his hands.

“No, we can’t give her tea now.”

“Can I see my mother?”

“Yes, yes, of course you can see her, but you must watch from beyond the glass partition. Staff, please take him to his mother.”

The nurse standing in front of him turned and started walking, he followed her.

His mother was asleep on a bed. Her eyes were closed. On her nose was something which seemed like an upside down funnel with a tube attached, all around her were a number of tubes like the saline tube. She was unconscious. Her face was pale, deathly. ‘She is not going to come out of this’, Vanamala had said this earlier today, he remembered. Tears clouded his vision and poured down his face, he could not control his sobs.

“Don’t cry here ‘Dada’, go and sit outside, if we need something we will call you. OK?” The nurse said half sternly, half with compassion. Putting her hand on his back she moved him away from the glass partition. Coming out of there he sat down on the bench outside. The tears were still flowing.

Taking out the mobile from his pocket, he gave a missed call to his father. He desperately needed someone near him right now, he needed to embrace someone and let the tears flow. Here there was no one to even witness his tears. ‘Couldn’t even give tea to mother, could only watch her from afar,’ so thinking the tears started flowing once more. Uncontrollable sobs wracked his body. Holding his head in his hands he kept crying.

The bottle with the tea was still in his hands, he felt like throwing it on the opposite wall, but restrained himself. He kept crying while looking at the bottle and then thought of something. He poured the tea from the bottle down his throat and swallowed it. By now the tea was lukewarm and he choked on it a bit, yet felt a little better.

Meanwhile, he felt someone’s touch on his back. The doctor had come out once more.

“Don’t cry. If you go to see, from the beginning your mother’s health was bad, wasn’t it, we knew that. Did she even take her medicines regularly?”

He didn’t answer. He had no idea, but probably not, because while straightening her mattress at home, he had found a lot of pills underneath it.
“See your sister and you both have the infection but since you take the medicines properly, you will stay healthy. Also your medication has been started on time, isn’t it? That is why your health is going to remain good. Henceforth you will have to look after your health; you will do that, won’t you?”

He shook his bent head affirmatively.

“You have a younger sister, what is her name?” Even though he knew her name, he deliberately asked Suryakant just to make him talk.

“Vanamala.”

“Yes. So you and Vanamala must ensure that you don’t miss a single dose henceforth, do you understand?”

The doctor was talking lovingly but Suryakant was too upset to respond. He was numb, unable to think of anything. Exhausted, he must have dozed off. The phone rang. It was his father. He had probably seen the missed call.

“How is your mother?”

“Mother is serious ‘Anna’. The doctor has put her on the breathing machine. If the machine is shut down, she will die.” He repeated what he had heard earlier from the nurse standing behind him when he was looking at his mother.

Father didn’t say anything.

“I am just informing you Anna. You left us to our own devices once you knew that mother and the two of us had HIV. Now my mother is going too. She should at least have taken her medicine properly. Soon she won’t be there, you won’t be there, how are my sister and I expected to survive? We don’t feel so much concerned about the HIV, but I am your son, today I am battling alone, I am looking after the house…mother”

He shut down the phone. Once more he held his head in his hands tightly. His head was spinning.

A moment later he was absolutely calm. He looked up to see who...it was Puja!

“How did you come here?”

“I came somehow. Let that be. How is your mother?” She asked coming closer.

“The breathing machine has been put on.” He said. She didn’t understand much, but knew that his mother was serious.

He burst out crying once more.

“Hush, keep quiet, hush.” She tried to wipe his tears with the ends of her long scarf.

His eyes filled up with tears. Holding him, she made him sit on the bench. She held his hand tightly with her own.

Still he was crying.

“Haven’t we decided not to cry Surya, we are together aren’t we? Am I not there for you?”

He nodded his head. Her gesture had truly made him feel calmer.

For a long time she just sat next to him. “I had brought the soup. The soup is to be given after two hours Vanamala had said.”

“They are not allowing anything now. They didn’t even allow tea.”

“Then at least you have the soup. Your stomach must be empty since the morning.”

“No, I had tea and bread before coming.”
“Still have it, it’s hot. You’ll feel better.”

He really felt somewhat better after drinking the hot soup. He even managed a small smile, looking at her; this was the first little smile on his face in the entire day. She too smiled back.

Just then he saw the doctor entering through the door in a rush.

Maybe… he thought.

He ran to the door. He looked through the closed glass doors to find out if he could see anything.

God knows how, but he knew what was about to happen.

Fifteen minutes went by. He was still standing there. Puja was behind him. Her hand was on his back.

Someone came out and asked, “Is there a relative of Temghare patient here?”

Both of them went in.

What was to happen had happened. What had been there was no longer there. All the tubes attached to his mother had been removed and she was brought out on a stretcher. Her pale face now looked calmly asleep. Holding her face in his hands, Suryakant started crying in earnest. Puja was the sole one present to look after him. She had no idea that something like this was about to happen. The hospital staff came running. They took both of them out of the ICU. Outside, Puja saw Suryakant’s father. She exhaled. ‘Suryakant, dearest,
don’t cry, listen to me, I am going home. On my way I will inform Vanamala. Then somehow I will come back to your house. See your father is here. Will you look? His father came forward and hugged Suryakant.

“Father, my mother is dead,” So saying he entered his father’s embrace.

* * *

A week had passed since his mother’s death, but Suryakant had not calmed down. In the beginning a lot of people had come home. Then everyone got busy with their own lives. Father too left after some days. Suryakant’s tears however, wouldn’t dry up. When he started crying, Vanamala too would begin crying. Vanamala was not going to school; Suryakant was not operating his hand cart. Whatever money had been at hand was now getting over. It seemed as if Suryakant had stopped caring. He would be awake through the night. Towards morning he would doze off, exhausted, again he would start crying when he woke up. If he was given tea, he would drink it, if he was forced to eat, he ate a few morsels. Because Vanamala kept the ART pills in front of him, at least he took them.

Puja would come and when he saw her he would start crying again.

Some time passed, then one day while coming to Suryakant, Puja was thinking that today at least he has to be pulled out of his crying and depression to some extent. He will have to be made aware of his responsibilities. Right now he was so immersed in his sorrow that he was neglecting Vanamala and himself and his own health.

Suryakant was a simple, straightforward boy. He was hardworking. He might have failed at school but at work he was bright. He was a person who believed in standing up for his principals. He loved his mother and his sister. Puja could feel that his love for her too was true. On her part, she too loved Suryakant. When he had confided to her that he had HIV, she had not really understood the meaning of the word. But one day he took her to the ART centre from where he got his pills. She understood better what it meant when the doctor there explained. There were a lot of questions in her mind. Would she get HIV, if she married him? But she did not ask the doctor about this. She was afraid of what the doctor would think if a student of ninth or tenth standard asked such questions.

One thing was clear to her through all this. This boy would not take her for a ride. Therefore, now she was determined to marry him. Her married sister had returned home due to the ill-treatment from her husband. She had seen for herself how people, who at first seemed gentle, later became over-bearing. This boy wasn’t like them. He was a straightforward person, she adored his truthful nature. But now, at this juncture, if he didn’t take care of his body, then she would suffer the same fate that he was suffering at this moment. Imagine the grave sorrow of the loss of a dear one! Today he was crying because of the death of his mother, and neglecting himself. Because of this if
something should happen to him in the near future? Then what would happen to her, what would happen to Vanamala? Who did Vanamala have in this world but him? He was now the responsible adult in this household. He was capable of taking this responsibility. How many more days could he avoid going to the market, not running the fruit cart? How much longer could he go on crying?

Determinedly taking him to the park and making him sit in front of her she said, “Surya I think you should come to your senses. For the sake of Vanamala, for my sake and most of all for your own sake.”

“The money you have saved up is going to finish one day... I am not saying this just for the sake of money, but you have to shoulder all the burdens now including that of money. Our marriage is still three or four years away. When I come, I too will be beside you. But there is time for that still. First I have to make my parents amenable. For that too I shall need your help. If you are standing on your feet then they will agree. I really need you Surya. It is true your mother is no more; her memory will always be with us but now there is me, there is Vanamala. Aren’t you going to look at us? You are angry with your father. That is natural. He has denied his responsibility towards you that is why you are angry with him, right? But if you go to see, right now, immersed in your grief, you are doing the same thing.”

“But why are you pushing everything on to me? Am I responsible for all of this? Mother, Vanamala, everyone’s responsibility devolved on to me…!”

He said, despite concurring with her opinion.

“Yes? You really feel that? I know you well Surya. No single person is simply a dead weight on another. She is your sister, she takes care of you, and she is attached to you! Think how alone you would have felt in the past few years? She is young, she is a little bull-headed, but she is not a dead weight on you, you have received her love in return. See how sad Vanamala is, who is going to pull her out of this? It has to be you.”

Surya nodded in agreement. For a moment she touched his cheek and said, “And what about me? We have loved each other and it has been our choice to do so.”

“And your Mother? For all these years the immense amount of hardships she has gone through, even though her marriage broke up, she kept working hard for you, was that so that you should nullify all her work by behaving like this? Tell me, what would she have felt looking at you, had she been here?”

After saying all this, however, she kept looking at him softly.

Suryakant did not utter a word. Silently, he kept caressing her hand with his hand. Lightly his fingers ran over her bangles. Intently he heard their tinkle, then looking at her he summoned as happy a smile as he could.

Puja felt like holding on to that precious moment tightly; but since moments cannot be held, instead she just held his hand tightly. Then, softly, very softly, so as to be audible only to him she started crooning her favourite song.
“Your sorrow is now mine,
My joy I bequeath to you,
These two eyes of yours
Are my sun and my moon.

Oh, my life-partner,
The dreams yours and mine

Are now coloured one.
Wherever the life will take us,
We remain together”

Suryakant was listening with all his heart.

*Translated by - Jyoti Kanetkar*
7. Room Partners

The final year of the liberal arts exam was almost over. The last two exam papers were remaining. The next day was a holiday as it was a Sunday. Even if the studies were done, a certain tension always remains.

This was their last year in college. That whole evening, Sandeep and Pradeep were walking on the hill behind the college. Deciding to sit down for studies after dinner, both of them spent a couple of hours roaming around after the exam. Though both of them were thinking about when again would they get an opportunity to wander like this, make fun of each other, neither of them showed it, but chatted with each other and fooled around. After reaching the hill, as usual Sandeep took out his mouth organ. He played Pradeep’s favourite song from the Oscar nominated film ‘Lagaan’, ‘Radha Kaise Na Jaale’. Then they both laughed heartily. They had been friends for the last four years. In the hostel too, they would choose each other as room partners every year. Thus for a lot of the time they would be together.

After returning to their hostel room, both of them lay down on their beds. Putting his hand across his forehead, Sandeep closed his eyes. Pradeep whiled away his time playing games on his mobile.

Even though his eyes were closed, thoughts chased each other in Sandeep’s mind. For no known reason, he was feeling dejected. ‘Having finished the last year in this college, now I’ll have to say goodbye to studies and help my father in his business. In today’s world this level of education is not enough. I would have liked to study some more.’

He had been mentally mulling around about a possible Masters in Social Work; but there was no hope that his father would allow it. Actually, right after his 10th standard exam, his father had wanted him to join him in his grains agency business. But Sandeep had insisted, “Let me complete my graduation. If not a doctor or an engineer, I’ll go for liberal Arts. I also want to experience hostel life. In today’s world no one honours a person who has just passed his 10th standard. Even if you look at Politicos, earlier they were not very educated, but today they send their children abroad to do B.Tech or MBA. No one looks at an uneducated person.” He had argued a lot with his father. In this his mother too had sided with him. ‘Why break your son’s heart?’ she had said. Finally his father had allowed him to go ahead.

‘Though he had reservations about further education, as a rule Dad had always pampered me. Especially, after
I fell ill in the seventh standard, Dad never said ‘no’ to anything. Do you want “this”, take it. Do you want “that”, take it.’ Even if he couldn’t afford it, in some way or the other he would procure it. I got whatever I asked for; whether it was expensive mobile, costly shoes, jeans, or anything else. So now if I say I want to study further, I am sure he will not turn it down.’ For a moment his mind jumped for joy with this thought.

‘But these days Dad did not seem as buoyant as he used to be earlier. There seemed to be some kind of a burden on his mind. When I went home last time, even Mother said, “Now when you come after the exam, it will be forever, won’t it? You will help him in his work, I hope?” And I had said ‘yes’.

‘I think I know what is troubling Dad’s mind.’

‘I know that Dad worries about my future. He doesn’t worry to the same extent about his own illness. But mother and I both have it. Dad must be worried about something happening to anyone of us. Truly speaking Dad worries needlessly! Touch wood all of us are in great good health. No one will ever doubt.’

‘But it is there! In my blood there is HIV. Is Dad worried about my marriage? Maybe. Will anyone give a daughter in marriage into an HIV infected household? Right now I don’t think about such things. We can see later. I have decided that I will not trap anyone into marriage by deceit. There are so many diseases in the world. There are so many questions. How to find the answers is my quandary. I do everything, going to college, eating in the hostel mess, studying, sometimes even playing football. But there is no compromise ever on regular medication. That has been Dad’s discipline all along.’

While thinking of it, he remembered his last visit to the doctor with Dad. As they were leaving, casually the doctor had asked, ‘you take medication regularly, don’t you?’ Dad had replied, “The question simply does not arise, Doctor. As far as me and my wife are concerned it is a given. When Sandeep was sick back in 2006, on 17th August once I had taken one pill half an hour late. Other than that like clockwork at 7:45 in the morning and 7:45 in the evening, the pill is taken without fail. Take the pill and leave for work at eight, after returning from work at seven in the evening, have dinner and immediately at 7:45 take the pill. There is no question of a mistake. Both of us take the medicine together so that question does not arise.”

The doctor had laughed heartily at this. “You are great Sir! Hats off to you,” he had said. The doctor had asked this same question several times and had heard the same reply every time. Even then he asked every time, heard Dad’s answer and laughed. What was there to laugh in this? If not as much as Dad, even I took my pill at 9.30 every night. Very rarely, it may have shifted by five or ten minutes. I had to take just one pill, but now it was a habit with me to take it regularly. Till the 9th Standard, Dad
regularly gave the pill to me. From the tenth standard onwards I started taking it by myself.

“And suppose you go somewhere out of station?” The doctor had still persisted.

“Then you have to keep it in mind. If I am not at home, my wife calls me up on the phone at seven thirty. Just for this I got her a mobile.”

At this point Sandeep had become apprehensive. ‘If Dad latches on to the subject of the mobile then God help us! From his wife’s mobile, he will move to my mobile and how expensive it is and how he bought it for me. Whether the doctor has time or not he will be subjected to his admiration for my mobile.’

They have known the doctor for quite a few years now. Everything goes on informally. Sandeep had almost forced his father out of the clinic saying, ‘Come on Dad, I have to go home and still do my packing.’ Remembering this incident he smiled to himself and opened his eyes.

“What are you thinking? Why are you smiling?” Pradeep was inquiring. ‘The mess will close, let’s go have dinner’ he said coming over.

Sandeep was yanked out of his reverie. How can I tell Pradeep why I was smiling?

If he had to tell about smiling, he would have to tell about the ART medicines, how was that possible since he had told no one, but no one about his HIV? A while back, while thinking about marriage, he had decided to tell his life partner about it. But he had given no thought about telling his friend. There was no question about anyone else, but for the last four or five years Pradeep was his room partner, he was his best friend too; while they shared the smallest, inconsequential things with each other, such a big thing...he had not shared with any person, not even Pradeep himself!

Here was someone with whom he had discussed many a topic in the world, for hours on end. They had resolved most doubts, questions, difficulties with each other’s help, but where this one thing was concerned, let alone a discussion, he had not given out anything, even as a piece of information. Had he been right? He faced this question for the first time. Well, really speaking not for the first time. Sometimes both of them chatted about, marriage, girls, their expectations from life, from their life partner. At that time Sandeep did feel the need to tell about the one issue that touched all these issues viz the HIV. Without taking that issue into consideration, all the talk about the other issues seemed contrived to him.

On the other hand, in daily life, other than the regular taking of the pill, no one had any reason to suspect anything. All the reports are with Dad back home. Once, when Pradeep had inquired about the pill, he had skirted the issue by saying they were vitamin pills. It had been decided earlier, in consonance with the doctor, that should anyone enquire about the pills that would be the answer given.
But this whole evening Pradeep and he had spent time together knowing that such an opportunity may not come again. Now within the next couple days they were going to return to their respective towns. Their four year old friendship lay like a comfortable old cushion between them. He did not have the wherewithal to tell a lie to Pradeep today.

Even then he said, “It’s nothing, just remembered something about my father. That brought a smile to my face.”

“What thing?” asked Pradeep.

“Come on lets go have dinner, then I’ll tell you.” He replied and suddenly tears sprang to his eyes.

He, himself, had not realised that he was crying.

Taking out a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped his tears. Seeing this, Pradeep put an arm round his shoulder.

When they returned after dinner, once more, Pradeep put his hand on Sandeep’s shoulder.

“My dear friend,” Pradeep said deeply moved, “These years went so well because you were there!”

Pradeep’s words touched a chord within Sandeep too. He could not make out whether he was feeling sorry that they would leave this room and start their separate lives or whether it was the fact that he had not revealed the truth regarding
his HIV for so many years, to such a close friend, that was making him feel guilty.

On their return, Sandeep was relieved when Pradeep did not pursue his earlier statement and ask him, ‘what was it that you were going to tell after dinner?’ And to avoid the issue entirely, Sandeep opened a book and put his head in it. Maybe Pradeep had forgotten about it too, because when he saw Sandeep open his book, he too picked up his text book.

After spending a long time staring at the pages of the book, without absorbing anything, Sandeep was fed up with himself. Really speaking neither Sandeep nor Pradeep required any further revision. Both of them were bright students. They were ready for the exam. All they needed to do now was to examine the question papers of the last seven, eight years and see if they knew the answers to the questions therein and tally it with the text book, but not a word was registering with him, when he held the text book in his hands. At last he got up. Seeing him get up, Pradeep too followed.

“Should we go down to the Regal and have a cup of tea?” Pradeep enquired.

Shaking his head, Sandeep picked up his chair and came and sat in front of Pradeep’s bed where he was sitting.

“Pradeep we are staying here for the last four years, sharing the same room. You are my closest friend; we talk with each other about things like whom we have met on the road, which girl we have liked, why we have liked her. Not only this, but we talk about everything under the sun. Yet there is one thing I have not told you. You may or may not agree with the reason as to why I withheld this information, but today when we are reaching the end of our journey together, I do not want to lie to you.”
Pradeep was sitting silently with his lips pursed. Sandeep paused for a moment. Then taking a deep breath he said, “I have a virus called HIV in my blood. It seems I have got it from my mother while still in her womb. My mother has it, so does my father. All of us take medication for it. Because of these ART medicines, now we have no problem at all. Actually this illness does not trouble me in any way, but in my mind I am always aware that I have HIV. I cannot forget that. That is the real botheration of this condition.” He paused as if exhausted by all this confession, and suddenly burst into tears.

Pradeep was startled. For some time he just stared at Sandeep. It was not that he had never wondered if his friend had some medical condition. In their life together over the last four years he had seen that every night Sandeep took some pills very regularly; that he may forget anything else but he never forgot to take those pills. He knew that Sandeep never felt giddy or never had a fit, he never seemed any sicker than anyone else he knew, then a natural question did arise in his mind from time to time as to what was the problem that Sandeep faced. But thinking, ‘I don’t understand anything in this regard then why bother with it, it maybe something,’ he had put the subject aside. ‘It could be a condition arising from a vitamin deficiency or…it may be anything else, if he doesn’t want to talk about it, so be it.’

But now he was startled upon hearing the name HIV. In his own town he had heard about some people being infected by HIV. He had heard some ideas that people having HIV are of bad character that they die early. But this is my closest friend? I know he has no affairs; he is not a person like that. That his health was as good as his own was something Pradeep had witnessed for himself. For a moment he thought that Sandeep was joking. But no, Sandeep was crying in earnest. This was not a joke in poor taste. Pradeep was upset by Sandeep’s crying. Putting his hands across his friend’s shoulder he said, “Sandeep, my friend, don’t cry, what is there to cry about? You have it so you have it, you say you have no trouble because of it, then why cry? Please stop crying.”

Sandeep felt a little better seeing that Pradeep was not rejecting him, to the contrary he was putting his hand on his shoulder.

“No, my friend, I am not crying because of this disease. I am not afraid of this disease, because this disease itself is afraid of the ART medicine and this I know for sure.”

“Tell me, there are no bad side effects of this drug, are there? They say that sometimes the side effects are worse than the disease itself. But that is not the case here, is it?”

“No, not at all. Meaning there are some side effects, but nothing to take cognisance of, at least as far as I can see. My doctor had pointed out that there are individual differences from patient
to patient, also the fact that one knows that by starting this medication we are in fact reducing our troubles, that too counts. I don’t know a lot about it, but personally I have no trouble with the medication and when I go to the centre to fetch the medicine, I meet several people who like me have no problem. So it must be like that.”

While Sandeep was talking, once more Pradeep put his hand lovingly on his shoulder.

Sandeep said, “You know Pradeep, I cried while telling you this, not because I was worried about the disease but I thought that you might get angry with me because I am telling you about this so late. You might regret your friendship with me. You might feel disgust about sharing a room with me. This was my greatest fear.”

Inwardly very troubled but outwardly at ease, Pradeep laughed out aloud, “You’re mad Sandeep. Is this the way you have judged my friendship?”

“Why? What is the mistake I have made?”

“Mistake? Is it your mistake that you have HIV?”

Sandeep shook his head.

“Then why should I be angry with you? Your friendship which gave me joy for four years, does it become a thing to regret just because I come to know that you have HIV? Am I a person of such poor calibre?”

“It’s not that, it’s just that for so many days we have been room partners, friends and not once have I mentioned this fact to you. I thought that would make you angry, offended.”

“If you come to know that your friend has an illness, do you feel concern or do you feel disgust and anger? Do you think I am such an idiot? I am not such an inconsiderate person, Sandeep.”

“You are not bad, but I am the person who has withheld the information.”

“Yes. Maybe I will feel a little bad that you did not confide in me. Maybe I will wonder; is it because he did not trust me, or was there any other reason? But certainly there is no reason to be angry. And if I do feel disgust about you or regret for being friends with you then I don’t need to feel bad. Then it will not be your mistake that you did not find me trustworthy, on the other hand one will have to surmise that you were right in your judgement of me” said Pradeep. Having said this Pradeep felt justly proud about how clever he had been. He admired himself for the way he had spoken with Sandeep and felt he had been right in the way he had handled the whole thing.

It was nine-thirty. There was a small beep on Sandeep’s mobile. He got up, took out the pill from the bag beneath his bed, took it with water.

“Pradeep, my friend, you are great!”

“Why? What have I done?”

“You know when thinking about not telling you, I never realised that a good friend will accept this with ease. In so many years I have not thought cohesively about this thing. You are great.”
Pradeep smiled. In answer he hit Sandeep on his back with his fist and said, “Now I will ask you that question. Tell me, why did you not confide in me till now?”

Sandeep needed some time to get his answer right.

“Now let’s go to Regal and have that tea.”

“No, now we are going to finish all the talk and then I shall treat you to tea. Because after tea we are going to sit down and study.”

“It is highly unlikely that I will be able to study now.”

“Let me see how you don’t study. Now you must talk. You have started the subject, now answer my question.”

Having uttered this in the usual rough and ready fashion amongst friends when Sandeep did not respond, Pradeep became gentle.

“Look my friend, it’s OK even if you don’t tell. If you don’t feel like telling what’s the big deal, let it be.”

“It’s not like that, the thing is,” Sandeep started talking, trying to recall, “I was told that I had HIV after the 9th standard exam. While in the 7th standard, I had become very ill. For a long time, nearly a month, I was in hospital. That is when these medicines, meaning the ART medicines were started. I recovered from the illness, the rest of the medication stopped, but these pills continued. I would get fed up taking the medicines, maybe not fed up, maybe I just thought that no one else in my class takes such medicines, why should I be the only one to take them, but my Dad would not allow me to miss a single dose.

The medication had to be taken at a particular time, this too pissed me off, but he wouldn’t let go, he would insist on my taking it. If I refused he would be angry. If I asked for an explanation, he would make one up. He would say something like your haemoglobin is low or something similar. Looking at his face, I knew that he was lying and really speaking he does not wish to answer this question. By the time I reached the 9th standard, I stopped asking. When we went to get the ART, I came to know that not only me but all three of us have this illness. If this illness crosses a limit, it is known as AIDS. We always read the signs on the roads!”

“Then I don’t know what he felt, but he took me to the doctor. He and the doctor together told me about my condition. I asked them only one question, ‘are the three of us going to die early? Because I have heard that people with AIDS die early.’ That doctor told me that ‘if the three of you take the medicine properly and regularly, there is no reason for you to die untimely.’ I told him, ‘please tell me the truth, whatever it is.’ Now I feel I may have behaved precociously then. But that doctor did answer my question. In this illness your immunity is lowered therefore it is necessary to keep checking it. If your immunity is normal it means your health is fine.
“He was a good doctor Pradeep. He even gave me the reports of the blood tests to read, which tell about your immunity levels. He showed me how to read them. You have to see the count of the CD4 cells. Now when a report comes, I read it even before the doctor does. However, there is one thing. These medicines which I am taking now, I have to take them lifelong. I cannot afford to stop them. Once these medicines get tired, there are others of a higher order. I will have to take those.”

Sandeep stopped in the middle. His mind was exhausted with thoughts and memories. For a while he sat with his eyes closed. Pradeep was sitting quietly, without uttering a word, resting a reassuring hand on Sandeep’s hand. Sandeep opened his eyes.

“…So he told me that I have to take these pills lifelong, till then Dad was sitting near me, with a serious face, silent. He only said, ‘don’t say a word to anyone. What is the illness we have, what are the pills we take, not a word to anyone. Take your pills responsibly, eat and drink and live happily.’ Since then there has been an unwritten pact between all of us. ‘Don’t say anything to anyone.’ Later on this became a habit with me. Mom and Dad were already used to it, I too got habituated.”

“It is not just you; I have never spoken to anyone on this issue, ever. But today when you asked why I was smiling, it was something that had happened at the clinic. That is when I asked myself, why am I not telling him? The reason is the fear that if I say something to a person and he breaks his friendship with me, but an even great fear is that, if one person comes to know, in no time at all the whole world will come to know. Therefore, the pact of silence. This is the only reason for my not telling you. It’s not because I do not trust you, not at all. I not only trust you but also am very sure of you that is why I talked to you today.”

Pradeep was quietly nodding his head. After a while he said, “Why do you talk in this guilty tone of voice Sandeep, you know it is quite understandable, this silence of yours. Just tell me something once more, if these medicines are so effective then why do people still fear HIV -AIDS?”

Nodding his head affirmatively Sandeep said, “This epidemic is comparatively new in the world. Earlier there was no medication, or else it was very costly, now they are quite cheap, also in the Government hospitals you get them free of cost. But people must be afraid because at the end of the day it is a lifetime condition.”

“Then it is all right. But you take care. We will go home after a couple of days, but remember one thing; you can call on me for anything, anytime. I am always there for you.”

After sometime Sandeep got up and embraced Pradeep. Pradeep thought ‘this was what I was about to do myself. I should have beaten Sandeep to it.’ All that had happened in the preceding two hours only served to strengthen their friendship further.
“Come on we have to have tea at the Regal.” Pradeep said.
“Regal must be closed now.”
“Come on, I’ll take out the scooter. We’ll go to the station. The station tea stall is open twenty-four hours. Tea we must have.”

Sitting pillion on the scooter behind Pradeep, Sandeep took out the mouth organ from his pocket and started playing it. Listening to those soft notes Pradeep felt, ‘after some days once college is over, we will move far away, but some memories will remain, this will be one amongst them, we are riding a scooter on the empty night roads and these notes are following from behind, music played by Sandeep, only for me!!”

Translated by - Jyoti Kanetkar
Priya reached her Pune home from Bangalore barely a week before her tenth standard exams. Priya used to stay with her paternal aunt and her two children, Vaishnav and Pinki. She fondly addressed her Aunt as Atya.

By the time she reached Pune, not only had her Cousin Vaishnav’s marriage been celebrated, but he and his wife, Priya’s new ‘vaini’, had already left town. She hadn’t been able to set eyes on her new sister in law. She would have to keep at bay, for some more time, the over-arching desire to see her. She was a little put off, but this was no time to think of anything else. Pinki, her elder cousin sister had been firm in her warning and she was right. A hundred things such as finding the examination centre, where to find the receipt, going to school, meeting her friends, remained to be done. No matter how much Priya had
studied earlier; a last minute revision was a must too. So leaving everything else aside she put all her heart in to her studies. Once the examination started, she had no time for anything else. Pinki didi used to say, ‘The only tiger on her tail is the revision for the next exam.’ The newly married duo returned, just as her exams were getting over. The house was full of excitement once more.

“This is our Priya - my cousin sister! She has just given her matriculation exams. And Priya this is Shivani.” Vaishnav ‘dada’ introduced Priya to her new sister in law.

“Where does she live?” enquired Shivani.

Priya was about to say, “Right here!” when Vaishnav suddenly interrupted saying, “Right now she was in Bangalore. Earlier for a few years, she lived in Neera, my mother’s natal place, a small town in western Maharashtra. Then for some years she stayed with us for her education. Now she will go to a college in Bangalore.”

Priya was taken aback with Vaishnav’s reply. There had been no definite decision about her being educated in Bangalore and saying that first she was in Neera and then for some years with them for education bordered on the limits of truth and falsehood. If one goes to prove it, then yes it was a fact, but it was not a complete picture. But she didn’t want to make him sound like a liar in front of his newlywed wife, so she held her peace. She had come to be suspicious about the fact that these days people spoke any old thing about her and they turned the facts around. Shivani seemed to be a good person but Priya was no longer in the mood to talk to her or hold any light hearted conversation.

Next day casually the new sister in law enquired, “Whom do you stay with in Bangalore? Who all are there at home?”

Priya was startled by the question. Before the exam she had prepared exhaustively for the answers to the most likely questions. Though after Vaishnav’s conversation yesterday, Shivani’s question could not be categorised as unexpected, nevertheless Priya was unprepared to answer it.

“Neema aunty and Jondhale uncle” Priya gave a non-committal answer just before leaving the room.

She knew how surprised and confused Shivani was going to feel with such a weird and uninformative answer, but what else could she have done?

‘Where do I belong really? Neera, Pune or Bangalore?’

Her mind was in a tizzy.

So far she had always thought herself to be a Puneite.

This was the first time in her life that she had visited Bangalore and that too only for a month or so.

Now who had taken this decision that she was going to do her college in Bangalore? Even to her, this was news. It seemed as if someone else was going to decide where she was to stay.

It felt as if she had no roots of her own. Atya, her father’s sister had brought young Priya from Neera to Pune like a young sapling. That sapling had grown into a tree in Pune and now they were going to transplant this tree to Bangalore.
Priya started feeling as if the ground was fast moving from under her feet.

Priya could feel that Atya and her two cousins were around her and watching her with bated breath. Nothing like this had ever happened to her ever since she had come to stay with Atya's family!

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Childhood memories are sometimes indistinct. Priya remembers coming with Atya from Neera to Pune by a State Transport bus. Since then she had started staying with Atya. She could no longer remember clearly the house in Neera. Neither could she recall the members of that household. She must have stayed with her mother, who was ill. Sometimes mother would give her tea and bread in the morning. There wasn't anyone else as such. She couldn't remember the food served, or anything else. There were some half-forgotten, smudged mental pictures, but that was all.

There was this memory of a meal at someone's house. That girl, what was her name? Probably she was a neighbour, they played 'house' at her home. While they were playing, sometimes that girl's mother would call out, 'Ashwini, come and eat.' Yes, her name was Ashwini. Then she would invite Priya to join Ashwini for a meal, 'you too come and eat with Ashwini.' Priya was ever ready for that. She couldn't remember whether she could or could not get food at home. But that day when she sat down for a meal with Ashwini, an old lady from the household came and scolded her badly. She scolded her so much that Priya couldn't eat the meal. She couldn't remember now why that lady was so cross with her. All that she remembered was that she cried so much that she threw up in the plate. Probably Ashwini's mother was trying to calm down that lady, but that memory too was not a clear one. After that someone from that house roughly dragged Priya and dumped her in her home. She cried herself to sleep that day. Mother wasn't well at all. In the morning it was Atya who woke her up. Why had Atya come to Neera suddenly? Who had called her from there? Priya couldn't remember at all. But a lot of people had gathered at home and were talking something amongst them. Thereafter Atya took her to Pune by a bus... Priya never went back to Neera after this.

Thereafter Priya never insisted that she be taken back to her mother. However, sometimes she would ask Atya, 'where is my mother?' and Atya would say, 'she has been taken to the hospital, because she is not well.'

Atya had a large house. There were a lot of people in that house. There was Atya, Atya's husband 'Anna', Atya's own two children, Vaishnav and Pinki, Inni meaning Atya's mother in law, Kaka and Kaki who were Atya's brother in law, and his wife and yes, there was Smita, Kaka and Kaki's daughter, who was as old as Priya.

If ever Priya remembered her mother, Atya would take Priya in her arms.

Once when this happened, Kaka and Kaki were there. Priya had asked Atya, 'When is mom going to get better?' Atya had tears in her eyes. She just hugged Priya. Kaki asked, “Do you want to go to your Mother?” Nestling closer in Atya's arms, Priya shook her head negatively.
Kaka said, “Tell us if you want to go, we will drop you off.”

Atya didn't say anything. After that incident Priya never asked Atya again about her mother. She was afraid that if she inquired again, she would be taken away and dropped off to Neera. She remembered vaguely that she used to be really bored when she was in Neera. Here in Atya’s house time passed without realising. Vaishav was quite a bit older than Priya and Pinki who was younger between the two, was also seven or eight years older than Priya. They weren't playmates, but if she needed anything they were there for her. But there was Smita who was Priya's own age.

In addition a lot of women would pay Atya to keep their children with her. It was a huge household with the three girls of the house and one boy; in addition the ten or twelve small children in the crèche, two men who went to work and two middle aged and one elderly women in the kitchen!

Atya and her husband were very loving. Priya remembered clearly how lovingly they had raised her. Though Anna was of a serious nature, unfailingly after returning from work he would enquire about Priya. Priya had decided long ago never to ask him about her past in case he didn't approve of her behaviour and sent her back to her mother. Kaka Kaki behaved with angst towards her and Inni too had no love lost towards her, this Priya knew without being told, but Atya, Anna, Vaishav and Pinki treated her very well. She too, on her part, kept close to them. When Anna returned from work, she would put his chappals in place and bring him water to drink. She had understood that if she behaved like this, Anna would be pleased and would praise her.

She helped Atya in her work to the best of her ability. When Vaishav went for his bath, she would bring his towel and when he shouted from inside, she handed it to him. She would tidy Pinki's clothes and later when she was a little older, she would iron them too. As far as the kids in the crèche were concerned, she really liked feeding them and playing with them. This enabled Atya to leave the kids to her and go to the kitchen.

Even though Kaka and Kaki didn't like her, Smita was her childhood friend. They would always play together, study together. Sometimes Vaishnav and Pinki helped them with their studies. There were times when Kaka would teach them. Priya disliked being taught by him. He would sit with a ruler and spank her when she made a mistake. ‘She doesn't know anything, she is not likely to know anything, she has no brains,’ he would say. She would be invariably scared when he asked her to come and study. Smita too didn't care for his teaching, both of them used to find some excuse to run away. When Kaka got tired of waiting for them and went away, they would giggle.

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Till they reached the eighth standard, Smita and Priya were best friends. They were staying in the same house; they were in the same class, so they were always together. After the eighth standard exams, however, Priya became very ill. She got herpes zoster
and it went on for a couple of months. Her back was covered with it, it burned a lot. Atya and Anna took great care of her. They showed her to a number of big doctors. They did some blood tests too. Priya wondered what the big illness she was suffering from. Even after the herpes was cured, Anna took her to big doctors. Sometimes Vaishnav would also take her. Kaka and Kaki, however, refused to even look at her. They wouldn’t allow Smita to come near her. Since then Smita stopped talking with Priya.

“AtIndexa, do I have cancer?” Priya had asked once. That was the only serious sickness she was aware of till that time.

“Who told you? Don’t talk rubbish. Why will you have cancer?” Atya got angry, so Priya kept quiet. Atya and Anna were literally rushed off their feet during that period. For some days Atya’s crèche too had to be shut down. Some of the mothers of the children got angry with Atya and some of them did not make full payment. Some never sent their children back, even after Priya recovered. Thankfully by then Vaishnav had a job. Priya recovered but missed school for one month. Slowly everything seemingly returned to normal. However, thereafter Smita started behaving in a stand-offish fashion with Priya. She knew why she had to do this. But she was never going to let anyone know that she knew!

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While she was still sick, one night Priya woke up to voices. She could hear Pinki’s angry tone arguing with her parents.

“Why don’t you just tell her?” Even today, Priya can remember this sentence of Pinki.

“You keep quiet.”

“No Mom, look, she is growing up. Shouldn’t she be told now? Some day she is bound to ask a question, you will see!”

“You keep quiet. Let her matriculation get over, then we will tell her.” Atya was saying. She surmised that the conversation was about her. They sensed she was awake, so they stopped. She went back to sleep.

In the next one or two days she collared Pinki. Both were going to the market to fetch vegetables. Priya told her outright to tell her what the matter was with her. She also confided that she
had overheard them talking in the night. Pinki was quiet for a while and then said, “I will tell you, but no one should know that I have told you. You’ll have to cross your heart and swear! “Nodding her head, Priya touched her throat with her hand in acknowledgement of the oath.

To pre-empt a lot of questioning, Pinki started off saying, “I don’t know a lot, but you have a disease called HIV.” “Meaning I am going to die very soon isn’t it?” Priya asked.

“I don’t know a whole lot, I will surf the net and tell you more, but if you take your pills regularly then you will not die. This is what Dad was saying. Remember you have promised me that you will tell no one.” Pinki sounded frightened.

Though her eyes were brimming with tears, pressing her lips together, Priya remained silent.

“I have read that in this sickness a person dies.” Priya said.

Right on the road, Pinki held her close. “No dear, if you take the pills the person does not die. My mother’s brother and his wife that is your parents, also had the disease, but they did not take the pills.”

“Is that why they died?” Pinki shook her head up and down to indicate assent.

Priya could barely walk on the road. Pinki too was at a loss. She took Priya to a sugar-cane juice vendor. Both of them had some sugarcane juice, they got up after Priya felt a little better. Priya did not carry on to the market; instead she sat on a road-side culvert. Even after returning home, she was completely quiet through the day. When she did not offer Anna any water upon his return, everyone was aware that something was amiss, but she did not let on what was wrong. If not taking the pills makes you die, then why take the pills, so thinking she tried not taking the pills. But a tiger called Atya was after her. Atya would personally stand in front of her with water and the pills. She would make her open her mouth to show that she had swallowed the pill.

After some days Priya forgot all that, even if not completely, the intensity of it faded from her mind. The illness was over, school started once more. Now nothing was happening to her, Priya started behaving normally.

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Priya was in the last year of her secondary school when Vaishnav got married. But she was not present for the marriage. She was not at home even when the marriage was arranged. Though she was eager to see his bride she never got to see her. She thought she would see her at the wedding but just then she had to go to Bangalore. She thought it would be fun to go to Bangalore, though she was a little apprehensive as she had never ventured so far on her own before this. One of Anna’s friends Mr. Jondhale, who was a writer and would frequently come home, was reportedly sick and there was no one to help out.

Since Vaishnav’s wedding was round the corner it was not possible for Atya to go, so Atya asked her instead. Really speaking this was her important year at school as it was Smita’s too. So it was a strange request to make of her. But Atya explained that ‘it was very
quiet in Bangalore and after helping Neema aunty - Mr. Jondhale's wife, she would be able to study for the rest of the time. Neema Aunty would help her in case of any difficulties in her revision. She was very knowledgeable and was teaching in a college. Here in the house with the disturbance and excitement of the wedding Priya would not be able to study well, or so she was told. There was a pre-exam preparation leave for a month.

“Atya, but Smita too has to study, so she too will be disturbed, should we both go then?”

“Let them manage their affairs, you will go though, won’t you?”
She nodded her head.

Priya had a great time in Bangalore. She could study well. Neema aunty was equally as loving as Atya, almost as if she was Atya’s sister. She would spoil Priya even more than Atya did.
‘Priya do you like Idli?’
‘Priya I have set yogurt for you.’
‘Priya today if you are tired from all that studying should we go for a walk?’
‘Priya I have bought this cloth for you, should we make a dress or a frock from it?’

Atya had her own children, in addition there were the children from the crèche. Here she had become like an only child of the Jondhales. Both would teach her, help her in her studies, would correct her revision papers, would chat with her, and would spoil her.

She had one question in her mind though; Jondhale uncle didn’t look ill. His work was going on fine. Both their teaching jobs in the college were going on regularly. Then why had Priya been summoned to Bangalore just at the time Vaishnav was getting married in Pune?

One day when the three of them were sitting down to a meal, she even asked as much. Uncle did not respond immediately. Neema aunty said,

“No, he is well now but before you arrived he had fallen sick. Later he felt better. We thought of telling your Atya, not to send you now, but then we thought since it is already arranged, let’s go ahead, but tell me truthfully, isn’t it fun being here?” Neema aunty said, laughing for no obvious reason.

Priya had the distinct feeling that she was hiding something, but she didn’t say anything. Probably they know about my sickness. Through habit she would take the pills, but Neema aunty never asked her what the pills were for. Quite to the contrary, she would remind her every night about the pill. Once when they had to go out at night, aunty had remembered to take the pills in her purse, so as not to miss the dose.

On the day of the wedding Priya was constantly reminded of home. Again and again she said, ‘I wonder how Vaishnav looks in the bride-groom’s dress, and how do you think the bride looks, I have never seen her, you know.’

She also said to Jondhale uncle, “Uncle, now that you are well, both of you should have attended Vaishnav’s wedding. Anna is such a great friend of yours…instead you called me over and now all of us are stuck here.”

“Do you feel that you are stuck here Priya, don’t you like it here?” Uncle asked with a serious face.

“No, no. It’s not that. I love it here. You spoil me so much, but I am
only saying this since it is Vaishnav’s wedding.” She said trying to recover the situation. She thought, ‘both of them have felt bad that I asked. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.’ At night when she asked Neema-aunty whether she should at least call Vaishnav on the mobile, aunty, who at other times would readily agree to most things instead said, ‘no, don’t, they must be very busy.’

Thereafter Priya kept quiet and didn’t say anything about anyone in Pune. She had begun to understand certain things.

If Priya had a difficulty in her studies, both of them would help her out. Once she turned the subject around to HIV on purpose.

“Why are you asking about this particular disease?”

“It’s in the syllabus and there can be a question on it in the exam.” She had already decided on an answer if questioned and also it happened to be true.

Jondhale uncle answered truthfully. He seemed to have given some thought to the question. Aunty also joined them to listen to his explanation. While answering his voice was very soft. Though they both never spoke harshly, this time round, his voice was extra soft like honey. He seemed to have studied the problem in advance; Priya noted this when she saw him get up to bring his notes.

‘Henceforth, no one need die of this disease, there are medicines called ART for this, those who have this disease have to take these medicines. If the medicines are not taken then the HIV in the blood goes up and that person’s resistance power reduces, he starts to fall ill often. But if the medicines are taken regularly there is no such danger. To check whether the disease is present in the body there is a blood test called ELIZA. There is a different test to check the resistance power of the body...One does not acquire it by staying with an HIV infected person, but sometimes it can be passed on from mother to child, because the child is in the mother’s womb and is breast-fed later. But now there are medicines to prevent even this occurrence, if they are taken the baby won’t have it.”

All this information was already known to Priya.

“Uncle, but what can a person with HIV become?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is if a person has HIV then what is a good line of study for that person to follow so that she can have a career?”

“Who do you want to become?” Jondhale uncle probably made a slip by asking this.

Priya also noticed a subtle change in the expression on his face. But basically she liked the charade wherein without mentioning her he was telling her things as a piece of information. She did not wish to change the state of affairs. By now she had an inkling that they knew, but were not showing it, so long as they didn’t show it, neither would she.

“What I mean is for example,” he said trying recoup from the faux pas.

Though she didn’t respond, he continued. “In some instances, like when there is recruitment into the police or the army, probably they do
these tests. Then if the person is found to have HIV, the person probably doesn't get the job, but other than that there is no problem in the world to try one's hand at anything. I think, no I am certain, that one can do and become almost anything else. You can become a doctor, an engineer, a teacher, a professor, Chartered Accountant; you can become whatever you want. You can act on the stage, in the movies, you can do social work, paint, draw, sing, there are no limits, but yes, lifelong you have to take the medicines. That is a must.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, I am very sure!”

She was deep in thought after this incident. Neema aunty suddenly held out her arms and hugged her tightly and kissing her on the cheek and said, “You are my own good girl!”

The demonstration of love made her so emotional that she was about to burst into tears. She got up from where she was sitting in front of them saying, “Should I make some great coffee for all of us?”

She got hold of herself while making coffee. Probably to give her a chance to recover, Neema aunty very understandingly didn’t come and help her the way she usually did. She kept on sitting with her husband. ‘How good these people are!’ Priya thought to herself. When she came with the coffee, she sensed that Uncle had liked her handling of the situation.

While sipping the coffee, once more he asked her the question, this time in a very natural tone, “What line of study do you wish to concentrate on in the future? Who do you want to become?”

“Like you, I want to teach in a college, become a professor.”

Once more hugging her close, lovingly, Neema Aunty asked, “Had you decided on this earlier or is it a decision you have come to after coming here?”

“It was after coming here, after seeing the two of you I felt, I can become a professor like you. I can teach students.” She said easily.

“Then will you come here next year to study in our college?”

The proposal both comforted her and took her aback. “Let me see what Atya and Anna have to say.”

After that day the subject did not come up again but it was also true that her relationship with the two of them became more real, sweeter, thereafter. They chatted more with each other, there was more laughter. Not only Neema aunty but even Jondhale uncle started treating her more lovingly as if to affirm the fact that she was a very noble and bright girl.

Priya had a passing thought, ‘what if she didn’t go to Pune at all and gave her exams from where she was. But she didn’t voice it. It was neither possible nor proper. Atya, Anna, Pinki, Vaishnav and now the new sister in law are all there. They are also good people, I remember them so much. As for Smita, she is also a good person, but she should understand what these people have comprehended so well. She is my age, quite young. Sometime she should meet these Uncle and Aunty. Everything here is fine, but soon I must go to Pune. I still haven’t set eyes on Vaishnav’s new bride.’ Priya was now eager to return, was anxious about the exam too.

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The exam got over. She had met Shivani. Now she was to return to Bangalore. Last time Priya had gone alone, but this time round Neema aunty had come to take her back to Bangalore. Priya, per se had no objections in returning to Bangalore, but the fact that no one had even asked her about it, hurt her, but she had made a conscious decision to not oppose the move. Any such action on her part would have been ineffectual and now her desire to stay on in the Pune house was diminishing. On the day that she was to leave for Bangalore, Atya cried a lot and then slowly calmed down. Pinki gave her a new mobile; Vaishnav bought her new clothes. When she demurred, he said, they had to be bought anyway in view of the recent wedding. Calmly she accepted all the overtures. Before leaving she brought a glass of water for Anna for the last time. Anna had tears in his eyes while drinking it.

She touched the feet of all the elders in the house and they blessed her saying 'Be successful.'

Smita was standing in the doorway; she fell into Priya’s arms and cried. She whispered in a tone only Priya could hear, ‘Are you angry with me?’

Priya did not answer.

Patting Smita she merely said, ‘Why don’t you come to Bangalore sometime?’

“Come on darling, otherwise we will miss the train.” Neema Aunty admonished lovingly, holding her close.

“Don’t worry about your niece.” She said to Atya.

Priya sensed that Atya could not reply. She smiled and started off. Without rebellion, she had accepted this new path in her life.

Even so, once she was in the train, irrepressibly all that she had held back came to the fore and she burst out crying. Understanding everything, Neema aunty put her hand on her back. She was certain that soon Priya would calm down because after all she was a wise and understanding girl.

Neema aunty and Jondhale uncle would now be her guides on the new path that Priya was determined to tread.

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