

silent voices

silent voices

Stories to Inspire

Edited by
Roli Misra & Anupama Singh
GenSen Cell



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A word after a word after a word is power

Dedicated to

All the women who have tread their own path

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PREFACE

Our past, struggles, make us the women we are today. The gender roles, gender discrimination and patriarchal set up has put women into a struggling zone where they struggle within themselves and also with the society. We have known many success stories of women across the globe and every success is backed by a story which may be penned, told, shared, have come into public domain or is lost forever without being heard. However, the stories of women's achievements are integral to the fabric of our narratives. For women, learning about the other women, their tenacity, courage, and creativity is an important and tremendous source of strength. Knowing these women's stories provides essential role models for everyone and that's what society genuinely needs so as to counter the ever-constant changes and overbearing challenges of this society. In this societal framework every woman has a story to tell or rather they have multiple stories to tell. Giving voice to their unspoken and unsaid words acts as a catharsis for many. However, there are many tales of strong women who never come into light and are lost. They are never heard, never written, never shared.

SILENT VOICES is an initiative of Gender Sensitization (GENSEN) Cell of University of Lucknow. This cell was created under the able leadership of our dynamic, energetic Vice- Chancellor, Prof. Alok Kumar Rai and this initiative is the first of its kind when the University thought of bringing out the real-life stories of its students and faculty. We discussed the idea with the Vice Chancellor that many a times girl students come to us, share their problems. We have come across battles of our colleagues too, while interacting with them we have felt that within them. there are deep layers of emotions which are passive and silent, so we are thinking to encourage all such women ever associated with the University of Lucknow to pen down the stories related to their struggles, hardships and victories, compile them in the form of a book, get it published and honour all the authors willing to share their lives

with us on the International Women's Day. The Vice Chancellor immediately agreed to this innovative concept and gave his positive nod to go ahead with this proposal and we flashed this idea on our University website.

This book is a collection of real life unheard, untold twenty two inspirational stories from girl students and women faculty associated with University and also from a boy student who got inspired from his friend and wrote her story, which we received. As a policy matter, we have kept stories related with sexual assault as anonymous so that the identity of the survivors do not get revealed.

These stories are a mixed bag of mixed emotions covering topics like sexual assault, molestation, child abuse, sexual harassment at work place, organ donation, emotional break ups, bad marriages, domestic violence, women and patriarchy, sacrifices, trauma of losing parents, fighting with disease. These are the stories which reveal how these women draw inspiration from their mothers, grandmother, how they have dealt with sexual assaults from people very close to them, how they have handled their life struggles, how they have been brave enough to combat deadly diseases and how they have survived after the loss of their own loved ones. But they never gave up and have come out as fighters.

Many of the contributors chose to remain anonymous. These anonymous authors were not comfortable in getting their names published as they have this fear that once their names come into public domain, people will judge them more on the basis of their past rather than what they have become in their present due to that past. They will be more discriminated and their families will become more uncomfortable. They were not confident that if their identities are revealed, they will be loved and respected in the same manner and will get social support. This reflects in itself that though they have the courage to speak up but the society is still not that progressive to accept these brave women, the way, they have been in their lives. However,

getting published anonymously does not make them less bold than those who have contributed their life stories in their names.

We salute all these strong, brave and bold authors who decided to share their life incidents, allowed us to dwell deep into their lives while discussing their stories personally with them. For many, it was a difficult journey to express their emotions as they had to relive that trauma again, yet they all cooperated in writing, re writing their stories with all patience and enthusiasm. The stories have been so powerful, that in the process of editing some of them brought tears in our eyes and we took a pause to think- how strong these authors are and what kind of traumatic journey they have been through. They are re- living their lives just to write for this book so that they can be inspirations for many others who are in similar situations or not in any different situations. After reading each and every story we also realized that so many incidents have happened with the people around us but we never realize that there is so much pain behind every smile which they wear. As it is said that Silence is the most powerful scream , so with these ' Silent Voices' , the stories are going to leave a strong impression in the minds of the readers that Yes each and every woman is very brave . Although she struggles, yet she never gives up. She sails through every uncomfortable situation and has a mighty power to translate her struggles into victories- those victories which you all are going to read. In every story you will see a battle being fought but at the end of every story each battle has been won with bravery. These stories will move you, will engage your mental faculties to take a pause and ponder about other lives, will activate your emotions more but will definitely motivate you to understand that although life comes with its own complexities, yet it is beautiful and should be cherished. Writing is the best catharsis and smiles are the best coping mechanism. This volume talks about warriors and survivors.

Acknowledgements

THIS VOLUME is a collective venture that has depended on the contributors of several authors to whom we are deeply indebted for their hard work and co-operation by sharing their life stories for this volume. Without their time and efforts this book would not have materialized. The authors patiently redid their stories on time in response to the requirements of this book.

We would place on record our sincere gratitude and thanks to our Hon'able Vice Chancellor, Prof. Alok Kumar Rai for encouraging us for this concept, generously giving us his valuable time whenever required, for his suggestions and guidance throughout the process of editing the book

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Thanks to all our friends, colleagues, family and our students, for their support and motivation which helped us to bring the unspoken voices into a reality.

We would like to thank Vaibhav Soni , Semester I, M.Com (Applied Economics), University of Lucknow and Lt. Pandit Gajendra Nath Chaturvedi for their paintings which we have utilised symbolically in this book.

BE A GOOD GIRL

Prof. Ranu Uniyal

Good girls stay away from streets, stay not in the dark, sleep early.

Good girls don't drink in the open,

Good girls don't have boy friends or wear short-cut sleeves, dresses that cling.

Good girls don't smoke or read porn.

Good girls refrain from laughing and ogling.

Good girls do their homework.

Good girls eat dinner at home.

Good girls sleep in their bedroom, switch off their TV and mobiles at ten,

wish you good night long before 12 midnight.

Good girls say their prayers.

Be a good girl.

Good girls get soaked in blood in their sleep, no one knows why,

Good girls fail to Wake up in the morning, no one knows why.

Good girls are killed inside their bedrooms, no one knows why.

Good girls die and no one hears them scream, shout or cry.

Good girls are found buried in the forests. Good girls are hanged, dumped, shot,

Ripped apart with a knife.

Good girls get raped, brutalized , no one knows why.

And yet they say

Be a Good Girl.

(First imprint of this poem appeared in "Still We Sing Anthology" edited by Sarita Jenamani, Dhauri books, 2020. This has been published with the permission of the author who is Head of the department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow).

PART I
Struggles and Victories

1

Every Cloud has A Silver Lining

Kanchan Srivastava

Pain, failure, anxiety, depression, under-confidence are not just word., These are phases of life and I think everybody has to go through these phases at least once in their life. Two years ago lying on the bed of the hospital, waiting for my number as it was my surgery day thinking about the predicament which brought me to that hospital's bed, I was very nervous the way I was never before. Yes, it was my breast surgery. I was happy because I knew that from today onwards I would get rid of my irritating pain. It all started when I was 19. I was not mature enough, not that daring, unaware about what will happen in future. It was the first time when I realised that something is there in my left breast which is not okay. I told my mother and went to the homeopathic doctor. It was an obvious thing for a young girl like me to have blind faith and trust in doctor and advised me to go for an ultrasound. After the ultrasound, I got to know that it is a Fibroadenma (non cancerous benign) which is very common among girls between 14-30 years of age. My doctor said, "you will be fine and there's no need to operate it". I was happy that everything is under control. But I was wrong. My doctor didn't tell me the whole truth. I was unaware of the fact that there is a lot more to suffer ahead. As each day passed, the size of that 3 cm tumour increased in size and weight. I was reluctant to take any second opinion because it

haunted me whenever I imagined about any grave disease getting diagnosed. All these thoughts defaced me both physically and mentally. I had a temporary solution of physical pain but my mental pain had no medicine. During my studies the most difficult time was when I had to be around my friends, having a constant fear of being noticed by anyone. It wasn't easy for me because I had to hide my pain, my imbalanced body and deal with inferiority complex. I always tried to enjoy as much as I can without letting my situation to be an obstacle in my way of freedom to live and to enjoy. But some days were hard to survive. I remember one incident when I got exhausted with this intruder in my body. Once, I went out for my birthday shopping. When I entered the trial room, I realised that nothing goes well on my body. I love to wear off- shoulder tops, shirts et cetra but some where my soul resisted. My heart lost all the interest in dressing up for any function. It was that moment when I started to hate my body more than anyone could hate me. But somehow, with time and support of my loved ones I regained my interest and my will to live my life the way I always wanted. I started to enjoy my life with my friends and family.

Due to this tumour, my whole breast had become imbalanced and I could only find a different version of pain: throbbing pain, burning pain, cutting pain, breathing issues, cervical. I started using 3 handkerchiefs just to balance my breasts and it made my situation more traumatic. Meeting people, being in a family function, hanging around with friends, going out for shopping all these things became tough challenges for me to deal. But I never avoided being with people because somewhere I knew that I am not a culprit and it is a temporary situation. One day, I decided to tell about this to a few of my close friends, who not only stood by my side during this whole journey, but also motivated me to be brave and calm. I think that decision was right. I never liked to carry a stole around my neck but I had to. I have long hair and my hair became my shield because it hid my imbalanced body. Many times people tried to cross question me about this disease but I

didn't have much to tell them. My health deteriorated day by day and I was still ready to sacrifice everything just to have a better future by clearing my competitive exams because at that time I felt that exams are more important than my health. I know it sounds foolish but I believe that when God has a plan for you, everything will automatically move in that direction. After suffering for a long time, I decided to meet an oncologist. When I went to the hospital and the doctor saw me her reaction was horrific. She said "her whole breast is damaged and we have to remove it and reconstruct it". It was an agonizing situation for me and my family. We didn't know what to do. So we went to take second opinion of other doctors. After consulting 2-3 doctors and getting same responses, I was sure that now I have to say goodbye to one of my body parts. I was nervous, disheartened and also muddled. I used to think and question my subconscious but could never find a reason for my unexpected suffering that I never deserved.

My mother is a very strong woman and had been my backbone during this whole journey. Her faith in God and good karmas helped me to stay optimistic. I always tried to hide my pain behind my big smile and I did it to the greatest extent possible. My brother had always been my life supporting system. We have always been close and shared a comfort zone to share anything and everything. He called me up and asked me for my pictures, so that he can show it to another doctor. It was not an easy task to do, not just for me but for any girl. I knew that it was an emergency and I had to do it. I clicked my pictures and sent it to my brother. After looking at the pictures, he said, "Kanchan, I am very upset. How could do this to yourself? Why didn't you tell me earlier? Don't worry, Be brave, we will get through this together." His words made me stronger and more courageous. I felt blessed for having him by brother by my side. The doctor called us to meet him and so we went to Medanta, Gurugram. He is a renowned and very experienced breast surgeon. We walked towards his cabin with a hope of positive response. He went through my reports and asked, "Why are you so late? Her

whole breast is damaged and we are 95% confirmed that we have to remove it. There is also a 50% chance of her having a cancer because there are a few symptoms of it". His words shattered us. We all became numb and hopeless. I was asked to go through check-ups and all the procedure for my surgery because now there was no point to sit and wait for another misery. I got an appointment for my surgery and underwent the pre-surgery medical procedures. I was mentally prepared for every possible consequence. I consoled myself to be strong and to accept everything as a gift of God. Finally, my surgery was done on 21st Feb. 2019. Doctor informed my family that it was a giant tumour of 18cm in size and 916.5gm in weight and some how he managed to save my breast. It was a sigh of relief for us. After one week of my surgery we got to know that I am out of danger and there is no cancer. It was an overwhelming situation for all of us and yes, my life was again a gift from God and everyone's prayer and support contributed into it. The post-surgery effects were another tough challenge for me. Within six months of surgery I got to know that the tumour has developed again but I was happy because I had learnt to tackle every difficulty with my courage and smile. After my surgery, I was advised by the doctor to take complete bed rest for next three months. This led me to depression because I was worried that my career will be ruined. Till that time, I had not qualified NET as I wanted to pursue research. I was not even enrolled in any institution for my PhD. All these vulnerable thoughts of losing my future hit me very badly. I started to lose my confidence again. I started to live in a continuous fear of being failure in my life. This disease had taken a lot from me. But then one day, suddenly, something happened to me and I took a decision that this time, I will crack the NET anyhow and my health can't be a barrier to stop me in achieving my goals. After two months of my surgery, I joined one library, so that I can concentrate more on studies. I put all my efforts and energy for this. After one month of my exam, the results were announced and I qualified with good

marks. God paid to my efforts and it was my first NET certificate. Qualifying NET was a motivation for me, I knew that now I will not stop. Soon, I cleared my PhD entrance and got a call for interview from Central University of South Bihar. I was very happy, but my family wasn't. Being parents, they were right on their part, they knew that it won't be easy for me to live in Bihar, away from them for next 3-5 years. They were worried about my health. This was the first time in my life that my family didn't support me for my decision. I took admission and moved to Bihar to pursue my research. Soon after getting admitted there, I started feeling that this place is probably not right for me. Just after twenty five days, I decided to leave the campus and return. I resigned from my PhD and came back home. On the way back I kept thinking and was perplexed that what will happen if I do not get any option for Phd admission in future? The feeling of fear, doubt and regret brought my confidence down again and again I had to face this uncalled challenge. But as I said earlier, that when God has a plan for you, everything moves in that direction. After one year, I cleared PhD entrance exam for University of Lucknow with first rank. I got enrolled in PhD and my family was happy and relaxed. These five years of journey transformed me into a better version of myself. It taught me the value of my life. It taught me the importance of family who were there for me at every difficult stage, value of good and supportive friends who cheered me up, and most importantly, value of my body. I love myself more than ever before. God made me realize I am strong and can survive even when life is not an easy path to walk. Life doesn't always invigorate. It is also like a wave of hope to grow, to love, to embrace, to struggle and to learn whenever you get a chance. Hold it like a sword and fight like a warrior.

2

Unhealed Wounds

Anonymous

...It makes me feel like I am 8 again.

It makes me feel that I should stop it,

Last time I didn't and it scared me.

I wished I had pushed, resisted, said 'No!' at least. I didn't do anything.

It seemed like my consent,

But I swear I didn't know what all that meant.

I just followed what I was asked to do...

Over the years I have realized that no matter how old I grow, there is always going to be an eight year old inside me. Sleeping, only evoking when triggered yet so dominant, that all my understanding reduces to that of an eight year old. Over the years I have realized that time doesn't heal everything, some wounds might not bother in a normal situations but slight discomfort makes them fresh again. It has been almost 14 years since those incidents happened, so I don't remember everything but my flashbacks haven't let me forget them. To be very honest, I don't

remember the day, month or even the year. Everything I remember is through the images I see in flashbacks and by that I can guess what time what happened.

I was six or may be seven years old; he was my neighbour, six years older than me. We were close, for him I was the little sister he didn't have. During summer vacation my brother and I mostly spent time at his place. We used to play together, dance and talk for hours. There was this song, 'It's the Time to Disco' from the movie '*Kal Ho Na Ho*' we used to usually dance to. One day after the dance was over; he suddenly kissed me on my lips. I asked him why he did that, he said, '*Movie me song ke end me hota hai*' (In the movie, it happens after the song ends). I believed him, I always believed him so I did this time too and I thought I might have missed the scene and there was no way to confirm then, also if you are wondering if it actually happens or not so let me tell it doesn't happen, I know because I have seen this movie numerous times just to confirm it. I didn't make it a big issue because it was just a kiss and also I forgot, we started doing something else I got distracted and then forgot. But the next day it happened again, and next to the next day again and it happened every time we danced on that song. Every time he would try a different style of kissing. I remember telling him that I don't like to be kissed on lips, if he wants he can kiss on my cheeks. But he said that my cheeks are rough and he didn't like kissing them. I tried resisting but I couldn't. He was strong. No matter how many times it happened, it felt gross, I remember brushing my teeth afterwards; I still do. I never really complained about it to anyone because for me it was part of the dance and I really didn't know it was that big deal. Also, a part of me knew that if I said anything my parents would let me go play afterwards. People already gossiped about me being the only girl playing among boys, I could sense that and my mom was already kind of worried because of it. She never directly forbade me because I always asked a lot of questions and especially 'Why?' And then what would she answer? That I am a

girl that's why, but she could never say that. The funniest thing about my mom is that she hates it if I blame her for patriarchy, she just says, 'I love you so much and that's why I say but you have to always take it in the wrong way. Do whatever you want to do.' And as a 7-year-old my priority was to go and play, not to think about what's appropriate and what's not. Do I feel stupid about making that decision? Yes, I do, every day. But I don't blame myself because I was unaware. How can something that I don't know be my mistake? Parents often kiss kids to show love. I didn't realize it was lust but again, how would I realize when I didn't even know the word 'lust' back then. Anyway, soon the vacation ended and he got busy with his school, studies, and stuff. We would rarely meet and nothing like that happened again. Nothing like that happened again, before winter vacation.

It was the winter vacation of the same year, 2005. I remember that we would sit on the terrace in the afternoon to sunbathe. By then I had completely forgotten about that incident but, soon it all started again. Now, it wasn't that song, by then we were bored of that song, but this time it was sometimes in the game of 'Truth or Dare' or sometimes while he was telling some movie plot. Now when I think of that time, whenever we were together he would always stay close to me, his hands were always on me.

On afternoons, when everyone used to take nap, I usually sneak out and go up on my terrace, there was a hall there and in that hall, there was a bamboo hammock. I would mostly spend my afternoon there with my comic books. So, one such afternoon, I was there again and that day, he too followed me and came. He said that he wanted to sit on the hammock and so I let him sit and then sat on his lap. I was a talkative kid, I always had a lot of stories to tell and a lot of questions to ask. I would literally bore anyone with my talks. So, I was doing that with him too. Suddenly out of nowhere, he says, 'Let's play a game. You will love it.' I can literally still hear his voice. There is a weird sensation in my ears whenever I think about it. His voice still echoes in my ear. It

may sound dramatic but it is true. I agreed, not knowing what the game was, I was just seven, I didn't know what games he was going to play with me afterwards. There were lots of windows in the hall so he took me to the corner where there wasn't any window so that we can't be seen. He then started kissing me, his hands started going all over my body, slowly they moved down and he went down on me. I went numb; I didn't know what was happening. There were lots of whats and whys in my head. I don't even remember for how long it happened, I was frozen, standing there pinned to the wall like a statue. He did ask me if I liked it or not. I don't remember what I replied, I ran off and washed myself because I felt disgusted and moreover I was thinking why would anyone do something like this someone. It was the first time, it was beyond my understanding, I was a kid, I barely understood kissing at that age. I didn't understand anything so to judge if it was right or wrong was not even there in the scene. The next day, it happened again and then next to the next day again and it happened so many times than I remember and every time it happened it would increase the level of disgust and I started to feel very uncomfortable. He wouldn't stop. I resisted more and more, asking him not to do but he was older than me, he knew how to manipulate me. He told me there's nothing wrong in it and that it is our little secret.

Christmas was arriving soon. We decided to prepare a play in the spirit of Christmas. I don't exactly remember what the play was about though I do remember a few parts of it. I was a little girl, he was a wolf and my younger brother was a hunter. The plot was something like he will try to eat us or something like that and I don't remember anything else. We would mostly practice on our terrace. While practicing he would take me to that hall, again in that corner, undress me and imitate eating me. I really don't know how to describe it, thinking of that corner itself haunts me. And when I would ask him to stop, he would say, 'you are chubby. It will take time to eat you.' and then he continued. After a point, I just got so frustrated, I backed out from the stupid play. He tried

convincing me but didn't try very hard because I think he too kind of got scared that I might tell someone this. Everything stopped for a while then.

Soon after this, a new girl came in our colony, about his age only and was really beautiful. But when she came, my troubles got doubled. He would fantasize about her and then, would tell me what he wanted to do to her, and he did not just tell me, he actually did. I clearly remember one day he was telling how he wants to make babies with her. Things went to a point where I couldn't just allow the things keep happening to me. I had reached my threshold and now I couldn't bear any of it. So one day we were on his terrace, he sent my brother somewhere for something so that he could find me alone and abuse me again. He once again pulled me but this time I resisted, I started shouting at him, beating him with all my strength and I don't know if he got angry or was scared. There was a storeroom on his terrace, he dragged me there and locked me up in it.

I was locked in there for 45 minutes and in those 45 minutes, he lost all the love and respect I had for him. Just because he is physically stronger than me, he can't do this. I wish I should have felt the same anger earlier when he started abusing me. I was furious. So later when he unlocked the door, I didn't say anything to him and went straight back to my home. My cousins saw me and they figured out from my red fuming face that I was upset about something. So they asked. I could have told everything to them but I was ashamed and humiliated. I don't know what I was ashamed of but I was. I didn't tell them what he did to me but I did tell them what he talked about that girl. I told them that I don't like all these talks and that's why I am angry. And then things ended, I stopped meeting him, he never tried to come near me. But, I could never get over it. The shame, the fear, the disgust, the discomfort still remains. Some days are better than others but there isn't a day I don't think of it.

After we stopped meeting these feelings slowly faded away. I once

again forgot about these things. Two years later, when I was 10, I was watching this show called 'Crime Patrol' and that episode was about 'Child Abuse'. A girl's uncle would touch her inappropriately and at that moment I realized what had happened with me in all those years. I watched the whole episode and you know what's wrong with Indian shows, they teach us to be ashamed of these things. My first thought was, nobody can ever know about it. I was scared of what others will think about me. I felt guilty, I was guilty about what I would wonder what if he told others, what if he told his friends and they would be laughing at me right now. I suddenly started hating any physical contact. I hated to be touched, especially by any men. I hated it to the point that I didn't even like my brothers touching me. I started to grow distant from everyone. People who know me know how less I hug or shake hands now. Over the years, I have improved and now though I don't deny it but still, I don't generally initiate hugging or shaking hands. I don't know why I still felt like he was always watching me even in private space. I would think that what if he planted a camera in my room. I know it sounds stupid but this is what trauma is.

I started to hate to see myself naked. Bathing became a task for me because even the idea of not wearing anything made me cringe. I remember how I would ignore the mirror in the bathroom while bathing. I have mastered in ignoring that mirror so well that even accidentally I don't look into it. I even started to wear full clothes. I didn't want my skin to show. I still remember I had a cute yellow skirt that my mom bought for me and I never wore it. I was too uncomfortable to wear. My school uniform was shirt and skirt, so I started wearing stockings beneath.

These were some of the changes that no one noticed. But everyone did notice one thing, dissociation. Dissociation is a way of coping by avoiding negative thoughts or feelings related to memories of traumatic events. When people are dissociating they disconnect from their surroundings, which can stop the trauma memories and lower

fear, anxiety and shame. Dissociation can happen during the trauma or later on when thinking about or being reminded of the trauma. I didn't even know this word back then and I was experiencing it. So, it would happen most of the time, I would be sitting with everyone and talking and suddenly would dissociate. I would not even know until someone would call me and interrupt my thoughts. I have been mocked for this a lot. The good thing about dissociation was that it was always a happy thought; I know it is a disorder but it would take me to a happy place where I was not scared. I started to spend most of my time there than in the real world. Everyone mocked me, elders would advise me that it's not a good habit to day-dream but little did they know that I wasn't day-dreaming I was escaping. My class-teacher noticed it and one day she called my mom to talk about it. She told my mom that I am going through something and she needs to talk to me about it. Parent-teacher meeting suddenly became a counseling session and they both started asking me what the problem was. I wish I had the courage to say but I couldn't. I just said that I think about cartoons and comics and stuff. Ma'am didn't buy it but my mom did and so that matter was closed there. Studies show that experiencing child sexual abuse can lead to early puberty in girls and that happened with me too.

After a few years, I actually started to heal. All the things that worried me started to fade away not completely though but most of the things such as, I wasn't worried about going out alone or I won't have nightmares and I won't wake up in the middle of the night. I would dissociate less, now it only happens if I am really tense otherwise not.

I am twenty-one years old and I have a boyfriend now. I won't go into the details but I still get flashbacks sometimes when we are too close. I still freeze and get freaked out and he has to calm me down. Sometimes I feel distant from him after intimacy but I have come to comprehend that it's not my fault, it's something very natural that ought to happen. I hate myself for putting the burden of my mess on someone, but he understands. He gets it whenever I am uncomfortable, that's

something very important to understand if your partner is a survivor. Abuse disables our ability to say 'No', it makes us believe that our consent isn't important. Having a relationship after such incidence is hard, it requires lots of patience from the partner's side but that's something I deserve after all that has happened with me.

When we are younger, basically children, we don't understand a lot of things and molestation is one of them. Most of the times victims start blaming themselves for what has happened to them. People often judge them by their clothes or the time they are going out or they simply start accusing them of not telling anyone. Victims start building up shame and guilt for something that they didn't do. We don't tell anyone because we get scared, we feel ashamed, and mostly we think that others might not understand. In case of children, they don't even understand till later ages, that they were even molested. There are so many people out there, both men and women, who at one point of time might have been a victim of some kind of abuse or molestation at younger ages never shared anything with anyone. They are still suffering from inside. I will probably get over all of this someday I know. It's a process; it will take time. But for now, I am still struggling.

I go to my living room, turn on the TV, open YouTube and play the song 'It's the time to Disco' in a loop and I dance. I dance till I am tired enough to even move.



3

My Grandmother- My Inspiration

Sanghamitra Chakraborty

“Woman” – what a spectacular creation of God. A perfect embodiment of grace, beauty and strength- a fighter when threatened, while a giver when untamed. A woman carries within herself the gateway to the universe- nurturing life in her womb. Since time immemorial, this civilisation has also witnessed women as “devastators” when evil seemed too overbearing. For instance, in mythology, in the form of goddess Durga and literally- as Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, known as the manifestation of Durga, among others. While the feminine figures like these have set a trail of zeal, courage and bravery for generations of women to follow, it would be imprudent of us to not look up to the “**regular**” women around us- in our family, teachers, domestic helps, so on and so forth as a source of inspiration who wakes up every day, hustle through this patriarchal social construct while still managing to stand upright with their shoulders languished with mountains of hopes, expectations and roles assigned to them by a society inherently unjust to women.

One such woman who I consider to be my immediate “HERO” is my grandmother who is now 75 years old. Born immediately after independence in a family of six siblings and destitute parents, she encapsulated within herself an ever-soaring spirit and an exemplary

strength of character. While the country was still floundering in the aftermath of a disastrous partition, things turned rather grim for my grandma's household too as she lost her father at the tender age of nine- leaving behind six siblings and a feeble widowed mother. Being the eldest in the house, the responsibilities of a giant poverty-stricken household fell upon her minor shoulders as soon as she arrived at the age of discretion and could make sense of the world. Ever since her early days, she had an intense knack for learning. At the age of twelve years, when her sisters played with dolls, she sought to learn world history and at fifteen, when girls of her age started to drop out of schools and groomed themselves for marriage, she dreamt of a life where she would put her signatures in office. At the age of eighteen years, when those around her spent their lives in servitude, were at their in- law's mercy, she earned herself a scholarship and saved her mother extravagant expense of a college tuition. She was the “**man**” of her house as they like to put it as if being a woman proscribes us of exhibiting strength, courage and shouldering responsibilities. She defied the patriarchal normative structure of the society at a time when rebellion wasn't fetishized but it subjected you to the scrutiny of the society only to label you as unscrupulous and despicable. As every other young woman, she looked forward to a happy married life but the destiny had to take yet another unfortunate turn when my grandfather lost all his material possessions soon after the couple welcomed their new born , that is, my mother. My grandfather's ill health did not allow him to work- bringing the old struggle ridden days for my grandmother back again. With a child and a husband to look after, she set out to find work again and as she likes to put it “**Education never goes in vain, you'll always have food in your plate while you have education at your disposal**”. She landed herself in a teaching job and toiled day and night to give my mother a secure future, never ever complaining even for once. She dedicated the rest of her life educating young minds with utmost dedication and enthusiasm. Such was the

impact of her knowledge and kindness, her students whom she had taught many years ago, still check upon her. She has taught me- that possessions might not always be a material, but what makes one sublime is the respect that they earn.

Life broke her yet again when my mother got a paralytic attack in 2003 when I was only three years old and she lost her ability to walk. It was my grandmother, who, amidst her own pain, imparted strength and will power to my mother- gave her the courage not to give up on life. Till date, when her wrinkled hands, devoid of strength, tremble, she never fails to run them through the strands of my hair and embrace me in the softest yet the strongest hug that I've ever felt on the days when life comes crashing down on me. She still cooks those scrumptious meals for me, the taste of which cannot be found even in the most royal of restaurants. While I use my phone to mindlessly scroll through my Instagram feed, she still plays KBC play along, hoping to make it to the hot seat one day. My grandmother will always be my HERO. One day I hope to inculcate just some of her knowledge, presence of mind, conviction, strength of character and most importantly, her kindness.

However, a lesson learned and not executed is a lesson gone in vain. Having learned from her experiences and inculcated her values, it has instilled in me an unwavering strength of character and ethics which are pure to the core. When her only daughter, my mother got paralysed, though shattered, she tended to my mother with all her might. She was resolute in her belief that an ailing individual can be ensured a speedy recovery not merely through medications but when nurtured with love and compassion and made to feel cared for. I still carry this motto forward and do not hesitate to fulfil this predominant responsibility among many others that life has presented me with. My grandma taught me that the modern day Shravan Kumar has no gender whatsoever. Being a woman, one can shoulder the responsibilities of their parents and household both and be as financially secure as their skills allow them to. Like every other middle class girl in this country, I

had spent my teenage years being ashamed of how my body looked. I learned too early to measure my worth off the scars on my face or the stretch marks finding their way across the skin on my waist. How often do we hear advices like “Oh just ignore it, get over it” all adding to one's already insecure mind. But here she was again, my grandma, who gave me a sense of worth in making me realise that you are defined by **how you make others feel. Your worth lies in the depth of your morality, your acts of compassion and how you spread kindness around like confetti.** Her philosophy in life has always been to incessantly and tirelessly stick to one's dharma or duty. The empathy that I feel for the destitute and the desire to serve others around me, all comes down to the ideals that she has passed on to me, which I shall carry forth and continue to pass on her legacy. I learned to love the imperfections embedded in my skin for I've always had her shoulders to lean on when I didn't even like the only place that I lived in, which is my body. She always provided me with a refuge which was ever accepting, which was ever welcoming, in the form of her warm embrace. I am grateful to University of Lucknow's Gender sensitisation cell for giving me a space to share my story, for letting the world know about my HERO, about the bravest woman I know. As they like to put it, life made me grow up too soon, way before I intended to. When I was just three years old, I've seen my mother suffer. First and till date with paralysis and then with a chronic lung disease. Amidst it all, I've seen strength and sacrifice manifest itself in the form of my grandmother who came running to care take of my mother, leaving behind her own teaching job. The ghastly covid pandemic took many lives and left millions unemployed- my father being one of them. Like the saviour she is, my grandma came running back yet again to the rescue and for a while year she did everything that she could- from cooking to taking care of everyone, so that I could devote time to building my career and my graduation is not affected. Today, while I write this, she's on the train back to her home Varanasi. I look around in disdain to a house which reeks of her absence

and pray for nothing but a long and a healthy life for her. She has left me in tears but her memories make smile because I'm so proud of the strongest woman I've ever come across. From here, I take the lead and venture forth hoping to fulfil my duties half as earnest as she did.

I could go on for pages and pages about the impact she has had on me and those around her but since every story has to end, mine will have too as well. On a concluding note, I'd like to appeal to whoever comes across this, please respect your grandparents. Sit with them, talk to them. They have experiences that can give you a better insight into life than any inspirational video can. Old age is the loneliest period in one's life. Our grand parents often fail to keep pace with today's technologically advanced world. When they seek to learn how your phones and laptops operate, team them with patience. Our grandmothers were the real multitaskers way before it was cool. Here's to all the strong women who have lived to inspire- May the fire within you remain ever alight.

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Winning the Unanticipated Battle at Work Place

Anonymous

I used to be a simple, carefree girl who was usually lost in her own world, was not at all bothered about what people think about her, what they say about her. I had grown up without noticing the difference that men and women are required to behave differently. To be more precise, I am the one who never believed in “Gender Roles” as defined by the society. It was the year of 2003 when I was placed in a Post graduate college as a Lecturer through my selection in Higher Education Commission. When I had visited the college once after my selection, I was very reluctant to join it as for me it had a different environment catering to students coming mostly from the rural background. The college was though, situated in the main city, yet I was uncomfortable there as I had completed all my education starting from graduation till getting my Ph.d degree awarded from University of Lucknow. I was accustomed of seeing sprawling lawns and huge campus, having freedom of expression and movement and a kind of open environment. So settling for a job in a college which was big but not as big as any University campus had put me in a conflicting situation. To add to my state of mind was that city which I never liked due to pollution, traffic congestion and lifestyle.

When I went to the college for my joining, I met a teacher who

incidentally was from my department in University of Lucknow and knew me. We interacted for a while and during our conversation I came to know that there are more than 60 teachers posted in different colleges who commute daily from Lucknow to that city from train. I got motivated , came back home and told my parents that I do not want to stay in that city and so I have decided that I will commute daily from my *janambhoomi* to my *karambhoomi*. They were astounded and said- Have you gone mad? Your college begins at 7.00 a.m in the morning, how will you reach so early. I said there is a train at 5.30 a.m which reaches my destination city at 6.40 a.m . It will take half an hour to reach my college in the morning , so I will manage. They again asked- so will you get up at midnight to get ready? Even I knew that this is going to be really tough as I was not used to get up so early in the morning and this I was expected to do everyday be it chilly winters or rainy season. Still I mustered courage and said Yes I will. Please allow me to do this. At least I will be able to come back to my city by afternoon, I will be able to stay with both of you, I will be able to continue with my hobbies and other routine activities the way I have been doing. What will I do the whole day in that city once my college gets over (The timings of my stay in college were from 7.00 a.m -11.00 am) as no one stays after the faculty time gets over. Hearing all these pleas my parents finally said – alright, give it a try. Let's see how things work for you and then we may reconsider this decision of commuting daily, in due course of time. I was happy that I will be coming back to my very own city which I love so much, but at the same time I was so worried that how I am going to do this as at that time I was not good in driving car, what will happen to my health as I will never get a complete sleep, how my complexion and skin will turn out to be, due to daily travelling in train and public transport, so on and so forth.

However, my train journey began and that was also the beginning of my long struggle which I had not anticipated. Initially for a year my father used to drop me to Charbagh railway station at 5.00 a.m and I used to

take public transport to commute to the other city and coming back to my home in Lucknow. This continued for two years till I started driving the car independently, which was however, confined to getting parked at the railway station. Two years passed in the college. My image in the college was of a very outgoing, outspoken, bold teacher as I was just not bothered how people perceive me, talk about me. I did not even mind in mixing up with my male colleagues, laughing with them, talking freely with them in the college premises. I was so naïve at that time that I could not understand the cultural difference between the two cities, the mentality of the people, their orthodox mindset which was engulfed with typical gender roles where a woman is supposed to be not so loud in her expression, cannot talk freely with male colleagues, cannot laugh with her heart out, is expected to wear only a saree and has to mingle more with her female colleagues. I was an exception to this line of thinking.

I would like to mention that in the initial year of my journey I used to get a train at around 12.00 noon from my work city for Lucknow. My college was although 10 kms from the station but due to heavy traffic congestion, the time to reach the station used to be somewhere between 45 minutes to one hour or sometimes even more than that. There was no direct route to reach the station so I had to change tempo at two places. After a year or so the railways changed the timings of the train from 12.00 noon to 11.30 am. Simultaneously the route of getting the first tempo from my college also got changed. I was not allowed to leave the college premises before the scheduled time and each and every faculty had to strictly follow the four hours compulsory stay in the college and the timings were monitored by the authorities. So the catch was how to catch the train at 11.30 a.m? From here there is a twist in my tale.

I had a very senior male colleague whose route to reach his home was the same till a point where I had to change my tempo. As we all know that getting a public transport is a process of waiting. Given my changed

circumstances I could not afford to wait for tempo. So I requested my colleague to drop me up to the point from where I could get a direct transportation to railway station. He was also OK with this request as the route was same for him too. So every day he helped me religiously to catch the train and this continued.

One day I went to office for some routine work when the Office Superintendent asked me to sit for a while in his cabin. He was a nice person and had been helping me from time to time in all official matters, hence I was fine in talking to him. Suddenly he handed an envelope to me and said- “ Madam this envelope contains a letter. Read it and keep it back in this envelope”. When I took that envelope in my hand, I noticed that on top of it was written CONFIDENTIAL. I thought it contains some official information. So I opened it casually and started reading it. As the lines progressed, my embarrassment kept on growing. Oh My God, it was a letter of my own character assassination. As I continued reading I could feel the Office Superintendent eyes stuck on my face as he was trying to read the changing expressions on my face. I was still, stunned. It was written anonymously but was addressed to my management who was the appointing authority in the college. The letter was typed and contained all abusive, filthy words which you could imagine about a woman labelling me characterless just because I used to take a lift from a male colleague that too only for two kilometres (my name and my senior colleague's names were also mentioned in the letter). I looked at the person sitting in front of me and handed back him the letter. He said “Madam, don't worry, this letter will not go anywhere. I will not tell anyone. I have stopped this letter but I am not sure if more copies of this letter are in circulation. The management and we all are with you. We will try to find out who has written this and who has posted it”. I again looked at him with expressionless face, said Thank you and left his office.

I was at crossroads. On one hand was that letter and on the other hand was the train. I kept on thinking what to do, how to move ahead as this

was a big blow on my self-respect, my character. I did not discuss this incident with anyone, not with colleagues, nor with friends and not even with my parents. I was extremely uncomfortable sitting with people, moving with people. For the first time I was compelled to think – I am a woman who should behave only in the manner she is expected to behave by the society. But this was not me. I was not like that and I could never be like that. Two days passed and I was living in a constant fear by remembering the words of my Office Superintendent that there might be other copies in circulation. When nothing happened in two days I was relaxed that somebody might have done a prank and now things are settled. Alas! It turned out to be only a wish. On the third day when I reached college, I saw people murmuring, looking at me strangely. Those who used to normally greet me, turned their back and started avoiding me, ignoring me. Already my stress level used to be usually high in terms of getting up early in the morning, cooking my breakfast, tracking trains, running after them, sometimes missing them , then wait for next train to come, always under slept, still commuting and to all this, their strange behaviour. Suddenly I remembered that letter and ran to the office. I opened the door of the cabin and asked the Office Superintendent “ *Phir se kuch hua hai College mein*” ? He said Madam come in and sit down. I said, please tell me what has happened, why nobody is talking to me, why they are giving me strange and ugly looks. To this he answered, Madam the copy of that letter has been sent to every head of the department in all the departments of this college. I said Ok, Ok. Please tell all the heads not to discuss. Since you are close to management, they will listen to you. I was almost panting while telling a this to him. He did not react. I went a little loud in my voice- why you are sitting quietly, why you are not doing anything. He said- Madam, the copies have been distributed to almost all the degree colleges of that city, to the Vice- Chancellor office of the University to which the college was associated and even to the higher education Directorate office in Allahabad. I asked how do you know this? He replied I have been

receiving so many phone calls from different people since morning and everyone is only asking about one thing- Do you have any such teacher in your college? We have received an anonymous letter about her. After hearing all this I was NUMB, completely NUMB. Tears started rolling down with my head down. I had numerous racy thoughts going on in my head- my reputation, my job, my career, my family. What will I do? How will I face people outside this cabin? What next? It was a silence inside the room and also deep inside me. I looked at him and could see helplessness in his eyes. I left his room without uttering a word. I came back to my department and sat quietly. I had two senior male colleagues who asked me what happened. They knew but perhaps they wanted to know my reaction. I told them everything. They said , don't worry, we know you are a very nice and descent girl. Everything will be alright. These words gave me a support but I knew that nothing was right as I had to prove that I am a girl of strong and clean character. The battle outside and inside had begun.

I came back home, kept thinking for three days , what to do, should I tell my parents. It is about my image, my character, my self -respect which has been tainted very badly. I can not continue at my work place with this big blow on my character. I was scared, tensed, broken as this has never happened with me. Finally, I decided to confide in my parents. I told them everything and my father asked -So what you want to do? I said I want to file a complaint. He said- You will file complaint against whom, the letter is anonymous. I took a breath and replied- "I will file the complaint for Sexual harassment at Work Place". He again asked- Do you understand what does it mean, are you ready to face the consequences? You have to work at the same place and you will file a complaint? It can affect your job prospects, your promotion and there is no guarantee that your case will be taken up or you will win as there is no proof. I listened to him carefully and firmly replied- I have no other option. It is about my self -respect, my character. I have to fight for it, even if it affects my career. Seeing me so adamant, my parents said- Ok

go ahead, we are with you.

I got more tensed as everything was so fluid. I was new in the college, had not known people, have never visited my management and yet I was ready to fight without any support. But I was confident that I will face everything that comes my way. If I win, I will continue in the same college and if I lose then I will leave that college. Oh Leaving the college meant quitting government job but was I ready for this trade off? Perhaps I was. I wrote an application and next day went to see the manager of the college who was the appointing authority (Higher education Commission was the selecting body). We had met for the first time. I explained to him everything and said- Sir, this is my complaint. He took my application, read it and said- You are very young, unmarried, your whole life is ahead, you commute daily. Already life is difficult for you and if you file this complaint you will earn many enemies, people will go against you and life will become tougher. I trust you, forget what happened and continue with your job. I said if you trust me then please help me to save my image, protect my dignity and accept my application. Finally, he accepted my application and the case was filed under Sexual Harassment at Work Place against my colleague whom I had suspected. An enquiry committee was immediately set up. I was relieved that now things will take their own course. But I was again wrong. Much more suffering was waiting for me.

When I came back to my college from my manager's office, my colleagues started giving me weird looks and asked- Do you know what is sexual harassment as you have filed a complaint, that too against our colleague? Was it really required. I said Yes I very much know what sexual harassment is, perhaps you all do not know and let me decide what is right for me. From that they I was boycotted by my colleagues. Male colleagues thought that I have done injustice to their counterpart as I was characterless and so I wanted to save myself through the complaint and female colleagues thought that I have over reacted and want to gain sympathy. There were only three male colleagues of my

department who used to talk to me but they also started maintaining a distance. My co- passenger colleagues also stopped moving with me, talking to me but there also two of my colleagues came to my rescue. They used to update me about train timings and were concerned.

As days passed by I had to appear in front of the enquiry committee to get my statements recorded. I had no proof to prove my point. In the mean while I started getting threats of Acid attacks anonymously. I had no clue as who was behind all this but got so scared as my movement was through public transport. I used to on high alert position while commuting. My parents used to get obscene phone calls related to me asking them to tell me to withdraw the complaint. One day a colleague told me that he had overheard that there is a planning to distribute the same letter amongst the students and distribute pamphlets in the college branding me characterless. A news got published in a prominent local daily about this case and my relatives of that city started calling my parents that what it is all about. I was embarrassed, stressed, scared, nervous, shattered to my core. There was no way out and situation seemed to be out of hands. There were rounds and rounds of enquiry and I had always one answer to give- I do not know who did this. I could guess, but was unable to prove my point. I was almost mentally prepared that I am going to lose this battle, my job and have to live with this scar through out my life. My confidence was shaken and so was I. There was no ray of hope.

Suddenly one day I received the news that the faculty against whom I had filed a complaint was suspended. I was astonished- How this happened? Is this some divine intervention? I immediately left the college and went to my manager's office which was ten kilometres away from my college. When I met him I asked him- Sir, I have received this news, is it true? He smiled and said Yes, the enquiry committee investigated and have found him guilty. Now it is his turn to prove himself innocent. I was looking at him with teary eyes. I was speechless, had nothing to say. I called my father and told him about the action

taken.

When this news broke in the college, I saw the changed behaviour of my colleagues. Some appreciated, praised me for my boldness and some accused me that due to my complaint that faculty is suffering. Days passed by, life started getting normal for me. After six months, I was again called by the manager. He said that enquiry committee has submitted its report. The decision is in your favour. They have found him guilty. So now what you want the Board of Management to do? Whichever punishment you say, we will execute, even if it is termination of his services. I said please give me sometime, if possible, I will tell you what I want.

I came back, pondered, discussed with my parents and went next day and told my manager. Sir, please forgive him. I do not want any termination as it will affect his family, his pension. Kindly repeal the suspension also. My manager was astonished to hear this. He said -do you understand what you are saying? I said Yes Sir, this fight was for my self respect. It was to prove that my character is strong. I suffered because of him and others associated with him but I do not want him and his family to suffer because of me. With your support I have won this battle which I fought to save my dignity. So kindly forgive him.

I do not know whether you all will agree to this decision of mine, but I sleep every night very peacefully. It has been fifteen years when this incident happened, still it is so intact in my memory that I could write scene by scene, what had happened. This itself is indicative that how impactful my trauma was that shaped this story. After going through this personal and ordeal, I earned tremendous respect in my college. My management was super supportive till the date I left that college and joined University of Lucknow few years back. I shall remain ever grateful to him and to all those who were there with me in this journey.

However, after this incident I became guarded in my approach, have stopped mingling much with my male colleagues. Most of the time I am

my own company at my work place. I do not mix up with people and do not allow them to peep into my personal life or talk to me freely. But I am definitely very proud of my inner strength, my confidence, my boldness and the support system which has made me stronger. Going anonymous as an author is simply respecting the privacy of my previous colleagues and those friends who have been a part of this real life incident. The purpose of sharing this story is not to glorify anything but to sensitize all those women who face similar situations but do not muster courage to stand up for themselves. Speaking up is the first step to end abuse- be it physical, mental or emotional. If you take a step forward, you will find ways through divine interventions. Miracles do happen and my victories are nothing short of a miracle, happening many a times in my life. I will only say that the strength lies inside you, it is only you who have to recognise it, ignite it and keep it alive.

5

She inspired Him

Animesh Barua

“The hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world”. As a mother inculcating spiritual values in the child outside the four walls of the household moulding the destiny of children, the hope of tomorrow as a teacher, providing relentless services to the society as a healthcare worker and the list goes on...The age old adage echoes it all..

Women play an indispensable role in our lives. They are the fulcrums around which our lives revolve. Breaking the shackles of antediluvian customs through their indomitable spirits and unparalleled conviction akin to the Phoenix rising from the ashes and soaring to even greater heights when the odds are against them. Stories of Mother Teresa, Anne Frank to name a few pump up our hearts to no extent but there are still names we haven't yet heard, stories waiting to be discovered.

This is such an unheard story which has moved me to the very core and as I pen it down on her behalf I wish her all the success in all her future endeavours..

“You are not Special like others, not even in the slightest...”, her mother remarked

“And that's exactly what makes me so Special”, she said with a grin across her face.

These are no words baked out from a movie nor are they from any renowned personality on cloud nine.. They are raw emotions coming from the depths of the heart of a GIRL HERO, one the world doesn't know of yet.. But they will... This is the unheard story of a She Warrior...

(For all convenient purposes I will be going with a pseudo identity hence the pseudo name Kriti)

Beads of perspiration on the forehead, dribbling the basketball and moving towards the basket one could easily sense the feeling of getting exhausted from her facial expressions yet the only thing I could notice was the unwavering compassion for the game and the focus in her eyes, a bird's eye view ogling just at the basket.

Moving bodies directing all the traffic, Kriti drained a long three pointer from the corner and swish it in. Nothing could be more satisfying. A distant voice resounded “Girls the practice time is over. Pack your stuff up and drop by at the same time tomorrow for practice” Everyone nodded..

I was waiting outside the court watching them play. Picking up her stuff, she came running towards me “Did you watch the last go in? how was it?”. I could only smile. I have known her for a long time. We were in the same school and for that matter our homes were nearby too.

Both being ardent basketball enthusiasts we have been friends for a long time now. We had a knack for the game ever since we were kids and what more does it take for two like heads to be great friends. From discussing previous night NBA games to playing solo matches against each other to debate as to who was the better player it was basketball which kept us going all along. Off the court she was a jovial person, lollygagging with her pet dog or watching games. On the court she had an all different persona, a genius of the game one could even argue that she was the best player in our prefecture, the right height to finish at the rim, a mindful presence to make the right plays and the leadership to lead the team. She had everything going right for her one would believe

except for she didn't.

The biggest deterrence she faced was from her parents. They never wanted her to even touch the ball let alone let her play. They believed that sports was the exclusive prerogative of men and that she would never take her game to the next level. Time and again when I would visit her place, they would constantly chide her for the same and even would ask me to talk some sense into her and even though I wanted to take her side I never really could.

As parents they had their reservations, being the only child, they always wanted the best possible future for her which they firmly believed she could never secure through sports. Beggars can't be choosers right? But with her it was different. The indomitable drive towards her goal of making it to the nationals never let doubt herself not even an ounce.

“You don't listen to anybody who says you can't do, Because You know that you can” it was her maxim, and it never ceased to amaze me every single time. Things went on with some ups and downs for some time till the day we would hit up the results statistics of our pre board exam from high school. All of the parents were called to the school to be updated with the analysis of their children's performance in the exams. Her parents were rung up only to be informed that she had flunked in one subject and that would be the nail in the coffin. One could sense the bellicosity in Kriti's father's voice as he kept chiding her giving pep talks all the way home.

All of her basketball gear was confiscated and locked away in the store never to be touched again. The prefectures were right around the corner and at a time when she needed to practice the most, she was alienated from the game. Even our coach tried to reason it out with her parents pressing on the fact that she had great potential and could make it to the state division team but her parents seemed to have turned a deaf ear. Nothing could phase through them. It was nothing short of a nightmare for Kriti, the one thing she had dreamt of in all

these years seemed bleak.

But you know what they say 'When your dreams are big enough facts don't count'. Kriti started putting in lots of effort on her academics, toiling days in and out to prove her point. She secretly continued her physical training alongside studies so that she could stay in shape and would ring me up to give an all-detailed report of the same and I had no doubt that she couldn't. The next round of exam pre board exam started for the rest of us; they were another round of exams but for her it was now or never opportunity to prove her point.

The results of the exams came out and Kriti's parents were all agog, she came out with flying colours in all the subjects. And Kriti broke the news about her participating in the prefecture games which were scheduled just a day after the results. They were hesitant at first but seeing Kirti indomitable they had to give in. But only on the condition that if she could make it to the finals and win it all, they will allow her to continue or otherwise it was game over.

Kriti was up for the challenge but a final hurdle awaited her. After being out of practice for so long she had lost her natural touch and consequently our coach had to reluctantly bench her or the very first game of the prefectures. Off the bench too Kriti had a bad scoring game and played just for a few minutes before being substituted. As I watched I could easily see that she was in dismay, though the team managed to pull off victory by a narrow margin, it was a loss for Kriti. The next match was scheduled four days after and now Kriti had to pull off a miracle to be back to her usual game and the spark in her eyes said it all. She worked tirelessly for the next three days working to cover up for her for her lost time and practice and we know it whatever the situation might be, a bird can never forget how to fly!

Finally, on the slated day of the game, Kriti had to come off the bench again and today her had a different air about her. As soon as she stepped on the court she intended to win whatever it takes. The genius on the

court we were used to see, was back. She ended up the game with whooping 32 points hitting a clutch shot with the clock running down. She made an immediate impact on the team as well the panel of selectors who were eyeing all the good talents in the prefecture.

And the rest is all downhill our team went on to the finals winning it all and Kriti had a big role to play in them all. Our board exams started and the division two games were to be held after that. She went at the division two game where the team lost in the semifinals where the selectors had now developed liking to her game and she was selected in the All States Division One team. It's been years since then and she has a long way to go to make her dream become a reality and with her indomitable spirit I have no doubt that she can't. Managing both her studies and her practice she really is an epitome of what dedication of conviction can't do..

This is the story of a Girl hero who never gave in to her harsh circumstances and emerged out victorious..



6

Diary of an 18-Year-Old

Suvidhi Jain

Have you seen anything darker than black? Have you experienced anything greater than pain? Have you ever wished that the earth would explode so that you can get absorbed by it? Have you ever experienced your heart racing faster than your mind and your mind filled with thousands and thousands of thoughts of fading, maybe dying? Well, I have experienced them all, have grown with these thoughts, and somewhat proud of myself for living through it.

It was January 15, 2018. I remember my family members sitting outside basking in the sun and whispering among themselves. But as I reached there everyone became silent. I asked what had happened? They told me nothing *beta*, Everything is Fine. I asked them "How is Papa?" One of them said he is doing better. I was convinced. For the past ten days, I used to visit Papa daily at the hospital. But that day I didn't go. There was something unusual that day. There was something bad about the air. I didn't feel fresh. It felt heavy on the chest. And it was difficult to breathe. I didn't go to my coaching that day. My brother came back from the hospital. I asked him the same question, he gave me the same answer. He was extremely stressed. Nothing felt right.

The day felt so big that day. It was in the evening and I was reading the newspaper and sipping tea when one of my aunts came and told me to

get ready to rush for the hospital. Damn that moment was scary as hell. I reached the hospital between 6 pm to 7 pm. It was cold in there. It felt lifeless. There was stress everywhere. What can one expect in places like hospitals? Fear is the first thing that comes to my mind. Fear of losing someone. Fear of hearing some bad news. It's like if hospital walls could ever speak, they would tell how everyday people lean on them to cry their eyes out. They would tell how many people who came with a living patient have gone with a corpse. They would reveal how much despair and fear overpowers hope in people.

I was told everything would be fine and the doctors were just examining Papa. Still, I was very hopeful. I was sitting there with my mother and other family members. It was around 8 pm. We were praying, joining hands, fidgeting. I really wanted to meet him. I couldn't. He was in the ICU. I peeped through the glass hole of the door. I saw him lying on a ventilator surrounded by a team of doctors. I started crying. What else could I do? Standing there helpless, watching, hoping, praying, still hopeful. The doctor came outside and gave my family some news. I was watching from a far. Crying, still hopeful. Everybody started crying. They asked me to go home with them. I was reluctant. I refused to go. I shouted. I screamed. No one told me anything. We reached. I was made to sit in someone else's house. My cousins told me to calm down. Can a person really calm down in such situations? What a funny word it is? Can you really calm someone down who is actually dead from inside?

After some time I heard the ambulance voice. I ran towards my house. That time I saw my father being brought by four men shrouded in a white cloth. I simply couldn't believe the sight. It was all so vague. So blur. It was impossible for me to believe my eyes. It felt as if someone had stabbed me with a knife. At that moment, I wanted the earth to explode and absorb me. I needed a place to hide. It was the first time I really understood the meaning of the word "helpless". I had never felt such kind of a pain in my heart ever. It felt as if it was bleeding. My

hopefulness crashed into a thousand pieces. My life was shattered in front of me. I was all so suffocating. It was hard for me to breathe. Can you feel the pain a fish goes through moments before it dies outside of water? I felt the same way. Like dying slowly. How should an 18-year-old girl react when she hears her father is no more? Cry? Cry some more to the point the eyes swells. Become silent or hope to die soon?

I was 18 at that time. I was preparing for my law entrance exams. So weak, so fragile. It was very hard. I was alone, directionless, hopeless, exhausted. I was very close to my father. He was my pillar of strength. He was my role model. He wanted the world for me. He used to surprise me with his innate ability to know exactly what I wanted and what bothered me. I celebrated my 17th and 18th birthday with him. He took me out and bought me expensive gifts. They were the best birthdays I ever had.

It was like a piece of me dying every second. *I had no idea where it would lead me.* Have you ever felt so empty that you cannot feel anything at all? Like, nothing matters. You don't like feeling anything and even don't want to. You want to be numb and stay in that state forever. But why? Because you are done with the world and its affairs to the point that it doesn't even matter anymore. Because you are so involved and exhausted with yourself. All you see is darkness. What is darkness? Darkness is a place where you are just destroying yourself, where you are just breathing not living. Why are you alive, do you have a purpose? Or are you living only for the sake of living? How many of us have a purpose? Few, just give in to the circumstances, and few rise above them. Is it important to have a purpose to live? Or can we live a purposeless life?

All I see around is suffering, suffering, and suffering;

People are dying the unwritten death

People are dying in every moment of their lives

The first time I felt that I had grown up and felt my father's absence was when I went to the doctor's clinic alone. I waited there alone. I also started doing grocery shopping which was usually my father's chore. It was as if I was forced to grow up. So weak, so fragile. Well, life goes on, and it waits for none. It will be over in a flash of a second, so please decide your pace. Nobody chooses the struggle, the struggle chooses them. Pain is always unwanted. But it lives with you, anyway.

It broke me into pieces and created a void in my heart which I know can never be fulfilled. It's was like someone has taken half of my heart away from me. I became so miserable and vulnerable that I was completely lost. I chose silence as my defence mechanism for the pain. In the first three months without him, I became extremely sick. No medicine could work. I stopped laughing altogether. Earlier people used to tease me for laughing too much. I became cranky. I couldn't sleep at night. I was always crying. In in the mornings and in the night. It was so bad that I got a migraine. The pain was pathetic. It was like my brain was getting pinched by several needles all at once. At that time I chose to stay with my family rather than going to another city for my studies. I didn't use to tell people about what I am going through. I never had. And I don't even now. Pain is not something that you can tell. It is meant to be felt. I have always believed that a person's sorrows belong to them which can't be shared. Because it can't be felt the same way. Maybe I am wrong but people judge and make you feel so low. As as if you have committed some crime. As if it was all your fault. That's why I chose to keep my pain to myself.

When I reflect at that time now, I can see how it turned me into the person I am today. It made me strong like a rock. People have become so insensitive these days that they only care about the careers and future of the individual that they forget that there are things greater than a degree on a sheet of paper. No one till today has asked me how am I?

How am I feeling? They are so curious about the career choices that I have made. There is a lack of emotional touch. Love, support and empathy are just some words that people show from outside without feeling anything from the inside.

If you meet someone feeling low and sad, ask them how they feel, both mentally and physically. I will end here with a poem:

I will bloom someday,
So high,
That I will shred the sky into small pieces,
That the pieces will cover the entire land where I am planted.
I will shine one day,
So bright that the Sun will be jealous of my light,
My light will be so bright that it will never hurt somebody's eyes.

Surviving A Patriarchal Society

Aastha Singh

The greatest struggle of the hero of my story was against the stereotypical mentality of her parents. The same father who had the guts to provide his son with the opportunity to become a doctor, had the audacity to deny his daughter her right to education and hence a meaningful life. Her family happened to be one of the most well to do families in her village. Her father was a high school teacher in a nearby town's state government school. It is suffice to say that it was more the societal norms and backward thinking which stated that women belonged inside the four walls of a house, which sounds more like a prison, than anything else to be blamed for this misfortune that met her. The lack of proper education came from a misogynistic, patriarchal mindset and not from poor financial conditions. It appears quite dubious that such a family with good living standard would stop their own girl child's schooling after eighth grade. Now as per our cultural norms, her grandparents lived with them in the same household. The neighbouring homes had families living in it that were relatives only. So, it was a big family with lots of cousins to play with and compete with. That is why, it feels even more shocking to me, a 19-year-old girl of the 21st century, how no one came to that girl's aid when her father decided to stop sending her to school. So many family members living close by,

sending their own children to school (even senior secondary) regardless of their gender and no one raised a single finger when her right to education was being violated.

She decided to pursue her senior secondary education from home. Studying by herself with no one else to help her, once she got done with running around the house and doing as many chores as were assigned to her, she would sit down to study only to be told off for it. Her brother and she both woke up early in the morning though he did it to go to school and she did it to prepare his lunch for school a school where she was very much not allowed to study where she would never enter, never hold a book or attend a class, forget doing homework or get punishment or get applauded and praised for good performance, nothing. Yet even facing all the odds mentioned and a lot unmentioned she managed to do what no other girl from her village could. Not only did she pass the examinations but even managed to secure second class. And while her father was exhilarated with her achievement, it wasn't enough to persuade him to not marry her off at the earliest opportunity. Which he did.

These are the experiences that burn and leave a grotesque scar for the rest of a person's life. A scar that never really fades. Always there to remind us of the pain and the feeling of injustice etched onto our brain. After all that effort and even subsequent success in achieving good marks, it was all rendered useless. These are the wounds that instead of healing, keep simmering beneath the skin and over time turn people bitter. Married before she even hit her twenties in the year 1992, the lady went to live with her new family in another village. Another year went by and she found her living in a small town, Sultanpur, with her husband, where he was transferred for his service.

The next milestone for our lady to cover was to get her undergraduate degree which she did with the help of guess papers, that she got a day or two before the exams as the lady and her husband had to travel to

another city that was Raebareilly where a relative used to fill her forms under the jurisdiction of Avadh University. She had to drop out for a year in between because she was expecting. As it happens, this lady apparently had a horde of determination in every crevice of her being. She went back and continued her under graduate and passed all the examinations. Then, she went on to get her post-graduate degree all by studying on her own. Due to many distractions, it was the year of 1999 when she could finish her Post graduation.

Walt Whitman said in one of his poems 'Song of Myself', " I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person." But I believe John Green when he said in his novel 'Paper Towns', "I must ask the wounded man where he is hurt, because I cannot become the wounded man. The only wounded man I can be is me." Same goes for me and the subject of this little story. I have imagined and imagined and imagined over the years yet I can never truly exactly understand or feel what she did in her quest to fulfill her heart's desire. For other people who are outside looking in, on the face of it all, this must seem so benign. Because for most, if it doesn't happen to them it doesn't happen at all. But oh! How wrong that is.

So anyway, life once again found her moving from the small town she lived in to a small city Raebareilly where, her husband was transferred to by the government media agency, Doordarshan that he worked for. Wanting but not getting the approval or support to get a job shoved her in a spiral of anxiety and depression. Along this, somewhere in between she had me too. They lived in Raebareilly,(where I was born), for eight years. These years were perhaps some of the most troublesome days for my hero, my mother. But as is the habit of time, it passes and as is the habit of government employees, they got transferred again.

Our family moved to our current residence, Lucknow, in the year 2007. The priorities might have changed for my mother but she remained honest to herself. The thing with depression is that, while those around

the patient can try all they want, but at the end, it all comes down to the person suffering from it to fight it. My mother sought the help that she needed and managed to overcome, that very few people in their life are able to do. She overcame her depression. And before life could push her in that dark corner again, she decided, that only she will decide what to do and what not to. After rigorous efforts, she managed to get a job in 2009 in HDFC as an insurance agent. But that was only the beginning. It was a hard steep climb getting to where she is today but she did it. That was almost a decade ago. Today, she's not selling insurance anymore. These days she doesn't rush around on public transports either. She bought herself a car with her *own* earning. Anxiety and depression do come to claim her every once in a while but she fights them back, every single time. Now our hero is an RTI activist and runs an NGO. She has been the Prison Visitor under the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, in the same small city of Raebareilly where she once lived. These days, she's also in her second year of LLB in a college affiliated with University of Lucknow, the same University where I am pursuing my undergraduate. Isn't it strange? How life has come full circle. Only this time, the girl is not being subjected to the same prejudices as her mother. Because my father and mother both ensure that.

It is suffice to say that, both my parent's life stories are more effective inspirational biographies for me than any other great soul of the past. To say that my mother has had a lasting effect on my life is an understatement. After all, children do carry a vast amount of impression of their own parents. For me, all I can say is that every time I face a challenge I know either I will best it or I will learn from it. That's all we can do. When we set on a quest, obviously there are going to be some bumps along the way. We can overcome them and even if we can't, then we can learn from them. And what we learn from them will tell us how to best them in future.

That's what my mother did. She came, she saw, she conquered. And that's what I will do too.

8

The Break-Up

Anonymous

PART I- Denial

When we are young, young enough, to understand our surroundings, we are taught to express ourselves, to sing, to dance, to speak et cetera. We make friends, we fall in love and we express ourselves a little further to the one we love. And then sometimes, suddenly, this all goes puff!!! Gone...

Like a lot of other people, I fell in love with a person five years back. I was head over heels in love with him. I admired and respected him. Our friends loved seeing us together. Being two different individuals, we had our arguments and we did fight. But at the end of the day, we were two people in love. He belonged to a Brahmin family and I to a Scheduled Caste. This never appeared to be any issue as we were both well-educated and progressive thinking individuals. I grew up with good education and in an environment promoting freethinking. So I never imagined that I would see caste before falling in love with someone. We were going to marry each other, our families knew that we were in a relationship good enough to marry each other, we had spent considerable amount of time with each other's families as well. I was very sure that we are going to end up together but things unexpectedly changed when suddenly out of nowhere his father

expressed his consent about us. He denied accepting an inter-caste marriage. He literally said that he wouldn't let a lower caste girl come in to his house as his daughter in law. Though he never objected his son having a relationship for five years with one such girl.

I was fucked! Big time!! It was five years of relationship, and I had gone too far for him. And what appeared to be a certain thing suddenly became impossible. I was suddenly standing in the middle of a barren nowhere.

All my life I have believed to stand up for the right thing and so I did. I wanted to fight for myself, at least for once, because someone else took my life's one of the most important decision without even hearing my side. But it didn't matter to anyone. I thought my 'ex' would fight for it and maybe he did but he accepted his defeat real soon. He surrendered to his father's stupid demands and left me. I asked him if can talk and convince his father but he clearly denied. I wanted to convince his father that we want to live with each other and I will be as good to him as a daughter is for any father. I decided to meet his father so I did a train reservation and reached the station. I was in the train and I called him, I told him that I am coming there to talk to his father, it's my right. He said, " No, don't come" He literally forbade me to come. He threatened me that I if went to see his father he would never even open the door. And that was the decisive moment for me. I knew it was over. I had not felt more humiliated in my life. In those three minutes of call I felt that someone actually went down through my throat, twisted my stomach and ripped me apart. It took me seconds to get up take my bag and step down from that train. I sat outside the train station and cried for a while. Then I called up a friend and he came to my rescue and picked me up and dropped me home.

Now how can I let go or forgive a person who didn't even let me try for my future, after all it was not just his decision to take. For the whole year of anxiety attacks, and emotional shit I went through he didn't do

anything and finally an hour before his wedding he texted me an apology, and expected me to understand. Of all the people, in the entire world he wants me to understand!! Why? How am I supposed to understand that the person who was supposed to stand by me left me after trying for a few months? Who surrendered before we even fought the actual fight? He didn't have the guts to face me. If I was that good for him than I deserved a better explanation. We have laws that state I can screw his life big time but how will the law give me back the ability to trust and love another person? How can that person pay me back the time and love I shared with him?

People around me... My friends, family, well wishers asked me to move on. My reply was, why should I? Love is a lifetime thing for me then why should I? They write inspirational stories. They say, let go! You're hurting yourself. I say, I won't. After all, all those great love stories that made me believe in love should not lose my faith in them. If I just move on like him than how would that be called love? Then how will I be any different from him? How would I face my students and tell them to follow their hearts knowing that I didn't do the same. I accepted his family, his culture then why should I be the one who gets punished. And if I don't deserve this than how can someone ask me to just forget and move on? My friends don't like me crying so they ask me to stop crying. They felt bad about me because they care for me. But this isn't for sympathy, its anger. I'm angry of being ditched, angry for my beliefs getting crushed. Angry for standing up for the man I fell in love with. I felt violated as a woman. No one let me speak but only wanted to adjust with the situation. He wanted me to suppress my feelings. And if he knew, that he can't be the person whom I trusted and in who I believed with all my heart than why the fuck did he fool around me all these years. Who gave him the right to do so? I did anything and everything but till date no one, no matter how wise he/she is, no one could make me understand that why this happened. Everyone just says that you can't do anything but move on. Why do we always have to pretend to be

fucking strong? If you're in a world where love, friendship, emotions exist than why am I expected to hide the pain in my heart. How is it justified? All my life I believed in love, respect, and humanity and then suddenly you just take it away as if nothing was mine! Believe me, its worse than loosing someone to death. At least, when a person dies he dies. But when the person is alive and you see him everyday with the one that is not you, you cant let it go. You're just fooling yourself if you think you can. Who will justify for the pain? He? His family? But his family doesn't owe an explanation to me! He does... only he does...

Some of my friends even said that, "he didn't love you enough to stand for you". I am an educated person, an open-minded woman, then educate me here. Couldn't he say anything? But instead he stayed quiet, quiet enough for himself. I wrote to him, a whole year in my diary. I wanted to ask him that why? Why was he so weak to not to fight for his love for me? Was it that hard to stay the person I fell in love with? Can he explain? Can anyone explain! For all those helpless screams and cry at my home and work place, facing people every day after spending a drunk, sleepless and tearful night.

We have all been dumped or have dumped someone in life but can you call that love? How can you define it as love if it ended like it was never there? I refuse to believe in that love. It was some 'pseudo' love world I was probably living in.

They say forgive and forget. No matter how big my heart can be, it won't be big enough to forgive the person who made me believe that true love exists, who pretended to be in this 'pseudo' love with me for five years... The five years that I gave of my complete self to him... Eternally... You might call me stupid but ask yourself and tell me... Why? Why should I forgive him? Why shouldn't I hate him? Why shouldn't he be punished by the God he prayed to everyday and why should he not be guilty for marrying some one else and ruining our relation's sanity?

And if all of this is justified then every other bad deed is also justified.

Because at the end of the day we have convinced ourselves that we all are equally helpless...

PART II- Acceptance

I have now written this side of the story after two years of my break up. So, most of us would think that this happens with a lot of people in our society. We all go through such trauma and nothing is new about it. Yes, indeed, it's true. We all have such stories. But we can all agree to the fact that this story could have been different if a man was in my position. Men might not agree. But if he was in my place and if my father had said no, then he could have acted rebelliously and could have fought. Being a woman, you are expected to act more selflessly and accept the situation without even fighting for it, isn't it? After breaking up and he getting married immediately, he certainly got busy with his life whereas I was still going through it. I used to cry in washrooms, at my workplace. A lot of people knew what's happening but most of them didn't interfere which is fine. I grew distant from them, because in my eyes I was being pathetic and I thought everyone around just loves drama.. My work life was completely disrupted and personal life was of course a mess. I used to cry all night at home and return to work next day trying to look as fine as possible. I broke things and hurt myself too. The nights were nightmares. Like a lot of people, I consumed alcohol too, to ease the pain and fall asleep. I used to go for solo drives around the city. Basically, I used to drive and cry. I know, it sounds pathetic but later in life you might understand the depth of it. I did everything, meditation, distracting myself by dating other people, learning to play music, made paintings that showed nothing but fracas. One day I decided to go for trekking. I wanted to, exhaust my body, be with strangers and feel okay. But later I realized that I am doing all this for a wrong reason. I always wanted to travel and explore but it took me a breakup to actually do all these things. The level of hurt explains the extent of love I had for him

and my inability to cop up with this hurt explains how dependent my life had become on him. He actually didn't just hurt my feelings but had ripped off my self-respect, as a person as well as a progressive thinking woman. I was shaken to the deepest core of my soul. The pain doesn't go that easily. It takes its course of time. And so it did. One of my close friends lived with me at that time. She saw me hurting and tried a lot to help me but actually she didn't know how. She saw me drinking and crying, she couldn't sympathize me but she sat with me till I was able to get up, wipe off the tears and go to bed. One other friend used to stay with me during the days when I used to go nuts. That friend later became my best friend.

On the night of his marriage, two years back from now, I went out with a friend to get drunk. I still remember that night. Right before getting married, he sent a text message to me; I still have that message saved, it said, " I am about to leave for my wedding. Wanted to apologize for all when I could not support you and stand with you. I may be the worst person you ever met but you shall be the best person I have ever met both from heart and love. You will always hold special place in my heart". It wasn't an apology, it was something that could make him feel less guilty move on and start a new life, he wanted my forgiveness and blessing. Obviously, that didn't happen. I actually called him back and cursed him as much as I could and that was the last time we ever talked. So I went out, and got drunk. But that just worked only for that night. I made a fool of myself in the bar, but today we (me and my friend who went out with me) remember that night and we laugh as hard as we can. It's good, and I have no regrets.

My family knew, but they were helpless too. Some of my relatives who knew about this suggested me to get married. They thought marriage might give the solution to this. They think that giving more responsibility to a person (man or woman) will bring happiness in their lives. How absurd that sounds! They don't even give you time to adjust to the changed scenarios. But I'm glad I didn't go for it. Believe

me, marrying is never a solution of heartbreak. One should give time for rediscovering one's individuality. Because, in a relationship, people often lose their individuality though at some extent it is not bad. In our society, people think that marriage is a solution of lot of problems. Earlier, when this was all happening, my sister's husband offered me that he will go and talk to that guy's father, which obviously I denied. This was my fight and I wanted to fight it myself, the only person I wanted by myself was not there.

So, everyone tried and nothing worked. This was something that I had to accept and move forward and my loved ones helped. The stages of denial and acceptance of a fact vary from person to person. Though I have been a practical person most of my life, this hit me hard and it took me a long time to move to acceptance from denial and then moving on. I couldn't help it. Mostly it was anger inside me that made me take this much of time to accept and move on. Sometimes, I still feel that anger inside me.

I started travelling more. I started backpacking to new places alone. It was hard at first, I got anxiety attacks but gradually travelling started giving me sense of satisfaction and independence. I have seen lot of women travelling with their husbands and I am happy for them but I feel proud of myself when I see myself going to places alone, managing trips and making new friends. Once, I met a woman lot younger than me who used to travel on her own, discovering new trails and that inspired me to travel even more. I met different people all the way. So many inspiring people, with painful past but moving ahead like a mountain.

I didn't want to meet people who knew me as they knew my condition but I didn't want to be alone either and meeting new people was scary. It was a long relationship and therefore it seemed impossible to see someone else. Physically, it hardly took a month for me to move on, but mentally it took me more than a year to accept that I was wronged and there's nothing that I can do about it. My friends played a major role in

all of this. They were there when he was with me and they were still there when he left me. It took a lot of me to make this life that I'm living now. It seemed impossible to be happy again. But today, I am a proud working woman with amazing friends. I am independent and love to go for adventures. That is how I met strangers who inspired me. My family supports my decision of not marrying just yet. Usually the process of grief is denial, anger, acceptance and then moving on but in my life, the acceptance part hasn't quite passed. I jumped straight to moving on because no matter how many years go by I would never accept the reasons behind all of this. I still follow my heart and I am happy. It was a bad breakup but I'm glad that I didn't end up with him.

For a lot of people, break ups leads to serious depression and they never get out of it. Unfortunately sometimes it might end up in suicides. But doesn't have to be this way. There are multiple ways to know that you deserve better. Having emotions is not wrong, that is what makes us human. We all have our baggage that we must loose. It's astonishing to see ourselves evolve.

They say, 'Forgive those whom you can't forget and forget those whom you can't forgive.' It's not easy to choose either but it is important for you to get out of it. Be open for love. Have your heart broken, go for adventures. Breathe... Sometimes blessings do come in disguise. As painful as a breakup can be it can still be an experience to learn a lot from. We learn to grow, to be a better person. And sometimes you can surprise more than barely survive.

The Living Donor

Sonam Patel

When I was born, like any other baby I had my eyes closed had no awareness how body parts work and what all organs a body is born with. However, I never knew how my body worked or what organs I'm born with. But with time as I grew up ,I understood the importance of good health and functioning of our body organs.

As a kid I was introvert, shy, quiet and my parents always protected me from everything happening around me. I was a luckier one to have a parental shade always over me. Years passed like this. It was 2007, I was in school and had few friends. To be precise I had only one friend. Everything was going normal but suddenly one day I found that my father was unable to see anything. It was frightening. I had never come across any such incident. I was too young to understand what was actually happening. I still remember I use to look at my mother and then at my father's face just to figure out what's actually happening. We went to South India for his treatment where doctors told that he has got an eye haemorrhage due to which he wasn't able to see and there's nothing they can do to cure it. If with time vision comes by itself then it will be good else, they can't help us. We thought that was the end; imagining the world without vision was scary. My father lived with a blurred vision and we tried being his vision. My mother used to hold

his hand and make him walk. One year passed and in 2008 a miracle happened. My father got back his vision. It might sound unreal but yes this had happened. Time passed by, we were back on track after a year of difficulties but worse was yet to come.

It was the midnight of 2009. I and my brother were sleeping in our room, I could hear my father's vomit and my mother's voice asking him to relax and have rest. We both were too young to understand that what was happening to my father, and we slept. The next morning when we woke up I saw my mother sitting beside my father and taking care of him. When she saw me coming, she took my hand in her hand and said - my child you are very strong, your father is not well. She did not tell as that last midnight the vomiting wasn't the normal vomiting, it had blood in it. She left me with my brother asking him to take care of me and she went to hospital where doctor referred my father to SGPGI, Lucknow. My mother came back home to take more cash, cards and some documents as she already knew something was not right. She booked an auto and took my father to SGPGI but on the way my father got serious and my mother keeping her cool asked the driver to drive fast, asking my father to be strong. Me and my brother were at home totally unaware of what was happening with my parents. Doctors admitted my father and we were three days at home, without our parents. Our neighbours were kind enough to take care of us, we still hold gratitude towards them.

I heard my mother talking to aunty on call who was taking care of us that my father needs blood, and when she ended the call I asked aunty, if I can give my blood, I remember she just hugged me and said no beta, you are too young, a week passed they didn't discharge my father. Meanwhile our relatives who live in other cities arrived. I was happy watching familiar faces after a week and soon (after 2 days) my father was discharged too. When he returned home, I was not able to recognise him, he had become thin. My mother stayed strong, I was very much inspired by her. I was happy that they were back home.

During that phase my dad almost lost his job but my mother's strength and patience helped us. She managed my father's office work and submitted every document to keep his job safe. The sad part was that being a woman, she was accused by the relatives that she was responsible for my father poor health condition. Instead of understanding the situation and helping my mother mentally, relatives were busy finding the cause of the ailment and blamed my mother for the ailment. How difficult it must have been for a woman to see her husband in such a condition and also being blamed for that condition, I can't even imagine.

We were trying to be normal but my studies started getting affected. My mother started watching yoga to understand how to get relief in liver disease through yoga. When I asked my mother why she is into this new practice, she said- beta, I will make you understand some day, you better concentrate on your studies.

One day , I found my mother crying. I asked her, what happened mumma, she said nothing. I asked her, you never told us what happened to our father, why did he get admit, she burst into tears and said your father is suffering from some disease. When I asked her about the disease, she said you are too young for this. When I insisted she replied- your father is suffering from liver cirrhosis, which is fatal and the only cure is liver transplantation. (My father never consumed alcohol, nor had any bad eating habit). She explained to me that my father will need a donor to undergo a liver transplant and they will have to bear the cost of this transplant. I was listening to all this without understanding what she was saying, where is liver located in the body and only understood that my father's life is at risk., we need a donor, money, which seemed to be impossible. My mother further added that doctor has said that if my father takes a proper diet and consume 1.5 litre water per day then we can increase his life expectancy and can save his liver; as, only 25% of liver was functioning at that time. So we can wait for transplantation as the last option. On that day, I decided that I will be the donor without

even knowing my blood group and other medical formalities. I only knew that I was very young and so may not be eligible to donate, yet I was firm in my decision.

By the grace of God, my father was stable and in was in regular consultation with doctors. My mother took care of his diet and his diet consisted of no salt in food, no spices, low fat and limited water. I used to pray every day to God that please make my father healthy, please never make us see the day of liver transplant, keep my father safe. Years passed, like this and my father remained on tasteless food. Then he started craving for good food and started having cheat meals on and off. We were scared that this might affect his health adversely and exactly this is what happened. I remember that not even a single day passed when I had not prayed to my lord, wished for his good health, until I was eighteen so that if need be I can be a donor to my father. Perhaps God listened in silence. Things started getting worse in 2015 as clinical symptoms of liver cirrhosis were now visible. The doctors advised him to go for liver transplantation and I, knew that the time to play my role has come.

My parents started searching for a liver donor (living or dead). While they were searching for cadaver they got to know the facts that there is a long waiting list for cadaver because not everyone who dies donates their organ and not every corpse is healthy!!. Later on compatibility issues aroused that if someone from the recipients family donates their liver, the compatibility is more and success rate is more as compared to cadaver. Our parents never asked us to be the donor, but I stood and said I'll donate and my parents straight away said No. I thought as being the youngest in my family obviously they did not want me to be a donor. Later on my brother said why would you donate your liver, your brother is alive and you are too young and you don't know, you will get stitches and scars and being an unmarried girl with scars she will not be able to get married. I listened to him, his blood sample was taken but unfortunately his sample did not match with the sample of my father. I

again said that I will donate and I will only donate. But my parents never looked very convinced with my decision. It was always No from their side. They started calling my father's brother for help that if he can donate a part of their liver to their brother. They approached every relative of ours for liver donation but everyone feared their life and thought of their families which I silently understood. They were also right in their aspects because surgery is a surgery. If something happens to them then who will take care of their families. Some of my cousins were like we only have one liver and if we donate how we will survive and what will happen to our future, we have a long future ahead. Only my mother's brother and his son were ready to donate but none of my paternal relatives were ready to donate. In fact, some of them told their different blood group instead of their actual one so that they do not had to donate, some made excuses, which were obvious and much expected. I used to listen to these conversations between my parents and our relatives. But one day I just said to my parents that I will be 18 years very soon and I will donate my liver and please don't say No because risking others life for my father's life is not justified even though two people were ready but it is our responsibility that we make sure that no one's family is at stake because our family. If I donate my liver and if I die in the process then this loss will be only of our family. I also said that if I get rejected for donation by the doctors then you can ask any of the two volunteers for donation. I searched for eligibility criteria for liver donation and started working towards it. I did everything which was needed but the toughest part was to gain weight as I was underweight for donation. Gaining weight was a challenge for me. I use to eat unwillingly and use to suffer nausea while eating. Despite gaining 10 kgs I was still short by one kg to become eligible for donation.

Finally we went to Haryana, for further procedure where pre-transplant test was done. I was just praying to be selected for donation and when the final reports came, I was excited and a bit nervous. I was

selected for liver donation and along with the report I got to know that I was suffering from hypothyroidism which according to doctor was not a big issue to hinder the transplantation. Finally, the day arrived when we were admitted to the hospital. Me lying to the next room of my father. We both didn't slept the night before the surgery. My mother used to switch between the two room and it was the longest night for all of us. My brother and cousin were in the blood bank busy in donating platelets and blood. They were also trying to arrange and convince people to donate blood. Early morning at 3:30 am my mother was asked to give me a bath before surgery After bath when I opened the bathroom door she just looked at me, her eyes were full of tears she wanted to kiss me and hug me tight but she could not, neither I encouraged her to do as we both thought that hugging and kissing would make us weak. I told her don't cry Ma, I'll be back, I'm strong, and I'm your daughter. Tears wanted to roll down her cheeks but my words worked as a barrier for them. I continued smiling, she just smirked, she tied my hair into plaits while my brother kept watching us. I could not to meet my father that morning, as he was also getting ready for his surgery. Nurse headed my bed to the elevator I watched my brother looking at me like he wanted me to stay, his eyes were full of tears, saying please stay back, the elevator door closed and my bed was headed to the operation theatre. At 6.a.m I entered Operation Theatre (OT), the nurse asked me my name, we had few words, she instructed me that I will be given an anaesthesia. I felt cold she handed me a blower kind of a thing which I was asked to hold and I was slowly slipping under the effect of anaesthesia. I tried saying mumma but I felt something got struck in my gut which was painful, my ears could hear beep sounds of the machines. I slowly opened my eyes and saw nurse holding my head and wiping my tears. I realised Oh my surgery was in progress, doctors were busy, mumbling whispering, tools clanging hands. The OT gate opened and I saw a stretcher coming. I heard them giving instructions that I should be transferred to the stretcher. On

stretcher doctor asked my name, city and an oxygen mask with vapour was put up on my face, rest I did not remember.

I opened my eyes, and the clock was showing 9:30 pm first thing I did was to puke, my dress was all messed up, and I could feel the unbearable pain. The nurse said something which I tried hard to listen but was unable to, she instructed me something and handed me a switch to relieve pain whenever I feel, but I could not understand and was again lost in my own world. Same night when I opened my eyes I saw my mother she was standing at the ICU door. She was speechless, I was feeling something still in my gut I said mumma, my voice was different, heavy. She kept standing there and I couldn't say anything neither she said anything, I stared at her, she stared at me. Next morning doctor came, monitored me and by the evening I was transferred to the ward. I exchanged words with my brother, the pain which was clearly felt.

After few days I asked my mother, where's Papa. Is he fine? She said, Yes, he is in the ICU. You had an 8 hours surgery and your father had 14 hours surgery. He will soon be shifted to ward. Few days later my dad was also shifted to the ward. I asked my physiotherapist to take me to my father to which he said, "he's immunosuppressed, you are not allowed to enter, you can only see from a distance, to which I agreed. My physiotherapist took me to his ward where my mother was already standing. My mother said to my father I had a gift for you, to which he replied what is it. And she showed me hiding my body as I was not able to stand straight. With her presence of mind, she made sure that my father should not see my pain and suffering so she stood in front of me hiding my body and only my face was visible to him. My father was extremely happy to see me, he gave a flying kiss and called me a saviour. I was then brought back to my ward. After staying one week in hospital, I was discharged. While my father stayed in the hospital.

Post Surgery

In my room alone with my unbearable pain, I felt like some vehicle tyre is continuously running over my abdomen, crushing me and missing my parents I only had my brother and maami, for the first time I saw my stitches and I remember I used to do my dressing myself, in pain, it took me three months to stand straight and walk. That time my Nani (grandmother) was my strength, she used to be in contact with me over phone. My brother told me that during surgery my mother was very much tensed but she never showed anyone her tear and fear. He had never seen our mother in such a condition before but as soon as she heard that the surgery was successful, she wiped her tears off and immediately went to see me. Meanwhile my mom was with my dad, he had complications and underwent one more surgery. I still remember first time I stepped out with my stitches during my father's second surgery, it was 14th day, I could feel blood and pus rolling down from my stitches and getting absorbed in the cotton pad which I taped over my stitches, while heading to the hospital as the surgery had started.

Father was admitted for two months, his conditions weren't stable. My mother was continuously with him. She was with him in his bed sores, in his pain, she always stood like a mountain. A time was there when I was completely broken I thought we won't be able to save dad but at that time also she was strong, she motivated me. I knew her pain and suffering was more than mine, seeing her family in such a condition but she was still telling me to be strong and made me believe nothing will happen to him. I was at room taking care of myself but the real fight was fought by my mother. She wanted to be with me but she wasn't able to because my father needed her the most. Helpless with the situation, she used to smother her motherhood and use to stay with dad. I used to miss her.

She never gave up, she herself lost her weight, her condition was also not good but she never left her family alone. She used to encourage my

father, make him laugh in the hospital. My father got discharged from hospital and with my mother's unending efforts he started walking after two months of discharge. Slowly he started eating food which earlier he was taking intravenously, muscle tone improved, he started getting back but he was too weak and prone to any disease. We could hardly recognise him as he lost tremendous weight.

The day my father got discharged from hospital my struggle actually begun and I'm struggling till now with him. The responsibility increased, I took his place in the family figuratively. My mother stood by my father and devoted everything for him and I made sure my mumma did not face any problem. Time passed, we returned back to Lucknow and I took admission in University of Lucknow in 2018. My father still has health issues but we as a family are working for better future.

Only few people know that I'm a liver donor because people don't usually want to listen. I have been called negative and weak, just because I took few decisions for the sake of my family. Someone, who liked me and probably wanted to marry me asked me to not to donate but I did, so he left me saying that I will have pregnancy issues in future. This series of events changed me, I became much more mature, I started valuing life. I have seen financial crisis, uncertainty, betrayal, harsh society, people leaving. But with bad times, good times also come. I got back my father, I inspired some people and some inspired me. But one thing I noticed about this society was that after my surgery, when anyone who heard that I donated my liver, their first expression use to be, '*beti ne diya hai?*' I heard them saying that it will be very difficult to get her married in future. '*Beti ko nahi dena chahiye tha, nobody will marry her 'ladko ka kya hai chal jata hai par ladki hai na bahot dikkate aaengi isko'*'. They definitely don't understand medical sciences but still I wonder if that would be the same reaction if a son had such thing.

There are so many myths and misinformation about liver transplant among people. We do have one liver but the only 60% of donor's liver is

grafted to recipient and recipient liver is totally removed. Meanwhile after surgery both donor's and recipient liver regenerate to 100% (liver is the only organ with power of regeneration). People think after donation life is complicated and there's no future. Infact, liver donation or any organ donation is a gift of life to someone and what's else is more beautiful than gifting life to someone.

I grew up watching my mother in crucial times, her patience, strength, mental ability, kindness has always inspired the woman in me. My father never complained about the situations, he always believed in God and himself and stood strong. All this made me what I'm today. Every independent woman is independent because there's an independent mind of a man/woman behind it and I believe we should appreciate that.

Donating your organ while living might not get you any reward but the scar which you get, is more valuable than any award. It reminds you that yes, you saved someone's life, you did your bit. Anyone can live for themselves but the greatest joy comes when you live for others.

10

My Mother: My Hero

Dayana Iftekhhar

Through out history, in every culture around the world, extraordinary women have pushed society to think bigger, move forward and create. Every woman is a glowing example of ceaseless curiosity, boundless courage and world-changing ingenuity. Thanks to each one of them, women and girls all over the world are able to live with fewer restraints and bigger dreams. An overwhelming majority of people out there have had a privilege to grow up with a loving mother, myself included, and we tend to quickly get used to seeing our mother perform her role admirably. The sacrifices that a mother makes to shape our world as we grow up are uncomparable and yet we just assume that, that's how things are supposed to be, and never give it much thought. Most noteworthy, mothers play a huge role in determining a child's attitude and future moral. Whether a child will be good or bad in the future depends largely upon a mother. People often remember their mother's values until old age. Hence, the mother is atually responsible for the well-being of society. An individual can share almost any secret with Mother. This is because Mothers have a huge level of trust with their family members. Motherhood, no matter how you slice or dice it, is never easy. Running after children, feeding them, tending to their physical and emotional wounds, and just taking the time to shower

them with love— that's a lifetime of internal resources.

I would like to tell you the courageous story of my mother. The struggle in her life began when I was not even born. Since childhood she wanted to study and was determined to achieve great heights of success in her life. Her determination towards studies and constant support provided by her parents made her believe firmly that she can achieve her goals. My maternal grandfather was an employee in railways. He always supported my mother mentally and emotionally as far as he could do, he did his best. As a father he was very cordial with my mother. Most young girls view their fathers as their hero and the relationship between a father and a daughter greatly impacts her future; their relationship influences the daughter's strengths, her confidence and her self-image. So was the case with my mother too. The bond between them was precious. His job was in another city and he couldn't get much holidays. But he used to manage and come after every 15-20 days to spend time with his family. My mother always shared her life's ups and downs with him. My maternal grandmother was a homemaker and she never stopped my mother for studies and never engrossed her in household chores, in a way, that time she helped my mother by reducing pressure of household work, as we all can understand that if we are really free from pressure, we can focus better.

My mother was an ordinary girl with a lot of dreams. We all know, that for every little thing we all need money. Influenced by her independent thoughts, she decided to manage her expenses on her own. After completing her basic education (intermediate), she started giving home tuitions to manage her expenses. Alongwith that, she was persuing her graduation also. Every morning before and after her own classes she gave tuitions. It wasn't that easy as it seems to be. She did her post graduation from University of Lucknow. After her post graduation she started doing part time jobs like teaching in convent schools, meanwhile she was filling applications for government jobs and was preparing for that.

It was 1993 she got married at the age of 24 in Kolkata in a joint family. After marriage, all of a sudden, it seemed like all her dreams of becoming independent in her life had been lost, because in those days married women were expected to be housewives only. When she left her hometown everything was new except her dreams. After a few months she told my grand parents that she wanted to continue her studies, but they did not support her, especially my granny said that now it's time to focus on her new phase of life that has just begun. Joint families do not free women to do jobs. They obstruct her freedom, by putting up restrictions on their decision-making ability and mobility. Women who live in joint families are significantly less likely to participate in independent jobs. So then, my mother divided her day in two parts- 3/4th of her time was for household activities and the rest for studies. Meanwhile she got pregnant also and it started getting very difficult for her to manage her health and everything going at that time. She did all household chores and then at late light and in early mornings she used to study for various examinations. In those days, getting books and study material was also a tedious task, as the city was completely new and strange for her. She then went out and started looking for shops and library for books but the basic issue was language as native language in Kolkata was Bengali My mother had studied from *hindi* medium but then she managed to make library card of national library of Kolkata. Mobile phones were not yet invented so she couldn't easily contact her father when she wanted to. She was handling all of this alone, by herself. She also tried to do some jobs but due to language problem she wasn't able to do so. Meanwhile she appeared for UGC NET exam and because of her determination, knowledge and continuous study she qualified that exam. But then also she couldn't get any job there because her subject was a very subpart of history. It wasn't given any importance in Kolkata at that time in late 90's. At the same time, everybody in society as well as the family started asking her questions that why does she needs to do job? Or Why does she needs to study any

further? But after sometime my mother took a decision of returning back to Lucknow as it was not easy to manage both study and household activities at the same time. And above all it was impossible to answer all the demoralizing questions of society as well as the family; which was more disheartening to her. At that time my elder brother was born. When my mom told everyone that she is returning back to Lucknow, her in laws told her clearly that if she leaves the house then she would never be allowed to come back. They fought with her to keep her son with them. But my mother fought very hard and returned back to Lucknow with "her son".

Our families are our source of strength. We seek support from them in every decision that we make. They look down upon you for standing up for yourself. But this exactly is the plight that many mothers have to endure even till date. Not only do working mothers face backlash from their families for prioritizing their career, but are also labelled as incapable mothers by default.

My father was a businessman, he was not ready at that very moment to leave his family and come to Lucknow, so my mother alone came to Lucknow. My maternal grandfather went to Kolkata to bring her back to Lucknow. Initially, she went to her home in Lucknow and stayed there. That was really a blessing for her that she was living with her parents during such a crucial time of her life. They were there to support her physically and emotionally. She decided to put my brother in a boarding school in Nainital. After few months, my dad started visiting her at Lucknow. When I was born, my maternal grandmother used to take care of me so that my mother could manage her job well. My maternal grandmother and mother raised me. I used to wait eagerly for weekends because I could spend the whole time with my mother. Later on, she managed to rent a room and started living there. She used to wake up early, make breakfast for both of us, then drop me to school and go to work. Similarly, after school got over she used to pick me up on time. At that time she was teaching in a degree college without getting

any salary. She taught there for five years without salary. After few years, she was called for a job interview in Allahabad. My dad was there with my mother. She was very nervous; he held her hand and said, "don't be afraid everything will be in our favour". My mother got selected for the post of lecturer in degree college. And after that she did her PhD from University of Lucknow. And the most blessed thing happened for her at that time; she got the job in the same college from where she did her graduation. Finally, the dream of being independent in her life was fulfilled that day when she got selected.

She never stopped her studies. She has published many books and participates actively in various activities like seminars, workshops and so on. Currently, she is an associate professor. She is so much dedicated to her work that if any of her student needs any kind of help, be it academics or something else, she is always there to help. Adding to this, she is also a Commissioned NCC Officer. Through NCC, she empowers volunteering youth to, become potential leaders and responsible citizens of the country, develop the leadership and character qualities, mould discipline and nurture social integration and cohesion through multi-faceted programs conducted in a military environment. She is doing many more activities in society for encouraging girls out there. So, from here we can conclude that she is not only empowering me but other girls too.

I feel blessed seeing my mother as a strong, positive and aspiring person. My mother gives me priceless motivation and energy to fight my own battles. Life was never easy for her and yet she always embraced the situation she went through. Her dreams were fulfilled due to her strong determination and persistence to be what she wanted to be and also because of her parents' support. She always accepted life's challenges and has won. She put intensive efforts and studied hard, never gave up and she overcame every obstacle to achieve her dream to finish her studies. This motivates me that I can also achieve my dreams. The only thing she says to me is," All you need is constant

determination to achieve your goal and you are already halfway there". Everyday from her busy schedule she talks to me for about an hour for motivating me and asking me that where am I possibly lacking, and whether I need her help at any stage of my life. She always talks to me as friend and she shares such a congenial bond with me that I can share anything with her.

University of Lucknow provides good environment to all students, and also offers the best faculty from all over the state. It makes me feel proud to say that I have done my graduation and doing my Post graduation from this university. The entrance exams for the programmes aren't that easy to crack but it feels so great to admit that I was selected to study here among huge crowd of applicants. It was all because of the moral support given to me by my mother. Every accomplishment in my life is undoubtedly because of my mother in some way or other. I proud fully say that I will be very successful in my life if I even get ten per cent of her courage. Every morning she is my motivation and I start my day with a smile and thousands of dreams that I have to make true, as my mother want me to be independent in my life. She is and will always be my Hero.



11

Be Characterless

Anonymous

Every woman has a story, so do I. I was in 5th standard when I came to know about depression. Yes, it was very unfortunate to see my mother devastated, battling with depression, sad, lost and empty. Initially, I wasn't aware about the reason for her depression. But somehow, despite being so young and naive, I could feel what she was going through. My hands are trembling while writing that my father had an extramarital affair with a woman living next door. When this came in my mom's knowledge, she was broken. I can still remember her restlessness, grief, yearning and sorrow. She was taunted by her own in-laws and relatives that she couldn't manage her husband. What she could do was to love my father and she loved him wholeheartedly. I wonder if it's appropriate to say that she couldn't manage. Why a woman is always wrong? She is wrong when she cheats her husband and also when her husband cheats on her.

She was raising three children, me and my two younger brothers. The second one was very young. He had not even completed one year. My mom was already taking clinical help to deal with depression. Breastfeeding was prohibited as she was on continuous medication and the little one had to bear a lot. As I was the eldest amongst us, it was my responsibility to take care of my brothers. I took care of them. I grew

with them. I still remember how I was consoling my mother while I was already being a mother to the little one. I taught my brothers everything I could, life skills, survival, ethics and morality which they were supposed to learn from their mother.

Mom, however, didn't leave my father. My Nana (maternal grandfather) wanted her to divorce dad but mom was not ready to take such a huge step. She loved dad madly, badly, and purely. Meanwhile, his woman (dad's girlfriend) had started blackmailing him, demanding a lot of money. My father was struck and mom came to his rescue again. She did not want the society to laugh at us. So, she sold off her jewellery to protect the dignity of my father. Papa turned back to his girlfriend and today my parents are together but my mom couldn't ever let go that phase of her life.

She always taught us that infidelity should not be kept in any relationship. Mom saw everything in her life. She shared her husband and while she was still coming to terms with it, another tragedy struck her. She lost her youngest son. I was devastated too, lost, broken and too weak to handle this one. The loss was too sudden and too huge to carry. While questions were being raised on my brother's upbringing, my mother was fighting multiple battles within.

While women are victims of the familial and societal torture and dishonor, they are the ones held responsible for the same. Being women in our society is tough, being women and coming from a society where your values are fixed makes it all the more difficult. Every woman inherits this struggle from her mother. I had seen my mother in pain as my brother came into this world and I was again a witness to her ordeal as he left us. I can still hear her screams, feel her never ending pain and it still continues. I remember how she pleaded for his vaccination and her mother-in-law wouldn't budge. She raised us with so much difficulty but she never gave up on us whatever may be. Even when the family and society that she inherited never stood by her, she

never ever let it happen to us. She is of course broken but beautiful from inside. She taught me everything and life taught her in the most brutal manner, that is, even if you are crushed by the society, at least leave your fragrance everywhere like a rose. Don't give up and don't give in.

I come from an orthodox Muslim family where a woman brings a veil from the mother's womb. In such a society, she has raised me like a son, giving me every freedom. She always taught me that the veil is not my luck. A family structure where relatives take my life and ways as a matter of their right, where even polishing one's nails is banned, where women are not supposed to go out without a burqa (veil), my mother has stood beside me like a rock. Although my mom herself wears a burqa, she never wants me to ever adorn one. She fought with everyone and gave me each and every freedom that an individual is supposed to enjoy. She provided me with the best possible education, gave me every facility she could afford. Although there were days when we slept empty stomach but her love and devotion never waned away.

She has been my mentor and friend both. Once I was returning from school and it was the grand Indian Festival of colors Holi. I was bathed in colors. When I stepped out of school van, everybody was looking at me as if I have committed some sort of crime. It was quite natural for me because I understood that a place where you couldn't paint your little finger, how could you apply color on your body. I was slapped by their sights and I accepted the title of Characterless which was given by them. But when I entered home, my mom reacted as if nothing had happened. She told me that color has no religion or caste. They are in fact the essence of life. So, I understood that it is okay to be characterless if the parameter of being characterless is enjoying colors.

Characterless women are more beautiful. They do not fear anyone. They are undoubtedly amazing. A beautiful bird in golden cage is never beautiful than a bird who flies in an open sky. If raising your voice makes you characterless then be characterless. A beautiful woman can

be very obedient to others if she speaks gently, resists herself of doing or feeling anything, sacrifices her dignity and kills her thoughts. An average or not so good looking woman says whatever she feels like saying, never resists herself of doing anything is way better than an obedient woman. A woman is obedient if she spreads her legs according to the man's will but she immediately becomes characterless if she does the same thing for her will. If being a characterless woman gives you immense pleasure of life then BE CHARACTERLESS.

12

My Parents' Troubled Marriage and Me

Anonymous

If you refused to bend down,

If you refused to give up,

If you refused to let others write your story

If you are your own creator

You are a she hero.

If you know your worth and you know to respect yourself.

If you can prioritize and choose yourself over others.

If you can make sacrifices without letting it consume you

You are a she hero.

Rose always comes with thorns

Struggles will always make you strong.

I believe every single girl/woman who is strong headed and have courage to change her situation is a she hero. For a very long time I believed that my story is very ordinary and my struggle is not really a struggle because my struggle is all about mental health. We all know the scenario of mental health in India and nobody takes it seriously but now is the time to speak up.

I belong to a middle-class family where we have enough for our necessities. I am lucky in many terms as compared to other people out there. I have my own conveyance, my own room, a beautiful house and education. But amidst all this, what I lacked was togetherness of my family. We have a house but not the relationships and emotions that make those four walls what we call a home. My parents are not really conservative but they did fail to keep with the change. I have heard that when I was born my parents were not ready for a child but they accepted me whole heartedly. They did not have any problem with a girl child being born in the family but a girl being the elder child was and still is a problem to them. I never had a say in the family decisions, even my career path was decided by my father. I always failed to understand my parents, they taught me to speak but they were also the ones who told me I should not speak in family matters. With the time so many things changed, yet many things remain same. I was never involved in family matters and I never asked why? Never told them how I felt or demanded my right. I was kind of okay with everything happening around me because that was the best solution, I could think of. As I was growing up, I realized my parents never respected each other and were always fighting. I was never at peace, my home was never at peace. Many a times I tried to explain my parents that how their fights were affecting me, my studies and my mental health but they never understood. My father simply asked me to stay out of it where as my mother told me it was normal. Yes, my mother normalized fights as if they are integral part of the society.

One day they were fighting again just like other days and I was sitting in my room trying to find escape from this harsh reality. But that day something unusual happened. My younger brother who is 11 years old and is ten years younger to me, came to me. He was crying and he asked me to stop our parents from fighting. I said it wasn't in my hand and asked him to stay with me. He stayed with me and was crying silently. I realized that today he has connected me to all those days of my

childhood when my parents used to fight and how I use to feel . I could relate with my brother that what he must be going through being a witness to one more emotional abuse of our parents. I knew exactly how it felt to be in his place, seeing your parents fighting, feeling helpless and losing hope and becoming numb. I know their fights were damaging me somewhere deep inside. As if some tab was open in my head and their arguments were always running in background. I remember that day very distinctly when I tried to tell my father that I couldn't study as I was finding ways to stop them. I was broken mentally to the extent that I thought of not coming back to my home many a times. Yet, he didn't understand even a single word conveyed to him. Given these circumstances in my home, along with my mental struggle, I pretended to be normal, wore a fake smile, attempting to be happy as these are my coping mechanisms as I do not want anyone to know what I go through and what are my own emotional and mental struggles.

When I saw my brother also like me, I realized my responsibility as a sister towards my sibling. In no way, I wanted my brother to have a messed up mind like mine or grow up like me. I went to my parents and asked them to stop. But they didn't. I locked myself with my sibling in a room and allowed them to fight. I feel it was the longest night I have ever survived. My father threatened to beat me but I didn't change my mind. I was scared that I might have to face serious repercussions after that night but then I had no other option also. I refused to live a life I didn't want to. It was around 4.40 in the morning when a soft voice said open the door, we will not fight. It was my father's voice followed by my mother's sobs.

That night was a night of so many realizations. I asked myself if I ever want to get married. And the answer was if this is what marriages look like I will never get married. If marriages are about someone else getting right to control your life, I will never give that right to anyone. If marriages are about someone questioning your identity, I will never let anyone steal my identity. I wonder why people want to have kids when

they do not know how to take care of them! I think it's better not wish for something you cannot value. Along with all these racing thoughts, I tried to also think about the reasons behind their arguments.

I have seen major fights in my family over stupid reasons or let me put it this way 'my parents are fighting because patriarchy still has a role to play'. My father shouts at my mother when he can't find his socks, he shouts when dinner is late, he shouts when he is frustrated, he shouts because he thinks he has a right to shout. He is earning and therefore, he has the right and authority to do whatever he wants to do. My mother was very ambitious and studious but she got married at a very young age. She had to sacrifice her dreams so that she can be a good housewife and good mother. It was in her upbringing that it is the duty of a woman to sacrifice and it is definitely not her choice. She was never a weak lady but no one ever reminded her of her powers not even she herself.

Sometime later, I asked my mother one day why do you suffer so much and she replied 'I suffer because I have chosen suffering'. She is frustrated and broken. She sits and thinks about life, that what her life could be if, she had the courage to fight. After talking to my mother, I understood that nobody will take a stand for you and you have to support yourself. Why will anyone else respect you when you don't respect yourself? From her journey and mistakes I learnt; you have to be the miracle you wish to happen. You have to be your own friend and strength. No matter how much we try, we will always end up hurting or disappointing someone, then why don't we try and not hurt ourselves. When we start making our own choices, we realise that life has not been rude, it is we who are actually cruel to ourselves by not making our choices and not fighting for our choices.

That day I understood the importance of being financially independent. My mother says, 'Earn enough money to keep your stomach full and have enough self-love to keep your heart happy'. She says, marrying will be your choice because it wasn't a choice for me and both of us

know what marriage did to me. In this context, I repeat, that I often wonder if I ever want to get married. I often ask myself if the concept of marriage is bad or it is the people involved in marriage make it bad. Things don't work out well because two wrong people are together or it is our own insecurities which affect the marriage when we start comparing our lives with others. So what are the reasons for our insecurities- money, trust deficit, love deficit, high expectations or something else. We always fear of being left alone and why we are not good enough for ourselves. I am still working on this thought process and trying to understand marriage and relationships. So if you ask me where do I stand today? I will say in the process of being enough. There are so many things I have learnt and some of them really helped me become the person I am. There are certain days when I don't have the clarity about what to do, what I want and those are the days when I talk to myself more and tell I don't want to become a mean person, I don't want my ego to drive me, I don't want my insecurities to control me.

My parents still fight but the degree of damage what I used to feel has been reduced. I am in process of loving myself and I am in process of healing. There are days in my life filled with sunshine and some filled with long cold nights but, now I can survive both of them. No matter if I am happy or sad I always tell myself, I haven't been through the worst yet. It gives me courage and strength when I am going through tough times and I am grounded on my happy days also.

My story does not end here. There are other aspects connected to my story. In this troublesome journey, I lost many friends. I was a troubled person. I was living two different lives- one which was traumatic and the other one which was camouflaged. I was silent at home but was speaking excessively outside my home. I was trying to compensate the emptiness in my life by making happy faces and making others happy. But I never realized that I was nothing more than a clown for my friends neither they realized why I was laughing unnecessarily. My mental health was in very bad state because what I was actually as a person

could never come out. In our society people can see your physical illness and they have quick remedies for it. They will give you sympathy and empathy both. But when it comes to mental health, they do not even recognize that there is something called mental illness which needs more attention and care as healthy body resides only in healthy mind. Given my own experiences I decided that I will become a person which is approachable, who can lend patient ears to listen to the problems of others, someone who will never make a mockery of somebody's else situation, instead will be more compassionate in her approach towards people around me. Now in the process of healing others sometimes I get hurt but by healing them I heal myself. It is important to understand that when people are troubled, broken , they may use bad words for you, they might shout at you , but, one should be mature enough to handle them and their problems too. Everything you go through gives you a new perspective towards life, the way you live it. My family problems taught me the importance of becoming self-independent and gave me a different perspective regarding marriage. My mother's sacrifices taught me why is it important to value yourself. My surroundings taught me to become kind and helpful. I became more creative in terms of writing poetries, making paintings. Today, because of my problems I am able to empathise with other's problems. The take away from my story could be- 'understand others because no one understood you, help others because no one helped you, love others because no one loved you'.

Breathing bodies, struggling soul, We all are looking for that one ray of hope. We grow by loving and giving. There can't be a rainbow where there is no rain, there can't be life where there is no pain. Everything in your life happens for a reason you just have to find what that reason is.

You know, it all starts with you. We always have a choice, we just have to learn to get better at choosing what is best for us. I am somewhere between the worst is yet to come and things can't get any worse. This

keeps me going. This reminds me that I have become a strong person but still I need to work more on myself. No matter how big or small your issues are, if it's bothering you and you are fighting with it, your story is worth writing. Life is too short to leave it for living tomorrow. Learn from your suffering and try to find out why is it happening?

13

Your Struggles are No Less Than Mine

Anonymous

STRUGGLE – A word that is associated with each one of us breathing on this planet. My struggle is none less than yours and yours is none less than mine. The only difference I presume could be in the ways we have gone through it and came out as warriors, or if it took away everything from us. We hear inspirational stories that make us proud and give us inner strength but have we ever dreamt of being an inspiration ourself? I have, because what we think and believe, is what we get one day and I am on the path of adapting to any situation that could make life easier and peaceful. I am 23 years old and there have been a few incidents in my life as well just like in yours that have led to the development of this side of me, that is spiritual awakening. So, here goes my story –

It was the month of May in 2009. I have always been an introvert and considered myself better at expressing things through writing than through verbal communication. I do not have a habit of talking much and it is the listening part that interests me the most. In a room full of people, I would sit quietly and observe others. It is seldom that I initiate a conversation with others rather I prefer others to do that and once I get opened up, I can talk about anything. I would not say that I am very shy but yes not that extrovert as people nowadays, expect one to be. Months had passed after I was admitted into a new and one of the most

reputed schools of Delhi. With a kind of shy and introvert nature I had, life seemed to be a bit difficult there. My class fellows were way too mature in the nature of conversations that they had and on the very first day of my school I was told the obligatory rules and regulations to join the existing girl's gang! Being mocked at addressing myself as "*hum*" (my state's Tehzeeb became the actual trouble). As the time went by, gradually I adapted myself into their culture, language, accent, conversations, etc. Making new friends was another STRUGGLE (it is even today) but somehow, I managed to make new friends and the journey from a shy girl to a confident young woman began. Alas! This journey was cut short as my father got transferred back to the same city in a year and so I was back in my city to the same school that I used to go.

In 2011, on the way back from Delhi to Lucknow my mother and me were travelling together by train, I was on the middle-berth in a Sleeper coach along with my mother on the nearby berth. On the diagonal lower-berth was a decent looking man reading some novel (the title and the author, I remember none). It seemed that he had travelled in a flight before as he still had the flight tag on one of his luggage. It would have been midnight as everyone was asleep and since I neither had a watch nor a mobile phone then so, I do not know what time exactly it would have been. But what I do remember very clearly is that I felt someone holding my feet. It happened twice or thrice and later I sensed that that decent looking man was very close to my face. I could not help yelling – mummy! And told her that the person was offering me some potato chips even though I was reluctant to take them (Yes! I lied because I couldn't gather the courage to tell her what had actually happened). Thankfully, he could not attempt the same thing the second time because my mother warned him and he got down the train after a couple of stations (God only knows if his destination had actually come or he just got down because of my mother's warning). From that day, train journeys have started haunting me and I barely close my eyes when I am traveling somewhere by a train.

2017

When I was about nineteen-year-old my maternal grandparents had come for a visit and were staying with us for 10-15 days. It was winters and my grandfather used to wake me up early for a morning walk and I used to get up to study but not as early as him. So, I told my mother to tell my grandfather not to wake me up with him as I get up only 30 minutes later and by the time, he would freshen up to go for a walk, I would be awake. The following morning, I was sleeping alone and felt somebody trying to get inside my blanket and I woke up in shock when I saw that it was my grandfather! I was shaken and scared; barely able to gasp a breath when I saw him like that. Like I should have done, I again told my mother about this. She disapprovingly gave me some shocking responses such as – *“kahi tumhe uthna na pade subah jaldi nana ji k sath islie bahana to nahi bna rahi?”*, *“bade log aisa karte hain”*, *“rona mat ab varna family mai drama ho jayega”*.

You must be thinking about what kind of a relationship I have with my grandfather since this incident so, before you get extra curious let me tell you that I have never talked to him after that incident, neither on phone call nor video call. I do not even answer the call on my mother's phone when it reads “Papa”, I let it ring and tell my mother that *“naniji called”*. I hate saying *“nanaji”*. Also, many a times it happens that my mausi or mama is having a video call with my grandparents and I just avoid and move away from there. Such is the type of hatred I have towards “men” since then. These incidents have taken away my ability to “trust men” be it anybody.

2016

I was returning from my coaching institute it was dark and quiet winter night. I was wearing a pair of jeans with a sweatshirt and my hair were half clutched while the rest fell down up to my waist. I had to walk around one kilometer from the bus stand to my home. One such night, on my way to home, I became the victim of eve teasing, just like so many

other girls that we quite often hear about. Everything happened in a matter of minutes and before I could react, the three boys vanished away. I was terrified and didn't know what to do. I was not very far from my place, so I ran as fast as I could and on reaching home, I hugged my mother tightly and started crying. What came to me as a shock again were my mother's words, she said and I quote, "*Room mai chalo, yha koi sun lega.*" I felt humiliated. After 3-4 days I told my mother that I have a male class fellow who would be dropping me off at home after coaching daily for some days. On that my mother said, "*Kahi uske sath aane ke lie to tum us din bahana nahi bana rhi thi?*" I was made to feel ashamed as if I had done something wrong and I invited those boys to come and tease me. However, things been said, my mother began to come and pick me up from the bus stand from that day. One thing, that this incident made me realize, was that it is never about what we girls are wearing because a pair of jeans is not something inviting for sure. In fact, none of the dresses we choose to wear as girls are inviting. Clothes are a matter of personal choice and should be taken the same way. If I would have been wearing a skirt or a pair of shorts at the time of this incident, people must have judged saying that my attire provoked the boys to do something like that which is absolutely wrong.

Now, here I would want you to take a pause, recollect all my story till now, and try to understand the chronology of the thought process of our society. When I say society, I mean my mother who is obviously, a part of "the" society. In fact, we all are a part of the same society. While I am narrating these things, an interesting thing comes to my mind so let me add it here before I forget. I believe you must have heard (at least I have) people saying – "SAMAAJ BAHUT BURA HAI" (*The society is evil*). This statement seems to be very funny to me and the reason is that on the one hand, people consider themselves as a part of the same "SAMAAJ" and then they say that it is very bad. So, going by the *transitive rule of mathematics* which is, if $a=b$ (people=SAMMAJ) and $b=c$ (SAMAAJ=evil) then, $a=c$ thus, don't you think that the people

themselves are wrong/bad? The next time you hear someone saying that the society is evil, I request you to ask them – “What is your contribution in improving it?” or “What did you do to change the evil society to an angelic one?” Tell them that you have been interrogating people for long now and it is high time to retrospect and introspect. Compel the people around you to ponder over what they have been doing to make the society better till now.

However, coming back to the chronology of the thought process I believe, we are in a sincere need of understanding what we have been passing on to our generations because the transformation from what has been inculcated so far to what actually should be has a long way to go. When a woman confesses what has happened with her and we hush her up, we kill the courage that she might have recollected with so much difficulty to assert what she's been through. And your response affirms that the next time she might not even tell you anything. So, always encourage them so that their struggle can become an inspiration for other people and this world will definitely become a better place to live.

We talk about Gender Equality but we teach the opposite by teaching our sons and brothers that “*Ladke nahi rote. Ladkiyan roti hain. Tum Ladki ho kya*”? we need to question ourselves that, what are we teaching to our coming generations? To cry, is an emotion and not a sign of weakness. You teach them not to cry, so they never express their feelings, resulting in frustration, depression, followed by suicide or if they are egoistic then, they happen to commit heinous crimes.

One day I visited my best friend, we were having a chit- chat and she says – “*Ladkiyon ki toh job mai break aa hi jata hai* once they become a mother”. This is the kind of mind set that even a 21st century woman has – just accepting the norms then we talk about stuffs like–society needs to change. How will the society change when we are not ready to change ourselves? We, as women in patriarchal society often lack the courage to speak-up: to speak-up for ourselves, to speak-up about

what we are going through (or have went through), to speak-up that we are human beings too and thus, deserve a decent normal life. One thing I have realized and that is, unless you ask and learn to fight for what you want or wish, you will never get it. As women, we have to be bold in all aspects whether it is accepting and collecting the courage to speak about what is wrong or fighting against anything that we feel is unethical. Movies based on women empowerment are made to tell us- "Our existence matter!". No matter if we are a workingwoman or a house maker, but initially, we are human beings. Whatever we do should be of our choice. If you want to become a homemaker, become one but that does not mean, you will have to lose your self-respect.

From every struggle that I have been through and the incidents that have happened, I have learned a lot. I have wept, shouted, cursed the culprits but have always tried to keep my confidence high. Fortunately, I understood what was wrong and what was right so, any thoughts to harm myself in any way have never crossed my mind. I am very fond of writing poems and have been mocked for the same too. At a point in my life, I stopped writing for some time altogether but after conversing with my mentors and well-wishers, I realized that what others think of you does not matter. I have learned to free myself from the cage of people's mockery. Today, I stand upright and desire to become a person who could help the needy in any possible way, a person who meditates daily, and to become a *Satyugi* Soul!

I am sure my struggles are not as big as what people go through but they have been life-changing incidents for me. If you are reading this and have been through incidents that had power to break you down but you came out as a warrior then, you are the real hero and the inspiration that you are looking for, is within yourself.

14

Rising Above the Storms of Life

Anonymous

The Take off to a Journey full of Dreams

With twinkling dreams in eyes and spirit of making it big, my journey started amidst the backdrop of majestic University of Lucknow. I passed out from the prestigious La Martiniere School and joined the renowned Canning College to pursue bachelors in Psychology. The days in college were a blend of learning and fun. I grabbed every opportunity that came to my way be it curricular or extra-curricular. I participated in myriad of activities like dancing, debates, beauty pageants and won accolades from friends and teachers. Life seemed good and promising. I was full of hope and youthful energy ready to conquer the world.

The Fateful Turn of Events

While I was still in the college enjoying the carefree days, I met a charming boy who stole my heart and swept me off my feet. His enchanting looks and angelic laughter mesmerized me. Meanwhile, my ambitions took a back seat. I completed my masters and cajoled my parents to get me married to this boy. We got married and shifted to Delhi. By far all was good and lovely in this fairytale of romance and love, but then things started taking an ugly turn. Troubles started in our marriage and soon we began drifting apart. I was still contemplating

the future of our relationship, when I found out that I have conceived. I gave birth to an undernourished child who was kept in incubator for 20 days. While this gift of child was a moment for joy but the problems in my marriage made it otherwise. To make things worse, I was met with an accident which left me severely injured. I got 20 stitches on my lips. My life was in a turmoil, a troubled relationship, an undernourished child and my deteriorating health. I was in dilemma about the future of me and my child while the family around insisted to go back to my husband and work on things. The pressure increased and deep in my heart I knew things are too bad to get normal.

Mustering up the courage

It is rightly said that, “It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves”. One fine day, I mustered up the courage and came back to Lucknow to fight back. I took job as a Lecturer at a college in Lucknow and laid the foundation of a new life. Although, the path chosen by me was difficult, I was determined to succeed. My child was young and needed special care and attention. I had parents who were retired, so I needed to be financially strong. The most difficult part was the society which is still not comfortable with a single, separated mother of a child. The society consider you a lesser mortal and you are constantly pitied. There were people who instead of admiring my efforts tried to bring me down with their constant barbs. I came across several organizations who were apprehensive of appointing a single, separated mother. I dealt with people who made pre conceived notion that I will not be able to give hundred percent of efforts due to my personal commitments. At every point, I faced a roadblock. In one of my workplaces, there was a director who sent me lecherous messages. I was fired when I filed a complaint. Later I lodged a FIR and the director apologized. While, I was doing everything to bring back my life on track, there were a thousand things that tried to put me off the track.

The never say no spirit

It is true that I faced challenges at every step, but my resolve to fight back was greater. I had made up my mind that I will rise back. I stayed up at nights to take care of my child and worked during the days. I never let it affect my work. Whenever I entered the class full of brimming and energetic young minds, I made sure to instil in them the knowledge and love of learning. I also prepared for NET exam in whatever time I managed to take off from my busy schedule. It indeed felt that my efforts paid off when I cleared NET in my first attempt. I always had good communication skills, I started anchoring at events and fests of colleges. I also started reciting self-composed poetries at stage. I even enrolled myself for Ph.D. in Psychology at University of Lucknow.

Limits are an illusion

Gradually, things started getting into the right place. My communication skills began to get noticed and recognized. I also completed my doctorate and winning gold medal for the same was a cherry on the cake. I was felicitated by the Governor of Uttar Pradesh. My picture with the gold medal was featured on front pages of the newspapers. My parents felt proud of me and I was on cloud nine. Life came full circle when I got appointed as Assistant Professor at University of Lucknow, the same place where I started my journey. The same people who once passed barbs on me started showering praises. I started getting invites for anchoring and speaking at various book launches, fests, etc. On the personal side, my son has grown up and is my strength.

Contributing back to the Society

I was always passionate about the field of Psychology. So, I began helping students via counselling and did research in Juvenile Delinquency because it is never late to start doing what you love. I am associated with various causes related to mental health and do whatever I can to bring a change in the society. I have been part of

several campaigns related to women empowerment. I am also a proud member of Mission Shakti team of the University of Lucknow. I am one of the leading members of Triveni Foundation, which is a NGO that has been formed with the objective of helping women in need. The foundation takes care of abandoned girl children and also provides financial assistance to girls for their education. All these causes have further enhanced my patience, kindness and resilience.

Women- An epitome of power and strength

I wish to convey to all women and young girls around that we have got immense strength within us. Sometimes, we are tested not to show our weakness, but to discover our strengths. We just need to identify our strengths and channelize them in the right direction. My never say no attitude helped me to rise up against the storms of life. Women are incarnation of Goddess Shakti, the epitome of power and strength. We have to stand up against exploitation and move ahead to realize our true potential with zeal and determination. Winners are those who are optimistic in adversities, undeterred by challenges imposed by difficult situations.

15

Perfect Place

Anonymous

I come from a loving home where everything I want to do is met with encouragement and support. I was a good kid in school. Your next-door topper kinds. I enjoyed everything I did and tried doing it with my best effort. Growing up, everybody saw a confident child who loved taking an active part in everything. I am still the same person. Growing up, I also had a best friend with whom I shared all my secrets and she shared hers. We didn't just grow up together, we grew in. However, I am a good liar. I've had years of practice maintaining the sham of being that perfect outgoing person, being that perfect friend. My surface perfection is however underlain with grave personal secrets.

As a kid, I had a perfect place, a perfect home, a perfect friend, a perfect abuser- He just masked his face as the perfect father of my perfect best friend. Most perpetrators of child abuse start touching just a little bit inappropriately to see if they can get away with it and to work out if that child has the capacity to tell an adult. The first time he touched me, I was a tiny thing, with short black hair. I didn't even understand as to what was happening to me. All I understood was someone touching me and it was not a touch to caress me but it was a touch to caress my body.

For years, he used to find these perfect moments to touch me- at playtime, at sleepovers, at night, at daytime. At my house, at his. I never

told her the truth though. We still kept playing. I still kept going to her house. It was my way of fighting him. Showing up each time he thought he had made me weak. I could never let him ruin our friendship like he ruined my body. If loving her meant getting dirty, I was ready for the grime. Over the years, I found better places to hide from him. I made sure I was never alone in a room with him. Whenever I confronted him, he marshalled an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization which was enough to confuse me.

Years of abuse left me with a high tolerance for pain. Dysfunctional environments require endurance and thick skin. This pattern of tolerance followed me everywhere I went. Instead of using pain as a signal to evaluate and change direction, I began using it as a signal to try harder. Trying harder to please someone. Trying harder to be a good friend. Trying harder to be in control. Trying harder to hide my flaws. Trying harder to look perfect. Abuse survivors, as adults often remain in survival mode that they picked up as a child. Their high tolerance for pain keeps them committed to dysfunctional experiences and relationships that recycle pain from the past. I started jumping into one toxic relationship to another, losing parts of me I thought I needed the most. I became a permeable membrane to their abuses- mostly emotional. I enjoyed the pain.

When I left Lucknow for further studies, I was relieved that he would stop. I was relieved that he would no longer be able affect our friendship. I thought, though apart, I wouldn't have to lie to my best friend each day by not telling her the truth- that I'll forget the truth, that I'll bury it deep within my brain. However, four years since his last act of abuse, as I visited her during summer vacation, he groped me again and slammed his coarse fingers in front of my black leggings, in his own home, while I slept right next to his daughter.

I just left her place without even saying goodbye. He did manage to

make a crack in our friendship this time. I did not go to her place for the entire summer after that. I had a perfect way to escape him. I had a new city to call home. That home was without him. But that home was also without her. So when he died five months later, I never got the courage to leave my new home and get back to the one I left behind. The one whose walls were wrecking and sinking.

I never even showed up for the funeral. I did not even call her. That was the longest we had gone without speaking. However, for those three months after his death, I wrote her a letter in my diary each night. When I finally got the courage to pick up the phone, she had long gone away. Gone away to a place with no space for me. She had changed. His death left her bruised and weak. I no longer recognised her. She was different now. When we finally did get together, we did not speak at all. At the same time, I kept burying all my feelings into a box deep inside my brain. The human in need to be visible, is countered by the need to be invisible to avoid further abuse and the need for intimacy and the dread of abuse, all pose insoluble dichotomies which promote further withdrawal from human contact, which reinforces the sense of dehumanization.

That day I wrote a letter to my future.

Dear Future Me,

I hope today you are the person you always set out to be. I hope you achieve everything that they said you could never do. How many lives do you change in a day? Do you speak out for what is right or sit there regretting your silence? I hope you are what I am not. I hope you speak out with such a voice that everyone around you can hear it even when you aren't speaking. I want you to have power in the way you speak-giving light into someone's world filled with darkness.

When you read this letter, I hope you are at a place where all your previous goals have turned into accomplishments. I hope you still remember your past and pass on your story to those who need to hear it

the most-to show them that they are not alone. I hope all your dreams become your reality and I hope that eventually your nightmares dissolve into the depths of your past- never haunting you again. I hope one day you take off the mask that hides the truth, that you break down the barriers you built, and learn to trust someone- really trust them, somewhere along your journey. I hope that when you look in the mirror with a small yet true smile, you are proud of what you see. I hope that you now see the world from a whole new perspective and learn to enjoy the sun more than the rain. Most of all, I hope that you have learnt to speak. To speak in such a voice that is heard; a voice that embroiders your words onto a heart that need them the most. I hope that you are happy and teach the ones who are like old you, to be happy as well. I hope, today you are the person you always set out to be.

Sincerely,

Your Past.

When I moved back home, it took me a lot of time, but I somehow managed to get back with her. I somehow managed to break down her walls. We had been through a war, but the love we had didn't fade away. I still regret not showing up though. The guilt of not being there for her when she needed me the most, kills me every time I look at her face. I will never tell her the truth because he was her father at the end of the day, someone she loved dearly. I don't want her dead father to be ashamed in front of her now. But I have decided to be a better friend, to love her more fiercely and shamelessly.

The letting go part wasn't easy. It took me a lot of time to forgive him. The hardest part was forgiving myself. But I did. It took practice. Practice doesn't make perfect, it makes permanent. She gives me the courage to love myself again. But it's hard to be kind to yourself the way you are kind to others. Especially if you are someone who is always there for others, who hides their truth behind their smile, if you don't receive the same love you give to others, if you wear your heart on your

sleeve, this is a reminder for you to keep going:

I know there are moments where a tender ache forms within your unhinged chest. There are moments where you are left wondering if someone will ever give you the love that you so freely give to others, moments where you wonder if there will ever come a time when someone asks how you are doing, how you are coping, how you are healing. Sometimes the people who are always there for everyone else, needs someone to be there for them too. Sometimes, the person who smiles the biggest holds the biggest hurt. Sometimes the person who encourages everyone around them needs to be told that they are appreciated, that they matter; they need to be encouraged, they need to be held- no matter how strong they seem, no matter how bright they shine.

So, I want you to know that your heart is rare. Know, that you hold within you, an ability to calm storms in people. Know, that you give people hope, that you inspire them by acknowledging the pieces of them that are mostly ignored, that you make people feel wanted, that you make people feel like they have a purpose. I know, lately your heart is tired of overthinking through sleepless nights. Of always hoping, waiting and wishing that someone was out there to give a sign or light. Not many people understand the way your heart beats. Not many people can know the stories behind your scars, I know that sometimes it can make you feel alone. Just be gentle to yourself. You are allowed to be sad. And maybe, the things will get a little heavier for you before getting better. But I know for a fact that all that you are feeling will pass and soon, you will wake up, remember that your heart is strong, that you are capable of weathering the storms.

I know sometimes the world feels like too much for those with heart like yours. That you feel let down. That some people have not always been kind to you. I need you to understand that whatever they did to you is not your fault. You are not a reflection of those who cannot love

you, respect you or show up for you. They are not for you. You have to find things in life that bring you even a moment of peace whether it's your favourite song, the midnight sky or the art you create. The cup of coffee in the morning, your mother's voice, a playlist that makes your bones dance. You get to choose how you heal and you get to choose what heals you. Hold onto whatever makes you feel alive.

Hold on to whatever brings you hope.

For me, it's her.



16

Sacrificio De Mi Madre

Anonymous

We were not rich growing up. But that did not stop my mother, my SHE-HERO, from letting us experience all the joys of childhood. While other kids played badminton, we had our own *desi* version. It was my mom's idea to use the hardcover of our used notebooks as rackets and a ball made of used paper, tied with a thread as the shuttle. But she never taught us to win. She taught us to help each other play. She clapped when we had long rallies and scolded us if someone cheated or tried to beat the other one. Kids in the neighbourhood had cycles growing up while we did not. But that didn't stop my mother too. Whenever the milkman came on his cycle, she requested him to teach us for 5 minutes daily, which led us to learn how to ride bigger cycles straight away!

We did not have the money to buy a bat, so Mumma taught us to play cricket with a Washing wooden paddle and a plastic ball. We never had the resources to buy new books, but mom made sure to wrap each of the second-hand ones in a new brown paper cover. She used to sit all night and erase all the pencil marks in all the books and used to put tape on the torn pages so that we do not feel like we were using old books. In each new term, my fellow classmates used to get new uniforms, but of course, we were not in a position to do so. We got them once every three to four years. As we were growing up, we were also getting taller. To

tackle this issue, Mumma used to get my brother's pants and my skirt stitched 6-8 inches longer, while hemming the bottom. Every year in the school, she used to open a fold and after a couple of years, she got them stitched inside out. That was her way of getting us a new pair, before beginning the session. Buying chips, chocolates and ice cream from their pocket money was a norm for kids around us. My mother, on the other hand, taught us to save all of pocket money in a *Gullak* and once every month we used to go and have roadside *chat* to feel good. At one point of time, we did not even have a roof over our heads. While my dad gathered all the money he could, my mother had to sell all her jewellery to get a new house. And then she taught tuitions (starting with a meagre amount of Rs. 100), for almost 10 to 15 years to pay off all the loans.

My brilliant mom is a gold medallist in B.Com and the only educated daughter-in-law in our entire extended family! Unfortunately, she was not allowed to pursue higher studies or take up a job. As a result, we never had to take tuitions because we were taught all the subjects by Mumma. In fact, seeing this, all our cousins used to come to her to get some guidance regarding their homework. She was not just our mentor. She was the guide and philosopher for all the kids in the family. Even today, she solves the logical and reasoning questions of competitive exams as a hobby! I always saw my classmates getting scared after scoring less marks but every time we came home after a test, or an exam or a competition that we participated in, my mother used to hug us and ask, "How was it?". In case, one of us was not happy about our performance and replied, "Not that great.", she would reply, "No *beta*, I have told you many a times not to doubt yourself. You worked hard and that's all that counts!"

My brother and I used to keep stockings by our bedside on Christmas Eve and wait for Santa to fill them with gifts. And "(S)he" never disappointed us. Sometimes the stockings had new pencils in them, sometimes toffees or a piece of chocolate. In fact, one time both of them were filled with peanuts! That day we realized that our mother was our

personal Santa. With her meagre savings, she would fill our stockings with whatever she could and the day she could not, she filled them with peanuts because our dear Santa would not disappoint us. As we reached higher classes, we were introduced to the computer which she did not know how to operate. But she could not let that affect her children, could she? So, she secretly joined a computer class with her saved money and attended the classes while both of us were in school, in order to learn the basics which she could teach us. We could never afford printouts for school projects, so my mother didn't throw away newspapers for an entire year! Yes, you read that right. For an entire Year! As soon as we got the topics for our summer vacation projects, all three of us would go through each and every page and cut out every coloured picture available in them. Then we used to go through the pictures which were cut, use them according to the topic and stick them.

My 10th Board exams and my brother's 12th Board exam fell in the same year. Usually, parents drop off their wards and then come back after 3 hours to pick them up. But my mother was not one of them. She used to take us to the exam centre, stay with us till we entered the premises and used to sit outside the school for the next 3 hours to take us home. It was somewhat logical to do for my brother because his school was an hour away from our home but mine was just 15 minutes away! But in the eyes of my mother, both her kids were equal, and she wanted to be there for them. In fact, she wanted us to know that she was right there in case we needed her. Fortunately, our exams did not fall on the same dates and so she took me with her, every time my brother had his exam. She knew I was giving Board exams for the first time and she did not want me to feel alone since she had to with her another child. Not a single woman, in our joint family, had ever moved away to pursue higher studies. I was the first one who had qualified to study in one of the most prestigious institutes, the University of Delhi. Meanwhile, my mother never even let my relatives' resentment reach to me. Not only did she

allow me to leave my hometown and stay in Delhi, but also, stayed there for a month to help me adjusting to the new environment. In fact, I could not cope with my surroundings and unfortunately contracted typhoid. And the day my tests came positive, my mother did not think twice before getting on to the next train to Delhi. She helped me write all my assignments, made my projects, and helped me to prepare for my end semester exams. She studied my subjects to help me learn and understand them at her age of forty! Not just for me, when my brother got jaundice and lost lots of weight, she stayed with him in his single room, (that too in a boys' hostel!) and slept on the floor, so that she could be by his side the moment he needed her.

Do not be mistaken. My father had a role to play in our childhood, but frankly, he is a businessman, and this patriarchal society dictates men to go to work and earn money for the welfare of their family. It was our mother who took entire care of us. Do not get me wrong here. Although I only focussed on the tough times, there were good times as well, all because of her again. There is not one moment or achievement in my life that I would have achieved or felt without her! And oh, how the tables have turned, we now own a couple of cars, a couple of bikes and a full-fledged house in a respected colony all because of my mother's efforts. My brother works as a Consultant for a reputed MNC, I am pursuing PhD from University of Lucknow and my father has a flourishing business. But my mother is still the same. She still saves every last penny she earns. She manages the entire house. She served my dad's parents till their last breath and is currently looking after her own parents. Her happiness lies in ours. She does not expect anything out of us and doesn't even accept any help that her children offer. In true SHE- HERO fashion, she never takes a knee, never backs down!

My Life, My Story*Richa Saxena*

My life has been full of trials, tribulations and tests. It is true that nobody understands the agony of a trauma survivor. I am a survivor of complex trauma and I am highly sensitive person, struggling to thrive in a society devoid of empathy and compassion for less fortunate people like me.

My struggles began even before I stepped into this world. My mother developed a serious complication of pregnancy called toxemia of pregnancy characterised by high blood pressure and swelling of legs. Although she had a normal delivery, I was born with pale gums due to poor circulation of blood. I never felt quite energetic or strong but in spite of my weak constitution, I managed to complete my studies. School years were never enjoyable mainly because I felt like a misfit and couldn't make friends easily. Being an introvert and a highly sensitive child, attending school was an everyday struggle. When I was young, I was also bullied by other children. Loud and busy environment of a school, and some harsh and critical teachers made schooling years overwhelming and challenging. Being a victim of childhood trauma, emotionally and physically abused by my elder sibling, my self-confidence and self-worth plummeted during childhood. Hence, I became a people pleaser struggling with assertiveness and poor

personal boundaries.

I was a quiet and reserved child but overall a good student. Being a creative person, I enjoyed art and crafts. I wanted to become an artist but due to lack of support from my family, I had to choose the conventional path. I was propelled by destiny to take up a course in Home Science specialising in Nutrition. In spite of being highly qualified in my field, I struggled for nearly 13 years to get a decent job. I worked briefly in two organisations but later I didn't get any meaningful work. Since I enjoyed writing, I used to write articles on Nutrition for popular science magazines to contribute meaningfully to the society.

There was a very challenging time in my life when career had taken a backseat as I had to shoulder household responsibilities because both my parents were sick. My mother was diagnosed with Cancer. Helplessly watching her battle with the deadly disease was extremely agonizing and traumatizing. I was under immense stress as I was unmarried and both my parents wanted me to settle down in life due to their failing health. I developed anxiety and had periods of depression due to an uncertain future. I had no support from anyone other than my parents. My mother was my emotional anchor, a confidante and the only person I was emotionally close to. My father supported me financially and my mother supported me emotionally during my struggle. Seeing both my parents suffer from chronic illnesses was emotionally distressing. I was unable to balance my needs with theirs as I am a loner and need plenty of alone time to recharge. Looking after two sick parents along with my battle with depression was not only challenging but exhausting too. I was suffering from caregiver's stress. Several sleepless nights, high anxiety levels were taking a toll on my physical well-being. After a long battle with cancer and ulcerative colitis, my mother passed away due to accidental overdose of painkillers. Her sudden and unexpected death traumatized me leaving an emotional void in my life. I was shocked and completely devastated

due to my mother's death. I was 32, jobless, unmarried struggling in all aspects of life. For a long time, I lived in a state of denial and would look out from the window waiting for my mother to return and surprise me believing it was only a nightmare. A few months after my mother's death, I was hospitalized due to acute gastritis. The doctors in that hospital were kind of minting money and I felt that they are robbing patient's of their hard earned money. After knowing that only me and my father are together, they tried to manipulate us and scared my father into believing that I was seriously ill, speculating the possibility of some serious disease in my intestines like cancer or TB. The entire team of doctors was trying to convince my father that I needed further treatment as I had intestinal TB. They were going to start my treatment for TB next day, but since I had studied human physiology and knew where the problem was, I immediately understood that they were trying to deceive us. At night, I asked my father to refuse further treatment and take me home. My father was convinced and he saved me from their conspiracy.

After losing my mother, I developed trauma-related anxiety disorder or PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). PTSD is a serious mental health condition which one develops after a terrifying or shocking event takes place. Since my father was also suffering from health problems like Diabetes and its serious complications like Heart Disease, Cataract and Neuropathy, I had to perform most of the household chores and look after him too. I couldn't see a psychiatrist as I was alone handling responsibilities. My PTSD got worse due to constant worry and tensions due to my father's deteriorating health. I was in a vulnerable position. My acquaintances were unreliable and untrustworthy, so I was afraid of asking for help. Finally when the dreadful day arrived that too unexpectedly, I had to face the challenge. I was once again traumatised as my father passed away suddenly. I had a panic attack in the morning on discovering that my father was no more. He suffered from cardiac arrest and left me alone in this world. I tried calling up

ambulance and cremation service providers whose contacts I had saved, but in vain. I was not getting any help from anywhere. I grew panicky and felt really helpless. I went near my room's window, looked up into the sky and finally asked God for help. I prayed to Him to give me courage and strength in this difficult moment of my life and suddenly I felt calmer and stronger as if some invisible force had bestowed me with inner strength. I called up a nearby hospital and took my father's body for confirmation of death. I was in a state of shock, uncertain yet had to stay strong. It was not a time when I could give myself permission to breakdown and cry. I had to control my emotions as it was a practical challenge, being a single woman with no one to rely on. I asked the ambulance driver if he knew people who make funeral arrangements. Luckily he gave me their numbers and I called them up immediately and asked them to make arrangements for my father's funeral. In the meanwhile, some residents in the apartment gathered outside my flat, were surprised to see me making arrangements for funeral all alone. I felt anxious but had to put up a brave front. I did not ask anyone for help. Still some men, out of courtesy, accompanied me to the cremation ground where I performed my father's last rites.

Now I am 38, single, battling with Complex-PTSD and undergoing psychiatric treatment for the same. I have become emotionally numb and since I have no emotional support from anywhere, I often feel depressed. I still try to keep myself busy with creative pursuits like painting, creating artwork, reading books on spirituality, growing my own vegetables, meditating and listening to music to uplift my mood. I am trying to heal myself from the emotional trauma I had been through. Charity work or helping poor and needy whenever I get an opportunity also helps in adding meaning to life. Life throws challenges before us so that we can realize our true potential and evolve spiritually. Through my challenges and difficulties, I have learnt to rely on myself, to stay strong during adverse circumstances and I am still learning and trying to improve myself by working on my flaws.

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After I Lost My Father

Sanjana Srivastav

I'm a 23 year old post graduate student. My life has been a complete roller coaster, but somehow due to faith in the universe as well as within myself, I have got back in the wagon. I wish this story to be an inspiration for the women out there, who might feel vulnerable at some point in time. This phase is something that got stuck into my mind and can never be wiped out. I experienced sudden goosebumps all over again once I began to narrate my story.

All of the hardships came in my life after I lost my father when I was in 12th standard. This all happened so sudden, all of it came onto us as a deep shock. My father's health suddenly started to deteriorate in a short period of five months. On further check ups he was diagnosed with third stage cancer. For me, it was the breaking point of my life since I was not only his eldest daughter but also closest among all children. Seeing him fading away each day was traumatic for all of us. It was almost too late for any treatment to work out. It was June 2014, when we lost him. It seemed as if everything has ended. Our life suddenly stopped as we never had imagined ourselves without him. I was broken up inside but then this was the reality which I had to accept and I had to put the pieces back up together. I had my responsibilities towards my mother and the twins sisters who were just nine years old by then. My

mother was a simple lady knowing nothing about the outside world and was confined to domestic chores. Being without a father is looked differently in our society. The widowed wife is judged, the daughter is eyed upon. But slowly and gradually, I learnt to deal with the circumstances, the hardships and sarcasms of the society, in short, all the turmoil that one can face. I still remember how other women of the society used to pity our family especially my mother, asking her whether how she'll be able to run the family all alone without any support of a man, all sorts of disgusting questions and comments were passed onto us during the initial time of our loss '*bina admi ka ghar*' (A home without man). This obnoxious statement was perpetual for few years. My mother was abandoned from marriage functions and family rituals, as presence of a widow in auspicious events is considered as bad omen in our society. Yes, these things still exist in our society. Having faced all these tormenting situations, I myself was in dilemma as to how four of us will be able to survive the hardships of the societal norms. I understood that nobody will understand your pain, people are the worst sympathisers most of them will try to erase your line for themselves to look bigger. Eventually by God's grace, I gathered the courage and strength to fight against all these odds. I also decided to teach my mother to retaliate and raise her voice against unjust.

After an year or so things were back on track. Four of us were now capable of doing all those things which were quite unimaginable for us during the initial times. People used to say that I'm the man of the family but I corrected them by saying, "No, I and my mother are the women heads of the family and are nowhere less than a man, we are self sufficient". I started believing that things have settled down thereafter but, as it is said things do not always work according to one's plan. For two years everything was in great shape, and then I took admission in my Post graduation. Here, I started giving more attention to my studies and myself because I wanted to have a career. Inadvertently spending lesser time with my mother and sisters because I thought that she was

strong enough but was ignorant that it was actually me who acted as a rock in her life. During that time she was all alone and had no one to talk to. Since after my father's death it was me who was important to her and somewhere I believe that it was my shallowness towards her mental health that changed things around. A few months later I became apprehensive of some weird behaviour pattern into her which was worrisome. Initially, she started distancing herself from us by sitting in another room all alone in the little corner, at times murmuring her favourite song staring continuously at the corner of the room. The situation got worse and one day I found her talking to her bosom buddy, unfortunately that was her own self. Yes, she had devised another person within her who used to listen to her, understand her and since I was a bit inconsiderate about her emotions for quite sometime a kind of guilt clung to every part of my body seeing her in that situation. Words stumbled out of my mouth in a monotone, "Have I failed to fulfil my responsibility as a daughter, shattered down a strong woman like her?" I was devastated to see my mother in this miserable situation. I thought I have lost her, lost a caring, protective and impetus mother in her. I broke down since I knew that I couldn't lose her, she was the reason for my existence. Seeing my mother being a paranoid patient hallucinating about things drained me completely. Later I realized that it is only I who can pull her out of this vulnerable situation. I started hearing all her stories which were mostly self created. In spite of this I use to give her my listening ears. Which eventually generated into her a sense of belief. And thereby she started trusting me again. Then one fine day, I went to the university to attend my classes and came across my professor. I don't know how, but in a quick glance at my face and she easily figured out that I was somewhere out of sync. She gave me a piece of good advice and it was because of her injunction and adjuration that pulled me out of that viscous circle of events. I started believing in myself manifesting for good, which motivated me and gave strength to my thoughts. Soon, my mother started recovering from her mental illness.

Thereafter, she started spending all her time with her daughters. I could replenish my lost mother, the same, caring, protective, and a strong woman in her that was somewhere strayed off.

My mother had lost her husband, her partner for life. She was torn from that and had struggled a lot for her remaining family. I, somewhere believe, this unfortunate event of mental illness happened to her because of the comments and disgusting behaviour of the society. It played an important role in deteriorating her mental health. All these times when she needed support from her family and the people around, she got nothing but tormenting taunts and negativity. But together, we stood up our ground and won this battle of odds. All of these circumstances have helped me to fight against the norms and building up my family. I was given to understand that male and female are treated equally but this is the most ironic statement I have ever come across. In fact gender itself is the construct of the society and being the family of only females I have experienced it quite closely that people are biased and will always be. It's an individual who has to fight through. Politics is everywhere be it society or your workplace, women moving ahead in life is a nightmare for many of the egoistic males out there, but all of this never broke me, in fact it made me even stronger. The hardships are still there but I have learnt to deal with it. I might not have done anything great to boast about but one thing is for sure, It requires great courage to surpass the loss that will always remain as a sting. I have learned to deal with all the responsibilities towards my family which were persistent, whenever I used to go out for any work related journey the constant thought of their well being used to get stuck in my mind. But even then I never regret to acquire these responsibilities, may be God has chosen me for this. Yes I am the volunteer and so I embrace my responsibilities, yes I do. It feels good to see your family grow emotionally and mentally stronger every day. This society pressured my mother to see a suitable man for me and get rid of this burden (me) but I and my mom realised how important was my career

for me and since then she has been supportive towards my choices. Four of us now have each others back which has helped us in our respective growth. I believe somewhere the medicines and manifestation of my thoughts worked hand in hand . And now here I am along with my mother and twin sisters, happy, contented and working harder for better achievements in life , seeing myself at some good position in order to make my mother and father (who is up there must be watching me, being proud on his daughter) proud. I do believe that having a man is important in life but my journey have instilled into me the fact that nothing is unimaginable or unworkable, you just require that zeal , patience and belief into what you do. The journey was tough and is still not a cake walk for me but I am a proud woman and I believe no woman is weak she is a symbol of *adi Shakti* and can deal with any adverse situation. I believe, that you might want a man in your life, that's a choice, but you should never NEED one. "Become capable, do not chase but attract."

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My Success Story

Dr Mustabshira Siddiqui

Two mantras drove my life; “Love Conquers All”, and “God is with me”.

Before beginning my story, I would like to tell all the girls out there; “There is a silver lining in every cloud.”

“You can do whatever you want.”

“You just need to believe.”

“Trust your inner instinct and be honest with your work.”

I exist today because of my honesty and dedication.

“Main apni jaan ki baazi lagakar badal doongi nizame zindagi ko”

“Though being honest is a difficult thing in today's world to achieve success but it is certainly the best thing to come out from the rat race and shine like a star.”

I was born and brought up in Lucknow in a middle-class Muslim family with four brothers and parents. Being a single girl child was my drawback and strength both. I was a brilliant child but was not given enough exposure due to the personal conditions at home. I suffered a lot of financial crisis in my studies. Every class seemed to be an ordeal with my fee not deposited on time. I dreamed to write (Dr) as title before my name. I always wanted to be a medical doctor but due to the

lack of support; both financial and moral, I couldn't pursue it. So, I chose to do PhD to fulfil the dream of writing "Dr." before my name. English language was also my passion. I used to watch my teachers speaking in English and coming in nice cars. I had a fascination for it but didn't know how to reach for these things. Anyways I took admission in Arts faculty in University of Lucknow, to pursue my PhD in English Literature.

I chose literature because when I used to read biographies and fictions of famous people, they somehow gave me solace to relate with the characters. Their struggles became my struggles and I lived like a hero in my dream world. I started to dream to be a writer in future and got motivated with the success stories of various characters like Maya Angelo, Toni Morrison, Kamala Daas, and Maha Devi Verma so on and so forth. I started to live like them, as if one day I will achieve the status of an author like them. I also wanted to be an inspiration for the younger generation so that when I achieve my dream it sends a strong message to all those girls suffering and giving up due to the financial crisis. Nothing can stop you if you aspire something with your whole being.

Money played an important role in my life. Though I always got money somehow for my fee and other needs but it was always a threat. I was a dedicated student and finished my studies on time. I never received a private tuition in my entire study career. Giving the main fee was an ordeal for me, private tuition was a luxury. I was a topper throughout my academic career except my graduation where I fell sick severely and gave exams by taking pain killers because I had a stone of 13mm in my kidney which slipped from kidney into my ureter and was operated later by laser therapy. By the way I had a record of falling sick in my exams. When I was in high school, I suffered an eye injury. It was March and Holi was celebrated at school where one of my friends wanted to play Holi with me and put green colour in my eyes by mistake. My eyes became green and her nails scratched my eyeballs which took a month to heal and I gave my exams in that state. The second big exam was

intermediate and again I fell sick in March and this time it was a double typhoid fever. I gave my exams in the same state. And the best thing was that I topped in both exams. Now the question arises, how did I top the exams? Well, I was a thorough studies student. I used to study from the day one of the class, I didn't wait for the finals to come and then study. Which saved me in my final exams. But falling sick in the second year of my graduation was not easy because it was the kidney stone pain which was so severe that I kept on vomiting whatever I ate which made me weak and fragile. But my Post-graduation was the only class where I didn't fall sick in the exams and again topped in MA English. But I fell sick again in my UGC NET exam after two years of my MA. However, I qualified UGC NET in my second attempt in the same year when I fell sick. So, falling sick in exams was a lucky charm for me. Finally, I finished my PhD after so many ordeals in 2016.

My job was always very easy for me because I loved teaching and started taking tuitions at home during my PhD. My first earning was Rs 700 from the tuition. I was super happy to earn on my own. Then I was selected at Lucknow Christian College as an Ad Hoc Lecturer on Rs 6000 as my first salary. After qualifying UGC NET I was selected at Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti Language University in 2014 as a Guest Faculty at Rs 500 per Lecture with the capping of Rs 18000, where I taught for four years and there I received a call for Taibah University in 2018. I never knew this decision of coming to Saudi Arabia will change my life forever.

I don't want to take the name of people who made my life difficult because they don't matter to me now. In fact, they made me what I am today; their bitterness and partiality only made me more kind to the victims like me. But I must acknowledge some people who played an angelic part in my life. Those people are my respected teachers and Mentors: Professor Upadhyay Sir, Professor Abidi Sir at University level. Dr Neha Arora and Dr Noor Khan ma'am at college level. Mrs Uzma Kidwai and Mrs Shaheen Imran ma'am at school level. These

teachers and professors made my academic life beautiful otherwise I would be someone else today. My best friend and school classmate Samreen Shamshad played an important role in motivating and helping me throughout my difficulties.

My family played an important role in supporting me time to time. Though my father loved me but when it came to my eldest brother, he preferred him. Which somehow made life difficult for me at some point but I always overcame it with the help of other brothers. I lived a complicated personal life which couldn't be defined in one story. Life was never easy; after finishing my PhD and during my job in 2017, I fell from two-wheeler scooter and broke my leg which was operated and a rod was implanted in my left leg. At that moment many people commented on my condition and showed their sympathy as if I won't be able to do anything in my life after this accident. But God had other plans for me and I got a call for Taibah University just after one year of my accident. Though all this never made me proud and arrogant because I knew the price of it. Today I live in a big house in Saudi Arabia, alone with all the luxuries of the world, and still feel empty as if something is missing or I need to do something great but don't know how...

I want to work for the students who are suffering because of financial problems specially girls who are good students and striving to become someone. I know the pain of not having money to study when you want to study. I send my heartiest love to the people of my country. You all are greatly missed here. Much Love, God Bless.



Combat Your Struggles*Vidushi Kashyap*

Childhood is the most beautiful of all life's season enjoying little things, no stress and worries. Childhood is like garden and children are like flowers and every flower has a unique story. This is a story of girl named Chetna, my mother. She had five siblings, one elder brother and four sisters including her. Being the eldest sister amongst three younger sisters, her childhood was spent in raising her sisters and helping her mother in household chores. Her father worked as peon so he used to get transferred to different districts frequently. He could not leave job also as he was in the government service, which was more stable and secure. But father's government service made family's life unstable, a mother with five children was left back at home by father. He could not travel back to his home daily due to distance, so that he could save money for family's future use. Due to poor economic condition and absence of husband, Chetna's mother decided to go out for work so as to meet both the ends of the family. But when Chetna realized that the money which her mom earned was not enough to meet family expenses and education of children she decided to discontinue with her studies so that her elder brother could study well in good school and could support the family in future. She thought that the prescribed gender roles like looking after the house was the duty of a

girl, a woman, so she should also do the same. At that time (in 1980s), she didn't know the 'power of education' and did not realize how unfair she was being her self by leaving her studies.

Gradually, working in home and raising her sister, she turned seventeen, although it was illegal to get a girl married before 18 years, but Chetna's father decided to get his daughters married before his retirement. Being father of four daughters his tension was genuine given the prevailing social system of dowry. She being the eldest daughter was the first one to get married amongst the five children. At such a young age she was going to get married to a stranger, whom she didn't even know and had to spend her whole life with him. Most ironic but true- in India, 'Girls are provided with all their favorite stuffs, except boy of her choice'. Finally Chetna got married hurriedly. But family didn't realize "Haste makes waste". Before the marriage it was told that the boy is an electrician but actually, he did not earn anything. The marriage was deceptive. Chetna and her family thought may be the boy will become responsible as now he was married but days passed and nothing changed.

Chetna's family attempted to talk to their son-in-law, to convince him to do some work so that his earnings and savings ould help him and his wife. She also offered that she could earn for the family but neither the boy nor his family paid any attention to these advices. On the other hand, her life was becoming pathetic with each passing day. Her whole day used to go in cooking, cleaning, washing utensils and clothes and doing other household chores. She tried to adjust with her in-laws in every possible way, but they troubled her more and more. For instance, once the house was cleaned they again used to throw stuff on the floor so that she had to clean again., switching off the fan and taking away the food platter, when she used to sit for her meals and sometimes used to beat her also. One one hand, she was tortured by her in- laws and on the other hand she had no support from her husband who never bothered about what she was going through in the house. The bond between a

husband and a wife was absolutely missing in this marriage.

After five years of troublesome journey, full of trauma, anxiety, tension and fear, a little ray of hope and happiness was seen through darkness. At the age of 21, Chetna conceived her first baby and this baby was supposed to be a new arrival in both the families from her maternal side as well as in her in-laws side. But her in-laws didn't show any happiness. After hearing this good news, her family visited her with fruits and sweets, but her in-laws did not even come to meet them. She was happy to see her parents and sisters but this happiness did not stay for a longer duration. All the days were the same old days for her, full of mental and physical abuse. As it is known that during pregnancy, body undergoes various transformations but her mother-in-law didn't allow her to relax in this period also, neither did she take care of her who was too weak to deliver a baby. However, she was blessed with a baby girl. Chetna and her family got very happy after listening to this news and her mother reached her house the very next day to see her granddaughter's face. Reaching there, her mother realized that the delivery was non- institutional. The mother was suffering from high fever and was not given any medical care. So, she decided to take her and her baby back to her home. During her treatment it was found that she had Tuberculosis (T.B.). However, due to care, affection and love for her little daughter, Chetna recovered from this illness. She gradually became healthy, strong and started working as policy agent in a bank. Since the job was on commission basis, the earnings were very low, yet she didn't give up. Being less educated she also used her cooking skills to earn for her daughter and for herself.

However, after one year a tragic and unfortunate incident took place when Chetna's father passed away. He was her strength and support which was no more with her. Being the eldest daughter, she consoled her sisters and also supported her mother to overcome the trauma of losing her husband. Gradually family recovered from this situation. Chetna's mother could understand better that how hard a life for a

woman becomes when there is no support of a man. She therefore tried to talk to her in-laws and son-in-law to go for a new beginning where both Chetna and her husband can earn and stay together for the sake of their daughter. But her in-laws and husband didn't agree to this proposal and the in-laws never asked their son to shoulder the responsibility of his wife and of a daughter. Seeing all this, Chetna finally reacted angrily and said, "If your son was too fragile and insensitive to take responsibilities then why did you marry him?" She firmly pronounced, "I can take care of my child alone!"

She was although less educated, had gone through many traumas in life, yet she didn't give up. She faced every challenge and also taught her daughter to be strong. Her daughter never saw her father's face since birth, but she always provided her daughter with every possible thing which she never had in her own life. Being a single mother, she always did her best so that her daughter does not feel insufficiency of her father. Her daughter is also a bright, talented student. She never compromised with her daughter's education. Her daughter also says that her mom has always inspired her. "Mother's loving spirit helped her finding her own". Her daughter is now in the University of Lucknow, pursuing her studies. She wants to become independent as soon as possible, so that she can ask her mom to quit her job. Chetna realized that quitting studies for his brother was her worst decision, else, she could have spend her life with ease and comfort. She realized the value of education and always taught her daughter, "A lady should always focus on what she wants to be and what she wants. She should embrace each and every struggle with brave heart as each struggle makes you stronger". A mother is always best guide and last hope when there is darkness all around. I am so proud of being a daughter of a strong mother.

21

My Existence, My Life: Story of A Simple Woman

Anonymous

Psalm 46:5 of The Bible reads, *“God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns.”* The strength in a woman is exemplary. The world would not be the way, it is in her absence. It is her existence on earth that gives existence to this world. But the very realization of this fact is itself unrealized by many women. They consider that in this patriarchal society, their identity is through their male counterpart. Shakti is woman and woman is Shakti, goes only in reading and in slogans but when will these slogans get assimilate into the hearts and minds of the women in general? We come across many incidents and stories of the deprived women wherein they have struggled to live with dignity or have stood against the prevalent norms of the society to carve out their existence. It might have cost them bitterly in terms of mental turmoil and physical bruises but at the end of the day it is their existence that matters.

Falling in love is a beginning and to feel that love forever in life is something that either adds to a meaning to life or takes away the charm if that element of love turns out to be transient. My marriage was a love marriage but this was not so easy. An inter-caste marriage does not get a willing support from the family. I surpassed through all tough situations to feel the victory of getting married to the guy I had loved.

Very soon, I got a letter of being selected in the Higher Education Commission, the interview of which I had given just before my marriage. My in-laws were happy but my posting in a small city created a scene of unrest in the mental state of my better half. But a government job is a government job. I took around 6-7 months to join in the given college. By that time, I was already in the family way. Living as a paying guest in that city and again continuing therein after availing the maternity leave enabled me to learn each day how to cope up with work and small baby. I used to avail the leave to go either to my in laws place or to my husband's working place. I don't even remember if I had spent a couple of days in my maiden home with my mother. For me, my life was around my new relations, and my in laws after a period of time came to stay with me in the government quarter allotted to me. I served them to the best of my ability and tried to keep a balance between work and home. It took my energy and time but then for me, if they are happy, my better half would also be happy. Thus, my love for him knew no bounds and I was ready to travel with my little son very often to let the son also get the feel of his father.

I never realized that I was gradually being taken for granted and I was being expected that way only. Rarely would his father come as he used to say that the city in which I lived, did not give him a feel-good factor. By and by, his irritation was quite evident in his words and acts. Gradually, the element of love got replaced with an element of indifference and a callous approach as all the responsibilities that were being ushered by me gave him full space to lead a free and casual life. For him, his professional and his own personal life got more attention at the cost of the happiness of the family.

Had it been the ailments of his father or the operation of his mother, their son would just give a guest appearance and the entire family responsibility was completely mine. Slowly and steadily, I thought if not me then who would take care of them. My values would never let me think that their son should at least shoulder the responsibilities. He

would only give command to others to follow them and that too without giving his presence in person. I did all the tasks assigned with a smile. I had not even realized how things were moving ahead contrary to my expectations. My place in his life was merely a caretaker of his parents and his two sons. I too found myself involved in maintaining that balance to keep my in-laws healthy and happy and to take care of studies of my sons as well. His disinterest towards me and his regular reprimanding led me to lose my confidence in my being. My inner self got bruised many many times, but then I had to keep the family fabric intact, as if it was only my responsibility. His accusations did hurt my confidence level and day by day negative thoughts hovered around me. This led me to a state of depression because when I needed him, he wasn't there. Toiling hard with my work , home, relations and society and matching it with his callous attitude left me heartbroken many a times.

As quoted in the beginning, God helps when a feeling of helplessness hovers around. I got selected in an interview in a University and moved to my own city, Lucknow. After years, I realized my shaken confidence was being rebuilt. His indifference did not matter much to me now. I live with my responsibilities and feel that positive power in me to take self-decisions and abide by it. The teaching profession teaches me each day to live like a new one, feel a new beginning and believe in my own self and my real existence. As a daughter, I am there for my parents and feel the pleasure to serve them whenever I get an opportunity, as a daughter in law, my in-laws hardly complain of my services as a homemaker, as a mother I try to do justice to my sons who are now teenagers, imparting them the values of how to treat a woman and how to be gender sensitive. The very feeling that they give value to my hard work and remark that their mother is an iron lady fills my heart with a beaming confidence that I happened to lose in those past days.

A family is nurtured by a woman. Let each man get this realization and respect the woman for building its fabric. A woman has that power to

inculcate values in the society and make this earth a place to live in peacefully. Both men and women are complementary to each other; they ought not to compete with each other. If a man thinks, that a woman is weak without the support of man, I stand up to say, no man can live happily without the support of a woman.

22

Goodbye

Anonymous

Goodbye “My Story” is not about one of the usual goodbyes, where we detangle our bond with the precious one. This story is about “goodbyes” we all go through in our lives intentionally or unintentionally. Here goodbye isn't only limited to relations but beyond a lane of relations, which we women's mostly go through, without any disclosures. This story entails out from lap of Lucknow city. “Goodbye” will make you inspire and realize about the opportunities you let go just to please few, who will only be a guiding road but not someone to walk along with you in the same shoe. This story is not about empowerment, but self-reliance, realizing that it's you who matters not opinion of others about you. You have to design your journey as per the lifestyle you desire, not the thoughts imposed on you by the society. I don't wish to disclose my name in this story, I want it to be remembered as “Goodbye”, which made me fight against the odds and made me and my family stand at the current position. Some of us might be enjoying our current position and some might be suffering with the same, but what all it took to be at this position just a “Goodbye”.

By god's grace I was leading a healthy and wealthy life. Completed my MBA from one of the Central University of Lucknow, saying “goodbye” to my preference to pursue my higher studies from Delhi or Mumbai!

Why? As my father was not willing to send me out of station, and being the loving daughter, I obeyed, being in dilemma that he loves me a lot so doesn't want me to leave. I neither fought for my career nor tried to investigate the reason for same. Now when I look back there is just realization that I allowed this injustice to happen to me. I never realized this goodbye was always attached on me. At first, I use to get bit upset, later I got adapted to such "Goodbyes".

After completing post-graduation, I went for a training for financial analyst. I wanted to be face of business news channels like CNBC Awaz and ZEE news, where I could portray my quintessential for market knowledge so as to suggest the necessary indicators to understand the market trend. I even wished to work with top notch companies like JP Morgan, Moods, SEBI, etc. By luck, I got in touch with one of the consultancies in Mumbai, which was conducting an interview for Morgan Stanley, one of my desired company to work with. Here I cleared three rounds of telephonic interview and big day was the next step, I was called to Mumbai for final interview. I was too excited for my first ever job, but suddenly I heard a low voice asking, will you leave and go? That voice was of Papa, who said leave this job as you can get many jobs in Lucknow. Obeying his order, I dropped my interview, knowing it was once in a life time chance. Later, I got selected in one of the stock exchanges dealing company of the city, waving goodbye to the one of the best companies and the handsome salary. Knowing that I was capable of earning what I was getting and also realized how these big business firm exploit your talent for the sake of their business, just because you are non IIT or non IIM. Initially I thought we women are only discriminated on gender grounds but then even we face discrimination due to our education. It was a time to say another goodbye and I decided to quit this job. Very soon I got placed in government institution on a temporary basis Life was stable and had a set routine. I had a passion to work in field, learn, gather new experiences and was getting that opportunity. Along, with this I was

following my empathic path towards animals' welfare by volunteering to help the voiceless when required. Along with it, I had plans to pursue a Ph.D. and get into the profession of the lectureship. I wished to be a guiding light or someone who inspires others to stand for themselves, can teach them how to fight with the odds of society and follow what they wish to. Along, my job I was also trying to make a change in the thinking scenario of people, use to have a discussion and investigate the reasons about why a person, especially women have to adjust to daily routines of life. I was achieving what I desired for until a deadly wave engulfed our lives- the covid pandemic.

2020!! This year I believed has created many lanes of memories in each one of our lives. Though Covid-19 pandemic was harsh on many, but at the same time it gave opportunity to us to work from home along with gathering under a roof with our family, without worrying to leave for work next Monday. I too got this precious time to spend with my father and mother. We use to get up late in morning and had fights on food menu. That was a fun time, it was the first time I saw my father taking rest, else he was on his business duty from 8am-9pm or more. He worshiped his work and was inspiration for me. He had business of building materials; I saw him running to shop late at 2am for checking the unloading of trucks. Sometimes he used to get back to home in morning at around 4.00 am-5.00 am. This pandemic was the time I was seeing him taking rest and also got chance to spend my most of time with him. He used to cook, do a bit of gardening, watch television and do other works, which he could not do earlier as he didn't find time due to his business engagements. I always wondered when a man has his own business then why he is unable to take out time for himself?

In June 2020, my father fell ill. Initially the family thought it to be a routine sickness but later on when situation got serious and tests were held, he was diagnosed with chronical kidney disease. This came as a shock for each one of us. I was with my sister in doctors' cabin, when tears rolled down our eyes, as we were there just to collect report of my

father who didn't accompanied us. We knew he was unwell but were unprepared for this scenario, doctor informed us to immediately admit him else he won't be able to make it for next week. He was to be on dialysis. We were thinking how to confront him about this disease. When reached home, we directly went to his shop and told him about the situation, he said I can't be on dialysis I will die. After convincing him for a day, he got ready to get admitted in one of the best hospitals of Lucknow, where we were informed to get one dialysis done so that he may be shifted on medicines later on. When he was admitted in ICU, I noticed tears rolling down his eyes. He didn't say anything and I know he was scared. His dialysis sessions got increased from one to four and there were many more to come in future. Later, when he got discharged, we approached a different doctor who informed us to cure the disease without dialysis. Though my father could make for next three months without dialysis, still he was quite weak and often fought with me when I imposed restriction on his food routine. His health deteriorated after the disease. I informed him that this is the last project I'm working on and after few days I will join him in the business. Here saying "goodbye" to my assignment was intentional as it was out of the concern for my father. My priority was clear and there was no second thought for this goodbye.

Suddenly in October 2020, one fine day I observed my father as quite restless, we took him to the doctor for routine check-up and everything was normal. We came back home, my sister left for her in-law's house. After the dinner, my father suddenly felt uneasiness and my sister came back saying that her conscience asked her to come back home. She arranged for an ambulance and I asked my father to be easy as we are taking him to the hospital. He whispered to my mother that he needs tea. While I was all alone with him in the room, rubbing his back I realized he had bent down and was not talking. I stood up, looked at him but he was gone. I was sitting and continued rubbing his back without realizing that he is no more. Life became absolutely difficult for me and

opened the doors for me in the business world.

My father's absence made me, realize the importance of "goodbye". All the goodbyes came out of emotions, which I don't show up much. The past five months were really a rollercoaster ride. My real struggle started when my father took a ride to heaven. The same day after his funeral, the struggle started when my family got its very first opinion to wind up the 35 years old business of my father in next six months. Just because my father raised two girls and not a boy, so society has this right to express their opinion that business should be shut as women aren't capable enough to run such a business, involving daily wages male labour, and visiting mandis.

I was going through mixed emotions. I was into a job that paid me well along with my interest in that work. Quitting my job was one of the hardest goodbyes because if ever I wish to restart again, I would have to do it from scratch. So, after realizing about hard work of my father and the need of an hour, I decided to join my father's business. At that moment society members were very curious to know who will be handling the "throne". Why throne? Because people made it sound like that as my father was a powerful person who genuinely helped people. I realized how strict he was to teach me and my sister to spend judiciously, but he himself helped many in building their home.

The first day, business helpers/labours were very happy, as they saw me standing with them. When we start something new, then, in the initial stages we all go through some ups and downs and same was with me too. Taking baby steps, I soon learnt the business ethics. This was the first time I was getting practical training in business ethics. Here I said goodbye to my scheduled daily routine because in business one has to schedule the availability as per the requirements of the product and the client. There have been times when I stay back late night to monitor the unloading of trucks of the material. I chose this path after considering all the odds that I was going to face and I have the

confidence to overcome the fear that society is trying to build up in my head-women are not meant to step out late in night. Further, many people around me are of this view that one who is running a business leads a peaceful life, as they are not answerable to anyone for their work, attendance, money, and so on. I also had the similar thoughts, until I walked into the business world. Business requires most of your precious time, a holiday for a day may result in loss of the customer I realized why parents used to tell me to restrict my spending because business earnings are not the same every month unlike the paid salaries. So, here is one more goodbye to freehand spending. Now, I restrict my desires and focus only on necessities. I also said goodbye to the opinion of others which are concentrated around gender roles. I made a choice to be a business woman that too in construction and building material business at the age of 27 years. Initially people thought that I will not be able to tread this difficult road, I will quit and will shut down the business. They said that women are not capable to do this kind of business. Who are they to decide? When women can work in construction sector as labour, then why can't a woman be a construction entrepreneur? My mother also gets worried that what will happen to my skin, my hair, as many times, I spend time standing in the sun amidst all dust and dirt, how will I get married so on and so forth. I said goodbye to all these do's and don'ts and have chosen my own path.

There are people who are happy with a girl child, but at the same time these people are the ones who restrict her from following her dreams, just because she is a girl and her thinking is out of the box. Empowerment is not about making women work or getting their education, it's about giving them freehand opportunity to grow and learn and encourage her to fight her battle no matter how many relations you lose mid-way.

My parents taught me to fly but never restricted my limits, so I do things only for my own self and not to please anyone. It is because of their

encouragement that I'm able to fight the odds of the society and can differentiate the things which are meant for goodbyes and hold the ones worth holding. Apart from this, it's also up to you how you want to tackle the myths of society. My fight with what people say about me is still going on but, now I take it as a regular dose because, after so many questions, I still have the same answer -no matter how hard it gets, believe in yourself, fight the odds for yourself and stand for yourself. Remember- whatever you are today and wherever you are, it is because of many Goodbyes of your life which played an important role at every step of your life. There shall be many more Goodbyes in the offing. Accept them and move on , keeping your head high and pursue your dreams.



PART II
Gender Sensitization

Stereotyping Gender

Shikha Chauhan¹

'A college basketball coach, married, no children. is a national champion and majored in physical education. Also, loves to play guitar and is an amazing photographer''.

'An architect, married, has two children, is a gold medallist and works in a reputed company. Also, loves to cook and parties every weekend'.

'A University Professor, unmarried, no children, is a voracious reader and cycles to the university every day. Also, loves to trek and is a melodious singer'.

Now, as we read the above characterizations, there are different pictures that are carved out in our mind. All the three could be men or women and could be of any age. Generally, we would imagine the coach to be somebody clad in a sweatshirt and track pants with an impressive muscular built, probably tall and in mid 20's, the architect to be well dressed, suited, carrying files and driving in an expensive car and the professor to be a simply dressed person, walking around the University or teaching, carrying books and wearing eye glasses. Moreover, we would attribute certain characteristics to each of these individuals

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Member GenSen Cell, University of Lucknow.

based on our socialization and experiences. We may imagine the coach to be poor in studies and good in sports. Also, we may attribute intelligence and good mathematical skills to the architect. Similarly, we may believe the Professor to be sincere, principled and a strict disciplinarian and women to be soft spoken, an epitome of patience and sacrifice, not raising their voices and succumbing to any situation which life has offered them.

Thus, each one of us carries a set of belief systems. These help us to understand ourselves in the context of others around us which is aggressive or polite, caring or daring, disciplined or rogue so on and so forth. Now, this process of self-discovery becomes challenging when a bunch of these characteristics revolve around our biological identities. Moreover, these create a social pressure on each one of us to confirm to the dominant or expected gender roles. The irony is that it's a never ending game wherein we get indulged in a quest for social confirmation becoming less sensitive to our own selves as well as others.

As we move out of our school life and enter college, this pressure for social confirmation is at its peak as each one of us tests ourselves against these benchmarks trying to fit into some or the other category just to seek respect and acknowledgment. So, as a college student, each one of us would want to adorn a new trendy dress every day, look like a popular heroine or hero with bouncy lustrous hair, flawless skin may be fair too and may be also drive in a car or motorbike. So, the physical built, complexion, height, accent, language, attitude are important characteristics. The failure to ascribe to these wanted features may land one in unwanted categorizations like and this pressure is equally demeaning for both the sexes as each tries to cope up with the harsh perceptions of others around them. So, it's important that we imbibe the sensitivity and openness towards our own personal attitudes and beliefs as well as others. It's a process of self-discovery wherein we try to move beyond the visible physical attributes towards inherent socialization processes that shape our understanding of the outside

world. We could understand it with the help of the famous movie 'Titanic'.

The Iceberg Analogy

The giant ship 'Titanic' sinks because it hit an iceberg. While the captain was assured that he will be able to sail through moving around the ship as he could see the tip of the iceberg, he overlooked the larger reality. The tip was only 10% of the iceberg while the rest 90% beneath the water proved to be a larger risk. Similarly, the physical traits like gender, race, colour, language so and so forth are only 10% of an individual's personality. 90% of our value system which are the thought processes, values, beliefs, life experiences, family which remain invisible and represents our socio-cultural socialization since childhood. We all are different and unique in ourselves. Also, the differences could only be biological either male or female. Rest all are culturally built and socially expanded through a set of invisible rules like the choice of colour or occupation or even psycho-social and emotional traits. For example, boys like blue and pink are for girls. Any feminine product has to be marked with pink and vice versa. Similarly, boys don't cry and girls are not good at driving or sports. Thus, we could notice that most of the Gender stereotypes are premised on the basic principle that the culturally stated rules apply to everyone in the group. Thus, they make it harder for an individual to pursue what s/he actually loves to do. It creates a social pressure on each of the individuals to conform to their peer groups. So, a lean and short boy would be hesitant to approach the girls in a classroom. Similarly, a not so trendy, regional language speaking girl in the class may not be a member of the trendy group of the batch. Thus, our acceptance amongst our own peer group is marked by these rules.

So, not getting attention from the others around us may mean a deficiency in one's persona. This thought and the premise itself is self-destructive. We start ignoring our uniqueness and try to imbibe the

homogeneity expected of these stated norms. The result is a group of people reluctant to embrace diversity of people as well as ideas. Thus, Gender refers to all the learnt roles, norms and expectations that have come into existence on the basis of one's sex. It's a socio-cultural definition of a boy or a girl, or a man and women. The society fixes their desired value systems, dress codes, attitudes, opportunities, rights, mobility, their freedom of expression, priorities and even ambitions. Gender roles and discrimination is rooted in social and cultural spaces. The societal systems change and so do our roles. Thus, attitudes towards each of the members should also change creating more liberal spaces for everyone and this can be done through Gender Sensitization. Gender sensitized persons become instruments of change as far as status of women in concerned. They become action oriented and alert to see that women are neither neglected nor discriminated against and they get their due status in the society. Conscious efforts are made to create a favourable climate that allows nurturing and flourishing of women's talent and provide more flexibility and freedom to women. There could be gender sensitive policies and programmes to allow meaningful participation of women in development and decision making process, and faster equitable sharing of benefits. Some of the actions that are making visible impact are gender focused programmes and policies by different ministries of Government and department under national policy on women, initiatives like identifying and addressing gender concerns at organization level and gender budgeting. All these are testimonies to the shift in approach that has taken place in recent years.

Gender Sensitization Committee helps us on the journey of self discovery examine as we examine our personal attitudes and beliefs. Enable a two way communication and interaction amongst diverse students. Enable students to think away from the fixed gender discriminatory rules of the society. A gender sensitization cell is not synonymous with a women development cell. It serves as a

fundamental platform for all the sexes to discuss problems and come about with mutually agreed upon solutions. Instill positive thoughts on gender issues and enhance the ability to bring about an attitudinal change.

Gender Sensitization and Equality

(Important Constitutional/ Legal Provisions and Role of Judiciary to Promote Equality, Provide Protection and Curb Discrimination Against Women in India)

Chandra Sen Pratap Singh²

The difference in sex and physical form denotes no difference in status. Women are complement of man and not inferior.

-Mahatma Gandhi

In early ages, particularly in matriarchal society, women enjoyed dignified and respectful status. In Vedic period, women enjoyed status equal to man. The great women like Ghosa, Apala, Lopmudra, Gargi, Atreyi, Indrani etc. had excelled in art, music, dance and even in battlefield. But, the equality in status did not last for long. By and by matriarchal society gave way to patriarchal society. The superiority of men over the women was established. Biological construction of men gave them economic dominance and slowly a conflict in ideology and actuality became apparent.

The struggle for legal equality has been one of the major concerns of the women's movement all over the world. In India since long back, women were considered as the oppressed section of the society and they were neglected for centuries. Thus, the first task in post independent India

² Assistant Professor of Law, Faculty of Law, Member GenSen Cell, University of Lucknow..

was to provide a Constitution to the people which would not make any distinction on the basis of sex.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women for neutralizing the cumulative socio economic, education and political disadvantages faced by them.

Important Constitutional Provisions/Protections for Women:

- (i) **Article 14:** Equality before law for **women**. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution declares that equality before law and equal protection of law shall be available to all.
- (ii) **Article 15 (1):** Article 15(1) says that any act of the state, whether political, civil or otherwise, shall not discriminate as between citizens on grounds only of religion, race, caste, **sex**, place of birth or any of them.
- (iii) **Article 15 (3):** The State has authority to make any special provision in favour of **women** and children. Therefore, the prohibitions given under Article 15 (1) against discrimination, would not preclude the State from making special provision for **women** and children.
- (iv) **Article 16:** Article 16 (1) says that there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to *employment* or appointment to any *office* under the state.
- (v) **Article 39 (a):** Article 39 (a) requires the state, in particular, to direct its policy towards securing that all citizens, irrespective of **sex**, equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- (vi) **Article 39 (d):** According to Article 39 (d), the state has to ensure that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and

women.

- (vii) Article 39 A:** Article 39 A obligates the state to secure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice, on a basis of equal opportunity, and shall, in particular, provide free legal aid, by suitable legislation or schemes, or in any other way, to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities.
- (viii) Article 42:** Article 42 of the Constitution makes it the obligation of the State to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for **maternity benefit**.
- (ix) Article 46:** Article 46 obligates the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people. And, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.
- (x) Article 47:** Article 47 obligates the State to regard, as among its primary duties, the raising of the level of nutrition and the standards of living of its people and the improvement of public health. In particular, the State is to endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption, except for medicinal purposes, of intoxicating drinks and drugs which are injurious to health.
- (xi) Article 51 A (e):** According to Article 51 A (e), it is the Fundamental Duty of the Indian citizens to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional diversities and to renounce practices derogatory to **the dignity of women**.
- (xii) Article 243D (3):** It provides that “not less than one-third (including the number of seats **reserved for women**

belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be **reserved for women** and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat”.

(xiii) Article 243D (4): It provides that “not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be **reserved for women**”.

(xiv) Article 243T (3): It provides that “not less than one-third (including the number of seats **reserved for women** belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Municipality shall be **reserved for women** and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality”.

(xv) Article 243T (4): It provides that “the offices of Chairpersons in the Municipalities shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and **women** in such a manner as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide”.

Legal Provisions:

In order to uphold the Constitutional mandate, various legislative measures have been taken by State in the form of enactment of laws and incorporating provisions for the purpose of ensuring equal rights, counter social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities, and also providing support services to working women. Although, women being a human being, may be victims of any of the crimes such as Robbery, Theft, Cheating, Murder so on and so forth. But, there are certain crimes which are directly specifically against women and they are characterized as 'Crime Against Women'. They can be further classified into two categories:

(I) The Crimes Identified under the Indian Penal Code (IPC): It includes offences like Rape (Section 376, IPC); Homicide for the purpose of obtaining Dowry, Dowry Deaths or their attempts (Section 302/ 304 B, IPC); Kidnapping and Abduction for different purposes (Sections 363-373); Molestation (Section 354, IPC); Torture, both mental and physical (Section 498 A, IPC), Sexual Harassment (Section 509 IPC) and Importation of girls up to 21 years of age etc.

(ii) The Crimes Identified under the Special Laws: Generally, these laws are not gender specific but the provisions of law affecting women significantly have been regularly reviewed and amendments have been made to keep pace with the changing/ emerging requirements. There are certain Acts which have made special provisions for the safeguard of women and their interests. Some of them are as follows:

(I) The Employees State Insurance Act, 1948

(ii) The Plantation Labour Act, 1951

(iii) The Family Courts Act, 1954

(iv) The Special Marriage Act, 1954

(v) The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955

(vi) The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 (with Amendment in 2005)

(vii) Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956

(viii) The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (Amended in 1995)

(ix) Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

(x) The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971

(xi) The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1976

(xii) The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976

(xiii) The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006

- (xiv) The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983
- (xv) The Factories (Amendment) Act. 1986
- (xvi) Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
- (xvii) Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987
- (xviii) The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- (xix) The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019

Thus, we see that Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(b), 39(c), 42 etc. of the Constitution of India are of specific importance in this regard. To uphold the Constitutional mandate, the State has also enacted various legislative measures as mentioned above to ensure equal rights, to counter social discrimination, various forms of violence and atrocities to women. Certain special initiatives have also been taken for women such as establishment of National Commission for Women and providing Reservation for Women in Local Self -Government

Role of Judiciary:

Judiciary is considered as an independent wing of Government. Judiciary has basically two roles: Firstly, the traditional role i.e., to interpret the laws, and secondly, Judicial activism i.e., to go beyond the statute and to exercise the discretionary power to provide justice. When any question comes before the court related to the protection of women, then the courts by the proper interpretation of the concern laws or statutes is able to express the meaning of provisions of the legislation and the intention of legislature and by this way judiciary can give justice and protection to the women.

Another important role of judiciary is to make precedent for the public interest or for welfare of the society. Where there is no specific law or where there is law but needs to give broader interpretation or expanding the dimension of such laws, then Judiciary plays an

important role in this regard. Article 141 of the Constitution of India provides that “the law declared by the Supreme Court shall be binding on all courts within the territory of India”.

Judiciary has made immense contribution to strike the balance between discrimination caused to the working women and availing them of justice against such discrimination. Some of the landmark judgments given by Indian Judiciary to curb discrimination and violence against women are:

- (i) **Air India vs. Nargesh Meerza:** In this case, the Air India and Indian Airlines Regulation were challenged as violative of Article 14. Regulation 46 provided that an Air Hostess was to retire from service upon attaining the age of 35 years or on marriage if it took place within four years of her joining service or on first pregnancy, whichever occurred earlier. The Supreme Court struck down the regulation providing for retirement of the Air Hostess on her first pregnancy, as unconstitutional, void and violative of Article 14.
- (ii) **Vishakha vs. State of Rajasthan:** Supreme Court provided a landmark judgment on the area of sexual harassment against women at workplace. As in this particular aspect there is no law or enactment by the legislature, the judiciary applied its activist power and provides detailed guidelines in this particular aspect, until the Legislature legislates to safeguard the interest of the working women and to protect them from sexual exploitation at their workplace.
- (iii) **Chairman, Railway Board vs. Chandrima Das:** In this case, Rs. 10,00,000 was awarded as compensation to a Bangladeshi woman gangraped by railway employees of Eastern Railway in Yatri Niwas of Howrah Station.
- (iv) **Bodhisattwa Gautam vs. Subhra Chakraborty:** In this case, the complainant was induced by the accused on false

assurance of marriage to cohabit with him. He not only made false assurance of marriage, but also fraudulently went through marriage ceremonies. He was prosecuted under various sections of the IPC. The Supreme Court refused to quash the prosecution, ruled that rape was not only an offence under the IPC, but was also a violation of a woman's right to live with dignity and personal freedom.

- (v) **Madhukar Narayan Mardikar vs. State of Maharashtra:** In this case, the Supreme Court said with reference to rape, that unchastity of a woman does not make her “open to any and every person to violate her person as and when he wishes”. Even a prostitute has a right to privacy under Article 21, and no person can rape her just because she is a woman of easy virtue.
- (vi) **Shayara Bano vs. Union of India:** In August 2017, the Supreme Court of India declared “triple talaq”, which enables Muslim men to instantly divorce their wives, to be unconstitutional.

Thus, it is observed that not only the legislature but also judiciary plays a very vital and important role in case of women empowerment.

Gender sensitization is all about changing behaviour and instilling empathy into the views that we hold about our own and other sex. Gender sensitization acquaints men and women with each other's existence. There are certain issues relating to gender sensitization but most of the times, we mix the issue of gender sensitization with gender equality. The word equality itself is a very vague term. No one is equal in the strict sense. Even the twins are not equal, despite the fact that they are born in the same family. The nature has made remarkable biological difference between the two genders.

Indian Constitution Part III which deals with Right to Equality, starting from Article 14 to Article 18, also make special provisions for women

and children. Right to Equality is treated as a negative concept whereas as Equal Protection of Law is treated as a positive concept. Whether economic independence, rights in property or creativity (productivity) of woman will make any difference in the direction of gender equality or not, the answer will not be affirmative. Let us start with creativity or productivity. It is very difficult to define productivity in terms of women because women are engaged in various types of household and other activities in which there is no return in terms of remuneration. It is not true for their male counterparts. The change of mindset is very necessary in the modern world where women are also emerged as earning members and securing jobs in various fields. The earning female members of society may also think of marrying with non-earning male counterparts. In today's age of unemployment, it will serve a better cause for society and more families will have economic security.

We are not living in an ideal and safe society where we talk about idealism. The Government and society is unable to provide security to the women in the way that they are supposed to, in such conditions, women easily become victim of harassments of various degrees. Despite the fact that there are various laws for the protection of women, still the women in our country are most vulnerable and unsafe. The question here arises that how to control such type of disparity? The most important role can be played by the society. Society has to take affirmative action in the direction of gender sensitization. Sensitivity is very important while handling such type of issue. A sensitive person is an asset to society because he will never accept any such type of injustice done to any person or even to animal as well as nature and he will certainly oppose any type of discrimination based on gender. The next important role can be played by the institution of family. The institution of family is running smoothly from time immemorial. Therefore, it can certainly be inferred that there is some merit in such an institution. Charity begins at the home. If the family sensibly

tackles the issue of gender sensitization then a major portion of the problem can be solved at the initial level.

Thus, instead of focusing on equality, we should focus on mutual respect and understanding between the two genders and family as a unit. It will not be true to say that only women are sufferer, men do not suffer and they only engage in exploitation. If any injustice is done to women, it will brutally affect the male counterparts too. If any women suffers any sexual abuse, rape, dowry death, domestic violence etc., their relatives and right thinking members of society are also affected, which includes male also, in the form of father, brother, husband, son etc.

Therefore, the most important thing is that there should be change of public opinion. If public opinion will not change then all the law will become dead letter and it will be of no value. It can be better understood by law relating to dowry in the form of 'Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961'. Since the public opinion regarding dowry has not yet changed, therefore this Act has not been able to bring any visible changes in the society. So, while focusing on gender equality, the major thrust is on gender sensitivity and it has nothing to do with education and economic independence. Various educated families, with both the husband and wife earning, if their first product is son then they don't think of procreating further giving the argument that this is their prerogative and it is difficult for them to take care of more than one child simultaneously with earning.

Gender Sensitization is one basic requirement for the normal development of an individual. Without being sensitive to the needs of a particular gender, an individual may refrain from understanding the opposite gender and in some acute cases even him or herself. The need for this sensitivity has been felt and realized through times immemorial and in almost all kinds of human existence, across the globe. Particularly in a country like India, with the vast diversity

existing in terms of its customs, traditions, rituals, social values, family beliefs and individual perception, the need for a More Systematic, Well Planned and more Professional approach is desired to inculcate this sensitivity and primarily highlight the contribution of both the genders in creation and development of a well-balanced society. Surely both the Genders are a Creation of Nature and equally essential for the Sustainable Development of any Society. Any sort of gap or inequality with respect to the survival rate, individual count, literacy, health, safety, respect and freedom will damage the sanctity and the authentication of human existence.

What Makes a Woman

Mridu Awasthi

What makes a woman, a strong woman?

A big heart with lots of love,

A beautiful smile without any fear, glittering eyes with lots of dreams,

Too many sacrifices without any question,

adjusting her life without asking for change,

hiding her emotions with lots of pain, feels deeply and love fiercely,

building herself without blaming herself,

Her essence is the gift to the world of nature,

Understanding the relations without being selfish herself,

Lighting the dark instead of burning herself,

flourishing flowers nourishing by her womb,

fearless her, conquering the world,

Never bow down or ask other to fix her crown,

Let it shine on its own, beauty from heaven,

She has strong wings for her own,

Obstacles of life never treat her weak,
She prove herself how strong she is,
Inequality of gender never treat her equally,
But she's overcome the fear how masculine dominating her destiny,
Fighting for her worth,
She's breaking the ceiling,
You never know a woman how courageous she is,
She always admire whatever she finds,
Battle scars or war wounds of life,
She displayed proudly for the world to see,
Remember! She's empowering woman for today's destiny.