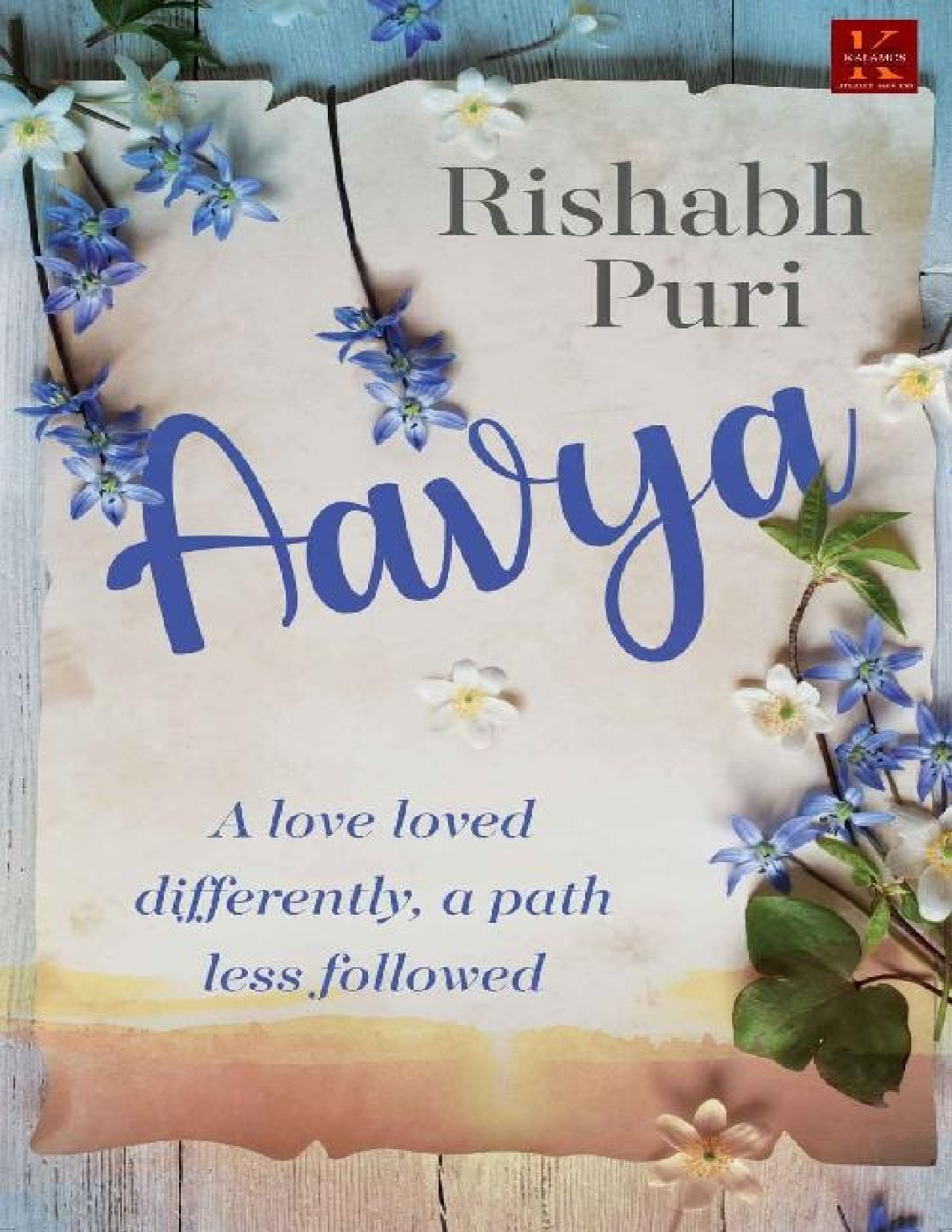

Rishabh
Puri
Aavya
A love loved
differently, a path
less followed

About Rishabh Puri

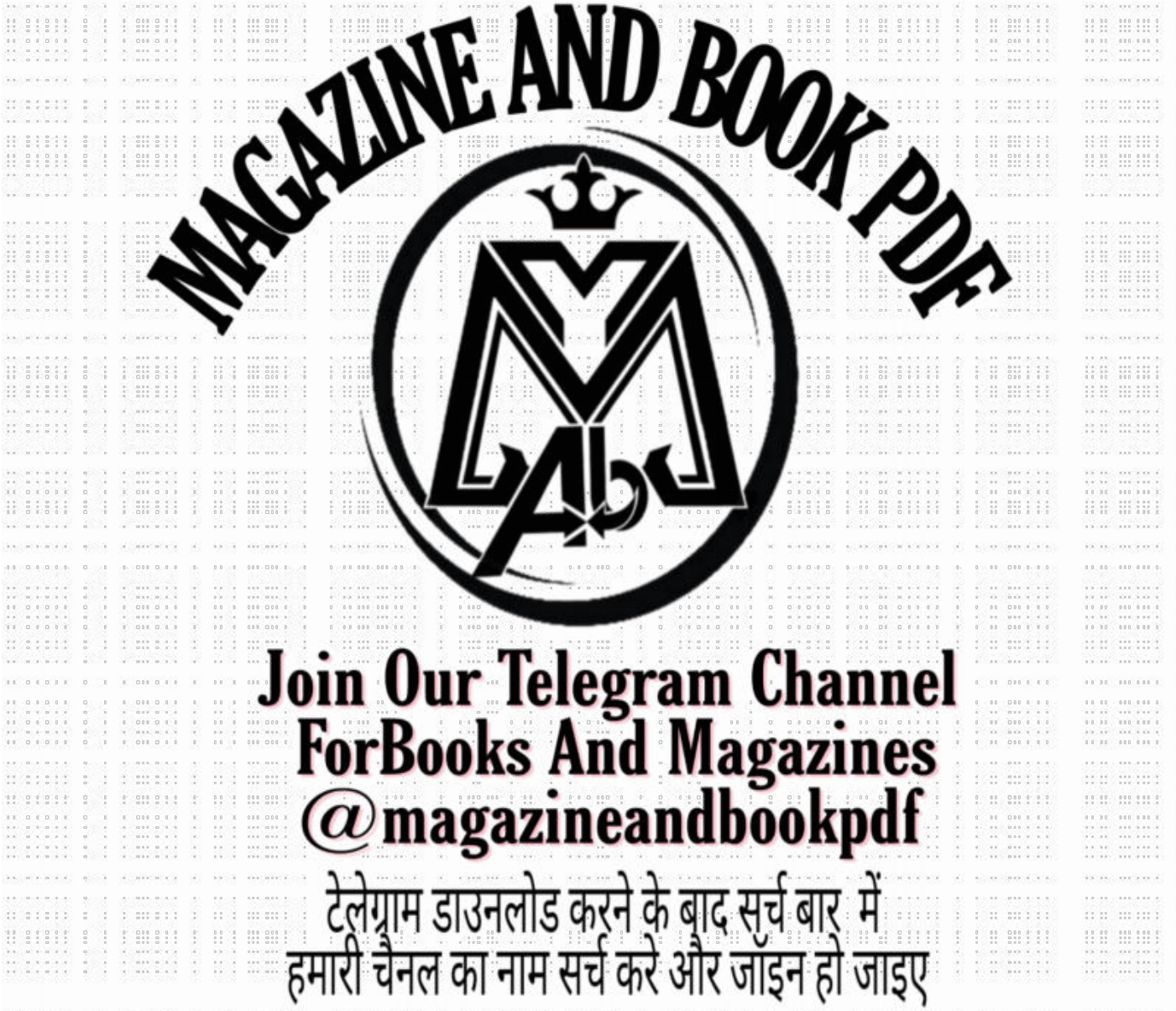


© Sarthak Parashar

RISHABH PURI is an entrepreneur of Indian origin with business in Nigeria, Dubai, and China. Despite his demanding day job, he finds time to indulge in his passion for writing fiction. He is a national bestselling author with three books penned under his name - 'Inside the Heart of Hope', 'Flying Without Wings' and 'Seductive Affair'. His readers have loved and enjoyed all his books immensely, and 'Aavya' is his fourth book.

Diagnosed with life-threatening heart disease at the age of 1, Rishabh's early life was mostly limited to talking to doctors and visiting hospitals for several major surgeries and regular checkups. Now, armed with the resilience and experience his fierce battles with the disease brought him, Rishabh has taught himself to live life to the fullest against all odds. His writings too are mostly centered on the beauty of hope, love, and life. Rishabh is also an avid traveller and a supercar enthusiast. He is based in Lagos, Nigeria but visits India regularly, returning to his birthplace, Chandigarh, which remains immensely close to his heart.

Aavya


MAGAZINE AND BOOK PDF
Join Our Telegram Channel
ForBooks And Magazines
@magazineandbookpdf
टेलेग्राम डाउनलोड करने के बाद सर्च बार में
हमारी चैनल का नाम सर्च करे और जॉइन हो जाइए

Aavya

Rishabh Puri



Kalamos Literary Services LLP

Kalamos Literary Services LLP
Email: info@kalamos.co.in | editorial@kalamos.co.in
Published in 2018
by
Kalamos Literary Services
ISBN- 978-93-87780-17-0



Copyright © Rishabh Puri 2018

Typeset in Kalamos Literary Services LLP

Print and bound in India.

All rights reserved. No Part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission by the publishers.

The views expressed in this book are entirely those of author. The printer/publisher and distributors of this book are not in any way responsible for the views expressed by author in this book. All disputes are subject to arbitration, legal actions if any subject to the jurisdiction of courts of New Delhi, India.

Acknowledgements

Love is the greatest certainty this life has to offer, but life happens where love's details get hazy. The love you want and think you deserve might not be the love that saves you in the end but looking back on a life of blessings I see now that at every turn, love was with me, in many forms, hand in hand.

I'd like first and foremost to thank God for the overwhelming blessings He has graced me with, being made from love and showing nothing but love to His whole creation. I would also like to thank my mother, father, and sister for their love and support throughout my whole life. This foundation of love and unconditional acceptance has been the firmest foundation I've ever known, and it allows me to fly.

The doctors who have, through their love of their art, taken on a case as difficult as mine and made it their own. Dr. Alok, my heart surgeon, my brother. My life has been in your hands so many times, and you have never shied away from the challenge of keeping me going. Dr. Dennis Lox, your seemingly boundless knowledge is matched only by the sense of humor that was able to lift my spirits from their lowest point. Without these doctors, I would not have had the life in my body to put pen to page. To Dr. Eliot Brinton, my gratitude for the years of study and expertise that led me to you is beyond what words can communicate. Your work has changed my life for the better. I am beyond grateful.

I am grateful also for the tireless efforts of Sonia Chauhan, my close friend and lawyer, who stood by me at a low point and lifted my spirits when I lost sight of the point. In defense of the words and of myself, she is a dedicated fighter, and her total devotion, heart and soul, has saved me.

Finally, I am grateful to you, my dearest reader, who loves words and loves stories about love. Whether this is the first of my books you've ever picked up or you are a devoted fan, you bring my dreams to life each day, and I hold you warmly in my heart. I hope you enjoy this book.

PART ONE

MAGAZINE AND BOOK PDF
Join Our Telegram Channel
ForBooks And Magazines
@magazineandbookpdf
टेलेग्राम डाउनलोड करने के बाद सर्च बार में
हमारी चैनल का नाम सर्च करे और जॉइन हो जाइए

The Winter of Grief

13 September 2019
From: rohitsharma@gmail.com
To: rajawesome@awesomeacademy.com

Raj,

C’mon now! You can’t just send depressing, wistful WhatsApp messages to me about the things you wish you could have, then hoof off to some sort of a meditation retreat in search of enlightenment before letting me check on you! Your secretary says you’ve disappeared to some Ashram to spend your time chanting with white tourists in search of your own soul. While it sounds like fun of a mild sort, I believe I could have provided more help and taken less of your hard-earned money for the privilege.

I would have called you overhead I’d known you’d been feeling so isolated and unfulfilled. We do Italian food on Thursday nights-- Kitty cooks, of course. You might enjoy it. And changing diapers might put things in perspective for you. It would definitely ground you to the realities of this Earth. Personally, I could use an enlightened retreat, actually any kind of a retreat. I do have a birthday coming up if you’re in search of things to get me. Five minutes of uninterrupted quiet, you can gift me that.

I hope that whatever it is you have been doing in that isolated bit of forest has brought you back to the wonders of this Earth and you understand that I am not the only person who is abundantly blessed. You may not have the ideal family you so desire yet, and your time with Aavya might have been depressingly short but your life has been blessed by the angels, far better than what most people

could dream of achieving. I hope you will bear that in mind as you sit there thinking hard about not thinking.

You are on the cover of magazines that announce to the world how wonderful your life is. The consensus is that everything in your life is going right and you should be enjoying it immensely. This self-pity is weighing you down. You throw yourself out of alignment with all this wistfulness and waiting, rather than being content, and even satisfied, with the wonderful lot that you have. This consistent sense of sadness that follows you around, this world like a little black rain cloud, may drown you if you are not careful. It would be sad to see such a wonderful life snuffed out like a candle, smothered by the oppressive sense that everything isn't perfect.

And while I am raising three children to be as good as I can make them, the number of children you have shaped into successful young adults simply by virtue of giving them access to all the learning they could possibly desire far outstrips anything that I have done. I don't think much about my legacy, and that may be, as you suggest, because I am blessed with children whose great lives will continue long after I am gone. When I leave this World, I will go with the satisfaction that I was a good man and those children are proof of that. But it could also be that my legacy doesn't matter at all to me.

I know this will shock you, Raj. You whose life is devoted to the future. Maybe this meditation course you are taking will teach you that the present moment is where everything lovely exists. You should think more about it and enjoy the many blessings that it brings. In this moment, you are healthy, you are successful, and you are blessed with good friends and family, the things you do bring good to the world. You drive a nice car, eat good food, and are able to spend some time sitting and looking at your own belly button, trying to marvel out the secrets of the universe.

Could you do that if you were doing manual labour to feed six children, coming home each day with aching bones and a sick body, just struggling to make it to bed as you sleep and work your life away? Because that is the situation in which many of the people who use Awesome Academy have to live with on a daily basis. They are using your project so that those six children won't have to kill themselves on the streets, working and doing what they can to survive. They are striving for the world that you take for granted. They don't worry about legacies. They worry about putting food in their children's belly, clothes on their backs, a roof to protect them from the vagaries of nature. That is enough for them.

This world without Aavya may never be enough for you. You have had a taste of perfect ecstasy in her arms, of having everything you want in a single

human being. Now that the struggle of our twenties is over, you are able to enjoy your success fully. I know you must think that with Aavya good life will be perfect. And indeed, her presence might. But who lives a perfect life? I suggest that you feel satisfaction with what you have. If there is something missing in your life, find a suitable replacement.

I know I may sound as though I am your mother lecturing you and trying to convince you that you ought to bring me grandchildren, (perish the thought but do tell your mother I say hello if you get a chance) but you should consider getting back out there. The dating game has changed a lot since you were eighteen, or so I'm told. I haven't been on any of the websites or anything like that since meeting Kitty, but I will say that I've heard from friends who married later in life that they got great results. I'm sure that your parents could even find some sort of arrangement, should you be lazy enough to want them to do the work for you. Your mother would be thrilled.

But all joking aside, you should find someone. Anyone. It will be lonely to be a seventy-year-old bachelor, microwaving instant rice and binge-Netflixing in a cramped apartment. You need a wife. Every man does, though I'm not convinced that every woman needs a husband as much as we need wives. They seem to function well by themselves, whereas, were it not for Kitty, I would never own a matching set of socks. How do you do it alone? It's been so long since I've been alone, I can't remember.

Go out on a blind date. Sign up for a dating website. Go out to a bar and actually kiss one of the women you spend the whole night talking to as if they are your best friend. You have confused half the female population of India at this point, but I'm sure that in the remaining half there is a true catch. I'm not saying to stop looking for Aavya-- on the contrary, look for her harder. But introducing a new woman into your life since the time you were a teenager might help you see the contrast and decide whether it is Aavya you truly want, or just the love of a woman, any woman.

Meditate on that, my friend.

Rohit



The Autumn of Separation

From: aavya@rediffmail.com
To: shrutisharma@yahoomail.com
1 January 2008

Hi S,

It is snowing here in Paris, everything is white and beautiful, but I still feel homesick. I miss Papa the most. I resented him keeping me away from home, in this far away land, but I do see his point. This course aligns perfectly with my interests and will help my career. Marrying Raj would have put a spanner in the works. Domesticity would have slowed me down; his love would have made me his but only his. I would not have become me but just his. Maybe it's all for the best. You know what I mean?

Acha, gotta rush, there are some new year festivities happening in college and my friend is calling me.

Yes, let's yahoo chat soon! And no, I am NOT opening an Orkut account.

XOXO

A

PS: I still love him soooooo much, it hurt



The Winter of Grief

BestManSpeechDraftSix.docx *19 July 2012*

When Rohit asked me to be his best man, it was mostly because he thought I could give a speech on love better than anyone he knew. I'm not sure about that. I was there to film his proposal to Kitty, and the things he said to her brought me to tears. Yes, Rohit, I know that a lot of things bring me to tears. That's the last joke you get to make during my speech. Sit there and listen. You asked me to speak, and that's what I'm doing. Kitty, kiss him so that he can't talk anymore. Like that, yes! Cheers, everyone, for the happy couple!

Rohit first mentioned Kitty to me, though not by name, when they first met on vacation four years ago. First, there was one email, talking about a beautiful Swedish girl he'd met while on vacation, but then she came up in another one, and in another. Before long, I was hearing a lot more about Kitty than I was about the French countryside that Rohit was meant to be enjoying. Rohit hates to be serious, so he tried to pass it off as though their relationship was casual. I soon learned it was anything but when she joined Rohit and me on an ultimately fruitless quest in the United States.

We trekked throughout much of the beautiful Californian countryside together for two weeks, and as you'd expect, I learned a lot about Kitty in that time. I learned that she was passionate, excitable, and incredibly empathetic and understanding. I was fairly sad at that point, especially when the important journey we undertook didn't yield the results I'd expected, but even then, it was hard to be upset when Kitty was there. She was enthusiastic about everything, from a beautiful field of poppies we came across in Big Sur, to the fat sea lions playing on the beach. A simple sunset made her smile. And when she smiled, so

did Rohit.

She loved the city, she loved the countryside, but most of all, she loved Rohit. She'd followed him to California on a wild goose chase simply because he asked her to. That takes a special kind of girl! I think the most important thing we discovered on that journey was that even Rohit could fall in love. I watched him watch Kitty and saw all those walls he'd built for himself come tumbling down every time she smiled. It was a beautiful sight, far lovelier than the California countryside.

To have a love that spans countries and years is a lucky thing. I can't tell you how happy I am for you two. And how grateful I am to have played however small a part in that love story. If I have any advice for you two, it's to hold on to each other. This kind of love only comes once, this true, pure love that spans a lifetime. To this true love - distance and time are easily surmountable. Passion is the only thing that matters, and dedication is so natural there is no other choice but to love, and to love well. So, I encourage you all to keep loving and to enjoy that love every day. It is a blessing to have the one you love in your bed every night and to smile at each other over the breakfast table every morning. Even your arguments are blessed because you are together to have them. So, cherish these times, the easy as well as the hard ones.

I can only pray that your life together will be as happy as it is on this day. I'm ready to be a godfather, Rohit, so I speak for myself as well as your parents when I say that I hope it will be a fruitful one as well, and I think I speak for your future children when I say that I hope that all your children look much more like Kitty than like your ugly mug. Remember when I said you couldn't make a rebuttal until I finished talking? I mean that. Kitty! Kiss him again!

But seriously. I couldn't be happier than to stand here celebrating the love of not just one, but two of my best friends. To Kitty and Rohit, everyone! May they live, move, and breathe in this wonderful love forever! Cheers!

…

21 July 2012 12:48 AM
From: rajawesome@yahoo.com
To: aavyasharma@gmail.com
Subject: I know this won't work

Aavya,

I just left a wedding that should have been ours. It was so beautiful. There was feasting and dancing and enough drinking that I'm writing this email to you,

praying it will work even though I know that it will not. Part of me holds on to hope. Though I have travelled around the world to find you and spent countless hours chasing a ghost, I can't help but pray it will be this easy for once. That I'll write an email, you'll answer, and I'll hop onto the next plane to wherever you are. It's an idle fantasy, but on days as good as this one, it's the only thing I can think about.

You would have loved it, the sensuous celebration of love, the music and lights, the taste of the food and the feeling of joy that permeates a body that has danced all night. Mostly I danced alone. I danced a couple of dances with Rohit's cousin Shruti, whom you once knew. But she hasn't heard from you in years. After she told me that, I could think of no reason to keep dancing.

I want to celebrate the love that our friends have, Aavya, but without you, all joy I try to express falls flat. It seems false to the ears of everyone who listens. My mother wants to talk to me about marriage, but I can't answer her honestly. I can't tell her that I feel in my soul as though I am still married to you. We never saw a wedding day, not at the courthouse or in a church hall or anywhere else. Yet still, my soul knows it belongs to you, even if the rest of the world disagrees.

So now I walk back to my hotel room, drunk and alone, and think about the way we left things. That night with you was the last night of real happiness I felt in my life. If only I'd known what not being attentive while driving could do to my future, I would never have looked up at the stars again. Maybe then I could be looking into your eyes, instead of up at the night sky reflected in a puddle of rain.

I will find you, Aavya, if only to assure you that you did nothing wrong, and to forgive you for all we have been through since we fell apart. I read that last letter you wrote to me often. I carry it close to my chest and read it when life seems too hard to bear. You worried that you hurt me, but I would accept all the hurt of those early days together for just another sweet moment by your side.

I rarely write to you anymore. Except for my meetings with Rohit, I never mention your name. I keep you secret, until one day I can shout your name for the world to hear. The day when I find you, I'll run through the streets with your hand in mine, singing your name. That's how great my joy will be. And our wedding will so outshine the one I went to tonight that everyone will forget we were ever apart. "Look at those two," they'll whisper, as you lean your head against my chest and we sway on the dance floor, "did you ever see a pair more destined for each other?"

I'll send this off, and I know it will not reach its intended destination. I have tried this email before. Just know that I hope you hear me, even if you hear me in your mind and not with your ears, and know that after all this time, your Raj is

still as much yours as he was on the day that we first met.

Until we meet again,
R

...

21 July 2012 12:48 AM
From: mailer_daemon@gmail.com
To: me
Subject: MESSAGE FAILURE

ERROR. Message addressed to aavyasharma@gmail.com failed to send permanently. Check the address again and make sure there are no misspellings or other errors.

Message Below (clipped):

Aavya,
I just left a wedding that should have been ours. It was so beautiful there... [click to expand]



The Spring of Love

30 June 2005

Dear Future,

I promised myself I would not write to you again until there was something in my life worth writing about. I know it seems silly to write letters to your future self rather than working to become that man, and to even address them "Dear Future" as though they will be mailed rather than sit here in my notebook as just another diary entry is a ridiculous thing to do. Still, here I am. Today, I break my month of radio silence because I have found love.

Let me write it again: *I have found love!* Because each time I think these words, delight fills my soul. My love makes my heart sing and brings my body to life in the morning. I wake up thinking of her and fall asleep dreaming of her each night. Her heart is the missing piece of my own, and when we fit together, the stars shine brighter, overjoyed by our joy. Her name tastes like honey in my mouth. I'll say it now as I write it down on this paper: Aavya.

It is not my first encounter with this heavenly creature, for in truth I've known her almost all my life. But never before have I seen her in such a way. She's always been a playmate to me, sometimes an irritant even an enemy, when the game we played put us on opposing sides. Since our fathers first met at a business conference and became best friends, before I could walk and before she was born, our lives had aligned. We've run parallel, close, but never entwined until last night. She was always someone in the background of my life, with her wide eyes and tangled hair, her fiery temper, and a wicked smile. But lately, something has changed about her, and about me as well. I couldn't put my finger on it until last night. Until last night, I've only known Aavya, the girl. Last night,

I met Aavya, the woman.

Last night my father met with hers, *Vinod Sharma – Co-President and CEO at M.R. Enterprises* – at their house in the posh Sector 4 of Chandigarh in order to hash out the details of a business deal that didn't interest me. I dragged my feet when he invited, no, ordered me to come along with him. Can you believe it, listening to me now, that I was reluctant to go when he asked me? If I had known then what I know now, I would have flown out the window and straight to Aavya's door. But I sulked the whole car-ride there, thinking only of myself, the books I would rather have been reading, the TV shows I would rather have been watching.

Until last night, I thought of Aavya only as my comrade in suffering, when I thought of her at all. She hated to see me darken her doorstep because she knew what it meant: a long night of entertaining my mother with stories of her studies and the boyfriends she didn't have, while I assured her mother that I was too focused on my own studies to even dream of having a girlfriend. Forced conversation and false pleasantries. While our mothers had become fast friends out of necessity if nothing else, we had never learned to get along the way adults got along. When I was smaller, I pulled her hair and pinched her while she kicked and spat and fought. In middle school, I'd teased her about anything I could think of, and she'd tell me what a loser I was. In high school, I ignored her, and she hated that worst of all.

It meant awkwardness and boredom at best. At worst, we'd fight. Not seriously, not with any real anger, not the way we fought when we were children. But when you put her strong mind up against my stubborn will, we were like fire and ice. We could argue all night over nothing and anything. Things I hadn't cared about before we argued became things about which I was most passionate. The economy, the lyricism of popular musicians, the needs of the environment all became my sole focus in life when Aavya was on the opposing side of the argument.

So, we'd argue to pass the time, or we'd find ourselves suddenly as pawns in the game our fathers have taken to playing with each other of late. It always starts something like this: they would invite us to sit with them as they drank and talked about strategies and concepts, most of which went over our heads. Then they'd do something dangerous: they'd ask my opinion, or Aavya's, on the issue at hand. The tobacco crop in Malawi, or the new tariffs imposed by the United States. Something pertinent but complex—the kind of things that mattered to the business, even though they seemingly had nothing to do with the company's day-in and day-out work.

Most of the time I'd be able to deflect with some statement about current

affairs at large, a reference to a piece of classical literature or a time in history that seemed to go hand in hand with the issue. Impressive bits of nothing that sounded smarter than they were. My father would say, “See, my son is clever.” Aavya would do mental calculations about the situation at hand or rattle off a fact she’d heard earlier in the conversation, and her father would say, “Yes, but my daughter is sincere.”

Last night over dinner, the game began before Aavya or I noticed. Aavya was busy eating, tucking a strand of her dark hair behind her ears as she complimented her mother’s hard work in the kitchen. My appetite was ruined, though I did not know why. I picked at my food. I kept losing myself in daydreams, thinking of everything and nothing, and the luster of Aavya’s hair. She’d trimmed it recently, and it curled a little at the edges. I wonder why I noticed her curls now. I never had before.

“Raj,” my father snapped, causing me to look up, “it’s hard to see a clear path to your future when your head is stuck in clouds.”

It was a quiet admonishment, but full of acid. It stung me to hear it from him. I wasn’t a boy anymore, but still, my father was my defender above all. To be scolded by him for my absentmindedness in front of others was particularly painful. I blinked, trying to think of something clever to say that would ease the tension, but my mouth was dry and my mind was blank. Aavya was the first one to speak.

“The origins of the oil crisis are complex in nature,” she demurred, tucking a curl behind her ear as she spoke. “As our whole world has interest in what is a very limited natural resource. You can’t blame Raj for pondering a good answer to a question that most experts on the subject cannot agree upon.”

Her father shot mine a look as if to say, “See?” My father shrugged lightly in response, but I could feel disappointment rolling off him in waves. Aavya’s eyes met mine, strangely absent of judgement. Her gaze was appraising. It made me feel hot and sick with shame. I would have liked it better if she mocked me. Instead, she seemed to understand me.

“You need to take this more seriously,” she’d told me once last year, presumably after my father had lost a round to her father on account of my absent-minded ways. “This isn’t my future they’re plotting when they play this game. It’s yours. You’re the only person out of the two of us who they’ve ever truly considered making heir to the company. These tests are just to see how good you are. Not to see what I can do.”

I couldn’t confess to her that I didn’t want the piece of my father’s company he’d set apart for me since the day I was born. I couldn’t say that I wanted to make my own way in the world. In truth, I didn’t know it myself. I only knew

that I dreamed of a world where I could be free to do all the good I wanted, without the weight of others' expectations upon me. But she seemed to sense this before I could put it into words. She was caring for me, in her own way, by asking me to be serious, by covering for me when my thoughts were troubled. I wondered how it was that she always seemed to understand exactly what I need. She gave it to me generously. I didn't have to ask.

After dinner, I stepped out into the garden, just to get away from the sound of her father's laughter and the heavy feeling of my father's irritation with me. The first breath of night air on my lungs felt like I'd just been saved from drowning. I took in another breath, grateful for oxygen in my lungs and a moment of peace. I stood there in the garden, listening to the breeze moving the bushes, trying to collect myself for another round of interrogation. But before I could go back inside, Aavya came out to meet me.

They say that hindsight is 20/20, and indeed, I can see now what I could not see in the moment she stood in the doorway. If I'd been more observant, I might have put together the pieces of the puzzle that was Aavya in love; her curious smile when she let me in the door, the way her body angled towards mine when I spoke, the burn of her gaze on me when there was no reason for her to be looking. I might have drawn my conclusion from the thousand little moments when we talked of nothing while her eyes watched the movement of my lips.

The invitation to be alone with her, when she went to fetch a book from the library might have propelled us together earlier, had I been wise enough to take that chance instead of letting her go while I talked to my father about something that bored both of us. Aavya wanted me before I wanted her. I marvel at this fact. I have never considered myself a person who'd be wanted. A good person, a strong person, sure. But never the object of a woman's desire. The possibility of it did not figure into my world before Aavya brought my world crashing down upon me. Maybe the day I met a woman in Aavya, she met a man in me.

Can words do justice to the wonder that happened then? Can I even begin to describe the feeling of staring up at a clear night of stars, knowing clearly, that they had a plan in the works for my destiny? How can I describe the glimmer of moonlight in her hair, the smell of jasmine thick in the air, the warm summer heat that I could feel on her skin, as she leaned in for the first time and kissed me?

The way she kissed me...it was as delicate as the petal of those perfumed blossoms, hanging heavy in the garden. She stood in the doorway, silhouetted in the light from the living room, where our parents sipped coffee and talked. I couldn't see the expression on her face, but I knew better than to break the magic of that sacred moment by speaking. I didn't know what was going to happen.

No, that’s not correct. I knew exactly what was going to happen. But I couldn’t believe my luck. She came closer without saying a word. Then she pressed her lips to mine, innocent and fleeting. She drew back quickly, touching her lips in surprise, as though I were the one who had kissed her without any warning at all, instead of the other way around.

In the shock of the moment, I could smell her shampoo and the night on her skin. I could see the wonder in her eyes, even in the darkness. A picture-perfect moment, out there in the darkness. It was all I needed to pull her closer to me. I could feel her heart racing, the flutter of her pulse like the wings of a moth beating against my bare hand when I placed it at her neck. It was a precious, delicate thing, that feeling. It was a gift she gave to me.

We kissed for another long moment, holding each other all the while, knowing without words that this was the start of something long and lovely. We didn’t worry about our fathers, or what they might think. We were separated from their anger only by the glass door that led to the garden, but it felt as though we were a world apart from them. It was only God’s own will that kept others from peeking out the window to find us but, somehow, they did not. I know we should have been more careful, but at the time the only thing I wanted to know was the sensation of her lips against mine.

For all that I claim to be sensitive, a poet at heart, I don’t understand my own thoughts sometimes. I needed Aavya to calm me, so that I could put them together. With her lips on mine, that was what I felt--a moment of pure calm. From the midst of the hurricane and into a clear blue sky. She took me there with a single kiss. Five of them would have cleared my mind entirely of anything but the thought of her name.

Then she stepped away, a smile still on her face, and went back inside. The world rushed back to life around me. Too loud and too fast. My hands reached for her, but she was gone. I took another deep breath and followed her.

I couldn’t sleep last night. I paced the floor, thinking up a million things to say to her. I started to write her a letter but feared that her parents might find it and end our love before it even began. So, I tore it into a million pieces and stepped into the hot shower, standing under the spray until it went cold. I tried to shape the jumble of thoughts in my head into something that made sense. Something that wouldn’t frighten her off. Something that would make her want to stay by my side in spite of the difficulties. I couldn’t think of anything. So now, with the sun rising overhead, I sit here at my desk and pen this letter to no one. To myself. To Aavya, if ever I let her read it.

…

1 July 2005

I can think of nothing else to say to her yet. Hopefully, a good mood will overtake my father and we'll be back at her house soon, so I can see her lovely face and hear the dulcet tones of her voice again. I'll smile at her mother and entertain her father, just so long as I can find myself alone with her for another moment so that I can say to her what I need to say. I just hope by that time, I've come up with something worth hearing to say to her.

…

2 July 2005

If I could say something to her, it would be this: I've felt the whispering of the universe in my ears. I've felt your heartbeat against my chest. We are cut from the same cloth, you and I. We are one and the same. This love is the beginning of something that will shape me for the rest of my life. I may not know much, but this much I know is true: my life will never be the same, now that you have kissed me.



The Winter of Grief

21 June 2009, 6:21 PM
From: rohitthemastermind@gmail.com
To: rajawesome@yahoo.com
Subject: Meet for Coffee When I'm Back? Article Attached.

RAJ MY MAN!!!

I write to you from the sunny shores of St. Tropez, where the wine flows like water, the water is shimmering and turquoise, the sand is a pure, sparkling white, and the women of every hue and shade are at least partly Brazilian. (The parts that matter, if you know what I mean ;)) Everything is going well for me and I have all my heart desires, except, of course, the pleasure of your company.

It is not just that you make such a fine wingman (as only you are the man who has sworn off women in favour of fortune and fame.) It's that I miss your unique point of view. I am sitting here in the lap of luxury, in heaven on earth, and the only thing I can think of is that I am satisfied. But you, my friend, would look at this veritable slice of paradise and think to yourself, "What can I do that would make this good thing better?" I envy that ability.

This is a roundabout way of saying congratulations, my friend! While a BMD Young Achievement award pales in comparison to a day on the French coast, surrounded by long-legged models who play volleyball in skimpy bathing suits, the financial benefits aren't too bad, and that magazine spread I read about you was interesting enough to take my eyes off a scintillating round of beach volleyball, if only for a moment.

I did want to mention that it seems you are not the only one of your dynamic soul-duo making waves in the papers. I've read an article recently that a

Genovese friend passed my way. He is a very, very good friend whose name escapes me right now. I know that you're thinking, "Rohit, you dog!" - know that your admonishment is noted and disregarded, as always.

I would never have given it a second glance, but she seems obsessed with my exotic Indian ways and wanted to know if I knew a fashion designer whose work is making the rounds in the eco-fashion circles. I hated to tell her that I hadn't realized there was enough going on in eco-fashion to form a straight line, much less a whole circle. But then she showed me an article in the SF Gate about a very mysterious girl, whose work is released under the brand Morning Light.

The story was compelling enough that I took a break from my very busy schedule to access the business center of my hotel where I have scanned the copy she gave me. (Ignore the lipstick kiss on the page, I assure you, I used the business center for nothing but business!) Read it and see what you think! Should we be making a trip to San Francisco soon? What does the future say about this, do you think? Are you allowed to take some time off from your rigorous work schedule to go and find your true love? And if so, can we plan that trip over coffee the next time that I am home? I've heard that the women on the West Coast there are wild and believe wholly in the concept of "free love." Which sounds wonderful to me, because these St. Tropez women are bleeding my pocketbook dry! Maybe the next time we are relaxing on a beach together, you'll have a woman on your lap instead of a book. And by "a woman" I am referring, of course, to the lovely Aavya.

Tell your parents you're looking for a place to start your MBA. Tell them anything, I don't care. Just take a vacation! You can afford to, especially if it means finding your true love in the process!

Here's hoping, buddy!

Rohit

…

Morning Light Illuminates a New, Eco-Friendly Path for Fashion

There are metric tons of plastic garbage floating not far from our shore. The fashion moguls at Morning Light want to get it out of there where it poses a great threat to our sea life and planet, and put it onto our bodies.

"Some people look at the mess we've made of our planet and only see a problem," says Morning Light Founder, a recent college graduate and Indian immigrant who operates under the DBA Anna Sharp. "But what I see is great fabric, material that has yet to be harvested and created."

Sharp's designs are just that: clean cut shapes and fabric made from recycled plastic straight from California's oceans. Sharp's designs may be simple, but her fabric doesn't shy away from the bright colours and ornate patterns custom in her native India.

"When I was a little girl," says Sharp, "it was one of my greatest joys to go to the markets of my hometown in Chandigarh and run my hands along the silk and satin there, to breathe in the rich smell of handmade dyes and study the elaborate embroidery on display. All the shopkeepers were artists and took great pride what they made and sold. I got my earliest inspiration from handmade *salwaar-kameezes* and *saris*." Her eyes glitter as she speaks passionately about her past. So why the move to America?

"I moved to America to start afresh and do something I couldn't do back home. Women's fashion has been my passion for as long as I can remember. It went so far beyond playing dress up in my room. I'd demand fashion magazines from my father when he went on business trips to other countries. I loved the easy-going French, the clean-cut Brits, and the glamorous Americans. Still, I thought their fabric could be so boring and dull compared to ours. So, when I came to America, creating my own fabric was a must."

Sharp found a new love for environmental issues when she began secondary school and met friends who were passionate about the world outside their walls. "In some ways, I had a very privileged upbringing, despite living so close to poverty. My parents were very protective and sheltered me, but in some ways, that made me stagnant. It was when I went outside myself and made friends who were always scheming to make the world a better place, I knew what I had to do to get myself out of that rut."

It was that inspiration that led Sharp, when she crossed the sea and started college at the University of Berkeley, to pursue a degree in fashion and merchandising with a minor in environmental issues. The two were a natural mesh for her and resulted in her senior thesis, which would soon blossom into the company, Morning Light.

"In some ways, Morning Light came from a place of anger. I was very angry when I first came to the states, and I took those feelings and used them in a positive way. How is it, I thought, that we can live on this planet, and yet trash it just to make an extra dollar? When you do that, you're stealing the joy of fresh water, of clean air, from another human being. That is a God-given right. You have no right to take it away from someone else. So, I decided to do something about it."

Morning Light purchases the recycled material from the plastic island floating in the Pacific Ocean and turns it into a synthetic fabric that is

lightweight and easy to breathe. The patterns from their initial launch are bright and romantic, with designs that put this reviewer in mind of a summer rendezvous, a romp in a secret garden.

“It’s funny you should say that!” Anna laughs when I tell her that. “I had just such a rendezvous in mind when I did the initial sketches for this line.” This reviewer tried to get her to elaborate further, but she was remarkably tight-lipped on the matter, though she never stopped smiling. That’s the amazing thing about Anna--though she tries to hide behind the name of her company, she shines as brightly as her work does. Perhaps one day, the fashion world will think of Anna Sharp the same way they do of Anna Wintour.

So, what does Morning Light have in store for their fall collection? Anna pauses for a moment, considering her words. “Blue,” she decides finally, “a little colder, like the very ocean from which we harvest our materials. The seasons here are really inspiring me. I think that the coldest days are the first ones you feel when you realize that a summer is gone forever, and you’ll never get it back again. My sketches so far have reflected a lot of that feeling.”

We look forward to seeing whatever Morning Light produces next, and hope that the world will take note. Mother Earth could use more eco-conscious fashion that is as beautiful and creative as the planet on which we live.

You can find Morning’s Light’s Summer 2009 collection at www.morninglight.com and in several small boutiques (listed on the website) around the Bay Area.



The Spring of Love

4 July 2005

Dear Future,

Even as I praise fate for the wonders it has done for me, I curse it. The circumstances under which my love for Aavya has bloomed are poor ones. I wonder whether our love will ever bear fruit. This is no place to start a relationship, hiding from the watchful gaze of our parents. But there we were, in the hallway of her home, unable to say anything to each other that might shed light on this new situation for fear of our parents overhearing.

As I pressed a kiss to her mouth, I could feel her trembling under my hands, aware that what we'd just done was something our parents would never support. Our families belonged to different social strata. I know her father would want to marry her off to someone rich like them. This love could ruin our parents' business, their close friendship, and their trust in us forever. I couldn't believe what we were doing. The betrayal of it. The threat inherent in every kiss. But I confess: I kissed her again.

Her father thinks I'm a layabout, a dreamer who does nothing of worth and can't commit to a career, much less a wife. He teases me like he has since I was a boy, but his jabs grow more pointed every day. I think he can tell, by the way Aavya and I look at each other, that there's something going on between us that he knows he won't like. Even my father, who considers the man to be his dearest friend, sometimes winces at the sting of his cruel jokes about me.

But all my eyes want to do is take her in, to study every follicle of her hair and the precise angle of her curved smile. I want to memorize the way her fingers brush across my skin, the length of them and the strange colours she

paints them, chartreuse and grape purple and electric blue to match the silk scarves she wears around her slender neck. I find myself glancing at her without even thinking about it, drawn to her magnetic presence. I can't keep my eyes off her, and when I'm not looking at her, I'm thinking about her. The things I was able to ignore about her, when we were younger, all stand out to me in perfect clarity ever since she kissed me.

She's beautiful in movement, graceful and fluid in the way she walks. Her voice is soft as a flower petal but never wavers when she speaks passionately about any of her many interests. I used to think that she was bossy when we were children, but I've realized recently that she's not bossy, she's passionate. She has a vision for everything and wants the world around her to meet her high standards. She's always dressed to the letter, hair styled precisely the way she likes it. I used to think that her dreams of becoming a fashion designer were silly, girlish pursuits until I realized her attention to detail and drive might really help her to get wherever she dreams of going.

That's another thing-- she has so many dreams, and I want to be a part of them. She bites them back, holds them in her head and keeps them private, but sometimes they come spilling out when she least means to share them. I know she dreams of tenures in Europe, semesters abroad in America and years spent travelling the world before settling down to have a family. Her mother frowns, but I can't help but imagine her hand in mind as we travel together. Seeing snow for the first time, delight spreading across her face as its cold flakes land on her sun-warmed skin. We're both so young. If we start now, we'll have so many years together on this Earth. We might as well use a few exploring it.

The thing that draws me to her above all though is that smile. Before she kissed me, I'd never understood how the smile of a woman could lead men to their doom. But I feel as though I could follow the light from her broad grin across the universe. I'd do anything to make her smile again. It's why I can't let go of this thought. Whenever I kiss her, I can feel the smile spreading across her lips, and I think I...

I feel as though I could do anything. It's a dangerous feeling to have. I want to steal her away and beg her to marry me tomorrow. I want to stand up to her father and tell him that I'm a man, not just some boy with no sense and no prospects. I want to let them know that I'm willing to become anything for her, to submit myself to their criticism so long as I am redeemed, in their eyes, as a man worthy of their daughter's love.

Is this what love does? Before you even speak its name, does it have such a hold over you that you'd do anything it asks? She hasn't even asked me for anything more than a couple of stolen kisses away from her parents' gaze, and

yet I think I'd lie at her feet if she so much as suggested it to me. I'd drain the ocean with a teaspoon if she told me the sight of the sand would make her smile. If she wanted me to pluck a star from the sky, I'd sprout wings and fly. For one more kiss from her lips, I'd go to war.

I don't know if she feels the same way about me. It's hard to say when we haven't spoken a word to each other since we kissed. I haven't heard her say she loves me, or that she likes me, or that I mean anything to her at all.

I know I may be overthinking things, but when I remember the look in her eyes as she pulled away the first time she kissed me, I can't help but think I haven't overthought anything at all. Sometimes, magic happens. I believe that with all my heart. I believe that the universe guides us all to the places we need to be. The stars have aligned themselves to put into motion the plan they've had for us since the beginning of our lives. When I kissed her under their brilliant light, I felt it truly soaking into my bones. The peace I feel when we hold each other isn't an accident--it's by design. Everything is going to fall exactly into place. And I think that my place is at Aavya's side. I just need to figure out a way to stay there and to convince her family that I am worthy of taking that place.

When I try to speak to my father, my mouth feels dry, and I can't get the words to come out. My mother, keen-eyed observer that she is, knows that something is amiss with me, but won't ask until I come forth and tell her. I'm not a person who keeps things from my parents, but even as the weight of my love for Aavya threatens to crush me, I cannot seem to confess it to them. Why is it so hard to say something honestly, that I have no trouble writing? I love a woman. A wonderful woman. I'm in love with Aavya.

And yet I can't seem to say it. Only to these pages can I confess the way I feel about her. I can find the words on paper, but they're absent from my mouth when I try to speak them. I'm not willing to risk these first, early stages, the kisses stolen just out of sight of our parents and the wordless love we share, until I know I'm not the only one who feels these things. I want to know what's true. I so desperately want it to be real. So, I waste time waiting, twiddling my thumbs and dreaming my life away until I see her next. I hope when we're face to face next, the words will come easily to me, and I will hear her respond in kind.



The Winter of Grief

From: rajawesome@awesomeacademy.com
To: rohitSharma@gmail.com
22 September 2019

Rohit,

I will tell you, I've had to stop reading this email and hover over the delete button many a times, trying to temper my rage. Though I will correct you on one point before I even begin this mail-- I spent no time at an ashram. That's what happens when I annoy my secretary too much. She starts lying to my friends to make me look bad. I was in New Delhi to speak at a conference on furthering education in early childhood--part of the new initiative on infant and toddler health that Awesome Academy is pursuing.

I've had a lot of thoughts since reading your mail. These thoughts have amounted to one overused phrase: how dare you?

Truly, I wonder how you dared to write that in response. Perhaps my longing and fruitless quests for the one whom my soul loves have annoyed you. Perhaps the lack of sleep you've gotten since your children were born has destroyed your mind to mouth filter, and you've just spewed the first thought that's come out of your mouth, no matter how cruel it might be. I'll say, my friend, that I expected this sort of reaction from my parents who have never understood my love for Aavya, and whose fault it is in part that we are separated. But you know me. You know Aavya. I took comfort for many years in knowing that when I doubted myself, you believed Aavya and I were supposed to be together. We went to America together in hopes of finding her!

I can’t imagine what has so swayed your opinion, but I have no trouble letting you know that your doubt stings. Indeed, doubt from another hurts more than nearly any other emotion. I have felt it from my parents, from Aavya’s parents, and it has worn at me for years. I wish not to feel it from my friend, who I trust as closely as I trust anyone, ever again. It is for the sake of this friendship only that I did not shoot out an angry, hasty WhatsApp message in response.

It is one of the reasons I refuse to abandon this quest I am on to find my true love once more. To doubt her love is to cause pain to us both. I suffer enough without her. Subjecting myself to doubt and losing the faith that keeps me going on these slow, discouraging days when nothing else can is not something I can do. Without my belief that Aavya will one day be mine, who am I? Do you even know me without my love for her?

Sometimes it is a curse, yes, but other times, it is a virtue. Though I love alone, no one can say that I do not love deeply, or that my love is in vain. My love has propelled me to great heights, and as a result, the lives of many have been changed. I meant to write you a mail from New Delhi before receiving your bit of correspondence that hurt me so badly, describing the wonderful people I met there and the lives I was delighted to learn I had changed for the better. There are bakeries and office managers alike who have ascended because of the skills they learned from my academy. There are many children who have been sent to the Awesome Academy because their parents believe in it and want their children to learn on it. I cannot say how many children have learned to read in part because of my interactive media for young audiences. But I have now met more of them.

Would they be so blessed had I not loved and lost Aavya, had I not dedicated myself to finding her and becoming the sort of man she would have me be? I think not. Without Aavya I was a dreamy boy who would no doubt have toughened himself up to follow in his father’s footsteps. I would be shipping packages internationally, and no doubt doing it better than it had been done, changing the world in another way. But I wouldn’t have gotten to see the light in a young child’s eyes as I read a book to her kindergarten classroom, knowing that she recognized my voice from the guest programing I did on one of our initial early childhood literacy and language courses. That moment in and of itself was worth the suffering I’ve endured.

No woman can bring me the peace that the thought of Aavya brings me. Even if that woman were lying in my bed, promising the world, promising to be everything I ever wanted if only I would have her, she would not be enough. She could not mould herself into Aavya any more than she could mould herself into a bird that could fly to where my love is and sing her a song that might convince

her to come home to me. So, there would be no satisfaction there. I wonder, if Kitty had been taken from you as young as I lost Aavya, do you think you could move on? Would you abandon those beautiful children you'd see only in your dreams to find some girl who might "serve as an adequate replacement?"

You don't have to answer me. I know you wouldn't. You love her more than you've ever loved anyone. You love her in a way you could love no one else. The Rohit and Kitty pairing is a classic love story, a rare one that few people will ever understand in their lifetime. You, like me, have been blessed with your soulmate's presence in your life. Unlike you, however, mine has left me. But it does not matter whether or not she's a mile away or a thousand miles away if she is whispering in my ears or only speaking to me in dreams. She is mine, and I am hers. I will not make the foolish decision to marry just for the sake of marrying because I think she may never be mine again. I will keep the faith. And if I die alone, I will die alone knowing that I have lived a good life and loved well, even when I've loved alone.

I will tell you, on a lighter note, that I have glimpsed a vision of my future while in New Delhi. It was an incredible moment which only strengthened my resolve, both to my company and to my love. While reading to a group of kindergarteners, a little girl paused me in the middle of my story. She sat quietly, her dark eyes serious, but a mischievous smile on her face as she mouthed along to some of the words in the story, one that was clearly one of her favourites. About halfway into the story, she raised her hand to ask a question. I called upon her, and she grinned. Her smile was so like Aavya's that I barely caught her question. Upon asking her to repeat it, I realized it wasn't a question at all.

She thanked me, in the middle of the story, for reading to them. She said that her mommy and daddy said that reading was fundamental and that the programs we brought into her class made it easier for her to learn to read. She said she was excited to grow up and do kind things for others. Even as her classmates giggled around her, she continued to grin. It was the kind of smile that was untouched by pain or sorrow. It had been so long since I'd seen such happy innocence in my work-- usually, the people I meet are scarred by circumstance. But this girl shone, as though her future was nothing but happiness and light. Perhaps it was. I'm not a fortune teller. I'm just a man.

I blinked back tears. Her hair was straight as mine. Her eyes, coffee black, like Aavya's. In that moment, I had a vision of a daughter I'd never had in that little girl. I wanted to say something that I would say to my daughter. So, I told her that the kindness she showed in being thankful to me, and the kindness she showed her classmates, was building a foundation of love that would follow her for the rest of her life and support her in times of difficulty and trial. I don't

know if it was the right thing to say. I don’t know if it’s something that she understood. But it was all I had to offer her at that moment, for the child who reminded me of the child that can only be if I find Aavya once more.

You are my closest friend, Rohit, but know this. I carry the vision of the daughter I may never have with me daily. That child can only come about if Aavya and I meet again. This is so much more than an old flame I want to rekindle. This is a future I want to create. Nothing will stand in my way.

Raj



The Spring of Love

7 September 2005

Dear Future,

The contents of this letter are sweet to me as honey on my tongue. This taste of my life I capture on the page is just an inkling of the pure sugar high that I feel running through my vein on these hot summer days whenever I see my love. How could we have known this plan would be so successful when we concocted it through smuggled letters and far too many close calls? But our parents suspect nothing, and we get away with everything we please. These hot summer days where few dare to venture out are ours entirely. I spend them with my love. What could be better?

I hold her hand so often now that I've memorized the feeling of it in mine, the warmth of her thumb as she strokes it down the side of my palm, the comfortable way she settles her hand in mine as though it belongs there. She is perfectly at rest when she settles her head on my shoulder, her smile a faint echo of the real thing when she nuzzles deeper into my shoulder.

It's funny that though I've known the girl my whole life, there is so much to learn and know about her. She was like a stranger to me before she kissed me. Now, in just a couple of months, she has become my best friend. I've never felt so understood and adored by a person in my life. She is patient with me. When I have fears, she helps me to fight them, staying strong and coaching me through every insecurity I face. She smiles when she talks of our future, lying on my chest by the lake as she dreams up our children's names and the places we will visit.

The lake has become our spot, a secret inlet where we rest in the shade, away from the sun and from the fears we have that we might be caught by family or

friends who don’t understand. I think I wear a bathing suit under my clothes sometimes as often as twice a week. My mother thinks I spend my days trying to cool off at the public pool, goofing around with school friends instead of in Aavya’s arms. I wonder if she’d be keener on where I was going if it weren’t so hot outside, but I thank fate for this weather and the mixed bag of blessings that it brings.

The seed of our next liaison is planted, either by word of mouth if we are fortunate or hidden in the pages of our library book if we are too busy to speak in person. Sometimes we plant love letters, long and meandering with no real purpose other than to tell the other person that our hands have brushed by the same spot, that we care, and that we are near. Sometimes I think I love this the most; the slope of her handwriting, the smudges and scribbles, and pauses that show that she is thinking, or too excited to contain herself. But then I hold her in my arms again and realize that not even her handwriting and the shape of her thoughts on a page can compare to the real thing: Aavya, her sweet voice and smile to die for.

We meet at the library, and she climbs onto the back of my scooter. She’s started wearing leggings with every dress, and I joke that she’ll be the designer of the first line of girl’s clothes meant exclusively for wear on the back of a scooter. She pinches my ear or sticks her tongue out at me like we’re still children, and then, with an impish smile, tries to topple me onto the grass. I could beat her easily, she’s so petite and light, but sometimes I let her win just for the prize of watching her smiling down at me, triumphant in her victory.

We don’t always drive out to the lake, though it is our favourite place to go together. Once, I took her to a history museum the next town over. We pretended that we were different people, locals who were touring the sights of their own town, friends who had nowhere to be and no threats to watch out for--just two young lovers with the world in front of them and no cares to worry them. We barely stopped to look at any of the exhibits. We had no interest in the history or the architecture before us, though I’m sure on any other day it might have been fascinating. She looked at me and I looked at her. The other’s face was the only thing we truly cared to see. Shy smiles and quick glances became hungry gazes, and before too long she had her arms around me and was kissing me in front of the town’s exhibit on their industrial history. It was so bold I blushed. But I kissed her back.

For all her boldness and the comfort she provides me, there are many times where she is shy and uncertain. Sometimes she looks lost in thought, and other times she just looks lost entirely. In those times, I have to learn to step up and be a man, to guide her towards certainty and to give her all the love in my heart

until at last she feels alright again. She is such a relentless force of sunshine and light in my life that when she feels dark and hurt, we both feel the cold. It's my job to keep her warm, to keep her smiling that gorgeous smile and looking towards the optimistic instead of at the major downsides we face.

We share a lot of the same worries, even though some of hers are related to the career path she wants to pursue and the ins and outs of the drama in her circle of girlfriends. She agrees that the problems of others sometimes seem so small in comparison to the looming issue we face of our parents' disapproval. It grows bigger with each day, each kiss we share, each lie we tell. I sometimes worry that the stress and pain of it will overtake us before our parents' disappointment ever has a chance to come to fruition. It's half of what I think about. The other half, of course, is overtaken by thoughts of her curling hair and the bright light in her dark eyes.

I worry about the end that this bright love will have. I think of Romeo and Juliet, kept apart by their parents' feud and through no fault of their own. I don't kid myself into thinking that our situation is as dire as theirs. I don't think it will end in bloodshed or bodily suffering. But I do worry that as we kiss, we consume. There is only so much we can give, and there is a lot more that can be taken away from us.

This worry is one she also holds. She called my cell phone a few nights ago, something we quickly agreed that we would never do when we first kissed, for fear of our parents looking at the cell phone bill and realizing just how often we communicate. I answered as quickly as I saw her name flash on the screen. It was late at night, one of those evenings that's all thick heat, too heavy to sleep. I'd been wide awake, thinking of her, and worried that I'd slipped into a dream when I heard her voice on the other end.

"Raj?" It was barely more than a whisper, hard to pick up over the static on the line.

"Are you okay?" I asked immediately, sitting up straight in bed. If she called me, I knew it couldn't be for any good reason. My mind flashed through a million fears. Had her father found one of my letters that she kept tucked away in an old textbook before she'd been able to burn it? Had someone died, or been seriously injured? I didn't know what I'd do if she needed me for comfort in a place where I couldn't freely give it. Would I give up our secret to take care of my love? Or keep us a secret just to save us for a few more days, digging our lie deeper?

"I just wanted to hear your voice," was her response, and it angered me.

"You know the risk you're taking calling? Especially this late at night?"

"I don't care," was her retort, obstinate and just as angry as I felt. "Let them

find out. I can't hide anymore."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I spluttered on the phone, trying to come up with something, anything, that might help ease her worries and calm her anger. The truth was, I wasn't sure how much longer I could hide either, but I didn't know what other options we had. It was either end our relationship, which I couldn't imagine, or continue to sneak around indefinitely or until we were found out. That would still, of course, end in our eventual separation. We couldn't keep going on as we've done, but I wasn't sure what to do to fix this problem. It's something I keep postponing, letting the bad build up so I can enjoy one more moment of good.

"I can't say the words I want to say," she told me. What I heard was, I need to leave you, but I don't know how. "I can't do the things I need to do. You weaken my resolve, Raj. You soften parts of me I need to keep hardened for fear of letting in something that might truly hurt me. A lover can only be your strength if he can protect you from the sharp and dangerous things that lurk in our world. But when we hide in the shadows, you can't protect me from anything. You're too busy protecting this thing we've made, and I'm left totally unshielded."

"Then we'll come out of the shadows, and I'll hold you safe and sound for the world to see," was my sudden resolve. Hearing the heartbreak in her voice, the raw and uncertain parts of her that needed my defence, my fear dissipated.

What I needed to do was give Aavya the life she deserved, one in which she could hold her boyfriend's hand around her parents and live in the sunlight. She was a flower. She needed the light to breathe. "Please, give me the chance to stand by your side, and you'll see that I am the man you deserve and the man you need. I won't fail you. I'll be what you need me to be. I've been a coward, a boy for too long. Let me be a man now. Give me that chance."

Her voice over the line still sounded uncertain, but it might have been the phone interference. She sighed. "Please, Raj. I want you to be that man. Show me all that you can be, and I will love him wholeheartedly. But I can't make a life with you in the shadows. We must be people of the sun."

"Then we will be. Even if it burns us at first. We will live in the light."

The rest of that night I slept fitfully, rising and falling in and out of restless dreams. In one I drowned in the depths of a lake, pulled down to its murky depths by tendrils of dark, curling hair. In another I slept cradled in the sunlight, twitching with laughter as its hot rays tickled my skin. Lush flowers blossomed only in rays of moonlight. The sky rose and fell in time with Aavya's breathing and threatened to fall upon me with every pulse. When the sunlight shone through my window, I hesitated to rise, even though I heard my mother calling

me, afraid that this was just another dream where the world around me might envelop me at any time, pulling me down into the depths of the darkness.

But all at once, I rose and began my day as the fears of last night slid off my body and retreated to that spot under my bed where all nightmares live. After all, wasn't I currently living in the depths of the darkness? In the waking world, it wasn't the darkness that scared me. It was exposing this fragile and wonderful new love to the light and seeing it whither under that intense heat.

I'll be the one to light that flame though, and I'll do it soon. With the gleam of gold on Aavya's finger, a ring of light, a never-ending beam that binds us together for eternity. This, I think, is the only way we'll ever truly be free.

Raj

…

(a letter written on a scrap of notebook paper torn hastily from a journal, smudged with long-dried blood)

18 September 2005

Dear Raj,

Yes.

Aavya



The Winter of Grief

21 February 2016

Raj,

I know he has not done it yet, but your father will apologize for the things he said to you. And when he does, you must, in turn, humble yourself and forgive him. If only you knew how upset you made him with your rejection of the world he has offered you! You would crawl back to him on your knees.

I don't mind saying that I was upset to see the two of you storming through the house, nearly overturning the dinner table and destroying the peaceful atmosphere of the home we raised you in. It was shameful behaviour from both of you, and I hope to see it rectified and the two of you getting along again shortly. He is your father, Raj, and you are his only son. You must love him, even when you don't want to love him. That is what family does.

Oh, Raj, if only you could see through a parent's eyes, then you would understand what you have done and why your father feels the way he does. We have always, since you were a child, been so concerned for you. Not just because you are our son, but because of who you are as a person.

You cannot help it any more than you could help being born with brown eyes or straight hair, but you were always sensitive, even as a child. Your father and I grew up in a world where sensitivity is a weakness. I see now, watching the way you have grown, that you have made it your strength in spite of our trying to change you. And I take pride in that. But it is harder for your father to see what I see.

If you could only understand the things your father has done for you. You would erect statues of him and name streets after him so that the world might know what a hero he is to you. I know that you have listened to his lectures on

what the world looked like for him as a boy so many times that they no longer sway you emotionally. They may even grate on your nerves from time to time. But they are the truth.

Sometimes, you forget the end goal he had in mind: to give you the best life he could. Your father has slaved the entirety of his life, especially since we found out that we were pregnant with you, to create a world you could enjoy. He just wanted you to have the things he's never had. Which makes your rejection all the more painful for him. If you could see the life of ease and opulence he has awarded you out of nothing but love, then you would understand. But you are a child and not a father. Such is the way of children.

I know that you are making a difference with your company and have been receiving many accolades and awards for your achievements. You know that we are proud of you for those. Have your father and I not been in the front row of every awards ceremony you have attended since you graduated from preschool, cheering you on and supporting you in every way we could?

There is only one foolhardy notion in which we have not supported you. I know you wish to hold that against us, even after all this time, but in your fragile mental state, we did what any parent would do and made decisions for you. And with that foolish and youthful marriage which might have proved disastrous for your business prospects, could you have been as successful as you are today? I think not.

This is why your father was so quick to offer you the path of success he's laid out for you. I know since you left the hospital, those many years ago, you have refused what help we might give you and become a formidable man. What at first felt like rejection I now see was a desperate attempt to pull yourself up from the depths.

You have become an incredible man because you have been determined to make yourself into the man that you want to be. And I believe that is bold and admirable in its own right. But wouldn't it make sense to hear him out and at least try to manage the business as well as your charity project? To take a break and let someone else's successes propel yours as high as they can go? To let your father be a father?

If you could step away, even a little bit and let someone else take over those day-to-day details, (I know your dear friend Rohit is always looking for more projects than he can manage. Anything, I suppose, to get him away from his little twins and into a quiet office space for an hour) then you could build up more security! The life of a do-gooder is noble and good, but it doesn't always pay well. A wife might feel more secure in marrying you if she knew that you had a good income to rely upon--I say this as your father's wife, who has been

with him through rich times and poor times. I might have married him sooner had we already been rich!

Even if you feel you must reject your father's offer, I hope that you will state with firm respect to him why you will not take over the company, and listen humbly to what he has to say in response. I have spoken to him, and I know his mind is not made up that you must take over his legacy. I know he has even spoken to Vinod about starting a new search for CEO. Again, my son, if you only knew what your father has gone through with that man on your behalf since your foolish teenage years! It is the job of a child to make life difficult for his parents, and in that, as in all other aspects of your life, you have succeeded!

I am proud of you, my son, even on these days when I despair of you. On the worst days of your life, my heart swells to cover you with my love. I hope that even when I am exasperated at you, or I do things you disagree with, that you understand my reasons are only this: I love you. Plain and simple. I am trying my best, and that is what I have done since the first time the doctor put you into my arms. Your father is the same way. One day, when you make a family of your own, your sons will put you in difficult positions by growing into the men they are instead of the men you want them to be. Then you will learn the lesson that your father and I are still learning.

I love you more than you will ever know,

Your Mother



The Spring of Love

20 September 2005

Dear Future,

In all the excitement, I realize that I have neglected to do one important thing, and that is to write to you and inform you of the plans I have made to shape you into the future I want you to be. Waiting for fate to present an opportune moment for our escape is no longer an option. Aavya calls. She begs for me to free her from this trap in which we've set ourselves. So, I will do that by any means necessary. You will have to move the stars for me, or I will arrange them myself. My love demands it, and I will do whatever I must for her.

My love has agreed to become my wife. We have decided that the best way of handling our parents' many objections is to force them to move for our love. It may not be the kindest way of making this marriage work but needs to be done. Aavya will have it no other way. We will show them by our actions, rather than by offering useless platitudes and comforts, that we are a force of nature. We will demonstrate that we are unstoppable when together, a couple whose love truly can conquer the world. I think if we can make this first bold step, the next few on our journey will be light and easy. We will remain convincing. We will be welcoming and helpful. We will be independent and hardworking. All the things they think that we are--a nagger and a dreamer with no direction and no future, will fade with time when we lead by example rather than with words. We will work together to overcome the class divide between us. This I believe.

That is why I snuck out one morning, early enough that the breeze was still cool rather than stagnant and punishing, with all the money I had to my name jammed into my wallet. I don't have much cash. My parents feed and house me while I'm in school, but I've never needed to work a summer job outside of the

chores I do for my father's business. Odd jobs and tutoring gigs here and there provided me with the rest of the funds necessary to purchase a plain gold band, size six, for Aavya's delicate ring finger in the first jewellery shop I could find.

I could have gotten her something fancy if I'd taken my father's money to do it, but this first step into our future was something I felt that I had to earn with my own money and work ethic. I wouldn't have it any other way. The jeweller looked at my austere purchase with something akin to pity, but I had no time for his judgement that morning. The ring I found seemed to gleam brighter than all the diamonds littered throughout the store. Whether it was the light of truth or the rose-coloured wash of optimism that fills me when I think of Aavya is yet to be determined.

I held the box that contained the ring as delicately as a rose petal, zipping it securely into my pocket to protect it from the elements as I sped towards my next destination. The librarian at the circulations counter looked at me with something akin to indulgence in her eyes when I entered. She's fond of Aavya, but then again, the whole world is fond of the woman I love. There's something magical about her stance, her posture, and that radiant smile. I wonder how many love affairs this librarian has watched unfold in her library. Probably more than there are books on the shelves. I wonder if she has seen any as incredible as ours before.

I made my way to the aisle where our secret book is stashed, my veins thrumming with anticipation louder than the buzzing of the lights above my head. I perused the Dewey decimal system past automobile repair and into the history of aerodynamics, looking for the familiar teal spine of the book that has no meaning to me beyond the love story of mine that it contains. I thought at first that I had missed it, or that one of us had mis-catalogued it when we were returning it to its rightful place on the shelf. But no, when it was where we expected it to be, we could find it with our eyes closed. It was in the same place every time, but it was not there.

I stood there in the shelves, staring at the place where our love story was often shelved, unsure of what to do. What if there had been a letter placed there when some old man decided to shake the dust from its pages and review its contents? Would he think it was a particularly intimate bookmark? Would he throw it away without a second glance? I could feel my thoughts clouding with despair at the thought of having lost even one precious letter from Aavya to a stranger. It was the violation of the act, of knowing that we were never truly living in private—that in the shadows there was no security. That only strengthened my resolve to present my love with the ring in my pocket. Once she was mine entirely, there would be no worry that we might lose parts of our love

to someone else's perusal.

It was at that moment, when I slipped my hand into my pocket to hold the reassuring weight of the black ring box, that Aavya herself turned the corner. There was red gloss on her inviting lips that spread into a shocked smile at the sight of me standing in the aisle. In her hands was the familiar tome we used to send each other messages. I could see a thick envelope tucked between its pages. She must have had a lot to say.

"Raj!" She exclaimed, a little too loud in the quiet library. In response, I dropped to one knee, proffering the black box to her. I wasn't sure what to say that would sound right. It was much easier to write things in letters than to speak them into existence. But she didn't need me to speak. She knew the sound of my soul and could hear it singing to her.

She took it in her hand as delicately as if it were a baby bird, this little black box that held the entire contents of my savings and the whole of our future. She knew that even though it weighed next to nothing, it was the heaviest thing she'd ever held. She opened the box, studying the golden ring with a light in her eyes that outshone the precious metal. I looked at her. She looked at me. Then she ducked into the next aisle, taking both the ring box and the book with her.

I was bereft. I couldn't move. I froze there, still down on one knee, wondering what in the world had just happened. Aavya had disappeared, leaving me with nothing. My whole world was in the next aisle, and I did not know where I stood in it. Slowly, I struggled to my feet, composing my face to receive whatever answer Aavya was preparing to give me. At that moment, she came back around the corner, an almost manic grin across her face. She held the teal book back out to me. There was no longer an envelope in it, but there was a gleam of gold around her finger. My heart started to beat again.

I flipped the pages carefully, eyes scanning over the small text and thick paragraphs until I came to the pages that contained a hastily torn scrap of notebook paper from one of Aavya's designing notebooks. On it, she scribbled a hasty salutation, followed by the word YES, written in big, clear letters. It wasn't much-- I'd received more detailed love letters in the first grade. But it meant more than any other letter I've ever read. I clutched it to my chest. I could feel my heart beating in double time.

There was suddenly far too much space between Aavya and me. I closed it, crashing into her, my mouth on hers. It was far too desperate of a kiss for such a public place. At any other time, I might have been embarrassed. But with her body warm against mine, her breath against my cheek, her lips working at the hollow of my throat, I couldn't help but get lost in her touch. The taste of her on my tongue was as exhilarating as it had been the first time she'd pressed her lips

to mine. She's mine, I realized. She's mine forever. My wife. My whole world contained inside one human being. My Aavya.

As I pressed her hard against the shelf, she let out a whimper. I could feel my future in the press of her skin against mine. I could imagine the children we'd have, placing my hand on her belly and knowing that inside her existed a human being who was half of me and half of her, fused together as one being for the rest of eternity, a concrete reminder that our love bore fruit. I could imagine sitting in the garden with her as those children frolicked around us, growing older and wiser, the love they'd know and the acceptance they'd feel unconditionally from us since we knew too well the pain that a parent's rejection could cause. This kiss was another step towards that ideal future. The ring around her finger cemented it.

Finally, she pulled away. Our words came back to us in a flood, overlapping as we struggled to form all of our thoughts through the haze of love we felt emanating off each other's bodies off of such a passionate kiss. "I hadn't realized that I'd run into you, much less that you'd, that we'd--"

"No," I agreed, "it was a spur of the moment thing. I'd been planning, maybe at the lake--"

"I like this the best. This is us. This is our love story. Us and this book, and--"

I paused her suddenly. "The envelope you put in there, where did it go, could I read its contents?"

She laughed, that smile to die for blooming across her face. "Darling, I've said everything I'll ever need to write to you in that letter you're holding in your hand. The next time you hear loving words from me, I want to be saying them out loud for all to hear at the courthouse. I want the next declaration of love I make to you to be one I make as your wife."

I could feel my cheeks heating up with sheer joy. We mostly communicated our love to each other in letters. There was something about hearing words like that falling from her ruby lips that made the butterflies in my stomach burst forth into flight across my nerves, shorting out my brain entirely. "I... I think--"

"Raj?" she asked me. I quieted. "All you need to do is say yes."

"Yes," I stuttered. "Yes, yes, absolutely, of course, yes--"

She laughed, and I laughed. A patron, a few rows down, stuck his head out from one of the aisles and shot us a dirty look, which just made us laugh harder. When we finally quieted, Aavya leaned in again and kissed me, soft, almost chaste this time. The kind of kiss a woman and a man shared when they were asked to kiss to seal their marriage with a sign of their love.

"Two days from now, right here at this spot where I agreed to become your

wife," she told me, "pick me up on that ridiculous bike of yours and drive me to the courthouse. There I'll pledge myself to you forever more, my Raj, my husband, the light I will walk in for the rest of my days."

"I will," I agreed, "my soul, my sunlight, my angel, my Aavya." I peppered each name for her with a kiss pressed to her cheek, her ear, her neck, her sweet lips. She was blushing when she pulled away, that bright grin on her face as radiant as I'd ever seen it. I wondered if it would fade, over time, as she grew old. Even if it did, which I doubt is possible, the blessing of being able to see that change would be enough for me. I'd always have plenty, having her as my wife. Whether we were poor or rich, with Aavya, I'd have everything I need.

"Take some time to peruse the library before you come out. Maybe five or ten minutes." She warned me, that gorgeous smile on her face fading only a little bit as she grew serious. "My mother's waiting in the car outside to pick me up. If she recognizes you coming out with me, she'll be more suspicious than she already is. I don't want my parents to know we're married until we are. They'll try to sabotage it or stop it, I know they will. So just hold on for another few minutes. I promise, my love, this will be the last time we have to sneak around like this."

She pulled the black ring box from her purse and slipped the gold band off her finger, tucking it away safely until the next time we'd need it. I hated to see her finger naked without it shining in its rightful place, but I soothed myself with her words. This will be the last time we have to sneak around like this. I know I won't regret or miss this time when we had to hide from everyone but each other, once we're able to live in the full sunlight of our love. Still, it's odd to know that your life is changing from one phase into the next. The last time. The last time.

She ran her hands through my hair and pressed a harder kiss to my lips, more as though she were saying "good luck," than "goodbye." I memorized the sensation of her ruby lips pressed to mine, the lingering sweetness of her lip gloss that I could taste long after she'd left. I took a mental picture of her cascading black curls swinging behind her as she left, not daring to look back at me. I wonder if she knew she didn't need to look. If she already knew, better than Orpheus and Eurydice did, that I'd be following soon after, chasing the sound of her song up out of the darkness and into the sunlight.

I waited in agony, soothing myself only with the single word she'd printed across that piece of notebook paper. Then, once enough time had passed, stood and walked out of the library. The librarian at the circulation desk must have been on break. I did not recognize the new person there. Nor did he recognize me. I zipped the letter into the place in my jacket where the ring box had been.

Close to my heart, I’d keep it safe.

Today is my last day as a single man. I’ve made my preparations to meet Aavya, cleaned my room and folded what little money I have left into my wallet. I look at this room I have lived in since childhood. I cannot imagine life outside of it. A smell filled with the scent of her wonderful cooking, the bed we share shoved into a corner where the light from the window in the morning will illuminate us lying there together. That is what you hold for me, Future. I pray you will give me this and all other happiness my love and I might wish. Give it to me as a wedding gift.

Raj



The Winter of Grief

From: sruthisharma@yahoomail.com
To: aavya@rediffmail.com
22 July 2012

A,

Was a great and happy day yesterday in the Sharma *khandaan*. The wild Rohit Sharma has finally been tamed. I am attaching some pictures from the *shaadi*.

Btw, I bumped into HIM. We danced a bit. He asked me if we still wrote to each other. I told him we had lost touch. Hope that's fine.

♥ ♥ ♥

S

Send me pics of your shopping!



The Spring of Love

11 August 2005

Raj,

Excuse my handwriting. I'm scribbling this note as quickly as I can in between pages of statistics homework so that my mother won't catch me slacking off on my studies to write to you. I keep smudging the ink with my hand as I write. It's because I'm trying to cover the page so that she won't see its contents, the contents of my heart. I feel ashamed even sneaking around like this, but stronger than the shame I feel, there is a lightness in my heart. It knows that I am writing to you.

I wish that writing wasn't the only way that we could communicate, but unfortunately, I don't see a time for us in the near future where we can speak freely. So, until that time I will cheerfully and dutifully write to you so that you might know my thoughts and feelings and better understand just how strongly I feel for you. I liked the passage you wrote to me a few days ago. I keep it pressed between the pages of an old textbook I know my parents will not read, and I study the words you wrote. I commit them to memory in case I have to burn it suddenly or get rid of it without notice.

I don't know if you'll see this particular letter, or if I'll have to write three more before I get the chance to give one to you. I'll try, the next time you come over, to sneak it to you at the supper table, or slip it surreptitiously into your pocket when we brush past each other in the hallway. I don't know how I'll get it to you yet. But I will do my best.

I know I will see you again so soon, but it's not soon enough. I count the minutes until we are reunited. The clock moves so slowly forward and changes little with every desperate glance I give it. I would rather have your sweet face

staring back at me than its blank, emotionless face. But you are not yet here. You might not be here again for days. It's not as though I can ask for you, or even ask my father how you're doing.

The anticipation of seeing you is part butterflies, part churning acid in my stomach. Something so sweet, a first love, a genuine friend, soured by my parents' scorn. I wonder, if they knew how much it hurt me, would they keep up this petty game?

You are good, Raj. You are good to me. You show such care when your hands touch me, as though I am something delicate and lovely and you don't want to break a piece of me by moving clumsily or too quickly. I'm not fragile, but you show such care nonetheless, it makes something soft and joyful light up within me. I feel like a woman when I'm with you, headstrong and self-assured, as though I'm taking what I want boldly instead of sneaking kisses and whispered words from you.

I love your dreaming. I love the way that you think about the future as though there is one, and it is good. I cannot promise that, but you seemed so certain in your last letter to me that I can't doubt you. In your world, life is good. You anticipate the future. The future is your friend. I think forward, always dreaming up what will happen next and how I will make it work. But you think upward about a better world, one in which all people are treated with justice and respect and suffering occur no longer. The world you dream is the one in which I want to live, and I want to live there with you.

I wish we could speak freely. I know your thoughts on everything from literature to particle physics, but I don't know what you think about me. I miss the way you ramble about whatever subjects truly interest you. I love following your train of thought wherever it leads. When it's a subject about which you're truly passionate, your dreams and thoughts, there's this glimmer in your eyes. I'd like to wear that glimmer around my neck, so beautiful that all eyes would be on me. I'd like to see that glimmer in your eyes when you talk about me.

We have to find a place to speak, sooner rather than later. There's got to be someplace we can go, something that we can do about this wonderful, terrible situation in which we find ourselves. I want to hear you speak to me with your voice above a whisper. I'd like to hear your collected thoughts on this unfortunate situation in which we find ourselves without the anxiety that comes from wondering whether or not our parents will come upon our private talks. And I want you to kiss me without fear of anyone watching us. I think I know of a place where we can meet, a place where they won't find us, and we can speak without anyone knowing: the library on the west end of town. There are plenty of private stacks where no one will think to look for us.

If this appeals to you, give me a nod the next time you see me. It will be a small gesture, but one that will mean the world to me.

I have to go now. My mother keeps giving me sideways glances, and I don't think I can keep this letter going much longer.

All my love,

Aavya

…

13 August 2005

Dear Future,

I nodded to her. And that was all I could do in response to the letter she sent me. A quick glance over the dinner table and the tilt of my chin was the most intimate gesture of affection I was able to make towards Aavya all night. But the smile on her face that lingered long over dessert and after we waved goodnight to each other showed that she was satisfied with it. That it pleased her. And in turn, I was happy as could be. It didn't matter that my father was in a rare mood or that his anger made my mother sulky all evening. It didn't matter that I was the butt of several jokes and could barely taste my food with how nervous I was. Her smile was the balm that cured all my ills.

How can I dream only of her happiness? How can her joy be my highest aspiration? She loves that I am a dreamer. That's what she says. That I am always thinking of a better world. But now my hopes and aspirations all fall in line with her hand in mine. I want her by my side. I cannot see the goodness of my world without her in it. The only hopes I have for my life are for this meeting we've arranged at the library on Saturday. I can think of nothing else but the warmth of her skin, the lightness in her eyes. I wonder what her hair will look like glinting in the light of the sun rather than illuminated by moonlight. It has been so long since I've seen her in the daytime.

I imagine all the details of it now. Before I was only a big picture man, but she has changed me so that I barely recognize my own thoughts. Now I imagine her hair curling around her shoulders as she leans, unobserved, into the pages of a book she reads while she waits for me to join her. My mind fills with the smell of paper and the quiet hum of library patrons flipping pages, broken only by our whispered conversation. I think only of her smile against my lips, the honey-sweet timbre of her voice filling my ears, my eyes able to gorge themselves on the sight of her beautiful face without any fear that we will be discovered if I stare for too long.

I can't wait to look at her. To really take her in in the daylight when she

doesn’t have to guard her expression or change the way she thinks to keep her parents from finding us out. No more dark hallways and sneaking around, keeping one eye peeled towards the door so we can never truly lose ourselves in our kissing even when we’d love to do nothing more. She might think that I’m crazy, the way my eyes always search her out, but in truth, there’s nothing I’d rather see than her. I spend all day dreaming her up in my head until the next time my eyes can truly take in her beauty. It’s driving me crazy if I’m not already.

I can’t imagine the way she looks all at once; it’s all details now. The curve of her lips, the dark gleam of intelligence in her eyes, the way her fingers stretch towards me before she takes my hand in hers. All these beautiful things, which are mine to love entirely. How lucky am I? How blessed by fate? Aavya wants to be mine. Her note said as much. And I will be hers, forever and ever. I know this as clearly as I know that the sky is blue. Oh, future, you must think me naive to fall so quickly and to belong so entirely to a woman who has asked for nothing more than a little of my time and a few stolen kisses. But I trust in you, so I fall wholeheartedly, with my eyes wide open. I know that Aavya’s arms will be the ones to catch me.

I plan to take my scooter and the extra helmet I have sitting by my desk, in case Aavya wants to go for a ride. I hope my mother won’t notice that I’ve moved it. I keep my room messy enough that she barely looks at it anymore, so frustrated she is with my disorganized ways. But if she does notice, I know I’ll make something up in the moment that will work. Maybe I’ll tell her that I’m planning to get it checked out to make sure there’s nothing wrong with it. She so worries for my safety. I’m sure she’d like to know that I’m taking an interest in it as well.

I hate lying to my parents. I do. But I see no recourse between the future of my dreams and the future my parents are determined for me to have. They do not think my future should have Aavya in it, but I know that a future without her is not one in which I can succeed. Her focus and drive in life will not railroad me, but will instead push me forward. Her high ambitions for her life, coupled with my wildest dreams for this world? Together, we make a good pair. I know what we are together. Together, we are good.

So, I will lie until the day I don’t have to lie anymore. I will say what I need to say so that I can continue building my strong foundation with Aavya, until one day we have built a home in which our children can live. I know what is important in my life and what will matter for my future. My parents just don’t understand it. Their futures were planned out for them, and they did the best they could to find love in what they had. But fate has different plans for me than my

parents do. I trust the stars, who have lived so much longer and seen so many more things fail and succeed under their light than my parents have seen in their lifetimes. I can only have faith that when the time comes, fate will intervene and let me know the right things to say.

So, Future, until the day you bring where Aavya and I are married, when our parents smile on us with approval and adoration in their hearts, until the day where we hold our first child together, our hearts bursting with love and joy, until that miraculous day when we don't even count the days until we see each other again, knowing that our future together is unnumbered and unimpeded, I will wait. I will trust in your guidance and the providence of God to get me where I need to be. I know Aavya will do the same.

Future, you are in the hands of the universe. Let it mould you into something good.

Raj

…

17 August 2005

Dear Future,

What could you possibly offer me that would measure up to the wonder that was today? What do you have in store for me that could possibly top the marvel of seeing Aavya in the daylight, of getting to speak with her at full volume and kiss her at will? Are there better things in store for me than getting to hold her hand without fear of being caught out, of running wild and free with her through the town, of being entirely hers without worrying that someone might tear us apart? If our lives together are as sweet as the day we just spent, life will be wonderful indeed.

I can barely focus enough to write. My heart is still fluttering with the thrill of holding her against me, of kissing her sweet lips. I want to dream, and not to bring myself back to earth by indulging in the mundane task of shaping these dreams into words. But even still, I must record every detail of this wonderful day before I forget any of its details. If I record it when it is fresh in my memory, then my memory will never fade. This letter to myself will be, in time, one of my most valuable possessions, because it provides more for me than any riches or wealth could. It will provide a constant stream of joy to get me through the hard times life might offer.

So where to begin? The thrill of the wind against my skin as I drove through the hot city, feeling freer than I have in months without the heavy weight of my parents' eyes and expectations on my shoulders? The scent of summer in the city, something that should have been oppressive but instead lightened my mood? I felt anticipation curling in my chest as I saw the library in my sights,

knowing she was there, waiting for me. Nothing else mattered. Everything felt right.

I pulled off to park and caught a glimpse of her face through the window, an expression of perfect focus painted across it as her eyes scanned the page of a novel. Seeing her in that moment, so unaware, made me love her all the more. In all these private moments we shared, there was one just for me. I took her in for a moment, a pane of glass between us, and let the love I felt for her well in my chest. I memorized the fall of her curls across her face, the faint smile across her face as she turned the page. I held the picture in my mind for another moment. Then I went inside.

If that private image of her in my head was beautiful, it did not compare at all to the light of her smile, the gleam in her eyes when she saw me. I would go to war for that smile. I would die to see it just once, but here she was, giving it to me freely for no more than a smile of my own in return. She closed the book as though it had never captured her attention at all, as though I was the most interesting thing in the world to her. Then she stood, took a few steps forward, and enfolded me into an embrace that felt like heaven.

“I’ve got you,” she whispered in my ear. In that moment, I wanted nothing more. Dreamed of nothing more than what I had. I felt perfect contentment. I was in her arms and could feel her love surrounding me. I could smell the jasmine flower in her shampoo and the scent of cardamom on her skin. I could feel the sunlight, purer than that in the city, in the warmth of her hug. I knew at once, where I wanted to take her.

“Let’s get out of here,” I whispered back.

And we were free. It was just the two of us and the open road, one destination in mind. The wind ran through her hair, caressing its curling strands the way I wanted to run my fingers through them. She wrapped her arms so tightly around my waist that I could feel her heart beating against my back. It fluttered with every mile I inched up the speedometer. She squeezed me tighter with every curve we took. The scent of jasmine in her hair floated across my nose as she buried her face in my shoulder. I was hers and she was mine. There was no one else to whom we had to answer. We belonged to each other. Our bodies moved in sync with every turn of the winding road.

We took the long route out of town, traveling along a scenic road that saw very little traffic. We couldn’t talk over the roar of the wind and the engine, but we didn’t mind. We had all day to talk as much as we needed, and we were used to silence in the meantime. Every once in a while, I’d feel a sharp intake of breath, a gasp, a peal of laughter at my neck. Aavya was overjoyed, and her joy was intoxicating to me. I let out a peal of laughter as I sped along the road. My

heart sang when I felt her answer.

The mountains rose above us all at once, as though God had just plucked them freshly from the earth for us to admire their beauty. I always forgot how close the mountains were to our little city once we got out of town, but there they were, in one sudden, stunning moment. Large, jagged, sticking out of the earth with their dark slopes tinged white in places, rivulets of water leaving old scars across their surface. The sight of them made me feel small, reminding me what a big world there was around us. But then, I felt Aavya's smile pressed against my neck. My world narrowed back down to the thing that mattered most to me.

Her arms wrapped tightly around me, holding me where she wanted me. I'd never felt freer in my life. The wind sang a song that the mountains echoed. We were free! Finally. My engine hummed as I slowed before a turn into the parking lot. She risked a glance from behind my shoulder as we rolled to a stop, and gasped in delight.

"Raj, really?"

"Yes, really," I responded. "I couldn't think of anywhere I'd rather be right now, if I had the day free to spend it with you."

The lake wasn't just any lake. It was a place we'd spent most of our childhoods together, where we'd learned to swim and gone on many youthful adventures while our parents laid on the beach and talked. The last time we'd been here together, just last summer, she wore a two-piece swimsuit for the first time. Her hair was shorter then than it is now, and there had been a moment when she turned to me with that smile, her eyes glimmering in the sunset. I got so mad at her then, for no reason at all, that I swam all the way to the next shore. I sat there drawing patterns in the sand until the sun went down, watching her swim aimlessly back and forward and wanting without knowing what I wanted.

I know what I want now. And it's Aavya. She's what I want. And I wanted her today. I pulled the keys from the ignition and stuck them into my pocket, taking her hand in my free one and leading her out onto the beach. The beach was more deserted than the streets had been, no one around that we could see. It was our own private piece of paradise, and we took full advantage. I slipped my shoes off, reaching to pull off my socks as Aavya did the same.

As I rolled up my trousers, Aavya dashed into the water, which was blessedly cool on such a hot day. The smell of the lake water filled my nose, reminding me of summers past and inspiring the thought of summers of the future, taking our children to the lake where our parents let us play. She lifted the hem of her skirt until she was knee deep in the lake. She turned to look back at me, haloed by sunlight as she smiled, and I ran into her arms, not caring that the hem of my

trousers was splashed with water.

I kissed her deeply, and she kissed me back. We took our time, exploring each other's mouths in a way we hadn't been able to do previously. There was no worry, no concern that we might get caught out. There was only the sun and water and our love. The cool water swirled around our knees. I felt her shiver as she pressed closer to me. My hands travelled to her waist, and I felt her smile brush against my lips before she kissed me, hard. It was all hands and lips and tongue and teeth after that as the kisses deepened. Her hands made their way under the hem of my shirt, one running up and down as her other rested on my chest.

I've never kissed like this before. Though my kisses with Aavya before haven't been innocent, I've never been touched in such a way that ignited such fire, such passion within me. I lost myself, forgot who I am and what else was around me. We forgot all our problems and found solace in each other's arms. We were one person, we were a million-different people over a million different lifetimes who found themselves in love and in each other's arms. I've never been kissed like that before. And I never want anyone else to kiss me in any other way again. Aavya is the only person who could ever make me feel so wonderful.

Eventually, something broke the spell between us--a bird crying out overhead or a shift in the wind. I don't recall, but we found ourselves again. Aavya and Raj. Two beings connected by hands, mouths, tongue, and teeth. It was a wonderful feeling. We made our way back to the beach to dry off, hand in hand. I sat on the beach, and she lay her beautiful head on my lap.

I ran my fingers through her long curly hair as I longed to do and we talked. Just talked. Occasionally I'd lean down to brush a kiss onto her forehead, but that was all. She told me about her parents' worries, her father's concerns for the company and how her mother had already started to look for a husband for Aavya. Nothing serious, she assured me. It was only that her mother didn't believe her plans for college would work out and wanted to find her some secure place to land before trouble arose. I told her of the way my father was beginning to despair of all my journals and daydreams, how he wanted me to pursue engineering but that my heart was still set on forging my own path, learning how to make human connections instead of machines.

Then, Aavya said something that made my heart burst with joy. She sat up, holding my face gently in her clever hands as she looked into my eyes. "If anyone can forge their own path in life, it's you, Raj. You're so confident in the goodness of the world around you. You try new things and solve problems in new ways. Even in this relationship between us, you find new ways to make me feel incredible beyond my wildest imaginings. I just assumed we'd spend the

day in the library with our heads bent low, trying to discover exactly what we are. But you didn’t just give me an answer; you gave me a memory I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.”

There on the beach I realized that I’d been listening for answers when I was actually experiencing them. I didn’t have to wait for her to whisper, “I love you,” in my ear, the way she did after she said that wonderful thing to me. I knew it from the time she trusted me enough to wrap her hands around my waist and get on a motorcycle with me. She trusted me to take her anywhere, just as I trusted her to unite us. That trust was an incredible demonstration of her love for me. When she said it, it was almost anticlimactic. I already knew for sure that she did.

What we are when we are together is so much more than what we are apart. Her drive and my imagination combine to create something beautiful. Something better than we could ever see without the other. We fit together in all the ways that matter and become something bigger and stronger than ourselves when given the chance. That’s love. That’s a wonderful relationship. That’s the kind of love that lasts a lifetime. This I know for sure. Our love makes the world a better place, both for ourselves and for the people in it. It’s a dream come true for me, to have found her and to truly know her.

Our time together ended too soon. With a groan, she looked at the time on her watch. The sun would set before we got back into town if we weren’t careful. Our parents would be out looking for us. We had to end this wonderful day and get back to our lives apart until we figured out how to be together. Her arms held me a little more loosely on our drive back. Part of me thinks it was because she felt less fear than she did on our way back, knowing fully that since she’d confessed her love for me, she trusted me fully. Part of me thinks she knew that we’d be able to hold each other soon.

We’ve established a hiding place, in the library, for our letters to each other. An old book on model-airplane building – that hasn't been checked out for years – is now the storage place for communications of our love. I’ve already left a note for her, telling her that I love her and establishing the next place for a rendezvous. It’s just another way we’re taking our love into our own hands. I can’t help but think that fate is truly on our side when things just fall into place like this. The meetings right under our parents’ noses, the empty beach, the old book--all these things align so that when I next see her, we’ll be deeper in love than we ever have been, and happier together than we were last. The stars have created these perfect conditions under which our love can grow. It’s up to us now to nourish it.

Raj

…

18 August 2006

Dear Future

In a perfect world, this sneaking around will only last a little longer before we are ready to argue the case for our love to our parents. I'm working out the right things to say to my parents, the most convincing ways to present my love to her parents. I'm worried that if I don't collect my thoughts, I might end up blurting out something that would drive both Aavya and her parents away forever.

Since it's just you, Future, to whom I'm writing, and you already know my thoughts, I will tell you this thing that we both know: I want to marry her. It's not just a thought I'm entertaining anymore. It's more than an idle daydream. It's something that I am beginning to plan. I want it all, two days' worth of celebrations and all our friends and family feasting and dancing rapturously as we are over our love. I know we're moving quickly, and maybe too quickly, but we already know what we want these ends to be. I can feel the weight of our future when she looks at me, and I know she is dreaming of this too. I feel shy, trying to suggest it. But I do wonder what she thinks.

Somehow, I feel our hearts are the same. I think our thoughts might not be that different after all. But a thought like that is bigger than something that I can fit on the pages of a letter, either to her or to myself. It's something that must be talked out and deliberated. So, until I'm willing to say anything to her I will hold in my heart the memory of this perfect day with Aavya. I know her thoughts and her mind. I know she is thinking of the same thing.

The memory of this wonderful day will get her through boring classes and lunches with her mother, just as it will pull me through days of boring work and setbacks with my family. We have each other now. It makes us brave. It calms the raging storms in our hearts. It makes us much stronger than we have ever been before.

Fully united in love and as a family, just think of the magic we can make. Think of the change our love can bring to the world. Think of the good that we will do, both as individuals and as a family, when we allow ourselves to be together fully and raise children with our values. We will teach them the power of love just by raising them right and strong. Our love will shine through. It will make the world a better place as it exists and grows stronger. There are many loves just like this around the world. I can't wait to let our light shine and to join

that love in healing the sickness around us.

Raj



The Autumn of Separation

1 October 2005

Dear Future,

I've started this letter a thousand times and ended it a thousand more. I treat these thoughts with all the worth I think they possess--crumpled on cheap notebook paper and tossed into the garbage, bouncing off the rim where the next nurse on shift will have to pick them up and deposit them with the rest of the waste where they rightfully belong. I don't want to face the truth about what you have done to me, oh wicked future. Though now, I suppose the blame rests not with what fate you have in store for me, but with your much uglier brother, the past.

I thought if I gave you the silent treatment, I could avoid some of the hurt I feel for another precious moment. If I ignored the circumstances that brought me to this hospital bed, aching and sore with my body wasted and the world around me plunged into dark chaos, I could somehow numb the pain I feel. But pain is omnipresent now, a constant reminder of the weight of my own breath in my chest. This is the cost of living and you have taught it to me, taking me the hardest way through the hardest lesson to learn. I am your student, future. Your rapt pupil, lying in a hospital bed, waiting for the next knock that will either make me stronger or shatter me beyond repair.

I hate you, oh vile, wicked Future. I despise you utterly, from the depths of what soul I still have, now that half of mine has been ripped away. Your dark and gloomy picture is painted across my eyes, since the fateful moment they snapped shut, to save me the pain of having to see everything I've worked for slipping away in an instant. It will not let me rest. I am up at all hours, faded like a ghost, that image playing over and over again in my mind. It gives me no peace.

Oh, wicked future! I put my faith in you, invested the whole of my world into the plans you had, knowing that you would not lead me astray. But here I am so far off the path. I thought my life would take that I do not know where I am, or if I will ever find my way towards the bright tomorrow I thought was assured. I curse you, as you have already cursed me. I am doomed.

What hurts me most is that I never got to see her face. The face of my love on the day we were to be married. It was a sight I dreamed of, but now it is just another thought that haunts me. Another of your promises, Future that will never come to fruition.

The scent of her skin was heady in my nose even though I'd left her miles away at her own house. All I was thinking about was the way her hair felt running through my fingers, the heat of her skin as we made love under the night sky.

My joy wasn't just because we'd made love by the lake, or because we'd chosen to make the day afterwards our wedding day. It was because of what she'd said afterwards, with her head pillowed on my chest as we listened to the lapping of the water and whispered sweet nothings. She talked about the children we would one day have. "We'll have to name one after you, of course," she'd said, and I argued that if there was a little Raj, there'd have to be a little Aavya as well.

I told her how I've always wanted a daughter, something I've never confessed to anyone before. I told her about my hopes for a child I could spoil and indulge, instead of one I'd have to shape into a man just like me. My father could be harsh with me. Sometimes he was cold. One can't be cold to a sweet little girl. Why would anyone want to punish their daughter, especially if she had Aavya's smile?

"My father has never had any trouble being harsh with me," she rebuffed me, but our conversation continued. "I think it's what I'm most looking forward to, about our future," she said, "the children we'll make. They'll change the world. With my ambition and your dreams, how can they not?"

I agreed, with a smile. But I could make out her face in the darkness. Her expression was grave. "Raj, if we don't work out--"

"Why wouldn't we?" I interrupted, shocked. My blood, so warm with the heat of her skin next to mine, ran cold. "all these setbacks, my love, are just temporary. I'd rather die than be separated from you."

"You mustn't speak like that," she told me. "What if we're separated by something bigger than us? We can't control everything. But know this, my heart: if I couldn't bear your child myself, I would freeze my eggs for you. I've heard about that--women who do that so that a surrogate can bear a child for them.

That way our love could last long after we do, no matter what happens to us."

My heart soared in my chest. To hear that she would go to such extraordinary lengths to create what we both wanted, even at her own expense, was such a powerful declaration of love to me. I couldn't believe it. I'd never had someone love me to the point of such sacrifice. The pain she'd be willing to endure to ensure that we existed on into eternity, was an incredible gift. I wasn't sure what to say. I kissed her lips again and again, losing myself in the idea of our bodies as one being.

One minute, I was reliving the joy of her love, her company, riding my bike back to my house. The next, minute I realized I had collided with a big car turning the corner.

I have one more memory of that night before my broken body slipped into unconsciousness and my life changed forever: the stars. They winked at me, almost mockingly up above my head. I had the sense to remember that I was mortal and they were not--that they would hang above my head forever while I was doomed to fall. Then, just like that, I fell asleep. I woke up in the hospital.

You wrecked me, wicked fate, and in doing so wrecked every hope I held in my heart. I don't know who I am, since this betrayal. I am not Raj, dreamer of dreams, husband of a sweet and good woman who loves me and would never desert me. I am a shell of a man, shattered and bereft. Because that is the salt in the wound, future, the fire that burns me to the core of my empty soul: Aavya is gone. Slipping through my fingers as easily as the future I dreamed of has, whisked away to her uncle's home in Himachal Pradesh before I could see her and explain just what happened to us.

The lump in my throat threatens to choke me when I think of her all alone, separated from her love by miles and circumstance. If you had not crippled me, I would be there looking for her now, fighting my way through traffic and whatever meagre chains her parents tried to bind me with to keep me away from her. I would bear it all, if only to be there by her side for just a moment. If only to provide her some sweetness or comfort in this time of great need. But I am broken. You have destroyed me. So, I lie here and I pray that wherever she is, she knows of my love for her and does not doubt it. I have no way of contacting her, however, to ascertain whether or not that is a fact.

I do not know if she worries for me, or if her parents even informed her of my accident. Perhaps they've lied to her, telling her that I abandoned her at the altar. That I was lounging at home while she waited hour after hour for a husband who never showed up. What does she think of me? Does she think that everything she knows about me is wrong after all, that in truth I am nothing but a selfish waste of a boy who cannot commit or follow through on anything but idle

dreams? Oh, if I weren't held fast to this hospital bed, I would sprout wings and fly to her, wherever she is. Wherever she is.

But I am injured, my wings crushed, my legs shattered, my dreams splintered into nothingness. I keep a catalogue of my injuries and run through them, focusing on the physical pain so that the mental pain can dissipate. My collar bone is cracked. I have a concussion, though not a skull fracture. I fell on my left side, with my bike landing on me and as a result, it's my body that's taken the brunt of the injuries: I have two broken ribs, my kneecap is shattered, and the bones in my left hand, on which I landed, are pulverized. I have contusions across my neck and chest, lacerations that will permanently scar my body in too many places to count. I lost quite a bit of blood, but I am blessed, the nurses say. That accident should have been fatal. It feels silly to tell them that I feel in some way as though I have died.

Without Aavya, who am I? I do not know the broken man I glimpse in the mirror, the one who does nothing but lie here and dream of a whole body and a lover's kiss somewhere far away. Chained to this hospital bed by my own broken body, with only intermittent visitors, none of them my heart's desire, I try to come to terms with the bruised soul living in this painful prison of a body. My hand grows heavy and my eyes droop against my will, without the ability to even hold the pen, what will become of Raj? Oh future, only you know, but I fear that you are no longer---

...

2 February 2006
Yahoo chat
Hi Aavya
Hi Sruthi
How are you doing? Coping well?
What do you think?! It's like I am literally exiled or something … even though I'm told it's for my own good ... Hate 'em all."
But we are too young to marry...
Right!! Cya then.
Aavya? Listen...
Aavya has logged out.

…

4 October 2005

Dear Future,

I could not finish the last letter I wrote to you. The brunt of my injuries conquered me, and I was subject to their whims. I sleep a lot now, and my dreams are all darkly tinged with images of things I want but cannot reach out to take. My body heals, slowly. Itches, some. Aches, mostly. The hours trickle past, slower than water melting off a glacier. I know that healing takes time, but I feel as though my time is running out. Every day Aavya gets farther from me, thinks of me less, moves on with her life while I am glued here to this hospital bed, marking time only by the change of sunlight streaming through the slats in the blinds and the change of nurses on their shifts.

The nurses here are so kind that I can't help but believe they've been trained on knowing just the right thing to say at the right time. They are too careful with me by far, wiping the tears I cannot reach from my cheeks and holding my good hand, allowing me to squeeze as tightly as I need when the pain grows too sharp for me to bear. I cannot stand them. Is it because they're too saccharine sweet, that they nauseate me? Or is this disgust because the feeling of their hands on my skin remind me how long it has been since Aavya has touched me?

My parents will not tell me where she is. I cannot parse out clues from their strained expressions and wringing hands. They have refused to pass on the letters that I've written to her, depositing them in that sterile hospital trashcan where all other written records of my hopes and dreams live. I hate them more than the nurses, who at least, are not active conspirators in my misery. My parents believe that our separation, neat and complete, is the only thing that will save us from ourselves. They truly believe that they are doing the right thing by holding us in different parts of the country, without so much as a chance to say goodbye to each other.

"But father," I protest, knowing even as I speak that my words fall on deaf ears, "I love Aavya. She is my world, and a part of my soul is tucked safely away inside her. My happiness lives inside her. Without her, I have nothing." He looks at me impassively as though nothing I say gets through to him. As though he holds my statements in such little regard as to be able to ignore them. As though I am an annoyance to him and not his only son. Once I was the light of his world. Now I am just another problem for him to solve.

"Without the relationship I have with her father, my business partner and dear friend - you have nothing. Without the company that I have struggled to build from the ground up, the legacy which you can only pray you will still be able to

inherit, you have nothing. The bills you rack up in this hospital, healing from the fruits of your own foolishness, are paid by a company that thrives on that relationship. The relationship you have strained for a moment of passion. You don't just ruin yourself, you ruin us all."

When he said that, it stung like a slap. Still, I could hear the pain and exhaustion in his voice. I could see the strain in his posture, the stress hiding in the lines across his face. His smile, when he came into the room was so weak. I'd assumed it was the pain of seeing me in the hospital bed. I hadn't even considered the stress he was going through at work, and especially now that I was in the hospital. He refused to leave my side, instead handling his business in the cafeteria where the sound of his arguments on the phone could not reach my ears. My mother, for her part, was usually so composed, but strands of hair had slipped from her braid and the smile she'd been working so hard to hold in place had slipped from her mouth. Guilt washed over me. I've been so focused on my own suffering that I couldn't spare a minute for those around me.

But as quickly as I felt that sting, it dissipated once more, soothed by a sudden understanding of where the blame in our suffering lay. Maybe I was just growing stronger when it came to dealing with pain, because I'd felt so much in the past weeks. I remembered the impossible position in which Aavya and I had been placed by the sins of our fathers, their dismay and their rage at each other's children. It was not of our own doing. Her father's hatred for me that had strained my family's business was his own fault, and he would reap the consequences of his actions just as we all would reap the consequences of ours. Aavya was innocent in causing that rift between my family and hers, and by extension, so was I.

"Our only sin was in loving each other," I argued, exhaustion seeping into my voice against my will. My mother looked as though she wanted to come to me and run a hand through my hair, but she remained steadfast. "Father," I pleaded, "I know you think that this love is killing me inside, but I must insist that Aavya's love for me has caused me nothing but joy. Only you have hurt me, but even still, you have not mortally wounded me. I can't help but think that Aavya loves me so strongly in order to heal the pain and discord that our parents' hatred has caused. I'd accept all of the consequences of our love, if only for one last kiss from her, and a chance to say goodbye."

But they refuse me that chance. Though I struggle for her, I am met with nothing but rejection and disappointment. My parents, her parents, all these deals are made behind my back as though I am a child. I know that I don't know the half of what has been spoken between them, and that upsets me most of all. To have such a stake in my own future and yet to be denied the chance to influence

that future. To be trapped here in this hospital bed while everything is decided and shaped for me.

My family does not know me like they think they do. I take a perverse pleasure in knowing that I am more than they could have anticipated, more than dreamy, pathless Raj. Pleasures are few and far between in this hospital, and the perverse pleasure of hatred is one I hate to love. Even still, I cannot help but feel vindicated in some way when my family so misses the mark of who I am.

They underestimate me. They do not know the man into which I have moulded myself into since my first taste of Aavya's love. They could not possibly understand what it is I truly need to reach the greatness for which I am destined. Because what I truly need, for any goodness to blossom in the concrete cracks of my life, is Aavya.

I need her, Future. Without her, I am hopeless, no better than this wrecked body in a hospital bed, no more hopeful than a shattered bone that I will ever become what I once was. Won't you take pity on me and grant me what I need to heal? Won't you see the harm you've caused me, though I have done nothing but put all of my faith in you, and rescue me from these chains in which you've placed me? This body is not my body. This hospital is not my home.

She comes to me in my dreams, a sweet angel who soothes my wounds and kisses the scars that score my body like a map. For a moment, when my eyes are closed, I am healed by the press of her lips to mine, the anticipation of her touch when her fingertips ghost along my skin, before she grabs me, as solidly as if she were real. In these torturous dreams, I can feel her warm body, hot and human against mine. But then I wake to the cold, sterile, air-conditioned hospital and I weep. There is nothing organic in this place, and certainly nothing as human as my love standing before me. In my dreams, her spirit begs me to hold on, and I try. But each day is more and more difficult.

This world you have plunged me into is a cruel one. Aavya is so far away, held a great distance from me, like a princess in a tower, by parental plots and foul circumstances. If this is your way of telling a fairy tale, you write a wicked plot. I don't wish to be subjected to it for a moment longer, even if you still hold the promise of a happy ending at your fingertips. I will rise and become the knight in shining armour Aavya needs me to be. But for now, I am captured in plaster, held at bay by the dragon of my own fragile health.

Oh, Future, I wish you would realize the fatal error you have made before it is too late, and fix the wrongs that you have done to me. I beg of you. For my sake and for Aavya's, let there be some way for us to join together once more. Even if it were just one conversation, just five minutes of time, I know that we'd be able to fix the mess you made of us and get back on the track we're meant to

follow. Let there be some nurse who takes pity on us, some friend who believes me, or a sympathetic family member who can connect the dots. Let them relay a message from me to her. Give us a chance.

Grant me a miracle or some shred of kindness. You owe me this, for the ruin you have made of my life when you let me slip off that road. You don't have to move heaven and earth. Just move one sympathetic heart to the plight of two young lovers, and let your great circumstance do the rest. I still have faith in you, though you have wronged me. I forgive you for all that you have done. The wrongs you have caused will all be righted if you just give us a break. All young lovers need your blessings to live until they are old together. Grant us that blessing. If you will not, I don't know what I'll do.

Perhaps I'll die in a hospital long before my time. My death will not be because of my physical injuries, but because of the wounds you have caused to my poor, broken heart. Maybe if I die, Aavya will one day join me in the holy river where they lay me to rest. Our ashes can mix together in death if our hands cannot join in life.

Raj

PART 2



The Winter of Grief

Skype
5 May 2009
Shruti calling Aavya…
Aavya busy
Aavya: Hey, sorry out with a friend. Will call later?
Shruti: No problem.
I find you are out with friends often these days :P



The Autumn of Separation

10 October 2005

Dear Future,

I woke up today and decided to live, in spite of the sadness you have in store for me. I have decided that I will not let you defeat me before my time. I will not let your potential for sorrow destroy me before I have tasted its bitter sap. Instead, I will stand up, as much as I can, on these broken bones, and fight for what I know is right.

I am the only person who can control myself and give myself the strength I need for the battle to come. If I cannot stay happy in spite of what you have done, I have no chance of ever getting back to Aavya. So, I woke up this morning with a renewed sense of purpose. And I will do it again the next morning, and the next, until I am able to roll over and wake up in Aavya's arms.

I will not dwell on the cruelty you possess any longer, even though you have been cruel. I have never gotten to wake up in my lover's arms, outside of my fantasies. I do not know what that joy feels like. But my dream is to one day know it so intimately that I can take it for granted. One day, I know that I will. And each day I wake up alone is another day closer to the blessed day when she is mine again. Our time together was short, but intense, plagued all the while by fear and sorrow. I know that when I see her again, it will no longer be that way. We deserve happiness, after the hell we have been through. And I expect that you will give it to us.

I do not believe that you would have introduced me to such heaven if you did not mean to promise it to me for life. My reward for this suffering must be sweet. That is why I won't waste away for want of Aavya. I have faith that I will see her again soon. Every other option you might have in store for me seems too

cruel, and I don’t believe, in spite of all that you have shown me, that the world can really be so cruel.

After all that you have shown me, future, your Raj is still an optimist. Does that surprise you? Are you shocked at my tenacity? Does it shock you that even though I cannot stand on my own two feet, I have risen and will keep moving forward? If it’s war that you want, you might as well surrender. My spirit is uncrushable, for it is infused with Aavya’s love. I will heal, I will stand, and I will find her again. Knock me off the roof. Throw me off a building. Push me in front of a moving car. Do it a thousand times over. My life will end with my hand in hers, or by your hand. But it will not end by my own hand. There is no other way for me.

I will see her again. If it takes a day or fifty years. I take my physical therapy seriously now, because I know it means the difference between approaching her as a man, or as a crippled invalid. You would like to see me crippled, and you would like to see me fall. But I will rise and stand before my love, whole and happy, and I will ask for her hand, this time as a man who is scarred but, not broken. She will see my strength, and she will love me for it, just as she has loved me all along.

I can only imagine what my body would be able to do if I only saw Aavya once. I think I would break free from the constraints of my broken body and fly to her, that I would be strong enough to hold her in my arms once more, and I would scoop her up in my arms and escape through these hospital doors and out into the street. With her hand in mine, I am powerful. With her hand in mine, I can do what I need to do. I can do whatever it takes.

How foolish I feel now, letting our parents deny us moments of affection we should have relished freely. How I crave them now, though I would be satisfied even with another stolen kiss if I could just feel her lips on mine once more. I should have been upfront and brave from the beginning. Perhaps if I had, we would not currently be in this situation. Instead, I’d be waking up next to her, my wife, and it would have been any other morning. Instead, I wake up in a hospital bed, and all hope of the smell of her skin or the feeling of my fingers carding through her hair is simple fantasy. Bravery, future, can get you anywhere. And I will be brave the second her lips touch mine once more. Brave like I have never been before.

Her kiss is the thought I hold in my heart when the pain threatens to overtake my body. I deny myself pain medication I might take otherwise so that my mind is clear when I try to recall the unique timbre of her voice, the sweet sounds she would make when my mouth was on hers. I know that my love, even if it cannot unite with hers as I so wish to do right now, will keep me alive until I next see

her. I have to believe that. Even if it's just vain fantasy. Most of the good things in my life are fantasy now. Sometimes I have trouble remembering that once everything my fantasies are based on used to be a reality in my life. And one day, they will be real once more.

When Aavya is mine. When Aavya is mine. That is the mantra that guides me through my days now. Future, even though I despise you, I cannot stop thinking of you. I hope that you will understand my pain and have pity on me. That fantasy dominates my thoughts. I explained it to you in my last letter--that one kind person in one kind moment. No one is kind enough here. Not truly. The nurses with their fake sweetness will not deliver my letters. They are on the side of my parents who pay the bill, and not their patient who languishes day after day in a hospital bed. I have no one here but the memories of Aavya to comfort me. I hope, one day, that you are able to bring me such comfort too.

I count the days until my body is truly strong enough to break free. I long for the day when I will not have to tolerate another moment of fake kindness, or my parents' disappointed gazes and staunch denials. Then I will leave this place and my parents behind. I will roam the whole countryside, the whole Earth if necessary, just to find her. I hope she has not given up on me. I will never give up on her as long as I live. This love, this first love, this true love, is all that I need to get me through these dark and painful days. I hope that wherever she is, she can feel me beside her, conjure up the image of me whenever she is lonely or sad, and know that I will never abandon her. Even if my flesh is separate from hers, her soul is my own and I am hers. We will be together, in one form or another, until the end of time.

So, until my love and I are united physically once more, I defy you, wicked future. I refuse to give into the despair you so wish for me to live in and I rejoice in all that I demand you hold in store for me. Because I will tell you what you hold for me, though you may think you have different plans: my love and I will be united and we will run away from all the darkness in which we are currently enshrouded. Her smile will light my way as we boldly step into the life we have planned.

We will marry, oh future, despite your meddling, and our children will be a light unto the world just as the work we do and our love for each other will be. I don't know why you have planned this despair for us, but I assure you that we will not stay there. Not when we are people of such light and goodness. We will carve out our own path and at the end of it, our reward will be sweet. You can try as you may to sour it with your wicked schemes and your misfortune, but whether near or far, Aavya and I have lived lives that have touched each other, and we will never truly be separate now that we know who we are.

So, that is my decree, future, for you to take and do what you will. Know that though you have lain me low in this hospital bed, this is not the last place you will find me. I am healing as quickly as my body will work and once I have, you should fear me. For I am full of fury and purpose, separate from the one who calms the restlessness of my soul. All I have is myself, but even alone I am your match. Even in this hospital bed, I am working to thwart you. You, my parents, Aavya's parents, and anyone else who stands in the way of our love. Our love will be the last standing pillar of the world when it is in ruins. This I believe. I have seen it in my mind's eye. I only have to reach out with these tattered hands and grab it to bring it to fruition.

Until I have healed, rest easy, future, but know that I am coming for you. I will take every sweet moment you have in store for me, every victory and every joy. You should surrender them to me because I will take what's rightfully mine anyway.

Raj



The Winter of Grief

25 July 2012

Raj,

Why is it that I am the one on my honeymoon, and yet I'm writing to you to congratulate you? I know that the rule is not to outshine the bride at her wedding, but let's face it, Kitty is so incredibly radiant that the sun itself couldn't outshine her. Here I am, two days into my honeymoon in Italy. I should be enjoying the private universe in which Kitty and I are living, spending time relaxing with my new wife, far away from everything else that I know. Instead, I woke up this morning and saw your ugly mug on the front page of my favourite business website.

I know your excuse already--that you didn't think I'd be foolish enough to dream of looking at a news website when I could be looking at my beautiful wife's face instead. Or, that you didn't want to bother me with the fact that you were doing these feature magazine interviews and running a business when I was busy getting my tux fitted and tasting wedding cakes. But Raj! It's a big deal to be the face of Business Insider, especially at your age. Weddings happen all the time. This is something worth celebrating as well.

Know that I have ordered ten copies to the hotel suite alone. I expect to be inundated with copies upon my return to India. Don't mind though, if I delay in coming back for some time. I did promise that I would hang around to make sure you were happy, but if this success doesn't make you happy, then you truly are, a hopeless case. Try to smile more, my friend. There is photographic evidence now that smiling suits you!

Until I see you next,

Rohit

P.S. Consider this a thank you note, not only for the blender you sent us which only Kitty will appreciate—given her new-found obsession with green juice, but for the upgraded flight on the honeymoon. Yes, I know it was you. You're not nearly as mysterious as you think you are.

P.P.S. I know Business Insider is delivered to Milan, Paris, London, and all other fashion Meccas of the west. I'm sure she'd have seen it by now. Let me know if she reaches out to you. I'll be on the next flight.

…

Free Education at Anyone's Fingertips: Meet the Man Behind It

At the table of an outdoor cafe sits a young girl, only thirteen, currently immersed in a math class. Even though the sun is going down and the school has been over for some time she has questions about balancing algebraic equations with multiple variables. Rather than slinking back into the classroom tomorrow morning with her head down and turning in a piece of homework of which she is not proud; she accesses another lecturer's course on the subject. A smile brightens her face as the concept clicks into place.

Down the street, a middle-aged business owner is learning about online marketing and sales funnels, getting ready to expand his company so that he can provide for his sons and daughters as they move onto college. He never got beyond a high school education himself before he took over the family business, but now he is working hard to make sure that his children, when they inherit his company, will have something they can be proud of when he passes it down.

A child asks his mother why the sky is blue and she can't answer off the top of her head. Two friends argue at the bar over a chemistry concept they've both forgotten from their secondary school days. A father helping his son with geometry homework struggles. Now there is a solution: *The Awesome Academy.*

With an incorrigible passion for learning and above all, access to information, Raj Baijal was never what you'd call a traditional student. "I had many dreams and plans," the twenty-five-year-old confesses, "so many, in fact, that I would spend hours at a time writing in my notebook instead of paying attention to my lectures. I'd come home and wonder, 'now what did my teacher say this was supposed to mean?' It was all Greek to me. Incidentally, we're starting up an introductory Greek course on the Academy this fall!"

Outside of the traditional academic sphere though, Baijal was curious about everything. He wanted to know it all: from the passions of Spanish love poets to the effect of industrial expansion on native species of fish. "I had more research

projects than I had time to actually research, and the passion to right any wrong I saw in the world beyond that. So, I'd charge in with a plan to save the universe, only half-baked, and find that I'd missed something important or hadn't yet read that a solution to the problem I was solving had already been offered and implemented. My parents despaired of me."

But Raj's opportunity to save the universe in his own way came about after he suffered a serious injury and was kept from his final year of secondary school, forced to study for his exams and apply for universities from a hospital bed with only a laptop for access.

"I realized as I was sitting there, that I wasn't a traditional student, but that many non-traditional students were some of the people who were most passionate about knowledge. Sadly though, a lot of them are denied access to quality education. With the internet at my fingertips, I realized it's all about access. I had to do something about it."

Initially, young Raj, in his first year of university, made an impassioned plea to businesses in his community and set up a small charity to raise scholarship money for young, promising web developers and engineers in the Punjab territory. This pursuit won him a lot of admiring fans, as well as a BMD Young Achievement award. But that didn't satisfy Raj.

"I wanted free education for all. When I realized I couldn't create that world by scraping and saving to earn money for scholarships, I turned to the internet, the information superhighway, and realized that I'd have to create a place of access where anyone could learn for free."

Baijal's model for the future of free education, Awesome Academy, provides self-paced classes accessible at a moment's notice to users for as little cost as watching a thirty-second ad or playing ten-second demos of a game. Since launching in 2011, Awesome Academy has become a household name for those in the education game. Professors from Oxford, Carnegie Mellon, Duke, and Yale, just to name a few, have jumped on board to offer free classes on anything from Artificial Intelligence to the science of happiness.

Though mainly focused on lectures in STEM, the academy is partnering with linguists and literature professors to build an extensive library that will span the whole of human knowledge. "We're hoping to offer as many courses as a real university would. We're not accredited so we can't offer certification, but at this point, just the extra knowledge that an hour a day devoted to the pursuit of a passion can provide is proving invaluable for many a person.

Just ask Ralph Oneidas, a forty-two-year-old shopkeeper from Queens, NY, who uses Awesome Academy while eating his breakfast and walking out his front door into the early morning to learn about geology and the formation of

sedimentary rocks. “It reminds me of the field trips I used to take to museums as a kid. Now there were things that excited me that I knew would never pertain to my life. I was never going to be a scientist. I was never going to make incredible discoveries. But now, with Awesome Academy, I am a scientist. Simply because I’m interested in the natural world and am pursuing that knowledge.”

“The point is, you don’t have to be an expert, you just have to want something badly enough to go out and get it. Knowledge is power, and Awesome Academy puts that power at your fingertips.” Baijal, who is popular in the talk circuits as well as at the Awesome Academy offices for his ability to give rousing, impromptu pep-talks, is remarkably shy when asked if he has any plans to star as a lecturer on his own app. “I’d like to do something like a series of TED talks,” he admits but says there are no concrete plans as of yet. “Give me some time to learn about myself, and then I’ll be ready to teach.” For now, Raj is content to learn from his own academy, and to see what the next years will bring.

Awesome Academy is free for download on Android, iPhone, and Yahoo devices.



The Autumn of Separation

13 October 2005

Mrs and Mr Sharma,

I have agonized over the contents of this letter for many nights. I want nothing more than to show the respect I have for you and the family you have made together. The many wonderful hours my family has spent with yours have been a strong influence on my life. It is with humility and trepidation that I prostrate myself before you in this letter. I write to you from my hospital bed, where I have laid now for close to a month. My body heals slowly, but my heart has not yet begun the process. It is missing a key ingredient that will aid it in the process: the love of your daughter.

What happened to the bond of our families? Surely, the blossoming of love between your daughter and me should have strengthened that bond, but I fear it has dissolved it completely. My parents have stayed faithfully by my side throughout this difficult journey. Friends have flitted in and out of this room, bringing their laughter, their prayers, and their company that has been my solace in many lonely hours. Even the doctors and nurses who are attending to my recovery have become close friends to me. But your family is absent from these hospital walls. I do not lack for love and affection, but the one I miss most has not been granted the opportunity to visit me. I wish you would give her the permission to do so.

Forgive me for speaking so directly, but I must speak to you as a man would. I am no longer the boy who is afraid to speak his mind. You deserve nothing less than the truth from me, and I hope that you will honour my integrity with a candid response in return. Your daughter is the love of my life, and I believe I

am the love of her life too. This separation that has been instituted is beneficial to no one. It has put strains on the business, on relations between our families, and on my own heart. I believe it has hurt your daughter as well. The only healing it will bring to anyone will happen when it ends, and Aavya and I are reunited at last.

If logic does not convince you, I beg you to be empathetic to our unfortunate situation. You are sympathetic people, with warm hearts, of this I have no doubt. If you feel no mercy for me as I suffer in this hospital, working day after day to heal and become the man who can stand up on my own two feet and support Aavya, then I beg you to think of your daughter. You have raised her to speak her mind and leap for her goals. She is ambitious and dedicated. Once she wants something, she works incessantly until it is hers.

Now, what she wants is me. And I want her, too. I trust that at this moment, she is doing everything within her power to achieve this goal--the goal of us being together. To stand in her way when you know the power she possesses, the care and dedication she takes when it comes to earning the things that she loves, I think is a mistake. For my part, I am working through my limitations, severe though they may be, so that when we do make our way back to each other, I will be ready to resume where we left off. I will try to help Aavya achieve her goals. I never want to stand in her way.

You were the ones who originally infused Aavya with this spirit. She is brave and can be very headstrong and even stubborn once she’s decided that something is good for her. I know that you have always thought of me as a dreamer, but my resolve to be everything Aavya needs me to be is serious. I will be good for her. She can see this, and I hope, with time, you will see this quality in me as well. If you cannot now, know that I will strive to prove it to you. My love for Aavya, and by extension, your family who has created her, is pure.

You may have had high hopes for a match for Aavya--some successful businessman who she has not met yet. I understand that. You think that her first love should not be her last, and that her last love might be able to provide far more for her than I ever will. I worry about these things too. So, I resolve to improve myself relentlessly, to grow exponentially to be the kind of man Aavya deserves at every turn of her life.

But to become that man, I need her by my side. Please, allow her to visit me, even once. If you will not, if you have read this letter and still feel, in your heart, that it is best to forbid us from seeing each other, please soften your hearts enough to at least pass on a letter from me to her from time to time. She is, if nothing else, my dearest friend. To be separated from such a trusted companion at such a fragile time in my life is disastrous for me.

I know it is through our own errors and lies that we have created such a rift of mistrust between us, and that healing that rift will take time. I ask you to trust us. We told those lies and behaved so dishonourably as a result of fear and confusion, youthful ways of thinking that have passed as a result of this recent tragedy. We are young. We are still learning from our mistakes. Sometimes, it is failures and mistakes like this that will shape us into the strong adults we hope to be.

I don't dare ask you to think of me as a future son-in-law, but I do ask that you remember the strong bond our family shares. In spite of all that has happened, I hope that we can still exist as we were before, or maybe with a stronger relationship than we've had before. Please, consider all I've said and think of me with mercy in your heart.

Yours in Hope,
Raj Baijal

…

15 October 2005

Dr. Kumar,

I would like to thank you and your team for the tireless work you have done to heal and rehabilitate me after my devastating accident. You truly are a team of gifted healers, not just of the body but also of the spirit. I am grateful to God that he led me to you when I needed you. I could not ask for a better doctor, or a better friend while I am in this state.

I have had no complaints about the quality of my care while at Central Rail Hospital. On the contrary, I could not have found a better group of healthcare professionals to tend to me while I healed if I'd gone searching for them. You have been so professional but have still managed to make these hospital walls feel like a second home. You have been nothing but courteous and careful of my parents, who have suffered, if possible, far more than I have.

I hope never to injure myself again, by accident, or on purpose. If for no other reason, so that I never have to see the disappointed look on your face when you hear I've darkened the doors of this hospital again. But should I fall to another misfortune, I feel I should carry your card in my wallet in hopes that the EMTs will send me back to you. That is how much I believe in you and the work that you have done for me. Your kindness was life changing for me and it will never be forgotten.

That is what makes this such a difficult thing to request for, but I feel that, for my health, I must try my hardest anyways. I have tried to come up with the right thing to say, to suggest that perhaps the climate was not suited to the intensive

healing I still need to complete, or complaining about the quality of food at the hospital. But I must not lie to you. You have never beaten around the bush or told me anything that wasn't true. As I become a man, I'm learning that honesty is one of the most important qualities a person can possess. If I had been an honest man, I would have never seen the walls of this hospital, so I will be honest with you now.

I am in love with a woman who has been taken away from me. I have little more than a hint from a memory that may be inaccurate to use as a roadmap back to her, but I believe I know where she may be. Or at least the approximate area. If I could only leave this hospital and go north to where she is, I can't help but believe that my chances of finding her would be better. It is for this reason that I am requesting to be relocated to a hospital in Himachal Pradesh where I think I may have better luck in seeing her again.

I know this sounds like a stretch, but I have seen miracles happen in this world and I can't help but believe that I am destined to receive one. While she and I are both limited in mobility, proximity may be the one chance we have at finding each other again. I believe that fate will intervene where my human form has limited me and that through destiny or coincidence we will be in each other's arms again once more.

So far, we have been thwarted at every turn since the day we decided to run away together. Both her parents and mine have made it immensely clear that they never want us to see each other again. They do not seem to care at all that we are in love. They insist that it is for our own good that we should be separate, that we are too young to truly understand love or the responsibility that marriage is. They think that we are too immature to fulfil each other's lives and act as dutiful spouses, that we are too lazy on some counts and too passionate on others to truly serve each other. As though love is simply an interview to determine if a person's traits match well with your own.

I don't believe that about love. I believe that love is a journey that does not end once it has begun. Even when you grow apart from the person you are in love with, or are kept apart by circumstances, once your lives have touched they are forever entwined. Good love makes the choice to grow closer to the other person's goals and dreams. Good love sacrifices and works hard to prevent fractures and splitting. It goes whatever distance it needs to cross and fix what must be changed in order to better both the people in a relationship.

But no relationship is between just two people, as both my parents and hers have made evident. Otherwise, Aavya would have been in my arms today. The workings of fate rely, in some way, on every person in a situation. One kind person who works one good favour might have the power to totally alter

someone’s life for the better. And risky though it may be, I am asking you to be that one kind person. Please. Request a transfer for me to a hospital in Himachal Pradesh. Whichever one you recommend. I will go there without a single complaint about the food or friendliness, if only for the chance that I might be in Aavya’s arms before I am discharged.

I know this letter may seem like the ravings of a desperate man to you, and I cannot tell you that I am not desperate. That would be a lie, and I am determined to be honest. I am running out of options. Shunned by her parents and denied at every turn by my own, I am doing what I can to give my soul what it needs: the love of that incredible woman who is currently lost to me. I’d do anything to see her again.

Please do this one thing for me. If you cannot, please, tell me anything you’ve heard about her. I know my parents must have mentioned the situation. If anyone has even the vaguest clue as to where she might be, that information would be a treasure far more precious than anything in the world to me.

Your loyal patient,

Raj Baijal

...

(A short, typed letter on official hospital stationery, crumpled, then salvaged.)

17 October 2005

Mr Raj Baijal,

We regret to inform you that your request for transfer to another hospital has been denied at this time. Without grounds for transfer such as inadequate care or dissatisfaction with the hospital or its staff, it is impractical and could impede your health should our staff transfer you at this time.

On a more personal note, Raj, I have spoken with your family and they are quite concerned that this obsession is only to your detriment. I have to say that I am inclined to agree. Your one love right now must be yourself, Raj. Only when you have devoted your soul to your healing instead of to the love of a woman you may never see again, will you truly see the results you desire.

I am not a psychiatrist, but I have spoken with the psychiatry team and they agree with me that a move to another hospital would be detrimental, if not outright disastrous, to your treatment. It is for this reason that your request has been denied.

You are in my prayers during this difficult time, and my team remains dedicated to your care.

Sincerely,
Dr. Ajay Kumar, M.D.

...

(Another crumpled letter, which seems to have been rescued as an afterthought, slipped into a stack of important papers as if by mistake. Recovered years later, and deemed worthy, this time, of preserving.)

17 October 2005

Aavya,

My love, why won't you come to me? What holds you so far away from me, so strongly that you cannot break its bonds and come to me in my time of greatest need? If you knew your Raj's suffering, my angel, would you come and remove my agony with your loving words and soothe me by pressing a kiss to my brow?

I ache without you. No doctor can help, nor do they even try. My mother hovers over me. She threatens to smother me with love and attention. But she cannot give me the love I need. Her attention cannot do what your love can. It made up for the joy that I know I would feel, if only you were by my side. My hand feels tired as I type this. Not just from the work I have put in today, trying to heal myself so that I can find you, but because my soul has begun to tire. Just a sight of my lover's smile might nourish it. A kiss might just strengthen it. Without you, I wither.

I fear without you I will fade away. I don't know how to reach you. I can't take this much longer.

God, I can barely stand myself these days. This self-pity will get me nowhere. It is what's truly smothering me, not my parents' attention or the care of the doctors and nurses who have suffered through my suffering with only patience and love. This letter is a bust, just as the other letters have been. My words are clumsy and useless, and I confess, I'm out of things to say. This letter will remain with the others in the wastebasket. I practice throwing away my inadequate thoughts so often now. I make a fresh resolve each time I let another mistake of a letter join its brothers in the garbage.

Raj

...

18 October 2005

Aavya,

I write this letter with full faith that it will reach you. Some way. Somehow. I don't need to know the details, I only need to hope. Hope is a rare rose these days, and it has trouble blossoming in the artificial light of this hospital room. But I hold it for you, the sunlight of my world. I know that you will read these words. I cannot doubt that even for a moment, because to doubt would be to give into despair. I am so tired of despair. All I want is you.

When I am given to the bone-crushing despair that haunts me these days, I simply think of you, and I am given momentary release from the pains of my world. I allow my mind to sprout legs, to wander far from this hospital and into a world that is entirely of our own making. Though I know it is idle fantasy, sometimes I feel as though you are truly there.

In these dreams, you are standing by the lake in your yellow summer dress. Your smile feels like the spring sunlight on my skin, warm but not as scalding as the summer heat we were used to on those days--not so long ago when our hands could reach outside of dreams. Your skin smells like jasmine and your lips, when they touch mine, send a spark of joy coursing through my whole being. In these dreams, I am not healing, because there is no hurt left from which I need to heal. You have cured me of all the ills I've suffered with a single kiss.

Your hands on my body feel soft, and you marvel at the strength in my bones. My soul and my spirit are so much stronger than the body I'm trapped in right now, and it shows in my fantasies. We lose ourselves in the taste of each other, until the dream dissolves and I wake up to grim reality. Like a nightmare, I am in this hospital bed, and you are nothing more than a memory which gets more and fainter with every waking moment I endure. The worst part is feeling your touch fade on my skin with every waking hour, until I am blessed once more with restless sleep.

I wonder sometimes, now that I have been alone without you for so long, longer than I've ever gone before: Were you ever real, Aavya? Did your hands ever touch this body I no longer recognize? I lose sight of all that was important to me in the outside world with every day spent here in this purgatory, no, this hell, where I am without you. I doubt you with every painful breath I take. I fear you will never return to me. That you are not even trying to find me. You are my love, my heart, but perhaps I have a heart no longer. If a heart has given up on its body, does the body then die?

I still breathe. Even though I have been denied by my doctors, by my family, by your family. Even though my relatives' visits and calls become less frequent with every day I spend here. I am still here and still living, so I must believe that you have not given up on me yet. That you are not just a recurring character in a

long-standing dream. That you draw breath and dream and hope that I will one day be with you.

I wish I could comfort you. If your soul is anything like mine, I know you must ache without my touch. I do not know what your parents have told you, or if you even know where I am or what I'm doing. You might not know anything about my situation, and may imagine that I'm lounging around in bed all day, instead of being stuck in a hospital bed for weeks on end, with the exception of my hour of physical therapy each morning, and arduous sessions with the psychiatrist. They could have told you that I've given up on you, and encouraged you to give up on me. But I won't give up, Aavya. No matter the circumstances I have suffered, I won't let these demons win. I will pursue you with all the will I possess until I am in your arms once more. Please, say you'll do the same for me.

I will leave this letter on my bedside table in hopes that someone will pass it along to you. I know that hope in a sad time as this is a useless, pretty and fragile thing but without any tangible purpose, like some glass knick-knack placed too close to the edge of a counter. I fear I'll be shattered. But I cannot let my fear stop me from hoping. And all my hopes are that we will be united soon. This opportunity to reach you may not pan out, but perhaps the next one will. If I let these discouragements stop me from trying to reach you, then I will truly be lost. For now, I am simply adrift, trying to find the shore. I will not stop swimming until finally, I reach you, and you are in my arms again.

All my love,

Raj

...

21 October 2005

Aavya,

This letter, along with another two I have written to you, remain on my bedside table where I have placed them. I have to accept that the one person I am hoping will come into my life is not there yet. I am on my own.

If only I had the magic to turn them into birds, they might fly to you on love's wings. I'd fold them into paper airplanes and send them sailing across the hospital courtyard, in hopes that a sympathetic breeze might carry them to your door. But I am no magician. I am just a man. So, for now, I am putting my pen down, and picking my life back where I left off.

The doctors are already talking about discharging me on the condition that I continue my physical therapy and meet with a psychiatrist once a week so that I

can resume my studies without any further disruption. If I work hard, they say that I will make a full recovery. The only way that I will have the energy and focus to do that is if I let my thoughts drift from you to the matter at hand.

I've come to accept that before I can find you, I must tend to myself. If my thoughts are always on you while I am being denied access to you at every turn, I will never break this pattern of suffering. This does not mean that I will forget you, or that I will move on. I'm not moving on. I'm moving towards you. But that involves taking a step back.

I still hope I dream of you tonight. I still hope you're in my arms tomorrow. But I won't close my eyes to the real world all day, hoping to get a glimpse of you in your yellow dress waiting for me. Sleeping through life is no way to live. I know that you yourself will tell me that.

If I'm going to search for you without the support of either my parents or yours, I'll have to build my own resources. And to do that, I'll need the help of friends I have neglected for some time. I only hope it's not too late. But then I feel the breath in my chest and the way my heart beats. I know it isn't too late until there is no longer air in my lungs.

Until the next time I see you, I am forever yours,

Raj

…

27 November 2005

Raj, my friend, where have you been? I know you were released from that hell hole of a hospital weeks ago, and yet, I've not heard a word from you since you left. Have you forgotten how much you value your friends, and indeed, anything but the lovely Aavya? I know I'm not as pretty as she is, but I should think you'd want to see me anyways. I have certainly longed to see you. It has been a while since we've been able to talk and I think we will have much to say to each other when we meet again.

If you are available for coffee this Tuesday, let me know. I have some materials that I think would interest you related to a new field of study I've heard you are pursuing. It is my hope that you will find them enlightening and informative. If the offer of my charming presence isn't enough to lure you from your self-imposed prison, I should hope that these materials I've collected on recent travels to see my cousin in Himachal will entice you.

Know that you are not alone, Raj. Your friends still hold you in high regard and wait for you to return to us. You are a bright and happy soul, with a world full of dreams that have yet to come to life and a keen mind that will make those

things happen. Don’t give up hope, and know that you can rely on your friends in this hard time.

Your Friend,

Rohit

…

31 January 2006

Yahoo chat

Shruti: Hi Aavya, Welcome to the Internet!

Aavya: Thank you. I am so happy I can write to you again. Can you do me a favour?

Shruti: Yes, tell me?

Aavya: Could you please give my chat id to Raj? I know that he doesn’t have a computer and is probably still not well enough to trudge to a cybercafé… But it’ll be nice to know he can reach out when he wants to?

Shruti: Aavya, I am sorry, but my parents have told me very strictly to not do anything like that. I’m here for you but I can’t put you two in touch.

Your Dad spoke to mine and it’s completely forbidden for me. Dad said he’ll seize my computer too.

Aavya: Urrggh! Shruti, you are such a baby!!!

Aavya is offline

…

1 February 2006

Dear Future,

What an awful friend I have been. I felt such guilt when Rohit’s letter arrived on my doorstep. My heart sank when I realized that I’d received yet another letter that wasn’t from Aavya. But this wasn’t a sympathy card or a nervous note from a friend who wasn’t sure what to say. It was just Rohit, charming and funny, never one to beat around the bush or treat me like a freak. How heartening it was to read his words!

I could tell that he felt neglected, even though the tone of his letter was nothing but kind and sympathetic. And why shouldn’t he feel neglected? I’ve been so self-consumed lately, so focused on Aavya and on no one else, that I have failed to reciprocate the care and love my friends and family have shown me. In truth, I’ve grown to resent the people around me. They think they are

caring for someone delicate and fragile. In order to escape my psychiatrist's frowns and my parents' worried looks, I've almost let myself believe that is the case.

I was excited to hear from Rohit because he got my mind spinning with possibilities. I've been sitting in self-imposed exile for so long, wasting away in my room as I scour the internet on my brand-new computer for any clue there might be as to where Aavya has gone. I've behaved like a man possessed. I'm afraid I'm scaring my parents again. I'm certainly more depressed now than I was before the accident, though I can't help but laugh at the irony of that. At least I had Aavya's love at that time. Now all I'm left with are these snippets of her floating in my mind. I've snuck around at night, barely able to sleep, so focused on solving the mystery of Aavya. Being able to speak candidly to a friend, in public, in the light of day might be the thing that saves me. So, I scheduled our meeting.

We met out front of a coffee shop. Despite the heat, he sipped a double espresso, sunglasses covering his eyes, his habitual self-assured smirk on his face. He had his planner out and was making notes in it when I arrived. No doubt, he crossed our meeting off his checklist upon seeing me. He sat the planner on the table and jumped to his feet, meeting me in a warm hug in spite of my sling.

"Don't touch me, I'm sweating," I told him.

"God, I know," he said with a laugh, pulling away. "Have we ever had such heat this late in the year before?"

"I'm sure when we look back on this year, all we'll remember about it is going to be the weather." I retorted. His smile widened.

"Glad to see your sense of humour hasn't abandoned you, old friend." He clapped me on the back. I was grateful for that, even though my ribs ached a little under the force of his affection. He didn't handle me like I was made of porcelain. How rare it is anymore, to have a friend who treats me like the man I used to be instead of the broken shell I feel I currently am. It's heartening to be treated with dignity. I felt more like myself in that moment than I had since I was in Aavya's arms for the last time.

"Come, sit. What'll you have? Something iced with more caffeine than not?"

"You know me well," I laughed.

"A man after my own heart. Whatever you want, it's on me. No, don't make that face, I haven't seen my dear friend in some time and you're looking far worse for the wear than I'd like. Really, it's the least that I can do. Go on. Drink up. You'll need it for what I've got to say." I felt my heart sink a little. Rohit was a fast talker, but I hadn't missed the meaning in either his words or in his letter

from earlier.

“What’s going on?” The cold brew I’d ordered was bitter and strong, but I felt it was helping to ground me as I sipped it. Come to think of it, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had any coffee apart from the miserably weak stuff they served at the hospital. The air was nice outside and the hum of people, which should have felt claustrophobic after being so long on my own, was actually feeling good. I realized in that moment how much I’d missed the real world. Rohit smiled like he knew.

“Not very much, though I still manage to be very busy. I’m going to lighten my course load a little this spring at the university so that I can do some planning on a project in which I’m interested. I don’t think that I’m meant to be an engineer of things. More an engineer of ideas. I’m fortunate that I’m not too far along in my classes, so that I have plenty of time to switch from a manufacturing track to something more business-minded, but of course, convincing my father to go along with it...”

It was at that point I lost track entirely of what it was that he was saying. I saw a glimpse of periwinkle blue poking out of his planner and my mouth went dry. My brain couldn’t reconcile what I was seeing with my memories. But the memory of that letter is clear in my mind as the day I saw it last: in Aavya’s hands, right before I asked her to marry me. I couldn’t hear Rohit anymore. I opened my mouth to speak.

“Raj,” Rohit said with a sigh, “I’m trying to civilize you. You’ve been living in the jungle of your own head for too long. You’re not fit for the company. In polite society, we listen to our friends with interest as they speak and maybe even ask a question or two. I know that the details of my life seem mundane to you, but--”

“No Rohit, please don’t say that. I am really happy to be out of that solitary confinement.” I felt a tinge of guilt on seeing his brows furrow for a moment. This was what I’d truly wanted since I’d woken up in the hospital bed. Not Aavya, but to be the man I truly was and to have someone believe me. Rohit was making it very clear that he did believe me.

“It’s good you’re out,” he said, with what seemed like a twinkle in his eye, “because once I show you what I came across when I visited my cousin, Shruti, you’ll want to live for a million years.”

I vaguely recalled his cousin, Shruti, who I’d met more than once at get-togethers when we were children. We’d played together in the way that children lumped together and ignored by adults often did, friends for the night who thought little of one another once we parted. But I remember that Aavya had told me that she’d grown close to Shruti and that they’d become pen pals in their

youth, a practice they continued to this day. I took a long sip of my drink, and Rohit grinned.

“So, Shruti, if you’ll recall...” he gestured broadly, making me laugh. “A little squat, with that whining little voice and that me-too, me-too attitude? The one who used to nag me constantly in our childhood? Turns out that as an adult, she’s actually quite the enjoyable conversationalist. Called me up a couple of weeks ago, while you were still in the hospital, asking me all sorts of strange questions. Like if I remembered Aavya Sharma, and if I remembered you.” He pointed.

“I told her that of course I did, I knew my best buddy Raj well, and she asked me if I knew you were in the hospital. That was quite embarrassing for me at the time, because I’d just made a big deal out of being your best friend and knowing you well, and of course, clearly, I didn’t know as much about you as Shruti did. Because she keeps talking. Tells me this tragic story about two young lovers meant to run off together, separated by fate. It sounds pretty far-fetched to me, and I told her as much.”

“When you put it that way...” I muttered, frowning into my drink.

“I told her she was nuts, but she insisted it was true. Said that a letter from Aavya had come to her house just last week. Apparently, she and Aavya kept a correspondence going for years. Funny, I thought that Aavya had more sense than to associate with the likes of my cousin. But they’d been good friends. Apparently, Aavya had confided the whole love story, the late-night rendezvous and sneaking out and even a proposal - Raj, you dog! Then just as suddenly, the letters had stopped, until this last one.” He waved a piece of torn notebook paper at my face, then handed it to me. I gulped. Aavya’s handwriting, hastily scribbled.

Shruti,

My parents found out. Locked in my room. Don’t know what they’ll do. Never seen Dad this angry. Please, find some way to get this blue envelope to Raj. Tell him I love him.

It ended so suddenly, without even her signature. My heart sank. My parents told me she’d been sent up north. Suddenly, I hoped that was what had happened. I’d never imagined her scared or upset before. But the tone of that letter was pure terror. I swallowed.

“Another letter came, a week later. Short and perfunctory with no return address, telling Shruti she wouldn’t be able to write again for a while. Apparently, she’s gone abroad. All it said was that you were in the hospital being

treated for injuries from an accident, and to look out for you. Shruti's quite fond of Aavya and took that seriously. So, she's assigned me to your well-being for the time being."

I was quiet for a long time, trying to process what I'd heard. Aavya was gone, possibly farther away from me than she'd ever been in her life. She'd been uprooted, taken away from everything she knew and loved, denied the ability to communicate with her pen pal and locked away from all her friends. All for a few kisses, a love that had barely had a chance to blossom. In that moment, I wasn't sure who I hated more--her parents, for taking us away from each other, or me, for not being strong enough to say no to the love I knew could ruin her in the first place.

"Raj," Rohit sighed, "in polite society, a conversation can only happen when both people are talking. You are far too quiet."

"I guess I'm just trying to process it all. So many strange things have happened. I don't know how to say what I'm feeling. I hurt, Rohit. Not just this broken body, but all the way down to my marrow. And I think it hurt less when I didn't know what had happened to her, when I'd just assumed she didn't know or didn't care what had happened to me. But now I know that she was scared, that she was worried, that she was trying desperately to reach me...I don't know. It's not only that that hurts me, it's knowing that I doubted her as well. It's all these things. It's everything. Everything in my life hurts."

Rohit nodded seriously, humming as he thought. "I guess I've got more work to do than I thought," he said, "if you're ever going to be as happy as Aavya wishes for you to be."

"I don't think you'll ever make me as happy as Aavya could," I joked weakly, wagging my eyebrows. Rohit rolled his eyes.

"I'll only go so far for Aavya. I do have my limits," he made a funny face. "Besides, I don't think my girlfriend would be very happy." We laughed. My ribs hurt again and I was beginning to feel tired, but it felt so good to be with a friend that I didn't want to leave. Rohit could sense how tired I was, though.

"But seriously," he insisted, "I'm getting you out of that hellhole of a house. Once a week. You're going to meet with me, listen to my brilliant ideas, fawn over them appropriately, and then contribute your own. I'm going to listen to you whine about how boring our correspondence courses are, and I'm going to complain that my father simply doesn't understand me, and eventually we're going to be happy and rich and sitting at the same cafe drinking the same coffee, and we'll find we have nothing else to complain about. Deal?"

I smirked. "Deal," I promised.

"I think you've been appropriately attentive," he told me. "Here, slide this

into your bag.” He brandished the blue envelope in his hand. I took it as though it might explode, feeling my heart start racing in a way that had nothing at all to do with caffeine. “Don’t read it in front of me. I don’t want to see you cry.”

“Can you drive me home?” I asked, “I know you’ve done so much, and I don’t want to be a burden, but with my knee, I can’t drive, and I don’t think I can face my parents right now.”

“Of course, I will,” he said with a smile, “I know I’m treating you a little harsh, but I know you’re hurting. You can count on me when you need help. For anything at all. I am your friend.” His laughing dark eyes were serious. I knew he meant it.

“You don’t know how glad I am to hear it,” I said, “I think a true friend is what I need right now.”

I sat in his passenger seat listening to him describing the nattering of his old professors and his father’s comically disapproving face. He joked about his sister who was getting married and a man he’d run into at a bar who almost punched him in the nose. All the way home, he told me tales of the world I’d been away from for so long. I tried to listen, but my mind was still on the contents of the envelope riding next to me.

…

Raj, my dearest one,

How do I begin this letter? Even now my hands shake as I hold this pen. Not from fear of our future, but with joy and excitement. I am writing today, an ordinary Friday, to tell you of my love, this undying passion that has burned within me since you first kissed me and ignited its spark. That love will be with you for the whole of our lives.

I never expected love would happen to me. Not with you, the Raj I played with as a child, my friend, and confidant. Who would have thought, when the two of us met so long ago, that one day we would feel this way about each other? This love is such a new sensation, so delicate and yet the way I feel about you is strong enough to go the distance we will endure to be together. I can’t believe it sometimes. I giggle, giddy as a schoolgirl, when I think of your face. I hold you always in my thoughts, and go through each day, even ones in which I am not with you, arm in arm with you in my head. We are already living this life together.

Could it be that this future seems so easy, laid out before us because we are soulmates?

A soulmate. I never used to believe in the term. I found the statistics to be too

unbelievable. Too silly to bother fathoming. But in my most private moments, when all the world was asleep, I dreamed of a man who would cherish me the way you do. I dreamt of kindness and devotion and undying loyalty, being held each night in strong arms with hands that knew every inch of my skin.

Even after all of my daydreaming, never could I have dreamed that I would feel so loved, so known, by anyone. And yet here you are, handsome and strong and not afraid to adore me with every millimeter of your heart. No matter the cost. No matter what it takes. Not only do you love me but you dare to love me more each day. You defy the odds in order to embrace my heart. If that is not a soulmate, then soulmates do not exist.

Perhaps what we have is even better than a soulmate. And if I do have a soulmate walking this earth, some cold stranger who isn't you and couldn't be half the man you are, I don't want him. I feel confident in saying that no one could adore me the way you do. No one could take the time to devote themselves to the details of love the way you do. You set about loving me as though you intended to master the art of adoration, and Raj, you are an artist. I can only hope that I am the masterpiece you want to spend your life studying and adoring.

I want to put down in words all the things I blush too hard to say aloud. I want to write of my appreciation for you, of my dreams for our future and love of your heart and soul. Even before that first kiss, you were always there for me, supportive in a way that surprised and delighted me. Even before a glance at your face felt like a sip of wine gone straight to my head, when we were only friends, I still felt adored by the many things you did. Now that I know this strange, bubbling feeling in my stomach is love, it feels magnified one thousand-fold. Every time you kiss me, I understand more and more what it means to be loved by you. It means always having a home when I need one, inside of a person. Raj, I don't care if we're castaways living together on the streets with only our love to keep us alive. Your voice is all I need to sustain me. Your kisses are all I need to live.

Even if we are rich, glutted with good food and given every gift we could possibly want, I would still think of you as more valuable than these worldly things that are mine. Oh, how I love to think of you as mine. As I walk down the street, I see all these people rushing past and I wonder how many of them are also lovers, how many belong to someone and have someone they belong to. Is that why the world spins? The push and pull of belonging that fall like gravity between two lovers? I don't know yet, but I'd love to travel the world with you to find the answer to that question. When I first met you, I knew in my heart that you would mean something to me. What a surprise, that first kiss felt like fireworks on my tongue. It let me know just how much you meant. I know this

must sound like something out of a storybook, but I want you to know that our love is my favourite story. The words you speak are what I want to hear. You, my love, are a story in and of yourself. I'll never get tired of wondering what comes next with you. You are spontaneous, creative, inspiring to me in more ways than one. I crave your passion when life grows dull. I think of how you'd react and life gets fun again. Like the world bloomed into technicolour the moment you kissed me. That's how I feel when your lips touch mine.

With every laugh, every smile, my love for you grows to the next level. Even if we fought for a whole year straight, I'd love to lose every fight to you, just to hear your voice. Your kisses send fireworks in my body, your hugs make me feel safe and far away from all harm. You are my protector, my fighter, and I know beyond a doubt that you would never stop loving me or stop fighting to make this love work. You make me smile even when I want to cry. Your smile gives me butterflies in the worst way. So, in the end, all I have to say is that I LOVE YOU. Even when you drive me insane, I love you. You make everything better in life. Thank you, my sweet, loving and handsome Raj.

In love forever,

Aavy

MAGAZINE AND BOOK PDF

Join Our Telegram Channel
ForBooks And Magazines
@magazineandbookpdf

टेलेग्राम डाउनलोड करने के बाद सर्च बार में
हमारी चैनल का नाम सर्च करे और जॉइन हो जाइए



The Winter of Grief

15 July 2009

Dear Mom and Dad,

San Francisco is beautiful in the summer, though colder than anywhere I have ever been in my life. There is mist on the hills, and the Pacific Ocean is a deep jewel blue that calms my heart when I look at it. The city proper is claustrophobic, once you've been out of it. I don't think we'll stay much longer. We went around the campus at UC Berkeley yesterday. It was nice, but they don't have the courses I was looking for, so I don't think I'll pursue my masters there.

I'm increasingly considering taking some time away from school. Since receiving the BMD Young Achievement award, I think it's more important that I lean into the company I'm building, rather than taking a step back. I know that you and I may disagree, dad, but the hands-on experience I'm gaining through my own successes and failures is far more valuable information to me than anything I can gain from a classroom.

But I digress. I'm on vacation, after all! I really should act like it. We're going to take a trip down to Big Sur soon, and I'm excited to see what beauty the golden coast has to offer! And our path crosses through some incredible wine country, the Napa Valley, which I know that Rohit and his girlfriend, Kitty, are very excited about. I think you will like Kitty, if Rohit brings her around to meet you. She's very Swedish, which is a trait that is hard to describe until you see it in person, but she's mad about Rohit and I think, though he's shy to admit it, he feels the same way.

My letter to you is too long to fit on a postcard so I'm attaching a postcard of the Golden Gate Bridge with this letter. I know that mail between the States and India can be very slow, and I'm afraid I don't have the money to rush shipping,

so I may arrive home again before this letter reaches you. Which is why I keep telling you to access the email accounts I have opened for you both.

Your Devoted Son,

Raj

…

21 July 2009 2:13 AM

From: rohitthemastermind@gmail.com

To: rajawesome@yahoo.com

No Subject

Raj,

It was worth a shot. That's all I'll say on the matter. And now you know that she was there! It doesn't matter that we missed her leaving by a month. We walked the same streets that she did. You got to be a part of her world for a little bit. You got to handle a dress that she had designed with her own two hands. I know you felt some joy in knowing that she's succeeding. I promise you, buddy, we will find her again. The fashion industry is a small world. She might have changed her name for American audiences or to avoid the public spotlight, but she can't hide forever. She's leaving a trail of breadcrumbs, and we'll follow it until we reach that happy ending you both deserve.

Speaking of happy endings, we must meet for coffee soon. I've got something I'd like to ask you. What did you think of Kitty? I know it was tasteless of me to bring her along, but those eyes, Raj, and that smile. You'd know all about the power of a pretty smile.

Rohit

…

Press Release

1 March 2016

Dearest Friends and Family,

This announcement is a long time coming. After years spent building our company from the ground up, it is with a bittersweet feeling that we write to inform you of our impending retirement from business. This comes after some deliberation, but we both have decided it is best to retire together, in order to

pass the company onto a new President and CEO who will represent the values of our company and continue on the path to success that M.R. Enterprises has pursued since its inception.

We are proud of the company and community we've built here at M.R. Enterprises. For the past forty years, we have been leading in the field of transportation and logistics in an ever-changing global market. We pride ourselves on our excellent service to our customers and of our employees with their ability to adapt to a quickly changing world. It is in that spirit that we have elected to hire a new CEO, Sanjay Gijare. You may recognize his name from the Forbes Thirty Under Thirty list. Gijare is a promising young entrepreneur whose position as VP of Engineering at popular logistics software company QuickClickGo cemented his place at the forefront of the shipping and logistics world.

We are pleased at the direction in which he will be leading the company we have founded. His forward-thinking vision and willingness to think outside the box is in line with all the core values upon which we founded M.R. Enterprises. We hope you will welcome him warmly and that you will join us in celebrating both our successes and the future of our firm. An invitation to a formal dinner in which we will celebrate our retirement and the installation of Gijare as acting President and CEO is soon to follow. Continue to keep us in your thoughts and prayers during this transition.

With all our love and appreciation for your support these many years,

Amir Baijal — President/CEO
Vinod Sharma — President/CEO

…

16 March 2016

Dear Future,

I write this letter to remind you that no matter how horrid things appear, they cannot be worse than the day I just lived. I could not be happier to resign this horrid experience to the past.

Oh, I know that the country club was glistening with fairy lights and the bubble of Moet champagne in my nose was enticing, that around every corner I caught a glimpse of women wearing beautiful gowns, some of which I could almost bet were designed by Aavya. The scent of cigar smoke billowed from the balconies, and the sound of music from another room was intoxicating me. I could almost feel my love at my side. But she was far gone, unable to return

even to see her father retire from the business he'd worked his whole life to build.

I longed for her, if only to have something in common with someone else at the party. I stood alone in the room, the shadow to the new rising star, a man I'd never met before shaking hands with him in front of the flash bulb of press covering the event. Sanjay is nice enough. He is not the problem. He is the solution, taking over what I was not willing to do. He is getting the best business deal of his life, and M.R. Enterprises will flourish under his management. I am the disgraced son pursuing a dream that few understand. He is the future of a beloved household name. A non-heir. The only other person who knows how I feel is still so disgraced by the event which happened when we were teenagers, that she could not attend one of the most important celebrations of her father's life.

I wondered how her relationship with her father must be. I wonder often about the many ways we have ruined each other for our love. Was it worthwhile for her? To find herself a banished princess far away from home? Certainly, it seems she's been able to do something with her life. As have I. I wonder if my mother is right, that our marriage might have ruined the both of us. But if their interference hadn't made the world seem so desperate to us in our youth, might we have been given the time to blossom slowly and succeed by each other's side, marrying when the time was right and having children in the same vein? I run through our story every day and night in my mind, but cannot find the start of blame for the way things turned out. It stretches farther back than the life I've lived.

I was mulling over such things as this when I made the worst mistake I could have made at that time. I was looking for Rohit, who had disappeared after one of his young daughters, toddling around in their beautiful blue taffeta dresses. I turned the wrong way and spilled champagne all over the shirt of Aavya's father. With cameras pointed at everyone involved, Vinod, laughed it off, making a b-line for the men's room to dry off his shirt. Like a fool, I let my apology linger for so long that I followed him there. I hadn't realized I'd let myself be cornered until he was screaming in my face.

"You drunken fool!" He shouted, "You dreamy idiot, walking around in a daze. How dare you even show your face here, when you ought to wallow in disgrace? Are you too stupid to have shame?"

I was not sure what to say. I admit that I stammered, unsure what to do. I couldn't just back out of the room and leave him to stew. Perhaps that's what I should have done. Instead, I continued to apologize. "If I've done something to upset you, sir--"

“Your whole life is an upset to me, you waste of a boy. You should have been a girl. Perhaps if my Aavya had been a son she would have been granted half the opportunities you’ve been granted. At least she would know what to do with them. Then I wouldn’t be handing the reigns of the only thing I’ve ever truly loved besides my daughter over to a stranger.” I could smell the whiskey thicker than cigar smoke on his breath. I wondered how much he’d consumed, not just tonight but since Aavya had left. When a father no longer has a child in his home, who is there to stop him from becoming a monster? The whispers of my parents across the dinner table in the past couple of years began to make sense.

“But no, wasting your own opportunity wasn’t enough for you. You had to ruin my Aavya so completely with your foolish talks of soulmates and love that she had to be sent a continent away just to be free of your wicked influence. You awful boy. You waste of a man. You ruin everything you love. But the thing you’ve broken worst of all was my daughter’s heart.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Part of my heart soared in a strange way to know that Aavya still wanted me, that she suffered the way that I had in those first days of our parting. Our souls, as I always thought, were the same. Did that mean she still pined after me? Of course, why else would she be gone from me? Separated after all this time. Her family was scared she still had feelings for me that would be relit if we saw each other. They feared the man and woman we’d become. We were so strong that at this time if we’d gotten together they would not have been able to keep us apart.

He wasn’t finished though, nearly foaming at the mouth. Clearly my mistake with the champagne had lit a fuse within him, and something exploded in him that had been building for years. He was on fire. And I was in his way.

“You should have died when you got hit by that car. Then Aavya would be here. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

At that, I lost control, something I’d never seen myself do. I shoved him, hard, just to get him away from me. His ugly face, red and flecked with spit, was looming too close and with those words, I couldn’t take it anymore. I’d considered myself a peaceful man. A civilized man. Not the kind of man who assaults another. But I was all primitive instinct, a stranger, when he swung hard and caught the edge of my mouth with his fist.

I’ll never forget the pain that exploded across my face when he did it. My memories of all other kinds of pain are faint in comparison. I know that being hit by a car must have hurt, but I was at least granted the reprieve of passing out. Apart from the occasional smack across the face as a child and the usual finger caught in a door or a scraped knee, I’ve not known the sharp pain of violence. But I will not forget this as long as I live. I shoved blindly again. I could hear the

animal noise he made as he fell to the ground.

My face in the bathroom mirror was red, and unshed tears glistened in my eyes. I reared back to attack him again but felt a sudden stillness within my body. I saw Aavya's father for who he was: old and miserable, a man who had created his own suffering and spread it to everyone he knew. Pain and its administration was the only thing he knew anymore. He was the sort of animal to attack and attack until someone drew blood from him, so he could feel satisfied that the reasons for his pain were not of his own making. It was uniquely pathetic. I could spit at him.

Instead, as he sat back on his elbows, panting and glaring through his beady eyes at me, I turned away. I could feel his gaze on me as he lay there, unmoving, petrified with fury. I spun the tap and let water collect in my cupped palm, throwing it onto my reddened face. I was sure a bruise would sprout there on my jaw, but perhaps one so small the cameras wouldn't catch. I pulled a paper towel from the machine and dried my face. I straightened my hair, running a hand through it to tame it down. Then I left him on the floor.

The guilt came to me later, after the adrenaline wore into a sick feeling, like a stone in the pit of my stomach. The cameras flashed, but not at me, as yet another distantly recognizable face in the business world entered through the gilded doors of the country club. I stood alone and red-faced in the corner, checking my phone for useless emails. Rohit appeared by my side the next minute, gnawing on the stick of a kebab pilfered from one of the many wandering waiters. "It's not your party," he whispered with a grin, "so you can't cry, even if you want to."

I rolled my eyes and turned to him. That's when he noticed the bruise on my cheek. "Woah, golden boy, have you been fighting?"

I bit my lip and nodded. I couldn't help but feel the shame welling within me, to even admit to that kind of behaviour. I had kept my fists to myself, even as a child. I'd been pushed so far over the edge that I didn't recognize myself. In the process, I'd confirmed in Aavya's father's mind that I was the very scoundrel he'd assumed me of being. I'd felt victorious at the moment to have struck him silent, to have ceased the vomit of hideous words that spilled from his mouth, but now I just felt horrified with myself. I knew better. I could have done better. I could have set myself up in a way that wouldn't have brought shame on us all. But instead, I failed totally.

Rohit simply patted me on the back, then snapped the kebab stick in half before sending it back on the tray of a disgruntled waiter. "This will all be over soon enough. Until then, enjoy the food and smile for the cameras. Try not to be a problem child for the rest of the night, if only for my sanity. I've already

brought two to this party. I can't be responsible for the little black rain cloud you're dragging around with you right now."

"Just put Kitty on my case. I'm sure she'll be able to take me on such a whirlwind tour of the amazing faces at this party that I'll get turned around and forget what I was blue about in the first place."

"Of course," Rohit laughed. "Everyone's her best friend. But see, the thing about twins is that Kitty is assigned to one, and I'm assigned to the other. That leaves neither of us to parent you. Go find your real father and make sure his drink is filled. It's his party, after all."

"Is your drink filled as well? You need the alcohol more than he does!" I laughed after him. But without Rohit to irritate and distract me, my thoughts were morose once more.

The worst thing about it is that I'd set up yet another barrier between Aavya and myself. The distance already between us, the insurmountability of our impossible situation, should have lessened the pain, but instead, it stung like the fresh bruise across my face. It was all my fault this time. I could have held my tongue and clenched my fists. Instead, I'd assaulted her father. When he told her what I'd done, would it crush what love she had left in her heart for me? Or did she have any left to begin with?

I sat at my father's left hand, with Sanjay now sitting to his right. Across the table, at the other seat of honour, Aavya's father sat, laughing and talking with his friends as though our altercation hadn't happened at all. The hall was a riot of laughter and love, a big celebration of the accomplishments of all who attended. It was a veritable gathering of success, which always draws success to it as naturally as magnets attract iron. So many of these people are ones who made their fortune when my father offered them a hand-up. Treating success as a ladder, my father was always reaching back to lift those who might otherwise have fallen behind.

I wonder if that is why his side of the table felt so much warmer than the side that the Sharmas occupied. The light my father cast was bright and welcoming. It nourished me as I grew up. Even in my darkest hours, my parents were reaching out to me to try and boost me up. Aavya's parents had banished her into darkness. It was a wonder she'd manage to blossom at all. But she possessed her own light. She'd used that to bloom into the woman I know she is.

My sickening guilt upon seeing Aavya's father's face turned to pity for the Sharmas once more. The same pity I couldn't help but shake through the years, one which had lingered despite my best efforts to dispel it since they'd first sent Aavya away. They were so convinced at what life should look like, so focused on what they knew should be the future; they hadn't allowed people around them

to be who they really were. Their hatred and irritation for those who deviated from their grand plans had truly eaten them alive. My parents had lived a life of worry and uncertainty, but even as they aged, it hadn't seemed to drain them the way the Sharmas seemed to be drained. My father was aging, but Vinod was an old man. Without the sunlight of his daughter in his life, he'd begun to wither.

But he was the one who had sent her away. It was his doing that had ruined my life, hers, and even his own. We were inextricably tied together in this mess. I couldn't help but dream of a life where he hadn't made that fatal error. I wonder if he ever did the same. In some alternate universe, was he my friendly father-in-law, a grandfather to my children, who doted upon them and showed the affection he'd never shown in this life? I struggled to imagine it, to feel empathy or anything at all.

Not even the bitingly sweet taste of bell peppers in my kadhai paneer could rouse me into the joy that the rest of the room held. Usually, food was a source of solace for me. And it had been a long time since I'd had such a fine meal, in a room full of people I loved. But the stain of guilt was upon me, and I could barely swallow. When the cameras were turned back to my father and Vinod as they sliced into the cake which had been prepared to them, serving Sanjay one of the first slices, I ducked away, a glass of scotch tucked safely into my palm. Sipping from it served to steady me until I could return, with a smile on my face, to claim a piece of saccharine iced sheet cake.

When it was time to leave, the valet brought my car around for me as I waited in the cool night air, grateful to finally breathe something clean and have a moment to myself once the cameras had dispersed. As I turned to tip the valet, I saw Aavya's mother and father in the lobby. Their faces were close together, but from their tense postures, it wasn't words of love they were murmuring to each other.

Oh Aavya! Without you, we're all ruined. I do wish you would return.

...

(A note scribbled on M.R. Enterprises executive stationery in shaking handwriting. There is a stain of something that might be spilled whiskey on its surface)

17 March 2016

Amir,

While I am grateful for your partnership in business and in life, I believe that it is time we conclude our friendship as our professional relationship comes to a

close. Your worthless son has besmirched the honour of my family for the last time.

Whatever faith you placed in him as you raised him to be the new figurehead of our company was a sore mistake on your part, one for which we have all suffered. Whatever support you're giving him to keep his childish little charity project afloat ought to end now, before he runs your coffers dry. I know you must be funding him. The boy doesn't have the insight or drive to raise his own funds, and never has.

You won't have M.R Enterprises to help you recoup the losses of whatever it is you're spending on him, should he fail you, as he has many a time. He is a layabout and a waste. A failure who will never amount to anything. Your inability to see that and to separate yourself from him before it's too late is a weakness that will send you to your grave.

Sincerely,

Vinod Sharma

…

7 September 2019

WhatsApp chat between Raj and Rohit

Raj: You really are so lucky man! How envious I sometimes feel of you, even now. 19: 30

Rohit: Lucky, my ass. I miss my days as a bachelor. 19: 45

Raj: Sure, you've traded long vacations and leisurely afternoons of watching football for dance recitals and early nights-in with the wife, but truly, you are so much more blessed now than you ever were. 19: 55

Rohit: Err… right. 20: 00

Raj: I know it can be tiresome at times-- I once slept sixteen hours straight after a babysitting session when the girls were four and your son was a baby. But still, I see the spark they bring to your eyes and the energy with which they infuse your soul. 20: 02

Rohit: That they do. I hope you saw their latest pics I put on the Cloud. 20: 03

Raj: Yes, yes, of course I saw them. Keep the baby pictures coming, yeah. The days may be long, but as they always say, the years are short. And Uncle Raj loves the sight of those smiling faces! ☺ 20: 04

Rohit: The little brats know that all too well ☺ 20: 05

Raj: How many teeth have the girls lost since we last spoke? I feel like when I was six, I'd lose one every other day. Hopefully theirs grow back straight—

otherwise, you'll have to pull the money for their braces from their college fund. Those things can be super expensive. 20:10

Rohit: Hahaha! Sure, man, raising kids is so expensive these days anyway. 20:11

Raj: But seriously, my envy is eating me alive. My life is so far off the track that I thought it would be on when I would reach this age. I figured I'd have at least half as many children as you do. 20: 12

Rohit: And I never thought I'd have any! 20: 13

Raj: Neither did I, but your Kitty is a tolerant and lovely woman. You can tell her I said so. But then again, I assumed at this point I would also have my wife by my side. Instead, I am chasing the woman who was almost my wife across continents, never really able to catch up with her despite my best efforts. 20: 15

Rohit: Oh well, I don't really know what to say … except I'm here if you want to talk about it. 20: 20

Raj: You know, Rohit, sometimes it feels like she is hiding from me, that she knows of my efforts to find her and she is thwarting them at every turn. When I was young, it was so easy to blame all these misfortunes on fate. But then I learnt just how many lives I could change with a single action. Now I feel almost too responsible for even the things that are out of my realm of expertise. 20: 40

People I've never met know my name and thank me for what I've done to better lives, even as we meet for the first time. So, are any actions truly a coincidence, or are they the result of someone else's best efforts? I wonder if I'll ever know. Perhaps when I die everything will be made clear? I wonder…20: 45

Rohit: Why this talk of death?20: 46

Raj: Maybe it seems gloomy to reflect on death when we are still so young... My mother sometimes jokes that I am young for my age, but sometimes I feel so unbearably old, though I've not yet lived half my life. It may be the wear of fighting so hard against what the future has in store for me. It's aged me prematurely. It could be the lack of true joy in my life? I know you think your kids tire you, but to me, what's truly tiring is watching this endless spread of days, day in and day out - devoted only to projects and goals, instead of going home to a family. 21: 00

Rohit: I feel you, my friend. And my kids are your nieces and nephew too. These doors are always open to you, man. Anytime of the day, or night. I mean it.21: 05

Raj: Yes, I can't tell you how much I adore them. But your legacy on Earth was secured the time your oldest daughter took her first breath and further strengthened when her sister debuted half an hour later. A part of you thrive even after you die and will continue through your lineage. People may feel that

children are possibly one of the banal blessings of life. They may not always consider them as a rare miracle, but to me, they are a promise of greatness that will survive even after my time on Earth is complete. 21: 10

I am not so young anymore, though sometimes, I do feel like a child. Neither is Aavya. I think often of the promise she made to me, one that feels too personal to disclose even now. It involved our children. I can't help but wonder if it was something she truly meant, or if that promise, like all her other promises, is lost in space. 21: 15

Rohit: Seriously, Raj – we have had this conversation over the phone too. I would like to put it delicately, but I don't know if that's possible anymore. Please, it really is time you moved on, my man. You can have it all. Success, fame, family, your immortality…whatever you want. But you need to give life a chance. It doesn't seem like you are… 21: 30

Raj: I am not able to move on, Rohit. Even if I wanted to dissolve this bond, I couldn't. Though we are time zones apart, I could no more do it than I could cut off my own limb. She has become a part of me now. Damnit, it feels like she is all of me. She is under my skin and on the outside of it too - igniting every nerve in my body at the merest thought of what if I find her. Even after all this time… 21:40

Her face sometimes blurs in my head, and I have begun to lose the cadence of her voice more often than I'd like to admit. Still, it sits solid in me that I am hers. She may not be mine, but I am hers... 21: 45

Rohit: Raj, this is perplexing. What will it take for you to stop this fantasy? 21: 46

Raj: Only if she tells me to turn away and to move on. But I cannot be certain that she wants me to do so. Not when she is so far away and I've heard nothing from her but dead air. 21: 47

Rohit: Oh, Raj… 21: 47

Raj: Just hear me out, Rohit. There is no one else who I can speak to about this. 21: 50

Rohit: I'm here. 21: 50

Raj: I feel myself approaching a crossroad. I am not sure what I will do when I get there. Perhaps I will have the courage to free myself from our world that I have spun in my head, the world which has now become feral and ruinous. Or perhaps, I will never feel such peace as I seek and my adoration for her will truly be the end of me. Maybe fate will intervene as I once thought it always will, and we will be united after all. I still dream of that day more than I can say, my friend. 22: 00

Rohit: I know that. And do understand your feelings… 22: 01

Raj: I know you know my heart. I know you know my dreams. But I wonder if she still does. 22: 02

Rohit: Why so sombre today? Has something happened? 22: 03

Raj: Ah, I guess I get maudlin when I stay at the office past five. 22: 03

Rohit: And you don't eat when you indulge in sentiments. Have you eaten anything today? 22: 05

Raj: OH, come on - I'll get something on my way home. Okay, let's lighten it up. 22:05

Congratulations, by the way, on the new home! I'm sure you'll fill this one up with more children until you need to move once more… Hahaha! 22: 06

Rohit: I hope not. No more children, I keep telling Kitty. 22: 06

Raj, can I say something at the cost of sounding soppy? 22: 06

Raj: You are talking to the soppiest man alive. Let it out... 22: 06

Rohit: I hope you know and remind yourself every day that you ARE loved while you are here with us on Earth. My children will remember you. A million children whose lives you have changed will remember you. You will never be forgotten. Sometimes, we don't need biology to make history. 22: 07

Raj: ☺ 22: 07

…

26 September 2019

From:rohitsharma@gmail.com

To:aavya@gmail.com

Aavya,

I tried to talk him out of loving you. You were the one who asked me to protect his heart, and I have done so, so much so that even I can't break it at this point. That is something only you can do. Even after all this time.

He does not know that you are back in town. He is easily distracted by his business and by his fruitless search for you. He thinks you are in Paris. I don't know what he will do once he finds out that you are sleeping in a hotel room six kms away from his office.

You must be the person to tell him. I cannot. He will hate me forever if I do and I can't bear that. Our lives are entwined in many, many ways, and he is not like a brother – he is my brother. He cannot end our friendship and cast me aside. I cannot lose him to hatred. And he will hate me if he knows that I have kept you from him. You know that. The guilt is already eating me alive. Know that it is hard for me to not address this letter to him instead of you. I won't be able to

keep this from him for much longer.

Raj dreams of your child. He still thinks the two of you may have a future together, that the only thing standing between you two and a happy ending is ‘distance’. I will not tell him about your husband and children. It’s not my story to tell. But you do. You need to tell him your story.

I pray, for everyone’s sake, that you break this to him soon, in person, and please be gentle. He may hate you for it, but I doubt that after this much time spent loving you that he will ever reject you. You are his Aavya. There is no one else but you in his world. When you tell him, his world is going to crash. And I am the one who will pick up the pieces. Have a good think about that.

Just break him already and get it over with. I cannot stand the agony of waiting much longer. I am not the ever patient and besotted Raj.

Rohit

...

From: aavya@gmail.com
To: rohitsharma@gmail.com
28 September 2019

Rohit,

Everything you say is correct and fair. I know it. I feel it down to my bones. But there is a part of me that hesitates. I don’t know what I will do once I see his face again.

If it makes any difference, please know that I still love him. I will always love him. But we can never be. Saying this out loud, and to him will make it real.

I don’t know if I want it to be real yet.

Just let me linger on the precipice a little longer. Then I would jump.

Aavya

…

From: aavya@rediffmail.com
To: sruthisharma@yahoomail.com
15 May 2011

S,

I have some news, and I feel you’re the only one I can share it with. I never

thought this would happen but it has. It has.

I fell in love. With a lovely, considerate, sweet man. The sweetest man ever.

I know what you are wondering. I wonder the same.

What kind of a woman that makes me, forgetting one love for another?

I can’t come back now. I guess that leaves but one way to find out what I am- by moving forward.

Take care,

A.

Part Three



The Monsoon of Crashed Hopes

2 October 2019

WhatsApp chat between Raj and Rohit

Rohit: Psssst! 11.04 pm

I want to meet you soon, if you have the time. 11.04 pm

Raj: I always have time for you. 11.07 pm

Rohit: Ok. Then, even if you don't have it. 11.08 pm

Raj: My my! Is someone missing me? 11.11 pm

Rohit: I know with your expansion into childhood education in its infancy, (pardon my puns) you're living out of your office and have been for God knows how long! I went into your apartment the other day to see if my son hadn't left his toy car under your couch and found a thin layer of dust on your kitchen counters. While I know that spending your days in that shiny office of yours just makes it easier to find you should I need to track you down, but it's no way to live for any length of time. It feels like you're without a home, for far too long. 11.12 pm

Raj: Awww… Are you proposing to set up my home for me? 11.15 pm

Rohit: I will remind you, (By the way I'm only saying what Kitty keeps reminding me all the time) that we are not as young as we once were, and it's unhealthy for you to call a pull-out loveseat your second bed. 11.16 pm

Raj: No love, but one can at least sleep on a loveseat! 11.17 pm

Rohit: Oh, do shut up please! Let me treat you to lunch-- but make no mistake, we won't be going out midday for beer and fried food. It'll be all green tea and fresh vegetables for you. Maybe just a salad, to keep you trim around the middle. 11.18 pm

Raj: Haw! Are you saying you won't find me hot anymore if there's more of me to love? 11.18 pm

Rohit: Haah, right. The only person you have to think of as your wife is bald and goateed, with a hoarse voice and a tendency to nag? I never promised in sickness or in health to you. If your diet of fast-food and celebratory whiskey sends you to an early grave, all I can say is that I told you so. Many a times. 11.19 pm

Raj: Ok, ok. Mea culpa! Yes, let's meet but is there something in particular you want to tell me about? It feels so to me… 11.19 pm

Rohit: I know that I beat around the bush a lot when I try to talk about stuff that matters, but yes, I do have some important information for you.11.20 pm

Raj: Nothing worrying, I hope? 11.21 pm

Rohit: No, no nothing to worry about. Just meet soon? 11.21 pm

Raj: Ok, how about luncheon on the 6th at The Lake Café? 11.21 pm

Rohit: Sounds good. 11.22 pm

Raj: See you on the 6th, mmmmuah! 11.23 pm

Rohit: Shut up. 11.23 pm

...

11 October 2019

Dear Future,

I fear you in a way I never have before. Even when I was betrayed by you, long ago when still young, I did not feel the dread I feel today. Because before, I did not know what you had to offer. I think of Aavya, as I always do, but this time, I don't wonder. There is nothing left to wonder about.

All my questions have been answered. Years spent dreaming and imagining have amounted to this: I waited. Aavya did not. All the joys in life that I assumed would come to me in time if I stayed faithful are no longer mine to have. Aavya is not mine, if she ever was. She is another man's wife, a mother to children who are not mine. I repeat this over and over: not mine, not mine. I have nothing.

I had felt a stone weighing in my gut as I approached the table where Rohit was sitting. The sense of Deja vu that I felt, seeing him just the way that he had been some fifteen years earlier, hit me like a wave. It could be the stress I could see radiating off him--his shoulders were tight, and there was a deep frown in place of his usual self-satisfied smirk. He seemed incapable of being comfortable. It had been strange to watch Rohit, who could make the most uncomfortable space on Earth seem like home, fidgeting like a toddler in his

chair.

He had my favourite drink on the table when I arrived. “Food’s on its way,” he muttered. “Have a seat.” I settled down into the chair, unsure whether or not I was settling down to my own execution. Or perhaps something worse had happened?

“Is it Kitty, or one of the kids? Has something happened to you?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s not a bad thing, necessarily. It all depends on your perspective. Isn’t that what you’re always telling me? About how your choice of a positive outlook has helped you do the things that others couldn’t?” It was a rhetorical question. He took a long pull from his straw, still looking at the table, instead of at me. At once, I understood.

“It’s about me, isn’t it?” Rohit nodded. I let out a long sigh. If Rohit had information of interest to me, there was little clue as to its subject. “Aavya?” He nodded again. I could feel my heart sinking. He took another pull from his straw before he spoke.

“I’ve always tried to be honest with you,” he started, “and to help you remember the joys of life. That’s been our friendship. That’s been what I’ve done for you since we were boys. So, when I received this information, I debated about what to do. If I’m honest with you, you may have trouble finding joy in this. But if I keep you in the dark, I would have failed you even then. I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“Tell me,” I breathed, even as I felt anxiety beginning to choke me. A prickling sensation erupted all over my scalp. “Is she alright?”

“She’s fine,” he assured me. “More than fine. She’s here.”

It was as though I’d been slapped in the face. Two words, stinging sharp.

“Where?” I could feel my veins thrumming with both fear and elation. I knew she wasn’t in the cafe, but I couldn’t help but imagine her around the corner, waiting to pop out and surprise me. For a flash of a moment I saw her in my mind’s eye, a woman who had barely aged since we were eighteen, smiling that smile of hers and falling into my arms as though we’d never been separated. But our truth never matches our fantasies, no matter whether we are dreaming of the future, or the past. And by the look on Rohit’s face, I could tell that the future wasn’t something I wanted to hear about.

“At home, with her father. He isn’t doing well. Bladder cancer. The doctors were considering removing it at one point, but there are blockages in two of his arteries that are making the surgery impossible.”

“That’s not good,” I replied, “if they’re removing the bladder, that might mean that the cancer has spread outside.”

“It was hard for her to get her family in from Paris, especially travelling with

a toddler," Rohit said gently, "they wouldn't have done it if they had any other choice." It was as though he knew, that with breaking this news, that he was breaking my heart.

"A toddler?" I could barely hear my own voice over the rush of hot blood filling my ears. The world felt very far away. I had a distinct feeling of vertigo, as though I was falling and falling into a bottomless abyss…

"She has two children," Rohit said, "and a husband." He added, a bit sheepishly. "Some man she met in Paris. He's a kind man. Older than us by a couple of years. Works in finance. Something boring and steady."

I nodded numbly, unable to do anything but accept these things that I wished I could reject. The barista found us outside, smiling blandly as he delivered two sandwiches in plastic boxes on the table. "Can I get you anything else?" he asked, turning on his heels when Rohit waved him off. I couldn't find my voice.

This is reality, my brain screamed, this is your reward for living a life made mostly of fantasy, you blithering fool! You built a whole world in your head and none of it was real. When the rain came, those sugar spun wisps of imaginary delight melted away with it. This is how it all falls down on you.

"It's all in this letter," Rohit said, his voice uncharacteristically timid. "She wanted me to pass it onto you before she had to leave."

"She's leaving again?" Somehow, that was worse than knowing that she'd come in the first place.

"They don't know when. Her eldest son has school, back in Paris. He's already been so disrupted by his grandfather's illness. They just want to get him back into a routine. But it depends on her father's health."

Though I'd fought with her father in recent years, I would never have wished for something as horrible as this to happen to him. How all our lives had been ruined, but now that his was running out of time, I could see clearly just how much suffering he'd undergone. Abruptly, I regretted my negative feelings towards him in recent years.

"I ordered the food to go," Rohit told me, "as I thought you might want to be alone when you read her letter."

"That was kind of you, Rohit." I fished in my wallet for bills, but he waved me away.

"This is the cruelest thing I've ever done to you. I told her I wanted no part in it, but she wanted to break this to you as gently as she could, and having her appear on your doorstep one day, changed and so far from the girl you once knew, wouldn't have been the way to do it."

I couldn't tell Rohit that for years I'd fantasized about her doing just that, but bearing happier news than what I was hearing, and not under such horrific

circumstances in her own life. I picked up the box because it was the appreciative thing to do. I felt anger stirring in my gut towards Rohit. I couldn't help but feel that in a way, he and Aavya had conspired against me, that he'd held back this news from me while he figured out a way to break it gently. But seeing how crushed he looked, I couldn't muster up any real anger. I was mostly numb from shock and sadness.

The letter was heavy in my palm. It was a couple of sheets of printer paper folded together with Raj written on them in Rohit's handwriting. Nothing at all exciting. Something he'd picked off the printer tray at work. No blue envelope promising forever. There were no promises in here.

I took the long way back to the office, reminded of Rohit's earlier admonishment that I was looking unhealthy. I hoped that the walk might clear my head or provide solace to my broken heart, but all it did was further confuse me. Images of Aavya flitted through my mind. I couldn't tell if they were real or concocted memories. I'd lived so much of her in my head that I knew I'd be in for a shock when I saw Aavya, the real Aavya, in flesh.

I'd always tried to imagine her ageing, but at almost fifteen years since I'd last seen her, I couldn't possibly be prepared for the real thing. I'd thought of laugh-lines on her face, but would we truly know each other? It was hard to say. Would we pass each other on the street right now and not notice each other, convinced that any resemblance we saw was a hallucination, a memory of a long-lost love?

She was here. She was home. She was leaving again. She was going back to Paris with her own family, one she'd made without me. All of these were facts I couldn't seem to process, though I couldn't get my mind off them. I had to go back to the office, to get a handle on the rest of the day's work. There were a lot of things I had to do.

Instead, I went home. I could see now what Rohit had meant about needing to spend more time here. This rented apartment in which I lived had lesser personality than my college dorm. My office was sparsely decorated with pictures of my parents, of Rohit's children, with degrees and awards and bottles of whiskey sent to me by business partners. I had a string by the window, to which I'd pinned my favourite "thank you" cards, drawn in pencil or crayon by some of the students who had enjoyed the lessons they'd learned at Awesome Academy. But my home had one sad-looking piece of abstract art hanging on the wall, something I'd picked up at a charity gala I'd remember being moderately interested in. It wasn't a home at all.

I always imagined that I'd build a home when Aavya came home to me. That the spaces on the walls would be lined with Rothko or Picasso or whatever artist

she would be obsessed with, the kind with lines and shapes that gave her new ideas for dress silhouettes or whose colours were so bawdy and bright she had to use their inspiration for spring. Later, I had imagined that the walls would have goofy portraits created by our children. That there would be flowers on the table (ones I'd picked for her) and love notes on the bedspread of our bedroom (ones she'd written for me).

But now, facing the prospect of building a home without her, I cringed. It was hard to take in all the empty spaces I knew now she'd never occupy. I didn't want to be here. And I didn't want to be in my office, either. That was my actual problem. I'd spent so much time dreaming about being with her that my mind didn't know what to do when faced with the prospect of living life without her. It seemed impossible now to start over, to let myself be enough to hold up all the things I'd built in my life for two.

All of my life, I'd been living like I was waiting for her to walk through the door. I hadn't learnt how to live for myself instead. Everything changes for me once I open that letter. I know I have to do it. But it frightens me to know that in one move, the fantasy I've lived will be gone forever. Perhaps I'll sit here a moment longer, waiting for the right moment to bring an end to everything I thought I knew.

Raj

...

1 October 2019

Raj,

How strange it feels to write to you again after all these years. I must admit, there is a part of my heart that still flutters like a schoolgirl at the thought of your name, though it is not a name that has been on my lips for many years now. Old habits die hard, I suppose, especially when they sprouted from such sweet soil.

Please don't be angry at Rohit, who, for all his oddities and his faults, has only tried to be your friend and to help you through this very difficult adventure that we call Life. I know he was agonized by the position I put him in, wondering whether or not he could keep my return secret for another day when he knew it was the only thing you wanted to hear. He has punished himself enough for one lifetime over this secret I forced him to keep. If you must be mad at anyone - be mad at me, though I dread the thought of you feeling anything remotely negative towards me after so many years of love. I suppose that I deserve it, after all these years of silence. So, I will steel myself to receive it, though in earlier years, your disapproval would have broken my heart.

It has been a long time since I left you. I am a woman now, and far different than the girl you knew. I know you are not the man I knew those many years ago. But I wonder, are you still a dreamer? Do you still imagine impossible things and create empires out of nothing but your own will and clear vision? I have seen you do incredible things as I watched you from afar, in magazine clippings and interviews. I am glad that you could do so much with your life even though I couldn't be there to support you.

Since we were parted, I have lived a very good life. I don't know if my parents told you anything at all about what I've been up to, but I made it in the fashion world, just like you thought I would. I'm mostly behind the scenes at a prestigious luxury brand company, working as an environmental liaison and inspiring the next generation of luxury to be eco-conscious. I also do designs for a green maternity clothing line. I learned a lot about the sartorial needs of pregnant and new mothers once my first son was born.

I know that you have lived an incredible life. It warms my heart every time I see you in the papers. I've saved every magazine with your face on the cover. My children have taken courses on Awesome Academy. My husband developed a lot of his copywriting skills that have been incredibly useful around his office from the lectures your courses provide. I took one class of yours, but stopped midway. I could imagine you carefully handcrafting each line of education your company offered. It reminded me so much of how you used to talk, talking about your dreams late into the evening. I was so happy for you that I cried.

I hope you can feel such happiness for me, when thinking about the things that have happened in my life. I have a good husband who loves me as you once did, and two incredible children from him who are the lights of my world. Oh, Raj, if you could see them play or listen to them laugh, your heart would swell with joy.

A family is all I have ever truly wanted. I know when we were young, we had dreams of building one together. I hope that you will do that one day when you find a woman who loves you even more than I did. Never doubt, Raj, that I did love you. I still do, in my own way. But more than I love you, I love my children. When I find my mind wandering towards what could have been, the sound of my youngest crying or my eldest singing quietly in the bath reminds me that I am exactly where I need to be. I do not ask your forgiveness for my resolve, but I hope you will grant it anyway, and that if not today, then someday, you will understand.

Rohit says that apart from the Academy, your life has been rather quiet. I know you are prone to introspection, but at times I worry that such behaviour cannot be good for you. I know that Dad and you fought, a few years ago. I

stayed away because I was afraid that my return would make your relationship with him even worse. But I can stay away no longer. He is dying. And soon he will be gone.

I would like to see you before our return to Paris, though I must admit that the thought scares me a little. But you and I were brave once, and so we shall be again. If you have the time to visit an old friend, I'd like to meet you at the art museum. I don't think my heart could handle the lake or the library. Those are places where our story still lives. We're saying the goodbyes we never got to say to each other, and I can't say my goodbyes in those places.

Email me at aavyalelievre@ecoluxegreen.com and we'll set up a time to talk.

Your friend,
Aavya

...

(A piece of paper in Raj's handwriting, crumpled, then smoothed and salvaged).

Aavya,

I'm writing to tell you no. That I'm not going to do this. That I'm going to sit at home and watch television and live life through someone else's eyes. I'll clean my house, my kitchen counters. I'll iron my clothes. I'll do anything other than meeting you.

My life has been a good life, if incomplete, because it's one with hope and possibility in it. I don't want it to end. I don't want to destroy it by coming to terms with things I know will never be true. Why won't you people just let me live and die in my fantasy? The one where I have waited patiently for the love I've always wanted, and I receive it in full? I've lived in anticipation of a happy ending since I was seventeen. Please, unless you're coming to tell me that I can have that, just don't come at all.

I don't want to hear about your family and the wonderful life you've lived. I don't want to hear about your father's suffering and your own fears. I don't want to hear about your return to France, and the things you've loved, and the life you've built of which I will never be a part. I don't want you to be happy for me. I don't want to try to be happy for you. I don't want to feel this way anymore. I don't want to keep waiting for you, staying up all night later than I intend to, even when my body is chasing sleep, because I still think you'll be coming through the door. I don't want to fake a smile when you walk into the art gallery tomorrow and break my heart. I don't want to say goodbye.

I just want you.
Raj

...

From: rajawesome@awesomeacademy.com
To: aavyalelievre@ecoluxegreen.com
22 October 2019 6:17 PM
Subject: Art Museum

Aavya,
11:00 AM works for me. A week from today? I'll take an early lunch.
Shall we meet on the steps?
Looking forward to seeing you. It will be nice to catch up after all this time.
All my best,
Raj

...

29 October 2019
Dear Future,

I arrived at the museum and there she was, on the marble steps. As beautiful as the day I last saw her, with her hair swept into a low bun, not a single hair out of place. Stylish as always. Age had only refined her. My Aavya. I could feel myself intoxicated by the sight of her, before I even smelled the perfume she wore or looked into her coffee-dark eyes. I was drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I knew approaching her would destroy me, but in that moment, I could think of nothing I would like more than to let her destroy me.

She did not see me when I first approached her, instead she was scanning the posters advertising the latest travelling exhibit with interest. Those same keen eyes, that same considering smile. I remembered how I would have moved mountains for that smile. If she asked me, I still might. There was the same magnetic quality about her that pulled me closer into her orbit. I would have fallen to my knees in front of her to see that smile widen even a fraction of a centimetre.

At once, I realized where I was and who I was standing before. In the next moment, her eyes were on me. That smile widened and she raised her arms as if to hug me. I rushed forward to embrace her, pausing at the last moment to remember that we were not eighteen and free any longer. A gold ring glinted on

her hand. It was not the one I had placed there. The diamond was far bigger than anything I could have afforded back then. I wondered what had happened to that plain band that I'd spent what felt like a fortune on at the time. But then her arms were around my neck, and I forgot everything.

She still smelled like sunshine and spice, a warm, peppery scent that reminded me of those too-hot summers we'd spent in each other's arms, when the world was far away, and all we needed was each other. When she pulled away, I felt bereft. I wanted to press my face into her hair and remember until I'd forgotten everything about the past fifteen years and we were simply Raj and Aavya, by the lake, holding hands.

"Raj," she said with a smile. "Raj."

I couldn't speak at all. I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask her-- whether her husband knew if she was here, or if she wanted to run away with me right now, and never look back. Even the sight of her couldn't dissipate the terror and anger and brokenness inside of me, the way I'd imagined all these years it would. I thought one touch of her hand would heal me, that one kiss would set me right. But now I knew, this wasn't magic or a fairy-tale. We were just two people who'd loved each other, and lost.

"I don't know what to say," she said with a laugh, and for the first time I could see the sadness that lingered in her eyes. I realized that in her version of the story, I was the prince locked away in the tower, someone to be pitied. Someone she couldn't rescue from living the same life in the same city. What an odd reversal we'd made of it, considering she'd been the one who had been kidnapped. How was it that I was the one who'd come away in need of saving?

"I don't know, either," I said, "but it's nice to hear your voice."

"I want to tell you everything," she said, "but I'm not sure where I'd even begin."

"Seventeen years is a long time to cover," I agreed.

"And we don't have the time to cover it," she said. Her smile faltered only a little. There was a scarf tied around her purse. Hermes, I realized, dimly pulling the name from a myriad of designers I'd researched when I thought Google might yield details about her fate. "Andrei agreed to take the children to the park for the afternoon so I could meet you, but that's only a couple of hours before they get hungry again. And I've missed you for what feels like a century. Hours simply won't do."

"Start small, start somewhere," I said, standing stock-still before her. It was all I could do to prevent myself from holding her again. My eyes could not help but take in all of her. The silhouette of her clothes against her thin body, the curl of her hair, tamed out of its once frizzy state with some expensive product. This

was the Aavya I'd known when we were young, only evolved, with seventeen years' worth of new experiences. Aavya, taken to her natural conclusion. A formidable woman in a yellow blouse, black skirt and kitten heels, looking all French. She could take me apart with one smile, and I would let her. No one had held that kind of absolute power over me, not even my father, since she'd left. I'd been my own man until she came back into my life. But now, I was hers once more. "I feel as though I've missed you for longer than my mind can fathom. Tell me everything." I begged. "Pick a place to start, and begin."

The sweet tone of her voice, that laugh, so bright and clear, like a bell ringing in my ears, those electric eyes and the excitement she could barely conceal as we meandered through the garden outside of the museum, talking of nothing and everything as the fragrant perfume of flowers tickled our noses. It took us back to a simpler time when we were free to belong to each other, before the world had gotten in our way. So far away from everything we'd come to know over these fifteen years of separation, it was hard to remember that we weren't so free any longer.

It thrilled me to just listen to her as she explained how her passion for the world had shaped the industry she so loved, the accolades and praise that she'd received quietly. She claimed that she preferred to work behind the scenes and within a team, and that she was not so fond of the praise she'd gotten, though she was happy that the causes she championed for had gained international attention. The plastic sea within the sea was shrinking, she said, and she couldn't help but feel as though it was, in part, because of her efforts to wake up the world to a more sustainable way of life.

I admitted that she'd influenced my life every day in small ways, as well as the big ones too. I'd stopped taking plastic straws at restaurants because of her insistence that they would find their way into the gullet of some endangered sea turtle, or end the life of some beautiful, tropical fish. Our limited resources on this Earth were too precious to waste on disposable convenience. Her eyes lit up at that. I could tell what she was thinking: after all this time, we still could speak to the words that existed in each other's souls. We were mind-readers, once so perfectly in sync that we could finish each other's sentences. Was it any wonder our lives had followed such comparable paths, half a world away?

She spoke of her time in college as though the memory were bittersweet to her, and I could understand how it might be. I'd considered the fact that I was able to spend so much time at home with my family both a blessing and a curse. A curse, because I knew there was a whole world out there, one which contained my only love in some undisclosed location, that I would never see. But in other ways, I was blessed. I loved Chandigarh, its sultry streets and even warmer

culture, its sweltering days and its dark nights, which held secrets glimmering like stars within its depths. I loved my family and my home.

Aavya, on the other hand, had been denied closeness with her family in this familiar environment where she was born. It had been taken from her and held just out of her reach at every turn, mostly by her father's paranoia that if she happened to be within the same city limits which also had me; the decisions she'd make would ruin her life before she was old enough to live it. I'd wondered for years whether or not that was my fault. But Aavya didn't seem to blame me, and by the end of our conversation, I was able to let go of the many worries that had haunted me since we were first parted.

Apparently, they'd come more than once in a semester to visit her in New York, and had only increased the frequency of their visits once she'd moved to Paris. Especially once she'd met the nice boy who would one day become her wonderful husband. How I wanted to hate him. How I had hated him, and her, only last night. The thought of them together made my stomach turn with envy and chagrin. I felt foolish, to have waited when she had not waited for me. But the truth was, a woman had never come into my life who was anything like Aavya's husband was to her.

Her courtship with him had been nothing like our courtship. There was no whirlwind, no declarations of passion, but there was also no suffering and loss, the sort that I ached with for more than a decade. It was quiet and kind, slow to grow and even slower to anger. The kind of abiding love that I would have given her if only we'd had the chance to mature in each other's arms. But I was not there, so she found it in another. I could not fault her for that.

She told me about how they met when she was studying abroad in Paris, a semester before she'd graduated and moved there full time. He'd asked her out during that semester but waited a whole summer for her to return. She'd put him off many a times, but he kept waiting, and three summers later, she was ready for him. She'd spent so much time hoping that one day she'd be able to come back to me, but through all that he'd waited patiently for her. He'd told her honestly that he would be just as happy if she found love with me, but would wait until she'd decided for sure.

When she'd accepted that she couldn't have the love she wanted with me, she'd turned around to find the next best thing, which had been waiting for her all along. She fell into his arms because she felt safe there, and happy. She loved him still, and their love was still growing. Their story was being written. Ours, she accepted, had ended on her wedding day.

The time passed quickly, yet at the same time, it did not feel as though a single moment had passed. I felt as though we had spent a year in a moment,

until at once, we hit the ground and snapped back into grim reality. She had to see her husband soon. I had to return to a life she was not a part of. I realized only once she'd left, that Aavya would never kiss me again.

I wanted to feel the rage that had consumed me earlier, or at least the gutted hopelessness, which meant I understood the loss which had befallen me since she'd married another. But instead I felt a strange sort of peace with this, as though the future had been right to set up a good life for her, since she couldn't have it with me. In truth, I was a bit angry at myself for feeling this happiness. If you're not heartbroken, is it truly love at all?

But even through my confusion, I was glad to see that she was happy. And she was happy. It reminded me of those days we'd spent at the lake, carefree and far away from all the things that we knew. She'd escaped her troubles before they had a chance to wear her down or tire her out. And in spite of the fact that she was raising two small children and her father was incredibly ill, she still managed to look joyful, and as radiant as ever. I knew Aavya like I knew my own soul. And I couldn't help but be happy that she had found the sort of love that could nourish her for her whole life, even though I wished that love had been with me, instead of with another man.

It was not her husband who broke my heart or made me envious. In a strange way, when the conversation turned to her children, the loves-of-her-life, that was when my heart broke more than anything. Because those children who she raised were walking this world with Aavya's smile and sense of purpose. But their compassion and kindness, their understated politeness of which Aavya bragged about, their reasoned ability to think and dream in small, practical steps, was not a gift from her. It was a gift from her husband. For too long, I'd dreamed of the wonderful people whom Aavya and I would make, passionate speakers and fiery leaders who fight for justice and create the beautiful new worlds they dream of. These children, though they were lovely, were not mine. That broke my heart in a way that I didn't recognize. I was no stranger to heartbreak, but this feeling, both old and new, struck me in a way I'd never been struck.

It was then that I realized that while I still loved her, I didn't miss the woman sitting in front of me. I missed the woman I had built up in my head, and the future I'd dreamed of for years that would never be mine. Those children that we'd had together, the ones who had only existed in my dreams, would never come to fruition. What they represented was nothing more than a fantasy. And to enjoy the presence of Aavya, who she truly was now, to love her as I still felt I did, I would have to leave them, and the rest of the falsehoods I'd built for myself, far behind.

Without those children, I was still a good man. A kind man. A successful man

who had influenced the future and had affected the lives of many in a positive way. And without those children, Aavya was still lovable, as a friend, as an old love for whom I'd always hold a burning flame. She was a strong and powerful woman who had done a lot of wonderful things in spite of the hardships of her life. I could see it in her face. That was all I wanted for myself.

But I had no time to voice all these feelings swirling inside me before our time together was cut short. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Her face fell. "That's my husband," she said with a frown, "apparently my youngest is running a fever. It's probably just from teething, but..." she trailed off with a shrug. My heart sank. I'd done little but listen the whole time we'd been together, and yet I still had so much to say. But she was buttoning her purse and zipping her coat, getting ready to walk out of my life once more, as though the separation wouldn't shatter her to pieces once she willingly accepted it. And maybe it wouldn't break her, but I wasn't so sure about myself.

When she bid me goodbye on the steps, she wrapped her arms around my neck again. The smell of her perfume, the warmth of her body against mine, was all the kiss goodbye I needed. But she lingered for another moment, whispering in my ear. "I won't be home for much longer. But I want to say goodbye one last time before I leave. I'll email you if you want to meet me. I can't help but think that despite today's meeting, everything's not finished between us yet."

Then, before I could respond, she'd spun out of my arms, and onto the street once more.

...

(A poem on a torn sheet of notebook paper, written in Raj's handwriting, in blue pen)

The Last Time
Is it enough to say goodbye?
Does it punctuate,
the flow of feelings,
words that live unspoken,
On the tip of my tongue?
Does it dam them up?
Holding back the flood
of words unsaid,
of thoughts unvoiced,
threatening to destroy,
all the good I have created?

Does it, like a band-aid
Staunch the bleeding,
of dreams that died
For want of you
And a life unlived
Without you in it?
Or can it, like glue
Keep me stuck together?
The parts of me that break
My heart crumbling to dust
When it learns that you
No longer call it home?
I can't say goodbye
Even if it healed me
I want to tell you the truth
And goodbye
From my mouth
Would be a lie.

...

4 November 2019

Dear Future,

When my phone rang late at night, I assumed that it was Rohit. Sometimes, when it's his turn to take care of his youngest son in the middle of the night, he will call me to chat.

But it wasn't Rohit.

"Hello?"

I recognized her breathing, even before she said, "Raj," in a weak, strange voice. I'd only heard that voice once before, many years ago, on one of our last nights together.

"Aavya?" I asked. I'd been drowsing on the couch, surrounded by stacks of papers, with the television still blaring. I'd answered my phone still half asleep, thinking I'd been dreaming the sound of it ringing. But when I heard her, I scrambled to my feet.

"It's happened," she let out a strangled noise that I realized was a sob. It took my tired brain a moment to figure out what she meant. Her father. Oh.

"I'm so sorry," I said, unsure of what else to say. I'd never liked or trusted Vinod, and thought he'd been cruel to Aavya. Still, he was her father, someone

she loved and honoured above all. Especially since they'd spent so little time together, I couldn't imagine the pain that she was feeling. Still, I didn't understand entirely why it was me she was calling when she had a husband who could tend to her far better than I could. The thought echoed in my head. She had a husband. And I wasn't him. It should be him comforting her. There was nothing that I could do for her. I didn't even know how to do that anymore. It wasn't my responsibility either. And I was trying to let go.

But the sound of her, so miserable and helpless on the other line, made my treacherous heart do backflips. I knew that even after all this time, I was still helpless. I was under her spell, and the need to make her happy outweighed the need to express confusion or irritation over this situation. Aavya needed me. Who was I to turn her down, after all this time? Just another hopeless fool, in love with a woman. As though I was a flower in the garden where we'd first kissed all those years ago, I had nowhere better to turn but towards the sound of her voice. I was in love with her, even after all of this. Perhaps I always would be.

"He just... died. His heart gave out, in the middle of the night. I'd been sitting by his bed, reading a story to him that he'd read to me when I was a child, then I dozed off, and he just--," she heaved a gasp, then let out a strangled laugh. "I suppose it wasn't a bad way to go. You hadn't seen him, Raj, he'd been in so much pain..." I couldn't imagine if his physical pain had been anything like the mental hell into which he'd cast himself for the majority of his life.

"It sounds like it'd been a long time coming." was all I could say, "but still, must be a shock to actually lose him. I don't know how a person could prepare for something like that."

"I actually thought that I could. Prepare myself, you know. I thought I was ready. But I'm not, Raj, I'm not."

"I know, I know." It was all I could say, to mutter soothing nothings into the phone and wish that I could hold her once more. I didn't understand why she had called me. I was bewildered though happy just to hear her voice.

"Raj," she asked after a lifetime, startling me. I realized I was still talking, though I'd long run out of things to say. I could only hope that I hadn't told her "I love you." God knows that phrase was no longer mine to say to her.

"Yes?" I asked, hoping I sounded supportive, instead of as lost as I felt.

"Do you remember that conversation we had, near the end? We were lying together, talking about the future?"

"I'll never forget," I swore. It was the most honest thing I'd been able to say to her since last we saw each other.

"Remember how I said if we didn't work out, I'd freeze my eggs, because

this world shouldn't have to go on without our child in it?"

My heart stuck in my throat. Of course, I remembered. It was the only thing I'd been able to think of in years. I'd mourned the loss of that child almost as much as I'd mourned the loss of Aavya herself. My foolish, foolish heart, so easy to break and so easy to pull itself together once more, thought something incredible might be in the works. Something too dangerous to dream of.

"Someone I've loved my whole life died tonight, and all I can think about is that I need to put another good person in this world to make up for the loss of him," she said. My heart stopped entirely. "I don't want to carry another baby. My husband and I are done having children. And I'm at peace with that," she continued, "but ever since my youngest was born, I haven't been able to shake the feeling that I wasn't finished yet. I've talked about it with my husband, mostly joking. I have told him about this guy I loved, with whom I promised I'd make a baby one day. Once we arrived in Chandigarh, among the bustle at home and all the sweet nostalgia of my youth, I couldn't stop thinking about you. And he realized and remembered. He actually brought it up. The concept I could never manage to forget. Freezing my eggs. Putting one last wonderful child on this Earth. And making it with you."

"I..." my heart had started up again and was racing double time to make up for the stillness it had felt. "Are you serious?"

There was a silence over the phone that must have been Aavya nodding, because she whispered, "Yes. I'm serious. I've been thinking about it for years."

The only thing I could answer was the truth, "So have I."

"You'd have to line up a surrogate," she said. I could hear the smile in her voice. It shined like sunlight across the dark walls of my room. Suddenly, my empty apartment did not feel so empty. "I'm serious when I say I won't carry a child again. And there's another condition."

"Anything," I breathed.

"I don't want to see you again, after this…" she told me. All the warmth and light went out of the room, and I was plunged once more into total darkness and despair.

"I... what?" I asked. I could hear my voice crack, the tears threatening to spill as the weight of her words knocked the wind out of my lungs.

"I think it would be best. Seeing you broke my heart open," she said, "all these feelings I'd repressed for so long just sprang out from within. I can't let that happen again. I'm a mother. I have a family. You are my past, but you cannot be my future. I'm doing this, giving my eggs, because it's right." I could hear the resolve in her voice. How many years, I wondered, had she thought this through, sitting alone in her room, even though her husband might be lying next

to her, fantasizing of a time in the future when we might be able to see each other again?

“I don’t understand,” I started.

“It’s right, Raj, and good, to create a life together. I feel as though our destiny has come to fruition. We can’t be together, ever again. Not as we were. Not as lovers, as close as husband and wife without ever exchanging rings. Not as soulmates. But as a single soul. That is how we can live on forever.”

I heard a sob then and realized she was the one crying, whether from joy or sorrow it was hard to tell. “You can say no,” she told me. “You don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to do. But Raj, I hope you say yes.”

And when she asked me like that, how could I not? It spilled from my lips like a prayer.

“Yes, let’s do this. Let’s.”

Yours sincerely,

Raj

Epilogue



The Summer of Hope

5 October 2048
From: rajawesome@awesomeacademy.com
To: aavyab@gmail.com

My Dearest One,

My favourite girl, the brightest star in my sky, the relentless beam of optimism and joy that lights my darkest day. I did not know love before I met you. I don't think anyone without children truly knows it. I will love your mother for all of my life, but nothing I felt for her, that all-consuming, burning love, can compare to the love I feel for you. Raising you has been my only purpose. If necessary, I would abandon everything, your mother, all over again, all my friends and family, the work I've done and the claims to fame I have, just to make sure you are safe and happy.

I think I have been a good father. I was not always confident, though with the help of your Uncle Rohit and Aunty Kitty, I soon became almost smug in my ability to diaper a baby and wipe a snotty nose. I know that sometimes I have been harsh on you, or withdrawn and lonely. I have not lived up to every promise I've made. There have been times when I have forgotten the wonderful parenting advice that I have been given. But know this: I have tried my hardest to be a good father to you. And you have been the best daughter a man could ever dream of.

I know, my dearest, that in some years you might be a mother yourself. That

fiancé of yours is a good man. And he will make a good father. But know that even after all of this time, I do not have all of the fatherhood figured out. He will need guidance. You will need guidance. You are in a more fortunate situation than I am in some ways. And I hope that is because of my parenting, but I know that it is mostly because of your incredible ability to summon good things into your life. You are so lucky, my love, to live the way you have. And I am so glad to have watched all of your successes and joys so far. I wish you many more in the coming years.

Raj

...

2 December 2020

Dear Future,

I forgive you for every heartache I have suffered in the past. I am ready to let all of our horrid history go, and to enjoy the fact that you are finally working in my favour. You are bringing the ultimate rectitude into my life as I write to you.

My life took a major turn when Aavya agreed. And I didn't waste a single moment in finding a perfect surrogate for our baby. I knew I had to do this far away from my family and prying eyes of the shallow society of ours, hence I chose a girl from San Franciso. Her name is Jane and she is the best girl I could ask for to carry my baby. I have practically moved here for almost an year – for the tenure of pregnancy and for the next few months. I know moving nursery and all baby stuff would be a hassle later, but I could move mountains for this baby, a nursery should not be a big deal then.

Oh future, how I feel blessed to let you know that she is being formed as we speak. For the love of her, I forget your pains and forgive every slight against me. My soul is free, on fire with the light of a joy I have not known as long as I've lived. A joy, that before this, I have only imagined: the joy of being a parent.

I know this because I have the ultrasound sitting on my desk. A blurry image in black and white with body parts labeled to let me know that she is growing happy and healthy, with only four months left to go before she is breathing in this beautiful world. I have a little daughter, growing within Jane's womb, who will soon be mine. I'll be a father. A father! All I have ever wanted is coming to me. It's happening to me. I am counting down the days until I hold her in my arms, and am able, once and for all, to put this wanting ache in my soul to rest.

This is the child I have dreamed of for so many years, the child whose face I had seen in the face of other smiling children, whose presence I've dreamed about since I was a young lad. And soon enough, she'll be my child. Part of me

is giddy with joy. Part of me is completely shocked that Aavya offered. I knew it was our dream to have a child together when we were young, but now that we are older, I was afraid she might have changed her mind. To know that she also had dreamed about the existence of this child just cemented the resolve in my mind: to bring this beautiful girl into the world.

So soon enough she will exist, dark hair, dark eyes, and the same smile to die for that paints itself across her mother's lips. The same clever wit and brilliant ability to plan a future for herself. Brave and strong. A wonderful little girl and a powerful woman. I am already so far in over my head. But I couldn't be happier if she were in my arms right now. My daughter! Imagine. Something I thought would never happen is now on the verge of becoming my reality. Aavya and I are having a child together.

Of course, Aavya will not be the mother here in the real sense of the word, beyond providing the genetic material for our child. That was what she, her husband, the surrogate Jane, and I all agreed upon. No one else will have any legal claim to the child. I am parenting alone. The thought filled me with dread at first, but now I feel brave, ready to take on and face the struggle that will be single fatherhood. This child is so worth it to me. I cannot wait to raise her. I know it is destiny and fate that made this happen for me. So, I must do the best I can to be a good father and to live up to the high expectations that fate has cast upon me. I have been gifted with a daughter. I cannot fail her.

In some ways, I am a father already, though I do not yet hold this baby in my arms. I am currently preparing my home and making it ours, with a little help from Rohit and a lot of help from Kitty. I've heard that it takes a village to raise a child, and it's good that in my village I have the parents of three children. Nothing surprises them about children. Any question I have, they can answer. I've joked that I'll have to hire them as live-in nannies, though Rohit balks at the thought of wearing an apron and changing diapers. "I've done my time," he keeps joking, "I've potty-trained three. Three. I won't ever do it again!"

They've been a great help when it comes to designing the nursery. I've never been much of a spender, though I've never been short on cash, I could empty my wallet in a toy store for that child who has not even been born. I've painted the walls a cheery yellow. The crib is made of dark wood. There is a rocker in the corner and curtains that filter in the morning light. On the wall is a painting that was once on the wall of my own nursery. It seems safe and happy. The kind of place in which Aavya would want to see her baby grow up.

I try not to think about Aavya any more than I have to think about her. It's not that I hate her, it's just that there's no more room in my heart for the sting that thinking of love lost can cause me. It's easier now than it ever has been to

put her at the back of my heart. Now, I'm making room for a new love. I will love Aavya until the day I die, and the power of that love is a warm fire that lights my whole being. But I am warmer now than I ever was when I loved her alone. All because of this beautiful gift that Aavya has given me.

I have no questions left about Aavya. Only answers. I am satisfied with every answer she has given me, though my heart will never stop longing for her. She is alive, well, and happy, with both a career and family that fulfil her, working hard and sleeping every night next to a person she loves. I know she still loves me. I know she doesn't mind me loving her. Even though what I learned about her life wasn't what I wanted to hear, it was clear to me that she was living a content life, one that she'd always wanted to live. How could her happiness hurt me?

It seemed in a way that my unhappiness was the only pain I had caused her. Even through my jealousy and all the things that our families had done wrong, the only genuine pain I could see that she felt was that she caused me unhappiness. Wasn't that why she'd originally contacted Rohit in the first place? To beg him to look out for me, and keep me happy while she was away? It's why she's made the ultimate sacrifice for my happiness. How many other women would be so brave as to make good on the word of their younger selves and put a child into the world that they would never nurture, never raise? Only Aavya. She's the only woman I've ever met who is capable of doing the things that she has done.

Especially with the impending birth of my daughter, I no longer ache for love. I have it in spades. I feel such great love in family, in my friends. Aavya has gone her way, with her family and children, and I am here, going my own way, towards fatherhood and the joy it brings. Now that she is gone and we have separated, I am able to see clearly just how blessed I have been. Even with the loneliness of my twenties and the pain of our separation, I have never truly suffered. Indeed, I've been richly blessed, not only because I've been loved, but because I've been able to love another with no promise of anything in return, to love, for love's sake alone.

I also see the people around me in a new light now that she is gone and my daughter is on her way. There are many loving people around me who have blessed me through these lonely years. It seems that all along, I have had almost all the love I needed. My parents and friends, Rohit, and Kitty, and their many beloved children who will be wonderful friends and playmates to my daughter. With my daughter, my family will be complete. I will have all that I desire. My heart will ache no more.

Thank you, future. I forgive all of the sufferings that I have had to live through in this lifetime because it has set me up for the moment that will come to

me soon enough: the birth of my daughter. I am grateful for the accident, the aches that never truly healed, the slight limp in my walk and the sadness in my soul. I thank you for the many near misses that felt like spears into my chest as I searched for Aavya. I thank you for the long nights alone as I built my company, for the naysayers who made me feel inadequate and all the fighting I had to do to realize my own potential.

I see now that it is the contrast of those sour moments that makes the sweetness I feel now so very sweet. I see how many opportunities and lessons have come from failures and falls. I see now, that it is only in falling to my knees, that I've been gifted the ability to rise and stand on two sure feet. So, thank you for the lessons, and let me apologize for every time I've grumbled and complained. I know now that it was only my happiness I was destroying. I deprived myself of so many happy moments by deciding to be sad instead.

So, thank you for this unexpected happiness. This daughter I get to raise, to love. Thank you for the sacrifices that so many have made to bring her into this world. Thank you for the many joys I will feel, but thank you also for the hard times to come. May I never react again with sadness and hatred in my heart, but instead, may I remember the miracle which has occurred, and how blessed I am because of it. Because of her. My Aavya.

Raj

…

3 March 2021

Dear Future,

More news on our favourite girl! Jane says that she is being an absolute menace. Kicking at her bladder at all hours, morning, noon, and night, making it impossible to sleep. What a spitfire of a child! I think she wants out into the world. Though I tell her every time that I see her, she doesn't need to rush, and should grow strong and healthy inside the womb for as long as she can, I must confess that my excitement grows with every week that passes. Only six more weeks to go, then I shall see my wonderful daughter!

I can't wait to hold her in my arms. It doesn't matter how many books I read or how many late-night conversations I have with Rohit about baby-management, I know I am not at all prepared or ready to actually hold her. But if I waited until I was ready, I'd be waiting for the rest of my life. So, we will learn from each other and teach each other. Eventually, we'll have it all figured out, but by that time, she will probably have children of her own. Imagine me, a grandfather someday. How did all these possibilities roll into my life?

I know it with certainty that she is the most incredible gift that life has given me. All my fortunes and hard work mean nothing when compared to the wonder that this child is already in my life. In spite of the fact that she is yet to be born, she has already made the world around me so much lighter, so much better. The world to me now is full of possibilities, and laughter, and fantastic things I don't remember feeling even as a child. All my hopes and dreams are finally unfolding, and I am beyond satisfied. I am not even that old yet, but there is so much meaning and promise in my days already that I can barely sleep at night. I feel such excitement just thinking about what will happen in the weeks to come. And it is all because of this wonderful child.

She's the answer to my prayers, grainy evidence in an ultrasound that says that God is real and his love for all of us expands across the Earth. Looking at her on that monitor, in a hospital room a lot like the one that I once lay in, thinking my life was over, I realized that my life had not even started until this very moment. My heart grew, just watching her move sleepily, protected in the tiny world of the womb. I will have to be that protection for her once she is born, I realize. I know only a little of the grave responsibility of being a father. Especially one all alone in this world, without a mother to nurture or provide relief during the long sleepless nights that are to come. But here is what I can promise her.

I promise that I will love her without conditions or questions. She will have my support no matter who she is or what she decides to be. No sin can make me abandon her. No transgression will ever make me love her less. I will love her until I draw my last breath, and then love her in the next life. I will make that love obvious to her every day, sharing it with her until she takes it for granted. I want her to take my love for granted, so that she knows that no matter what she does, she will always have her father to rely on, in both good times and bad.

I promise that I will fight for her and that I will always be by her side. Even when we disagree, and I have to parent her and guide her, I will not view us as two people in opposition to each other. I will view us as two people fighting for the same thing: her freedom, her happiness, her safety, and all the goodness that she deserves. Perhaps we'll have to compromise or work it out for weeks at a time before we come to any conclusion, but I won't fight her or battle her, try to break her spirit or make her less than she is. There is a world out there that wants to do that. I refuse to be my child's bully. I will be her knight and protector.

I promise that I will be honest and truthful with her even when it is hard. When people want to know where her mother is, and who she is, I will simply say that she is a loving woman who lives elsewhere, but whose love was enough to create an incredible young woman. Maybe I won't be able to tell her

everything at once in a way that she can understand, but I will make that effort to eventually reveal all things. Even the uncomfortable and sad things. Even the things that break my heart. I will be honest with her so that she will trust me all her life.

I thought, when she was first conceived, that it was just her and me, that we only had each other. But now I realize that we are a part of a larger community, who love her and accept her already, who want only her happiness and will fight for her just as I will. It was Aavya's love that helped conceive her. And Aavya has been given enough. She doesn't need a mother if she has a loving family. I don't worry about that any longer. I will be what she needs. I promise that much.

I can't wait to tell her all these things myself. I can't wait to hold her, to listen to her first word, to watch her take her first steps, to be there when she graduates school and finds her passion, finds someone of her own to love, and learns, as children often do, from mistakes that everyone around them has already made. Most of all, I can't wait to love her through it all.

Raj

...

17 March 2021

WhatsApp chat

Rohit: So, how's it going? 8:00

Raj: How do you THINK it's going. It's like a snowstorm of diapers and onesies.8:30

Rohit: Awww… Well, you have the offer of babysitting from Kitty. The woman is a ball of energy. I say, take her off my hands.8:30

Don't tell her I said that. 8:31

Jokes apart, she honestly thinks that parenting gets easier with every new child you have. Because they can play with each other or some such. I suppose that's one of two reasons we have so many. The other, of course... ☺ 8: 32

Raj: You are a dog. 8: 32

Honestly, either give me good advice or be gone! 8:33

Rohit: Ok, Ok, at this point, you don't need much. A good and NEW car-seat, not a bought or used one. You never know whether those have already been in an accident or not. You don't even need a crib yet, though the one you already have in the nursery is beautiful. I slept in a drawer for the first two months of my life and know many people who did the same. :P 8:34

Might be something that inspires genius tendencies or makes a person more attractive. Clearly, you want your baby to turn out as awesome as me. Perhaps

she’ll grow a goatee when she grows up. 8:35

Raj: I shudder at the thought. But please, don’t let my sane remarks interrupt this transfer of knowledge… 8:36

Rohit: Fine. 😐 I’ll tell you what I really think about being a father, so you better write it down. 8:36

Yeah, so there is no one way to make a family. The determining factor always is love. 8:37

Love your child, as desperately as you loved her mother or more. Your first thought on waking and your last thought before you sleep should be her wellbeing. Think of ways to make her happy. Ensure her safety. Protect her peace. Dream of a good life for her, then wake and do everything in your power to realise that dream. 8:38

Raj: ☺ You are not a dog. You are a god. 8:40

Rohit: Hahaha! Ain’t I?! But seriously, I’ll tell you what--there will be days when she tests your last grain of patience, and days where she is going to be incredibly trying just to be around. Days when you think that she is deliberately trying to create trouble for you, and days when she will make your life easier. 8:42

Children aren’t quite of this world alone. These little persons have one foot in the land of miracles and the other firmly on the ground. It is your job to relish the fruit that grows in that land of miracles, not to try to drag her too much into the harsh reality. 8:43

Laugh at her jokes, even when it is the fiftieth time she’s repeated it on that day. Even if the punchline doesn’t make any sense. Because there will be years ahead when you long to see her smile light up the room, many years in the future when she will be a moody teenager or a stressed-out college student. This short period of carefree innocence (or temporary madness, as I like to call it) is worth loving just as it is. 8:45

Raj: Go on… 8:45

Rohit: When she makes a mess and destroys stuff that you think is valuable, take a breath before you yell at her. At that moment, think about what you value most in this life. There is nothing more valuable than your child’s eyes, sparkling with mirth just because. 8:46

If she says or does things that embarrass you in front of those you respect, or some people who might not have, or even like children; people who will judge you for that moment, be on her side anyway. She doesn’t know any better then. She’s still learning. Have faith that at the heart of her stupid actions that often backfire, she wants to make people happy. Even if that silliness irritates adults, laugh with her, and know that the self-assurance she gets from you siding with

her then is worth far more than you gaining the respect of people who won't let children be children.8:47

I'm not saying that I don't struggle with parenthood, but I know for sure that I could be happy sitting on the street with nothing to my name if I have Kitty and the kids by my side. 8:48

I know it will be the same for you. 8:49

Raj: Wow, Rohit. That is incredible advice. I want to know more… 8:50

Rohit: There are days when she will not eat or want to take a bath. There are days when she will stay up way past her bedtime, openly defying you beyond her own point of comfort and happiness, just because she wants to defy you. 8:51

Maintain the rules you have set out for her. Rules that are there to keep her healthy and safe, but also remember that she is little. She is trying to be big because she sees you governing yourself. So, she wants to do the same thing, and may not understand why the rules are different for both of you. Be patient when you correct her, and be loving when you show her how things are done. 8:52

She will understand in time, and she will be grateful for your guidance when she makes friends who were not shown the ropes of life the way that she has and watches them fail…8:53

So, those are my tips. Did you take notes? 8:54

Raj: I am so floored–don't know what to say. 8:55

Rohit: Thus far I've raised three children, none of whom seem to be serial killers as of now. I suppose you can say that I'm a successful father. 8:56

Raj: Hallelujah!8.57

Rohit: Hahaha! Totally. But I know that you will be one as well, Raj. How could you not be? Your baby was conceived out of love and will be raised by a person with the biggest heart ever. 9:00

Raj: Thanks, brother. But I am nervous. 9:00

Rohit: Don't be. You're wise. You're a creative thinker and a problem solver. Babies are full of problems, which only grow as they grow. So, I am confident that your daughter is in the best hands. 9:01

You are self-made, independent and hardworking. You will be an amazing father on your own terms, but know that you do not need to do it alone. Kitty and I will be there to support you when you need support, just as we always have been. 9.02

Raj: ☺ Can I say that I love you? 9:02

Rohit: Too much mush. :/ 9:03

Raj: Honestly, Kitty and your support mean so much to me. Thank you so

much for always being a part of my crazy plans and for being there for me, even then (you know when), and especially now. 9:04

Rohit: Congratulations, new dad! Enjoy your last week of uninterrupted sleep before the big day comes. God knows you deserve the rest. May He grant it to you abundantly! 9:05

Raj: Hahaha, speaking from experience? 9:06

Rohit: You bet. 9:07

...

30 April 2021

My Dearest One,

I am writing to you from the hospital waiting room, to let you know your name. I'd kept it a secret for some time, lying awake at night trying to decide what your name will be. It's been months of thought and worry, but when I decided upon it, it felt clear. It felt right. In the end, there was only one name that I could think of that would encapsulate what I want for you: the freedom, the light, the choices you will have. Your liberty, your bravery, the glowing sunlight with which you will illuminate the world: Aavya.

This is the name that I have loved above all names, and it's a love I want to share with you. It's a love that you are the part of. You are the conclusion of that love; the best outcome I could have dreamed of. You are my greatest dream, come to life. And right now, I am waiting for your birth. I am shaking with joy and anticipation. I can't wait to see the person you become. I know that if you are anything like your mother, the woman whose name you share, you will be a truly incredible person. And if you are not like her, I have no doubt that you will become the sort of woman with whom she'd be proud to share a name with.

I wanted you to have a tangible connection to your mother, even though she may not be in your life. This was the best possible way that I could think of to make it happen. Your name is her name. Part of her life is your life. No matter how far apart you might be, you will know that you were the product of two people's love. You will feel your mother's love surrounding you each time you write your name on paper or hear it said aloud. Just a tiny spark, but it will be a glowing flame of love in your life.

I can't wait to see your face. I can't wait to hear your cry, a sound that will mean you are alive and boldly existing on this earth. I can't wait to hold you in my arms and watch you take your first breath, to know that this is the beginning of our lives together. I want to kiss the top of your head, to smile down at you in my arms and say, "Hello, Aavya. I'm your father."

It will be a few hours, at most, until my dream comes true.
All my love,
Your Father

...

How Being a Single Father Saved my Life and Helped Me Save the World.

Raj Baijal

25 March 2028

When it comes to visionary creatives, I've yet to meet one who can see the world the way that my seven-year-old daughter can. When I have a particularly hard problem that I can't hash out in the boardroom or while on lunch break, sometimes the only way that I can find the answer lies in watching her play. With focus and singleness of purpose, her toys move in an elaborate dance, their storylines interlocking and spinning off again in ways that I can barely follow. They fall, they rise, they help each other and hurt each other in a way that would put any Bollywood writer to shame, and yet at the end of the day, the day is saved, all is right with the world, and everyone is tucked into their little doll beds to sleep soundly until morning comes all too soon.

The real world is not so different from the world she interprets through dolls and building blocks. Mercy reigns, as does love, truth, and faith. Those are the abstract concepts of the world that she understands as intimately as her lungs know how to breathe and her heart knows how to beat. But the forces they clash against--hunger, injustice, poverty, cruelty, are alien to her. And in the real world, unlike in her games, sometimes, they save the day. Still, good does not quit, and love does not stop trying. At the end of the day, the battle for truth and goodness may have been lost, but the war wages on. And those of us who fight for good have not tired of it yet.

When I started the Awesome Academy, many years ago now, I did not realize that in doing so, I was making myself a general in the fight against ignorance and poverty, against inequity and injustice against sexism, racism, and the many other isms that keep some people held far below the standard of human dignity to which they deserve to rise. I simply thought that I was making a teaching platform that would rise and fall on the app charts within a year's time. I was prepared for failure. Even the success I saw was not nearly as miraculous as the success I actually achieved.

From then on, Awesome Academy was my life. Expanding the program to be

bigger and better and to reach people in need was my only focus. I spent all of my twenties and most of my thirties sleeping in my office, neglecting my apartment, my relationships, in favour of the next bigger and better thing.

Through that hard work, Awesome Academy grew exponentially. I was able to travel to the slums to witness the horrors of abject poverty, as well as to mansions more opulent than anything I'd ever seen. I've visited six continents in my time as CEO of Awesome Academy and met countless men, women, and children who have been given a fresh start in life or a solid foundation due to the courses I've been able to provide to them. I've worked with educators, translators, and am able to provide lectures in over 70+ languages and dialects to people around the world.

This was enough for me until I was offered the opportunity to raise my daughter. But in comparison to seeing her smile at me for the first time, or her grasping my finger in her tiny hand... well, there is no comparison. My world shrunk back. Gone were the continents I'd visited, the people I helped. Those first few weeks out of the hospital, I did not care for anything beyond the walls of her nursery and that tiny wonder in the crib.

But one day, feeding her a bottle and watching the news while she drowsed in my arms, I saw a refugee on the television running with a baby not much older than mine in her arms. My world expanded once more to other tiny beings. I thought about my daughter's peers, the ones who were growing up in war-torn and ruined countries, who might starve to death or be poisoned before they were old enough to speak. Who could not advocate themselves or dream of going to school, who could not dream at all of the immense privileges in which my daughter would grow. I called my secretary and told her I was ready to return to work.

I don't think my employees imagined I'd be returning to work with a sleeping infant strapped to my chest, answering phone calls while mixing formula, and conducting meetings while rocking my daughter to sleep. She grew used to the sound of the elevator door opening and closing and had her own little "desk," an activity table by my office desk, where she worked to learn while I worked to make a world in which all her peers would be able to learn. With every milestone she crossed, I celebrated but worried simultaneously about those many children in the world her age who were delayed in that milestone or who would never make it because of malnutrition, poverty, and war. In a way, the whole world had become my daughter. It wasn't enough just to keep her fed and safe and happy. I had to fix those problems for the rest of the world.

I haven't managed to do it yet, or this would be a very different article entirely. But in the time that it's taken my daughter to get to kindergarten, we've

been able to establish a free lunch programme for the poor and destitute children in my hometown and in three satellite sites in India. Our early childhood education programme is available in 30+ languages in every country in which Awesome Academy is accessible. On any platform, including the many tablets we've donated to schools around the world, young children can develop literacy and language skills, math skills, and a budding interest in the sciences.

A child in Cape Town and a child in New Delhi can ask the same question: why is the sky blue? And receive the same answer on an interactive platform that engages them in critical thinking and allows them to explain it to their friends. The universal language of math and science is shared by my child and every child who uses Awesome Academy. To know that I've set up a platform where my daughter can get her start as a member of the larger intellectual world and community is of great comfort to me. Wherever she goes in life, whatever problems she solves or answers she pursues, I know I have done everything I can to give her the knowledge she needs, knowledge far beyond what I possess myself. I know I've started her on a solid foundation and helped her peers be put on equal footing as well.

This quest towards advancing the next generation has made me consider my own generation in a new light. I've met many people my age, and even a little younger, who have been laid low by inequity. Some are illiterate or unable to do more than basic sums, starved or wasted by too many years of back-breaking labour, or lost in the substances they've abused to make a hard life just a little easier. What was I doing for those people of my own age? I wondered. Did my parents, when I first wrapped my own tiny fist around their fingers, wonder about the world that they were bringing me into and the suffering that would befall those born on the same day?

It was not just enough to provide lectures and coursework for those who were able to find the time and space to learn a new skill. From that, the Adult Literacy Improvement Scholarship Endowment (ALISE) was created. We have graduated three years' worth of classes in India, Pakistan, and the UAE, both of men and of women, completely free of cost to them and their families. In spite of backlash and outrage, we have improved the lives of over one hundred people. I can't wait to improve one hundred more or one thousand more.

There is a postcard on my refrigerator of a girl, born not far from where I grew up, who began using the Awesome Academy when she was seven years old. She recently graduated secondary school and will be attending university on full scholarship in the United States. But in the picture, she is still very young, staring up at the camera with a wry smile. The photographer does not yet know all she will accomplish. Neither does she. Nor do I. But when we come home

after school, my daughter smiles at that picture as though she is smiling at a friend. “Daddy,” she says, “that girl looks like me.”

For my daughter, and for every child she sees as a friend, as a part of her family, and part of her world, I’ll fight to make that world just a little bit better. I invite you to join me.

Raj Baijal is the Founder and CEO of Awesome Academy, a multidisciplinary virtual classroom that aims to provide access of knowledge to all people, from infancy to adulthood, in order to advance the pursuit of human knowledge and raise the status and dignity of all people regardless of class, location, or ability to pay. You can find more about Raj by visiting www.awesomeacademy.com or by following him on Twitter at @RajAwesome.

...

23 March 2039

Raj: Hey, so Kitty and you will be there for Aavya’s graduation next week, right? 3.00 pm

Rohit: Is that a question? Of course, we will be there to watch Aavya graduate High School. Oh my God, how time passes. That sweet baby with long eyelashes and outrageous laughter is a young woman already. What happened to that little girl with chubby cheeks and sticky fingers? 3.10 pm

Raj: Yes, I feel like it was just yesterday when she’d waddle up to me like a duck, chant Dad-a. Now, that little monkey is going to be a graduate. God. 3.11 pm

Rohit: Yes, How incredible. She has worked so hard. I know how many nights you had to cancel our standing dinner date in order to stay home and help her with Chemistry. A parent works almost as hard as the child to accomplish anything. The glory, of course, will all be yours too, but I feel I ought to say something about all of your efforts as well. 3.12 pm

Raj: Hahaha, yes, one of my biggest achievements so far, I’d say. I took to heart the advice you gave all those years ago when Aavya was about to be born. 3.12 pm

Rohit: Brother, while you have done many wonderful things in a single lifetime to change the world, I feel confident saying that the best blessing you’ve bestowed upon this earth is your daughter. 3.15 pm

Raj: Yes, I feel so too. 3.15 pm

Rohit: What a girl. What focus and single-minded purpose at her age. She possesses an unearthly devotion to making the world better. With all the resources she has and all the fire with which she pursues everything, it is a

wonder she hasn’t taken over the whole world yet. 3.15 pm

You may have done amazing things with Awesome Academy, but just you wait. Once Aavya Baijal is released, there will be no stopping her until all of the world’s problems are solved. 3.15 pm

Raj: Well, she is a force to reckon with already. Rohit, what will I do when my Aavya flies away? 3.16 pm

Rohit: What will WE do when she is gone from your house and you have no more reason to ask me for parenting advice? Well, seek solace that in some years you might have the good fortune of becoming a grandfather, though we’ll let Aavya finish her degree at the university before she even considers a husband. Hahaha! 3.17 pm

Oh, and at least a Masters… 3: 18 pm

I already pity the man she’ll marry. She will have droves of men who fall in love with that personality. Thank God that her studies have so far kept her off of boyfriends. 3.20 pm

Raj: Hahaha, spoken like the father of two girls! Also, how can we be sure she doesn’t have a boyfriend? 3.22 pm

Rohit: Three! But you know her. She tells you everything. She will tell you if she does get one. 3.23 pm

Anyway, if she does have a boyfriend in the near future, I know you of all people will know better than to try and prevent them from seeing each other. She is stubborn and headstrong and loves just as boldly as you. 3.25 pm

Raj: I wonder what I’d be had I taken your advice all those years ago? 3.25 pm

Rohit: Ha! Don’t embarrass me now. A married man, perhaps, but still, a colder one than the man you are now. 3. 26 pm

Raj: Thank you for being there. 2.27 pm

Rohit: No thanks needed. Kitty and I send our love and an email with a little something extra in it, just for Aavya. I remember the excitement of getting graduation money and hope that she will use it wisely. She is so serious sometimes; just make sure that instead of investing it she spends it on something silly, such as loads of fancy shoes or a trip to Europe or whatever it is teenager girls love nowadays. Unless, of course, mutual funds are all the rage. Somehow, I doubt it, but you never know with the kind of ambitious friends that Aavya has. 3.35 pm

Raj: Hahahaha, Yes, one never knows these days. But honestly, I couldn’t have raised Aavya without you two. 3.40 pm

Rohit: And we can’t think of her as anything but our daughter. 3.45 pm

...

aavya-baijal-valedictorian-speech-class-of.docx

Family, friends, fellow graduates, it is an honour to be here today addressing you from the podium. When I learned that I was to be valedictorian of our senior class, well, many of you know me, I was restless. I could not sleep, I could barely eat. The responsibilities weighed on me.

It is said that with great power comes great responsibility. It is also said that unto whom much is gifted, much will be expected. Consider your position on this earth at this very moment. You are graduating secondary school, in a position of privilege indeed. Think of the hours people have spent working to get you to this position. Your parents, who have worried over you since your birth, investing all their time and energy moulding you into the successful young man or woman you are. How their hearts must swell with pride to see you. How overjoyed your teachers must be to send this class of informed and passionate citizens into the world. They can't know what we will do. They can't see the future. But they have such high hopes.

Since before my birth, the hopes of people on this earth have weighed on my shoulders. I know many of us can say the same. We were born into privilege, and as such we have responsibilities that we cannot shirk or deny without causing the world to suffer for it. But when we do as we have done so far, taking on harder and harder projects, always going the extra mile and trying to think outside the box, we fulfil the hopes of someone out there waiting for someone with privilege to offer them a hand up, so that they can help the next one in line.

We are part of a generation that is better than the one who came before us. The generation after us will be stronger than we are as well if we do our part to make them strong. It is the way of the world. So, we must remain cheerful and never tire of fighting the good fight and doing good work. I know that sometimes, especially to those who have been gifted, both with terrible hope and terrible responsibility, the world can seem heartbreakingly broken at times. But it is our opportunity and our great privilege to be healers, to be visionaries, and to have the chance to try where some people will not be able to try.

So, I urge you to consider, on your drive home, before the parties and celebrations. I urge you to take a moment of quiet pondering and reflect on this question: what will you do with this life? You have just received a gift more precious than the checks your aunties and uncles will send, the parties thrown in your honour, the mugs and bears wearing graduation caps--you've received an education. And a good one, at that. So, what will you do with it? Will you waste it on something small? Or will you step up to the challenge this world issued you in burdening you with a terrible greatness, and making something wonderful

happen?

Knowing this class as well as I have, I believe that you will. So, I encourage you to try. Take the resources available to you and do good. And when you tire of doing good, know that there is a community of fellow do-gooders and gifted try-ers who will be there to lift your chin up when you feel down. I know all of you know that you can call me at any time, day or night, and I will be there to offer a word of support, a cup of coffee, bus fare, a smile. Because that sort of currency is a gift-- and the kind of thing that is worth more than its monetary value when it comes to encouraging the good in this world.

Thank you for a wonderful education, and the amazing work that I know you will do once you leave this place. And happy graduation!

...

23 May 2039

Dear Aavya,

On your graduation night, I knew there was one gift left to give you that I did not want to give. It's not that I disapprove of the gift itself--I think it is a wise thing to give you, especially now that you are old enough to read the information. I also would not break a promise, no matter how difficult it was to make. But I know that in giving you this gift, everything will change. It is a letter from your mother. Yes, Aavya, the mother after whom you were named.

I promise that I have not read it. I will not read it. I respect her wishes as she has been nothing but respectful of mine. I know there may be more questions than answers by the end of it, so I'm going to give you the puzzle and let you work it out yourself. You are a smart girl. Too smart for your own good, even. My heart still flutters just looking at her handwriting, though whether it's a fault of muscle memory or the love that lingers in my heart for her, the love that will never dissipate, it's hard to say.

Here is what I know:

Love made you. Love sustains you. Love will abide in you, as long as you live.

My love eternally,
Your Dad-a
Raj

...

1 January 2021

Dear Baby,

As I am writing this, you are not even a baby. You are half of a lifeform, an egg, waiting to be fertilized. An idea. Incomplete. All potential.

Once, my life was a lot like yours. Incomplete. I was waiting, hoping something would happen. Then, one summer night, I kissed Raj Baijal in my parents' garden. And that was the catalyst. My world thrown into motion with the press of my lips against his.

Everything that was going to happen began that night in the instant our skin first touched. The world burst into life and started to decay. Our first kiss doomed us, but still, we were full of hope. We fought, and we tried, but in the end, we were not as strong as the forces that moved around us and within us. We fell apart.

It's simple physics, really.

But if I were able to take one moment out of time and save it from the crush of gravity, I would take that kiss and save it. Press it like a jasmine flower in suspended motion, hold it safe behind glass where nothing could touch it. Hold it like a specimen, an example of love, perfectly preserved, forever.

Your conception is an attempt to do that.

Because once, I was in love with your father, in the way that a drowning woman loves a lifeboat, in the way that a locked door loves a key, in the desperate way that lungs love air and parched earth loves the first touch of rain. He awakened the memory of freedom within me. And once I tasted it, I only wanted more.

I convinced myself once that I could never have stayed with Raj and lived the life we thought we wanted. What nourished me about your father was the wildness of him, all the fresh air he provided that stagnant summer. He was the cool breeze. But he wanted to comfort me, to soothe me and provide shade from the storm. What I wanted was to ride the breadth of the breeze out of town into a pure blue sky and never look back once he'd set me upon a trade wind. I wanted to be a bird. Your father wanted to be a bird cage.

Still, I loved him. Like the bird loves its cage because it's the softest home she's ever known. When I was trapped in the tower of my parents' home, I still thought of him as the liberator. As the lover.

Then I was out in the world, and I realized how small it was. I wanted to swallow it in my mouth and take it over. I could hear him calling me over the waves, like a compass always pointing north, but I resisted, for fear that I'd grown too big for him. That we wouldn't fit right anymore. That we were no

longer puzzle pieces, interlocking, but that he'd become a lock. My parents had caged me. I didn't want to allow anyone the chance to hold me down again.

If I let myself admit it, I know now, that I was wrong. It was always Raj. At least, it should have been. If we'd stayed together, we might now know more freedom than we'd ever known in this long lifetime apart.

Anything created by Raj and I will always be free. It has to be. `It's a terribly feral thing inside of us, always howling, always hurting, because when it was too young and new, we tore it apart and tried to mould it into feeling content. Even though it was broken.

Now we don't fit together anymore, but that's my fault. I tried to join myself to another. I married and had children and told the wild thing in me it would have to sing itself to sleep, to soothe itself without the wild breeze off the lake or any other comfort I might have found in Raj's arms. I beat it and broke it again and again and shaped it into something it wasn't. And now, it won't ever be what it was again.

But then I saw him again. I felt that compass call of his heart to mine. And I knew our story wasn't finished yet.

So, Raj and I are going to take that broken, wild heart we once shared and try to mend it. To put it together into a single person and hope that it grows up as free and as fierce as we once were. That wild thing, my love, is you.

By the time you read this you will be an adult yourself, not much younger than I was when I first kissed your father. I don't presume to be a person who can give you advice. I am not your mother in anything more than the questionable gift of my genetic material, with all of its longing and strangeness and sadness. You'll likely inherit my sharp smile, my questioning eyes, and the fire inside me that threatens sometimes to consume me. I know it will be a dominant trait for you. It burns in your father too.

But if I could tell you one thing about this world, my baby who is not mine, I will say that when you find love, let it live. Let it grow however it needs to flourish. Feed it with what you have. Love can only be a good thing, can only do good things. Let your love make a good thing in this dark, bad world.

Because after all, Baby, you are a product of love. The best love I've ever known. So, you must be a good thing indeed.

With all the love I have to give to you,

Your mother,

Aavya