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An Embrace to Remember

Adhiraj Kashyap

“I don’t think we should push it any further... We’ll have to understand that we can’t force it on her”, Ratan spoke, trying to initiate any possible eye-contact with Mira, holding her left hand gently between both his hands.

“So you’re saying that we should give up?”, Mira retorted, keeping her eyes lowered, avoiding Ratan’s line of sight. When her question couldn’t arouse an answer from his side, she turned towards him and asked again firmly, forcing direct eye-contact this time- “So you’re giving up!”

It made Ratan take a prolonged pause. He was in the driving seat of the conversation till then. He was the one trying to get Mira to speak her mind out. He was the one trying to provide her the quilt of comfort. But he had to avert his gaze this time, because he genuinely didn’t know what the proper answer to her question could be. He wasn’t even sure of what he was feeling inside. He wasn’t sure whether he was really ready to give up.

He slowly loosened his hold on her hand and started cracking his knuckles instead, diligently picking each of his fingers one by one. The silence, which both of them didn’t know how to get rid of, was barged in rhythmically by the sound of his joints being cracked. Mira kept waiting for him to speak, but eventually relented as she also knew that Ratan wouldn’t be able to come up with an answer. She knew it even better than Ratan himself did. But somewhere, there existed a tender thread of hope that entwined both of them. “I’m not saying that I’m giving up... But I think we need to give her more time. It’s not easy for her; especially at her age...”, Ratan said, elevating his dismayed morale with a somewhat positive boost.

“I am saying the same thing... I have been saying the same thing constantly. I know that it’s not easy for her... But... But this can’t go on forever. We already have tried to make it work for months... It’s been so long since you moved in... There has to be some solution. There has to be a way out of this mess... There has to... For how long...”, Mira’s vehement rant was interrupted by her own overwhelming emotions. Her frustrations were on the brink of pouring out from the corner of her eyes.

“See... This is what I was talking about”, Ratan sounded mildly enraged as he started; but slowly gained composure as he proceeded further- “This whole thing is making you angrier day by day and it will get even worse. And that is not healthy for anyone... Not for you... Not for me... And definitely not for Ruhi... It will take you away from her, even before you can realize it. She is just a nine year old kid after all...”- By the time Ratan brought his sentence to a close, Mira had already put her head on his shoulder. She didn’t want to speak any longer. She wasn’t being able to cry; but when she closed her eyes, a tiny teardrop made its way to Ratan’s shoulder. Ratan was still ruminating on how they could tackle the situation. But he could also comprehend that there was no point mulling over it as Mira seemed to be in no mood to discuss. He held her hand instead and they both sat snugly on the bed inside Mira’s bedroom. They both didn’t know what course the fate of their relation would take. But they knew for sure that they both needed that sense of solace at that particular moment in each other’s company; and they were not ready to let go of that serenity by having any further arguments over something they had been discussing for ages.

Mira and Ratan first met each other when she joined Kirori Mal College as an assistant professor. Ratan had already been working there on a contractual basis as the assistant librarian for around 5 years. Mira was 35 years of age; but she appeared to be much younger. Her short height and the tiny round face added massively to that illusion. When Ratan first stumbled upon her, he perceived her to be someone who had joined the chemistry department provisionally, right after finishing Post-graduation. It was when she mentioned about completing her PhD from the IIT of Hyderabad, he

learned that she wasn't as young as he thought. But he still didn't reach that degree of camaraderie with her where he could ask bluntly about her age. But once, when Mira brought her daughter to the Teacher's Day celebration, he couldn't help but ask. At first, when he noticed her with the kid, it didn't cross his mind even for a second that the young girl could possibly be her daughter. But when he came to know about it, it struck him as a comet of surprise. And Ratan wasn't the only one in the college that day who was hit by that comet. All her colleagues refused to believe that Mira could be a mother of an eight year old.

Ratan is roughly five years older to Mira. But ever since he started talking to her, he had always treated her with utmost respect; as if she was much senior to him. Whenever she set foot in the library, Ratan always went the extra mile to make her comfortable; even when he was absorbed in some other work. He even addressed her as "Ma'am" during the initial days. But he had to dispense with that habit soon after Mira strongly persuaded him. Ratan, anyway, is someone who always greets everyone with extreme respect and chivalry. He carved out a name for himself for his benevolent demeanor in the college- so much so that at times, some of his seniors at work would even exploit his amiability to get things done. The students also often approached him whenever they faced any trouble. They knew that he seldom failed to help them out with any problem they had- not only regarding the library, but with any other administrative issue that could possibly arise. He would often take out time to chew the fat with the students, especially the freshmen. Whenever they would be standing in the queue for issuing books, he would always throw himself into conversations. He would get so riveted by the chatters, that he would need sporadic reminders to continue his work. He would talk to them about the decent Paying Guests that were available in that area and where they could rent rooms at a cheaper price- he would talk to them about the tea stalls in and around Kamla Nagar and the sweet shops in the vicinity of the Shakti Nagar red light- he would elaborate the precise metro routes to the best tourist spots to visit if one is new to the city- he would

divulge about where they could get cheap Xerox stores and second-hand reference books- and he would also whisper to them how they could skip the hassle of standing in queues for paying the annual fee, if they were friendly with any of the Students' Body members. Ratan himself came to Delhi to pursue his graduation nearly 20 years back and permanently stayed in the city thereafter. After passing out of Ramjas College, he kept doing a variety of odd jobs in the city before finally landing the job of the assistant librarian in Kirori Mal College, a job he thoroughly relished ever since. Though his monthly wages were marginal, the job still paid him better than what he was earning before. It was more than enough for a person staying alone in Delhi and hence, he didn't persist with his search for better opportunities after that.

The first ever instance Mira spoke to Ratan was in the library only. She went to meet Mr. Pandey, the librarian, seeking help to find some books she needed to refer to the final year students. While Mr. Pandey sent Ratan to scout around for the books, he invited Mira to his cabin instead and got engaged in having a prolonged chat with her. He was smitten by Mira's charm instantly, and couldn't resist sending forth his flirtatious vibes. Mira was straightaway repelled by his obnoxious behavior and waited for the conversation to get over quickly. Since then, whenever she needed any help, she would always speak to Ratan and evade meeting Mr. Pandey however she could. Mira often spent an ample amount of time in the reading hall. She preferred it to any other place within the campus. She would, out of courtesy, accompany other professors to the common room to sit and chat every now and then. But whenever she would get bored of the small talks, she would sneak away to the reading hall. She would glance through the newspapers at first, before bringing out some book from her bag and bury herself in it. It took both Mira and Ratan a while to break the ice; but slowly and steadily both got quite friendly. Whenever he could steal away a tiny bit of time from his usual routine, he would go and sit near Mira. Mira was the more talkative one between the two. So naturally, it was her who mostly ignited or carried forward the conversations. But Ratan would also offer his best to match up. With the

passing of more time, Ratan started developing an ardent infatuation towards her. At first he resisted even acknowledging it. But he couldn't get a grip on it either, as it kept growing bit by bit. Initially, he even felt ashamed of his feelings as he thought of Mira to be much younger to him. It was when he met her daughter at the Teacher's Day; he was a bit relieved. But that relief itself was momentary as having a daughter also meant that she was married too. After that, for a few days, Ratan forcibly tried to abstain from meeting Mira too often. He maintained his courteous conduct and lent a helping hand whenever she needed; but tried to bottle up his feelings as much as he could. On the other hand, Mira was getting closer to him day by day. By then, she started spending most of her spare time with Ratan only. During breaks, she would either go to dawdle around with him in the library or she would invite him to join her in the canteen. Sometimes they would travel to the metro station together, even though Ratan didn't really have to take the metro to reach his room. But he would opt for the much longer route just to be with her a little longer. He would always stay put in the college lawn, after the classes were over, hoping for her to ask him to tag along to the metro station. And more often than not, his wish would come true. Their booming "friendship" reached a stage where their proximity became a topic of whispers in the college. It started with the students, but trickled down to their colleagues as well; and that started making Ratan even more uncomfortable.

Once, both of them were heading towards the metro station in an E-Rickshaw. Mira was carrying on with the conversation they were having just before leaving the campus and suddenly she mentioned something about her husband's untimely demise that occurred two years back. Ratan had no clue how to react to that. He didn't have any idea what to feel either. But somewhere deep down, he was conscious of the fact that he felt pleased to hear that she didn't have a husband- and that sense of pleasure came with a sense of self-loathing too. He was guilt-ridden for feeling that way, but he couldn't help it. He was hit by a bundle of emotions and thoughts all of a sudden. But he also knew that he couldn't let himself get distracted and submerge

into a world of his own as Mira was still talking. So he had to manifest some sort of gestural response to her letting out such intimate vital information. Luckily for him, Mira continued with what she was saying without the slightest of change and hence he could be absolved of his duty of having to respond with words. But none of what she spoke registered in his ears. He wanted to ask her properly again, just to reassure what he just heard was right. But he preferred not to and just kept on listening. Usually both of them part their ways on the platform as they both take the opposite routes. But that day, he sensed that it wouldn't be wise to leave the conversation midway. So he lied to her that he anyway had plans of going to Rajiv Chowk to meet a friend. Mira knew that he was making it up; but didn't complain as she didn't mind him keeping her company.

After that day, things started shaping up differently- as if an unseen barrier that existed before was shattered. Ratan didn't forbear showing his emotions any longer. He didn't feel guilty of his feelings either. He let his care and affection spring up to the surface without inhibition. He got less and less perturbed by what people were saying about them. In fact, the "gossips" became a source of humor for both Mira and Ratan, which they would often have a good laugh about. They would spend most of their time in the college with each other; in the reading hall, in the canteen, or at times, roving about Kamla Nagar to get a quick snack. Sometimes, when Mira couldn't go out due to her classes, Ratan would bring Chhole Kulche for her from her favorite stall. The metro rides, which both of them savored immensely, became more frequent. He would often travel to Rajiv Chowk with Mira; and he didn't have to conjure up an excuse anymore. The frequency of the phone calls and the text messages mounted up rapidly. Ratan even met her parents and her daughter, when she hosted him over dinner once. Ruhi used to adore Ratan's company a lot and it didn't take her long to get fond of him. In fact, once, owing to her constant badgering, Ratan even had to attend one of her school functions. Within a few months, Ratan grew to be an indelible part of not only Mira's private life, but also her family as well. Both Mira and Ratan

were cognizant of each other's feelings and they both knew where the relation was racing towards. They decided to get married. Her parents were quite supportive of the decision; though her father seemed mildly apprehensive about Ratan's contractual job, which didn't have any assured future. He even raised subtle questions about the fact that whereas Mira was a professor, Ratan on the other hand, was merely a Grade-III employee, that too in the same college. But Mira's stern gaze as a reply to her father's futile doubts was enough to put everything to rest. Ratan's family, on the other hand, was glad that Ratan finally made up his mind to tie the knot as they had lost hopes long back. But the foremost concern for both Mira and Ratan was Ruhi and how she would react to all of it.

Mira and Ratan gauged that it wouldn't be smart of them to break the news to Ruhi right away. So they decided upon living together in the same house for a few months to see how it played out; especially for Ruhi. They rented a house temporarily near Model Town and moved in. Ruhi felt more than comfortable in her new habitat. She took an immediate liking to the changed atmosphere and treated it more like an extended holiday. Mira's parents would drop by from time to time, for making the transition smoother for Ruhi. Ruhi enjoyed the fact that her favorite "Ratan Uncle" stayed with them too. But she never regarded Ratan as anything more than her mother's friend. The romantic involvement between the two never crossed her mind; until a point, when their intimacy started unsettling her a bit. The addition of a new person in their lives seemed quite daunting to her. Even though she shared an earnest bond with Ratan, but she wasn't yet ready for the concept of a new "Father" in her life.

Losing a father at the age of six can be distressing for any person; and Ruhi was no exception. But somehow Mira had been able to hold the family together during the storm that hit them out of the blue. Her entire focus, after her husband expired, shifted towards looking after Ruhi fervently to provide an ambience for her where the loss of her father couldn't scar her deeply. And she had been tremendously successful in

doing so. In the process of forging a healthy atmosphere for Ruhi to thrive, Mira herself could deal with the demise better. She was so caught up with Ruhi that she didn't even have the time to grieve and that helped her come out of it quite positively. But Ratan's addition to her life made Ruhi withdraw into a shell. Even though she moved on from her father's death pretty well, but somehow Ratan's presence in the house hauled her back to her father's memories. She forcefully tried to hold on to the reminiscence of her father. She didn't want to offer that place to anyone else at any cost. But actually, more than Ratan replacing her father, she was more fretful about him taking the place of her mother's husband. She was somehow averse to the idea of a new companion in her mother's life. A sense of possessiveness subliminally transpired inside her mind and she couldn't do away with it.

Mira and Ratan could discern the vibes of resistance from Ruhi's end quite clearly. It was evident that their genuine efforts couldn't induce fruitful results. But they couldn't confer with her either as Ruhi never spoke anything from her side. She had gone much quieter. Ratan would make every possible effort to break into the wall Ruhi had built around herself, but to no avail. It wasn't as if Ruhi remained in a perennial state of passivity. She would intimately mingle with Ratan quite often. Ratan would drop her at school every day without fail, sometimes even without Mira accompanying them. He would take her out for regular evening strolls in the park too. She would frolic around with other kids of her age, while Ratan would wait patiently in the corner. He would even let her have an ice-cream occasionally on their way back, but Ruhi would make sure Ratan didn't tell her mother. When they didn't feel like going to the park, they would switch to playing badminton instead, in the alley by their house. Ruhi would sit by his side whenever Ratan would be watching football matches. She even developed a strong affinity for the game, though it didn't last long. Ratan bought her a ball. But soon after her zeal faded away, it became a permanent habitat of the store room. He would often help her out with her homework, a duty Mira would deliberately pass on to him. Even when Ruhi didn't need any help,

he would still quietly stick around. Ruhi would eagerly wait for the weekends to go out. She loved going to the Gurgaon malls. But more than the malls, she actually relished the metro journey. She would always try to memorize the metro stations on the yellow line and would recite it out to Ratan while travelling. Ratan would also express his interest by asking her the sequence of the stations whenever they went out. It was sort of a test she wanted to excel at. Each day before going out, she would jot up the names in her mind- "Model Town... GTB Nagar... Vishwavidyalaya... Vidhan Sabha... Civil Lines..." The next task she assigned herself was to predict on which side the door would open in each of the stations, before the announcements were made. She even knew on which station there would be a colossal crowd; and on which one there wouldn't even be a single being standing on the platform. She was terribly scared of the rush in Rajiv Chowk and she would always clutch Ratan's hands firmly just before reaching the station. She would do the same while crossing the roads also. Mira was happy that inch by inch, Ratan was being able to win Ruhi's trust with diligence. Ruhi's comfort level around Ratan was easily perceptible. And Ruhi knew it herself too. She knew that Ratan's affection for her was something that she surely needed at that point of her life. She knew that the sense of security Ratan could provide her was nothing short of that of a father figure. She knew that even though she was resisting this gradual change in her life, the change was so smooth and organic that she didn't even notice it. She knew that whether she embraced the idea of a new father or not, he eventually became one for her; and it all felt as if it was always meant to be that way. But Ruhi was too young to fathom all of it. Her tiny little mind was at constant war with itself, trying to absorb everything. She was still holding back and Ratan still failed to get past the last layer of the wall to reach the core of her heart. Whenever Ruhi felt that her rapport with Ratan could be misread as her acceptance of Mira and Ratan's impending marriage, she would immediately switch back to her quiet state to make it apparent that she still wasn't ready for it. She would purposely resort to quietude for a few days to put her point across. She even

stopped talking to Mira once, for a day or two, when one night she woke up to find Mira sleeping in Ratan's room.

When the situation refused to change even by a tiny bit, Ratan and Mira pondered that they perhaps shouldn't be pushing it any further. Mira wasn't willing to give up and wanted to try more; but Ratan realized that Ruhi would need more time to let everything sink in. He also realized that the entire situation was making Mira unnecessarily angry whose ripple effects were harming Ruhi in turn. So it was better if they separated. They didn't know about the fate of their relation; but they knew that the first step had to be Ratan moving out of the house. Even Mira was intending to move back to her parents' house by the next month. When Mira let Ruhi know that Ratan would no longer be living with them, it came as an absolute shocker to her. She was on the verge of reacting, but held herself back one more time. She clearly didn't wish for him to leave. She felt as if someone had pulled out an integral chip from her heart and a sense of vulnerability suddenly struck her, the same sense of fear and timidity which she experienced after losing her father. She wanted to stop Ratan somehow, but didn't know how to. Just when she was on the brink of crying, she turned around to go inside her room. The following weekend after Ratan had moved out, he thought it would be nice for the three of them to go on a small trip. It would refresh everyone's distraught energies and also put a beautiful end to the entire saga.

They reached the station half an hour prior to the scheduled time. Mira, Ratan and Ruhi- all three of them were drowned in their own oceans of thoughts. But each one of them exerted themselves to put on a jovial face. Mira, quite opposite to her usual self, largely remained silent. It was Ratan who was trying to tempt Ruhi into talking- "Did you bring your favorite water bottle?"- "Do you remember the photos of Taj Mahal we saw in your textbook? Do you remember? Today we will see it up close..."- "Do you want to have Butter chicken and Naan for lunch?"- "Should I get you a packet of chips? Or a Dairy Milk?"- No matter what Ratan said, or asked; he was met with a cold response from Ruhi's end. Ruhi kept trying her best to evince enthusiasm

for the trip and converse with Ratan; but she kept getting pulled back to the mayhem inside her mind.

The Shatabdi Express was yet to arrive at the platform. They were sitting on a marble slab near the water cooler, and the clock just above their heads showed it to be nearing 7 in the morning. Ratan shifted his attention towards Mira's dejected face. He was trying to communicate to her through gestures to cheer her up. But he couldn't trigger anything from her side apart from a dry dismal smile. She was sitting there cross-legged, exactly like a statue staring blankly into space. If she didn't blink, one would have easily mistaken her to be one. Ruhi also exhibited a similar stillness sitting on Ratan's lap. She just kept swinging her legs as the only form of movement. But Ratan kept finding ways of entertaining Ruhi to speak more. He brought out her favorite doll from her tiny yellow backpack. But that couldn't evoke any change. The doll too seemed to be in the same gloomy state as Ruhi and Mira were. Ratan took out his mobile to show her the route the train would take to reach Agra. He tried to engage her in reading aloud the names of the stations they would pass through. But she was in no mood to play that game this time. He couldn't even draw her into a game of Ludo, which usually used to be her go-to pastime. After all his tricks failed, he also took refuge in silence and hoped that once the journey began, things would change. But that didn't happen. There was no visible change in her demeanor inside the train as well. In fact, Mira also occasionally tried to cheer her up; but failed in the same way Ratan did. Ruhi sat on a window seat and kept herself busy looking outside the window, without uttering single word.

As the train was approaching Mathura, it paced down a bit for a halt. Ruhi was engaged with the phone; whereas Mira had dozed off by then. Ratan got up from his seat to head towards the washroom. But Ruhi thought that he was stepping out of the train to buy something in the platform. So she kept looking outside the window the whole time. Suddenly after merely a minute, the train started budging. The movement was so minute initially, that it took Ruhi a moment to gauge whether it actually

moved. So to make sure, she glued her gaze at a book stall at the platform; and when she realized that the stall was moving backwards, she panicked. Her eyes started searching for Ratan in a hurried manner. She stretched out her neck to get a good view of the platform and quickly scanned through it. But Ratan was nowhere to be seen. She put her earphones down right away. She was so frightened that tears came rolling down her cheeks, even before she could realize it. Her breath got heavier and she started quivering. She clasped Mira's arm and tried waking her up. It did knock off Mira's sleep; but she was at a complete loss, having no idea of what had happened. She just saw Ruhi crying through the haziness of her half-opened eyes. Ruhi thought that by the time Mira would get back to her fully conscious self, it might be too late. So she dashed towards the door to look for Ratan. Seeing Ruhi rush like that, Mira followed her instantly. As Ruhi was taking her hasty strides towards the door, her tears picked up more speed and flowed down at full tilt. It reached a stage where her tears hindered her vision so much that she had to wipe her eyes frantically to even see properly. But that didn't reduce the pace at which she was approaching the door. Just when Ruhi opened the cabin door, Mira closed in on her and picked her up in her arms. With utmost difficulty, rubbing her eyes and gasping for breath, Ruhi was being able to tell Mira what had happened. Mira had a quick glance at the platform from the door to see if she could spot Ratan. When she couldn't, she rushed back inside to grab hold of her phone to call him. As soon as they turned back, they saw him drawing nearer from the other end of the coach. Ruhi got down from Mira's arms in a flash and started racing towards Ratan. Her mild sobs, by then, turned into howls. Ratan couldn't perceive why she was crying and looked at Mira for answers. Ratan also quickened his steps and when he reached near Ruhi, she hugged him as firmly as one could. Ratan still couldn't discern why she was crying. But he knew that all she yearned for at that moment, more than anything else, was that hug. Seeing the two of them like that, Mira's tiny teardrop couldn't resist finding its way to her cheeks. But her content smile, simultaneously, couldn't resist popping up brightly either. Ratan felt a deep sense of relief after a long time and that made him hug Ruhi even tighter.

The embrace had the power of binding the three of them together with a thread of comfort and solace they all had been seeking for a long time in their own ways.