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*Quarter
Of a Life*

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Preface

I used the word 'quarter', since I feel from zero to twenty years of age would approximately be quarter of a normal human life span. That is from the time you are born till the time you get your admission into a professional college.

Depending upon the family and other environment young ones go through many deep and fundamental changes and often turmoil in this segment. They move from being totally dependent, vulnerable, impressionable, delicate and innocent to perhaps strong and even scheming. A child's relationship with closest of family members plays the most important role in deciding how the child will play his/her own cards in life as he/she grows up.

Putting your own life on line, fully or partially is always a tough decision to take. Until now the cause and effects of first quarter of my life were only within the confines of my own boundaries. But as I decide to publish it, entire log of storms of emotions and tsunami of feelings is now in the open. It is open to reader's analysis and reactions in any which way they would feel.

In the end I would like to admit that although the incidences in this biography are true; some parts of it had to be dramatized for effect.

I also admit that many names in this book have been changed.

Dedications

Since the story is about me and my relationships with my immediate family, it is only fair to dedicate this book to my parents, brothers, my grandparents, all uncles-aunts, and cousins. I am also including many little villages and towns where I lived for short periods. Some of these tiny places frightened me, some others were frustrating while a few may even have helped stabilizing and plant a seed of growth in me... but their overall integrated experience has molded me into, 'who I am today'.

I take this opportunity to fondly remember those family members who are no more around, but are a part of this book.

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2014, Mumbai

Before I was even there...

Maudaha, a small town in Uttar Pradesh (about 180 KM south-west of Lucknow), August 15, 1950.

It is about 7am. Sunlight has lit up the verandah of the house. A tall young man puts a brass padlock on the heavy wooden door of his official house. His small made and heavily pregnant wife comes two steps down. Man picks up the large grey iron trunk and joins her. Slowly they walk up to the road. They both notice a passing Tonga. He hails loudly, "Bus station?" Tonga stops a few yards ahead. Man walks briskly and keeps the trunk behind on the footboard. As the couple too climb up on the back seat, front of Tonga tilts up. In panic wife supports her stomach. Tonga man gets down, "no problem, no problem, you relax, madam." He picks up the trunk and places it in front by his side. Tonga is balanced now. Uttering a few affectionate words for the horse, he lightly prods the horse with a small stick. The horse makes some sounds, strains a bit and pulls the Tonga. It takes the horse half a minute to get to its normal speed and rhythm. The couple, Param Kumar Sharma and his wife Vimla Sharma are going to Delhi to Vimla's parental home.

Looking at the large trunk by his side Tonga man asked, "Sahab are you going for a long time?" Everyone knows Param Sharma here. He is an important state government officer, not very senior in post, but important. "I will be back in three days." Then looking at his wife he added, "She will come back later." Tonga man acknowledged with an, 'I understand', look.

While passing the market area, many vegetable vendors happily waved their hands and greeted them with a 'Namaste sahab'. A little after the market, bus station appeared on the left. It had a large messy compound with worn out walls. 'Maudaha Bus Station' was written in faded alphabets, on an unkempt front wall of the building. Tonga entered the compound and stopped close to the ticket window. Param got off first and helped Vimla get down. Tonga man put the trunk down near the slot for the bus. Vimla stood next to the trunk and then sat down on it. Param took out a few coins from his pocket and handed six annas to the Tonga man. He touched the coins to his forehead, as it was his first income of the day and dropped them in his pocket. He called out to the horse again and tonga moved towards the exit. Param went to the ticket window. "Delhi. Two tickets."

"New or old?"

"Old. Have to go near Sabzi Mandi."

Sabzi Mandi, that's where Vimla's parents live in Delhi. As is the custom, she would be delivering her first baby there. 'Maternity Home, Maudaha' had not

appealed to her as she would have liked it to be. Vimla did not want to take a chance with her first child nor was she comfortable with male doctors. After having tea and rusk, which they had as substitute for breakfast, they were ready to leave. A badly rattling bus entered the gate, followed by a large cloud of dust. It reversed and parked in the empty slot. Cloud of dust now swallowed the bus and everything else around. The engine shut down with a loud metallic shudder. It seems as if every part of the bus is loose. Param is upset with this rickety bus. He looks at the ticket window to ask if that was his bus. The clerk nodded in affirmation. Feeling upset he carries the trunk quickly and entered the bus. There are no seat numbers. He wants to grab good seats in front and if possible, together. Conductor watched the pregnant woman entering. He asked an old man to move to another seat and gave the couple just what they wanted. After settling down and keeping the trunk in front within their sight, she said, "I hope they have got my letter, no reply has come so far." Param said, "Don't worry, they must have got it. There was a Sunday in between and one holiday too. May be it will reach when I am back here." She feels a bit put off with 'when I am back'.

"If Ranjan does not come to the bus stop, we will take a cycle rickshaw," Param added. Vimla nodded.



At Delhi bus depot doubtful Ranjan was there to receive them. He was an auto rickshaw driver. Smiling profusely he touched their feet and placed the bag in the rickshaw. The bag took up almost all the leg space. Param sat in first and Vimla squeezed in second. Ranjan revved up smartly and took off with a flourish. Both shouted in unison, "slow Ranjan slow". He understood. Rest of the journey was comfortable and in about 20 minutes the rickshaw stopped in front of a motor mechanic shop. Owner and two young mechanics smiled and greeted them with Namaste ji. Ranjan promptly picked up the trunk and carried it up the stairs. Her father, Kapil Muni Sharma was there to receive them both. Vimla looked up. Her mother Dhandevi was smiling from the balcony of their tiny first floor house. Vimla tried to touch his father's feet; but he stopped her mid way. Vimla had to be very careful climbing those irregular steps. Param helped her by taking her arm, while she supported her stomach from underneath. Vimla's mother touched her daughter's cheeks affectionately and took her in the room. Vimla immediately lay down on the bed and felt instant relief. Bus journey was very tiring for both.

"Tired no?" her mother asked.

"Yes quite."

The house is a very poky two-room set, as delhi-ites call it. Both rooms are of the same size. Both rooms have a common balcony opening towards the wide Roshan Ara road. The traffic on the road has a cacophony created by taxis,

buses, double-decker buses, school buses, cars, trucks, auto rickshaws, along with scooters, motor cycles and bicycle-bells. It was so alive and different from the town that Vimla was living in with her husband. All that noise gave Vimla a comfortable feeling of being 'back home'. Vimla's due date was still a month away. But she had reached much earlier as travelling from a distant UP town by any mode was not going to be easy. She wanted to make it well before the crucial time arrived. It would have been a tedious journey for any pregnant woman in her last month.

Much earlier in month of March she had written a letter marked 'personal' to her mother about she being in the family way, as well as her wish to deliver the baby at home with the help of Santosh. Her father read out the 'personal' letter's contents to his wife, as she was illiterate. Vimla had written, "I have not been feeling too well lately. The other day I vomited. Param has to travel a lot. I will write again when I am ready to leave from here." Father looked worried after reading his daughter was not well. Dhandevi saw his concern and coughed loudly hiding a smile under her dupatta. He understood.

Two days passed quickly. Param had packed his dirty shirt and pant in a cotton bag. He was ready to set off for his return journey back to Maudaha. He gave Vimla some cash for her expenses. "We should not burden your father. You should get your tonics, medicines and fruits... from this money." Vimla was clearly gloomy that he was going back. But he couldn't stay longer for three reasons. Most insignificant one - he did not fit properly on the bed in this house. Two nights had already given him a mild pain in the neck. Second he should not be staying in his in-laws place for too long. It is not a done thing. And thirdly, just a few months back he had taken up this job with the UP state government. Government jobs were most sought after by everyone, but this was an important one too. In 1950-60s state governments had taken up a massive task of consolidating agricultural land owned by farmers. Most farmers owned their land in many bits and pieces scattered all over their village and sometime even outside their village. It was a serious hindrance to the farmers and to the government's record keeping agencies. Param's job was to calculate each farmer's total area of all the pieces of land that he owned, then consolidate it into a single piece. This new piece of land would be marked out and allotted to the farmer concerned. Param was a land 'consolidation officer'.

It was a very challenging task. He and his assistants would work on jumbo size 'blue prints' or maps of villages. All the maps were hand drawn in indelible black ink using a nib on a holder. Each such map would show name of the village, 'Tehseel or Taluka' and district to identify it.

It would also mention population, number of houses, number of wells etc. But most of it had hundreds of adjoining boxes denoting pieces of land, with an identity number inside it. The job was to merge some of those boxes into one large box if possible otherwise not more than two. It was tedious for him and his

team travelling to various villages. Assistants would measure the fields with tapes and premeasured ropes. Make notes on the maps, keep record of farmer's original papers and take signatures on the new documents. Farmers were always on guard of being cheated. Sometime even the fertility of land came into the consideration. Such cases made the division even more complex to satisfy all the farmers.



After Param left, Vimla's mother Dhandevi quickly decided to set herself in motion. She waited for her husband and son to leave for work. Her husband was like clockwork. He would leave for work every day at 9am sharp. Ranjan would get out a bit later. He was a lazy person. Any job that needed any effort; lost his respect. To top it all he did not have any qualifications to mention. But he did have fancy desires, like currency notes raining in his lap.

After clearing the kitchen, seeing Ranjan out of the door and Vimla comfortable, Dhandevi changed into a fresh but un-ironed cotton salwar kameez. Vimla watched her straightening the wrinkles of the shirt with her hand. She touched Vimla's shoulder and said that she was going to meet Santosh for her. Vimla shut the door after her mother's frail frame climbed down the staircase and turned right.

They both had known Santosh for years. She was a trusted mid-wife of the area. Many women in the locality had delivered their children with her assistance. Dhandevi started walking through the winding Sabzi Mandi lanes. Vegetable vendors were out shouting each other to sell their stuff. Some hawkers said 'namaste' to her and asked if she wanted to buy something. Nothing, she told them with a wave of her hand. Dhandevi and Santosh were about the same age, similar background, status and language. They had a fairly large comfort zone between them...

Throwing glances at various fruit and vegetable stalls and judging the stuff, she reached her destination. The door was open. Santosh was putting clothes on the line to dry. She was about 50, but looked younger. In this crowded area she lived alone in one room, courtesy a bad marriage. Her ex-husband had taken away their only son with him.

"What happened Dhandevi? Why all of a sudden? All well?" Santosh asked her from far only.

"Vimla has come. I want you to come and check her."

"Oh really... that's good."

Santosh too had known Dhandevi's family for as long as she could remember. After keeping the empty iron bucket in place, they both sat down on the floor. Santosh lit two 'bidis' for both. After some small talk about nothing, Santosh said,

“I can come now if you want, but let us have a cup of tea first.” Dhandevi said, she will make it for her in her house. They got up, locked the room, dumped the butts of bidis in gutter and dissolved into the hustle of Sabzi Mandi lanes.

Vimla raised herself from the bed as she heard voices coming from the staircase, but by the time she reached the door there was a soft knock. She opened it and said Namaste to Santosh, who affectionately touched her hair and cheeks. They went into the room. Santosh asked Vimla to lie down on the bed. She moved her hand all around on the stomach and pressed lightly in a few places, “all is well.” “End of September,” she announced. She checked Vimla’s skin tone and brightness of her eyes.

“Ok. You are fine. So now get up and make tea for us. Moving around is good for you.” They both sat on the bare cot kept in the shady part of open verandah and lit bidis again. After the tea was handed to both women in odd cups, Santosh told Vimla to go in the bedroom and shut the door. She did not want her to inhale the smoke.



Brahmins as a race usually are never rich people. They have been more concerned about education, religion and culture in their families. Sense of business or making serious money for money’s sake, has not been in their so-called, blood or genes. For this reason they always keep their expenses on a leash. Kapil Muni would always travel by tram or a bus, that is, if he could not walk to his destination. He had been using three sets of white shirts and dhotis for ages. He never spent much on clothes or fancy edibles. The family fulfilled their requirements of vitamins, carbohydrates and minerals from wheat, rice, dals, regular vegetables, some seasonal fruits and milk. Items like sweets, cold drinks, coffee, chocolates or dry fruits were purchased rarely. Of course festivals like Diwali or Holi were exceptions. And it seemed to work. No one had fallen ill because anyone lacked nutrients of dry fruits or minerals of pomegranate.

Santosh told Dhandevi to add fruits and dry fruits to Vimla’s regular diet of roti, rice, vegetables and milk. It was a matter of few days only, she said. “She has to eat for two now!” I would have suggested eggs, but I know you people wouldn’t touch that. As Santosh was ready to leave she informed that all is well with Vimla and she will come to see her regularly. That made Vimla happy and confident. Climbing down the steps she whispered to Dhandevi, “By the size of her stomach, it seems she has boy inside her.”

That evening as soon as a tired Kapil Muni Sharma entered home, his wife asked him to go out again to pick up some fruits. Washing his hands and face he reasoned, “It is already quite late. Fruits will be stale now. He will get fresh ones first thing in the morning.” Vimla knew her father as upright, principled and

energetic person. Sure he may be tired right now but he had good reason behind what he said.

Next morning he got ready in his regular dhoti and long sleeve white shirt, picked up the cloth shopping bag and went straight to the Sabzi Mandi. He returned home with bananas, oranges, guavas and some grapes. Vimla insisted and took care of these extra expenses herself from the money that Param had left with her. After some resistance her parents yielded. This made the atmosphere at home more congenial.

Once in a while if Ranjan picked up an orange laughingly, he would have to hear deathly Punjabi curses from his mother.

In the city of Pratapgarh, Param's letter was being read by his father, Pandit Devidas Sharma, mother, Jayanti Sharma, Param's college going siblings Veer and Sundar. The news about Vimla's pregnancy and approaching due date added thrill to the family. Pitaji and biji were going to be dada-dadi. End of September will make them grandparents!

Letter also mentioned that Vimla was doing fine. And finally it mentioned that if Biji could start planning a visit to stay with them at Maudaha to help Vimla and the newborn. They were all very excited and distributed sweets in the neighborhood.

As due date was approaching, Param was getting tense as a first time 'would be father', would be. His heart was beating much faster these days. He was always anxious and especially anxious about Vimla. He thought about her all the time. This had started taking a toll on his health in the form of acidity and stomach upsets. He wanted to get a report of every moment from Delhi. But there was no way to do that. It was last week of September. Now any day could be 'due day'. He just wanted everything to go safely, especially for his wife. He was feeling so much love for her at this stage of their marriage. In fact they both were in similar situation.



At 7.30 PM on Sep 25, Kapil Muni, Vimla's father was calling out to Vishambhar from his balcony. He was not getting any response due to noise of evening traffic. A young mechanic heard him and screamed into the alley, 'Vishambhar... oye Vishambhaaaaar.' A lanky frame of Vishambhar appeared, looked up at the balcony, ran up the steps, came running down and moments later he was running away like a gazelle. He was dodging his way through the lanes of Sabzi Mandi. Badly out of breath he faced Santosh and said, "Sharma uncle is calling you urgently." Santosh covered her dinner plate and kept it inside the Netted

storage, grabbed a chunni from the clothesline, locked the door and walked out briskly. Vishambhar had already sprinted back to inform Sharma family that she was on her way.

Santosh entered the house. Vimla was whimpering softly due to pain. Santosh looked at her, touched her right under the stomach and asked everyone except Vimla's mother, to go out of the room. Ranjan was told to go out of the house itself. The door was shut securely. Her father too went out leaving a few neighborhood women in the other room. Santosh prepared herself by arranging many pieces of clean white cloth and a bucket of warm water. She put a rubber sheet underneath and asked Vimla to breathe deeply...

After a short usual struggle between midwife and the woman a baby boy popped out. He cried immediately. Dhandevi took a sigh of relief and looked at the clock. It was a little over 10.35. Soon an ecstatic Vimla was holding her precious newborn son, Amol.



Param's house at 7 AM, in Maudaha. Servant Ramu was making tea, when he heard the phone ring. It was a trunk-call from Delhi. Param spoke briefly and rushed to the washroom. He changed, gulped down the tea. And soon a very anxious, tired and sleepy Param was in a bus to Delhi. Resting his head on the window, he remembered the romantic conversation, "If I get a boy we will call him Amol and if it is a girl she will be Arunima." Now that Amol has arrived first, Arunima will have to wait for quite long... um, may be not that long. And he couldn't stop that smile. He put his face in the line of strong morning breeze to let the smile fly out of the window.

Param couldn't fathom the thrill that he was holding his son in his arms. Looking at the baby he told Vimla, "So, Amol came first huh?" She just smiled. He found Vimla looking good and relaxed. Everyone had left them to meet in privacy.

Entering with a glass of water and a cup of tea his mother-in-law said "Let her be here for another forty days. It is good for her."

"But biji had agreed to come to Maudaha to help us."

They settled for twenty days as Santosh felt she would like to see the progress of the baby and the mother for some time.



On 27 September 1950, a postman handed over an eagerly awaited telegram to Pt Devidas. It read, "Boy born September 25, 10.35 night. Kapil Muni". There was an instant wave of happiness. They all thanked God. Pt. Devidas and his wife were dada-dadi now and his younger sons were uncles. Weird, but in an instant people turn into different entities and they get new titles. Man becomes a father, woman a mother, others grandfather, uncle, aunt for the rest of their lives!

After about 20 days, a very tired Param had taken yet another trip to Delhi and returned to Maudaha with his larger family. Param's mother had arrived from Pratapgarh to help Vimla with the baby and other household chores, mainly cooking. Param was truly relieved.

Vimla was taking good care of Amol. His feeds were timely. Amol's dadi spent most of her time playing with him, when he was awake. He seemed to be a content child. He did not cry too much, unless of course he was hungry or wet. He looked at everything and everybody with a wide-eyed inquisitiveness. Dadi declared that he tries to know the new person in place of getting scared of him. This is the sign of an intelligent child... the declaration came straight from dadi's treasure of knowledge and experience.

Time kept passing and the close family members kept meeting each other either in Param's house or at Pratapgarh or in other cities. Amol had become very popular among all. He received loads of attention and affection, because he was the first son of the first son of Pt. Devidas. Amol's uncles too doted on him. He too loved everyone back equally. With an abundant diet of affection Amol kept growing well.

By the end of 1951, Amol was walking and talking fluently. Every outsider believed or liked to believe that Amol was a child of above average intelligence. If not that, he surely seemed different. His parents being first time parents, failed to notice that difference. They were pretty average kind of people, along with their family. They did not have the capacity to believe that their own child could be an exceptional one; way brighter than everyone else they knew. Average people can think big about themselves but cannot think that anyone else could be superior to them. Just completing every day's routine jobs made them content. They did not find anything mundane. Because of this reason they did not and could not feed Amol with stimulating ideas that were needed during his early period of growth. They did not know how to become a child with him. They also did not know how to communicate effectively to stimulate his mental potential. Param did not have much time as he was justifiably busy with his office work. Amol gave them happiness but they could not give anything back to him. Vimla was busy with kitchen and general upkeep of the large house with four servants. Managing the servants also a new job for her. She never had servants at home before this. Every day at sun-set when the first lamp in the

house would be lit; either a 'diya' in home temple or a light bulb; they would bow their head and mumble a mantra or something. It was to thank god that by his grace another day had passed without any problem.

Seeing his parents, Amol too picked up habit of holding palms in a namaste posture, close his eyes and bow his head down. Nothing beyond that. He was just two. He did not know if there was anything to feel or think about, while doing that. Initially they lived in very small towns or a villages. In early 50s anyway the world was rather primitive. Amol did not have any toys to play, or friends to play with. He wasn't sent out also. There was no one to take him and take him where? Perhaps there were no parks or gardens. Concept of play schools wasn't yet there. So, in order to be busy with something, Amol would be often be seen near the shoe rack. He would arrange and re-arrange the shoes and slippers, untying and re-tying shoelaces! No one noticed it as odd, because much older children are not able to tie their own shoelaces!

I need to bring in here the fundamental point for narrating this story. In English that would be, "As you sow, so you reap." Same thought in Hindi, "Jaisa karoge, waisa bharoge", scientifically too, "every action has an equal and opposite reaction".

The book is not as much about this family, as it is about 'Karma' of various actors of this plot. We will see ahead how Amol's life is takes shape. He is so young! Such children are handled most tenderly and delicately. In family their care is always are prioritized. If family is gone out they are pampered by carrying in arms, in case they are getting tired. They are bought interesting things. Home schooling is very important. So people get picture story books, alphabet books, or a basic abacus with beads to learn counting. Nothing of that sort is happening here. Without knowing Amol has started facing a very tough life. Children don't know what is easy or hard in life. They just go through it. They cry if something hurts, but if they don't have a toy, they have no idea how to react. Of course unless they see it with someone else and then demand it.

Amol was quiet but active child. He was always moving about the house. One afternoon his parents told him if he did not want to sleep, then to stay out of the bedroom. Amol was too young to realize that it was not a very affectionate gesture to be told that.

Now, to remind ourselves, that we all are integral part of nature and nature works in its own slow but firm ways. However insignificant the seeds may be, but once they are sown, they start germinating. It was too early in life, but gradually something started eroding between Amol and his parents, without them noticing it. The invisible bond of affection that lays the foundation slab of psychic sixth sense between a child and parents started getting thinner.

Staying out alone and peacefully checking out various things around the house was better for him. His mind was always looking for some excitement, something new. But again, he did not know that his mind was looking for all that. He was barely two years old. He would go looking under the large trunks for no reason and sometime find lost objects or discover something new. In 1952 there were no games for him to occupy, no friends to be with and he had not started reading, yet. He looked at pictures and tried to make sense of the stories behind them. He asked many questions. But his parents did not have adequate answers for a small child like him. If you have to transfer some liquid into a bottle with a very small mouth, you have to use a funnel with thinner pipe; otherwise it will spill out. Param and Vimla would tell him that how great Ram or Krishn were if he pointed to Sita Ram or Radha Krishn's paintings in their home temple. What sense could he derive from Maryada Purushottam? Such vague explanations did not enrich him. Later on he felt his questions too became unwelcome. He did know what was happening to him. He had no idea that he was getting bored. They were also unnecessarily strict with him. If he made a face due to a piece of cream in the milk, they would shout, "No... finish it all just now."

He felt he was much happier in the company of his dada, dadi and chachas. They always fed him with nice and digestible answers. They also told interesting stories and real incidents of their life. Whenever they were there, they were always 'with' him. They also did a very important thing - they praised Amol often. When he finished his milk, a 'good'; if he narrated the days of the week, 'excellent', remembering today's date, 'that's right', drawing a flower would get a 'very nice'. Amol's dadaji would call out to his wife, "Look Amol has made such a nice flower." This feeling of being 'praised' brought Amol much closer to them than he was to his parents even at this early age. And that is why he would be so miserable, every time his 'dada dadi' parted after a vacation.



In end of January 1953, Vimla was back to her parent's home for delivering her second child. Once again Param had come to drop her. "I am hoping for Arunima this time," Param said before leaving. This time Amol too was with them. He met his nana and nani for the third time, as they had visited Maudaha twice during festive seasons after his birth in 1950. This time Amol was being spoilt badly by his mother's brother, Ranjan mama. He would carry him across the busy Roshan Ara road and buy him cold Coca Cola. First time Amol could not understand why a drink has to be so difficult to drink. So much gas resulted in choking him and later he burped continuously. But it took some practice before he could control his sneezing and coughing. In a few days he developed a taste for the adventure of it. He could talk about having a cold drink from the bottle to people in Maudaha. It was also a proud moment for him to have a cold drink costing four annas! He did not remember his father ever paid money to buy

anything for him that he wanted or would have excited him. Due to this Amol added a value to the relationship with his mama, as he was paying valuable money for him that too for a pleasure of five minutes!

On February 23, 1953, Kamal was born in the same room as him. This time Vimla stayed back in Delhi for full forty days. She had to. Param had received orders of his transfer to a town called, Karvi. He had realized that she would not be physically fit to take the hassles of looking after packing their entire household and knowing her nature she would also not be able to sit quietly without instructing and ordering around. Kitchen would also be not be functioning. It was a good decision. He managed to get all the work done and she too was taken care of by her mother and Santosh.

In due time Sharma family now of four, landed in Karvi by bus. Param's office jeep came to the bus depot to bring them to their new home in officer's colony. Karvi too was an insignificant place, just like Maudaha. Small little market, no train station and again no school beyond primary...

This time Param's mother and father both came to extend a helping hand. Other than Vimla and the newborn, the luggage was still being unpacked and placed in right places. Dada and dadi were getting it done with the help of servants and office staff. Amol was bursting with energy, exploring environment of the new town in dada-dadi's company. Amol and his dadaji were always together. So good rapport was developing between them. They would go for early morning walks to a river that was about 15 minutes away from the house. Many times they would relieve themselves on the bank of the river. On the way back dadaji would break a Neem twig for cleaning their teeth and they both would return home happily ready for breakfast. In Karvi, Param had much more office work than in Maudaha. Frequency of his tours to remote villages had gone up. He would be out for 2-3 days, every week. Vimla patiently took care of both her sons.



One afternoon Amol was lying awake next to his sleeping mother. Suddenly he felt there was music floating from somewhere close by. He couldn't stay in bed any longer. He looked at his mother. She was facing the other side and seemed fast asleep. He quietly and slipped out of the bed and bedroom. Music was clearer and louder in the living room. He asked the servant, "From where is this music coming?"

"Tripathi ji is playing his gramophone," servant said. Amol had no idea what gramophone was. But he knew that uncle. Excitement of that music was making him desperate. He ventured out of the house.

This would be three year old Amol's first adventure as he was following his instinct and working on it without anyone's help or permission. At such a young age he was not scared to find answers on his own. Of course it could be said that he was just going to the house next door. Yet he was going alone and it was his decision to go there. He was being pulled by something that he seemed to appreciate instantly. It was also the first time that a sense of 'appreciation' for an art took roots in his heart and mind... He reached Tripathi uncle's door but at the last moment, felt scared to knock at the door. Door was ajar but the curtains were drawn to make it a bit dark. He went closer and peeped in. Music grew louder, so did the sensation in him. Tripathi uncle and aunty were sitting close to each other listening to the music. They noticed him and immediately called him in.

"Come come, Amol come in," she said getting up.

Amol walked in without hesitation and inquired pointing to gramophone, "What is this uncle?"

"This is a gramophone."

"Gramophone?"

And then questions started pouring out.

"The song is coming from this big horn?" He put his ears in front of the horn.

"How is the song put on the black plate?"

"Oh the record?"

"Why record has to go round and round?"

"This needle has to be put?"

Tripathi uncle picked up the needle and the music stopped. He put it back, it played again. They turned the record over, another song started. They showed him gramophone's operations excitedly first, then patiently and then... they felt tired. Amol was getting hyperactive with all this. He had never seen anything so amazing. He had heard songs in many places; he had also seen horn like speakers from far; but he had never seen the gadget that produced the music or the song. Now he wanted to do it himself. That's when Tripathis got touchy. They did not want him to touch it, as they were scared of something going wrong. When they found him getting a bit out of control, uncle told him firmly, "now we want to sleep Amol, you come back later. Then we will show you more."

Amol did not object to being told to go. He was used to it.

He returned home as a very excited person. He immediately woke up his dadi and dada and told them about the gramophone. He knew they will not mind being disturbed. He also sang both the songs that he heard on two sides of the record. After a while his mother woke up, he started narrating the story to her. As expected she said, "You disturbed Tripathi uncle in the afternoon? You went out alone?" He knew she was angry. But he couldn't stop talking about it to her. Soon he realized that it was no use. She did not approve of what he had done. He never told his father about it, but she did. Two days later when his father came from his tour, he shouted at him. Amol felt, now he did not care. He knew how they are. They never approve of anything he did.

First time in three years of Amol's life, a feeling of thrill was more powerful than the fear and pressure... but he was not equipped to analyze it.

That evening his dada and dadi left for Allahabad. Param was too busy in his office. He sent office Jeep to drop his parents to the bus depot. He told the driver to take Amol along carefully and bring him back. It was fine; but it felt good that he will be coming back alone in the Jeep. At the time of their departure he felt extremely sad but did not cry.



It was a little before Holi of 1954 and Kamal's first birthday, Param received a post card in his office from Vimla's brother Ranjan. Param read it there and brought it home during his lunch break. He excitedly showed it to Vimla and said Ranjan wants to visit us. He knew that in Delhi Ranjan used to take Amol out and entertain him a lot. So this was a good chance for him to return the favor. Vimla digested the news with some concern. Param in his hurry to gobble up lunch and get back to office, did not notice the expression of worry on his wife's face. Luck was totally on Amol's side. He was excited beyond words. For him Ranjan mama was important. He was someone who took him out, bought him cold drinks and even 'paan', spending good money on him. Later at night Vimla told Param that they should be careful about Ranjan. He was not trust worthy...

Ranjan paid the cycle rickshaw and swung his small cloth bag on his shoulder. Amol ran to him and Ranjan mama lifted him high up with one movement and then hugged him tight. "So, want to drink Coca Cola again? Mummy daddy did not give you, no? I will give you. We will go in the evening and drink a cold bottle and eat paan too." Life was being kind to Amol. His dada dadi just left but to his good luck his mama came down to continue the fun.

Two days later was Holi. Param and Vimla started their Holi by putting colors on each other privately first and then came out in public. They remembered that last year physical action of forcing colors on each other had frightened Amol very badly. He thought that they were fighting with each other and his father was using too much force on his mother.

They walked to other officer friends like, Tripathi ji, Srivastav and Singh sahab. Everywhere they were offered homemade sweets and snacks with tea, coffee and cold drinks. Srivastav had made a cold drink with milk. Amol was not allowed to have it. He had a bottle of Coca Cola instead. To his surprise Ranjan mama was having the milk! His father and mother had tea. Visiting three houses was very tiring for everyone in the end. It was also getting late for home lunch. In any case Holi activities do stop around 1 PM and that's, when everyone heads home. It is a common ritual in all families. After Holi, when people return home,

all of them go through long and arduous baths resulting in streaks of muddy red colored water running on the bathroom floors. Yet it would not remove the red color from faces. That always takes a few days for skin to become entirely normal. Next in line would be long and strong siesta.

So, after returning home everyone started queuing up for bath. A sumptuous festive lunch was waiting after that. Ranjan mama excused himself saying he was not in a hurry and he will come back later and bathe. Vimla did not look too happy with this. Her face showed concern. Param said, "Oho he will come back. Why are you making such a long face on Holi? Come on let us go for bath." And he tried to pull her into the bathroom. She turned her arm and released herself from his grip, picked up Amol to give him a bath in the other bathroom.

People waited for Ranjan in front of hot lunch for about 15 minutes and then, they couldn't. Param and Amol were eating away as if there is no tomorrow. But Vimla kept stealing glances towards the door.

Ranjan arrived nearly at the end of lunch. His face was looking happier but redder. Vimla said, "Come come, we are nearly done. Here take a plate."

Ranjan went straight to Amol, picked him, put him in his lap and took the plate. Then he made a large bite of poori and potato vegetable and took it to Amol. Amol turned his face away. For the first Amol felt that Ranjan mama was holding him too tight, with a lot more force than he did in the past. He felt a bit odd first but then started getting scared. Vimla told him pleasantly that he has just eaten his full meal. But Ranjan said, "Ok but now he will eat from my hand". Amol got a very foul smell from his mama as he spoke and stared struggling to get away.

"Leave him Ranjan. He will vomit."

"No, he will eat again," Ranjan said.

Param knew immediately that Ranjan had a lot of something to drink. Ranjan kept on holding him tight and eating sloppily. Finally Vimla got up and released Amol from Ranjan's arms, "you eat comfortably. Amol go and wash your hands." Amol went to the hand pump and burst out crying. His mother noticed it and came to him. Pumping water for him she said, "Don't worry Ranjan is going back in two days." Amol picked up some mud from the ground, rubbed it around his hands to remove grease and then washed it off. As soon as he was done Vimla picked him up, wiping his tears with her sari, she took him away to sleep in the bedroom. After she lay Amol down, he felt comfortable. But he was very confused with the smell coming from Ranjan mama. How could someone smell so bad? Did he fall in a gutter?

Ranjan mama's physical aggression and the stinking breath were not the only reason that made Amol cry so bitterly. True these were the changes in physical parameters that hurt and disturbed a child of that age. Amol felt he just lost

someone who was always nice to him. But he could not highlight the damage to his own emotional state; he was not equipped to know it as yet.



A fellow officer, Mr. Srivastav's family had invited Sharmas for dinner on the same day. "Come over all of you for dinner and yes, please don't forget to bring 'saaley sahab' (brother-in-law) along," Srivastav whispered leaning towards Param. They shared a small laugh. "Also, shall I arrange for some non-veg food and... a drink perhaps? Madhu has no problem with it." Param felt agitated as he found Vimla looking at them whispering. He did not think she might have heard the conversation. "Oh no, no way, nothing. Just cook edible roots and leafs from your garden" and they laughed again. Vimla was stealing glances towards Param to guess what was so funny. Mrs. Srivastav was keeping her engrossed with too many questions about the jewellery that Vimla had worn today and last week.

It was only around 5 pm when people started stirring in their beds. With his eyes shut Param called the servant Gopal, to make tea. Vimla pulled herself out of the bed after she heard the sound of cutlery being set on the table. Param joined her. As Vimla poured tea in three cups, she told Gopal to ask Ranjan to come for tea. Gopal went and returned in a minute, "he is sleeping," he said. A question mark appeared on their faces. Now Param and Vimla called Ranjan from the table itself, but he did not answer. Amol was looking at his parents getting worked up. Param knew that source of the foul smell was keeping Ranjan asleep. Gradually they started getting dressed to leave for the next get together, dinner at Mr. Srivastav's house. Vimla was dressing Amol and baby Kamal with layers of woolen. She had a distinct huff on her face. Param too was not looking pleased. He went to Ranjan's room, "Ranjan we are nearly ready and you are still in bed. You didn't even come for tea."

Turning the other way Ranjan said, "Bhai sahab I am getting a headache."

"Your headache will go if you come out and breathe in the open."

"But..." , Ranjan said again from under the 'rajai' and a nearly very angry and confused Param turned away. Wearing his shoes, he asked Vimla, "Isn't he over doing it?" All four were fully dressed in winter clothes and ready to leave. Amol's cap covered his head, ears and went under his chin. Stealing glances in the direction of Ranjan mama's room, he stood stiff with anxiety and cold. Tension was flowing from his tender face.

It was 7 pm. Dark and cold. Little movement of breeze sent a chill through all the layers of woolens. Finally as a last resort Param tried a half-hearted blackmail, "Ranjan, Mr. Srivastav has called you especially, but if you want to turn down their invitation, then it is fine." Now Ranjan clearly announced that he can't come for dinner, as he is not feeling well at all. Also he has decided to leave for Delhi early morning as he has some urgent work. Frustrated they

dragged themselves out of the room, giving a final look to the stubborn bundle wrapped in the rajai. They instructed Gopal to eat dinner and ask Ranjan also to eat.

“And today sleep near the door, because when we return you can hear the knock.”

They started walking down to Mr. Srivastav’s house. It was the fourth house on the right. Amol walked holding his father’s finger, while Vimla carried two weeks old, Kamal.

Loud Holi greetings were exchanged by the families. Param and Srivastav hugged each other in customary Holi way. Three times changing sides, right, left then right again. Mrs. Srivastav picked up baby Kamal and started playing with him. Women of all ages love to carry and hug newborns. Feeling protective about Kamal, Amol too went behind her. She said, “Amol you go and eat *petha* from the table. They are delicious. Uncle got them from Meerut two days back. Go, go fast.” Amol was very fond of sweets, so it was not difficult for him to leave his little brother for *petha*. Srivastavs had an impressive spread of special dishes like ‘gujia’, spicy ‘pooris’, potato curry with ‘raita’ and also pure ghee ‘halwa’... Everyone gorged to their limits. Soon good times approached the end. Tired faces and voices started saying Namaste to each other and leaving.

Dinner lasted long enough for that sleepy little town. Around 9.45pm all formalities were over with mouth fresheners, saunf and ilaichi. Sharma family started walking back with both sleeping kids in their arms. It was quiet. Their own footsteps were sounding much louder. Here in Karvi, market would shut by 7pm and traffic will be close to zero around 8pm. That was about when the last bus would depart from the main bus station for Delhi. Most people went to sleep around 9 o’clock to start their day at 5am again.



Param called softly to avoid disturbing Ranjan, “Gopal... Gopal.” Getting no answer they knocked. A very sleepy Gopal stood up suddenly and opened the door. He dragged his bedding aside for everyone to enter. Param asked him about Ranjan. Rolling up his bed he said, “He is sleeping.” He then picked up his bedding and headed to sleep in the storeroom, his usual place.

Vimla tiptoed into Ranjan’s room to check. Her face turned white with what she saw. Ranjan was not there! She tried to keep her calm and ran into other rooms and met with similar disappointment. Then she decided to look in unexpected places, like under the bed, behind the cupboard and finally screamed, “Ji, Ranjan is not here! Just see where he has gone. Has he gone out to drink again?” Param panicked with the urgency and fright in her voice. They both went to check near the hand pump at the back, ran to the store where Gopal was sleeping, then rushed back into her own bedroom. Her cupboard was open! She

was puzzled. She looked inside. In a few moments her eyes saw the unbelievable. Her ornaments were missing! She went in a daze. Breathing heavily she clutched the bed for support to avoid a fall. Param moved swiftly and caught her in time. Amol shrieked in fright and started crying. He carried her and lay her on the bed. After Param sprinkled water on her face, she opened her eyes and tears started flowing freely. Amol had never seen such a sight. He was observing them both one by one, trying to fathom their reactions.

“Daddy what happened to mummy?” he asked choking in fright. Param did not notice his question. He picked up the cycle key from the drawer. Vimla pulled Amol towards her. Untying Amol's shoe laces she said “nothing happened. Ranjan mama has gone to Delhi without telling us.” Amol knew it was not true. He had said he will go tomorrow. There was a lot more to it. Vimla gave Param a muffler as he raced his cycle away towards the police station. Bleary-eyed Gopal was in a state of shock. He mumbled to himself “But Ranjan saab was here only when I went to sleep.”

Everyone in police station knew Mr. Sharma the consolidation officer. Param shook hands with the Police Inspector on duty, J. N. Singh and reported in brief that his brother-in-law, Ranjan had said that he wanted to leave for Delhi in the morning; but when they reached home around 10pm, he was missing! Other cops too had collected around him. Param told them softly about the empty ornament box. Inspector got up, picked up his cap and they all swung into action. Four of them went to the Jeep. Inspector took the wheel. He asked Param to sit behind. After two false starts and muted curses the Jeep roared and turned towards the bus station. They knew logically bus station would be the most likely escape point, so should be searched first. Jeep entered the bus depot and applied brakes just inside the gate. Inspector shut the engine. Cops jumped out. It was past 10.30. Bus stop was deserted. Vendors had packed their wares long ago and gone home. There was no sign of life. Even the dogs refused to stir. One cop went to the ticket counter to check if someone was still there. Another started looking around for clues in the compound. He was looking for a neat looking bag, as explained by Mr. Sharma. Or someone sleeping under a clean blanket. First cop entered the ticket counter and went inside the resting room. He found a clerk sleeping on a wooden bench. He switched the light, waking up the clerk with a start...

Second cop was still looking around to find any tell tale signs. Bookstall was shut with iron rods running across its wooden shutters. Fruit vendor had tied his wares with ropes crisscrossing over gunny bags. Beggars were sleeping under benches, fighting the chill with holey blankets and layers of newspaper and hand painted film posters. Most poor and beggars use a bag containing their life's most valuable property as pillow and that serves two purposes for that night. Clerk pulled out some papers from a drawer. Looking at the chart he said, “Last bus to go out was for Delhi and... it left at 8.10pm”. It seemed that he got away. Param too was looking at the chart from behind. He described Ranjan's feature

to him. Clerk definitely did not think so, “No, no such person bought a ticket from me for the last bus.”

Param’s job had made him a very bold man. He had met many tough people who had tried to twist his arm to get undue benefits from the system through him. But his brother in law stealing his wife’s gold ornaments had made him nervous. He found himself in a serious kind of double trouble. It was like choosing between the devil and the deep blue sea or frying pan and the fire. He thought if Ranjan has taken away the gold, his wife would lose all her expensive wedding jewelry, she is very emotional about. And if he is caught with the gold, then it will be such a terrible public shame for them both! Obviously second option troubled him much more.

Param and the cop came out of the ticket counter. From a distance second cop lifted his eyebrows to ask the other if he noticed anything. He nodded ‘no’ but pointed towards the tea stall, just to check.

He moved to the tea stall. He knew the young boy sleeping on the floor. Quietly cop went near him and tapped on his shoulder. Seeing the cops he stood up in a shock. Cop gestured him to keep quiet and whispered in his ears. Wrapping the blanket around him the boy pointed his finger upwards. Cop too lifted his finger in that direction, asking for reconfirmation. Boy nodded indicating, yes. Cops in Jeep noticed it too. Two of them coolly surrounded the tea stall exits. One of them started climbing the creaky wooden stairs. On the roof of tea stall, he saw three people sleeping under blankets. Immediately he noticed the odd man out. Feet of two men on the sides had cracked dirty heels. Pair of feet in the middle did not match the two. Cop looked down and nodded in affirmation...

A handcuffed Ranjan was screaming from inside the lockup. Initially they tried to get his story by offering him a chair with them in the office, but he was too violent. He had used all his strength to escape when they apprehended him. Param was clearly pale and shaken. Policemen had started checking the contents of his bag and were checking every article thoroughly. They opened the cloth bag. Took out shirts, pant, pajama, towel, everything; shook it thoroughly and then kept it aside. Everything was out, but there was no sign of gold. They turned the bag upside down, patted its bottom to see for a false compartment. Nothing! Pockets of what he was wearing had also been emptied, shirt, pant, coat, everything. Nothing.

Param took a deep breath and thought may be God is on his side. He preferred the second alternate of losing it all but keeping the family shame away. They announced; the ornaments were not on him or in his belongings. Param felt better.

Inspector called Param aside and told him that he will not clear Ranjan. He certainly was far from a simpleton. May be he has hidden it at some other place and will pick it up later. Param seemed in agreement but requested them to keep Ranjan’s name out of the police records for a day or two. So he would not

be kept in the lockup. Inspector advised that Ranjan be handcuffed and locked up safely in his own house until the search was given up.

It was well past midnight when Vimla heard the sound of Jeep, people shuffling and footsteps. She came out of the bedroom and shut it behind her, as Amol and Kamal were fast asleep. Gopal unlatched the main door and peeped out. Param entered with a face stern with emotions. He opened both sides of the door wide for others to enter. And then Vimla saw the most horrific sight of her life - her brother was handcuffed! Cops held the chain as he entered and stood in front of her. Ranjan screamed out, "Tell them I don't have anything. I did not steal your gold. Would I steal from my own married sister?" Three other cops were around. She did not speak at all. *

Brother and sister stared at each other for a few seconds. Cops too did not drag him. Vimla's tears flowed like a monsoon river. She just kept sobbing without saying a word. Perhaps she had no words or did not know how or where to start. This scene was never supposed to be a part of her life. Few times their eyes met and Ranjan lowered his.

"Didi I did not take anything from here." He muttered.

She took long to say, "Then why you had to run away like a thief in the night?"

He did not answer. Param guided the cops to move Ranjan to the room where he stayed. Vimla swayed again and held onto the chair. Param promptly caught hold of her again and took her in the bedroom. He made her sit on the bed and came out to see what the cops were doing.

Inside Ranjan's room, cops were trying to figure out how to make him fully secure. Ranjan's handcuffs were kept on and keeping in mind his violent behavior one of his legs too was chained to the thick iron bars of the window with a chain. He could not move more than 3 ft away from the window. Param found the arrangement satisfactory and thanked the Inspector and other cops. They all said Namaste to each other. Inspector assured him saying that he will return in the morning and check Ranjan out.



In the morning Amol woke up with a hope that Ranjan mama had gone away.

"Mummy mamaji has gone to Delhi?"

"I don't know." Vimla said.

"I will check in the room." Amol headed to find out.

Vimla screamed instantly, "no, don't go there." Amol stopped in his tracks.

"Go to the bathroom and then brush your teeth. No going towards that room."

Amol was confused. Obviously he had no idea about last night. At breakfast time he heard Ranjan mama shouting menacingly, "I don't want to eat anything. I don't have anything of yours." A frightened Amol was shaken up. He kept his glass of milk back on the table. He realized mama is still here and now he is very

angry. He moved by the side of his mother. There was loud crash sound of the brass plate and glass. Param ordered Gopal sternly, "Let it be Gopal. Bring it back. Feed it to the dogs on the road."

"I guess I was feeding a dog only," he mumbled to himself.

Vimla tried sending food to her brother all day but he kept refusing it. He kept screaming that he has not touched anything.

At night the Police Inspector and other two cops had been theorizing all the angles of the theft. They were back at Param's home at 8am. They were trying to find various possibilities in this theft scene... There was no one at home that night, except for Gopal, who was right here in front of them, doing his job as simply as he did every day. He was only 16. His belongings too had been frisked quietly. Everyone now zeroed back on Ranjan. The only point was to crack him to admit, where has he hidden it.

Another night was upon them and everyone was tired and depressed. Param and Vimla had not eaten anything all day.

Next morning Amol was sent to Mr. Srivastav's house for the day, as he was taking all that very badly. Gopal had gone to drop him with a hand written note to Mrs Srivastav to take care of him for the day. And in case it gets late then make him sleep there only. There Gopal handed the fruits and an English alphabets book to Amol. Mrs Srivastav asked Amol very affectionately, "what happened Amol? You are looking scared." Amol just nodded sideways but didn't say anything. Image of Ranjan mama with handcuffed hands was floating in his mind. He had never seen anyone in handcuffs. He did not know how to react. He remained wide-eyed and dumb struck.

At 6PM, dead tired and ready to give up, Inspector decided to play another card. He got up and walked off. Inside Ranjan's room, he announced that due to presence of his sister and two small children they cannot risk keeping him in this house any more. They are shifting him to local jail and simultaneously inform his father in Delhi..

It worked instantly, like a magic wand. He gave in. They brought him out and he followed them with his head down slowly.

Police Jeep took him back to the bus station. He got off and walked to tea stall. He pointed to the corner on the roof and described the packet. A policeman went up and pulled out a newspaper roll from under the planks of wooden flooring. Entire party returned to Param's house with the packet, where Vimla to her relief and shame, found everything in order. She did not look at her brother's face when he was being taken away to the bus stop. Looking away at the last minute she decided to stab him with, "I could not believe that my own brother would do this to me!"



Amol was more than three years old now. He should be going to some kind of school, like a nursery or a play school. But his father would always be posted only to very small towns, even villages, where there were no such schools. After a very long period of deliberations between Param and Vimla, a very emotional Vimla gave in to the idea of sending Amol to Allahabad to be with his grandparents. Param promised her in the mean while that he will try to get a posting to a bigger town soon, where Amol could be with them and go to a regular school.

Allahabad was a complete shock for Amol. Dadaji's house was on the first, second and third floor. It was a part of large building with many tenants. Building also had a name, Kishori Mahal! It faced a very busy road, which had a famous name, G T Road, like in Delhi, his Nana's house. Amol's school in Allahabad was quite far from their house in Khuldabad, which was adjacent to famous Khusro Baug. He was in for more shocks. He had to wear a uniform and go to school by a school bus! He had no idea that schools also have buses. It was a dark green Chevrolet bus, with old style bonnet over the engine that stuck out of the body. He had hardly traveled in buses with his parents and now he had to travel all by himself with unknown children. Journey was 30 min long. He was never able to mix with anyone, as he never had any friends. He was always full of inhibitions and fright. He remained in a daze with bright ambience of school and his classroom. Students spoke about strange things. During recess students would be given snacks. He had never tasted any of those before.

Sharma family was very tightfisted. They spent only on the basic necessities and never for any style or fun. Amol came home during holidays with his dadaji. He was 4 years old now. He had become conscious of ironing his clothes, keeping his things in order and clean. Surely it was the effect of the play school. Param's salary used to be less than Rs 300. Even those days this sum was not enough to run a home with two children. But Sharmas showed as though they were on top of things. May be they were, because they never spent a penny they didn't need to. They never went to restaurants, never bought a shoe, a sari or a shirt because it looked good. There had to be an occasion for it. Except for festivals never bought sweets, chocolates, and butter for home. Even during festivals they made snacks at home only. Amol used to help his mother with making snacks as annual rituals.

Well, Amol was not even five and he was going to get another sibling. This time for obvious reasons Vimla did not go to her parents in Delhi for the delivery. Sharmas chose Allahabad as the place of birth for their third child. They got another son and called him Vimal. Param's father asked him in private why they were not practicing family planning in today's age. They should have done it after the second child only. He answered, "We would have Pitaji, but we

desperately wanted a daughter. Even if our second child was a daughter, we would have stopped right then.” Pt. Devidas nodded and kept quiet. Well, there are millions who will kill to get as many sons as possible but this couple... thought otherwise.



When Amol turned five, Param was transferred to yet another town, Bijnore. They were given a large ‘haveli’ (mansion) called Rahat Manzil opposite Jama Masjid. It was to be used it as residence cum office. Rahat Manzil was the largest and tallest house in Bijnore. It was three stories tall and above that was a tiny terrace as the fourth. But the mansion had not been opened for many years. There was a general belief that the large haveli was possessed - well, by spirits. So no one dared to enter inside it. Its owners were frightened, as they believed in the legend of their family members who swore that they had seen ghosts moving around in flowing white sheets. And since then it had been kept locked. Param did not believe in such myths. He dismissed all those rumors and requested the owners to get it opened.

Few large keys turned easily, to open the huge locks placed on the 15 feet high door. The door itself was eight inches thick. Numerous four inch long ornate nails were stuck on it all over. Amol was told later that these nails helped keep the elephants away if they were ordered by enemies to push to break the door open. There was also a three feet tall little door within that huge door. That was used only to walk in and out after the office was shut. The wall behind the main door was at least two feet wide. Within the wall, there was a 10 inch wide square hole hiding a fitting log of solid wood. At nights after the main door was shut, this log would be pulled out from one side and inserted in the hole on the opposite side of the wall. There was no way anyone could break in after this. All this was part of keeping the inmates secure during local wars of olden times. All forts have this arrangement.

Ceilings of the room were nearly 15 feet high. Ground floor had eight large rooms that were converted into the office and living quarters for servants. The family stayed on the first floor using four huge rooms, a kitchen and a massive terrace.

As Param and his staff were moving in the mansion, its owners watched from a safe distance. Param took the lead and entered first. He found himself surrounded by dense jungle of cobwebs. He came out, picked up a stick and started a kind of sword fight... It took a team of five people three days with kerosene flames to clean up decades old spider homes to bring the house in a livable condition. Then only the family decided to sleep in for first night.

The office was much more active and noisy here. There were so many assistants, orderlies, lawyers, their clients and other field workers. There was a cacophony with so many of them.

Param became so busy that he would hardly get time to come up to have lunch. Vimla was busy with cooking, taking care of children and keeping the house clean. She was obsessed with cleanliness or rather with the act of 'cleaning'. It seemed that she did not care if the floor was clean or dirty. She just wanted to know that it was cleaned today, everyday, twice a day. Servants would be fed up sweeping and mopping the huge area. Kitchen and toilets were on one end. There was no running water, but only hand pumps. In spite of it being such a large haveli its bathing space did not have a ceiling! Vimla had got it covered by old bed sheets. But bathing during winter was a shuddering horror. Northern India gets bitterly cold in winter and piping hot in summer. Toilets were two holes in two elevated cement seats. The excreta would drop down straight on the floor. Use of water would make it flow out all over the floor. You couldn't walk on the floor. Vimla had told Amol to step down and wash up near the water drain.

Here Amol was admitted to class one in a small primary school that looked like a slum house compared to the stylish play school that he went to, in Allahabad. His mother would dress him up in well-ironed clothes and black leather shoes. Amol had used those shoes for a year already. So they were very tight for him. When the servant would push his feet in, his feet would hurt badly. May be later he would get used to it or forget about the pain or shoes would stretch a bit. But for Amol getting into those black pair of leather shoes was always painful.

After getting dressed, eating a paratha with milk and swallowing an almonds-resins-pepper ball, Param's office orderly would take Amol to the school on his bicycle. Tripathi would make Amol sit on the rod in front with his school bag clamped in the carrier behind. As a small kid it was very difficult for Amol to keep his balance on the cycle rod. He had never done it before. The rod would also hurt his bottom a lot; but he could not do anything about it. Many times his fingers would get jammed between the brake rod and handle. Amol had not learnt to complain. He was perhaps resigned to the thought that whatever is happening cannot be challenged.

The classroom had five rows of running choir mat on which children sat, one behind the other. Most of the students dressed very shabbily and were far from clean. They carried their books in torn cloth bags and food for recess wrapped in a paper. But for Amol same servant would bring lunch for him from home. Amol would eat quietly in front of many pairs of glaring eyes. He did not know that he was supposed to feel very odd when others were staring at him.



At home Amol would find himself moving around the house over and over trying to discover new things. Patterns on the tiled floor were made of broken crockery. He would try to find the names of company or country it was made in.

He would notice cracks in the wall, insects peeping out, he would follow a never ending row of ants, lizards running around, wood girders on the ceiling... One day he found the narrow stairs that led up to the fourth floor terrace. He had seen the terrace but didn't know how to reach there. When he discovered it, his heart was beating hard. He thought he will surprise everyone by screaming from there to attract attention. Carefully he moved up on the staircase. Excitement was growing. He was watchful of any crack or weakness in the bricks of each step. It had not been used for ages. In a few minutes he found himself at the highest point of the house. He was thrilled with the view. He looked around. There was nothing taller than him. He realized that he was standing at the highest point of Bijnore! Entire town seemed to be spread underneath like a flat sheet. Holding the parapet he shouted for his mother, "mummy mummy, see where I am." He had to repeat it several times because the house was huge. She finally appeared on the lower terrace and started screaming at him, "Get down right now or I will call daddy." Amol's thrill fell off from that highest point. It was not that he was not expecting this. But he did not allow his credit of discovering that high point to fall and the thrill that he got.

Amol was very scared of his father. Quietly and gingerly he came down. He got some more mouthfuls from his mother and started getting worried about when his father returned home. All Amol was hoping for was that his mother would look happy and add, "Wow, so high! What can you see from there? I can't climb so high. Ok come down now." She on the contrary told Param about it and he too gave him a piece of his mind. All he had done was to go up on the terrace of their own house! He just wanted someone to like what he did; but it was not to be. People who loved, appreciated or liked what Amol did were with him only during vacations - his grandparents and three uncles. Though Ranjan mama turned out to be a villain; but he would still take him out to drink a cold bottle. Both his parents never said anything encouraging to him or to any of their children. Amol also was not getting company of both his parents together. Parents and children never sat together on the bed or around a table to chat, hear stories of the day or an event in the office and laugh about something. Nothing. Although Amol was only 6 years old, none of the parents had affectionately held him in their lap. This was drying Amol up emotionally. It was strange but at this early age he was losing his affection for them both. And to make matters worse parents' fright in him was growing.

Param would be late for lunch often from his office. Vimla would wait for him. She never ate before him. They would eat together and go in their bedroom. Amol and Kamal would be shunted out. His father would tell him in a rough tone, "I am giving you one hour. Go down and play. After that I will give you math's test." In the heat of the summer afternoon Amol would walk down the steps most unwillingly and find some servants to talk to, if they were not occupied. He

had absolutely nothing to do. Mostly nobody looked at him. They all passed by him by, busy with their work carrying files and papers.



One day Amol saw someone dump a cigarette butt on the ground. People do it all the time, but this day he noticed it differently. He kept looking at it and also checking if anyone else was looking. It was still lit and smoking. Casually he picked it up, sat in a corner and put it to his lips. He found the drag very bitter. He exhaled. Some smoke came out. He pulled in again and found the smoke coming out of his mouth very exciting. "So you are smoking?" someone popped the question. A strong shiver went down his spine but before Amol had a chance to react, the man had walked off. No one was bothered. If his parents were not worried about him, why would others. Of course if someone had to mention about this incidence to his father, it would be an unimaginable horror. In spite of knowing that, Amol was getting bolder. He got used to quietly picking cigarettes or bidi butts and hide in some corner. A very dirty toilet for the office staff became his smoking space. There were days when he did not find a butt. He experimented by rolling a piece of paper and lit it by asking for a match from one of the servants. He had developed some guts!

There was another habit that he had picked up from some of his schoolmates, which was far worse and dangerous, as far as his parents were concerned. He had started playing with his penis! One day in his school he saw one of the boys hiding in a corner with his penis in his hand. Amol was shocked to see him like this. But he did not bother to hide. Amol asked him what was he doing. "Nothing, it feels nice. You also try." he said. Being from a middle class Brahmin family all the burden of morality was on his shoulders, unknowingly. Amol found it very hard to swallow that someone right in the middle of school time was being so bold and outright dirty! He moved off, but the words "it feels nice" hung on his mind.

He touched himself the same night. He felt some excitement that was also so different. He gradually got used to touching himself at any time. He found it was less visible than smoking. So, chance of someone complaining to his parents was negligible. Amol's problem was the enormous amount of 'time' he had for himself during an entire day. This activity was safely possible in the nights only. He had to find a secluded spot in the day too. He didn't. So he would just go behind any door and start playing with himself.

It had to happen. After all how street smart a six year old can be? A servant noticed him and told it to the cook and he in good faith complained to his mother. If it stopped with her it would be fine. She did not hit very hard. But problem was that everything that his mother came to know had to filter down to his father. She did not feel that it would be better to handle such delicate issues on her own. It did not occur to her that she should take Amol in confidence and

try to sort it out between two them only. It also did not occur to her how much damage father's one slap could do to a small kid like Amol. Param had hit children several times for different mistakes. Vimla also knew that this matter was something that will infuriate Param to no limit; yet she told him about it...

As a very angry 6ft tall and strong Param moved towards Amol, Vimla noticed a wet patch developing in Amol's khaki short pants. She pleaded, "Ji, let him be." Amol was stone stiff with fright as the uncontrolled flow of warm yellow liquid trickled down his legs, making a growing puddle on the floor.



This incident sealed Amol's emotional status. Although he was saved from the physical assault of a slap, but was very ashamed of urinating due to fear. Six years old boy's mental mirror was being tarnished due to the persistent fright of his parents. He had vaguely imagined that his mother will shield him from his father, but she didn't, although, she seemed different from his father, a bit softer, more approachable. He was confused. Will she always take up his father's side or she could ever be his confidant too.

Amol knew she could not. He started feeling more and more closed and by himself. His inner doors were shutting down, making him lonely. Strangely he found something positive in this incidence too. He realized that 'he did not get his father's slap because he was very scared of it'. He remembered few other incidences too, when he was mortally scared and extremely worried about something; but they did not happen. It certainly was not a conclusion. It couldn't be. How could Amol analyze, theorize and derive a conclusion on such matters...

Now Amol started being scared all the time. He seemed to be scaring himself to death. Perhaps a 'fear' cell was created in his mind. Many times while walking up the staircase he would convince himself that a lion or a snake or a wolf was following him. His muscles would get stiff with fright. He would not even look back until he had reached the first floor safely. Only then he would turn back and look down. He would relax further when someone ran down the same staircase or saw someone carry up a bag of veggies. But still he wouldn't go back there to dismiss the imaginary presence of a wild animal.

As his wild imaginations during each day became his problem, frightening dreams haunted him during nights. He would always dream of death and pain, as if someone was trying to kill him or was killing him. He would see the gory details of being stabbed by a robber or an escaping killer. He would clearly notice the

size of the knife; hear the opening click, menacing man's unshaven face, tearing of his shirt with the tip of the knife; knife entering his stomach, pain, blood...! Many times he had woken up screaming with pain and fright due to dream of him getting stabbed in his stomach. Sadly no one ever heard his screams to wake him up and say, "It's alright, you must be dreaming."

Other than these, most of his 'dreamtime' was taken up by nightmares of slipping and falling down from great heights. He would dream that he is precariously balancing on top of a high wall. The ground below is made of sharp pointed rocks pointing upwards. Ultimately he would fall down and the points of rocks would pierce his body in many places... He is on top of a very large and high shiny dome and slipping down. He is trying to stop the fall by digging his nails into the hard slippery surface... he is holding onto sharp blade like objects to stop his downward slide... he is looking down into a invisible valley from a steep, near vertical mountain and is trying to save himself by holding little plants on the slope...

No night was spared from such nightmares. No day passed without those imaginary figures chasing him. The dreams would be so real for him that it would cause him real pain. In fact sometime a servant sleeping on the floor had to wake him up to break the dream. Amol would sit up with a jerk, drenched in sweat and go on feeling the pain much after waking up. He would even try to touch his stomach to check if there was blood...



Parents in most families make some effort to keep their children in good humor. Or maybe it just happens naturally, without efforts. No one has to make extra effort to humor anyone. After all that is how it is supposed to be in all normal families. Someone may do it by sharing the day's incidence or telling a small joke he heard in office that day; after all life is funny too. Parents take their kids for movies, parks, to fairs, someone invites them for a meal or people come over for a cup of tea. But in this family such occasions were a rarity. Amol had no reason to share a laugh with anyone to feel lighthearted. There were no light moments and practically nothing enjoyable or fun in relationship between him and his parents. He was always alert about what might anger them. It was better for him to stay neutral. His face was becoming stern and expressionless...

In the meanwhile as a result of children being kept out of his parent's bedroom, his mother was going to deliver yet another baby.



As if to retrieve Amol from a deep, dark bottomless labyrinth, his grandparents, Pitaji and Biji, suddenly came over from Allahabad. May be it was because of last stage of his mother's fourth pregnancy. Amol felt he is being saved from the irritation that his parents were showing. He decided to be with Pitaji all the time. He was so happy that his bed was shifted to their room. They both doted on him. After all Amol was the eldest son of his eldest son, Param. Amol found his life suddenly eased off and all the anxieties dissolved. On the first day itself Pitaji took him to the market to buy vegetables. He would take him for a morning walk, like in Karvi. With him Amol went on so many roads he had never been to. There was nobody to take him. He did not remember his father or mother had gone to shop for grocery, like wheat, rice, sugar, oil or vegetables. Most shopping was done by servants only. Only during festivals, like Diwali, Dashehara or Holi whole family went out shopping for crackers, lamps, colors and sweets. But with pitaji, he was watching and learning how to buy different vegetables, how to see if the vendor is cheating in weight. What is good, what is not?

One night when all the children were asleep, Vimla went away for four days and returned with Tarun. Amol's first reaction to the name was that it did not rhyme with other names. His father said, Tarun means young. So because he is the youngest of them all, he is named Tarun. His father had become erratic in his behavior. He would be smiling one moment, but would suddenly become tense. He distributed sweets in to the office staff of nearly 15 people. He gave one rupee each to the servants. And he to put a final stamp of this show he went to the terrace and firing four rounds of bullets in all four directions from his service revolver. From a safe distance, Amol experienced a revolver being fired for the first time. He had seen the revolver many times and held it in his hand too; but it was never used in front of him. He felt great seeing his father shooting the bullets! In the end Amol used all his guts and asked his father to let him also shoot once. To his surprise he gave it to him. Amol stretched his arms out fully, aimed towards the sky, his eyes shut and face distorted in trying to squeeze the trigger. He couldn't. He tried it again. He couldn't press it all the way. His father helped him with a little of his force and it went - bang! A wide smile spread across his face. Now, getting a new baby brother became a happy occasion.



One day Param told Amol to go for a haircut to the barber opposite the house and take Kamal and Vimal too with him. Pitaji said he will go with them. But Param said, “No Pitaji, let Amol take them. He should learn how to cross the road with his brothers and make payments.” Amol realized it was the first time his father gave him some responsibility. It made him feel real good. But he was loaded him with instructions, “Tell him to cut hair short. He charges one anna for one person. That makes it...

“...Three annas for all three of us.” Amol poked in the middle.

“Yes but give him four annas. One anna as a tip!”

Amol did not understand the concept of tip. But he knew it would be a stylish thing to do.

He looked at the coins. One of 2 annas and 2 coins of one anna each. Makes it four annas. Dressed in a baniyan and shorts. He had kept the coins in the pocket of his stripped short and felt them from outside. He asked Kamal and Vimal to wear their slippers. He held their hands tightly before crossing a nearly deserted road. In the salon one seat was vacant. He made Vimal sit. He argued with barber when Vimal’s neck was aching, as his head was held down for too long. Soon haircut was over. He asked the barber, “How much?”

“Three annas” barber said

“Three annas? Here, take four annas!” he banged the coins on the table with a flourish and walked out with his brothers.

Pitaji acknowledged them from a distance, “So you all are back?” Amol ran into his arms and sat with him for a long time. Pitaji too held him tight. It seemed so perfect. Scratches on his mental mirror were clearing a bit. “Come on go for bath all of you.” He heard his mother say.

Three brass buckets of water were ready in the open-air bathroom. Amol poured water on Kamal and Vimal with a ‘lota’ (tumbler made of brass). Tripathi soaped them and then Amol poured water again to wash the soap off. They both were happily jumping for some reason. Tripathi wiped them and they ran off naked to wear clothes. After bath everyone was sitting on the floor for lunch. Everyone had a large brass thali (dish) in front. It seems mummy had cooked rice today.

There were two preconditions for cooking rice. One, it should be summer and second an important guest should be present. Kamal complained to his mother that Amol was showing his tongue towards his thali and making it 'joothi' from a distance. Vimla snubbed them both.

In the evening around 5pm, pitaji asked Amol to come with him for shopping. In a flash he was ready. They both walked out. After about 15 min walk they reached a grocery shop. He bought 'caustic soda', palm oil and some other things. After they were back, pitaji took a large iron tub and started mixing some items from the shopping they had done. Amol had no idea what was he doing, but he was watching the activity with total concentration and fascination. Initially the mixture fumed, then bubbled and then started thickening. Pitaji was constantly mixing the enlarging solution with a thapi (flat wood used to beat clothes to wash). In a few minutes the mixture released a familiar smell. Washing soap! Pitaji was making soap for washing clothes! Gradually the solution started getting thicker and harder; but he kept on mixing it. Finally he stopped and let it settle. He washed his hands. It was left over night.

Next morning Amol woke up and ran to the terrace to check out the tub. It was covered with a newspaper. Pitaji too came, pulled the paper off and touched it. It had hardened. Amol too felt it. It did smell like 'charkha' brand soap they used at home. Pitaji turned over the entire large cake of soap on the ground and started making deep cuts into it with a large knife. It needed strength, but finally nearly 20 cakes of washing soap came out from this procedure. Amol was happy that he was involved in the process from the beginning.

Two days before pitaji and biji were to leave for Allahabad, Amol started feeling traumatized. He spent all his time with pitaji and biji. Biji would keep him in her in her lap affectionately and talk to him about things in Allahabad. He was any ways full of questions. The more she told him the more he asked. He found questions in all the answers. Thanks to his animated gestures, one day lying in her lap Amol touched her breast by mistake. He had no idea if they could be touched or not. But since only women have it may be it is out of bound for men. He got very scared by this goof up, but then covered it up by pressing it again and again and making the sound of a bus horn, "pom pom, pom pom!" She did not say anything; just asked in the most normal way, "does your mummy let you do this?" "No", he nodded and walked away.

Two days passed in a jiffy. Everyone was at the railway station to see them off. Train was late by two hours. Amol had been weeping all day. Pitaji was keeping

him by his side. Suddenly coolies started their movements. They had noticed train was approaching. Soon it entered the station. Everyone touched their feet before they boarded the train. Param passed the 'surahi' of water from the window to Pitaji. He peeped out and said to Amol, "When you come to Allahabad, we will put you in a good school." But Amol was too upset to understand what he meant. Amol got startled with the loud train whistle, and whoosh of steam. He could also hear whistle of guard from the other end. Train crawled forward. Amol walked with it waving his hands to them. Ramu picked him up and walked with the train until he could. Amol kept his eyes on pitaji's white handkerchief waving for long a time. Soon last bogie passed by with guard still waving his green flag. Train was disappearing in the horizon, taking away Amol's pleasures and hopes.

As the family walked out of the station, Amol put his hands in the pockets of his knickers and dropped his shoulders. He felt as though all is lost and he is going back to same prison, where everyone is dead serious. No one likes him. He has to do what pleases 'them'. He had no idea for how long he will have to fight this uncertainty. A boy of 6 years was contemplating 'what to do with his life' now. For him there was no hope and escape from his angry and boring parents.

Life went back to same dreary style. Wake up; sit on the potty, clean your teeth with some powder, have a bath, then and only then you can have breakfast. Many times he would not feel like going to the toilet; but no one was allowed to change that sequence; make potty, clean teeth, bathe. Make potty, clean teeth and bathe. You could not clean your teeth first if you did not feel like potty...

After pitaji and biji left, Amol could not concentrate on his studies for many days. He wondered why there was so much difference between people of the same family. Why those were generally so happy and these were so angry? He would forget the sequence of English alphabets if his father asked him to say it. In front of him remembering tables of 4, 6, 7 and 9 was tough. And to top it Hindi alphabets were most confusing. All he had memorized thoroughly was Hanuman Chalisa. He could narrate it anytime. Yes, this was one thing his parents praised him about - they would say proudly, "Amol can narrate entire Hanuman Chalisa"... perhaps that was about all, he was good for.

Amol had learnt to be patient and tolerant. He studied a pattern and figured that life was comparatively easier when his father was out on tours. He calculated he is out for 3 days a week. His mother was not so strict and generally

did not beat them and if at all she did, it would not be very hard. So it was a matter of going through a four tough days every week.



Life carried on and one fine day his father was transferred to a very small village, called Ratangarh. Here they had a huge house, with a lot of land around it. Amol started spending his time wandering around and exploring the new landscape. He enjoyed being with servants while they ploughed and flattened the land for sowing next crop. He learnt a lot from this. First night in that house was quite scary. Servants had told us that wild animals like wolfs, jackals and foxes were always on prowl. So we must shut the door and all windows properly before it became dark. And there were so many of them. The house was in the middle of forest after all. Amol's mother was very worried. There would be 4-5 lanterns and 2-3 large lamps to be cleaned and lit for so many rooms. Servants would do that.

One fine day Amol walked off to explore a little far from the house. There was just one muddy road to take. After walking for about a kilometer, he reached the main intercity road. He saw a bus parked under a tree. The bus stop seemed like a small fair. There were excited sounds of people buying eatables, luggage being loaded on top of bus, women and men shouting instructions to others from the window of bus. Amol was completely engrossed in this lively ambiance. People were laughing and seemed to be so happy. Children were adamantly pulling their fathers shirts and demanding eatables. And to his surprise many were getting what they were crying for.

Suddenly he noticed a huge commotion. Then he heard a man screaming. He noticed someone in black underwear was tied with ropes and was being dragged by a group of men. He was continuously growling. Most of the men were carrying strong bamboo sticks used for fights. Amol overheard, tied up man was thief and was caught inside the school building. He was hiding there after committing the crime somewhere else. All he was doing was braying like a buffalo, not complaining or explaining. Amol realized the school was right there in front. It was only a mud structure with a thatched roof. It had an open entrance without a door, also it had no windows. Thief was finally securely tied to a tree by those men who then sat down in front of him. Someone said they were waiting for the police to arrive by the next bus. At this point Amol decided to walk back. He had

no sense of time. He just thought it must be late and before anyone starts looking for him, he should reach home. He was safe when he reached back.

After a few drab days, Amol was told that soon schools will be opening and he will be going to Lucknow to study with his chacha (uncle). He was going to be in sixth standard and that mud school with thatched roof was the culprit, as it was only till fifth standard. So it did not have facility for Amol's higher education.



Ramu came to drop him to Lucknow. They traveled by a train. It was a day journey. There were no seats for them, so both sat in the space of the door with their legs dangling out. It must have been fun, because normally he wouldn't be allowed to do something as hugely adventurous as this. Ramu noticed Amol was very tired. May be due to cool breeze hitting the face he started dozing immediately. At one point his body bent in front with a jerk and he would have fallen over. But alert Ramu noticed it and instantly put his arm across Amol's chest and blocked his fall. And then he held the rod on the other side making a barrier across Amol. Ramu was a very reliable person in the fleet of helpers at home. He also had a very village intelligence or intellect. One day in some conversation he told Amol, "Bhaiyya, everybody in the world will die in seven days." It was an earth shattering statement to make. Much later he told Amol what seven days meant, Monday to Sunday, he said. So true, everyone has to die within these seven days!

Lucknow was an enormous city for Amol, who was used to small towns or villages. There were too many distractions and frights for Amol. There was so much traffic, noise, loud speakers blaring film songs, large film posters, cinema halls, shops displaying never seen before goodies, like sweets, chocolates, clothes, bright colors splattered all over... he had seen all this, but only from the first floor balcony of his Nanaji's house in Delhi. But now he was walking similar forbidding roads on his way to school! He would mostly get carried away and lose sense of time, watching film posters and get delayed in reaching home. It was not very far, but he was not used to crossing roads with such heavy traffic. He had no sense of timing to dodge between rushing vehicles. He would be sacred of everyone coming his way, only to find them rushing off. The building of the school was overpowering and studies were too difficult to grasp. In the middle of the year, he was told that he was being sent to Allahabad to his grandparents to complete class six there. He didn't know why, but it was a great relief. Again

someone came to drop him. Allahabad was much better, as pitaji and biji were very affectionate and his favorite. He also had been here many times during vacations.

He was admitted to 6th standard again in Kesarvani School at Chowk area, which was perhaps more crowded than Lucknow. But then it was familiar. His grandparents had brought him here often for shopping and for eating 'chat'. He still had to walk to school and this walk was even longer than previous one. The school was hidden inside a narrow lane of the busy city center. His class was on the third floor. He had never been on a floor higher than first floor. But this may have been more amicable place for him, as he did slightly better in studies. Main reason must have been going back home to Pitaji, Biji and Om chacha. Om chacha was very lively and very entertaining. He was fond of singing and seeing movies. Amol enjoyed his company thoroughly. Chachaji would narrate stories of films he would see and also sing songs from it. He loved actor Raj Kapoor and singer Mukesh. If he had just seen a movie, he would enter home with a broad smile and a song from that film on his lips, 'Nain tumhare mazedar o janab-e-aali...' or 'tum jo hamare meet na hote...'

Amol too followed him and started admiring Mukesh and Raj Kapoor. Listening to so many film stories and songs from Om chacha, actually did something else for Amol. It sowed the seed of 'films, film music, actors...' in his psyche and mind. Om chacha was fond of watching Hindi films and singing songs, but Amol started dreaming of movies in a different sense. He started reading names of producers, directors, cameraman etc on the film posters. He would memories them without any trouble. If he saw a film poster, in his thoughts, he would remove the hero's face next to the heroine and replace it with his own. He obviously did not know how much more was there to the movies than only 'acting'. He was clearly glamour struck and started getting infatuated with what movies were about. It was a new phenomenon. First time there was something else in his heart other than fear.

In 6th standard Amol did just a little better than very bad. Next year in 7th standard, he had to move back with the family at a small town called Patti, in district Pratapgarh. Here too his father's government house was extremely large. It had large mango, ber and jamun trees, fields where servants grew peas, gram and seasonal vegetables. This was also a place where he played Badminton for the first time, in an open court in compound of the house. Another rude psychological affect was awaiting him, when he realized his younger brother

Kamal became as tall as him. Few days later someone commented, “Oho younger brother has become taller!” Amol was very distressed at this. If family went out somewhere, he stopped standing next to Kamal. He was only twelve, yet he felt a psychological pressure due to slower growth.

His father had a lot of respect here, as he was Tehsildar (administrative head) of this town. Due to this all the brothers were safe from any bad remarks from teachers in school. They used to get to sit right in the front row and teachers never caned them. Everyone was taken to school by servants on the bicycles. Soon he too started riding a bike to school and even taking a younger brother with him. Seventh grade ended without any significant incidence, except he was being sent to Allahabad once again to study in class eight. This school at Patti did have classes till 12th; but he could not understand 'why', he had to study next class away from his family. These questions did not fall within his working intelligence.



In Allahabad he was admitted to CAV School almost 4 km away from his home at Khuldabad. He walked to the school through monsoon and winter of that year. It never occurred to Amol that the situations were not really good. He did not realize that walking 4 km was too much for a child of his age. He just went along doing everything without a thought, like a bull goes round and round turning sesame seeds into oil. He did not feel anything like tiredness or frustration and thus, did not protest. His face remained expressionless and stoic until he reached home.

Walking up and down every day made him a bit bolder. Normally he would be frightened of people he passed by on the road, mainly because they were unknown. He felt someone may ask him why was he going this way. Why was he looking like that? He was scared of being bullied, because that's he had experienced all along. Any such imaginary thought was good enough to scare him. One such scary thought he had, was about traffic police. He thought that they moved their arms to send people in whichever direction they wanted! And that for him was very frightening.

Finally half way through the year his father bought him a mid size bicycle. 'Eastern Star' was its name and it carried a price tag of Rs 135. In no time young Amol became very good at riding his bike. He would speed up and go through the traffic very smartly. One day under the railway flyover near Niranjana theater he

squeezed his cycle between a rickshaw and an approaching Fiat car. There was a very narrow gap and it was such a dangerous move that even he shut his eyes as he heard shouts from many people, but next moment he found himself on the other side safely.



Pitaji made him join a 'shakha' a branch of RSS for physical activities. That was the best thing that happened to him ever in his life till then. He played all the games, exercised well, got more disciplined, developed nationalism and most importantly met new people of his age and some very positive older ones. He also learnt their anthem, 'Namaste sadaa vatsale matribhoomo'. He memorized it and in a few months became a leader in that small group. Soon he was given the honor of raising and unfurling the saffron flag at the start and the end of one hour of shakha time. There was a certain procedure to do it and he picked that up well. Another emotion he experienced here was of being looked up to. He had earned respect of seniors, who would trust him. As a part of their routine he learned fighting with 'lathi' (stick) and also a few moves with knife. He participated in the national rally in a large ground when the national head of RSS had come. Everyone was in full uniform of khaki shorts, white shirt, black shoes, black cap and a lathi. It gave him a high, being part of an organization whose ideals were so nationalist. He also became physically much stronger thanks to the games he played during 'shakha'. It improved his muscular strength, made his lungs stronger due to many breathing exercises and most of all developed confidence.

This year was by far the most important year in life of Amol, yet. He had turned a teenager, though he had no idea what it meant. He also developed a deep reverence for movies and movie making and he owned his own bicycle. His positive emotions were showing up. Once he heard a puppy crying all night in a chilly winter night. He couldn't sleep. And when he came down to go to his school, he found a little fawn pup right in the middle of the Grand Truck road. He picked it up and took it home and asked pitaji to keep it till he came back. He became very attached to it but could not resist his grandparent's point of view that it was really impractical to keep that dog at home.



Finally the year was over and Amol moved back to his parent's home one more time. This time they were at a place called Basti. His father had become a

deputy collector now. They had a large bungalow in officer's colony with some land around it to grow vegetables. Amol's wish of keeping dogs at home was fulfilled here, as one of his father's friends Mr. P. D. Singh, gave them two dachshund puppies. These remain short but become longer. First one was named 'Honey'. She became his most favorite and she too loved him back any amount. Here he developed a knack in homeopathy by reading his father's books and became familiar with many medicines and their uses. There was an alphabetical way to place the medicine bottles in rectangular wooden boxes. Soon he was able to place his finger on any medicine in not more than two seconds. He became good in curing common sickness.

Monsoon season starts in July, just when schools reopen. During heavy showers, it would get very cumbersome to hold your school bag, wear a rain coat and take a brother also along. One such day when it was raining very heavily all four brothers were ready to leave. Two servants were taking bicycles for younger two brothers. Amol was really miserable seeing the sheets of water falling. He told his mother that we all will get a 'rainy day' when we reach the school, so why are we going at all. He was so resistant to do that school trip that particular day. "I hope something happens today to stop us going to school today, anything", he thought. As the bicycle caravan was about to take off, phone rang in the room. Amol's father took the call. Mother went inside and came out to verandah immediately. She told everyone to stop. Amol did not know what suddenly happened to his mother to change her mind. Then he noticed his mother's tears and saw his shaken up father. He was told that we all were going to Allahabad as Pitaji had died. Amol was stunned. But on a second thought he realized that thank god he did not have to go to school on that horrible day. He felt relieved. Param through his resources found out that an empty Ambassador car was going to Allahabad. A driver was delivering it to a buyer in Calcutta. So conveniently lucky! Whole family comfortably sat in along with the bags in boot. And a rather tough journey started. At one point the car had to cross a swollen river by boat! It was scary. It took nearly 12 hours to reach Pitaji's home. The car had to carry on to Calcutta via the same G T Road, where our house was. What luck!

Pitaji's body was kept on ground floor on a large ice slab. Most of relations had arrived. When the movement to take the body to Sangam for cremation started, Amol couldn't control his grief. He cried bitterly and had to be sent away to the house.

Pitaji's passing away ended a major chapter in Amol's life. His memories would always be there, but a sense of security and safety in his company was no more available.



After his final exams of ninth his father said that during the summer vacations he should give free treatment and medicines to poor from a close by slum colony. Orderlies went around in the slum making announcements that free medicines will be available at our home between 9am and 5pm with one hour lunch break. After two days only Amol did not have time to even get up from the chair or go to wash room. There were long queues of coughing men, women and women with little babies. Activities of these two months gave Amol a lot internally, but of course he did not know what they were.

Problem with Amol was that he was too simple. He could not scheme or plot his game with people or circumstances. He was always there for the day or even for the moment. Perhaps he would find it objectionable if someone was taking his sweet from his plate right in front of him. That's all, beyond this he was not able to comprehend games people played or trick they had up their sleeves.



Once late at night he was studying to prepare for his board exams of tenth. Everyone had gone to sleep and it was all quiet and peaceful. He went out of the large house to stretch and take a breather. He moved towards the gate at the far end of compound to relieve himself outside the gate on the roadside. Suddenly he heard a woman talking loudly to someone. He couldn't see as the voice came from the dark part of the street. She spoke, where are you taking me? He heard a man mumble. Amol felt man was drunk and was forcing the woman. Then he heard the woman say, "why are you taking my clothes off? No, no stop..." This alarmed Amol. He called out to family's trusted servant Tripathi in a hushed tone. He was sleeping in the verandah. Tripathi woke up and asked, what was wrong. Amol said, "tell my father to give his revolver, a crime is being committed here!" Well the revolver never came, man and woman had walked away in the dark and Amol went to sleep with that thrilling experience.

Amol got 63% marks in the board exams of 10th. His father was elated as he entered home waving a news paper and shouting 'first class, first class'. Amol's

father feeling thrilled with Amol's performance was a rare event to watch. Next year Amol barely scraped through his midterm exams in 11th standard. Luckily for him his father got transferred yet again, this time to Gorakhpur with a promotion. This was the biggest city that he was transferred to. Amol got into a college half way in 11th. Here somehow he got hooked to game of Badminton and became very good at it too. Gorakhpur being a hub of Badminton, he ended up attending many coaching camps for this game. He became a Gorakhpur university player. He practiced with Gurdarshan Singh, who had been semi finalist in boy's section in Asian championship. He had lost to Atul Premnarayan. Gurudarshan and Amol became doubles partners. There was also opportunity to watch three time national champion Mr. T. N. Seth. He even got to play one or two singles games with him. Mr. Seth was a little stocky and not very tall, but Amol was fascinated with his stroke play and wrist work. Amol too became excellent Badminton player in such great company. He could be labeled as a state level player, as once he had had defeated the captain of school boys' team in a tournament. The period up to 1969 was his highest point in the game of Badminton.



A great benefit that fell in his lap from this game was getting friendly with Jyoti Varma. She also attended coaching camps at the police stadium. She was an average Badminton player, but was very nice by nature. Soon Amol started meeting her often, even after the coaching time. Sometime she would drop in at his house but mostly he would visit her. Her father Dr. M. Varma was HOD Education at the Gorakhpur University. He was brother of the celebrated poet Mahadevi Varma. So, Mahadevi Varma was Jyoti's 'bua'. This was huge for Amol, as Mahadevi Varma's poems were part of his Hindi curriculum for many years. Jyoti was doing her MA English. She somehow took up immense liking for Amol. She was four and a half years older than him. So, she behaved too like his caring older sister. Amol would also address her as Jyoti didi. In many meeting he came to know that Jyoti and her family used to travel to Bombay during vacations. They had friends there. She would narrate her experiences of the dream city to Amol and he would be awe struck listening to her. Whenever she talked about things that were too dreamlike for Amol, he would feel like spending even longer hours with her. Bombay is very clean city, she told. Traffic is disciplined, most buildings are 8-10 stories or higher, it's a city that doesn't sleep; the sea and most of all she had seen a film shooting there! She would say I would love to get

married to someone from Bombay and spend my life there. Amol couldn't get more frustrated with such fantastic stories.

On Sundays or holidays Jyoti would phone or send a note saying, 'if you are free come over to spend time with me'. This was the first time someone had made Amol feel wanted in eighteen years of his life. No one had so far told him to 'come over to spend time together'. Jyoti did that. At the end of his freedom struggle from education, during his B. Sc. Part-1, Amol had surprised many by getting admission form for the Film Institute of India, Pune. It was for fun. Even his parents did not know about it. He had found the address in the well known film weekly 'Filmfare' and sent them the required money order as the cost of the form and the postage etc.

Amol had already failed in getting into the Indian Navy after his 12th exam. He also did not get reply from IIT and Roorkee Engineering College. In the summer vacations of 1969, he got a call letter for appearing in the written test for the Indian Railways and Film Institute. Family had planned a visit to Delhi to meet members of both my father and mother's sides. We were staying at Nizamuddin with Shyam chacha. Amol's father had asked him to name Delhi as written test centers. Amol appeared for both the tests and in busy summer vacations, forgot all about them. At the end of vacation family returned to Gorakhpur. Amol was planning to complete his B. Sc. Somehow. He was just not good enough for it. He may be very bright but he was not made for formal education.



Well before the new academic year started he received intimations from both, from the Indian Railways and from the Film Institute. Railways did not want him and Film Institute said you have cleared the written test and will be required to appear for an interview. They gave dates when. Amol showed the call letter to his father. He did not know how to react. Only silver lining was a word, 'engineering' in the name of the course Amol applied for, 'Sound recording and sound engineering'. Neither his father nor Amol could fathom what in the hell can be done with sound engineering.

At Gorakhpur train station Amol was given a letter for a contact in Bombay, where he would be staying for a night, before he took a train to Poona next morning. Second letter would be given by the Bombay contact for someone in Poona, where Amol had to stay for appearing in the interview.

Family in Bombay turned out to be good fun. There were young boys about his age, who drove him around in a Mercedes and took him to restaurants... Amol was having a test of 'daring' in his life. He had never done such big things, like getting off a train in the middle of the night at Dadar station and reaching the address at Shivaji Park by taxi. It is besides the point that the taxi driver charged him Rs 5 instead of actual cost of only one rupee! Morning after next he was dropped back at Dadar station, he bought his ticket to Poona and reached the platform. The winding train journey took him through the hills overlooking deep valleys and tunnels. With every passing tunnel his heart was getting more excited. Strangely in that totally unknown land, he was beginning to feel at home. It was certainly too soon, but that was what he felt.

At Poona station he found an auto, that took him to the written address and charged him the exact amount that showed on the meter. That was too honest, he thought. So different from the earlier experience. He reached the second floor house of the people and handed them the letter from the Dadar family. They said they had already been informed on the phone. So they welcomed him and made him feel well at home. In any case Amol gave them the letter. Next morning they explained him the route to the Film Institute. Amol had to change one bus on the way. In the morning again with his heart in his mouth, he took the first bus to Deccan Gymkhana bus depot. Ticket price -10 paise. As he entered the bus, a woman passenger was getting off. Her foot by mistake touched Amol's. It was nothing. It happens all the time in north and people carry on without giving it any thought. But here the lady extended her hand to touch Amol's feet in the gesture of an apology! Amol was shocked. He would realize it much later that this was not a one off chance, but that is how people behaved in this part of the country. This was another incidence that made him think, 'a place having this kind of decency is meant for him'.



Amol reached his destination 'Film Institute of India' well before time. There couldn't have been any other way. He found out that the interviews will be held in a cute little house right in the middle of entire land mass of institute. That was Principal's office. He name was called in after three candidates finished. As he entered he faced five people, who welcomed him with pleasant faces. One person read from a paper in front of him, Mr. Amol Sharma. Yes sir, good morning to you all, Amol said. They all gestured and asked him to take the seat. After formalities of from where did you come and where are you staying, they

got down to serious business. Why films, why sound, why not mechanical or electrical engineering after B. Sc.? Do you listen to music? Do you see films? How many films have you seen? Have you noticed sound in any film especially? Which is your most memorable film? Why?

After this a painter looking gentleman asked Amol to pay attention to what he will be tapping on the table. He tapped two different sets of beats with a pencil and asked Amol if he found them different. Amol said they were different and tapped them back for him. The interview went on for one full intense hour.



He came out in the open, totally exhausted and not knowing where he stood. This must be his life's most confused moment. He did not know whether he got through. He also did not know if his parents will let him study here even if he got through.

He went to the administrative office to ask what time will the results be known and where will they put up. At 5 pm, he was told on the notice board. It was only 12 noon. He decided to return to his hosts after having lunch in a restaurant. He did not want to burden them with that.

They were too nice to tell him that he shouldn't have eaten outside. There was food for him. Amol very politely apologized to them and told them that he will have to go back to institute to see his results. He decided to rest for a while, before anxiety of result took over again.

Although he was very nervous about traveling that late in the evening, especially while returning from Film Institute. He was also calculating further that which train he would be taking to go back to Bombay and then back home. That was important, because in his opinion that was going to be the most likely scenario. He had found out most of the options and had settled with, taking a train from Poona to Kalyan and then Punjab Mail for onward journey. He will of course buy his ticket for through journey...

The results were delayed. It was getting dark in an unknown huge city for a boy of eighteen, who had not ventured so far away on his own. He was clearly very nervous. He walked up and down near the gate. His eyes were focused any activity near the notice board. Finally he saw someone moved to the notice board and opened it. That must be it! He walked briskly. He looked at the top of list, "Successful candidates for course of 'Sound recording and sound engineering',

starting July 1969. Then he started reading the names. He didn't have to read much. His name was third in the list! This was the second time in a day he felt so very confused. He did not know what to do and how to tackle this most unlikely situation! He picked up courage and went out to find from where he could book a telephone trunk call to speak to his parents. He had to inform them about this new situation right away. In his heart he wished that they told him to return soon, so that he can finish his B. Sc. That would be the best, because it would be easiest for him. In half an hour he got through. His mother picked the phone. He told her about the results. She passed the phone to his father. Amol was about to face the third test in one day. His father told him take the admission, I will send the fees by telegraphic money order...

Amol got his fees on the address where he was staying as a guest. He had to wait at home for two full days to make sure he didn't miss the postman. But the tests of his will power and mental strength were not yet over. Film Institute did not have a room for him in the hostel. Now in this new city he had to fend for his accommodation himself. Again it was best for him to take advice of his host family, who very kindly guided him to a student guest house close in their own area. To feel secure, Amol took it up without any thought. He would realize it later that this was not a good choice, as it was too far from the institute and that it would make it more expensive and time consuming. He had to change a bus to get to institute, which needed major will power. He was given a ground floor room with a clerk type of person. All he could do here was to keep his bag and sleep at night on a metal cot with a thin mattress and a sheet. Toilets and bathing rooms were common.

Classes started immediately. He got immersed in many scientific subjects like, electricity, electronics, optics, chemistry etc. But all of this was applied to movie making, sound recording and its reproduction. All his life he craved to see as many normal Hindi films and know what goes behind making them by reading magazines. And now heaven itself had fallen in his lap. As part of studies he would watch many international films every day, along with Bangla, Marathi, Tamil and Telugu films too. New students were expected to see them to build a base to understand cinema. With such interesting studies, it did not even occur to Amol how much trouble he was going through, traveling by buses and economizing all his meals.

He was on a different plane now. Gradually he was becoming free of the immense pressure that he used to go through at home. He was now far away

from that ambiance and the atmosphere. He stood first in the first semester examination and went back home armed with that good news.

He didn't realize it; but he had gone through quarter of his life, the first chapter. For all practical purposes he was 'never' going to be home on a permanent basis. He will be happy to visit them during short vacations. He was on his own now and will remain so for the rest of his life... but the feeling had yet to sink in, inside him.

●End●

Lasting impressions

RSS 'Shakha' in Allahabad, where I developed physically and mental agility

Walking and later cycling to schools in Allahabad

Om Chacha, Shyam Chacha

Ms. Chandni Varma (Gorakhpur), for being there when I needed tenderness of emotions most

Game of badminton

Most unlikely incidence of getting admission in Film Institute of India, Pune and also somehow taking it up

Thank You

Quarter of a life

(A biographical novella)

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