

A scenic landscape photograph of a lake with mountains in the background and a wooden walkway in the foreground. The sky is a pale blue, and the water is a deep blue. In the foreground, a wooden walkway with railings leads down to the water's edge. Two people are standing on the walkway, looking out at the lake. In the distance, a small boat is visible on the water, and a small island with trees is in the middle of the lake. The mountains in the background are hazy and blue.

Embers Rekindled

Geetima Baruah Sarma

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Embers Rekindled: A novelette by Geetima Baruah Sarma

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Dedication

*“Everyone has a friend during each stage of life.
But only lucky ones have the same friend in all stages of life.”*

~ Anonymous

***To my best friend, whose inspiration and encouragement has
made this book possible.***

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Chapter 1: Embers Rekindled

Roop's name flashed on the screen of her laptop as Mili was going through one of the social networking sites. As soon as she saw the name, she felt a shiver running down her spine and her heart began to beat fast. She gazed at the name for a few moments and sat still.

Slowly she could feel a lump in her throat and a tear rolled down her right cheek. She looked at the clock hanging on the wall. Tears blurred her eyes and she could not see anything. She was not sure whether the tears were of joy for having found him after a long, long time or they were of grief for having lost him twenty three years ago.

She heaved a long sigh and looked at his name again. The embers of love that were flickering in her heart all the time, rekindled her faith in his words that he said to her when she met him for the last time. Reminiscences of a decade gradually began to flow in her mind and she became nostalgic. The sweet memories of yesteryears consequently brought smiles on her face as she took a trip down memory lane.

Chapter 2: At First Sight

Thirty three years ago. It was evening and Mili was playing badminton with her brother on the court that was marked out in the garden in front of their house. At a distance, she saw two boys walking on the road. The road had three intersections, each leading to three houses.

When the boys reached the first intersection, Mili thought that probably they were going towards the first house. But she was wrong. They walked straight and were about to reach the second intersection. This time too she thought that perhaps they were heading for the next house. She was mistaken again and saw them proceeding towards the third and last intersection, which ultimately led to her home. Finally they reached the gate, opened it and stood at the entrance of the house.

“Can we have a word with your Dad?” The taller among the two asked her.

“Dad has gone out, I’ll call Mom.” Putting her racquet down on the ground, she ran inside.

“Mummy, two boys have come and they want to speak to you.” She informed her mother.

After turning off the gas burner, her mother came outside and Mili followed her behind.

“Yes?” Her mother said, looking at the boys.

“We have come with a book and if you wish to buy, you can take it.” The taller boy explained, with a quick glance at Mili.

Her mother took the book in her hand, read the name and author, looked at the contents and then began to turn the pages.

“Sure, I shall buy one.” She said and then asked, “What’s the price?”

The tall boy mentioned the cost. He then smiled at Mili.

“Just wait for a moment, I’ll go and bring the money.” Her mother said and went inside the house.

The tall boy looked at Mili and smiled again. She also smiled at him. She looked at the other boy who was quietly standing beside. He was watching her brother who in the meantime was playing with a ball. Through the corner of her eyes, she could make out that the tall boy was still looking at her. She turned her face towards him and he smiled at her once more.

“Here it is.” Her mother came out and handed the money to the boy.

“Thank you,” he said, with a quick glance at Mili yet again.

“Where do you stay?” her mother enquired.

He replied to all the questions that her mother asked him and during the conversation that went on, the other boy also introduced himself.

“Come and have a cup of tea,” her mother requested.

“I guess we’ll be late as there are many books still with us. I think we should proceed on our way,” the tall boy replied.

“Alright,” her mother said and watched the boys walking towards the gate. Mili went back towards the badminton court, picked up her racquet and looked at the boys leaving. The tall boy closed the gate and smiled at her. She also smiled at him.

It was eleven at night. Mili opened her school diary and packed her bag for the next day, according to the time-table that she had written down.

“Finished your homework?” her mother asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

“And did you set the alarm?” her mother reminded her.

“Yes of course, at five,” she said with confidence.

“Well, go and sleep now,” her mother said with a pat on her arm.

Mili put off the lights, switched on the dim light and lied down on her bed. She closed her eyes and murmured a short prayer.

About an hour gone but she was still awake. The eyes of the tall boy, who came in the evening, appeared in her mind. His smile simply caught her attention. The whole incident, right from his opening of the gate till he left, occurred before her eyes.

She tried to recall the conversation between her mother and the boy. Her mother had asked him where he resided and also whose son he was. Through his replies, her mother came to know about him. The town where they lived was a very small one and so most of the people knew each other.

At that moment all of a sudden, Mili remembered Ruby, who lived in the same house that the boy had mentioned. Ruby was Mili’s class-mate in an art school, which they both attended till a year ago. Gradually she began to recall what Ruby had told her when they got introduced. She remembered Ruby telling her that she had an elder brother and then it was not difficult for Mili to understand that the tall boy was Ruby’s brother.

Mili looked at the alarm clock that she had kept on the table near her bed. It was half past twelve. She got startled as it was quite late. She made up her mind to go to sleep as soon as possible because the alarm would wake her up a few hours thereafter.

Chapter 3: Driving To And Fro

Two days later. It was evening and Mili's father planned to take them all for a long drive.

"Come on, get ready," he said.

"But I had some essential things to buy," her mother said.

"You can, on the way," her father assured.

As they reached the marketplace, her father parked the car beside the road and stepped out.

"You both sit for a while. We'll be back soon." Her mother said to Mili and her brother.

Mili opened the window and looked at the road ahead. A car went past and she noticed that the tall boy who had come to their home a couple of days ago was at the wheel. As he passed by, he also noticed her and smiled. A few moments later, he drove from the opposite direction and smiled at her again. This went on for several times and each time as he passed by, she saw him smiling at her. Mili also smiled at him every time.

"Why is that car going to and fro?" Her brother asked in surprise.

"Perhaps the one who is driving is looking for someone," Mili replied.

That night lying on her bed, Mili wondered why the boy gave her a friendly smile whenever he saw her. She did not know his name and neither did she know what he was studying. She tried to sleep but just couldn't. His sparkling eyes, his face and his radiant smile kept coming to her mind. She smiled alone, thinking of the incident of that evening as well as of the other day when she first saw him.

Chapter 4: A Beginning

Every afternoon, after coming from school, Mili went to an institute to learn typewriting, a course which was compulsory for the students of the ninth standard. It took about twenty minutes from her home to reach the institute and she always walked with her classmate Sonia. On the way, there was a place which they both despised because of eve-teasing by some rowdy boys. However, they never paid attention and just tried to ignore them as they walked past.

One afternoon, while returning from the institute, she saw a boy standing alone at a distance. That day, Sonia was absent and Mili walked alone. She just hoped that it would be fine if she does not get to hear the silly things that the boys uttered when she passes by.

As she came close to the spot where the boy was standing alone, she tried to pace her steps with her head turned towards his opposite direction so that she could avoid listening to what he would say. But to her surprise, she heard him calling her name. She turned her face towards the boy and was absolutely astonished. He was none other than the tall boy who often smiled at her! She felt very much ashamed of herself as she thought him to be one of those unruly boys.

“Hi!” he greeted.

“Hi!” she said nervously.

“I’ve brought something for you,” he said quickly.

He put his hands forward towards her and Mili saw that he was carrying a book. For a moment she was puzzled thinking whether to accept it or not. But before she could take any decision, her hands automatically went forward and he handed the book to her.

“Thank you,” he smiled.

Mili was much confused and did not know what to say. Instead she smiled. Then putting the book inside her bag, she hurriedly went on her way.

On reaching home, she straightaway went to her study-table and took out the book from her bag. The book was thick and she read the name, *Guinness Book of World Records*. She opened the book and found an envelope inside. Her hands trembled as she slowly opened the envelope. There was a card inside. A nice message was printed on it. To see what was written inside, she turned the front page of the card and read...

“To

My Mili,

With Love,

From Roop”

A smile appeared on her lips as she read the words. Finally she knew his name, she thought and said to herself, “He’s tall and handsome.” Then, keeping the card inside one of her books in a drawer of her study-table and holding the book that he gave her, she went outside the room and sat on the deckchair kept in the verandah.

She turned the pages of the book to read but her mind wandered. She remembered the conversation that she had with her class-mate Niyorkona, a few days ago.

“Mili, you must tell me honestly,” Niyorkona said, holding her hand.

“What is it?” She was puzzled.

“Do you like him?” Niyorkona asked, without beating around the bush.

“Whom are you talking about?” Mili narrowed her eyes.

“You know that very well!” Niyorkona smiled mischievously, shaking her head.

“How on earth did you come to know?” Mili was totally confused.

“His friend Arup told me to ask you.” Niyorkona explained.

“But why does his friend wants to know?” Mili kept questioning.

“Oh come on, don’t act silly. The actual one wants to know.” Niyorkona grinned.

Mili smiled shyly. She did not know what to say.

“Say something Mili,” Niyorkona continued, “Yes or no?”

Mili smiled, nodded her head and ran away.

Chapter 5: The First Letter

Next day afternoon, while returning from the institute with Sonia, Mili saw that Roop was waiting at the same place. As they came near him, he smiled at her.

“Who’s he?” Sonia whispered.

“One of my friends’ brother,” Mili replied. “You go on, I’m coming.”

Roop stood next to Mili as Sonia went on her way.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she replied.

He looked straight at her eyes affectionately. She also looked up at him. Few moments passed and none of them spoke anything. There was silence between them and she liked his presence. She wanted to know more about him but could not find words to speak or rather some guts to ask him.

“I must leave now,” she said after a while, looking at her watch.

“Take this,” he said, suddenly pulling out an envelope from his pocket.

“What is it?” she asked nervously.

“Go home and see,” he said quickly.

She took the envelope and put it inside her bag.

“This is for you,” he said, giving her a chocolate.

“Thank you,” she smiled.

He also smiled and watched her leaving.

Mili walked towards her home and on the way, she kept wondering about what could be inside the envelope. As she reached, she went straight to her room and took out the envelope. She opened it and found a letter inside with his passport size photograph. She sat on the bed and began to read his letter.

Roop wrote that he was a student of engineering and had come home for summer vacation. He would be returning to the hostel two days later as his classes shall recommence. He asked Mili for a copy of her photograph too. He also mentioned his birth date and requested her to write a letter to him on his birthday. At the bottom of the letter, he gave his hostel address.

It was a simple letter but the words “You are forever mine” that he wrote at the beginning, simply touched her heart. She loved the way Roop expressed his feelings towards her. It was then that she realized that she was in love with him too. After reading the letter, she folded it along with his photograph and kept it among her books in her study-table.

At night after dinner, Mili brought out all the albums that were kept in the built-in cupboard of her room and searched for photographs. Most of them were group photos and she kept on searching for one where she was alone. Finally she found one, in which she was in her school uniform and standing with her school bag at the back. Looking at that black and white photograph, she smiled and put it inside an envelope and then further inside her typewriting copy.

Mili lied down in her bed and thoughts of meeting Roop in the afternoon started pouring into her mind. His face came before her eyes very often as she recollected the contents of his letter. She liked the moments spent with him that day and experienced a different kind of feeling within herself.

In the silence of the night, she could hear the alarm clock ticking, some nocturnal insects squeaking and it took her much long to fall asleep.

Chapter 6: Tete-a-tete

After coming back from school the next day, Mili quickly had her lunch and went to get ready to go to the institute. That day she spent much time in front of the mirror to dress up.

“Hurry up, or else you’ll be late,” her mother said entering the room.

Mili looked at her watch. She was already late by ten minutes.

“Oh my God!” she panicked and rushed towards the door.

“Take care,” her mother called out.

She hurried towards the institute and however managed to reach there on time. That day she could not concentrate well in the lessons that were taught. She frequently looked at the clock hanging on the wall above and wished that the class would end soon.

The bell rang and Mili quickly put her book inside her bag. She then stood up and went outside the classroom. She tried to walk fast while returning with Sonia.

“What’s up?” Sonia was curious.

“Nothing at all,” Mili tried to be calm.

“I doubt,” Sonia grinned.

“What?” Mili asked in surprise.

“Someone’s waiting for you,” Sonia said in a playful tone.

“Oh,” Mili smiled with embarrassment as she saw Roop.

“Have a good time,” Sonia said teasingly and proceeded towards her home.

Mili looked at Roop. He was leaning with his back on a car, the one that he drove to and fro at the marketplace a few days ago. She went near him as soon as Sonia went on her way.

“When did you come?” Mili started the conversation.

“Just a while ago and waiting for you,” he said, with a smile on his face.

“Leaving tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yes, will miss you,” he said, looking deep into her eyes.

“Me too,” she said fondly.

“Don’t think about all these. Study well.” There was warmth in his voice.

“Hmm,” she nodded. “When will you come again?”

“After two months perhaps,” he replied.

“It will be a long time,” she said tenderly.

“Write to me,” he said and turned towards the car.

He then bent forward a little and through the open window, he took out a letter-pad, a couple of envelopes and a chocolate that were lying on the rear seat and gave them to her.

“I will,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

Mili put them all inside her bag and at the same time, took out her photograph that she had brought for him.

“My picture,” she said, forwarding the envelope.

“Oh thank you,” he said happily.

Mili knew that she was getting late for home but did not want to leave either.

“I think I should move on now,” she said after sometime. “Bye, see you.”

“Bye, take care,” he said affectionately.

Chapter 7: Birthday Wishes

About two and a half months later. It was Sunday afternoon and Mili was sitting on the wide verandah in the first floor of their house and looking at the road in front. There were many cars moving about on the road and suddenly she spotted the car that Roop often drives. She looked at the car closely with much attention and saw Roop driving it very slowly and looking towards her house. Mili waved her hand and smiled at him. He also waved his hand and looked at her with a smiling face. She felt very happy to see him again.

Next day afternoon, Mili met Roop at the same place where they always used to meet. He came driving and was sitting on the seat behind the wheel. As she approached the car, he slightly bent towards his left and opened the front door. Then with a nod with his right hand, he signaled her to sit inside.

“After a long time!” he said, smiling at her.

“So glad to meet you!” she smiled, closing the door.

“Same here,” he said cheerfully.

“Did you receive my letter?” she asked.

“Yes, but late. I was expecting it on the day of my birthday,” he said in a serious tone.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she apologized.

“It’s okay.” He continued, “That day I couldn’t perform well in a recitation that I had participated, as I was unhappy for not receiving your letter. I came down from the stage and just tore off the sheet of paper that I was carrying in my hand.”

“I’m really very sorry, please don’t mind...” she pleaded, expressing her regret.

“Hey, it’s alright,” he interrupted. “But keep writing to me often.”

“Yes, I will,” she assured.

Mili tried to recall the day when she wrote her first-ever letter to Roop. She remembered how her heart thumped and how anxious she had felt, thinking about what to pen in the letter as the day of his birthday was coming closer.

When merely a couple of days left for his birthday, she took out the letter-pad along with one of the envelopes that he had given her and sat down to write a letter to him as he wished. But she kept wondering how to start as she could not find words to express her thoughts.

She opened the drawer of her study-table and took out his letter and photograph from among her books. While reading the letter once again, she looked at his eyes in the picture every now and then. His phrase “You are forever mine” struck the chord!

Mili then took a deep breath and started writing in the same manner. She expressed her feelings too, with her words “I’m yours for eternity” at the beginning of the letter. She wished him a very happy birthday and many happy returns of his special day. She also wished him happiness and that all his dreams come true.

She smiled as her mission was accomplished and jotted down his address in the postage paid envelope. That afternoon, while going to the institute, she dropped the letter in the post box that was nearby.

Chapter 8: At the Studio

The following day, while coming back from the institute, Mili saw Roop's car parked at the same place. The front side of the car faced away from the road on which Mili was walking. Though she could see only the back portion of the car, yet from quite a distance she could still make out that there were two other boys who were also sitting inside along with Roop. As she came near, she saw Roop looking at her through the rear-view mirror.

"Hi! Meet my friends," Roop said, alighting from the car.

The two boys also descended from the car and Roop introduced them to Mili. After a short conversation, they said goodbye and left the place.

"Mili, there's a studio nearby. How about a photograph?" Roop suggested.

"You mean the two of us together?" she asked.

"Of course," he smiled.

"Sure," she agreed.

"Come on, let's go," he said and locked the car.

Mili walked beside him and soon they reached the studio that was round the corner. Both of them entered and Roop spoke to the man standing behind the desk. The man went towards the adjacent room and told them to follow him. He switched on the lights of the room and asked them to stand in front of a screen. The man then adjusted his camera and requested them to pose. Roop stood towards the right side of Mili.

"Let me hold you," he said and put his left arm on her left shoulder.

"I want to hold you too," she said softly and with her right hand, she held his right hand in front.

“Smile please,” the photographer said and pressed the button on his camera.

“Thank you,” Roop said, looking at the man.

Roop further spoke with the photographer and took the receipt.

“Come, let’s go now,” he then turned towards Mili.

Both of them came out of the studio and walked on the road.

“Bye,” Mili said, as they reached the car.

“See you,” he smiled, forwarding a chocolate to her.

Chapter 9: During Dance Drama

Mili and Roop met again the next day afternoon.

“Take this, Mili,” he said, giving her a copy of the picture that they had clicked the previous day.

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed, discontent appearing on her face.

“You had closed your eyes when he clicked,” Roop said.

“But you’re looking good!” she smiled.

“Ha ha,” he laughed heartily.

“Anyway, nice that we have a picture together,” she said, still looking at the coloured photograph.

“Are you going to watch the dance drama later today?” he asked after a while.

“Yes, I’m going with Mummy,” she replied. “And you?”

“I’ll go with my friends,” he said.

“All right, will see you there again,” she said happily.

It was late evening. Mili and her mother went to an auditorium where a dance drama was to be performed. They reached the venue in time and took seats in the middle.

Mili turned her head and looked around to see if Roop was present anywhere. People kept coming in and within a short while, all the seats were filled up. Mili constantly turned her head towards the back from time to time.

“Why don’t you sit straight?” her mother asked sternly.

“When is it going to start?” she questioned, instead of giving a reply.

“It’s half an hour already late, they should have started by now,” her mother said.

Mili’s eyes kept on searching for Roop and after quite some moments later, she saw him standing along with his friends, towards the extreme left of the audience in the midst of the crowd. She observed him and could make out that he was also looking around, as if searching for someone. Suddenly he could locate her and they both smiled at each other.

Since it was getting much late and till then the dance drama did not start yet, disappointment among the people could be perceived, but not for Mili and Roop though, as they were busy casting glances and exchanging smiles.

Finally, the curtains of the stage began to open and performers started making their entry as music was being played. But even when the dance drama was being performed, instead of looking at the stage, Mili and Roop both looked at each other very often and smiled.

Chapter 10: Sitting Close Together

It was weekend and Mili's parents decided to go out of town for some work that had to be dealt with urgently. At first they thought of taking Mili along with them but as she wanted to attend her music class, they planned to keep her at her uncle's house. Mili felt very happy at their decision because it had been quite a long time since she met her cousins and stayed in their house.

"Mili, do you have any class in the morning hours?" Her aunt enquired.

"No Aunt, I'll have to go in the evening." she replied.

"Good, then I'll take you along with me or else you'll have to stay at home all alone as everyone is going out now." Her aunt, who kept herself busy by participating in numerous social activities, informed Mili.

"Where are we going?" Mili asked.

"Come on, get dressed soon, I'll tell you on the way," she said, hurrying up.

About an hour later, they reached an office. Mili was very surprised to see Roop there. He was equally amazed to see her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, with a sparkle in his eyes.

"I've come with my aunt who has brought me along," she explained.

Mili looked all around the place. She saw many ladies gathered there but very few young boys and girls present. Some cars were also parked near the office.

While coming on their way, her aunt explained that some leaflets had to be distributed among the people of certain localities with the aim of spreading awareness and their names had to be registered. The ladies who gathered there then formed groups and decided which areas they would visit that day.

Roop walked towards the car which he always drives and looked at Mili.

“Aunty, let’s go and sit there,” she suggested, pointing towards the car.

“Okay, you go and sit, I’ll be back in a moment,” her aunt said and quickly went towards the office to bring some papers which she had left behind.

Mili went towards the car in which Roop was sitting and opened the front left door. She sat in the middle of the bench seat and then smiled at him. He also smiled at her. Meanwhile, four ladies stuffed themselves in the rear seat.

“My aunt will sit near me,” Mili told a lady who wanted to sit in the front seat.

“She also can sit here,” the lady said and sat next to Mili near the left door.

In the meantime her aunt arrived and saw that the car was full.

“Oh, there’s no seat for me,” her aunt said. “Come out Mili, we’ll go and sit in another car.”

“Please wait, you also can sit here. Let’s create some space for you.” The lady quickly told her aunt and looked at Mili, “Can you move further towards your right?”

Mili looked at Roop and went near him. He also moved a little towards his right side. A portion of his back touched the door as he sat in a slanting position while putting his right elbow slightly out through the open window.

Her aunt was not happy at all and Mili could read that from her face. They were getting late already and so at that moment her aunt did not say anything but sat quietly instead. The ladies sitting at the back began talking among themselves and created a great deal of noise.

Roop silently watched all that was going on. Mili’s right side almost touched his left side as she sat very close to him. He drove the car at a moderate speed. During the journey both of them sat quietly and enjoyed sitting close together.

After about half an hour, they reached the area that was chosen for their mission to be carried out. Her aunt and the ladies went from door to door distributing leaflets and collecting information. Mili kept herself busy by collecting some flowers that her eyes fell upon while strolling on her way.

It took more than three hours to accomplish the entire task successfully. Finally it was time for them to return.

“Mili, you sit near me now. Let the lady sit that side,” her aunt said, as the whole team came towards the car.

Mili did not like the idea but had to follow the instruction as she was advised. She thus had to sit between her aunt and the lady, but not next to Roop. During the journey, she arranged the flowers that she had collected and neatly placed them on top of the dashboard. Roop looked at her once in a while as he kept driving.

Half an hour later, they reached their destination and everyone got out of the car. Mili’s aunt and the other ladies went inside the office room to submit their documents. Roop stood near the car and Mili stood near him.

“I’ll be going to the music school in the evening,” she informed him.

“You come and wait near the main road. I’ll go and drop you,” he said smiling.

“Alright,” she said cheerfully.

Chapter 11: Introduction

Mili's parents returned on Monday and Mili came back to her home. In the evening, her mother took her to a cultural function that was organized in a club. Mili felt glad because she was sure that she would find Roop there, as the club was very near to where he lived.

Her intuition was correct. As they entered the gate, Mili saw him standing near the entrance of the auditorium. He was wearing a white full sleeve shirt and black trousers. A smile appeared on her face and she thought, "He's really looking handsome!"

Roop smiled at Mili as soon as he noticed her. She went inside the auditorium along with her mother and saw that it was almost filled up with only a few empty seats here and there.

Her mother found a seat in the front row and told her to sit in the one that was at the extreme left in the second row. Mili went towards the empty seat and was delighted to see Roop's mother sitting next to it.

"Hello Aunt, I'm Ruby's friend," Mili introduced herself.

"What is your name?" Roop's mother asked.

"Mili," she replied. "Ruby and I learnt art in the same school which is nearby your house."

"Oh, so you are Mili! Yes, Ruby told me about you," she remembered.

"We also did a radio programme last year," Mili reminded her about the event that was arranged by the lady who privately owned the art school.

"You performed well," she complimented.

“Thank you Aunty,” Mili responded happily. “Ruby told me that you are also interested in music.”

Roop’s mother smiled.

The light music that was being played all the while when the audience took their seats, suddenly stopped after a moment. The lights were also switched off followed by an announcement that the function would start soon.

Mili looked around to see if Roop was anywhere nearby but in vain as the hall was pretty dark. In between the programmes, she continued her conversation with Roop’s mother.

“It was nice meeting you Aunty,” Mili said, as the function ended after two and a half hours and the lights were turned on.

“My pleasure,” Roop’s mother said, with a smile on her face.

Chapter 12: The Ring

Next day, Mili and Roop met again in the afternoon. They sat in the car and spoke on various topics.

“You know, there’s a girl in my college whose name is same as yours. When my hostel-mates came to know about you, they wrote your name in front of my room somewhere above the door.” Roop laughed heartily.

Mili joined in the laughter.

“And there’s a restaurant, which I visit sometimes with my friends. Usually young boys and girls go there because of the atmosphere with dim lights and soft music being played.” He related his activities with enthusiasm.

“Oh really,” Mili listened with great interest.

“Look at this.” Roop gave her a college magazine where his article was published.

“Wow, that’s nice. Congratulations!” She smiled and began to turn the pages.

“Thank you! You can keep the magazine with you,” he said.

“Oh thanks! But where is your picture?” she asked. “Except yours, everyone else have their pictures next to their names.”

“I don’t like putting it,” he responded.

Roop also told her about all the movies that he had watched.

“How many uncles and aunts do you have?” Mili wanted to know more about his family.

“Let me count... oh there are many really!” He grinned. “But mom and dad, they are the eldest among their siblings.”

Roop replied to all her queries eagerly and also asked Mili about her birth-date. He also told her that he would be going back to the college the next day. After a while, he gave her an envelope and requested her to open it only when she reached home. Mili took the envelope and found it a bit thick and heavy. After a short while, she said that it was time for her to go home. Roop gave her a chocolate as always and wished her goodbye.

Mili walked fast and tried to reach home soon. She went straight to her room and opened the envelope. There was a letter with a ring inside. She held it between her fingers and looked at it closely. Then she began to read the letter.

“My dear Mili,

‘You are forever mine’

It was a pleasure spending time with you all these days. This is my ring that I wear always. I want to keep it with you. I’ll take this ring from you on that day, the day when I shall bring you to my home. Can you understand what I’m saying?

Study well. Keep writing letters to me. Take care.

With lots of love,

Yours only,

Roop”

Mili’s heart began to beat fast as she read the letter. She looked at the ring again and thought, in what a unique way he proposed to her! A smile lit up her face and she held his letter close to her heart.

That night she could not sleep. Roop’s letter came to her mind very often as she tried to close her eyes. She remembered the day when she first saw him and felt very pleased thinking about the turn of events that was happening in her life.

Chapter 13: A Pleasant Surprise

The academic year was coming to an end and Mili became busy preparing for her annual examination. After the exams were over, the results were declared and she got promoted to the next standard.

The period of winter vacation was for one month and Mili's father took them all to her grandfather's house, which was a yearly routine visit. Though Mili went there every year but she was very much excited during that visit because her grandfather's house and Roop's college were in the same city and she had high hopes of meeting him someday somewhere during her stay there for a few days.

It was late afternoon and Mili was sitting in the verandah, watching the people and vehicles moving on the road ahead. All of a sudden, she saw Roop and Ajoy beyond the road. Both of them looked sideways, once towards their right and then towards the left, in order to cross the road.

Ajoy was Roop's friend and Mili knew him very well since she was a child. In fact, they were almost neighbours with just a few houses in between. Ajoy was pursuing higher studies in a college in that city and stayed in a hostel.

Mili watched them crossing the road. She felt surprised when she saw them coming towards her grandfather's house and finally opening the gate. She stood up from the cosy cane chair on which she was sitting and went forward.

"Hi!" Ajoy greeted her.

"Good to see you!" said Roop, dressed in jeans and a yellow T-shirt.

"What a pleasant surprise!" Mili exclaimed, looking at both of them.

"Is Uncle at home?" Ajoy asked.

“No, he has gone out with Mummy and my brother. I’m with my grandma,” she explained, with a quick glance at Roop.

“Oh! Actually I came to deliver a letter to Uncle,” Ajoy said, holding a long envelope in his hand.

“You can give it to me. I’ll give him when he returns,” she said.

“Thank you.” Ajoy smiled and gave the envelope to her.

“How long will you stay here?” Roop asked.

“For two weeks perhaps,” she replied.

“Come, let’s go now,” Ajoy said, looking at Roop.

“Sit for a while till Daddy returns,” she requested.

“We’ll be late Mili,” Ajoy said, turning towards the gate.

“Alright,” Mili said and waved her hand.

“See you,” Roop said and smiled at her.

Mili also smiled, feeling happy to meet him after a long time.

Chapter 14: In the Dark

Mili went to attend a wedding with her parents in the week that followed. A pleasant surprise awaited her again as Roop was also present there. Likewise, he too was astonished to see her.

After greeting the bride and presenting a gift to her, Mili and her mother sat in the chairs that were neatly arranged in rows. She looked towards her right and saw Roop standing near a door at the extreme end of a row of arranged chairs. He also looked at her and both of them smiled at each other.

The bride's mother came after a while and spoke to her mother. Mili and Roop kept smiling and exchanging glances from a distance as her parents became busy talking with the people around.

About an hour later, suddenly the electricity went off and there was commotion among the people. At that moment, Mili quickly got up from her chair and finding her way through the darkness, she slowly moved towards the door where Roop was standing.

"Roop," she called out.

"Mili?" he asked, recognizing her voice.

"Yes, it's me," she confirmed.

"Come this way," he said.

They entered through the door and after moving a few steps ahead, they found a staircase on the left. Roop began to ascend the stairs slowly but Mili felt afraid and hesitant at first, thinking whether it would be proper to go upstairs as it was complete dark. But without any protest, she decided to quietly follow him behind.

"It's so dark here," she gasped, putting forward her right foot on the first stair.

“Don’t worry, I’m with you,” he said and held her right hand with his left hand.

Mili held the staircase railing with her left hand and then both of them moved forward. Soon they reached the landing and then again turned left to ascend the remaining set of stairs. Finally they reached the first floor of the house and went near a door which was shut from inside.

Roop stood very close to Mili and she could feel the air that he breathed out but could not see his face as the place was pretty dark.

“Are you scared?” he asked, as she was silent all the while.

“Not at all,” she tried to sound normal though she could feel her heartbeats.

“Really glad to meet you again!” he exclaimed.

“Me too,” she said. “Is the bride your relative?”

“Oh, she’s my eldest aunt’s sister,” he explained.

Mili and Roop stood there silently for quite some time. They did not speak much though, but were happy to spend some moments together.

Then all of a sudden they heard a noise behind the door, near which they were standing.

“I think someone wants to open the door,” Roop said thoughtfully.

“Let’s go down,” Mili suggested.

“Alright,” he agreed.

“The stairs are hardly visible,” she said nervously, peering into the darkness.

“Watch your steps,” he said with concern.

Both of them descended together slowly and eventually reached the ground floor.

“See you,” she said, with a smile on her face.

“Take care,” he responded and watched her going out of the door through which she had entered.

Mili heard the sound of the generator and there were lights shining all around. She caught sight of her mother who was moving here and there. She understood that her mother was searching for her.

“Mummy,” she called out and stood beside her.

“Where were you all the while?” her mother asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I... I went upstairs,” Mili stammered.

“Stay near me,” her mother said firmly. “We’ll be going home very soon.”

Mili looked at Roop and waved her hand. He also waved at her with a smile.

That night lying on the bed, Mili analysed the whole incident of that evening. The electricity going off, how she quietly went near Roop, how tenderly he held her hand, how they stood close to each other, their short conversation and at last waving goodbye. She also recalled her heartbeats and how scared she was in the beginning before going up the stairs.

But though they were in complete dark with no one around, Roop did not touch her at all. He just held her hand once, only while ascending the stairway and that too for guiding the way for Mili because she was facing trouble in moving forward as it was too dark.

For the first time in her life she understood the real significance of true love through her experience of standing close to him in the dark that evening. Mili felt blessed to have Roop in her life and she had a high regard for him.

Chapter 15: Change of Venue

The winter vacation ended and classes for the next session started with the beginning of the New Year. As the days passed, Mili became busy with her studies, going for tuitions and attending her music classes.

Four months later. One afternoon, while Mili was returning from school walking with her brother, she suddenly saw Roop waiting at a place quite a distance ahead and her heart began to beat fast.

“Hi!” he greeted, as Mili came near him.

“Hi!” she responded with excitement.

“Don’t you go to the institute nowadays?” he asked.

“Well, I completed the course,” she explained. “It was only for a year.”

“Oh, I waited there in vain for the past two days,” he frowned.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know that you would be coming,” she said, feeling awkward.

“How long will you stay?”

“I’ve come just for a week,” he replied.

The street was crowded with students carrying their bags while coming back from school. There was also lots of noise all around as the students chatted with their friends while walking along.

Mili looked at her brother who went forward. He kept turning his back now and again to see if she was following him.

“I’ve to go now,” she said after a while.

“See you,” he smiled, giving her a chocolate.

He promised to meet her again.

“Can you come at seven in the morning before my school starts?” she suggested.

“My goodness, seven o’ clock is midnight for me!” he exclaimed laughing.

She also laughed and then wished him goodbye. Roop waved his hand and Mili tried to catch up with her brother who in the meantime had proceeded much forward.

Chapter 16: Got Rebuked

In the afternoon the following day, Mili came back from school with her brother and was happy to see Roop waiting at the same place, like the day before. A bright smile appeared on his face as he could locate her among the crowd of students who were walking on the road. He stood leaning with his right hand pressed against the right front door of the car in which he came driving. His right forearm rested on the base of the open window and his right leg crossed his left leg below the knees. The car was parked slightly far away from the road on the right hand side and the rear part of the car faced the road.

Mili told her brother to keep walking ahead slowly and she went near Roop. She saw three of his friends sitting in the car, one in front and two at the backseat. She recognized two of them whom she had once met before and smiled at them.

“Hi!” she smiled at Roop. “Waited long?”

“No, came just now.” He continued, “First of all, put these inside your bag.”

“Thank you,” Mili said and took the letter-pad and some envelopes that Roop had brought for her.

Few minutes later, Mili suddenly saw her father driving the car very slowly and coming towards where she and Roop were standing. As the car came near, she saw her mother sitting in the front and her brother sitting at the back. By looking at the faces Mili could make out that her parents were very upset and hence she became extremely nervous.

Unfortunately, that afternoon did not turn out to be a pleasing one like those that had been always, as and when both of them used to meet. They could hardly start any conversation that afternoon, which of course was very rare, as there was mostly silence between them though they had so much to say to each other.

Mili did not know what to do. She took some steps backward instead and went behind the car which Roop came driving. Watching her reaction, Roop became nervous too and he slowly opened the right door in which he was leaning and sat in the seat behind the wheel.

“Mili,” her father called out in a stern voice.

Mili looked at Roop worriedly and gradually moved towards the car in which her parents were sitting. She opened the rear door on the left and sat inside.

“Who is he?” her father asked, turning his head towards the back.

“He... he’s one of my friends’ brother,” she stammered.

Mili’s mother recognized Roop as she had met him once before when he had come to their house with a book about a few months ago. Her father started the car and pushed the accelerator. He then drove at full speed and no one spoke during the ten minutes that was needed to reach home.

As they reached, her father parked the car in the garage. Everyone got out of the car and her parents made their way towards the living room that was in the ground floor. Mili and her brother picked up their bags and went towards the staircase to go upstairs to their room.

“Come here Mili,” her mother strictly called out from inside the living room.

“So that’s what is happening while coming back from school,” her father rebuked.

“From how long is this going on?” her mother questioned.

Mili did not reply.

“Now this is the time for you to concentrate in your studies, not having an affair, am I clear?” her father asserted sternly.

“You are a teenager now and this is just infatuation, all that you see in movies,” her mother tried to explain. “Do you understand?”

Mili was silent.

“Don’t meet that boy again, get my point?” her father said, annoyed.

“Please drop them in the morning and then again bring them back home in the afternoon,” her mother said, looking at her father.

“Of course, that’s what I shall be doing. From tomorrow, no going to school by foot,” her father announced, turning towards Mili.

Mili was still silent.

“Go and change. I’ll be serving lunch now,” her mother instructed.

Mili picked up her bag and slowly went upstairs to her room.

“What did you tell Mummy and Daddy about me?” she questioned her brother.

“I didn’t say anything, I swear.” He continued, “Daddy picked me up in the car and then asked me about you. I told them that you were coming behind.”

Tears flowed through her cheeks and a lump choked her throat. She remembered all those moments that she had spent with Roop. She wanted to meet him again but knew that it was not possible further as her father decided to drop off and pick up from school himself from the very next day onwards. Her typewriting course in the afternoon had also completed. She did not know what to do and felt as if all had come to an end.

However, Mili did not lose hope yet. She sat still at her study-table looking downward with both her hands covering her face. After a while, she took a deep breath and joined her palms. She closed her eyes and silently muttered, “O God! I know I’ve done nothing wrong. I really love Roop. Hope everything turns out to be fine. May our feelings for each other always remain in our hearts”.

Chapter 17: Words of Assurance

Every weekend, Mili went to learn music. There were many students in the music school with whom she had friendship but she was very close to Renu, a girl who was much elder to her. Mili discussed various topics with her including her personal ones. She told Renu everything that was happening in her life and also those facts that she could not disclose to others. Renu knew Roop and his parents very well from long before and Mili told Renu about all her feelings that she had for Roop.

Mili felt sad from the day she got rebuked. She waited eagerly for the weekend to arrive. She wanted to tell Renu about the whole incident that happened during the afternoon. However, through a sixth sense Mili presumed that Roop must have met Renu before he left for his hostel.

It was evening and Mili reached the music school on time. She was very pleased to meet Renu that day.

“There is a surprise for you,” Renu smiled.

“Really, what is it?” Mili asked, curious.

“You guess!” Renu kept on smiling.

“Perhaps anything that relates with Roop,” Mili said softly, as she was thinking of him all the while and also due to her sixth sense presumption.

“Of course,” Renu said with a pat on Mili’s back.

She took out a letter from her bag and handed it to Mili.

“I’ve something to tell you,” Mili looked around to see if anyone was nearby.

“I know, Roop told me all about that afternoon,” Renu held Mili’s hand.

Mili’s eyes became moist and she put the letter inside her bag. She became restless and was anxious to know what Roop had written to her. She wanted to read the letter then and there but knew that it was not possible at that moment.

The music class ended after about two hours. Mili was picked up by her father, who turned up a short while ago and was waiting in the car near the gate. As they reached home, Mili headed straight towards her room. She locked the door from inside, took out Roop’s letter from her bag and began to read.

“Mili, my dear,

‘You are forever mine’

Whatever happened that afternoon was really very unpleasant. In fact, I was at a loss for words. Hope you did not mind.

Don’t worry. Let me complete my studies and get a job. You also study well.

If our love is true, we will certainly get married one day.

Keep writing to me. Take care.

With lots of love,

Only yours,

Roop”

Mili’s eyes got filled up with tears and she held the letter close to her heart. She felt cared for and was extremely glad to read the words of assurance from Roop. Her faith in God grew much deeper and she expressed her gratitude to Him with a silent prayer.

Chapter 18: One-Way Communication

Mili's parents did not allow her to go alone anywhere from the day she was rebuked. Either her father or her mother always went along with her wherever she had to go. As a result, Mili and Roop could not meet each other for a long time thereafter.

Mili's only way to keep in touch with Roop was through letters that she kept writing to him in his hostel address. But she could not go and post the letters herself as she was constantly under the careful watch of her parents. However, her class-mate Mary helped her by posting the letters for her.

Only Mili could send letters to Roop and so it was just one-way communication. There was no way of receiving Roop's letters as she could not give him her own address and neither Renu or Mary's, lest they would get into some kind of trouble for her sake and that she never wished at all. Mili kept writing to Roop about all the activities that were going on in her day to day life.

Days and months passed by and finally the year came to an end. Mili's classes also ended and she got study leave to prepare for her tenth board examination, which was to be held after two months. All the outgoing students including her were given farewell by the school and since then, Mili's contact with Roop got totally cut off for the first time as there was no one to post her letters henceforth.

Chapter 19: A Realization

Another chapter dawned in Mili's life and she obtained admission into a higher secondary school. After her tenth board examination, she had always wanted to study in the city where Roop was studying but her parents did not allow her to go to a different place and stay far away from them. Accordingly, she had to study in the same town where she lived.

Her new school was slightly far away compared to her previous school. Her classes did not start at a fixed time every day as she had different subjects as per the choice of her study. On some days, Mili had to attend classes from early morning while on some other days from forenoon. Since there was no regular definite time to reach the school, thus her father gradually discarded his decision of dropping and picking her up. Henceforth, she was allowed to go alone by foot.

After about one and a half years later, Mili suddenly met Roop one day. Her happiness knew no bounds and she silently thanked God. Roop had come home during his short vacation and one afternoon he waited for her near the school.

For the next consecutive days, Mili and Roop met again. Sometimes they met in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon, sometimes near the school and sometimes on the way. If Roop came driving, they both used to sit inside the car and talk. Sometimes he also walked next to her on the way towards her home.

These activities happened whenever Roop came from the college to spend his holidays at home and for a year or so, they could meet several times. Although they spent many moments together, not even once did Roop touch her. Mili had feelings of deep admiration for Roop always and a fact that she continuously realized was that true love was divine in fact, a concept beyond the earthly world.

Chapter 20: Out of Touch

The final examinations of Mili and Roop were drawing near. Mili had to appear for her twelfth boards and Roop had to appear for his final semester in engineering. Since the commencement of her study leave, Mili faced the problem of posting letters to Roop yet again as she was not allowed to go alone anywhere. Therefore, she lost touch with him for the second time prior to appearing for her exam.

In due course, the examinations were held. Mili had no whereabouts of Roop. She could not contact Renu as well because in the meantime both she and Renu had completed their courses in music and therefore stopped going to the music school further.

After Mili's results were declared, she was admitted to a college situated in another town, which was not far away from the place where she lived with her parents. Accordingly, hostel accommodation for her was also acquired.

Time flew but Mili still could not gather any news about Roop yet. He was entirely out of touch. Moreover, she could not send letters to him in the same address because it was obvious that after appearing for his final examination, he must have left the hostel by that time.

Mili felt very helpless and unhappy. She did not know how to get in touch with Roop all over again. She kept thinking about him all the time and dark circles gradually began to appear under her eyes. She missed him a lot and fondly remembered the lovely moments that she spent with him.

Nevertheless, Mili knew that except hope, there was nothing that she could rely on. She prayed for Roop's success always and was sure that he would definitely apply for a job somewhere. She earnestly wished that their love for each other remain deep and pristine forever. She also wished to regain touch with him.

Chapter 21: Deep Faith

Every alternate Sunday, Mili's parents went to visit her in the hostel. The college authorities had strict rules for the boarders. They could meet visitors only on a Sunday and were not allowed to go out of the hostel alone. Except for the parents and local guardians, no other visitor could take the students out of the hostel.

One Sunday morning, Mili was informed that someone had come to visit her. She was surprised to hear that because that day her parents were not supposed to come and she could not think of anyone else who would come and meet her.

Mili went downstairs towards the room arranged for the visitors. She saw Partha waiting there and just could not believe her eyes! Partha was a very close friend of Roop and she knew him from long before, much earlier than she had met Roop. Mili felt very happy and was much surprised too, to see him. She just could not imagine that Partha would come and meet her in the hostel. Instantly a thought came to her mind and she guessed that he must have come with some message from Roop.

Partha asked Mili about her well-being and said that he had come with a letter from Roop. He quickly gave it to her and did not wait for long. He then wished her goodbye and went away.

Mili went back towards the staircase and proceeded to her room. She sat on her bed holding the envelope between her hands and looked at her name that Roop had written on it. She tore one of its ends carefully and pulled out the letter.

After about two and a half years later, Mili could get in touch with Roop once again. She had waited for such a day with deep faith. She closed her eyes and her heart was filled with gratitude for The Almighty. Tears of joy began to flow down through her cheeks and she read the letter with great enthusiasm.

Chapter 22: Correspondence

As always, Roop started his letter with the words “You are forever mine” at the beginning. He wrote that he was working in a multinational company and lived in a metro city. He also expressed his feelings for her and conveyed that he was missing her all the while. He requested her to continue writing letters to him and at the bottom of the letter, he gave his new address. At the end, he asked her if it was possible for him to send letters to her as well.

After reading the letter, Mili immediately wrote a reply to Roop.

“My dear Roop,

‘I’m yours for eternity’

For the last couple of years, I was missing you too. Thank you very much for sending a letter through Partha and acquainting me with your new phase of life. I’m extremely happy to know about you and I wish you all the best.

I’m very sorry for not being able to keep in touch with you from a very long time. Please forgive me and I hope you don’t mind.

You can send letters to me also but not in my hostel address as the rules here are too strict. I shall give you the address of Arati, one of my class-mates, who has promised to help me in every possible way.

I’ll keep writing to you. Take care.

With lots of love,

Yours only,

Mili”

With a smile on her face, Mili folded the letter, put it inside an envelope and tucked it under her pile of books that she had neatly kept on her study-table. Next day, she went and met Arati after the classes were over.

Mili explained to her about the help that she needed and Arati agreed at once. She gave Mili her home address. Mili quickly wrote it down in her letter to Roop. Then she gave the letter to Arati and requested her to post it as soon as possible.

Few days later, Arati met Mili in the morning before their classes started.

"I have a letter for you," Arati smiled, taking out an envelope from her bag.

"Thank you so much!" Mili said cheerfully. "You are really a great help to me."

"Oh come on, don't be so formal," Arati said, holding Mili's hand. "It's my pleasure."

Mili looked at her watch. There was still some time for the first class to begin. So instead of entering the classroom, she hurriedly went back to her hostel room.

She looked at the envelope. Her name was written on it followed by Arati's address. She opened it by tearing the right end. Mili found another envelope inside and she pulled it out. The edges of the second envelope were slightly folded to make it smaller so that it could fit inside the first envelope. Roop's message was written on it...

"This is a personal letter to Mili. For God's sake, please don't open it."

Mili opened the second envelope and began to read Roop's letter.

"My dearest Mili,

'You are forever mine'

Why do you say sorry when there is no fault of yours? Forgiveness is given to the one who commits a mistake and since you have done nothing wrong, the issue of forgiveness does not arise at all.

Besides, I shall mind only on that day, the day I shall go crazy!

Study well. Keep writing to me often and I shall reply too. Take care.

With lots of love and kisses,

Yours and only yours,

Roop”

Mili kissed the letter and felt emotional, almost tearful. From the words in his letter she could make out that his feelings for her were still the same, just like as it was earlier, in spite of the fact that, gradually it was being hard for both of them to keep in touch with each other due to numerous reasons.

This was Roop’s first-ever reply to her letter. Previously, only Mili could send letters to him at his hostel address but could not receive a reply from him. She could not give him her own address to which he could have sent his letters and thus it had been always a one-way communication.

As days rolled into weeks and weeks rolled into months, Mili and Roop were able to keep up their relationship once more by regular correspondence with letters for a year throughout.

Chapter 23: Truth Revealed

Mili left the hostel after she appeared for her final examination of the degree course and consequently lost contact with Roop for the third time. The university procedure from the bachelor's degree final examination to declaring of the results and then further till her admission in the master's degree course was undoubtedly a very long process and so during this period, she worked as a part-time teacher in the school where she had studied.

In due course of time, Mili stepped into another arena of her academic life and she started attending classes in the university, which was located in a town, quite far away from her hometown. In the beginning, for the first couple of months, she had to stay at her aunt's place because there was a dearth of hostel seats. Eventually, she could obtain one and accordingly shifted to the hostel.

Mili kept thinking about Roop always and also wished for his well-being. From the day she acquired a seat in the hostel, many a time she tried to send a letter to him. But she hesitated to post the letter because she was not sure if the letter would reach him at all at the same address. It had been a very long time since she was able to communicate with him through letters and she had doubts regarding whether he still lived in the same place until then.

Mili used to go home whenever she had holidays. But few months later, her parents wanted to have a discussion with her and so during one weekend, they called her home.

"Mili, as you are aware, your daddy's heart condition is not well," her mother said anxiously.

"What about the tests?" She continued, "And what do the cardiologists say?"

"They have advised a bypass surgery without delay," her mother confirmed.

“Before my operation, I would like to sort out certain issues,” her father asserted.

“A good proposal has come for you and we would like to go ahead and finalize it.” Her mother brought out the topic forward.

“Please, don’t force me to say yes.” Mili was perturbed.

“Why?” her father asked, raising his eyebrows.

“I don’t want to tie the knot with somebody else,” she replied honestly.

“What do you mean by that?” her mother asked, in dismay.

“Are you still keeping contact with that boy, with whom we advised you to stay away from?” her father asked, bewildered.

“I love him and I want only him in my life,” Mili revealed the truth.

“Mili!” her mother exclaimed, perplexed.

“No, that’s not possible,” her father said straightforwardly.

“But what is the reason?” Mili asked, feeling disappointed, though she knew that her parents adhered to astrology and believed in the traditional system of matching horoscopes preceding an arranged matrimony.

“According to the prediction of an astrologer whom we consulted, if horoscopes do not match properly then there shall be lots of problems after marriage which may lead to a divorce even,” her mother explained.

“What rubbish! I don’t believe in all these. If that’s what is written in my fate, the same shall occur with any other individual who comes into my life,” Mili protested, who unlike her parents was not at all interested to know what was likely to happen in the near future.

“Why don’t you try to understand?” her mother asked impatiently.

“Just tell me one thing. You may perhaps forcibly unite me with whoever you want to against my will, but what about my mind? Can you put an end to my feelings that I have for someone?” Mili tried to convince her parents, as she had a practical outlook on life.

“Come on Mili, don’t argue,” her mother said, upset.

“I’m not arguing Mummy, just trying to be logical,” she clarified.

“I don’t know what shall be the outcome of my heart surgery. If in any case, I move away to another world, I hope you shall consider my words as a last wish and give your consent to the proposal that has come for you,” her father pleaded.

Mili heaved a deep sigh and slowly went away towards her room and mumbled, “This is nothing else but simply emotional blackmail!”

Chapter 24: Out of the Blue

Mili felt depressed after the discussion with her parents. She found herself in a great dilemma and did not know what she could possibly do. She thought about Roop and also about her father who had to undergo a major operation. It was difficult for her to make a choice and come up to an agreeable conclusion. However, the next day she went back to the hostel to attend her classes again.

“Hi Mili, when did you reach?” her room-mate Smita asked, as she entered the room in the evening.

“Hi, about an hour ago,” Mili replied, lying on her stomach and reading a book.

“Hey listen, today someone came to meet you,” Smita informed her.

“Any message left for me?” Mili asked, placing a bookmark between the pages.

“Yes, he said that his name was Roop and tomorrow afternoon he shall come here again to meet you,” Smita replied.

“What!!” Mili exclaimed, hearing the name out of the blue, jumping from her bed.

“What happened?” Smita asked, surprised.

“Nothing at all,” Mili’s heartbeats began to increase but she tried to be stable.

“Come on Mili you can tell me, who is he?” Smita insisted.

“First let me meet him tomorrow and then I’ll tell you everything,” Mili responded.

“Alright, as you wish,” Smita agreed.

Mili wanted to be all alone for some moments and so she went out to the terrace.

Chapter 25: Rendezvous

Next day, Mili did not go to attend her classes. Instead, she stayed in the hostel to meet Roop. From the moment she came to know that he would be coming, she was totally excited and waited for him eagerly.

It was about two and a half years ago when she was able to keep in touch with him last, by communication through letters. She began to calculate further and found that, more or less after six years, she was going to see him again that day!

“Mili, you have a visitor,” a hostel staff came and informed her.

She was waiting to hear these words from a long time and at once ran down the stairs quickly. Roop stood near the gate beside a car, different from the one that he used to drive during the earlier years when they used to meet.

“Hi! How are you? Where do you live nowadays?” Mili smiled, thrilled to see him and began asking questions as she wanted to know all about him.

“Hi!” he smiled at her too and informed that he was living abroad.

“You look the same as I had seen you last but why are the dark circles appearing under your eyes?” Roop asked with genuine concern.

“Stress, to be honest,” she replied.

“Can we go slightly far away from here and talk?” he asked hopefully.

“Yes, that’ll be fine,” she agreed.

“Come, sit in the car, let’s go,” he suggested.

Roop drove through the crowded streets of the town and proceeded towards the outskirts. As the traffic thinned out, he looked at Mili and smiled at her.

He then gently touched her hand with his left hand while simultaneously driving the car, holding the steering wheel with his right hand. This was the first time that Roop held Mili's hand intentionally to express his feelings for her. She also placed her other hand over his hand and smiled at him.

Few moments later, he plucked a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and slowed the car. As he was about to light a cigarette, the lighter slipped from his hand and fell near her. She picked it up and gave it to him.

"Thank you," he said, smiling at her and lit his cigarette.

After sometime, they reached a place where a narrow lane went towards the left from the main road and sloped downward a little just at the point of entry. Roop took a left turn and drove down through the rough, bumpy lane which eventually led to a dead end. He then made a U-turn and parked the car at that spot.

"Was there any discussion about your marriage at home?" Roop started the conversation.

"Yes, a proposal has come and my parents want to fix the marriage but I declined," Mili said earnestly.

"Don't refuse." He continued, "Look, according to the existing circumstances, we have three options. We can either elope, which is not possible during this phase of life, or commit suicide, which is definitely not a solution or we can fulfill our parents' wishes by giving consent to the proposals."

Roop looked at Mili. She silently listened to his words with attention.

He tried to make her understand and further said, "Usually at a very young age, boys and girls elope. But now at this stage of life when we're quite matured, it shall be really awkward if we go and do such an act, isn't it? Next, by committing suicide we just end the life, that's all. Instead if we continue to live, who knows, maybe in future we shall be in touch again."

Roop smiled at Mili. She smiled too but was still silent.

“My parents have always given me whatever I had asked for and now they wish that I should settle down. I feel there’s no point to our waiting any further because as you know very well that the decision of your parents would never change. They would prefer giving your hand in marriage to someone else instead and I’ve no doubt about it,” he said and held her hands again.

“You know not how much I love you,” he said, looking at her affectionately.

“I know and I love you too,” she said and held his hands firmly.

Roop went closer to her and kissed her gently. Mili closed her eyes and experienced a beautiful feeling that was pleasing to her senses.

“Promise me that you shall give your consent to the proposal and fulfill the wishes of your parents,” he requested.

Mili had never expected that their relationship would eventually turn into such an unpleasant outcome. As Roop had explained to her, she understood well that there was no other option for them but to accept the consequences, which she never wished at all.

Mili thought, in such a situation if she alone had to take a decision about her future, she would have preferred to remain single all through her life. She loved Roop deeply and did not want to hurt him by turning down his request. All that she wished was to see him being happy always and to see his ever smiling face.

She tried hard to control her emotions of despair that welled up within her. Then quickly turning her head away from him for a moment, she glanced out of the window. She blinked fast so that Roop would not see the tears that filled up her eyes. Then taking a deep breath, she looked at him, smiled with profound melancholy and slowly nodded her head.

“Please say something,” he said, concerned. “I really want to hear you speak.”

“When are you going back to your place of work?” she asked.

"I shall go day after tomorrow. But I'll come again to meet you, tomorrow evening," he smiled.

"Mili, I want to tell you something," Roop said after a while.

"Yes, what is it?" she asked, looking at him.

"I had tough time in-between after I lost contact with you," he told her some facts of his life.

"Oh, sorry to know about all that," Mili said with concern.

"And I took to drinking," he said honestly.

"Please don't make it a habit. Promise me, Roop," she requested.

"Sure, I promise," he said and touched her hand affectionately.

Roop then took out his camera from the car dashboard.

"Let me click your picture," he said.

Both stepped out from the car and Mili stood in front of Roop.

"Smile," he said, smiling himself and pressed the button of his camera.

"Thank you," she smiled.

They stood near the car for some moments more and then decided to return. Roop drove back through the busy streets of the town and finally reached her hostel.

Chapter 26: Unforeseen Loss

Mili came back from her classes the next day and waited for Roop in the hostel. He came in the evening and they both went out to the same place that they had gone the previous day. But that day, Roop did not go through the lane inside as it was very rough and bumpy. He parked the car just at the entrance of the lane near the main road.

“I’ve brought a dress for you,” he said, with a smile on his face and gave a shopping bag to her that he had kept on the rear seat.

“I like it, thank you,” she said cheerfully, looking at the dress.

“And here is my address,” he said, pulling out an envelope from his pocket.

Mili took the envelope and put it inside her bag.

“This is your picture.” Next, he gave her a copy of the photograph that he had clicked the day before.

“Oh, thanks!” she smiled.

“Have a look at this,” he said and gave her a photo album.

Mili opened it and turned the thick pages. She looked at his photographs and kept on asking him where they were taken. Then she came across a picture of a girl.

“Who is she?” Mili asked.

“Her name is Julie. Today her parents came and met my parents at home to talk about the marriage,” Roop explained frankly. “And that’s why it was absolutely essential for me to meet you yesterday and discuss the matter with you.”

Mili looked at Roop and admired his frankness. Her feelings for him grew deeper as she came to know how much he was concerned for her. She loved and respected him much more than ever before.

“So what if we can’t be together, but no one can stop us from thinking about each other.” Roop tried to cheer her up.

Mili felt sad and just nodded.

“Good that no one can read our minds except God and it would be better if no one invents such a machine in future.” He further said and laughed.

Mili tried to smile. She turned that page and reached the last page of the album. She saw her picture there, the one that Roop had clicked the day before.

“It’s beginning to get dark. I think we should return,” Roop suggested.

“Yes, let’s go now,” Mili agreed.

Within half an hour, they reached the hostel. Both descended and stood near the car for a few minutes. After a while, they finally wished goodbye to each other.

Roop went away, smiling at her and waving his hand. Mili bit her bottom lip to hold back her tears and waved at him. She watched him driving away till the car went out of sight.

Then with a heavy heart she went to her room and took out the envelope from her bag that Roop had given her. She opened it and found a letter inside with a couple of Air Mail inland letters.

In the letter, Roop gave his address and asked her to send letters to him. He wrote that she should study well and always be strong enough to face the difficulties in life with courage. He sent his best wishes to her and wished success for her future.

Mili burst into tears after reading Roop’s short and simple letter.

“What’s the matter, Mili?” her room-mate Smita asked.

Mili shook her head, shedding tears.

“Whose letter is that? Have you received any unpleasant news?” Smita enquired.

Mili shook her head again, still sobbing.

“Then why are you crying so much?” Smita kept asking.

“I lost him Smita, I’ve really lost him,” Mili said softly and began to cry louder.

Smita embraced her and put Mili’s head on her shoulder, so that she could cry her heart out. Mili wept for a long time and then heaved a long sigh.

“Speak out Mili, you’ll feel better,” Smita advised.

Mili nodded and told Smita all about her romantic relationship with Roop.

Chapter 27: Wind Up

It was weekend. Mili took out Roop's letter and read it again. Then taking out one of the Air Mail inland letters that he had given her, she sat down to write on it.

But Mili could not begin the letter. She had written innumerable letters to him in the past but that day she felt somewhat uncomfortable and began to think whether she should send the letter to him or not. She did want to write to him at the new address that he had given her but felt as if an inner voice was preventing her from doing so. Another reason for her hesitation was that, she was not sure if it would be proper for her to continue sending letters to him like before because he would be starting a new journey of life according to the wish of his parents.

Mili felt apprehensive. She stood up from the chair and began to pace to and fro, thinking what to do. After a great deal of thought and making an effort to go through all possible pros and cons, she came to the conclusion that for Roop's sake it would be better to wind up her relationship with him. She loved him dearly and all that she ever desired was his happiness at all times. She sincerely wished that her letters to him must not create unnecessary problems for him in his future and also hoped that their relationship should not land him in any sort of trouble.

Hence with much grief, Mili wrote her last letter to Roop which was in fact a reply to his letter basically, unlike the letters that she used to write to him earlier. She sent her good wishes to him and wished immense success for his bright future.

Mili then recollected all the moments that she had spent with Roop for a decade and found contentment in relishing the 'quality' time that he had always given her although she could hardly spend 'quantity' time with him since they first met. She knew that no one can ever fill the painful void in her life. However, she kept faith in his words that he said to her... "Maybe in future we shall be in touch again."



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