

### A GLIMPSE OF LIFE

I peeked from behind the laced curtains of the window and only a veritable bedlam of chirruping caught my attention. There was not a single human soul to be found outside at this hour. It has been almost five months since the pandemic broke out, which has jolted lives across the globe. Today in the afternoon it had rained, this was a respite from the scorching heat. The roads looked shiny and slippery, the petrichor emanating from the wet soil and grass reminded me of the little joys of everyday life.

"Roma" my mother called out "why don't you go for a short walk, you haven't gone out for the past whole week. A little exercise will make you feel good."

I was obstinate about remaining indoors as the fear of catching the virus strongly gripped my heart. At last, I surrendered to my mother's wish who prepared me like a spy ready to undertake a secret mission. Mask on my face, gloves on my hands, sanitizer in my bag and a word of good advice to maintain social distance.

I was out and about; there were very few people to be seen on the road which was usually filled with the noises of children playing around. As I walked further I noticed a squirrel scuttling here, a cow lazily chewing grass over there and a dog barking from somewhere. I pondered that these are the small things that we seldom notice in the hustle and bustle of our hard-pressed lives but today walking at my own pace, I was able to appreciate the benign nature. As my spirits felt uplifted, I thought Maa was right, as usual. I reached a nearby market where a few shops were open; I thought to buy a few groceries for home. After the purchase as I was turning to walk back home I saw a familiar set of gentle eyes and creased forehead. "Vikram Uncle" I called from behind "is that you?" "Yes, how do you know me?" he said

I folded my hands in obeisance and said: "Uncle, I'm Roma, I was Deepak's classmate in school, and we used to go to the same English tuition. I hope you remember me."

He took some time to recollect and when he finally did, he nodded and asked "It has been a long time now, right? How are you, dear?"

"I'm fine, Uncle. How is Deepak?"

"Deepak is doing well, he has returned from Hyderabad after the lockdown. He has been attending the online classes. He keeps taking up new hobbies every two weeks according to, what you children call these days, trending on social media" he chuckled.

I laughed along with him: "Uncle, what are you doing here?"

"The shops near our home are closed today so I walked here to do some shopping."

I looked at one of his hands and noticed he had bought some balloons, candles and chocolates. In the other hand, he held a bunch of freshly bloomed white flowers. Curiosity arose within me, "Is it something special today? Are those flowers for Aunt?"

Uncle laughed: "No, these flowers are for my darling daughter, Shweta. She loves these flowers."

"Your daughter?" I was totally flabbergasted on hearing this.

As far as I remembered Deepak was their only child. He never mentioned about having a sister. I had visited their home a few times in the past and only the three of them lived together.

"Let's walk and I'll answer the queries running in your mind, Roma."

Ruminating a little he said: "Three months ago one early morning there was a knock at our door. We were puzzled as to who could have come at such an early hour. When I opened the door I was astonished to see Hari at our door. He is the brother of Lata, our house help, you may have seen her."

"Yes, I remember Lata Didi, when we were kids she used to play hide and seek with us whenever I came over. How is she?"

Uncle's face darkened: "She passed away from COVID-19" he sighed.

I felt a sting in my heart after hearing this sad news. After we had passed out of school I was not in touch with Deepak. His family lived nearby but the busy life had offered me no opportunity to pay a visit to their home.

"I am sorry to hear about it, Uncle" I said crestfallen.

"The news had devastated us; she had worked so many years for us. The doctors tried their best but they couldn't save her from the jaws of death."

A moment of silence passed between us. I kept my eyes fixed to the ground unable to think what to say next.

After a few moments Vikram Uncle said: "Hari wanted to return to his native village. He had lost his job here; he had no more money left with him. I offered him some money but he refused, he had made up his mind about going back."

I thought, undoubtedly, people all the world have been immensely affected by this pandemic but the worst hit are the marginalized sections. They have been pushed further into grief and poverty.

Uncle continued that he noticed a little girl timidly standing behind Hari. He had met the little girl a couple of times when Lata had brought her to their home on festivals. When he enquired about the well being of the girl, Hari said that he was in a great dilemma as he would not be able to raise the child all by himself. After all, he was a young bachelor who was unemployed. Even though it caused him great pain yet he had decided to give her up at an orphanage. Lata's husband had passed away a few years ago of tuberculosis. The grandparents had refused to take the child as Lata and her husband belonged to different castes and had married against their family's wish.

"Roma, I was grief-stricken hearing this then something inside me moved me to ask Hari that if he would agree then I would like to adopt Shweta and raise her as my own child. He was taken aback on hearing my proposal, he pondered over it for some time. He tenderly asked Shweta if she would like to stay here. I had not asked Rita or Deepak about it but felt it was the right thing to do."

"What did Shweta say? Could she even understand what was being asked to her?"

"Even my heart was pounding when Hari asked her the question. I had some doubts whether she will be able to fathom the question that was being asked to her. She took some time then slowly walked towards me, held my hand and nodded back to her Uncle. Her little gesture had me teary eyed."

"What did Rita Auntie and Deepak say about it?"

"They took some time to come in terms with my decision but they were more elated than me to have Shweta at home. Since that day she has become the centre of our lives. She has filled our home with laughter and her childish songs" Uncle laughed gleefully behind the mask.

"That is great, Uncle" he immediately showed me a picture of a wide grinning Shweta with ice cream smeared near her mouth, sitting on Rita Auntie's lap while Deepak is seen smiling in the background.

"Today we are celebrating her birthday, had there not been the lockdown we would have celebrated with a lot of pomp and show. Nevertheless the three of us have tried our best to make her day special, after all she is our dear little princess. Rita is baking the cake and will get her ready for the celebration, Deepak has already bought a drawing book and a set of crayons, Shweta loves to draw. Alright Roma, it is almost near your home. It was very nice to catch up with you. Give my regards to your folks and do well in life, dear."

"Thank you so much, Uncle. Give my regards to Auntie and please do wish Shweta on my behalf. I hope someday I'll get the opportunity to come by while Deepak is in the city." We bid adieu.

As the silhouette of uncle faded away, only a lingering thought of the bittersweet story I had just heard remained in my mind. As I kept walking towards home, I could not help but think about the miracles of life. Even during such gloomy times, a silver lining could be found. I realized, families are not only made by blood relations but by love of the heart. Family is not about being related or sharing the same genetics it is about the commitment and the emotional bond.