

# ANYTHING FOR LOVE

*It's well worth it.* By Sophia Acharya

The doorbell buzzed. I opened the door and was somewhat taken aback by Sudha who was standing in front of me.

"How are you, Sophia didi?" she asked me, smiling.

"Fine, please come in," said I, a bit curtly, for I did not like her coming to our flat that evening.

She entered our drawing room and sat on the sofa, sweeping everything in the room with a curious glance. Once her eyes met the eyes of my sister, Ruby, she gave her a friendly smile. Ruby reciprocated it.

We sat in silence for some time. There was some awkwardness on Sudha's part and I did not want to start a conversation with her, for I knew for certain that the

purpose of Sudha's visit was to ask for financial assistance from me.

Sudha, must be 22 now, was the daughter of Sanjay Kamble, who was a clerical worker in my office. I knew her since she had been a lanky girl of no more than 15. Working with me for many years Sanjay, a soft-spoken and simple fellow, banked on me a lot and quite often confided all his personal problems to me. I had been once invited to his place to dine and that was when I had seen Sudha for the first time.

Around a year back one morning when I reached office Sanjay, gloomy-faced, stopped me and asked me to follow him to the office veranda.

"Sophia didi, never did I harm anyone in my life yet destiny is always so unkind and unjust to me. It is such a disgrace," said Sanjay, almost in tears.

"What happened?" I enquired, surprised by this sudden outburst.

"Last evening Sudha eloped with someone. She left a chit for me and her mother. She claimed that she loved him with all her heart."

"Do you know that fellow?"

"Not exactly, last week while we were discussing her marriage she told us that she liked someone. Just imagine how audacious she was to tell us that she would not marry someone we chose for her. What is more, I have

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heard that fellow has no steady income. I doubt whether he earns at all. He is not even from our caste. It is such a disgrace."

Looking at Sanjay's troubled face, I felt that all he wanted from me was a few words of hope.

"If he does not do anything for a living then she would come back soon, take my word for it. Meanwhile, do not let anyone know about Sudha's elopement," I tried to reason with him. Sanjay nodded in agreement.

Sudha was about 20 now but her whole bearing bespoke great determination; something so rarely found among the people from the lower strata of society. She was a girl with regular features and a very warm smile which made her eyes twinkle. She was dusky-complexioned with long coils of jet black hair.

A month passed by since Sudha's elopement, but there was no news from her. Sanjay always looked low and downcast. No more did he seek my advice or guidance as my prediction proved wrong. Nor did I ask him about her as it would be like rubbing salt into his wounds. One evening after returning from office I found Sudha standing outside our apartment building. A streak of vermilion powder in the centre parting of her hair indicated that she was already married. There were narrow lines of determination and hard work on her young face. Yet her eyes were glinting with hope.

"I need help from you, Sophia didi," she said to me as I neared her.

She stopped for a moment and began again,

"I am in financial difficulties, didi. If you could help me with a couple of thousand rupees..." She trailed off, looking at me beseechingly.

I pursed my lips, wondering as to what I should do. Most probably my dilemma hurt her self-esteem, for she told me at once, "If you cannot help me it is fine, didi. I have come to you, for I have no one else to ask for money."

"Come with me," I told her. I knew that she did not want to discuss her present predicament with me nor did she want any advice from me. She took the money from me and promised to return it as soon as possible. For the next six months I didn't hear from her and, very obviously, had given up the hope of getting the money back. I had not told anything to Sanjay about Sudha's visit to my place as he might feel humiliated. And then one evening again Sudha came to my place, looking forlorn and exhausted as though the battle of life took a heavy toll on her. Again, she asked for another 2000 rupees from me, more pleadingly than before. Somehow I could not bring myself to say "No" to her and she went away with the money, promising to return it soon along with the money she had taken from me earlier.

Another few months passed by without any news from Sudha, and now this evening she was sitting on the sofa in my drawing room. This time I was determined to say "No" once she asked for any financial assistance.

"Didi, we want you to come to our place this on Sunday evening," she began,

somewhat sheepishly.

"Your place means?" I raised my eyebrows, almost questioning.

"We want to celebrate our first marriage anniversary with you. Please bring Ruby along. Here is my address," she scrawled her address on a piece of paper.

What cheek, thought I, rather than returning my money she is inviting us to her marriage anniversary.

"Well! well. We will try," I said vaguely.

Sudha left immediately, claiming that she was in a hurry.

I was not much interested in going to Sudha's place, but Ruby was adamant. For

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some strange reason she took a liking to Sudha.

And so on the evening of next Sunday we found ourselves in a *chawl* in Tilaknagar. It was not difficult to find Sudha's place which was two cubbyholes on the first floor in Vinayak chawl. Entering her place I was completely baffled, for

there was almost no place to sit. Sudha was beside herself with joy to see us. She vacated two chairs for us. Soon, her husband joined her.

Shrinivash was his name and Sudha affectionately called him Shrini. He was an inch shorter than Sudha with a dark complexion and thick curly hair. He spoke Hindi with an accent.

They sat on a mattress in front of us, and then Sudha slowly told their story to us. Shrinivash was an amateur painter when she had met him for the first time. Soon they fell for each other and decided to marry when any of them would have a steady income. But once Sudha's parents insisted her marrying a man they had selected for her she eloped. Though Shrini had possessed barely any material things at that time he welcomed her to his life and since then they had had a terrible time.

The jobless couple had to sell almost everything they owned to stay together. During that miserable time Sudha had come to me twice for financial assistance. Yet she continued inspiring her husband to paint whatever he wanted.

"All the money you gave me was used to buy Shrini's paints and brushes. Time and again he wanted to give up painting and start doing something for a living. But I did not let him do so. And at



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last, a month back for the first time, luck favoured us," Sudha stopped and with her eyes asked her husband to speak.

Shrini seemed to be an introvert. He began after a few moments, haltingly, 'I was never sure of my talent for painting. I do it, for it gives me pleasure. Over the last six months I made no less than 40 paintings, depicting the whole story of the *Ramayana* chronologically. I did not know how to make them reach the people who might judge my work and pay me some money for it. Sudha took the initiative and requested the manager of Big Bazaar, Mulund, to allow us to use the foyer in front of their shop to display my work only for a weekend. The manager was kind enough to allow us to do. We priced the paintings very

nominally. However, almost no one paid my work more than a fleeting glance.

"But at last, Sudha's and my effort paid off. A director from a big corporate house took a fancy to my work, most probably, because they were cheap and easy to understand. He was in his late fifties. He bought all the paintings right away. That evening I earned more than ₹50,000 in one go. Later, he talked to us at length and was apparently impressed when he learnt about our days of struggle. He promised a job for Sudha if she completed some 3 month-long computer course.

"At his suggestion at present I am working on the *Mahabharata*. This time I would make around 50 paintings. It is beyond me to imagine that my paintings

will decorate the conference hall of a big corporate house. But all credit goes to Sudha for, without her, I would have given up my effort long back," "Shrini smiled shyly," looking at Sudha.

Mesmerised by Shrini's story I was speechless for a few moments, and then I asked, "May I see your present works?"

"Sure," said Sudha and led us to a small balcony jutting out from the room. I saw Shrini's half-finished paintings, portraying the major events of the *Mahabharata*. Creating such paintings might not need much imagination, but the painter's sincerity was evident in each work. They were no way abstract and someone who knew the *Mahabharata* could easily associate and relate the

paintings with the great epic.

"They are awesome. It reflects your deep love for your work," I said to Shrini.

When Shrini went out to get sweets and ice cream for me and Ruby, Sudha gave me an envelope. Opening it I was at a loss for words. It contained ₹5000. Most probably because of her high self-esteem she wanted to give me an interest of a thousand rupees, I reflected.

"I cannot take it," said I, returning the envelope to her.

"No, didi, you have to take it. Without your help we would have been nowhere today."

"Well, I accept it," said I and added, "but please keep it with you as a gift from me on your first anniversary."

When we were about to leave, both Shrini and Sudha bent to touch my feet. Instinctively, I backed away.

"We are extremely grateful that you have come to our place," their voice was filled with gratitude.

"I would love to attend all your marriage anniversaries," said I. My meeting with Sudha and Shrini had already filled me with a sense of deep fulfilment.

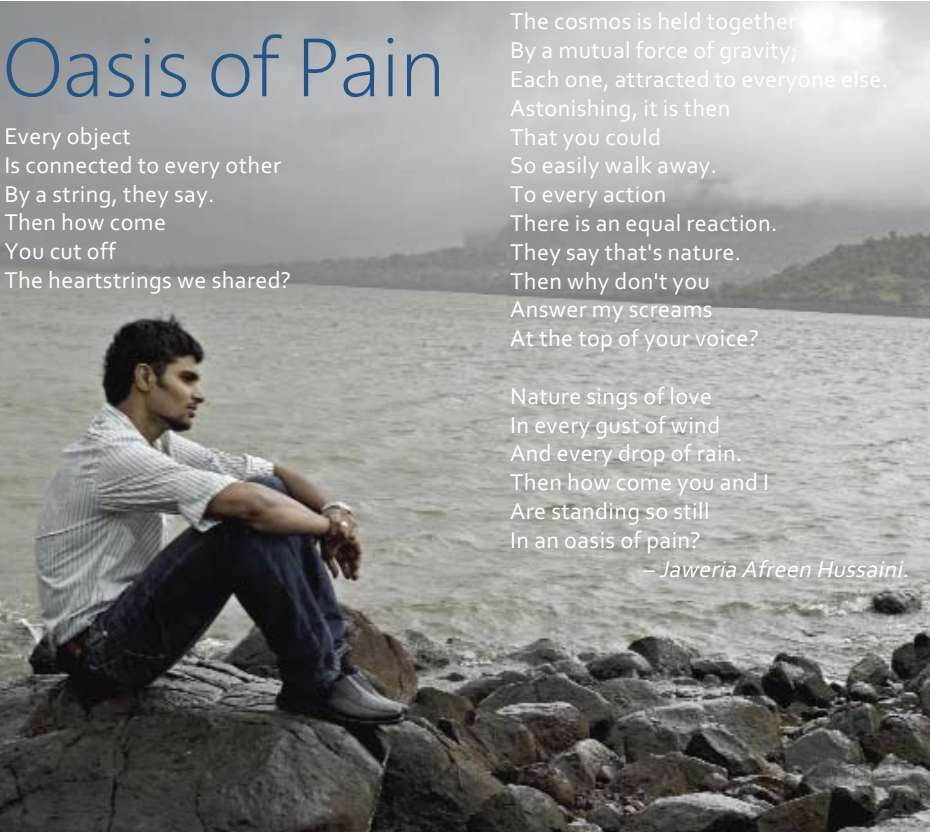
"Didi, do you think I committed any crime by eloping with him?" Sudha asked me all of a sudden.

"No, Sudha, definitely not, and in future if you need any help from me do not hesitate to come to me," I said.

Sudha's eyes twinkled with happiness and it was a rare moment in my life when I loved another woman as much as I loved my own sister.

We

When love is in excess it brings a man no honor nor worthiness.



# Oasis of Pain

Every object  
Is connected to every other  
By a string, they say.  
Then how come  
You cut off  
The heartstrings we shared?

The cosmos is held together  
By a mutual force of gravity;  
Each one, attracted to everyone else.  
Astonishing, it is then  
That you could  
So easily walk away.  
To every action  
There is an equal reaction.  
They say that's nature.  
Then why don't you  
Answer my screams  
At the top of your voice?

Nature sings of love  
In every gust of wind  
And every drop of rain.  
Then how come you and I  
Are standing so still  
In an oasis of pain?  
— Jaweria Afreen Hussaini.