**Third Place: The Call of Life**

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It was a wonderful Tuesday morning. Clouds were scattered across the sky promising a brief shower or two. A soft breeze blew across the city, rustling the leaves of the trees. Birds called out to one another to announce the arrival of spring. It was as if Mother Nature herself had ensured the clemency of the weather.

However, all of these bounties were lost on me and my batch-mates as we all mentally prepared ourselves for the standard 12 Board Exams. All of us stood outside in a single file and clasped our hands in prayer in accordance to the teacher at the assembly. For a change, though, there was neither any dilly-dallying nor any fumbling; we all stood firm praying to all the gods above for leniency and benevolence. I, myself, closed my eyes and fervently prayed that should I do well in the Mathematics exam, I would most definitely give up eating meat and would spend a chaste and fulfilling life. All my prayers were cut short with the unpropitious sound of the assembly bell.

As I sat down in my assigned seat, I reminded myself that this was the last exam and within three hours all my troubles would be over. I looked around for the invigilator who was going to start distributing the question paper. My neighbor caught my eye and wished me luck. I gave a wry smile and returned the gesture. In a few moments I got the question paper and I feverishly began to go through it. The quiet room suddenly exploded with the sounds of pens scratching on paper and the occasional cough or two.

I focused my attention on the first question and began solving it earnestly. The solution was quite simple; a little too simple perhaps? I checked it again and discovered that in my haste, I missed out an important part of the question. I crossed out my answer and began solving it anew. The fact that I had blundered on the very first question itself seemed ominous and did nothing to reassure my nerves. I looked at my watch- 7 out of my precious 180 minutes had already passed and I was only on the second question. As I began to work my way through the paper I felt morbidly aware that I had forgotten some important formulae and I began to note down all the formulae I knew on the back of the paper. With a sickening lurch in my stomach, I discovered that although I remembered many of the formulae, I had overlooked memorizing the operands that were scattered across most of them.

Time passed swiftly as it always does when you don’t want it to. Minutes turned into hours and when I reached the last set of questions, I only had half an hour to try and redeem my injustices on paper. I tried very hard to attempt all the questions, but within a few moments (or so it seemed) the exam bell rang; its shrill overtones condemning me to failure with every ringing beat. As I rushed through my paper, adding a number here, a unit there, the invigilator came and pulled it away. I looked at him carrying my paper away and I felt an inevitable sense of doom surround me. My batch-mates were smiling; free at last they were from the burdens of the cumbersome trials. The class topper was animatedly discussing her paper with her friends. I tried not to listen as I walked past her but I heard snatches of their conversation anyway,

” Yes, the 5th one was a tricky question, but I’m sure that the correct answer is 5 cos theta”.

 “5 cos theta!” I thought to myself “My answer was nowhere close to that!”

I walked past a jubilant crowd, trying to maintain a brave façade, but my insides were rolling with turmoil. I felt sick. I knew that I would fail. FAIL- the word echoed in my head as I contemplated the reactions of my parents. They had spent a good amount of money on tuitions, books and school fees throughout the year. When I pictured telling them the truth about my exam, their shocked faces came to my mind. I didn’t mind the scolding or the anger on their part; I probably deserved it; but I kept thinking about the disappointment and at that moment tears began to flow freely on my face.

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I reached home and greeted my mother.

 “How was the exam?” she asked me with bated breath.

“Oh! It was pretty good. Some of the questions were pretty challenging but I attempted all the questions” I lied.

 My mother gave a sigh of relief and said,” That’s good. You deserve a treat for all your hard work. Look at what I ordered today!”

 She smiled and took me to the lunch table where my favorite type of pizza lay. Normally a sight like that would have filled me with delight, but today I felt nothing but anguish.

"But ma, we just managed to pay my school fees. Why did you spend so much on a pizza?”

 “Look at you, worrying about money” my mother chided, “You just do well in the exams and get admission in a good college. That’s all. I don’t need anything else.”

Minutes later the doorbell rang and my dad came in from work. He looked weary enough to sleep for the whole day, given a choice; but all he got from work was an hour’s worth of free time for lunch. Today though, none of it mattered; he came straight to me and asked,

“So! How was it??”

And with the same listless tone I repeated my lie to him. A smile of pride coursed through his tired face and I felt a throb of guilt. He took out a small, carefully wrapped package from his bag and he handed it to me.

I opened the package and I saw that an expensive watch lay inside the cover. I was overwhelmed just looking at it; knowing that I did not deserve any of it, but on the outside, I smiled and thanked my dad.

“Don’t thank me, beta, you deserve it” he said.

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By the time I went to my room, I was a mess. Every step I took prompted a fresh wave of guilt. I put the watch inside the cupboard where I wouldn’t have to look at it. As I lay on the bed, I began screaming at myself in my head; asking, demanding, why I hadn’t been able to do well. I was reasonably smart enough and I was sure that I had done well in the other subjects. But math was the one thing that I was really poor at. Part of the blame lay in the fact that I never told my parents that I didn’t want to be an engineer. The reason I never stood up for my dream was because I never had one. I never knew what I was going to do in life. I wasn’t good looking or well-built. Neither did I possess any special talent or skill, nor did I come from a wealthy family. So when the time came to choose a career stream, I accepted my parent’s choice for me to be an engineer without any qualms or hesitation.

As time passed however, I only realized that being an engineer seemed like a daunting task. I longed to find something that I was good at. With this mentality, coupled with my attitude towards math, I had written what I could say as the worst examination of my life. Never had I ever considered myself failing an exam before; and when faced with the indomitable prospect of doing so, all hope left me and I was left helpless, feeling that life had lost its meaning. Visions of my parent’s ashamed faces loomed before my eyes and I felt something break in me.

I decided to end my life.

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Morning came yet again, with its seemingly beautiful allure. But I felt that no amount of brightness could illuminate the dark place I was in. I looked at my surroundings and felt a stirring of the gloom that had eaten me up the night before. I mentally thought to myself that I was going to end it all later. I decided to go out for a walk to just be rid of my thoughts for some time.

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 As soon as I returned, my mom greeted me saying,

“Go wash your face, you look like a wreck! Oh, and by the way Kishore Dada came by; he wanted to use your computer”

I froze. I had left my computer on after having used it the previous night. I didn’t want anybody else to see my search results. I rushed to my room, hoping that he hadn’t used my computer yet.

Kishore Dada was the son of the Kapoor family- our neighbors. As a child, he used to be rather mischievous, his antics garnering the attention and reprimand of almost everyone in the colony. As he grew up, he became increasingly free spirited and wild. At the age of 21 however, he joined the Indian army, and within sometime, he transformed into a person who was mature, thoughtful as well as disciplined. Suddenly, everybody in the colony began to look up to him, mothers telling their sons to be more like Kishore Dada; young maidens stealing furtive glances at him; and even praise from the other men.

I went into my room and Kishore Dada looked up from the computer,

“Arrey! Come, come. I’m seeing you after such a long time.”

He pulled my hand and gave me a firm handshake; something he had picked up in the army no doubt. He looked at me and smiled.

“So what’s up? What’s new? Auntie told me that your exams are done. You must be pretty psyched. Yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah, It’s all good” I muttered distractedly. Inwardly I was relieved that he didn’t see the search results yet.

“What next. You’re done with school. What do you want to do in life?” he asked, looking at me.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t decided yet.” I replied.

“Hmmm. I’m not sure that you’ll have a lot of options, if you kill yourself, though.” He said.

My heart skipped a beat. So he had seen it.

“Hey relax. I’m not going to tell anyone. I just came here to send an email to a friend. I didn’t expect to see that, though!” He cajoled me.

I was still in a daze.

“Really? You mean it? You’re not going to tell my parents?” I asked.

“What am I? Your mother? No! You’re done with school now and are somewhat mature enough to make your own decisions. If you decide that you are done with life, who am I to stand in your way? But yeah, if you feel comfortable enough, I would like to know what’s making you think like this. Whatever it is, just talk to me about it. Who knows, maybe there’s something we can do about it.”

He sounded sincere and the fact that he didn’t tell my parents made me trust him a lot more. My head was a mess and when I opened up to him, I told him everything. After listening to me carefully he said,

 “I was about your age, when my father and I had an argument. My father wanted me to study commerce, so that one day I would be able to take over the family business. I however had no notion of joining the family business, whatsoever. When I told my dad that, we had a huge fight and in the end he told me: Son, it’s very easy for you to disinherit my legacy, but it’s only because you haven’t earned it. In life, whatever you are right now, it’s only because I could get enough money for your stay, your food, your studies and your pleasure. You don’t want to get into the business. Fine! But I won’t spend another rupee on you. If you really want to be something else, you go ahead and earn it for yourself. But I doubt you can really achieve something on your own."

“I never realized with what a heavy heart he told me these words, but I was a very hot headed fellow back then, and I jumped at the opportunity to prove him wrong. I packed my bags and I left my house. I went to stay at my friend’s house. Days passed, and I didn’t get a single job. I began to panic. My money started to run out and my friends became “busy.” A day came, when I was just wandering the street, with my luggage, having had half an apple for breakfast.”

I was taken aback hearing this. None of us ever knew about any of this and from the looks of it, Kishore Dada was probably telling his story for the first time. He continued.

“Although the days passed, I couldn’t bring myself to swallow my pride and go back home. A day came, when I was so starved, I ordered food at a restaurant and ate it all without paying up. Cops came and they arrested me. The entire night, I spent in a lock up, just thinking about the kind of person I was becoming. I saw the way the cops looked at me. It didn’t matter that I came from a decent family. They didn’t respect me. The next day as I was going to be released, the Chief Inspector came in, and all the cops stood up saluting him “Jai Hind.” It was then I knew what to do.”

“I enlisted in the army. I figured that if I was going to play around with my life, I might as well get some respect out of it. It was very hard at first. I wasn’t really known for my obedience. But as time passed, I learned a lot of things and I earned commendations, friends and respect. That day I went back home, and when my dad opened the door, I didn’t have to tell anything to him; he just knew. My parents were proud of me!”

I was moved by his story. I had never seen this side of him. He showed me a photo of a house.

“Look here. Do you see this house? An old lady lives here. Every day she waits at the gate for her son to come back.”

“Where is her son?” I asked.

“Dead” he replied. “He died defending our country. He was a good friend of mine. His mother still hasn’t lived down the shock. Every day she stands there just waiting. Her younger son works at a retailer’s store. He earns very little; and what he does, is spent for her medicines. Yet every day he continues to do so, without complaint.”

“Life is unfair” I commented reflecting back to my own troubles.

“That’s my point. Life is unfair or rather life SEEMS unfair for everybody. But that isn’t an excuse to lose hope. When I left my house it seemed plenty unfair to me that because I came from a wealthy family, people didn’t respect me; they respected my dad’s wealth. But I couldn’t give up hope, because of my pride. They always say, pride is a sinful thing, but in my case, it changed my life. Similarly, life may seem unfair to you too. I can understand how horrible you feel. But there’s a chance you can be something; a chance you can be someone big; a chance that you can touch a thousand lives…. But you won’t ever get that chance, if you quit life itself”

My eyes brimmed with tears as I absorbed the wisdom of his words.

“But what about my parents? I cannot bear to see them disappointed. I can’t stand to see that shame.” I asked.

“Your mother carried you around for nine months in her body. You caused her a lot of pain. But at the end of it; it was worth it. Your dad supported you all this time; he gave you all he had. It pained him; but it was worth it. Your parents are much stronger than you think. Give them time. They will understand you. But if you choose to end your life, remember; the strongest man will bawl like a baby if he has to see the corpse of his son. If you think that your life is unfair, don’t take the easy way out. Change it. Don’t worry about a failed exam. Your grades are nothing in front of the kind of person you are. Big companies will hire you; heck! You’ll start your own business and while you’re at it you’ll invent something huge. But all this only if you choose to live.”

I felt a sense of calm. His wisdom had touched my very core; my essence. As I thought about it a strange feeling enveloped me. I felt invulnerable. I could do anything; I could achieve anything. All I had to do was: LIVE!

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**15 years later**

“Why did you have to be late today?” shouted my wife.

 “What can I say dear, I have a bunch of people working with me, but none of them have any sort of idea how to handle a project. The Vice President himself wants me to spearhead this, so I couldn’t say no. Anyways I’ll be taking a 2 month paid leave in a few days, so stop fretting, everything will be fine.”

After half an hour, the nurse came out with a bundle in her arms. I smiled at the sight of them and she smiled back.

“You have a very healthy baby boy. Have you thought of a name yet?”

I smiled and said,” His name is Jeevan.”

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