

# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue-II (March 2014)



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## One Sunday

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Sunday, 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1998  
4 P.M

A chilling wind is trying desperately to defeat the trees and shed the left over leaves. The dim sun, losing to the wind in the battle, has hidden itself for the rest of the night behind the skyline of the horizon. The roads are lying still, as if afraid of the wrath of the gusty wind. The bungalows of Rowland Lane are standing like petrified soldiers in a row, silent, dark and devoid of life. The only sound is the echoing moan of the forceful winter wind. Amidst the dead and dreary surrounding, the last bungalow down the lane poses as an exception. A strange glow of light and warmth from the interior of this house has managed to penetrate the curtain covered glass panes, faintly illuminating the little courtyard in front.

This last bungalow belongs to the Sahais. The Sahais are well known in the neighbourhood for their amiability and hospitality. Inside the bungalow, Akash, Mr. Suman Sahai's elder son is busy preparing for his annual examination. An intelligent student, Akash studies in standard six. Mr.Sahai is sitting at the dining table, busy with his office work. The afternoon has been of immense merrymaking for the family. Being a Sunday, father, mother and the two sons have had a sumptuous lunch followed by a game of chess. Although the repeated upsetting of the chess-board by Mr. Sahai's younger son, Ayan, a bubbly kid of two years, has left the game unfinished and uncompleted. Having spent a lot of energy in spoiling his father's and elder's brother's game, and thereby drawing immense pleasure from that, Ayan is now peacefully asleep in the bedroom, reviving his energy for another mission. Komal Sahai, having managed to make her naughty younger son fall asleep, has left for a nearby market to get groceries. Though Akash generally accompanies his mom and sometimes even run errands for her, he has decided to stay back home today to prepare for the Mathematics paper scheduled for the next day.

5 P.M

There is a still silence inside the bungalow. Akash is engrossed in his sums and Mr. Sahai in his balance sheets. It has been almost one hour since Mrs. Sahai has left for the necessary shopping.

“Trrrrrrriiiiiing! Trrrrrrriiiiiing...”

The hoarse ringing of the telephone suddenly shatters the stoic silence. Piercing the lull, the sound of the telephone echoes itself. Akash jumps up from his study-table to receive the call. It is 5 P.M in the evening, time for his grandparents to call.

“Hello! Is it grandma or grandpa today?” picking up the receiver Akash says in his usual playful tone. Every day it is a game for him to guess who is on the opposite end of the line-his grandmother or his grandfather.

“Huh! Let me guess, it’s grandpa today.” Akash guesses.

The voice on the other side does not answer him back. Every day the moment Akash guesses, his grandparents reveal if his guess is correct. Today it seemed to Akash that the telephonic voice has gone mute.

“Hello, grandpa, can you hear me?” Akash asks again, “Or, is that you granny?”

And yet neither of his grandparents’ voice comes through the receiver. Guessing that something has gone wrong with the connection, the way it happens often, Akash lifts his finger to disconnect the call. He, however, stops since at that very moment he hears a voice over the telephone. But the voice is neither his grandpa’s nor his grandma’s. The voice is his mother’s. It seems to be coming from a far off place. Extremely faint, it was growing fainter with each passing moment.

“Beta,” the distant faint voice of his mother tells him, “I am no more...I have died in an accident just now...Before I have to leave this place, I wanted to tell you something.”

Akash is dumbstruck. His blank mind fails to grasp what his mother is saying. Without giving him the chance to think anything, his mother’s voice goes on and he keeps listening mechanically.

“Beta, I love you all a lot...tell your father not to worry about you two brothers...wherever I am, I will be watching over you and protecting you...just do one work for me...ask your dad to marry the woman who resembles me...she will take good care of you.”

Saying thus the faint voice fades into a distant background. Mr. Sahai, all these whiles has not paid any attention to his son, but now he becomes distracted by a shrill cry from the bedroom. Ayan has woken up by the telephone call, and is crying frantically for his mother. Mr. Sahai turns his head and is surprised to see his elder son dumb who usually becomes a chatter-box over the phone with his grandparents. Not only dumb, Akash is staring at his father with a blank look across his face, the receiver shaking slightly in his hand. Mr. Sahai, sensing something is wrong, leaves his work and goes to his son. Father and son stand face to face saying nothing. It seems the telephone call has turned the silence of the house into a deathly one which is time and again pierced by a sharp cry from Ayan. Mr. Sahai places his hand over his son’s head and asks softly,

“What is it, beta? What did grandpa say?”

One affectionate touch from his dad and Akash regains his senses. The receiver starts shaking violently in his hand about to fall any moment. The suppressed sobs are let loose. Terrorized at what he has heard, confused about the whereabouts of his mom, Akash bursts into tears, his whole body shivering.

Mr. Sahai stunned at the sudden change in Akash’s behavior snatches the receiver from his hand and speaks into it.

“Hello! Who’s this? Hello!”

But he cannot hear anything. The line has been disconnected and all he could hear was the irritating, incessant, almost ominous shrill sound of a dead telephone line. Ayan has stopped sobbing too, as if anticipating some unknown danger. Mr. Sahai pulls Akash towards him, holds him in his arms and says,

“Akash, beta tell papa what has happened. Stop crying dear. I am there with you.”

Far from being consoled Akash hides his face in his father’s arms and starts sobbing more.

“Akash whose call was it?” Mr. Sahai asks again, growing a little worried himself, “Tell me son, what have you heard over the telephone, tell me.”

Hiding his face in his father's bosom, Akash manages to utter a few broken words through his sobs.

"It was mamma...she said..she said she has died in an accident...said she loves us...she..she told you to re-marry."

Akash could speak no more. Sobbing and hiccupping he stammers,

"I love mamma pa...please bring mamma home...I want to see her...please bring mamma home...I want mamma...please pa..."

Mr. Sahai is perplexed and bewildered, but before his mind could spur a second thought the phone rings again. Another loud cry from the bedroom subdues the telephone ring. It is Ayan, who is now desperate to see his mother. Suddenly Mr. Sahai seems to be standing amidst a turbulence of noises. The ringing of the telephone, Akash's sobs, Ayan's cry. He decides to ignore everything and picks up the receiver.

"Hello!"

"Hello! Mr. Sahai?" a panting voice asks from the other end.

"Yes, please may I know whom I'm speaking to?" Mr. Sahai tries hard to keep his composure.

"Mr. Sahai, it's me, Mrs. Rastogi, your neighbour," there seemed a kind of urgency and fear in Mrs. Rastogi's voice. "Mr. Sahai, please come down to the colony market place quickly. Komal has met with an accident. We went out to buy groceries together. Just as we were crossing the road..."

Mr. Sahai slams down the receiver without listening to the rest. He tells Akash to look after his brother and rushes out. Akash, petrified, watches on as the main door bangs close in front of his eyes. He could sense that a chord has been snapped and their lives would never be the same again. Slowly he moves into the bedroom, hugs his little brother tightly and breaks down into tears.

Sunday, 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2013

3 P.M

This year the winter seems to be staying back for a longer time than usual. The temperature suddenly dropped by a few degrees just as people felt spring was in. The cold has been aggravated by incessant showers for the past two days. Today, though, the damp earth has been spared of rain, the sun has decided to hide its face behind large stretches of thick black clouds. Akash, flipping over the newspaper, glances at his baby daughter blissfully asleep by his side. The afternoon lunch was a family get-together. Akash's wife and step-mother had prepared delicious dishes. Holding an important position in a well-known multi-national company, Akash hardly gets time these days to spend with his family. Today was an exceptional day. He pulls the quilt lovingly over his daughter and affectionately plants a kiss across her forehead. Ayushi, his daughter has features like his mother. It has been fifteen long years since that fatal evening when the evil hands of fate had snatched away his mother forever. A lot of water has flown since then. His father has re-married, and his step-mother, Kavya, strongly resembles his mother; she has taken good care of him and his brother and has never let them feel the loss of their own mother; Akash has successfully completed his B. Tech and has been placed in a reputed company; Ayan is preparing for his twelfth board examination. Sometimes he feels his mother's presence in their

lives. Like an invisible shadow she is taking care of everybody's need. He can feel his mother in his step-mother, his wife, Divya and his little one year old daughter.

Watching over his daughter's divine face, a wave of nostalgic emotion swept over him. Tears swelled up as he imagined his mother's happiness had she been alive to see Aradhana. Suddenly he begins to miss his mother terribly. All these years whenever he or Ayan has missed Komal, Kavya through her love, care and affection has soothed them. She has nurtured them like her own sons. But today, Akash felt even Kavya's love would not be able to soothe him. He wants his mamma back; he wants her to bless Divya, to play with Aradhana, to make her fall asleep by singing lullabies as she used to do to him and Ayan. He wants to speak to her, hear her voice. Unable to control himself, he pulls Aradhana to himself and falls asleep holding her in his arms.

Akash dreams of his mother in his sleep. He can see her standing in front of him. He yearns to run over to her, embrace her, and sleep on her lap the way he used to do when he was a child. He tries frantically but fails to lift his feet. He could see his mother slowly receding, becoming a shadow. He cries out,

"Mamma wait! I want to speak to you. There are so many things I want to share with you. Mamma!"

Sweating feverishly he stretches his hand to hold her. Tears stream down his eyes. How could his mamma leave him without speaking to him? She has come after all these years and yet is leaving without saying anything. A shiver runs down his spine the way it had fifteen years ago hearing his mother's voice over the telephone. He closes his eyes and starts sobbing and hiccupping as if he has been transported back to that cruel evening. Hearing his sobs and hiccups, Kavya and Divya came running. Kavya holds him to calm him down. Divya tries to soothe him.

"Akash, why are you so perturbed?" She says, "see we all her here. Mamma, Papa, Aradhana, everyone."

Nothing affects Akash. It is as if he has been transported to another world and would not be calmed down by anyone other than his dead mother. Kavya scared of her son's condition rushes to get a glass of water; Aradhana never having seen her dear dad like this stares wide eyed at him; Divya holds her husband and shakes him violently to bring him back to his senses.

4.30 P.M

Akash opens his eyes. He is still shivering. He sees Divya shaking him. He looks aside and finds Aradhana sleeping cuddled under the quilt. For a moment he fails to understand where he is, what he has seen, if that was reality or a dream.

"Where's mamma and pa?" He asks Divya.

"Papa is reading a book in his study, and mamma is making tea," Divya replies. "I came into the room to call you for tea and found you shivering violently in sleep and murmuring something. Have you seen a dream?"

Without replying, Akash gets down from his bed. "I need to see mamma and pa," he says and walks over to the study.

He found Mr. Sahai reading a book on his favourite couch and smoking a pipe. Seeing his son he says, "Good evening son. How is the idea of a game of chess post tea?"

Akash does not reply to him as well. In a state of trance he starts walking towards the kitchen. He needs to see Kavya, his step-mother. Stepping into the kitchen he sees her engrossed in making tea. He calls softly, "Mamma."

She turns around and Akash gets the shock of his life. It is not Kavya but Komal standing in front of him. Not a youthful Komal whom he had seen in his dream, but an aged Komal with powdery hair and a rimless spectacle. Komal is surprised at the look of shock on her son's face.

"Anything wrong beta?" Komal asks in her usual soft tone, "why are you staring at me as if you have seen a ghost?" She laughs at her own joke and gets busy with the tea.

Slowly the blurred picture crystallizes in his brain. The telephone call, his mother's voice, his brother's cry, the accident, his mother's shadowy image, his step-mother Kavya-the images sweep across his mind one after another. Did those happen really? No. His father reading a book, his *own* mother preparing tea-this is real. Nothing has changed. He is married with a kid and a happy family. The winter evening, the telephone call, the news of the accident, his step-mother Kavya, were all a part of his dream. His mother's shadowy image receding to the background was a dream within the dream. Suddenly Akash felt extremely relieved. His family is with him, his *mamma* is with him...nothing has changed, no chord has been snapped.

Thanking God that the scaring event was nothing but a dream, like a kid he goes over to his mother and embraces her. Komal, surprised at her grown up son's behavior, nevertheless says nothing and pats his back affectionately.

Hiding his face in his mother's shoulders, he whispers, "I love you mamma."