

Loving Anjali

Zia Marshall

"...are you always a sister, even when the other half of the equation is gone?"

– Jodi Picoult

Hyderabad, 1992

"Sit still, Anjali. I'm almost done," Aayushi swiftly braided her little sister's long hair into two glossy plaits that swung down her shoulders. Snatching two strips of white ribbon, she neatly tied two bows at the tail end of the plaits. Then she stepped back and surveyed the result. "I think I got them right. But it would be easier if you cut your hair, Anjali," she grumbled. "You wake up so late every morning and I am always afraid we'll miss the bus because we need to plait your hair."

"Oh, I love my long hair, Didi," Anjali said. "I don't want short hair. Ma wanted to cut it. She is so mean, Di."

"Hush Anjali, don't speak about our mother like that," Aayushi sternly admonished her little sister.

“Ma is like a step mother, Didi,” Anjali continued, staring earnestly at her beloved sister.

Aayushi’s stern face dissolved into a smile and the two sisters giggled.

“Ma wants you to cut your hair because she doesn’t have time to plait it in the morning, Anjali,” Aayushi explained, sobering up. It wouldn’t do to allow Anjali to speak badly about their mother.

“But you have time to plait it, Didi. Can you tell Ma? She’ll listen to you.”

Anjali stared at her sister beseechingly. As usual, Aayushi smiled and gave in to the mute appeal in Anjali’s doe-like brown eyes.

“I won’t let Ma cut your hair. Now hurry up! We have to be quick if we want to catch the bus. Here, let me hold your bag. Now hold my hand and walk as quickly as I am walking.”

The bus was already at the stop by the time the two sisters got there. They tumbled into the bus and made their way to their usual seats at the back of the bus.

Aayushi looked out of the window as the bus wended its way through the familiar streets of Hyderabad. At this time in the morning, there wasn’t much traffic on the roads. The shops that lined the streets were mostly shut. They passed a Hanuman temple and outside it, hawkers were standing beside carts laden with fresh water-sprinkled roses. There were other hawkers selling coconuts, apples and bananas.

Aayushi watched as people haggled with the hawkers over the price of flowers and fruits and then entered the temple with their offerings in their hands. She loved these early morning sights as they made their way to school. Often she sat with a diary in her hands, noting down the things she saw. Aayushi loved writing, and someday, when she was all grown-up, she had decided that she would be an author and write novels. For now, she was content to read almost everything she could lay her hands on. She enjoyed observing people and things and making notes in her diary. She saw this as preparation for the time when she would finally write her novel.

“Didi,” Anjali said.

Aayushi turned from the window and glanced down at her sister.

“I heard Ma and Papa talking about Geeta Maasi. They said she has taken a larger share of prop...prop...I don’t know that word. What did they mean, Didi?”

Aayushi took her little sister’s hand in hers. “These are grown-up things, Anjali. You don’t need to worry your little head about it.”

“But what does ‘share’ mean, Didi? Did Geeta Maasi say no to sharing something with them?”

“No, Anjali, it just means that Geeta Maasi got more of Nana’s property. I mean his house and land. Ma and Papa didn’t like it, that’s all. Don’t worry too much about these grown-up things, Anjali,” Aayushi assured her sister, stroking her hand.

“But Didi, Ma and Papa said they would never talk to Geeta Maasi again!” Anjali stared at her sister with large, round eyes. “They also said something about ... about cutting a tie. I didn’t understand that. Papa wears ties to office and so does Pramod Maasa. Why would they cut their ties?”

Aayushi smiled. Anjali had all the artless innocence of an eight-year-old and a penchant for taking words literally, which often made the rest of them laugh. She patted Anjali reassuringly on the back. “Grown-ups fight at times, Anjali. You mustn’t worry about it.”

“But, Didi,” Anjali said anxiously. “I’m scared. If Ma and Papa are ‘*katti*’ with Geeta Maasi, then we can’t play with Abhi and Meera. I like going to Geeta Maasi’s house on Sunday and playing with Abhi and Meera.”

Aayushi didn’t want to lie to Anjali. “We may not go to Geeta Maasi’s for some time, Anjali,” Aayushi said. “But don’t worry about it. I’m sure things will become fine and Ma and Papa will be speaking to her soon.”

“Why do grown-ups fight over things like money, Didi? It seems so silly, doesn’t it?” Anjali said artlessly. “We would never fight, would we? If I wanted something, you would just give it to me, right? And even if you didn’t, we wouldn’t be ‘*katti*’ because of that!”

Aayushi smiled and shook her head. She pulled her little sister towards her and hugged her tightly. They passed the rest of the journey in silence.

That evening, Anjali walked into Aayushi’s room with a couple of books in her hand.

“Didi! You have to help me with my homework.”

Aayushi sighed. Anjali was still in Grade 3, but Aayushi, in grade 8, had exams coming up in a few days time.

“Why don’t you ask Ma to help you?” she coaxed.

“No Didi, I want you to help me, please.”

Aayushi shook her head. “Please Anjali, I really have so much to study. Just this once why don’t you ask Ma to help you? Once my exams are over, I will help you, I promise.”

Anjali stared at her sister, tears swimming in her eyes. “Ok, Didi, I’ll ask Ma. It’s just that she gets angry and shouts if I do even one small sum wrong. When she shouts I get so scared I do all the sums wrong. And then she gets even more angry with me. But you never shout at me. That’s why I like you and want you to help me with my homework....” Anjali’s voice trailed off as she ran out of words she could use to convince her Didi that she had to help her.

“Oh, Anjali,” Aayushi said, smiling and pulling her sister close to her. She pushed her books aside on her desk to make room for Anjali’s. “Come, let’s see what you have to do.”

“But what about your exams, Didi?” Anjali asked, staring wide-eyed at her sister.

“It’s fine. I’ll wake up early tomorrow morning and study. Now come, let’s finish your homework.”

The two girls sat at the desk. Aayushi patiently explained the Math sums to Anjali. Anjali listened to her sister with

rapt attention. Just then, her gaze fell upon a glass jar filled with shells that stood on her sister's desk.

"Ooh Didi! Those shells are so beautiful. Where did you get them?"

"My friend Preity got them for me. She went to Goa recently. Come now, pay attention to your work, Anjali."

But Anjali was completely mesmerized by the shells. Dropping the pencil from her hand, she picked up the jar and stared wide-eyed at the shells. "I have never seen real shells before, Didi. I have just seen pictures of them," she whispered. "Why can't Ma and Papa take us to a place with a beach? Then we can see the ocean and get some shells from the beach. Do you want to go to the beach, Didi?"

Aayushi nodded absent-mindedly. She wanted Anjali to concentrate on her homework. If they finished early, she might just about find time to study before Ma called them for dinner.

"Come now, Anjali, let's finish this Math so that we can do your English homework."

"Didi," Anjali said. "Can you give me these shells, please?"

"You can play with them whenever you like, Anjali," Aayushi replied.

"No, Didi, I want them to be mine. I want to put them on my desk. Can you give them to me, please?"

Aayushi hesitated. She loved the shells and besides they were a gift from her best friend.

Anjali's eyes swam with tears. "I won't get angry if you don't give them to me, Didi," she said, staring earnestly at her sister. "We are not going to fight over silly things like shells like Ma and Papa fight with their brothers and sisters over money."

Aayushi laughed. "You're a naughty girl, Anjali," she scolded. "You know just the right things to say to get your way, don't you?"

Picking up the jar of shells, she placed it in Anjali's hands. "Here you go. They are yours now."

Anjali's eyes shone with joy. She flung her arms around Aayushi and hugged her tightly. "Oh, Didi, you are the best sister in the whole world. I love you, Didi." Then she hastily picked up the jar of shells and said, "I'll put them on my desk and come back quickly."

Anjali ran out of the room clutching the jar of shells tightly against her chest like a precious trophy. At the door, she turned and whispered to her sister, "You can play with the shells whenever you like. We'll always share things, won't we? Not like Ma and Papa?"

Smiling indulgently, Aayushi watched her sister running out of the room. At thirteen, she was old enough to realize that she spoiled Anjali hopelessly. Ma was always scolding her about how much she indulged her little sister. "You shouldn't pander to all Anjali's whims and fancies and give her everything she asks for," Ma had scolded Aayushi. "One day, when you're older, she'll ask you for something you won't be able to give her. What will you do then?"

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Anjali,” Aayushi had replied.

Pune, 2003

Aayushi hurriedly stirred the potato curry simmering on the stove. Lifting the lid, she checked if the chicken was ready. Rubbing her aching back, she turned and sat down with a sigh on the chair she had placed in the kitchen. Six months pregnant, Aayushi found it difficult to stand for long. She had put on a lot of weight and her feet were swollen.

“I feel so fat, tired and clumsy, Aakash,” she complained to her husband, when he walked into the kitchen.

“Just a few months more, Aayu and then the baby will be here. Have you finished cooking? We must leave for the station in ten minutes.”

Aayushi shook her head. “No Aakash, you carry on. I won’t finish in time and I don’t want Anjali to be kept waiting at the station.”

He nodded and left the room. Aayushi busied herself preparing the meal. She was making Anjali’s favorite dishes. She was so excited about her sister visiting her. This would be the first time Anjali would be staying with her after she had married Aakash. It had been almost a year since they had seen each other. Aayushi hadn’t been able to travel because of the baby and Anjali was busy with college life. But the two sisters were still close and spoke to each other almost every day on the phone. And when Anjali was finally done with her exams, she had immediately declared that she would visit Aayushi.

“I’ll stay with you and help you, Didi,” she had exclaimed over the mobile. “I want you to just sit back and relax while I take care of everything.”

The doorbell rang. They were here already! Hurriedly Anjali wiped her hands on her apron and smoothing down her hair, she walked awkwardly to the door. Opening it, she stared at Anjali, her little sister, who was not so little any more. She had changed so much in just a year. Gone was the shy and awkward teenager. In her place stood a tall and slim girl with sleek glossy hair and makeup on her face. Aayushi blinked in surprise. She hardly recognized her sister.

Anjali stepped inside and dropping her bag to the floor, she enveloped Aayushi in a tight hug. “Oh Didi, didi, didi, it’s so good to see you,” she said.

Aayushi smiled with relief. Although Anjali looked different, inside she was still the same girl, her little sister whom she adored. They had been there for each other through all the highs and lows of childhood and now as adults, they were confidants and best friends. It was true that both of them looked different, but nothing had changed.

Anjali stepped back and stared at Aayushi. “You’ve put on too much weight, Didi,” she said, looking critically at Aayushi.

Aayushi smiled tiredly at her sister. “It’s what people do when they get pregnant, Anjali,” she said.

“Girls, if you are done, can I enter the house please,” Aakash exclaimed impatiently.

The two girls realized that they had been blocking the doorway. They hurriedly stepped aside and made way for Aakash to enter. He walked into the house carrying Anjali's bags.

"Your sister carries an awful lot of luggage for a short stay," he grumbled, as he took the bags to the guest room.

Anjali stared after the retreating back of her brother-in-law. "He's still as handsome as he was when you married him a year ago, Didi," she whispered, clasping Aayushi's hand in hers. Aayushi smiled fondly at Anjali. She was still such a child, underneath the sleek blow-dried hair and makeup.

"Well, he didn't get pregnant, did he? He's bound to still look handsome." she replied.

The two girls burst into gales of laughter. "Imagine how he would look with a big, fat pregnant tummy," Anjali said, giggling as she pictured her brother-in-law strutting about the room with a big tummy.

Aakash walked into the room just then. "What's the joke?" he asked, raising his eyebrows quizzically.

"Nothing," Anjali said, stifling her laughter.

"Come, let's eat," Aayushi said. "Dinner's ready. There's potato curry and chicken."

"All my favorites! Oh, Didi, you are the bestest!" Anjali said, enveloping her sister in a huge hug.

The two girls walked into the kitchen arm in arm. Anjali grabbed a carrot from the ones lying on the kitchen counter and nibbled on it while Aayushi busied herself warming the

food. She handed the dishes to her sister who carried them out to the dining table. Aakash stood at the door, observing the two women.

“Can I help?” he asked. Aayushi glanced at him, realizing he felt left out. She signaled an apology with her eyes, as she motioned him into the kitchen. Aakash always helped her warm the food, lay the table and clear it up afterwards. It was their time together. While eating, Aayushi would pour over the TV schedule and they would take turns to pick a movie, which they watched after dinner, snuggling together among the cushions on the comfortable velvet couch placed before the television. When the movie finished, the two of them made their way to the bedroom together. Aayushi loved the small, simple routines that made up her married life. She adored Aakash and was utterly content in her marriage. He was everything she had ever wanted in a husband – jovial and happy-go-lucky with a ready smile on his face. Having grown up in the somber atmosphere that Ma and Papa created at home in her childhood years, she had promised herself she would marry a man who would make her laugh. And she had gone ahead and done just that.

Later when the three of them were eating their meal, Aakash waited for Aayushi to bring out the TV schedule. She realized that in all the excitement of preparing for Anjali’s visit, she had forgotten to place it on the table, as she usually did.

“I’ll get it, Didi,” Anjali exclaimed, pushing back her chair and rising. “Just tell me where it is.”

"It's in the newspaper rack, Anjali."

"Got it!" Anjali exclaimed returning to the table with the schedule in her hands. Aayushi stretched out her hand for it, but Anjali was already pouring over the schedule. "This is fun," she chattered. "Do you guys do this every evening? Dinner at home is so boring! Pin drop silence while Papa chews on his food thoughtfully and Ma silently serves us what she's made."

"Don't be rude about our parents, Anjali," Aayushi said, gently rebuking her sister. But she couldn't help smiling at the excitement she saw in Anjali's eyes as she poured over the schedule. "Go on then, pick a movie."

She sat back with an amused smile, as she heard Anjali suggesting possible names of movies, while Aakash mulled over each one and rejected it.

"Let's watch Rain Man," Anjali and Aakash exclaimed together.

"Hurry, it will start in just five minutes. Come Aakash. I don't want to miss the beginning."

"Wait...I need to help Aayu clear the table..." he said.

"No, go ahead Aakash," Aayushi said. She was happy to see her sister and husband getting along so well together. This had been one of her biggest fears when she married Aakash. What if Aakash didn't take to Anjali or found her troublesome? She adored these two people most in the world and more than anything else, she wanted them to get along with each other. She had been a bit apprehensive

about having Anjali come and stay with them. What if Aakash found her pesky or intrusive? But luckily, the two of them seemed to be getting along like a house on fire.

During the film, Aayushi felt her eyes closing. It had been a long day and she was tired. Yawning, she mumbled an apology and rose from the couch. "Sorry but I'm going to bed," she said.

Aakash rose to follow her to the room.

Oh, stay for a bit Aakash," Anjali said. "The movie should finish in about half hour I think."

Aakash hesitated.

"Stay Aakash," Aayushi said, as she walked to the bedroom. "You can tell me what happens tomorrow."

The next morning, Aayushi rose early, as she usually did.

"Aakash, wake up!" she said, shaking him gently.

"Ummm...let me sleep, baby."

"But aren't you coming for our walk?" she asked in surprise.

"No," he mumbled. "Feeling lazy sweetie. I'll skip the walk today but you go ahead. I don't want you to miss it. It'll do you good."

An hour later, when Aayushi returned home, she found Aakash and Anjali in the kitchen cooking breakfast.

"Good morning, Didi," Anjali called out. "See we have breakfast ready for you. You just sit at the table and enjoy it."

Aayushi sat at the table glancing at the newspaper lying there. "What shall we do today, Anjali?" she asked. "Would you like to go shopping? Then we can have lunch at a new restaurant, 'Spring Flowers', that opened last week. It has some fabulous food, I have heard."

After a brief pause, Anjali said, "Didi, I'm so sorry, I completely forgot to tell you yesterday. I'm going out this morning and will be back only by five or so."

Aayushi raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Where are you going, Anjali?"

"Oh, out with some friends," Anjali said airily, as she walked into the dining room with a plate of steaming *idlis* in her hand.

"Friends? But you don't know anyone in Pune, Anjali." Aayushi said, puzzled.

"Oh, they are just a bunch of people I met on the train while coming here. I became quite friendly with them and we decided to meet up today."

"But Anjali, you hardly know these people. You know nothing about them. How can you go out and spend a whole day with them? It isn't safe."

"Oh, Di, don't play the big sister with me, please. I am all grown-up now, see," Anjali said, as she pirouetted in front of her sister.

Aayushi smiled but still she hesitated. After all, Anjali was her responsibility while she was staying with her.

"I am not sure..."

Aakash walked into the room just then.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Anjali wants to go out with some people she’s just met. I’m not sure if she should or if it’s even safe for her to do so.”

Aakash frowned and shook his head. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Please Di, Aakash, please please please,” Anjali pleaded, staring at the two of them earnestly. “Ma and Papa hardly allow me to go anywhere or have any fun. Please let me go. They are nice people from good families, I promise. Nothing will happen. Please trust me.”

Aayushi hesitated and then she gave in to the mute appeal in Anjali’s eyes. She knew exactly how Ma and Papa could be and how stifled her little sister probably felt at home.

“All right, Anjali,” she said.

Smiling, Anjali waltzed out of the room to dress.

“You are far too indulgent with her,” Aakash grumbled, as he sat at the table.

“I know,” Aayushi sighed. “But it’s hard for me to say no to her.”

“Well, I need to be off early today, Aayu,” Aakash said apologetically, placing his hand over his wife’s. “What do you plan on doing with yourself now that Anjali isn’t here?”

“Oh, I’m not sure,” Aayushi grumbled. “I’ll probably stay at home and watch television, I guess.”

“Why don’t you start working on your novel, Aayu? You’ve always been talking about writing it. Why don’t you give it a go?”

“I’m not sure Aakash. I keep thinking I’ll start but something seems to be holding me back. The words just won’t flow. Maybe I’ll start today like you said and take it from there.”

“Right then, I’ll be off,” Aakash said, adjusting his tie and bending to give Aayushi a hug.

Aayushi glanced up in surprise and realized that Aakash was already dressed for work.

“So early?” she asked.

“Yes, Aayu, I have an early morning meeting with some clients. But I’ll try to get home early and maybe we can go out somewhere. I think the break will do you good.”

Aayushi nodded absent-mindedly, fiddling with the *idlis* on her plate. In a few seconds, the house was empty and she was left staring at the food on the table. She cleared the table, left the dishes to soak in the sink and then flopped down on the couch tiredly.

Time seemed to be whizzing by in a blur of nothingness, Aayushi thought, a few days later. She felt abandoned, neglected, and utterly alone. Aakash was exceptionally busy at work and even when he was home, he was silent and withdrawn. He usually pulled out his laptop and continued working. When she had reproached him that he

was far too busy for her liking, he had hugged her absentmindedly and said the project he was working on would soon wrap up, after which, his schedule would be back to normal. At times, she wondered if he minded the fact that Anjali was staying with them. Was this why he was away from home so much? She had openly questioned him about it, but he had stared at her in surprise. He had assured her that it was work that was keeping him busy and he certainly didn't mind Anjali staying with them.

As for Anjali, she was hardly at home. She waltzed in and out of the house, spending most of her time with the new friends she had made. But what worried Aayushi even more, was the fact that Anjali had changed. She no longer confided in her. When Aayushi asked questions about her friends or asked her to invite them home so that she could meet them, Anjali was strangely reticent. She refused to speak about her friends and downright refused to invite them home. This was very unlike the Anjali of old, who always shared every single detail of her life with her. When they were children, Anjali would spend the bus ride home describing every minute detail of her day to her sister. And the pattern had continued even after Aayushi had married and moved to Pune and Anjali had started college. She still called her sister every single day as soon as she got home from college. Aayushi knew all about Anjali's college life. She knew about her best friends, Maya and Yohan. She knew about the annoying teachers who gave far too many assignments and the boring ones who couldn't explain a thing. She even knew about Anjali's little escapades – the time when she had cut classes to watch *Spiderman* and the

other time when she had stayed at Maya's place because she had wanted to attend a late-night party, which her parents would never have allowed.

And now Aayushi was concerned about Anjali's secrecy because it was so unlike her sister. Aayushi's big-sister antenna was up and sending out warning signals. Anjali was hiding something from her, she was quite sure of it. But what could it possibly be? Was she moving around with an unsavory crowd whom Aayushi wouldn't approve of? Was that why Anjali refused to speak about her friends? Was she involved with someone? But if that were the case, she would have told her about it. Unless she was involved with someone completely unsuitable. Aayushi was worried about Anjali. Often, she thought of having a frank discussion with her. But Anjali was so cool and aloof, she found it hard to do so. The words stuck in her throat when she saw the steely, almost flint-like hardness in Anjali's normally gentle, doe-like eyes. Aayushi had always been able to read her sister's eyes. She just had to glance down into Anjali's melting brown eyes and she knew exactly what her little sister was thinking or what she wanted. But now, Anjali's eyes were masked by a sheen of cool indifference, which Aayushi found quite hurtful.

One Monday morning, Aayushi was sitting at the dining table reading the newspaper. Anjali walked in from her bedroom. Aayushi glanced up from her newspaper. "Going out?" she asked, although she knew it was a silly question. Anjali was all dressed up – of course she was going out.

Anjali nodded. "I'm a bit hungry, Di," she said, dropping her bag and mobile phone on the table.

Aayushi rose. "I'll get you some breakfast," she said, eagerly, happy to spend some time with her sister.

Anjali shook her head. "No, don't bother. No time for that. I'll just grab some fruit from the fridge. She opened the fridge, grabbed an apple and a pear from the fruit bowl and then picking up her bag, she left, calling goodbye to Aayushi.

Aayushi sighed and returned to her newspaper. Solitude settled over her like a heavy cloak enveloping her in a deafening silence she found almost hard to bear at times. Aakash had left early to work as usual, mumbling an apology and promising he would soon be done with his project. The sudden beeping of a mobile startled Aayushi. Her own mobile was in the bedroom, charging. She looked up from her newspaper and saw that Anjali had forgotten her mobile on the table. Aayushi stared at the mobile. Here, at last, was her chance to find out what Anjali was up to. Surely her phone would have some evidence that would offer her a clue to what her little sister was up to. She knew it was wrong to intrude on Anjali's privacy. But concern for her sister overrode her normally high ethical standards. Rising from her chair, she reached out and picked up the mobile.

The words of the text message swam before her eyes and she dropped the mobile from her hands. It fell to the table with a clatter. Aayushi felt the room swimming before her eyes and she clutched the chair to stop herself from falling.

She couldn't possibly have read that message correctly, she thought. It was surreal, unbelievable. It couldn't possibly be true. She must have been mistaken. Sitting down on the chair, she picked up the mobile and glanced at it again. There was no mistake. The message was from Aakash, her husband Aakash! And the contents were utterly disgusting. A shudder of revulsion ran through her as she read Aakash's depraved message about how he would make love to Anjali today, the things they would do in bed, and how he was eagerly waiting for her in their room.

Aayushi rose from the chair and stumbled out of the house holding the mobile in her hands, as if by leaving the house she could, in some way, escape the brutal reality of her sister's betrayal. She stood on the pavement while the traffic whizzed past. She was surrounded by the sounds of cars honking and people talking to each other as they walked past her on the busy pavement. But the sounds slowly receded into a distance. A dull roaring filled Aayushi's ears as she stood in the midst of the bustling street. She was enveloped in an unnatural silence that dug its roots deep into her, immersing her in a chasm of grief that seemed almost impossible in its proportions. She walked, aimlessly, purposelessly, not heeding the strange glances she received from people around her. "Miss, you are bleeding," a stranger told her, concern lacing her voice. "Perhaps you didn't realize. Would you like me to take you somewhere?" But Aayushi shook her head, her eyes welling up as she realized that she was probably losing her baby. But it didn't matter, nothing mattered. And so she walked on. The hours passed and the sky lost its color as it was

enveloped in the gray hues of dusk. The city settled into shadowy silhouettes against the night sky. She glanced into a shop window and was startled when she saw her reflection. Stopping, she stared at herself. Fat, bedraggled, with frizzy hair. She didn't remember the last time she had washed her hair or been to the salon. She had been so wrapped up in her pregnancy and the safe little cocoon of Aakash's love, which she had so artlessly taken for granted, that she had not paid any attention to her appearance in the last few months. A picture rose in her mind of Anjali, slim, sleek and beautiful. It hadn't been a level playing field, she thought bitterly. Except she had been completely oblivious to the fact that a game was being played and she was one of the players. She envisioned Anjali and Aakash wrapped in each other's arms and an almost impossible kind of sorrow overwhelmed her. The phone in her hand rang stridently just then, again and again, till finally, in a fit of rage, she flung it into a trash can.

It was close to midnight, when, overcome by exhaustion, she made her way home. They were waiting for her there, her sister and her husband, who was now her sister's lover. Bitter bile rose in her throat when she saw the two of them waiting on the velvet couch, anxiety writ large on their faces.

"Didi," Anjali said, hesitatingly.

"Don't call me that! Don't you ever call me that again!" she said bitterly.

"Aayu, you are bleeding...the child! Let's go to a doctor immediately!" Aakash exclaimed.

“No! It’s good that we lost the child. You have ruined my life, Aakash. Isn’t that enough damage? Or do you want to ruin the child’s life too?”

“But, Didi! We didn’t mean to hurt you. It’s just that we fell in love. We resisted but eventually, this thing we felt for each other was bigger than us. We want to get married. Oh Didi, can’t you somehow find it in your heart to be happy for me? I know I’m asking for too much when I ask you to give me your husband, but marrying Aakash is the only thing in the world that can make me happy.”

“Anjali, stop! What are you saying?” Aakash said harshly. “I never promised to marry you. Oh, what have I done? Believe me Aayu, this thing with Anjali was just a temporary madness. It doesn’t mean anything. I don’t know what came over me. It’s just that she was so young and adoring. I fell for her charm but I never meant it to go so far. Oh, you have to believe me.”

The two women stared at Aakash. If it was possible to love and loathe a person in equal measure at the same time, then the two sisters achieved it in that moment. It was Aayushi who broke the spell.

“I don’t quite know what to believe anymore,” she said, in a voice that was flat and tinged with exhaustion.

Goa, 2007

The buzzing of the alarm woke Aayushi. She got out of bed. Walking to the window, she peered outside. At six, it was still dark, although the birds had already started chirping to herald the arrival of a new day.

Aayushi fixed her customary cup of tea and then wandered out of her little house to the sit-out facing her garden where she usually read while sipping her tea. She glanced down at her mobile lying on the table beside her mug of tea. Today was 13th September. Her divorce had come through on this very day four years ago. With a wry smile, she sipped her tea and allowed herself a moment to reflect on her erstwhile husband.

Aayushi recalled the initial months after the divorce, when she had oscillated between grief and anger. Aakash had called quite often, even after the divorce. He said he still loved her and begged her to return to him. Of course, she had been tempted to give in. But each time she thought of doing so, a picture rose in her mind of Aakash and Anjali wrapped in each other's arms. She knew that although she still loved Aakash, she could never live with him again.

She missed Aakash terribly in the initial months after the divorce. She missed his laughter and the way he lit up a room with his presence when he entered it. She missed the way he snuggled up close to her in bed, curling his feet around hers. She missed the daily routine of life with him. Loss and grief were her constant companions, dogging her heels in those days. She was consumed by an aching loneliness and a feeling that she had been completely abandoned.

That's when Aayushi took to writing. She wrote her first novel in three months flat in a torrential creative storm. She barely ate or slept in those months. Instead, she spent the entire day and the better part of the night at her laptop

working on her novel. Writing offered her a release from the all-consuming fury that choked her. And from the creative almost frenzied outpouring of her rage, grief and loss, a terrible beauty was born in the form of her first novel. Publishers had snapped up her work and the novel had soared on the popularity charts to become a bestseller. She had published two other novels since then. Both had also been bestsellers and her readers were clamoring for more.

Today Aayushi is content with life. She divides her time between her writing and running an NGO for battered women and both satisfy her completely in ways she believes a relationship with a man never could. Time certainly doesn't heal all wounds. But the raw all-consuming grief has finally given way to a dull, barely perceptible ache. When she divorced Aakash four years ago, Aayushi had ruthlessly cut him out of her day-to-day life. Now she finds that, with time, he is fading from her memory as well. It never ceases to amaze her that any person, no matter how loved he may be, can also be eventually forgotten.

Then Aayushi's thoughts settle on Anjali and she sighs. It has been five years since she has seen or spoken to Anjali. After the terrible day when Aayushi had found out about Anjali's affair with Aakash, Anjali had returned to Hyderabad. Aayushi had ruthlessly cut all contact with her sister. Her parents had been completely bewildered by Anjali's sudden return. When they heard about Aayushi's impending divorce, they had been horrified. Girls from

decent families didn't divorce their husbands, they had told Aayushi sternly. If she persisted in taking this step, they would cut all ties with her and have nothing more to do with her. Aayushi had refused to change her mind and her parents had not spoken to her since her divorce.

Anjali had called often, begging her Didi to forgive her. But Aayushi hadn't been able to find it in her heart to forgive her sister. Eventually the calls had stopped...the ringing of the doorbell startled Aayushi out of her reverie. Picking up her mug of tea, she made her to the door to open it. She found Anjali standing there. Her sister looked painfully thin and there were large hollow circles under her eyes. Anjali's once beautiful, glossy, long hair, which she had so prided herself on, was cut short. Horrified, Aayushi saw several gray streaks in her sister's now coarse cropped hair. What on earth had happened to Anjali?

"Oh Didi," Anjali whispered, her eyes welling with tears. "I've made a mess of things. Help me, Di."

Aayushi stared wide-eyed at her sister. Anjali looked like a waif, completely lost and forlorn. A wave of immense love washed over Aayushi, dissolving the hard knot of resentment and anger she had nurtured for five long years at her sister's betrayal. In that moment, she realized that she still loved Anjali. And she would always love her. It didn't matter what Anjali had done. Without a word, she pulled her sister into her house and enveloped her in a tight hug.

"I'm sorry Di," Anjali sobbed, clinging to Aayushi. "I ruined your life. Can you ever forgive me?"

“Hush,” Aayushi said, stroking Anjali’s hair as she attempted to calm her sister down. “We won’t speak of that anymore. It’s done and over with – a closed chapter in our lives. But what has happened to you, Anjali?”

Aayushi listened horrified as Anjali poured forth a sordid tale of drug and alcohol abuse. “I want to stop, Di,” Anjali sobbed. “But I am not strong enough to do it on my own. Will you help me?”

Aayushi nodded.

Goa, 2008

“Anjali, wake up!” Aayushi shook her sister awake. “I’m going to the beach for a run. Are you coming?”

“You carry on Di,” Anjali mumbled, burrowing her face in her pillow. “I’ll join you in five minutes or so.”

“When are you going to start exercising, Anjali?” Aayushi grumbled, as she walked out of the room. But she didn’t push her sister. The rehab had taken its toll on Anjali and the doctors had instructed Aayushi to let Anjali set the pace on how she wanted to pick up the threads of her life again.

Fifteen minutes later, Aayushi was running along the beach when she heard a familiar voice calling, “Di, wait for me.”

Turning, Aayushi saw Anjali jogging towards her. She smiled. It was good to see her sister out in the fresh air. Anjali was clutching something in her hand, as she jogged towards her sister. Aayushi wondered what it could possibly be. When Anjali drew closer, she saw that her sister was holding a glass jar of shells.

“Di, do you remember this?” Anjali said, as she drew closer to her sister.

Anjali smiled and nodded. “I can’t believe you still have that!”

“Here Di, I want you to have it.” Anjali thrust out the jar towards Aayushi.

Aayushi hesitated for a brief moment and then took the jar from Anjali. “I don’t understand. Why are you giving me this, Anjali?”

“Di, the shells, Aakash, so many things...I have just taken and taken from you all these years. Oh, Di, I was a selfish, spoiled child and I grew into a selfish adult. But I don’t want to be that person any more.”

“Oh Anjali,” Aayushi smiled, enveloping her sister in a tight hug. Then holding Anjali’s hand, she led her towards the sea. The two sisters kicked off their shoes, rolled up their tracks and walked into the cool waters. Aayushi took the glass jar and upended it till all the shells tumbled into the sea.

“Di, what are you doing?” Anjali said, attempting to grab the jar from Aayushi’s outstretched hands. But it was too late. The shells had already fallen into the water and were swept away by the waves.

“Hush Anjali,” Aayushi whispered soothingly. “Come with me.” Holding the jar in one hand and taking her sister’s hand, Aayushi made her way back to the beach. Bending, she picked a single, pale pink, tiny shell from the sand and

dropped it into the jar. Giggling, Anjali picked another shell and dropped it into the jar with a tiny chink. The two women walked along the beach, clutching the jar between them, slowly filling it with shells.

Zia Marshall is a writer.

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