



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal
Vol.4 No.2, June, 2019

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Friends

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The phone had been ringing since morning. First, it had been her daughter's friend and then her own mother. Baani sighed when the phone rang again. She rushed to answer the buzzing phone in the dining room. Hesitating to pick up the receiver with her wheat smeared hands, Baani picked it up when it rang ceaselessly. The landline connection in their home was one of the very few left in the age of mobile phones and laptops. Even though Baani found it to be a menace due to its constant ringing and immovability, she along with her husband had decided to keep it, for that was what was desired by her father-in-law.

"Hello, yes. Okay, please hold on."

"Papa.. someone wants to speak to you." Baani shouted out to her father-in-law, who was taking in the sun on a cold Delhi winter morning.

"Papa there is call for you." Baani called out again for she knew her father-in-law was becoming hard of hearing with each passing day.

Dilsher had however heard her the first time. Curiously, he always heard whatever mattered to him in the first go, but took several minutes to process any other information that was not of his interest. Perhaps, with time and age he had decided to not care about the things that didn't matter anymore.

He wobbled up from his padded wooden chair, using his stick to balance his fat, swollen legs. Walking slowly towards the landline, he wondered who was it who had called him. His wife had died seven years back. Most of their other family members were either dead or too old to talk. And the ones who could would never care to call him. He had a few other acquaintances but those people lived nearby and hardly knew his phone number. His hands shook when he went for the receiver, "Hello I am Dilsher Singh. Who is this?" He managed to utter between his coughs.



“Yes, yes no. I will. How is he? Just .. Can he talk? I will yes, Thank you.”

Baani was eyeing her father in law from the kitchen when she noticed that he had dropped the receiver and was beaming with joy. She rushed to help him, asking him questions. “Who was it? What happened?” Baani got intrigued after she saw the reaction of her father-in-law.

Dilsher didn’t utter a word but kept on flashing his fake set of teeth in a smile, the one Baani and everyone else in the house had forgotten he owned. The last time he was this happy, was perhaps when my younger daughter, his granddaughter was born, Baani thought.

“It was Aasif, his son was calling. He wants to see me as he is not really well. Chander too. I am going. We are going!” He beamed joyously when his coughing fit started.

“Here, have some warm water and calm down. You know you start coughing when you talk this loud.” Baani poured a glass of water from the chipped ceramic green jug kept on the table.

“When are you going to meet them?” Baani asked when his coughing subsided.

“Today evening. I have memorized the address.” Dilsher answered softly.

Baani smiled and went back to the kitchen to continue her work when she turned around and said, “I’d suggest you to go and rest for some time. You know you shouldn’t exert yourself so much, especially after the surgery. I’ll send Mannat to help you. Besides you have to be fresh and active for going out tonight.”

Dilsher nodded and walked back slowly to the wooden chair in the balcony putting his weight on his meek brown stick.

Dilsher was a seventy-eight years old man but looked older. He had undergone a heart surgery a year before when had felt pain in his chest. Blocked arteries, the doctor had said. He had ignored all cautionary signs when one day he had to be rushed to the hospital due to what the doctor said was a minor heart attack. His son, his only child had thanked the Gods that day. Dilsher had a loving



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family. Even after the death of his wife, his son, daughter-in-law and his two granddaughters had taken great care of him.

Yet he was always at loss. For something. He couldn't laugh properly. There was a constant nagging in his heart.

"I heard you are going out today." Mannat jumped in the balcony, a beautiful young woman of 19.

"Yes, to meet my old friends." Dilsher smiled.

"I didn't know you have friends" Mannat winked. The relation between the grandfather and granddaughter was rather playful and amusing.

"These two are my college friends" Dilsher exclaimed, his voice pitching higher in jubilation.

"Tell me about them" Mannat enquired. She always loved hearing stories from her grandfather.

Dilsher sighed and reclined back on the cushioned wooden chair, falling into a pit of memories that he had so often visited but had stopped visiting a few years back dreading that they will consume him.

Dilsher, Chander and Aasif had first met during college and had become inseparable before college ended. They laughed, cried, studied and grew together. They were together when the country became independent. The unsettling situations had then for the first time created differences between them. People around them drew a line demarcating them into religions, castes and class. While Dilsher was a Sikh, Chander was a Brahminical Hindu and Aasif a following Muslim. They never realized they were different from each other till they felt the pulling of their community, asking them to break ties with the 'enemy'. They however persisted. They tried to stand together when inter religion riots between the Hindus and the Muslims shook the country. They were drawn apart, not willfully but due to circumstances. The final thread that held them together was broken because of anti-Sikh riots a few decades back. They never doubted each other, neither of them viewed the others in suspicion even during the bleakest of times. In-fact they felt the safest in each



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other's company. They were times when they laughed, smiled and spoke without a care in the world. Even during the dark hours of curfew, they managed to sit with each other, cracking jokes over a glass of scotch. Deteriorating situations and communal problems, however, separated them, put them into different parts of the country and each went along with the flow, for they had their families to look after. A time came when none was in contact with the other.

Some letters followed in the coming years. A few here and a few there. They moved, their postal code changing with the seasons.

Now, in the present day, they no longer had any contact, only memories that pushed them to survive. The weekly dinners with their favorite biryani now appeared only in a haze before their eyes.

They held onto, all three of them, to the memories. The best times of their life, they thought. The only hope for survival? they wondered. The memories of a time, when no one was different from the other. When they all sat together, as humans. When the color of the skin and the holy place they visited didn't create differences between them. When their different religious incantations didn't ring differently in their ears. When all of their laughs mingled in unison to form the sweet melodious tune that they could now only hum in their minds.

A constant pestering for a month or two had led Aasif's son to dig out an obsolete yellow book, The Yellow Pages, it was called. It was a directory of phone numbers. It took him two long days to locate Chander Sharma and Dilsher Singh out of thousands of out of service names, addresses and numbers.

"These are landline numbers, no one uses them anymore" Aasif's son told him.

"Try them, for me" Aasif insisted.

They rang, both of them. The calls were answered and the meeting decided. Three landline numbers still rang out of the very few left.



Their happiness knew no bounds.

“Eighteen years, since the last letter” Dilsher said, concluding his story tearfully.

His granddaughter sat, silently on a stool near his feet wiping her now moist eyes.

That evening came late for him. The day is too long today, Dilsher uttered irritably. He stood in front of his steel almirah, wondering what shirt would fit in his now round stomach. It was after years, the family was seeing the otherwise reckless old man, being too conscious about his clothes.

Dilsher picked up a starched pink shirt, that still had a tag hanging from the neckline. His son let out a small laugh, looking at his father being fussy about his clothes.

“Blue or Black” Dilsher asked his granddaughters.

“Blue!” They giggled together.

He wore the blazer with much difficulty.

“Have you taken the evening’s medicine?” Baani asked.

“Who needs medicine today?” he answered gleefully.

“Go start the car, I don’t want to be late” Dilsher told his son.

He walked towards the door; starched blue turban with neatly ironed pants, a new pink shirt and a matching blue blazer.

“Dadu, your stick” Mannat called out.

Dilsher stopped in his tracks and took the stick that his granddaughter handed to him. He put the stick over his head not requiring it anymore and went down the stairs with his fat, swollen legs.