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1. SARA'S AFTERLIFE

Date: 10.10.2014

Institution: CAMH (Centre for addiction and Mental Health), Toronto, Ontario

Psychiatrist: Dr Sarabjeet Walia

Patient's particulars:

Name: Tyler Stewart

Gender: Male

Age: 21

Treated for: Depressive Illness

CAMH recommended to patient by a general practitioner. Patient earlier treated for milder depression by the same GP. He has attended counseling services and drop in centers without any positive outcome.

But lately the depressive symptoms are more severe. The symptoms include depressive mood most of the day. Markedly has diminished interest in all activities. Significant weight loss, a change of more than 5 % of body weight in a month. Insomnia. Addiction to few drugs. Recurrent thoughts of death. _

Analysis: I consider the illness to be severe, though the events that may have triggered its onset are yet to be determined. Besides psychosocial interventions, I recommend a biological treatment for the patient. Psychotherapy will be secondary to the use of medication. A day's dose of serzone (nefazodone) is given and the patient is booked in for another session at 10.30 am on 11.10.2014.

I finished the last note of the day and shut my cyber pad resting the pen on its side.

The computer logged me off in a blink saying "Sayonara Dr Walia".

It's been saying this for about a year now, since Chou altered it.

I stared at the clock impassively. It was five minutes past seven.

This was the time of the day I wish could be erased from my life.

Time to go home.

If a place where you use a bed to sleep and a restroom to shower is a home, then yes it is my home.

Three blocks away from the hospital.

Three fourth of my salary goes in the mortgage repayment of that one bedroom apartment, leaving me just adequate amount to buy groceries and pay bills. I do manage to put some in emergency savings account every alternate month.

It's just a habit. I'll never need it.

I have medical and accidental insurances, which will take care of my bills if I end up disabled or sick anytime in life.

And there is no person that will look up to me in case of an emergency.

Family, yeah I have heard that word somewhere.

A dad who left my mother before my birth and never came back for me, giving me a feeling that I was born to a virgin mother just like Christ, doesn't ought to count for a family. And a mother who paid for a sin which she didn't atone in the first place was left with me as a reminder of her failed arranged marriage, though she happily accepted it and gave 21 years to more than just feed me. Three years ago she did what she must have done a long ago. *Remarriage*.

Paul is a nice guy. He has a son from a previous marriage. His ex wife died of cancer and it surely took him a long time to overcome despair.

They look like a happy family to me.

But even if my mother wants me to be, I am not a part of it.

I stay away from her on purpose. I am just a reminder of a tragedy that costed her, *her youth*. She deserves better.

Friends, I don't have and don't need. The whole point of staying near to work is to escape any contact with the world that exists outside home and this hospital.

I am not social. I have tried to go out for drinks or dinner with work colleagues sometimes but it doesn't work.

Though I am a psychiatrist but I have failed to cure my mood disorders. The transitory blues lead to prolonged depression when I am out of home except for work. I know it is an illness.

I am taking medication for it.

But that doesn't make me similar to *Tyler Stewart* in any ways.

I am ill, I am not insane.

The first question he asked me echoed again in my mind "*Why must I live doctor?*"

I irritated picked up my bag, turned off the light and walked out into the helter skelter of the world.

The corridor was overflowing with people, even at this hour of the day. Each eye was on the Led displays flashing the numbers in the queue.

I offered to work extra hours to take off some burden from the evening doctors but my application was declined. Though the medical practitioners are exempted from the labor standard hours of work but the people above doubted my evenhandedness to patients after 7 in the evening or after a 12 hours shift.

But they are considering using me for evening shifts in near future.

It's the busiest time of the day.

An extensive darkness, an eccentric seclusion and everything except for peace is not just my idea of a night.

Peace. Isn't it a strange word?

If it's not in socializing, it's neither in solitude. The quieter I become the more I hear.

I advise my patients everyday that acceptance is the first step to inner calm. But I know acceptance is the hardest part to achieve.

The remorse for something that happened yesterday has become initiating factor of my life and also of many of my patients.

I was on the verge of losing myself few years back. When my psychiatrist told don't *agonize*, organize.

And now I have a job and a house. I am organized but I am no less *agonized*.

I don't have the ability to forgive people who have left me all alone. *Why was I not a priority to them? Why didn't they think what will I do, where will I go, How will I survive?*

They left me laid on the cold hard ground to live and die alone. *Where did I go wrong? You just can't turn your back on me and leave one day, you'll have to give me reasons. Why? Was I nothing?*

I have so many questions but apparently the answers have vanished with those acquaintances.

They made me feel that I don't know who they were, at all. The time and love I put to build up those relationships has gone in vain.

And the tragedy is that they have forgotten me, but I can't forget them. Even if it's costing me my life.

Every time someone asks me if I am okay, it's just a reminder that I'm not. I am crying inside when I am not feeling empty.

It's exhausting pretending living, to breathe in and out all day long.

But someone once told me *"Be kind when you are sad. If you'll become light to others God will show you light"*.

I am acting kind ever since. That's what I do 12 hours a day, but I see no light. *Maybe that was a lie too just like the other statements.*

I walked through the city. It was late but people seemed more awake than ever. Lights lit up in the night and signs flashed. I could hear horns blaring everywhere. The stars managed to twinkle and retain a charm in all the mock worldly lights. Skyscrapers reached up farther than eye could see.

And then there was another face of this city, very clear to me. Under the florescent lights it was a landscape painted by a palette of darkness. In the hustle and bustle of night my eyes also contemplated the street signs directing the empty lanes of traffic and the night lights standing watch over the empty corridors of residential buildings. This is a city where large darkened plazas are peppered with a face or two and there is also a solitary driver returning for the night.

I stopped at the Thai take away perfunctorily. This place has been feeding me supper for past one year. The place was bright as usual and the music which was playing was not truly authentic but maybe something from Bali. I didn't linger to gaze at the menu. I know my order. I have decided a meal option for each day in a week. It's not just convenient. It's a habit. A very old habit. I have had a time table for meals all my life.

"Hey dhocor" Ung, the little girl at the counter wished charmingly in her typical accent.

"Hi Ung, How are you?"

Everything that came out of my throat outside the hospital was tiresomely predictable.

"Good. Yourself?" Ung always wanted to talk more, something that was more than courtesy essentially demanded.

"Good Thanks. Can I have a mixture of garlic mushroom with steamed jasmine rice" I said with a smile.

She was grabbing a cardboard box before the words were out of my mouth.

"Nice top dhoc" she mumbled smiling filling the boxes.

"Thanks" I whispered.

My clothes come from home shop magazines or from online shops. Ladies would prefer dyeing rather than doing that. But I don't have tendency to go around shopping, spending hours in ladies try rooms.

The top is baggy and too formal; I don't think *Ung* actually means what she is saying.

I think if one day I just disappear nobody would notice except for her.

I used to think the same about someone who was so similar to *Ung*. Someone who is engraved like a scar in my memories. Maybe *Ung* is the reason I have been coming to this place for one year now.

"Thanks. Have a good night." I murmured taking the change and the boxes from her.

The boxes were still scorching against my freezing hands when I reached my building.

A huge brown envelope which seemed pretty heavy was badly chucked into my mail box. It took me a lot of effort to pull it out safely. There were another two envelopes. I emptied my mail box and unthinkingly rushed towards the lift twisting the brown packet in my hand.

It took me a microsecond to reach the 22nd floor. I threw my bag on the table and quickly splashed water on my face once in the apartment. I got changed to night dress and took the boxes and the envelopes to sit in my window bed. The view of the city from this wall size mirror was stunning at night, but something I wasn't interested in. One of the white envelopes had my superannuation statement. Few random charities were the beneficiary to my super as for some reason mom declined to become the nominee.

Another envelope was my bank statement, I knew without even notching it.

It was the quiet or else my heart was beating cautiously but the sound of the beat was way too loud, when I was opening the brown packet. It didn't mention the sender's name on the envelope but the stamps told me it was from overseas, from *India*.

There was a letter and a diary. A very feminine pink diary. Something which couldn't be found in market now days. It seemed old but well kept. And I remember seeing it somewhere.

Few pages were stapled together, it seemed like a letter. At every mail, every single day, deep down I wish it is from India, from that *someone*. Though I also know that would never happen. There would be no apology and there would be no forgiveness.

I started reading dizzily.

Dearest Sara

How are you? I hope that you are in the best of health and spirit.

I talked to your mother yesterday.

I don't know how to say it but you have completed education, you are at good job, now I think is time to take another step forward. Don't waste your adolescent years in sorrow and in anger.

Move on. Even if she is not there with you to say but I know she wants you to not give up.

Forgive her and try to forget her. It's hard but I know you can. I am sending you an old diary of hers, which maybe I should have sent you a long ago. It helped me understand her better; maybe it will help you too. It's all in the stars, its destiny. There is no one to blame.

I also want something else from you; to me you are a daughter so consider it as a demand not a request. I and uncle want you to spend three months in the year end with us like old times. We also want you to attend your school reunion which is in December this year.

Go back and face it Sara, exorcise the demons from the past. You have had enough.

I'll be waiting for you.

Please find enclosed an air ticket. Uncle has requested a vegetarian meal for you. If you change the dates, do let us know.

With lots of love and heaps of blessings

Sujata Aunty

As I read the letter the tears started rolling down my cheeks. It brought up the pain I try not to remember every second of my life.

How can I forgive her? She left me aimless and hopeless. How can I not ache with sorrow? And how can aunty forgive her? Even if she is her daughter, she cheated on us.

And still I miss her so much. How could she be in a better place than me? She vanished from sight and now even from my dreams. I don't want to read her diary. She loves him more than she loves me.

I aggressively threw it in the corner and lay on the floor. I had to press my heart with both my hands to stop it from aching. I failed terribly. And I chocked before starting howling, it's impossible to cry out the pain. No matter how hard and for how long I cry, I don't feel relieved. It usually fades into sobs after few hours because my body retires not that the grief diminishes.

It was midnight by the time I was sobbing. I uncomprehendingly stared into the sinister. Beneath the faint beam of a bulb my medical degree captured my attention. I contemplated it for fairly sometime before gathering myself. It took a lot of effort to pull up my unresponsive corpse from floor and to walk to the bathroom.

I reluctantly looked at myself in the mirror.

I saw a shadow of her in the mirror, and whispered '*As a gift to myself, I'll never forgive you.*'

But then a part of me believed that I was equally responsible for whatever happened. I am there for some random drug addict: *Taylor Stewart* but I wasn't there for my friend who was a sister, a mother, a family. No doubt she left without seeing me, she didn't count on me.

Maybe it's not just the sorrow but the guilt that's killing me. I tried resolving my thoughts.

I microwave my dinner and almost crawled to pick up the diary with trembling hands. I was so scared to look at it as if it will somehow look back at me. I went to the same place, my window bed, tugged myself in quilt and vaguely opened the diary. This time with more hope than grieve

2. PINEGROVE

SAMIVA

It was dark when I heard a clack sound. It took me a minute to realize, I was in bed at home.

Today was the day when I will be heading to the place which is actually '*my home*' in the literal sense of the word.

Pinegrove, a purely residential coeducational school, as young as I am.

Feels like it was yesterday when I first saw that place hidden amidst the green Shimla hills.

It was covered with thick and beautiful grove of pines, situated on the banks of a brook in the exotic valley of Kothar, in the state of Himachal Pradesh.

At the age of six and a half I asked mum, "Can we stay here longer? They say there are snakes in this river, I want to see them?". Mum told me to take my time. It's been ten years now, seems like she really meant what she said.

I still try to find snakes in that brook which I once thought was a river. But later turned out to be very shallow, confined within a bed of rocks and seasonal; thus having the characteristic of being recurring and perennial which to some extent qualified it as a stream. Once, it stayed dry for months and I wondered maybe it has decided to change its course, which really upset me. I justified to myself that it was illogical scrutinizing my very lack knowledge of environmental geography. Another time, the stream flooded, overflowed its banks and covered the adjacent lands which were less of floodplain and more of football ground. There were rumors that the school was cursed and all would die from flood in the so called river which I later started doubting.

For three months of winter break at the end of each academic year I had to come and stay with my parents. This year I was home for two weeks. Class 10 board exams finished in March. It was up to students of school to decide if they wanted to stay back and study. Almost everyone did.

Pinegrove is more than bed and board to me, it's a place where I have spent all my childhood and adolescence. It proffered me with my morals, beliefs, sight to see what's best for me and also a very focused academic discipline taught me to give more than hundred percent in whatever I chose. It is where I belong. I could not exist in any other situation or place. Food, climate, people and there are so many other commodities which are concealed like emotional attachment. I am visceral to the place like a polar bear to Arctic Circle.

Still giving up the luxuries of parents' home like staying up late, getting up late, eating in bed and watching television at any odd hour of the day bring a streak of disappointment the very morning of this day every year. I have to leave for school at the earliest possible hour before sunrise to avoid the heavy traffic in the city. The city where I think the number of vehicles almost equals the number of people, not to mention whose count is more than the total population of Australia, New Delhi.

The packing started few days ago and we were fortuitous enough to accomplish it by quarter past ten last night. Mum is a kind of freak when it comes to organization. Everything in the list goes in trunk in the same given order and had to bear torture of verification quite a number of times. And everything is dualistic for her. She has to pack for two because my kid sister, my only sibling escorted me to school four years ago. Though to Niya this is a much more devastating experience than to me, she calls it the day of execution.

Suddenly other than the irregular snoring sound I heard the clack sound again. Mum must have woken up early to switch the geyser on, that means I can still afford sleeping for next fifteen minutes, or probably just lying down calculating the pros of going back to school which might lighten the pull in my nerves.

I got dressed in a pair of dark blue jeans and white hoodies which I bought this week and didn't get much of a chance to wear. Though there was no point buying it so close to the school date yet I thought this will be the set of civils for me this year. The circular clearly stated, "*Students are allowed to keep no more than one set of casual wear*". It must have been difficult to pick one thing from heaps of clothes for Sara, my closest friend but it was just a matter of choosing color for me. I had a very scarce wardrobe of different shades of blue in jeans, and different colors in hoodies.

Mum and Nanhe will be going to drop us to school today. Dad has an important meeting to attend otherwise He is not a kind of a person who will send mum with driver and kids on a 12 hour journey. I have to give him credit for being very possessive.

It was 5.30, everything was nicely fixed in the car boot and mum was checking again, "... trunks, sleeping bag, donnas, pillows, badminton rackets, pithu bag ...". My mind got side tracked on hearing the last two words. This bag which once I thought could fit in a baby elephant was now carrying my books.

I was in class 11 now. Results for tenth boards were not out yet but students were given admission to streams based on choices and pre-board results. My parents decided medical stream for me, not after tenth exams but probably when I was ten days old. They had a misconception that my pretty average grades are the output of lack of effort I put in. It never occurred to them that maybe I am not smart enough, maybe a med school is not where I belong. Dad had to push headmaster a bit to give me admission in med on 80 percent marks. Not that they were not good enough, but for the fact that from class of 50 students, 20 scored above 85 and there were only 15 places for science streams. They had to adjust one more. The thought of being the worst in sixteen students was killing me, and now I had to prepare for medical entrance exam. The cons easily outnumbering the pros agitated me a bit.

We bid goodbyes to dad.

He had a very strange way of showing concern. I think it was embarrassing for him to show love by means of any physical contact like a hug or kiss to a girl who almost reached his shoulder, even if she was a daughter.

Though I liked it this way.

He told me to always carry inhaler in my pocket and keep a spare one in locker.

Asthma had been one of the many reasons for me going to boarding school. Pollution free environment prevented acute attacks so far but still I was bringing inhaler to use on numerous occasions. Mum is always fussing about not using inhaler in front of others, as if it is an illegal drug. I don't understand what's so embarrassing about a medical condition. Also it is way beyond my morals to hide things or to pretend something I am not, especially in front of people I have grown up with, who know me inside out, my friends. So I don't actually care of what mum says.

After four hours drive, at the time of dawn we were opening our journey into Himalayas, whose beauty once fascinated me.

It was a green alien planet then, but gradually it lost its charm for me.

It's surrounded by green pastures and sometimes on lucky mornings one gets to see snow covered mountain peaks. Travelling into the valley of Kothar, I always get a strange feeling as if I am going for a pilgrimage, one's final destination. I don't know what to make out of it, to feel blessed to inhabit a place full of dense pine trees and deodar forests or to hate the idea of living in the same. To some the place may be serene, but to me its just home.

We left Dharampur road behind us entering into a lane which I can barely call road. To drive here one needs a lot of faith, self belief and sheer old fashioned courage. Guess Nanhe was used to it.

We finally reached.

The board painted white on black background saying, "Pinegrove" was clearly visible. Beyond that point, each and every thing was the property of Pinegrove. Once on the other side you are isolated from the outer world or for me you *no longer need an outer world*. Its like *city of Ember*, self sustained just that this one is above the ground.

There was a car in front of us and within minutes a queue started forming behind.

The wait was due to the single steep road leading to the school which was at the floor of a very deep valley. The road only accommodated one car at a time to pass across the reception and main building to the car park which was located opposite to the dormitories and on the bank of the Brooke. A watchman came running and asked for student particulars. Nanhe shouted at the peak of his voice, "*Samiya Mittal, Niya Mittal*" as if his shouting will accelerate the process.

After few seconds we were going down. I had my first glimpse of that city for this semester.

It is difficult to conceive how the imagination of our headmaster may have first perceived that this isolated valley miles away from civilization was to be the place for his new school. On a rural land at 5600 ft, forested with pine and evergreens, Pinegrove has developed over some 150 Acres. With its characteristics stone walls and blue roofs, the estate is a veritable wonderland of rambling paths, trees, flowers and exotic birdlife. To the north, on a clear sparkling morning, the snow clad peaks of Himalayas can be seen. Away from the distraction of city life, here interests are concentrated within the idyllic environment.

Amongst the oldest buildings is the Chapel, the church where I have lit more than a hundred candles over the years and the Central Dining Hall which is also the largest room, where Staff provides over 1700 meals a day. There is an indoor and outdoor sporting complex with solar heated swimming pool and squash courts. There is a separate building for learning resources centre other than the Academic and boarding buildings and this is the place where I have spent a quality time of my life surrounded by books. The Pinewood Hall, where plays, shows, films and lectures are regularly held is also called Rumpus room. The superb basketball court is the newest addition to the numerous playing fields and is used by me to assemble and admire the Brooke that scurried parallel to it.

All the students have their own electronic keycards with individual digital signature as all the areas have electronic key access entrance. This key also serves as an ID Card.

There are many other buildings supporting academic and non- academic activities.

Sitting in a valley as it does, physical activity is the daily bread of life for all pinegrovians. Though there are few magical spaces for repose and quiet, where students are free to sit and reflect, and those are my favorite spots in the whole valley.

Mum decided to leave me at the reception to take care of fees payment and she went to unpack the stuff in respective dorms.

The school reception had an appeal of the modern mountain house as it is unruffled and rustic, to make you relax and rejuvenated at the very first look. It doesn't work for me though. Also the untreated timber beams and raw, rough rocky walls standing in contrast to the sleek, contemporary fixtures and modern and urban interiors look marvelous. Certainly there is plenty of character in each and every part of *Pinegrove*.

Headmaster was the first familiar face I ran into, his words, "*All set? Tie your seat belt we have an entrance to crack Dr Mittal*" metaphorically meant *welcome back to hell*.

I could see all my prejudices turning real now.

I had no idea of mess I was entering.

He was in a chatty mode when Mr. Mathur, our physical instructor joined the conversation. I made a narrow escape when I saw Sara's mum at the fee counter.

It was a bit crowded, and the recognizable faces were in uniforms already. Many students usually came a day before the start date and stayed in Kasauli. So most of them were bidding farewells to their parents by now. My eyes were desperately looking for Sara when someone jumped on me, with the force of a fired bullet. I shouted in panic.

There she was, a bit taller and skinnier than I last saw her. With a new weird hairdo, all smiling, holding my hands so tightly that probably they were crushed by now. *Sara*, my wild funny mischievous friend, the only child of her single mother, citizen of Canada and owner of a very beautiful heart. We were together since grade 1, shared socks, slept in same bed, gave each other head baths for past 10 years. But now was the time to part to different streams. She was in arts now. It was hard to imagine seven hours everyday without her for next 2 years.

"*What's wrong with your hair?*", I asked.

"*Mum trimmed them with her teeth, for a party*", she said giggling.

"*Halloween party I wonder*", I said winking and she chuckled. Her mum interrupted when she was giving details about the origin of this hairstyle, I conveyed greetings and moved

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