

**ALL IS RIGHT WITH**  
**THE WORLD**

*By Srinwanti Paul*

***Dedicated to my dear parents***

... you always believe in me, no matter what...

*A special thanks to my special family... we may bicker and we may fight, but we complete each other...*

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The stories in this book are based on fictional characters that are a product of my imagination. Any resemblance to a person or entity is purely coincidental.

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# All is right with the world

This was a very important day of my life. I had finally completed a month without smoking a single cigarette – a feat that seemed impossible for me to achieve even till a couple of months back. Smoking for me was not merely a habit, rather it had wormed its way into my life to form a very essential part of my very existence. I have smoked through life's lows as well as the highs and also through the in-betweens, causing me to unknowingly relinquish all my control to those extremely addictive white sticks of nicotine. I was held under the spell of those slender beauties, a slave to their incessant call.

Cigarettes have been my companion since the time I was in college. They were the only stability in my highly unstable life of studies, girlfriends and jobs. Even when the world around me changed many times over, my love for cigarettes was constant and

firm and unwavering. They remained with me even after a secure job, a stabilising marriage and the anchoring birth of a daughter. Now that my daughter, Mahima, is on the verge of stepping into independence, my body has decided to play pranks with me, by outright rejecting my very lifestyle. This resulted in my wife, Garima, dragging me to the doctor, who made it his life's mission to get me to give up cigarettes for good.

I had no intention of following through with the doctor's suggestions, but unfortunately Garima had been very attentive at the doctor's chamber. It certainly did not help that the doctor expostulated the virtues of quitting cigarette smoking, after explaining vividly its ill effects on my health. She had then made it her sole priority in life to keep a tab on the number of cigarettes I smoke every day, not even flinching from using underhand means like limiting my daily pocket expense. She successfully nagged me into giving up the bad habit completely.

For the past one month I lived with the constant fear that I might not have the strength of

conviction to overcome my addiction. I might fall into the temptation of just one smoke, and then get sucked back into its vicious claws. Yet, overcoming all odds, here I was, celebrating a month's anniversary of my complete deaddiction. I decided to celebrate it in style. After all it wasn't a feat achieved by the weak-hearted! It took an immense amount of self-control on my part to successfully kick out this habit. I intended to brag about it to Garima when I reached home later in the day.

After work, I drove myself to the newly opened posh café across town. There was a nip in the evening air of early spring. The light wind rustled the leaves of the ornamental plants bordering the picturesque garden on the side of the road. I wondered what it would feel like to sip on a hot mug of coffee while sprawled across one of the wrought iron benches lining the garden. That would be for another day when I had Garima with me. This day was solely my own – my personal time.

The weather certainly reflected my mood and partook in my celebration. Lingered there, I let myself enjoy the beautiful surroundings for a little while, before stepping into the quaint building that housed the café. I had planned to gift myself the costliest snack on their menu alongside a huge mug of delicious cappuccino. After all I certainly deserved this treat for not giving in to my cravings for a whole month. I had bravely withstood the beckoning of those sultry beauties for this long. I know that Garima would be very pleased with me and Mahima would be very proud of her father. So, I decided to include them in my celebration of the completion of half a year of my deaddiction. But this day, I would spend only with myself, celebrating like a hero that I was!

There was a noticeable spring in my steps. My buoyant mood seemed to be infectious. The parking valet and the doorman, all appeared to reflect my huge grin. I made a mental note to tip them generously. And why not! I had saved a sizeable amount of money by kicking out my bad habit. I could very well afford to be generous and



share my happiness with a few other less fortunate fellow beings.

It is said that a joyous heart finds beauty in the most mundane things. Just as I found the whole world to be a great unravelling beauty. Why, even the shapely waste bin standing at attention on the porch caught my eyes! Had I been smoking, I would have thrown the butt callously into it without giving it a second glance. Now that I had no other distractions, I could really stop to marvel at the beauty of trivial things that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Considering the fact that it was still early, there were not many cars around the parking lot. This gave me hope that the café would be relatively empty and I could enjoy my gift to myself in peace. There was a couple sitting in the café when I walked in. As the light was low, I didn't know who they were until the woman turned around, and I saw it was my wife. She had daintily raised her hand to get the attention of the waiter.

My world seemed to come crashing down around me in that one moment that I got her glimpse. What was she doing here at this hour, that too all decked up? It took some time for me to get a hold upon myself as I staggered to the nearest table and crashed onto one of the bedecked chairs, holding my head in my hands. She had not yet seen me. I focused on her companion. He was in his mid-twenties. He was facing me, so I could get a good look at him. He was smart, clean shaven and had a good physique – certainly better than my bearded, pot-bellied person. He was dressed in a checkered shirt and wore his hair neatly parted sideways, I noticed, while slowly moving my hand over my balding pate. It was quite obvious that my beautiful wife would prefer such a handsome young man, but he was young enough to be her son!

The whole time Garima had her back towards me. So, I could watch her stealthily without her knowing. I was certainly curious about their exchange. The young man was looking at her so lovingly, that I felt sick to the pit of my stomach. Garima had her hair done up in an intricate up-do. She was even wearing the expensive peach

coloured sari that I had gifted her last month for our anniversary, saying the colour complemented her complexion. It certainly was a slap across my face! After spending twenty-six years with me, she had decided to get herself immersed in the ardent affections of a mere “boy”, I thought, drowning in my own despair.

Meanwhile, the waiter kept pestering me about my order. What a nuisance! He did not have his wife sitting in front of him, sharing a romantic evening with a handsome young man! How would he understand my pain? I was not in a state of mind to order anything. I mumbled irritatedly about waiting for someone, to get him off my back. I could not believe this was happening to me. A few minutes ago, I was flying on the seventh heaven and now, I was wallowing deep down in the depths of despair.

I put my attention back to the couple sitting a few feet away from me. At one point, when the young man took Garima’s hand into his own while saying something passionately, I could take it no more. I got up in a huff. Then suddenly an idea struck me.

Taking out my phone from my pocket, I discreetly took a picture of them holding hands, and then left the café. I did not know what purpose the picture would serve me, but at the moment it seemed to be the right thing to do. I guess this had something to do with the huge number of crime-shows I watched on television every evening.

My mind was reeling with what I had just seen. I couldn't believe that my wife had gone behind my back and was dating a younger man! It felt like something inside me had died, leaving me completely hollow and vulnerable. I could not even describe my feelings in words. There was a feeling of immense pain, hurt, betrayal and also a tremendous amount of anger. How could she do this to us after all these years of living like a happy family? When I had given my all to keep this family happy and satisfied!

I got into my car without bothering to tip the valet and drove away without a destination in mind. My anger kept nagging me to act on impulse and do something rash. I began to search for options to take revenge on my wife and her companion. They

all involved doing something unlawful. Thankfully I calmed down my anger and reasoned with myself that getting locked up behind bars would do me no good. Also, there was Mahima's well-being to think about. Did Garima not for even once think about the implications of her rash actions on our young and impressionable daughter?

Looking back, I realised that the signs were always there. I was too foolish to read into them. Garima used to constantly pester me about my bad habits and deteriorating health. Now I knew that she had been comparing me to her young admirer all this while. That was why she always found flaws in me. I repeatedly fell short of her immensely high expectations. How could I compete with a strapping young man in his twenties? The competition was moot from the very beginning. Any day, that man would win hands down and I would be left to wallow in my self-pity.

After driving through the streets aimlessly for some time, without realising it, I had come to the street in front of my bungalow. Parking my car in front of our gate, I made a beeline for the street-

side vendor. I bought a pack of cigarettes and made my way back to my house. But instead of ringing the door-bell, I sat on the bench in our lawn and lit my first cigarette in a month. Then another followed and then yet another. Soon, numerous butts littered the ground around my feet. There was no point in trying to please Garima any more. I was now free to waste away my life as I pleased. And I had thought foolishly that she cared!

I was drowning myself in my own sorrows and dismal thoughts, when I heard a car screech to a halt in front of our house. I saw the sari-clad figure of my wife get out of the car. She then bent at the window and said something to the person inside. I could see no more. I closed my eyes and wallowed in pain and heartbreak. Heel-clad feet click-clicked on the pathway to the door. All of a sudden, they stopped and I heard a voice call out: "Dad!"

The universe shifted and the earth tilted on its axis. My eyes flew open. It was as if I had seen a ghost! Seeing me speechless, she came closer to me. She was none other than my daughter, Mahima!

“Dad! Why are you sitting here alone?” she asked.

“A...I...No... Mean...”

My brain had stopped functioning properly. It failed to send the right message to my tongue for it to produce a coherent reply. I was already reeling under a shock. The thought that my feeling of heartbreak was a farce, was an even bigger shock. Yet I would any day prefer this shock over the previous imagined one.

“What is it Dad? Are you okay?” Her voice was laced with worry. She came and sat beside me. She placed her hand on my arm, and this action helped me to come out of my reverie. I realised how my daughter had grown up into a beautiful woman and I foolishly had no knowledge of the simple fact, even though she was always in front of my very eyes.

As the world righted itself, I eventually found my voice again. With a lot of effort, I managed to put together a meaningful sentence at last. “You look so gorgeous in a sari! Just like your mother...”

“Thanks Dad!”, she smiled shyly. “Actually Arun, from my computer centre, had asked me out on a date”, she added, sensing my obvious discomfort.

She then looked down and saw the cigarette butts lying there. “Dad, you had promised us!”, she admonished indignantly.

I gave her a wistful smile. “I slipped just this once. Don’t tell your mom...”

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# Grace of the Godavari

Close to the city of Paithan, in a small village called Sauviragram, which lay along the banks of the great river Godavari, lived a woman named Ilaa. Being cotton farmers, her family was well to do, but not among the richest in their area. It was the harvest season, and cotton had to be picked from the plants. The wholesalers and traders from Paithan would be arriving in just a few weeks, carrying gold and goods for barter. They would exchange what they carried for the cotton that the farmers grew. The bales of cotton had to be ready in time! Work was at its peak!

But Ilaa was not to be found in the fields. She wasn't working. Instead, she was sitting by the banks of the great river Godavari.

'I am sick of this!' she grunted loudly. As if to give force to her words, she took up a stone and threw it with full force in the flowing waters. As soon as the stone landed in the water with a plonk, Ilaa's

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