

BREAKING FREE

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*To God, grandparents, parents, family, friends and my adorable pets –
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You all are my life and mean the world to me.*

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and high the goal is, you have the power to achieve it
if you think that you can.*

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Prologue



An year-and-a-half ago, I was like any contemporary young woman - having dreams to make it big, possessing the ardour to learn and developing myself to achieve those goals. My confidence was much talked about. In the beauty and fitness regime too, I wasn't behind. It took repeated turns for the gym instructor to come with a flushed face and say that I have worked enough. I was just like any girl in her twenties would be – looking at the mirror multiple times in a day, dabbing make-up to look prettier, posting all those selected photos on the social websites, and pursuing my hobbies. I have a wonderful family and circle of friends who stood by me, no matter what. I had a life which one ought to have.

But soon, my world came scattering down. That was because of one wrong decision, followed by another right decision. It was just a call, but a crucial one which shattered me to the core.



I stood in the hustling and bustling Howrah station on a cold and still night in the midst of a milling crowd, as I awaited my destined train. Minutes ticked by and I saw the train approach like a majestic giant – long, undefeatable, determined. Soon it halted with a loud screech. Momentary evil-ish suicidal thoughts crept in and tempted me to jump on the tracks and end it all, but a voice deep inside me echoed – *I'm not a loser. I'm not a fool. I love my life. My family and friends don't deserve this.* Now I faced the hour of truth. It was now or later. It is often seen that when it comes to personal experiences, we have been tuned to procrastinate things. But I had no time to delay my decision.

I decided – It was *now*. After all, they say, 'No one knows what's in store for us tomorrow, so live in the now.' It is only now that is under your control. Tomorrow is dependent on what you choose today.

I boarded the train and found my path, sandwiched amongst the passengers trying to fight their way to the train door. As I climbed into the train, I gasped for breath and searched for my seat mentioned in the e-ticket flashing on the screen of my mobile. On reaching it, I shoved my rucksack on the seat, spread the moist bedsheet given by the railway staff, and lay down on it. Fluttering my eyes, I turned my head towards the window and

wondered again whether I had made the right decision – that of going away from him. Should I have given him a second chance? Could he have reformed? As such questions crept in, a sudden sporadic pang of guilt stormed and flashed through my shivering body. The train whistled and with the start of the train, my new life began too. I told myself when things are not in your control, it's best to move on.

Through the window, I only saw darkness – black, stubborn, directionless. Then suddenly, in the vastness of the dark night and tracts of land, I saw a small stretch of land lit up by shining bright sliver of the moon and a dangling lantern outside of a hut. Next to it was a cow standing in the midst of the barren land. If the cow had the strength to survive in such adversities, I could too. If the people in the hut could toil hard to keep themselves alive, I could as well.

I turned away from the window and looked at the other passengers travelling on the train. This is the real world – everyone living with a purpose. Life is never stuck at one place and is never at a standstill. You choose to perish if you hook on to a still time-frame.

It was then that I told myself, “Yes, I took the right decision. It had to be this way.”

In the near past, I had been living my life in a limbo, without any goal or motive, just passing through time like a living cadaver. But now, I would live it my own way, moulding it the way I like.

As I swayed to the tune of the whistling ‘chhuk chhuk’ train, I remembered my good old school days when I used to get so excited to board a train to begin my vacation. It had been a long time since I had travelled in a train. Recently, lounges at airports where I'd wait for my flights were places I'd frequent while travelling – a result, both of India's dynamic growth and my

position as the sole daughter of an affluent businessman. Today, I had chosen the train journey, where my childhood had its roots and where memories had been made. I knew I could fly high only with my roots strong.

Nostalgia enveloped me. I missed my parents, Neena and Shakti Agnihotri. We were Marathi but our generations, long settled in West Bengal, made us more tuned towards the Bengali culture. I assumed that by now they would have found their twenty-four-year-old daughter's 'adieu' letter. I felt guilty, but I knew deep down that what I was doing was necessary for me – for my inner calm, peace and strength.

“Breathe in and breathe out. Everything will get sorted soon. Life will be alive very soon. Have faith in God.” I told myself for the millionth time.

Then I closed my eyes and sank into deep introspection, which is one of my favourite pastimes. It was only due to these interactions with myself that I was now on this train and wheeling off to a far off destination. Suddenly I put a stop to my pondering. I didn't want to remember the day that had passed. I struggled to shut my eyes tight and sleep. I didn't feel sleepy at all – not even a wink of drowsiness, even after an hour-long effort. The uneasiness within me was killing my peace. Also the thoughts churning inside my mind were volcanic. They could erupt anytime, because I hadn't vented it out earlier. I couldn't have shown a sulking face to my family as I loved them way too much to even show a tear on the face they cherished so much.

Suddenly, I felt the need to cry out, to release that pressure inside me. So I climbed from the lower to the upper berth and shielded myself by drawing the curtain of the berth, pulling a bedsheet over me. I finally allowed myself to cry. I gave in to the

moment. I needed to sink in my tension through the unstoppable tears rolling down my cheeks. It was relieving me. I felt better.

The train halted at the next station and I could hear some passengers boarding and some getting off at the stop. Someone moved the curtain of my compartment a bit and I heard a male voice, “Excuse me ma’am, you are in my seat.” Without moving, I replied, “Do you mind exchanging seats? Mine is the lower berth.”

“Alright, that is absolutely fine with me,” he said. “Who doesn’t want a window seat?” I heard him mumbling to himself.

Subsequently, I heard him settling down, and then the sound of him logging onto a MAC laptop and a short phone conversation during which he informed someone that he had boarded the train and that he had had dinner as well.

A few minutes after his telephonic conversation, I heard a chuckling and giggling sound. It was high-pitched and irritatingly continuous.

After a minute of pause, again...then a minute of silence... then again...

The hyena-like titter was weird and funnily awkward enough to stop my tears and bring a stir to my face. It reminded me of all those hilarious scenes of actors which I saw on the television channels, You Tube, social media and movies. This was similar. I pursed my lips so as not to laugh out loud. I put a hand on my mouth and looked down to see what he was up to. I needed to make sure that he was not insane and that I was safe alone in the compartment with him.

The man was sitting on his seat wearing glittering white earphones and watching some video on his laptop. I decided to tell him that his laughter was too loud. So I called out to him but he could not hear me. When my attempts proved unsuccessful, I threw a bottle on the floor hoping that he would look up

and I would manage to talk to him and apprise him of the disturbance he was causing to his fellow passengers – though in the compartment, it was only the two of us.

Thud.

The mineral water bottle fell onto the floor. But he just lifted it up without any prospective expected reaction, and placed it on my seat near my legs without even looking at me. My plan failed. I was too exhausted to climb down and talk to him or put any other strenuous effort to catch his attention. It has also been seen and proven in history, that if the mind is weak, even a bull's body will make no difference.

I got another idea and unwrapped the stole from my neck and dangled it all the way from my fingers down to the laptop keyboard.

Bingo! He looked up. “Hey, are you asleep? Your dupatta has fallen down.” But he was shocked to see me holding and letting it hang down intentionally. I saw his eyes – deep black, alive, assertive.

I gestured to him to remove his ear phones and told him, “I can only sleep if you stop laughing so loudly.” There are times when your mind is already so preoccupied with commotion that you can't take an ounce more. Today was such a day for me.

“Oh oh, I'm extremely sorry that I disturbed you. I will take care. You can go to sleep now. I will try my best to control my chuckles tonight,” he said.

“Thank you. You better do that and not bother your sleepy co-passengers,” I said while dilating my eyes to strongly emphasize the point. My tone sounded rough but I preferred to retain it that way.

Fortunately, I fell asleep in the next ten minutes. It was a major achievement for me considering that in the last few months, I

had been struggling with insomnia. I woke up the next morning, once again greeted by the annoying chuckles and titters. I didn't have the composure to go through the ordeal again. I told myself that my destination was just an hour away so I will be out of the place soon. And so I decided to tolerate it with what God has given me – patience, perseverance and determination.

I reached Puri – the land of the Lord of the Universe, Lord Jagannath. I wanted to take the blessings of the Almighty God. I just had a rucksack, so I climbed down conveniently from the train, after jostling through the crowd in the train and the station. And suddenly, while I was walking towards the exit of the station, I heard a loud thud. Many heads turned towards the one who had just fallen down. Poor fellow. I ran towards the spot where the sound had come from. Someone had fallen down on the platform along with a whole lot of his luggage – one big airbag, one big suitcase, and a big backpack. I saw that it was a man and could only see his back. He was touching his head to check for injury perhaps.

I rushed to help the poor guy. That's me; I always stepped forward to assist other in need. I used to actively take part in many social volunteer activities as they added purpose to my life. I called out to him and held my hand out to help him. But he didn't see it, so he did not acknowledge it, and instead, put his hands on the ground and levered himself up.

“These days people don't value help. What a pity. And one should carry only that much which one can hold comfortably,” I uttered to myself while retracting my extended hand.

And as he turned, “Oh, you,” he said with a frown and the expression didn't look appropriate on his chiselled, handsome face which was covered in a beard. I noticed him for a brief moment; he looked like a model straight out of a fashion

magazine. Any girl would jump to the sky and return, to go out on a date with such a good-looking person.

“You again!” I could sense the steeliness in his voice. His behaviour was unsuitable for a guy who looked as well-bred and decent as him. But these days looks can actually deceive. When you see the photographs of good looking thieves or thugs, you end up wondering how he can be one at first place and then the second reaction is of hatred on how he wasted his life.

“Yes, it is me. But why are you so annoyed to see me here? You are making me feel as if I owe you millions and am on the run from you,” I said.

“On our first meeting you had problems with my happiness – my laughter which is cherished by my family and friends. What should I expect from our second meeting? As if that was not enough, you are now after my harmless bags,” he said with displeasure.

“Well, an emergency is the reason of our second meeting. I rushed here to assist you after you fell down. And being a guy, what is the need to carry so much of baggage? That too when you are in trains and on railway stations. If you travel alone with so many bags, you are bound to slip and trip,” I said callously.

“Who on earth said that guys can’t carry a lot of luggage? I mean...I mean if all the girls out there can plan and carry outfits for every occasion, why can’t we guys do it too?” he said without any warmth in his tone. A part of it also could be blamed to the bad hard fall he had had just a few seconds ago.

“I’m a girl but am I carrying a lot of luggage?” I said, raising my voice and turning to show him my red and black rucksack.

“Ma’am.” His voice had taken on a belligerent stride. “Why am I defending myself? Are you my granny? I don’t owe you any explanation.”