

Turning Point

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CHAPTER 1

I went to judge a debate today. The motion was 'Marriage is a big turning point in life'. The debate was quite engaging. Most of the speakers who spoke for the motion were aged between twenty and forty-five. The age of the speakers against the motion was above forty. There were ten speakers on each side. Finally, the speakers supporting the motion won based on the total points scored by each team. On my way back I thought that such debates were indeed necessary. When we were students, debates and public speaking were given considerable importance but now their importance has declined. Debates go a long way in developing critical thinking.

I myself have no doubts that marriage is indeed a turning point in life. Many faces appeared in front of my eyes one after another like scenes out of a movie... Padma, Rumi *Di*, Atanu....

Padma was my friend even before I understood what the word friend means. I just remember that I longed to play with her. With time I realised that I missed her a lot when we did not meet. We went to school together

and stuck together in the school the whole day. Even then when I returned from school, I quickly finished my food and ran to the playground to meet Padma once again. As we went to higher classes the playground sessions decreased the main reason being that we stayed in a village where once the girls reached adolescence, they were no longer permitted to remain outdoors. Post class eight we spent our time after school either in our terrace or in Padma's. Slowly I came to understand the reason for such rules. The group of boys slightly elder to us began to show keen interest in us. Their smiling faces waited at the crossroads when we walked to school and again when we returned home. When we were at the terrace, they roamed on the streets below revealing their earnest presence. It surprised me to think that these same boys bullied and teased us in a big brotherly fashion when we were kids. All are acquaintances and from the same village and now for some reason they suddenly want to transform into lovers! We decided to ignore them.

Padma stayed in a big joint family. Her father and two uncles ran the family business of wholesale grocery items. Among the handful of pucca houses in the village, Padma's family owned the largest with three storeys. Behind the house was a cowshed followed by a big pond surrounded by mango trees. I stayed in a rented two roomed house and wondered how marvellously rich they were. She was the one and only sister of the

ten brothers and male cousins in the house and was the apple of everyone's eye. But I was not jealous due to her. I had a privileged position in their household. When we played or studied in their terrace, often their servant brought a big bowl of warm milk and insisted that we finish it. Pure milk from their home bred cows... it tasted delicious. The taste lingers till today.

Padma was not a good student but always got her promotions, with few red marks in her report card. When we reached the tenth standard, I felt a sense of responsibility that she should pass her boards smoothly. I was her best friend, now I started doubling up as her teacher as well. I was happy when she passed in all the subjects in the pre boards and was convincingly allowed for the board exam. We had study leave in January and February as the board exams were in March. The school was closed hence we met at home and I kind of tutored her.

One afternoon I went to her house and found everyone extremely gloomy. Padma's mother told me "I need to tell you something. A nice marriage proposal has come for Padma. The groom's family has an established pharmacy in the Bardhaman city. The groom has one brother. They will come to see Padma in a day or two. But Padma has declined. However, your *Kaku* has given his word. You are her best friend; you must convince her." This was a bolt from the blue. "Why do you want her to marry now *Kakima*? The

final examination is approaching. Why can't they see her after the exams?"

"Why would they agree to defer for so long? There is no guarantee that they will choose her and if they do, we can tell them to fix the marriage after her exams are over. Please, my dear....do make her understand. She didn't eat anything since morning."

I went straight to the terrace. Padma's eyes were red from crying long. Seeing me she burst into tears again. I comforted her. "Don't cry dear. From what I understand, we can't stop them from coming over. But I have an idea. If they do like you, you tell them straight that you don't like the groom-to-be. That's it! Please smile now...and come on, get your books out!"

"You don't know them." she said sadly. "Nobody cares whether I like him or not"

"You have to fight Padma. You must convince them that you cannot marry before completing your graduation. Do you understand?" "Who will listen to me? I am not even good in studies that I can insist" "Listen. If you try you will certainly pass your graduation exam. But you need that opportunity. Now you don't bother about unnecessary things and please focus on your studies. Do well in the Higher Secondary exams. Then nobody can stop you from pursuing graduation."

After three days on a Sunday evening, the groom's party came to see Padma. I could not wait and rushed

to her house as soon as the guests left. The mood in the house was celebratory. *Kakima* was all smiles. "Your friend finally returned to her senses and they have also liked her. We'll find an auspicious date and your *Kaku* will go over to finalise everything. They said that the wedding will take place once the higher secondary exams are over. My heart throbbed in pain. "I'll go up *Kakima*" I said with a dry smile. Padma stood on the terrace watching the sun set. She looked very distracted; she was even oblivious of my arrival.

"All settled then? Couldn't stop it uh?"

"So you got the news." she said with a smile. "Are you upset?"

"Why should I be... it's you who's supposed to be upset."

"But I just couldn't be. You won't believe how handsome he is. Just like.... Amitabh Bachhan!! It was simply love at first sight for me."

"Got it. Seems you won't need to study further. You can keep thinking about your Amitabh Bachhan. Bye."

"Oh my dear Manu...don't be angry. You know what? If you had seen him even you would have fallen in love" she chuckled.

I gave her one nasty look and left. I felt let down as I walked home. I just couldn't accept this transformation of Padma.