



Key to Happiness

You cannot buy happiness; you must learn how to be happy.

At the end of the blind alley of Duttanagar spreads a large society, Sukhwani complex in a posh area of Nigdi in Pune. The window of the flats in a row face east. With open windows, in summer the rooms bask in the sun until noon. But being it the early monsoon in July, the windows remain closed. The sun limns on the closed windowsills through the foliage of the leaves of the Pyrus trees in the garden of the society nearing the boundary.

On the fourth floor—the topmost floor—one sash of the window of a 2BHK flat is open. Today Rohan has got up very early to the humming of the mobile ringtone set as alarm. He flips the tube light on—fainting light against the morning sunbeams fills the room. He is going to Mumbai for an official work.

‘Where’s my hair gel?’ Rohan cries out in anger standing before his dressing table, rubbing his hair on a towel and searching for his Garnier gel missing from the table. He walks to another table that leans against the wall at a side—as he always wanted— searchingfor the gel and stumbles against it. Rohan is very particular in keeping the household items in places. If he does not find the things he needs on time, his head would be on fire. Abusing everyone, sparing none. He is always scornful to his wife and would hardly speak with her with direct countenance.

Rohan has a good job by any yardstick. He is a senior executive in marketing with a reputed company that makes his economy satisfactory. His wife Jaya is beautiful, well- educated and well cultured. His widow mother, Sharada, aged about 65, lives with them. But he does not find all these reasons good enough for his satisfaction. He always expels grudge over one thing or the other. He wants the household items to be placed in a certain arrangement—which he keeps on changing though. Or else all the hell breaks. It breaks anyway!

‘Why the fuck is this chair here?’ He would kick. His meek wife would rush to his rescue but to no advantage. The fuss would hardly die out. And she would receive the resentment the hardest. She would prepare his tiffin well before time, keep the shaving items on the table so Rohan would not need to search for them, bring out the dresses for him so he would not need to open the wardrobe. She would do her best to appease him but he is never fat dumb and happy. The things would always fall out of place at the right time. Or he would turn them so.

In a hurry, Rohan eats biscuits and drinks tea, mixing both. He would dip the biscuits in tea only to make his task of swallowing easy; otherwise he distastes dipping biscuits.

‘I hate the soaked flake, you know’, he says to his wife who is standing before him, waiting for his orders. He seems to be in a hurry although there is still enough time left to catch the train. He flaps his tie, makes a knot on his collar and looks into the mirror one more time. To ensure he looked executive in the real sense! He pulls the small tourist bag and strides out slamming the door on his wife who is scampering after him to bid good-bye.

Disheartened Jaya hangs her face and descends on the sofa, sinking her head in her palms leaning on her knees. She looks at the floor. She is wearing a shalwar and has a watch on her left wrist. Her two gold bangles tinkle as they fall down toward her elbow.

A few paces away to her left is a single bed by the wall from where Sharada gets up kissing the beads she was counting and hangs it on a clip of a hanger on the wall. She puts her feet into the slippers slowly—she easily catches cold on barefoot— and walks to Jaya. She limps as she has been suffering from joint pain for a few years now.

‘Why you feel down, my child?’ She consoles Jaya bending a little over her. Sharada removes her hands and holds her chin to see her face. ‘He is like that. He behaves so with everyone, with me also. When his father was alive, Rohan behaved with him likewise. So avoid him. Just cheer up and forget about him.’ Sharada looks into Jaya’s deep eyes.

‘Make tea. We both will enjoy it.’ Sharada tries to divert her focus.

‘He is never satisfied with anything.’ Jaya exclaims. ‘I keep things as he wants but soon he changes his preference and finds the things are not according to his wishes. He is always on fire.’

‘I know, you’re so good.’ Sharada replies. ‘He is lucky that he got such a good wife. But

Rohan does not understand.’

‘But why so? It is difficult to live with him, isn’t it?’ ‘Just forget about him, my child. Else it will pain you’. ‘But how long can I continue like this?’

‘Don’t worry. I hope he will change once you both have a child’. ‘I don’t believe so. He will never change.’

‘Have faith in God. Everything will change to good.’ ‘I’m so unfortunate that I got such a man’.

‘Don’t say this. He was not like what he is now. He was very jovial in nature. But some incidents changed him altogether.’

II

Rohan married late. He got his job late. He finished his studies late. He was late for everything but for a reason. And the reason was best known to him only—always elusive to others. After finishing his schooling, he sought advice from people who he thought were well-informed. He studied commerce and finished charter accountancy. There he spent a good many years to complete the course and was lamenting why he took up CA while his friends were already working. When in the final year, he fell seriously ill and missed out his current session and so he was not on board for the campus selection. He appeared for many interviews on his own but could not clear though he was good at study, had good knowledge in his subjects, and wide knowledge about general studies. He could tell which cricket team played which games, which players won or lost and when, which political parties came to power with landslide victory and which ones were wiped out. His history was good! It was a gap of about six months from finishing his degree to getting his first job. That too it would make him run on toes.

When he thought of marrying, he searched profiles of so many girls. He created a list of criteria that a girl must have. All the promising brides would miss out at least by one or two conditions and he would reject the proposal. His parents were left with no hope if Rohan would ever marry. It was 2008 when the economy was slack, he came across the profiles of two girls that he showed interest in. By 2009, he lost his job and one of the girls who was Rohan's first preference backed out. Rohan hurriedly agreed to marry the second preference who stood by after being convinced that he had taken up a few interviews and would most possibly get an offer from one of them soon.

The girl who showed faith became his wife—and she was Jaya. But he did not get his job from any of those he had aspired. Luckily he got a job from another one after waiting for a few more months. When everything was fine Rohan's attention was sharp at his wife and he started finding issues in her. All the time he would say he married in a hurry and he had no fair chance to go by the criteria of his likes and dislikes.

His wife is by any means a fine girl. Well educated, well cultured. Knows good cooking, and does as Rohan wants her to do. But he is never satisfied and is getting highly abusive as time passed.

III

The train is winding through the Lonavala valleys. Rohan looks out from the window. Woods sprawl as far as the eyes can catch sight of and the hills covered with thick grasses lurk like green velvet against the azure sky. The train slows its speed screeching. It stops at a small halt.

'The signal is not clear.' A news butcher [1] pronounces. Rohan buys a bottle of cold drink from him and sips. He is still looking out from the window. Some passengers get down on the low platform and some others stand on the lay-by[2] looking to the peaked end[3]. The engine emits white vapour which thins out into the air. Half an hour passes but the train is still standing.

Some passengers walk from the double-irons[4] to the bushes and stand with their back to the train and make water. Rohan too cannot tolerate and gets down on the platform and looks to the engine. The eye[5] has not turned green yet. A man in railway uniform passes by.

'What is the issue?' one of the passengers asks him.

‘A goods train has derailed’, he replies. ‘Until that train is put back on the rails, we’ve to wait.’

Rohan looks to the valley, hills and the forest. His eyes follow the streak of the thick smoke coming out of the engine that drifts into the valley to the farthest. He walks following the smoke leaving the train behind, to the rugged hill and reaches the edge of a gorge. A thick fountain of snowy water whooshes out of the gorge cascading down the valley. Rohan takes a ruttogonear the fountain. As he walks, he looks back at the train which is still standing. He keeps on moving. He peeps down at the foot of the fountain. A vast stream ripples off to the wilderness. Fish jump out of water and then run playing. All around him, there is greenery, bushes, plants and flowers.

Rohan hears splashes. He gets scared if a wild animal may be around. He follows the sound in awe scanning through the bushes. His eyes roll along the stream down the hill tract and suddenly stop at the sight of a girl bathing at a side of the stream. She is white in complexion and wears dark black lock, which covers her bare back. She has an oval mien and wide eyes. She is wearing a single loose cloth wrapped around her body—her beautiful bosoms reveal through the drenched white cloth. She is nothing short of a mermaid.

Rohan looks for a way to reach her. He walks down the rockbound and stands before the girl. As the girl turns, she sees Rohan. She feels shy and runs out of the water. As she runs out, the cloth from her body almost slips down revealing her shining body. Rohan is smitten.

The girl picks a towel and covers herself. She wears her outfits hurriedly. She and Rohan look at each other without spelling out a word. She runs from there. Rohan

follows her. The girl then reaches a pasture where the sheep and goats are grazing. She picks up a staff and maneuvers the cattle to the west up the hill. Rohan follows her.

‘Hello, who are you?’

‘I’m Menka. I live there.’ The girl points to a cave that they could see from there.

‘You’re so beautiful.’

‘Go away. Leave here. I do not like to be with any unknown person.’ Menka turns her face away.

Suddenly they hear rustling in the bush on their left. They turn and spot the backofatiger

crouching toward the cattle. Menka screams and shields herself behind Rohan. Rohan thinks

for a minute and picks up a dry stick. He takes out a lighter from his pocket and lights the

stick and scares the tiger away. Menka hugs Rohan in joy. He kisses her.

‘Come with me’, Menka smiles, ‘I’ll introduce you to my parents.’

They both walk to the cave. As they reach, Menka runs to her father and hugs him.

‘Baba, he met me near the stream’, saying this Menka goes near her

mother. 'He saved me and our cattle from a tiger.'

'Who are you?' Menka's father asks. 'Where are you from?'

'I'm Rohan from Pune. I was just roaming around and met her.'

'Thank you. You saved my daughter and our cattle.' He replies. 'I wish you should stay with

us for a few days, if possible.' Menka praises Rohan's wit and brave act to her mother.

'Hmm,...actually I'm

'Please don't reject our proposal', says Menka's mother. 'But how did you come here?' Menka's father enquires.

'Actually I was going on a trip to Mumbai.' Rohan replies. 'The train stopped at the halt here

and I got down. I was just roaming about and found Menka. You people are so lovely.'

'Thank you.' Menka's father turns to Menka. 'Serve him something to eat and take him to our meadows.'

'Ok, baba.' Menka holds Rohan's hand and takes him to a large rocky room. A maid brings earthen pots, fruits and raw vegetables and puts them on a mat on the floor. Menka sits and asks Rohan also to sit. Rohan looks at the vegetables.

Menka takes out pudding on a banana leaf and pust chapatis.

Rohan begins eating. He then picks an apple and grapes.

'You don't like vegetables?' Menka asks. 'I like cooked vegetables.'

Menka smiles. After finishing the lunch they leave for the meadows. Menka shows him

the meadows, fields, and ravines where they roam about and play daily. She makes

voices of some animals. They run to her. Rohan is amazed how Menka could call animals

and play with them with much ease. They play until the sunset.

The next day as they are bathing in a stream, Rohan finds pearls scattered around.

'Hey, see so beautiful pearls', picking up a few in his hand Rohan shows them to Menka.

'Are, these are not as beautiful.' Menka replies. 'We've even more beautiful pearls. I'll show

you'. She smiles. When they return home, Menka takes him to a large treasury. She opens a box that lay nearby and unlocks the treasury. It is full of gold and

silver jewelry,
diamonds and other precious stones. ‘Wow!’ Rohan
exclaims with wide eyes.

‘I’ll show you one thing, the most precious thing.’ Saying this Menka picks up a
shining
gold key from one of the racks of the treasury and unlocks a small door in the
center.

‘Wow! It’s so beautiful. Is it sapphire or diamond?’

‘No, it’s soul.’ Saying this, she takes it in her hand and brings it out. She leaves
it in air.

The soul hangs in the air rotating and becomes brighter by each passing
moment. Rohan feels

the wave of happiness around him. He is spellbound. ‘Where did you get
it?’ He asks gleefully.

‘I don’t know. My parents know it.’ She puts the soul back in the treasury and
locks it.

She puts the gold key in a cloth-made wallet and slings it at her waist.

At sundown, Rohan, Menka and her parents are sitting for dinner. Menka’s
mother
serves them food.

‘Where did you get the sapphire?’ Rohan asks Menka’s father. ‘Which
sapphire?’ He retorts.

‘He’s talking about the soul.’ Menka replies. ‘I showed it to him.’

‘It is not sapphire; it’s soul. We’ve inherited it from generations’, says her
father. ‘It is said

that one of our progenitors got it as a gift from our deity of happiness.’

‘Deity of happiness?’

‘Yes. Centuries back, deity of happiness—the king of all our gods—held a contest
to show

who is the happiest person on the earth. And one of our forefathers won it. Only
the happiest
person can hold it for life.’

IV

It is Friday morning. The light breeze makes the atmosphere very soothing
and

pleasant. Rohan knocks at the door of his flat. As soon as he enters his flat he
takes Jaya in

his arms and swings in joy. His mother stands surprised.

‘Are you okay? What happened to you?’ Sharada asks with a smile amid
surprise. ‘Did you

achieve what you wanted?’ Jaya asks.

He kneels down and touches his mother’s feet. ‘Would you bring me a

cup of hot coffee?’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Jaya goes to the kitchen with a smile. She is happy because Rohan is so happy and he is showing love to her. That’s what she wants.

‘What is it that Rohan is so happy?’ Jaya says to herself. She sets the coffee on the stove and returns to Rohan. Rohan is talking with his mother, who is sitting on a chair.

‘This is for you.’ Rohan takes out a wristwatch and hands it to his mother. ‘See this sari.

This is also for you.’

Rohan takes a beautiful salwar suite and gives it to Jaya. ‘How is it?’

‘It is so beautiful.’ She hugs the suite to her bosoms. Sharada has a wrinkle of joy in her

eyes. She is happy not because Rohan gave her the dress but because he seems very happy.

Soon Jaya goes back to the kitchen and brings coffee for him. ‘Thank you, my darling.’

‘What is it? You’re so happy.’ His mother asks. ‘Did you get promotion?’ ‘No, mom. I’m just happy.’

Rohan has the coffee and prepares for going to his office. He is humming songs.

V

It’s night. Rohan is at the door of his bedroom and bids his mother. He smiles. Sharada too goes

to her bed with a smile. She is wearing the sari that Rohan has brought. Jaya, in a light orange

coloured suit, is waiting for him on the bed. ‘Wow, you’re looking so gorgeous today.’ ‘Thanks.’

‘Would you tell me the secret behind your beauty?’

‘I look so every day’, Jaya smiles. ‘But you’re casting beautiful eyes tonight.’

‘Hmm.’

Rohan smiles.

‘Would you tell me the secret behind your beautiful eyes?’ ‘Really?’ Saying this he tickles his wife and kisses her. ‘Would you please tell me?’

‘On my way to Mumbai, I got down at one of the stations near Lonavala.’ Rohan narrates. ‘I don’t know how I took a secluded byway into the valley and got lost. There I met

a girl. She was very beautiful.’ He stops for a while and twinkles his eyes. ‘She took me to

her dwelling and introduced me to her parents. I stayed with them for two days. I don’t know

why but I feel a completely changed person.’ ‘What?’ Jaya could not believe him. ‘Who was she?’

‘They live in the forest and told me that they do not like to come in contact with the people from outside their area.’

‘What are you saying?’ Jaya frowns.

‘Yeah, just a minute.’ Rohan jumps from the bed and rummages his bag and takes out a locket

studded with a diamond. ‘See this is the locket she gifted to me.’

‘This seems very precious.’

Jaya’s eyes fall on a gold key in his bag. She picks it up. ‘What is this for?’

‘Are, this is the gold key to their treasury.’ Rohan cries. ‘How did this come with me? Oh,

no.’

‘To their treasury?’ Jaya exclaims.

‘Oh, I must return this to them. I have to go back to them.’

VI

The next day, Rohan and Jaya go to the same station and search for the area looking for those

who he met. Rohan is surprised how the area looked very different from what he had seen just

two days ago.

‘Are , this is the same station but the entire area is different.’ ‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m telling you the truth.’ Rohan holds Jaya by her arms. ‘This is a matter of two days only, you know. There were no houses, no people around.’ Rohan stops at a place.

‘This village did not exist. This was a lonely place.’

‘What? Are you fine?’ Jaya is clueless to what he says.

Rohan looks around and stops a man and asks him. ‘When did this village come up here?’

The man shrugs off and walks away without answering him. He asks the same

question from some other people but no one replies him.

Rohan and Jaya search high and low

but to no trace. At one place, Rohan sees an old man who is idling on a cot at his door. He

goes to him and repeats the same question.

‘I don’t know what you mean by when this village came up here.’ The old man replies. ‘We

have lived here for hundreds of years.’ Rohan and Jaya look

at each other.

‘But how can it be so?’ Rohan says. ‘I came here just two days back and there was nothing

around. Now you say you people have been living here for hundreds of years. I cannot believe

it.’

‘Would you tell me something about what happened to you? Let me see if I can help you?’

Rohan narrates the whole story that happened with him. The old man stares at him with

great surprise.

‘Why are you looking at me this way?’ Rohan asks.

‘I believe you met the soul of the girl of the first family who settled here?’

‘Whatsoul?’ Both Rohan and Jaya exclaim.

‘I’m talking about the first family who settled down here. But it is more than hundreds of

years from now.’

Rohan and Jaya are surprised. They cannot believe.

‘It is said that those are lucky to whom that family appears.’ The old man says. ‘The girl

may have given you some gifts. Isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ Rohan takes out the locket and gold key and shows to him. The old man takes

the key in his hand and turns it up and down and smiles. ‘The key to

happiness,’ the old man murmurs.

‘You’re a lucky man’. The old man returns the key to Rohan.

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