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Teenage Fears and Fantasies

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Twelve-year-old Sneha was thrilled to go round the vast jasmine garden of her aunt. The bushy plants in full bloom swayed gently in the evening breeze. The aroma of the blossoms wafted across the field, mildly intoxicating her. She felt she was in a dream world.

The garden was on the outskirts of the south Indian city of Madurai. She had arrived there only a few hours ago with her parents to spend her *Navarathri* holidays. Her aunt lived alone in a palatial house adjacent to the garden. Her uncle was a child specialist having a thriving practice in Dubai. Her cousins, a boy and a girl, were with their father studying in the emirate.

In the garden, women workers were busy plucking the flowers in their bud stage. Both their hands worked in clockwork precision, deftly pulling and depositing them in baskets tied to their waists. Their job fascinated Sneha. She ran into her aunt's house to fetch a basket so that she too could engage herself in plucking.

The bushes were roughly of her height. "Take out only the fully-developed bulbous buds, not the thin short ones," a worker advised her, as her tender fingers kept working. A feeling of immense satisfaction at doing something of her liking engulfed her. She could not imagine doing things like this in her home city of Chennai, which had become a concrete jungle with traffic jams, pollution and scarcities of power and water. Further, she was constantly under pressure from her parents to read school books and do little else.

Sneha developed pain in her fingers and the plucking rate slowed down. "Don't hurt yourself, stop for the day," the worker shouted. Yes, it would do for now, she felt, and ran to the house with her basket. Her aunt was standing at the main doorway. "Aunty, aunty, I plucked 241 buds in half an hour," she beamed. The woman patted her warmly on the back.

Sneha's aunt knitted the flowers into a long string and pinned it on the girl's head to hang in two rows at the back. "You look gorgeous. Madurai *Malli*, as the locally-grown variety of jasmine is called in Tamil, imparts a unique beauty and fragrance to its wearer. It is internationally famous, though more than 200 species of it are grown all over the world in tropical regions," her aunt waxed eloquent.

The girl heard her in rapt attention. "Jasmines grow as bushes or vines. In South Asia the flowers are used in bridal decorations, religious ceremonies and temple worship. In China jasmine tea is a specialty. In Hawaii, it is the subject of many songs. It is the national flower of some countries, including Indonesia and the Philippines."

Her aunt had named her house "Jasmine Gem." It was built only a few years ago out of profits earned from exporting the flowers. The particular type grown in her garden enjoyed an excellent

market globally and fetched good returns. The flowers were air-lifted every night to foreign destinations in temperature-controlled reefer containers.

The bungalow's architectural features, colour scheme, paintings, wall hangings, furniture and upholstery were all designed on the jasmine theme. This was Sneha's first visit there after the house was constructed.

Every evening Sneha went to the garden. She immensely loved plucking the flowers. She also evinced great interest in learning the techniques of managing the farm, especially the methods of applying fertilizers to the plants, watering, tending and pruning them.

Sneha was given a separate luxuriously-furnished room for her stay. Her parents were in a similar but bigger room. It was a totally carefree holiday that the girl had. She had no homework to do and no text books to read. Moreover, her aunt was very affectionate. Whenever time permitted, she would narrate stories to her drawn from the epics. She would take her to the market and buy her whatever she wanted. This was quite contrary to the experience she had with her own parents, who never had sufficient time to spend with her.

Time passed very fast.

One night as Sneha lay on her cosy bed, her mind raced back in time. When she entered the third standard in school, her class teacher had asked her, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" Her reply was, "A cardiologist like my mother. I will go to the US, get enlisted in a hospital and earn good money." But this idea gradually got diluted. She would not like to spend her time with patients day in and day out. She looked for better avenues. She would become a computer engineer like her father. The reason: she could work in air-conditioned comfort.

In reality, she was finding it difficult to get high marks in the crucial subjects of Science and Mathematics, necessary for getting admission into medicine or engineering after the school. When her aunt, who had no worthwhile educational qualification to her credit, could make good money through jasmine exports and live like a queen, why she should not emulate her, she wondered.

Her smart phone rang. On the line was her dearest friend and classmate Ramya. The caller said, "Hi Snake, how are you? Our school is going to re-open in two days. We will get our quarterly exam marks sheet. My stomach has already started churning."

Sneha remained cool, as she did not like the topic at all. "It's ok. No big deal. Let us not worry ourselves much right now. Any other news? Good night, bye."

Sneha touched the FaceBook icon on her smart phone. After logging in, she looked into the 'feed page.' A quotation posted by an acquaintance stared at her -- "Happiness is doing what you really want." How true! She loved the idea but it was a far cry in her case. Her parents would not allow her to have a say in anything.

A few flips and another post hit her on the face. “Happiness is being yourself, in a world that is constantly trying to change you.” She cried, “Sure, sure.” She closed her eyes for a few moments and then logged out of the network. She dragged a velvet-covered soft pillow lying near her feet and hugged it tightly. Soon she fell asleep.

The next day, Sneha and her parents left for Chennai. Before leaving, the girl embraced her aunt and kissed her passionately. “I miss you, aunty,” she said softly with tears in her eyes.

In Chennai one night Sneha’s mother had a feverish discussion with her husband about the girl. “She is not showing much interest in studies. Her performance has been deteriorating day by day. She appears to be an odd girl out in our relatives circle. We should not allow her to continue like this. We will also cut a sorry figure in our neighbourhood, where girls are aiming at scoring high marks to be able to get into medicine or information technology.” Sneha’s father listened to her carefully and agreed with her. The two decided to approach a psychologist and seek a solution.

A few days later Sneha’s mother took her to a psychologist. She was a specialist in problems of the teenagers and had several research papers to her credit. Sneha’s mother narrated to her the girls’ tapering interest in studies and sought a way out.

The psychologist had a fairly long one-on-one session with Sneha and later a separate discussion with her mother. She also conducted a few tests on the girl. Finally she told them, “Teenage psychology is complex. Hormones play havoc on their psyche. Research confirms that the road to independent adulthood is a bumpy one with plenty of struggles on the way. Several external factors shape the mentality of a teenager, besides genetics. The activities of relatives and close friends cast a strong influence on the person. More often they are pushed to the limits of their endurance. Parents should keep a cool head, try to understand their changing needs and see if they are reasonable.”

She continued, “In the case of Sneha, conventional studies do not appear to hold any promise for her future. Her eager involvement in floriculture activities when she had a holiday at her aunt’s place is a clear pointer. She derives satisfaction from working with the nature.”

The psychologist finally gave her advice, “Forget medicine or computers for Sneha. At college, let her do an agriculture-related course. Bring her up keeping this in mind.” The suggestion appealed to the youngster. Instantly she jumped in her seat but sat down quickly.

On returning home, her mother had a talk with her husband and finally told the girl, “Relax dear. You don’t have to do medicine or computers. We will not insist. Somehow complete standard XII. We will be happy if you just get pass marks. Then we will manage to put you in B.Sc. (Horticulture).” The girl liked the idea. Soon her behaviour underwent a dramatic change. She volunteered to take private tuitions to cross the school barrier.

That summer Sneha and her parents went on a tour of Europe. The world-famous monuments like the Leaning Tower of Pisa or the Eiffel Tower did not excite her. Nor did a thundering ride in the super fast train Eurostar under the English Channel between London and Paris appeal to her. But when they visited the annual flower show at the Keukenhof gardens in South Holland she felt overwhelmed. The wide variety of tulip flowers grown there, besides daffodils and other spring types, mesmerized her.

She was enchanted by the flamboyant riot of colours displayed by the tulips. The blossoms glowed brilliantly in fiery scarlet and pure white, golden yellow and hazy brown, bright violet and suave pink, and several other hues. There were near black tulips as well.

At the garden office she made enquiries about its history and growth. She learnt that the Keukenhof garden, covering an area of 80 acres, was the result of team work of floriculture experts, landscape artists, computer engineers and management specialists, all functioning in tandem. She fantasized creating and managing a similar garden in India, featuring the famous Madurai *Malli*.

The wheel of time rolled by fast. As planned, she completed her school, entered the college and earned a masters degree in horticulture with specialization in floriculture. Subsequently she also did management studies. Interestingly, she obtained high grades in all these subjects

Sneha's parents purchased for her a large jasmine farm near her aunt's place. It was developed into a beautiful garden with well-tended lawns and neatly-laid walk-ways. Several bushes were cut to resemble animals, including some extinct ones. Replicas of world-famous statues installed at strategic points added a touch of romance to the landscape. Benches under a canopy were placed at important intersections for the visitors to sit and relax. A research unit with experts drawn from different specialties and a museum to highlight the history and growth of jasmines in India also came up.

As preparations for the inauguration of the venture got underway, her earlier days kept reflecting in her mind. She personally supervised all the arrangements. She was going to have her day! She was excited.

The opening ceremony was a grand affair. Sneha's aunt, who inspired her, was requested to cut the ribbon. At the end, the invitees were taken round the garden. On a small artificial island at a central point, surrounded by water fountains, stood a tall granite slab in the shape of a jasmine bud. A message inscribed on it attracted everyone's attention. It read, "Understand your children. Help them realize their grand dreams. This is one such."

Sneha was delighted. It was the best day in her life. She felt she had succeeded not only in realizing her long-cherished dream but also in sending a powerful message to parents.