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## I Will 'Live' !!!!

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Tears kept rolling down Meera's eyes. It seemed the dam had finally burst. All the sorrow that she had stored inside her was pouring out. The sobs were soft but they wracked her body. There was nobody beside her to console her. Once again she had to obey the order given to her. Self-centered and pragmatic Sukant, her husband may have been, but she had never expected this level of callousness from him.

*But no one, even from her own family, had ever cared. Never.* It had always been like this for her. Ever since she was a child, she was kept in the shadows, not allowed to question and made to feel confused and nervous by the people shouting at her all the time. Surrounded by four elder brothers and a very strict father, it became very natural for Meera to remain a patient listener, never venturing to speak or express an opinion not out of choice but out of compulsion. Already a shy and introvert person, she was inadvertently forced to retreat into her own private self. As months passed into years it became a habit for her to remain passive and do just that what was *ordered* to her ; never to argue, question, suggest or retaliate. Her mother, already overburdened with housework was relieved to find a compliant and quiet daughter never sensing her sense of deprivation and loss of self-expression and identity. She was happy to cater to her boisterous patriarchal brood and preferred Meera more as a helping hand rather a soul mate. Ironically, it was she who passed the most sarcastic remarks sometimes at Meera's quietness or lack of enthusiasm not realizing that Meera had been forced to become such a person and she, as a mother, had failed her daughter.

It was not as if the family members did not love or care for Meera, it was just that they over did it. Nobody realized when this 'care' turned into 'control'. By not letting her speak out and express or to take decisions, Meera's family robbed her of her personality, her involvement, her individuality and her freedom. Meera tried to console herself thinking that they knew better and were perhaps doing the best for her. Still, the sense of acute deprivation of meeting her inner soul and leading her own life became totally unbearable at times. She was never allowed to decide on anything about her own life. She had wanted to take up Economics Honours. The subject interested her. Nobody knew she was the only one who read 'The Business Standard' cover to cover in the recesses of her room. But she was forced to take up Home Science. "Good for you girl", her father had bellowed and a terrified Meera had just nodded. How she had hated those three years. Her request to join German and French classes had also been laughed away. "You think you are going to marry a German or are you planning to settle down in France?" , her younger brother had roared. Better learn tailoring, she had been advised. With teary eyes Meera had cut blouse after blouse without any interest.

Unconsciously, she was killing herself, forcing herself to believe that everything was happening for the best, for some kind of a plan destiny had for her.

And then that day had arrived. She had been handed a pink *kanjeevaram* saree and some jewellery and asked to get ready with the help of the maid. Naturally gifted with good looks and a charming personality, she got ready soon, totally confused by the gaiety and feverish excitement on the faces of her family members. She actually did not know what was happening around her. She thought they were going for some important ceremony, hence this special preparation. She was escorted to the drawing room and handed the tea-tray. It was then that realization dawned. Her heart almost stopped beating. Quite she might be but stupid she wasn't. She very well knew what this meant. She wanted to cry out aloud, to run away from this place. She did not want to get married. She wanted to continue her studies and take up a job; open a boutique perhaps. This aspect had never occurred to her. She longed to talk to someone, to share her pain, to put her thoughts across to her father. But she had no one. Not a single special friend. Her silence was taken as her attitude and her snobbery, more so as she belonged to a very affluent family and always came in a chauffeur driven car. Other students preferred to keep a distance from her. A loud sigh escaped her lips. The old maid, startled by this unexpected sound threw her a sharp look. Meera was aware that any protest was futile. The decision, once again, had already been taken on her behalf. She entered demurely and placed the tray on the table catching the glimpse of a gold cufflink on a white sleeve and the golden pleats of a saree.

“Sit here, by my side.”

The soft female voice sounded very soothing and Meera promptly did as she was told. Slowly and very daringly, with nervous trepidation she lifted her head to see whether the voice matched the picture she had conjured in her mind. It sure did! There was a warm smile and such welcome on the beautiful face that Meera suddenly longed to be enveloped in her would be mother-in-law's arms and pour out her innermost feelings. She forgot to even glance at the prospective groom, so mesmerized she was by the lady's pleasant disposition. To her delight, the negotiations were finalized and Meera soon tied the nuptial knot with Sukant. Few people realized that the joy on the bride's face was not due to the man in her life but his mother. The big jolt hit her hard the next day as she reached her *sasural*. Her eyes kept searching incessantly for her mother-in-law from behind the veil in the thick crowd but she could not locate her. Presuming her to be extremely busy but still finding it strange for her to be absent from the customary welcome, she nevertheless preferred to be quiet. It was only when she was led to her bedroom and was left all alone with Sukant that she sought the answer to the question that had been bothering her.

“Where is *maaji*? Is she unwell? Why did she not come to meet me even once?”

The perplexed look on Sukant's face startled her.

“What's the matter?”

“But...but my mother’s dead. She died six years ago. Severely diabetic. Suffered a heart attack.”

“Oh! I am so sorry!” Meera was stunned.

“The lady....Who had come with you...That day...” she stammered.

“She is my aunt. She is my mother’s younger sister. *Maasi* often comes. She planned everything and made all arrangements for this wedding. She had to return yesterday itself. Her mother-in-law slipped and broke her hip bone. Very unfortunate, isn’t it?”

Meera shook her head.

“Didn’t someone tell you? We talked about everything.”

“We!” Who is this “we”? *She wanted to tell him that she was not a part of this “we”*. Who would bother to tell her anything .She came to know the groom’s name only through the wedding invitation. She wanted to ask him instead whether he had been told anything about her by her family. But then who would tell him and what would they tell him. *Did they really know anything about her?*

“Hey Meera!!! Come on! Cheer up!! Don’t be so sad. At least you have your mother with you. I miss *maa* terribly all the time but to be frank, I never expected a daughter-in-law to feel so bad about her mother-in-law. I thought you would be happy at this information...Most girls do not like to be under their *sasuma*’s shadow...Well, you know what I mean. Any other girl would have been thrilled, I believe. But you...You amaze me.”

Meera could not understand why fate had to be so cruel to her. She kept staring at Sukant vacantly until he became alarmed and hugged her closer. He could never understand the depth of Meera’s agony, the gnawing pain for the relationship she had longed for and the void that could never be filled. The matter was indeed strange. He was really touched to have such a sensitive, caring wife. But he also doubted her reaction. How could she not be aware of the details? Was it an act to touch his soft spot and hold him tight in an emotional grip?

But Sukant never got a chance to ponder over such thoughts. Meera suddenly became very talkative and started asking questions, desperately desirous to know as much as possible about her mother-in-law. In her single-minded pursuit, she simply forgot her husband who sat by her side, completely flabbergasted. Sukant was shocked. He had never imagined Meera to be so inquisitive; that too about her mother-in-law. Much as he loved his mother, Sukant had never expected his wedding night to be completely overtaken by her. He could not understand Meera’s unbridled inquisitiveness ; she was trying to make a dead person come alive by her queries and questions.

“*Maaji* would have loved me very much.” Meera whispered to herself.

“Well....let her son do that now”, said Sukant with a glint in his eyes.

“What?”

Sukant just pulled her closer and kissed her mouth shut, eager to make Meera his own completely.

The days followed in a usual monotonous pattern for Meera. There was nothing new in life for her. Marriage simply became an extension of her maiden life: laden with even more responsibilities and catering to the biggest and the smallest wishes of her father-in-law and her brothers-in-law along with her husband. Ever since her mother-in-law's death, the big house and its inmates had been starved of a female's touch. Meera was indeed the best person to fill this vacant place. She assumed the role of an ideal *bahu* very easily. Disciplined, quiet, totally self-engaging and highly reserved, she functioned silently, resembling an automaton so much that even Sukant, buried deep in his business deals, sometimes wondered whether it was the same Meera who had indulged in that non-stop chatter on their wedding night. Since that night she had never asked any questions and her replies to the questions directed at her were mostly monosyllabic.

Meera, on the other hand, had resigned herself to her fate. She realized that she could never get what she yearned for the most and there was no use cribbing about it. To be truthful, life was not totally bad for her. She did not lack any kind of material comfort and was free to do whatever she wanted with her free time. Money was no constraint either. But having been deprived of assertiveness all her life, it became difficult for her to open her mouth for even trivial or everyday matters. Moreover, when she realized that decision making was out of her control even now, whatever zest she had somehow managed to generate was thoroughly quenched down. Her desire to take classes for the slum children was totally disapproved and her father-in-law promptly arranged for a 'post' at a nearby posh school through his contacts and deposited a new 'chauffeur driven car' at her disposal. He might have been doing this with the best of intentions but Meera deeply resented this 'control' that others conveniently labeled as 'care'. There was no one to understand her, to empathise with her, to be her soul-mate and to provide her emotional support.

Her quiet demeanor was more of an advantage to the people around her. And Meera preferred to behave in the manner expected of her. But sometimes she deeply resented this subservient nature thrust upon her. And then it hurt badly, very badly. Just as it did this morning.

“How many times I have told you not to serve me tea at this hour?” Her father-in-law's irritation could be clearly seen on his deeply marked face.

“But you had especially asked for cardamom tea”, Meera replied softly in a confused tone.

“Nonsense!!! Go and make some coffee. You must pay more attention.” Her father-in-law shouted.

“Okay *Babuji*, I will bring it soon.”

Blinking away her tears and feeling sure that she had indeed heard correctly, she nevertheless put herself to task and was awarded only by a curt nod when she placed hot coffee in front of him.

At times she wondered whether her own family was ever bothered by her increasing silences. But then, they too, had never had the time or the desire to understand her feelings. And now that she was no longer their responsibility, the need for sensitization diminished even more. Their visits were always formal and customary. They came on religious ceremonies and festivals, laden with costly gifts and were extremely delighted by the ‘comforts’ they saw Meera surrounded with. They departed happy and satisfied; congratulating themselves for the excellent choice they had made for her.

Nobody ever bothered about her drawn silent faces or her apparent withdrawal in the conversations and discussions. Even her mother never had any apprehensions or misgivings about Meera’s nature. She also took it for granted that Meera was happy and since Meera was an introvert by nature, there was no need for her to be vociferous and talkative all of a sudden. In fact, Meera had been deeply shocked to learn that her mother had been insistent about this particular *rishta* because she thought that Meera would be happy and rule over the house as the eldest *bahu* since Sukant’s mother would not be there. Little did her mother know that *Meera never longed for power but for love, which perhaps the mother-in-law might have given her*. Nobody ever guessed the void in her heart; no one realized the fact that her entire identity, her soul and her personality had been subjugated and totally annihilated; strangely by her near and dear ones. To be more precise, all the males in her family were responsible for this destruction in her personality.

Meera’s silences multiplied with every passing day. She had no friends and social occasions saw her being a quiet companion to her husband or her father-in-law. She rarely answered a question directed at her. The others were always quicker than her. She would have loved to experiment with a mocktail, maybe tried a mojito, but was always handed a glass of fresh lime soda, perfunctorily. Gradually she lost interest in such social gatherings and the others were happy too: *they* believed attending such parties was actually a strain for such a reserved and quiet person. The visits to the parents’ house were also not very frequent. Meera did not find any change in the atmosphere there unlike other girls; in fact her *maika* was more stifling. At least she had her personal space and privacy at her *sasural*. Besides, who would have looked after the males back home? They did not want to miss a single moment of the care and affection that Meera poured on them. Her brothers’ weddings were the occasions where Meera had to be present as an important entity ; the groom’s sister and she really reveled in the moments of glory and importance awarded to her then. After all, she had four brothers; three of them elder to her. Wasn’t she lucky ? Yes, indeed ! She muttered to herself.



She had suffered another great shock when her brother-in-law had announced that he would remain a bachelor always. This meant there wouldn't be the entry of another female for the next ten years at least, that too, depending upon the decision of the youngest one who was still in college. This was so because the third brother had already announced his preference for his Australian batch-mate Cynthia and his decision of not only migrating to Australia but settling down in that land as well. The very brief half an hour meeting with Cynthia had made it clear to everyone that Cynthia had absolutely no desire to come back to India, this filthy land, ever, once she finished her post graduation in Buddhist Studies. The others were angry and disappointed ; Meera had been agonized. She would have loved to be with Cynthia, she would have cared for her too. She would have given anything to have a female companion, even a foreigner: even if she was as evil as the ones they showed in the *saas-bahu* serials.

The absence of another female affected Meera very badly. Her father-in-law, missing his wife terribly had immersed himself in his work, forgetting to behave like a normal person. He wanted and also succeeded in establishing Meera as a substitute for executing the duties and responsibilities of his wife but was totally unconcerned about *her* feelings and *her* desires in that process. Sadly, the four sons were heading the same way, impatient, bossy and totally insensitive. The brief snatches of conversation made Meera realize that the situation had been almost the same for the mother-in-law. But this did not offer any solace to her. On the contrary, she began missing her even more and fantasized about being a soul-mate, a friend to the old lady had she been alive.

Amidst all this, exactly three years after her marriage, Meera found she was pregnant. Throughout her pregnancy she prayed to God to bless her with a daughter, her very own bundle of joy. This daughter would compensate for all the pain in her heart; she would be her best friend, her companion for life. Wasn't the bond between the mother and the daughter the most special one? She feared that a son would definitely grow up to be a replica of his father and his grandfather and once again she would remain lonely and friendless. Only a daughter could understand her better, share her thoughts and feel her pain. A daughter would also imbibe the sensitivity and the care, natural to all females: something that Meera coveted so fervently. She longed to hold her daughter in her arms and lavish her with all the love and express all the feelings that lay dormant in her heart.

Thankfully, her pregnancy passed without any problem. She abstained from doing any tiresome chores except supervising Sukant's special business lunches. Everybody took care of her in his/her own way but Meera longed for companionship. She wanted somebody to sit beside her, massage her back, feed her something special ( she was fed up of the chocolate pastry Sukant brought dutifully every weekend ). Her mouth watered for something *khatta*, or something spicy. Most of the times, the cook and the maid did not understand the dish and when they ultimately managed to make it, Meera had either lost her desire or the dish was nowhere equal to the taste she had in mind. She had had the tastiest meal only on her *Goadbharai* when her mother and her eldest *bhabhi* had cooked some of her favourite dishes; Kokum fish *curry*, *brinjal-mint pakoda* and soya *biryani*, as per the custom. But more than

anything else Meera longed for the advises and the tips of an elderly experienced lady, someone who could dispel all her fears and doubts that were so normal in the first pregnancy.

Her pains came quick and sudden. Since she had made herself believe that she was carrying a female child, she kept addressing the unborn child by the name she had chosen, Tanu ; a shorter version of Tanushree. However, fate had other plans for her. While the nurses squealed and congratulated Meera for a bonny boy; Meera felt that God had actually been supremely unfair to her in all aspects. The shock of being deprived of the soul mate she longed for combined with the formidable prospect of seeing this boy grow up as an even 'improved' version of his family made Meera feel so depressed and desolate that she started weeping uncontrollably. The doctor, alarmed by her hysterics, made sure that she was not in any kind of discomfort and then beckoned the anxious family members inside. Disconcerted at being the centre of attraction, Meera's howls became louder. Everyone tried to comfort and pacify her. They were all genuinely puzzled by her reaction. Meera, on the other hand detested any kind of talk during this vulnerable moment. Seeing her disturbed state and her apparent dislike of the visitors thronging the room, the doctor finally ordered everyone to leave the room and allow the new mother to take rest. While her parents requested the doctor to take special care of her, Sukant, deliriously happy, became unusually concerned and holding his wife tenderly, asked what the matter was. But Meera, conditioned to remain quiet for years simply buried her face in the pillow and kept shedding silent tears. Accepting this behavior as a part of the post-natal blues, Sukant left the room, leaving Meera alone with her thoughts. The next few days were spent in a whirl-wind of visits and blessings. Meera's father threw a big party for his grandson's arrival. Not to be outdone, the day Meera returned from her parents' house after the customary forty day period, her father-in-law threw a party too, more lavish and more grand. Meera was gifted a diamond pendant. There was joy and gaiety all around. But even then Meera's heart missed a beat whenever anyone remarked that the baby had great resemblance to his father and his grandfather. Sukant's *maasi* had also come. She looked just the same, full of love and compassion. It was she who made the tasty *adrak ka ras* and the *chana dal halwa* for Meera, on all the three days she stayed. She also made a box of *pinni* and *methi-gond laddu*, important post pregnancy food for lactating mother. Besides, she instructed the cook to give a big bowl of *massor dal* to Meera for lunch and eggs and *palak saag* for dinner without any miss. The maid was told to give only boiled and cooled water to her mistress and to massage her feet with warm mustard oil every night without fail. Maasi's words were like manna from heaven to Meera. Meera's mother and *bhabhi* had indeed taken great care of her but they never gave her this kind of love, the unsolicited attention and this special care that affection deprived people like Meera craved for. She wanted *maasi* to stay forever; she wanted to talk to her .But what would she talk about? And how long could she stay? No! *She had to learn to stay alone, to be alone, as always.*

However, Meera could hold no grudge against her son. She was, by nature, a loving and generous person and did not see her son as the anti-climax of her nine month long wait but as a part of her own self. She devoted herself to bringing up her son and refused to take the help of a nanny. Sukant was very happy to see his wife becoming 'normal' and settling back into



the old routine. He did not complain at the hundred percent attention his son was getting at his cost and was actually delighted to see Meera as a full time mother, totally absorbed in taking care of their child. What he did not realize was that by giving the baby her total time, Meera was inadvertently trying to bring up her son like herself, giving him her values and principles and teaching him to be more sensitive and understanding.

Alok, her son was an adorable child. Everyone doted on him. Blessed with his mother's charm and innate goodness and his father's pragmatism and attractiveness, he grew up into a fine young boy excelling in every field. He felt hurt at his mother's subordination in the house. He was sensitive enough to understand her pain but chose to keep quiet about it. The only time he showed his silent anger was when Sukant, habituated to mocking Meera even unintentionally, did it publicly. Alok never spoke a word but left that place instantly; especially the dining table where the members sat together, leaving his meal unfinished. A long uneasy silence followed his departure. Quite strangely, none of the male members ever reprimanded him or called him back. How strange it was, thought Meera, an eight year old child is allowed to take decisions because he is male, not me. Alok's comforting glance and a bear-hug made Meera forget all her woes. She thanked God everyday for this 'humane' touch that existed in Alok, his care and his concern that was not limited to his mother but even to the gardener who was debarred from watering the plants if he had fever. The driver's daughter could continue her education in a Convent only at Alok's intervention; the driver had once mentioned his financial constraints while driving Alok to school. Meera was more than happy to assist Alok in his humanitarian concerns.

Life followed a normal pattern. Things took a dramatic turn suddenly on the eve of Alok's thirteenth birthday. Busy with the preparations, Meera suddenly found herself giddy and nauseous. The doctor confirmed her fears. She was indeed two months pregnant. She was so ashamed of herself. Another child! After such a huge gap! How will she take care of it? Will she be able to give her full attention to both the children. After all, Alok was also at a crucial juncture. But Meera had stupidly forgotten that no decision was ever her own. The thought of another child was not very welcome to either Sukant or his father, more so when they already had Alok, their successor. The two 'powerful' males did not take any chance. As soon as the ultrasound confirmed that it was a girl-child, a date was soon fixed for the termination and Meera was simply asked to be ready. A stupefied Meera had sat on the bed, holding her stomach, trying to caress her unborn daughter. She knew she had no choice; she had to obey the order this time too. But to kill a part of herself, the daughter she so badly wanted, was unbearable to her. Her mind went numb. She had not realized when Sukant had silently slipped out of the room and had preferred not to disturb her. For once Meera was actually relieved to be left alone. She did not want to talk to anybody. What was the point! *She had to do what was ordered to her.* But grief enveloped her tightly. Her body shook with silent sobs.

She felt a hand on her back.

She turned around swiftly: her tear-stained face expecting a remorseful Sukant.

“Alok !!!!!”

Her son wore a grim expression. In the Far East, dawn had broken and the sky was dimly lit with bluish red lights. She realized she had spent the whole night sitting beside the window, just recalling her whole life. But what was Alok doing here so early in the morning ?

“Come on *maa*....you are over doing it!”

“What?”

“It has gone too far.”

“Oh Alok!” Meera started crying aloud. This was so humiliating. Of all the people, she never expected her son to be here. How much he knows, she wondered.

“Stop crying ! It is useless !”

Meera looked up at her son incredulously. He seemed a different person. Mature. Wise Grown up. Was he going to order her too?

*“Live for yourself maa...! Learn to live for yourself. This is your life. Start taking your own decisions! Why do you allow others to take all decisions? Why don’t you react? Why do you meekly accept all orders and digest all insults? I don’t like it maa!!!!Why should others do everything for you? Why? Do you think it is correct?”*

Meera stared at her son. His face was contorted, full of pain. He seemed to be so disturbed, so agitated.

“Very soon they will start ordering me too. Will you like that? Papa has already started talking about sending me to a hostel. Will you keep quiet then too? Will you continue being a doormat?”

“No...never!! That is impossible!!!!” Meera felt faint.The mere thought of being separated from her son was unbearable.

“Then wake up *maa*! Show your rights! Your needs! Don’t go on just performing your duties! Learn to demand your rights too. Fight for your rights. *Nobody has the power to make you do anything that you do not want. Nobody.....especially with your own body.*”

“Al...o...k!” Meera stammered. So he knew.

He nodded in confirmation.

*“And remember maa...I love you and I am always with you.But I cannot speak for you !!!!  
You have to do it yourself!”*

The sun was out in the sky. The bright blue sky heralded a new dawn. The room was full of light.Meera was filled with a new strength. Her patience and faith had finally been rewarded. *This ‘male’ was so different. This was her son. Her blood. He will not fail her. He would always be with her. He will always understand her. He will be the companion she always needed. He will help her take decisions.*

*He will help her ‘live’.*