

## Story

### Highway E-47

**P**IERCING THE STILLNESS of the night, the phone rang persistently. Shubh stirred in her bed for a moment, and slowly opened her eyes to complete darkness. She decided to remain in bed, listening to the phone. She heard her son, Rahul, shuffle in the darkness across his room to the living room to the ringing phone. He picked it up, and said in a drowsy voice “Hello?”

The person on the other side of the line spoke for a moment, and when she heard her son reply, the tone of his voice indicated that he was taken aback. For a while he listened in absolute silence, and then walked over to his mother’s room.

Shubh’s eyes were fixed on the ceiling. She fancied she could make out its blue colour; her eyes must be adjusting to the dark. “Mum,” Rahul called to her. Shubh could clearly sense the anxiety in his voice. “Mum,” he called again.

“Hmm...” Shubh made the sound.

“There was a call from the hospital. They’ve found a kidney for you. You need to go to the hospital for the transplant.”

Startled, Shubh sat up on the bed. Rahul switched on the light and the tiny, dark room was illuminated. Shielding his eyes, Rahul looked at his mother’s face, and repeated his words, “Maa, they’ve found the kidney which is a match of your blood and tissues. Shortly an ambulance will be reaching here to take you to the hospital. Get ready.”

Life has its own ways to twist and turn. Six months ago the doctors had shocked her declaring that her kidneys were not functioning properly; she needed dialysis to clean the blood. At times Shubh felt dejected about what her life had turned out to be! She was only 47 years old, and all these horrible medical problems were a part of her life. But the very next moment, she would console herself that she was lucky to be living in a welfare state like Denmark, where the government takes care of all medical expenses. And she thanked the person who invented the dialysis machine.

In the midst of the night when the whole city might be sleeping Shubh came into action. She washed her face, changed her outfit, and packed a bag for her hospitalization. Precisely fifteen minutes later the ambulance arrived, which brought her to the hospital.

Shubh went to this very hospital for dialysis three times a week; it had become a part of her usual routine. But as she stepped out of the ambulance, and stared at the hospital building, she felt as if it were a new place to her and she was going to enter it for the first time.

A team of doctors and nurses performed some tests on her body. The kidney was preserved in some cold chemical solution for her. Along with the kidney Shubh travelled to another hospital, which was well equipped for the transplantation.

The staff was anticipating her arrival, for she did not need to spend any time on any formalities. As soon as she reached there, she was transported to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor in a wheelchair; then through the large corridor to room number 226, which was designated for her. It was a quite spacious room and a clean, comfortable bed lay there. The turmoil of emotions she had endured in the past hour had tired her terribly. Sighing ruefully, she curled up on the bed. Rahul started putting her clothes, toothbrush and her other personal belongings in the cupboard. A remarkably young nurse darted inside. Glancing at Shubh and Rahul, she smiled.

“How are you?” she asked Shubh.

Shubh’s lips quivered and then she started sobbing.

That young nurse began to cajole her as if she were a child, “This operation will let you lead a normal life. You will be free from the use of dialysis. You should consider yourself fortunate. There are many people who spend their entire life on dialysis and in search of the right kidney.”

Shubh nodded, wiping her tears.

The nurse handed her a gown, and asked her to change her clothes and remove all her jewellery. Thereafter she should relax on the bed. Shortly she would be taken for the operation.

After giving instructions the nurse walked out of the room. Rahul also strode behind her, and Shubh was left alone inside the room. She did as she was told; she cast off her clothes and draped herself in the patient gown, and removed all the ornaments that adorned her ageing body. Thereafter she again lay down on the bed. She closed her eyes and suddenly her entire past flashed before her...

They were originally from Lucknow, the city in India where she was raised and educated. When she was twenty-two years old, she was married to Sandeep, who was an academician by profession and worked in a technical college as an assistant professor. She came to his city to start a new life with Sandeep. They had a reasonable living, and everything seemed to move smoothly in their life, barring minor hiccups here or there. In the five years of their married life they had been blessed with two sons.

Then Sandeep had been offered an assignment in the regional college in Jutland, the biggest area in Denmark, which shares a border with Germany. The family rejoiced and looked forward to moving to Europe and the exposure in the western world. First Sandeep left his country, assuring Shubh that once he made living and other necessary arrangements for the family he would call them. Shubh waited behind in India in a vain hope that she would fly to Denmark and join Sandeep there, and start a new life.

For a year in his each phone call and letter he assured her that soon he would be inviting them to Jutland. Then she received that awful letter from him which astonished her. He had openly revealed in the letter his love affair with Anili, a secretary in his department, and his wish to marry her. He wanted a divorce from Shubh.

In a state of shock, Shubh’s eyes clouded with pain, her hands trembled with fear, and her heart leapt with anger. Fidelity and trust - words that go hand in hand with marriage - had lost their meaning. She was being betrayed by her husband. It was so agonizing that Shubh could not think what to reply him. Days elapsed swiftly. In six months duration she received five letters from Sandeep. In every letter he literally begged

her for divorce. Her family and friends were equally surprised with this knowledge and pitied on her. Their gestures of sympathy made her feel only more dejected.

When she received the 6<sup>th</sup> letter from him, pleading her for divorce, she looked at the situation in a realistic way. After considering all consequences Shubh put forth a condition that he first arrange for her and her sons to come to Jutland. She had neither the will to live in the conservative society of India where divorce and remarriage were still considered taboo, nor the strength to raise her sons without the support of their father. If they lived in the same city, at least the sons would be closer to their father. Sandeep agreed on that and the family migrated to Aarhus, a city in the Jutland peninsula.

Sandeep had already rented a small apartment for them in Aarhus. He himself was living in a spacious, independent house with Anili. Subh had thought that perhaps living away from his family Sandeep felt lonely and that may have been why he fell in love with another woman. Once Shubh and children would be near him his infatuation with that woman would subside. But she was totally mistaken.

She was only 28 at the time and she had faced so much in her life. However she needed to divert her attention onto other essential things. Life lay like a bumpy road full of challenges for her. She had to prepare herself to live a long life in an alien land amongst people she hardly knew. The only person she knew, her husband, seemed the utmost stranger to her. Back then the Danish Government's policies were not harsh against foreigners. In fact they wanted people from other nations in their country for work, so the immigration was made pretty easy; acquiring a job for foreigners was also not all that difficult.

Shubh learnt Danish and within a year she started working as an assistant in a kindergarten. She was an educated lady. If she had taken some training courses and tried for a better job, she could have gotten it. But she had lost all her zeal to fight for a better life. She was merely surviving. However she was in a better country. Her job provided her a substantial amount of money for her own expenditures. After the divorce proceeding, which had started and ended in its due course, she was receiving alimony from Sandeep and some monthly amount as children's support from the commune. She was able to pull through life.

**A** MEDICAL TEAM, clad in white, entered her room and interrupted the wave of her thoughts. Rahul also returned. His face betrayed his nervousness and anxiety.

"Are you ready for the operation?" Someone from the medical team asked her.

She nodded.

The senior most male doctor explained her how the transplant would be carried out. She knew that in Denmark doctors don't keep anything from their patients.

Shubh made an effort to ask, "Whose kidney am I getting?"

None in the medical team replied her query.

Then, on a stretcher she was taken to the operation theatre. Rahul had come forward to hold her hand and walked alongside the stretcher up to the operation room. At the door, before releasing her hand, he said to her, "Mum, you've to come back alive from this room. We don't want to lose you too."

The emphasis on 'too' gave away the fact that their father had already been discounted from their life. She glanced at him - he was now crying bitterly. Shubh felt sorry for her son.

Though she herself was not convinced, she assured him, “I will.”

Inside the operation room all she could remember was that she was shifted from the stretcher to the operation table. A number of tubes had been inserted to her body: an intravenous to supply glucose and other liquids to her body; some wires to monitor her heart, a catheter to remove urine. Thereafter the stench of chloroform drifted her into deep sleep.

She did not know how long it took but when she regained consciousness she found herself in a ward. It was again dark outside which meant an entire day had passed and she had not seen that day’s sunlight. With Rahul, Mayank was also sitting in the room. They wore solemn expressions on their faces. However, seeing their mother having regained consciousness it was replaced by a joyful expression.

“When did you arrive?” she asked Mayank in a feeble voice.

“Just an hour ago,” he replied.

Both sons walked over to her, stood on either side of her bed, and began to stroke her gently. A mild smile appeared on her face. Her sons always caressed her this way whenever there was something upsetting going on in her life and she needed to be cuddled. However the impact of the sedation was still very strong in her body. Lying between her sons she drowsed and the recollections of her past life again hit her...

Once people adjust to their new surroundings sufficiently, time flies by. Her sons, Mayank and Rahul - who were small kids when she had migrated to Denmark – very quickly, grew into handsome young men. Sandeep was living in another house with Anili and their two children - a son and a daughter.

Mayank and Rahul used to see their father from time to time and were getting guidance from him about their education and other general affairs. After graduating from Aarhus University Mayank went to the USA on a scholarship to obtain a Master’s degree. Shubh was enthralled seeing her son’s career taking shape.

**A**T NINE P.M. the surgeon who had operated on her came to examine her. Two nurses, who were on night duty, also came along with him. Mayank and Rahul immediately left her bed and stood erect.

“How are you feeling?” the surgeon asked her.

“Not very good,” replied Shubh weakly.

The nurses began to brief the doctor about the current situation of her health. The amount of calcium in her blood was too high. Otherwise she was fine; she did not develop any kind of infection.

“Whose kidney have I got?” Shubh could not stop herself from asking.

The surgeon and the nurses exchanged glances. Then the surgeon bent over her bed, held her hand gently and said, “Whosever’s kidney you have got, your body is responding well. There are no adverse complications so far.”

The medical team left her ward without satisfying her curiosity. Shubh fixed her eyes on the white ceiling and again succumbed to her thoughts...

As time passed, the years of life snatched mercilessly her colourful youth from her. She passed her entire youth without building a romantic relationship with anyone. Sandeep was also no longer a young man now. Sadly enough, Anili had discarded him from her life. He had lived for just five years with Shubh, but he had spent fifteen years with Anili, and yet he could not develop an eternal bond - one that lasts until death - with her. He left his big house, furniture, and children with Anili and moved out into a small rented apartment, all alone. Shubh's children briefed her with all this news in segments. "Papa lives very close to our house," once Rahul had informed her.

Shubh recalled that morning when Mayank had shouted, "Maa, see, who has come?"

It was Saturday, a holiday for everyone. Shubh was in the kitchen, making an appetizing meal – stuffed parantha with reddish for the family.

She came to the living room and saw Sandeep standing there. He was hesitant and guilty expressions instantly appeared on his face as he saw his former wife. Shubh threw a cold glance at him and retreated to the kitchen.

Rahul and Mayank set the dinning table, served hot steaming paranthas to their father. They also ate with him. Shubh stayed in the kitchen. From the kitchen she heard the three of them talking, bursting into laughter. Then Rahul brought back the dirty dishes. "Papa said that paranthas were very tasty. He would come again to eat," he conveyed the message.

"Why do you come here?" she snapped at Sandeep when he visited her house the second time.

Somewhat confused he said, "I've come here to see my children."

"You can meet them outside like you used to earlier."

He lingered around the doorframe. After a brief pause he said, "Shubh, Actually I've come here to see you." Without her invitation he stepped inside.

"But I don't want any contact with you Please leave me alone," she said, and went over to the sofa to sit there.

"Where are the children?" he asked roving his eyes around the empty house.

"They are not in.... You should go..."

Like a stubborn child he stood there, and after a while he sat on the sofa across her.

A deep silence fell between them. It was broken when he asked, "Can I make tea for myself in your house?"

His question indicated that he wanted tea. Shubh rose and strode towards the kitchen.

"Make it Indian style," he said at her back.

Seeing only one cup in her hand he asked, "You'll not have tea?"

"I've stopped drinking tea now," Shubh said calmly and handed the cup to him.

"You used to be so fond of tea..." he said recalling the time when they used to live together.

She silently moved towards the dinning table which was placed far from the sofa, and sat there.

Again both fell silent. The only sound in the room was that of his slurping tea from time to time. ‘You still drink tea very noisily,’ she wanted to say but preferred to keep quiet.

After some moments of silence he said, “I had thought that you’d find someone...”

Shubh stared at him, trying to understand his question. He made his statement more clear, “I had not thought that you will spend your life living alone, you would find someone to share your life with...”

A meaningful smile appeared on Shubh’s lips, and after a pause she said, “I will not say that I never thought about that or that other men did not take interest in me. But I simply could not...”

He shifted in the sofa to get a clearer view of her; and was looking at her anxiously. Lost in her own thoughts, she continued, “I did not make another man a part of my life because of Mayank and Rahul. I saw you busy with your new family and noticed that you hardly had any time for Mayank and Rahul. You used to meet them like relatives do. I thought if I also established another family – a new husband, new children – Mayank and Rahul would be totally neglected. And I did not want that to happen to them.”

“You’re too great!” He placed the empty cup on the table. “Shubh...”

Please don’t say my name, she wanted to say him. She fixed her eyes on his cup.

He cleared his throat before speaking further, “I have been thinking about you – about us - a lot recently. We were doing fine when we were together, before I... What I mean to say is that we have always gotten along. And I know I hurt you. But I think we can get past that. We have two sons together. We were married once... Do you think we have a chance together again?”

She looked up at him - he was still a good looking man. She was not happy with her current situation. Sometimes she really felt that something was missing; she wanted a man in her life. But then her pride surfaced and questioned her where this man, who was ready to share life with her now, had been during her youth? He had been with Anili, and now that she was gone, he had come back to her. What did he take her for? She had been silent for a long time. When she spoke her voice trembled a little, “If I had done the same thing to you - what you did with me - would you have accepted me?”

Speechless, he looked at his shoes.

His silence fuelled her anger and gave her the strength to go on. “I was 25 years old when I was subjected to your betrayal; now I am 45 - can you give me back those twenty precious years of my life? ”

He remained speechless. Shubh did not have anything to say either. After a few moments of awkward silence he rose and shuffled towards the door. Shubh also left her seat and walked behind him. On the threshold, before shutting the door behind him she said firmly, “Please don’t come here again.”

**W**ITHIN A WEEK all the tubes had been removed from Shubh’s body. She started taking her meal orally, and urinated normally. She walked along the long corridors to exercise her limbs; the rooms of the private patients lined both sides of the corridor. In that wing of the 13<sup>th</sup> floor all the patients were kidneys’ patients. She talked to them in a friendly manner. It was nice talking to them. Sharing one’s grievances often

brings people closer together, and while they may not be cured, talking about them with others can lessen the pain.

When the nurse came that morning she pronounced happily, “Your body has accepted the kidney well. All the complications related to the transplant have been resolved. The amount of calcium in the blood has dropped to the normal level now. There is no infection in your body. Now you are in perfect condition to go home.”

“Will you tell me whose kidney I’ve got?” Shubh vented her curiosity one more time.

“I really don’t know,” the nurse answered. “We don’t keep track of these things. We just get through the hours assigned for our duty.” After a pause she suggested, “You should ask your doctor, he can tell you.”

When the doctor came for his routine check up, she repeated her question, “Will you please tell me whose kidney have I gotten?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because if that person is dead I want to pray for him, or her.”

“Yes, that person is dead.”

“How?”

“She died in a car accident. On E-47. The bend on that highway is very dangerous. Many vehicles meet with an accident at that spot.”

Shubh closed her eyes. “Was she young?”

“Not really, but not old either.” The doctor scrutinized her face for a moment and said, “Probably about your age.”

“Was she alone in the car?”

“No, she was with her boyfriend. Both died. The woman was a card-carrying person – who says that if she dies she is willing for her organs to be used in transplant operation.

“What was her name?”

“I have told you more than enough,” replied the doctor, and went away.

After the doctor’s visit Shubh took a leisurely bath and sitting on the bed prayed for a long time. Apart from her favourite deities she included that unknown woman also in her prayer. She thanked her and prayed for her departed soul. Then she went to the dining hall and had a good meal.

It was the first time that Mayank and Rahul had not shown up. Normally they would come to the hospital in the morning before the doctor’s visit; and one of them tried to be with her throughout the day. When it was late noon she called them at home but no one picked up the ringing phone. She tried Rahul’s cell phone, but no reply. She wondered - where had these boys gone! Then she thought, they were young men, they must have other plans... Mayank might have gone out to visit his old friends. Rahul might be in college, or the restaurant he worked at as a part time employee. It had become too much for them to be at the side of their sick mother constantly.

When the daytime had passed and evening arrived she descended the floors via the escalator and took a long walk in the garden. Then coming upstairs to her room she lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. The whole day had passed and Mayank and Rahul had not come. It had never happened before. She felt sad and anger was also taking over her. The next moment she consoled herself that she should now train herself to live without the company of her sons. After all her sons were young people; they had their

own lives, and their mother perhaps did not count much. Shubh recalled those times when her own sons had seemed like strangers to her...

By then Mayank had left the house to go away to New York to pursue further studies and she was left at home alone with Rahul. The house appeared so empty without Mayank. One day Rahul would also leave and she would be left in the house all alone. Her only companions would be the dog and a TV set.

After supper she was relaxing in the chair and watching TV when Rahul broke that news to her: "Maa, Papa has found someone..."

She felt a thud in her heart. Her eyes moved from the TV screen to Rahul. "Papa now lives with another lady. Her name is Ginger," he said.

Without saying anything she turned her gaze towards TV screen.

Rahul went on, "Ginger is a very nice lady. Today I met her. She does not have her own children. She told me that I am like a son to her. She gave me this present... Look, Mum, Philips patek's watch..."

Shubh turned her gaze to look at his hand - a new watch was glittering around his wrist. All of a sudden she became furious. She grabbed his hand and started pulling the watch from his wrist. "Take it off... You are not Ginger's son! You are my son! Remove it."

Rahul immediately stood away from his mother and placed his left hand over the watch as if protecting it from the fierce attack of his mother. At that moment he seemed like a stranger to her.

Another day when she returned home from her kindergarten, she was pleasantly surprised to hear an MP3 Player blaring in her house. Rahul was listening to the music while doing some assignment. "Where did you get that?" she asked.

He immediately switched off the music and a stunning silence prevailed.

She knew that Rahul earned a few thousands kroner every month from his part time job at McDonald's, and he used to get student's allowance from the commune. "I didn't know you had bought an MP3 Player," she said staring at it.

Her sons were not in the habit of lying. He said hesitantly, "I didn't... It's a gift from Ginger. She is a very nice lady."

"I don't care!" she growled. "Throw this player away. She must have put some magic in this player! In the influence of her magic she will turn you against me..."

"What are you saying?" asked Rahul in surprise.

Vehemently, she continued, "Your mother has raised you both all alone with great difficulty, and I've never said 'no' to you for anything. But now you listen to me, throw this player out. I don't want to share my children with anyone; and I don't want anything from your papa's so called wife or partner in this house," as she finished she hit the player in desperation.

Rahul rushed to pick that up.

'Oh... The world is not letting me live peacefully,' Shubh grumbled silently. "Once a woman had stolen my husband from me and now another woman is trying to snatch my son from me."

Caressing the player Rahul said, "If you hate Papa, it does not mean that we should also hate him. We love our Papa and like his girl friend." This had stung her deep into her

heart. She had thought that her sons were the eyewitnesses of her affliction. The last thing they would do was to annoy her. But how misunderstood she was!

“**MUM!**” SHE HEARD Rahul’s soft voice and opened her eyes. Mayank and Rahul along with their half-sister, Mila were standing in front of her. Mila was carrying a big bouquet, which she placed on the side table. They all looked tired and it seemed that they had spent a busy day somewhere.

Mila’s visit delighted her. Despite whatever she had against Sandeep and Anili, she used to admire their children silently. A mixture of Indian and Danish genes, Mila and Vilad were extremely beautiful.

“Where were you the whole day?” she asked her sons, unable to mask her irritation.

“We had something important to take care of,” replied Mayank. Rahul and Mila nodded in agreement. Their eyes reflected sadness; Mila’s face also betrayed a strange kind of fear. Shubh comprehended, Mila had come to see her but she wasn’t comfortable with this visit.

Mostly Mayank and Rahul were conversing with Mila. Shubh was listening to them talk quietly. Mila stayed for only 20 minutes and before leaving she wished her a speedy recovery. Mayank and Rahul accompanied her to the escalator. Shubh saw the trio stride away.

Shubh mused at how several facts about her own children were hidden from her. She did not know how close her sons were to Mila and Vilad. How often did they see each other? How close were they really to Ginger? There must be so many things going on in their lives that she didn’t know about. Just like over 20 years ago she had no clue that her husband was falling in love with another woman while she was in India. Is it really possible to know absolutely everything about anyone?

“Poor girl!” she said aloud. She felt sorry for Mila. She was the youngest among Sandeep’s four children and if she remembered her date of birth correctly, she was not more than nineteen years old. But she knew that she did not live with either of her parents, for her parents were living with other people who were strangers to her. ...

**L**ife had had many awful things in store for Shubh. But no matter how difficult the days of one’s life are, they pass by. Finally the day arrived when she returned home - alive and recovered. She was taking some medicines orally, but was free from the use of dialysis now. She continued to pray for the woman who had died in the accident, and saved her life by donating her kidney to her.

Gradually their household was returning to its normal routine. The following week Shubh was supposed to join her job. A day later Mayank was leaving for New York. He was in the living room packing his suitcase, when Shubh said in a lost voice, “This whole month I have gone through so much but your Papa didn’t even bother calling me, never mind visiting me.”

Mayank and Rahul suspended their work and sat on either side of her. Mayank held her hand and started caressing it; Rahul patted her shoulder. Suddenly she felt anxious, in anticipation of what they might say. She knew it would be unpleasant.

“Mum, we’ve got something to say to you...”

“What?”

“It’s not good news...” Rahul said sadly.

“Whatever it is, just say it. Your mother has capacity to hear anything – good or bad. It is said that when something does not kill you it makes you stronger.”

Mayank said slowly, “Papa is no more, Mum. He has died.”

Her feelings and emotions for Sandeep had been washed away in the tumult of these years. The news of his death did not jolt her, neither did it sadden her. She just said with a tinge of regret, “Oh! He died too young!” Speculating his age she continued, “He was four years older than me. 52 is not the age to die. What had happened to him?” she inquired as if she was inquiring about a distant relative.

“He was killed in a car accident.”

She was taken aback. Her voice quivered when she asked, “Was Ginger with him?”

“Yes. But no one survived. Both died.”

“When did this accident occur?”

Rahul said, “Surprisingly, a few hours before you were operated. But even I came to know about it much later when you were in the hospital.”

Shubh put the pieces together. “Mayank you came here all the way from New York not because of my sickness, but on your father’s death...”

“I came here because of both reasons,” he replied.

“...And that day when Mila had come with you to the hospital you all had come from the crematorium! That was the day of your father’s funeral?”

They nodded silently.

Shubh asked the final question in stammering voice, “Where did that accident occur?”

“On highway; E - 47.”

So many questions cropped up in Shubh’s mind but she but she was too shocked to ask further. In bewilderment she looked at her sons alternately. Rahul was quiet but she felt as if he was telling her, “I used to tell you, Mum, Ginger is a nice lady. She donated her kidney to you before dying.”

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