

## ***Beyond love***

**- Shrija Arya**

**(Age: 21 years)**

It was a refreshing summer morning. The sun was rising gently over the 'Panch hills' of Bankhedi. Farmers were at their respective farms and resumed farming. Bankhedi is a remote and peaceful village of Madhya Pradesh. It has a sparse population with merely five thousand people living in the entire village. The tranquility of the place and the large old Banyan trees have shaped numerous rural poets. This village is a delight for the budding photographers, who visit this place every year, out of their love for nature. Living in the hustle-bustle of the cities, we have lost our real selves. But, the rejuvenating air of this undisturbed, unpolluted village could repair many of us.

It was not a usual day at the tiny village. Thousands of gulab jamuns were dipped in sugar syrup at the Shiv temple. It was the oldest temple in the village. Besan laddoos were also being made by Shobha's mother. Shobha ran to her mother in an attempt to pick up one, but failed. Her mother denied to give her, before offering them to Lord Shiva at the temple. Shobha was also called 'Doobai' by many in her village. The love for '*besan laddoos*' gave her this name and not getting them could make her sad, but surprisingly she did not feel bad that day. It was Munni Didi's wedding and the very thought of the pink frock she was going to wear that evening, delighted her. Shobha was fond of dressing up and had a great collection of pink dresses. This pink frock was another addition to her '*pink collection*'.

The setting sun painted the entire village red. Shobha's mother called her as they all were getting late for the ceremony. She hurriedly wore her matching pink sandals and rushed to the black ambassador, they had. Shobha's father was an officer, so she liked travelling in the luxurious cars they owned. They were about to leave when she heard a strange sound. She got off the car and followed that familiar sound. A small white kitten with beady eyes, stood shivering in the scorching heat of the garage. It was frightened and had been abandoned by someone. Shobha went near the kitten. It was quivering terribly. She lifted the tiny creature in her arms and covered it with a thick sheet, lying in the garage. The gentle warmth of Shobha's arms comforted the weak kitten.

"Doobai, hurry up! We are getting late." Shobha's mother called her. Shobha was super excited to attend Munni Didi, her neighbour's wedding. She was like an elder sister to Shobha. They had spent a great time together, but

suddenly '*Doobai*' changed her mind and decided to stay. She could not afford to leave the little guest alone, in such a terrible state of health. *Kaveridevi*, Shobha's mother wasn't surprised by her benevolence. Everyone in the village was aware of Shobha's love for these little beings. She recalled how her little girl risked her life to rescue two puppies, when heavy rains hit their village. *Kaveridevi* did not insist '*Doobai*' to come along and asked their servant *Kishore* to cook something for her. She was a very kind-hearted woman and always encouraged Shobha for the same. Shobha took the kitten to her room and placed it in an empty drawer. She brought some warm milk from the kitchen for the kitten and also covered it with her fancy pink scarf. The kitten was weak and did not open its eyes until the next morning. Shobha could not sleep the entire night and kept guarding the kitten. The kitten gradually opened its eyes, as the golden rays of the rising sun lit Shobha's room. She was asleep. She slept around four in the morning, waiting for the kitten to respond. The baby cat mewed and licked '*Doobai*' while she was in deep sleep. Shobha smiled as she slowly opened her eyes. She felt relieved, watching the furball playing. She named her '*Chanda*'. As the days passed, Shobha developed an angelic bond with her.

Shobha was twelve-year-old. Her love for animals grew immensely with her age. She could sense their pain and understand their emotions. She never believed in marriages and refused to ever marry when her mother would ask her. Life was a different kind of journey for her. Mountains fascinated her. She wanted to conquer the highest peaks. She was a trained folk singer and a brilliant student. Meditation was an integral part of her life, since childhood. She used to recite the '*Gayatri mantra*' for hours. The life of '*Yogis*' drew her attention.

"I am really tired now, will tell the rest of the story tomorrow," uttered my grandmother as she wiped her wrinkled face and tied her long gorgeous pepper-and-salt hair, that everyone praised. It was a busy winter afternoon and the old lady vendor had arrived. She was my grandmom's best friend and used to always talk about her spoiled brats, who did no work at all. I bought a fresh leafy cabbage from her. Grandma was working in the kitchen as I gave her the fresh vegetable, I had purchased.

She cooked delicious healthy dishes for us. There was a unique taste in every dish of hers. One could easily feel the aroma of different ingredients, she put in her dishes.

Something caught my grandmom's attention. It was a small glossy beetle that slithered in between the two fresh leaves of the vegetable, she was about to cook. She took that tiny beetle in her palm and placed it on a leaf in the sunshine. She even sprinkled some water on the leaf, in case the tiny beetle needed some. The shiny green insect disappeared in the thick bushes of the papaya plant, which was home to many insects. My grandmom, Shobha was extremely kind towards these tiny beings. She believed in '*karma*' and also that every creature was a gift of God to mankind. We could not even kill mosquitoes in her presence!

"Why did you ever marry if you never wanted to?" I tried to initiate another round of conversation with Dadi. "After a certain point of time, you just have to and we all live in a society where getting married is mandatory, especially when you cross a certain age. Now don't ask me more on that"; prompted my grandmother in an exasperated tone. Shobha always thought that she wasn't as beautiful as her sister, but she never realised the beautiful heart she carried, was rarely found. She never spoke much about her futile marriage.

I was desperate to know about Shobha's story of love. How she found her only love and decided to marry, especially when she wasn't eager to, appeared of great interest to me. So, I went downstairs to the kitchen, where my mother was making *chappatis*. Trying to help her, I started applying ghee on them. "Ma, why grandma never opens up about her marriage? Was it not a successful one? Tell me please, I am curious to know!" "Why do you want to know specifically about her marriage?" enquired my mom. I tried to convince my mom to the utmost. I really wanted to know about Shobha's journey of love. So, I somehow convinced my mother.

Shobha was extremely talented, but her circumstances never allowed her to pursue her talents further. She got married at a very young age, soon after she completed her graduation, even though she never wanted to. It was an arranged marriage. Eventually, she tried to adjust as days passed by and her initial years of marriage proved to be quite successful, but life is not a bed of roses. A storm soon hit her magical bond with her husband just after a short span of two years. It was her husband's past relationship, that ruined their happy life. Shobha never gave up. She did, what all she could to survive her marriage. Despite all her hard efforts, nothing seemed to work. There was a point in her life, when she even thought of getting separated, but her parents never let her take that step. She started losing her real self. Every day appeared the same to her, but it was her inner strength that helped her fightback. She was already losing hope, when destiny hit hard on her. Her

husband was diagnosed with blood cancer. She was deeply wounded, still completely devoted herself for the betterment of her husband, but soon he departed.

She was left alone with her two small kids, but never lost hope and faith in the Almighty. Her love and devotion towards the injured and abandoned animals helped her survive this roller coaster journey. She started spending most of her time with cats and dogs. Several injured dogs were survived by her. Many media houses contacted her to publish her story of selfless love for these animals, but she never followed them back. Gradually, her children matured and settled at different places, leading their respective lives.

This was the perfect time for Shobha to relive her childhood. Her love for animals grew as she started ageing. She rediscovered herself in isolation. Now she wanted to sing and dance like a child. She wanted to live more for these glorious creations of God. Love is truly magical. I could redefine love. It is a selfless devotion for a lifetime and yes; 'Shobha was in love.' She was in love with her tailed buddies. Writing this, I can hear her best friends; Chotu, Gubbu and Munni call her. They regularly visit our place to drink the warm milk, my grandmother keeps for them in a big steel bowl. They shower their love upon her each day by guarding our house. Selfless love is rarely found these days. It is lost somewhere in the dark and needs to be enlightened. She ignored all the stories people cooked about her. Today, *Doobai's* little world revolves around these divine beings, who firmly believe in her, unlike humans.

*"The influence of a mother in the lives of her children is beyond calculation and Shobha continues to be a mother to all these divine souls."*