

Incapable of Love

Addy explores what it is to love someone beyond physical and social boundaries. As they say, key to happiness is something to do, someone to love and something to hope for!



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It was a cold night in August – not unusual in these parts. I had returned from the funeral of my grandfather with a box full of family memorabilia he had wanted me to have in his will. They told me that the box was just some old photographs and newspaper reports. My grandmother, an imperious lady with a famous temper and executor of the said testament had insisted that I take the box and worry about the contents later.

That night, under the influence of a cocktail of multivitamins and caffeine chewing gum, I was having trouble sleeping. I decided to open the box. I examined the lock, taking care not to damage the exquisite little carvings in an ancient alphabet. They told me that the box had been in the family for four generations before my grandfather and that it would be priceless if I ever hit the auction-house circuit. The seventh generation of fingers rolled those little wheels like a modern combination lock, trying to spell out an ancient family name in an ancient alphabet. It came from my grandfather's grandmother's family. That generation had had only daughters and the family name had been lost forever till it reappeared as my middle name.

I wondered about what I would say to my ancestors when I meet them on the other side if I did not have any children. I was inching closer to fifty and was no longer sure of my ability to carry a child to term. In a little facility on another continent, were four little containers that contained my only chances – eggs that I had preserved in my early twenties thanks to the wisdom of my mother.

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"Sometimes, I wonder if I will ever have grandchildren."

"Ma! Please! For heaven's sake, don't even begin that one! Right now, all I need is to make the next promotion. There is no way you are getting any grandchildren. I am not sure if K and I want any children at all. We haven't even started talking about it."

"You might not want them now. But, you will later. It is instinct. It is nature. We are born to beget. You are not ready now. I know that. I don't want you to give me grandchildren when you are not ready to be a mother."

"Thanks for understanding. Then, why did you even bring this up?"

"Listen carefully. I am a fertility specialist. So, this is more professional advice than parental advice..."

The box snapped open. I was scared I had broken it. The cause of the fear probably was a combination of the wrath of six generations of forefathers and the loss of the millions I would have made auctioning the contraption off. Tout suite, I shook the contents out on to the carpet and slammed the lid shut to check if I had damaged my precious box. After all, I was good at damaging things I treasured.

After twelve years of marriage, K had decided to move to South Africa for work and I realized I just did not love him enough to bother. It had taken me twelve years to realize that I did not love the man I had been married to. I did not feel any sense of belonging towards him. When he was gone, I did not miss him at all. Whatever we had was over. When he came back and hugged me, I realized I wasn't even attracted to him any more. I was indifferent. We just did not have the magic anymore. It had taken me exactly three hours to ask him for a divorce. We had a loveless marriage and we both knew it. It had taken him three minutes to



agree to it. After all, there were no children, no shared assets to squabble over – we hadn't even a joint bank account. Years of singlehood later, I wished that I never desired love. If I had not asked for divorce, we would still be carrying on like we had been – appearing together at family functions and going on vacations together. We were always in a good mood around each other and we glittered in photographs. If you believed the photographs, we had the most perfect marriage ever. So much for picture-perfect.

“Pa! I wish I still had a marriage.”

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“Are you saying you wish that you still had K?”

“Yes! I wish I had K. Actually, no! Anyone... just anyone would do. I just wish I had someone.”

“Then you did the right thing. Your marriage would have kept you both out of love. Today, you have hope and K has children with someone he loves.”

“You have been watching too many movies Pa! Oh! It is his daughter's birthday next week. I must go buy a present...”

There were pictures of my extended family scattered all over my floor. There were little newspaper clippings of pictures of my great-grandfather shaking hands with the Governor-General, that of his father with a foot over the carcass of a freshly hunted tiger and that of his mother – an old frail woman peeking out of the curtains of a palanquin for a last look at her husband's remains. That lady had owned this box at some point.

It was a strange kaleidoscope of my ancestors. It traced their lives from the black-and-white to the colored photograph era. My grandfather had neatly written a little date on a spot of Scotch Tape and affixed it to the back of the colored photographs. I wonder if they ever diagnosed OCD in those days. He had taken extra care of the pictures of my grandmother. However, not all of the pictures were happy. There were pictures of the time when she had fallen off a horse and slipped a disc in her spine and then those of the time when her liver had given way from all that drinking. There were also pictures of them in the early years of their marriage. Awww! Look at them on that camel-ride on the dunes and them on the little boat in the lagoon. Strangely, my grandfather hadn't changed at all between his youth and middle age whereas my grandmother looked like a completely different woman in her photographs with Pa as a child. In those pictures, she looked like a younger version of the matriarch who had run the household while we were growing up.

And then, I turned a picture over. It was the oldest colored picture in the lot. It was from my grandparents' wedding. Wait a minute! Grandmother looks a lot like the woman

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with Pa in shorts. Then, who is the woman with Grandfather on the camel and in the



boat?

I arranged the pictures in chronological order. Grandfather was riding camels and boats with this strange woman when Pa was fifteen years old and grandmother was recovering from her cirrhosis. Oh My Gosh! Grandfather was philandering! He was cheating on grandmother. She is in mourning for a man who was cheating on her. Oh My Gosh! She has to know about this. She has to come out of mourning. This is so degrading to her as a woman.

I couldn't sleep all night. As soon as the day broke, I knew I had to call grandmother. I knew she had to know. I just know these things. I just know what I must do like I knew I had to end my marriage. But, there was no way I was prepared for her response.

"And do you think I did not know?"

"I don't understand!"

"I know if an insect crawls on the skin of any of you. There is nothing that I can't find out when it comes to the people I love. And I did love your grandfather. She wore awful perfume. I knew he had been with her right then."

"Do you know who she was?"

"No. I never bothered to find out."

"You never bothered? You make it your business to know everything. You used to know the names and telephone numbers of the boys who called me mobile telephone

when I was in high school. I don't understand. The last time I did not bother what my husband did, you said that I needed to end my marriage."

"Do you know why I did not have children after your father?"

"You became an alcoholic! You had to send Pa off to boarding school so that he could be kept away from you."

"Yes. When your father was away, I slipped my disc and almost drank myself to death. Do you know who lived with me in this house during those five awful years of sickness? Your grandfather did! With my back, I was incapable of going to the bathroom on my own. He carried me – each time! When my liver gave way, I used to vomit like the most vicious of demons was stirring my guts. He held my hair out of my face as I retched. He was ready with aniseed, cardamom and a smile for me. Do you remember your marriage vows? In sickness and in health? For better or for worse? I don't know any man who would have done it for me. By the time I recovered, he had already passed every test of fidelity there is as far as I was concerned. He was still with me after the monster I had been to him and our child. He still held me and cared for me when I was in that condition. If there was another woman, I knew that he was devoted to me far more than he would be ever devoted to her. There is no way I was ever going to believe he was cheating on me."

"But he was!"

"If he was, I realized I loved him so much that I did not care. He had already proven he loved me so much that I did not care. The bottom line here is that when I found out, I realized I did not care. And you will watch your mouth when you speak of a dead person. Your parents have worked a lot on your upbringing."

That ended it. Love makes us do strange things. I can't imagine grandmother pardoning anything. She always knew how to punish us when we did something wrong so that we would repent it as much as we possibly could have. And here I was, incapable of loving K. Incapable of loving anyone!