

There, on the living room wall of her latest home, was a rainbow from Alaska. Anya stared at the canvas art that her cousin, Katha, had made and sent to her a few years ago. There were other gifts from Katha — right below, on the table, lay ‘Anne Frank’s Diary’, Anya’s sixteenth birthday present. And next to the book was a series of hand-sketched postcards with stories from various parts of the world.

After her third house move in six months, Anya’s sister’s love and memories, all scattered around her, made her feel at home.

Anya was twenty-five, single, and lived alone in a city far away from where she grew up. Her hometown was not one place but a collection of cities. Because for the first twenty years of Anya’s life, her parents moved homes countless times. It all began when they first migrated from Delhi to Gujarat. At that time, Anya was just five and her memory of that move was a haze. So it was right before her eighth birthday when Anya had a dejavu. She realized she was about to lose all her friends, teachers, and playmates again.

“I don’t want to go,” Anya said.

“You’ll like it there, Anya,” Anya’s mother said.

“But I like it here..I like my teachers, my friends, my neighbors.”

Year after year, Anya found herself in a land of strangers. No one to talk to, no one to play with, and no one to spend her birthdays with. Her parents tried to reason every time — a better town, a better job, a better school. Yet, friendless and without a sibling, for Anya, every move felt worse than the last one.

That’s why, when she met Katha and Mudra, her mother’s sister’s daughters, she decided they were more than her cousins. They were playful and warm. So for Anya, Katha and Mudra became her sisters. And no new city, new school, new neighborhood would change that.

Katha was 10 years older than Anya. She lived in a small apartment with Mudra and their parents.

Katha enjoyed the trust and responsibility that her mom had bestowed on her. She was the watchguard for everything in the house, and was accountable for her sister, Mudra, in the absence of their parents. All her life, Katha felt so encouraged by the multitude of roles she had — the dutiful daughter, the caring sister, the obedient student — that she believed everyone else admired her for these qualities too. So years later when she learned that her best friend, her confidant, her beloved sister Mudra was terrified of her for most of her childhood, she was both sad and amused.

“Why do I remember everything so differently?!”

Katha reminisced over these feelings a lot: sometimes as she stepped into new roles as a curious writer, a loving partner, a playful parent; and other times in chance conversations. Like that day when her phone beeped during the lunch break at work — it was a message from Anya.

*“Katha, do you remember these?”*

Anya had shared a picture of Katha’s Alaska painting, hung on the wall of her latest flat.

*“Aww! How nice of you to take it with you,”* Katha said.

*“I keep everything you give me and take them wherever I go. Makes every new house feel like home,”* Anya said.

*“Hugs!”*

Katha wondered how Anya handled her endless moves to expensive cities for low-income jobs.

She wanted to ease the struggle somehow.

*“Hey Anya, can you give me an art prompt?”*

*“Hmm, let me think.”*

WhatsApp indicated ‘anya is typing...’, and Katha waited with curiosity. A few seconds later, Anya responded.

*“White and pink flowers, like this...”*

Attached was a stock image of a vase filled with small jasmine-like flowers.

*“What kind of flowers are these?”* Katha said.

*“I don’t know,”* Anya said.

*“Huh?”*

*“These look just like the ones we used to decorate your house that day.”*

*“What day?”*

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It was one of Anya’s first memories of the time she spent with her two dear cousins. Mid-week, Anya’s parents dropped her off at Katha’s house to stay for a couple of days. Just like Anya, Katha and Mudra were on their summer break from school. And with parents off to their workplaces, the three girls had the whole house to themselves all day.

*“Hey, how about we surprise mom and dad today?”* Katha said.

*“Huh? How?”* Mudra said.

*“Maybe we can decorate the house?!”* Anya said.

*“That sounds perfect!”* Katha said.

Katha had a compulsive urge to impress her parents at every opportunity. Being the oldest in the trio, fuelled it even more. Mudra, on the other hand, just played along.

*“Mudra, you clean our room, I’ll clean Mom and Dad’s,”* Katha said.

*“Hmm, okay,”* Mudra said.

Mudra's disinterest made Anya feel important. She had her eyes fixated on Katha and ears alert for her own name.

"Anya?" Katha said.

"Yes, Katha?" Anya said.

"You can watch how I clean the house, and then, I'll tell you what to do, sounds good?"

"Yes! Sounds perfect."

Anya watched, as Katha broomed, mopped, and dusted the living room and parents' bedroom.

Katha, on the other hand, enjoyed the self-assumed role of a mentor to Anya, and grabbed every opportunity to show Anya how to do household chores. They changed the sheets, wiped the tables clean, and put the glassware and books in their place.

When they were about to finish, Katha asked Anya to go and observe Mudra. Anya came back and told her that Mudra had already finished cleaning and was reading a book. Katha stopped wiping and walked over to the room Mudra was in. She was impressed but held her chest high — she had to keep her position in front of Anya.

"See Anya? You must be quick and efficient," Katha said.

"*Quick and efficient*" Anya made her mental notes and followed Katha toward the entrance door of the house. Katha opened the door and stared at the porch. Anya peeped from behind.

"Here, we'll make a potpourri," Katha said.

"Ooh, sounds fun!" Anya said.

"So, are you ready to help out?"

Anya's eyes gleamed, and her chest swelled up.

"Yes!" Anya said.

Katha had found someone who shared her enthusiasm. She brought out a big, wide bowl from

her parents' room. It was gold plated, like everything else her mom used for ceremonial purposes.

“Oh, that looks nice,” Anya said.

Katha set the bowl on the tinted-glass-top center table in the living room. She poured a little water in it, and added a few drops of essential oil.

“Oh wow, I have never made a potpourri before,” Anya said.

“Well you are now. This needs flowers. How about you get them?” Katha said.

“Yes, of course.”

“Great, give me a minute.”

Katha went to the patio and plucked a few leaves of Indian basil and mint from the planters. She sampled the leaves and then put each leaf separately in the gold bowl.

“So, Anya.”

“Yes, Katha.”

“If you go down to the park where kids play, you'll see a few trees with flowers in it. Can you pluck, say, about a bagful of flowers?”

“Yes — any flowers or some color or type?”

“Pick anything, they are all wild.”

Katha handed over a plastic bag to Anya, and Anya walked toward the door.

“Oh, one thing Anya,” Katha said.

“Yes, Katha?”

“Make sure you pluck flowers only from the park. Keep off from house yards, okay?”

“Okay, sure.”

Anya put on her shoes and ran downstairs from the second floor apartment. Excited, she counted

each of the forty two steps down the building. Once at the ground level, she walked toward the park.

The apartment's landscape had a central green area that was similar to an English garden — a meadow surrounded by a series of average height tropical trees and shrubs. The trees on the perimeter were filled with small creamish wildflowers. “Aha!”, Anya turned toward the first tree on the right and walked up to it. The nearest bunch of flowers was a couple of feet away from her head. She reached out, stretched up with her hand, and yet the flowers were out of her grab. She tried again, and jumped. No luck. Then, she moved to the next tree. And then the next, and then the next. Anya was desperate. She turned toward her left and tried every tree in that direction. She even tried to climb one of them and fell down.

“Ouch!” Anya looked around. It was 4pm on a hot day and everyone seemed indoors. There was nobody to ask for help.

Anya got up and took a full turn — she had tried every tree and shrub. She was tired, thirsty, and her bag of flowers was empty.

“What will I say to Katha?” Anya began to walk back toward Mudra and Katha's apartment building. As she traced her steps, she looked at the empty bag, “Katha will never ask me for anything again.” Lost in her thoughts, Anya missed a small piece of rock and tripped.

“Argh!” Anya pulled up, managed a few steps, and then stopped again. In the line of her sight, there was a big bush of flowers.

“Yes!”

The bush, however, was in the front yard of a house.

Anya turned around and looked at the series of ground floor houses. Many of them had a similar tree — filled with white and pink flowers and each one of them was at Anya's reach.

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“You’re back!” Katha said.

Anya smiled, and handed her bag over to Katha.

“Wow, that’s a lot of flowers you got there,”

“Is that enough?” Anya said.

“More than enough — well done!”

“Nice flowers..I didn’t realize we had these in the park,” Mudra said.

Anya looked at Mudra, smiled, and pointed at the clock.

“They will be here soon, right?” Anya said.

There was silence. Anya turned and found Katha’s eyes on the bag.

“Anya, where did you get these flowers from?”

“Huh..umm.. from downstairs?”

“I mean, which trees?”

“Oh..there are so many.”

“Yeah, can you show me where?”

Anya clasped and unclasped her fingers, smiled and pouted, looked here and there.

“Yes, even I want to know. I have only seen the creamish flowers,” Mudra said.

Anya took a quick glance at the bag, filled with white and pink flowers.

“Oh..ah..uh..there are a few different trees on the other side,” Anya said.

“Okay, let’s take a look?” Katha pointed toward the balcony.

Anya kept her head low and raised her right arm toward the balcony, index finger pointed out in the distance.

“Uh, beyond that first block.”

“Anya?!”

Anya looked up. Mudra’s stare, her knife-like eyes, stabbed through her bones.

“Anya, if you lie, you die,” Mudra said.

“Oh..uh..”

Anya tried to speak, but her words were stuck. And when they came out, they brought along a flood of tears.

“I..I tried..\*sob\*...but the trees...they were too high, \*sob\*”

“Anya?”

If only Mudra would stop saying her name.

“I climbed \*sniffle\* over the rocks, uh..uh.., and even over one of the tree branches.\*sniffle\* I fell.”

Anya lifted her left arm, pulled up her sleeve, and showed the scratches she got from the fall.

Katha and Mudra held her on both sides and led her to the couch. Anya sat down.

“The..the only tree, \*sniffle\* ,I could reach was, \*sob\* \*sob\* ,the one in the front yard of your neighbors downstairs.”

Mudra brought a glass of water.

“Here, have some,” Mudra said.

“I tried..\*sob\*...I tried Mudra,” Anya said, as she accepted the glass and took a few sips.

Then she turned toward Katha on the other side.

“I tried, Katha. And was on my way back empty handed. But then I saw the front-yard was filled with these flowers. \*sniffle\* I thought, why would it matter if I plucked a few?!”

Katha rubbed Anya’s back as she gulped down the glass of water.



“Anya, why didn’t you say that before?” Katha said.

“I was scared,” Anya said.

“Of what?”

“That you’ll be annoyed..and that you’ll not give me anything to do.”

Anya stared at the floor, as tears dripped down from her cheeks.

“..I wanted to bring the flowers. I want to decorate. I want to do things with you, with my sisters.”

“Look here,” Katha said.

Anya wiped her tears, and turned toward Katha.

“Anya, do you know what good sisters do? They are frank and honest to each other. And when we do that, we can do anything, anything together.”

Anya wiped her tears and kept the glass of water on the table.

“Now come on, let’s decorate the house, sister!”

Katha got up and pulled Anya out of the couch, and the three sisters got back to their project.

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*“That flower decoration day is one of my favorite childhood memories.”*

Katha smiled as she read Anya’s messages. She had no memory of that day. Yet because of how

Anya felt around her, years ago, Katha re-lived a bit of her own self from those days.

“What kind of a commando was I?” Katha said.

“Haha, sista commando?!” Anya said.

“Love you, Anya!”

“Love you, sista...”

“..Now, can you please paint something with those white and pink flowers?”

Katha was fired up, inspired, and eager to splash the canvas.