

## Gut Feeling

Atul scared me silly when I talked with him over the phone for the first time.

“Are you wearing a purple-ish top with an asymmetric neckline?”

He was spot on. I was stunned – how could he *see me* when we were in different parts of the city?

Sensing my unease, he apologized immediately: “It’s just that the vision came to me so vividly -- and I just had to check whether it was right. Sorry, I didn’t mean to spook you.”

No apologies or explanations from Atul settled my discomfort. He had shaken my inner peace, vigorously. I shuddered and decided not to meet him.

After listening to my weary description of the Atul incident, my sister, Rachna, pestered me to visit her and talk things over in person. I happily obliged, hoping that discussing and decompressing with Rachna would help me shake the feeling that Atul was watching me.

When Rachna saw me, she scooped all her unsorted photos midway, stuffed them in a bag, hugged and led me to the family-room. Rachna’s huge cache of photos had always been a joke in the family. She is never tired of rearranging them. As far as I was concerned, I felt relieved that she did not ask me to join her in her favorite hobby of “photo viewing”.

Instead, Rachna pulled out a pack of cards. I tore the new plastic covering and shuffled the pack.

We played, cheated and laughed. Samir, Rachna’s husband, joined us. He called out aces

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correctly – even before they left our hands – as though the deck was transparent to him. “No, I cannot see the cards” he smiled, “but I know it when you throw one.” *Ace Intuition in Spades*, he called his talent. What could I say? Outwardly, I laughed at his bragging but secretly, I was amazed, totally overwhelmed by this untimely and uncanny display of his card intuitiveness. A doubt nagged me: Did Rachna set up Samir to show me that intuitiveness was common and harmless – that it was nothing to worry about? Was Samir just like Atul – somehow seeing the unseen? Did everyone have such an uncanny power?

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That night, I met a new Rachna – unfathomably deep and secretive. I was reading when she knocked softly and let herself into my room. She was agitated – it was as though someone had wrested the sleep out of her domain. Concerned, I took a step towards her and together we sank onto the strewn books and clothes on the floor. Rachna nervously swallowed, and took out an old photograph from her pajama pocket. Without any “forward” to her story, she bluntly spilled the plot: “Photo viewing time,” she said with false cheer, “I have a picture of Mohan to show you.”

Seeing my confusion, she added, “Our brother Mohan, who died twenty two years ago.

Remember him?”

“What? - A real brother? Born to our parents?” I was aghast.

The boy looked scrawny and sad. Rachna filled in other details – Mohan had died of unknown reasons, and Ma had broken down completely: lost, melancholic and aloof. Pa was a comforting but a mute presence. He destroyed all of Mohan’s pictures from the albums. No one spoke about

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Mohan anymore. Every effort was made to protect Ma from grief *while the grief of the children was conveniently neglected.*

Rachna sniffled: “During my disturbed childhood years, I explored psychic readings to find Mohan. I just couldn’t. This stolen picture was all to comfort me.”

Why wasn’t I told about my own family history and left out of the loop? Why was it such a huge secret? Self-pity suddenly took over like an expanding black hole. I had always felt incomplete – searching for something out of reach. Was I looking for my dead brother?

I was angry with everyone: Ma and Pa for imposing the punishment of muteness on Rachna, a kid who did not know how to resolve a confusing absence. I was even angrier with Rachna for keeping this secret from me for so long. Did Rachna want to protect a little sister or did she feel I was too dumb to be of any help?

*Why was this epic revelation happening now?*

Rachna snapped: “Can’t you see I am sharing Mohan story with you *now* because of new hope? I think humans could use this intuitive ability to see the unseen – to connect with souls that have had an untimely death... spirits that are roaming restlessly...like Mohan”

“I can’t help. I have no intuition,” I protested - but she brushed aside all my objections. I could develop intuition even if it wasn’t inherent, she insisted. *Atul and Samir’s intuition must have made you realize that this sixth sense is within reach.* The pleading went on and the guilt was laid on thick: “Frankly, you owe it to yourself to search for Mohan.”

“Huh...?” I was bewildered.

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She did not address my confusion, but continued her own thought: “Besides, who else could I turn to other than you?”

I immediately thought of Atul, who was able to see my clothes across a whole opaque city. Surely, he could help spot Mohan. However, suggesting this to Rachna now would have been rude and inappropriate; clearly she was spewing confusion and needed help.

Could Mohan’s spirit be still around, two decades after his death? Could intuition connect me with a different world? This visit was supposed to be an escape for me and yet I was the one getting imprisoned in the catacombs of an intangible world.

Rachna was unstoppable. She continued her arguments from every angle. “Aren’t you curious how Atul and Samir saw the unseen? What is wrong in me wanting to see the invisible Mohan – the-unseen-for-a-long-time-Mohan?”

I couldn’t help pitying my sister for looking for a corridor to connect with a dead person. He was still important to her – maybe more than me. This sinister thought started hurting me more with every passing second. I was crying inside and the pain and bitterness were getting intense. I wanted a time-out to organize my thoughts; instead I shot my bitter excuse: “You and Samir have failed at this, right? What makes you think *I can succeed?*”

*Well, I could try! Where was the harm?*

Rachna had worked out the details for helping me develop my intuition through a game of Sudoku. “Go to a particular grid slot, where logic is not available readily and feel the number that’d fill the gap. With closed eyes, gather vibes for a number to pop into your head. This

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sudden popping up of a number is intuition. That's how Samir developed his intuition for a particular card.”

Rachna's arguments, her intensity and here thought processes started doing a number on me. I started thinking she was doing this partly for me! She wanted me to understand the inner workings of intuition, and all I was doing was blaming, calling the behavior bizarre, and protesting. I was so selfish. I needed to rise above my pettiness.

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I rigorously tried Sudoku for a month, desperately wanting it to work but finally conceded that Rachna had talked me into an impossible quagmire. Sinking was inevitable.

I listed things that had gone awry since my visit. I had lost my job, and I was physically exhausted and mentally fragmented. I was sucked in a scheme, not of my making.

My best friend and colleague Neil was empathetic and wanted to hear my “full” story over the “best Chai in town.” It felt really good to be out with Neil - but in the Chai Latte shop, I ended up howling and pouring my heart out – about Mohan, about Rachna's secret, and about my very recent headaches and guilt over not being able to help Rachna. My chai was untouched and cold. My hiccupping dredged out my undefined but real pain. My nose and eyes leaked and flooded my voice. We were drawing a lot of attention even though we were sitting in a corner. Neil silently led me out of the café towards the stream. He bent down and picked up a flat pebble and tossed it across the water. It leapfrogged twice before disappearing.

“That's your pain – flying away,” He smiled.

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“Good. I can’t see it,” I grinned, “I wish I didn’t *feel it* either.”

Neil hugged me. “It will go away. Believe me, it will.”

I liked this moment. What a friendly pillar to have for a support!

Later, when he was dropping me back home, he said: “Meghna - if Mohan doesn’t mean anything to you, then he doesn’t exist. Never has. Life is about what the truth is to you. You do not have to struggle with Rachna’s truth.....”

I liked this moment too. I was turning into a collector of moments, hanging on to flashes of hope. I know I was being sentimental but feeling light and floaty after the heavy sessions of *intuition-development* felt good.

The next day, I went to the office to retrieve my belongings. My nature poster stopped me cold – it was a pristine scene of arctic water dotted with countless chunks of drift ice. It read: *It is not how much we have, but how much we **enjoy**, that makes happiness.* I had often stared at it and found new meaning in it.

Today, a sticky-post-it note paper was on the poster and it had Neil’s handwriting on it: “Meghna - I ***enjoyed*** being with you.”

Neil had signed his name with a smiley face. The yellow paper showed starkly on the picture of the blue water with white ice floes.

I liked this declaration of caring and decided to frame it along with the post-it note. This was going to be my bedroom poster – a reminder of precious Zen flashes Neil brought into my life, at

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a time when I was giving up on Rachna, Mohan and myself, Neil's friendship felt good, very good.

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Neil gave me a lead on a job and arranged a meeting with someone who was going to help me further in this regard. That day, throughout the meeting, I felt unsettled. I just couldn't focus. I was clearly agitated for blowing away my opportunities - and yet, I couldn't shake off my unease. I reminded myself to calm down, to breathe deeply but instead of air, smoke filled my lungs. A strong *intuition* consumed me suddenly - I was looking through a thick and smoky fire that left me with a feeling of losing something precious and organic. I couldn't see clearly. I was choking and sputtering.

My intuition had finally kicked in after those epic failed tries. I should have been happy but this felt ominous. This gut feeling was strong and felt like a bad start!

Both Atul and Samir had their intuition *in the present* – the unseen clothes or calling the ace was *happening in real time*. Mine was futuristic and bizarre – *fire will happen*.

When? – I don't know.

Where? – I don't know.

Who will be in the fire? – I don't know.

I was just close by to inhale the smoke – that's all the information I had. This *intuition or thought* was a befuddling and useless flash feeling, nothing more.

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Neil listened to my intuition tale with understanding: “Meghna, you’re under too much pressure. Losing a job is stressful enough, and you have loads of other weighty tensions... Tell you what, how about we go for a long relaxing walk every day starting this minute?”

He sprang up from the couch, took my hand and together we walked, silly-talked and brainstormed ideas to get out of fires. He was half joking and laughing, but I was critically reviewing my experience. How seriously could I take this ill-defined intuition?

I talked to Neil about how to broach this topic with Rachna. He looked at me quizzically and thoughtfully for a full minute before answering.

“Want to invite her for dinner – away from her grill fire?” Neil knew about her grilling obsession.

However, his humor was wasted on me. I did not laugh. Instead seriously I told him: “I don’t cook. Besides, even if we go out this time, how often can I keep her away from fire? How long can we keep eating out? - For months, for years? *Intuition does not have a time frame or reality check. Intuitions are tricky – unquestionable and unanswerable.*”

Neil did not know how to answer me but he tried: “This must be highly frustrating like watching a teaser segment of a film – tantalizing and *unrevealing*, right?”

I was quiet not because the comment was silly but because I did not know about intuition enough. I had very limited experience with it; in fact, this fire snippet was so fleeting I wasn’t even sure if it was an intuition or merely a thought.



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After much back and forth on fire situations, I made a phone call to Rachna just to extract a promise from her to be extra careful around a fire.

She laughed, “O.K. So, my little sister has had an intuition at last. I guess my lessons worked.”

She was merciless and teased me nonstop until Neil took my phone and reminded Rachna about the fire.

“Oh yeah, I won’t grill on fire. I promise.”

Samir’s voice interrupted the call: “Hey Meghna! Your sister has almost finished grilling, but don’t worry. I have the fire extinguisher ready.”

Neil whooshed an imaginary fire and I laughed.

I cannot let certain things out of my mind. Ideas get stuck in my brain and right now, the smoke and fire ruled. I was glad I was with Neil. He made me laugh and laughter is clean – it makes smoke disappear, at least temporarily.

Neil drove me back, gently probing my experience – with careful words and patience. Suddenly, two blocks away from my apartment, he stopped his car. The road was blocked and the detour posted. We pulled to the side of the road, parked and got out of the car to see the smoke out of the only tall building – my apartment building. Was this the fire I saw in my flash intuition? There was a crowd nearby. Chaos surrounded us: ambulances, hoses, firemen, the ghostly building, ladders...

Neil was holding my shaking self and saying: “Hey, calm down, Meghna. Please... Rachna, Samir and I are safe...you are safe...that’s what matters.”

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Oh, my dumb, useless intuition! – It reeked of fate, predetermination and helplessness.

Neil was still holding me and trying to soothe me. My neck had become taut and my limbs had started hurting. Relief at being safe and dread of the whole situation, were glued together. I was holding on to Neil as though I'd evaporate without him. I wanted to calm myself and oust this feeling of fright by shouting: "Gut feelings are wrong... I lost nothing ..."

Suddenly, I recalled my treasured poster – the one with Neil's post-it – the one I wanted to frame for my bedroom wall. It was in a cardboard box on a table in front of the window through which the smoke was billowing.

I recalled my intuition – the feeling of losing something organic and precious in a fire. I recalled the details while the fire raged on and the smoke thickened.

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