

Maulik M. Dhandha

**America.....Where the soldier met the poet, the poet met the joker and the joker.....**

“Teetet..teetet..teetet,” the alarm rings and I say, ‘*Wake up, Maulik. Wake up, its 5:30 am. You have to read the newspaper to improve your English. Remember, the war of Mahabharata—the greatest epic in Hindu mythology, always started at sunrise. You also have to start at sunrise to win your war—to succeed in the SAT and TOEFL exams and in the VISA interview to reach your dream place—America.*’ This was my attitude towards life during the four years of high school. Day and night I used to work on my Scientific and English skills to achieve my dream of reaching America, studying medicine and doing scientific research. I had thought that once I reach America, everything would be alright. The war would be over and I would be able to relax and study peacefully.

I did succeed in the exams and interviews and reached MSU. The orientation days were beautiful because I felt that everything was finally happening. But, there were three major battles still to be won—to get a job for paying my loan and expenses, a position in some research lab for my interests and textbooks for classes. I got the job easily at Holmes cafeteria and was really happy. I went to the Book Store and asked for *Thomas Calculus*, the one that I needed urgently. It was costing 150 dollars. *Shhhmm bang!!!* A bullet in my knee. Apart from 350 dollars all I had was loan money for the tuition fees. ‘*How will I buy books for all subjects and still pay for my expenses and loan?*’ But, I remembered what my teacher had said once, “Where there is a will, there is a way.” I asked my friend Nag who was in the same class to share the book with me for few days. He agreed. So, two battles were still going on. But, I won both of them soon. I got a position in Dr. Sinha’s Dermatology research lab and I found out that there is always one copy of every textbook in the library. So, the relaxation that I had expected in America was not realized. Working on my research skills and studying for my classes in library for all night once every week started. Today, with the help of lecture writing skills and library, I have taken all classes till now without textbooks. Bravo!

But, textbook problem is not the only bullet I survived. Broken dreams of scholarships, rising loan debts, increasing job hours and speed of classes have hit me even more, day by day. It was spring when I lost a big scholarship opportunity. I was crying all day. But, at the end of the day, my conscience told me, *You loser, fight, you have to fight*. In the midst of snow I ran from Hubbard Hall to Holmes cafeteria, where I used to work, and told them I will work more hours. So, it started increased job hours on top of 6 classes. But this was not enough for paying my loans, so I took the job in custodial which paid more and worked at night from 9 pm to 1 am. Maybe, this was my destiny and Almighty's wish that the following event occurred due to the custodial job. It was Thursday night in the month of February. I got out from my job around 1:15 am and was dead tired. It was snowing heavily. I waited for the bus for a few minutes, but for some reason it had got late. So, I started walking back to my dorm and suddenly felt that I was naked, all in front of myself. *'So this is America. Congratulations, Maulik. Relax and study. Or Fight. Isn't that the word you always use? Yes, fight? See what have you made of yourself—A wounded soldier with nothing in mind but aggression and hate.'* I was already into tears. *'Don't cry you fool. You only have done this to yourself.'* I was sobbing and said out aloud, "Why can't I be successful? What's wrong with everything and where is the justice of the world?" My conscience told me, *My friend the world is perfectly just, and everything is fine. You just need to change your view of life. See, how much this country has given you. Come with me, I will help you.* I took the hand and today I can describe that meeting in the form of a poem.

*"My friend where were you?"*

*"I was chained as a slave deep within you"*

*"But, do not worry I am free now;*

*And you will not fight but sing from now.*

*Not the battle of life but the song of eternity*

The next day I went to class and to the research lab. I noticed for the first time after six months the difference between the class here and the one back in India. It had a projector, internet connection

and an automatic sharpener! The lab had the latest computers, devices and a vacuum pump—actually a vacuum line. How I had spent days back in India for finding a scientific vacuum pump for my project and here there was a pipe line for vacuum! ‘*You see, how much distraction your war has caused,*’ my conscience told me.” I thought, ‘*Indeed I have received much from this country.*’ I finished the work early, that day and had a few hours before the custodial job. ‘*Let’s go.*’ My conscience told me. ‘*Where?*’ I asked. ‘*Somewhere near the river.*’ I went to see the frozen river and sat in front of it. ‘*How much I had wished to do this every time I passed near the river, but never did it,*’ I thought. My conscience said, ‘*Don’t regret it my friend, just enjoy this moment. See the whiteness of snow.*’ Yes, this was a door opened and the meeting of the soldier in me with the poet in me had finally occurred.

In the words of Shakespeare,

“UNDER the greenwood tree

Who loves to lie with me,

And tune his merry note

Unto the sweet bird's throat—

Come hither, come hither, come hither!

Here shall he see , No enemy

But winter and rough weather.

Life was flipped by 180 degrees. I was doing more and more work than before—not only as a soldier’s duty but also as a poet’s art. In the summer, I went to Florida for a week with my cousins and came back with renewed energy. This time I was holding two jobs, plus the lab work and three fast track summer classes. The soldier and the poet inside me were moving ahead happily. On one such busy day, on my way to class on a bus, I heard two boys talking about their party last weekend. I thought, ‘*What a waste, partying is?*’ “You are true, partying for no reason is a waste many students do,” said the poet in me. I didn’t realize that I had said it out aloud. The two boys who were talking overheard it. One of them came to me and said, “So, what do you think is useful in life? Work?

Studies?” I knew what was coming—a bullet wound. I could not concentrate on anything that day. At night, as I had done 6 months before, I went for a lonely walk. This time, I had to find the solution myself because I knew what was wrong. Amongst the serious career oriented days, I had forgotten to notice the small joys of life and had killed every form of delicacy that life had offered me. Since that day, I started questioning my thinking pattern again. When I saw people playing games in playgrounds, I used to think “What fun do they get out of this?” Now I try to stop myself. But, this transition is not easy. Even today, I try to find those joys but it is hard for me. Five years of life in science projects, jobs and studies have brought me to this state where life to me is nothing more than a serious monologue, though I am still 19.

So, the days began for finding the joys of life. On one weekend morning, I thought I would meet my friends instead of going to library. I got ready early in the morning and knocked at my friends’ door. My friends were shocked when they saw me. All were in their pajamas, and I was in jeans. I told them I was there to hangout with everybody. They smiled. They knew something was wrong with me. One of my friends told me, “Maulik, you are too late for yesterday’s party and too early for today’s party.” I started laughing and everybody joined me. Next time, I asked my roommate for some English music suggestions. He gave me a curious look. He might have thought, “When did the sun started rising from the west”. But, he gave me a few CDs and I put them on my iPod, which my sister had sent me. One day, I was listening to my iPod during my custodial job, as is allowed in the job. In midst of the song, I started dancing. My colleague looked at me and said, “There you are boy. Now you are getting somewhere.” I acknowledged him. But, soon I found I had spilled the bucket of water. I laughed. This was when the poet in me met the joker in me. Today, I have realized that life is neither a battle, nor a poem nor a joke. It is nothing, but Life. In one year of my stay at MSU, the soldier inside me has met the poet, the poet has met the joker and the joker is laughing in the drama called Life.