

# Her Last Wish

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*Dedicated to my HIV friend.  
I wish I could mention your name.*

*“Always try to represent yourself as ‘happy’,  
because, initially it becomes your ‘look’,  
gradually it becomes your ‘habit’,  
and one day, it becomes your ‘personality’.”*  
— Astha Sharma

## *A note from the author*



When I started writing my first book *You are the Best Wife*, I never had, even in my wildest dreams, imagined that it will win so many hearts. I just did a little research on my own to find out what works in the market, read a few dozen books and realized that readers are unpredictable, that there are no flat rules. So I made a rule for myself – I will write like a husband, not a writer. This could have been my first and last book, but whenever I decided to quit, I got a review which said, ‘you have come so far... you did it in the past, and you can do it again’. I try to reply to every single message and comment that I get. Believe it or not, it is you who has made me what I am today. I would take this opportunity to thank all the wonderful hearts who stood in my support in their own individualistic way. Your reviews and feedback are the silent way to promote an author, especially one who have limited resources to promote a book. I would like to thank the following readers who have now become a part of my life, my extended family – Sheetal Poojari, Anandhini Iyappan, Lalita Sharma, Rajesh D. Hajare, Ranjithakrishna Mudradi, VP Dharshini Vellingiri, Huma Naaz, VishakhaTiwari, Anupama Sudhir Singh, Riya Ranjan, Nivetha Muralidharan, Shweta Desai, Sunaina Kapoor, Satish P Babu, Monika Pandya, Nidha Mohan, Madhu Shunmuganathan, Pallav Goswami, Tania Chatterjee, Guru Priya, Merlin Felisha, Arpita Saxena, and ChocoHolic Angellina.

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Thanks to Madhuri Varma, Ankit Bhan and Ravi Kant Gautam for their contribution in the book.

So, here is my second book! No matter how many books I write, *You are the Best Wife* would always be close to my heart.

What I am today is because of a beautiful soul who made me a better person. Now onwards, a portion of my royalty will always go for donation. I refrain to mention any fixed percentage as readers will make their own opinion about me and I don't want to use this as an appeal to sell my books.

Thank you for making me an author, though I would politely say – I am not an author, nor a celebrity; I am just a husband, who wrote something from his heart.

Never Surrender!

Ajay

There are three kinds of teachers in this world – those who teach what they feel like teaching; those who teach what students want them to teach; and those who intend to teach, but never really do. I happen to fall in the third category.

My salary slip stated my designation as assistant professor, but throughout the year, I was busy invigilating exams, assisting in placements, cultural and technical festivals, counselling students, addressing RTI notices, writing false stories to be published in the college's yearly magazine and making arrangements for a professional tour for students. If I had some time left, I would teach.

I am, in fact, an ad hoc faculty; I am only required to fill in for faculties on leave. Most of my students love me, perhaps because I am a jack of all trades, but essentially, master of none.

## **Tuesday, June 2010**

I disembarked the Goa express at Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station in Delhi after a long journey of thirty-two hours, though I didn't look even half as tired. Delhi was boiling at this time of the year, as if the sun was taking revenge from the Delhiites. Clouds were giving a false ray of hope for rain, by making the air humid. The roads were jam packed with commuters. I managed to hire an auto for Malviya Nagar and after another thirty minutes, just when I was about to press the doorbell of flat no. 65 of block L, the most amazing lady of my life opened the door.

“Good morni...” Even before I could finish, she jumped forward and kissed me. I wasn’t surprised because I know she can even climb up the Qutub Minar to exhibit her emotions. I couldn’t reciprocate, more concerned about a free show for the oldies doing yoga in the society garden. So I barged inside the house, holding her, and needless to mention, we kissed. This time I reciprocated deeply and passionately. I had explored that a long time gap in two kisses increases its importance manifold.

“I missed you darling!” she whispered in a nasal tone, perhaps because of her cold. I smiled at her and after a few minutes of silent hugging and kissing, murmured slowly, ‘Missed you too.’ She was elated, because I am not very verbal with my feelings otherwise.

We cuddled in silence for a while. Sometimes, silence speaks a lot and that was the best language known to me. I had been away from home for more than twenty days for the first time after marriage.

“How was the trip?” she asked, caressing my face.

“I was on duty.”

“Okay! I know what that means. It was a trip for the students and not for me.” She always understood what I meant, and had the audacity to speak for me. I smiled but chose not to speak.

She rose to her feet and said, “Listen, there is poha in the sauce pan and juice in the fridge. Please have your breakfast.”

“Where are you going?” I asked instinctively.

“Just in case you have forgotten, I work with Axis bank.”

“Why not take the day off, sweetheart? You still have a bad cold,” I finally managed to speak my heart. The truth behind me asking her to stay back was that I had missed her badly in the past twenty days. Too add to that the fact that



she had the same symptoms when I had left Delhi and she wasn't okay as yet. But Astha rejected my request.

"No," she replied as she brushed her hair. "My probation is due next week and I don't want to give the manager a chance to pull me down. Don't worry, it's just a common cold."

Astha was a career oriented woman, and wanted to make it big in her job. She had a terrible boss, but our financial condition made her stick to the job. I am just an adhoc faculty at Sri Ram College of Art, Science and Commerce.

I walked her to the parking lot and helped her get the Activa out. She was about to drive off when I said, "Do call me before leaving office. I may go to see Papa."

"You usually meet Papa on Saturdays...it is just Tuesday."

"I was away for almost a month."

"I know, I know. You are a son too," she taunted and I smiled.



I was exhilarated to be home. It hardly matters whether we stay in a five star hotel or are on a leisure tour, nothing can be compared to the comfort of one's home. I finished my morning chores and was planning to take a short nap, unaware that the very next moment would change the course of my life. It was the moment of truth for me. I wish I could go back in time and never receive that call. It was an unknown landline number.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, we are calling from Rotary Club blood bank. May I speak with Mrs Astha please?"

"Astha is at work. I am her husband. You may leave your message with me."

“May I know your name, sir?” the lady on the other side sounded serious.

“Vijay Sharma. What is the matter? Is everything okay?”

An awkward silence followed. The lady on the call sighed, giving me an intuition of some bad news. “Mr Vijay,” she finally said, “since you are her husband and our records confirm your name as her family member, please understand that it is not our duty to inform you and that we may be incorrect in our understanding.” A long pause followed.

“What is the matter? Please come to the point.” I was getting restless.

“Your wife had donated blood during a blood donation camp at her office and as per our standard procedure, we conducted some basic tests such as HIV, p24 antigen and rapid tests. I am extremely sorry to inform you that Mrs Astha Sharma’s blood has been diagnosed positive for HIV.”

*Did she actually say HIV?*

It took me a while to register what I had heard. I gathered my wits and said, “If this is some kind of prank call, end it right away!”

I was about to disconnect the call when she said, “This is not a prank call, Mr Vijay. Sir, we are not a hundred percent sure about our diagnosis and would suggest that your wife get the Western Blot test done.”

I went numb and lost my voice. Soon I realized that this was happening for real. The word HIV heavily echoed in my head.

“Mr Vijay, are you there?” she prodded as I was lost in my agony and hadn’t spoken a single word.

I managed to utter, “HIV... meaning AIDS?”

## 2

I had heard the unexpected. It was something that I had heard of only on Doordarshan advertisements. Was it the news that could change my fate? Well, that was not the only struggle I had been through.

I had been a loser all my life. People usually say that change is the only constant. But not for me. The only consistent thing in my life was losing.

My grades in school were consistent between forty and fifty percent. Somehow my life had never crossed the threshold of fifty percent. I had prepared for five years for IAS/PCS. I surprised myself for having spent five years for these exams. My father was always hopeful that his son will be an IAS officer someday. It was his craziness to expect something of that kind from me. I am the only child of my parents and considered it to be my moral duty to fulfil my parents' dreams.

After graduating in English from Allahabad University, I had applied for my Master's. During those days, I was also preparing for the IAS exam. I am unsure whether it could be called preparation, but I was sure then and I am sure now that the IAS is beyond my capacity. However, it took five attempts for my father to realize the same thing. I don't blame him for that either, because it was by mistake and I still wonder how I cleared the prelims and main examination of PCS once, which had added two extra years of hope for my father.

I had applied for many government jobs and successfully managed to clear a few written exams as well. The most horrifying part of my life was facing an interview – when five pairs of eyes stare at a person as if they are about to post-mortem him, it becomes difficult for the person to even open his mouth.

At the age of thirty, I realized that I wouldn't be eligible for any government job anymore. I never had a dream of my own to chase, but for my father, his dream of seeing me as a government officer finally died.

I had no courage in me to appear for a recruitment process. How could a mother not sense her child's feelings! She acted as my saviour, declaring that her son wouldn't prepare for any of those stupid exams. A mother's heart always beats for her son, no matter how useless that son is!

My journalist mother helped me to get the job of an Asst. Professor in Sriram College of Arts, Science and Commerce. It was really embarrassing for me that even at the age of thirty, I had to use my mom's reference, and that too for an ad-hoc job. But I had no other choice.

Generally, parents are at peace once their kid settles down in his professional life. But my parents were more worried after my appointment, for the next question was – who would marry such a loser?

I vividly remember the day when Papa had asked me about the kind of girl I was looking for. That was indeed a difficult question. I applied my mind and in the end asked him to decide for me. How could I have made the most important decision of my life when all the other decisions had been made by them? I wonder why he had even asked me. I soon got the answer when my mother asked me whether I had a girlfriend.

I rarely laugh and that was one of those rare moments. My mother too joined me in the laughter, although our reasons were quite different. She was laughing at herself for having asked that question. Who would want to be in love with a person like me, I thought. I am good looking, but again, that was according to my mom. The truth is that I am a boring person. Sometimes some people use good words to say it and cover up by calling me shy instead.

My parents always drifted in opposite directions for everything, but were always united in their views for two reasons: One, they both love me, and two, they both wanted me to settle down and get married to a good girl. I don't blame them for their expectations; after all, every parent has the right to dream of a beautiful daughter-in-law.

An extraordinary profile with fancy details was created on online matchmaking forums. Brahmin boy of height five feet eight inches, fair complexion, smart, age twenty-nine, full-time professor at Sriram College, father works in the police department, mother is a senior editor of a famous newspaper, own house, et al. I hated most of the above mentioned details as I knew the truth of it all, but liked the last line which was in bold – **No Dowry**.

After reading this advertisement on Shaadi.com, I confronted my mother, "Mom, this ad is full of lies."

"What lies?" she asked.

"Everything. My height is five feet seven inches. My age is thirty. I am just an assistant professor and whose house are you referring to as 'own house'?"

"Vijay, isn't this your house too?"

"It suggests as if I am the owner of a separate house."

"You don't worry about all these things. Leave it to me." This is how my parents behaved. Whenever things go complex, they declare that I should leave it to them.

“You mentioned that my complexion is fair. My photo will prove otherwise.”

“That is not a lie!” she protested in a serious tone. Her raised voice silenced me.

A year passed by, but my age in the matrimony site remained twenty-nine. As if my mother had taken an oath to promote my age to thirty only once I got married. I met almost a dozen girls; a few showed a little interest in me, but later denied the proposal. Some would ask me to meet them at a nearby mall, few would talk to me over the phone, and we even went to the homes of a few. But each one of them declined eventually.

Whomsoever I met personally, I would tell them that I was not a rich guy and that I was just an ad hoc assistant professor. That would help them in making their decision, but it wasn't helping my family. Every girl had her own reservations – some didn't want to live with my parents while some were looking for a government officer. But these weren't the actual reasons for rejecting me. I knew the reason, but somehow my parents were in denial until they met Sonali.

Sonali worked as a Java developer with TCS in Gurgaon. Her profile picture spoke volumes about her beauty and confidence. She was ambitious and wished to continue with her job even after marriage. Her hobbies included watching reality shows on TV, playing with puppies – so much so that she wanted to have a pet puppy after marriage. She was unaware then that she'd get two puppies if she married me.

One fine Sunday, we visited her place to meet her. As usual, some boring and irrelevant topics were discussed. Her parents, being very smart, poked me twice so that I'd utter something. But I only nodded at whatever they asked. After

half an hour of normal chatting, Sonali and I were blessed with some time in isolation.

The real struggle for me began then. A beautiful girl looks killer when she puts on make-up. She was looking like a queen, and I felt like a poor man. I went numb, not because of her beauty, but because of the isolation.

After smiling for around five minutes, Sonali asked, “Any questions for me, Vijay?”

“No,” I replied hesitantly, “but if you have any, feel free to ask.”

And the very next second, she began talking like a tape recorder. I realized that I had committed the cardinal sin.

“What are your future plans?”

“Where did you study?”

“Do you stay in a rented flat or own it?”

“How is your job?”

“Are you closer to your father or your mother?”

“Did you ever have any girlfriend?”

“Do you have any psychological problem?”

“Do you have any health related issues?”

“What is your salary?”

“Do you have any bad habits?”

I answered a few questions straightaway, but got irritated later. I am thankful that she didn't ask me the size of my dick.

“Haven't you gone through my profile? The answers to all these have already been mentioned there,” I said.

There was a well-known silence in the room. She replied with a cunning smile, “I think we would be good as friends.”

Well, that did not surprise me at all, but it also had Sonali's answer hidden in it. The very same evening, Sonali's mother called up and expressed her regret. “Vijay is a very nice boy, but Sonali is actually looking for a government employee. We are really very sorry.”

This shot my mother's blood to boiling temperature and she shouted aloud on the phone, "This is disgusting! His profile was shared on the website. If your daughter had different demands, then we shouldn't have been invited in the first place."

I was sitting very close to my mother and could easily comprehend her conversation with Sonali's mother.

"My son has a heart of gold," said my mother. "I bet that you cannot find anyone better than him for your daughter." I looked at myself in the mirror and wondered whether my mother was actually talking about me.

Hearing my mother's words, Sonali couldn't hold back any longer. "Hi Aunty," she took the phone from her mother and rattled away.

My mother kept mum, but that didn't discourage Sonali. She further said, "Let me tell you the actual reason for my rejection. I am totally fine marrying a teacher or even an Asst. Prof. for that matter. But your son hardly speaks a word. He is an introvert and a boring person. He has below average looks and lacks confidence. If it is difficult for you to digest these facts, then please consider my former reason of denying him. Hope you have got your answers now. Goodbye and all the best for your great son's future." Saying all this in one breath, Sonali disconnected the call.

My mother could hardly bear that insult. In her boiling rage she said, "How dare she disconnect the call!" and dialled her number again. This time, however, I held her and said politely, "Mom, enough of running away from reality."

There was an abrupt silence and tears rolled down my mother's eyes. She is not a lady who gives up easily. She is egoistic. She shouted at my dad, "Sanjay, you are to be blamed for this!"



That was it. Now the two age old enemies were ready to spoil the rest of the happiness in my life.

“What the hell did I do?” Papa retaliated.

“You have always forced your dreams on him. You never asked him about his wishes and dreams. That sucked out all the confidence from him. I cannot accept an idiot like Sonali calling my son an introvert.”

“Stop shifting the blame onto me. Let me remind you that I work for the police force and am out for majority of the time. You have spent the most important moments of your son’s life with him.”

“Is it? Was it me who wanted him to be an IAS officer? No! It was you. You wanted him to continue attempting for that stupid exam which wasted his five precious years!”

In spite of theirs being a love marriage, I couldn’t spot even an ounce of love between them now. They rarely spoke to each other and whenever they did, the conversation would witness raised volumes, ending up in a quarrel. Thank god for our small two BHK apartment which had bound us to face each other, else none of us were even willing to look at the other’s face.



“Vijay, please dress up. We are going out for lunch,” my mother instructed me one fine morning while I was lazing around peacefully. My intelligent mind immediately decoded the intention behind this lunch – another girl-seeing program!

“She is the daughter of one of my old friends and knows everything about you.”

I was left wondering what was covered in this *everything*. ‘Is she aware that I am a hopeless man?’ I wanted to ask. As we headed towards Mukherjee Nagar, I have no idea

what crossed my mother's mind, but she started chanting her all-time instructions. "Vijay, please understand, my son. I know that as a person, you are the best human being. But every girl wants to marry a confident man."

"Okay."

"Please open up, son. Express yourself. A silent person is just like a closed box – people are unaware of the stuff hidden in it. Whereas an expressive person is just like an open book – howsoever much one tries, they cannot change the contents. It can be read by one and even by millions. Be like a book." Now here was a new definition of me – a closed box!

I nodded and no matter how much I wanted to say, 'I understand', I kept mum. But my mother understood my emotions. This was not the first time I was receiving this inspirational speech from my mother and I was well aware of ways to avoid it – silence.

We reached the destined place and my parents were welcomed. I settled in one corner of the sofa and scanned the room inquisitively. My mother immediately sprang into action by flaunting the most famous hero of Bollywood.

"My son is very obedient and brilliant. He has cleared his PCS entrance exam and one day he'll be an IPS officer just like his father. Although he isn't interested in his current job, he is just parking himself while preparing for a government job."

My father stared at me. He seemed happy that at least my mother was appreciating him in others' presence.

"Vijay has never even touched alcohol, let alone his having a girlfriend."

Isn't that the reason why we were here? Had I had a girlfriend, why would we have met these people? My weakness of being unable to have a girlfriend was somehow showcased as my strength. After a few minutes, my mother's

next target, a lady entered the room. Speaking of her just as a lady would not be enough. She looked like a model with her shining hair, adorned in black and white Punjabi suit with high heeled sandals making her five feet six inches tall. On her ears glittered small diamond studs. She had a perfect body, with all the curves at the appropriate places. Her cheek bones made her look like Kareena Kapoor in size zero. After a few seconds, I was apprised that this model had just landed a job with Axis bank. The beautiful name of this beautiful girl was Astha.

*Mr Vijay, be ready for another rejection!* I made a mental note.

I had prepared myself for the worst. It is very interesting to know that once you are prepared for the worst, your confidence touches the sky, because you have absolutely nothing to lose. I glanced at Astha and our eyes met for the first time ever. She smiled, but I was too engrossed in her beauty to smile back at her. However, I wasn't nervous as I was already prepared for the worst.

"Astha, why don't you take him along to the nearby ice-cream shop?" her mother suggested. After almost a dozen bride-hunts, I was familiar with these formalities. For me, it was an opportunity to chat with a model. We were just about to move when my mother said, "Vijay, come soon." Her merciful eyes were pleading me to talk openly with Astha. I nodded.

Five minutes into our walk to the nearby ice-cream parlour, Astha took the first step to strike a conversation.

"Do you like ice-cream?"

"Occasionally."

We reached the parlour and settled at the extreme corner table. Being a Sunday afternoon, the place wasn't much crowded.

“Welcome to the ice-cream wonderland of New Zealand. We pioneer in natural ice cream flavours,” a waiter said and asked Astha her choice. It amazed me to see how expert these waiters are to extract an order from ladies, offering maximum courtesy to them and conveniently ignoring the fact that the bill could be paid by the man too.

Astha was busy going through the menu while asking for my preference.

“Nothing specific,” I said as choice of ice cream was millions of miles away from my mind. I was busy looking at her. The way she spoke to the waiter, her hairstyle, the way her hands moved... everything mesmerized me. And as expected, I was playing my part of remaining silent and observing this beauty with brains.

“Vijay, why are you so silent?” she shot her first question. What would I have said? That this is how I am?

“Nothing like that, do you have a boyfriend?” I blurted out something I could never even imagine in my dreams. This is what happens when you force someone to speak.

“So, you want a virgin?” She instantly concluded. I was aghast with the frankness with which she said this.

“No, no, you totally misunderstood me.” I tried covering up for my blunder. “I was only wondering how a girl like you doesn’t have a boyfriend and how you opted for an arranged marriage. That’s it.”

She smiled, but chose not to reply. Meanwhile, we were served our ice-cream.

“You don’t seem to have any particular inclination towards ice cream flavours, do you?” she asked. I was never aware that an ice cream would come to my rescue someday. I shook my head and Astha fired another question.

“Are you seriously preparing for the IPS?”

“No,” was my first direct answer.

“Then what is your plan for the future, Vijay?”

“Nothing huge.”

“Do you have any past?” This question was weird for a person who was not clear even about his present.

“I feel that is trivial.”

“Hmm.” She smiled and asked, “Do you eat non-veg?”

“No, I belong to an orthodox Brahmin family.”

“Do you like drinking alcohol?”

“I have never even touched alcohol, let alone pass it down my throat. I have already mentioned this in my profile,” I replied sounding a bit irritated. She was taken aback with the sudden change in my tone.

“But what if your future wife loves to booze?” My irritation had had no lasting effect on her.

“I appreciate personal freedom, but also believe that there has to be a limit to everything.” I think that was the first time when I had answered someone with such maturity.

“What do you aspire to be?” I suddenly felt like I was being interviewed for the IAS.

“I only want to be a good human being.” I couldn’t have thought of a better answer; this made her smile.

“Vijay, do you have any specific questions for me?”

“Nothing much.”

I was so sure that this model was going to reject me that I didn’t even think of investing energy in speaking when I was sure that there would be no returns. At the same instant, I got a call from my mother. She was worried because she had wanted me to wind up my conversation with Astha soon. She knew that more interaction meant more chances of rejection.

“Vijay, I want to tell you about my past,” she said, sounding serious. I was cent percent sure that she was about to reveal something that I didn’t wish to hear.

“Vijay, the woman who was introduced to you as my mother is my stepmother. My father had an affair with my mom. When she passed away due to a heart attack, I ended up with this family,” she said with difficulty. “I am an illegitimate child.” Saying this, she went silent. I guessed that she was about to cry.

Throughout my life I had believed that I had trouble with my terrible parents, but her story seemed to carry more pain.

“Astha, no child is illegitimate. Don’t ever say that. If anyone is illegitimate, then it’s the parents, not their children.” Hearing this, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“You are a nice man,” she said.

She was feeling low and I thought of sharing something about myself to make her feel better. “Astha,” I said, “I am not a professor, but an assistant professor who is only an ad hoc faculty. My father is a retired IPS officer. Ours is not a wealthy family. I was never good at studies. And to tell you something interesting, you are the fourteenth girl I am meeting.”

Astha looked at me the way the rest of the thirteen girls had looked at me. She went quiet. After a few seconds, I suggested that we should leave. She nodded and we started walking; silence still prevailed. I think my revelation helped her make her decision. Before entering her house, Astha said something that I had heard before. “Vijay, I think we’d be good friends.”



“How is Astha?”

My mother commenced her interrogation as soon we started for home. Her question amused me but being a shy person, it was easy for me to hide my blush. I was sure that I would have been the topper had this question been asked in the IAS exam. But to my mother, I just managed to say that she looked good. I didn't want to raise their hopes as I was anticipating a negative outcome of my meeting. I didn't even share the fact that she was an illegitimate child. A few more days passed without receiving any call from Astha's mother.

The answer was obvious, but not receiving a call was more heartbreaking for my mother than a rejection because Astha's mother was her colleague too. My mother again started her endless inspirational speech for me to speak up. I was now convinced that another rejection from a girl would result in me landing up in speech therapy sessions. A few days later, we received the news that Astha's father had passed away due to brain hemorrhage. I pitied Astha. She had lost her mother during her childhood and now she had lost her father too. I wondered how a girl who looks so charismatic and confident could have such a painful life. I felt an urge to call her but I, Vijay Sharma, once again, saved my energy by keeping silent.

After a span of about two weeks, my mother had a reason to smile. Astha had agreed for our alliance! My family was exhilarated. I had a serious doubt about her answer and so I approached my dad, “Why is she marrying me??”

My father smiled at me and said, “This is the same question I had asked myself when your mother had said yes.”

“But yours was a love marriage!” I countered him.

“Love can happen after marriage too.”

His answer failed to satisfy me and till date, the same question continues to poke me – why did she marry me? Anyway, I was neither interested in love, nor lust. For me, I had cleared my IAS exam when Astha accepted me as the man of her life.

Our wedding date was about to be fixed when Astha called me up one day. “Vijay, please tell your parents about my past. I don’t want to hide anything.”

Taking her cue, I informed papa about her being born out of an illegitimate affair. My father’s response made me proud of him. He said, “These things hardly matter. Astha is a nice girl. However, please refrain from discussing this with your mother.”

‘Astha weds Vijay’ read a board on the day of the wedding. But, for me, it read: ‘Extrovert weds Introvert’, ‘Celebrity weds Commoner’, ‘Winner weds Loser’.