

## Tall Lives

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*“Papa, please don’t come to drop me. I will walk to my class by myself.”*

*My hands froze on the lock of the car door. As I heard those words, they turned me to stone. Why was he avoiding me? I looked deep into his soft eyes. My heart skipped a beat. It was a moment of defeat.*

*“Ah, yes! I see my son has grown up. Go along and have a nice day!” I recovered quickly, clutched his small hands and kissed him before letting go. The smile in my face hid whatever was racing through my mind, my thoughts for a three-year old.*

I looked up from the letter I was reading, thinking about the fateful morning I had been summoned to my parent’s room. The normally cheerful atmosphere wore a serious look and made me uncomfortable.

“Hi, Ma. Hi, Pa.”

“Hello.” And, without any further reception, my father blurted out, “Prithwish, these are letters from your real Pa” – handing me a bunch of faded letters.

“These are dated 22 years back,” he said.

“My real Pa?” The words came out as question, shock and surprise.

“Yes. Please read them before we speak about these further.”

*Prithwish’s walk to the school gates seemed to take ages. He did not turn to wave back. I did not know what my child was thinking, but I realized that the battle had just begun. This world seems to have made our normal son see abnormality in his parents. He has grasped the difference between this world and that of his parents. Our struggle has just begun to be accepted. We will not give up so easily.*

As I turned to the next letter, the man whom I called Pa until this day said, “You may not remember this; through a series of incidents that took place, it struck your parents that their abnormality could have a severe psychological impact on your mind. They asked us for help. We were happy to oblige, as we couldn’t have our own child.”

I saw he was struggling with his emotions while revealing this. My mind was numb. I bent my head down to read further.

*Anant, giving away Prithwish to you and Deepanjana is not easy for us. But we realize that this is the best to save our child from what he considers his humiliation. We will not be the reason for him to be ashamed. I am sure that one day he will come to terms with our so-called abnormality and accept us as normal people. As I give away my child to you, I pray to God not to let this sacrifice go waste.*

It all sank in. For the past few years, I was made to interact with the dwarf community in California. I would have questioned my parents’ reasoning on this, had I not genuinely appreciated the ‘little’ people’s efforts to be productive members of the society and felt a

soft corner for them. Perhaps, now I know ‘why’, the reason Pa had forced me to be an E.N.T. specialist, since the children with dwarfism often suffer from a greater susceptibility to ear infections and hearing loss than average-sized children.

“It was all meant to save you.” This time it was my Ma speaking, “You were too young to understand then. But we did try to make you appreciate this aspect, which cannot be altered. We tried showing you and making you understand that dwarfs are not jokers to be seen in a circus or a movie, but are real people with a mind and personality of their own. They are meant to be respected and treated with dignity just like any other human being.”

“Can I meet them?” I asked, in a rush.

“Yes, we are leaving for India tomorrow. Anil has not been well for some years. Now his condition is serious, your Ma had called up to inform us,” she said with sincerity. I couldn’t help wondering how she felt revealing the reality of my situation to me.

The woman in front of me, my real mother, is sitting up late night personally replying to all the letters that have come.

“Ma, please get some rest now. I will take care of the letters,” I offer, as I sit on the floor next to her couch.

“I want to do this myself, Prithwish,” she says, with a sad smile but an air of finality that leaves nothing to be debated. Only a pall of silence hangs in the air.

“Anant says your father was a giant who stood like a pillar against all diversity.” I can hear the cheer in her voice as if she is in complete agreement.

“He was really a giant, your dad.” Her voice was full of pride.

“Yes. He really was,” I agree, as she goes back to replying to the letters, leaving me to the thoughts which I have deep inside me.

I distinctly remember the large, round face with a big forehead with a mismatched, or rather awkwardly fitting, small pair of eye and a flattened nose above the thick lips. A bright smile had spread across his face when he saw me.

“I am not going to lose to this disease so easily – at least, not when I have you beside me;” he had said and put a brave fight; a fight only great Samurai warriors are capable of. I had hidden my tears seeing his smile.

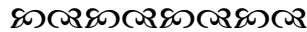
*Anant and Deepanjana are your real parents. You acknowledge us today because of the upbringing they provided. We gave you birth, but they made you human. You respect life today. I am sure, in another life – if there were ever one – we will fulfill our duties towards you completely. We owe much to them and to you, but I would ask you a favor: just help those that are not ‘normal’ in the sense of this world, to bind their family together; don’t let them do what we did to you because of our own weakness. I don’t want that anyone else should have to bear what we had faced these long years without you...*

*We could have lived in anonymity forever, but I have this little queen in my life, your mother. She is the life force who dared me to face all the odds. The strength to give up our*

only son for his future well-being was derived from her. We have taken care of each other until this day. But now, when I am to leave, I want you to not only take care, but also give her the respect and dignity for which we have fought all our lives. I leave my little queen to you.

As I read this last letter from my real Pa, my head instinctively goes and rests on her knees. The writing stops and her hands ruffle my hair.

“He is still here, with us, between us. He shall always be,” she says, in her soft soothing voice. In those words I sense his victory, their victory.



**Editors’ Note:** *Kudos to Shri Banerjee for highlighting an important issue through his story.*

*Dwarfism is a medical/genetic condition characterized by short stature – technically, an adult height of 4 feet 10 inches or under – in both men and women. This condition may be attributed to one of >200 conditions, most of which are genetic. The most common cause of dwarfism, accounting for 70% of all cases, is called achondroplasia, followed by spondylo-epiphyseal dysplasia congenita and diastrophic dysplasia. Achondroplasia often occurs in families where both parents are of average height. In fact, 85% of children with achondroplasia are born to average-size parents. On the other hand, even when both parents are achondroplastic, there is a 25% chance that their children may inherit the non-dwarf allele (form) of the gene and be average-sized.*

*To refer to persons with Dwarfism as a group, such terms as dwarf, little person, LP, and person of short stature are all acceptable; but ‘midget’, a throwback to an earlier era, is considered offensive. Individually, of course, most little people would rather be referred to by their name than by a label, just like anyone else.*

*Dwarfism is a condition, not a disease that requires a ‘cure’. Majority of LPs have normal intelligence, and enjoy normal life spans, and reasonably good health. However, many require surgeries or other medical interventions to deal with orthopedic or secondary complications. Otherwise-healthy LPs can participate in swimming and cycling; however, long-distance running, contact sports and other activities that can potentially put significant pressure or impact on the spine are medically discouraged.*

*Answers to various questions on this issue may be found at the informative website ([lpaonline.org](http://lpaonline.org)) of the advocacy group, Little People of America (LPA), which has, since 1957, provided peer support, social and educational opportunities to thousands of individuals with dwarfism and their families. To put the facts about LPs into perspective, the LPA is comprised of >5000 individuals with >100 types of dwarfism, their families, a medical advisory board, and other friends and professionals. It counts among its community LPs who are teachers, artists, lawyers, doctors, accountants, welders, plumbers, engineers and actors, representing every nationality, ethnic group, religion and sexual orientation – with the common feeling of self-acceptance, pride, community and culture. LPs are single and married, with families with spouses, parents and children who are average size and dwarfed, biological, and adopted.*