

# Daddy Dearest

Four writers get together to pen a story of intrigue laced with passion

Yesterday was my friend Swati's birthday party. She's not like my best friend, but she's my third best friend. She had a brilliant birthday party. Her house was full of people, and I wondered how someone can have so many friends. But they're all not actually her friends. She said some were her cousins, and they're like brothers and sisters. We were almost fifty children and we all played musical chairs together. It was wonderful.

Today I couldn't stop thinking about it, so I thought I should ask Dad. He was reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. "Dad, what's a 'cousin'?" I asked. He looked up, surprised. "Why do you ask?" "Just like that. What does it mean?" "Alright," he said, folding the newspaper and thinking hard, "if I had a brother, and he had a daughter, she would be your cousin."

"What if he had a son?" "Yes" "And your sister's son and daughter?" "Yes" he sighed and looked back at his newspaper.

"I want a cousin" I said. "But I don't have any siblings," Dad replied. "What about Mamma's siblings?" "She didn't have any either." I was disappointed and sulked behind my book for a while.

"Why are you suddenly curious about cousins?" he asked. "Yesterday at Swati's birthday party she had called all her cousins. There were so many people. At my birthday party there's just two of us and my friends."

"Yes, but we also had other super-cool people last year. Remember the magi-

cian?" "Hmm, okay." "Why do you want brothers and sisters anyway?" he asked, "You would have to share everything."

"I don't mind..." I mumbled. "It's not that simple, Ramya. I'll explain it to you when you're older." "You always say that Dad. I'm not a baby, I'm seven years old!"

"Oh, alright Miss Grownup!" he laughed and went to his room. But Daddy is right in a way. And last year we did have a magician at my birthday party; he was incredible. I think Dad's still really sad about what happened to Mom.

He says she died when I was very little—only as big as his arm—and we had to move to Bangalore. I think he really misses Mom. Sometimes he even cries. But he makes the best pasta with red sauce, and I love my Dad.

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It was my 14th birthday. My dad presented me with a cell phone. I was so excited that I couldn't help but hug my dad and say, "Dad, you are the best in the world." I just couldn't wait to show it to my friends. I am sure they will feel jealous. As I got ready for school, I heard the cordless phone ringing. We had a new one which allowed dad to speak to anyone from different parts of the house. I picked it, but Dad had already picked up the other one in his room, and I heard him talking to a lady.

"When are you coming?" she asked. "Very soon. I am waiting for her to go to school," my dad answered. For a moment I was surprised, but I didn't care. I was in a hurry to go to school and show



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my cell phone to my friends, especially to Swathi. She's always showing off gifts she gets from relatives abroad.

In the evening my dad arranged a great birthday party in a hotel. The hall was decorated with purple orchids, my favorite colored flowers. There was a big chocolate cake shaped like a tower, and Rapunzel peeping out of it, her long flowing hair in butter scotch icing.

As I cut the cake, the live band played "Happy Birthday."

"How lucky you are," said my friends. "Thank you, Dad, for such a lovely party." I said.

"I love you Ramya. Please don't misuse the cell phone."

"I will not," I promised.

The next evening Dad called me after school, and told me to take a rickshaw back home. When we reached home, the driver demanded more money. Just then dad returned from his office, and said "What is happening?"

When I told him about the driver

demanding more money, he was furious. He went over to the auto and I saw him furiously arguing with the auto driver. He grabbed his shirt and was about to hit him. I held his hand and he looked at me. I saw the anger drain from his face. He let go and paid the auto driver.

The summer holidays started. All my friends go to their grandparents or uncles, but Dad takes me to different places. I would like to have gone to my grandparents or uncles and meet my cousins. I wonder why dad doesn't like them. In the wedding album, dad keeps in the cupboard in his room, everyone seemed to be very happy and they all looked like nice people. I wonder though why they didn't help dad when he was in trouble. I was lost in my thoughts.

"Pack your bags, Ramya, we're going to Disney Land in Florida."

"Are we going to Florida? Really?" My happiness knew no bounds.

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It was the relentless buzzing of my cell

phone that woke me up. Last night the girl gang had all come over to the hostel for the arbitrary midnight birthday celebrations. There was a gargantuan cake, beer, pizza, the whole works.

I groggily reached around for the darn phone which was fervently vibrating like it was having a mini seizure. It was the umpteen Facebook and Whatsapp messages from friends and acquaintances. Dad had called at midnight; he was in Delhi on a business visit. I didn't feel much like talking to him these days. He reminded me of all the things I didn't have.

He wanted to explain, he wouldn't be able to make it to Chennai for my birthday but he'll make sure he is in the day after. I felt sorry for him. He depended upon my happiness to make him happy, I couldn't think of anything more pitiful than that. Yet I loved the man; he was all I had. As I scrolled through the many insincere wishes on my Facebook wall, I noticed Indira Aunty had sent me a mes-

sage. She'd sent me a friend request a few months ago with an accompanying message claiming she was my mother's sister.

I had excitedly replied, asking her a million questions about my mother and expressing vehemently how much I'd like to meet her.

She replied a few days later saying I was welcome to come over anytime. As wary as I was my desperate need to know more about my estranged family took over and I hurriedly got dressed. I replied saying I was coming over and set out immediately.

I pressed on the doorbell with clammy nervous fingers. A beautiful woman in her late 40's opened the door. On seeing me she flung her arms around me and sobbed violently. Unsure of what to do I stood there rigid as she continued crying.

She managed to compose herself in a few minutes and invited me in as she apologized for her behavior. "It's just that you look so much like your mother" she explained. I don't think I've ever smiled with so much joy as I did when she said that. Soon enough we were talking like we'd known each other for years. She showed me albums filled with pictures of her and mum when they were younger and told me more stories about her than I could've ever hoped for. It was overwhelming but I didn't want it to stop. I hadn't realized how long we'd sat there till the light outside started fading and Indira Aunty got up to switch on the lights. She looked at me as if to ask something and then stopped and turned around. Then almost as if there was a debate going on in her head, she whipped around and asked me "How's your dad treating you?"

I was surprised that she didn't inquire about his well being.

"He's wonderful. He's coming to Chennai tomorrow. Maybe, I'll bring him over too?" I inquired.

Suddenly she looked flustered and worried. "Umm I don't know if that's a good idea. Well, you see, we will be out of town for a few days" she said.

"Indira aunty, how come you guys never kept in touch with Dad?" I asked. Something changed in her face.

"I prefer not to speak about that" she said with a curtness I hadn't seen in her till that point.

"Maybe, I should get going, it's getting late," I said.

She went silently to the door and opened it. I awkwardly said a hasty goodbye to her and walked out utterly confused as to what just happened. As I walked down the road, I heard someone calling out to me. It was Indira Aunty, she'd run all the way. Thrusting an album filled with pictures of my mum into my hand, she hugged me tight without letting go for a while. Then holding me by my shoulders she looked at me and whispered gravely "Call me if you ever need anything and most of all please stay safe."

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October 2, 2013: Rekha's partner poured two litres of acid down her body as she lay sleeping in her home at Electronic City, a mere hour after he had bedded her. She screamed, but no one came as her face melted away and her burning clothes stuck to her body. Fumes rising from her person, she wore a new nightie and ran to her brother's office in the next street and from there to the hospital. All because, she had had the temerity to question him about his continuing relationship with his previous girlfriend, and his drinking and smoking.

Today, Rekha lies in a city hospital – spirit teetering on the cusp of hope and despair, life irrevocably changed, and a prayer on her reconstructed lips for her four-year-old daughter. Rekha is one of the country's many acid attack victims, who find their lives, and bodies, cruelly misshapen after a single act of senselessness. Rekha's six surgeries over one and a half years have cost Rs 3.75 lakh, and the costs mount daily.

On December 8, the Supreme Court made two important announcements. 1. All states and Union Territories include acid attack victims in the disability list – thereby giving them the opportunity to gain employment by the state under the reserved category. Two. The rupees three lakh compensation the court had mandated in an earlier case (Laxmi v. Union of India & Ors) was a minimum, not a maximum amount that states had to provide. While the judgement is being hailed as a step forward for victims, watching Rekha – with one side of her scalp burnt and hairless; a mere hole where her ear pinna should be; arms seared with contraptions and boils – circumspection seems more apt.

Bhagirath Iyer, co-founder of Make Love Not Scars, the NGO that has been funding Rekha's treatment since February 2014 is cautious. Citing the struggles to get Rekha the rupees two lakh compensation she eventually got from the Government of Karnataka ("by which time we had already raised money"), he is not optimistic about the order. "Plus, there is huge competition among the disabled sector itself for quota and employment. It's not easy."

The bureaucracy doesn't help. V Shakti, start-up mentor, social media expert and disability rights campaigner, who is wheelchair-bound, discusses his brush with a bid for the disabili-

ty criteria. While in theory, he admits that it helps to be categorised – "reservation when you apply for a government job, railway concession for the disabled individual as well as the person accompanying them and so on" – the reality is very different. For one, government machinery moves excruciatingly slowly. "I registered for a government job under the disabled quota in 1995 once I finished engineering. Then I went to the US for my post-graduation and worked in the IT sector. Eight and a half years later, my parents got a letter from the employment exchange, saying there was a problem with my application – they needed to know the exact per cent of my disability," he says. "I was in the US and doing well and my parents were mildly amused. But imagine if it was someone really counting on that job? His/ her entire life has gone to waste in the interim."

It's a travesty of a well-intentioned legislation, sure, but what of those who don't even get the opportunity to apply? Take the case of Geeta, resident of Shivamogga. In 2001, she was 32 and the mother of a 12-year-old when her husband, peeved after their many altercations over his drinking, poured acid over her face. She was rushed to the hospital by her son and mother. Due to inadequate treatment she lost vision in her right eye and has very little vision in the left eye. Geeta was later brought to Bengaluru and for three months her eyes were operated upon. "My brother and others in the family cobbled together Rs 1,90,000 for five surgeries until 2005 – mouth, eyes, face, ears and buttocks. My son could not go to school, he had to take care of me. Today, at 27, he has no education and works in a pharmacy. After the 2005 surgery, they asked me to come after six months, but I had no more money. I don't have a job, I can work as a cleaner or an attendant, but no one is willing to give me a job," she says, sobbing. In 2006 she got rupees two lakh as government compensation. When she went to the Mahila Ayog in Cauvery Bhavan, at the behest of Karnataka Women's Commission Chairperson Shalini Rajneesh to enquire about a job and registering under a quota, she was told that it was for the future cases. The tragedy is

A look at whether the SC's latest judgement increasing compensation for acid attack survivors is adequate. Turns out, not quite

How much money is enough to rebuild a corroded LIFE?

**GEETA**  
ATTACKED IN 2001  
BY HER HUSBAND  
FIVE SURGERIES UNTIL 2005  
COST: ₹1,90,000  
NO MONEY FOR FURTHER  
SURGERIES OR  
TREATMENT

**REKHA**  
ATTACKED ON  
OCTOBER 2, 2013  
BY HER PARTNER  
6 SURGERIES IN  
1.5 YEARS  
COST: ₹3.75 LAKH  
AND RISING  
COMPENSATION  
RECEIVED FROM  
THE GOVT: ₹2 LAKH



**HASEENA HUSSAIN**  
ATTACKED ON  
APRIL 20, 1999  
35 SURGERIES  
OVER 10 YEARS  
COST: ₹20 LAKHS

copious. Geeta's eye drops alone cost Rs 500 per month, and she needs to go for eye check-ups once in six months. "I have barely one eye remaining – I need to take care of it, any hospital I go to will charge money, plus the medicines they prescribe are expensive. If I get rupees three lakh or say, Rs 10 lakh, it will be used on surgeries alone, even that won't be enough," she says, stating the cruel truth.

Indeed, treatment for acid attack survivors is prohibitively expensive. Haseena Hussain, herself a survivor after an attack in 1999 and who is now an activist for others like her, spent 20 lakhs for 35 surgeries over 10 years. And while her dignity and courage is commendable, it does not gloss over her catastrophe, her blindness, and the Rs 700- Rs 1,000 eye drops (a month) she still uses 5-10 times a day, and has to, "for the rest of my life". The costs are not restricted to the surgeries alone. The cost of a hospital bed; to and fro transport (especially when the survivor is in a small town); consumables (medicines, appendages, splints, dressing and bandages, drops, etc); food and water; doctor's fees; an attendant ("compulsory, if the victim has no family," Iyer says) and more add up to a substantial figure. The surgeries itself are not mere vanity – they're literally life-saving. Take Rekha. Her eyelids had to be reconstructed because she couldn't shut an eye, couldn't blink or sleep, and it watered constantly. Her neck had completely melted into folds and pulled her jaw down, leaving her mouth open and her unable to eat or drink. She had no nose, couldn't smell and had to eat and breathe through her mouth. She couldn't straighten her arms, because the burnt skin on the inside of her elbows had congealed and webbed. Each procedure has enabled her to breathe; stand; eat; drink. They're saving her life, one scalpel at a time.

Mangla Verma, Advocate, Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), the Delhi-based organisation that filed the petition which led to this judgement, serves up the facts. An attack results in the loss of education; loss of employment and earning power; the family's sacrifices to seek treatment and more. Keeping these in mind, in April, the Supreme Court had directed private hospitals to provide free treatment, including physical treatment,

## LAWS IGNORED

» States and Union Territories should include acid attack victims in the disability list – thereby giving them the opportunity to gain employment by the State under the reserved category

» Rs 3 lakh is the minimum compensation for acid attack survivors and not the maximum

» Supreme Court has directed private hospitals to provide free treatment, including physical treatment, medicines, bed, food and reconstructive surgery

» Over the counter sale of acid is prohibited without a log/register; the retailer is required to have a valid, relevant license

» Acid attack survivors are entitled to a monthly government pension of Rs 3,000

medicines, bed, food and reconstructive surgery, Verma says, quoting the order. But therein lies the rub. While all the states are respondents and are required to issue directives to inform hospitals of this, there is no consistency. "Most states have issued some directive or other (but not all), but even then, it is a battle to get the patient admitted. We have to carry a copy of the order, call the police and so on," she says. And yet, in all the cases Iyer has seen, treatment is never free. As with most court notifications, implementation is still a pipe dream.

It is the same case with the sale of acid, regulated strictly by the same Supreme Court judgement in the Laxmi case. "Over the counter sale of acid is prohibited without a log/register; the retailer is required to have a valid, relevant license and so on. But you can walk into a grocery store and buy floor cleaning acid with impunity even today. It is this acid that is often used in these attacks," Verma says. There are other directives that languish. Hussain cites one that mandated a monthly pension of Rs 3,000 for acid attack survivors in August, in Karnataka. "I have still not got it," she says. Still, they persevere. Rekha dreams of a future for her daughter. Will Rekha work once she is well? "Yes, I want to run a small eatery." She also wants to be an activist like Hussain. Will she move on from this incident? "Sure," says Rekha, fishing out a life-affirming contraption – a plastic nose fitted with a pair of spectacles. She wears it and smiles in delight with the knowledge of a shape-like nose upon her disfigured one. And the gold nose ring that Rekha has added to her prosthetic nose sparkles.