



SPICE OF LIFE-BY CHITRA DIVAKARUNI

A 6-YEAR-OLD LEARNS THE MEANING OF "FOREVER"

WHEN HIS BEST FRIEND MOVES AWAY.

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All the last year, Anand has had a best friend, his first one, a boy named Jamie. They are inseparable in the way only 6-year-olds can be: They go to school together, are picked up together, come home to either Anand's house or Jamie's, play together in the afternoon and often into the evening, and when they are forcibly separated at dinnertime, they rush to the phone to call each other. It is with Jamie that Anand has learned how to share. And that sharing, while difficult, can bring joy. ("I feel warm and soft inside, like melted ice cream," he said the other day after he'd loaned Jamie his new Beast Wars toy -- which Jamie had bought him for his birthday -- to keep overnight.)

Of course they fight too. I'll come home and the baby sitter will roll her eyes and say, "7.5 on the Richter scale." I'll go to Anand's room and he'll be sitting inside his closet, his face splotched with angry tears. "Where's Jamie?" I'll ask. "I don't know," he'll say, "and I don't really care. Because I never want to see him again."

Jamie will be in the backyard, kicking the ball around, pretending everything's OK. Until he sees me. Then he'll burst into tears and say, "Take me home, I want to go home right now. I hate Anand."

By next morning they've forgotten it all. "Want to come over?" says Jamie on the phone. "Of COURSE!"

yells Anand. "Mom, MOM, are you listening? Can I stay for dinner?"

"But what about yesterday?" I ask when I drop him off.

"Oh, that," say both boys. They look at me with pity. Really, their eyes say. Adults are so ignorant.

Now Jamie is moving away. His father has a new job in Los Angeles. A good job, says his mother. Would I please explain to Anand?

I'm happy for them, but I dread breaking the news to Anand. And when I do, it's as bad as I expected.

"What do you mean, going away?" Anand asks. He has a great big scowl on his face, like he always does when he's trying not to cry. "You mean, on vacation? Like for a week?"

No, I say. Longer.

"A month?" asks Anand. "Like when we went to India to see Grandma?"

No, I say. They're moving for good. Forever.

Anand stares at me. He cannot comprehend that word, which he associates only with fairy tales, and with the death of his grandfather last year.

And suddenly an old memory that's been buried for 30 years comes back to me.

A taxi waits outside a small house in Calcutta, loaded with suitcases. My father has climbed in already. "Hurry," he calls. But I refuse. I'm holding onto my best friend Sabita's hands. We're both crying. "I don't want to go to Assam," I tell my mother. "I want to stay with Sabita. Why can't you let me stay with her?" My mother murmurs something as she pries my fingers open, but I refuse to listen. "I hate you! I hate you!" I scream as I'm dragged into the taxi. The car window is steamy with my tears as I watch Sabita become small, then smaller, and then disappear. It hurts so much, like someone reached in and plucked out my heart. No grown-up can understand how I feel, least of all my cruel, cruel parents.

Now of course I know better.

I look at Anand, who has turned away from me and is playing busily, furiously, with his Legos. Over and over, he makes a tall tower, then knocks it down, taking a bitter satisfaction in each crash. I want to take

By Elinor Lipman

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**Mamafesto**

Why it's time  
for Mothers Who  
Think

**Newsletter**

Win a set of  
signed Anne  
Lamott books  
when you  
sign up

away his hurt, to make it all better with a kiss. I wish I could suffer it myself so that he won't have to -- just as I'm sure my mother wished on that Calcutta morning. Because it's the hardest thing in the world, watching helplessly while your child hurts, knowing that no matter how many protective walls you build around him, at some time or other they'll crash to the ground.

I know Anand'll get over it, eventually. I did. For a month or so I woke up with a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach. I didn't want to leave my bed. I didn't want to eat, not even when my mother tempted me with my favorite foods: stuffed potato parathas, sweet rice pudding with raisins. Then one day I woke up and heard the birds singing in the Assam bamboo outside my window. They must have been there all along, but I hadn't been ready to listen. That week at the park I met Nisha. She was my age, and we both loved playing Five Stones. She became my new friend. I loved her -- but just a little less than I'd loved Sabita. I think my heart was wary. And when we moved again, after two years, it hurt just a little less.

When I tuck him into bed, Anand whispers, "I don't think I'm ever going to have a friend again."

"You are, sweetie," I assure him. "You'll have lots of other friends."

He looks at me, not believing. It's another one of those adult ploys to pacify him, he can tell.

"But meanwhile you can call Jamie whenever you want and tell him about your day and find out what he's been up to."

"I can?" he asks. "Really? Every day if I want?" His eyes gleam with sudden reprieve, something he thought lost forever given back to him.

I shudder internally as I think of our phone bill. Maybe I should have suggested letter writing. But I say, "Every day if you want."

And when he throws his arms around my neck and hugs me tight, tight, tight, I know it's worth it.

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