

Article: The Adorable Happy Birthday Soap Opera!

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A closer look made me realise that it was the album I had been searching for a long while, which held precious memories of a sentimental treasure.

As I opened the first page, my mind raced back into time in an incredibly rapid recap. These were photographs of my 3rd birthday- a fun-filled, cosy affair with neighbours and family. I could hardly recognise some of our guests. Was that really Shagufta Didi, wearing two neat plaits, who was now blissfully married and a mother too?

And those two young boys dressed in *kurtas*- posing hilariously at the camera- were those two really my own 'elder' brothers? Could they really have been 'small' once upon a time? Even as I wondered at these questions, my mind promptly 'reserved' these photos for a certain sometime, when my brothers would playfully taunt me for being the smallest- then, at that desperate moment, I could at least defend my self-pride by making them remember that they too were once small!

And yes, who was that little girl wearing a colourful frock, sporting a neat bob-cut? She resembled my elder brother. Why, that was me, of course! The cake was a petite pink one, on which was lovingly written in enticing pink icing- 'Happy Birthday, Sarah.' This little girl in the photo looked so different, though it was the same 'me'.

The desire to plunge into the deep sea of nostalgic memories had been ignited within me. So, I couldn't help searching for more 'treasure'. My efforts were rewarded when I triumphantly found another photo album. This one had photographs of my 10th or 11th birthday, my last 'celebrated' birthday party.

We get so engrossed in our own lives that we don't bother to greet our neighbours when we see them on the road. You think that a nod is all a 'mere' neighbour deserves. We don't bother to wish the girl next door on her birthday, even though you remember the occasion since childhood, when she used to distribute chocolates to everyone faithfully.

We don't bother to enquire about the health of that kind elderly 'Aunty' who so sweetly used to send you even sweeter '*obbattus*' (sweet *chapatis*) to eat on Ugadi- remember? The Aunty who lives just two houses away? We don't bother to... But in my photo album, I could see all of my neighbourhood friends gathered together,

like a joint family of a daily soap. All of them were there to celebrate my birthday. Most of them, if not all, had temporarily forgotten their rivalry, enmity, bitterness, and ignorance, as a birthday party seemed much more important (especially if garnished with generous return gifts!!) than these evil emotions. Not to forget, the grand birthday cake.

So, frowns gave way to smiles, coldness transformed into loving warmth (even Shah Rukh Khan would get a complex!!), and hearts began to melt like heated *vanaspati* ghee.

Everyone was eager to make amends and glue together broken relationships. It was so magical. These same friends now hardly give you a glance, all of them immersed in their own busy lives.

Birthday parties were like fantasies (and with a lot of fantastic arrangements to be done, too). I remember (in a memorable blur) all the excitement, enjoyment and 'enchantment'- right from deciding which cake it should be. More than the flavour, we used to prioritise the shape of the cake- Mickey Mouse, Tweety, a house, a book, and so on! Then the decorations to deck the house, the invitations, and the invitees...

However much that old foe of yours (try not to curse them!!) despised you, they would at least, definitely wish you a happy birthday on your special day, so what if their hands are devoid of any presents! That one wish could mend all the damage done throughout the years.

How can I forget the special and much-awaited, much-liked part of the birthday presents? I am sure every person, young or old, loves getting presents on their birthday. The gleam in your eye, the wide, toothy grin, give satisfactory evidence. So, the next time your friend or relative asks you what gift you would like for your birthday, don't half-heartedly mumble, "Oh, nothing at all...your wishes are all I need," when you know very well indeed that you are craving and waiting to pounce on your birthday gift as soon as possible!

When my birthday finally arrived this April, I decided to re-live those pleasant pleasures of the past. I distributed chocolates to all our neighbours. What I got in return was my best birthday present ever: their warm smiles, hearty welcome, heartfelt wishes, and sincere blessings. I felt like being in the shoes (preferably stilettos!) of some super-duper celebrity, loved by one and all.

Everyone thinks birthday parties nowadays are a wasteful expenditure of money, time, and effort. But I beg to differ. There are invaluable things in this world, much, much better than notes of money.

Birthdays not only make a person feel loved, special, and appreciated, but they are an occasion and opportunity to share happiness with others; to patch old, worn-

out relationships, and start new ones. If birthday parties can bring everyone (who had otherwise drifted apart) together in peace and harmony, can make people realise the importance of others in their lives, and can serve multiple benefits, then it's worth it.

After all, if you can uncomplainingly empty your wallet to repair the damage done to your 'precious' hair using 'Dove's damage therapy systems', WHY can't you repair something much better (and may I say, priceless?) using 'Birthday damage therapy'? Try and experience it to believe it. And you will, by God's grace, end up with more than soft, silky hair like the foolishly proud girl in the ad: strong, secure, and smooth relationships to last for a happy lifetime.