

FRIENDS ONLINE

Tathagata was different. He was, to be frank, the odd man out, in the eighth grade classroom of the school.

The students were chirpy, lively, energetic and of course, so mischievous. But, Tathagata was a sad exception. The classroom resembled the pretty picture of the season of spring in a beautiful garden along with a cool, refreshing breeze of youthfulness. And yet, at one specific corner, there was autumn.

He was very quiet and laidback right from his early days. In fact, he was named so as he resembled the calmness of lord Buddha, and Tathagata being one of His other names, was a perfect match. Where on one side, kids of his age would make new friends and enemies each day; he in fact had no friends whatsoever!

He had seen death a little too early in his life. His grandmother, whom he fondly called 'Thamma', died right in front of his eyes from cancer. As fate would have it, his little sister had an inborn heart disease. She was everything to Tathagata in those eight and a half months that she survived.

Tathagata was perhaps too young to understand his Thamma's 'sudden disappearance', but what that incident did was that it became the solid foundation on which a skyscraper of grief was to be built later. The bricks for this construction came from his sister's demise and the cement was supplied by none other than his own parents. They were both working and hence could not give enough love, care and genuine time to young Tathagata when he needed it most.

There would be times when alone in the house, he'd spend hours staring at the portrait of his little sister. Tears rolled down his eyes but there was no one to console him. On the other hand, his parents started getting worried about their son's inertness. Initially they tried speaking him out of his shell, but seeing their efforts bear no fruit, their frustration got the better of them. Unfortunately, what followed was a series of very animated outbursts from absolutely furious parents, sometimes even in front of family friends, with whom Tathagata refused to mingle. It was evident that his parents had absolutely no idea of child psychology. And was all this helping Tathagata's case? It's anybody's guess.

Life went on. Tathagata was the biggest joke of his classroom. Nobody talked to him and he talked to nobody. No mate of his was even prepared to sit beside him!

Thomas was the latest addition to the class. The teacher had asked him to sit beside Tathagata. He was just like any of the other students in the class - very chirpy, energetic and lively. The only difference being that he was very kind at heart and was much more matured compared to his age.

He very soon realised that Tathagata (although he sat beside him, they hadn't actually spoken a single word among them!) was in a terrible state of mind. He kind of liked him and was sensitive to his case. Often when other people would ask him to change his seat, he'd flatly refuse. He also tried his level best to protect Tathagata from the countless pranks and jokes that were deliberately being played on him. Although Tathagata was appreciative of what Thomas was doing, he'd still not talk with him. But this uncomfortable situation was to change very soon.

One day, Thomas picked up a fight with someone who played a very crude mischief on Tathagata. The brawl resulted in a deep cut under Thomas' left eye. Just at that point, a very soothing and yet an unheard voice reached Thomas' ears. It was that of Tathagata who spoke to him for the very first time. This was just the beginning of what was to later become a very special friendship between the two.

As days progressed, they got closer and closer to each other. Tathagata had begun to open out to Thomas. Thomas, who by now had the keys to his friend's feelings, carefully manipulated them so as to bring him out of his shell. What's more- he was pretty successful at that!

Tathagata, at last, seemed to get back his youthfulness. He'd now take much more interest in various sports and other activities - but only if he knew that Thomas would be there with him.

Thomas was so mature that he very quickly realised that even this over dependence of his friend on him was not good for the overall development of his friend's personality, to ensure which, had he put in so much effort. So, he began speaking to his other classmates and made them aware of the role that they could play in helping Tathagata lead a normal life. A lot of persuasion changed his friends' attitude towards Tathagata. As the entire class started getting behind him, Thomas' job became easier and Tathagata's condition improved in leaps and bounds.

Things were much better now. Tathagata was, slowly but surely, getting transformed. Thomas slowly introduced him to the world of computers and the Internet. As if to acknowledge his efforts, Tathagata got himself extremely interested about these two things and immersed himself into them. They now spent hours exchanging e-mail and chatting to each other through the 'yahoo messenger'. Yet, there was one difference. Although Thomas had a host of entries in the 'messenger friends online list', Tathagata would keep only Thomas' name in the list.

When Thomas got to know of this, he felt disappointed that he couldn't succeed entirely in his mission. Even then, he tried convincing him to make new friends and allow more entries to that list. To this, Tathagata spoke to him-"I know that you fear that I may go back to my old habits, but I assure you that I won't let that happen. As far as the 'friends online list' is concerned, please let me keep it exclusively for you-as a mark of appreciation and respect of your efforts and your friendship."

Thomas was persuaded.

Time went along and with that, their friendship rose to unbelievably mature heights. Tathagata was getting better and better by the day. But ...

Just when Tathagata had begun to look ahead in life, fate showed him another one of its ugly faces. One day, he got the news that Thomas was unaware of an appendicitis problem that he had, and that it had suddenly burst. Thomas lay on his deathbed!

Tathagata stood by him, crying profusely. Even at this critical stage of his life, Thomas feared that whatever changes he'd managed to bring about in his friend's life, might all be undone by his death. He spoke to Tathagata-"I know that you'll feel sad when I'm gone. And, you must do that. After all, that is the ultimate reward that a friend can get for his friendship." Tathagata was inconsolable.

Thomas spoke again-" But, if you want to keep this friendship alive even when I'm gone, do not let my death coerce you into your pensive past. For, it will hurt me even after my death."

Thomas died soon after.

Tathagata's parents realised that a young boy has taught them all about life that even their grey hair couldn't teach them. Their heart overflowed with gratitude. They had by now also learnt how to treat a child who's seen more than his share of deaths in his life. This time round, they were right behind their son to support him in this time of distress - not for Tathagata's sake but for that of Thomas. Tathagata's classmates actively joined them in their efforts.

Tathagata slowly got over this loss. During this period, he had lost interest in each and everything that this brief friendship had given him. But now, just to keep his word to his friend, he

fought hard and won over his grief. He revived his relationships with his other friends and today, after a long, long time, he was back at the computer and on the Internet.

Just when he clicked open his 'yahoo messenger', he realised that his 'friends online' list was now devoid of its only entrant. The entire screen filled up with the message-

NO FRIENDS ONLINE!!!

...And, Tathagata's mind filled up with the thoughts of his first genuine friend who had changed his life forever.