

NEEDLESS SUICIDE

By Gautham Srinivasan

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

The Tamil Nadu Express slowly chugged itself away, leaving behind Platform Number 3 of the Chennai Central Railway Station. Many people - some happily while some despondently - waved their hands to their near and dear ones travelling in the train. However, at the far end of the train, in the penultimate coach, sat two men facing each other, oblivious to what was happening outside. The AC first class ticket that they possessed would allow them to travel the train's full distance – up to New Delhi.

As the train neared Basin Bridge, a few kilometres away from the source, a curly headed man with bespectacled eyes joined them at their seats. But for the black coat and name badge that man wore along with the list of names he carried, one could easily have mistaken him for a fellow passenger. The Train Ticket Examiner, after scanning through the railway tickets brought by the men at the ticket counter in Chennai Central Station, gave a nod of approval. The only passengers in the AC first class coach for the journey had valid tickets, he had verified.

Time was ticking. Only after a few minutes after the bespectacled man had left, did a conversation between the two lonely passengers get initiated. The taller of the two, who went by the codename K2, spoke first in a hushed tone, as if someone in the empty coach might overhear, “So, what stupid task you have done! If I had wanted, I could have reported you to the police as well. This is not the right way to deal with things. I mean, running away like this is not the solution. You have gotten me into the loop as well. Along with you, I also would be branded a fugitive, if not already, that too for no fault of mine.”

The shorter man now interjected both his arms up in the air sideways, “What wrong have I done?”

K2 continued, “As if you don't know K1, you should not have put her to sleep and left her there. Now, it's just a matter of time before all hell shall break loose.”

“What do you mean?” K1 eyed questioningly, beginning to sweat in the cool atmosphere around him. Has he come to know about it? If yes, how come?

The taller man nodded and took out the evidence that would well for sure incriminate K1. He inserted the pen drive in the laptop and opened the file. It was enough for K1. He quickly pulled out the pen drive and put it in his pocket.

K2 spoke, "I wanted to prove to you who I am. What you are thinking about me is wrong.

This was the first time in the past year since you had known me could I arrange a meeting between you and her. And what did you end up doing? Put her to sleep!"

His words were now echoing in K1's ears. He felt strange. He felt weak. What had gone wrong? What does K2 want to prove to me? I had known him for the past one year. He was perhaps the best friend I could ever have had. I am so close to him, and perhaps we share everything with one another. Or perhaps not? For otherwise why would he speak so? Something was wrong, horribly wrong yet I know not what actually is wrong. Why he speaks of the police, tells me that I am a 'fugitive' and more so, if he knew everything, then why is he helping me run away. Eventually I have to get caught one day, but what was the point in him risking his life as well. This cannot continue. I have to put a full stop to this saga.

The sudden and distant honking of the train disturbed his reverie. But K1 felt the train moving at full throttle. He consulted his watch. It had been more than an hour since the journey began. The full moon outside the window shined brightly getting company from the innumerable stars that twinkled in the cloudless night sky. Trees were covering both sides of the train.

"Perhaps, we are moving through a forested area", whispered K1. "I better stand outside the compartment to get some fresh air. I always feel comfortable with the night air hitting my face."

"Why don't you think we better sleep for some time and perhaps think our next plan fresh tomorrow morning. It's nearly midnight now." whispered back K2. "After all it has been a day to forget, and maybe once we really wake up, we can even get a feeling that this was all a dream."

K1 snorted. 'Tomorrow?' He whispered. 'You must remember K2 that tomorrow never comes.'

K1 spoke for one last time, 'Dream? You might be thinking it was a dream. I know what a dream and a reality is. I know what to do now.'

Without another word, K1 got up from the seat, opened the cabin door, went out and stood near the vestibule. He unlocked the door of the coach to get some fresh air and leaned out into the air, out of the train moving at full throttle. Just as K2 joined behind him, he wanted to warn K1 being precariously balanced at the edge of the door. But before words could come out of his mouth; before his thought was converted into action, it had happened.

K1 jumped.

The howling wind silenced the momentary agonizing scream he would have let out, although K2 quickly got his act together and leaned out of the door. In the pitch dark night of the forested area, K2 could only feel the loneliness the corpse would experience and the feeling he experienced – horror, agony, shock.

Just then the bespectacled man joined him at the vestibule, standing right behind him. As K2 welcomed the Train Ticket Examiner to give him company as the only other witness to the suicide, he already knew that this lonely night is far from over.

Also he had realized the next moment.

The pen drive is not with me.

CHAPTER ONE

Five years, four months into this world, I was glued to the television watching Dada and Master Blaster open the innings. The Wall would take either's place one down. It was a one-day international bilateral cricket match between India and Pakistan. Needless to say, this too was a high voltage affair. Emotions were running high on both sides of the border especially with the world cup just a few months away. India lost the toss and was invited to bat first.

My prime focus was on the top three Indian batsmen. Dada, as Sourav Ganguly is fondly called, played well. He had negotiated through Shoab Akhtar and Waqar Younis' bowling.

The Master Blaster, in a zone of his own, had yet again scored a century-his second in a row. There was no stopping Sachin Tendulkar.

A healthy opening stand always augurs well for the team. This was one of the numerous occasions the openers had done that. At the departure of Ganguly, Rahul Dravid took his place.

The Wall needs no introduction. He did the same thing that he has been doing for a couple of year's now-play the role of sheet anchor. What happened further in the match gave me little interest, for what I was bothered with was an Indian victory, and that was what had exactly happened.

My father had introduced me to the world of cricket. I had chosen my heroes. I was in a happy mood-excited and ecstatic with the performance of the Indian team.

Cricket, the first facet of my life, was born in me. Ever since then I associated myself with cricket, and as my interest in the game increased, it turned out that I had fallen in love with the game.

There was intense campaigning going on the roads. There were barely few days left. The November chill notwithstanding, every candidate was garnering votes. It was all new to me. Nine candidates had filed nominations, out of which, the lone female contestant had withdrawn her nomination. So, it was a matter of eight contestants for one seat-the seat that shall give him the position of Rama Krishna Puram's MLA for the next five years. Add to that, the perks he would get, the status and the power in his hands. It was worth the money spent. Electioneering was in full swing.

Out of the eight contestants, only two represented political parties. Rest was independents. In a country like Independent India, do Independents stand a chance?

Obviously, the big wigs of the political parties, the Indian People's Party (IPP) and the National Congress of India (NCI) were in for a tough fight. They campaigned hard. Beyond that, their fate was in the electorate's hands.

It was Election Day. All schools in my neighbourhood were converted into polling booths. Booth level officers were up to the task. But then, few had exercised their right. I had thought it was a proud moment for the adults to vote, to show the silver chloride painted on their finger. May be not, they perceived it as just another holiday. Indian constitution gave them the universal adult franchise. Unfortunately, they did not want to exercise their right. I could not see the same fervor as Deepavali or Dusshera with the people. But I came across a new type of attitude in the people, chalta hai, what big difference was it to make? Every drop of water together makes an ocean. One drop of water may not have much power, but an ocean has enormous power-the power to sustain anything, the power to destroy anything.

At the end of the day, I didn't understand why the votes polled percentage was so dismal.

May be, elections in India are not attractive to the people. Only a section of people had exercised their right, yes, and a poor 36% of the total electorate in R.K.Puram.

Three days passed.

The fag end of November approached. The winter chill was on the rise. Fortunes were on the rise. The minimum temperatures were falling. Fortunes were falling. Fortune does not always favor the brave. It also checks for money power, perhaps.

Out of 70 legislative assembly seats for the taking, 68 were won by the political parties. Only two seats, may be as an aberration, were won by the independents.

The NCI had out-righted victory in the elections, its representatives wresting 52 seats. IPP trailed with only 15 seats in its bag. Out of the 55 parties that had contested, only 3 had opened their accounts.

India has a patriarchal society. Ashoka Singh of the NCI had won the MLA seat in my area. But the lady from Gole Market constituency had waved her magic wand. She was the undisputed queen of the land. Who would have guessed that she was here to stay, and indeed cement her place in the history of Delhi politics? Who could have guessed politics to be my second facet of my life?

Welcome, Leela Menon, the newly elected chief minister of Delhi.

CHAPTER TWO

Christmas followed the victory of Congress in the Delhi Legislative assembly elections. The festive fervour had continued unabated for a month now. New Year was at arm's length.

Preparations were in full swing to welcome the last year of the first millennium.

I keenly welcomed the New Year, the year that shall show me the third facet of my life.

The winter waned. It was spring. The flowers bloomed; the nature was at its colourful best. Scent filled the air. This time also passed.

Temperatures rose, indicating the beginning of summer season. Twelve weeks of the New Year had passed.

I was standing at the landing of two staircases. My parents, facing me, asked "Which direction do you wish to take?"

I had been presented with two choices: violin or mridangam.

I gained time.

It was the fourth day of the fourth month of the year. We were at the Delhi Tamil Sangam. It was a place to learn extracurricular vocations. Apart from that, many activities such as drama, theatre and live musical performances were staged regularly. Weekly, members got to watch Tamil movies, a rarity in the commercial theatres of Delhi. The classes for extracurricular activities were held anywhere in the building, where enough space was available.

My father broke the silence.

He repeated his question, indicating that we had to move left if I chose mridangam else we have to move right if violin was my choice.

I was thinking.

I was not even six years old that I had to take a tough decision in my life. It was to be a decision which shall forever affect my future. It was to be a decision that should have been accepted by destiny. It was to be a decision that must bear fruits, at a later stage, though. I was vexed.

Moments later, I stretched out my left hand. My fate was sealed. I would become an Mridangist. Emotions filled my mind. The road not taken. How would it have been? Why did I choose to stretch out my left hand, in spite of being right-handed? Fate certainly had a say in it.

As we climbed the stairs, my parents in approval of my decision, let me lead the way. We went into the green room, where that day's class was going on.

We entered the room. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I clutched on to my mother's sari.

It was a typical green room, mirrors covered the walls mostly, and where ever there weren't mirrors, the wall was painted green. It contained a single washroom, and a store room. The room was large enough for a capacity of fifteen people to be there, at one time. Obviously, the washroom and the store room had been locked now, as there was no need of it.

The room looked a tad congested. Seven mridangists, (well they knew at least something to play, hence I call them so) were sitting in a semi circular position, with the, guru, as we referred him to, sitting in the middle.

We offered him the guru dakshina and he accepted it. My lessons had started.

He taught me the correct posture of sitting with the mridangam, and then came the first lesson of my life as an mridangist.... Thaa, Thee, Thom, Num.

After a while of playing mridangam, once I had got the feel of it, I felt elated, a feeling that cannot be expressed in words. I had become an Mridangist.

The newly born mridangist could not sleep that night. A feeling of happiness and uniqueness was always with me.

In the back of my mind, however, the thoughts continued. The road not taken... how would it have been? Why did I not choose it? What game is the fate playing with me?

Deep inside me, I had a feeling of indecisiveness, a feeling that told me even before anything had begun, I had lost.

CHAPTER THREE

The red painted brick building stood tall. Although I had been a part of this institution for two years, this was the first time I was to attend the full duration of my school, 6 hours 10 minutes. In my kindergarten days, I had school only for 3 hours. Sooner than later, at the wink of an eye, I was at my mother's lap. But now, that was history. I knew I was entering a journey of twelve long years.

I was standing at the school gate. Up above on the front side of the building, the school name was etched in blue letters. I was new to reading big words, hence I skipped it. I was escorted to my classroom by my father. He left me there and went away.

There was still time for the classes to start. Kajari ma'am would only enter at exactly 8:30 am. This year onwards, we would have only one class teacher and a separate teacher for Hindi. Till I was in the kindergarten, we had two teachers always in the class.

I had already made a mark on the school front. The kindergarten teachers had branded me a chatterbox. What was so wrong? We come to school to talk, laugh, play and study. But then, everything has its limits. I did not know until then.

I had reserved my desk. Karthik and I sat together. This was not to change for the next many years, or so I thought.

She entered the class. The classroom was noisy, as one always expects it to be. Since it was the first day after the school reopened for class I, there were numerous greetings, fights over seat sharing, etc. going on. It is always a big task for the teacher to control the class. But maybe, they have the power to control the students. As she shouted, "Silence! Please settle down", it seemed the classroom had become a morgue, albeit temporarily.

I lived up to my brand. The chatterbox in me would not let go of me. Karthik and I always talked that too in Tamil.

I had known Karthik for a couple of years now. Both our fathers worked in the same office. They knew each other well, and hence we had become close friends. Moreover, having a person who speaks in your mother tongue is always a delight.

We spoke about anything and everything that was there for our age. Six year olds more often than not watched cartoons, and our favourite was Popeye, the sailor man. We were discussing intensely how Popeye used the magic of spinach to ward off Brutus from Olive, his lady love. When this topic was over, we spoke about how and why we fought with each other some day before, what each of us had got for lunch, how India fared in the cricket matches it played currently and why school was indeed for so long. Was 'class one' a big deal? A couple of months before we had three hour schools and now double that time we had to stay put!

We discussed about how fun holidays were, waking up late in the morning, no studies, only play. We showed each other the eagerness for the school to get over for the day, for the summer vacations.

“Kaushik, stand up!”. Kajari ma'am had lost her patience. The chatterbox in me deserved this. I did not. But the first day of Class I passed with me standing for the whole day. I felt bad not because I was standing the whole day, but because Karthik was sitting the whole day.

Deep inside me, something was telling me, on the first day of my primary school, Karthik had made a good impression and I had made a bad impression. I had lost.

CHAPTER FOUR

At long last, I was relieved to see the calendar switched to May. The week end signalled the start of my summer vacations. Full sixty-five days of fun.

I learnt to spell my name, my school name, my house address and other personal details. This was my exercise, my only academic related work the whole length of summer vacations. But fun was unlimited, Karthik and I had brought the roof down with our antics. It became very difficult for our mothers to manage us at each other's place. They were no teachers, I realized.

Summer vacations were soon to get over. It was July. But for one reason, I would have hated this month for this month had no festive holidays.

All six of us were sitting at the Guruprasad Udipi Restaurant in Munirka. We frequently dined out together, but none of the time did even one of us order north Indian food. Plain dosa was always my order, of late my father did not even bother to ask me for my choice. He knew it was always the same.

Karthik's father was a staunch south Indian food lover. He would always need curd rice for lunch and dinner, if not anything else. When he was with us, perhaps, he would substitute it with idlis or dosas or utthappams, which is if compelled to do so. His wife and son, maybe silently followed him; as he ordered only South Indian food, they too ordered the same.

But today was different. I had turned six. I was more mature than yesterday, when I was one year younger. What had come of me suddenly? I wanted a change. A dinner that was different from the usual dosa.

My father was the ad-hoc host of today. Since finance was not in my domain, it mattered little to be a host. Birthday wishes was the attention I would seek. I wanted more attention.

Ganguly was the new captain of the Indian cricket team. Hence he was the cynosure of all eyes. He

lived up to the expectations or not, that did not matter. But he got the attention, the focus was on him for all key decisions. And Ganguly was one of my heroes... I would learn to lead. If he can, then I also can do it. Now I had an opportunity.

I stood up. This was the best way to grab attention. On the first day of my primary school,

Kajari ma'am had taught me this. All five of them looked at me.

"Do you want to go to the toilet?"

I was stumped at my mother's question. Does everyone stand up only for that reason?

I shook my head. I cleared my throat. I began, "Today I would like to differ from the ordinary. Eating dosa here has bored my taste buds. Today I will try something different."

"Will you then eat idlis today, like give me company", Karthik interjected.

I ignored his question. Perhaps, the only alternative he knew for dosa was idlis. Or maybe, he genuinely wanted company. I didn't care.

I enquired about any more interruptions I was to face. All shook their heads. My mother signalled me to sit down. I obeyed her, partially because even others in the restaurant were looking at me now.

So much time had passed. We had not even placed orders. I could sense my father's ire.

"I want north Indian food. Simply put, I want to eat Naan with dalmakhani". My father's apprehensions were thankfully dispelled when I got support from an unlikely guest: Karthik's father. He supported my choice and asked my father to go ahead with it. Two plates naan and one plate dalmakhani. The order was placed, along with the usual idlis and dosas, for others.

We were served with the orders. Karthik's father was singing praises for me and for what he ate: One plate naan with half plate dalmakhani. Without his support, perhaps I too would not have had the other half.

Desserts were served. Children ate strawberry ice creams. The men had faloodas. The ladies drank milkshakes.

With the bill paid, we left for our homes. The taste lingered in my mouth. I was reluctant to brush my teeth that night, until my father glared at me, of course.

I had learnt to eat north Indian food in a north Indian restaurant; to be a Roman in Rome.

My father returned home happy and jubilated. His son had made him the talk of the town. Everybody in the office wanted my father to host a dinner, with his family.

I understood Karthik's father had not stopped singing praises even in the morning. He was perhaps too overwhelmed eating the north Indian food the previous night; He had credited me for the change he had undergone, breaking his stereotype.

Or perhaps, his lunch did the trick. He had not brought his usual curd rice to office. He had brought rotis. This may have made heads turn, and the reason for this sudden change in his lunch.

Nevertheless, I was being constantly referred to in the office. People knew me, talked about me - the underlying characteristic of a leader, to be the cynosure of all eyes.

My father wondered how this change had suddenly come in me.

I simply smiled at him. I did not reply.

As the rain poured down that night, I felt elated; a sense of happiness. Before I drifted to sleep, I knew: Master Kaushik Swaminathan had brought about a change in a person's personality. And then I drifted into the dream world of mine.

CHAPTER FIVE

My mridangam classes at the Delhi Tamil Sangam had restarted, signalling the end of a two month hiatus from it, and of course the beginning of school. With less than twenty four hours to go for the school to reopen, I had the task of falling back to the daily routine. My mother made me sleep early that night, just in case I missed school the next day.

The same building, only repainted red, welcomed me. I had time. I slowly read the name of the school above. My mother had taught to me during vacations, I just wanted to verify if she was correct.

I had been asked to mend my ways by my parents; the actual implementation of that test was from today onwards. Karthik and I sat separately, on the insistence of Kajari ma'am.

It helped.

We developed a rapport with other classmates. We started mingling with them. The best time of school was the lunch break, wherein our lunch boxes were turned into bats and aluminium foils squeezed to make balls of various sizes.

We would take turns to bat and bowl. Five minutes to eat lunch and fifteen minutes to play, it was our routine.

It was English period.

Ma'am said "Please open page 10."

“Where?” Someone asked.

Obviously in the book, I thought.

I myself scrambled through the book thinking where would be page 10, counting numbers on my fingers. Finally, I opened the page.

“About me?” I mumbled. I had to write about myself?

On the teacher’s command, I started filling. It went about like this:

My Name: Kaushik Swaminathan

Age: Six

School Name: Tagore International School, Vasant Vihar

Brothers: No

Sisters: Two.

My hand pained. Hence, I stopped writing. My mouth was tired being silent, it started its functions. I thought, the chatterbox in me would never leave me. My teacher saw my book and was perhaps flabbergasted; it would be confirmed only later.

The last period was the games period. One period a week is a tad too low, to be more specific, 40

minutes of games in a week is negligible. But thank God, we at least had a games period.

We had been split into groups, for a running race. That's what games consisted for us, because we were too young to play cricket or football.

It was my group's chance. I was to run as hard as possible. I had to beat everybody. Upbeat, I was ready for the run. The first two chances were false starts. Will I be third time lucky?

The whistle blew.

After a tiring games period, I was happy to be with my mother. We were walking home together.

My mother initiated the conversation, "So how was your day today?"

I was excited. I precisely wanted this. I wanted to tell about my achievement in games period.

I replied "We had games period today, running race. And do you know?"

I stopped abruptly. I wanted my mother to interject.

"Not until you say what, Kaushik".

"I came fourth in running race".

My mother could not believe her ears. Her son had secured fourth in running race. And all these days, she thought I was fit only for one thing...watching cricket.

She continued.

“And how many of you ran?”

We walked the rest of the way home in silence because of my reply, maybe.

I said to her “Four”.

CHAPTER SIX

I had by now grasped the art of playing mridangam, or so I thought. I was ready to face competitions for I was on the verge of completion of my second thalam, Roopaka.

The first thalam, Adi thalam seemed long and gruelling, partially because I was new to it, I was new to mridangam.

It had been decided that games, or in general, sports was not my cup of tea. Does life offer you a second chance? I had lost once; it would mean I would lose always. No morale in me to continue sports, I had declared to myself.

My focus should now turn to mridangam and studies, I knew.

It was parents-teachers meeting. I would never forget this, because it changed my life, it gave me lady luck.

It was now confirmed. The flabbergasted face of the teacher was genuine, otherwise she would not have touched this topic.

She asked my parents “So, you have two daughters? How old are they?”

It was my parents’ turn to get flabbergasted. Two questions at once did more than that.

They were dumbfounded.

Kajari ma’am, sensing something was amiss, asked my parents to check my English book.

“So Mr.Kaushik, do you have two sisters?”

My father was checking my English book.

Yes, of course. One lives diagonally opposite to our home and the other adjacent to our home. Isn’t it true?

My father had understood everything; he is such a knowledgeable man.

He taught me relationships, the meanings of father, mother, son, daughter, brothers, sisters, friends,

nephews, nieces, uncles and aunts.

I was grave.

“So isn’t it possible I have a sister?” I muttered at the end of his lecture.

My mother interjected, “It isn’t a plaything to have a sister, Kaushik, that today you will say yes and tomorrow you will say no and your sister performs the vanishing act, according to your whims and fancies”.

I knew it was tough for me to convince my parents but still, everything is worth a try.

If anything I had asked for in my life, it was a sister, my sister, on whom I had every right as a brother.

I prayed to God incessantly, daily and with my whole heart.

I was pretty excited with two things: firstly, only being with my father and secondly have a sibling, preferably a sister.

My parents had after quite a lot of discussions accepted to welcoming a fourth member of the family. My mother had gone south to her parent’s place with the baby due in a month’s time.

I could not accompany her for one I was too young and secondly, I had school. Hence the decision of me staying with my father for a quarter of a year was implemented.

I was duly advised to welcome a sibling into the family, not specifically a brother or sister. Both must be given equal respect, care, love and affection, I was told.

I had effectively scaled down from saying “I want a sister” to “I prefer a sister”. But in my mind, I was stubborn. God knows it. I had to wait for a month more, no other choice.

I had progressed well in mridangam. At the end of sixteen months of training, I had successfully completed three thalams, was learning my fourth thalam and ready to face competitions.

It was children’s day. The Nehru Bal Samiti had organized the Nehru Bal Mela. There were competitions organized for all percussion instruments, apart from dance and other oratory skills. It was a week-long event. My competition was to be held on Nehru’s birthday.

There were two groups: junior level and senior level. My age of seven warranted me to be in sub-junior level, but was promoted to the junior level, which was the lowest possible group.

There were a total of twenty eight contestants. Youngest of them all, I was given the first preference to play, which quite ruefully, I accepted because I was made to accept. It actually was not preference, but compulsion.

Being a junior-most of all juniors was in itself a problem. I had to face its consequences. Moreover, I was a first timer, not knowing the feeling of stage fear, or that of being on stage.

All that I knew was the Mishra Chapu thalam, technically third most difficult thalam, but then it is always contentious to rate thalams like that.

On my father’s insistence and the backing of my intuitions, I had taken up to play this thalam on stage. I should have known playing big thalams imperfectly is far worse than playing easy and well known thalams confidently and perfectly.

By the time I went off stage, the world knew the result.

I had lost.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It would be my unforgettable day of my life. I could promise anybody, even if I were affected by dementia or Alzheimer's, I would not forget what happened that day. It would just not suffice to say, it was the happiest day of my life.

I was anticipating the phone call for long. Each passing second was an hour to me. I could not resist hearing the phone bell ring.

Patience. I was waiting for five full minutes that is exactly three hundred seconds. My anxiety levels had reached a peak and I waited actually for three hundred hours, it felt.

Finally the suspense was to be over, if not for the connection error. The phone bell rang, I lifted the receiver.

My grandfather was on that side: "Hello"

I replied, saying "It's useless!! Come to the matter".

Perhaps, I was a bit harsh but then I was anxious as well.

He spoke "You have a sibling. Congratulations Kaushik!!! I heard you were desperate to have one, your mother was telling".

But mother, you did not ask him to tell whether its sister or brother?

My curt reply started and finished like “yes”.

And yes, the phone line had snapped. The phone was dead.

It's irritating to know you have a sibling but whether a boy or a girl, you don't know. I was not to know about it until I came back from school.

That was perhaps my worst outing to school. My attention was somewhere else while the teacher moaned on something useless. Well, everything was useless until my question was not answered and for that I had to reach home soon. Remember? Each second was an hour.

At very long last, the school gave over for the day. I was surprised to see my father take that day off. Was a bad news in store for me?

I asked him “Brother or sister.”

His reply was no reply. He came back home silently. I had to. Thank God, he had ensured to have got the phone line back on again and just as I reached home, the bell rang.

“Hello, sister or brother? Why don't you tell me?” I was yelling.

There was silence.

I was afraid.

I was afraid of the reply.

I was afraid of the past.

I was afraid of the past that had given me only losses.

I prayed God for change in my luck.

I felt change was good, for once.

“Yes, your parents have been blessed with a daughter, Kaushik”.

Well, it is in some people’s blood to give you indirect answers; indirect answers for straight forward questions.

Nevertheless, the caller shall be pardoned. He had given me favourable news.

My prayers had won.

I had won.

To celebrate the birth of my sister, it was apt for me to organize a party. My sister would celebrate her birthday, in absentia. We had all the decorations ready and I had gone to my neighbourhood to announce the hastily but meticulously arranged party. Everybody congratulated me and had

promised their arrival at my home.

The usual party fervor was there, no doubt. But then, I too had a feeling of missing the host of the day. I had hardly got the message of her birth, but within those few hours itself, I started missing her.

They ate pastries and chips, drank cool drinks, laughed, played and would have surely thoroughly enjoyed the party. But me, I saw them doing all that but did not do accompany them with that. I understood I was a bad host. I understood I was being possessive. I understood that I was messing up with the very reason of the party, but what can I do?

Before I found the answer, Thank God, my father had waked me up from my dream; a bad dream to commemorate an auspicious event.

But it meant something as well: The attitude of losing had mixed with my blood.

Unless and until I acted fast, I acted smart; I knew I was waging a losing battle with life. I knew I was waging a losing battle with fate.

I knew I was waging a losing battle with destiny.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Although I knew I had a sister, I had not yet seen her. I shared the news with Karthik, expecting him to give the same reply. It was nothing of that sort. He merely nodded and congratulated. There was no other reaction, nothing else. There was something queer in his attitude; a change in his attitude. I had noticed it, but failed to investigate it.

The winter vacations had started. Hastily, my father had booked tickets to visit my mother, or rather my sister.

My train journey was rather informative. It pointed to the future. It pointed to a change, I detested. It pointed to the fact that I shall never ever embrace change again.

Simply speaking, I had a sister. Karthik did not. I was a brother. Karthik was not. Lastly, our family had four members. His family had three.

My sister is the most beautiful girl in the world; I would claim anywhere, to anybody. I would perhaps never forget the first time I looked at her. I kept gazing at her face, her eyes closed and deep in sleep.

I was with her for most of the time I stayed at my grandparents' place. We held her naming ceremony. New Year had dawned, and this time I conveyed my New Year wishes not only to my parents but to my sister as well.

Finally, the day had come; the day of our departure. My sister would be in Delhi. We packed our bags and left for our home. All way through I was excited to be with her. I had become possessive, I felt.

Karthik's family very well knew of the developments in our family. They too were excited. But Karthik was different. I had come to know.

The school reopened after the winter vacations. I just managed to reach school on time. My sister's presence had delayed me getting ready to school; by the way, I had wanted to take the day off, more specifically, every day off.

I should have listened to my instincts. If I had taken the day off, could that situation have been

avoided? Or if Karthik had had a sister, could that situation have been avoided?

I don't know.

All I knew was a catastrophe took place, something I had never dreamt of. It was perhaps a part of the play God made me an actor of. It was perhaps fate playing a game with me.

Mr. Fate. I don't just like playing games, if you don't know.

Will fate listen? Can destiny be changed? What happened had happened.

Karthik's mere nod and an unenthusiastic congratulatory message the previous month should have set the alarm bells ringing in me. It didn't. I had to pay the price for it.

Grapevines cannot be avoided within a group. Rumours spread like wild fire, especially amongst us, who were too young to actually think about the truth in other's words. Whatever others said, we believed. No thinking, nothing.

All types of non-sense were spread about me in the class. What was truth and what were white lies, who were bothered to know?

I was bothered to know. But me being the cynosure of all eyes, would I be told about it or would anybody discuss it with me? No chance. I had become an easy fodder on which grapevines grew. I cannot escape the truth.

What shocked me was the person who had spread these rumours. He had been my fair weather friend, I was disclosed. It was difficult to accept the truth, but truths are always bitter. I had to swallow the pill. No choice.

I had confided in him so much, to be true. He had simply back-stabbed me. He was a stabber, a back stabber. It hurt. But thank God, I had not shown him my chest; else I would have been no more alive.

The day's events haunted me. What had he done to me? I never expected this to happen to me, and certainly not from Karthik.

I could not sleep that night. The rumours had given me a bad boy image, something worse than that actually. I had lost everybody, every one of my friends. I shunned Karthik, he deserved it.

But what will happen to me? No friends in school, nobody to call a friend? I shuddered to think.

How beautiful it was to have a friend! A friend who spoke in my mother tongue; a friend who shared my feelings; a friend who shared my aspirations; a friend who shared my grief. This had all become past.

The days we spoke about anything and everything that was there for our age. The days we watched together our favorite cartoon Popeye, the sailor man. The days we spoke about how and why we fought with each other some day before, what each of us had got for lunch, how India fared in the cricket matches it currently played and why school was indeed for so long?

The days we discussed about how fun holidays were, waking up late in the morning, no studies, only play; the days we showed each other our eagerness for the school to get over. Everything was past.

The present was different; very different, indeed.

How much had changed! For all the happiest moments I spent with Karthik, this was a complete U-turn his behavior had shown me. Every coin has two sides, he too had two, and it was just that I did not recognize it before.

By the way, what big difference would it make? I had lost so much in life; losing friends may just add another event to the list.

I have been a loser throughout. Winning once or twice may be an aberration, which really won't change your loser's tag. Will it? As my eyes welled up, I knew I had lost that night's sleep.

A loser always loses. I have been a loser throughout. What I feared most had come true. Before anything had started, I had lost. I had lost because of changes that had come about in my surroundings, with the people around me.

I wanted to remain the same. I wanted everybody to remain the same. I wanted time to be stand-still. I did not want change as it gave me losses. I wanted modification, not change.

I took a vow to never speak to Karthik again and to mind my own business in future. I had become a loner in school.

Change: The word that was my new enemy.

CHAPTER NINE

I returned from school, dead tired, really. Although it was winter, I had felt tired-tired of being silent the whole day. It had been weeks since I had spoken in the class. After the split with Karthik, my best friend of yore, I hardly had the feeling to talk, to discuss about my sister with anybody. Karthik was the best person, but not anymore. I was looking forward to the long weekend, thanks to the Republic day, the next day.

I had woken up early, for a change, even though it was holiday on account of Republic day. Due to this, or even otherwise, my father decided to take me to Rajpath, the parade venue. The two of us left early, very early in the morning.

The crowd had started to trickle in when we had reached Rajpath. We were just in time to find the front row seat. Minutes later, the site was full; full of enthusiastic spectators, who had come to watch the grand occasion of India's republic day anniversary parade. A couple of hours later, the parade started.

There, you could see India's military might in display. From the vintage tanks to the technologically advanced machines, all were on display. The air force displayed the new range of military aircrafts, spraying colours of saffron, white and green. Anywhere and everywhere, the tricolour could be seen flying high. Everybody was in a happy state of mind; patriotism filled their hearts, India, the name that repeatedly reverberated in their ears, except in one region, Bhuj.

I reached home, excited. I had just a few hours ago seen the republic day parade, something few got to watch live on the spot each year. I had been one among the lucky few that year.

The television was blaring with news contained only about Gujarat. Bhuj, Kutch and other places had been reduced to rubble due to the Earthquake. I had learnt in school, shifting of tectonic plates caused earthquakes and its magnitude is measured on a scale, called Richter Scale.

The magnitude of the quake was 7.7 on the Richter Scale. The temperature in Delhi that morning was 7.7°C on the temperature scale. Both measurements were completely different.

The former had caused massive destruction to life and property, while the latter, did no such thing, but only gave shivers down the spine.

The enormity of destruction could be gauged from the fact that the media was constantly focusing on that issue for a long, long time. The numbers too supported it.

Some 20,000 people had lost their life during the quake and the after-effects of the quake. People in 4,00,000 were shelter-less. The quake was classified as intense and had struck sixteen kilometres under the ground.

The famed Swaminarayan temple too had bore the brunt, albeit it was destroyed partially. In short, there was nothing, not a single person, who escaped nature's fury.

Scientists claimed a previously unknown south dipping fault, trending parallel to the inferred rift structures had caused the fault, but then I believed there was no use conducting post mortem in this case; for then humans cannot control the movement of tectonic plates.

One particular newspaper article describing the destruction few days later shall always remain in my memory.

It described about a very rich doctor living on the upper floors of a high raised building. He did nothing different that morning, but his life was to change forever, when the quake comes.

His house was one among many that had been reduced to rubbles. It would not have been possible for him to even identify the bricks with which his house was constructed.

Wearing only a shirt and a pant, he was penniless then, although he had lakhs of rupees moments before. He was one among the millions who was homeless, left to beg for food, his status now equal to that of a pauper. Perhaps, he was a pauper.

Nature always has a neutral say, I learnt. It does not differentiate between the rich and poor, lower caste or upper caste. It just unleashes its fury and all those caught in its jaws have to suffer. No reservations here.

Also, I learnt one more lesson. Change takes place. It does not ask for your permission. It acts when it sees it is desirable for it to act. It acts on its own. There is nothing constant but change. How we adapt to it is in our hands.

But for me, I hated change. Change always brought losses; change was always for the worse.

Change: You continue to be my enemy.

CHAPTER TEN

It was March 2001. India was to play Australia in a test match at the Eden Gardens. The cricket fanatic that I was needed no better fodder than what happened on five days, from the eleventh to the fifteenth of that month. Undoubtedly, the test match would go down as one of the best ever India played in the annals of test cricket's history. No doubt it would find mention in the folklore of Indian cricket. It reiterated the fact that I was blessed to be a part of a generation who could watch cricket greats like Rahul Dravid bat.

The essence of the test match and how the teams played could be done if we analyse it day by day. So, here it goes, the saga that took place between India and Australia and the spectators at the Eden Gardens are a witness to that.

Day 1: I had switched on the television just moments before the toss. As the two captains, Steve Waugh and Sourav Ganguly, were ready for the toss, I too settled down on the easy chair to spend the rest of the day glued to the television. Australia had the first laugh, winning the toss and electing to bat first. It inadvertently meant India has to play the fourth innings, which on any track is a tough job.

Out came the two Australian openers, Micheal Slater and Matthew Hayden. The sooner this partnership is broken, the better, I mused.

That was not to be. They played and kept on playing. No doubt they were the invincible; no doubt they had won a record sixteen test matches in a row. The openers showed the class of the Australian team. At the end of two sessions, I was miserable for the scoreboard read 193/1. The Indian bowlers were sent on a leather hunt.

During the tea break, I contemplated switching off the television, for there was no use for an Indian fan watching what was obvious, an Australian romp. But what else should I do? My exams were over; the only way to pass time was to be associated with cricket.

With no other option, I watched Hayden and Langer coming out to bat, more specifically, to torment the Indians in the final session of the day.

I don't know how it happened for what followed was something so dramatic that I have never seen it in any of the test matches or one day cricket. Harbhajan Singh, the man with the golden arm, ripped apart the famed Australian batting line-up to leave them wobbling at 291/8. The mighty

Australian team had lost seven wickets for a meagre 91 runs in the final session of the day. At last I could get some night's sleep, I felt.

Day 2: I was all set for the match to begin. At last, the Australians had succumbed to the Indians, with Harbhajan leading the way. It was just a matter of time before the Australian tail would be polished off, or so I thought.

But what happened was jaw dropping. Steve Waugh was on a rampage with Jason Gillespie giving company and took the score to 402/8, at last when Gillespie fell. But McGrath gave able company to Waugh to take the Australian score to 445. A total of 176 runs had been added in one and a half sessions before the tail perished. I was stunned. What followed made me skip my dinner, for the famed Indian batting line-up crumbled to 128/8 before the stumps were drawn for the day. India needed 118 runs to avoid following-on, with only VVS Laxman as the recognized batsman at the crease.

In all probabilities, win number 17 was on cards for the Australians. The Indian team simply had squandered the advantage they had gained on day 1. More so, the Australians had wrested back the advantage from the Indians.

Day 3: The Indian tail wagged, or should I not say that? From the overnight score of 128/8, the Indians managed to reduce the deficit by 58 runs, with Laxman stroking 59 important runs. Nevertheless, Indians had 274 runs in deficit. It meant that the Indians will not play the fourth innings, but will have to bat again. Waugh had imposed follow-on.

This time the openers showed resolve. They batted better than how they did the previous day, putting up a half century opening partnership. When Sadagopan Ramesh was dismissed, Laxman came one down. I heaved a sigh of relief. Here came a man who was in good touch. With Shiv Sundar Das and Sachin Tendulkar following Ramesh to the pavilion, Laxman and Ganguly were in the damage control mode, putting up a century partnership. The woefully out of form Dravid took the place of his captain and helped Laxman complete his century. When the stumps were drawn, I had something to cheer about- the resilience of Laxman and innings defeat was most probably out of question, with the deficit only 20 runs.

However, win number 17 loomed large for the Australians. The Indian tigers were to be humbled in their own soil. No denying that.

Day 4: This was perhaps a dream I was seeing. How often would one see days like these, especially when Indians were batting?

I was happy when the deficit was indeed cleared. At last, the Oz have to come out to bat. I was elated to see The Wall back in form, scoring a patient fifty. But what followed was something divine. A performance that I think I would never see but once.

Laxman and Dravid forged a partnership of epic proportions. They batted out the whole day without even a single wicket down and the lead worth 315. For the first time in that match, I felt why the stumps were drawn. India had reached 589/4 with Laxman on a mammoth 279 and Dravid beyond the century mark. What if this continued for eternity? A draw was on the cards that is if Indians don't crumble the next day.

Day 5: With the last day of the test coming up, I was happy that at least the Indians had stretched the match to five days. This was not a case of abject surrender, as it looked a couple of days ago.

The Indians batted in the batting paradise, and reached 657/7 when Ganguly declared the innings. Laxman had missed triple century by 19 runs and Dravid had missed his double century by 20 runs. But they had contributed to the team, pulled them out of precarious situation Indians had found themselves in.

The net result was this: off the remaining 75 overs, the Australians had to score 384 runs for their 17th win on a trot, a near impossibility.

With Hayden, Slater and Waugh looking solid, draw was the only possibility. They had reached 166/3 in the 45 overs bowled so far. The remaining 30 overs would have been of no interest of course, until the man with the golden arm returned into the scene.

Harbhajan Singh and Sachin Tendulkar had spun a web on the Australian batting line-up. The Australians who so far looked like the invincible, were set for abject surrender due to an unprecedented batting collapse with Harbhajan, the wrecker-in-chief.

The outcome of the match was one which I thought was a near impossibility, an Indian victory that too by a margin of 171 runs. This was only a third case in history of test cricket that a team forced to follow on had gone on to win the game, the commenter was saying. This was the first time India had achieved the feat.

I shouted out loud:

“Mera Bharat Mahaan”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The city landscape was fast changing. With the slogan of “Green Delhi, Clean Delhi”, the Leela Menon government had acted efficient and quick.

The Delhi metro was operational by the penultimate month of the year 2002. Leela Menon had one more year as the chief minister of Delhi in her first term and she had played the master-stroke. She had ensured Delhi metro had become operational; at least phase 1 was completed. She knew the tricks of the trade. She knew how to keep people in good humour.

The success of Delhi metro was to say the least unimaginable. Mr.E.Sreedharan had doled out a gift to the Delhiites. With the increase in the number of privately owned vehicles, like cars and motorbikes, the traffic congestion and pollution spiralled upwards. Metro had offered the solution: it had eased traffic congestion and reduced the time of travel, at the same time increasing the comfort levels of commuters. No doubt it was a run-away hit.

This was also an important move keeping in mind Delhi Government’s aspirations to bid for the Commonwealth Games to be held in the year 2010, the following year.

My father had planned an outing the first Sunday of that month. We were to travel in the metro from Kashmere Gate to Rajiv Chowk and back. He had deliberately chosen Rajiv Chowk as the venue so that we could do some shopping at the posh Connaught Place market, dine and return back home.

Karthik's family was also to accompany us. I balked. He hesitated. But the financially powerful people had their say. For the first time after my vow of not speaking to him, I had met him outside school. But I had to keep my vow, hence tactfully avoided his company throughout our outing.

That day after shopping, we dined at the Bikanerwala, ordering Chhole bature, with Karthik's father giving me company. Something was wrong with us, both our parents knew. But what was wrong? Don't know.

I was in the practice mode again. The annual Nehru Bal Mela was coming up. I had by now understood the mistake of playing mishra chapu thalam and had focussed myself only with Adi Thalam.

Whatever I did, the result was the same: yet again I had lost in the mridangam competition.

I didn't know what was happening with me. Perhaps, I will never achieve success in mridangam? Perhaps I will die only fighting and losing battles? Success was not in my destiny, I presumed.

The same old feeling had haunted me again. I was unhappy to feel it but still, I felt lost even before going on-stage to perform. This was for the third consecutive year the same feeling was repeated. From next year onwards, I would not participate in the competition again, I convinced myself.

I was starting to feel awkward. Feeling lonely in school may be made me depressed. All I knew was I was not well. Something was wrong, what was wrong, I know not.

My class teacher identified my awkwardness, growing more and more each passing day. Finally she concluded my sister to be the chief reason for my depression. I could not convince her otherwise.

I had lost.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The rest of the year had passed without any more fireworks. My sister's birthday was celebrated but not with much show and pomp. The New Year had dawned. Ten months had passed.

“You would be presented with a new mridangam”, I heard my father saying.

I was sulking over my decision to skip this year's Nehru Bal Mela competition. I had just put forth my idea, or decision, to my father. I expected some hard core scolding but I was surprised with what I heard.

He had made an offer. It should be carrying some conditions with it, I was musing, when he spoke:

“But one condition, you must practice hard, very hard; put your whole heart and mind this time and then leave the rest to God. Are you ok?”

I had already told myself not to mind much about last year's defeat. My mind gave me an idea, perhaps it's revenge time, give your best Kaushik; no expectations, no disappointments.

I said, “Deal”. I was ready to deal with the challenge.

I had chosen Roopaka thalam this time. It was so far not tried and tested by me. I knew I had practiced to the best of my ability; the best practice I had had for mridangam in a long, long time.

It was my D-day. My name was called for as the next contestant. Yes, for all these years I was a participant, now I was a contestant. That was the best frame of mind I think I ever had had. I told myself : no expectations, no disappointments.

What followed next was the best ten minutes I had experienced. I wanted it to go on for eternity. But this time also passed. As I went off the stage, whatever the result, I knew one thing: I had done my best.

After all the contestants had their chance, it was result time. This time I knew I was in for a chance. But again, I simply controlled my emotions, for the past has not been in your favour, Kaushik, I reminded myself.

The judge announced the verdict. Third prize goes to...not my name. Second prize goes to...unlucky here as well. My heart sank. I was just about to leave the arena when I heard my name being called.

I had won the first prize, they told.

Even this year was about to end. Only some two hours were left. I had spent ten years in this world, had seen what failure was, what success was and how to achieve that success. As I went to sleep, I recollected my achievements this year. No doubt it was a comparatively successful year. It had showed to me how to achieve success, gain confidence and look forward to new events.

A change in attitude was noticed by me, by myself. It felt good. My opinion on change changed, I knew I had to embrace change, how much ever I may not like it. Also change is always not for the worse.

Change: My outlook on you has changed. You are neither my friend nor my enemy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

During the last month of the year 2004, the chill was indeed in the air. The temperature readings were down to single digit, before dawn and after dusk. It was a dreary month, with cold waves lashing from the north. Foggy mornings and evenings made life difficult. Still I considered winter the best time of the year, frankly because one never feels tired, even if tons of work is done. Afternoons were a pleasant time and on all holidays, I found myself in the Rose Gardens.

The afternoon sun was warm and cozy. We played chess. My father read newspaper and my sister, well, sort of interfering with me or my mother or the chess coins. Then the game used to end then and there, for neither of us could concentrate. My father would more often than not find himself in a deep slumber with the newspaper in front of him.

The winter vacations started and it was time for less study, not necessarily more fun. On the third day of my winter vacation, we had planned to go to the Thyagaraja Auditorium to witness a musical evening by S.P.Balasubramanian and his troupe.

Ever since childhood, I was introduced to both carnatic and film music. I became an ardent fan of Sudha Ragunathan and Nithyashree Mahadevan. The songs sung by these artistes not only captivated my mind, but also gave me peace of mind. I knew being connected to carnatic music shall help me a great deal, and hence there was no question of quitting mridangam. Some day, I knew, mridangam shall do me some good. All I had to do was to remain patient, bide time till the right time arrives.

I hardly listened to film music. But if I did, mostly it was Balasubramanian's as far as Tamil film music was concerned. So, it was no doubt that I was well aware of the type of songs I would listen to at his concert. I was looking forward to it.

Had my parents not seen the news that day, we would well have been on the way to the auditorium. Perhaps, it was not my day to be one of his audiences. There was a massive earthquake in Sumatra, Indonesia, the news flash read.

“So what?” I asked out loud.

“Tamil Nadu too is an affected party”, my father replied.

He continued explaining how the undersea earthquake had triggered tsunami. It’s a word never heard before, I recalled.

The news flash explained further the definition of tsunami, large sea waves caused due to undersea quake. The waves were of enormous size, for they could not have otherwise travelled the distance between Sumatra and Chennai, via Sri Lanka and Andaman islands.

The effect of the undersea quake had its effect in Australia as well. It was a multi-national calamity, I noted.

Goodbye, the live performance of S.P.Balasubramanian, I told my mind.

Time flew by. Five years and ten months had passed. I was growing older. Hints of beard and moustache became apparent on my face. But the only medal I had won years earlier at the Nehru Bal Mela never got company. It indeed was the only prize I managed-the sole achievement that was followed by subsequent defeats which more or less spelt doom for Kaushik, the mridangist. Or was it not?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was, and no doubt will be the unforgettable day of my life. Many more may come, but I certainly can't forget this day. It was the third day after the month was born. There were twenty percent chances of rain predicted that day. I prayed for clear sky and no wonder several thousands of people would have done the same.

I was sitting in a room at the Jawahar Lal Nehru Stadium reminiscing the moments, events and the efforts that got me here. Perhaps, a decade ago, I would have been considered a dreamer and may be a year ago, a mentalist. Few would have anticipated this moment in my life. I should have got an astrologer look at the horoscope or gone to a tarot card reader. Most certainly, destiny has had a role to play in it, I felt.

My joy had known no bounds that moment which was experienced a couple of months ago. No doubt the fact was known in 2003 itself that New Delhi would host the Commonwealth Games 2010. Every effort was taken to put up the best face of Delhi forward during the Games. But myself being a part of the opening ceremony of the Games — well I had to pinch myself twice for it to register in my mind. No wonder, destiny has a unique way of making people achieve things in life.

Ever since then, I had been quite busy with the rehearsals for the multinational event, shuttling between school and the Jawahar Lal Nehru Stadium. I had found a rejuvenated interest in my hobby. I had no doubt put quite some effort to sit here. Now was the time, this was the place, where I felt my decade of an enriching experience of learning mridangam would culminate.

My reverie was broken by the excited chatter of my fellow participants who had just entered the room. With just about a few minutes left for the opening ceremony to begin, the television in the room was showing the live footage of the events transpiring outside the room, barely a few metres away. The Prime Minister, Chief Minister of Delhi, Organizing committee chairman and other honorable dignities had taken their seats and the spectators were loudly cheering out of excitement at what they may witness. They knew for sure this time may not come again in the near future, at least.

A few metres away from them, inside the enclosed chamber we were in, the excitement was palpable. One by one, we started changing to the costumes of kurta and dhoti we were supposed to wear for the night. The mridangists wore the purple kurta, the tabla players wore green coloured kurta while the sitarists donned red colour kurtas. The Bharatnatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohini Attam and the Manipuri dancers were all in their respective costumes as well. No wonder we were to become the cynosure of all eyes, a couple of hours later.

In the couple of hours that separated us from giving our performance, the spectators were already left spellbound by the performances of leading music composers. The aerostat floating above the stage gave the already electrified surrounding an unmatched aura. No doubt they had high expectations and they were getting value for their money.

With just about fifteen minutes for our performance, I was getting ready to leave for the stage, to become the cynosure of all eyes. My mind drifted back to the first rehearsal where in we were assigned our positions on stage and a number for identification. Our team was called the 'Tree of Knowledge' and why not, we were to showcase the rich and diverse culture of music and dance the country possesses. The subsequent rehearsals merely reiterated what we should be doing today. Practice makes one perfect. Unfortunately, how much practice is something that no one can measure. Nevertheless, it was a proud moment for me and as I stepped out on stage, I came back to the present to take my already assigned position in the north east side of the stage.

To the incessant flashes of light emitting from the digital cameras from the spectator's stand,

I ended up playing mridangam for ten full minutes in front of the thousands of common men watching live from the stands and the television sets from their homes and the select dignitaries present for the event.

To the thunderous applause of the spectators gathered, I left the arena looking around for one last time the moment which is never to be erased from my memory unto death.

By the time I entered into my bed, I knew the opening ceremony was conducted the previous day and that in the annals of history could I always mention myself being associated with the Commonwealth Games 2010 held at Delhi, the place which had Leela Menon rule over it uninterrupted for the last twelve years.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Some eight years had passed since Ganguly's boys had faltered at the last hurdle separating India and the World Cup. India had lost to Australia by 125 runs. Interestingly, the margin of defeat in the World Cup final equaled the total team score India had posted against the same opponents in the league stage during that very World Cup, held in South Africa.

The previous World Cup in West Indies was a horror for Indian fans. With Dravid at the helm of affairs, I expected the team to go the full distance. But what happened was ugly to say the least. India had to play three matches in the group stage. With Bangladesh trashing India soundly, there was desperation in the Indian camp. People were too dismayed. No wonder, Bangladesh had pulled off an unlikely victory. Worse still, India had to beat both Bermuda and the eventual finalists Sri Lanka to reach the next round. Unfortunately, the team could muster only one off the two wins. India crashed out of the world cup in the group stage. I, among uncountable fans, was left dismayed.

Now, I was to witness the World Cup 2011 final held in Mumbai. For two reasons, I would not forget it.

The first reason was the obvious one. The electric atmosphere at the Wankhede Stadium could have foretold the event it was to witness. All modes of future forecasting — be it astrology, numerology or tarot card reading — all were used. All Indians wanted only one result — that of an Indian victory. They wanted to know this result.

Dhoni's men were intimidating this World Cup, to say the least. They had lost only to South Africa this World Cup. The only blip in their fairytale journey they were going through. One last step though was left. History has never supported the hosts to win the World Cup. Even in 1996, Sri Lanka as co-hosts lifted the trophy. Now again, Sri Lanka stood between India and World Cup.

I had already booked online tickets to watch the Battle of the Blues live at the jam packed stadium. Well, don't be surprised to know that Karthik accompanied me to the mega event's last match. We both had rented a room in a lodge on the outskirts of the city. I had patched up with him a few months back mostly because of the affection his parents had shown towards me. They would not be able to show it anymore.

The match was to start in fifteen minutes time. The toss was called twice — a comedy moment on such a big stage. The first time when the coin was spun, neither captain knew who had called. Hence, there was a re-toss. India was asked to chase. Sri Lanka would set a target, the re-toss tale inferred. The Lankan batsmen came out, started very slowly against the accurate line and length bowled by the Indian fast bowlers. Karthik and I were having a jolly time together with both cheering India yelling out of our lungs. However, our voice was just two of the thousands cheering like us. The fairytale of Dhoni's captaincy had brought about India's second World Cup in four years, the first one being the T20 world cup in September 2007. Fittingly, Dhoni finished the match

with a towering six, hit towards the direction in which we were standing. I watched the ball sail over my head. The spectators went berserk. I too joined with them.

No wonder the last six off Dhoni's bat was the image one would best describe the World Cup with, just like the unbelievable feat by Yuvraj Singh in the 2007 T20 World Cup — Six sixes off a single over versus England that had turned the match on its head and perhaps paved way for India's ascent as the World T20 Champions.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I had for the first time ever come to know about the art of hypnotism — the science of mind control — while watching an episode in a television program, few months back, in the past year. Ever since I had repeatedly tried the technique to hypnotize a person, in other words, control the other person's mind, thoughts and actions.

In that episode, a bull's-eye chart with concentric rings was used to make the subject focus intensely. With a little help from Internet, I came to know hypnosis really doesn't require an object. It simply requires intense concentration both on the person hypnotizing (called the hypnotist) and the other getting hypnotized (called the subject).

Truly speaking, hypnosis is the state of human consciousness involving intense concentration and reduced awareness of the surroundings in which the subject has enhanced capacity for response to suggestion. It can be used for both entertainment purposes and that of therapeutic purposes. The use of hypnotic induction helps the hypnotist induce hypnosis in the subject. Hypnotherapy is used in the field of medicine while stage hypnosis is used for entertainment purposes.

Around the year 1841, a Scottish surgeon who went by the name of James Braid, is credited to have coined the words hypnosis and hypnotism, the longer form of which is neuro-hypnotism, meaning nervous sleep. Etymologically speaking, the word hypnosis consists of two words hypnos and the suffix —osis. The former word means sleep while the suffix may mean the term "put to sleep" in ancient Greek language.

Hence, hypnotism simply makes a person sleep but this sort of sleep is different from the common

sleep. In a sleep induced by hypnotism, the state achieved is that of progressive relaxation of mental concentration. However, it must be noted that the theory of hypnotism and mesmerism are completely different, for the former term influences the mental health of a person and the latter term influences the health of the human body as a whole. The research on the science of mesmerism was performed by Franz Mesmer in whose honour the name was given.

To perform the task of hypnotic induction, many methods are used. The most common ones include Original Eye Fixation Method and conversational hypnotism. The former method, that is, the original eye fixation method is also known as Braidism as it was Braid who had developed this method. His method was called a direct method of hypnotic induction.

The key to hypnotic induction lay in the ability of the subject to intensely concentrate or in other words, stare at any object continuously. If that doesn't work, making the subject listen to monotonous music also yields the same result, the subject's unconsciousness concentration on the hypnotist. This was called the indirect method of hypnotic induction.

And my last few months of practice of this art was to be helpful tonight, to fulfill my second objective, which would make this a night to remember — the Indian victory at the Wankhede was simply an icing on the cake, I feel. It helped me get Karthik to trust on me — the fact that I had doled him out a ticket for the World Cup final.

And it was imperative that I fulfill my own wish tonight, for it will be easy for me to escape through the train back to Delhi moments later.

I momentarily broke out of my reminiscences to find Karthik fast asleep and his head had just rested on my shoulder, causing me to come to the present. We had hired a taxi back to the lodge. He had slept during the course of the long travel that we were taking. I too would have done the same but for the fact I had a job at hand and I had to finish things off. The more I looked at his face, the sorrier I felt for him. Poor boy! What cruel role fate had played! He was now an orphan. Exactly five months back, to the day. All I had heard him sob through his welled up eyes as he in front of his eyes saw both his parents lose their life to the bomb blast at the busy Sarojini Nagar Market that thronged with the last minute rush of people for Deepavali purchase. He had escaped with minor injuries, just because he had trailed his parents a few metres behind. From then on itself, I reconciled my differences with Karthik, feeling sorry for a boy out of place due to the sudden tragedy that had struck his personal life. I hoped to take it upon me to make Karthik's life free of suffering one day. I felt the time nearing.

A few minutes ride from here and we would be all alone in our rented room. I had carefully planned

the scene of crime well in advance. Perhaps that was the reason; I could show off as if I had enjoyed the outing to Wankhede. In reality, I knew one wrong step would doom my life forever. What I was to undertake was a task that looked so simple but being a perfectionist is actually what matters. If everything goes as planned, my ticket to Delhi would be the perfect alibi I would possess to leave the police on the false trail. By the way, I had not booked a return ticket for Karthik, a fact I have till now and maybe forever hide from him. Even more, I had no ticket for myself as well!

The taxi reached the destination. I paid the driver off and turned around to look at the nearly dilapidated building one last time. It was exactly the place I had told the driver. From here, however, I had to walk a fair distance with Karthik to reach the room wherein Karthik would commit suicide.

Fifteen minutes later, a kilometre away, on the second floor of the star hotel I had reserved for the night eighteen hours ago, I stood with Karthik, sensing a chill go down my spine. I entered the room key in the key hole, turned the latch and stepped in. Karthik followed me behind. But if he had had even an inkling as to what was to happen, he might have just turned away, or even scurried away.

I made him look comfortable. To get his sleepy eyes focussed on me. I knew this was a big test, a big moment in my life. It mattered most. A job was at hand.

My mantra was simple: I had planned to use the art of hypnosis on him.

Now all that was remaining was execution.

His execution.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I can’t believe my ears” he commented. The other man in the room too was stunned. Here was a video they were watching wherein a confession was about to be made. Constable Ravi Ratnam of the Railway Police Force had pressed the pause button on the video at the behest of his senior,

Inspector Dubey of the Andhra Pradesh Police Department.

“How did you come across this pen drive?” the senior officer questioned, pointing to the crimson red rectangular device attached to the laptop.

Dutifully, Ravi spoke, of the saga that had unfolded in the past six hours, which had brought him acquainted with Dubey. He knew he had to get all the facts right, at least to the best of his knowledge, so that he would not be in trouble tomorrow, if not being hailed as one of the most observant cop in service. He was happy that he had been asked. He was itching to tell it. He recalled everything from the very beginning.

The lone train engine was sent early today morning at daybreak to check the sturdiness of the track near the forested area of the Tamil Nadu — Andhra Pradesh border. It is a routine exercise that is performed everyday to ascertain any defects in track. Today was no different until the driver spotted a corpse lying on the trackside. Fortunately, he did not panic and at the same time did not investigate it as well. All he did was to inform the station master of the body that lay face down beside the track. The station master alerted the developments to the Railway Police Force and a team of five constables with a head constable on duty was sent to the scene. I was one among them.

I don't know the exact geographic coordinates of the place where this body was found. However, from what the station master told me, the man could have been travelling only in Tamil Nadu Express, because that's the last train to use the track beside which the body was found. Also, since the track was the left most of the three tracks available on the stretch, it was gathered the man was either pushed or had deliberately jumped using the left side door of the coach. It does not seem possible that the man would have accidentally fell out of the train, maybe while leaning out of the coach, because his body was found with face hit on the ground. Also as glass pieces were found beneath the body, pierced into him, which could have actually caused the death, according to the medical doctor who has conducted the post mortem on him.

However, it could be purely accidental that he had landed on the glass pieces when he ejected out of the train for there were glass pieces beside all four sides of his body. The doctor puts the time of death at sometime just before mid-night, which could be again used to confirm the fact that the man indeed travelled by Tamil Nadu Express, the train which had crossed that location around the same time yesterday. Also another reason that lends credibility to the fact that the man indeed travelled by the train is the fact that one person is missing in the first class AC coach. However, another man – the only other person - is here in Vijayawada in our custody along with the TTE. This information was given by the Train Ticket Examiner who was on duty for that coach, and has alighted here in Vijayawada.

If you want sir, I can request him to speak to you. The RPF has nonetheless, requested him to

present himself as regards this case, whenever summoned. He has accepted to put forth full cooperation with all the authorities. By the way, I have gathered the names of the only two passengers who had been in the penultimate coach of the train, the first class AC coach. Their names were....

“But what about the pen drive, Ravi” questioned Dubey.

Ravi looked startled at being suddenly interrupted.

“How did you get it?” Dubey completed his question.

Ravi complied to answer with his senior’s latest question. He continued his monologue, being specific to the question put forth.

“As we had reached near the body, we tried to overturn it to identify the man’s face. It could have been possible that he was any bystander, although the possibility looked remote. Then, we started searching his clothes, to find any clue that could tell us who he was. He was wearing Peter England shirt and trousers. The striped yellow shirt looked perfect with the creaseless, well ironed black trousers. What we met with although was an unsuccessful search. As I just looked up a bit ahead from where his head lay, I had observed a small object. It turned out to be this pen drive sir”, he concluded pointing to the pen drive that had now been connected to the laptop. He knew he had not described the depressions the body contained and the dried blood that had oozed out due to the glasses that had pierced him. It was indeed a gory sight to see. He felt relieved he did not have to describe that to him.

Dubey, listening keenly, now spoke, “It now means that the pen drive would likely have been in the shirt pocket of the deceased and due to the impact and force of his fall to the ground, it is very much possible that the pen drive would have ejected out of his pocket to fall some distance away”.

He nodded to himself in approval.

“Do the two witnesses know about the body and pen drive you had found?”

“They know we found the body, sir. But I did not mention the pen drive, thinking the police should

check it first”.

He nodded to himself in approval, again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A few metres away in the Vijayawada railway station sat two men facing each other. Both were flabbergasted at the turn of events. While one felt it was just fate that made him visit the coach, the other was thinking how mad his co-passenger had been. But this was not the first time he had acted so.

They knew very well they cannot talk with each other with the RPF personnel surrounding them in the room. Technically, they both were in custody because they had witnessed a suicide.

All they could do was to sit in silence, only thinking what to do next. But neither of them was interested in the future. No wonder that both were thinking about the same thing — the conversation they had had in the train.

“What did he end up doing?” Puneet Mishra asked to the now remaining only passenger of the coach. He could see the terrified, horror filled eyes of the passenger.

“He is ... well, I mean, was a mad man”, K2 stammered. Saying, he slumped into the arms of Puneet Mishra.

The TTE, petrified himself, had somehow supported K2 through the cabin door and helped him sit on the berth. He had allowed him to rest a few minutes and had given him water. Once K2 came close to his normal self, the TTE continued speaking, “Are you sure you were unaware of his move, sir?”

K2 merely shook his head. He had then told Puneet everything they both had discussed sitting alone in the coach. There was no point hiding it now. Once he completed his monologue, the

TTE's face looked grave.

“The pen drive holds the key, then, isn't it?” Puneet commented, more to himself than to K2.

“And are you sure, you don't know the contents of the pen drive sir?” he asked to K2 “because you were the one who had the pen drive in the first place.”

“Yes.” K2 spoke solidly “I had the pen drive. I intended to know what he had spoken to her. I was not there when he spoke with her. When I was indeed there, she was dead. That's why I took out the pen drive to insert it in my laptop and play the file. But the moment he saw his face, he had pulled it out. It may be the only thing that could explain her sudden, unplanned death”.

“Now do as I say. Let's get down at Vijayawada and wait for the body to be found. If you continue your journey beyond Vijayawada, you will be branded a fugitive” Puneet said, with finality.

K2 could see the world spin around him.

K1 was the supposed fugitive. Now he had gifted that position to him.

Worse still, now it may well be impossible to trace the pen drive.

And coming out of the reverie, they again found themselves sitting in front of each other.

A few rooms away, Dubey was saying:

“Press the play button. We will see the rest of it.”

Ravi complied.

But both were afraid to see the remaining part of the video, for they had inkling, it may not just contain a confession of a murderer, but something more than that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I had divided my execution part of the plan into three different parts. Firstly, I have to hypnotize him. I knew it was easier said than done. Using the original eye fixation method was the best option I had given these circumstances. I requested Karthik to look into my eyes, although I was wary he might just ask for the reason. I prayed in my mind that such a situation does not arise. Should I tell him, I am going to hypnotize you to murder you?

Fortunately, he did not question me. Instead I felt he was ready to get hypnotized! He looked more interested in my eyes, the reddish hue of my cornea capturing his attention. He looked and looked at me, mumbling in his half asleep state why my eyes were red. Slowly but surely it happened. He got convinced to focus on my eyes, he was losing his senses, he knew. But my eyes were far too much hypnotic for him.

Secondly, I have to verify thoroughly that he was indeed hypnotized. This was tricky, but this was the best plan I could think of: Once certain he was under my mind control, I asked him to perform some simple, harmless tasks, like exercising, sitting, standing, jumping back and forth and walking backwards. If one sees the task I gave him to perform were increasingly difficult and at least at one point of time, he would have refused to do them, if he were in his own control. To again recheck my conviction that he was indeed in his hypnotic sleep, I asked him to keep his eyes open for full ninety seconds. Under normal circumstances when he was feeling extremely sleepy, he would have certainly refused but now, he had complied with my instructions.

The third part of the plan was the trickiest of them all. I have to instruct him to kill himself, without me touching him for no reason whatsoever. A rope for hanging washed clothes was tied in the balcony. Being a star hotel, I knew this provision would be there and I had physically verified the room with Karthik while booking it. He thought the reason for spending the night in this room was that since both of us had never been to a star hotel, we wanted to get a feel of it, being in a star

hotel. But I had other ideas.

I, with a shaky voice, requested my subject to get the rope after untying it from the balcony. Then, with a heavy heart and turning my back to him, I asked him to do it — to tie the rope around his neck. I would not have been surprised to receive a backlash anytime but he was truly in a deep hypnotic sleep. As I instructed him to tie the rope around his neck harder and with full strength, I felt a sensation like never before.

Then he slumped and fell on the bed on his back. Game over.

He had strangled himself, right here on the second floor of the Savera hotel.

Inspector Dubey, wide eyed, instantly sputtered out, “How in the world is that possible?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Things would start taking turn for the worse. The sooner I leave from here, the better. In the middle of the night, in death silence, after committing a gruesome act, I had to plan my escape. Initially, I thought of going through the main door of the hotel. It was so easy. But now only had I seen the repercussions of that idea. Jumping from the balcony of the second floor room would be suicidal. Taking the stairs at this hour to the exit would certainly raise eyebrows of the receptionist and other hotel employees. The problem was I was alone as well; Karthik was no more with me.

Every problem always contained a solution, I knew. The point is staying back here was a foolish thing. My mind was getting delirious. Firstly, I had affected a murder as suicide and now, I had no ways to escape. It is impossible. Every problem has a solution and I realized the solution to this problem lied in that room, with Karthik.

After untying the rope from Karthik's neck, wearing the tricolour gloves on my hand that I had purchased from the stadium, I ensured to tie it securely on the rim of the balcony. The rope was long enough to reach three-fourths of the total distance between the rim of the balcony and the ground. I slid down the rope and reached the tip of the rope. From there, I had jumped down. Barely had I been harmed. Little did I realize then the ramifications of the rope still tied to the second floor balcony.

I climbed up and jumped out of the compound wall, which was less tall but fancier. The back side of the hotel was totally unguarded perhaps because nobody could enter into any of the rooms from this side. I had precisely used this way to escape. Advantages of choosing a star hotel...

However, on landing on the footpath, sandwiched between the main road and the compound wall, I realized it. There must be closed circuit television cameras on the backside of the hotel and I would have been seen as escaping. Time was the essence. The sooner I escaped, the better.

As I raced on foot to the bus terminus, I looked back once to see if anyone had followed me. The relief when I saw no one behind me was immense. Now, the job was to catch the earliest bus that left for the Chattrapati Shivaji Railway Terminus.

The buses for night service were scarce and most of the time empty. That day was no different. The conductor looked questioningly at me as I panted and puffed onto the bus. I was not to panic, I reminded myself. The odd look the conductor gave me was most uninspiring. I was flabbergasted. I could feel my blood stop flowing. The colour on my face drained. I fought with myself to look normal, as though nothing had happened.

The bus conductor, a short bearded man with betel-leaves stained tongue, asked the reason for this state of mine.

I simply stared at him. Seconds passed. My mind raced to find a suitable answer. He, not in the mood to wait for an answer, murmured to himself in Hindi, aloud enough for me to hear. Dumb people, every day I come across someone or other. I was relieved.

Asking me where I wanted to go, he waited to understand the sign language I used. I thought hard and did the action of a train in motion- both palms millimetres apart and circling in the clockwise direction.

“Railway Station?” he demanded.

Fortunately, the conductor had understood and gave me the ticket. The bus set in motion.

Fortune favours the brave. And this was a brave and a daring escape I had plotted. No sooner had I finished thinking, I had my heart in my mouth.

I could hear police van siren bellowing behind the bus.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Sitting inside the bus, acting dumb, I feared for the worst. What could happen at the most? They may send me to gallows, or shoot me in an encounter. Both cases indicate the worst case scenario - that of death. Everybody has to die one day but fighting till the death is the spirit mankind must possess, I recalled my last English teacher's words. Today, this soon the day had arrived, no, I did not expect this. I cannot accept it. I am still young, I will fight till the end, I resolved. But the more I thought to be brave, the more cowardly I felt. Maybe I was indeed a coward. Otherwise, why would I run away after affecting a suicide? Wasn't it because my conscience knew it was murder?

The bus made slow progress towards the road having the hotel's entrance. Panic set in. It was the hotel where, in the second floor of the building, Karthik lay dead; It was the hotel from where I seek to run away. The police vans were now slowing down and before I took any stupid action, I realized it. Thank God. They stopped at the hotel gates as the bus gained speed. Relief.

No wonder now that for the rest of the journey, I was thinking about Karthik. Once a best friend of mine, then a bitter enemy – that's how I would describe Karthik. His lie to our former classmates had reversed the dynamics completely between us. Then there was the reconciliation, and finally his death. Had his life come around a full circle? He owed me a lot.

He still hadn't felt sorry for alienating me in my schooldays. Perhaps the suffering he would have undergone during his death, wouldn't that suffice as my revenge? No, how I wish to see him suffer mental agony! I was becoming a sadist.

But what should I do now? I questioned myself. The hotel employees had known about the murder and would surely have seen me escape from back side on the CCTV cameras. I have to hurry, I know. But I cannot panic. I have to bide this time. This time shall also pass.

Suddenly, I had this queer feeling of cowardliness overcoming me. I had a feeling of fearing death. Should I take my own life or should I let anybody else have a claim over it? My life is my own. I should be the one who decides what to do with it. But, I took away his life — Karthik's life — where was my conscience then? Shouldn't it have stopped me from committing the cowardly act? Or was it revenge — a revenge for the lies Karthik spread about me nearly a decade ago? Shouldn't I have overcome it by this time, now that I was no longer in contact with any of my classmates from school? My head was confused.

The tap by the conductor on the shoulder brought me back to the present. "Get down! You dumb fellow!" the conductor ridiculed. I was in no mood to protest. I had to escape out of this place. Now, somehow.

As I saw the BEST bus move on, I turned around to have a look at the vicinity. No probing eyes, no followers. That was good news. But how long will it be so? I don't know. But what I indeed know is that I have to board a train – any train that departs earliest. I entered the train standing in the platform number one. It was the train to Chennai. That's good. At least I shall go to a place where I can survive, knowing the language well and also I can look for some college there. I can study engineering. I can grow in life. Time is the best healer. It will heal the scars of today. However, all this is future. It would have been possible if I were not an escapee. I brought the ticket for Chennai using the cash stolen from the dead friend's wallet.

I settled into the seat of the second class sleeper compartment of the train knowing very well that I was in trouble. The effect of murder was beginning to have serious repercussions as the law abiding citizen of the country. I shuddered at the thought of my name being all over the media, the thought of going to prison, facing trial in court, bringing shame to my family. All had one reason and the reason was well known.

I am now not only a murderer but a fugitive.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I realized it was the noon. The sun was nearly overhead now and at its brightest. The packed compartment notwithstanding, I had slept for a long time. I wanted to sleep more and more. I wanted to sleep till I forgot the events of the previous night. But that was not to be. I sat in silence knowing full well that I should not be surprised to see either my face or Karthik's face in either electronic media or print media or both. What stupid task I had done! I could have at least surrendered to the police after the heinous crime I committed. These thoughts and the guiltiness kept me troubled for the rest of my journey.

Finally the train had arrived at the Chennai Central Railway Station. I had to make my moves prudently. With little cash left, I had no option but to spend my first day in Chennai as a fugitive on the roads.

If I take out money from my father's debit card, then I may be in trouble. I was on a lookout for my own face or for my victim's face in front page of newspapers, at the railway station, where ever I could find them. The sweltering heat of Chennai during April would take its toll on me if I moved out in the open. Will I be able to sustain for long? I knew not. I was riding my luck.

I took a electric train finally from the Park station opposite the Chennai Central and reached Theagaraya Nagar, shortly called T-Nagar. With the aim of surrendering to anybody who identifies me, I moved along the bus terminus into the crowded market to find some food and a newspaper. I had scanned it thoroughly to find no news about me and Karthik. It means till now, the news has not reached the masses through print media. I have to see news for any mention of my act, the previous night.

Standing by the roadside and peeping into the tea shop where the shopkeeper was watching news, I remained hidden from his line of sight. I did not wish him to know that I was watching the television in his shop for the crime of mine, lest he identifies me the moment my face is put on air.

Half an hour passed. No news about me. That was good news. It gave me confidence. Now I will make a call to Delhi to inform my parents I am in Chennai to enroll myself in a college. I called their telephone number. Three rings...seven rings...eleven rings...no answer.

I mused, sitting on the roadside, the reason for them not picking up my call. Could they be sleeping? Or are they somewhere out. I will know that later. But first of all, I needed money and I could allow myself to use my father's debit card now that I am not the cynosure for anyone. I had to hurry up for I knew it was a matter of time before the beans are spilt.

I rented for myself a cheaply priced room at a lodge nearby to spend the night. I could not sleep knowing full well that I was to be in jail the next day. The newspapers would surely put this in their issue, might not be on the front page but still people do read through the full paper. I had no escape.

The whole night I stared at the ceiling thinking the turn of events that had happened. I used to be a law abiding citizen - no more. I used to sleep at night – no more. And finally, my parents were not picking up the phone. What's the matter? Had they lost the phone and waited for my arrival? But they would not find me in Delhi. That's what I wanted to precisely tell them. I will again call them the next day, that's the only option left. But what will I tell them? Should I plainly speak like, dad, I committed a murder and showed it off as suicide, or should I cryptically inform him the fact that I was no more a law abiding citizen?

My thoughts again drifted back to my problem, I had put myself in. I resolved to myself, the moment anybody caught me and knew I was a murderer, I would give up the fight to hide, the fight to survive.

I would commit suicide.

Inspector Dubey looked at Ravi and nodded. The video was paused. They both were thinking the same thing. Five years before today, a person called Kaushik wanted to commit suicide. Five years ago he had the mindset to murder anybody whom he thought was a danger to him. And today there is a body in the mortuary that could have been a case of suicide or that of a murder. The pen drive would single handed be enough to become the indisputable video evidence.

Ravi replayed from the last line Kaushik spoke, to continue the narrative,

I would commit suicide...

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Two days had passed. I was distraught. The newspapers could not have carried any news more devastating than this. I had not eaten anything for the past many hours. I had no appetite. I had moved out of the lodge to save every penny possible. Resources had become limited. I had no relatives, no friends here or anywhere else. I slept, or rather tried to sleep on the pavements, wandering aimlessly till I always found myself back at the same place, at T-Nagar. I had got the punishment for my wrong doing. Shaking my head and deeply embroiled in the mental agony I was undergoing, I did not notice a man walking right into me, until he bumped on to me. All the pamphlets that he was carrying fell on me.

“I am sorry”, I said, speaking in Tamil fluently. Then there came the glimmer of hope in my life... the chance to survive, to make a living, now that getting admission in college was ruled out. I had to make the most of the opportunity that came by.

I quickly saw what was written on the pamphlet, looked up at heavens and moved on. Now, I had a place to go – a chance to survive, I must make the most of it, I reminded myself. I went to the lodge, rented a room again, bathed and had some food and waited for the next day.

I boarded the bus to Vadapalani, to Laxmi Shruthi Musicals. It was a shop which sold musical instruments, many of which are manufactured by them. This was my last shot at survival. If I fail, I am dead else I will live to fight another day. I rehearsed my mridangam lessons well in the available time during the bus journey. I looked confident. My mind was optimistic.

It was my turn at the interview. I had learnt mridangam as a hobby, played at the Commonwealth Games in Delhi but never thought it would become my mode of survival, that is, if I got selected. I was brimming with confidence.

My curriculum vitae spoke for itself, it seems. And why not? The participation in the Commonwealth Games is indeed the biggest achievement of my life. The judges just asked one question: would you like to be involved in manufacturing of mridangam or playing it? The scope for manufacturing was more in a place like this. However, I was more confident in playing, for I had done that for a decade. I gave a neutral answer, that of being a mridangam expert, who would check for defects in the sound the mridangam emanates and correct it if found necessary. This way, I was not really involved in only manufacturing but also playing it.

A few hours later, I was jubilated to be selected as one of their employees. Bigger than anything, I had found a mode of survival.

I looked up at the evening sky, to see my only relatives – my parents and my sister smile at me from heaven.

A day earlier, I had become an orphan who wanted to join his relatives in heaven. Now, this orphan lives on to fight another day. Slowly but surely, as days passed, I was getting confident that my murder had gone unnoticed. There was no news about it. No prying eyes behind me. But how had it been possible? The question remained.

Four years had passed. I was well settled into the job I held. I could make my ends meet. But I was no graduate. My education had stopped right after school, abruptly. India's World Cup victory was a distant memory but the events that followed that victory was still fresh. I was surprised that not one person in the last four years had found me, assuming that I had somehow missed the news about Karthik's death. It was possible that no photos were shared by the police. It was possible that the case was closed, partially because there was no one to follow it up. Even he had lost his parents, and he had no blood relatives either. How much we shared in common! Yet I had a feeling to see Karthik alive. I will meet him someday in heaven, I assured myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

“Kaushik” a voice called out and a hand touched my shoulder. This was when I realized there was indeed somebody beside me. I looked up. A boy wearing spectacles and neatly combed hair was standing beside me. He continued, “I did not know you were here. By the way, where do you stay? I am sure you have nobody here and your resources seem to have surely dried up. But then how did you survive for so long?”

I was aghast. How had he known my name? Did this man expect me to be dead?

I protested at him. I questioned him, “Who are you and how do you know my name? I have never seen you before.”

The other spoke, “That’s what time does. Not for nothing does people call time the best healer. Let’s go to the hotel nearby. We will have lunch. I will tell you everything later”. We went to eat. After all, this person looks familiar, does he not?

After a hearty meal I had, I again questioned as to which philanthropist he was to look out for me, find me and give me food. I thought he had just done that.

He spoke plainly, “I am somebody, Kaushik. It is enough for you to know that I am a messenger of God. It was He who sent me here to take care of you. You must remember that when you make a mistake, you are not supposed to leave a trail for it. Else you will be caught...”

My face went pale. “It means”, I broke in between his talk, “you are a policeman in plain clothes and you know what I have done. After four years, the law has finally caught up with me.”

The man, now irritated, continued, “Why do you break in between the lines? What you said is both right and wrong. Give me a patient hearing else you will be in trouble.”

The thought of again being out of job, caught by the police to be put into the prison made me silent. What does he mean by saying; I was both right and wrong?

He, however, continued “So where was I? Ha! Yes, you are not supposed to leave a trail especially if you commit a grave crime like a murder. You had made a mistake of giving your own real name in the train ticket and God followed up you till here and sent me here.”

He ignored my shocked and surprised face and kept on speaking, “I am not a policeman. I am merely a law abiding citizen of the country.”

I was also a law abiding citizen, till some four years ago.

“You can call me Bhagwandas, because God sent me to take care of you. I am merely a servant of the Immortal.”

He paused, before restarting his monologue, “Now listen to me, we will board a bus and I will give you shelter, food and clothes – your clothes. Let’s go. On our way to the destination, you shall tell the reason for your sad looking face. Was it just the lack of food or is there something else?”

I walked in silence towards the Mylapore bus stand and we took our seats in a near empty bus. Then came my turn, the chance to pour out the grief I had been stricken with for the past four years. Grief shared is grief halved. But to whom shall I tell my grief? The question was finally answered. I will tell it to Bhagwandas, which I suspect but dare not question, to be his pseudonym.

I had food and shelter but I wanted to see the clothes. He had said he will show me my clothes – the ones which I had left in Mumbai.

I spoke everything of the last four years. I started from the very beginning.

“I have now become an orphan.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The two men sitting in the Vijayawada railway station could not fathom what was being played in the pen drive. There was a confession and they thought that that was the end and then came an escape of the murderer. Here comes some man called Bhagwandas in this tale who knows Kaushik is a murderer but still help him.

“The video is still long enough, sir” Ravi was saying. “If we listen to the full narration, then we can come to know who this Bhagwandas is.”

Dubey nodded and then spoke, “But, the problem is not that. The problem is that it is being recorded. Who is recording the video? Does Kaushik know it is being recorded, and if yes, why is he still confessing in it. Wouldn’t he be in trouble if this video is leaked?”

Ravi offered an explanation, “Sir, the only logical answer I can think of right now is that Kaushik is not aware of the recording of the video else he would not have spoken about the murder.”

“Then”, Dubey continued, “Who is recording this video and why? And what was the pen drive doing in the dead man’s pocket, if at all it was there. It is very much possible that the pen drive be found just where you found the dead man and it was a mere coincidence.”

Ravi swallowed his saliva. The possibility spelt out by Dubey could mean they are dealing with entirely different and unrelated cases. Yes, it was possible that the pen drive and dead man were totally unrelated. Should they go forward questioning the two men sitting a few rooms away, leaving the rest of the video unseen?

But for an intuition of some other worse event they were going to listen or see, Dubey would have left the rest of the video unseen. He prodded Ravi to click ‘resume’.

A few rooms away, seeing the TTE fall asleep, K2 knew, it was the best option he had till they were waiting for questioning. However, the last moments before his long time friend’s death left him perturbed. Should I have apologized to him? Should I have told him my identity? Thus he pondered.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

“Why do you think God sent you to me?” I asked childishly.

“Precisely, to help you overcome this situation you find yourself in. I don’t want to bother you more on your losses but let’s concentrate on the future. We have to get down the next stop.”

Saying, both of us, stood to walk to the door. Should I jump out of the bus and commit suicide? Bhagwandas read my mind and held me tight. Then we alighted.

We were standing in front of rows of building in K.K.Nagar. “Here is where you will stay with us. I hope you share a good rapport with Chennai at least from now on.”

“With us, you said, Bhag...er...sir. What is that?” I blurted.

“You heard it right. You are going to meet another person as well, my girlfriend.”

I gulped.

“By the way, you can call me Bhagwandas”. He winked as he strode away into the apartment gate. I trailed him hurriedly.

As we reached the top floor of the multi storeyed apartment, it seemed she had been waiting for my arrival. He led me into the house, which was well decorated and well maintained.

She served me coffee and the conversation amongst us began. Bhagwandas spoke first and all that I gathered was,

He was a B.E. Computer science graduate working in Infosys with a handsome pay package. He had done his schooling in Delhi and studied in Anna University Chennai. He was, like me, an orphan and was also one of the spectators at the Wankhede Stadium where India lifted the world cup four years ago.

Next was her chance. She called herself Aarti, did her schooling in Lucknow and was a classmate of Bhagwandas. Her parents, who were Tamilians settled in Lucknow, would come to visit them once in six months. She was the only child to her parents. She was working in Wipro with again a handsome package.

Well settled, both of them. And they were graduates. I was not.

Perhaps, marriage was on cards, I thought.

I told them about myself in short and finally asked him the things for which I came here.

“Where are my clothes — that I had left in Mumbai — and you said that you would be showing me?” He laughed off and asked me to accept them as friends first and slowly as time passed he promised to reveal everything to me.

Although, I was sceptical at first, I was in a way happy to have friends outside of my workplace. I accepted their invite to become friends. Time passed. I gained his confidence. He gained mine. But my clothes — he never gave me. Whenever I asked for it, he said it is too dangerous to show it to me. Perhaps he knew it would bring back in me the memories of Karthik. So congratulations pretty woman, you got my life history out of me. But alas! Everything comes with a price, dear lady. And the price you pay for it is not with your blood, but with your life.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

“No!!!” a female voice was heard in the video. The camera shook violently and in a glimpse Inspector Dubey caught sight of the woman. The video was again paused.

“So it was her to whom he was narrating his story, at least we could see her face now!” Dubey commented.

“But sir, do you know who she is?” Ravi asked.

“No. Not at all. But now we have another person whom we can approach to check the authenticity of the video.” Dubey said. “It is not only the two men who are sitting in custody. Anyways, play the rest of the video, Ravi.”

I fear not, sir, for you are mistaken. Ravi thought as he clicked the video to resume the recording.

Kaushik got up and went out of frame. Then she came well into the frame. Her eyes were filled with terror. She was pleading to him, shaking her head. Tears rolled from her eyes.

You look beautiful even when you cry, Nisha. Now, Kaushik's back was visible. He rubbed his palms and repeated, "You have signed your death warrants." She quickly through a flower vase from near the table at him and picked up her mobile phone. The vase hit Kaushik and he stumbled backwards, momentarily losing his balance. In the meantime, Nisha was doing something in her mobile phone desperately, as one could hear the keypad tones.

Kaushik lunged forward and pulled the mobile out of her hand. He bellowed, "You sent a blank message to an unknown number?" She prayed. He knew he was in trouble. It was to be done quick and efficiently. There was a job in his hands. He could not let her escape. He had confessed to her about being a murderer and she had to die, for secrecy is maintained between two persons, only when one is dead.

Then it happened.

He clutched her throat and banged her head against the wall. She struggled under his grip. Her hands tried to release his clutch but he was too powerful for her. Slowly her hands gave up. She had given up. For one full minute, he had held her throat tightly. At the end of it, there was no struggle, no movement.

The video went blank as something fell on the floor.

Footsteps were heard fading away.

"What happened?" Dubey asked. The video is being played sir. Everything seems so still. They

waited in shock and horror for the video to end. “It ends in just over five minutes from now.” Ravi explained.

Five full minutes later, somebody picked up something. The face was visible for a moment. It was immediately recognized by Ravi Rathore.

“What!” He gasped.

“Believe it or not sir, I have seen this man.” He told Dubey.

No wonder, Ravi Ratnam had recognized K2.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Scratching his head, Inspector Dubey was deep in thought. Finally, the video was over. His intuitions had come true. The video was not only a confession by Kaushik of Karthik’s murder but also contained the live murder of some girl, whom Kaushik had called Nisha.

This was serious, very serious indeed. The pen drive had certainly fallen from the dead man’s pocket and he was no doubt travelling with the other passenger. But who is this other passenger and how are they both related? The answers lay a few rooms away.

The Inspector put on his police cap and stood up. The constable too stood up. It was time, they realized, the jigsaw be solved. According to Ravi Ratnam, this man in the video is under their custody now.

“I must see the passenger and the TTE now.” Dubey said as he led Ravi out of the room.

Ravi was relieved. At last his observational skills are helping the police solve another case. If not for the pen drive....Ravi stopped thinking. Ifs and buts are not to be considered. They help in forging excuses, not solving cases.

A few rooms away, disturbed out of deep slumber, both men were suddenly trying to come to the present. They were still in the station but now they were joined by two policemen. They got up in respect and saluted them.

“We are ready to question you both”, the Inspector said. “But I am afraid you need to come to the police station”, he completed his sentence, pointing to the passenger. He continued, “We will question you both separately. First the TTE will be questioned.”

The TTE was escorted by the constable and two other RPF men to the room in which the Dubey and Ravi had watched the video. Once settled, the questioning started.

“What’s your name?” Dubey asked.

“Puneet Mishra, sir.”

“Have you seen this pen drive ever before?” Dubey showed him the pen drive.

Wide eyed, the TTE replied, “No sir. I have not seen this pen drive but have heard about this pen drive.”

“What do you mean?” Dubey exerted Puneet.

“Sir, the other passenger, that is, the other man who was sitting with me a few rooms away, was describing something about the pen drive being the only source of evidence for his escape. He was telling that he would become a fugitive without the pen drive. This must be the pen drive he would

have been talking about, I suppose. However, I had not seen this pen drive before now.”

Dubey noted the answers of Puneet with great caution. Also recording of the testament was being done by Ravi.

Dubey continued, “Do you know about any death in the first class AC coach?”

“Sir, There were only two men who were travelling by the only first class AC coach of the Tamil Nadu Express train that left Chennai yesterday night. I had verified their tickets. However, more than an hour later, I returned to the coach to just check if no other passenger had accidentally got there. I know sir, there was no need for me to be there, but fate brought me there. At that time, both the men were standing near the vestibule with one leaning precariously out of the opened door. Just as the other passenger was about to say something, the man leaning across the door, well, sir he just ...” he shuddered and said “jumped.”

Dubey was alert now. He asked Puneet to repeat what he had said. Dubey no doubt wanted to be doubly sure what he had heard.

Puneet repeated dutifully.

After he completed his narration, Dubey asked him to follow to the railway hospital mortuary. Puneet was expecting this. He showed no emotion. He just prayed he recognized the body.

Dubey asked, “Do you recognize him?” pointing to the body with holes on chest and the face nearly unrecognizable.

But still with the dress he was wearing and his shoes, Puneet had recognized him instantly. He blurted out, “Yes sir, this is the man who had committed suicide by jumping out of the train yesterday night.”

“Suicide? You mean this man committed suicide. Was it not murder?”

“No sir, I don’t have an iota of doubt in saying that he jumped all by himself. The other passenger had no role to play in his death.”

“If I say his death is an accident. He accidentally fell from the train. What proof you have to disprove my statement?”

Puneet took out his cell phone. He showed the ten second video that he had recorded. Sir, this is what happened in the last ten seconds, saying, he played the video.

Dubey was convinced from what he saw. The man had leaned precariously out of the door and had deliberately jumped. The other man standing behind him had no role to play whatsoever. It showed the other man trying to see the place where the man had jumped but does look unsuccessful in his attempt. This is an important video evidence. The court will accept it.

Dubey now asked his next question.

“And what is his name?”

“Sir, the other passenger claims he had the pen drive which is the only evidence which will prove against him being a fugitive.”

As an afterthought he added,

“Sir, his name is...”Puneet told,

“Kaushik Swaminathan”.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

“You may leave the room and wait in where you were all this time.” Dubey ordered Puneet.

He asked Ravi to get the next man in. He had now known it would not be possible to interrogate him at the police station. They could not gather any evidence of murder against this passenger even from Puneet.

This is going to be long interaction, Dubey knew. His duty as a policeman had yet again robbed him of his night sleep. This is going to be my last case. I had come here to solve the mystery behind one death but in the process had two of them, with both unsolved. This man is the key to the case. He must be investigated thoroughly.

Ravi brought in the next witness to K.Swaminathan’s death to the same room where they had watched the video. The inspector was taken aback seeing his face; it was the same that was shown in the ending moments of the video in the pen drive.

He started on the offensive with this man, because there was a good chance of him being guilty of at least one of the two deaths, although in no case he seems to be directly involved. There was video evidence that K.Swaminathan had jumped to his death and there was also the video evidence that Kaushik had strangled Nisha. It was imperative to listen to his story carefully to get an answer to many of the unanswered questions.

“You are accused of Kaushik’s murder. Do you accept it or not?”

The passenger calmly replied “That’s impossibility. The TTE had taken a video on his mobile phone of Kaushik jumping out of the train. If you had seen the video, you would know, I had no hand in his death. That evidence is sufficient to acquit me of Kaushik’s death. But yes, I can tell you about Kaushik – the type of person he was and why he could have committed suicide or why he had killed Nisha.”

The Inspector for once was dumbfounded. This man was clear in his talk and is so convincing. It would be fruitless to protest against him. It would be intelligent enough to listen to what he wants to say, and then hope his mouth does his own undoing.

“Before you go on to tell any further, we will visit the mortuary. You have to identify a body.”
Dubey said.

All three of them went to the mortuary where the passenger broke down on seeing the body.

“Yes, it is of Kaushik’s”. He broke down.

After consoling him of his friend’s death, they returned back to the room. All three of them settled down to listen to the narrative of the passenger who went by the name of Bhagwandas.

CHAPTER THIRTY

From one year earlier till today

It was the middle of December. In the Tamil month of margazhi, which had just begun, there were a lot of carnatic music concerts scheduled at various places of the city. I had planned to attend a couple of them, those which were held on Sundays. Both Aarti and I had a free day. By the way, Aarti was my friend from my college days and we were staying together in the same rented house at K. K. Nagar.

This particular Sunday I had visited a concert by Sudha Ramamoorthy, an upcoming singer who was accompanied by various side artistes. While listening to the concert, I was impressed by the mridangist. He played so beautifully. On a conversation I had initiated with the man on the left side to me, I, by chance, came to know that this mridangist is an orphan and that he works in Laxmi Shruthi Musicals at Vadapalani. I wanted to meet him alone after the concert and hence sent Aarti home.

At the end of the concert, I joined him. Touching his shoulder, I called out his name. He was no wonder surprised. I wanted him to accompany me home and in the process tell me all that he had undergone in the last four years of being in Chennai and before he had been to Chennai. He had mentioned of being in Mumbai, and how in hurry forgot to pack all his clothes, before coming to

Chennai. I used this as reasons to convince him come to my home. I, in fact, did not have his luggage. He stayed over for the night and left the next day morning.

I attended two more concerts that he had played in and ensured he became a very good friend of mine. You see, he was an orphan and I too was an orphan. Our eyes met on many things. Slowly and gradually, we became close friends. His line of profession was mridangam. Mine was in the field of Information Technology.

I realized he was a loner. I too had been at his place a long time ago. It feels horrendous to be a loner. Man is a social animal. He needed a friend. I ensured to give him one.

It was some ten months ago from today, when I made him meet Nisha. I understood that he was of unstable mind because of prolonged loneliness he had faced in his life. All four of us frequently dined out and I ensured he got good company. He had to be happy. That was the only way he could be cured of his mental illness.

Slowly but surely, as the wheel of time rotated, I became one of his best friends and he confided in whatever I did. He was so dependent on me that he would ask my permission to even meet Nisha. He blindly believed me. I had noticed this now.

Nisha and Kaushik started spending time together alone. But however, he would always keep me updated of his whereabouts and had trusted me as the sole friend of his life. He would not hesitate to ask any help from me. I was happy to help him always. I felt it was my duty. Two months ago, I had a small talk with Nisha. She said she had fallen in love with Kaushik. I was startled. But I did not show any emotion in front of her, lest she became suspicious of me hiding something from her.

I, over the last week, talked to Kaushik on the prospects of having a life partner. He was grateful to me for being like a parent and guiding him through the way of life. He had called me a godsend friend. I simply smiled at him.

At last, after one year, I had fixed a private meeting for Kaushik with Nisha at the nearby hotel room. I had wanted him to tell her his life history and vice versa so that both would know well about each other before we could all sit together to decide the marriage date for both Kaushik and Nisha as well as myself and Aarti.

I had asked Nisha to wear an expensive wrist watch specifically for the occasion. It contained a spy

camera and would record all conversation that the two had. I wanted to ensure that both told the same story to each other that they had independently told me. But both had no idea that their conversation was being recorded by the wrist watch that contained a camera. Hence I was confident; they would only speak the truth. As for the purpose of verification, I could always copy the contents of the camera to the pen drive and see it for myself.

I had asked Nisha to send a blank SMS message to my number in case she was in any trouble. I had told her to delete the saved name of the contact. It would hardly take me five minutes to reach the hotel and solve any problem, I knew. However in reality, I was expecting no message from her. As for Kaushik, there could be no trouble, especially from Nisha, who had confessed her love for him to me.

After the meeting late yesterday evening, I had planned to go to Delhi to exactly find out the cause of death of Kaushik's parents and sister. For that purpose, I had booked two first class AC tickets by Tamil Nadu Express to Delhi.

It was a bolt from the blue, when I indeed received a blank message from Nisha. I was certainly not expecting it. I hurried to the hotel, past the reception to their room. The door was not latched. I opened it and then saw the lifeless body of Nisha on the bed. Kaushik had gone to the bathroom to take a bath after the murder he had committed. I went over to her body and looked for the watch. It was not there. But as I leaned over her body, I saw it on the floor. Like a fool, I picked it up and showed my face to it, before stopping the recording.

I cursed myself for the action and went out quickly. I prayed Kaushik would not know about the watch. Listening through the door, standing on the deserted corridor of the hotel, I listened to Kaushik's footsteps coming out of the bathroom. At that moment, I knocked the door and waited for Kaushik to open the unlocked door.

He opened it after a minute. He spoke quickly and the nervousness was unmistakable in his voice. "You came at the right time, Bhagwanji. It's getting late for our departure to the railway station. Come, let's go."

I asked to him about what to do with Nisha. For that he replied, or rather lied, "She's asleep Bhagwanji. She got bored listening to my story and told me she would rather sleep than to listen till the end. Also she asked me to leave the room and that she would follow later. I have to obey her."

He virtually pushed me out of the door and held my hand tight as he moved unstopped to the car to leave for the railway station. I told him to sit whilst I drove to the station. Fortunately for me, he slept while I was driving and then I stopped the car at a nearby cyber cafe to get the recording downloaded to a crimson red pen drive I was carrying. He would have had no inkling, that I had disposed off the watch and the recording had been in pen drive.

We reached the station and boarded the train. Next we waited for the TTE to check our tickets after the train departed. He was perhaps silent for what he had done, while I was silent for what I had seen at the hotel room.

Well after the TTE left the coach, I confronted him his crime. He feigned innocence. I showed him the pen drive recording in my laptop. Barely had the video run for five seconds, he pulled out the pen drive and went and stood near the door, well, to jump out of the train running at full throttle. I found the TTE standing behind me when I turned after seeing Kaushik jump. He is the sole other witness to the suicide.

At his behest, I am sitting in Vijayawada, because Kaushik Swaminathan had committed suicide.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Inspector Dubey was caressing his beard. This was what had got Nisha to be murdered. I suspected it long back. Five years before itself, he had shown a tendency to kill, to take his own life. And now, he had done both.

“Do you know where the pen drive is, Bhagwandas?” Dubey broke the small silence.

“Sir, it is not with me. It was with Kaushik when he jumped out of the train. But sir, it will have the evidence as to why Nisha was murdered. Sir, please believe me, there is indeed a crimson red pen drive that contains the much needed answers for her death. We must search for it. Send your teams to the place where his body was found. It must be somewhere in the vicinity there. It must not get into wrong hands sir.” pleaded Bhagwandas.

“What if I say that I have the pen drive?” Dubey questioned with his eyebrows raised.

Bhagwandas was shocked. He uttered, "Show me, sir, and please show me. It contains the video which will prove to you I am not an accomplice to Nisha's murder. It was committed only by Kaushik and that too without my provocation. I swear on that account."

Dubey spoke calmly. "The contents of the pen drive have been viewed, Bhagwandas. Your story seems to match with that of what Kaushik had said. I am going to verify your claim of reaching the hotel in which Nisha was murdered and if found true, you will face no charges, either for Karthik's murder or for Nisha's murder."

He paused to take a sip of water. Then he continued; "Now you may go and join Puneet Mishra. I will be addressing you both shortly."

With that Bhagwandas was escorted away from the room.

Once again Constable Ravi Ratnam and Inspector Dubey were alone in the room. There was a moment of silence. Both were seeing the crimson red pen drive Dubey had taken out of his pocket.

Then he spoke, "What do you think, Ravi, is Bhagwandas speaking the truth?"

"Sir, that is for you to decide. You are a senior officer; I cannot speak with you my opinions, if it may in any way convince your doubt to be true or false. If I need to say any specific facts in this case, I shall certainly speak up."

"That's a good answer, constable, but the point that is disturbing me is that there was no mention about Karthik in whatever Bhagwandas said. Even when I said Karthik's name, his face was as stoic as ever. I cannot confirm whether he knows about Karthik or not, whether Kaushik had ever mentioned it to him about Karthik, but he claims to know Kaushik had an unstable mind. What he says is true; Kaushik indeed had an unstable mind, for otherwise he would not have hypnotized Karthik to commit self strangulation, murdered Nisha and then killed himself. Again, we don't even know whether Karthik is dead or not. I cannot believe a man died of self-strangulation."

Ravi nodded and spoke out, filling the momentary pause, “We need to then check out two things before we again meet the two men. Sir, shall I arrange a phone call to Mumbai’s Savera hotel?”

Dubey gave a negative reply. He instead asked Ravi to call the Mumbai branch police and verify from them whether there had been any case of death, escape or kidnapping in or around the hotel.

Ravi followed Dubey’s instructions. They were asked to wait for a return call within five minutes. By that time, Ravi, on instructions from Dubey, called the Hotel Amhey in Chennai to verify Bhagwandas’ claim. Ravi gave the phone to Dubey and he had got the answer Bhagwandas had told.

One problem had been solved. Bhagwandas had spoken the truth. Both Nisha and Kaushik had been in Hotel Amhey the previous evening.

Minutes later, Dubey received a phone call from Mumbai.

His face turned grave.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Ravi was shaking his head feeling lost.

Dubey was saying, “A First Information Report needs to be filed. Karthik is not dead but had been made unconscious by Kaushik. Then Kaushik had escaped from the balcony of their room using the same rope with which Karthik had tried to strangulate himself. This had saved Karthik because the rope around his neck was for a duration that was not enough to strangulate him but however enough to make him faint. The Mumbai police had not filed a case of culpable homicide on the insistence of Karthik and the last time they saw him was when he boarded the train to Chennai.”

Ravi spoke, shell shocked, “It means on one hand as Kaushik always used his real name, it had been easy to track him, but now he’s dead. We need to find Karthik, who in the last five years could have easily gone anywhere, even disappeared from the face of the Earth.”

He continued, “We need to start the hunt to find Karthik, and file an FIR saying Kaushik, now deceased, had kidnapped Karthik. We can even put an attempt to murder on him.”

Dubey spoke irritated, “You can put a thousand cases on Kaushik. But we are not going to ask the court to remand his corpse in custody! The point we need to file an FIR is to keep this as a record. Also this Karthik will be roaming with an alias, if he is alive even today.” That’s what my gut feeling says.

Both the policemen had summoned the two men to their room. The inference had been reached.

Dubey spoke, “We shall file an FIR for the purpose of record and call this case as closed.

However, we need to continue to hunt for Karthik, who could be anywhere now, for calling this case as solved and not closed. I am sure; someday Karthik will resurface somewhere to help us solve this case.”

He observed the two men. No emotions shown. Their mind would be as hard as a rock.

As of now, due to no evidence or the lack of it, I have no option but to release you.

Bhagwandas and Puneet Mishra walked away free, from the railway station, hand in hand.

The latter asked, “Why don’t you stay at my place till tomorrow?”

Time passed. Four more years down the line, Bhagwandas, although caught in the shackles of his past, moved on with life. The marriage with Aarti in Chennai was blessed by both the Inspector and the constable, apart from his friends.

EPILOGUE

50 years later

Her summer vacations were on. Anu had scribbled everything her grandfather had told her.

Still, all is not over, she realized. She asked her grandfather, “Grandpa, was Karthik ever found in these last fifty years?”

Her grandfather smiled, and replied, “No, dear, he was never found. He has successfully hid himself from this world all these years.”

Anu spoke, “It is even possible that he may have died. He would be your age, no?”

“You are right, Anu. He would indeed be of my age. What is the time?”

She replied, seeing the clock, “Ten minutes to midnight”.

Bhagwandas gave a cry of agony, “The same time when half a century ago, Kaushik jumped to his death. Anu, listen to me carefully, Record my statements now! I hereby give you a dying declaration. I won't see the light of the day tomorrow. Fate has decided to take my soul away in less than ten minutes. You will help the Chennai police solve the fifty year old case. Go and tell them your grandfather was called Bhagwandas and Kaushik had nearly identified him. It was because

your grandfather also had another name, another identity. He is the man who escaped Kaushik's attempted murder and he is the man who spread lies in his schooldays to completely alienate his best friend of yore. Do you identify him, Anu, do you identify me? I am Karthik."

Anu nodded, speechless at the revelation.

She mumbled, "I promise to bring to light the whereabouts of Karthik to solve the fifty year old case. I shall leave for the police station right now."

He nodded and continued, "No! Anu, Now is not the time. Let the clock strike twelve. Let my soul leave the shackles of this impure body. I was waiting for this moment. Let it pass. All these years in the fear of getting arrested for forging my name, I could not reveal myself. Anu, I am no messenger of God. I am a liar. I am the one who had to lie always because I had lied once.

I made Kaushik a loner. And here, I shall wish to die a lonely death. Go out of here, Anu."

As Anu stopped the recording and went out of the open door to call her parents here, she could see her grandfather breathe his last, the soul moving out of his body precisely at one minute to midnight. The clock never struck twelve. Midnight never came.

Anu realized the truth in Kaushik's words.

Tomorrow never comes.