

THE DAME
WHO
DARED TO
DREAM -
PERFIDY

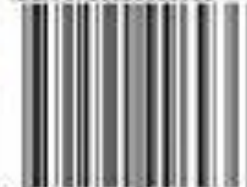
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Nisha is an avid reader, who loves to read Thrillers and Mysteries. The lives of women around her are the main inspiration of her work.

Karthika is a fresher at college. Being a wallflower, she finds it difficult to make friends. Finally, she not only finds a friend, but also falls in love, which is unfortunately, not reciprocated. As years roll-by, Karthika, who is a budding writer, tries her best at online competitions from time to time. When she finally wins one, she is unable to enjoy the fruits of her labour - simply because she is a woman!! To add to her misery, her marriage is arranged with a guy who demands huge amounts of dowry. Being an educated woman, she is unwilling to be sold out this way. What will happen? Will she be able to convince her parents not to pay dowry? Will she be able to make her educated fiance understand that receiving dowry is a criminal offense?

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NISHA SADASIVAN

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, organizations, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or, are used fictitiously, and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, or locales is purely coincidental.

“Sudhandhiram Mattum Illamal Sorgamey Irundhum Yenna Payan?”

-Poet Vairamuthu

(What is the use in having heaven itself, if the only thing not available there is “freedom”?)

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction | 8 |
| Chapter 1: Welcome to Planet Earth..... | 9 |
| Chapter 2: This is ME! | 13 |
| Chapter 3: How I met my friend | 17 |
| Chapter 4: Classes Begin | 20 |
| Chapter 5: Days Roll By | 22 |
| Chapter 6: Dear Old Grandma! | 27 |
| Chapter 7: I Earned an Enemy | 29 |
| Chapter 8: The Wheel Turns | 36 |
| Chapter 9: The Chess Tournament | 38 |
| Chapter 10: My 'girl' friend..... | 40 |
| Chapter 11: This is Heaven on Earth!..... | 44 |
| Chapter 12: Murphy's Law! – Mission TCS | 47 |
| Chapter 13: Apocalypse | 51 |
| Chapter 14: The Big Day..... | 55 |
| Chapter 15: Finally, we mingle..... | 58 |
| Chapter 16: A 'girl' friend and a 'boy' friend | 60 |
| Chapter 17: Pune Plans | 64 |
| Chapter 18: Hell Days..... | 65 |
| Chapter 19: Perfidy | 67 |
| Chapter 20: Despite Dams, the River Flows..... | 71 |
| Chapter 21: Le rêve des rêves..... | 75 |
| Chapter 22: I wish I were a Man | 77 |
| Chapter 23: A Groom comes home | 81 |
| Chapter 24: Where are you going to, my pretty maid?..... | 85 |
| Chapter 25: Mysterious Miseries - Part I | 92 |
| Chapter 26: Mysterious Miseries–Part II | 95 |
| Chapter 27: Mysterious Miseries - Part III | 102 |
| Chapter 28: Subhashree opens up..... | 106 |
| Chapter 29: The Marina | 111 |
| Chapter 30: Nadhiya | 114 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 31: Good luck is a residue of preparation | 121 |
| Chapter 32: September the 3rd | 126 |
| Chapter 33: Freedom At Last | 130 |

Introduction

Not all scars show, not all wounds heal. Sometimes, you can't always see the pain that someone feels.

-Lisa French

Every woman dreams of marrying a handsome, smart and independent guy, with a brain of his own, who will fall on his knees to court her, and who would do anything to win her heart.

And yes, I found my man! Aravind is the name!

I've been crying uncontrollably for two weeks now (July 15th, 2015), trying to figure out why Aravind called off the marriage with me a day after we were engaged.

The engagement was scheduled on June 29th, 2015.

The mehendi function happened two days earlier. Mom was moistening my hands with lemon water. I was so excited!!

This was the first step to the rest of my life with Aravind. I was already dreaming of long drives with my sweet heart, kissing him all the time, late night movies every other day, my brain could not contain all the reveries.

But now, he was no longer mine. Why? Was I not beautiful enough for him? Was I not intellectually exciting enough? Why me? I love him like no one else, and I know I will marry no other man... No one else but him...

Chapter 1: Welcome to Planet Earth..

If you follow the crowd, you will likely get no further than the crowd. If you walk alone, you're likely to end up in places no one has ever been before.

- Alan Ashley-Pitt

Here's the template of a typical Indian society:

You go to school, study, study, study and study. Are you good at sports, acting, oration, anything? Forget it. Don't give those a damn, because even if you do indulge yourself in any such things, it's a waste of time, for you will ultimately land up only studying. That's the way it works. All you need to know here is swallow and vomit books – ranging from Tamil/ Hindi, English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Zoology, History and Geography.

You won a state-level athletics gold medal? Bravo!! So what? You failed in three subjects, just pass in the rest. Oh, you're totally worthless and unfit for society.

The society calls you a success only when you score a 100% in everything, or at least the first rank in class.

In your 11th/12th, did you happen to choose Nutrition or Home Science, Commerce, or absolutely anything other than Maths with Biology or Maths with Computer Science?? There you are!! "Loser!! Loser!! Loser!!". You would be branded forever. The moment you choose any of the non-engineering/ medicine subjects, the world knows you are going to be a loser. Of-course, of what good is an accountant or a chef?

If you are the best of the best students, you ought to become a doctor; else obviously you are an engineer. If you try to become anything else, oh, of course, you are a loser!!

According to the so-called-society, a doctor or an engineer can earn more money than any other profession – and may be its true. But ask the medical students why they have chosen this career, and their response will be only this: A doctor can save lives... (But no one wants to say that you can practice in 4 to 5 hospitals at a time, and earn equal amount from all hospitals, private practice excluded!!)

Well, if you were so interested in saving lives, you could also become a nurse, there are so many accidents around, you could provide first aid and save lives.. You could become an ambulance driver - saving lives is the true motive!! No!! No one will accept it. Money!! yes!! It's all about money! But it's just that they won't name it so!!

Free Will does not exist. Oh yes, it exists on the dictionary, nowhere else. You have no right to choose your own religion. You belong to the religion you were born into. If you denounce religion, you are labeled "ignorant" and if you switch religions, you are a "disgrace" to the family and the religion's sanctity.

Well, the concept of castes and communities exist, but to what good? Oh, to play politics, what else!! What is the purpose of castes? Why can't we abolish them? There is a small group always asking this question, but there is a bigger group to emotionally play you down, to rouse everyone's blood for a caste that means nothing. Do it, and then they call you "normal human".

A woman does not have the right to choose when she wants to get married or have babies. If she tries to make her own decisions, they would simply call her an “ill brought up brute, unfit and useless for the society”

Well. Life long, everyone has the responsibility of meticulously following their predecessors and never to think out of the box. Thinking out of the box is a taboo. Mind it!!

And this being the state of affairs, I dream, every day, of being different. I want to be different. I want to think different. I want to live different. I do not want to do what every Dick and Tom and Harry does. I do not wish to do something any Dick or Tom or Harry can do. I want to be myself. I want to build my own world. Neither do I wish to compare myself to anyone, nor anyone to compare themselves with me, something this world is incapable of. Individualities have neither place nor respect. I desire to follow none, and demand none to follow me. I want to do something no one has ever done before, something that's unique with its own signature!! I know I belong to utopia. I wish utopia existed. I belong there, better than anywhere else. When I do something different, the world wants to know “why” I do things differently. I say “Why not?”, and they call me a “fool”. What they don't realize is all progress that had ever happened on earth was because of “visionary fools”, and the crowd that is busy following the crowd, is always meticulously following the crowd.

Chapter 2: This is ME!

Fashion is about dressing according to what's fashionable. Style is more about being yourself.

- Oscar de la Renta

Hi,

This is Karthika. I am different – I wear glasses and am easily the shortest in a group of people. Oh yes, I look different (always proud of my height). I just joined into a prestigious engineering college in Chennai. Yes, you guessed it right. I am second-grade, unfit to become a doctor. But wait. I didn't get it all through luck. I got it through management seat. My parents have paid 1 lakh INR for the registration and first year fees, and every year, they need to pay 1 Lakh. That makes the worth of my degree 4 Lakhs other expenses excluded!

My cousin, Divya, entered into this college too. Same age, same year, same department, same class. Now, we don't share a great relationship, and both side parents keep comparing us for every other thing. I wanted to keep away from her as much as possible all through my school days. But as fate would have it, I am locked up with her for four awful years.. **four aaaaaaaaaaaaaaawful**

years!! I can't imagine living four long years with her around my back. 4x245x8x60x60 seconds of my life had to be spent with her.

I often imagine my mom's lamentations:

1. Divya got this much marks!
2. Divya scored more than you
3. Teacher appreciated Divya!
4. How much did Divya score?
5. Divya would be studying now. You are watching TV
6. Divya got a better score in this test
7. Divya will never waste time. Look at you. Sleeping!!
8. You scored slightly more than her this time. Good. Keep it up!
9. Will you score more than Divya at least this time?

OMG!! Endlessly it's going to be the same boring stuff. The very thought of it sends shivers down my spine

We are both day scholars. Luckily, I stay at Mandaiveli, and she at Ambattur. So, at least, we will be taking different route buses from college! At least a small respite for the tortured mind.

I am a very good dreamer with no clear goals. I myself hate for it to this very day. I dream of French. France! Paris! The Eiffel Tower, Nice, Cannes, oh, the list is endless..

I want to be as fluent in speaking French as the French people themselves. For what reason? Don't ask me that. I love French beyond words and that is a craziness that rages within me day-in

and day-out as an eternal flame. I want to learn French at any cost, no matter what. Incapable of pursuing my dream, I am one vain creature sitting with my Engineering Graphics drawing.

Bharati - my elder sister - was a topper all her life. She has graduated from the best medical college in Chennai.

My parents are extremely disciplined people. My dad is a professor of Statistics and my mom, Botany.

Almost, all my school days, I had been compared with my sister and rebuked openly by my parents and teachers alike:

“How could you be Bharati’s sister? She never got such horrible marks in all her life. What a shame to your sister’s name”,

And now I was getting all set to be snubbed alongside my cousin. Heights of irritation! Whenever was I going to be free of all this nonsense in all my life?

I wasn’t particularly a last ranker. I used to hit the first five ranks somehow. Now, the point is that, Bharati was one person, who, if given a chance between giving up first rank and her life, she would gladly choose the latter. Hence, compared to her, of course, I was “hopeless”.

Thus, I was understandably, the useless brat, born ‘out of place’ and raised without another choice.

Not to forget, my most inspiring mind did the trick most of the time saying, “Of course, you are worthless. Your parents don’t allow you to study French. You know for sure you are never ever going to study French again. Already you would have forgotten almost

all the basics you learnt in the first level. It's no use anymore. Go become a software engineer like everybody else. Like every Dick and Tom and Harry. No other way!"

I was sure if I ever died that way, I would be one of those unsatisfied spirits roaming around the earth, waiting to fulfill an unfulfilled desire(if one such concept truly exists). Oh how I wish it does!!

I am an amateur Chess player. I won a chess gold medal sometime way back in school. I enjoy playing the game, but for the fact that I know nothing more than which directions the pieces move.

The most horrible part of my life is its mundane, nothing changes at all, it's the same yesterday, today and forever. Oh! I loathe it.

And, I love reading books. I read a lot of books, some interest me, many don't. I am a fan of Agatha Christie. I sound old-fashioned, don't I? I want to one day write a book that I would enjoy reading every day of my life. No, this book will not be written to make money, not to become a best-seller, but to be enjoyed by me, to be enjoyed by someone who enjoys my taste. For no one else. It's definitely not for every Dick and Tom and Harry. It would be for someone special – for me!!

I dreamt of visiting France, the Champs-Élysées, the tour Eiffel, the Louvre, Arc de Triomphe, the Seine, the Bateaux Mouches, Luxembourg Gardens, Palais de Versailles, Marseilles, French Riviera.... Oh!! Dreams are divine!!

Chapter 3: How I met my friend

Friendship at first sight, like love at first sight, is said to be the only truth.

- *Herman Melville*

College was nothing less than a “prison”, as it was fondly called by all. As any engineering college in Chennai, boys and girls are not allowed to speak to one other.

I am generally a loner who does not bother about friends as I am mostly incapable of finding my kind of person. I am neither the mingling nor the flirting type – as I told you, I don’t belong to this world. The ordinary doesn’t excite me. It’s only bizarre that does.

I like to be on my own, minding my own business. I had a couple of bad experiences in school, with friends who had cheated me. So, I promised myself, that in college, I would be on my own, without getting too close to anyone, boy or girl, whoever it be. What are lessons in life for, if you cannot learn from them?

First day in college was uneventful. I was sitting with Divya, as I knew no one else, I didn't have much choice. I would have been a lot happier without her.

On my way back home, on the bus, a beautiful, homely-looking girl sat beside me – lean, fair, bespectacled, curly-hair well-oiled and braided. As someone said, “The first handshake and the final goodbye are the toughest things on earth”. Well, I guess someone said that. I am not sure.

Yeah, I was thinking of the right words to start, when, out of the blues, she said: “Hi, I am Devi. Studied in JGVV, Anna Nagar. And you?”

Wow!! That homely-looking Devi started the conversation! Unbelievable. At least, she isn't that much of an introvert as I am.

“Hi. This is Karthika. Studied at Ewart. What did you say, was the name of your school? Sorry, I didn't get it right”.

“JGVV – Jai Gopal Garudia Vivekanada Vidhyashram”

“Oh, haven't heard of it. Is it CBSE or State Board?”

“CBSE. It's a famous school. Surprised you don't know it. I get down in Mylapore. How about you?”

“Oh that's pretty close. I get down at Mandaiveli. I am in CSE department. How about you?”

“Same. Are you a vegetarian?”

(Oh! I wanted to ask that question myself)

“No, am not. Am non-vegetarian. You?”

“Same, non-vegetarian. Thought you were a Brahmin”

“I too thought the same of you😊”

“Ok Karthika. Nice meeting you. My stop is coming. Need to go. Bye. See you tomorrow on the bus”

“Sure Devi. Bye. I will save a seat for you”

And off she went, sparking the first flames of friendship

The reason I wanted to ask that question was because, I hate Brahmins. I have had bad experiences with Brahmins in my school days, and I loathed them for it.

They have tricked me, insulted me, spoken ill of me to others, mocked me so much so that I reviled them beyond words.

So, generally I wasn't fond of the lot that they were. If only Devi had been a Brahmin, I definitely would not have had anything more to do with her.

Chapter 4: Classes Begin

Day 2 on the college bus:

I love the morning breeze, no matter how cold it is.

Mine was the second stop. Devi embarked two stops after mine. Looking forward to meeting a friend felt great and the breeze only added charm to the feeling. There she came – in green chudi with the dupatta pinned on both sides.

For the records, if you did not know, all girls in my college (or prison to be more precise) were to be wrapped in chudidhar and dupatta pinned, and no sleeveless! Else... Fine of Rs 15/-

No ID Card? Fine

Found speaking to boys? Go meet the Chairman – (The goonda-man Mr. Muthuramalingam), bring your parents to college, etc.

Forget the punishments, back on the bus, my friend was coming. She saw me, found me and sat next to me.

We talked and talked till we reached college. No, she wasn't talking things about others, it was just about us and I liked it. Gossip is one thing I cannot tolerate. Not even in my dreams.

We proceeded together to same class room. We sat together. Pop, came my cousin and dutifully occupied the seat next to Devi. Ooh... That was the end of all goodness.

I made it a point that nothing negative should distraught my happiness any further. I started to spend time with Devi - talk to her, lunch with her, roam around together. I never worried about Divya, unless she asked for something, or I had something to tell her. Luckily, pretty soon, she made friends with a girl named Chitra, and there ended my burden. Happy again!

I sit on the row next to the boys, because Devi was a very reserved person, who did not want anything to do with "boys".

A lean, bespectacled handsome guy sat to my right.

The class in-charge entered the class- Mrs. Jayanti, a stern-looking, short, dark, bespectacled, smartly-dressed professor. She warmly welcomed us into the prison and said she would be handling Chemistry for us.

The roll calls began...

And I found out! The bespectacled fellow was Balaji Srinivasan.

Professors came in one after another, introducing themselves, telling us what to expect out of the jail, reminding us that we had come here to study and not to flirt, so on and so forth. Eight periods of non-sense done, with each session having a separate roll-call, we finally packed our bags back home.

The goal of any engineering college is always one and the same: Study well, get good grades, get a job, that's exactly why you study, job.. job and job.. dream of nothing else. Placement numbers make their hoarding boards, and my college was one in the lot! They tell you what to dream. None of your business to dream your dream. Mind it!!

Chapter 5: Days Roll By

Our English Professor, Mrs Vimala, was the funniest of all. Oh! She was a double Ph. D in Linguistics, and blimey, her English was no better than a second standard kid - replete with blunders.

With a wig dangling down her waist, and English awfully wrong, (a noticeable Tamil accent to it, and with Tamil words interspersed here and there), wonder how anyone controlled laughter in class.

“Pa, this koshin is very important for the egjam. If you cannot concentrate, you jus get out of my class I say”

Srini used to ask me little things – textbook, pen, shoes for Electrical/Mechanical lab, match box for Chemistry Lab, etc, etc. There was no better reason to spark a friendship, and of course, no better reason to start teasing a boy and a girl. Devi started teasing me with him. And, every time she teased, I dutifully rejected it, while secretly enjoying the feel☺

My Chemistry professor and class in-charge developed an immediate liking for me, and she made me the class representative for girls. Mind it, we had two leaders for boys, and two leaders for girls!!

Engineering Graphics was one subject that broke my spine. No matter how many times I tried, it just wouldn't penetrate that skull of mine.

Ellipses and parabolas and hyperbolas, orthographic projection, Perspective drawing, so on and on and on. It simply did not make any sense to me.

‘Cycle tests’ came and went. In a few I scored more than Divya. In few, she scored more than me.

Reactions at home:

“Look at your marks. In English, Computer Engineering and Digital Principles, you have scored more. But what’s the use. She surpassed you in Physics and Maths. You could have done better. I really don’t know when you are going to become responsible.”

Scoring more than my cousin means being responsible!! I’ll note that one down. But the problem is, people conveniently change the definition of “responsibility” as per their needs, so much so that it’s so tough to tell what the ultimate goal of being responsible is.

Exams were fast approaching. Fear of an arrear was fastest approaching 😊 The fear of lost dreams was comfortably residing within me.

Practical exams were fun. No one studied anything (except, of course, the toppers), but everyone wished to clear it, somehow or the other, by luck or chance, call it what you may.

We had different batches separated based on the alphabetical order, and hence, second and third batches had a lot of time, while waiting for the previous batch to finish.

In the acres of green land that our college was built on, if you are not found studying under the trees, the only other place one could possibly locate you was in the canteen, not particularly to eat or study, but mostly to gossip / meet and watch guys (provided spies were not around). You are most likely to see most of the handsome picks there, in case they weren’t the studious types.

Main exams came and went. Study holidays were fun. I was expected to do nothing other than study. Of course, locked up in my little cozy room, and engineering books – ANSI C Programming by Balagurusamy, B. S. Grewal, Higher Engineering Mathematics, R. K. Gaur, and S. L. Gupta, Engineering Physics, Anand and Chatwal, Instrumental Methods of Analysis, English textbook written and published by one of my own college professor who speaks amazing butler English, Bhargav Gupta, “Basic Electronics & Linear Circuit”, and Engineering Drawing, all dutifully displayed in front of me, I seamlessly embarked on the ship to dreamland.

France was a dream destination, with beautiful clouds, greenery and well-lit streets...

Tonight I am on the beautifully lit Bateau Mouche sailing across the Seine, alone, peacefully, with no one else on it. The boat cruises across the river, the sun hurriedly hiding behind the buildings, before drenching me in the final shreds of black. Against the moonlit sky, the Conciergerie, the Notre Dame de Paris, the Monnaie, the Louvre, Orsay, the Pont Neuf, the floating restaurants - all magically apparated before me. Wow!! Paris is mesmerizing. I wish I could live in my dreams forever.

Suddenly my mom shouts from outside, “Are you studying Karthika?”

“Yes mom”

I am urgently transported back from the Seine to my single room haven - surrounded by the wall behind me, and books on the other three sides

Every morning, I diligently study on the bus. After reaching college, Devi would quickly run me through all the important topics. And hurray, I finished my exams – pass or fail, I had no intentions of thinking of results just yet.

“Mom, exams are over. Can you enroll me for the French course?”

“Score more than 80% in your exams. We’ll think of it”

Bah!!! 80%

I just wish a miracle would happen somewhere.

Chapter 6: Dear Old Grandma!

My vacations were always reserved only to visit my native place. Mom wanted my company to visit her ailing mother who was in the care of my aunt (incidentally Divya's mother).

Destination Nagercoil!!

I loved the train ride from Chennai Egmore to Nagercoil.

It was mostly Anathapuri Express. My favorite stations:

1. Kovilpatti – what better station to get kovilpatti kadalai mittai?
2. Maniyachi Junction – I love it for the patriotic feel that surges within me every time I think of the hero!
3. Aralvai Mozhi – Beautiful windmills as far as the eyes can see!! Wonderful feast to the mind

But alas! Nagercoil is reached. The train journey ends there.

Then we take an auto to my aunt's place.

My grandmother was 85 years old, completely bed-ridden for the past three years.

We would go there and take care of her for a few days during the vacations.

She could barely remember anyone, not even her daughters, leave alone me. I used to tell her stories narrated to 4 year-old children. Tears rolled down my cheeks. There were days when

she did this to us when we were kids. Now I am doing it for her!!
What a vicious cycle life truly is!

A heavy old woman weighing nearly 83 kg, she would urinate on the cloth-woven cot. Defecation was the challenge. My aunt, mom and I, all being small built, would struggle to carry her to the bathroom.

That was my only routine during all semester holidays, and I did not regret it.

But poor old granny, she recognized none of us.

“Granny do you know who I am?”

She would stare at me for long and then stare again still harder. She remembered nothing – not even her daughters, leave alone her granddaughter!

Leaving all the bravery behind, here was the incapacitated Jhansi Rani sitting beside me – staring hard at the floor – for her head wouldn't turn much.

There are many tales of her heroism – fact or fiction I do not know!

At the age of 17, she had run away from her house, to evade marriage, she wanted to study – and her parents relented.

She had refused to pierce her ears with huge holes like the other uneducated women in her village. Wow!! I don't know how truly proud I felt when I heard this. She had fought against the society and won! How had she? I don't know. I wish to ask her. Only that she doesn't remember it anymore! May be she was Jhansi Rani II, whom I ought to have interviewed when she was in her senses.

I had missed a golden opportunity.

Chapter 7: I Earned an Enemy

After semester holidays, I was awaiting the commencement of the second semester. Time to meet friends and foes alike!

Alas! Devi was not on my bus anymore. They had changed the bus routes and Mylapore was missed. Loneliness sunk in again,

I went to College BE CSE II sem, only to find that even my class had been shuffled. Devi was not in my class anymore. Luckily, neither was Divya!!

English, Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Digital Principles, Data Structures and the same cycle again and again and again.

I went to Devi's class for lunch. Otherwise I was lonely. Oh, I adored it, and I made the most of this lonely time to do what I usually love doing – writing Tamil poems.

“ Nilavae, kaarirul padarndha vaanathiley eppadi nadakkindrai thaniyaaga?

Ulagin innalgalal theyndhalum, eppadi valargindrai veguvaaga?

Un nenjil vazhiyum veerathiley, oru thuli iraval thaarai enakkaga“

[Meaning :

Dear Moon,

How do you walk in the dark night through the sky?

In spite of becoming smaller from the pains of the world, how do you manage to regrow yourself?

Please lend me a small part of that courage as an offering.]

First sem exam results were published and as luck would have it, I had cleared all papers. And to add cream to the cake, my total was higher than Divya's. Thank goodness. I can imagine what her mother would have been telling her if only it had been the other way round. I had actually got an 86%

“Mom, French classes”

“Go study your engineering subjects. We will join French classes in a few weeks”

Wow!! In a few weeks!! Amazing!!

As usual, I shut myself in my little room, surrounded by my close neighbors – books, books and books, and as usual, dreams galore!!

Whom am I staring at? ‘La belle Ferronnière’ herself!!!

Unbelievable!!

Welcome to the Louvre – to the “Portrait of an Unknown Woman.”

The sitter gazes out from a dark almost black background. Only her head and shoulders are illuminated by a light from the front, she is almost lit by the viewer’s eyes. Her head turns with a twisting motion to her left and her eyes also gaze to the left complementing the sense of movement within the picture. The features are wonderfully proportioned; Leonardo has achieved an astonishing smoothness of finish in the facial tones. She wears a Spanish costume, popular at the time, and a decoration of beads around her neck. The lower part of the figure is concealed by a parapet; this gives the sitter a little extra depth.

I remember reading a small discussion on this painting in one of my French books. Is she truly a masterpiece of the Vinci himself? or by one of his apprentices? Hey lady, were you a mistress of some great French king –though lawfully wedded to an ironmonger? Were you infested with Syphilis?

Is she that stunningly beautiful? Let me take a better look for a longer angle. Hmm. May be she is, but hey you magnificence, why can’t you smile a little? Why so serious? What’s shrouded behind that severe look of yours? Did the painter ask you to look angry? Hey, say cheese ma’am!!

#

One day, as I was sitting on the bus by myself, thinking of what poem to write next, a girl came smiling at me, said hi and sat next to me. She was plump, fair, beautiful and what not? She did not,

in the least look like a South Indian. So, to play safe, I resorted to speak in English.

She said she was Abhinaya, same year, ECE department. Hers was the next stop after mine, and on further chatting realized that she was actually staying quite close to my place.

Just for a clarification I asked, “Do you understand Tamil?” and she burst out laughing outrageously. It took a while for her to control her giggles before she replied: “*Naan Tamil dhan!*” (*I am Tamil*)

I found a new bus mate. Abhi would chat on and on and on endlessly as the sky about absolutely anything and everything. Well, I guess some people are naturally gifted with this rare talent, which introverts like me can only dream of.

Second semester...

Only when I entered into the second semester of first year CSE A section classroom did realize that my class had been shuffled.

Lucky me!! Divya wasn't in my class anymore, but neither was Devi. That really upset me. I was again in alien land.

Same old classes, assignments, home works, and me, not a single friend in my class.

A few people in my class:

“Kutty” Meenakshi – sometimes called ‘kutty’ or ‘meenu kutty’ or ‘kutty meenu’ as per convenience. (Her real name was

Meenakshi, we called her 'kutty' as she was very short- may be 4ft. 5"). A person with a 'never say die' attitude.

Venkatasubramanium : He was a good student, spoke fluent English and was Devi's school mate

Kokila: A girl who could do anything simultaneously, from sleeping and paying attention in class, to flirting with, and ditching 2-3 guys simultaneously. Yes. You guessed it right. She was a beauty with brains.

Uma Maheshwaran: A very meek boy in the class whom everyone teased. But his stature and height would make him look like a giant, it was nothing at all to worry about! We fondly called him "Umaaaaaa".

There was a topper in my class. Subhashree was her name - a silent, intelligent girl who had answers to any question from any professor.

In spite of being a topper, she had no head weight and helped everyone generously. If you needed any help, you needed only to ask Subha, and she would do it for you. If you wanted to copy homework, she would share it. If you had any doubts, she would clarify it.

What a wonderful girl she was!

She was as silent as the grave, as calm as the depths of the sea. Wow!! I admired her a lot. I wouldn't talk much to her though.

One day, Mrs. Smitha walked into my class and asked for nominations for Chess matches during the culturals. I wanted to

give my name in, but I didn't. I was anyway going to lose. Why go and insult myself? I left the matter to rest.

I knew engineering and an IT job was beyond my brain

I started writing short stories and novels when my parents were not noticing. I wrote for my pleasure, to erase the pain of comparing myself with the world, and concluding that I am undoubtedly one of the biggest failures that ever walked on earth. I did not write down my pain of being the 'everybody', I wrote encouraging words; words that made me forget my agony and helped me look beyond the world – deep into my dreams.

I treasured them. I knew they were only stories, but every time I read, it brought a smile on my face – not with the feel that I had written my first short story, but reading it made me forget my worries. I felt like the happiest free bird in the world, without a care, exploring the skies without any fear!! I was doing something different from what the crowd is doing. The thought made me feel like God.

One day, I was in a hurry to catch my bus, so, I politely requested Subha to get a printout for me, as she was a hosteller. OMG!! She bluntly refused giving some lame excuses. I was shocked. She never spoke that way to anyone.

Then another day scholar came and requested the same to her, and right in front of me, she politely accepted!

I didn't understand why she detested me. I had never spoken to her before. I had never hurt her as far as I knew. Then why was she rude to me? Despicable Me!!

To add fuel to the flame, she replied to me in Brahmin dialect. I do not know why she hated me. But, I definitely found a reason to despise her.

Once again, after a week's time, again, Mrs. Smitha came to class begging people to join in. This time, I thought, "Fine, if no one else is going, lets give it a try". And I enrolled myself for the match.

Weeks became months... A semester passed by, still no updates on my French. Everytime I asked my mom, she would say, "Oh, I will allow you to join French classes next semester. That's a promise".

Chapter 8: The Wheel Turns

Thus, another semester passed by uneventfully. Exam times with Devi helping me and the semester holidays were spent at Nagercoil, my native, with my grandmother.

Bang!! The third semester was going to start and I dreaded to get back to a college that made me feel terribly bored.

Start of a new semester. No new dreams. Only dreads. I made no efforts to make friends, and effortlessly, I already had the best student for an enemy!

Horrible though, nonetheless, to college I went.

As usual, the bus reached late at college. The next tough task, was finding the classroom. I finally found that unfortunate dungeon, full of dirty desks with seats attached, and a teacher's desk. Mind it; our college teachers did not have the luxury of a chair. The college management found it unnecessary for teachers to sit and teach, but why does a human being not realize that a person cannot go on standing for 50 mins without a break? What if that teacher has two classes back to back? Would they be standing for 1 hour 40 mins? Yes they obviously should. Heartless and pathetic indeed!

Back to the third semester, all the girls' seats were taken, and only the first row of the boys' bench was left. Already I did not have friends. To add to it, now, I do not even have a place in the class. I was standing at the doorway, feeling hopeless, on the verge of tears!

Subhashree entered just then. I thought: "Oh, her friends would have reserved a seat for her. She is going to laugh at me today". I was totally frustrated, when, suddenly, Subha turned to me and said: "Hey, shall we both sit in the first row on the boys' side?"

I stood there, not knowing what to reply. I was dumb struck!

Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat???? What did she just ask me? She already hates me, and now why does she want to sit with her? To insult me further may be, by showing others that she was way too intelligent for me?

As I was thus lost in thought, she shook me back to reality, "Hello. What say? Anyway, there is no other seat that we can take. All other girls' seats are occupied. But I will sit on the side to the boys. You sit in the middle."

I thought, *'Ok. Let me sit in the other corner of the seat. If I am able to exchange seats with anyone, I will do it. Of course, Subha is a wonderful girl. Who wouldn't want to sit next to her after all?'*

Shalini, another hosteller came and joined us on our seat. I was about to ask her to get in, when, to my astonishment, Subha pulled me to her, showing the vacant place to Shalini, while having a casual chat with her.

Now, what was happening? I began to get nervous.

During the break, I usually visit Devi. I was getting ready to leave, when Subha asked me, “Do you have any work during the break?”

Nervous enough, “No”, I blabbered

“Then come with me. I want to meet our second sem professors and tell my scores to them”

I dutifully followed her to the staff room. Now, was she trying to get friendly with me? Or was she trying to show off that her frontal lobe was doing a better job than mine? I don’t know. But it just didn’t look like she was trying to fool me.....

Chapter 9: The Chess Tournament

The D-Day for the chess tournament ultimately arrived. On a sunny day, I took a public transport bus to college, and was waiting in the indoor sports auditorium for half an hour. No one turned up.

I walked up and down, sat in the pavilion, and waited, waited and waited. When all patience gave way, I picked up my bag to dash for the exit, when Mrs. Smitha came running in. “Karthika, you are

the only person we have from CSE department. We need a team – three more girls are needed. Please go over to the hostel and find a few more players.”

I was shocked. Even more shocking was the next revelation:

“It’s ok even if they do not know to play the game. We can teach them”

Amazing indeed!! And look who they are calling in to teach chess! Someone who knows nothing more than directions on the chess board.

I dutifully went to the hostel, ran around for CSE girls(who knew nothing more than the name “Chess”), and caught hold of 4 girls with great difficulty. Oh, I had a bigger team than was required.

The moves were taught and the game began.

I won, and the rest of them lost. Funny though.. Don’t ask me what I played. I won. That’s pretty much it.

Team CSE – ladies team lost.

Mrs. Smitha was very upset. She came to me saying, “Even the boys team lost”

I was surprised. I didn’t know that a “Boy’s Team” existed.

On my way home, I saw Praveen Raja (my class mate – a tall, thin, silent fellow) in the camp road bus stand. May be he too came for the chess match. Is he a chess player? Does he play

chess? I don't know. I wish I could talk to him. But I could not muster the guts to do that.

Well, I guess he looked handsome to me. I couldn't stop watching him. But I somehow, just, couldn't go and say "Hi"

Chapter 10: My 'girl' friend

Well, what more can I say? Subhashree.. The beautiful angel turned my life 360°. Imagine, the best girl in the whole class was my best friend!

And, for the records, we had sat together on that single bench on the guys' side, every semester thereafter!

We spent time together chatting about family, life, past, present, future, ambitions and what not!

Her father was working in Abu Dhabi as a Mechanical Engineer. She had a younger brother who was doing his Engineering in Sastha Engineering College, Tamil Nadu. He was also a topper just like her, I guess.

She rented a house in Ambattur (close to my college), and stayed along with her mother.

She had been a topper all her life. And here she is, hanging out with a loser!!

I was all so excited. I used to visit her house often during weekends, telling my parents that I was going to do combined studies with her. Subha's mom was as friendly as she was. Can you imagine that?

We went to movies together, roamed around on her bike, ate out and then went back home.

Else, we sat back in her house, chatting with any other batch mates who came online on Yahoo messenger, or watched TV together, or she used to entertain us on her Veena – she was a trained Carnatic singer, and Veena player!

At college, “officially”, talking to guys was a taboo and was strictly forbidden. But Subha, never gave rules a damn. She would speak to any and every guy she developed a crush on, and then, she would tell me how wonderful Balaji Prasad was, what Mani says, how Saranya cheated Madhuvanath, so on and so forth. They were all interesting stories. Trust me, if anyone else had spoken such things to me, I would have simply shut the conversation saying: “Please don't gossip to me. I don't like it and I have better things to do”. But with Subha, I seemed to enjoy gossiping for once in my life.

“I always wanted to be a doctor. I had been a topper all along, and not once in my life did I ever dream that I would be in this college, studying computers.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks

“Its ok Subha, past is past. We can't change it. Let's put it behind us”

“Do you know how much it hurts when I see a name plate saying, ‘Dr. XYZ, MBBS, MD something something?’ you'll never know the pain”

“May be I won't. But had you become a doctor, I wouldn't have met you. So, I guess it's better you became an engineer”, and I winked an eye at her.

“May be yes”. She smiled, and put her head on my shoulders.

In spite of all this, she was always very cheerful. She would always motivate me saying one day I would get to learn French and that I would definitely speak fluent French.

When the thought of French pierced my heart, I would involuntarily rest my head on her shoulder, an indescribable succor.

She was one woman for whom, I would have done anything. She made me feel alive and awesome in-spite of all the hardships life so heartlessly imposed on mankind. She was one spell that drove away all the negative spirits that surrounded me. Her presence gave me the confidence to conquer almost anything on earth, do you know why? She encouraged me like no one else.

“You can always be what you want to be. Its all in your mind. Be patient and it will definitely happen one day”.

She made me believe in myself. She made me realize that all my dreams were achievable, only that I had to put in the right amount

of effort and desire. Yes. That was the true magic she created in my life. The goddess who bestowed the boon of self-confidence on me. I began looking at Brahmins differently. I will not say that every Brahmin is like Subha, but definitely, Subha is not one among those many Brahmins who mocked at me in school.

Shalini silently existed next to us, but we seldom bothered her, and she was almost always lost in her own dream world – for she had a boyfriend, somewhere in her native, waiting for her.

When classes were boring, Subha, Shalini and I quietly played a lot of games, sitting in the first row, right under the teacher's nose

Every semester, at home, my scores were compared with four others: Subhashree, Devi, a son of my mom's colleague (not my college) and of course, undoubtedly, Divya

1. Subha always scored more than me – without a pinch of doubt, no issues. I didn't bother who said what. I was happy for her. She was my best friend after all
2. Devi, also scored more than me always – close friend of mine – very happy for her again
3. Son of Mom's colleague – this was the real tug-of-war, because sometimes he would score more than me, and sometimes I would. Who won and lost the match, by how many marks, and in which subjects was a topic of important discussion in my mom's staff room. Hence, it was a matter of slight irritation when I lost, and my mom made a big fuss about it.

4. Divya – I dreaded this comparison, though, thankfully all the eight semesters, I scored more than her! Thank Heavens!! Else, am sure my mom would have brought down the house!

Chapter 11: This is Heaven on Earth!

Sitting with Subha beside me was the best place in the world.

Data Structures classes was going on. Never mind what the teacher, Mrs. Usha, taught, for she seldom taught. What she spoke was beyond our understanding. Whether she meant herself to be understood or not was a question no one bothered to ponder.

But she was strict and would question us on whatever she taught the previous day. Not a big deal. If you know the answer, say it and sit. Else you get to stand the entire period and the question

passes on. Nothing much I dare say. May be imposition once or twice.

The questions were usually targeted at the back-benchers. So Venkat would religiously come and occupy the first bench.

Mostly he would be the only person sitting on the entire bench, but the fun was watching him sleep in the middle of a serious Data Structures session. Usha would be standing there, watching out for students who were not listening (particularly the last bench), and from my place, all you need to do is turn to your left, and there would be one guy, sitting right under the teacher's nose – sleeping like the happiest man without a worry in the world! Good for him he never snored.

If that just wasn't funny enough, turn to the right. The first row girls – Kokila, Kutty and Aishwarya are sure to keep you engaged and amused. The seating arrangement is thus:

Kokila – Kutty – Aish.

Kokila and Aishu would be talking to almost always and Kutty Meenu would be seriously taking notes. Oh yeah, she was having a pen in her hand pointed at her notebook. The other hand was against her cheek, covering her eyes. Well, technically you never knew whether she was taking notes or sleeping. You had to take a very close look at her small eyes to recognize the difference.

At my desk, it was a combination of everything. Subha and Shalini were studious. Unfortunately, because of these two bookworms,

professors automatically thought I was a scholar too, well, that was an image I made efforts neither to create, nor to maintain.

When teachers weren't looking, we would play all kinds of games from Antakshari to Dumb-charades to passing chits from boys' benches to girls' benches and vice-versa. The 'naughty-Subha' was the one who introduced us to this entire fun, mind it, the topper and the leader of all mischief!

In the middle of the class, some guy from the last bench starts whistling. When Usha turned, the whistling stopped abruptly. Then she continued with her class, and after a considerable pause, the whistling continued. The class then came to a standstill as she has stopped teaching. She had to find out the felon!

She asked politely at first. No response. Then she tried threatening the class saying she would report the incident to the Chairman (implicating all of us), if we didn't give up the culprit. Now college life was getting to be fun. The lecturing changes topic from subject matter to respecting teachers and behaving oneself in class. Well the latter topic felt much better to comprehend than the former and we enjoyed it, thanks to that unknown guy who had whistled.

Subha and I started whispering.

"Karthika, read this"

"What's it?"

"Something in French. You tell me what it is."

She had seen some French words and the back of some package and she wanted me to translate them for her. As I was doing so, unconsciously tears bathed my cheeks. My voice and hands had begun to shake. I was losing control. She noticed it and started stroking my head with motherly warmth, and I nestled my head on her shoulders, closing my eyes, and forgetting the world for a moment.

“Sorry, I thought you will like it”

“I am not able to”

Chapter 12: Murphy's Law! – Mission TCS

Semester after semester, life thus passed – sorrow, comparison and pain, friendship and compassion.

Third, fourth, fifth and sixth sems passed with my bosom Subha beside me through troughs and burrows.

Placements would be racing towards us in the seventh and eight semesters. Anyone with no more than two standing arrears was permitted to attend the placements, and once placed, you cannot try for another company, even if it was your dream destination.

So, sixth semester saw tough and rigorous preparations for placements. An organization called ‘Blue Lotus’ came over to train and hone our inter-personal skills. Saturdays were fun. They didn’t train us in Aptitude or Technical, it was purely inter-personals skills. Now, anyone who had attended job interviews, and who knows that any interview has three sections – Aptitude, Technical and HR, would definitely know that this training is a complete tomfoolery and non-sense, nonetheless we enjoyed it, because we got to mingle with the group, crack jokes, make fun when someone blundered, and funny punishments were meted out to them. Whether we prepared for the placements or not, we were clearly enjoying ourselves.

My CV was written up for the first time in my life. Everyone was mandated to have a mini-project on it.

Devi and I joined with Eileen, and we cooked up the “Library Management” Project. Now as the name suggests, obviously, it is going to hold names of books and authors, tagged against names of students who had borrowed them. I had absolutely no idea about the project more than this. I only hoped that no one questioned me on this at the interviews.

Bang... The day of placements arrived.

A whole auditorium packed with rats from all streams and departments – at least some 2000 odd ones – all scurrying for one place, just one small place, in a multi-national blue-chip IT Company.

The procedure was thus for any company:

First, we would have the company culture and policies introduced to us by the HR for some 2-3 hours, and then the online Aptitude test, those who cleared it - went for Technical round, and the final round was HR

The first company was TCS: 3 hour intro, one hour of Aptitude, which I cleared very easily. Next was my much feared round – Technical. I was very bad technically (everyone was just as bad as I was, but frankly speaking I displayed fear on my face more and that was my doom). I didn't know anything about the mini-project.

I wished that the interviewer would somehow miss the mini-project section. But to my greatest dismay, that was the one that caught his attention first.

An array of questions followed:

What is the database you used?

Database.. eh eh.. we didn't use a database

Then how do you store the data of books and students?

Oh there is a textbox in which we need to enter details

You enter details. Where does it get stored?

Stored? No where.

Oh ok!! So, you did this project, or you got it from someone?
I did it myself, with two other friends, just that I wasn't handling the database part.

Oh..

I know I lost my job with TCS because of these dumb replies, and I did not know the right answers either.

Status after Day 1 Placements for comparison at home:

1. Subhashree – Placed
2. Devi – Not Placed
3. Karthika – Not Placed
4. Divya – Placed

The fact that Divya had been selected was enough to rip me into pieces at home.

I went into the washroom and shut myself for hours. I was crying uncontrollably not knowing what to do next.

I was a failure. I hadn't got a job. I was nowhere close to learning French. My dream of a career as a writer was getting no better..

The next company was Wipro, and I was sure that I was going to do the same blunder. My life was doomed.

Scoldings in progress:....

"You aren't going to land yourself a job when all my fellow batch-mates would be earning their livelihood. You are undoubtedly going to be the biggest failure on Earth. Sister of a doctor/topper,

daughter of two respected professors was a fit-for-nothing girl. What a shame on the family!”

Well, my mom had screamed at me a couple of times already, and she was flinging swear words across the bathroom door. Time for me to wipe my tears, wash my face, clear my nose, check if my eyes looked red, and walk out as cool and composed as possible.

I was mad and possessed. I didn't know what I was doing. I just had to something about my life. “What if not an IT professional? I am going to be a writer. IT industry isn't my world, this is!! Live where you are loved and do what you enjoy” I told myself.

I went online, Googled for all kinds of short story and novella contests, and uploaded my story. I waited for a few days. As days sped, I got no response, and eventually forgot that I had even submitted any.

Chapter 13: Apocalypse

A week after the TCS disaster grandma passed away. I was not in a position to attend the funeral. You could take it that I was

preparing for my next interview, or that I was too ashamed to face my relatives. Either way, it would still be the truth.

When I went for Wipro placement, I was shaking from top to toe. I still did not know anything about the front end or back end of my project, nor did I know to write even one single line of code if asked to. Yet, it was still there on my CV. I was sure the job was lost, and lost it was. I was so nervous that I could not answer even the questions I knew very well. The interviewer asked me to drink water twice. Lol.. Then he asked me to write code from my mini-project, and I was almost to tears.

Latest Development:
Devi – Placed
Karthika – Not Placed

That day I cried so hard. I had no guts to face my parents.

I was at the receiving end, not knowing what to do. All hell broke loose at home.

“I knew you were fit for nothing”

“See Divya knows her parents’ financial position, and found herself a job first day. Look at you. Useless to the core”

“You are not fit for the IT industry. You better become a teacher or prepare for some entrance exams next year”

“Do you have any serious plans for your future?”

Me: “Yes. Syntel is the next company. I am preparing”

“Leave IT. You can’t succeed anymore. Think of something else. What a shame. Everyone would have got to know by now that Divya has a job and you don’t”

“What will I say if my colleagues ask?”

“What a shame. What will others think of you?”

“Both of us (parents) will retire in a few years. What will you do for your bread and butter? We can’t be feeding you lifelong”

“4L college fees is waste. You should have studied BA or B Sc and become some teacher in some small college”

OMG!! The torture was endless. It made me extremely traumatized.

I could have replied back saying, “Did I ask any of this? I hated computers. Did I even ask you to get me into computer science engineering? You could have rather allowed me to study French or Physics.”

However, having been dutiful brought-up in the institutionalized mentality, I realized that I was indeed putting my parents to shame and I was solely responsible for everything happening around me.

One never knows what one does when one is frustrated.

I made up my mind once and for all. I was not going to become a software engineer after all. I was destined to be a writer, an accomplished writer. That was what I was going to become!!

I read my stories again and again. I loved them all. I was no more in this world. I was in another world, where no one could touch me, where no one could compare me, where no one could annoy me. It felt amazing to be different. It felt awesome in the world of books, but why couldn’t anyone else enjoy my world? May be my world was created just for me.

All the commotion around me brought me back to Planet Earth! Even my mind started scolding me: “One year down the lane, you

will be without a job, no income, standing in the middle of the road, mocked by friends and relatives alike, parents let down, as lonely loser. Ok. So anyway you are worthless. Let's contemplate on how best you can commit suicide. A dupatta from the fan or may be jump from terrace, some poison from somewhere? Well, the truth is, though the thought of a shameful future taunts you, you don't have the courage to commit suicide. The thought of a painful death sends shivers down your spine. You have the courage neither to face life, nor death. How inept of you indeed!"

And then I forgot all about my brain telling me of being pre-destined to be a writer.

Nonetheless, for Syntel, I prepared. I was not going to let anyone's small talk deter me. I was getting a job into IT industry. Definitely, there was so much more to do, than die urgently.

College reopened for seventh sem. Even Abhinaya had got placed in TCS, Balaji Srinivasan and Venkat in Wipro. I wasn't brave to face my class mates in college. But everyone was unbelievably supportive there. The day I went to college, all my friends asked me why "I" hadn't made it into TCS or Wipro. I was lost for words and would have cried any moment. But, everyone was extremely compassionate and encouraged me like never before.

Two of my class mates (Dinesh and Ananth – both placed in TCS) conducted a mock technical round for me. I told them, technical is my weakest point and that I was a big zero when it came to coding.

Here was their review and advice:

1. When you talk we are clearly able to see tension and fear. Just be relaxed and answer questions
2. If you know the answers say it. If you don't know, don't get tensed. Politely tell them that you don't know yet you were ready to learn from them
3. None of us answered all the questions of the interviewers, so that's not the key. Control your tension. That's where you lose.

Now I seriously started root-cause analysis, determined that I will get through Syntel. I knew fear of failure was my biggest problem. Fear of failure due to lack of knowledge on my mini-project. I had to get a job. I wasn't losing again. Not this time!!

Without another thought, I removed the mini-project from my CV. But, everybody else will have one in theirs. What would I do if the interviewer asked? I was prepared to face anything other than that project. If they asked anything, I would simply say, I hadn't done one. If I again lose my job because of that, let me re-invent again was the plan

Chapter 14: The Big Day

It was the day of Syntel placements. I had to do it this time no matter what.

The company intro went for two hours. The Aptitude Test was a cake walk. It was 90% English grammar-based questions which I finished in less than 15 mins as against the 2 hours allocated.

Something deep within me kept telling me that this was going to be my day.

Then came a new round: Essay Writing.
The topic given to me was: "The Need for Education".

Oh English was one of my favorites. Essay-writing was another easy task for me. I kept telling myself: "Karthika, if you clear the technical round, you will definitely get placed in Syntel. HR round is nothing"

The next was the much awaited technical round. The interviewer asked me a lot of questions, 60% of which I answered right. He even asked me why I hadn't done a mini-project while everyone else had one on their CV. I simply smiled and said I hadn't done one ;) and he asked me no more on that.
No matter what I answered, I was determined to be confident, nothing more, nothing less.

Finally, we came to the end of the technical round. The interviewer asked me: "Do you have any questions for me other than whether you are selected or not?"

I smiled and replied, "No"
"Alright. Then please wait outside for your turn"

As soon as I came out of my tech round, I was asked to wait for my HR round!!! Wow!! I had done it

After almost 15-20 mins, my HR round happened. A series of dumb questions ensued, and finally he said, "You are selected".

I called and informed my parents once the HR round was over.

But of course, I had to wait till everyone was interviewed and the official statement was made

My tactics of removing the mini-project had payed-off and I silenced all my valued critics. I too had an offer letter in hand.

Parents were very happy for me. There were sweets all around the house. Suddenly they were saying that I was far knowledgeable than Divya, that I was very special, that God had special plans for me in life, etc, etc. I only wish they had supported me better in crisis, but wishes are only to be wished, nothing more.

Chapter 15: Finally, we mingle

It was eight semester. Most of the class was placed in some company or the other, and the remaining had better plans for their lives. But for a few friends who still did not know “What next?” in life, everything was fine.

Being in the final semester, we did not allow professors to take classes for us. Mrs Smitha used to conduct game shows in our class – Balaji Prasad was the co-ordinator. Crossword puzzles, guess the person, some technical puzzles, etc. It was fun.

Other professors simply asked all of us, to come forward and share our experiences during the last seven semesters. We started getting to know each other. We hadn't mingled in the last seven semesters, it almost felt like it was the first time we got to know the guys in our class. 3.5 years we had lived with people whom we seldom knew.

These days neither the spies nor professors bothered which guy was flirting with which girl or who wasn't wearing identity card. Anyone who was blundering against the college constitution was magnanimously forgiven. Wow!! Being in final year definitely had its own share of advantages.

During these games, we were fortunately forced to mingle with the boys. One fine March morning, Mrs. Smitha asked, “Hey the GATE results have come out. Has anyone written the exam?”

Praveen Raja, from the last row, stood up and said, “Madam, I got a 92 percentile”.

Wow!! I really thought it was a wow. I am sure if I had written, I wouldn't have got more than 30%. I wanted to find out how he had prepared. I am not sure if I was interested to prepare for GATE. I just wanted to know how people who win, win it anyway.

I was weighing my options as to how to approach him, I could not talk to him in college, no, definitely not! I didn't have his mobile number. Even if I had, I doubt if I had the courage to call and speak to a guy!

I could send a formal note on email!

I spent almost half an hour searching through the yahoo group contacts.. Eureka!! There it was

I sent him a mail saying I congratulated him on his score, and wanted to know how to prepare as I was planning to do so myself.

Almost instantaneously he replied, “Hi, it was nothing. I didn't prepare at all. I simply went and wrote the test”

I was about to reply, when a notification popped up on Yahoo Messenger- I had a friend request – from Praveen Raja

I was simultaneously checking frequently for any responses from the short story competitions, none whatsoever.

All sites acknowledged my participation, few replied that they would get back; some said I was long-listed and a few said my work was short-listed. But, I won none.

May be I was really not fit for anything. Maybe I won't be good enough to study French either. May be I was an all-round failure.

I do not have the right to choose what I want in my life, even if we choose, success is probably unattainable. May be the only thing only to free-will is death. Unfortunately, even those attempts are not always successful.

Chapter 16: A 'girl' friend and a 'boy' friend

Every day I would reach home by 5:30 PM. What other better job than chat with a guy?!!

Praveen's Yahoo Messenger Name was Kimi Praveen. Oh yes. He was a die-hard fan of Kimi Raikkonen.

As soon as I open my Yahoo Messenger, there will definitely be a message waiting ready for me to read..

@KimiPraveen: What plans for today?

@Me: Nothing. Just Chatting with you 😊

And we kept chatting, chatting and chatting through the days....

He would tell me loads and loads of stories about Raikkonen in the dead of the night, and I would be sitting and chatting, not realizing the clock was ticking away.

We talked about college, our school days, our teachers, our families, well, almost anything. We just had to talk.

His father worked at the Indian Railways, and they stayed in the Kodambakkam Railway Quarters, his mother was a house wife, his sister, Cetlin, was a software engineer, married and had a kid.

He was always there on yahoo messenger. Whenever I logged in he would be available. Praveen lived and breathed the Messenger!!

He would explain: "Oh, I am jobless. I always keep surfing the net, always there on Yahoo Messenger and Orkut. What other better business ;)"

I also found out that Praveen was a chess player, an accomplished chess player. He had won several inter-collegiate matches. Then how come he has lost in the inter-departmental matches? "Over-confidence" he replied.

I told him of how I had seen him at the bus stand on the other day.

He replied: “Oh. I too saw you. I too didn’t know how to come over and talk to a girl I had never spoken to before, that too in a public place. So, I didn’t”

After that, every other day, we played on Chess.com

Praveen played amazingly. He would defeat me in less than 10 mins. Seeing my deplorable position, he taught me from the English opening, the Kings Indian Defense, Larsen’s Opening, Latvian Gambit, Napoleon Opening, Ruy Lopez Opening, name it, and he knew it. I enjoyed every bit of the time spent on the learning.

We bunked college and went out for movies. – Anjathe, ‘Saroja’, ‘Abhiyum Naanum’.

During the interval of ‘Anjathe’ movie, Praveen softly and suddenly took my left hand in his. I thought probably he was disturbed about something, and thought of soothing him. I slowly and comfortingly placed my right hand above his, trying to give a reassuring touch, when suddenly, he took both my hands in his, and said, “No matter what happens, I will never leave you. I cannot live without you anymore. You are everything. You mean the world to me. Life without you is impossible. I know that I am a Christian and you are a Hindu. I will convince my parents no matter what. If needed, I will convince your parents too. I love you Karthika. Will you marry me?”

I could not say anything. I wanted to say so many things, but words failed me, I wanted to say, “Praveen I love you too, just as

much as you love me”, but I couldn’t. Not knowing what to do, I allowed my head to rest against his chest for a while. Time flew; I don’t know how long, I don’t want to know how long. I don’t know how many people saw or how many people watched. It did not matter at that moment.

I have a friend who is beside me no matter what, a boyfriend who would do anything for me, and I have secured a job. Dreams soared up. I was going to earn my own money and start studying French on my own. Syntel had said training would definitely be in Pune. I would go there and study French without having to ask for parents’ permission. I was going to master French like no one else, I would visit France, find a job there,

Somewhere within my head, Red¹ reminded me that:

“You shouldn't be doing this to yourself. This is just shitty pipe dreams. France is way up there and you're in here... and that's the way it is”

¹ ‘Red’ is one of the main characters in the movie “The Shawshank Redemption”

Chapter 17: Pune Plans

There had been a special job drive for dream companies, exclusively for toppers. In this, Subha was placed in IBM as well.

She would be joining in Pune too. So, ever since she got placed in IBM, we were making “Pune Plans”

Life seemed picture-perfect.

For once, I slept happily, confident of a happy future.

I realized that a motivating friend beside me through everything and the prospect of standing on my own feet really turned me on!

May be I had to go through all this pain just to uncover the true Karthika that was wrapped up within.

Today as I look back at the days I spent fearing being a loser, or being mocked at, I just wish I had encouraged myself to pursue my dream rather than discouraging myself along with everyone else. I wish I had trusted the unknown future rather than believing in its doom. Belief and trust are everything. What you believe is what you become. Motivation is nothing but a specific set of lies you repeatedly tell yourself until, one day, you believe it, and finally you make it happen.

I waited semester after semester, hoping my mom would allow me to study French.

When all semesters got over, and I had a job in hand, I knew I would go to Syntel- Pune and join Alliance Française of Pune with my first month salary.

(+91) 020 2566 8001/2/3

That's the Pune AF number. I noted it down in a scrap of paper nervously and put it in my travel bag.

One day, as I was walking through the college corridor, dreaming of living a free life in Pune, someone called me from behind, "Karthika". It was Praveen, with a beautiful smile on that handsome face, and I allowed another person to enter into my dream without waking up.

It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting.

In the words of Stephen King:

"Hope is a good thing, may be the best of things, and no good thing ever dies"

Chapter 18: Hell Days

Close to two months after college closed, Subhashree got the joining call from IBM – Pune it was. I went to the Chennai Airport to see her off, reassuring her that I would be joining pretty soon.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months.. Still no calls from Syntel. The recession wreaked havoc on my life.

In the meantime, Divya had got a call from TCS. Two months later Wipro folks too joined in.

I was sincerely waiting for the Syntel HR to call.

Parents became desperate. Relatives again started comparing Divya and me. To add to the list, my parents started comparing me with Subha and Devi. “You are useless, and the company you get placed is just as you are. Look at your friends – your best friend is a topper, and look where you are!! You are a shame to the family. You ought to have become a school teacher. Waste of 4 lakhs of money. I could have invested this elsewhere”

I was sharing my insecurities with Subha and Praveen, whom else could I turn to?

Both of them were very supportive, encouraging me that Syntel would eventually call me someday. Let’s wait hopefully.

Praveen was trying for the MS CSE course in IIT-Madras. He will be attending his interview tomorrow. I was so excited. I wished him good luck nervously.

He had already tried for NIT Trichy and failed. I only wished that his wild dream would come true this time.

Chapter 19: Perfidy

The wait for Syntel continued. In the mean-time, to ease the situation, I attempted and cleared the Cognizant interview, which was a big relief. I was to join in Chennai in 3 weeks' time.

Praveen cleared the IIT interview and joined the MS course. But ever since, he had stopped talking to me.

I tried pinging him on Yahoo Messenger, there was no response. The guy who had once said:

“Oh, I am jobless. I always keep surfing the net, always there on Yahoo Messenger and Orkut. What other better business ;)”

had suddenly vanished into thin air. He had blocked me on Yahoo Messenger. Living without him was hell itself. I tried messaging him on yahoo, on mobile, on mail, saying I was sorry in case I had hurt him unknowingly. Yet there was no response.

In all the frustration, one day, I logged into Orkut, to see if he was available at least there. A beautiful lady by name Beulah had written a testimonial on him – calling him the most handsome man in the world. I knew what it meant. I logged off with tears in my eyes.

Almost a month later, Praveen replied back on Yahoo, saying he wished to break-up. I did not respond back. I didn't want to waste words, but I wasted my emotions. I cried like mad.

I called Subha and cried to her. I would shut myself in the washroom for hours, seeing my tears and trying to control them, all in vain.

I joined Cognizant and training commenced. Still I kept telling my parents that I would go to Syntel if I got a call.

My mom kept persisting that I ought to stick to Cognizant

“Cognizant is a bigger company. Are you a fool? Why do you want to go to Syntel? To Pune? For your friend? Don't you love your parents?”

I didn't know how to respond to this emotional black-mailing. This was something I had never anticipated.

“Mom. I told you I was joining Syntel only. Cognizant is only for the time being. Why all this fuss suddenly?”

“Darling. What would we do without you? Bharati is married and gone. You are all we have in our life. What would dad and I do without you? You never understand our pain”

And she started crying uncontrollably.

“You know what? You will earn 15k per month, and your friend earns 25k per month. Then you will have ego clashes and you will separate. You will then realize your blunder and wish to come back to Chennai, but then, it may not be possible. Don’t you realize I am telling all this for your own good.? Already you are earning 20k per month? Who would move to a company that pays 15? Nobody will”

“I will mom”

Why would a mother who never thought twice when she called me a worthless person who was unnecessarily giving them an expense of 4 lakhs, now suddenly talk of love and not being understood? And why does she suddenly want to save a friendship that is good and going, and in no way breaking apart? What right did she have to say this? What did she gain by having me under her control? Oh yes. I would not be able to study French. And, of course, the common mentality that a woman has no business to be on her own!! She has to be under her parents’ control before marriage and under husband’s control after marriage. She has no bloody right to be independent!!

I read her thoughts between all the melodramas, and confirmed affirmatively that I would go to Syntel, no matter what.

I cried all through the nights thinking of Praveen. “If I convert to Christianity, would he marry me? Will it be worth trying?”

Slowly, two months later, the IT department students of my college started getting calls from Syntel. My nerves trembled in

excitement. I called Subha anxiously. She made all plans for my arrival. She had rented a separate 2BHK (previously she was staying with a few others from IBM), and moved into it a week later.

The much-awaited news arrived. One evening when I came back home from office, my mom told me that the HR from Syntel had called.

WOOOOOWWWW!!

And then I asked, “What did he say?”

‘He asked, “Is Karthika willing to join Syntel?”

I said, “She doesn’t need your job, she already has one. You can cancel her job offer.” I told him the truth. I did the best thing for you dear’.

I crashed down. My French dreams went right into the gutter.

I cried everyday thereafter. I don’t remember for what I cried, May be I cried thinking of Praveen. May be I cried thinking of Pune. May be I cried thinking of Freedom. May be it was French.

I cried all the time. I didn’t know which of these made me cry the most. Nonetheless, I cried!!

I slowly went to my travel bag. I pulled out the scrap of paper with the Alliance Française phone number, tore it to pieces, and threw it in the dust bin. Subhashree moved into a different sharing room a month later. This is all a woman can dream of!!

“Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane.”

May be Red was right and Andy wrong all along!!

Chapter 20: Despite Dams, the River Flows

Every morning I boarded the office bus.

Every morning, I crossed IIT-Madras. I knew Praveen was somewhere inside, studying with all his might. Every time I crossed it, I looked out, hoping to see him somewhere within the visible premises. Foolish idea indeed. Whatever I was doing until then would immediately cease the moment the bus reached Gandhi Mandapam. I would look out until the bus crossed Dollar and Pounds. The man of my dreams had someone called Beulah

in his life. Who was she? Then I would start crying again, till I reached office. I made sure I dried my eyes before I got off the bus. This was my daily routine.

I was working, I was earning, and my salary was credited into my parent's bank account. I did not have the right to even get or save my money. Whatever be my expenses, I had to ask my mom. And mom would ask me a billion questions:

“What do you need the money for?”

“Oh how extravagant of you! We are in a small middle class family. Please learn to save money”

“Mom, I am not asking for all the money, just Rs. 2000/- extra mom, please”

“No”

“I don't know when you will learn to be responsible”

There, the definition of “being responsible” changed yet again.

Every other month, I faced this mammoth problem and decided to finally tackle it.

“Mom, I want to have my own bank account”

“Not required. As long as Bharati was with us, we were handling her salary. So will it be with you. After marriage, you have to give your account to your husband. Do you understand? Having your own bank account, for a woman, is not required. This is how every woman has to live her life. This is what women are meant to

be. When are you going to stop living in your fantasies and come to reality?”

“Mom, but don’t you have your own bank account?”

“Yes. I have my own bank account. But daddy handles it. I don’t. Do you get it? Now shut up and go about your business.”

“If controlling finance is all you want, why don’t you manage your own bank account? Why do you want to pull mine?”

Spank!! A tight slap hit my cheek and I dropped the topic

May be I am the biggest failure that burdened the earth with its presence.

I had so often dreamt of freedom, studying French, standing on my own feet without anyone’s aid. But, here I was – earning the money I could never spend, I had no ownership over what was rightfully mine.

The man I loved didn’t love me anymore.

The lady who supported me all along, was far in Pune, minding her own cup of problems, she seldom had time for me these days.

Was my life worthwhile? Isn’t it a waste of time? Rather than living this worthless life, it would do better to die. But, by dying, I would again achieve nothing. People would cry over me for two days, garland my photo and probably say that I had been undergoing treatment for depression. One never knows what this world is capable of. No. I wasn’t allowing someone to say such non sense of me when I am gone. The point is, you can never stop such non-sense talk after your death. How I wish ghosts truly existed!! But, even if I have to live a 40 more worthless years in chains, let

me see if one day, I can be a free bird.. Just one day.. One day enough for me... A lifetime of failures will be forgiven and forgotten.....

So, I started studying my options. Mom was the one always antagonizing me. How about trying dad for a change?!! Let's go.

Chapter 21: Le rêve des rêves

Dad was a strict officer. Not that he would scold me or hit me hard. I was just scared of him. Why? May be the thought that he would scold me scared me off.

I don't know. What if he scolds me in front of everyone?

Its ok. Life's worth the risk. Let's give it a go..

Ok.. Now where's dad?? I went hunting around the house in search of dad. He wasn't there.

"Mom, where's dad?"

"Gone to meet Shanmogavel uncle. Why?"

"Nothing. Just asked as he was missing"

"hmm.. I am not taking it. Something fishy"

"As you like it"

I went back to writing short stories and reading French articles online, painting, pencil sketching, poetry. As Red rightly noted: "*In prison, a man will do almost anything to keep his mind occupied*". I continued submitting my short-stories, and writing blogs – frankly speaking, I didn't know how to go about publishing books, or rather, I was skeptical of the idea – the fear of failure.

I copied a picture of 'Dennis the Menace' fishing by the lake with his father- as a pencil sketch.

Why did Hank choose Dennis to have pimples? He could have created a little cute boy without blemishes. Why not?

Why did he never cut that extra hair standing at right angles once in a while? I don't like it.

Thoughts respond:

“Karthika. You have loved Dennis just the way he is, in spite of his pimples and hair sticking out. Not just you, every naughty kid out there has loved him in his/ her childhood. It alright not to be perfect. Just be in the moment, enjoy every roller coaster ride in life. Smile a lot. I like you that way.”

“Any reason to smile?”

“Smile while you still can. You never know what will happen tomorrow”

The wait of two hours seemed like years, when dad came home. Shall I start the topic now? No. He just came from outside, he must be tired. Let's not irritate him.

I waited for dad to change his clothes and take tea. Ok. Now, mom was around. So let's wait till I am able to get him alone. He sat there reading the newspaper for another half an hour,

Next, dad went to the study room, to browse the net. I too stealthily followed, in the pretext of reading a book.. It was now. Come on Karthika. Dad is alone in the room, you have to speak now.

But Alas! Yet again my courage failed me, when suddenly dad said, “Do you want to go to Alliance Française and do your French course?”

I was lost for words. This was probably the very last thing I expected my dad to say. I stood searching for words, when dad added, "Let's go and register for your classes this week-end"

"ok dad".

In the excitement of the moment, I had forgotten all about the bank account details. It just wasn't important at this moment.

Dreams filled my eyes, mind, heart and soul. I did not belong to this world any more. No not here. You can meet me in Dreamland any time.

Chapter 22: I wish I were a Man

Subhashree was married and she settled down in Chennai with her husband.

Weird!! She was one hell of an extravert, who could easily mingle with anyone. She had a lot of friends. I always expected that she would marry a guy who would go down on his knees to propose to her with a rose in a romantic English beach setting. I never thought of her boyfriend to propose in any other way. Had I been a man that is exactly what I would have done. Unfortunately, hers was an arranged marriage, a typical Indian arranged marriage. It hardly had any of the kick I had so much anticipated all these years.

DELTA A2 classes started. I looked forward to weekends like never before in my life. Life was happening at last.

Saturdays and Sundays were a matter of sheer pleasure to me, like a child awaiting the games hour. I felt my happiness soaring to the skies. Of course, this was a dream. It should be. How could this be true.

But yes, it happened. Dad made it his personal responsibility to drop at and pick me up from the classes. Even if I say I would go by myself, he wouldn't budge.

One day, while dropping me he said, "I thought mom was always right. But I can clearly see that we made a mistake. We could have allowed you to study French earlier."

I could see his face had become sad and burdened with the thought of the pain he had made me go through all these years.

I replied, "Dad, it's alright. Now I am alright. The pain's all gone. I am studying French. What more do I need? This is heaven dad. All the agonizing past is forgotten. Love is beautiful dad".

Suddenly my mind said: "Let's not delay it further. Let's ask dad"

"Dad, I would like to have my own bank account, and handle it by myself"

"Ask mom"

I considered the chapter closed.

"By the way, before you leave for the class, eh.. mom and I are thinking of searching a guy for you. Eh....hmm... In case you have someone in your life, eh.. just hmmm.. let me know. It will save us a lot of time."

I sat there for a while thinking of Praveen. I thought if I had to marry him I had to fight it out with my parents. But look here what

was happening. I felt like crying. May be I didn't deserve such a kind man for a father.

Seeing that I was hesitating to open my mouth, he continued:

"I don't care about caste or community or religion. As long as he is employed, I don't think it will be a matter of concern. If in case he belongs to some other caste, let me know, I will go myself and talk to his parents"

"No dad. I don't have any boyfriend."

"Really? Am I supposed to believe that?"

I didn't expect my dad to say that!!

"Yes dad. Absolutely. I am such a moron, that I don't have a boyfriend. You can start searching for a guy for me. Sorry for all the trouble I am causing you dad. But on one condition. I will never marry anyone if you are going to give dowry. I will definitely not marry him. That's a promise dad. I don't want myself to be sold so cheap. Please find me a guy who is capable of standing on his own feet, come what may. I don't want a guy who will marry me for money. I want a guy – a real guy – a guy with guts"

My dad smiled and said, "Let's see".

I slowly and dreamily walked up to my classroom, thinking how many women and men in India would have loved to have a father like mine. I was lucky, indeed.

I was late for class already, but my eyes were watering. I didn't have another option. I faked a sneeze and walked into "Salle de Classe".

Around 5:00PM that day, I received a mail stating that, my short story, “Tinku and the torn-kite fairy” had won the first prize in a competition and I(along with four other contestants) had won a week’s free vacation to Andaman and Nicobar Islands!!!!

Woooooow!!! My literary work had received recognition, not just any recognition, but a trip to Andaman and Nicobar Islands!! Amazing!! Did anyone dream of that coming?? Not me!!

Life was definitely happening. After a very long time.. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“Mom, I submitted one of my books, and I have been awarded a week’s time in Andaman!!”

She replied, “Oh good. Let’s see if you will be going or not. Will discuss with dad and let you know”

“But what’s the matter?”

“Of course, don’t be silly Karthika. You are a lady. You can’t be going around that island all by yourself. If you were married, I would not have given it a thought. Definitely not when you are with parents. Anyway, I will discuss with dad and let you know.”

“Mom, this offer will not wait for me till I am married”

“Then forget it. That’s not important. Your safety is”

A few weeks later, there were follow-up calls from the agency asking if I would be making the trip. I answered in the affirmative – I just wished some miracle would happen, and my parents would agree.

As expected, after a week, my parents said “No”

I wish I were a guy. None of this security hush up would ever happen to me. Why do boys have all the fun?

Chapter 23: A Groom comes home

Years rolled by. Parents went haywire searching for a suitable guy for me...

Sitting at home all day reading an intriguing Sidney Sheldon or an Agatha Christie would have been most suitable job position for me, if only the world paid for it!!

Unfortunately, it doesn't. So, the introvert that I am is forced to go and mingle with less intellectually exciting extraverted “emotosapians”. On the outside, I work for a software company, on the inside, I am dreamer.. I dream the impossible. I wish I could live the impossible. I only wish....

- There was no money
- I could get a year's vacation on the moon

- Educated married women didn't have to work as part-time household cooks and nannies.

Oh! I only wish there was no one else in this world, but for me!! How nice!! I could go wherever I want, whenever I want, without asking anyone's permission, without fear of anyone raping me, without fear.. I would grow my favorite vegetables only, cook only what I liked, read my favorite books, build my own world, if anything went wrong, it could always be deleted with the vanishing spell. Life would have been so much easier, living by my own rules....

“Karthikaaa!! How long should I wake you up? Its 8:45 already. Are you planning to go to office today? You don't have any love for your mom. I am slogging here all day cooking, and all you do is sleep, sleep and sleep. Irresponsible moron!! Remember you are going to be someone's wife. Time to learn to be responsible”

That's the next definition... the old order changeth, yielding place to new..

Pat! Got one tight slap on my cheek. Oh that was my mom. Time to wake. No more dreams!! Wake up Kar!!

#####

Oh!! Its 8:45, I am going to be late to office! I woke up and got ready in 15 mins and was at the breakfast table at 9, when my mom started ordering me, “Go cut the carrots. It's for biriyani”

I was staring hard at her and angrily said, "I am already late for office"

Mom: "On Sunday?"

"Really?? "!!! You told me I was late for office, and I woke up.. "

"Are you aware that I've been trying to wake you up for the past one hour?"

"Oh, I was in a different world, the dream was amazing"

"Oh, may I know what it was? Was it your wedding? Honeymoon? Or do you already have kids? One or two?"

"Oh mom. Stop that kind of talk. Please. Not in the morning!! I was a free bird. Isn't it exciting?"

"Non-sense. Free bird and do what?"

"Nothing. Just enjoy life"

"God knows when you are going to behave responsibly. Marriage will set you right"

"Marriage is non-sense. What to do. At least dreams are beautiful. You are not allowing me to enjoy even that"

I went away scrapping and cutting the carrots.

##

Evening 4:00 PM was when Aravind came home with his parents and sister, her husband and two kids. He was my prospective guy through a marriage broker.

Damn that I have to marry a man, What a pity. Why can't I be a free bird?

He sat at the corner sofa. First look? Not attractive at all. Dark, nose looks snobbish, dark lips, just wish this is just another guy to whom I need to say "Hi, How are you? what do you do?, etc" I am definitely not marrying him!

Parents were seriously welcoming them for a while, and then dad said, "Why don't you talk to each other?"

Oh yes, talk in front of everyone!! Funny enough!!

He started! I am sure he is an extravert.

"I am working in Kotak Mahindra Prime Branch as Deputy Manager. I manage car loans."

"Oh great. I work for Cognizant as a Software Developer"

After talking a few sentences, we dropped the conversation, parents continued. We fed them well and bade them good bye.

Parents tried seriously to convince me that he was from a very respectable family, and that I ought to consider the proposal seriously.

They were very happy. Aravind was working in Chennai, so I wouldn't have to leave the place. His parents were educated and

his father had a respectable job. This was the first time they had come so close to perfection.

Earlier, either the horoscopes wouldn't match (99% of the cases), or the guy wouldn't have a decent salary, or would be in some other location, or (in most cases) the parents were uneducated, or he would have too many brothers and sisters (where mom and dad feared they would demand too much dowry)

Chapter 24: Where are you going to, my pretty maid?

Aravind had asked for six months' time for marriage, to get to know one another before the big day. I too was very happy. This was what I too wished for.

He got my mobile number from daddy. He would call me every day. We talked long hours, about movies, cars....

Me: "I like the Shawshank Redemption movie. It's amazing"

“Oh yes. Morgan Freeman’s narration steals the show”

“I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away, and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free.”

Wow!! Even I have most of the dialogues by-heart. Awesome movie.

Aravind: *“You know the funny thing is, on the outside I was an honest man, straight as an arrow. I had to come to prison to be a crook.”*

Me: *“Sometimes it makes me sad, though... Andy being gone. I have to remind myself that some birds aren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock them up DOES rejoice. But still, the place you live in is that much more drab and empty that they're gone. I guess I just miss my friend.”*

Aravind:

“Get Busy Living, or Get Busy Dying”

Andy Dufresne - who crawled through a river of shit and came out clean on the other side. In 1966, Andy Dufresne escaped from Shawshank prison. All they found of him was a muddy set of prison clothes, a bar of soap, and an old rock hammer, damn near

worn down to the nub. I remember thinking it would take a man six hundred years to tunnel through the wall with it. Old Andy did it in less than twenty. Oh, Andy loved geology. I imagine it appealed to his meticulous nature. An ice age here, million years of mountain building there. Geology is the study of pressure and time. That's all it takes really, pressure, and time. That, and a big goddamn poster. Like I said, in prison a man will do most anything to keep his mind occupied. Turns out Andy's favorite hobby was totin' his wall out into the exercise yard, a handful at a time. I guess after Tommy was killed, Andy decided he'd been here just about long enough. Andy did like he was told, buffed those shoes to a high mirror shine. The guards simply didn't notice. Neither did I... I mean, seriously, how often do you really look at a mans shoes? Andy crawled to freedom through five hundred yards of shit smelling foulness I can't even imagine, or maybe I just don't want to. Five hundred yards... that's the length of five football fields, just shy of half a mile.

Me: You read books?

Aravind: "No. not much. For the past few days, I've been reading a book called 'The Power of Now'. It's a good one. I think you should try it. I am sure you'll like it"

Me: "I am not very fond of reading self-help books unless I feel depressed. Am not upset now. I don't want to read it just yet"

Aravind: "Yesterday I saw a hummer on the road"

Me: "Hummer or Hammer?"

Aravind: “Madam ji (that’s how he always called me), it’s a car brand. It looks amazing, and one of the costliest top-notch models. Please google and check it out”

Me: “Sure sirji. I will do it.” 😊 Aravind, do you drink or smoke?

Aravind: Yeah.

Me: Really? Drinking or smoking?

Aravind: Both

Me: What??!!!

Aravind: Yeah, I smoke a little and drinking – only social drinker – nothing more.

Me: Damn, don’t tell my dad. He will be very upset.

Aravind: Doesn’t your dad drink or smoke?

Me: Of course, he doesn’t .

Aravind: Teetotaller? Seriously?

Me: Will you leave all these habits after marriage?

Aravind: Hmm.. I will try madamji. Ok, leave that. You know something? I was so scared and excited to ask your number to your dad.

Me: (Purplexed) Why?

Aravind: You are so beautiful. I still can’t believe I am going to marry you!

Me: OMG!! Come on, stop this Aravind.

He was very romantic, showering words every woman wanted to hear. He would say, “You are very beautiful”, “I liked you the first moment I saw your photo, and ever since, I was waiting to meet you”, or “I couldn’t wait to get your number from your dad”, “I am very lucky to have you in my life”, etc, etc..

I thought life would be perfect. There need be no regrets anymore. He is my man. Maybe I have been waiting all these days of my life just to meet him, just to marry him, just to live a lifetime with him..

A few days later, I thought of giving him a surprise. I took the train to Egmore, and went to his office. I stood outside Kotak Mahindra Bank, and gave him a call, asking him to come out.

He was thrilled, but very nervous to meet me at office.

“Wow. What a surprise. But, I don’t want us to be seen by my colleagues. They will start teasing me”

He quickly drove me out of the complex in his grey Hyundai i20, to – Skywalk Mall. We had our lunch there, and then went for a movie.

The day ended on a very positive note. When we were returning, he asked me, “Karthika, I’ve been thinking for a while, if we could give invitation wedding with our names as invitees, not the traditional ones our parents gave”. I was floored. That sounded really romantic. I simply gave in. “Wow, I’d love that”

That night, I was very happy. Suddenly, the mysterious question came up on my head, and I pinged him on Whatsapp:

“Sirji, after marriage, will you help me cook?”

“No Karthika. It’s tough. I will be coming back home very late. Cooking is impossible”

Just as I was preparing myself for a lifetime of some lonely time in kitchen, cooking, cooking and cooking, I was reminded of my Parisian fantasy

“How about a Paris honeymoon Aravind?”

“Why not darling?”

“Seriously?”

“Absolutely”

“Woooooooow!! So simple? I am going to Paris!!!! Doesn’t it sound too good to be true?”

“Why darling?”

“Do you know, it’s been a big dream for me? And I am going there with you. How lucky I am”

“Nope.. I am the lucky guy, always”

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No messages from him for the next few days, no messages, no calls. May be he was too busy at office. Oh! These bankers!!

A week later, he came over to my office - to return a favor. To surprise me.. Rather than a true feeling of love, I felt he had really

come to return a favor. We went out to a nearby cake shop and he dropped me back in office.

Was this his idea of a romantic outing!! Pathetic taste indeed. Now what was really wrong with him? I just assumed that may be he was too stressed out at office.

The engagement date was nearing. We went out shopping for the dresses and engagement ring with Aravind, my parents and his. The excitement surged within me. I felt on top of the world.

Finally, the engagement day came. We had planned a simple function in my house. Mehendi was applied two days earlier. Aravind came a little late with his parents. He was wearing an old blue shirt, I don't know why. He was looking very tired.

I got the new saree from his parents. The beautician helped me change, and I was back. Later, a simple pooja happened, and we exchanged rings. Relatives came over to bless us.

Breakfast was arranged. Aravind started eating even without waiting for me, I was with my relatives, when suddenly my dad called me over urgently for breakfast.

That's when I realized that the groom had started having breakfast without the bride!! I sat next to him, when he apologized saying he had been very hungry, and felt very sorry about his conduct.

But somehow, it wasn't ok. This was our first official announcement, and he had behaved odd. I felt hurt, but didn't express it.

All festivities over, we called it a day.

Chapter 25: Mysterious Miseries - Part I

Three days passed. There were no calls from Aravind. My dad tried calling his father several times – no response from him either.

Panic struck everyone. What had happened? I waited patiently. I was very upset. Parent's situation was worse.

Dad said:

“We had given them 5 lakhs as dowry on the day of engagement. May be they felt the money was insufficient”

“If they had any issues, they could have told us before the engagement. Why bring it this far, and then maintain silence?”

“No. I am sure it was the dowry issue”

I wanted to just then scold my dad, “Why did you give dowry without my knowledge, how dare you?”, but I could not. Everyone was just too upset to take in such fights just then

Two weeks gone by.

Still no response. I got very angry. I called the women's helpline number: 044-43111143. I didn't get any proper positive response from them. The lady started shooting questions at me: "Do you have proof?" "Did you take any photographs?" "How do we know that you really gave the money and this is not a prank call? Sorry, we can't do anything", and she hung up.

I was getting desperate.

I didn't care for Aravind, or why he hadn't called me. No one was getting me married with dowry. Never. Any Dick, or Tom or Harry in the world may give dowry and get married, not Karthika. I will not marry Aravind, unless he returns the money. If he doesn't, I am going to sue him.

Life came to a standstill. Parents were mentally distraught. I couldn't take it in anymore, Things had to stop. I repeatedly called Aravind to find out what was happening. There was no response.

Then, I picked my friend's mobile and called him. He picked, and I screamed at him in a single breath:

"What do you think of yourself? You don't pick my call. Neither do you call me back. No calls or messages for the past two days. Everyone is upset at home. I will register a police case against all of you. See what's going to happen" – and I disconnected.

I was shaking all over, in anger, in tension. I didn't know what I had just done. I had vented out my pain.

I guess the "police complaint" trick worked. He immediately called back on my mobile.

"Hey, what's happening at your place?"

“Why do you care ditcher?”

“What are they saying about me? Are they saying this guy ran off?”

“Shut up. Yes they are. You have put my parents into such mental torture I can't explain in words. I will make you and your parents suffer the same pain. You don't know what pain is maybe. Let me teach you.” I was shaking head and heart.

“Hey, I can explain. After all this, do you think we can live happily?”

“No Aravind. Leave being happy. I can't live with you”

“Exactly. That's what I too wanted to say”

“Idiot. You have no right to do this to me. I will not leave you alone. Just wait and watch what I will do”

“What will you do to me Karthika?”

“I don't know. May be I'll hit you all. All of you”

“Can I come to your office? I'll talk to you. Please don't pull my parents into all this. I am alone responsible for what's happening. I am very sorry. Whatever punishment you wish to give, give me. Not my parents. They are innocent. They know nothing. If I come to your office, will you meet me?”

I disconnected the call.

Chapter 26: Mysterious Miseries–Part II

Aravind came to my office, and started apologizing.

“I am sorry. I am responsible for everything that happened. I cannot love you”

“Aravind. I love you. How could you doubt me? Wait.. think I got it wrong. Did you say YOU don’t love me? Or that I don’t love you?”

“Yes. I don’t love you”

“Oh, you came this far to tell me that you don’t love me. Thank you so much.”

Tears started rolling down my cheeks

“Sorry”

“Why is it?” My voice began to quiver. “What is it you don’t like about me? You want a more homely girl right?”

“No. Not like that. I am sorry.”

“Oh may be I am not beautiful enough for you?”

I started crying uncontrollably. Yes, I know I am the stupidest girl.

“No Karthika. Nothing of that sort. You said you would do something to me. Hit me if you want. Beat me please. I am responsible for what happened. Don’t blame my parents. It’s entirely my fault. I can’t love you. I can’t marry you”

“But why Aravind? It’s come this far. Engagement is already over. Parents will be upset. They already are. Why did you wait this long? If you didn’t love me, you could have told me long back. It’s just two months away for the wedding, and what do you mean by stopping everything? What happened? Do you love some other girl?”

“Yes. I met her in my office. She was the one who came and proposed to me. I too fell for her, We were in a relationship for six months. Then she left me, because of me. I was too possessive of her, and she didn’t like it. In the meantime, parents started searching for a girl. I thought if I marry someone else, I would forget her. We came to your house. I thought you were the answer to my pain, and that my life with you will help me forget her. That’s why I asked for six months’ time – to get over her thoughts. But I am not able to. I can’t live without her. I am not

able to move out of her memories. Please leave me. I am sorry. I don't want to ruin your life"

"It's ok Aravind. I understand your problem. Take your time to forget her. Then we can get married. I will wait for you immaterial of how long you need. My parents can't take this Aravind. They are already broken"

"I will talk to them Karthika. I will fall at your parents' feet if you want. If they want to beat me up, let them. If you marry me, your life will be hell. I am drinking and smoking everyday thinking of her. You said you don't like drunkards right?"

"I love you Aravind. I don't care if you drink or smoke"

"Please leave me Karthika. Please don't tell all this to your parents, please say something else; even my parents do not know that I had a girlfriend. If they get to know, they will be completely distraught. Please. I beg you." He touched my feet and cried. It felt horrible. Nonetheless, I promised not to reveal it.

"Is she coming back into your life?"

"No"

"Then why are you wasting your time waiting for her? Why can't you marry me? What is it you don't like about me? I want to know Aravind. Tell me. If not you, some other guy will come to marry me. I don't want to be rejected by others too. Please tell me what's wrong with me. Please"

"You are perfect Karthika. I am the unlucky guy. Please don't change yourself for anyone. The one who gets to live with you is really lucky. I am the unlucky one – neither am I able to win the

lady I love, nor am I able to overcome her memories to live with a wonderful woman like you. I am the worthless one”

“How beautifully you talk Aravind. Guess they taught you all this speaking skills at office. But, of all the women out there, why did you choose me as the guinea pig, to test if you could live without your girlfriend? Why me? Why me? Why me?”

I broke down hysterically.

That evening, his mother informed my parents that the wedding would be called off, as she was lately seeing many dangerous dreams and was scared to take the wedding forward.

I was depressed. I had completely fallen in love with Aravind, that now I didn't have the heart to let go of him. I called him every day. He never attended them. I messaged him daily. There was no response. I became frantic. I wanted to commit suicide. Parents were very gloomy and crest-fallen.

I saw my father crying for the first time in my life.

A week later, my dad went to Aravind's native (Nagercoil), returned the engagement saree, and got back the 5 lakh dowry. Aravind had returned even the engagement ring!! It was safely put away into the locker.

Every morning I would wake up, thinking this was just another nightmare, I would walk up to the locker, open it and see that ring I had once put on Aravind's finger. I touched it, felt it, flipped it into

my ring finger, wiped my tears, and kept it back.. Alas, it wasn't the nightmare of the dreams that disappeared by daybreak, this was a nightmare that stays to taunt and haunt me for a lifetime.

That finger I had longed to touch and caress all my life had returned back my love, empty-handed.

Days just didn't move, didn't even crawl. Everything seemed to have stopped. Even time!!

Parents started searching for another guy. It was just two more months for the wedding.

Dad came to me....

"We are going to find another guy. All is not lost. We still have two more months. You don't worry. Mom and I been to the astrologer today who said that these problems were happening in your life because of the Saturn transit. In a few months, all will be well. He has given us a list of temples to visit in Kumbakonam. Take one week's leave in office. We are visiting the temples this week"

"Dad, please give me some time to forget Aravind. What's the hurry for marriage now? Please help me get over this pain. I need some time. I can't marry someone else"

"Look at me." I looked. His eyes were watering. "Do you know what I am going through? You think about only yourself? Do you think of what your parents are going through because of you? Do you know what this society will say if they get to know that a girl's wedding was cancelled? They will talk bad about your character. Do you want to sit and hear all that? Do you want your parents to hear all that? Do you want us all to die of pain and shame?"

“No dad. I love you so much”

“Then prove it. I want to live. Please. Don’t kill me”

He touched my feet and cried.

I simply couldn’t talk back in such situations. The only thing I could do was cry - and cry, I did.

I visited every possible online counseling site – seeking a solution for depression.. I don’t know what I was seeing. It was of no use. I needed help from somewhere. I could not find it anywhere. I was desperate. I was going mad

I cried and cried, and cried again. I pinged my manager on Whatsapp. I was taking a one-week leave

Next it was my mother’s turn.

“Why is all this happening? Because, you don’t believe in God. Because you are unholy. God is punishing you. And with you, all of us are suffering. I am sure you would have spoken arrogantly to Aravind, so, obviously, he thought you would not be a good wife, so he dropped the wedding. Isn’t that right?”

On any other day, I would have fought with my mom for such words. But not today. Everyone was already hurt enough. I wasn’t opening my mouth.

“I don’t know mom”

“Don’t say you don’t know. I am sure that’s what happened. You must have been very harsh to him. He doesn’t like you because you’ve got a bad attitude. If you continue being like this, no man will marry you. See, dowry is something we have been giving through the ages, and will continue giving. Are you a big Raja

Ram Mohan Roy trying to change the society? You can't do it. So for God's sake, stop all this non-sense, and comply with the society. Next week we are going to temples, all because of you, it's for you. I know you don't believe in God. But, look, we are all dying here because of you (she started crying loudly). Look what you have done to all of us. Please, this is not for you. Think that it's for your parents' happiness. Please come with us to the temples, even if you don't believe. Do this one small sacrifice for your parents. Please”

I gave in, to everything. I didn't know what else to do. Aravind had ruined my life. I wanted time to forget my pain, but pressure was only mounting up higher, higher and higher. I was not able to raise my voice and express my opinion. All I could do was, say “Yes. So be it”.. Life was horrible.

Chapter 27: Mysterious Miseries - Part III

We had visited every possible temple in one week. Every pujari said some shani or the other had started, some guru had moved suddenly into my rasi and hence my life was hanging on the edge of despair. "Please do this pooja, that pooja every Saturday". They would give a black cloth and some Prasad. I was sure that neither the cloth nor the Prasad could save me. My life was doomed.

One evening, as I came back home, tired from office, dad was sitting on the sofa - amused. I was surprised to see him happy. I stared at him for an answer.

“Mom and I went to the astrologer today. He said, in another week’s time, a guy will come to us – his house will be east-facing, working in some other city. He has been waiting to marry you for the past one year. The astrologer added that all we needed to do was to wait for him to come and ask us, and then say yes and proceed. There will be no issues. We can have the wedding in two months’ time. He will be your husband. That’s what he said. We are so happy for you!!”

I was stunned. “Dad, I need some more time. Please”

“What for? The astrologer said he would be the best match for you”

“Dad. Whoever it is, why all this hurry for marriage? I am not hunger, to be quenched with whatever food is available. Dad!! I am a human being. Please allow me to live with dignity”

“Darling, please allow your parents to die with dignity. We are not able to bear anything. Look what all of us have gone through. Already, a lot of people are waiting to put us down. If they come to know that your wedding is stopped, it would be a shame for us”

“What shame dad? Tell them the wedding was called off because the guy didn’t want the marriage”

“That’s so easy to say, you don’t know this world. I don’t want to live to see my daughter go through such horrors. Please. I beg you. Allow me to die in peace. Anyway, peace is already denied.

Allow me to live at least for a few more years. My heart will burst if things go on like this”, and he started crying like a child, again.

I dropped the topic and rushed to the washroom. I had to cry my pain out. I wasn't going to cry in the open.

Aravind gone, another guy comes, and I have to marry him. Now I can't even open my mouth about dowry. Whatever the guy asks, dad is going to handover the money, because all he wants is to get me married – all he wants is to get rid of me – for the sake of a useless society!!

Simply because the society cannot accept if a woman's wedding is called off!! To hell with an atrocious society. I wish I were a man. I wish my dad had never dicked my mom. I wish I had never popped out... I wish.....

I am going to be sold in broad daylight with heavy dowry, with no one available to raise a finger against these shameful acts.

A week passed. True to the astrologer's words, the new bride came – Kannan Kumar – working for Infosys, Bangalore. After marriage, I had to move over to Bangalore. I initiated the transfer formalities with my manager. Well, I was left with no other choice. A woman has to leave everything and go behind her man like a dog. Do I have other options?

Kannan openly accepted that he was from a poor family, and that he was building a big independent duplex house in his native. 90% of his salary was going on house loan and personal loan. So, they asked my dad for a dowry of 10 lakhs. Dad accepted.

My jewels were to be 'strictly' kept in his native after marriage – dad accepted. (Who is he to decide where my parents put the jewels after the marriage? It's their money, their gold. I had, in fact, intended to return it back to them after the wedding function. Apparently, many others had other plans)

He wanted my dad to gift him a car, a washing machine, LED TV, refrigerator, and other household accessories in Bangalore as part of the dowry, before the wedding. Well. He didn't even request for them, he ordered for it. All the demands were agreed to.

What did the guy live on if he had nothing of his own? Bloody beggar! And I had the world's stupidest father, who would do anything to wash his daughter off his hands. He was shamelessly selling her away. And that was all the society wants.

I had always wanted to marry a man who was capable of standing on his own feet, if he isn't rich, it's ok. He doesn't have to be the most handsome, or the greatest of men. I only wanted a man, a real man, an honorable man – that was all I wanted in my life, and here was one, shamelessly begging my dad for money, oh, I am sorry! In societal terms, it's not called begging. It's his right!!! Mind it. A man has the right to plunder all the savings of his wife's family, and that was exactly what was happening.

I felt let down. This was it!! Any possibility of rationality or decency ends here.

Chapter 28: Subhashree opens up

Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings.

- Cheris Kramarae

I had to drain my pain somewhere, and my elixir was always Subhashree..

I visited Subha's place after a very long time. We hadn't spoken much after her marriage. She had purposefully avoided my calls and messages on several occasions. But I didn't have another choice now. I didn't care whether she ignored or avoided me. I had to talk to someone close, or I would die of madness...

So, I made my way to her house.

I told her everything that was going on in my life.

She stared at me and started speaking after a moment's pause:

"When do you plan to have kids by the way?"

"Kids? You should be crazy. I am talking about all the stupidities that are happening in my life, and you are asking me about kids. Do I look like a fool to you?"

"Answer my question"

"Not now. I will not beget a kid with a bankrupt beggar. May be after a year or two if he learns to respect me. Not until then"

"Don't deny a man sex. Have kids as soon as you are married. Else, they will call you a 'transgender' – that too in front of your

parents. How would you like that? Don't you think your parents are already going through hell? Don't make it worse for them.

And don't expect your husband to help you with household work. No 'normal' man will do it.

Don't expect him to allow you to do higher studies; no man wants a wife to be more qualified than him.

It will be better if you quit your job after marriage as it will be tough to handle both family and profession simultaneously.

Even if you know more, even if you are more intelligent than Kannan – don't show it off. It's always safe to be a dumb obedient wife than to show off your knowledge – the society will call you arrogant.

If your husband tortures you for sex or money, don't complain to anyone – it will be a waste. This world will not pay heed to your pains. According to them, that's what women are meant for. Even if you feel like scolding your husband in public, scold him within your heart and always say nice things to him. There is no other way. If you find that your husband is unfaithful to you, ignore it. Else, there is only one thing that will happen. Your husband and his family members will call you a whore, and chuck you out of home.”

Her voice was shaking. She stopped a little to regain herself. Then suddenly she looked straight into my eyes. I never expected Subha to say such things – no –this was not my best friend. I hadn't come here for this. I wasn't taking this.

She continued:

“All a man wants is to feel like a man. Feeling like a man means having a woman to control. That’s all. So if you think you want to be free or independent throw that shit in the trash bin, and keep going. There is no such thing as freedom. Your mom was always right. ‘Bank account will be controlled by parents before marriage and by husband after marriage’. That rule isn’t changed. We thought our parents were too old-fashioned and they are not in tune with the modern society. The truth is that men are still old fashioned. We are the ones who are too modern for this society”

I wasn’t able to take it in anymore. I stopped her angrily.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Your dreams were mine too. I know how it feels when you expect a man to treat you like a queen, and all the treatment you get is that of a slave. It’s what all women go through. We are no exceptions. I want you to be prepared. I don’t want you to go through the horrors I went through. I want my best friend to be safe. I don’t know what the anti-dowry laws in India are doing. When the practice of taking dowry hasn’t stopped, we can obviously see that anti-dowry laws are of no use. We can’t do anything. This is how our lives were meant to be doomed. Get used to the idea. We are goats that are raised to be slaughtered. Miracles happen only in Harry Potter’s life. In ours, only disaster happens”

Her eyes were watering.

“Subha, I don’t know what I am going to do. This can’t go on forever. I am not marrying someone because my marriage with someone else got called off, or because he has to close his debts

with my father's hard-earned money. My dad definitely did not earn with the motive of fixing a beggar's loans. Give me an idea”

“If I had the idea, I wouldn't be leading the life I am leading. Even I had ideas as you do. ‘Of course my husband won't be like that. He will be decent enough. He will definitely respect women’. No! I was not fooling the people around me. I was fooling myself. I just want my best friend to be aware”

“How much dowry did you people pay?”

“Oh forget the dowry. Dowry is a very small part of the problem. There are many other towering ones. That's just the starter. If you shudder so much for the starter itself, how will you handle the main course?”

“Why are women so dumb that they know married life is such an injustice to women, and still they shamelessly live it? Are they that senseless? Eh.. Sorry. I didn't mean you. I meant it in general”

“Yes. May be they are. That's the way the laws of the society are. We know that they are fools. But the problem is, they look at us as fools. ‘What kind of a woman doesn't want a man's security?’ ‘What kind of a woman won't use sex as a weapon against men?’ yeah. Don't stare at me that way. That's how the society's brain works. May be we are a little different. So, we possibly can't escape this shit.”

“I am not living through this shit”

“Even the former Miss Universe Aishwarya Rai can't escape this. Then how will you?”

“Of course Aishwarya Rai can’t, but Sushmita Sen can. You forget that Sushmita Sen is more intelligent than Aishwarya Rai. That’s how she became Miss India, beating Aishwarya. She was a beauty with a little more brain than the most beautiful. That makes all the difference. It’s not Aishwarya who awes me. It’s Sushmita. How did she manage to adopt a child at the age of twenty-five when she was still unmarried? The world would have raised eyebrows at her. Still, she did it. Indeed, she seems more intelligent to me. She made a difference in this world, an example most women can only awe at, but few can dare to emulate”

“No matter how hard a woman works, or how hard she dreams, at the end of the day, all the world wanted to call her is a “whore”. Dreaming of change, for a woman, is waste of time. May be Sushmita Sen can, not you Karthika. If at all you do that, do you believe that your parents are going to support your decision? Think again. Sushmita’s family will stand by her decisions no matter what. Will yours? Will they be with you through thick and thin? Even when you ask them for some more time to forget Aravind, you don’t get it. What makes you think they are going to allow you your way in anything at all? Forget all these fantasies. Yes, they exist in imagination, just in imagination. Cautioning you is my duty. Looks like you are not going to change. I don’t want see you suffer. Hope you understand my concern for you dear.”

“Yes your majesty!” and I walked out of her house disappointed.

Yes, she was right, absolutely right. Parents who would not allow me just some more time for marriage, will possibly not give me anything else in life, the way I want it. There were no doors left open to me. I was doomed. So, I turned to contemplate death on a serious note. Frankly, that was the only remaining option.

I stumbled along, thinking of Subha getting scoldings from her husband, being called a 'whore', doing all the household work without support or concern from her better half, simply because she has to save the relationship, simply because she needed someone in life. I shuddered. To think that this was the very life every woman ought to have an orgasm for was unthinkable.

I went back retracing my steps:

“But do you remember days when they said getting good marks, and getting a job was all that mattered. I toiled away, getting scolded for bad marks, and not landing a job when everyone else had. Now, it looks like nothing but being sold and oppressed (for which education and a job were a basic necessity) ever mattered to them”

“As Long as Women Are Less Safe Than Men, We Are Less Free”

Chapter 29: The Marina

I was sitting inside an empty boat parked by the seashore, waiting for death.

Life didn't push me to death. Death beckoned me lovingly with open arms.

Of course, they don't say live in peace. It's always rest in peace. Death is the only one that offers unconditional peace. I sat inside a small boat parked on the beach, enjoying the wind and the view.

Was this the right decision? What a question at such an hour!! The choice is simple: do you want to live there rest of your life among women who take it upon their shoulders to mentor you on how to satisfy the whims and fancies of a man? Do you choose freedom to seeing your parents falling at the feet of uneducated cannibals, simply because they had begotten a daughter?? It was that simple...

Well.. in peace I was.. contemplating death. The sea was beautiful black.. black is beautiful. Small silver stars strewn on the black background.. even they had rules to follow - the gravitational law, the general and special laws of relativity, the Compton effect, Coulomb's law, Doppler effect, Faraday's law, Fermi's principle, Murphy's law, Ohm's law, Snell's law, thermodynamics laws, the uncertainty principle, Van der Waals forces..

As if these weren't enough, new rules were discovered and old ones disproved every day.

I looked beyond the stars... The galaxies, matter, anti-matter...dark matter dark energy, the black hole, helium, hydrogen, nuclear fusion, quasars, CMB... There was so much of

beauty in this life to savor and enjoy... But here I was - thinking of how to live with the superstitions of the misogynic society... Or even better - die...

I wish ghosts existed.. no, I won't come back and haunt anyone here.. not on earth. Definitely not here.. Never here again... I want to go inside the black hole, become Spaghetti, and travel through a worm hole. But will I come out whole? Will I still be Spaghetti or will I get back my normal form? I won't need permission from the government. I won't need a spacecraft to carry me outside. I will explore the other end of the universe. Dear scientists, whatever be unfathomable questions on the universe, you can post them on my website (oh, don't bother, I will create one shortly after death), I will find out and quench your knowledge thirst, absolutely free of charge. However, as I would be constantly traveling through the fabric of the cosmos, I may have limited or no time to respond to emails. As time travels would be involved, please don't be surprised if you receive delayed responses or if you find that the reply date is earlier than the query date..

No.. I don't have branches.. I don't work in clusters or partnerships.. I am the sole proprietor!!

I wish I could become a ghost...

The beacon of the light house suddenly snapped me back to planet Earth. I saw the massive rebounding ocean before me... The bay of Bengal, the marina- the world's first longest natural urban beach - her gorgeous waves were like the outstretched arms of a lover, impatiently awaiting to embrace me... And here I come.

I got down from the boat. I removed my gold chain and put, my watch, my mobile and my wallet inside the boat, and walked on the beautiful wet sand. The water touched my feet – the feel was divine, the waves pulled me in, I stretched my arms out in joy. Death was giving me a warm welcome.

Life asked death, “Why do people love me but hate you?”

Death responded, “Because you are a beautiful lie and I am a painful truth.”

Chapter 30: Nadhiya

The Spaghetti was long, yellow and slippery, flowing on the fork, right through my mouth.

No. I hadn't turned into spaghetti through the black hole. I am sitting on a mat and happily eating away in Nadhiya's house.

Now who is Nadhiya? I too don't know. All I know about her is that, as I was enjoying the ocean, she urgently stopped me, took me to her house and prepared my dinner, saying she wanted to speak something important with me.

Her home was a 1BHK with nothing much to admire.

After the meal, she started talking.

“So, what’s bothering you? Only fools attempt suicide. What kind of a fool are you?”

“I would have peacefully died by now. After all that I have gone through, you bring me here and feed me to call me a fool!! I am extremely honored. Thank you.

Do you know what I have been going through? Its hell.. nothing short of hell”

She didn’t interrupt me. I continued speaking. No. Now, I wasn’t speaking. I was screaming at her. I was venting out my anger through the nozzle.

“My parents got me engaged to a guy. After four months, he called off the wedding, saying he was in love with someone else. Then, in spite of knowing that I am an atheist, my parents take me to every available temple in Chennai and Kumbakonam. I had strictly told my parents not to give dowry for my wedding. Now, look what happened!! Aravind goes, Kannan comes as a replacement. An atheist goes to temple, a person who doesn’t want to give a single paise as dowry, is forced to give 10 lakhs in cash, an LED TV, fridge, washing machine, cot, sofa set, table, chair, stove, household utensils and more, all because the wedding date had been informed to our relatives, it’s a shame for a woman if the wedding is called off, it’s a shame for the girl if the guy refuses to marry her due to dowry issues. After marriage, a woman has no right to think of her life or career. All she has to do is, cook his meal, clean the house, wash the vessels, his dirty clothes, give up her career, beg and borrow money from parents for him to meet his debts, and beget babies for him, clean their shit and piss and the cycle continues. Don’t women have the right

to live life like Gods as the men do? Is it a curse to be a woman? I want to be a man. I would have died today. You spoilt it. It's ok. No regrets. I will try tomorrow.”

Smiling at me, she said:

“So you don't want to marry him?”

“Not him, not any other man. I am not allowing another man to ruin my life. If I live, I will live like a queen, if I die, I want to die in honor”

“Is committing suicide called dying in honor?”

“Of course. Do you know Vanchinathan? That's dying in honor”

“He at least killed a British man before committing suicide. So, make sure you abolish the dowry system before dying. That's dying in honor”

“Funny that”

“Shall I stop your wedding?”

“You kidding me? Sorry, I am not in a mood for jokes.”

“No, I am serious”

“Do it”

“Ok. Then go back home and be cheerful. Accept to marry him, and show him that you are totally in love with him.”

“And marry him. And be his ATM, washing machine, cooker, sex appetizer, what else?”

“No. Just do this. Keep him and your parents happy. Make everyone believe that you really love Kannan, and you want to

live with him. Make him fall completely in love with you. I will stop the wedding for you. I will make him feel the pain. That's a deal."

"Really? Are you serious? What do you want from me in return?"

She smiled at me for a moment and said:

"Will you be my friend?"

I didn't know what to reply. I embraced her with moist eyes.

After a while I stretched myself lazily on the mat, wondering if God really existed, when I realized that I had forgotten to study the history of my guardian angel who was sitting opposite me, looking into my eyes.

"Hey Nadhiya. What were you doing all alone in the beach?"

"You don't own the beach. Of course, I came there to enjoy the breeze and spend some quiet time, when I found this silly girl"

"How will you stop my wedding?"

"Surprise, Wait and watch. By the way, when is it?"

"September 3rd. I don't want to see my parents hurt"

"They will be happy that you didn't marry him"

"Your words sound heavenly. I hope you do some magic"

"I will Karthika. I will. Trust me. But allow me to surprise you on your wedding"

"Permission granted. Hey, what do you do for a living?"

"I am a psychiatrist. I meet a lot of depressed people and counsel them and help them overcome their pain in life.

“Don’t make me envious of you. You’re married?”

“Do I look it? Yours is a very minor case. I see so many women with worse stories than you almost every day. After one incident, you are attempting suicide. When I hear of hundreds of such incidents every day, do you even think I am going to get married? Not in this lifetime, not in a hundred lifetimes to come”

##

Nadhiya was born in a well-to-do family of lawyers and doctors. Theirs was a reputed family in the city - generations of rich people, who had important connections in every department.

“I studied MBBS in Ramachandra Medical College. In my final year of study, I was engaged to a rich guy whom many of my close relatives had recommended.

I started talking to him. In the beginning it was all good. As days went by, I felt it wasn’t ok. When interacting with one of his close friends, I got to know that he was a drug addict.

“I spoke about this to my parents. They wouldn’t accept. Ours was one of the high-profile families in Chennai. Calling off a wedding would be a public shame to them. So they resisted my pleas.

I didn’t know what to do. I was helpless. I cried to one of my uncles who was a famous doctor in Madras Medical College. He spoke with the Dean of CMC Vellore (that’s where the guy studied), and enquired on his character –he did get a lot of negative feedback. Twice, the guy had been suspended on eve-teasing and rape charges, and re-instated again, thanks to his influential parents.

“After hearing all this, my parents relented. The wedding was called off. From there, mine is almost the same story as yours.

As the wedding day was approaching, they tried to find another guy by that time. I was helpless. I wasn’t ready to accept it. I picked my bags, and walked out of home, and this is where I have been living ever since.

“If a woman born in a rich family could undergo such horrors, I couldn’t think what the poor women would do. I wanted to do something for them. I provide counseling to poor women in family harassment issues. I save the lives of poor young women - and that’s the best part of my life. This is my life, and I love it. I even run a private detective agency with a few of my lawyer friends to collect evidence against these men”

Wow!! There was someone so bold! I was flabbergasted.

“Our stories are nothing. Almost every day I meet women who have been beaten up by their husbands/ fathers-in-law, who have been forced to have sex – either with them, or with someone else.

There are women who are verbally abused with sexual words almost every other minute, by their own family members, and they have nowhere else to go. They listen to all the shit and still live with them.

There are still others who are forced into prostitution, some who are tortured to an extent of mortal danger – mentally and physically, some by the society, but most are by their own family members. That's when I realize there is so much to do in this world, so many women to save. I cannot rest”

And she smiled.

“Nadhiya, why do you think I should live? I guess, no matter what you say, I would have been better off dead than alive”

“Don't be foolish Karthika. This is your life. Go live your life in your own way. Don't let anyone take your happiness and freedom from you. Live to see the change you want to see in this world. I didn't save you to go and ruin your life again. Go and save a few other women like you. Be a role model someone would want to emulate. I am not asking you to become a Mother Teresa overnight. Do what little you can, to the suffering women around you. Not much. Just a little. Very little. That should be enough. Give women the courage to be free. Give them the conviction to be independent.

I've done too much of talking. Now get out of my room, and be off with your life”

“Can I be with you and help you? I don't want to go back home”

“I promised you that I will stop your wedding. Take my word. Please go back home. All will be well on September 3rd.”

“Wow.. Hey, one more question. How did you find me in the beach?”

“Last week you had entered your details in my website”

Oh, I had forgotten all about it. How funny to think that someone had considered my case seriously.

Chapter 31: Good luck is a residue of preparation

Home was the same dreary thing. Preparations for wedding, and then, more preparations for wedding.

I thought over and over again - of everything Nadhiya had spoken. She had promised to save my life. All I had to do was to fake my happiness in front of the world. It was that simple.

But was Nadhiya trustworthy? Would she really stop my marriage? Or had she said it simply because I must not attempt suicide once more? Moreover, she was a counselor. She would definitely know how to brain-wash people.

OMG! She has saved my life. I owe her my life. I ought to think of her with reverence and not as a brain-washer. She had taken all the pains to follow me up to the beach, wait for me to walk till the sea, and then save me... She was definitely up to something. She has taken it upon herself to save lives of women. I ought to respect and not think ill of her.

I tried smiling at home; it wasn't quite a successful accomplishment.

A few days later, Nadhiya called me up, and asked me to visit her at her house. It was just one week more for the wedding.

“Hey Nadhiya”

“Hi Karthika. Your wedding will be stopped on 3rd, by 9AM or even before that (muhurtham was scheduled at 9:30AM). I will create some turmoil. A cab will be waiting for you outside the wedding hall. I will send you the cab details in the morning of Sep 3rd. Use the confusion to escape and come to my house. Here's the duplicate key. You can come and change your dress here, and then take the cab to the airport, Here's your ticket to Hyderabad. The flight leaves by 11:30 AM. Whenever you find time, you can bring your luggage and keep it here.”

“But Nadhiya, what will I do in Hyderabad without a job? Life will be even more miserable”

“I have a friend’s NGO there. They arrange and impart training to destitute women. Would you like to help?”

I held Nadhiya’s hands in reverence. I didn’t know what to do.

“And here’s a Hyderabad SIM. It’s already activated. Once you get into the cab, abandon your old SIM, and start using this. Don’t use it until then. I have the number with me. Here, make a note of it. Don’t share with anyone – not even your best friend, if ever you intend to escape. I have also made arrangements for your stay there. The lodge details are inside the cover. Once you reach there, you can contact Gokul. I will send you his number shortly. Good luck”, and she patted me lovingly on my back.

“Nadhiya. Thank you so much. I am not worth all this. What will I give back to you? How can I ever thank you enough. Why are you doing all this to a woman you don’t even know?”

“Don’t I know you enough?”

“May be. But it’s not reason enough to be doing this. Are you crazy?”

“May be its because I believe you deserve a better life. Do you?”

My eyes were filled with tears. I hugged her for the second time, speechless.

“By the way, how are you planning to stop my wedding? I can’t wait to know the surprise”

“I am not spilling the beans yet. Now run back home. Bye”

I softly asked, “How can I ever pay you back Nadhiya?”

“Pay it back with a life full of purpose, helping women live respectable lives. That’s enough.”

I didn’t doubt Nadhiya anymore. I was as cheerful as a lark. My face was glowing with happiness. New life, new hope.

I triumphantly embraced her one last time before leaving.

I spoke loving words with Kannan, knowing that I was anyway not going to live with him, not with a guy without a backbone. No way!!

Parents were very happy to see me cheerful. I liked it. How I wish everyone around me would be happy all the time. But the problem is my happiness and theirs was always mutually exclusive, making us incapacitated to smile simultaneously at the same thing with the same feelings. I only wish we could!

Two more days for the wedding.....

I packed my clothes – they were meant for Bangalore. I took a few more clothes and packed them separately.

“Mom, I have some important work. I have to go to office today”

“But, haven’t you applied for leave since last week?”

“Yes mom, it’s urgent. They need me, I will be back in sometime”

I squeezed my luggage inside my backpack, and the rest in a hand luggage.

“What’s there in the luggage?”

“They are collecting old clothes for poor people in my office”

“Do you have to carry all your old clothes only now? When are you going to be responsible? It’s just two days more for your wedding, and its only now that you thinking of giving the poor.”

Now what did this responsibility mean??!!

“Mom, the drive for collecting the old clothes is happening in my office. It will be over in a week. I can’t give it otherwise”

“God knows why you are suddenly trying to be a good Samaritan. Wait. Let dad come home. Let him drop you at the railway station at least. Are you going to office just for this?”

“No mom. I seriously have work. Trust me”

“Show me what dresses you have packed to give away. Are you sneaking out anything? Then why are you taking these things even without informing me? What game are you up to? ”

Oh.. I was caught.

I was about to open my bag, then suddenly, an idea struck me.

“Mom, don’t you smell leaking gas?”

“No, don’t act. Show me your bag NOW”

“Mom, go check in the kitchen first. Don’t behave like this. I am not running away. I am having only old clothes.”

Mom went inside. I pulled out one of the dresses she hated, and showed it to her. She was pleased.

Dad dropped me at the railway station, and then I made my way to Nadhiya’s house. I opened her house and put my luggage in one of the shelves, along with a thank you note with a Rs. 30,000 cheque for the help. I don’t know how much her service was

worth. It meant life to me. I am sure to a normal client she would have demanded a few lakhs for these services. Thirty was all I could afford.

Chapter 32: September the 3rd

The mehendi was done and the jewels and saree arranged and packed for the wedding.

September 3rd: I woke up at 4:00 AM and we headed straight to the wedding hall. The beautician was late by two hours. She came in by 6:00 AM. I was nervous – not thinking of the wedding. This was a life changing day for me, the day I would be an independent free bird.

The beautician was drowning me in make-up. She made my hair beautiful. Oh, it looked amazing. She draped me in a blue silk saree. I went over to the stage, for the initial function - when the groom's family would give the new saree to change into.

I received the saree and came over. Nothing had happened yet. I was waiting nervously. What if I had to live with him all my life? What if the wedding gets over?

No way. I thought of Hyderabad. Nadhiya would never let me down. I waited nervously for magic to happen. I went and sat myself near Kannan. The priest was offering prayers.

It was then that some commotion started brewing at the entrance of the hall. After ten minutes (that seemed to me like an hour), the police came in. They arrested Kannan, his father and his mother, and walked out of the wedding hall. A beautiful pregnant lady I had never laid eyes on before was accompanying them.

I lost myself in the commotion. I was excited. Wow! I was going to escape the dreaded marriage life with a backboneless moron. The word "Escape" brought me back to reality. I had Nadhiya's key in my purse. I ran to the bride's dressing room. Women were wailing around me, waiting to pacify me.

"Looks like Kannan is a womanizer. He has promised to marry that woman, and had demanded a lot of dowry from her, a car, a house – all registered in his name, an LED TV, the latest refrigerator, washing machine, all brand new. That apart, he has demanded 20 lakhs in cash. Initially, the girls parents thought they could talk the guy out of the excess dowry, and didn't raise the issue. Kannan has even slept with her promising to marry her. Later when he realized that her parents will be unable to pay all

the dowry, he has refused to marry her. The girl's name is Sowjanya. As his daughter's marriage was stalled, her father has committed suicide in grief, and her mother became mentally unstable. All these days, she has been silent. Suddenly, today, she has given a complaint against him, after she got to know that he was getting married to our Karthika. The girl is now pregnant. Oh, she saved our daughter. Poor thing. Sowjanya is so beautiful, look how much she has suffered. Look at what this Kannan is capable of doing!! An educated man, joins with his uneducated parents, and runs marriage as a business. He deserves to be hanged. And what a pity, our Karthika had to fall prey to his plan. Thank God, she is saved now. God is great!!"

I was so happy that people around me were so naïve. While they were wailing about what had just come to pass, no one, for once stopped to think, how she had got to know that Kannan was getting married today. Well, I was secretly thanking Nadhiya for the prank well played.

Another two to three ladies came wailing in..

"Look, look, this seems to have been their engagement photo"

"First Aravind ditched you, now it's Kannan. Oh. Lord shani is torturing you. Don't worry darling. He will come back soon. There won't be any issue. You will lead a happy life....."

I grabbed my purse and fled.

"Where are you running dear?"

"Aunty, dad will need money to bail out Kannan. I am going to give this to him. If anyone asks, tell them I am waiting near the gate"

“Oh Karthika. Why do you have to do the running around with the make up, hair-do, saree and all? Get someone else to give it to dad”

“No. no problem.” I didn’t wait.. I ran, ran as fast as my legs could carry me...

I checked my mobile. Nadhiya had messaged me the cab driver and cab number details, and Gokul’s number. I called and spotted the black swift Dzire waiting two buildings away. Wow!! My favorite color. I ran for my life. As I drove to Nadhiya’s house I was thinking of all that I had heard. How did she manage to cook up such a beautiful story? She even got the police into believing it. Looks like she runs very good business.

Chapter 33: Freedom At Last

I discarded my Chennai SIM card, reached Nadhiya's house, grabbed my luggage, changed my clothes, washed my face, altered my hair-do and made a dash for the airport.

I called her with my Hyderabad number.

“Hey. It was amazing. How did you set up the whole thing?”

“Set up?!! Do you think the police would come if you didn't show them adequate proofs? The police aren't that foolish yet. I remember telling you that I run a private detective agency. They are facts, not stories. Good luck dear. Keep me posted till you reach the lodge safely”.

I couldn't believe it. I thought she had faked it all!! This fellow was truly a womanizer, he had truly cheated on a woman, and if not for Nadhiya, I would have been one of his preys. Someone's father had committed suicide because his daughter's wedding was stopped. Sowjanya, the beautiful lass was pregnant!!

I reached the airport, paid the cab driver, and waited in peace. I had just half an hour more, It was 11:00.

Check-in was done quickly in less than 15 mins. I boarded the flight and was all set with my seat belt by 11:30.

As the flight took off, I put my mobile in aeroplane mode. Chennai was quickly fading away. The cramped up city was now going to be my past. Thoughts of Hyderabad gushed in. I was going to live without my parents, without my sister, my niece and my nephew, even without Subhashree – may be for a while.

I looked into the cloudy sky, but my heart was clear. I slipped into dreamland.

I was going to help underprivileged women and children live respectable lives, I was going to become a writer. I was going to be a free bird. I will write and raise my voice to liberate women. If not me, who else?

I dreamt again, like a child without a care in the world, like a fearless tornado that saw no obstacles...

Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.

THE END

