

NEEDLESS SUICIDE

By Gautham Srinivasan

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

K1 jumped.

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

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

Also he had realized the next moment.

The pen drive is not with me.

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three days passed.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I gained time.

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

My father broke the silence.

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

I was thinking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FOUR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you want to go to the toilet?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I simply smiled at him. I did not reply.

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

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